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The Exploration of Nature Through the Plane

by

Rodger A. Book

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Date: March 26, 1995
Thesis Statement:

I intend to explore the ways in which planar manipulation depicts nature. I will research other artists' theories on this topic, and then create a series of oil paintings on canvas or paper, possibly using other mediums.
This thesis explores the depiction of nature through planar manipulation. In order to lay a foundation for this discussion, I will begin by defining the concepts that are basic to an understanding of the topic, including nature and the aim of art. I will also highlight important aspects of the origin and development of the picture and the picture plane. Particular emphasis will be placed on Cezanne, Cubism, and Hofmann, as they play special roles in the evolution of the concept of the picture plane. Finally, I will apply the concepts and theories to my own work.

According to Millet,

The chief mission of the artist is to reveal that portion of nature's riches which he has discovered to those who would not otherwise have suspected their presence. He serves as a translator and interpreter of nature to those who cannot understand her language. ¹

What is nature? One definition of nature describes it as the elements of the natural world, such as mountains, animals, rivers, or plants. It may also be interpreted as the sum total of the forces at work throughout the universe, or, the universe with all its phenomenon. Artists have studied these natural phenomena and no longer see only objects. A landscape becomes light, dark, color, and line in interesting patterns, instead of being simply trees, fields and buildings.

"Nature is the mother of art.' It was from Nature that the artist adopted his esthetic elements and from her he has drawn his chief inspiration ever since art began."\(^2\) It is in nature that we originally see artistic elements such as line, form, texture, and color. The artist has taken these "natural" characteristics as his own and uses them as tools to express his visions.

The aim of art, then, is to combine one's life experience ("nature") with the natural qualities of the art medium. Part of this process is creatively interpreting one's experience of nature. Another part is interpreting the expressive medium in order to translate ones' feeling for nature. Creation, in this sense, is not duplication of an "observed fact." Rather, it is a unity, or a synthesis from an artist's viewpoint of space, matter and color. "Exploring the nature of the medium is part of the understanding of nature, as well as being part of the process of creation."\(^3\)

Even in the process of creation, however, the artist must adhere to certain art principles. The following principles were handed down to us by the Greeks. Although they are general in nature, they form the basis for thinking about each medium and the art upon which it is based, and the relation of each art to its medium. These principles are:

(1) Make your medium do what it can do best; (2) don't strain your medium beyond its capacity; (3) don't attempt with one medium what another can do better or more easily; and (4) don't imitate one medium with another.\(^4\)

To be more succinct: "Respect your medium." As a two-dimensional medium expressing three-dimensional subjects, painting demands unique forms of respect.

Background on the development of the concept of the picture will help us to understand the medium. The following discussion will include the ideas of Cezanne, Cubism, and Hofmann. While similarities can be seen between them, each artist or movement has its own specific variations. In regards to my own work, I have found particular ideas of theirs helpful, while I have chosen to reject others.

The concept of the picture originated in the painting of the Renaissance and stimulated the development of the principles of perspective. The picture plane is not a physical surface of a painting, but an imaginary one. It has been described as a window separating viewers from the image. The picture plane is theoretically envisioned as a transparent plane through which pass all the lines of sight between the eye of the viewer and the positions of the subjects depicted in the picture.

CEZANNE

In the 1870's a post-Impressionist painter named Paul Cezanne introduced exciting and radically new qualities of representing deep space and flat design in his work. To best explain his method of the painting, Cezanne wrote:

Treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything in proper perspective so that each side of an object or a plane is directed toward a central point. Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth that is a section of nature ....Lines perpendicular to this horizon give depth. But nature for us men is more depth than surface, whence the need of introducing into our light vibrations, represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient amount of blue to give the impression of air.  

Cezanne invented this process of modulating a volume through chromatic nuances - in effect, using a series of tiny overlapping color planes which often worked three-dimensionally. Regardless of how briefly he sketched in main contours, he was "using line to establish the planes which filled the space." He then retraced and verified the drawn lines with a thinly applied bluish gray color. This process established the spacial relationships, and he could then begin arranging the tiny planes of color. The volumes created by this method attain a solidity different from that attained through basic dark-to-light modeling, because Cezanne exploited the characteristics of warm and cool colors and the full range of the color scale as no one had previously done in painting.

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To better understand the creative process of Cezanne's paintings and his concepts, especially the use of the planes, it is helpful to include visual as well as verbal representations. This allows the reader to more fully see and comprehend the idea of the plane as treated in Cezanne's work. The diagrams that follow first appeared in Loran's *Cezanne's Composition.*

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Well and Rock in the Forest of the Chateau Noir - Cezanne

Well and Rock in the Forest of the Chateau Noir
Cezanne - Loran, Cezanne's Composition
THE PICTURE PLANE

STATIC PLANE

DYNAMIC PLANE

OVERLAPPING PLANES
THE FUNNEL EFFECT
AND THE HOLE
IN THE PICTURE

PLANE OF A VOLUME.
VOLUMES MOVING IN SPACE.

TWO DIMENSIONAL MOVEMENT

TWO- AND THREE DIMENSIONAL MOVEMENT COMBINED
RISING AND FALLING MOVEMENTS.

LINEAR RHYTHM OR MOVEMENT.

AXES OF VOLUMES.

AXES OF IRREGULAR VOLUMES AND PLANES.
TENSION BETWEEN PLANES

TENSION BETWEEN VOLUMES
Cezanne stressed vertical, horizontal, and angular lines of direction in the compositions in order to attain his structural and emotional purposes. He was also severely analytical in geometric observation, and this paved the way quite logically for the Cubist analysis of form.

CUBISM

Cubism is characterized by an intellectualization of painting, where the artists depicted "the world not as they saw it, but as they knew it to be." The Cubist movement reached its greatest development between the years 1911 and 1918, and though considered a form of Realism, it willfully rejected the principles of perspective and relegated color to a position of secondary importance. Though no simple statement of the objectives of the Cubists can be given, it is possible to break down the movement into three major phases reflecting various aesthetic attitudes.

Characteristics of the first phase, generally called Analytic Cubism, are the abstraction, simplification, and emphasis on the form of objects. Analytic Cubism consists of facets or cubes, arranged in superimposed, transparent planes with clearly defined edges that establish mass, space, and the implication of movement. The subject matter consists of traditional landscapes, portraits, and still lifes. The artists wanted to be free from the trickery of traditional illusionistic painting, which was tied to a fixed moment of time and a fixed viewpoint. The fragmented, crystalline structures of early Cubist paintings carry explicit references to the motif and strong sensation of light, form, and space without compromising the

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integrity of the flat surface. The effect is of a more total experience, combining different aspects of the motif which are assembled on the surface.

The second, or Hermetic phase of Cubism, is marked by the disappearance of the representation of objects, and a gradual dissolution of the distinction between form and space. Characteristic of the pictures of this phase is an iridescence caused by the use of transparent, overlapping planes, whose position in space is ambiguous. In one context, the edges and angles of a plane may seem to belong to one abstract form, while in another context, the apparent positions in space and the relationships to larger compositional forms appear to change. The result creates a dynamic interrelationship of form and space in the picture.

The third phase, Synthetic Cubism, marks a radical change in the artistic point of view of the movement. Synthetic Cubists sought to enrich reality by creating new aesthetic objects; real in themselves and not representational of reality. During World War I, the Cubism of Picasso and Braque and their major followers such as Juan Gris, became more expansive and colorful. The synthetic Cubist styles made less use of existing views from various angles and more use of collage. They not only re-introduced more positive color, but at times combined Cubist space with aspects of Renaissance perspective space.

Synthetic Cubism did not start from analysis of a particular motif, but from materials which were put together to create a motif. The picture surface was no longer the transparent window onto an illusion, but the flat arena upon which this assemblage took place. Many of the objects used were everyday disposable items -- newspapers, matchboxes, for example -- bringing art closer to the informal commonplace reality of life. Though
Cubism ceased to be an active movement in the 1920's, its influence on modern art -- Painterly, Post-Painterly, and Geometric Abstraction -- is profound.

HOFMANN

Hans Hofmann is one artist who was greatly influenced by the Cubist movement. Hofmann created works of art to provide viewers with aesthetic enjoyment. His early work in the post-Impressionistic tradition led him to reject the methods of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance masters. Hofmann believed that depth should not be simulated by "the arrangement of objects one after another toward a vanishing point," nor by tonal gradation. 9

His first law of painting is that "the picture plane must be preserved in its two-dimensionality throughout the whole process of creation until it reaches its final transformation in the completed picture." 10 What I find interesting about Hofmann's work is its activated space; it is full of contrasts that stimulate the composition. Also, his pictorial message strives to attain plasticity, conveying a three-dimensional experience in two dimensions. So, when a work of art is plastic, the pictorial message blends with the picture plane, and nature is incorporated with the medium of expression.

To achieve this plasticity, Hofmann used a technique called "push and pull." This means that "the picture plane must be animated by counter-balancing forces... whenever the picture plane is activated in one location, this stimulation causes a counter reaction." 11 Hofmann's theories and

10 Ibid.
concepts of the plane are not completely different from previous painters, such as Cezanne; there are similarities in the use of overlapping, dynamic, and static planes. Much of what was previously diagrammed in Cezanne's paintings also exists in Hofmann's work. This is particularly evident in the use of planes that shows two- and three-dimensional movement, tensions or volumes between planes, and volumes that move in space.12
26. Untitled (California Oil Field), c. 1930s; Ink on paper, 8 1/2 x 10 3/4 (21.4 x 27.8). Estate of the artist; courtesy Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York

Early Works - Hofmann

Hofmann- Later Works - Blue on Gray - 1956
Goodman, Hans Hofmann
One can say that each painter has a unique way of creating art; there are myriad variations in the use of color, line, and application of the medium to the surface. Although Hofmann's work is certainly unique, it is obviously based on previous planar theory, and supplemented with other concepts that he believes are relevant to his work.

Hofmann often discusses the importance of three-dimensional experience, spacial relations, and keeping the two-dimensionality of the picture plane intact. His debt to Cezanne is evident in some of Cezanne's own writings.

The picture, regardless of the exigencies of the subject represented, must remain faithful to its own structure, to its fundamental two dimensions. The third dimension can only be suggested; it is from this double necessity that most of the inventions in the art of painting are born.... 13

Although there are strong relationships between Cezanne's and Hofmann's theories, Hofmann's theories are more relevant to my present work than Cezanne's. I intend to use these ideas, and build from them to find a new way of expressing the use of the plane.

I, too, believe that one should never destroy the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. Hofmann describes this destruction as occurring when the picture has the "illusion of holes or protruding objects, or creates an effect that destroys the architectural wall -- the architectural space." 14 The proper placement and movement of the planes on the picture plane gives the potential to express plastic experience in nature. The planes allow one to become absolutely free of the picture plane.

13Loran, Cezanne's Composition, p. 33.
Nature is my inspiration; it is a driving force that demands my full attention. It is the means from which I create, and I must respect its complexity if I am to unlock its secrets. As Cezanne and Hofmann have worked from nature, I too will follow in their footsteps by seeing nature in planes, transferring my three-dimensional experience to two dimensions, and by making my work the expression of my emotion, and not the rendering of nature.

As a young artist, it is imperative that I find a concept around which I can build my work. I feel that it is the continual act of imitating other works of art that confuses the artist; this act hinders an artist's progress in finding a starting point or foundation for his own work. Since the beginning of my painting career, I have worked primarily from the subconscious mind, and the shapes have been non-representational. However, I too have fallen into the trap of imitation. Consciously, I was mimicking the styles and processes of other artists, while subconsciously, the work itself was showing me the concept that I needed to follow. What is most angering and frustrating is that I was unable to comprehend its message.

DISCUSSION OF THESIS WORK

Through the discussion of four paintings - Positively Poultney, Casey, Casey II, and Casey and Tito - I will explain in detail how I became aware of the concept of the plane, and in what direction it has taken me in depicting nature. Positively Poultney began as many as my earlier works did, by working from the subconscious mind. I approached the picture plane by applying medium in random, with no plan or idea, allowing intuition to govern the painting process. What transpired because of this randomness was a mixture of larger and smaller rectangular shapes being placed on the
was a mixture of larger and smaller rectangular shapes being placed on the picture plane. They were usually overlapping or showing tension between one another. What I did not realize was that these shapes were in reality planes. I had heard the term (plane), but was not cognizant that I was actually using them. As the painting progressed, it became apparent that I was reducing the number of shapes. Many shapes that were placed in the center of the composition were slowing being eliminated, and those that survived were at the outer areas of the picture plane. I call this process of creating transformation.

In this particular painting, the paint was applied in thin layers; this created an atmospheric quality. I used primarily warm colors (for their advancing characteristics) to show one shape's position in relation to another's position. I also used cool colors, which show recession, to enhance the push-pull effect. What is remarkable about this painting is that although created in my Rochester studio as a non-representational work, the painting resembled the view from my Vermont studio - a place that I had not been for more than six months prior to Positively Poultney's inception. Even after I became aware that this was a view of nature outside my studio, I still did not realize that the shapes that I was pushing around on the canvas were actually planes that I was using to depict nature. I finished two paintings after Poultney, and was still experiencing frustration because I could not understand what the paintings were trying to tell me.

It is quite possible that I would still be searching for an answer to Positively Poultney if it were not for a trip to Italy some three to four months after the painting's completion. While I was in Italy, Nick Carone, a student of Hans Hofmann, introduced me to the concept of the plane. Nick emphasized the use of static, dynamic, and overlapping planes to depict
nature. These planes are used to create a three-dimensional effect without destroying the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. Using the planes allows the artist to depict the innate qualities of the subject matter. "You [the artist], nature, and the plane are one."15

Carone followed Hofmann's teaching, which in its simplest form is based on the determination of the artistic process. This determination is made by

three absolutely different factors: first, nature which works upon us by its laws; second, the artist who creates a spiritual contact with nature and his materials; third, the medium of expression through which the artist translates his inner world.16

Technically, I had been painting for several years. However, when I began using these ideas and the concept of the plane, I truly began creating art. Out of all of the living things in nature, I could find none better than the human figure, in its natural state, from which to work. From the beginning of time, man has been emotionally inspired to depict nature using the human figure, especially the female figure. As examples, the Venus of Willendorf is from the Paleolithic period, from the Roman period, Aphrodite of Cyrene, the Renaissance Venus of Urbino, and modern art has the Reclining Figure by Henry Moore. It is based on referencing this significant historical background that I use the plane to depict nature in my thesis work.

15 Interview with Nicolas Carone, International School of Art, Umbria, Italy, 1 August 1994.

My first attempt to use the plane in working from the human figure is called *Casey*. This particular oil painting is done on paper. So as not to be stifled by thinking of the concept and all of its complexities, I began quickly drawing from the figure in charcoal on paper. I used sealant to keep the drawing intact and to allow a permanent register of the lines. As I applied oil paint, I found it increasingly difficult to see the outlines of the drawing. At times, I found it necessary to scrape off some of the medium so that I could get a sense of the figure and the original emotional experience that allowed me to create it. I did not want to get lost in the medium and forfeit any three-dimensional element of volume, or forget that the creation must have rhythm and spatial movement. In other words, there must always be visual free-ness of flow and planes that show movement into and out of the depth.

We must keep in mind that color and light do play a role in rhythm and movement. To this point, my palette was limited, and for reasons still unknown, my color palette changed and increased tremendously when I began painting *Casey*. The only explanation that I can offer is that Italy's natural colors overwhelmed me visually, emotionally, and subconsciously. I possess the gift of color; I know intuitively, rather than theoretically, that colors should be in certain places with respect to one another. Warm and cool colors now blend successfully more here than in any of my previous works.

The strengths of this painting are: good use of color relationships, complete utilization of the picture plane, and strong elements of rhythm and movement. *Casey* was a breakthrough in my painting. The planar concept alone broke me free of non-representational work. *Casey*'s weaknesses are the levels of tension between different planes, and the transference of the
three-dimensional experience to two dimensions. Reflecting upon this piece, I am now aware of some of the specific areas in which I need to improve.

With *Casey II*, my plan was to increase the thickness of the medium, concentrate on volumes and depth, and try to incorporate subject matter surrounding the human figure. Also, I wanted to make sure that the spontaneity of the painting process was not hindered. As in *Casey*, new colors were added to my repertoire. I began the painting by drawing in the figure with charcoal, but I never stayed with the exact composition. Paintings have lives of their own; it is my belief that an artist should never will or force a painting to be what he wants it to be. From this, I allow the conscious and subconscious minds to integrate and make decisions about the process of the painting. Nothing has to be placed in an exact location; variations make for a better work of art. It is acceptable to freely make changes during the painting process.

In this work, my main goal was to test the flexibility and limitations of the plane. I may have been excessive in my experimentation, but I believe that it was a necessary step in my learning. I was determined to see the painting through, regardless of the frustrations that I encountered in the painting process. I became so involved in experimenting that I lost touch with the emotional aspects of the painting, and was faced with starting the work over. If I wanted to be successful, I needed to concentrate on interpreting my experience with nature, and translating that emotion to the viewer by means of the medium.

In retrospect, this painting was much more successful than *Casey*, because the three-dimensionality of the human figure is more evident in this work. The planes that show volume in the previous painting were not as well defined as they are in *Casey II*. This picture is full of life; it allows the
viewer to be part of the picture and explore the entire painting. Warm and cool colors integrate well; one type does not overpower the other.

The spatial element show atmospheric qualities, but the arrangement of the planes gives an illusion of depth. This illusion was accomplished by moving the planes from left to right, up and down, or by small movements in other directions. The illusion of depth does not destroy the picture plane. In some respects, I feel that this painting was over-worked and experimented upon. However, doing so allowed me to become more free in my painting, and the piece does not appear constructed to the viewer. The overall sense of this work is one of mysteriousness or tranquillity.

I have no doubt that the frustrations I experienced while creating Casey II were responsible for the success of Casey and Tito, final painting examined in this thesis. Casey and Tito came together as if it painted itself. At times, it was as if the life of the painting directed the brush in my hand. For example, if I put in a plane to show volume or tension, I immediately added another plane that had relationship to it, without consciously deciding to do so. Because of the spontaneity and quickness in applying paint to the surface of the canvas, I am unable to give any substantial background on the process of transformation.

What I can discuss in detail is the use of medium and the use of color. For the first time in my work, I chose to use 3-inch to 5-inch brushes. In the past, I used exclusively smaller brushes. Using larger brushes allowed me to load the brush with a large amount of paint. It was now possible to put in a sweeping brush stroke with authority. In comparison, when using the smaller brushes, applying the medium seemed restricted and controlled. I much enjoyed this new-found freedom, and I believe that it shows in Casey
and Tito. Even the use of charcoal to show line was unrestricted, and full of movement in its application.

This painting exploded with color. Because of the large brushes and the amount of paint being mixed up, I was able to add to a particular color being placed on the surface. For example, when working with a large solid-colored shape, varying the shades of the solid color was in effect adding planes to create a three-dimensional effect.

Originally, I started with the female figure Casey, but during transformation, Tito soon appeared on the canvas. Tito had modeled periodically with Casey, so I was not surprised when this happened. The subconscious mind and what part it plays in a painting is quite amazing. After working on the piece for a short while, it took on the personality of the two figures moving in space with a tremendous sense of energy and excitement. Splashes of color in certain areas accented and enhanced this excitement and movement in the painting. As with the other works, the color placement was intuitive. This painting gave me the confidence to challenge my use of the plane. Areas of color, the use of the plane, movement, space, and line quality all increased in quality both individually and in combination. The only area that I did not consciously test was depth, but the life of this painting dictated that depth should not be a factor.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

I consider Casey and Tito a milestone in terms of my technique and use of the plane to depict nature. However, I realize that I have only begun to understand and exploit my varied talents and skills. Breakthroughs in my work are motivating, but they are not the final answer. There is much work yet to be done.
I believe that each young painter reaches a point in his career when he must evaluate his dedication to art. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this lifestyle? Is this truly what I want to do for the rest of my life? Or, is it that the image and the mystique of being an artist blinds the truth of total commitment and reality? Will my inner forces, the complexity of the art world, and economics destroy my desires and perhaps even my person? I believe that this is a serious set of questions that every young painter must consider honestly and rationally.

I have had to ponder these issues and I have realized that there are no guarantees in achieving success as a painter. One must, without fail, live to paint and be totally committed to one's work and beliefs. As I continue to push forward in the concept of the plane, I am convinced that if a new major art movement should develop, it will have direct relationship to the plane and how it is used on the picture plane.

I also believe that the person who supersedes Jackson Pollock's drip paintings will discover the next level of painting. Since the Renaissance the picture, to the viewer, is like looking into a window. Pollock created the opposite view. Instead of looking into the picture, his rhythmic layers of line spread out laterally across the picture plane and seemed to extend far beyond its edges. Pollock made the viewer look from the inside outward. As far as painting is concerned, no succeeding movement has gone beyond Pollock's work. With that in mind, my direction as a painter is clear. That is, I continue to work from nature, and search for the answer beyond Pollock.

My answer to the next major movement in painting lies with the use of the plane and Pollock's drip painting theory. The combination of these two concepts - how they complement each other with the picture plane - will break the stagnation of painting as we know it today. Joshua Reynolds once
truth shows the greatest command of his materials. "17 If I can be true to my painting and myself, I will find my answer.

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45"x41"
Charcoal/Oil on Canvas
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45" x 45"  
Charcoal/Oil on Canvas  
1994