Freshwater Spring

There goes a neutrino. Here comes a gamma ray. The x-rays, ultraviolets, infrareds, the microwaves, and radio waves. The atmospheric water molecules pressing pressures with gravity’s useful curves. Vibrating, pulsating forcefields emanating, breathing from the water, bushes, flowers, trees, the soil, and rocks absorbing, reflecting particular frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum. Sunrise & sunlight—the waves of electromagnetic radiations strike the leaves of grasses, bushes, & trees; the physical processes of photosynthesis start. The freshwater flows [from underground] into pools and streams as sunlight begins to bend a bit at the surface—penetrating the moving but bonded molecules of $H_2O$, illuminating the limestone here & the seashells and sandy bottom there.

Discovering, photographing the freshwater springs of northern Florida became a sequence of delightful enjoyments. One of those photos became the basis for the painting entitled ‘Freshwater Spring’.

Cool refreshing clear, the rare oasic waters of the springs upswell from a webby network of underground streams–currents–fluxes that flow inside extensive beds of limestone rock. The rain replenishes the groundwater; and layers of limestone, partially porous, filter water into a transparent clarity. Springs appear when underground water breaks free—to the surface thru geological weaknesses, forming lucid pools that stay around 72 to 78 degrees the year-round. The outpouring waters flow into “runs” that meander to a nearby river. The pools and runs contain aquatic plants, the shells of mollusks, fish, and white sand, as well as other seen and unseen ‘objects’; the flowing waters glide among the forests of cypress, maple, pine, and oak, as well as other flora and fauna. The interactions of water, light, and the surrounding areas create outstanding oases: special spaces, places, plots, lots, dots, and spots.

Here’s a few comments about the painting: Freshwater Spring.

Mixed media: clear acrylic spray and liquid; technical pen and ink; metallic paints; in pure and powder form, a variety of crystalline minerals; granulated gel medium; and acrylic paints. The painting grabs with its polychromatic and tactile intensity, reflecting van Gogh’s paintings at his best; the clean, precise, and well-defined forms; a personal originality; richly detailed, patinaed sights as found in nature itself; and the attempt at the reflective, translucent, metallic sheen, and vibrantly chromatic qualities of water.

Does my painting possess a competent level of artistic quality? Is the manipulation of the raw materials, the hands-on making—sensitive, subtle, apt, & strong? Does the overall
effect— draw attention? Is the painting— beautiful? Art articulates an overabundance of aims. A tiny few: to entertain; delight; enlighten; synthesize natural spontaneity with artful design; release intensity & passionate tensions; express emotions, moods, ideas, attitudes, and experiences; sublimate suffering; and create a bit of original beauty.

What’s beauty? wholeness, harmony, radiance of Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus? Must there be a wholeness, a unity, atmosphere, overall impression, commanding concept, significant form, idea of general import, a controlling vision? Harmony: parts connected in rhythm and balanced to the other parts and each part connected in rhythm and proportioned to the whole; the rhythmic parts integrated together to make a unified wholeness? And radiance: a passionate glow, a radiating ‘whatness’, a shining energy, a visually vital force? An actual image of the beautiful: the glowing fullmoon? A visual image of artistic beauty: the Garden of Delights by Hieronymus Bosch? A literary example of artistic beauty: A Midsummer Night’s Dream by Shakespeare?

Is art, the imitation of nature? Imitating nature can be seen as practice, training, education, apprenticeship. It can also be the focused selection of nature’s exquisite details, crafty ingenuity, abundantly skillful elaboration, sensitive but strong execution, sublimity, and deeply subtle beauty— in the service of artistic attention and expression. Ah, but art creates more than mere imitation; it revels in a triumph of creative make-believe or pretend over the riotous uproaring chaos and overwhelming abundance of nature. Nature, the universe provides the overabundant raw material from which art selects, arranges, and adds mood-production to the mix. Art uses sensuous sensations and perceptions from nature, excitatory stimuli, to achieve the making of something new in nature: enhancing creation. Does my painting aptly fit these ideas about art?

Perhaps we can partially answer this question by taking a puckish peek at the hardworking workshop of an artist, at the developmental genesis of the painting ‘Freshwater Spring’. By looking into the process of the making of this work, in its actual temporal sequence, we might, perhaps, get a glimpse at the painting’s degree of artistic quality.

Let’s eye a minimum of six areas of activities: original source and five morphings. Original source? the actual, geological space, the geographic place of Ginnie Springs in north-central Florida.
First morphing: initial sensations and perceptions? the body’s focused filtering, selection, arrangement, and mood-producing addition from out of the overabundant sensory stimuli [many of which our bodies can’t even directly sense] of nature, the universe: water’s subtle complexities of shapes and colors in the shifting degrees of ambient light— it calls and has a hold on me, as well as the colors & forms of bushes, rocks, and trees. Forceful nature grabs the ‘mind’.

In a state of focused excitement, the mind begins to flow into a photographing activity: second morphing. And the body flows into a physical motion in harmony with the mind, the eyes, and spontaneous artistic selections, interpretations, evaluations while seeing the springs from many various viewpoints.
At Ginnie Springs, from deep underground limestone caves and caverns, the water flows up— to the surface, forming a group of pools containing the clearest water, arresting the eyes, the heart, the mind, emotions, and the body. Going, flowing, photographing one pool and its flowing ‘run’ and another and another and so on—fill out in full the entire morning and noon, transforming all into one continuous fluidity of capturing in photos the beautiful images from primal nature itself. As the memory card of the camera eventually fills up, so ends the photographic fun-flight of snapping shots.

So, in this area of activity, imitation of nature seems to dominate. Photorealism to the max. Over-rich and subtle details. Cornucopia of ‘objects’ overflowing. Super high definition. Excellent clarity of all the natural forms. Photos, almost, perfectly reflect the ocular images. To a certain degree, the camera becomes Hamlet holding up the mirror to nature and aptly reflecting it strength and power, its grace, its details, forms, and beauties. But still, so much is left out: the smells, the sounds and noises, the temperature of the ambient air, the humidity level, to name a few.

A beef, where’s the art? in the technical choices of the lens, the aperture size, the f-stop number, zoom level, depth of field, and lighting conditions. But more importantly, out of the chaotic loud profusion of possible shots, selection of particular points of view reveal the main designing aspects of this type of artistic activity.

Now to the third area of morphing: digital editing of the digital photos. RAW files to TIFF files to JPEG files. Shots with blinding glare, deleted from the computer. A few shots, cropped; and others, sharpened. The colors? some contrast added, here and there, but not much. But changes to nature happen, emphasizing certain aspects, removing others; thus some enhancing, amending of nature occurs. Many competent photos occur.

The fourth area of morphing: the painting, based on one of the photos. The painting process started with doodles, noodles, sketches; I toyed and fooled around with ideas stimulated by the photos— with no clue to a definite direction. After thinking, more intensely, about those ideas, the imagination flared & flashed: I saw the general design. Roughly sketched on paper, with ruler and pencil I turned the blank and voiceless canvas into nine equal sections, using photography’s rule of thirds in which the visual plane is equally divided into three vertical parts and three horizontal parts, with the focal points at the intersections in the center of the visual plane. Here’s one type of artistic process: spontaneity duet dancing with reflective thought. With a pencil, I sketched the controlling design onto the canvas: trunk of a cypress tree, the edges of the spring and its tree reflections, and the three steps at the bottom of the painting.

While I artfully maintained the general design thru the process, the mind spontaneously produced the individual parts, completing various layers, usually, in one sweep— while also relating and connecting them to the other parts in a skillful and competent manner.

Through profuse and subtle details, the center-third part displays the freshwater spring with its underwater rocks, the water, and the reflections on the surface of the water. Five main
qualities of the water at this special spot? clarity, translucent colors, wet sheen, the slightly curvy wavy motion, and reflectivity. With thousands of brushstrokes, I smoothly painted the three water reflections: two trees with autumn leaves, a plumaged plethora, and a partial view of a cypress trunk, all with curves due to the water’s movement. I produced the wet sheen effect by layering clear acrylic coats in spray and liquid mediums. The interactions between these acrylic coats and the paints of acrylic evoke, a bit, translucent colors. When the acrylic coats dry, they become transparent, clear; thus, the clarity that reflects the clarity of the well-defined forms of the underwater rocks patinaed like nature’s own hand. And these rocks become a matrix for crystals, uncut and rough gemstones in their natural setting under the crystal-clear water of the spring.

Personal originality? dynamic, organic transformation of the underwater rocks into a matrix for crystals, uncut gemstones, like emeralds and sapphires. These crystals and jewels do not actually exist in the spring; the rocks are mostly calcium carbonate or limestone—seashells, invertebrate remains, and coral skeletons.

After more reflective meditation, the hand and eyes began to work on the bottom-third of the canvas. This part depicts three opaque but colorful stony steps, not found in my photo nor at the spring itself—a bit more of personal originality that sets up a vivid contrast with the water. Two are square stones, like nature’s own work of a roughly hewn and granular texture, using a grainy grayed gel coated and sealed with minerals and crystals; and the other step—geometric, round but set in a square, with a hexagonal emerald in the middle, uncut, translucent with tinted acrylic coatings. Diagonally, the two square stones, in area, balance the magnified leaves (another example of personal originality, a highlighting effect to remind the viewer of the leaves in the two reflections on the surface of the water) but also contrasts with them in terms of texture, colors, and shapes. Catercornered, the partially seen round stone, in area, balances the cypress trunk and its surrounding soil; but it also contrasts with them in terms of texture, colors, and shape in a satisfying way.

After more thoughtful deliberation, I decided to paint the top-third part, depicting a cypress trunk, with a 3D modeling technique; the leaves with the impasto technique of van Gogh; and the soil with a richly detailed, polychromatic, visually rhythmic style of van Gogh. However, frustrating trouble confronted me with this part; the raw recalcitrant materials put up a scrappy fight; they’re small, but real tough; but I worked, stood back, looked hard and long, reworked, stood back intensely contemplating the painting, and grappled with them again until I put an end to their proud, defiant, obstinate behavior (almost as bad as naughty children)—somewhat molding them to humane ways.

Overlapping similarities of shapes, designs. Like the geometric symmetries of crystals, jewels, gems, and minerals (the molecular structures of minerals are crystals: repeating geometric patterns), the vertical part in the center is similar in symmetry to the vertical parts on the left and on the right. However, the vertical part on the left, with its suggestion of pulling tensions, strongly contrasts with the vertical part on the right, with its suggestion of stability, serene repose. Scanning from the bottom first and then looking up, the three vertical sections on the left, center, and right remain in balanced contrast with one another
in terms of textures, colors, and shapes— creating variety and various focal points and highlights in rhythmic motion.

Even though imitation occurs in the painting, the overall impression involves imagination, education, patience, practiced skills, some thoughtful ideas, and spontaneity overpowering the exact imitation of nature— changing its rawness into a resonating, polychromatic, enhanced, transfigured echo or suggestion of it. Thru the painting, we remember nature; but it also opens our many, different minds to new possibilities.

Earlier, I mentioned Shakespeare’s famous line about Hamlet holding a mirror up to nature. The idea that art imitates nature has been used for centuries in Europe as a guiding principle for an enormous amount of material searching into the nature of art, especially in literary theory. In the Preface of The Mirror and the Lamp (1953) M H Abrams writes: “The development of literary theory in the lifetime of Coleridge was to a surprising extent the making of the modern critical mind. There were many important differences between, let us say, Horace’s Art of Poetry and the criticism of Dr. Johnson, but there was also a discernible continuity in premises, aims, and methods. This continuity was broken by the theories of romantic writers, English and German; and their innovations include many of the points of view and procedures which make the characteristic differences between traditional criticism and the criticism of our own time, including some criticism which professes to be anti-romantic.” A main and major premise of this traditional criticism? art imitates or mirrors nature. A major premise of romantic criticism? the creative mind of the artist works as a lamp illuminating, enhancing, and transforming nature.

Two distinctions need to be clarified about the word ‘nature.’ Nature is the existence of all the elements and compounds that are non-biotic, which means they contain no genetic compounds for reproduction, along with all the biotic organisms that are either unicellular or multicellular, including homo sapiens. Under this definition, to hold a mirror up to nature would mean to accurately imitate, in some artistic form, mountains, minerals, crystals, diatoms, algae, flowers, bushes, dolphins, mockingbirds, corals, dogs, and homo sapiens: nature processed by evolution. Predation and various forms of symbiosis rule, epitomizing natural forces.

Hamlet’s mirror of nature somewhat shows the customs and behaviors of a society at a particular place and historical time of Elizabethan England, the relationships between and among homo sapiens who lived in that place and time— and these traditions transform them, somewhat. Now it gets a bit tricky. Homo sapiens have the potential to become humane by engaging in non-animalic activities. Various social norms and restrictions direct the members of a society into non-eukaryotic activities; but unfortunately, people often regress and become as ‘tigers wrapped in human clothing’; people, too often, viciously prey, like predators, on other people; & the cruel animal gets the better of the sympathizing human. By using the first distinction of nature, mentioned above, predation is natural; but from the perspective of the second distinction, it’s inhumane. Therefore, we can picture nature as being both a natural and unnatural or inhumane condition.
In the workshop exposition, I showed that art can imitate and transform nature. Art is a lamp as well as a mirror— but much more: transformed butterfly in fluent flight, graceful glissando, metallic sheened in sunlight, or graceful fluidity of the translucent melted moving jewels composing freshwater springs. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of all? The spring or painting? Both are, each in their own way. What is a mirror? A pane of glass (or a pain in the ass?) with a metallic layer on the backside. Mirror: looking-glass: glassy surface of water: water’s reflectivity: water as a mirror, a looking-glass, a watery glass. In the romantic comedy *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Lysander, speaking to Helena, says: “when Phoebe [moon] doth behold/ Her silver visage [reflected image] in the watery glass [water’s reflective surface]...” What is glass? melted, cooled down sand. What is sand? multitudinous grains of quartz, and quartz contains transparent or chromatic masses of hexagonal crystals and science calls this compound— silicon dioxide, a mineral composed of geometric forms that repeat in an orderly manner both on the molecular level and the macroscopic level. A mirror is a sheet of crystal quartz that’s backgrounded with a thin layer of metal. The surface of the freshwater spring exhibits these same qualities: mirror-like reflectivity, a mirror sheen, a glassy sheen, a metallic sheen. Water, a moving mirror of H$_2$O molecules. Freeze those molecules and they organize themselves into repeating patterns of geometric forms, ice crystals, that mirror the molecular structures of crystals, gemstones, and minerals. The interweaving links between and among water, crystals, jewels, and minerals run deep, even into the molecular geometries of actual, existent nature.

And not only does the spring exhibit those qualities, it also can be seen thru: transparent near the surface; but as you look down into the water, it becomes a semi-transparent blue of aquamarine, then a translucent light-blue sapphire, then a semi-translucent darker sapphire, and then a semi-opaque darkblue sapphire color. Likewise, as you scan the painting downward, focusing on the rocks, they possess the colors of topaz, peridot, emerald; focusing on the water, it possesses different shades and tines of sapphire blue. And I find the painting quite beautiful in its wholeness, harmony, and the enormous range of colors that glow with an intensity of saturation. Are all of the preceding statements— apt and accurate? The fifth morphing? This written work of interpretive information.

Historical context? The date of the photographing adventure & the photo of the freshwater spring? December 11, 2009. The painting: 7/2010. The essay about the adventure, photo, and painting was written, off and on, between October 2012 & March 2020, with the latest reworked revision on March 31, 2020. The freshwater spring is located in northern Florida, the United States of America. I worked on and finished the painting while living in south Picayune Mississippi, USA, thirty miles directly north of the Mississippi Gulf Coast [where the eye of Hurricane Katrina passed, August 29, 2005, where I was living, in a self-built studio, a bit north of Picayune on eleven acres of country land]. I wrote the essay while living in Murphy Texas, north Dallas area, USA. What was generally going on in the US and around the world at this time in history? 2020: the corona-virus, covid-19.