8-29-1989

Being of Shape: Being -- the ground through which all things are

Ruth Schultz

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation
Schultz, Ruth, "Being of Shape: Being -- the ground through which all things are" (1989). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BEING OF SHAPE
Being--the Ground through which All Things Are
By
Ruth Schultz

August 29, 1989
Approvals

Advisor: Mr. Philip Bornarth / __________________________
Date: 11/2/89

Associate Advisor: Mr. Edward Miller / __________________________
Date: 10/27/89

Associate Advisor: Mr. Lawrence Williams / __________________________
Date: 1/7/89

Special Assistant to the Dean for Graduate Affairs: __________________________
Date: 11/2/89

Dean, College of Fine and Applied Arts: Dr. Robert Johnston
Date: 11/13/89

I, Ruth Schultz, hereby deny permission to the Wallace Memorial Library of RIT, to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.
Date: October 25, 1989

Ruth Schultz
43 Bly Street
Rochester, NY 14620
To the person O. V. de Milosz, who echoed:

To some extent, I have only lived to have something to outlive. By confiding these futile remembrances to paper, I am conscious of accomplishing the most important act of my life. I was predestined to Memory.  

--L'amoureuse initiation
Proposal

This thesis is a study of the emergence of shape in painting, in the Twentieth Century, and the philosophy behind it. The exploration is of the shape, in Twentieth Century painting, as it evolved from form building in painting prior to the Twentieth Century.

The thesis is a series of paintings showing pictorial development of shape. The media, scale, and the support illustrate my motivations for painting.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENCOUNTER--FORM</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENCOUNTER--CONCEPT</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENCOUNTER--SELF</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF PLATES</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLATES</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

On these pages my intention is to address personal concerns about shape. 'Being of Shape' recognizes roots in form building of past centuries but concerns itself with shape development of this century. The intent here is not to define the words form and shape but to describe them in terms of painting.

The paper will expand upon and support the paintings. Particularly, the paintings' forward, backward, and sideward progression is marked by considerations other than the history of painting. Perceptions about my nature and mental outlook as they exist in this world excite questions. Words written by those who have realized the same, more, or not as much as I, have renewed, humbled, and tortured. Likewise, the effects of the words spoken to me and exchanged with me have been profound.

Influences of the world bombard. So do the fantasies. This paper is like the painting. It all comes at once, over time as expanded space.

Inceptions.--The real beginnings of 'Being of Shape' begin in traceries over the eons. But the roots of 'Being of Shape' begin in the recent past. Its movement originated somewhere in Abstract Expressionism's philosophy and went into color fields that could not contain it.

Describing form's tradition, Clement Greenberg has compared historical form building to the more recent shape development. With the beginning of this century painting abandoned tradition-bound, chiaroscuro and shaded modelling to come to form.¹ The limitations of the paint--the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment--were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly and indirectly.² Greenberg speaks of the attitude change.
Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors. The picture plane grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas; where they lie side by side or inter-locked or transparently imposed upon each other. Where the painter still tries to indicate real objects their shapes flatten and spread in the dense, two-dimensional atmosphere.3

Mark Rothko characterized shapes in these words.

They are unique elements in a unique situation. They are organisms with volition and a passion for self-assertion. They move with internal freedom, and without need to conform with or to violate what is probable in the familiar world. They have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms.4

The artistic milieu of the late 1940's and early 1950's has been pictured as "a set of shifting positions about an unknown center."5 William Seitz's words still hold. He called Abstract Expressionism "a perceptual structure, it suggests the possibility of valid generalization from concrete data, but at the same time acts as a warning recognition of the intangibility of zeitgeist--a reminder that pat formulations can be as false as they are precise."6

Although it was never a coherent movement or school in any accepted sense, Abstract Expressionism's ideological congruences may be the ground of perceived unity, even if they are largely oppositional to an academy or a prevailing set of beliefs and theories.7 What may be called the aesthetic orientation denotes a set of progressive experimental individual commitments. It is notable that the lure of the unknown propelled such diverse characters as Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Mark Tobey.

What approximates the nearest idea of an Abstract Expressionist manifesto is a manifesto against manifestos.

Once the political choice has been made, art and literature ought of course to be given up.
Whoever genuinely believes he knows how to save humanity from catastrophe has a job before him which is certainly not a part-time one. Political commitment in our time means logically—no art, no literature. A great many people, however, find it possible to hang around in the space between art and political action. If one is to continue to paint or write as the political trap seems to close upon him he must perhaps have the extremist faith in sheer possibility.°

This—a reaffirmation of the autonomy of art.

Not precluded is the ethical consciousness of the art maker. "Without ethical consciousness, a painter is only a decorator. Without ethical consciousness, the audience is only sensual, one of the aesthetes."° The art maker is of society, but in a very particular capacity.

More internally, art is about getting past personal expression. "When the artist transcends his personal anguish, when he projects in the midst of the shrieking world an expression of living and its end that is silent and ordered . . . that is opposed to expressionism."°° It is not a question of intent; it is according to one’s fate and character.

To further explain the background of 'Being of Shape' and its roots in Abstract Expressionism, Herbert Read describes the progressive front. In its purest and most revolutionary form, there was never a question of academic fixation. Inherent, was an advance from experiment to experiment, always maintaining the vitality and naivety, and avoiding any temptation to be satisfied with the purely decorative function.°°°

The abstract forms are not used to illustrate subjective themes. There is not the initial idea executed into the plastic equivalent. There is no precedent idea. The idea is the form, the form the idea. The idea is conceived, ab initio, in plastic terms. It cannot be translated into any other language, and is not itself a translation from any other language.°°°° Herein—the problem of words and Abstract Expressionism.
What further articulates the true correspondence to expression is not the style be it realism, super-realist, or abstraction, but the manner. By manner is meant the actual handwriting, the workmanship, of the artist. It is the difference between form and texture—forms may correspond and constitute a style, but within this style there may be infinite varieties of textures. It was never a matter of realism or abstraction.

On Being.--The paintings came to be, just about as directly or indirectly as anything the painter had ever done. Directly or indirectly compared to what? They wanted to be like the world they were in but they did not know how. They were of it.

As often as not, they could not be painted about, around, over, or through. They could not be spoken to, but with. But they all spoke. They seized. They had to be seized for some reason and then let go.

They all terrorized. The most simple thing was confusion. And at an end point it was just like that.

All that they left were more questions. What is it all about? As one man has said, "... we paint not what we see, but what we would like to see; not how we are, but how we would like to be." These words are not his exact words. They are the way I remember them.
ENCOUNTER--FORM

'Being of Shape' is page on top of page, layered on the tablet. The pages are erased or covered over, picked at or obliterated. What remains is an end point of what was covered as so, and what was to be uncovered as so. Through the work of painting itself, questions come to be.

Intimate still lifes based on fruit and vegetables orbs were flooded with light. They were mental landscapes at the same time. In those days there was a need to "get-a-hold of." The orbs took on various meanings depending on overall mood, the paint, the state of the world, the state of the painter. The orbs and their surroundings and their composition mattered. Solidity was the word used for what was sought.

Cézanne was important.--Cézanne knew that external form was secondary and that outward form was not that which causes a thing to take form. The shell had to be shattered. What remained to be painted?--cubes, spheres, cones. The elemental forms were broken by dimension of color, not the simulacra of the colors of nature. Concepts of color, space, and volume expanded.14

The late watercolors speak to the space of the objects on the picture plane. Space radiates around planes that cannot be assigned to any place at all: "a superimposing of transparent surfaces, and a flowing movement of planes of colors which overlap, which advance and retreat."15 It was a question of relations of relations.

Paradoxically, solidity was not the goal at all. Spatial desperation was the dilemma--to talk about near and later, and of far and now.

Gaston Bachelard had the words.--Bachelard's words created places known
before with those orbs. Reading the words during the last month's work brought the questions.—What if the words were encountered years ago?—Synchronicity. Those words would not have been known, really known, even one year ago. Are the words comprehended today?

A flower, a fruit orb, or a simple object suddenly comes to solicit thought of it, to dream near it, to help raise itself to the rank of companion to man. Once the object has been chosen, the object itself changes its being—an orb of the world, a flower of the world.¹⁶

Flowers and fruit orbs are already living in the being of the dreamer. Orbs of words murmuring memory, says the poet. Comfort and humility for the painter, another has already known.

To explain thanks to the orb, the whole being of the dreamer becomes round. Thanks to the flower, the whole being of the dreamer relaxes. Those forms were encountered in the painting process. The orbs represented a way to another place.

Rainer Maria Rilke proposes, "Dance the Orange."

Dance the orange. The warmest countryside,
Project it out from you, that it may radiate
ripeness in the air of its land! . . .¹⁷

Bachelard explains the word "cogito" as the oneiric activity in which a glimmer of consciousness subsists. The dreamer is present in a reverie. Even when the reverie gives the impression of flight out of the real, out of time and place, the dreamer of reverie knows that it is the dreamer who is absenting himself or herself and becoming a spirit of the past or of voyage.¹⁸ Reverie is born naturally in an awareness without tension.¹⁹
The cogito is a place to go to. It is in the world. It is a place that is like a room in a house that may be entered from the inside. But, from the outside of that same house there is no visible wall or dimension to explain how the room is contained in the house.

The renewing of the eternal garden carries the "cogito" of the dreamer in reverie not to images of color fragrances, but images of man. They are images of delicacies of feeling, the warmth of memory, and of the temptations to make offerings. Reverie does not recount. Reverie descends so deeply as to rid the dreamer of his or her history. The original solitudes leave indelible marks on certain souls. Reverie of original solitude returns the dreamer to primal life. It liberates from names.

The jar of anemones (windflowers) that set somewhere near the paint table was about those gardens and yet not. A huge leap of space and time separated that worldly image from the painting. That was the beginning of 'Being of Shape'.
ENCOUNTER--CONCEPT

The story projects into the painting
The painting goes back into the story
The world comes back and forth.

Art is a lot about wonder. It is not about picture making. Tracks from Marcel Duchamp's ideology are bothersome and intriguing. The controversial nature of Duchamp's work gave rise to the questions that art is about today. His effort to "de-aesthetize" art has revolutionized art making in the twentieth century.

I use Duchamp's words for my concerns. The imperative of his work was not about creation of a new language but to propose an attitude.

'Being of Shape' is not speaking a new language, but studying an old one and trying to speak in its own voice. Just like this paper, I thought I had to know, in order to write. I am writing the paper in order to know. Like the painting, I do not know, therefore I do.

I use the words "to make" speaking of the way in which my objects come to be. Creation and creativity are words that bring discomfort yet there is a need to reckon with them. Duchamp "did not believe in the creative function of the artist."20 Tangentially, all people are not artists, even if artist here means a role played in society by those who produce art pieces. Those who are the makers of new existences are the artists, if that is what they are named, because they do things in a certain indefinable but describable way.

'Being of Shape' came to be from the innermost need to see. Any kind of judgements on it are not based on aesthetic choices but on structural relationships and honest expression. The path is a search for the self but as it is perceived in the world--painting to get past painting.
Duchamp sought to put painting at the service of the mind, the final product being a wedding of mental and visual relations, and to put away the idea of the physical aspect of painting and get beyond the sensuousness of color. 'Being of Shape' asks, "what is painting?" Considerations of just what art is have led to replies that anything can be art in the right context. Therefore nothing can be art. "Any thing" cannot be painting. It seems that painting must go back to a primitive state, particularly a primitive psyche for reconsideration.

REDS, PLATE III, began from the concept of a two-panel work. The shapes' development came not only from the layers of paint on the canvas, but from other exigencies. Initial paint layers were of varying states of viscosity and dilutions. Use of resists, sanding, erasing, rubbing, slipping into oil paint, and scratched smears with charcoal invited shapes to emerge layer over layer. The result was an integrated configuration so unto itself as not to be pulled apart. Ordering occurred from within. REDS emerged from green.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty borrows from Gestalt psychology and speaks of the structures that comprise the orders within man. The physical, the vital, and the human orders, are disclosed as forms, as global structures in which each component part influences every other and in turn influenced by every other component. These components are total parts. They are parts, not in the sense of objective parts as portrayed by "realism." The components "maintain their specificity in the midst of global order." The order of the components of the configuration builds into the support; the visible end point of the work is the work that is left to be perceived by the viewer. The shapes develop into the form by reason of what they are. The shapes rise from quite another thing than appearances. They ask the viewer to look for their reality.
'Being of Shape' began in the summer warmth and grew from the intensity of it. It did not know this then and even now it is only part of the story.

Last summer a body of work came to be that was built in another way. Previously, the work was conceived from the figure-ground relationship. My background was gestural. During that summer there was a mental shift of time and space. It was a time when expectations ended. It had something to do with solitude and something to do with an understanding that the way to be--is just like that. Paradoxically it was a liberation and a sure commitment. (The joy was to see that which somewhat pleased for the first time.)

Edge of August PLATE I, happened out of response to the paintings preceding it. Maybe it should have been called August Series--august meaning that which is most high, intangible, and unreachable. These are not the dictionary's exact words. The title reflects: never being able to reach whatever IT is and never expecting to, but savoring all that is around IT. In the end there is the acceptance of the various modes of understanding and the various ways of construction to express understandings. There is no choice. The axis is within.

Mark Tobey's painting in gouache on paper entitled, "Edge of August" probably is connected to my triptych. Having read Tobey's words last summer and surely, at some point having seen a reproduction of the painting, would indicate a connection. The words "Edge of August" were spoken to me as well. There was the impact. The same words are perceived and absorbed in different ways according to what is already internally known.
We know only what we do, what we make, what we construct; and all that we make, all that we construct, are realities. . . . these images are the reality itself and that there is no reality beyond this reality except when in our creative process we change the images: then we have new realities. 23

Architectural Building.--*Edge of August* PLATE I, ended the summer work. It was the last of a series of similar nonobjective expressions. The building process spoke of architectural building. Shapes were built upon each other. They could not be pulled apart. They found their being in the paint and media saturations into and with the paper. As the layers dried the shapes emerged and brought new shapes into existence to be pursued. They were fragile and breath-like. Shapes came off the paper. Shapes grew.

For all the fluidity and lack of premeditation, the intention to build propelled the paintings. Light moving no matter how slowly over shapes, invited the layerings. Light fascinated. Cathedrals and whale bones?

Louis Kahn's words offer architecture as an Order. Order is spoken of in metaphor. It is an active creativity. It is a way things come into being. 24 In architecture there is a model of the underlying principles that govern the world, the forces that give it shape and space and time for its action. "Order is." 25 Architecture is the manifestation in form of the order of experience. It is a model of consciousness, the fitting between earth and sky. The patterns relate to one another. 26 As the shapes develop on the paper they give cause to the total work--a three sheet composition that would like to be viewed from all sides.

Color Architecture.--Red, made of every other color to some degree, was a primary builder. The ruddy-black composition that makes up *Edge of August* appeared as a result of varied saturations of acrylic paint and media into kochi paper. The
layers were interlocked and interleaved. The rectangular compositions were the constant shapes. The shapes which the media layers brought were the fluid and foundation-like shapes upon which to build. The use of more than one paper sheet for the total composition was a progression of the use of the series concept necessary to the statement.

Red in the darkest tones to red in the clearest transparencies spoke well. Those reds were blotted, dragged, soaked, brushed, sponged, rolled, and more. The paper allowed natural pooling. The grain of the wood table surface had something to say as well. The tactile nature of the paintings owes to the support. Tactility--a way to see more accurately.

_Desert Peace._--Life is a lot about wandering. Allowing oneself to wander and the ability to reap whatever those journeys might bring with responsibility is freedom's heart. The desert brings this to mind. Another had the words. Philippe Diolé wrote, the desert must be lived "the way it is reflected in the wanderer."^{27} Diolé invited a type of meditation in which, through a synthesis of opposites, we can experience concentration of wandering. "These mountains in shreds, these dunes and dead rivers, these stones and this merciless sun," all the universe that bears the mark of the desert, is "annexed to inner space."^{28} Through this annexation, the diversity of the images is unified in the depths of inner space--the correspondence between the immensity of the world space and the depth of inner space to build upon.

"In the hidden desert that each one of us bears within himself, and to which the desert of sand and stone has penetrated, the expanse of the spirit is lost in the Infinite, uninhabited expanse that is the desolation of earth's place of solitude."^{29}

The forces within are powers that come from the most primordial existence.
Words are interposed with the discussion of the works. The path circumvents. The painting comes from the center, from where the thing derives its meaning and source. It comes from an inner source. The word is soul—an inner vision that is expressed in sunlight and warmth and the effect of sunlight on brilliant colors in that heat. The viewer is asked to participate in the light. Certain people are able to see.

A painter speaks, a producer of lights. "The painter knows from what heat source the light comes.--The intimate meaning of the passion for red. At the core of such painting like this is a phenomenon of the soul. The body of work redeems an impassioned soul." 30

Art starts because it is work. It is not something abstract. Art work begins in the realm of the unmeasurable, goes through material means, and in the end is unto itself.

Specific Works.--The words speak of: Swing PLATE VI; Untitled Diptych PLATE II; Untitled on Canvas PLATE IV; and Heavy Metal PLATE V; as well.

Swing and Untitled on Canvas owe their existence to the importance of being staged in nearly square compositions. A very personal gestalt surfaced but only as a result of nonobjective expression. Nonobjective expression is real. The word stage is used to describe the staging of an event in time. The details of holding the support to the wall tell the idea of separate planes held together in a particular way. The details are significant. They are not by accident. They are crucial to another layer of thought. The details offer another exposure to the space that is of the painter.

Heavy Metal PLATE V; always had its own way. The dimensions (73"x36½") are roughly figurative dimensions. There was a universal scratch that would come to
mind. But it would elude. The painting held to its being and gave no heed to the painter. The painter finally saw and dared to let it be.

Heavy Metal is a paradox. It smacks of the question, "on the function of art:"

The child had never before seen the sea. One day, his father took him to see her. They traveled for many, many days until they found her, beyond the tall dunes, waiting, announcing herself in the powerful fragrant winds, and in the hoarse voices of waves breaking on the shore. When the child and his father finally reached the crest of the dune, the sea exploded before their eyes. The immensity and the brilliance of the sea was so great that the child fell silent, awed by her beauty. When he finally found words, he begged his father in trembling stutter, "Help me to see!"

And Heavy Metal is the sheathed solitude:

They are all like lives who are touched
Then let go of to go on to the next
Man is a vast being--vast secretive being.
"That art is non-conceptual in character seems to me self-evident; for what makes possible a work of art is not simply a good translation of ideas, but the capability of 'somehow' betraying those ideas."\(^{32}\) Leonel Moura's words only recently came to my attention. His words reflect my thoughts even though his media is not paint.

As quiet as my work is, there is a continued need to rebuild painting through shape development. Rebuilding painting from its foundations and taking it apart and putting it back together again calls forth new shapes and even new forms. This "taking apart" even down to the pigments' separation as it goes into the support is a key detail--the architectural color building--the monochromatic format. The assembly of the support, itself and the space the work is surrounded by are significant to the complete sense of the work and how it is perceived.

The words describing the painting speak of a need rather than a security of an end achieved. The words reflect desire rather than fulfillment. This another end point.

Along the way--"The right art," cried the Master, "is purposeless, aimless! The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede. What stands in your way is that you have a much too willful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen."\(^{33}\)

'Being of Shape's' perception of the world asks questions of how to be in the world. The answer is to begin again through painting.

There is so much to tell you now.
NOTES


10. Ibid. pp. 40 and 42.


12. Ibid. p. 51.

13. Ibid. p. 89.


17. Ibid., p. 156.

18. Ibid., p. 150.

19. Ibid., p. 151.


21. Ibid., p. 11.


25. Ibid., p. 18.

26. Ibid., p. 60.


28. Ibid., pp. 204-5.

29. Ibid., p. 205, Bachelard quoting Henri Bosco, L'antiquaire, p. 228.

30. Ibid., p. xvii.


# LIST OF PLATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. <em>Edge of August</em></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. <em>Untitled Diptych</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. <em>REDS</em></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. <em>Untitled on Canvas</em></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. <em>Heavy Metal</em></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. <em>Swing</em></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EDGE OF AUGUST

July 1988

acrylic on paper, each sheet 26x21\(\frac{1}{2}\)" with 1" separating sheets

PLATE I
UNTITLED DIPTYCH  September 1988

acrylic on paper, each sheet 25x 21½" with 1" separating sheets

PLATE II
UNTITLED ON CANVAS  January 1989

acrylic on canvas
84x72½"
HEAVY METAL  January 1989

acrylic on paper
73x36½"
SWING  March 1989

acrylic and charcoal on canvas
85x95½"
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


