Flat Monumentality

Theodora Cichy

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FLAT MONUMENTALITY

by

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of the Rochester Institute of Technology.

August 28, 1970.

Mr. Fred Meyer, advisor.
. . . Concepts, feelings, theories, ideologies, goals can mislead; they have no bearing on my work. The work exists as art solely within itself.  

Allen Leepa

My paintings, as are my experiences, are in constant change; changes that are subtle yet significant and that invariably effect my sense of values and attitudes. Thereby the suppression I impose, you impose, (the use of language), results in variable expressions of a static idea, the static idea being my paintings as objects. I will therefore present some isolated ideas about my work which may or may not be consistant.

"Art", as a value or way of life, has no philosophical relief for me. My paintings are not meant to have any specific meaning for others. "Meaning is whatever any mind happens to find meaningful; a meaning is anything that one can grasp, recognize, identify, recall, or imagine."  

as George Santayana states. Now you might ask why I paint. In retrospect, my paintings complete my past, in retrospect they effect my nowness.
Today is such a time, when the project of interpretation is largely reactionary, stifling. Like fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities. In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.

To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—-in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings".

In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone.³

Susan Sontag
Vital life force and reality.--Art in its painting form is not a vital life force in our society, for any reason. It does, however, force life into the painter. The painter is progressively acted upon by his work until the two are one. Each being parasitic, each drawing from the other exclusive of society and excluded from it.

Painting does not lose its quality as art, it only loses its direct relevance to our existence. An art thus detached from the realities of living does not cease to be real, but can only become more real by thus gaining its independance, its freedom, its own reality. When the limitations of reality cease to exist, art can become a pure expression of the artist's inexhaustable self.
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INTRODUCTION

Beginnings.--I began my thesis work in a new area of flat representational paintings, hard-edge in description and logically approachable. I found the main decision-making was toward color. I produced the image by applying flat areas of color, playing with perspective through color and pattern. I noticed the design qualities inherent in architecture due to its repetitions and primary forms, and wished to exploit these aspects.
Flat/hard-edge. — Painting flat, hard-edge images does not dehumanize this art, it only frees color and form from drawing and modelling. The personal is not expunged by using a neat technique, anonymity is not a consequence of highly finishing a painting. I repeat, hard-edge paintings are "fully human". Mondrian said:

Execution and technique play an important part in the aim of establishing a more or less objective vision which the essence of the non-figurative work demands. The less obvious the artist's hand the more objective will the work be. This leads to a preference for a more or less mechanical execution or to the employment of materials produced by industry.

It is equally wrong to think that the non-figurative artist creates through 'the pure intention of his process,' the he makes 'calculated abstractions,' and that he wishes to 'suppress sentiment not only in himself but also in the spectator'. It is a mistake to think that he retires completely into his system. That which is regarded as a system is nothing but constant obedience to the laws of pure plastics, to necessity, which art demands from him. It is thus clear that he has not become a mechanic, but that the process of science, of technique, of machinery, of life as a whole, has only made him into a living machine, capable of realizing in a pure manner the essence of art. In this way, he is in his creation sufficiently neutral, that nothing of himself or outside of him can prevent him from establishing that which is universal. Certainly his art is art for art's sake . . . for the sake of the art which is form and content at one and the same time.
Object as vehicle.—There is a struggle between the abstract and its opponents and there is a state in which abstract forms seek to become either meaningful objects or pure symbols as constant as numbers and letters of the alphabet. I tried to alleviate this problem by using identifiable objects to lessen the deception people as viewers impose upon themselves through interpretation. The objects I used were basically vehicles for design and color relationships, having only a spiritually subconscious meaning for me. The shape then became a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex.

For pure art then, the subject can never be an additional value, it is the line, the color, and their relations which must 'bring into play the whole sensual and intellectual register of the inner life...', not the subject.

As regards the 'content' of the work, we must note that our 'attitude with regard to things, our organized individuality with its impulses, its actions, its reactions when in contact with reality, the lights and shades of our spirit,' etc., certainly do modify the non-figurative work, but they do not constitute its content.5

Mondrian
Architecture as subject.--As with my paintings, so is architecture a complex system disguised by a seemingly obvious simplicity. The apparent simplicity is achieved through subtleties and the precision of distorted geometry. In other words, good architecture is not simple, it just looks simple, and this is a feat I would like to achieve in my paintings: the contradictions and tensions inherent to an ordered structure, as complex and contradictory as modern experience.

Actually my paintings have, I believe, a messy vitality which can rein over the unity, employing ambiguity and paradox rather than simplicity. Although my paintings may appear well-balanced and ordered, disequalibrium exists in the sense that one can lose one’s position between the now and then, the now and infinity, by way of the changes in the spatial perspective, illogical logic, vanishing points inside and outside, a coming forward, a stepping back, a shifting of emphasis from distance to plane. A flat moving space. Corbusier describes such an experience as "... the intense feeling that has come from that sequence of movements.".

Successful architecture, the masterly correct and magnificent play of form in light, use of repetition, simplicity and monumentality, inspired my thesis work.
A desire to experience power and massiveness in my perception of architecture; at first bluntly, with paintings as the House and the Motorcycles, Plates I and II respectively. I slowly worked toward a more subtle interpretation with the Converging Buildings and the Statue Interior, Plates III and IV respectively, to a more minimal type statement in the last painting, the Eiffel Tower, Plate V. I had seen the similarity between the intrinsic nature of the monumental in art and architecture on one hand, and the minimal type statements and their architectonic structure on the other, which led me in this direction.
We need static values.--Poe and Duchamp pose the idea of the work of art as a temporary center of energy which gives rise to psychic events. The potency of the work of art is measured by the clock. Today all works of art have become happenings in some point of time. The aesthetics of impermanence stresses the work of art as an interval in the life of both artist and spectator.

The static, the sublime, are values few are trying to reintroduce into painting. It appears to be reactionary and contrary to the modern attitude toward existence and phenomena. What is important now, however, is to recover our senses. Susan Sontag states: "Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life--its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness--conjoin to dull our sensory faculties." We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. This can be accomplished through contemplation.

A painting ontologically may be an immobile object to be contemplated. In this respect there is nothing to differentiate it from any other object. Thus the artist can reassert art as being an object and that objects should be viewed as art. This would allow man to recon-
object and man; a relationship that can be universal and timeless.

My view is that contemplation, plastic vision, has great importance for man. The closer contemplation brings us to a conscious vision of the unchangeable and the universal, the more the changeable, the individual, and human pettiness in us and around us, will seem futile to us.

The deepest purpose of painting has always been to give concrete existence, through color and line, to this universal which appears in contemplation.  

Mondrian

The impressions, feelings, and sensations of our visual experiences are as fleeting as are senses of sound and smell. Changes; looking, listening, grabbing; missing the variations in a single changing sound. There is only chaos with little variation in intensity and too much intensity to survive, while yet leaving an after-image of simplicity and clarity that is unconsciously sought after, (as the eye will make irregular or distorted forms appear quite regular in their after-image). This is not a truth, but a shadow; a compensation for a lack-of.

No understanding, insight, or richness of experience can be produced by the surface values of an experience. One must examine the subtleties in every experience or relationship to know this experience, to understand this experience, and to interpret, if one must, into love-hate, or whatever emotional or intellectual resultant.
Impressions.—Both hearing and seeing are selective processes, but music can more easily fill the ear than painting fill the eye. Because painting has a limited size and shape, this gives the viewer more option on whether he will merely focus upon or really perceive the piece, whereas music so fills the environment that it is able to demand the full attention of the senses. Therefore, I decided to enlarge the field of vision in my paintings and give the color a rather constant effect, a grayish, muted color effect. Not only does the relative largeness of the paintings attract attention to the otherwise unimpressionable color of my painting but it also increases the field of vision for the viewer, allowing an easier entrance into the subtleties I seek.

Today, a certain amount of shock is necessary to receive the slightest recognition from a viewer. I attempt to get this immediate recognition mainly through the size of my paintings, drawing the viewer into my designs; into my color. The color forces me to increase the size of the painting and, conversely, the size of my paintings allows me to employ the muted colors. For this reason, I decreased the size of my paintings as the color intensity increased. Chevreul believed that: "The apparent purity (chroma, saturation) of a color tends to increase as its size
increases - from a small dot to an area that covers about 20 degrees of the visual field (about $\frac{3}{2}$ inches at a distance of 1 foot, or 12 inches at a distance of 3 feet). As the area of the color is made still larger, its purity tends to decrease.". 

At first I used subject matter, (Plates I and II), and was more conscious of the mundane than of celestial values. This relates to my earlier use of color as well as to the subject matter. Then, a transition occurred from a concern with just the particular object as subject matter to an increasing concern for a more abstract and universal value. This transition appeared while painting the Statue Interior, Plate IV, in which more brilliant color began to invade and enhance the muted tones. The subtle relationships became more meaningful visually, and the muted tones tended to make the intense areas richer and purer.
Color: emotional and musical. --Sir Joshua Reynolds:

There is not a man on earth who has the slightest notion of coloring; we all of us have it equally to seek for and find out, as at present it is totally lost to the art.

Color is emotional and therefore beyond rule and law. You respond rather instinctively to red, yellow, green and blue because these colors are primary and your eye has nerve structures that react frankly to them. "Dirty" colors, faded colors, are those that depart from a primary character and approach the subtleties which I strive to appreciate and utilize and hope the viewer would appreciate likewise.

In order to understand color better, let us make an analogy. Colors may mutually relate like musical cords. Color has vibrations as with music. Various hues have different rotary speeds; rapid for red, slow for blue. Music moves along quickly or slowly, depending on its tempo. It jumps into tints for high notes or drops down into shades for low notes. When it is fortissimo, the colors are near, intense, heavy. When it is pianissimo, the colors are filmy, grayish and far away.

In music, however, the sounds of an instrument or a symphony fills the ear. Color in paintings gives only a minimized impression because of the limitations of the
human body, specifically the eye, in coincidence with the limitations of perception in the ordinary human spirit.
Physical sensation.--The retina of the eye is capable of receiving two kinds of impressions from light. The rods receive light and dark impressions or degrees of illumination (achromatic or colorless sensation), from white through all grays to black. They can distinguish about six hundred degrees of lightness or darkness. The cones receive that of color or hue, (chromatic sensation). Light rays visible to the human eye lie between the vibrations of 770 billion per second to 400 billion per second, ranging from violet, 400; to yellow, 570; to red, 750.

Red, yellow, green, and blue are unique hues and bear no resemblance to each other. Yet all other colors appear to be blends of them. Visual mixtures are medial and generally tend to work toward a neutral gray which can be accomplished in one way by spinning disks on a color wheel. Gray can also be produced in paint by combining complementary colors, while the combination of complementary lights produces white light. (Grays are usually simply mixtures of various colors such as red, yellow and blue in various proportions, or of black and white).

Faber Birren contended that tone was the universal form, because it contained all three primary elements: white, black, and hue. These elements produce different sensations, as all are quite unique. All colors are made
by combining these elements. When we combine a hue and white, we get a tint. Tints have both hue quality and a white quality. A hue and black gives us a shade, which looks both like pure hue and black. Gray has both qualities of white and black, but tones, a combination of hue, white and black, show traces of all three primary elements. Therefore tone is a unified and universal form: (fig. 1).

In Maitland Graves' *Color Fundamentals* we find that achromatic reflectors are colorless, or non-selective opaque colorants, such as white and gray paint. These colorants are non-selective in that they absorb and reflect equally light of any color. That is, they modify light by decreasing its intensity or brilliance without changing its spectral composition or hue. The greater the absorption, the darker the reflected light appears.

Colorants of strong chroma produce a less balanced color sensation than white, gray, and colorants of moderate chroma which have a more uniform reflectance. Consequently, strong colorants are less restful, and we tire of them more quickly, (fig. 2). In fact, equal and simultaneous stimulation of the red, green, and blue sensitive nerves produce a balanced or achromatic color sensation of white or gray; a natural balance.

The above facts are presented to help me qualify
Figure 1.

Faber Birren's Theory on Tone. (Taken from Faber Birren's *The Story of Color*, P. 257.)
my personal preference for the grayish or muted tones I employ in my paintings. I believe these colors to be of a more primary and universal character because our bodies, our eyes accept their vibrations more readily and under many conditions. Actually this information had no direct influence on my paintings, and I would rather believe that color is emotional.

Figure 2.

(Taken from M. Graves' *Color Fundamentals*. Page 24.)

Spectral reflectance curves of gray, and strong-chroma red, yellow, green, blue, and purple paints plotted by the spectrophotometer. Spectral transmission curves of transparent colorants—such as gray, and strong-chroma red, yellow, green, blue, and purple glass or plastic—would be similar to the above reflectance curves.
Color symbols.—There are many symbols and meanings attached to the muted or grayish tones. These should be noted but not seriously considered. I have recorded a few psychological and historical attempts to classify the significance of this color.

1. Gray generally symbolizes sedate and sober old age with its passive resignation and humility.

2. Gray, in the emotional sense, is austere, cold, solemn.

3. Gray is calm, sensible, and conservative.

4. Gray, having attributes of black and white, signifies tribulation, penance, humility, sadness, age, matured judgement, dreariness, quietude, solitude, fear, death, sobriety and depression.

5. In severe depressive states of psychotic degrees, the rejection of color may be of a negative order; the person preferring a "gray" world and disdaining a colorful one.

6. In Cabalistic symbolism, divine light was white. The symbol of understanding was black because it absorbed all light. The symbol of wisdom was thus gray, a blend of white and black.

7. The pallor of Protestantism, being so devoid of color, bespeaks the human spirit only as black, white, brown and gray.
8. In astrology, gray was the ancient symbol of Aquarius, the age just passing into existence.

9. In Christian lore, gray represented Christ risen, a blend of the white light of divinity and the blackness of sin and death.
The painting **House** was the first painting of my thesis and was begun primarily because the photograph of the house, which I had taken in Buffalo, excited me so and seemed to warrant being painted. I had used this photograph in an animated film I was working on before coming to Rochester, and the image, which was the primary theme in the film, would not leave my mind. I had to paint it, and paint it in a monumental form as it appeared to me. Actually the painting was clear in my mind: the size, the colors, everything came naturally to me, and the image began to take form on the canvas.

While experimenting with the photograph, I had happened to lay a sheet of acetate over the image, a dotted sheet of acetate. The dots seemed to merge into the image, yet float on top of it. This appealed to me and I decided to use this effect in my painting. At this point I began to have technical problems concerning the application of these dots. There were many alternatives but I decided to use a silk screen with oil paint as pigment to achieve the sheen of oil floating on top of the flat acrylic. I began painting these dots, repainting them and painting them out. A solution was not easy for me because of the image I had formulated in my mind. I had originally planned to cover the entire canvas uniformly with dots, but before I could
reach this point, I realized that the dots, sparsely located, had the vitality the image of the house needed on such a large scale. The House is perhaps the most static or lacking in movement of all my paintings. The movement created by the superimposed dots is the primary activity on the canvas and these remain inside the perimeters of the canvas which allowed me to frame it. The framing I chose is reminiscent of the dots to increase their activity, and to create a tension that spreads around the entire canvas instead of localizing the dots within the certain areas of the image.
Motorcycles.--The painting, the Motorcycles, was also based upon a photograph which I had taken. This photograph appealed to me because of its illogical and confusing positioning of the two motorcycles, as if one bike were coming out of the other, like a split screen: a birth of a cycle, a tension or play of forces pulling in opposite directions. Because I had started this painting out of the studio and could not make use of the overhead projector,--which I normally use to enlarge certain images--I had to grid the painting and thus draw in the image before painting. As with the House painting, I used two panels bolted together because of the convenience it affords me, working on such a large scale.

The only problem I confronted on this particular painting was the background color. At first I applied an ochre tone which worked, but gave the painting more of an appearance of being an ad in a magazine, more so than it already is. To alleviate this I put in the gray tone that is now in the painting and which, I feel, sobers it up. The color of the bikes had also hassled me. Working with the colors I use, it was hard to find a light tone that could possibly fit a motorcycle, it being an aggressive and heavy machine. I experimented with various tones and, without getting into darker tones or more intense color, I found the colors I finally used.
Converging Buildings.--This painting was taken from a photograph I took of an abandoned apartment house. Working with the photograph, I removed the skylight connecting the two buildings and butted them together, creating a strange perspective. I had decided not to include the windows on the building because I felt this would destroy the effect of this perspective, and work against the design. I was advised to use an intense color in the sky or upper portion of the painting. I realized that this suggestion was workable and good, but only could work well in the painting when it had another such color to relate to, so I also applied the strong red-orange stripe. This use of touches of strong color did not, I found, violate my principle of employing muted tone, since in small quantity the rich, full color but provided a touch of counterpoint: a needed accent.
Statue Interior. -- The Statue Interior was the first painting in which I used a color photograph, the color being the most dominant characteristic that attracted me to it. Again I wanted to emphasize perspective and design. Therefore I combined the receding plain of the interior of the church with the advancing plain of the floor, both being vertical. In effect, I turned the floor on its side.

When I began painting I stayed relatively close within the color range of the photograph. As I proceeded, however, and after much criticism about my color as being "boring", I began adding intense color, my first addition being the thin red stripe on the right. After this addition, other colors were necessary to complete relationships set up on the canvas.

I then began adding more color and changing the composition in slight ways. For instance, I first removed the second figure to allow more space around the main or first figure. I then had to remove the other smaller figures that now were too isolated to exist where they were. This also gave the first figure a more important position in the painting. As to the coloration of the figure, I cannot explain it. After painting, and repainting several times, I sat looking at this area for the longest time. All of a sudden I got up and painted it; it was finished within an hour. It's a funny figure; I like it.
Eiffel Tower. — The Eiffel Tower painting had started out to be the Eiffel Tower, pretty much as I had seen it while photographing in Paris. I began the painting with stripes of warm color, as shown in the photograph of the temporary red and white fencing I saw there at the time. I then added the green of the trees and the blue of the sky, colors I had seen in many contemporary paintings and had automatically and subconsciously used. These colors were too ordinary, too calm; they worked too well. I therefore decided to add some tension to this area of blue and green and put the radiating lines there.

I had originally planned to continue the painting on another panel extending to the right to include the network of steel in the tower itself, but decided that a continuation of the plain on the left was more vital. I had to think more abstractly at this point, and continued the circles I had begun on the first panel, these being reminiscent of the bright lights seen about the tower at night and their reflectings in the nearby River Sein. The square of activity in the lower left is the busyness of people around the tower, quite insignificant in relation to the tower; merely insignificant blurrs hardly seen at all.

The red stripe, which completed the painting, is the tower itself.
FOOTNOTES


5. Ibid. p. 126.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


