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TROPHIES FROM A WANDERING SOUL: A STUDY OF VISUAL TEXTURE

by

Westy Caswell

May 23, 1993
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Moyers: Who interprets the divinity inherent in nature for us today? Who are our shamans? Who interprets unseen things for us?

Campbell: It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today. But he has to be an artist who understands mythology and humanity and isn't simply a sociologist with a program for you.

(Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth)
In my thesis proposal I described the need to explore texture as a language. I mentioned that before this thesis work, I had often used texture as a tool, but usually unconsciously, and without enough knowledge of just what it could do. I wanted to make texture a force. I wanted to speak about the fascinating layers of life around us, and the habitats we all must share; homes which we constantly mold to our growing needs. The subject matter was to have centered around the myths of “masks”, in all their various shapes and forms, including all the disguises Society has brought about for one reason or another, from giant buildings to made-up faces. I drank in all of Campbell’s books on heroes, myths, goddesses, and the like. I found that every culture, not just our own, lives out its daily life out with the aid of masks.

Somewhere along this thesis journey, however, amongst the creative urges and flashes of insight one seems to get when working at such a fevered pace, I went around the bend (and then some). The proposed subject matter grew less important, and the theory of merely “exploring texture” took on new tangents as I found myself exploring quilts, history, and the notion of the found object. Along with my usual contingent of favorite and influential artists, I began to see other artists in a new light, and I found myself bouncing back and forth, taking ideas from a vast number of my forbears, both ancient and modern, and incorporating their information into my own brand of eclectic conglomerations.

To give credit to just a few, I will mention the energy and passion of Picasso’s relentless creations, the effective patterns found in Gustave Klimt’s work, as well as in that of Philip Taaffe, and the remarkable use of color in the
Work of Henri Matisse. I found similarities between my own work and that of Marc Chagall in the use of symbolism, and I explored the nature of textures and images such as Jean DuBuffet did.

I am incredibly excited by this final body of work. It is nothing like I ever dreamed it would be. Turned loose in the studio, I was free at last to apply pattern to my heart’s delight. The world of monoprints and collages opened the doors wider than ever, and endless opportunities surrounded me. Admonished by various committee members to contain myself, I finally chose one or two paths and followed them as much as I could in such a small stretch of time. I will attempt, in this thesis, to provide an interesting and informative retrospective of my thoughts, my spirit, and my methods used while working on a fairly specific set of issues.

Each chapter of this thesis will concern itself with one of the several “issues”. These issues were: 1) A concern with layering, both technically and historically 2) A need to continue exploring a set of very personal symbolic images 3) The “quilt” theme 4) A delight in the “found object”, and the introduction of the frame as part of the print itself.
II.

For a variety of reasons, my work is quite often made up of layers of information. Originally this was a result of my need to work on a painting or a print in stages. I both added and subtracted as I worked the piece up to a point where it pleased me. The resulting image could be compared to an archeological cross-section, where one can glimpse bits of information remaining and working together to form complex layers. In my former work, these built-up bits of reference have often added up to an overly informed and confusing image. Slowly, during the process of this thesis, I have learned to control this layering of images and to guide it in order to make the end result stronger. I believe a weakness in my past work lay in the fact that layering was a crutch. Too often, layering became a way of working that helped me muddle through a composition that didn't work. The resulting image was often overcrowded with information, and the complexity was unreadable.

“Layering” is a process I consider on two different levels: both technically and historically. Information can be culled from a variety of sources: from the present as well as from the past. Thus one can build imagery through historical layering, adding to this by making use of a variety of printmaking techniques in order to build up the layering technically. Either one of these methods introduces a means of achieving great amounts of visual texture.

Here I would like to mention an artist who's work strikes a chord of recognition with me: Philip Taaffe. Taaffe is a painter whose large, decorative paintings are a perfect example of a combination of historical and technical layering. Taaffe utilizes a vast knowledge of traditional patterns and motifs from various cultures, and incorporates these patterns in his work through direct
painting, rubbings, and hand printing. Although Taaffe's work is generally abstract, he manages to convey a great sense of history through these various patterns. In my own work, I use more personal symbols to convey meaning. Studying Taaffe's work has been valuable to me in terms of accepting both straight pattern and repetition as bonafide tools to use in my quest for texture.

During the process of this thesis project, in addition to combining lithography, woodcut, and etching, I began to incorporate newer and freer techniques. This included working with collage, hand-stamping with linoleum blocks and small pieces of old woodcuts, and monoprinting. One concern that had previously held me back from experimentation was my stress on traditional edition printing. I scoffed at the notion of one-of-a-kind prints! However, once I discovered how many ideas could be generated by the spontaneity of monoprints, this concern disappeared.

I began my experimentation by cutting up images and sewing them back together. I used white string instead of ink to create "line". I pulled monoprints over lithographs and stamped linoleum cuts over that. I pulled last year's rejected works out of their boxes and transformed them by reprinting parts of them. Here is where layering took on a whole new meaning, and my images took on a freshness and a spontaneity that had been absent before.

The print "Summers in Springfield, VT" began as a lithograph with a Xerox transfer of a photograph. It then graduated to monoprinting, as I created flat colors with aluminum plates. After this I incorporated a very old woodcut I'd carved many years ago, as well as other woodcuts carved especially for this piece. Into this conglomeration I also placed an entire print from a previous era, as well as my now trademarked "stamp" from a linoleum cut. In this print I decided not to actually stitch any of the parts together, as was my latest
TWO NIGHTS AGO I DREAMED THAT I WAS CLEANING OUT THE MASE-LIKE RIVER THAT RAN THROUGH OUR BACK YARD. I CLEANED AND HOSED PATIENTLY FOR HOURS UNTIL THE WATER BECAME CLEAR AND THE WEEDS WENT GONE.

PASS AND I NEVER
passion; instead I printed simulated stitching as a “trompe l’oeil” effect.

In “Cat Eat Man Eat Fish”, I incorporated a woodcut printed on metal, monoprinting, stitching, hand-woven cloth, holepunching, and even straight painting. The original woodcut image has traveled a long way through all the textural layers which have been added to it. The final result in these two pieces, as well as in the rest of my thesis work, has been a successful effort to limit the complexity of built-up information. The images are interesting yet not overloaded. “Texture” may be found in the variety of printing techniques, the variety of colors, and in the many approaches to mark-making used on the litho stones. I have re-discovered the old adage, “less is more”. I feel that my new sensitivity with layering has allowed me to be more specific in terms of the information given to the viewer. I now realize just how ambiguous much of my former work has been, even though I have always worked with very specific ideas in my head! Many of these “ideas” came from my personal iconography, which will be the next issue I discuss.
Every artist is drawn to different sources and references to gather materials for use in their work. It seems as though I have been dwelling entirely in my mind for most of my artistic career, centering mainly on psychological mood scenes as well as on a cast of objects and characters that have become very important, powerful, personal symbols. These are things I am drawn to time and again; things which seem to need to be a part of every image I create. These include the cat and the owl/man figures, which represent myself, fish which represent the soul, and vast rows of city buildings, which to me conjure up the very essence of Mankind and his takeover of the world. Admittedly, up until quite recently, these images were used somewhat haphazardly, perhaps more out of habit than with a serious effort to convey their more personal meanings.

Having admitted this weakness, I made an effort to study more critically an artist I have admired all my life: Marc Chagall. If ever there were an artist who, with utter freedom and joy continued to repeat his own set of personal symbols throughout his lifes work, managing always to end up with beautiful, moving images... here's our man! I realized as I looked closely that his work is engaging because of continual variety, an ever-present freshness, and a lack of the dull repetition that my own images seemed to have fallen into. When I look at Chagall's work I see many similarities with my own: the floating people, the world turned askew, the larger-than-life animals, the impressionistic colors, and much more. Furthermore, feel sure that, being fellow human beings, both Chagall and myself are touching on the same universal subjects when we work with these symbols and our means of portraying them. Chagall was able to sum
up his experiences and the world in which he lived with beautiful simplicity. His canvases are full but not overwhelmed.

I believe that somewhere along the path my work was following, as I stubbornly continued to use my aforementioned symbols, they began to transform themselves into something above and beyond the mundane. This was due to a struggle on my part to render my subjects in new ways, to try and forget old habits, and to open myself up to new ideas. The world of collage, of monotype, and of stamps brought out the freshness and spontaneity I had admired so much in Chagall’s work. This transformation was also due to a new attitude towards composition, in which I concluded that repetition was acceptable if used in the proper, unexpected manner. Thus was born the “quilt” idea! This is the subject of my next chapter, from which evolved the idea of the entire print/collage/conglomeration/frame as a whole.

Somehow the images which are my personal symbols fell quite naturally into this new style and method of composing, perhaps because it allowed them to be more mysterious as well as more iconographic. "Trophies From a Wandering Soul" is a series of etchings made from the same plate in homage to Picasso’s “Bull” series. Picasso worked on a litho stone for many weeks, transforming a richly detailed drawing of a bull into a simple line drawing through the process of subtraction. He pulled an edition at each new stage, thereby recording the transformation process. My own series was achieved using the same process of subtraction on a zinc plate. The first in the series was a very dark, rich drawing. The final fish is nothing but a skeleton. The series is mounted on a richly colored cloth background and over-printed in selected areas with a separate plate. They are framed in a matching colored frame which was roughly carved on the sides. The resulting image, in which the
prints combine with the background and the frame, is an entity in and of itself.

"See Him Fly" is a large, ten-color lithograph with hand-stamping that incorporates a number of symbols which become part of the overall image yet remain somewhat obscure. I have made the fish and the birds an integral part of the figure. The viewer may here speculate and design his or her own theories as to whether or not I meant something deeper by them. The obviousness of my former work is not present here.
At some late point in the thesis process, I began, out of pure and utter frustration, a print I jokingly entitled “Art Quilt”. This piece was my first wholehearted attempt to chop and stitch and glue and paint and print an image in some wild, abandoned, attempt at a different “solution” for a work. Although this piece never became completely resolved, it generated some very important ideas for future work. These included: pushing the stitching idea further both as a method and as a metaphor, as well as incorporating, quite literally, old prints from my archives. Finally, I came up with the whole notion of the quilt as a repetitious, pieced-together, historical item with its pieces being of a greater value as part of the whole. The notion of stitching items together played in perfectly with my need for history. Stitching also allowed me to pursue my options when binding parts together.

At this point my thesis work started to regenerate itself at a very fast pace, as one idea led to another. I enjoyed rediscovering old talents such as sewing and forming collages. I was very comfortable with this new emphasis on working and reworking an image in a very hands-on manner. I'm sure part of the reason for this was my old impatience and my need for quick results. Now, instead of waiting for a stone to dry or a plate to etch, I could quickly stamp or stitch one item to another.

Finally, repetition had a purpose and a strength. In turn, repetition offered a rhythm and a pattern, each being a variation on the “texture” theme. I am not at all surprised that this new “quilt” idea felt so natural. I believe that pattern-making is a trait which has always cropped up in both the animal and plant kingdoms. Furthermore, I am a woman in a culture where craft and
piecework have always, at least until quite recently, been valued as a way of keeping busy, of recording history, and of creating “art” in the form of quilts, samplers, etc. I see a direct link between both my “Art-Quilt”, the rest of my thesis work, and a crazy-quilt from many generations ago which hangs on the wall in our old house in Vermont. This ancestor of mine incorporated pieces from the cloth of her life and history, and stitched them together with the same eye for composition and order which I am now using to piece my prints together.

The way in which this “quilt” issue aided me is crucial: I began to sort out my images! I removed the extraneous details and left only what was necessary to support the original idea. Instead of being full of overburdened images, my work began to take on a certain complex simplicity. By this, I mean that every individual piece in the layered structure works into the composition. There is less unnecessary stuff. Added to this, because of the repetition, my personal symbols receded somewhat. By this, I mean that they were no longer blatantly obvious rather, they were an actual part of the whole. This allowed me to set up an order of importance, such as in “Wild Cat-Autumn Leaves”. This piece is made up of a background of repeated images, overshadowed in one place by the fractured image of a face. Cats, people, and faces all play important parts for me in this image because of what they stand for. However, the overall pattern created by the repetition of the symbols becomes more important than the individual symbols in and of themselves. Here is where I began to create art that incorporates images necessary to me while at the same time obscuring them somewhat. The basic impression of this piece is one of a quilt pieced together.

The quilt theme allowed me to organize my compositions, to simplify my imagery, and to operate on a very special, personal level through collage,
stitching, patching, and stamping. I was very taken with the idea of actual quilting and its historical, woman's-craft implications. I am an artist who needs to involve all of myself in my work. Often, in the past, I believe I made art that was so personal, only I could understand it. The quilting effect has allowed me to be involved even more personally in my own work while maintaining a kind of universally recognized order.
After completing "Trophies From a Wandering Soul" and framing it with a frame I happened to have back in my junk-heap, I recognized the fact that the piece worked especially well because of the way it acted as a WHOLE. The frame, because of its color and its carved texture, had become an integral part of the print! I realized this was something I could continue to do for all my pieces. The found object has always been a fascination for me, along with shopping in thrift stores and junkheaps and finding "treasures" that can be worked into my art. In many of my thesis pieces I have incorporated the found object in a variety of ways beyond the frame. These include everything from Grandma's fabric, old woodcuts from my own oeuvre of eight years ago, frames from the thrift store, even pages from old found books. Each of these elements has added "texture" to the work in one way or another.

It has been suggested to me that I explore Duchamp and the Dadaists in search for relationships between my work and theirs. This, however, I find somewhat misleading because "Dada" literally meant "nothing". The artists most often placed their importance on the illogical, the absurd, and pure chance. In my work with found objects, I place importance on the original use/origin of the object. Each object has a distinct purpose as well as, in many cases, a personal history. Duchamp et al. seemed to use found objects with some disregard for their original purpose. This is quite different from my own more precious need for these objects.

I became tremendously caught up in the notion of collage, which to me was a breath of fresh air, a ticket to freedom. Lo and behold, the history of collage started one thousand years ago in Japan! Certain poets from the 10th
Century wrote their words on cut and glued paper. Through cutting, they created visual aids to go with their work. I was interested to discover that a certain button-covered casket created by an unheard of artist in 1896 is considered to be “the grandfather object of all Dada". I am sure that the notion of collecting items stems from our culture’s long-ingrained habits of keeping memorabilia and of filling our homes with stuff.

One artist in particular whose work is fascinating to me because of the sheer amounts of stuff he incorporates is Joseph Cornell. In my opinion, Cornell was one of the most interesting users of the found objects. He created piece after piece using various items, layered up in very real textural collages. “Cornell’s strategy is to draw a series of subtle verbal, visual, and textural threads between separate objects." It is Cornell’s ability to create this relationship between things that makes his work so readable and so fascinating. Although I certainly did not use as many physical objects in my pieces, I did work carefully to incorporate a similar wide variety of images and textures.

There is a certain challenge in matching a print to a found object, or vice versa. The two must complement each other without looking like add-ons. It took me a long time to make my prints and collages work with their appropriated frames, and I am quite pleased with the outcome.

Another weakness in my past work was a certain lack of closure. In my constant need to create and explore new ideas, perhaps I stopped short of completeness. Being happy with what I’d learned, I quickly moved on to my next idea. ("Slow down!" my teachers implored me.) Two things happened to

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me during the course of this thesis: 1) I actually curbed my urge to work so swiftly, and I concentrated on the quilt idea, and 2) After producing several pieces I was happy with, I understood that they needed absolute closure, right up through the framing process. Here is where my love of the found object met its match.

Here also is where my intellectual decisions had to meet halfway with my intuitive decisions. For some pieces I needed to come up with an appropriate frame; for others I basically designed the piece to fit an existing frame. Two of these frames I had to build myself, and I believe these are the ones I pushed the farthest in terms of how they interact with the piece. These are on "How Does Your Garden Grow?" and "Memories From the Attic". Each piece took careful consideration as to what the whole was about, and how the frame might best continue that idea. As I worked on "Memories From the Attic", the idea came to me that a frame built from old barn boards would continue the idea of an old quilt. I left the boards rough and darkly stained. To further integrate the piece with the frame, I used paint to continue certain patterns up and over the wood. For "How Does Your Garden Grow?" I became fascinated with the idea of binding the whole frame with basket reeds, giving it a hand-worked, primitive look that coincides with the notion of a garden.

I am certainly not the first artist to consider the frame to be an integral part of the artwork. David Hockney often incorporated the frame in his paintings; my favorite example is a work entitled "Portrait of Celia." In this piece the paint flows off of the canvas and onto the frame without stopping. The only change is one of depth and texture. It was this painting that I had in mind when I painted the barn-board frame for "Memories From the Attic".

It was delightfully refreshing to build a new frame for each of my pieces,
because too often we frame our art in precious black squares that deny certain qualities contained within the piece. Actually, the roots of my latest framing urge are contained in my artist's books from the previous few months. These books were also created out of a need to bring something more to my prints. I was not satisfied with merely hanging them on the wall in little black frames. To make them a part of a narrative gave them more substance.
I spent so many hours in the studio this winter and spring that I began to go into a trance. A different sort of awareness came to the surface of my consciousness. I almost felt like someone else had taken over this project. It is a strange experience for me to look at this new work, and to see my success. This is the first time in my artistic life that I really, really, pushed an idea; I won't say "to its limits" because that was just not possible in the few weeks that I had. However, I do feel that my original goal, that of exploring visual texture, has been duly entertained in the myriad of techniques employed. Texture, variation, history: it all came together! Layers of stuff: old etchings, old linocuts, etc., were all dredged up and recycled and applied in new, innovative ways.

Perhaps the proposed subject matter dropped briefly out of sight; I could say that the "masks" have literally been removed. So much material in this work is personal, my own, about me. There is no hiding, and there are no secrets. All my personal symbols are arranged, carefully stitched together for all to see.

And so, here are my thesis pieces: a grand culmination of two and a half years' worth of struggling to rise above the ordinary and the mundane to achieve my immediate goal: work that excites, that makes people pause! This goal has been achieved for several reasons: I learned to control my layering and to utilize "complex simplicity". I learned to use my "symbols" wisely, to change them, to blend them, to make them PART of instead of ALL of. I learned some things about composition, thanks to the notion of quilting. And above all else, I learned about CLOSURE! These pieces have been followed through to their logical end, and they speak for themselves.

I am happy to report that, on the date of this writing, the exploration
continues. This thesis project taught me what is possible with sheer hard work, and I am eager to continue, and to find out what else lies inside this quirky head of mine.
Dedicated to
Mom and Dad
May 23, 1993
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