



"The Cosmos Falls into the Chaos as Shakti Urborosi: The Elimination of Value Systems by Spectrum Analysis," by Paul Laffoley (detail). (The Boston Globe)

VISUAL ARTS

The Boston Globe

## A beautiful mind

**Paul Laffoley has some unusual ideas about science and philosophy. And he puts plenty of them on canvas.**

By Ken Johnson, Globe Staff | February 11, 2007

I can't tell if Paul Laffoley is pulling my leg. We're talking in the artist's downtown Boston studio, and he tells me he has a tiny pellet lodged in his brain that is transmitting information about life on Earth to extraterrestrial beings somewhere else in the universe. He shows me a copy of a CAT scan that reveals exactly where it is located.

Laffoley, 66, seems a bit extraterrestrial himself. He has a pale shaved head, wears aviator glasses, and dresses entirely in black. He discusses the object in his head in such a cheerfully matter-of-fact way that he may not realize how preposterous he sounds.

But then, in the case of Laffoley (pronounced LAFF-oh-lee), suspending disbelief is probably the best policy. Since the mid-'60s, he has been slowly and steadily producing some of the strangest and most fascinating paintings to be found anywhere in contemporary American art — works of visionary imagination, meticulously executed in a dazzling mix of Medieval, Victorian, Pop, psychedelic, and pulp illustration styles. Lately his work has turned him into a contemporary cult hero: There's a Paul Laffoley website created by and for fans on [MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com). And Kent Gallery in New York is now presenting "Mind Physics," a small but revelatory exhibition of works dating from 1965 to 2006.

Combining neatly outlined, comic book-style images and words made of vinyl stick-on letters, Laffoley's paintings are essentially large, absorbingly complicated diagrams explicating a mind-boggling profusion of philosophical, scientific, artistic, and religious ideas. Time travel, astrology, lucid dreaming, black holes, and mathematical theories of four, five, and more dimensions are just a few of the topics addressed.

Some resemble Eastern mandalas, others look like posters for a bizarre New Age religion. Typically they are made on 6-by-6-foot square canvases and feature a wildly eclectic array of symbols and images, from ancient hieroglyphs and Gothic cathedrals to infernal demons and flying saucers. Often they include wordy charts displaying stages of spiritual progress, calling to mind the Jewish Kabbalah, which Laffoley has studied extensively, and Tantric Buddhism.

A 1981 painting in the Kent show called "The Orgone Motor" describes a machine that converts "meta-energy" — or what the maverick psychologist Wilhelm Reich called "orgone energy" — into "kato-energy." A central square shows the



machine, an electrical transformer, while peripheral panels illustrate such details as the "orgacell" and the "orgonomic crystal control." It is weirdly thrilling to behold, like a window onto some heretofore unknown parallel universe.

Though visually gripping, Laffoley's paintings can also be baffling. They seem to be cut from a far more extensive fabric of thought to which the viewer has only limited access. Talking with the artist is not always helpful – his endlessly digressive conversational style can be as perplexing as his paintings. Maybe if you read all the deep thinkers that his canvases identify as sources of inspiration – William Blake, J.W. Goethe, Teilhard de Chardin, Carl Jung, the futurist Buckminster Fuller, the scientist and inventor Nikola Tesla, and dozens more – and studied Laffoley's pictures for a few years, it would all make sense. But who has time for that? "It's not fast art," he acknowledges.

#### Outsider or insider?

Linda Dalrymple Henderson, an art historian at the University of Texas, Austin, has written about Laffoley in a new edition of her book, "The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art" (MIT Press, due out next year). She sees Laffoley as part of an under-recognized tradition of modern artists devoted to mystical and occult subjects dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "I think he's a truly remarkable artist," says Henderson. "He is a model for a younger generation of artists interested in the occult and visionary experiences. He's been treated as an outsider, but he may turn out to be the ultimate insider."

In fact, Laffoley's resume shows a record of impressive, sustained professional achievement. He's had more than 50 solo exhibitions, including many in Boston and New York. In 1999, the Austin Museum of Art in Texas produced a traveling exhibition called "Architectonic Thought Forms: A Survey of the Art of Paul Laffoley." Douglas Walla, director of Kent Gallery, says major paintings by Laffoley sell for \$95,000.

In 1971, Laffoley founded an artists association called the Boston Visionary Cell – of which he is the sole active member at present – and in 1977 he served as president of the Boston-Cambridge chapter of the World Future Society. He gives lectures when he's invited, and when he does, he wears a prosthetic foot in the form of a realistic lion's paw (he's a Leo) that he commissioned a Hollywood prop maker to create. (After a fall in 2001, he had to have one of his legs amputated below the knee because of osteomyelitis, a bone infection.)

In the past two decades in Boston, however, Laffoley has not been very visible. Says critic and curator Charles Giuliano, who organized Laffoley's most recent Boston exhibition in 2004 at the New England School of Art and Design, "Laffoley is a national treasure, and he is one of the most important artists of the international visionary art movement. But his presence in Boston has too long gone unnoticed." Prior to Giuliano's show, Laffoley had not exhibited in a Boston gallery since 1985.

Laffoley could be seen as the visual equivalent of a great science-fiction writer. But he disagrees. He doesn't think there's anything fictional in his art. He insists that it is all factual, or if it isn't now, it will be at some point in the future.

"People have called me crazy, and I might be, but I don't feel crazy," he says. He does, however, say he has a mild case of Asperger's disorder, a form of autism, which might explain his unwavering focus on painting and his tendency to talk nonstop and with an encyclopedic grasp of an incredible range of information.

#### A Belmont beginning

Laffoley grew up in Belmont. His father was a vice president – and for one year, president – of the Cambridge Trust Co., and also taught taxation at Harvard Business School. But he had his own idiosyncratic spiritual and philosophical ideas. "He taught me yoga when I was 7 years old," says Laffoley. "He also disbelieved in gravity." (How anyone could seriously doubt the existence of gravity, Laffoley can't say, but his father considered it a myth.)

At Brown University Laffoley studied classics, art history, and philosophy. After graduation in 1962 and a series of shock therapy treatments for neurasthenia, he says, he went on to study architecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, where he was expelled, he says, for deviating from the school's strictly modernist approach. After that, he worked in New York briefly for the artist and architect Frederick Kiesler, but that ended badly, too, when Laffoley damaged a sculpture he was assigned to polish and the exasperated Kiesler chased him out of the studio with a mallet.

Laffoley had two other odd New York jobs before he went back to Boston. He worked as a draftsman for the company that was designing floor plans for the World Trade Center Towers and was fired, he claims, for suggesting that pedestrian bridges should connect the towers. And, for several months, in exchange for a place to sleep, he worked for Andy Warhol, who had him watch television between the hours of 2 and 6 a.m. every morning and report what he saw that day. Laffoley



thinks that staring at test patterns in the early morning hours was what led him to the mandala structure that his paintings later would typically favor. What Warhol got out of it, he doesn't know.

In 1968, Laffoley moved into a one-room studio at 36 Bromfield St., an office building in downtown Boston, and there he lived and worked for 38 years until, he says, his landlord decided to evict him for living there illegally. Last June, he moved into his present quarters, a loft in the Midway Studios building on Channel Center Street in Fort Point. He paints 10 hours a day, reads (lately, books about topology), and watches movies.

Laffoley's first mature painting, completed in the basement of his childhood home in 1965, is included in the Kent exhibition. Called "The Cosmos Falls into the Chaos as Shakti Urborosi : The Elimination of Value Systems by Spectrum Analysis," it features at its center an X-ray of a human hand and a view of outer space framed within a cosmic egg. There's a portrait of the leader of a satanic cult to one side and the image of an ecstatic nun copied from a film still on the other. Below, a figure eight-shaped device like the drive belt of a machine diagrams a cycle of spiritual states between "boredom" and "care."

It's a painting about holding in equilibrium extreme opposites — good and evil, male and female, time and space, mind and body, order and chaos, life and death. And that, I think, is what has driven Laffoley's art over the past four decades: Underlying all the metaphysical razzle-dazzle is the herculean effort to maintain a whole, integrated perspective against the fragmenting, contradictory pressures of modern life and society. It's a psychological survival system for an artist who has more going on in his head than most ordinary people could bear without cracking up. Laffoley accepts my theory. "Sure," he comments, "I've maintained my rationality by working."

Whatever therapeutic purpose they may serve for the artist, the paintings perform a valuable service for viewers, too. They are consciousness-expanding devices, Nautilus machines for the soul. If you want to give your mind a good stretch, try a Laffoley.

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