DEVELOPING FORM FOR NARRATIVE PAINTING IN A FIGURATIVE CONTEXT

A Thesis
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INTRODUCTION

When I began work on this thesis my objective was to describe the issues that I had struggled with during the 1980-81 academic year at The Ohio State University. I was also interested in locating the position of my work and attitudes in the aesthetic and historical milieu.

The results, however, went much farther. Through the thought clarification that accompanied the writing, I determined the nature of my current studio work. For over 5 years I had toyed with the idea that narrative painting was a logical direction of growth for current figurative art. I have, however, felt unsatisfied with efforts of many contemporary painters in this direction. Certainly I did not feel prepared to make full-blown narrative statements of my own at the beginning of my term at Ohio State. The development of this paper propelled me to draw certain conclusions about the nature of narrative painting and the nature of my attitudes regarding pictures that tell a story. The relationship of written thought and painted image was direct and ongoing. The conclusions drawn in the paper were acted upon in the studio to effect a change in the kind of painting I was
involved in. The thesis, therefore, evolved from a description of ideas to a documentation of a change in style.
CHAPTER I

THE CONTENT IMPERATIVE AND FIGURATIVE NARRATION

Many artists today perceive a need for a significant, easily recognizable and literal meaning in their work. This literal content, long second-rated by an emphasis on purely formal art, is becoming their overriding concern. This group feels a real need to provide images that will imbue their work with content beyond its design and physical properties. In his book, The Shape of Content, Ben Shahn discusses an imbalance that occurred during the heyday of the formal phase of modernism.

Form and content have been forcibly divided by a great deal of present-day aesthetic opinion and each, if one is to believe what he reads, goes its separate way. Content in this sorry divorce seems to be looked upon as the culprit.  

Shahn's book was written 20 years ago, but there are still today strong artistic descendants of this tradition of formalism. The need for literal content has simmered beneath this formalist regime almost from its inception.

But this simmering has turned to boiling as many artists are now thinking about, and experimenting with, strategies for meaning. The issue of content, long considered the "culprit", is becoming the imperative issue.

Artists working in many idioms are responding to what I call the "content imperative". A group of symbolic expressionists grows out of Chicago and the west coast. Conceptual art and performance art continue to address issues of content. A revival of figurative art, born out of the "content imperative," now finds such established painters as Alfred Leslie, Jack Beal, and Paul Georges experimenting with metaphor, narrative and allegory. As I perceive the state of art and the concerns of new generations of artists, there is a movement across the spectrum of styles and media that is a response to the need for literal meaning. The "content imperative" is a rebellion of artists against what they consider a dictatorship of formalism and the imbalance which it represents.

Of particular interest to me is the way this issue has been resolved by the figurative painters in the second half of the 20th century. I think it is fair to say that contemporary figurative painting actually grew out of a response to the "content imperative".

Most of our best known painters working in a realistic figurative mode today, were originally abstract
expressionists. Their mission, in changing idioms, was to make a point about painting the figure during a formalist era. Their move from abstraction to figuration was considered impossible by some critics. The idea of painting a form so inherently wrapped up in content and meaning was absurd in the formalist perspective. The painters who broke with abstract expressionism during the 1960's were attempting to correct the imbalance which Ben Shahn discussed in his book. However, a strange paradox concerning form and content developed out of this particular figurative revival.

To simply portray the human figure in an unabashedly representational mode was almost overly meaningful during those days. As a result the most important issues for the new figurative realists became formal ones. Having made their point about painting the figure, Alfred Leslie, Philip Pearlstein, Jack Beal and others had to concern themselves primarily with formal issues in order to make their work credible to the viewer and to themselves. Writing in Art News, 1966, Fairfield Porter, painter-critic, discussed this dichotomy:

2An example of this attitude is Clement Greenberg's statement to Willem de Kooning "It is impossible today to paint a face." Thomas B. Hess Willem de Kooning (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968) p. 74.
The realist thinks he knows ahead of time what reality is and the abstract artist what art is, but it is in its formality that realist art excels, and the best abstract art communicates an overwhelming sense of reality.³

Figural representationalism has, in the recent past, developed on a formal rather than a content level. The formal emphasis has seemed proper and workable in order to create a new aesthetic of figure painting infused with a contemporary sense of design and structure. In this sense figural painting has gone through an analytical phase. A period during which painters taught themselves the rudiments of description, the analytical phase also witnessed a deep involvement with the structural and formal implications of painting the human image. Probably the most famous example of this analytical attitude towards the figure is the work of Philip Pearlstein.

The last decade, however, has seen changes in this analytic phase. The "content imperative", once thought satisfied solely by the introduction of the human image, demands still more of artists working today. Artists like Leslie and Beal have recognized this demand. After painters have illustrated their command of figural concepts, the question immediately arises, what can be done

with these figures? How can they be fused with a significant, easily recognizable and literal content?

The answer was expressed by Jerrold Lanes, writing in Artforum, 1972:

Because for the human figure to fully embody, express, or arouse the meanings of which it is capable, it has to be doing something that characterizes humanity; it has to be engaged in a significant action.4

The "content imperative" confronting an increasingly skilled and formally sophisticated group of representational painters seems to call for some means to "characterize humanity." In response to this charge many figurative painters are now experimenting with narrative, allegorical and symbolic content. Witness Jack Beal's commission, The History of American Labor, for the Labor Department in Washington, D.C. or Alfred Leslie's enigmatic metaphorical piece, The Killing of Frank O'Hara, or Paul Georges' recent controversial allegory, The Mugging of the Muse. These painters and others seem to be responding to Lane's call for painted figures to be "engaged in a significant action". In terms of their

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research into literal meaning, it would be fair to say that some branches of the figurative-realist movement are now going into a narrative phase. This narrative phase, when its problems are resolved, will be, in my view, the most complete and satisfying response to the "content imperative".
CHAPTER II
NARRATIVE PAINTING AND SYMBOLIC FORM

Many problems face artists working in a narrative mode today. Important questions revolve around the balance and resolution of the form-content issue. Can forms which were revived out of the long realist tradition, to speak to an analytic phase of figuration, be now applicable to a narrative phase? If not, what forms will need to be developed and how will artists go about finding and inventing those styles?

Before we address these questions directly, however, I would like to spend some time discussing the implications of form in a figurative art. When Jack Beal, Alfred Leslie, Philip Pearlstein and others made their break with various abstract motifs, their interests were primarily analytical. The closely observed object and the rendering of detail became important issues. During this analytical phase, carefully delineated, clearly stated solids and a conscious reference to Renaissance space were both typical forms of the "new realists" and ideal expressions of their reactions against the dominant idioms of the period. Just as the
use of the figure proved a point, so the new realist form was symbolic of a point of view. It was a "symbolic form."

The idea of "symbolic form" is one originated by the eminent art historian, Erwin Panofsky. In his essay, Perspective as Symbolic Form, he outlines how the use of perspective was a symbol for 15th century attitudes. In his work Panofsky discusses how the system of perspective was developed in response to a particular "content imperative". The 15th century Italian artists felt the need to deal in a literal sense with the characteristics of their age. The system of mathematic perspective, with its emphasis on geometric regularity and the capturing of infinite space, was a perfect symbol for the strict order of Renaissance life and the newly expanded world exploration. Within that symbolic form the subject matter could be manipulated to narrate those themes which were important to artists and their patrons.

In 15th century Italy, as well as 20th century America, the basis for symbolic form lies in the simple idea that the message is conducted through the manner in

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which the picture is painted as much as the subject matter of the piece. Symbolism according to Panofsky's theory can be communicated as much by the style as the subject matter. The form symbolizes the content. Let me apply this criterion to specific 20th century examples. William de Kooning's symbol is not woman but the particular idiom he has found in which to depict her. Giocometti communicates ideas not through the figures in his paintings but through the way in which the figures exist in pictorial space. The meaning in Jack Levine's paintings is created as much by his expressionist-cubist style as by the actions of his figures.

It is at this point that we get back to the question, can forms which were revived out of the realist tradition, to speak to an analytic phase of figuration, be applicable now to a narrative phase? In determining the criteria for dealing with this question I would like to present what I feel is the central statement of this thesis: Before significant content can be literally narrated in figurative painting a symbolic form must be developed for that narration.

If we agree to that particular line of thinking then our task obviously lies in determining what the significant content will be. It is at this point that this essay becomes aimed directly at me, the artist in
question. I come to this area of thought after a five-year involvement in analytical realism; I now feel the need to respond to what I perceive as a historical directive, described in these pages as the "content imperative". I feel the need to develop a narrative style of figurative painting as a logical result of my continued probing of the painted human image. However, unlike some other painters who have blazed this trail of thought ahead of me, I have concluded that the realist form that I pursued in the 70's to address my analytical interests does not function as an appropriate symbolic form for my narrative intentions of the 80's. These intentions exist on two levels. The first level is the narrated episode and the second is the meaning which underlies that episode. On both levels I want to communicate my perceptions of our society as a pressurized environment.

I feel that people in our culture are particularly vulnerable to a persistent pressure from their increasingly man-made world. This pressure derives from our hyper-active urban environment. Our society seems prone to accidents, violence and crime. Our surroundings threaten us.

I believe it is this vulnerable condition that creates the "content imperative" which in turn compels a straightforward narrative painting. An idea that has
been struggling for a narrative expression in my mind is the episode of a bicycle accident. The event in itself characterizes the danger of our environment. Also the event is symbolic or indicative of a kind of vulnerability that is peculiar to our society. In many ways we are all frail bicycles at the mercy of large, fast-moving behemoths.

In my first months at The Ohio State University I set about giving this idea visual expression. In a painting titled, Memorial: Bicyclist, I attempted a metaphorical statement about a real event that happened on the OSU campus in the fall of 1980. In this piece I used a realist form. I painted from the observation of models, in the same style as my previous analytical paintings. See Plate 1. On the surface this work depicts a genre scene, but I also hoped to communicate some sense of tragedy with the use of symbolic objects such as car tires, broken glass and fragmented debris. I also wanted the interior space with the doorway and "cellar light" to act as a symbol for the death that was the result of the accident.

After the exhibition of Memorial: Bicyclist in late 1980, I felt that its success in content terms was extremely limited. Frankly, few people recognized its
symbolic meaning. To even the educated viewer the analytical forms hid the narrative content. The piece was appreciated for its formal properties rather than its message.

It was at this point that I realized that my pursuit of literal content would have to take new directions. For my venture into narrative painting, I would have to find a "symbolic form" to portray the content of an almost paranoid perception of our society. That form, I felt, must be different from that of figurative realism. The answer then to the crucial question asked earlier in these pages became for me an obvious one. No, the analytical forms of new realism will not apply to a narrative art, especially if that narration deals with our vulnerability to an increasingly dangerous environment. From this new point of view the expressionist forms of de Kooning, Giocometti and Jack Levine seemed like more appropriate models than the realist forms of Alfred Leslie, Jack Beal and Philip Pearlstein.

During the months following this discovery, I devised an expressionist-realist form as an appropriate symbol for urbanized vulnerability. In this form the pressure of our urban surroundings is symbolized by painted grounds that refuse to subordinate themselves to the figures. The swelling activity in the negative
areas narrows the figure's space. Hyperactivity is symbolized by an almost overly energetic brushwork, at times depicting volumes and spaces and elsewhere flailing ambiguously. Vulnerability is symbolized by the shrinking, collapsing quality of the figures, caused by the negative areas invading the positive form. Conflict is represented by the distortions the figure puts up with as it struggles with the dense activity of the picture space. I developed each of these form symbols in a successive group of figure paintings during a prolonged period of experimentation following the exhibition of Memorial: Bicyclist. In the summer of 1981, I returned to the theme of the bicycle accident. Putting the new form symbols to work on a canvas entitled Bicycle Accident I (see Plate No. 2), I found a new freedom in the use of figures in action. Unburdened by the weight of analytical form, I believe Bicycle Accident I conveys a strong sense of drama and believable rhetoric. The new idiom promotes movement and psychological intensity, qualities difficult to achieve in an analytical style but essential to narrative painting. For these reasons, I don't believe an "out on the street" image would have been credible in the realist form of Memorial: Bicyclist. In the fall of 1980 the symbolic approach
of Memorial: Bicyclist was as close as I could come to literal content and still believe in the image. With the reworking of the form into an expressionist-realist style, I was able to develop a credible image that directly spoke to my narrative concerns. Bicycle Accident I was the result.

Developing an idiom or symbolic form to express vulnerability, or any other idea, becomes an exercise in developing credibility. Artists must be able to believe in the images they invent. That credibility, that believability, results from a fusion of the content with the form. The balancing act that an artist performs is one in which both sides (form and content) are in a state of catching up with one another. Developing a credible image is responding to a need which the artist feels. Whether this need comes from the form or content side of the question matters less than the experimentation and research that the artist goes through in order to respond to it appropriately. It is through that experimentation that aesthetic statements come to fruition as unified and credible images.

For me all visual images are symbolic in one way or another. Today we as artists are caught up in the possibilities of symbolic meaning which can underlie an image.
In terms of believability, however, the symbolism must function on a form level as well as a content level. In a truely narrative painting the subject matter carries the direct message, but the metaphorical overtones ring from how it is painted.
Plate 1. Memorial Bicyclist
Oil on Canvas 66" x 58"

Plate 2. Bicycle Accident No.
Oil on Canvas 48" x 48"
Plate 2. Bicycle Accident No. 1
Oil on Canvas 48" x 48"
Plate 3. Bicycle Accident No. 2
Oil on Canvas 48" x 120"

Plate 4. Self Portrait as a Painter
Oil on Canvas 44" x 31"
Plate 4.  Self Portrait as a Painter
Oil on Canvas 44½" x 31"
Plate 5. Standing Nude
Oil on Canvas 48" x 32"
Plate 6. Portrait of a Theologian
Oil on Canvas 32'' x 26''
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