

Communion with Canvas – May 1, 1965

Red, blood-red, a sea of blood, from corner to corner, from top to bottom. It is maintained that red symbolizes blood; life when in the veins, but misery and suffering as it oozes out of the pipes and spreads out in concentric rings, until it covers the limits of vision, from corner to corner, from top to bottom.

The eye seeks relief from such a carnal sight, and slowly moves toward the centre. White, as pure as light, clean, virtuous, gentle; but wait, the whiteness is breaking apart into a horrid twisted collection of grotesque fragments. The illusion of virtue and peace in this ocean of universal suffering is shattered, and the eye picks out streaks of gray and hints of blue. All is not as it should be. Perhaps we have not sought far enough for our window through the opaqueness of the human condition.

There must be more. The shattered hopes are doused in the common fate of all, but the discerning soul senses the beyond, and discovers the deluding fragments silhouetted against an emerging awareness of darkness. An inexplicable nothingness which comes to dominate the sense, forcing the windows of the soul to be inexorably drawn together, until they are riveted to the apparent centre of meaning. The fringes of life are confused, but nonetheless give some perspective to the unquestioning creature, permitting him to stumble along like a lump of clay that God bypassed when dispensing the breath of life.

The penetrating stare of the agonized soul focuses on the centre of meaning, the mystery of life, but is met only by blackness, smoothness with no fissures to reveal that which lies beyond. A darkness with no texture to reveal its quality, no hints as to its character.

Nothing but in penetrable darkness; blotting out the solution to the ultimate question of the meaning of life. We are in a trap. To move back to the region of false hopes, to drift with the crimson tide, is to confirm that man has no soul. Break through the barrier, escape from the oppression of existence, release from the relentless chains of time! Time – maybe that's what God is. After all, time always wins. Our souls are free to wander this universe, our minds can explore the intricacies of creation, but both are subject to the inexorable march of time. The element of time may not be God – but it is certainly a step toward discovering him. To know our limitations, our slavery to the reality of mortality, is the first step through this window of darkness. The first step is taken with hesitance, but all is still black ahead, and it will reveal no more. Someday I may be back to take the next step, and if I find no other, it may be the step of faith. The picture will say no more – it can define the vagaries of life, but the shrouds of darkness must be wiped away by the sensitivity of a selfless soul. Enough for today, I will search again.

These thoughts were inspired by "Fourth Avenue", a 1954 abstract by Georges Mathieu, on display in the Chicago Art Institute.