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

by

Diane Calder Belsley

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The abstract of Diane Calder Belsley is approved:

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ABSTRACT
SURFACES ON WHICH TO BUILD

by
Diane Calder Belsley

Master of Arts in Painting
January, 1973

INTRODUCTION

In presenting my work to you the viewer and the reader, I am faced with the perplexity of openly exhibiting my feelings, identity, and actions to help you to understand the paintings.

As an artist I seek out the character and idiosyncracies of my environment. My awareness of and reaction to what is outside myself has an influence on my work. But unlike a camera or mirror, I will not give back an exact reflection. I will assimilate, choose and transform experiences until I am ready to make an artistic statement that is distinctly personal. As you experience these personal statements which are my paintings, you may begin to apprehend some similarities and some inconsistencies in my perception of and reaction to life as compared with your own view. I will not record for you truisms and shining mottos made by other artists or critics. I cannot gain your understanding by basking in their reflected
glory even though I have listened to them and nodded in agreement with their profundities. Instead I will try to reveal the excitement I gain in the act of forming and reacting to layers of pigments to build a balanced, harmonious surface.

A basic level of understanding of my work demands an examination of the process I use to produce the paintings you see reproduced on the following pages. After describing this process, I will discuss some of the ways in which I assess, reflect, and incorporate the realities of change, scale, time and unity into my work. Each of the areas of explanation is preceded by a few more or less relevant thoughts concerning these things that have happened to me as well as feelings that I have had which illuminate my ways of seeing and help me to keep in touch with myself.
THE PROCESS

My work is creating a surface: pouring pigment suspended in water onto a canvas. The water dries and leaves the pigment to become itself a flowing surface. The result is a complete unit, all in one, with undulations moving throughout.

The surfaces of my paintings are constructed by repeated applications of a relatively direct process. Acrylic paints (and sometimes other materials such as aluminum powder as in Surface No. 37, Grey, page 5 and Exogene, page 7) are mixed with a vehicle, water, and flooded over the canvas. The pigment is encouraged to settle into various areas through the use of sheets of plastic which are superimposed on top of the wet paint. After a drying period of twelve to twenty four hours, depending on conditions such as humidity, quantity and wetness of paint poured, layers of paint applied to the canvas, and the effect desired (soft runny lines as in the first poured veils of pigment in Slip, page 18 and Exogene, page 7 or dry concise edges involved in parts of Expanded Grey, page 25), the plastic is pulled off leaving me to react to what is revealed.

The surface may be left to dry completely. This often happens during the first few pourings when a rhythm
Surface No. 37, Grey

4'7" x 4'9"
Exogene, detail

8½ x 5½8"
and texture is just beginning to be established. Sometimes pigment is added and mixed into the still wet layer to blend in an edge, or to make a gradation of line clear or less obvious. Some areas of paint may be wiped or brushed out, or blended into the whole. Frequently a combination of these processes may occur in various areas of the work.

After the final layer of paint has been poured and the canvas is stapled to wooden supports, the work is hung and reassessed. Sometimes a piece which seemed complete when viewed on the working surface of the floor, is found lacking in the changed light and perspective of the vertical wall. This happened with Shaft (page 10). The original gradations of color from narrow yellow to expanding mauve were too obvious and separate. A smooth transition from the tight, transparent area which included much surface detail to the large, flat, opaque expanse of its almost opposite hue was needed to somehow imply that these diverse elements were part of one whole gestalt. Instead of a glide, I had a series of separate steps: bump, bump, bump. The work was removed from its backing and three layers of thin to opaque paint were poured before the desired result was attained.

In critically analyzing my work at each stage of completion, seeking modifications which will lead toward
harmony and balance of value, density, and direction, a sense of anxiety builds. How many chances should I be willing to take to reach out for something better while being aware of the threatening possibility of obliterating what has already been achieved?
My Mother had other plans for me, but she died.

Some day we will order the kind of child we seek. Already type X sperms are separable from Y. "My son will engineer a bridge or pitch a no hit game." Try to explain, "But sir, he would increase your world by bringing to it 'himself' if not compressed to growing only far enough to fit your preshaped mold."

I have few preconceived ideas of how my paintings will look when they are completed. Each single step is scrutinized carefully to determine what will happen next. Each layer is a new surface on which to build. It would be impossible for me to say, "In four months I will have a finished painting six feet by six feet, using white, yellow citron, and an accent of cadmium red that will look like this sketch I have prepared." Some artists do make a plan and follow it exactly. I cannot pin down the exact time when I am motivated to begin certain works. My life is full of looking and I am constantly seeing rhythms and patterns which relate to my work: the cadence of stone pillars in front of the Tate Gallery in London, their surfaces slick with rain falling on layers of soot built up over the years; Turner's late watercolors and their
haunting colors, surfaces and atmospheres; ridges on a sea shell; surface prints left in the sand by receding tides; layers of California hills greyed with smog. All of these have the flowing, built up quality I seek.

I do not strive to copy these objects, though their beauty reveals something about life that becomes a part of my response to living and the work I produce. Once a few layers of paint are down, the work itself takes over and dictates what is needed.

With my method there are countless surprises along the way - visual rewards and frustrations. Each of twenty or forty layers sets up the necessity for awareness and feedback. What happened? Why? How? Where do I go from here?

This method of working has much in common with the quickened life style, full of imposed changes, which is effecting increasing numbers of people. A young adult who plans an old fashioned rigid life style, "x" years of school, marriage, "y" number of children, forty years service with "z" company in the town where his family and friends have always lived, may be in for some shake-ups. He or she must be ready to ride with, or take advantage of, events such as changing educational methods, war, technical advances (which may wipe out, modify, or increase the need for certain professional skills),
environmental changes, transience, layoffs, shifts in values, divorce, inflation, recession, etc. Change is accelerating, and only those who have a certain degree of adaptability, who relate to the specific situation which they find themselves in at the moment, can hope to survive and be enriched by it.
A friend of mine has twin daughters. She avoided giving them rhyming names and does not dress them alike. I try to accept each child as an individual, but I cannot resist the fascination of looking at them as a unit, comparing and contrasting their physical characteristics and mannerisms. Marnie is a bit thinner and quieter than first born Julia, her hair doesn't hold a curl quite as well. My eyes have to search for these clues before I can call one girl's name. I need only catch a glimpse out of the corner of my eye to recognize their older brother Andy, who is distinctly one of a kind.

Twins have always fascinated me. The parts of a group of two are intimately related, but still retain some qualities of individuality. One must look carefully back and forth from one to another to ascertain where the sameness and differences lie.

This is another breakdown of the larger problem I have set up for myself within each of my works. There are differences and gradations in parts of the painting, but they must each hold together as one unit. How much variety defeats unity?
It is intriguing to experiment with two-piece works, coming closer or farther away from sameness and differences in them. The two pieces in Gemini (page 20) were once distinctly red and green. This was too obvious a contrast and many pourings took place before their relationships were resolved to my satisfaction.

As I began work on Slip (page 18), it was one long band of diagonal ridges. I planned to cut it up the middle and invert one half to form a "V" shaped mirror image. After I cut, I was confronted with a simple geometric truth - two slashes do not make a "V". I worked on each separate part to strengthen the differences (especially in the placement and amount of fine red tracings which float on the surface of the work). I intend to continue experiments with mirrored images.
Slip  Each section 4' x 3'4"
| Gemini          | Each section 5'5" x 2' |
SCALE

I recently returned with my sons to the home I had frequented in my early childhood when my grandmother loaded the table with seasonal bounties to celebrate family festivities. I was prepared for the absence of the smell of fresh baked short bread and the sound of Aunt Ruth's, "My, how you have grown!" I had not expected to be confronted with my own changing eye level, which made everything look much smaller and less significant than I had remembered. Changing physical size, along with experience and expansion in our ability to see and understand alter our feelings about and relationships to people and things around us.

Change of scale is incorporated into the "imagery" of my paintings. I aim for ambiguity between surface and picture plane so the configurations in the paintings can be viewed as being anywhere within a wide size range rather than pinned down to the exact scale of known or recognized objects. There is a wholeness in the patterns of the works which, when seen from a distance, will hopefully entice the viewer to come very close and enjoy the fluctuations in color within tiny areas of the work.
There are no figures, no foreground or background to tell the viewer that these waves of color are tiny fragments blown up to greater-than-life size, or huge skyscapes brought down to a comfortable package for humans.

Our view of the world in regard to scale is constantly changing. Technological extensions of the eye have amplified our view of the universe from two ends. A camera on an orbiting satellite takes impressions of the earth's surface which are transmitted into our television screens as part of the weather scene for the morning news. I have watched an "earthrise" and seen the surface of the moon grow and recede in size and detail as astronauts journeyed to or away from it. At the other end of the scale, photomicrographs have revealed the inner structure of minerals and living tissues. ¹ These extremes of view, in reference to distance, time, and scale have revealed many formerly unrecognized rhythms and surface patterns which exist world wide, a bond of all things that are.

A certain amount of change is important in the repeated patterns of my work. Subtle edges can be seen only against contrasts in tone, (Expanded Grey, page 25) or color (Cosmos, page 27). However, problems arise when one area of the whole comes out looking especially "beautiful." There was an especially sensuous, distracting

area which resembled a nude in the first layers of *Exogene* (page 7). I seem to have an affinity for producing strips of romantic blushing color like a vein in a slab of marble. I work hard to reach the balance point between variety and sameness that means a lively unity.
Expanded Grey, detail

7' x 4'
TIME

In order to have meaning, the moment I am living now demands my complete attention, even though the "me" that is living it has developed from the past and will give issue to the future.

Analytic cubists attempted to reveal time by superimposing bits and pieces of various views of one or two objects on a pictorial plane. I am actually piling image after image on top of one another to create a pattern or rhythm which grows over a duration of time. The pulsation of the layering of paint spaced in time gives a kind of life force; pour, dry; pour, dry. Rhythms are very much a part of life whether they be sunrises, tides, civilizations, glacial ages, or art styles coming and going and leaving their impressions on whatever follows. The exact amount of time which elapses between events in cycles of time is relative. Looking through any series in the same way as our eye follows the ins and outs of layers of paint on these surfaces (Surface No. 37, Grey, page 5) we see that certain areas will shine through and others will be nearly hidden, but the passage of time and the changes it brings is always apparent. Like other aspects of life, duration and being exist only in the transitory, in change, in repetition. These qualities are inherent in my method and are consequently a very basic part of my paintings.
Naqqarah

9' x 3'2"
UNITY

Is the shadow part of the obtruding tree branches, its stencil; the radiating sun, its power; or the nourishing planet, its anchor?

We are discovering a sameness or unity in many aspects of life. Chimpanzees are like us in their protection of their young and their use of tools. Dolphins have a speech like method of communication. Water or air contaminated in one city or country flows on to endanger life in other places. Madison Avenue struggles to help one learn to distinguish one brand of cereal, gasoline, or automobile from another. As soon as young people develop a new way of wearing their hair or clothes, their parents move in to imitate it. Europe is becoming a common market. We are all becoming world citizens aided by travel, television, and technology, and the terror of what could happen if we fail to cooperate. Holland has more buildings of an international style than windmills. Protesting youth on the Stroget in Copenhagen look very much like the Sunset Strip variety. Once we had a string of missions up and down the Pacific coastline, each separated by a day's journey. Now one city incorporates the next. Methods which kill cancer cells endanger their healthy neighbors. Some of the roles assigned exclusively to men or women are beginning to shift or merge. Increasingly, we see
signs of a drift toward unity.

Reflecting this trend in our lives, my paintings are not concerned with separate, different, objects isolated from each other by patches of background. The works offer no predigested "scene", but rather a merger in time and space, ambiguous in scale, presented on a surface for you to survey.