

Original title
Copernicus: A novel about AI and Consciousness.

Author of the book
James Mahu, WingMakers.com


June 2023


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Copernicus

A novel about AI and Consciousness.

Written by James Mahu

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Original Mixed Media Painting, 30x40 inches by James Mahu

JamesMahu.com

SovereignIntegral.com

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English Version: 1.0

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Chapter I

The jagged brush stroke divided the new canvas into an unholy whole. Muted crimson rolled onto the ivory landscape like a river of blood. A thin smile, shy at first, animated the face of Saraf Winter as she wielded her brush with both measured abandon and technical competence—the birthright of a Goldsmith’s College MFA (Master of Fine Arts) graduate.

Saraf, a 32-year-old bohemian, was a free spirit barely contained by a body. Apart from her rather large nose, she was petite in every dimension, topped with a bramble bush of black hair. She carried herself with the physical presence of a ballerina, and indeed, had studied ballet when she was a young girl, but it was to visual art that her passions swung.

Her ethnicity was an exotic blend of Irish, African and Catalan bloodlines. No one had ever

successfully guessed her ethnicity; a fact that Saraf found disquieting.

Her education granted her the pedigree that most artists dream of. It was a private token into the prestigious corridors of art museums and elite galleries. She had been on the art radar early when she was only nineteen. Her professors had made private introductions to the crème de la crème of gallery owners throughout the art centers of Europe.

London's gallery directors were always on the lookout for the next sensation. Gallery owners had relationships with the top art school professors and worked those relationships to have access to the work of their foremost students. Saraf was one of those sensations.

She was the *total package*.

Her studio, bright and spacious, lacked organization. Large canvases leaned eight deep against 12-foot walls. Drawers, filled with brushes

and messy paint jars, were left half-opened in absentmindedness.

When Saraf painted, she was utterly absorbed in the act of imprinting matter with ideas: lucid, bright, vivid ideas. As these ideas left the clutter of her mind, they were birthed in color fields orchestrated by a hand untethered to ownership of any kind. She was as amazed as anyone when her canvas filled with paint.

There was no premonition. No plan. No preliminary sketches. It was sheer instinct that radiated the length of her arm without censor.

Her teachers recognized it in Saraf—the confluence of confidence and surrender. It was the difference between the good artists and those who were destined to bring the high art—the metaphysicians' language.

At 24, Saraf experienced her first solo exhibit at the Tate Gallery in lower West London. Financiers, and power brokers in their navy suits and pale yellow ties, cavorted with hardened art critics at

the opening gala. The power of Saraf's work was undeniable. Before the wine had been exhausted, each and every one of her paintings possessed the footnote of a SOLD tag.

Saraf was thus initiated into the world of high art. Her work was commercial *and* important. Most importantly, art critics praised them. This is how great artists were born.

After her birth as an artist of stature, she spent the next eight years on a rollercoaster ride of great success in Western Europe. There were some downslopes into despair, triggered by the disquieting feeling that success had come too easy.

She felt indebted to her galleries and collectors who had an insatiable demand for her “slash” paintings. A spontaneous brushstroke that cut the canvas into smaller sections. It held a magical presence in her paintings that other artists—even great artists—could not replicate.

It was precisely the bold slash of her brushstrokes that had made Saraf a sensation in the London art scene. The pangs of feeling hemmed in by her own talents ate away at something emergent deep inside her.

Saraf knew it was really her eye that made the difference. An artist can't move the brush without the eye guiding it. She had the ability to relax her outer eye and let a different way of seeing guide her arm, hand and fingers. They operated as one mechanism to express something that had never been birthed before on the planet. It was exactly why Saraf loved to paint.

Whether it was a brushstroke or a line rendered with pencil lead or charcoal, the result was the same. There was something in that line or brushstroke that was imprinted with a touch that wealthy patrons and museum directors desired and obsessed about.



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An intruding buzz interrupted Saraf's brush. She backed up to look out her loft window to the street below. She smiled and set her brushes down carefully to ensure there was no contamination of color. She pushed a button on a small rectangular panel near her apartment door.

An electric buzz filled her studio menacingly. Moments later, the sound of footsteps echoing in the stairwell grew louder. She opened the door just as David Coleman beamed his broad smile and put his arms out for a hug.

"I knew you'd let me in," he said.

He was a tall, slender man, distinguished by his owl-like appearance, due to his round spectacles and brittle look. Long gray hair framed his thin, but handsome face. He looked tired most of the time, yet he was capable of flashing a brilliant smile if the mood struck him. As the director of

the Tate Gallery, David had great stature in the art world. To Saraf, he was a mentor.

“You said ten, but I figured you’d be sleeping if I came that early.”

“You’d be wrong in that assumption,” Saraf said with a forced frown, “I’ve been painting since eight.”

“That?” David asked, pointing to a half-finished canvas on an easel in the far corner of the studio.

“That.” Saraf bobbed her head once.

David walked over a little hesitantly, stopped a few feet in front of the canvas, and put his hands to his mouth in a steepled configuration, his head shaking back and forth almost imperceptibly. He let out a deep sigh.

“I can sell whatever you make, Saraf, but this new style... it’s not you.”

“Well, I sure as shit painted it. If it isn’t me, then who the hell is it?”

“You’ve gone too far,” he said, his voice quiet and introspective. “There’s stylistic *evolution*, and then there’s stylistic *discontinuity*. Your collectors won’t recognize the structure, color palette, or even the subject. The brushstrokes are... are less confident. I don’t know. This isn’t your voice.”

“I’m a fucking artist, David, I’m not here to produce the predictable.”

Silence filled the room for a moment, as Saraf retreated to her couch. The distant wails of a police siren suddenly drew their attention.

“You can evolve,” David offered, his voice tired. “You don’t need to swing the pendulum so far. Sometimes...” he glanced at her new painting, “sometimes, it’s enough to make subtle changes and see how your market reacts—”

“You make it sound like I’m a bloody business!”

“You *are!*” David replied emphatically.

“That’s exactly what you are. You’re a bloody business. Every art journal wants to promote you. Every museum and gallery wants to represent your work. Every collector worth their salt wants to possess your work. There’s demand, and you, my dear, make the supply, and there’s only one of you. You want to experiment? Go experiment. Do it and be done with it, and keep the paintings to yourself.”

David almost glared at the half-finished painting. It was strangely beckoning, he had to agree, but there was a monstrosity to it that he knew would make it unmarketable.

“Maybe I need a new clientele.”

“Maybe you need a new agent, new gallery distribution, new museums, a new network of patrons... new everything. Don’t you see that what you’ve built over the last eight years will fall apart if you pursue this style in favor of the one that

brought you success? Why would you want to do that?”

“I’m bored.”

“Why?”

“Because my collectors and curators have put me in a box and said: *'do more of these and we'll buy it. But if you dare to do anything else, we'll find someone new'*. I’m a hostage to their money and influence.”

“A hostage? Really?” His arms went out like the first branches of a tree.

“This studio is one of the best in London. You made nearly a million Euros last year doing what *you* love. Did you forget that? You’re one of the privileged. You’re an elite artist at the tender age of thirty-two. Corporate collections all over the world are funding your success—”

David let out a long, exasperated sigh, as he turned to face Saraf.

“I know this won’t come as a shock, my dear Saraf, but your collectors don’t give a *rat’s ass* about your artistic needs. You *know* this. Why are we even having this conversation?”

“You’re missing the point,” Saraf said. “I’m not happy. All of this... this stuff, it’s meaningless if I can’t be free to create what *I* want. My artistic temperament is—”

“Then get a real job,” David interrupted.

“You want artistic freedom? Then don’t be a professional artist.”

“Are you joking or trying to be ironic?”

“No joke, my dear. Artists aren’t free. That’s a bloody lie. Any artist who’s made a name for themselves will tell you that. They live in their gilded cages, owned by collectors and museums. They create at the behest of those with deep pockets and large egos. That’s reality. I’d be doing a disservice to you if I didn’t tell you the way it is.”

David sat down next to Saraf and put his hand on her knee.

“Your success is my concern. We’re a team. If you throw your career out the door, you throw *me* out the door with it. Look at me, I’m an old man. My legacy is in the artists I help, and you’re my last project. At least consider it as you spend your time on that.”

His thumb pointed at the new painting behind him in the corner, seemingly cowering from his condemnations.

“How will I know if my experiments are any good if I don’t share them?”

Saraf snarled, her lips curved in a question mark.

“That’s what I’m here for, my dear.”

David squeezed her knee and patted it lightly. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out an oversized business check and handed it to Saraf.

“This should help ease your angst.”

David stood up slowly, stealing a quick glance at the new painting. He smiled and looked down at Saraf.

“It’s not horrible. It’s just not you. You’re reaching for something that isn’t you... at least not yet.”

“I don’t know if I should thank you or hate you,” Saraf said, pouting.

“Maybe you’ll thank me later, but for now, you should probably hate me.”

He tightened his necktie a bit and buttoned his gray, pinstripe suit coat.

“But I do need to run, my dear. You’re prepared for the meeting this evening with the Andrews, right? She *really* wants to meet you.”

“I saw it on my calendar, so, yeah, I’ll be ready. What’s her first name again?”

David grabbed a pen and jotted something on a scrap of paper, handing it to Saraf.

“Her name is Roberta Andrews. Google her and find something to talk with her about. She married one of the most powerful men in the City of London fifteen years ago. You’re on her short list for a project that she and her husband are developing.”

“Remind me, what’s the project?”

“I don’t think I ever told you, because I don’t know myself. It’s all a big secret. Perhaps she’ll tell us tonight. I’ve arranged a private room at The Ledbury, so we can get acquainted with the project.”

“They’re coming here first, though, right?”

“Yes, 7 p.m. They wanted to see your most recent pieces, so have a few of those presentable—not that one.”

David pointed to one of her paintings she had leaned against a wall.

“That’s mine, and don’t forget it, I waived my fees last month for a reason, and it’s sitting right there, waiting for you to finish it.”

Saraf let out a long sigh.

“I know. I promise I will tomorrow.”

David nodded.

“Good, I’m counting on it. Once we’ve concluded our business, we’ll walk over to The Ledbury... and don’t be cheeky. They’re aristocrats.”

David flashed a quick grin, gave a definitive nod, and then walked out the door without giving Saraf a chance to argue.

The door closing into silence troubled Saraf. She was alone in the rejection of her trusted agent. She wanted to have a drink or smoke, possibly both. She lit a cigarette. It was within arm’s reach. With every drag, she unleashed mental curses on the iron bars that surrounded her. What she felt inside wasn’t as simple as career sabotage or

narcissism. It was something rooted deeper, and its depths made it inexpressible. She could feel a movement towards something magnetic. She just wasn't sure if it was her will that was moving her in this new direction or some invisible hand tethered to a rebel heart.



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Chapter 2

The Ledbury was an easy walk from Saraf's flat. Long held as one of the best restaurants in London, if not the world.

Saraf and David never missed an opportunity to meet new collectors there. It was a favorite routine to have them visit Saraf's studio, view her most recent work, and then walk over to The Ledbury for lunch or dinner after a sale was consummated.

Martin Andrews, according to Saraf's research on Google, was a major powerbroker in the City of London. A senior banker who specialized in mergers and acquisitions. Martin's fiefdom was a large, but relatively unknown investment bank in London's Canary Wharf. His eight-figure income was, for tax purposes, increasingly diverted to public projects that brought him honor.



Roberta, mid-forties, was not a typical trophy wife. She was educated at Cambridge, possessing two advanced degrees: one in philosophy and the other in psychology. Her family were aristocrats.

When the four of them arrived at The Ledbury, they were ushered to a private room in the upper reaches of the restaurant. The Andrews looked elegant in their black attire, entirely at home in the opulence of the storied restaurant.



“We love it here. Shall we enjoy some wine to get started?” Martin asked as he sat down at their private table and then nodded to the waiter.

“Saraf, tell us about your story,” Martin suggested, as he gave a quick nod to the Sommelier.

“We only know bits and pieces from what we’ve read online, and that, as you well know, tells

a partial story—sometimes, in my own case, an inaccurate story.”

He smiled mischievously.

Saraf took a deep breath and stole a quick glance at David.

“I guess I’ve always been an artist. Even when my mom was teaching me ballet I was pretending I was a brush in the hand of God, and he was moving my body. I never really had any doubts that art was where I was supposed to be.”

“Very poetic,” Roberta said.

“Your mother was a great artist of her own. I watched some of her performances online.”

“Thank you. Yes, she took her ballet seriously,”

Saraf replied, as a frown grew on her face.

“Someone like me, for example, would say, *too* seriously.”

“More about your story, please,” Martin requested.

Saraf’s face instantly turned introspective, as she closed her eyes for a moment.

“Let’s see. I grew up in London... Dalston, specifically. Dropped out of public school when I was fifteen and started at the Art Academy full-time. From there, I got a scholarship to Goldsmith’s College to study fine art.”

“As a mere sixteen-year-old, I read.” Roberta smiled when she spoke, Ingrid Bergman-like.

Saraf shrugged her shoulders and grinned. “No one knew what else to do with me.”

Her guests chuckled in unison.

“I got my MFA when I was twenty and started working as a full-time artist that summer.” Saraf nodded dutifully in David’s direction.

“David landed me my first solo show and I was fortunate to sell out—”

“Fortune had nothing to do with it my dear,” David interjected. “Your work was so original that every collector who saw it fell in love. It’s really that simple. Of course, it helps when the critics fawn over your work, too.”

“Whatever the reason,” Saraf said, “it validated my choices. Until people actually buy your work, you never really know if you can call yourself an artist. It was after that first show, for the first time, that I could call myself a *bloody artist*.”

She beamed a smile that echoed in her guests.

“How do you define your artistic voice?” Roberta asked.

Saraf studied the ornate moldings that wrapped around the 18-foot ceilings, and then looked down at her wine glass.

“I thought I understood it, but lately I feel it’s much deeper or perhaps better hidden than I had expected. Layers... it’s like a labyrinth. I think it’s

one of those things that beckons. It's very subtle. One day you think you have it understood; the next day you doubt you ever possessed it. The other thing, at least for me, is how to put it into words."

"Please try," Roberta requested, though it was spoken like a command.

"Some artists call it a muse or daemon, but I definitely feel it guiding me. I don't really think of it as my voice—in the strict sense of personal ownership. It's more like a voice of intuition that inspires me."

"In what way?" Martin asked, leaning forward with his elbows on the table, cradling his bearded chin.

"Well, for example, I've had sleep paralysis since I was a young girl. When it happens, I often receive... ideas or visual suggestions—"

"It's a voice that *talks* to you?" Martin asked.

“No, it’s not a voice. It’s more like a feeling of being led, sometimes it’s a vision. For example, before I begin a new painting, I’ll often get a flash or a vision the night before I start the painting, during these episodes of sleep paralysis.

“It isn’t the subject or composition of the painting that I see, but rather the emotional content. I *feel* it. It’s as if some part of me is arranging the painting within me before I start to put brush to canvas. Does that make sense?”

Martin smiled.

“Not to me, but then I’m a banker, and the only voices that get through to me have to be holding cash,” Martin looked at Roberta, “or originate from the lips of my lovely wife.”

Roberta smiled back at Martin and then turned serious. “How’d you and David meet?”

David cleared his throat.

“She was introduced to me when she was just a teenager... seventeen, I believe. She was a small, quiet girl, waif-like in her torn jeans and cotton t-shirts, which were always white—dabbed with paint. Her hair, believe it or not, was even wilder then.”

David paused and smiled knowingly at Saraf, who smirked back.

“What’d you like best about her... when you first met?” Martin asked.

“Her confidence and skill with a brush,” David replied without a thought.

“You can’t really teach that. She’s an old soul when it comes to art. Very precocious. That kind of talent is genuine because the passion isn’t manufactured. It’s *felt* and it drives them from an early age. That fuel lasts an entire lifetime. When I find that, if the art has potential, I watch as they develop. I saw her first group show and made

note of her skills. I wanted to represent her even then, and I told her teachers that I did. One day, about eight years ago, she came into my gallery with a set of canvases and asked me what I thought of them.”

David took a sip of wine and then rolled his eyes. “They were brilliant. *Bloody* brilliant! I hadn’t seen anything like them. I bought them on the spot and wrote up an agreement that very day—”

“—Which he forced me to sign,” Saraf interjected with a grin.

“There was no force, other than my greed, my dear.” David dabbed at his upper lip with a white linen napkin. “She signed the next day and we’ve been joined at the hip ever since.”

“And what do you see in David?” Roberta turned her attention to Saraf.

“He’s my mentor. I think of him as my guide into the strange and perplexing world of collectors,

museum directors, global distribution, financing... all of that. He's a truth-teller, too. Something an artist needs from time to time."

"You are too kind, Saraf," David remarked, as he tidied his necktie. "Would you like to order food now?"

They ate a five-course dinner and emptied four bottles of wine in the process. The table conversation remained focused on London politics, the differences between the City of London and London proper, and the vagaries of collecting art in an increasingly global world.

As coffee was served, Martin shifted in his chair and looked pensive for a moment.

"I think it's time we tell you a little bit about our project."

"Yes, please do," David said.

"We're very excited to hear what you have in mind for a commission."

Martin looked at Roberta and nodded, gesturing with his hand, as if he were introducing her.

She took a long sip of Amaretto di Saronno, swallowed, and locked eyes with Saraf.

“We want you to join a team of artists that we’re assembling to finish a new property we’re developing. A very special property that we intend to turn into a world-class contemporary art museum.”

Saraf blinked hard, opened her mouth, then closed it. She tilted her head slightly.

“Team?”

“I know... I know artists don’t usually work in teams, but the scale of this property requires it.”

Roberta paused, gathering a deep breath.

“We spend our summers on the French island of Corsica. Are you familiar with it?”

“By name only,” Saraf replied, her voice distant.

“I’ve never been...”

“Well, it’s a beautiful island that Martin and I just adore. Four years ago we bought an estate on the western shoreline, a large property, but the home itself was in disrepair, so we razed it and built a new structure in its place. It’s been three years in the making, and it’s nearly complete... *except* for the interior design, which is where you come in.”

“You see,” Roberta continued, tracing her finger along the rim of her glass, “every wall is primed with white paint. It’s really quite sterile by design.”

“It’s insanely large,” Martin added. “The only reason we built it so large is that the French government agreed to provide tax incentives since they believe it’ll become a tourist magnet.”

“How large is it?” David asked.

“A little over 52,000 square feet,” Martin replied.

“That’s indoors. There’ll be sculpture gardens in the back that will total another 21,000.”

“We want to have certain rooms that are immersive, which is to say, we want the walls to be murals, the furniture to be sculptures, the lighting to be mobiles, the floors to be mosaics... you get the idea. These rooms will be the featured elements of the museum, and you’d have a hand in developing them.”

“In what way, exactly?” Saraf asked.

“We want you to paint the walls in six rooms,” Roberta answered. “These rooms are strategically placed to draw visitors to all parts of the museum. They’re *circulators*, as our architects call them.”

Roberta took another sip of her after-dinner liqueur and looked directly at Saraf.

“What do you think?”

“My mind is reeling,” Saraf admitted.

“I’m thinking about all of the ramifications... I don’t know, it’s simultaneously amazing and fear-provoking.”

“What’s the fear?” Martin asked, concern showing on his face.

“It could be a major detour in terms of my career,” Saraf answered. “I’d have to move to Corsica. The project would... well, it would consume me.” She turned to David.

“What do you think?”

David cleared his voice and leaned forward.

“Six rooms... she’d have full control over the subjects?”

Martin and Roberta nodded in unison.

“How large are the rooms?”

“We can’t give you exact dimensions, but they’re large,” Roberta said emphatically.

“We’d want you there for as long as the project takes. If you get bored being on the island, you can take breaks.”

“We’d pay you whatever you think is fair,” Martin said.

“The team of artists we’re assembling has very high project caps. We have a site supervisor who’ll authorize work, according to budgets. Our objective is to manage the overall project and make sure it’s progressing according to plan—not crimp your style.

“One of the perks of building this in France is that the Louvre will provide conservateurs to consult on best practices to ensure the longevity of the works.”

“The project sounds fascinating,” David said. “I can’t imagine Saraf *not* wanting to be a part of it. We just need to work out the details of scheduling—”

“Yes,” Martin interrupted, taking out a folded agreement from his breast pocket and passing it to David.

“I’m sure you’ll find all the details in this agreement. And to sweeten the deal, we’ll buy the three latest works that you showed us earlier at whatever the current market prices are... for the museum, with a commitment to have a minimum of two pieces—in addition to the murals, of course—in our permanent collection.”

David did a quick glance in Saraf’s direction and unfolded the agreement, which consisted of nine pages of legalese. He scanned the section on page two that contained the *Terms* and nodded, his lips moving silently as he read. The table, for a minute, hung in awkward silence.

“Everything looks in order,” David said, looking up.

“I’ll talk with Saraf in the next few days and we’ll get everything buttoned up.”

“What’s the timeframe to start?” Saraf asked.

“Oh, we want you as soon as you can get started,” Roberta said cheerfully.

“If that’s tomorrow, wonderful. If it’s in two months, we’ll make it work.”

“Why me?” Saraf asked, her voice quiet and withdrawn.

Roberta straightened in her chair and leaned forward on the table, crossing her arms.

“For the very reason you just asked that question. You’re not a hothead. We went after the best talent in the art world, but we didn’t want egomaniacs, no matter how talented they were.

“We wanted those who had philosophical ground. Those who were intellectuals commanded the respect of the most critical of the critics. And those who had trajectories whose arcs would likely take them into immortality.”

David turned to Saraf.

“A worthy criteria to say the least, don’t you think?”

“I’m honored to be considered in the company of these artists, but I still don’t know why you want me to paint six rooms or how that will contribute to your museum.”

“These six rooms are the soul of the museum,” Martin replied. “It’d help you to see it. Saraf, are you up for a trip this weekend?”

Martin winked and looked at David with a nod.

“You, too, of course.”

“This weekend?” Saraf grinned, half-incredulously.

“You mean tomorrow?”

“We have a private plane,” Martin said.

“We’re leaving tomorrow morning at 9:30 a.m. and arriving in time for lunch. We’ll return Sunday evening around 8 p.m. Why don’t you join us and

you can see the property yourself. We think you'll be inspired."

There was a pause, while all eyes seemed to converge on Saraf.

"What if I don't sketch?"

"Pardon?" Roberta asked, narrowing her eyes.

"You said that your only request is to see a sketch before I begin painting. I don't sketch. I paint autonomously. I visualize my starting point, then after that, it's one thing that leads to another and the painting, quite literally, paints itself. I'm just an instrument of its completion."

Roberta blinked, her face suddenly contemplative.

"Then you won't be submitting sketches, will you? A simple adjustment to the agreement."

Roberta smiled, and held out her hand to David, gesturing for him to return the agreement. She then opened it up to page three, while Martin handed her a pen. She crossed out a sentence and

initialized it. Martin added his initials and handed the document back to David.

“Any other concerns or issues?” Roberta asked.

Saraf smiled and shook her head.

“Then we’ll leave in the morning!”

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