

Art is Life



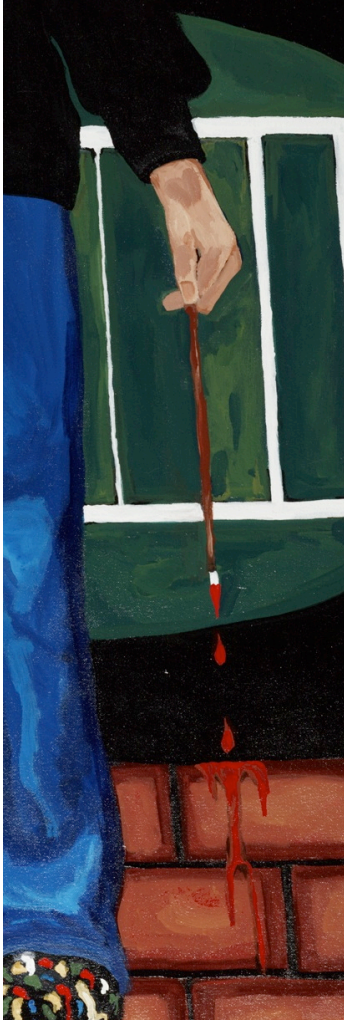
some words on the work of Eric Anfinson

by John R Strain

March 2010

www.ericanfinsonpaintings.com

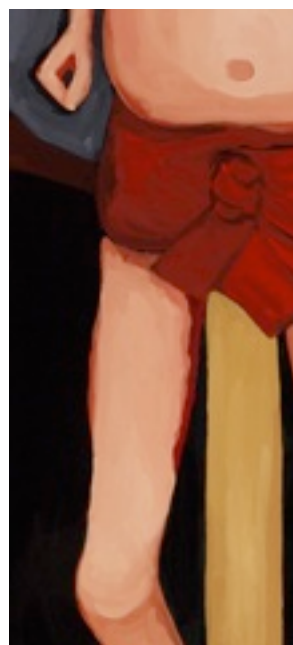
Art is Blood



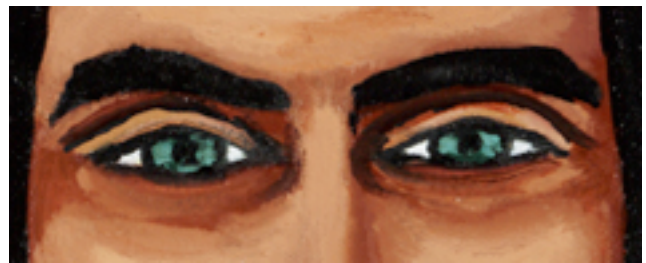
To speak of Eric Anfinson is to speak of art: art as animating force, art as life's blood. Eric and I became friends several years back at the beginning of his most recent incarnation as an artist. Initially, Eric and I found a wonderful overlap in shamanism. When he introduced me to the works of Martin Prechtel, an author and visual artist, I was convinced we were operating on common ground. One of my great interests in life is the art of dreams, which shares much in common with painting with regard to the use of various visual symbols.

At that time, Eric was more of a writer. He also had other affairs to attend to: life, joy, passion, friendships, and, importantly, falling in love with our fickle little home town of Key West, Florida. If one doesn't fall in love with Key West, and there is an art to this, one is constantly in danger of a kind of hatred toward it, a sort of aggressive disenchantment. Once in love, the town provides everything one could possibly require.

Painting had only made its presence known in Eric's life a few times before Key West. Even then, it only existed in potential: some sketches as a young boy and a figure drawing class in Colorado. Feeding off the nourishment in Key West's atmosphere, seeds long forgotten started to grow roots, and a voice. "I think I want to start painting." Blood began to circulate.



Art is Dangerous



Eric's painting has always focused on the emotional, the colorful, and the deeply meaningful aspects of life. One gets the sense that he has always known that art is dangerous. It constitutes a different kind of threat than the ones he faced as a high school football star in his hometown of Austin, Minnesota. Those dangers paralyzed his outer body, and he has lived the life of a quadriplegic for over two decades now. His condition forces him to look inward on a daily basis, and it is over the inner realms that art holds sway. Art, like a dream, has the capacity to bring the inner worlds to the surface. It is a master key, a threshold, and a gateway.

What I call the danger of Eric's work really began with the way he painted eyes. From the start, the bright yellows, oranges, pinks, and browns of the naked flesh of his nudes all conveyed a gentle eroticism, respectful yet penetrating. The eyes, however, were typically left empty and open. Perhaps you could fall into them. Perhaps, like mirrors, they would reflect your own soul back to you. On the whole the eyes were neutral, but that is where the danger lay like a fault-line. With Eric's early work, one holds one's breath and watches the eyes for signs--a flicker of rage or an echo of unbearable sadness.



When he left his figures faceless, the effects were similar. These pure-bodied mannequins invite you to project yourself onto them, but there is a slight possibility of having your advances rejected. Eric's eyes developed, in time, to be a source of profound expression.

Art is Feminine

As inner worlds found their way onto canvas, much of what came through was feminine. The inner feminine often shows herself first in projection. We joke about the time Eric declared, "But I don't know what my inner feminine looks like." I stared back at him. Behind him were multiple portraits of women: all different, all beautiful, all his. In the interchange between artist and model, Eric could start to see what he was bringing to the table.

Soon the inner feminine came to Eric in dreams. She beat him over the head with a metal rod--an angry Sibyl. Once she changed him into a woman so he could experience a brief lesbian affair. I believe there was even a shower scene. The inner feminine helps people access their deepest fantasies. When a person's relationship with her is healthy, she can provide stability when dealing with the emotional complexities of life.



Art is Death

After completing a flurry of work examining the beauty of life from many angles, Eric noticed new forms of attractiveness were seeking expression. Several observers had mentioned Modigliani in connection with Eric's figures, and he soon felt a gravitational pull to the work of that great artist. Gone was the need to depict even breasts. Darker more ambiguous realms began bleeding into the compositions and into the figures themselves.

As the new layers emerged, Eric's models suddenly experienced a previously unknown threat. The danger of art had descended upon them. When you are a stand-in for a goddess, the goddess will win out. In all likelihood, even the artist is only taking orders. Eric learned first hand what it is like to submit to a larger archetypal vision when he painted himself crucified on a field goal post in a work entitled "Broken Heart."

When I reflect on a painting like "Broken Heart," my thoughts extend past Eric and onto the culture around us. We sacrifice our heroes on the playing fields, and on the killing fields. We raise them up, and then we carry them home. The victims are often young, beautiful men. I wonder if they enter willingly into their destinies, or would they choose different paths of expression if they were open to them? Unnamed figures lurk in the background of Eric's painting. Sometimes I conjure up stories for them. Their stories shift in my mind as fragments of the daily news attach themselves to their bodies. Eric, however, seems free. Having painted himself as Christ, Eric puts the onus on the viewer. Somehow the problem is no longer his. What's inside has come out. Eric did not chose his accident, but he chose to make his wounds, his pain, and his loss a sacred event.

Broken Heart flew out of Eric's studio and up to Brooklyn for a remarkable group show. At one point, a light fixture broke loose and the lightbulb descended onto the canvas directly between the field goal posts, burning a hole in the process. Perhaps it was an attempt by the universe to assure a complete lack of ego on Eric's part. Eric was nonplussed. Imitating a football referee calling a field goal, Eric lifted his arms and said simply, "It's Perfect."



Art is Wisdom

One symbol that arises frequently in Eric's work is the tree. While it is both difficult and dangerous to pin a symbol down, certain concepts tend to cluster around them. Trees are often tied to growth and knowledge. Large trees, for example, are often addressed as Grandfathers and Grandmothers in native traditions.

Perhaps you can make a leap from Eric's trees to the wise ones who play such a significant role in his art. As in fairy tales, they can appear unexpectedly. A friend agrees to model for Eric and much to a his surprise, finds himself aged significantly. He is given white hair and a staff of wisdom, generating stability for the still emerging self in the background. In Eric's self-portraits, he often paints himself as an older man, paving the way for his future life and tapping his own innate wisdom. Eric also allows wisdom to take on its shadow form, as in his painting of an old man with dementia.

With any art, I am glad if I can come away with at least one new concept. In Eric's work I began to see his trees as extensions of the mind. Thoughts as trees is something I hadn't considered before. I find Eric's trees weighty, but kind.

Sometimes it strikes me just how much time Eric has to spend in his mind. I notice how often he has to formulate what he knows and then convey it exactly to others just to function in daily life. There can be an ongoing difficulty to this process, and, of course, an inherent vulnerability. How comparable are Eric's daily trials to the budding artistic self or the inner self in general? It feels trite to make the comparison and important not to ignore it.

The old man always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea...can extricate him.

-CARL JUNG

The Phenomenon of the Spirit in Fairytales



Art is Choice

One day Eric revealed a dream of three women set apart from him, egging him on in a hotel room in Paris. I was struck by the parallels to the famed “Judgement of Paris” from Greek mythology. An angry but honest Goddess named Discord has been left out of a wedding party and takes her revenge with a golden apple labeled “to the fairest.” Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera scramble to claim the prize. The choice falls on young Paris.

An author named Edward Edinger reminds us that because Paris is human and choosing between Goddesses, it is an impossible choice. No matter who he chooses, the others will be angry. The act of choosing, however, is necessary in life. It is an act of maturity. Given the gravity of “Broken Heart,” to be able to choose at all is it’s own sort of victory and a cause for celebration.

Eric presents the options given Paris in their fullest, and with great respect. Adding Hestia, for good measure, Eric contributes earthiness and grounding to Paris’s plight. Hestia is the Goddess of the home and hearth. In the end, like Paris, Eric decides on Aphrodite. While all the Goddesses are vessel-shaped in body, it is she who is accompanied by a flowing stream of life energy. Is its source the ominous water tower from the painting entitled “Hometown?”



Art is Self

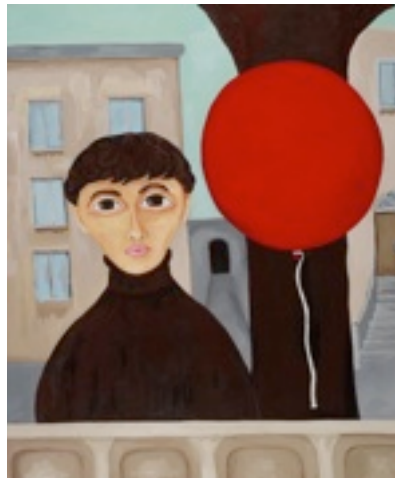
Eric's work is deeply influenced by the film "The Red Balloon." I see the red balloon as a symbol of wholeness for Eric. Likewise, the golden apple can be viewed this way. Ultimately, these symbols of the Self exist for unification, even if their source is suspect--an omnipotent father who looks the other way, as with the cross, or a spurned Goddess using her cleverness to play on the endless vanities of her fellow female Olympians. It seems as humans we are doomed to become whole. For all its dangers, art is one of the safest ways to bring this wholeness to life.

"The shadow locates the divine" is a phrase used in dreamwork. Art existed in shadow for Eric for a long time. Through his art, we bear witness to Eric as he gives birth to both himself and to the Divine.

The ego's relation to the Self is a highly problematic one and corresponds very closely to man's relation to his Creator as depicted in religious myth. Indeed the myth can be seen as a symbolic expression of the ego-Self relationship. Many of the vicissitudes of psychological development can be understood in terms of the changing relation between the ego and Self at various stages of psychic growth.

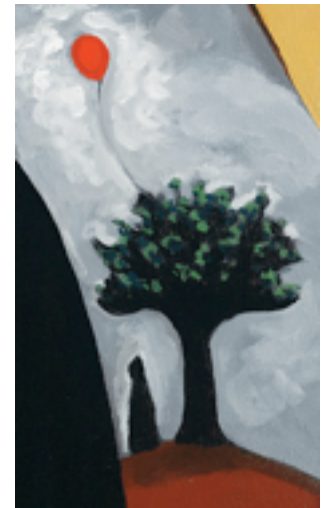


-EDWARD EDINGER
Ego and Archetype



Trees have individuality...A tree, therefore, is often a symbol of personality...It is a prototype of the self, a symbol of the source and goal of the individuation process.

-CARL JUNG
The Spirit Mercurius



Self is Art



*[He] is in great danger.
In danger? What kind of danger?
In danger of finding himself.*

-from Fassbinder's *Querelle*