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Donald Kuspit on Holy Matter: Daniel Massad's Still Lifes

G. Daniel Massad, Stoneware, 1989, pastel on paper, 18 x 24 inches. Private collection. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

Holy Matter: Daniel Massad's Still Lifes

By DONALD KUSPIT, OCT. 2018

The same beam of light which Christian spirituality, rightly and fully understood, directs upon the Cross to humanize it (without veiling it) is reflected on matter so as to spiritualize it…. perhaps we may be allowed to vindicate and exalt that aspect of it which the Lord came to put on, save and consecrate: *holy matter*. - Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*(1)

By their very nature, and at every level of complexity, the elements of the world are able to influence and mutually to penetrate each other by their *within*, so as to combine their 'radial energies' in 'bundles.' While no more than conjecturable in

atoms and molecules, this psychic interpenetrability grows and becomes directly perceptible in the case of organized beings. - Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*(2)

G. Daniel Massad, On the Edge, 1990, pastel on paper, 16 1/8 x 22 inches. Private collection. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

One cannot begin to comprehend let alone fully appreciate Daniel Massad's tenebristic still lifes –the twenty-two pastels that are the climactic, most extraordinary works of his long career, works that testify to his unusual brilliance as an artist, for he is a master of *sprezzatura*, the art that conceals art, and as such the highest art as the Renaissance humanist Baldassar Castiglione famously argued in *The Book of the Courtier*—without knowing the ideas of the important Jesuit thinker and palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. To be a master of sprezzatura, the

lost art of what Baudelaire called the "Great Tradition," is to make fine art, an art so refined that the hand of the artist disappears, gives presence to the object that appears rather than to the artist's subjectivity, as it tends to do in modernist painting, especially in the surfaces of expressionistic painting, certainly unrefined and raw compared to the polished surfaces of traditional painting, especially Massad's neo-traditional paintings. For so he called his pastels, in recognition that pastel was a more refined medium—peculiarly less material--than paint, and thus better suited to serve the spiritual purpose of his art, conveyed by the quotation from de Chardin that gives the retrospective exhibition of Massad's art its name, "A Small Radius of Light." "We know ourselves," de Chardin wrote in *The Divine Milieu*, "and set our course but within an incredibly small radius of light. Immediately beyond lies impenetrable darkness, though it is full of presences—the night of everything that is within us and around us, without us and in spite of us….In fact, everything beyond a certain distance is dark, and yet everything is full of being around us."

G. Daniel Massad, The Keys to Everything, 2010, pastel on paper, 4 x 2 3/8 inches. Collection of Barbara Palmer. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

The use of the quotation—the prominence given to de Chardin's words, encapsulating in spiritual terms what tenebrism, with its "violent contrasts of light and dark, and where darkness becomes a dominating feature of the image," is in artistic practice—strongly suggests that Massad is a disciple of de Chardin. Massad's tenebristic still lifes are best understood as visual enactments—theatrical stagings, if you prefer--of de Chardin's Christian existentialism: the idea that we must suffer and endure what Saint John of the Cross called a "dark night of the soul"—Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death"--before we can see the "light" of God and be saved. Tenebrism began with Caravaggio. Where he shows isolated saintly

figures seeing the light in a dramatic moment of illumination—thus tenebrism has been called an art of "dramatic illumination," illumination exaggerated to suggest revelation, the saving grace of a higher consciousness--as they experience the dark night of the soul (perhaps most famously in the *Conversion [of Saint Paul] on the Way to Damascus*, 1601)--Massad shows illuminated objects, miraculously radiant with inner light, bundled together in figure-like configurations, isolated but holding their own in impenetrable black space by reason of their insularity, self-containment, and stability.

G. Daniel Massad, Very Old Are the Woods, 1991, pastel on paper, 17 ½ x 27 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Dr. and Mrs. Robert E. Carroll Gift, 1992. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, N.Y.

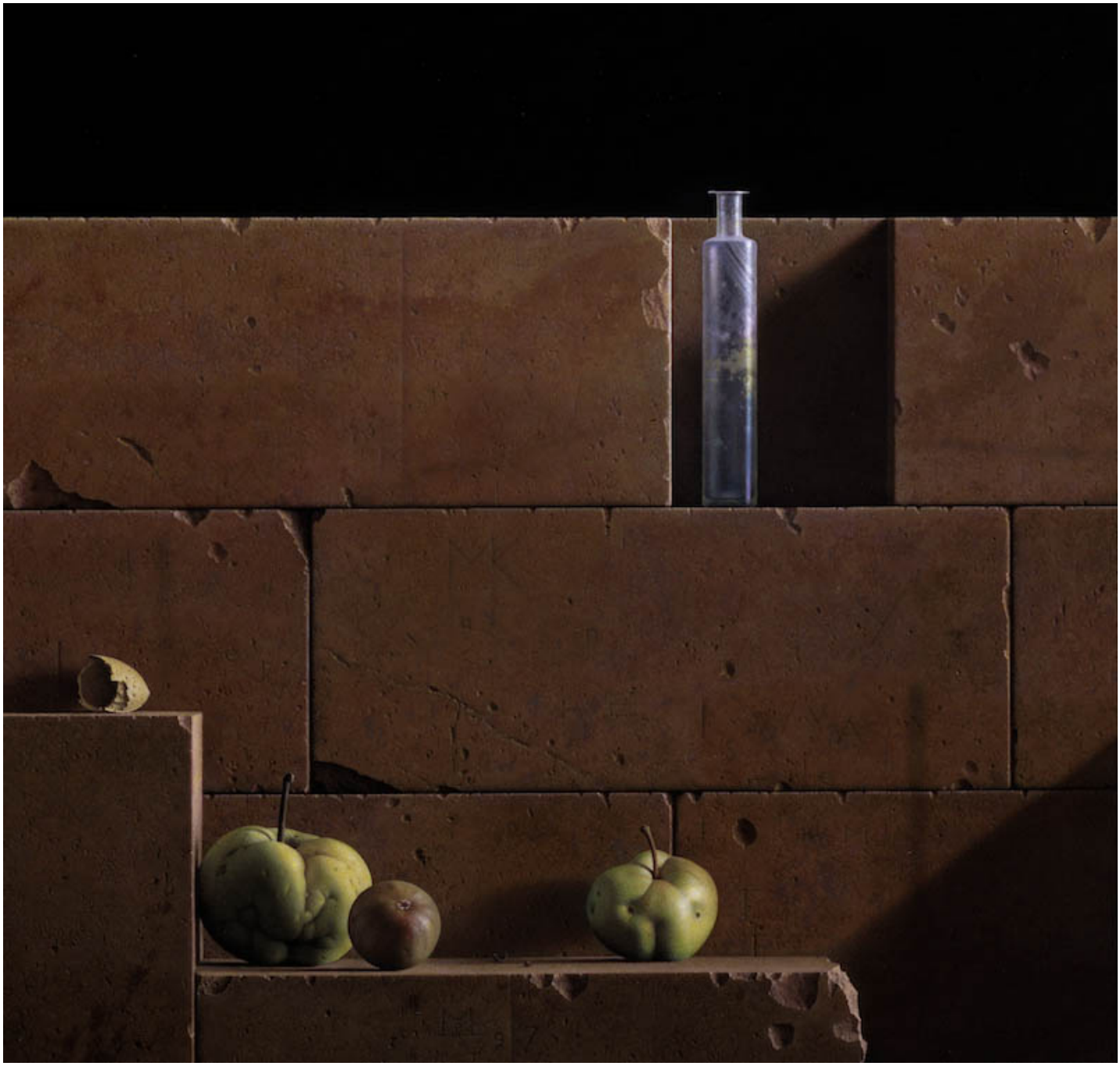
Caravaggio's Baroque paintings served the Counter-Reformation, even as the Catholic Counter-Reformation followed the Protestant Reformation in showing extraordinary, trans-human, holy beings as ordinary, vulgar human beings, often at the dramatic moment they become conscious of a being—Christ—greater than them. Caravaggio depicts this brilliantly in *Supper at Emmaus*, 1601. The

illuminating revelation of Christ transforms them—sanctifies them, to use de Chardin's word--by inviting them to identify with Him. And, in the case of Mathew, to follow Him, as Caravaggio's *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1600 shows. The dazzling light will lift St. Paul off the ground—he is flat on his back on the earth, laid low in preparation for being raised high to heaven—sanctified, transcendentalized--and seeing Christ with devoted new eyes. One might say that Massad shows objects as they see the light, internalizing it in what de Chardin calls their "within." "Things have their *within*," he writes, and it is through their within they acquire "*spiritual perfection (or conscious 'centreity')*," which is what happens when Paul, Matthew, and the two peasants who suddenly "see" Christ, realize they are in the presence of Christ—the most perfect, centered, conscious being for de Chardin—and what the objects on display in Massad's tenebristic still lifes acquire when they experience the light of Christ, a genuinely new transformative "sensation," taking it into their within. The central placement of many of the objects, grouped together to form totemically upright peculiarly abstract figures—to abstract is to transcendentalize--confirms that they have achieved conscious centreity and with that spiritual perfection.

G. Daniel Massad, Bellstruck, 1994, pastel on paper, 14 ½ x 15 ½ inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with funds contributed by various donors and with the Julius Bloch Memorial Fund created by Benjamin D. Bernstein, 1994. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

Human beings don't appear in Massad's still lifes, but oddly humanized—memorable—objects do. Their humbleness is deceptive, for imbued with light they become more than—other than-- everyday: they become uncannily sacred, inwardly extraordinary however outwardly ordinary they remain, strangely spectacular, unfamiliar, and "different," however banal, familiar, and indifferent: they are no longer simple matter-of-fact but paradoxical holy matter. The commonplace

becomes uncommon in Massad's still lifes by reason of the inescapable light that informs them—indeed, they seem formed of light, seem oddly immaterial however obviously material. The light forces them upon us: given revelatory presence by the light, compelling us to become acutely conscious of them, they become our revelation, our "advance of consciousness" as de Chardin puts it. Nor do Massad's still lifes have the Baroque flair, grand-standing, and self-assertiveness—narcissistic flavor--of Caravaggio's paintings. They all proclaim and dramatize the self, suggesting that it is sufficient unto itself however illuminated. The dialectic of light and dark that is the spiritual substance of Massad's still lifes has a subtler, more unsettling grandeur, for it signifies a tragic, conflicted, troubled sense of self, a self doubting its capacity for revelation, for higher consciousness: one doesn't know if the infinite darkness will finally blot out the finite light, a triumph of death and despair over life and spirit. Massad's objects have body, the blackness is an abyss in which they can disappear without a trace, suggesting death without salvation.



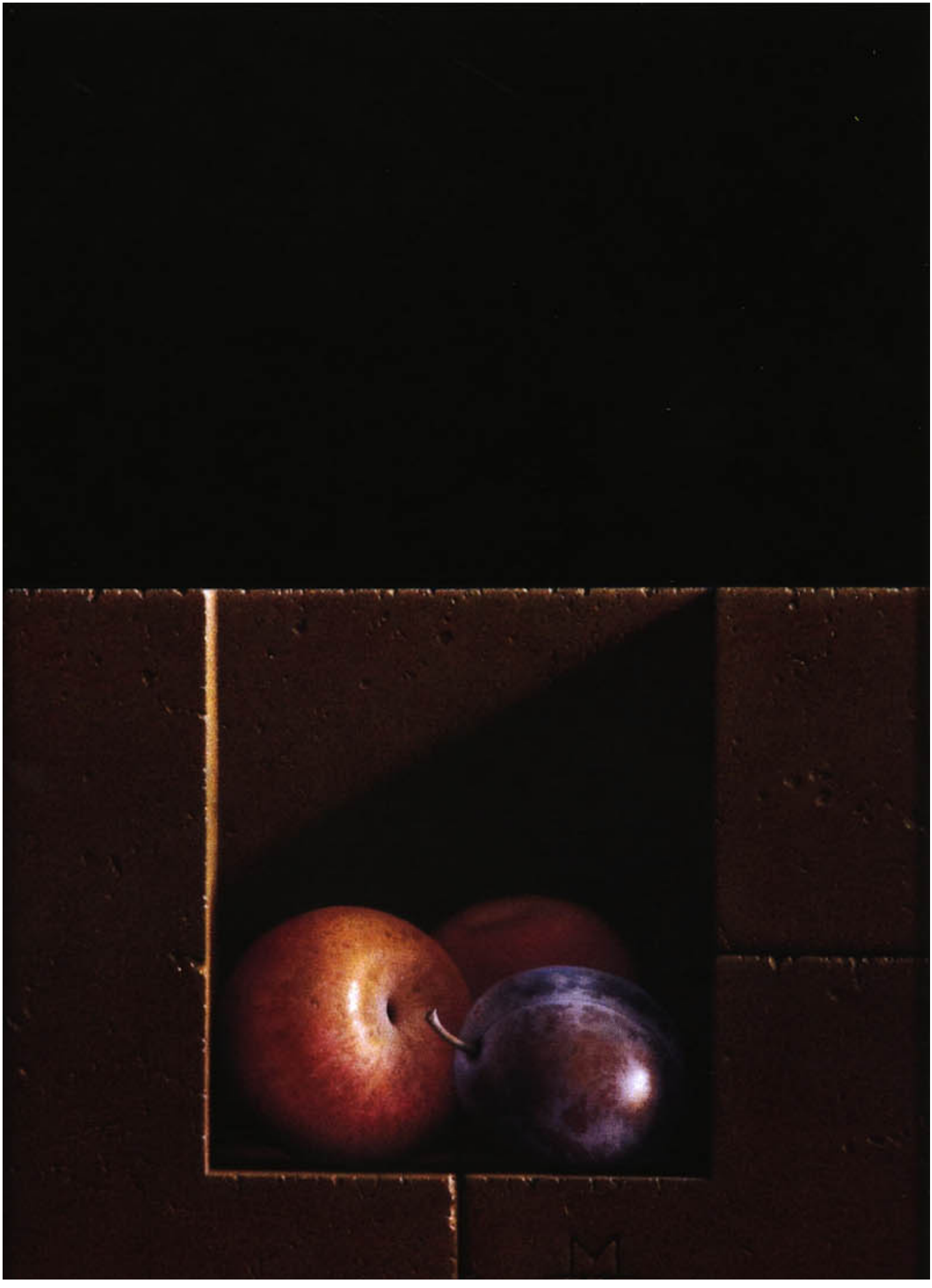
G. Daniel Massad, Niche, 1997, pastel on paper, 15 x 15 ½ inches. Allentown Art Museum, Purchase: Edwin Schadt Art Museum Trust, 1997. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

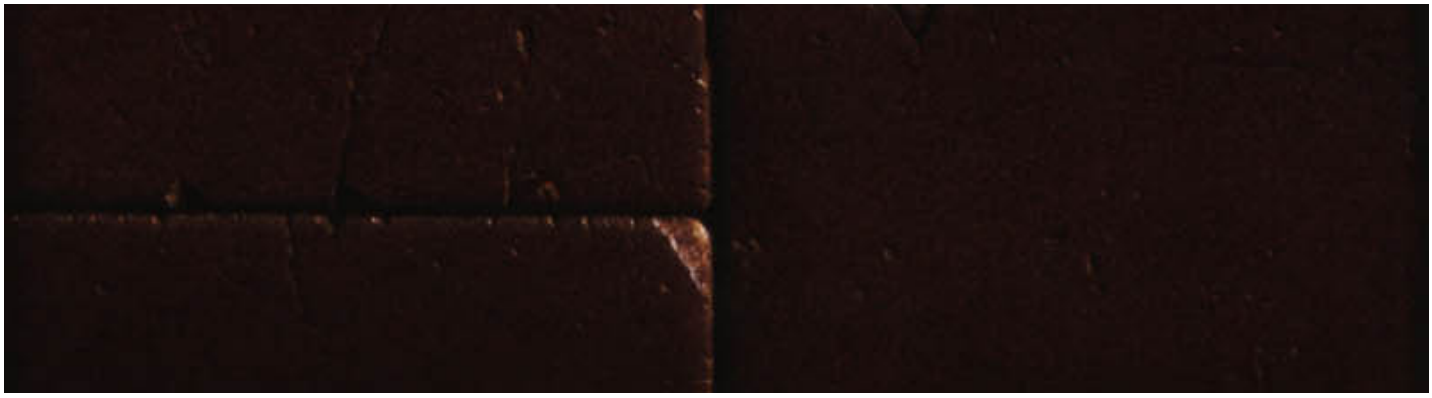
The *Stoneware* in an early still-life (1989) is solid, even as the light that informs it seems to soften its hardness, but the darkness that all but engulfs it threatens to dissolve it completely. The objects *On the Edge*, 1990 are not only precariously poised on the edge of a table, as though hanging on to it for dear life, but on the edge of the darkness that all but completely surrounds them. In *Very Old Are The Woods*, 1991 the dead twigs almost completely disappear in the darkness, even as the ledge on which they

rest remains intact, resolutely holding its own against the darkness. The horizontal tabletop and horizontal ledge are in effect altartops, the still life objects on them offerings to God—a deus obsconditus, that is, a God hidden in and obscured by Massad's darkness (emblematic of the dark night of the soul). These works clearly have an affinity with Juan Sanchez Cotan's still lifes, offerings of the first fruit of life on the altar of God, with the crucial difference that Cotan's objects are not enclosed in darkness, and as such the last fruit of life—the leftovers of lived experience, which is what Massad's objects are.

G. Daniel Massad, Darkness Behind Everything, 1998, pastel on paper, 22 x 19 inches. Private collection. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

Darkness dominates the objects in these still lifes, but objects dominate the darkness in *Bellstruc*k, 1994, *Niche*, 1997, and *Darkness Behind Everything*, 1998. "Get behind me Satan, you prince of darkness," the latter work seems to be saying, suggesting that to be in the dark—to be stuck in darkness, seemingly forever, as the eerily absolute static character of Massad's objects suggests—is to be in hell. The objects seem immovable—fixed in place forever, their immobility and stillness emblematic of their immortality but also, paradoxically, their uselessness. However luscious and ripe some of them are, the fruits in the still lives are inedible, for Massad's Midas-like touch, magically turning everything into aesthetic gold, has made them ironically eternal. But while they have been eternalized into things of exquisite beauty—sanctified, perfected, purified by Massad's masterful art, making them marvels to behold--and as such worthy of everlasting contemplation not to say worship, they remain threatened by darkness, that is, death—the impenetrable darkness of the proverbial grave. They have not been obliterated, but they are hushed into silence, awaiting death with stoic courage.





G. Daniel Massad, Reliquary, 2005, pastel on paper, 14 3/8 x 9 ¾ inches. Collection of Barbara Palmer. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

If to be in darkness is to be unsaved---to be in a state of sin, or to have one's existence blunted by guilt because one has sinned, then Massad's objects may be in purgatory, atoning for their sins—the sins they symbolize—despite themselves. Christianity posits a god who is pure creativity—a god who creates matter, some thing, imbuing it with his holiness (for to be creative is to be holy)—in defiant denial of the nothing of death, which destroys matter, profanes it, renders it meaningless. I suggest that Massad's still lives are a creative protest against decreative death even as his objects embody it by reason of their stillness--their profound inertia and immobility, essentializing their existence while giving them a petrified look. Their libidinous color is life-giving, but the shadows that haunt them and the darkness that surrounds them is deadening, and their stillness is fatal.

G. Daniel Massad, Six Wooden Blocks, 2007, pastel on paper, 24 x 23 ½ inches. Private collection. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

Are they in limbo, as the pre-Christian philosophers and poets are in Dante's *Inferno*, their higher consciousness their saving grace—saving them from complete damnation and punitive suffering in the lower depths of hell? Massad's still life objects are painted with painstaking, focused consciousness, reflected in their

hermetic isolation. They are at once poetic and philosophical, seductive and thought-filled. He has depositing his consciousness in them, so that they seem self-conscious, and with that become self-symbols, symbols of his state of being as well as mind. To use de Chardin's words, Massad has imbued his chosen objects with "the radiation of his own consciousness," "stored up and transmitted" it for the enlightenment of the viewer, that is, so that the viewer can also realize that there is light in the darkness, however limited the light compared to the darkness.

G. Daniel Massad, Studio, 2008, pastel on paper, 15 ½ x 15 inches. Private collection. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

Massad brings great, deliberative consciousness to bear on his objects, fills them with it so that his consciousness becomes their consciousness—their consciousness of the impinging darkness that surrounds them. The light essentializes them, the darkness is the situation in which they exist: each and every one is a clearing in the darkness, a small pearl of hope in the dark shell of oceanic space. Massad's

luminous object are numinous enigmas, but his darkness is terrifyingly enigmatic. They are fraught with awe and mystery, as holy objects—sanctified things—are, suggesting that Massad is a mystic, for he mystifies objects into mysteries. He sees them in what the religious philosopher Rudolf Otto calls a “numinous state of mind,” so that they seem fraught with *mysterium,* “that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar.”(3)

G. Daniel Massad, Stack, 2007, pastel on paper, 11 ½ x 11 inches. Collection of Blake and Linda Gall. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

De Chardin thinks that consciousness is an attribute of and innate in nature--it "contains and engenders consciousness," he states--and so Massad's oddly conscious (self-conscious?) fruit seem to be. But so is what de Chardin calls "the destructive action of time." Massad's objects seem timeless and permanent, but they too are marked by time—timeworn—and will perish, fade away into oblivion, disappear in the darkness. They may be commemorated and venerated, as *Stele*, 2004 and *Reliquary*, 2005 make clear, but they have been stilled by death. Massad's art has not saved them from death; his art is deeply morbid, if darkness signifies death—not only the literal darkness of the grave, but more insidiously what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls the "living death" of depression—as it unavoidably does. I suggest that the monumental figure-like constructions centered in darkness in the stunning series of tenebristic still lifes that Massad painted in 2007—*Six Wooden Blocks*, *Studio, Stock*--are hyperreal personifications of death. The oddly statuesque figures are in effect skeletons composed of debris—useless odds and ends that are at most mnemonic traces of unlived life. *The Keys to Everything* and *Letters from Home*, both 2010 are momento mori, as *Memoria*, 2018 makes clear. So are the *Shards* and *Shells*, both 2012—the remains of life, the shells empty, the shards remnants of some building—that crowd two other still lifes. They pile up, flood the canvas, but they are embedded in darkness, as though embalmed in an artistic afterlife. Memory is a form of mourning—mourning in disguise—and Massad's objects are mournful because they are memorable, and with that more mysterious: there is an elegiac quality to Massad's fine art. The ripe fruit of *Plenty*, 2012, an offering on a central raised altar, are the remains of nostalgia, as the oblivion of darkness in which they suddenly appear, like transient epiphanies, suggests.

G. Daniel Massad, Letters from Home, 2010, pastel on paper, 23 x 22 ½ inches. Private collection. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

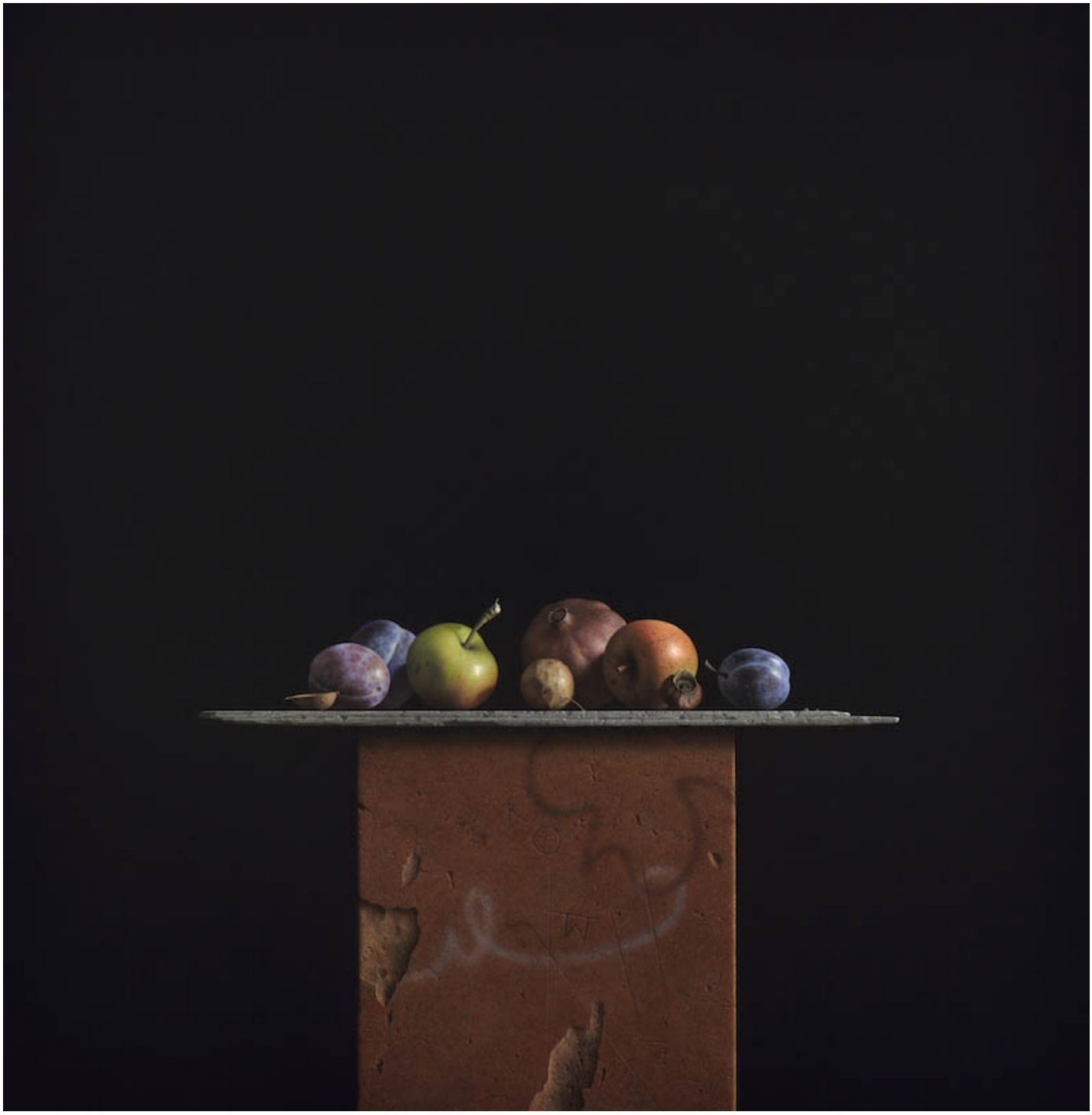
“I am bound to admit that, in these contributions to the collectivity,” de Chardin writes—the remarkable contributions that Massad’s still lifes, informed with his authenticity and spirituality, make to our collective consciousness—"far from transmitting the most precious”—Massad’s fine, precious art—“we are bequeathing

at the utmost, only the shadow of ourselves." But what a shadow Massad casts! He inhabits the darkness of his still lifes as well as its light, the darkness standing to the light as body does to soul—suggesting that his still lifes show him casting off his physical body to reveal his psychic core, less personally the triumph of consciousness over the unconscious. In this he shows himself a true disciple of de Chardin—a true Jesuit. The still lifes are in effect spiritual exercises, ascetic practices advocated by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of Jesuitism, to control, discipline, purify the self and refine consciousness. De Chardin's *The Divine Milieu* is a "treatise on ascetical theology," more particularly a "description of a *psychological* evolution…*over a specified interval*," a "series of inward perspectives gradually revealed to the mind in the course of a humble yet 'illuminative' spiritual ascent," which is exactly what Massad's tenebristic still lifes are. One might say that they trace his psychological evolution, reminding us that he was once a psychotherapist, suggesting that painting the still lifes served a psychotherapeutic purpose in his life, indeed, was a form of self-analysis, each still life a symbolic rendering of his state of mind at a certain period in his life. Dare one say he held on to the objects to avoid driven mad by the darkness—the satanic void? "But even in the interest of life in general," de Chardin adds, "what is the work of works for man if not to establish, in and by each one of us, an absolutely original center in which the universe reflects itself in a unique and inimitable way? And those centers are our very selves and personalities."

G. Daniel Massad, Memoria, 2018, pastel on paper, 15 ¼ x 14 ¾ inches. Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

To use de Chardin's words yet again, each and every object in a Massad still life has "the three-fold property possessed by every consciousness: (i)of centering *everything* partially upon itself; (ii)of being able to center itself upon itself *constantly*; and (iii) of being brought *more* by this very super-centration *into*

association with all the other centers surrounding it." Centered in his still lifes, Massad's objects convey his original self and unique personality, even as his still lifes show that there is no originality without tradition, as Winnicott said.



G. Daniel Massad, *Plenty*, 2012, pastel on paper, 22 x 21 ½ inches. Private collection. Photo courtesy of the Palmer Museum of Art

“A Small Radius of Light: G. Daniel Massad, A Retrospective” is on view from September 25 -December 9, 2018 at the Palmer Museum of Art on the campus of Pennsylvania State University in State College, Pennsylvania. It is one of the premier university museums in the United States. The catalogue of the exhibition contains Joyce Henri Robinson’s essay “A Rare Coincidence of Life and Art,” a comprehensive overview of Massad’s development. “Backstories” to each work in the exhibition—they’re all beautifully reproduced--written by Massad complete the catalogue. **WM**

Notes

1)Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960), 75

(2)Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1959), 239

All quotations from de Chardin are from one or the other of these books.

(3)Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 13

DONALD KUSPIT

Donald Kuspit is one of America’s most distinguished art critics. In 1983 he received the prestigious Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism, given by the College Art Association. In 1993 he received an honorary doctorate in fine arts from Davidson College, in 1996 from the San Francisco Art Institute, and in 2007 from the New York Academy of Art. In 1997 the National Association of the Schools of Art and Design presented him with a Citation for Distinguished Service to the Visual Arts. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 2000 he delivered the Getty Lectures at the University of Southern California. In 2005 he was the Robertson Fellow at the University of Glasgow. In 2008 he received the Tenth Annual Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Newington-Cropsey Foundation. In 2013 he received the First Annual Award for Excellence in Art Criticism from the Gabarron Foundation. He has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Guggenheim Foundation, and Asian Cultural Council, among other organizations.

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