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Photography, Painting, and the Spirit World

Laura Bench

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PHOTOGRAPHY, PAINTING AND THE SPIRIT WORLD

by

Laura Bench

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
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Richard D. Zakia, Chairperson

Elliott Rubenstein

Barbara Hodik
PHOTOGRAPHY, PAINTING AND THE SPIRIT WORLD
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Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences of the Rochester Institute of Technology

Submitted by: Laura Bench

Thesis Board: Richard Zakia, Chairperson
Elliott Rubenstein
Barbara Hodik

Title: "Photography, Painting and the Spirit World"

"Imagination is always the ruling and divine power, and the rest of man is only the instrument upon which it sounds or the tablet on which it writes." John Ruskin

Purpose of the Thesis: To introduce fantasy to the potentially anthropomorphic images found in nature through the juxtaposition of photographic and painted images on emulsified canvas. Through the combining of the two media, I hope to share with the viewer the enchantment of allowing the imagination to see a world beyond the logically real - to explore the connection between the human and non-human.

Scope of the Thesis:

Refusing to shed the childhood world of dreams and extended vision, I would like to make images which invite the viewer to see the natural world through the eyes of a grown up child who is neither looking for logic nor inhibited by what should be. In nature, devas lie hidden, waiting to be discovered, only to disappear and reappear to forever tease those who have dared to discover them. They are found in natural phenomena (wind, fire, clouds, water) and most often in the plant life of forests, in trees and rocks.

My inspiration does not come from any particular photographer. Instead, I have found my roots in my education as a painter, having
realized later in my career the value and aesthetic qualities of photography for inspiration and subject matter. Ideas have stemmed from Victorian fantasy illustrators (particularly Arthur Rackham) and the more contemporary images of Brian Froud. Their visual language is that of dreams and visions inspired by, but separate from, everyday phenomena. The accessories of the familiar world are abandoned in favor of personal vision which transcends the trivialities of everyday life to attain a level of heightened spirituality.

Arthur Rackham's work most effectively blended the real and fantastic, creating mysterious and macabre effects in watercolor. He was a master of anthropomorphism. It is his work which has had the most visual influence on my development of this project.

There is an invisible world of the spirit. I believe that art is involved with magic which maintains the sensitivity and soul-life of humanity and that this magic is brought forth through the imagination.

To be able to point out something which could be seen but which has not been seen before is my thesis. Are trees and shrubs best described as humanoid? Are faces really imbedded in the image, or has one's own imagination recognized, independent of the artist's selective intention, the essential features of yet another face?

Implementation:

With camera and oil paint, I will attempt to fabricate a world of my own - a world in which I am both creator and participator, recalling, revisiting the fantasy world begun in childhood years and extending itself into an adult land of enchantment.
Procedures:

1. To photograph anthropomorphic images in nature which initially suggest human-like qualities;

2. To experiment with silver and non-silver emulsions to give the effect (contrast, color) I wish to work with;

3. To project the images selected onto canvas (approximately 16" x 20");

4. To paint with oil colors over these devic images to enhance and emphasize the hidden humanoid appearances. In some instances the photograph on the canvas will in part remain undisturbed by paint, but in all instances the mixture of media will be evident.

I plan to have this work completed before the end of 1978.

Bibliography


PHOTOGRAPHY, PAINTING AND THE SPIRIT WORLD
The integration of the photograph and oil painting

BACKGROUND

The subject matter came as an outgrowth from a fascination and appreciation of fantastic literature and art which consisted of unrestrained imaginary images and ideas, including fairy tales, horror stories, science fiction, and any of the surreal tales and illustrations of the strange and irrational.

Nineteenth Centuryimaginative artists had the opportunity to explore the world of dreams and fantasies through the illustration of poetry, classics and contemporary fiction. Some illustrators such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Pre-Raphaelite, were able to realize fantasies of their own creation which spring more from their inner lives than from the inspiration of the works of literature. Others, such as Sir John Tenniel and F. D. Bedford seemed to be able to create images of fantasy only when inspired by a particular text. For these and other fantasy illustrators, the precursor was William Blake (1757-1829) who had a unique ability to amalgamate the verbal and visual by illustrating his own texts. Blake became a viable source of inspiration to the late Victorian and Edwardian era artists.

Fantasy artists have a unique ability to find meaning in the world in which they live which sometimes involves making unacknowledged feelings of fear, or ecstasy or desire materialize as recognizable images. This illustrated phenomena is inspired by, but separate from, everyday existence.

Such literature as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* provided opportunity for illustrators such as John Tenniel to anthropomorphize a white rabbit. Even more contemporarily, Walt Disney's work with this same piece of literature gives human qualities to flowers, caterpillars, mushrooms, and other assorted non-human life.
The artists whose images were more stimulating and inspirational to me were Arthur Rackham (1867-1939) and Brian Froud (1948-2023). Rackham's vision was a consistent blend of the real and the unreal, recreating from memory the images that had imprinted themselves on his imagination during his childhood. He not only equipped his animals with human responses, but gave animal characteristics to unmistakably human figures. Transmutation abounds in his work. Faces peer from behind tree trunks or emerge as parts of the tree itself; branches threaten to clutch and tear. Fire, water, clouds, reveal human features. Even where no human response is evident, nature and the elements had a strong sense of life. One looks at his trees and suspects that they are not swaying in the wind, but are themselves grotesque — though kindly — monsters, who in their movement bring the wind into being.

Rackham's medium was watercolor, using its transparency to overlap colors, building his images layer by layer, such as an oil painter might do by glazing. He used color to evoke a mood, working over a black and white ink drawing.

The more contemporary Brian Froud, whose images maintain an old-world and traditional flavor, conjures monsters and fairies that are more obviously present in a world that he created deliberately for them. Besides Arthur Rackham, Froud's influences ranged from 15th Century Germany to the Pre-Raphaelite concepts of beauty and nature. One of the charming features found in both Froud's and Rackham's work is the use of their facial features as models for some of the elves and goblins, much like an aside in a stage play. This is fascinating because it displays their inner involvement with the fantasy and childlike musings as part of their everyday lives. Although my work (just beginning in the area of articulate fantasy paintings) has not reached the point
where I have placed my own features into the atmosphere I've painted, it is something I would like to see happen.

It is important and rewarding to work from those subliminal images which stem from past experiences and observations. Froud's most cherished memories of his childhood are of solitary explorations after school and during vacations in the pockets of unspoiled natural countryside where he grew up, and of building his own private world and sanctuaries in the undergrowth. The thick and brambled bushes and gargoyle-type trees and rocks which he paints give the impression that this surreal world really exists. He extracts from nature and extends the images to be what he wants them to be. Some of Froud's fantastic images find their stimulus from the photograph, for often when he gets "stuck" as he draws, he walks the moors of his English homeland to take photographs, the knowledge from which shows through in his paintings. He begins to draw only with a very loose concept and prefers to let the fantasy grow as he works. In spite of some very grotesque subjects, humor and play dominate his images. It excited me to see humor evolve in my own work with fantasy images, since humor was not one of my original intentions but became a delightful element as I worked.

My thesis is to combine the two media - photography and oil painting - in a private and imaginary view of the world of nature. There is an invisible world hidden in the trees, plants, bushes, rocks and clouds. Sometimes the hidden spirits are anthropomorphic, sometimes vaguely hinting of some animal or plant life not actually seen but whose presence is felt, and in all cases, it is one person's perception working itself out through the imagination.
APPROACH TO THE PROJECT

The images in my paintings are first seen through the lens of the camera. My method of working began by placing myself and my camera in a place which excited me visually, not actually seeing specific images other than the obvious, but rather feeling them. Only later, when I began working with paint did they become articulate. The psychologist Carl Jung states that part of the unconscious consists of a multitude of temporarily obscured thoughts, impressions and images, that, in spite of being lost, continue to influence our conscious minds.1 As a child I was an avid reader of every fairy tale and piece of fantasy literature available. Being visually oriented, it was wonderful to imagine the written descriptions. Many hours were spent drawing my own interpretations of them. As my interest in science grew, science fiction literature became an extension of the fairy tale, conjuring even more exciting imagery of a different kind. I relied on the stimulating effect of these mental images for the visual re-creation needed for the photo-paintings. The photograph was used as a means of initial stimulation and also as a symbol of the real world. When paint was applied to the canvas, the imagination and unconscious images took over. For when I began to paint, no further visual imagery was used other than the photograph itself. Thus the struggle with the real and imaginary began - looking at plants, rocks, clouds, as I painted, I found, among other things, kindly monsters and spirits stalking, conversing, sleeping, floating, in the real world. Carl Jung further held that although forgotten or latent ideas cannot be reproduced at will, they are present in a subliminal state - just beyond the threshold of

recall. The unconscious takes note of the things seen without our consciously seeing them at the time - so that subliminal perceptions do influence how we react to the world.²

IMPLEMENTATION AND PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

My first encounter with how to implement the photograph and paint began with the problem of making the canvas photosensitive. This research began in early March, 1978. At first I began with painting in color over the image on photo paper, but this did not allow the freedom of interpretation since watercolors and Marshall photo colors tended to color the photograph rather than to overlay it. The surface of the paper was not conducive nor responsive to my style of painting. I felt more freedom from working on canvas. The feel of resilience that painting on canvas offers is part of the psychological experience of painting as opposed to working on a solid, unyielding surface. I then experimented with Rockland emulsion on cotton canvas. A gel solution was painted on the canvas first, which allowed the emulsion to stick. Although an image was obtained, this did not give me the consistent type of photographic image that I was after - the image was rough looking in character and the contrast was too low. I further experimented with Kwik Proof, but the image quality again was not consistent, too contrasty, and did not pick up detail in the shadow area.

The best solution, and the one I finally used, was photo linen, manufactured by Luminos Company in Yonkers, New York. This fine, smooth linen is precoated with a light-sensitive emulsion. Once the negative is projected onto this photo-sensitive linen, it can be

². Jung, Carl, Man and His Symbols, p. 20.
processed like any other photo paper. Because of the expense of photo linen ($96.00 for 25 sheets of 16" x 20" linen), I limited myself to this size, which when stretched onto a frame gave me a 15" x 18" image upon which to paint. After the photo linen was washed following processing, I let it drip for a few minutes and then stretched it immediately on the frame in order to obtain a drum-tight surface upon which to work.

In the original photograph several mental images were awakened. I proceeded to let spontaneity take over and began first by putting a light wash of turpentine and linseed oil along with some oil color over the entire canvas, almost in the same manner as Rackham gave an overall tone to his image before coloring it. This surface not only prepared the canvas for me to paint without losing the integrity of the photograph, but also gave an overall oil gloss to overcome the matt finish of the photo linen. In a few instances nothing happened when I approached the canvas - no strong or particular imagery came to the surface and, like Brian Froud, I wanted the image to grow as I painted. So, not wanting to force the image, I put these few aside. In some cases I was able to approach these canvases at another time and an image emerged spontaneously. I found that I was using the oil paint as a transforming media rather than using it in the usual painterly manner. The technique was one of glazing to retain the photographic image. The colors I used were more related to the metamorphic image evoked by the original photograph than to or inspired by the photo image itself. In some instances the images are not related to anything I've seen before. To enhance the humor that I found in some of the images, I titled them. None of the images were done with any profound message or attitude in mind so they resulted in playful and sometimes mystical interpretations of the original photographic image.
CONCLUSION

The final visual result consisted of 25, 15" x 18" photo-paintings with narrow, simple, brown wooden frames. The experience of working on small canvas was frustrating in one respect. I wanted to be able to make larger images but the cost of photo linen was prohibitive. I think a larger image of this kind would allow room for more subtle areas and give an overall somewhat different and more exciting image. The most visually exciting of all the paintings for me at this time are: "Sleepers at the Foot of the Giant Rock Monster", "Spirits of the Wind", "Dream Bird" and "The Landing". In these, the quality of light that the paint produced upon the original image appealed to me sensually, the coloration being totally unnatural and therefore enhancing the unreality of the real image.

I intend to continue working with combining oil paint with the photograph simply because it was a pleasant experience for me visually. Even though photo linen is expensive, it is very easy to work with and well worth the expense. It gives a complete range of tones, maintaining the original quality of the negative beautifully, which quality was important to the project as I envisioned it.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX

The experience of combining photography and painting is not a new idea. As early as 1861, Alfred Wall wrote a book giving instructions for coloring photographs on various materials, including canvas, with crayon, powder, oil or watercolors, adapting the new media to the particular characteristics of the surface worked upon. However, as stated in the body of the thesis, my desire was not to give color to a black and white photograph, but to obtain an integration of the two media so that on the surface, the visual result appears to be a painting. The photograph worked as an underpainting. Glazing in itself is the application of a thin, transparent layer of oil paint over a dried underpainting, which is not concealed by the glaze, but its colors and contours are blended with it, the total color effect being entirely different than that of paints which are intermixed with each other. In this early method of glazing in the history of art, the original drawing and underpainting contributed strongly to the final effect and the dominating contours gave the painting a linear effect.

In my work the photograph worked not only as the original drawing or underpainting, but also and even more importantly as the prime subject matter for the fantasies created on the canvas. It was to have the effect of a painting with a minimum of paint. This way of working is not unlike my usual method of handling paint, as I normally use oil paint thinly and am used to working with an underpainting. The fascinating part about this thesis was the use of the photograph as not only an underpainting, but as a representation of reality, since photography has been early on held to be a picture of "what is there". By manipulating the original image with paint, I was able to allow the viewer to see through my eyes those things I felt and imagined and fantasized as though they were real images.