PERCEPTION AND REVERIE

A Thesis

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by

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Two silent figures gliding across the grey linoleum floor— their shadows overlapping, fusing, separating. Preparations made— insulated in silence; two porcelain bowls, glazed seasonal sky colors, filled with hot blackberry tea, a landscaped plate with heavy brown bread stacked on top, cloth napkins, tray arranged, waiting. Familiar squeak of screen door— lift the door eliminated. Whispering, pattering of bare feet on solid, sandy path move thru the thicket to the clearing. STOP! Stand and wait till the breath returns before entering the garden— Sharon's Garden. It's so inclusive, so hidden— be convinced she's growing joy and peace here, not just vegetables and flowers... The breakfast site is in the center, where two slant backed wooden chairs cross views like sentrys on guard. Sit and give yourself over to the visual platter. See the melon colored glads nodding from the arrivals and departures of hefty bumbling bees, the purple laden spears, swallowtails, jet black with shocking blue, racing hummingbirds, viny plants producing eggplant, cucumber, all joyously and unashamedly prolific. (a good Catholic garden) Tuck your feet under your legs, sit Indian-style in your chair and enjoy the pace of the early morning. Finally, after several minutes of silence, our eyes meet and we grin, proud of our victory. We've won another sunrise breakfast in the garden, leaving the rest of the party in the grey shadows of a sleeping house. "I think you practice sorcery here," I tell my friend. Her grin expands with pride. Her whispered voice tells me that swallowtails light only on people emitting good Karma, as I stare at the two on my right forearm.
The preceding page is an example of an evocative verbal sketch. Taken apart and analyzed, it contains the same elements as my paintings, installations, and other written pieces.

I pulled these images from last summer's journal and embellished them with references to inconsequential sensory observations most everyone can identify with. These sensory observations, acting as comments, are key issues in my work, and what I use to convey my ideas. For a very long time, I have been interested in why some people are creative and others are not. This interest was a product of frustration. I felt mute, unable to express ideas, emotions, sensations. My approach to finding this answer consisted of developing an understanding of the process of creativity while in search of a "magic formula". This approach eventually led to the viewers; to seeing how and why they processed their perceptions of a piece. My first source of information was myself. How do I look at things? My search then led to friends' and students' informal observations. Finally, I began studying text books on perception. Unfortunately, like many text books, the majority of these were pretty turgid reading. However, answers they had, even the answer to why I had to read so much of the material over to understand it. The human mind, it seems, rejects change as much as possible. It will begin to process new information only after it has acquired some remote familiarity to it. There is an elusive sensory experience attached to particularly rich moments of our lives, which we refer to as perception. Whenever we encounter one of these moments, we bring to it our historical memory baggage, which effects how we will learn from, relate to, or ignore the experiences. They're comprised of memories, both realized and subliminal, emotional and factual. We can tap into these memories through a variety of channels, namely our senses. Until very recently, trying to locate and define memory has led to discussions almost as cryptic as those discussing
the location of the soul.

Recently, a series of experiments were conducted over a twenty year period, and the results were as follows—"...efforts to bake, burn, freeze, and cut memories from the cortex have failed and, no injury through which the individual can survive destroys memory completely." The hypothalamus was named as the memory location. Damage to the cortex results in loss of ability to retrieve the memory, not in loss of the memory itself. With the memory intact, it would seem reasonable to conclude that we respond to emotive stimulus on the basis of the entire bank, not just what we can actually consciously recall. Further, scientists can now do a dazzling job reading genetic structures, chromosomes, etc., but there's still the question of the alleles, those odd little nubs attached to our chromosomes. No one seems to be able to read their contents. Perhaps alleles transfer emotional tracks from one generation to the next. It's an interesting possibility and one that would help explain why so many of us remind oldsters of long departed relatives in behavior, or why we sometimes experience "intuitive" warnings of danger. That is, some one ancestor of ours passed on genetically, information defining a particular set of circumstances as dangerous.

Carl Jung speaks of "the creative act... as being the antithesis of mere reaction." It's important here to understand that I'm not suggesting my


creative formula consists of experience. I am suggesting that as an artist, each of my pieces are interpretations thru an entire myriad of experiences, some of which are mine only through my ancestry. Jung refers to it as a collective psyche, "... which imparts a common rhythm to all human existence, and allows the individual to communicate his feeling and his striving to mankind as a whole".³

It appears that the collective psyche can be one of the causes of the artist making the piece as well as one of the causes of the viewer relating to the piece. Visual stimulus is the most complex and powerful, or evocative of the sensory input we receive. It is so powerful because it works on both an external and internal level. We can look at one thing, associate it with another, and create a mental image of the associated object in our minds. What we see at any given time is always effected by what we have seen, thought, or learned before.⁴ Arnheim states that... "the experience of the present moment is never isolated. It is the most recent among an infinite number of sensory experiences that have occurred throughout the person's past life. Thus, the new image gets into contact with the memory traces of shapes that have been perceived in the past."⁵ Another interesting thing about imaging is that we envision internal images through sensory connectors other than sight.⁶ For instance, the aroma of stewed tomatoes

3. IBID, pg. 223
5. IBID, pg. 32
6. Languis, Sanders, and Tipps, Brain and Learning- Directions in Early Childhood Education, pg. 38-39
always produces for me a mental image of my mother's mixer, mashing and whirling through steaming tomatoes, with canning jars lined up around it. Our senses make emotive connections through fragments or remnants of things used for our daily existence.

When expressing an idea, I work to find an image which is so personal and specific to me that by the integrity of its inclusion and its personal nature, it may become a universal to viewers. The visual mechanism of the viewer works in a general to specific pattern. We, as viewers, accomplish this move from general to specific very rapidly due largely to the sophistication of our perceptual capacity to filter out. While it's important for me to give consideration to the formal elements of art in my work, they are not what create the evocative connectors. Rather, select materials and the use of specific imagery provide the connections, "for an emotional response accompanies every sensory encounter with the world." 7 Formal considerations are given only to increase the level of communication to the viewer.

Influences have come to me in the form of reassurances. A realization of the wide range of materials used by Joseph Cornell and Betye Saar has been very encouraging for me. As a teenager, before I had chosen art as a profession to pursue, I used to make something I called "escape jars". I would arrange feathers, driftwood, broken bits of jewelry, etc., in little glass jars. The results weren't nearly as provocative as Joseph Cornell's boxes, but did hold a degree of inviting wistfulness. How exciting it was to see Cornell's boxes and see them recognized as a viable art form! Cornell's dialogue is so expansive. He speaks of so many

things in each of his private little spaces! Yet, the theme is always expressed through a feeling or mood.

Betty Saar, whose early works I recently became familiar with is a junker like myself, and always seeking out tiny remnants of life, because of their evocative presence.

Visionaries, too, have a private vision they respond to and interpret through found materials. The worn phrase, 'Don't pick that up—it's dirty', elicits no response from them. Found objects are treasures to be used to express ideas. Vestiges of civilization, small pieces of world information are all to be wondered over and slowly digested. Junk tells stories, or more accurately, junk connects us with stories of our own. When I was a child our entire neighborhood was comprised of old folks. They all told me stories. Thru story listening I developed a healthy appetite for story reading. Novelists such as D. Du Maurer, Austen, Doyle, Hilton all have such a power to engage! Most of my work has a strong narrative quality, which is highly consistent with my concern for emotional connections. A good example of narrative in my work would be 'Girls Night in', a performance piece. While it was a collaborative piece, I authored the third section exclusively, which was a narrative relating the results of societal pressures and Sigmund Freud's studies of women. It was both graphic and humorous. Narrative, like junk, has an extremely direct quality. Another example of narrative is in my painting titled 'The Fallen Woman'. The image is that of overlapping masks. The issue is one of power misused. If all energy is channeled toward the maintenance of the mask, or exterior, as the mask tips and falls we see nothing of the inside but the back of the mask. The first in the upper right hand is intensely colored, adorned with glitter, imaged over with a pyramid. The triangle, an ancient symbol of female power is represented by it's three
dimensional counterpart, the pyramid. The viewer is invited to look at the interior, therefore. Unfortunately, there is none left.

Mental Rape is a piece that deals with a multitude of issues and emotions. It was originally conceived of and executed as a poem which reads:

Pellets of conversation
Invade Lacy Baroque patterned thoughts...

Morning work
Routine Woman Style
Made for scattered attention
Routine

Creates space-places for fancy patterned thoughts

Voices Rise pelleting again...
Three gems in the kitchen
Sez Garnet, 'yup, that there little girl-only fourteen-'uz raped by her uncle-an' now she's pregnant-
Sez Opal, Wunta ever happen-them damn kids-s'posed to be in school. Now he's goin'ta be in trouble and family trouble if she tells...
Garnet counters-She wunt 'sposed to be at school-she's et home-he cum in and gotter in her own home when he knowed she wuz alone. Still-Opal-Goin' to be a heap o'trouble for him.

Well, says-intrudded-on-I, I think they ought to cut his wang off and let the son-of-a-bitch die.

The gems were shocked to hear the pearl talk that way.

You'd be shocked too, I think...
You come to me from the morning garden
And stand over my bath, dropping petals
One by one
From a single pink peone
Onto the still surface of my water-thoughts
Womb mystical thoughts
And you ask...What are you thinking about?!

All the rich images contained within, meant to convey exploitation of the female both physically and mentally, seemed to cry for audio and visual treatment. The final piece, a video, was originally shot and edited on Super Eight
film, and then transferred to video tape. It is two minutes and four seconds long. The short length and insistent repetition drives home the idea of mental rape, thru interruption, routine, and the chronic threat of physical violation. I filmed my mother's beautiful worn but efficient hands preparing fresh vegetables for canning. The kitchen colors, warmed by the autumn morning sunlight are visually stunning and extremely seductive. Harsh reality of institution or restaurant kitchen images are interspersed- the contrast between locations exaggerated thru color. I used Tomita's interpretation of Debussy's Footprints in the Snow as an audio ground for the human voices reciting parts of the poem in conversational style. Three voices were used. One represented the woman who's inner thoughts were interrupted by the gossiping of the other two women. I used a male voice as one of the two gossipers to illustrate the idea that women frequently remove all guilt or blame from men for crimes they (the men) have committed against other women. Clarity or resolution comes to the victim of interruption when the gossiping stops and her voice mates with the visual images of a small painting (of mine) indicating a return to her creative reverie.

Not long ago, while working on my portrait of Alphonsine, I found an old cardboard button box in a junk store. Originally, I was interested in the box itself, but in more relaxed surroundings, I began to realize the true nature of the contents of the box. This was not just a couple of years collection of buttons, but rather, a history of a family. There were buttons from infants' clothes, as well as men's jackets. The collection spanned years in terms of the age of the buttons as well as the former users. Interesting connectors, if you'll forgive the pun.

I have some wonderful memories of a woman from Belgium, and I'm working on a series of small projects as a portrait of her. It's a re-examination of my
perception of our neighbor, Alphonsine Corneille, whom I knew when I was a child, as she was a very close friend of our family. She died the year I was twenty. My project is a portrait of a young Alphonsine, who, because of our vast age difference, I never knew. I’m synthesizing her personal history. The 're-life' of Alphonsine is depicted through a diary, installation pieces, photographs, personal mementos, and a film. It is based on my perception of stories told to me about her as I grew older, memories, and pure optimistic fantasy. My main ambition is to create the illusion of character with such intensity and evocative detail that whatever information is uncovered about her will be absolutely convincing. It is a study of my own perceptions as a child, a teen, and now as a woman. It is also a tribute to a friend. I have imbued the re-life character Alphonsine with perceptions of her own, depicted here in the diary:

Wed. October 9, 1929

"I am awed by the way a special aroma in the autumn can alter my perceptions of reality. Today, as I was walking home from the factory I passed a man smoking a pipe. The late afternoon breeze was brisk, but the sun warming. It must have been the blend of his tobacco mingling with coal smoke from one of those identical little factory bungalos. Markison Avenue, my daily path home, melted away. The purple sky, streaked with white gold shafts of sunlight was the same, but all sound stopped and though I walked on, my feet were like gliding spirits carrying me thru a maze of kaleidoscope recollections toward the evening sun..."

I used the diary format as a starting point because it enabled me to reveal aspects of her inner thoughts. Other examples of Alphonsine's perceptions were revealed in 'Phonsie's Inner/Outer Sitting Room'. This was an installation piece which I arranged as a sitting room of the late 1920's. I defined
the emotional importance Alphonsine placed on the furnishings thru color, placement and decorative glitz. Future plans include revelations of Alphonsine's perceptions thru her travel trunk, collage pieces and further installments in her diary. A very popular form of entertainment during the early part of this century was the serial story. Alphonsine's diary is a serial story and will be published as such in the monthly news, "View After Dark". Although Alphonsine was not really an artist in her re-life she is. She has inspired art. If it is true that the purpose of art is to inspire more art, then my ambition is to expand my art as a facet of life; as an instrument to inspire something more than a work cycled existence.

When I make my pieces, I am in a specific emotive place. Since viewers come to my pieces with their own emotional baggage, I hope they will take away with them a connection to their own emotive place. It's not just the moment in space which exists in my piece that is important, but also the moment in the viewer's memory to which the piece calls.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


