THE USE OF COLLAGE AS IMAGE AND SURFACE IN MY PAINTING

A Thesis

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by

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This thesis is dedicated to

Rosalind and Margot
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I. INTRODUCTION

"It is hard to tell time by revolutionary clocks. Everything, including time, changes in a revolutionary time, and the clocks inherited from the old regime are usually too fast or too slow."

-Lerone Bennett, Jr.

The challenge being waged against the aims and values of contemporary American society is clearly visible in the changing mood of our cultural climate. Change is inevitable of course, and the arts have probably been more receptive to change (if not the actual precipitators of change) than any other institution social or cultural. Particularly in the 'fine arts' the old ideas of the self-expressive stylists and still older ideas of beauty, seem meaningless to the younger more radical artists. Art as a barometer of change is perhaps best expressed in an introductory statement by Shipley and Weller, Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture 1969 (Univ. of Ill. Press) in which they state, "The new artist is in a variety of ways engaged with current issues which seem significant to him, he is tuned in, he is hip, he is using today's means and today's vocabulary to produce art which speaks, not necessarily of himself, but of 'Now'."1

The characteristic of change in contemporary painting is vividly recognizable in the materials and methods the 'Now' artists are employing. A revolution in means has radically extended the artists supply of materials and total availability seems to be the rule. Perhaps the singular feature
accompanying change within any transitional art period is the corresponding liberation of means and materials. Though many artists are pursuing "today's means", there is still considerable exploitation of the traditional means. The impact of revolution propels a vertical as well as a horizontal penetration of the art forms. While some seek the virtues inherent in the new, others attempt to transform older materials in new and ingenious ways. The new esthetic is as much about method as it is about means.

Collage is a process that has a history. This paper commences with a casual examination of its history; not that a history of collage is critical to the appreciation of my painting but, that it is significant to the process. My approach to painting, by way of the liberation of materials and methods, has been given impetus through an investigation of historical collage as a painting medium. First exploration, then exploitation. That has been the historic sequence, by and large, of man's venturings into new worlds on earth.

Finally, all art must proceed from assumptions. Thus, even if one does not agree with my assumptions, it is hoped that one can follow my pattern of thought with a degree of clarity. My aim is to illuminate a personal aesthetic and examine my current interest in canvas as a collage medium. Through some critical analysis of statements made by "note worthy writers," I will attempt to buttress my ideas. However, the major concern of this thesis is: The use of canvas as image and surface in my painting through an exploitation of the fabric in a way that minimizes the need for color.
II. THE EVIDENCE OF HISTORY

"When we measure the distance traveled and the enormous present-day expansion of this art and then go back to the tiny core of artists working in 1912 we discover, not without amazement that all the basic elements were already present at the start..."

-Michael Seuphor.

Collage is certainly not a recent arrival to the current art scene. John Lynch in his book, *How To Make Collages* (Viking Press, N. Y. 1961) stated that the first artists to use collage elements as part of their paintings were Braque and Picasso in 1912. If this is correct one may at least conclude that collage is a twentieth-century development. The evidence of the use of collage is readily confirmed in a number of works by certain 'cubist' painters. Notable among them are: Picasso's *Bottle, Glass and Violin 1912-13*, *Braque's Violin and Pipe 1912* and *Jaun Gris' Still Life with Pears 1913*. The "papier colle" designs by Picasso, of this same period, are examples of an extremely delicate and carefully cut-out use of paper collages. John Lynch states that the first collages composed entirely of cut-out, pasted paper images were those of the Dadaists.

Any examination of collage would be incomplete without special mention of Kurt Schwitters. His collages, it seems to me, belong at the very center of collage constructions. When most artists had abandoned the process during the 20's and 30's, Schwitters was producing some of his most ambitious and truly exciting work. He seemed to move steadily
from a basically flat, two-dimensional expression *Merzbild* 1922, to an 
assemblage type of construction *Small Home for Seamen* 1926 and finally 
to his building or space enclosure constructions of the 1930's.

I noticed a similarity between Kurt Schwitter's "space construction" 
and the Watts Tower construction in Los Angeles, California. The sim-
ilarity is not in the technique or material employed but, in the truely 
'un sophisticate d' approach to the handling of such an ambitious project.
Schwitters, whom Harold Rosenberg says was not a Dadaist or Surrealist,
remains outside the academic tradition as does the artist of the mosaic 
Watts Tower. Theirs is truely an art produced by individuals, not move-
ments.

In the more recent past, the so-called abstract expressionist 
group has employed the process of collage in interesting and even curious 
ways. Robert Motherwell, Willem De Kooning and Jackson Pollock, who are 
said to form the nucleus of the 'movement', all made use of the collage 
process. Perhaps some of Motherwell's finest work exists in his early 
collages; certainly his *Spanish Prison* 1943-44 and *Mallarmé's Swan* 1944-
47 are the most appealing to me. The *Elegy* 1948 is a collage that seem 
to anticipate the gaint *Elegy* paintings to come in the 1950's.

The term "curious" may seem somewhat awkward but, not when specifi-
cally directed to a given work. Jackson Pollock's large paintings, es-
pecially *Full Fathom Five* 1947, are a curious example of a "collage in 
swirl." "It has a special fascination," says Time magazine, "for it con-
tains in embryo the later paintings of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper 
Johns. Its panorma of steely swirls is under laid with nails, cigarettes, 
tacks, buttons and other detritus - yet all made lovely, as it were, by 
lying drowned at the bottom of a sea of paint..."^{2}
Working within the same sphere as the abstract expressionists, though perhaps without its spiritual embrace, was Conrad Marca-Relli. Marca-Relli appears somewhat unique in his controlled exploitation of the canvas collage process. His uniqueness tend to lie not in his use of imagery but, in the preservation of canvas as fabric. Contrary to the traditional approach, his collage is perceived as an extension of the use of canvas as a painting medium. Marca-Relli is actually replacing paint with strips and fragments of canvas.

Harold Rosenberg in his book, Artwork and Packages (Horizon Press N. Y. 1969) quotes a statement by a Welsh poet named David Jones. The statement can be regarded as a sufficient definition for a De Kooning painting, Collage or Pop Art. Jones writes, "A series of fragments, fragmented bits, chance scraps, really, of records of things, vestiges of sorts and kinds of disciplinae, that have come my way by this channel or that influence. Pieces of stuffs that happen to mean something to me." The meanings implicit in collage may not always be clearly visible but, all have the same cultural physiognomy. A physiognomy that suggests a fundamental rejection of illusion as an artistic means.

To assume an importance of collage beyond its use as image-making may be prone to a great deal of speculation. However, I pose the question as to whether there is a linkage between collage and protest. Is there historical evidence to confirm a connection between collage and protest? Picasso was perhaps protesting against the traditions of 'realism' (in the academic or 'evolutionary' sense) when he produced his cubistic collages. Motherwell use the collage process in the transitional phase of abstract-expressionism. The transition away from the 'realism' of the W.P.A. sponsored project art, as well as the "modernist European tradition." It
can also be argued that Rauschenberg's "combines" mark the transitional phase between abstract-expressionism and what is labeled the "Now" art.
III. A PERSONAL AESTHETIC

"The aesthetic motives and goals of every artist, and every viewer, are finally self-determined. For some of us they are privately held ideas that are actually never revealed. All of us artist or spectator are responding to many forces."—Shipley and Weller.

Since my paintings are often labeled as nonobjective it may be inappropriate to refer to the collages of shapes within them as images. The collage being as much about canvas as it is about form, it may appear fruitless to dwell on imagistic-intent. However, imagery is certainly present if only to the extent that E. H. Gombrich recognized in his statement, "All art is image-making and all image-making is rooted in the creation of substitutes." The assumption the imagery in my painting is merely a substitute for something existing outside itself is questionable. The most interesting and creative art of our time is not open to the generally educated; it demands special effort; it speaks a specialized language.

Painting as a 'creation of substitutes' may be sufficient to explain the fragmenting of reality as evidenced in cubism or the work of the Dada-Surrealists but, it rests uncomfortably with abstract painting as a direct manifestation of creative thought processes as they might appear in computer designs. For a computer, as McLuhan observed, is not simply or even mainly a business machine, but rather an instrument for storing and processing information. In other works, the computer pattern
is information, Claude Levi-Strauss shows a clear observation of the phenomenon when he stated, "The mind may be the prisoner of a secret code, locked in the unconscious, that often has as little to do with conscious reality as the rules of grammar have to do with the function of speech."\(^5\)

To the extent my paintings possess a schemata with communicative powers, there is imagery but I consider imagery to be only part and parcel of a process having more to do with the exploitation of materials and methods rather than purely private and subjective fantasies and dreams.

Susan Sontag made the statement, "Art today is a new kind of instrument an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility."\(^6\) This view probably grows out of a statement by Marshall McLuhan that each medium of expression "profoundly modifies human sensibility in mainly unconscious and unpredictable ways."\(^7\) Aside from the dubious notion of art as a 'medium of expression', the label of instrument implies that it performs a task. That art performs a task is not sufficient criteria for explaining what it is. Miss Sontag's statement provides a justification for the tremendous exploitation of new materials however, it fails to define art beyond its own "objectness."

The use of canvas as a surface for paint has a long, time-honored tradition. In my handling of the canvas as surface, I have not separated entirely from that tradition. The canvas still forms the rectangular format upon which and into which my process unfolds. The canvas is still stretched over a wooden frame. However my attitude about what it is at this point starts to differ from traditional notions. The painting is now in existence and my perception of the final work is 'conditioned' during the construction of the format, not after its construction. I place a certain value on being able to construct my own canvases because
it serves as a kind of "sensitizing session" for the emerging product. The so-called empty canvas does not exist to one who has not been conditioned to seek out images within.

My prior statements perhaps qualifies me for that category Clement Greenberg specifies as "Art Art". He labels Picasso, Braque, Matisse and Klee as artist who derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. "The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in the pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces shapes, colors etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not implicated in these factors." I suspect the negative connotation ascribed to the term "pure preoccupation" is supplied to rule out spontaneity. If there is an individual aesthetic it owes very little to the education of the spectator. The artist's own problem solving is an extension of the art process and adds measurably to its growth.

To be involved with canvas as image and surface implies a concern with formal and aesthetic problems. However, this may be only a surface concern since my basic interest is to exploit the material as material. If there are formal considerations evident in the result, it is incidental to my process. It is difficult to deny, my early academic training has somewhat conditioned my perceptual awareness to such an extent that the product may seem planned or even contrived. The unmolested purity of the canvas in certain of my paintings is a deliberate attempt to retain the 'freshness' of the fabric as material only. Motherwell stated "A picture is a collaboration between artist and canvas. "Bad" painting is when an artist forces his will without regard for the sensibilities of the canvas."
IV. ANALYSIS OF PAINTING

"People seize on painting to cover their nakedness....They make everything from God to a picture, in their own image. That is why the picture-hook is the ruination of painting...."

-Pablo Picasso.

My method makes use of strips and fragments of canvas, cut or torn, pasted or glued to a stretched surface to which color has been added. In the painting entitled Arroyo, I lightly stained the surface with color before applying the collage fabric. I find that in staining unsized canvas the color flows easily when the fabric is wet. I also discovered when acrylic paint is applied to unsized canvas its drying closes the interstices of the fabric and further painting seals the pores completely. This surface buildup creates a smooth finish that becomes quite brittle to give the appearance of metal. I occasionally prefer to retain the natural quality of canvas as long as possible therefore I dilute the paint and apply it in solution.

I owe a great deal in my use of color to influence of Mark Rothko. His painting surfaces comprise a few broad planes of thin color-wash arranged in parallel bands, giving the impression of both a solid plaque and a luminous color haze. Though canvas collages have not been historically colorful, I feel that color can add an extra dimension if it is applied with precision and intelligence. I seek a kind of "process of expansion", not merely through shape manipulation but also through the application of color as a visual element. Fortunately, the color is somewhat relaxed as it does
not necessarily carry the burden of imagery.

The fragments and patterns of canvas become quite pliable when wet therefore I moisten each strip as I seek to discover its peculiar shape. Twisting and pulling the wet canvas will provide creases, wrinkles and frayed edges that can be used to advantage. I often fold pieces of corn fabric to create a rather smooth, straight edge rather than a jagged edge is often quite pleasing. I delight in being able to invent shapes not only with the material to be pasted down, but also with the area onto which it is to be pasted. In the interplay of canvas on canvas, I confirm the exploitation of the fabric as image and surface. For inherent in this manipulative process, I must perceive the fabric as material, image, surface or (more academically) "figure and ground."

Occasionally, I will add fragments and strips of other material to my collages if I consider it appropriate. String, wood and ropes have been used in many of my paintings (the subjective implications is erroneous) to add a note of color or emphasize an edge. Though I attempt to limit myself to the use of fabric, I often respond to the 'urge' to use other material. The creative process is not so carefully controlled that certain 'urges' cannot be satisfied. John Dewey is reported to have said: The scope of a work of art is measured by the number and variety of elements coming from past experience that are organically absorbed into the perception had here and now."10 Because of my reliance on the immediacy of the response I have found preparatory drawing not germinative to my work at this time.

The paintings included in this text are to serve as evidence of an investigative process that has only been recently explored. With this in mind we may examine a few plates that relate to my present concern with
canvas as image and surface. The first three plates, though they are not collages, initiated my current interest in the collage process. In plate I, the medium is oil on canvas. The paint is applied in bold, saturated energies of pure complementary hues. Even in this painting, the suggestion of ragged edges balanced by crisp hard outlines starts to make its debut. An overlay of colors establishes the illusion of shallow depth that is in anticipation of the coming overlays of canvas on the painted surface. The shape is contained by the color and is observable as color. Furthermore, the paint is applied in flat opaque strips that attempt to preserve the two-dimensionality of the surface. Further speculation may reveal the drips of paint as reminiscent of the frayed edge of torn canvas.

One of my first examples of work done entirely with acrylic paint is presented in plate II. In this painting color carries the burden of imagery. The stretched canvas, having been slightly sealed with gesso, received a diluted application of pigment. By dragging the brush over the partially sealed surface, I produced an interesting modulation of tones. The modulated surface was then exploited as image and more color was added in thin applications. The final color statements were applied as flat areas of bold hues. The free, loosely applied pigment placed next to a smooth opaque surface is a technique that is to become consistently employed in future paintings.

The painting in plate III often referred to as the “OX”, is significant because of the reduction of imagery. Color and texture are obviously used to accentuate what is essentially a simple motif. Simulated texture is produced by washing the very fluid color onto a surface that has been closed by thick layers of acrylic paint. The watery color dries
without penetrating the surface fabric. The curious textural pattern of transparent wash is again played against the solid, more opaque notes of color. A hint of collage is introduced by the glued string visible on the painted surface.

The following three paintings are examples of my first excursion into the use of fabric as a collage medium. The painting of plate IV is evidence of a combination of fabrics used as fragments of the collage process. This particular painting may appear ambitious because of the use of such a wide variety of fabrics. Burlap, canvas, cotton cloth and ropes were all used as collage materials. The paint was applied opaquely as well as in stain solution. Aside from being the largest project attempted to date, it is obviously the most adventuresome.

The use of the letter "X" in my early paintings was also an attempt to simplify the imagery. Perhaps the negative connotation associated with the letter "X" was the basis for its selection as a possible motif for the painting in plate V. The negation of imagery for schemata may be a characteristic derived from the work of Robert Motherwell. Though Motherwell's motifs possess a rather strange and personal symbolism, my reaction is they are less esoteric when viewed as simple intuitive shapes that result out of the artist's struggle for order within chaos. It has been my attempt in this painting to reject that which is not essential to the construction of the painting. I have worked toward a "compression" of space through the reduction of color modeling. The nineteenth-century attitude concerning 'form' does not relate positively to my painting at this time therefore, I consider it irrelevant.

One prevailing characteristic in my painting is the use of linear statements that comprise the shapes or imagery in my work. I have noticed,
in retrospect, that many of my paintings contain an overall directional peculiarity that resides in the form of line. A line of varying width and angle of direction but a line none the less prevalent. I cannot begin to understand the "psychological implications" of this phenomena but, it is definitely present and clearly observable. In the painting of plate VI, the horizontal force is acknowledged by the group of collage strips of varying widths extending across the front surface plane. I have attempted to combat this "linticular force" by applying paint in such a way as to surround the collage strips and make the area cohesive. It is hoped that the individualness of the strips will be "read" as single complex shapes. The use of color for grouping and containing shapes within a given area designates its secondary function of maintaining "closure."

The Arrow painting (plate VII), to which I referred to earlier in this section, also posses a generous use of color. Color carries the motif as well as illuminate the "ground". The painted surface may be perceived as the subject matter portion of the painting thus, assigning the collage strips to a secondary role. Since it appears natural for the layman to acknowledge a recognizable image first, one may conclude that the totally abstracted image is secondary simply because it is "non-representational." It becomes difficult to combat this kind of visual illiteracy, however placement can be a convenient tool in controlling it. Therefore, in this painting the collage strips are given a place of prominence in the upper portion of the format. The arrow points toward the collage to emphasize its importance.

Perhaps the most minimal stance of any of my paintings is the one presented in plate VIII. The simplicity of its construction is due in
part to the attitude of completion which I experienced in the formative
stages of its growth. The color was added first in diluted washes.

Next, two strips of fragmented canvas was placed non-chalantly on the
surface. Later I added another small strip and felt no desire to add
more. Forsaking my initial satisfaction, I dared to strengthen the color
and add another note to the collage fabric. I highten the suggested
motif of a spear and added color to the edges of the canvas. Now, with
every glimpse of the results I am reminded of the words of the architect
Louis Sullivan, "less is more".

The painting of plate IX exhibits my concern for opening and clos-
ing the canvas fabric. Areas of raw canvas are stained with color; then,
a layer of gesso is applied across the mid-section of the painting. Paint
is added to this gessoed section establishing a smooth glossy band of
rustic orange. The collage elements remain natural except for a small
note of green that tints one strip slightly. The pale muted tones of
color allow the natural canvas to read as a light hue. The dark bottom
portion of the painting consists of a simple stain of pure brown. The
architectural flavor of this painting is accented by the straight, precise
directional flow of shapes across the format. I consider this painting an
exploration of the dual role of image operating as shape and color.

The last painting in this series (plate X) is significant in that
it points to a possible direction that I feel may prove fruitful in the
future. This painting is the culmination of all that my thesis describes.
The simplicity of its design is evidence of my growing confidence in the
collage process. First, the color is a single rectangle of intense green
with a slash of blue across the upper portion. The color is applied in
a smooth opaque stain, flat and "unmodeled". The canvas, slightly tinted,
was torn into individual strips, etched then frayed with a wire brush. After the material was sufficiently raged, I pasted it to the painted surface. In the act of gluing down the fabric, I allowed for wrinkles and creases to remain as an un molested quality of the plasticity of fabric. There is an equality in the distribution of the two basic mediums used to produce this painting. The pigment has been applied in only two colors and the canvas has been utilized in only two ways. The balance can also be observed in the treatment of paint and canvas as surface and image. Paint is viewed as figure when place on the canvas ground. However, paint is viewed as ground when canvas is placed over it. The ambiguity of surface and image as, contained is this painting and others, satifies my thesis of canvas fabric as image and surface in my painting.
V. CONCLUSION

I consider my work thus far to have validity in that I have been able to expand on an idea that is of interest to me. However I must admit I have never accomplished everything pursued in a work nor fully understood what it is I was striving for. It is from these frustrations comes the necessity for my next attempt. My observations reveal a world of opposing forces. My creations are of that world.
FOOTNOTES


7 Ibid., p. 130.

8 James B. Hall, op. cit., p. 179.

9 Frank O'hara, Robert Motherwell, (Garden City, New York), p. 54.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


EXHIBITS

The following is a partial listing of paintings which were exhibited as the studio portion of this thesis. These works were exhibited at The Ohio State University School of Art Gallery during the Fall Quarter of 1969.
CATALOGUE OF PLATES

PLATE I  "Syk Top", 28 1/2" x 48 1/2", oil on canvas, 1967.

PLATE II  "Composition #5", 36" x 40", acrylic on canvas, 1968.

PLATE III  "Two Panels", 28 1/4" x 60 1/4", acrylic and string on canvas, 1968.

PLATE IV  "Composition #8", 66 1/2" x 66 1/2", fabric collage and acrylic on canvas, 1968.

PLATE V  "Big X", 47 1/2" x 58 1/2", collage and string with acrylic, Fall 1968.


PLATE VIII  "The Spear", 45 1/2" x 55 1/2", canvas collage and acrylic paint on canvas, 1969.

PLATE IX  "Brown Bottom", 46" x 50", canvas collage and acrylic paint on canvas, 1969.

PLATE X  "Composition #12", 45 3/4" x 55 3/4", canvas collage and acrylic on canvas, Fall 1969.
PLATE I
PLATE IV