ABSTRACT

THE ELLUSIVE ILLUSION

by

Lana Jean Merhaut

Master of Arts in Art

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The Abstract of Lana Jean Merhaut is approved:

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"What is prime and basic about painting is exactly that it is prime and basic. Painting is, without the particularities of handling and mechanics, an art medium which occupies that aesthetic area between sculpture and nothing. Painting requires, aesthetically, two dimensions, minimum objectness, to exist. It has survived various philosophies, styles and supposed crises. Nevertheless, painting's being perceived as basically two-dimensional is an assertion of its precarious position between immaterial consciousness and objectness." ¹

Due to the recent enthusiasm for Conceptual Art and a wide acceptance of object art, painting has been forced into a position where its justification and importance as a valid art form has been questioned. As a painter I have found myself personally confronted with this problem. Therefore, it is the purpose of this abstract not only to justify my own work, but also the necessity for the

continuance of painting as an art form.

The object qualities have become an issue for modernist painting only in the past several years. Previous to this, paintings and even sculpture were simply not thought of as being nothing more than an object. The acceptance of a painting as an object began to assert itself around 1960 as the result of developments within modernist painting. The more advanced painting had become assimilated with objects so that the history of painting since Monet was viewed as a progression to the revelation of essential objecthood. Stella has pursued this course and has revealed to us a profound sensuality.2

"I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values of painting -- the humanistic values that they always find on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is that he's doing. He is making a thing... "3

Conceptual art has been an attempt to replace the object, to replace things with theories. Conceptual artists in their effort to invigorate the intellectual

bases of the visual arts and give preference to concept over the object have only confused the theory with the practice. Paradoxically, by playing up the theoretical side of art, Conceptual artists have not only questioned the norms of object making but the norms of conceptual art itself. The variety of theoretical inquiries posing as practical objects can be loosely divided into two categories: The largest and best known are occupied by artists who can be said to deviate from the norms of object art, and the lesser known are those who question the norms of object art.

It is the intent of the artists of the first group to become more involved with the process rather than the object. The second group is composed of art theorists who give priority to verbal theory over visual practice in different ways. Their premise is expounded in this advertisement for the English Conceptual art journal, Art Language:

"Art-Language is a journal devoted to the publication and development of a body of discourse on the theory of art... It is assumed, for the moment, that broader concerns for the relevance, function and importance of art can more usefully be served by this means than by the production of further art objects."\(^4\)

As evidenced by the attempts of the Conceptual artists to replace the art object with "Art Discourse", painting is seeking a new structure. Unfortunately it is misleading to think that painting or art forms in general can develop based on word structure. Structural linguistics have undoubtedly been responsible for many metaphysical concepts; however, it is quite inadequate when applied to the visual arts. Rudolf Arnheim, in his book, "Visual Thinking", asserts that all thinking and, not just thinking related to the visual arts is basically perceptual in nature. His contention is that the ancient dichotomy between seeing and thinking, perceiving and reasoning, is false and misleading. Far from being a "lower" function, our perceptual response to the world is the basic means by which we structure events, and from which we derive ideas and therefore, language.5

Painting, therefore, is a type of thought process which deals with images and the practice of intellectual and emotional ordering of visual meaning. It has a life as a thing as well as a theory. Paintings' limitations can be seen as quasi-rules for bracketing and focusing devices, and therein lies its strength. It is for this

reason I have chosen painting as my medium for expression and perceptual explorations.

The approach to a work of art is based on certain assumptions about the nature of art. One of these assumptions has been that art creates order out of the chaos of experience. The artist, being primarily concerned with perceptions, whether they be conscious or unconscious, in his attempt to seek new order for art should, therefore, grasp the elements which make up the new structure of experience. This can only be done if he involves himself in the activity of making a work from the dictates of the materials being used. This is why I have involved myself in the experience of chaos rather than pre-conceived order.

"There must, it seems to me, be some human activity which serves to break up orientations, to weaken and frustrate the tyrannous drive to order, to prepare the individual to observe what orientation tells him is irrelevant, but may very well be relevant. That activity, I believe is the activity of artistic perception."^6

Since painting is conceived as a series of existing tensions between objectness and nothingness, between consciousness and otherness; I have chosen to deal with problems inherent in painting, essentially the marking of

a two dimensional surface. All markings on this surface are illusionistic, and herein is the painter's opportunity to contradict the immediate quality of "real" experience. To form a multi-dimensional experience on a limited two-dimensional surface. It is my intent to create a tension between the illusionistic, and the literal surface of the canvas. This same tension was discovered by Cezanne and by analytic cubism, and is present in the work of Hans Hofmann.7

I have examined the physical properties of paint by comparing pigments of various weights, textures, and consistencies, to one another and to the canvas surface. It has been my intent to create a work which was anti-illusionistic, in which the activity of the paint reacting to the surface and the resulting relationships become the subject of the painting. In an attempt to eliminate formal relationships of line, color and shape, and deny architectural space and the importance of the structural supports of the canvas; the paintings were composed by the process of pouring. Subsequent layers of paint and glazes are added with a palette knife or in some cases a small squeegee.

So that I can become involved and also that the observer becomes enveloped in the work, I have chosen to

7Clement Greenberg, Art And Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) pp.52-53.
work large. The dimensions of the works ranging from six to nine foot, approximately human scale. Through experience I have found that working smaller than six foot becomes too limiting, and working larger becomes totally exhausting. Since the work involves direct experience with the media, I work directly on the canvas, without pre-conceptions but to let the paint determine the images which occur. Working with a knife, pouring, throwing and splattering are more effective in that they are more physical than visual, allowing the work to become a total experience.

In an attempt to contrast surfaces, I have experimented with various paints, adding gels, thickeners, glazes and metallic materials to the canvases (Plates 1-4). An attempt was also made to construct the surface of a canvas by tearing a finished painting into sections, and then reconstructing the former surface of the painting in another work (Plate 5). I experimented briefly in sculpture (Plate 6), only to find that the problems of surfaces interacting could be dealt with, but the problems of real space are far different from those of Illusionary space, and it is the nature of the illusion

and finding ways to negate it which interest me. Thus, the resulting prints were done (Plate 7-9).

In conclusion, I feel that these paintings are successful in that they negate the illusion on a two-dimensional surface and provide a multi-sensory experience. They also deny architectural space and are not dependent on the structural supports of the canvas. I, therefore, believe that my premise is sound and will be the basis for future perceptual explorations.

"The painting exists; it is perceived in being perceived, it changes; in changing, it loses what certainly it had and slips back to simple du-soi existence, only to be perceived again, in endless cycle."9

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
108" X 78"
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
84" X 78"
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
84" X 78"
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
72" X 78"
VINYL
13" X 13" X 13"
ETCHING & SERIGRAPHY
35" x 18"