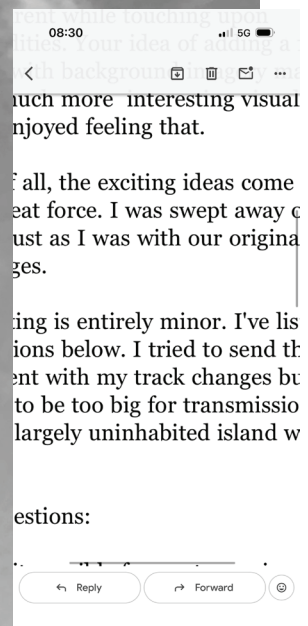


Notes from an ongoing
e-mail exchange between
scientist, Professor Brian
Swimme and Mary Ramsden



BRIAN: I have a question for you. "What is it you consider when you wonder about the impact of your work in terms of the effects it has on consciousness?" I myself think about this question of impact a lot. In particular, my own sense is that post-Newtonian science, contemporary art, music of all kinds, humanistic scholarship, and various mystical traditions offer forms of consciousness that humanity can enter, for the first time. And that these forms of consciousness are part of the remedy for our current impasse. I would love hearing you reflect on what you hope to awaken in others with your work.

MARY: With reference to Ilya Prigogine you say in your book *Cosmogenesis* 'the universe is an agent organising itself in order to develop greater complexity and consciousness...its future form demands that it be that way' and also therefore 'to allow the mathematics of the universe's beginning to think inside of us'.

With this in mind - when it comes to an awareness of consciousness - I think often about the recursive nature of trying to reply to beauty with beauty...

I think about how making paintings is about responding to something because of its effect and in knowing the response is coming from that effect I can be simultaneously aware of my intention to also create more of it. In that way i am working to pass the beauty on or contribute to some sort of universal growth energy.

I think about how the things I'm looking at from day to day live inside of me and I in them - how we inhabit one another in part because of our shared origins. As humans we are the only beings that can speak directly to that cohabitation through our developed minds. In knowing this privilege I feel almost duty-bound to nurture the fragments of perception like an ever-expanding map of understanding,



I glanced at the file and think it will be most enjoyable to add to and edit before you cut it down to something readable. I'm not sure if I'm right now but I'm just about to begin teaching an eleven week course and am scrambling to bring all the ideas together but I guess is that I'll be able to edit our raw dialogue in a couple of weeks. What fun that will be, to revisit our thinking!

I am happy to know you enjoyed my reflections on the effects of your work. I appreciate knowing that.

And Yes, Happy New Year!
Brian

From: Mary Ramsden
Sent: Monday, January 5, 2026 3:53 AM
To: Brian Swimme
Subject: Conversations with Brian 1

reverence and awe. Making paintings for me is a way to reply to the experience of being without attempting the impossible which would be to try to hold all of it as thought.

My work has always been concerned with light in a formal sense and so it seems remiss not to sustain an awareness of the fact that I am observing and manipulating light from time immemorial and to paint with the ever-present knowledge that these photons are the very same as those from the origin of the universe or 'the original light from the dawn of time'. In this way I feel I am engaging in a literal approach to 'combining autobiography and cosmology'. My interiority becomes the light and the light then reflects that back at me and the viewer.

When I start a painting I usually begin with an attitude I want to translate. It's a transformative urge that is really an energy related thing, closer to a bodily sensation or tone like trying to grip hold of something very tender or agitated or expansive. So when you ask what it is I hope to awaken in others it would be for them to access sensations through the looking. I realise this sounds prescriptive and it's not that they need to feel what I was drilling down on but more to tune into a primal responsive frequency that is likely to be outside of language or criticality. I want to tease out the raw commonality that binds us, to take the mind back into its source. I think to try and gesture towards that place through paint might be one way to foster an essential nature which, at this time is an instinct in danger of calcifying in all of us.

I watch a lot of slapstick videos, people jumping out at each other or similar. For a moment you witness someone yelp without any self-awareness as if the reaction comes from some elemental place inside of them. This is the door I'd like to try and open. Not the fear part (!) but the unguarded reflex that snaps you back to a deeper part of the self. Lately I've wondered about what form consciousness (or a thinking)

can take without language as for example an animal or a baby; to be sentient without attaching words and theories to an experience. We now know a pre-term baby can be found to show the same response to lullabies as can be seen in the brain activity after it is born. There is this inherent vibration or essential noise that is both outside of ourselves and somewhere within us. We are musical before we arrive into the world as it seems that this world is already internalised, as is the music. I want to try and facilitate a renewed trust in that knowing.

I think about all of the ways we as humans have made marks on (and been informed by) the place in which we have existed for millennia. We have always had the desire to unpack the universe onto the wall, to point at the naturalistic, the celestial, the incomprehensible, perhaps as a way to ground these mysteries and bring them closer to the eye or make sense of them for our fellow man. And did this begin in an attempt to (aside from sharing practical hunting knowledge), draw the invisible thread that states that thing is us and we are it? To fuse the relationship between knowledge and devotion so they become indistinguishable? When the Sumerians etched cuneiform shapes onto stone did that urge arise from an advanced understanding of the unity shared with the calendars and constellations depicted or simply as a way to communicate the experience of being in our collective space/ time? As you say, a kind of 'symbolic consciousness'

It's so vital to be aware that 'thousands and millions of our ancestors had created symbols that engendered new symbols that led to the symbols before me.' This force of history behind us moves me to reconsider paintings not as 'inert objects' but as vibrating active superclusters of light and awareness that carry this weight of existence from the very beginning of it all and can morph, absorb and transmit a sense of indivisibility -a portal through which to feel the

whole thing. This will forever keep them alive and evolving. I would like for the paintings in essence to quite simply be an invitation to the 'vast cosmic party'. Perhaps i need only to have replied with that.

BRIAN: I loved your statement: "I think about how making paintings is about responding to something because of its effect and in knowing the response is coming from that effect I can be simultaneously aware of my intention to also create more of it. In that way I am working to pass the beauty on or contribute to some sort of universal growth energy."

The statement brings to mind how I think about "effects." I am writing this to celebrate the resonance that exists between our two reflections.

So here we go.

Imagine I'm sitting beside a rose bush and admiring one rose in particular. In an overall sense, my experience of course is the effect of the rose's luminous presence in that photons from the rose cross the gap, interact with my photoreceptor cells which transform the light into electricity which the central nervous somehow transforms into experience of the rose.

But note that the photons radiating from the rose are the rose's response to the effects of the light from the outer region of the sun, the light from the outer regions of the sun is the effect of the high heat of the sun's surface, the high heat of the sun's surface is the effect of the gravitational interaction, and so on back to the primordial burst of light fourteen billion years ago. That whole sequence is responsible for the effect, my experience. In rare moments, we experience not just this rose simply existing in one space and time but as the entire chain back to the origin of the universe. Such moments are both rare and unforgettable. Our consciousness has the power

to broaden the effect of a rose, to show more of its reality. An entity is experiencing the rose, yes, but simultaneously it's experiencing the column of time, the fourteen-billion-year construction leading to this particular rose which becomes the face for the whole causal sequence back to the origin.

This is what I mean with the phrase, "cosmogenetic experience." It's an exalted form of perception that has been made possible by contemporary thought.

There's a second crucial point to be made. For most of the last three centuries of science, we pictured the eye in the mechanical terms common to all scientific explanation. In particular, that the eye processed light the same way this century as last, and for an individual, the same as a child or an adult. What we are beginning to understand is that powers of the eye and the central nervous system differ from individual to individual. And the subtle anatomy and physiology of the eye changes depending on the person's culture and educational development.

I thought of this when I pictured you in some natural setting, beholding something ineffable but real. You experience a desire to contribute to this "universal growth energy." I love that. In my way of speaking, you have entered the heart of the universe as, manifested by your cosmic yearning.

A shorthand way of pointing to the essence of existence is Alfred North Whitehead's assertion that the primary aim of the universe is to create beauty. Beauty is hard to define but at the very least we can say beauty shuns boredom and thereby prefers novelty. That's why you as an artist cannot say what you've experienced because it hasn't yet been actualized. It's ineffable, its "unprethinkable", it's where the universe in its mysterious development wants to go now, into a new realm of new experiences. Hence, the need for endless groping. But when the feeling that haunts you is finally

captured by you and then released into the culture, your work becomes an ongoing activation of cosmic creativity in others. Which you know first hand and express so beautifully: "I love to think of paintings not as 'inert objects' but as vibrating, active superclusters of light and awareness that carry this weight of existence from the very beginning of it all and can morph, absorb and transmit our oneness as a portal through which to feel the whole."

"Paintings as Superclusters of light and Awareness"! Think of the works of art all around the planet. Every day, every hour, they are radiating light and awareness in the ongoing maturation of our species.

There are other interesting statements you have made ("vibe," "raw commonality," "consciousness without language," "access to sensation from looking," "snapping back to a deeper self") that would be great to reflect further on. I have an idea concerning this. Forgive me if this is asking too much, but I would so love to hear you reflect on your process in the terms we are using in our conversation. I think it would ground our thinking in a helpful way.

What do you think?

MARY: Your dynamic rose illustration made me think of Terrence Deacon's definition of teleological and the idea of purpose in the universe. It also reminded me of Roger Penrose and the three worlds, three mysteries stuff and that out of the physical world our consciousness has emerged and somehow from this consciousness we have gained access to mathematical forms and then by extension the world of mathematics provides an explanation for the physical world. I don't agree with the idea of consciousness emerging from matter but I like the circular nature of this perspective and your description is a great example of this dance with consciousness inside of the cosmos. The circle or spiral form

Objective
Unconscious

subconscious
perceptions

a universal knowing
or truth
(personal unconscious vs
expansive consciousness)
Mind

peripheral
subliminal
perceptions

Mind

body

Self-
reflective
ego
states

localized
experience
Matrix of all existence.
(starts at noon)

Objective reality

- "mind" in the broad dearest sense
meaning one unified medium of
all existence

keeps reappearing in my paintings so maybe this is a nice entry point into speaking about the way the paintings come into being as you suggested.

I love the idea of the rose as the face for the whole causal sequence back to the origin. I would like to handle the paintings in much the same way and invite them - as markers of the column of time - to act as signposts to a kind of awakening. For Plato the awakening is an effort to realign the internal soul with the ordered rational movements of the universe or to achieve an awareness of what is seemingly absent. If I can disorient the viewer into a place that is unfamiliar then perhaps the work can gesture towards a gateway of awareness. My hope is that this would serve to unlock fresh possibilities in the mind and maybe a new kind of attention or rather non-attention. If attention as a compound word comprises ad, 'towards' and tendere, meaning 'to stretch' then this focus is primarily aimed at the object or thought being stretched towards and therefore limits the possibility of an open and empty presence of awareness, detached from an objective experience. Anyhow the first step to getting there is to push the painting to a point where it starts to assert itself as a convincing field of flux and agency that can encourage a kind of careful listening.

The thinking begins with dry pigment. These crushed powders originate from fragments of rock or earth or rose madder pigment made by precipitating dye extracted from madder root or the precious lapis lazuli from Afghanistan etc. I start by crushing and liquifying this expansive rainbow of matter into the desired hues needed to achieve the right charge - inviting matter to yield to consciousness. From here on out the process demands a sort of alchemical play between wet and dry states. The first loose layers go on with big brushes and this preliminary action is the point where the embryonic uncertainty slowly begins to yield to something

instinctive. I work quickly here holding only the very particular energy I want to work with. I also use my hands a lot with these first layers, pushing the colour into the grain of the canvas and resisting the urge to obliterate some of the slippage that refers back to human touch. The aim here is to figure out what the painting wants to become and so am working to get into the right receptive mindset in order to hear what needs to happen next. I'll apply a general structure and then pour on buckets of water after some drying time to loosen areas back off and then go again until the 'thingly' nature of it begins to answer back. Once this very physical preparatory performance comes to an end I wait for the surface to dry and then slowly try to make sense of it on the wall with oil paint.

Deleuze speaks about a rebellion of the hand against the eye, a hand freed from submission where the diagram in a painting can emerge and help to enable the orderly abyss or a germinal chaos. When I'm holding the right kind of focus, aspects of a painting in my peripheral vision will ask to be altered and through maintaining this elusive non-attention these demands keep coming and if I'm on receive I will trust these invitations and not question them formally or try to understand why that thing should be altered. In these moments I often think of Danah Zohar's observation in her book *The Quantum Self* when she writes about "entertaining a vague train of thought only to find that the act of concentrating in order to bring it into better focus somehow changed the original sequence or 'flavour'." When I concentrate hard the thing becomes less visible and I begin to imagine that our peripheral sense of the world (the wider mind) may be more developed than the conscious mind. "Real thinkers don't think." I often feel the decisions made from the edges of my perception will be right in the end. It's a very strange sensation.

When Teilhard de Chardin speaks about seeing (“we might say that the whole of life lies in that verb”) as the most important thing, for me this is what I believe to be really seeing. It is seeing as feeling. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio suggests consciousness may be somatic - that the inaugural state of consciousness is manifest in the body through feeling rather than in the brain as thought. However I know Damasio to be a materialist and I wonder if there’s a world in which his embodied theory of consciousness could also function under idealism? If consciousness is the fundamental feature of reality and our bodies filter consciousness through our physical egoic corporality could that filtering process not also begin in the body primarily through feeling and emotion?

I think the triggers for this ‘feeling’ happen in the most surprising ways that we may not even realise we are responsive to: the point where one colour meets another and something just sparks or in the dynamism reflected back because of an attitude visible in the actual application of paint or the size of the brush marks. I don’t know how to explain it but there is something fizzing in these thresholds between states and colours. Through the paintings I want to speak to a thing that is generating itself whilst simultaneously manifesting its own collapse like something evolving and dissolving between blinks, in a constant state of transition. The challenge is to notice when the vibrations start to happen and then apprehend them and allow them to pulse. This requires a lot of trial and error and thinking with the hand.

I also feel that time is held in a very particular way in a painting. There are capsule representations of the period of its execution but there are also micro conversations on time all over the surface. There are gestures where you see a whole arm at work and where the paint landed fast and with

certainty like a fishing rod casting a fly. Then elsewhere - repeated strokes delivered as a conductor would maintain a steady tempo to give structure to the big noise about it. So I feel that maybe this visual discourse on time is how I want to get at the heart of it all in creating a way to receive time. I suppose if I'm feeling bold, it's like trying to choreograph a relationship between the temporal and the eternal. It's really hard to find the language for all of this though. I just want to share the beauty, to point to it and on a good day it can feel like paddling a canvas canoe out to uncharted waters but really always in an attempt to find my way home.

On another note, I can't help but consider what or whose consciousness you refer to? I'm consumed by the interlocking and often very conflicting ideas around what generates mind and the greatly differing perspectives on this metaphysics from panpsychism and idealism or embodied consciousness through to main stream materialism. I feel like the argument for idealism makes a lot of sense to me - the notion that reality is fundamentally of mind and that consciousness is the primary and ubiquitous feature of all existence rather than a secondary product of physical matter. This concept is very aligned with my effort to dissolve or disrupt my own localised state through painting and in trying to get a grip on these theories I feel a little closer to the root of what it might be to achieve a sort of decoherence that has the potential to access something like a collective awareness.

Bernardo Kastrup uses an appropriate metaphor of the whirlpool to illustrate this proposition which sits comfortably adjacent to the spiral motif that keeps turning up in the paintings. He describes the wider body of water in this example as the expansive mind and whirlpools within that as our individual self-reflective psyches. He speaks about the periphery or stream about these whirlpools as the subconscious or collective reality we ordinarily cannot access

due to an obfuscation created by whatever does not fall within the scope of the ego. In visualising this metaphorical representation of mind I can picture how it might feel to temporarily delocalise the mind or somehow eclipse the egoic state and allow more unconscious contents of the extensive mind to become more discernible or as Kastrup says "to see the stars at noon".

I wonder though when you write that "the universe is an agent organising itself in order to develop greater complexity and consciousness" if there is a part of you that believes panpsychism is a more feasible hypothesis than idealism? When you spoke about the rose... " a power that consciousness has to broaden an effect, to show its full reality" perhaps you are not just speaking of our consciousness which enables an appreciation of the rose but also the primitive degree of consciousness that could be present in the particles that come together to create the rose itself? I now find hints at this kind of philosophical standpoint all over your writing eg...

"The universe isn't being watched into existence it's watching itself into coherence".

Through the act of making paintings everyday, I am in a sense spending my time managing the relationship between the physical world and consciousness and so am looking deep into the heart of the mind/ body problem at all times. This could also be said of simply existing but in the case of the artist, our practice is spent studying, developing, celebrating and illustrating the relationship between the two. So...if consciousness is indeed a fundamental feature of reality then the whole business of making a painting becomes one magnificent energetic event as if suddenly the 'causal skeleton of the world' can get up and dance!

I think what is becoming clear to me is that I used to think of

consciousness as deepening my understanding of painting but I now realise it is painting that enables me to drop into deeper levels of consciousness and the wider mind - in search for the beauty at the end of perception.

BRIAN: Thank you for sending photographs of your work. That's the main feeling I wanted to convey. Gratitude. As I was viewing them I felt the shift, phenomenologically, from "looking at a painting" to "being the cosmos." I stayed in that state of consciousness for a bit, then words began surfacing, including a question: "Did this experience happen in part because of our conversations?" I've always enjoyed learning what the artist has to say, as well as what others have to say, about the artist's work. I know this is a contentious issue, but for me, even though the artwork is beyond the reach of language overall, language can help develop the sensibility that does not need any mediating words.

The creative process of a star led to its blowing up and coalescing into our Sun surrounded by pebbles that condensed into matter and some humans who transform the matter into a magical symbol called art that enables a human to feel the action in the star that led to this experience, the universe feeling itself in the mode of conscious self awareness.

You asked a question in your recent emails. Whether or not I am a panpsychist. Yes. Pretty much. I'm reluctant to categorize myself because of the long-noted inadequacy of words. Another word that has surfaced is "cosmopsychism" which is philosophically distinct but equally compelling. Trees, birds, octopuses, all of them blazing with experience we can only dream about. My own favorite form of vitality is granite boulders and granite mountains.

As a phrase that captures the overall connection between our two approaches, I would use your line about a "painting

being a portal to a vast cosmic party.” So much of my work involves deconstructing my reader’s industrial consciousness, so that the door to the party can open wide.

As soon as I write this, a passage from your email leaps to mind. You speak of your aim to disorient the viewer’s mind so they can take in the work/world, from a new perspective. That’s exactly what I am aiming at. Especially when I can pull this off using only the most mainstream scientific discoveries. That’s my way of getting them to “a kind of careful listening.” One more thread between us: that art “moves you in a certain way that puts you outside of yourself through the experience of looking” and that “this outward looking may then draw you back to the truest part of the self.” In the midst of the journey of your thinking, the phrase “Raids Upon the Inenarrable” surfaced in my mind. Artists will recognize intuitively the experience you reflect upon. It means a great deal to me. It touches the heart of what I was created to do.

Brian Thomas Swimme (born 1950) is a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, in San Francisco, where he teaches evolutionary cosmology to graduate students in the philosophy, cosmology, and consciousness program.