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Spirit, vision, heart

Deane Colin Fay

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SPIRIT • VISION • HEART
By
Deane Colin Fay

May 12, 1990
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My artist's statement, based on a childhood experience, is in the form of a short story. It not only describes me as a person but also discloses the roots of my intense personal involvement with my work.

It was still black outside when I heard dad creeping upstairs to get me. He had his boots on already but they weren't tied yet. I could hear the leather laces whipping the bare hardwood steps on his way up. He was trying not to wake anyone else. I had been awake for at least an hour. Dad knew I would be awake. He whispered into my room "you ready?" I said "you bet" as I leaped out of bed. I was already dressed. I had put my clothes on the night before. I wasn't going to miss this for anything.

It was one of those crisp mid-October mornings. My birthday was coming up in a couple of days, but that was nothing compared to this. The temperature had dropped low enough to form a thin layer of ice on the leeward side of the sloughs. There was a slight freezing drizzle and a stiff wind that made my eyes water as we marched into it. You're always suppose to walk into it. You don't want your scent blowing in the direction you're headed.

There was a ploughed field we had to cross. The big clumps of dirt made it hard going for me. My rubber boots were too large and as the wet gumbo built up they got weighty. Eventually they stuck and I walked right out of them. My socks got all muddy. Dad threw me up on his shoulders and carried me the rest of the way. "They will be flying low today" dad said. I was four, in two days.

Dad told me to climb up the haystack and then he covered me over
with a layer of hay. I could still see through it. He told me to lay still and not to shoot until they started to land. I had my cork gun. It was one of those double-barreled jobs with the corks attached to strings so you wouldn’t lose them. I reached over and put my right hand on it and checked the safe. Dad said this was important to do every once and a while. It felt good in my hand. Then I heard them coming in. They kept getting closer and God they made a lot of noise. Jesus, they were huge! I thought my heart was going to burst right out of my chest. A giant Canadian goose landed right next to the stack. I jumped up and let him have it with both barrels. Then they were gone.

I could see dad coming up from the blind he was in. It wasn’t until then that I realized I spooked the whole flock before they passed close enough to dad for him to get a shot off. I was worried. I thought I might be in trouble. Then I saw his face, he was smiling. I felt great. He swung me up on his shoulders again and told me “you waited longer to shoot than I would have.” Dad loved to tell the story about my first hunt. Dad enjoyed telling any story.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I sincerely wish to thank my sister Julie, my brother-in-law Terry, my brother Jack, my brother Mark and sister-in-law Chris for their encouragement, assistance, and support, without which none of this would have been possible.

A special thanks also to my old hunting dog Buzz who up until the last quarter of school, at which time he passed away, faithfully kept me company during the ordeal.
FOREWORD

Coming from North Dakota, a land characterized recently in a New York Publication as "America's Outback," has been somewhat of a cultural shock but not an experience I regret by any means.

Over the years my travels have taken me to the remote tundra regions of Alaska, the desert southwest, the ocean city of San Diego, the McKenzie River valley above Eugene, Oregon, and the inland lakes country of Minnesota. I have a nomadic streak in me but I always return to the midwest.

Having been a resident of all these areas for brief periods of time I've discovered certain aspects of all that I've acquired a love and appreciation for. But I fear that the only thing I'm going to appreciate about New York is leaving it.

Without a doubt the big cities of New York are the most uncivilized, uninviting, hostile environments I've ever been in. I've met some wonderful people since I've been here, but in general I've encountered a total lack of human decency in this part of the country.

Experiences I encountered walking to my downtown studio proceeding my move to Rochester, combined with reports from the local newspapers and television stations, and the constant blair of sirens from emergency vehicles all served as notice of what life is about in New York: Drugs, prostitution, Mafia, serial murders, nuclear waste, Kodak dumping toxic chemicals into the environment, robberies, a local minister sodomizing young male parishoners, racial tension, gang fights, rude people, inconsiderate drivers, and city streets that smell of urine and are littered
with garbage and human feces. Some defend New York as being "cultured and civilized." If this is culture and civilization I'll take the "backwards" but thoughtful consideration, respect and conscientious behavior of the folks back home. And I'll breathe the unpolluted air and digest the peaceful, uninterrupted serenity that nature provides in the wide open prairies of the Dakotas and the lakes of Minnesota.

What the afore mentioned article doesn't allude to is the fact that Fargo, North Dakota ranks in the top ten cities in the United States concerning quality of life. And that's what I'm into, a quality life. I am not a city person and spending time in an eastern city has kindled an appreciation for the attributes of the midwest.

I thank New York for the awareness I've developed of the premium style of life offered in my homeland. My experiences in New York truly have brought out the best of me in regards to my painting. I was having difficulty measuring my work and finding meaning before arriving here. The meaning was there, in my roots back home, but it required moving to New York to realize this.
"There is no profession... in which you may expect less happiness and contentment than in painting. For a painter, before he can attain even a moderate degree of perfection, has to submit to so many drudgeries and toils, that they exceed human credibility. Nor, after so much sweating, may he expect even a little applause unless some wind of favorable fortune turns up to blow him into the harbor. Wherefore it often happens that his life ends in misery and want."  

INTRODUCTION

The main intent of the artistic adventure I have embarked on in the past two years has been to develop a series of works that reflect a more personalized statement in my art. A statement which is more expressive of my unconscious and subconscious thoughts, with subject matter deriving from past and childhood experiences, and nature. I'm developing a pictorial language based on my unleashed mind's interpretation of experiences, both visual and emotional. Also I'm imposing more of a gestural quality in my work.

My color palette is incorporating the use of richer, more intense color, and the experimentation process in regards to technique is addressing various surface qualities in painting.

1 Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves et al., eds., Artists on Art: From the XIV to the XX Century (New York: Pantheon Books, 1947), p.129.
EARLIER WORK

Although at the time I was actively pursuing painting, my university education commenced with enrolling in a school of architecture while the country was still in the throes of the Vietnam war. The students at the school of architecture I attended were not part of the local bohemian activist crowd. I was and consequently I changed universities and majors.

The advent of the “drug culture” had come about along with Woodstock, “the Chicago Seven”, hippies, and the slogan of the day, “peace and love.” Campus unrest swept across the country like wild-fire after the slaughter of students at Kent State, causing major universities (including the one I attended) to suspend classes while the protests continued.

I recall watching the first draft lottery on television. It was crazy. It was like watching a game show. They were drawing numbers out of a huge tumbler, with the winners being prime candidates for getting their heads blown off in Vietnam. To avoid being shipped to Nam guys were going on starvation diets and eating tin foil which showed up as ulcers on x-rays, attempting to flunk their physicals. Many fled to Canada. Luckily I didn’t win in the lottery. But I had close friends that did. You can now read some of their names on “The Wall” in Washington.

All of the craziness of the times acted as a bonding agent uniting the group of local artists in support of a common cause. We weren’t going to school to get a degree. We were attending university because it was the thing to do. We could pursue our art, promote the cause, and get high. We
as a group undertook our studies in art with a passion, working day and
night, weekends and holidays. The comradery of the group did much to
foster the development of the participants.

My concepts and images in the late sixties and on through the
seventies were closely allied with those of the abstract imagists or so
called color-field painters.

For a period I concentrated my experimentation on variations of a
basic theme, investigating spatial relationships and working on large
unified pure fields of color that alternated with contrasting geometric
color spaces and hard edge linear shapes as evidenced in (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2)

The brush gave way to a variety of techniques for applying paint such
as the spray gun, paint roller, and spatter method. I combined these
methods with crisp lines achieved through the use of masking tape.

The execution of each piece was very technique and process oriented.
Special attention was given to details such as the surface preparation of
the canvas, assuring that it was smooth and flawless like an automobile
finish when called for. Hard edge lines were meticulously laid out with
tape and the edges were sealed with clear medium to prevent bleeding of
paint. The whole process had a clinical feel to it.
TRANSITION

I was rewarded over the years with some success and much gratification as a color-field painter and wasn't comfortable with the thought of "abandoning" that direction. A gradual stripping away process is what transpired. I was slowly ridding myself of the old techniques and controlled thought patterns, or as Kandinsky once said "I was reminded of a snake that couldn't quite succeed in creeping out of it's old skin. The skin already definately looked dead - but it still stuck." It was like tearing down a functional, well designed building, attempting to salvage useless parts, and having nothing to replace it with. I went through a cumbersome transitional stage, and then it was a slow trial and error rebuilding period that ensued.

My painting has incurred a radical series of transitions in the past two years. Modifications have often eventuated in style when I've moved to new surroundings, but nothing as drastic as the transformation my recent work has gone through in regards to process, image, and concept. These stylistic and conceptual alterations can be attributed to a number of factors. Personal tragedies that have had an emotional impact, and a renewed awareness of influences from the environment in which I was born and raised have necessitated that my work adjust and respond to changes in my life.

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The hallmark piece that pre-dated the major change in direction my work would take was a granite sculpture which serves as a marker stone for my father's grave sight (Fig. 3). This was the first time I approached a piece with a narrative theme in mind. What is evident is a break-up of geometric forms into figurative organic shapes, combined with personalized markings. There is also a spiritual element evidenced by an alter like area with a cross carved into the inset. On one side of the sculpture there are three etched scenes which symbolize various aspects of my father's personality. This conceptual change from the systematic approach I was accustomed to, to one of intense personal involvement was new to me. I didn't quite know what to make of this approach but it had a marked impact that left me restless and uncertain about the direction of my work.

There was a desire to bring my painting up to date with changes which occurred in my life over the years and I wanted my work to reflect those changes, but I was enmeshed in a dogmatic pursuit. The direction of my work was veiled in concerns that no longer addressed current issues in my life. My painting was slowly dying before I returned to graduate school. I was somewhat detached from my work and no longer pursued it with the commitment or personal involvement that I enjoyed in years past. Although I was still addressing concerns in painting, my creative energies were being expressed primarily in three-dimensional work, and there was an imperceptible relationship between my sculpture and my painting.

It required a period of rethinking my art and conceding to transitions
and impressionable events in my life before feeling comfortable with making a break from customary habits. Sighting through unjaded eyes I searched for meaning with a renewed awareness. It was a difficult and sometimes frustrating experience attempting to gain insight and perspective on the situation, but as novel ideas and processes began to gel, my work was energized with a new found vitality.
EXPERIMENTATION

I experimented with a variety of materials and techniques in the developmental stages of this process, adapting a mixed-media approach. In earlier works I combined gestural brushwork of paint with other elements such as reeds and plexiglas (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). In proceeding works on paper the compositional components were derived from a combination of oil pastels, color crayons, and acrylic paint. Typically I mapped out the groundwork for these painting-drawings with large flat areas of acrylic wash, over which I executed gestural sketches with crayons and oil pastels. In some pieces I dripped melted crayons on the work for a textural effect. Bold strokes of thicker, trowled in paint were accomplished with acrylic polymers as a finishing touch to activate the picture surface. The naive application of intense color added to the primitive dream-like quality of these earlier pieces. I was able to achieve a rich harmonization of color, texture, gesture, and image.

It was at this point that a basic change occurred in my approach to painting. There was a shift from working fragmented parts and finishing isolated pieces and shapes, to an overall working, reworking and revising of forms. I was building layer upon layer, achieving surface qualities never before seen in my work. My paintings were continuing right out to the edges of the canvas rather than encapsulating and containing shapes as I had done previously. An opening up of forms and release of new imagery came about. The arbitrary application of intense unmixed pure pigment directly from the tube aided in promoting a more direct style. Earth tones
and black appeared in my palette for the first time in twenty years.

Initially some of these pieces started out in basically a landscape type format, but as they progressed underlying stories developed about a number of experiences I've had (Figs. 7, 8, 9, 10). Some rather mysterious imagery came out of these, some of which was quite frightening from a personal standpoint. As thought processes were overlapping, so were my translations into two-dimensional representations. Sections of these painting-drawings which were initiated with naive intentions, transformed into imagery with ominous overtones.

I began to feel that the break from my old style was complete. With the basic experimental groundwork out of the way I was able to focus on elements I wanted to retain and carry with me in this new direction. The recognizable figurative images in these earlier pieces on paper were important in the developmental stages but were no longer appropriate for the overall effect I wanted to achieve. I needed to carry my thought processes and means of expression to a different level.
NEW DIRECTION

I began new pieces in a controlled manner, but as the interpretations of my thoughts into imagery began to flow more naturally, so did the physical application of pigment. An intense fluidity developed as I worked on these pieces, assimilating a spontaneous, automatist approach not unlike Jackson Pollock's manner of action painting. I was using slashing brush strokes, applying paint with a palette knife, broad knife, and bare hands. I used sticks for scratching and at times I literally threw paint at the canvas (FIG. 17 and FIG. 18).

These painting sessions were highly intense experiences that moved along at a rapid pace. The rendering process was swift and vigorous. It was the involvement and intensity of the "session" that determined the outcome and success. This intense personal involvement was the key as my work in this new direction matured. By focusing my energies on the act of painting rather than consciously analyzing my decision making process, a distinctive vocabulary spontaneously began to unfold. I was aggressively responding to the exploratory process rather than manipulating it.

This resulted in expressionistic and gesturally structured pictures which combine both abstract and figurative elements. These paintings are an exteriorization of my feelings about the world in which I live. These spontaneous, psychologically charged images took on expressive powers that had a strong emotional impact as the works progressed, liberating both gesture and thought. I adopted elements of
figuration as a means of infusing human qualities, with lines that don't necessarily define shapes but have lives of their own. Some of the line quality is reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy, with characterizations of images reduced to swift strokes that lead the eye around the entire piece.

Mark Tobey was one of the first to seize on linear calligraphic images to keep the eye moving: a "moving focus". "He has made line the symbol of spiritual illumination, human communication and migration, natural form and process, and movement between levels of consciousness."  

These pictures express my new discovery of plastic form, the impact of personalized gestural accents, the beginning of an iconography of my own, and the emergence of a new and more personal style.

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OTHER ARTISTS

In the mid-nineteen twenties the focal point of the art world began a gradual shift from Paris to New York as artists from both Europe and the United States who were addressing a new approach to art began to congregate in New York. This gathering was comprised of a number of European refugees and ex-patriots and a younger group of Americans. Included in this group were Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Fernand Leger, Piet Mondrian, Morris Graves and Mark Tobey, Arshile Gorky and John Graham, Willem de Kooning, Clifford Still, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Lee Krasner (who was to become Pollock’s wife), and Jackson Pollock himself.

Some of their concepts had roots starting with the direction of works such as Picasso’s “Guernica”. It was the feelings of horror and despair conveyed by this piece without the use of literal imagery that was new. And it was this form of expression that these artists seized on. What a person sensed or how he was moved by the work was what was of importance to them. One can’t interpret the specific meanings from these images, rather there is a universal impression felt by all. These artists were moving toward a spiritual or mystical interpretation of art based on their unconscious responses. The symbolism they were drawing from was no longer based on literal interpretations of imagery but rather from the inner-self. What one could see happening was a gradual break up of forms into abstraction. These are some similarities there are between the work of these artists and recent stages I’ve gone through in my art.

Graham, an early force in this group and a guru of sorts was into a
number of unorthodox studies including the occult and musical systems, yoga, astrology, numerology, alchemy, cabalism, and black magic. In a book he titled "System and Dialectics of Art" he stated "Art is the authentic reaction of the artist to a phenomenon observed, set authoritatatively to the operating plane. No technical perfection or elegance can produce a work of art. A work of art is neither the faithful nor distorted representation, it is the immediate, unadorned record of an authentic intellecto-emotional REACTION of the artist set in space. Artist's reaction to a breast differs from his reaction to an iron rail or to hair or to a brick wall. This authentic reaction recorded within the measurable space immediately and automatically in terms of brush pressure, saturation, velocity, caress or repulsion, anger or desire which changes and varies in unison with the flow of feeling at the moment, constitutes a work of art...

The difficulty in producing a work of art lies in the fact that artist has to unite at one and the same time three elements; thought, feeling, and automatic "écriture."4

What Graham seems to be suggesting is that it's the artist's reaction to a given event and how that artist automatically responds to the event without making a conscious effort to control the outcome or execution of the visual elements that determine a piece of art.

Of this group Pollock was the critical artist in the development of twentieth century abstract art. It was the explosive physical energy of his brushwork and his intuitive response to this energy that set him apart. It is this intense raw energy that one is drawn to. "...Pollock's emphasis on the fury of animal nature is his personal poetry and strength."\(^5\)

Fragments and parts are sensed, there is no specific meaning, but a connection is made. The work isn't necessarily contained within the borders of the painting. The works continue past the edges of the canvas. This infinite space of his paintings was a major influence on other artists.

Another artist's work I am drawn to is Pierre Alechinsky's. Alechinsky transforms the world into an extraordinary creation of his own, using an unrestrained and unintentional process. This uninhibited approach toward his art is what attracts me, more so than even the work itself. "To observe the artist in action is to confirm one's impressions of his art. For in all of Alechinsky's paintings we find the spontaneous expression of an unbridled imagination. One's eyes wander over his canvases with delight both at the imagery and superb use of color. But there is more. There is the vivid evidence of a high intellect at work."\(^6\)

What Alechinsky's work affords me is an opportunity to look inside another's world of unconscious inspiration. The beast within that drives

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out the forgotten past, the fears, the inhibitions, and the search for meaning.

Sometimes an artist begins to question what his art and life are all about. And then you come across another's work with which you can identify as having similar meaning as that of your own. This helps to validate one's own purpose. This is what Alechinsky's translations of the world do for me. Alechinsky's observation of life is centered on testing out new techniques and incorporating them with images of his own personal idiom.

Sharing similar experiences and ideas with other artists has helped me toward a better understanding of how to communicate the real-life situations that I am attempting to express through my paintings. The bizarreness of some of the representations of Alechinsky's have helped me to release imagery from remote parts of my past. Studying his work and reading about his ideas on art have also added to my own visionary thought processes, helping me to establish the primitive characterizations of imagery that I have been searching for in my own work.

Alechinsky has taken what he knows about the world and turned it into a fantastic creation of his own without losing sight of the universal experiences that we all share. Being able to communicate feelings we have as individuals is a talent, expressing ideas visually that we all can identify with is a gift. This is a gift that Pierre Alechinsky has mastered.

Another artist that has always fascinated me is the German Expressionist Vassily Kandinsky. It was the "nonatmospheric spacial
quality"⁷ and geometric shapes that caught my attention as a color-field painter in the early seventies. More recently it is the spiritual and mystic nature, linear freedom, figurative distortions, and energy of his earlier work that I identify with.

⁷ Michel Conil Lacoste, Kandinsky (Bonfini Press Corporation, Naefels, Switzerland, 1979), p.86
REGIONAL IMPACT

My new work also reveals a touch of primitivism and mystic qualities shared with the styles of artists such as Jean Dubuffet and the American Northwest artists Morris Graves and Mark Tobey. For me, like Tobey and Graves, the specific roots of this primitive influence take on a regional aspect, addressing the spirit of the land.

A major impetus for my work comes from the prairies of North Dakota, which are bountiful with wildlife, wide open spaces, and Indian lore and artifacts.

Columbus, North Dakota, located in the northwestern corner of the state, bordering Montana and Canada, is one of those little prairie settlements that is slowly dying off and returning to the dust of the wide open plains, leaving behind a few scattered shadows of what once was. It was here that my father was born and raised and here in my early childhood that he showed me his collection of Indian arrowheads chipped out of flint, pipes that were once passed around in ceremony, and stones that were used to mill grain and serve as clubs.

I remember the magical feeling I experienced from touching these treasures, and the mystery and awe I felt when I found my first arrowhead. It was years later when I returned as a young man to work on a ranch in the same region that I again had a similar experience.

It was one of those blistering hot days. The temperature had climbed into the high nineties. I jumped down off the tractor to sit in the shade of a solitary tree that offered me brief respite from the heat. How
the Indians ever survived these extreme elements, ranging from 35 below zero in the winter to 102 degrees above in the summer amazes me. Out of the corner of my eye I caught something that was the slightest bit out of place. Nestled in between two rocks, partially uncovered from a recent rain was the red stone bowl of an Indian pipe.

This was Sioux (Dakota) Indian territory at one time. A red stone pipe was spiritually significant to these peoples. "The Keeper of the Sacred Pipe" was a spiritual leader with mystical powers (wakan)\(^8\) that performed sacred rites.

The last time I was fortunate enough to come across such a find was a few years ago while hunting in the southwestern corner of North Dakota. Standing on top of a butte I stumbled across an arrowhead, connecting me with a hunter of another time.

Remembering experiences such as these has brought me to the realization that it is the magic and the mystery of one's personal life that I want to capture in my art. Mark Tobey "has often stated that there can be no break between nature, art, science, religion, and personal life."\(^9\)


Often called a "Northwest mystic" and "the sage of Seattle," Tobey sees the highest reality as mystical and spiritual rather than physical.10

Through an exteriorization of my feelings, capitalizing on my intuitive self, I am attempting to develop a pictorial language that is expressive of my mind's interpretation of experiences. Taking a walk through my life and pinpointing the most impressionable moments has assisted me in releasing thoughts, feelings, and imagery that I want reflected in my work. Being in close touch with nature has helped to bring out those instinctive qualities shared by all mankind throughout history. Ghosts from the past have entered into my art through recollections of events that have left me dreaming of another time and another place.

AFTERWORD

The harsh environment and solitude that the spacious prairies of North Dakota yield, and the crisp air that the towering aromatic pine trees and lakes of Minnesota provide, inject me with the SPIRIT and the VISION I require to continue on with my work, and it is here that my HEART lies.

I will continue to be a wanderer, but along with the seasonal migration of waterfowl across the potholes of North Dakota, the plumage of the cock pheasant coming into full bloom, the battle scarring of the majestic racks of the whitetail and mule deer in rut, and the banding together of the pronghorn antelope, the spirit of this hunter will in the fall of the year always return home to the wetlands and prairies.
Fig.1. Seven Views. 1986
Acrylic on Canvas, 90"x48"
Charpentier, Hovland, Jonk Collection
Fargo, ND.

Fig.2. Untitled. 1974
Acrylic on Canvas, 96"x48"
Boulger Law Firm Collection.
Fargo, ND.
Fig. 5. Untitled. 1988
Acrylic on Canvas, 84"x48"

Fig. 6. Untitled. 1988
Acrylic on Canvas, 60"x48"
Fig. 7. Untitled. 1989
Acrylic on Paper, 41"x29"

Fig. 8. Untitled. 1989
Acrylic on Paper, 41"x29"
Fig. 9.  Untitled. 1989
Acrylic on Paper, 41" x 29"

Fig. 10.  Untitled. 1989
Acrylic on Paper, 41" x 29"
Fig. 11. Untitled. 1990
Acrylic on Paper, 41" x 29"

Fig. 12. Untitled. 1990
Acrylic on Canvas, 78" x 48"
Fig. 13. Untitled. 1990
Acrylic on Paper, 41"x29"

Fig. 14. Untitled. 1990
Acrylic on Paper, 41"x29"
Fig. 17.  Prairie Madness. 1990
Acrylic on Canvas, 116"x100"

Fig. 18.  Medicine Man. 1990
Acrylic on Canvas, 102"x82"
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