

MORE PERSPECTIVES

FINDING DAVID BOHM

PAM HARRIS

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill...engulfed in the infinite immensity of which I am ignorant and which knows me not, I am frightened and am astonished at being here rather than there.

Blaise Pascal (1625-62). *Pensées*.

At some point in our lives, most of us look for answers to questions about our existence. What is the meaning to Life on Earth? What does it mean to really 'BE' as against 'being' in the whirl of our daily lives? What is our connection to the Universe? Is there a particular way of 'BEing'—a certain consciousness—that allows us to comprehend this connection?

The above quotation from Pascal's *Pensées* perfectly sums up the way I felt at the beginning of my search for understanding. I had no idea where it would lead me, but I trusted my intuition to guide me in the right direction.

I wasn't always a painter. Music and classical piano filled much of my younger life. When I switched my medium of expression to painting, the discipline of learning a musical instrument stood me in good stead. I practised my 'scales' and 'arpeggios' daily as I slowly found my way into this new language. Painting was becoming as much a part of my life as playing music had been earlier; I hoped in time to find a similar sense of my Self in this medium of creativity.

After many years, I began exhibiting work. In 1986, after an exhibition called *Passage*, I had to decide what kind of artistic journey I was on; what would be my 'voice.'

The title, *Passage*, was chosen because of its obvious meaning—a corridor or space that allows movement from one place to another. On the other hand, it could also mean a passage towards a more internal conversation of what 'the little space which I fill' might mean.

After this exhibition, I had a difficult conversation with an eminent scientist who advocated for Strong Artificial Intelligence. I was shocked to discover how ill prepared I was to challenge his views, especially in the realm of science. It propelled me to search for ways in which to fill the many gaps in my knowledge.

It proved to be a rewarding exercise. I wanted my paintings to reflect the concepts I was interested in. From this point on, I often turned to science, particularly quantum physics, and philosophy for answers.

Ultimately, this is how I came across the work and ideas of David Bohm. The images I have chosen for this article are intended to illustrate this journey and the way in which Bohm's concepts increasingly informed my paintings.

This is an image of a loose grid-like structure containing a small red square. It is an attempt to express the notion of fragile humanity as it exists somewhere in the flux of the Universe.



Grid, 2009

The use of the red colour for this small square was instinctive; red is 'bright' and 'strong'—a description that does not fit my palette. However, when alluding obliquely to the human presence in my work, it seemed right. Then, quite accidentally, I came across the following quote by the painter Barnett Newman while looking at a reproduction of Newman's *Adam*.

The first man was called Adam. 'Adam' means earth, but it also means 'red.' I bring this up for a real reason...my work, although it's abstract...is involved in man'.

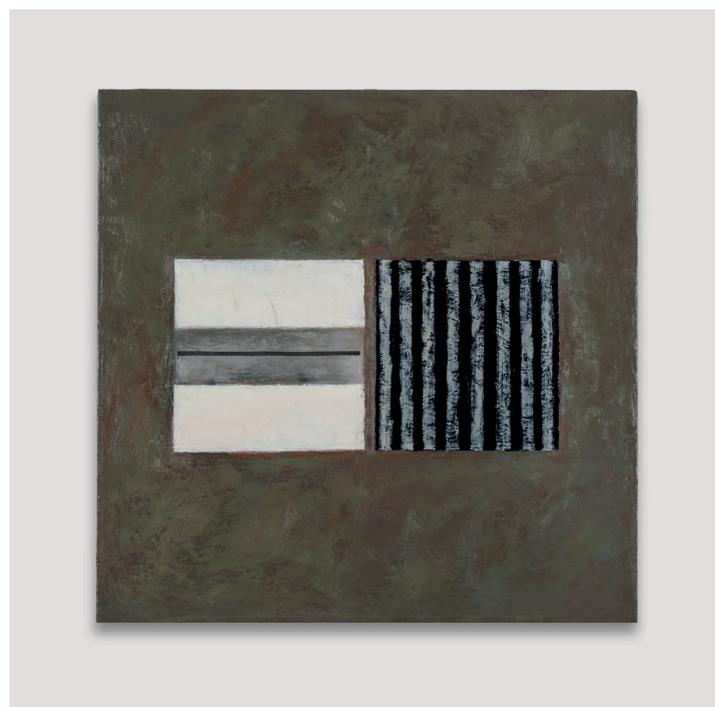
Although I was unaware of Newman's use—and explanation—of red when I painted *Grid*, the serendipitous finding of the above quote gave me a sense of support in the additional layer of meaning I wished to impart.

My iconography is limited to horizontal and vertical lines, grids and squares and stripes, oil paint on canvas or paper. Perhaps because of this self-imposed limit, my work was once described as 'simple, but not simplistic.' Although my means of expression may be simple, the concepts I try to explore through the use of this painterly vocabulary are certainly not—and so I took this description to be complimentary.

In the studio, I test whether my simple understanding of a complex notion is sufficiently credible to be turned into an image that will, in the first place, attract the viewer. I work on several paintings at a time. If I can convince myself of the veracity behind the imagery, the idea, whether scientific or philosophical, might be developed to become a series. In this way, each series becomes a 'stepping-stone' towards further exploration.

The notion of Duality seemed like a good place to begin.

I thought that the philosophical concept of Duality might be likened to the two sides of a coin, innately connected yet always separate. I wanted to see each 'side' beside the other, so I had to prise them apart to see how I might proceed.



Duality, 1996

I made a three-dimensional version of the ‘two sides of the coin.’ There is a small gap between the images, indicating their autonomy. They appear to be similar, yet different. They both carry black and white bands or stripes. However, one is thickly painted with horizontal bands of black and white paint and contains a small lead square. The other one shows black and white vertical stripes on a metallic gray background. The paintwork on each canvas continues around their sides. (Later images will show examples of side-views).

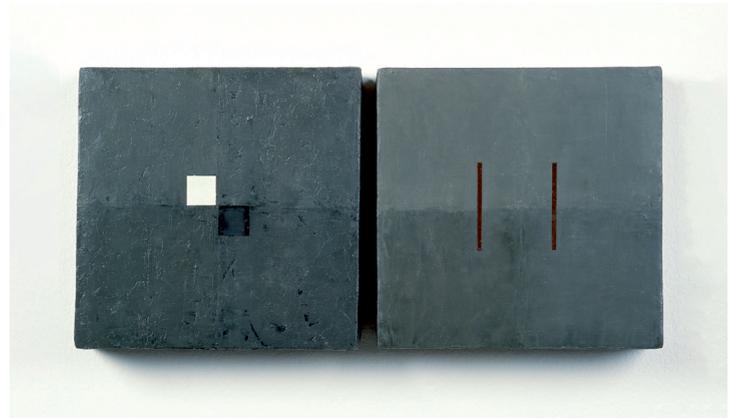


Subject and Object (diptych), 1998

When he lived in Dublin, Erwin Schrödinger wrote a beautiful book called *What is Life?* (now reprinted with *Mind and Matter*²). When I came across it, I was immediately drawn to its title and, in reading (and re-reading) it gained much food for thought. In particular, six words gave me the necessary confidence to re-present the concept of Duality as one unified image.

Subject and Object are only one. These words underlined the profound connectedness of the observer to the observed and succinctly expressed what I hoped to be able to convey in paint. The paragraph concludes: *The barrier between them cannot be said to have broken down as a result of recent experience in the physical sciences, for this barrier does not exist*⁵.

This idea, and how I might reconnect and represent ‘subject’ and ‘object’ other than as two sides of the same coin, are shown in the following images from the series *Unified Field Paintings*.



Top: *Subject and Object* (diptych), 2006
Above: *Union Painting no. 25*, 2006

By inserting ‘one side of the coin’ within the ‘other,’ it became possible for me to express this connectedness as a *Union Painting*.

I first came across the use of an insert while looking at the striking paintings of Sean Scully. He had developed this device, and used it as a kind of ‘window’ in his works. It was a Eureka moment as I immediately realised that it was exactly how I could convey the concept of Unity.

I also liked the idea of a Unified Field Theory to express the notion of connectedness. I was, however, aware that the use of metaphorical imagery to explore scientific theories might be a trap—tiny dots for atoms, etc. So I painted a square divided into four to represent the fundamental forces and, since it will probably be ‘man’ who will find a way of ultimately unifying them, I inserted a small red canvas into the centre.

In the example, below, the resulting central image is surrounded by a gray field, representing the different scale in which the forces operate.



Unified Field Painting no. 7, 2006

Over the years, I developed several series of paintings with titles such as *Duality* (1996-7); *Subject and Object Paintings* (1997); *Union Paintings* (1997 onwards); *Unified Field Paintings* (2006). Each completed series led me towards an exploration of the next one. I continued to read many books written by quantum physicists, philosophers and poets to broaden my understanding of what I wanted to express.

There is no reason why Art and Science shouldn't inform one another. In my explorations, it occurred to me that an artist's approach to expressing a concept somewhat mirrored Einstein's ‘thought experiments.’ Playing with or freely testing an idea in the studio is, I imagine, a very familiar process for a lot of artists. There might be something to work on—or maybe not. But for me, often, the paint itself will show me how I might find a way to begin and, hopefully, lead me in the right direction.

I believe that the Universe is an immense, intelligent and orderly structure and that the planets and stars are living and dying organisms. When James Lovelock wrote about Earth in such terms in ‘The Gaia Theory,’ it wasn't universally embraced by theoretical physicists of that time. As it turns out, however, he appears to be correct.

*O body swayed to music, O brightening glance
How can we tell the dancer from the dance?'*

When my paintings have an insert, it is painted separately to the larger canvas. On completion, both appear together on the same plane to indicate their connectedness.

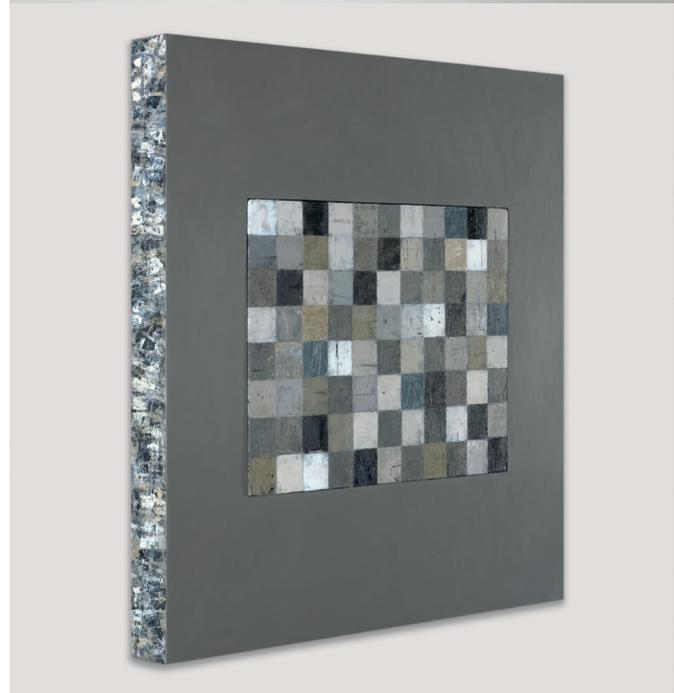
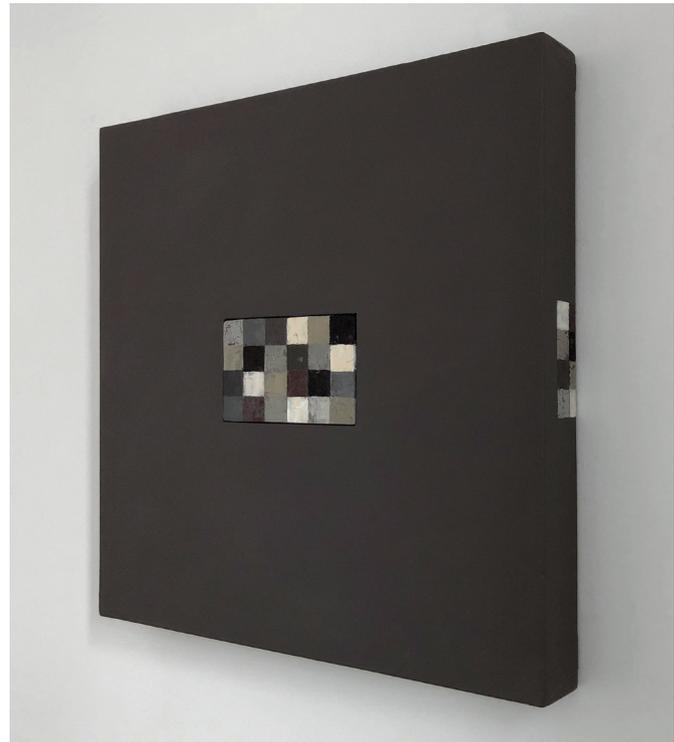
This painting shows a small canvas of thickly painted squares inserted into a larger canvas. It is an earlier expression of the connection between objects of differing scales. The central image represents 'us,' intrinsically connected to our 'planet,' the larger canvas.



Union Painting no. 15, 2000

This simple representation of innate connectedness is not simplistic; its intended implication is that of harmonious reciprocal maintenance between all living, sentient beings on Earth and, therefore, within the wider Universe.

My canvases are not flat; their sides measure either 5cm or 7.5cm making the paintings rather sculptural. The sides of the paintings are an integral part of my work. They are used as 'echoes.' They always relate to the front image, but they also imply that there may be something else waiting to be discovered. (My understanding at the time was that this 'something else' took the form of so-called higher dimensions which might inform our lives, even if we are unaware of them.) A couple of examples follow.



*Top: Union Painting no. 15, 2000 (side view)
Above: Union Painting no. 4, 2010 (side view)*

This initial philosophical understanding of higher dimensions was underlined and became crystallised as I began—very slowly—to interpret David Bohm's concept of the Implicate Order.

I must have 'found' David Bohm in 1998, because that is the date I wrote inside the front cover of *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*.

With the word 'Wholeness,' the title drew me in. Wholeness conveys much more than Union—it is an immense notion. I was excited by the concept that everything is contained within the infinite potential of this Implicate Order. In reading more and more, I began to comprehend how explication happens through various autonomous orders. My allusions to higher dimensions on the sides of my paintings became much clearer to me. Every 'thing' is ever present, just waiting for its moment to be unfolded—to become.

I didn't realise at the time what a constant companion this slim book would be. Bohm's concept 'spoke' to me in such a way that I felt all my questioning was finding truthful answers. Without being aware of it, his thinking was infiltrating my work. It was beautiful and elegant, and I trusted it.

As I understood it, Bohm's Causal Interpretation did not in any way contradict the accepted interpretation of the Laws of Quantum Theory. Instead of piecing fragments together to provide a picture of the Whole, the notion of Wholeness was Bohm's starting point. From the infinite potential, which is a crucial expression of this Wholeness, various autonomous orders are enfolded and unfolded in a continuous flowing movement. I wanted to find a way to express this.

The markings I placed on the sides of my paintings offered a possible way to explore this concept.

A particular side marking, an abstract grid, was adapted to become the main image. This small painting is an attempt to represent the infinite potential of the Implicate Order.



Enfolded, 2021

Harmony shows an insert of small squares set in a soft gray field—but there is an additional panel to the L (viewer's) side of the painting. It expands it three-dimensionally.



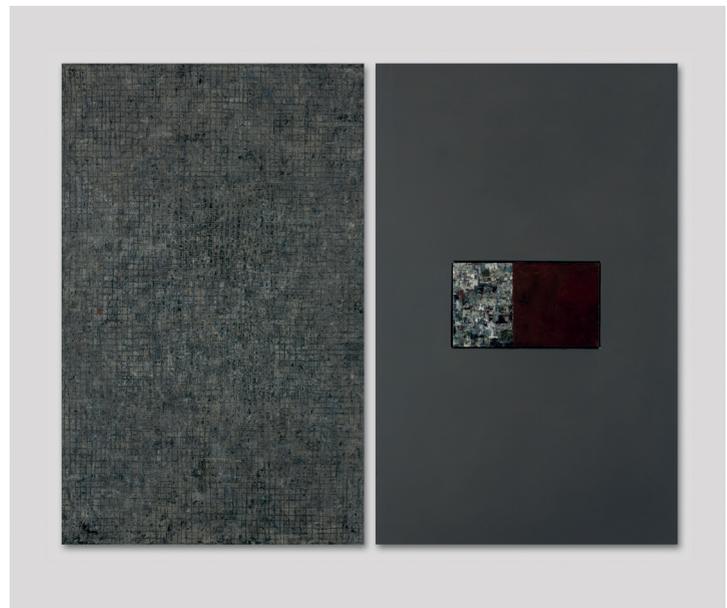
Harmony (diptych), 2015

This 'side-bar' is painted plainly on its front face and on both left and right sides in colours that relate to the front image. There is minimal space between it and the main canvas so that one can just see 'around' it. This addition of a three-dimensional side to the main canvas hints at the ever more subtle, deeper dimensions which may exist as the Super Implicate Order. The other sides of the painting, (not shown) have the markings I habitually use as 'echoes' relating to the front image.

Subsequently, many other absorbing books relating to the Implicate-Explicate Order came to my attention. *Science, Order, and Creativity*, written in collaboration with F. David Peat; *The Bohm-Biederman Correspondence*; *On Creativity*; *On Dialogue*; *The Undivided Universe*, written with Basil Hiley; *The Essential David Bohm*, edited by Lee Nichol.

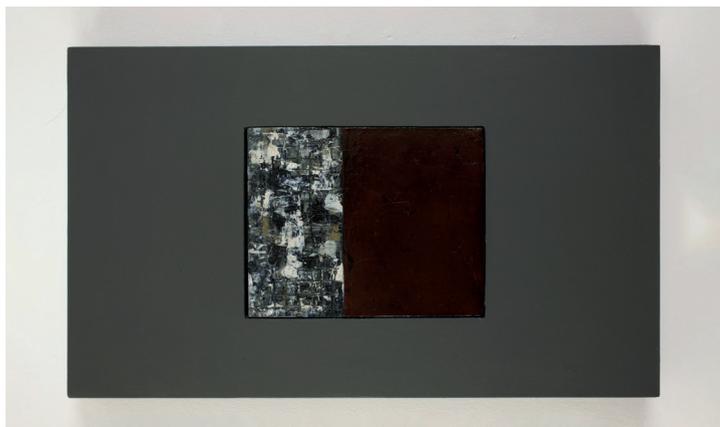
These inspiring books seemed to appear for me at just the right moment, and (although I have had to skip the difficult mathematical bits) they are always nearby companions.

The following two images are from the series 'Enfolded' (2008). In the first, the grid-like panel 'enfolds' a tiny red square, which 'unfolds' as the central image in the right (viewer's) panel as an effort to describe the 'flowing movement' of the Implicate-Explicate Order.



Enfolding-Unfolding (diptych), 2008

The example below tries to capture an awareness of the explication of an autonomous order, *that moment when the future becomes the present*⁵.



Here-Now, 2008

In *The Limits of Thought*, the dialogues between David Bohm and J. Krishnamurti naturally became another book to keep nearby to read and re-read. These amazing discussions, in which they never seem to say precisely what they are trying to pin down, are both compelling and frustrating. But what was clear was that a scientist and a mystic-philosopher had a very similar worldview, and each was entirely open to the other's informed challenges and explanations.

The painting shown here is from a series of six large canvases called *Meditation*, which I made between 2018 and 2019 as a result of reading these dialogues.



Meditation 3, 2018-19

When asked what these relatively blank paintings were meant to be about, I had to honestly reply that I was trying very hard to paint nothing—no 'Thing'. (Nevertheless, there remains some 'Thing' there—an energy that, paradoxically, seems to impart stillness—which is closer to what I wish to express in this series.)

It is immensely gratifying to be alive at a time when both the scale and importance of the Implicate Order are increasingly gaining extensive recognition. It provides a profound understanding of our place in the greater scheme of things. This is such a pivotal moment in our existence on our planet. Surely 'wholeness' rather than 'fragmentation' is exactly what is so urgently needed?

I am indebted to David Bohm for the beauty and breadth of his inspirational work. It sings out to me in such a clear way. It has offered me a greater understanding of what 'the little space which I fill' might mean—and how this very sense of intrinsic connectedness relates me to the Implicate Order itself.

His clarity has enabled me catch glimpses of his vision, and to interpret and represent it, however simply, without having any formal scientific knowledge whatsoever.

The following three images are efforts to express my current, small, understanding of Bohm's enormous work.



Top: *The Implicate Order* (triptych), 2020

Middle: *Unfolding*, 2020

Above: *Consciousness 2* (detail), 2021

I am astonished to find myself here, in a place where images of my work and the name of David Bohm appear together.

My most sincere thanks to Eleanor Peat and Maureen Doolan and to the Pari Center for their generosity in offering me this possibility.

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time⁶.*

T.S. Eliot.



Endnotes

¹ Voice of America (United States Information Agency), interview in Sao Paulo, 1965, audiotape, BNFA. (Barnett Newman, Ed. Ann Temkin. Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Tate Publishing, p. 192).

² Schrödinger, Erwin (2012) *What Is Life? & Mind and Matter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Reprint edn.

³ Schrödinger, Erwin (2012) *What Is Life? & Mind and Matter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Reprint edn. *Mind and Matter*, p. 137.

⁴ Yeats, W.B. (1990) 'Among School Children.' from *Poems*. London: Everyman's Library.

⁵ Peat, F. David (2000) *The Blackwinged Night: Creativity in Nature and Mind*. New York: Perseus Books, p.161.

⁶ Eliot, T.S. (1942) 'Little Gidding' from *Four Quartets* London: Faber and Faber.

PAM HARRIS has been curious about Consciousness and Being for many years. She is an abstract artist.

On a painting in 1989 she placed the following words: **consciousness is the connexion that holds the balance between evolution and destruction**. Feeling wary about making such a bold statement, she joined the words seamlessly in mirror writing, using a stencil and silver pencil—making them difficult to decipher within the image. In an attempt to discover whether there might be some truth in these words, (which 'came' to her) she turned to philosophy and quantum science in her search for answers.

Her paintings have been widely exhibited over a period of forty years. They are in several public and private collections in Ireland, where she lives and works, as well as in the State Collection. They have also been shown in France (Galerie Municipale Les Bain Douches, Antibes) and in The Netherlands.

The above essay is an account of a very particular phase in her explorations, which brought her into the realm of David Bohm's breathtaking understanding. As his ideas increasingly inform her paintings, she feels she is finding answers to her questions.

For more information, please visit www.pamharris.ie