FORM, CONTENT, GREMLINS

A Thesis

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by

James Patrick Flahaven, B.F.A.

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The Ohio State University
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Master's Examination Committee: Approved by
Georg Heimdal
Stephen Pentak
Robert Shay

Adviser
Department of Art
VITA

July 5, 1963.................Born - Grand Forks, North Dakota

1986..........................B.F.A. Painting and Drawing,
Department of Art
North Texas State University
Denton, Texas

1986-Present..............Teaching Assistant,
Department of Art
Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Painting and Drawing
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INTRODUCTION

It is important to note that the three aspects of my work covered in this thesis are not exclusive of one another. When I paint there occurs a vigorous process that involves all three. Separating the form, content, and gremlins is acceptable on paper, but it would be disastrous in a painting.
My paintings are figurative. They are done in a style that actually consists of several styles. Not a great range, but several styles nonetheless. To me, style and form are interchangeable terms. They simply refer to the outward appearance of the painting. These styles range from delicately modeled to awkward and clumsy, all within the same painting. I do not paint this way because of some artistic flaw. There are several important reasons for these variations in style, why I employ this variety, and the limits to the variety.

The first reason is something I call "The Curse of the Diplomat". This curse is common among middle class white males, specifically Catholic ones from the Midwest. Victims of the curse are afflicted with a need to objectively weigh both sides of every issue; a habit that usually makes us see the grey areas in everything. Those of us who become painters habitually translate our diplomatic views onto the canvas. What results is a multiplicity of views that can best be communicated through a variety of styles.
Another reason for my style variations is my personal battle against twentieth century confinement. I am waging a battle against our tendency to pigeonhole everything. I feel that modernism went along with that tendency; art became Art, and the life was drained from it. Art was surgically removed from the outside world and placed in the museums. But that was not enough. Painting, for example became even more specialized. There appeared paintings about color, paintings about line, paintings about texture, and so on. Meanwhile, the art was being drained from everyday life. I think our quality of life suffered as a result.

In response, my aesthetic is non-modernist. It is inclusive. There is a generality that I strive for because our lives are indefinite and complicated. There is nothing specific about living.

There is a third reason for my stylistic variations. I was never taught how to paint. One could argue that nobody was ever taught how to paint, but my generation is really the first to work without the crutch (or burden) of a prevalent style.

My generation of American painters can justifiably lay claim to being one without teachers. It may just be that my education was lacking, but no one taught me how to mix paint, how to blend colors, how to create certain effects, and no one ever told me what to paint.
An artist recently said that today we can go shopping for styles as if in a grocery store. The history of art is filled with a huge variety of painting styles, all of which can be assimilated. I do not see any one style as being superior to another, rather I see one style as being more appropriate for a certain image and less appropriate for another. As I paint, certain styles assert themselves in particular areas of the painting and die out as I move to other areas. Angular dirty shapes may be perfect for a dead coyote, but they will not suffice for a Virgin Mary.

Therefore, I shop. I try different things. I pillage the isles for different styles to fit different subjects. As a result, I reek of my generation. I know a few things about several painting styles. I am both a victim and an exploiter of my time.

My shifts in style are not, however without temperance. There is a certain harmony that I strive for in my work. Too many disparate elements will destroy it. Granted, I am walking a thin line; but for me, harmony implies similarities and differences -- working together. Most artists deal with harmony by slight alterations in color, shape, pattern, and the like. I too employ all of those methods, but I also alter styles; a touchy device, and one that requires moderation.

There is another reason why I temper my stylistic differences: I find something very gimmicky in paintings
with huge stylistic jumps. In fact, those paintings appear to be too easy to produce. However, they are currently fashionable. Painters like David Salle who utilize huge juxtapositions are able to elicit a response based only on shock value. The tricks of such paintings often seem to be used to hide a lack of content, or worse yet, the tricks may be the entire content.

There is a kind of world I try to create in my paintings. With too much disparity, or the picture plane broken, the world is not whole. My ideal world (both outside and inside my paintings) is one in which there is harmony, but not total harmony. Total harmony is simply not interesting. The balance I create often makes viewers uneasy. Sometimes it makes me uneasy too. That is good, because there is a definite uneasiness in the content of my work.
PART TWO
CONTENT

I can write about the content of my work in only the broadest sense. Each painting varies in mood or subject. However, there are some issues that are often brought up in my work.

On the whole, my paintings are ethically evaluative, that is, I use them as a means to comment on the human condition. This commentary is presented from my own perspective. I explore several main issues: The potential for violence or annihilation; the human race's domination over nature; and our basic tendency towards greed. Yet, in spite of the flaws that I address, I see some good in our condition. I see dignity, sensitivity, and humor. I hope all of those qualities find their way into my paintings.

I feel that we are in a precarious position. That is nothing new. However, the potential for our destruction is at an all time high. Also, what we risk losing is greater than ever. I do not think it is necessary to list our every threat, but with nuclear proliferation, overpopulation, the heightened militarism in America, and so on, there are many. I am worried most by what I perceive as our
inability to come to terms with the danger. We party while we destroy ourselves. Personally, I am nervous. I would like to make my viewers nervous too.

I want my paintings to convey some of the threat that I feel. I want them to be microcosms of reality. That is why I create a mixture of festivity and danger. The danger is often undefined, implied, or questionable. For example, it may take the form of a snarling doberman. Will the dog bite someone, or will the owner be able to restrain it in time? The danger may be in the form of a ghostly specter on the edge of the crowd. Does it imply imminent death, or the agonized soul of a man in the crowd? As in everyday reality, we do not know exactly where or how the danger will occur. Will the Russians be the aggressor, or will we? I think of it as tension without resolution.

I also comment on our relationship with nature. Simply put, there once was a battle and now it is over, and the humans have won. Gone are the days of Jack London's burly nature. In his time nature provided a formidable foe for humankind. Now nature is crippled, but we continue to pummel it. I feel though, that the end of nature will create our demise.

In my paintings, nature is getting battered. Usually nature is represented by an animal. Perhaps it is a coyote that has been crucified for the sake of a farmer's livestock. Or possibly it is a horse, once a symbol of freedom and
passion, now reduced to a useless horse/machine; a sterile, modern plaything. Nature, in turn is no longer supporting us; little mutant children fish on the shore of a polluted river and catch only the most grotesque fish. A kid walks his dog while wearing a radiation suit.

Some kind of greed or lack of sensitivity may be an overriding theme in all of my work. These are the human faults that lead to violence and the senseless destruction of nature. As a result, the people in my paintings are not flattered. They drool and grin as they fight over a new toaster. They look on impassively as a violent scene erupts nearby. They are often part of a mob that has taken a turn for the worse.

Yet, amidst the world's corruption, there is good to be found. This good cannot be denied, and I think there is potential for it in all of us. For this reason I inject positive qualities into my paintings. The combination of threat, exploitation of nature, corruption, and essential good creates paintings that may be viewed as contradictory. This is, however, my view of life. Therefore, my paintings contain scenes of sensitivity intermingled with scenes of violence, and scenes of quiet compassion intertwined with scenes of chaos.

Humor also plays a role in my work. Depressing information is difficult to accept. Humor makes it easier to digest. Humor is also disarming. We drop our guard when
we laugh. We become more receptive. I cannot look at most things without seeing something funny in them. Perhaps I use humor as a personal defense mechanism.

Considering the weight of my subject matter, the laughs usually take the form of black comedy. A man who faces failure in the form of an ominous statue-like woman blows a party favor in her face. Like a child at a birthday party, an ugly toy monkey gleefully clanks his symbols at a potentially dangerous crowd. He seems to summarize the surrounding confusion.

Ultimately, I have a need to communicate. My ideas are complex and layered. They can only be expressed in complex and layered images. Painting allows me to communicate on several levels -- simultaneously. I hope my viewers are emotionally pulled in several directions at once. I hope they get a feeling for the gravity of my subject matter.
PART THREE

GREMLINS

The last aspect of my work is perhaps the most difficult to articulate. It is the enigmatic part of my work; the part that misbehaves and defies logic. It is the gremlins that bypass my knowledge and creep into both the form and the content of my work.

The gremlins may be responsible for the most poetic aspect of my work. They defy rational control. They allow for the fairy tale part of my work to come out. At their best, they push my work into the realm of allegory. In this phase the message rings true and everything seems right.

The gremlins are paradoxical. They wreak havoc on the narrative aspects of my work. Yet in so doing, they nudge it into the realm that Philip Guston refers to as "non-explanation" where it becomes interesting because it is so mysterious. In this realm the viewers can add their personal interpretations to the work.

The gremlins give me difficulty because they are so irrational. They tend to bury logic and common sense. Their non-intellectual point of view tends to disarm the potency of my content. They make the paintings convoluted
at times. The gremlins make my brush react in certain ways simply because "it feels right". They add elements to my paintings which may fog the narrative. They come out when my logical side is at its weakest; when I have been working for a long time and I am running on intuition. The things they make me do are brash and daring.

Actually, I like the gremlins. I know they come from some inner part of myself. I have faith in the dream-like images they produce. Those images have their own potency and logic. While on the surface my paintings may seem chaotic, it is my belief that there is a structure underneath. This is how I perceive life.

Ultimately it is those paintings that have bucked and broken free and lost some of their rationality that I am most rewarded by. These are the ones that still puzzle even me. They are fresh to me. I am forced to interpret them again from time to time. I am still allowed to participate with them.

This aspect of my work -- whether it is called spiritual, irrational, or fantasy -- may be the underlying thing that makes me an artist. It may be the thing that communicates most to my viewers. It has something to do with instinct and communication. It is hard to define, but it is important to me. It keeps me interested in painting.