

# Tomaselli's Postmodern Gnosticism

DANIEL PINCHBECK

Fred Tomaselli's paintings are saturated with cosmic space. The figures in many of his works stand amidst swirling blackness, the antique night of the solitary Romantic or Medieval melancholic. Engulfed by cosmic space, the collaged heroes and heroines in works like *EXPECTING TO FLY* (2002) enjoy or endure their own implosion or atomization, as if every fragment of themselves simultaneously subdivides and seeks to flee from the collapsing entity trying to hold the structure together. In other works, like *ECHO, WOW, AND FLUTTER* (2001), there are no figures but only patterns or criss-crossing loops suggesting electromagnetic fields, the rephrasing of matter as informational bits, energy, or vibrating waveforms. These patterns remind me of the entoptic imagery I sometimes encounter when I awaken into a hypnagogic state to find swarms of sparks like fireworks swirling across the velvety night skies of my eyes-closed view screen. They also call to mind the "Zero Point Field," the startling discovery of contemporary physics that "empty" space is actually a crackling quantum sea containing vast amounts of energy.

Tomaselli is known for pressing pills and the leaves of psychoactive plants into the surfaces of his paintings. This humorously literal use of drugs reminds us that drugs—and the ferociously time-and-paradigm-smashing trips they sometimes engender—are really just symbols of that encounter with the Other that is the suppressed base of human existence. Tomaselli's work seduces us toward the edge of that nonhuman Otherness whose realms have always been explored by occultists and shamans and clairvoyants. It is the terrain that Rainer Maria Rilke indicated in *The Duino Elegies*, when he wrote, "Beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror ... and we are so awed because it serenely disdains / to annihilate us."<sup>1</sup>)

But what is this Otherness that beckons and terrifies us while it serenely disdains to finish the job? How can we hope to define or even think about it? How can we allow its presence into the "rational" constructs of the contemporary world without collapsing these constructs? Part of the answer lies in art, which can shine like a flashlight beam, exposing ever-more of the glittering mica and towering stalagmites inside the vast, dark, unexplored cave of the self and the soul. Art can be the necessary prelude, the allusive introduction to the places where a future science, inconceivable to us now, will someday follow.

I am writing this in the wake of the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster, as the embittered nations of a ruined world seem to be pushing toward multiple Armageddons—nuclear, chemi-

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Fred Tomaselli

FRED TOMASELLI, EXPECTING TO FLY, 2002, photomontage, leaves, acrylic, gouache, and resin on wood panel, 48 x 48" / IN ETWARTUNG ZU FLIEGEN, Photocollage, Blätter, Acryl, Gouache und Harz auf Holzspanel, 122 x 122 cm. (PHOTO: JAMES COHAN GALLERY, NEW YORK)

cal, ecological, and social. Is it possible that the violent contradictions of the present time have less to do with globalization, technology, greed, and racial enmity than with the titanic pressures building up as the old conceptual model collapses while a new one self-assembles? "If quantum theory were applied to biology on a larger scale, we would be viewed more as a complex network of energy fields in some sort of dynamic interplay with our chemical cellular systems," writes Lynne McTaggart in *The Field*, one journalistic effort to describe this new, nascent paradigm. "The world would exist as a matrix of indivisible interrelation."<sup>2)</sup>

While only one cataclysm among many, the fall of Columbia seems particularly poignant because the space program symbolized our faith in the power of materialist science and technology. Coming at this time, when the once-glittering promises of modern civilization have lost their luster, the accident represents a bitter betrayal of that faith. Outer space seems to have slammed the door on our attempts to woo it through the metal machines and phallic rockets we are so proud of. I suspect we will only get off the planet by going deeper into the earth, which means, alchemically, deeper into the mysteries of the inner realms of consciousness.

Psychedelic drugs are one means of encountering the shocking Otherness that lurks within the interior of the earth and the self, and Tomaselli acknowledges their influence on his work. They are, as writer Ralph Metzner put it, "Gnostic catalysts." What follows the personal apocalypse of the psychedelic trip is the necessary restructuring of the Ego and, possibly, the uneasy awareness that the world is woven together by invisible forces and supersensible beings with different agendas from our own. No longer dismissible as superstitious residue, myth reveals itself as living reality.

After my own psychedelic apocalypse, I turned to the Western esoteric tradition for answers—or at least better questions—and eventually I found the works of the Austrian clairvoyant Rudolf Steiner, founder of Anthroposophy. An esoteric Christian, Steiner parses the Biblical devil into opposing forces striving to divert human development: Lucifer, the "light-bringer," who draws us up toward imagination, fantasy, and pride; and Ahriman, the dark earth spirit of the Zoroastrian faith, who pulls us down into the mineral world, materiality, material technology, and death. This modern age represents the temporary ascendance of



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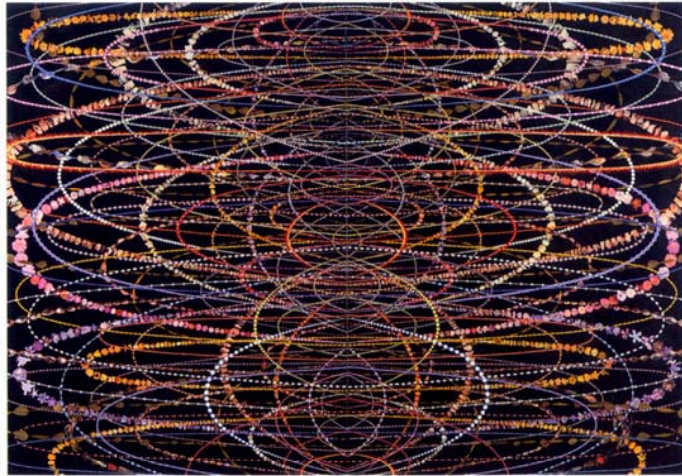
Ahriman, who wants to make the world into a machine. Lucifer, a dangerous but necessary spur to human evolution, dominated during the epoch of pre-historical civilizations, and we now need to seek his influence again to counteract the Ahrimanic impulse of our age.

For Steiner, reincarnation is a fact. Not only human beings, but the earth itself reincarnates—this is currently the fourth incarnation of the earth. In fact, humanity exists in order to transform this greater being, the earth (though we are doing a poor job of it at this time), and we keep coming back until we have completed the job. Each incarnation of the earth represents an evolutionary step for humanity. We developed rational cognition and empiricism in the last centuries—which required temporarily cutting ourselves off from “supersensible” perception—so that we could cognize our way back into the lost spiritual realms as equals. “Just as there would be no life in the usual sense of the word if there was no death, there can be no real knowledge of the visible world without insight into the supersensible realm,” he wrote in *An Outline of Esoteric Science*.<sup>3)</sup> “All knowledge of the visible must immerse itself in the invisible again and again in order to be able to evolve.”

In *Imaginary Landscapes*, William Irwin Thompson characterizes “the Steinerian vision” as “one that looks at the human as so completely embedded in the animal, vegetal, and mineral evolution of the solar system that it becomes nonsense to separate a fictive ‘matter’ from mind, and a mere three dimensions from ten.... All of the seemingly mystical perceptions of Steiner have a biological relevance that fits a new kind of science, and a new kind of culture.”<sup>4)</sup> The impulse of works such as Tomaselli’s *UNTITLED (EXPULSION)* (2000) pushes beyond surrealism or postmodernism into a new realm that integrates science and mysticism. The Void expulses taxonomies of insects and flowers, while Adam and Eve are revealed as anatomical specimens.

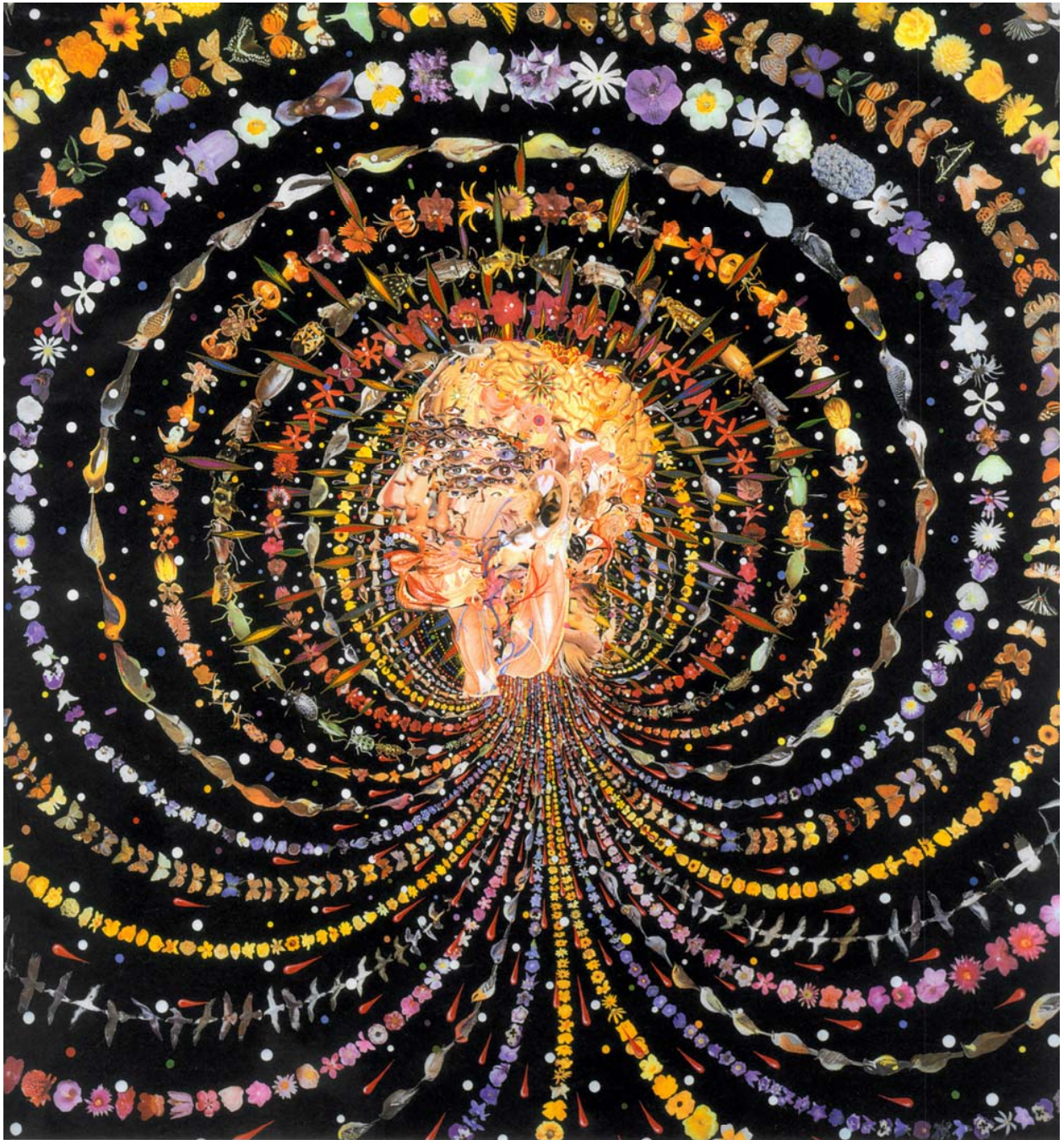
In the new paradigm, mind and matter are not separate; therefore, articulation and understanding must be seen as actual forces that directly impact the physical world. For Steiner and other occultists, the physical world is a kind of symbolic alphabet or mirror of the spiritual realms. It is the art piece of the “higher hierarchies,” representing levels of conscious and spiritual development far beyond our current state. Through our intellectual intuition and creative efforts, we can learn to read the world as an occult script. Steiner writes, “If you succeed in bringing about the metamorphosis of intellectualism into artistic perception, and are able to develop this artistic approach into an instrument of perception, you will find in the outer macrocosm the phenomenon that exists in the human being.”<sup>5)</sup> Tomaselli works intuitively in this arena. Paintings such as *BREATHING HEAD* (2002) suggest processes of transfiguration or transformation from the physical world into astral realms beyond our perceptual frame.

The clairvoyant Steiner described the relationships between macrocosm and microcosm with extraordinary—some would say absurd—precision. In his book, *Harmony of the Creative*



FRED TOMASELLI, *ECHO, WOW AND FLUTTER*, 2000, photocollage, acrylic, and resin on wood panel, 84 x 120" / *ECHO, JAULEN UND FLATTERN*, Photocollage, Acryl und Harz auf Holzpaneel, 213,4 x 304,8 cm.





FRED TOMASELLI, BREATHING HEAD, 2002, photocollage, leaves, acrylic, gouache, and resin on wood panel, 60 x 60" /  
ATMENDER KOPF, Photocollage, Blätter, Acryl, Gouache und Harz auf Holzpaneel, 152,4 x 152,4 cm.



Fred Tomaselli

Word, he showed how different animals relate to larger spiritual processes. He characterized the cow, for instance, as the animal of spiritual digestion. Through its constant grazing, the cow spiritualizes earthly matter, reversing the destructive processes of human existence, which constantly remove spiritual substance from the earth. According to Steiner, if the cow was not performing its function of spiritual digestion, the earth would soon become so hard and unyielding that we would be unable to walk upon it.

Steiner connects the creatures of the air to different aspects of our mental processes. Birds represent thought. We have our thoughts as the birds have their plumage: “Our thoughts flow from the brain in the same way as the feathers stream out from the eagle,” he writes.<sup>6)</sup> “The thoughts given to human beings are the astral aspect of the development of feathers ... A feather holds something tremendous: it holds the secret of how thoughts are formed.” Butterflies, delicate beings of the “light ether,” are connected to the process of memory: “It is memory-thoughts which live in the butterfly.”<sup>7)</sup> We create interior wombs for our memories, just as the caterpillar weaves its cocoon. And bats, for Steiner, are linked to dreams. In the same delicate, unreal way that bats flit through the twilight, dreams flit through the mind: “The earth is surrounded by fluttering butterflies—they are cosmic memory; by the kingdom of the birds—this is cosmic thinking; and by the bats—they are cosmic dream, cosmic dreaming. The flying dreams of the cosmos actually rush through space as bats. And as dreams love the twilight, so, too, does the cosmos love the twilight and send the bat through space.”<sup>8)</sup>

For Steiner, such correspondences are not just poetic or metaphoric; they are part of a higher order of perception that can be substantiated through inner work and esoteric development—what he called “spiritual science.” To make room for a thinker like Steiner, we need to reevaluate our basic understanding of myth, “to move from a postmodernist sensibility in which myth is regarded as an absolute and authoritarian system of discourse to a planetary culture in which myth is regarded as isomorphic, but not identical, to scientific narratives,” according to William Irwin Thompson.<sup>9)</sup>

Tomaselli’s paintings are like fables synthesizing contemporary concerns with the body and the deconstructed self with Gnostic concepts or mythic archetypes that he neither ironizes nor trivializes. The figures in works such as *FIELD GUIDES* (2003) stand upon the earth like flayed saints, both terrified of and yearning for contact with that ineffable and infinite “Otherness” that our deluded culture desperately seeks to deny. His work points to the shocking but necessary moment when we recognize our current Ahrimanic civilization as a fragment of cosmic history and seek to escape the amnesiac underworld in which we lie entombed.

1) Rainer Maria Rilke, “The First Duino Elegy” in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 1980).

2) Lynne McTaggart, *The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 12.

3) Rudolf Steiner, *An Outline of Esoteric Science* (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Anthroposophic Press, 1997), p. 61.

4) William Irwin Thompson, *Imaginary Landscape: Making Worlds of Myth and Science* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), p. 66.

5) Rudolf Steiner, *Harmony of the Creative Word* (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Anthroposophic Press, 2001), p. 20.

6) *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

7) *Ibid.*, p. 83.

8) *Ibid.*

9) Thompson, *op. cit.* p. 63.