

Ephemeral Self Allegory (1993)



oil on canvas - 48" x 43"

Upon approaching turning 30 years old this kind of symbolic painting was started that late August of 1993, in the Mission district of San Francisco where I'd been living for years. I would say I was caught up in that numbers game, when nearing a landmark

year, we tend to obsess about it, only to quickly get over it after turning that age. 30 isn't old, yet marks a peak of being in prime shape — mentally and physically. It's doubtful that I felt that way back then. I didn't yet have a stable career, and was in experimentation mode — an important virtue for an artist to have at any age. I just wasn't financially successful yet. This insecurity probably opened me up to exploring creative whims more than if I actually was stable!

This painting falls into the explorative category. There might be a preparatory sketch around somewhere. From memory, the clock bust of myself had been bandied around that year. This is one of them, from a sketchbook of early 1993...



It seems to be about time effects of aging, entropy, and with myself as the busted bust.

This next detailed rendering gets deeper into the concept of the ravages of time. I don't think it is supposed to represent me, but an ancient character, kind of a Rip Van Winkle. The oval clocks came from my eclipse predicting digital watch. The Casio '*Cosmo Phase*' I bought in Chinatown in '92. The oval shape was interestingly cosmic, futuristic and spacey.



This drawing table creation (that summer?) led to the painting, that I began working on a few days before September 6th. My 30th birthday. Armed with a determination of achieving something significant for this marker of time. I believe the main figures were made prominently first as the compositional and thematic anchor, with the rest following as I painted along.

The elements include a seemingly stone head, and clock with calendar numbers added

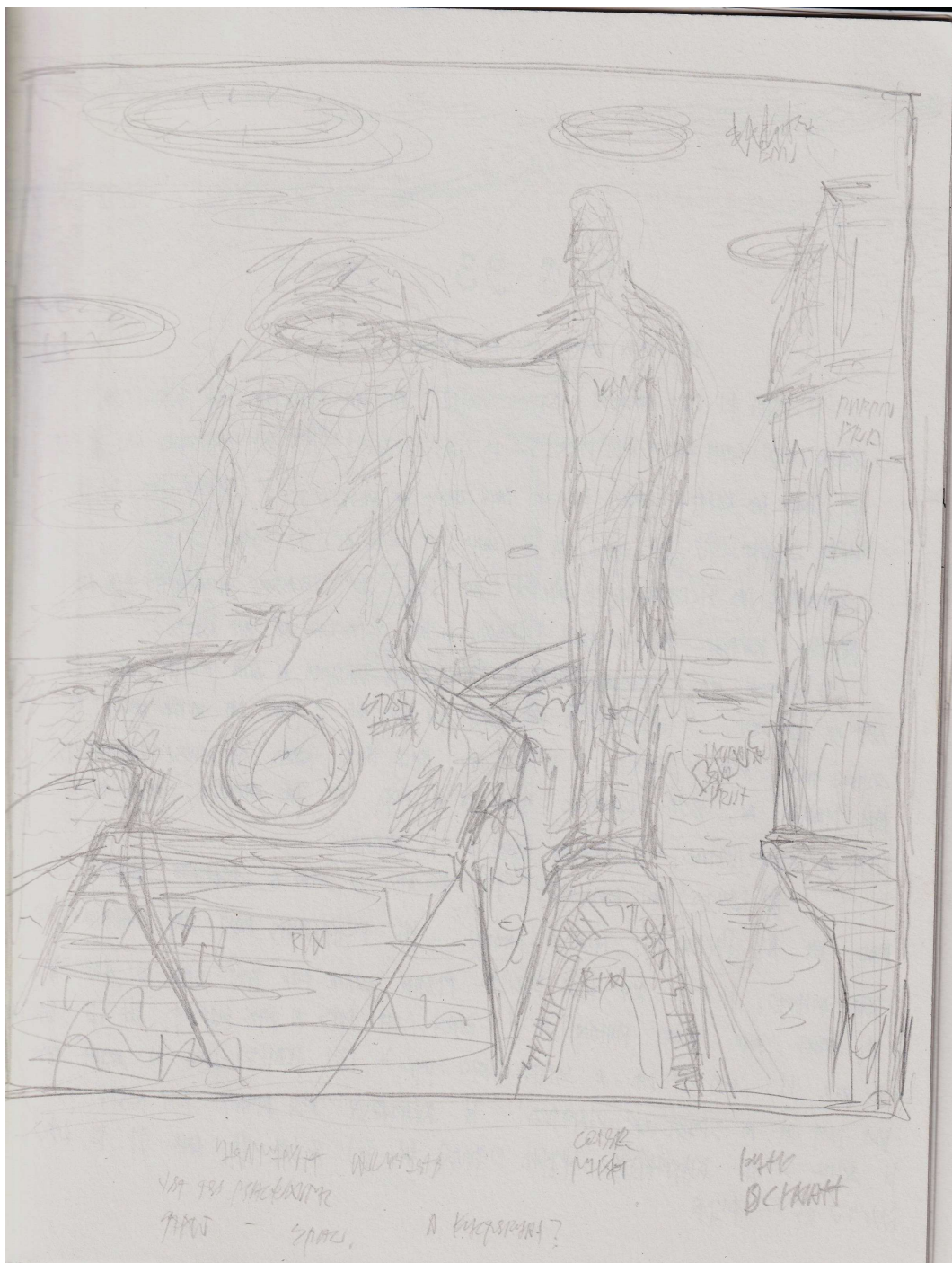
up below. It's a precarious scenario with a precarious concept. I'm standing on a runestone, barefooted and barely fitting atop very safely. The vertiginous spiraling waters below could spell danger. My knees are on fire, signifying lifelong arthritis in the legs. (by then only occasionally flaring up during cold, wet times) I hold paintbrushes in one hand, while reaching for what look like oval shaped window (or portal?) The clock head stands upon a truncated structure, too light on the bottom to be supportive enough, adding tension to this surrealist scene. The house is very San Francisco, which sits on eroding ground. The firmament is not firm. (all representing impermanence?) The time of 8:05 is arbitrary. Just a time that looked good. Autumn leaves show that beautiful, favorable season yet to arrive in a month.

Roots like synapses emerge, with a mysterious tree root over my head. (Symbolic? I don't remember.) The ovals are like windows into the night sky above, but it's still light out, with what seems to be diffused light. More detail depicts prism colors in the house windows. An arch bridge off in the rocky, sharded distance. It all shapes up to be justifiably called an *allegory*.

Painting vigorously — to my hearts content — on the night of September 5th, working into my birthday, gave me extra determination and purpose. I believe most of this was mostly done by those wee small hours, with finishing touches made in following days. It turned out okay. Not the best figure, but definitely of me, just from my imagination and hand-eye-mind coordination.

The 6th was a successful 30th birthday! Well worth my first time skipping Burning Man in the desert. I painted this thing about myself. In the daytime I was with great friends, playing drums on the ocean cliff down the peninsula in Half Moon Bay. With Jim, Jason, Dhaivyd and Diana. Drumming until sunset. Returning to continue work on this painting. Way to live! *Carpe diem* indeed! Now decades later I have this to see, recall, and write about. Thank you, younger Dean!

- Dean Gustafson, May 2025



rough preparatory sketch