**On the Other Side of Complexity**

“For the simplicity on this side of complexity, I wouldn't give you a fig. But for the simplicity on the other side of complexity, for that I would give you anything I have.”― **Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.**

“Our life is frittered away by detail...Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let our affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand...Simplify, simplify!” ― **Henry David Thoreau,**[**Walden**](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2361393)*.*

When you encounter the paintings of Paul Matheny, you are invited into a world full of paradox. It is a jewel-like mosaic world full of color and frenetic energy, and yet also full of order, stillness, and calm. A world that is both emotive and logical, complex and simple. A world full of familiar images, but presented in a way that forces you to see them with fresh eyes. It is a world of enchantment, where the ordinary becomes mysterious. It is a deeply personal world, yet it is also a reflection of the world we all inhabit.

Matheny has been painting this way for decades. I consider myself fortunate to have called him a friend for all that time. We met when we were both undergraduate art students at Winthrop University back in the early 90’s. The seeds were planted then for the work he does today. As a student Paul became deeply interested in folk art and “outsider art;” artists who were not academically trained, but for whom art-making was a kind of compulsion, a part of their identity, even if their work was never seen or recognized by those in the art market. This includes everyone from whirligig makers to folk potters to sign painters. He spent hours traveling the backroads of South Carolina meeting these makers and championing their work. You can see much of their influence in his paintings today, particularly in his silhouetted iconography—images of snakes, stars, pigs and heads—and in his bright color palette. At first glance, one can almost imagine them as a cross between hand-painted roadside signs and impressionist art. This is part of what makes his work so accessible, so fresh, and so whimsical.

But the initial ease in which we approach this work is soon checked as we explore the iconography more closely. There are really only a few symbols used in the entire body of work, yet working out what they are actually trying to tell us is elusive. These are not easily read and understood roadside signs. As these icons mix and remix their meaning seems to change. Some of the icons, like the hand with the heart, can be read multiple ways: is it a hand from a fortune-teller’s or magician’s sign, the hand of God as seen in many Byzantine mosaics, a symbol of offering, or somehow all three?

To get a better understanding of how to interpret these paintings, it is best to understand more about Matheny’s artistic process. Each work starts with stream of consciousness writing on the surface he is painting. As he writes the words bend, turn, overlap and continue on until the entire surface is completely covered with unreadable words. But readability is not the intent. In a conversation I had with Matheny, he states, “The writing is very fast paced… *and the words can be anything, [they create]* a stream-of-conscious matrix that is the foundation for the images to evolve from.” Once the matrix is complete Matheny then overlays it with the iconography in the design. Finally, the painting begins, as Matheny slowly and meticulously paints the small spaces in between the lines, the matrix of loops and overlapping words.

While the work is laborious, it is also contemplative. Matheny describes it as an escape from the noise and clutter of everyday life:

*“The work overall is… the opportunity to escape technology and escape the clutter or sounds and escape the clutter of images and the bombardment of information that is constantly coming at you….When I’m doing the paintings I’m very focused on what I’m doing, I’m almost contemplative as a way to escape the chaos of everything that happens around me. It’s just a good opportunity to...just be in that specific moment to create something that has never really existed before, to have the excitement to watch it evolve and grow right there at that time.”*

Knowing that Matheny approaches his process in this way gives us, as viewers, a better way to approach the work as well. It is less to be read and understood, more to be contemplative and mysterious; it’s an invitation be still and be present, rather than a didactic call to action. It is absolutely appropriate therefore, that we cannot easily ascribe singular meanings to each icon, or that icons may seem to mean different things depending on placement, scale, and context. “*I want people to approach the work from their own perspective without thinking about my own.  It’s part of the mystery of the work, and I like that mystery being a part of the concept,” says Matheny.*

As I become more and more acquainted with these paintings, I find some of the works seem to be speaking directly to me, like “Truth Deeper than Knowledge,” and “Listen (Star Truth),” while others, like “Conversation to Nowhere” and “Strange Fruit (Don’t Sit Under the Anvil Tree),” seem to be speaking into our sociopolitical climate. I don’t know that Matheny wanted me to see them this way, and it would be unfair to ask him. What I do know, having lived with a handful of Matheny’s works for 20 years, is that as I allow myself to sit with them, the mystery and the delight of them only deepens.

When I imagine Matheny at work on these paintings, it is easy for me to see him as a modern parallel to a medieval monk, working day after day, year after year, on illuminated manuscripts. There are ways that I think the comparison is apt: certainly the dedication and the attention to detail are similar, as well as—I would argue—a certain spiritual component. But I have come to realize that a better parallel might be to the American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, who spent a few years living in a cabin in the woods and writing about the experience in *Walden,* an iconic work of American literature.

Matheny has been inspired by the writings of the Transcendentalists, and like them he finds solace and a deep spiritual undercurrent in nature. (It is no surprise, then, to find trees, animals, and stars amongst his personal iconography.) Like the Transcendentalists, Matheny’s work seems deeply rooted in a place. Perhaps because of is so influenced by Southern folk and outsider artists, his work takes on that flavor. This is not to its detriment. In fact, I believe it is because of its deep roots that it has the power to speak to more broadly to the human condition. As Thoreau explored the symbolic meaning he found in his experience in New England’s woods, Matheny explores the symbolic meaning—or rather meanings— that can be expressed through his Southern-based icons. Also, like Thoreau, Matheny’s work is an attempt at simplifying and ordering the complex, but in a way that does not deny the complexity.

Matheny’s work represents the simplicity “on the other side of complexity,” as Oliver Wendell Homes, Sr. put it, and therein lies its great value. In a world of increasing clutter, where “tweets” and “fake news” promise truth wrapped in simplicity, Matheny work gives us deeper wisdom, a simplicity on the other side of complexity, where truth may be found in mystery.

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