Conscious visions

Masako Nitz

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Conscious Visions

by
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Date ____________________________
I am quite certain your best work will come from dealing with the memories which have stuck after what is unessential to you in experiences has dropped away. . . . Anyhow, all work that is worth while has got to be memory work.

A work of art is not a copy of things. It is inspired by nature but must not be a copying of the surface. Therefore what is commonly called "finish" may not be finish at all. You have to make your statement of what is essential to you--an innate reality, not a surface reality. You handle surface appearances as compositional factors to express a reality that is beyond superficial appearances. You choose things seen and use them to phrase your statement.

Robert Henri, The Art Spirit
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Introduction: Working from Memory

My goal in creating this body of work is to investigate narrative painting using images which are personally relevant. I have labeled my paintings as representations of personal allegories derived from memories and dreams, and in doing so I am referring to the transference of memory, and its inherently subjective and ambiguous visual images, into a concrete visual form. I also attach symbolic importance to the memories I have chosen to paint, not because the events they describe are hallmarks of my life, but rather for their random nature. These images all describe moments when I have consciously thought "I should remember this."

I avoided choosing memories for which I have photographic references because I wanted to fully embrace the process of working from memory. My interest lies not in replication, but rather in the process of constructing a narrative setting which captures a brief moment in time. The joy of working from memory is the ability to select, distort and edit at will within the transition from three to two dimensions. To acknowledge the subjectivity of this process I like to refer to my paintings as visual constructions. Acknowledging the subjective nature of memory and of composition, I feel free to approach representation, color, perspective and composition in a non-traditional manner.
Any perspective system utilized to translate the visual three dimensional world to two dimensions is subjective in that certain decisions must be made which eliminate visual information available in three dimensions. Classical linear perspective, while considered in its time a highly scientific method of creating the illusion of three-dimensional objects and space on a two-dimensional surface, is unarguably subjective in that it is based on a single viewpoint. Classical composition dictates a level of objectivity to the relationship between viewer and painted illusion. The edges of a picture plane function as the frame of a window or the edges of a stage: "painters of perspective stood outside the world they represented and observed--as if through a window--from a single, unifying viewpoint." (Dunning 1990, 13) A viewer may be made to feel they are on the same plane or in the same space as the painted illusion, but there is always a distance maintained between the viewer and the illusion.

Patricia Sloane, in discussing the divide between perspective in art and visual perception, concludes: "Human beings do not typically see from either a single eye or a fixed viewpoint. The eyes, of which we have two, continually scan. And the world is neither petrified nor a mirror image of ideally frozen forms that transcend its flux." (Sloane 1989, 113) Richard Birmelin, a contemporary painter of New York street scenes, creates compositions such as
Sloane describes. Birmelin's paintings recreate a sense of flux and the way a pedestrian's eyes might scan a crowd while moving along the sidewalk. The perspective swings up, down, around, close and far. Birmelin captures the feeling of a moving crowd by describing some figures or parts of figures as translucent after-images or blurred objects moving in peripheral vision. At the other end of the spectrum is a painter such as Vermeer, whose controlled and calculated perspectives and light strove to create such "ideally frozen" tableaus.

In approaching my paintings, I wished to make a departure from the traditional linear perspective and distanced viewer/painting relationship, and bring to the viewer a more personal sense of perspective. I mention Birmelin and Vermeer because in creating my own style I wished to incorporate both an interpretation of visual perception translated into two dimensions and a structured, formal sense of composition. The starting point for all my compositions is my own view point; providing viewers a vantage point from within the scene rather than from a distant window. I don't see my memory as comprised of snapshot-like stills from a movie, therefore I wanted to incorporate the extension of vision available when I move my eyes or body. Changes in view point and perspective combine to create images which cover the surface of the picture plane, and the edges of the picture plane become arbitrary borders of the visual images; the images can be imagined as extending beyond the picture plane.
Drawing

Drawing has always been a fun and creative process which allows me to develop ideas and composition. The simplicity of black and white and the non-precious and non-permanent nature of paper and charcoal free me to be spontaneous and energetic in my mark-making; the results showing in balanced and dynamic compositions. It became apparent during my first year of graduate study that my drawings held qualities which I failed to bring to my paintings: my compositions lost spontaneity and the energy of the charcoal was lost in a vain effort to cover the canvas surface with paint. Therefore, in creating this body of work, I wished to approach painting as I do drawing. I drew upon the paintings of Jerome Witkin as inspiration during this process, because Witkin consciously seeks to retain the energy of gesture and impulse in the surface or "skin" of his paintings through the use of sharp lines and strokes of paint which form, define and highlight. My goal was to incorporate drawing such that I could develop some areas more than others and allow the process of mark-making, the brushmarks, to become an integral part of the composition, without feeling the need to cover the ground of the canvas evenly or completely.

In order to approach the larger compositions for this body of work, I originally envisioned completing a charcoal drawing prior to beginning each painting. I found as I progressed, that I often felt I had developed an image in a drawing to such an extent that I could not add anything new by painting it. While I no longer find this true, the feeling that I was being redundant slowed the painting progress
and I completed drawings for only three of the paintings. While drawing prior to starting a painting provides evidence of the development of an image, a direct start on the canvas allows me to fully incorporate the process of drawing into the painting process.

Line

Line, real and implied, is the building block for my paintings. The predominance of line is the result of incorporating drawing into the painting process. The process of sketching out the image in paint becomes, instead of a preliminary, soon to be hidden substructure, a valid and visible component of the image. The presence and function of line varies from painting to painting, ranging from residual outline to pure line and from a descriptive tool to a compositional element. I do not subscribe to any particularly logical system of perspective, but in creating directional lines with the intention of leading the viewer's eye, I often visualize the diagrams of Vermeer's perspective which art historians have drawn up and analyzed. Where Vermeer used direct and implied lines as a perspective system to create illusory space, my interest in line and space has more to do with directing the eye than with believable or logical illusion. While the placement of figures and objects--the elements of narrative--is largely governed by memory, I view the emphasis on line and direction in my painting in an abstract manner. The direction and interaction of line and form, positive and negative space, creates movement: implied lines which direct the viewer's eye across the picture plane, and in and out of
illusory space. The goal is to form a pattern or confluence of line which leads the eye around the whole of the painting.

Color

As a painter who loves mixing colors, my decision to use a limited palette was both the easiest and the most difficult. I found in my first year that, as I approached larger compositions, I had too many ideas about color surfacing in my paintings: areas of local color; areas of non-local color; warm/cool, monochromatic and complimentary value systems, all of which I had trouble reconciling with each other, so that I ended up with paintings lacking a sense of overall unity.

The transition from drawing to painting that I followed suggested the use of a limited palette which would use color to unify the composition rather than present the task of trying to unify individually developed elements in which color performs different functions. Eliminating emphasis on local color and focusing on a monochromatic value range simplifies the process of building space and form in the picture plane. For each painting I chose a base color from which to start. This base color is nearly always a medium value, allowing me to develop the value range of the painting as much or as little as I feel is necessary, as opposed to starting with a ground which would provide immediate strong contrast (as the white of paper would function in a charcoal drawing.) Rather than staying with the same palette for the entire
body of work, I used color to create a mood and atmosphere individual to each image.

The Paintings

A note on my choice of medium and the construction of my canvases: I paint in oil, using a damar varnish, stand oil and turpentine mixture as a medium. I prefer to work with oil paint because of its malleability and versatility. I prefer the traditional damar varnish concoction over modern alternatives due to its very liquid nature and slow drying time, which I feel is advantageous when working on large canvas. I enjoy building my own canvases because it speaks to the craftsperson in me. When I paint, I know I am not just creating a surface, but I have created the entire object.

In this section I will briefly discuss each painting individually. I will proceed in chronological order based on an approximate timeline of when I feel I finished the bulk of the painting, rather than the date of completion, in order that I may trace the development of various approaches and directions of interest.

I. Nicole's Magic Frog Dream, 60" x 84" (Colorplate 1)

Four years ago my sister had a dream which she described to me in a letter. Her description conjured in my mind such a vivid image that I promised myself I would paint it. In order to develop a general concept for the composition, I began by working on a large charcoal drawing of the image. The painting continued to develop
where the drawing left off, and I see both as separate but related works which show the development of the image. The detail and the frontal composition set this painting apart from the others. The composition is the result of the dream inspiration and is meant to refer to a sequence in the dream where the figures are posing for photographs.

The organic forms of the figures and the frogs exist within a geometric framework of diagonal and oblique lines. The directions and interaction of line and form which might otherwise be distracting or busy, are muted by the neutral palette and limited value range. The frogs, painted in high contrast, almost appear to have been applied to the surface of the painting. the red pattern and the purple glaze over the broad, dark stripe on the wall and on the shorts of the figure in the foreground are deviations which serve to enliven the muted palette and provide delineations between forms and space. The thin, in some areas transparent application of paint and the muted palette in contrast with the solidity of the frogs, give the image a slightly hazy quality which adds to the fantastical narrative.

II. Family Portrait, 48" x 72" (Colorplates 2 & 3)

In developing this image, I found a trade-off in the spontaneity and quickness of the charcoal and ink drawing which preceded the painting, and the malleable medium of oil which allowed me to continually change and rework the image. Rather than a conventional, frontal composition, where the figures are given
hallowed and supreme importance, I wanted to approach the idea of a more candid family portrait, where the family is part of, not the entirety of the composition. Drawing on the memory of dinner at a restaurant, I based the composition on my vantage point at the table. Although the table is central and seems to be the focal point, attention is drawn to the figures on the periphery through the placement of dishes and unusual cropping. The hand at the lower left corner and the face on the right edge of the canvas attest to the presence of these two figures, while the top of the wine glass visible on the bottom right suggests the presence of a fifth person, that of the viewer of this scene. The warm orange and sienna palette is offset by the gray turquoise which, although present in some shadow on the table and figures, is predominantly in the background. This gray turquoise, in combination with the overall darker value of the background and direct lighting on the table, isolates the table and the figures and gives them the central presence of the painting.

III. Bay off of Kam Hwy. , 36" x 60" (Colorplate 4)

This is the only image from memory where the essential element is color: the lush green landscape, the turquoise water and the warm bright sunlight. I first approached this painting in full local color, and only after I decided to split the picture plane did I choose a green and yellow palette for the scenery. The impossibility of showing the entirety of a crescent bay, of showing the views available lying down, sitting up and turning your head, prompted me
to create the bifocal perspective in this painting. The unusual and unexpected cropping of the figures, the split perspective and the bright, sunny palette are eye-catching elements which distinguish this painting from the others. While I originally felt that the combination of these elements presented a rather busy composition to the viewer, I believe a sense of serenity is communicated through the use of color.

IV. The Furies, 60" x 96" (Colorplates 5 & 6)

The image depicts two women fighting, inspired by the memory of two friends good-naturedly engaged in a wrestling match. My original concept was for a triptych image which would show three different views of the two women. I worked on a drawing which depicts two charcoal and conté renderings of two different views flanking a larger, gestural pencil drawing. The dramatic lighting and detail of the black and white contrasts with the more stylized, loose pencil drawing which captures the feeling of motion through the repetition and erasure of lines. Approaching the canvas after completing the drawing, I felt that I had developed the composition of the drawing to the extent that I would only be copying the image by painting it on canvas. I chose instead to develop the central pencil drawing as a drawing on canvas. My goal was to create a painting/drawing of pure line which would reflect the gesture and process of drawing. The repetition of gestural line and the repositioning of the figures, evident through the shadow lines left by erasure, give the drawing a sense of motion and energy.
while also revealing the drawing process. Volume in the clothing is achieved through the layering of different colors and values of line. The scale provides a monumental, larger than life image which increases the impact of the painting. I had originally envisioned the drawing and the painting displayed together, but I feel now that the painting possesses a fullness in its own right, and though condensed to an almost iconic image, it still provides enough information and interest to carry a narrative.

V. Hiking in Nu‘uanu, 48" x 72" (Colorplate 7)

Climbing a steep hill in a combination of shadow, sunlight and greenery - this image in influenced both by memory and countless dreams. The placement of figurative elements and the pattern of light and shadow ascending the hill create a dynamic vertical composition. The large hand cropped at the lower left edge of the painting, the climbing figure, and the cropped figure visible at the top of the hill create definite references in space which add to the illusion of the hillside. The shadow beneath the climbing figure, the area of darkest value, also adds to the illusion of the upward perspective by visually placing the figure on the surface of the hillside. Predominantly cool blue tones and grayish green are combined with a muted warm brown in this palette. Rather than the typical value contrasts used to build spatial illusion, the color contrast between the cool gray green and the warm brown succeed in creating the features of the hillside. The overall effect of the
palette gives the image the timeless appearance of a faded photograph.

VI. Manhattan Ronin (or Jon's Eyebrows)

48" x 56" (Colorplate 8)

Waiting for a friend to walk out of his narrow apartment hallway, Lia sat on the floor, against the wall, and Mike was doing something weird, balancing on one foot. As I saw my friend standing in the doorway I thought, "With that ponytail and those eyebrows, he looks like a samurai."

Dispensing with any preliminary drawings, I started gestural drawings directly on the canvas. This painting developed somewhat simultaneously with *The Furies* and *Hiking in Nu'uanu*, and I tried to maintain the element of drawing through the emphasis on gesture and brushwork. The almost complimentary contrast between the blue/violet and the orange ground, and the loose and energetic quality of the rendering of the seated figure and the "dancing" figure dictated the spirit in which I approached further development of the painting. The making of individual brushmarks became important in maintaining a loose feeling. The dark mass of the figure in the doorway contrasts with the gesture and value of the moving figure, but the evidence of brushwork in the dark figure, the contrast of the light, layered background behind the dark figure and the solid darkness around the light figure create a balance between gesture and light and solidity and dark. The use of a nearly complimentary palette creates a surreal atmosphere rather than the more closely
related colors of the other paintings which evoke associations with memory.

Conclusion

Looking at these paintings as a body of work, I can trace a developing interest in process and intuition. The rectilinear/planar elements in *Nicole's Magic Frog Dream* and *Family Portrait* caused me to be concerned about building a visual space, and in both I was conscious of wanting to form a pattern or confluence of line which leads the eye around the whole of the painting. In the successive paintings, however, I found myself relying more on intuition for composition, preferring to concentrate on the physical process in order to maintain a loose quality. I see *Hiking in Nu`uanu*, *The Furies*, and *Manhattan Ronin* as paintings in which I have successfully incorporated the drawing element in the painting process. All three possess a gestural, fluid quality which speaks to both the process in which they were created and the nature of memory.

Developing a composition reliant on the use of line rather than carefully blended edges and chiaroscuro, and using palettes more evocative than mimetic, I feel I have moved away from the realm of illusion and firmly into subjective representation. Relying on my memory and imagination for inspiration, I have created paintings which are as much about the process of painting and the
construction of images as they are narrative images. Michael Zakian describes narrative painting as such: "Instead of depicting a static, iconic image, narrative painting attempts to capture a moment in the unfolding of an event. The implied context of this 'moment,' the time before and after the scene depicted, adds resonance to the image." (Zakian 1990, 13) In addition to the implied context of the narrative "moment," I hope that my paintings bear the implied context or narrative of another moment, that of the process in which they were created and which sets them apart from carefully crafted realism and illustration.

I was once told that narrative painting required clarity, and in this sense, perhaps narrative is not the most appropriate description for my paintings. The images in my paintings are more allusive, evocative and ambiguous than narrative. These qualities can be ascribed to the inspirations for the images: memories and dream. When I first started thinking about how to put the inspiration for my thesis into words, I looked up the definitions of allegory, dream and memory. I find that memory and dream, ostensibly separated by their respective basis in reality and in the unconscious mind, have many similar words and qualities associated with them. Certain words and phrases used to form the definitions of dream, dreamworld and memory, more than the definitions themselves, came to define the qualities I wish to impart through my paintings, the qualities I associate with memory and dream alike: sensations, images, thoughts; transitory; dream-like; surrealistic; illusionary;
fanciful vision of the conscious mind. By taking such abstract and intangible qualities and developing tangible visual images through the painting process, I have created personal allegories. These allegories reflect, to draw on the words of Robert Henri, that which remains after what is unessential to me in experiences has fallen away.
Colorplates
Family Portrait

48" x 72", oil on canvas

Colorplate 3
Bay off of Kam Hwy. 36" x 60", oil on canvas  Colorplate 4
The Furies

42"x72", charcoal, graphite on paper

Colorplate 5
The Furies  
60"x96", oil on canvas  
Colorplate 6
Hiking in Nu‘uanu 48"x72", oil on canvas  Colorplate 7
Manhattan Ronin (or Jon’s Eyebrows)  48"x56", oil on canvas  Colorplate 8
References


