ABSTRACT FORM IN PICTORIAL EXPRESSION, with a Statement of the Artist's Formal Development

DISSERTATION
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

DAVID DALRYPELTE KETNER, B.A., M.A.

*****

The Ohio State University
1956

Approved by:

[Signature]
Advisor
School of Fine and Applied Art
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to all those who have given of their time and substance so that the paintings and drawings presented here might have existence. I am especially indebted to my wife who put aside her own academic goals in order that mine might be realized, and has helped me in every phase of this work. I also owe much to Professor James Grimes, who has been a constant source of encouragement and assistance and without whom this effort would not have been possible. I am indebted to Professors Hoyt Sherman and Robert Gatrell for many enlightening talks on problems intrinsic to the creative process.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION: STATEMENT OF THE ARTIST'S FORMAL DEVELOPMENT**  
**Part One**  
**Part Two**  
Illustration 1  
Illustration 2  
Illustration 3  

**ABSTRACT FORM IN PICTORIAL EXPRESSION**  
Plates 1 - 20
STATEMENT OF THE ARTIST'S FORMAL DEVELOPMENT

Part One

Interest in the artist's creative process seems to be an expanding one in our culture. It has become a subject of research, not only of aestheticians, but of psychologists and educators as well. For the artist, however, this interest is of a more particular nature. He is concerned with the universal aspects of the process only so far as he may use them to clarify his own relationship to the thing he creates. The quality of this clarification has a direct bearing on his work, and, if he is also an educator, would seem to be proportional to the effectiveness of his communication. The process which has resulted in the paintings and drawings presented herewith will become clearer as the factors which have conditioned it are examined.

It is necessary to make clear at the outset the purposes of a written adjunct to what is primarily a studio dissertation. Traditionally, artists, if they have written at all, have generally written about their work in order to instruct their contemporaries and posterity in the craft and techniques of making a work of art. But seldom, if ever, was the need felt to justify the activity of painting or sculpturing even though there have been those who have questioned its validity. Since the turn of the century, however, artists have of necessity turned to linguistic means to make their art more comprehensible. This change has occurred in part it seems because of the increasing drift away from the inclusion of literary elements in painting and because of the fact that art has come to mean commercial
illustration as well as what is termed fine art.

Those works which are now devoid of popular myths, scenes of natural "beauty", and religious symbolism cannot of themselves appeal to those persons who look to art only as a substitute for reality, or more exactly as the relationship of an object to its original, or as a didactic instrument. It is natural, then, to find much contemporary art to be without meaning for these people. The artist has become acutely aware of a growing isolation from the layman. The rift is sharpened when artists in increasing numbers become committed to an autonomous art form which to a great extent ceases to serve these ends. Without the elements which laity equates with "practical" value, the activity of making such an art object becomes, for them, an almost meaningless occupation. It is this estrangement of artist from public which is at least partially responsible for his literary efforts in defense of the activity, if not the style, in which his visions are manifested.

As a painter, one always senses the risk involved when attempting to establish a verbal affinity to his art. Part of this sense of risk comes from the awareness, as Henry Moore put it, that, "By trying to express his aims with rounded-off logical exactness, he can easily become a theorist whose actual work is only a caged-in exposition of conceptions evolved in terms of logic and words", and partially from the knowledge that, however lucid may be the affinity as "feeling", it never has a translated equivalent in words. Concluding, we may admit that words do not serve in the way he would prefer,

---

but can in many instances give fresh insights into his artistic development, and may serve as a means to greater, if extra-aesthetic, apprehension of the works themselves.

The purpose of this exposition, then, is not to substitute for the dissertation proper which is in all ways visual. It is rather to serve only as a preface. Because the paintings and drawings are the result of some years of growth, the opening pages contain a compendium of the visual-intellectual experiences which I believe have been most notable in the conditioning of my art to its present status.
Part Two

An interest in drawing has always been with me, but if I were to attempt to find a genesis for this interest it would probably occur at the age of four or five when my father, noting my proclivity toward drawing, supplied me with quantities of paper, pencils, and crayons. In retrospect, it appears that self-expression was the motivation behind these germinal efforts. My subjects were most often the romantic stories of the brothers Grimm or the lesser adventurers of now-extinct radio heroes. The satisfaction derived from these early drawings was undiluted, since they were not subject to criticism and were accomplished with supreme self-confidence. It was the delight of seeing human figures and animal shapes appear on the white paper without much conscious effort which sustained my interest and, for that matter, still sustains it. I remember quite clearly being entranced with the idea that until each drawing was finished I never knew what form it should take. The experience was like watching a not-self create the forms, and yet being able to take full credit for the product.

It is natural, since these subjects were taken from nature, that by continued repetition and observation they should become more accurate in their imitation. Thus, in primary school during the weekly art instruction I was singled out as the boy who could render daffodils (and the other traditional subjects) that indeed looked like daffodils. Being informed of this talent, my parents felt that formal training in the arts would aid growth in this direction, that is, accurate imitation of nature, and subsequently I was
enrolled in the Cornish School of Music and Art in Seattle. At Cornish a skill was developed, that of making daffodils look even more like their counterparts. Any other considerations were minimized in the drive for accuracy of the illusion. I should not deny that aspects of the experience at Cornish play a role more or less vital in what I am striving for today; they contributed to the fund of knowledge which is concerned with technique and craft.

Throughout this period of development I was unaware of the existence of such artists as Picasso, Braque, Matisse, or any others of the modern movement. At that time even the paintings of Cezanne or Van Gogh would have been considered lacking in precision, if not overtly revolutionary. My parents' taste in painting stopped with the Impressionists, and I reflected this in some degree. The individual masters I considered only in terms of their subject matter; thus, Rembrandt, Titian, Leonardo, all were found lacking the romantic qualities I saw in Winslow Homer. On visits to the Seattle Art Museum I tended to neglect western art, with the exception of those works whose subject matter was appealing, in favor of the more exotic forms of the oriental collection. By and large, painting was for me imitation of nature, whose quality was proportional to the degree of the imitation.

Returning from a year and a half in the army, I entered the University of Washington's School of Fine Art to study painting, and it was here that I made the first contact with contemporary forms. Although the painters with whom I worked were, for the most part, abstractionists, formal training at the University of Washington was in the beginning academic, that is, it was directed toward the rendering, in accord with the laws of perspective, the great works of art
which were presented in reproduction. As at Cornish, it was still a matter of illusion and of gaining a knowledge of Renaissance perspective.

Although this experience did not produce much of merit, its positive contribution was the continued development of skill and the sense of proportion. Negatively, it was conditioning to perceive the visual field in terms of isolated objects, rather than in a totality. It is this aspect of training which I have had to overcome in learning to see in a manner requisite to abstract form.

Abstract painting was the accepted mode of expression of the teaching staff at the University of Washington, and during the years of 1949-1951 an appreciation of the values of abstraction was developed. This was accomplished partially through the ministrations of my instructors, and more definitively, as always, in the experience of creation itself. The concept implicit in the instruction was that an academic foundation was fundamental to a knowledge of abstraction — that to conceive abstractly one of necessity must have had the experience of skillful imitation. Although the school was predominantly abstract, I had the opportunity to study with a German impressionist, whose chief concern was the effects of light falling on objects, and with a social realist who, claiming to have "passed through" an "abstract phase", had returned to Renaissance concepts and techniques.

However, the most significant experience of this period was discovering what had happened to art, and particularly painting, since Cezanne — to be able to find in Picasso, for instance, not a physically-distorted humanity, as I had supposed, but a pictorial instrument which was capable of more profound statements about the world than mere
reproduction of the appearance of the physiological fact.

There was no formal aesthetic in the instruction, but a cubist aesthetic was implicit in the teaching precepts. The inference I drew from these precepts may be seen in the words of two cubist painters, Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes, in their book, *Cubism*: "Let the picture imitate nothing; let it nakedly present its motive, and we should indeed be ungrateful were we to deplore the absence of all those things—flowers or landscapes, or faces—whose mere reflection it might have been." (2) With the Washington painters, as with the cubists, subject matter was still present, but was incidental to the creation of an integrated, aesthetic form. Through their example, I began to see that a work of art may exist entirely for its own sake, and not only because it relates itself to nature by virtue of its illusionism. The growing awareness of the possible autonomy of a work of art, in which the character of the medium became important, pointed to an appreciation of the configurational and other formal aspects of painting.

My own work, however, remained more or less representational in style in spite of occasional experiments with abstraction. In these experiments abstracting was taken to mean a kind of selective distortion of the features of the subject, based usually upon whim, or in the manner of whichever artist had most recently been attractive to me. There were also attempts to analyze subjects cubistically in order to present several views simultaneously.

Illustration 1
(Oil on Upson Board, 1949)

An Early Attempt to Abstract in the Manner of the Cubists
Illustration 2
(Oil on Upson Board, 1931)

An Early Example of Subject Matter Suppressed to Formal Requirements
During the time at the University of Washington I met the painter Morris Graves and became an admirer of his very personal pictorial expression, but at the same time was puzzled by certain of his cryptic remarks — "vision grows in the meadows of obscurity". I was entranced with the evocative qualities of Graves' work, which has always been deeply concerned with nature and particularly, the forms of birds. Along with this attraction to his work, existed a growing desire for complete freedom from the limitations of recognizable forms, which anticipated the present polarity which exists in my art. Under his influence I painted a series of birds, while trying quite self-consciously to see in these subjects some inkling of the mysticism which Graves had felt. I had as little success here as had John Varley, the man for whom Blake drew the Visionary Heads, when he tried to see literally the visions of the artist. These birds, however, remained little more than birds.

In the summer of 1951, with the work at the University of Washington completed, I felt the need of a change in environment and moved to Mexico. The artistic milieu at Mexico City at that time took the form of an intense national self-consciousness which seemed to be a residuum of the 1910 revolution. The social realists, the so-called "Big Three" — José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Siqueiros — and Rufino Tamayo so dominated the scene that sincere individualism in lesser lights was seldom seen. Those Mexican painters with traditionalist-chauvanistic bent found their apotheosis in Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco, while artists leaning toward a more contemporary expression looked to

---

Tamayo. The latter were a definite minority, possibly because it was difficult to eulogize Mexico overtly in Tamayo's more international idiom. Of the artists mentioned, only two had any genuine appeal for me, Orozco and Tamayo — Orozco for his baroque, linear quality and Tamayo for his sensuous color forms. The preoccupation of Rivera and Siqueiros for social commentary could not contribute to a growing concern on my part for aesthetic form which I felt was most essential to painting.

The attitudes of the social realists may be seen in the Mexican manifesto published in 1922 by the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors, of which these artists were members. This was a Tolstoyan concept of aesthetic quality dependent upon the degree of infectiousness of the work of art, which moved the viewer to action. It then became the painter's obligation to effect a virtuous action through his art. In the case of this Manifesto, the virtue was a continuance of the struggle against bourgeois individualism. "... the art of the Mexican people... is great because it surges from the people; it is collective and our own aesthetic aim is to socialize artistic expression, to destroy bourgeois individualism. We repudiate so-called easel art and all such art which springs from the ultra intellectual circles, for it is essentially aristocratic... The makers of beauty must invest their greatest efforts in the aim of materializing an art valuable to the people, and our supreme objective in art, which is today an expression of individual pleasure, is to create beauty for all, beauty that enlightens and stirs to struggle."

Although at that time the tendency toward chauvinism seemed to prevail in the thinking of the Mexican artists, many of the individual members of the Syndicate did not fully subscribe to the ideas set forth in the manifesto. Orozco, for one, while a signer of the document, looked upon it as the personal achievement of its authors, David Siqueiros and Xavier Guerrero. Something of his humor and attitude toward the communistic truisms evident in the proclamation can be seen in his Autobiografía. He states, with regard to the statements on easel painting, "to condemn easel painting as being aristocratic was to condemn a good part of the art of all time. The Rembrandts, the Titians, the El Grecos would have to be destroyed". Again, commenting on proletarian art, he states, "proletarian art consisted of paintings which represented laborers working and which were supposedly destined for the laborers. But that was an error because, for a laborer who has worked eight hours in the factory, there is no pleasure in returning to his house to find 'laborers working'."  

It was the less obvious nature of the literary in Orozco's art and its expressive dynamism which made him preferable to Rivera or Siqueiros. But of the four Mexican artists, the work of Rufino Tamayo came nearest to the objectives I sought. It was his use of color which I found most stimulating, since it was an element which Orozco did not generally employ, which Siqueiros used for its ability to shock, and which was, for Rivera, a local phenomenon. Tamayo seemed to have a love of color for its own sake, and his  

ideas of what painting is were more nearly analogous to those
which I was beginning to formulate: "A product whose value
derives solely from its plastic qualities. Qualities obtained
during a process of purification until the essence is reached.
The plastic essence ordered by a poetic feeling within the
precise limitations of the picture. This is what I call
painting".\(^6\)

At the time, Tamayo was working on his mural in the
Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, and fortunately it was
possible to watch him work in this large scale. Unlike many
of his contemporaries, Tamayo did not use a fresco technique,
but employed the plastic media (pyroxiline and vinylite) which
were coming into vogue. (At the time Tamayo began the Bellas
Artes mural, Siqueiros had already painted one in the same
building, using a plastic paint on masonite.) Watching
Tamayo work, I felt him to be more Mexican than the other
muralists, not in terms of identification with political goals,
but in his response to color and form – a response which one
finds in all Mexican folk artists. My own visual experience
in Mexico made Tamayo more understandable, since it was the
quality and intensity of the colors here, rather than any
historical atmosphere, which was most vital during those first
few months.

A feeling for color existed in the people which was
never prejudiced by fashion as it is in our country. I
believe I was affected most strongly by the natural occurrence
of striking color tonalities in the people themselves. The

\(^6\) Tamayo (Mexico: Imprenta Nuevo Mundo, 1948).
brown skin of the indians clothed in pink-orange, juxtaposed to buildings faded by the sun to pastel hues, occurred in a landscape, which was in itself quite colorless. These things gave me, as Picasso would say, an "indigestion" of color which had to be emptied into painting. At this point I began to employ Tamayoesque shapes, which appealed to a growing sense for the abstract.

The feeling for color for color's sake derived from direct experience of nature and from the paintings of Tamayo led to a renewed appreciation of the work of Paul Gaugin and to a revaluation of a statement of his which had seemed apocryphal before the Mexican trip. "Color of itself, being enigmatic in the sensations it gives us, it can only logically be used as an enigmatic quantity whenever we resort to it, not to delineate, but to convey the musical sensations which emanate from its very nature, from its enigmatic, mysterious, inmost force. By means of skilful harmonies we create the symbol, and color which, like music, is vibration, achieves what is vaguest and most universal in nature: her inmost force." 7

After a year and a half in Mexico, I returned to Seattle for a period of nine months of sporadic artistic activity, and then to Ohio State University. The paintings and drawings which compose the dissertation are a partial result of the work and study accomplished here. I feel the gains made at Ohio State have been substantial in that these works were accomplished with a greater security than any done previously, and begin to relate more closely to the direction in which I prefer to work.

There are several factors which have contributed to this security. One, of course, is the increased experience of painting itself, but more notably it has been the addition of some small knowledge of the process of visual perception and its relation to art. This knowledge has come partially from experiences in the Visual Demonstration Center at Ohio State University, and directly through the many informal criticisms given me by Professor Hoyt Sherman and Professor James Grimes. The time spent here has been most fruitful in other terms as well. One of the most important has been the increased control of the oil medium. The many technical aspects of painting had interfered with the kind of direct work which I felt was most natural to what was being expressed. The flow of thoughts which resulted in the relationships, tonalities, shapes, and so on was so often interrupted by problems concerned with the physical properties of the medium that the results lacked continuity.

With the paintings of the dissertation the technical factors were less of a problem, so that more direct expression has been possible. Also important was the personal discovery of drawing as a medium in its own right, rather than as a mere preliminary to painting. This discovery occurred partly because of the inadequacy of my control of the oil medium. This led me to large scale drawings which would allow as direct a realization of the graphic and pictorial ideas as possible. More particularly, the increased dimensions allowed a brightened kinesthetic awareness.

The aesthetic underlying these works and toward which I have unconsciously leaned since I began formal instruction is
that the autonomy of the aesthetic object is more or less absolute. By this I mean, that which activates my work is the aesthetic quality which is given to the component elements (i.e., color, contrast, configuration, etc.) and is intensified by integration into a synergism. The associational attributes of external objects and situations are incidental to my purpose. However, when a painting seems to call for a form which coincidentally delineates a recognizable object, I do not hesitate to employ it. Picasso refers to a similar attitude when he says, "Whenever I have something to say I have said it in a manner in which I thought it ought to be said", or, "Different motives require different methods of expression". It would be a denial of the freedom now enjoyed by artists to self-consciously exclude natural forms which may be of themselves expressive.

It is generally admitted that form, which I take to mean all the non-cognitive elements of a work of art in a totality of causal relationships, has always been the essence of what we term "good" or "great" in art. That grandeur of subject, loftiness of purpose, or technical virtuosity does not ipso facto make a great work of art, and further a painting which has these attributes and nothing more is without life. This is self-evident in the whole tradition of "pure" abstraction (Mondrian, Kandinsky, Van Doesburg, et sequitur depend entirely upon formal qualities for significance.)

For myself, the success or failure of such a linguistic structure is beside the point, since the reason for creating in the manner I choose is grounded on the way I see and feel

---

concerning the world, and is in a constant state of flux. It is a case of the work of art determining the artist. This relationship is pointed up by Carl Gustav Jung in Modern Man in Search of a Soul in reference to Goethe: "The work in process becomes the poet's fate, and determines his psychic development. It is not Goethe which creates Faust, but Faust which creates Goethe." The fact that one may find an aesthetic logic to support his work is reassuring, but not intrinsic to the process.

Looking back over the past few years to works which retain some subject matter, I see that it has never been the subject per se which has interested me. When painting a portrait, or even a bird in the manner of Graves, I have never been motivated by the character of the individual, but by the quality of the form in which these subjects were embodied. Again the figures of Matisse mean little to me as human beings, as plants, as fruits; it is only their color, shape, and inter-relationships that appeal. The aesthetic response to these qualities is strong enough to warrant a search for them, independent if need be of the objects in which they may be found. Thus, one of the drawings may resemble a tree, or a painting—a human being, but it was not my intent that they should have meaning specific to trees or homo sapiens; so much the better if they say more than I intended, but this must be as much in the viewer as in the artifact. So there are those, to make an analogue, who may see in a rose all the glories of creation, while others will find only beauty and fragrance.

---

In spite of the recognition that formal qualities are necessary and may be sufficient to a work of art, I find no dichotomy between realism and abstraction, in the broad sense of these terms. (It is characteristic of this freedom that such a statement is allowed.) If, as many contend, Picasso's "Guernica" is the greatest painting of the 20th century, it would surely be less significant if deprived of the connotations of its subject. For my part, the degree of cognition in my paintings is slight because I am most interested in working free of the limitations of subject. However, it is the manner in which I perceive which is important and is constant regardless of the thing perceived — whether it is mountains and trees or the emergent forms of a non-cognitive painting in process.

The pioneering done by Kandinsky, Mondrian, and others has resulted in a freedom which has no precedent in the history of art. It is precisely this freedom of expression which is so attractive to contemporary artists, and which does not seem to foreshadow a change to more restrictive attitudes. The attractiveness seems partly due to the fact that the expression may include in a formal sense romantic, classic, expressionistic, and even impressionistic qualities.

Another facet of this new freedom is that which has to do with the reciprocity of artist and artifact in the creative act, that is, the artist's vision is clarified in the process of externalization, and indeed is often completely changed from that which originally gave impetus. I suspect that the element of reciprocity, or "feedback", is much more
pronounced in the creation of abstract art since the artist is free to follow these suggestions, no matter where they may lead, conditioned of course by his own sensibilities.

It is possible that this freedom may have anarchistic overtones. Because artists may not appeal to an academy in the traditional sense for style and a raison d'être, each must find his own. We embark on a self-conscious search for individualism, which when found is often only superficially individual, being concerned with novelty instead of unique fundamentals. For most of us, however, the vicissitudes of freedom are preferable to the kind of security derived from stereotyped procedures.
ABSTRACT FORM IN
PICTORIAL EXPRESSION
PLATE 2

Drawing, 38" x 48", 1956
PLATE 3

Oil on Masonite Panel, 30" x 46", 1955
PLATE 4
Oil and Enamel on Panel, 48" x 36", 1956
PLATE 5

Oil on Canvas, 36" x 25", 1935
PLATE 7

Drawing, 36" x 48", 1956
PLATE 8

Oil on Canvas; 25" x 30" 1955
PLATE 10

Drawing, 35" x 48", 1956
PLATE 13

Oil on Upson Board, 25" x 48", 1955
PLATE 1A

Oil on Canvas, 30" x 48", 1956
I, David Dalrymple Ketner, was born in Seattle, Washington, January 21, 1927. I received my secondary school education in the public schools of Seattle, Washington, and in the Lakeside School for Boys of Seattle. My undergraduate training was obtained at the University of Washington, from which I received the degree Bachelor of Arts in 1951. From the Centro de Estudios Universitarios de Mexico City College I received the degree Master of Arts in 1952. In January, 1954, I enrolled in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University. While in residence at the Ohio State University I acted in the capacity of graduate assistant to Professor Ralph Fanning during the year 1954-55, and subsequently as a departmental graduate assistant. In October, 1955, I received an appointment as Simon Lazarus Scholar, specializing in the School of Fine and Applied Arts. I held this position for one year while completing the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy.