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CONTEMPORARY ROMANTIC FIGURE PAINTING

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INTRODUCTION

It was my desire for this Thesis to paint the human figure and its environment in a romantic manner bringing to these paintings as much as I could of our time.

During this time I read, thought, felt and painted. I recorded what my findings were and how they affected my paintings. I also read what I could of the past and present acceptance of and rejection of the romantic movements. I examined the works of the romantic painters and sculptors. Technically I tried to let my canvases dictate what they needed and, in turn, then hoped I had the skill to meet these needs and to create successful paintings.
Why do you paint? A question we are so often asked. A question I could never answer. I now have an idea of why I paint. I think it is simply because I am a romantic. A person that dislikes rules and representation. A person that likes problems and hates problems at the same time. One that loves to search for answers where they know there are none. One that thinks, if there is an answer, it is only temporary and tomorrow there will be one to contradict it. A person that wants to know but knows they never will, and are glad for it.

Romanticism was given its name in England in the 1840's. It was already a half century old. It was primarily a theory of literature and the arts. The people most concerned at that time included Wordsworth, Shelly and Byron in England, Victor Hugo and Chateaubriand in France, Schiller and the Schlegels and many others in Germany. In art it raised basic questions on the value of truth, the importance of human faculties and the relation of thought and feeling. Romanticism represented a way of sensing human experience.

I believe the most fundamental romantic attitude was a love of the unclassifiable; moods or situations or personal idiosyncrasies which the mind could never explain away. The
romantic insisted upon the importance of feeling as well as reason. He would be suspicious of a clear idea for fear it would be superficial. Consequently, the romantic was aware of the importance of the subconscious.

The romantic respected the Middle Ages as a time of colorfulness and spiritual depth. Whereas, the Enlightenment deplored the Middle Ages because of its intellectual errors. This caused the romanticist to turn to the past and a study of history.

Being aware of these ideas, I began to paint my thesis and make written notes as the problem went on. First I must say that there were about six paintings just prior to my thesis that are relevant. Four of these are shown on Plates I - IV. The thing I considered my major problem with these paintings was the one or two figures isolated in a rectangle. They lacked a meaningful relationship with their surroundings or with one to another. This lack of environment and relationship between figures, and figures and the world comes from the serious way I faced life-drawing classes. In these classes we were trained to draw the single figure void of a relationship to anything else. This has its dangers.
The first painting I consider part of my actual thesis is Plate V. This painting was started completely abstract. Large thin washes were applied with as little direction as was possible for me to muster. I used this method of beginning in all the rest of my thesis paintings. I used this approach with two desires in mind, the first desire was to be less serious and more playful, the second desire was to keep the painting more open-ended or not tied down too soon.

The first desire, to be more playful, was because playfulness is the necessary connection between intellect and emotion in a work of art. I also believe our society is not as embarrassed when confronted with a less-serious work. A person or a project that is concerned with majestic endeavor is often embarrassing. It is especially so if the project is being carried off by a naive person that is trying to be sophisticated. Romanticism should not be naive. The second desire, to keep the painting open-ended, was sponsored by the hope of increasing my visual experiences. I believe we see to the extent we are able to at any particular point in our development. We find the things we are conditioned to and want to find. But, I hope to increase this awareness by keeping my attitude elastic in the early stages of a painting.
The second painting of my thesis is Plate VI. During this painting the shapes seemed to come out too strong. Even though I realized it takes time to develop a vocabulary of personal shapes, it has not entered my thinking that I might just be looking for shapes for their shape alone. At this point it seemed shape must take on a different importance. With more painting and thinking along these lines I realized the forms were coming out too strong because of the great value and croma difference between them. The shapes weren't good either. I say not good because they lacked meaning. But, as the painting made itself clearer to me, the shapes then became shapes with a reason, a reason in relationship to the content of the painting. I also realized during this painting that the positive shapes are dominated by the negative shapes. Then, are the positive shapes only called positive by me because they are objects? But, isn't it possible that there can be no positive and no negative shapes in a figurative painting?

I sit back and look at a shape and think, does it have the right color, is it the right value, how does it relate to its surroundings, and I wonder about this. Should I as a romantic painter work more intuitively and try less to be
intellectual. If I could, possibly my work would not have that labored look. After letting this painting set for a week I tried to finish it and I think I did. It has a few balanced qualities that at the moment seem essential to me. These balances are calm and activity, seriousness and humor, intellect and emotion and representation and abstraction. It may sound as if I like this painting. I don't -- it's only better.

The third painting of my thesis represented in Plate VII is not the third in a sequence. I have eliminated one or two that were painted during the thesis period. I felt after the first one and one-half hours of painting on this particular painting that it may be better now, than when I'm finished because it is less tied down and lacks the labored look. But, it still was not right and I didn't know why. After leaving it set for a few days it came to me that it had an insecure feeling. It was at the other end of the scale, or too unfinished. The problem was how to balance finished and unfinished and still keep it fresh. I also decided that I had gone overboard on crowding the area. It was necessary to go backward and eliminate some of the activity. I had to give this painting more space. It did not go well, the painting looked trite.
I believe it is because I only employed a painting-out technique and left large uninteresting areas of flat color. The flatness could retain the fresh look but was primarily concerned with being a foil for the more active areas. It worked, but to a limited extent. Later I found painting out and painting in had to go on simultaneously. This worked much better. This painting is a romantic painting as far as I am concerned because it speaks of a human condition. If I were to name it, I'd call it, "People Going Different Ways in the Same Direction".

The paintings represented in Plates VIII, IX, X and XI I don't know much about because they are too close to me in time. It is possible that I don't know much about them because they are more intuitive; I hope so. They are more playful and still more ominous. Playful because of the form, ominous because of the value. The last five have been great fun and more acceptable to me.

My conclusions about the paintings I have already stated. But, I have found out some things about myself as an artisan that seem important. I can paint four days a week and make prints two days. I can do this but it requires order in the other areas of my life. I no longer demand of myself that
my work be part of what is considered new, but it must be mine. Last, I find the more I paint the more I want to paint.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


