

San Fernando Valley State College

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EXPRESSIVE  
VISUAL IMAGE

An abstract submitted in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

Art

by

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The abstract of Vida Bernice Rava~~ff~~ is approved:

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Committee Chairman

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EXPRESSIVE  
VISUAL IMAGE

A. A Statement of the Problem, Project or Investigation.

The problem will be to develop an expressive, poetic visual image. The underlying theme will be that of the human figure shown in an environment that is natural or man-made. The image, though recognizably figurative, will not necessarily be constructed with direct reference to naturalistic visual perceptions and spatial relations. Distortion and abstraction will be employed to heighten the emotional effect and to also investigate spatial tensions between the figure and its environment.

Oil paint will be the predominant medium employed, although other materials combined with paint will also be investigated. The plastic, tactile, and transparent qualities of paint will be explored in terms of their effect and influence on the creation of the expressive image.

A few prints will be included in the artistic performance exhibit in order to demonstrate the development of the expressive image in a related area. The prints, oil sketches, and large paintings in the

exhibit will attempt to demonstrate the steps leading to the development of a personal expressive interpretation of an image using the human figure.

B. An Exposition of the Methods, Procedures, and Experiments Employed or Attempted Throughout Performance.

Some of the methods employed during Art 597, Artistic Performance, developed from experiments attempted in Art 521 X, Y, and Z, Studio Problems: Painting. Several projects were required that combined collage and construction materials with paint, but no restrictions were placed on the kinds of materials that could be used. Initial experiments involved Spackle, gesso, Wilhold Glue and old toys - particularly small plastic figures and dolls. The toy objects were arranged into scenes set within a box-like frame and painted with Liquetex paints after Spackle or glue was used to secure the objects in place (figures 1a and 1b). The paintings which only employed paint consisted of plant forms (figure 2), still-lives, or figures.

In Art 521 Z, attention focused on the human figure as a theme to explore and develop. Without conscious evident direction, void-like areas appeared in some of the paintings. The large, somewhat ambiguous spaces that surrounded the figure were rational in content; the figure was backed by a wall, or occupied a room. The large space was balanced by concentrating the lighter values on and around the figure.

In Art 597, Artistic Performance, the last phase of the program, the human figure in a meaningful environment was decided upon as the specific theme for

the graduate project. A continuing exploration of the figurative image on at least one very large canvas was intended. At this time, oil paint was the only medium used. Sketches were made in preparation for the larger paintings. Oil paint was used instead of the usual drawing materials because drawing implied linear emphasis and neutral colors rather than shape and color. Details of the figures in the small sketches were difficult to achieve with oil paint so parts of small plastic figures were substituted for heads, hands, or arms (figures 3a, 3b, and 4). An interest in experimenting with construction materials in a like manner, but on a larger scale, developed out of the small paintings. Glue, parts of toy figures, and paint were the only materials necessary for the small sketches.

On a larger scale, it was necessary to utilize an additional material to serve as an intermediate surface between the canvas or board surface and the higher reliefs of the toys. A plastic compound called "Floorfix", which is used by linoleum tile-setters to build up surfaces underneath linoleum, was purchased and employed in the larger paintings. In the painting illustrated in figure 5, parts of a child's life-size doll with the plastic compound were used on a plywood surface. Smaller plastic toys and the compound were used on stretched canvas (figures 7, 9, and 10) and on masonite (figure 8).

C. A Statement of Findings Resulting From The Artistic Performance.

The high relief constructions attempted early in the program were not successful as finished projects. Technical problems were encountered because the Spackle cracked easily and made the constructions too fragile. They were predominantly arrangements, not paintings; paint acted merely as an embellishment. The role the toy figure was to play in the arrangement determined its selection and placement. The toys retained their original identity, and merely served as parts of a scene. However, an increasing awareness of the "symbol-laden significance of figure substitutes"<sup>1</sup> developed from the experiments with the dolls and toy figures.

Later, when attention was focused on the human figure as a theme to explore, the role that paint and color must play in the development of the image became more apparent. The expressive image actually dictated the methods and colors used. Paint and color, acting as contributing subordinates, should help to convey the meaning of the image. The void-like areas that appeared at this time were appropriate. No inclination was felt to "fill the void" or to activate the entire surface of the painting.<sup>2</sup>

In the development of the small sketches, it was discovered that the intrinsic imaginative qualities of the toys gave impetus to a more imaginative treatment of the figure. The objects began to play a new

role. They lost their identity as toys when they were dismembered and anatomically re-invented on the two-dimensional surface. Tensions grew between space and figure on the flat surface, and also between concrete and apparent realities. Parts of the figures became blurred and merged progressively into more detailed surfaces of varying reliefs such as head, arm, or hand. Sometimes an arm broke free from the flat surface to interrupt the space before the observer (figure 4). In order to allow more experimentation with construction materials, expressive imagery, and spatial tensions, the previous plan for one or more large paintings for the exhibit was substituted for a set of paintings employing figure substitutes on a larger scale.

The plastic compound that was used to act as an intermediate surface between the toy objects and the canvas or board surfaces of the larger paintings, was in powder form. Similar to Plaster of Paris, it is mixed with water. It can be used by combining it with glue on either a stretched canvas or a board surface. The board surface allows for higher reliefs and is more resilient if any cutting away of the material is necessary. On a flexible canvas surface, more glue is required to prevent cracking. The compound sets quickly and hardens into a rigid material which is much stronger than Plaster of Paris or Spackle. It does not flake or crumble and can also

be sanded, carved, or sculpted.

At first, parts of life-size dolls were combined with the compound (figure 5). The baby-like characteristics always seemed to dominate and were not suitable for the desired effect. The larger dolls required too large a board and the painting became too cumbersome. Smaller toys of molded plastic were purchased (figure 6), because their adult proportions, expressions and gestures were more suitable.

The smaller plastic figures were used in the paintings illustrated in figures 7 and 8. The toy figures existed as the focal point of the painting, but the desired spatial effect was not achieved because the painting surfaces were too small. The importance of proportion was overlooked, and it was also discovered that the reliefs employed in these particular paintings were too high. The tensions between real and unreal depended to a great extent on how far the figures emerged from the surface. Rather than just beginning to emerge from the surface, the figures appeared to have already broken free of their confinements. The figure substitutes lost some of their illusionary effects because the necessary close relationship between the figure and the two-dimensional surface was interrupted.

Proportionately larger canvases and lower reliefs were used for the next two paintings (figures 9 and 10).

In these, spatial tensions exist to a much greater extent and the lower reliefs provide for greater tensions between real and unreal.

An absence of strong color is a characteristic of nearly all of the paintings. Large areas of intense colors, attempted in the beginning stages of several paintings, were inevitably removed and replaced by muted colors that were more appropriate to the emotional content of the expressive image.

D. Conclusions Drawn By The Artist.

Throughout performance, a more direct approach to materials was attempted. An increased understanding of the way in which materials help to convey the meaning of the imagery developed out of the explorations. "Painting in this sense tends towards a complete interlocking of image and paint, so that the image is in the paint and vice versa..."<sup>3</sup> The investigation of new materials and textures will be of continuing interest, and will be explored in terms of their contribution to the expressive imagery.

The imagery seems to shift between real and unreal. The concrete reality of the figure substitutes is contrasted against the apparent reality of the painted surfaces, and it is this characteristic of shifting realities that needs further investigation. Because of the qualities of unreality, the imagery tends to verge on the grotesque. "Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks."<sup>4</sup> The figure substitutes may perform a role "in the close relationship between man and his mask - the real and the grotesque."<sup>5</sup> Grotesque or not, it is that particular aspect of the imagery - "the significance of the symbol-laden figure substitute"<sup>6</sup> - that will receive the most immediate attention in further investigations.

# FIGURES



fig. 1a

Relief Constructions

fig. 1b





fig. 2

"Plant Forms"



fig. 3a



fig. 3b

Oil Sketches

fig. 4 Oil  
Sketch



fig. 5

Doll on a  
Plywood Board



fig. 6

Molded Plastic  
Figures (h. 7")

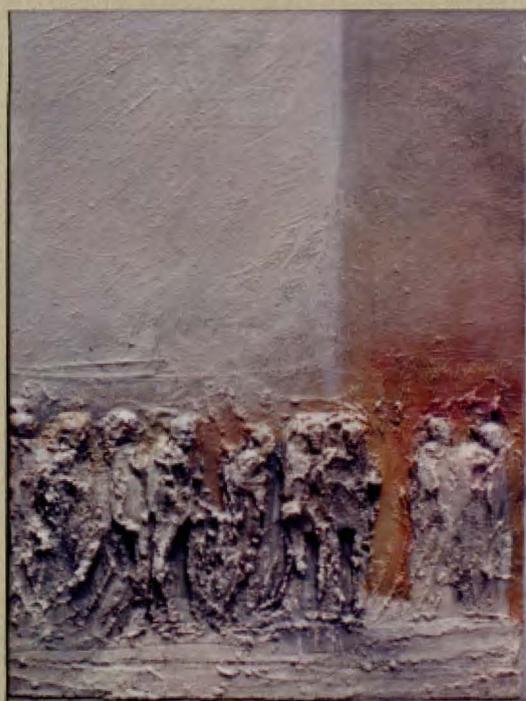


fig. 7

"Frieze"



fig. 8

Diptych



fig. 9

"Matriarch"



fig. 10

"Two Figures"

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Fidel A. Daniele, "L.A. Scene Today: Figurative", Art Forum, Summer 1964, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Selz, New Images of Man, Museum of Modern Art, 1959, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>Francis Bacon, Quoted in The New Decade, New York Museum of Art, 1955, p. 60-61.

<sup>4</sup>Wolfgang Kayser, The Grottesque in Art and Literature, Indiana University Press, 1963, p. 183.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Selz, op. cited, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup>Fidel A. Daniele, op. cited, p. 53.

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