PAINTING IN THE COMPUTER ERA:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF ARCHAIC
STRUCTURES TO CONTEMPORARY FORMALISM

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By
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ABSTRACT

In my M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition I showed a painting in the format of a panorama. The size of the painting is 3’ high and stretches to 70 feet. The painting comes in two sections of 35’ each and one section is the inverted version of the other. Depicted on the painting is a landscape. The landscape came from a black and white postcard, the most generic I had available. I found it at a thrift store. I digitized this postcard and applied a little bit of almost every filter that was available in the Photoshop computer program. This filtering, where the computer generates color out of a colorless picture, I liken to the medieval science of alchemy. For it is written, ‘when blackness appears, then you must rejoice’. It is with black (the unconscious) where alchemy starts. In the color black takes place a certain unity of the male and female. Alchemy is the science of transformation. In alchemy every transformation has a spiritual meaning.
Dedicated to my father
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A special Thanks to John Gargano.

Most of all I feel in debt to my wife and fellow artist Mary Jo Bole. Without her I could have never done this.
VITA

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EXHIBITIONS

Solo Exhibitions

1. M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition, Hopkins Hall Gallery, The Ohio State University,
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Selected Group Exhibitions


2. Edith Fergus-Gilmore Scholarship Exhibition, Hopkins Hall Gallery, The Ohio
State University, Columbus, Ohio, 1997.

3. "Ecstasy, Sickness and Confusion: Examples of Travel Art", The Columbus Art
League, Columbus, Ohio, 1996.


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Painting/Drawing

Minor Fields: Printmaking, Art History
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The collection of artworks in my M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition are unified by a conceptual framework. With the writings of this thesis I follow a similar structure. My painting ‘Landscape’ (plate 1) was the central piece in the Thesis Exhibition. I have chosen to discuss this piece at the hand of writings and works done in the past year.

It is highly relevant in the discussion of ‘Landscape’ to include preliminary sketches, studies and related finished paintings. It shows the evolution from the first intuitive ideas to the execution of the painting. Some of the preliminary works show the concepts and issues of ‘Landscape’ as clearly as I could ever do it. The reason I put so much weight on the earlier works preceding the painting is my strong belief that a form is at its most pure state at the moment of its conceiving. The painting then seeks matter that goes beyond the visualization of concepts. Here the pure manual labor with the material is of utmost importance.

Much of the studies and sketches for ‘Landscape’ are done with the aid of a computer. I am investigating the influence of the computer to the visual reality and the consequences this has for the practice of painting. Beside this I am researching the historical content of the computer; the relation it has with photography and how archaic structures still exist within digital information. When I state that the computer has a secret relationship with alchemy I intend to show that there is a magic aspect in the computer that goes beyond the inventors and modifiers of the technology. The secret is a metaphor for the validity of tradition (painting) in the computer era.
Before I start with the collection of writings I feel the need to mention a very important factor in my decision to make the large scale painting which 'Landscape' is. The experience of looking at Claude Monet's paintings of waterlilies in Paris and Hendrik Mesdag's 'Panorama Mesdag' in the Netherlands made a permanent impression in my brain.
CHAPTER 2

ABOUT THE SPIRITUAL IN ART

The article 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' by Wassily Kandinsky was first published in German under the title 'Über das Geistige in der Kunst' in 1911. I could easily translate this original title into my native language (Dutch) as 'Over het Geestige in de Kunst', I could translate this back into English as 'About Humor in Art'. When I would retranslate the article and replace the word spiritual every time it is used for humorous, it would take away the seriousness of the article considerably. It would replace Kandinsky’s non-democratic tone for a more humanistic one.

In 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' Kandinsky presents a model where a spiritually conscious human being moves slowly upwards in an imaginative pyramid while the pyramid itself moves slowly forwards and upwards in time. Placing myself in the realm of the pyramid (which occurs automatically as I read the article), I find myself wanting to move in two directions simultaneously. I want to engage in this slow motion upwards towards a 'spiritual wholeness' but I also want to move downwards preferably to the downmost and darkest edge of the pyramid. This downward motion would occur in a much faster speed than the motion upwards. The frustration of the impossibility to reach the top of the pyramid makes me wanting to go down to fight this hierarchy, to stir up trouble, to cause a rocking motion at the very base what would disturb the perfect balance of this model.

I would not retranslate this article to question Kandinsky's achievements -I respect his art enormously- but I would like to reverse the structures of the model for the sake of
making the model available again. Shifting notions to open things up, investigate other criteria. After all art seeks freedom and if the pyramid feels like a prison to me, something must have gone wrong somewhere. Reading the original article I found myself continuously looked upon as this creature from the dark mediocre layers and Kandinsky pointing with his finger at my imperfection. By changing now the context of the article I create at least a dialogue with Kandinsky rather than his original monologue.

I am not opposed to the idea of spiritual art. Great masterpieces in the history of art that could withstand time could do this because they contain some values going beyond the fashion or styles of their time. These values, I think, are spiritual in essence; they belong to the realm of the eternal human condition. I am asking the question: “Could spiritual meaning be assigned to the formal reality at the end of this century?”

Spiritual thinking is very much in conflict with our modern society. It is based on archaic forms and structured on the notion that the human condition does not change or very slowly. It is, too often, used as an excuse for social difference or confused with structures of power. It is a-social, a-democratic, gender specific. Our society and contemporary art is increasingly moving away from the idea of spirituality. Our language (English, but my native Dutch as well) got rid of their gender specific words while spiritual language depends on notions of gender. Objects had a gender ascribed and had thus a spiritual meaning, now the word is only a formal description of the thing. Besides gender the archaic origins of a word were of major importance, it tells something about the object in its relationship with others. Contemporary philosophy acknowledges these losses as a departure from reality and replaces this by a new kind of (postmodern) reality. It means roughly that the modern human accepts now this departure from reality as being unavoidable for the progress of the human condition. This raises a basic philosophical question that is an important continuum in my thinking: Is a form at its most perfect at the
moment of its conceiving or does something start immature and develops then gradually towards a wholeness?

For my art practice this question means that I assign a great importance to the moment a certain idea takes shape. That moment carries in essence already the meaning of those works that derive from it. I put effort in showing the first beginnings of a concept alongside with the more developed results. This does not make the work spiritual but it stimulates to exam the origins of works further back than recent studio practice. The process of comparing forms I come up with to things done in the past leads to the unconscious and archetypes. Painting is a practice based on the unity of color and form. The meaning of those are less fixed than that of language.

A pure spiritual art in the history of western art did exist until the occurrence of the Renaissance. From the 11th until the 16th century the alchemists produced an art that was spiritual. The alchemist was not necessarily an artist but a spiritualist, occupying fields as broad as theology, chemistry, literature, art and basically everything that dealt with culture. This range of activities was not perceived as diverse but rather as a unity where everything is part of a system. In the renaissance a rupture occurred in the alchemy when alchemists specialized themselves resulting in formal research of material; chemistry. These chemists were seen by the alchemists as charlatans, fakes, ‘souffleurs’. The chemists (scientists) soon gained importance and gradually wiped out the practice of alchemy.

Now, with the invention of the computer which I see as the accumulation of the formal history since the renaissance, we can be investigate these remaining archaic forms in a neutralized space. In search for meaning within the most formal activities, one has to consider every field of culture again. I propose that meaning is to be sought beyond self-reflection. In this sense, the word pluralism (a postmodern term assigned to a mode of art making in the 1990’s where artists use a multiple of styles and concepts in one work) relates back to the alchemists.
CHAPTER 3

ABOUT AN UNTITLED PAINTING AFTER A LANDSCAPE BY L. SWINBURNER

About a year ago I laid my hands on a dozen reproductions of the artist L. Swinburner. The originals were lithographs that I think could be dated somewhere around the turn of the century, either at the end of the 19th or at the beginning of the 20th. It is difficult to determine the country from which they originate. About half of the reproductions I think are made in the Netherlands, the other half are generic looking landscapes not at all typical for Holland. Intuitively, I would suggest that landscapes like the one I used in my untitled painting (plate II) were done in England. The name Swinburner is most likely to be English although it is not impossible that it would be Dutch. If he (I am almost sure it’s he) is Dutch than we would have lived in the north-west part of the country. I grew up in the south-east of Holland.

A friend of mine, a printmaker, claimed that he heard of Swinburner before as being a contemporary of William Blake. According to my friend Blake and Swinburner knew each other. They were leading printmakers in England. Swinburner represented the traditional printmaking school while Blake, as his archenemy, was totally against Swinburner’s ‘small town mediocrity’. Swinburner was respected in Victorian England while Blake was seen as merely a madman. I like this little history but I do have a hard time believing my friend’s story.

In any case, Swinburner is a thankful subject for my own work. The speculations about who he was helps to mystify the character and the anonymity of this artist allows me to project my own visions and imagination onto his work. He became the personification
of my wish I addressed at the end of a period where I was obsessed with the Italian artist Roberto Crippa of who I did not know anything (see Chapter 4).

There is no question about the significance of Blake and Swinburner; Blake’s work has proven to be way more historically important than Swinburners’. It is this small town ‘mediocrity’ or romantic Kitsch aspect what attracts me in the work of Swinburner. Though it might be impossible for me to appropriate Blake’s prints for my work. Swinburner’s prints are so unspecified that each of his works ask me for intervention. The landscape I used for the untitled painting is generic, it could literally exist anywhere. To me the depicted landscape is beyond reality. It is an ideal, the accumulation of nostalgic sentiment. Certainly, the original sketch for Swinburner’s lithograph was done from nature but what is left is generic memory. What I did in the bottom half of my painting was to copy almost exactly Swinburner’s picture. Doing this I was stressing this generic memory and, within the context of the 1990’s, I was replacing the romantic feel of it for a wry sort of irony. I admit, this landscape feels a lot like this small town I grew up in.

The idea for reworking the generic landscapes of Swinburner came to me by accidentally about a year ago. At that time I was working on top of found images, initially intending to be humorous cartoon-like works that commented on art issues. On one occasion I drew a copy of a generic looking landscape, a Swiaburner, on top (in the sky) of the original (Plate III). I realized almost immediately that I was on to something. This intuitive idea went beyond the mere jokes of the previous works in the series. It was visually funny but strange; something was happening there that challenged the conceptions of taste and style. The original artwork, forgotten in the name of “low” culture, became “high” art simply due to its exact replica. It proves that a copy has a different meaning than an original, it appeals to me that a copy can mean more than the original.
The decision to work with found generic landscapes is far from unique. Many contemporary artists had done similar things. I was especially influenced by the works of Mark Tansey. His painting ‘Action Painting’ of 1989 for example, addressed similar issues as I was working with. In ‘Action Painting’ Tansey juxtaposes high-tech imagemaking and the plein-air amateur painting tradition. The launching of the shuttle in this painting could only be captured by high speed photography while Sunday painters capture this moment painting on their easels. The irony of this juxtaposition is even stressed more by the title; a punch to the history of modernism.

On the top half of my untitled painting I repainted again Swinburner’s landscape but this time I applied a number of distortions to it. I painted the distortions in the same way a computer would apply filters: I painted the landscape as if I had applied the storm filter of the Photoshop computer program, the wave filter, the twirl and inverse. The top half of the painting is the macrocosm of that little bit of nostalgia in the bottom.

The acceptance of modern technology in painting opens for me a possibility to challenge conventional notions of painting. Not only is the digital appearance of color very different than traditional paint colors but the computer itself seems to me a most perfect modernist tool. The computer treats every aspect of a picture with the same intensity; there is no difference in for- or background, in representation or abstraction. For me the invention of the computer is an accumulation of a history of formalism in which the main crux seems to be neutrality. This against the backdrop of a society where democracy is the ideal, not gender specific, without discrimination.

I am not advocating that the modern painter should become an advanced technician but I am positive that new technology as the computer will have a tremendous impact on the modern reality that visual consequences can’t be ignored. I am investigating this and contemplating painting after the computer.
A third artist I owe credit to in my untitled painting is Gerald van der Kaap. Kaap is obsessed with new technology. Unlike Tansey, Kaap gave up his activity as painter and used the actual technology as the medium for the finished product. Where Tansey’s influence for my painting is conceptual, Kaap’s influence is very direct. In his ‘Soft Gym’ of 1992 he puts a computer generated duplicate above a photographic original. I simply stole this idea.

In a book on Armenian Folk-art I found a painting of a night sky on top of a daylight landscape. This was yet another concept I literally used for my own painting.

Next to all these artists I discussed are influences which are harder to trace. While in the process of painting the painting I made sometimes unexplainable choices. These unconscious influences come from my personal visual experience. An investigation of these is for me often more surprising and interesting than the rational conscious thought. Painting is for me not an accumulation of study; if the unexplainable does not happen a painting is not complete.

One of the most disrupting aspects of the untitled painting is the appearance of the polka dots. I realized, after I finished the painting, that I had painted the dots because I was intrigued by a picture, a snapshot of my wife in the snow. I am convinced that a lot of the choices of color and form a painter makes are rooted in the everyday experience. A painting painted in the winter is more likely to have cold colors than one painted in the summer. The polka dots, furthermore, appear in various forms in my visual experience. The effect of the circles in the snapshot created by the snow (an influence ironically again through a technical medium) is comparable with the experience of closing your eyes after looking in bright light; little balls of color pass in various directions in front of your eyes.
CHAPTER 4

FROM THE BOOK: ITALIAN SKIES

4.1. ARTIST STATEMENT

My obsession for Italy started with my own created myth around the painter Roberto Crippa. From that painter grew my fascination for Italian movements like Futurism and Spaziale Roma. In this book I project my feelings concerning my native country (Holland) to Italy. I am veiling with this my personal engagement with the subject matter (I have never been in Italy). I could not have made this book without this distance, neither could an Italian have made it. Holland as subject matter would be too painfully self-kitsch. Holland and Italy have a very rich history in painting in common. This was a wonderful fact (the Dutch painting history) for me when I started painting (and still is) and filled me with a sense of pride. Much more than Holland felt Italy the drawback of such a history. The existence of it turned against those artists who believed in a modern world. Above all this book is a metaphor for the burden of tradition in general.

4.2. ROBERTO CRIPPA

For years I only knew one drawing of Roberto Crippa. I used this drawing as a reference for a whole body of work in which I imagined how his other work would look like. I did not know any background, only that one drawing. I speculated that his work was situated in the background of Italian Futurism, a contemporary of Balla. Since I never managed to find anything else of or by this artist I also assumed that he was pretty much obscure and/or died early, perhaps as a soldier in the Italian army. My works concerning Roberto Crippa
have titles like ‘Neo-Futurismo’, referring to the many neo-isms in modern art as well as to neo-fascism.

How disappointed was I when I found a thick book totally dedicated to Roberto Crippa. It was the end of the myth, of the nostalgia. The book presented Crippa to me as a different person and from a different time than I had expected. Furthermore, the rest of Crippa’s work was completely disappointing to me.

I guess I have to look for somebody else to hide behind.
PLATES
BIBLIOGRAPHY


