

San Fernando Valley State College

STUDY OF PERSONAL EXPRESSION  
THROUGH VISUAL IMAGERY

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

Fine Art

by

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EXPRESSIVE IMAGE

### I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem will consist of executing a series of paintings intended to aid in the development of the artist's expression of abstract visual image. The artist will seek to establish through this development of individual expression, a communication in which the abstract form will stimulate the mind to create reality. Reality once created, it is hoped, will induce additional thought.

The human figure will be employed as a pathway toward the expressed goal of this major theme. The figure, although sometimes recognizable, will not be exhibited in its total naturalistic or spatial form. Subjective reaction will be limited and objectivity will be promoted by abstracting and distorting the figure. In addition, the direct intuitive approach will be employed for the purpose of creating forms that will communicate directly to the viewer both the real and the unreal thought expressed.

Transparent water color, the predominant medium to be used, forces the artist to express himself quickly, while under pressure, with very direct forms. The very nature of the media makes it near impossible for the artist to rely on self-conscious or preconceived form.

In addition, both opaque and transparent water color, other materials (media and backgrounds) will be combined with the basic medium and investigated in terms of their effect and visual impact on the creation of the sought-after visual images.

Media to be employed were ink, pencil, copal oil and beeswax resist, alcohol, wilhold glue and varnish. Backgrounds included masonite, gesso canvas board, rice paper, and others.

Pictures to be shown in the Graduate Exhibit will appear in the sequence demonstrating the development of the expressive image sought.

## II. AN EXPOSITION OF THE METHODS AND PROCEDURES USED IN THE INVESTIGATION OF THE PROBLEM.

Methods of drawing the figure developed in Studio Problems-Painting, Art 521, was employed where distortion, to interject fantasy within the human figure, inspired the concept of seeking visual imagery via the human form. But as a graphite pencil seemed to limit the project principally to light and dark areas and line, a way was sought to combine line and color into a total personal imagery. (See Appendix 1)

### Water Color and Wash Method

The first experiments involved ink washes and water color media. It was quickly discovered that repeated,

intense washes over the color and line either overpowered or destroyed the visual images to the point where it was necessary to redraw the first intuitive forms. Because of the artist's tendency to redraw already learned forms, the resulting composition became mannerized and stilted. Since fantasy imagery was the principal value sought in the problem, extensive use of the above technique was discontinued. (See Appendix 2)

#### Plastic Sheet over Lap Technique

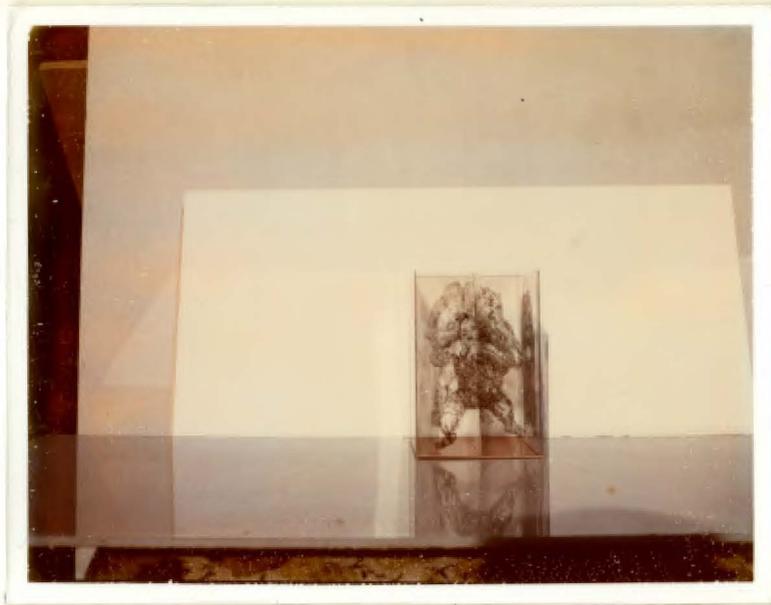
In Studio Problems-Painting, Art 521b, attention also focused on imagery because the investigation in Studio Problems-Painting had proven unsatisfactory. This new quest developed the use of line and a lapping technique, in which multiple images were combined to create a single, abstract image which would stimulate the viewer's emotion through visual impact. Transparent plastic sheets of various thickness were found to be the most suitable surface for this overlapping method. An electric engraving tool was employed to draw on the plastic surface; the engraved lines were filled in with printer's ink. The plastic sheets were then assembled into oblong or square boxes and so arranged that the drawn figures faced each other to project an abstract image.

An additional engraved and inked plastic sheet could be inserted in the box, projecting multi-images to the viewer which completed and projected the combined image

into the fantasy stage.

Ten boxes were constructed in all. A description of three of these will somewhat clarify the technique employed.

Figure 1



Box 1 employed not only an interposed sheet to aid the projection of the image, but also an engraved diagram to offset the figures. An opaque panel helped to create a reflection image upon the three existing panels, giving a geometric effect to the visual images. This technique was successful only with careful lighting.

Box 2 (on the following page) utilized an opaque end panel. While somewhat restricting the view from any angle, the end-panel helped to define the engraved line image. Grotesque figures were used in an effort to invoke fantasy and hidden images in the viewer's subconscious

Figure 2



mind. Each figure when observed from an overlapping view, dissolves into a single large image.

Figure 3



In Box 3, simple forms were used in an attempt to

create an attitude rather than abstract images, for the purpose of making a statement or creating an anti-form imagery in the mind of the viewer.

Although the superimposed faces and forms in the boxes did project expressive imagery, the drawings themselves proved unsatisfactory for the purpose desired. No matter from which angle it was observed, the viewer was always aware of realistic figures. Furthermore, the figures themselves seemed to be confined into an area which limited or conflicted with the attempts at fantasy imagery.

Failure of the technique employed to achieve the desired effect, combined with mechanical failure of the boxes themselves, prompted the experimenter to discard this method in favor of a more appropriate approach to the problem.

#### Water Color and Rice Paper Technique

After experiments with various media and materials, the experimenter discovered a suitable vehicle in the form of transparent water color on rice paper.

This technique proved to be highly successful in that it lent itself to extensive stimulation of the imagery sought, both conscious and subconscious. The transparent water color reacted on the soft absorbent paper, spreading into varied patterns, both organic and inorganic. Large simple intuitive forms rather than small detailed figures, were found to suit the medium best. Continual overpainting

into some areas of the composition developed a juxtaposition of opaque and transparent color areas which heightened and stimulated the visual images. Black paint or black India ink was then used to re-establish these figures to the point where the viewer could create reality of form. The artist then continued to create personal interpretation by additional overwashing of the total picture to produce hard or soft areas within the figures and color. Visual imagery was again heightened by repainting the forms. This process was repeated again and again until the composition was dominated by the abstract theme desired.

Figure 4



The rice paper was placed on a glass surface during work. In this way the paper could be lifted or tilted to control the flow of paint without danger of tearing. It was additionally learned that each layer of water color

should be permitted to dry before the next application of paint; otherwise a muddy, opaque result would destroy the juxtaposition of colors.

As a final step, a wax finish was applied to impart luster to the tones and hues of the completed water color composition. (See Figure 5) This finish consisted of turpentine, beeswax and copal painting medium applied to the rice paper with a "bright" brush. The wax was applied in heated state so that the brush action would not tear through the paper. Additional applications seem to enhance the result. (See Appendix 3)

Figure 5



### III. A STATEMENT OF FINDINGS RESULTING FROM THE INVESTIGATION

In Artist's Performance, Art 597, the final course requirement of the Graduate program, it was decided to

to continue the use of the human figure as the specific theme to stimulate visual images. In essence, the exploration would continue as originally projected, employing the figurative image with emphasis on the total abstract image, and using transparent water colors for the medium.

The experimenters planned to use large areas of rice paper for the ground. However, this technique had to be abandoned because of the technical difficulty of keeping the glued sheets together which separated when wet. A solution to the problem was achieved by gluing the rice paper to gessoed masonite board. (See Appendix 4)

During this exploration it was discovered that technique and materials used, had played a very strong role in the visual imagery evoked. Although the primary intuitive image dictated the total composition, the technique of continuous overlapping of color layers on the image, learned in Studio Problems-Painting, Art 521b, tended to break down the original intuitive identity of the forms. It re-invented new forms, apparently of subconscious origin. That is, parts of the human form in the composition blurred and merged progressively into more and more abstract images.

Thus encouraged, the artist attempted various experiments to vary the completed image by employing plaster of paris on the surface of the masonite board. Large areas of plaster were applied to create a three-dimensional effect, which added texture and dimension to

the result. While the effects created were striking, the experiment had to be abandoned because it was impossible to prevent or control chipping, cracking, and peeling in the dried plaster. (See Appendix 5)

Returning to the use of rice paper many failures resulted from gross over-painting, the non-absorbent quality of the whilhold glue, along with unsatisfactory results in producing the desired semi-accidental images.

Gesso canvas board was next tried as a background surface over which color was applied with no attempt at conscious pattern or reason. A thick layer of printer's ink was rolled over the colored surface; when this dried, areas of the ink were washed off with water. The emerging images, although entirely accidental and without conscious design, nevertheless did not quite project the desired

Figure 6



imagery. Therefore, various outlines were cut back through the areas to aid the visual context and to allow the desired image to emerge. (See Figure 6) As this project tended to draw the artist away from the major theme it was also rejected pending further investigation.

Once the use of gessoed masonite board was accepted as the proper surface to paint on, the experiments were continued to determine if an expansion of area would aid or heighten the psychological effect being sought. An area of three feet by three feet was found to be somewhat limiting for the illusionary effect desired but when it was expanded to four by four feet, the size appeared correct for the psychological needs of the composition. The artist did however experience initial difficulty in adapting the figure to the larger size. Perhaps because of prior concentration on smaller image sizes, large negative spaces appeared in the total enlarged composition. As a result of the many-layered image development the human form tended to dissolve into numerous smaller images which distracted from the total composition. Both problems led to confusing results.

At this stage of development the experimenter was faced with the three choices which were as follows:

- a. he could produce a total image surface in which the many images created the total surface;
- b. he could strive for a symbolic picture;
- c. he could return to the original theme of establishing a communication in which the

intuitive abstract form stimulated the viewer's mind to create its own reality.

It was finally decided to use only large simple forms which would lend themselves to the fantasy desired. To counter any further distraction of multi-images and negative space problem, ink washes were used to darken offending areas and to heighten the large positive areas.

Figure 7



This technique is illustrated in Figure 7. Here one can see the figure breaking down into various smaller abstract factors. To counter this effect, the color was toned down and the distracting areas tied together with darker ink washes.

Figure 8 (on the following page) shows the large simple figures as they broached the theme off into more concrete forms, destroying the desired fantasy imagery. Although the figures are realistic, the total composition

Figure 8



and theme carry the imagery very appropriately to the edge of fantasy.

Figure 9



Figure 9 is an effort to break away from the use of distorted figures and large monumental spaces, developing

imagery primarily through the use of color.

Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 10 intends the complimentary color scheme to carry the major contribution, via psychological shock, but adds figure distortion to attract the eye. This

picture was satisfactory as a composition, but did not meet the desire for evoked imagery; therefore the next attempt reverted to the large monumental figure. (Figure 11)

The desired psychological factor level was achieved through this composition. It was discovered that the use of the sponge produced blurred soft areas which suggested the visual images sought, and aided the viewer to complete the composition mentally.

Figure 12



Regarding this technique: It was found that in using the sponge on masonite composition, a coat of beeswax and whilhold glue help greatly to establish certain desirable factors. If the sponge was rubbed into a hot coat of wax, it tended to form images within images. Water color paint could be applied directly in a dry

brush method. Rubbing alcohol dropped into the wet water color paint formed desirable patterns of an abstract nature. (Figure 12) If the composition did not suit the needs of the artist, the wax could be removed by heating under a sun lamp, whereupon the undercoating of paint could either be sponged off or washed off with water pressure.

An additional finishing medium aid was a combination of Dorland wax, whilhold glue and turpentine. The glue finish over the wax tends to give the appearance of encaustic waxing.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

It was felt that the experiment was successful in resolving its main theme which was to invoke and develop a personal vocabulary of the visual image for the artist. The imagery of fantasy has always fascinated the artist but up to this time it has been difficult, if not impossible, to research and investigate this elusive problem and capture it in some concrete form.

The experimenter felt that the foregoing experiments were, however, a beginning and not an end. This type of investigation never seems to end but the experimenter hopes that his efforts will stimulate further investigation along the same theme. Aside from the personal enrichment experienced, the experimenter felt that his attempts to solve the stated problems demonstrated that the problem

is approachable for experiment without the need to produce a realistic picture.

The project illustrates some of the personal reasons which exist for the artist's own enrichment. The actual enjoyment of involving oneself in a medium employing intuitive action stimulates the unconscious and conscious alike, releasing a creative force within.

The artist must experiment with his tools in order to find stimulating pathways to express himself. These tools must be thought of not merely as brushes, sponges, paints, and surfaces, but rather, as an extension of the mind and arm of the artist. Thus, the artist realizes that the approaches to concept of an idea can be greatly enlarged.

Initially, one of the experimenter's major concerns was communication of visual imagery to the viewer. However, as the project progressed, the artist was stimulated to see the inner world of visual imagery and this concern was discarded. It was also realized that no two viewers see the same thing at the same time. Each individual sees, feels, and thinks what he wishes. Indeed, the simple demand to "see the unseen" prompts a complete re-evaluation of some of the viewer's insight toward art. In a sense, the viewer is being asked to define a composition in which the definable has been deliberately obscured, and one in which no one should be asked to seek the natural object as a basis for aesthetic judgment,

but rather should adjust his point of view to the intentions of the artist. The artist is no longer bound by a relationship between his picture and any natural object with respect to form and color, but, rather, is bound to any expressive power he can use as variables, because he seeks to be intuitive.

"The parallelism in art is not to be located between the work of art and the subject matter, but adjoining of the work of art and the aesthetic emotions of the painter. In essence, the value of the art creation arises from the painter Himself and not in His subjects."<sup>1</sup>

Thus the artist himself brings into being the intuitive in his work, and this beauty is the expressive form of the work itself. It is not a representational form to the viewer but is, rather, an intuitional consciousness of life that consists of emotion, color, and symbolistic form, representing an idea, or an object in the virtue of an idea in the mind of one using it.

To paraphrase: the sign  $\sigma^1$  is the symbol of man, yet there is nothing in the shape of this figure itself which suggests man. It is one's mind which motivates the symbol into a conceptive state. The artist's responsibility is to weld the arrangement of colors and emotions into a unity. This unity, this symbolic meaning, this kinaesthetic sensation, is the artist's communication

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<sup>1</sup>Charles E. Gauss, Aesthetic Theories of French Artists, 1855 to Present. Trans. ed. W.J. Strachian. John Hopkins Press: Baltimore, 1949. p.3.

to the viewer.

Since the work of art is a symbol, basically representing the feelings and projection of the artist, the spectator must make the reference. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth, the theory of *Enhuhlung* was born to describe the act by which one projects into the object before him his own psychic feelings. Thus the viewer must transfer his own kinaesthetic sensations and emotional reactions himself to the work of art. He must bridge the bond of empathy expressed by the painter. Once this reference is instinctively made the world of art opens its meaning to the spectator without intellectual effort. The artist only tries to communicate the hidden personal meaning existing in himself to the viewer. The spectator, if he accepts only the meaning of nature, that is, the total realistic optic sensation, will slight his own power of cerebral vision, and the communication will not be established. You will see in each picture whatever you have wished to see there. It is the spectator's own responsibility to see that part of reality that conscious thought can not penetrate: the intuitive state of mind.

"Through intuition one enters into a higher sphere of mental existence, thus perceiving the visible existence of things which in their endless profusion and vacillating

confusion man had taken for granted as simple and clear."<sup>2</sup>

He must grasp with the power of his own mind an entangled multiplicity of appearances and develop it into configured visual existence. This realization was the beginning of personal freedom of the artist, who tried to throw away ready-made recipes which usually result in pictorial mannerisms. Any effort that will help create a personal, idealistic, abstract or product of painting for the artist, will eventually lead to mature growth in his paintings.

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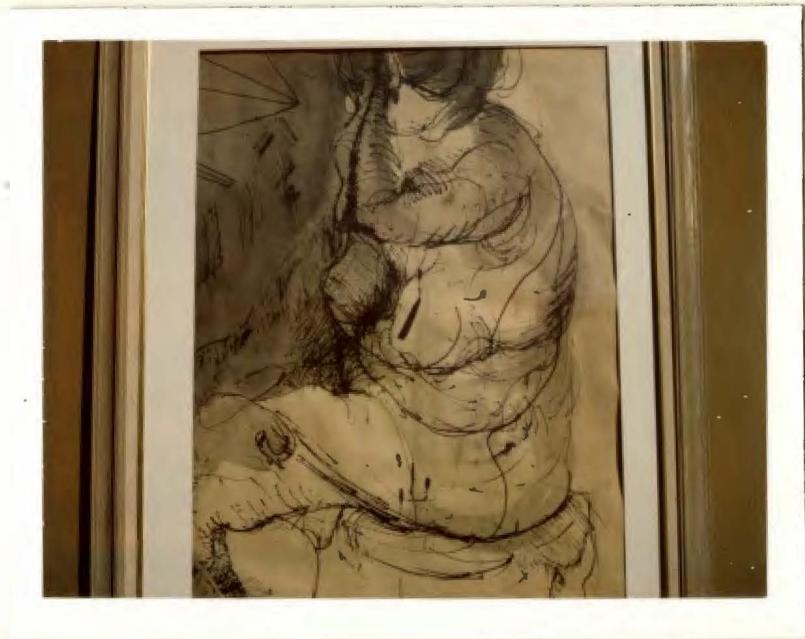
<sup>2</sup>Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy. Trans. ed. Michael Bullock. International Universities Press, N.Y., N.Y., 1953. p.136.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Page 2



Appendix 2. Page 3



Appendix 3. Page 8



Appendix 4. Page 9



Figure 5. Page 10



Figure 6

