A PERSONAL SEARCH FOR IMAGERY

A Thesis

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by

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INTRODUCTION

My development as a painter has come about through my continual search for personal imagery. . . using images from my background experiences. I have tried to incorporate them into a unique visual statement. I have constantly sought new means in order to express this viewpoint. This has led me on a varied search for new materials and mediums. Through this search I have developed a better understanding of the formal elements that have given strength and interest to my work.

My work in art has been a search in finding the best way to express myself. This search has led me away from a realistic representation of nature, toward a use of nature as inspiration and a starting point for my paintings. The main tendency in art history for the last Century has been this evolution from representational to non-objective painting. However, no one style is dominant today. Realistic painting is as prevalent as non-objective painting.

Thus I am stating that my evolution is not the only logical way an artist can develop. I started as a realistic landscape painter. Had I chosen, I could have developed this direction into a contemporary statement, such as photo-
realism. But I realized that realism-literally representa-
tion, was not the best way for me to communicate my particu-
lar energies or vision. However, getting away from recogni-
able imagery was not an easy break. It took a step by step
evolution to enable me to handle the problems involved in
constructing a painting.

I have drawn inspiration from everything that has
preceded . . . , impressionism, cubism, abstract expressionism,
pop, and minimal art. My search has been to find the best
way to use this wealth of information and turn it into a
statement that expresses my viewpoint. This Thesis, then,
is not an attempt to show how this is unique. It is merely
a descriptive statement of how my paintings have developed
in the past two years. In Part I, I will deal with a dis-
cussion of my current paintings and relate how I feel and
react to them. In Part II, I will discuss the evolution
that enabled me to arrive at this stage.
The work of the art student is no light matter. Few have the courage or stamina to see it through. You have to make up your mind to be alone in many ways. Alone one gets acquainted with himself, grows up and on, not stopping with the crowd.

--- Robert Henri
CURRENT WORK

In my current work, I am at the stage where I feel I can eliminate all ties to recognizable imagery. This development was not a blind trip to the inevitable. The path was filled with much self-doubt and soul searching to find out what I was all about. This direction has come about through artistic decisions I have made. In two years my painting has grown from being tied literally to nature to a point where I now use nature selectively. My newest paintings are not about nature, but, my indirect impressions of it. Nature is used only as inspiration for dealing with formal problems. At this stage I can eliminate this need and truly deal with my own internalized visions and creative forces.

In the paintings, shapes from nature are used as I deal with surface texture and color relationships. For example, in the "Farm Field" series, the surface is divided into three bands. I view these bands as foreground, middle-ground with horizon, and background with trees and sky. When I first saw this compositional design occur in a mono-print that I was working on, I knew that it was a clear and strong statement. The divisions of the canvas,
although derived from nature are still simplified in form and allow for infinite possibilities and variations.

The old scene presented itself one day before my eyes framed in an opening between two trees. Three solid masses of form and color—sky, foliage, and earth—the whole bathed in an atmosphere of golden luminosity. I threw my brushes aside; they were too small for the work at hand. I squeezed out big chunks of pure, moist color and taking my palette knife, I laid in blue, green, white, and brown in great sweeping strokes. As I worked I saw that it was good, and clean and strong.2

Out of the bands, the landscape imagery that I had been dealing with for two years is evident, but not dominant. Reflections occur, tree shapes emerge, but they all work as color shapes, lines, and textures. These paintings are about the tactile surface, the subtle illusions made by transparent layers of color, and about the personal marks of painting.

In the last canvases, the marks became even more calligraphic. The paint was applied in horizontal and vertical slashes. While traveling in Pennsylvania in January, I saw that the shadows cast from bare trees on the side of the mountains formed an irregular grid. I transformed this image into slashes of paint. In the paintings, however, the marks go beyond that. What I am trying to do is relate the marks to the three bands with very subtle changes in the illusions of depth.
How these works fit into contemporary art, I can't say. They are still based on recognizable imagery. The work reflects the influence of Abstract Expressionism, mainly in the loose brushstrokes and ties to some sort of image. The works appear very minimal in their concern for surface texture and simplistic bands of color. The marks also read as pattern which seems to be a trend in current New York art. I have been influenced by the newer works of Jasper Johns, particularly "Weeping Women." The patterned surface of his works is very sensuous and I can see this concern becoming a part of my works.

I have tried to assimilate all of these influences into a statement that I feel is both direct and highly personal. The imagery has developed to where the marks and surface texture are the dominant force in the paintings.
THE EVOLUTION

During my undergraduate days at Ohio State, I became very proficient at painting the still life motif realistically. As my skills increased, I began to search for more interesting subject matter. I started taking photographs to use as starting points for my paintings. The photographs were landscapes with close-up views of the ground, house foundations, and building corners. These pictures were used as source material for a series of paintings that was completed during 1975.

Although these paintings seemed very personal, I realized that I had avoided many of the basic problems of painting. For example, I used color as I saw it in the photograph. Very little attention was given to dealing with the structural and formalistic elements of color use. I ignored this aspect of color and only used the local color of the objects in the photograph:

Local color refers to the naturalistic appearance of color as we find it in our environment. That is, apples are red, skies are blue, and grass is green. These types of judgements are based largely upon our past experiences, and often lead to assumptions that are not well founded. This customary use of color frequently leads students into confused notions about color relationships.\(^3\)
The compositions were also pre-planned and very few changes took place after the paintings were started. This pre-planned approach to painting placed rigid limits on my progress, consequently, my work was uninteresting. These works were much too literal in character. I copied nature and did not use it as source reference for more personal work.

When I entered graduate school in the Autumn Quarter of 1976, I needed to learn more about the mechanics of painting. For example, I needed to understand how color could be used in a more structural and interesting way. Color used in this structural way is defined as organized color:

Organized color is used by the designer, or artist to satisfy the formal requirements of the organization and to realize his own expressive intentions. His choice of color is not restricted by naturalistic appearances or color symbolism. Instead, he is free to select color in accordance with the aesthetic needs of the organization as it develops.4

It was necessary to learn how to compose paintings that expressed my ideas more clearly and with more impact. I wanted to deal effectively with line, value, color, etc. to create a strong visual statement. Consequently, it was imperative to discard the use of photographs as
source material. I needed to discard them not because they were uninteresting as photographs, but because they were being used as a crutch and not as a tool.

During the next two years, my work generally took two directions. One was my concern with conventional painting problems. The other was the novel use of real objects attached to the surface. At times, the directions have been quite different. At other times, they have crossed paths and been combined. Eventually the ideas came together to form the nucleus for my recent work.

The first paintings were experiments and efforts to find a process that would lead to more expressive imagery. In the search for imagery, I reviewed my background for ideas that might be used as material--images which could be interpreted and transferred into more personal statements. Thus, my agricultural background became my expressive source. These images were interesting, not only for the personal connection, but also for their aesthetic shapes. I studied and observed these shapes in order to decide what aspect in them I wanted to express.

At this time I was also experimenting with a new medium—encaustic, which is a combination of beeswax
and oil paint. The stimulation of a new medium opened new possibilities and I sought to find the best way to use it. The process itself was new. The wax was liquified on a hotplate and mixed with turpentine, damar varnish, and linseed oil. The medium was then mixed with paint and either brushed or poured onto the canvas. I found many possibilities in the way the surface could be built up to a heavy impasto or left very thin and translucent.

These first paintings were experiments with the use of the agricultural imagery and encaustic medium. The series of paintings included images of leaves, horses, cows, pigs, and flowers. The descriptive nature of these images was eliminated by applying the paint abstractly. I started to deal with color relationships, relations of figure to ground, surface texture, and other formal problems.

The most successful paintings completed were those in which I incorporated the image of the horse. This image was the one I felt strongest about and had the closest ties to. These paintings were started with a stylistic silhouette of the horse in the center of the canvas. In order to work directly with the ideas of figure ground, the size was enlarged until it touched the four edges of the canvas. In this way the shape became important, but equally
important were the four negative areas surrounding it. They were reminiscent of cave paintings and this primitive quality became very important. (plate #1) The more successful ones had two superimposed silhouettes. Small brushstrokes outlining the shape gave the image a sense of energy and movement. (plate #2)

These paintings were very similar to the paintings of Susan Rothenberg. She also used the horse silhouette in her abstract works. She painted horses in suspended motion. According to Rothenberg, the horse shape had no particular meaning to her. Thus, she was free to use it as a vehicle for the exploration of formal problems.

At this time my paintings started to move in another direction. A series of paintings was started in which a real object, in this case corn husks, was attached to the surface. Again it was the shape that intrigued me, but there was also a psychological connection to it. This connection being that the image was taken from my background and this connection to my work was very important. This was also another way of stimulating and generating ideas.

The use of corn as an element in painting was a new idea for me. However, the idea of using real objects in paintings or as art objects has a firm place in art history.
Marcel Duchamp took everyday objects and transformed them into what he called "readymades." Later, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jim Dine used real objects in their Pop Art statements.

I used the corn, an art object in its own right, and incorporated it into a personal pictorial statement. These canvases were uniform in scale, each 12" by 14." Acrylic paint was used and applied in many different ways. Thick, juicy brushstrokes were contrasted with the thin washes of color. In some, the corn was painted differently than the background. In others the background texture covered over the corn image. Color varied from being bright and intense in some, to monochromatic in others. (plate #3)

Several canvases were then completed in which corn was placed over the entire surface. The separate leaves were stapled close together to create an overall surface texture. Imagery was not involved except in the rough texture. Although the surface was interesting, the minimal concept of overall surface texture was not the statement I wanted to make.

Using the shape of the corn husk, several paintings were started in which a collage method of construction was combined with conventional painting procedures. I designed
the shapes from different materials and positioned them on the canvas. Cloth, canvas, thread, acrylic, encaustic, and oil were used in combined methods. This approach offered me greater flexibility. Images were moved and adjusted until they were compositionally interesting. Painting methods used were pouring, glazing, scrubbing, and brushing. Color relationships became a primary consideration in the overall formal pattern. (plate #4)

At this time I started to make monoprints. This was a quick way to sketch out future painting ideas. A painting was done on a metal plate and then run through a press to transfer the image to paper. I used the same images that had been used in the collage paintings. Oil paint, printer's ink, and metallic spray paint were used to execute these sketches.

In the process of doing these monoprints, I saw that they were a synthesis of what I had been trying to express. I began to work on ways to transferring their qualities to a larger canvas. The prints had a very thin and transparent quality and the encaustic seemed perfectly suited to reproduce this aspect. (plate #5)

This series of monoprints became a point of reference for my current series of landscape paintings. In these
paintings, the landscape references were combined with metallic paints and the encaustic to create a format that had some references to imagery but was much more non-objective. The glossy metallic paint functioned well with the translucent qualities of the encaustic to create strong visual illusions. I used the encaustic medium to its fullest advantage. At this point metallic paint and enamels were introduced in combination with the encaustic. Subsequently, this combination revealed new qualities and offered new possibilities.

These are the paintings that I discussed in Part I. I feel that they are the strongest paintings that I have completed. I have dealt directly with the formal problems I had been learning to use. Not only is the imagery personal, but the sensuous surface of the encaustic is aesthetically pleasing. (plate #6, and #7)

The first series that I called "Farm Fields" although strong in structure were still too closely tied to customary perception:

Customary perception for the average person tends to be a minimal visual experience. One tends to see only that which is essential to safely and properly perform the immediate activity in which one is engaged. Thus, one tends to edit out all visual stimulation
which does not apply to our immediate purpose. Visual perception, then, becomes a matter of identifying things in our environment and localizing their position in space so that we may act upon them. These types of judgements are largely based upon our past experiences, and often lead to assumptions which are not always well founded.

Customary perception, then, tends to be object centered (recognition, identification, and localization), and it's motivation is immediately purposive activity. 6

I wanted to eliminate still further the ties to realism and deal more with the material and with aesthetic perception:

When one becomes object-centered in the visual arts one tends to lose sight of the unity as a whole. Aesthetic perception differs greatly from customary perception in that it is a more comprehensive visual experience -- one in which the observer is acutely aware of a field of relationships as opposed to being object-centered. The motivation for this type of perception is aesthetic. The observer is critically concerned with the propriety of formal relationships. Consequently, one finds that when one is making aesthetic judgements, one tends to see differently than when one does in customary everyday perception.

The last paintings, with the horizontal and vertical slashes seemed closer to this idea about perception. They are landscapes, but the subject matter is abstracted in a more indirect and non-objective manner. (plate #8, 9, and 10)
Art is simply a result of expression during right feeling. It's a result of a grip on the fundamentals of nature, the spirit of life, the constructive force, the secret of growth, a real understanding of the relative importance of things, order, balance. Any material will do. After all, the object is not to make art, but to be in the wonderful state which makes art inevitable. 8

--Robert Henri

I am not interested in Art as a means of making a living, but am interested in Art as a means of living a life. It is the most important of all studies, and all studies are tributary to it. 9

--Robert Henri

Got to hurry back into my hotel room, Where I got me a date with Botticelli's niece, Next time, everything's gonna be different, When I paint my masterpiece. 10

--Bob Dylan
FOOTNOTES


3 Robert King, Syllabus.

4 Ibid.


7 Ibid.


9 Ibid., p. 158.

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