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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The College of
Fine and Applied Arts in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

The Non-Representational Language

by

Andrea Geer

May 29, 1990

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Approvals

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Part I Introduction

The formal aspects of painting are color, value and texture. As much as these elements have dominated the formalist language, there can arise from the combination of these formal elements, types of expression that cannot be achieved in any other way.

With the many conflicting theories that attempt to explain what art is, what its function is, and how it fits in to our culture, it is a difficult task to sift through all the information in an effort to find the ideas that have a personal relevance.

In this society, there are many different philosophies and ways of thinking that make this a very exciting and confusing time to live in. There are many different philosophies and ways of thinking that make this a very diverse world. There is room in this society for many different religions and beliefs that seem to be in conflict with each other. Pluralism seems to be the essence of our times.

In the history of art, the different developments seem to have been built upon tradition or the reaction against it. Starting in 1905, fauvists continued with the philosophy that Van Gogh and Gauguin practiced. Out of this the expressionist tradition began. Developing from the post-Impressionists came Cubism and constructivism. Since these developments in Europe in the early 1900's, there have been numerous styles that happened as an outgrowth of these early beginnings. There are also styles that developed as a reaction against

these philosophies.

American Modernism grew from a desire to be free from past European art. All previous opinions and preconceptions were challenged by the New York artists. Barnett Newman in a letter defending Abstract Expressionism wrote: "The Americans evoke their world of emotion and fantasy by a kind of personal writing without the props of any known shape. This is a metaphysical act. With the European abstract painters we are led into their spiritual world through already known images. To put it philosophically, the European is concerned with the transcendence of objects while the American is concerned with the reality of the transcendental experience."¹

As I pointed out earlier, pluralism seems to be a necessary concept and in light of this, there will always be an alternative argument to what I have to present. I consider this necessary and good because if we fail to recognize other points of view as valid, we become closed to new and different ideas.

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1 1 Thomas B. Hess, Barnett Newman (Walker and Company, New York, 1969) 38.

Part II-technical development

The paintings and monotypes that make up my thesis work are representative of a consistent area of study. That is not to imply that what came before or after the thesis work was not consistent but that this particular body of work is consistent with and exemplary of the ideas I have about art, artmaking and painting in particular.

The past two years have been a very productive time for me. There has been the support, studio space and time to explore in depth the principles of painting such as use of color, surface qualities and other formal aspects of painting. These practical areas of painting are too often underplayed in an attempt to reach some important message or meaning. Knowing how to use color is crucial in finding just the correct nuance or shade of meaning. The study of color and form will be an ongoing learning experience because each work is individual. So each painting is approached freshly in an effort to create an object that is self-contained.

In addition to the formal training that I received, The other area of study that I have embarked on was trying to find meaning in my work. My thesis work is representative of my continued effort to develop a visual language or vocabulary using personalized forms. It was not a direct goal to develop personal signature marks but to somehow translate what I want to express in the painting medium using colors and shape. I felt painting was the most appropriate method after I had experimented with different materials and processes.

During the past two years, I have completed a series of monotypes, paintings and drawings. Since these three areas of work are so interdependent and interconnected, it does not seem right to discuss them as if they happened separately. Basically everything I have done is a product of my interest in painting.

While I was Painting on stretched canvas, I was drawing with paint on paper. While I experimented with found objects, I was figure drawing. The most recent combination and the most productive has been the experimentation with monotypes on paper simultaneous with painting on canvas.

Painting on canvas has allowed me to explore different aspects of line, shape and color. Monotypes allowed me to do the same thing but on a smaller scale. The change in scale was a faster process so I was able to experiment more without a huge investment of time. Also, testing ideas on a smaller scale meant I did not try to do everything in every painting. I became more selective.

Another advantage of the monotype process is that it is possible to do many variations on one formal idea. Once the ink is on the plate, it can be printed, reworked and printed again. This sequence can happen a number of times. This is a relief because the testing of an idea is so much less tedious on a small scale. The process actually is perfect for experimentation.

The smaller works were not actually studies for the larger paintings. Although there was an obvious effect on the other work, they are works individually. Becoming familiar with the techniques of monotyping was a challenge and the effects of the ink on paper is very different than the effect of the paint on canvas. Also the brayers make a very different type of mark. The surface usually seems more dense and flat. Using brayers to create images instead of brushes made me develop a new vocabulary of shapes that were more suited to the equipment and materials I was using.

Scale is another important aspect of the work. The scale of the monotypes is very different than the scale of the paintings. The monotypes occupy a much more personal viewing space, as opposed to the paintings that occupy a different kind of space. I have noticed that people react very differently to the different sized works even though the shapes are much the same.

When viewing the smaller pieces, people tend to feel very possessive as if they can possess the beauty or control it in some way. When people see the larger canvases, they feel more unsure or uncomfortable. Also the larger canvases occupy a space that is somewhat human in proportion. Most of the canvases are slightly taller than an average person and almost as wide as the span of the arms when spread out.

It is interesting to note that many of the Abstract Expressionists painted on a very large scale in order to make the work

more of a total experience. The large scale is intimate in that it becomes part of the environment. Certain American critics also promoted these large paintings because they felt that art on this scale suggested such "American" qualities such as expansiveness and freedom from tradition.²

The subject matter of my paintings and drawings are shapes and color. The combination of the shapes and color can probably be applied to a variety of meanings. However, if I wanted to make a literal statement, I would be able to do so directly, by using images that convey a message that cannot be mistaken for anything else. I do not want to do this or have my work be misinterpreted by using a central image as a vehicle. That is why I continue to do work that is free of recognizable or symbolic images; because this way I am free to attempt to directly get at the emotions or ideas I want to create.

In the past two years, not only have I experimented with material and processes but I have developed an aesthetic way of thinking that I am comfortable with. My working attitude reflects the ideas that I think are important. Each time I begin a painting, I concentrate not on what I know but on what I do not know. This way each painting is built on all my past experiments but will reach beyond it in some way.

* * * * *

2 2 Jeffrey Wechsler and Jenni L. Schlossman, Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions, (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990) 2.

Part III: Perception- What Role it Plays

Painting is an act that requires many skills to be produced.

Painting as a creative act relies on the strength of the intuition and sensitivity of the artist. The creative process cannot be dominated by the intellectual thoughts of the artist. Rather, the creative process is based on the dualism of the technical and expressive aspects. Both the technical and the expressive qualities play a part in creativity but the artist first and lastly listens to his or her intuition. This is my particular approach to painting.

The spontaneous act of the artist is partly attributable to sensitivity and receptivity on the part of the artist. It also is due to the formal training of the artist. The skills that it takes to be a good painter are constantly being practiced and fine-tuned. There are many perceptual skills an artist uses such as eye to hand coordination, the laws of color theory, and the many spatial and design aspects of line, shape, and space.

For example, color has properties that make your perception of it vary in different circumstances. When you place one color next to another, you may intellectually have an idea of what the result will be, but there are so many colors, hues, values and chromas that you don't know exactly what the result will be.

When we look at the colors in a painting, it is to encounter and be part of a complete experience. It is impossible to see the shapes

and colors independently from one another. We see the colors and shapes in relation to each other. Our perception of the work is affected by our past experiences. Nothing we see is an isolated element. Our subjective feelings and physiological reaction are part of the whole experience. Our bodies and minds respond to all of these things.

Seeing the work of these artists and other abstract expressionists was a visual and complete experience that had a profound impact on me. There were writers such as Suzi Gablik and E.H. Gombrich that helped me understand the reliance of art upon perception. These writers dispelled a lot of the myth that that the design of a painting or a drawing was the result of some mysterious gift. In reality, perceptual skills account for the ability to draw. Placement of shapes and colors in a two dimensional format and our reaction to them is controlled by our minds in an effort to understand more clearly the order of the composition.

Perception is the interaction between the mind and the eye. Seeing is not an optical process but a function of the brain. A painting's accuracy of impact or successfulness relies on how it is perceived. In light of this, perception is very much a part of the arts. The arts rely on perception.

There are relationships between color, shape and texture that dominate perception. The artist as designer tries to keep ideas from being clouded by putting all the elements of a painting in an order

that expresses the meaning most clearly. So, while the artist is concerned about the mechanics of making art, he or she is also envisioning a final outcome.

Laws of perception such as gestalt, figure-ground relationships, grouping subdivision and hierarchy of shapes all explain clearly how people perceive two dimensional paintings. What these laws do not explain is why the artist creates or why some artists are able to actually achieve some spiritual level in their work. What is it about organized shapes and colors that can speak to us so personally and powerfully about concepts other than line, shape and texture? These are questions that cannot be explained by perception.

Part IV: Historical Context

Modernism was an extremely important part of art history because of the many great artists who worked under the aesthetic guidelines of art for arts'sake. The paintings that they were doing at that time will have an effect on people for a long time.

While many artists today feel the need to break completely from tradition that modernism is now a part of, I feel that my work relies a great deal on the history of American and European art. I feel a strong relatedness to the modernist ideals. The Expressionist painters Van Gogh and Kandinsky among others created and developed a new aesthetic that led to later American Abstract Expressionism.

Radical art that offers cynicism and pessimism has no relation to my work. I feel that the basic ideals of Modernism can be preserved and extended. The "subversive" art that proliferates is the opposite of my work yet I feel that accepting tradition can be a radical action. To me, placing guidelines on what I do gives structure to what I do. There is the ironical feeling that complicity itself is now passed off as subversion - and being hospitable to traditional values is the most radical act.³

There were stages in the development of my work that were influenced greatly by other artists and writers. There were paintings

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3 3 Suzi Gablik, Changing Paradigms for the Artist, Thames and Hudson, 1984) 26.

I saw that had a profound impact on me visually and perceptually. Robert Motherwell's paintings and prints had a great impact on me. Also, DeKooning, Rothko and Hoffman and Newman along with others. Reading about the ideas of these artists helped form my work but the greatest experience was seeing the works of art in person. For me, the work is emotionally charged. The theory interests me much less than the work itself.

work itself.

Suzi Gablik, in a series of essays called "Has Modernism Failed" attempts to discover how we got to this postmodern time. While I don't agree with every point she makes, I continue to read her essays and books because they are interesting points she makes. Also, while many art writers today are cynical, nasty, and pessimistic, Suzi always offers the reader some ray of hope that there is some underlying order in this confusing time.

"If we open our eyes, if we open our minds, if we open our hearts, we will find that the world is a magical place, filled with power and wisdom which any of us can have. The self is not limited. Any artist who can see this, who is capable of knowing that he or she is one of those magical figures who can command spirits, who can make contact with the source of meaning and power as our ancestors did, has already taken the first step towards transformation."⁴

* * * * *

4 4 Suzi Gablik, Changing Paradigms for the Artist, (Thames and Hudson, 1984) 29.

This type of reading material has indirectly affected my way of thinking about art and may in some way have influenced my work. The Abstract Expressionist painters I mentioned earlier had the most direct influence on my work. Although the styles of the artists who worked at this time were very different, their first concern was the actual process of putting the paint on the canvas. This is also my first concern.

Conclusion

"Just as a flower, by virtue of its existence as a complete organism, is both ornamental and self sufficient as to color, form and texture, so art, because of its singular existence, is more than mere ornament."⁵

"Aesthetic enjoyment is caused by the perception of hidden laws... aesthetic enjoyment is joy itself, released from subordination to any purpose; therefore, it embraces the enjoyment of nature and the enjoyment of art both." (Walter Rathenau: Notes on Art Philosophy)
The aim of art is always to provide such joy for us in every form of expression. The faculty to enjoy rests with the observer.⁶

These quotes, both taken from the same book, for me, represent the joy and purpose of art. It is this type of expression that makes me continue to work as an artist. I enjoy making things and I enjoy seeing. This is what motivates me.

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5 5 Hans Hofmann, Hans Hofmann: Search for the Real and Other Essays, (MIT Press, 1967) 69.

6 6 Hans Hofmann, Hans Hofmann: Search for the Real and Other Essays, (MIT Press, 1967) 59.

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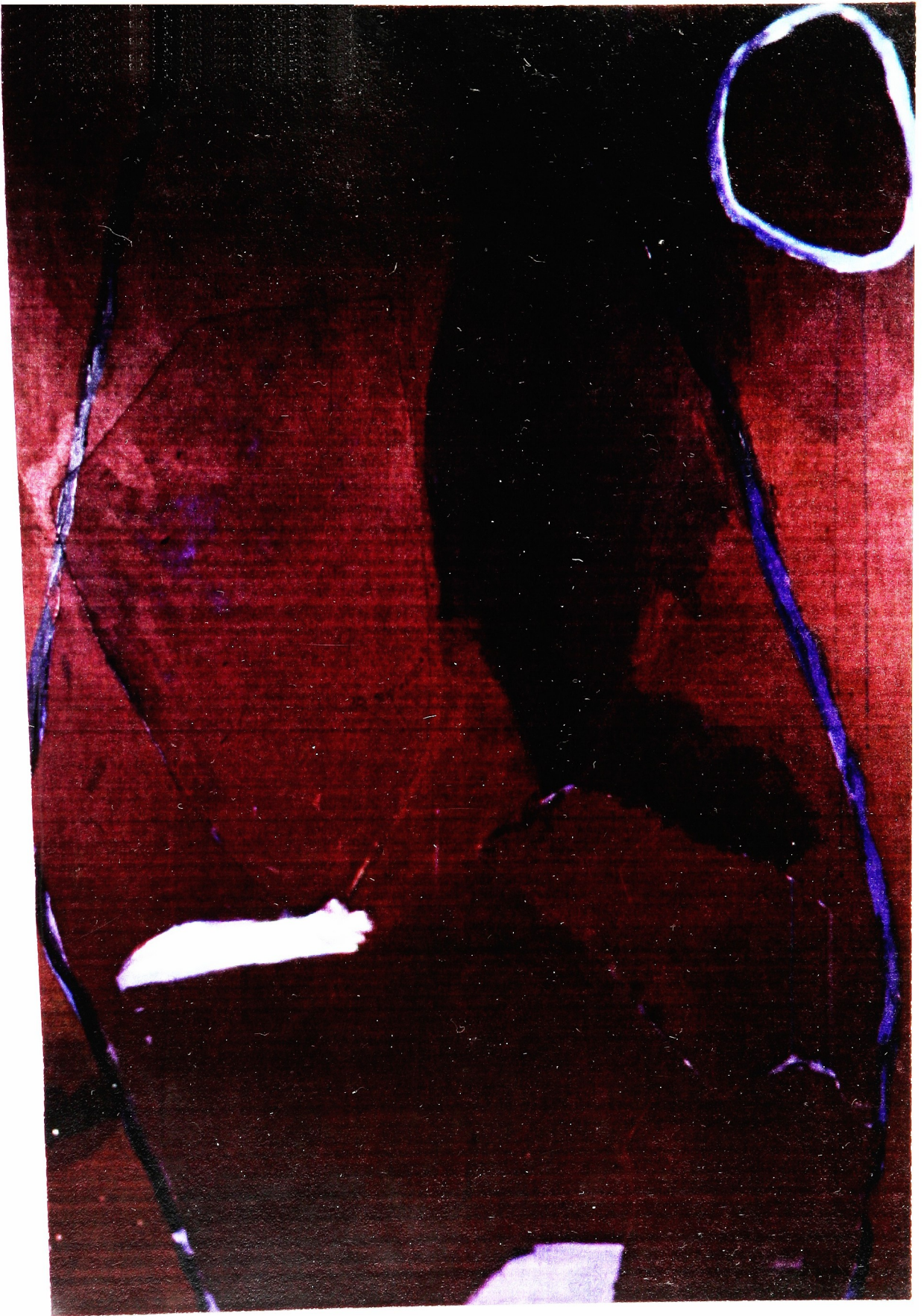
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"Grey Patch" 1991
acrylic on Canvas
46" x 78"



And Blue II 1991
Acrylic on Canvas
35" x 46"



"Blue Ground" 1991
Acrylic on Canvas
47" x 72"



✓ "Blue Figures" 1991
Acrylic on Canvas
49" x 60"



"Orange Line" 1991
Acrylic on Canvas
12 x 12"



"Orange Ground" 1991
Acrylic on Canvas
40" x 78"