PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A SURVIVOR

A Thesis

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

by

Michael Neal Noland, B.A.
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Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of Art
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For her encouragement and constant support over the last two years, I would like to thank my beautiful wife, Cindy. This thesis is dedicated to her.

I would also like to thank Georg Heimdal, Philip von Raabe and my advisor, Charles Massey, for their ongoing support.
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My father raised me to believe that strength will always prevail. This attitude is not uncommon in Oklahoma where most people, including my father, still herald the pioneer spirit. As a child I was very sensitive to this situation and my family's attitudes. The divorce of my parents when I was seven was a very critical time for me. I was devastated by this twist of events and felt an increasing amount of rage at the absence of my father. As was common practice in those days, my brother, two sisters and I were given to the custody of our mother. My mother wasn't a monster but she was emotionally unstable and acted very irresponsible towards our care. In fact, she would be gone for days at a time. At the very least we were the recipients of many levels of mental anguish and abuse from her.

My way of coping with this abuse was to feel responsible for my parents' actions. Because of this belief I carried around a lot of guilt, frustration, and anger about circumstances over which I had no control. This unfounded belief was re-enforced by my parents who reminded me that they had gotten married at an early age (her: 14, him: 19) because of an unwanted pregnancy (me). Looking back, I can see that my parents were not emotionally prepared for marriage or
children at this age.

The reason I define these early traumatic experiences is because they are without a doubt a very strong driving force in my life and are probably the reason I became an artist. These episodes also taught me to take life seriously and not to take anything or anyone for granted.

Early in my life I began to search for an outlet for my feelings of frustration, anger, unhappiness, etc. The most natural outlet for me was drawing. I would draw on my tests, books, desk and even my meal ticket. Encouragement for this talent in drawing came from my mother who had drawing lessons when she was a young girl. She quickly realized that drawing helped me to vent these feelings. Being raised in the Southwest only contributed to my lack of identity as an artist. All men had to be macho and never show pain, fear, compassion, or sensitivity. (Many people believed that only queers made art!)

By the time I reached High School I was pretty confident in my skills as a draftsman and received much encouragement from my art teacher, Marilyn Bivins. Eventually she helped me to see that art was more than just making pretty pictures. I was surprised that art could be used to help release the emotions I had bottled up inside. During my senior year in High School we made a trip to Oklahoma City to a show of drawings and prints at the Oklahoma Art Center. There for the first time, I saw art in a fine arts context.
that wasn't the usual "cowboy and indian" imagery. At first I was put off by this new work but later realized how it had opened my mind to new ideas.

When I graduated from High School I decided to go college and major in art. Cameron University was the local college, so it was natural that I went there. That first year I took the usual foundation art courses and did pretty well. Everything went smoothly until my first painting class and then the trouble began. The instructor, Larry Hefner, had been influenced by the Abstract Expressionists and encouraged his students in this direction. One of the first things he said to me was that "...it is impossible to paint the figure in these (contemporary) times." Well, I was young and naive so I took him at his word and began to do Abstract Expressionists derived works. (After all, I thought, he has an M.F.A. and is teaching at the university; so he must know what he's talking about.) Much later it dawned on me that I was doing work that I cared very little about and was being dishonest to myself. This was a very important lesson because it was the first time I become aware of my integrity as an artist and how much it meant to me. For me, integrity and personal conviction are by far the most important aspects of an artist's personality.

During my first few years in undergraduate school I was encouraged very strongly to look at art magazines and books because in Lawton there wasn't very much art around to
be seen in the "flesh". This also was very important and helped me to be aware of an art world I never dreamed existed. Soon I began to look religiously at these periodicals. I discovered new heroes such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Arshille Gorky and many others. Gradually I became aware of the structure of Art History, especially recent Art History via the Abstract Expressionists and Pop Art movements.

As I have said, I was ignorant about contemporary art and was starved to find out more about it first hand, but couldn't because there were no museums or galleries close to where I lived. Luckily for me, the faculty at Cameron were aware of the isolation of Oklahoma from the contemporary art world. The faculty members would therefore organize trips to major shows at museums in larger cities such as St. Louis, Dallas, New Orleans, Houston and even New York City. It made all the difference in the world to be able to view the works first hand. It was wonderful to be able to see the true colors, textures, and size of the works that I had previously only seen in reproductions.

During my third year in undergraduate school I was influenced by two people who really helped to change my attitudes and approaches to art. Up until this time I had mainly worked in painting and sculpture. Drawing had always been very enjoyable for me, so I decided to take a few drawing courses. This brought me into contact with
Dwight Pogue for the first time. Dwight, who taught drawing and printmaking at Cameron, had just returned from England where he had taught for two years. His approach to drawing was one of strict discipline combined with an emphasis on using graphite pencils in a sensitive manner. Dwight taught me not to be as concerned with realism but rather to look at the overall image regardless of content. Because of the respect I had for him as a teacher, I began to take printmaking courses with him. Although at first I found the technical aspect of making prints taxing, I soon discovered that printmaking offered me a unique way of making images. Whereas the printshop was fully equipped for all of the various printmaking mediums, Dwight emphasized his favorite medium, screenprinting.

During the first year I worked with Dwight, I became aware of a more professional attitude towards art. He taught the Library of Congress standard of matting, and expected us to mat our drawings and prints for critiques. At the time, I didn't understand his emphasis on these things, but now I can see that his attitude towards my work helped me to look at it more seriously. Dwight made me see that I could be a part of the art world and not just a spectator.

The other important person I met that year was Cathryn Waller, who taught painting and drawing at Cameron. Cathryn changed my perception of artists because she made me aware of different artforms such as classical music, dance
and film; I hadn't taken these into consideration before. Of course I had listened to music, (mainly country and western, and the blues) but hadn't thought about its relationship to visual art. She brought in foreign films for us to see and also talked about contemporary art movements happening in Chicago and New York that I had never heard of such as the "bad" painting movement, West Coast "funk", performance art, etc.

Not only did Cathryn open my mind to new concepts about contemporary art, but she also forced me to think about my choice of imagery. Some of the images at this time were influenced by the Pop Art mentality, and others were more personal. The unifying element in all of these works was the mark making and color decisions. At this point I had begun to develop a personal vocabulary of color and handling of paint but as yet hadn't resolved the images. Because of my continuous relationship with the art periodicals and the topics I discussed with Cathryn, I began to get a clearer idea of the artist's role in society.

At this point in my life, I was trying to sort through some very painful experiences from my early childhood and the recent death of my mother who was a major source for a lot of my childhood traumas. Most of the work from this period were self-portraits and portraits of very close friends. These paintings were full of anxiety and reflected a certain amount of psychosis. The major part of the
composition in most of these paintings emphasized a face gone mad.

Some of my influences during this time were the German Expressionists and especially the Dutch painter, Vincent van Gogh. Because of the similarity of the emotional impact of their work and their emphasis on the human face, I identified very closely with them. Van Gogh was by far the most important for me because not only did he approach his life very passionately but also honestly.

As time went by I worked harder at trying to understand certain obligations I had to the past experiences of my childhood. I felt that by bringing these emotions to my artwork, I could purge them from my subconsciousness. What in fact happened was just the opposite. These feelings of pain and rage became more and more intensified as I did more paintings and prints about them. Instinctively I felt I couldn't continue to pursue these personal emotions without a little more distance and objectivity. Quite by accident I soon found a new image that I identified with very strongly and one I felt could give me the distance my work needed to make it stronger.

At this time in my life I began to open up emotionally in ways I, as a child, had previously closed off in self-defense. This allowed me to fall in love and marry my wife, Cindy. For the first time, I discovered that marriage didn't have to be a painful experience. I opened up in other
ways, too. I had never really had a pet of my own before and decided that it would be good for me to have one to take care of and love. One day I went to the Comanche County Animal Shelter looking for a kitten to adopt. As fate would have it, I got there just after they had gassed a lot of lost or unwanted pet dogs. The dogs were piled into the back of a pick-up truck, there must have been around thirty of them dumped into a pile. As long as I live, I'll never forget what I saw or heard that day. A few of the dogs weren't dead or were still having nervous reactions to the gas, because they were still whining and crying out. I'm not sure if this was common procedure for the disposal of unwanted pets, but I felt such compassion for these dogs who were victims of our society.

Shortly after this experience I begun to use the dog image in my work. Most of the images were of dogs in bad shape as if they had been beaten or starved. This probably had a lot to do with my identification with them as victims of circumstances over which they had no control.
Graduate School

When I first came to Columbus, Ohio in the summer of 1980, I experienced a culture shock in many ways. Being raised in a relatively small city did not prepare me for a city the size of Columbus. The campus of Ohio State practically overwhelmed me at first. It took me forever to find my way around the place. My way of dealing with this feeling of alienation was to work at home on my dining room table executing a series of small colored pencil drawings, taking up with the self-portrait and dog imagery where I had left off. However, these new images of dogs were usually isolated and skinned. The dogs were portrayed in outdoor settings that had the landscape and sky coloration of the Southwest. This intense use of color combined with the image of a skinned dog was very disturbing to most viewers.

Later that first year, the dogs portrayed began to have emotions (such as hate, rage and fear) of which I didn't believe they were normally capable. They were often in painful or hazardous interior environments experiencing pain internally and externally as in "Lonesome Dog" (plate no. 1) or "Mad Dog". Most of the earlier dog pieces had been on a smaller, more intimate scale. These newer paintings, also on paper but measuring 30" x 40", brought them closer to
life-size. Where the color had previously been intense, it now became very "acid". Most of the time the setting was very dark with the dog in an intense spot light. This spot was very hot in color and seemed to actually be exposing the "bad" side of the dog's soul. In almost every case the dogs were singular and looked as if they had been pushed to their limit and were ready to attack. The scale, color, and nightmarish quality of these dog images made them very confronting to the viewer.

Not only were these images confronting in their imagery and color, but also in their surface. My method of painting at this time was one of building up the paint and reworking the image over and over until the surface of the painting was very "skin-like" in appearance. This surface was caused by the forceful manner in which the paint was applied, almost attacking the painting. The physical act of painting was as much a part of the release of emotions as the finished painting. Vincent van Gogh talked about this kind of passion for painting in a letter to his brother Theo:

I must warn you that everyone will think that I work too fast. Do not believe a word of it. Is it not emotion, the sincerity of one's feeling for nature, that draws us? And if these emotions are sometimes so strong that one works without knowing one does so, when sometimes the brush strokes come with a sequence and a coherence like words in a speech, or in a letter, then one must remember that it has
not always been so, and that in time to come these will again be dreary days, devoid of inspiration. So one must strike while the fire is hot...  

During my first year in graduate school, I did many images of dogs but at the same time continued to work on portraits, sometimes imaginary and sometimes people I knew. At this period in my work, I considered the images of the dogs to be more important because they seemed more in fashion. Most of this attitude came from my constant relationship with the art periodicals (for there it was easy to see what contemporary art should look like!). As my convictions grew stronger and I became more cynical about the reaction of periodicals to the art market, I began to realize that the subject was important but not as important as the artist's translation or interpretation of the object, regardless if it was a dog, a head, or a still-life.

During the winter and spring of that year, I encountered a printmaking technique, the monoprint, that could give me the spontaneity of a painting combined with the surface of a print. The most important aspect of this new medium was that it was comparatively quick, therefore letting me work through more images and ideas in a shorter period of time. Another nice aspect of this medium was that I could do several similar images due to the ghost image remaining on

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the plate after pulling the first impression, therefore making it easy to retrace. In the beginning I worked with the dog image, but gradually the figure began to take a more prominent position in my work.

The most successful of these monoprints was a series of "Burned Self-Portraits" and "Swimmers". They were successful for me because not only were they powerful images of burned and skinned human figures but also because they were self-portraits. In many of the earlier monoprints the figures became stylized, not because I wanted them to, but because they were imagined. The reason I find the more "real" images more successful is because I realized that I am interested in specific human beings, not generalized impressions of a universal symbol for mankind.

At the beginning of this school year, my second in graduate school, I felt like I had covered a lot of ground on a technical level but was dissatisfied with the works I was making. This was because I felt I was in a rut image wise, and also in my approach. It was easy for me to make another dog painting or print. I was beginning to feel that using the dog as a metaphor for mankind, created a certain loss of impact to the viewer and myself, which confused and complicated what I was trying to say. I felt that a certain amount of watering down of the emotional quality of the images was beginning to occur. Slowly, I began to understand that what I was really concerned about was people, not
dogs charged with human emotions.

In the fall, as a change of pace, I began a series of self-portraits titled "Desperate Men" (lithographs) and "Survivors" (paintings on paper). I felt that by returning to the human image with the same intensity that I had earlier used with the dog images, I could get closer to the human emotions with which I was originally concerned. In both of these series I was interested in confronting the viewer with a powerful image of a tormented and questioning human face. I have always worked on paintings and prints concurrently knowing that both mediums would feed the other. Both of these mediums are very different in approach and product: painting is very spontaneous and printmaking often times is very time consuming. Painting offers me a direct outlet for my emotions with an immediate reward, whereas printmaking forces me to look at the image over a longer period of time. It is this long term looking and thinking that I find helpful and important to my approach to my paintings.

After I had finished with the "Survivor" paintings I took a few weeks to study them and came to the conclusion that they were not having the impact I had intended. This was due to the application of the paint which was thin and wash like, which, in my opinion, didn't have the strength the image required. In the second version I applied the paint very thickly giving the paintings a "skin-like"
surface, therefore in my opinion, making the character of the paint as strong as the image of the tormented face.

The "Desperate Men" lithographs were not very successful, in my opinion, because they became like many of the monoprints of faces, too generalized and mask-like. This was primarily due to the way in which the colors were printed on top of one another, pretty much cancelling each other out, thus resulting in a very flat overall image. Having been very much dissatisfied with these lithographs I turned to a medium that I had been wanting to try for quite some time, the woodcut. I was attracted to the woodcut for its directness and simplicity. My first woodcut, "First Survivor" (plate no. 2), was very similar to the "Desperate Men" lithographs in image, a large frontal view of a head, but very different in appearance. Whereas the "Desperate Men" images had been mask-like, this new self-portrait image was definitely a face, but a face that was almost disfigured beyond recognition, which I found very pleasing.

Here was a face that became other things such as a landscape or hunks of flesh. I found it very satisfying to have made an image that could be read on many levels. For the past several months I had been thinking about my past work and how it usually conveyed one or two emotions, fear or rage. But, the more I thought about myself, I realized that I felt many emotions in my life other than rage and began to bring these other emotions to my work. Most of
the artwork I admired in Art History worked on many levels, too. (For example, the paintings of Francis Bacon are very emotional, usually portraying human beings disfigured in a violent manner. For me, these paintings are not only important for their portrayal of the darker side of the human condition, but because they are successful in formal (classical) painting terms). "First Survivor" was an important step for me, because I saw that emotional impact alone was not enough. For me, the work had to work on all levels.

For the past three years I have painted mainly on paper because I like the qualities that it has to offer. It is readily available, inexpensive, and I have grown rather fond of its smooth surface. But as part of my challenge to myself to try new ways of working, I stretched a 3' x 4' canvas. At Christmas break I went back to Oklahoma for a visit and saw some relatives of mine I had not seen in about five years. When I got back to Columbus I did a painting called "Family Reunion" (plate no. 3), which dealt with my impressions of that visit. For me, this painting is unique in another way because it consists of three figures, two cousins and myself. This painting is very successful and important to me because it contains a variety of emotions that I felt on this visit. The figures are obviously very glad to see each other, but there is a very uncomfortable feeling to the painting.
The three figures in "Family Reunion" are placed compositionally in a way so that the figure on the left seems to be pulling away from the central figure and the third figure on the far right of the painting who is cropped in half by the picture frame edge. The uncomfortable feeling in the painting not only comes from the expressions on the figures but also from the carnival-like colors used. These "acid" colors create an overall intense light that seems to electrify the colors used on the figures and the background. Another contributing factor is the paleness of the skin of the figures. This paleness creates an impression that these people may not be well or even close to death. For a long time I had been wanting to express my feelings about my relationship with my family. "Family Reunion" is the first painting that successfully deals with this subject.

The next important painting was "Cindy and Mike" (plate no. 4). This painting was my first black and white painting, and I found it very difficult to do because I had been working and thinking in color for so long. The important thing about this painting was that it forced me to think of value as structure, which I had gotten out of the habit of doing. The painting is also unique because I attempted to portray the figures realistically. I found that by structuring the form of the figures with value, the painting began to have the illusion of volume, which in my opinion, added to the overall impact of the piece. This
painting is about the relationship I have with my wife, Cindy. I wanted the painting to express a bleakness which I accomplished by removing color. I find this painting, which is about our relationship and marriage, very strong but at the same time sad. Our outlook on life contrasts strongly: I am usually very pessimistic and Cindy is always very optimistic. This difference in attitude is expressed in the painting through the contrasting facial expressions of the two figures; I am frowning and Cindy is smiling. It is this contradistinction of human emotions that I find interesting.

I continued working in the woodcut medium partly because it was simple and direct technically, but more importantly because I found the black and white print could say everything that I had been saying in color prints but clearer. Often times the color in my earlier prints became decorative and did not have that much to do with the overall image. The next woodcut, "True Love" (plate no. 5), was significant because I attempted to reduce the importance of the faces in the figures. In this print, I made the faces smaller and contrasted them with a lot of pattern at the bottom two-thirds of the print. This de-emphasis of the faces was successful mainly because of the dark value of the pattern on Cindy's blouse which helped to draw the viewer's attention away from the heads.

After working in black and white for a few weeks, I was
anxious to work in color again. The next painting was a large portrait of my Grandpa, titled "Grandpa Virgil" (plate no. 6). My Grandpa has always been very close to me, and I wanted to do a portrait of him that contained as much of the love and pride which I feel for him. I wanted the color to be expressive and bring out these feelings. This painting isn't as flat as some of the earlier paintings because of the use of color as value to create volume.

The most important thing about this painting for me is the shift in mood. Many of the earlier works are very bleak, but this painting is very sarcastic in mood. This is mainly due to the smile on my Grandpa's face which has many interpretations. The viewer is not sure if the man is laughing with them or at them. But, the bright yellow background color could be associated with sunshine and warmth to reflect an overall positive mood.

Next, I did a painting of my father and a cousin titled "Daddy and David" (plate no. 7). In many ways this painting is frightening yet funny because of the expressions on the people's faces. Again, it is the contrast of emotions that I find fascinating in this painting. There are also many physical contrasts between the man and child such as the difference between the textures of their skin. There is a feeling of fear and anxiety in the painting caused by the grimace on the man's face and the frightened look of the child. Yet, there is the normal feeling of caring shown by
the composition of a man holding a child. In many ways, the child, my cousin David, is at the mercy of the man, my father.

I also did a lithograph of this painting with the same title. The print is compositionally the reverse of the painting, and because it is in black and white, it has a totally different feel than the painting. In both pieces there is a concern for contrast in texture and value, but in the print this is emphasized even more. In the print the overall value of the skin tone of the man is very dark, contrasting strongly with the pale skin of the child. This contrast in value and texture helps to create a mood of tension and fear in the print, therefore functioning very much as the color does in the painting. Of course in the print there is the same facial expressions on the two figures, as in the painting, therefore giving the print the same impact as the painting.

The painting, "Curtis and Liberty" (plate no. 8), is a portrait of my brother and my dog. I have always had a very close relationship with him because he was born with cerebral palsy, and when he was a small child I was one of the few people who could communicate with him. We are still very close, and although he is now twenty, in many ways he is very naive about the world. This painting was done to express my feelings of our close relationship. I used a very intense blue for the background color because I was
trying to create an optimistic element in the painting. The image of the dog, Liberty, has a very uncomfortable expression on his face and appears to be wanting to get down from the embrace of my brother. Curtis is portrayed with a big smile on his face, but it is the kind of smile that can become a grimace. This contrast in emotions and color help to create a feeling of tension but because of the dog's expression, a certain fear. This again shows my interest and involvement in dealing with the dichotomy of human emotions.

The next image on which I worked was a woodcut, titled "Innocent Hope" (plate no. 9). This image is a self-portrait holding my baby niece, Jessica. This woodcut is about the innocence of small children and their dependence on adults. But more than that, it is about the innocence I felt when I held her in my arms for the first time. There is a strong glowing light radiating from the faces of the man and baby. The man seems to be as naive about the child as she is about the world. Although there is a feeling of innocence in the print, there is also an expression of resignation in the man's face about the child's situation.

After I finished the woodcut, I did a painting of this image titled "New Found Hope" (plate no. 10). As in the woodcut I was interested in expressing the love that I feel for my niece. The major difference between the print and the painting is that the painting has very electric colors thus giving it a strange glow. In the painting, color is
used to create an overall dark mood. This dark mood contrasted with the innocent facial expressions of the two figures creates irony in the piece. Normally, when we are presented with the image of a man holding a newborn baby we see it as a happy or good thing. But in this painting, there is a feeling of gloom and darkness. Because of the paleness of the skin in the figures' faces, there is also a feeling that they could be sick. These expressions combined with the glowing use of color gives the painting an overwhelming feeling of sickness.

The very last two pieces that I have done this year are lithographs titled "Little Princess" and "The Sick Child". These prints are the most exciting pieces I have done in lithography. For me, these prints are successful because of their use of value and line to create a similar mood which previously existed only in the paintings. These prints represent to me a change in my attitude about printmaking, especially lithography. For the last two years, it seemed like I was becoming increasingly more caught up in technical approaches to prints. The woodcuts I did helped me to get away from this kind of approach, and when I returned to lithography I did so in a very basic and simple way. My new lithographs are crayon drawings with which I feel a lot more comfortable because this approach helps me see the image clearer and also to have more control. The excitement I feel about these prints is not because of their technical
merits but because I feel that these later lithographs and woodcuts have helped me to bridge the gap between my paintings and prints.

"Little Princess" (plate no. 11) is a portrait of my niece, Jessica, at the age of two. In many ways this print, along with the other portraits of her, are my way of coping with my rage and frustration over the treatment she received by my sister, her mother. Her situation is not that much unlike my own childhood; therefore I identify very much with her. This print expresses the anger I feel toward my sister, but it also contains the love that I feel for Jessica.

"The Sick Child" (plate no. 12) is a portrait of Jessica when she was just a few weeks old. The feelings that I mentioned before pertaining to the "Little Princess" apply here also. A major difference between "The Sick Child" and "Little Princess" lies in the fact that a two year old child is better able to defend itself than a new born baby. Tension was created by moving the figure holding the baby as far to the left as possible. This composition creates a very insecure feeling, and we are not sure if the baby is safe. Adding to this anxiety is the contrast in value of the paleness of the baby's skin with that of the dark patterns around it. It is the paleness of the skin combined with the expression of peace on the baby's face that makes her appear sick and possibly close to death.
Over the past two years my work has changed a great deal. By striking out in many directions my first year, I was able to cover a lot of ground, and in doing so I discovered that art meant more to me than success or fame and that if my life was to mean anything, I had to be strong in my convictions. I also discovered that I am interested in direct personal experiences and relationships, not vague or superficial ones.

My latest work deals with my feelings about relationships with my family. These later paintings and prints are very emotional and personal, but are exciting for me because they also work on a formal level. Many of my earlier paintings and prints worked effectively on an emotional level but were often awkward formally. The emotional and formal elements (color, surface, texture, composition and subject) in the newer pieces work together to create a unified, clearer statement than in previous works. Plans for the future include making paintings and prints similar to the ones produced in the last few months. I feel that I have only begun to express the feelings I have for my family and will continue to search in this direction.
Plate No. 1
Plate No. 2
Plate No. 5
Plate No. 7
Plate No. 8
Plate No. 9
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Plate No. 12
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ARTISTS I RESPECT AND ADMIRE

Ivan Albright
Francis Bacon
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