ATTAINING AESTHETIC AND INTERNAL INTIMACY

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree Master of Fine Arts in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

by

Karen Frey Snouffer, B.S.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1987

Master's Examination Committee: Approved by
Georg Heimdal
Alan Crockett
Susan Dallas-Swann
Richard Roth

George Henneman
Adviser
Department of Art
To:
My Parents
My Husband
My Son
VITA

November 16, 1946 .............. Born - Columbus, Ohio

1968 ........................................ B.S., Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1968-1970 ......................... Elementary and Secondary School Instructor, Columbus Public Schools, Columbus, Ohio; Toledo Public Schools, Toledo, Ohio

1970-1983 ......................... Graphic Designer - Lazarus, Design Communications, Columbus Monthly, free lance

1983-Present ....................... Painter and Installation Artist - exhibitions, commissions; art instruction

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Painting/Drawing

Studies in installation art with Georg Heimdal, Alan Crockett, and Richard Roth

Studies in expanded art, including performance art, with Susan Dallas-Swann
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEDICATION</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. THE PURSUIT OF INTIMACY</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. HOW I FIND THE SECRET PLACES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. TWO-DIMENSIONAL AND THREE-DIMENSIONAL ISSUES: THE PICTURE-MAKING DANCE/ THE INVOLVING OF A SPACE</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE THEMATIC CYCLE: BONDING MEANS NARRATIVE; NON-BONDING MEANS FORMAL</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. COMBINING OF DIVERSE THEMES: ELEMENTS OF MYSTERY AND PLAY</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOOTNOTES</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

A late Sunday evening in January I was reading from a text on Wassily Kandinsky an account of how his experiences while studying law led him on a trip to a peasant village in Russia. This village consisted of scores of colorful buildings decorated with intricately carved surfaces. As he entered a modest house, he felt as if he had walked into a painting. Suddenly, his visual senses were overwhelmed. Lively and intense colors, inviting and curious details, and displays of personal, handmade objects surrounded him. His whole internal world of childlike fantasy and imagination seemed to explode and open up. He felt in touch with a very magical part of himself.

I stopped reading this text for a moment and realized how it caught me off guard and how personally revealing it was. For quite some time I have been exploring the notion of getting closer to myself by walking into and through my paintings. I seemed to have been pleased to read of such an historically prominent artist also having an attitude of three dimensionality toward his paintings. This attitude, after all, might have been the concept which led Kandinsky to be the first artist to create totally abstract works of art.
CHAPTER I

THE PURSUIT OF INTIMACY

Jackie Winsor...carries within herself a concept of completeness coupled with an idea of static energy. Her works are created out of hundreds of repetitive movements...When a piece is finished, she says of it, "I have created my relationship to it, so I can create that completeness with you."...A closer look at her work reveals that its pristine beauty is continuously renewed by the stored energy which made it.1

The connecting thread through all my work has always been intimacy. Obviously, all earnest artists seek a state of intense closeness with their work. I have realized I have my own special ways of arriving at this place of close contact.

The intimacy is like a flow of energy that weaves through the sticks in my constructions, over the marks and into the layers of my paintings. The flow hides, then re-appears, surfaces, and quickly disperses again. Just as the need for closeness exists in my work, it is often intense in my relationships with people. I make extreme demands of myself to find this intimacy. I am persistent in searching out
any unknown territories in aesthetic processes and in discovering more about new companions.

The obsessive layering in my paintings results in a building of a rich, juicy strata of color and texture that symbolizes a person who has innumerable layers of personality traits. For several months, the paintings continue to build. Some layers are quick and direct, brightly colored. Most are frantically applied. No allowances exist for questioning the marks. Other layers are laid on with a delicate application. They have a distinctly different personality. They may symbolize mystery or deceit, perhaps arrogance. All the time the work contains a visual energy that comes from the constant physical and emotional contact this process requires.

In the layering of diverse personality traits there develops a complex woman. The viewer may curiously wonder what is underneath the layers of oil stick. Is it a cadmium red or soiled smudge? Is it an orange layer of marks on top then, to be covered later by a cobalt? Under the behavior patterns of a self-assured, focused woman, doesn't one sense shades of an intimidated child or quirky girl? Doesn't the refined female instructor layer have some transparencies? Don't they mutedly reveal an artist who anxiously desires approval from her mentors?
CHAPTER II

HOW I FIND THE SECRET PLACES

The intimacy search develops in the work on several levels. First is the juxtapositioning of two-dimensional work with three-dimensional. This process involves going from a painter-wall artist to a form-maker space artist. (Notice, I did not use "sculptor.") I keep the other dimension at bay, knowing I will go back to it and probably combine the two.

A second level is the thematic cycle I have followed which allows for intimacy. The varying issues in the work seem to result from two periods: one of close bonding with other people (my husband, my son, my dancer and artist friends), as well as bonding with my inner self; other periods I call non-bonding address different issues. This is a time when I am more reclusive and very sensitive to the materials around me. Bonding periods result in figurative and narrative work, referring to those relationships. Non-bonding periods often result in work which is about the work, the materials, the studio...a more formal style.

The final level focuses in the subjects of mystery/the unknown/the disturbing, staged in contrast to playfulness/
quirkiness/tackiness. This combination of diverse themes allows me to be intimately in touch with many hidden parts of myself.

In the following sections I intend to explain the processes, forms, and themes which allow me to become intensely close to the work and, therefore, closer to myself.
CHAPTER III

TWO-DIMENSIONAL AND THREE-DIMENSIONAL ISSUES:
THE PICTURE-MAKING DANCE/ THE INVOLVING OF A SPACE

The Painting Develops...

Even though most paintings are flat, I maintain in my work an acute awareness of space. I am not referring only to picture plane space, but more critically to the space of the room where the painting exists. I meet the painting here. This is where a new relationship begins.

Movement is a vital issue. Flat-surface marking becomes a statement about dance and energy. The contact turns into a ritualistic expression. At some point, the picture-making involves a dance across the surface and throughout the studio.

I hit the canvas. I walk away. I walk in circles. I look from several vantage points. I don't look. I go back and hit again, sometimes reaching up with awkward full extension or occasionally squatting down to the lowest canvas edge. The whole piece is a result of using not only the surface, but the entire room as well.
The Room is Involved...

Large scale means--PAY ATTENTION TO ME!
I am significant. Stand up and take notice!
There is something about the piece taking
over the room and encompassing the viewer
that speaks of my need for aggressiveness.

Journal entry, May 17, 1986

Paintings begin to extend from the predictable canvas
rectangle to the surfaces of the surrounding wall. I cannot
resist painting below the piece onto the floor. Two walls,
to the right and left in my long, narrow studio, carry ex-
tended marks often emanating from the painting on canvas.
Within days, the piece becomes a statement at the end of the
room.

To activate open studio areas, I place wooden "flattish"
forms in front of the paintings. They are supported by the
Painted surfaces of the floor and nails or hang from the
ceiling. These constructions may appear like over-sized
cutouts that have popped out of a painting, with many layers
of marks covering them. Or they may be formed from hundreds
of interlocking painted sticks which echo the interlocking
brush strokes on the walls and floor.

Occasionally, an altar piece has developed that invites
a visitor to approach at close contact or that demands safe
distance. Sticks jutting out from forms and objects con-
densed into confined spaces require one to move carefully.
I, the artist, enter in stocking feet. Others may ask to do so. A sacred, precious atmosphere has evolved.

Body Awareness...

I am my body. I am large.
I am my body, and I am not going away.

I love my legs.
I hate my waist.
I like my arms.
I avoid my neck.
I accept my shoulders.
I like my lips.
I love my eyes.
I grit my teeth.
I feel my breasts.
I confront my stomach.
I squeeze my buttocks.
I fear my crotch.
I rub my toes.
I stroke my calves.

Journal entry, April 14, 1986

Back to the dance. Dancing for fourteen years in an improvisational group has heightened my awareness of space and body. The weekly renewal of experiencing my body penetrating a gymnasium space and relating to ten or fifteen other female bodies, has been a rich, growing participation. Exploration, risk and/or experimentation in the dance group is on an intimate, energy-charged level which transfers into my studio. The physical-space intimacy transfers to the visual-space intimacy. I continue to explore my physical
expression on the most intimate levels possible, through my individual movement and moving with others. This process flows onto my studio or any room where I am making decisions about visual space.

**Installations...**

I've been searching for installation spaces...anywhere...
Ad in paper..."Empty Skating Rink"...
Cemetery Rd., w. on Main, go n. to sm. rr. tracks. Center St...."SKATE"
George Yoakum, 8500 sq. ft., 876-9007, public phone

Journal entry, Summer, 1985

Some of the resulting combinations of paintings and three-dimensional forms, eventually to be labeled "installation art", have revealed a sensibility of theatricality, of stage sets or over-sized dioramas. I have created installations in my studio, through hallways, in performance spaces, in outdoor courtyards, in galleries, and on wooded lots. David Hockney's sets and Judy Pfaff's space transformations motivate me to enthusiastically continue with this unconventional, unpredictable art form. I have concluded that this way of working is an offspring of my performance experiences and of an interest I have had in creating objects which movers/dancers can use in performance. These
props would also exist as elements in installations. They would stand as objects with their own integrity and energy without being utilized.
CHAPTER IV

THE THEMATIC CYCLE:

BONDING MEANS NARRATIVE; NON-BONDING MEANS FORMAL

Bonding with Others...

The experience of knowing Lucy's thighs better than her personality or Gloria's arms better than her face became a significant contribution to my appreciation of the unique physical qualities we all possess. The bombardment on women as to what is the most perfect breast or the most sensuous thighs, is a destructive force in our love of each other's individuality.

Journal entry, Spring, 1986

You are being unrealistic. You are being overconcerned with relationships that could result from revealing yourself in your work.

A friend in my studio,
November 16, 1984

This whole topic of intimacy implies closeness between two individuals. I seek out this state with family and friends. I find it in new acquaintances who are instantly exciting. A penetrating gaze says, "I see something special in you, and I have something unique to share. Let's
discover more about each other." I also seek it in my dance partners. As I move with others, I discover parts of them and me that I could never discover with words.

I found this need starting to flow into the content of the work. Years of physical and emotional bonding through movement have resulted in figurative paintings with references to women touching, refusing to touch, almost touching. They are leaning on each other; they are ignoring each others' body parts. They are swimming in opposite directions in a public swimming pool.

In installations with preconceived ritualistic themes, I have addressed the aggressiveness and high energy that exists between gathered participants at a sacred event. Even though these environments appear fictional and fantasy-based or surreal, they come out of the bonding I have repeatedly experienced in my life.

Bondering with Mysel...
11-9-81
Sun., Snouffers came over for gifts, I went to bed after one hour, feeling ashamed for my weakness...disequilibrium when standing...depressed, afraid...it's been ten months and it's not getting any better...

Journal entries

Some pieces have referred to a very alone time, a two-year period when I was in much physical and emotional pain. I spent a great deal of time in bed. Thus, years later, the bed paintings and representations of inflamed body parts materialized. During this illness I was becoming painfully intimate with the dark side, the crazy side of myself. Altar pieces now scream of pain and burning, with their poking wooden slats, metal shards, gaudy lights. A sense of crashing and falling prevails. All of these alone states I have confronted result in an intimacy with my spirit; the part no one knows, parts I never thought I could encounter, overcome, then sanely leave behind.

Non-Bonding: Materials Take Over...

Materials exist just to get you where you want to go...

Journal entry, January 20, 1984
This process of choosing a dominant medium seems like choosing a favorite child or friend.
I can't do it.

Journal entry, October 29, 1984

I am at times seduced by the materials that comprise all my narrative works. A fascination with electrical components--theater lights, ultra-violets, lasers, work lights, tube lights for aquariums, dimmers, gels--becomes dominant and results in hours of scanning hardware stores. My palette consists of a vast variety of curiosities, junk and valuables, found objects and custom-made art objects. I reach a point of great relief from all the emotional issues when I decide to give myself permission to let anything happen with these materials.

If an industrial-looking, abandoned object catches my attention, I grab it. I want to embellish it, distort it, restructure it. I want to add myself to it. I may allow it to sit quietly in my studio for months until the solution of impact with the object becomes apparent. This process allows me to become more intimate with the subconscious part of me that surfaces through the materials and found forms. Some of this work has been labeled as "formal", which is fine with me.
CHAPTER V

COMBINING OF DIVERSE THEMES:
ELEMENTS OF MYSTERY AND PLAY

The Diverse Sides Take Form...

Basically, you make things out of the structure of who you are.³

Through the work I have discovered two fascinating areas of the human psyche. These are parts of myself that I obsessively explore and reveal. I hope that when others discover these qualities in a piece, they will identify with them as compelling parts of their own psyches.

The first element, "mystery", may involve complexity, obscurity, or fear. Anxiety may override a mysterious theme. Or haunting aggression is about to leap into the space of a room. Or it may attack the audience. Mystery is stated in dark rooms with harsh tube lights streaming reflections across terrazzo gallery floors. It peers under drappings of industrial-smelling walls of polyethylene. It is revealed in the facial expressions of a slit-eyed, bird-like creature. The unknown exists in the clustering of crude forms, constructed of raw sticks that may be hiding
some delicate, glittery objects underneath. Continuous references to long spears and gaudy darts impart cryptic meanings that are not necessarily explainable. The bad girl, the obscure woman, the reclusive but teasing female chooses her vocabulary.

Another side of behavior, comic relief, has recently surfaced in the work. Emotional intensity in building threatening stick forms overloads my psyche. So I sit and rest and begin to let go in the studio. I consciously decide it is time to play. I look for release of my lighter side.

When dancing, I have been involved in cautious, dramatic, physical statements; serious, exaggerated, and emotional ones. Then it is time to be a child and explore childlike movements: roll on the floor, scream, whisper, tap dance, wiggle, pinch someone, stand and stare, do a tongue dance. It follows that the same attitude is working in my art-making. I cover a wall with dots. I hang a fiery, cumbersome comic book dart from the ceiling. I place an oversized pinkish-grey female hand in the corner of a wall-sized picture frame. I use a large canvas stretcher frame as a shelf for precious but quirky, delicately decorated, wooden objects.

This whole attitude of nonsense and unpredictability is just as much a part of me as the sometimes distraught or haunted emotions that seemed to dominate my expression for
years. The other side, the nothingness, has value of equal energy and significance. An attitude of non-pursuing is in stark contrast to the intense involvement in melodrama. Sitting and painting little black blocks with little white dots is valuable. Quirkiness is not easily pursued. It requires being on the edge of creativity just as recalling pain does. As long as I give myself permission to let the child emerge, I become intimate with an unknown spirit.

The Fragmented Roles...

call Kroger...mussels? Columbus Camera Group--tripod in basement call high school order filler--Epoxy bring racket for Hilary, slides

Journal entry, April 20, 1987

I am a woman of middle class, waspish upbringing. I deny the predictable. Sometimes I look in the mirror and feel ugly, disgusted. Other times I am proud; I want to caress myself and be pampered. I want to inappropriately tell how much I care for someone, how I want to embrace her or him for a kindness, a sharing of frustrations or celebrations. I feel I have to restrain some very intense feelings which come from my desire for intimacy.

For fifteen years I did not make art. It wasn't real art. I was making commercial art or teaching or selling art.
I am now excited, sad, angry, anxious. If I don't say it now, it will never be said. All this obsessive creativity is like a continuous guttural scream, a draining release.

I am an artist. I am a wife. I am a mother. When I buy bananas and margarine, I am thinking of C-clamps and drill bits. I have endless lists of domestic duties mixed with art-related errands. My husband is fascinated by my complex plans for my work in partnership with my love for family. I am fascinated by his evenness, his faithfulness, his focus. We are sometimes worlds apart. He leaves the house in a business suit. I leave in sweat pants. We always kiss good-bye. All this intermixing of diverse values and roles is zany. Changes of attitude and confidence are unpredictable, but I constantly strive to keep the changes in control. I refuse to be bored. I refuse to be boring.

As frustrating as this diversity is, I am convinced it adds to the fuel in my work. The complexity of persons I am is parallel to the variety of directions my work takes. The more I allow myself to become a variety of interrelated parts, the more I am able to get closer to the essence of my work.
Carrying the body and soul and embracing the one,
Can you avoid separation?
Attending fully and becoming supple,
Can you be as a newborn babe?
Washing and cleansing the primal vision,
Can you be without stain?
Loving all men and ruling the country,
Can you be without cleverness?
Opening and closing the gates of heaven,
Can you play the role of woman?
Understanding and being open to all things,
Are you able to do nothing?
Giving birth and nourishing,
Bearing yet not possessing,
Working yet not taking credit,
Leading yet not dominating,
This is Primal Virtue."
FOOTNOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY

