REFLECTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS ON THE SEARCH FOR
A FERTILE MOTIF AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS
INVOLVED IN EXPRESSING IT IN VISUAL FORM

A Thesis

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for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by

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This thesis is dedicated to

Hoyt L. Sherman, Professor Emeritus
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PREFACE

The aim of art, so far as one can speak of an aim at all, has always been the same: the blending of experience gained in life with the natural qualities of the art medium.¹
INTRODUCTION

This statement is an attempt to clarify and define the content and process of my art work. I would first like to briefly discuss the title so as to avoid confusion or misunderstanding. When I speak of visual form I am referring exclusively to two-dimensional forms involved in painting and drawing. When I speak of a fertile motif I mean an underlying theme or content in my art that is capable of growth and expansion. The motif must also be capable of communicating to myself and others. The search for a fertile motif is a continuous process involving a combination of personal experience, skill, knowledge, intelligence, and intuition. The motif chosen should, I think, reflect all of the above and culminate in visual forms that are expressions of myself and the world around me.

I have divided this statement on my work into three major areas. The first division is concerned with content, the second with influence, and the third with process. Information in all three areas is based on the experience and knowledge that I have gained during my graduate studies.
CONTENT

I began my graduate studies at The Ohio State University with tremendous enthusiasm coupled by a feeling of panic. It seemed that I could not simply pick up where I left off as an undergraduate student in art - I felt like I was at a loss as to what to paint and draw. I knew that I wanted to paint and draw but I did not know what the content of the work should be. I did not realize then that it is impossible to forcibly instill meaning to a work of art. For some unexplainable reason I started incorporating recognizable objects into my non-objective compositions. For example, sometimes I used the image of a clock, sometimes that of a fish. I think that I was groping for a specific content that would be easily read. The need to do this soon vanished because it held little meaning for me. I began to accept the fact that the content of my art work was a mystery - an unknown. It was enough to simply attach meaning to the actual process. For a while I believed that possibly there was no meaning to my art. At the present time I believe that the content of my work can be clearly stated. At the same time it cannot be completely understood or known. What is the underlying theme of my work? It is simply the expression of a personal vision of myself and the world around me. This inner vision is somewhat vague because much of the content can be recognized only by the unconscious.
The Greek Narcissus was enraptured by the beauty of his (her) face; the new narcissus is enraptured by the vision of his (her) soul laid bare.\textsuperscript{2}

It is my belief that works of a personal vision are superior in meaning and validity to all other possible motifs. "Works of a personal vision alone will live."\textsuperscript{3} Expressing it visually is a problem that I will discuss at another point in this statement.
INFLUENCES

The artist who had the most influence on my early graduate work was Miro. The poetic titles, literary content, and inventive imagery of his art appealed to me very much. I was also drawn to that child-like quality inherent in his paintings and drawings. This same quality is difficult for me to relate to now because the young, carefree feeling evoked by his imagery is too distant from the way that I presently feel. The admiration that I had for Miro has faded considerably. The literary content is so easily read that it no longer holds my interest. The imagery, although usually inventive, often lacks subtlety and depth.

I was also interested in and influenced by the black and white paintings of Franz Kline. His bold images often resemble enlarged versions of Chinese characters. This Oriental quality and the gestural characteristics of his imagery are what intrigued me. I was attracted to the apparent spontaneity and immediacy of these paintings. Later I realized that the process involved in his work is much more complicated than what I originally thought. I still admire Kline's paintings although my interest in them is not as strong.

One influence that has lasted is that of Chinese calligraphy. I find the marks and characters to be highly interesting and visually stimulating. I first became aware of calligraphy while I was an undergraduate - this interest has not faded. The calligraphic line and mark are essential to my art.
Recently I have been looking at the work of Alberto Giacometti. I like his sculptured figures because of their elongated and almost vanishing form. They communicate a special feeling to me. I also think that his paintings and drawings are visually exciting. The sensitive textures and lines are qualities that interest me. I am drawn to the work of Cy Twombly and Bradley Walker Tomlin because of their calligraphic nature. The charcoal drawings of Jim Dine have recently become a source of stimulation for my work. The vast range of values, both subtle and bold, along with the fine textures and the variety of lines and marks reveal a visual sensitivity close to that which I am striving for in my drawings. I am attracted to the work of Mark Rothko because of its sensitively sensual shape and color. I have looked at the work of Bissier and it seems to contain some relation to my work - in many cases there is a kinship between our imagery. I like his work because it is poetic - it also has a quality of sincere simplicity. I could go on and name other works of art that I have a special feeling for but I think it is sufficient to say that I am drawn to art that is sensitively formulated and personal in nature.

I have always been deeply affected by music - I seldom paint or draw without its accompaniment.

A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today,
achieves this end. He (she) naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his (her) own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, abstract construction, for repeated notes of color, for setting color in motion.  

I also have a special liking for physical activities that incorporate form and rhythm. Examples of this are modern or ballet dance movements and certain athletic activities such as figure skating. Form, rhythm, and movement are essential to my art.

A recurring motif in my work is that of fragmentation and a "floating appearance". I think that this occurs partly as a reflection of the society I live in - one that is characterized by change, division, separation, uncertainty, and destruction. Recently I have come to another realization. I believe that the fragmentation and "floating appearance" is partly a result of a personal experience that lasted for twelve years (from the age of six to the age of eighteen). During this time my life was a series of moves from one place to another - it seemed like I was always on the move. It was interesting but this did not compensate for the fact that I was forced to cope with a new life about every six to twelve months. I think that this experience has had a deep effect on my life and my work.
PROCESS

When I started graduate school, and for a long time afterwards, my drawings were primarily executed on wet media acetate. I drew with brush and ink. The surface quality of the acetate was smooth — it allowed the brush and ink to flow across the picture plane. Accidents freely occurred. This gave a welcome element of surprise to my work. If I was not satisfied with an area, shape, or line, I simply wiped it off with wet cloth and started over. Eventually I was able to control the medium quite well. I was concerned mainly with position of shapes and lines on the page. I realized that having one mark or shape out of place would prevent the drawing from being successful. "Every form is as sensitive as a puff of smoke, the slightest breath will alter it completely." I was, and still am, very much concerned with the sensitivity and interest of my lines and shapes. I feel that these can be very expressive up to the point where they become "mannerisms" or "cliches". I worked with the acetate and ink until the point where the drawings became repetitive and boring to do. For several months now I have been working with charcoal on paper. I like the tactile quality of the material, the immediacy it allows, and the subtle variations that can be obtained. For example, with this material I can have areas that are very clear and sharp and I can also have areas that are so blurred or faded that they are almost non-existent. I feel that I can express myself freely with this material.
I had more success with my early drawings than I did with my early paintings. The paintings lacked the spontaneity and immediacy that occurred quite often in the drawings. I worked on canvas with rather dry acrylic paint. There was no "flow". I still use acrylic paint on canvas but by adding a polymer medium to the paint I am able to obtain a more fluid material to work with. This alleviates the frustration I felt when struggling with stiff paints. Color was another problem - I simply was not using color effectively. I concentrated on value relationships at the expense of color interaction. At this time I was also using a very ineffective technique or process of painting. I would put the ground color on first, then on top of that I "drew" my imagery. The result was an inability to integrate the figure and the ground - they were physically, visually, and mentally separated.

I gradually became more knowledgeable about color - I realize now that the choice of color, and where it is placed, is an integral part of the creative process involved in painting. Furthermore it has a profound effect on the content of the painting. Value, intensity, hue, size, and position of color area are all critical to the outcome of a painting. The power of color should not be underestimated. I feel that I may never completely understand color but I am spurred on by the fact that I am learning more about it as my experience increases. I have found that in many cases the color choices that are intuitively made are equal or even superior to those choices that are carefully thought out.
The concept of figure-ground was a difficult one for me to grasp. For a long time the ground was merely a background for the images I was so fond of. I saw them as separate and I painted them separately, never working back and forth. Gradually I began to change my working habits and with this came a better understanding of the figure-ground relationship. The initial step was to eliminate the process of painting the ground first. I began to see the figure and ground as one - sometimes the ground became the figure and sometimes the figure became the ground. By working back and forth and by the process of both additions and subtractions I have been able to achieve a higher degree of integration between the figure and the ground.

My drawings and paintings are largely the result of an intuitive feel for the material - I try to work with the material. When I am insensitive to the material, a frustrating experience and a "dead" painting or drawing are the results. I feel that each work is a chance for a new discovery. I never plan a work out in detail - usually I start with only a vague idea of what I want to do. Often this initial idea disintegrates and a new one appears. Each move or decision provides me with new information and is the basis for the next move or decision. Some of my decisions are conscious, others are unconscious. A special communication between the material and myself develops when all is going well. When I am rigid I lose touch with the material and with myself - the result is once again a work lacking in vitality and significance. In order to express my personal vision, I must allow myself to get lost in what is happening on the canvas or
paper. I have to achieve a balance between conscious and unconscious control and at the same time allow free reign to the material. This balance is not easily achieved. I do not think that I have ever achieved it but sometimes I come close. I feel that I might achieve it eventually.
CONCLUSION

I believe that an artist must work from necessity - an inner drive to express his or her personal vision. "Every artist chooses, from the forms which reflect his own time, those which are sympathetic to him, and expresses himself through them." 6

The generation of a work of art is a struggle to master the creative process in order to make a statement that is visually significant. My personal struggle with the creative process has involved a number of failures, obstacles, and deadends. I continue to paint and draw because it is what I want to do and because my paintings and drawings continue to develop.
FOOTNOTES


3. Herschel R. Chipp, THEORIES OF MODERN ART, speech by James Ensor (Berkeley, 1975), P. 111.


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