



Michelangelo, *The Separation of Light from Darkness*

#### Robert Sagerman; Recent Monochromes

Of all the Sistine Chapel Ceiling's nine central panels, the magnificent *Creation of Adam* receives the most attention, and deservedly so. It appears near the midway point of the Ceiling, the fourth scene in the Ceiling's Genesis chronology. The first of these is *The Separation of Light from Darkness*, representing the initial moments of Creation. Years ago, while in graduate school working toward my doctorate in the study of Jewish mysticism, I became preoccupied with what I had perceived to be the schema underlying these nine panels. I discerned a precise correspondence between the content of the Ceiling's nine central images and the symbolic motifs associated with the array of nine heavenly *sefirot*. The *sefirot*, according to medieval Jewish mystics (kabbalists), comprised a hierarchy of echelons or potencies that made up the divine realm. This correspondence between the Ceiling panels and the *sefirot* of Jewish mysticism is not as far-fetched as it may initially seem. The chief papal advisors of Michelangelo's day were avid students of kabbalah, and Michelangelo himself was doubtless treated to a heavy dose of this doctrine from other such enthusiasts, his mentors during his formative years in the Medici Court in Florence. Three publications and many years later, I found myself still much absorbed with the appearance of these themes in the Sistine Chapel Ceiling. The latter had begun to read almost as a mystical primer or handbook to me. Its theme was not just the unfolding process of Creation, but also the means of a spiritual return ascent, the uppermost destination of which was encapsulated in *The Separation of Light from Darkness*. The latter became a creative focus of mine. Its swirling motion, which describes the

actualization of the real out of inchoate potentiality, served for me as an apt metaphor for my painterly interests, which had long focused both upon the eliciting of an intense materiality out of its opposite, the uniform emptiness of the field, and, as it were, upon the intellectual and experiential return journey. This opposition of the material and the immaterial, along with other, similar such oppositions, had long been crucial for me. The essence of my work, I observed, ran in parallel with what I found expressed in *The Separation of Light from Darkness*, whose principle theme may be understood as nothing other than the first manifestation of dichotomies or of differentiation. Impelled by this connection, I ultimately decided to come as close as I had ever come in my mature work to representation, as I projected and traced the motion in *The Separation of Light from Darkness* onto one of my canvasses, using it as the basis for a painting. This move became the starting point for an ongoing body of work. Since that first painting of this type, I have opted to develop my own compositions. Nevertheless, all of the works in this series hearken back, both visually and conceptually, to the same source.



