

Oneiric Realism - The Art of Steve Smith

Artist Statement

The act of drawing Dream Matter is an expression of a Taoist idea known as Wu Wei, which, in western thought, is simply defined as spontaneous, free expression; not forcing, allowing the drawing to be freely created, with as little planning or interruption from the conscious mind as possible. I attempt to draw intuitively, to plumb the depths of the imagination, to tap into and express the fundamental nature of reality.

My work has evolved slowly over many years. In 1979, while talking to my high school art teacher, I absentmindedly dipped an old paintbrush in some india ink and began moving it around on the paper. My mind was focused on the conversation, and I paid little attention to the piece of art I was creating. When I looked down, I was excited by what I saw. Suggestive forms--a hint of a face, skeletal outlines, and more--were harmoniously placed on the paper. I was amazed that all of this had emerged unconsciously.

This was the beginning of the journey. Repeatedly, I attempted to create an intuitive drawing, but I could not achieve the same result that I had that day in my art class; I was trying too hard. I passed up an opportunity to attend art school, feeling that formal instruction would interfere with the mindset I was trying to achieve, and I continued to paint and draw whenever I could. It was over twenty years before I created another piece that had the quality I was looking for. Dream Matter no. 1 was completed in 2003. It was three months in the making, drawn with simple graphite pencils and erasers.

While working on that first piece in the series, I was unknowingly following the principles of spontaneity and absence of conscious control outlined by the original Surrealists in the Surrealist Manifesto of 1924. As I was drawing, a concept began to form. During this time I was listening to the lectures of Alan Watts on the topic of Taoism, and I began to see a connection between my Dream Matter concept and the metaphysical teachings of Taoism; In the Taoist laws of reality, I saw a foundation for the way I wanted to approach the art. The idea of “li,” or organic patterning, was what I wanted to achieve in my work.

As the work evolved over the years and I was more able to work in the correct mindset, I began to see more organic patterns and morphing of the imagery. This was something I had hoped would emerge. It allows each viewer to have a unique experience when they see a Dream Matter piece. People seldom see the same imagery, and it seems to be a very personal experience for some viewers. It's exciting to be able to offer this in my art, and remains an important goal for me. I enjoy giving the viewer something that captures their attention, entertains the mind, and possibly leaves them wondering.

In searching for other artists who are attempting to draw in a spontaneous manner, I've been fascinated to discover very similar forms and imagery in their work, which reinforces the idea that by freeing the mind and letting go of conscious control, we allow ourselves to tap into and express the underlying fabric of the universe. These fellow artists have expressed very similar ideas about the mindset involved in this type of drawing or painting and the feeling that they're allowing something organic to emerge rather than creating something from their individual concepts.

Alan Watts said, “When you make something, you put it together--you assemble parts, or you carve an image out of wood or stone, working from the outside to the inside. But when you watch something growing, it works in an entirely different way; it doesn't assemble parts. It expands from within and gradually complicates itself expanding outwards...like a bud blossoming...like a seed turning into a plant.” Dream Matter emerges in this way.

The process has evolved over the last several years; I've combined charcoal with graphite in several of the drawings, resulting in darker more mysterious works. I've also experimented with other mediums, and continue to explore new techniques that will allow Dream Matter to emerge in various forms. It's a process that morphs and changes just as the work itself does. It continues to fascinate and hold my attention, sometimes bordering on obsession. I'm often surprised when I look up and see a new face or form that I'd never noticed before in a Dream Matter that has been on the wall for several years. It seems to be a reflection of the way reality and perception morph in our everyday lives. It's a journey of discovery that, for me, offers insight into our existence, the mind, imagination and reality, and I look forward to observing and participating in its continuing evolution.