THE SEARCH AND DISCOVERY

A Thesis

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by

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A Song of Ascents

I will lift up my eyes to the mountains;
From whence shall my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.
He will not allow your foot to slip;
He who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, He who keeps Israel
Will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper;
The Lord is your shade on your right hand.
The sun will not smite you by day,
Nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil;
He will keep your soul.
The Lord will guard your going out and your coming in
From this time forth and forever.

Psalm 121
INTRODUCTION

This paper will consolidate thoughts, problems, and influences that major expressionistic movements in painting have had upon the growth and development of my work during the past two years.

To discuss the growth and development of one's own work is a challenging task. Paintings seem to speak for themselves and the words they use are not always the ones that we might use in conversing with friends. Artists too have refused discussion saying that they have spoken through their paintings and no more needs to be said. The viewer who says of a work of art that "it works well" supposes that he understands the work and the language it is speaking. But many are unable to go beyond the phrase "it works" to explain what they mean. Another approach is to talk of the subject matter that is visually identifiable within the framework of the art object. It might present a social injustice, an insight into human behavior or some other talkable subject. However, this is not the case in all artwork and it is not the case with the work to be discussed here. The problem here is talking about things that primarily describe themselves and art objects that express an artist's emotions or feelings. It is unequivocally true that an object made is not totally independent of the artist and his environment. Whether or not it speaks in English or from the subconscious with groanings it is nonetheless still a part of and derived from the artist and lends
some ground for discussion or analysis. This leaves with us two major frameworks for analysis and criticism: 1.) The form of the object, be it paint, wood, color, line, value, shape, etc. or; 2.) The content and emotional qualities that are presented by the artist.

The artwork discussed here possesses the quality of inner expression rather than that of objective subject matter per se. Therefore, it is approached in the framework of itself and its relationships to the artist. Discussion will center around the abstract content qualities, the inputs, the processes, new media, and the results of such experiences.

This thesis will approach painting (both mine as well as that of others) as an experience. The expression of oneself and the means of expression become the primary elements in art. Approaching this will entail an evaluation of the emotions expressed by the artist and an evaluation of the types of medias, approaches to subject matter, and the formal handling of the canvas surface.

It is my purpose to expose the influences and problems that have caused me to do the kind of art work I now do. These will be handled as follows: 1.) My search, finding meaningful direction in my work as influenced by historical and artistic influences; 2.) The process in making the works; 3.) My findings, and conclusions.
PART I

THE SEARCH

When one sets out on a search, it is assumed that one is looking for something. Generally one has a good idea as to what that might be, whether it be a person or object lost or a cure for a disease. An end is acknowledged and in part, has been conceived at the outset of the search.

In the artistic process, however, it is not clear. Some end has been thought about but rarely does that end occur as was expected. When feelings and emotions enter the picture, the end as well as the process of the search become quite intricate. Emotions do not lend themselves to rational systems of thinking nor do they enable one to see what he is after.

Within the search process many new avenues of possibility present themselves for evaluation. The artist's problem is to choose or eliminate possibilities for his own work. At times, too many means of expression from which to choose hinder the artist. Within the process many failures, blind alleys and dead ends are experienced. All of these are necessary elements in the process. As the artist approaches an end or solution in a painting, he may discover other possibilities and proceed with them.

The conflict arises between an end in a single work and the total solution covering an entire lifetime of work.
This is not to imply that the long range working of an artist is well planned or that the available end can be foreseen. However, the entire life work of the artist is made up of groups or periods of work that eventually say, "this was the life of this artist." One example is Pablo Picasso: his blue period, his pink period, his invention of cubism and many other artistic excursions comprised his works.

The artist finds that each painting has its own problems and solutions. Although momentary victory is found in a single painting the artist presses on in his work continually trying new possibilities. Why? Because the conclusion of one painting reveals new problems. New possibilities must be given the proper evaluation. In this way the lifelong work of a painter is finding many solutions or discoveries and at the same time the total of his work has its unique direction.

With this realization I discovered another factor that was equally significant. With each of my paintings came its own development. While working on Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin, illustration No. 1, I began writing my thoughts on the canvas and incorporating them into the design. It then became clear to me that this painting was not one painting, but several complex paintings worked into one piece.

The question of reality is a key that opens the door to understand different artists' approaches. What are the realities of his world? How important are certain elements over others? For the impressionist it was light, for the German Expressionist it was the
emotional impact, for the Surrealist it was the subconscious, for the American Abstract Expressionist it was action, and for the Pop artist it was the power of the commercial mechanized environment in which he lived.

Reality is the name of the game! Who am I and what am I doing can be answered only after one has found reality. The reality of my work lies in the understanding of conflicts of life. My work is not an attempt to illustrate conflicts, but an illusion of the inner feelings and struggles experienced. These emotional factors are difficult to recognize or understand until the painting is complete.

Much like Rouault, I see the world in a turmoil, a constant mish-mash of oppressions, misfortunes and hardships. Wars are inevitable and will continue. People will continue to be persecuted and oppressed because of race or religion or such.

On the individual level one is brought through different hardships and must readjust his lifestyle to contend with these. These conflicts are a basis for the emotions I express in my art. More directly, the Apostle Paul expressed an exuberant expectation in suffering,

"we also exult in our tribulations; knowing that tribulation brings about perserverance; and perserverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint."

The Greek word for "exult" means to leap for joy. Not that I handle problems in such a manner, but my work is an expression of the struggles I experience. These conflicts might be spiritual,
environmental, or psychological. These conflicts are reflected in my work. It is my hope that after going through different conflicts I become deeper and, therefore, I become a better artist.
THOUGHTS ON EXPRESSIONISM

Four important fundamental components of art that I embrace in my own work are: (1) feelings of empathy; (2) urgency; (3) vision, and; (4) creative will. These components come from the German Expressionists.

Empathy, a state of oneness with a work of art, was first developed by Theodore Lipps in the early 20th Century. Oneness with an art object is technically or physically impossible. This leaves one with the spiritual side of art. Suffice it to say that the diversity of opinion and philosophy on the spiritual is endless. Oneness, therefore, can only be obtained in a spiritual and psychological state of the mind. The emotion expressed by the artist can only be identified with, and cannot be, perfectly communicated as the early German artist thought. The painting or art object only reflects the artist's emotions or his psychological makeup. I believe that my work is a reflection of incidents and events from my life. Some are conscious and some are subconscious.

The state of urgency comes from the need to speak, to think, to mark, or to paint. The creative process exists in most people but frequently lies either inactive or suppressed. It is much the same as the drive for food, shelter, and love. The artist understands, accepts, and channels this urgency into the creative process. The early German Expressionists spoke of it as a force which would
oppress them and cause them to be in a nearly uncontrolled state when they were involved in the art processes, such as painting. This was called Ziegist. My paintings do have a sense of urgency, but not in the same Ziegist manner.

"Vision" and "creative will" are closely related. For the Expressionist, vision is a new means of judging or viewing a painting. Creative will is the choices made by the artist from the means of the vision to complete his work of art. The Expressionist generally disregards previous standard of criteria for judging works of art. As an example, the German Expressionist generally disregarded the previous romantic period.

These four fundamental components are a criterion for well made art. Correct formulas do not exist in making art, but I have found that urgency, empathy, vision, and creative will are strong factors in understanding my work.
THE PROCESS

The process is the channel through which the painter develops his true thesis. How he channels each mark, stroke and color will determine to what degree he is successful.

The process stands before a multitude of decisions and choices. An infinite variety of choices and possibilities are available. An endless opportunity for new discoveries lie in the overlapping of ideas, the rearranging of space, the shifting of color, the manipulation of value. For the process to be successful in bringing about art work there must be a unique crossbreed of these elements.

Drawing is a means that enables me to see the process more clearly. Drawing is manipulation of light and dark elements. Basic tools are charcoal, paper, and eraser. They are primarily an expedient approach that can be changed without too much difficulty. At the same time it offers the artist one of the most complex and rewarding processes.

Drawing offers a release of the inner self and provides challenging problems and solutions which might have been overlooked or forgotten while painting. Drawings are not always meant to be final statements, but are a means of arriving at some solution.

My early drawings were an end in themselves, but as time progressed, drawing became a means to another end. Drawings were not completed, but worked until some solution was found. At times,
drawings became quite belabored and the need to start another drawing was obvious. Some drawings were not completed because the elements within the page were not exciting nor did any of them offer a good possibility for solutions.

I do not use models when I draw. Many artists who work figuratively use models regularly. They start with the figure and use marks to describe it. I use marks and discover the figure. As in my painting, the problem is a relationship of parts rather than a picture of a figure. The drawings begin as an idea of gesture, or more simply, several marks on paper. I mark and look for a concrete image to emerge from the marks. This process works for me and I use it in painting and in drawing.

At the beginning of each painting, washes are applied quickly and liberally. The canvas remains on the wall or at a slight angle allowing the paint to flow and run outside any boundaries that I have conceived. The canvas is turned at different intervals to allow new directions for the flowing paint. As this process progresses charcoal is applied in describing new shapes that emerge from the overlapping of the paints. Drips become lines, dividing areas or shapes. The dark marks of the charcoal suggest what is already there. Gorky, late in his career used a similar method of painting.²

Because of the lack of distinction between my approaches in painting and drawing, they both began to merge as a single entity. Drawing and painting could no longer be separated. I found myself

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painting on drawings and drawing on paintings. At this point my work began to blossom and mature.

Until this time paintings were essentially vacant. Each painting was more an exercise in a discipline than an expressive form of life. The painterly quality was characterized by flat colors, non-functioning color, and ordinary shape making. Attempts to control the shape of the figures in a realistic manner meant loss of meaning for me.

My search continued. One day I felt the urge to draw on my painting. The feel of the charcoal both slipping across the wet areas of the canvas was a jolt that it sent me sailing. It was the best possible expression of the moment. (The visual quality of the charcoal on the painting evoked in me the same excitement). The charcoal retained its own luster and yet functioned with the colors. Black, being a natural color harmonizer, was integrated into a multicolor system.
INFLUENCES

Influences from artists and art events bear much in determining what type of art work the artist does. Within the art world and art history there exists a paradox in the matter of influences. Some artists claim no influences while others are bold to declare their allegiances to artists and movements. Some admittedly note that they are influenced by other artists and movements in the art world and attempt to live and produce art in that knowledge. Two who claimed no influences were Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. Pollock did say that "the only American master who interested him was Ryder".\(^3\) Motherwell disassociated himself from the German Expressionist as well as other expressionists by calling himself an "Anti-Expressionist." DeKooning on the other hand, was more practical concerning the matter,

"there is a train track in the history of art that goes way back to Mesopotamia ... Duchamp is on it. Cezanne is on it. Picasso and the cubists are on it. Giacometti, Mondrian and so many are on it ... whole civilizations."\(^4\)

Artists and events have influenced my work. My early interests were in paintings of Matisse. Later a slight shift was made to the work of Milton Avery. It is said that "Milton Avery was the only American artist who really understood what Matisse was doing."

I became interested in Matisse's handling of color. The large bold patterns of color intrigued me. He used few colors, yet each painting contains its own color complexity. The idea of color for colors sake has always appealed to me. A painting should give a
visual experience and that experience should deal with a color harmony.

Later in my development I became interested in the color field painters. Such painters as Morris Louis, Olitzky, Rothko, and Newman caused me to look into single areas of color and explore possibilities. I began to use mediums with the acrylic paints.

I found that attention to the overall harmony of colors and extreme care in single shapes of color produced a higher quality of painting. This lead me to a concern for the surface quality. I found that glazes and washes produced subtle impressions of space. Charcoal could be mixed with the paint to cut down the intensity of a color without destroying the hue. Employing these methods a truly emotional quality was achieved in my work.

While working on the "Green Figure", illustration No. 2, the theories of cubism were foremost in my mind. I found that one major factor in the cubists' space was overlap. I then made overlap a primary element in establishing tension between different shapes on the canvas. This method seemed more worthwhile than the traditional chiaroscuro method.

Color, as an element within the framework of painting has its own function. Too many colors leads to chaos. Too few colors lead to boredom. It became my responsibility to turn chaos into order. The black areas or black lines added to the order. A need for balanced harmony and a limitation of color was needed. The "Earthen Figure", illustration No. 3, is an example of that control. Earthen
pigments were mixed with red pigments to reduce the color complexity and give an overall harmony of red. Blue was occasionally used to set off an area or mark an area. The bright amounts of yellow and red are used as keys or climaxes of color much like the work of Rouault. In the "Green Figure" yellow ochre was used as a base color. Mixing from that one color gave me control as the paintings progressed. The choice of a color in an area was used to effect color harmony. Whistler during a show with Constable abruptly painted in a red spot on his canvas. He explained later that his paintings did not function in the room with Constable's bright and colorful paintings.

It might be said that color is a product of an abundant life. Uncontrolled and nonfunctioning color becomes useless and boring. Color does not have a life of its own, it only appears to have.
CONCLUSION

It is this artist's conviction that the artistic struggle is of great benefit in making art. This struggle can be broad in its forms of conflict. Conflict in my personal life has a definite bearing on my work. Conflict within the process also leads me to new possibilities and results. The emotional qualities are reflected by the process.

The search which is the process is never ending. New possibilities are discovered before old ones are fully worked out. Alternatives must be carefully selected and worked with before eliminated.

It is my intention to be aware of various artistic influences and use them as reference material while painting. As the process moves along, I select various elements and methods as the need arises.
FOOTNOTES


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Illustration No. 1

"Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin"
illustration No. 2
"Green Figure"
illustration No. 3

"Earthen Figure"
illustration No. 4

"The Two of Us"
Illustration No. 5

"Figure"
Illustration No. 6
"Fantasy"