

REBECCA BREWER / Seers of the Cosmos, do not mourn over the scheme of things

Cease to be a disobedient child in the school of experience, and begin to learn, with humility and patience, the lessons that are set for your ultimate perfection.

I have always been interested in the melodrama of human interiority. Recently, a difficult transitional year found my work taking thematic cues from the language of the therapy bed, and from the pop-psychology, faulty logic, bad advice, and specious claims of various self-help philosophies. At the time I was also profoundly invested in the depicted figure in painting, which I was aware could be the last stop on the train to total dissolution into bad taste and uncritical claptrap. In retrospect, these tensions in my life and interests were dovetailing neatly to create a body of work that integrated text, images, and ideas engendering the dubious associations and uncomfortable sensibilities of a coping strategy.

Avoid exaggerations. The truth is sufficient.

I took the book on which these images are painted from the free box at Banyen Books—"Canada's spiritual and healing resource since 1970." I thought it was a pleasing object—a nicely proportioned, low-budget paperback printed in the 1970s with New Age-y flair—but it turned out to be an unexpectedly gravid publication. The text was assembled following the death of writer James Allen; fragments were culled from his long and prolific career as a proto self-help writer, or what the editor's preface calls a "Prophet of Meditation." Allen died in 1912. During his time as a writer and in the turn towards secularism, the genre of Popular Philosophy recommended personal systems of ethics in the absence of holy texts. The influence of Christian doctrine, however, is evident.

Be watchful, that no thought of self creep in again and stain thee. Think of thyself as abolished.

It has been stated, in no uncertain terms, that the anthropomorphic turn in painting a) is recursive, b) is connected to periods of decline, imminent fascistic vibrations, and unequal distributions of power, and c) is therefore an easily instrumentalized, regressive sensibility, and all around bad mojo that ought to be avoided.¹

1 See Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression" (1980).

Man is not the result of outward conditions. Outward conditions are the result of man.

The cipher-like figure forms over the *Meditations* pages contribute to a formal alphabet that has developed in my work. The influences on this figural alphabet range from Constructivist illustration to Art Deco to Medieval polychrome sculpture to early Tarot cards, a paralleling of antiquity with 20th-century Modernism that recurs frequently in my casual artistic research. Anthropomorphic figures, so often mired in the heresy of allegorical meaning, are something I repeat with cautious conviction. The ongoing project of working with the figure constitutes a minor personal artistic rebellion for me. It's no secret that artists live by dictums as much as anyone else. We derive guidance from philosophers and critics and seek to purify our art with the wisdom of progressive ideas. Yet, the forbidden thing, once aptly pointed out, immediately becomes inevitable and all philosophical injunctions are in some way as monstrous as the ideas that they forbid. Of interest to me, however, is how prohibitions, once invalidated by having been spoken in the voice of authority, can become material to work with. Different dictates and competing demands for our moral attention can coexist in a given document or artwork to interesting ends.

The present is the synthesis of the entire past; the net result of all that a man has ever thought and done is contained within him.

As self-help goes, Allen's *Meditations* are severe. They are at times absurd statements and walk a fine line between a refreshing call for modesty and a self-loathing gravitas not fit for contemporary consumption. In my inner world, the simultaneously satirical and sincere relationship that one must assume to read these dictums feels appropriate. Reading these suggestions for how the body should be formed in relation to the individual's scruples and character of mind, the heady proclamations of a 19th century pop-philosophy guru feel oddly relevant to the project of reimagining the figure in light of the injunction against the figure.

Rebecca Brewer, *Nothing can prevent us from accomplishing the aims of our life*, 2012-13, watercolour on paper (pages from James Allen's *Meditations*, 1913), 17 × 12.25 cm each

APRIL 28

*Be watchful, that no thought of self creep
in again and stain thee.*

THINK of thyself as abolished. In all thy doing think of the good of others and of the world, and not of pleasure or reward to thyself. Thou art no longer separate and divided from men, thou art one with all. No longer strive against others for thyself, but sympathize with all. Regard no man as thine enemy for thou art the friend of all men. Be at peace with all. Pour out compassion on all living things, and let boundless charity adorn thy words and deeds. Such is the glad way of Truth; such is the doing which is according to the Eternal. Filled with joy, the right-doer, he acts from principles which do not change and pass away. He is one with the Eternal, and has passed beyond unrest. The peace of the righteous man is perfect; it is not disturbed by change and impermanence.

Open thine eyes to the Eternal Light.

JANUARY 3

The lover of the pure life keeps his mind

AS the energetic man of business is not
distracted by the allurements of the
to overcome the temptation of the
aspiration to the higher life by
temptation, he must now be fortified
by the temptation of the lower life. A
man who is in at work and un-
governed by the temptation of the
should be taught the nature and meaning
of temptation, so that it is known that it cannot
be overcome. The man who is to overcome tem-
ptation must understand how it arises in his
own mind and must study, by
introspection and meditation, how to dis-
perse the illusion and error by
truth.

A man must know himself if he is to know
the Self-knowledge of the handmaid of

*He daily in holy meditation on Truth
and its attainment.*

JUNE 8

*Nothing can prevent us from accomplishing
the aims of our life.*

MAN'S power subsists in discrimination and choice. Man does not create one jot of the universal conditions or laws; they are the essential principles of things, and are neither made nor unmade. He discovers, not makes, them. Ignorance of them is at the root of the world's pain. To defy them is folly and bondage. Who is the freer man, the thief who defies the laws of his country, or the honest citizen who obeys them? Who, again, is the freer man, the fool who thinks he can live as he likes, or the wise man who chooses to do only that which is right?

Man is, in the nature of things, a being of habit, and this he cannot alter; but he can alter his habits. He cannot alter the law of his nature, but he can adapt his nature to those laws.

*He is the good man whose habits and thought
and action are good.*

JANUARY 11

*It matters little what is without, for it is all
a reflection of your own consciousness.*

THE deplorable failure of many outward and isolated reforms is traceable to the fact that their devotees pursue them as an end in themselves, failing to see that they are merely steps toward ultimate, individual perfection.

All true reform *must come from within*, in a changed heart and mind. The giving up of certain foods and drinks, and the breaking away from certain outward habits are good and necessary beginnings, but they are only beginnings, and to end there is to fall far short of a true spiritual life. It is good therefore to cleanse the heart, to correct the mind, and to develop the understanding, for we know that the one thing needed is a regenerate heart.

*It matters everything what you are within,
for everything without will be mirrored
and colored accordingly.*
