SOUTHERN OHIO Museum

Clarence H. Carter
Properties of Life

Clarence Holbrook Carter's ovoid painting series are a commentary on the human condition and what it means to be alive. To Carter, "...the egg is a universal symbol of life, death, and rebirth. It concerns past, present, and future." The egg and its potential for growth and life has long fascinated humanity. An ancient Arabian proverb reads, "What has neither head nor tail and is neither alive nor dead?" The answer is: "an egg."

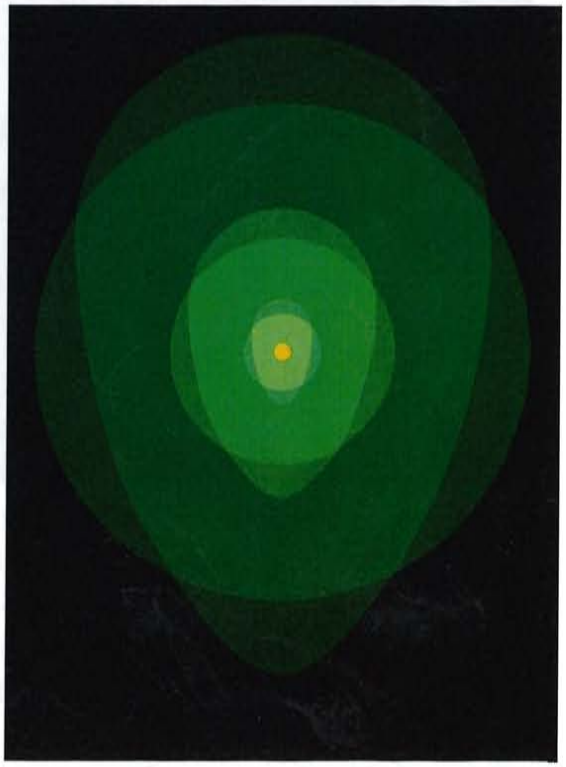
In order to truly understand Carter's use of this enigmatic symbol, we must first look deeper into what it means to be alive. Scientists do not agree on a universal definition of life. However, science generally categorizes life as possessing seven properties:

1. Life demonstrates **organization** – a resistance to chaos and entropy
2. Life (as far as we know it) is made up of one or more **cells** containing genetic material
3. Life has metabolism and **uses energy** to maintain organization and create negative entropy
4. Life **grows**, whether it is a single cell growing larger or cells multiplying in a bigger organism
5. Life **responds** to its environment through senses and motion
6. Life has the ability to **reproduce**
7. Life **adapts** to its environment, and populations change over time

According to this definition of life, eggs are not considered to be alive until they start to germinate and grow. Eggs are dormant. They have no metabolism and no response to the environment. It seems counterintuitive to think of eggs not being alive because it is very obvious when they are dead. A rotten egg no longer holds the potential for life.

Fresh vegetables and fruit, and even fresh meat, contain living cells. These cells exhibit internal movement under the microscope, and are considered to be living tissue, but not a living organism. The cells of rotten fruit or meat are dead, as is cooked food.

Fruit contains seeds, and, like eggs, seeds are not thought to be alive even though they hold the potential for life. Like the egg, the seed is dormant until it finds the right environmental conditions and starts to grow.



Mandala No. 23, 1993

Long believed to have a short and finite shelf life like the egg, seeds have recently been demonstrated to remain viable much longer than previously thought. Extinct Judean Date Palm seeds excavated from Herod the Great's tomb in Israel in 2005 have been grown despite being over 2,000 years old.

Besides eggs and seeds, there are other objects that exist on the edge of life as well. Some plants, fungus, bacteria, and protists (the kingdom containing amoeba) are capable of producing spores, which are smaller, hardier versions of seeds. Unlike seeds, which are multicellular, spores are unicellular. This makes spores more like eggs, which contain a single cell represented by the yolk. 25-40 million year old bacterial spores found inside a bee encased in amber have been revived, revealing the tenacity and durability of life.

Another object which exists on the edge of life is the virus. Scientists argue about whether or not viruses should be classified as living organisms. Because a virus has no metabolism and is not capable of reproduction without the help of a host cell, most scientists do not consider viruses to be living. Viruses do exhibit some of the properties of life, including organization, response to the right host cell, and they also contain genetic material. However, a living being must possess all the properties of life.

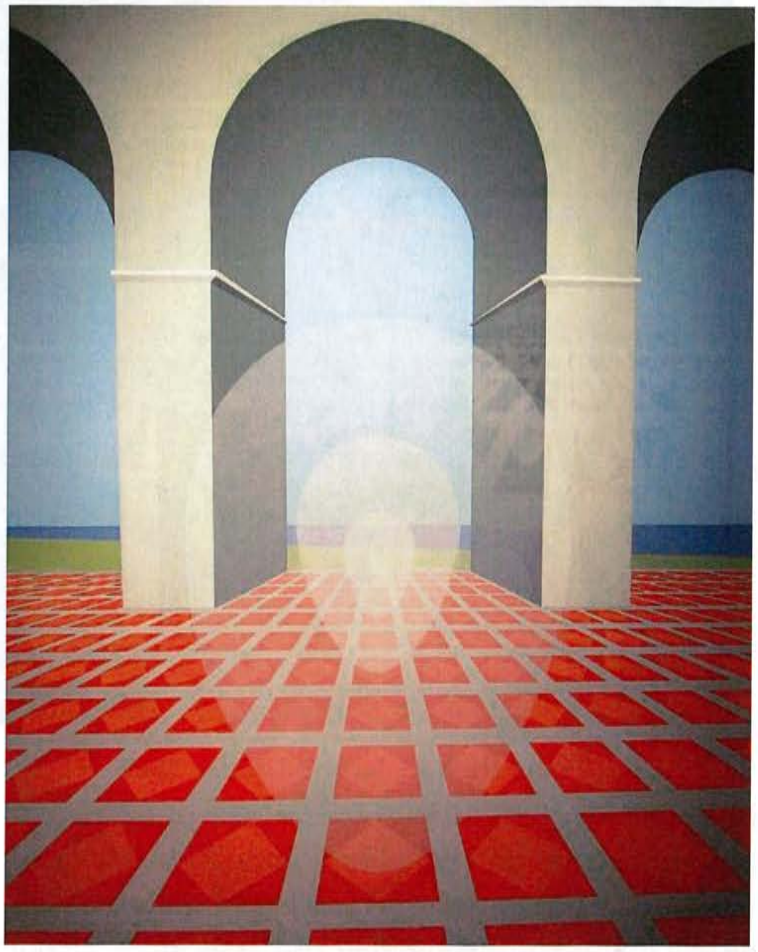
Indecision, 1986

"A good teacher must know the rules; a good pupil the exceptions."

– Martin H. Fischer,
doctor and scientist

There are exceptions to this rule, where organisms which are obviously alive do not fulfill all of the criteria to be considered living. One famous example pointed out while scientists finalized the list of life's properties is a single rabbit. An individual rabbit is not capable of reproducing without a mate, much like a virus is not capable of reproduction without a host cell. Unlike the virus, the single rabbit does fulfill all the other criteria for life. Sterilized animals and hybrid animals (like the mule, a cross between a horse and donkey) are not capable of reproduction, but are certainly alive. Not all populations of living organisms adapt and change over time, either. The coelacanth, a fish thought to be extinct for over 60 million years, was found alive in the ocean in 1938. Coelacanth fossils date back almost 400 million years, and the fish has not changed in its current form. Life demonstrates many exceptions to the rules imposed by science.

In a biography of Clarence Carter, Ricardo Pau-Llosa wrote a section titled, "The Ovoid – Symbol as Structure of Thought," where he stresses that Carter's ovoid is not just a symbol of life and death, but also of human consciousness. Humans are conscious and alive despite the fact that we are all made up of components (molecules & chemicals) which are generally not considered to be alive. Chemicals found in our bodies are also found elsewhere in the universe – in stars and in nebula. Some organic molecules can be produced by non-biological reactions.



Villa by the Sea, 1979

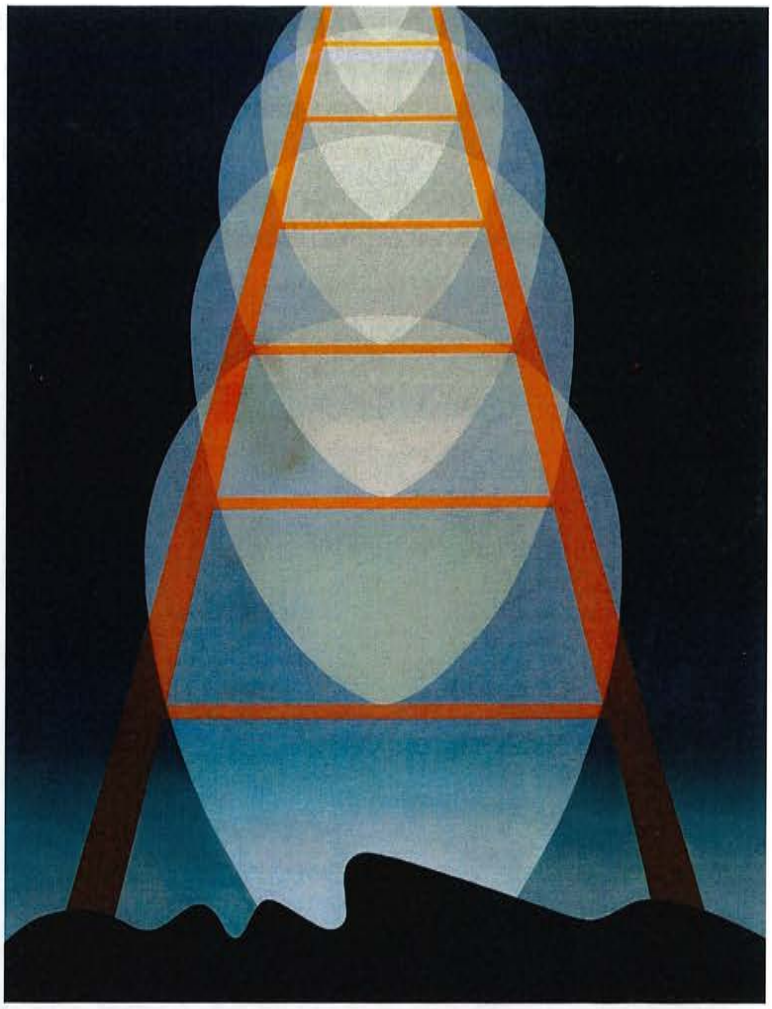
In an age where artificial intelligence (AI) is at the forefront of human technology, and artificial life and synthetic biology are not just science fiction, but appear to be attainable goals, the definition of life is further blurred. More important to developers of AI than fulfilling all the properties of life is the question of whether or not awareness and consciousness can exist outside of living organisms.

This is an interesting question, especially since scientists do not agree that all living beings are conscious or at what level of level of living organization awareness emerges. Study of the science of life reveals reductive reasoning and mechanistic tendencies. Interestingly, in science, thoughts and consciousness are not requirements for life. There is also argument about whether or not the human brain is equivalent to a sophisticated computer system. The most difficult problem in the study of consciousness is how subjective conscious experience arises from non-living components. How do senses, driven by receptors on our cells, acquire characteristics like color and taste in our awareness?

Computer scientist Steve Grand illustrates this difficulty:
"Think of an experience from your childhood....Not a single atom that is in your body today was there when that event took place...matter flows from place to place and momentarily comes together to be you. Whatever you are, therefore, you are not the stuff of which you are made."

Clarence Carter explores this concept through the ovoid symbol. The egg is a paradox, at once representing life and death. Pau-Llosa writes that the egg, "fulfills its promise of continued life by destroying itself." But at the same time, the egg is also a, "symbol of life and continuity....Carter's rebellion against the ultimate concern of consciousness – that is, death."

Symbolism of the environment surrounding the egg in Carter's paintings is suggestive of the infinite and the paradox of mortality and what lies beyond this life. The architectural settings chosen by Carter exemplify this paradox. Pau-Llosa points out that, "Ladders and stairs and all their variants are fragments of an infinite sequence." Stairs serve a transitory function: "...no one lives on a stair." According to Carter, "...stairs are a symbolic connecting link between life and death. The way up and down is the same."



Transection #5, Jacob's Ladder, 1969

Carter's repeated use of concentric egg shapes implies growth, starting from a point of light Carter called, "the seed." These concentric shapes are also a pattern which can be extended to infinity. Pau-Llosa believes that it is Carter's interest in the infinite which sets him apart from other artists. The arches and doorways used by Carter in his ovoid series are paradoxical symbols, too. Simultaneously, they represent birth and death – the final escape of the soul either leaving or entering a realm of existence.

Pau-Llosa suggests that the translucency of the egg is a spiritual symbol in and of itself. "...Carter's translucent ovoid is the symbol of consciousness because its translucency alters whatever is glimpsed through it, much as consciousness alters what it focuses on." Quantum physics reinforces this concept, where observation does alter reality, and in another paradox, it is impossible to know both the position and momentum of a sub-atomic particle at the same time. And though it is impossible to reconcile the paradoxical nature of human existence, Carter does not hesitate to explore the topic through his ovoid paintings.

Carter's egg is a universal symbol of what it means to be human and what it means to be alive, transcending culture and religion, to bring us all together under an umbrella of shared experience in an infinite universe.

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