

That Directionless Light of the Future: Rediscovering Russell FitzGerald

Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC

September 3 to December 8, 2024

Curated and written by Jon Davies

“Museums over-light all pictures. Only the living daylight in which they were painted is right, it changes. Sometime in my dream studio I will paint for that directionless light of the future.”

—Russell FitzGerald, journal entry, March 18, 1962

In 1968, American Canadian artist and writer Russell FitzGerald (1932–1978) designed his own tarot deck. Friends who received it were struck by one Major Arcana card in particular, XIX, The Sun. In the short guide to his tarot, FitzGerald notes that The Sun signifies, simply, “happiness” when facing upright and “less so” when reversed. The card itself figures a duality in its depiction of two intertwined men, one Black and one white, their faces turned away from us. White locks are crowned by a black Afro, a white arm reaches over a black shoulder, a black hand holds a white foot, a white knee hugs a black ankle, and a black arm reaches over a white back to either inflict or staunch deep lacerations. The great science-fiction writer Samuel R. Delany—a close friend of the artist—tells me, “It’s hard to tell whether they are in an embrace or whether they are tearing each other to pieces.”¹

FitzGerald rendered his tarot deck in black and white, but this was not exclusively an aesthetic choice. The artist’s worldview was shaped by a Manichaeian duality of light and dark that originated in his Irish Catholic upbringing and evolved through his pursuits in painting, literature, mysticism, alcohol and drugs, and sex in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. It would come to embody all of his thought and his art. For over a year now, I have been trying to understand Russell FitzGerald, the man and the artist, and his distinctive intellectual-erotic-racial cosmology. He struggled to arouse interest in his ambitious allegorical and religious pictures during his lifetime and left the earth with virtually no art-historical recognition. Through the efforts of his widow, Dora FitzGerald (née Geissler), almost two hundred of his surviving artworks were donated over twenty-five years to the Belkin Gallery under former director Scott Watson.² *That Directionless Light of the Future* is

¹ Samuel R. Delany, interview with the author, June 17, 2024.

² The Belkin also has a modest FitzGerald archival fonds, though the majority of his and Dora’s archive is at The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (journals, letters, published writing, photographs, etc.). The artist’s surviving works that are not in the Belkin collection are mostly privately held, purchased by or gifted to others.

the first time that a major solo exhibition has been assembled of FitzGerald's work.³ Considering the FitzGeralds' poverty and their itinerance between San Francisco, the US East Coast and finally Vancouver, it is a small miracle that this many of FitzGerald's works survived at all, and their condition varies greatly. Artworks from the historical past, sitting quietly in dark storage rooms, have a capacity to *detonate* in times and places far removed from their original contexts. Overlooked and understudied artists are legion, but FitzGerald's ambitious metaphysical vision—which we can now appreciate by seeing twenty years of his work in one space—seems uniquely suited for rediscovery at a time when we struggle to reconcile messy desires with “good” politics and where we seek out and romanticize heroic figures from the past to redress historical erasures and injustices. FitzGerald is decidedly not a hero, but I hope that digging into his complexity and difficulty will reveal not only radically different ways of thinking, but also a history that while resonating with our deeply afflicted times is by no means comforting. This essay aims to summarize FitzGerald's life and thought, trace key relationships and scenes and begin to unpack the ideas in his work.

San Francisco, 1957–early 1960s

“Christ / You'd think it would all be / Pretty simple. / This tree will never grow. This bush / Has no branches. No. / I love you. Yet. / I wonder how our mouths will look in twenty-five years. / When we say yet.” —Jack Spicer, “For Russ,” *Admonitions*, 1957

FitzGerald was born into the suburban somnambulism of Bucks County, PA, on December 29, 1932. After studying for a time at the Philadelphia Museum School of Art, he dropped out and headed west with friends, arriving in San Francisco in August 1957 at the age of twenty-four. Dora first encountered FitzGerald a few months later: “He was tall, still gangly, religious, great at conversation, gay, and smelled extraordinarily fine to me.”⁴ Russell quickly fell in love with Jack Spicer, one of the pillars of the San Francisco Renaissance of poetry, art and revelry centred on the bars and streets of North Beach, particularly Grant Avenue. Sexual liberation and social experimentation were integral to this avant-garde, notably queer scene of poets, painters and bohemians; alcohol- and drug-fuelled camaraderie and conflict thrived in equal measure. It was a time for misfits from all over to find each other and turn one another on to the latest ideas and art, which included a turn toward magic and the occult as part of a broader counter-cultural interest in non-Western and mystical spiritual practices. Spicer's ethos of authenticity, purity and rigour held great sway, and two of his

³ With Celia Duthie, Watson organized a posthumous FitzGerald retrospective titled *'Stations of a Cross' and other works*—appropriately enough, on Easter weekend of 1982—at 1048 Robson Street, upstairs. The show received a somewhat negative review by Barbara Daniel in *Vanguard* 11, nos. 5–6 (Summer 1982): 52–53.

⁴ Dora FitzGerald, “A Brief Sketch toward a Biography of Russell FitzGerald,” carton 3, folder 24: “biographical info,” Russell FitzGerald papers, BANC MSS 2009/106, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

beliefs in particular stand out today. First, Spicer and others believed that the artist-poet was just a conduit for transmissions from beyond: “Martians,” higher powers, what have you.⁵ Painting a picture or writing a poem involved channelling from the outside rather than self-expression; the artist was the medium, and the work had its own will distinct from its creator.

Second, Spicer believed poetry and art to be sacred, and he professed to be uninterested in what audiences outside of North Beach, the Bay Area or the West Coast might have thought. The people he socialized, drank, read, wrote and made culture with were what mattered, not the faraway reader—a proudly regionalist and anti-capitalist ethos that mythologized the local and spurned distant cultural centres, such as New York. When FitzGerald first arrived, the scene’s emphasis on the individual and their often esoteric “trips” seemed mystifyingly hermetic.⁶ If we see art as a form of private or secret knowledge meaningful to perhaps only a few—and thereby dissociate its value from the size of its audience—then FitzGerald’s failure to find a market or critical notice for his artwork becomes less relevant. While his work may have been publicly exhibited during his lifetime in only a handful of bars, galleries and at least one Catholic bookshop, it was seen by friends, lovers and muses—the people who the work was made *for*, who shaped it, and who were its first, most vital viewers. What if we instead prioritized this audience of the artist’s intimates? It certainly puts pressure on outsiders (both temporally and geographically) like me to reconstitute at a remove the often-esoteric influences and meanings of a cultural object, pushing us toward queer methodologies such as gossip, the anecdotal, cruising and speculation.⁷

To rediscover Russell FitzGerald is to embrace curiosity, *unknowing* and a sense of queer affiliation across time and space, as well as the value of what historian Jennifer V. Evans calls “bad kin” or “difficult kinship.” Evans’s theory of queer kinship resists the urge to affirm current LGBTQ2S+ identities by looking to the historical past for role models, instead delving into the messy machinations of desire and power that animate erotic life. Drawing on Michel Foucault, she critiques what I would call identitarian approaches to history:

⁵ See Jack Spicer, “California Lecture: Poetry and Politics, July 14, 1965,” in *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 168.

⁶ “The social life here is really more conformist in certain ways than elsewhere, EXCEPT that one may say absolutely anything! This terrific folk-way leads to the most horrible IN-communicativeness imaginable. [...] Noncommunication is the point [...] there can be only the most rudimentary exchange.” Undated letter to Bill, carton 1, folder 1: “correspondence from RF,” Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

⁷ See Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Simon Ofield, “Cruising the Archive,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 3 (2005): 351–64; and Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: Norton, 2019).

Suddenly, one's place in the world today is secured by a past that confirms how we got here. This leaves very little room for bad gays, difficult histories, and internecine struggles, in essence for a productively fraught politics of difference. It also masks the coalitional successes amid these charged moments of shared struggle that may not have elided differences completely but held forth the prospect of actuating relationships "of differentiation, of creation, of innovation," in a word *kinship*.⁸

Embracing unknowing, meanwhile, is necessary when it comes to FitzGerald's elaborate spiritual cosmology—central to his life, but difficult to summarize—and the iconography of his pictures. He understood his art as a religious pursuit and struggled throughout his life to reconcile his homosexuality with his Catholic faith. A syncretic system of Marian theology, the tarot, mythology, science fiction and the thought of sixteenth-century German mystic Jakob Böhme, among others, offered a more idiosyncratic path to enlightenment, one that was capacious enough to accommodate his unique passions and drives. Seeking derangements in sexual excess and risk, intoxicants and unrequited *amour fou*, FitzGerald ultimately crafted his own cosmology via his art, his writing and his intense, searching conversations with friends. He once explained, "I am certainly most importantly a person / a soul who God (senselessly) loves, but there is also the artist. He must be included."⁹

FitzGerald's journals from his early twenties chronicle his earnest self-fashioning and soul searching: on March 10, 1956, he prayed for a life of "interesting conversations of the things which can produce the manic state—sexual love, religious adoration, aesthetic participation, all which echoes somewhere down the corridor in a chamber marked 'discipline-work and glory-love.'"¹⁰ Two months later, on May 17, 1956, he imagined his journal being read one day and recognized as a record of the gradual definition of a personality in God; the evolution of a twentieth-century, catholic-convert, low-middle class, painter-classicist, self-educated, self-centered, communist-anarchist, homosexual, Perfect-

⁸ Jennifer V. Evans, *The Queer Art of History: Queer Kinship After Fascism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 217. Scholar Kadji Amin warns against the impulse to idealize "queer" as inherently just or liberatory: "Queer intimacies, taxed with the burdens of pathologization, criminalization, and social abjection and with the precarity and psychic duress these conditions engender, are as likely to produce abuse, exploitation, and the renunciation of care as more loving, sexually liberated, and just alternatives to heteronormative social forms." See his *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 7.

⁹ He continues, "I have discovered that religion and art neither replace nor displace each other, and that an artist's spiritual progress is dependent upon the enabling heat that his artistic development generates, that there is a factor of temperature without which the artist cannot endure the light." See undated letter to Father Hayburn, carton 1, folder 1: "correspondence from RF," Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

¹⁰ This and all following excerpts from FitzGerald's journals can be located in: "Journal," carton 2, folders 7–15, Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library. FitzGerald's writing is characterized by effusive dashes, idiosyncratic punctuation and spelling inconsistencies. These have been silently changed here for clarity and readability.

Truth seeker; into—a timeless, sanctified, high class, artist, intellectual, God-centered, apolitical, homosexual, Perfect Truth finder, Mystic-Contemplative.

Following this litany of identifications, he articulates a surprisingly mature artistic ethos:

The art of painting [is] creative tension. You stand before the blank surface. Every mark seems an act of marvelous pride. But every mark is also an act of self-effacement. I believe that if I ever manage to make a new thing with a life of its own, it will be at the expense of my own life. Not as any tragic sacrifice; but rather because I will have stepped aside from my own life in the act of making another. I do not wish my paintings to live with a mere autobiographical force but with humanity's force. The fact that I liked to suck cocks or that I adored the Virgin should not live as long as my surfaces, but only that I lived in a time when human suffering wore a new dress and that I did not believe the dress mattered.

After Russell's death, Dora linked her late husband's religious views to his racial desires:

His spiritual quest was central to his life, as was his disillusionment with the human condition. As a teenager, he was groomed to become a Pentecostal preacher. He moved on through the Baptists, the Lutherans, and eventually, went on to high church Anglican before becoming a convert to the Roman Church. He left each of these religious affiliations, in turn, as none was untainted by human corruption. This search for purity is not unrelated to his love for blacks, becoming a significant feature in his work. The little picture book towns of his youth hid the sins and transgressions of the white well-to-do and the prominent, while being openly abusive toward the blacks who were relegated to living in poor shacks in Lambertville, across the river. These dynamics led him to a belief in the natural superiority of blacks—why else would whites reveal themselves to be so fearful and hostile toward blacks? The fact that Russell also found himself powerfully attracted to black male beauty leads to a chicken/egg argument as to the origins of this major obsession in his life.¹¹

Throughout his life, FitzGerald also lived hand to mouth, proudly choosing to pursue transformative experiences rather than economic security. He struggled to keep going with his painting in the face of great psychic pain and an art world then uninterested in figurative realism. He was already deeply disillusioned and increasingly reliant on alcohol by his early

¹¹ FitzGerald, "A Brief Sketch toward a Biography." FitzGerald's best piece of writing is about a harrowing visit to Lambertville, and these events directly informed his painting *Prince of the Blues* (see below): "The Bridge to the Meaning" (1965) in *Magazine 3* was based on a journal entry recalling Memorial Day weekend 1963 when FitzGerald ended up in a Lambertville shantytown with brothers George and Carl Brown and others looking for sex. He was understood by some men as being the "queer" there to service them, and—with guns and booze—the situation became somewhat dangerous.

thirties. However, FitzGerald's strong sense of spiritual mission to be an artist kept him at it; he also took on commercial art gigs from church painting to miniature making to set and costume design. Simply put, precarity was a powerful force in shaping his art and life.

While Spicer was a profoundly formative figure for him—in FitzGerald's mind, he was the first peer who ever loved him, and Spicer's voice and ethos would guide his aesthetic choices long after the poet's death in 1965—their romantic relationship was derailed by, among other factors, FitzGerald's consuming obsession with the pioneering Black Beat poet Bob Kaufman, who had several influential poetry broadsides published by *City Lights* in San Francisco. Kaufman was primarily heterosexual (and married), but FitzGerald seemingly could not help fixating on him, calling him “a living poem” in an October 20, 1957, journal entry. While Kaufman's condition deteriorated over the years, his status as a libidinal lodestar endured.

The earliest paintings in the exhibition, *Fourteen Stations of a Cross* (1957), depict Kaufman as Christ enduring the stations of the cross inside the popular poets' bar The Place. A stylized Kaufman rendered in a subdued palette endures his afflictions within the four walls of 1564 Grant Avenue, a world replete with its own codes and mores. Kaufman was indeed a kind of martyr, constantly hassled by the police for reciting his poems on the streets and regularly imprisoned; he was also subjected to electroshock therapy. Bohemians all behaved badly, but white youth were not hounded by the authorities or criminalized to the same degree as their Black compatriots. Kaufman approached life like an improvisation, fictionalizing his life story and disappearing for long stretches of time. In a further act of withdrawal, he undertook a ten-year vow of silence following the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy. Kaufman consciously sought to erase himself, rarely writing down his poems and telling one editor, “I want to be anonymous [...] my ambition is to be completely forgotten.”¹² FitzGerald's painting cycle recognizes the persecution of his friend by turning it into a sacred event; it also perversely acts as a monument to someone who wanted to disappear. While the setting of the events leading up to Christ's crucifixion at a bar might be profane, on a spiritual level they are deadly serious, and his love for both Christ and Kaufman merged in this singular pictorial program. Kaufman's own poems incorporate religious motifs and flirt with this identification with Christ through suffering, such as in “Benediction”: “America, I forgive you ... I forgive you / Nailing black Jesus to an imported

¹² Quoted in George Fragopoulos, “‘Singing the Silent Songs, Enchanting Songs’: Bob Kaufman's Aesthetics of Silence” in *Journal of Modern Literature* 40, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 156. Late in my research, I also discovered Maria Damon's work on Kaufman and her particularly relevant “Triangulated Desire and Tactical Silences in the Beat Hipspace: Bob Kaufman and Others,” *College Literature* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 139–57. Damon uses FitzGerald's unpublished journal to trace the “historical intersection of Beat, gay, and minority writers/cultures in San Francisco in the late 1950s” (139), analyzing FitzGerald's ardour and Kaufman's flirtations with the gay writers as one of the few Black figures in the Beat scene. A later version of the text appears as a chapter in her book *Postliterary America: From Bagel Shop Jazz to Micropoetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011).

cross / Every six weeks in Dawson, Georgia. / America, I forgive you ... I forgive you / Eating black children, I know your hunger. / America, I forgive you ... I forgive you ..."¹³

The *Fourteen Stations of a Cross* established the approach and themes of FitzGerald's future work. His pictures often feature real historical figures or friends cast in allegorical roles drawn from religion and myth and aspire to the ambitious scale of history painting. Dora notes that FitzGerald was far more interested in ideas than in the plastic surface of the canvas, leading him to associate more with poets than with other painters: "He referred to his paintings as 'pictures' in that they were representations of ideas and thought processes rather than pieces of paint."¹⁴ His literary vision reached back to figures such as William Blake—perhaps his most relevant forebear, committed to both writing and images—and Thomas Eakins, Paul Cadmus and other New Deal figurative painters and muralists (including Diego Rivera), and arguably anticipated the 1980s return to painting via artists such as Leon Golub or Nancy Spero and, later, Kerry James Marshall or Nicole Eisenman.¹⁵

New York City, early 1960s to 1970

FitzGerald moved between San Francisco, New York and Doylestown, PA, in the early 1960s. In 1963 he eloped with Dora to New York—removing her young twin girls, Jessica and Marianne, from their father / her husband, the poet Harold Dull in California. Dora would go on to be FitzGerald's companion through thick and thin, love and rage, until his early death. Dora was the breadwinner, pursuing a career in social work, while Russell would nominally provide childcare. Russell's 1960s journals are filled with recriminations about domestic life and persistent complaints about his inability to paint in close quarters with the boisterous young twins, whom a dejected Harold wanted custody of against Dora's wishes.

FitzGerald fled the family home to pursue Black men in the city. He also started seeing concerts at Harlem's legendary Apollo Theater, taking in acts such as James Brown and Stevie Wonder. Dora, who regularly accompanied him there, recalled that many of the acts at the Apollo were gospel singers, and the spiritual ecstasy of the experience offered a more libidinal form of worship than the brocaded formality of Catholic mass: "People would

¹³ Bob Kaufman, "Benediction," in *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 9.

¹⁴ FitzGerald, "A Brief Sketch toward a Biography."

¹⁵ Dora initially hoped to place Russell's work at an American institution, considering the quintessential Americanness of his project. A December 3, 1984, letter to the Smithsonian reads, "I was struck, once again, while in Washington, by the realization that the content of Russell's paintings is overwhelmingly American. He had been an indefatigable student of the Civil War, not in terms of battle strategies, but in its effect on the hearts and souls of white and black Americans. His mentors in painting, after Michelangelo and Blake, were [Albert Pinkham] Ryder and Eakins, while in writing, his heroes were Whitman, Poe, and [Hart] Crane." See letter to Virginia Mecklenburg, National Museum of American Art, carton 1, folder 2: "correspondence from Dora FitzGerald," Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

be moved by the spirit and stand up and start shouting and sometimes passing out, and there were attendants that would scurry up the aisles with a stretcher and get them out of there.”¹⁶

FitzGerald had long had Black male boyfriends, lovers and crushes, but in New York in the 1960s he threw himself wholeheartedly into drinking, hooking up and pursuing relationships with them—gravitating to jazz musicians and their friends. He also drew these men; the stories of many of them are lost to history—though his archives contain correspondence with a few, including Eugene Smith, from prison¹⁷—but scrawled names remain: Noah Howard, Henry LaFargue, Herbie Conrad, Tyrone, Clement, Albert, Cowboy, Fish, Reds, Tommy ... He catalogued many of these men in a later (November 12, 1970) journal entry grappling with the metaphysical figure of the “Dark Brother,” a kind of shadow self or “twin mother never gave me,” which he had long projected onto the “urban American negro male[s]” in his life. Here he tries to understand the difference between loving these men and turning them into muses for artistic inspiration: “The Beloved is the body of this BLACK soul, this love, this theme, this meaning, this purpose, this process of making and becoming. While Dark Brother inhabits these Beloveds they function for me as my catalytic connection to the Muse. He passes on. The mere beloved remains. Reappears. Ages. Changes.”

Thanks to the intensity of their five-year relationship, his role as muse and his crossover into FitzGerald’s artist-poet scene—via, for example, FitzGerald publishing his writing in the small literary review *City*—we have a bit more information about one notable lover, Harold Reynolds. Heroin (or “skagg”) was a volatile ingredient of Reynolds and FitzGerald’s relationship, a toxic glue that bound them like its own form of sex. He is the subject of FitzGerald’s 1968 canvas *Reflections of Harold*, which shows his figure multiplied within a maze of mirrors, and of the artist’s final (of five) large-scale “altarpiece” paintings—now lost—*Black Prometheus, for Harold Reynolds* (1970), as well as some drawings included in the show.¹⁸ The artist penned an ode to Reynolds in his journal on May 24, 1967: “So easy to praise him. The bawdy wit. The really astounding courage to love me in public and ignore all the homosexual slander it has brought so profusely. The sheer beauty of his physical style. The clothes other people look cheap in, the dances that make other men look like

¹⁶ Dora FitzGerald, interview with the author, October 30, 2023.

¹⁷ FitzGerald and Smith corresponded when Smith was incarcerated at the notorious Attica prison in upstate New York. Over several letters, he developed suspicions of FitzGerald’s motives: “Russell it is something difficult to have friends white as you and at the same time know I must distrust the white race for what I’ve known to do” (March 27, 1966); “As for you, you have not been a friend, but something of an archaeologist” (August 14, 1966); “you couldn’t be a friend to someone whom you really don’t know” (August 16, 1966). See carton 1, folder 40: “correspondence from Eugene Smith,” Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

¹⁸ Some of his most important works were posthumously lost, accidentally cleared out of a family member’s basement during a move and brought to the dump: this includes five “altarpieces,” a format more associated with the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance than with modernist realism.

faggots, the perfectly placed insult or hidden kindness. And the other secrets. So easy to praise, so hard to criticize. Narcissism, dope fiend, thief, ruthless exploiter of women, irresponsible conceiver of children.”

Their intertwined fates are dramatized in a muscular drawing by FitzGerald—later published in the *Georgia Straight* alternative weekly when the FitzGeralds lived in Vancouver—of a Black man resembling Reynolds and a white man locked in violent struggle, the white man plunging a syringe into the Black man’s arm, and the Black man about to stab his companion with a curious dagger topped by what appears to be a Venus of Willendorf figure. This trope of an interracial embrace that might also be an act of mutual assured destruction recurs in FitzGerald’s work—as we saw in the XIX, The Sun tarot card: “the idea of irreconcilables embracing instead of annihilating each other and themselves by and in the sacrifice (including immolation and consumption) of love” (December 22, 1958, journal entry). A stylized version of this makes up FitzGerald’s cover design for the first issue of Delany and Marilyn Hacker’s “speculative fiction” review, *QUARK*. Here, the figures are reduced to a mop of blond hair and a black Afro haloing the black arm holding the dagger and the white arm with the syringe; the Union and Confederate flags are knotted in the middle, from which a fire burns. Inside, a folio of drawings titled “12 Ancillary Animations for the *QUARK*/Cover Called *Appomattox*” shows a variety of different figures posing with the flags as well as close-ups of the syringe and knife. (Appomattox, VA, was the site of one of the last battles of the Civil War before Robert E. Lee’s army surrendered.) On August 22, 1967, FitzGerald wrote in his journal of his beloved Reynolds, “If I ever told him that what I really wanted from him is to push face first into his ass until I could draw my feet after me into him while his sphincter closed and then to raise my head into his and stretch my arms inside his and place my feet inside his socks and *fuse!* Then he’d run out of my life and leave me with lesser desires. (And nothing less will do.)”

In his journals and in conversations with both Black and white friends, FitzGerald wrestled extensively with his desire for Black men and how it fit within his larger belief system. He was friends with and read the work of Amiri Baraka (f.k.a. LeRoi Jones) and was a great fan of James Baldwin, even compiling pictures of the celebrated author, who has been referred to by one scholar as “the greatest expert on white consciousness in the twentieth century United States.”¹⁹ This Baldwin passage neatly captures the kind of racial dynamic that FitzGerald struggled in vain to move beyond:

The Negro came to the white man for a roof or for five dollars or for a letter to the judge; the white man came to the Negro for love. But he was not often able to give what he came seeking. The price was too high; he had too much to lose. And the

¹⁹ See David R. Roediger, ed., *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schocken, 1998), 177.

Negro knew this, too. When one knows this about a man, it is impossible for one to hate him, but unless he becomes a man—becomes equal—it is also impossible for one to love him.²⁰

In the late 1960s, white bohemians looked on in awe and fear as Black ghettos burned and the Black Power movement charted a path that did not offer a clear place for even the most radical or sympathetic whites. In 1966, FitzGerald wrote the libretto for a “rhythm and blues opera,” *Sabus*, inspired by the 1911 mystery play *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* by Gabriele D’Annunzio with music by Claude Debussy. His take on the St. Sebastian martyrdom story unfolds as a cultist pageant set in a trash-ridden tenement backyard in Harlem, with the saint embodied by a handsome but “mad” Black cop, the ultimate symbol of racial double consciousness. The Union and Confederate flags again tensely intertwine—at one point wrapping Sabus like a mummy—in a similar fashion to the commingling of Black and white bodies in the artist’s work, nodding to the Civil War and chattel slavery as the inescapable original sin that cast racial relations in the US on their mutually imbricated and phantasmatic trajectory, one that seemed to be reaching a fever pitch in the late 1960s. FitzGerald called *Sabus* a “ritual play” and pointedly dedicated it “to the black men of America whose cunning preservation of human grace has kept this nation from its just death by shame and to Jack Spicer who would never believe it.”²¹ None other than Harold Reynolds was to have played Sabus.

The play culminates not in Sabus being pierced by arrows but rather tied to a utility pole and subjected to a highly stylized castration behind a shroud; the horrific fate that befell many Black men who were lynched in US history takes its place in FitzGerald’s worldview as a form of martyrdom deserving sainthood. For him, Black suffering in the US was part of a longer historical, religious and artistic continuum. Earlier in the play, the twins Dove and Hawk prophetically sing, “Blades don’t tame you / This fire won’t fade you.” *Sabus* was never staged, so we can only speculate about how Black and white audiences would have reacted to this white playwright stylizing one of the most traumatic and pervasive racist legacies—an aspect of American history so prevalent it could be seen as a national pastime.²² Contending with this same theme, a strange 1964 painting titled *Ex Voto* depicts a neatly resected white penis and black penis resting on plates set atop a Confederate flag (with a sliver of the Union flag poking out), which is perhaps draped on the coffin of a soldier.²³ There is no trace of blood; the flaccid members look rather like specimens from the Civil War, emblematic of deep-rooted conflicts while also appearing absurd.

²⁰ James Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” the *New Yorker*, November 16, 1962.

²¹ Russell FitzGerald, “Sabus” libretto (fourth draft, May 15, 1966), carton 2, folder 37: “writings,” Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

²² FitzGerald’s papers at The Bancroft Library contain correspondence with theatre companies about the political and logistical difficulties of mounting the production.

²³ *Ex voto* refers to a religious offering given in fulfilment of a vow.

When I asked Delany about what FitzGerald called his “erotically informed”²⁴ interest in blackness, Delany replied, “Everybody I knew had a fetish, a little or huge fetish—I would have been surprised if there wasn’t one.”²⁵ His comment points to the fascination with and misplaced envy toward Black men felt by many white male Beats and hipsters.²⁶ FitzGerald’s idealization of Black masculinity may reflect his sincere belief in Black superiority, but this romanticization is a distorting stereotype. However, as Dora notes, FitzGerald’s desires were inseparable from his larger cosmology, and his art not only returned over and over to Black male figures but eventually embraced light and dark, black and white, as its main conceptual orientation—its form, not just its content. The *Dark Brother* came to epitomize FitzGerald’s entire spiritual-racial-sexual-aesthetic system.

The lost 1964 altarpiece *The Prince of the Blues* survives only in drawn studies and a handful of 35 mm slides. The painting references Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train, which travelled from Washington, DC, to Springfield, IL, in April 1865 allowing many thousands of mourners, Black and white, to pay their respects to the slain president. Again, the Civil War looms large in FitzGerald’s imaginary, with its Manichaeian good-and-evil opposition of Union and Confederate armies, but this work is notably dedicated to his and Dora’s favourite R&B performer from the Apollo, Little Willie John. The composition of figures is held in the palm of a giant hand. Standing astride the locomotive’s cowcatcher is the recurrent motif of a naked Black male figure bleeding from his groin. While working on the painting, FitzGerald wrote in his journal on June 8, 1962, “If one race of men is allowed all the economic power it is curious how their masculinity drains into those men who are denied that power. Both races of men carrying their unsatisfactory portion, find each other frighteningly attractive. They sense, each his own, fulfillment in the role of the other. The sexual discharge may be as much a side-tracking as violence, what is really needed is an exchange of gifts. How?” How to get beyond the white obsession with Black virility and the phallus; how to see someone for who they really were, rather than a phantasmatic projection, whether of swag, of virtuosity, of cool, of resilience ... The artist understood well the historical context that this ambitious picture would enter, writing in his journal on February 20, 1964: “another boy shot by a cop. [...] here a block from the home of an NAACP rep who was beaten by doctors & a cop at St. Vincent’s Hospital, [...] here the Prince of the Blues finds his music.” In church, altarpieces draw the attention of the congregation, promoting prayer and contemplation. FitzGerald used figuration to advance

²⁴ FitzGerald credited poet Lew Ellingham for this turn of phrase; see his December 26, 1968, letter to Kirby [Congdon], carton 1, folder 1: “correspondence from RF,” Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

²⁵ Delany interview, June 17, 2024.

²⁶ For example, see Damon, “Triangulated Desire and Tactical Silences.”

his vision of art as a sacred, spiritual arena during the era of US postwar materialism; he did so to destroy the myths that America told itself, especially that of white innocence.

The motif of the body as a site of symbolic violence manifests elsewhere in FitzGerald's work. In a number of drawings and paintings, bodies are opened up as if the artist were searching for the seat of the human soul or trying to reconcile inner essence with outside appearances. His 1967 painting *Apollo Theater (Harlem), for them* depicts a musical performance inside a Black man's mouth, which stands in for that of the god Apollo himself (a Venus resembling the handle of the dagger in other works from this period floats enigmatically above the stage). FitzGerald's lost *The Great White Father, for Richard Wagner* (1965) altarpiece was set inside a burning horse carcass from which guts and dollar bills exploded. Ten years later, one of his last canvases, *The Mahler Orchestra* (1976), arranged a suite of musical instruments bedecked with ribbons of text inside an open chest cavity—an internal orchestra. This fascination with something secretly contained within something else conceptually links to the duality of the tarot, where each card holds both a “surface” meaning when dealt upright and an antipodean significance when reversed.

The FitzGeralds met the poet Marilyn Hacker at a bar—they spent most of their time either at the Old Reliable or at Margie's—and she soon introduced them to her boyfriend, “Chip,” a.k.a. Samuel R. Delany. The couple's collaboration with FitzGerald ended up being extensive: his cover for the inaugural issue of *QUARK* and his story “The Last Supper” for the second issue²⁷; his co-editing with Hacker of the small literary magazine *City*²⁸; his cover designs for four of Delany's books²⁹ (which led to other sci-fi illustration gigs), and more. The couple arguably opened up sci-fi as fruitful new terrain for FitzGerald, or more specifically, a new field for his singular spiritual cosmology. One example is his story “The Gospel According to Emanuel,” a sci-fi retelling of the story of Christ. Narrated in the first person with a haughty detachment, Christ is a technologized extraterrestrial, a superintelligence who laconically refers to his earthly body as his “instrument” and to the

²⁷ According to Delany (interview, June 17, 2024), “The Last Supper” was based on a dream; it describes in detail how to cook and consume a lover's body.

²⁸ Short-run magazines such as *City*, Ellingham and David Franks's *Magazine*—which FitzGerald also contributed to—and Allen Ginsberg, Kaufman et al.'s *Beatitude* were a vital DIY publishing platform for poets and artists. Other key titles from the North Beach scene were Spicer and Herndon's *J*, Stan Persky's *Open Space* and, in Vancouver, Robin Blaser and Persky's *The Pacific Nation*, which articulated a distinct West Coast culture.

²⁹ Delany recounts this memorable anecdote about FitzGerald's compelling cover illustrations for the British (Sphere Books) edition of his 1968–69 *Fall of the Towers* trilogy, each of which features an imposing Black male figure striding through a gauntlet of towering obstacles: “I never gave the characters in *The Fall of the Towers* racial identities—it was all very post-racial—but Russell made the main male Black. [It was] probably the first time a Black body appeared on the cover of a science-fiction story.” Delany interview, June 17, 2024.

inseminated Mary as his “mother-matrix.”³⁰ Hacker and Delany moved to San Francisco in the late 1960s, by which time the North Beach scene had dissipated following Spicer’s death in 1965. There, they acted as ambassadors for the “SF” (science fiction or speculative fiction) literary genre among the remaining Bay Area poets. Hacker informed FitzGerald by letter, “All the local poets are on a science-fiction binge.”³¹

FitzGerald’s interest in the tarot partly came from the Scottish balladeer and mystic Helen Adam, a beloved éminence grise in the San Francisco Renaissance who moved to New York with her sister Pat and became friends with Delany and Hacker. Utterly singular, she wrote ballads that draw on ancestral myths but often are set in contemporary times and explore racial and sexual violence, drug abuse and the acts of often violently rebellious women. In Delany’s 1968 novel *Nova*, a ragtag group led by captain Lorq Von Ray seek out a supernova on his spaceship the *Roc* in order to gather a valuable power source. Despite being set more than a thousand years in the future, the character Tyÿ turns to the tarot for guidance, performing a reading for Lorq that prophesies the journey and its outcome. Another character explains, “The seventy-eight cards of the Tarot present symbols and mythological images that have recurred and reverberated through forty-five centuries of human history. Someone who understands these symbols can construct a dialogue about a given situation. There’s nothing superstitious about it.”³² Intriguingly, the supernova is represented by the tarot card The Sun—that iconic card with the entwined Black and white boys from FitzGerald’s deck—which the character Mouse steals during the Tyÿ’s reading: “[The captain] pointed to the card. ‘What do you see there, Mouse?’ ‘Well. I guess ... two boys playing under a—’ ‘Playing?’ Lorq asked. ‘They look as if they’re playing?’ The Mouse sat back and hugged his sack. ‘What do you see, Captain?’ ‘Two boys with hands locked for a fight. You see how one is light and the other is dark? I see love against death, light against darkness, chaos against order. I see the clash of all opposites under ... the sun.’”³³ Delany inscribed *Nova*, “The author gratefully acknowledges the invaluable aid of Helen Adam and Russell FitzGerald with problems of Grail and Tarot lore. Without their help *Nova* would cast much dimmer light.” FitzGerald’s green-on-pink cover design for the Doubleday edition of *Nova* aggressively pops; what first appears to be a seal is actually four stylized figures representing different suits (here clubs, diamonds, hearts and spades rather than the tarot’s Minor Arcana suits of cups, pentacles, swords and wands). The design is reminiscent of a rune, and it was around this time—the occasion was Dora’s thirty-fifth birthday, on February 17, 1969—that FitzGerald began using a stylized symbol combining

³⁰ “The Gospel According to Emanuel” (1967), carton 2, folder 22: “writings: prose,” Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

³¹ Undated letter to Russell FitzGerald, carton 1, folder 26: “correspondence from Marilyn Hacker,” Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

³² Samuel R. Delany, *Nova* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1969), 136.

³³ Delany, *Nova*, 157–58.

his own and Dora's initials as a signature on his pictures and elsewhere, recognizing her contribution to his art.

In New York, FitzGerald had acquired a basement studio for himself down the street from their apartment (#19) at 68 East 3rd Street, named it for Aubrey Beardsley and painted it all black as the British decadent artist had done (located at 77 East 3rd Street, the building later became the Hells Angels' NYC headquarters). Delany was then writing the obscene novel *Equinox* (published under the title *The Tides of Lust* in 1973), a porn-phantasmagoria set in an American port town and based on the Faust myth. The character Dr. Jonathan Proctor is partly inspired by FitzGerald, and descriptions of the contents of Proctor's studio conjure pictures by the artist: "A gutted horse sat in flaming money. Two naked figures hid in its carcass, toying at each other's genitals. A castrated Negro on a train's cowcatcher moved forward through dispersing figures: one, the great flower of a woman's face; another, a man with a broken sword [...] on a Confederate flag, spread across a table, were two bronze plates. A white man's testicles and penis lay on one; a black man's on the other."³⁴ Dr. Proctor's philosophy in *Equinox* sounds suspiciously like FitzGerald's own: Proctor argues that the artist is the only figure in society who is allowed to indulge in all of Man's three "systems" at once—work and its rewards, spiritual belief and erotics—"simply to fulfill his calling" in life.³⁵

The 1960s were a period of great productivity for FitzGerald's art and eros but damaging at the same time. He lost control of his heroin use and his fragile young family was at risk of destruction. Dora recalls: "The ritual of shooting up [with Reynolds], providing the bond of intimacy in which both felt satisfied. His coterie of black men gradually diminished as the effects of heroin began to erode some of his charisma. Finally, when his heroin partner was in a mandatory treatment facility, and Russell was sick and kicking, I proposed that we move to Vancouver. To my utter astonishment, he agreed."³⁶ It was 1970 and in Vancouver, FitzGerald indeed managed to kick heroin, but his alcoholism only worsened, as did his mental health. The cross-continental move put distance not only between FitzGerald and Reynolds but also between him and Black men more generally, considering the significantly smaller Black population in Vancouver. In a December 20, 1970, journal entry, FitzGerald called it "a drought of blackness here in my white exile." The source of his desire was cut off, but "he tried to pull things together."³⁷

³⁴ Samuel R. Delany, *The Tides of Lust* [a.k.a. *Equinox*] (London: Constable & Robinson), 58, 80–81 [ebook].

³⁵ Delany, *The Tides of Lust* [a.k.a. *Equinox*], 65.

³⁶ FitzGerald, "A Brief Sketch toward a Biography." Reynolds was frequently incarcerated and spent time in the Bayview Rehabilitation Center for addicts in Manhattan, part of then-governor Nelson Rockefeller's crackdown on heroin. FitzGerald continued corresponding with him from Vancouver in the early 1970s.

³⁷ FitzGerald, "A Brief Sketch toward a Biography."

Vancouver, 1970–78

Longing and nostalgia are powerful drugs: thousands of miles from Harlem, FitzGerald began work on what would eventually number thirty paintings and a handful of small bronzes, a collection of Black male nudes based on men he knew and missed in New York that he titled initially the *Watchmen* and ultimately the *Dark Sleepers*. The works were shown in a small exhibition in the “free space” of the Vancouver Art Gallery in March 1973, which the artist considered his first proper gallery show. While based on men with whom FitzGerald was intimate and sketched nude—particularly Reynolds, “the black bass voice of Eros,” he called him in an August 28, 1965, journal entry—the final paintings are stylized to become more “imaginary,” evading precise identification. The series title also obscures individual portraiture in favour of a generic type. And while a sleeping subject intensifies the asymmetrical power dynamics of the artist/model relationship, it is worth recalling that FitzGerald and many of his New York paramours got drunk and/or high together, rendering both artist and model alike into sleepers. FitzGerald ultimately needed these men more than they needed him, but it was a significant burden for a white man to ask a Black man to save him from his own masochistic self-hatred.

Although he was deeply pained by the forced separation from New York and his revelry there, FitzGerald’s most artistically and metaphysically ambitious single work was undertaken in Vancouver in the mid-1970s. Dora recalls how FitzGerald “had read history, philosophy, art, and religion in the 50’s and 60’s, and was extensively knowledgeable in these fields although he had not attended university. In the 70’s he no longer displayed an appetite for the new, whether in thought, music, or art. Nevertheless, he continued his spiritual quest.”³⁸ Rather than following the latest cultural and intellectual currents, this quest took the artist back four hundred years to find an appropriately heady afflatus.

FitzGerald’s “last major picture,”³⁹ *Blueprint for Böhme* (1975), attempts to visualize the thought of the German philosopher and Christian mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), who had influenced many mystics that followed, including William Blake. Böhme believed that humanity had fallen, and that only God could return the world to a state of grace. Scholar Bryan Aubrey describes how at the “heart of Böhme’s system” is the idea that “the price of self-consciousness is the setting of one thing against another. [...] God must have a dark centre and a light centre, poised in such a relationship that the dark serves to reveal rather than overshadow the light. The origin of this dark centre can be found in the opposition Boehme posits between will and desire, or spirit and nature.”⁴⁰ In Böhme’s system, self-

³⁸ FitzGerald, “A Brief Sketch toward a Biography.”

³⁹ FitzGerald, “A Brief Sketch toward a Biography.”

⁴⁰ Bryan Aubrey, “The Influence of Jacob Boehme on the Work of William Blake” (PhD diss., Durham University, 1981), 38.

knowledge, will, creativity and imagination are all powerful forces. (And if FitzGerald had long struggled to reconcile lofty spirit and carnal body he was only following in Christ's footsteps as the son of God made vulnerably flesh on Earth.) Böhme's was also a Manichaeic system of light and dark, love and hate, joy and anguish, yes and no. The swirl of limbs in FitzGerald's *Blueprint* evokes a cosmic connectedness and love that is not merely corporeal. Most striking, however, is how the work is premised on the binary of light and dark, black and white so central to FitzGerald's cosmology. The original drawings—which consist of sixteen large panels—were meticulously inked in black and then a Mylar blueprint was produced that reversed light and dark, allowing the design to potentially be reproduced. Both versions are extraordinarily powerful—grandiose in scale and conceptual clarity, dense in spiritual ideas and, simply, love of and hope for humanity.

Why did the FitzGerald family end up in Vancouver? Robin Blaser, one of the three queer pillars of the San Francisco Renaissance (the other two being Spicer and Robert Duncan), had accepted a position at Simon Fraser University in 1966. Other gay poets from Spicer's circle such as George Stanley (who was a close friend of the FitzGeralds) and Stan Persky also ended up in Vancouver, where they befriended a young art historian and writer named Scott Watson, who would go on to be hired as curator of the UBC Fine Arts Gallery in 1989. The FitzGeralds settled in a home on Frances Street, and Dora found a job at the School of Social Work at UBC. Russell became a Canadian citizen in 1975. Six weeks after a return visit to his beloved San Francisco in 1978, FitzGerald fell into an alcoholic fugue—cirrhosis of the liver had already been diagnosed—and his condition deteriorated rapidly. He died on March 30, 1978, and a "Liturgy of the Death and Resurrection" service was conducted in the backyard of the FitzGerald home. Dora wrote a series of devastating poems during Russell's final illness and death, grappling with their tumultuous love and the reality that all they had left was "one soul weeping for another" ("The Second Narrows").⁴¹ Russell's impotent rage at his weakening condition was often directed at the woman who had loved him unconditionally. At the end, she observed him with a lucidity no one else could have mustered, but she still couldn't fully understand the tortures Russell put himself through, which left her "as spent as he" ("An Inside Poem"). Their favourite classical music records play in the background:

"Life is short' / You told me over and over again. / I've lit a fire. / 'We are the children of the stars' / Yet your life-long sorrow was: / 'We have come to the wrong place' / This earth did not fit you." —from "Russell's Death Poems III," 1978

"You died like a man / to rid yourself utterly / of all earthly beauty and defeat / 'Nothing is wasted' / 'Nothing dies' / you said. / You are my best friend. / Godspeed. / Today I am a

⁴¹ This poem of grief, and those quoted below, are to be found in carton 2, folder 45: "writings—by others: Dora FitzGerald," Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

river of tears and prayers / flowing to heaven and to Russell.” —from “Russell’s Death Poems V,” 1978

Watson built up the Belkin collection and profile from 1995 when it opened to replace the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, and it was this gallery that Dora finally entrusted with all of Russell FitzGerald’s surviving works.⁴² She moved to Galiano Island in 1989 to be closer to nature, and she is now ninety years old. Following Watson’s retirement in 2021 and the completion of my PhD in art history, which was partly about the queer postwar painting and poetry scene in San Francisco, I was invited by curator and acting director Melanie O’Brian to propose a collection exhibition at the Belkin. I jumped at the chance to finally research and survey FitzGerald’s work. As the art-historical literature on the artist is virtually non-existent, I am indebted to Dora, Delany, Watson and the late New Narrative writer Kevin Killian. He was a passionate and perceptive chronicler of the constellation of queer artists, writers, filmmakers and others in San Francisco (a legacy carried on by his widow, the great writer Dodie Bellamy⁴³) who published some of FitzGerald’s writing and co-authored, with Lew Ellingham, a book that includes a powerfully evocative chapter on FitzGerald.⁴⁴ I hope this project will lead to a renewed appreciation of FitzGerald’s art and thought, and a more nuanced relationship with historical figures that appreciates their singularity and their challenge to present models of art, sex and identity. I seek here to advance an art history that refuses to sit in judgment of the dead, no matter their sins.

⁴² Seeking to garner interest in her late husband’s work, she wrote to prospective museum directors and curators. “Russell painted because he had some rather complicated ideas to communicate. They cannot accomplish the job for which they were created in a storage bin in Vancouver.” See the December 3, 1984, letter to Mecklenburg, Russell FitzGerald papers, The Bancroft Library.

⁴³ In “Chase Scene,” her posthumous love letter to Killian, she reflects on FitzGerald’s love for Kaufman and the artist’s *Fourteen Stations of a Cross*: “The series chronicles a figure’s collapse through time (239) [...] Shapes morph as we move from daily time to mythic time” (240). She also sees in Russell and Dora’s relationship a “precursor” (240) to her and Killian’s marriage of thirty-four years. She had even hoped to use FitzGerald’s *Station 9. Third Fall* as the cover image of this book, *Bee Reaved* (2021), but was “vetoed. The image doesn’t pop enough. It isn’t sexy. It looks dated. I suppose all those are true” (239). Meeting the surviving members of Spicer’s circle, she muses, “I’d always thought of history as something you read about in books or went to conferences and heard papers about, but that first visit to Vancouver it felt like I was walking through history, like I could reach out and give it a hug” (242). “From you I learned that history is not pure. It’s recollections and gossip and preconceptions backed up by sketchy documentation” (243). See Bellamy, “Chase Scene,” in *Bee Reaved* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext[e], 2021), 187–249.

⁴⁴ Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).