

# The Gathering Field: Circa Diem

KYNA LESKI

Rhode Island School of Design

***Field* is a ground that forms at the creative beginning of a work. The true beginning of any creative work is the desire to know something that you do not know but need to know. This need may provoke a project or may not develop until you are deep into one, realize the inadequacy of existing strategies and start to look elsewhere. This can also come from the realization that you are working from ideas that are no longer relevant. The absence caused by what is abandoned creates a kind of negative pressure. You start to notice things that are relevant. Things that are relevant seem to attract each other by association and a field of related elements is elicited. What is gathered, how it is gathered and who is doing the gathering creates a structure that becomes a coherent context that assists in navigating the creative process. The structure of this field is the mind of the project. What follows is one example of a gathering field.**

## CIRCA DIEM

Twenty-five years ago I started drawing/painting my dreams with the purpose of recording them to learn from them. I practiced this daily during a two-year period of living in Rome. I was experiencing vivid dreams which I would quickly sketch with a few lines in dim light, so as to hold onto the dream image and not have my attention be overwhelmed by my waking image of the page or room. There are over 250 dream paintings from this period and several filled sketchbooks of dreams since. My experience with dreams tell me that there is a lot more that we sense or have gathered than we are aware of experiencing. Images that we have received but may not be aware of are latently triggered in dreams. We create dreams from a succession of these images like editors working on a film without a story board or script. The rising pattern of our lives surface into consciousness.

## MY FATHER'S GARDEN

I must have been leaving through the side door onto a narrow strip of lawn between our house and the hill. Instead of finding the nectarine tree and air-conditioner there, I found a set of garden plots. My father's garden. Planting beds were cut into the green lawn, fresh and rich. They looked like beds that are dug each year for planting vegetables. But instead of vegetables or flowers, body parts filled the earth, human body parts. A stone border of white rocks embedded in sand ran along the edges.

I felt no horror. I saw a swarm of clean-cut torsos, arms, a leg and a foot separated from its ankle. I didn't see any blood. Fine capillaries just under the skin of a torso had ruptured leaving a fine veiny pattern. I saw a spinal column attached to what looked like a pelvis. Some parts appeared to float below a thin muddy layer. I saw what looked like a brain. And there was a bat.

I woke up and took out the sketchbook that I kept by the side of my bed as a dream journal. I used it to sketch dreams upon waking and then painted them with watercolor during the day. It was a way of processing all of the rich and intense experiences that I had during a period living in Rome. I didn't make these paintings to show anyone. The process helped draw out my dream memory and the journal was a record to refer back to. I passed through seasons of prolific dreaming/sketching/painting and then I slowly filled with doubt, as I wondered whether it was worth the time taken. No sooner than convincing myself to stop, something would surprise me. Then I would keep at it again. Each dream drawing presented a different problem of how to convey a dream's experience.

I started to sketch the dream of my father's garden. I drew the planting beds, the one inclined in front of me, and those on my right and left sides. I knew that I could see around in a sweep that extended beyond my cone of vision, and I didn't remember turning around or moving to view it all. The rectangular beds of my sketch skewed into shapes with irregular angles, approximating the inclusive and extended view. I drew the skewed shaped bed ahead, on the left and right, and the round white rock and gold sand border on the left edge of my view. I wasn't sure of all the body parts and their placement; so, I drew what I remembered: the torsos with the veiny pattern, a foot, the spine attached to a pelvis, a brain and the thin



Figure 1: *My Father's Garden*.

layer of mud. I sketched the bat off to the side. I scribbled on the facing page, "My Father's Garden." And as was my practice, I wrote the date of the dream: 10/28 (1993).

I came back later that day to paint my sketch. I had supplies laid out on the marble desk in the guest room: watercolors and brushes, a glass bottle filled with water and an ashtray and some templates for mixing the colors. Sometimes the pleasures of mixing the paint, watching it spread and soak into the page, the way pigments separate when drying, or the play of transparent layers giving form would overwhelm the memory of the dream. It initially seemed a lie to depart from a strict depiction; but often getting lost in the process ended up generating a quality that was closer to the dream in some way. Most of the time the divergent process captured an unidentifiable something that was a felt memory as opposed to a specific element that I remembered seeing. When painting the dream of my father's garden, I didn't allow myself to untether from what I knew I saw. I felt that I wanted it to be a strict, yet perhaps incomplete record. When it came to paint the bat, I realized that I never actually saw him in this scene; I just knew he was there. I erased him,

leaving only an impression that the pencil made in the page of the outline of a bat. A wash of paint betrayed the bat's presence; pigment deposited in the crevice of its outline

#### REVELATION

A couple of days later, on Saturday, October 30, at 9:30 a.m., I arrived at the Sistine Chapel for an appointment. I had been living in Rome as the academic head of an American Program which brought special privileges: Ezio Genovesi, the Director of the Program, arranged an appointment with Gianluigi Colalucci to see up close the restoration of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Gianluigi Colalucci, a well-known restorer, was in charge of the fourteen-year restoration of the vaulted ceiling and was near completion of *The Last Judgment*, Michelangelo's painted fresco on the altar wall. *The Last Judgment* depicts the story of the *Day of the Lord* in Christian theology, the final and eternal judgment by God of all nations. It is told by Saint John in *Revelations* through prophecy, an apocalyptic message that he received from Christ about the end of the world and judgment of souls' destiny. *Apolcalypse* is a greek word meaning revelation, "an



Figure 2: *The Brazen Serpent* Pendentive, Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo

unveiling of things not previously known which could not be known apart from the unveiling.”

The entire west-end wall of the chapel was shrouded by a tarp that hung on a seven-tiered scaffolding. Ezio, his wife, and Gianluigi Colalucci and I met on the floor level of the chapel and started up a lift up to the upper-most level. The chapel is tall and some prominent figures are quite large, almost three meters tall; each level offered partial views of their bodies. As the lift climbed, we passed slices of figures framed by scaffolding. We arrived and stood in the top corner, where the restoration was complete. Here the vaulted ceiling meets the end wall and the side walls, in a cusped-shaped slice of vault pulled down and in between the two walls called a pendentive. One could simultaneously see the end wall, the side wall, and the vault overhead. This painted pendentive depicted *The Brazen Serpent*, a story from *The Book of Numbers*, of the creation of the sacred bronze snake called *Nehustan*. From the close-up view, one could see that the figures are enormous and distorted; the shin of a leg reaching well over a meter long. Michelangelo distorted the

figures so that they would appear correct when viewed from the ground. A border of white and gold decorative shapes depicting a carved molding inconsistently met the arched meetings of the vault and the walls. As my eye traced the border from top to bottom, the border gradually disappeared into the corner. Our guide explained that Michelangelo had requested that the end wall, instead of being plumb, slant for an optical effect. An additional brick curtain-wall was added in front of the existing wall, making it project out by 24 centimeters at the top. This had the unfortunate consequence of collecting soot from the candles. In addition, the layers of plaster from previous frescoes on the side wall contributed to the uneven geometry. Michelangelo painted the gold and white border in order to create a new edge that concealed the irregularities. I noticed a distinct rectangular meter of the painting that had a dirty dark film covering it; an area left untouched by Colalucci’s team; so that as restoration techniques improve, specimens can be tested with the techniques of the day and compared. And then I saw something above the pendentive of *The Brazen Serpent* that seized me: two bronze nudes with torsos covered with a fine veiny pattern. The sight of this pattern held me until its mystery was revealed. Signor Colalucci explained that water damage from the roof formed



Figure 3: Torso of putto above *The Brazen Serpent* Pendentive by Michelangelo

microscopic tributaries carrying water to the surface of the fresco. As the water evaporated, salts were left on the surface. Most salts left a white crystalline efflorescence. Vegetable oils and animal glue were applied in earlier restorations to make the white salt deposits transparent. The effect was temporary and animal glue collected dirt. Signor Colalucci was able to clean the dirt away; but the damage from one salt, called *saltpetre*, could not be reversed. It leached from the mortar between the bricks, followed the fine cracks carved by water through the layers of fresco causing an irreversible staining. That staining was the veiny pattern on the torsos. Saltpetre, or potassium nitrate, was made from bat guano accumulated in and collected from caves.

I had a sensation from head to heel; a sense of recognition that I had been here before. It was a physical memory, which had no words. And then I realized, that I was standing in the image of the dream that I had a few nights before.

What I had seen in my dream as a spinal column and pelvis looked like the staff with the bronze serpent held by a hand wrapped by a snake. The rock and sand border looked like the painted border around the pendentives; the faceted corner composed of vault, pendentive and side and end wall was similar to the simultaneously skewed planting beds that were ahead and on my sides in my dream. The film of thin mud looked like the film of the unclean area left by the restorers. And the veiny patterns of the torsos in my dream

looked like the veiny patterns of the bronze nudes. There even was a head of curly hair seen from behind that looked like a brain.

Overwhelmed, I recounted the corresponding details of *My Father's Garden* and this upper corner of the Sistine Chapel to my small group. It seemed to make them uncomfortable; so, we continued on our tour.

The view of *The Last Judgment* from under the veil of the scaffolding is privileged; it is the view that Michelangelo had himself in painting the fresco: close and partial. *The Last Judgment* is organized in clusters of figures that depict scenes from *The Revelation*. The clusters are organized like tightly gathered clouds. The figures of each cloud are muscular, twisted and knitted. They intertwine to form a billowing cloud that seems to be rising or falling or suspended. Up close only a partial cluster is visible, the rest is beyond view, behind the scaffolding parts. This draws one's attention to the undulating, twisted and intertwined body forms. Years later, visiting a show of Michelangelo's drawings at the British Museum, I saw a sketch that appeared as a smudge from arm's length. As my eye's adjusted to the sketch's articulate texture, I could slowly read the pencil marks as describing musculature, head, arms and legs tangled in a storm cloud of activity. These were his studies for *The Last Judgment* and *The Brazen Serpent*; surprisingly small for what would be executed in so large a format.

*The Last Judgment* was painted as a true or buon fresco—a process of applying color to wet plaster and then finished in places, a secco, on dry plaster with the same color. The fresco is 539.3 by 472.4



Figure 4: Study for “The Brazen Serpent” by Michelangelo.

inches or approximately forty-six by forty-three feet made in increments called *giornate*, the area of wet plaster that can be completed in the span of a day. Up close one can see the seams of the giornate; they fall along the outlines of cartoons that Michelangelo prepared of part of figures, figures or groupings of figures, depending upon size and detail. The cartoons were transferred to the plaster with indirect engravings or by pouncing of points, a process called *spolvero*.

We moved through the levels, negotiating areas of enclosed tents glowing with the restorers’ lamps, seeing the swarming figures subjected to atmospheric pressures of ascension, suspension, or the pull downward by the demons below.

At the bottommost level stands Charon, oar in hand, manning a boat of the damned. Minos stands in the bottom right corner, wrapped in and bitten by a snake. A winged Lucifer chews on the ankle of one of the damned. Shown with a raking light one can see clearly the engraved lines used to transfer Lucifer’s image from cartoon to the wall. His large wing extends across the hull of a boat...a wing that has claws at its tips. I asked, “What kind of bird has claws at the end of its wings?” “A bat,” was the reply.

I returned home and looked at my painted sketch; it was an uncanny set of visual field notes of our visit and specifically the close view of upper corner pendentive. The paint had dried; and the settled pigment left in the crevices of my erased sketch of the bat was no longer there. I painted the bat back in its place. What percolated

through the layers of dream into day were partially drawn out, layer by excavated layer, incomplete mark and memory. The memory is more of a physical sensation of being in a space than a crystal-clear film. Entering the upper west corner of the Sistine Chapel was like entering the space of my dream.

Prophecy is the knowledge of future events, of past events of which there is no memory or of present hidden things which cannot be known by reason alone. Jung called the experience of meaningful connections that have no causal explanation, *synchronicity*. Klaus Conrad, another psychiatrist, used the term *apophenia*, for “the perception of patterns, meanings, or connections were none exists,” as related to a mental disorder.

Different points of view privilege different patterns. *Pattern* comes from *Pater*, which means *father*. Are patterns the father of prophecy or the intuition of the field?

#### **PATTERN, THE SUN AND THE PINEAL GLAND, AMEN**

The ritual of sketching my dreams started earlier that year, on the second day that I arrived in Italy. I had a journal with me, a gift made by a friend, beautifully bound in card and leather. Also with me—another gift—a book of watercolor pigments—used by cutting the pages of pigment and adding water. Day by day one book, with pigment pages, would empty while the other filled with images. Suffering from jet-lag, I took a nap upon arriving in Orvieto. Orvieto has a *pozzo*, a well that goes deep into the earth with double helix ramps to take you down and back up to the surface. I had a powerful dream that I was submerged in a pool of water and as I ascended



Figure 5: *The Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo.

to come up for air, I couldn't break the surface. The water's surface stretched around the top of my head and then I woke up. My jet-lag, a visit to the well and dream seemed obviously connected. My pineal gland was thrown off by the timing of daylight in this new time zone. A pea-sized gland located in the center of the head, the pineal is the body's clock, regulating diurnal functions, our sense of the day, travel time and maybe time travel. It is a vestigial unpaired eye, related perhaps to the dorsal eye opening at the top of the skull in some ancestral amphibians. Some call it the third eye; Descartes thought it was the seat of the soul. My jet lag dream was as vivid as the visit I was about to take into the *pozzo*, so I sketched and painted it. It foreshadowed the winding trip down and back up the well's ramps and the mystic's journey into the unconscious that is every dream; sometimes takes as much an effort to return from its depth as it is to stay there.

The rhythm of the day is pronounced in Italy. *Prima colazione* is a small pastry taken with an espresso, lunch is late and the full meal of the day. There is a time in the morning for the market, fresh foods traveling short distances just picked from the vine, caught or slaughtered. No jet-lag here, banking hours and siesta; it seems that all clocks are synchronized. The *girosole* turn in sync on the fields, men walk the streets for the evening *passeggiata* in groups of matching hats and politics. My days were linked to the rhythm of Rome by the nightly dream and daily ritual of remembering and drawing. It was my way of feasting on the Italian giorno.

*Buona giornata*, a greeting meaning have a special day and the term for the increment of a *buon fresco*, or true fresco, a day's worth of wet plaster to work. *The Last Judgment* is a journal of 456 giornate, of 456 sunrises and sunsets. These work days are measured by the saturation and evaporation of the plaster: lime from sea creatures and pozzolana ash from the earth's mantle. Days measured in humidifying the chapel and Michelangelo's lungs.

There are many messages about time in Michelangelo's fresco. It depicts Christ's return to earth and end times in an unusual way. Instead of a vertically tiered arrangement with hell in the bottom band, purgatory in the middle and heaven above, Michelangelo's painted an orbiting arrangement of figures. The story is told through clusters of characters that spiral around Christ located on the upper part of the central axis. The dead are resurrected from the earth on the bottommost left and as we continue up and around in a clockwise loop around the figure of Christ we see a cloud formation of the elected rising; a group of saints near the level of Christ's atmosphere; another group of Saints around to his right; continuing down are three of the deadly sins: avarice, lust and pride and the damned falling into demons in Charon's boat.

Envelopment and emanation, two spatial conditions attributed to God in Christianity: God as centripetal or centrifugal force that holds the whole. Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* is a universe with Christ as a kind of radiating sun god; shining like Zeus, God of the day. His arms bent like the arms of a swastika, conducting the revolution of the whole.

At the same time that Michelangelo began his work, Copernicus was finishing his heliocentric theory of the order of the cosmos, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, which Copernicus dedicated to Pope Paul III, the same pope who was the patron of Michelangelo's fresco. Copernicus wrote in *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, "In the midst of all assuredly dwells the Sun. For in this most beautiful temple who would place this luminary in any other or better position from which he can illuminate the whole at once? Indeed, some rightly call Him the Light of the World, others, the Mind or ruler of the Universe...So indeed the Sun remains, as if in his kingly dominion, governing the family of Heavenly bodies which circles around him."

Revolution is a revelation: a model of the universe is turned inside out. Emanation wins over envelopment as the Copernican heliotropic model sees the light of day. Michelangelo's *giornata*, one rotation of the earth in its trip around the sun and circadian rhythm are all *circa diem*, "around a day" with the Father, the sun and the pineal gland as the referent measure.

Judgment Day is everyday as the rising pattern of our lives surface into consciousness. We make choices as salts seep from the nocturnal mammal into the giornata.