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Thoughts in Space

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May 29, 1968

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PROPOSAL

- I Purpose of the Thesis: This thesis will explore stream of consciousness painting with its accompanying spatial contradictions.
- II Scope of the Thesis: The thesis will attempt to first explain and justify stream of consciousness painting by comparing it to a similar movement occurring in literature. The book Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel, will be used as the source for this explanation and justification. Then the paintings of six or seven artists (among them, Miro, Magritte, Tanguy, Wesley, Chirico, and Chagall), which have been or are concerned with illogically (to the conscious mind) juxtaposed imagery and mystical, contradictory space, will be compared to the paintings which I will complete. Both acrylic and oil will be used on my canvases to attain desired effects. The number of paintings to be used in the thesis is not definite as yet, but probably six or seven approximates the number to be presented.
- III Procedures: The procedure will be to continue work on my painting while also doing research dealing with works of art and philosophies concerning my topic.
- IV Alternative Proposals:
- 1 Contradictions in Space
 - 2 Personal Versus Impersonal Painting

BACKGROUND

Beauty, as defined by Lautreamont is "The chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table."¹ This meeting is one of many made possible by the unpredictable, imaginative, seemingly illogical, little known or understood, section of the human mind. The stream of consciousness approach to painting or literature allows this section of the human mind to freely reveal itself, because stream of consciousness is concerned with the levels of thought that are without rational control or logical order.

'Consciousness' involves the whole area of thought or mental experiences: recalled dreams, memories, feelings, sensations, ideas. 'Stream' signifies the way in which the thoughts occur, not logically connected as they must be at the speech level, but as a flow, one thought clearly or remotely suggesting another. The psyche is continuously active and cannot concentrate for very long on any one thing, even if great effort is exerted. The activity of consciousness must have continual content; this is accomplished by the ability of the mind to have one thing suggest another through an association of qualities in common or in contrast, whole or partially to the barest suggestion.² Dr. Jung in his studies on the mind used this method of free association to discover the critical

secret thoughts of his patients. He found that he could begin from Cyrillic letters, prayer wheels, meditations on a crystal ball or trivial events; the patient would, from his suggestion, think of an instantaneous word response to that suggestion.³

In literature the purpose of writing in stream of consciousness is to present the character more accurately and completely (the internal man being as important as the exterior). And yet at the same time, through the penetration into the minds of the character, the author is better able "... to express his private vision of reality, of what life, subjectively, is."⁴ James Joyce was able to express this by comparing what occurred in the mind of a man and how he actually performed. Some writers, such as Celine, who "...chooses himself, and the malediction which lies over his life," reveal their vision of reality through their own thoughts.⁵ The painter also presents his private vision of reality directly from his own thoughts, by the use of images.

Those such as the dadaists and surrealists, of the early twentieth century, were deeply affected by the sick years before and after World War One. They depicted their own dreams and irrational thoughts in order "...to turn the literal world inside out and reveal absurdity at its core."⁶ "The routine, falsity and injustice of life inflicted a feeling of senselessness."⁷ Instead of an existing continuity that united and related everything and gave everything significance, a world in which life made

sense and one could reckon with it, in their world view, nothing had structure or significance; the world barely held its own against collapse.⁸

For most artists though, working in stream of consciousness is simply a way of presenting their personal, inner thoughts and obsessions. Their work of course reflects the philosophy of the time, but is much more concerned with personal symbols and imagery. Some of the work stresses the weird and negative, but some, such as the paintings of Miro or Chagall, is more childlike and playful.

Marc Chagall created his own illogical world of floating animals, monsters and human beings. Memories of his past, of native Russian streets, homes and people he knew, love and hate, fear and pity and a whole range of emotions have their place in his paintings. Their poetic significance lies in "...Their demonstration of the unreal, lending plausibility to the impossible and thus endowing the work with a magical power."⁹ Chagall was concerned with "... otherworldly aspirations and earthly realities."¹⁰

Chagall happened to relate the development of one of his early paintings, "The Dead Man" [figure 1]. The explanation is an excellent example of the phase of stream of consciousness that deals with memory.

Starting out with a view of the street as seen from his window, he balked at the idea of painting a realistic street of no interest to anyone. By adding the figure of a dead man, which as a boy he had glimpsed in a neighboring house, he created an aura of mystery. Why a corpse surrounded by tapers in the open street? Because when brought together, the street taken from

fig. 1



the real world and the dead man from the painter's memory, they produce an unexpected collision, a shock. Another memory of his childhood was that of his grandfather, an amateur violinist, who periodically crawled out on to the roof where he could fiddle away in peace; Chagall capitalized on this to accentuate the fantastic side of the picture. On the other hand, the presence of the street cleaner, the woman shrieking in despair, the legs of a man running into a house in panic, all these are realistic elements.¹¹

Chagall painted memories as they came to him and objects he encountered at the time he was painting.

In the painting "Circus" [figure 2], Chagall juxtaposes an imaginary fish, a girl on the trapeze, a circle with a moon and violin in it, a horse and a chicken with a drumstick. Sometimes the images relate to each other or to a setting, but in most instances, they do not interact with each other, but are just next to each other; by their proximity they suggest strange relationships. Rational size relationships in space are denied, a huge may dwarf a small figure that it shares the same plane of space with.

There are many ways in which stream of consciousness painting can appear, because it is the expression of the thoughts that come to an individual's mind. Chagall's mind allowed him to leave us with paintings which convey a lightness and fairytale-like quality.

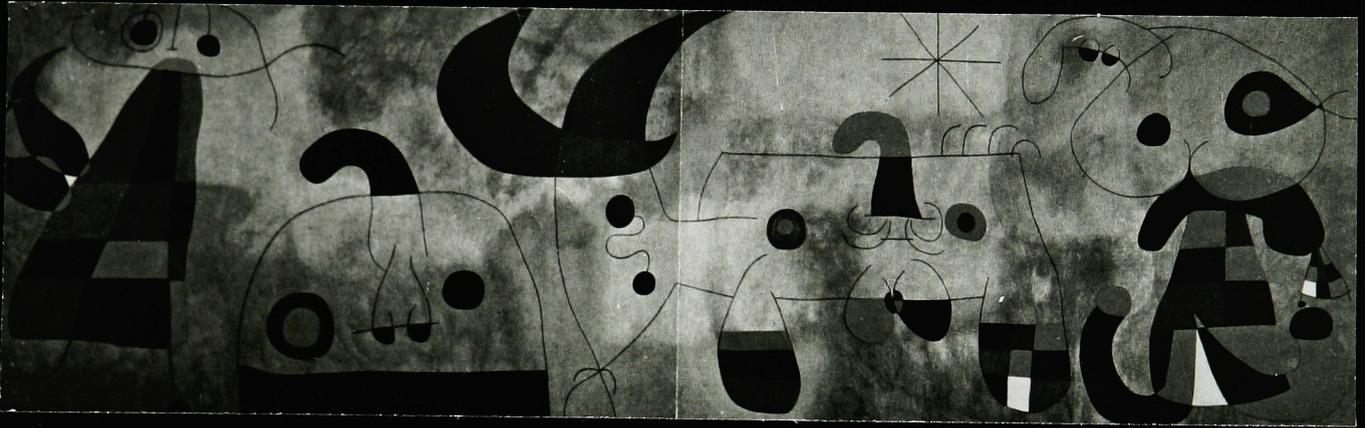
Miro also paints, from the recesses of his mind, the signs and symbols which have the lightness of Chagall's images, but are much more abstract. Behind all of his shapes "...lies a fragment of reality and each is a nucleus of a mass of suggestions."¹² Stream of consciousness allows the expression of the inner thoughts of



the painter and the interpretation that the viewer may wish to bring to the work.

It is interesting to note the way in which Miro began some of his paintings. He would drop a splotch of color on his canvas, then he would prepare a ground by wiping the brushes on the canvas and letting drops of turpentine fall randomly. For a drawing he would crumple or wet the sheet of paper; the flowing water would trace lines on the paper which might suggest what should come next.¹³ Miro felt that "... The painter works like the poet; first the work, then the thought. I attach much importance to the initial shock."¹⁴ Miro's style can be called magical with a childlike feeling for form and color "... conceived in the spirit of play and evoking the innocence of childhood."¹⁵ His space is mystical and imaginary. Sometimes objects float on top of a mystical space, such as in his mural painting for the graduate center of Harvard University [figure 3]. In other paintings space and objects seem to exist almost on the same plane, such as his "Swallow Dazzled by the Glare of the Red Pupil". His landscapes are the most difficult to analyze; for instance in "Nocturne" or "Person in the Presence of Nature" [figure 4] it is hard to tell whether shapes are acting in the space or on top of it. It is difficult to tell how much depth exists. Dr. Robert Goldwater feels that "Miro achieves an imaginary universe that is both near and far, both flat and infinite, a sort of lunar landscape seen simultaneously through telescope and microscope."¹⁶

fig. 3





While Chagall more often relied on memory, when working in the stream of consciousness, Miro created his own personal symbols. "Symbolization is a primary mental process"¹⁷ and James Joyce, one of the first writers to work in the stream of consciousness, often relied on symbolization in his novel Ulysses. For instance, one of the major characters in the novel thought of "... the ring of bay and skyline holding a green mass of liquid"..."¹⁸ which is a symbol for the green bile vomited by his mother for whom he would not grant a death wish. Miro in "Maternity" [figure 5] connected a black triangle to a black rounded shape with wavy spike-like projections, with a long thin line. Two breast-like shapes float on either side of this line. This image in total represents a symbol for a mother figure. Near each breast floats a black bug-like shape; one is a symbol for the male, the other a symbol for the female. The painting attains a cosmic, eternal quality and suggests continuous life.

Georgio de Chirico also used private symbolism in his architectural fantasies. Eggs, artichokes and other objects re-occur over and over in his paintings, evidently indicating some type of private symbolism. His stream of consciousness painting can be seen in "Turin Spring" [figure 6], where he juxtaposes a huge drawing of a hand next to a building and a red table with an egg, book and artichoke placed on it. The hand is flat black on a flat white rectilinear ground, all the other objects are modeled and appear with shadows. A contradiction in space takes place between the flat hand on white which has little if any

fig. 5

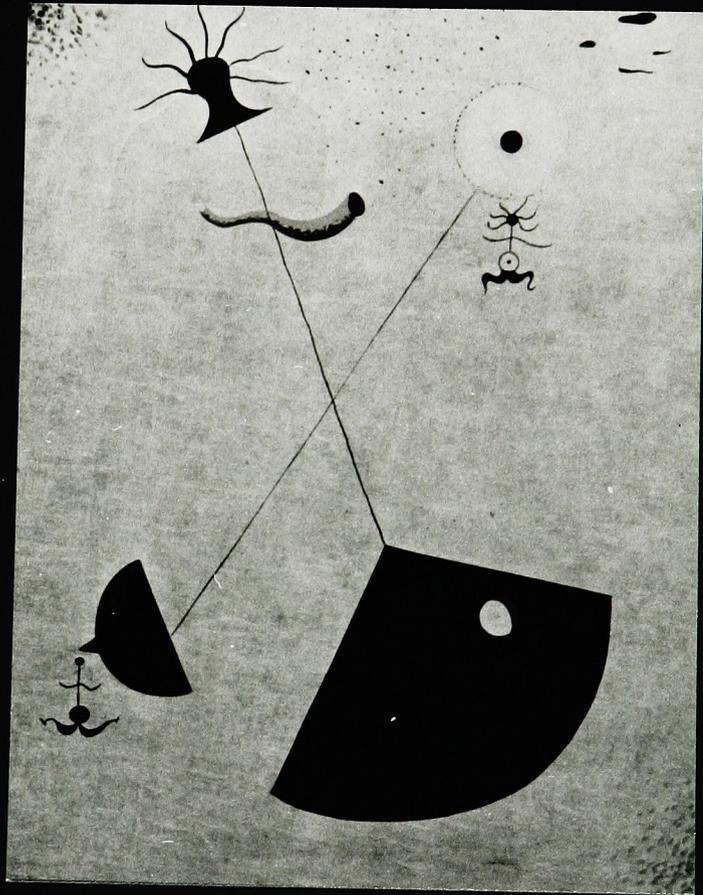


fig. 6



volume or light source and the other three-dimensional objects which are lit from the right.

Some of the reason behind Chirico's irrational combination of objects is explained by one of his own statements, "...a picture must always be a reflection of a profound sensation and that profound means strange, and strange means uncommon or altogether unknown...to be really immortal a work of art must go completely beyond the eternity of the human...In this way it will come close to the dream state and also to the mentality of children." ¹⁹ In this statement Chirico seemed influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche wanted the adult to pick up the a-religion, amorality and will to power, which are characteristics of the infantile mentality.²⁰

When Chirico placed scientific objects in antique surroundings, such as scientific equipment alongside an arcaded palace, he combined two different realities, the past with the ever-expanding technological achievements of the present. He brought out the illogical and contradictory nature of his own society.

Yves Tanguy's paintings are much lighter than Chirico's and lack the social implications of Chirico's work. Tanguy worked automatically and found that he couldn't enjoy painting a pre-planned composition; "...he allowed his painting to grow like a plant and bloom slowly until the point of perfection was reached."²¹ Sometimes he painted upside down so that he might be more surprised at the conclusion.

Most of his images are placed in a landscape setting, where earth and sky merge. Often sea-like forms float in the nebulous space; they seem childlike and playful and yet convey a feeling of loneliness.

As often happens when working in stream of consciousness, some of the most dissimilar elements meet in his canvases. In "Genesis" [figure 7], a black, conical shape floats in the foreground along with a snake, further back a girl walks a tightrope toward a huge hand, bearing a torch, submerged in a cloudlike form. A contradiction in space occurs when the almost flat, black conical shape and the flat figure exist in the same space as the sharply modeled snake. This contradiction, instead of destroying the unity, makes the painting more fascinating.

"Reason is the daemon of the Immutable Laws, the guardian of the Absolute. Everything it touches becomes determinate, coming within the scope of unambiguous order that is utterly different from that indeterminate world in which man plunges into experiments with only his senses and his fantasies to keep him afloat,"²² Rene Magritte tried to reduce the opposition between the rational and irrational. His paintings seem very reasoned although the combination and handling of the subject matter is irrational. He considered nothing irrational if the world is an extension of what takes place in the mind. Perhaps all things do not exist except in the mind and are conceived not perceived by the mind.²³

Magritte worked with inventions of the mind in a much more calculated way than Tanguy, who let his paintings

fig. 7



grow spontaneously, bit by bit. This is evident in his very planned landscape painting, where a painting in front of a window is placed so that it is an exact continuation of the landscape outside of the window [figure 8]. Even though his paintings may not be as automatic as Tanguy's; they still retain the freshness of a spontaneous idea.

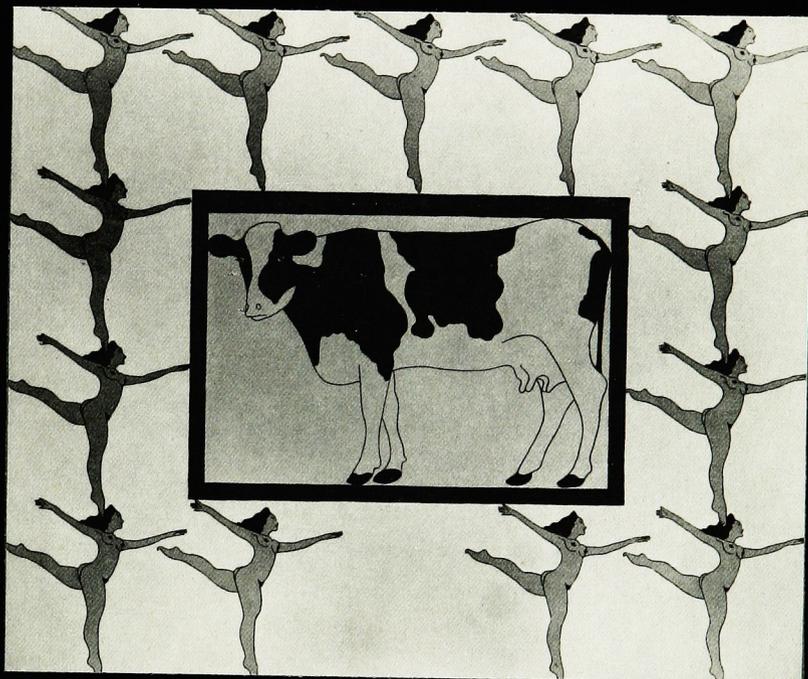
John Wesley is a contemporary artist who works in the stream of consciousness without the weird or very mystical overtones of the surrealist painters. Wesley leaves the spectator to draw his own conclusions about his combination of imagery, presenting it impassively, rather than exotically as the surrealists might have.²⁴

In "Holstein" [figure 9] he presented a group of dancing nudes surrounding a framed cow. The nudes and cow are both flat, hardedge and float in front of a slightly mystical space. The cow and nudes are presented in a somewhat humorous way. The only 'weirdness' occurs in the juxtaposition of these images.

The results of stream of consciousness painting may be: simply unrelated subject matter presented impassively, personal symbols, dreams, memories or any combination of these. Such variety exists because each artist presents his own personal, individual thoughts. He does not usually work consciously with the knowledge that he is using stream of consciousness as a specific technique, but his results are a flow of thoughts.

fig. 8





EXPOSITION

Painting number one [figure 10] was inspired by a black shape composed of acrylic and elmer's glue. I had mixed some acrylic paint and elmer's glue in a can and poured it onto a piece of acetate. After it had solidified, I peeled it off of the acetate and jokingly placed it on my canvas. When I saw it on the canvas it made me think of some kind of primordial force. I placed the shape in a brown, modeled circle and had lines of force (consisting of small, black drops) coming from the black shape. I painted a mystical space around the circle which engulfs some of the black dots. Next I painted a flat blue sky at the top of the canvass. The mystical quality of the painting caused me to think of the painting as an ancient story of creation; this is how the snake developed.

I used acrylics for this painting, but for the first time I found their fast drying time to be a problem. Because I began to do more blending of colors, I eventually switched back to oils as will be discussed in later explanations.

I had been looking at some Chinese paintings of the underworld (furor of the god's type) when I began this painting [figure 11]. I was fascinated by the red-brown symbols used to depict fire. My painting started with these fire symbols which were eventually transformed into a red-brown, mystical space. I then thought of a large

fig. 10

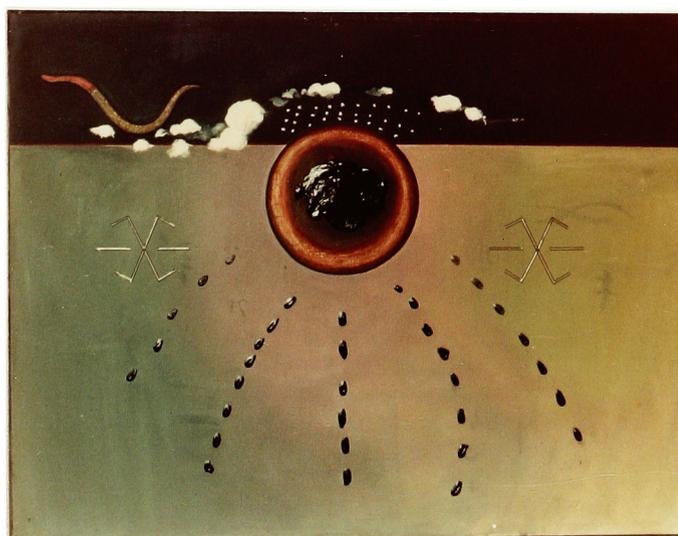
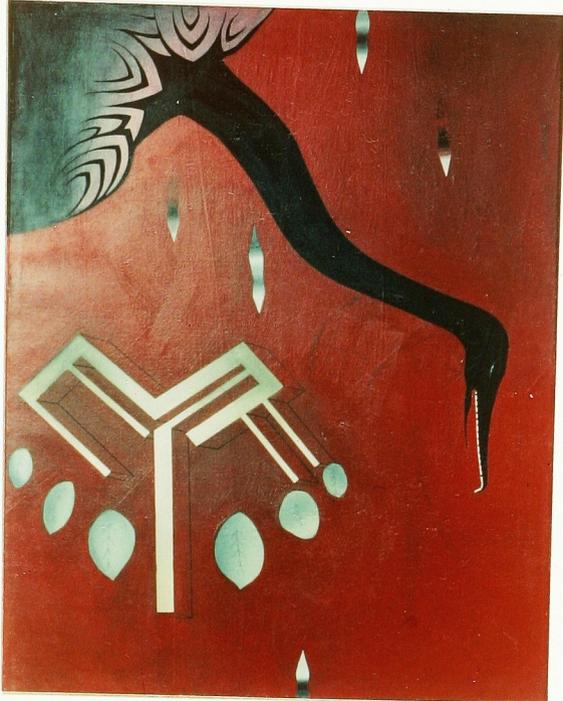


fig. 11



strange bird; I painted it flat black on top of the red space. The bird suggested a tree, so I invented my own personal symbol for a tree. This symbol of a branching, central core appeared in earlier paintings and re-occurs in later ones, always much altered. The tree form is shaded so that it appears to have an interior light source or a very strange exterior one. The little gray forms that dart in and out of the red space also have their own light source. Each image is separate and exists by itself, but in some unexplainable manner is related to the other objects in the painting, just as in a stream or flow of thought, each thought has its own identity and is taken out of another context and seems unrelated to the other thoughts, but is vaguely suggested by the thought before it.

The black bird floats on top of the red space and recalls some of Miro's paintings that have black shapes floating over a mystical space. The gray shapes are immersed in the space while the tree shape floats in and on the space. Instead of the logical space found, for instance, in a romantic painting, where objects recede in an orderly manner into the space, contradictions occur because thoughts are not rationally ordered.

Before I began this painting [figure 12] I was thinking of a rose and then I read T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Man".

Sightless unless the eyes reappear
 As the perpetual star
 Multifoliate rose
 Of death's twilight kingdom

fig. 12



The hope only
Of empty men.²⁵

The poem reinforced my idea.

I began with the rose, then using the free association method, the gray tuning-fork shape and eyes followed. The problems began soon after I sketched in my rose. I had to decide what type of rose I wanted. When I first started shading the rose, it looked very new, almost 'popish' with that slick, surreal surface that Jack Beal achieves. I decided that I wanted a more solemn, spiritual, eternal rose, so I dulled the bright thalo blue shading with black and sanded the highlights to age the rose slightly. With this change in the rose, I discovered that I had to alter the pink color that I had previously painted beneath the rose. I changed the color to a more serious black. I worked on the leaves and eyes above the rose and tried to impart a mysterious quality to them. I almost cut a hole (as Magritte often did) into the leaves as though another world was going on behind the leaves. I decided against this because I felt that it was unnecessary for this particular painting. It would have appeared too 'clever' or 'novel'.

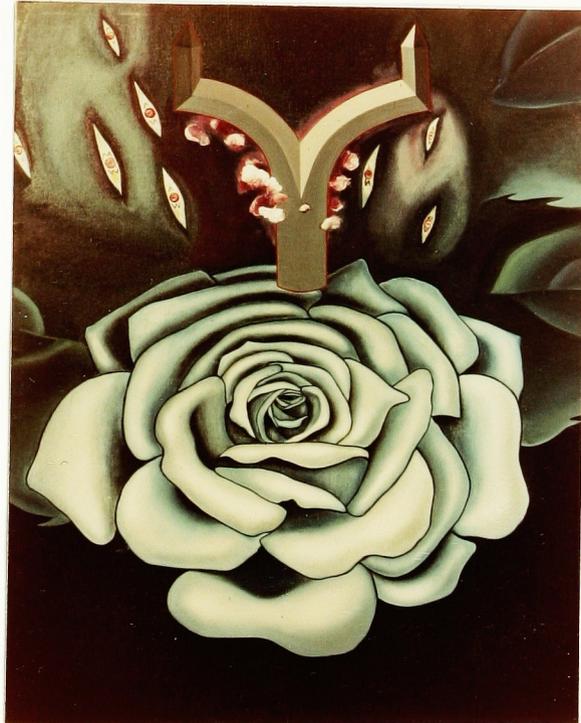
It took me a long while to determine the type and amount of space needed. I finally chose to have the rose recede into the space. The gray tuning-fork shape is a solid, yet flat shape. The bottom of it appears rounded and yet it is not shaded with a light source as is the rose. It floats almost on top of the space and yet it is pulled in slightly by the pink clouds. A spatial contradiction occurs because of the flat gray shape existing in the

same picture as the modeled rose. This contradiction is reminiscent of Chirico's painting where the flat hand exists in the modeled city scape. I guess there is also something jarring about a rose, which exists in nature, (although not my rose) combined with an abstract shape.

Painting number four [figure13] was quite a departure from the rose, being almost graphic in character. The painting passed through several stages before arriving at this fairly simple solution. (It seems as if one of my greatest problems is simplification and clarification.) The main shape is mechanical, almost steel beam in character and yet it blossoms into a flower-like end. It is mechanical and also romantic. I began with the shape being used as a subordinate one in a complex composition; this was not successful, so I started a new canvas with this shape as the main one. The shape then suggested the small circular shapes that accompany it.

For some reason when I began this second canvas, I was afraid that it would become too romantic, so a more mechanical shape resulted, although I didn't start with the intention of painting a mechanical shape. I had been looking at engravings of flowers in my Grammar of Ornament book and the harshness of the engraved images influenced my painting.

The shapes in this particular painting hold no symbolic meaning; they are simply interesting shapes that I have invented. Any meaning the viewer finds he brings to them himself. The thoughts in space this time are simply the shapes.



The spatial contradictions occurred when I placed the three-dimensional butterfly-like shapes in the center of the flat white circles. The perspective and shading of the large shape is also contradictory.

"Blue Elephant Fantasy" [figure 14] started with a very complex composition. As I was working on it one of my friends thought she saw a blue elephant in the painting, so I started thinking about blue elephants and animal crackers. I decided to make the elephants stiff and toy-like. Then, I thought of a gun, a large one that doesn't work. I didn't feel like having any serious, efficiently functioning mechanical device. The fat leaf came next and after that the brightly colored tongue shape. I placed all of these images in a landscape setting.

I encountered a great deal of difficulty in working with the space. About half-way through I discovered that some of my elephants were in the space, while others were on it. I decided to have them all floating on the space. I felt like James Joyce, who sets out to "...depict what is chaotic at an inchoate level and is obligated to keep his depiction from being chaotic."²⁶ Each of my images seems as if it is a piece taken from another context. The leaf is shaded with a light source, while the elephants are flat and the striped shape is partially shaded. The discontinuity is intentional, but the problem is getting the painting to work, regardless of contradictions, as a unified whole.



I used oil glazing on this painting because I wanted bright, rich color. Waiting for the glazes to dry seemed the only disadvantage of using them. I haven't been consciously thinking about color very much lately; after being exposed to the beautiful subtleties in color that Magritte achieves, I have determined to be more conscious of color.

My last painting [figure 15] was the largest and the most difficult to complete. In it, I was interested in capturing a brightness and playfulness almost escapist in nature, as is displayed in the fantasy painting of Paul Klee "Fairy Tale" where a "...young man sought and found the bluebird of happiness and so he could marry a princess."²⁷

My painting started out as another toy fantasy¹¹. I had two flocked giraffes in the lower left-hand corner, a striped awning-like cloth behind them and part of a gear behind the cloth. Leaves, clouds and rain occupied the top space of the painting. Everything was pretty well underway, when I decided to make drastic changes. I scraped off the flocked giraffes, covered over the awning and transformed the gear into a tree-like shape. The tree-like shape suggested the snake. I left the upper portion of the painting, which was working quite well, untouched. I undertook this destruction after I had talked with someone who convinced me that the toy-like shapes were not as original or personal as the shapes which I completely altered or invented.

I worked in glazes again and found it exciting to be to be able to create a deep mystical space by working in

fig. 15



this manner. I enjoyed making my own thick blue atmosphere and I think that I will continue working in this way.

CONCLUSION

Jung has stated that "...mystical participation has been stripped off our world of things. We are so accustomed to the apparently rational nature of our world that we can scarcely imagine anything happening that cannot be explained by common sense. The primitive accepts the weird and irrational as part of life."²⁸ This quote perhaps would have applied in the earlier part of the century, but today people have less and less faith in the ability of science to logically explain everything. People seem to be more willing to accept the strange, the irrational, for instance the possibility of the existence of flying saucers, or the prophesying of Jean Dixon. The absurd is more and more evident in our society, where a "Trip-to-Sunny-Florida" billboard can exist next to a slum settlement and a toothpaste ad can be seen on a hospital TV at the same time someone is dying.

I don't mean to suggest that my paintings have 'social comment', 'protest', or didactic overtones, but only to point out the relevance of the irrational to our times. The most important quality my paintings have, to my way of thinking, is their individuality, which results from the presentation on the canvas of my own thoughts.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Patrick Walberg, Surrealism (Cleveland, 1962), p. 26.
- ²Robert Humphrey, Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1955), p. 43.
- ³Carl G. Jung, Man and His Symbols (Garden City, 1964), p. 28.
- ⁴Virginia Woolf, quoted by Robert Humphrey, op. cit., p. 13.
- ⁵Beaujour, quoted by Erika Ostrovsky, Celine and His Vision (New York, 1967), p. 34.
- ⁶John Canaday, "Dada and Its Offspring", New York Times Magazine, March.24, 1968, p. 29.
- ⁷Maurice Rheims, The Flowering of Art Nouveau (New York, 1959), pp. 18, 19.
- ⁸Ibid., p. 19.
- ⁹Lionello Venturi, Chagall (Cleveland, 1956), p. 18.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 18.
- ¹¹Ibid., pp. 24,25.
- ¹²Jacques Lassaigue, Miro (Cleveland, 1963), p. 71.
- ¹³Ibid., pp. 47, 48.
- ¹⁴Ibid., pp. 48.
- ¹⁵Walberg, op. cit., p. 70.
- ¹⁶Dr. Robert Goldwater, quoted by Nicolas Calas, "The Place of Space", Arts Magazine, 42, 36 (February, 1968).
- ¹⁷Humphrey, op. cit., p. 81.
- ¹⁸James Joyce, Ulysses (New York, 1961), p.5.
- ¹⁹Georgio de Chirico, quoted by Marcel Jean, The History of Surrealist Painting (New York, 1959), p. 53.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 54.
- ²¹Ibid., p. 167.
- ²²Ibid., p. 183.
- ²³Ibid., .
- ²⁴Lucy R. Lippard, Pop Art (New York,1966), p. 161.
- ²⁵T.S. Eliot, T.S. Eliot - The Complete Poems and Plays (New York, 1952), p. 58.

²⁶Humphrey, op.cit., p. 81.

²⁷Jung, op.cit., p. 167.

²⁸Ibid., p. 45.

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