







I paint with a black pigment known as Carbon Black. As a dry powder, it has a granular, almost crystalline consistency (at least the pigment that I have is of this type). But when it's mixed with linseed oil and put through a three roll mill, it becomes buttery very easily, and a little bit of it has a great deal of tinting strength. Carbon Black (Channel Black being the particular type that I use) is essentially a residue of a combustion or burning process. My work process begins with this raw dry pigment. It goes through a number of stages of preparation before it finally ends up on the tip of my palette knife, ready for stroke-by-stroke application. Working with paint in the manner that I do, I am very keenly aware that I'm not simply painting with a somehow disembodied "color," but with a combination of substances, only one of whose properties is its hue.

As to the hue of black, considered in isolation, it can in a certain way be considered to be the "absence" of color, as it results theoretically from the complete absorption by a surface of light, no wavelengths being reflected to the viewer's eye. Of course, color never actually belongs to or inheres within the seen object itself. Quite the contrary, the hue that is seemingly "possessed" by an object is precisely what does not "belong" to it, it specifically being that range of the spectrum that the seen object does *not* actually contain or absorb. In this way, one may think of black as the fullness of color, all hues being absorbed or contained by the object that is perceived as black. Similarly, concentrations of paint colors with deep values, without the admixture of white, progress toward black; and the combination of red, green and blue in the RGB color system gives rise to black. What we find, then, is that black is both a consummate emptiness, or absence of color, and a quintessential fullness. This paradox has powerful resonances for me insofar as I am drawn to metaphysical conceptions of my artistic process.

In medieval Jewish mysticism, the divine or the transcendent, in its most undiminished manifestation, was understood to be infinite in every way possible. The process that gave rise to what we know to be the created, perceivable world resulted from (and continues to result from) the progressive, willful delimitation of the divine essence. This we may understand from the simple fact that, both all around us and within us, things possess properties, they are describable, which is to say that they lack the infiniteness associated with the purely divine. Indeed, the word "infinite" itself actually indicates only indescribability, pointing rather to what the referent is *not* (finite, in this case). A kind of filtration takes place in the giving rise, from its source in the transcendent divine, to the finite, known world, the latter in all its dazzlingly varied fullness. Jewish mystics from around the thirteenth century onward developed an increasingly elaborate accounting of this process, positing ten echelons, called *sefirot*, through which the divine essence flowed downward into the created world of delimitation.

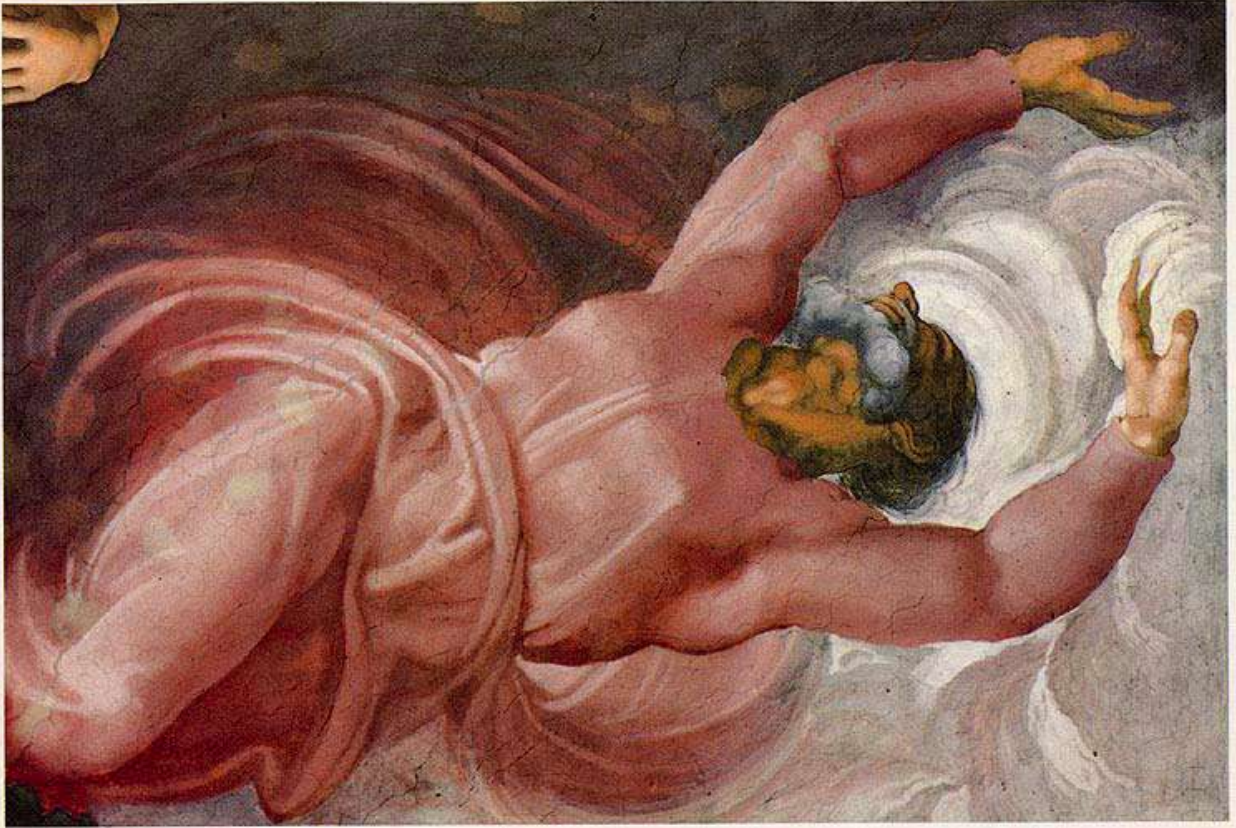
This metaphysical position was in a way codified in the sixteenth century by Isaac Luria, who propounded a doctrine called *tsimtsum*, or "contraction." Luria explained that God withdrew or contracted his essence from a particular point or locus in order to give rise to creation, this point subsequently being filled in such a manner that the universe could come into existence and be sustained. In this way a kind of equipoise is established. Everything is a constituent part of the divine, but the latter's true nature, its infiniteness, is necessarily absented in this space of creation. At the same time, a delimited aspect of the divine comes to be responsible for all finitude. A nothing and an everything coincide.

From my first forays into abstract painting decades ago, I have been focused upon the simultaneous emptiness of the color field, where utter immateriality prevails, as against its opposite, the stuff itself of paint, which paradoxically serves as the vehicle for immateriality's expression. Over time, both of these dimensions to my work have come to be exaggerated. Using black paint amplifies this theme. Since black, as a color, epitomizes the simultaneous expression of both emptiness and fullness, it acts in the furtherance of my chief artistic concerns. These themes are potent objects of contemplation for me as I work, paradoxes to be held in the mind as a meditative exercise, and the hue black functions in the service of this end.

The black painting *19,528* is of a particular type, where the marks that I apply form a swirling composition. I began making this series in 2015, and this piece was among the first. The series actually began incubating many years earlier, while I was in graduate school working toward my doctorate in the study of Jewish mysticism. At that time, I had become preoccupied with what I perceived to be a thematic schema underlying the Sistine Chapel Ceiling's nine central panels. I discerned a correspondence between the content of these nine Ceiling images and the symbolic motifs associated with the array of nine heavenly *sefirot*, the hierarchy of echelons or potencies that I had mentioned earlier. This correspondence between the Ceiling panels and the *sefirot* of Jewish mysticism was not as far-fetched as it might initially seem. The chief papal advisors of Michelangelo's day were avid students of Jewish mysticism, and Michelangelo himself was doubtless exposed to this doctrine by his mentors during his formative years in the Medici Court in Florence.

Several publications and years later, I was 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 to me. Its theme was, of course, the unfolding process of Creation. But this seemed to be mirrored in the artistic creative process itself, encapsulated most specifically in the last of the panels, representing the uppermost of the *sefirot*, *The Separation of Light from Darkness*. The latter's swirling motion portrays the actualization of the real out of inchoate potentiality, an apt metaphor for the eliciting of an intense materiality out of its opposite, the uniform emptiness of the field. Indeed, the principle theme of *The Separation of Light from Darkness* may be understood as the first manifestation of dichotomies or of differentiation, finitude drawn forth out of the infinite. Impelled by this connection with my own work's central themes, I first 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, in which I've since come to develop my own compositions, all still recalling that first one. The piece *19,528* is of this type, and its black hue resonates with that paradox of infinite absence held in suspense against delimited fullness.





Michelangelo, *The Separation of Light from Darkness*