VISUAL COMPOSITION - RESULTING PROCESS

A THESIS

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by

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This thesis is dedicated to Linda with love
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Visual Composition - Resulting Process

I use imagery as a stimulus for pictorial invention, the final visual composition resulting from resolving the dynamics of the field, with a primary interest in color. I have found that when I suppress my tendency to decorate and inject humor into my paintings, that my work becomes monotonous and lacks the pictorial impact I think my more fanciful work possesses. I attribute this result to the fact that by depersonalizing my art I tend to become more analytical, and thus less aware of the ground. Therefore, I have no desire to make paintings which are devoid of imagery.
In beginning a painting, I usually have some image in mind. In the case of Mormon Ragman Veteran (plate 1), I was thinking of a ragman. I have no idea what suggested that the ragman should be a Mormon. The idea that my Mormon was a veteran evolved during the process of painting. I had begun by sketching in line a canopied cart and wheeled figure, and I had used battle ribbons and medals, a motif which fascinates me, and these suggested, I think, the hook. The hook, in turn, suggested a veteran. However, the hook may have resulted from my interest in pirate imagery.

The ragman's cart necessitated drawing wheels of some sort, however, it was actually my desire to draw wheels that prompted me to draw a cart and then a ragman, rather than vice-versa.

Just where this interest in wheels comes from, I don't know. However, I have always tended to use circle motifs, and wheels seem a logical outgrowth of this tendency. However, any further speculation would most likely lead to rather absurd conclusions. Therefore, I think I should simply point out that the wheel has had a strong influence upon every aspect of my life, as it has had on every life. That is the wheel is one of many images which are a part of my environmental ground.

The striped frames resulted simultaneously from a desire to decorate, and from the demands of
composition. I was painting VAN (plate 2), and having a difficult time resulting the rivalry within the field. Therefore, I decided to use a succession of striped frames as grounds and thus stabilize the field.

These frames reached their ultimate in STEPHANIE (plate 3), in which the frame was completely realized before any painting on the canvas began. Thus, the frame set the key for the painting, and the ground effect was so strong, that I did not need to pay any conscious attention to it in order to integrate it with the rest of the painting.

Since painting VAN and STEPHANIE, I have traded on this use of concentric grounds to allow myself to organize more complex compositions.

The gray circle in ALLEN (plate 4), is a variation on such a use of concentric grounds.

In this case, the circle also set the scale for the painting. That is, it was necessary to relate all the central elements, in terms of their size, to the circle. Furthermore, the grid made by the texture of the paint roller used to draw the circle had to be integrated with the central grid. These problems were solved, not by any conscious measuring or adjustment, but by reacting intuitively to the field. Indeed, since I was concerned with color, no other manner of working would have been effective.
In order to explain this statement, I must first explain my concept of color.

When rivalry within the field is eliminated, and all the pictorial elements compliment one another, the field generates an apparent color tone which is not actually present in the field. This phenomenal effect of the field is designated by the term tonality. Therefore, color is a phenomenal effect of the field, and not to be confused with local color, which is simply the actual character of a hue and not a relational effect.

Since color is an effect of all the pictorial elements the problem of establishing tonality becomes extremely complex. That is, the effect of all pictorial elements is dependent upon all other elements. The effect of any value is dependent upon all other values within the field, depending upon size and position. Furthermore, value has an effect upon hue, as does shape, size, position, intensity, and juxtaposition with other hues of varying sizes, shapes, values, and intensities. Moreover, intensity can provide an apparent value range, and size affects the intensity relationships. Also, shape affects intensity, and thus, affects value. Therefore, the relationships which comprise the field are so interdependent, that to attempt to deal with them analytically is frustrating.
Thus, any attempt to find a logical rational for the decisions made in painting any of my paintings is illogical, since I must of necessity work intuitively.

The girl-figure in STEPHANIE (plate 3), came from an earlier drawing, done in a drawing class. In that drawing, the figure was suggested by scribbles. Indeed, I always read figures into scribbles, and the figures are always cartoon figures, and usually female. I think this tendency results from a preoccupation with the female form.

I also used dragon images in STEPHANIE and again in many other paintings. It occurred to me that dragons are love symbols. I really don't know how I got this idea, and it should be obvious that I don't know for certain, or even care, from where any of my images come, or what they mean. Indeed, by not analyzing my motifs, but by simply reacting to them emotionally, I retain my fascination with them, and it is this fascination which stimulates pictorial inventiveness.

I suppose, that it is because I tend to remain naive about imagery, that I have adopted a rather child-like style for the majority of my painting. However, this style is also quite liberating. Since I am not concerned with realism, I can manipulate size, value, hue, shape, position, texture, and intensity purely for the needs of
color. This enables me to establish a more dynamic field relationship, and it is the pictorial relationship which gives the images their emotional impact, elevating them above the level of the cartoon into the level of abstraction.

I think that any image, when it exists on the level of abstraction can express the zen concept of the all, without loss of identity. That is, all things have essentially the same character as the all, and all things are a part of the all. This character is strongest, and therefore, more discernable when the entity is in a state of cohesiveness. Thus, the pictorial image which is functioning cohesively, that is free of rivalry, more effectively expresses this concept.

The matter of choosing images demands that I acknowledge the importance of the ego. I do think that all images are equal to the task of expressing the all, and that no recognizable images at all are necessary to this task. However, I am primarily interested in painting in order to explore my own character, though I believe that in order to understand myself, I must also know the all. Therefore, both the connotations of the image, and its abstract existence are essential to the realization of my goals.

Furthermore, when ones work expresses this concept, all images suggest all other images. Thus
a mountain can suggest a fish, and a dragon may suggest love. In this sense, I do know from where my images come. That is, my images come from every other image, whether visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, or literary.

When I am "tuned in", that is in a state of enlightenment, I am aware of all image relationships, and of all pictorial relationships. Thus, I am able to invent within the field intuitively. This intuitive response and interreaction with the field is essential to the creative process. If one attempts to deal with the field analytically, several things happen. First of all, one loses awareness of the totality and his relationship to it. Thus, the painter becomes locality conscious, and impersonal. Because he is impersonal, invention ends, and because he is locality conscious, he is no longer in command of the field, and cannot possibly resolve the field dynamics. This is because any pictorial element is dependent upon its ground for its character. Therefore, if one is unaware of the ground, one cannot resolve the rivalry because he cannot control the individual element. This results in failure to establish tonality.

Thus, my pictorial goal is to establish increasingly more sensitive tonal relationships. This is why I have chosen paint as my medium rather
than sculpture or graphics. The techniques of printing and sculpture are so involved, and indirect, that these mediums are less conducive to an awareness of the field. Painting on the other hand is quite direct, and flexible enough to be conducive to the creative process.

To illustrate this concept, of tonality, I shall use several examples. For instance, Mormon Ragman Veteran (plate 1), consists of a large red ground and relatively small figural elements. The figural elements are keys, that is, adjusted in order to compliment, to the red hue. The effect of the ground upon the figure is so critical, that, to change the ground would destroy the color relationship. For instance, if the red were changed to yellow, the other hues would cease to summate to a unified effect, and function only as local color and value. Similarly, the gray ground in TEDDY (plate 5), is critical to the tone of the painting, and in ALLEN (plate 4), the unprimed canvas is critical. If the ground in ALLEN were changed to white, the circle would function as value and local color only. If this ground were darkened, the value and intensity of the yellow in the grid would be out of key, and the yellow would cease to exist as color.

Because visual perception is an organizing process, visual composition is an organization
consistant with this process. To support my premise, I cite the stabilized image. ¹ This image is projected on the retina by means of a slide projector mounted on a contact lens.

Because the projector moves as the eye moves, the image is always on the same spot on the retina. This situation is unique since the eye is always in motion, and images are therefore not stable in regard to position on the retina.

Within a very short time, the stabilized image deteriorizes into segments of itself. However, these segments are always organized into groups as shown below.

BEER       BE, BEE, BEEP, PEEP, PEER, EER

In the first examples, the original image was the word BEER. In no case, has the image deteriorated into any of the following examples; B ER, BE R, P ER, PE R, P E, B E, P P, P R, B R, B P, E R, E P. In other words, the letters were always grouped, as were the segments of the triangle and circle. Furthermore, in the case of the image BEER, the image never deteriorated into nonsense syllables. This indicates another possibility. If past experience plays a role in visual perception, such as a knowledge of

¹. Stabilized Images on the Retina, Pritchard J:B., Scientific American, June 1961
the English language, it could be that we tend to organize the present visual field in terms of our past experience.

Past experience is critical to my method of working. I rely upon feedback in order to compose. That is, I do not simply decide upon an idea and then make a painting of or consistent with this idea. Once the idea is sketched out on the canvas, and indeed, during the process of sketching, I am aware of the size and shape of the canvas, and this influences how I sketch. Once I look at the canvas, it becomes a part of my past experience, no matter how recent. Furthermore, if the canvas is very large, I may not be seeing all of the hues of the field while I am applying another, since anything perceived by the rods is perceived as value only. Therefore, if I "see" a red out of the corner of my eye, I am really remembering the red. Thus, past experience is influencing how I deal with color. Moreover, I may very well be remembering a hue which is no longer present in the field. Therefore, past experience can mislead me in making decisions as to color. However, past experience usually inhibits me only in that it causes me to be less objective about the field.

The obvious beneficial aspect of past experience is that it provides a source of images which is more abstract than external sources. This is because the
image is altered by the individual personality. Thus, the images I sketch upon my canvases are drawn from past experience. However, since I am concerned with pictorial needs, the image is transformed during the act of sketching. This transformation, then, influences how I see the image. Of course, my past experience is still influencing my perception and so, I do not see exactly what is on the canvas, but an interpretation. I then adjust the field as a result of my interpretation. This then alters the feedback, and I again adjust the field. This process stops only when feedback ends.

Feedback also comes from other sources, such as the work of other artists. If I look at the work of a primitive artist, it is usually the decorative quality which interests me; or I may be fascinated by an Australian aborigines' device of giving an x-ray view of the internal organs of a kangaroo and the fact that the kangaroo is more realistic than the hunter who has speared him. As a result, I may paint a cripple with his esophagus and stomach showing, as I did in JOE (plate 6). Another time I may see an Eskimo sculpture of a walrus in a humorous stance and this may lead me to use similar poses in my paintings. Also, I have always liked the decorative quality of medieval manuscript illumination. From these, and other sources, I have gained subconsciously, a tendency to elaborate and
characterize. Since the influence is subconscious, I pick up only that which is relevant to my own personality, and therefore, my style remains exclusively my own.

Similarly, I study the work of Paul Klee. I find the humor of a Klee painting very much like my own. Indeed, before having been led astray during my first few years of college, my work was extremely like that of Klee's except for the quality. In fact it was only after discovering Klee, that I was once again able to relate personally to my own paintings. I had not been able to truly discern the artificiality and shallowness of technical innovations and the "in thing". In Paul Klee, I saw an artist with whom I could identify, and whose ability was the equal of any, and superior to most. In Klee's work I saw the decorative quality and humor of the primitive's work, and the sound structure of the accomplished artist. I realized that the abstraction made the decorative elements more emotionally effective, and it was at this time, that I not only accepted the primary importance of the formal pictorial structure, but really understood it. I also realized what freedom is available to the artist who opens himself to new possibilities.

Leading to my understanding of Paul Klee, was my knowledge of Pablo Picasso. In the work of Picasso, structure is more evident than in the work of Klee.
I was aware of Frank Stella's use of ambiguity, and I saw in the paintings of Picasso, the same effects within a more complex field, and in a context of recognizable subject matter. Picasso also widened my understanding of shape. Shape in Picasso's work is not a simple matter of matching geometrical shapes, but of using the visual energy of each shape to compliment the field.

Matisse also widened the scope of my understanding of shape. In Matisse's work, shape is instrumental to color. That is, Matisse is primarily interested in color, and shape results as the needs of color are realized. Moreover, I turned to Matisse when I wished to learn more about color. Matisse usually paints in a fairly low key, but his paintings have the appearance of being very bright. This apparent brightness first appeared in my work, effectively, in SYLVESTER (plate 7).

I am also aware of influence in my work from Dubuffet, Gris, Kandinsky, DeChirico, and others, though for the most part, I think their influence has been peripheral.

If I were to make any statements concerning the necessary concerns of an artist, I would make broad generalizations, which can accommodate exceptions and variations.

Visual perception is dependent upon contrast. One cannot perceive a dark, unless he is also
perceiving a light. Also, one cannot perceive any shape unless it is distinguished from its ground in either value, intensity, or hue, or all three. Indeed, if one's field is entirely light he tends to black out. Therefore, I may make the statement, that an artist must use contrasting values, intensities, or hues. No other absolutes may be established regarding visual art.

I reject any rejection of styles, because such rejection is a result of narrow conservatism. I also reject rejection of any medium for the same reason. I reject justification of visually weak composition through the use of new materials, because this is a failure to deal with the medium. I reject the idea that art is no longer visual because the medium is still perceived visually.

At present, I do not foresee any drastic changes in my art. I am becoming ever more interested in highly elaborate paintings. The last few paintings I have made have been in a lower key than I have been accustomed to painting in, and it is precisely because I am unused to painting in this key, that prompted me to explore it. I have no desire to change mediums or styles, although I imagine that interests in different images will come and go, and I suppose that my style will change, but I think that I have arrived at an art I can pursue for the remainder of my life.
CATALOGUE OF WORKS

Plate 1. Mormon Ragman Veteran 63 1/4" X 84"
Plate 2. Van 34 1/2" X 39 3/4"
Plate 3. Stephanie 37 1/4" X 48 3/4"
Plate 4. Allen 48 1/4" X 48 1/4"
Plate 5. Teddy 42" X 51 3/4"
Plate 6. Joe 64 1/4" X 85 3/4"
Plate 7. Sylvester 43 1/2" X 43 1/2"
Plate 8. Skip 53" X 98 1/4"
Plate 9. Tabatha 61 1/4" X 61 1/4"
Plate 10. Sweet Mary 44 1/2" X 44 1/2"
Plate 11. Joy 31 1/4" X 41 1/4"
Plate 12. George 61" X 61"