THE LOGIC OF ABSURDITY: NOTES PERTAINING
TO MY RECENT WORK IN THE VISUAL ARTS

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prologue............... iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction............... 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modesty Standards, Sexual Repression and Absurdity....... 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kafka, Beckett and the Unseen Power.................. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magritte, Cocteau and Magic.................. 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion......................... 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography......................... 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plates........................ 19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- ii -
PROLOGUE

"Christian modesty demands, under pain of sin, that dress be such as to conceal and in no way emphasize the parts of the body which, if revealed or suggested, are an occasion of sin to normal individuals."¹

Rev. Francis Lawlor, O.S.A.

"The absurd exercises the mind and the memory."

Alfred Jarry

INTRODUCTION

Whenever an artist chooses to discuss his work he often approaches the written word in much the same way as he approaches the forms in his art. As a result a pragmatic artist may end up with a clear-cut manifesto while an expressionist may set down his feelings with a flurry of adjectives. In any case, the artist also runs the risk of escaping the true meaning of the work altogether because the language of words is far different than the language of the visual arts.

Most of my work involves the selection and assembling of representational images. The forms and symbols of any given piece come from diverse and often absurdly contrasting sources. My efforts as an assembler are to draw these images together and juxtapose them correctly. After refining them and perhaps restructuring them the diverse images take on a new meaning. I have approached the writing of this paper in much the same way. During the past several years I have made notes on the various influences of literature, photography, films and the work of other artists which have motivated me and prompted me to work in one direction or another. By addressing myself to these diverse influences and collecting them together in this paper I hope to clarify the reasons behind some of the choices I have made.

- 1 -
MODESTY STANDARDS, SEXUAL REPRESSION AND ABSURDITY

In the Spring of 1974 I began work on a collage-style animated film called Modesty Standards. The idea for the film arose from my response to a pamphlet with the same title published by the Ave Maria Institute. This curious piece of literature was presented to me as a classic sample of 1950's kitsch; it contained various "do's" and don't's" that were to guide the behavior of young parochial school girls. It was not the dated morals or the severe style of writing that struck me so much but rather the underlying tone of eroticism that pervaded the various descriptions.

"Since the foundation garment is largely the basis of much of the undue emphasis on the definately dangerous parts of the body, a Christian sense of modesty should dictate the choice of such garments. They should be comfortable and a proper fit, but should never distort the normal and natural contours of the body so as to be too revealing and so as to attract undue attention."2

The incongruity of this situation struck me as absurd (modesty standards vis-à-vis erotic standards), but the more I thought about it, the less unusual it seemed. At that point I began an investigation of the printed media and saw similar cases where eroticism was masked as something nobler. In the newspapers I found sordid stories of murder and rape containing details elaborated with such relish that the story could have been mistaken for a pornographic novel. The weight-lifting magazines displayed horrifying shots of

2Lawlor, p.3.
greased muscle-men "pumping iron" which appeared to be thinly disguised homosexual fantasies. In the women's magazines I found incredible lipstick ads with a dozen pink phallic lipstick cases surrounded by a score of cropped, fleshy female lips. The pattern began to emerge: sadomasochism masquerading as news, homosexuality masquerading as physical fitness and oral sex masquerading as an advertisement. These absurd metaphors indicated a repressed unhealthy society not so much different from the days of Modesty Standards.

I began my film with the thought of exposing all the absurd and totally dishonest situations that I found myself submerged in. I clipped every photograph I could find that alluded to eroticism (overtly or subtly) and then began constructing an absurd narrative to connect them all. The "raison d'être" of the film was not the story but rather the presentation of all these images in a jam-packed, intensive manner using the "good gestalt". I wanted to get it all out into the open so that people might be able to see the sex where they may never have noticed it before.

The film Modesty Standards was essentially a one-shot affair to express the strong feelings I had. However I am essentially a printmaker rather than a filmmaker and my activities since then have been almost entirely devoted to making prints. Even though the media changed I still was interested in the same ideas. I decided to work in silkscreen printing at this time
because it allowed a great deal of freedom to move shapes around in the composition and as a result I could play with images much the same way that I had in the film. The first print to emerge was also titled Modesty Standards, since the idea also dealt with sexual absurdity. Each image was selected because it contained a specific sexual reference. The lady combing her hair in the bathroom, the large streamlined car and the grief-stricken woman all represent various aspects of sexuality (seduction, potency, tension). The nude male in the composition is depicted twice, once kneeling, once suspended from the ceiling. This is another reference to repression: the same figure turned upside-down (an absurd act) loses his eroticism and becomes emasculated. In front of all this is a monstrous hand which has a dual symbolism: at one level it is a fist which is attempting to isolate the viewer from all the other sexual symbols, but at the same time the fingers form an erotic feminine pattern that invites penetration. This was the crux of the idea and was what I originally reacted to in the Ave Maria pamphlet: moral controls are never pure but have their own forms of the things they are trying to censure.

The notions of force, repression and absurdity reappear in most all of the works that followed. Modesty Standards acted mainly as a catalyst for preexisting attitudes; at the back of it all lies my artistic sensibilities, the roots of which should now be investigated.
KAFKA, BECKETT AND THE UNSEEN POWER

Two authors, Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, more than any others, have shaped the direction of my thought and thus have played a major role in shaping the iconography of my work. Although there are striking differences between Kafka the novelist and Beckett the playwright, each has dealt with similar ideas of modern man plunged into absurd situations.

In Kafka's stories there is usually one main "hero" who is struggling with a loss of identity (Kafka often denotes a character simply by using a letter, such as "K"). This hero usually finds himself in the center and at the mercy of a totally inscrutable bureaucracy. In The Trial, for example, the hero is charged with crimes his prosecutors insist on keeping a secret. In The Castle it is the invisible ruler who exercises the unimpeachable power that keeps the hero in doubt. In The Metamorphosis the hero is changed into a hideous insect by some unknown power and driven to a tormented death.

For me the important aspect of these stories is that they are parodies of reality and not fantasies. A fantasy may be free of relationships with the known world; a parody is a particular kind of abstraction that distorts what is normal. The professional faster in A Hunger Artist is rendered so precisely and naturally that we become convinced of the existence of someone willing to starve himself for pay.

- 5 -
Kafka's stories are usually shocking and totally implausible, but they are written with such convincing detail that they compel our involvement and make us believers. I have aimed for a similar effect in my prints. In *Rest on the Flight Into Sweden*, for example, the situation is totally absurd: a man is posed in front of a stretched tarpaulin, mysterious amorphic shapes slithering between the two, a telephone receiver ejaculating tears and hands dispensing pastes which curl and fly around the space. The fact that all this bizarre material is in a congruous space (by standard pictorial means) gives it an attachment to the real world and removes it from the realm of fantasy. My aim is to draw the viewer into the parody and make the absurd situation believable. The central figure is my counterpart to Kafka's hero, while the various aggressive objects entering from the top and sides represent manifestations of a mysterious power. The figure who is struggling to be free of these forces is thwarted by the giant phallus running up the front and center of his body. The likelihood is that the phallus belongs to the man himself and he is therefore oppressed by his own identity. Ultimately, as in Kafka's stories, the source of power is never clarified—it may come from without or within one's self.

Samuel Beckett treats his heros somewhat differently. They are not heros at all but anti-heros in that they exercise no will of their own and are unaware of their plight.
In Beckett's plays it is the audience who is dumbfounded and exasperated—the characters in the play don't care. While Kafka's hero almost (but not quite) become romantic heros, Beckett's characters are comfortable in their stupidity.

Vladimir and Estragon, the two protagonists in *Waiting for Godot* are far from capable from exerting will. Always on the lookout for something to fill in the time, they wait for the mysterious "Godot", who perhaps stands for God (according to numerous interpretations), but most probably stands for any power source which exerts control over people. Vladimir and Estragon display the dilemma of modern man—the ability to perform isolated tasks without understanding how those parts fit into the scheme of things. We have achieved sophisticated systems for the division of labor, but we have failed to provide institutions to look after their correlation. Man, though given specialized identities, has lost his human identity; like Beckett's characters, he sits and waits and occasionally makes some blind decisions. Power no longer resides with individuals but rather its sources are invisible and occasionally operate over vast distances. Beckett's concept of the unseen power is similar to Kafka's (is Godot the celestial ruler of the Castle?), however while Kafka's hero struggles and suffers to learn the sources of power, Beckett's anti-hero submits totally to it.

The etching *Angst Her Away* deals with heros and power
sources similar to Beckett's. The sailor on the left side of the composition stares out of the picture in a posed stance. He is not the disturbed kafkaesque hero of Rest on the Flight Into Sweden, but rather is more of a Beckett anti-hero. His doltish lack of expression makes him insignificant as a personality. The fact that he had the potential to be a military hero makes him even more tragicomic. His noncommittal smile shows he is willing to yield to any power, as the inverted personage in the center of the composition already has. She is wearing the same smile as the sailor and is being administered to by the elongated fingers from the left and the hand from the right (messengers from the power source). The triangular composition is completed on the lower right by the anatomical side view of a man's head. Seen in cross section, the face is totally impersonal and without identity. The tongue is being pulled up and away by a cord that disappears off the left edge. This symbolizes complete loss of self and subjection to unknown power. What has less power than a cadaver being dissected?

In Beckett's play Act Without Words I the protagonist is flung onto the stage, prodded about the stage by a goad, teased by a carafe suspended from the ceiling and confounded by a circle of light that appears on the floor—all these events are manifestations of a power whose source is outside the man's arena of knowledge (and our's). The use of absurd theatrical devices clearly correlates with not only the
tongue-pulling cord of Angst Here Away but also with the fingers, hands, tubes and dispensers that enter from the sides, protrude from shafts or dangle from the tops of nearly every composition I have done in recent years.

In Rest on the Flight Into Sweden, Angst Here Away and all the other prints, the objects presented have little meaning in isolation. It is only because of the absurd juxtaposing that they take on a new sinister or comic meaning.
MAGRITTE, COCTEAU AND MAGIC

As one who deals with the juxtaposition of dissimilar objects, I can hardly sidestep the fact that this is also a trademark of the Surrealists. However, Surrealism as a movement plays a minor role in my development; the resemblances are more superficial and stylistic than iconographic.

In contrast to the Surrealists, I do not operate largely from the subconscious. My compositions do not spring from dreams or hallucinations but develop from something already in existence; a simple pun or play on words may begin an idea and suggest a variety of images. My normal manner of working is to collect preexistent visual material (newspaper and magazine cutouts, parts of old drawings, photographs taken by myself and others, etc.) that supports the idea and image. The materials are then arranged, added to, subtracted from or otherwise manipulated until the expressive effect is achieved and the design works. My subconscious may come into play at any time but it is treated like any other tool at my disposal. When I feel my subconscious choices are inappropriate I don't use them. I also feel it is impossible for me to work divorced from all moral or aesthetic preconceptions. I have definite satirical ideas in mind and definite compositional preferences and I don't wish to sacrifice these for the sake of automatism.

I don't mean to imply by my previous statements that I have a total concept of a print before I begin working on it.
however, I do exert controls all along the way. At times this involves minor adjustments for the sake of good design or it may involve a complete change of idea. An analogy may be made by describing the two basic types of scientists: on one hand there is the technologist who plans intelligently and designs efficiently according to available data; on the other hand is the speculative scientist who does not plan thoroughly but rather sets up tests. In this regard I consider myself more of a speculative artist. The art of assembly for me consists of unifying heterogeneous parts that are apt to have a symbolic significance independent of their role in the composition. The notion of "test" enters when decisions are made concerning the appropriateness of any given part. The original symbol of an object may be too strong to allow its meaning to change in the new setting. An example of this would be the Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of a burned Vietnamese child sitting in the road. Most people are familiar with this image and could never forget their strong feelings about it even if they saw it incorporated into one of my strange compositions. I could never alter the meaning of such an image to suit my purposes, therefore I would not use it.

I trust that I have clearly explained how I differ from the Surrealists while acknowledging that there are certain stylistic qualities that definitely have had an affect. Most notable of these is the use of magic by a painter and a film-
maker who are commonly associated with the Surrealists: Rene Magritte and Jean Cocteau.

My fascination for magic as a visual element can be seen as early as in the film Modesty Standards, which is really one unending stream of magical tricks: a knife floats through the air and cuts off appendages as if it had a will of its own, a sausage flies into a boudoir to caress a lady, plates of food dance symmetrically in the sky and a mountain range parts to reveal giant triplets. The inherent flexibility I found in the animation techniques suggested the flexibility I already knew existed in printmaking and the transition from one to the other was quite simple. Magic in the form of visual impossibilities appears in Deborah Anne's Lip Service, where a service attendant dispenses mouths; it also appears in Horned-Rimmed Molasses, where a tiny giraffe is engulfed by cigarette smoke and in Pieter de Hooch Goes Out For Pie, where lemon cream and cherry pies fill the sky.

The compelling effects of levitation, theatrical staging, trickery and visual puns were first demonstrated to me by Rene Magritte. In his paintings he presents totally incredible contrivances as if they were perfectly normal. The purpose of these works is not so much to entertain or titillate but rather to shake up our senses in order that we may reflect on the nature of perception. In one work Magritte painted a giant rock, crowned by a castle, and made it all float in the air. In another work he conjured up the scene of a
locomotive issuing from a fireplace. In still other works he made bowler hats into flying saucers and created an inverse mermaid (with the tail of a girl and the head of a fish).

A central reason for the use of magical images in my work is to enhance the erotic content. For me eroticism and mysticism go hand in hand; there can be no eroticism where there is no mysticism. Feminine and phallic forms and other sexual symbols have been a part of the sorcerer's strategems since primeval days. When Magritte floats a pair of female lips in the sky of his landscape, they become totems of a most sexual sort. It is the mystery of this event that gives the lips their power; if they had remained attached to the face from which they came we would not feel so strongly about them. Similarly in many of my prints I use fragments of anatomy that are not necessarily sexual or mysterious in themselves, but placed carefully in a composition in just the right relationship with the surrounding forms they can indeed become mysterious and erotic. The elongated fingers of Angst Her Away, the juicy cherries of Pieter de Hooch Goes Out For Pie and the scrotum-like shape coming out of the woman's mouth in On the Divan all have their erotic implications intensified by their mysterious, unexpected placement within the composition.

Although Jean Cocteau created in a variety of media it is his films which have had the greatest impact upon me. Blood
of a Poet, made in the 1930's, consists of a series of bizarre "episodes" containing several scenes which became important in the development of my own iconography. In the first episode, a painter erases a mouth from his canvas, only to find that the mouth has been transferred to his hand. He then rubs the animated mouth all over his body in an erotic manner and falls helpless to the floor. After waking up the next morning, he clasps his hand over the face of a female statue; the mouth is once again transferred and the statue is brought to life. This scene has a striking similarity to a scene in Modesty Standards where a pretty girl's mouth metamorphoses into a series of awkward or ugly mouths. Her real mouth reappears and then her face dissapears leaving the mouth to float through space until it finds another personage to attach itself to.

In the second episode of Blood of a Poet a woman is teaching a girl how to fly. While practicing, the girl gets stuck on the ceiling, refuses to descend and sticks her tongue out contemptuously at her teacher. This scene also has a counterpart in a number of my prints which feature levitation, including the buoyant couple in Reunion, the floating cat in Cat-Show and the suspended male in the silkscreen Modesty Standards. It seems to me that Cocteau's use of the flying lesson episode was to express the idea of flight in the face of restraints -getting away from conventions and moralistic entanglements. The various images of levitation in my prints
are meant to complement and thereby intensify the images of repressed sexuality.

In a later film *Beauty and the Beast*, Cocteau took a traditional fairy tale and executed it on the screen using a variety of camera tricks to heighten the surreal effect. The most compelling of these took place at the end of the film when the dead Beast metamorphoses before our eyes into the live Prince who sweeps up Beauty in his arms and flys up into the air and off into the clouds (all accomplished by some extraordinary trick photography). This sudden lunge into space is one of the most compelling images I have ever seen. The powerful thrust of the leaping figures -almost orgasmic in its flow- suggests they are in full positive command of their flight. An effect similar to this is present in my print *Homage to the Giraffe League*. In the center of the composition several figures or body fragments are tumbling out of a container and into space. Their momentum of lift is sustained like that of Beauty and the Prince. In both the print and the film we can perceive the motion even after we are no longer looking at the forms. It is a much different kind of levitation than the static or ensnared floating that was present in the flying lesson of *Blood of a Poet* or that we associated with the buoyant figures of *Reunion*, *Cat Show* and *Modesty Standards*.
CONCLUSION

The art of the 1970's seems to be withdrawing from life. The ideas of space, gesture and expression have been replaced by talk of concept, process and the ultimate particle. Although I concede to the inevitability of it all, it nevertheless leaves me distressed that so few artists are dealing with basic human issues.

One reason that I am attracted to printmaking is that it has historically been enmeshed in the tradition of social change. One needs only to think of Piranesi's attempt at prison reform, Hogarth's satirical view of English society or Goya's outrage at the horrors of war to see what I mean. After working in a variety of media for over a decade, I can now say that I feel the strongest when I am attempting to unite myself with the great humanist printmakers: Durer, Rembrandt, Callot, Goya, Piranesi, Hogarth, Blake, Meryon, Picasso. I am less interested in launching new aesthetics than I am in developing new and commanding icons.

The search for new icons has led me to some very strange images. They are not random images designed for shock effect alone but have traceable roots and specific symbolism. They were rationally selected and therefore are logical. However an artist is never sure that his intended meanings will ever be transmitted to a sensitive viewer. I realize that such an absurd combination as a giraffe and a shoe will communicate an idea or feeling only to a very small audience. But at the
same time I realize that the number of people who understand perhaps the most logical idea of the twentieth century—the Theory of Relativity—is also very small indeed.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


