Contrasts...Veils...Fragmentation

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INTRODUCTION

"When that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away... For now we see through a glass, darkly..." (Apostle Paul)

I seek to clarify my vision. Along with being an artist, there are several characteristics that are inherent to my identity, and all are interdependent. But, central to my being is the fact that I am a believing Christian—a Mormon. Religion is for me a daily observance and an integral part of life. I seek unconditional truth and spiritual growth, and I know that this is obtainable. I try to pattern my actions and relationships after a code of divine ethics. Because of this, self examination and the questioning of what I see around me is an ongoing process which I feel yields results. I have what I believe to be a genuine faith, yet I acknowledge the contradictions and questions that exist within my experience, and I seek to reconcile them. Much of what I do is based on feeling and intuitive responses to my circumstances. I rely on an inner voice for guidance that my actions can be of some positive consequence as I continue forward. I believe that perfection is the destiny for those that embark on a sincere spiritual search.

I find a strong parallel between my experience of art and the process of life. My artwork is a reflection of my search and a questioning that deals
with the concept of an ideal. It is a record of my thoughts and feelings as I acknowledge and sort out the complex experience of this world.
CONNECTIONS

Strong connections exist between what I am doing now in my art and what I have done previously. A discussion of experiences from the past will, I believe, help elucidate my present work.

Religious practices were a regular part of the daily activities of my family as I was growing up. I was raised with a belief in God and a desire to please him. In addition to attending church, my family, as a group, regularly discussed Mormon doctrine, a part of which deals with the concept of progression and becoming like our Father in Heaven, the ultimate purpose of this life.

When I was nineteen years old, I went to Korea for a year and a half as a missionary for the Mormon church. This experience helped to solidify my commitment to God. It was a difficult experience as I adjusted to a new culture, struggled with a new language, and taught my religious beliefs. I learned a lot about myself and human nature.

Art is something that I have been interested in from my earliest memories. I grew up with a desire to be an artist, and I worked at developing my skills. I was particularly drawn to representational images; Vermeer and Degas were two of my favorite artists. As I learned more about the conceptual side of art at Brigham Young University, I began to question the things that I was doing. Why was representation appealing? How does abstraction communicate? Why was I drawn to certain forms?
What was my purpose for art? Making work became more difficult as I considered these questions. I wondered if using representation was just an exercise in skill or if non-representation was an excuse for those who possessed little skill? During this time, as I was involved in various daily activities, I would draw in my notebook. These drawings were mostly non-objective, and they all had varied value patterns placed within a type of grid structure. I did not pay much attention to them at first; they did not seem very important, but after some time, I realized that there was something vital about those drawings for me. I started working seriously with non-objective forms. My BFA project was a series of non-objective grid paintings and prints. Color and value gave individual parts or shapes an identity and created contrasts. These works were predominantly dark with varying degrees of lighter value areas emerging through the darkness. I never assigned specific meaning to them, but it was mentioned to me by some people that they had the quality of stained glass windows illuminated from behind. I felt that they possibly referred to the underlying structure of life, a system of order in an apparently chaotic world. I liked that the non-representational forms maintained an ambiguous and mysterious quality while having the potential to convey feelings and ideas. However, I was not completely satisfied. I felt that the direction was limited, and I realized that the representation of recognizable forms needed to be part of my work. They had the potential of meaning as symbols and signifiers, while functioning as anchors to our visual experience—a common vocabulary.

After graduating from college, I incorporated a combination of representational and non-representational elements in my work. I have continued to use this combination as I have investigated several
representational forms; references to the landscape, images of classical sculpture, and details of plants are all classical subjects that I have incorporated into a divided and structured setting. While at The Ohio State University, my investigations have also extended into the usage and integration of mediums as I have continued my search.
EXPANDING ON THE NOTION OF THE IDEAL

My current work does not question the existence of an ideal. My investigation, through the process of creating art, then, is to discover what that ideal is. In a Mormon context, the problem with searching for the ideal is the "veiled" state of human existence. Mormons believe that the earth was created for a single stage in the progression of people towards their ultimate destiny, that one of the most important conditions of this sphere is that it be isolated from the presence of God, and that we, as individuals, be cut off from former memories. This earth is, then, veiled. This veiling provides an opportunity for us to develop in a more independent and autonomous way than was previously possible. Additionally, we are for the first time in this world, possessors of physical bodies. This condition prompts us to experiment with the limits and capabilities within this new state of being. We experience pain, hunger, and passion for the first time in this life, and we accrue a wealth of memories. We learn what it is to be mortal.

It is easy to see the influence of this concept of existence in my art. There is a sense of isolation and fragmentation in my work that is in some sense a commentary about this very temporary, temporal life we live. We deal with distractions and doubts, yet despite the limits of understanding that are placed on us in this sphere, I believe that there exists an ideal that not only can be achieved but should be the focus of my search. I have what might be called a perfectionist attitude about process and technique. I have
a passion for the nature of materials and surface. I believe in aesthetics and in the judgment that that implies. I have an interest in the group of objects and ideas that we call art, and I have been influenced by range of artists that have existed throughout history. In summary, the creative process, for me, is a search for the ideal. It is a search that must be undertaken in a world with limits and barriers.

Early in my graduate program, I began working with a new approach to materials and compositions. Phases (plate I) marks this point of departure and innovation in my work. Prior to this, I had employed the medium of printmaking in its more conventional application, but with this work, I began an investigation of materials and processes that have broadened my perspective of the potential of printmaking and art.

An idea within Phases is to consider the plate or source of the image as essential to the work itself, a model or ideal that is immediate and available. The constructed boxes of Phases were a response to the notion of disintegrating boundaries in art mediums.

My work began with four found plates (this being the first time I have used found objects in my work). Through a photographic process, partially obscured images of trees were added to the random preexisting marks on the plates. Prints were taken from the plates before they were canceled by having the outer edges folded backwards perpendicular to the picture plane. The addition of wooden structural supports and end pieces complete the box format. The prints were then collaged to the exposed wood, and the finished piece stacked vertically on the wall, with interspaces that allow for glimpses of the collaged areas. The images on the plates display a range of value as well
as various levels of abstraction. The verticality of the format creates a tension between the expected horizontality of the landscape subject. The projection of the boxes into the viewer's space defies, in a traditionally modern way, the idea of image as window.

The dimensions and proportions of my work are as essential to their meaning and content as they are to formal relationships. In many of my works, compositional elements spill over the sides of the frontal surface incorporating the use of secondary spaces--prints or printing plates wrap fluidly around three sides of the object, a continuous band of image, process, and history. The idea of flatness is heightened by the emphasis on the paradoxically three dimensional elements of the two dimensional work. In my experience with printmaking, I have explored the possibilities of rendering what is perhaps the flattest of mediums in this context. Much of my work with printmaking, while in graduate school, grapples with the contemporary ambiguities between flatness and plasticity. Some works are incorporated into formats that project the work outward from the wall, rather than merely paralleling it. In other works, I render plastic forms illusionistically in a two dimensional medium. Thus, in some cases, I mount prints sculpturally and in others, I print sculpture.

*Questioned Past* (plate II), which is one of my most recent works, integrates multiple parts, continues my experimentation with collage, and creates a dialogue about the process of seeing. I believe its multiple fragments refer, not only to the mass of information that surrounds us, but also to our limited ability to piece that information together--part of the process of learning and discovery.
Mormons believe that God created the universe by adhering to preexisting laws of physics and from preexisting materials. Questioned Past re-configures multiple images created at various points over the past two years in a number of mediums. Because its components can still be re-configured, it questions whether or not this is the ideal configuration. If a true order or pattern exists outside my works, how do I recreate it within them?

Another aspect of the ideal that is considered in this work is the tradition of the classical figure. Figuration, in general, has a great deal of meaning for me as an artist creating work at the end of the twentieth century. These forms have the potential to symbolize many different things. In particular, ideal figures reflect the image of God, in whose image mankind was created. Mormons believe that God is not some indefinable spiritual force but rather an exalted, individual, physical being. We become more like God when we assume physical bodies. This belief is not common to all of Christianity, but it has much in common with the exalted status that the figure enjoys with the academic tradition of the arts. My choice to "cite" classical or Renaissance figures in my work is an arbitrary one in some senses. I could have emulated the figure style of a number of traditions, but these images, while abstractions of the perfection that lies outside the work, embody a rational system or canon. The classicized body has come to represent, within western culture, a form of perfection, which seems appropriate to my work. Because of their particular separation in time from our day, these figures also evoke a mysterious quality that relates to the unknown. The fact that they represent a very physical form of deity also holds significance.
Three of the statues in *Questioned Past* are painted with spiraling stripes of color. The stripes function in the same way as does the lopped off heads and arms of the figures—to interfere with the comfortable reading of the forms. I chose to combine parts of three pieces, fracturing these inherited fragments further.

Another element in my work that relates to fragmentation is time and transition. Mormons believe that time exists as part of this world but that time is altered or non-existent in other spheres. A day to God is a thousand to man. It is through the continuum of time that we are exposed to information and experiences. I think time effects the way we see things. As we learn new information, our vantage point changes, things are placed in a new context, and this context affects the way we interpret what we see. This questions our knowledge in a way, but it is also a motivating factor to look ahead to new discovery and understanding. This is where I think faith is required. In *Questioned Past*, I acknowledge the effects of time on our perceptions by taking images from history, interfering with them, and placing them in a new context.

As a Mormon I believe in a right and a wrong. It is through contrasts that we distinguish one thing from another—sometimes these differences are obvious and sometimes they are not. In a world that is complex, the endless contrasts can be confusing as we try to discern what is best for us. We have to make decisions, and they can be difficult, even torturous, because the consequences affect our lives and our happiness.

This idea of contrasts is manifest in *Violet and Green* (plate III) where two opposing but separated figures exist in an ambiguous state. What are they feeling? Is there really any emotion at all? Are they moving apart or
coming together? There is a tension in the work. The use of color emphasizes the contrasts between the two forms.

The work, Blue Veiled Vision (plate IV), is an intaglio print pulled from one of the plates in the work Phases. It has an image of trees on the right side which is obscured by darkness and random marks (which cover the entire print). It has two vertical divisions which create three repeating shapes, the center one being a fairly opaque area of blue tones with emerging structural lines. I see the central area as a veil. Previously, I stated that this world is veiled, meaning that it is excluded from the presence of God. The temple of Solomon had a veil which separated the outer room from the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies. This division, this veil, separated the place of men from the throne of God. A veil, then, is initially an acknowledgment of separation, but ultimately a portal to divine access. It is the acknowledgment of separation, and the promise of unification. The veils in my work are meant to function in the same way. They both obscure and highlight. They bring about a focus while constructing an elusive screen. That which is obtained too easily is esteemed too lightly. The veil makes us work for enlightenment.

I consistently refer to some kind of pattern or structure in my work, through indirect reference or literal symbols. In Shadow Figure (plate V), there are two images; one of an obscured figure and the other a color field which veils a negative image of the figure. Within the color field, there are multiple divisions that relate to its shape and structure. Here and in many other works, orthogons have been inscribed both beneath and on top of the various mediums. These lines and the perspectival recession they imply
stand as rigid counterpoints to the organic and human contours within the works. These lines, mathematical in origin and based on the square, reinforce the more structural aspects of my compositions. Historically, the orthogons functioned as an ideal system of formal ideas that had application to the representation of the figure as well as the landscape and architecture. In many of my works they function akin to lines of force. These lines symbolize an underlying purpose that I feel exists in life and which is very hopeful. This is important.

In Shadow Figure, the relationship between the two figures corresponds to the idea of the spirit of man being separate and distinct from the physical body. But to see these two entities in separation is not natural. The resurrection of the dead means a literal reuniting of spirit and body, never again to be separated. These images are interdependent and constitute ultimately only one image—both formally and symbolically.

Art in this century has to acknowledge that there is nothing new under the sun. Images are not created; they are recycled. The increase of new mediums that has occurred within the most recent decades still relies on time-proven motifs and themes. Artists often resurrect, but only rarely give birth. Yet, originality is born within the freshness of context and associations that the artist introduces. Each successive generation of humanity re-appropriates traditional representations, whether figurative or non-representational, for their own purposes—infusing them with additional layers of meaning and significance.

My work frequently plays with the twentieth century dialogue between the forces that demand innovation and those that accept its impossibility. It
has become a reoccurring motif in my work to take the most traditional of academic subjects—the human figure, landscape, and, in this century, geometric abstraction—and place them within a compositional context that is disorienting and self-examining.

Repetition within my work does not stop at subject types, but continues with the repetition of the single image through multiple works. These images are often mirrored by their own reversal—an emphatic acknowledgment of the reproduction in printmaking. *Questioned Past, Altered Vision* (plate VI), *Violet and Green*, and *Reverse Play* (plate VII) all incorporate a drawing by Michelangelo of the dead Christ which I altered and re-presented first on copper plates, and subsequently through the prints that they generated. The idea of formal interaction between reversed images is far more important in these works than any overt Christian content. It is a compelling image, and on some level a spiritual image, but for me in these works, it was primarily a visually appealing image.

My approach to making art is initially intuitive and formal. I respond to images, shapes, or objects and include them in my work. I evaluate what I have done, and then I respond again to the work itself, adding, deleting, and changing. It is in the process that my ideas are multiplied. It is in the evaluation that the discovery of my intent begins.

While the reference to the human figure plays an extremely strong role in my work, there are other reoccurring images; stands of trees, flowers, and various references to nature are represented. *Replications/Implications* (plate VIII), *View in Twain* (plate IX), and *Phases* are examples of these. Mormons believe that all life forms possess a spiritual nature just as their human companions do. I see in these living entities the hand of a creator as well as a
model for the same kind of perfection inherent in man. These forms from nature represent an ideal.
CONCLUSION

The image of seeing through a glass darkly, which I referred to at the beginning of this paper, represents the human search for meaning. In my work, through formal elements discussed such as veils and fragmentation, this state is represented. This search is also implied through the use of images which represent an ideal state but are usually fractured—not complete-like our vision.

Significantly, despite these fractures and obstacles, there is an underlying reference to structure and order (even though the nature of this order is questioned). It is possible to make sense of the conglomeration of images—fractures and fragments. There is an inherent optimism in my work, a belief that it is possible to see beyond, a belief in progression, a belief in an ideal. It is the searching for this ideal that is reflected in my work through the investigation of materials and mediums, and through the incorporation of various images which refer to this ideal.
PLATE I, PHASES
PLATE II. QUESTIONED PAST
PLATE III, VIOLET AND GREEN
PLATE IV, BLUE VEILED VISION
PLATE V, SHADOW FIGURE

[Image of two panels: one with a blue background and the other with a figure in shadow]
PLATE VI, ALTERED VISION
PLATE VIII, REPLICATIONS/IMPLICATIONS
PLATE IX, VIEW IN TWAIN
REFERENCE

The Bible