AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON PICTORIAL ORGANIZATION

A Thesis

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by

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Autobiographical Notes on Pictorial Organization

At the present time I feel that an image cannot be the result of a lot of problem solving or soul searching and remain a truly meaningful and real experience for its creator. One does not make images the way one goes about solving a math problem. An image should be perceived. It should have a virgin birth. Andrew Rush's statement, "I do not make images, I find them", seems to be apropos.

Originally my thoughts about picture making were all based on the external world. That is to say, that little attention was given to the innate forces that make one an individual. From the conditioning I had received I felt that certain manners of portrayal were acceptable and others were not. This kind of narrow conclusion was drawn without any real inquiry into what made it actually exist. I felt that all my concentration should be directed toward the most recent notions of pictorial organization. At that point I was unable to be selective about my influences; all seemed worthy of investigation.

While I felt it was important to make myself aware of as many new trends as possible, I nevertheless abstained from hopping on any stylistic bandwagons. My ideas about pictorial construction started to develop as a result of the type of structural training I had received and my haphazard formation of opinions. I assumed that one's work should be the product of one's inquiry into a particular problem. A visual statement must be based on a highly intellectualized degree of thinking. I gave little thought to the
importance of, or to the initial reasons for, possessing the desire to create. Decisions about where my influences should come appeared to be made simply through whim. The truth of the matter, though, is that these conclusions were later realized to be very intuitive.

For me, Joseph Albers' talk of the constant flux of the Universe gave his work a very complex philosophical reason for being. His entire life's work is devoted to a theoretical system. Even the actual execution is approached in a very scientific fashion; each color for Albers is an ingredient of exactly the right proportion.

After some thought, I concluded that the reason Albers and I were able to communicate was not because of a common philosophy, although there was a great deal of admiration in this respect, but the reason was more due to a common innate force to create in a classical manner. Simply for lack of a better means of classification the classic style seems to serve my intentions best. From my first viewing, the work of Poussin, Chardin and Corot created an enthusiasm that has never ceased to exist. The trends in painting to achieve a more restrained, balanced and harmonious means of expression seemed to relate most to my idea of what art should be. I felt that, even though one no longer thought in terms of classical or romantic styles, my greatest excitement came when confronted by works that possessed the qualities that could only be referred to as classical. I wanted to create a perfect world. I was really being omnipotent, trying to recreate a superior environment. In reality, my goal was a truly selfish one as my
images were created only for my own existence. I wished to create a perfect harmony without the least hint of uncertainty. The solution for my earliest prints was the hard-edge arrow series. Originally I thought of these images as perfectly cut gems. They were like a precious stone which glows with a sparkling and ever-convincing gleam that attests to its flawlessness. To produce such images I had to simplify and organize in as solid a fashion as possible. Suddenly, I found myself producing in a way to which I had previously been much opposed. Symmetrical motifs started to emerge. Although I was somewhat at odds with this aspect, I knew that the only way to insure that kind of harmony I was after was to work in symmetry. To speak of the gleam I had to use color. Vibrant colors that fluctuated with a maximum intensity were chosen to dress the images.

It is now quite obvious how much Albers meant to me. The presence of the classical qualities of perfection and simplification were all in order; all elements appeared to fit together quite naturally. An additional attraction was found in the Albers' theory. The over-enthusiasm of my study was given a boost as I found myself approaching my work in a fashionable, scientific manner. To further accomplish this goal of perfection, I had to use "hard-edge" forms; I had to omit free-form elements, blended areas and textural qualities. This type of form, arranged in a mathematical fashion, paying great attention to proportions and intervals, was again the

1. See color plates I, II, III; pages 9, 10, 11.
only way to portray the type of world I visualized. I looked to the highly organized fifteenth century Islamic manuscripts for further stimulation, but wished to omit the decorative aspects. I also looked at Suprematism and Neo-Plasticism. I felt that in general, the approach or actual execution to be somewhat contradictory since their method spoke more of romantic ideas and of traditional ways of working. The theory of getting at the essence of art in terms of form and working with only the basic elements, geometric forms, was as it should be.

As these images were produced I paid special attention to the space involved. Due to the fact that Suprematism and Constructivism were very closely related, I was forced to develop an attitude toward constructivism. Through the use of color I produced what I felt to be planes in space which were similar to the organization of Poussin. By placing areas of color on white paper and not allowing them to overlap, as is true of Albers' work, I was able to create a maximum fluctuation in space. These planes of color when arranged in a group were thought of as having more of a three-dimensional existence than a two-dimensional one. Obviously, the next step was to make an actual three-dimensional relief. This resulted in a statement that convinced me more of the sincerity of its being. This was due to the fact that the actual

2. See color plates I, II, III; pages 9, 10, 11.
three-dimensional, solid forms contributed an additional element in realizing my original ideas.

Although I used the arrow form quite often there was no conscious symbolic meaning behind it. I simply liked the form as a shape and at times I considered its directional implications. As the hard-edge motifs progressed, especially as sculptural reliefs, I began to think of them as symbols or emblems. The total configuration began to take on a symbolic character. It was at this point that I started to seriously reinvestigate the more traditional modes of structure. This inquiry probably came about as the result of my teaching. My responsibility was to present the nineteenth century concepts of pictorial organization. Because of the necessity to clarify and communicate, I started to play with the more traditional formal methods.\(^4\) My change in direction was not really as simple as it appeared since for some time I had been disturbed by the question of whether or not my images were "decorative". I felt that I must arrange the way I did in order to achieve my particular kind of perfection. But quite often the final statement seemed to relate most to works of a very decorative nature. I sensed that the symmetrical aspect contributed a great deal to this feeling. Even my original thoughts about creating emblems could also be related to the effect of the decorative nature that most emblems exhibit. Obviously, in searching for perfection I realized that I must execute my work

\(^4\) See color plates V, VI; pages 13, 14.
in as skillful a manner as possible; thus, I wondered if the craftsmanship involved didn't contribute more to the decorative feeling that the real goal of my problem. Looking back, I am sure that this questioning forced me to search for a different way of realizing my intentions. Therefore, my second look at traditional modes of visualization was taken as a welcome opportunity.

What followed was retrogression. I continued to think of my work in much the same way as before, only now the images became more of a traditional abstraction. My major objective was to prevent the decorative element from coming through; but all the time I knew that the type of harmony or balance I had originally intended had lost out to a system of organization that I considered decadent. I was able to achieve an image that no longer carried the decorative quality, and the work produced was in some cases significant enough and quite solid. But all in all, I felt that these represented only so many impersonal abstractions. To some extent this is true of both the sculptural reliefs and intaglio prints.\(^5\) I concluded that as a result of this change, the real reason for their existence was no longer present; but possibly the strength I gained in creating a new type of harmony made me question the basis of my initial theories. My classical bird flew out the window.

\(^5\) See color plates V, VI; pages 13, 14.
Some time ago I experienced a certain excitement for the work of Mark Rothko and although it did not hold my attention as much as Albers' work, the experience continued to haunt me. In the beginning this interest appeared to be most contradictory to my classical motivation. For a while, I thought that this might be the way out of my decorative hang-up. I thought that I must take a soft, free-flowing form and make it conform by placing a minimal hard-edge element in its presence. From the beginning I automatically referred to these free-flowing forms as clouds. At first these seemingly inconsistent images only appeared from time to time; but as I battled my problems, they became more and more frequent.

After working with a number of artists, each of a different temperament, I began to question the significance of my work. What is a significant problem? Why do I create the type of image I do and how do they relate to me? I began to realize that maybe what I had originally thought to be true was probably only the result of the type of conditioning I had received. Without a doubt, many of the basic solutions were intuitive; but the theory could only be the result of my life experiences.

At present, I feel that for an artist to continue to be true to himself he must never prevent himself from growing. As one grows one inevitably changes. Life becomes a never-ending cycle of growth and change, and for an artist to define a style or method as

his final solution is to deny growth. This, in turn, puts an end to the cycle and prevents the creative process from functioning.

As I loosened my grip on the idea of a need for a style, my images started to change again. My infatuation with Rothko evolved into a use of completely new forms. Although I continue to cling to hard-edge forms, they are no longer of mathematical proportions. For a while, I toyed with the surrealist theory of automatic writing, as I felt it to be the closest possibility in searching for the real me. The free-flowing Rothko forms that I referred to as clouds suddenly became clouds. In many cases they were thought of as cartoon "thought clouds". The images became thoughts or rather my thoughts became images. For me, they remain symbols; symbols of thoughts and events which I have experienced. They do not lie because they change as I change. The images stand for the many facets of my environment. To react to a concrete set of rules is the method of a machine or computer. If for no other reasons, my present work speaks of the true state of resolved confusion I exist in.

Those which I consider my most successful statements were the result of a reaction to a given experience. They were revealed to me in a split-second glance. But the strength they carried burnt an impression on my mind that was ninety per cent complete. These impressions were repeated in metal.

7. See color plate VIII, page 16.

8. See color plates IX, X, XI, XII; pages 17, 18, 19, 20.
COLOR PLATE IX
COLOR PLATE X
BIBLIOGRAPHY


