RIDING THROUGH A CORNER

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

by

Henrietta Lynne Haagensen, B.A., M.A.

The Ohio State University
1975

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of Art
This thesis is dedicated to Hoyt Sherman and Sidney Charetz in appreciation of their persistent criticism.
LIST OF PLATES

I. "Horsemens Rhyme"- gum bi-chromate print, hand colored, 9"x 12".

II. "Botany"- black and white lithograph, 14"x 15".

III. "Band Saw"- black and white lithograph, 6"x 9".

IV. "In and Outs"- hand colored lithograph, 30"x 21".

V. "Space-Time, Barnett Newman on a Horse"- black and white lithograph, 12"x 8".

VI. "'A' Show- Dialectic"- handcolored lithograph, 25"x30".

VII. "Untitled"- black and white lithograph, 16"x 24".

VIII. "Gulliver's Out to Sea, Homage to Muybridge"- color lithograph, 31"x 23".

IX. "\(\frac{1}{2} + 2\)"- silk-screen and mixed media, 20"x 24".

X. "There's Dust in Florida"- painting, oil on paper, 30"x 40".

XI. Fresco from the Camera degli Sposi in the Ducal Palace at Mantua by Andrea Mantegna, figures are just under life-size.

XII. Detail from the Camera degli Sposi.

XIII. Detail of scene shown in XII.

XIV. Detail of the Camera Degli Sposi.

XV. Detail of the Camera Degli Sposi.
FOREWORD

"I learn by going where I have to go..." - Roethke.

This thesis is written as a history rather than as an essay. I chose the form of "history" because the visual work the writing accompanies does not radiate from a single conceptual core but progresses, instead, along a line of successive experiences. My interests and my basic understanding changed in the course of making the objects being discussed.

Observations on the work of well known artists are included in this paper because they influenced my work. I am concerned with showing how the analytical studies, accurate or inaccurate, affected my own studio decisions.

The worth of a "history" of my work lies, I think, simply in its existence. I am writing as honestly as I am able. Perhaps some future student who reads my thesis and looks at the work illustrated will better grasp the relationship between verbalized thought and studio action.

While this thesis is "honest"—all the ideas discussed were indeed my concerns at the times I say they were—this account is necessarily far from complete; other influences not mentioned also affected my work. In writing, I tried to select those idea sources I most often consciously exploited.
My first deliberate application of an insight gained by studying the work of a major artist occurred early in the second quarter of graduate study at Ohio State University. The work presented in this thesis begins at this point. Before discussing particular works and specific ideas, I will summarize my previous experience.

I came as a graduate student in printmaking to Ohio State immediately after completing a Master of Arts degree in art history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. My last year at Carolina was spent writing an analytical thesis on several works by Andrea Mantegna and, over the same stretch of time, reviewing a series of 20th century artists' writings on art—most importantly The Thinking Eye by Paul Klee. Since the last year was very busy, I participated in only one studio course, beginning etching. I had consistently done a limited amount of studio work—mostly painting—throughout my undergraduate and graduate art history programs. When I applied to Ohio State in printmaking I was pleased by the progress I felt I had made the previous spring working in color wood block printing for the first time; I was eager to see if encountering other new media might further improve my understanding of two-dimensional organization.
While I had pursued both my history studies and my studio work vigorously in Carolina, the two activities were then related in my experience as complements, not coordinates. Though I had sometimes laughed at a correlation between a paper topic and a painting, I had never consciously attempted to make my studio work deal with the ideas of organization I studied in art history. My Chapel Hill paintings and prints were pieced together on an intuitive basis or planned to visually parallel the structure of particular poems—early poems by James Dickey appealed to me.

At Ohio State, an increased interest in pictorial space triggered my recourse to knowledge gained by art history analyses. During my second quarter I began working in a new media—lithography. My restricted technical skill in this area forced me to work intensively in black and white, something I had never done previously. Without the complication of color, the placement of shapes received more attention.

I began trying to use the picture plane as a refer- ence in a way which paralleled Mantegna's organization. Studying this artist's frescoed room in Mantua, the "Camera degli Sposi," I had realized the wall surface was respected as a plane in reference to which other planes were balanced. (The background buildings are an obvious example; they are placed corners to the fore so that
their sides recede at equal angles from the picture plane.) I had also observed a balance existed in these frescoes between cues which created an illusion of space and cues which reinforced the flatness of the wall surface. (John White's book *Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* had trained me to look for this type of interplay.) My awareness of the Camera degli Sposi's spatial organization guided the planning of the print "Botany" and later "Band Saw". In designing these pictures I reviewed a series of old and new photographs concentrating on the depth-surface tension of the elements' arrangement rather than the subject matter.

Working in black and white I not only became more aware of position; value contrast also asserted itself as an important concern. In developing "Botany" I relied for the first time on Klee's maxim, "The eye is like a cow grazing a pasture, it finds the sharpest contrast (richest grass) first and then explores the rest of the field". In retrospect I think this was a crucially important step—my growing interest in basic perception phenomena will be discussed later.

Another art history derived understanding I began to investigate in my work was the impact of non-retinal information on compositional order. Under "non-retinal" I group kinesthetic signals and imagery which sets up expectations via the viewer's knowledge of the subject.
Studying the Camera degli Sposi I had been impressed by Mantegna's handling of a very wide range of such information. I had concluded the gestures of the people he painted—the direction they looked, the way they touched or did not touch each other, the tension or ease of their position—were factors as important in establishing the rhythm of the work as the repetition and spacing of shapes. Non-retinal cues such as the tautness of the dogs' leashes or the twist of a rolled curtain were also part of the work's structure.

The lithograph "In and Outs" evolved from my concern with non-retinal ordering. "In and Outs" is the label given to a series of fences used in training a horse. The fences are spaced so a horse must jump, take one stride and jump again. Wooden horse jumps served as my subject matter for this and several subsequent works because they were associated with a wide range of information—the path the horse took, gravity, speed, the rider's physical sensation of jumping. Also the jumps could be drawn quickly and easily rotated in imaginary space; this made them good candidates for surface-depth manoeuvring. Initially I drew on my own experience for imagery, since as a child I had spent hours constructing fences for my backyard pony, but, soon I began raiding the library for additional material. (Currently my work implies greater equestrian expertise than I ever actually acquired.)
Yet another interest based on my admiration of Mantegna was my concern for exploiting the viewer's awareness of the artist’s action. Mantegna is an unusual artist in the context of quattrocento painting in that his work is "cold". Despite a crystal-invisible picture plane he never allows his viewer to forget he is looking at an artwork; some element always speaks of contrivance— for example, in the Camera degli Sposi frescoes naturalistically drawn leaves surround fruit too perfectly round to be credible; the rendering of form attracts our attention reminding us of the artist rather than letting his presence be forgotten. In "'A' Show-Dialectic" I meant for an awareness of a decorative pattern of lights and darks to compete with the empathetic response invited by the presentation of movement. I tried to make art-making a subject alongside whatever other subject appeared. (Perhaps I should note the 'A' in 'A' Show doesn't come from school grading, but from the way horse shows are rated, an 'A' show is a large show.)

Hoyt Sherman served as my critic when I worked on "'A' Show-Dialectic". I owe to him an expanded interest in basic perception. (Sidney Chafetz cuffed my ears until I recognized this interest.) Through Sherman I became aware of the phenomena of ground-forming-figure, or "configuration". (I refer my reader to Sherman's book on Cezanne.) Sherman tried to make me consider size, posi-
tion and brightness. I think I had started to control
tion and brightness earlier via my interest in Mantegna
and in Klee, but I thank Sherman for my awareness of size.
(I was a slow learner; only now, almost a year after "'A'
Show..." am I realizing, I think, the importance of basic
sensual contrasts.)

When I wrote the foreword for this paper I said my
interests and fundamental understanding changed in the
course of making the work in this thesis. My discussions
with Sherman were largely responsible for the transition.
From "'A' Show..." forward my history based ideas competed
with a shifting understanding of configuration and its
significance. The year between "'A' Show..." and the
present was a hard one, as I tried to consolidate old and
new concepts.

"Gulliver's Out to Sea, Homage to Muybridge," a
color lithograph done over the summer was, I think, a
successful synthesis of my interests. Klee's concern
with addition, subtraction, multiplication and other
simple mathematical procedures as subject matter moti-
vated the initially playful manipulation of the diagrammed
horses in this print. The Muybridge photos followed as
images which by their subtle differences demanded close
scrutiny. (I admired the way Mantegna's work rewarded
analysis and I wanted my own to do the same.) The hand
drawing around and over the photos came last in reaction
to the imagery already established. (My interest in various methods of art-making had led to the decision to work in layers.) Formal criteria—the need for transitions, the need to make open space meaningful—as well as thematic concerns (Huynhbridge's horse is a "liberty" circus performer trained to rear on command) determined which drawn imagery was accepted and which was thrown out.

Another piece, "2", developed like "Gulliver..." over a long stretch of time, but did not turn out as well. After "Gulliver..." I wanted to work more with color, so I decided to try silk-screening as an alternative to the time consuming process of color lithography. At the end of a quarter of silk-screening I realized I'd spent too much time with the process and no prints were complete; I drew and painted over my prints. "Y0+2" is one of these mixed media pieces. In this work I meant to set up a rhythm of "dead" (meaningless) and "alive" (meaningful) open spaces and to use the viewer's built in capacity to see relationships (mostly non-retinal) as a means of making him smile. I became involved with contexts—the relationship of a part to its immediate surroundings and to a wider field. Humor, I thought, would be the natural by-product of seeing an element in contrary contexts. "Y0+2" finally disappointed me, however, in being over-bearingly rational as opposed to sensual. Looking back, I think that in attempting to adapt my understanding of
configuration to a preconceived goal—humor, I impoverished my work.

The more recent painting "There's Dust in Florida" is, I feel, a sounder work. At least this was a transitional piece which, I think, put me out of the mire and back on firm ground. A greater share of the components of this work pay their dues to sensual considerations. In making the painting (my return to this media was motivated by the immediacy of the process) I tried out many images, checking repeatedly, as when I had worked on "Gulliver..." to see if they helped unify the surface. I realized again that a concern with satisfying my sensual intuition of balance could enrich my work not only sensually but conceptually by stimulating my imagination; for example, the stars in this work happened as a variation on blue and yellow. Most of the art history based ideas examined in this paper are reflected in this painting, but they entered the process of making the work via the possibilities they suggested; my intuitive response to the relationships set up determined the result.

In conclusion, my current commitment is to work firmly based in sensual experience. I feel as if I am only now beginning to work efficiently. I now trust my ability to solve visual problems; I no longer try to know the solution in advance. I see my art history knowledge as a tool set which can help me, but I accept that what I do with
the tools will be decided as much by subconscious as by conscious activity. Finally I recognize intuitive thinking improves my work and feel that I must grow in my reliance on such thinking.

I hope the work described in this thesis will soon seem like the warm-up canter which precedes a real race.