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PERCEPTION AND PAINTING
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CONTENTS

LIST OF PLATES ............................................. i
INTRODUCTION .............................................. 1
   The Art Historical Dilemma and its
   Philosophical Basis
Body ......................................................... 6
   Painting and Visual Thinking
Conclusion ................................................ 10
   An Ontological View
BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................. 13
PLATES ....................................................... 14
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. &quot;Untitled, 1971&quot;</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. &quot;Untitled, 1971&quot;</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. &quot;Untitled, 1971&quot;</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. &quot;Web #1, 1972&quot;</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. &quot;Web #2, 1972&quot;</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. &quot;Web #3, 1972&quot;</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. &quot;Untitled, 1972&quot;</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. &quot;Untitled, 1972&quot;</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

PERCEPTION AND PAINTING

by

Donald Craig Sorenson

Master of Arts in Art
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Since the beginning of the twentieth century the style termed "Modernism," seems to have rapidly depleted itself, and we now have what some critics have termed "post-Modernism." This situation particularly affects painting, in which forms, methods, and techniques that have been used until now presently appear exhausted to artists, and they are turning to sculpture and/or conceptual forms of art.

"Modernism," has been defined as a progressive stripping down to bare essentials or a discovering of underlying structure.¹ This can be observed in two tendencies that arose in painting -- one stems from Monet, which was eventually refined to color field and flatness -- the other from Cubism and the artist Mondrian to a sort of geometric abstraction. The two directions

have also been synthesized in certain cases. They represent the "issues" that painting has always faced. Being highly philosophical, they represent the dualistic nature of man -- the Dionysiac/Apollonian poles. The shift that occurred in the 1960's was the complete secularization of art -- it was the final determining force of the system that perhaps was put into operation by Manet -- it marked the end of an epic and a tradition.

Faced with an immense historical consciousness and knowledge, there is a general malaise among many artists, painters, in particular. It is the purpose of this brief abstract on my own work to define painting, and to provide justification for its continued existence and necessity.

Conceptual art has been an attempt to "go beyond the object," and transcend the physical. Ironically, in some forms it has become mystical, a reaction to the static quality of "object" painting and sculpture executed during the 1960's, which was one of the charges brought against "vitalist" or expressionistic painting of earlier styles. I want to point out that true painting has never been "physical." It is the nature of working in two dimensions that contradicts the physicality of the painting. A flat color field is still "illusionistic."²

This is painting's hope and its strongest asset.

It should be obvious by now that what might be needed is a new structure -- one that goes beyond the ninety degree, vertical and horizontal grid. Non-object art is one attempt to do this, but will fail unless it is ontological and based in perception. The art historian Kubler suggests that a man appears at the end of an epic or at the beginning of one, who synthesizes all the past forms of the culture and creates a new structure.\(^3\) The process is particularly evident in Western art (for example: Giotto, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Rembrandt, Beethoven, Picasso, Schoenberg, etc.); however, Kubler came to this conclusion by studying the forms of pre-Columbian art in an absence of a written tradition. Our modernist epic is drawing to a close, another structure is being formed, and it appears we are on the threshold of the new.

Being genuinely concerned with a rift between a perceptual versus conceptual form of art in the past, I no longer wish to acknowledge a difference. It is the quality of the forms or the ideas that is important. It is a period of speculation, theory, experiment, and in some cases, decadence. In some areas painting is still the most propitious medium or methodology available.

for experimentation -- providing one learns its limits. Painting is a type of visual analytical thinking which comes upon discoveries simply by its own act, or more correctly, by the artist's act.

Currently, painting is under a surge of linguistic structuralism. Marcel Duchamp made the remark that he was tired of being termed a "stupid painter." He wanted to put painting "at the service of the mind" -- as opposed to "retinal" painting. This paper is partly an attempt to show that an illiterate painter, far from being "stupid," can have a very refined perceptual "intelligence." Being unfortunately misled by linguists into thinking that painting and all art is based on word structure, Duchamp hypothesized that when one strips away the forms, pure thoughts are the result; hence, his work, "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even." 5

Structural linguistics is one way of looking at the world -- especially language -- and has led to important discoveries. However, it is only one of many theories and basically epistemological. Because of this it can be applied to language systems, literature, and other


mental thought-systems with great success -- but when applied to the visual arts it utterly fails to give an adequate explanation in any great depth. This is because most art is based in experience and perception and is ontological in scope. It is about being.

Through readings in phenomenology and gestalt psychology it has become apparent to me that painting is a form of "visual thinking." Artists learn from looking at art and from their own experience. The mind receives impressions of form and simple shapes and creates a synthesis. This is done partly consciously, partly beneath awareness. The painter in a sense "thinks" with images. Being a very complex operation that the mind of a great painter performs, it has little to do with linguistics. He tends to grasp the elements that will make up the new structure of experience before it has been realized and gives it concrete, sensible existence. This becomes a violent revolutionary act that tends to break down the old order of art and create a new one.

Painting, since it can transcend the limitations of physical form and does not require an accumulation of vast amounts of intellectual literary knowledge, has

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the advantage of grasping a new structure in the most expedient way. This is why I believe that painting is as good as any other methodology of art to reach this goal.

In large scale paintings there often exists a certain strength; paintings that are conceived small rarely work in bigger dimensions. For example, analytic cubism which usually relied on small formats and small dabs of paint could never be painted large. Picasso's "Guernica" has been criticized for this very reason -- being actually three separate compositions.\(^8\) An important step was taken in the 50's and 60's in painting. The scale was increased and the observer was actually enveloped in the work.

For these reasons I chose to work large, using dimensions of about six by eight feet -- human scale. I do not work from small studies, (except perhaps to work out a new structural problem) conceiving and working directly on the canvas. A sort of dialectical process takes place between myself and the canvas -- being a series of diminishing returns until I feel it is finished. It becomes an analytical as well as an

intuitive process of constantly rearranging, repainting and reconsidering. If I go too far the painting is a failure -- the same as when Pollock would "lose touch." 9

Using acrylic paints that produce a sort of pastel chalky surface seems most agreeable to my sensibility. My paintings end up fairly thick with lots of underpainting. Having a sort of predilection towards "difficult" color schemes, I enjoy juxtaposing shrill and dissonant colors to create tensions. The entire painting is painted with a brush guided by a light pencil drawing. Then certain shapes -- stripes, zigzags, bars or triangles are taped off with masking tape, although some are painted freehand. These end up being very complex configurations of over-under shapes, and some are almost completely painted over by a protruding background.

Coming to the problem of figure and ground we can see that this has been an occupation either consciously or unconsciously of painters for centuries. It is crucial in my opinion to what painting is about -- for it is also how we perceive the world. Painting, for many artists, has returned to a primal perceptual method

in the 20th century. That is why some painting is so similar to paleolithic cave painting or children's art.\(^\text{10}\)

Although being very sophisticated, it has returned to a simple perceptual configuration; that is, as a simple figure against a plain background, with almost total flatness.

At the present moment in the art-political situation, painting has been given about three alternatives: photo-realism, wall sculpture, and non-painting or conceptual art. Having experienced a strong political pressure to "push" painting into new directions, I have experimented with "wall sculpture," (see plate 4). Close to a hundred newspaper strips were cut out, being about four layers each. These were then dipped in acrylic paint and left to dry. A construction of interweaving with staples and glue took place which formed the final semi-rectangular web. This is the danger painting faces when pushed to its limits -- the forms jump out into the world. I thought the strips would be the figures, while the background would be the gallery or the world. However, this is the function sculpture has always performed and I have since temporarily abandoned this idea. As I stated earlier, painting's strength (enigmatic structure, 

hence interest) lies in the very fact of its two dimensional illusions. The nature of this illusion is what interests me and it is what my earlier (see plates 1, 2 and 3), and later (plates 7, 8 and 9) paintings are about. The paper strip paintings helped me to realize this structure as applied to the world (compare plates 4a, 5a and 6a, and plates 7a, 8a and 9a) in relation to painting.

The early paintings attempted to integrate the stripe and zig-zag figures into the background color-field. Some were buried in the field, some going in and out of the plane, and some lying entirely on the surface. They were placed at an oblique angle creating a very dynamic composition.

After experimenting with the paper-strip paintings, it occurred to me that they were too immeshed in the reality of experience to say what I wanted them to. That is, they became three dimensional, occupying "real" space. They needed explanation, whereas the paintings did not. Hence, taking a cue from gestalt psychology, I painted the bar and triangles paintings (plates 7, 8 and 9). The premise of these paintings was to make statements on how we perceive the world -- using simple gestalt principles.

How do we structure experience? What is the basic
cognitive process by which the mind pulls out objects from chaos or nothingness? In order to answer these questions I used simple rectangles (bars) or triangles painted in a purely random all-over pattern. Like the earlier zig-zag paintings, some of the bars were half painted out, some complete. Since I used fairly thick paint, a tension is created between the literal surface and the overlapping illusionistic space or sense of shallow depth. This same tension was discovered by Cezanne and by analytic cubism, and is present in the work of Hans Hofmann. According to the principles of gestalt psychology, the mind should order and complete the partially overpainted bars.

It was my desire to have the perceiver actively involved with creating gestalts by "completing" the bars. The viewer was supposed to see the fragmented bits of figures and "know" them as simple rectangles. Cognitively the mind would tend to perceive the painting in an orderly over-all effect -- although in reality they were chaotic and random. However, my own mind is constantly striving for order while painting them, consequently they are somewhat ordered. This can be


seen somewhat through my use of color balance. As I was continually frustrated by my own conceptions and the inability to realize them, these paintings were not as successful as they could have been. However, I still believe that my premise is sound and will be the criteria for future explorations.

Painting is therefore ontological in scope and is about the dialectics of perception. It is intimately connected to life and to the world. We know painting as well as existence in a kinesthetic way. It is a belief in the actuality of painting as well as objects. Painting is always in danger of either exhausting its forms, or becoming relief sculpture. In order for painting to remain healthy, it is important that painters keep the latter in mind. Painting is a delicate balance between existence and non-existence. It is a tension between figure and ground. It is a tension between organic and geometric, it is a balance between perceptual experience and mental conception, but most of all -- it is about man as "being in the world."

Merleau-Ponty made a statement about philosophy which can be equally applied to painting: "True philosophy (painting) consists in relearning to look at the world, and in this sense a historical account can give meaning to the world quite as 'deeply' as a philosophical treatise. We take our fate in our
hands, we become responsible for our history through
reflection, but equally by a decision on which we stake
our life, and in both cases what is involved is a
violent act which is validated by being performed.” 13

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books:


Periodicals:


PLATE 1.

PLATE 1,a. (detail)
PLATE 2.

PLATE 2,a. (detail)
PLATE 3.
PLATE 4.

PLATE 4, a. (detail)
PLATE 7.

PLATE 7,a. (detail)
PLATE 9.

PLATE 9,a. (detail)