

A (RE)VIEW OF SALVADOR DALI'S CRUCIFIXION (CORPUS HYPERCUBUS)

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*IF WE PASS SUDDENLY FROM THE ONE STATE TO THE OTHER,
EVEN WITHOUT SUPPOSING THESE TO BE THE EXTREMES,
BUT ONLY, PERHAPS, A CHANGE FROM BRIGHT TO DUSKY,
THE DIFFERENCE IS REMARKABLE, AND WE FIND THAT THE
EFFECTS LAST FOR SOME TIME.*

—JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE, THEORY OF COLOURS

Last December, unless you've been sleeping under a rock on a hillside in Siberia, you heard that they found a window to the afterlife. No, it hadn't been Heaven in a handbag, Limbo on a lapel, or Fire and Brimstone in a fondue set. The void took its shape, some shape, in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City on Salvador Dali's *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)*. Large enough for a few fingers, but too tight for a formed fist, a lot has been attempted in the presence of Oblivion and even more has been said about it. People have slept near it, sung, prayed, and tried to kiss it as if it would claim what came from the tongue. They put it to the pope's face, and people wondered what celebrities would do in front of it; what sort of venom it would bring out from the president or how much more rambunctious rock stars would be at its fount. There are pages upon pages of internet speculation, art and philosophical dissertations, short stories, movies in production, and scientific research abound. But not one person yet has thought of reviewing the Eternal Night. It feels like I am the first to think that since Oblivion is part of an art piece, it is therefore art and open to critical analysis. There is no one more fitting than me to be the first to review the afterlife. And if you have been one of the few to not make the trip and avoid its presence, do not be fooled from what you hear from the fake news outlets—mostly evangelically-backed—its depth is not illusory, its silence is not passive,

and its chosen vessel doesn't appear to be entirely random.

For those in need of a reminder, the Dali in question (76 ½ x 48 ¾"), which depicts Christ on the polyhedron net of a tesseract, is his attempt at quantum mysticism, a term he coined that fuses mathematics, science, and religion to create a unique interpretation of Christ's crucifixion. Levitating before this hypercube—that of a four-dimensional form—Christ's body is impeccable, healthy, and athletic, bearing no skirmishes, scrapes, punctures, or scars, as well as none of the thorns or nails we are familiar with. Below Christ is a figure witnessing The Lord's triumph over corporeal harm. The background is that of a barren landscape and a chessboard floor.

What is portrayed within the scene is essentially playing with the idea of how God exists in a space that is incomprehensible to us, and the hypercube and its four spatial dimensions, which are equally impossible to grasp, show how something can be made more relatable when given human shape. Cue the coming of nothingness into our existence, though it has gone by many names including *The Black Dark*, *The Pre-Universe Patch*, *The Eye of God*, *The Synecdoche*, *The Vast Ordinary Night*, *Nihil Negativium*, and so on. A museum guest noticed the corruption on December 13th and requested a curator take a more scrupulous look at the potential defect on the canvas. It appeared that the Caravaggesque lighting that theatrically and typically enveloped the Christ figure had gone a wee-bit darker.

In line with paintings like Jan Van Eyck's *The Man in the Turban*, Francisco de Zurbaran's *Christ on the Cross*, and Caravaggio's *Saint Jerome Writing*, the upper left corner of Dali's work appeared to happen surrounded by darkness in the form of a splotch of odd ink as if its Baroque horizon had been an accident. As is typical with dark backgrounds, a fissiparous anomaly had taken place—separating the paint and re-interweaving it, giving a darker hachure map-like quality to the work. But something was different about it. This patch was so dark that it seemed impossible to view as if you couldn't actually see it. "It was no use knowing / their own nothingness," D.H. Lawrence once poeticized and this appeared to be the case.

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Still, the Met knew they had something special on their hands, and the effects of the change were felt immediately when a curator quit, three fights broke out within the vicinity while security guards fell into sleeping spells or broke down crying. Word spread quickly through art's alleyways of a work of Dali's becoming so invidious and morbid that it deserved its viral status, essentially injecting zoccs of adrenaline straight into the sternum of the dying art community.

Within weeks, the French were calling it *Le Néant*, the Japanese *Nishida*, Buddhists *śūnyatā*, and here in America, *The Splotch* picked up steam, as if we were afraid to give it the power it so rightfully deserved.

Before its discovery, the darkest substance known to man was the expensive and synthetically produced VANTablack [Vertically Aligned Nano Tube Arrays], a forest of carbon nanotubes that captured roughly 99.965% of radiation in the visible spectrum. The Splotch was tested for its ability to capture light. Spectrophotometry results indicated that The Splotch absorbed 99.996% of light with a margin of error of +/- 0.004%. Experts in the field explained that when light strikes the painting, it bounces around within the unknown substance and doesn't deflect; it traps and most likely dissipates off as thermal energy, allowing light photons in, but offering no chance of escape¹. The discovery of The Splotch's ability to absorb light was far-reaching in terms of applicability. The whole world wanted to know what sort of power there was in total darkness. One of the very first institutions to contact The Met was NASA who were hoping to study the substance in terms of its application toward creating an incredibly powerful telescope, infrared camera, or even solar technology.

Before officially being declared a semi-graspable view of our upcoming eternal nothingness, reactions, beliefs, and opinions were

¹ The spectra were run on the entire light wavelength, from 250.0 to 900.0 nanometers (nm). Ultraviolet is in the 260-400 nm range, visible is in the 350 to 750 nm range, and infrared is higher up there. Results indicated that there was full interference over the entire visible spectrum. Nearly 100% transmission was stunted throughout. Attenuation coefficient, molar absorptivity, and all other absorption coefficients indicate an anomaly in electromagnetic absorption properties. Further discussion of the painting's properties requires knowledge on Beer-Lambert law and other physics postulates.

split on what The Splotch was, and nearly everyone felt they had to come see it. It was a strange reaction to witness such little fear to what death brought us because, as I have now felt myself, the stain and its implications distort and even annihilate the essential matrices through which we understand our reality and its complications. It's a real bummer at times but access to The Splotch provides a therapeutic function: adding value to human finitude. It has since been most often compared to keeping your eyes open in a dark room. At first, it brought some fear because nearly everyone can relate, I'm sure, to feeling "afraid of the dark." Maybe it's the dark itself, other times it might be some unnameable force within it, but it is especially frightful when it occupies an apparatus it has no right to inhabit. "Wake and feel the fell of dark, not day," shouted Gerard Manley Hopkins. "What hours, O what black hours we have spent / This night!" With the word "darkness" nearly always comes a negative connotation. Yes, of course, dark matter and other forms of light's spectrum are part of science but it also comes into play in both a theological and moral sense as well. But most importantly, darkness is the absence of something, light the presence of it, which makes it a paradox because darkness both is and is not. Dionysius struggled with this concept and believed in a "ray of divine darkness" (Θείου σκοτους ακτινα). There is a sense of total privation—those who have stared far too long at The Splotch have been known to remove their clothing, shout their deepest darkest secrets into the void, and perform other acts far worse such as copulation, defecation, and other generally ecstatic Dionysian-style reveling. Maybe it's not only the privacy felt in the dark but that we are fascinated by that which opposes us. Why wouldn't our diurnal nature be interested in the aspects of the night? And that is the allure of The Splotch—it cuts through the marbling that veins our lives and it intrudes on our sense of space, of what is vertical or horizontal and our ability to decode the images that form in our retina. It whispers to us, "Don't bother me and I won't bother you." But unfortunately, this has not been the case.

It was only a week before I started writing this that a whole cult committed suicide in synchronicity, "head[s] swinging from swollen

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straps," as Hart Crane so gracefully put it, in front of The Splotch as if in some religious ritual involving unfoldable galleys. It claimed 24 lives and many before that.

Suicides weren't even the worst part. It is all too disturbing to think what has been ruined by human experiment and greed, human anger and confusion. The Splotch, on numerous occasions, had seen attempts at its destruction whether through fire, acid, or holy water attack. All had failed to do harm. Only then was it moved and placed in a new wing also due to congestion and prolonged campouts by museum patrons, but the effect worsened. What can only be described as terrifying and sublime, it appeared that under the correct lighting conditions, the spells only became stronger. The lighting, far too powerful, now made it a hazard for human consumption. Several aestheticians were hired and promptly quit because they felt they could not properly illuminate the painting in a way that romanticized its features without causing total chaos around it.

Eventually the painting was moved again where it was given its own newly constructed wing with extra security parameters taken at every skip and step. No longer would guests come within inches of almost quite literally fucking The Splotch. God forbid. The plan was executed with the idea in mind that time and natural light would dull the colors out and therefore dull excitement surrounding the piece. If The Splotch was indeed just a defect, it would fall bereft to time's hand like all other colors and substances. That was, if it even made it that far. Time and time again, religious zealots and chromophobic prelates came to attack The Splotch in its place.

In a state of panic, the world argued over whether to put a piece of fiberglass over it. Some were infuriated at the thought of detracting from its overall chiaroscuro. Though that debate, still fresh, hangs in the air, the museum, fearing the loss of this treasure, agreed to allow it to be tested by scientists. No researcher or group before, had yet proposed one of several pertinent analytical grids that could be used to define the tinctorial parameters of what it was. First, they started by attempting to see what was in that paint, and it was just that: paint. From analysis of the back of the canvas, any substance acquired came from the original oil on canvas and they made no scrape or chemical fissure on the actual

anomaly—its contents always registering as nothing. So then the question became—what was on the back of *The Splotch*? Scientists uncovered, between the oil and mysterious substance, microbes that could live without any form of sunlight or oxygen; they have labeled the group of bacteria as autolithotrophes, which usually live within the deep recessions of rock, deriving their nutrients from their hosts. Specks of other extremophiles such as *desulfotomaculum*, *paracoccus denitrificans*, *bacillus boroniphilus*, and *spinoloricus cinzia*, along with other forms of facultative anaerobes and obligate anaerobes were also discovered and tested. Some of these forms have been proven to be feeding off of the lack of oxygen and light. It was only after the stumping of the scientific community that both sides started to believe we'd torn a hole in this life and seen our fate as punishment for it. Even environmentalists believed this was the Eternal Night's response to us burning the forests in order to better see the world and ourselves.

For the purpose of analysis, we should regard *The Splotch* and the painting as separate acts of creation whether or not that be the case. But I began to wonder: how do you review a nothing? Does its being on an object therefore make it a something? How can nothing be on a something? Well, I can also ask, as we have been for centuries, how something came from nothing, can't I? How do you review an absence from human, post-modern *weltschmerz*? Maybe the problem, to begin with, was our way of reading it, or misreading it as a philosophical endeavor because, do not be mistaken, it doesn't suffer from the pillars of philosophy, but I will make it suffer my critical approach, my way of interpretation because I've despised Dali's popularity (and those horrid knees he painted onto our Lord and Savior), yet I've imbibed its form and if this ends my career in doggerel and japery, then so be it.

A contemporary cynic like myself might respond that it's bunkum to look at the interpretive frameworks, and that any attempt to do so would null and void the essence of what *The Splotch* is trying to be—not for some, not for most, for all—for every single thing that will ever live and die, but it seems certain, after seeing it in person, that this specific Dali was chosen as a home for Oblivion. Art critic and poet Kelly Grovier said, "There is a meditative intensity to *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)*

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The painting seems to have cracked the link between the spirituality of Christ's Salvation and the materiality of geometric and physical forces. It appears to bridge the divide that many feel separate science from religion." It was just that: Dali trying to have his painting leave the surface and enter space and this form of geometry could be salvation for all. "The tesseract crucifix would seem to extend beyond the dimensions of this world into planes unknown," says Grovier.

Before I saw the darkness, and having spent half my career by José Ortega y Gasset's side, I was ready to simply dismiss it as a mockery of light. But once in front of it, time was like a sense blocked by severe nerve damage. Once I left the premise to write, I again felt the dissolution of minutes as if I were in a vat of acid, slowly eroding away, watching all the years slip by and all romantic reveries of my once seemingly limitless future appear to acquire nothingness as their ground.

As I returned home, I came to think of images of black that came before it. Most attempts at capturing pure black like in Robert Fludd's *The Metaphysical, Physical, and Technical History of the Two Worlds, the Major as well as the Minor, Black Square* by Kazimir Malevich, and the enigmatic "black pages" from Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* seem to amount to a rote and barely viewable slog of hackneyed impersonations. Many will come here, stare, and immediately expect magic, and not one will be disappointed because The Splotch's precision makes its place in the annals of art history feel preordained. It breaks every rule of art, not as avant-garde posturing, but more because it cannot help itself. To tie this patch of Oblivion to task, to seek out its significance in everything, to take and never give back to it is all our mistake. The Splotch came sudden as a springboard and has no Test of Time to pass in order to remain. There is no survival of the fittest or gauntlet to be run by it. Long after the world explodes or becomes a wizened husk of itself will The Splotch, like a stain, stick to its spot in space.

Whoever added to the Dali, or if it was a time-sensitive composite of his own sly doing, they were never asked to construct an adequate philosophy—to write a manifesto on the back of the canvas on what The Splotch meant to convey and, for me, anonymity is a condition

of good art. A great sculpture by Rodin, even if etched with his name, intends, as a work of art, to lose the identity of the artist; it means not to represent him, but some two-dimensional version of Auguste that will, eventually, be forgotten.

The Splotch is the once-in-a-million-millennia synthesis of universal ideas and the biological empty set of each individual: a mouthpiece for letting every wanderer who casts out to know that this noumenal world was doomed from the get-go. Some may consider this changing of the guard an artistic travesty of apocalyptic proportions—or, at least, a shameless byproduct of too simple a metric, but if the foundations of Oblivion are simple, the grounds of Simplicity are fecund because there is actually some kismet at work here. Given its foreground, The Splotch lives somewhere between accident and spiritual sojourn which evokes feelings that maybe this next world is a world perfected and it takes on black.

The emptiness that Beckett imagined was omnipotent and very full and maybe we should be saying a sort of “amen” to that. Because there’s a small chance the darkness is divine—a superlative far beyond anything we would be able to understand. Keep thinking this way and you may console yourself endlessly. And like St. John of the Cross said, “For the intellect faith is also like a dark night.” So we go blindly because The Splotch is in some sense a most confusing funhouse mirror, everything falling into it in a way it begins to reflect itself. If it is filled with terror, we are terrifying; if beauty, we are beautiful. It is the impresario of our ideas and I shall simply suppose The Splotch came into existence so we can become aware of it, so that falling will become easier once we’ve jumped into its unselfish, swallowing hug. Some will continue to look upward as if God had not made mud into man and they will try to fish their souls from the swampy bottom as if all spirits were carp. But maybe it’s more like what Rilke said, that we are birds “let down on indifferent ponds,” without an instinct to just let go and this is part of the price we pay for being brained rather than finned or flown. Like Dali’s Christ, we have access into a triumph over corporeal harm—a portal in which to join the majority: a return to our ancestors, a gateway into the infinitely incorruptible insoluble variety. Or maybe we don’t. Who will really ever know?

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I'll enjoy my company here while I still can.

7 out of 10.