

# THE GREAT ALL

ELSA DUAULT



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Ashraf Jamal, 2018

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FINE ART GALLERY

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The mystic-philosopher-painter, the French-born South African based artist, Elsa Duault, has introduced a rich vein of thought and feeling into our art world. Running against the dominant interest, domestically and globally, in narrative driven art, that is, art shaped by the consuming fixation with a raced or gendered identity politics, Duault has provided us with a more esoteric or gnostic set of concerns.

Her 'credo', she says, is defined by 'the Great All', a belief in the eternal circularity of life in which 'nothing is created, nothing lost, everything transformed'. This vision, or credo, deserves closer attention, for what Duault believes in is not the customary monotheistic absolute, shared by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, but, rather, a belief in an organically self-creating – and perpetually transforming – world in which neither a sovereign God nor a self-possessed artist is ever wholly in control of creation.

In freeing herself from self-control and from the reliance upon the absolute, Duault opens up a very different understanding of creation. It is perhaps fitting, as a French woman, that Duault should echo the visions of the molecular theorists, Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, as well as the philosopher of movement and author of *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson. For like Duault these three thinkers, and Bergson in particular, advocate the notion of an 'Open Whole', that is, the vision of a ceaselessly morphing totality. This vision is evident in the artist's recognition of 'mother nature's balances and harmony' which, all importantly, is 'full of surprises and beautiful expressions'.

In Duault's world, therefore, nothing is given, and yet everything is given. One cannot underestimate the centrality of this paradox in the artist's painting. Her surfaces and framing form for her work is circular. This refusal, structurally, of a four-cornered world, affirms the artist's commitment to an eternal, never-ending, geometry, for the circle, more than any other form, attests not closure but infinity.

Duault's 'circle of life' echoes T.S. Eliot's belief that in our beginning lies our end, but unlike Eliot, who converted to Catholicism, Duault's circle is never, finally, completed – except momentarily. Completion, in a given outcome of an artwork, is therefore incremental and partial – it speaks to the wondrous enigma of the natural world which, while eternally gestating, finds moments, always, in which a churning world finds some incidental and fleeting respite.

In this regard, with this view of creation uppermost in her mind and heart, we can say that Duault more profoundly shares Bergson's notion of the 'open whole'. But there is also another critical philosophic innovation which precedes Bergson's idea, and which also inspired it – Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the 'eternal return' or 'eternal recurrence', in which we are conditioned to repeat ourselves.

If repetition is central to Duault's art, this is not because life is mechanical – which it is – but because creativity requires ritual. Each act of painting, therefore, is an act of prayer; each prayer, which is bound to the circularity of a mantra, allows for 'surprises', or accidents. If this is so it is because insight, or inspiration, or vision, is something which, simultaneously, one manages, and which one stumbles upon.

Watching Duault at work this paradox becomes vividly evident. Working in acrylic paint, the artist operates by creating three densities – three plastic containers of paint, in different colours, which

vary in their thinness and thickness. The first layer, spilt on the canvas, is the most thinly pliable. Duault then varies the density, manipulating the paint by breathing upon and against it through a straw, or by shifting it about with a stick or blow dryer. What is immediately evident is that no paintbrush is used.

Duault's reasoning behind this technique has its own mystic root, for the artist, as best she can, refuses to control the movement – coagulation and dispersal – of paint. In this regard the artist acknowledges the influence of Jackson Pollock, wittily remembered as 'Jack the Dripper'. Action painting, or colour field painting, or, more inclusively, abstract expressionism, is the artist's ancestral painterly root. In a similar vein, she too seeks to gift priority to the animus of paint. For in Duault's hands – hands which operate more as a medium than an agent – what assumes centrality is the matter that is paint. However, if Duault refuses the ego she does not do so with the cool flippancy displayed in Damien Hirst's spin paintings. Rather, for Duault, it is neither the ego nor the machine that, finally, matters. Paint as a material does not only exist in and for itself. Rather, paint is a means through which nature's fragile harmonies are articulated – paint is a mystic portal.

Duault speaks of 'energy colliding ... dispersing ... reaching equilibrium ... a resting point'. For what interests her most is the 'essence of movement'. In other words, it is paint's intrinsic vitality – after Bergson it *elan vital* – which compels her. It is the mercurial, or 'molecular' nature of paint as a material and medium which, mysteriously, fulfils life's meaning – the very meaning of creativity. It is through the 'density and ratio of materials', the 'interdependence of substances', the 'movements present in nature', the 'free expression of textures', and the 'effervescence of the creative process', that Duault arrives upon her challenge to the art world. For in a time which has grown increasingly divisive, conflicted, and stricken by the brute grievances of the powerless, the disenfranchised, the oppressed, and the need to right these secular-material-psychological imbalances in a world grown increasingly oppressive and systemically cruel, that Duault asks us to pause and reflect more deeply on those hidden and very real realms which exist concurrently with our manic secular obsessions.

It is for this reason that I regard Duault as a mystic philosopher who, through painting, has paradoxically sought to remove her ego, the better to access what she terms 'the 'Great All''. For art is not only the stuff of secular conflict, or the vehicle of the aggrieved self, or the weapon of a struggle – art is also the medium for a spiritual quest.

It is curious to remember that Duault began her career with a degree in marketing. One would reasonably have expected the artist to apply this very secular and media-driven skill to, say, marketing the products of others. However, on discovering a secret trove of paintings made by her grandfather, the artist chose to radically shift gears. A degree from the Michaelis School of Fine Art followed. Well known internationally for its conceptually driven ethos, and its commitment to an Afrocentric international style, Michaelis could, logically, have spawned an artist who could have branded herself as such. Duault, however, would have none of this.

This is because Duault is emphatically an outlier, someone who has chosen to carve out a singular and complex spiritual and philosophical path. One does not read her works as a cipher for some prescribed and current meaning – her works are not representative or illustrative. Caught up in the enigma and fluidity of marbled paper – an ancient Turkish tradition – her paintings invoke feelings and meanings as unerringly on point as they are mysterious. Aniconic, non-symbolic, anti-narrative, strange, Duault's paintings have chosen – peremptorily, suddenly, surprisingly – to call up the unknowable at the very heart of the known.

This unknowable realm, which precedes and exceeds the fetish and obsession of the human today – its beleaguered subjective consciousness and fraught agency – is not, however, something to be

afraid of. On the contrary, it is this primal mystery – the very mystery of the natural world – which, for Duault, will offer us a greater calm, a greater peace – a greater *All*.

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