

A Daughter's Reflections on her Father

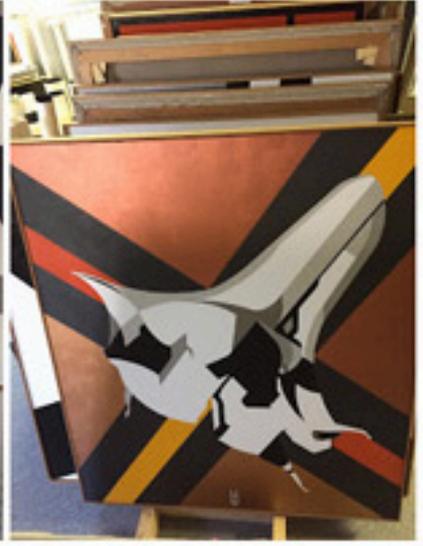
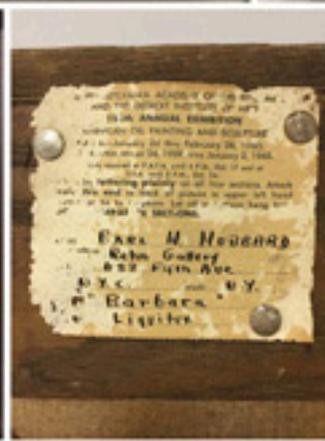
by Suzanne Hubbard



American artist Earl Hubbard, 1924-2003

*Through the scrim
of perfectly settled
dust—light and
shadow piercing in
an intellectual way.*

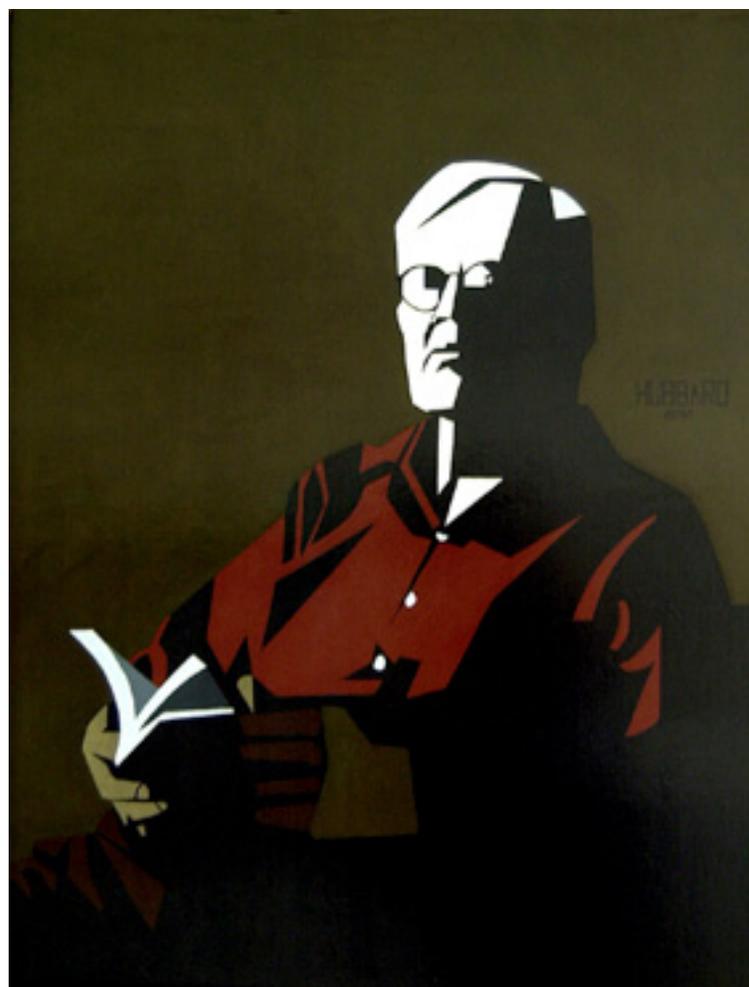
"Self Portrait 10/33/39"
Liquiter acrylic polymer
emulsion on Lucite acrylic
monomer
Clean with soft cloth
use NO abrasives and NO
solvents
Earl © Frankenthal



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What do you do when your father dies and leaves behind a lifetime's worth of artwork? This was the question that my two grown children, Peter and Renée, my husband Sandy, and I asked ourselves when we visited his Connecticut home and studio last April 2017. When we entered the studio, time appeared to stand still when a show he had hung years ago in the gallery section of the studio was still in place. The stacks of paintings in the storage area had not been touched since 2003 and a notepad with a reminder jotted down gave the sense he would be returning to his desk soon. Other than a surprising amount of accumulated dust, indicating time had passed, there was a curious sensation of going back to the year he died—but for the fact our eyes were open to all that has taken place in our country and in the world over the last 14 years.

My stepmother, Jacqueline Hériteau—a nationally recognized author, columnist, and authority on cooking



Man in Red Shirt: 35" x 25," acrylic on pressed wood, 1960.

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and gardening—is in her nineties and is simply not able to maintain the property any longer and plans to put it on the market shortly. There were two large dead trees in the yard, the driveway to the studio had become overgrown, and a frayed and faded American flag hung limp on its pole. The only bright spot in the yard was a cluster of daffodils, which seemed oblivious to their deteriorating surrounding. Meanwhile the images of my father's portraits also seemed to peer out from their veils of dust to defy the entropic force of physical decay.

My father, Earl Wade Hubbard, was born in Bradford, Pennsylvania, in 1924. He served 30 months in the Army Air Corps during WWII, much of that time in the China-Burma-India theatre, after which he



Downtown Millerton, NY: 18" x 23," pen and ink on paper, 1953.

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Still Life with Silver Teapot: 33" x 26," acrylic on incised Masonite, 1958.

attended Amherst College. In 1949 he went to Paris to do some soul-searching and while there saw an exhibit of Matisse's cutouts. The patterns of these works made a big impression on him. While in Europe he was also exposed to Rembrandt's portraits whose rich color palette and use of contrasting lights and shadow also had a great impact.

Patterns, light, and shadow, at times articulated with the help of a rich color palette, combined to form the basis of my father's aesthetic aspirations. However, he grew up in the age of comic strips, cartoons, Hollywood movies, jazz, and the first advertisements, which he believed constituted a unique American folk art. His

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early townscapes were like motion pictures that were still moving, and they made me a little seasick when I looked at them.

To say that his work was solely informed by these aesthetic and cultural influences would be to miss the vital aspect of his work, which seemed to transcend both time and the dust that enveloped it. The living element was a spirit of hopefulness—the nature of which could be described as undeniably American.

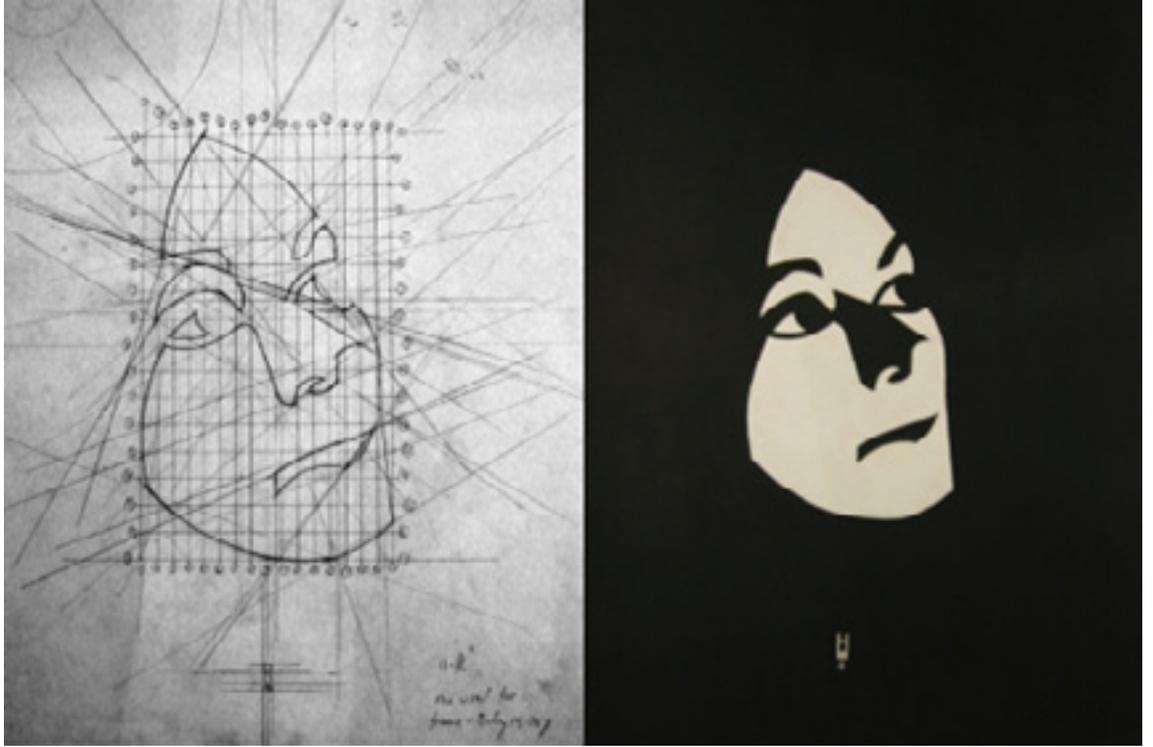
The fact that his work expressed this was not because he had an easy life being this type of American. My father quoted Thornton Wilder (1951) to introduce a family history: *How the Hubbards Came to America*. He believed the deeper significance of this history was embedded in stories from past generations that told a very American tale:

The American we know—the American which we and foreigners so often laugh at and despise—the American in ourselves who is often the subject of our own despair—the joiner,



Watermelon: 35" x 31," acrylic on incised Masonite, 1958.

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Eve (pencil study and painting): 27" x 27," acrylic on acrylic on pressed wood.

the go-getter, the moralizer...all, all... are very busy doing something of great importance. They don't know it and they often do it awkwardly and fall short. They are inventing a new kind of human being—a new relationship between the individual and the all. It is very occupying; it takes an immense toll in shattered lives and minds. It is not easy to be an American because the rules aren't made yet; the exemplars are not clear. It is like leaving the Known and Comforting and crossing an ocean into a trackless wilderness in which one must gradually set up a form of government and one must decide what should be taught in the schools and one must build a church...

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The studio smelled like a Connecticut used-book bookstore, which seems different from other places. He had a substantial library in his office, but the books themselves did not entirely cause the scent—rather it was more of an intellectual air of a thinking artist permeating the room. Thinkers, philosophers, artists, gardeners, and diviners of fundamental principles frequent Connecticut used bookstores like the one in West Cornwall. They are hoping to discover or rediscover a lost wisdom from a bygone era, one which still rings with the tone of truth. It was in this intellectual but very musty atmosphere that we began taking inventory of my father's extensive collection of paintings and drawings. We also sensed the scent of ideas that would be unearthed in the process.

My father once said: "Artists have mountain peaks in their artistic lives and also valleys." The first stack of paintings we began cataloguing was a series of works from a mountain peak in his artistic career. This was self-evident, even through a scrim of perfectly settled dust particles, coalesced into a unified fog. The geometry of his paintings, around which he orchestrated patterns of



Portrait of Young Woman: 38.25" x 31.5," acrylic on pressed wood, 1965.

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light and shadow, was piercing in an intellectual way. Each line and angle guided you to the point of asking that universally asked question—what does it mean to be human? It was then I realized that his work is much more than a family heirloom; he was hoping to create ongoing conversations on the subject.

This stack of paintings was from a 1965 show at the Gallery of Modern Art at Columbus Circle in New York City. It was the first one-man exhibition of a living American artist to be presented at the gallery. The title of the show was *The Challenge is Freedom*. There were 48 portraits and accompanying text, hung together in a documentary form of presentation. The portraits were of family members and personal acquaintances, but his relationship to these individuals was not the story of the paintings. They were not intended to be direct representations but instead images of what he believed was most beautiful about human beings. The catalogue for the show sheds light on what this could be.

The essence of a man is his purpose. The agents of his purpose are his intelligence, his faith, and his understanding. I am painting the new beauty—the aspiration of man now.

He felt these images could amplify our “new capacities,” which related to many forms of cultural innovation in technology, the sciences, the arts, philosophy, and other examples of cultural achievements. The title of the show, *The Challenge is Freedom*, relates to his realization that our new capacities are changing

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us, and therefore, are also evolving a human purpose that is unclear. My father's purpose was not only to create beautiful art but to offer provocative perspectives: "Man has changed. He is being transformed by his capacities. New capacities mean new freedoms and new responsibility."

My mother, Barbara Marx Hubbard, played a critical role in helping my father develop his ideas, and she also created venues where he could express them. She helped organize, for example, a "television center" at the Gallery of Modern Art. My mother shared his passion and could articulate his ideas eloquently. Setting up a television center in a museum gave a new purpose for television, which also introduced a new focus for a museum. She explains below how television unifies individual viewers when they see the same image on their screens:

Television is a major force in the cultural evolution of man. Through world television, along with other forms of communication, mankind is at last becoming conscious of itself as a whole. The quality of that consciousness will be profoundly affected by the images which appear on screens throughout the world. A museum can serve a useful function by giving sustained resonance and permanency to the best works produced by this new medium of communication.

My parents met in Paris at the restaurant Chez Rosalie on the Left Bank in 1949. He was soul-searching

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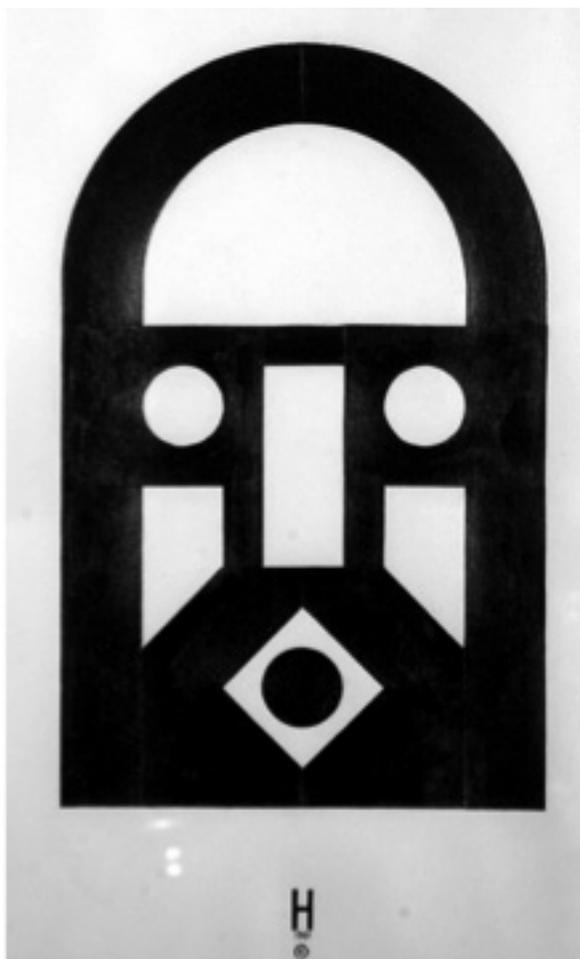


Chez Rosalie: 12" x 16," gouache and crayon on paper, 1949.

and studying art, and my mother was studying abroad her junior year at Bryn Mawr. She was attending classes at the Sorbonne and at the École des Sciences Politiques. The restaurant had open seating. The day they arrived for lunch there were two seats in which they sat opposite to each other. The two immediately struck up a conversation and it wasn't long before my mother asked my father a question, which apparently she asked every young man she met. "What is the meaning of our great powers that could serve the good of the whole?" She was referring to the atom bombs that were dropped on Japan in 1945.

His response was more of an artist's statement: "I am an artist and I am seeking a new image of mankind that is commensurate with his new powers." All the

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The Prophet: 28" x 22," paper cutout and acrylic, 1981. one:

images of his portraits, over decades of his artistic career, emanate nuanced versions of this new image.

Albert Rosenfeld, science editor for Life Magazine in 1966, introduced my father in the Guest Column, as there was a full-page article explaining his new image. Rosenfeld indicates the importance in finding

Barbara Tuchman (the historian who wrote *The Guns of August* in 1962) recently pointed out that man's image of himself has been horribly scarred "with the result that man, at this moment in history, may no longer believe in his capacity to be good." I tend to go along with my artist friend, Earl Hubbard, who has lately been saying that artists and writers must create a new image people can aspire to in the fantastic era of change and the challenge ahead, an era where man will be free to choose his fate and his future.

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The idea that people today will agree on a shared image seems highly unlikely. But were it ephemeral in nature, because the image expresses the human spirit—which I believe was my father's intent—then the visage will transcend physical differences. It does create common ground. Its universality could also inspire thoughts on what our species' purpose is on earth and beyond in the greater cosmos. A dialogue of this sort, which correlates a new purpose with a new image, is exactly the type of conversation that he hoped his work and ideas would invite.

When reviewing my father's novel, *One Step, Two Steps* (published by Exposition Press in 1951), John Steinbeck remarked that he had a "painter's eye." However, it is also possible to say his paintings mirror the eye of a writer. He was a thinking artist. He used image and text interchangeably.

An art critic for *Connoisseur* magazine (November 1962) could identify the intellectual scaffolding underneath the portraits of his new image. The journalist



Churchill: 27" x 26," acrylic on acrylic on pressed wood, custom Heydenryk frame, 1968

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described his work as having evolved "...a true visual asceticism, intended to bring the artist face to face with man and to reveal with scientific perception the ultimate facts of the human spirit."



Barbara: 37.5" x 31.5," acrylic on incised Masonite, 1958.

He took an almost scientific-mathematical approach to developing the patterns for his portraits. His use of light and shadow seemed to sharpen the point of his work. The concepts were palpable to the viewer, if not fully intellectually comprehended. His technique contributed as much to the portrayal of transcendent ideas as the images of his portraits were animated by them.

He began with architectural sketches of planes of light and shadow from which evolved the final portrait with areas of color. His color palette—ochre, brown, deep grey, and accents of black and white—was reminiscent of the Flemish portrait artists. He painted with acrylic on either board or Lucite to achieve a hard-edge appearance. One could see the influence that Matisse's cutouts

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had on my father's work. He explained that the main objective in his art was to:

...eliminate the environment of background and body, for the greatness of man does not lie there. It lies in the mind—man's instrument of aspiration. I only paint as much of the face as is necessary for the beauty of purpose to be revealed. (The Challenge is Freedom)

My father was not an easy man to live with. He did not know how to relate well to his five children on an emotional level. My mother left him in 1974 because she wished to find her own voice and be heard for her ideas. Peter found a handwritten letter she wrote

on yellow legal paper in a dusty file drawer, telling my father that without the stimulus of sharing her ideas with others, she would "wither." She explained: "I cannot survive psychologically—it is as vital to me as sunlight



Self Portrait: 20" x 18," acrylic on pressed wood, 1965.

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Lilly II: 42" x 36," acrylic on linen canvas, 1990.

and water is to a flower.”

On her own she developed the worldview Conscious Evolution. It is a perspective that answers her question as to what the purpose of our great powers could be. To consciously choose a purpose to serve a greater good is a core idea of the perspective. She addresses the challenge of freedom—to destroy life on a massive scale that many technologies today give the power to flex on a whim.

Both my parents are very American, and pursuing their missions—as Thornton Wilder indicated—is “very occupying; it takes an immense toll in shattered lives and minds.” They burned a lot of bridges in their personal lives but in many ways they are no different from their

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fathers. Grandpa Hubbard and Granddaddy Marx personified legendary characteristics of the American ideal.

My father's father, Percy Clarence Hubbard, was born in 1883. In a family history he explained why he had to find a job at a "...tender age, as in those days there was no social security, or any relief and when a family ran out of money, they quit eating. Life was as simple as that."

Perce did every type of job possible. He typically worked seven days a week—working as a pharmacy clerk, making deliveries for shops, harvesting wheat in Kansas, working as an oiler for a ship on Lake Erie, or repairing radiators. But somewhere along the way, my grandfather decided to become a lawyer. He raised the money, took night classes, got into the law school of the University of Buffalo, and passed the New York State bar in 1907. He was an example of the resilient, tough, hard working, and very determined American.



Marilyn: 34" x 28," acrylic on linen canvas, 1991.

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Abraham Lincoln:
28" x 26," acrylic on
acrylic on pressed
wood, 1967.



My father's brand of Americanism squared more with Thornton Wilder's American who was "inventing a new kind of human being." People may have been changed by his ideas—but this success is difficult to measure. He felt that he never quite measured up to the obvious achievements of his father and my mother's. His desire to paint portraits of the beauty of a human purpose was also overshadowed by the art movement Abstract Expressionism.

While he was painting portraits, the abstract expressionists were filling their canvasses with fields of color and non-representational abstract forms to much acclaim. The vigorous, gestural, abstract painter Jackson Pollock seemed to attack the canvas as if making art was a physical event. The effect of this painting was never to clarify.

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Art critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg identified the movement as “the first authentically American avant-garde.” The website The Art Story expands on this with: “Their work was championed for being emphatically American in spirit—monumental in scale, romantic in mood, and expressive of a rugged individual freedom.”

Abstract Expressionism mirrors a fragmented American society after WWII but now it fits the polarized image of the country’s many competing ideologies. What has been lost in both recent American culture and art, which are mutual reflections of each other, is the golden thread of ideas that first wove the fabric of American values—which materialized the complex Nation of immigrant Americans.

My father’s stark and precise patterns align with early American values which express an unwavering line of focus. In 1962 a writer for New York News identified the golden thread of Puritan values which connected my father’s works to the crystal lattice pattern of elemental American values: He describes the effect as:

Puritan Humanism...conjoined to give the work a very special American tang... The portrait characterizations of Earl Hubbard can, without undue discordance, take their proper place in a gallery of ‘ancestral portraits’ by our early limners. Which is another way of saying that they are stamped with timeless, and merciless, candor.

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My husband, children, and I retraced the life of my father with a tactile process of organizing all the different series that he had done over the decades between 1950 and the early 2000s. It was also a bit like riding a roller coaster as we moved from mountain peaks in his artistic career down into its valleys. During the 1980s, for example, he had reached sea-level with pen and ink studies of famous baseball players.

He also made paintings that were inspired by native masks. He did a series of nudes and another of flowers, both subjects evolving out of his signature geometric patterns. However, a profusion of color in some of these refracted the white-light intensity of his portraits of the new image.



Vida Blue: 12" x 12," acrylic, pen and ink on paper, 1982.

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Midway back up the mountain, in the '90s he produced a 23-painting series entitled Hollywood Faces. He picks up the golden strand of seminal American themes and values when he reconnects with his childhood fascination for the first Hollywood movies and their stars. He explained to a reporter for the Washington Post:

As potatoes and tobacco are native here, so are comic strips and jazz. As corn is all-American so are the American movies. The movies of the 1930s, '40s and early '50s are folk tales... I grew up as an ardent member of the movie generation—I have been painting the faces of some of my favorite stars of those early films. They are America's folk characters.

Thornton Wilder understood the complexity of being American and he would have identified my father as someone who personified many different facets of the archetype. Besides being a painter, my father also earned the reputation as the first space philosopher. He wrote a book called *The Search Is On* (Pace Publications, 1969), which states his philosophy on why space exploration is a necessity. He believed it imperative to find new worlds to colonize or face extinction if we remain on earth.

In July 1970, a columnist for the *Village Voice* made this comment about his philosophy, the sentiment of which echoes Thornton Wilder's American who is the "moralizer":

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Mostly Hubbard's philosophy sounds like an ecstatic tract for a manifest destiny, updated for the space age, and richly couched in billowing metaphors.

This same journalist however picked up on prophetic ideas of an original American thinker when he acknowledged:

While listening to Hubbard rhapsodize in the living room of his Lakeville estate, it occurred to me that some of his ideas were not as far-flung as they seemed at the onset. His ideas tend to be somewhat pompous and simplistic. The part which is easier to accept is his constant repetition that spaceship earth is breaking down: "As the urge to transcend is frustrated within the closed system of earth, this new reservoir of energy is building. On this force of frustration depends the evolution or extinction of the race of man...there is no element of doubt in the prediction of man's extinction if he remains on earth."—That part means something to an inveterate cynic.

My father painted the image of mankind in the universe against a black background. The faces were as white as light passing through the fathomless vacuum of space. There were no atmospheric particles for the light to filter through, which would have given the images the

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Mother: 24" x 18," collage, Out of Stardust: 24" x 18," collage, acrylic on paper. acrylic on paper, 1975

hue of mortality. This was intentional when his more mystical vision was that ideas were seeding a new cultural universe and therefore his portraits shimmered with the white light of awareness.

When it became physically difficult for him to paint, he took advantage of the new capacities provided by computers. He could design patterns, with a computer graphics program, in which he established the architecture of a concept or idea. He expresses his love for, what then was, a very new technology.

Art deals with concepts of reality. The stuff of our 1992 reality, the reality of this computer age, is not matter but ideas. The visualization of an idea is pattern. We don't see three dimensions. We see patterns.

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Twenty-five plus years have passed between 1992 and now. Our new capacities since then have radically changed. No doubt we have changed as a result, but how and into what? What does it mean to be an American today and for that matter—what does it mean to be human? What is our purpose and what is the purpose of our great powers that could support the well-being of the larger whole—which includes the natural world? His art provides a unique cultural portrait of the '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, and '90s, which is also uniquely American. Maybe it could spark new conversations that explore fresh answers to questions as perennial to the human experience as the yellow daffodils—which come up, year after year, regardless if their surrounding is in a state of disarray.



Wonderful Woodleigh: 42" x 36," computer art, vector painting on paper, 2001.