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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

When Attitudes Become Form

By

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Thesis Statement:

The purpose of my thesis is to develop a group of work that contains forms and images that come from my experiences and attitudes about the world. I intend to use paint, canvas and other material, some seldom used in art, as vehicles to make art that will express the energies of life itself.

WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORM

Elizabeth Coyne

Two years spent studying as an artist in a university graduate level program is a short period of time. In a career's time, it will encompass just two of some sixty-plus year's work. It is difficult to convey one's development as an artist in such a short period of time. As an artist growth and discovery occur on an individual level. This progress is often imperceptible to a casual observer.

My work as an artist these past two years can best be conveyed by not transcribing my growth and discoveries, but by making the reader aware of the attitudes and influences that form my work.

These attitudes and influences are often a result of my development as an artist. Although perhaps not new to the art world, they are new to me. These are private discoveries which result from my direct interaction with the artistic process. They ensue partially from an understanding of the recorded thoughts and words of other artists. I believe that most knowledge is acquired through experience and "doing" and that only a portion can be gained by reading or listening to others.

I will attempt to highlight two views which I have continually reviewed and altered during the past two years. One view can best be described as confusion and the other as instinctual bond. The first concerns my outlook toward today's art world and the second involves my relationship with nature.

In observing today's world an artist becomes confused by contradictory values. Today's general public has been overloaded with stimuli and is left little room for seeing realities created by the painter. Society provides little direction for the painter and he is forced to invent his own destiny.

Along with the public's disinterest, its ennui, the painter must face an art community which has become over-institutionalized. The painter sees today's views of art being "administered". The art values of today are being transmitted and controlled by techniques commonly used in corporate management. Far too often, today's most celebrated art work, becomes so through successful marketing and public relations work.

The painter unable to compete in this arena is left with little meaningful feedback to measure his abilities and accomplishments. The combination of an apathetic public and an art community whose judgment seems arbitrary, results in the painter feeling an absence of purpose.

The momentum of social change in the modern world has altered not only the nature of art, but also the psychological drives and motivations of those who shape it, to the point where we now find ourselves without ruler or compass in evaluating all these changes.¹

Every artist today finds himself increasingly enveloped by a cultural system that formulates his destiny and requires that he act in certain ways. To remain separate from the art community as an artist is to be "alone". A state that is not akin to human nature. Art is created out of aloneness, but to be whole one must feel communion.

Little middle ground is left for today's artist to work in. In the end one must suffer through the path that the bureaucratic art world imposes on its members.

The old values of individuality, indispensability and spontaneity are replaced by new ones, based on obedience, dispensability, specialization, planning, and paternalism. The goal is security: to be part of the big powerful machine, to be protected by it, and to feel strong in the symbiotic connection with it.²

This quote from Has Modernism Failed is directed at today's society in general. The author contends that the artist by his

¹Suzi Gablik, Has Modernism Failed (New York, 1984), p. 15

²Ibid., p.62

nature is hostile to these values. It is this feeling of hostility that makes it so difficult for a "real" artist to join today's bureaucratic art world.

The bureaucracy is perpetuated not by the artists, but by the art bureaucrats who join the system seeking the same status or appreciation that the artist receives. It is these people who shape the system in their effort "to be a part of the big powerful machine".³

It is these people who seek the security of and who are protected by the bureaucracy of the art world.

How is it possible, then for artists living in a society centered on production, consumption and success to become independent personalities once again, and to once more exert their influence on society? Only perhaps by the willingness to apply an inner brake that says "no" to the dominant claims of our times, even when everybody else says "yes".⁴

It is with this view of my environment that I struggle as an artist. My participation is not like that of the bureaucrat who lives through words. Words which each have a specific meaning and can be looked up in a dictionary. In painting I use line,

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 71

color and form. Each brushstroke is indefinable and in constant flux. The art bureaucrat attempts to capture this in words and reduce it to the "definable".

First of all you must cut off your tongue, because your decision takes away from the right to express yourself with anything but your brush.⁵

I exist in the world as part of today's bureaucratic society and at the same time as a part of the natural world; as a tree, a river or an animal would be. This kinship I share with nature is not easily put into words. It is something felt or known; not tangible. These feelings are at the very root of everybody's existence and can transcend many of society's strictures.

Out of this bond with nature, I believe comes the makings for art. For nature has always served as man's constant inspiration in his efforts to express and share inner thoughts or feelings.

Early man had no trouble in sculpting forms which expressed his inner feelings. His stronger ties with the natural world and his lack of societal inhibitions allowed him to share his thoughts more easily. Many of primitive man's creations would be classified as modern art today. For primitive man it was pure expression. Observers of his work were not concerned with which

⁵Jack D. Flam, Matisse on Art (U.S.A., 1978), p. 9

category it filled or to whose work it might be compared. Instead early observers simply absorbed the work's life and feeling in the same way they shared day to day relationships with nature.

Primal art deals not with the "eye as a camera", so to speak, but with the "mind's eye" that consummates everything we know, imagine, feel, conceive, perceive and dream about the object we are painting."⁶

From those primitive times up until the era of industrialization, man as well as society shared strong bonds with the natural world. People relied first hand on nature (the earth) for their existence. The community efforts of working the land for basic needs, helped nurture people's ties with nature.

Art in those times was a part of everyone's culture. Expression was easily transmitted to all. Few artificial barriers existed to hide the expressive creations of artists. People saw art as sharing a common ground with the natural world around them.

The complex process by which the artist transforms the act of seeing into a vision of the world is one of the consummate mysteries of the arts--one of the reasons that art is inseparable from religion and philosophy for most tribal peoples. The act of envisioning and then engendering a work of art represents an important and powerful ritual.⁷

⁶Jamake Highwater, The Primal Mind (New York, 1982), p.86

⁷Ibid., p. 58

My life consists of trying to achieve a sense of unity between myself and the world around me. Painting is my connection to the world. It is my way of making sense of today's environment. I take all that I see, feel and experience and make something out of it.

It is my bond with nature along with the use of my most basic instincts that makes my painting possible. I attempt to look at the world not as an observer would perceive it from without, but as if I am an inseparable part of it. I try to communicate my feelings of oneness with nature in all of my work.

It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.⁸

Through my use of canvas and paint, I try to recreate the communication and feelings I have shared with nature. I focus on one of nature's many objects as I begin each painting. I begin with a vague representation of the objects outward appearance, and slowly remove traces of reality. Injecting instead an abstracted representation of the object's vitality. I attempt to produce a painting which depicts the objects innermost being, its secret soul which is more often silent than heard.

⁸Maurice Merleau - Ponty, The Primacy of Perception (U.S.A., 1964), p. 162

The purpose of art is not to reproduce what is already given, nor to create something in the pure play of subjective fancy, but to press forward into the whole of the external world and the soul, to see and communicate those objective realities within it which rule and convention have hitherto concealed.⁹

Nature not only provides me expressive models, it also furnishes the compositional principles upon which all my work is based.

Through observing and studying nature I have refined my use of line, color, space and form. My observations have also helped develop principles of unity and continuity that support my work.

It was clear to me that whatever secrets there are in nature, I can unravel and understand them only through the images which my consciousness forms of my experiences. The image of our life, as well as nature, can only be understood when we take them for what they are in our experience, namely as works of art created by our consciousness.¹⁰

The more I study artistic composition, the more I see its likeness to the composition of life itself, from the pattern in nature to the structure of human feeling. From this understanding, my painting becomes more than a thing, it becomes a living form created.

⁹Max Scheler, The Nature of Sympathy as quoted by Graham Collier, Art and the Creative Conscious (New Jersey, 1972) p. 11

¹⁰Naum Gabo, Divers Arts, Bollinger Foundation Series XXXV8, as quoted by Graham Collier, Art and the Creative Consciousness, (New Jersey, 1972), p. 26

The images I am using at this time come directly from the feelings and images I have collected in the past. A cow I saw standing in a field, a photograph of Guatemalan tragedy and a barren tree in winter have all been starting points for my work.

There is always an inspiration, something that excites ideas and stirs emotions. Ideas and emotions that will become a part of my work. I attempt to transform these emotions into a representative form.

"Nature is on the inside," says Cezanne. Quality, light, color, depth which are there before us are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them."¹¹

As an artist I do not operate by only using my relationship with nature. Living in a society as complex and fast paced as ours, one cannot escape its sphere of influence. In fact the man made world seems at times to hold my feelings captive. The thought of being a statistic, the sombering effect of front page news, and the false sense of a bureaucratic art world all create feelings of anxiety.

When I speak of form, the reference means something abstract. Although a work of art appears concrete, it is something more

¹¹Merleau-Ponty. p. 164

than a physical shape. Form created in a work of art is influenced by the use of color and the texture of the materials. The materials come together in the way they are handled, paint and canvas become more than a modeled surface. Out of the material comes expressive form. In observing my work, I do not see it as having expressive form but as being one.

Modern society provides me with little in the form of expressive example. I can, however, use the feelings it instills in me to create expressive form. The transformation is possible through the lessons I have learned from nature. It is with these expressions and forms that I attempt to bridge the gap I often feel with society.

I do not mean to downplay the good points of today's society. Instead, I am attempting to define my current struggles and attitudes toward life. For it is these energies which seem to compose my work. I find in the end, it is my work which slowly provides me with answers to these struggles.

One answer my work has taught me, is that experience and feeling are not formless and illegible. I have found that I can express myself without the confines of language. Through my work, I find myself more at home in the world, and with other people. Somehow my work restores in me a lost wholeness. It gives me the sensation of being one with both nature and society.

,he came to understand quite naturally, one fine day, that it only remained for him to see Nature as it really is, without looking at the words or studying the opinions of others. From the moment he conceived this idea, he took some object, person or thing placed it at the end of his studio and began to reproduce it on his canvas in accordance with his own outlook and understanding he made an effort to forget everything he had learned in museums; he tried to forget all the advise that he had been given and all the paintings that he had ever seen. All that remained was a singular gifted intelligence in the presence of Nature, translating it in its own manner.¹²

Occupied with thoughts, which parallel this last quote, I enter my studio and attempt to come together with nature through painting.

¹²Emile Zola, Edouard Manet as quoted by Francis Francina and Charles Harrison, Modern Art and Modernism A Critical Anthology (New York, 1982), p. 30

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APPENDIX:

PAINTINGS

1. Untitled - Oil on Canvas - 4'x 6'
2. Untitled - Oil on Canvas - 4'x 6'
3. Emerging Form #1 - Oil on Canvas - 5'x 6'
4. The Barrens - Oil on Canvas - 4'x 6'
5. Emerging Form #2 - Oil on Canvas - 4'x 6'
6. Emerging Form #3 - Oil on Canvas - 5'x 6'
7. Emerging Form #4 - Oil on Canvas - 5'x 6'













