
Abyssal Awe: Response to Brent Weston's Mandala Series

Kathryn Madden

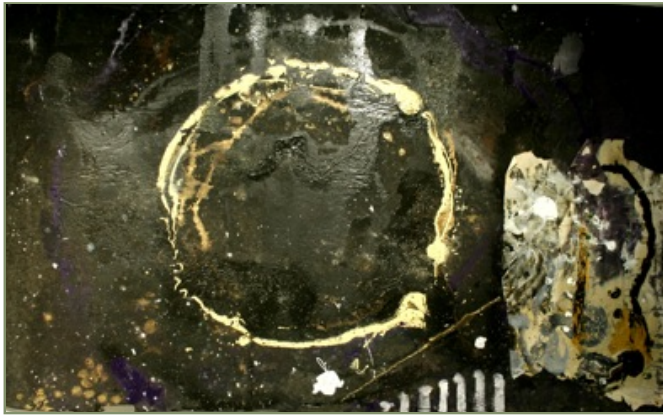
Painter Brent Weston, who hails from Tennessee, has been selected as *Quadrant's* Distinguished Artist of 2011. Brent has been influenced by an awareness of the sounds of nature in conjunction with lectures and study. Having traveled through Western Europe, Morocco, and Turkey, he spent three months studying in L'Abri, Switzerland. There, he was inspired to build an easel made of cut wood and sticks from Tolkien's short story, "Leaf by Niggle," along with personal research of the Bible's "creative mandate." He then headed to Italy with his easel and a small gouache paint set, later returning to paint in Switzerland and in France. In the US, he studied at the Georgia Institute of Technology in the Architecture Program, The Atlanta College of Art, and the University of Tennessee. Brent's solo exhibitions include "Bipolar," at the Woodruff Arts Center, Atlanta, GA (1997), and "Untitled" at the Czigan and Rummel Gallery, Jacksonville, FL (2001). Group showings include "Coincidence" in Monzambano, MN, Italy; The Nexus Patron's Party; and participating in Project Interconnections, Inc. from 2002-



2008. Brent has painted many mandalas without a formal study of their meaning. He has a fascination with Carl Jung's teachings on the subject and has attended Jungian Seminars on spirituality and psychology. This series of nineteen mandalas is his most recent interior journey into the subject matter, based upon his response to the cover and words of *Dark Light of the Soul* by Kathryn Madden.

Kathryn Madden is a licensed psychoanalyst of Jungian orientation with a private practice in NYC. In addition to *Dark Light of the Soul*, Dr. Madden has co-edited *The Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* (Springer, 2009). Editor-in-Chief of *Quadrant* since 2004, she also is a speaker and lecturer in the US and overseas on subjects including the symbolic nature of the psyche, dreams, early trauma, psychology and spirituality, the history of the feminine in religious experience, the abyss, desire, spirit, and inner conversation. She is most honored to respond to this series of mandalas with excerpts from her book.

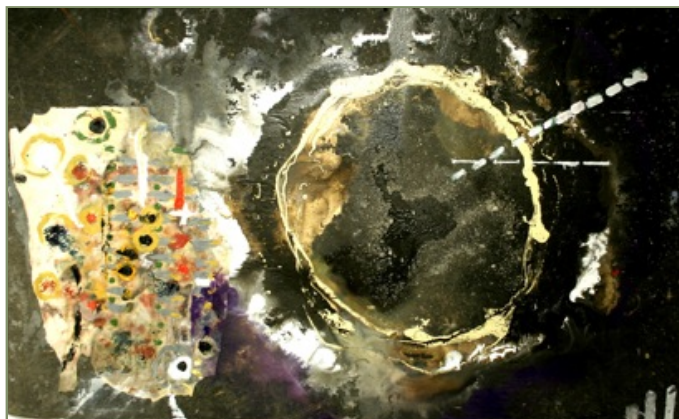
At the primordial level, depth psychology raises to consciousness a new experience of otherness, a *transcendent ultimacy*, beyond the psyche that continuously encroaches upon, seduces, dismembers, and transforms surface immediacy. Making the unconscious conscious in a variety of expressive forms, especially through art and painting, is one of these creative modes. Our previous notions and images of God, the transcendent, the ultimate—whatever we call the beyond, the unknown and mysterious—are shattered and redefined through an experience that I call *unitary reality*.



De-integration and fragmentation seem to be important aspects preceding the potential integration of the disparate parts that are contained in what psychologically may be experienced as unitary reality, or oneness. Unitary reality is a meeting of human spirit with divine spirit. The abyss of “divine” spirit may be so other that it feels as if it is beyond our categories of understanding altogether, beyond God and our conceptions of God, beyond even being itself (pp. 1-5).



We meet the primordial and numinous at great levels of depth in the psyche. As we correspond with these inner contents, eventually a third factor or position emerges through what Jung calls the transcendent function of the psyche. This third bridging factor integrates the opposites at a different level. The dynamics of spirit conjoin the concrete and the universal. The notion of spirit refers here to an experience of that which incarnates, that which breaks in through the unconscious in dreams and imagination and informs us in an inner way.



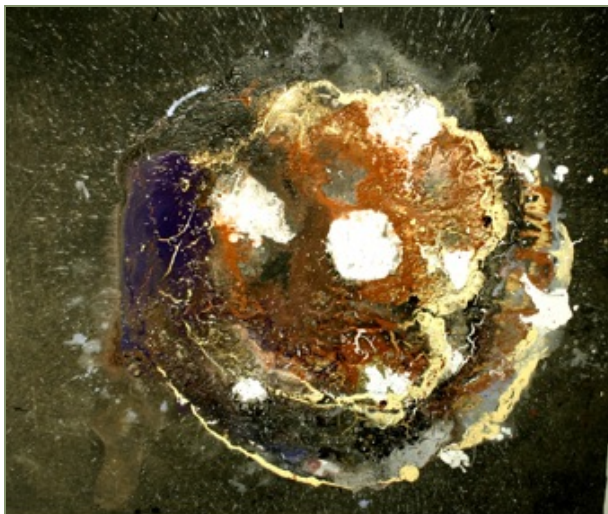
Attending to this conscious-unconscious process fuels a living, symbolic process: vivid, alive, inspiring, and meaningful. We begin to relate to the special significance of our individual symbols that simultaneously point toward, and participate in, their archetypal source and its own source. This source and ground is preexistent and personal. We can relate to it in a meaningful way through the tools of the psyche that we inherit.



We meet spirit as we penetrate and are penetrated by that transcendent factor in us that is dynamic and free. Another layer of reality at times becomes apparent in the exchange. This layer of reality moves us beyond self-referential categories altogether and guides us toward beyond what we know, toward glimpses of a timeless reality.



The actuality of time is not eliminated, but we feel temporarily outside it. Eternity, however momentary, feels to be no longer like an abstract heaven but as if we were part and parcel with the stars (pp. 21-22).



As we experience the artists' depictions, the fragmentation, deintegration, and working of the transcendent function point to psychological engagement with a unitary reality, an *a priori* reality that is in motion, moving toward us with intense desire. It requires a willingness to probe beyond our psychological independence to receive what is archetypally present and spiritually actual.



Spirit meets us as dynamic reality at the abyssal level, at the level of radical otherness, and points beyond itself. It matters less what we receive in our conscious states. What is ultimately important is what extends beyond human consciousness.



Can we seek, like the artist, the painter, that aspect of human existence with all of its light and dark sides so that life in its fullness can be affirmed and shaped, and the meaningfulness of life can be experienced?



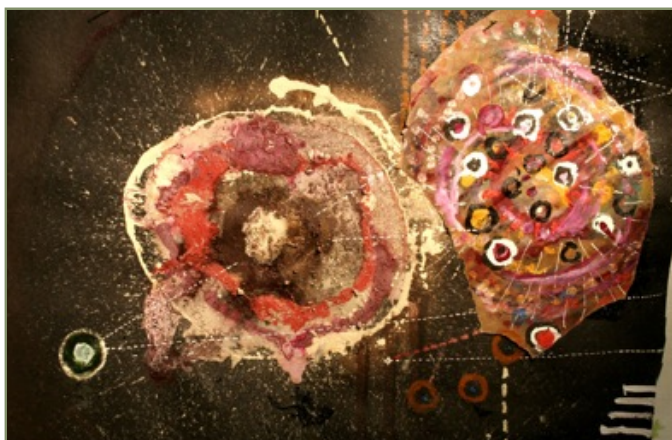
By engaging with our inner experience, we find that what we discover often prefigures something else. As we relate to the primordial or archetypal images and symbols that we encounter, we are given markers that encircle a central vision. The vision itself is boundless. If we keep these markers in view, even with their sometimes contrary natures, we can proceed toward the maturing of the Self in Jung's terms, the soul in terms of religion.



This Self is affirmed in the analytic tradition as individuation and in many faith traditions and spiritual practices as the soul's immediate experience of divine spirit. The discipline of art particularly demonstrates access to the potentially arresting new birth that resonates with primordial experience (pp. 23-25).



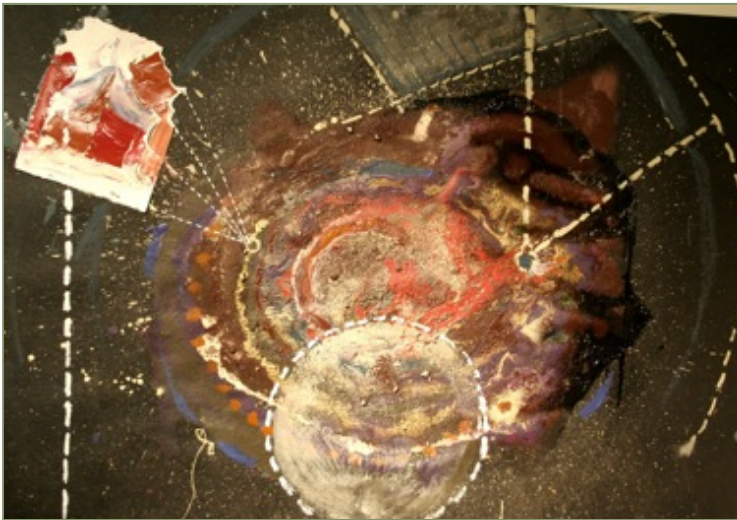
We are presented images—sometimes when we most need them—images that lead us to where we can recognize the *unus mundus* and the divine. *Unus mundus* means unitary reality, or one world: literally, "conjunction," pointing to the union of opposites and the birth of new possibilities. We are, each of us, enabled to hear the sound of deep calling to us and receive it in the deepest reaches of our inmost parts, *in intima mea*.



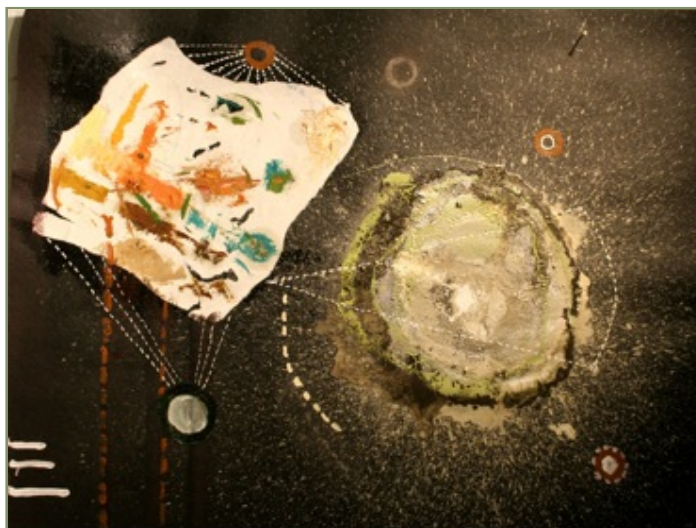
Unitary reality is a form of summoning, as in reference to the Psalms (42:7), a process of "deep calling unto deep." It is as if the Self were directing us, "whose souls thirst for the living God" to a deeper experience of life, to a level where the ego is not in control, but perhaps is perched on the limb of a tree staring in the void at the rising star of the self-same Self.



If we are fortunate, we are able to incarnate this new experience, or are assisted in doing so through the presence of a vessel or container of psychotherapy, or spiritual direction, or the ever-ready blank canvas, or roof tiles of the artist.



The encounter with unitary reality is a specific experience of otherness that involves passage through a fundamental dynamism or tension of the opposites.



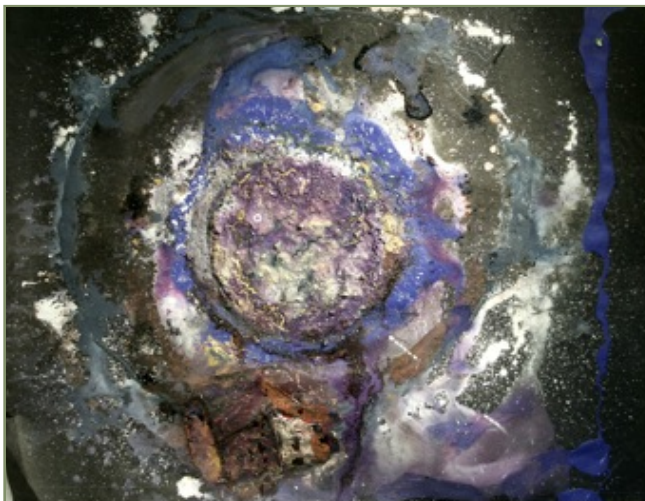
The ego shifts away from a position of primacy by engaging with what is real and what is radically other. It is moved out of first place as the Self comes into consciousness in some expressive form.



In the experience of the abyss, we see that we reflect a far deeper reality than our ego consciousness could possibly know. We may see through the “air hole” into the dark, preexistent void, but our longing gaze is met and returned by the light of a star (pp. 254-255).



As we relate to these inner contents and the third factor is activated, a symbol begins to unfold in pictorial, tangible forms and images that represent a synthesis of the previously conflicting elements and a resolution to the conscious conflict.



Attending to this conscious-unconscious process fuels a living, symbolic process. We begin to understand the specific significance of our individual symbols that point toward, and participate in, their archetypal source *and* its own source.



This pre-existent ground exists and is personal. A star is born—a unitary reality that enables us to see through the contents of the psyche to a predifferentiated, universal ground. And that star pertains to our rising.

*All excerpts above are drawn directly from, or paraphrased from *Dark Light of the Soul*.

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Reference

Madden, K. (2008). *Dark light of the soul*. Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books.