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THE FINE LINE

by

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Professor Fred Meyer
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Photography by Giorgio Furioso
And Andrew Raischazy
I would like first to explain the intention of my thesis. This paper will be a step by step account of the development of my multi-sided canvases, and how the technical and aesthetic considerations are derived. The art portion of this thesis will primarily be dealing with one painting. I hope to be able to enlighten the reader through a better understanding of my thoughts of this painting called "May I Have This Dance," and also my feelings and theories in which I concern myself within the daily involvement with my work. The thesis will be written simultaneously as the painting progresses, in order to insure continuity with both written and visual work.
Thinking and drawing is the beginning step for any of my particular pieces. The first ideas are formulated by quick and loose drawings in a non-representational style. From one drawing to the next, the ideas are explored until the basic shapes give off the feeling that I want to express. (See Photo #1.) Later, from more extensive drawings, the ideas become a set linear shape. Within the drawings there are notes and fine lines to indicate where the metal, which gives the cloth its third dimension, will be placed. (Photo #1.)

When the idea is formulated and the drawings finished, some of the technical problems become apparent. I then give consideration to weight and size and how the structure will finally be placed together so that it hangs as a unit. (See Photo #1.) Many times from the moment the idea comes until the final stage of development, months may pass so that I am always involved with the piece. I am continuously trying to make the piece exciting, by simple or drastic changes. I do this so that the piece will reflect my present state of mind, and yet will hold the old as well. Some of the technical aspects of this particular piece are drawn so that I have some assurance of its feasibility.
The painting I am dealing with now came to me months ago from a rock concert in New York. It was truly an exciting moment watching people dance, music being played loudly, and yet there was grace, true soul, and feeling.

I believe many times artists are trying to do just that, to hold a feeling or an experience. I find this in life one of the most difficult things to do- to remember a moment or an experience, and then even more difficult- to transform that feeling into an object of art.

I take the complete drawing and cut a prototype out, to see more clearly what the shapes will do in space. (Photo #1.) This technique is helpful to me in making a decision on the scale of the piece. The pieces when cut are placed in an opaque projector and the shapes projected onto the wall. The shapes are increased and decreased to see at what size the forms seem to work best. At all times I must take into consideration the limitations of wood, metal, and linen. Many times there are frustrating moments because of the materials and the environment with which one must deal. I believe, though, that to overcome such problems
and still to create good art is something artists have to strive for. For myself, success is overcoming these problems and being able to turn out good work. When the size is established I then place three quarter inch interior finished plywood in front of the images and draw out the shapes onto the wood. I find the opaque projector a tremendous tool for me, for it is unique in that a simple small drawing can be blown up to whatever scale you wish to see.

For this particular piece changes were made when I transformed the images to the plywood. It seemed to have an overly rippled look so I eliminated some of the lines. This change helped the piece a great deal. I conceived the structure to be of tremendous scale—roughly eight feet by twenty-five feet. Despite its size however it may still hang, and (depending on its environment) at an even larger scale with increased space between units. This idea came to me while playing with the cut out prototype. I feel the structure can also hang at different levels, around corners, or even lie on the floor.
This I feel is a real breakthrough in my work, for it is taking the construction idea of units and space one step further, thus giving consideration to where the piece will hang.

Having made the choice of making the painting in sections, it should prove to be more exciting visually and far more challenging to work with. The way I approach my art is that I feel there must be a challenge, a problem to solve - a theory or even an answer, or else the piece has no significance to me. My sketch-books are full of ideas and I may pick one out of a hundred of these ideas. In my art I need to have a purpose or reason, just as life is to me, with real purpose and reason. I feel that to make an object for object's sake is not enough - not even valid. The reasons, or purpose, or even theories for beginning a work are not later what at first they pretended to be; through time, the reasons for finishing might prove to be quite different.

I discover and rediscover myself, and my existence is reassured when working. I feel that whatever discoveries I might experience, they are the greatest affirmations for my continuing to work.
As a student of art one must consider that he is a student of life - like the great Oriental philosophy of life and pottery: to have real purpose, real honesty with oneself is the ultimate in life. Trying to achieve this, though, is difficult, for I am caught in a society where honesty does not exist easily - so it is of equal difficulty to achieve this in my work. One is caught by the glamour of what an artist is or should be, yet supposedly we are to be such individualists and yet it seems we are a far cry from this. I've made a real attempt within myself to be myself and I feel this has carried through into my art. In my opinion, not even the superstars of Art History were ever one hundred percent honest. Only those artists (and not particularly the best known) who made a great effort are the ones who, I feel, stand out far above the crowded area of the art world. Because of my young age I feel a long road ahead to even getting close to understanding honesty--but I feel the first step is to recognize one's dishonesty.
I have now begun to cut my plywood; this is an important step in the beginning of the construction of my multi-sided canvas (see photo #2.) Many of the units are larger than a four foot by eight foot piece of plywood, so I must laminate the pieces together. There are changes slowly occurring in the cutting stage because of the limitations of the saw and also certain curves that later prove to be unstretchable have to be somewhat modified. After the long stage of cutting, I begin sanding and adjusting the shapes to fit each other. (See photo #3.) Because of the nature of the plywood used, there are many defects in the wood so there is much patching and fine sanding to be done. I seek to remove all the edges in the plywood so that later the cloth will not pick up the nicks and chips caused by the blades when cutting. I want the painting's edges to have the cleanest line possible. As I continue to prepare the wood, I realize the tremendous work ahead and that I should not insist that I carry each step to completion too methodically. The reason for this is that with a piece of such large scale I find myself bored with the repetitive
procedure of each step. It is better to take certain sections and go through all the steps with them, with the exception of priming and painting. For the painting portion I must see all the finished shapes together to make a choice on how to deal with the surface of the canvas.

In looking at the piece I felt that some order within all the organic shapes was needed. So I drew three lines straight across the piece—with the intention of having all the edges of the metal meet and end on the same line. The variations will come in height and curve. Before the metal can be placed on the plywood, I turn the piece backside forward and work out a basic coding or lettering structure that later will keep the shapes in units. The structures are kept together with wooden lathes, metal braces, and also one inch by three inch wooden strips. (See photo #12.) Now that I have done the planning and have marked out the back frame, I may begin the metal stage of the piece.

Because of the decision that each section of the painting will be done to its entirety, before
going on to the next section I find that I am feeling more confident with the piece. I use different gauges of metal depending on how much of a relief I want. Different gauges are chosen so as to secure the metal from buckling when a lot of pressure is applied while stretching canvas over the forms. So that I may have the height and curve desired, I make the necessary measuring and then draw on the sheet metal. I begin to cut the sheet metal with shears, using different shears depending on the types of curves needed. Later I tape the edges so that the metal will not rip the canvas when stretching. I then cut the bottom part of the metal one half inch deep, and one quarter inch apart and bend the ends over on alternate sides, so that I may fasten the metal to the wood. (See photo #4.) I find this technique of using the metal quite desirable for the types of shapes and curves I want my painting to have. I have done paintings using different materials to acquire various types of reliefs - such as clay, wire, masonite, wood, bowed strips of wood, and other objects.
Finishing the metal of section one, I now begin to stretch the cloth. Stretching the cloth over the irregular metal forms is difficult. I have chosen unbleached muslin, tightly woven, to give real strength because of the pressure I use to eliminate all of the wrinkles. I might describe the stretching part as if trying to wrap a ball with paper. It would seem almost impossible to get all the folds out. Through wetting the cloth and stapling, restapling, and pulling at different angles, I finally achieve the smooth surface I desire. At times of stretching there are real problems with my hands in trying to hold the large pieces, as I must pull quite hard and staple at the same time. It becomes tiring, so I go to another section and do the next step so as to break the monotony of it all. The primary stretching is not quite as difficult as the final stretching, for that has to be done while the cloth is completely dry, for if wet and then dried, the cloth would have a loose quality that I do not desire. Therefore the final stretching is done when the piece is completely dry. Then the whole shape is stapled and then restapled one staple right next to the last, in order to
insure no loosening of the cloth. The excess cloth in the back is then cut and the staples are hammered in firmly. (See photo #6.)

Many weeks have passed and all the pieces are now stretched. (See photos #7, 8, & 9.) After all the stretching is done, I begin priming the canvas. Before I prime the surface, I prime the back portion which has staples in it in order to seal the cloth. This is so that when the surface is primed, it will not pull and loosen the cloth. It is very important for the cloth forms to remain tight or wrinkles may appear in the shapes, which will cause displeasing qualities on the surface.

I begin covering the shapes with a thin coat of gesso, continuously thickening it with each application. Four coats are applied and sanded with fine sandpaper after each coat. (See photos 10 & 11.) While gessoing I begin to learn about the form; more extensively the painting begins to suggest color or an attitude. Even through sanding I learn about the curves and flat areas. I begin to really feel close to the forms. Many times if the painting is not suggesting anything in the way of color, I try many things, such as priming it with different colors or playing with spotlights to suggest patterns for color through
shadows. I also try closing my eyes and feeling the piece and trying to be completely in touch with its forms.

The painting is now ready to be painted in one or more colors. I've decided to make it one basic color and one section of the piece having the most relief interest to be accented with gradations of the same color. I am striving for a color that has a warm as well as a cool feeling. After several days of making colors, I have found a violet that under incandescent light is a warm violet. Under fluorescent light the same color becomes a cold blue violet color. I find this fascinating, and therefore lighting the painting will be a crucial part of the piece. When I gessoed the canvas I measured the amount of liquid it would take to cover the entire piece. Now I have some indication as to how much paint it will take to apply at least three coats to give a better finish to the piece. When thinking of color there are tremendous alternatives on how the piece could be painted. I made the final decision by a subtractive measure — by eliminating ideas after exploring as many of them as possible. The minimal attitude of painting
in one basic color was not my total concern. Instead I made an effort to tie the whole painting together, as opposed to redefining the separate sections by making them different colors. The painting then is all one basic hue, more on the dark side to tone down the complexity of the shapes and reliefs and simultaneously tie the piece together. The division is made by the space chosen between each section. Even though the painting takes a lot of paint and time, the final decision on whether or not the piece will remain that color can only come after the painting is totally placed together and hung on the wall.

The decision on how to paint the middle section where there is a gradation of color came to me from a theory of the correlation between numbers, shapes, and color. What I did was to give each section a number, from one to six - and depending on the shape and the value of the number, I transferred it to color. This is like a value scale in connection to a numerical scale. For example 123456-5432-34321-23456-54321--Light to dark, medium dark to medium light, light to dark, & dark to light.
I tried this and it worked quite well. There were some changes at the very end, because of the visual effect in certain parts of the painting. All in all the theory for this painting, choosing numbers for color and how one-two-three, two-one etc., corresponded to color worked quite well. One of the reasons for trying this was because of the large scale of the painting, and as the painting was being calculated in every other step, it seemed a good idea to continue in this fashion of calculation, even in the choosing of color all across the painting.

The way in which I work, I feel, is one which has developed only through experimentation. Only through thinking and then doing could I seek out answers, and even more important for myself, questions. This painting has opened many avenues of thought for me - the idea of space, environmental considerations for the space, and using space to over-emphasize certain shapes within the overall painting. The feeling of mass within one piece was another adventure in this painting, also the number correlation with color. Technically, I also explored the ability of
plywood to be connected together for large sections and I gained the knowledge of how to hang a piece of such large scale. The painting has been a positive experience in which many things have been answered and yet it poses many questions still to be answered. I feel this is good. I find, however, a tremendous depression seems to be setting in after the completion of this piece. I have a terrible time trying to understand the depression; it's one of loss. I know other artists have had just such feelings. For me, I feel it is much more -- not only a sense of loss but that I can no longer hold or remember the experience of doing this piece. Somehow I feel removed in every way from the actual body and soul of the work. It is as if someone else had done it and I can't seem to regain the experience of the long hours and of the hard, physical labor which it took to construct the piece.

Yesterday

Yesterday there came hard long hours
Today the hours seem just brief moments
What of weeks months years ago
I remember some beauty
I feel sad and puzzled when the beauty of yesterday seems vague.
And the reality of today so real
I know the time now is 2:58
How strange to write time down on paper
It is now 2:59
It is an unexplainable feeling. I felt this depression coming on, so before starting this painting I had another under way, so I could immediately start again. Many of the negative feelings which I experienced had to do with the physicalness of the painting. It had taken up so much of my studio space that it was impossible to work directly on any other piece. Because of this, I realized I began to resent the painting. Though I feel good about finishing something of this scale, there is something romantic and exciting to involve yourself with something so much bigger than yourself. I believe this is a step in the right direction for me, for I want my work in many ways to be bigger and better than myself.

The question of what is painting and what is sculpture does come up in the discussions with other artists, especially in dealing with my work. I do not feel one has to justify what an art object is but for argument's sake, it is good many times to try to see if one can justify and verbalize what one is or does. I feel my work is basically a construction, yet still in
the category of painting, for what you see is cloth being painted. I feel today there are fine lines between the crafts, painting, sculpture, and other such areas. It seems to me the fine line is only in the viewer and not in the doer. My constructions are paintings because of my approach; that is to say they are conceived in a painterly manner. On paper my works are merely fine lines which later are transformed into constructions. Once they become constructed, I then again approach them as paintings by using paint and brushes. It is all in the attitude of the creator where his justifications lie. One must assume that answers really do not lie in the visual content, but in the mind of the maker.
I would like to make one last comment about the things that I have experienced, not only in this thesis painting "May I Have This Dance," but in my total involvement with my work for the last two years: I have learned that the greatest importance of my life will be in dealing with my work as intensely as I have done in the past few months.
PHOTO ONE

PROTOTYPE AND DRAWINGS
PHOTO TWO

PLYWOOD CUTTING

PHOTO THREE

PLYWOOD CUTTING
PHOTO FOUR

SHEETMETAL STEP
PHOTO FIVE

PRELIMINARY STRETCHING
PHOTO SIX

FINAL STRETCHING
PHOTO SEVEN, EIGHT, NINE

TOTAL PIECE STRETCHED
PHOTO TEN, ELEVEN

PRIMING AND SANDING CANVAS
PHOTO TWELVE

BACK STRUCTURE
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MAY I HAVE THIS DANCE

COMPLETE
PHOTO FOURTEEN

SIDE VIEW