INTERPRETIVE OBSERVATION:
AN EXPLORATION OF FORMS IN NATURE AND THE SYNTHESIS OF
REALISM THROUGH SPIRITUALLY COMMUNICATIVE IMAGERY

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by

Anne Downes B.F.A.

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Introduction

Reconstructing the visual elements found in nature into evocative movements of color, shape, pattern and form is the most important issue within my work. My interest in animals and a rural life style has provided me with important subject matter with which to explore the various elements of pictorial image making. I have utilized these elements in an effort to reconstruct or interpret the "real" and "familiar" images of life. I wish to extract the spiritual omnipresence found in nature in order to synthesize the experiences in my work. My interpretation of nature, or natural subject matter, although not rendered "realistically" in a classical sense, is nevertheless concerned with "readable," recongnizable shapes and forms. However, my prints are not mere illustrations. There are no overt attempts to capture a single moment but rather I work to create montages of subtle imagery in order to provide a mood. My work involves a personal statement; within it I seek to understand and transmit a quiet solitude. I am interested in animals and nature as terrestrial monuments. It is through their spirit, dignity and form that I seek to define my own visual aesthetic.
Family Influence
in Development of Imagery

"Tell me, Father, what is this white man's Heaven?"

"It is the most beautiful place in the world."

"Tell me, Father, is it like the land of the little
trees when the ice has left the lakes? Are the great musk
oxen there? Are the hills covered with flowers? There will
I see the caribou everywhere I look? Are the lakes blue
with the sky of summer? Is every net full of great, fat
white-fish? Is there room for me in this land, like our
land, the barrens? Can I camp anywhere and not find that
someone else has camped? Can I feel the wind and be like
the wind? Father, if your Heaven is not all these, leave
me alone in my land, the land of the little sticks."

This quote is from the dialogue between a Dog-Rib Indian and
a priest extracted from the book *Sleeping Island* written by my
father, Prentice Downes. My father was a cartographer, geologist,
ethnologist and teacher. Above all he was a northern explorer.

He lived and traveled with the Cree Indians of northern Manitoba
and Saskatchewan, exploring wilderness areas by canoe months at a
time. He documented his experiences through his writing, a few
pictures and many maps. My father was very much concerned with the
plight of the vanishing Indian and Eskimo people of northern Canada.
In *Sleeping Island* my father expressed a spiritual respect for the land while documenting the lives and customs of its native people. I feel there exists a strong bond between myself and my father and his love for the wilderness and its inhabitants. It is of the utmost importance for me to be able to express in my work those 'spiritual' sentiments which I share so deeply with him.

For the past few years I have been illustrating a collection of Indian folktales called *Kyass* or *Stories of Long Ago*. This project has developed out of my interest in my father's studies in Cree Indian ethnology. He collected these stories during his travels in Canada in the 1930's. They consist of original material narrated to him by an old Cree Indian. He was in the process of working up this manuscript for publication when he passed away in 1959.

In an effort to complete what he began, I have used the *Kyass* manuscript as a vehicle in order to develop in my prints my personal visual qualities or aesthetic. Examples of prints in which the *Kyass* manuscript serves as a narrative basis are: "Crying Kingfisher and the Giant Lynx" (Fig. #1), "Nimosom Goodbye" (Fig. #5), "Underwater Moose" (Fig. #6), "Fox In The Hollow, Bears In The Den" (Fig. #7), "Mah-gua The Loon" (Fig. #8) and "Prayer To Great Black One" (Fig. #9).
Development of Style
and Spiritual Concepts

In the woodcut, there lies intrinsic naturalistic and primitive qualities. It is my intent to express or portray these qualities by using figurative imagery and overtly organic textures. Similar qualities are found in Indian folklore and tradition, and therefore the historical reference intended within the imagery is enhanced by the use of the relief or woodcut technique. Historically, the woodcut dates back to Medieval times where it was used to document and illustrate texts and reproduce in quantity the written word. All the qualities which are inherent in the woodcut process remain valid to me and are purposefully manipulated in order to describe a feeling and create a mood.

The tactile surface of the woodcut lends itself easily to the use of patternization. "Crying Kingfisher and the Giant Lynx" (Fig. #1), "Holstein" (Fig. #2), "Suffolks" (Fig. #3), and "Fox and Geese" (Fig. #4), are examples in which pattern or a repeated mark is used as an important descriptive element. In my relief prints, pattern is a device which I have used to define the image and the space around that image. Shapes are densely juxtaposed and overlap; patterns fill up the page so that there is a controlled sense of recession in the objects as they appear on the picture plane. Flattening of the space through pattern enhances the design qualities of the imagery, and is in keeping with the
primitive or folklike aspects of the subject matter. The natural and organic qualities of the woodcut are also enhanced through this use of pattern and texture.

Textural qualities are again used in the landscape woodcut entitled "Nimientos Goodbye" (fig. #5). In this print I remain concerned with subject matter stemming from nature, yet it begins to depart from the stylized animal imagery found in the majority of my work. This print represents for me a link between the textured surfaces of the woodcut and my concerns for color and space which I explore in my serigraphs. In this print the landscape imagery is dealt with through horizontal contours and subtle manipulation of color. The flattened perspective and the closely juxtaposed shapes have been replaced by subdued, layered contours to evoke a definite sense of space and depth.

The "Underwater Moose" (Fig. #6), "Fox In The Hollow, Bears In the Den" (fig. #7), and "Mah-gua The Loon" (Fig. #8), are prints executed for the Kyass series. These prints again utilize pattern and texture to indicate space and shape emphasizing their organic forms. The organic nature of the image is enhanced by variation of pattern in and around the object. The inherent texture in the woodcut is used to support my use of patternization. Again there is a controlled recession of objects where I place the forms in a definite but limited space. Stacked pictorial levels are used to flatten out the surface and limit the space in order to enhance the primitive type qualities.
Earliest of the prints in the Kyass series is the "Underwater Moose" which was executed in 1976. I began in this print to divide the space into horizontal planes. I have used this format in many of my works since and have found that it can serve several different purposes. In "Underwater Moose" the upper and lower division of space and surface sets up a mirrored and reversed image, creating a certain dream or mythic quality. By dividing the space a sequence of events is depicted simultaneously without destroying the unity of the print. Multiple scenes found in Primitive art are often arranged in horizontal segments to tell a story to the viewer. In my prints, the use of the divided segments is in keeping with the primitives' use of sequential art and best illustrates the passage of time which I wish to portray.

The intaglio process allows for softer more varying use of grey tones than does the relief technique. In the prints "Wolf Cry" (Fig. #10), and "Whisper White in Winter" (Fig. #11), I am again concerned with the magic and spiritual qualities found in animals and nature. The animal imagery depicted in my intaglio prints is translated in a less literal fashion than in the woodcuts. This abstraction allows for the spiritual qualities to be enhanced through technique while suggesting to the viewer a dream like feeling. The veil like quality of the grey tones evoke a sense of mysticism while the shapes themselves are as elusive as the howl of a wolf or the fleeting glimpse of a bear in a darkening forest.
Many of the Indian tales that have influenced my work are about secretive yet powerful creatures possessing a sense of magic. It is because of these mythical qualities that I have focused the images on the animals themselves, emphasizing their form and portraying them in a primitive stylized fashion.

In my serigraphs, color and shape delineate images which have been reduced or simplified to their basic forms. Through this abstraction I seek to further define what is already understood in nature -- what may be called the "essence" of their existence or inner spirit. The origin of the conceptual ideas behind the screenprint "Piddessu" (Fig. #12) come from a Cree Indian tale told to their children when there is thunder and lightening. They say "it is only Piddessu stirring," a great bird who lives on a tremendous mountain far away. In this print the image of the sheep is predominant. The bird, or Piddessu, is less obvious at first and thereby implies a more spiritual feeling. I have consciously worked to build up the surface until a delicate or subtle quality is achieved. Slowly the mystical image of a great grey bird appears hovering over the flock, emerging from the mountain-scape behind.

In "Flock Reflections" (Fig. #13), color again plays an important part in the transmission of the spiritual sense found in nature. The colors themselves are not organic in hue, however, they do evoke the lyrical sense one feels when viewing a peaceful vista or the seasonal changes found in nature. I wish to express in my prints a feeling of softly moving forms; a sense of quietude, where the spiritual presence of the image is felt and the essence of its existence is understood.
Literary and Social Influences Upon Visual Content

The most viable parallel of thought between my work and what has gone on before exists in the ideology of some of the literary artists of the 1920's and 30's. The writings of William Faulkner, John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway have had an influence on my use of imagery. These authors' interest and concern for man and his relationship to nature, have provided me with a conceptual sensibility that is expressed in my work. I feel a stronger bond between myself and these artists than with contemporary visual artists. Of these literary artists I feel most influenced by the sentiments portrayed in the works of William Faulkner. In Go Down Moses Faulkner examines the changing relationship of man to the land. One senses his fear for a wilderness lost and an increasing disillusionment in man. As the city moves in in Faulkner's novels he tries fervently to express the timelessness of the moment, the essence and why of the instant. Faulkner was consumed by legend and love for the land. In expressing this love and respect there develops a stronger reliance on the spiritual world found in nature.

The importance of the animals found in Faulkner's wilderness is also evident within his writing. Faulkner often gives animals a mystical quality; their own psychic realm. They are presented without sentimentality, and arise immortal spiritual presences, pure and dignified in their own right.
Just as Faulkner's characters are never sentimentalized it is also a concern of mine not to over sentimentalize the images with which I am dealing. The animals I portray in my images are presented boldly; stylized to capture their essence. They have become personal interpretations of animal forms, enlarged and abstracted to present a personal view of my interests and concerns.

One of my earlier prints, completed in 1977, which illustrates my concern for the spiritual qualities found within animals and nature is "Prayer to Great Black One" (Fig. #9), from the Kyass series. It also illustrates the bond between man and animal that brings dignity to the relationship. The following quote is from Kyass or Stories of Long Ago from the Chapter "Prayer to Great Black One and the Hunt." It explains the ritual involved in the killing of the bear by the Cree Indian hunters.

"Just before the winter snows have melted away in the early spring and before the black one has stirred from his warm winter den where he has been lying all winter sucking his paws, we used to go on a great hunt. If we came to his den, which might be among the rocks or under some old fallen tree, we would know if he was there, for there would be a little hole melted through the snow from his slow breathing. Before killing him, we would do this. First we would sit down opposite the den and think about the great black one. We would then smoke our pipes for a few minutes and blow the smoke toward him. Then we would say a little 'prayer' which went like this:
'Oh great black one,
Strong animal,
Wisest of all animals,
It is our time to kill you that we may eat.
Oh great black one,
Strong animal,
Wisest of all animals,
Be not angry at us weak men who are about to kill you.
Send not your spirit to trouble us.
See, we place for you this offering of tobacco.
Now, as it is to all of us, your time has come.
Oh great black one,
Strong animal,
Wisest of all animals,
Be not angry with us.'

Then again we would blow a little smoke toward him and sit there thinking how fine an animal the black one is, how wise he is. We would think of him and how his spirit was so powerful that he could sleep all winter without eating and yet awake in the spring strong and fat. We would know that he was sleeping there sucking his paws for the blueberry juice which had soaked into them as he gathered berries in the moon of the falling leaves the previous fall. We would know that on the day you call 'New Year's' he had gotten up and turned around and laid down on the opposite side than that on which he had been sleeping.
Then we would remove the snow and kill him and the meat would be used for a great feast for all of us, a great feast in which the wisest man would beat his drum and sing songs about the brave deeds of the bear. Every single piece of meat must be eaten before any person might leave. This feast is called a 'mack-ra sham.'

This quote embodies both the thought and spirit of my interest in translating the duality i.e. the spiritual versus the physical that exists in nature. This duality is embodied in the quote "Prayer To Great Black One." Here there exists a homage to nature through the harshness of survival in the wilderness as is described in the killing of the bear. It is the 'necessity of life' that creates the duality which is so important for me to express in my visual language.
Conclusion

In the past several years I have found that my interest in a rural life style has evoked a personal response in my work balancing image with concept. Therefore the spiritual and physical content become unified and present a visual whole.

My work at this time is, in part, a synthesis of my father's ideals and my own. His literary works have provided me with a variety of 'story telling' possibilities. I feel a need to be involved in nature as he did, exploring it further through visual means in an effort to discover the essence of its existence. It has been my goal to place particular importance on the visual presentation of an image and to define that image and its relationship to nature. The images with which I have worked are developed with formal compositional devices that enhance the visual beauty of the image while supporting the narrative qualities in my work.

It is through the experience of life itself that I am able to see my images gradually emerge and grow. Familiarity with technique enables me to distill ideas and present these concepts in a new and fresh format. Nature itself seems never changing but always moving. My interpretation of this natural omnipresence is the essence of my work.
Plate 11
Bibliography

Footnotes