

Christmas 2018 in Town and Country

Prof. Vernon Gras

1339 Massachusetts Ave SE, DC. 20003

Grasmere Farm, Sperryville, VA. 22740

Personal: This past year has been the worst year of my life. I collapsed in church service back in March due to a heart going on vacation for too long. Which then needed a pace-maker installed down at UVA to make the heart behave. Then, in perhaps my last European visit to enjoy friends and places, I suffered a stroke down at Wuerzburg, Germany, called “Broca’s Aphasia” It produces words and language problems. While I retain my wits and understanding, my speed and accuracy aren’t supported by words or language very well. I need to bring back what I had in abundance before. Things are improving, but normalizing my brain is taking it’s sweet time because I’m 90 and after celebrating 90 this year in February, I start on 91.

But I will send my usual Year in Review in a shortened form:

Political: The country seems going downhill at an ever faster pace and with increasing loss of control. Trump’s incompetence and growing risk to our Democracy has brought the Federal government to a halt. 800,000 government workers have received no-pay checks. Why has a democracy based on the desire and power of its voting people come to such a ridiculous dead-end? How does a Trump and Brexit (in democratic England) end up with such self-inflicted wounds? How about if those people’s wounds came first and Trump and Brexit were a result?

Well- yes - Hillary did receive three million more Presidential votes and – yes - the electoral college should be eliminated. But why in the U.S. are the majority of people losing the ability to afford homes, college education, and food, while extending their need for ever more jobs to increase work time? Meantime, 10% of the population has been acquiring ever more wealth than the 90% of the other more needy population. This wealth inequality has produced a democracy in name only. So, why can’t we fix this take over of our democracy by plutocrats? Academia has certainly helped produce this wealth inequality that has surged ever upward in the last forty years - especially, by our two Nobel listed economists, Milton Friedman and James Buchanan. Both of them, I seem to follow around at the University of Chicago (my alma mater) and George Mason University (my teaching job). Here’s Jim Hightower’s criticism of Friedman: Already, back in 1970 “shareholder mumbo-jumbo became *ideology*” when it “received a veneer of academic legitimacy from the University of Chicago’s reigning guru of *laissez-faire* economics, Milton Friedman. He embraced shareholder-above-all as an absolute truth.” He asked: “Do corporate executives, provided they stay within the law, have responsibilities in their business activities other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible? No, they do not!” But as we have all learned from Gingrich in 1994, the Koch brothers already in 1980, and their Neo-Libertarian followers, “corporations *write* the laws, routinely dumping millions of dollars a year into lobbyists,

lawyers, legislators, and judges to ensure that the definition of what's legal will stretch" as far as it needs to go.

But corporate billionaires did not, politically - want or expect - Trump and Brexit, so they realized that they need to fix social inequality because it threatens their wealth and power. That is what they are attempting to do now. Here is Anand Ghiridharadas in *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*:(2018): " The winners of our inequitable wealth now declare themselves partisans of change. They want to lead the search for solutions in the forefront of social change. But the social change they attempt reflects their bias. Their initiatives mostly aren't democratic. They share the private sectors view and its charitable spoils – the market way of looking at things and bypassing government. They reflect a highly influential view that the winners of an unjust status-quo – and the tools and mentalities and values that helped them win – are the secret to redress the injustice. When elites, however, put themselves in the vanguard of social change, it not only fails to make things better, but also serves to keep things as they are. It takes the edge off of some of the public anger at being excluded from progress while improving the image of the winners. Private and voluntary half-measures crowds out public solutions that would solve problems for everyone without the elites blessing."

In his book, *The Fifth Risk*, Michael Lewis makes clear what the long term damages Trump is doing in his assault on government itself. The best way to undermine government is to make it as stupid and as inept as your rhetoric has always claimed it to be. Reagan had already led the anti-government publicity by claiming – "what if government is not the solution but the problem." Following that, Trump could claim that "Washington (with its public institutions) is just a swamp needing to be drained." Thus, you can and should end up destroying it. Trump has become a powerful weapon of administration destruction. One finds it difficult to wait for Mueller's February expose of his Russian/Trump investigation of collusion. .

To better news of 2018: The Gras annual lecture last April at GMU was given by Robert E. Singleton, perhaps the best painter produced so far by Virginia/West Virginia. He was selected because his work continued the emergent and evolutionary comments of Wendy Wheeler, the 2017 speaker. In her recent book, *Expecting the Earth: Life/Culture/Biosemiotics*, Wheeler had criticized that Nature was still determined and only Humans had freedom: "The age of gene-centrism and mechanism is slowly passing. In its place, the biological sciences increasingly recognize that life isn't simply a genetically determined programme, but is centrally a matter of information and communication systems nested in larger communicative systems. The latter include both internal and external, and natural and cultural, environments. But 'information' is an under-analyzed term in relation to living systems. Accordingly, a new interdisciplinary, biosemiotics, has grown up to study the ontology of sign relations in biological, aesthetic and technological ecologies. From the Greek bios for life and semeion for sign, biosemiotics is the study of these intertwined natural and cultural sign systems of the living. ... These groundbreaking new developments are relevant to the environmental humanities, social ecology, and the life sciences more generally." What Wheeler did for philosophy, Singleton did for art.

I wrote the following letter to persuade him to give the lecture and as it is a critique of his work, you may find it interesting:

To: Robert Singleton

Great to hear back from you, Robert. Let me help persuade you to give the lecture. In my first email, I described how I came to understand you better through your work and the pictorial biography of your two books. Rather than wait for our next meeting, let me expand on my reaction to your work, now. First, I do believe, that "a critic is a person whose interest can help to activate the interest of others" (quote is from A.O. Scott, NYTimes critic). In my last ten years in academia, I wrote on film. My edited books and essays on Dennis Potter and Peter Greenaway, both screenwriters and directors, helped establish their reputations. Why those two, when there were far more popular films and directors? Because their work interpreted me while I was interpreting them. There was mutuality between their work and me. And that is what happened in my relationship to your work. From just being a fan, in awe of your technique, I moved to an understanding and interpretation of your work. Of course, my interpretation will be unique to me, but critics always assume the "subjective universal", that what interests them aesthetically will interest everyone else. So what excites me in your work? Well, you are right that art always originates in the emotions, whether it's Wordsworth's dictum that "poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility" Pascal's "passion has authority over reason", Goethe's "Gefuehl ist alles", or Kant's take on "the sublime". And yes, your later paintings do evoke feelings of the sublime. Those clouds and the play of light are magnificent with their towering presence building and changing in the light over an endless horizon. Shades of Caspar Friedrich with his "finite in the infinite" which you allude to in describing how small in scale what we can focus on is to our encompassing circular vision. And it may well have been why the Mandala with its square within the circle or vice versa was so attractive to Jung. He said that the goal of human existence was the creation of "a Self". "Self" was defined by him as achieving the proper relationship between the individual consciousness and the collective unconscious. In wanting to unite the individual ego to a wider whole, Jung psychologized what myth, religion, and science have tried to do, down through history and continue to do so today. Their common motivation is to establish a true self/world relationship. Great literature and art (as opposed to entertainment) have the same motivation expressed in various, unique ways. And that motivation is what I find in your work, and your execution of this desire I find very relevant to our moment.

I taught myth and literature for about 25 years at George Mason University. Myth gives depth and resonance to story-telling because it's among the earliest human attempts to establish a self/world relationship. While I used James Frazier's Golden Bough which dealt with later agricultural myths of the seasonal cycle as the dying and resurrected god or the Eniautus or Year Spirit, the earliest myths deal with creation, the origin of the people telling the myth, and their relation with these first beginnings. Creation is often described as a movement from an eternal unformed and unchanging dark chaos in which sky and earth lie together in a changeless embrace until forced apart by their offspring who drive a wedge between them producing light and movement. That your paintings resemble or are allomorphs of these creation myths is very persuasive. Even though you give a genealogy of the horizon line between earth and sky as emanating from your personal experience of Midwest prairie horizons and ocean vistas in Florida, why did you and our early ancestors pick the meeting of sky and earth as a creative beginning? Each of your later paintings is a creation whose subject is creation. Sky and earth are usually male and female in myth and from this polarity all other things derive. We, too, need the polarities of proton/electron, quarks/leptons, dark matter/dark energy, going all the way back to the yin/yang of the Tao, to account for and interpret time and change. Without polar tensions there is no motion and no story. Thus your sky and sea (or earth) always divided by a wedge to keep them in tension produces clouds which in their movement and reflection of light bring in temporality and process. Nothing changes more quickly than clouds whose shape and color can announce brutal violence or reflect glorious spectacular light through which our consciousness hopes to gain unity with nature. Of course, this unity whether expressed as string theory, Plato's

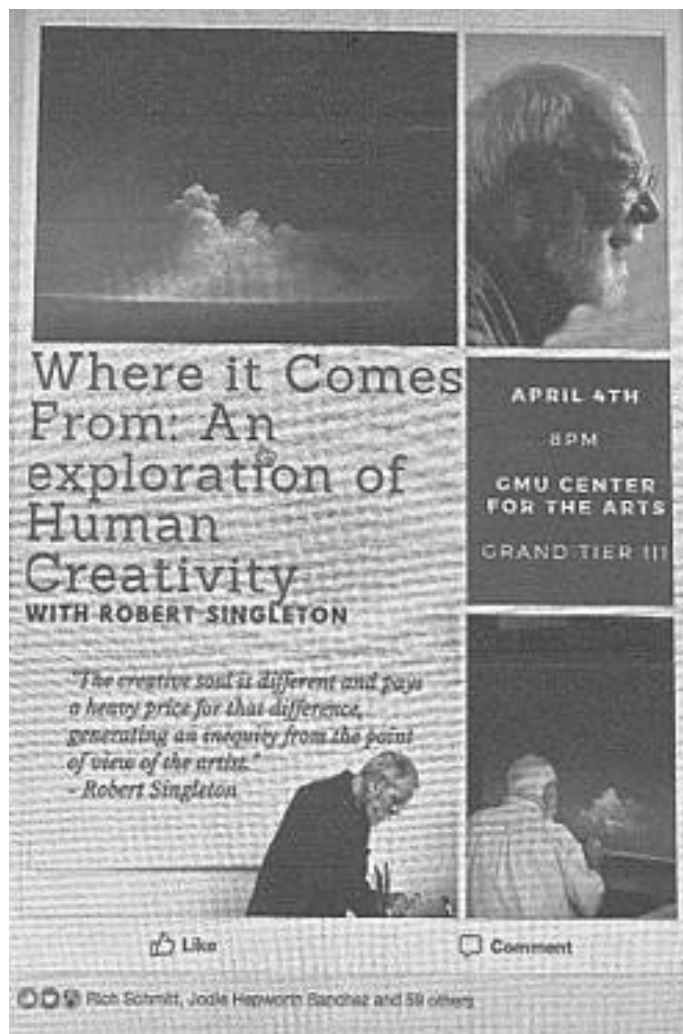
Ideas, Newton's universal laws, the paradise of world religions , or Jung's "Self" will never be achieved, will never arrive. Many of them have already been replaced. We live in the postmodern age which understands that all we will ever get is an interpretation, never the thing in itself. There is no unmediated access to reality. Our interpretation or "world" is always dependent on the knowledge available at our moment. Thus cultural interpretations or "worlds" resemble nature's evolutionary emergence. Both are processes and will always remain open-ended.

So, how do your paintings speak to our moment? They do a great job in revealing our 'reality'. If reality becomes an historical creation via individual imagination echoing the evolutionary emergence of nature then, to feel at home in the universe today, we have to embrace process and ongoing creation over some changeless perfection or absolute. That is what resonates in your painting. While every work of art has to achieve a balance of the tension or forces that motivated it, your paintings include a sense of imminent future which is full of potentialities and joyous fulfillment. While you do admit that "evil" exists via dark clouds, most of your clouds announce better and maybe greater events are about to happen. Your paintings reveal the "world" of our moment in a positive and more relevant way than most other artists do. There may be historical reasons to have Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman's Seven Stations of the Cross on the top floor of the National Gallery of Art and while both he and Rothko based emotion on color, emotion still has to be tied to a self/world relationship. This season, Michael Kahn, director of Shakespeare Theater, probably has personal reasons for putting on Waiting for Godot and Pinter's comedies which illustrate our need for illusion. But Absurd Theater and Rothko/Barnett embody a spiritual end of the road, as does John Barth's novel with that title. This was art that echoed loss of meaning, the abyss of nothingness in the 1950s-60s. I doubt that you will end up in a bathtub with your wrists slashed, even though it would be neater than Rothko's kitchen mess. Since then, biology has supplanted physics as the dominant science for our cultural moment. The Sante Fe Institute with its anti-reductionist play back complexity science is focused on emergence. We have learned that Nature is not an indifferent, mindless, deterministic machine but rather proceeds via interpretation. Emergence seems more a result from feedback communication than chance mutations. The journey from bacteria to us certainly is one from simplicity to intellectual complexity. If our cultural potential was already present in and from bacterial interactions as revealed in Lynn Margulis's endosymbiotic theory, then imagining a better future should echo and continue nature's interpretative processes. Your paintings champion this creative process and establish a continuity principle between nature and our creative imaginings so we can feel at home in the universe. Your work speaks to us in our time of need. Thanks.

Hope this persuades you to be our visiting scholar and give the lecture.

Vernon W. Gras
Professor emeritus
English and Cultural Studies
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

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Vernon, As I read, and re-read your critique of my work, I am beyond humbled and grateful. I am certain, that I will not be able to convey what you have so beautifully articulated with my words in a lecture. As another artist once said; "If I could explain it, I wouldn't have to dance it". I create with my paintings, you, use words. I will be honored to speak about my creative process, using slides and a small selection of my works and to dialogue with those in attendance afterwards, like I did in the Petersburg show. Vernon, I can only speak as the creator. I cannot speak from the perspective of a critic. I do hope that perhaps you will share your interpretation as so beautifully articulated in your analysis of my work. Dan and I very much look forward to collaborating with you on the logistics of my visit and thank you for this wonderful opportunity.
Robert

Robert - The only painters whose critical skills equaled their painterly ones (or at least almost) were Kandinsky and Leonardo d'Vinci. I doubt whether, Van Gogh, Cezanne,

or Picasso, could give or were interested in giving a verbal equivalent to their painting. Nor are *any* artists able to provide a total interpretation to their work. What makes an artist a noteworthy artist is that there is a transparency in his/her work to the meaning of their cultural moment. Their work actually expands their cultural moment for others. You do that and, while it perhaps wasn't foregrounded in your conscious thought, creatively imagining a wider (better?) future was present in your painting earlier than in your more explicit later ones. I quote from your Kennedy/Hunter show descriptions: "I seek a means of involving another human being, all human beings, not as viewers, but as participants in the ageless impact of the creative emergence." You do that in spades with your later paintings but that motive, seemingly, was always there.

I want you to repeat what you did in your pictorial/biography. I think you have slides of those early paintings because you used them to create that Joy of Light booklet. If both nature and culture are in motion and thus historical, than a chronological show and tell of your work would be marvelous. Why your work has suddenly become more relevant is that we are changing our self/world relationship from viewing reality as one of substance to one of process. Emergent evolution has replaced Newton's static, causal world-as-machine. Creative relationships produce new realities, more than matter in motion - certainly in the biosphere. Wendy Wheeler already provided a verbal account of this changeover in the last Gras lecture. You will provide the art. We will talk about this changeover in the coming months, about the parallel between creative emergence in nature and in culture. Vernon