

ILLUMINATIONS

The Geography of the Imagination

ILLUMINATIONS

Paintings Poems Drawings

by Steven Edwin Counsell

BLACK SWAN EDITIONS

Santa Fe, New Mexico



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Robert Graves once said you cannot marry your muse, which is of course nonsense for thirty years ago I married Hope. This book is a love affair to all the people that have helped me. My friend Buck who has been my friend for a lifetime, whose critical intelligence and sense of fun is without price. Jane Lipman and Janet Eigner, who have been my partners and midwives in poetry. John Cole's book design which you will soon be lucky enough to open. Monika Wikman, whose generous introduction makes me feel that I almost know what I am doing.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT LAND HAVE WE ENTERED

WITH STEVEN COUNSELL'S work doors open into the living imagination and invite us to walk through with him into its autonomous creative expressive landscape. And as we do the living question arises — what land have we entered?

From one point of view, we enter through his work via his paintings, drawings and accompanying poems, the landscape of the creation matrix itself erupting in ever fresh images revealing its own life from the depths as it informs contemporary daily reality.

In this land personal and transpersonal dimensions join hands and create the world anew. And we as witnesses may be opened, challenged, strummed and renewed in the process. For Counsell's work has as its bottom a courageous instinct that dares to drive a tap root down deeply into the living imagination, the strata beneath ordinary consciousness where image of its own volition moves, lives,

transforms and asks for witnesses and participants.

As the pages turn and the depth, complexity and volume of his work take hold I also imagine we have been invited into Counsell's alchemical laboratory where the contemporary alchemist at work puts into our hands the living, changing waters from the depths of the psyche via his art and accompanying poems honed in the vessel of creative life.

The archetypal images provoke us to discover the world anew. This is by definition the mystery the artist opens, the door in the psyche where first man, first woman in each of us is taking its first breath, first step, first perception of the mysteries of the natural world and the dance between spirit and matter of which we are all a part. Counsell helps us open our lenses of perception to discover this mystery within.

Steven Counsell is also a culture carrier, for he explores and expresses currents of change that are happening collectively as well as individually. I would caution the reader to be prepared to be disturbed, surprised, stretched,

shaken and taken into new territory. For Counsell's imagery portrays the dismantling post-modernist world view, where fresh life force disrupts form, erupts from some molten core beneath and inside all form.

Archetypal motifs play out as his shamanic visionary world view explodes traditional form and recasts life in new ways. In one of his images the tree of life itself, the axis mundi, is blast apart into many pieces and recast in new ways. It gives one the visceral experience of what Counsell's alchemical work has tapped — that sea of sulphuric transforming lava seething beneath the formed world that destroys the old and creates the new. Not a journey for the faint hearted...

His poem "Tree" is an exquisite example of this shamanic revisioning spirit that prevails in his work. The archetypal story of the world tree is taken into his poet hands and with this we as readers also hold the reality of the creation and destruction of the worlds as we all truly do hang in the balance these days. The reader is invited into the shamanic experience of the axis mundi (Yggdrasil) that connects us with our ancestors and all those we have ever known. Then the poem draws us, thaws us out of collective spells that freeze perception and life energy, and portrays the poignant meaningful role of the artist at the world tree. The poem hauntingly hangs in the air at the end over the abyss of creation and destruction of the worlds — just where the Norse creation myth saw it at the beginning of time, just as we know it to be so in our contemporary world — ending with the felt sense of the self portrait of the artist/poet;

Until re-carved in the branch and the twig, our life is rendered as art, masks, mannequins, torques of gold filigree on children's blocks, or concave mirrors of brass for seeing ourselves in the sky.

Proud adornments to a rendezvous with the gods that reign above the tree, patiently waiting upon our brief fountain, rising upward, to at last craft a future before the bough breaks.

Those interested in depth psychology will have a field day with this manuscript, for in it we find what Jung pointed to at the bottom of creation—the transformation of the divine, the changing god image. As we know, with the recent publication of Carl Jung's *The Red Book* by the Philemon Foundation, we now have access to Jung's own magnum opus, his own revelations poured forth onto the page in paintings, drawings, incantations, active imaginations and more. The exposure to the depths that Jung traveled, as portrayed in *The Red Book*, is daunting. And as Jung's opus takes its place as a contemporary alchemical book of revelation, it spotlights the hunger in the human soul to find places in the contemporary world where individual expressions of the mythological unconscious are lived and portrayed anew, both in our own lives and in the lives and work of others.

Steven Counsell's *Illuminations* reveal his 'Red Book', his magnum opus, his text of revelation where we witness the fruit of the work done in his alchemical vessel, the specific nature here, in this artist and poet of the divine transforming in the human soul.

As the pages turn and the depths stir, I wonder who will come to mind for you, dear reader, as kin to his work. As I found myself

musings on where *Illuminations* would find kindred spirits in my library I saw the life and work of Maria Remedio's Varo, Alex Grey and Hieronymus Bosch. It is tricky however, because Steven is part poet, artist, alchemist, ethnographer and depth psychologist. And the complexity of themes that run deep in his writing and art deserve much more than this brief introduction would allow. They deserve to be studied in depth by people of many fields of study. May that be so, and may the world (for its own sake) open its doors widely to the soul-stirring work of this needed visionary as his light from the depths shines for generations to come.

— Monika Wikman, Ph.D. Tesuque, New Mexico, March 2011. Jungian analyst and author of *Pregnant Darkness: Alchemy and the Rebirth of Consciousness* published by Nicolas Hays, 2005.



P A R T O N E



THE ONE TREE

XYLEM

THE LIFE STRUCTURE of trees, without showing trees themselves — Xylem and Phloem. Biology always gives budding young artists and poets so many lovely and mysterious forms and words.

Altering context offers the gift of abstraction. Scale, even a change in the grammar of objects, causes them to pattern. Colors not expected or a contrast not parsed. How glibly narrow is the workaday script that makes reality just so. The doors to larger rooms, to whole wings of the unknown, start with looking, say, at the bark of a tree, really looking until the mind blurs to a lexicon of shapes. Once you enter the shape of things, other symbols, and myth, the worlds beyond the looking glass will open. To begin, make form more than the function it follows. 



SELF PORTRAIT AS A TREEHOUSE

IN THE MORNING my hand, like the shape of this tree, is wooden. Yet I know within the mind that seduces fingers to grip brushes and chalk there are cubbies of space, windup wells for stairs, and balconies for sailing kites and kittens from.

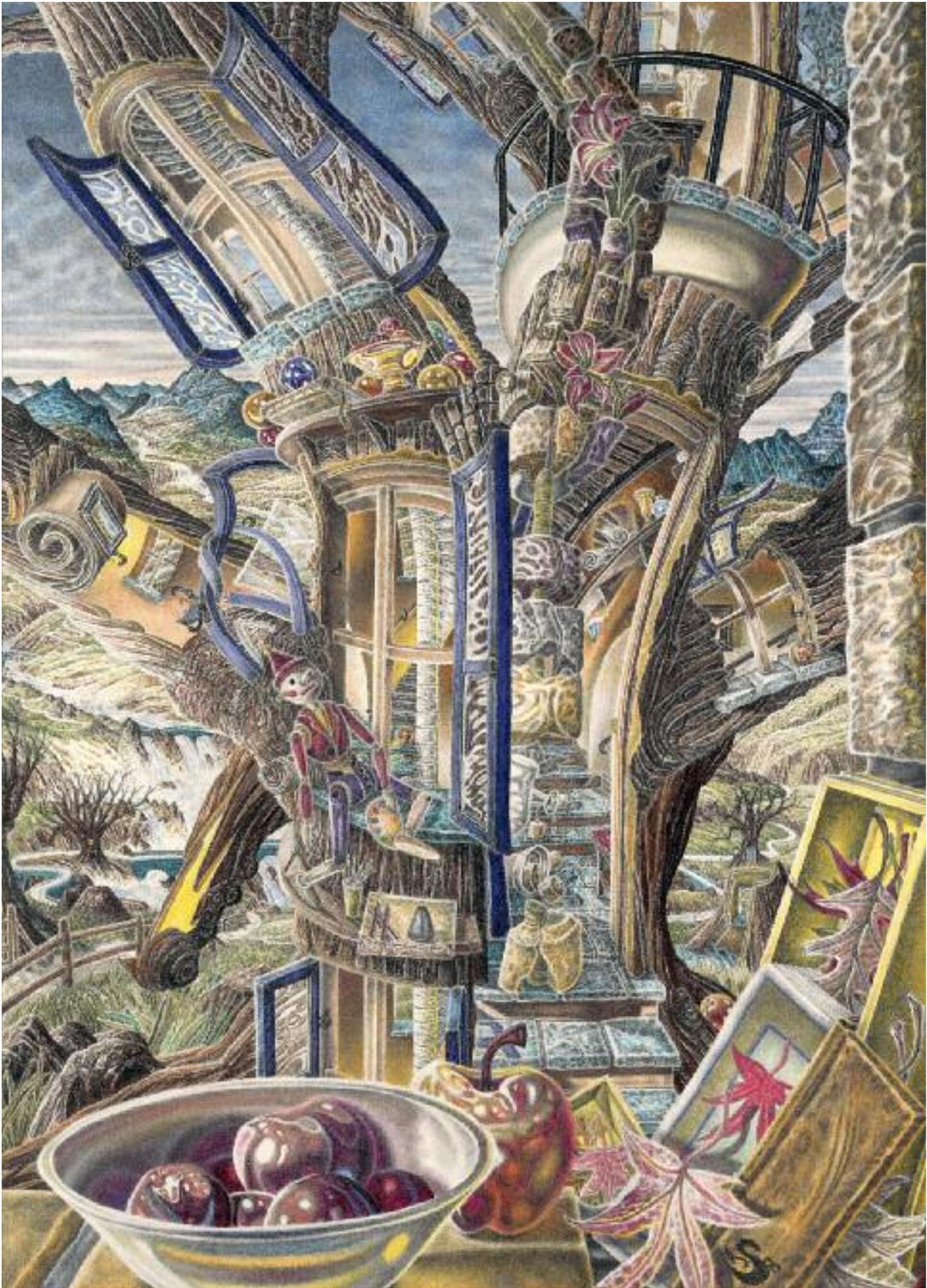
That the Pinocchio that lives inside the real boy is the one who wants to get out. He's the one with all the adventures. The Blue Fairy promised life but a sheet of flat paper in a book offers escape beyond the prosody of simple song.

There may be more life in a painting, more to explore than in a repeated trip to the same office, or a destiny with the same meal, more soul or meaning than the thrall of doxologies or the tyranny of current events.

The marionette that I am sits in a world of wonders. When my painting session ends, the real boy returns and has to pretend again that he knows what an adult is and worst of all that he cares what an adult does.

After all, as the saying goes, history is the nightmare from which I'm trying to awaken. However, daydreams fogging into the frame of imagination, or stealing away care, that's a wholly different mythopoesis.

You can walk a hundred miles in this painting, or a few feet, follow a line of thought or a rattle of bark, or come to rest upon its surface like a blue bottle fly, or simply turn the page, it just depends, like Pinocchio, what kind of blockhead you are. 







TREE

YGGDRASIL, the great world tree in Norse cosmology.
Its root in the underworld fed by the pool of wisdom,
its trunk in the realm of men, a column of life
and its branches in Asgard the home of the gods.

Look carefully in the fissures of any tree,
everyone you have ever known will be there.

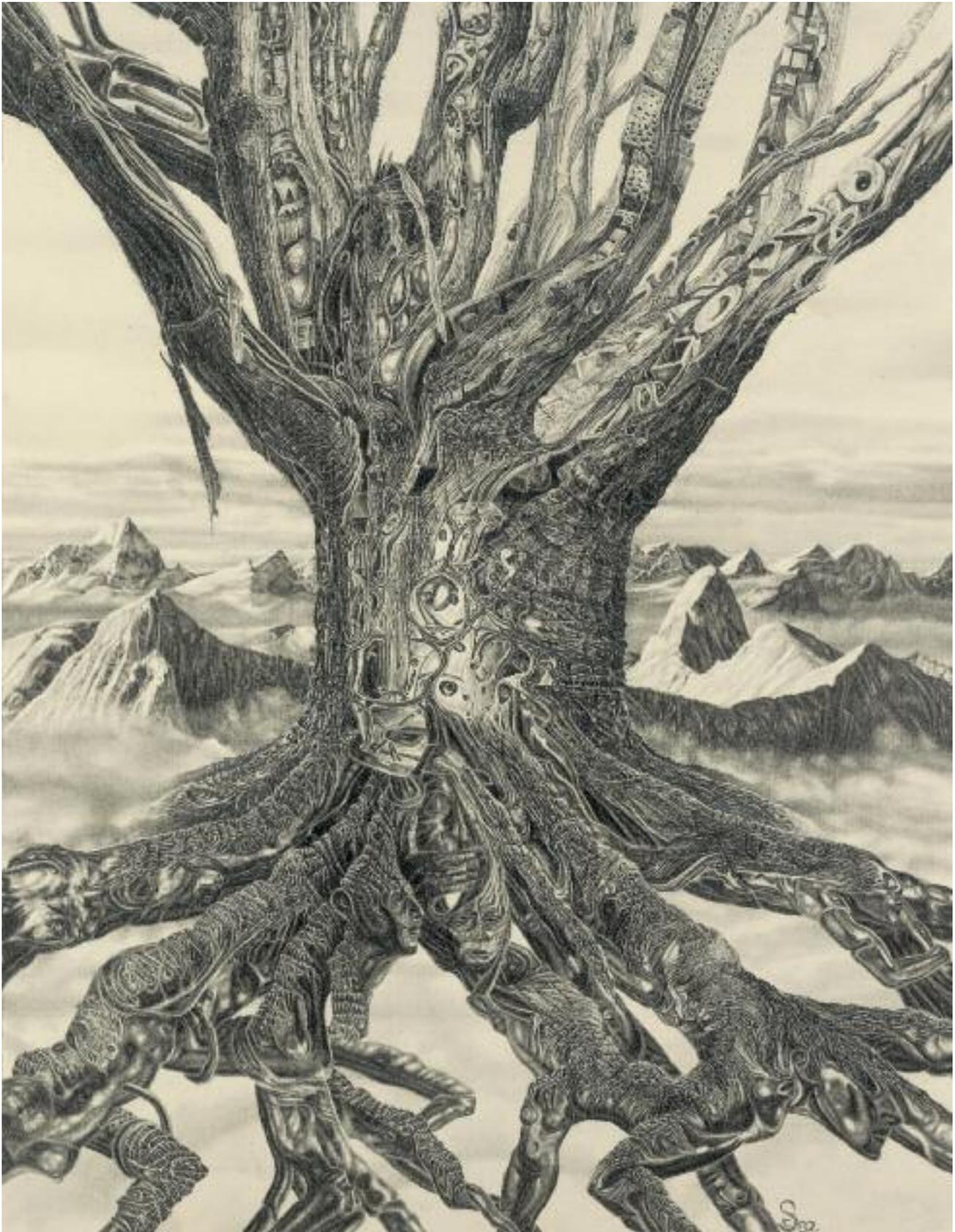
The rooted nerves that match your own
and the watery blood rising through dry bark.

The grounding green wire, snapping and firing
is moist, as we remember being dragged up the trunk.

The crystal cathedrals of in-spired ambitions
lost in a frozen lattice of tasks and taskmasters...

Until recarved in the branch and the twig, our life
is rendered as art, masks, mannequins, torques
of gold filigree on children's blocks, or concave
mirrors of brass for seeing ourselves in the sky.

Proud adornments to a rendezvous with the gods
that reign above the tree, patiently waiting
upon our brief fountain, rising upward, to at last
craft a future before the bough breaks. 





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