The Music of art

Chad L. Cleveland

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
Rochester Institute of Technology

August 2009

School of Art

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

The Music of Art

By

Chad L. Cleveland

Thesis Committee:

Alan Singer

Tom Lightfoot

Lanna Pejovic

Don Arday
Chad Cleveland  
Title: The Music of Art  

Abstract  

Through the research of Jazz/Improvisational music I plan to investigate its’ influence on my visual artwork. I also intend to demonstrate the interaction and relationship between the creation and performance of a piece of art. There seems to be a correlation between the elements of art and music which I am intrigued by. How are the elements of music translated into visual space? In the elements and principles of art there is a visual response waiting to be invoked. For the purposes of this writing, music is the muse. What takes place during the translation of listening, thought response, spirit response, and physical action, and material choice when creating a work of art when listening to music? I believe there is a connection of spirit and understanding between these two worlds which collide in the form of painting, drawing, and sculpture. Art and music have long since influenced one another, yet the intrigue remains. Thus, the thesis is merely a suggestion, as well as a meditative reflection on how improvisational music can influence a visual space.

My art will consist of a range of visual representations including, but not limited to: found object art, charcoal sketches, and oil paintings. I intend to investigate what media works best, if any. In the end, I would assume it to be temperamental. My art is a result of many factors; it’s an intersection of personal experience with time, space, architecture, environment, and for the case of this thesis, music. I am fascinated by the improvisational musician’s ability to veer off the foundation, to aspire to the unknown. The decision of the musician or artist is not merely an uneducated guess, it’s a guided intuition. Furthermore, the resulting artworks are attempts to create an immediate, spontaneous, and visually agile experience built upon the foundations of our craft.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction........................................................................................................ 4
2. Process/Drawing........................................................................................... 7
3. Painting..............................................................................................................13
4. Assemblage.......................................................................................................22
5. Conclusion....................................................................................................... 24
6. Thesis Exhibition.............................................................................................25
INTRODUCTION / INFLUENCE

As a visual exercise generated from the process and experience of improvisational music, I have found inspiration concerning the direction of my body of work. The thesis title “The Music of Art” is my personal perspective concerning the relationship between Art and Music, as well as a reflection of the ideology and philosophies of the jazz greats, as well as the relative contemporary artists and musicians carrying the torch of spontaneous prose/art.

“The Music of Art” symbolizes simplicity in thinking. The idea is not to think so much, but to respond. Thinking is time consuming, refined, and appropriate for most situations! However, the ideal to react to the immediacy of a moment is what I find most intriguing, and what I think that most of the artistic, musical, and literary greats from the jazz and beat era were all about. There is something exciting, raw, uncensored, free and pure about an unrefined, blurted response.

The idea of “The Music of Art” was also generated from listening to jazz/improvisational gurus such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Miles Davis. Their philosophy was to react musically to the moment as fast and as intuitively as possible without over thinking. Their work was process oriented. Beat poets such as Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Allen Ginsberg were known to recite words spontaneously. Thus, they paralleled this fresh, new jazz exercise into their poetry and linguistic performance.

During such musical performances or recitals, poets would yell “Go” as an encouragement for spontaneity. “Go” symbolized the revealing of a musical or lyrical idea without pause. Editing was basically a taboo. Therefore, many performances and writings were developed without implementing the rules or structure associated with the art form. Basically, there was limited preconceived plan or formula. Much of the artwork I present in my thesis is an attempt at this process in response to some of the music created by the artists formerly mentioned. A great deal of art created in the past was done so in response to the
music of the times. My approach to art is a fresh visual response to the music of the past, as well as a conversation with the music being created now in the 21st century.

The process of making art is one of intimacy with a chosen medium. As one creates, one finds new ways to reinvent themselves through their work. Throughout my investigation of music and its influence on art, I had to take note of the successes and failures of working with certain media. There were many questions at stake. What media is most spontaneous? Is it actually pertinent or possible to catch the fleeting moment with an eventually static brush stroke? Is there some other artistic realm/media more appropriate for my intent? Artwork is an investigative process, and what will my findings prove?

Like music, visual art has an emotional and engaging impact on the personal experience of its maker and the audience. It is this aspect of the visual arts I find to be imperative and awe inspiring. Like many others I am drawn to Picasso, but maybe more so to his statements and philosophies concerning the visual arts. The following statement is of endless value and inspiration to me.

Picasso so eloquently stated:

“A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While it is being done it changes as one’s thoughts change. And when it is finished, it still goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it. A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on us by our life from day to day. This is natural enough, as the picture lives only through the man who is looking at it (27).”

In music, layering and motion can be created through the intersection of many musicians playing different instruments simultaneously. In addition, this experience can also be accomplished by a soloist. There is a marriage of musical instruments, and how layers of sound are created when they are played. My interest is in how these layers of sound translate into visual space.

---

Most of the artwork created in this body of work was influenced by the contemporary musical group Phish. Phish is composed of four band members. They are: Trey Anastasio (Lead/Rhythm Guitar), Mike Gordon (Bass), Page McConnell (Piano, Keyboards), and Jon Fishman (Drums/Percussion). The name of their musical piece which inspired my art is called, “Ambient (Jam)”. 
PROCESS

Drawing

Drawing has served a grand purpose concerning the direction, ideation, and conception of my current work. The conversion of the black and white drawings color benefited my control of a different medium. They have also manifested a new direction regarding sculpture and assemblage.

Drawing is the tool that has propelled all of my approaches to my work including painting, assemblage, and sculpture. Whenever there is stagnancy in my work, I find drawing to be an essential factor for igniting inspiration.

Most of the drawings I have been working on deal with an architectural and/or musical space and theme. My process is very similar to that of the paintings. However, the drawings are more immediate. What interests me most when drawing, is the raw nature and directness of the charcoal. Working with charcoal is what I like to refer to as an immediate mark of the soul, as well as the brand of one’s temperament.

Regarding my drawing process, I have used tape as an improvisational tool. For example, I will start a layer of a drawing by random mark making in response to music. Gestural lines take shape, and shading eventually takes form. I try to cover as much paper as possible. The balance of light and dark seem to follow naturally. After I am satisfied with the visual occupation of the first layer of charcoal, I lay down tape across the drawing in random structural locations. Next, I repeat the first step with another layer of charcoal. After the second layer is applied, the tape is ripped off and a new image is born. The new image forms a marriage with the old, and the process is repeated continually until intuition ceases, or the music stops! Many of my drawings are done in this manner.

‘Mystic Deconstruction’ (Figure 1) is a drawing reminiscent of some of the
works of Picasso and Braque. The layers of the image break the drawing up into a cubist study. Layers of charcoal were applied to create this image. Charcoal, eraser, spiritual temperament, music, and physical interpretation were all culprits regarding the image constructed, or deconstructed if you will. However, textural rubbings were also used from architectural structures to enhance the composition and image. I believe there is a textural quality to music. Musical space can be as rugged, as it can be smooth and spacious. It can be full and empty almost all at once. I think ‘Mystic Deconstruction’ touches on some of those textural qualities. In retrospect, it almost looks like a musician’s sheet notes scattered on the floor, abandoned for immediate pursuits!

**Figure 1** – Mystic Deconstruction, 18” x 24”, charcoal on paper

![Image of Mystic Deconstruction]

Ultimately, the drawing was an exercise in visual fluency and balance in response to music. The layering of the tape allowed for an extra ingredient of chance. As the layers of experience with charcoal were applied, a unified image eventually came into being.
Many of the drawings I have produced owe a great debt to the works, and more specifically, the writings of Wassily Kandinsky. For me, “Mystic Deconstruction” was serendipitously linked to a segment of Kandinsky’s “Concerning the Spiritual in Art”. I believe Kandinsky was heavily concerned with the nature, process, and creation of art and its' impact on humanity. However, in light of his dark writing he reveals an eerie optimism:

“And as we rise higher in the (spiritual) triangle we find that the uneasiness increases, as a city built on the most correct architectural plan may be shaken suddenly by the uncontrollable force of nature. Humanity is living in such a spiritual city, subject to these sudden disturbances for which neither architects nor mathematicians have made allowance. In one place lies a great wall crumbled to pieces like a card house, in another are presumably immortal spiritual pillars. The abandoned churchyard quakes and forgotten graves open and from them rise forgotten ghosts. Spots appear on the sun and the sun grows dark, and what theory can fight with darkness? And in this city live also men deafened by false wisdom who hear no crash, and blinded by false wisdom, so they can say “our sun will shine more brightly than ever soon the last spots will disappear.” But sometime even these men will hear and see (Kandinsky, 12)."

In addition to music, other personal interests and topics that come to light when viewing my work are time, space, architecture, and energy. I am fascinated with the challenge of conveying the motion of music through the visual arts. Music is a traveling art form.

I have always been a loyal fan of Giacometti. It is in his expressions about energy I find most intriguing. Giacometti stated, “I always have the impression, or the feeling that living beings are very fragile, as though they needed some terrific energy to keep them upright” (Bonnefoy, 374). Biographer Yves Bonnefoy pinpoints Giacometti’s pursuit, as well as my own, as he suggests:

---

“And it is precisely because of drawing’s access, even through painting or sculpture, to the absolute, that it can become in them an experience of time, or in time: aware that his object is inevitably elusive, the artist is caught up in the dialectic of having glimpsed this object and knowing also that he will have nothing more (Bonnefoy, 386).”

Music also has this elusive quality. It has the ability to draw the listener in an emotive dialogue. For an artist, I find this emotive quality of particular interest. The question becomes how to translate and capture the emotive quality of music, and inject it into art. In addition, the physical performance of the translation and creation of an artwork becomes just as important as the art itself.

Furthermore, it is important for me to describe the correlation of the medium between music and art when talking about my own work. I will attempt to breakdown the relationship between these two subjects by categorizing and pairing the instruments with the medium used in my works of art. For example, I like to pair the guitar/bass (strings) with the use of line. The quality of line usually is respondent to what I might have been listening to at the time. To elaborate, if I were listening to soaring, sustained, high notes, my brush strokes or charcoal lines would tend to elongate and become bending, and gestural. If I were to stray for a moment, and meditate on the bass line my strokes would tend to become thicker, shorter, choppy, and rhythmic. When the lines start intersecting on a canvas, shapes are created and structure begins. It is almost as if the music has suggested a visual or gestural architecture. It is these structures that were formed through the use of drawing exercises which resulted in the following bodies of work.

Drawing - The Music of Art

Figure 2
‘Transcription 1’
18” x 24”
Charcoal on paper

Figure 3
‘Transcription 2’
18” x 24”
Charcoal on paper
Figure 2 and 3 are two drawings created from two repeated, but different experiences of “Ambient Jam”. For half of the exercise, I used an old art trick of the senses, a professor of mine had once taught me. I blindfolded myself, armed myself with a piece of compressed charcoal in one hand, and eraser in the other, and started the music. As the music progressed, I naturally meditated on the emerging sounds. At one moment guitar notes trickle and dominate. At others, the guitar succumbs to the low vibrating thump of the bass line, eventually falling to “om” like a Buddhist monk deep in prayer. Piano overlaps in hard layers, and the cymbals hush in rhythm behind the snare drum serving as the heartbeat-like backdrop behind the entanglement of sound. The music in this piece progresses to chaotic, eventually converging sound striving for a harmonic crescendo, and falls away only to start again.

All the while I responded to the music in a mostly gestural manner. The charcoal loops in line around the paper and creates an architectural space. In an attempt to mimic percussion, I momentarily abandoned the charcoal for the bare palm of my hand as I rubbed, brushed, and patted along the surface of the paper. The action of the percussive reaction served nicely as a value tool for these pieces. Throughout the experiment I would turn the paper many times. As the 50 minute “Ambient Jam” came to an end, I removed the blindfold.

At first glance, the drawings were uninteresting to me. One of the drawings turned black and muddy. The other drawing was what I considered to be an ordinary gesture drawing. However, as I stared and meditated on the drawings something began to happen. From the dark drawings emerged distinct shapes. Almost instinctively, I grabbed some scissors and cut the shapes out, setting them free. Thus, the “Transcription” series evolved. Interestingly enough, Figure 2 and 3 in retrospect resemble two musical notes.
Painting has been the next challenge concerning the translation of music into an artwork. The conversion of one medium into another has always been a great obstacle for me.

Not only did I need to play around with paint, I also had to prepare myself for failure, yet remain open enough to persevere. At times I find myself underestimating the courage involved in art. In addition, I began researching artists from the beat era with whom I felt a personal connection. Artists I am drawn to and whom I find inspiring are Willem De Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock.

I consider Franz Kline to be an influentially evident artist concerning my own body of work. What draws me to Kline is his injection of architectural line in his paintings. Kline also developed a series of black and white paintings which I feel a kindred connection to, as well as a source of inspiration concerning the feel of the brushstroke.

‘Spiritual’ (Figure 4) was my first attempt at translating the feel and experience of my drawings to painting. Like the ‘transcription’ drawings, I began painting from listening to Phish’s “Ambient Jam”. The music once again inspired a variety of movements and techniques regarding the application of paint. At first, I would apply wet layers of paint. Then I would take a cloth and swipe through the paint thus leaving streaks. In other areas of the under painting, I would dab a wrinkled cloth on the wet paint in a repetitive manner resulting in a pattern of cloth print. The under painting consisted of rusty reds, burnt oranges, and faded blues. As for correct documentation of the process, the music was influential in application as well. When the first underlayment of the paint subsided, I calmed the experience and dusted the paint with a dry brush. It was at this moment of the painting that I realized the hypnotic and communicative powers between music and art. The process became meditative, and of course different each time. But in
this case, with this painting I realized that the movement of the dry brush was creating a percussive, broom sound-like experience with the music. My brush strokes were in rhythm with the music, and the connection became clear. Furthermore, the experience became wonderfully real, yet remaining enigmatic. It felt for a moment as if the music was creating the painting, and I was just a translator.

As for the next layer, I would mask off certain areas of the painting using duct and masking tape. The structure of the tape was orientated very similarly, yet unintentionally to the architectural layouts of Franz Kline’s paintings.

After the tape was laid out, and with the music blaring in the background, I applied another layer of paint over the first. However, the next layer called for black and white paint. The second layer became more dramatic, contrasting and intense. Throughout the application of the black and white layer various techniques were used. I splashed and dripped paint on and against the canvas. In addition, large, gestural brushstrokes were added, thrown, and thrashed across the canvas. Every way I could think of painting with a brush was physically manifested. And when the experience ended, the layer ceased, yet the tape remained. There is an excitement and mystique of removing the tape. It is a very enigmatic process, sometimes with the result of satisfaction, and at other times disgust. Just as in the improvisation of music, the setup for failure is inevitable. It is creating without a net. However in this case the removal of the tape produced an interesting spatial and visually historical result. I now had a new image, and with that the masked under painting showed through to merge with the new layer. Thus, there started to emerge a history of visual experience within my own painting.

For the final layer of paint, I masked the painting again with tape. This time I simplified the tape layout which resembled a crooked section of a ladder, or a leaning ‘H’. Nonetheless, I abandoned my intent of improvisation for the instinct of an artist. I wanted to simplify the architecture and give the image a strong, compact statement. In doing so, I thought I had compromised the intent of my thesis; the thought that my painting was strictly unplanned. But the more I thought about the creation of music, and being a musician myself, I realized that improvisation does,
and needs to coexist with planning. They need not abandon one another, yet they need to mingle and dance. Thus, ‘Spiritual’ evolved out of a marriage of planning and improvisation. The painting reminded me of the idea of organized chaos, a topic frequently found in Zen literature. The following Zenrin poem documented in Alan W. Watts The Way of Zen so eloquently reflect my ideal of myself as an artist, and that on which I create:

“The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection; the water has no mind to receive their image” (Watts, 181).¹

As for the final layer of paint, my chaotic energy I had experienced in the formal layers of the painting became subdued by some of the calmer sections in the music. I mixed the paint on the canvas in a slower, more sedate, meditative manner. I was captivated now with the interaction and blending of the paints on the final layer. Deeper I descended into the music, and deeper I delved into the world of mustard yellows and cadmium oranges. The path of music at this point led me to unearth a plane of mossy, avocado-ish green. At that moment I knew I had touched upon a spiritual region of color within myself, as well as a moment of self-actualization in regard to the journey of painting. The act of painting is a living experience. Emotion, time, intellect, and physicality are all factors of painting, and in this case music. And so when the music trickled to an end on my CD player, ‘Spiritual’ (Figure 4) was born.

Figure 4
Spiritual
30” x 46”
Oil on Canvas
‘Several Below’ (Figure 5) was meant to be a monumental dedication to the “music of art”. The process was an extension of that used for ‘Spiritual’. Whereas ‘Spiritual’ was completed through three layers, ‘Several Below’ was created through several. It was also created through several listenings of ‘Ambient Jam’. The painting is a triptych divided into three canvases; each six feet tall and three feet wide equaling a total size of nine by six feet. The stretchers themselves were homemade and they were constructed with 2” by 3”s giving them a noticeable, strong relief when hung.

Figure 5
‘Several Below’
9’ by 6’
Oil on Canvas
The artwork itself was an exercise in scale. The grandeur of the painting posed many challenges. I worked on this piece within the confines of a studio too small for its’ scale. Nonetheless, the work succeeds in some areas, whereas it fails in others.

This particular artwork thrives in intent, yet it is strangely my least favorite. It is visually balanced, architecturally busy, and colorfully unified. It also succeeds in its practice as a musical exercise as it creates movement and a dance of the eye throughout. For example, one can start from the left side of the canvas and follow a passage of architecture into areas of organic shapes and splashed paint across the painting.

What is also interesting about viewing the image from left to right is the large, half circular structure dominating the upper right portion of the painting. The circular movement directs the eye up and around to the left, thus manipulating the viewer back to the left side of the canvas. The circular shape acts like a da capo in music, catapulting the viewer into a visual segue. In music, a da capo is a composer’s symbol to repeat a piece or section of music.

Mark Tobey (Figure 6) is a painter whom I greatly admire. Like Kandinsky, Tobey was interested in the relationship between art and music. He was not so concerned how color is translated from sound, but how the music creates spatial and textural qualities.

He was also inspired and found a spiritual thread between music and art. I believe Tobey’s artwork is extremely gestural and indicative of rhythmic movement as illustrated in Figure 6. I strongly suppose, and reaffirm that it’s the experience of listening to music that most inspires me as an artist.
Art and music draw influence from one another. One experience is sonic, the other visual. Music is a moving art form. It is a traveling art form; an integration of time and sound. The creation of art is very much the same. However, the audience experiences a stagnant end product. I am more interested in the process of how the artwork is created and influenced by music during its moment of creation. And maybe it’s the performance of the artwork that I find most compelling. Most of the time, I am disinterested with the final piece of art. The process and experience of creating a painting is what I find most interesting, and more eager to create again. However, I do believe it is this process of creation which leads me to create a compelling image. And for the purpose of me being an artist, the


---

⁶ [www.studio-international.co.uk/.../tobey_b.asp](http://www.studio-international.co.uk/.../tobey_b.asp)
performance of creating art leads me to believe and reaffirm the connection between art and music. Figures 7-8 are my attempts at translating musical experience through oil paintings.

Figure 7
3 Below
30" x 46"
Oil on Canvas
Figure 8
7 1/2 Below
30” x 46”
Oil on Canvas
ASSEMBLAGE

Perhaps the closest I have come in pursuit of my shared idea of connecting music to art is assemblage. Throughout my investigation of music’s ability to achieve spontaneity, I have played with assemblage as a possible source of spontaneous inspiration.

Instead of using paint as an immediate form of visual response to music, I one day stumbled across a new medium. As I sat in my studio listening to my “oh so famous” source of inspiration (Ambient Jam), I began pondering what material I could use that would be more spontaneous, musical, and immediate than charcoal and paint. Suddenly it occurred to me, I could just start taking physical objects around me and arranging them in a visual order I found to be musical, much in the same way I created my other pieces of art.

And so the journey began. I started collecting objects, and rearranging them and layering them in a relief state. Assemblage became a very liberating, and eye-opening stage for me in relationship to my artwork. As I began attaching objects together and arranging them on a wall space, I realized that this art form was no more spontaneous than the others. It still took time to arrange and attach, as it did to mix, mask, and splatter. However, the assemblage artwork offered an interesting possibility. As music changes in front of the listener, I had the idea to change my artwork during my thesis show. And this is where I believe my artwork succeeded. As my assemblage hung in the gallery space, I could add and subtract from the artwork as I pleased. Much like the musician playing without a net, I would occasionally intrigue a visitor of the show, as I would walk into the gallery space and take or add a piece of my art right in front of them!

Assemblage is a new direction for me, and I use it the best I can to fit my temperament and concepts with music. The materials can be elusive, much like the notes of a musician in the middle of an improvisational surge. The objects,
whether they are a weathered old window screen, wood, nails, shingles, or wire, are capable of many different visual arrangements at one time. ‘Blow’ (Figure 9) was an example and encore of the journey of the ideas presented in this thesis. Much like the beat poet, or the improvisational musician, assemblage offered a message of a visual spontaneous prose in balance and rhythm. Figure 9 represents the assemblage body of work.

Figure 9
Blow
30” x 46”
Found objects
CONCLUSION

The artwork created for my thesis show was an extension of my limitations as a figurative artist. I began my two year M.F.A. journey as a figurative artist. I was heavily influenced by still-life paintings and realism. As I extended my thought, and opened myself to the exercises of those around me, I found myself becoming more aligned with my true artistic endeavors and my love of music. I have always painted to music, and it has always strongly influenced my brushstroke as a figurative artist.

The artwork created for this thesis was a bold attempt to break my own personal boundaries as an artist. It was not intended to break ground in the art world; it was merely a participatory gesture in the celebration of music's influence on my art world. My thesis is homage to what has already been touched upon by myself and others. Music has, and can influence an image. I have investigated many different media concerning ‘The Music of Art’. I have asked myself many a time which media is most appropriate for conveying a piece of artwork through the experience of music. I have concluded that they all are, and my only failure was in my idea of thinking there was a limitation.
THESIS EXHIBITION
THESIS EXHIBITION CONTINUED
THESIS SHOW CONTINUED
WORKS CITED


[www.studio-international.co.uk//tobey_b.asp](http://www.studio-international.co.uk//tobey_b.asp)