

## Post-postmodern Art: A Return to Belonging

Marc Gafni



© Kleefeld 2012

*diary of dead bones 5. Andromeda Spiral Galaxy*, Conté crayon on paper, 15¼ x 23 inches, 2010

Artist Claudia Kleefeld is not the first person to see the symbol of the spiral as being a portal to a vision of a coherent cosmos. She is original in that she is a first-rate, old-master-style artist with thirty years of training, who paints the spiral as an expression of an Eros of certainty that asserts the utter meaningfulness, depth, and order of the cosmos. Kleefeld's paintings emerge from her own opened eye of the spirit and speak directly to the higher spiritual intuition of her viewers. Finally, Kleefeld is unusual in that she is part of an emergent form of art, which seeks to reveal the enchantment of a cosmos—a cosmos that is good, true, and beautiful.



*diary of dead bones 7. Fingertips*, Conté crayon on paper, 22¾ x 15 inches, 2010. © Kleefeld 2012

I write this essay on Kleefeld's work as an integral thinker looking through the lens of the school of thought called World Spirituality, a philosophy committed to articulating a post-metaphysical and post-traditional vision of evolving spirit. World Spirituality is not a religion; rather it is an emergent framework, which includes the great traditions of gnosis. It has the potential to foster a shared spiritual

grammar for the leading edge of evolution. In this vision all major forms of science, art, and religion occupy their natural and rightful place. Kleefeld's work, besides being remarkable art, has at its core the same Eros that animates the World-Spirituality imperative.

Through Kleefeld's work, art serves to voice Spirit's next move: to discern a grand narrative of human meaning.



*Roping Tornado*, oil on linen, 10 x 16¼ inches, 2011. © Kleefeld 2012

Kleefeld’s art, like *World Spirituality*, is about the Eros of wholeness and interconnectivity. It is about being able to—in a post-metaphysical, post-traditional, and post-dogmatic parlance—once again recognize “the patterns that connect;” and through this recognition to experience, in first person, that sense of—to borrow Kleefeld’s term—“ultimate belonging” in the universe.

#### ON WORLD SPIRITUALITY:

To reiterate, *World Spirituality* is not a religion; it is a framework. Charles

Taylor reminded us in his classic work *SOURCES OF THE SELF*<sup>1</sup> that we all live in “inescapable frameworks.” Rebecca West<sup>2</sup> has pointed to modern man’s “desperate search for a pattern.” The grand narrative of modernity and postmodernity is that there is no grand narrative. The emergence of a world-centric, and even cosmocentric, consciousness has made many traditional narratives seem naïve and childish. Modernity’s scientism, with its reductionist prejudice, has reduced much of the world to flatland. This is what critic Lewis Mumford meant when he talked about the “disqualifications of

the universe.” Depth is scarce either as a value or a reality. Postmodernity, with its keen insight that every expressed truth exists within a social, psychological, and historical context, challenges dogmas of an absolute or eternal truth. We ask ourselves, inchoately, what can follow all of the deconstruction?

After the deconstruction of post-modernism we begin the great reconstructive project of post-postmodernity. This is *World Spirituality*’s project: to weave the durable insight of pre-modernity—the depth and structure shared by all the great traditions—with the key insights

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of modernity and postmodernity. This great reconstructive project brings together the empirical eye of the senses and eye of the mind that created the modern hard and soft sciences, together with the evolutionary hermeneutics set in place by postmodernity, and from them emerges the matrix of a new post-postmodern world view. What is revealed in this reconstruction is a post-metaphysical and post-dogmatic vision of evolving patterns that connect. It becomes clear that all fields of knowing are part of a grand narrative, which transcends limited contexts and points towards a universal grammar of meaning. Once again the human being is able to locate herself in the cosmos; once again humankind feels a sense of profound belonging and thus, responsibility for life in all of its evolving forms.



*Book Spiral*, books, floor to ceiling, approximately 8 feet, 2011–12. © Kleefeld 2012

### ON THE NATURE OF ART, THE ARTIST, AND THE CRITIC:

In order to place my commentary within a larger context, let me share a wider view of art and particularly of art criticism. From an integral perspective—a leading-edge mode of thinking that seeks to incorporate into a larger whole the partial truths of competing perspectives—there would seem to be three core approaches to the issue of how to unpack meaning from art. Each of these approaches to art and criticism is true but partial.

The first approach suggests that what is essential is the intent of the artist: The artist injects the object with meaning. It is the job of the viewer to ascertain the intent of the artist to the best extent possible. Skewing this viewpoint, however, is the notion that the intent of

the artist is not always conscious. The critic must unlock the unconscious intentions that the artist may well have imbibed from his or her cultural context and imbued in the artwork. According to this view, historical, cultural, and all other contexts are no less critical in “reading” art than the conscious intent of the artist.

The second school believes that the interior of the artist is irrelevant. This was Heidegger’s view: Art must be judged purely by the artwork itself, be it painting, sculpture, or novel.

The third school usurps the place of the artist with that of the “critic.” It claims that the meaning of art rests neither in the intention of the artist’s conscious or unconscious, nor in the piece of art itself, but in the reader’s interpretation, or in the experience and insight that the art evokes in the viewer.

A more integral view includes more truth. This holistic strategy holds that we need to pay attention both to the intention of the artist, to the broader contexts in which the artist works, and to the intrinsic evidence of the piece of art itself.

### ON LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND ART:

Another trinity of issues must be raised if one is to come to an integral appreciation of art. The first question is what level of consciousness is the artist working from? Next, what faculties of perception is the artist deploying in creating the art? And third, what level of consciousness does the art evoke in the viewer?

By “level of consciousness” I refer to a distinct structure-stage of interior consciousness. Integral theorists point out that these structure-stages have been broken down in roughly similar fashion by more than a hundred developmental researchers working independently around the globe. In the moral line of development, levels of consciousness might be seen as egocentric, ethnocentric, world-centric, or cosmocentric. This refers to the depth of caring, concern, and empathy

felt by an individual. Is it limited to that which is necessary for survival and success (egocentric)? Does it extend further to the tribe or nation (ethnocentric), or perhaps even farther to include all human beings on the planet (world-centric)? Does the circle of caring and concern include all sentient beings in every generation, past, present and future (cosmocentric)?

A second line of developmental consciousness refers to the cultural prism through which spiritual experience is interpreted, including those outlined by Jean Gebser<sup>3</sup>—magical, mythical, rational, pluralistic, and integral.

If we read Spirit as mythic, for example, which is the fundamentalist reading in religious dogma, the message to be extrapolated from a visionary experience will be markedly different than the same dream seen through the prism of the rational level of consciousness, as it emerged from Western Enlightenment thinking. The identical dream will be read still differently through a pluralistic level of consciousness, as recognized in the latter part of the twentieth century. These levels of consciousness are part of the context from which the artist creates, the viewer views, and the critic critiques.

*Vibration (vibrare) means "to move." To be alive is to be in movement. The Musical Tree, its vibratory structure, is the mathematical mechanism for the magical, mythical, mystical Movements we call "Life." To partake of the wondrous fruit of the Tree affords the sacred knowledge of who I Am.*

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A key question is what faculties of perception does the artist deploy in creating her art? Here there are three core possibilities: They are the eye of the senses, the eye of the mind, and the eye of the spirit. The eye of the senses looks at physical reality and reproduces it in art with as much inspired skill as possible. The eye of the mind accesses the interior world of symbols and meaning; the artist creates from that inner image. The eye of the spirit discerns directly—not through dogma—the interior realities of spirit through contemplation, intuition, or practice, and creates art from that place of realization.

This last understanding of art as deriving from the eye of the spirit is central in the teachings of early Hebrew mystics who point out that, in the original Hebrew language, the words for faith or trust in the divine and the word “artist” have the same etymology. Naturally, the eye of the spirit is refracted through the level of consciousness of the artist. An ethnocentric artist will see something differently through the eye of the spirit than will a world-centric artist!

Finally, art may open up a deeper vision in the viewer. The question is which eye of the viewer is opened: the eye of the senses, the mind, or the spirit? There is no one kind of art but multiple forms, all emerging from different levels of consciousness, shaped by larger contexts, and reflecting the many visions made visible through diverse perceptions.

#### ON THE POST-POSTMODERN ART OF CLAUDIA KLEEFELD:

With the integral meta-picture of art in mind, allow me to draw a line from medieval to Renaissance art, through modern and postmodern art to what I

am labeling *post-postmodern* art as it is exemplified in Kleefeld’s work.

Medieval art in European history was often inspired or commissioned by the Church. Its primary focus was to use the eye of the senses to depict compelling scenes from the scriptures or other articles of faith. These were not scenes originally composed by the artist’s inner eye but rather attributions to “gospel truth” as taught by the Church. Religious art tended to be concrete and generally did not reach towards the abstract or mystical. Even, however, when the artist did access the eye of the spirit as the inspiration for his art, what he saw was refracted through a particular ethnocentric and anti-scientific level of consciousness, namely, the prism of dogma. This is critical to understand. Spiritual states, including the perception of the eye of the spirit, never exist in and of themselves. That is the great postmodern insight, foreshadowed by Lurianic Kabbalah, which Integral Theory has placed front and center. Every spiritual state is refracted through its particular level of consciousness. So the grandeur of spiritual art—virtually all art of the medieval period—was almost always reflected through a mythological, fundamentalist lens.

Renaissance art expresses a revolutionary nature that was later to explode into the Enlightenment. Renaissance art was greatly concerned with the objective world. It sought to reproduce the most beautiful and accurate vision possible. In a recent conversation with integral philosopher Ken Wilber while preparing this article, he pointed out that as perspective, dimensionality, and a desire to depict things as they are seen began to be the dominant motif in European art, there emerged a parallel of third-person

perspective in formal operational logic that birthed the scientific and industrial revolutions. Third-person perspective was born in full force and became the source code for a nascent rational, scientific and artistic worldview. The eye of the senses was a dominant faculty in Renaissance art.

Medieval and Renaissance art shared a sense of order and hierarchy. For the Church, order was refracted through a dogmatic ethnocentric prism in which the hierarchy of the church was said to be identical with the hierarchy of natural order. By the Renaissance era, a sense that the natural hierarchy and order of the cosmos were independent of the Church was beginning to be explored. In this dimension the eye of the mind began to assert its independence from the Church. Mystical experience and scientific investigation tentatively asserted their independence from the filter of organized religion. It remained clear, nonetheless, that the world was ordered, with a beginning, an end, and a great chain of being that linked all of reality into the sacred text of the one uni-verse.

This sense of order was shattered in modern and postmodern art. (For the purposes of this essay it is appropriate to lump the two together.) Modern art

rejected the exterior world of ordered objectivity and located its source of inspiration not in religious dogma, nor even in the outer objective world, but in the subjective mind of the artist. During the postmodern period, the distinction between highbrow and low-brow art was eliminated. Apples and mountains, everyday objects, and grand vistas were accorded the same authority. The eye of the mind superseded the eye of the senses as the dominant faculty in art. Modern art was characterized by a dislocation of forms, bold distortions, and the arbitrary manipulation of objects.



“Chi Rho” page from the Hiberno-Celtic *Book of Kells*, illuminated manuscript, c. 800

Objective reality was undermined in art as it was in thought. There is no story line in much of modern and postmodern literature and art. The modern artist turns to the inner eye of the mind and draws inspiration not from the image before her but from the images in her mind. There is an intentional destruction of received and traditional forms. All that remains is the eye of the mind, the radical inner subjectivity of the artist. Because nothing can be known objectively the artist asserts her subjectivity—and with it gains the freedom to collapse time, linearity, form, and anything else that hints at a coherent narrative of reality. Man is very much a stranger in the world painted by the modern and postmodern artist. W. B. Yeats sums up the modern and postmodern situation in both its poignancy and its desperation:

*Now that the ladders are gone,  
I must lie down where all ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of my heart.*

Enter Claudia Kleefeld with her post-postmodern art, an authentic expression of its era. Kleefeld is very much in rebellion against modern art and its deconstructions. The spiral, as it appears in all facets of existence, is her holy grail and through linking all of the spirals that appear in every dimension of existence,

she seeks to rebuild Yeats's lost ladder. What is crucial is that she does not do so in a regressive manner but rather through powerful, evolutionary movement. Kleefeld's art is inspired by the unified order of all things, seeking to remind us that we are not strangers in the universe. She writes, "I am working on understanding the mechanics of the Universe as seen through the Spiral in order to help us experience our belonging and a sense of our interconnectivity of all parts with the whole." What is critical is that Kleefeld's art and texts are entirely post-traditional, post-dogmatic, post-metaphysical, and even post-scientific in a limited sense of the term. She has subliminally incorporated the modern and postmodern critique of religion. Her consciousness is clearly world-centric at a minimum, and possibly cosmocentric.

The spiral in Kleefeld's art becomes a symbol for the post-metaphysical possibility of discerning patterns that connect. The Eros, the essential wholeness of reality, is alluded to in the spiral, which appears in and animates all spheres of reality and knowledge. Kleefeld captures this in an image of books from different disciplines that find right balance in the magic of the eternal form.

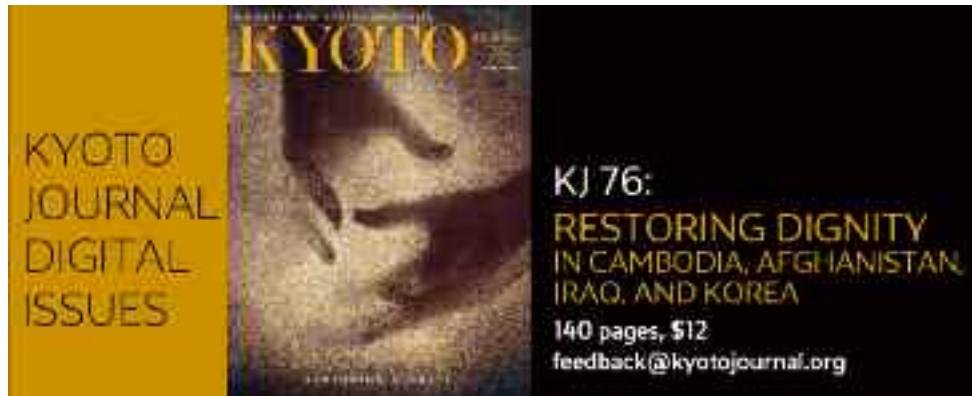
Kleefeld seeks in the spiral to re-qualify the universe. In the exhibition *Patterns of*

*Nature: The Spiral and Interconnectedness*, she depicts many images of the spiral, which abound in nature, science, mathematics, and religion in forms too numerous to list here. Continuing this work in her upcoming exhibition, *Patterns of Nature and Man's Machinery*, Kleefeld contextualizes this pattern using one of the most famous spiral forms: the pinecone, a central emblem in the entrance to the symbol-laden Vatican. She points out that the spiral appears in Sumerian culture pollinating the tree of life; as the sun god; in ancient Egypt; in the hands of the Hindu deities; and on the staffs of Osiris and Bacchus as well as the contemporary papal staff. The fingerprint, fossils from the pre-Cambrian era, the spider's web, the logarithmic spiral with its stunning mathematical sophistication (including the Fibonacci sequence), the caduceus with its winding snakes, the upside-down water spiral that is the

tornado's shape, a bee's back, the octopus and the bat, and of course the cosmos itself—all are revealed to be spiral forms. We find the spiral in music and in math. If fine sand is sprinkled on a metal plate and a violin bow drawn across its edge, a spiral correlated to high numbers is revealed. Add to that the spiral patterns of the planets in their orbit, Kepler's Golden ratio, the symbolic forms at Glastonbury and Chartres Cathedral, the Nazca Lines, and in contemporary developmental theories, the pattern evolves of an interconnected cosmos incarnate in the Eros of the spiral. These concepts, some of which were derived from the artist's investigations into hermetic and other ancient practices, were the basis for the exhibition in question.

Kleefeld's tenets are not formally scientific but spiritual and artistic. A flash of insight, which came to her in a dream state, initiated the artist into

*diary of dead bones 1. Word Spiral written in reverse,  
Conté on paper, 22½ x 30 inches, 2010. © Kleefeld 2012*





Kleefeld depicts the spiral as an expression of an Eros of certainty that asserts the utter meaningfulness, depth, and order of the cosmos. Kleefeld does not intend for us to regress to pre-modern paradigms; rather, she asks her viewers to evolve towards post-postmodern meaning, where science and religion inform each other. Each deploys a different eye: science the eye of the mind; and religion the eye of the spirit. Each eye is mediated or refracted through the particular level of consciousness of the viewer into larger contexts. It is imperative that the interconnected unity of all of reality and its underlying principles is once again experienced as the essential nature of the cosmos. Kleefeld's artistic thesis is that we can re-access our core sense of being at home in a cosmos that is intelligent and patterned. All of this, for Kleefeld, finds expression in the natural archetype of the spiral. ■

contemplation of the spiral. The spiral means for Kleefeld a heightened awareness of what I would call the Eros of wholeness. Kleefeld views her art as sparking from her own enlightened states—from, I would say, the moment when her own eye of the spirit was most open and clear. Her explicit intention is to invite viewers into the radical experience of belonging.

“Patterns of Nature: The Spiral and Interconnectedness” exhibited in Chicago in 2012 at Woman Made Gallery. This show travels to LA Artcore in Los Angeles in December of 2012.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *SOURCES OF THE SELF: The Making of Modern Identity*, (New York: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Huston Smith, *THE FORGOTTEN TRUTH*, (San Francisco: Harper One, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Jean Gebser, *THE EVER-PRESENT ORIGIN: Foundations and Manifestations of the Aperspectival World*, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1986).

#### STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation (Act of August 12, 1970: Section 3685, Title 39, United States Code). Title of Publication: Parabola. Publication no. 104-830. Date of filing: October 1, 2012. Frequency of issue: quarterly. No. of issues published annually: 4. Annual subscription price: \$29.95. Location of Office of Publication: 20 West 20th St., 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10011. Location of Business Offices of the Publisher: 20 West 20th St., 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10011. Name and address of the Publisher: Jeff Zaleski, 20 West 20th St., 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10011. Editor: Jeff Zaleski, 20 West 20th St., 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10011. Owner: Society for the Study of Myth and Tradition, Inc., 20 West 20th St., 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10011. Known Bondholders, Mortgages, and other Security Holders: None. Extent and Nature of Circulation (first number gives average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months, second number gives actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date): Total no. of copies printed (23,072/23,029); Estimated paid circulation through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales (6,599/7,188); paid or requested mail subscriptions (9,701/9,421); Total paid and/or requested circulation (16,300/16,609); Free distribution by mail (195/196); Free distribution outside the mail (121/170); Total free distribution (316/366). Total distribution (16,616/16,975). Copies not distributed: office use, left-overs, unaccounted, spoiled after printing (923/701). Returns from news agents (5533/5,353). Total (23,072/23,029). Percent paid and/or requested circulation (98%/98%). I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. Jeff Zaleski, October 1, 2012.

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