

## The Feminine Cosmos: Sandra Lerner's Sublime Paintings by Donald Kuspit

How to represent the unrepresentable—the sublime, the sense of being in the presence of “unrepresentable excess” or “limitlessness”—that’s the task of Sandra Lerner’s paintings. They are undoubtedly abstract—they belong to the tradition of so-called musical painting that began with Kandinsky’s abstractions. But they are also representations of limitless cosmic space, grounded in a scientific understanding of its complexity—Lerner knows her astrophysics—not to say absurdity, at least to everyday understanding. In Lerner’s *Macrocosm* series, 2019, the circular, spinning disk-like shapes, radiating particles of light—cosmic radiation, energizing space, as it were—are wormholes, she tells us. But they may also be black holes, as *Macrocosm VII*, suggests. In *Macrocosm I, II, and III* they appear in the lower left corner of the painting, sending out a beam of light from a white-hot luminous core embedded in a red hot shape, sometimes circular, sometimes elliptical. The core is surrounded by an auratic ring of enormous circles that extend beyond the canvas, as though to convey the infinite space in which the explosive core—it resembles a volcano blowing its top, viewed from a telescopic distance—exists.

In *Macrocosm I*, the aura dissolves into a darkish-bluish space, in *Macrocosm III* cosmic radiation spreads like an open fan: cosmic geometry and cosmic radiation—form and energy—are inseparable. In *Macrocosm IV* three cosmic forms, each with a luminous center embedded in a red aura, radiate—generate—rays of light. Is it too much of an imaginative leap to suggest that they resemble the sprouts of plants, implying that the cosmos is alive, germinates life—organically, certainly inherently, creative? More often, as *Macrocosm V, VI, VIII, IX, X* show, the cosmic forms are paired, as though magnetically attracted to each other, and interacting, as though in intercourse, I dare to speculatively suggest. It’s a no doubt all too imaginative overinterpretation, but one that I will argue makes unconscious sense—has emotional credibility—for however cosmic the content of Lerner’s paintings they are expressive masterpieces, indeed, ingeniously original abstract expressionist paintings. Their source is as much Lerner’s unconscious, as her acknowledgement of their psychological import—and indebtedness to Taoist philosophy, with its distinction between Yin and Yang (dark and bright, negative and positive, the receptive and the active principles), complementary opposites—as her scientific knowledge. The emphasis on pairing, doubleness, the attraction of opposites—the inseparability of opposites, resembling each other yet in separate spaces of their own, passionately drawn to each other in a desire for intimacy, as the surge and exchange of energy between them suggests, for the light that binds them is libidinous—is explicit in every work in the *Macrocosm* series. The cosmic pair holds its own in the infinite darkness, linked together by inextinguishable light.

Even more speculatively—and perhaps absurdly—I want to suggest that Lerner’s wormholes or blackholes are the hiding places, as it were, of the so-called *Deus Absconditus*, the hidden God that created the cosmos. Cosmic radiation is the basic subject matter of Lerner’s paintings, and cosmic radiation is inherently numinous. Looking at the night sky, with its radiant stars, one cannot help being awestruck by the mystery of the cosmos. I suggest that Lerner is a mystic in scientific disguise—or is it a scientist in mystical disguise: her cosmic paintings are scientific and mystical at once. They suggest that scientific knowledge of the cosmos can lead to a mystical experience of it—a sense that it is a “*mysterium tremendum*” (tremendous mystery or mysteriously tremendous) and with that peculiarly sacred.(1)

Does God inhabit the wormhole or blackhole—is God a wormhole or blackhole? Or is each a different manifestation of God? A wormhole is “a bridge or tunnel that provides a shortcut from one region of the universe to another.”(2) Isn’t God a creative transitional shortcut between non-being and being, as the Book of Genesis, with its story of the creation of the cosmos, strongly suggests? God brings light out of the darkness—to find and see the light in the darkness is to see God. But God is also a blackhole, for everything light—everything brought to life by light—sooner or later falls back into darkness, dies in darkness. A blackhole is a symbol of Death: “a space-time warp...so radical that anything, including light, that gets too close to [it] will be unable to escape its gravitational grip.”(3) I am arguing that Lerner’s paintings have subliminal existential as well as overt scientific and mystical import. Even more, they are subtly feminist, for they imply that God is feminine rather than masculine: God is creative, and women are inherently creative, for they possess a fertile womb. It is like a wormhole, for it is a transitional space between nonbeing and being, and like a blackhole, for there is no light in the womb. It remains dark as death until the one large egg it contains is fertilized by one small sperm. The many others that attempt and fail to penetrate the egg die in the womb. Lerner’s wormholes—symbolic wombs—radiate raw heat. They burn brightly, a veritably inextinguishable fire,(4) in stark contrast to the phallic pillar of cloud—little more than glorified smoke—in which the male God appeared in the desert. I am arguing that Lerner’s wormholes and blackholes are the feminine sublime(5) in symbolic disguise. And I am arguing that there’s more to Lerner’s paintings than meets the eye, however much they excite it: to view them only as exquisite illustrations of a scientific idea is to be blind to their visionary complexity—their appeal to the mind’s eye, their multidimensional subtlety, their sublimity. They are full of wonder, but also wisdom.

Science and art converge in Lerner’s paintings, as they do in Kandinsky’s—he used science to justify his turn to abstraction, as his remark that “the theory of moving electricity, which is supposed to completely replace matter”(6) indicates—but his knowledge of science was superficial compared to Lerner’s, as her Macrocosm paintings make clear. They convincingly picture the theory of quantum entanglement. It “occurs when pairs or groups of particles are generated, interact, or share spatial proximity in ways such that the quantum state of each particle cannot be described independently of the state of the other, even when the particles are separated by a large distance.”(7) Quantum entanglement is cosmic dialectic: the interacting, interrelated, intertwined globular cosmoses, each with a dazzling white core surrounded by a pulsing yellow ring, in Lerner’s Microcosm series exemplify it. She looks down on her Microcosms, like a farseeing goddess on the heights of Olympus. She comes closer to her Macrocosms—in Macrocosm VII she daringly stares into the black hole. As though into the blind eye of a Cyclops? Is she provoking it, as Odysseus did? She is clearly on an odyssey in cosmic space.

Quantum entanglement is a theory of relationship: to say that one particle cannot be described independently of the other is to say that they are permanently in relationship and cannot exist without the other. Similarly, the wormhole’s regions of space-time remain connected—bound to each other—however widely separated. This particle is not thinkable without that particle, this region of space-time is not thinkable without that region of space. However far apart the particles and regions of space-time they’re together. They’re enigmatically equivalent to each other. Quantum entanglement theory and the wormhole are about cosmic relationships. I think they are metaphors for human relationships for Lerner. Like Yin and Yang, they form what psychoanalysts call a relational matrix. In the last analysis Lerner’s paintings are about the cosmic import of human relationships.

## Notes

(1)As Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 13 writes, “mysterium denotes that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar”—the tremendum. It brings with it a sense of the “uncanny” and “aweful,” and with them a sense of “exaltedness and sublimity,” and finally of “absolute overpoweringness.” Otto calls this the “urgency’ or ‘energy’ of the numinous object” (23), in Lerner’s art the cosmos. The numinous object brings with it a sense of “the wholly other”—wholly other than ordinary experience. (29)

(2)Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe* (New York: Random House, 2000), 264

(3)*Ibid.*, 79, 81

(4)Describing how cosmic radiation is created, Greene, 81 writes: “as dust and gas from the outer layers of nearby ordinary stars fall toward the event horizon of a black hole, they are accelerated to nearly the speed of light. At such speeds, friction within the maelstrom of downward swirling material generates an enormous amount of heat, causing the dust mixture to ‘glow,’ giving off ordinary visible light and X rays. Since this radiation is produced just outside the event horizon, it can escape the black hole and travel through space to be observed and studied directly.” Lerner’s paintings are exquisitely incisive renderings of the creation of cosmic radiation.

(5)The feminine sublime is a concept developed by Barbara Freeman in *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Woman’s Fiction* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1995) to distinguish woman’s creativity from man’s creativity, conveyed by the concept of the masculine sublime. Freeman argues that the concept of the sublime, as it was developed by male philosophers, particularly Kant, unconsciously conveys the sense of what it means to be a man. Thus the masculine sublime is an expression of phallocentrism and with that an assertion of male narcissism and autonomy—absolute difference from woman, implying that a man can make art without being inspired by her: the sublime masculine artist does not need a muse to be creative. In contrast, the feminine sublime is an expression of wombcentrism and with that an assertion of female narcissism and autonomy—absolute difference from man, implying that a woman does not need a male mentor to be creative.

Freeman’s concept of the feminine sublime and Otto’s idea of the numinous object clearly coincide. Lerner’s feminine cosmos is a numinously sublime object.

(6)Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular,” *Complete Writings on Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 142

(7)Greene, 143