FUNK, FUNCTION & FANTASY

A Thesis
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by

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgment.</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Plates.</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences - Erotica.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Prints - Flat Abstraction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Prints.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Prints - Objective Abstracts</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Prints - Abstract Illusionistic</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plates</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to dedicate this thesis and to extend my heart-felt appreciation to my parents Albert and Emily Ettinger for their morale support and advice, and to my sister Susan Kahn for her assistance in editing.
LIST OF PLATES

1. Throat Plate
2. Forbidden Cuts and Tears
3. Haywire Woman
4. She-Shu
5. Shoop - Loop
6. Ta - Da
7. The Curtain
8. Glasses
9. Saw Chair I
10. Saw Chair II
11. Fold Mobile I
12. Fold Mobile II (closed position)
13. Fold Mobile II (open position)
14. Fold Mobile II (detail)
INTRODUCTION

Funk, function, and fantasy, these are the touchstones of my art. They are present in varying degrees and combinations regardless of what I am working on in my two chosen mediums, print making and sculpture. Funk Art stresses the importance of symbolism over representation and it is in this symbolic idiom I find the clearest expression. Function has always intrigued me and I view the problem of creating sculpture which functions on two levels, art and utility as a tantalizing challenge. Fantasy pervades all my work, for me it is a much needed release, a method by which I can inject humor into a world which takes itself too seriously.

In order to understand my work it is helpful to trace my evolution as an artist. In high school my creative skills were geared towards commercial printing and design. Bold graphic symbols comprised my working vocabulary when I was involved in commercial offset printing. In college I chose to follow a similar route and learn serigraphy.

The first art work to which I was exposed as an undergraduate at Ohio University was that of the Pop Artists: Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann, and Claes Oldenburg, to name a few. These artists were discussed most often in my classes and I found my art was influenced by the principles of Pop Art. I chose common objects such as a car, a cigar, or a pizza and simplified the representation of these objects to the point where they became flat and one dimensional. In
this form, the cigar lost all reality as a cigar and it became a fragment, a puzzle piece, or a symbol.

My sculptures from this period have an Oldenburgian sense to them, yet they are a departure in the way they serve to function as fantasy furniture. These works were often derived from motorized vehicles, mostly from cars of the 1940's and 50's. Many utilize real parts of a car or make references to them.

When I arrived at O.S.U. my first efforts served the purpose of broadening my exposure to art, artists and ideas. The diversity of talent among my peers was refreshing and exciting and it provided a good environment for open-minded creativity. I became increasingly aware of other artists, their ideas, and their work. I began to question my own attitudes and how they related to those of professional artists. This questioning marked the beginning of my growth as a serious artist.

The purpose of this thesis is to review my work, attitudes, concepts and growth as a graduate student in Fine Arts at Ohio State University. I have made an important departure from the preconceptions of my undergraduate influences and more importantly, I feel I have matured and likewise have my attitudes concerning my art.

INFLUENCES - EROTICA

I have always been attracted to "erotica" in art. During my first year in graduate school, I lacked the ma-
turity to deal openly with these ideas and symbols in my own work. Later, I was able to overcome this and learn more about why I was drawn to such images by studying artists who I feel handle erotic themes successfully.

I discovered there was a resemblance between my images and those of Jean Arp. The shapes Arp uses are always organic and could be integrated in a natural environment. Both his paintings and sculptures reflect a sensual eroticism. His images are streamlined, never overcrowded with excess information. My compositions also utilize organic, sensual shapes but I depart from Arp's static quality and create in my work a nervous energy through the use of jagged edges and sharp angles. The result is an "eroticism" that is funky and offbeat as opposed to warmly sensual and delicate.

In order to further expand my visual syntax I viewed and studied other contemporary artists whose imagery revolves around agitated patterning with garish and "tacky" colors, and whose subject matter tends to be kinky and erotic. The Chicago School artists, such as Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson and other members of the Hairy Who make art which reflects the Funk or Imagist style. This style suggests the importance of symbolism over representation. In imagism nothing is unrecognizable, just altered. The strength and conviction of Funk is its peculiar seductiveness, its capacity to excite us while at the same time repelling us. Funk is
anti-intellectual and anti-formal, its statements are paradoxical, primitive and universal. I have sought to create in my own work this complicated and contradictory attraction.

The working vernacular for Funk artists is a collection of such diverse items as tattoo designs, pin-ball machines, comic books, picture postcards, ads for treatment of varicose veins or unwanted hair, bad souvenir tapestry and the commercial kitsch of the last forty years.

Jim Nutt's paintings often illustrate human form in a manic and tortured fashion. There are elements of perverse eroticism in the handling of the forms. His figures display amputations and freakish deformity. The compositions are diagramatic in design and suggest an undecipherable hieroglyph. Many of Nutt's paintings contain elements which are parallel to those found in primitive and naive art. He also alters the formal conventions of painting by incorporating the picture frame as an integral part of the piece.

Gladys Nilsson, Nutt's wife, does watercolors as intricate and loaded with sexual references as her husband's paintings. But the sensibility is completely different. Her pictures are filled with snakey, soft penile forms, half-animal and half-human. They are intertwined in a dense, shallow space made more complicated by her pastel colors. Instead of mutilation, her small watercolors convey snide humor.
Like Nutt and Nilsson I use symbolism as a tool to represent objects in a disguised fashion. A subtle erotic element is born from the contrast between the major shapes, the soft organic ones and the hard edged, prickley ones. I choose many shapes which are reminiscent of male or female genitalia.

The colors found in Nutt's paintings are similar to those seen in comic books, primary and secondary colors which are manipulated into blaring contrasts. These colors seem to have a simpleminded ugliness to them. However, Nilsson's pastel drawings and watercolors are basically low key complements and tinted cool colors.

While I have been influenced by the Chicago School artist's erotic symbolism, I deviate in my use of color. I derive my color palette from commercial objects and domestic interiors of the 1950's which serve to reinforce the funky nature of my work. I feel these colors reflect an artificial cheerfulness. I seek flamboyant contrasts to create a tension between the basic shapes and the background.

The dominating issues for both artists are the shallow depth and overall surface decorativeness. Similar qualities have become apparent in my art. The element of decorativeness comes from my interest in wallpaper and camouflage designs is expressed in my work as small, torn, feather-like shapes in the background. These have the effect of creating a hyperactive and menacing mood.
EARLY PRINTS - FLAT ABSTRACTION

When I began printmaking in graduate school I abandoned the use of complicated photo stencils and hard edged emulsions. I wanted to work "non-objectively" and I needed to develop new printing techniques. I chose the paper stencil because it is both simple to manipulate and inexpensive. Most importantly, it is the intrinsic quality of tracing paper to reveal a delicate deckled edge when it is torn. This "tearing" became the basis for my new imagery and led to the development of a new vocabulary of shapes from which I could expand. First I started working in torn construction paper collages and random scribble drawings. I wanted very little drawing or planning to go into the preparation of the prints and intended to rely on information drawn from scrawled haphazard fingernail sketches.

THE PRINTS

My first print, Throat Plate (plate 1.) consists of shapes arrived at by tearing a paper stencil. Some of the forms are abstracted "teeth", like those found on a wood cross-cut saw. The surface has a random torn texture, similar to that of a military camouflage pattern in both color and placement. The random opaque black drips provide a point of focus and a sharp contrast to the colors. The composition tends to float and is weightless because of the transparency of all the colors. There is no attempt to suggest depth, but instead, a circular motion is implied
by the encompassing camouflage texture. Without my actually planning it the design evolved into an erotic statement. This is because the u-shaped opening is suggestive and it could symbolize both a mouth or a female sex organ.

In Forbidden Cuts and Tears (plate 2,) the thorn-like tears take on a uniformity and are used more purposely to create a movement and direction. Their colors remain camouflage-like in reference. I also introduce an element discovered from my subconscious scribblings. These marks, when extracted and isolated, resemble barbed wire. I exaggerate and stylize this element almost to the point of a calligraphic gesture. In this image the serpentine barbed wire is meant to contrast with and to deny accessibility to the lush shape and to convey the idea of evil. The whiteness of the paper serves as a ground for the colored shapes.

Still influenced by subconscious thinking, I was becoming increasingly aware of an erotic element emerging in the image. This erotic element was born from the combination of high key cosmetic colors and ambiguous biomorphic forms which have a suggestive nature.

MIDDLE PRINTS - OBJECTIVE ABSTRACTS

In Haywire Woman, (plate 3,) I am more selective with the placement of the thorny tears and introduce total page color coverage so that the white of the paper no longer acts as just a ground, but interacts as color. My new colors
range from creamy tints to high key contrasting complements. This print begins a series of object based images, using the female torso as a departure point. I use cosmetic flesh tones to reinforce this reference. The "barbed wire" lines serve to define the torso shape and the barbs themselves begin to take on an animated nature.

In She-Shu, (plate 4.) subtle illusionary depth is suggested by experimenting with shadows. When I designed this print I was really excited about the placement of the large black shape, and how it would interact or dominate the compositional space. The black shape is derived from an abstracted profile of a high heeled shoe. More hard-edged shapes are used to further vary the texture and the contrasts. Snake-like lines delineate space and the negative forms are strikingly similar to the outline of the torso shape developed in Haywire Woman. This print presents some erotic characteristics, not only because it resembles an acceptable sexual symbol, a woman's high heel, but because it suggests (indirectly) an erect phallus.

LATE PRINTS - ABSTRACT ILLUSIONISTIC

From experimenting with shadows in She-Shu, I began to move away from flat abstraction and into abstract illusionistic images. In Shoop-Loop, (plate 5.) I used shadows more expressively, striving to emphasize shapes existing in different planes. The addition of Chine Colle creates more visual intrigue when the print up close. It
sets up a contrast between the ink layers, illusionary layers and the real layer. A glossy circle encompasses a portion of the information and magnifies it, adding still another dimension. With this print I begin using Day-glo fluorescents to generate more visual excitement. My torn shapes give way to cut, hard-edged shapes. I also introduce patterns which are associated with textiles, an element I continue to explore in my following prints.

Ta-Da, (plate 6.) recalls and restates the bathing suit top or bra shape used in Shoop-Loop but transforms it by surrounding it with garish texture and pattern. The reference points for these patterns were textile and wallpaper designs popular in the early 1950's. The layering of diverse patterns and textures, suggest a shallow depth and I now introduce a stronger sense of shadow-play, which produces contrast. This print further develops the animation apparent in the calligraphic gesture established in the earlier prints.

In Ta-Da, I thought the shape expressed an animated caricature of a figure, who, when he finishes a performance, spreads his arms and places one leg behind the other to bow to the audience and melodically declares, "Ta-Da"!

The Curtain, (plate 7.) further explores many of the elements to be found in the other prints. My concern in creating this image was the contrast set up between the flat, blue-black curtain and the isolated fluorescent colored patch. I was also interested in the gesture of the ribbons
that intertwine the curtain flaps. This image is another abstract female form, this time wearing a strapped black gown with a bare midriff.

In my latest print, Glasses, (plate 8.) a more elaborate handling of shadows is presented. This element creates interesting visual complexities. The composition is broken up by more shapes and colors, which make up the illusionary shadowed elements. Shapes take on a stronger sense of solidity now. Shapes which in past prints served only as texture exist now as forms that cast shadows. The depth suggested by layering is also intensified by the shadow-play.

The corset shape now transforms into a pair of glasses, emblazoned with warning stripes, the stripes which first appeared in The Curtain. This print makes reference to cross-sections and layers which are either broken or missing, revealing the hidden workings beneath: arteries, wires, and worms severed and exposed as they cross beneath the surfaces.

Lastly, I employ a little "trompe l'oeil", in the upper left corner, by printing shadows that would imply that the corner of the page is turned back. To intensify this device, I have cut the corner of the page along the contour of the illusionary bend. This device complements the other illusions of depth and dimension and supports the image compositionally because it creates a tension point at the edge of the image and at the same time directs the eye back into the center of the print. In addition this gives me another
surface to reveal. I was pleased with this effect and I intend to exploit it further in my future prints.

This print as well as some of the others is finished in part, with a gloss over-print varnish, which suggests a plastic-like finish, that is reminiscent of commercial placemats. Plastic covers suggest an indestructable quality which is impervious to the ravages of time and use.

SCULPTURE

While pursuing the goal to arrive at a more personal statement in screen printing, I was also working in the sculptural medium. In sculpture I knew that I wanted to continue to experiment with different methods of assembly and materials. My sculptures are based on functional - three-dimensional ideas with an effort to inject an element of humor. At the same time I was working on my first print, Throat Plate (which employs the saw-tooth motif), I was building a set of chairs which resembled the shape elements found in a handsaw. My sculptures are inventions intended to solve problems in reality.

In Saw Chair I, (plate 9,) I wanted to use a saw in a way that would make it more than a saw. In this way I differ from Claes Oldenburg who, from my point of view, merely renders familiar objects in different materials and sizes. I imagine the object as a shape and manipulate it accordingly so that it assumes greater possibilities. Function is important to me and Saw Chair I is a real chair as well as
a sculpture.

I chose plywood as my material because it is the wood of the home craftsman, it is inexpensive, and it is easy to work with. By using glossy and metallic finishes and simple hardware, I retain the simplicity of a real handsaw.

_Saw Chair II_, (plate 10.) is designed in basically the same manner as the first one. The same dimensions are used and the over-all shape relationships are the same. This chair is also built entirely out of laminated wood, but by using a utilitarian grey finish I tried to de-emphasize the laminations and emphasize the mechanical and industrial qualities. To further create this impression, I constructed bulky machine-like wooden hinges which are used to connect the back of the chair to the seat. The heavy hinges in combination with the chrome - painted support suggest the notion that the back and seat are capable of coming together, crushing of severing whatever comes between them. Like other pieces of Funk art my sculpture simultaneously repells and attracts. The viewer first recoils with imagined pain yet he is drawn back to examine the sculpture more closely and can discover a humorous aspect.

The two chairs complement each other and are studies in the growth of an idea. One serves as a functional interpretation of a saw, while the other exists as a sculpture focusing on the various functions of the saw.

The inventing and building of my next sculptures, a
series of works entitled "Fold Mobiles", was generated by a longtime dream: to design a new type of vehicle. This vehicle would be lightweight, foldable and easy to carry. When folded it would be no larger than 36 inches square by six inches deep, nor would it weigh more than thirty five pounds. The mechanics would be simple and well-integrated.

Fold Mobile I, (plate 11.) became an example of a plan that did not get off the drawing board. The sculpture is half a working vehicle and half a drawn blueprint. It is built from a single sheet of plywood and is hung vertically. The blue print, complete with measurements, arrows and labeling, merges with the working and three-dimensional twin half. Pegs can be adjusted and parts fold out.

When I first began working on the Fold Mobile series I based my studies on drawings and designs of engineers and amateur inventors. My serious intent to create something real and practical made me question the validity of my concept of it as an art form. However, I came to realize there is genuine beauty in a well designed piece of functioning machinery and I referred to other artists whose works combined invented mechanisms and aesthetic statements, such as the sculptures of Jean Tinguely, Ernest Trova and the California artist's group Ant Farm.

Tinguely's junk assembled parodies of a mechanized society designed around built-in self-destruction, lean towards an aesthetic sculptural conclusion. On the other
hand, Trova's later works present a sterile and dehumanized future world where man and machine become fused as a single chromed, streamlined device. I feel I relate most to the Ant Farm group, because their sculptures revolve around automobiles. However, their works rarely consists of newly invented objects, but rely on the assemblages of already existing car parts.

Although my original intent was very serious, the end result reflected a humorous look at the hard and fast laws of engineering and auto design. There is humor in the naive mechanics and simplicity of the design. This element is further emphasized by uselessness of such a vehicle were it to exist. This is because the Fold Mobile was designed to go down inclined surfaces and is not capable of moving under any other means.

In an attempt to restate the principles of Fold Mobile I in a working model I built the copper Fold Mobile II (plates 12, 13, 14). This sculpture is full scale and built from copper plumbing tubes and fittings. The already existing plumbing hardware simplified the construction and contributed to a more convincing look. Additional hardware was incorporated, making all the mechanisms functional. I built laminated wooden wheels in an attempt to keep the vehicle from looking too structurally sound. Displaying this Fold Mobile on a horizontal plywood board recalls its origins as a model in Fold Mobile I. The qualities of plywood are further ex-
explored in *Fold Mobile II*, i.e. in the construction of the seat and wheels.

**SUMMARY**

When I arrived at the Ohio State University, I wanted to expand the thought processes I used, but divorce myself from the strong influences of Pop Art with which much of my art was so easily associated. Influenced by imagist art I struck out in a new direction, experimenting with collage, mixed media drawings and looser, less-slick printing methods. As I matured I became more comfortable incorporating erotic symbolism in my work. However, I have not chosen to let the eroticism dominate the image. I tend to choose ambiguous biomorphic shapes or real inanimate objects with some sexual references. But in simplifying the image and by my use of non-referential colors and surface decoration, I discourage obvious erotic interpretation.

My prints evolved from flat abstraction to abstract illusion with increasing complexity of composition. I became intrigued with illusory depth created by shadows and the interplay of textile influenced pattern and texture. I have come to a better understanding of my color choices and I have learned to use color more effectively. I can clearly see some limitations of screen printing, but I realize that it is the smoothness and uniformity of the surface that is important to me—this and the ability to create a multiple image, which in turn has the potential to increase the
work's availability for public exposure. It is for those reasons I have remained a printmaker. Since I chose to work simultaneously in sculpture, I had the opportunity to transfer some of my concerns with abstract symbolism to a third dimension.

Rather than discarding and disassociating myself from past philosophies, I feel my efforts in graduate school have helped me to grow towards a personal style. I have tried to distill and incorporate elements from Pop Art, Funk Art and Surrealism and yet to maintain the integrity of my own creative vision.