



INCONCLUSIVE AUTHENTICITY

SACRED ART IN A SECULAR WORLD

by Tom Wudl

This essay attempts to put my work in a historical context, albeit a lineage of my own invention. It is about spiritually motivated art, and the challenges faced by artists who have made it from the Renaissance to our day. I have not written a legitimate history, but an outline of ideas, from art and artists of various disciplines, that have guided the trajectory of my work for nearly fifty years. Some of what is written here might be paradoxical and is not subject to verification. That said, my hope is that the reader may recognize the logic that unifies all the contradictions. Facts like dates, places and names are intended as anchors for the flights of fancy that shape the speculations, opinions and beliefs presented. There are three alternating themes

throughout: the sacred role of art, the curious but inevitable collaboration between the sacred and secular arts, and lastly, the intertwining of rational and irrational modalities of creativity.

In 1975, Robert Rosenblum's writings about Caspar David Friedrich, the eighteenth century mystically inclined German artist, focused on what he called "Friedrich's Dilemma." He was referring to the challenge faced by the spiritually motivated artist living in the modern world.

Friedrich and his contemporaries lived at the dawn of a new age. They were products of the Enlightenment, when the primal mysteries of nature began revealing themselves as quantifiable empirical truths whose certainty was so absolute that they could not be called anything other than laws. And as the laws of nature continued to reveal themselves, they brought into question the veracity of revealed divine laws that for the western world had functioned as the unquestioned authority on the origin of the universe, and how it worked. As a result, the mysteries of creation would no longer be entrusted to religion. Faith was reassigned from ritual to research.

Research is empirical, its method is metric, numbers are convincing. Friedrich's Dilemma was to present to the world convincing visual evidence of sacred truths that would match the authority of empirical truths. Friedrich's Dilemma has continued as a challenge to this day for the spiritually motivated artist, and a conundrum—sometimes a vexing one—for everyone else.



Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840)
Monk by the Sea, 1808-1810
post 2015 restoration

oil on canvas, 43.3 x 67.5 in. (110 x 171.5 cm)
Inv.: NG 9/85. Photo: Andres Kilger

Convincing visual representation of religious truths had been problematic in the West, primarily for artists within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Three hundred years before Friedrich was born, Giovanni Bellini intuited that the canonical symbols of divinity that served his medieval predecessors well were losing their authority. He was an artist who observed nature closely, and thanks to the invention of oil paint, was able to record what he saw with subtle accuracy. He learned by studying the Flemish Masters. They taught him how to observe and paint light, and he taught himself how to use it for his own purpose. To the analytical Van Eyck, light was the principle

by which he took measure of visual data, one he then employed to compartmentalize the world into crystalline order. But Bellini's calling was harmony, not order, and he may very well have been the first Western artist who saw a sacred presence in the limpid light of a sunset, and in the effulgence of dawn. But more than that, he possessed the vision and the mastery to craft an entire world out of light's life-transmitting luminescence, the world of the nature-loving mystic St. Francis of Assisi: a world where heaven and earth have surrendered in complete harmony to the gentle solemnity of Francis' devotion. Bellini may not have known, as we do today, that while he was painting his magnificent religious masterpiece, spiritually motivated artists in China were equally engaged by sacred truths. For them it was not light, but the permanent vital potential in nature's rhythms that revealed the hidden workings of what they named Tao. The artists of the Ming dynasty would also have had a word for the ecstatic meditative concentration of Bellini's saint, an ancient word brought to them from India a thousand years earlier: *Samādhī*. Had they known the Italian painting, they may have recognized that the diminutive scholars they depicted, camouflaged in their retreats among pines and waterfalls, conveyed an identical religious message: that solitary, contemplative immersion in meditation is the delicate and profound power that confers serenity upon the Earth.

II The philosophy and religion of India had already been introduced to Europe by 1809, when Friedrich's monk appeared on a desolate seashore wondering what had ever happened to God.



Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1430–1516)
St. Francis in the Desert, ca 1476–78

oil on panel
48 7/8 x 55 5/8 in. (124.1 x 140.5 cm)
© The Frick Collection

From the little I know about these matters, it seems safe to assume that neither Friedrich nor any of the visionary artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had the understanding of Hinduism, Yoga or Zen we have today. *Dharma*, *Tathātā*, *Śūnyatā*, *Karma*, *Mantra* and *Mandala* are words that would not have appeared on the pages of the philosophical or sacred texts that captured their imagination.

Although it is possible that in their readings of philosophy, Greek and Latin, they may have encountered some version of *Ego*, *Libido*, *Anima*, *Animus* and *Archetype*, it is unlikely they would have understood what these words have come to mean for the mystically inclined artists of today. And yet, by the singular visionary power of art alone, Goya, Fuseli, Blake and Friedrich among many others anticipated and made the first attempts to picture the confluence of psychic and sacred agencies that inspired and guided both the mystically inclined and the secularly oriented artists of the modern world.

The visual, literary and musical prophets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were obligated to see through a forbidden boundary, beyond the unthinkable, and into the irrational. It would be preposterous to suggest that Bellini's St. Francis somehow represents the artist as a literal or symbolic self-portrait. On the other hand, it would be an appropriate reading of Friedrich's monk. It is a new kind of picture, a reflection of the artist's personal condition, a painting of his thoughts and feelings, which were now charged with questions that artists of the past with his calling were never meant to think or ask. Such unsettling reflections inspired William Blake to ask who or what forged the wild feline flame that flares in every living heart. Around the same time Francisco Goya crossed the forbidden threshold to picture the hidden predators that lurk in the depths of the human soul, and because he was still under the influence of the Enlightenment he said, "the sleep of reason produces monsters." Had he known what we have been taught about the

human psyche, he may have retitled "Los Caprichos" to "Exclusive emphasis on reason guarantees the creation of monsters."

We would do well to remember the insight and daring, not to mention powerful skill, of artists like Goya, Blake and Beethoven who took an unimaginable leap of logic in their instinctive recognition of the irrational. It was an intuition that liberated them to create strategies of great significance, not the least of which were exaggerated distortions and unexpected juxtapositions that in the twentieth century became the fully realized syntax of Surrealism and Expressionism.



Joseph Mallord William Turner
**Shade and Darkness—
The Evening of the Deluge,**
exh. 1843

oil paint on canvas
31 x 30 ¾ in. (78.5 x 78 cm)

There were also others without whose inventive power the new language would remain incomplete. Their temperaments were not forged in fire and blood, but baptized by the light of weightless white clouds in infinite skies and the ease and refreshment of life-giving waters that flow in contemplative wilderness seclusion. They too wondered what had happened to God, who or what was in charge of life and death and where might they direct their private whispered gratitude for companionship and the comforts of food and shelter.

Even though Isaac Newton seemed to have taken ownership of heaven and earth with his discovery of laws that govern the weight and movement of stars and planets, an urgency of unanswered questions troubled the poetic visionaries who walked the earth. They sought refuge from the mundane whirl. They wondered not about the influence of gravity but of feelings, not about laws that govern the weight of stones but those that might soothe a weariness that bears down upon the human heart.

William Wordsworth and Joseph Mallord William Turner were among the first explorers of the Inconceivable. They approached it on solitary excursions in nature's depths and heights of stone, water and sky. They found refuge in the gentle leafed profusion of green and flowering meadows. It was not a boundary they stepped through, but an unbounded vastness into which they wished to be absorbed, a realm of impressions and sensations, of feelings and influences that defied measurement or description. Wordsworth fell into a spell

while hiking on the banks of the Wye River, where he found himself in "a blessed mood" that allowed him to "see into the life of things." He remembered earlier visits to that place when "nature then to me was all in all" and although not at a loss for words, he did lament "I cannot paint what then I was." Well, he needn't have worried so much since, in most faithful coincidence, Turner was about to master the sublime in color and paint, "the presence of something more deeply interfused whose dwelling is the light of setting suns." And last but not least, Wordsworth wrote words that the taciturn Turner might surely have thought, but dared not say. It was a confession and a prayer that might be whispered in the morning by a woman who with open palms accepts the light-filled blessings of the sun. "That I, so long a worshipper of nature, hither came unwearied in that service." The "Woman before the Rising Sun" that Friedrich painted in 1818 appears to have found an answer to the troubled questions that were asked ten years earlier on a desolate shore. That monk might now take comfort in the simple demonstration of her faith and the serenity in her effortless devotion.

The American Walt Whitman was born one year after Friedrich painted the picture. Whitman knew what Wordsworth knew. In the distant past, poets of the ancient world implored spirits to take possession of their voice and sing through them. But Whitman was a poet of and for a new world and of a new age that would be called modern. Like poets of the past he too was a lover of nature but unlike any of them he worshipped at the altars of the present and



Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840)
Woman before the Rising Sun, ca. 1818

oil on canvas
8 5/8 x 12 in. (22 x 30.5 cm)
Collection Museum Folkwang, Essen

the future. He was not motivated by the light of setting suns but by a newly discovered cosmic vitality. Empowered by its energy he took ownership of inspiration and in a triumphant excitement of self-assurance, he willed into existence words that could never have occurred to all the immortals that had written torrents and rivers of verse for thousands of years before he was born: “I sing the body electric.”

The old world slowly faded as candles went out, and then gas lamps. At last, a time was extinguished. A past that was pastoral for ages was forgotten now that streaming electrons sparked light like life in glass bulbs and lifelike motion in machines.

III It is my belief that art has a sacred function. The necessity for art is so elemental that it preceded the invention of writing. Art was invented to make the sacred visible by giving form to silent invisible processes that facilitate the unfolding of life. From the very beginning art has attempted to dissolve the boundaries of the objective visible world in an effort to reveal the hidden mysterious vitality that animates all things. It is through the incantatory power of art that the sacred rituals of all religions are actualized, and it is by the visionary power of art that the invisible life giving symmetries are illuminated.

The phrase “incantatory power” may sound arcane to contemporary ears and the mystic message it carries might at best meet with patronizing tolerance within current art discourse. Nonetheless, there exists a secret longing in every human heart to voice that for which there is no rational justification. It is a yearning for a validation of life that can only be satisfied by art.

Admittedly, sacredness is problematic. Spiritual matters are empirically inconclusive. That may be why today the sacred origins of art might not be of interest to many, and many may not agree with a

premise of art's spiritual mandate. All the same there are those for whom art is conditioned like life by a consecrated mystery, and they don't differentiate between contemplative devotion and creative vocation. For them art is the indispensable validation of life itself.

I believe it was Louise Bourgeois who said something to the effect that "art guarantees sanity." Many years ago I arrived at the same conclusion after numerous visits to the exhibition *Beyond Reason: Art and Psychosis*. At first I wondered about the secret kinship I felt with this art and the people who made it. With time, kinship evolved into empathy and I found I could not let go of the notion that the survival of whatever psychic integrity these artists possessed was granted them by the opportunity to hold a pencil or pen in their hand. This was something that resonated deeply with me. Furthermore, I had the feeling that any violation of the rigorous protocols many of the artists had imposed on the detailed program of their drawings might have catastrophic consequences. Any mistake might cause them and the entire universe to collapse and become oblivion. Although I could not put it into words, I sensed what I now know is the sacred covenant of art. Art serves the mentally ill and those who are not in equal measure. It insures psychic and spiritual well-being. That is its sacramental purpose. It was a revelation to me that no matter how damaged the mind, creativity remains intact!

Art of the mentally ill differs in only one respect from the art of those who are healthy: there is either a disinterest or an inability on the

part of the psychotic artists to contextualize what they do and this in turn liberates them to invent unexpected visual modalities. Already in the early years of the twentieth century, artists who enjoyed mental health recognized the dynamic potential of these inventions and proceeded to include them in the vernacular of modern art.



Hilma af Klint
Group IX/SUW, The Swan No. 12, 1915

oil on canvas
59 5/8 x 59 1/2 in. (151.5 x 151 cm)

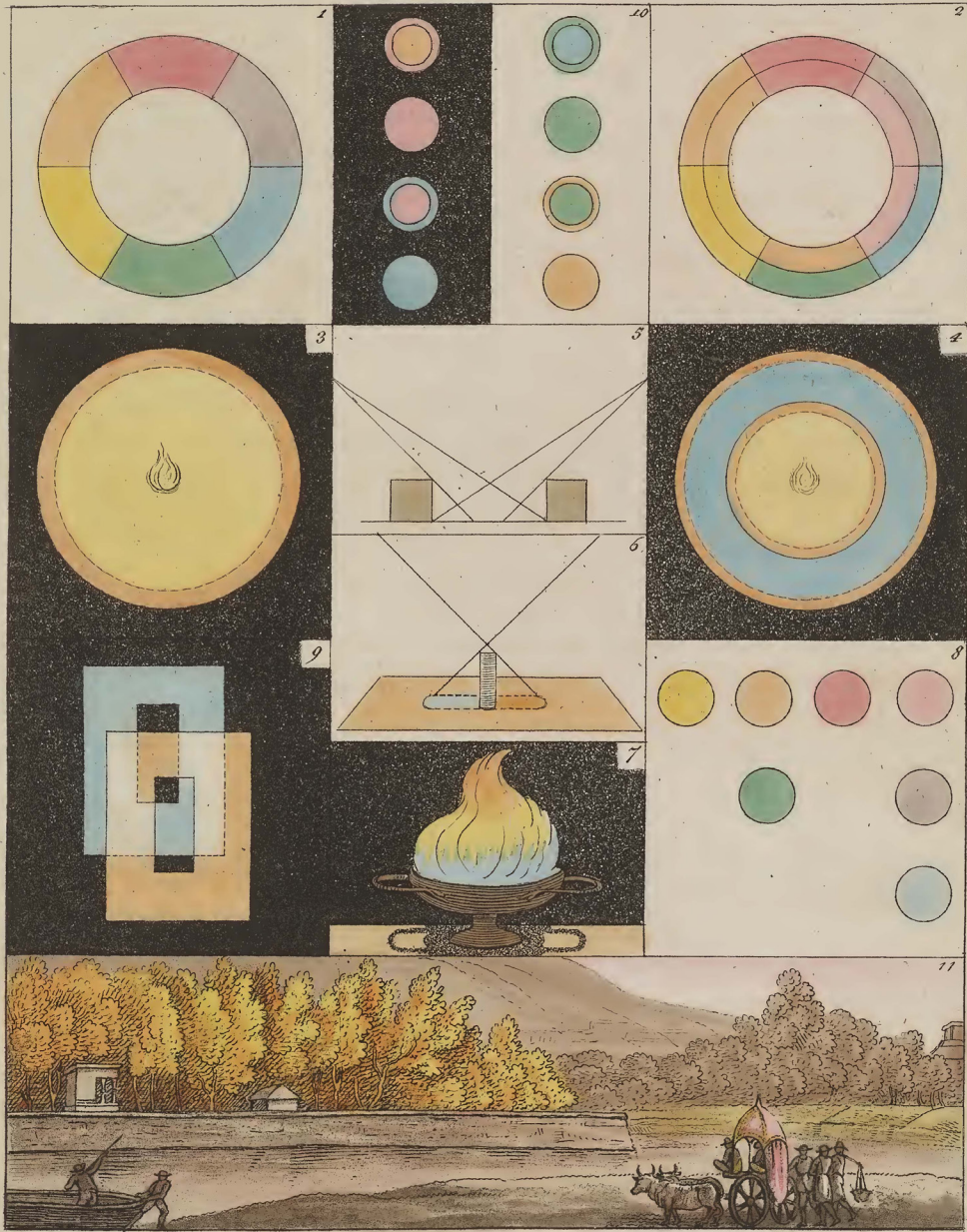
Agnes Martin said, "Happiness is the goal," a surprising declaration from someone well acquainted with the unhappiness of mental illness. While some artists of her generation were committed to picturing the solemn terror of modern apocalypses; she, like Mondrian and Malevich before her, envisioned a future of abstract structured harmonies with idealized proportions and a promise of spiritual restoration. Agnes Martin suffered from schizophrenia but unlike the artists I mentioned earlier, she had the capacity to contextualize her work. She did so within the discourse of abstraction. Ironically a conversation that welcomed the metric logic of her imagery would have been dismissive of the mystical inclination that inspired it.

I offer the following anecdotes as examples of Friedrich's Dilemma as it exists in the modern world. Here it concerns the disparity between the intention of the artist and the mandates of the culture in which they live. The disparaging attitude adopted by those who measured the merit of an artwork according to the dogma of abstraction in the sixties and seventies still exists today. According to the scholar Gertrud Sandqvist, when the prescribed time had elapsed after Hilma af Klint's death, her heirs brought her paintings to the attention of the director at the Moderna Museet Stockholm who at the time was none other than Pontus Hultén, the man who some years later was named the first director of MOCA Los Angeles and contributed to the creation of Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Apparently he refused to look at the work of a woman he considered to be

a kook. The paintings were returned to the Anthroposophical Center in Stockholm where they had been housed for many years.

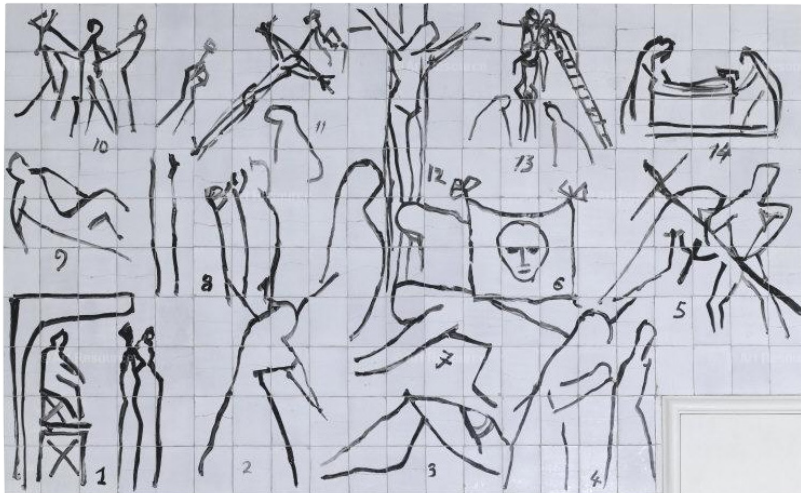
Some time later the art historian Åke Fant arrived there to convalesce from a malady. One day while walking by a nursery he came across one of af Klint's paintings casually unfurled on a wall. He was so taken by it that he contacted his friend Sixten Ringbom, the author of *The Sounding Cosmos*, a book whose focus is the spiritual motivation behind Kandinsky's work. That book inspired Maurice Tuchman to assemble an exhibition of spiritually motivated art in the twentieth century at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Ringbom was one of the curators of the show and that is probably how Fant was invited to write one of the earliest if not the first essay on Hilma af Klint.

"Consider the case of Hilma af Klint" is how Fant chose to introduce an unknown artist to the world in 1986. "The case" begs the question, how are we to integrate this anomaly into the rationale of modern art? It seems no one can say or write a word about af Klint without invoking the obligatory phrases "pioneer of modernism" and "inventor of abstraction." This unfortunate false construct is a contrived attempt to legitimize af Klint by intellectualizing her spiritual motives. The attempt to enfold af Klint into the accredited discourse that originally justified Hultén's rejection of her work completely dismisses her religious intentions and wrongly imposes on her a self-conscious modernist ambition.



To the best of my knowledge there are no references to modernism or abstraction in the available translations of Hilma af Klint's notebooks, no evidence she asked or received artistic guidance from her occult mentors. On the contrary, she says they recruited her not to invent new art forms but to convey spiritual knowledge to mankind through her art. When she declared her paintings to be for the future, she envisioned a religious art for a spiritual future. Therefore it might be advisable to say af Klint was a visionary pioneer of modern spiritual art, rather than attributing false formalist claims to her life's work.

The spiritually motivated artist working today belongs to a tradition established in the early years of the twentieth century by artists such as af Klint. The modern tradition is a little bit crazy and mixed up because the modern legacy has locked mystical and empirical motives in a contradictory embrace. The sacred/secular paradox remains inconclusive. To start with, there was a close kinship between the work of artists who were not spiritually motivated and those who were. They often shared the same visual sources and exchanged stylistic conventions. There is also the curious matter of sacred imagery appearing in works whose authors made no spiritual claims whatsoever. Last but not least is the inventory of visual data these artists appropriated from archaic as well as contemporary scientific, philosophical and occult manuals. Much of what gives the appearance of invention in Hilma af Klint's work, for example, bears



Henri Matisse (1869-1954)
The Stations of the Cross

ceramic in the Chapelle du Rosaire, Vence, 1950
 Photo: Gérard Blot. © Succession H. Matisse / ARS, NY

more than a passing resemblance to illustrations and diagrams in the alchemical, Rosicrucian, and scientific literature she consulted. One need only take a cursory glance at the illustrations in a book she most assuredly knew and may have even owned, Goethe's treatise on color theory, to see the extent to which it affected her work.

How are we to reconcile the artistic authenticity of works by the mystically motivated? "The Alliance of Aesthetics and Mysticism" is how Hilton Kramer put it many years ago when writing about Mondrian. It's a brilliant insight to which I would only add that

the alliance of aesthetics and mysticism may also be the alliance of empiricism and mysticism. As stated earlier, both the mystic and secular inventors of modern art shared the same visual sources and exchanged stylistic conventions. For example, two early mystic



Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O), 1907

oil on canvas
 96 x 92 in. (243.9 x 233.7 cm)
 © Estate of Pablo Picasso / ARS, NY

modernists, Mondrian and Malevich, would have been directionless were it not for the invention of both analytical and synthetic Cubism, respectively. I'm also thinking of Matisse, who to the best of my knowledge did not identify as a mystic by any stretch of the imagination, but was well served by the paintings of Gauguin, that visionary wild beast and godfather to the mystic Nabis. Ironically, Matisse who never declared his faith, considered the Vence Chapel his finest work and I would count the "Stations of the Cross" mosaic among the most convincing expressions of religious sentiment since El Greco. Finally there is that emblem of secular intellectual invention, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," a painting that could not by any stretch of the imagination be considered a sacred work of art motivated by religious belief. Therefore it is more than just an academic curiosity to me that ritual instruments such as sacred masks from a distant culture and a distant past managed to insinuate themselves with such abandon onto its classical aesthetic. Whenever I set eyes on this fraught and prophetic masterpiece I am reassured that art is guided by an irrational logic. I see the inevitable union of art and spirit. I see the dynamic play of secular intention with sacred authority. Finally, I recognize an archetypal inevitability. The sacred will have its way no matter what the intention of the artist or the expectation of the viewer.

IV Many years ago the late Dr. Edward Wortz placed a book in my hands as I was leaving his house. It was the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, known in its brilliant English translation by Thomas

Cleary as *The Flower Ornament Sutra*. A long time passed before I sat down to read it. But when I finished the first page I knew the Sutra would be my contemplative and creative companion for life.

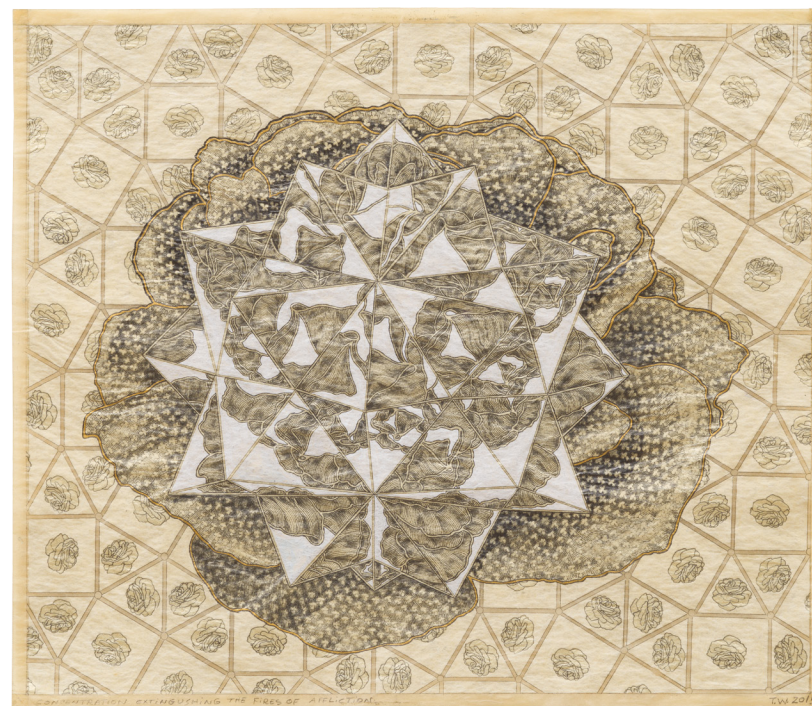
The work I have done in the past decade can be summed up with an obsolete word: psychogrammata. I don't know if the great Giuseppe Tucci coined it, but it appears on the opening pages of his remarkable attempt to explain to Europeans *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, as the title of his succinct but intense little book suggests. I love the sound and concise precision by which psychogrammata describes mandalas as graphic/symbolic representations of consciousness. Tucci was an admirer of C. G. Jung, who convincingly ascribed a psychoanalytic function to mandalas. Tucci was also incredibly insightful and unusually well informed about the spiritual function of Tibetan mandalas as vehicles of liberation from the primordial ignorance that holds beings captive in the cycle of birth and death.

At some point it occurred to me that the *Avatamsaka* could be a mandala in literary form. It employs organizing principles very similar to its visual counterpart, the classic Tibetan mandala. In both we enter precincts that represent entire realms but are also structures with chambers and gardens. We encounter various celestial emanations such as Gods, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, all of whom contain inconceivable myriads of realms and oceans of worlds and world systems in every pore and atom of their being.

Jung designated two categories of mandalas, personal and devotional. Devotional mandalas exhibit specific motifs arranged according to iconometric and iconographic guidelines and require instruction in their construct and use. The personal mandala is a spontaneous creation with unlimited motifs. It does not require initiation or technical expertise, nor is it obligated to thematic protocols. Both the personal and the ritual mandala are vehicles of liberation and healing.

The mandalas I make are both spontaneous and calculated. I take visual cues from ritual mandalas and from other art be it secular or sacred, classic or modern, and combine them at my pleasure. The imagery consists of metric, as well as organic components. Most often an intricate eccentric grid supports a prominent blossom and both are filled with a proliferation of imagery meant to represent the *Avatamsaka's* description of mutually reflecting infinite pluralities. There is a loose symbolic program not associated with any liturgical orthodoxy. For example, flowers can represent the source of life, wisdom and different states of mind. Jewels represent the preciousness of Buddhist teachings, the variety of doctrines expounded in the teachings, and when combined as ornaments they may represent different skills employed in the cultivation of liberating practices. Water may represent both consciousness and the unconscious, also vast scale and depth. In all honesty though, these are afterthoughts. There is no preconceived design on my part with the exception of the tiny clubs dispersed throughout. They represent the infinity of atomic and molecular aggregates as well as aggregates of feelings and thoughts that combine into existence.

Mine are not sacred images, but the act of making is sacred and the sense of wellbeing for both artist and viewer that results from a conscientiously crafted object is also sacred. My artistic motivation is exclusively aesthetic. One pointed contemplation is the method of Zen and also the method of my work. I recently read a quote by Sol LeWitt that describes me better than I could: "Society can function without the artist. He is concerned with art. He makes art without regard to society. If he made no art society would not know the difference. Artists live in a society that is not part of society."



Tom Wudl, **Concentration Extinguishing the Fires of Affliction**, 2015
pencil, white gold leaf, 22K gold powder, gum arabic, acrylic on vellum
8 1/2 x 9 7/8 in. (21.6 x 25.1 cm)