Process, color, form, space and motion

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Recommended Citation
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

PROCESS, COLOR, FORM, SPACE AND MOTION

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Date: February 25, 1983
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Date: March 23, 1983
Different

There was a big figure 3 - white on dark brown. Its upper loop was the same size as the lower loop. So many people thought. And yet this upper loop was SOMEWHAT, SOMEWHAT, SOMEWHAT larger than the lower one.

This figure 3 always looked to the left - never to the right. At the same time it looked slightly downward, for only in appearance did this figure stand perfectly straight. In reality, not easily discernible, the upper SOMEWHAT, SOMEWHAT, SOMEWHAT larger part inclined to the left.

And so this big white figure 3 always looked to the left and a little downward.

Or perhaps it was different.

Wassly Kandinsky
Klänge [Sounds]
Prose poems with 56 wood-cuts, edition of 300 signed copies
Piper-Verlag, Munich 1912
Things are not what they appear to be. We see our bodies, that entity which we know far better than anything else in the world and see a warm, live, feeling organism. And yet modern science tells us all we are seeing is approximately $.98 worth of fungible chemicals. When we are reduced to our component parts we become interchangeable -- each one like the other. Yet, intrinsically, spiritually, we know we are unique. We have individual values, evoke singular emotions, each one different, each one contributing something to that fabric of mankind which is necessary to our own individual existence.

An artist, by necessity, must view the world through his eyes, that very organic, common faculty which we possess, and yet there is an incumbency upon him to view the world differently than the majority of men. A responsibility, and yet, what an opportunity! Existence as we see it, or as we want to see it. Life is space - the undefined, limitless expanse in which we live. Life is motion - at times being shallow and at other times being deep beyond comprehension. The issue arises when the artist begins to analyze how he can portray these forces in a manner such that someone other than himself can grasp them.

Perhaps it is easier for the literal artist to cap-
ture his idea, his concept, his message. And yet it is said that the viewer of a figurative study brings with his visual appreciation of the figure all his knowledge of what a figure should look like. Thus the most common and universal of subjects becomes the most difficult to capture meaningfully for the viewer. The artist who chooses to represent known entities on the canvas or paper has certain hurdles to cross, but does that leave the abstract artist free to attack reality, or abstraction, in any manner he might choose?

The answer must be no. Although Kandinsky, in his prose poem, deals with things which seem to be something other than what they are in harsh reality, most artists, unless they are producing art purely for therapeutic reasons, feel a need to produce art which will have a relevance to someone other than the maker: a much more difficult task for the non-objective artist than for one who is attempting to capture a feeling, an emotion or a spirit based on an easily definable object. Childhood's discarded doll, the tree seen on a sharp, cool autumn day, the unused prom dress all bring with them emotional connotations which evoke definite emotional responses. But what about the movement of matter through space? The recession of forms through time? The warmth of planes of reality within the unknown reaches
of infinity? How does the abstract artist deal with his messages when those messages have no basis in realities our senses perceive?

It has been interesting for me to deal with this problem since I evolved from an era of the very concrete. The tragedies of World War II were, for me, very real; the hardships of Korea I could almost feel; the total inequities of Viet Nam I lived personally. Yet the art I have felt during the sixties and seventies is not one of despair, but an art into which I want the viewer to extend himself without regard to his position in time.

What have I been dealing with?

the process itself
color
form
space
motion

and the results? I think the result is a combination of all these forces. I don't want people to forget. Yet I do want them to be diverted. I want them to be aware and I want them to see a reality which they might have missed. As an artist there are certain tools which I use to heighten their awareness. These include the concepts of space, color, form and motion. However, process, a keyword to a printmaker, a graphic artist, is a concept which should not
be obvious to the viewer, however important it is to the artist.

An artist has the ability - no - the luxury, of allowing his image to evolve. That fortuitous accident, unplanned, but so important to the final image is an exciting part of the print medium. Certainly the print can be carefully predetermined and thought out, but it can, on the other hand, be permitted to evolve. This has been my approach to the process of printmaking, and has been surprising to me because it runs counter to my approach to life - one which is systematic and well-planned. Even my process of reaching this printmaking approach has been an interesting one; an almost conscious letting-go of the strictures of life. The change has been gradual and accomplished with hard work -- let go a little and push yourself to letting go even more. In the end I want the spontaneity to be, if not obvious, at least felt.

What sort of space can be achieved within a fixed two-dimensional area. Working with a given set of dimensions -- eighteen inches by twenty-two inches -- is it possible to achieve varying feelings of space? This was one of the challenges I set for myself. Hans Hofmann is one of those artists who has dealt with this issue of "space" within a two-dimensional plane. He rejected the Rennaisance attempt to depict space through perspective, stating that
depth should not be simulated by "the arrangement of objects one after another toward a vanishing point"\(^1\) nor through tonal gradation. Rather, this sensation of depth and space is accomplished through the tension of push and pull within the picture plane. Just as the eye transforms three-dimensional space into two dimensions, the artist must bring a three-dimensional effect into being. Hofmann has stated, "The totality of sensitive controlled shifting actions produces finally the coexistence of a produced depth rhythm and a two-dimensional surface rhythm, and with it a new reality in the form of pictorial space."\(^2\) Hofmann starts with the supposition that the four edges of a canvas or piece of paper are the first four lines of a composition and that the first line or mark within those planes is, in actuality, the fifth. But through a creation of forces, in the sense of push and pull, the artist can create a sensation of depth. Hofmann further refines this to state that planes are the most potent carrier of this push and pull, lines and points are less so, but that color is an important factor in achieving this.

My own prints deal directly with this concept of space, tension and movement. Dealing with a given physical dimension, they convey different feelings of space -- in


\(^2\)Ibid., p. 32.
some cases the images sit on the surface of the picture plane, in others the activity moves back into the picture plane, and in others we are given "windows" through which to view what may be going on behind. What is going on behind? Or on the surface? Or back into depth?

The movement across the picture plane is also important to me. Granted, the surface is stationary -- nothing is actually moving -- but I want to give the sensation of motion. This is very closely tied to Hofmann's idea of tension -- movement and counter-movement. It is relevant to the way we experience modern life. Our values continually flux. No longer does a little girl know that when she grows up she will be a teacher, a nurse, or a mother. The whole world is open to her. In a like vein, Aaron Berkman states, "To express life in contemporary terms a painting must incorporate movement (action), time (duration of action), and space (place of action), without which experience in life -- or art -- is inconceivable."\(^3\) To the modern artist the whole world is open. He is no longer restricted to portraying the world as he sees it. He may portray it as he feels it, or as he wishes his viewer to see it. I feel the origin of my prints is nature, even if, as Hofmann comments on his own work, this nature is found only in

the imagination. My statements about nature come in purely visual terms, not relying on literary or ideological devices. I do not feel that I want to connect my prints with any particular school or movement, and yet I related to a comment made about "color and field" painting:

Despite their utter abstractness, these canvasses retain an inescapable if remote connection with the landscape tradition and it may be that there-in lies one of the sources of their content; their openness, their wholeness, their expansiveness -- qualities associated with the sea, the sky, the open field. Abstractness does not need external justification today any more than it ever has, yet it needs to be explained by what means this art goes beyond merely formal and decorative. Perhaps its connection with landscape is part of the answer.

Movement and space, which, it seems to me, go hand in hand in my prints, are both achieved through the interaction of planes and forms and their tension with line. Although composition can be achieved through a delineation of concrete two-dimensionality, I have chosen to seek composition through abstract entities. Closely allied with

4 Seitz, op. cit., p. 9.

5 Hofmann states that the artist who superimposes a literary meaning on his art "produces nothing more than a show-booth." Hans Hofmann, Search for the Real and Other Essays (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), p. 40.

space and movement, and, I think, equally importantly, is the utilization of color to achieve the total effect of the image.

Color. How many treatises have been written on the use, effect and symbolism of color. Josef Albers's treatise, Interaction of Color, treats the aesthetic effects of color in a particularly scientific manner. Yet interwoven throughout his writing is an emotional, spiritual analysis. He speaks of a single color evoking "innumerable readings." He states that if there are fifty people who hear the word "red" it can "be expected that there will be fifty reds in their minds." Is this perhaps because we view color with more than just the eye? Itten states: "... the deepest and truest secrets of color effect are, I know, invisible even to the eye, and are beheld by the heart alone." How many associations we bring to that which we see!

In producing my prints, I consciously attempted to make use of these associations. A print produced in brown and black should convey a feeling of comfort, something akin to being in a man's den filled with soft, dark leather furniture and smelling of well-oiled wood. A print done in acid greens, with orange and yellow, should

8Ibid., p. 3.
give a feeling of unease. One printed in warm, but vibrant pinks with an undertow of complacent blue should not lull, but convey a feeling of comfort, but only because of the underlying vitality. Or finally, those rich, opulent vermilion with the overlay of stodgy black are intended to bring forth a total sensation of opulence, ease and self-satisfaction.

The artist who says he does not use color to achieve effect is not being honest. Color is a tool — much like using a satyr figure to indicate evil — and it should be utilized. Color "is conceived of as a vehicle of feeling"\(^\text{10}\) and should be used accordingly. Itten states that color aesthetics can be based on: impression (visually), expression (emotionally) or construction (symbolically)\(^\text{11}\) and the artist must be aware of which, or which combination of these, he is using. Even Kandinsky acknowledges that someone looking at a palette of color receives "a purely physical effect" as well as a "psychological effect."\(^\text{12}\) Utilizing these effects enters prominently into the artist's aesthetic decisions. Sometimes, despite conscious color decisions by the artist, color choices produce an unexpected effect. Richard Anuszkiewicz, a student of Albers at Yale,---------------------

\(^{10}\) Color and Field 1890-1970, op. cit., p. 8.

\(^{11}\) Itten, op. cit., p. 17.

\(^{12}\) Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1847), p. 43.
has stated:

... an investigation into the effects of complementary colors of full intensity when juxtaposed, and the optical changes which occur [will show] ... the effect of the changing conditions of light and the effect of light on color.\textsuperscript{13}

In the final analysis, it is the harmonious bringing together of these elements which will determine whether a piece of art "works." Art has the power to "create spiritual atmosphere ... If it is 'poor' it is too weak to call forth spiritual vibration."\textsuperscript{14} And it is only when this spiritual vibration is produced that a piece of art assumes an entity outside of the artist. Kandinsky states: "A work of art is born of the artist in a mysterious and secret way. Detached from him it acquires autonomous life, becomes an entity."\textsuperscript{15} It is this separate existence which the artist seeks to achieve. His tools are the medium and the elements of color, form, depth and movement. The artist must have an intuitive feeling for the medium with which he is working in order to convey his idea. He must have "something to communicate, since mastery over form is not the end but, instead, the adapting of form to internal significance."\textsuperscript{16} This internal significance need no longer

\textsuperscript{13}Una E. Johnson, \textit{American Prints and Printmakers} (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), p. 188.

\textsuperscript{14}Kandinsky, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 74.

\textsuperscript{15}Kandinsky, \textit{loc. cit.}

\textsuperscript{16}Kandinsky, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 75.
be based in concrete reality. "The modern world is no longer factual in its interpretation of the object."\(^{17}\) The modern artist is freer today than ever to deal with what the picture encloses and upon which the mind speculates.

This has been my attempt in producing my prints. I have sought an understandable entity which can exist outside myself, a harmonious combination of elements which conveys to the viewer my attitude toward life and reality.

\(^{17}\) Berkman, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
As an initial step in all my thesis prints I applied liquid ground to the clean plate with a two-inch poly foam brush. With broad, sweeping strokes I could cover as little or as much of the plate as I wanted, either using the brush in a totally flat manner or angled to produce strokes of varying widths. Using spray paint to provide an "aquatint" on the exposed areas of the plate, I etched in 10:1 nitric acid for a relatively short time (approximately three minutes). Without cleaning any of this resist from the plate after etching, I applied more liquid ground, covering up some of the areas which had already been exposed to the acid through the spray paint. This again gets about a three-minute etch.

Repetition of these combinations of steps was made until the plate was fully covered, each application of liquid ground preventing additional darkening of the original aquatint. The result of this first stage was a series of areas with different richesses of aquatint and some unetched areas.

After cleaning off the plate, I began the process again. Using the poly brush and liquid ground either in a "dry brush" manner or fully saturated resulted in a layering of textures over unetched and aquatinted areas. Additional techniques I utilized to achieve a build-up of surfaces were rolling on printing ink as a resist, soft ground texture
transfers, and some deep, open biting.

In order to use ink as a resist, I used a one-inch roller with relatively stiff etching ink. The roller can be used flat against the plate or angled just to get the edge of the roller. I used the 10:1 nitric acid when using ink as a resist and found that gradually the acid will eat through the ink and etch the plate in varying degrees, depending on the density of the ink application.

The soft ground transfers were applied in the traditional way, often over previously etched areas or with additional etching done over them.

The open biting, particularly when deeply etched, resulted in those "windows" which look back into the spaces behind. It also produced the areas of actual embossing which added to the three-dimensional feeling in some of the prints. For open biting, I etched the plates in 6:1 acid for as long as one hour for deeply etched areas. This resulted in retention of whatever previously etched texture was in this area of the plate before the open biting etch.

In order to increase spontaneity and avoid tightness, I went through many stages of applying resist and etching before ever taking a proof of the plate. When I was at a point where I wanted to bring a plate to completion, I proofed the plate with black ink. From this point I made specific additions, deletions or corrections
to the plate.

The actual printing process began with inking and wiping the plate in the standard manner with a relatively stiff ink. I rolled over this inked plate with a looser second ink. Most of these rolls were done with a single color ink although I did experiment with blended rolls applied vertically, horizontally or diagonally, depending on the image on the plate.

Some prints were completed by inking and wiping a second plate of the same size in a third color and printing over the image from the first plate. By using black on the second plate I toned down vibrant combinations on the first plate or high-lighted other combinations by using a light third color ink.
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