A PERSONAL OBSESSION

A Thesis

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by

Sue Carroll Purcell, BFA

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Advisor
Department of Art
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INTRODUCTION

Painting and the development of a personal art have been the determining concerns in my life for some time. As I entered graduate study it was my intention to fully submerge myself in my work and to become more totally involved in a community of artists. The resulting period of painting research, aided by a constant dialogue with other artists, has played a significant part in the development of my recent work and my growth as an artist.

The major direction or course my painting has taken in the past three years has been two-fold: 1) a movement away from the complexity of many forms in space toward the simplicity of a single isolated image and 2) a movement from non-personal abstract imagery to very personal, direct, recognizable forms. The notion of isolation or aloneness has become very important to the paintings, as well as the direct nature of the image.

The imagery comes from outside myself. I am drawn toward forms which have a certain power for me—an almost obsessive power which I can't quite explain. Not only do they convey certain notions about themselves, but they also exist as intriguing shapes or forms. Through these forms and their interaction with their surrounding space, I hope to convey the abstract notions of isolation, inwardness, tension, compression, repression, and containment.

By examining the elements at work in my paintings, by tracing the sources and evolution of each, as well as the abstract notions they convey, I hope to more fully comprehend and come to terms with, not only my work, but myself.
IMAGERY: SOURCES

"Sometimes I went back very far, further than the horses of the Parthenon...to the wooden rocking horse of my childhood."

Paul Gauguin

We are all collectors of images to some extent. We live in an image-world and as we move through it, our senses are constantly bombardet with stimuli, most of which we can't possibly absorb or digest. We are forced to make choices of which images to focus upon—which memories to store. This selection process fascinates me and has come to play an important part in my art. Where does it begin, how does it evolve in each of us, and how does this process color our perceptions of the world?

Collecting images is an obsession with me. I can trace its origins back to my childhood when, armed with a Kodak Brownie camera, I began taking black-and-white photos at a very young age. From family and friends as subjects, I quickly moved to objects: my bicycle brightly decorated for the Memorial Day parade, the fins of my parents' Ford convertible, the Lombardy poplar trees which lined our driveway, a small turtle I found in the woods, its blurry form filling the entire frame. Somehow the importance and value of these images grew as I
handled and studied the soft-focus, muddy-gray snapshots. They assumed a greater importance as time passed to become almost symbolic images as documents of my life—captured moments in time. They are experiences filtered by memory and enhanced by distance.

"In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing...To collect photographs is to collect the world." Susan Sontag

I collected the world in scrapbooks. As picture diaries or journals they were records of the events of my life in visual terms, and they overflowed with photos, clippings from magazines, movie star postcards, ticket stubs, dried leaves and flowers, and drawings. As my family moved from town to town and friends came and went, I sought refuge in my journals. Their familiar, comforting images provided me with a sense of stability.

At this time in my life television and movies offered another kind of stability and continuity in my life. Moving images fascinated me, not only in terms of their visual impact, but as powerful emotional tools to express ideas and feelings. As windows on the world they expanded my own small world and inspired a great deal of curiosity and creative activity, including my earliest experiences with drawing and painting. Certain vivid screen images from films I saw when I was very young still haunt me: the young boy in *Shane* gazing into the distance as Alan Ladd rides away, James Dean dancing in the bean fields in *East of Eden*, and Marlon Brando's shattered face on discovering his brother dead in *On the Waterfront*. They are stunning images that, I feel, had a tremendous impact on me at the time and still remain
powerful visual memories. Experiencing them only made me want to experience more. As I began to turn to art as a focus in my life, I began to erase the boundaries between the different media and to see them all as part of the same whole. They are all about selection and focus, action and reaction, seduction and manipulation, atmosphere and mood, feeling and emotion.

Stored memories and associations, photographs, magazines, television and movies have had a strong impact on my notions of imagery and have become sources for my visual vocabulary. It seems only natural that my paintings would reflect my obsessions with visual pictures or icons. But until recently, this wasn't the case.
IMAGERY: EVOLUTION

At the time I began my graduate studies my paintings were composed of very abstract and non-personal forms. Inspired by urban landscapes, they referred to that reality only as a point of departure. I saw the forms and shapes of the cityscape as cues for newly invented abstract forms. (plate 1) Billboards, bridges, freeways and skyscrapers became planes in space -abstracted and geometricized ribbons and tubular forms, intertwined, floating, jumbled together. To the complexity of the many shapes interacting with each other and their space, I added another element of complexity -that of color, line and pattern. Every plane, surface and ground was active with richly colored stripes, chevrons and dots. The resulting color and pattern activity, along with the complexity of interacting forms, tend to overwhelm the viewer with a barrage of visual stimuli.

Having pushed my work as far as it could go in terms of overall activity, I decided to make a move toward simplification or reduction. The resulting period of cutting away, selection and focus was a very difficult one, which ultimately, after months of work, lead to a single isolated image. Decisions regarding imagery and formal issues
became more critical as they decreased in number. And during the duration of this simplification process, a change in the nature of the image occurred: a move away from non-personal, abstract imagery to very personal, direct, recognizable forms. Source became a necessary element to my work, and as a collector of images I felt it imperative to include them—to even make them central to my painting. I began to look to myself and my life for imagery ideas.

From the first very personal, quirky choices, such as the crudely painted, distorted image of my Polaroid "Big Shot" camera (plate 2), I moved to very direct, recognizable forms, like the rope in Taut (plate 4). Handled in a new straightforward manner as simplified icons centered on the canvas, they "retain the vestiges of sculptural form—of real objects—while functioning primarily as colored shapes," much like Matisse's cut-outs. A repertory of images (ropes, bones, hammerheads, skulls) slowly emerged as I explored the versatility of the icon and experimented with size, scale and format. A vocabulary of images had begun to develop, and for the first time as a painter, I felt I was coming close to inventing my own visual language.
PROCESS: EVOLUTION

The period of research involving reduction, simplification and focus of imagery spanned nearly one year's work and produced, as a by-product, a significant change in my technical process of painting. Springing from my love of drawing tools (crayons and oilsticks, as opposed to paint and brush) and reacting against the flatness of my earlier work, the process involved "coloring" over layered paint to build up the relief of the surface and produce a deep, rich, seductive kind of color. The results excited me about the physical act of painting, and this excitement carried me through the difficult struggle with imagery.

Starting on a workboard on the floor, I build the paintings in layers. Although the canvas is moved to the wall at a later stage, the initial work is done horizontally on the floor, because I like to feel the painting around me, to walk and kneel on it, to be encompassed by it. Upon a flat ground of acrylic paint, more paint thickened with gel medium and rhoplex is applied to build up the surface. Marks are then vigorously scraped or gouged out of the gel layer, more paint is applied, and finally layer upon layer of color from oil paintsticks is added. It is a slow process involving drying periods between each stage. But the result is a richness, not only of color, but of surface—a denseness in which every layer or stage of development is visible in the final piece. The paint and unstretched canvas become one—a single entity—and the resulting strong sense of physicality plays against the notion of illusion in the imagery. As an
issue this intrigued me and to explore it further, I felt an integration of process with imagery first was needed.

THE MARK OR GESTURE

Integration came in the form of the mark or personal gesture. I began to search for a mark with expressive power which, when etched into the surface of the painting, could charge the space with energy and create a real sense of rhythm and movement. (plate 6) The obsessive repetition and patterning of the marks reflected the activity of my earlier work, however, the resulting energy was of a new and totally different nature.

With the introduction of the isolated image, the mark suddenly had a reason for being there: to react to the image by responding to its size, form and character. The marks radiate out from it, dance around it, charge its space with energy to create a kind of visual magnetic field. They are simultaneously repetitious and unpredictable. And they give the image a sense of presence that extends beyond its physical size and space, as a sleeping person has a potential energy that is manifested in a dormant state. The image projects itself beyond its body, setting up a tension between it and its surrounding space - a space which threatens to trap or compress it.

Through the mark, or frozen gesture, I feel I can express all:
I can be obsessive, compulsive and driven.
I can be repetitious, monotonous and boring.
I can be playful or profound, delicate or brutal.
I can create contemplative moments, or frenetic, gripping ones.
I can lose myself or find myself.
THE BORDER OR FRAME

As the active energized space acts to compress the image, it also threatens to move off the canvas. The marks seem to explode out from the image, pushing out at the edges while pressing in on the central image. Somehow that energy had to be contained and a sense of completeness or enclosure had to be achieved. With this in mind I began to explore the notion of a border or frame. Experimenting with its width, varying the amount of color and surface activity, and even fragmenting it, I became excited about all the possibilities it offered. Serving a very real function (without a frame of some kind, the paintings appear to be fragments of larger pieces), it became an integral part of each painting from inception. (plate 7) The freedom of color with which Seurat painted his pointillist borders and the beautifully-crude patterning in the frames of American primitive artists provided fresh ideas for me to explore.

In one series of paintings, in particular, I pushed the element of the frame or border as far as I wanted to take it. The Fan/Vase paintings (plate 8) were marked by wide, elaborate frames which were heavily patterned and colored and which served to introduce the illusion of another space. However, my next response was a reaction against the restrictive border, and in Barbed Wire, a painting in which the margin was minimized to a very narrow band of color, a nice tension was created between the very large canvas and the very narrow frame. This notion was carried even further in a later painting, entitled Palm (plate 9), which is marked by the disintegration and fragmentation of the border into separate and disconnected strips of canvas tacked to
the main body of the piece. In short, this investigation offered many possibilities. The frame/border element continues to hold an interest for me, and as a side issue, it has been an important part of my painting research.

COLOR

Historical research has always been a natural and necessary part of my painting research and my development as an artist. As my work evolves, new areas of study and exploration are continually opening up to me, and often a sense of discovery or renewed appreciation accompanies this research.

Many aspects of my new work suggested historical antecedents, and as a matter of course, I began an intensive study of a few artists whose work seemed most relevant to my own. I found myself particularly drawn to the works of Henri Matisse. His cut-out pieces offered so much in their lively and exuberant color and pattern and especially in the vitality captured in his simplified shapes and form. As I found myself exploring a range of images, from inanimate, manufactured objects (rope, hammers, wire) to organic forms and shapes (bones, leaves, trees, pineapples), I studied Matisse's imagery with a new appreciation.

At this same time I looked to the paintings of Edvard Munch for their expressive power and strength. I find his haunting, disturbing images an intense emotional experience. Two extremes: the joy of Matisse, the anguish of Munch. Both fascinated me, and I began to feel a closeness to their concerns as artists.
For color, however, I feel the strongest affinity to the works of Vincent van Gogh. Amazingly fresh and free—at times even dissonant and crude—his sense of color is always used to create a kind of emotional intensity which almost overpowers the viewer. On the study of color, he said:

"I am always in hope of making a discovery there, to express the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complimentary colors, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. To express the thought of a brow by the radiance of a light tone against a sombre background."7

And to create the sense of a mystical power beyond the physical form, he describes painting a portrait in these terms:

"Beyond the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky."8

This is exactly what I attempt in my paintings: to go beyond a specific image into the realm of the abstract or universal, to convey the inner reality of things, to "paint infinity". As van Gogh did, I try to develop or invent my own system of color and explore its emotive range with each painting. At times I've played it against the image: a bubblegum pink hammerhead (plate 5) or a dead gray palm tree (plate 9). Or I've tried, through color, to set up a jarring or disquieting effect to intensify the tension between image and space. But always it is used to underscore the emotional impact or abstract notions implicit in the work. Color, in combination with energy, movement, form and space, works to convey ideas or feelings which are central to my being.
On the powers of color, Matisse spoke so eloquently:

"Colours win you over more and more. A certain blue enters your soul. A certain red has an effect on your blood pressure. A certain colour tones you up. It's the concentration of timbres."

DANCE

energy
isoalation/space
rhythm/pattern/movement
expression

The very words I use to describe my paintings reveal a very direct tie to another major force in my life—dance. The study of ballet, modern, jazz, and especially tap has brought me an awareness of the body and how it articulates the space around it. In my paintings the space surrounding the image is altered in much the same way by the marks. The marks become the beats or tempo. Alone, they are not as strong, but in combination with others, through repetition and modification, they gain a sense of power. Working together, they set up a crisp, staccato rhythm of clean, sharp "sounds" which, through pattern, produce an overall sense of movement around the image. As in dance, the notions of energy (high and low, contained and uncontained, inert or active) is central to the work, and even further parallels can be drawn in the physical activities of both.

"Dance turns restlessness into rhythm, giving that impulse to move a form of self expression."

Jerry Ames, Tapdancer

I find the same kind of release in painting that I do in dance. And with its marks, the painting is a record of my movements, my gestures frozen in time. I see it as a notated choreographic score of the physical act of painting.
ABSTRACT NOTIONS: A SUMMARY

Dance has also shown me how emotion can be expressed through movement and energy, and how, in my paintings, the canvas can become the stage for expression. At the same time, I have become more aware of how aspects of my own personality are revealed in my interaction with the space around me. The air, light, color, temperature, season changes, sounds, and, more significantly, other people affect how I feel and move - my everchanging moods.

Often I feel at odds with the space around me, as if it and the things in it were pushing in on me. A delicate creature, I feel alone and threatened by my environment. However, my role can change. I become the aggressor, anger and hostility giving me strength to hold my ground or to fight back. This anxiety toward and alienation from the rest of the world have, at times, seemed overwhelming. Fortunately, I have an outlet for these emotions in my work. Painting has provided a focus in my life, as well as a sense of purpose and responsibility as an artist. And as a means for releasing emotions, it helps me maintain a perspective on life, which is always tempered by a sense of the ridiculous - the humorous strain which runs through life and seems to balance the heavy with its lightness. (My small paintings and Polaroid photo series reflect this lighter side of me.) In short, my paintings provide for - and more importantly, are "about" - that delicate balance in my life. Picasso refers to that same balance:

"The painter goes through states of fullness and evacuation. That is the whole secret of art. I go for a walk in the forest of Fontainebleau. I get "green" indigestion. I must get rid of this sensation into a picture. Green rules it. A painter paints to unload himself of feelings and visions."
Tension / Isolation / Inwardness / Repression / Alienation

We all experience them at times, as we attempt to define our place in the total scheme of things. As abstract ideas, they hold a fascination for me and have become the central focus of my work. In my paintings, the tense, uneasy coexistence of the image and its space reflect, for me, life's awkward sense of balance.

As aspects of my own personality and my life have become central to my art, it has grown as a means of personal expression. This has been the most significant development in my work during the course of my graduate studies, and it has led to a deepening sense of commitment and professional responsibility as an artist. Looking ahead, I feel good about the momentum and direction of my work, and I feel confident its future.
FOOTNOTES


3. Shane, 1953, Paramount Pictures, Producer: George Stevens, Director: George Stevens


8. van Gogh, p. 383.

9. Henri Matisse, *Matisse on Art*, Phaidon; dist. by Praeger, p. 120


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