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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of
the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in candidacy for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DARKNESS WITHIN

By
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May 1998

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DARKNESS WITHIN

IN A DARK TIME

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
I hear my echo in the echoing wood-
A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
I live between the heron and the wren,
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of the soul
At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!
I know the purity of pure despair,
My shadow pinned against the sweating wall.
That place among the rocks - is it a cave,
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!
A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
And in broad day the midnight come again!
A man goes far to find out what he is -
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing an unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I ?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

Theodore Roethke

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A number of people have served as inspiration, teacher and/or friend during the course of my development as a painter. First, of course my parents and brothers. My first images of painting are of my parents working in their diverse ways. My brothers, Richard and Walter also painted.

To my friends Janet Feigelson, Eric Loeb and Kate Burch I owe a debt of thanks for helping me to develop my voice as an individual.

Jean Koehler was my first real painting instructor at the Dayton Art Institute, her encouragement helped strengthen my resolve to take the big plunge. Among the faculty at Wright State University, Diane Fitch, Kim Kaiser and Ernie Koerlin were particularly helpful.

I had a truly transforming experience at the Vermont Studio Center (VSC) in the summer of 1995. The encouragement and guidance of Barbara Grossman and Bernie Chaet helped me through a difficult transition. As I did this body of work I constantly heard Barbara's voice telling me to, "Paint like a demon!" and Bernie's admonition to, "Get in there and compete." I tried to obey. The opportunity to work with these two world class artists as well as the visiting faculty at VSC, helped propel me to strike out in a new direction.

During my graduate career, my advisor Phillip Bornarth was a constant source of challenges and guidance. His patient manner and interest were constant and his encyclopedic knowledge of art history provided an unending stream of resources. For his role in my artistic development, I thank him deeply. Similarly my committee members Judd Williams and Edward Miller have given hours of their time to consideration of my work. I have benefited from their eyes and experience and I thank them.

Finally I would like to acknowledge George Gibson for scanning, printing and document processing in preparation of this thesis.

DEDICATION

to George, the light in my life

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Introduction

This thesis presents an analysis of a body of work that I completed between September 1995 and April 1996. I will discuss the *raison detre* for the work and the historical touchstones that have influenced my thinking and my style. Aspects of the body of work that show its main technical and thematic currents will be discussed. Finally I will present some details of my method of working and how that method works in consonance with the thematic content of the work.

My work is at one time intensely personal and, if executed properly, personal to the viewer as well. This duality forms the paradox that is the heart of my work. Paradox, a fundamental aspect of living (eg. kill for peace), can only be dealt with comprehensively in art. When I talk about my intent for a work, my attempt to stage manage the experience that the viewer will have, I do so with the knowledge that my intent is only one of the valid translations of that piece. If viewing these paintings causes you to encounter yourself, they have succeeded.

Much art, of course, is about other art. I have learned a great deal pouring over books of reproductions and tramping through museums. Lucian Freud, in an interview shown at the 1995 retrospective of his work held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said, "To me, going to the museum is like going to the doctor." He used the experience to "cure" some problem he was facing. For me the museums have been more like school. I have, therefore, in the course of this thesis, mentioned some of the shows that I have seen over the last several years that have been important to my artistic development.

A central experience has directed my work from quite early in my artistic development. This experience is isolation. It appeared first in a series of small, interiors that I produced at Wright State University. During my graduate studies I have begun to work on a larger scale and my style has become less cool and precise and more expressive. The scale, subject and style combine to provide a more forthright expression of the theme of my work than I have previously achieved.

Philosophical, Personal and Historical Underpinnings

I have executed a series of paintings, largely in oil on linen, that stimulate reflection on the isolation of people in our mobile society. Physical, personal and philosophical distance from our families, our traditional source of feelings of community, has left us alone and rootless. In a wider sense, the experience of our solitude transcends this time and culture. The experience of our isolation has been one of the most pervasive themes in all of human thought. That isolation, moreover, is not just isolation from friends or family but is a reflection of the fundamental sense in which each of us stands alone in the universe - alone before God or alone in the void.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition isolation begins with the loss of paradise. God holds all involved in the acquisition of knowledge individually responsible, and each suffers a customized punishment. In the end God abandons his creations to fend for themselves.

“... and you shall eat bread
till you return to the ground,
for out of it were you taken:
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.¹”

No promise of salvation, no heaven, no hell - for Adam, 930 years of toil followed by nothingness.

From the beginning of barely recorded human thought we have looked outside and populated the heavens and earth with gods. There was much, after all, to fear. Which of

us has not felt the lash of fickle fate. Our lives hang from a thread and in one moment, disease or accident or flood or fire (or any one of a million other “acts of God”) can bring our life and even civilization-as-we-know-it, to an end. One school of thought holds² that monotheism was the first expression of humankind’s terror upon observing the complex and often malevolent world around them. This God, holding sole and absolute power, became remote and unapproachable.

“When I was away at seminary school
there was a man who said you could petition the Lord with prayer,
petition the Lord with prayer:

YOU CANNOT PETITION THE LORD WITH PRAYER!³”

Faced with such power, people, it is suggested, filled the heavens and earth with gods of lesser powers, more approachable gods both as intercessors and as wholesale replacements for this one god. We find the earliest art is made to personify these deities. Fertility figurines like “Venus of Willendorf” are found dating from nearly 25,000 years ago. Caves in Monte Pellegrino show scenes of ritual dancing dating from 12,000 years ago. The history of art is inextricably intertwined with the history of our diverse and changing belief systems. The artifacts of these systems form some of the most widely recognized icons of the creativity of our species. From personal devotional totems to the pyramids, we have sought to offer the fruits of our creativity to win the favor of the forces we believed controlled our destiny.

The Greeks invented a whole bestiary of gods: gods that were grand and gods that were petty, gods that were envious of each other and fought; gods in the likeness of humans. These are gods with whom a person can deal, unlike **God**, the master of the

universe and primary cause of all things. Of the myriad threads of religiosity let us turn to that which has shaped much of western thought, the Judeo-Christian tradition.

First we recognize that this tradition is not monolithic but, in fact, branches widely in both time and space. Adam's God was of quite different character than the God we meet in the New Testament. This latter view of God, which has done much to shape western art, is of a God of love. Through good works and by the intercession of the saints, salvation could be achieved⁴. The Roman Church spread this word in many ways. Certainly, as the chief patron, the Papacy controlled the message art transmitted for hundreds of years. The emphasis was on uniformity of message. The Church, deriving its authority from Peter, knew the **Truth**. Behave according to the dicta and salvation is assured. About those pesky misfortunes that befall you, don't worry, your life may be brutish and short, but you will get your reward in heaven. Do you feel pain because a loved one died? Don't worry, you just don't understand God's plan. Trust authority, you will be all right. But even in the face of this message, institutional salvation, the terror evoked by each person's contemplation of their individual judgment by God, survives. We see it, for example, in the flayed skin of Michelangelo hanging limp in "The Last Judgment". The point is subtly made since the church did not cotton to heresy.

A third sort of God emerges during the reformation. This time the individual nature of the person's accountability was made explicit. The path to salvation was to be found between you and God - do not ask "authority," ask your conscience. Salvation is achievable not through sacrifice and good work but by grace, as a gift from God. The previous stand of the church had been - sure your life is brutish and short but don't pay

attention to that, this life is not important, your reward will come in heaven. With the reformation the individual experience was validated. This sea change in theology is powerfully reflected by the contemporaneous art. Protestant zealots⁴ destroyed altarpieces, religious statuary and desecrated gravesites, citing Calvin's assertion that religious art was indistinguishable from idols. Both positive and negative forces arising from the reformation pushed artists into concentration on religiously neutral subjects including still life, portraiture, landscape and genre. Among these subjects, the genre paintings are the most profound. The celebration of common life echoes the best strains of the spirit of the reformation, individualism and democratization. We see Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin and Johannes Vermeer⁵, whose works are said to present, "Domestic life raised to the level of poetry."⁶

Calvin's view does not win out however, and a Protestant religious art does arise. Albrecht Durer, a devoted follower of Martin Luther develops an art that becomes increasingly austere⁷ in its treatment of religious themes (see for example *The Four Apostles* (1523-6)). Another voice struggling to develop an art consistent with Protestant religious sensibility was Rembrandt. We see such powerful works as "The Raising of The Cross" (1634)⁷ where Rembrandt himself appears as a sinner, helping to raise the cross on which Christ dies for his sins.

Left to struggle with our consciences, a diversity of viewpoints arises. All aspects of life began to reflect this diversity. Facing "La Forza del Destino," dark questions began to surface. We hear Christ from the cross cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me⁸?" If his faith is not unshakable how can ours be. Our own experiences prod us to call into question the old answers which fail us in the face of the seemingly random

misfortunes that are a piece of every life. Largely, however, we refuse to give up our faith in the divine.

The scariest thought we as a species seem to be able to conjure is the void. CNN has greatly increased our knowledge of the suffering that is the common lot of most of the planet's inhabitants. For some, the cognitive dissonance caused by the contrast between the brutality of the world and the image of a loving God becomes too much.

“I am in high school, maybe younger, when I realize God is a bad joke ⁹”

The lapse of faith of Christ presages the existential conflict that sets man not on the threshold of paradise, but back in the position of Adam. In this view, gods are viewed as delusions and a sign of failure of courage.

“Diffuse the outpourings of the spiritual coward,

The rambling lies invented for the sick.

O see the fate of him whose guard was lowered!-

A single misstep and we leave the quick ¹⁰.”

It seems that no matter what our philosophical convictions are we confront this same issue: we are each alone in our skin. Paradoxically, this widespread experience of isolation can be uniting as we recognize our feelings in the reaction of others to solitude. This community of solitude extends across time and place. Images of solitary persons and places evoke this experience which is at once individual and communal. This recognition and the search for community that does not deny the experience of my solitude drive my work in many respects; they drive my choice of subject, my tools and my process.

The Experience of My Training

There have been four formative experiences in my artistic career to date: the painting that my mother, father and brother did as I was growing up, my undergraduate training at Wright State University, my study at the Vermont Studio Center and my graduate work at R.I.T. Throughout the latter three of these my work has had a consistent central theme, isolation.

My mother was primarily a colorist. Her bright palette and cheerful landscapes served as a stark contrast to the work my father and elder brother. The men of the household painted dark, moody landscapes (although my younger brother, Walter, liked to say, "I paint the house - that counts doesn't it?"). I'm not sure that I recognized the darkness of those works at the time but as I look at them today I see my roots in those paintings. I was primarily a performing artist at that time, playing piano and organ, indeed I started my undergraduate training as a piano major (organ minor) at West Virginia Wesleyan College. Reviewing my repertoire, heavily stacked with Bach, Beethoven, Rachmaninov and Prokofieff, I now notice the dark turn of mind.

After nearly ten years of a debilitating illness, I began my undergraduate studies again. This time, swayed by more practical concerns, I finished a B.S. in Applied Social Science at the State University of New York at Binghamton (now known as Binghamton University). After graduating I worked for several years as a social worker for Catholic Social Services. Wanting more depth, I began study for my M.S.W. at Marywood College. During this period of my life, I became increasingly in tune with, and interested in, the psychology of human behavior. The curriculum at Marywood allowed me to study

art therapy. While doing a practicum as a therapist in a county mental health clinic, it became clear to me that I was more interested in the art than in the therapy. I left Marywood 4 credits short of my masters degree and began my search for artistic identity.

During this same time I was married and my husband and I moved four times in three years, as his employment demanded. Finally arriving for a long stay in Dayton, Ohio I started my training as an artist by studying painting at the Dayton Art Institute. There I had a teacher who was a newly graduated M.F.A. from Parson's School of Design. She encouraged me to begin serious study at Wright State University where she had done her B.F.A.

At Wright State I enrolled in the Painting Department and studied the traditional undergraduate curriculum. I attended part time which, taken together with the other differences between me and the largely fresh-from-high-school student body, heightened my sense of isolation. Wright State has a very rigorous curriculum, heavily weighted in art history and with very structured studio instruction. While the painting department is extremely strong technically, it is dominated by strong individuals who generate a distinct painting style. Throughout the area at galleries and shows it is easy to spot the Wright State Style. Although it was a wonderful place to study fundamentals, with its strong emphasis on drawing, color theory and art history, it did not foster diversity. It was here, however that the beginning of my thematic work emerged. In a painting course given by Professor Ernie Koerlin (a student of Bernard Chaet at Yale) we were told to do 40, 3"x 5" paintings in addition to the larger studio works. What emerged was a series of quiet interiors, cool in palette, rectilinear in design and devoid of movement. These uninhabited

interiors have become a pervasive feature of my iconography. I completed all the art courses for a B.F.A. just before we moved again.

When I came to RIT my initial reaction was - I am alone here. The diversity of style and lack of uniform instructional perspective allowed me to begin my struggle to become myself. I have not always had confidence as I took steps (some of them sideways) down this road. I began, feeling I was the lone realist trapped in Dante's Abstract Inferno.

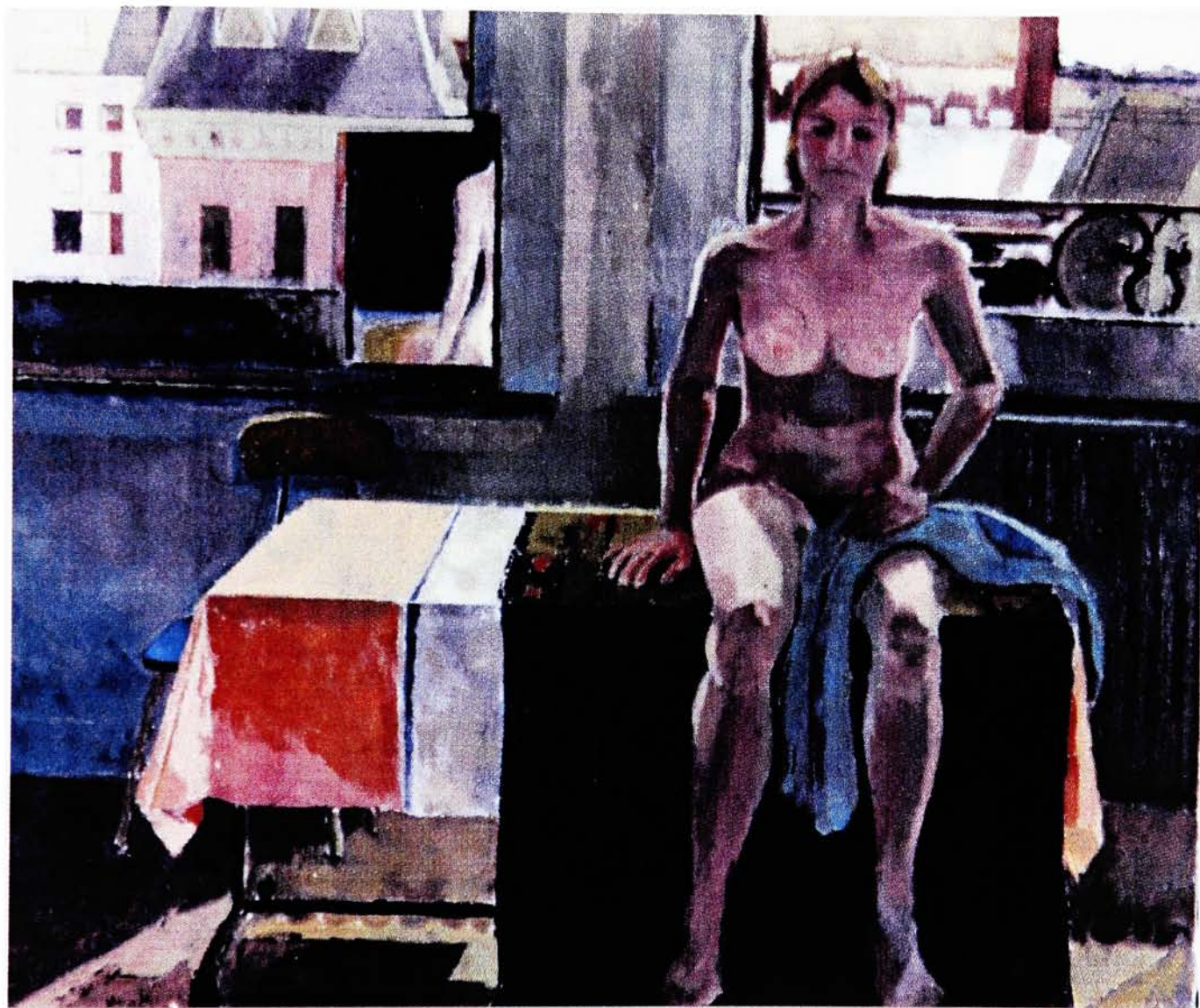
My first works at R.I.T. were a continuation of the silent interiors. They were modest in scale and my palette remained cool. These works continued, while growing in scale to ca. 30" x 40" culminating with *Public Property* which contains my first self-portrait.

I have always painted first from direct observation. While I abstract the forms and work with the light and color to some extent in order to create the effect that I want, the paintings are all of real people and places. This has led to a fascination with light and space in my surroundings (or perhaps it is the other way around). It was at this juncture in my studies that I found a space that was to be influential in my experience of R.I.T. as well as influential in the development of my work.

There is a large empty room adjoining the studio in the RIT City Center, which has large, uncovered windows. The lighting makes cavernous the proper descriptor. I instantly became intrigued by the possibilities that the room presented as a setting for my work. There were, however, problems. I have had a two-year fight with the facilities management staff to obtain and maintain access. In many ways this struggle, for access to an unused room has become one of the defining experiences of my study. It has forced me to fight for the work and has led to an embattled quality of those two years. While the

room was completely unused and, while my use of it did no damage, created no mess, caused no one inconvenience, I constantly had to fight for continuing access. On several

Figure 1. *Sonja*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1994, Oil on Linen, 42" by 36"



occasions I came to the studio to find that I had been locked out of the room and my set-ups destroyed. This personal struggle seems, in some ways, to be the current campaign to eviscerate the fine arts programs at R.I.T. in microcosm.

The last two paintings that I did in the 1994-5 academic year are of and in that large empty space. They are transitional pieces leading from the cooler more objective treatments of *Sonja* (see Figure 1.) and *The Last of the Snow* (see Figure 2.) to the

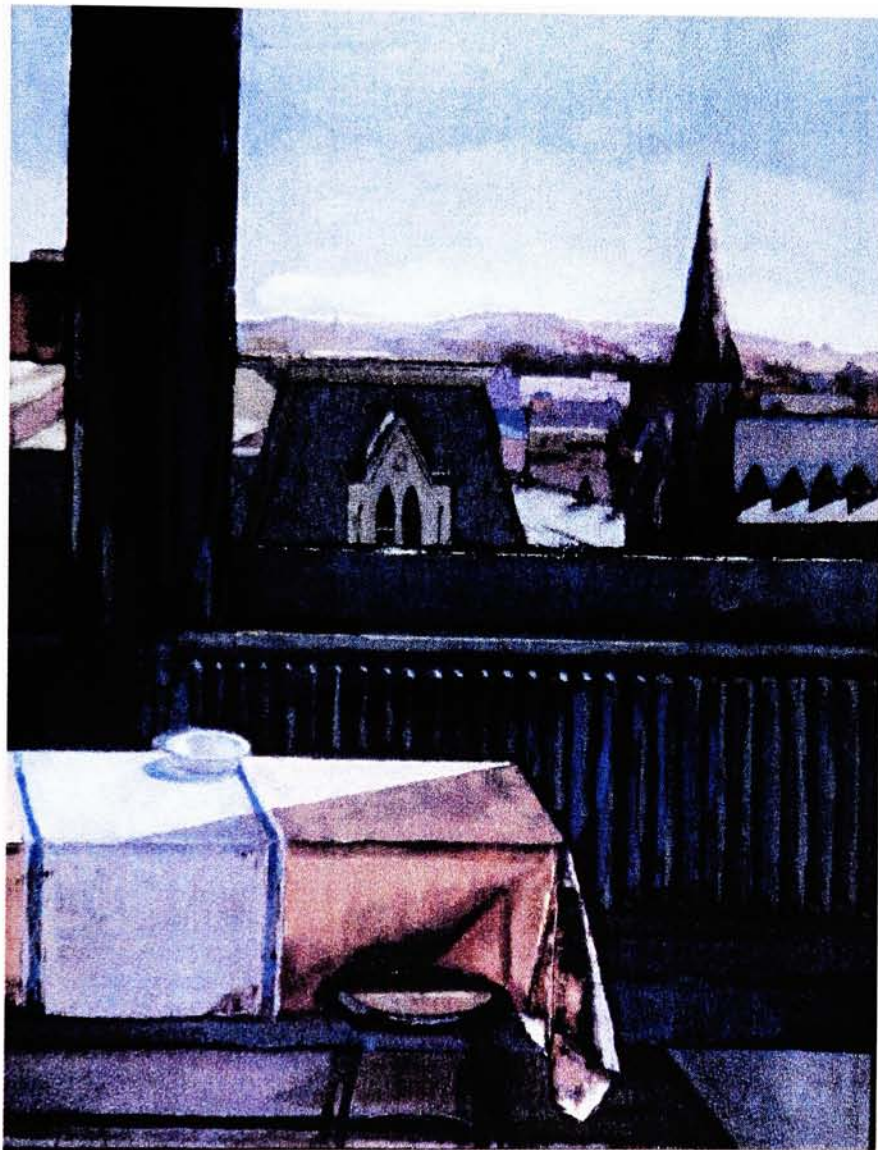


Figure 2. *The Last of the Snow*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1994, Oil on Linen, 40''x30''

more emotionally charged and expressive thesis work.

Darkness Within (see Figure 3.), which seems as though it should be the title work of this thesis, was actually completed the year before. In this work I begin to use *scraffitto* to define line and add light to a large area of closely related values. Here I begin to see with my third eye as well, and I paint what I see.

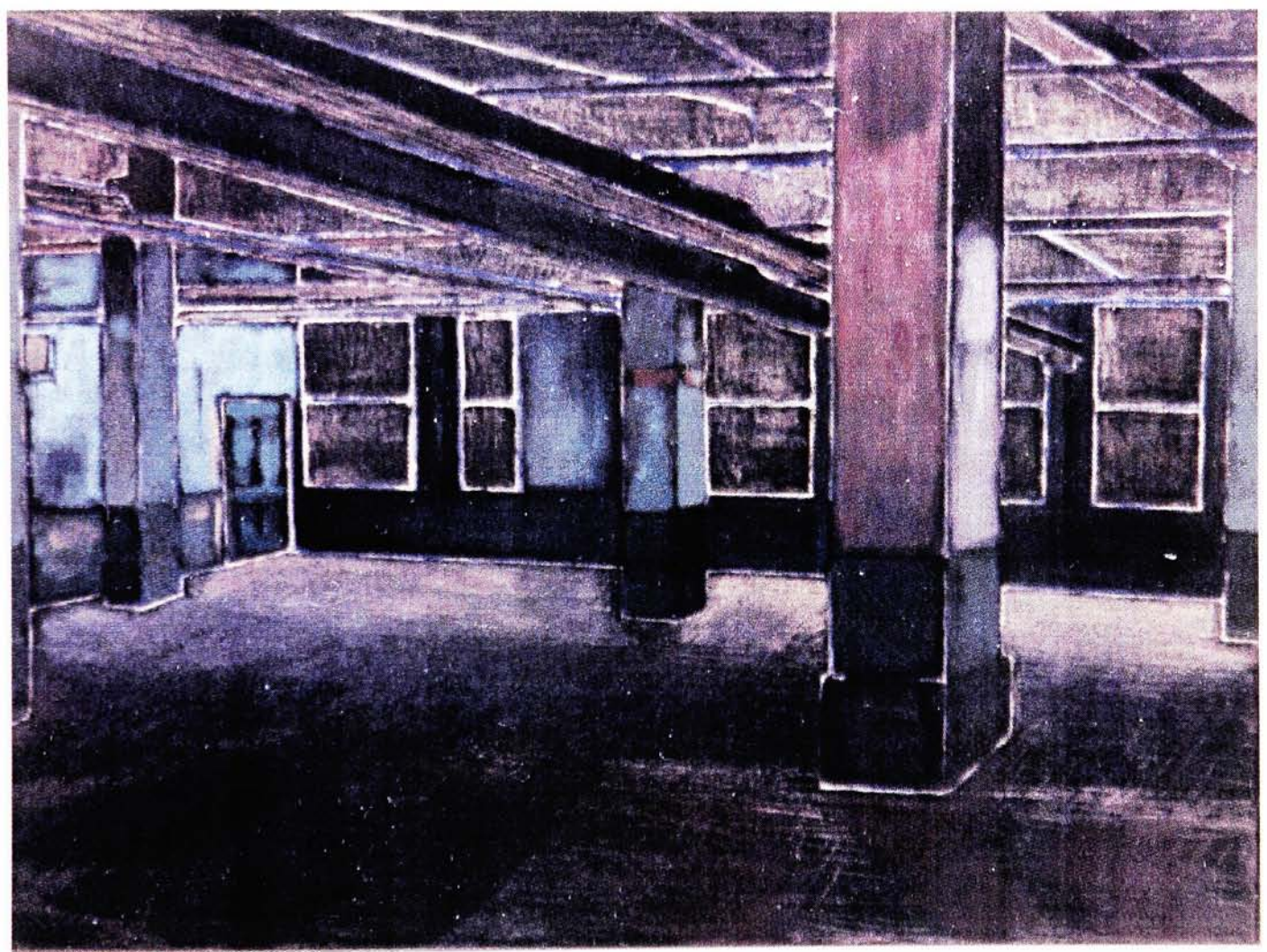


Figure 3. *Darkness Within*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1995, Oil on Linen, 30" by 40"

Before the school year ended I went to the Vermont Studio Center for a month. The

program at VSC was very intense. We rose at 6:00 AM for breakfast at 7:00 AM and painted 'till noon when we broke for a half-hour lunch. Then it was back to the studio until supper at 6:00 PM. After supper the program continued. There was either a lecture by one of the resident or visiting artists, a slide show and lecture by a student, or a drawing session. These ended somewhere after 11:30 P.M. and often continued into the wee hours. Bernard Chaet and Barbara Grossman critiqued my work almost daily. In addition the visiting artists, including Bill Jensen and Archie Rand, critiqued my work. The pace was grueling. In some ways I felt as if I had been sent to a concentration camp for reeducation. Eventually I got so tired that I became more suggestible and willing to take the risks that the staff was urging me to.

When I returned to R.I.T. in the fall of 1995, a large number of diverse influences were swirling in my head. My original thesis proposal, which anticipated a voice and treatment like that of *The Last of the Snow*, seemed inappropriate for the work I was feeling. But just what was it that I was feeling? Where would this all take me? My central theme remained unchanged but the number of tools that I had to express that theme, and my ability to look directly at the issue without a reserve of reason, had clearly increased. The story of this thesis is the story of how these tools became more easily accessible to me and of how my confidence in their use grew.

The Work and Its Context

The heart of isolation is the self; accordingly, a number of works in this thesis portfolio are self-portraits. The progression within these self-portraits is, in some ways, a metaphor for my progression as an artist and certainly a map of those artists who have



Figure 4. *Self Portrait*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1996, Gouache and graphite on canvas board, 14"x17"

most influenced me. Part of my experience of community has been (and continues to be) the study of the work of other artists. Much of what I paint, print and draw is best understood in the context of the work of the artist that I was looking at most at the time the work was created.

I begin with “Self Portrait I”(See Figure 4.) a study in gouache and graphite on canvas board. This is in many ways the darkest work in the group, it was also the first. Being first it most clearly reflects the sensibility of my study at Wright State where the work of Kathe Kollwitz, Alberto Giacometti and Richard Diebenkorn was emphasized. This self-portrait depicts a disembodied head, floating in, and at some places barely distinguishable from, its surroundings. Disembodied heads create a disturbing effect as can be seen in the later Rembrandt self-portraits (for instance *Self Portrait*, (1657)⁷). This moving work is a bust, when closely examined, however the dark pallet nearly hides the connection between head and body. While the expression, palette and setting I use seem sufficient to convey the isolation of the subject, several other devices are employed to heighten the effect. The tension is heightened by the interplay of contrasting elements: light and dark, painterliness and the searching graphite lines.

Contrast is a common device in my work. I use it to heighten tension and to help the work embody paradox. Light and dark, painterliness and drawing elements, curvilinear and rectilinear elements, as well as varying degrees of completion form contrasts that shake us loose from our usual frame of reference.

The lines in this first self-portrait are the beginning of my incorporation of aspects of Giacometti's^{11, 12, 13, 14} technique into my work. The introduction of a drawing device in

the painting is a common theme in my work. I feel a strong connection between drawing and painting and use the interplay of painting and drawing elements to help create feelings of unrest and discomfort.

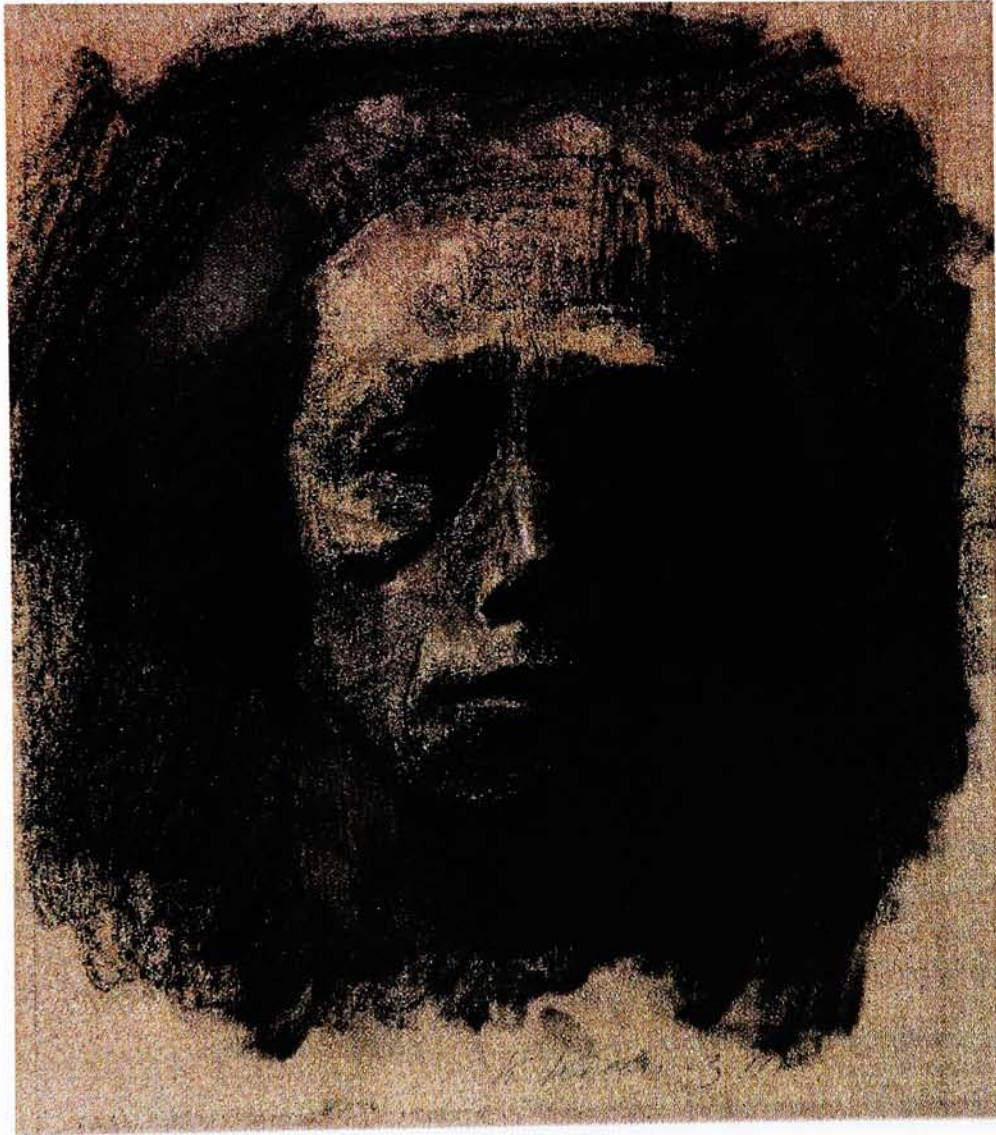


Figure 5. *Self Portrait en face*, Kathe Kollwitz, 1911

Although I was not looking at it contemporaneously, this first self portrait has an eerie resonance with Kollwitz's, "Self-Portrait en face," (see Figure 5) of 1911. The melting away character of the work also reflects my internal state at the beginning of my thesis work. The indecision and timidity that I felt at this jumping off point in my artistic development are reflected in this first painting.

The second of these self portraits (*Self Portrait II*, see Figure 6), a work in oil on prepared paper, has been three distinct paintings. First to appear was a very dark value study in shades of black and gray. The drawing was not anatomically correct, the face being noticeably elongated, but it was the most expressive and held emotional truth. Lucian Freud nicely encapsulates this interplay of expressionism and verisimilitude in a statement. "I would wish my portraits to be of the people, not like them. Not having the look of the sitter, being them."¹⁶ Most noticeably influenced by Giacometti, the visage was dominated by the searching lines that form the face and corona. While far from a perfect work it was a self-consistent portrayal of grim determination. The figure was, however, disconnected from her environment. The head and shoulders confront some challenge but the painting presents no clue about the nature of that challenge.

In the next phase of the work I added color, cadmium red medium and Naples yellow lightened with white, to the background and t-shirt. This made the distinction between figure and surroundings more explicit and the apron becomes apparent. While a struggle with painting was not explicitly identified as the problem, the reaction clear on the face becomes attributable to some work in which the subject is involved. Butcher and painter are not distinguished, but the grim determination and sense of frustration evident in the face seems clearly related to some task at hand.



Figure 6. *Self Portrait II*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1996,
Oil on prepared paper, 22.5" x 30.5"

In the final state I added white and Mars black to the face and corrected its proportions. I begin to cause the searching lines to coalesce thus giving real volume. Now the person is distinct in her environment. While the sense of grim determination is most evident, the determination becomes more emphasized. These states are reflective of the time in which they were created; the first and most expressive being the second work of

the thesis, the second state about 30 days later and the final state completed as the last work in this series.

“Self Portrait as Alien” (see Figure 7.) shows the most direct influence of



Figure 7. *Self Portrait as Alien*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1996
Oil on prepared paper, 22.5" x 30.5"

Giacometti of any of the thesis works. Clear references are made to “Portrait of Annette” (1964) (see Figure 8.) in matters of style and content. Alien meets our gaze, wide-eyed and confident. If the eyes are indeed the gateway to the soul, then staring at Alien we



Figure 8. *Portrait of Annette*, Alberto Giacometti, 1964

stare into the soul as Rorschach test - deep black pools that could contain anything. These eyes present an element of danger, you must be careful not to fall into them. The grimness of the earlier works is replaced with more self-possession. The intensity of the figure is heightened by the acidic pallet and by the interplay of drawing and painterly elements. My palette is informed, to some extent, by that of Walter Sickert¹⁷ (see for example, *La Hollandaise*, 1906 and *Mornington Crescent Nude*, *Contre-Jour*, 1907). His pallet



Figure 9. *Self Portrait IV*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1996,
Oil on linen, 32.75"x46.75"

intensified the drama of his Camden town works, portraying light at once natural and unnatural.

The final self-portrait in the thesis work is also the largest (see Figure 9). While the face is again seen to be heavily influenced by Giacometti, the composition is influenced by Lucian Freud. In his "*Reflection With Two Children (Self-Portrait)*," (1965)



Figure 10. *Reflection with Two Children (self portrait)*, Lucian Freud, 1965

Freud is shown looking down at his reflection. In a filmed interview which was shown at the 1994 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Freud said that the “trick” of self portraiture was to make oneself neither more grand nor more terrible than you

actually are. Accordingly, my self-portrait has a matter-of-fact quality. The figure is rooted in its space by the use of searching lines piercing the figure and alluding to the surrounding architecture. This interplay of architectural and organic elements is common in my work. Here it conveys both a sense of groundedness and a sense of tension. The semi-transparency of the figure, suggesting lack of permanence and substance, contrasts with the strength of the arms and the confrontational gaze. She is the captain of her soul, a creator goddess, stern and powerful not lost and despairing.

Another important source of tension in my work is the contrast between areas of differing degree of completion. I first became aware of this device in the work of Degas. (Indeed an article which appeared in *Art News*¹⁸ in 1993 featuring his “Woman at a Window” bears the same title as this thesis.) Found and lost edges and appearing and disappearing mass have the power to create mystery. This mystery invites the viewer to supply the missing details heightening the individuality of his/her experience of the work.

An important step in the development of my work is seen in an examination of my use of architectural detail. The intaglio print shown below (see Figure 11.), “Public Approval processed require definition and time cycles should be revisited Property” depicts an area near my studio. The contrast of light and dark value and apparent transparency of substantial objects combine to create a feeling of disconcerting stillness. Translated into a painting the same subject matter takes on several new dimensions (see figure 12.). The cool palette, the interplay of finished and unfinished

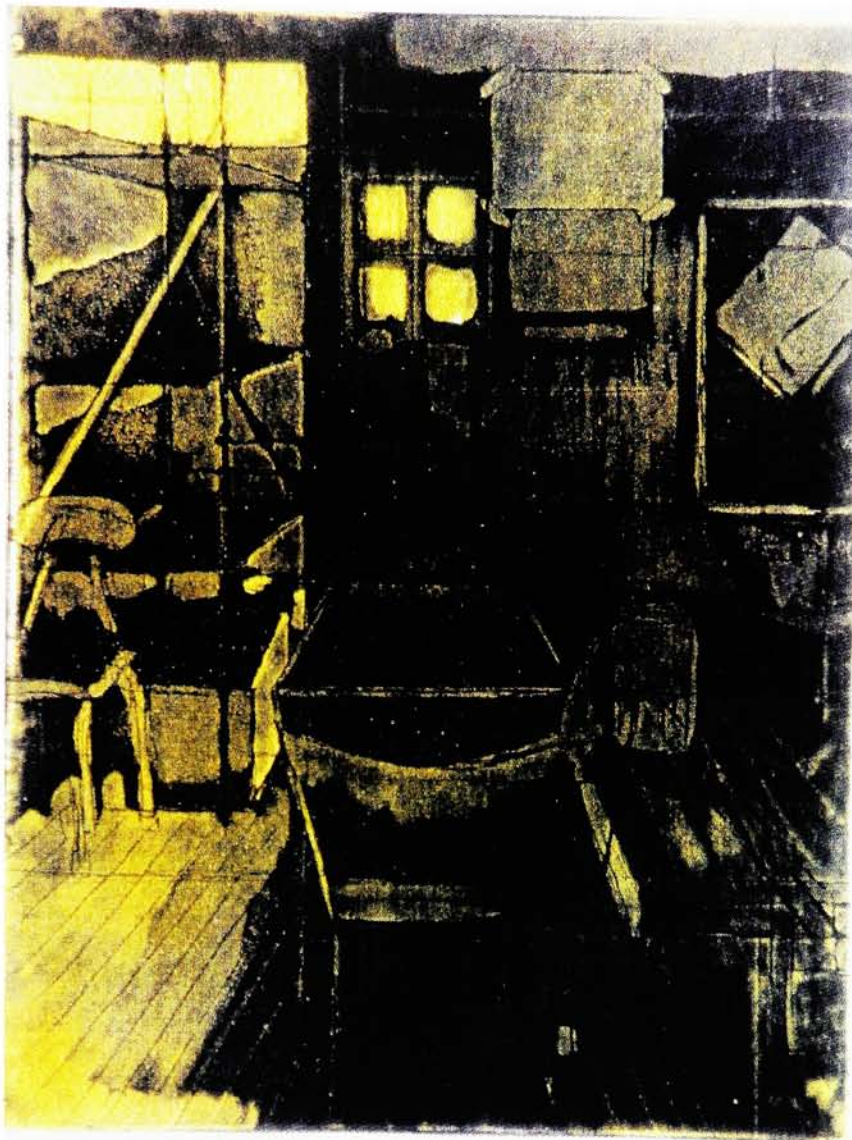


Figure 11. *Public Property*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1995,
Etching and aquatint, 23" x 16"

areas and the voyeur-like self portrait help to increase tension in the painting. There is much about this treatment, however, that is familiar and reassuring. The stacked planes reveal an inventory of the contents of the space. Within the painting the presence of domestic detail reassures us that we know what this space is. In the more recent "la Cage"

(see Figure 13) a distinct change in portrayal is observed. Here, in another etching of a space near my studio much of the detail is stripped away. The place is not filled with

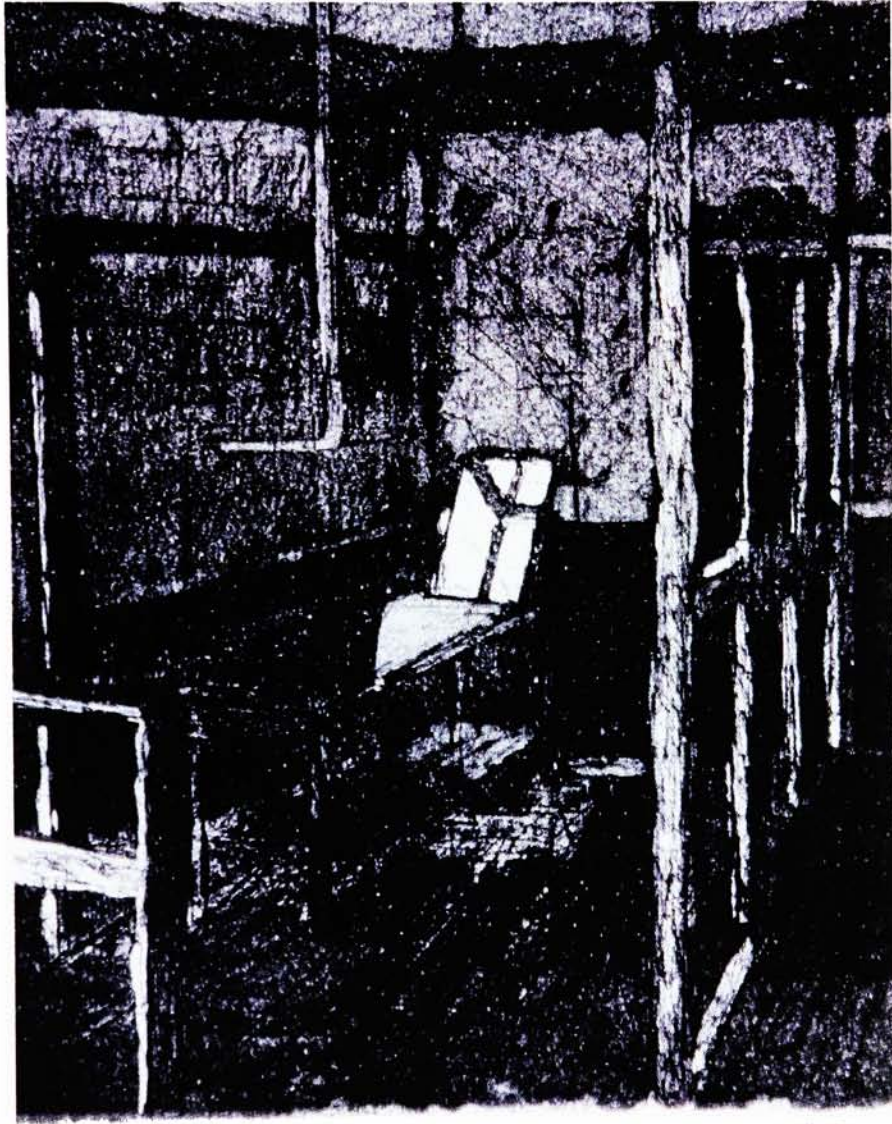


Figure 12. *Public Property*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1995,
Oil on linen, 30" x 40"

clues that encourage a benign and even intimate interpretation of the scene. Instead the stripping of detail leads to ambiguity. Neither the purpose of this space nor why we are

here is obvious. Scribbling lines are used, in addition to aquatint, to create middle values.

This results in a noisier image which generates the sense of motion where none is possible (e.g. on a wall). These features combine to allow a greater range of Figure 13.



la Cage, Virginia L. Gibson, 1996,

Etching and aquatint, 23" x 16"

interpretations. Dark narratives are now suggested and the sense of disquiet is increased.

Disquiet, the feeling of being slightly off base, is very helpful in experiencing primal

emotions. We can hide within familiarity but, stripped of our familiar context, we have a greater chance of encountering mystery.



Figure 14. *Tom II*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1996
Oil on linen, 45" x 60"

Illustrated by “la Cage”, my art can be seen as narrative. Not, perhaps narrative in the traditional sense, where the clues to the story are to be found in the work, but rather a mystery story where the information essential to complete your understanding is

deliberately omitted. Like Lucian Freud's grandfather's view of dreams, the paintings present us with raw images that we must supply with context in order to derive meaning.

A lone figure, seated in the same space, forms the composition of "Tom II" (see Figure 14.). Compositionally, the work recalls Kathe Kollwitz's "Poverty" (see Figure



Figure 15. *Poverty*, Kathe Kollwitz, 1895

15.). The table and mirror of "la Cage" are transformed into a simple bed and a living space is created. This space which encloses the figure also draws the viewer in. The

portrayal of a large figure in a constricted space which, none the less encompasses the figure and the viewer, recalls Bacon^{19,20} (see for example Study After Innocent X and Study After Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X (1953) which I had the good fortune



Figure 16. *David II*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1996
Oil on linen, 50'' x 60''

to view at the Hirshhorn Museum). Tension is created by the luminous but acidic palette, the interplay among the linear elements and between line and plane, the sense of

resignation arising from the figure and the apparent dissonance in scale. Is this place a prison or a monastic cell? Why is a place with such potential for odious portent so bright and what is implied by the palette? The narrative is incomplete. Viewers must impose their own interpretation on the gestalt.

The same device, dissonance in scale, is used in *David II* (see Figure 16.). A large figure is caged in an area between two doors. What the model and we are doing here and what is the purpose of this space are questions left for the viewer to divine. Visually, we find the figure imposed on a dark pool of color reminiscent of Goya's use of chiaroscuro²¹ (see for example, *The Third of May 1808* and *Prison Interior*). Strong verticals formed by the doors are truncated as the doors' diagonals funnel the figure and the viewer into the space beyond. Though in a resting pose, nothing about the figure conveys rest. The strength of the figure contrasts with the docile pose. Strong and dark, the acidic palette uses rose madder to contrast with the Courbet green, cerulean blue, Prussian blue and cadmium yellow light which form the dominant hues. The interplay of the flesh tones with the greens and blues of the background recalls the pallet of Soutine's, *Portrait of a Young Man*²². A nervous energy is seen in the mark making, especially those marks composing the figure resulting in layer after layer of overpainting. The lighting is eerie, with the figure seated in front of a black hole, surrounded by a halo of light. The source of that light and especially of the light in the upper right of the picture is not clear. What is this man waiting for?

The final work that I will specifically address is "Sonja" (see Figure 17.). In this painting a lone nude woman stands in a barren room. The consonance between the



Figure 17. *Sonja*, Virginia L. Gibson, 1996,
Oil linen, 50'' x 60''

woman's nudity and that of the room unifies her with her environment. In an early state, the painting showed a skeleton constructed with Giacometti-like searching lines, standing in the room. This x-ray like quality also recalls Bacon, whose use of medical imagery to structure painting is well documented.¹⁹ The figure was built upon that skeleton with layers of color. The central vertical formed by the figure and reinforced by the column

behind her is disturbed by the model's curved spine. That vertical contrasts with the sweeping diagonal formed by the floor plain. These elements combine to define trapezoidal spaces like those common in Hopper's²³ scenes of isolation and despair. Again the dark, Sickert like, acidic palette and the contrast between finished and unfinished areas serve to heighten the tension. What is this place? What is this woman doing here? Is she awaiting judgment? What are we doing here? Are we mere voyeurs or does the open composition²⁴ include us too. After Caravaggio, the picture has no defined edges²⁵. Are we drawn into this space as Bacon has drawn us in, to share the figure's space and predicament? These are among the questions that arise when we confront "Sonja."

I bring no answers to these questions to the work save my own. The questions are the important part, the answers are personal.

The Process

As I said earlier, part of my aim in making art is to find community with those that confront the fundamental question of their isolation. I have mentioned some of those whose work gave me the most guidance over the last few years: Rembrandt, Degas, Freud, Goya, Sickert, Giacometti, Kollwitz, Hopper, Diebenkorn and Bacon, but how do I experience community with them. Some of this sense of community comes from the rather traditional process with which I work. I hand build my frames and stretch the linen. Rather than buying pre-primed linen, I prefer to apply the rabbit skin glue and primer myself. As a primer I prefer lead white, ostensibly for the working properties it imparts to the over painting but in part because of its long history. The process of preparing the linen for use gives me time to consider what I will paint. It helps to keep me from taking a painting lightly (if I'm going through this much trouble it better be important). The craft-like aspect of this ritual helps me feel part of an unbroken chain of artists all of whom have, at one time or another, been involved in just these tasks.

When I work, in spite of my desire for a sense of community, I am a solitary worker. I do not have music on and I prefer to work alone. I do not converse with the models after work has begun and I resent the intrusion of others. Writing about Giacometti, David Sylvester says:

“Giacometti was an extremely inner-directed man but he was not a solitary. He enjoyed talking and listening, above all in a one-to-one situation, and his models were people he loved or people he liked to be with, so that working with the model was a pretext for conversation. And when talk had to stop for the real work to take over, this

involved a still more absorbing interaction. Giacometti was not one of those artists who wanted the model to be an apple; he demanded the 'attentive presence' of which Annette spoke to me¹²,

I want the model to be an apple.

The paintings have often been preceded by several studies. Ink wash, graphite and gouache are my favorite media for these exercises. Sometimes months of studies will precede a full-scale painting. During the preparation of the thesis series I did not use studies in the traditional sense. Rather than painting fragments of the final work, I used other media or sometimes oil on prepared paper, to do warm up or pedagogic exercises. Several of the works in the thesis series started as such projects.

In approaching the prepared linen I sometimes use a transfer grid and sometimes do not, but one thing remains constant, I create a drawing in paint before hanging on the painterly edifice. This helps to reinforce my intertwining of drawing and painting. I make corrections directly on the canvas and do not always try to hide the fact. A painting is not a photograph and should make no such pretense.

In painting, the mark of the artist is a significant part of the aesthetic. In making my marks I use both brushes and knives. Scraping of the work down to the ground or at least down to the drawing is a device that I commonly use. In several of the works in the thesis series I have made extensive use of sgraffito, a nervous like scratching and scribbling done with the pallet knife, to draw in form and light. In marked contrast to my earlier work, I have transitioned to broad brushes, concentrating on the creation of atmospherics and the elimination of distracting detail. Smaller brushes are employed in

building the underdrawings and figures. In fact often the painting proceeds as a conversation between searching line (fine brushes) and light and volume (broad brushes).

The museum, gallery and bookstore are essential parts of my working process as I continue my attempt to broaden my community of practice, learning from, and elaborating on, the work of other artists. The application of this research to the evocation of our primal experience is the essence of my work process.

Epilogue

The question of whether or not art should have a purpose has been a subject of debate. Understanding my position on this is pivotal to understanding my work. As I said earlier, my goal is to find a sense of community that does not deny the experience of my solitude. I seek to achieve this by creating art which touches on one of the transcendental issues which has faced our species since we became cognizant; what is our place in the universe?

I have attempted to awaken this question in viewers of my work by my choice of subject and by my method of representation. While not narrative in the classical sense, the tableaux I have created invite the viewer to make up stories that explain them. In so doing, the paintings serve as a sort of Rohrshak test, an uninterpreted image in which the viewer encounters him or herself. Unlike the inkblot test, which attempts to present neutral images, I intentionally load my paintings with cues to help guide the viewers' experience. I have chosen to present pictures of solitary people and solitary places. Often I have joined the person and the place to underline the mood.

I have garnered elements of composition and technique from masters who have also confronted isolation and incorporated that experience in their oeuvre. The work of Degas, Kollwitz, Giacometti, Hopper, Sickert, Goya, Freud, Bacon, and Soutine have been particularly influential in the development of my work. These masters have effected my choice of palette, composition and method of execution. They have taught me much and I have incorporated elements of their individual styles into mine. This stylistic and

technical sharing helps me feel myself as a part of a community of practice that pre-dates the drawings in the caves at Lascaux.

Across time and culture the many issues that define our humanity provoke our finest thought and our most profound emotions. While I resonate most around themes of solitude others find the search for significance or, the existence of truth or of objective reality compelling. Always these questions move us to eloquence.

“Vincent van Gogh cut off his ear and
sent it to Marilyn Monroe.

The severed ear reminded Marilyn
Monroe of a crescent moon, and for hours
she contemplated it by moonlight.

She telephoned Vincent van Gogh,
‘Does the moon have a purpose?’ she asked.

Vincent van Gogh considered her
question. He decided it was silly.

Albert Camus wrote that the only serious
question is whether to kill yourself or not.

Tom Robbins wrote that the only
serious question is whether time has a beginning
and an end.....

There is only one serious question. And that is:

Who knows how to make love stay?

Answer me that and I will tell you whether or not to kill yourself.

Answer me that and I will ease your mind about the beginning
and ending of time.

Answer me that and I will reveal to you the purpose of the moon.^{26,,}

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