

Steve Danzig - Anthro-Ecosophy

When I first looked at Steve Danzig's digital prints and video images from the Anthro-Ecosophy series they appeared as strange watery gateways into an unknown darkling sea. A world of floating and gently swimming things, fleshy and vaguely sexual, indistinct yet clearly alive, though deeply alien; concerned with their own thoughts and experience, isolated and unheeding of any other world. That unknown world is brought to an even deeper sense of isolation in Danzig's video (accompanying the prints and rendering them as an installation) hinting at deep longings with its several medusae softly swimming upwards towards some unseen intent, perhaps the surface? perhaps the light? a knowledge? But they bear that light in themselves in Danzig's reworking of the colours of this sea. These deep and mysterious images glow with a translucent blue; wondrous cabochons of ancient amber now wrought in sapphire. Here, in the prints, in an anthropomorphic way, glimpsed through lenses of our own construction; such wisdom as is possessed of the human is inchoately projected onto worlds unreachable, imperceptible, other than through those lenses.

If Danzig's images are an abstraction into ideas, they are not that form of abstraction which involves the distillation of some idea into geometric or expressionistic form. The elements of the images are not abstract, they are figurative, but they are collage and that is itself a process of abstraction, of withdrawing a pictorial element from its original matrix and placing it into a new framework, thus reworking its meaning potential. Here it is an abstraction of something more emotive, more biological, closer to mutation than abstraction. It is an organic abstraction, drawn from thought and dream, abstractions in collage where the elements are real, of disparate origin, perhaps distorted but mostly, in being displaced, their meanings have been reworked, so that their source meanings are no longer identifiable and where their new meanings themselves float, signifying something quite other, quite alien, a separation, where the emotional connection is one of isolation, otherness, and a longing that leads to the spiritual.

They are spiritual images, images of an unending seeking, not in the sense of Kandinsky, where an essence is sought through the distillation that seeks to expose the human soul, nor even Chagall whose ghostly human entities make representations to the gods of older social structures. Neither are they surrealist in that they are not particularly the unconscious renderings of human desires, yet they do seem to rise from some unconscious yearning. They are spiritual within a more contemporary frame, fitting well within the realm of their peers, images produced in the newer forms of digital photo-collage where thought and feeling is still pre-eminent but the tensions seem greater now. The feeling is one of where are we now? Have we reached the end of our enlightenment? What can we do now? It is a kind of fear of the present, let alone the future (unspoken as that is) a longing to return to the matrix. Those artists, Danzig among them, who are producing digital collage, within a background of the surreal, the abstract, the collages of Ernst and Cornell, are freer to form new images from the familiar which, in combination, hint at a darkness in the soul, a need for magic and even to be able to confront the horrors that we are faced with everyday. Much of the work is bleak perhaps, yet hopeful in its willingness to confront that bleakness to lay siege to despair and sometimes almost parody it.

Yet, to my mind, the Anthro-ecosophy images are unique, a new departure, exploring an inner space the like of which we are only just becoming aware, the deepest depths of oceans that have been utterly inaccessible to us, perhaps they have been drawn from one of those documentaries on the life of the seas - the amniotic fluid of life on this planet. In the ecology of the contemporary image they seem to carve out a new and private niche. They bring us immediately back to the origins: of life itself, of our lives, of our desires and of a possible future genesis of our very biologies. Swimming in this amniotic sea, our gestation recapitulates a deep and mysterious past that we know as the unfathomed source of desire and dreams. After all, are our tears not salt, our blood not saline, our sweat not for the licking and the taste of the other for whom we bend in this flow of dreams and reflections and that anthropomorphic projection that renders us alive and always becoming?

And we are forced to ask, do we have a place in this world, this world in a bubble that makes up the self, shows itself in the depths and extravagances of these images as transparent, translucent, floating? It is a world that reveals and conceals. Making the depths evident but

masking what they might be. Are they flesh asking nothing but their own isolation? Are they flesh for our desires, our consumption? They seem alone, isolated, having no connection with each other, not even aware of the presence of others in the space of the image - and this is even more strongly reinforced in the video, where that medusa works its way lightwards, ignoring its companions yet presenting to us the burning colours of its own light. And the other half-formed, un-named forms, flesh floating in some interior sea of imagination? It is almost as though they were flesh desiring to become human or human desiring to be fish

The images become as bubbles, bubbles in the depths of the sea that is our source. Those bubbles that lie within the unconscious, the contents of a mind, the things experienced, almost unprocessed, unthought, pre-articulate. I have always thought of the mind as a pool of creatures floating, swimming, gathering in its depths. Occasionally one or more of them might gather together enough energy to cross the threshold into consciousness, leaping into the light of the world beyond the depths, above the surface of the pool. It is these that form the airy world, the world above the depths, the world of human knowing. But in the depths still lurk these unknown creatures; desiring, wanting, growing into the light.

In Danzig's images the human form appears only rarely, though an almost-human form is glimpsed throughout as in a dream, a mystery asking just what is the human? Pointing to the origins of all that is alive in the sea - blue, salt, sweat, soft and flesh. The creatures of that precursor sea possess a nightmarish quality, things from our depths that we do not wish to confront or things from our ancient past that remind us of from whence we came and bring premonitions of a future unknowable, unpredicted, in a departure from the past. Or is it a future merging with the sea, a return to our origins reminding us of that future scenario, developing through the further visions of our biological post-Darwinian genetic futures.

But then you look again. In one image, deep beneath this sea are buildings, city streets; an urban centre. A city seen in the depths, reflecting the world, yet now mysterious and uncertain, distinct yet now unclear in meaning. Suddenly the images become archaeology. It is a city seen from on high, mirrored and refracted, crystalline in the depths. That city, that crystalline city, symmetric, sunken in the depths of our historic quickening. The images are immediately brought to another level, are we now engaged in an archaeology of a watery planet, an alien planet; one in which water is the space of living not the air? An archaeology of the other onto which we can project our anthropomorphic world view and try to interpret it in our own way.

The intent that Danzig seeks he calls Anthropo-ecosphy. Anthroposophy is the human wisdom; ecosphy is the wisdom of the greater system of the earth itself, the connectedness of all entities, something that would continue even if the human were to disappear from the scene entirely. In all these images it is as though we were probing for new knowledge, using the tools of an underwater archaeology in the submersible, the sonar image, as though we were at the threshold of a new planet, or at the first intrusions into inner space. Yet other images seem as though scientific, taken through the windows of some submersible inner-planetary exploration vehicle. And it is just that, we are viewing all this through the viewports of some ship of self-exploration. Probing, exploring, in wonder at things unknown, newly seen yet so reminiscent of the things we know and of which we are so familiar.

These images offer a questioning of that search for self-realization as it shifts and grows over time, reflecting our impact on the other expressed through that search. It is a search in questioning, and a questioning of the search. The behaviours of nature, the other, to which we attribute human motivation bring us face to face with the very impossibility of knowing. It is the relations between the human and that unknowable nature, the other, that makes it possible to be human. Just what thoughts could possibly be weaving their way through that medusa's experience of its world? And just what oceanic thoughts are they that redirect us to these early origins of life? As with Danzig's images, one can only ever hint and occasionally point the way.

Dr. Stephen Jones
31 January 2005.