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Personal Imagery and Paint

By: Stuart Green

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

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Advisor: Fred Meyer
Dedication

Dedicated to Amos, Andy, the Kingfish, and my Uncle Berney, who could sing in four voices at once.
"Nothing in this book is true. 'Live by the foma* that makes you brave and kind and healthy and happy.'"

Once upon a time many thousands of years ago, God sat nursing the piles in his sanctified anus. He was pondering what new way he could devise to dismay, harass, and generally increase the frustrations of his adolescent children, men. After giving the matter some thought and applying a freshunction to his holy ass-hole, God finally decided to make certain men painters. These "painters" would be endowed with imagination, the ability to draw, and a love for a medium which could turn on them at any time. Removing a greasy compress from between his buttocks, God smiled and said, "Behold, oil paint."

Joyce Cary wrote a novel called The Horse's Mouth, a great little book, but I have a sneaking suspicion that Cary had intended to title his book A Horse's Ass. In this "universe of quiet indifference," of little sense, and no ultimate meaning, the most meaningful bastards of all are painters. Painting is a great ego trip!

Meaning, meaning, who's got the meaning? If it is true, for all the preacher's blustering and the philosopher's speculation, that there is no final eschatological deus ex machina, and if all life amounts to is millions of beasties striving to devour one another, then as a child I must ask why eat, breathe, paint, or live? Perhaps I should include a lengthy discourse on why, and various structures

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Cat's Cradle, p. 12.
that seem to give us the answer. The whole mess is irrelevant as it concerns me personally. Suffice it to say, no theology or philosophy has provided me with meaning for my life. However, were I to suggest a philosophical course to follow, it would be essentially existential. Do something, but get off your ass!

You see, having chosen activity rather than speculation, I am still left with the problem of what to do. Acting out the routine physiological functions necessary to survival, I soon find myself restless - a good sign. Those who are not restless are merely waiting for their physiologies to cease functioning. Like the aged in rest homes, they are waiting for death. If a man can find no purpose in living, no one special activity to gratify his days, he too is waiting to die.

Victor Frankl in his book *From Death Camp to Existentialism* discovered among concentration camp survivors no great physical hardiness, but rather a capacity to find meaning beyond their immediate conditions. Life was sustained not for its own sake, but for God, the future, Aunt Sadie in Hoboken, or whatever; the key to enduring was a genuine belief in the purposefulness of living. To find or create meaning and purpose, Frankl feels, is a positive need in man, a need not unlike the sex drive or death wish in intensity. He called this "the will to meaning."

Who's got the meaning? Anyone who can find it. So I decided when I was about seven years old to become a painter. It seemed
very meaningful. Michelangelo had done it and people felt he meant a helluva lot. Anyway, it seemed like a good idea at the time. I could draw a tree and it looked a lot like a tree. It made more sense than other seven year olds who wanted to be cowboys and had never even seen a cow. As I grew older and began to splash around in paint, I had a great time. I enjoyed making lovely colored marks on clean white paper. The first few brush strokes on a virgin canvas are still pure pleasure. Three strokes later and you've already got a problem. What did I know ten, even five, years ago. I was a dumb kid. The whole world seemed to pat me on the head, except for a few dates' mothers. "So, an artist, tsk, tsk, but what can you do with it?" "Hah, lady, I've got meaning."

But mostly I heard, "Boy, looka this kid draw willya, eight... eighteen years old, and can he draw; damned if I can draw a straight line." You asshole, damned if I can draw a straight line without a ruler, or paint one without wrapping myself in a tangle of masking tape.

I am a painter, but I am not an artist. An artist is one who has command over his medium. Now my father, he was an artist. My father was a shoe salesman and he owned a little schlock house* called Arnold's Outlet. What my father could do with outdated merchandise and Bohemian bunions, I hope to accomplish with brush and paint.

* Jewish Phrase meaning junk store.
Once I saw him sell two old cronies (who, by the way, spoke almost no English) one hundred and sixty dollars worth of shoes. He nudged these old bags along, leading them ever deeper and deeper into a morass of buckles, laces and combination lots. His skill at playing the grotesque against the sublime was extraordinary. Three hideous clunkers and then a slipper for a princess, a gasp, "I takit dat!" Picking and choosing this and that from our ridiculous stock, that old man put together odd sizes, disparate color combinations and made them sell. Somewhere over his years of dealing with corns, callouses, and athlete's foot, my father had developed a sense of what would sell and to whom. His stock resembled my palette - a disaster - but, unlike me, he knew where each shoe was to be found. And if he found the right shoe but it was the wrong color, he'd dye it. Let me say it again, my father was an artist!

What does an old man in a shoe store have to do with painting? Everything! The above very personal anecdotes serve as a parable for my goals as a painter. Upon examination, it reveals the painter's predicament, or, at least, this painter's continuous dilemma.

All painters are shoe salesmen beneath the skin. They deal with a stock of merchandise which is an enormous joke. The joke is as follows: man's subjectivity, that which is given, the world, and man's imperfect perception. Now every salesman knows this joke
of a stock; to be sure some know it better than others, but each knows it pretty well in his own way (his own system of ordering perception).

The salesman (painter) waits for a customer (an insight, an idea for a painting). Suddenly a customer walks through the door and the eager salesman jumps into action. What size, color, on and on, figuring out what will sell (how to turn a cognitive speculation into a physical entity). If the salesman is an artist, he knows by thought or intuition which part of the stock has the shoe he needs. If he is not yet an artist, he will try and try until he comes up with something that looks likely. He is in trouble because he doesn't know how to use his stock effectively. So, more often than not, the customer walks out (a good idea ends up as a bad painting).

Martin Buber in his book I AND THOU gives an accurate account of what a painter must face:

A man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work. This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. The man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises.

The act includes a sacrifice and a risk. This is the sacrifice: the endless possibility that is offered up on the altar of the form. For everything which just this moment in play ran through the perspective must be obliterated; nothing of that may penetrate the work. The exclusiveness of what is facing it demands that
it be so. This is the risk: the primary word can only be spoken with the whole being. He who gives himself to it may withhold nothing of himself. The work does not suffer me, as do the tree and the man, to turn aside and relax in the world of IT; but it commands. If I do not serve it aright it is broken, or it breaks me. 2.

Had Buber been a painter as well as a philosopher, he might have echoed the sentiments of Richard Lindner, "My best paintings I have never brought to canvas."* What I believe Lindner meant was that what he wanted to paint either came out wrong on the canvas, or he could not raise the idea to a physical form. To put the germ of a creative response into paint is the problem, and is cause for genuine anguish.

A few weeks ago, I chanced to be at a cocktail party in a fashionable home on Long Island. I was standing around sipping my drink when I spotted a shabby, paint-spattered old man in a beret standing by himself in a puddle of linseed oil.

Me: Hey, aren't you what's his name, Rembrandt?
Rem: Dat's right, say you voudn't haff ein tube Thalo Blue by hany chance?
Me: No, I'm sorry, but say you sure are a mess.
Rem: It's da paint. Gets into everytink, mine hair, mine teeth, clothes, everytink. Mine fater he vanted me to be in dry goods. You never saw a bolt of yards goods mess you up like diss damn paint.
Me: O.K., then why don't you go into dry goods and quit painting?
Rem: (stabbing me in the neck with a palette knife) Take dot you philistine, paint is zo smoot, zo loffly. (and he then smeared himself with a tube of raw umber, which he had concealed in his smock.)

I left the party and went to Utrect Linens and brought forty tubes of Thalo Blue.

4 Lecture, Art Institute of Chicago, 1968.
As a painter I am trapped by an inherent love of the paint itself and I, therefore, am continuously struggling to maintain a good working relationship with paint. There is a danger in painting of becoming too attracted to one particular approach to either one's subject matter, or to one way of using the paint. If one is not aware of this danger, it is all too easy to start painting by a preconceived formula. While the structuring of ideas is necessary, especially in figurative painting as opposed to, for instance, action painting, one's painting can easily become sterile and regimented. The painter may find himself a self-styled academician and not even be aware of it. The formula, if it brings a measure of success, can preclude the need for exploration and will exclude further growth and understanding of the medium.

As I finished the "Lady with the Lion," and reviewed my work up to that painting, I was dismayed to find my paintings had taken on a rather static quality. The color was good, the paint handled well in a direct manner, and even the composition of the space seemed sound and fairly interesting. I had been exploring the figure, using photographs of family and friends, placing the figures into a contrived artificial space. The paintings also dealt with the figure as an artificial or cartoon element, utilizing strange juxtapositions of dress and pose, disparate elements, as animals and articles, from daily use. Outlining
the figures helped to create the feeling of flatness, creating a polarity, I hoped, between the illusion of three-dimensional and two-dimensional space. So if all this was working more or less, why was I disturbed? I realized that I had stopped learning and was merely perfecting what I already knew. I could paint fifty or one hundred paintings, refining one technique and one basic compositional framework; it was scary!

What occurred in the ensuing weeks was a painful re-evaluation of my work. I stopped painting and began to sketch. During this period, I went to see a show of paintings by Harvey Breverman. They were a revelation. Paint, thick and rich, balanced against flat geometric areas. Figures were blurred, caught in motion; but my main interest was in the variety of paint which worked so well together. Breverman was not first in achieving this kind of paint. Bacon, Levine, and older masters such as Rembrandt, Eakins, and Kokoshka have all managed to achieve working results with washes, impastos and glazes. What struck me about Breverman was his use of such techniques at this present time.

As major figurative painters, Rosenquist and Wesselman are outstanding. Rosenquist paints large conglomerate photographic images using relatively little medium, yet achieving a wet on wet technique that is rich with paint. Wesselman's work has tended to deal more abstractly with the figure, creating flat abstract patterns which harken back to Matisse. The many imitators of
these painters fail miserably, because both painters have a firm grasp of the abstract relationships of their images to the space they occupy. I, on the other hand, had become too thoroughly engrossed with the image for its own sake (a process started with a series of large heads during my senior year at S.A.I.C.*) and had relegated spacial composition and paint handling to secondary positions in which they would enhance the image. My paintings still had unity, but grew less and less exciting. On seeing Breverman's painting, I was made aware of what was missing. I had been filling in images (a failing in many who paint from photographs) instead of building images in paint. I would have to disagree with New Realist painter Chuck Close who feels this is justifiable, even necessary, to create strong images of lasting impression.

Francis Bacon stated, "idea and technique are inseparable." In his earlier work, Bacon himself seemed to be filling in his drawing on canvas; only later did he use the brush stroke to create form, a goal, Bacon feels, that leaves one open to chance and mystery, and, I think, consequently, great drama. Kokoshka speaks of Mondrian as a designer and I am inclined to agree. Placed against the painting of either Kokoshka or Bacon, Mondrian's works seem less involved with the reality of this world and rather concerned with a very conceptual rather than visceral reality. Mondrian did not feel the paint or the struggle that this or that

3. Ronald Alley, Francis Bacon, p. 9.
* Art Institute of Chicago, 1969.
brush stroke means. To respond to paint is to allow one's mind and guts to be open to the activity of painting.

I had fallen into the mistaken notion that I was making the paint do what I wanted. Up to a point this was true. I had achieved a facility utilizing a rather buttery application of paint. My method required a linear painted outline, usually a violet hue, which, when almost dry, was blended into an area of local color. So it worked; but where were the other possibilities of paint? In my desire to create a successful image, I had unconsciously excluded every technique of paint application except the one I knew I could handle.

Part of my difficulty in achieving a working union between paint and idea is that I tend to think in words rather than in images or paint. The New Realists are often highly conceptual, as in the case of Close's concern over the focus in photographs; that is, the blur or clarity from the camera's optical limitations. But it seems to me that the New Realists are basically content to take what they see and, although they are selective, to render it accurately in paint. If they are concerned with symbol or allegory, it is the captured symbol of society in its streets and objects. A step removed from the iconographic vulgarism of Warhol, the New Realists shy away from social satire, perhaps to allow just what is there to be lyrical, vitriolic, or whatever.

In commenting on the subject matter of "Painting 1946,"
(a seated clerical figure under an umbrella surrounded by beef carcasses), Bacon, when asked whether this represented some sort of relation between an aspect of spirituality and of carnality, replied, "Good gracious no. I began that particular picture with the intention of representing a bird of prey alighting on a ploughed field. The carcass? Well, when I was a boy I used to be fascinated by butcher's shops." 4.

Levine in returning to his birthplace, the slums of Boston, in 1935 said, "I feel the sordid neglect of a slum section strongly enough to wish to be a steward of its increment... to present this picture in the very places where the escapist plans his flight." Snatched from his environment of drunks and whores at eight years of age, Levine had comforted himself with drawing drunks and the like, and in 1935 he returned to what he knew and could paint. 5.

I have heard it said of writers that they spend their entire lives trying to sort out their childhoods. And if the vast army of Freudian thinkers are correct, our formative years, our wonderbread and butter years, do make deep and lasting impressions on the psyche. As a painter, I, too, have been drawn by my childhood recollections, mixing them with the present like a Bromo-seltzer. Unlike the New Realists, whom I admire immensely, I find myself irrevocably drawn to my past. This, while giving me a great range of subject matter, also causes the headache of selectivity over and against my too literary mind.

4. Ibid., p. 12.
During the early part of this year, one scene occurred over and over again like a nightmare. It was morning, noon, or night when I heard nasal female tones asking: "Gee, did you paint that?"

Me: Yes.
She: Uh, huh, well how come you painted Gene Autry?
Me: It's not Gene Autry; it's my uncle.
She: But, why a cowboy?
Me: Why not a cowboy?
She: Did you want to be a cowboy when you were a little boy?
Me: No, I wanted to be a painter and paint cowboys.
She: How come?
Me: Because I couldn't be a cowboy.
She: Hold on, you didn't want to be a cowboy, but a painter, and you paint because you couldn't be a cowboy, that doesn't make sense. Why couldn't you be a cowboy if you wanted to?
Me: I am afraid of horses.
She: Oh, so that's why you paint cowboys.
Me: No, I told you, I painted my uncle.
She: But he was a cowboy!
Me: He was an asshole.
She: So are you!
Me: Fine, bye-bye. (Me to Myself: She was right!
Myself: You mean I'm an asshole?
Me: No, it does look like Gene Autry.)

Not only was the cowboy my uncle, who happens to look like Gene Autry, he also had his graphic origin in a photograph. So here is the combination of my childhood recollections of the stories of my uncle out west, B-horse operas on T.V., and my usual reference for subject matter, all in one. In this case the idea and its realization were conveniently packaged. However, this is not always the case. Even in this particular painting, the figure of the cowboy was only one of three figures fit into a landscape setting. It is this piecing together of figures and other images which involves one in a literary train of thought.
Any image can be interesting in and of itself. For example, Van Gogh's drawing of a pair of old shoes contains a pathos for the absent worker who, it would seem, belonged to the shoes rather than vice versa. Well drawn or well painted images, even against a flat unmodulated ground, can be effective and quite lovely. But, as in the case of Van Gogh's shoes, the viewer provides the literary concept which may or may not have been intended by the artist. For me, this is unacceptable. While I try to tread the line between painting and story telling, I must have some measure of conceptual control over the viewer. More importantly, my ideas just will not work with single images and I must work them out to my own satisfaction, so that they communicate to me in paint what I think and feel.

I deal primarily with lies: space that should work one way, but achieves two or more readings; objects put together which do not belong together, or objects of unreasonable size. My paintings strive to order the many absurdities that I have experienced into a bigger and better absurdity. I believe that if the absurdity is big enough, perhaps it will reflect the human reality inherent in much fantasy. As one laughs himself ill seeing Dr. Strangelove, one also ingests the genuine horror of loving and living with the bomb, and the caricature of the government and military becomes terrifying as one realizes the verity of Kubrick's satire.

At this point I have stopped making visual jokes, but fantasy
persists, as does the problem of arranging or staging my fantasy
work. I am at present contemplating a series of paintings utilizing
dwarfs. I mention this to give me a way of illustrating my process
in creating a composition for a painting. The dwarf; ugly deformed,
a spook of childhood days and still a shocker when you trip over
him in a dim subway station. The dwarf is somehow a figure of
scorn, mocking humanity as it struts about tall and healthy. The
court jester mocking the courtesans, our dwarfs are still generally
regarded as freaks for side shows. In my painting of wrestling
dwarfs, though they are just little people, I hope they may
achieve the effect of the jester, a gadfly who now recalls our
mortality, our flesh which may turn cancerous and make a monster
out of an Adonis. That is the basic premise, the literary concept;
now, how to get it together.

Somewhere outside of Alexandria, Egypt:

O.K., now all you dwarfs and hunchbacks, line
up in front of the mosque. Now Herbie, bring
in the camels, let's have a darker sky up there
Lord. "Right, behold the sky darkens." Cut the
Genesis crap and throw a few storm clouds in
there. Let me see: dwarfs, mosque, stormy sky;
looks good, but the dwarfs are in the wrong
position, and the mosque is sienna instead of
pink. What the hell, I'll improvise.

Along comes a six year old street urchin, "Hey,
Sahib, that mosque looks corny as hell with
all those camels."
Crushed by a goddamn punk kid. Reference, I need
more reference.

References which bear a close semblance to the mental
picture are indispensable to the way I paint. Without the right photographs, it is highly unlikely that I would achieve the accuracy, especially in figurative images, which my ideas require. It is, therefore, necessary to scrounge up a selection of photographs, or take my own, in order to have a wide range of images to select to put into a painting. Assuming that amid piles of discarded newspapers and magazines, I can find numerous photographic sources to work from, there remains the task of organizing the chosen elements into a cohesive visual unit. The relationship between reference and paint and idea is well expressed by Larry Rivers in this brief painter's monologue:

These references to reality at least give me the opportunity to vary the quality of the energy. All paint and no potatoes seems sentimental. That is, if it seems that I love cadmium red orange this week I yawn. Yet if it is all potatoes, all tangible content, something you recognize, everything begins to feel stuffy. It used to be the sum of the parts are almost equal to the whole. At least that was all I was capable of. It is something else today. I can't see anything in my work that will elevate anyone. I am not from the sunset school. My work has nothing to do with gorgeousness. It isn't virile in the sense of 'power'. The hard edge is too handy for Spearmint gum. I don't know what to say about my work. It might be funny. Perhaps it is only a visual gossip column that depends for its life on juicy bits of cigar box covers, cigarette packages, Buick grilles, Ford trucks, playing cards, politics, dying and already dead Civil War veterans and so forth. All these things do appear and disappear. I suppose it is enough to paint them. It will never make anyone who looks a better person. I'm sure that this is all building
up to something, no matter how camouflaged, that will really be flattering to me. Well, when I was very young, and went to the zoo a lot, I once went with my father who is quite strong. He was feeding a deer through the wire fence and then began playing with the deer's antlers. Suddenly the deer backed away and a part of its antler broke off and there was my father holding it in his hand, and the deer charging off into the distance. Aside from expectations of glory, all I can hope from my work is that it arrests your attention with no more or less insistence that the breaking of a deer's antlers—that something in my work obliges you to forget for a few moments the absurdity of your life.

At this point I would like to make a case for using black and white photographic references rather than color. In using color photography the tendency is to ape the color in one's painting. Color is too elemental to idea in paint to settle for a chromatic arrangement that is convenient. Also the color in a photograph may be pleasing, but it has nothing to do with paint. Along with the color of pigment is its texture, intensity, opacity, and transparency— all qualities to consider in terms of their capacity to achieve a visualization of an idea. The black and white photograph gives good reference while leaving the color and its quality to the painter. This is, to be sure, another difficulty, but one which forces the painter to consider image and paint as a unity.

If one thinks this would lead to a filling in process akin to glazing over an underpainting, all I can say is that it

6. Ibid., 401.
does happen. I have at times jumped from local color to local color, but even at its worst, this discretion still has yielded color relationships that made direct sense to the painting.

Sometimes when I dream, I see paintings, beautiful paintings, that spring from my restless eye movements. When I awaken all that's left is the vague memory of seeing a group of dogs, a watermelon patch, or Superman zooming skyward, but just what the images looked like, and how they related on the canvas is lost. The germ of an idea must seek a solid ground on which to state itself.

Here I sit on top of an Everest of magazine photos, but which one should I use when image after image floats in my mind's eye, now in this posture, now in that position? Should my dwarfs be in a church architecture, or should they be compressed at the bottom of an elevator? Busy, busy, busy.

My paintings are staged, and many of them intentionally resemble stage settings. I endeavor to maneuver my figures as dramatis personnae among their props which range from landscape to wrestling arena. During my Junior year, I attempted to design stage settings for a play which I intended to write. The play was never completed, but I became fascinated with the notion of players moving or standing on a stage. Two years later the stage has reappeared in my work. What fascinated me most about the theater was the almost visible tension between the actors
during a dramatic moment. This tension exists in the physical space separating the players on stage and the tension carries over into the audience.

If I am so concerned about space, then why do I not involve myself with three dimensional art in which the observer participates in the space. The answer is in the quality of spacial tension I am aiming at. I have no desire to have the audience involved in a game-playing role. The movable panels in two works I have painted, while achieving a toylike effect, did not appreciably alter or interfere with established visual space. Moreover, my concern is with the mental and emotional and visual rather than environmental involvement with space. As the eye registers the play of figures interacting in the painted environment, hopefully the space they occupy and that which surrounds them will achieve a magical effect registering as mystery rather than confusion.

Bacon's imprisonment of figures in linear cages, closing them off mentally and not visually from their surrounding space, is the kind of spacial manipulation to which I refer. Again, Bacon in placing the figures in space interiors has achieved an emotional despairing quality by playing the flat geometry of walls, ceilings, and floors against the violent activity of the paint in the figures.

The desire for empathy of the viewer to the psychological
consequences of the figure in a spacial environment has continuously led me to illusory space: a space which has its root in the real world of, here I am, yoo-hoo; look, now I walk a few feet and I am over here. What is unreal about my painting, perhaps, is that its space and figures are frozen forever in a world which never was and never will be, except in that painting.
Bibliography


