

**Roots, Suns, and Spheres:**  
**Kikki Ghezzi's Preconscious Sublime**

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**Brooktondale, late November.**

A light snow has fallen overnight in upstate New York. Kikki and I take a walk up the hill to the quarry, turning down an abandoned dirt road towards Six Mile Creek. There's probably enough snow on the slope for sledding with the family, but we decide to look first for dead tree roots to take back to her studio in the city. Her interest in natural debris is recent, but as we scour the bank along the path I remember Dürer's watercolors of the rock faces and exposed tree roots of a quarry, images that reappear in the background of "Knight, Devil, and Death." Near the creek we find some possibilities: a dark, hard section of hornbeam root, then a piece of elm that's been lying around for much longer – part is buried and has been hollowed out by carpenter ants, creating a reddish series of galleries within the darker wood. Extracted from the snow and mud, both pieces are filthy, and we drag them home, uncertain if they will even fit in the car. . .

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**Brooklyn, late winter.** Upstairs to the studio to see what has become of the roots – or rather, as it turns out, to discover what they have become. As expected, there are still life drawings of roots precisely rendered while resting on vaguely delineated surfaces. More interesting, though, is a remarkable group of paintings that challenge my expectations of

“still life” and transpose these gnarled pieces of wood into a variety of artistic registers. Some present shapes and shadows immediately reminiscent of their dendriform original, even in variations with different colors and shadings, ranging from natural reds and browns to deep North Sea blues or summer yellows and greens. In others, the original shapes and contours have been nearly palimpsested by a flatter palette of mixed colors and brushstrokes that foreground the activity of painting itself. And then there are a few images where the roots have become as bleached as driftwood, their contours rendered with a spectrum of whites that seem to gesture in homage to Morandi’s still lives with shells.

A sweeping generalization of these images as “abstract art” would be far too homogenizing to do them justice, in part because their indistinct borders and hazy backgrounds resist the clearly delineated geometrical shapes and color boundaries often associated with the “abstract”. These images place the viewer in a perceptual quandary, gesturing both to the shapes of the original contorted roots and the shadings of their surfaces, while simultaneously resisting the category of “*objet trouvé*” because they are no longer recognizably natural wood forms. And most interestingly: this *nature morte* almost seems to have a life of its own, sometimes suspended within the frame of the painting, sometimes extending beyond its lower edge. Some repose calmly in themselves, while others exude an energy that seems irritable or even angry. Their hovering quality also makes some appear if they were transfigurations *in potentia*, something just formed or about to be formed.

The psychic energy of these paintings connects them to another set of images in Ghezzi’s recent œuvre that feature a rather different group of hovering objects. “Two Suns” in particular is suggestive regarding the relevance of metaphorical “roots” to the artist’s pre-conscious sublime. The painting’s title refers to two different suns, a small, isolated orb on

the horizon outside the mouth of a foreshortened tunnel, and a much larger and brighter sphere in the foreground, attended by a hovering figure. In spite of the orientation of the tunnel towards the distant sun (displaced to the side of its vanishing point), the composition compels a choice, drawing the viewer back into the foreground. For while the external sun resembles a red dwarf, casting only a thin edge of white light on the lower left corner of the tunnel entrance, the much larger and brighter “sun” in the foreground exudes a brighter and more ethereal white radiance with yellow and orange streaks that seem to warm the figure to its right. Or does this figure instead have the more active relationship to the sun, radiating its warm orange towards the sun’s right edges and seeming to encourage it with the curved edges of its lower torso? The image seems to imply some complex interplay among the forces of artistic creation.

The synergy between the “sun’s” circle and the weightless figure echoes a long iconographic tradition in Christian art, which juxtaposes the sphere of a still inchoate universe and a hovering *deus artifex* – a traditional representation of “creation” that stretches from illuminated manuscripts and the frescos of medieval Italian churches to William Blake’s *Book of Urizen* and beyond. Of course, “Two Suns” does not simply repeat a religious or romantic creation myth, but redirects the topos inwards to the artistic unconscious, giving energy to both the object being created and its creating force.

The iconography of “Two Suns” may also provide ways of thinking about other paintings where the interplay of psychic components is less obvious. In “Fluffy Purple”, for example, the creative spheres appear again, this time as three small lavender balls at the bottom center of the image, connected by tendrils or roots to something more tentative in the center, providing a hopeful contrast with the somber Expressionist color-scheme of the whole. Will they eventually flourish amid the more massive forces in the scene, the large

brown trunk on the left, the blue house-like shape towards the middle, and the ominous face-like green mass on the right?

In “Liquid Dream” traces of the hovering figure and the sphere resurface in a curvilinear blue vehicle submerged in what appears to be a vast blue ocean. Although the two passenger seats in front are empty, our orange figure from “Two Suns” reposes behind them as a luminous small dot on a bed-like platform, its lower fringes drooping over the edge of the mattress. The sphere also reappears as a driver’s wheel in the lower center. But is the wheel being turned by a shrouded figure to the right with a reddish face under its hood, or is this merely the right side of the vehicle with a window revealing a reddish light outside, as in the windows to the top and left of the image? The potential of the luminous orange dot to balance the overwhelming blues of the ocean is latent, still without direction – an embryonic artistic spark in the vast dream-like ocean around it.