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To Whom It May Concern:

The enclosed slides are from David White and are examples of his "Elmo" style in which a fanciful paper montage figure (an apotropaion) is the vehicle for an expressive odyssey.

While influenced by the Italian "Metaphysicals" - particularly DeChirico and Morandi, the paintings in acrylic reveal their own qualities independent of any movement and embody concerns different from orthodox surrealism.

The artist holds a degree in philosophy from Illinois College, Jacksonville, Illinois and has a number of styles that he has developed over two decades. While not having studied art formally, he nonetheless has worked a number of years with a competent instructor.

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Who is Elmo?.....and what is Elmoism?

Elmo is an "apotropaion", a talisman created out of scrap paper - to be exact, manila envelope, for his head, old newsprint for his torso and brown paper (as in shopping bag paper) for his bottom or pedestal.

Elmo is distinguished by two large flat sky blue disks for eyes. Eyes indeed for an apotropaion deflects with his strikingly brilliant eyes all disasters, evil intents and malicious eyebeams directed at the innocent. This is, of course, an ancient perception of how mischief comes about. There are malevolent people who desire the ruin of the good!

This primitive preoccupation with warding off evil forces is the earliest religious awakening. Man resides in a mysterious and, at times, a hostile world where spirits, demons and unfriendly men roam.

As an artistic invention, Elmo is a "vehicle" for creative expression. This expression is no longer concerned with the kind of magic an apotropaion would have embodied in remote times. Elmo today is "irony" and "ironic man" as he moves about in the contemporary world discovers an affinity for "apotropaic man".

Ironic man is educated in the arts and sciences and questions his world according to its ever-shifting paradigms: is the universe only matter? Or is mind the true basis of reality?

Apotropaic man knew a world of change and dangers and felt the need to protect himself at all times. The spirit world was all pervading and invited caution, fear, awe and reverence.

Ironic man rediscovers apotropaic man deep within his twilight soul. It is here in this realm of the ambiguous, in this strange crepuscular world of dream, where the meeting of the two occurs.

In a playful fashion, Elmo was constructed and his adventures include his anatomy. Made of debris that is commonly discarded, Elmo exalts what is ignored or marginalized. His newsprint proclaims nothing but an echo of the culture which ignores him. Elmo is both manifest and unmanifest in the contemporary world.

This twilight soul of contemporary ironic man searches for expression and is not easily content with the glib and the superficial. The world remains a mysterious place and now that science has turned its gaze upon the mind, the twilight soul of ironic man confronts its apotropaic other and the two converse in a manner both penetrating and playful. This is Elmo and everything else becomes a kind of adventure in Elmoism.

What is a shadow? In a painting a shadow is a structural component; but a shadow may also symbolize conditionality where time passes, lights grow and diminish, the very phenomenal world we find ourselves in changes from day to night, months to years.

In Byzantine painting and in Old Russian icons, there are no shadows. Shadows signify the temporal whereas the images of saints reveal a world of eternity beyond shadows and sorrows. No shadows are permitted in the world of the sacred. Gold backgrounds frustrate perspective and enhance the sense of the transcendent and the timeless.

In the Plotinus Quest series, you see the contrasting symbols of column and pyramid – where perspective now expresses longing and deep nostalgia.

In the past, behind statues of emperors the great columns stood imposing world order and the ruling mandate. The shadow-casting column of Caesar (the phenomenal world) and the golden shadowless pyramid (absolute world) across the brilliant blue Mediterranean Sea creates a metaphysical drama.

The Egyptians, in an ancient pyramid text, held the view that a pyramid is a “ramp of sunlight” upon which the soul of the deceased pharaoh would ascend to the heavens. This is the esoteric meaning of the pyramid: enlightenment as ascent and disengagement – rising to full emancipation.

That dark draped figure is the image of the inscrutable “monachos” or one of the few “monachoi” – solitary ones who have become unified with the Ultimate. This is a Gnostic term that expresses the urgency of this quest for the one.

DeChirico and before him in the 19th century – Böcklin, explored this draped figure of remoteness and contemplation – depicting such a figure as a strange phantom. A phantom lost in its own depths. For DeChirico, this phantom was the “dark philosopher”, Heraclitus.

I have tried to create a world of deep silence. A static Mediterranean world where intense color and severe architectural form evoke an inner sense of spiritual transformation. The Mediterranean becomes the mysterious yonder shore – the much sought after yonder shore of ancient sages. This, then, is the yonder shore where the “monachoi” strive in their trances to attain; but only “death” – psychological death to this world, will release them. Only a psychological death liberates from the prison of Caesar’s realm. The “monachoi” dwell within the prison and yet are free from its walls, its limits, and its despair. They know that mind (nous) is beyond all limitation and that the noetic quest is the truth-seekers quest.

What we see is the quest of the contemplator.....that phantom figure is the philosopher, Plotinus.

Alone.....and he spoke of the flight of the alone to the Alone.....here his spiritual solitude echoes through the sunlit Mediterranean world.

The Mediterranean Sea is just a horizontal band of blue; the blue of ancient heroes – Odysseus!

It is that same Mediterranean recorded in the Book of Genesis as the “waters”. The adventurous waters of Homer; the primal waters of the bible. Always the Mediterranean!

This Mediterranean is also the empire of Rome where our contemplator finds himself and his quest for the – *one*!

Beyond the blue band of sea lies a metaphoric pyramid with the apex hidden. Golden and shadowless – the timeless world of mind and ascent.

Before the pyramid is the white column representing Caesar’s authority and power. The column is stasis as the pyramid is transcendence. Note that the column casts a shadow – we are in the realm of time; of coming and going; of birth and death.....we are in the realm of sorrows.....

The pyramid beyond draws the questing soul to a higher order than that of Caesar. This does not represent “*Contemptus Mundi*” but rather the quest for completion.

What vision is our contemplator seeking? Is it not *anamnēsis* – a remembering; the recollection of a pristine and glorious realm forgotten?

Alone.....very much alone – ascending to the light with eyes of light – to that ineffable pyramid.....and the apex beyond.....

THE PYRAMID: ANCIENT AND MODERN

The evocative power of a pyramid is described by the 17th century thinker Leibniz, who was in possession of both an abstract (he invented calculus) and visual imagination. Poetically he wrote of his vision of God's perfection as a pyramid:

“The halls rose in a pyramid, becoming even more beautiful as one mounted toward the apex, and representing more beautiful worlds. Finally they reached the highest one which completed the pyramid, and which was the most beautiful of all....for the pyramid had an apex, but no base; it went on increasing to infinity.”

The above from Leibniz's THEODICY demonstrates the constant nature of the pyramid as a spiritual entity persisting in time. This lofty sense of ascent, of transport to a higher reality was true of ancient Egypt; it is true in the baroque fantasy of Leibniz. The awesomeness of infinity! That the apex of the pyramid continues increasing to infinity makes Leibniz's vision congruent with Plotinus' quest (the flight of the alone to the alone). Leibniz and Plotinus express their aesthetic mysticism through personal experience. Since antiquity, the pyramid has represented a deeper spiritual perception of the world. A perception that there is an underlying unity to all that is; that all is one.

In the Plotinus series – there is a kind of contemporary antiquity. If the architecture is rendered too correct – it sinks into mere academism; if the architecture consists of lonely ruins with broken columns – then it is romanticism. I have tried to avoid these two extremes and paint architecture suggestive of a quasi-mathematical nature which I hope expresses metaphysical longing.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PLOTINUS STYLE

"...The ancients loved sham perspectives (these are always present in Pompeian painting) and sham marble, and even false windows." Mario Praz noted this fact in his book, La Casa della Vita.

In my Plotinus series, sham perspectives and such Pythagorean fantasies were invented to create an atmosphere of timelessness.

The ancients, and we today, feel something mystical about architectural glimpses; fugitive encounters with buildings under construction or demolition.

We create buildings and are either their masters or their prisoners. Architecture liberates or enslaves!

Perspectives are metaphors for metaphysical insights. A world opening – a distant horizon viewed - may give us a feeling of emancipation.

Doors and windows, columns and walls have their own poetics.

This poetics may evoke cities and civilizations from remote times; also the sense of the eternal is possible with evocative geometry. A geometry of order and light repeating itself in a continuous way generates the sense of the "infinite". Is space bounded or unbounded? Infinity is a concept that is disturbing.

Perhaps architecture is the very precondition for all abstract thought. Without architecture, it is difficult to imagine mathematics, philosophy and cosmology having appeared.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE PLOTINUS STYLE

It is with an empty expanse of sea – a blue water horizon line undiminished by atmospheric clouds or the obstruction of trees that we get a sense of the infinite.

Walls and columns can only dramatize this blue ethereal world. This is the realm where we find our remote figure of the philosopher contemplating.

“The idea of endless repetition in the firmament eventually developed into the concept of cosmic uniformity that is now the foundation stone of modern cosmology and known as the COSMOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE”.¹

I wonder if the earliest buildings aligned with the starry heavens in an attempt to set a divine order on things gave us the concept of the infinite. Scientists tell us that infinity does not exist in nature, that it is a concept derived from our perception of the vastness of space.

Certainly the living world of biology, such as a forest or the very bottom of the ocean, is a self-contained world; in fact, it is a rich and varied finite world...

But it is the idea of the infinite which draws us out of ourselves toward immensity and awe.

On an old neo classic building that I had observed, a series of ornamental fluted ionic pilasters ran down parallel sides of the outer brick walls. Each pilaster was regularly and mathematically spaced apart all the way to the very end of this very long building - just where this edifice came to an end the pilaster was literally cut in half longitudinally (one voluted scroll over a slender half column) as if to reveal that this repetition would continue “ad infinitum” had not the blunted wall stopped this measured procession.

Infinity haunts our very thoughts about the world we live in, in ways not conscious but rather there is a sense of union not understood but nostalgically experienced.

¹DARKNESS AT NIGHT
BY EDWARD HARRISON
P. 16 1987