Synergistic qualities of form and space

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SYNERGISTIC QUALITITES OF FORM AND SPACE

by

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You know who you are "Darling".
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INTRODUCTION

It has been written that, "The best way of approaching Alexander Calder's work is to respond to it and that means to approach it without preconceived or intellectual ideas."\(^1\)

I believe this is how one should approach any work of art, and therefore, how I would like the viewer to approach mine.

I draw a lot. I have since childhood, been captivated by the art of drawing and what it can lead to. I have taken as many classes in drawing and ways of drawing that are possible, which included all media, perspective and life studies. I paint a lot as well. Drawing and painting have been the source of my artistic passion, and are responsible for my desire to seek, know and understand the value of these passions as a student and artist. I shall attempt to inform you of the things I have uncovered over the last two years of my graduate studies.

\(^{1}\)Dr. Giovanni Carandente, Calder Mobiles and Stabiles (New York: The New American Library, 1968), 5.
Part I

Form Making*Drawing

I should like to start my discussion with the drawings, since they have always compelled me to seek and understand form and spatial relationships. I have engaged in abstracting intuitive forms during my studies. It is informative to note that these forms come from, so it seems, previous studies that relied heavily on the figure and objects in nature. The combination of soft flowing lines, intersected on occasion by a geometric line or shape, for the most part, have been the object of my drawing compositions, as in the drawing, "Point of Departure" (Fig. 1).

Various compositions have taken on the characteristics of space that moves the eye in and out of a complex structure, which is clearly seen in the drawing, "In then Out" (Fig. 2). The use of mixed media, charcoal, pastels, oil crayon, pencil, graphite, waterbased paints, erasures, smudging and finger rubbing, have contributed to the overall tactile sense of the drawings. They seem to have their own sense of modern "chiaroscuro".
I draw in a very gestural manner, using expressive lines, biomorphic forms and little color. These things tend to be the keys to my image making, this is clear in the drawing titled, "Parting the Way" (Fig. 3).

These forms have sprung from an inner response to drawing, coupled with my personal point of view, they are unique to myself as the artist, but indeed have a reference to those who view them. They convey a sense of drama, an energy within a space, a synergy, or bringing together forms and space, that create a sense of space. The drawings "FourA" and "Summertime" are further examples of synergistic form making (Figs. 4&5).

Well what does this have to do with space and form. The idea of looking at space and forms that reflect a sensualness without the need or use of realism in a pictoral framework is the foundation of "Abstract Expressionism". One does not deny that these forms may directly relate to nature, the human made environment, the media, the state of our nation or any other event that impacts on the nature of the human condition.

To create a personal sense of space that communicates on a emotional or sensual level, that lies within the mind of the artist is true of the work of Arshile Gorky. Gorky's work in the 1940's fused objects from nature and enigmatic symbols, expressive gestures and color; he too worked from his own personal point of view.
"Gorky opened the 1940s with an intriguingly hybrid image of description, memory, and pure abstraction, stretching Surrealism beyond its literary sources and leading American painting into one of the most experimental periods in history. Gorky focused on a series of paintings he titled "Garden in Sochi." It was initially through this group of works, and particularly the renditions after 1940, that the artist made the breakthrough to his most mature and imaginative images, in which remembered landscapes from his childhood in Armenia fuse surrealist fantasy with abstract bursts of line and color, anticipating the expressive gestures that are the hallmarks of the movement that would later be called Abstract Expressionism." 2

Gorky's drawings are directly related to his paintings. I was able to see the exhibition of his drawings and paintings at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. This exhibit included his drawings, which showed how he developed his ideas of form making that would directly relate to his images in his paintings. This exhibit was a revelation to me, because it seemed to validate my own way of form making and creating images for what would eventually become paintings.

2Michael Auping and others, eds., Arshile Gorky The Breakthrough Years (Fort Worth: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 1995), 16-17.
The drawings selected as part of my thesis, and of which I have referred to as Figures 1 through 5, to me have been important in the sequencing of the paintings that were done for this thesis. The drawings have been, and are the starting points and departure points from where my ideas sprang that evolved into the paintings.
Part II

Form Making: Painting

There are some things I can tell you about my paintings. I do not have a formula, intuition is my process. You will notice that the paintings may include as part of their language, contradiction and opposition, geometric and organic shapes, permanent and ephemeral ideas that relate to form through spatial relationships.

They seem to suggest a visual sense that represents an intense personal quality. The expression of feelings, emotions and personal adventures is the basis of the forms in the paintings. The coming together of space and form that creates a synergy in the paintings. I like to refer to them as "dream/mindscapes." They have a mystical contradiction of sensualities, that may suggest fear, sadness, joy, happiness, romance, pain, energy, lyricism, passion and a need for understanding.

I should like to begin with the painting "Solitude" (Fig. 6). I consider this painting a pivotal painting in the work that I have done during my graduate studies. The large forms and paring down of my palette, enabled me to combine elements that have a strength, yet quiet sense.

"Solitude" reflects little in the way of energy but speaks a quiet language of combing forms and space that deliver a somewhat cold or aloof message.
The use of white that has some black or grey tones keep this painting on a surface level. The forms touch and break through one another suggesting overlapping that goes behind or in front of the forms. This overlapping is not aggressive and does not upset or set up an apparent tension between the forms and the space they lie in. The large white space that surrounds the forms only slightly suggests a circular vortex.

For me the power of this painting rests in its quiet undertow. Still waters run deep. I needed to paint this to show that these elements could be and are powerful in what they say.

What "Solitude" made apparent to me was that form and space could have synergy that employed minimal color, line, and shape.

It then begs the question, can you accomplish synergy with black and forms that have no apparent delineation.

So sprang forth the painting "White Vision" (Fig. 7). "White Vision", in actuality is based on dreams that I have had. I find myself in a place that has no defined space, except for a somewhat circular white area that I desire to go through. This uncomfortable space had many reflections and details.
"White Vision", has a powerful sense of space and forms. The subtle changes in the black areas set up the space that commands your attention to view into the white. This painting also has a quiet sense, yet it is strong and commanding. The use of little color and line work seems far removed from my drawings. However, within the blacks you will note subtle variations reminiscent of my charcoal drawings. Indeed, I began this painting with a wash of charcoal and mineral spirits. I use oil crayon and my fingers to rub and create various details in the painting.

Robert Motherwell in the book, Motherwell & Black, has put form, content and meaning in this way, "These matters are not easy to be clear about if one has, in the background of one's mind, the traditional critical distinction between "form" and "content" as a valid and necessary distinction. To experience a work of art, as in making love, is to experience a human contact:and one can say equally well, the "content" is just the "form" involved, or the "form" is just the "content" involved..." He continues, "Painting is a "language," and its only legitimacy is that it can "say" certain things that words can't. What I can do in words is give you a few associations, a few metaphors, but mainly point out that-as Wittgenstein says-the instant you reach what is interesting in terms of meaningfulness, words stop."
And further, "In one sense the content of Abstract Expressionism—hence its being called expressionism—has to do with energy... And how you determine what's the form and what's the content of energy, or what's the form and the content of Bergson's elan vital—if such a thing exists—or of the "id", or of anything that one could call and energetic field of force?"\(^3\)

These words of Motherwell say much to me, and much of what he has written I agree with and feel is a clear representation of what my own ideas about form making in my paintings mean. I am glad to have read his work.

To depart a bit from Motherwell and philosophy, I would like to go back to the next paintings in this body of work. They are, "Floating Away", and "In the Middle", (Figs. 8 & 9). Much of my painting has been done in tandem, with two or three paintings at a time, therefore, I would like to discuss their evolvement. "Floating Away", has a lot of movement and energy in its composition. Its colors are subdued and again show a direct relationship to my drawings. However, it is at this point that I also began to recognize the value of my "underpainting". It has been a constant throughout this learning process.

At first, I was hesitant to accept this part of my process, and it was at this point, during my work on "Floating Away" that I began to accept and use to my advantage the underpainting process. This process now seems so natural to me and I accept it as a, pre-painting, or sketch, that adds to the final piece.

While "Floating Away" kept me occupied with the process of underpainting and other processes I've already mentioned, "The painting, "In the Middle", was done with limited underpainting. Throughout my work I have used dripping to accomplish certain effects, it is in this painting that I feel I was most accomplished with this technique. I was able to control and determine how, where, and when I would work it into the painting. "In the Middle", is a painting that I consider to be spontaneous and not overworked.

While in this mood I began the painting "Yellow Dream", (Fig.10) it is in this painting that I am confident of my techniques, my forms and the direct relationship to my drawings. "Yellow Dream" is most like a drawing-painting. It also has, in my opinion, the most direct condition of synergy.
"Yellow Dream", for me is a benchmark piece in this body of work. Everything is working in this piece and I am more than happy I was able to recognize it when it happened and that I could work in the same way again.

This about brings me to the last paintings in my thesis. They are "goo" and "Escape" (Figs. 11 & 12). "goo", has several underpaintings and it is notable to mention, has a bit more color. I chose warm, earthy colors as my palatte, because the forms in "goo" are very strong, they push and pull against one another, there is tension and a sense of mystery. It is a very active moving painting, that flows and swirls around the canvas.

The painting "Escape" is to me as successful as "Yellow Dream". However, there are some strong differences. While this painting is also what I call a drawing-painting, it has an underpainting. This last piece is for me an additional breakthrough painting. I could now see that I could use either the technique of thin, light paint application, combined with a strong drawing component, or I could have an underpainting and still be able to have a strong drawing quality and surface that speaks about the languages of drawing and painting.

"Escape" and "Yellow Dream", contain the elements that are important to me as an artist. They satisfy my artistic passions and seem to make a statement about understanding synergy. However, I feel throughout this body of work, through various methods and trials, I have set out to do what I wanted to do. To explore the synergistic qualities of form and space.
Conclusion seems like such a final word. Afterall, this process seems to be ongoing. Painting for me will continue, I will continue to explore and try to understand more about what it is that I want to paint. For now I know that in relationship to everything else, this is where I have learned the most about my desires to paint and to be an artist.

I know I have learned much and have sought to give meaning to my images and ideas. I know that this is a search that does not end and as I know from life,

NOTHING IS FINAL.
Figure 1. Point of Departure
Figure 2. In then Out
Figure 3. Parting the Way
Figure 4. FourA
Figure 5. Summertime
Figure 6. Solitude
Figure 7. White Vision
Figure 8. Floating Away
Figure 9. In the Middle
Figure 10. Yellow Dream
Figure 11. goo
Figure 12. Escape
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