

**REGARDING THE FIGURE AND THE GROUND:
RUMINATIONS OF AN ARTIST**

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Prologue

An empty room. It is an object that is the subject. I walk into the room. The instant I enter the room, all is changed. The room is now the ground, and I am the figure. I become the subject. It could be said; the subject is now “the figure in the room”. It could be said; “the figure in the room” is the object. So much depends upon where you are standing.

FIGURE AND GROUND: a unity



Fig. a The Figure is in the Ground, the Ground is in the Figure.
Mixed media on canvas, each panel 15 x15 in. ©Fran Bull 2007

Figure and ground are a unity, like Being and Nothingness, like the question, where did I come from? *Ground* and *figure* exchange places continually. There is no beginning, nor is there an end. Something to make art about!

I live in the countryside, close to the ground. I love the fragrant soil, leaves decaying under foot, the sight of fields turned over for planting. I am drawn, as well, to sciences that study the ground and its mysteries—archaeology, paleontology and geology. I ponder the ground as a rich metaphor: the *Underworld*, a place of suffering and transformation for Persephone, Euridice and the ancient goddess Innana, and for the Year God who goes underground in winter as if dying, only to re-emerge in spring, bringing renewal and resurrection.

I muse on the ground as a psychological space, a space that gives rise to a range of feelings—“grounded”, or confined. Fear engendering, mood engendering, as in the anonymous poem:

*In darkness let me dwell.
The ground shall sorrow be*

The ground as sorrow, the ground as melancholy, as despair, and conversely, a place harboring hidden treasure, if one but persists in the search, as artist and as earth scientist, suggesting a requirement of courage to go into the unknown, into the dark places. These many dimensions of Ground are and have been, fodder for my imagination and for my art. In two-dimensional art, the figure or picture, is not possible without a ground, its substrate or support. It is the ground that provides the screen upon which the figure, the picture is projected. The ground is a receiver in the way a radio receives waves or signals and converts them into

intelligible sounds-spoken language or music. It is an intermediary between the artist's thought and the thing made.

When I apply brush to canvas or pencil to paper, the first mark I make introduces a figure onto the ground. The figure comes into being, and the ground is irrevocably changed. If I model a figure in clay or carve a figure in marble, the ground is created as the space all around the figure, a mutable, 3-dimensional ground.

In the former instance, I rely upon the substrate, the paper or the canvas for support. In both 2 and 3-dimensional art, figure and ground are married, interdependent and in precise relation.

GROUND AND BACKGROUND: a distinction

While the ground in painting is the blank canvas, a place of infinite potential, a kind of metaphor for the Void, the background lives within the art itself.

Painters from many historical periods will depict a central figure, the subject of the work, a portrait, perhaps. The background provides context, is the "where" component of the picture, establishes the location of the figure in space and time. It might also illuminate the details of a narrative, a story in which the central figure plays a part.

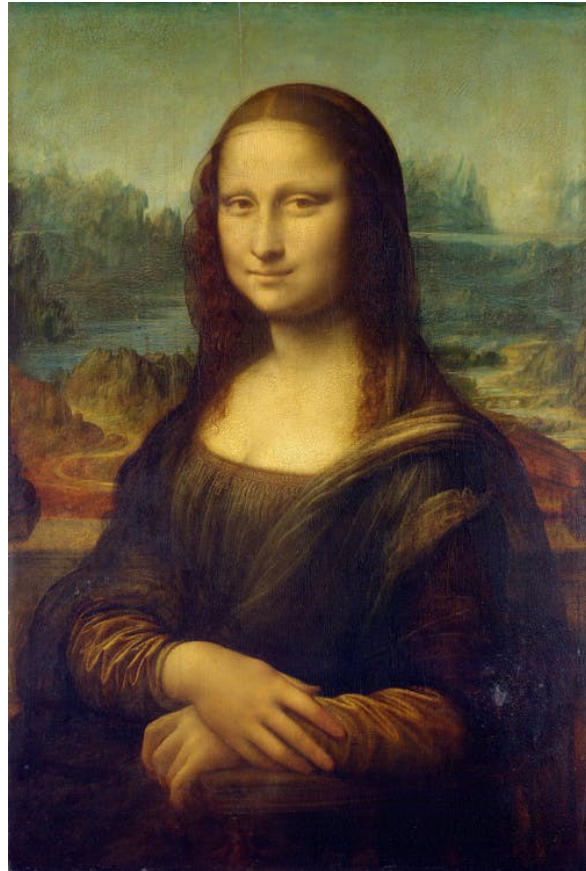


Fig. b. Mona Lisa, Leonardo da Vinci, 1503.

Consider the very famous painting, the *Mona Lisa* of Leonardo da Vinci. A verdant landscape surrounds the iconic portrait, placing it in a specific context. In da Vinci's great work, we focus upon the portrait. The background, the landscape, is secondary. Perhaps the figure has an association to this place, or the artist posits a kind of metaphorical equivalency, implying that Mona Lisa is as rhapsodically beautiful as this place in Nature. Her beauty rivals the trees and the hills; her calm demeanor mirrors the peacefulness of the landscape. Her spirit pervades the environs.

From a phenomenological perspective, both figure and background occupy the same two-dimensional space in the painting—the flat plane of the canvas, or the ground. We note that the background in the painting does not in actuality, flow behind the figure. It has been painted

most skillfully, around the figure. In our schooled Western minds and imaginations, we assume the figure to be in the foreground, while the landscape provides context in the distance. We suspend disbelief, allowing ourselves to be caught in the illusion that the Mona Lisa is near to us, and that the landscape exists in the far distance. We understand that the two are somehow related by their coexistence on the flat canvas and by the relation implied in their juxtaposition.

Other clues that promote the illusion of deep space have to do with the relative size of the objects as they are arranged on the surface and by the known conventions of portraiture itself. It is a likeness of someone real. Her name, we are told, is Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco Del Giocondo, a name that means in Italian, pleasant, delightful, happy. She is as her name implies. She is called La Gioconda, the smiling one.

The ground in painting, (not to be confused with the background), is a unifier. Objects depicted on the same ground, on the same picture plane, even if they appear to emanate from disparate orders of reality, are assumed nonetheless to be in relationship. In this way, each work of art or body of work creates a world, one whose laws, dimensions and inhabitants can derive from a complete fiction created by the artist. The sovereignty of the artist grants permission, as Picasso famously noted, to tell a lie in order to present the truth.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM: a radical fusion of figure and ground



Fig. c. CONVERGENCE Jackson Pollock, 1952

In the second half of the 20th century, mainstream painters veered sharply away from an adherence to the illusionistic representation of three-dimensional space. The *zeitgeist* was ripe for a re-invention of painting, concurrent with a relocation of the geographical center of the art world from Paris to New York, from the Old World to the New. American artists, eager to wrest power from the Parisian center, grappled with a radical question: *What is painting?* They answered by stripping away everything they saw as irrelevant and non-essential to the art form.

These art warriors, among them, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell, explored the idea of a “pure” painting, variously described as marks made on a flat surface; the detritus left behind from the sum of gestures; known subjects reduced to some essence. The art was rigorously to refer exclusively to the act of making painting. It was not to be “about” something other than what you saw in front of you.

Artists jettisoned traditional practices such as easel painting and the use of brushes; they eschewed Renaissance perspective, illusionistic space and representational subject matter. The scale of work was monumental as some idea perhaps, of announcing the manifesto loudly. A revolutionary movement was born that came to be called Abstract Expressionism.

Abstract Expressionists aimed at energizing the entire painting surface; they sought to honor the hand and mind of the artist engaged in moving across the ground of the painting. The process was made intentionally obvious, exposed and raw. This was an art about applying paint to canvas, to the ground.

Exposed to these ideas as a student artist, I was drawn to explore what lay hidden in the ground, a task better taken up by the imagination. I felt, as well, a loss of the expressive possibilities of image and of representation. I wanted to find a synthesis of image and abstraction. I'm remembering, in this context, the words of one of my great mentors, the artist Malcolm Morley, "Everything is a picture of something". The blank canvas, then, is a picture of the Void!

I might argue that the real ground, the landing strip, the true still place for a work of art, is the Cosmos, itself. Moving outwards in nested Russian doll fashion from the painting itself, ground and figure change roles continually. Intriguing as it is to extrapolate to the ends of the universe, it is more useful for purposes of this earth-dweller to assign the ground of the painting to the blank canvas. Empty and without definition, it quite succinctly symbolizes Infinity and the Void. The painting, then, becomes a skin upon the ground. Viewed this way, the entire painting is a figure resting upon the ground, the canvas. It becomes one with the ground, image (figure) and object (the canvas) are one.

In the diptych (Fig. a) the two figures (heads or masks) are fused with the ground, physically, with paint and plaster. The piece is a sort of *memento mori*—a reminder we come from the ground, we return to it, becoming of it once more.

Art restorers and researchers frequently want to know what the skin, the image in a work of art conceals. They will X-ray a painting for an image of what lies beneath the surface. Like archaeologists who dig, they dig into metaphoric soil. Their X-ray images can reveal clues regarding the making of the art and help us gain insight into the workings of the mind of the artist.

THE CLAY MAN: who are we?

The Latin word for soil, for earth, is *humus*, *hum* being the root and from which we derive the words *humble*, or lowly, *exhume*, and *human*. Man, then, is associated with the *humus*, made of earth.

In the Judeo-Christian creation mythology, God shapes the figure of a man from the soil and animates him, imbues him with life and breath. The clay man, a continuum of mud and flesh, is an embodiment of the ground in the figure.

If Rembrandt's burnt umber oil paint has become a hat in a painting, Rembrandt has acted as a god, transforming matter. Oil paint becomes hat—yet remains in some provable way, oil paint. But it is no longer the stuff in the tube.

THE UNDERWORLD: in the realm of imagination



Fig. d. Magdalene Cycle: Clarissa
Acrylic on canvas, 65x90 in. ©Fran Bull 1995

Consider now the strange and wondrous Underworld and its uncanny inhabitants. In the 90s I made a group of 13 paintings that were prompted by meditations on the biblical Mary Magdalene. I imagined her as a Feminist heroine, defamed and banished by revisionist history and Patriarchy. My intention was to exhume her and restore her to power through art. I wrote the following poem to accompany the work:

SONG OF MARY MAGDALENE (EXCERPT)

Mary Magdalene lay under the Earth
for centuries
she lay in the peat bog
for centuries
she lay in volcanic rock
she lay in the tomb for centuries
then came a moment when called
by Future's choir
called by Earth's own longing
called by her desire
to appear once more on Earth
she gathered herself
propelled herself into Time's flow
ascended up up through strata:
black schist marble
amethyst diamond
once more to tend the Fires
to welcome strangers to her temple

The *Magdalene* paintings posit an imaginary archaeology, the discovery in the ground of the defamed Mary Magdalene. In the New Testament, she is portrayed as a harlot, but other sources describe her as having been a mentor and disciple of Jesus. I, the artist, exhume her, rescue her from the false narrative and bring her to light, revisit her story. She arrives in my art not yet embodied, moving under the surface, swimming through soil towards reincarnation. I show a figure not yet a figure that is evolving towards form, still a part of the ground, the "clay man" still in process. My artist's task was to paint a figure not yet a figure, a synthesis of the abstract and the figurative.

BURIED FIGURES. *Season of Bones*



Fig. e. Season of Bones: where the wedding was *The Lovers of Valdaro*
Printed on Arches paper; Plexiglas plate,
36¼ x 31½ in. 2008 ©Fran Bull

Archaeologists and geologists have seen the treasures that abound if you “scratch the surface” of the ground and explore what lies beneath. The teeming life of insects, worms and other burrowing creatures is revealed to the naturalist. The archaeologist examines a world of objects, large and small, exhumed from the past. Through the research of these scientists, our understanding of the planet and our species expands.

Archaeologists unearthed a pair of human skeletons at a Neolithic tomb in San Giorgio near Mantua, Italy in 2007. The two skeletons, called by the Italians, *The Lovers of Valdaro*, appear to have been interred with arms around each other. They had lain in the ground for 6000

years and their discovery was facilitated by modern science. The poetry of this discovery was lost on no one, myself included as I read an article with photos in *Archaeology Magazine*. The entwined skeletons were dubbed Romeo and Juliet. For me, a great fan of opera, they were Tristan and Isolde, whose love was so powerful, it transcended death.

Mesmerized by compelling photos of the archaeological dig, moved by the *Lovers*, I made a series of etchings based upon the simple, evocative image of embracing skeletons, *Season of Bones* (Fig. e).

STATIONS: bed as Ground



Fig. f. STATIONS 1: kindness must watch for me this side the ground. Plaster and mixed mediums, 63 x 58 x 17 in.
2014 ©Fran Bull

In sleep we human beings abandon our worldly identities and surrender to the body and psyche's need for restoration. In our beds, we give over to unconsciousness and to the elusive underworld of dreams. We exist in an existential solitude.

The series *STATIONS*, (*Figs. f. and g.*) is made of Venetian plaster, a form of calcium carbonate. When wet, it feels like clay and as its moisture evaporates, it becomes pure hard limestone. Somewhat exaggerated figures, human and otherwise, repose upon and are fused with the ground, the canvas. Structurally, the figures are embedded in the ground. For me they echo the *Lovers of Valdaro*.

The beds are upended and hung on the wall. Now, the horizontal becomes vertical. The literal becomes metaphor. The bed is now a picture on the wall. This series explores the intimate, private, interior life of human beings on the ground of bed. We lie upon the *bed* as if upon the ground. In sleep, we rehearse our final sleep. Awakening to morning, we are reborn.



FIG. g. STATIONS 8: you will greet yourself arriving at your own door. Plaster and mixed mediums, 82 x 61 x 25" 2014 ©Fran Bull

EPILOGUE: Art and cultivation

I live in the countryside, in the midst of hay and cornfields. I compare making art to cultivating soil. Like the farmer, the artist prepares a ground, the canvas, which is the starting point, a metaphor for nothingness or for infinite potential. A work of art is made to “grow” upon this ground. The analogy, while poetic, is not quite exact. Art does not spring from the canvas as crops spring from the earth. But somewhere in all of this, a deep mystery flows through both

and something organic and natural takes place in the way art comes into being as a collaboration between the artist and the ever beckoning, ever present impulse to make art.