MODERNISM TO ECLECTICISM

A Thesis
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for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footnotes</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"Submerged beneath the public styles, schools, and theories of art, independent of isms and unamenable to criticism, is the private mind of the artist. This is the realm of fantasy and desire, of dream and obsession, of secret need and stated program, of Idea and idée fixé. It is the part of art that gives resonance to structure and meaning to the marks and shapes the artist makes: it is the part that is "impure." In the vast field of broken idols, worn-out legends, and obscure signposts, it erects its own myth."

Beginning with my earliest esthetic orientation in "modernist" theories of painting, I feel that my art has developed into an eclectic system of decision-making for my visual statements.

My early concerns centered on two distinct yet contiguous systems. The first was the study of color theory, particularly Michel Eugene Chevreul and Josef Albers. In the painting studio, this examination of color was controlled by a methodical style. The paintings consisted of simple geometric compositions. Colors were applied by taping, resulting in hard edge color bands (see illustration 1). Here a triangular format and four colors were chosen. Each color then was methodically taped in graduated value stripes. My analytical method of taping these color bands was inspired by Chevreul's writings on "flat tint painting." "In the painting of flat tints, the colours are neither shared nor blended together, nor modified by the coloured rays coming from objects near those imitated by the painter."
While Chevreul's writings provided a phenomenological foundation for color in my work, his writings were clouded by nineteenth century bourgeois notions of object glorification. The color relationships of Josef Albers' work provides a clearer influence: "He was drawn towards a study of the ways in which colours act upon one another. The pictures and prints of the Homage to the Square series, Albers' best-known works, are planned experiments with colour."\(^3\) The color bands in my works were principally shade, tint, or merging color systems, exhibiting their relationships in a geometric framework (see illustration 1-3).

The motive of this work was to sharpen my understanding of color and how it interacts with form. I worked with shaped canvas of circles, squares, and triangles, and also with circle-square-triangle compositions in a rectilinear stretcher, all with these modulated value stripes (see illustration 1-3). I was not so much concerned with my personal expressions in colors, but with the psychological effects and technical aspects of colors. After the paintings were finished, I attached names to them, evoking more than just literal flat paint on canvas. One painting experiment later became known as "Dream-Sicle" because the blue and orange stripes situated on a white circular stretcher gave me a cool feeling of an ice cream bar of the same name (see illustration 2).

Concurrent with this color/form investigation, I did gestural monotone paintings in which the density and texture of the paint was the emphasis. These paintings were also studies, planned experiments,
but contradictory to the flat hard edge color bands. These paintings were about texture and the gesture; they emulated Rothko, Gottlieb, and Pollock.

I then combined these two conflicting devices in a single painting series which was completed in 1975. These paintings consisted of a hard edge geometric border, with a monotone gestural textured center (see illustration 4,5). This series was similar to the work of Jo Baer. My intention for this work or image was to display these two devices as a contradictory whole (see illustration 5). Again, metaphors were an afterthought and were a consequence of the composition, color, form, and texture. This was particularly evident in one painting because of the dark brown, sandy looking textured center and maroon dotted hard edge border; a title of "Morocco" was attached to the work.

The devices I used in these works were drawn from modernist reductive conclusions about art.

"We may take it for granted that in this system all narrative and symbolic content had to drain out of painting because that kind of content was held in common with literature. The depiction of solid forms was abandoned because 'three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture, and for the sake of its own autonomy painting has had above all to devest itself of everything it might share with sculpture.' Recognizable entities had to go because they 'exist in three-dimensional space and the barest suggestion of a recognizable entity suffices to call up associations of that kind of space...' and by doing so, alienates pictorial space from the two-dimensionality which is the guarantee of painting's independence as art."
Formalism's literalness of the two-dimensionality of painting provided a working structure whereby I could make paintings by combining art devices (line, shape, color and others). I widened my range of devices to include color blends, new materials, especially aluminum and plywood and the wall itself. This enlargement of my visual painterly vocabulary precluded a change in my presentation of my art. The new series which was completed in 1978 differed radically from a square within a square composition on stretched canvas; it was a more literal, materials oriented sequence of horizontally placed devices (see illustration 6). It adhered to the modernist "truth to materials." More importantly, it was an eclectic system of devices.

The intent of this detailed introduction is to present the sources and evolution of my working method. The foundation of this method is based on the use of formalism. I used modernism as a source to build a catalogue of painting devices from which I chose to construct my art. This studio process and evolving series continues to form new combinations. This eclectic system for working is the foundation for the work that I am doing now.

"The pictures of the last fifteen to twenty years insists on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of visual experience of nature but of operational processes."5

My recent work depends upon the physical acts of drawing and painting. I work out the form of each individual piece through
the actual process of "doing" or "making" art. For example, in
the drawing "Ground Clutter," the natural arc of my arm making a
sweeping mark became the basis for its composition. This arc
suggested a radar scanner, hence, the title (see illustration 7).

"It was necessary to turn inward, to the means
of art, the materials and techniques with which art
is made. Artists still interested in painting be-
gan an analysis - or deconstruction - of painting
turning to the basic question of what painting is,
not so much for the purpose of defining it as to
actually be able to vivify it by beginning all
over again."6

The formal considerations of my drawings (or paintings) as
primarily flat objects is another important foundation for my
art making. Each drawing is begun as a flat surface; the primary
concern is for the continuation of the art process and the use
of the prescribed materials. I do not use the paper or paint
surface as an illusionistic "window" in the early stages of pro-
duction. The only thing I retain from one drawing to another in
a given series are the predetermined materials and the technical
process. However, certain visual signals appear by accident during
the various processes of cutting, rubbing, debossing, darkening
and roughing up the surface; smoothing down the surface may suggest
images or illusions which are consciously developed after their
discovery.
"This pretending resulted in a kind of extra-consciousness, a looking in from the outside. We were no longer 'involved' in painting in the sense of engagement, but now saw clearly what we were doing from an exterior position - an attitude appropriate for the interim period of work which some saw this to be."\(^7\)

I carry on the tradition of Modernism by always emphasizing the flat literalness of the object as a point of departure. "Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to the art...and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else."\(^8\) Later on in the production of a piece, I test the boundaries of Modernism to try to do something idiosyncratically my own. The drawing "Night Baseball"'s original conception was a flat, overall gridded design of small debossed dots, and small cut-out geometric shapes. I broke through this formal limit by literally cutting out the central image, adding another shape of paper which reminded me of a baseball being pitched to the batter, developed this metaphor and titled the piece. An ambiguity between flat and spacial resulted (see illustration 8).

It is not important to me to make universal art statements. I am more interested in de-emphasizing the formal art product to expand my definition of art. The complete whole of a Rothko monotone painting or a Judd cube is used as a "back drop" or a starting point. "The Minimalist's source is the module, the unit, the one, Serra's is the verbform."\(^9\) Like Richard Serra, I perceive my art as the process of life rather than in an iconographical
object. Cultural, personal, and sexual ideas that are important to me are incorporated in my art process and products as metaphors. In "Rooftops, Beacon lights, and Angel Dust," there is a direct reference in the title to a popular drug which I experienced in an urban New York setting (see illustration 9). The image shows fractured triangles, floating bits of white dust, and a central beacon shape. This drawing is a by-product, a life experience, and a determined studio process.

In some ways I consider my art self-indulgent. Mixing gold powder with oil paint and applying it with a putty knife in "Formally Untitled" was a sensual/indulgent process. While applying this mixed paint, I was aware of nothing but that enjoyable experience. I indulge myself by collecting "new wave" records and incorporating the ideologies I hear and enjoy into my art. The art products reflect, perhaps only through a personal symbolism, this aspect of culture.

In addition to reflecting my personal pleasures and interests, my art reflects the social conditions around me. Because I have always lived in a city, urban ideas such as night baseball games, ("Night Baseball") (see illustration 8), buildings or rooftops, ("Rooftops, Beacon lights, and Angel Dust"), or an interior bedroom scene ("On the End of the Bed") (see illustration 10), appear in my art. I am also influenced by specific art settings and communities, specifically New York City in 1979. "Formally Untitled"
refers to how paintings are produced and evaluated. "Artometer" is a non working meter which stands for the powerful contemporary critic (see illustration 11).

The eclectic nature of my work demands that I use a variety of criteria to evaluate it for myself. My work uses formal devices such as ambiguity of space, flatness versus depth, balance, harmony, rhythm, and literalness of the materials which can be attributed to my orientation in Modernist theories. Yet because metaphorical storytelling exists in the same pieces as actual holes and emphasis on formal concerns, an intended tension exists between the flatness and implied space in my work. Extremely shallow relief is actually produced when I deboss shapes into the paper. Yet by using a rich and deep black, I imply deep space as well.

Historical criteria are also appropriate concerns in my work. The dominant shape in "Rublov, St. Basil's and a Pennant" was taken directly from an iconographic painting by the Russian artist, Rublov. In most of the drawings, too, are geometric constructivist shapes, such as the spiral in "Night Baseball" and the circular figures in "On the End of the Bed." These have a commonality with the water carrier paintings by Malevich and the automation figures present in Leger's works.

"Whatever else one may think of Greenberg's construction, its overwhelming effect is to put painting in series."10

This historical evolution of reducing art to a system, a set of rules, provided a formula for me to work within. In my early
investigations I used formalistic devices in a systematic manner. Throughout my painting investigations I have always planned my works. Often I found that these procedures I set up dictated the results and precluded the possibility of the paintings being similar. I found that when I changed materials I had to change my painting format, or when I changed the process, the product changed as well. For me the art product became the act and the product combined. The works became visual records of the act.

"It minimized - almost to extinction any valorized finished product, but instead stressed those issues and procedures which are central to the execution of any specific act, or set of acts, in as clear and didactic a way as possible. Since the stress is on the executive act and programmatic clarity, the resultant experiences tend to be simple and frequently repetitive."11

In 1978, I made a departure from my previous manner of working in a way whereby each series incorporated ideas from its predecessors (linear progression) to a system of working on several series simultaneously. In the new sets of series there were occasional influences that each had upon the other; while at the same time, the parallel development promoted new possibilities that did not specifically have to do with modernist devices.

"At one historical moment painters get interested in finding out just how much their art can annex into how much non-art it can venture and still remain art. At other times they explore the opposite end to discover how much they can renounce and still stay in business."12
At this time I have expanded my awareness to include as art all that interests me. In "Close Your Eyes" the concept of the work was an incomplete list of things that make a person close his eyes, or things that happen to a person when his eyes are closed (see illustration 12). My intention in producing this work was to make a piece of art that was far removed from modernist stipulations. The piece was illustrative; it was incomplete; it was narrative. It was three dimensional in that the piece was contained in a black box and had recognizable entities in each drawing of photographs of my eyes closed. There was also some personal symbolism contained in the work.

At the same time I was working on a set of 21 painted pieces of paper which I titled "Formally Untitled" (see illustration 13). The intent of the work was to question the formalist notions of balance and placement through straight adherence to formalist prescriptions. Each viewer is to choose for himself/herself three panels, pin two to the wall in a horizontal fashion and place the third panel on top of the other two in a pleasing position. There is no symbolic content, the panels portrayed no spacial or narrative characteristics, and the pieces are a complete whole in this work.

The production of these new works requires consistency of both materials and technique. In making "Formally Untitled" and "Close Your Eyes," the materials were chosen beforehand and no compromises were made during their production (no new materials were added spontaneously). Also the works were made in a production-line
manner. In each drawing in "Close Your Eyes" the letters were inscribed. Subsequently they (the drawings) were darkened with charcoal, the photographs were added, and then sprayed. Similarly, in "Formally Untitled," first the colors were bought and all the paper was sized. In an assembly-line like fashion, the colors were applied to the paper. Through the actual making of art series and disciplining my art processes I have developed clearer concepts that continue to strengthen the images of my art.

In conclusion, the intent of this paper is to present the sources, evolution, and present working methods in my art. My work was founded on formalist criteria. From the emulation of Modernist artists such as Albers and Pollock I gathered a painting vocabulary of art devices. From this repertoire of devices emerged series of works. By the production of these series I concluded that the process of making art was of equal importance to the finished product. During the process of making my art, certain cultural or personal symbols appeared. My work then deepened to include humanistic elements. My art has expanded from formal devices making up series of works to include everything that interests me. These interests precluded an eclectic approach of systemic process/product making which gives me an expansive understanding of myself as an artist. By better understanding these private interests I gain clearer meaning to art, to myself and to my environment.
"Untitled" painting on canvas 42" x 42" x 42"
"Dream-sicle" painting on canvas 60" x 96"
"Untitled" painting on canvas 36" x 48"
"Untitled" painting on canvas 102" x 78"
"Untitled" painting on canvas 72" x 78"
"Tulia" painting on plywood and aluminum 29" x 96"
"Ground Clutter" Drawing charcoal and conte on paper
25" x 38"
"Night Baseball" Drawing-charcoal and conte on paper
25" x 38"
"Rooftops, Beacon lights and Angel Dust" Drawing - charcoal conte on paper 25" x 38"
"On The End of the Bed" Drawing charcoal and conte 25" x 35"
"Close Your Eyes" 19 Drawings with photographs charcoal on paper 15" x 18"
"Formally Untitled" 21 paintings
oil on paper 15" x 18"
FOOTNOTES


5 Ibid., p. 84.

6 Marcia Hafif, "Beginning Again," Artforum XVII (September 1978), 34.

7 Ibid.

8 Steinberg, p. 67.


10 Steinberg, p. 67.

11 Pincus-Witten, p. 21.

12 Steinberg, p. 77.
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