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DEVELOPMENT OF AN IDEA IN PAINTING

by

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This thesis submitted by Marlene Morelock in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the University of North Dakota is hereby approved by the Committee under whom the work has been done.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN IDEA IN PAINTING

If I were a finished artist I would probably have a preconceived idea to be made into a picture. This is no doubt a rewarding experience. But it is greater fun when the mind is seized upon by something outside of it, some surprise element which gradually evolves into an understandable shape.¹

In this thesis it is my intention to trace the development of an idea and conception of form which have taken place within me during the past two years. It has been a development which has resulted in a change from one form to another, from one conception of a subject to an entirely different conception of it. It is as if I have been the spectator of my thoughts, have seen a story unfolding to me for the first time, and have watched to see what will happen next. These changes have occurred as a result of my search for subject matter and order. There has never been a definite climax, nor has there been a definite termination. It has been a search in which phases and transitions have more often been meaningful than climaxes and solutions.

As I see it, painting is not so much picture making as a process of thinking in which one endeavors to put one's ideas into some sort of meaningful order. My search during the past two years, therefore, has gone on as much away from

¹Sir Rabindranath Tagore, On Art and Aesthetics; Orient Longmans, 1961, (published for International Cultural Centre), p.89.

the canvas as at it. But this should hardly be surprising. Many ideas and sensations are inexpressible by their very nature. Such purely mental creations are at times more enjoyable and valuable to one's aesthetic growth than is the physical act of painting.

But if one is to become a painter he must ultimately paint. Though it is possible to create within the mind alone, there are certain aspects of one's aesthetic growth which must develop visually, through actual participation with paint. The flick and stroke of the paint-soaked brush held by the human hand is an experience which cannot be completely comprehended by the mind. The errors, surprises, and accidents which come about during the actual painting create sensations which often suggest new directions and relationships to enrich the initial conception.

Moreover, by seizing upon one kind of subject matter and physically imposing upon it one's personal sense of form, one cannot only express one's self, but can trace the various phases in one's development. One can thus work within a limitation which has no limits. This is not to say that one stops thinking or even planning paintings in other ways or of other subjects. In fact part of the value involved in this limitation is the struggle each idea must go through before rejection or acceptance takes place. One is not only allowed to handle mentally any and all ideas which come in a creative way, but is allowed the all-important experience of making a choice.

When I first became aware of windows I began to see them as something steeped in individuality. Each one, though related

by a certain structural requirement, afforded a unique experience. Each was subject to an environment, governed by weather and imposed upon by human care or lack of care. I was intrigued by the textures and by the naive "painterly" manner in which each had been decorated. Also, I became interested in the potential use of the actual elements of the window: the curtain, the window shade, the venetian blind, the screen, the latch.

It was my intention to combine, on a two-dimensional surface, the actual objects of the window with the painting technique which occurred on its surface: the loose handling of paint, which had been splashed or dripped and painted unevenly on corners and edges.

In January, 1963, in the first such assemblage on canvas a large white window sill was painted in an illusionistic manner surrounded by a red background to suggest an interior wall. (See Slide 1.) Across the window a curtain rod and two red-checked curtains were attached. The rod expands the window gap and the curtains can be opened and closed at any interval, allowing many relationships to occur. When the curtains are closed the visual relationship is that of a red-painted surface juxtaposed with red-checked cloth. In the window gap magazine pictures of figures, trees, and rocks have been pasted in the collage technique. These form various scenes which might occur in a window view of the outside. The scale of the objects varies as does that of actual viewing, when some things are close or far from the window.

The next few assemblages continued this theme of combining window parts with the painted two-dimensional surface. One composition treated a small metal awning attached to a four foot by five foot masonite panel; another, a window blind. (See Slides 2 and 3.) There was a visual play between the reality of objects and their textures and the enamel paint surface which continued the suggestion of reality by the use of the "copied" painting technique of the original windows. I was delighted to discover a new subject matter, or more precisely, to see it in new terms. It offered a wealth of possibilities within which to work and think. At first it was the window itself. Then, later in the year, it was also the square. Finally, the window had become completely rejected for the formal shape inherent in it.

During the first phase I became gradually aware of the use of the window by painters such as Vermeer and Matisse. Paul Zucker, in his book, Styles in Painting, discusses the relationship of the figure to the window, referring to the psychological implications. He also points out that:

The window in earlier paintings was an opening to admit light and sometimes to afford a partial view of the outside world. Gradually the window begins to assume the function of a selective frame. This frame creates a picture within a picture and becomes a visual device for stating the contrast between interior and exterior, so that the framed-in view is separated from the interior and yet remains a part of it.¹

¹Paul Zucker, Styles in Painting, (Dover Publications, Inc.) New York, 1963, p. 252.

The twentieth century French painter, Henri Matisse, continues this idea but adds a second visual quality to the window by working with advancing and receding planes of color. By juxtaposing strong colors in both exterior and interior areas, the natural growth and man-made settings, he bends, ties, merges and incongruously places the two parts of environment in space. In his paintings one sees the greenness of nature pop into the foreground and play visually with the interior tones. One sees the three-dimensional world transposed from normality into a two-dimensional sensation of color and form. The window is the gap to let one secret into another. It is the breaking of the barrier of the two existing though somewhat separate worlds.

In working with the window I began to see it as a thing entirely independent of anything else. There was enough potential in itself to completely exclude any and all reference to psychological implications of the figure and of nature. On close observation I discovered many small occurrences and designs which offered many possibilities with which to work.

Most of my experiments with the window at this time were carried on inside my mind. They were done mainly by contemplating windows, then by trying to decipher what element existed which I wanted to paint about. I began photographing certain relationships further to search out ideas. At this point there were many imaginary sensations, the majority of which could not have been painted. At first I found this fact difficult to comprehend. I felt in an odd situation, one in which I could not find a way to express the ideas I was having.

Eventually I came to realize that the sensations I was having did not have to be painted; that if not a completely physical impossibility, painting was at the least restrictive. Therefore I painted very few ideas, but I carried on a private pursuit with them. I explored many ideas, dismissing some and developing others (some of which later became visual in other forms).

These sensations are difficult to describe. They were close to Andre Lhote's term "hallucinations from nature" in reference to Paul Cezanne's manner of thinking and painting, or as Etienne Gilson speaks of Cezanne's "own manner of transfiguring reality in the very act of perceiving it."¹

There were flashes of form induced by the viewing and immediate transfigurations of windows on a flat surface. These sensations were not particularly painterly nor complete as images, but were educating my sense of balance and design, as well as giving a momentary pleasure of form. It would have been futile to attempt at this time to translate these visions into a painting. I had neither the right formal conception nor enough understanding of what was important in the visions. The theories were being developed but as yet too vaguely to be committed to a visual surface.

I did, however, attempt a few paintings. Some of those ideas I painted come from the awareness of the window as seen reflected in another window, a view of itself, almost in the

¹Etienne Gilson, Painting and Reality, Meridian Books, Inc., New York, 1959, p. 355.

same way as a figure is presented studying itself in a mirror. The assemblage method was neglected for a time in favor of the flat surface on which to play with the illusionistic quality of space, probably influenced to a certain extent by the paintings of Matisse and by seeing and photographing several examples of one window reflected in another. There was an interest in the spatial play in depth between the two images. I tried to create tension by allowing the paint to overlap and contradict the implied position of each image in space. (See Slide 4.)

There was also a concern for the window as seen behind another one (rather than reflected), the idea of the space of a room cutting between two windows and creating a volume between them, but allowing the paint and color to weld them together in a two-dimensional space, and thereby creating conflicting planes. (See Slide 5.)

I was still thinking in two techniques: (1) the two-dimensional surface concerned primarily with the spatial planes, and (2) the assemblage combined with the paint surface, almost in a sculptural manner with the combination of boards, cloth, and other material. Even though I enjoyed seeing the relationships between the actual objects and the painted illusion, my inclination was to break from this approach and go toward a more formal relationship, concerning myself with only two dimensions. I felt that I was neglecting more important problems of form by concerning myself with the physical rather than the mental situations. The paintings lacked a strong form due to the conflict of dimensions and also because of my lack of persistence in developing each idea fully. This was caused

by the overenthusiasm for the materials and the unexpected compositions developed from them. I was too quickly satisfied with the results of the strange impression and did not thoroughly think enough about the overall form. I was, in fact, not completely aware of it at this time.

Two things caused this gradual change in my thinking toward the abstract approach. First, I began to see the camera as a more definite medium to reveal to myself certain visual data. I could search out things which satisfied a certain form and order for me without having to contrive them on a surface. This became a creative means to find form (especially in unanticipated material), a visual search of the already formed environment -- one which gave me a more personal awareness of my surroundings. In other words, the camera opened up a new expressive manner and at the same time freed my mind from dealing with the same material in a contrived way, therefore, allowing the two-dimensional search to become more important.

The second cause of my change was the actual viewing of a type of environment which produced the very kind of assembled form I had been working toward in my thinking and painting. In seeing the shanty houses in San Juan, Puerto Rico, I was confronted with many visual relationships which expressed certain designs by the use of boards, textures, curtains, scraps and incongruous materials assembled out of natural necessity. (See Slide 6.) What I had contrived to do on several small surfaces existed there in quantities. I saw which I felt to be the end product of my direction at that time. The colors

and strange relationships were visually delightful. My mental and visual explorations were, temporarily at least, concluded because of my recognition of powerful primitive creativity. There seemed to be no actual need to pursue the search for this type of relationship any further because I had found it intact, already done. (I was affected quite differently in seeing this as compared with seeing a forest of trees with the desire of finding an order to present on canvas. Part of the attraction this exploration had had was in the uniqueness. The inspiration came not from a particular scene as might happen in confronting a portion of nature, but in the creation of relatively unseen situations). There was a satisfaction in seeing this type of structure and a new thirst to search out form with a camera from this maze of assemblage. With a camera I could both think about and gather this material more quickly, thereby making visible my ideas of this sort of structure. I could now discuss texture, color and shape two-dimensionally in one medium, and be freer to work with other ideas in painting. My discovery, in other words, freed me from the fascination of construction on the painted surface, allowing slowly a re-evaluation of form which did not contradict the two-dimensional format.

The technique began changing which caused a new conception of the subject matter. The shapes in the window began to command more thought and to become more important. The window was considered as a closed one, a thing in itself, a thing existing on a flat surface. There was no intrusion from either side, no reference to the interior or the exterior, beyond that

of a wall. Two types of things inspired my design: the window itself, the squares and rectangles of the glass made by the division of wooden panes -- that is, the actual architectural workings; and the window shade as caught by light striking the parts and creating shapes on it. The window shade severed the window from anything beyond itself, creating a two-dimensional surface more concretely. I was impressed by the fact that this subject matter was a thing dealing with abstract relationships such as the various geometrical divisions, the venetian blind stripes, and its placement on a wall in relationship to other windows on a wall. There was not the usual struggle of transposing something three-dimensional to a two-dimensional surface (since it was basically a one plane object), only searching for certain formal sensations.

During this time I had been using rather arbitrary color choices, working with various color schemes. I became aware of a red and green relationship in two or three paintings which had appeared quite unconsciously. (See Slide 7.) This combination began to suggest itself as a deliberate choice because of the potential of creating an illusionistic and vibrant conflict in space. There was a contrast in warm and cool tones, of advancing and receding planes giving a non-objective pattern and at the same time possibly suggesting or symbolizing a feeling of exterior and interior tones. Both colors are near in value which allowed a closeness without separation in space, as would the complements yellow and violet.

The illusion became an important concept just as the assemblage had been. There was an interest in the optical

changes which resulted when the two complementary colors of full intensity were placed in juxtaposition. There was an excitement in seeing two colors fighting for the frontal position in space, and one color trying to stretch forth past the one that is painted over it. In these paintings there is a constant struggle for first attention, and yet in the mind each color receives prominent attention only shortly before the other one jumps out past. These paintings are never visually static. It is next to impossible for a viewer to memorize the definite space pattern of jumping and pushing caused by the quarrel of the two colors.

Most of my paintings until this time dealt with the window as seen from the frontal view, being slightly parallel to the sides of the format. Another way I found of creating more suggested illusion was by the use of a diagonal shape (or a window painted at a 45 degree angle) cutting into a flatly painted area. There is an ambiguity intended by the conflict between the implied perspective and the flatly painted background. The paint quality itself was applied in a non-painterly objective manner, thereby giving no suggestion of depth in the surface quality of the brush strokes. The use of flat enamel paint allowed for the intense pure colors and for the non-active surface. (See Slide 8.)

The last major window assemblage is composed of a red and green window painted diagonally on a flat bright orange surface suggesting this illusion of depth. (See Slide 9.) The orange surface, however, serves as a counter-action against the

implied depth. I attached a red wooden frame to the edge of the canvas with hinges. This frame can be moved out from the window in various degrees to further create an implied depth. The painting of November, 1964, is an important painting because of the combination of a window presented as a recognizable object and a window presented as a square shape. On the red background the former shape tries to suggest space with its diagonal view in contrast to the latter shape, a green square, which seems to float on the surface of the red. (See Slide 10.)

From this point, approximately one year from the beginning experiments, the window was becoming fairly unnecessary as inspirational material. The rectangle, square, and stripe had gradually become the dominant subject matter. They became shapes, angles, positions and sensations in space; that is, compositional elements freed from their previous connotations. There was no longer a need to illustrate or work out designs through realistic subject matter; thereby perhaps limiting my inspiration. This is not to say that there are no reverberations within the paintings of the window. On the contrary, often the same visual impression can still be sought out from them. The distinction was that the paintings basically did not literally imply windows as at the beginning of the process; however, the subject had been distilled within my mind, that is, the certain sensations on a flat surface.

Of the four major paintings done in March, 1964, only one, entitled "Detail" suggests a window -- and then only because the title indicates it. This is a painting which subconsciously described a relationship of which I wasn't aware until after

its completion. Analyzing it now, I can find two suggestions of windows: a similar division of shapes and a similar application of paint. (See Slide 11.) The other three paintings have no implications of windows. They deal with squares and rectangles playing in space. They indicate the beginning of my break from the subject. (See Slides 12 and 13.)

The paintings done in April were inspired by basic designs on and about the window (e.g. Venetian blinds, clapboards, panes), but, again they are detectable chiefly because of the title and other external evidence. "April Window Event" has no obvious resemblance to a window at all, but when compared to the photograph of the sun and shadow on a window shade, the connection can easily be seen. (See Slides 14 and 15.) The painting "Stripes on Orange" deals primarily with an abstract relationship of colors, but can refer to the stripes of Venetian blinds in a window square. The colors, of course, lead away from the literal connotation. (See Slide 16.)

In May, 1964, a new concept began appearing. Instead of painting in complete stripes, paint was only partially applied to the area -- especially when the composition was based on a succession of stripes. This manner allowed the stripe pattern to underlie the area but not become visually redundant, because each stripe was handled differently within its boundaries. In several of these paintings the unprimed canvas was green; white lines were penciled in to show the size and boundaries of the stripes and allowed to remain as part of the idea. By not filling in each stripe completely, a visual surprise occurred

within the preconceived pattern. Several things happened within each stripe: the bare green canvas, a partially painted stripe, a white penciled line. (See Slide 17 and 18.)

At first glance the shapes appear to have a somewhat hard edge to them, that is, as shapes easily defined by the eye. A certain order is suggested by a definite, recognizable area. But there are contradictions to this order caused by the somewhat loose handling of paint: the splashes, drips and uneven edges. (See Slide 19.) This is an intended addition to offset and contrast the defined areas. An additional visual purpose of these drips is the manner in which they create and control spatial depth. Small green drips coming over a large area of red can act as a restraint and can hold the red within the spatial boundary. Red is an advancing color and tends to pull too far outward from the surface, especially when placed near green, a receding color.

One should at this point be able to understand this process of thinking and begin making personal assumptions and conclusions about the paintings, creatively deciding about the subject matter. Several of the compositions done in May can be seen as window-inspired, though most are left untitled so that each individual viewer can seek out a personal subject. An actual window is not so important as a design, but it exhibits several subtle relationships which resemble patterns inherent in many other things. These relationships are often difficult to define verbally, but when stated visually and studied, they can seep into the subconscious and eventually

become abstract transcendent realities.

In November, 1964, a few paintings and many ideas carried the squares and stripes one step further. (See Slide 20.) These paintings are interesting to me as acts of thinking as I am working on a canvas. In my mind the image was developed and painted completely. But as I began to work on the preconceived design, I allowed another process to interrupt the "copying" process. I became definitely aware of this happening. In fact, I desired this overtaking and indeterminable act. Precise lines and shapes were first penciled on the white primed canvas in a certain order with the idea that these were to be painted in with color. In other words, the canvas was marked off in a predetermined manner; and yet, a moment afterwards, I allowed thoughts and emotions and transitory impressions to obliterate the preconception completely. In my mind the "finished" composition vividly existed: I painted towards it, but did not "complete" the composition. This is not to say that the resulting painting is an incomplete work, but that it becomes a finished transition. It is an undefined but suggestive state before the final state, which was originally conceived in the mind, has been reached. Rodin speaks of this when explaining movement within his sculpture by stating it as the transition from one attitude to another. "We see a part of what was and we discover a part of what is to be."

The imagination becomes an important part of the situation -- in fact, the imagination explains the situation. The guiding lines to the shapes are evidenced by the color. The

color goes almost all the way to the finish but it stops just before it. This forces the eye in the right direction but does not push it. It hints and stings until the mind completes the passage, until it finishes the suggestion. The spaces between the penciled lines are touched with color but not saturated or filled. They are open surfaces which defy and define the direction which the color begins. They contradict the space, allowing the background to share their area. The shapes, then, become like a muffled or whispered sentence in which only the key words are clear, and the rest is surmised.

This might be equated with the Oriental poems, haiku, "wordless" poetry of just "seventeen syllables which drops the subject almost as it takes it up."¹ It "is a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener's mind, evoking associations out of the richness of his own memory."²

This becomes an exciting form of thinking, of challenging one's sense of harmony and balance within a short length of time in a "hit or miss" method. It becomes a matter of knowing when enough is stated, of knowing how much can be left unsaid, of knowing when to stop activating the surface with unnecessary strokes and completed or complicated areas. There is a danger also in being too aware of the image in the memory and being tricked into thinking that more is stated than is actually present, or the opposite, thinking the idea is too incomplete

¹Dr. Alan W. Watts, The Way of Zen, Mentor Book, (published by the New American Library, N.Y.); 1959, p. 177.

²Ibid. p.178.

because of such a vivid awareness of the original idea. There is a possibility that this form of thinking could develop into a form of drawing (on a large scale) which one remembers Max Liebermann's statement that "Drawing is the art of leaving out."

There is a certain inexpressible charm and mystery (to me) in seeing a relatively large surface which has only a few strokes or color notations on it. Its simplicity is the major part of its richness -- as in the late watercolors of Cezanne, the line drawings of Matisse, and the Sung landscapes. In the Oriental Zen poetry:

The empty space is the surrounding silence which a two-line poem requires -- a silence of the mind in which one does not 'think about' the poem but actually feels the sensation which it evokes -- all the more strongly for having said so little.¹

Dr. Watts discusses this concept further in the Sung landscapes:

One of the most striking features of the Sung landscapes, as of sumi-e as a whole, is the relative emptiness of the picture--an emptiness which appears, however, to be part of the painting and not just unpainted background. By filling in just one corner, the artist makes the whole area of the picture alive. Ma-yuan, in particular, was the master of this technique, which amounts almost to 'painting by not painting,' or what Zen sometimes calls 'playing the stringless lute.' The secret lies in knowing how to balance form with emptiness and above all, in knowing when one has 'said' enough. For Zen spoils neither the aesthetic shock nor the satori shock by filling in, by explanation, second thoughts, and intellectual commentary. Furthermore, the figure so integrally related to its empty space gives the feeling of the 'marvelous void' from which the event suddenly appears.²

¹Ibid. p. 177.

²Ibid. p. 173-174.

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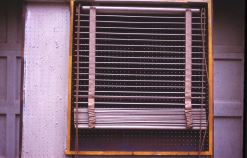
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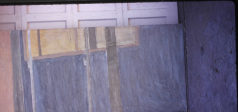








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