San Fernando Valley State College

IN THE MIDST OF EVOLVING

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

Painting

by

Pamela Hammond

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ABSTRACT

IN THE MIDST OF EVOLVING

by

Pamela Hammond

Master of Arts in Painting

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INTRODUCTION

At best the words presented here will provide a nudge toward the work itself, for that is where the poetry lies. The conscious mental processes can be shared, but the illusive intuitive decisions reside within the work and are hidden from definitive explanations. In approaching a discussion, I find myself orbiting the core, touching the tangible, illuminating the surface.

What we want art to do for us is to stay what is fleeting, and to enlighten what is incomprehensible, to incorporate the things that have no duration... All that is infinite and wonderful, having in it that spirit and power that man may witness, but not weigh; conceive, but not comprehend; love but not limit, and imagine, but not
Earliest memories revolve around sensory experiences: the tingling electric sensation of the squish of a boot in a first snow, the lingering odor of baked foods, the dazzling myriad reflections in a favorite mudhole puddle after a rain. These kinds of sensations continue to fascinate me and beckon an encounter. These memories are the raw material for creating art. The problem lies in bringing the whole of oneself to the work, yet the more conscious the effort, the more evasive the results seem to be.

Whoever looks within himself, whoever is conscious of this uncontrollable stream which continually fills his being, knows with certainty that this is his own intimate world and that no one else has access to it. He knows at the same time, however, that it resists his every effort to make it the subject of expression or communication. Indeed, even an attempt to be more than generally conscious of it, or to consolidate this world,

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1John Ruskin, Stones of Venice, reprinted in Lionello Venturi, History of Art Criticism, New York, E. P. Dutton's Co., Inc. 1964, p. 183
In view of this dilemma, is the investigation of this private world forsaken? No, it is not, not at all. Revealing memories, clarifying experiences, and sharing these awarenesses through artistic expression are at the heart of the artist's function. Increased understanding of the creative process can only nurture the work of the artist. Yet this knowledge in itself contains a whole host of intangibles which often defies conventional logic.

Art then is not simply a sort of cognition, but rather one of the means by which man tries to extricate himself from his isolated position and tries to regain contact with nature. 3

The mind erects barriers both conscious and unconscious that must be constantly faced and broken through time and again: barriers of propriety, the work must be done in a certain way; barriers of fear, how many chances can be taken before the work is


\[3\] Fiedler, op. cit., "A letter from Fiedler to Hildebrand", p. 467
lost?; barriers of intellectualism, solving creative problems reasonably and therefore being unable to transcend thought into art on its intuitive level. There are no illusions that any of these impediments will vanish, yet they have become identifiable and therefore more manageable. They have at times even disappeared to disclose new avenues of expression.

It often seems that frustration is more a constant in the development of one's imagery than comfort and self assurance. At times the satisfaction derived from deep involvement within the imagery is overwhelming, consequently, many new realizations are sparked after a breakthrough, a frenzy of activity and change ensues as each painting grapples with problems set forth in a previous work. The search for imagery often falls back, flounders, then reasserts itself at the most unexpected moments. So it appears that there is a great deal to be said for frustration, which present in varying degrees in the creation of every work, provokes the artist's quest for greater insight in each succeeding effort.
Plate 1. Womb of the Sea
Plate 2. Revival
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Plate 14. Transfiguration
Until recently, oil paint was my chosen medium, largely because of the flexibility it offered. Areas of the painting could be manipulated over a long period of time, and I enjoyed developing an image slowly and making adjustments along the way. A great deal of medium added to the pigment produced a very fluid transparent paint; and copal medium proved to be of a happy consistency, drying a bit faster than the traditional linseed or stand oil mixture. Canvas was probably my favorite surface, although I sometimes enjoyed working on the hard surface of gessoed masonite. On this surface, paint could be rubbed into the gesso and applied in transparent layers, achieving a rather beautiful translucent effect. I preferred prepared linen canvas, utilizing a rabbitskin glue base with thin layers of gesso applied over it, lightly sanded in between each coat (Plates 1-7).

When I decided to move from square paintings to a circular format, I had to devise a new armature in place of the routine reinforced pine in order to stretch a round surface. I purchased 4' X 8' sheets of particle board and took them to a bandsaw shop
where I had them cut into concentric circles allowing a 3" rim. In this way I obtained several supports from one sheet of board. I reinforced joints with metal brackets and found this to be a very strong, stable armature on which to prepare canvas. Ideally, they should have been routed to create a raised surface directly on the edge; yet, with care I could offset the problem of preventing the support from impressing the canvas. I placed wax paper between the wood and the unsized canvas so that the glue applied to the canvas would not adhere to the wood. The wax paper was removed when the sizing process was completed (Plates 5-7).

The graphite drawings were done first on paper then on gessoed board, and finally on white mat board. In order to achieve an extra smooth surface, I used masonite finished with several soupy-thin applications of gesso. The thin layers eliminate brush strokes, although the process of building the gesso up to the proper surface is painfully slow. The reward, however, is worth the effort; for the surface is a pure delight to draw on, and extremely precise movements are possible without a textural interference. Erasures are not advisable, as any such adjustment leaves an unremovable smudge. The gesso white is delicate, but
far more luminous than the mat board white (Plates 9-11).

These drawings were cradled with pine and completed with plexiglas. In some cases, the plexiglas was attached to the cradle of the drawing by countersinking screws into the outer sides. In other cases, I mounted the drawing to a second gessoed masonite surface. The sides of the cradled drawing were in relief, and I had to decide how to treat them. In "Expanded Appearance" (Plate 9), the pine cradle was carefully applied and gessoed to simulate the same value of white of the face of the drawing. Not totally satisfied with this effect, I opted for the use of strips of mat board flush with these sides finished in the appropriate value (Plate 11). Other solutions are based upon elements in the drawing and what they suggest.

I chose gouache and watercolor to create the later paintings because of the mat-like finish and faster drying properties. In addition, the inherent transparency made them more suitable than oils. If I desired greater opacity, I added casein medium to the gouache, which also tended to slow the drying process (Plates 12-14).
Good paper was essential. If I wanted to wash into an area, which sometimes necessitated virtual scrubbing, the paper had to be strong enough to take the abuse. I used Arches 140 wt. smooth watercolor paper, which offered an almost perfect surface; at once delicate enough for fine lines and tough enough to withstand extensive experimentation. I stretched or mounted the paper on heavy illustration board. The latter mounting was achieved by dampening the back of the paper with a sponge. Quickly and evenly, a layer of polymer emulsion is applied with a large brush. The paper is immediately applied to the board and smoothed from the center out. The surface is covered with clean wrapping paper and weight applied. In order to prevent the impressing of ridges by the shape of these weights, I use a sheet of masonite that is larger than the watercolor paper over the wrapping paper.
A SEARCH FOR CONTENT

For the artist communication with nature remains the most essential condition. The artist is human; himself nature; part of nature in natural space. ⁴

During the latter fifties and early sixties, I created works reminiscent of my professors at UCLA and the "movements" in vogue at that time. The results were eclectic, superficial in personal involvement, and subject to little risk. It was a time of apprenticeship, of learning the trade, of becoming proficient at making a picture but not a painting. Out of discontent I reassessed my past efforts with a former instructor. The overriding problem became evident during our talk together; the images were public, not personal, and relied upon a memory riddled with cliches.

You shall no longer take things second or third hand, nor through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books

⁴ Paul Klee, Pedagogical Sketchbook, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1953, p. 7
You shall not look through my eyes either,
nor take things from me
You shall listen to all sides and filter
them for yourself 5

I began to draw. Concentration on informal studies
released me from the demand of "finished" work, and
set the tone for greater experimentation. Landscape
forms had always attracted me more strongly than other
figurations, so this is where emphasis lay. At first
outdoor locations were chosen, favorite spots along
ocean cliffs, rocky mountain areas and the like.
Strangely enough, locations became distracting in
their scope, and a need arose to nestle into some
cranny and focus on tiny objects. From the narrowing
of vision and deep concentration on detail demanded
by this approach, an intimate interplay between the
subjects and myself ensued. Without recognizing the
significance of the whim--"I like this, it feels
good"--I began to bring small objects home. These
organic structures: rocks, shells, seaweed, bones,
wood....stimulated me. I became more deeply involved
with my work, but my isolation from other artists

5 Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, New York, New American
Library of World Literature, 1954, p. 50
limited my vision. Out of the need to discuss the problems that provoked me and to receive fresh insights and evaluations from others in my field, I began graduate work at San Fernando Valley State College.

Springing from observation of found objects, my painting continued to reflect a strong relationship to my drawing, which depended upon the linear description of form (Plate 1). These chosen items were carefully arranged with the utmost care and selection. This process resembled the setting of a stage with all the elements in accord so that the artist could enter into that world and participate in it comfortably and freely. As a result of being urged to maintain a closer identity with the objects in the painting, I developed a real sense of security. I allowed that little world that I created to guide me. So long as a sense of timing and pace was maintained between my visual sensations and the tactile ones of brush on canvas, a harmony ensued that was admittedly quite pleasing. But in time, even harmony became uncomfortable, because it resisted change and I desired to explore new relationships. Visual contact with the prepared "miniworld" faded as fantasy took its place.
producing configuration that belonged to the habitat of the painting (Plate 1). These kinds of configurations grew in number. The fastidiously devised still lifes disappeared in favor of conjured mental images (Plate 2). The images harkened to blueprints in my mind from objects visually encountered. For inspiration at times a selected item was chosen from the box, sill or hearth where it had been placed for safekeeping. But this happened less and less frequently until finally my efforts were devoted exclusively to non-figurative imagery, crossing the line between visual reality and fantasy.

Renunciation of the figurative world relied solely upon the ability to expose mental images; esthetically liberating in the sense that one no longer depended on the visual, esthetically frustrating in the attempt to transform these configurations into a viable reality of their own. These kinds of images resist definition as they are highly intuitive and often are clouded by numerous sensations. As the work became more personal, it reflected the striving for a poetic image in response to a spiritual awareness of life about me. At first it seemed important to express an everchanging quality.
Circular configurations predominated and suggested a strong sense of movement (Plate 5). A desire for movement and visual activity was later countered by a need to concentrate attention on specific areas of the canvas; to form a more contemplative image, quieter, more static, one withdrawn somewhat from those processes subject to perpetual change. "Echo at Sixth and Flower" (Plate 6) still maintains the circular format, but relies more upon a less flexible central image. Perhaps greater simplicity and directness is more conducive to the development of a spiritual bridge between the individual and the nature of which he is a part.

Once again a collection of organic forms drew my interest. Not at all rationalizing the act, really without plan, perhaps as a form of escape, I began making small drawings. The objects were drawn as they were, with no effort to interpret or fantasize, perhaps with a hope for some murmur of truth transmuted from structure. After a long period of non-figurative work, refuge was found in something seemingly real. The muse wore the cloak of nature and confidence moved me to decipher the message. The drawings soon departed from the realm of casual study and something quite
magical happened (Plates 9-11). Despite a deliberate attempt to create a realistic "study" of the objects, the result was fantasy; not a reproduction of visual sensations, but my poetic interpretation of them. Each object had particular qualities not seen before, although each had been studied closely. Their individual nature led me to see each one in a new light, each as the center of its own universe.
A SEARCH FOR STRUCTURE

One strain in American art has always been contemplative, Apollonian, otherworldly, interested in tenuous, amorphous material and nostalgically charged ambience...the concern has been to transmute concrete material into some ethereally charged, unutterably refined, sentient substance that vibrates in the mind as in a dream. One of the major problems faced by this pictorial sensibility has been structure: How to make durable by some other order a perception that wants to exist unbounded in and of itself. 6

Out of an attempt to give the imagery structure, the arrangement of the formal elements, three stages in the development of the work are recognizable.

**Early Work**

The first paintings sprung from a long series of drawings and depended upon line (Plate 1). Line is

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the plastic element that delineates form by traversing a contour or building upon itself into a dense configuration. Somehow when visual sensations are received, I unconsciously interpret them with my hand in a linear expression. Areas that receive much more deliberate efforts tend to become modeled in terms of light-line as contour giving way to line as edge, edge submitting to value.

Early works suggested a light source; not a raking, dramatic light source but one illumining this private world, producing gentle fluctuations of light. Strong value contrasts tended to create areas of dominance that detracted from a uniform surface rhythm and continuity.

Space was shallow. Although the painting was figurative, it was not an illusion in the sense of playing games with vision to create an image more real than reality. It was fantasy-images transformed through the artistic process into a new identity and reality. The use of paint was not, in itself, meant to evoke a response but, submitting to the fantasy, was unified with the surface. Open spaces were minimal in a fantasy of intermingling forms. The outer format was
rectangular, but gradually the overall configurations on the canvas worked toward the square.

Color was subdued in intensity to give greater emphasis to the description of volume and mass. Intense color, although sensually exciting, tended to lift from the surface, grasping at one's vision, destroying at this point an invitation into the canvas. The selection of color was sometimes intuitive, sometimes close to the local color, and sometimes reflected a selection based upon a feeling for the objects. The use of grayed colors produced an overall tonality creating unity and continuity regardless of how many hues were introduced.

A Stage of Transition and Dilemma:

Differentiating between the linear and a painterly sensibility has been a primary problem in the development of my work. As soon as the painting became non-figurative, the dilemma arose as to the guises these images must assume. Works such as "Revival" (Plate 2) expressed a need to visualize the imagery on the canvas as soon as possible, undoubtedly due to fear of losing a statement so ephemeral in nature. But with each succeeding canvas, large areas and shapes evolved and
became significant (Plate 3). In "A Place I Like" (Plate 4), they were determined by a painterly application of paint through gesture rather than an amalgamation of line. Relying upon an unconscious flow of self to canvas, the approach became less restrained, and small thumbnail sketches which preceded most of the previous works were forsaken. Nevertheless, my nature resisted automatism, the ultimate state of this direction. A need to be in control, to contemplate the development of the imagery, canceled the possibility of achieving an unconscious dialogue (a la Pollack) with the painting. Instead, there was a search for moments of give and take between what evolved out of the unconscious and what appeared on the canvas. The approach harkens to moments of discovery such as those Jean Dubuffet shares with us. He spoke of the images that appear on the canvas somewhere from the recesses of the mind-they suddenly look back at you from the painting and the artist then, quite consciously, construes the birth of a new image. 7 A similar situation is depicted in a study by Rhoda Kellogg in the book, The Biology of Art, on the development of image making.

in children. Her study shows that after a period of scribblings and circle makings, the child rather accidentally fills a circular shape with lines in such a way as to resemble a face. The face in turn gazes back at the child and the stunning moment of "A-ha, I made a face" occurs. The naivete of this process was attractive for its immediacy and freshness, and for the arrival of unexpected notions. Experimenting with soupy paint, pressing objects into paint, throwing, dribbling, and spraying paint, I meant to trigger some evocative response that would lead to the formation of a new image. Even cut up old canvases (a Dubuffet method) were used to expose new images. It was all terribly adventurous but proved to be contrary to my needs as an artist. The approaches emphasized the materials as the image rather than the materials in deference to the image. Somehow materials blocked the development of images in my mind.

The painterly sensibility not only bore involvement with shape in the work, but also sparked a parallel investigation into the shape of the entire format. Increasingly, circular forms predominated in the work.

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(Plate 4), and I felt constrained to combine circular forms with circular canvases. The problems arising from corners dictating placement and relationship of one configuration to another seemed alleviated (Plate 5). A feeling of movement grew and the imagery and format assimilated one another. Yet the very sense of movement I had worked to achieve proved, after a time, visually fatiguing. Consequently, counter forces were devised to partially arrest the pace without sacrificing validity for the circular format.

Increasingly, concern developed over the problem of giving greater detail to specific configurations, and the pace was slowed. Open spaces grew-quiet, soft, and undulating. The paintings still held numerous configurations, but the density in one area contrasted with the emptiness of another. In "Betwixt and Between" (Plate 7), a strong linear band was moved directly through the upper third of the painting, dividing the work into two distinct areas. This development marked a dissolution of the circular format in preparation for another phase of my work.

Although many of these works never achieved a final presence, they did provide an arena where new awarenesses
evolved. The effectiveness of the interplay between vast areas at rest contrasted with portions actively handled. There was a greater awareness of space and the feelings evoked when open spaces were compressed and expanded. A sense of space was not necessarily achieved with size. Printmaking was undertaken at this time, which provided parallel experiences emphasizing spatial relationships. This new medium also reflected a need to be in control of the materials before making use of them, and both the collage investigations and the printmaking experience reflected my love of drawing. Collage brought this interest into focus insofar as it totally frustrated the use of drawing, while, on the other hand, printmaking employed linear elements with considerable vigor (Plate 8).

During this series, a pictorial light emanating from the images themselves without reference to a natural light source was sometimes achieved. It was of prime importance in such works as "Refresh Your Imagination" (Plate 3), which was completed before my material enterprises. As soon as the pace slowed, an interest in individual configurations and in achieving pictorial light was renewed (Plate 6). In addition, color underwent a change. When working more
with materials chosen for their unique qualities, I tended to use purer, primary color; but as my concern for structures increased, color became subdued and subject to my taste.

A Stage of Synthesis

Restlessness marked the previous stage of work. A dissatisfaction certainly influenced a need to re-evaluate my performance from painting to painting, and no discovery was intriguing enough to pursue in depth. I felt overwhelmed. My work began to appear garish and public. Color often seemed estranged from content; moreover, a desire to become more painterly had not been reconciled with my inherent linear approach. All of these factors, and more, led to a period of withdrawal and reflection.

There was a return to drawing found objects. The drawings began as casual little graphite studies, but the simplicity and power of the images quickly evoked more serious consideration. The gray tones of the graphite renewed an interest in value relationships without the intrusion of color. Volume was achieved through the variation of light and line, and the surface space was unified as that-surface, and not
illusions or means of supporting other information. Several shifts occurred: a shift from non-figurative to figurative, from paint to graphite, from large canvases to more intimate surfaces, and from a more dynamic to a more restrained image.

Each drawing progressed from a central figurative theme, and some were more meticulously worked (Plate 10). This central theme became contained in space. The encasement simplified into line as it moved out from the central core; and the line restated the core, establishing a spatial statement in minimal terms. The organic gradually gave way to a more rigid constraint of the geometric in concentric movements from the center. Great care was taken, however, that the geometric line was not mechanical in nature so as to weaken the link between itself and the interior core. It had to be a human line, a natural line subject to varying intensities. Curiously, the spaces created by the line cast variations of tone. The encasements closer to the core were usually broken by open spaces through which a flood of light emanated from the center. Here a gradual value change and a sense of light source was relied upon. At times I feared the format would
I slip into a comfortable niche, but I became reassured when viewing the works as a grouping. Each drawing maintained its own identity, each held a special excitement that was its very own (Plates 9-11).

The presentation of the drawing was integral to its effectiveness. The frame, rather than merely setting off the drawing from its surrounding environment and giving the work a finished look, became part of the imagery. Some drawings were mounted so as to make use of tonal patterns created by outside light sources (Plate 9), and these tones became siblings of the value gradations in the drawings. In other works toned mat boards were utilized to mount the work, imprisoning the imagery. Varying tensions in the work dictated the response in these final steps of presentation.

These drawings seemed to me to be clear, cohesive, aesthetic presentations. Perhaps the casual nature with which this series of drawings began, unencumbered by preordained ideas, added a certain honesty and consistency I had been searching for in the painting. It may have been the dramatic change in media that was critical in stimulating me to make adjustments.
In any case, the transition from one media to another was beneficial, and subsequently the transition back to painting was made with expectancy and enthusiasm. A move to further elaborate the theme with color, rediscovering its poetical potential, was made with confidence, (Plate 12). Although viewed as finished works, not simply as preparation for painting, the drawings also can be viewed as a bridge between one phase of painting to another. The attributes developed in the drawings synthesize with color in the paintings that follow (Plates 12-14). Those aspects of the painterly approach most appealing to me—the freshness, the human spontaneity—are assimilated in more subtle fluctuations of color and gesture. Those aspects of the linear approach most appealing to me—the artistic control and deeply personal quality of line as shorthand of aesthetic expression—are reflected in the manipulation of materials.
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