THE DUALITY OF CONCRETE REALITY AND ILLUSIONISM

A Thesis
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by
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Everyone wants to understand art. Why not try to understand the song of a bird? Why does one have the night, flowers, everything around one, without trying to understand them? But in the case of painting people have to understand.¹

Pablo Picasso

I am expected to do things a clever fellow could easily fake. But my consolation must be that I am much more handicapped by the sincerity of my intentions than by any lack of talent or ability.²

Paul Klee
1902
In the beginning the goal is not always clear. It is under the footsteps that the path is formed.  

Antonio Tapiés

It might be more effective to show a heap of sand containing an infinite number of grains, each of them equal in size than to make any amount of speeches about human equality.  

Antonio Tapiés

I hear the work "evolution". Repeatedly I am asked to explain how my painting evolved to me there is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all.  

Pablo Picasso

The Evolution

After ten years of creating art and studying its history, I now look back towards my brief history to recollect where I was and how I made it to this point in my art.

Many roads were taken, some came to a dead end, but all were productive to my learning process. These various roads widened my definition of art and shaped my thinking about myself and my concern with visual experiences. In retrospect, the ups and downs in my career as an artist paralleled those life experiences man must deal with. The accepting of my faults and failures and yet continuing
towards my goals paralleled the ability to incorporate what was considered a failure into the next work as an unanticipatedly important approach in making my art. The search in the visual arts was, in hindsight, a search about myself. Opening myself to a variety of experiences, breaking barriers of definitions and perceiving the world in a new way were my real education. Tearing down these barriers freed me to create and grow confident about my art and myself. In short, my route to creative freedom was to transcend painting something, to the act of just painting. This realization was indeed quite lifting.

They speak of naturalism in opposition to modern painting. I would like to know if anyone has ever seen a natural work of art. Nature and art, being two different things, cannot be the same thing. Through art we express our conception of what nature is not.6

Pablo Picasso
1923

The Stimulus

The scope of a work of art is measured by the number and variety of elements coming from past experiences.7

John Dewey

A man devoid of images, without imagination and sensitivity of ideas and sentiments will see nothing.8

Alberto Burri
The number of varied environments in which I have lived in the past few years has been the source of stimulus which registered in my memory. These environments have shaped my way of seeing and thinking.

My early works as an undergraduate painter at Lincoln, Nebraska were affected by the stimulus of the flat plains, grid-like structures, muted colors, and intense clear light. These elements became the groundwork for my paintings. When viewing this severe environment, architectural and organic images were the objects I concentrated on. The white grain elevators protruding vertically above the horizontal great plains and triangle shaped houses seem to appear like a flat theatrical setting casting long diagonal shadows. This intense image seemed so unreal and mysterious that it became etched into my mind.

During this period my paintings were painted with muted earth colors like the ones that surrounded me. Greens, golds, browns, salmon, ochres and blues dominated the pallet. The organization was created through a grid structure and the form of the painting relied on chiariscuro methods due to my orientation with seeing form through value. This theatrical appearance of the Nebraska landscape alluded to DeChirico's surreal interior still lifes. The paintings took on a psycho-
logically disturbing presence. This was my affinity with Surrealism.

During my study at Nebraska I looked at past artists who dealt with similar problems and concerns. In their own personal way Edward Hopper, Vermeer, DeChirico, Morandi and Richard Diebenkorn all painted with the grid system, architectural settings and value dynamics.

It was not until my move to the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville (for graduate study) that I realized the impact of color and organic structure. During the spring season the lush organic environment flourished with intense hues of reds, yellows, violets, magentas, greens and smoke blues. This new stimuli created a new sense of awareness which gave new visual input to my art.

In my year of study at Tennessee, I was confronted with the difficulty of transferring my drawing skills and use of value dynamics into the painting process. When I painted (brush on canvas) in a painterly technique the process seemed timid and anemic. The feedback became weak. Everyday I faced failure when I picked up the brush. The work ethic that was instilled in me demanded a physical involvement in the process.

My work ethic was deeply rooted in my early years
by my family. The summer jobs I worked on were blue collar type jobs such as stacking hay, working on barbwire fence crews, carpenter, pile driver, hod carrier and other various physical jobs. Working in the summer's heat and sweating twelve hours a day made the memories equally painful and rewarding.

When I began making art the psychological enjoyment was present but the physical aspect of the process was anemic. Producing paintings, though rewarding, became mentally exhausting. The constant analyzing became frustrating. There was no physical release from this built-up frustration. The paintings I worked on in Tennessee were visual failures. Through increased frustration I finally, in a last desperate attempt, eased my frustrations -- defacing my work by scraping, ripping, punching, burning and actually destroying my creations.

In this frustrated period I was not aware that destruction could be creative as well. The definition of painting that I held was one of addition and creative act. This convinced me, that again, I had failed. The process was wrong, the technique anemic and the whole ordeal lead me to believe I was not an artist, especially not a painter.
In the old days pictures went forward towards completion by stages. Everyday brought something new. A picture used to be a sum of additions. In my case a picture is a sum of destructions. I do a picture then destroy it. In the end, though, nothing is lost.9

Pablo Picasso

It was not until my introduction to other artists' movements and my awareness of new possibilities in creating that it seemed possible to continue painting again.

My introduction to Brut Art and Matter painters of modern Europe broke my old concepts and definitions of painting and art in general. The introduction to other possibilities fitted my need to physically control the media I wanted to work with. Brushes were unnecessary. The discovery of new tools and materials was due to my need to physically control the medium in a more crude, primal, tactile and physical manner. The direction of the Brut Artists was in the same vein. Men like Dubuffet, Fautier, Paul Klee and Wols all dealt with these same processes and concerns. This approach to painting is child-like and unsophisticated. A real interest in the physical aspects of the process gave them an affinity with primitive art and children's art. This was a reaction against the slick skills of early painters. Their work questioned the definition of reality.
A later generation of artists again supported this interest. Antonio Tapies, Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana (Matter painters) dealt with the same issues. Thick, textured surfaces of new materials other than commercial paint were used. These counter parts to American Abstract Expressionists dealt in anti-formal art. The materials used by these Brut artists and Matter painters ranged from marble dust, sheet metal, wood, plastic, found objects, asphalt or most any non-commercial media. The tools were anything beyond the brush. The use of these crude and unsophisticated materials and tools were considered to be anti-formal.

My introduction to these mens' concepts, processes and use of new media broke down my previous barriers and inhibitions, and gave me a renewed sense of confidence that was needed for my sagging ego and confidence as an artist. These people's work remind one of the discovered cave paintings at Altamara, France. It was approximately at the same period that I was studying medieval and Byzantine manuscripts. These tactile, primitive, precious and jewel-like objects were again reminders of the new possibilities offered to me. With the search of new media I started to collect and incorporate discarded materials in my works. This incorporation of discarded junk materials became an
important ingredient for creation. Bringing life back to the dead was itself a discovery of creation. This concern, though new for me, had historical references. The Dadaists in 1917 and Kurt Schwitters added a new value to old, overlooked and downtrodden bits of reality -- reincorporated them into a new relationship thus creating a new entity and reality for them. Later on Rauschenburg was to again revive this concern in movement known to us as neo-dadaism.

At this point I directed my concerns to color relationships and eliminated objects painted in a chiaroscuro manner. This freed me from past concerns and allowed me to invent new shapes, colors and to be more intuitive and less analytical and logical in making my paintings. The works became less forced and more exciting to create. This "letting go" of logic and trusting my intuition gained a kinship with "surreal autonomism." Symbols and images were personal signs and messages created through marks. Making these marks, in a drawing sense, restored the unique, primal need to communicate a visual message. With all the information, education in history, study of techniques and concepts, I wanted to hold on to the simple idea of making the visual mark. I feel drawing is inately a child-like and primitive approach. This became an important ingredient in my direction.
In my recent mixed media paintings the works have subtle symbolic significance. These works, in retrospect, are a logical development of my past ideas and experience. I have been concerned with a variety of images in an illusionistic and surreal situation. As the work progressed, I became aware that the process was as important as the end product. I went beyond the medium of traditional paint and explored media such as plaster, sand, metal powder, oil pigment, twine, staples, nails, found objects and aluminum sheet metal. These materials met my physical need to actually construct paintings. The various tools used were hammers, drills, sanders, trowels, punches and blow torches. This process of application which I felt necessary in order to age the work, fulfilled my concern for the work ethic. The aging process gave a sense of history to the piece and value to the work because of my commitment to it.

My concern for a sense of history was reflected by my awareness of the classroom blackboard. The historical information of marks the blackboard receives parallels my concerns. Writing (drawing) messages and making marks on a flat surface to communicate an idea; and then erasing this information and resuming this process later was similar to my adding and subtract-
ing process in painting. I can imagine the incredible amount of history the surface has built up in time. This reflection of time and aging seems to reflect my own concerns to age the work. While aging the work of art and creating this tactile, scarred look, I simultaneously sought to create a visual sense of quiet beauty and dignity via manipulation of subtle colors actually rubbed into the etched metal. I was excited by the duality that aluminum sheet metal has. Its ability to absorb physical punishment creates a look of severity, aging and physical abuse. Simultaneously, it can be rubbed, polished and subtly painted to create a glowing illusionism.

This duality of "concrete reality" and surreal illusionism created from this natural reflected light becomes a major concern in the looks of these narrow, vertical panels. The ambiguity itself, created by these two aspects is the other major concern. In the metal and mixed media panels the shapes are usually in vertical placements with rough texture against soft reflective materials (metal) to compliment this look. The center shape reminds one of an object (silo, gothic window, bullet, or penis -- if you're Fruedian) or simultaneously flips to - deep space as if you are seeing through a classical arched window or door. The objectness of the painting (caused by its concrete reality)
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seem to push the viewer against the wall in a claustrophobic frontal manner and if the viewer moves over to the center panel he/she could step into a mysterious open void of deep space. This respect for the flatness and yet alluding to deep space plus its surreal lighting and classical arched doorways allude to De Chirico’s metaphysical exteriors and his concern in shifting and distorting the space to create a discomfort and disorientation to the viewer while pleasing the eye. The soft glowing light which is reflected by a direct light source is against a textured material which breaks up and absorbs the light. A visual change and shift into ambiguity will occur while viewing the paintings by the spectator’s own movement.

In retrospect light became the root of my past concerns. Casting shadows from objects created a mysterious sense about my environment, especially in the soft light of the evening on the plains of Nebraska.

In the acrylic paintings preceding the recent metal works the glowing shapes and soft edges allude to an inner light source. Jewel-like objects, incorporated into the recent works allude to evening stars and embedded jewels of Byzantine manuscripts. These nuances of scattered light visually integrate the whole of the painting.

My latest works (drawings on metal) are now more
direct and simple. The materials employed are old discarded, rusty litho plates already aged by the elements of weather and abused during the printing process. This discarded material had its own life. With its own aged quality, I now can directly etch a gesture or mark, thereby eliminating the aging process. This quick and simple act became a culmination of years of working.

Because I believe in the purity and honesty of children's art, I seek the most simple and yet direct manner of visually expressing my concerns. I find this search exciting as I realize I cannot ever truly return to the state of naivety which a child naturally possesses. My recent work is evidence of this search which I intend to continue.

Ron Milhoan
May, 1977
To become truly immortal a work of art must escape all human limits; logic and common sense will only interfere. But once these barriers are broken, it will enter the regions of childhood vision and dream. 10

DeChirico
1913

A landscape enclosed in the arch of a portico or in the square or rectangle of a window acquires a greater metaphysical value because it is solidified and isolated from the surrounding space. Architecture completes nature. It marks in advance of human intellect in the field of metaphysical discoveries. 11

DeChirico
1920
FOOTNOTES


2. IBID, p. 442.


4. IBID, p. 18.


6. IBID, p. 460.


10. IBID, p. 440.

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