San Fernando Valley State College

THE NATURE OF MY REALITY

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

by

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THE PROBLEM

It was my intention in the paintings which are described in this abstract to examine human forms as they relate to one another on both symbolic and realistic levels. The symbolic rendering of an inner reality has been evidenced in the art world for some time. But today there seems to be a reverse trend towards a more literal realistic tradition. This has been indicated by Herbert Read:

Art for the first time is clearly conceived not as the mere reproduction of a ready-made, given reality, but as the discovery of reality, which discovery is communicated in symbolic form... Art as Goethe said, is formative long before it is beautiful; it gives form to feelings that are otherwise obscure or inchoate and that is its main biological and cultural function.¹

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Human figure: The human figure referred to here is a two dimensional rendering of those persons portrayed in this project. The human figure is used both as a symbol to portray my feelings and attitudes towards the subject, as well as to realistically render these same persons. Therefore, they exist not only in a fragmentary and generalized fashion, proportionally realistic in appearance, but also in terms of symbolic meaning.

Linear composition: A composition which depends for its effect on the pattern made by drawing outlines of the forms represented

(whether naturalistic or not), rather than on painting the masses of tones and color (which read as shapes rather than edges).

Sign and Symbol: The difference between sign and symbol. Sign forms a one to one relation, in that it represents a form which is prescribed and whose meaning is previously agreed upon. Symbol is used in the psychological sense, in that it is a non-verbal image, and communicates a meaning beyond the reach of the conscious mind. A symbol is a concept between an object and reason. A representation of that object by means of a single, formal equivalent - it may imply abstract ideas through visual techniques i.e., line, colors, form etc.

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

For the show, I selected cotton canvas stretched on 1" x 3" stretcher bars, to create ten 5' x 7' panels. These were primed with Liquatex Gesso, to size the canvas and present a flat white ground for the setting of the subjects. The actual compositions were done with various graphite pencils and erasers. These drawings then were covered by oil washes, using tube pigments and a medium consisting of equal parts; sun-thickened linseed oil, rectified turpentine, and damar varnish. For the washes, this was diluted to two parts turpentine, and one each linseed oil and varnish. Other than just a drawn line and oil washes to indicate shadows, I have also employed the use of the hatched line. It is in the form of a series of diagonal lines which are parallel, one to another, and maintain a lower left to upper right direction. These then were treated like the drawn line and

covered with thin oil washes.

Process: A preliminary series of drawings and several paintings were completed in varying sizes, in preparation for the final scale of the works. These sizes ranged from an 8" x 10" sketch pad to 6' x 9' canvases which were treated with various media ranging from oil painting to the pencil line, and these ran the gamut from a more painterly approach to the linear, drawn technique which was ultimately decided upon. The 5' x 7' format which was selected was a compromise which best fit the life-sized quality I desired in the portrait groupings. The sketches were at first taken from models, friends and interesting people. It then seemed evident that the direction which I should follow would be to recreate these people who would ultimately see the works, and capture their images on canvas in that same environment where these likenesses would be seen. With this decision made, it seemed more appropriate to capture likenesses with the camera in a series of photographs than to ask them to pose for many long sessions. Thus, a certain spontaneity could be captured through a candid photograph which would not have been possible in a posed format. It was from these many photographs, taken at several intervals during the process of completing the work for this show, that I selected those compositions which would appear on the canvases.

PRESENTATION

Illustrations of my works may be found at the end of the text for easier accessibility. They are numbered individually and follow the sequence in which they were viewed. Illustrations one through eight comprise a continuous scene which forms an arc which
bisects the gallery, (beginning to the viewer's right as he enters the room, and progressing to the opposite wall). The remaining two paintings numbered nine and ten, were hung on the wall to the left of the door and were, in effect, facing those paintings which form the arc. Thus the viewer is surrounded by the illusionary world of these paintings. The paintings which form the arc follow a progression in increase in the size of the subject matter. There is one freestanding group, (illustrations eleven and twelve) of two figures, cut out to form a three dimension effect, to give the feeling that one is walking through this created environment. This panel is set several feet in front of the last of the canvases, forming the arc. On the back of this figure is another figure facing that group to continue the interaction and viewer response to the figural composition.

These works are set up as they are for several reasons, the most important of which is for the people in the works themselves and how they relate to one another. Displayed as they are, they create a whole world of their own, uninterrupted, unaware of our world around them, where they are free to transverse one panel to another as well as to move within their own isolated rectangular space. But apparently they do not desire to move. For in movement they mime the world as we know it, and this, obviously, is not their aim or purpose. For theirs is a world unto itself.

The first painting is crowded, the figures almost have no room to be believably in that picture plane. As an early Renaissance painting it appears to be a sea of heads with no bodies. Even if the bodies were to be rendered, there could not possibly be room for them to fit logically in the space. But they do, for this is literally
taken from one of the group portrait shots from which I worked. This painting also contains the smallest figures and they progress in scale as the canvases swing in the arc in which they are placed. This was done so that the viewers would have less control over spatial relationships, that is, so that the viewer would not have as much of a logical placement of figures to work with. The larger the figure, usually the closer it seems to appear, yet these figures in the later canvases are larger, but not physically closer to the viewer. Along with this, as their size increases, the numbers of subjects in each panel decreases and the seeming complexity and crowded condition lessens. This heightens the separation between the reality of our world and the reality created in their world.

ANALYSIS OF THE VISUAL STATEMENTS

"Every generation must find a solution to the same problem: to bridge the abyss between inner and outer reality."\(^3\)

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side..."Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being

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wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "YOU BECOME. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are REAL, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

It is my purpose to explain fundamentally what is in evidence in the gallery. I feel that this study of the human form is important as it relates to my artistic development. The works evolved from a central idea, and were created with that idea always in mind. That idea was, basically, that these paintings would be the realistic representations of the art students, and would thus be shown in a sympathetic environment. The subjects are friends and represent not a sum total of my acquaintances entrenched within these hallowed walls, but are a selection of those most interesting characters who have come to dominate the scene, not only here but in the wild world of pseudo-reality. In this respect I would suppose that these may be compared with the Renaissance tradition, wherein one's associates might be portrayed in more humanistic views. These, of my contemporaries, are beings like myself, who are caught up in an era of turmoil, and like mankind of all ages, we are seeking escape, each in his own way. Many have since gone off to find adventure, some have graduated, but the majority remain.

As first conceived, they were to be real images set within

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1. Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co.) p. 16-17.
the confines of the gallery in which they were eventually to be viewed. 
But as they began to take shape, and my own limitations and peculiar 
traits evidenced themselves, I realized that the basic concept would 
not be changed if the subjects were rendered in a less real manner and 
instead formed a combination of that real. My own sense of a linear 
composition, and an inner reality which evidenced itself while the 
work was in progress - but this is a stylistic consideration and will 
be discussed at a later point.

The entire project is a happening, and I call it an experiment because that is exactly what it was. I gathered the subjects into the gallery, where the exhibit was shown, and wandered among them taking photographs as they presented themselves. Of course some of them were posed but, in most instances, these cohorts were asked to be natural and to do whatever they felt like doing. As evidenced in some of the poses, that is exactly what they did. They are acting out the parts they generally play and, for this reason, several are represented more than once, as they were the most photogenic: (note the female in illustrations 1, 8 and 9). However, certain of my friends were portrayed in duplicate or triplicate just because they were my friends, (eg. the male figure in illustrations 1, 8, 9 and 10).

From these photographs, I drew the inspiration for the compositional groupings displayed in the works. I did deviate from the photographs, and would rearrange the models as I saw fit, but these deviations were usually held to a minimum for the people were living their own reality in that isolated room and this is the reality which I was trying to capture. However, as has been stated, these are not photographic likenesses, but are the gross output of my sensitivity.
As such, they are subject to those factors which dictate the limits of my capabilities. In the main they are changed only for slight compositional reasons to either heighten the dramatic effect or to create the illusion of depth in a world devoid of traditional environment. The background is left white intentionally to minimize the depth of the composition and to keep the subjects on the picture plane.

There are some shadows indicated, in the whiteness which surrounds the subjects, but these are employed as much to create a compositional effect, as to create depth and a sense of a spatial environment. When I mention a compositional effect, in this instance, I am referring to a shaded area which binds the figures together. (Illustrations 1, 2, and 5). There are also employed, various shadowed effects on what would seem to be the ground, (evidenced in illustrations 2, 4 and 5) that is, the floor, yet I feel that these are not inconsistent with the concept of an undefined space, for they suggest only that these creatures of an unbound world, are yet affixed to some ground, no matter how vague or undefined it may appear. These are images in a reality as different from our own as they themselves are visages of what we know and see, and yet similar too, for they are the representations of a once real moment, and that moment, being gone from this world, has never escaped from theirs.

While trying to remain faithful to the interaction captured by the camera, I did not feel that it would be inconsistent to alter slightly the positioning of the sitters so as to create, in certain instances a more pleasing composition. Thus some are moved together and others moved out of their original photographic grouping and superimposed in the group of which they are now a part. (This has oc-
curred in panels 3, 4, 5 and 10). Aside from the compositional motivation, there was also, in at least one instance, (illustration 4) a move for my own psychological reasons. That is, the sitter posed in one grouping was moved into another grouping, (the next in that particular sequence of photographs). But I tried to be ever mindful of the fact that these personalities would have to live in harmony, forever captured in that one moment, and so was careful not to disrupt the harmonious feeling of a cohesive group by the introduction of a foreign personality.

In actuality, these works comprise both the drawn line and a thin wash of oil color, on a white plane. Yet are basically illustrative of a linear technique, that is, the drawn line remains dominant, and being conceived in a linear manner, the line is of the utmost importance. This may seem rather inconsistent with the subject matter but stop to consider, how do we really know someone? Is it visually, through layers of pigment or skin, or is it a knowledge of some inner presence which is only evident at times, and at times, not there at all? If so, then it is a deeper relationship; and, is it not appropriate to represent these fleeting images of human responses with the fast stroke of the pencil, the unfinished wash and blanched out areas, the never fully understood, and never really all exposed? There is some aspect in each of us which is hidden from the peering eyes of all who surround us, some secret spots which are never fully explained. Why should one who represents a friend and who maintains this quality of separation feel obliged to model and explicitly detail said image, since it is this separation which, in effect, makes an individual. Thus, the fact that the line is stopped, the images are opened, not
entirely confining space, allows the whiteness of the surrounding environment to penetrate the usually impregnable area designated as the human form. This, in my estimation, is a visual representation of the fact that we, as thinking beings, are ever illusive not only to those who surround us, but to ourselves as well. But this is not a philosophical dissertation, rather, it is a mental insight into the small world I have created. These are my people, and, rather than appearing whole, as do those in reality, they are purposely left incomplete. But then aren't we all? We only seem to be the full visages of the paradoxical "human being", and seeming as such, are less real than these few images who claim nothing more than that which appears on the surface. But then who is to say what reality is? These caricatures of our known world may be read in so many different ways that it would seem unjust for them not to evoke some individual response.

This opening up of the line, the image, and the space, allows the two dimensional characteristic of the paintings to remain dominant. The objects in areas become part of the environment (background), and the environment, in turn, creeps in to become part of the objects. These characters are not out of someone's imagination but out of our reality, and form their own world when played against the two dimensional surface. They are located in a two dimensional world and are partakers of their environment, much in the same way that we are evolving in the four dimensions (height, width, depth, and time), which we encompass. Because this is my creation and these are my people, they can be only what I allow them to be, but this is true for anyone who views them. However, they are the vestiges of what we know as reality and as such, the individual viewer can make his own inter-
pretation of the content matter without guidelines of a symbol (which being analogous to icon in this instance, would represent a prescribed form whose meaning was previously agreed upon). Thus, these paintings are symbolic in a psychological sense, in that they are non-verbal images, communicating a meaning beyond the conscious mind, but individual in response, just as the viewer is individual in action.

These figures, as their earthbound counterparts, are interacting; they respond to each other as well as to the spectator. Many of them peer out, but are always caught in that fleeting moment of time, that instant of reality between the clock beat of two seconds, when the glint in an eye, the upturned corner of a mouth, can betray the innermost feelings one may be hiding, not only from others, but also from himself. But remember, it is not they who interpret their glint, but you - perhaps you then betray your innermost feelings. Thus, are these figures caught, some in directed interplay with the viewer, putting him under the same type of scrutinization as they undergo. And then there are those who will have nothing to do with these foreign interlopers. After all, there are more interesting things going on in their own world, than to have any "truck" with these poor souls, who seem to have nothing better to do than to stare into a world which is not their own.

They are the manifestations of my mind and my world; they, too, are the direct outcome of my own limitations in that the quality of the line and the subordination of the color to that line, are strictly of my own preference. Yet, as beings, they, too, are at times subordinate to that same line, which at times takes over completely, and the color is no more.
It is the product, the statement, which is important. If
If one is pleased with the presentation and goes away with nothing
more than the feeling of satisfaction that he really understood what
was spread before him, then that is all I can hope for. But if he
feels that there might be something more, a deeper meaning, then it is
his to fill in. In agreement with Picasso's statement in regard to
the Guernica's that:

...if he had wanted to put it into words
he would not have painted a picture. He
would have written a book...One may make
of these symbols whatever explicit inter-
pretation seems necessary, but beyond a
certain point explicit interpretation is
superfluous. The pictorial images evoke
emotional associations without identify-
ing tags.5

The Impressionist painters visually left it up to the spec-
tator to fill in, not only with his eye, but also with his imagination,
whatever he felt needed to be clarified. In a like manner, these
works beckon for interaction with the viewer, for him to close a line,
create a shape, and possibly transform this reality into the reality
with which he is more familiar. Just as the Renaissance artist played
with perspective, the camera obscura, and the placement of the figure
in an environment, here I have created a world void of walls. There
are no boundaries to that white all encompassing space, save the edge
of the canvas. Yet it (the work as a whole), is not devoid of space,
for there are cast shadows of various members of the ensemble, aiding
in the illusion of space without defining the world of which they are
a part.

5. John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art (New York: Holt,
BIBLIOGRAPHY


