Chromatic textures of realism

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CHROMATIC TEXTURES IN REALISM
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INTRODUCTION

Realism as a style has provided me with a vehicle through which to explore texture. Rather than an impasto surface, my concern has been with creating the illusion of texture on a flat surface by juxtaposing colors or chroma. The title, Chromatic Textures in Realism, describes this technical concern and the vehicle in which it is used. Exploring juxtaposed textured surfaces has shared attention with the pursuit of sensual effects created by color, as influenced by underpainting, used to heighten the illusion of depth, add interest and create vibrations.

My goals have been to search for such chromatic and textural combinations as would subtly excite and hold the attention of the viewer and to strive for greater technical perfection. In the process of working towards these goals, the canvases have grown larger while remaining square in format, the textures more elaborate and the compositions simpler.
TECHNICAL PROCESSES

A technical description of the evolution of style necessitates an explanation of why I started working this way in the first place. About three years ago it became necessary for me to have a spinal fusion, a lengthy operation which involved major surgery, three weeks in the hospital, many processes which are comparable to torture in the dungeons of medieval castles, and almost a year in a full body cast which held me together from just under the chin to the perenium.

During this process, I looked to my doctor for advice and strength. He was always there with the best answer to my problems and his responses gave me patience and great faith in man's inner strength and willpower. I learned that the will to survive is perhaps mankind's greatest asset. Dr. Chan's wisdom instilled in me a deep respect for him; because of this, I wanted to know more about the culture which had produced his beliefs. In that my field is painting and the art of a peoples reflects their attitudes towards life, I spent a good deal
of time during that year in a cast looking at Oriental art. First, Chinese painting absorbed my interest; tiring of that, I went on to examine Japanese woodcuts, developing appreciation for their color and composition. The first of my small square canvases was painted during this time.

For the first year and a half of painting small detailed square canvases, the style tended to be fantastic or surreal in nature, the composition and color strongly influenced by Japanese woodcuts. During the first painting course at RIT, underpainting began with using turquoise underneath the flesh tones in legs because it seemed to be the way flesh looked. Then Barry Dalgleish, the graduate assistant, suggested underpainting with Venetian reds in the sky for the sake of depth, saying that the Venetians had gotten a lot of mileage out of that technique. The Japanese dynamic of cropping on the edges inspired me, as it did Toulouse Lautrec, because I believe it adds to the feeling of the picture being a 'slice of life'. Professor Philip Bornarth pointed out that in
doing this one should be especially aware of the entrances and exits into and out of the picture. I have tried to be aware of this ever since.

The second course at RIT was with Professor Fred Meyer last summer. Fred said that my strength lay in attention to detail and also pointed out that a more realistic rather than surrealist approach would have lasting interest rather than sensational draw. These two observations had a major influence on my choice of subject matter. A search for subjects which would demonstrate my strength in rendering of detail led me to paint such surfaces as cacti, Oriental rugs, buildings with their many materials, and most recently old frocks and wall coverings. I appreciate patiently hand-made objects where the surface has either very simple rhythmic patterns or complex and intricate ones; I enjoy looking for progressions, patterns, etc. in relationships between shapes and/or lines. My Aunt Molly spent four years making a needlepoint staircarpet from thrums; the texture and pattern are wonderful and one can't help but admire the
patience for such an undertaking in spare time and the frugality of using materials which would otherwise be thrown away.

The size of my paintings is small to moderate for convenience and because I prefer not to continue a mode of the past several decades which has placed a high value on heroic scale for its own sake.

Instead I attempt to intrigue the viewer on these moderately sized canvases with elaboration of detail. I like the regularity of working on a square canvas; having done it for a few years, I still enjoy playing with the composition in a square. The squares have, however, become larger as the content becomes more elaborately detailed.

Nicolas Poussin said, "Colors in painting are as allurements for persuading the eyes, as the sweetness of meter is in poetry." After incorporating underpainting, further experimentation followed. My underpainting was done in roughly the complement of the final color, allowing varying amounts of the underneath color to
show through, determined by the subject, and allowing small amounts of the pure color to show around the edges, creating vibrations which seem to bring life into the forms. "The animation of the canvas is one of the hardest problems of painting. To give life to the work of art is certainly one of the most necessary tasks of the true artist. Everything must serve this end, form, color, surface. The artist's impression is the life-giving factor, and only this impression can free that of the spectator," Alfred Sisley stated.2 This has been a constant goal in my work.

As I proceed with the use of underpainting, I find that when the chosen complementary hue is applied in a close value to the final color it is more successful in creating depth and vibrations. Colors I choose are not always an exact copy of what I am viewing, but rather are chosen to meet the needs of my personal aesthetic taste. According to Ingres, "Fine and delicate taste is the fruit of education and experience. All that we
receive at birth is the faculty for creating such
taste in ourselves and for cultivating it, just as
we are born with a disposition for receiving the
laws of society and for conforming to their
usages.\footnote{Thusly, my color choices reflect my
education and experience.} Unlike Photorealists,
who often work from projected photographic images, I proceed by making
three or more thumbnail sketches from life, and
then a larger, more detailed drawing which is in
turn gridded to facilitate enlarging it. Art is
not imitation according to Delacroix. "Consider
such an interesting subject as the scene taking
place around the bed of a dying woman, for example;
seize and render that ensemble by photography, if
that is possible: it will be falsified in a
thousand ways. The reason is that, according to
the degree of your imagination, the subject will
appear to you more or less beautiful, you will be
more or less the poet in that scene in which you
are an actor; you see only what is interesting,
whereas the instrument puts in everything."\footnote{In}
creating my preliminary drawing, these choices are made, what to include, what to leave out, and how to arrange it all into a well designed composition, thereby eliminating these problems when approaching the canvas. In making a composition I strive for Poussin's characteristics of the grand manner, "The structure or arrangement of the parts shall not be farfetched, not strained, not laborious, but lifelike and natural."^5

Much time is spent before the start of each new piece in thought. I scrutinize all of the elements which will enter into the piece. William Hogarth best enumerates these elements. "...and I shall proceed to consider the fundamental principles, which are generally allowed to give elegance and beauty, when duly blended together, to compositions of all kinds whatever; and point out to my readers the particular force of each, in those compositions in nature and art, which seem most to please and entertain the eye, and vie that grace and beauty which is the subject of this enquiry. The principles I mean are FITNESS,
VARIETY, UNIFORMITY, SIMPLICITY, INTRICACY, AND QUANTITY; all which cooperate in the production of beauty." 6

TECHNICAL INFLUENCES

Venetian canvases along with Persian miniatures were two of the first types of painting to use color and texture for their own sake and for this reason they are the two major technical influences on my work. 7

Rather than extemporize on the subject of Venetian painting, I shall quote John Steer's words which describe most succinctly the qualities of Venetian painting with which I feel a kinship.

(Underscoring is my own.)

"A love of colour and texture in the thing seen has its natural complement in a similar love for the sensuous qualities of the medium in which it is recorded; and a feeling for paint, for the texture and surface of the canvas and the decorative pattern of the brush-strokes on it, is an essential element in Venetian art.

Venetian painting, then, is about colour, light, and space, and only secondarily about form. It can be called visual in a special sense, because colour and light and shade are, in fact, the raw materials of visual experience, and Venetian painters of the
sixteenth century found the means of recording with paint the way in which we perceive them in the eye. They also found in oil paint a medium of immense range and potentiality in which they could express their love of colour and texture for their own sakes. All these characteristics have their origins in an artistic tradition going back to Byzantium, and they continue as the main themes of Venetian art into the eighteenth century."

He continues,

"The other fundamental, but less tangible, influence on the development of the Venetian school of painting is the city herself. Built on water, she is a city whose visual effects are, from the very nature of the dominant medium, changing and shifting. The atmosphere is softened by evaporation, and the surfaces of the buildings, eroded and made porous by salt, seem often to be absorbed in light to the point of dissolution. The effect of environment on painting is, of course, fundamental....The painters of Venice only rarely illustrated their city, and when they did they tended to seize on its permanent characteristics rather than its flux; but its unique visual qualities entered into their whole way of seeing and, fused with the decorative traditions inherited from Byzantium, determined the direction which Venetian painting took."}

Rochester's brick and stone buildings are strongly affected by the salt poured on its streets in winter. Its proximity to Lake Ontario contributes to its ever changing dramatic skies and lighting. The age of the city and recent interest
in historic preservation provides us with a rich tapestry of hand-wrought surfaces, i.e. slate roofs, wrought iron, elaborate brick work, the gingerbread of Victoriana. The vegetation here is also lush and varied as a result of Rochester's northeastern climate. Highland Park has a great variety of trees. During my eight years of residence in this city, these phenomena have been assimilated into my sense of beauty.

Steer also poetically describes the works of certain painters of this period who possess qualities which I admire and to which I aspire.

(of Bellini) "Our eye jumps the foreground and perceives distant things directly; and it is this central fact of vision that is at the core of Bellini's late painting. He does not deny space, but he makes it more directly a function of vision, so that forms in depth and forms on the surface come together on the plane of the picture, as they do on the retina, and space is experienced with the richness and ambiguity of perceptual experience itself.....At the same time, because for a painter seeing is a way of living, this vision is an expression of the artist's own 'Weltanschauung', so that the warm, urbane harmony of Bellini's late paintings is the sum of his whole experience; a marvellous affirmation of his faith in life."10

"Titian had from the beginning sometimes used landscape as a complement to his figures,
but here the landscape and the figure are woven together by an infinity of delicate relationships of colour, so that the orange of the evening sky is caught up in her (the Empress Isabella's) hair and the grey-blue of the distant mountain in her eyes. This is visual poetry of the highest order and with it Titian raises the painting of likenesses to the level of great art.\textsuperscript{11}

"If colour is the most characteristic quality of Venetian art, then Veronese is the most essentially Venetian artist of his period, for unlike Titian and Tintoretto, who in the sixties subdued colour to chiaroscuro, he remained always first and foremost a colourist. In a sense, his paintings are the truest successors to the late works of Giovanni Bellini, for like the aged Bellini he thought of his canvas as a kind of carpet or tapestry of interwoven colours."

"To Veronese, as a decorator, this coherence of surface was all-important. The harmony and richness of his compositions came not only from the arrangement of the forms but from the balance and interrelation of colours, extending over the whole canvas and woven together into a pattern. In the detail of the 'Adoration of the Magi' in the National Gallery, London, we can see how he matches colours with their complementaries—crimson-red against dark green, pink against emerald—and how the warm brown of the ground makes the blue sing, and is tinged with orange by reaction against it. Through Veronese's understanding of the interaction of colours even the neutral areas take on a tint and the whole surface becomes vibrant."\textsuperscript{12}

As Stuart Cary Welch said, Persian manuscripts were made to delight.\textsuperscript{13} I find my delight in the combination of colors and textures as did the Persian miniaturists. In printed patterns,
patterns formed by structural elements, repetitions of color and shape I take my pleasure. Again I quote Mr. Welch.

"Perhaps the most characteristic element in Iranian painting is its use of arabesque, the rhythmic design based upon flowering vines that invigorates most Islamic art. Like a pulse, the reciprocal rhythms of this ornamental system suffuse and unify all Iranian compositions. Without it, these paintings would be as unthinkable as an orchestra playing a Bach suite without rhythm. With it, they are the visual equivalent of poetic verse."

A favorite miniature of mine is "Nushirvan Listening to the Owls on the Ruined Palace". Its appeal lies in its content and approach. It depicts a ruins in which two owls are having a conversation regarding the increase in the number of ruins due to the fact that the ruler persists in leaving his people to perish in misery and neglect. In this instance I see parallels to the contemporary problem of building abandonment. Nostalgia is also an element in this piece, a part of the content in several of my recent paintings.

The most succinct description of Persian minatures which includes their most appealing qualities was penned by Basil Gray.
"We have spoken of an established, classic, Persian style. What are its special qualities? Its most striking and peculiar gift is its use of colour. The colours are of singular purity, mostly prepared from metallic bases, and are applied flat. It is natural that an art which did not concern itself with temporal relations should not have been interested in spatial illusion. But the art of combination of different colours is of extreme importance. They are used not in a tonal scheme, as in most western painting, but as a chord; they do not foil one another but sing together. They have a positive value in themselves, so that as in Venetian painting a pleasure is to be got from the pigments rendering textures of stuff, so a sensual pleasure is to be had in some colours of the Persian palettes. But here we do not rest in this sensual response: the deep hue above the garden of Humay, the vibrating blue background of the scene in paradise from the "Mi'rajnama" (plate 6) convey the infinite more intensely than any European painter, even Piero della Francesca, has ever done. The coats of the horses in Bihzad's 'King Dara and the Herdsman' (plate 8) are so combined into a bouquet that the impression produced haunts the imagination. The flocks of Samuel Palmer or Calvert are not more vividly put before the imaginative eye. It has been suggested that this raising of everything to its highest pitch is no more than romanticism: but that is to introduce a secondary, human emotion into what is for the Persian no more (nor less) than a statement of cosmic reality. The painter must needs use every resource at his command to depict the smallest flower, if he holds that it is as important, as worthy of attention, as a tree, since God is equally in each. Such a pantheistic view must be understood in order to appreciate rightly the extraordinary care 'de minimis', of the least detail, in Persian miniatures. This is no
idle display of skill, no childish trick; it is the result of a natural humility of a man in face of reality and a vindication of artistic integrity of vision. No true artist would of purpose exclude anything which he sees."16

I strive for the Persian miniaturists' sensitivity to color, pattern and care of detail. I may not share their religious convictions but I am awed in the face of reality and do have infinite respect for the subjects of my paintings.

One answer to the question of how nature entered the paintings of the Persian miniaturists is "the revelation of Chinese landscape painting which came to Persia when the Mongol conquest of Chingiz and Qubilay (13th century), united the two ends of Asia".17 The Persians brought a more personal and colorful treatment into similar subject matter. In my assimilation of these styles, I strive for greater simplicity in composition, which leads me into the next area of influence.

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Upon hearing an emotionally or aesthetically
moving piece of music, goose bumps appear on my skin. Music makes an immediate impression. The visual arts can be just as chillingly dynamic, but I don't find visual works of art which move me to this degree quite as frequently. However, when I do, the memory lingers. Rather than attempt to do an in-depth analysis of visual art objects which have made a lingering impression, I will just briefly list those which I feel may have in one way or another been assimilated into my aesthetic sensibility: the color, composition, and overlappings of Japanese woodcuts, the delicacy and refinement of fine porcelain, organic patterns and rich coloration of cloisonne, laciness of finely carved ivory and jade, geometric simplicity of antique Chinese rugs, bold, intricate and dynamic geometric patterns of Near Eastern Oriental carpets.

A brief list of contemporary painters with whom I empathize includes the Pop artists (misleadingly classified, I believe) Piero Gilardi, creator of a lovingly detailed top-view of
a vegetable garden, Domenico Gnoli and his textured suit, the Superrealist, Richard Estes with his color sensitivity, and last but certainly not least Charles Sheeler and his geometric patterns which he most successfully expressed in industrial content.18

PERSONAL INFLUENCES

The decorative qualities of my paintings are very important but the symbolic content ranks equally, as expressed by the subjects. The cacti, which appear frequently, connote a dry warm Northeastern dream of the Southwest. The Victorian Gothic Board of Education building's admirable ornamentation brings to mind a more affluent era which has become too costly and inefficient in a small planet with a rapidly diminishing supply of natural resources. The slate roof and oxidized copper detail of this building are very special, both in aesthetic value and in that they show skill of craftsmanship which is seldom found in building today. They ring with nostalgia.
My paintings try to be humanistic—in coloration, texture, content and attitude. I am not a nihilist. I do not feel anger towards the world; I am often very saddened by things I see in the world and this sadness or wistfulness shows up in the nostalgic content. Even though my medium is plastic, I want to avoid being slick. I identify with the return to nature rather than the computer age.

A goal in the portraits I paint is to be direct and appear as if they, the subjects, are apprehending the viewer looking at them. I want the portraits to seem intimate but not embarrassing. (I find Duane Hanson’s sculptures embarrassing.) I don't want them to be distant. The portrait subjects' personalities and tastes are echoed in my choices of background and coloration. The treatment of the hair in my painting, Jack, is akin to that of the pricklers on the cactus. In my portrait of Michele, My Friend, I see soft low key pastels...mauves, yellows, dusty roses. I compare myself in my self portrait, with the Night Blooming
Cereus, because it shows signs of having been broken (my operation for scoliosis) but still thrives. (And I don't mean to be maudlin!)

As most art is a reaction to or against what has come before it, what I am producing seems to be a reaction to the art of the sixties and seventies, which we are still analyzing and trying to put into an historical perspective. The Minimalists, artists of this period, have been called nihilists. Mr. Lucie-Smith says, "The true Superrealist aspires to be strictly neutral. This at least is the theoretical defence put up for it by the handful of critics who have bothered to investigate it. They see these canvases, with their deliberate lack of style and their apparently slavish dependence upon the camera, as a new variation upon the theme of the found object. They find in Superrealism a nihilistic streak which goes even beyond Minimalism."19 (I do not believe that all Superrealists are nihilistic.) He continues this examination of recent movements twenty pages later when he quotes Daniel Bell.
"There are, however, signs—and the Minimalism of the Sixties was one of the most striking of them—that Modernism has become institutionalized to a point where it has begun to contradict its own nature. The insistence of the Modernist (or at least of the majority of Modernists) that revolution in the arts was to be equated with revolution in politics has long since been disproved, though it is interesting to see that the artists themselves feel compelled to keep on reviving this untruth, because to them it is a necessary myth. Much nearer to the mark is Thomas Mann's notion that Modernism cultivates 'a sympathy for the abyss': 'Whatever the political stripe, the modern movement has been united by rage against the social order as the first cause, and a belief in the apocalypse as the final cause. It is this trajectory which provides the permanent appeal and the permanent radicalism of that movement.'" (Daniel Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, London, 1976, p. 51)

He responds, in kind, three pages later.

"What it does mean, on the other hand, is that Modernism itself must now be seen not as something present and immediate, but as something which, to be fully understood, must be set in a historical context which is no longer the one which we ourselves inhabit.

I am therefore reacting to the historical precedents of a cold art. Yes, my search is for warmth, a combination of intellect and emotion, a humanistic creation to which one can respond on
several levels. And much like the style of recent architects who reacted to the coldness of corporate monoliths and started designing warmer buildings for people to live in which were eclectic and made references to the past, my painting tries to have the warmth of emotional content. The architectural style is called Post-Modern; perhaps my painting could also be called Post-Modern.

CONCLUSION

During the course of this thesis I have succeeded in improving my technical skills as a painter, with the expert help of those on my graduate committee. I have learned to be more careful about my selections of content and composition. I have learned about color mixing and about how to create an array of patterns.

But perhaps just as important, I have become more analytical in my attitudes toward what goes on in the world. I care about the fact that the majority of students in city schools come from homes with many problems and have trouble learning; I care that the aged have a difficult time
surviving in our economically depressed and inflation-ridden economy; I care that many buildings are abandoned. We seem to live in a time when the hardest things to find are value in life and value in ourselves. Jeremy Seabrook in What Went Wrong describes the plight of the modern English working class individual. This can very believably be extended to include the average American man.

"Most of us now do not want for basic comforts; and this has been achieved, not for the most part by exercising our skills, but by forfeiting them. Many of us resent the work we do now. We grudge the use of our time, and are often indifferent to the things we make or the services we provide. We feel bored and functionless. We see work seldom as something worthwhile in itself but as a means to something else; it is an unhappy intrusion into the real business of our lives. We measure ourselves not by what we do, but what we can acquire. Our function is no longer a primary determinant of our identity."

There was a time when many people found their identity in the pride they took in loving production of handcrafted items. This bygone time held in great esteem paintings which demonstrated ability in craftsmanship and draughtsmanship. I see a resurfacing of these values being a necessity
for man's survival as never before. As the computer threatens to take over most of man's functions, a difficulty of survival is maintaining individual identity as 1984 draws evermore near. A computer can make art of a predictable nature because it can only feed back variations, infinite though they may be, on its human programming. It is still a machine. In painting, the natural irregularities, the human factor, lends strength to the creation. This human factor, which can be seen in all great painting, gives proof that the warmth and nobleness of mankind's spirit survives. Experiencing painting, tangible evidence of man's spirit and will to survive, gives us good reason to continue our physical presence in the universe.
FOOTNOTES


2Ibid., p.309.

3Ibid., p.216.

4Ibid., p.233.

5Ibid., p.156.

6Ibid., p.181.


9Ibid., p.12.

10Ibid., pp.74-75.

11Ibid., p.121.

12Ibid., pp. 161,166.


14Ibid., p.13.


17Ibid., p.7.

20 Ibid., p. 480.
21 Ibid., p. 483.
PUT ON A HAPPY FACE
PRESSED BACK CHAIR, CAMISOLE
BIBLIOGRAPHY


