THE ROLE OF TECHNICAL MASTERY IN VISUAL SELF-EXPRESSION

With Reference to Personal Experiences and Experiments in Printmaking and Related Media

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

"The life of everyone is a way to himself, the search for a road, the indication of a path. No man has ever yet attained to self-realization; yet he strives thereafter, one ploddingly, another with less effort, each as best he can."

Making prints has been a significant part of such road building for me. The following is an attempt to describe the effort and map some of the route covered.

MOTIVATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Alfredo Zaloe says of his involvement with printmaking:

"Our goal was to transform our art into a means of social and educational reform... The graphic arts were not intended and did not develop as an alternative to painting. They will never be competitive with painting. The graphic arts, like mural techniques, have been born of the need to reach a continuously expanding audience." 

Other artists and student artists, even without specific political or social messages to promulgate, say that they make art in order to communicate with other people. Clearly, if communication, especially on a wide scale, is a consideration, printmaking is a logical means for the visual artist.

As an undergraduate I was bothered by the fact that I could not see or make any connection between my social and political concerns and my art work. Although I admire some satirical, polemical, and didactic art I have never been able to make any. Still, I worried about the nature of the artist's social responsibility.

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2 Roger L. Cosgrove, "Interview with Alfredo Zaloe," Artist's Proof, VII (1967), p. 34.
Gradually, it has become clear to me that the concern was misplaced. The moral responsibility of the artist depends not upon his placing his art in the service of a cause, but upon his realization that the impact of the image is powerfully suggestive and non-rational. His imagination must be honestly and thoughtfully employed.

I make art to find out who I am, to define and give shape to my reactions to my environment. One clarifies one’s thoughts and feelings in the effort to formulate them. I do not make art to communicate or influence. If any of my images "speak" to another person, that is gratifying, exhilarating, even moving to me. Reaching others is a bonus of my making art, not the motivation for it.

What Nabokov says of his writing poetry applies to the act of making pictures:

"The kind of poem I produced in those days was hardly anything more than a sign I made of being alive, . . . a phenomenon of orientation rather than of art, thus comparable to stripes of paint on a roadside, or to a pillared heap of stones marking a mountain trail.

But then, in a sense, all poetry is positional: to try to express one’s position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness is an immemorial urge. The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are, the better . . . ."

Gabor Peterdi eschews the democratic communicative feature of printmaking which Zaloe values when he writes:

"There is no doubt that the production of a great number of original prints from a plate is an economic and social asset. This aspect, however, has very little to do with my interest in printmaking. I make prints because in using the metal, the wood and all the other materials available, I can express things that I cannot express by any other means. In other words, I am interested in printmaking, not as a means of reproduction, but as an original, creative medium. Even if

I could pull only one print from each of my plates, I would still make them."

I share his attitude to a large extent yet have reservations about becoming too enamored of a "look" dependent upon materials.

When I turned to printmaking after I had completed my undergraduate work in art education and ceramics, I was still "groping to lengthen the arms of consciousness." I think I believed simplistically that processes in themselves could assure artistic achievement. Because technical skill and knowledge of methods are concrete areas to master, progress is obvious, and the order of learning procedure is clear.

Furthermore, the novice printmaker is stimulated by the great variety of sensual surfaces to be exploited: the taut spring of the engraved line, the bold character of hewn wood, the furred contours and rich tonal gradation of mezzotint—there is tactile titillation for all. Most printmaking books cater to the "crutch" mentality with their elaborate emphasis on means and methods and photographic blowups of alluring detail. Sooner or later, one realizes that while a process may excite him to try something, unless he has something to say, the excitement remains nothing but a strangled urge. Ideally, the student begins to evolve a personal vision and selects means compatible to it.

I admit I was dazzled overlong by the technical riches before me, but I do not regret the fact that I have experimented with a large number of media. This range of confrontation has helped me develop a balanced attitude toward the role of technique, skill, and procedure. I have

been disabused of the notion that meaningful statement can result from reliance upon "effects," but I still feel that sufficient control of material frees me from the tyranny of the "happy accident."

Crudeness of execution is not so much the problem to be overcome as the interference with the conceptualization of the image.

TECHNICAL EXPERIMENTS

A description of some of the work I have been doing on the problems of color-printing illustrates more specifically what I consider a healthy respect for the procedural as it relates to the expressive. After meeting the complex challenge of color in painting I began to be aware that the printmaker has difficulties with which the painter does not have to contend. I refer to problems which the printing procedure imposes upon the artist's thinking, not problems of skill or process, themselves.

The painter can move freely around his palette, drawing alternately from one color or another, keeping his painting "open," allowing it to develop simultaneously all over. The image can look organized from the outset and subsequent work on it can simply enrich or clarify. This is also true of the black and white print. Because the printmaker must structure the color print to accommodate separation and overlay he has only limited opportunity for "feedback" and alteration during printing. The image has all ready been formed - in fragments.

Most difficult of all is the impossibility of visualizing color nuances resulting from overlay before the entire image is complete. Inasmuch as the printing of five colors in all possible combinations
produces thirty-one variations (Figure 1); and the addition of a
sixth color increases the available tones to sixty-three, precise
visualization would be super-human. In addition to hue changes, there
are unforeseeable shifts in opacity, brilliance, and value. One
result is that many opportunities for color richness are overlooked
because they are never considered. Another is that there are often
as many disappointments as pleasant surprises.

Printmakers do, of course, compensate in several ways:

(1) by limiting the number of colors severely;

(2) by using chiefly opaque colors and/or eliminating overlaid
shapes;

(3) by planning the print completely in advance and merely
executing the drawing in print (or having it executed);

(4) by maintaining totally separate sets of stable images for
each color and pulling many proofs;

(5) by increasing the ability to predict through long experience
in one medium.

While these are all valid approaches they are still unsatisfactory
for me because I like transparencies and complex shapes. I find total
preplanning unsympathetic. The trial and error method is nearly impos-
sible with lithograph and silkscreen where each partial image is usually
destroyed to make way for the next. Reductive printing in any medium
requires the irreversible alteration of the image during the printing.

To counter these disadvantages I have invented a simple testing
board as an aid to predicting the palette. This was designed for
relief printing but the idea could be adapted for other printing methods.
To render Figure 1 in visual form I incised on a board a pattern of thirty-
one squares about two inches on a side. In the illustration (Figure 2)
Figure 1—Table of color possibilities

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Each vertical column represents a possible combination of colors.
The image is reversed top to bottom contrary to the usual practice of reversing right to left.

Figure 2--Image on the testing board
the black represents the raised or printing surface; the white, the part cut away. Five different, partly overlapping inking configurations were charted and drawn small at the top of the board for easy reference (Figure 3). Following the charts, each ink is rolled onto some combination of sixteen squares and printed one at a time in order in the usual way. Because the configurations were deliberately kept simple (with squares as nearly adjacent as possible) the inks are quickly and easily applied with a small brayer. After all five colors have been printed each color appears in one square alone and once in each of its possible combinations with the others (Figure 4).

The position of the white dots shows which color or colors occur in each square and in what order they have been printed. That is, a dot in the bottom position means that the first color printed is present; a dot in the middle position refers to the third color applied, and so forth. Each Roman numeral on the right is inked with the corresponding configuration and pertinent information about the ink mixture noted beside it after each proof is pulled. These sheets can be filed for future use. I have had no problem matching inks at any time.

The use of a proofing board can be extended to collect a variety of information. I have used it to compare identical sets of overprinting on different papers and to contrast the results of printing the same inks in reverse order. It is also informative to lay scraps of paper (as temporary maskout) on the freshly inked surface before printing to see the effect of a small amount of color surrounded by a relatively large area of another. This apparatus is easy to use, clean up and store, and could be a useful aid in teaching.
The colored squares comprise the areas to be rolled with ink.

Figure 3--Inking configurations
Figure 3 (Continued)-- Inking configurations
In using the device the artist by no means avoids the problem of selection, nor is he relieved of the fundamental struggle with size, shape, and position. He is merely provided with a little more information in advance on which to base his decisions. It is important and helpful for me that this information is in the form of concrete sensual evidence rather than intellectual surmise. I believe it is a technique worthy of attention since it frees the artist from some obstacles to expression.

CONCLUSION

It has become increasingly evident to me that it matters not so much which materials and techniques I work with so long as lack of control is not an inhibiting factor. My concern is that my individual vision manifest itself and that certain predilections emerge to conform with some consistency of statement. While this statement, in so far as it discloses an outlook, will continually alter, I feel there will be a continuity.

My graduate exhibition reflects numerous forays into a variety of techniques. For a long time I felt "blown about" - stylistically bewildered, fighting constantly for originality, yet having no clear sense of where to locate uniqueness. Now, despite diversity in my work, I feel that definite tendencies have surfaced.

I think that one psychological attraction which printmaking has for me is that, traditionally, it has been the arena in which the image and the word have met. My environment has always been academic
and my relationships with people intensely verbal. I value language but resent its dominance in our culture. I want to "put it in its place."

Titles often occur to me while I am working on the picture (see Plate I), not suddenly, but emerging gradually with the image. More recently, words and phrases have begun popping up as I work in any medium and I incorporate them as they come along as in the paintings: "Monument" (Plate II) and "Find out, Find out" (Plate III). Sometimes I use pieces of words simply as pattern, sense ignored, as in the two cut paper pieces (Plates IV and V). Occasionally, I use words more obviously as in "Come" (Plate VI). I am still struggling with the problem of beginning with words, for example, a quotation, and building the picture around that.

Line quality is very important to me. In the drawing "The Woman and the Jar" (Plate VII) the pen line suggests the contour but also swings free to speak for itself. The same interplay between line as edge definition and line as free agent may be seen in the sugar-lift etching, "Land Monsters." (Plate VIII).

A loose, gestural scratching is evident in both the woodcuts (Plates I and IX) and assumes even more importance in the stitched and painted pieces (Plate X, for example). These images on cloth are, in a way, a protest against aesthetic classification on the basis of medium or process. They are structured in color layers or in separation such as are prints. The color, though generally simple, is influenced by my painting experience. There is, in addition, a special reliance upon interest of texture - the surface of unsize linen and
dye bleeding into fiber - derived particularly from the textile arts. Line is line whether rendered in ink or thread. For those who be compelled to classify, these pieces might be called "embroidered paintings," although the machine stitching is not embellishment ("embroidery") but an integral part of the drawing.

The imagery of "Trolley" (Plate X) has affinities with the little color lithograph "Lunar Landing Module" (Plate XI). Both are somewhat whimsical interpretations of machinery whose operation and maintenance dominates our lives. Objects may appear sometimes ominous, sometimes humorous when animated by our own attitudes.

The way in which we use body coverings to disguise ourselves from ourselves and even to transform the human being into a thing of some specialized function is a related theme for me. The "magic" so romantically sought after in pop culture today is truly to be found in our own psychological projections. The color lithograph "Torso" (Plate XII) came from one of a number of sketches which I made of suits of armor. "Battle of the Land Monsters" (Plate VII) grew out of my contemplation of the helmeted, padded, automaton of the gridiron.

I have been asked why I would think machinery or football interesting as subject matter when I do not think football or machinery interesting, NEP SO. Aside from the reasons already given, I like drawing upon material which I find fascinatingly complex in shape and movement but about which I know nothing. I can, therefore, have no intellectual or emotional obstacle to distorting it or using it as I will.

I believe that choice of imagery and personal gesture cut across boundaries of media. I think I have come to a point in my "road
toward myself" where any material which allows me to make the marks required will suffice. I decline to be dominated by a skill or a "look" and am ready to abandon a technique any time the image requires a turn in the path.
Plate I

"Squatty Little Potentate in All His Trappings"
Plate II
"Monument"
Plate III
"Find out, Find out"
Plate IV
"Group"
Plate V

"Ghost"
Plate VI
"Compa"
Plate VII
"The Woman and a Jar"
Plate IX

"The Innocent Fish Swallowed a Bicycle Horn"
Plate X
"Trolley"
Plate XI
"Lunar Landing Module"
Plate XII
"Torso"
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