A VISCOUS INQUIREY INTO
MEANING AND TRUTH

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By
Derek Scott Anstis, B.F.A.

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Masters Examination Committee:
Professor Stephen Pentak, Adviser
Dr. Robert Arnold
Professor Georg Hemdal

Approved by

Adviser

Department of Art
This short dissertation is a description of a portion of a large body of paintings, as well as an analysis of the philosophies behind their production. Particular attention is given to concepts that relate to grids and various applications of those concepts: architecture, cartography, mathematics. The notion that some concepts, such as the grid, hold too rigidly to an internal logic to have more than limited use for determining approximations (or simulations) based on previous empirical data. A preference is given to such *empirical* data as it appears to have a more concrete relationship to notions of material truth.
VITA

October 4, 1972 .................... Born – West Palm Beach, Florida

1997................................. B.F.A. Painting, the University of Florida

1999 – present .................... Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University

PUBLICATIONS

No Further Publications

FIELD OF STUDY

Major Field of Study: Art
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A VISCOUS INQUIRY INTO MEANING AND TRUTH

I have always had an interest in the sciences and mathematics. At the age of two I was so interested in the physical world that my parents kept me on a leash to keep me out of it. I was most adept at attracting filth and grime, and at breaking things. These talents stemmed from the same issue: I was unable to believe something was real unless I touched it. I had to physically come into contact with an object to experience it. Logical deductions such as "It looks like stone it must feel like a stone" were worthless to me; only the empirical data obtained by physical contact could be trusted. Factual data uncovered through logical deduction and theory always seemed to fall short of actual experience. In fact, they make an idea of a thing less precise by giving us preconceived notions about what that thing is. I believe logic and mathematics are wonderfully devised closed systems but we cannot use a system that only refers to itself to qualify factual information in the physical world. Empirical data should be the primary guiding factor in a pursuit of truth. I have made some inquisitions, of an empirical nature, using the viscous material paint.

At first glance, the painting "Frequencies" (fig.1) seems to be a large (6.5' x 5.5') painting comprised of an overall sandy color on a black background. Upon closer inspection, however, it reveals some subtle complexities. The faint variations in tone,
hue, color and intensity make evident groups of shapes; these shapes vary from organic squares to lines that vary slightly in thickness. All of the shapes refer to an underlying grid structure, which (if you look closely) reveals that the black is not the ground color at all -- rather, the ground color is white. The black ground is an intermediate layer that is comprised of a thick barred black grid. The sandy shapes only cover areas of the white ground, which show through in areas where the black grid's paint coverage is incomplete, and are placed within the grid structure. These shapes only on occasion cross the black bars that make up the grid. Around the border, however, there is a different type of mark made in the same sandy color, which follows and partially covers the black lines with light brown lines and forms yet another grid layer. These lines create another shape in the center of the painting, a shape that is revealed by the light brown grid lines around the border, which cover some of the black around the edge of the painting.

The title "Frequencies" was derived from the fact that this painting can be described in terms related to the broadcast sciences. The frequency of the occurrence of a particular mark is determined by an overall static (a non-predetermined byproduct) that reveals only ghosts of images. Though the grid refers to a great deal of mathematical history, when the grid is broadcast over a surface in paint, interference clouds the accuracy of the grid. What is transmitted now is a faint facsimile of a black grid and some of the aforementioned shapes revealed through a reference to the information laid down originally in black paint.

In the "Graded in Green" series (fig. 2-4), the grid structure is more clearly evident. Colored lines have been laid down over a colored ground. In these three paintings the grid lines have been laid down while the ground was wet and the two layers
have merged physically into one layer of paint. This has allowed viscous slippages to occur and distort the pattern of the grid, as evident in "Graded in Green #3" (fig. 4). Here the paint, including the grid lines, has flowed to the center of the sagging stretched canvas, making a thick area of paint in the center of the canvas. The greater density of the blue gridlines has caused it to sink into the violet ground. Only the crest of the line has been left exposed, and, due to the surface tension, it remains a reasonably consistent thickness in this area -- with the result that the original lines are much thinner, much more attenuated.

In the other two paintings in this series, (fig. 2 and 3) a third color has been added. This layer comes in the form of green dots dripped into the squares of ground color that remain after the grid was laid down. These dots have also been applied to the wet ground and similarly have become a part of one painted layer. These dots are not clearly visible in "#3" because a phenomenon similar to what happened to the blue grid lines has effected the green dots. Due to their relative specific gravity, they have been almost entirely consumed by the violet layer. An area only at the very top of the dot can be seen, and only upon close inspection. In the case of the other two paintings the green dots are clearly visible. In fact they affect the grid by occupying a volume of the area formerly occupied by the ground color thus viscously distorting the grid lines that attempt to merely pass by. It is evident that a grid of sorts was intended, but this grid has been subverted, both by the viscous nature of wet paint and the green dots, so that only an irreverent reference to the grid is left.
To me, the grid is a system that tries to define and categorize our surroundings. It is an accepted way to flesh out the truth mathematically or semantically in any given situation. Almost every human conception is filtered through a grid at one time or another. Ideas; however, are viscous; the strength or validity of any philosophy is ascertained by periodically determining its ability to change; if a concept is firm then it still might alter its course when externally influenced. In a flood it is better to have a boat than a bridge, and yet following a flow to its conclusion can be a dangerous endeavor: you may find yourself over a waterfall or in a stagnant pool. I see the grid as a concrete idea whose walls resist penetration or change. Take for example our insistence on using grid structures even where they seem inappropriate: the earth is approximately a sphere, and yet, since cartographic convention dictates that we define spaces using grid structures, a grid was applied over this sphere creating approximate rectangles. This results in an area at both poles that is literally nowhere. This necessity to quantify our surroundings through the grid has led to approximations taking a more than supporting role in our relation to our landscape. The Mercator projection, for example, was invented to allow sailors to steer a straight course by their compass, and it was moderately successful there, but it's still far from perfect. Mercator's maps worked only approximately. It can be mathematically shown that it's impossible to accurately map a sphere onto a two-dimensional surface without distorting it somewhat.

There is a paradoxical relationship between the way we conceive of our world and the way we interact with it that is analogous to elements of my research. Consider the architect whose goal is to define a space comfortable to inhabitants who view the world
along the horizontal plane and yet he or she views the plan for such a space from above. This simple yet illustrative analogy demonstrates the problem that arises when a concept meets application or when theory encounters material. Concept in its pure ephemeral form operates as a vertical logic; the architect's gaze intersects the landscape at a right angle, and material reality acts as horizontal logic, a logic of the tangible and the visible. Do these two situations exclude one another, does theology deter natural instinct and is this a functional subversion? I am interested in the intersection of these ideas, where the grid meets and reacts to the material, where the materials' reaction to concept reveals the concept's resistance to change, I grade the materials' ability to demonstrate a concept clearly.

Gregory Ulmer has proposed a concept that he calls *Post-Literacy*. The general idea is that we, as a society, have entered a new age of literacy, one in which reading and writing skills alone can not deem one literate. Literates must have the ability to read, define, and qualify information and concepts in a way that relates the information to his or her material reality. He may be describing a utopian reality that exists at the intersection of material and concept.

Slippages in paint here are used to refer to *viscocities* in concept and the fluid and dynamic interaction of a flow on a concrete structure. Invention, frequently the result of well-orchestrated mistakes, is this kind of innovation -- and not just a curious subversion. Any system that defies previous conventions is destined to be defied by those of the future.
Other paintings such as "3000" (fig. 5) refer only loosely to the grid structure that is a connective thread in this work. "3000" relies on a pattern of dots to create a visual structure. The dots are lined up in horizontal rows and vertical columns. The rows seem much more uniform; one column can not be clearly defined but one row can be followed from one side of the painting to the other. The columns are grouped in a different manner, by color. Two green/yellow bands on either side flank a green shape, standing in the center running almost from top to bottom. The shape is not relative to the uniformity of the rows but rather the non-uniform nature of the columns.

The ground layer, the surface of the primed canvas, is clearly visible between the dots but rarely in other areas. In one area, located above the bottom left corner, two of the rows do not touch, exposing an area of primed canvas. This gap makes evident the previously suggested uniformity of the rows as no similar gap exists in the columns. This is because from left to right the spacing between dots is consistent but its relationship to the superior and anterior dots is not, either in terms of spacing or juxtaposition. The columns appear held together by their relative color, and the rows by their relative position.

The painting "Incised Grid" (fig. 6) shares some visual similarities with other paintings in this group, but a more in-depth analysis reveals some stark differences. It does share a grid-like structure. The grid, however, seems to have been the last element to have realized its effect on the surface. The exact process here is a little confounding, to the eye though some evidence is unquestionable. There is a solid violet layer that has been poured on (as evidenced by some drips that appear on it's relatively tall sides: height 10" x width 7" x depth 2.5"). On the face of this painting, marks have been incised into
and through this layer. Then the areas that create the bars of the grid have been removed, to reveal the ground layer. So in the top layer what is left over is the violet, tactile shapes referent to the areas that would not be the grid lines, or the blocks that are contained and defined by these lines. It is not, however, merely the ground that is revealed with the removal of the violet layer from areas. The incision has also penetrated the ground layer in areas, and this violence has left chipping in this layer. This chipping is most evident in the areas where the ground is revealed through the intermediate green layer and describes the course of the blade. This in turn helps to place the violet layer in its proper historical context as the last layer laid down, and the context of the removal of sections of this layer as the last action performed. What is not exactly clear is why the green layer is left in some areas and removed in others. A weak bond may have occurred between the ground layer and this second one so that when the last action was performed a better bond had been made between the violet and the green layers. Thus when the violet was removed the green accompanied it in some areas and not others. This demonstrates one way a painting can be deciphered as a record of actual events that occurred over the course of it's creation and illustrates a relationship between material and chronological truth.

Simulation, simulacra, and approximation predominate our culture -- so much so that philosophers, writers, and artists have been led to question the nature of actual experience. Lewis Carroll, in his poem Slive and Bruno Concluded, refers to a map that includes everything, to such exact detail that it is a one to one scale. It seems that this simulated world supported by approximated facts and estimated cartography may be
growing in importance in today's world and may at some time overshadow the real world and real experience as the map in Slive and Bruno Concluded shielded angry farmers' crops from the sun.

Jean Baudriard in his essay Procession of Simulacra refers to a similar map and discusses some of the possible implications of having such a sociological relationship with simulation. Cindy Sherman photographs situations that appear to be movie sets, thus addressing the nature of film and photographic image as simulated experience and not empirical or material experience. Her photography performs a function similar to Slive and Bruno's map to alter or divert an awareness of material reality. This discourse with the simulated did not interest me. Lewis Carroll also wrote a poem about a map that contained nothing, The Hunting of the Snark. In this work Carroll refers to a map of the open ocean. It is this second, empty map I wish to explore.
Figure 1: “Frequencies” Acrylic on Canvas, 2000
Figure 2: “Graded in Green” Acrylic on Canvas, 2000
Figure 3: “Graded in Green #2” Acrylic on Canvas, 2001
Figure 4: “Grade in Green #3” Acrylic on Canvas, 2001
Figure 5: “3000” Acrylic on Canvas, 2000
Figure 6: “Incised Grid” Acrylic on Canvas, 2000