

Amy Myers - The Opera Inside The Atom

Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Center 2005

Four years ago in an interview, Amy Myers emphasized the scientific basis of her monumental style of drawing when she succinctly stated, "It's very mathematical."¹ She noted at the same time that her father, a physicist, "recognized mathematical expressions," whenever he looked at her work.² Following these suggestions, art historian Robert Sobieszek listed some of the specialized mathematical and scientific terminology used by Myers in her conversations with him. They include: "four elemental forces, black holes and event horizons, branes and Calabri-Yau spaces, extended-dimension objects and curled-up dimensions, wormholes and Quantum tunneling, supergravity and supersymmetry."³ Viewers unacquainted with these terms, their meaning, and possible ramifications for Myers' art, need not be daunted by the exclusivity of Sobieszek's list since there are several other very important points of entry into these wondrous drawings. Foremost among them are the works' Macrocosm-Microcosm references, play on Kant's mathematical sublime, mandala-like appearances, and general emphasis on dematerializing force fields of energy as visual equivalents to physics.

Both the name of this exhibition, "The Opera Inside the Atom" and the drawing it references are major clues to the Myers' thoughts about her overall work's participation in the ancient Macrocosm-Microcosm debate. A chief literary source for it is Socrates' reference in Plato's *Philebus* to the four pure and strong elements found in the universe that correlate with weaker admixtures of them in human beings. And a still popular example of this correspondence between people and certain planetary bodies is the ancient pseudoscience of astrology, based on the law of similars: it posits, for example imagined psychological dispensations of individual planets as plausible influences on human lives. Through this strategy of colonizing the universe by anthropomorphizing it, these early theorists were able to link the very

¹ Amy Myers in Mary-Kay Lornbino, "An Interview with Amy Myers" in Constance W. Glenn ed., *Amy Myers: Centric 60*, exh. cat (Long Beach: California State University Art Museum, 2000), p. 17.

² Ibid.

³ Robert A. Sobieszek's excellent essay, "Fearful Symmetries: Amy Myers' Epic Paradigms," is published in *Amy Myers*, exh. cat. (Claremont: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2004), p. 6.

dissimilar realms of human habitat and intergalactic space, thus bridging essential differences, at the same time they assured human beings a firm place in the known world. By extension, the idea of a universal soul, mind, or spirit could then be hypothesized as inhabiting both the Macrocosm and the Microcosm.

Seen in terms of this predominantly anthropomorphic approach to the theory of the Macrocosm and Microcosm, Myers' wonderfully surreal drawings might appear to be subscriptions to its genial and very human familiarity. However, instead of reducing the autonomous heavens into personifications of mere human traits, her works culminate in strange hybrids — more attuned to the physical than the biological sciences — which appear to obey supra-human laws. They can be construed as bearers of light or harbingers of darkness. Moreover, the abiding surreality of Myers' seemingly autonomous forms makes one wonder if these transparently vivid apparitions or force fields are to be trusted. In fact, they can be most productively also be thought of as fields of energy operating according to the logic of a distant and barely discernable intelligence, which even the initiated, including the artist and her father, only partially understand. Looked at in this way, Myers' works bespeak an entirely independent and chimerical force — a world soul, perhaps but certainly not an anthropomorphic one — that is capable of connecting the smallest and most elemental elements of our physical world with the grandeurs of outer space. Conceived in terms of the opera metaphor in Myers' title, her representations of atomic elements as energies can also be construed as participants in a hyperbolic and strange theater where distinct rhythms reach a great crescendo. Moreover, in view of Stanley Kubrick's use of Johann Strauss' "The Blue Danube" waltz as a guiding metaphor for the weightlessness of outer space in his 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Myers' opera reference as a poetic trope for the music of the spheres, which animates even the smallest atomic particles appearing in her art, is entirely logical.

Since Myers' work goes beyond the Macrocosm-Microcosm's naive affiliation of human beings with a universe structured in their image to posit connections based on laws governing the overall physical universe as well as its inhabitants, her art can also be interpreted as transcendent in the contradictory sense Immanuel Kant outlined in his description of the mathematical sublime. Fueled by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century researches into the laws of physics, Kant attempted to establish guidelines for the human apperception and comprehension of particularly large objects, which on first encounter might be described as overwhelming affronts to

empirical understanding. His mathematical sublime, a two-part program, reconciles humans' initial experience of objects, which defy and outrage their imagination, with their subsequent ability to view these failures as indications of a need for transcendent understanding. According to Kant, recognition of this need enables people then to leap over empirical hindrances to the sublime, which they can then attribute to an internal and very human feeling of judgment rather than a quality of the object catalyzing it. As Kant pointed out:

We can see here that nothing in nature can be given, however large we may judge it, that could not, when considered in a different relation, be degraded all the way to the infinitely small, nor conversely anything so small that it could not, when compared with still smaller standards, be expanded for our imagination all the way to the magnitude of the world; telescopes have provided us with a wealth of material in support of the first point, microscopes in support of the second. Hence, considered on this basis, nothing that can be an object of the senses is to be called sublime.

[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within

us a supersensible power; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is the use that judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to [arouse] this (feeling), and in contrast with that use any other use is small.

Hence what is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment.⁴

Similarly Myers' references to cosmic and subatomic forces in her work create an opportunity for her viewers to experience a failure of empirical comprehension as a prelude

to a sublime experience prompted by a desire for totality, which her mathematically orchestrated forms can catalyze but not create.

These ensuing symmetrical force fields of energy are the basis of stately mandalas she creates. Although mandalas were originally circular mediation devices



⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Prueher (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987). pp. 250, 106.

through which Hindu and Tantric Buddhist devotees were able to manifest visually the concept of a divine spirit emanating from within each individual, over time this cosmically oriented schema has proven to be elastic enough for psychologically predisposed initiates to gain insight into their relationship with themselves and the largely secular world they inhabit. Under the guidance of Myers' painstaking hand, mandalas reenact their early Hindu meaning as concentric energy circles, even though she has replaced in these works a traditional spiritual iconography with a surreal and scientific one. In her art the original association of mandalas with energy is re-construed to reference modern-day physics as a search for the universal order of matter and energy. Fittingly, Myers' mandala qua physics cosmograms play on the tensions of attraction and repulsion stemming from the Macrocosm-Microcosm dialectic and correlate as well with the following description of particle physics and the universe that she has provided:

The perspective of particle physics is one of a universe without "stuff." All particles exist with the potential to combine with and become different particles. They are intermediate states in a network of interactions and are based upon events, not things.⁵

Myers' hieratic compilations of overlapping transparent shapes and elaborate configurations appear to be moving toward the center of the sheets of paper on which they have been realized but are unable to achieve the type of equilibrium one assumes to be their natural purview. Despite this imbalance, her bi-laterally symmetrical mandalas emanate outward in measured, rational, yet mysterious cadences from clearly articulated centers.

Although Amy Myer's works might appear to ratify age-old beliefs in a seamless universe in order to join elements of the Macrocosm with Microcosm and thus scale down both known and unexplored worlds to human limits, they actually replace this highly questionable and comfortable description of the universe with a far more mysterious one predicated on scientific and mathematical insights. To viewers unacquainted with the intricacies of the arcane theories on which Myers art is predicated, her work is accessible through the thematic of the mystery that thoroughly pervades it as well as the feeling of the sublime that the unknown is capable of catalyzing. It can also be understood through an undermining of the ancient and superannuated Macrocosm-Microcosm theory of unity, particularly in

⁵ Ibid., p. 8

terms of its subtle allusions to the duality that surrounds it. In addition, Myers' art certainly accrues meaning through its general employment of mandala symbolism as a means to direct a focused energy, which is upheld in its dominant figures, and withdrawn as an overall compositional device in its off-center fields. The lack of sync between the two can be interpreted in terms of the fast paced dynamics of change and fierce reactions to it that keep our world from ever achieving harmony and balance.

— *Robert Hobbs* ©2005

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