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Art History 1B

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Life: Bio-logical or Dumb?

The subjective and imaginative entity of art merely coexists with the logical and quantitative entity of science. Their planes within our universe segregate their existence; however, Terry Winters, an American contemporary artist, has found a way to blur the line between art and science. Winters claims that, “I’m just interested in using science as a factual beginning for making a painting as a landscape painter might use a landscape as a factual beginning.”¹ Winters has a way of coalescing the two entities to create one piece that depicts biological figures, such as cells, and organs, in such an abstracted manner that is only capable through the touch of art. The canvas of *Dumb Compass* withholds this identity onto its skin and bares its ambiguity to its audience, causing them to dissect these biological figures, and uncover their puzzling existence as they evolve in an artistic environment. With this in mind, I want to explore how does Winters’ dichotomous approach as a “scientist-artist,” shapes the creation of life?

Visual Dissection

Amorphous figures scatter the canvas in various sizes, as it appears to be a random dispersal. To the right side of the piece, there are these colorfully gooey textured forms that congregate in a group. They appear to be cross-sections, possibly originating from a body, like a cross-section of a spine, or a brain. They are fragments of a larger piece; otherwise why wouldn’t

¹ Terry Winters, Interviewed by TateShots, “Terry Winters- Studio Visit: TateShots,” Youtube video, 2:49, Tate, February 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLW3cs0LfpY>

they stand alone.? They're longing for completeness, as some appear more finished than others. They would need to stand together, especially because they simultaneously look like developing cells, undergoing embryogenesis, clustering together, to ultimately form a completed body. When comparing the cell-like structures in the top right corner to the cell-like structures of the middle ground, they are all similar in line work, yet are lacking in that goeey color that is plastered onto their surface as the cells of the middle ground possess. They are dripping down, undergoing a metamorphosis as you guide your eye down. Are they transforming their form into existence, conjuring their colors from the concise circles along the top of the piece, to develop their own colors? Are they lacking identity, or the ingredients necessary for their existence to be possible? There are infinite combinations the red, yellow, green, and blue can make, as there is infinite variation of human DNA, producing life with such great diversity; no cross-sectional area of the body is the same. Guiding the eye down the cellular-like figures are rendered again, with a similar quality as they were in the right corner. There is this fogginess to them, as they are there, but simultaneously not there. Just faded lines on a canvas, void of color, or that physicality that the other cellular figures have. This is the continuation of the metamorphosis as the cells descend and transform back into lifeless beings. Or possibly, these phantom cells could be in the midst of becoming alive, as there is no indication of chronology in this piece. What follows or precedes a translucent existence? The foreground on the right side lacks iconography, and bares only the thick textured fleshy paint until your eyes run off the bottom of the canvas. The cellular figures fail to exist after this point, epitomizing a fleeting life.

The right side of the painting utilizes its own distinct sense of imagery through the cellular figures; however, the left side completely juxtaposes these fragmented images, and seizes the left vicinity, taking as much space as it possibly can. The left side is filled with two

figures; two tall, colorless, black, gray, and white, muted, amorphous figures. They have a gestural outline making their shape, giving them a humanoid shape, yet lacking any human-like features, like a face, or limbs. The white-filled figure on the left appears phallic in shape, and the shorter black-filled figure to the right has a cavity-like character, like a vessel, or a uterus. There is something sensuous about the union of these two figures, which could potentially birth the conglomeration of cells on the right side of the piece. Despite this disparate separation, the cells and the humanoid organs are related by blood; their genetic code is written in black, and white paint, passed down and visually expressed in the cells, intermixed with the recessive gene of color.

Diagrams Caught in Between Abstraction and Representation

Terry Winters was influenced heavily by the natural world, and would diagram its imagery, not for the purpose of illustrating it realistically, but rather to use the process of painting to abstract the image, leaving it with an ambiguous essence of what the natural object may be. Natural objects such as botanicals, crystals, embryonic cellular structures (blastulas and morulae), honeycombs, fungi, and spores, etc., were thematic forms of imagery that would consistently show up in his body of work.² Museum curator, Lisa Phillips, claims in *The Self-Similar*, that Winters' use of imagery is "poised between abstraction and representation."³ To build on Phillips' assertion, abstraction and representation are paradoxical in nature and Winters finds a way to simultaneously convey both in the convergence between art and science. Abstraction is created through the touch

² Knight, Christopher, "Terry Winters," *Terry Winters: Painting and Drawing by Phyllis Plous*, (1987): 21-30.

³ Lisa Phillips, *The Self-Similar* (19)

of art, and is accompanied by the ordered and specific depiction of science in the form of biological imagery: the representation.

The biological images that Winters abstractly rendered were microscopic, cellular structures, as well as male and female anatomy. These corpuscular structures are “the building blocks of morphology, the forms that seem recognizable as the basis of life”⁴ as Phillips has asserted. This statement makes me question how these forms are recognizable as biological, despite their abstraction. They are merely brushstrokes of paint, layered and textured on a canvas. They are not found in a medical textbook with paragraphs explaining their physiology and arrows naming each anatomical structure of the image. The cellular-like figures are scattered, floating in space with no order; however, the abstraction does not dilute the sense of metamorphosis of the images, evolving their structures, through abstracted time as they develop more complicated shapes and colors. According to art critic, Christopher Knight, Winters images are discernable because “external reference gives way to inner, abstract value.”⁵ This implies that a viewer would have to have a knowledge bank of biological background to see the figures as cells and organs. Despite a lack of knowledge of biology in the viewer, that should not hinder the value of life that this piece evokes. When looking close, you can visually see a humanoid characteristic in the organs and a gradual change and growth in the cell-like structures. This is biology that can be seen, without the jargon of biological labels and processes it references. In terms of that biological jargon, Winters’ amorphous cellular-like figures are comparable to the process of embryogenesis, as depicted in the attempt to create a visual argument that logically orders these abstracted objects from the painting into the stages of development, as seen in *Figure 4*.

⁴ Lisa Phillips, *The Self Similar*, 18.

⁵ Christopher Knight, “Terry Winters,” 28.

The stages of development almost mirror the embryonic development that would be seen in a medical textbook that Winters may have referenced in the creation of the painting (See *Figure 2*). After the union of the phallic humanoid structure (representing a male genital) and the uterus-like figure (representing the female genital), proliferation of the scattered cells occurred and the formation of life became present. Life began as a single fertilized zygote as represented by the white circle, lacking any form of identity. Then it differentiated into a cluster of cells, called a morula, then a blastula where it separated into the different germs layers of the embryonic cell. By the fifth image in *Figure 4*, the cell develops its first colors, then proceeds to contort its cellular structures into premature organs. The ninth structure in *Figure 4* is the most humanoid looking shape in the whole piece, as it has a face and a make-shift body. This looks very similar to *Figure 3*, depicting an embryo at 32 days, where a head and face begin to take shape. Underneath this anthropomorphic figure is a pool of magenta liquid, rich and pungent in color. It seems as if this is a pool of blood that is fueling the creation of the humanoid in its development, with samples of its color being found in the mouth, the body, and the eyes. The puddle of paint/blood is like a metaphorical umbilical cord that is giving life to the painting. Lisa Phillips explained that Winters used paint as “a viscous, primordial liquid, the unspecified, undifferentiated matter out of which life and art are born.”⁶ To me, the building blocks of life are not only cells, in fact, paint is the substance of life that proceeds the existence of the cells. Without the “primordial liquid,” life in the form of art cannot exist.

⁶ Lisa Phillips, *The Self Similar*, 18.

Redefining the Process in Art and Science as Defined by a Dual Paradigm Shift

Robert Root-Bernstein, a Professor of Physiology, asserts that “both scientists and artists are engaged in the common pursuit of new ways of perceiving and of controlling nature.”⁷ Root-Bernstein wrote this piece in 1984, merely a year before Dumb Compass was created, which substantiates the idea that art and science were recognized as merging fields at this time, and Winters was very much influenced by that notion. Root-Bernstein addresses the idea that, “artists reject earlier traditions of art for the same reason that scientists reject earlier traditions of science: the old problems are solved; new ones await,”⁸ to express that new phenomena and methods need to be introduced into these fields to keep progressing for new knowledge, or new art. This argument serves as a framework when understanding Winters’ career, which was birthed from the “death of the painting” in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹ His predecessors of the 1960s were minimalists, which made the work of art reductive, and minimized to basic forms, and structures, void of any meaning or artistic imagery of the past.¹⁰ Winters was given the responsibility in the 1970s and the 1980s, to build art back up again, as a scientist who is researching how to create life again for the first time. Art historian, Richard Shiff, has claimed that Winters had to learn how to re-create the painting “with no trace of nostalgia” and he would do so through “his interest in materiality of painting through direct experimentation.”¹¹ Winters was known to study his pigments and paint, and as Shiff would argue, “as much a scientist as an artist, he worked his pigments overtime to

⁷ Robert Root-Bernstein, “On Paradigms and Revolutions in Science and Art: The Challenge of Interpretation,” *Art Journal Vol. 4. No. 2* (1984): 109-118.

⁸ Robert Root-Bernstein, “On Paradigms and Revolutions in Science and Art: The Challenge of Interpretation,” 111

⁹ Christopher Knight, “Terry Winters,” 22

¹⁰ Christopher Knight, “Terry Winters,” 21-22

¹¹ Richard Shiff, “Evolution,” *Terry Winters: 1981-1986*, Matthew Marks Gallery (2004): 4-13

discern their extremes of efficacy and points of failure.”¹² Winters was researching and experimenting with materiality to rebuild and influence the direction of contemporary art, instead of riffing on previous art periods. At the same time as Winters was experimenting, he was drawing the life blood of his imagery from the budding field of molecular biology, which was thriving in the 1960s and 70s after the discovery of the structures of DNA by Watson and Crick in the 1950s.¹³ There was this dual paradigm shift that occurred in art and science, and led to the creation of *Dumb Compass*: Winters creating art after it has been reduced by minimalists, and molecular biology forming into an established field.

Art and Science as the Compass for Life

In an interview with *Bomb Magazine* in 1992, Bob Holman asked Terry Winters about his use of “Fate Maps.” Winters explained that a fate map is “a diagram used in embryology to describe the future of a form. Fate map is a technical term. I like the idea of projecting a future, graphically.”¹⁴ There is no written evidence that claims the images in *Dumb Compass* are in fact fate maps; however, the visual evidence holds its own merit in supporting this idea, especially when comparing a biological fate map to the cellular images in *Dumb Compass* (*Figure 5*).

If this painting is actually a depiction of embryonic forms, then the spherical, foggy form with longitudinal and latitudinal lines, can be a version of a deconstructed fate map (*Figure 6*). It’s loosely identifiable as a blastula, a cluster of cells, but its identity, its markers of what tissues the

¹² Richard Shiff, “Evolution,” 8

¹³ Michel Morange, “History of Molecular Biology” *In eLS, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd (Ed.)*: 4-5

¹⁴ Bob Holman, and Terry Winters. “Terry Winters.” *BOMB*, no. 39 (1992): 42-47.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40424304>.

cells with ultimately become are not present in this form. It seems as if Winters pulled this aspect out and placed it elsewhere; in the linear progression of the circular rainbow at the top of the artwork. Also, segregation of patterning can be seen in the bullseye looking cellular form. Fate maps are created for the purpose of “projecting a future” for cells, their ultimate form of differentiation. This imagery appears to be contradictory to the nature of this piece, where determining a meaning out of it is unclear, ambiguous, and not reflective of a specific fate. Winters use of art and abstraction has created a piece that is guided by a Dumb Compass, a deconstructed fate map that guides us to nowhere, somewhere, or maybe a place in between. When referring to Winters’ previous drawings (in 1983-1984), it seems that the cellular forms were predicted and planned, as fate would have it, in Dumb Compass.

Terry Winters used his sketches of morulae in Morula I, II, and III, as well as the sketches he did for the Paris review in 1984, as a way of hypothesizing life prior to his creation of it (See *Figure 7*). In 1983 and 1984, these forms have not yet come into fruition; however, they were the budding ideas of the artist in the form of research, providing him with guidance for the final experiment of Dumb Compass. You can see the phallically shaped humanoid forms, and the congregating cells in these graphite drawings, as they are rendered quite similarly in Dumb Compass. These are his fate maps, dumb object drawings, yet when they coalesce and are brought to life with paint and the action of the artist, they amount to life itself. Dumb is in the fragmentation and disorder, however, when the useless cells and figures are put together, they amass this totality that is engulfing, powerful, and ambiguously expressing life.

Winters revealed in an interview that he wanted, “the pictures to have an associative power, a sense of life. Entities, events, and scenes are depicted, but I’m reluctant to give them over-determined titles. I like the range of ambiguity that paintings can contain. They have a

hypothetical narrative.”¹⁵ Terry Winters is simultaneously guiding us through science, yet blurring our grasp onto these scientific depictions, confusing the viewer, and making us relish in the ambiguity. Is this what life really is; are we guided into the unknown by dumb compasses? By not knowing the specific meaning of this piece, are we relinquishing our power as viewers or are we embracing this power of the unknown? Lisa Phillips described Winters’ body of work as “belong[ing] to an indeterminate world where the comfort of science encounters the fear of the unknown.”¹⁶ This fear of the unknown is a gap that is filled by art, grounding the art piece in a sense of feeling and physicality that can be consumed, providing us with the artistic nourishment to keep persisting in this process we call *life*.

¹⁵ Jennifer Samat, “Beer With a Painter: Terry Winters,” *Hyperallergic*, February 7, 2015. <https://hyperallergic.com/180766/beer-with-a-painter-terry-winters/>

¹⁶ Lisa Phillips, *The Self Similar*, 21.

Appendix



Figure 1: Dumb Compass (1985)

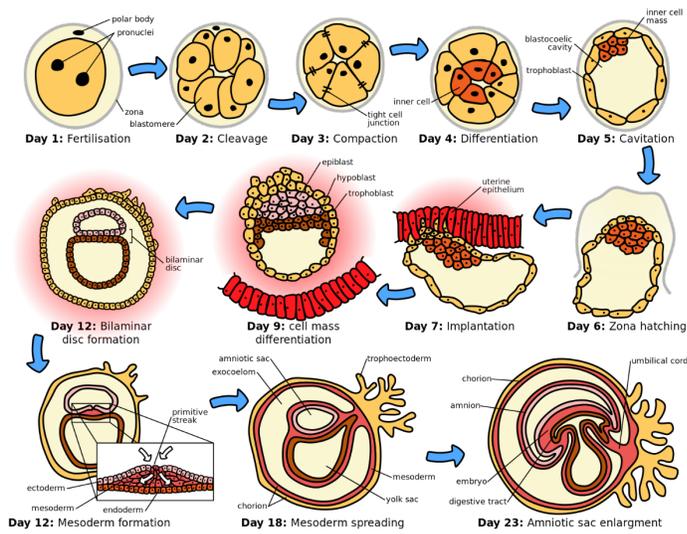


Figure 2. Process of Embryogenesis

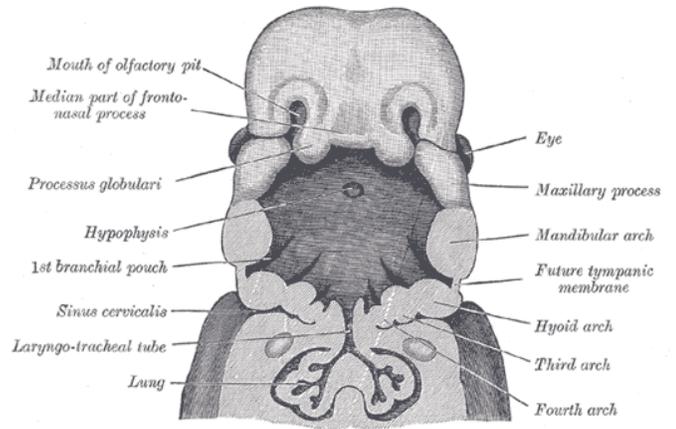


Figure 3. Henry Gray's Anatomy of the Human Body. 1918
-depicts an embryo at 32 days old



Figure 4. Deconstruction of the embryonic imagery in Dumb Compass into a logical timeline of development

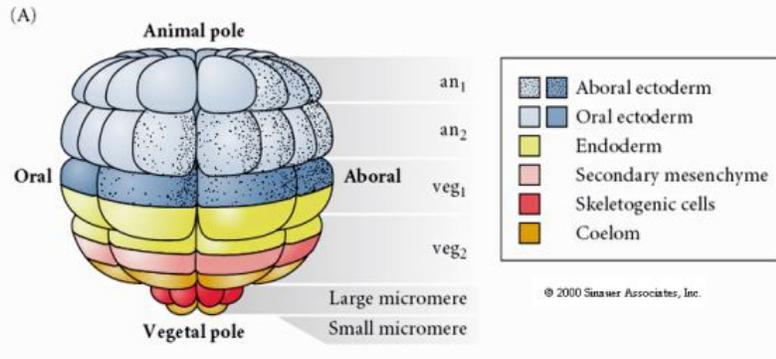
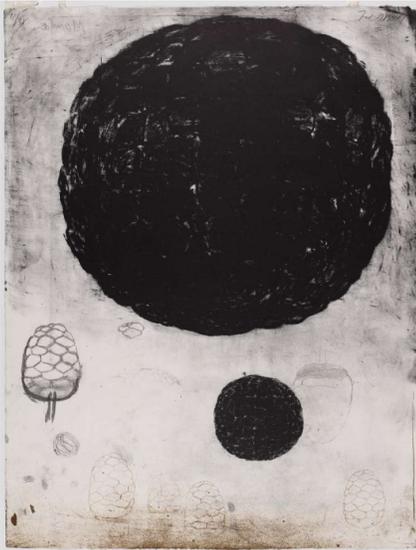


Figure 5: Fate Map of a sea urchin blastula



Figure 6: Deconstruction of a fate map

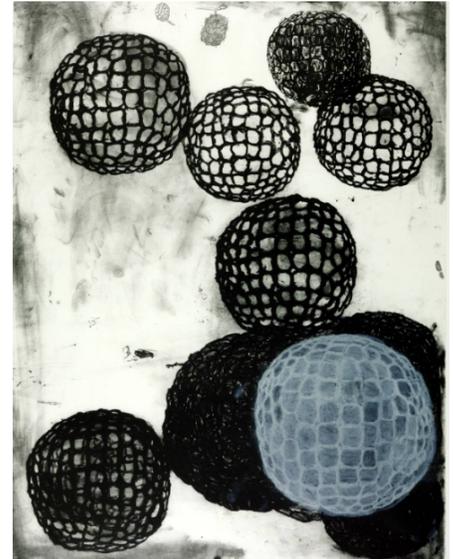
Figure 7



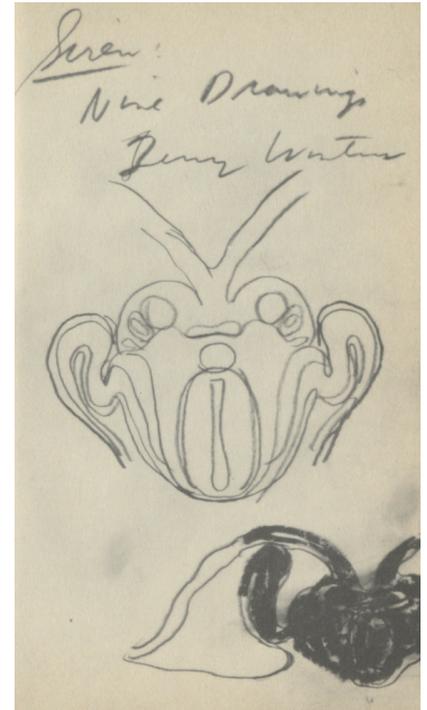
Morula I (1983-1984)



Morula II (1983-1984)



Morula III (1983-1984)



Siren: Nine Drawings (1984)- These were showcased in an article in the Paris Review

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