



*Avi Roth dallies over his morning coffee, but maybe not the way many of us do. In fact, playing amorously and respectfully with its properties, he tarries with coffee most any time of day as it creeps over plates, dragging its sediment or not, taking up its position for the time being. We could say, “Time Being” – for it’s really a way of traveling to distant shores that, once vanished, might still have something to offer.*

If by now we accept without a fuss that, as Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has elucidated, the visual exceeds language (and by language he means words) — that there aren’t enough words to contain by label all that there is to see — maybe it isn’t at all evident that, as scholars have argued, narrative as we know it has come and gone. What is it that makes stories stick even as

# COFFEEGRAPH®

By Diane Sippl, PhD

words vanish? Could it be that as we become less literate we become more imagistic? If so, are we not concocting new modes of storytelling that are hardly bereft of riches? We’ve heard it said: “All stories have been told before; the truth is in the telling.” Then in our increas-



Eden Pear, 2008

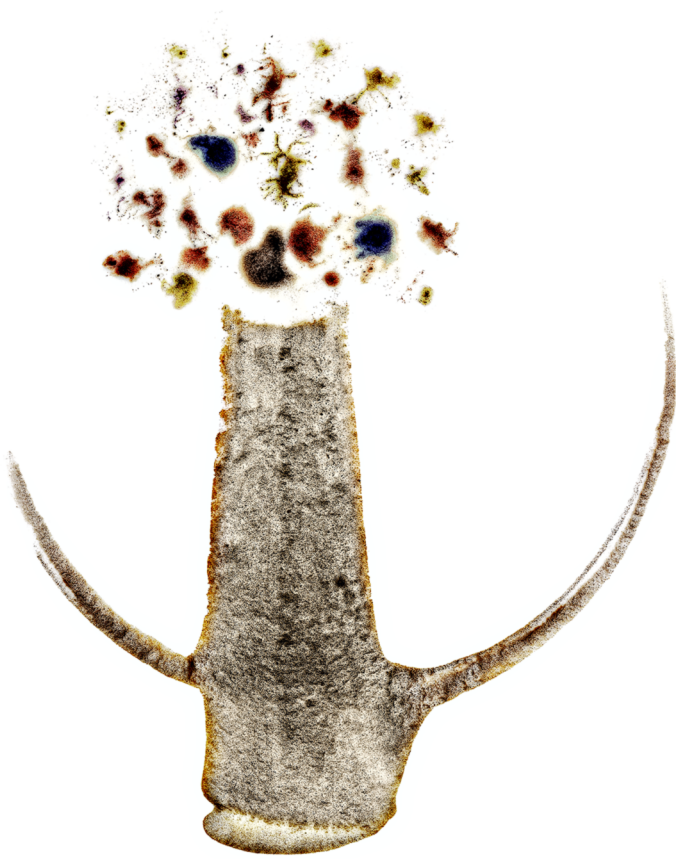
ingly hands-on, user-friendly, post-verbal world today (when we prefer to just “go-to” rather than to read “how-to”) are we still passing down the wisdom of ancestors, the repositories of cul-

tures, the lessons of history we once spoke by the fireside, heard from the griot, and read in novels?

What if we are actually more *pre*-visual than we think? Call it tactile in an era when the thumbprint will be the signature that replaces bankcards. Would that viewers of Roth’s coffee-graphs could run their fingers over his works to delight in the play of their textures so as to discover their stories. But if seeing is believing, their lines and forms, tones and colors have more to tell.

Leonardo da Vinci advised his students to take a long, hard look at ruined walls. The cracks and stains there offered endless images to stir the mind. What treasures or cataclysms of history lay behind them? In these humble remains of nature and human toil, sensations were in

Gemlike Heartbuds, 2013



abundance, and perhaps they were not far, after all, from the emotions and inverse trajectories to be found in the dregs of coffee. The remnants of the liquid have long been connected with a certain kind of faith in the most everyday sense. Might they serve as traces of language, vehicles of stimulation for the intellect and the senses beyond consumption of the drink itself? Could imbibing the deeper light and shadow of the strangely glorious residue elevate the spirit or even allow the keen participant to transcend the hollow promises of daily life?

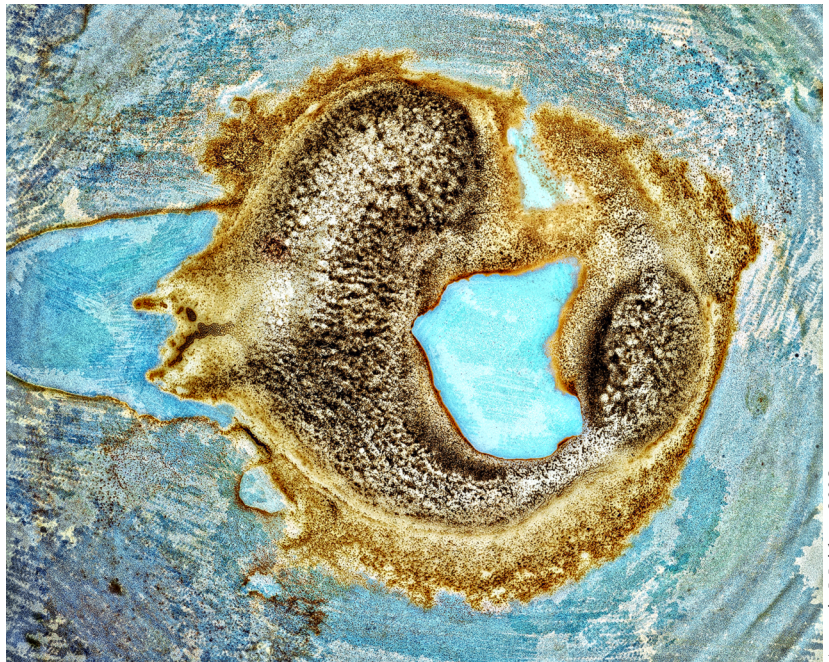
“Coffeegraph already exists in the collective unconsciousness;

I’m just unveiling it,” Roth tells us. “It’s not seen, but it’s there, almost a déjà-vu of what we

have experienced. The language it speaks is humanity’s common denominator.”

Coffeegraph is a *sui generis* artistic practice that yields stand-alone visual stories, the secrets behind our grand narratives. Neither painting nor sculpting nor etching per se (there is no brush, no chisel, no chemical bath), the artist applies just this one substance, coffee, prepared in a variety of solutions with water, to non-porous surfaces where it will dry, one layer at a time, as he guides, shapes, and scrapes the liquid and its particles into remote landscapes, portentous skies, gods, heroes and anti-heroes, hybrid creatures.

Their life is extended by a digital printing process that may add to or de-saturate the organic colors of the coffee and accentuate its textures across and between surfaces.



Aquatic Maiden, 2008





It's as if the right amount and strength of coffee at the right time enables Roth to approach the sounds preceding words, the mysteries of existence that disappear with language. And yet he entitles each coffeegrph, not that the words name what cannot be depicted visually, but that they evoke what has been overlooked, conjure what has been hidden, lost, rejected, neglected, while the graphs disclose it in luminous glory.

Coffeegrphs are about time and space, but newly perceived, registered, and projected; the persistent patience in the time it takes for the coffee to "land," travel across the plate, dissolve

into suspended entities, occupy a position with the resolve of a halo, crust up or swell with the visitation of another wash or mounting of dregs – this *invested time* – is an allegory of the Time of the universe, and the space of the print is then the analog of cosmic Space as the coffee carries us to turf perhaps recognized only by our uncanny selves.

We can note some influences in Coffeegrph from the grandfathers of 21st-century art — theories and practices of automatism and *vertiges* among the Surrealists; of intuition, spontaneity, and "controlled

drift" in *art informel*; of color fields, negative space, impasto, tachisme and drip painting among Abstract Expressionists such as Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock.

Yet Coffeegrph stands alone.

And much as it is something new, ageless underlying themes are at play in the concentric circles of layers, textures, and forms. The halos of the coffee draw us into stains without frames, into tales that have gathered us in social webs tangled over centuries. Coffeegrphs lend a voice to the gauze of stories and invite dialog and reverie; they are porous and fluid



by nature, luring us into their cracks and fissures in search of lost light.

A work such as “Gemlike Heartbuds” looks ancient and immediate at once, teeming with life that is mineral, plant, and human as the flower-jewels shine a face when their shaft drives upward, inward, through the coffee ring to a burst of excitement – emerald, ruby, and topaz – as delicate as the tufts of dandelions.

Perspectives shift or dissipate in coffeegraphs, happily losing their ground as layers escalate of their own accord, enabling concepts such as “elevation” to commandeer new thought. “Luminous Aviator, First Attempt,” levitating from his launch pad in a sputter, and “Enlightenment,” with its eyes sunk in the skulls of three gurus, suggest that it is the faces – *always faces*, looming, hiding, lurking in the graphs – that beguile us to

“transcend,” a journey that is never necessarily vertical.

The direction might be toward the womb, while from above, as if in a sonogram, we enter the inner life of parent and offspring just as we see the babe on the back of the nurturer as she trudges forward in “Mother and Child.”

Then again, “Omelette” almost riffs the same theme, its splat of a rooster crowing from the feathers of coffee grain, flipping the ur-forms of spiritual belief systems all the while it conjures them by marking the time of day with a summons to gather.

Central to Coffeegraph is a vocabulary of anthropomorphism that is not only visceral and lush but also serves as a river for the transmigration of symbols to images: familiar forms are no longer tethered to conventional references as we know them but released to wider investigation.

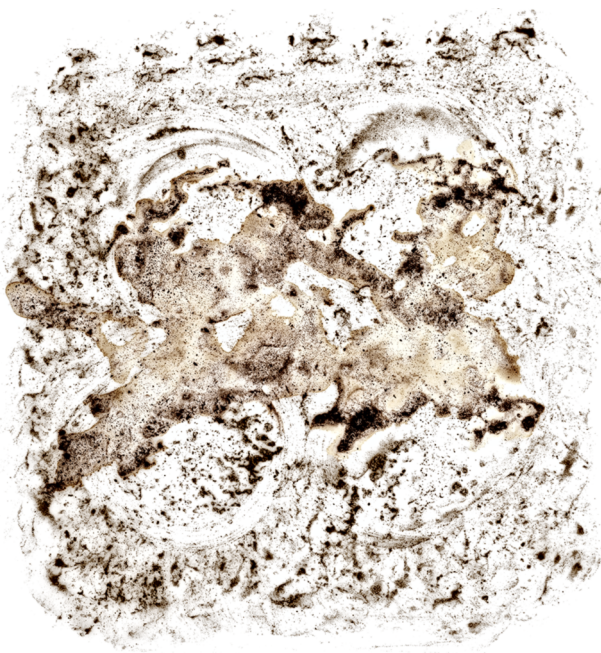
More *presentational* than *representational*, they are performative rather than interpretive. They stand right up and stun us in their novelty and nerve.

The uncertainty of time and indeterminacy of space can be surprising, disconcerting, and astonishingly liberating at once. A work like “Inferno di Terra Santa” might look like trance art with its obsessive rendering of abstract vegetal-architectural details, its boils and



craters festering as they multiply. Likewise, the rhythm and repetition of dust flurries in “Kazakh Rebellion” pre-figure the din of horses and sabers at the center of the coffee’s stain.

Some works are alle-  
gories of coffeegravity  
itself: ironically, in  
“Chimera,” as the cof-  
fee sharply establishes  
its contours with grada-  
tions of residue and de-  
posits intact; mystically  
in “Indian Tales” with  
the bean depicted as the source  
of shale-like orbs of time – the  
fossilization or petrification of  
ethereal words; brazenly in  
“Athletes” through the bold,  
gestural power of the application  
that results in a lava-like impasto



Kazakh Rebellion, 2011

of coffee dregs in collision with  
themselves; fluidly in “Crossing  
Styx” in the currents and  
counter-currents of the medium  
as it moves and is moved. The  
coffeegravity as the womb of the  
imagination is announced in the

cocoon-like rings that  
emanate from a potent  
seed, core, or fruit such  
as “Eden Pear”; the fluid  
nature of the brew and its  
oneiric lure for the artist  
arrive in “Aquatic  
Maiden” and evoke the  
relation to the liquid of  
the artist as navigator;  
the transformative power  
of coffee on such a  
taken-for-granted sub-  
stance as water is regis-  
tered in “Blue Water  
Petulance” while “Boat-  
ing the Arctic” conjures  
Viking-like conquerors

as it introduces the violent  
strokes of the artist’s palette  
knife through the frozen forms  
of the coffee stains.

Above all, “Lollygag” can’t help  
but be an imperative from the  
artist himself, for the improvisa-  
tion and serendipity of a process  
that insists upon profound in-  
quiry joined at the hip with pa-  
tience for fabulae to show  
themselves.

There is an insouciance in Roth’s  
attitude toward coffee afforded  
by his capacity for play. That  
ludic sensibility carries him to  
harmonies yet unheard produced  
by creatures who have not yet  
appeared.

The ancient clays of the vessels  
of coffee’s preparation and con-  
sumption set the stage for queries  
beyond time and quests outside  
the cosmos. And yet we might  
recognize them if we see them.  
They are there for us to dis-  
cover – in coffeegravitys.



Athletes, 2012