SURFACE AND INTUITION OF THEME:

A DEVELOPMENTAL STANCE

A Thesis

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

by

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1975

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about my exploration of media, process, and ideas and how I have organized my efforts in terms of self-discovery. It is also about my concerns for kinetic and optical qualities and it covers a variety of media which are concerned with the internal or formal structure of my work. My ideas are not preconceived but are unfolding in time. This is a result of my interaction with process and optical visual problems. I now have reached some conclusions about how I work.

EARLY WORK: PRINTS

My undergraduate work was primarily of two types, landscape and an ornamental abstraction. In the landscapes the illusion of space was depicted with textures, pattern, and line. These elements, however, were subordinated to creating a fairly conventional idea of space (foreground, middleground, background) and were tied to creating the elements of landscape (trees, clouds, grass, etc.). My other work was abstract in the sense that it did not refer to anything realistic. These prints consisted of geometric forms surrounded by a dark textural ground.

My first experiences in Graduate School were frustrating since I tried to make a radical break with my earlier interests. I tried new subject matter, a new media (lithography), and new ideas of execution. Now I am able to see that this, of course, was too much and the resulting work was confusing and somewhat arbitrary. My next approach was to return to my earlier landscape interest. However, this time I concentrated on pattern relationships and on avoiding representation. It was at this time that I discovered how little I knew about formal qualities of organization. I understood organization at that time only in reference to creating the
object. Some of my work at this time resulted in confusion and although a few prints were successful I was not really conscious of all the reasons for their success. One such print, "Ground" (Figure I), was made by taking a photograph of the ground, organizing patterns, and using the result as a readymade surface. I completed this image by adding color as a structural device. This color is semi-local; I used red dots for leaves, yellow-pink for sunlight, and blue for shadows. At the same time, however, the addition of color also imposes a structure to the previous black and white image, the initial form. Although there were some successes, most of my work looked cluttered, busy, and confusing. I also had the problem of being interested in subordinating color and form to representation. I felt a need to try something more free and inventive. I wanted to learn something new and not do more of what I already knew how to do.

WATERCOLOR PAINTINGS: THE BREAK WITH SUBJECT MATTER

Because I wanted to get away from subject matter I imposed a system on myself which allowed for freedom of invention and the development of ideas through the process of making a picture—the "feedback" method. This technique allowed me more freedom in adjusting elements to each other, in dealing with the relation of color, shape, and organization for purely aesthetic meaning. I found this system very liberating after working with problems of representation. Since watercolor is a more direct way of working than printmaking, the discipline of working the paper for best results in one sitting encouraged spontaneity. The color shapes had to be correct the first time they were formed for too much manipulation muddied the color. Watercolor’s rigidity, its discipline, was just what I needed.
When I first began doing watercolors I thought of them as sketches, which allowed me to be more experimental. They were the simplest way to make a pictorial statement. I now perceive that I began to react personally when I thought of the surface in the simplest way—a color ground shape spreading over a surface. I advisedly use spreading because I let the paint literally flow over the surface of the paper. I used a brush, rags, my hands, and sponges to help the flow of paint. The kinetic touching and feeling of the surface improved my awareness of placement and of correctness of color. After forming the generalized ground shape, I began accenting or developing the ground shape with scratches, using my hands to sense the formation of pictorial space and adding dark and light accents, scraping away the surface of the page for whites. This resulted in a contrast of color and texture. This process is perhaps best illustrated in "All the Morning Stars Sang Together" (Figure II).

I feel that this method of working helped me with my printmaking. I worked directly on the lithographic stone and plate and realized that this medium is capable of holding a greater variety of texture. These prints were much more successful than my earlier efforts. Playing around with the internal structure concept helped me think of a picture as an adjustment concerned with relationships and not with representation. Although this feedback system allowed me freedom I began to notice that I was making marks and movements with my hands and primitive tools in an habitual and predictable way. This began to make it difficult to keep the surface fresh looking. The gesture was becoming too important. I realized that I was concerned with visual qualities too and that I needed to investigate them,
PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINTS: THE USE OF A SUBJECT MATTER REFERENT

I have done photographic prints for several reasons. First of all, I wanted to train myself to perceive relationships in external sources. I was also attracted to the camera's visual orientation, especially its ability to record detail, and to the fact that photographic images can easily be manipulated within the graphic processes. I wanted to investigate possibilities of texture and pattern—interests I had developed through my paintings. Finally, I wanted to test a notion which had increasingly intrigued me, the idea that internal relationships are more important than creating the object. In other words, I was interested not in subordinating relationships to the creation of what something is but in stressing how it can be seen.

For subject matter I looked to nature because of its variety and density of texture. The first successful photographic print, "Leaves" (Figure III), is a close up of leaves on the ground which was enlarged to slightly larger than actual size. I composed this print by selecting abstractions created by the patterns the leaves make. Although very detailed, the structure does not define or describe what leaves look like—it does not represent. The detail is subordinated to defining the relationship of the shapes that are created by them. This capacity of the leaves to form abstract patterns through a photographic detail (description) is, I feel, the intriguing quality that this print has. Something else has happened. Now the external subject matter informs the internal experience as a result of my separating the visual from the gesture of painting.

Instead of making marks by hand on a surface I used the camera to provide relationships which are entirely visual. The personal interpretation is the result of grouping or arranging the composition according to
how I see relationships. The subject matter, leaves, is thus distorted for expressionistic ends. What is left out in the photographic work is a sense of creating space by touch. Working with these four photographic images has been, I feel, a valuable experience. It has helped me focus on mainly visual qualities and has renewed my interest in printmaking, not only in terms of photography, but also in hand drawn or kinetic work.

SYNTHESIS

In assessing my earlier work, I see how my concern is with synthesis—how my working habits have become increasingly complex compared to my earlier kinetic and visual concerns. I also sense a more specialized role for "process," the role of the photograph, and the necessity of using studies to develop my ideas. This specialization of function is due, I think, to a more definite sense of my involvement with the media, the role of "feedback,"² and my concern for optical interests.

In my most recent work, "Gleams of a Remoter World" (Figure IV), I have used process to execute the painting but I have relied on subject matter for studying the relationships or composition. I believe this means that the "feedback" method plays a minor role compared to earlier work. I no longer use this method to generate the main idea of the composition; I use it only to adjust ideas to the media. These ideas are a synthesis of other ideas from studying other works of art, the visual characteristics of photographic images, and from making sketches of primary groupings, arrangements, and motifs. Although I have a more definite interest in the role of Process, I see it in a more liberating sense because of the way in which optical studies enrich the quality of the mark on the surface.
Also I feel that the organization in these recent paintings attests to the influence of greater perceptual concern. The organization is a result of vision rather than gesture. In my earlier work I felt that the gesture or "feedback" method was determining the organization—a kind of turgid, swirling space. In itself this is not bad, but I was becoming unsure of the degree of personal choice involved with this method of working. I wanted my marks and my organization to be individual, a result of my vision and not a result of gesture divorced from concept.

CONCLUSION

Now as I review my work and my involvement with it I feel that I have progressed in terms of my development as an artist. This progression is a result of personal discovery. I have a more definite idea of my interests. I feel confident that I can continue my growth and pursue my interests outside of graduate school. This confidence is a result of a more professional approach towards art. I feel this is the beginning and not the end of my education.
FOOTNOTES

1) I use feedback here as an abstract expressionist would use it--no prior planning, complete improvisation.

2) Here, although I use a modified form of feedback to adjust elements of the composition, I have a preconceived idea of the kind of picture I want to make.
FIGURE I  Ground, etching; 24x34

FIGURE II  All the morning stars sang together, watercolor; 23x30
FIGURE III Leaves, photo-etching
24X34

FIGURE IV Scenes of a Remoter World, watercolor; 23X30