Notes on Liberation

Phillip Garbus

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JOSEF JOHNS: THESIS ADVISOR TO PHILLIP GARBUS
A CRITIQUE OF THE WRITTEN AND PAINTED THESIS

When an artist discusses his work and his life the result is usually a well-intentioned bore. Mr. Garbus' written thesis has the directness and simplicity of his paintings: there is a sense of discovery in both forms. In the written thesis there is the discovery of an alternative lifestyle and a sensual awakening; in the painting there is the distinct impression of a series of discoveries and it is the way superb modern pictures should look.

The fact that Mr. Garbus works intuitively and without any apparently fixed aims accounts perhaps for the charm of his style of writing as well as that of painting. He seems to be guided in this crazy, almost sensual way to create pictures which are compositionally flawless and brave enough in scale to assure the viewer of a kind of solid authority not generally found in such a young an artist.

At one point I had a great disagreement with Mr Garbus when it seemed that he was striving to make his paintings witty, even campy. Visual jokes are always a bore—they date quickly, like the poster or clever bumper-sticker of the moment, and to put a visual joke on canvas, well, Marcel Duchamp did it once and for all and very long ago at that. Fortunately Mr Garbus' good taste finally had him using his witty motifs as a stylistic point of departure and I heaved a sigh of relief.

Mr Garbus has a way of experimenting which is entirely unpretentious; everything is eventually absorbed into the body of his work which is so naturally sophisticated that it really does not allow for obvious "trends". Originally his "Argyle" series began as a painting far too controlled, almost scientific and most certainly alien to the rest of his work. It was disturbing in its self-consciousness and quite unlike the primitive monumentality of the others. Ultimately of course the argyle shape became another motif and the calculated pattern was surrounded once again with those wonderfully big old sloppy sections of paint.
That Mr. Garbus is fundamentally an abstract-expressionist seems to surprise no one; but it surprised me, and pleasantly. In the face of hoards of art students today whose product has been limited to a vague kind of "photo" realism, Mr. Garbus seems a refreshing throwback: everyone knows by now that art is either dead or dying, and perhaps unconsciously Mr. Garbus' pictures lend strength to the notion that the last truly great movement in painting which was validly alive was Abstract Expressionism. Therefore it isn't a question of a revival but merely an extension of a style which in fact never deserved such an early death.

His colours are delicious and strange, the shapes are powerful, yes; but one of the most interesting facets of his work is the fact that the small pictures bear the same sense of monumentality as the large canvases. Everything is bold and the detail never cramps the sweeping style.

Perhaps it is unique, even peculiar, that a student chooses to write a thesis not about another artist or a period in art history but rather about himself; and if so, why not? Mr. Garbus talks about the fact of "hiding" behind his work. In a sense every artist does precisely this, but how pleasing not to have to be confronted with canvases steeped in esoterica and self-indulgent symbolism. Mr. Garbus paints extremely good pictures and that is that. He also, in an entirely separate context, discusses his life in a most disarming fashion. Once again as in his work, there are no pretensions and for this reason alone one does not find so unconventional a thesis the least bit disconcerting.

Of course it is an apparent necessity that Mr. Garbus, at this stage of personal development, speak of his private life with excessive candor. Inadvertently however he seems to be aware of the natural curiosity that most people have concerning the lives of artists and he is prepared to tell nearly all. In his thesis he has flanked himself with homosexual artists of the past to strengthen his point of view. It is very distinguished company indeed; but it is a tragic and unfortunate fact that the struggle for understanding is really no less for today's homosexual than it was for Oscar Wilde and friends. It seems inconceivable that the 20th century mind is no more advanced than that of the 19th century when it comes to sexual relations, but the sweet urgency of Mr
Garbus's plea for compassionate understanding makes this all too apparent.

Josef Johns
May 15th 1974

Josef Johns
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

NOTES ON LIBERATION

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE THESIS COMMITTEE,
THE GRADUATE PROGRAM
OF THE COLLEGE OF FINE AND APPLIED ARTS
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY
PHILLIP GARBUS

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
MAY 1974
"I would almost go so far as to say that periods and countries without homosexuality are periods and countries without art."

Andre Gide, Corydon
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INTRODUCTION

When I first had to think about what I was going to write about for my thesis, I found it very easy and at the same time very difficult. The decision to write about myself was very easy but the approach appeared quite difficult. During the past two years I have revealed a great deal about my personality and all that that entails, more than I have in the previous twenty-two years of my existence. Talking about it is one thing, but having to sit down and put my thoughts on paper is quite another thing. It is something that I find very tedious and uncomfortable to do. I will ask questions. You will ask questions. Some will be answered, others will not. All sorts of assumptions will be made and you will draw all kinds of conclusions. Some of you will agree with what I have written and you may have shared similar experiences. Others will disagree and feel that what I have written is irrelevant and blown way out of perspective. But this is your privilege. I have tried to be as open and honest as I can be. It's up to you to try to understand me, if you wish.
PART I

Ever since I can remember, I have been interested in art. Although I have a very poor memory—things that happened yesterday escape my mind—I believe I started fooling around with clay and watercolors when I was seven or eight. My interest of course was at various levels, according to what materials were available and how much I could spend to buy new materials. My aunt, as an artist in her own right, also devoted much time to help me. She was a great influence on me. People close to me did not see or realize the state of confusion my mind was in, but the interest was there, the fantasies and ability to create something was there.

During high school I was in a leadership capacity with the yearbook. Because I had the confidence in what I was doing, and that my way of doing things was right for the moment, or at least better, I had few friends. I still feel that when I am confident about something, I am right. My sensibilities are tuned right. This may be my greatest weakness. I need someone to show me otherwise. Deflate my ego.
High school was not much fun. I stayed home a lot. Mostly all the time, except when I was doing some photography at a sporting event. Dates. Four or five. Mostly to dances, the junior prom. But, I really can't say I regret anything about those years. They can not be relived. I can only use my experiences from the past to help make today a little better.

My serious painting began when I was a sophomore at Syracuse University. 048-40-0398. I could find no way to escape from this shell I had built around me. Or had society, with all its bigotry hatred and ignorance built it for me? Society is much too obliging. However, I was quite sucessful with the painting I was doing and had been recognized for it. But there was something missing in my work, in me.

Others recognized a barrier in front of my work, too. It prevented my work from being as liberated as I should be. Not necessarily politically, but emotionally. (This is not to say we should not be totally liberated. We should. We must be). My senior drawing teacher sensed a barrier, something holding me back. In front of the class one day he told me I was hiding behind my painting. Second guessing. I don't know.
There were six or seven of us "guys" who had lived on the same dormitory floor all through college. We got along fine, had fun, had arguments. But, when the others horsed around, like I suppose all young college men do, I was not that ready to get involved. I would have enjoyed it a lot more than they would realize. I even had a girl friend come up for the weekend. Several times. Had to be one of the "guys". You can go to great lengths, it even hurts sometimes, just to try to make a point. It didn't work.

My four years at Syracuse were worthwhile at least because I developed a desire to paint. I broke away from feeling uncomfortable with a four-inch wide paint brush and a gallon of manganese blue. They are now a part of my repertoire. But it was finally time to develop as a total person and realize who and what I was. To break out of my shell. It was something that I longed for and finally I had the courage to act on my desires.

I've known for a long time that my sexual feelings were different from those around me. Today, most people that I'm around share similar feelings. I have always loved to look at men. I still do. I love men.
I want my work to be an extension of me. It must be. How can an artist deny something that is such an integral part of his life? So natural. To deny and repress my sexuality is to deny myself life. A person's sexuality is still only a small part of his existence, and I hesitate to put such strong emphasis on it. But, although it has not that much to do with my painting per se, it has a great deal to do with me as a total human being. Since my painting is a part of me and my sexuality is a part of me, to deny either one its full right for existence is wrong.

I will maintain that an artist needs this: a special world of which he alone has the key. It is not enough that he should bring one new thing, although that is already an achievement; but rather that everything in him should be or seem new, seen through a powerfully coloring idiosyncrasy.

He must have a personal philosophy, aesthetics, and ethics; his entire work tends only to reveal it. And that is what makes his style. I have discovered too, and this is very important, that he must have a personal manner of joking, his own sense of humor.

Andre Gide

When I moved to Rochester in May, 1972, I knew the first thing I had to do was find someone I could feel comfortable with, someone to talk to. We all need someone to talk to, to confide in, to discuss things that we have
not told anyone before. Release. People at The Gay Liberation were like salvation. It was the most important thing to happen to me since birth. This might seem a little exaggerated, but this self-acceptance was like a second birth, or a rebirth, a renaissance. If you can not accept yourself for what you are, and be proud of who and what you are, can others be ready to accept you?

One can therefore say the following, which I see as a kind of inverted sincerity (on the part of the artist). Rather than recount his life as he lived it, he must live it as he will recount it. In other words: his portrait, which his life will be, must be identical with the ideal portrait he desires; and in simpler terms, he must be as he wants to be.

Oscar Wilde

I don't talk about my work that much to people. Most of the time I talk because I sort of have to, and sometimes I am not in the mood, in the groove. I feel I must explain things about myself or at least let people know what's really going on in my head. To be totally open and honest with them. Not hold back for fear of something. It's my personality. My work is my personality.
When exhibiting my work, of course I don't bring along my life story in detail. That would be absurd. Those that are not familiar with me have have a much different attitude about my work, That is logical. Those that are close to me can see my personality in my work, they see what I am striving for and more. Strangers assume and/or analyze my work in a different way, and maybe a lot more. What is he really like? What is he thinking? That's fine, too.

As I stated previously my sexuality has little to do with my painting per se, but my attitude does have a great deal to do with the way I function as an artist. I feel that if someone is really interested in my painting, they should be just as interested in me as a personality. I think I'm involved in more diverse activities outside the painting studio than most others. This affects my attitude. People who know me casually or who are good friends have to accept me as a total person and all that that entails or they can not logically accept me as an artist.
PART II

The shapes that are in my paintings, more recently the teeth, do not just come out of the air. They have evolved. My paintings are always evolving, always changing. To put it in simpler terms, or to explain this evolution I must begin with my painting at Syracuse.

I was quite involved with painting bands of color, texture and form that related to each other, the canvas, and the world. Most were horizontal, some were vertical. Although I never used the landscape per se, as a basis for my thoughts, I did start by turning around a photograph of a horizon view of Syracuse, with green rolling hills and gray buildings. Hence, the rolling hills became vertical abstract bands of color and texture. There were other less related objects in the painting. That's where it all began.

A while after, the bands developed little curves and squiggles. Not as a major element but just another ingredient to the painting. I always like to put something into the painting that maybe is unexpected. Or just to throw the viewer off for a second or two. Does it really belong there? Of course.
These little curves soon developed into shapes that come to a point. The birth of the tooth. After working with the pointed zig-zag shape for a while, the actual tooth shape got extracted from everything else and stood alone. Flying, having relationships with the other teeth, the other shapes and colors. It has its own life.

I love color. I always have. It reflects the particular mood I am in at the time. Although the colors I have been using the past two years are quite brilliant and sometimes off-beat, they are not the colors I have been accustomed to using. At Syracuse, I used mostly blues, grays and whites. Maybe they reflected the mood I was in at the time. Fezandie and Sperrle, Inc. in New York City provides me with a glorious list of colors. I love getting the order in the mail and opening up the envelopes with all that brilliant color inside. They are really beautiful.

In several of my more recent paintings I toyed with the argyle shape. It too came from the tooth, another departure. But the shape was also inspired by this fabulous pair of argyle socks I have. Brilliant colors and silver threads running through them. Again, the argyle was not a dominant shape or theme, I didn't want it to be, but rather another ingredient, a different kind of element to introduce into my work.
I find it very difficult to work from drawings. It becomes too mechanical. What worked with a drawing doesn't necessarily work with a painting. Why would I want to paint a painting from a drawing? It should stand by itself. What happens with my work and that I find exciting, is what happens along the way. Intuition, my subconscious, my conscious, my fantasies. I'm constantly making decisions about a painting. Sometimes when I get very frustrated with what I am doing, I either have to destroy what I've done, or I must leave it for a few days. I come back later and it's a completely different painting. Or at least I have a different attitude about it. That works.

When I started to paint at Syracuse, I was greatly influenced by and interested in the Abstract Expressionist period. I still employ a lot of what those painters did at that time, in terms of the actual physical painting. A lot of rags, paint, wiping, color, brushes, small ones, wide ones and energy. Add and subtract. But there are times when I feel I have to be a little more formal. I can usually solve problems that develop out of my work myself. Then there are times when it's very difficult to be objective about something that you have been looking at for several weeks. Then you need an outside stimulus, a distraction, a breadth of fresh air to actually allow you to see what it is you are doing.
Scale is important. I want the actual size of the work to almost overpower me. But not quite. The actual paint on the canvas is under my control. The lifting, turning and positioning of the canvas is all very physical, very important. It is a part of the work. The painting itself is not that precious. The experiences are. People are.
After people read this thesis, hopefully they will walk away with some new thoughts and ideas to ponder. A better look at me. I would like them to have gotten some new perspective and outlook on life and people in general. Once I sat down and starting plugging away on the typewriter, it was not as difficult as I thought it would be. It just took a lot of ambition to begin. It has been a learning experience for me, and I hope for others as well. Now most of my personal thoughts and philosophies about art and life are on paper. This is a first. This thesis should be a starting point for those who might share similar life styles and/or ideas who hitherto could not freely express themselves. It should inspire people. Once this barrier is broken inside people, they can open up their eyes to a whole new world. That is the important thing. To enjoy people, life, and love.
NATIVE MOMENTS

Native moments—when you come upon me—ah you are here now,
Give me now libidinous joys only,
Give me the drench of my passions, give me life coarse and rank,
To-day I go consort with Nature's darlings, to-night too,
I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the midnight orgies of young men,
I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers,
The echoes ring with our indecent calls, I take for my love some prostitute— I pick out some low person for my dearest friend,
He shall be lawless, rude, illiterate, he shall be one condemned by others for deeds done,
I will play a part no longer, why should I exile myself from my companions?
O you shunned persons, I at least do not shun you,
I come forthwith in your midst, I will be your poet, I will be more to you than any of the rest.

Walt Whitman
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Argyle #1  Acrylic  68" x 90"  1974
Argyle

Lithograph

20" X 23"

1974
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Most of the books I have read in preparation for this thesis are about people. What could be more fascinating? How did these artists handle their sexual identity and what effect did it have on them and their work? The most recent, and still living artist is a musician, Ned Rorem. His Paris and New York diaries detailed his career, and very candid personal, sexual anecdotes. The others were a little more reserved. Oscar Wilde was tried and sentenced to prison because of his homosexuality. Some talked about it in a small circle of friends and others wrote about it rather openly. Certainly if today's standards were more relaxed, gay artists could feel better about openly expressing themselves. There are very few books written by gay artists who feel comfortable enough to candidly write about their experiences, as well as sell them to the public.


