THE EVOLUTION OF SPIRITUAL
ATTITUDES IN MY ART

A Thesis

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by

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I

My work is a conscious effort to give form to a spiritual (incorporeal) reality. I define a spiritual reality as one not decidedly pursuing a connection with our temporal existence. If I believe deeply enough in the existence of a reality based in the idea that we have a soul or spirit, the source of which may continually be the subject of argument and which many of us doubt exists, then I am asserting a degree of honesty when I reflect this part of myself in my work. I do not pretend that I am not constantly influenced by the secular world I am part of, however that influence is more or less a vehicle for expressing the timeless or undefinable. These qualities just mentioned have been the impetus for the work of a number of artists for several generations past. By referring to historically important painters who have influenced my attitudes in some way and by discussing my own development as an artist I will clarify my concern for the presence of a spiritual content in my painting.

II

I do not think that I can evoke truths or levels of consciousness many of us have not already encountered. However, the visual language I use to express my ideas and feelings is unique to my personality and interpretations. My thought process is particular to me and is the source of my work. The sense of mystery of our existence, the beauty of emptiness, the sound of quietness, subtle humor, indelicacy, nonsensical thoughts or visions, these are a part of my thought process. I do not dwell on the everyday reality around me when I make a painting but try to interpret my hidden feelings and thoughts which may be as varied or subtly different as each painting I attempt. Images, shapes, or colors
that seem evocative of various moods, states of mind, or imaginative spaces are important avenues for directing myself or the viewer into a spiritual (not necessarily sacred) state of consciousness.

Because of my need to work from a searching inner force there is a connection between myself and the tradition of romantic painting. It is the lasting and infilling qualities in the work of past romantic painters that lures me. For instance, the paintings of American late nineteenth century painter Albert Pinkham Ryder, though not seen as particularly innovative works of his time, have long outlasted their time. His poetic recording of a vision from his environment makes his work universal and not limited to an understanding of the current affairs of his day. My appreciation of one of Ryder's contemporaries and a fellow New Yorker, John Sloan, is limited to perhaps only a feeling for his handsome handling of paint. I find his realism too particular to his own surroundings. In contrast I can link easily with Ryder's vision. His subject is his vision, not the ocean or a particular landscape. His paintings are timeless in what they offer, not temporal. This is a quality I find intriguing in the romantics, a search for meaning beyond our current existence.

The sense of a spiritual other worldliness is something that draws me to look at two European painters of the mid-nineteenth century romantic landscape tradition. They are Caspar David Friedrich and Samuel Palmer. Perhaps theirs is even an exaggerated spirituality. This enhanced visionary quality makes their work seem almost surreal at times though probably not intended. Images such as a line of monks walking through the facade opening of a Gothic cathedral in ruin (in a stark wintery
forest) is common to the work of Friedrich. Palmer's moonlight landscapes become almost electrified by his strange light. I find in these images an awe of God and nature - a vision beneath reality. Though often morbid or morose a landscape by Friedrich is also inspiring or frightening because of its mystery.

A possible relationship between these Northern European romantics and several twentieth-century American painters such as Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still is explored in Robert Rosenblum's book Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition. I find interesting what Rosenblum says about Friedrich's intensely religious painting, Monk by the Sea.

Within this Northern Baroque tradition of sea painting, the tradition most accessible and compatible with Friedrich, "Monk By The Sea" strikes an alien, melancholic note, strange not only in the presence of so haunting, and so uninterrupted of an expanse of somber, blue-gray light above a low horizon, but in the disturbing absence of any of the expected components of conventional marine painting... The picture is daringly empty... For modern spectators, Friedrich's painting might even fulfill the transcendental expectations of a religious art although, to be sure, it conforms to no canon of religious subject.¹

Perhaps the intended feeling Friedrich tried to express in Monk By The Sea was similar to Rothko's expectations for his paintings.

Rothko said, "I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them."² The intensity in expression of the incorporeal is as strong in Rothko's paintings as it is in Friedrich's. There is also an unrelenting seriousness in the work of Friedrich, Rothko, or Still. The intense spirituality


²Rosenblum, p. 215.
and seriousness of expression are qualities I find satisfying in the Northern European tradition and its American counterpart. I realize, however, that I cannot endure these qualities for an extended period of time. I need to seek out expressions of the lyrical, more passive side of life. I depend much of the time on a counterweight to my religious reflections.

The counterweight I seek is reflected in my admiration of several late nineteenth and twentieth-century French painters. In my opinion the paintings of Henri Matisse and Bonnard show evidence of both an affection for life and an affection for the possibilities of formal invention in painting. Their paintings give me a sense of a spirituality on a very human level instead of one as deeply internal as Rothko or Friedrich express. For instance, one of my favorite Matisse paintings, The Red Studio, demonstrates Matisse's ability to take an everyday interior setting and translate this setting into a painting which I feel has the capacities for universal expression. Ordinary experiences seem heightened by Matisse without the disquieting type of motifs I see in Friedrich's paintings. In my own paintings I try to give form to a full range of moods and emotions. This desire for varied expression reflects my affinity with both European traditions and my admiration for artists of contrasting expressions within each tradition.

I have also been influenced by several twentieth-century American artists. I do not think of them as a tradition in themselves, but rather as individualists exhibiting like-minded attitudes toward painting. In the work of Marsden Hartley, Milton Avery, and recent Philip Guston I find aspects of the two European traditions I previously discussed. Their
paintings suggest subject matter of a peculiarly romantic nature integrated with inventive formal concerns that possess a non-academic appeal. The images or motifs used by these artists reveal an enigmatic presence of those images rather than mere or novel description. To arrive at a visual poetry, Philip Guston invented imaginary places through odd juxtapositions of ordinary shoes, legs, unoccupied jackets, pyramids, or ladders within ambiguous interiors or landscapes. I sense a similar mysterious environment in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings. Both artists invented a new reality outside of our day to day experiences. The late paintings of Hartley and Avery seem to also represent a "new" reality. Though they were using more direct observation for stimulus as opposed to Guston's "invented" environment, the result is consistently something that has been deeply affected by each artist's personality and imagination.

There are qualities in the work of these artists which I feel typify attitudes inherent in my own painting. I sense that their paintings are the result of a difficult search to find motifs that characterize a particular facet of each painter's personality. Many artists deal with similar human experiences in their work. If my paintings are to be seen as independent from the work of other artists, I must let my personality surface in my images. The unpretentious way these three artists reveal multiple levels of their personalities and thoughts is encouraging to me.

I found a restraint in the assertion of emotions in the work of Hartley, Avery, and Guston. Perhaps this adds to the feeling that their paintings often elicit several types of responses from me whenever I see them. If I am correct in reading several interpretations into these artists' work then I can assume much thought was given to the choice of
images. I also try to envision the interpretation of my paintings from the initial idea to the completed work. I often ask myself if my idea is too concise or too ambiguous as I paint, and sometimes discover that I can "say more with less."

Although I admire the paintings of these three artists I realize that I cannot become too infatuated with their stylistic traits. I want to understand more clearly their attitudes toward painting in general. The sequence of their work seems concurrent with what each had to say about the process of painting;

Marsden Hartley on the imagination, "This is a difficult art - it calls for real expert power to create an idea and produce it as one sees it in the mind."  

Milton Avery on painting, "In order to paint one has to go by the way one does not know. Art is like turning corners. One never knows what is around the corner until one has made the turn."  

Philip Guston on the creative process, "To will a new form is unacceptable, because will builds distortion. Desire, too, is incomplete and arbitrary. These strategies however intimate they become, must especially be removed to clear the way for something else - a condition somewhat unclear, but which in retrospect becomes a very precise act. This 'thing' is recognized only as it comes into existence. It resists analysis - and probably this is as it should be. Possibly the moral is that art cannot and should not be made."  

III

As a means of bringing into focus my current work, I will reflect upon the development of my graduate study. I began painting without too

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many explicit expectations that could force me toward a specific stylistic or conceptual direction. I was trying to find a visual language that would come close to reflecting my spiritual self. To make my paintings more personal, I needed to be more self-critical of my work. I anticipated many changes would occur, but I believed these changes could take place in an evolutionary process.

I wanted my work to evoke a mood and not a specific idea or thought. An enigmatic expression that would urge the viewer toward a spiritual introspection was desired. I was working decidedly abstract that is, as far as my forms were concerned. The idea of several simple forms engaging in a visual dialogue was interesting to me. I was thinking at this time of an almost visual analogy to the music I listen to (jazz, blues, modern classical) in which melodic passages make responses to one another, controlled dissonances are weaved within chord structures, or the way the haunting quality of a "blue note" can be felt deep inside your body. I found gestural markings and subtle color transitions to be appropriate for these feelings.

After completing a number of early paintings I began considering new approaches to my working process. I made several drawings that were executed in a spontaneous way. They led me to believe that my paintings could be approached in a less calculated way. I especially considered the ground areas of my paintings noting that the paint application was almost methodical and lacking in the more physically aggressive surfaces I like in the drawings. A painting entitled Contemplation of a Hotpot was the result of this questioning of my working process. It is also the first painting of this phase where I began to periodically use recognizable
images. The subject matter is a hotpot and lid placed at opposite ends of a thin, vertical canvas. The paint was applied in a sketch-like fashion with a small brush. This suggests an energetic surface that I like. The intensified treatment of the surface coupled with freely drawn objects give the painting a mysteriousness which I find appealing.

From this point my attitude toward making art became less cautious. My paintings were not as formal and had a quality of playfulness in them. My color choices began to reflect moods I wanted to express in my paintings. However, I deliberated for longer periods of time over what mood I wanted a painting to express. This "thinking" about my paintings before execution that is, gave me a greater opportunity to approach them spontaneously without the fear of overworking the surface.

The next painting to employ representational forms was Vision at Dusk. This long, horizontal picture is an allusion to an imagined environment. I wanted to approach the idea of a place I could only sense in my mind. I used the image of stage curtains to refer to an interior juxtaposed against a dappled ocean-like substance suggesting an exterior space. To create further ambiguity I introduced a chair that appears to extend out of the "ocean." I feel that I achieved the representation of an unidentifiable type of environment and simultaneously retained the essence of an abstract painting.

After completing that picture my work took on a new dimension. I no longer felt that I could say everything I wanted to, particularly if the forms in my paintings remained non-representational. The levels of meaning that surface from combining representational imagery with abstraction please me. I believe my new paintings can act as vehicles for
several kinds of spiritual and cognitive responses simultaneously. The music of American composer Charles Ives gave me a parallel experience. With similar thinking, Ives wrote, "Music is one of the many ways God has of beating in on man - his lifes, his deaths, his hope, his everything - an inner something, a spiritual storm, a something else that stirs man in all his parts and consciousness, and all at once." I understand what Ives was trying to express and hope my paintings will someday become a visual counterpart.

I feel very confident about my most recent paintings. These paintings are specific insofar as a daydream or an inspiring random thought is specific. My motifs vary from a landscape implanted with bedposts to a tornado seen through two bare trees. There is something readily identifiable about these motifs, but I think they can also be visual metaphors for the vulnerability of our existence. Perhaps I feel that these motifs can symbolize vulnerability because they are visually vulnerable due to their obvious presence on a relatively bare canvas. I like the idea that I can show someone else my private visions which I feel these recent paintings do.

Another important aspect of these paintings is an intended spatial depth. Flat shapes that now overlap one another produce visual tension. I have given clues as to where a person might be located if that person were in one of the environments I have painted. For example, motifs in paintings such as The First Hole and Island suggest that the viewer has an aerial perspective. This again brings up a desirable dilemma in which a painting can be decoratively flat and simultaneously suggest that a

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complex space is being presented.

IV

As I reflect on my ideas of the past two years, I speculate that my paintings will continue to show evidence of gradual evolutionary change. I will not fashion a path excluding purely abstract forms if I feel they would be a valid alternative. If major changes in my attitudes result from a justifiable need for understanding myself more deeply, I welcome the changes.

I hope that my ideas can develop from a wider spectrum of sources in the future. I have become intrigued with the idea of travel and increasing my awareness of "places" that seem to have a metaphoric quality. I want to interact with musicians or writers who possibly could offer a fresh perspective to my thinking. I intend to do more reading in the future. Poetry especially interests me when it evokes many feelings with economy. It is important to me to find out why I believe the works of modern poets, such as Robert Lowell and William Carlos Williams, parallel my paintings.

I would like my future work to include new mediums beyond paint on canvas. Recently I began assembling and transforming found objects into sculptural paintings. I have also started to make hand-built pottery which I paint. I hope to see the potential of this work mature and become a more frequent activity rather than a periodic alternative to painting.

Conclusion

My paintings are the result of a need to express a spiritual reality. I have discussed artists from several distinct traditions who have had an influence on my thinking and perception. Through their work, these artists
have confirmed many of my attitudes about painting and inspired me to explore my own ideas in a deeper way.

The transitions my work has undergone up to the present have revealed much to me about my creative process and personality. I have found a gratifying union of my pictorial and conceptual concerns in my most recent paintings. These paintings present new possibilities for gaining access to the spiritual reality I want to reflect. There is no certainty, however, to the direction of my future work. I feel that this uncertainty is crucial to a meaningful development of myself as an artist. For me, the fulfillment in making art lies in the possibility of tapping an unknown, regardless of how futile the effort seems at times. However, my future work will probably involve painting, an activity I am dedicated to pursuing for an extended period of time.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


PLATE I

Contemplation of a Hotpot
PLATE II
Vision at Dusk
PLATE III

The First Hole
PLATE IV

Island