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From Earth to Sky: (Observations of) a Transformation

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Abstract. When Galileo first turned his telescope to the night sky in 1609, our relationship with the cosmos was forever transformed, providing glimpses of space without the frame provided by our grounding on Earth. My paintings have followed a similar journey, moving from the Earth to the sky, from the concrete to the sublime. Earlier work is grounded, literally, with landscapes and sky. Increasingly, however, abstraction replaces representation, and my paintings leave the comfortable Earth behind, ultimately moving into the cosmos. Surfaces are built up with veils of light, sometimes smooth, sometimes bituminous, producing a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. Viewers are no longer attached to the Earth: they are transformed, much as Galileo must have been transformed when he first saw the night sky without Earth's frame.

My paintings have always been a reach for the sublime, an invitation to contemplate space–an invitation to wonder. They are metaphors for that which is not visible in the nameable. They are meant to imply, to question, and ultimately to transport.

Throughout the course of this paper, I will take you through an overview of my paintings that record my efforts to represent the intangible, unnamable universe that humans have pondered for millennia, and that Galileo opened a new window onto some 400 years ago. This talk is autobiographical, and uses my own journey from a world framed by the human experience to images of unbounded space, revealing the search for the sublime. During the course of this talk you will see my work turn into something akin to a disappearing act. From series to series elements become transformed until space becomes deeper and deeper and careens into the infinite.

The sublime can take many forms. In my own work it began in the most grounded way, describing small still life cubes. I was interested in expressing a volumetric yet compact space (Figure 1, left panel).

In the series of interior space paintings that followed the earlier still lifes, the small boxes left their condensed arena began to encompass the larger box in which we reside (Figure 1, right panel). Certain formal issues continued to take center stage; the vertical was still an implied reference to the human figure and the horizontal, a reference to the clear and near horizon. This work described layers of space and the wonder of light. These elements, meandering between horizontals and verticals, were meant to provoke a psychological response to that which lay beyond (Figure 2, upper left panel).

My move to the dry American southwest in 1978 profoundly changed my relationship to these spatial cubes. The unrelenting light of New Mexico virtually collapsed atmospheric perspective. The dense and familiar atmosphere of the east was gone, and in its place was an open and ever-present light (Figure 2, upper right panel).

Figure 1. Left panel: *Still Life with Yellow Box*, 1977, oil on linen, 20″ × 16″. Right panel: *Studio Interior*, 1978, oil on linen, 74″ × 50″. (Credit: E. A. Feinberg)

Space, as we normally experience it, became so shallow that it almost seemed flat. I realized that I could no longer be tied to describing tables, boxes, and interior spaces volumetrically. Rather, I began to manipulate space, to invent color, and to pick those objects I would treat volumetrically, and those I chose to flatten. I approached my subjects with a new sense of inquiry and a new sense of invention.

In 1984 my work shifted again. I received a year-long artist-in-residence grant from the Roswell Museum and Art Center in southeastern New Mexico.

My work in Roswell began with paintings of tables, boxes, and the geometric figures and solids to which I had been accustomed. I continued to paint the still life; however, after a time, the pull of the vast southwestern landscape slowly crept into my work. An opening, a window, appeared in the still life paintings and the landscape, albeit dark and uninhabited, entered. Soon, however, the exteriors became flooded with light (Figure 2, lower panel).

What I saw in this landscape, away from the city of Albuquerque, was the return of aerial perspective. The moisture in southern New Mexico, particularly at dusk, was just enough to describe a perspective I had known virtually all my life. Perched atop mesas and cliffs I saw a distance that appeared vast and deep. Every evening I trekked outside of Roswell to my favorite overlooks above Bottomless Lakes State Park, to observe the sunset. The land was inflected with spellbinding color in the fading light of dusk. Ultimately, this time of day became my touchstone. The still life to which I was so attached became second to a more and more infinite space. A visual dialogue emerged, encompassing a provocative set of oppositions: the ordinary interior and the extraordinary exterior; the human made objects and nature; the hard edges of a still life and the soft edges of a landscape; flat interior space and deep exterior space; a controlled interior light and the less predictable light of nature (Figure 3, upper panel).

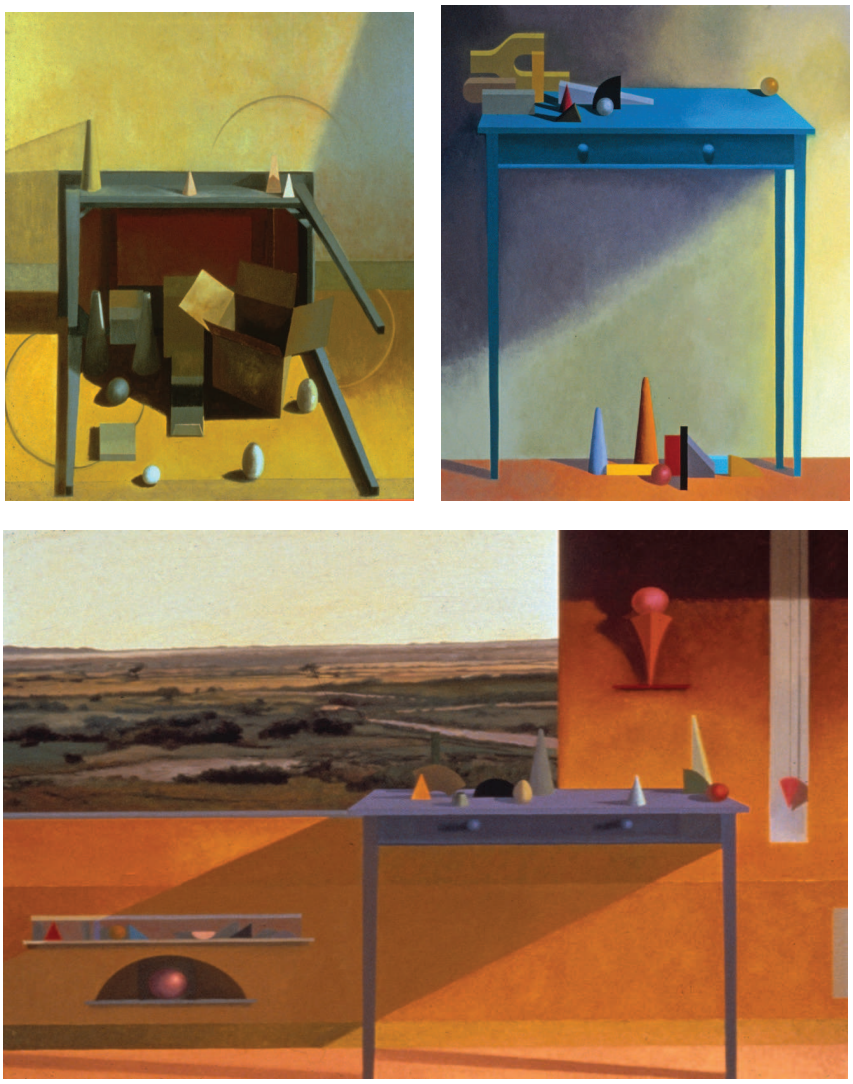

Figure 2. Upper left panel: *Still Life with Box*, 1982, oil on canvas, 62″×62″. Upper pight panel: *Dream 2*, 1984, oil on linen, 60″ × 50″. Lower panel: *Eudaemonia*, 1985, oil on linen, 88″ × 92″. (Credit: E. A. Feinberg)

I was engaged with the still life that resided in the foreground of these landscape paintings for a short time thereafter, but soon, the still life exited from my canvases, and my focus turned outward, towards an uninterrupted landscape (Figure 3, lower panel).

During this year, I was also busy, as artists often are, sending out set after set of slides to galleries in New York. As these paintings evolved into pure landscape, there's a short story I'd like to share with you about a letter I received from gallery in New York. This particular letter caught my attention partly because of its elegance and

Figure 3. Upper panel: *Incantation*, 1987, oil on linen, 29″ × 38″. Lower panel: *Dusk*, 1987, oil on linen, 12″ × 12″. (Credit: E. A. Feinberg)

partly because its brutality. The letter read, “Dear Ms. Feinberg, your skies are some of the most beautiful I have ever seen. Your landscapes, however, have all the appeal of a low-calorie lunch”. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this gallerist was predicting the future direction of my paintings.

The installation shots shown in the upper panels of Figure 4 give a sense of the scale of these paintings. Both images are from an exhibition at Watson/deNagy & Company in Houston, Texas, in 1982.

Figure 4. Upper panels: Gallery installation (two views), Watson/deNagy & Company, Houston, Texas, 1982. Lower Panel: *Ocean Watch*, 1990, oil on linen, 72″ × 72″. (Credit: E. A. Feinberg)

In spite of that letter from New York, pure landscape endured; my exploration of this space was not yet complete. I continued to paint the landscape: my work ranged in size from 12 inches to 12 feet.

There was a point, however, as I continued to paint the landscape motif, that I began to feel as if I were repeating myself. In my view one of the great sins of any art form is pursuing, knowing that the work is becoming rote and predictable. I realized, with some sadness, that I had to abandon the landscape.

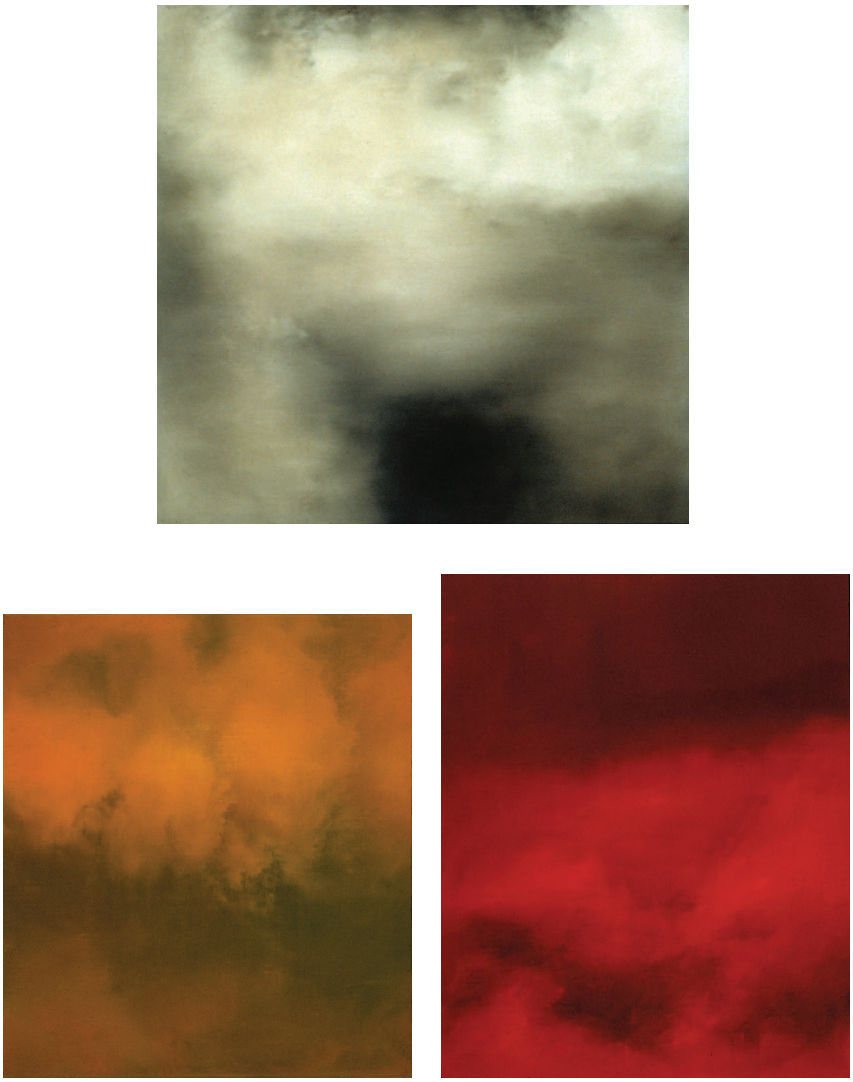

Figure 5. Upper panel: *Nocturne III*, 1999, oil on linen, $19\frac{3}{4}'' \times 19\frac{3}{4}''$. Lower left panel: *Nocturne XVIII*, 1999, oil on linen, $14'' \times 13''$. Lower right panel: *Nocturne XXXII*, 2000, oil on linen, $66'' \times 54''$. (Credit: E. A. Feinberg)

A series of events eventually led me to make paintings of the ocean (Figure 4, lower panel). I intuited that this would be the next logical step in describing deep space. As I worked along the coast of northern California and Oregon the land became replaced by the far reach of water: a series of ocean paintings emerged that lasted over two years.

Figure 6. Left panel: *Ocular VI*, 1996, oil on panel, 48″ diameter. Right panel: *Ocular V*, 2009, oil on panel, 36″ diameter. (Credit: E. A. Feinberg)

Again, after some time, as my engagement with the sea began to wane, I realized that that New York gallerist was right: it was my love of the sky, that ever-changing light, those ever moving mists and clouds that truly enchanted me (Figure 5).

I had moved from the namable space of recognizable subjects to the free-floating enigmatic, at times elegiac world of light and space. Reference to the verticals of the human form or to the horizontals of the landscape vanished, and suddenly I was freed from gravity. The infinite became my touchstone.

I could never have arrived at this point without having first painted the still life, then the space of the room, then the vista through a window out into nature, then the vast landscape with those soon to be retired objects, then the pure landscape, then the seascape, and now, where the paintings have moved up into the sky.

I refer to the images in this suite as paintings of "atmospheric events". A shift of color, a change in light, a softening of edge, the deepening of space, became a metaphor for the sublime, for the mystery of the invisible behind an ever-changing atmosphere.

In 1995 I traveled to the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena, California. There, I was introduced to hundreds and hundreds of photos taken from the Hubble Telescope, and these myriad images became the springboard to my next series of paintings. And so began the tondi (Figure 6).

What I find so provocative about the Hubble images of our stellarsphere are the ways in which these vistas are inextricably bound to parallel psychological ideas. For example, light describes the psychological parallel of illumination. Spatial elements embrace the philosophical components of finitude and infinity, and scale moves physically and psychologically from the infinite into free falling space.

And so my work on the rectangle shifted as I realized that in order to express the infinite, the vertical (a direct reference to the human figure) and horizontal (the reference for landscape or horizon) had to disappear. And it was this disappearance of the rectangle that yielded the circular or tondo format.

The tondo, telescopic in nature, has neither corners nor edges. As result it "tumbles up" our conventional handholds and dislocates us from traditional benchmarks, which have served to define our sense of gravity within a picture plane. It circumvents

Figure 7. Left panel: Museum installation, University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2006. Right panel: Museum installation (eight tondi), *The Starry Messenger: Galileo's Vision in 21st Century Art*, Louisiana Museum of Art and Science, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2009. (Credit: E. A. Feinberg)

the psychological conventions we normally associate with the ever-present rectangle, rendering possible new ways of experiencing and contemplating vision.

As I conclude, I will show you another tondo (Figure 6, right panel) along with some installation shots (Figure 7) from recent exhibitions at the University of New Mexico (2006) and the Louisiana Museum of Art and Science in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (2009).

What I am expressing in these tondi is an ongoing and potent dialectic. It is, on the one hand, reassuring, on the other uncertain. For these images speak to our fragility as well as to our persistence in enduring. They are meant to challenge our ideas about beauty and the sublime. They are invitations to reframe, expand and refine our perceptions by encouraging a consideration of continuity among disparate phenomena. They implore us to look at the role we have in a far vaster universe, and to ponder how, rather like the course of life, the nature they describe is ultimately random and unpredictable in the way of destiny.

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