



Ben Woolfitt, *Transcendence - Glow*, 2015, acrylic on canvas and plexiglass, 48" x 42"

Ben Woolfitt: Artist of the Ineffable **Reprinted from New York's Literary Journal, Epiphany**

by Siba Kumar Das

When you gaze at Ben Woolfitt's paintings, their sublime beauty moves you deeply. But where does this power come from? In search of an answer, and thinking of Woolfitt's effulgent colors, I turned to the book *What Color is the Sacred?*—a meditation by anthropologist Michael Taussig on color's mysteries. He not only highlights the delight in color by non-Western societies, he discusses the interest in color taken by Walter Benjamin, William Burroughs, and Marcel Proust, who he says saw "color as something alive, like an animal." Taussig also reminds us that John Ruskin saw color as "the most sacred element of all visible things." He cites Denis Diderot

saying: "Drawing gives shape to all creatures, but color gives them life. Such is the divine breath that animates them." He asks us to consider what Ludwig Wittgenstein said about color: "Colors spur us to philosophize. Perhaps that explains Goethe's passion for the theory of colors." From the time Woolfitt began painting, he seemed to know of color's sublimity in his bones. He says, "Color gives to my paintings a strong emotive power. The paintings are large, large enough to create an environment that you could enter and that I create with as many as eighty to 125 layers of paint, layers almost always diluted with water so as to make an aqueous field of color.

Each coat of paint is the outcome of a conversation between it and the previous layer, and what generates the painting is this conversation, not some pre-existing idea or external image." It is color's mysterious power that moves Woolfitt's painting arm.

Hoping I might find further enlightenment if I went back to modernism's origins and thinking too that, post-modernism notwithstanding, the revolution launched by modernism is still running its course in the contemporary arts, I dipped into *T.E. Hulme and Modernism* by Oliver Tearle, a poet and a critical and philosophical writer, who says in this book that "not just modern poetry but modernist fiction owes something to the kind of philosophy of literature which Hulme helped to clarify." He points to the affinity between James Joyce's idea of the "epiphany," Virginia Woolf's "moments of being," and Hulme's idea that "literature should seek to represent individual moments of experience which are grounded in the everyday world while keeping one eye on the quasi-spiritual or more profound implications of such events." Hulme wanted the writer to connect the everyday to the numinous. But what about the visual artist?

We sometimes think of modernism as a culture embodying a rising rationalism and secularism. But Ben-Ami Scharfstein, professor emeritus of philosophy at Tel-Aviv University, reminds us in his book *Art Without Borders* that the giants of twentieth-century physics — Einstein, Bohr, Schrodinger, and Dirac — expressed views that were mystical or akin to mysticism. He also demonstrates that mystical thinking was common among modernist artists, and that this was especially so for the creators of twentieth-century abstract art, including Kupka, Malevich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian. Ideas taken from India by Schopenhauer and others co-mingled with the influence of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism to reinforce and variegate European Neo-platonism. Scharfstein tells us that recent and contemporary

Western artists, especially members of the New York school — artists like Reinhardt, Pollock, Rothko and Newman — spoke of linkages between abstraction and mysticism. One could add to Scharfstein's list. Think of Hans Hofmann (who spoke of color as a "mystic realm"), Robert Motherwell, Jules Olitski, Agnes Martin, and Brice Marden, among others. His essential point is this: aesthetics has always needed some notion of transcendence in explaining or legitimizing the importance humans attach to art — and transcendence can even be approached in a religiously neutral way, as it has been by many artists and thinkers. Hulme addressed to literature his call for the everyday to be connected to the numinous, but that appeal could well have applied to all the arts. And so we could appropriately ask if, through his paintings, Woolfitt creates a memorable coalescence between the world of color and the world of the numinous. I think he does. Let's take a look at *Glow*, a 2015 painting from a series Woolfitt calls *Transcendence*. A field of gold in various hues painted on canvas is framed by thickly layered metallic-bronze impasto applied on plexiglass. Both in the frame and in the main body of the painting we see subtle patches of saffron, the most vivid patch lighting up an area just south-east of the painting's central region. Gold and saffron are sacred colors in many religious traditions. One could say that the patches of saffron highlighted by the gold background resonate in one's mind to create a metaphorical path. Something striking will happen if you move on to *In Gold*, another 2015 painting from the *Transcendence* series. Here, the field of gold has become significantly darker, turning more bronze than gold, and there is much less of a contrast with the impasto on the frame. But the areas of saffron are now brighter, larger, and visually more dominant. Two diagonals crossing each other in the center create movement — a dynamic generating a spinoff entering the regions of saffron. Look now at *Glow* and *In Gold* at the same



Ben Woolfitt, *Graceful Descent - Pearl*, 2011, acrylic on canvas and plexiglass, 66" x 78"

time, and you will realize that we are in the presence of a diptych. The two paintings interact and reverberate across each other. It is as if something cosmically mysterious is becoming manifest. This is liminal art, art at an intersection — art that is at once sensuous and numinous.

Woolfitt was born to a farming family in Saskatchewan, Canada, where he grew up in a landscape of limitless space ruled by a continental climate in which you swung from extreme heat to even more extreme cold and back again during the course of a year. Think too of the color resplendence this geography generates: the unending sunlit gold of the prairie in summer, interrupted by powerful storms and tornados, the gold and bronze of fall, and winter's awe-inspiring snowscapes. In Saskatchewan we are in J.M.W. Turner country. When Ben Woolfitt turned to painting in his youth, driven by an inner compulsion, a Turner-like alchemy in his sensibility lit his way. During Turner's time, Europe's cultural milieu was strongly influenced by ideas of the sublime. Think of this and look

at Woolfitt's *Pearl* (2011), a painting from his series *Graceful Descent*. It's evocatively expressive, its atmospheric effects and ethereal luminosity fusing above what appears to be a body of blue water. If a force arising from within made him a painter, Woolfitt starts each day exploring his internal world through drawing. In her book *The Primacy of Drawing*, artist Deanna Petherbridge "expresses the passionate belief that drawing is the basis of all art and visual thinking." She says it is not only key to "the invention of new ideas" and responding to "the external physical world"; it also enables the creation of "the private signs of the subjective and emotive creative self." For Woolfitt's drawings, the third function is clearly paramount. Each drawing of his is like a page from a personal journal. In an essay for a catalogue that accompanied a 2011 exhibition in Tokyo of his drawings and paintings, curator and art historian Dennis Reid described the drawings as "an open book offered up for our perusal." Reid also said: "Although they bear no visual relationship to East

Asian brush-painting, the experience of these drawings always strikes me as being akin to the experience of the more personal forms of Chinese and Japanese painting and in particular the works of Japanese Zen masters..." In the wake of Zen Buddhism's introduction into China from India, the Zen style of painting and calligraphy appeared in China in the 12th century and was transplanted to Japan during the Kamakura period (1185–1333). In Japan, it flowered in fertile soil, gradually pervading the fine arts. Zen's essence is the idea of "sudden awakening", and accordingly you brought the painting's core into existence in one stroke. As Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, philosopher and Zen scholar, put it, you do not in a Zen painting move towards "the One or the Formless" — that is, that which you apprehend through "enlightenment." It is rather "the One or the Formless [that awakens] out of itself as the self-expressing creative subject." Immediacy, spontaneity, free expressiveness — these are the hallmarks. As Hisamatsu further observed, from Zen's influence emerged art marked by asymmetry, simplicity, austere sublimity, naturalness, subtle profundity, tranquility, and freedom from attachment. In the main, these very attributes characterize Woolfitt's drawings — as will be seen with the greatest immediacy if one takes a look at two recent pieces: *There are Tears Everywhere* and *In Flight*, both composed with mixed media on paper in 2015. Both present emergent images with accompanying text set out allusively against an expansive space that suggests a numinous mystery. We are again in the aura of a liminal vision. Woolfitt's daily practice is to draw before the arrival of dawn in a process that is cathartic to him, with a view — his words — "to clear my soul for the day." His technique is to make tracings on drawing paper from crumpled paper, paper folds, wires, screens, bamboo branches and leaves, and then apply graphite across the drawing paper's surface. He next uses sheets of gold or silver to fill spaces

before rubbing down the metallic foil to remove its glossy sheen. Since his drawing sheets are bound together as a book, he can and does allow the rubbing process to let the previous drawing show through. He takes an inclusive approach to the odd fold or tear or hole that may appear. He incorporates writing that is set down quickly and spontaneously and may be ostensibly incomplete. Woolfitt says, "It is not important for everyone to read it all." We may even think of the writing in his drawings as akin to the speedy, carefree fluidity that Chinese and Japanese artists attained with calligraphy under the influence of Zen ideas, enabling lines in written characters to become expressive tools in their own right.

Each drawing of Woolfitt's is similar to a haiku. Looking into himself using frottage and other techniques enabling emergence to occur, he embodies in his drawings something akin to what R.H. Blyth, a scholar of haiku, attributed to that poetic form when she said, "A haiku is the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things." Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki went further when he said, "A haiku does not express ideas... it puts forward images reflecting intuitions." For him the images were themselves intuitions. Think also of the insight that poet Jane Hirshfield expressed when she said that in the hands of haiku master Matsuo Basho, the haiku form became "a near weightless durable instrument for exploring a single moment's precise perception and resinous depths." Similar heightened awareness also emerges from Japanese tea ceremony rakuware objects. You are reminded too of the tonalities, textures, and images on these seemingly artless objects — sometimes the unpredictable, imperfect products of raku kilns — when you look at Woolfitt's drawings.

Hirshfield said something profound when she wrote: "The desire of monks and mystics is not unlike that of artists: to perceive the extraordinary within the ordinary by changing not the world but



Ben Woolfitt, *There Are Tears Everywhere*, 2015, mixed media on paper

the eyes that look. Within a summoned and hybrid awareness, the inner reaches out to transform the outer, and the outer reaches back to transform the one who sees." While Woolfitt's drawings possess an autonomous life and are not preparatory sketches for his paintings, there is between his two artistic modes an interaction arising from this mutuality of transformation. His drawings and paintings are contained within a loop of change and feedback that is all the time in the making when he draws and paints and then draws and paints again.

Changes induced by his perceptions as an artist tend to accumulate, leading from time to time to quantum leaps in his way of seeing. Each such significant event produces a drawing or painting theme that he explores serially, making adaptations as he goes along till another leap occurs and the cycle starts again. Seriality is a feature of both his drawings and paintings.

Woolfitt's art makes you see the extraordinary in the ordinary. You can view this as a sacred process or as a non-religious activity. Whatever your choice, his colors and textures and images are sublimely beautiful because, lit from within, their light transports you into a realm that is numinous or luminous, depending upon your preference.