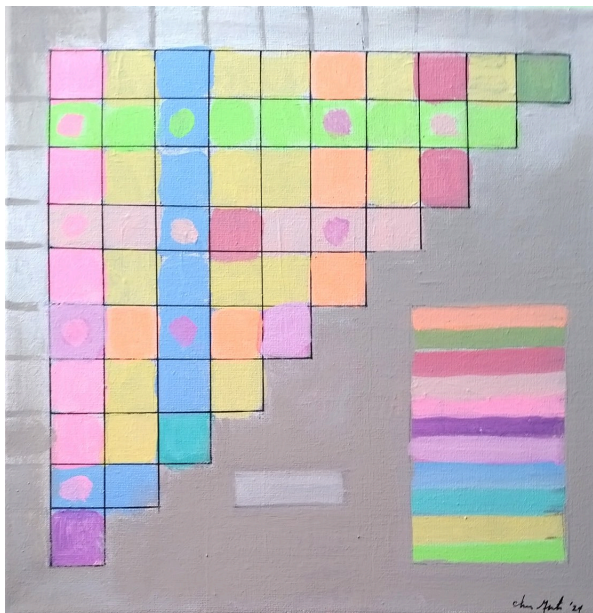


Birds of Mars Digest

Number Twenty

January 2024



Music Paintings

Birds of Mars Digest

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The Birds of Mars Digest is published occasionally to primarily document any artwork I recently created. Beginning in 2020 the first six issues were printed books in the Alt Lit style. Since Number Seven (April—October 2021) I have created just digital versions. This issue documents a return to painting after a seven month pause and the creation of a group of new artworks.

With this year I have decided to use chronological numbers for each artwork irrespective as to whether it is a drawing, painting or something else. I am doing this in part because of a ‘notebook’ I have which has a lot of musical research in it. Since some of the pages in that notebook also have to do with current artworks being created and related matters, and since it is a notebook I am still using, I wanted to document that there are art related materials in it. This notebook is anomalous in these regards, and as such I put it at the start of the index to denote its significance in this manner. Beyond this are the artworks which are described in the comments section. Images of some of the artworks and drawings/studies are shown as well.

I made some related Artwork in 2022—a collection of paintings of musical based themes, of which I’d like to mention here since they predate these current music paintings by almost two years. The current works are an extension of these earlier ones. Rather than put the images of the 2022 artworks here, I will point the interested reader to the following Birds of Mars publications where one will find images and comments about each of those artworks.

Birds of Mars Digest Number Twelve March—April 2022

Birds of Mars Digest Number Thirteen May 2022

Birds of Mars Digest Number Fifteen August 2022

Artwork Index

January 2024

No.	Title	Description	Size
24-01	Notebook w/32 pages	pen(cil) on paper	11x8.5"
24-02	Design for [24-12]	pencil on paper	11x17
24-03	Design for [24-12]	pencil on paper	11x8.5"
24-04	Design for [24-12]	pencil on paper	11x8.5"
24-05	Design for [24-12]	drawing/paper	12x12"
24-06	Design for [24-12]	drawing/paper	12x12"
24-07	Design for [24-12]	various/canvas	12x9"
24-08	Design for [24-12]	pencil on card	7x5"
24-09	Design for [24-18]	pencil on paper	11x8.5"
24-10	Design for [24-18]	pencil on paper	11x8.5"
24-11	Design for [24-18]	pencil on paper	11x8.5"
24-12	"The Expanded Key of C"	acrylic on canvas	20x16"
24-13	"Major Modes"	acrylic on canvas	20x16"
24-14	"Color Key"	acrylic on canvas	12x9"
24-15	"Waltz For Debby"	acrylic on canvas	12x9"
24-16	"Triads"	acrylic on canvas	12x12"
24-17	"Row Your Boat"	acrylic on canvas	12x9"
24-18	"Some Modes"	acrylic on canvas	16x20"
24-19	"Some Letters"	acrylic on canvas	12x12"
24-20	"Miles Mode"	acrylic on canvas	12x9"
24-21	Study for [24-20]	pen(cil) on paper	11x8.5"

Comments

I hadn't done much painting since Spring 2022, and the reasons were multifold, but now I was painting again. Curiously I also didn't make a new Digest since Number 18 (January—February 2023). I have a file started for Digest Number 19 (March—December 2023), and eventually I will fill in the details of everything that happened during those months. Here is the overview for now.

In the spring of 2023 I made a series of arduous color mixing charts [23-20] that led to my satisfaction of personally understanding all relevant facets involved with mixing the paints I am using. I subsequently codified that information into a series of lists and charts for subsequent use. And then I took a break from art for the rest of the year.

At that time I focused my attention on investigating Thorough Bass in an attempt to unravel its secrets. This is an endeavor I began in earnest back in March 2022.

I keep research journals and files of various sorts, and at one point in the back of my mind I thought that perhaps it would make a good book. But what I also was aware of was that in conducting this kind of research is the simple fact that as someone's understanding of a subject deepens, earlier research notes may seem out-dated and full of mistakes. Music theory investigations in this respect can at times be a kind of math which is interpreted as aesthetics. It evolves as one's perception of it evolves. There is the sense that one never really arrives, that one is always traveling. So in realizing this, a book made no sense, since it would soon be outdated since I was still discovering new things.

As mentioned, I keep databases and charts of musical information in various forms. Sometimes I use color to help identify areas of similarity. These databases sometimes would contain hundreds of entries, of various kinds relating to tonalities and musical constructions, and the colors help to differentiate between, or create within, understandable groups. Over time I would create new databases, modify old ones, and sometimes I would change the color schemes. Now when I look at some of the first databases I am amused because I can clearly see representations of my way of thinking of the subject matter at that time. I can also see how my understanding has deepened and changed over time. I can see how I would alter these earlier databases, diagrams and charts if I were to update them. I've decided, however, to leave them as they are.

That is what Thorough Bass research seems to be for me. An exploration into a realm of unfathomable complexity from which emerges a system of rules (suggestions), of sometimes glaring simplicity, which set the groundwork for ways of creating beautiful music. It is a language and as such can be learned fluently, allowing one to speak spontaneously with music. These paintings are explorations into finding ways to do this with color and form.

[24-02 through 24-08] Designs for “The Expanded Key of C”

In December 2023 one line of this research led me to a few new concepts of which I realized the only way to understand the information was to make a diagram. I began by making a variety of sketches which evolved into seven artworks which document various stages of the development of what became the painting #24-14 “The Expanded Key of C.” I was bringing data into a form. Data I didn't fully understand into a form that hadn't been

created yet. Over the course of a few days, the diagram evolved and I made several versions, slowly refining it. Eventually I had enough of a scheme that I made a 12x12" drawing on construction paper, and then a second one, more refined. After a few more days I realized that I would need to make a larger version since there was so much data contained in the diagram. I decided to make a painting, since I had a spare canvas and it would be more permanent than the drawings I had made, which had already becoming tattered since I was constantly looking at them and making corrections and refinements.

I began working on the first painting, which ended up not being a painting at all, but more of a drawing on a small canvas.

Soon thereafter I started a larger version and as I worked on this larger version I realized that I would need a color scheme. A way to represent certain notes with certain colors so that when looking at the diagram I would have a quicker way of understanding what things meant.

One of my goals was to create a method of mixing colors and have them be similar each time since I sometimes work on a painting over the course of a week, and when I paint a color I'd like it to match the same color already on the canvas. As such I'd like to have a set procedure that works and can be used each time.

There were challenges in creating a color scheme for the various groups I was using. But I was prepared. I had my color charts from the Spring of 2023. I got them out and studied them, slowly remembering all the work I had done creating the mixing charts. I also studied a few paintings I had made back in 2021 that were early investigations into color mixing and color classification. One thing I realized is that 21 unique colors is too many to have for each to be uniquely differentiated and recognizable, even if they are. I ended up with a dozen colors.

In creating this palette I spent a lot of time contemplating which colors were to be associated with each of the sharp and flat notes. A friend asked if I had synesthesia—he thought that I might be seeing certain colors when certain notes were played, and I explained that that is not the case with me in this instance. This was more to do with color mapping specific musical tonalities. As mentioned this idea originated within my spreadsheet databases where I assigned colors to specify kinds of chords or modes to help me understand various groups of them fuller. I am hesitant to go into much more detail about how I derived this group of colors to represent these specific notes for the paintings, partly because it will likely change in the future, and also because it seems superfluous at this point in time, even though while I was in that discovery phase it was interesting.

[24-12] “The Expanded Key of C”

acrylic on canvas, 20x16”

This painting was the result of creating a diagram representing what I call the expanded key of C. At first I was just trying to draw a diagram to help me understand a facet of music theory I was looking into. This ended up being the beginning of this new group of artworks. I began work on this painting in mid-January. I had a nice design of the information and I wanted it in a larger format. So I began the painting. I quickly realized that I was going to need colors to represent the various sharp and flat notes. That began the process of creating a good palette of colors to make it easy for me to have specific shades or values of known colors quickly.

Fortunately I had my detailed color mixing charts from Spring 2023 as previously mentioned, and that helped me greatly in creating this palette.

The painting itself changed many times. Many aspects of it changed from day to day as I painted more. I was still working on selecting and finding ways to mix the colors I wanted to have represent the sharp and flat notes. Slowly it became more refined. Choices were made. Initially I was going to include mode names within the concentric circles, and I was going to write the names of the modes around the circle. But then I decided to just make the legend at the bottom because there wasn't enough space for the lettering for the modes. I almost used those little plastic peel letters at one point, but I didn't have enough of them. They would have worked nicely on this painting and given it a nice "Paul Laffoley" feel. But I was content with doing all the lettering by hand.

A lot of the interesting 'problems' I've encountered with these paintings is how to make the lettering. In fact one of the paintings is just that—letters of various sizes. More than just figuring out the size, it is also the spacing, how to paint the letter. When drawing one can control the line to the smallest point, but when painting, the smallest point always seems to be a blob, and it is difficult to get a nice thin line.

[24-13] "Major Modes"

acrylic on canvas, 20x16"

This started as an idea to make another painting using my newly created palette of colors. This painting is a kind of meditation in a way. It is very simple to paint once the design for the form is known. I tried a variety of ways to make the lettering, and in the end I decided to use the marker because I don't know how else to make a line that thin. This painting really got me thinking about letters. What I like about this painting is that it is interesting to look at. There is lettering and form and

information represented. This painting is an exploration into arranging color in a manner that I might not have done otherwise.

[24-14] “Color Key”

acrylic on canvas, 12x9”

Once I had determined the colors I was going to use and how to mix them, I created on my palette an arrangement of how to do this. Specific colors of the palette were for specific areas on the palette. Over the course of days this increasingly became refined as I added new paint over the dried paint from a previous painting session. Then I thought that perhaps I should make a painting of these colors themselves, a ‘key’ showing their relationships to the notes represented in the other paintings. This was also about the time I was beginning to realize that a few of the paintings I was working on looked good without any words.

This is a small painting and it has areas showing the various colors that I used on the Expanded Key of C painting. At one point I added lettering. This painting was quickly made initially. I didn’t plan out where each color would be. I just added those areas based on what color I was using at the moment on another painting. At one point I thought I should start anew, but then I decided not to. The painting was showing some of the process—even though it is the most nuanced obscure meaningless bit of information. Without these words describing this here no one would know anything about this. Every painting changes each time paint is added. Does each change need to be identified like a chess move? Does each addition of paint need to be notated and recorded and stored as information? Where does the importance lie in the choices of the artist which are of interest and value enough to make note of it? Should art be made with

these things in mind ahead of time? An artist has many yet to be answered questions.

This painting is finished, but it isn't one I plan to show. This is a painting which has more meaning for me due to the things I learned in creating it. I want to keep it as it is as a document to this process. On the painting itself are colors which are my first basic palette. I want to keep this as a nostalgic reference.

[24-15] “Waltz For Debby”

acrylic on canvas, 12x9”

I was thinking of how I would interpret the chords on Waltz For Debby, a song by pianist Bill Evans. Since I am of a Thorough Bass mind I interpreted the slash chords in bars 4-8 in terms of how I understand thorough bass to be, more or less. I decided to make a painting of this, since by this time I had already realized that I was making a new group of paintings and that I wanted to bring them over to the Woodstar Cafe to show them there. So now, along with working on these paintings, with refining my color mixing, with continuing with my research into thorough bass, I was also entertaining thoughts of what the next painting might be.

The progression is one of dominant chords through four steps of the circle of fourths. If one wanted to land on the tonic C Major, the progression would look like this:

E7 A7 D7 G7 C Major.

But the chords are written with either the 3 or the b7 in the bass, which when alternating, create a descending bass line.

Another way of interpreting these chords is in the language of Thorough Bass. There are many ‘dialects’ of Thorough Bass as it is a language which has survived centuries. Even CPE Bach in his writings points out that many of the things he had seen

written about the subject were wrong. That said, the idea behind Thorough Bass is that a triad or chord can easily be described with the ‘figures’ or ‘signatures’ as they are called—the numbers above the notes. More varieties of chords can be described in more specific detail.

[24-16] “Triads”

acrylic on canvas, 12x12”

This painting is of a diagram I made of some triad groupings. On one day as I was painting it, it seemed finished, so I decided to leave it how it was. In that respect it is an unintended finished painting. I think that this painting is one I will make again. For me it is just very pleasing to the eye. My role as the artist is to have a philosophy in place which allows me to recognize a certain beauty along the path, stop painting and recognize if it is finished. I can’t really explain it more than that.

[24-17] “Row Your Boat”

acrylic on canvas, 12x9”

After having finished the Waltz for Debby painting I thought I’d make another painting of a song. I picked the first song that came to my mind—Row, Row Your Boat. That is the correct title, as far as I can tell, based on images of sheet music from the 1800s. The most common version of the name of the song appears to be “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” which is also the first line of the song.

This painting was interesting to make. It evolved over the course of days. At first it looked very amateurish. But as I continually painted over it and moved something one way or

another and figured out the colors better, and decided where to place things it slowly improved.

I decided to just call this painting Row Your Boat, in part because there already is confusion surrounding the title of the song, I felt I should select a title which makes the best design. Fewer letters is better for a title design. It seems that way to me anyway. One thing that I always have liked about acrylic paint is that it is so easy to paint over something and make it look better. In the back of my mind I was trying to imagine someone who would perhaps purchase this painting, but I realize that this is just me creating stories in my mind, and whatever future reality there is which will occur in relation to this painting has absolutely nothing to do with whatever I am thinking about while creating it. This is something I learned from the poets. Once I realized this I had more freedom to just paint what I wanted to paint.

This painting as of now is still unfinished. That is one of the things I realized—a painting doesn't have to be, and might not actually, ever be, finished. And that is ok for many reasons.

[24-18] “Some Modes”
acrylic on canvas, 16x20”

After completing the Expanded Key of C painting I wanted to make another painting of a similar type, but with a different group of modes represented. At the time I had created a group of modes based on some Thorough Bass ideas, and I wanted to create a diagram style painting of them. For this painting there are 11 modes, almost half of the 21 modes that appeared in the Expanded Key of C painting.

What I remember about this painting is how wide I had made the lines of the rings of the concentric circle initially. At

one point as I started adding color to areas within the circles I remarked to myself about how wide these lines seemed to me. I kept trying to make them narrower and I also kept lightening them. For some reasons the dark lines didn't look good to me over the pastel colors within this group of paintings. Usually I like outlines on things, but for some reason not with these paintings. I kept painting everything lighter.

And then this painting seemed suddenly finished. I had originally intended to add words to it, but it seemed that it would be better without them. But it wasn't finished, and still isn't as of me writing this.

[24-19] “Some Letters”

acrylic on canvas, 12x12”

As I worked on these paintings it became apparent that letters and words would be part of them. So I began thinking about ways to make the lettering. This is not a subject new to me. I have made many artworks with lettering on them. Sometimes as letters on signs on building. Other times as part of the art itself. There are many works of this genre that it would take time to look through my art to find them all, and is something I might do in the future. I remember one year I was making a lot of small drawings of alphabets. Many of my sketchbooks are filled with letters.

This painting is one which I found when I was organizing a stack with some paintings I created in 2021. It is one of the paintings from the 12x12 series. This one, however, isn't numbered and with my new philosophy, I felt it was ok to keep painting it. Already on the canvas there was a group of letters of various sizes in black, white and gray.

I started painting color over the letters that were already there. I did this in various ways. As I was refining my color mixing process and fine tuning these colors I would add them to this painting. Looking at it over time I continually lightened it. All of these paintings are on the lighter side. As I work on a specific painting over a few days I am continually refining and updating the image—making it more aesthetically pleasing as I go. I have to see the painting over time in various light situations and contexts. My mind will see what I think should be improved and I make a mental note to fix that in the future. If, when I look at the painting again in the future, my mind is still seeing that thing to fix, it will stick in my mind to do it. If that thing I wanted to fix subsequently looks ok in a different light then I might leave it. I am aware of how it looks in both situations, and that it looks ok in one situation may be enough to not change it.

Usually when I look at a painting I know what I would like to work on next. I see something I could do to make it look better. It keeps evolving in this way. These paintings with letters and words evolve similarly. The interesting thing about a word is that it is a set number of letters and each letter has limitations of form (otherwise it wouldn't look like that letter if it varied too much).

A painting is finished when anything on it that bothers me isn't bothersome enough to create the impulse in me to change it. A painting can also be suddenly finished. Perhaps in my mind I had an idea of how I wanted the painting to look and I was progressing through the steps that would take the painting there. At some point, suddenly, perhaps when I was waiting for the rising sun to bring enough light into the room so I can see the paintings in the dimmest light. As the light slowly increases I can see the variances of tonal values within the painting. Only the lightest brightest colors are visible to the eye as color. The darker

value pigments appear as dark grays, with slight hints of color. Over time the colors become bolder and in full sunlight it is hard to believe how the same painting looked in near darkness. As an artist I'm aware of the many ways it can look in different lighting situations and try to find a way so the painting looks good in all of them. I'm not sure if this painting is done yet, so I am leaving it as is for now.

[24-20] “Miles Mode”

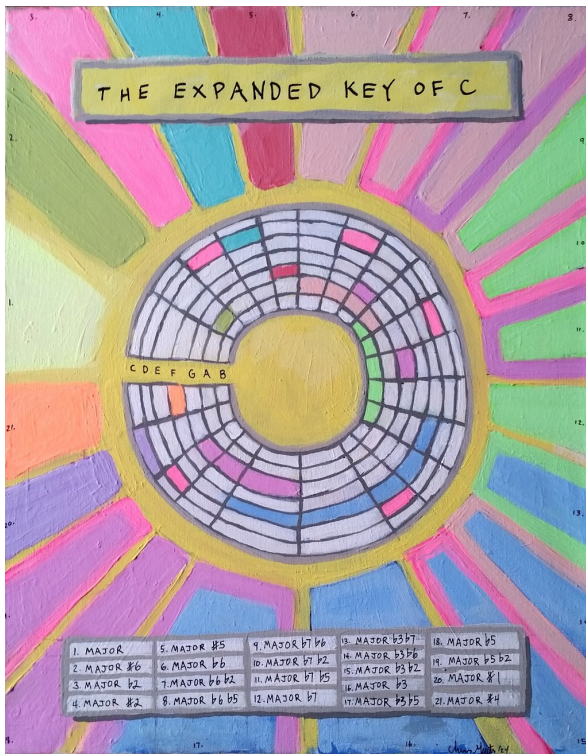
acrylic on canvas, 12x9”

As I was working on these paintings I watched a documentary about Miles Davis, and in that movie Chick Corea told an anecdote about how Miles once showed him three triads: E, Ab, and C, and Chick said that if you make a scale out of those triads it has a lot of elements of ‘Miles’ sound’.

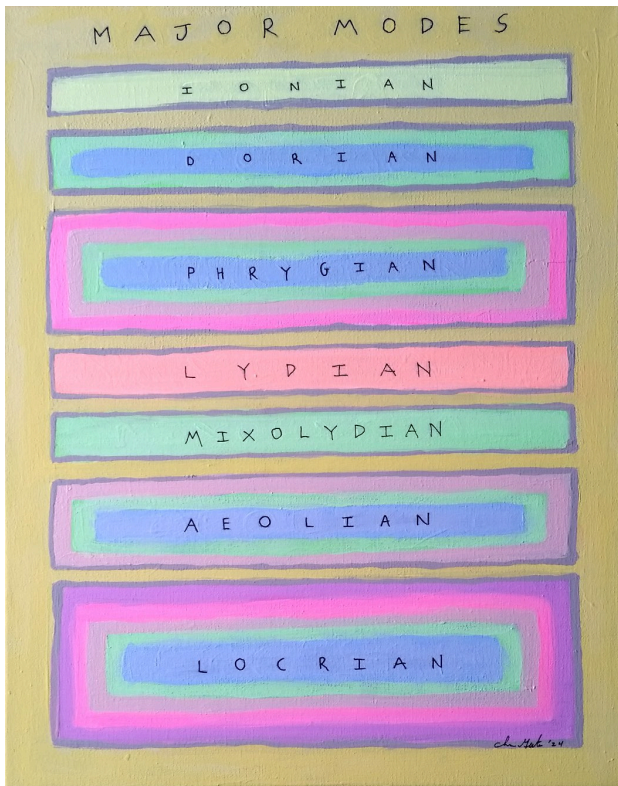
This painting is showing this ‘information’ through various symbols of music, color and words in the context of a painting. I started working on this painting, and then I made a study and then I just keep working on it—like a drawing. I kept mapping out space on the canvas so that I had a spot for each letter and everything flowed. I just kept painting it over and over, making changes each time, slowly refining and improving it according to my personal aesthetics in the moment. The study for this painting is a lot of lettering sketches. I am still slowly working on this painting on occasion.

Artwork Images

24-12 "The Expanded Key of C"
acrylic on canvas, 20x16"



24-13 "Major Modes"
acrylic on canvas, 20x16"



24-15 "Waltz For Debby"
acrylic on canvas, 12x9"

WALTZ FOR DEBBY

BILL EVANS

A

5 3 3 3

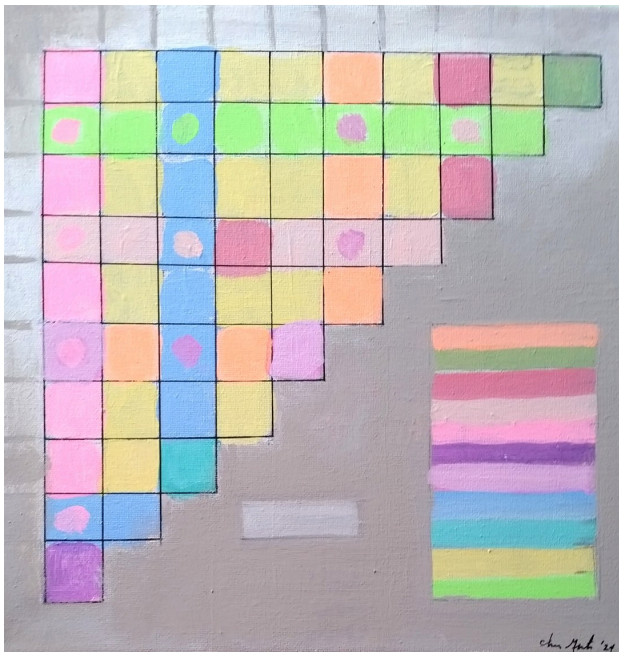
6 5 3 #4 2 5 6 5 4 5 6 2

3 2 5 6 7 3 2 5 6 7

10 7 7 7 7

Chris Fontana '24

24-16 "Triads"
acrylic on canvas, 12x12"



24-24 "Color Key 2"
acrylic on canvas, 12x12"

