

## **The Gap Narrows In Fine Art: Modernism And Women Artists**

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### **Abstract**

The paper expounds on the matrix engaging science and art through the culture of visual fine arts. By sourcing the movement of Modernism at the turn of the century a social attitude is revealed, which focuses on the communication potency between science and art in Western art culture. Modernism's theme of "self-searching" educated an extended range of artists from Vincent van Gogh to Eva Hesse. Individuals like C.P. Snow and Gyorgy Kepes in the 1950s propelled a challenge to science and the arts to creatively interrelate their disciplines. In the arts artists of various mediums invented art movements and art forms that brought progressive contributions to fine arts media. Modernism in the 1960's actualized women artists into the new definitions of today's Post Modernism.

Definitions of new and different fine art styles are found at the onset of the Modernist era. In 1936, Meret Oppenheim becomes one of the first women artists whose unique style of sculpture symbolically embodies the Modernist approach. Eva Hesse, working in the modern abstract art of the 1960s, used industrial materials to describe a delving content. The artist author of this paper describes his own ventures into combining the astronomy process for studying celestial images to create audio and visual paintings. At focus in this writing are the inescapable influences of Modernism and the creative contributions of women artists who have brought science and art language into a new definition of fine art today.

### **Introduction**

The twenty first century, with its abundance of new media created by the latest digital technology, is affecting creative artists who are seeking new working methods to discover aesthetic aspects of the human condition. The modernist movement of early in the twentieth century liberated artists to think about their own artistic process, to question methods and consider alternatives, and to realize that the means and the media are part of the message. Since the 1960s artists have been trying to employ new technology in order to express themselves. My own development as a fine art painter began in 1965 and I would never have imagined a creative future assisted by science. Today this type of creative participation functions on a much wider global scale, and artists are creating new unclassifiable art forms of social relevance.<sup>1</sup> In this

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<sup>1</sup> Christiane Paul, "Introduction", *Digital Art*, (London: Thames And Hudson, 2003), 7, 8.

field some of the most interesting work is coming from women artists. The intent of this paper is to chronicle the advancing partnership of fine art and science, and the Modernist legacy of self expression, and will conclude by focusing on two women artists, Meret Oppenheim and Eva Hesse, whose work has been a catalyst for women artists for decades.

### **Merging Art and Science**

I introduce my own artwork as an example of how art merges with science towards a creative end. It is an artwork encompassing images from the world of physics and astronomy in order to give a view of the universe. Using imagery from astronomy books to create personal vision is not enough for artists who seek to create tangibles forms. Researching scientific information of this nature involved talking to people in the field of astronomy in order gain pertinent and inspiring information. The most significant source for creating an image of the universe is to study it first-hand at observatories by looking through telescopes. This practice of creating art through unconventional methods is a legacy of Modernism. Working from unfamiliar sources engages adventurous thinking, which in this case led to creating personal interpretations through the lens of science. I employed electrical lights to produce unusual color affects -this combined with images studied at observatories-, creates a new aesthetic experience.

To create this series of paintings involved traveling to the American National Astronomy Observatory at Kitt Peak and Vega and Bray Skywatchers in Arizona, U.S.A. The work

entails working through the night during the dark hours when observations of deep sky objects can best be studied. Usually an astronomer technician or even the program director will work with you to operate and guide the special equipment that digitizes the captured deep sky objects. This is time consuming work done with a 16" inch Cassian Schmidt or a 20" inch Maksutov-Cassegrain telescope equipped with Charge/Couple D (CCD) cameras. Required time to locate and digitally capture outer space images on a clear night is approximately six hours. Afterwards images are burned on to CDs which are studied and abstracted into watercolor images to better understand the sky image's visual variables. All this effort is preparation for the actual canvases which will be embedded with electric florescent lights (fig.1) and audio CD players all hidden behind three-dimensional wicker baskets, before the surface images are painted. Many of the images are of illuminated gases from time transgressing galaxies which are also rendered in relief on certain painted sections of the canvases. The hidden lights produce colored areas on the relief surfaces (fig.2) which combine to project real light from the stellar images of the painting. These paintings vary in size from 5 feet wide to 6 feet in height. Sound effects also emanate from these canvases in order to create a total hyper aesthetic art experience. Combining scientific technology and the traditional arts affects changes in language and thought. Millions of people have been able to raise their quality of life because of new technological and media advancements. The historical picture of the social and global progress we enjoy today is due to groundwork laid in previous decades.

**Art Engages Technology and a New Attitude**

## Forum on Public Policy

In the 1950s, C.P. Snow wrote *The Two Cultures And The Scientific Revolution*, in which he considers the dual cultures of science and art.<sup>2</sup> The origins of this progressive thinking about art and science occurred in the nineteenth century, from the time of the second Industrial Revolution to the birth of Modernism. Modernism was an art movement and should not be confused with the term modern. Any historical period is considered “modern” to people living at the time.<sup>3</sup> Modernism was a specific approach to the nature of making art through an inquisitive and critical attitude, which grew into an enthusiasm of the individual’s possibilities for learning new ideas. “What I call ‘my present’ has one foot in my past and another in the future”, wrote Henri Bergson, in his book *Matter and Memory*. Bergson, a French philosopher, promoted the studies on time that strongly influenced the writers, artists, inventors, and photographers of this emerging age.<sup>4</sup> The innovative media of that time was photography.<sup>5</sup> Etienne- Jules Marey, a scientist and physician, and the artist Eadweard Muybridge pioneered “chronophotography.” The new technology captured images in sequential motion of people moving and horses running.<sup>6</sup> This age saw the joining forces of peoples’ attitudes with new technologies, cultivating understanding and setting the way for a novel experiment. Positivism was a philosophical movement from the same time period expressing the methods of scientific and empirical thinking. The

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<sup>2</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, “Introduction”, *A Fine Disregard What Makes Modern Art Modern*, (London: Thames And Hudson, 1990), 7, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Rosenberg, *Art On The Edge*. “The Old Age of Modernism”, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 282.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Rush, “Introduction”, *New Media In Art* (London: Thames And Hudson, 2005), 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 15.

second industrial revolution also brought about the invention of steel and electricity.<sup>7</sup> During the late nineteenth century artists sought much more from their art and from their process of making art: “thus, modernism.”<sup>8</sup> The excitement for this age was evident in artists such as George Seurat, a French Post Impressionist painter, who worked in a systematic method he called Divisionism. In accord with his study of physics, he painted pictures through a method of placing colored dots next to each other, optically affecting the viewer’s eye so the third color is created in the mind.<sup>9</sup> This is an example of how much this generation was conscious of their creative activities. Artists such as Seurat who adamantly choose to reject the past and its art conventions were called “avant-garde”.<sup>10</sup> Innovation grew out of human determination and inventions, which changed the masses’ thinking and lifestyles towards eventual “modernity”.

### **The Modernism Attitude**

Two more recent modernists contributed in immeasurable ways to technology and the function of art in society today. Their influences on traditional culture are felt now, especially in the communication of visual language. In 1965 one of these individuals, Gyorgy Kepes published *Structure In Art and In Science* and wrote, “The world as a set

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<sup>7</sup> Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiya, “The Rise of Modernism Art of the Later 19<sup>th</sup> Century”, *Gardner’s Art Through The Age* Twelfth Edition, vol. II, (Belmont, Ca.: / Wadsworth, 2005), 853.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 900

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Buser, “The Early Modern World: 1860 to 1940”, *Experiencing Art Around Us*, Second Edition (Belmont, Ca.: Thomas/ Wadsworth, 2006), 419.

<sup>10</sup> Trewin Copplestone, “The Modern World”, *Art In Society*, (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice Hall Inc., 1983), 327.

See Fred S. Kleiner and Christian J. Mamiya, Twelfth Edition vol. II, “The Rise of Modernism of the Later 19<sup>th</sup> Century”, 853, 855.

of structural systems does not divide into the two territories of scientific knowledge and artistic vision. Rather, both our scientific understanding and our artistic grasp of the physical world exist within a common structure of motivation, communication, and knowledge.” There was the similar pronouncing spirit that existed in the late nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The 1950s era was of a kindred spirit with the proponents of the “communication crises” who advocated the scientific approaches merge with those of the traditional cultures. Gyorgy Kepes was a major force in the early 1960s when he was engaged with the progressive culture of scientists, engineers and artists.<sup>12</sup> He was a talented artist before World War II, working in Berlin as a painter, and a designer in film and stage. In the United States, he headed the Light and Color Department at the Institute of Design in Chicago and later moved to Massachusetts Institute of Technology as Professor of Visual Design.<sup>13</sup> The anxiety existing at this time over differences between the scientific and intellectual communities was also addressed in *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, by C.P.Snow. Gyorgy Kepes also wrote two books, *Language In Vision* and *The New Landscape in Art*. He edited the six volume book series titled, *Vision + Value Series* which brought together the essays of scholars, artists, and scientists. Gyorgy Kepes’s mission was, as he put it, “the reintegration of our contemporary scientific, technological social and artistic environment.”<sup>14</sup> For fifteen years at M.I.T., he conducted seminars with invited speakers from a variety of fields, such people as metallurgist Cyril Stanley, art critic Margit Staber, physicist Lancelot Law Whyte, sculptor and teacher Richard Lippold, and engineer Pier Luigi Nervi. In the book

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, Copplestone, 327

<sup>12</sup> Gyorgy Kepes, *Structure In Art And In Science*, (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1965), IV., Rush, “Introduction” , 8, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, Inside back cover,

*The Visual Arts Today*, he assembled essays by Margaret Mead in anthropology, Paul Weiss in biology, Sigfried Giedion of Harvard University's School of Design, Andreas Speiser in math, Walter Gropius in architecture, and Albert Camus in literature; these are few of the individuals whose influence he relied on for his educational perspectives.<sup>15</sup> The intention of the seminars was to expose students to the ideas of many fields of study in order to stimulate creative motivation for finding links within subjects.<sup>16</sup> This was a liberal arts approach towards having students advance their own education. Scientist, architects, and artists participated in these seminars.<sup>17</sup>

### **Similar Mind Set**

Both C.P. Snow and Kepes envisioned a comparable set of intellectual issues. They realized the significance of the overriding issue; that science and the traditional fields lacked the relevant appreciation of the other's disciplines.<sup>18</sup> C.P. Snow felt that "literary intellectuals at one pole, at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension...There is only one way out of all this: it is, of course, by rethinking our education."<sup>19</sup> By the same resolve Kepes writes, "We must combine and intercommunicate all such knowledge so that we may gain the sense of structure, the power to see our world as an interconnected

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<sup>15</sup> Gyorgy Kepes, *The Visual Arts Today*, (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University, 1960), 268, 269, 270, 271, 272.

Also see Kepes, *Structure In Art And In Science*, 188, 189.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Introduction, IV.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, I, see C.P. Snow, "The Two Cultures", 4 -8.

<sup>19</sup> C.P. Snow, "The Two Cultures", 4.

whole.”<sup>20</sup> Even now reading Kepes’ book series and deciphering his exploratory lessons is to venture into a curriculum with infinite methods of self expression in today’s contemporary world. The exploration of new venues through science and art is a distinctly twentieth century characteristic.<sup>21</sup> The cultivation for such characteristics stems from advocates like French Dada artist Marcel Duchamp who created art works utilizing mixed media. Using found objects and industrial materials like glass to create art he questioned the entire definition of art. In the 1950s he lived in New York and influenced a new generation of people in the arts.<sup>22</sup> John Cage was another propionate of art experimentation. As music composer, Cage employed Eastern philosophy for the creation of experimental music. In the late 1950s, while teaching at the New School for Social Research in New York, Cage contributed to

the new explorations of music.<sup>23</sup> During this time the American art critic Clement Greenberg gave a wider definition to modernism.<sup>24</sup> In reference to artists of the Abstract Expressionist group and later, he wrote, “late-twentieth century modernist artists were those who refined the critical stance of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century modernists. This critical stance involved rejecting illusionism and exploring the properties of each artistic medium.” The use of scientific technology in art forms during the decade of the late 1950s and early 1960s came from different art movements formed by an experimental culture of artists who were following in the modernist tradition. Gyorgy Kepes’s ideas were developed by a new generation of artists who were willing to

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<sup>20</sup> Kepes, Introduction, II.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Morgan Spalter, *The Computer In The Visual Arts*, (Reading, Ma.: Addison-Wesley Longman, Inc.), 19.

<sup>22</sup> Rush, 21,22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid* , 23,24.

<sup>24</sup> Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiya, Twelfth Edition vol. II, “Modernism, Formalism, and Clement Greenberg”, 1034.



venture creatively with chance and media.<sup>25</sup> The art movements before 1960 certainly contributed to this mode of thinking. European modernist art had set signature criteria for what defined twentieth century artistic practice. An artist had to be an individual in his thinking, have original ideas and be able to make a personal statement. The questioning of art

intent and process that was practiced by the European Dada and Surrealist artists had its continuum in Post World War II New York City.<sup>26</sup> In the 1950s, American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler continued a strong commitment to finding other ways

to communicate artistically. Jackson Pollock worked in a style where abstract intertwining lines were produced by the dripping of paint on to canvas laid on the floor. His purpose was to create compositions by chance using the subconscious.<sup>27</sup> Helen Frankenthaler, who helped develop the style of Color-Field Painting, also utilized through her abstract paintings a method of using color by the selection of chance.<sup>28</sup>

Artist Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950s learned from all these techniques of new exploration; his art incorporated real objects, such as rubber tires, light bulbs, metal cans onto his painted canvas surfaces; he called the process “combines”.<sup>29</sup> His attitude embraced the technology of science. By 1961, Rauschenberg was not alone in his embracing new media. In this same year an avant-garde international artist’s group

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<sup>25</sup> Kepes, Biography Notes, 187 -189. , See Rush, 24, 25.

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<sup>26</sup> Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiya, 966.

<sup>27</sup> Harriet Schoenholz Bee and Cassandra Heliczer, Editors, Second Edition, *MOMO Highlights*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 194.

<sup>28</sup> Lois Fichner-Rathus, Seventh Edition, *Understanding Art*, (Belmont, Ca.: Thomson / Wadsworth”, 2004), 498.

<sup>29</sup> Buser, “Mixed Media”, 200.

calling itself Fluxus was attracting various filmmakers, artists, writers and musicians. George Maciunas headed this movement and its manifesto coined the term “Neo-Dada”.<sup>30</sup> “Neo-Dada” is an art term label for a 1960s artists group organization that followed the same experimental attitudes and Dada are not typical everyday words. Art words coming from a lexicon towards producing art as the original European Dada group. Neo-Dada for describing visual media or discussing art ideas can become problematic; since these words often come in a cursory and confusing fashion to anyone who is not in a place where art terms and words are practiced. Trewin Coplestone discusses this in the introduction to *Art In Society*, when he writes, “there is an advantage to be gained from a gradually extending familiarity with an art language”.<sup>31</sup> This brings up the issue of words and relevance to art culture.

### **Questions of Art Language**

In the film *Art of the Western World*, art historian Michael Wood talks of a particular art style’s “visual language” developing in a new direction. In another scene from the film, Wood describes the historical content [of divine right] in Baroque painting as being “visual language”. Even the use of the word “content” in the last sentence to connotes an art meaning-this word is not commonly used by everyone seeking to enjoy art forms. But, to those experienced in discussing art it is a frequently used word in referring to the meanings of art works. Both the term “visual language” and the word “content” have specific applications concerning art. In his book *Modern Art*, Meyer Schapiro targets the question about universal art and says, “If there are eternal values in art, it seems they are

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<sup>30</sup> Rush, “Duchamp to Cage to Fluxus”, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Coplestone, “Introduction”, 8.

preserved only by those who strive to realize them in a new content.”<sup>32</sup> Or take the use of the word “content” in this next statement, “The power of content can sometimes overwhelm the power of shape.”<sup>33</sup> How does one relate the definition for “content” in art experience if the meaning sometimes appears to be embedded and esoteric? Confusing also is the shuffling of “high” art and “low” art. Historian Kirk Varnedoe upon describing the drawing influences from a Picasso caricature sketchbook refers to “a tussle in which the energies of the painter’s “low” art were allowed to rise up and transform the look of his “high” art.”<sup>34</sup> These words describe categories of art. The term: “high art” is used to qualify the status of art forms, apart from such arts as ornamental textiles.<sup>35</sup> Being utilitarian, textiles are classified as being applied arts and often are referred to as “low art.” In the other extreme art that has no practical use such as painting falls under the distinction of being “fine art”.<sup>36</sup> The term can also be taken to mean high art. Another word to clarify since it has multiple applications is “Design”. “Design” of the house, engineering “design,” intelligent “design,” web page “design,” a painting’s “design,” such are the various uses of the word “design.” Design signifies the function of an “intention”.<sup>37</sup> An intention can be seen as a plan. Plans can fail. The latest meticulous engine design for a new model automobile is no guarantee it will perform well. The opposite may be a custom-designed house might be ideal in all its utilitarian and aesthetic functions.

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<sup>32</sup> Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, “Courbet And Popular Imagery An Essay on Realism and

Naïveté (1941), (New York : George Braziller, Inc., 1978), 138.

<sup>33</sup> Lois Fichner-Rathus, “Emphasis and Focal Point”, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Varnedoe, “Four Primitivism”, 196.

<sup>35</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, And Society*, “Modernism, Abstraction, and the New Woman, 1910-25”, Third Edition

(London: Thames And Hudson Ltd. 2002), 271.

<sup>36</sup> Coplestone, 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

Because a poem has a complex (design) composition does not mean it will always communicate effectively. A design might work or it may not work. This is why experiencing art can be so precarious or so interesting; art intends to connect with people. But the viewer also has a responsibility to stay open minded with unfamiliar ideas. Some people who see paintings with their eyes often do not think or ask questions about artworks. Some of these viewers are under the notion that art is only created by following visual perceptions-or, in other words, believing an artist's job is to copy from nature. "What is the design of painting?" is not a valid question to this kind of art viewer. For viewers who have little knowledge about design in art the word "composition" might mean less. "Artist's statement" is yet another term some people and even artists think carries a stigma. Why do artists have the entitlement to make statements? Yet to a certain population these terms are elementary; these people are comfortable with their usage in art culture setting. Art language also carries terms that refer to art-making problems- whether technical or conceptual-which are called "visual issues".

### **Basic Art Processes**

The initial and basic concept to recognize about art is that it encompasses human thoughts. Pictorial language and its importance has been a fact since the start of the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> The Renaissance was responsible for initiating such a systematic approach to manipulating the art of picture making. The process of framing human thoughts into a pictorial language involving decisions about how to manage the colors,

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<sup>38</sup> Kepes, H.L.C. Jaffé, "Syntactic Structure in The Visual Arts", 148.

shapes, and the areas of surface space in pictures is called formalism.<sup>39</sup> Though this is a recent systematic approach to gain appreciation into art forms of varied types, it does come with a history. In 1436, Battista Alberti states in his book *On Painting*, that an artist needs skills in astronomy, geometry, perspective, and the rules of composition.<sup>40</sup> Maurice Denis a figurative painter, in 1890 writes, “One should remember that a painting—before being a war-horse, a nude woman or some anecdote is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order.”<sup>41</sup> Both Alberti and Denis are stressing “management” for creating images. Language requires an arrangement of meanings in order to communicate a message and this process is know as syntax. H.L.C. Jaffé writes of the painter Georges Seurat that he was “most preoccupied with the idea of a visual syntax.” To Jaffé, Vincent van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, and Redon were artists representing a generation. In this same essay Jaffé names Vincent van Gogh as having “formulated this new vision of a wider and deeper reality.”<sup>42</sup> The Van Gogh generation embraced the word “expression,” and by doing so the word begs to be considered as language. In the late nineteenth century the generation of Van Gogh advocates a search for “the laws of pictorial language.”<sup>43</sup>

Art is an artificial endeavor. The media of painting and sculpture are manufactured through techniques, which are primarily learned techniques. As an example, on analyzing Edgar Degas’s Impressionist paintings historian Varnedoe writes, “the process

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<sup>39</sup> Lois Fichner-Rathus, 533.

<sup>40</sup> Coplestone, “Patronage and the artist”, 175.

<sup>41</sup> Kepes, H.L.C. Jaffé, “Syntactic Structure in The Visual Arts”, 139.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 143.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 143.

Degas's art followed was one of building up an artificial world"; he becomes specific about the artificial method used in the painted scenes, by saying, "they were concocted to convey a sense of the partial", and as he further describes this artificial process, he notes that Degas makes paintings "by 'jury-rigging' together various conventions of relative scale, narrative, and so on, into sophisticated new relationships."<sup>44</sup> Degas's new relationships are artificial design aspects which Degas or any artist needs to consider in the creative production of an art work. These design aspects must be resolved by techniques of the medium regardless of which medium it may be—painting, photography, or film making. The second facet in the design aspects of these mediums is for the artist to discern clarity from the content variables. Techniques and methods used to resolve design and content aspects are labeled "art problems." In this regard every step of technique implementation and conceptual decision for the work's narrative or message is a problem to be resolved. If problems in art production become a priority of multiple considerations with multiple alternatives for resolution, then it is a "visual issue." The visual issue does not only lie in the artists' domain; it can also be with the interpreter—the conscientious historian—who through the experiencing of an artwork is discerning the multiple levels of communication a particular work is suggesting directly or indirectly. Historical concepts or environmental context to an artwork can also pose a "visual issue." These artificial processes, the manipulations of drawing, and the manufactured effects of painted segments in pictures to relate all the parts into an organized whole, producing a sensation of images on flat canvas surfaces is partially where the "art" of art is found. It is known as composition.

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<sup>44</sup> Varnedoe, "The Nineteenth Century", 122.

## Composition

The articulation of a composition in a work of art and its communicated personal message is the primary criteria applied today when conventional authorities like art historians, museum curators, artists, and art critics venture to define fine art painting or sculpture. In a painting, a sculpture piece, an architectural building, a poster, a photograph, or a digital web page, it is the composition of the work that produces the desired emotional effect. The visual elements in an art work are line, shape, light, value, color, texture, space, time, and motion.<sup>45</sup> “The organization of the visual elements in a work of art is a composition”, as defined in the text book *Understanding Art* by Lois Fichner-Rathus.<sup>46</sup> This means the creative job of using the design elements to manufacture interest in an art work is where the artist reveals his unique intelligence. Joae Mirö’s biographer, in describing the design manipulation of a Mirö painting states, “The white border line to the right lights up the side of the canvas to which the model is looking. The black square area facing her echoes the square beneath her foot. All in all, the composition, which is relatively empty and flat, appears highly together of working parts.”<sup>47</sup> Descriptions like this give a clue into the general facet of an artist’s strategizing intelligence by studying the design or composition in a work of art.? When the viewer starts to recognize decisions the artist makes in selecting a color for a line or a shape that has relation to another similar color or shape, then the viewer will enter into the process of seeking in the art form– to recognize other decisions involving scale, or effects, or placement of images. Recognizing decision differences in any number of art forms occurs through looking closely at the works treatment of material and imagery. By

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Lois Fichner-Rathus, 531.

<sup>47</sup> Mink, “A Monk, a Soldier and a Poet”, 28.

noticing the difference in the choices, the viewer is also involved in experiencing such choices, feeling smallness relative to larger areas of bright color or surface spatial illusions. This process of viewing and sensing the relations between visual elements and perceiving the unifying level of the composition is how the viewer takes part in the art experience.

### **Art Content**

The Impressionists and the Post-Impressionist take credit for advancing personal style as both a visual issue and a new art aesthetic. Concerning the content criteria for experiencing art Wassily Kandinsky, states, “The artist must have something to communicate.”<sup>48</sup> Kandinsky is now defining the artist’s role as someone who conveys a message, and of someone who creates an artist’s statement. Intended content has always been a convention in art forms whether it was from Egyptian art, Christian icons, a Zen rock garden or a 1950s abstract painting.<sup>49</sup> In Western culture religious paintings going back to medieval times contained Christian narratives which conveyed moral lessons. Scenes depicted in the stain glass rosette windows carried Christian scripture messages. This is not a new idea, but it did progress. Renaissance artists introduced a personal element to art content. Michelangelo, through his forceful painting style, creates, “almost a message in itself.”<sup>50</sup> Raphael was credited as having “forged a personal art.”<sup>51</sup> Aside from the painted religious stories of their pictures, both of these artists have communicated something through their painting styles that connects with even modern

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 144.

<sup>49</sup> Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiya, “Meditative Zen Gardens”, 782.

<sup>50</sup> Coppelstone, “Mannerism”, 203.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 199.



viewers. Experiencing art also introduces cultural taste. Fine art is a status term that evolved out of the Renaissance standards for painting, sculpture, and architecture, and is derived from a couple of basic criteria. The first is that designed visual imagery or composition is apparent in the work of art being experienced by the viewer. The second requirement the viewer needs to bring to the experiencing of a work of art is the recognition that content is being conveyed. This latter requirement may often be an interesting challenge to the viewer

### **Modernism Accesses the New Isms**

To Western art aesthetics the inventive mind is quite natural. The liberal attitude of modernism ushered in what seemed to be an explosion of art movements. Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionist, Primitivism, Neo-Impressionists, Symbolists, and Classicists all emerged from around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> Dada was a European art group which formed during the time of the First World War as a reaction to the horrors of war. Their art “was characterized by a disdain for convention, often enlivened by humor and whimsy,” as it was art created by intuition and the irrational, often mixed with an aggressive anarchist political content.<sup>53</sup> The group existed during the war years. In 1913 the French Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp exhibited his first “ready-made” sculptures. Duchamp’s ready-mades are an example of applied science used in the service of art. These mass produced utilitarian objects were designated “art” after being selected by the artist, because they were free of value judgments.<sup>54</sup> This act was an implied criticism to

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>53</sup> Kleiner and Mamiya, Glossary, Twelfth vol. II. , 1096.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, “Dada”, 981.

the general nature of art, and was justified by a modernist attitude of bringing attention to “the facts of art making”.<sup>55</sup> Previously, the Cubists had begun using sand, wood fragments, paper, and other common objects on their canvases to express a sense of humor.<sup>56</sup> It was also the year Marcel Duchamp was at the heart of controversy because of the provocative style of his painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which he exhibited at the pivotal Armory Show in New York City.

The Armory Show was a historical event in modern art because it was the first time the larger public was exposed to the new worlds of modernity and modernism. This event also introduced the other art “isms” that helped propel the attitudes which would influence public and artistic thoughts through out the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. All the lessons in modernity were here.<sup>57</sup> This exhibit broke art culture ground in a variety of ways. On display was not only the latest European art but an art dealing with the processes and qualities of painting in a more serious fashion.<sup>58</sup> Foremost, it opened the world of refined art to the general public. European art work with its modernity styles along side the emerging talents of American artists exposed to the public unfamiliar art that would influence future styles as never before. The painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* was distorted and puzzling to the observer, even chaotic. The painting’s style related to the Cubists’ fragmented images as well as to the Italian

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, “Conclusion”, 900.

<sup>56</sup> Schapiro, 148, 149.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

Futurists' repetitive sequenced imagery.<sup>59</sup> Stylistically the public was being presented with a different idea— in opposition to the traditional female nude, this new art ideal was “imageless”. In 1913, contemporary art was made legal when the U.S. Government cleared import duty on imported art works. Evident in the Armory Show was the artists' commitment to being free through exploration of art language. The European Dadaist's art temperament created a public disdain as well as satisfaction among those experiencing the new art perspectives of confusion and indulgence.<sup>60</sup> The Armory exhibit sowed the seeds of artistic mapping which would evolve over the coming decades into an inventive future of visual languages.

### **Women are Artists**

Women artists today have cultivated fine art standards which until very recently—the 1970s—were unavailable. A look at art history reveals women artists creating significant art since the Italian Renaissance.<sup>61</sup> Yet I would argue that two twentieth century women artists in particular, Méret Oppenheim and Eva Hesse, broke cultural concepts regarding art and the female artist's status. The origin for this change in status begins in the 1930s. Dadaism eventually gives way to a new movement in 1924 called Surrealism. Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud influenced this group of Surrealist artists whose expressive aim was to connect with an unconscious reality through dreams. Surrealists co-opted many of the Dadaists techniques; Max Ernst, who was first a Dadaists and later a Surrealist, created collages with found objects using the compositional process of the chance selection of

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<sup>59</sup> Kleiner and Mamiya, “The Armory Show and Its Legacy”, 986.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 138, 139, 140, 144, 171.

<sup>61</sup> Chadwick, “The Other Renaissance”, 93.

design elements.<sup>62</sup> No modern art movement had as many women practitioners as the Surrealists.<sup>63</sup> André Breton, the writer who gave specific definition to the movement of Surrealism, was devotional about the emancipation of women artists.<sup>64</sup>

“Women are artists”, can be a loud declaration or a dry statement of fact and it would never connote an insight into the contradictions existing in art cultures which sustain biases against women that as a result marginalize and silence any form of creative statement.<sup>65</sup> No one knows this better today than women artists. The women artists of the past all experienced the difference standards which society held female artists to as opposed to male artists. Women choosing to make art in the 1930s created a juncture for the modernism art culture of that time. During the modernism era artist of both genders realized the emancipation of an art from natural objects to the self, and saw the deconstructed image as a threshold to a more humanizing culture.<sup>66</sup> Yet the possibility for women artists to be humanized into a culture of empowerment was limited. Vocabulary used to define intellectual and creative qualities, such as “hero,” “master,” or “greatness,” connote the innate originality and transcendence of men. Women artists on the other hand, have been defined by their sexuality. As established as Georgia O’Keeffe’s art reputation is, her flower paintings still carry for many viewers a sexual implication.<sup>67</sup> Coinciding with Modernism’s ambiguous attitude toward women artists was the Surrealist movement, which incorporated women into their ranks in order to

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 996, 997.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 309.

<sup>64</sup> Chadwick, “Modernist Representation: The Female Body”, 310.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 279.

<sup>66</sup> Schapiro, 145.

<sup>67</sup> Chadwick, 279.

narrow the prevalent divisiveness. Women artists joined large numbers in the artistic group of thinkers and creatively focused on their own realities.<sup>68</sup> Women brought to Modernism a preconditioned affinity to abstraction by way of their interest in fashion and their wide participation in designing textiles for the decorative arts.<sup>69</sup> A photograph by Ellen Auerbach shows imagery in an abstract configuration. Anni Albers created totally abstract patterns in her woven wall hangings. Both these women were members of the famous Bauhaus School in Germany. These women participated in the Modernist movement, but of the two Anni Albers held the lowest status at the school because she was a weaver in the decorative arts. Ellen Auerbach was a student and used the new technology of photography to convey her own personal statement. Still, the Bauhaus found it difficult to grant status to women.<sup>70</sup> The women of the Surrealist group, often being left out of the male art dialogue, chose instead to work with what they were most familiar with: the self. The majority of Surrealist woman artists were painters—the Czech painter called Toyen, Emily Carr from Canada, Leonor Fini and Dorothea Tanning, both American, Spanish-Mexican artist Remedios Varo, Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, with the exceptions being the English sculptor Barbara Hepworth, who worked in total abstraction, and the Swiss sculptor Meret Oppenheim who produced works of a subversive nature. All these artists were involved in depicting imagery of a subjective and metaphysical nature. Kahlo translated the physical pain of her own body into paintings. Tanning explored the sexuality of the adult world through fantasy. Fini painted imagery from the realm of her dreams. Through sculpture Hepworth explored the

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 310.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 252.

<sup>70</sup> Jeannine Fiedler, Peter Feierabend, eds., *Bauhaus*, (Cologne: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 1999), 474, 520.

ideas of biomorphism.<sup>71</sup> Women artists through their art not only gained freedom but validated their own identity. The Surrealistic group emerging from the concerns of Modernism formed a phenomenal dynamic in the history of art. Art language gained value-method approaches because of women artists' different perspectives. The value placed on personal fantasy resulted from women delving into investigations of personal psychology. Modernist art in the 1930s produced a language for a continual, rather than fixed, creative condition forming lessons for future decades in Western art. But, as Whitney Chadwick wrote in her book *Women, Art, and Society*, "the category 'woman artist' remains an unstable one."

### **Meret Oppenheim**

Meret Oppenheim is one of the first women artists who created a signature visual style which artists still draw on for motivation. It was modernism with a statement, an image that intrigues when the viewer sees it. Meret Oppenheim created *Object(Le Déjeuner en fourrure)*, on the stage of Surrealism with the sarcasm of Dada. The kind of artist's statement as experienced in the "Object" sculpture that sets a standard. Her image set a benchmark for personal art statement, an art definition known to male artists since the Renaissance. Surrealist Man Ray, being interviewed on the subject of what made great art, said, "you only need to make one work that people can remember and the rest is history." Oppenheim's "Object" has that sustaining power. Dada and Surrealism were made tangible to an unsuspecting public in 1937 when the Museum of Modern Art exhibited their sculpture. It is not a large work, not even 3 inches in height with a nine

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<sup>71</sup> Chadwick, 307, 308, 309.

inch diameter. It is the size of a tea cup and saucer which is what it is. These items were purchased in a department store.<sup>72</sup>

Why is this art? Or the question could be why are “things” like common consumer objects considered art? The answer is they are not art. An affirmative answer has to do with the artificiality of art, the intention of design. Meret Oppenheim was a young Surrealist artist operating on the comfortable premise that art functioned through ideas. She learned from the Dadaists that art could be created from the selection of things aside from the use of conventional art materials. She learned from how ideas could not only provoke but that they should provoke, even shock.<sup>73</sup> This credibility came from the Armory Show in New York City. Art critic Harold Rosenberg wrote of the Dadaist ideas of Duchamp, “modern technology exposes the futility of manual copying and forces the artist to reconsider his vocation.”<sup>74</sup> Maybe this is what Oppenheim did when she took the idea Picasso threw at her while drinking coffee, when he said to her “that one could cover just about anything with fur.”<sup>75</sup> Showing some wit she did just that. She carefully lined an ordinary tea cup and saucer with Chinese gazelle pelt.<sup>76</sup> According to her Surrealists friends she was a sculptor. Meret Oppenheim had created a work of content. The judgments were left to the public. Criticisms were often severe, but they are also the stuff that actualizes memorable art.

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<sup>72</sup> Harriet Schoenholz Bee; Cassandra Heliczer, *MOMA Highlights*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 155.

<sup>73</sup> Kleiner and Mamiya, Twelfth Edition, vol. II, 996.

<sup>74</sup> Rosenberg, “Private and Public”, 10.

<sup>75</sup> Harriet Schoenholz Bee; Cassandra Heliczer, “Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure), 155.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 155.

Oppenheim's content of the *Object* is where her art lives. She redesigned this domestic object. Modernism taught artists that if they could affect a powerful visual style, maybe the age had an aesthetic hero. In the Oppenheim age, for the modernistic style to have effect it needed to meet Vincent Van Gogh's "new vision of wider and deeper reality".<sup>77</sup> The *Object* sculpture was of a wider and very different reality. This work was certainly thought up by an individual. To any viewer experiencing this work even today the sense of another reality emerges. The work has no age, it intrigues the senses. The object's designed surfaces of fur in conjunction with the symbol of the object orientates the viewer's imagination to some where else, maybe to a place for tea, maybe an undesirable place. To the European viewer of 1936 or especially the bourgeois viewer this was an intellectual assault. If you took your daily time to drink tea you were civilized. To be "modern" was to be living in a progressive civilization. To find a hair floating in your tea would not only be repulsive it would be unhygienic and uncivilized. If viewer believed in magic, then experiencing these furry household utensils might inspire the imagination to fantasize about other things being covered in a similar way, an entire chair, or even entire room. If there was no magic enjoyment because the mind would not let it happen than looking at this sculpture meant maybe the world was going crazy. Such was the interpreting power of whatever suggestions came to mind when seeing un-heroic, small domestic items belonging to a serving parlor. This message was not from a male ego. This creation was insightful about human behavior, and was precise and perceptive in the selection of forms that could be perceived by viewers. It was a direct confrontation to the values of physical objects common in world of reality. If Duchamp's *Nude* painting conveyed speed and its impact showed pertinence against the classical treatment of the

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<sup>77</sup> Kepes, Jaffé, 137.



nude in art, it's the concept of unreality the viewer is experiencing. Oppenheim's *Object*, in its dormant stillness imprints with an enduring vertices. When comparing Oppenheim's work to Duchamp, or Van Gogh by saying her artwork reached the definition of "object reality"—a theme which had obsessed Van Gogh—is to place her work on an art issue platform.<sup>78</sup> Why was she using foreign material to make art? Why has she forgotten to relate to people in her manner of work? Maybe she should be doing something else? These are general questions that come to a viewer when another language communicates to those areas of the mind that rational thought find unfamiliar. Being in the age of modernism she was doing something that was in her best interest as an individual. Through her Surrealistic approach to art-making, she was connecting with the subjective side of herself and presenting another reality to the viewer. Oppenheim's intended art form has content which involves the viewer's senses, and activates the mind—this is why her visual language is fine art.

### **Eva Hesse: 1960s**

Eva Hesse was a 1960s sculptor whose creative vision cycles back to the modernist approach to inventing new art. Her interest in art started when she was young; and attending the School of Industrial Art in New York, where she studied window dressing. She attended Pratt for a short period but did not stay there, and instead went to Yale, where she earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1959.<sup>79</sup> Yale provided the opportunity for her to do the personal self delving she would embark on as an artist for the rest of her life. She wrote of her experience there, "they don't approve of

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<sup>78</sup> Shapiro, "On A Painting Of Van Gogh", 93.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, Another Hesse, 220.

experimentation, search, freedom, or any form of expression. Painting is from the mind, not the hand, this is Yale Law.” Josef Albers of the famous Bauhaus was now teaching at Yale. She stated later that her preferred method was that of the Abstract Expressionist group,<sup>80</sup> a method which stemmed from Clement Greenberg’s thinking: “Purity in art consists in the acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art.”<sup>81</sup> This last reading on Greenberg’s modernists’ art-making strategies is a very real example of what can be called “art issues”. Eva Hesse attended schools where her art studio teachers held the ideas of the 1950s generation. This generation was also attuned to the “Communication Crisis” issues which C.P. Snow and Gyorgy Kepes worked.

Eva Hesse was thirty-four when she died in 1970. She had become well known in the New York of the 1960s, when much of sculpture and painting belonged to the movements of Pop Art and Minimalism. What made her sculpture different from this group was her interest in using industrial materials to create her work. She used, metal, cheesecloth, latex, rope, rubber, wire mesh, materials she could be physical with the way a ceramicists use their hands to shape and knead their ideas into forms.<sup>82</sup> Here color selections were often monochromatic variations of values spreading into lighter or darker natural colors. Her creations sometimes seemed like empty containers made of metal or latex. Her sculptures often looked like bent armatures in the form of empty square frames, or hollow translucent cylinders. Her scale would be body size, the width of her pieces were the reach of her arm’s length, or two lengths. I make reference to body

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 219.

<sup>81</sup> Kleiner and Mamiya, “Modernism, Formalism, and Clement Greenberg”, “Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism”, edited by J.O’Brien, 4 vols. , 1034.

<sup>82</sup> Chadwick, “Gender, Race, and Modernism after the Second World War”, 339.

measurements because her sculpture appeared to be formed as she moved around the materials, assembling this end to that or hanging an extension of something else she might fashion as she sat somewhere else where more materials happen to be. Hesse explored what materials would do, she bent them, broke sections, stretched, pulled, hung up units, painted, sanded, and attached them. Pieces were scattered and multiplied, and her results appear hard or soft. She was trying to fine potentials as she worked, and was fascinated by her own thinking. Her work would start out to be a single piece, and then would multiple into repeated unites and grow into an installation joining walls to ceiling. This is the way sculptors enjoy being involved with their work. It was a modernism approach, to create adventure with your work. Anne Middleton Wagner, in her book *Three Artists (Three Women)*, writes, “To think of the subject of Hesse’s work as being, in some profound sense, ‘human’ experience, rather than specifically female, is to make better sense of her ambitions as a modernist.”<sup>83</sup> She lived in New York City where the art center existed for the most serious art making and where she felt “inherent rights” to be an artist. In an interview about artist Carl Andre, she revealed her own vision in this way: “I am interested in solving an unknown factor of art and an unknown factor of life. For me it’s a total image that has to do with me and life.”<sup>84</sup> There are similarities with her intentions here to the intentions Van Gogh wrote about in his letters to his brother. This past May the New York Jewish Museum exhibited a collection of her most notable past work. This work was done before 1970 and has an organic presence that communicates to a wide range of conceptual and visceral sensations. The young twenty-

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<sup>83</sup> Wagner, “Another Hesse”, 276.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

year-olds experiencing these works for the first time at the exhibit were seeing work with its own reality born out of Modernism.

### **Today's World**

During the time of the great art movements in the late nineteenth century the media of photography because of its technological nature worked well as an investigative tool for the human condition. Young artists wanted to express the “inner state”. This concern for individual expression originated with Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh, and Cezanne in the first phases of Modernism. Photography was the advancing force in contemporary visual communication because of its ability to question aesthetic concepts. Czech Photographer Váchal in his 1906 self portrait of himself as *Christ Crucified* created a form of art that today would be considered as a deconstructed perspective.<sup>85</sup>

In the twentieth century the industrial era accelerated the pace of life and transformed the modern world. Technologies from the applied sciences and the communications medias have fundamentally altered people's lives. Philosopher Bertrand Russell considered the abstract propositions in mathematics as absolutes. James Joyce could not hold on to standard concepts for plots in his writing. This was so evident in his book *Ulysses*.<sup>86</sup> If there is fragmentation in the way today's world functions, it is due to modern technological diversity and consumer choices. These choices create a myriad of issue which today's artists feel they must address and

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>86</sup> Coplestone, 328.

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make personal statement about. Women artists seem to have more of a need to venture into concerns that involve their lives through as honest an approach as possible. Time is the big factor in our contemporary way of living. Umberto Eco, from his book on *History of Beauty*, writes, “The mass media no longer present any unified model, any single ideal of beauty. They can retrieve, even for an advertising campaign destined to last only a week, all the experimental work of the avant-garde, at the same time offer models from the 1920’s, 1930’s, 1940’s and 1950’s.” This is the challenge artists face today. This period which today bears the label of Post Modernism, contains a pluralistic and historical approach towards creating art. Women artists for the last fifteen years have been reconfiguring the many new art definitions. The “word art” is blurring to the new and more fashionable term “Visual Language”. It is a term used to describe art making, but it includes all the electrical media— film, video, television, computers, ipods, cell phones, hand-held cameras, video game transport equipment, blackberries, and the internet—all things which reproduce and convey information to other people. Only time will confirm what the new directions of Visual Language will contribute to society.

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### Figures

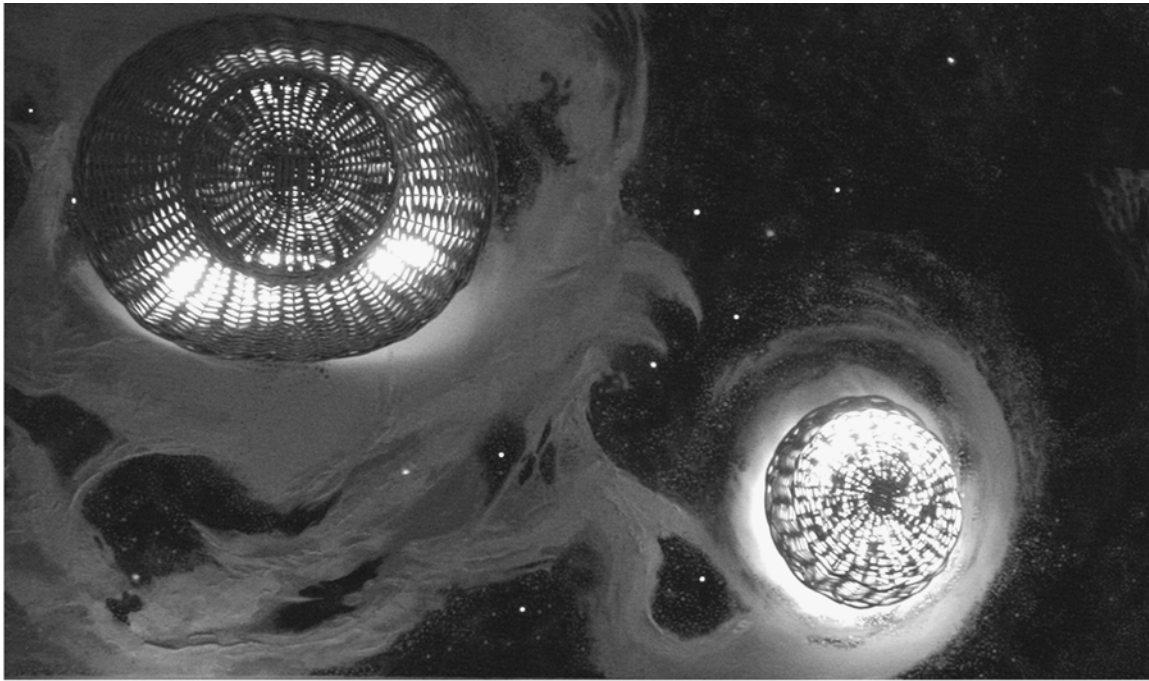


Figure 1 Universe Genesis II, painting mixed media, electric lights, audio CD player, paint on canvas, 6'x4' ft. 1995

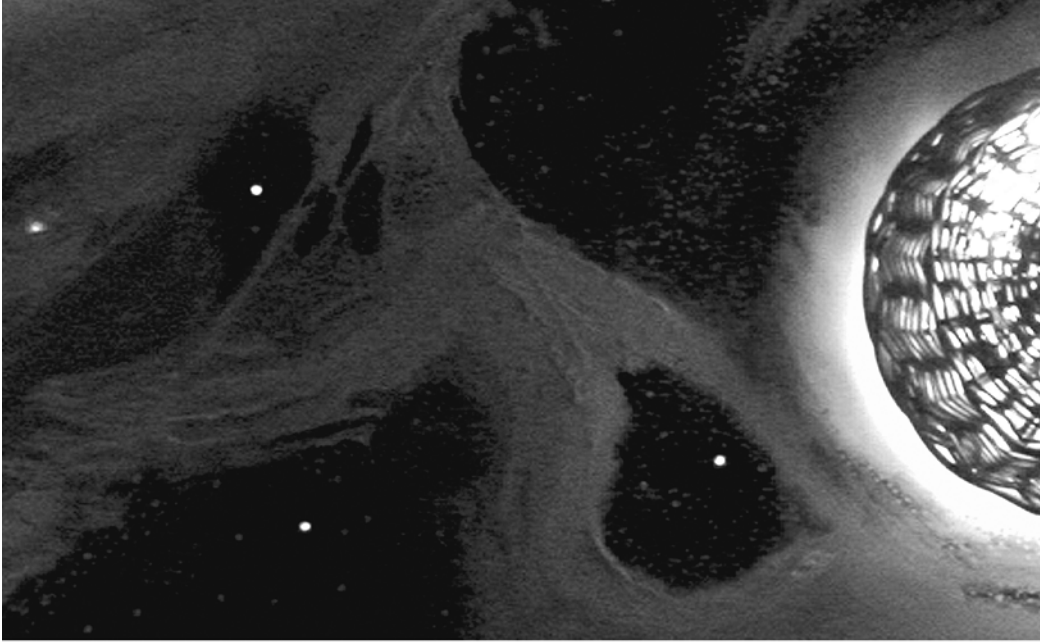


Figure 2 Universe Genesis II painting, detail view of created deep space images with mixed media. 1995

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