



QUARTETS

Kindred Spirits Revisited: Bruce Herman and T. S. Eliot

Matthew Milliner

“The transfer of creative energy from one medium to another can be wonderful!”
—Philip Guston, 1980

In 1849, the American painter Asher Durand painted a consummate American masterpiece, *Kindred Spirits*. Two figures, the painter Thomas Cole and the poet William Cullen Bryant, stand upon a precipice admiring the softly glowing, river-wrapped hills that it is their privilege and profession to contemplate. The scene is wild and warm, dangerous and inviting. Speaking of the unattainable green hills outside his nursery window, C. S. Lewis once explained that when he was a child, “They taught me longing, Sehnsucht; made me for good or for ill, before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower.”¹ There are few paintings that better exemplify the Blue Flower—the German symbol for Romantic longing—than this American image. This was not yet the kind of Romanticism that T. E. Hulme would label “spilt religion.” Thomas Cole believed that “the Fine Arts are an imitation of Creative Power.”² Bryant was just as clear, writing that poetry’s function is to “shape the creations of the mind into perfect form according to those laws which man learns from observing the works of his Maker.”³

Though there are significant exceptions, rarely do painters and poems fruitfully inform one another, both media being too focused on their own fractured pasts and uncertain futures to bother with cross-pollination. And there is no need to expand here on the now quite familiar prohibition of serious religious faith in much poetry and art.⁴ As if to illustrate this situation, the New York Public Library recently auctioned off *Kindred Spirits* to the highest bidder, a Walmart heiress. After years of intermittent appearances, the painting is now permanently on view again at the newly constructed Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. It is fitting that with its liberation comes a project that returns to this kinship of painting and poetry, as well as to an embrace of Christian spirituality (albeit in a less sentimental form). The paintings of Bruce Herman featured in this exhibition return to the underestimated kinship between poetry, painting and piety at the core of the American tradition.

The way has already been prepared for this kind of recovery. Art historian Barbara Novak concluded an attempt to reconnect painters and poets in the American tradition by contrasting several writers and artists, concluding with a contrast between Jackson Pollock and the postmodern poet Charles Olson. Her book, *Voyages of the Self*, which largely explores the well-trodden Transcendentalist detour from traditional faith, ends on a curious note. She describes the late Olson’s confession, presumably made by the sea on Cape Ann in his native Gloucester, Massachusetts: “I’ve found out that I believe in God and in Creation...”⁵ Like Olson, Bruce Herman resides on Cape Ann and has had a similar theistic revelation. But the poet who has most influenced Herman is a different Cape Ann inhabitant who summered in this part of New England throughout his youth. To explore the relation between T. S. Eliot the poet and Herman the painter—and the wind- and prayer-battered Cape Ann that unites them—is to pick up where Novak left off. It is to look off into Atlantic sea spray as Cole and Bryant looked into the Catskills, and to reach more deeply into Christian orthodoxy—an equally compelling, and just as artistically fecund, characteristic of New England life.

Philip Guston and Bruce Herman

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995), 5.

² Thomas Cole, journal entry for May 15. Louis L. Noble, ed., *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman and Company, 1856), 238. “Each of [Cole’s] works,” writes art historian Michael J. Lewis, “could be read as an allegory of Christian redemption, expressed in the foliage at every state of life from blossom and maturity to death, decay and rebirth.” *American Art and Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson), 92.

³ William Cullen Bryant, Parke Godwin, ed. (New York: Appleton and Company, 1889), 15–16.

⁴ For an extended discussion of this predicament, see James Elkins and David Morgan (eds.), *Re-Enchantment* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁶ Patricia Hanlon, “Bruce Herman: A Profile,” *Image*, Issue 7, Fall 1994.



In the second of Eliot's Four Quartets, "East Coker," Eliot journeys to his Puritan ancestral homeland in England. In an image far more appealing than an excursus on genetics, Eliot imagines his progenitors dancing and coupling, and there discerns his beginning. Likewise, discerning the beginning of Bruce Herman entails a journey to his ancestry, at least his artistic ancestry, which takes us to the twilight of Abstract Expressionism and the rebirth of figuration through Herman's most noteworthy teacher, Philip Guston. This famed defector from the New York School's inner circle was teaching at Boston University when Herman began his Masters of Fine Arts degree there. Guston had many acolytes, as one commenter puts it, and Herman was determined not to be one of them.⁶ But Guston's

was the struggle of myriad painters in the 1970s, and his influence was difficult to evade. Philip Guston's career has been cast as biblical: "Just as Noah and his family restarted civilization from the animals gathered aboard the ark, and the seeds left deposited in the muddy soil, Guston set about reforming painting from the remnants of the artistic tradition."⁷ And if Guston was a Noah, this makes Herman something of a Shem.⁸

Indeed, for an artist who hoped to differentiate himself from his teacher, Herman's career has surprisingly paralleled Guston's. If Guston struggled with the possibilities of figuralism after abstraction, so has that tug of war defined Bruce Herman's creative journey. As Guston fled from Manhattan to his retreat of Woodstock, so Herman would flee the city of Boston to his retreat at Cape Ann. As Guston was an intellectually serious, verbally articulate painter with philosophical inclinations, so is Herman. As Guston was deeply in touch with Italian Renaissance imagery as a journey in Italy, so too is Herman. As Guston lacerated his canvases to call attention to and complicate their surface lest he be implicated in the tricks of illusionism, Herman will as well.

In a different artistic era, obsessed with originality, to offer such a parallel between two artists might be so much condemnation. But there are more benign ways of viewing creative processes, explicated by Eliot himself, who questions "our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else."⁹ Instead, if we avoid such prejudice, "we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."¹⁰ With this in mind, we can turn without embarrassment to one of the

⁶ Patricia Hanlon, "Bruce Herman: A Profile," *Image*, Issue 7, Fall 1994.

⁷ Aaron Rosen, *Imagining Jewish Art: Encounters with the Masters in Chagall, Guston, and Kitaj* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and W. S. Maney & Son Ltd., 2009), 62.

⁸ "This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons, who themselves had sons after the flood" (Genesis 10:1). As to Guston's successors, Robert Hughes—reversing Hilton Kramer's denunciation of Guston—suggested that his followers "were rarely more than stumblebums dressed up as mandarins" (*Shock of the New*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1991, 398). If so, then Herman is one of those rarities.

⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (Toronto: Random House, 2002), 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

more direct parallels between the artistic journey of Philip Guston and Bruce Herman—their mutual devotion to T. S. Eliot’s poetry.

Guston’s earlier work was informed by the “heap of broken images” of “The Waste Land” and “The Hollow Men,” “the giddiness of certain of Eliot’s forays into the vernacular and vulgar.”¹¹ But Guston ended with Eliot as well. *Four Quartets* “accompanied him as mirthless companions on his last stretch.”¹² The heads that had emerged in Guston’s post-abstract work, first as Klansmen, then as unmasked Cyclops, finally became a recognizable portrait of Eliot himself in a painting made the year before Guston’s death, “East Coker: T. S. E.” Dore Ashton suggests that Guston “parallels the mood of dry despair created in both “Burnt Norton” and “East Coker” . . . Guston] spoke in his language of what Eliot had spoken in his.”¹³ And yet, to evoke *Four Quartets* in artistic form as “dry despair” is to mistranslate. Guston’s portrait of Eliot evokes more an etherized patient than the compassionate, wounded surgeon of “East Coker.” Which is to say, Guston’s Eliot is stuck in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” regardless of the title reference to *Four Quartets*.

Herman’s paintings—four in this case, not one—come to terms with the influence of T. S. Eliot in a way that Guston could only begin. “What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it,”¹⁴ wrote Eliot. Just so, Herman’s artistic journey puts his predecessors in a new light. If all of Guston’s objects “inhabited a threatening universe of unmeaning,”¹⁵ Herman works through that threat. If in Guston’s work “we are thrust back on the theme of the absent creator,”¹⁶ Herman thrusts in the other direction. If Guston offered us “abandoned Edens,”¹⁷ Herman offers the new Eve. Guston’s newborn forms are “like masterless robots . . . humanized in the absence of man as man himself is mockingly divinized by the absence of God.”¹⁸ Herman, however, on the far side of the agonized complexity bequeathed to him by his teacher, offers the possibility of genuine theosis. As his latest biographers have underscored, Eliot was “a man who conceives of his life as a spiritual quest despite the anti-religious mood of the age.”¹⁹ Exploring how Herman shares this quest with Eliot, both artistically and spiritually, is necessary to fully grasp the success of his painted *Four Quartets*.

¹¹ Dore Ashton, “Parallel Worlds: Guston as Reader,” in *Philip Guston Retrospective* (London: Thames & Hudson with Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth), 89.

¹² Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 190.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 101. The more fashionable Pierre Bourdieu makes a similar claim: “Each artistic act which ‘makes history’ by introducing a new position into the field ‘displaces’ the whole series of previous artistic acts . . . the whole series of pertinent events is practically present in the latest, in the same way that the six digits already dialed on the telephone are contained in the seventh . . .” Pierre Bourdieu, “Being Different,” in Charles Harrisons & Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory: 1900-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 1023.

¹⁵ Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 190.

¹⁶ Robert Zaller, “Philip Guston and the Crisis of the Image,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1987), 92.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 1998), 374. The most complete study of this underestimated facets of Eliot’s life is offered in Barry Spurr’s *“Anglo-Catholic in Religion”: T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010).



Looking Eastward

Among the parallels between Herman and Eliot are their mutual journeys with Eastern religion. Both looked to the East not out of casual interest but from a sincere, even urgent, search for meaning. Dissatisfied with his Unitarian inheritance, Eliot sought broader horizons at Harvard by studying Sanskrit and Pali, to engage Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively. He discovered that the subtleties of Eastern thought “make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys.”²⁰ His doctoral work on the Idealist

philosopher F. H. Bradley could also be considered part of this journey, as Bradley’s notion that the self does not exist is similar to Indian thought to which Eliot had been drawn.²¹

Herman’s engagement with Eastern thought was less academic, if more experiential. Unimpressed with his native Episcopalianism, Herman looked elsewhere, and in 1970 encountered disciples of an Indian holy man named Meher Baba. Baba was considered an avatar of God, and the confidence of those who had gathered around his teachings offered Herman the spiritual answers he had found hitherto elusive. Herman moved to one of the movement’s retreat centers, and there, a couple who had studied with Wilhem De Kooning encouraged Herman to go to art school. His artistic journey, like Eliot’s, would henceforth be co-mingled with his spiritual one. The Sanskrit chant that concludes “The Waste Land” has a parallel in Herman’s numerous portraits of Meher Baba.

²⁰ Cited in Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2008), 24.

²¹ Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions: A Study of Poetry and Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 103.



But the further Herman submitted himself to Baba, the darker his interior life became. In 1979 Herman won the Philip Guston Traveling Prize, awarded to one student in Boston University's graduate painting program by an external review committee. The Guston Prize enabled him to travel to Italy for a year's artistic work with no strings attached. But instead of feeling inspired by the great art around him in Florence, he was driven into a rented basement studio where he found his portraits of Baba resurfacing indirectly in the form of psychologically charged imaginary dream images, stripped of

the admiration and worship in former Baba paintings: "A man with luminous cat-eyes, riding on the back of a beast and holding a dagger to its neck, but with the blade also turned partially toward the viewer . . . The image evoked only horror."²² A self-portrait from this era shows the same ominous eyes in Herman himself. The dictates of expressionism had proven correct in this case, permitting Herman to see what he termed "the horror and dread at the core of my inner life."²³ In *Sleepless Nights* (1979), cypress trees—markers of Mediterranean holy sites—instead become omens of evil. Herman was in the grip of the vision of darkness Nathaniel Hawthorne expressed in the short story "Rappacchini's Daughter," and devoted a series of paintings and drawings to that story, which he felt exposed his condition.

A similar sickening of the soul emerged in Eliot as well. He was shattered when his tutor, Bertrand Russell, had an affair with Eliot's wife Vivienne. "He has done Evil," wrote Eliot of Russell, "without being big enough or conscious enough to Be evil."²⁴ Not only Russell's sin, but Eliot's own, surfaced as well, revealed in the turbulence of a tragic marriage. Faced with these revelations, Eliot discerned Eastern philosophy and religion's "failure to understand the fundamental reality of human sin."²⁵ The Abyss was experienced too deeply for an irresponsible exoticism, or fashionable nihilism that came in the wake of the success of "The Waste Land." Eliot saw danger in the pluralism of his Harvard teacher, Irving Babbitt: "Professor Babbitt knows too much . . . he knows too many religions and philosophies, has assimilated their spirit too thoroughly . . . to be able to give himself to any."²⁶ Still, Eliot recognized "in the mazes of other religions a hidden purpose; a wandering in the desert, it may be, but a preparation also for the land of promise,"²⁷ which for Eliot came with his 1927 conversion to Anglicanism.²⁸

Herman's turn to Christianity was more of a renunciation—and perhaps necessarily. Eliot had considered becoming a Buddhist, but had not done so. In contrast, Herman pursued his associations with the Baba community well through his intonations of darkness, even becoming President of the Meher Baba society in

²² Patricia Hanlon, "Bruce Herman: A Profile."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Quoted in Kevin J. H. Dettmar, "Eliot as a Religious Thinker Companion," in David E. Chinitz (ed.), *A Companion to T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 372.

²⁵ Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions*, 138.

²⁶ Eliot, "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt," 110. Cited in Barry Spurr, "Anglo-Catholic in Religion," 109.

²⁷ Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions*, 133.

²⁸ Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions*, 138–139. Eliot did not thereafter abandon his interest in Eastern religions more thoroughly. On the contrary, "the question of belief resolved, Eliot could approach these texts, paradoxically, with a greater rather than a lesser sympathy." Ibid., 158.

Cambridge, Massachusetts. As a result, a more violent casting off took place with his conversion to Christianity in 1982. “I knew I was safe forever from the turmoil and dread that had nearly consumed me,”²⁹ he later reflected. Or, as Eliot might have put it: “Years of living among the breakage/ Of what was believed in as the most reliable— /And therefore the fittest for renunciation.”³⁰ Still, Eliot’s words, looking back at his own time of searching in philosophy, apply to Herman as well: “[I]t is, after all, worth while exploring a blind alley, if only to discover that it is blind.”³¹



Art after Christianity

As Christian converts, both Herman and Eliot were faced with the question as to how—or even whether—to leave a record in their creative pursuits of this transformation. Eliot did so most famously in “Journey of the Magi” and “Ash Wednesday,” but Herman’s artistic record of his faith was at first more elusive. He retreated from Boston to Cape Ann, which would become his permanent residence, but was haunted by echoes of the city he departed. In *Dream of Wet Pavements*, Christian imagery is shy, appearing as saints that could be confused for klieg lights as they watch over something like Eliot’s “Unreal City.”³² But Christ does appear in one provocative work inspired by Jacques Ellul’s *The Meaning of the City*. Herman encapsulates the book, offering the viewer a choice between menacing gears or the crucified body.

Later, spurred by members of his own church who desired more explicit imagery, Herman painted his *Golgotha* series. Here the cat eyes of his earlier self-portrait and the contortions of *Rappacchini’s Daughter* are bound up in the sufferings of Christ, just as the indeterminate images of Eliot’s earlier poetry are stabilized and sanctified in his poetic work after 1927.³³ Eliot’s female imagery is uplifted and transfigured through the Virgin Mary in “Ash Wednesday”; but for Herman, the face of Mary, as evidence in *Behold Your Mother* (1991), is still inchoate. In response to the needs of his congregation, Herman collaborated for two years with his pastor, the Old Testament scholar Gordon Hugenberger, to produce eight large vertical triptychs exploring typological iconography of Christ. In the same way, Eliot answered the commission to create poetry for the Church of England in “Choruses from The Rock.”

Conflict of Imagery

But both Herman and Eliot were dissatisfied with a purely ecclesial art. In Herman’s case, a studio fire that destroyed almost all his previous work caused him to readjust his priorities. Realizing that explicit religious imagery could not engage a broader public “where no one set of symbols, or reference, or grand narrative

²⁹ Patricia Hanlon, “Bruce Herman: A Profile.”

³⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Dry Salvages,” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 193.

³¹ T. S. Eliot, Christopher Ricks ed., *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998), 194.

³² T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 55.

³³ Marian devotion, especially the rosary, was a mainstay of Eliot’s piety, and deeply informed his poetry. See Barry Spurr, “Anglo-Catholic in Religion,” 155ff.

reigns,” Herman shifted, aiming instead to “seek transcendence in the midst of human history.”³⁴ The words of Vincent Van Gogh could well apply to the next stage of his work: “I shall not try to paint a Christ in the Garden of Olives, but shall paint the olive harvest as one can still see it today, and by giving the human figure its proper place in it, one might perhaps be reminded of it.”³⁵

Eliot made a similar observation, evincing his further poetic development:

To many people religious poetry sounds like a variety of minor poetry. It seems to imply that the religious poet is not a poet who is treating the whole subject of poetry in a religious spirit, but [...] is leaving out what men and women consider their major passions, and thereby confessing to his or her ignorance of them.³⁶

Herman’s next series, *Buildings in Ruins*, moves in this “secular” direction, but slowly.³⁷ Traditional Christian imagery appears, but it is faded, whispered lest it offend. This is not an evasion of conviction, but engaging “the problem of making visual meaning in a post-literate, post-GOD human universe.”³⁸ Rather than depicting the crucified body of Christ directly, Herman evokes it in his next series, *The Body Broken*. All the while, he pursues the contrast between abstraction and figuration, pursuing both paths simultaneously.

Women first begin to dominate Herman’s work in studies based on his wife and daughter. But the possibilities flowing from these studies force Herman to return to paths of biblical imagery he had left insufficiently explored. The women he painted appear, in retrospect, as preparation for the archetypal woman displayed in *Magnificat*, in which Mary is no longer faceless, and now waits at the cross. Here Herman seems to have found a more stabilized meaning for his abstractions, a Byzantine gold ground evoking the Holy Spirit. Mary’s expression in *Overshadowed* evokes “the hardly, barely prayable / Prayer of the one Annunciation” from “The Dry Salvages,”³⁹ but her fallen body, wrenched upwards, is unsettling—even painful to behold.

³⁴ Bruce Herman, remarks delivered at the opening of an exhibit of his works in Orvieto, Italy: *Il Corpo Spezzato*. <http://www.gordon.edu/lettersfromeurope/herman> Accessed August, 2012.

³⁵ Vincent Van Gogh, Ronald de Leeuw, ed., Arnold Pomerans, trans., *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 467.

³⁶ Quoted in Michael Symmons Roberts, “Poetry In A Post-Secular Age” *Poetry review* 98 (London, 2008), 70.

³⁷ “The turn to the secular,” writes Timothy Gorringer, “may not be a sign of Christianity losing its grip, but, on the contrary, of realising its true implications.” T. J. Gorringer, *Earthly Vision: Theology and the Challenges of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

³⁸ Bruce Herman, remarks in context of *Image’s* “Artist of the Month: November 2000.” <http://imagejournal.org/page/artist-of-the-month/bruce-herman> Accessed August, 2012.

³⁹ T. S. Eliot, “Dry Salvages,” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 194.



With his next exhibition Herman oscillates again, returning to his earlier intention to avoid direct religious imagery. Like Eliot, he creates ambidextrously, with different audiences in mind, navigating the “border land between the allusive/poetic aspects of abstraction and the possibility of biblical narrative.”⁴⁰ This time Herman investigates his home of Cape Ann, well trodden by poets and painters before him. But having learned from Guston, the slick seascapes of the nineteenth century Luminist painter Fitz Henry Lane, or even the painterly but recognizable maritime vistas of Edward Hopper, are off limits. “We cannot revive old factions / We cannot restore old policies / Or follow an antique drum.”⁴¹ The more Herman focuses on the lichen-licked rocks of Cape Ann, the more Herman is drawn to abstraction—not to retreat from reality, but to represent it more faithfully. And here also is where the longstanding influence of Eliot in Herman’s life surfaces most directly. For the rocks he rendered are the very granite consistently evoked by Eliot’s poetry. In *Presence/Absence*, Herman swims in the opposite direction from Guston, moving from realism to abstraction. And yet, the exhibit includes a large figure of Adam in the center of the gallery, entitled *Witness*: an insistence that “human presence can be woven into the distilled abstracted experience of time

and space.”⁴² The elusive head, however, is turned away from the viewer. For a trained figurative painter such as Herman, Eliot’s words from “Ash Wednesday” might apply: “No place of grace for those who avoid the face.”⁴³

Four Quartets

Up until this point in his career Bruce Herman has found himself pulled by twin creative tensions. On the one hand is his struggle between figuration and abstraction that he inherited from Guston, and which he attempted to resolve in *Presence/Absence*. On the other hand is the struggle as to just how faith permeates painting, explicitly or implicitly. After a season of submerging his religious imagery, it resurfaces in *Magnificat*, demanding to be more fully worked out.

The tensions in Eliot’s poetic career are similar. As a modernist poet, Eliot dismantled the recognizable cadences of his poetic predecessors, both bringing a poetic self-consciousness and expanding his range of communication, especially regarding disjunction and alienation. But having recovered meaning in Christian faith, Eliot sometimes resorted to the rhetorically straightforward, even sermonic. And while such works are effective, Eliot was never fully comfortable leaving his modernism behind. “[K]nowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies, / For the pattern is new in every moment.”⁴⁴ The value of modernism—both in poetry and painting—is that it destabilizes imposed patterns, and thereby becomes too valuable of a tool to discard.

Assisted (but not overwhelmed) by modernism, Eliot could exchange poetic goods with a world alienated from Christian imagery, producing “satisfying religio-poetic meditation”⁴⁵ rather than direct Christian art.

⁴⁰ Bruce Herman, correspondence with the author.

⁴¹ T. S. Eliot, ““Little Gidding,”” *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 206.

⁴² Bruce Herman, correspondence with the author.

⁴³ T. S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday,” *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 92.

⁴⁴ T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 184.

⁴⁵ Cited in Barry Spurr, “Anglo-Catholic in Religion,” 217.

His aim was art that, without ceasing to be Christian, infiltrates universal experience, there to unfurl universal implications of Christianity. “Between the usual subjects of poetry and ‘devotional’ verse,” wrote Eliot, “there is a very important field still very unexplored by modern poets—the experience of man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser [sic] human feelings in terms of the divine goal.”⁴⁶ Hence, according to Barry Spurr, Eliot “had not demonstrated by his poems the truth of a creed; but he had shown, through imagery, how the believer comes to his belief.”⁴⁷ If this is what Eliot accomplished in *Four Quartets*, Herman capitalizes on Eliot’s achievement, but also makes it his own—thereby both returning to Guston and surpassing him. Herman’s *QUARTETS* paintings are both modern and figurative, Christian and universal, and therefore finally at rest.

The challenge of painting *Four Quartets* is not to be underestimated. The titular allusion to music makes that medium—discussed in Jeremy Begbie’s essay in this catalogue—the most immediate avenue of approach. And yet the poem also begs to be rendered visually: “Only by form, the pattern, Can words or music reach / The stillness.”⁴⁸ Charles Altieri explains that “Eliot’s own actual relation to visual art is an outgrowth of his wariness before all visual experience, because that experience seemed so insistently bound to objective surfaces that it could not display the density of relations that, for Eliot, constituted a livable reality.”⁴⁹ As a consequence, only a painter wary of visual experience could proceed; this, Herman—who intentionally scrapes, scuffs and sands his surfaces— can offer.

But calling attention to the surface is not a sufficient solution to the intractable problem of how to render this impossibly complex, image-rich poem visually. Sophomoric, illustrative attempts such as a flaming rose would call to mind a heavy-metal rock album for the modern viewer before it would Dante. Indeed, any attempt at direct illustration would have failed, and Herman had already assayed a meditation on the rocks of “The Dry Salvages” in his show “Presence/Absence.” The way Herman has resolved this considerable problem is by borrowing not only from the poetic, but from the art historical tradition as well, evoking the long established trope of illustrating the four elements, the four passages of life and the four seasons.⁵⁰ Cued by the most dazzling image in “*Burnt Norton*”, “children in the foliage,”⁵¹ an image that reappears throughout all of the quartets, the image Herman chooses is the tree, an obvious bearer of each season.

But the most promising advantage of the tree motif is that it finally offers Herman a ground for abstraction. Piet Mondrian’s famous sequence of trees growing more and more ethereal en route to pure form becomes a destination in itself here, rather than a pit stop on the road to Theosophy.⁵² Herman’s abstract trees break up like a flickering cell phone signal, the pierced veil of reality still valued, “neither flesh nor fleshless.”⁵³ As James

⁴⁶ T. S. Eliot, Letter to William Force Stead, 9 August 1930. Cited in Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 1978), 29.

⁴⁷ Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 264.

⁴⁸ T. S. Eliot, ““Burnt Norton”,” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 180.

⁴⁹ Charles Altieri, “Visual Art” in Jason Harding (ed.), *T. S. Eliot in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 105.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Nicholas Poussin’s (1594–1665) series on the Four Seasons at the Louvre, Joachim Beuckelaer’s (1533–1574) *Four Elements* at London’s National Gallery, or Thomas Cole’s (1801–1848) *Voyages of Life* series at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.

⁵¹ T. S. Eliot, ““Burnt Norton,”” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 181.

⁵² Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) moved from his native Netherlands to Paris in 1911, where he was inspired by the Cubism of Pablo Picasso and George Braques. His tree paintings became more and more ethereal, a move that was in the spiritualist doctrines of Theosophy, then a relatively new religious movement. He would eventually leave natural subjects almost completely behind, opting instead for pure geometric form.

⁵³ T. S. Eliot, ““Burnt Norton”,” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 177.

McCullough says of Fujimura's art in this volume, so with Herman's: It straddles the "dynamics of aesthesis and ascesis, the intersection of the unapologetically sensory and sensuous . . . with spiritual discipline."



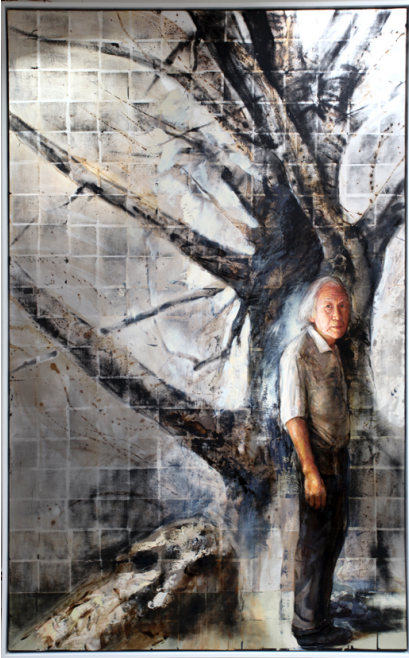
Four Quartets constantly breaks in on itself as well, calling attention to its status as poem, even offering up poetry itself as futile, until it is given back by poem's end, purified. But not the purification from matter sought by Mondrian, but a mattered purification from the "motives late revealed" of "Little Gidding,"⁵⁴ Just so with Bruce's tree-scapes, in which each of the four elements are not discarded—but transparently evoke a fifth. Herman finds this elusive element in "the presence of heaven in the ordinary . . . I find it located where my painted surfaces break down, revealing palimpsests or vestiges of lower layers in the paint or the image—like the failures that end up being the main place of meeting with God."⁵⁵ In the canvas's weakness, we might say, is its strength—making these the most satisfying abstractions of Herman's career. At the same time these trees, with their evocation of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the tree of the Cross, also subtly evoke the Christian tradition. Herman thereby conquers two of his struggles at once—the indeterminacy of abstraction, and the dilemma of explicit religious imagery.

But the act of mooring Mondrian's trees alone would be insufficient. Herman as an artist would remain dissatisfied if his classical training went unengaged. Hence his arboreal home for abstraction is further tethered with bodies and faces, also the most convincing and evocative figures of Herman's journey thus far. He has learned to be wary of artists such as Lucien Freud or Philip Pearlstein, who "approach the human form as a site of abstract formal investigations."⁵⁶ Instead, these are recognizable people, male and female, particular and universal, conjuring every life journey from childhood through youth, into maturity and old age. Herman has captured, in three cases, the elusive expressions that have bewitched artists ever since *La Jaconde*.

⁵⁴ T. S. Eliot, "'Little Gidding,'" in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 204.

⁵⁵ Bruce Herman, correspondence with the author.

⁵⁶ Bruce Herman, "Saving Face: A Mediation on the Fat of the Portrait," *Seen: Christians in the Visual Arts*, XII:1 201, 226.



The first of these is the face of a boy with an expression of intelligent innocence, evoking the Eden of every childhood. Here is the exact moment that Eliot expended so many lines in “Burnt Norton” to have us fully inhabit. Herman’s colors summon spring and the element of earth—an Edenic plot bathed in Eliot’s “white light still and moving.”⁵⁷ Following Eliot’s intentional disorientation from standard progressive time, the next painting in the sequence is old age, winter—the element of air.⁵⁸ The face that looks back at us has retained something of the wonder of childhood, the ease of a benign ghost. The figure is well aware of the memento mori skull beside him—but is prepared by disposition for death. This not the “fear of frenzy . . . fear of possession, / Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God,” that Eliot cautioned against in “East Coker.”⁵⁹ Instead, the face suggests something of lightness, the endless wisdom of humility. This is the beautiful face that answers Guston’s hideous portrait of Eliot in his version of “East Coker”.

But the clemency of old age comes not without the purgation. Next in the sequence is “*The Dry Salvages*,” conjuring autumn, water and the trials of adulthood. Here Herman finally achieves the resolution he had been groping for in the face of the Virgin. This is the joy that we were deprived of in Herman’s *Magnificat*. But the smile is not facile. “People change, and smile: but the agony abides.”⁶⁰ Observing the face of this woman is to see suffering that has strained but not conquered. Waste deep in floodwater, she has—in the words of another poet—“Leapt into the Abyss but find[s], it only goes up to your knees.”⁶¹

⁵⁷ T. S. Eliot, ““Burnt Norton,”” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 177

⁵⁸ Herman takes the liberty to reverse the traditional associations of “*Burnt Norton*” with air and “*East Coker*” with earth. He follows Eliot in associating *The Dry Salvages* with water and “*Little Gidding*” with fire. Such categorizations, however, are not strict. The poem, and these paintings, are also not bound to any particular order.

⁵⁹ T. S. Eliot, ““East Coker,”” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 185.

⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot, “*Dry Salvages*,” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, 195.

⁶¹ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, “Babe, You Turn Me On,” *The Lyre of Orpheus* (Studio Ferber, Paris, France, 2004).

Herman's paintings afford the visual space to contemplate Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and the spiritual harrowing



they represent. But only in the next painting is the severity described by Eliot evoked most directly. Herman reaches to illustrate summer, youth and fire, and his choice of a young woman is a challenge to our broader visual culture, which “prefers the sexualized image of a young woman over her native beauty that flows from a heart, mind and spirit alive to this world of wonders.”⁶² If “Burnt Norton” is the Father’s poem, “East Coker” the Son’s and “The Dry Salvages” Mary’s, then “Little Gidding” is the Holy Spirit’s quartet. This woman—is it Julian of Norwich?—wears the “intolerable shirt of flame” woven by a Name still so unfamiliar. Yes, “All Manner of thing shall be well,” but how? Only “By the purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching.”⁶³ However young, and appropriately beautiful, she—whoever she is—has been purified, has achieved the simplicity costing nothing less than everything, caressed by wheat but lacerated—a stigmata not of the hands, but of the body whole.

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