San Fernando Valley State College

SURFACE AS SURFACE

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

by

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PREFACE

It is the purpose of this paper to discuss how I came to realize the essence of my work; how I began to search for ways to express this essence, and the methods and techniques revealed by this search. In this investigation, I limited myself to the expression of an autonomous surface (surface as surface) and materials for their own natural qualities.
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ABSTRACT

SURFACE AS SURFACE

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Since my earliest interest in sculpture, I have dealt primarily with surface and the feeling that a particular surface can generate. I must admit, however, that I was not totally aware of how much this element of art intrigued me or how important it really was as a basis for my art as it developed.

I began my sculptural experience with varying materials: old doors with encrusted surfaces, beat-up trash cans in their stalls, weathered wood, and asphalt. Next I used black plexiglas in varying sizes and shapes with chrome screws. These pieces were very elegant in their effect. Although the materials outwardly were very different in their nature, both types spoke to me on equal grounds of surface stimulation; one being old and textured and the other shiny and smooth.
At this point I was doing paintings that were very rough and thick in texture with subtle color. It occurred to me that I could bring my painting and sculpture together by combining the textured effect with three-dimensional volumes. After completing three of these pieces, I came to the realization that my problem had nothing to do with volume or object per se, but dealt strictly with a highly textured, rough surface.

When I realized that my problem dealt primarily with surface, I had to think in terms of processes that would allow this aspect to be read free of any superfluous interferences such as meaning or symbolism. If I wanted to express surface as a surface and nothing more, what would have to be eliminated? What elements would have to be accentuated or played down? What about shape in relation to surface? What about the integrity of the surface itself? I had to answer these and other questions to arrive at a satisfactory expression of my problem. The only element I felt need not be questioned was the type of surface I wanted to work with which was highly textured, rough, and tactile. (This may be questioned from a psychological point of view, but I am primarily concerned with expressing myself artistically and it seems pointless for me to pursue the "why".)

The results of my questions and experiments can be discussed in four areas that have yielded the best answers
to my problem of surface: rejection of volume, use of the square format, the integrity of the surface, and edge consideration.

1. Rejection of Volume

As stated above, prior to my realizing surface as my basic problem, I was covering three-dimensional volumes with textured materials: dirt, sand, and vermiculite (a cork-like granular substance). While I was aware that I was trying to express a certain tactility, I was unable to justify the use of a pyramid shape in one of my works as a ground for this texture (Figure 1). When questioned as to a particular shape's function in terms of its relation to a tactile expression, I was unable to find a valid defense. Obviously a reappraisal of my volumetric forms was in order. It was at this point that I realized my problem to be strictly an expression of a tactile surface. Volume became a superfluous element so I rejected it.

Without volume as a ground, I gave myself a new problem. I knew now that I wanted to express only surface, without supports of any kind, so that the essence of pure surface alone would read through. This meant no volume, no support bars, indeed no structure at all. To solve this problem meant that I would have to find a new material since paint derived its cohesive strength from its ground and could hardly stand on its own. I knew what was needed:
a substance that could be applied in a liquid form, to facilitate mixing in textural elements, and would dry hard. Yet, because of the lack of supports, it would have to be flexible to keep from cracking. Flexibility would also aid in transporting larger pieces since, theoretically, they could be rolled up.

After much searching for different materials, I found what was needed in the form of a flexible polyester resin. I could work it like paint but it would remain flexible after setting up to a required degree of hardness. Thanks to this material I was now free to work on flat canvas and build a texture devoid of any overshadowing volumetric supports. I believe this lack of volume is one of the most important steps in my art as it is the single, strongest aspect that has enabled me to finally express surface purely as surface.

2. Use of Square Format

Now that I had rejected volume as superfluous, it came time to find a new form from which my problem of surface could realize itself.

I wanted to keep the viewer's eye on my surface, to wander from one edge to the next and back across again; to become totally immersed in the interior of the picture plane. Therefore, my new form was practically dictated to me by necessity--the square.

The square is the most static of forms. By its
inherent qualities it is still and does not suggest movement in any direction. It was the perfect vehicle for my idea because it would allow my surface to merely exist in space, or define itself in space, by refraining from imposing a suggestion of movement along a plane.

This idea can be expressed by the two most common shapes used in painting, the square and rectangle. The rectangle, by its very nature, suggests movement in a horizontal direction if seen horizontally, or in a vertical direction if seen vertically. This is an element that the artist must see and work with if he chooses a rectangle. The shape must work with content. The content must be arranged by a desire to have the viewer's eye move in a horizontal or vertical direction. However, in the square we have a different situation. Since all sides are equidistant, the eye cannot be forced to move in any direction but rather is forced to come back and contemplate the interior. By this constant inward movement of the eye, the viewer must become totally aware of the interior space, which is the essence of my work.

By eliminating volume in favor of flatness and the square, I solved two problems at the same time (Figure 2). The flatness served to let only a surface be exposed and the square kept the viewer's eye contemplating only that surface.
3. The Integrity of The Surface

When I began to make the actual surfaces, I knew exactly what I wanted to create: a thick, gnarled, rough texture that would read only as a surface.

In the actual working process I found that there would be more to creating the overall quality I was looking for than I had expected. Just laying down my materials (resin, vermiculite, cabosil, foam rubber, and cheese cloth) would not do. I noticed that some particles of texture materials would cause larger lumps in one area in contrast to a minimum distribution of lumpiness in other areas. This was a particular problem when I used dirt or vermiculite. Such unevenness soon caused a tension on the surface that tended to interfere with the movement of the eye. Instead of moving freely all across the surface, taking no single element into consideration except surface, the eye would find itself focused on a particularly large lump or a conflicting smooth valley. It was a tension one could not avoid. If the eye were attracted to this point of tension, it tended to return even after moving on.

This problem was one of the more important aspects revealed to me as I began to attack surface more seriously. It caused me to see my surface more specifically and thereby enabled me to go about working and thinking in ways to avoid this tension.
To solve the problem called for a little more work. I began to sort out the larger elements of my material beforehand, and then, after laying the materials down, I scrutinized the surface, removing any interfering lumps or filling in smooth parts. The main purpose of this effort was to eliminate all elements that could possibly affect the experience of surface.

4. Edge Consideration

Even in the earliest stages of planning, I believed that the edge would be a primary concern. At first I felt that a straight, hard edge on my square form was the answer needed. I felt that with a hard edge all around the interior texture would be presented directly against the wall it hung on and cause itself to be highly accentuated by this contrast of rough and smooth. However, during the actual creation this proved to be inaccurate.

Instead of the hard, clean edge accentuating the surface, there was a new source of distracting tension. The four crisp corners, forming hard ninety degree angles, encroached upon the surface by drawing the eye out from the interior to this source of tension. What seemed to work logically in theory was unsuitable in practice.

This problem was solved by keeping the edge somewhat irregular all the way around (Figure 3). This type of edge related more logically to the irregular surface and broke up the tension at the corners. By varying the
thickness and the contour of the edge, the eye was free to explore the interior surface.

5. Understanding My Materials

In dealing with a textural expression, a prime element has always been the selection of materials. With my earlier texture paintings I used paint as the medium and dirt, sand, cabosil, and vermiculite as the textural elements. At first I worked very loosely and quickly, throwing my materials together in a most intuitive manner. I simply knew that I wanted to achieve a certain rough surface and used the more obvious elements at hand.

As I discovered the basic premise of my work to be pure surface, I went through certain intellectual processes described above. These processes not only revealed the aim of my work but also called for a more objective appraisal of my materials and their expressive possibilities. To understand "The Surface" I had to understand my materials better since they were the means to the desired end. In other words, since I was beginning to intellectualize my problem of surface, I also had to intellectualize my use of materials if I was to achieve a consistent, mature statement.

The results of examining my materials more objectively can be discussed in two main aspects: rejection of subjective color and textural quality.
6. Rejection of Subjective Color

As I began to approach surface more seriously, my use of color changed. Earlier, in the texture paintings, I used subtle, cool colors with hints of earth colors over a textured ground (Figure 4). The color was low in key and aimed at a serene effect. Later, as I brought the use of texture from painting into sculpture, color served a new function. Basically, I was trying to make these three-dimensional volumes read as strange forms that could not be interpreted easily. In completing, say, a bar shape covered with texture, I realized that if I was going to keep the identity of the piece obscured, it would not do to use a color that could be easily recognized. If the bars were yellow than the piece could be said to be "two yellow bars". So I had to use colors that no one could name exactly. I worked with metalics, glazes, and unusual color mixtures. In Figure 5 the bars are a brickish red but not exactly red. This is achieved partly through applications of glazing material which lends a muted wet quality to the color. In Figure 6 the squares, depending on the light, are a grey-silver-greenish color, but nothing one can identify exactly.

As I rejected the use of volume as detrimental to surface, I began to see that my use of color also was serving no purpose. My manipulation of color was getting in the way of my concern with surface. I found that I
was busying myself with trying to invent "new" colors instead of attacking the essence of surface in a way that could achieve concrete results.

In the first piece executed with flexible polyester resin (Figure 2), I completely rejected the use of any subjective color to cover the textured surface. Instead, in an attempt to let the material stand alone, and in turn allow the surface to exist more freely, I refrained from any color at all and merely let the natural, unaffected colors of resin and vermiculite come through. The results were more than satisfying.

I feel that my rejection of subjective color and the denial of volume are the two most important decisions that enabled me to finally reach a successful expression of surface.

7. Textural Quality

As for the actual quality of the type of surface I was trying to achieve, my textural materials were proving inadequate. The dirt, sand, or vermiculite just could not be made to form the heavy, expressive surface I wanted. In searching out a suitable material I came across chopped foam rubber chunks. Here was a material that was irregular in shape, lightweight, and formed a gnarly, overall texture when spread out in a layer. It seemed to be what I was looking for.

Since completing several resin and foam rubber works,
I feel that this material has led me to achieve my most successful statements concerning the element of surface (Figures 7 and 8). The rubber chunks, as a cohesive layer, form the most rugged texture to date. While it may not be the ultimate solution, it has been the most rewarding, leaving little to be desired.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I feel that I have experienced rewarding intellectual processes that have brought about a mature statement of my artistic problem. For the present I have realized my goal concerning surface. But this does not mean that I have achieved the ultimate expression of this goal. In my future efforts, I fully intend to search out new methods, materials, and techniques in an attempt to further both myself as an artist and my work as an artistic expression.
Figure 1. "Pyramid". 3' by 3' by 6". Vermiculite and paint over a polyurethane core.
Figure 2. "Surface Experiment #1". 7' by 7'. Vermiculite and flexible resin on unstretched canvas.
Figure 4. "Untitled". 3' by 3'. Dirt, sand, and paint on masonite.
Figure 5. "Textured Bars". 7' by 2" by 2". Dirt and acrylic house paint on wood.
Figure 6. "Texture Squares". 12" by 12". Dirt and acrylic house paint on masonite. Six squares form one piece.
Figure 7. "Foam Rubber Piece #1". 3' by 3'. Cheesecloth over foam rubber chunks and canvas sprayed with flexible resin.
Figure 8. "Foam Rubber Piece #2". 5' by 5'. Cheesecloth over foam rubber chunks and canvas sprayed with flexible resin.