

Gordon Onslow Ford

Mirando en lo profundo
Seeing in Depth



Fundación EUGENIO GRANELL

Gordon Onslow Ford: Exploration of consciousness in painting and meeting the Asian scholars in California

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"There is but one force of creation and the painter, on the quest of the inner-worlds, has to enter the spirit of this universal force."¹

Six decades of Gordon Onslow Ford's paintings can be seen as a journey into the exploration of consciousness. One by one, his paintings unfold a story – a story of the expansion of the Universal Mind from the surface of appearances to the depth of seeing. His early surrealist paintings were a metaphysical playground for what later became a full expression of what he calls the inner-worlds. Passing through the world of dreams and myth, this journey moved inward in the search of deeper layers of the psyche where the Mind quietly unfolds its mystery. Such discovery took years of incubation, cultivation of virtue (inner-life) mastery of technique and an on-going connection with Mother Earth.

"A stirring of the Depths happens, I suppose, at times to everyone; but only a few have the grace, through spontaneous expression, to be transformed by what appears under the hand."²

Early in this century, in the western hemisphere, the exploration of dreams and the personal unconscious was introduced by the psychoanalytical work of Sigmund Freud and provided an important foundation for the surrealist investigation of the psyche³. However the work of the last members of the surrealist group, Matta, Esteban Frances, and Onslow Ford emphasized exploration through a new organic morphological language that expanded perception beyond the familiar dream narrative. Influenced by the metaphysical writings of Ouspensky on the fourth dimension and Carl Jung on the collective unconscious, the natural direction for the young painters was to capture invisible dimensions beyond the symbolic, representational form.

For Onslow Ford this transition in his paintings happened when he started to practice automatism. Drawing from the technique of "free association" developed by Freud for working with dreams, automatism was used by the surrealists as a way to access unconscious processes that were often seen in dreams. For Onslow Ford, automatism was a key to find the freedom, not so much to express personal dreams, but to develop a mythological world that served as a gateway for later exploration of consciousness. He makes a distinction between automatism and spontaneity. This distinction is important in understanding his work.

"Spontaneous creation appears out of the unknown, and then grows out of itself, in stage after stage until all the multiple components of the world can inter-act and play their part in the ecology of the whole."⁴

In observing Onslow Ford's decades of paintings one can clearly see this gradual movement from the world of myth to the deeper layers of consciousness. The seed for this direction in painting is clearly marked in his early surrealist works. "Three Trees Move Along" (1938) proclaims the possibility that matter, although seemingly solid, is transparent and that we need to expand our perception beyond the limitations of our sight. Also he introduced the idea of multiple horizons. In this early painting he introduces two horizons: one in front of the trees and one in the back of the trees. This play with perspective and the white lines as the invisible also is seen in his paintings "A Man on the Green Island" (1939), "Street Scene in Paris" (1939), and "Landing" (1938).

Had the war not interrupted the surrealist movement, Onslow Ford is certain that this direction in art, the exploration of the inner-worlds, would have been the next step in the development of Surrealism. Paintings created in New York explored the mythological aspect of the psyche and in Mexico the world of myth transformed gradually into a transparent landscape and finally a great freedom of separating lines from color. Already in Mexico the personages in his paintings were "communicating in depth."⁵

His most revolutionary paintings and the least understood period of his work happened after he arrived in California and was introduced to Asian philosophy. It was a natural move for Onslow Ford to come to the Pacific Coast where many cultural movements converge and new ideas have fertile ground to grow.

When he arrived in San Francisco with his wife, Jacqueline Johnson, in 1947 he soon became an important cultural figure. He called his first retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1948, "Towards the New Subject in Painting." But for Onslow Ford it was not really "towards the new subject", it was "the new subject in painting" that he was proposing but he realized this later. This exhibition which was very well received by Californians marked the transition from the world of dreams into the first stages of the inner-worlds.

Pacific Coast of California and Asian philosophy

For more than a century and a half, California has been America's gateway to the East. Immigrants from China, Japan and Russia settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. However their cultural, philosophical and spiritual way of life was not always well received by the American public until the Theosophical Society held a conference in San Francisco in 1886. The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 and was based on the teachings of the Russian philosopher/mystic H.P.Blavatsky; it proposed an important alternative philosophical view point to the materialistic scientific approach. Its ideology centers around transformation of human consciousness urging a planetary outlook by the synthesis of the Eastern spiritual practices with Western philosophical and scientific thoughts. Another important bridge between the Eastern and Western thought was drawn in 1900 when Swami Vivekananda delivered eight lectures on Hindu spirituality at the First Unitarian Church in San Francisco and founded the Vedanta Society of Northern California.⁶

There was a gap of fifty years until the next important group of Asian scholars appeared in the Bay Area and with whom Onslow Ford became associated. At that time, Onslow Ford paintings already had gained wide reputation in San Francisco and he was planning a major exhibition (Dynaton, 1951) with his Austrian friend, former surrealist Wolfgang Paalen and American painter Lee Mullican, at the San Francisco Art Museum⁷. Dynaton, The Possible was Paalen's culmination of years of writings and paintings that carry the idea of painting as a "state of self-transcending awareness." This attitude which was shared by all three painters was at the core belief of Onslow Ford who continue to deepen this idea with the learning of Zen and the art of calligraphy.

Around the same time (1950) a businessman named Louis Gainsborough who traded with Asia established an East-West Center in San Francisco. The Chair of the Comparative Religion at Stanford University, Professor Frederick Spiegelberg, was appointed to establish and direct this East-West cultural center. Spiegelberg chose a unique group of scholars to come to San Francisco to educate Westerners about Eastern thought including Alan Wilson Watts English-born scholar of Zen Buddhism and Haridas Chaudhuri an East-West Scholar from Bengal, India.⁸

The Asian Academy was established in 1950 with the mission of furthering the dialogue between the Eastern spiritual world view and Western thought. Onslow Ford, who was at the frontier of the cultural evolution in San Francisco, was naturally curious about this movement and attended the first lectures of the Academy.

He soon began studying the philosophy of Vedanta and the writings of Sri Aurobindo with Haridas Chaudhuri. Sri Aurobindo, an Indian sage, was also a scholar of western philosophy and his system of thought based on the evolution of consciousness was influenced by Hegel. His monumental work on Integral Yoga influenced many contemporary thinkers. The idea of expansion of consciousness from surface to depth, the oneness of universal mind, and the union with the ground of existence are among many important teachings of Integral Yoga that later found echoes in Onslow Ford's writings and paintings.

According to Chaudhuri "An integral insight into the structure of the absolute, as the eternal universal, gives rise to the most balanced ideal of life. It is the ideal of joyful participation in the creative adventure of life and evolution on the basis of integrated union with the eternal"⁹. This union with the eternal is later reflected in the paintings and writings of Onslow Ford. "The ultimate aim of existence after lifetimes and lifetimes is to become eternally one with the Mind Shared by All."¹⁰

In the philosophy of Integral Yoga there are three essential dimensions of reality. The first dimension is the non-temporal dimension of Being (Shiva) which is the *ultimate ground of existence*. In this dimension there exist no duality, verbal expression or conceptual ideas. "It is in essence beyond number, quantity, quality and concept. Being is not to be equated with any symbolical structure or categorical scheme, whether monistic or pluralistic".¹¹

The second dimension is the dynamic universal (Shakti) or sometimes referred as the all-embracing creative principle or cosmic creative energy, "phenomenologically interpreted, the dynamic universal is the totality of all phenomena, observed and observable, past, present and future. It is the experiential whole of all dynamic processes in the world"¹². The third dimension of Being is the unique individual. These three dimensions can be seen in the evolution of Onslow Ford's paintings from the exploration of the personal unconscious (the unique individual) to his later exploration of the Universal Mind.¹³

While studying with Chaudhuri, 1951, and contemplating these metaphysical ideas, he had a revelation that, in painting, "line, circle and dot" are at the root of art and later refer to this trinity as the "underlying ground of existence." This insight came in his daily walk in the Muir Woods, California and it was an important discovery for him as he found the primordial language, the tools in which he could enter deeper levels of consciousness.

Slowly the personages that were created in his poetic Mexico paintings became veiled under the storm of lines vanishing in depth. Painting "A Stone that Dreamt" shows this important metaphysical transition. From 1951, the elements of line, circle and dot became the predominant expression. The paintings points also towards a transformation of the self who is being conscious of its world to a self that becomes one with the creative force (non-duality). At the threshold of moving from the known to the unknown the egoic self transforms and becomes one with the world. I should note here that this transition is also experienced in the transpersonal dimensions in lucid dreaming and in meditation.¹⁴

*"In Paris I was in contact with the great poets and painters of our time. They were all original but lacked a metaphysical structure. Meeting with Haridas gave me a structure which I hadn't had before.... Haridas opened the way for me to the same depths that we all share. The images that appeared gave me the feeling that I was reawakening the place I have always known unconsciously."*¹⁵

Onslow Ford's first expressions of line, circle, dot (1951-58) was created while he had his studio on the Ferry Boat, Vallejo, in Sausalito. His early line, circle and dot paintings carry the spirit of water and wilds of nature. Apparition of circles and dots seem to come through a green forest perhaps were the vision of this line, circle and dot trinity initially revealed themselves. In these paintings one is no longer conscious of ones self. There is no sign of personages any longer but the mind is opening to the spirit of nature. Later in this period, concentric circles move back and forth from surface to depth. Lines rhythmically transit from right to left vertically and horizontally and dots overlap and interact creating transparent fields. Here we see the first apparition of the collective unconscious. These images that are often recognized by long term meditators and lucid dreamers as the initial inner expressions beyond geometry. Geometry is one aspect of the experience of the inner-worlds.

After studying with Chaudhuri for a year, Onslow Ford studied Buddhism with Alan Watts. Buddhism initially started in India and then moved to China (Called Ch'an) and then from China, in the sixth century, reached Japan and eventually developed to Zen Buddhism. Zen emphasizes the cultivation of the open mind and the study of its nature (the interplay of form and formlessness, the importance of the present as pivot of experience, the interdependent nature of being) through meditation. Onslow Ford's paintings became a form of meditation and the cultivation of the open mind a virtue that enabled him to see ever more deeply into the nature of consciousness.

*"Drawing is meditation
Painting is meditation
meditation is meditation"*¹⁶

Perhaps the most important connection for Onslow Ford with the Asian culture was his meeting with the well known Japanese painter Saburo Hasegawa and Zen Master and calligrapher Hodo Tobase Roshi. He met Saburo Hasegawa, through Alan Watts who had asked Onslow Ford to host Hasegawa for a week while Hasegawa was staying in

California. Onslow Ford remembers Hasegawa as an elegant man long brown Japanese rob, quiet yet powerful presence.

When visiting Onslow Ford's studio, Hasegawa made calligraphy which permanently changed Onslow Ford's way of painting. Hasegawa took a brush paint and ink from his long hanging sleeves and began preparing the ink. Grinding the ink took two hours. At last Onslow Ford became the witness of seeing calligraphic lines appearing with great energy and total mindfulness.

When calligraphy is expressed by a master there is an orbit of energy circulating around the painter and the creation. It is that energy around Onslow Ford's paintings, since 1950's, that gravitates the viewer.

Wanting to learn calligraphy, Hasegawa introduced Onslow Ford to Hodo Tobase Roshi. Tobase Roshi was raised in a Zen monastery, Eiheiji, from childhood and came to America after World War II to give support to the American Japanese farmers whose land was expropriated from them.

He studied calligraphy with Tobase for five years (1952-8) and became a pupil and disciple of the Master. This was the first time that Onslow Ford assumed a mentorship with a master for a long period. This training not only enhanced his technique in painting but became a path to deepen his understanding of art as a spiritual practice.

*"Little by little I discovered through my meeting with Tobase Sensei that calligraphy – not writing about something but expressing yourself in line – was the way of talking about the spirit. That gave a fluency and assurance to what I was doing. Western calligraphy is different. It is done with a rigid nib with a strong technique. It is done with the finger and the wrist while Chinese and Japanese calligraphy is done with the whole body/mind."*¹⁷

In the art of Chinese calligraphy one mindfully expresses the line as if the whole of creation is about to become visible under the hand of the master. Every line is alive and is done with full attention. It is this expression of total attention in creation that makes calligraphy of a master different from any other calligrapher.

In the second period of the line, circle, dot paintings (1958-62) color slowly disappears and the phenomenon of line, circle and dot appears in full view. Paintings became a source of meditation, a direct expression of the mind in a complex web of interconnected elements with the two most powerful colors – black and white. Onslow Ford refers to black and white as two poles of the universe.

*"The appearance of the line, circle and dot world is a natural process that comes spontaneously in its own spirit. The Line, circle and dot world consists in essence of a black pole and a white pole."*¹⁸

I refer to this period of Onslow Ford's paintings as a phenomenon because these images again have been repeatedly recognized by individuals who have experienced and reported these images in their transpersonal dimensions in lucid dreaming and other altered state of consciousness¹⁹. It is difficult to talk about these paintings because we are no longer adventuring in the narrative, metaphorical structure of the psyche. To be in communion with these paintings, the image asks that we leave all our presuppositions aside and become witness, with an open mind, to its Presence.

In his first book "Painting in the Instant" is clearly written in the spirit of Zen: the "I" as subject is aptly absent. The paintings then became the subject and the painter disappeared into the poetic expression of the phenomenon.

*"The instant is an absolute and thus is honored with a THE before it, as in the Mind, the Universe. The instant does not refer to speed. A slow line or a fast line can both be in the instant. There may be intervals between one stage of a painting and another, and yet the whole is in the instant. The instant is ever-present. The instant refers to attention. In the instant there is a state of full attention to what is happening. In the instant there is a co-incidence of events- wind blowing, grass growing, brush strokes appearing. All there is, is in the instant."*²⁰

Painting in the Instant can be compared to the meditative state in which the mind is open to its vastness. It is the experience of being at one with the Universal Mind. *"Painting in the instant is the direct manifestation of the unknown through the painter as an instrument. The painter disappears in the instant, and reappears in the painting."*²¹

The exploration of line, circle and dot continued for eleven years until a gradual movement into a new aspects of the mind. Onslow Ford calls this period of his paintings "Great Spaces of the Mind." These enigmatic paintings began forming in the late 60's and continue to this day. He titled a number of these paintings "Voyager in Space." While this coincides with the first landing on the moon in 1969, where Onslow Ford is traveling is that of an inner-space.

These paintings are again recognized by many who have experienced transpersonal dimensions in lucid dreaming and deep meditation. They are dealing with the energetic aspect of the psyche emanating light and color auras. The personages that disappeared in the canvases for ten years reappear, transformed as "Beings." These "Live-Line-Beings" have been the messengers of the implicit order of his world.

Onslow Ford's study of the mind continues today. He is still in dialogue with great minds of our time who visit him frequently. Authors such as Brain Swimme, Fritjof Capra and Theodore Roszak are among many who appreciate Onslow Ford's contributions towards the exploration of consciousness. However, he continues his hermit life in the tranquility of mother nature where he receives his insight and wisdom. This profound union with nature has always been an on going inspiration for his paintings. He takes pleasure in his daily walks in the virgin woods, sitting under an aged oak tree he calls his teacher tree, melodic whistling to wild birds, watching the light through the fog, and catching the first glimpse of the crescent moon to make a wish for the new month. At the center of his world, his paintings act as a vertical axis, the Axis Mundi that connects heaven and earth.

The paintings of Gordon Onslow Ford bring us ever closer to the existential wonderment about the universe and the nature of the mind. His art carry the ancient wisdom offering new images of ourselves. His paintings can be seen as an object of contemplation.

*"Awake or asleep,
we are in the Great Spaces whether we are aware of it or not.
The Mind is open to be discovered
and will offer clues about its nature to those who seek."*²²

Notes

- 1 From Gordon Onslow Ford's notebook. (Inverness: Bishop Pine Preserve archives, April, 1994 - July, 1995), 67.
- 2 Gordon Onslow Ford, *Creation*. (Basel, Switzerland: Galerie Schreiner. 1978), 27.
In this book Onslow Ford takes us on a journey into the dimensions of the inner- worlds from the surface of seeing into involution, moving in depth and coming out through evolution transformed with a new myth. This transformative movement of going into the inner-world and coming out of the inner-world was a central theme in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy.
- 3 In dreams and myth, images are often referred to the perceived world. Images of painters such as Magritte, Dali and Ernst bridge the waking and the dream world. Such a bridge is apt to involve the personal. In a regular dream state the "dreaming ego" is engaged with the narrative of the dream therefore the picture is the unfolding of a story. Such images can be seen in the paintings of Remedios Varo in which she eloquently and masterfully illustrates an alchemical world of dreams and myth. Her paintings takes us to her fascinating inner-world in which she is transformed to a new body and is engaged with the magic of a dreamlike landscape which is in communication with the spirit world.
- 4 Private communication with Gordon Onslow Ford, Bishop Pine Preserve, Inverness, 1992.
- 5 Refer to "Communication in Depth" title of a painting created in Mexico. 1944.
In many of his Mexico paintings we see two personages communicating not directly, but with lines that connect them to a circle either in heaven or earth.
- 6 For detail cultural influence of the Asian Academy, see Vern Haddick (editor), *The Growth of East-West Integration in the San Francisco Area in Transcendence and Transformation: Writings from the California Institute of Integral Studies*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1983.
- 7 See Wolfgang Paalen, "Theory of the Dynaton," in Dynaton Exhibition catalogue, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1951.
- 8 Spiegelberg also invited Indian educator Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, Judith Tyberg, an American teacher of Sanskrit, yoga and theosophy and Ram Landau, an Islamic scholar. Haridas Chaudhuri later became the founder of the Institute for Asian Studies which is currently called Institute of Integral Studies, a graduate Institute in San Francisco.
- 9 Haridas Chaudhuri, *Integral Yoga: A Concept of Harmonious and Creative Living*. (Illinois: A Quest Book, second edition 1970), 116.
- 10 From Gordon Onslow Ford's unpublished notebook. (Inverness: Bishop Pine Preserve archives, April, 1994 - July, 1995), 154.
- 11 Haridas Chaudhuri, *Integral Yoga: A Concept of Harmonious and Creative Living*. (Illinois: A Quest Book, second edition 1970), 105.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 110.

- 13 In Japanese Buddhism (prior to Zen), the doctrine of the Shingon sect. Kukai (774- 835) emphasis that the development of the human mind was divided into ten stages. "1) the mind of the non-sage, 2) the mind of a young child, 3) mind of a child realizing "awelessness", 4) mind realizing no ego, 5) mind eradicating fundamental ignorance; 6) mind realizing Mahayanan Buddhist mercy, 7) mind realizing non- generation and non-extinction, 8) mind realizing the, a prior, way to the absolute truth, 9) mind realizing ultimate non-entirety and 10) mind comprehending the deepest secret." In Gradner Murphy and Lois B. Murphy (ed.) *Asian psychology*, New York: Basic Books, 1968)183. Gordon Onslow Ford's paintings after 1951 begins to address the last three aspect the mind mentioned by Kukai.
- 14 Lucid dreaming is a state of consciousness within sleep when the dreamer realizes that he/she is dreaming. The body shows all the signs of sleep but the mind is awake. In this self-reflective state one can be the witness of the expansion of the mind in dimensions never perceived before. Often such dimensions are related to mystical experience. The paintings Gordon Onslow Ford created after 1951 have been recognized by many lucid dreamers and meditators, as a similar state to spiritual dimensions. See Bogzaran, *Images of the Lucid Mind*. Dissertation. (Michigan: UMI, 1996) and also Bogzaran, *Through The Light: An Exploration into Consciousness*. Catalogue of the exhibition *Through The Light*, (San Francisco: Dream Creations, 1997).
- 15 Private communication with Gordon Onslow Ford, Bishop Pine Preserve, Inverness, 1992.
- 16 Gordon Onslow Ford, *Insights*.(Emeryville: Lapis Press, 1991).
- 17 From the interview by Michael Wenger and Kaz Tanahashi. *Creation in the Instant: An Interview with Painter Gordon Onslow Ford. Wind Bell*. Publication of Zen Center. Vol. xxv, No. 2, Fall 1991, p. 39.
- 18 Gordon Onslow Ford, *Ecomorphology* (Inverness: Bishop Pine Preserve, 1983),10.
- 19 Research presented on the topic of inner-world paintings and transpersonal experiences in lucid dreaming, *Images of the Lucid Mind*, (1996) and *Consciousness through Art of the Mind*, (1998) *Towards a New Science of Consciousness* . University of Tucson, Arizona.
- 20 Gordon Onslow Ford. *Painting in the Instant*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), 36.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 36
- 22 Gordon Onslow Ford, *Insights*.(Emeryville: Lapis Press, 1991).

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