

THE OUTER EDGE

Part One

Everything is connected. Butterflies and plankton, dogs and elephants, the traffic emissions in New York and the gardens in London, the debris left on the moon and the vineyards in the Rhône valley. We find ourselves inextricably woven into an intricate creation web that is absolutely comprehensive; no one and no thing is left out.

Eugene H. Peterson¹

Introduction

Several years ago a visitor to my studio asked a question concerning the origins of a number of paintings. At the time, besides my offering a somewhat limited oral response, the question also prompted the refining of an earlier piece of writing, which now takes the following form. In essence it is a reflection on the path my life has taken, particularly with forms of visual art. It will also serve as an endeavour to answer the question in more detail.

At the outset I acknowledge that there are agencies of different kinds that have influenced or continue to influence the general course of my life. Some are quite tangible. Others are less so and yet also contribute in their own unique way to the transformation it undergoes. But in beginning my story I am fairly confident with saying that artistically it found its first expression in the context of music and singing when I was a child. And then during my late teen years, in the early 1960's, a significant change took place in my interests when, through a camera lens, I began to observe and record aspects of the environment in which I was then living. Over time this new visual pursuit became synonymous with a path of a spiritual nature, and my practice as an artist took on a purposeful direction.

To some extent images tell a story of their own; though silently. Words add other information, from a slightly different vantage point.

Foursquare

To date, the major part of my work as an artist over the past five decades has been a series of paintings and prints that utilizes a small square as a character in a simple visual language. The series, which I call Foursquare, had its origin in 1976 with a single square roughly sketched with a pencil and about half a centimetre in dimension.

In the making of that small square I had no impression of it being the first of a multitude of squares in varying dimensions. In fact, although tentatively embracing the idea that a fresh step had been taken it seemed at first a rather naïve activity. Even so, as time passed, through a process of building up images in a mosaic-like manner with the square motif, firstly by tens, then hundreds and then by thousands, the series continued to evolve, and through various media.

Initially and for the greater part of the early work I used oil pastels, a medium with which I was already familiar, and from 1986 until 2008 acrylic paints. During the latter part of this time and with an awakening interest in the digital environment I began to question and explore the relationship between my own square motif and the rather impersonal, minute picture element of computer monitor displays called a pixel (normally represented in a square form).

My early experiments with the media had initially avoided its direct visualization, the priority given to learning about some of the basic tools that are available within the digital environment and looking at other possibilities as far as an actual way of working was concerned. Eventually the connection was made and my established philosophy of artistic work (in which the tactile involvement with material was integral to the making of a unique object) underwent a considerable re-formation. As a result, through the incorporation of a computer in my workflow, the Foursquare series has been served in terms of richness of colour, has found its first expression in print (where the square is now also realized on a smaller scale than the earlier media) and has been facilitated in its overall direction towards a refinement of line.

In a simple manner it is easy to document the formation of my work with the square from its origin, which occurred while I was staying at Little Gidding, ² to the present time. The route from using a pencil to a computer mouse has been reasonably straightforward, although it involved some personal challenges, and took many years! But the whole story, of the foundational roots of my expressive journey is more complex. A diverse formation of ideas and emotions characterized the earlier years of my life and in working as an artist. Before I arrived at Square One my visual interests took varying forms, for the most part revolving around the making of sculpture, and this in another country. Even so, the path on which I journeyed led to a surprising new sense of place and being. This in time found a fresh voice and a way of thinking and working from another perspective.

The path travelled by each one of us is unique. And yet there is common ground. The course I have taken within an artistic environment is similar to the one experienced by many individuals who have the desire or a need, as I would have expressed it years ago, to be creating something; individuals from all kinds of disciplines, and not only artists, each working through what is often a lengthy journey of exploration and discovery. For some there are dreams, rare moments of inspiration or encounters with unexpectedly difficult events that prompt a sudden change in direction. For others a pathway might well meander for a lifetime like a gently flowing river through lowland countryside. Whatever its course growth, in one manner or another, is its natural outcome. A gradual maturing of an inner vision generally takes place. An expressive voice will, over time, manifest previously unforeseen characteristics or find its realisation in several different ways, even simultaneously – not so much a single journey perhaps but a succession of smaller journeys, linked together to form one coherent narrative.

At times the landscape being traversed is pleasantly challenging. At others it is marked perhaps by a loss of orientation or conviction, when the path is simply too rough to navigate with ease. With artistic activity being linked to life itself it is inevitable that both experience and expression will change. Something new is taken up and also perhaps a letting go of something else. And, just as there is in the natural order of things in this world, night and day, summer and winter and valleys created within the formations of mountains there will also be fruitful and barren periods. Where these dormant or darker periods of time take on the character of conflict, sometimes to a great degree, their successful negotiation can even turn out to be not only significant but also to an outcome that is richer than before.

In 1975 my life, and its expressive journey, was transformed; a revelation defined the reality I had often perceived, especially within my working process, and yet had been unable to articulate. But besides the subject of the revelation itself, which I shall enlarge upon later in my story, one particular aspect of its artistic outworking has been the way in which colour has featured in its evolution. For the reader who has normal colour vision this might not seem at all unusual. However, as a child it was noticeable (to others) that I couldn't correctly identify a number of colours, which led to the common but incorrect term of colour-blindness being applied to this inability, and of my growing up with a considerable inhibition about using colour at all. I recall an art teacher at school suggesting that there wasn't much point in my painting anything - not that this particular comment was important to me at the time. My childhood interests as far as creative endeavour was concerned lay in the direction of music and into my teen years this continued to be the norm. Throughout my life there have been occasional forays into playing, even with some dedication, but generally it is the pleasure of listening to music that has stayed with me and this has perhaps provided a kind of subconscious aesthetic foundation or undercurrent to other activities.

From the place of music being the dominant expressive interest of my childhood and early teen years to the beginning of a vocation with forms of visual art the transition seems on reflection to be linked to my arrival in Canada in 1962, at the age of seventeen. As I encountered the vast expanse of this country and engaged with the rich cosmopolitan cultural environment in which I found myself - quite unlike anything with which I had previously known - perhaps it was only natural that the expressive desire that had given my life its earlier direction and meaning would be transformed. In a similar vein I associate the eventual re-formation of my artistic journey with a life-changing event of an entirely different order, after my return to England twelve years later.

The more recent introduction of a computer into the studio environment has prompted a further restructuring my creative process. And it must be said that this has happened with direct input from my son, who has grown up with the computer as a natural extension of his life in work and recreation.

At first I experimented with simple graphics and the manipulation of photographs, and then with the production of a series of prints that were made up from gradients of computer-generated colours in narrow strips. My explorations eventually led into extending the Foursquare series and more specifically to the digital reconstruction of some early work with oil pastels, and from there to the making of totally new images. Even so, besides the personal challenge of working essentially with a form of coloured light and then overseeing its translation into print, my whole encounter with the digital environment remains somewhat of a challenge, especially as the boundaries in which the experience is centred also continue to be modified.

Undoubtedly the adoption of electronic technology has affected my outlook not only on the creative process but has extended the way in which I engage generally with the world around, as it has done with countless thousands of individuals across continents. However, it is not to suggest that my entire artistic path is now digital in expression. The refinement of line that can be produced by the manipulation of individual pixels in a displayed image may only represent the extreme outer edge of geometric clarity as far as any personal visual work (of a two-dimensional kind) is concerned. And, although increasing familiarity with the technology allows me the freedom to make more informed decisions within various programs a degree of

detachment is still required to utilize the computer as a tool, indeed as a whole toolbox for a variety of applications. Overall, with the introduction of this technology, I have been inclined to think that my philosophy of working has been transformed to allow the inclusion of a totally fresh course of action, with the field of possibilities for expression increased from its previous limitations.

Growth always seems to demand encounters with change and challenge. But to understand something of the complex processes involved it is like seeing through a glass, darkly, as St. Paul wrote about glimpsing the kingdom of heaven. The reality is to be experienced, not necessarily for comprehending in its fullness. For now we see only in part and we are inclined to misinterpret, to underestimate or overemphasise. As for creativity the word alone evokes and encompasses a diverse spectrum of activity, the embrace of slow evolutionary development and also the spontaneous introduction of something new, and all things in between.

My essay continues by tracing a path through the foundation years of my artistic journey and reflecting upon its further development, in the light of changes within my life itself. I do this with the acknowledgement that what has gone before affects what is, and both bear upon what will be, and all this involves many associations and influences. Nothing exists in isolation. Everything is connected.

The Journey

April 1962 ... I recall that the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was an adventure in itself and after a week at sea the Empress of England docked at Montreal following a brief stop at Quebec City. It was a memorable occasion. Within a very short time a number of things began to impress - the sheer expanse of the natural landscape, contemporary architecture, bright open city spaces, and the social ambience - all things far removed from the small town environment in which I had grown up in England. And although it took a while for it to become a concrete reality there seemed to be within me a growing desire to respond to this new situation. This happened initially through photography when I began to record something of my new surroundings. It also happened in monochrome and it marked the beginning, for one thing, of an interest in textures and shadows - the effects of light falling on objects, especially on some of the very modern buildings that I encountered, which I found quite fascinating.

In 1964 a kind of synthesis or a bringing together various aspects of photography, my observation of architectural structures and no doubt other stimuli besides all worked together to set my life in a fresh direction. I made my first piece of sculpture. Suddenly a new creative horizon appeared. My earlier interest in music gradually lessened, even though in one respect I had in fact joined a band and toured through northern Ontario for a month in 1963 and also later played in another group, a dance band, for about a year.

Music of course exists in a different realm of experience from painting or sculpture. There is an abstract link however. There are similarities not only in the making but also in the listening or looking experience. Harmonies and composition are involved, rhythm or counterpoint - the combining of independent parts. It is not unusual to talk of the colours of the orchestra or even of painting with sound. Expression in painting may be discussed as an orchestration of colours and even sometimes as an aural experience. The concept of visual music comes to mind. And occasionally, whilst working with the square form, I have thought of it as a single musical note with which chords are built up visually or used in conjunction with others to create the impression of movement through various shades and patterns of colours on the picture plane.

A related activity to the actual making of sculpture at that time was the sketching of ideas for possible future work, and this led into making other abstract images as an expression in its own right. My attraction to the essential nature of black and white photography (in which reality is interpreted in shades of grey) may have influenced this development. But I also realise that both activities may have derived from the same root, perhaps stretching back into some unknown childhood experience, or simply sitting for long hours at a piano keyboard and looking at sheet music, and black and white keys! Through 1965 and into 1966 I studied architectural drawing and then worked as a draftsman in Toronto, developing at the same time thoughts about the relationship between sculpture and architecture. It was however in the making of sculpture itself, for its own sake, that I found a singular kind of fulfilment, as if the course of my life had somehow been predetermined to work out in this particular direction. For about five years the process of carving was my principal interest and native hardwoods were readily available from a nearby sawmill. Later I also worked on a much larger scale than with the carvings, constructing sculptures with rough sawn or planed and polished timbers fixed with steel bolts. 1968 saw my first public exhibitions and these followed on a regular basis until I returned to England six years later.

Of all the visually creative activities carving is rather unique in that it is a subtractive process. The end of one's labour is reached through the elimination of material. Block printing or engraving both have some similarities in this regard, although need another work of printing to be fully realized. Further, as my sculptures were generally abstract in form it sometimes seemed expedient to allow the grain of the material itself to suggest a pathway (as with the sensitivity to any tool or material this connection may often seem to take a hand in the enterprise).

In this working process, and at the same time as I identified with being a sculptor and found a kind of justification for living in being expressive in this way, so I also began to sense the presence of something apart from what I could actually see or work with my hands. There were some similarities in this encounter to that which I had perceived at times with taking photographs, perhaps simply involving the creative process itself, but certainly beyond what I could articulate. A kind of dialogue would sometimes take place, an interaction between one physically active and somewhat noisy state and the other having about it an inexplicable interior quietness, a paradox that was difficult to resolve. My perception of this experience as akin to being in the foothills of a spiritual path – of a calling towards God - would have been vague. I don't think that the concept of being on a journey, spiritual or otherwise, entered my mind. This came later. The experience of being an artist was sufficient as a purpose in living, not at that time for understanding or questioning where it might lead.

Together with the naturally shifting and evolving patterns that make up of our daily lives we can perhaps also recognise moments when something had been introduced to alter its course or otherwise gave it an added impetus and set it more firmly on its way. This might just as easily have been sublime as traumatic in nature. One such personal occasion, outside any sculptural interests of the time, occurred in 1971 when I made a series of small drawings with a few sticks of oil pastels, which belonged to the daughter of a friend. These drawings emerged quite spontaneously, as if something from deep within me had surfaced. It immediately grasped my attention, as if expressive of a fresh direction. However, to my frustration it seemed impossible to find a way to continue. Over the following months I made several unsuccessful attempts before temporarily abandoning the activity.

In 1972 I was invited to join a group of artists being assembled to make paintings and sculptures for the public buildings in the town of Oakville, near Toronto – a project that lasted for seven months of that year. Apart from its main objective it was a marvellous project for the artists involved, affording the opportunity for a lively interchange of ideas and social gatherings, which on a personal level certainly stimulated my creative taste buds. Occasionally I experimented with different materials and processes but among other things a degree of inner restlessness also began to surface.

The majority of my early sculptures had been carved in the round, intended to stand freely and be viewed from different directions. Over time the work evolved towards having a more singular face and stand quite happily against a wall. In Oakville this process continued, especially in regard to experiments with wall-mounted or small freestanding constructions, with some added colour. Having grown up with a considerable inhibition about using colour this represented something of a break with my past. (The oil pastel drawings from the previous year had been the result of a simple impulsive action.) Without realising it I had entered into a lengthy transitional period away from working with three-dimensions towards the adoption of a single flat surface area and towards painting. On reflection every thing I did with colour was relevant to that future development.

At the end of the Oakville project I returned to my former place of residence, to London (Ontario). An inner spiritual searching had come to the fore, gradually becoming as important, if not more so, than any outwardly expressive interests. Over the next two years I began to find myself more frequently in the Religion and Philosophy departments of bookshops and the public library. Writings like the Hindu text of Krishna - the Bhagavad-Gita, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, theological discourses by the Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin, and all kinds of related things passed through my hands, but not always easy reading. Zen Buddhism I found more accessible, and the novels of Hermann Hesse³ even more so and I related strongly to his stories exploring self-knowledge and spirituality. However, the personal creative process in which I seemed to naturally invest so much thought and energy continued to have a stronger hold on me than many of these literary expressions of faith or religion, or other authors' searching for authenticity and meaning in their own lives.

An on-going degree of restlessness found some temporary relief in another change of environment, this time led by my own volition and perhaps with the thought that this might help provide an answer to my unresolved thoughts and feelings. I had visited the west coast of Canada in 1970 for a short holiday but this time, at the end of January 1973, I travelled as far as Edmonton, Alberta, and there for a few months worked in a commercial stone yard and learned something of cutting marble and granite. Some fresh sculptural ideas formed in my mind but although I had previously done some stone carving I didn't pursue the activity further in any personal way. My interests were transforming slowly towards a more two-dimensional expression, making collages, combining pieces of cut or torn coloured paper and highlighting different areas with oil pastels. It was a medium I was gradually beginning to embrace. When I returned to England in the late summer of 1974 these little sticks of colour had in fact more or less completely replaced chisels and rasps as my essential expressive tools.

Returning and rest

Several factors seem to have been conspiring together to prompt my return to England. Various alternatives had presented themselves in terms of a fresh direction or the resolution to an indefinable longing for something beyond my immediate circumstances and expression, but I

had responded with little conviction. However, in accepting the possibility that my years in Canada were coming to an end the prospect of returning to England seemed to hold both an element of adventure and at the same time a strange kind of peace. A decision was made. Thus, a few months later and after a second crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, I arrived at Southampton aboard the S.S. Stefan Batory on the morning of 24 August 1974, no longer with the identity of a sculptor, but simply as an artist, caught up in what I might have described at that time as a quest for truth.

A mild kind of culture shock was perhaps inevitable with this relocation to the place of my birth, though unanticipated. Before returning to England I had been living again in London (Ontario), a prosperous city, at that time a major Canadian art centre, in circumstances far removed from that in which I now found myself. Also, in England, as in so many other older countries, there is a depth to our heritage, that perhaps here we tend to take for granted, which does not exist in Canada to anywhere near the same degree. This serves as a backdrop to a different way of life than what is intrinsic to a very young and vibrant country, with vast natural resources and looking optimistically towards the future.

Nevertheless, in Wisbech the historic environment and local events awakened memories from my past and no doubt I derived some comfort from these things. Making fresh associations was also stimulating and this helped to dispel some feelings of separation from friends and familiarities in Canada. I discovered a little concert that was taking place on Saturday afternoons at the local parish church in the form of the organist playing through his repertoire. This was a pleasurable musical event. The library provided some continuity in my reading; the museum (one of my favourite haunts as a child) some aesthetic and other cultural input to my life and the bar at the Rose and Crown the occasional rum and coke!

March the following year saw the first of some relatively large oil pastel drawings from my hand. In terms of my previous work with the medium this was a quite a new development. Over the years there had been a general tendency towards an increasing largeness of scale with my sculpture but the two-dimensional work by comparison had been much more limited in size. Here now was a substantial new beginning and initially I was optimistic. The first piece was circular in form, measuring about a metre in diameter, and in its making was a fulfilling and intense release of expressive energy. Instinctively and without any conscious reference I called it *The Word*. As it happened there were five pieces in this new series, produced over a three-month period. They were separated, somewhat strangely, by intervals of time that seemed to embody a sense of apprehension that intensified as the weeks passed. My creative process itself was also changing. Formerly, in Canada it had been a fairly consistent activity. Now it seemed restrained and then released in a concentrated way into a single work.

The second and third panels of the series were similar in actual area to the circle although rectangular in shape. The fourth, in the form of a triptych, was somewhat smaller in size but experienced in an equally intense way, and its mood quite beyond my comprehension. I could neither resolve the feelings that had arisen within me or come to terms with this group of coloured drawings that had come from my hand over the passing weeks. However, I was sustained somehow to continue, as if being drawn myself towards a new place, captivated by what was being revealed in these compelling abstract forms.

On reflection, now forty years later, I am able perhaps to look upon all those early years rather objectively, from another perspective. At the time it would have been impossible to discern the relevance of that particular period to my life as a whole or to define my needs with any clarity. The general pattern of my existence might well have been seen in terms of a personal creative

journey, but formerly it had been experienced in a different kind of cultural and physical environment and within the context of relationships with other people. In living alone and aware of the very distinctive change in my circumstances from my way of life in Canada I'm sure that some of the uncomfortable feelings I encountered were intensified in this isolation. And yet, without that time of solitude, the demands of the searching upon which my life had centred so much of its energy may not have been fulfilled.

Early in the morning of 24th June I stood before a tall narrow panel prepared during the previous week for a new piece of work. I was refreshed from having spent the weekend visiting family and friends in different places.

However, on that Tuesday morning, in spite of feeling well and having a kind of acceptance about where I was and with what I was doing, as I faced that panel my whole existing creative world just seemed to collapse around me. It was impossible to continue. I recall throwing my hands up in the air in some kind of act of resignation, surrender, submission, call it what you will. And then, within a most sublime moment, found myself quite peacefully picking up a small stick of oil pastel and move towards the panel.

As I made those first strokes with the colour, so the word, the name of Jesus formed on my lips. Immediately my sense of awareness was altered. The veiled truth of my years of seeking and of the gentle stirring at the heart through so much artistic activity was revealed simultaneously within me, in the spoken name of Jesus and in the emerging image. And, in saying the name of Jesus several times I perceived my whole being as though enveloped in a purity of light and power of love, more than I could have ever imagined or call to mind again the magnitude of its dimensions. And so it was that I entered into a different place and time, into another landscape.

Part Two

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

T.S.Eliot⁴

On Reflection...

After two more days of a continuing revelation, during which time the visual image effortlessly materialized on the panel, there remained not only a profound sense of rest but also an awareness of having entered into an unfathomable mystery in which, or so it seemed, no further realization was necessary or even possible.

Over many years a developing personal concept of identity had centred, perhaps quite naturally, on an inner need for self-expression. Certainly I had justified my existence through creativity in art and found within the making process a fulfilling degree of completeness. There was now however a keenly felt separation from this established perception of self and of thinking and working. In purely human terms the former quest had come to an end. My earlier understanding of identity was overturned. Among other things a surprising new condition came to the fore in which my awareness of *being* was something altogether apart from its former related and tangible act of *doing*. Without any immediate verbal interpretation or articulation of this inwardly realized state (which came only much later) I was left in a sense of awe, which under the circumstances was perhaps not surprising.

In some rudimentary respects the experience was akin to that venture made as a teenager of crossing the Atlantic and the process of beginning a new life in Canada. This time however, in this new situation, changes within my heart and mind were affecting both my self-awareness and my perception of the world around, not vice versa. And I had come not simply to the shores of another country but to a different kind of environment altogether, immeasurable by the limitations of present frames of reference or language.

The process of adjustment (or readjustment) to daily life was not particularly straightforward and long before I found myself on the road to Little Gidding and from there to the beginning of a fresh visual expression there were other demands to be met, and also, thankfully, a few supportive friendships with which to engage. One of these was with a local church minister, who, as it transpired, and quite inadvertently, contributed to setting my life in the particular direction it has now taken over the past few decades.

At first, on hearing my story and seeing the work that had come from my hand, he remarked that I would never paint again (in actual practice one 'draws' with oil pastels). This aside, a number of short conversations seemed to nourish a gentle light arising on the horizon of my deliberations. Perhaps his sensing my need for a time of sharing in the life of a small community, rather than in the prayerful solitude in which I seemed to find myself, led to the subject of Little Gidding being raised. Eventually, during the hot summer of 1976, I headed in its direction.

Life in the community was lightly structured. Informal gatherings in the chapel and times of bible study were incorporated with the sharing of meals and recreation in the daily routine. And then one day, whilst sitting quietly at a table in a room set aside as a library, I took up a pencil and on a piece of paper found myself sketching a small square, about a half a centimetre in dimension.

At first there was little appreciation of this being a genesis-type moment. The square was, in essence, simply a doodle, and if I remember correctly I made no conscious association between this and things past or with any further expressive work. As far as an artistic direction was concerned I had abandoned the possibility of continuing on such a course. I seem to have believed that my life and any creative thought or action was now somehow reassigned towards a different kind of purpose and that this had superseded the outward visual activity – in a similar way in which this in itself had upstaged my earlier interests in music, sometime after my arrival in Canada all those years earlier. Prayer had become important to me but apart from not yet comprehending its nature in terms of an attitude or a place to be as much as (or even exclusively as) an expression, I also hadn't ever contemplated a possible future of working as a painter (in spite of the gradual addition of colour into my expressive work) or that these things could ever combine, with integrity and purpose. With my deficiency in colour recognition the whole idea of proceeding in this direction would have been questionable anyway, if not exactly risible. (I recall the earlier comment from my school art teacher). Moreover, in the light of what has transpired more recently, given my former attitude towards art and the uniqueness of the handcrafted object, the electronic manipulation and possible multiplication of images wouldn't have featured at all in my mind as a future and viable personal creative process, let alone one that I would eventually explore with some dedication. The suggestion from a friend just a few years ago that in my sketching the first single small square God had given me a pixel, would have been incomprehensible had it been spoken anywhere near that time. Even so, a small mark made with a pencil on a piece of paper had also left an impression on my mind. Shortly after returning to Wisbech I tentatively sketched some more small squares and then, with coloured crayons, began to combine a number of them within the space of a few inches.

For all its simplicity what may have been likened to a step taken by a child proved a difficult course of action. (And it is perhaps worth noting here that it is relatively easy to take such a step; the real challenge comes with staying in the direction upon which one has set out.) There were personal difficulties to overcome in terms of relationships and the environment in which I was living. One definable issue was the awareness of a new identity, in respect of a newfound faith, and, in relation to this, of coming to terms with the separation between life and activity that I had encountered immediately following the revelation.

In this regard I tended to believe that my spiritual journey, which was earlier so caught up with its artistic counterpart to be almost indistinguishable from it (and then perceived as being separated from it completely) was finding a fresh manifestation, although now no longer confined to this work or defined by it. But, given that during the previous year I had allowed myself to fall into a state of denial over any further artistic activity it was all too easy to lose the small patch of ground that had been restored. Some earlier negative comments that I had encountered from within the Christian community about art and faith had impacted upon uncertainties of my own about creative language in general, which had left the likeness of a cloud hanging over any clear vision. This would all take some years to disperse. And so, perhaps partly as a result of these unhelpful thoughts (and their origins) missing from my overall engagement with the new work (still very much in an embryonic form) was, for one thing, an appropriate respect for the context in which the square had so recently appeared on my creative horizon – that of community. For a brief period of time I had participated, even sensed a kind of ‘belonging’ in the sharing with others at Little Gidding. It was *that* landscape, that of being part of something wider and deeper, and its significance not only to the initiation of the work but also to its continuation, that I had failed to discern and embrace. This was an essential component in the given new framework for a fresh course of action. Only later did I begin to see that it is the sum of all things that is important. Relationships are established as well as the work. They go hand in hand. For the sake of wholeness, everything, and everyone is connected and taken into account, although held lightly, for there is one greater who is above all.

The Colour

During the late autumn of that year (1976) a second short break from Wisbech included my first ever visit to Scotland. It was a rewarding trip. Apart from the refreshing change of environment from the Cambridgeshire Fens it was memorable for an entirely different reason. I had found myself engaged in conversation with a minister after a church service I had attended, and in relating to him the events that had recently transpired he expressed the opinion that, in becoming a believer, all which was creative in my life was intact but now restored to its proper place, and whatever concept of creativity I had was being redeveloped in the light of this newfound faith.

At the time I’m sure I didn’t fully appreciate the extent of what was being offered. Nevertheless, the words were energizing. As I returned to Wisbech, the idea came to me to interpret a portion of text from the book of Revelation (which I had been reading) consciously working with the visual language that had been developing prior to the manifestation of the square.

On one hand it may have seemed natural to consider the biblical text as a source of subject material for a new expression. The thought had occurred to me. My hesitancy to actually proceed in this direction was due partly to the fact that I was, at this time, still concerned about the merits of an on-going artistic activity in relation to a Christian identity. Certainly I was

aware of my own inability for the kind of work that I imagined. It seemed impossible. However, an interpretation of the opening verses of chapter four from the book of Revelation on a large oval shaped panel served as something of a breakthrough. After this work other texts provided the inspiration for a number of new pieces. The largest of these, approximately 180 X 300 cm. in 1978 derived from a vision related in the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah. But to some extent this kind of large-scale work overshadowed the entirely new development with the small square. A considerable time would pass before this would in itself become the dominant motif in my visual output.

The Isaiah piece was itself upstaged, in a manner of speaking, in 1978, when I married and entered into a relationship that in its own way continues to impact upon how my thinking and working evolves within the whole context of life in its fullness. And, although my use of colour has to some extent been a story of its own, going back many years, it has certainly continued to mature, and also, after the birth of our son, taking on a further manner of expression with the digital technology. All this has transpired in the light of other associations as well, and underpinning everything the inner spiritual path upon which my attention has been held, and without which very little would now seem viable.

To return for a moment to an earlier comment about my use of colour, or with colour vision deficiency, to give the condition its proper designation, it places me in approximately 8% of the male population (according to research) that have a problem with accurately identifying some colours in the visible spectrum.⁵ The condition varies in degree from one individual to another and can be mild, in which colours might only be confused when they have the same brightness, to extreme, in which one sees only in shades of grey – true colour-blindness. Besides my having the most commonly inherited type of red/green dysfunction (with which, on a practical level for instance I find it difficult to see poppies in fields or some varieties of apples on trees) I am aware that my own deficiency extends into confusing blue with pink or purple, green with brown, and quite often grey with blue, pink or green, and even at times green with yellow.

It perhaps goes without saying that an individual having colour vision deficiency will see the world somewhat differently from others who have normal colour vision, as well as from those whose deficiency differs in intensity. Of course this will be true for anyone with any particular impairment. But further, in my own experience with this particular anomaly, I very rarely “read” the colour of an object when it is observed, or retain that information. The exception to this would be that I have learned that fire engines and post boxes are red!

With my first use of oil pastels in 1971 and for a period of about five years I had worked from a box of only ten or twelve sticks of colours. Then very gradually, perhaps as I became more confident with their use, the numbers of colours began to increase on my palette to 20 and then after several more years had passed there were 120, with different shades of individual colours. And also by this time, in the early 1980’s, two different manners of working co-existed, and in terms of scale the work it was now almost identical in size.

In 1986, the year after our son was born (which initiated a new era for our lives) and after fifteen years of using oil pastels I switched abruptly to using acrylic paints. Not only did the prospect of becoming a painter enter my mind but also the potential of the little square began to be realised in a singular way. Our social relationships broadened when we began to meet with a new local Christian fellowship and I had joined a London based association for Christians involved in the arts, which offered sympathetic friendship and support, if only from a distance. This was a very much a time of change and exploration and growth in various aspects of life.

Taking up with the acrylic paints also marked the end of my former manner of working with the oil pastels that I had embraced again after the relatively successful Revelation IV in 1976. Without any experience of using acrylics, or even simply of painting – except at school some thirty years earlier - it was a matter of jumping in at the deep end. A friend, aware of my activity and much more knowledgeable about these things, kindly bought me a paintbrush that was more appropriate for the medium than the one I had initially acquired. Having the right tools for the job makes the task easier.

It soon became apparent that my expressive space had altered, although nothing like that involved with using a computer, which would happen a further twenty years along the line. At least this was a tactile activity, an involvement with real material. Now mixed with a palette knife and applied with a brush, colour took form on a solid board, prepared for the occasion. I discovered how the wet colours darkened slightly as they dried, and once dry (within a couple of minutes) were firmly attached to the surface of the panel. Oil pastel, on the other hand, is very easily removed, at any time.

In respect of using the acrylic, the decision making now had to be more precise (if over-painting and the resultant variable thickness and intensity of paint on the surface of the panel was to be avoided) a similar practice to that involved in the process of carving wood or stone where material once removed is not replaceable. I made samples of every colour I used before applying them so as to gauge their effect against other colours within a given space and I did this on small strips of card on which I also identified the colours involved, in the event I wanted to use them again at a later date. Often I also made charts of the paintings, identifying the colours by their position on the panel. It slowed down the whole making process, but there was no rush. A work in oil pastel would evolve over a few weeks, an acrylic only through several months.

There were adjustments to be made but the long-term working process was agreeable. One thing seemed sure, a totally new arena of expression had opened up, not only with using a paintbrush for the first time in my artistic practice but also of the availability of a multitude of colours and their variations that I had never before found at my fingertips. At first this was a somewhat daunting prospect. Eventually I would learn to mix colours of my own and adjust to a fresh manner of working. And, besides the actual physical change of process, I was aware that my approach to the activity as a whole had also evolved towards being more fully engaged with a broadening and challenging sense of purpose. Through a lengthy and progressive reformation of my life and work I was seeing things come from my hands I would have never thought possible. Twenty years earlier I was just getting to grips with becoming a sculptor! There was more to come.

By the mid 1990's the numbers of colours I mixed for a painting had gradually increased until almost all the colours I used were combinations of two or more separate ones, rather than, as my lack of experience and confidence allowed, just tints produced from a single colour. My interest in and response to colour undoubtedly enlarged, and in one painting, as an experiment, I consciously separated blues and purples, working from the names of the colours on the tubes of paint. Prior to this my inclination had always been to intermix them, as if they were variations of the same colour, something I continue to do within the digital environment.

The borders of my once familiar and comfortable colour landscape continued to extend. With the encouragement of my son (whom, as he was growing, seemed to have a natural affinity with all things electronic) I gradually entered into working with a computer and the area of

manipulating virtual images via a mouse and a keyboard. This development was concurrent with a rethinking of my whole philosophy towards the artistic process. On one hand, even though as far as a natural progression of my work with the small square was concerned it was logical to pursue the refinement of line that the technology could easily deliver, on the other it did seem to demand a strange kind of detachment from the making experience, something which had always been integral to my life and work. It took a while to learn that part of my unease was a matter of unfamiliarity with the technology. As this hurdle was overcome so I began to regard the computer simply as a different kind of tool, with a variety of applications.

As far as adjusting to the vast array of computer-generated colours available at the touch of a button, and the ways in which these could be manipulated, it all represented a quantum leap within my artistic experience. For a few years it was sufficient to explore some aspects of the technology and learn slowly (and through sheer frustration) not to demand too much at once from my very limited understanding and appreciation for the new tools at my disposal. Beyond all the early experimentation my first significant step forward was in making a series of prints in which images were built up from rectangular shaped gradients of individual colours, as I mentioned earlier in my text. (The idea originated from the strips of sample colours I had mixed for painting with the acrylics, about 150 of which at some point I had combined into a small assemblage.) However, a more substantial step occurred, in relation to the square form, when, in the process of digitally reconstructing some early oil pastels from photographs, a different characterization of colour was realized in the resulting images. In this process individual squares maintained something of their own unique character rather than the uniform flatness of those that were completely computer generated.⁶

Part Three

One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.

André Gide⁷

Closing the Circle

Due to the manner in which my life has taken its particular formation it may seem natural to say that I have found it expedient to believe that to whatever degree of understanding there is of the purpose of life and work there is always an inexplicable element of truth that remains beyond one's grasp until that is found, in the first place, in the pre-eminence and presence of God.

Further, with regard to the work I call collectively Foursquare, I can pin-point its physical origin by place and time, and also chart its development, but without this particular acknowledgement there can only be, for my self at least, a partial answer to the question (referred to at the beginning of my essay) as to where it comes from.

The existence of the Foursquare series is undoubtedly connected to a unique blend of circumstances, relationships, thoughts and feelings, and even the music I listen to, the books I read and many other things besides, that all, in their own mysterious way, feed into its development.

But how is my life motivated in the first place that it should find a manner of expression characterized as it is not only by abstraction but certainly, for a considerable time now, by centred, geometric and variegated fields of colour? And what (if any) distinction can be made between the initiation of this body of work with one square and that of seeing its multiplication

to many tens of thousands of squares in a myriad of combinations, through the various means employed during this period of my life? Can these things be known explicitly? One might ask more generally of artistic activity itself, that it should exist in any form. Is it simply the outcome of playful improvisation and exercise of innate talent? Or, is it perhaps the by-product of transfigured emotion? For some individuals this may be the case.

Personally I tend to believe that finding comprehensive answers to these questions requires extending the subject of enquiry to a much larger sphere, specifically to the relationship between a Creator God and the whole universe as an expression of his being. But this is a big subject, and would perhaps double the length of my essay. However, in reading into my own experience I perceive that all these realities are inextricably and even consequentially related. From my present perspective any attempt at an explanation, any evaluation without an acknowledgement and involvement of God, would be incomplete.

To return to the beginning of my story and to the question that was asked about the origin of my work with the square form I must add that this took place before the series had attained its digital outworking. Nevertheless, my worldview⁸ was sufficiently in place enough to provide at least a partial account of its history, within the bounds of my understanding.

It may be a matter of conjecture to suggest that my present viewpoint was undergoing an unarticulated formation over a long period of time before it had any conscious realization, but in any sequence of events there is continuity with all that has gone before even if the links seem tentative. Comparative states in a progression may be as simple as a flower emerging from its bulb or as complex as a caterpillar being transformed into a butterfly.⁹ And so, although I still consider the work with the square form as a new branch of my visual output (as something introduced when it was not previously evident) there are surely points of continuity with the past, with life and activity, even if there has been experientially some considerable distance between the earlier period of direct carving in the round for instance and the present digital manipulation of colour into print. Just as for the caterpillar and the butterfly my own DNA remains the same, regardless of the changes that have occurred in my life and the work that has evolved alongside.

At the present time and in terms of the direction the Foursquare series has taken within the digital environment I am aware that my earlier worldview has been both modified and enriched. I have also come to regard the very first square sketched at Little Gidding in 1976 in terms of a God given "pixel" (as my friend had suggested) in a basic form, awaiting its potential cultivation as a motif or vehicle for a new expression.

Finally, in approaching a new piece of work, the starting point for all the oil pastels and acrylic paintings was a drawn grid on the panel. Within the digital environment and manner of working the pre-drawn grid is dispensed with. Rather, the work is composed square by square of colour, a process more closely related to the very earliest small compositions made with pencil crayons almost forty years ago.

When it comes to the coloured image as a whole, to the evolving of an actual work, then in a very real sense I'm not sure exactly how this all comes together. This seems to be as true now within the digital workspace as it was for the oil pastels and the acrylics. If the work goes well then it seems more like being a participant in a making process rather than having an awareness of any personal achievement. On the other hand I might, at times, also find myself wrestling with the work, shaping and reshaping the emerging form. In any event I have learned that two things are also required, regardless of the means involved, and that is the rightful acknowledgement of the Giver, and an appropriate respect for the gift as something received.

One further question now arises in relation to my adoption of the digital media and all I have discussed, and that is whether or not this development represents the final stage of my working with the square or, as I commented earlier in my essay, is the technology involved simply a process for attaining geometric clarity - the outer edge of expression as far as precision of line is concerned? For the time being I prefer not to set a limitation to my own perceptions but at the present the digital process seems to offer a potential environment for the ultimate maturing in expression of that first small square. And yet as life goes on so an altogether new work may emerge, beyond the combination of media or transition of the square into completely different materials.

Notes:

¹ Eugene H. Peterson - a quotation from the author's contribution to the illustrated book: *In a word see what you believe*

² Little Gidding - a Christian Community, near Huntingdon, originally founded in the early part of the 17th Century.

³ German author (1877-1962) of *Siddhartha*, *Steppenwolf*, *The Glass Bead Game*, and others.

⁴T.S. Eliot: from "Little Gidding", *Four Quartets*

⁵I am also categorized as being an anomalous trichromat, a term relating to the Trichromatic Theory of Colour Vision. The theory explains that there are three types of cone receptors in the eye that convey colour information, each cone responsive to a different wavelength within the visible spectrum. In the anomaly one of the cones doesn't function correctly.

⁶There are dozens of filters and textures that can be applied for effects within graphics programs that are entirely computer generated. I have however generally been inclined away from their application to my personal approach to working with the computer. Instead I have adopted a process of sampling coloured squares from oil pastels and acrylic paintings, which I then manipulate within the Photoshop program.

⁷"André Gide" at quotesarchive.com

⁸My framework or appreciation for life and work, not only of how I approach my work but indeed of the whole world around, also goes through subtle changes but also has at its heart the knowledge of God as the primary source of life and inspiration. "In the beginning God..." (Genesis chapter 1 verse 1.)

⁹As far as I understand it this remarkable metamorphosis takes place through the action of some cells that have the ability to turn on or turn off genes at different stages in the insect's life cycle.

