A DISCOVERY OF CONTENT

A Thesis

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by

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INTRODUCTION

During the time that I have been making art, a change in my understanding of my own imagery has taken place. There has been an increase of self-awareness, both in terms of the depth, and the content of a core of concerns. These reflect a change in my attitudes toward art and society in general, which can be attributed in part to my having had more life experiences, thus enabling me to better evaluate myself, my work, and my environment. The process of making art has also significantly enhanced the development of a self-awareness and self-confidence through the development of technical skills, aesthetic judgement, and conceptual concerns. This new level of understanding has manifested itself in my work in a unique, but not unrelated fashion in each of the areas in which I have worked. While some areas, like painting, have fallen by the wayside, others, such as printmaking, have become my primary interest, and still others, like sculpture, have been ignored for a time, only to resurface later.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW 1970-1978

In order to more fully define the progress I have made, I have included a brief description of the transitions that my images and interests have gone through in the past eight years. For clarity I have broken these down according to the media and order in which I became involved with them.
SCULPTURE - My first interest in art was in sculpture and the process of constructing objects. After my initial involvement in the creative process, I found that I had problems in coming up with ideas that had more than a visual appeal. Even the sculptures that were successful lacked a good reason for existence other than as a successful completion of an assignment. The issue of a conceptual basis for a piece of sculpture was hard for me to deal with early in my development and I lost interest in the area. In retrospect, I felt I needed a process or technique to help me focus my energy and interest in three-dimensional work until my ideas had matured enough to be expressed in a three-dimensional form.

PAINTING - In the act of painting and dealing with the plasticity of paint, I intuitively explored color and composition. Painting in an abstract fashion helped me incorporate the visual information from the canvas with the environment around me. The landscape was a significant influence on my paintings, leading me to paint broad expanses of color with an active surface to emphasize the horizon and deep space.

PHOTOGRAPHY - Making images through the camera's viewpoint encouraged me to develop a personal style in the documentation of my environment and surroundings. At the same time, I was developing a sensitivity to composition and structure within the images themselves, becoming more selective and conscious of what I photographed and why. These photographs became a stock of images which I used over and over in my prints and drawings.
PRINTMAKING - In the printmaking process I found a technical framework through which to make images. By using a particular technique to make an image, I had a solid footing from which to work out ideas and develop new images. This was extremely important to me as I became more aware and sensitive to visual information. The printmaking processes allowed me to incorporate photographic images with color and visual structure, while maintaining a recognizable image. Beginning with the intuitive selection of specific images, I began to integrate these within a more abstract and far reaching context.

After an initial contact with the various media mentioned above, I found that even though I continued to paint, most of my energy and interest was in the printmaking area. I maintained my interest in photography but only as a part of the printmaking process, as a source of ideas and images. I selected a printing technique for the inherent qualities it would give to an image, rather than having the process dictate the image. The idea of making multiples was important to me in terms of the economics of the art marketplace. I became concerned with the political issues of reasonable access to art for the public at a sensible cost, and began producing tear off and giveaway prints the viewer could choose to take away with them from the gallery environment. The issue became one of the act of giving away prints rather than of what the actual images were.

A usual procedure for me was to incorporate photographic images
within other contexts and images in a print. An example is an autographic
mark within a photomechanically produced image, such as the small sea
scenes using a photograph of a fishing village and hand drawn color, or a
small grid added to it (Figure 1). The idea of taking a known quantity, such

![Figure 1](image)

as a photographic image and changing it through combinations of techniques
holds a great deal of interest for me. Mixing the media in one picture by
drawing, cutting, or transferring the image was a method of transforming
my perception of that image and to enhance the effectiveness of the statement.
This concept of changing the perception of image and the orientation of the
viewer is one I have come back to in other media as well. Of continuing
interest for me is working with multiples within the image as well as in the
traditional concept of multiples of a print. I have used this idea in producing
the same image element over and over in a serial fashion, with slight variations in color or placement in a single print. Through this variation or ordinary photographic images, I began to work with less reality-bound images, while maintaining a continuing emphasis and concern for recognizable symbols.

I now realize that the images I was using were inexorably caught up with my experiences in the world at that time, essentially a semi-rural prairie environment. My strongest images were an intuitive response to the experiences and scenes of my childhood as I became aware of the visual information on the paper or canvas in front of me. I also became concerned about what the statements were that I was trying to make. Even as my aesthetic skills and technical facility developed, I was uncomfortable with the product of my labours because of this apparent lack of statement.

EVOLUTION

In graduate school my work went through major changes, not only in terms of ideas but also in materials and processes I was using. The contact with new technology has always been an extremely stimulating one for me, both in terms of creating a high level of involvement to enhance the exchange of energy, and in ideas with other interests. My involvement with computer graphics at The Computer Graphics Research Group under the direction of Professor C. Csuri has been a major element in my development as an artist. Interestingly enough, the work I did on the computer was essentially dealing
with the same problems found in the prints, but from a new viewpoint. The idea of machine aiding an artist in making a picture has intrigued me for several years. I had experimented with primitive computer generated pictures in 1974 at the University of Saskatchewan as an undergraduate. Also, while working as an offset pressman in the printing industry, I became familiar with new developments in image-making technology. Access to sufficiently advanced equipment was almost impossible to get or extremely expensive, and I had no real opportunity to follow up on my interests until coming to Ohio State University.

In the area of computer animation I have been able to explore a time-based illusionary world that is entirely synthetic in origin, while containing a reference to the real world and human experience. Initially, I tried to maintain a sense of real world qualities by using identifiable commonplace symbols within a landscape context. Later, I found that it was not necessary to restrict myself to recognizable elements in order to have a comprehensible image. This led to the development of images unrestrained by my own limitations and preconceptions, specifically those of viewpoint and the relationship of objects to environment and viewer. By moving away from traditional symbols, I began to identify what was effective in other media as well, and started to more accurately focus on the real issues in my work. This movement toward abstraction relates strongly to what had initially interested me in painting. It is apparent now that my involvement in computer graphics was an important step in breaking out of an excessive dependence on
photographic images.

I started integrating computer-generated images with traditional printmaking techniques as a means of documenting and reproducing the video image on paper. This also helped me to focus on the quality of the image and the clarity of the image statement. The process of printing these images has had as much as an effect on the computer-generated images as computer technology has had on my prints.

Being involved with computer graphics also renewed my interest in electronics. I started by making electronic devices that were based on miniature electronic sound synthesizers which were constructed to respond to motion and light. As I devised more of this type of object, I became aware of the similarities in the conceptual framework between the sculptures, prints and computer animation. For example, in the creation of box shapes by the computer, I was able to figuratively go in and out of the shape, and this helped me understand and explore what the box symbol represented to me. Conversely, the act of making a print out of a computer image made me conscious of the structure and color relationships of that image and assisted me in improving it.

Through these three media I began to realize that my primary interest was in the definition of space and the relationship between microcosms and the world image. The sound devices became a means to explore the relationship and characteristics of interaction between the artist, objects, and audience. As tentative steps in the exploring of new ways of communicating
and systems of control, these devices also had an influence on how I perceived and responded to the other images I was making at the time. They paralleled the prints in which a sense of space was limited by the confines of a box, or a scenic view was broken up by extreme separations of color and shape.

REALIZATIONS

My images have changed in appearance as well as in how they were conceived. In retrospect, I find there has not been as great a change in my personal orientation toward art as there has been in the look of the resultant product. As my skills and visual sensibilities were developing, I became aware that there is a group of ongoing concerns that have been evident in my work since the very beginning. They follow roughly in the categories outlined below:

1. The relationships of images to the emotive and intellectual ways we construct conceptual frameworks to connect what we see around us and what we see inside us (fantasy).

2. The connections between different realities and systems with the restrictions that are both internal and external to their interactions with each other.

3. The definition of control and its limits, both as we impose them upon ourselves, and as it is imposed on us, particularly in terms of the artist-audience interaction.
4. The orientation and personal conceptual frameworks through which we view and respond to art.

The identification of and understanding of these specific issues has helped me understand both myself and my particular path through life. This, as an aspect in itself, relates strongly to the statements I am making in my art.

To this end, self-awareness has begun to take the place of the intuitive expression and statement of concerns. Usually, I would discover some form of statement and concept after the work was completed, rather than having a specific concern before starting. My interest in the "content" of an image was based on the strength of my emotional involvement and a visual response to the image. I realized that by being more aware of visual elements throughout the creative process, I would be able to enhance both the statement and its visual expression. Now I am able to add to this an orientation and focus to the creative process. However, even with more forethought and planning, the process of bringing a work to completion, there still evolves a certain amount of surprises and new information about myself.

CONTINUATION

The discovery and realization of a conceptual framework has been a major improvement in the way I approach the art making process. The ideas I have been involved with are based around several recurrent themes. One has been the symbol of the box or container as an analog for a microcosm.
In the container image there is a definite representation of the limits to the world inside the container on one level, while allowing for the possibility that the container may be itself the contents of some other world. The idea of these levels of meaning or reality holds a strong fascination for me. The Russian wooden dolls that come apart to reveal another slightly smaller doll inside is a good illustration from my childhood.

The first boxes I constructed were strictly for use as protection for prints and drawings. Although I was concerned with the quality of the construction and the general appearance of the print boxes, I was not consciously making aesthetic decisions about these boxes and the relationship of the container to its contents. Later, I began to make a series of small paintings and drawings that were built into small boxes which were part frame and part container. I also used the container symbol in drawings and prints where the box was represented by a few simple lines, and the contents rendered more realistically by photo lithographs or Xerox transfers.

The photographic images I used were of places or objects that had played a particularly important part in my life, such as childhood memories, or special places I had lived or worked in. That these images represented particularly strong emotional connotations for me was an important motivation for the recording and reevaluation of those experiences. The strength of my reaction to particular images allowed me to put more of myself into my work, however, this was by no means a conscious process or one I could easily control.
I noticed as I traveled from one area of the continent to another that the images I used seemed to lag behind my physical changes in locale. After I moved from the prairies to the Atlantic coast of Canada, I was still making images based on my prairie experiences for over a year. When I moved to Ohio from the Atlantic provinces I made pictures of maritime scenes. I realized that what I made was in response to what I had seen or experienced and not something that I was in control of.

I believe a lot of the insecurities I had concerning my abilities as an artist were based on not really knowing how or why I would come up with a successful piece, and consequentially, I never felt confident that I would be able to continue to make good work. By placing my store of photographic images in a container or treasure box context, I could free myself from the strong emotional connotations that these images had for me, and go on to new images (Figure 2).
The sound and lightmaking objects went through a similar process in which I had made the objects to be containers for the physical components. With each new box that I made, the container became a more involved and integrated part of the object, both in the sophistication of the shape as well as conceptually. The first step I made in this direction was the "surf egg" (Figure 3). A shiny black wooden egg was set on a white truncated pyramid pedestal. A red button was set into the pedestal, and if pressed would start a sequence of electronically created surf sounds. Here, the physical object was as important as the sounds that issued from it. In this piece, the viewer could choose to be involved by pressing the button to initiate the sound sequence. I expanded this idea and constructed several sound boxes that responded to movement and variations in light caused by the viewer. The entrance of a viewer into a room or the viewer picking up an object would activate or change
the sounds. Although these boxes fascinated me, I had a great deal of difficulty in finding an adequate way to display them; they were inevitably small and delicate and needed to be handled by the viewer to be the most effective.

I worked toward showing a box in a gallery situation where the object could be accessible to the public and still function without fear of damage or breakdown. I constructed a totally illusionistic environment that was removed from the viewer by its physical boundaries and small peepholes, which were the only means of seeing inside the container (Figure 4). I changed the basic shape of the container to make it more interesting in appearance and to disorient the viewer when they looked inside. The interior of the object was totally different in appearance, spatial organization, and color. This was an attempt to work with several levels within one object; the peepholes would look in on
a different view of the interior and the exterior of the interior space, while still looking inside of the box. I also wanted what one saw to be unpredictable at any moment and incorporated a series of lights that turn on and off randomly to selectively illuminate the interior and exterior spaces. Because the peepholes are small, the viewer has to approach the piece on a very intimate level to see the illusion and inner world inside. This is not only a device to involve the viewer with the object and its inner qualities, but also an important factor in what the viewer perceives when he looks inside.

Another extension of the idea of a container for these devices has been to turn them inside out so that the sound instrument in effect becomes a container in itself. It surrounds, restrains, and defines the space of someone who is wearing it by responding to their movements and the light around them (Figure 5). I found that although the sounds in themselves were very interesting,
the real issue with which I was dealing was the symbol of containment of the individual. This became a self-imposed restriction on the individual produced by the sound and movement combination made in reaction to the environment.

This is another of these recurrent themes to which I find myself returning to, simply the human condition as a response to environments, limitations, and self-imposed restrictions. These often are combined with each other in a multi-layered and extremely complex series of interactions. Through this representation of the limitations and restrictions based on the container symbol, I realized what I had really been interested in and what I had been making prints, sculptures and drawings about for the last ten years. A simple restatement of this would be:

"The exploration of new and old image-based realities combined with an awareness of boundaries both real and imaginary, their effect on myself and the images that I produced."

Another issue has been the illustration of microcosms and other realities through a personal exploration of reality and fantasy. I have always had an interest in speculative fiction that up until recently, I was unable to integrate in my artmaking activities. I have been particularly fascinated by stories that dealt with other universes which existed in parallel to ours. The levels of these universes would often be differentiated from ours by a dimension of time, scale, or distance.

Through my explorations in computer generated animation, I became interested in working with the concept of time and space. This was a totally
new area for me. As a result, I felt I was free to innovate and experiment more than in my prints. The computer-generated images were based on a three dimensional system, therefore I was totally unrestricted in the environments that I could "build" and move around in. Initially, I used a simplified landscape image which had simple cones and rectangles combined as a module to represent a stereotyped suburban estate. The modules were combined to make up a symbolic neighborhood with each module having three hills, a lake, and a small house with a fence surrounding it. I was able to combine the modules in a regular grid layout to create a strong feeling of repetition and sterility. I also isolated the land modules from any suggestion of the real world by surrounding them with black space and enhanced the insular qualities of the group of modules by moving toward them at high speed from a great distance. With the development of more animation skills I began to move about more boldly within the images, while introducing more and more activity within the scene. I made the hills grow and shrink as they turned around themselves, even as the houses appeared one or two at a time while the land blocks were splitting apart beneath the viewer. With all of this activity taking place I reached a turning point; as the images became more active they also became almost surreal and certainly less reality-bound. At this juncture I discarded the house element as being to obvious a reference to the real world. I became flexible enough in the way I worked with the modules that I totally destroyed the land reference by having the hills and lakes spin off into space (Figure 6).
Through the process of creating this mini world, I became aware that what I was doing was creating an analog of the ways that we deal with our own worlds and I became more conscious of the larger scenario that surrounds me. I started to work on a series of prints that utilized the understandings and discoveries that I had made in the films. In these prints I began to vary the location size and orientation of the five basic blocks of the land image and to break up the modules in a random fashion by literally erasing certain ones and randomly tilting the others (Figure 7). The actual idea of breaking up the group of land modules came from one of the first silkscreened images made from this series of images. Out of frustration I printed black over parts of one of the prints. This led directly to my restructuring the images in the computer animation, which in turn fed back into the images I turned into prints.
I was initially only interested in using the printmaking process to document the computer-generated images through a simple color separation process. The prints that resulted were very unsatisfying, and so dead in appearance that I ended up working back into them by modifying colors and the surface quality of the image with varnishes and iridescent pigments in many layers of transparent color. As I was modifying the color in the prints, I also began to modify and improve on the colors and color relationships in the animation itself.

As the prints became more and more complex, I wanted to leave a record of the colors and plates used in the image to draw attention to the illusion of the print by making the process a part of the image. I felt as well that in the process of making the print I was referring conceptually to the idea
of different levels of reality where the image was one reality, the process another, and the viewer's perception of the total image was a third reality (Figure 8). I created a discontinuity in the print image space by leaving thin strips of each color printed around the edge of the image. This also functioned as a formal device to keep the edges of the image from becoming dead or uninteresting and to direct the viewer's eye back into the center.

Prints were for me a more contemplative means to approach the same concerns, as in the animation I was able to focus on the individual aspects of the visual elements within the image. In essence, this was a means for me to slow down the movement and look closely at what was happening in the image itself.

Through the combinations of process, these prints became more than just a documentation of a computer-generated image and were strengthened by drawing from each area of involvement.
In this interplay between the computer-based techniques and the more traditional printmaking processes, the ideas and concepts have become the meeting ground and common factor for both areas, and has led to a very fruitful exchange of ideas and orientation to both "sides" of my artistic "id".

In both computer graphics and printmaking, I am dealing with a variety of ways of seeing the worlds we create for ourselves. Through the compartmentalization of image elements and by the repetitive use of the same basic image element with slight variations in color or viewpoint, the viewer is encouraged to reevaluate underlying elements of that image. This idea of multiples and the repetition of an image relates directly to my interest in microcosms and reality systems inside of other realities. This is analogous on one level to the way which we perceive and interact with our own personal universes. This involves at times, a multiplicity of views of what is superficially the same thing.

The idea that we are all intrinsically involved in setting up our own limits to our "worlds" has led me to explore the idea of creating new microcosms and worlds within worlds that maintain an identity as a piece of something larger. One level may or may not be perceived by another, even through their existence is interdependent. As I experimented with movement of the observer around and in the landscapes I had created, I became aware of the potential for movement within a space to define the limits of that space environment. I devised a more three-dimensional environment by constructing a grid type framework that appeared to be like the skeleton of a large
building (Figure 9). In this structural setting I wanted to have a feeling of movement and activity where different things would happen which the viewer need not understand the purpose of. I proposed to show that space could be moved through by other objects even as the observer would be exploring and moving through the framework and looking at the limits of the observable universe. By changing the observer's position and the direction of his view, I was able to show different extremes of the same basic environment, even to the point of turning everything completely upside down. More in the animation than any other medium I have been able to explore the concept of microcosm and limits to how we perceive our environments. I feel that the next step is for me to start constructing worlds within worlds where one microcosm can be complete in itself while being a part of a larger system. To this extent contract and contradiction is important to reflect the images on themselves and to maintain relevance and contact with the real world.
SUMMARY

My involvement with varied techniques and technology has been extremely beneficial in the development of my images. I am only beginning to explore the potential of the three main areas of my interests: computer graphics and printmaking combinations, computer animated images, and sound light and motion in sculptures and environments. With the decreasing cost of computers and the advancement in technology and software systems, I believe I can continue to produce art using these tools. Other artists and I will soon have the same access to computers as we now do to brushes, pencils, and printing ink. I look forward to the rich potential inherent in the new technologies, even while I enjoy the contact with traditional materials and processes. I can appreciate the speed and sophistication of having a computer make my images, while still growing from the often slow and painstaking process of constructing a print.

That there are risks and dangers in the use of emerging technology in art is of great concern to me. I acknowledge the attraction of using tricks and techniques that may only have a momentary impact on the viewer rather than having a strong and substantial statement to communicate. There must still be an overriding concern for the use of solid aesthetic judgement and a strong conceptual basis in the creation of this kind of work. To this extent my background in the traditional arts and processes has been an invaluable one; it has allowed me to retain a certain degree of critical perspective on
what I am doing, the context of that in relation to the art world as well as giving me a strong aesthetic foundation and critical awareness of myself and my work.

I have always tried to push and explore conventions beyond the usual orientation of art. This was not only to satisfy my own interest in technology, processes, and ideological issues, but also as a result of a deep conviction that the most effective role of an artist in society should be as an explorer and innovator whose work becomes the mirror of society. With the speed of change in our society and what now are commonplace developments in technology, I feel it is extremely important that the arts still maintain their relevancy. Of course, this can be done by dealing with issues and concerns that rise above the "trials and tribulations" of everyday life. Art movements since the later 1800's have made definite efforts to maintain their relevancy to contemporary issues and the problems facing mankind. It is crucial that this concern is not lost now that we move into the electronic age. Art can reach out to and touch the child of television and rock music in the same way that abstract expressionism was able to communicate with the children of the second world war. The tools that up until this point have only been available for the control and destruction of society must be used for reflection on and consciousness of our world. What today is in the hands of technologists and engineers must be used by artists, writers, and musicians.