San Fernando Valley State College

STONES, SEEDS, AND BONES

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

by

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The abstract of Regina Joyce Behl is approved:

Committee Chairman

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ABSTRACT
STONES, SEEDS AND BONES

by

Regina Joyce Behl

Master of Arts in Painting

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" asked Alice.

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where," said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

from Alice's Adventure in Wonderland

INTRODUCTION

I know where I want to go. I want to express myself in my own unique way in painting. There is a powerful feeling inside me, as real as life emotions, but different. Spiritual - perhaps best describes this feeling and the need to objectify it.

Roger Fry, the great English critic, eloquently explained how some artists begin to work. His statement
is so appropriate to my painting that I included it as the introduction to my Master's Show. It follows in part:

"Almost any turn of the kaleidoscope of nature may set up in the artist a (this) detached and impassioned vision, and, as he contemplates the particular field of vision, the (aesthetically) chaotic and accidental conjunction of forms and colours begins to crystalise into a harmony; and as this harmony becomes clear to the artist, his actual vision becomes distorted by the emphasis of the rhythm which has been set up within him. Certain relations of directions of line become for him full of meaning; he apprehends them no longer casually or merely curiously, but passionately, and these lines begin to be so stressed and stand out so clearly from the rest that he sees them far more distinctly than he did at first... In such a creative vision, the objects as such tend to disappear, to lose their separate unities and to take their place as so many bits in the whole mosaic of vision."*

PROCESS

Outside of my work itself, a look at my studio probably tells the most about my art-life style.

In the corner of the room is a large, four-drawer, legal size art file which was started when I was an art student in high school. The middle of the room is dominated by a huge, white formica table on which I do most of my work. I prefer working flat on the table to painting on an easel because it affords me more control of my flat, unmodulated painting. In front of the table are shelves holding dozens of neat boxes with labels in which are stored three-dimensional references such as stones, shells, bones, insects and industrial components. The bulletin boards above the shelves display currently interesting specimens and idea sketches. More shelves line two other walls, one holding narrow rows of paint, mostly in jars like an apothecary shop, while the other holds art periodicals and books.

On a high window shelf is a colorful abacus (a leftover from my son's childhood) that delights me in the afternoon with its odd, changing cast shadows on the white table. Next to it is a plastic rectangle of honeycomb
from the aerospace industry. Organic forms - man-made forms - it is the shape of objects and the order or rhythm that is so important to me.

In my idea file are thoughts jotted down on all kinds of scrap paper in the middle of all kinds of life activities. Some evolve while reading, while looking at technical science magazines (Dark Forms and Formation), while visiting an Indian museum (Eastward Journey - suggested by a strong arch form in a wall display). But, most frequently, my ideas come from contemplating actual materials or objects that I can hold in my hands and examine intimately -- a rock with fossils, a half melon with seeds, a bleached bird bone, a piece of beautiful black teflon, a thin square of copper with technical hieroglyphics -- all these hold my fascination and launch me into creating new forms by suggestion.

To understand why these particular objects are a joy to contemplate, I frequently make drawings to crystalize relationship of parts, to fathom structure and order. This activity stimulates the imagination. Up pop my own subjective images that first echo and finally replace the original, visual ones.

I love the entire process of making a painting... from
One of the viewers at my Master's Show commented on my paintings. Impressed with her discernment, I said I wished I had a tape recording of what she had said. She exclaimed, "Why, it's in all of your work - your work speaks of freedom and well-being." How wonderful! I am an incurable optimist: my Latin heritage keeps my faith in milagros!

"The content of a work of art is not its material theme but the artist himself and his spiritual life".* Therefore, although stones, seeds and bones are the sparks, I hope that my work tells you about Reggie Behl's spirit.

the anticipation of the original idea and the small sketches to the final touch of paint or framing. I love every step. Once the size and the shape of the support is determined, I delight in building the panels out of untempered masonite and 1" x 2" pine. After discovering that 40" x 48" was a comfortable size to work with, I began to "manufacture" several panels at one time. The surface I find most agreeable is a gesso surface. I roll several coats of thinned gesso on masonite with a long-handed paint roller like a house painter. The edges of the 1" x 2" cradling are carefully covered too as I paint around the edge frequently. Most of my paintings are on masonite. The few I have done on canvas have proven the responsive surface of canvas unsatisfactory for my severe way of working.

I paint with Liquitex acrylics, preferring the jars to the tubes. The jar paint helps achieve a flat, velvety quality. I use the tubes for pigment variation and for occasional transparent color.

Most of my paintings retain the original white gesso as the ground creating the dull white space which usually makes up half of the painting. With this kind of ground
The BP outline detail of The Beginning (page 14)
and the clean, hard-edged shapes I use, I can not afford a mistake. Once the surface is changed, the pure look is gone. So, I frequently make a full sized drawing of the major shapes and trace these on to the surface. It is kind of a game, a challenge to plan all ahead. Once I start the painting, I try to restrict changes to interior shapes or color or additions avoiding corrections on the ground.
CHARACTERISTICS

My draftsmanlike approach leads naturally to a strong, decorative, hard-edge style with special emphasis on shape and rhythm (order) in space.

DEVELOPMENT OF STYLE

Galilee (page 8), one of the first of my recent paintings, set the current pattern of working. Using concrete, organic forms (cork and shell wrapped with twine), I made many chalk drawings stressing simple, large shapes, frontality, line and texture. These were translated into a painting in acrylic.

SERIES

After Galilee, I generally worked in series, basing several paintings on common inspiration or points of departure (such as stone, seed and bone). The first few paintings were the stone or rock series sparked by a unique rock found on the beach. Contemplating the rock for long periods with a magnifying glass, I saw marvelous natural imagery. The intense studying, the quiet, the mystery of the odd fragment of rock all created a feeling of magic and primitive urgency. The first painting, Kwakiutl (page 8) reflects this feeling for me. I was not surprised when a totemic
Moonstone  36" x 42"

Kwakiutl II  30" x 38"
figure emerged as if carved by the Northwest Indians, inspiring its name.

SHAPE
If I were to choose the one most important element of my work, I think I would say shape, the relationship of shapes and how they move in space. Perhaps, my early graduate work in modern dance has taught me this special awareness. I still describe shape and movement with my hands (like a miniature ballet) for clarification before I begin to make even the first sketch. The kind of imagery I developed in Kwakiutl made me all the more conscious of the juxtaposition of shapes: large forms next to tiny ones; curved against angular; shapes squeezing space or occupying it loftily — all these considerations help to create the strong tensions I try for in my work.

SPACE
Unlike Galilee, the gesso ground of Kwakiutl was left prominent (half the painting). Here, I realized that this is very important to me in establishing the kind of space I want for my paintings. I need space that amplifies the frontality of the design. It is difficult to explain. My paintings are figure-ground
Kwakiutl detail of line

Tapitawi 48" x 40"
relationships. The shapes are frontal, laying flat on the surface. They occupy shallow, close-in space and the white ground becomes the deep space or the void. There is no middle space in my painting because it is not important to me in my work. Acknowledging it would weaken the frontal image.

While the big white areas read as space, they also read as secondary shapes or negative space. They reinforce the total design. One amusing exception is the big white bear that accidentally emerged while I was painting *Tapitawi* (page 12). Here, the negative space doubles as primary shape.

**LINE**

How do I use line? I rarely use it for description of outside shape; but, I do use it to suggest suspension in space and ambiance (*Kwakiutl*, page 8; *Moonstone*, page 10) or strictly for decoration (*Kwakiutl II*, page 10). One exception is *Moonstone* where I felt descriptive line was the best way to create needed eerie imagery.

Originally (*Galilee*, page 8), the lines were made with a wide felt pen and modified by varying densities of gesso wash. Still dissatisfied with its regularity,
The Beginning  
40" x 48"

Pamplona  
30" x 38"
I looked for a more sensitive way of creating line in later work. In Kwakiutl, I found it. Here, I used a fine lettering brush and acrylic paint, varying the thickness, color and value arriving at much more satisfying imagery and uniqueness.

COLOR
I reluctantly admit that my interest in color was weak, yielding to earth colors and a wide range of grays, as a simple and safe solution to most paintings, until I became involved with the first of the Melon Seed Series (The Beginning; page 14). Suddenly, the sensuous, fecund nature of my inspiration demanded a new attitude: a new respect for color, its power, and the need for its creative invention as an important factor in my painting. Here, I began to find again the infinite variation of color within the same unity. Here I began to enjoy the sheer pleasure of color - ochre, deep purple, grayed violet, hot pink and vermillion. What an experience! It inspired me to write a poem about the painting which is included in the Conclusion of this report.

SURFACE
I use paints in a very flat manner to reinforce the
Eastward Journey

40" x 48"

Seed
detail of transparent wash
frontal image, the strong shapes and the decorative quality. The rough, physical texture (marble paste and sand) in the early paintings was quickly abandoned because it negated the starkness of the simple shapes. However, I occasionally do use transparent textures that are physically flat on the surface if the work needs it. This deliberate use of pattern can be seen in Pamplona (page 14), Eastward Journey (page 16), and Seed (page 16, 18). In the first one, I affected a stone-like quality conjuring primitive caves like Altamira. In Eastward Journey, I designed a snake-like scale wash in limited areas that whisper aboriginality and symbolism. And finally, in Seed, I enhanced the mystery and intimacy of this smaller work with crystalline, geometric, transparent color washes in tiny areas.

EDGES
Although I found the rough edges in character with the whole rustic imagery in the early paintings (Galilee, page 8), I generally abandoned this kind of roughness in later paintings.

SCALE
While most of my paintings are large (40" x 48"), every now and then I like to work on smaller ones as a
Seed
24" x 32"

Icarus
12" x 15"
change of experience. The large size helps to create a feeling of awe, emphasizes the basic shapes and is made to be seen from a distance as a totality. On the other hand, the smaller paintings invite intimacy and a greater invention on the surface. Seed, Icarus (page 18), Patch of Blue (below) and Ask Once (page 20) are some of these smaller paintings. In Seed and Icarus the ground surface is no longer a pure white gesso but toned and imaginative. The illusionary textures are important facets of these works.

In Patch of Blue, I use physical texture again but, this time, the controlled pattern is very subtle. The limited, raised design works because of its small size and lack of contrast (white on white). Ask Once is an experimental departure. It is a cut paper sculpture and painting combined, framed in a shadow box of plastic.

Patch of Blue  12 3/4"x16"
CONCLUSION

In reviewing all of my Master's work, I can see a progression of attitude from a personal and complicated one toward one of greater detachment and simplicity. When dealing with organic forms, the emphasis now appears to be on the single, pictorial image (Patch of Blue, page 19 and Unitary, page 20). However, as I work increasingly with man-made forms, the accent is on order (Dark Forms and Formation, page 22). Next to shape, order has always been the most important catalyst in nature for my expression. My painting, The Beginning (page 14) which was the first of the Seed Series, inspired me to attempt to write the only poetry of my adult life:

The Womb
Hollow that harbors the harvest,
With surplus of seed,
With dignity of purpose
And confidence of need.

Regal order, order,
Infinite variation of the same,
Graceful pocket for the code
That continues the name.
Dark Forms

9" x 10 3/4"

Formation (assemblage) 2 1/2" x 10 3/4" x 6"
aluminum, teflon, lucite
One of the viewers at my Master's Show commented on my paintings. Impressed with her discernment, I said I wished I had a tape recording of what she had said. She exclaimed, "Why, it's in all of your work - your work speaks of freedom and well-being." How wonderful! I am an incurable optimist: my Latin heritage keeps my faith in milagros!

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