

On "12,969" and Tiepolo's Hermes/Mercury at the Würzburg Residenz

My starting point in abstract field painting, beginning as an undergraduate in 1988, hinged on the idea that my work was concerned with an underlying metaphysic, or about what's called "the transcendent." To that end, I took a slow and contemplative approach to the all-over color fields that I created. It took a long time to see that such subject matter, which so interested me as an artist, called for more in-depth scrutiny than I was giving it, that I proceeded on the basis of preconceptions that I had not thoroughly examined. That growing awareness led me ultimately to extended graduate academic work. In retrospect, enriching as my subsequent studies proved to be, it may be that an overdependence on preconceptions is unavoidable in contending with concepts that are inherently beyond comprehension, when one has only one's limited intellect and imagination at one's disposal.

Along similar lines, in painting there is only the material stuff of paint at hand, even if one wishes to embody something of that which lies beyond it. That is central to the two-fold dynamic of painting for me, and perhaps for all painters in one way or another. In terms of metaphysics or of the transcendent, it's not possible to dwell within or experience the incomprehensible in a sustained way, to fully plumb the depths of immateriality, conceived in such a way. But there's a certain harmonization that can occur instead, where there can be a felt sense of both materiality and immateriality at once, a type of equanimous balancing, in which an experiential shift back and forth between the two domains occurs. That one may think of as a place of liminality.

In esoteric circles going back to antiquity, Hermes (Mercury, in the Roman pantheon) represented this state or place, insofar as tradition assigned him the responsibility of transiting between the worlds of gods and men. For this reason he became associated with secret divine wisdom, magic and mysticism. In the Renaissance, speculation concerning Hermes lay at the heart of a renewed interest in such matters in intellectual circles. In my academic work concerning the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, I've written much about how interest in the figure of Hermes – symbolically centering, in particular, upon one Renaissance representation of Hermes in a church in Siena - foreshadowed the development of the kabbalistic (Jewish mystical) program of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling. The same Christian theologians whose thought and writing demonstrated a fascination with both Hermes and with Jewish mysticism – to the point even of asserting that Hermetic wisdom was nothing other than kabbalah itself – also exerted a powerful influence upon both Pope Julius II and upon Michelangelo.

As I've maintained in my academic work, the Sistine Chapel Ceiling program's nine central panels correspond sequentially and thematically to the nine divine echelons (sefirot) of Jewish mysticism, the lower portions of the vault corresponding with the tenth, terrestrial echelon. Elaborating upon this important subtext to the Ceiling came ultimately to have a momentous impact upon my art-making. In 2014, a shift in my paint application took place, which stemmed from an ongoing fixation upon one Ceiling panel in particular, "The Separation of Light from Darkness." This panel stands as the starting point of the Creation saga depicted on the Ceiling, and it resonates for me with the creative process itself. Certainly the "separating of light from darkness" lies squarely at the core of visual art. The billowing, swirling composition of Michelangelo's image suggested itself to me as the starting point for the introduction of similar directional motion in my mark-making practice, and that influence persists to this day.

In the year following this first introduction of compositional motion into my painting, a collector in Germany was generous enough to arrange for me a private tour of the Baroque ceiling frescos by Tiepolo in the Residenz in Würzburg. In the course of this amazing experience, I happened to note in particular a representation of Hermes in the building's enormous central fresco, "Apollo and the Four Continents" (Fig. 1). This portrayal of Hermes has played on my mind ever since. I learned later that Tiepolo himself had more than a passing interest in the type of esotericism for which Hermes is symbolic, as has been discussed (among other places) in Roberto Calasso's well known book, *Tiepolo Pink*.

Tiepolo's Hermes image captured my imagination all the more for reasons having to do with my earlier Ph.D. dissertation and eventual book devoted to the medieval kabbalist Abraham Abulafia. The latter made a central preoccupation of the archangel Metatron, who first began appearing in Jewish magical and mystical texts in antiquity. For several reasons, Metatron, of Jewish tradition, was equated with the pagan Hermes in a number of different historical contexts. When one looks to Abulafia's characterizations of Metatron, this, in fact, makes a good amount of sense. Abulafia described Metatron as partaking of a two-fold nature, divine and terrestrial - or, intellective versus imaginative, in Abulafia's parlance. Mystical achievement Abulafia understood in terms of the inner reconciliation of one's own like two-foldness, which would result in the mystic's self-realized identification as Metatron himself, representing a kind of self-divinization or angelicization.

My academic engagement with this material concerning Metatron carries forward into my fascination with the same themes surrounding Hermes. In the last couple of years, Tiepolo's image of Hermes has time and again served for me as the imagistic nexus for these concepts. And with the passing away not long ago of the collector who first took me to see the image, it's also taken on something of a poignant, elegiac quality. All of this has led to my recourse to Tiepolo's Hermes image, in much the same way as had earlier been the case with Michelangelo's "Separation of Light from Darkness," as the basis for the composition of several paintings over the past year or so. This includes "12,969" from the current exhibition (Fig. 2).

Embedded compositionally within these pieces is the visual echo of the same duality that has undergirded my paintings for decades now. True to form, one might say, this image of Hermes is there but not there. Clearly present in the painting's underdrawing, my focus is upon the compositional suggestions to which this schema gives rise. I am less concerned with maintaining the image's representational clarity. The viewer may know the image to be there under the surface, but may or may not discern its contours. At times as I work I'm aware of this substrate, but equally often I am occupied with other matters. At my core, I am not a representational artist, though I have gotten the impression from viewers that some trace of the image tends to persist for them. Medieval Jewish mystics characterized the divine as both revealed and concealed, hidden and manifest. In this sense, my approach to the image seems in keeping with the essence of this two-foldness, and of a concomitant liminality.



