My Approach to Nature in Art

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

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1972

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Introduction

The references to nature in my art work stem from remembered days spent in the fields and woods of Wisconsin. The quiet atmosphere I see in a stark winter day, in a warm sun drenched marsh, or in a fall day near an abandoned farm house is the atmosphere that I want the viewers of my art to feel. This reference to nature and the conveying of a mood to another person is the purpose behind my drawings and prints. Maybe when looking at my prints they will experience a similar remembered day in their past.

My first formal training in drawing and printmaking was at the University of Wisconsin. My watercolors had 'Americana' as the subject matter and depicted junk yards, fruit markets, and "Main Streets." My drawings were detailed botanical subjects done in pen and ink. My woodcuts were either abstract organic forms or based upon old wooden structures.

Graduate school was a continuation of my undergraduate work until I tried to break away from my tight style in a struggle with Expressionism. By working faster and with more spontaneity I learned to organize my ideas more intuitively so that the composition was stronger. By eliminating my concentration on details, finished products, and incidentals I was able to focus my attention on the composition.
I also learned that Expressionism was not satisfactory to me as a style. What I had discovered about composition and shapes I applied to my previous interest in detailed naturalistic drawings and meticulous woodcuts. The mood created in my drawings by subtle color and delicate gray lines I transferred to my serigraphs. In the serigraphs I eliminated most high contrasts as in the silver and taupe print. But let them be, they're dead and gone.

Although I did continue with nature as a subject the mood became more important to me than merely an accurate reproduction of the outside world. Realism and romanticism began to overlap in my new approach to nature.
My Response to Nature and Its Moods

According to John Canaday naturalism and realism are opposites.

Moral values are incorporated into realism; naturalism is a moral. The realist interprets what he sees; the naturalist merely paints the spectacle of life around him; its vice and ugliness, its beauty and sweetness, not preferring one to the other and commenting on neither. The realist may try to find fundamental truths in commonplace objects, but the naturalist deals with the moment only, even at its most ephemeral.¹

I seem to find myself somewhere between his definition of a realist and a naturalist. I do not try to make a moral judgment—I basically record what I see. I do not try to picture ugliness, but I do try to transfer a mood or an atmosphere. The idea of relating a mood is discussed by Canaday when he writes about romantic-realists and the Barbizon painters.

As romantic-realists they were interested not only in the look of nature but in discovering its "moods," the "spirit of the trees and fields and skies," "the oak wrestling with the rock," one of them said. But the mood was always discovered within the subject; the subject was never violated to serve the mood.²

Here again Canaday's terminology cannot be strictly applied to my work. However if his description of the Barbizon school approach can be exemplified in Theodore

²Ibid., p. 118.
Rousseau's Under the Birches, then I can see a similarity in the Barbizon painter's attempts to find moods in trees and skies and my desire to catch certain atmospheres in nature. For example, in my serigraph, In all their loneliness and pain, the very wintery foreground contains a subtle hint of spring in the color used within the markers. I believe as the romantic-realists,

that any fragment of nature as it existed, even the most familiar and commonplace bit of field, river bank, or forest, was a legitimate subject for a work of art that could be intellectually satisfying without classic artificialities, and emotionally expressive without recourse to the visual romantic stimulants. ³

Certain aspects of Canaday's description of realism, naturalism, and romantic-realism can be applicable to my use of nature in art. I take what I see and change it as an artist does in choosing certain elements to be represented abstractly and certain elements to be handled realistically for the purpose of creating a specific mood. It cannot be compared to taking a photograph, for I want the subtleties of the drawn line or the cut wood to add a new dimension to reality.

I again emphasize that it is extremely important to me that my feeling for nature is extended to the viewer. I could create for the sake of creating but I do not want it to end in merely the act of creation. The subject

matter and how it affects the viewers are important in transferring my ideas to others. As I see unlimited beauty in nature I want other people to realize this; thus I draw trees so that clouds and leaves become one mingling form. Trees in winter or weeds in a graveyard give me a feeling of isolation, quietude, and freedom. Haze rolling across deep green hills or gray green clouds before a storm are seldom noticed by some or observed only momentarily by others. Hopefully my prints and drawings will enable others to discover the moods I see in nature. There is so much ugliness in this world that a recollection of the beauty which can be seen in nature may give pleasure to others. In my self-portrait print, I have spread my dreams..., the combination of the textures, colors, and tree shapes exemplify my philosophy of art and nature. I feel that the words of the poet William Butler Yeats contain the sentiments I try to create in my art so I have quoted many of them for my titles.

My views are that art be for the viewer and not just the artist, that art should be a delight and joy to the mind and spirit. Because of this attitude towards art I find myself reacting against some of the current trends. Two examples are: that art which is meaningful only for the artist or that art which can be experienced only by crawling through a plastic tunnel. These are not positive aesthetic experiences for me or for many other viewers. A
branch taken out of nature and hung by a string and feathers in a gallery I feel merely detracts from the natural beauty of the branch. My views about chicken wire and sheep in a gallery are that they are equally as absurd as the plastic tunnel. If these absurdities were not considered the art in themselves but would be the basis for art I could see their validity. The absurd as handled by Goya in his *Caprichos* seems to have more creativity and artistic proficiency connected with it. As I create prints I strive for something beautiful knowing that most art of today is in conflict with that idea.

In the past, artists have sometimes reverted to the classical style in reaction to some of the avant garde approaches. Matisse returned to greater naturalism in the 1920's and 1930's as a reaction to abstraction. And

[1]n the immediate post-war period there was a general reaction to the experimental excesses of the preceding epoch and a renewed emphasis on classical clarity and order or alternately, a return to realism. This more relaxed and perhaps equivocal mood affected even the inventors of the new radical styles: Picasso, Gris, Braque, Matisse, and Leger, and led to the formulation of new esthetic programs.... As early as 1915 Picasso had begun to draw realistic portraits in an elegant style, as if to counter balance the abstract impulse of Cubism.  

In *Arts and Ideas*, William Fleming refers to the sculpture of Maillol and Despiau, who in the 1920's created neoclassic

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figures which were a "relief in a turbulent century. His
[Maillol's] neoclassicism is creative not imitative, free
not academic. [His work] achieves a quiet monumentality
that is both universal and timeless." 5 Our century continues
to be turbulent and in it there will always be a need for
the social commentators and conceptualists—but there is
also a need for art that is more realistic, or naturalistic
or classical.

Conclusion

I will continue to develop the kinds of prints and
drawings that I am doing presently until I reach that stage
where I feel my art is no longer rewarding to me or others.
Drawing has become the most positive vehicle for relating
my ideas. From my slow, tedious working on my drawings
comes the desire to create similar prints. A subtlety of
color, a faint grey line are expressive enough at this
stage but will develop into a greater use of color with
a continued reference to nature and its moods.

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5William Fleming, Arts and Ideas (3rd. ed.; New York:
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