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IRREGULAR PAINTINGS

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"All things, particularly in art, are the theory developed and applied in contact with nature."

Cezanne

"Can one make works which are not works of art?"

Marcel Duchamp
INTRODUCTION

Panofsky's definition of art is as follows:

Art is a man made object which by its intent demands aesthetic experience as a result of human perception and its form is relative to the culture from whence it came.

Herbert Read's definition of art is as follows:

Art is a means of symbolic communication based on ideas or the establishment or the clarification of truths. It contains organization and is capable of communicating a mental experience to other people. Art is responsible for man's adjustment to his environment.

Read says that culture is the result of art and Panofsky just the opposite. Panofsky states that art is the result of the totality of man's intellectual and cultural being. I think perhaps the difference occurs in that Panofsky is a historian and Read a philosopher. In terms of both fields I can claim to know only a minimum and, therefore, cannot make judgment as to the validity of either argument.

The criteria which follows is a combination of ideals needed in a work of art paraphrased from Panofsky and Read.

1. It is an object (a composition).
2. It demands aesthetic experience.
3. It is particularly relative to our culture.
4. It is a symbolic form of communication.
5. It is based on ideas.
6. It contains organization.
7. It gives a mental experience.
I feel that both writers are establishing the same case with the exception of one point; that is the point about art being the result of culture or vice versa.

As an artist I find it vital to my work to define the meaning of art and to keep within the context of the subject as a result of this criteria.
PART I - IRREGULARITY IN PERIMETERS OF PAINTINGS

Experimentation in "irregular" canvases began with the idea of birds' wings. They extend outward from the main body of the bird. I felt that I wanted to work on the essence of the wing-forms, rather than the space around. I proceeded to execute in wood a sculptural relief of feather like forms, which was to be mounted on a larger square base. When I finished the relief, I decided that no background was needed. The form existed in our environment and to give it another background would have been redundant.

The old fashioned idea of painting was that one viewed the images through a window, a perimeter of which is the edge of the picture plane, the effect was somewhat a two dimensional stage set. I felt that the idea was old fashioned to supply another background, when the one we exist in is suitable to my needs.

I also observed the support of this idea in the art of several contemporary weavers; notably works of Dorian Zachai and Dominic DiMare.

"As such, these strong, free hanging three dimensional works emanate a concrete reality as objects of conceptual and imaginative forms with backs, fronts, insides and outsides that are real rather than illusionary (as in tapestry which took its inspiration from painting) completely available to touch and sight -- a communicative sculptural presence, a depth of textural adventure, and the self-rejuvinating technological energy of the craft of hand weaving."
These new American weavers have taken the tapestry as their jumping-off place. Up to the recent past, the tapestry, traditionally confined to the wall, followed the lead of painting in the weaver's search for a visual and emotional language. In our milieu of artistic experimentation in which all materials and techniques are being challenged and re-investigated, these tapestry makers have found their contemporary reality in the pure object—-in formal innovations and spatial exuberance. It is the same spirit that infuses the struggle of painting to leave the flat canvas, and sculpture, the base.\(^1\)

The image becomes more real when our real environment serves as its background. In terms of directness I feel an image is only complicated by a "background".

In excluding background I found that almost all of my paintings with the exception of those of geometric form, will be irregular. Where I have used a wood relief I think the ground could be considered background. I do not feel that geometric shapes are irregular. However, then, background exists in degrees.

The concept of real form in combination with illusionary forms is an integral part of my involvement.

I became interested in third dimension because I was tired of flat illusionary painting. I felt much like this quote from Robert Rauschenberg, contemporary American painter of the New York school.

"I just liked working with these objects as objects, and I liked the idea that a picture could come out into the room."\(^2\)

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1 CRAFT HORIZONS, March/April, 1963, The New Tapestry, pg. 10
2 BRIDES AND BACHELORS, pg. 217-218
Mr. Rauschenberg uses "found" articles, that is, articles which man used and discarded; bits of trash, newspaper and metal found on the streets. I differ in that I make the objects I incorporate with a few found forms. I feel that incorporating another painted article or construction on a larger one accentuates the subordinate part and punctuates the larger. There are certainly limitations in painting, one of which is that paint is relatively flat. I feel the need to build areas out of other materials. The end result is a painting with third-dimensional parts, some of which are painted on.

There is no problem of illusionary foreground, middleground, or background. They are all real existing things in my painting. Parts actually stick out into our environment and others naturally recede, sculpturally. This again draws me to my point that my paintings are things existing in our environment.

My preoccupation with the relationships of real to illusionary form led to the concept of "irregular paintings".

When I started work with real objects such as commercial stretchers, I found that it was necessary to extend outward from a given format. It would have been necessary to change by cutting or bending the shapes of my objects to fit them into a given square, circle or rectangle. I simply let them hang comfortably off the edge of my paintings, rather than compressing an object into a too-small space at the edge of a painting.
In short, I felt limited by the physical properties of squares, rectangles or circles. I eliminated the problem by not allowing their shapes to limit what I did to the surface on which I worked.

The irregularity of my paintings is due almost completely to the occurrence of materials other than paint on my canvases. These materials then had to be used in accordance with qualities inherent in themselves.
PART II - METHODS OF CONSTRUCTION AND TREATMENTS OF MATERIAL

Papers were attached by soaking in acrylic medium and permanently bonded in plastic. When the water vehicle evaporated the paper was adhered and strengthened by plastic permeation. The plastic puts a protective coating over the whole painting.

I found that additional color vibrance and transparency could be produced with a layer of varnish over acrylic color. The oil in the varnish made the acrylic colors more transparent. Gold leaf was applied on certain paintings with acrylic polymer medium, rather than the traditional gold leaf varnish technique. The thin sheets were then coated with plastic, thus protecting them.

In some of the later paintings where birds were used, the acrylic medium served to seal the birds from moisture, to seal in the smell and to strengthen their brittle bodies which were dry and prone to cracking. Water base glue worked adequately to attach light objects, others were nailed with tacks and brads, nailing directly into the ground. When shingles were used, nails were the obvious solution, since shingles have been attached to buildings with nails for centuries. The birds where glued to the surface, then coated with acrylic medium. The combination of glue and plastic made the birds adhere firmly to the ground.

Various types of wood were used. I used balsa wood because of its elastic quality, and harder woods where they were to be glued into position. The thin balsa sticks could be bent and pinned into position as direction lines. The common pins that
were used became a visual element of the paintings as well as structural. Little attention was paid to the texture of the wood because most of it was to be painted anyway. The cedar shingles were the only real exception because the color is beautiful and a strong visual quality in itself.

A substantial ground had to be found suitable for supporting heavy objects nailed or glued onto it. The ground was in most cases 1/2" plywood because I could attach canvas first then heavier objects by nailing through it.

Extensions could be attached securely by nailing support beams across the main section and to the extension. When the seam was filled the two parts seemed, from the front, to be a whole unit.

On three occasions I chose to include areas of vitreous enamel on copper as a central point in the composition. Vitreous enamel is like a ceramic glaze in that it is a fluxed glassy material on a metal surface. It lent itself to the painting metaphorically as a landscape or some other abstraction. The enamels were glued or bolted into permanent position on the picture plane.

In creating objects, one has no consideration for framing because the painting is created as a whole. A frame tends to set aside or section off from our environment an area which heretofore we called a painting. As I see it, since objects are in our environment, no frames are needed; however, there is an occasional edge to be covered for the sake of finish. I chose to do this with aluminum stripping which was screwed into the sections requiring such finishing. The edges of the two round paintings
show the tacks used to stretch the canvas over them. This is sufficient in that they are objects that merely exist on a wall; their occurrence needs no excuse or enhancement. (The canvas is, of course, held in place by tacks. Why not see them? They are a quality in themselves.)
PART III - THE INDIVIDUAL PAINTINGS AND APPROPRIATE COMMENTS

The first two paintings, both birds, were a development of a single idea. Both are bird-flower forms and both are wood reliefs. Only one contains acrylic color and then only black, white and grey. Both the paintings have brown paper extensions.

Some concepts began early, for example, the idea of extension itself, though it was not until sometime later that I thought of paintings as objects.

The idea that direction lines have more strength when they begin outside of the painting, or rather that the painting be thought of as an object that has parts extending into space, occurred here.

Base-relief occurred here also and continued through all paintings to date. Here the black serves to unify the types of woods used in the relief. The white heightens the relief in certain areas. The extension is a continuation of the feather forms, but flat rather than relief.
The second painting contains elements of metal, cloth, wood and paint, including the sinkers below. Whether or not the painting is a painting containing sculpture is not the question. It is simply that some of the areas of the painting extend toward the viewer and others naturally fall back. The depth of the painting was accentuated by dark umber oil paint directly on the cloth.

The image of the lead fishing sinkers below came to be musical to me in the sense that notes occur on a staff of musical notation, perhaps, above which exist the idea of what the notes are doing.

The woven forms influenced me to hang the cloth forms off the bottom of the painting, since I was working with an object.

The idea that an extension below could occur is the important idea to note in this painting. In this case the tying of the strands to a part of the painting logically produces unity between the object and the sinkers below. They hang there quietly because they have to, or fall to the floor.
The Piero della Francesco Madonna Del Uovo comes immediately to mind when one views the orange "Pomeander Ball" in this painting.

This painting is the natural development from the last. The crown is gold leafed balsa. It surmounts the enamel portion. Suspended below the "Crown" like some incense laden burner is a cloved stuffed orange. It swings freely from the light area to a dark. The odor from the orange seems to flatter the gold leaf and rich brown tan colors present in the painting.

Balsa lines move horizontally across the composition preventing the viewer from being caught by either the enamel or the orange. The cloth ends like tongues, hanging down as in the weavings. The lines of direction begin logically outside the central canvas and continue across to end logically just beyond the opposite side. The extensions are slight in this painting, but I still am not limited to keeping inside the window.
A poetic image exists here of shingles raining, if not extending upward, from the side of a structure. Perhaps it is the end of a house. At any rate, the space at the left is something different from the shingled area. The shingles extending upward were painted black to emphasize the height of the canvas.
The circular painting with the bell occurred as irregular when the small canvases which I tacked there would not fit inside the circle. There is a progression of rectangular elements across the circle. The bell is suspended and can be rung by a string extending to the right side of the picture.

The idea occurred here of real objects in the same painting with illusionary painted ones. The bell is a found object as are the shingles. These are "combined" with small canvases, paper and paint.
Birds in Paintings:

A fellow graduate student said he had found a dead bird in his cellar. At first I was intrigued with the images I had seen in my childhood books, witches with birds hanging by one foot. Durer also did a water color of a dead bird in his superb style of craftsmanship. As a child could be fascinated with an image, I used the first starling, hanging it by its foot. It had been dead a long time and was well dried out. Since I was alarmed about disease, I decided to coat the bird's body with acrylic and I felt that the odor might also be sealed in permanently.

The birds lent themselves naturally to my now solid idea of doing irregular canvases because of their shapes. They could easily be hung to protrude off the bottom or stuck off in any direction as demanded by the design.

As I worked, combining this real object into the painting, regarding it as a shape, I realized the significance of the dead bird. (Picasso's idea was that a painting is not worth painting if it's not Picasso-shocking.) The birds have shock value if nothing else. I used not only the whole birds but the wings of one. The wings were of extraordinary color and construction. The parts of the paintings were perhaps drawn in, pure analytical admiration of the anatomical structure of the bird's wings.

Birds could be painted, cut, put in relationship to other things and arranged in numbers.
Death is "a part of life", a basic universal which the birds represent to me. Also, the question of how birds come to be in the painting presents a proper source of shock stimulus for the viewer.

The basic shape that the bird becomes when coated with paint is, however, the element with which I choose to work. If a symbolic connotation comes from the colors or composition, an almost inevitable occurrence, I accept it.

The birds are used with or without other construction areas. The wings sometimes hang naturally off the edges of the small pictures. Sometimes an extension with an illusionary wing is placed in juxtaposition with the real wing. Extensions are sometimes designed to protect the delicate feathers of the real wings from being crushed when the object is in storage.
CONCLUSION

"What seemed to be endless possibilities for invention afforded by a painting's flat surface and the creation of spatial illusion upon it no longer suffice: the extension of abstract painting onto oddly shaped flat supports and, more recently, three-dimensionally constructed surfaces is occupying growing numbers of painters (in a period which also is witnessing the proliferation of painterly ideas in sculpture). Work of this kind has a sort of intrinsic physical excitement-stretching, straining, an often implausible material tension--and an implication of formal daring, in the wake of the entire modern tradition with its fanatical aversion to illusionist space and its insistense on painting as the affirmation of a flat surface."3

The citing here of the new concepts of painting affirm for me that the direction I have taken in this thesis is valid. It further brings to mind one of my original quotes by Marcel Duchamp:

"Can one make works which are not works of art?"

3 Solid Anti-Geometry, ART NEWS, March, 1966, pg. 56
Bibliography of Readings:


I  "Purpose of the Thesis":

In a series of paintings I intend to explore the extension of paintings outward from regular perimeters and away from their flat surfaces.

II  Scope of the Thesis:

In this area it will be necessary to become involved in contemporary trends of Art. Readings from Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, John Cage, Marshall McLuhan, etc will be necessary to develop theory.

In 8 to 10 paintings I will explore the ideas I have formulated. The work will combine 2 and 3 dimensional techniques. Combinations of materials will be adhered to the surface to make the canvases independent objects capable of existing as units in themselves.

III  Procedures:

The work will take form in a series of paintings which develop in idea from one to the next. Conclusions will be drawn from analysis of the work done and the thesis completed thereon.

IV  Alternative Proposals:

1. Hanging objects in paintings.

2. Visual metaphors from unusual combinations combined in paintings.