AN APPROACH TO FIGURATIVE PAINTING

A Thesis

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

by

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I want to express my gratitude to my teachers and my wife, who, despite their demanding positions and exacting creative work, so generously spared time for me.
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When I began painting as an undergraduate my work was largely imitative of the works of other artists. At that time the prevalent mode of painting was abstract expressionism, and I emulated the masters of the New York school. My efforts were spent paraphrasing the style of DeKooning.

I became dissatisfied with my abstract expressionist work because it was too derivative. I felt a need to get away from the stylistic cliches of the current painting scene. Thus I rejected being "new" for the sake of being new; of being "radical" for the sake of being radical. I began to deal with representation, and in particular with the traditional image of the figure. This move was not an attempt to maintain the realist tradition. I don't care about being "realistic" if by realism one means the imitation or replication of reality. However, I am a realist in the sense that when I lift shapes from nature I attempt to endow them with pictorial authenticity.

Since entering the graduate program the predominant subject matter of my graduate painting has continued to be the human figure. While the figure is a traditional subject for the artist, I think of it largely as an incidental pictorial element. The figure for me is an object in relation to an environment. While it is incidental when considered as a compositional element, it is not a completely arbitrary subject. The use of the figure in my work has been to some
degree a habitual decision. The instruction at the school where I did my undergraduate work was thoroughly figure and environment oriented, and I continue to be influenced by that experience.

My decision to deal with the figure is also personal; I like the human figure, I find it interesting and intriguing visually. Many artists have used the figure as a vehicle to communicate specific emotional qualities. An obvious example would be the work of Rodin. I attempt to de-emphasize these qualities of the figure. This attitude is probably caused by the influence of POP art. The pop artist treated the figure with a very unromantic attitude. Their subjects were placed in everyday mundane situations. Like the POP artist I choose to avoid sentimentality. Unlike the POP artist I make no effort to interpret subject matter for the viewer. I try to remain neutral, not letting the viewer know what I think about the subject matter. I present it in a matter-of-fact representation. An example of the type of POP art that is social commentary is the "Great American Nude" series of paintings of Tom Wesselman. The gesture and the position of the figures within the format certainly conveys eroticism. Wesselman's subject matter in combination with his titles evoke responses in the viewer and imply that a comment is being made concerning the institutionalizing of sexuality in America. My paintings don't have titles and the figures are positioned in a neutral documentary way.
I am concerned with the relationship between abstraction and representation. (I include in the term representation the idea of illusionism.) Obviously any two-dimensional work of art is to some degree an abstraction. Yet abstraction and representation are often conceived of as mutually hostile by beginning art students and laymen in general. A painting is either abstract or representational. To combine the two is to be inconsistent. I have sought to achieve an image which on one level can be viewed as a picture of a human figure in an environment and on another level as an abstraction, or more specifically as pictorial reality. By abstraction I am referring to patterns of hue, shape, line and value on a flat surface. High quality representational paintings function on an equally high level when evaluated abstractly. Hans Hofmann describes it:

The most complete representation of three-dimensionality, in which all the three-dimensional fragments are summarized in an entity, results in pictorial two dimensionality.¹

A primary, and perhaps the greatest example of this synthesis that Hofmann refers to is the work of Rembrandt. An example of the type of work which does not achieve this synthesis; which belies pictorial reality is Raphael's

"Alba Madonna" where the illusion of sculptured, modeled volumes in deep space has been nearly perfected. Color is confined; the delineation of shapes in space has taken precedence over the picture as a construction on a surface. Raphael has disguised the abstract level, i.e., he has given up pictorial reality for the sake of illusionism. It has been my objective to make the abstract level apparent; to always give precedence to pictorial reality. Rather than hide the abstract pictorial devices I want them to compete with the subject matter portrayed. My paintings are not about a figure in a room; they are about compositional elements. The content of my painting is pictorial reality. My paintings are didactic in the sense that they give information about painting. My primary concern is the relationship set up between illusionary space and the surface of the canvas. I want to make the viewer conscious of that surface. In an effort to make both levels "read" in one painting I construct a number of illusionistic cues and balance them with cues referring to the two-dimensional surface. "Move and countermove result in tension."\(^2\) The tension exists as a result of the illusionistic forces directing the eye into space and the forces of pictorial reality directing the eye to the flat surface.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 42.
Depth, in a pictorial, plastic sense, is not created by the arrangement of objects one after another toward a vanishing point, in the sense of Renaissance perspective, but on the contrary by the creation of forces in the sense of push and pull. Nor is depth created by tonal gradation...\(^3\)

The above quotation by Hans Hofmann refers specifically to the problem with which I am dealing in my painting. Hofmann goes on to say that: "depth is not created on a flat surface as an illusion, but as a plastic reality."\(^4\) Essentially what Hofmann is talking about is that without something standing still there is no movement. In other words when the two-dimensional reality is established, the three-dimensional illusions will also read. He is talking about the difference between a line concept and a plane concept, the difference between Renaissance perspective and what one of my professors once referred to as sectional perspective. Renaissance perspective is concerned with the "realistic" projection, delineation and modeling of three-dimensional objects in illusionary space. It deals with distorted rectangles, with objects at an angle to the picture surface. Sectional perspective deals with what Hofmann calls "plane organization".\(^5\) The planes are conceived of as parallel to the picture surface. They are larger or smaller as they approach or recede from

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 43.
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 44.
\(^5\)Ibid., p. 44.
the picture plane. No matter what their position in the painting their shape remains constant; they always will be true rectangles.

My paintings can be visualized as a stack of planes lying parallel to the picture plane. One plane can be visualized as representing the distant background, or the subject, or an overlay. A series of planes represents a different symbol or group of symbols occupying different levels or positions in pictorial space. The reader may refer to plates I and II for examples of plane or sectional perspective.

Each plane in Renaissance perspective grows out of diagonals generating a false shape. In sectional perspective, however, the back and front planes are parallel, often about the same size and shape. When a plane in Renaissance perspective is delineated it is seldom a visually integrated part of the picture surface. Although occupying part of the picture surface, it makes an angle visually to the surface. It is a false shape which belies the surface of the painting. If a plane is parallel to the surface, it's shape will remain constant and will be visually integrated with the picture surface.

Not all views of objects or environments resolve themselves easily into sectional perspective. Paintings with corner views, which may be of a room interior, so
overwhelming the viewer with their perspective impact that great care must be exerted to overcome this insistence. I have attempted in several paintings to apply a "corner view" in sectional or planal perspective. (Plate III is perhaps my most successful attempt.) In this particular implementation I have tried to dramatize the visual activity of the floor plane and the wall planes through the contrast of their respective hues and values. The emphasis on the silhouette of the whole shape of the floor plane is helpful in overcoming the perspective drive into depth. The insistent close corner is somewhat reduced in visual impact by the interruption of the flat silhouette plane of the figure. The solid contour line around the figure, in this case, serves to relate the figure to the picture plane.

In a majority of representational painting, the brushwork is concealed, thus the viewer's attention is focused on the illusionistic cues. I refer the reader again to Raphael's "Alba Madonna". Raphael mentally painted around his volumes as if stroking a cat. Although his brush was always on the actual picture surface, the goal of visual roundness in the painted image dominated his every move. As a result, the highly modeled volumes in deep space so overwhelm the viewer that he loses the impact of the picture as a construction on a surface. My
brushwork is evident so that the forms of nature are inseparable from the paint and surface. I apply paint to the picture surface as I would butter to bread. I apply color flat to accommodate the flat surface. These flat areas of paint on the picture surface relate to the image, which is also described with flat planes in or parallel to the picture surface. There is a logically harmonious melding of paint, surface and image. To hide the brushwork in the service of modeling and illusionism detracts from the two-dimensional surface. To allow the brushwork to be clearly visible helps attract the eye to the flat surface.

Pieter Breugal the elder was able to construct volumes in illusionistic space and at the same time relate them to his surface pattern.

Of later painters, Henri Matisse's "Pink Nude" of 1935 is a good example of the organization of paint in relation to planal shapes.

I like the contrast between areas of flat paint and areas of heavy impasto. I think the interplay between thick and thin, active and flat paint is very exciting.

In an effort to focus on the tension between illusion and surface, I find myself very often involved in a simplifying or reductive process. The areas of a painting are pruned of non-essentials; reduction of illusionistic cues like modeling to a minimum needed for
recognition. While I retain a degree of size and shape relationship, I eliminate a great deal of objective detail. The shapes and areas are equated with various planes and divided into a pattern of simple uncomplicated shapes. I like to exploit the interplay between large and small shapes. A degree of perspective and illumination effects are retained for illusionistic cues. The dichotomy between the effects of illumination (modeling and cast shadows) and flat pattern form a tension by virtue of their contrast, opposition and interplay. However, even the shapes formed as a result of illumination I conceive of as planes to some degree. Illusionistic devices direct the eye to objects receding in pictorial space. Flat pattern and plane organization direct the viewer to the picture plane. The former attends to the three-dimensional; the latter to the two-dimensional.

Line is the most obviously abstract pictorial device. However, "a line concept cannot control pictorial space".\(^6\) Only edges exist in nature. As my painting progressed I became more aware of line. I became more selective in the use of line. Again to quote Hans Hofmann:

A work based on a line concept is scarcely more than illustration; it fails to achieve pictorial structure. Pictorial structure is based on a plane concept. The line originates

\(^6\)Ibid., p. 44.
in the meeting of two planes... We can lose ourselves in a multitude of lines, if through them we lose our sense of planes...  

Line can act as a strong illusionistic cue. Diagonal lines tend to imply divergence away from the surface. They operate as a powerful cue to recession in pictorial space. Delineation detracts from pattern and surface.

The dominant feature of Renaissance perspective is the diagonal driving into the distance. In either Renaissance perspective or sectional perspective diagonals are often unavoidable. But in Renaissance perspective they are dramatized, while in sectional planal organization they are subordinated or eliminated. For an example of the dramatization of the diagonal one has only to examine Tinteretto's "The Last Supper". At times the overall shape may be stressed and the internal diagonal reduced in importance. (Plate IV) If the reader will examine the diagonal which begins at the lower left corner of this particular painting he will find that it is very much de-emphasized. The force of this diagonal has been reduced because the floor plane and wall plane which produce it have been conceived as one shape. While their hues are different their values are so close that they unify visually.

A long important diagonal can be interrupted by overlapping forms. (as in the case of the figure in Plate III.) The effect of the diagonal is preserved, yet the picture

---7Ibid., p. 65.
can still be controlled planally. The problem of line arose for me when I related drawing to painting or, as Hofmann puts it, when I went from a "line concept" to one of "color bearing planes".\(^8\) I avoid confining linear structures. I try to create edges in an effort to accent shape and pattern. I make edges simply by virtue of paint meeting paint on the surface of the canvas. I am not here referring necessarily to one hue meeting another but more precisely to actual, physical "ridges" formed by one plane of pigment meeting another.

When I began the figurative paintings I was very much concerned with hue. I made use of arbitrary color systems. One painting dealt with a complimentary system. I followed it with three paintings using approximately the same analogous system. As the paintings evolved I became more concerned with value as a controlling variable. My most recent paintings make use of local color, muted hues with subtle intervals and chromatic grays. My volumes are indicated with flat color bearing planes and shape rather than through modeling. Pictorial reality; planal structure and shape pattern remain my dominant concern in my use of color. In Raphael's "Alba Madonna" color is used as an adjunct of drawing, as a tint. His concern with the illusion of three-dimensional roundness

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 65.
had precedent and was dependent on careful modeling and delineation.

My paintings are based on photographs. I compose with the camera and again with preliminary drawings. The photograph is a two-dimensional approximation of three-dimensional reality. The camera distorts according to the mechanisms of the lenses. I distort according to the formal needs of pictorial representation and abstraction. The information of the photograph is filtered through my sensibilities. The image evolves in the process from photograph to drawing to painting according to the pictorial structure.

Three-dimensional objects in nature are recorded optically as two-dimensional images. These images are identified with the two-dimensional quality of the picture plane.  

I arrived at graduate school with the intention of developing myself as a painter. To prevent my activities from becoming diffused I had to direct them; I had to have a goal. That goal I decided was basically to deal with the "multi-problems" of painting; to learn to paint. I decided to deal with representation or more specifically with figure painting with an emphasis on resolving the formal problems of constructing a painting. I believe that my painting has arrived at a synthesis; I have

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9Ibid., p. 64.
equated nature to the picture plane. I feel I have achieved a representation of reality without destroying the two-dimensional essence of the painting.
List of Plates

Plate I. ......................... Cheerleader

Plate II. ......................... 4 Portrait

Plate III. ......................... Corner

Plate IV. ......................... Woman in room
Plate II.
Plate IV.