

About the work:

When I was introduced to the work of emerging artist, Patrick Fagerberg, I was thoroughly seduced by his vocabulary of forms. They brought to mind words that critic Katherine Kuh wrote in 1979 to describe Clyfford Still's work: "The paintings seem to inhale and exhale, to respond to stimuli like living organisms. It is this organic activity that sets them apart. They never duplicate nature; they merely operate by the same laws."<sup>1</sup> Fagerberg's paintings meander and surge. They seem to shift state between liquid and crystal, solid and gas. All this activity stimulates a thought process in the viewer. A painting might suggest boiling clouds illuminated by heat lightening or a far-off nebula giving birth to infant stars. It might even take the viewer deep inside a body to witness the chemical processes of life itself.

Fagerberg's imagery may be ambiguous, but his approach leaves no doubt; this artist avoids realistic representation in order to explore natural laws at a cosmic scale. Like Expressionist predecessors such as Still and Mark Rothko, Fagerberg approaches abstraction as an act of representing fundamental natural processes and moments of becoming. The artist himself states that "the paintings are a conduit for something bigger, and it's coming through me."<sup>2</sup> He's not certain if that "something" is God or cosmic design, but the transfer takes place as he coaxes black and white paint across a wood or metal surface. "Sometimes it's my hand in it, I'll crawl in it. It's a whole body thing...It's my body, energy, soul,... everything I have goes into this paint, which I think, at the end, is why they have energy and life."

When Mr. Fagerberg explained this to me, I could immediately visualize his paint as a medium not merely for capturing images, but for recording -- perhaps even cosmic energy. The stark blacks and whites, the infinite gradations of grey, all possess a kinetic vitality. They invade and overwhelm the mind, inviting the viewer to ask, *Am I doing more than just looking at this work? Can I hear sounds coming from the image before my eyes? Can I sense changes in temperature and even feel the pressure of shock waves arising from the dramatic event depicted?* The images inspire the viewer to create a complete scene, including a fantasy of merging with the mysterious design of something larger than the self. This is a transcendent experience, a sublime experience. For centuries painters have been

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Kuh, "Clyfford Still." In *Clyfford Still*, ed. John O'Neill (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 1-5, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations were taken from an interview the author conducted with the artist on 18 September 2014.

fascinated with aesthetic compositions and responses called “sublime.” However Mr. Fagerberg adds a very contemporary nuance, noting, “It’s about math.”

Mathematics featured explicitly in his earliest paintings: some explored overlapping parabolas so precisely rendered that they could be transposed into equations. The mathematical influence has become more subtle and powerful as Mr. Fagerberg has moved to work related to fractals. Fractals are the patterns that underlie apparent chaos, either within a system or across systems. (Fractals can be expressed mathematically, so for example, the formula that describes branching patterns in a tree might also describe streams in a watershed or the circulatory system of a mammal.) Mr. Fagerberg has a unique ability to see beneath the surface of nature, to abstract fractal patterns and offer them in provocative visual forms. That’s why a viewer might briefly interpret one of his paintings as a plant structure only to have the image spontaneously flip in the mind, and turn into a geological formation. These paintings are laden with detail, and the artist confirms that “I want you to be able to look at them through a microscope.” For the viewer who comes close, the paintings work another type of fractal magic. In some areas the tonal changes are very densely packed, each differentiated by shade, a unique texture or ridge, and a reflective property. These details capture the energy that brought the image into being. They also create a worlds-within-worlds intricacy. Each square inch could be a fractal, a complex painting in its own right that reflects the structure of the whole.

As a result, the viewer enters a special aesthetic state where connections multiply: between different domains of nature and between micro and macro views of a single painting. The resulting collision of interpretations can be jarring and thrilling. It can also deliver unexpected, but tantalizing truths. Nothing stays stable for too long. Connection lies just under the surface of variety. And the *universe* is just that –fundamentally unified and equally ambiguous. This work communicates the artist’s world view and intent: He says, “the more you know, the more you realize you don’t know anything.... What appears black might be white and anywhere in between.... I question my beliefs constantly ... and I want my paintings to make people question everything ...the existence of the world.”

Perhaps the energy Patrick Fagerberg transposes into paint also flows into the viewer, whose mind begins to move, turn over possibilities, and reach for the grandeur of systems we do not completely understand –and that are all the more fascinating because of their mystery.

Tacey A. Rosolowski

Houston, Texas December 2014

## About the Artist:

The journey to art-making can move along many paths, but the route taken is rarely as dramatic as Patrick Fagerberg's.

In 2011, Fagerberg was at the height of his career as a successful defense attorney in Austin, Texas. On the evening of March 19<sup>th</sup>, he attended a performance of *Orchestral Maneuvers in the Dark* at a popular music venue, when a 400 pound camera boom collapsed and struck him on the head.

Mr. Fagerberg knew he was lucky to be alive. He also recalls that, in the days after his injury, "I couldn't put sentences together. I couldn't make toast." The accident had injured his brain's left hemisphere, the center that controls language and the ability to put together sequences of ideas and actions. His life would never be the same. With some of his abilities impaired, Mr. Fagerberg had to stop practicing law. His memory, once photographic, suffered. He felt suddenly more emotional and impulsive, yet at the same time socially detached. He confided to me that he had to "mourn his own death," and admitted that he was at times close to suicide.

A key event pulled him back from that brink: his discovery of painting in an art therapy class about a year after the accident. Fagerberg says he was "was not an art person" prior to his injury, but painting triggered a compulsion so strong that he began painting ten to twelve hours a day. He produced four hundred paintings in the next year and a half. When he wasn't painting, he talked about art, while ideas for new work crowded his mind. He describes his need to paint as a pressure that builds and creates anxiety --and even depression-- if he does not express his ideas visually.

In psychological terms, Mr. Fagerberg's injury brought about "savant syndrome," a condition in which a person with a brain injury develops an "island of genius," suddenly "excelling in music ... art, calendar calculating, mathematics, or mechanical/visual spatial skills" despite other

cognitive limitations.<sup>3</sup> Most of us associate savant syndrome with people born with developmental disorders such as autism. (The film, *Rainman*, explored such a case.) People who acquire savant syndrome through injury, however, may *not* have severe cognitive limitations. An injured brain is very “plastic” as neuroscientists have discovered, and it recovers in complex ways. Experts hypothesize that, in some savants, the acquired talent is the product of a neurological trade-off, where sophisticated right-brain skills emerge in the place of compromised left-brain abilities. In other individuals, a dormant ability may emerge without any loss of ability at all. Mr. Fagerberg speculates that, for him, art therapy served as a catalyst, but the emergence of his creative compulsion was “almost like epigenetics. We all have it. We just have to get triggered.”

In fact, he did not become a completely different person after his injury. Fagerberg worked from the age of ten and has always prided himself on his productivity. The accident did not compromise this drive. After the camera boom fell, he stood up, held the wound in his head together, and walked out of the concert, because he wasn’t going to let the accident beat him. When he discovered painting, he brought this same drive to his newly chosen profession. His fascination with mathematics also pre-dated his injury. He had always believed that “law is like math,” with its orderly reasoning and logical arguments and proofs. The mathematics of fractal patterns now permeates his imagery. Mr. Fagerberg is adamant: “My brain is as powerful as it was before my injury. I can still problem solve. I just do it differently. My right brain tells me what I want to paint. My left brain tells me how to do it. It’s a good balance.”

It’s exciting to imagine that creative power and problem-solving might lie dormant in any one of us. However, simply triggering an ability does not guarantee professional success. In fact, very few savants have achieved that status, a fact that points to how unique Mr. Fagerberg is. He possesses more than mere skill. He falls into the category of “talented savants,” since his abilities distinguish him –not only from people with similar injuries, but *also* from individuals with *no* brain injury.<sup>4</sup> He works from a complicated and coherent artistic vision. He can stand on his own as an *artist*. His work similarly goes beyond novelty. Fagerberg’s paintings have status as

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<sup>3</sup> Darold A. Treffert, M.D. “Savant Syndrome: Realities, Myths and Misconceptions.” *The Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorder* (2014) 44: 564 – 571, 564.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 565. Neuroscientist Bergit Brogaard interviewed Mr. Fagerberg and confirmed his condition for her article, “Hidden Talent Unleashed: A Miraculous Encounter with a 30-Foot Steel Camera Boom.” Date of access: 10/15/2014: < <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-superhuman-mind/201309/hidden-talent-unleashed>>

art, making references to Abstract Expressionism, the aesthetics of the sublime, and the current fascination with fractals and the linkages between science, mathematics, and art.

Mr. Fagerberg is also unusual because an artist's creative education normally evolves over a lifetime, while he has compressed this process into a few short years. During this "rite of passage," as he calls it, he has taught himself about materials, composition, and imagery. In addition, of course, an artist needs an audience and support, so he began looking for gallery representation. In 2013, Ron Gremillion of Gremillion and Co. Fine Art in Houston, Texas visited his studio. Fagerberg recalls saying, "If you take a chance on me, I won't let you down."

Clearly the artist's work and drive made a convincing case. Mr. Gremillion saw something new in the imagery. He also personally shared the artist's belief that the imagery touched "the mystery of nature, the Divine, of God. We're all part of this." His gallery has represented Mr. Fagerberg for the past year and, in early 2015, will present his work in a solo exhibition. Viewers will experience the grandeur and mystery of Fagerberg's vision. They might also glimpse the creative power that can lie dormant in any one of us.

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