FROM DESCRIPTION TO ABSTRACTION:
THE METAMORPHOSIS OF A PAINTER

A Thesis

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

by

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Preface

This thesis describes the change in my attitude towards painting that has taken place over the last two years. This can generally be described as a shift from concerns with rendering nature to those of building a unified painting with the emphasis placed on formal relationships on the canvas.

These basic concerns with structure transcend any one canvas and give a continuity to the act and meaning of painting.
Part I

In the past I was primarily interested in painting that closely corresponded to nature. I had no access to abstract art since I was looking at the objects themselves and not their relationships. The type of "looking" needed to see relationships on a canvas is not the vision used in everyday life, which is object-oriented. An artistic sensibility has to be cultivated and developed so that forms can be seen in context to one another.

Throughout the history of culture, art has demonstrated that universal beauty does not arise from the particular character of the form, but from dynamic rhythm of its inherent relationships, or -- in a composition -- from the mutual relations of forms. Art has shown that it is a question of determining the relations.¹

Before I developed this new awareness, I held the simplified belief that the artist's job was to abstract some element out of nature to which he or she gave special attention. The content of the painting was the element the painter chose to emphasize ---- color, light, linear design, space or detail. In my mind Giacometti's work dealt with space, the Impressionists' with light, Botticelli's with linear design, etc.

My particular strength and inclination was in describing color.

In my earlier work my process for making a shape was to broadly lay in the color and find the precise contours later. I determined the borders by continually referring to the scene being painted and carefully shaving off excess areas until the shapes conformed to those I was observing.

I still determine the borders of shapes by laying in broad areas of color, but now boundary decisions are based on how much of a particular color is needed in the overall structure of the canvas.
Part II

As I have stated, my major concerns have shifted from depicting objects to establishing relationships of color and shape on the canvas. With these goals taking priority, it is not necessary that one paint figuratively at all. However, I choose to do so. I like working within a structure; I have a general idea of what shapes will emerge on my canvas and this gives direction to my efforts.

Nature presents limitless possibilities of color and shape. My intuitive perceptions of what colors and shapes are right for each other stem from my relating them to a real or imagined scene. These scenes become the starting point, anchor and reason for building color relationships. Rather than working without restrictions I know that each color must eventually come to represent a wall, a chair, a floor, etc.

I generally work with scenes around me. Since the easel, tables and chairs in my studio were my environment for the past two years, they became the subject matter in my paintings. Although I do select objects whose shapes please me, the objects have no meaning per se, they are merely the letters from which I form my words or canvases.
I initiate paintings on the basis of relationships observed in nature. For example: the studio wall may be warm in color, the floor and objects cool. A painting stating this relationship might become a very quiet color statement (plate #1) or an intense and bold statement (plate #9).

In plate #9 the large yellow area corresponds to my white studio wall. The cool colors chosen for the floor stop the yellow shape where its size seems appropriate. As I worked on the painting, the colors of the floor and wall competed with one another: at times the yellow expanded into the floor shape; at times the floor pushed back into the yellow area. But at one point the optimum area for each color emerged and the boundary of the wall and floor was set.

This activity is quite different from drawing out the boundaries in a predetermined fashion using nature alone as a guide. Had I chosen to work with floor colors different in hue and intensity, the wall might have had to be another color or size altogether. Once the basic color relationships are chosen, the canvas rather than the scene being painted becomes the basis for decision-making.

The determination of an optimum size for a color area is not scientifically measurable: it must be felt out intuitively. The success of this search can be
verified by the harmony of the parts in a given canvas and by the correctness of the color and shape to the rectangular format.

Once I turned my attention to the canvas itself, my first task was to work with invented color relationships rather than with observed local colors.

I reconsidered the figurative painters who had inspired me in the past -- Morandi, Matisse, Cezanne, Derain and others -- and realized that what I had assumed to be copied observations of nature were in fact inventions. They varied too much from artist to artist to be naturalistic. To me, at my particular place of development, the colors seemed so believable and real that I had not understood the mechanics of the paintings.

Plates #1 and #2 were my earliest attempts to find my own color system. In these canvases I held for the most part to naturalistic space and size relationships. Given the option of adjusting a shape by cutting back on a color area or altering the color to save the realism of a shape, I opted for the latter.

In plates #3 and #4, two paintings which followed, I stuck to my original color choices and cut back or added to the shapes as needed. Consequently, they depart somewhat from a "logical" illusion of space.

A series of monoprints (plates #5, #6 and #7), done
in fall, 1976, had a great input into my painting because they forced me to set up basic relationships quickly and abide by them. The thin oil paint dried too quickly on the metal plate to allow for any moves which would not support and strengthen the initial decisions. Hence the prints evolved methodically and with relative ease from suggestion to completed statement. Areas were adjusted in relation to each other to make a unified painting. Using acrylic pigment for painting, however, allows for working at a slower pace, which permits greater control of purpose. On the other hand, the luxury of time may cause problems when a painting is basically completed except for one questionable area. Correcting one area without simultaneously adjusting the surrounding area becomes a process of trial and error and is considerably more difficult than working the entire canvas at once.

Ideally, the intuitive decision-making used in monoprints should apply to painting as well.
Part III

Although all paint physically lies on the same plane, color can create the illusion of areas moving back and forth in space on the canvas. At present I am not interested in using color to give the illusion of space. Rather, I would like to suppress the illusion of depth created by color and make all color appear on the same plane.

Making color stay on the surface of the canvas does not conflict with my desire to paint figuratively. The viewer seeing recognizable objects or overlapping shapes will interpret a foreground and background on the canvas.

My interest in this flattened type of painting is twofold. Pushing all the colors to the surface helps me consider the whole canvas with every move I make. As I lay in an area of color I judge in terms of how well a particular color rests on the same plane established elsewhere on the canvas. Secondly, I am fascinated by the sense of immediacy that this type of painting generates. With both figurative painters like Matisse and abstract painters like Mondrian who use color in this fashion, there is, for me, a heightened awareness of the totality of the canvas. The entire rectangular format becomes more pronounced than any one
part. Clement Greenberg has described this phenomenon in the following manner:

The eye has trouble locating central emphasis and is more directly compelled to treat the whole of the surface as a single undifferentiated field of interest, and this in turn, compels us to feel and judge the picture more immediately in terms of its overall unity.²

My method of pushing color to the surface is to treat all areas of the canvas with equal emphasis. For example, I may use the same color intensity in areas on the canvas that represent the background of a still life as I do in areas that represent foreground.

Plates #8, #9 and #11 are recent paintings based on the processes discussed above. Plate #10 is a drawing that attempts to emphasize the surface using black and white.

Part IV

My paintings are based on observations of nature, but they develop through intense involvement with the process of relating shapes and color on the canvas. When I use this method, the final appearance of any painting is unpredictable at the outset since much depends on intuitive choices made as the picture takes shape.

Certain contemporary styles of art are based on other systems. For instance, photographic realism involves the transfer of a gridded photograph to a large canvas and certain types of conceptual art may be based on mathematical formulas. These forms seem fundamentally different from the work I do.

Much contemporary work, however, both figurative and abstract, has its basis in the manipulation of colors and shapes to form an integrated canvas. I feel a strong connection with this type of work and I realize that this method I am using now is open to numerous possibilities and can lead in any direction I choose to take.
List of Plates

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<td>48&quot; x 36&quot;</td>
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Plate 1
Plate 3