Natural and Artificial Depth in Painting

Beth Baldwin

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NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL DEPTH IN PAINTING
BY BETH BALDWIN

Candidate for the master of Fine
Arts in the College of Fine and
Applied Arts of the Rochester
Institute of Technology.

May 29, 1967
Mr. Frederick Meyers
"All modern art is distinguished by a relatively greater freedom from the oppression of the subject..."
- William Irins, Jr.
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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND SCIENCE

Have artists failed to live up to the twentieth century challenge? This is quite a question, but one that should come to the fore more often than it does.

At one time we lived in a world that bred familiarity and love; now who even knows his corner grocer who once chose a beautiful piece of meat for him with care and concern? Today, man has cast himself off from that world, and must cope with an 'expanded scale of events' in a larger, more alien world. Within this world, there are new visions and new vistas being opened up with every new discovery, and the artist cannot ignore them.

"There must be feedback to our central scale of values from the new vistas that confront us in the scientific-technological fields. Our senses need to bridge these vistas and catch their meanings, their human overtones and undertones. Using our extraordinary vision, we can fashion such bridges."

- Gyorgy Kepes

Artists should not make the easy mistake of escaping into their own nostalgia and sentimentalism. They must advance to the level of knowledge that is possible today. According to Kepes, one must combine and incorporate all such knowledge, and gain thusly a sense of 'structure'... the power to see the world as an integrated whole. With all of our structural knowledge, what can stop the artist then, from using it along with his own personal reactions, to arrive at a statement true to our times?
I will not attempt to include in this paper a history of painting; however, the attempt of painters to come to terms with a world dominated by science is important here. The Cubists were trying to give up the complete representation of men and 'things'. They felt that their period had experienced a breakdown of classical ideas of space and time. In this climate of scientific innovation, (re: theories of space as well as Einstein's theory of relativity) the Cubists flourished. They tried to show space as something more than just a meager emptiness within which an object stands. They conceived that space could be looked upon as a system of relationships.

Today, in distinction to the Cubists, we have the new technology of optics; which can produce an image that incorporates everything we could see of a work as we move about it, and while changing our spatial relationship to it. Also, within the last quarter of a century, the typical scientific image has been transformed, and within this time came the important movements in paintings that resulted in unfocused, over-all textural works. Examples of these works include such notables as Antonio Tapies, Jean Dubuffet, and Mark Tobey.

"The highest prerogative of the artist is in fact that of being able to synthesize in a natural, and I would say almost involuntary manner, the characteristic sentiments of his own time and to translate them into forms valid for everyone."

- Pier Luigi Nervi
"Scientists say...there is no such thing as empty space. It's all loaded with life. We know it to be teeming with electrical energy, potential sights, and silent sounds, spores, seeds, and God knows what all."

- Mark Tobey

Can this idea of space, the twentieth century concept of what surrounds us, not excite the contemporary artist!? We are no longer bound by the ideas that came before Copernicus. Since the time of the discovery of the vastness of the universe, and the reaches within our own mind, artists have delved into the new and experimental.

Most of my work for the thesis has stemmed from the scientific work being done to extract pure water from sea water. Close-up photography of a water-oubole with its texture, and strong contrasts of light and dark seemed to lend itself beautifully to a painted image. From a literal translation of this subject, I went to free imaginative forms with no specific point of reference. Most of the shapes became circle or egg forms, with a margin reacting as a negative space to set off the textured form. Also, by contrast of the flat surfaces as opposed to the modulation of paste and styrofoam, the tactile image is thrown into focus. It takes on a character of its own and causes the material itself to be regarded as the means of expression.

"(There exists an) importance of the interplay
between imagination and the cold facts of task and material if the designer is to arrive at new, authentic solutions of form problems."
- George Kepes on Nervi's essay

As far as the imagery present in my three-dimensional shadowboxes is concerned, it is strictly an experimental method of approaching the collage. It began as a relatively flat collage with a protruding frame. When natural weeds were added, set in thick paste, (as a result of the influence of Jean Dubuffet) it was necessary to encase them in glass for protection.

It was then called to my attention that the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences had in their possession similar encased 'handiwork' from the Victorian period. There were for the most part, ornately framed boxes, containing flowers made from wax and human hair; designs executed with feathers; and natural dried weeds in straw baskets. Bell jars were also a common container for the executions.

In doing research, after developing an interest in this area, very little written material could be found. The consensus of opinion is, however, that many of these articles were done as a memorial to a loved one who had died. They would cut off the child's or woman's curls before the casket was closed, and frame them, or use them in some type of flowered arrangement. Common at this time also; (1860's) crosses were made from wood and
covered with wax and flowers, then to be put into a bell jar to eulogize the dead person. Many arrangements too, were done primarily for artistic purposes. Women would sit for hours working on a piece, with which to decorate her home. Even poor people were expected to be ingenious, in finding materials for such works; so instead of jewels and wax, they would use the dried weeds, shells and any other articles easily accessible to them.

Hearing of my interest in this subject, a photography student brought to me a framed collage which was done by his grandfather about the time of 1890. (see the following photograph) The standing, cut out figure, is actually the artist himself, and he has undoubtedly surrounded himself with the things he cared for; his dog, the lake and trees, suggestive perhaps of a particular spot that he loved?

In doing the two pieces of work along this line for the thesis, three thoughts dictated the resulting image:

1. To keep the work in modern terms; that is in the clean and unbroken lines of the box itself, as well as the 'crispness' of the finishing - as contrasted to the ancient and ornate character of the image. One was finished with a smooth walnut veneer, and the other with sharp white acrylic.

2. In the image itself, to be wary of a desire to
over-sentimentalize, or to have the combination of materials become saccharine.

3. To be aware of the 'actual' depth being created within. Especially in work number 5, where each piece put in was staggered; the final steel piece being placed so as to eliminate the sharp horizon line created by the box.
II PROPOSAL

Purpose of the Thesis:

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the problem of depth within a flat visual surface, using textures and relief surfaces as well as illusionary or artificial depth, to create an aesthetically pleasing perspective.

Scope of the Thesis:

The thesis will be based on investigation and readings of contemporary painting that deals in any unusual treatment of visual depth, and surface quality. This will be followed by further research on aspects of form and space, as well as the Victorian counterpart of actual depth in shadowboxes and bell jar assemblages.

There will be experimentation with different media; wood and canvas, modeling paste, wheat paste, styrofoam, sand, and other textures. It is questionable as to the number of paintings expected to be completed, but there will be one, at least, from each of the following areas of experimentation: Wood and canvas, 'natural' painting or assemblage encased in glass, and one of an illusionary nature with texture and depth achieved with line.

Alternate proposals suggested:

Relationship of micro-organisms to painting

Textural surfaces in painting
"Perspective is the science and art of representing objects on a flat surface so that they appear to exist in space. Linear perspective is the representation of the apparent outlines of objects. Aerial perspective is the representation of light, shadow, and color so as to produce correct effects of color, distance, etc."

- Josephine Green

When one thinks of perspective, it is very easy to fall back on the idea of the Florentine schools and the rigid format which they tended to follow. However, in my illusionary painting, as in many twentieth century works, depth is achieved through retaining the flat surface, this resulting in a flattened-out perspective. Area lays upon area, in between others, and at times loses itself in another area.

No rules to follow, no scientific approach? To a degree... the simple statement of perspective as stated above is all that is needed for my format. The quote is taken from a beautiful little book printed in the late nineteenth century; Perspective, by Josephine Green.

Let us take painting number 6 as an example. Areas are defined by simple linear perspective, although they appear at first to be 'using' the same space existing on one plane. Aerial perspective, per se, is not used in this painting except for the light brought into the top of the circle to show its relationship to the larger half-circle. Aerial perspective is brought into play more in painting 7. The color and tone help to keep one area separate from another. Although, in some spaces, the color change is very
subtle, sometimes relying only on the difference between the yellowing effect of Gesso as opposed to white acrylic. (see painting number 7)

Shading, with pencil and acrylic, is a further means of defining edges, and hence the limitations of an area, and its position in relationship to the rest of the painting. What I have been speaking of then, is actually the creation of an illusionary perspective, which leads us into the purpose of this paper...

NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL DEPTH

The question could very well be raised here; where does one end and the other begin? Particularly when one considers the depth of the textured paste...it is an actual depth but also creates a deeper illusionary perspective when used with shading.

So for the purpose of this thesis, natural depth will be defined as actual or real, that is, a three-dimensional perspective achieved through extending the picture plane with physical materials. Artificial depth then, is the illusionary three-dimensional effect achieved by linear and aerial means, and retaining the two-dimensional surface.

The two-dimensional paintings or those with artificial perspective were achieved through the use of the following methods:

1. Making use of linear and aerial perspective as
mentioned in the previous section on perspective.

2. Using paint thickley on a wash surface; which makes it appear 'on-top-of' the wash.

3. Making use of extended angles as opposed to straight areas.

4. In certain areas to be brought forward, a bright surface is utilized, such as spray paint (gloss) and silver leaf.

In the actual or three-dimensional paintings, the following methods were used:

1. Styrofoam under canvas to extend the picture plane.

2. Styrofoam cut and used in its natural state to bring out certain areas. Depth is also achieved within the pieces by burning and cutting into them.

3. Extension of the retangular canvas both in front and on the sides, by wood construction protruding from underneath the canvas.

4. By the use of actual boxes constructed from plywood and set-up as a shadow-box or diorama. Glass is placed in the front for protection of some of the natural materials, as well as to create a sense of 'self-contained' space.

Here I will deal with just number three, because details concerning the others are mentioned elsewhere in the paper. Although this might not be considered the most successful of the natural depth series, I think that it does have a
great deal of potential. It presented many problems; in construction of the armature, stretching the canvas, and in the image, if any, that goes on it. However, I feel that all of these can be worked out in doing a succession of paintings using the extended perimeter.

Immediately, the irregular shape of the canvas asserts itself upon the artist and viewer. It takes on an almost sculptural quality. Therefore; the lines must be kept simple, clean, sharp, unbroken and uncluttered. Any image whether it be realistic or abstract, must be also applied purely and simply, so as not to detract from the structure; which is, in itself, the primary 'image'.
III MODUS OPERANDI
MATERIALS AND TECHNICAL ASPECTS

There were many and varied basic materials used in my thesis paintings. Acrylic paint was found most satisfactory because of its fast-drying quality; it allows one to work quickly and spontaneously. Other materials used were modeling paste, sand, Elmer's glue, silver leaf, pencil, pen and ink, canvas, wood, and styrofoam. Modeling paste and styrofoam will be the only materials considered in depth because they contributed more to the development of my paintings, and their properties are less widely known.

"The creative man involved in the shaping of physical forms must have a deep respect for the nature of his material and for the structural pattern that this material dictates."
- George Kepes

In a sense, the 'structural pattern' dictated by the surface forms of the modeling paste became my major source of inspiration. Its organic character went well with the sand, gravel, and color tones, so that the texture united with the picture space to create one image.

The textures can be easily achieved if worked and manipulated while wet. In most cases I would use a tongue depressor or palette knife to swirl the paste and to scratch into it. Sometimes I would even use my fingers, especially for a 'stipple' effect. The thickness of the impasto done in this manner, modulates in depth and on the surface, by
A technical problem arose, as to whether or not resulting cracking was an adverse effect. Even when mixed two to one with Gel Medium and applied to dry canvas, the paste would form slight fissures on the top surface. Tests were then made on less flexible surfaces; styrofoam, and masonite, with and without the Gel added to the mixture. In most cases cracking still occurred, leading me to conclude that it is due to the rapid drying and separation between thin and thick areas, that cracking results. Therefore; the rigidity of the surface that the paste is applied to is not relevant. The cracking then, could be overcome by applying the paste in thin layers gradually until you achieve the desired thickness.

However, in my case, should I build up these super-imposed layers, a lack of spontaneity would result. The gestures of scratching through an entire area, and the fluidness of some of the shapes would be lost in such a process. Also, in nature and scientifically or organically orientated forms, perfection should not be a primary condition. We don't find it naturally so why should it be represented that way even in its abstracted form?

One might refer also, to the Spanish painter, Antonio Tapies. He seems to work entirely with abstract spaces and surfaces upon which one might find not only cracks, but bubbles and scratches as well. Tapies himself defines the
miracle of painting as being 'when dull, inert matter begins to speak with incomparable expressive force.' It is the force of this matter that becomes expressive, and to me, it requires a direct application; the crackings, if they appear, need to be accepted (or ignored) as a part of the action.

Styrofoam, the second material that contributed significantly to the development of my technique, was used primarily to extend the physical depth of the canvas. In one painting it was covered with canvas and lost any function other than as an extender. Thereafter, it was left in its natural state and merely cut into shapes with a small saw. Then, by various means; puncturing, spraying (enamel spray paint) and burning, a textured surface was achieved. The result is a ruined, decayed feeling or one of decomposition. Plexi-glass cement can be used on the styrofoam to dissolve it; deterioration of the cells takes place and it sometimes forms a web-like structure. Acrylic paint adheres well with two or three coats built up, and a very rich surface is obtained.

The only problem encountered is perhaps one of aesthetics. it is rather difficult to assimilate the character of the styrofoam within the entire 'image' of the painting.
COLOR

In the context of most of my painting, color becomes secondary and the geometrically or texturally defined form becomes the major element. The range of tones are even confined to a scale of the greatest simplicity, giving the image an almost metaphysical flavor.

Most of the color is not only subtle, but leans heavily to either cool or warm tones. Color exists within the form and is also used to further define it outside the area.
IV CONCLUSIONS

Some, much more experienced in the field of painting than I, may find my conclusion rather simple and obvious. However, to myself, the results of my undertakings were rather exciting...and surprising.

In the beginning I felt that building out with materials, such as styrofoam, would result in an almost scatheless statement of the three-dimensional image on a two-dimensional surface. I desired a feeling of depth that I did not think possible without extending the surface with physical materials.

Now, it appears to me, that the artificial or illusionary paintings have much more to offer in the way of depth. They go back in space dimensionally because of overlapping and aerial perspective, but more importantly because of the image they impart. (Depending entirely upon what the viewer brings to each work, or to what extent he 'pushes' the field of vision.) A painting such as number 9 lends itself easily to fantasies of outer space, volcanic depths, and so on, ad infinitum.

An analogy one could use here is one of radio versus television. In the days of Amos and Andy, the Lone Ranger, and of course the murder mysteries, the power of imagination ranged free. The creaking door or the clapping of hoofs sent one's mind into wonderful visions and fantasies. TV: how much is left to the invention of the individual and his own personal creativeness? Everything is there, to
accept or reject.

The same with 'actual' depth. Although in some cases it works better than others, the 1 1/2" of styrofoam remains 1 1/2" of styrofoam. The irregular canvas begins to work better, perhaps because of the relationship between the natural and artificial depth. Otherwise, there is no illusion taking place with actual depth. All that is happening is in response to the physical dimensions and their limitations.

I feel that the research done for this thesis "Natural and Artificial Depth in Painting", was valuable to me and I hope in some way to those who shall read it. It is sufficient to say that I will continue painting along these same lines, perhaps experimenting with bio-plastic as the textural image as in painting number 14.

Natural depth and illusionary depth in painting is an area that should be explored and expanded upon NOW. With our new vision, materials, and zest for things 'tangible', the discoveries possible through exploring dimension itself, are--- unmeasurable ---- exciting ---- real ------

fanciful ------- and ----------

unavoidable!
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