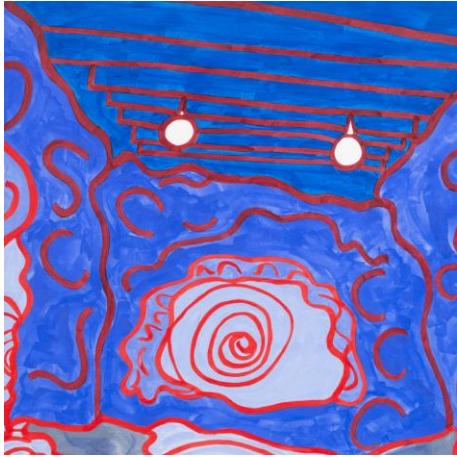


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Anna Kovler on Sandra Meigs



A Descent into the Basement. The Dizzying Paintings of Sandra Meigs

Sandra Meigs has been exhibiting her work in Toronto for over three decades. Across those many years, variety of artworks, and materials used emerge some of Meigs' most enduring choices and preoccupations - architecture, repetition, and the emblem of the spiral. The exhibition currently on view at Susan Hobbs and Georgia Scherman Projects, while entirely new, is also deep in its connections not only to the artist's oeuvre but also to literature, philosophy, the history of art, and contemplative subjective experience.

The Basement Panoramas consists of four paintings so large they require a double venue. As the title suggests, these massive paintings depict long, panoramic views of four distinct basements. Filling the entire length of the wall on the first floor of Susan Hobbs is a rendering of Meigs' sister's basement in Vermont. Each title includes the painting's predominant colour, the address of the house, and a corresponding state of being – this one is *Yellow. 435 Longmeadow. (Insomnia)*. On the second floor along the length of the wall is *Blue. 1000 Mountain Rest. (Breath)*. A few doors down, filling the expanse of the largest wall at Georgia Scherman is *Red. 3011 Jackson. (Mortality)* and folding into the corner of the back room is *Grey. 224 Main. (Transformation)*.

A key to understanding Meigs' work, and this series in particular, is hidden in her very first Toronto exhibition. *The Maelstrom* was the title of that show at A Space in 1980 and included a table which endlessly moved to a horizontal position and back upright, a series of watercolour drawings described as “illustrations for a book of children's nightmares” and a definition of a maelstrom that would appear on screen as part of a 25 minute film. The Maelstrom, it read, “is a whirlpool off the coast of Norway ... People believed that the Maelstrom led nowhere and that persons caught in it would travel through its endless pit forever”¹. Appearing in Meigs' work for a long time, both explicitly as a vortex or spiral, and thematically as an attraction towards dizzying repetition, the Maelstrom is the repetitive embodied, the dangerous, the infinite.

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In *The Basement Panoramas* the Maelstrom appears in the wonky doorways of the *Blue* painting, front and centre in the *Grey* painting, and radiating out from the middle of the *Red* painting. The *Blue* painting is akin to an architectural nightmare. The viewer is positioned as though looking down two apartment building hallways while on a hallucinatory drug or in a bad dream. There is absolutely no escape. The haunting swirl of the Maelstrom is the single thing inside every visible door and window, and like a hall of mirrors at a carnival show, every option is exactly the same. The primary colours are strange and child-like. A blue, a light blue, and swirls of red are applied in a way that evokes using a Crayola marker to colour in a large area; the result is always patchy and irregular.

In the wonky world of the *Blue* painting the red swirl is king. It cannot be contained by the blue doorways and windows and spills out into the puddles that seem to flow from the rounded doorways or portal openings. The only way out is via the stairs on the right and left, but they end abruptly and offer no real perspectival resolution, no way out. At once childlike and serious, this surreal interior is a trap where the only way to go is down into the funnel of the Maelstrom, into the unknown.

The Maelstrom spiral evokes the work of Marcel Duchamp, whose longstanding fascination with spinning, eternal and unfulfilled repetition, is exemplified not only by the spinning spiral of his *Rotoreliefs* but also with the vicious cycle of the erotic machinery in *The Large Glass*. M.C. Escher's architectural loops also come to mind, with their impossible, inescapable spaces. Next to Escher Meigs' architecture is less severe, her lines undulate and breathe, making the impossible space somehow more inhabitable.



In the *Red* painting the Maelstrom appears in the centre as a series of expanding circles like the ones made by a pebble dropped in water. If the *Blue* painting is an architectural nightmare, this one is an architectural storm. Painted in red on a white ground, it features doors jutting out at strange angles, windows aslant, a lattice of ceiling beams, and shelves and cupboards with a cartoonish slant. Words appear intermittently to label the various basement elements, and the expected “water portal” and “electrical portal” are accompanied by more esoteric labels including “Door Mortal Birth” and “Bed Mortal Death”.

These labels quietly hint at the reason for Meigs' descent into her own basement, which the *Red* painting represents. It became a place of fascination for her during her husband's fight with cancer, the labels express an attempt to understand and cope. In the *Red* painting, the circular Maelstrom

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emanates from a rock found by Meigs in her basement, which reminded her of a mortality chamber. Despite the importance of the life of the artist, the power of these paintings lies far beyond the limits of biography. Roland Barthes writes that the author does not precede the work, but is “born simultaneously with his text”ⁱⁱⁱ and *The Basement Panoramas* are a representation of death *and* birth, hopelessness *and* resilience.

In 1841 Edgar Allan Poe featured the Maelstrom in his short story “A Descent Into the Maelstrom”, which inspired Meigs in the eighties while she was living on the coast of Nova Scotia. Poe describes an old man’s survival of shipwreck in the Moskoestrom, a whirlpool off the coast of the Norwegian island Moskoe. This massive vortex appears as a gyrating whirl more than a mile in diameter, a “terrific funnel” sloping to the horizon at a forty five degree angle, whose gaping mouth is a wall of water spinning at a dizzying speed from the bottom of which sounds a terrifying shriek. In the story, the ocean calmed before the old man could be pulled to the bottom of the gigantic vortex where ships, trees, and animals get beat to pieces against the crags at the bottom, to emerge in a completely unrecognizable form. Perhaps Barthes does not go far enough. Like Meigs’ and Poe’s whirlpool, perhaps the author is not only born in the current of the artwork but also broken to pieces against the rocks at the bottom and spit back up to the surface of the world in pieces, transformed, an entirely new person.



In the *Grey* painting the whirlpool is the centre of the composition. It is embedded in a symmetrical grey and black architectural structure reminiscent of a coliseum, which fans outwards as though it has wings. Shoes, clocks, light bulbs, floating orbs, and a string of words appear in the fine and spindly basement architecture. To the right of the vortex are words synonymous with death including cease, eclipse, obliteration, and vanishing. To the left are words synonymous with birth, like attendance, coming, arising and appearing. Positioned by Meigs as mirror images of one another – birth and death, appearance and vanishing – start to lose their difference.

Jean Baudrillard, among others, meditated on the simultaneous movement of the real between appearance and disappearance, “The real vanishes into the concept. But what is even more paradoxical is the exact opposite movement by which concepts and ideas (but also fantasies, utopias, dreams and desires) vanish into their very fulfillment.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Indeed it is the nature of a dream that it ceases to exist the moment it comes true; it dies the moment it becomes real. And the Maelstrom too, with its eternal rotation, is at its birth a death of what surrounds it – as the ocean water swallows itself. In this way, the mirror image of birth and death in the *Grey* painting is fitting for a

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perpetual becoming, going around the circle of the Maelstrom, here appearing, there disappearing, forever.



The *Yellow* painting stands out among the panoramas. Painted with yellow and thin lines of blue on a white ground it radiates a cool electric glow. This basement is full of ubiquitous basement stuff – boxes, baskets of bits and pieces, piles of things. Four figures lounge among the objects, thinking, reclining, ruminating and reading. White gaps contain words that seem to refer to types of people – lost souls, drifters, losers, winners, fools and sinners, planners and dreamers. Who exactly the words refer to is a mystery. Are these the inhabitants of the basement? Is the junk we store in basements reflective of our life’s achievements?

The basement is certainly a place where, looking through boxes of objects and old photographs, we can get lost in a reflective reverie – the sum of a full life, mementos of having lived. Like an archive of memory, the basement is the place where we store thoughts to retrieve them at another time, on a sleepless night or in a moment of crisis, just when we forgot all about them.

The Basement Panoramas are about everything and nothing at once. A lifetime of consciousness stored in the basement and caked with dust is rendered as simple lines and swirls on a white ground. In quick gestures Meigs reduces the heaviest, deepest, most cumbersome parts of a human life to its skeletal beams; wispy, meandering lines, but always telling, always tracing some untold story. The massive size of these paintings suits their scope of things. Meigs leads us with her dancing, winding lines through the circles of birth and death, lightness and darkness, dream and waking, around and around in the eternal Maelstrom that has dwelled in her work for so long.

ⁱ Mays, John Bentley. “A Harrowing Ride Through Sandra Meigs’ Maelstrom.” *The Globe and Mail*. 12 April, 1980.

ⁱⁱ Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image-Music-Text*. Hill and Wang 1977. 42-148.

ⁱⁱⁱ Baudrillard, Jean. “Why Hasn’t Everything Already Disappeared?” Seagull Books. 2009.