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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Pastels in Oil Painting:
Experimentation in Line Quality and Tonal Areas
in a Series of Figure Paintings

By

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March 31, 1984

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to show how I proceeded with my experimentation through a body of work. My original intent was to explore the use of pastels in attaining different line qualities and tonal areas in oil paintings. However, as the work progressed, I found myself too limited by using only pastels for the effects I was seeking. My aim was to achieve a pastel-like effect, but I found I became too aware of the necessity of using only pastels for this effect, which hindered me from branching out into all the possibilities my experimentation suggested. At that point, I stopped using the pastels and tried to produce the same line qualities and tonal areas without them. Further on, I tried using more definite lines in some of the paintings and studies on paper. As I relaxed and experimented more, I returned to using pastels as the work demanded it. This, in fact, was one of the most important things I discovered while doing this work: the freedom in selecting the necessary medium for the particular situation, that is, the inherent spontaneity in the development of the work, plays an important role in the creative process.

II. Preparation for painting

The theme of the work is the human figure in varying settings. I work very often with drawings from the model as a constant reminder that the human figure, even in its distortion, must still have the feeling of the possibility of having the right proportions. Thus, I always go back to the model, I

have been doing most of my recent studies in charcoal for two reasons: first, the directness of the medium, and second, the extremes you can get with it. In these sketches, I wanted particularly the strong contrast in light and dark, and I felt very comfortable using this medium. I approached the studies with a heavy charcoal stick with the aim of finding the line - the line that defines the form as well as the space. The drawing is not an academic exercise, but rather a search for the meaning of the form and the space and shape that the line creates.

My working method is to draw and erase, to put down and take away. What I do in the charcoal drawing, I also continue to do in the paintings, which are a search for the right proportions, line, color field, and harmony. There must be an honesty to the work, as an individual expression which is independent of its acceptance by others. That inner quality can only be brought forth through the inner feelings and approach of the artist.

The color areas and fields present their own line and space. The feeling of honesty I try to bring to the drawings and studies related to the work, I also bring to the paintings. Here each color field and area is a search for the truth and inner harmony within the completed painting. This search for the proper balance usually begins with the fluid application of oils. Prior to this, I usually make a quick charcoal sketch on the canvas without details, which defines the general space and form. Then comes the first oil application, although even in the simple fundamental sketch, the truth of the line



STUDY IN CHARCOAL # 1



STUDY IN CHARCOAL # 2

and shape and form must already be in existence because I believe that an artist cannot do one thing one way and then proceed to do another a completely different way. All the elements that pertain to the work are part of the whole work, and, although I do not work according to a specific set of rules, I do see that each mark is an act which determines a reaction, and that, while each element adds, it must also be able to exist on its own strength. That process is the one I call finding the inner harmony which exists inherently in the art work. Each color application or each charcoal line and erasure becomes an integral part of the work.

III. Comments on the various paintings and studies

A. "Woman in a Chair"

In the painting "Woman in a Chair", I have concentrated on broad color fields. The way the colors act and react to each other, as well as the tension created by different color fields, are central to this painting. The application of the medium is very direct and fluid; however, the subject matter dictates to a great extent the means of application for given areas. In some areas, the application is loose, heavy, and direct, while in other areas washes, equal brushstrokes, and pure colors are used, and in still others the paint is mixed directly on the canvas, a method which appeals to my way of working and which I most unconsciously use.

B. Oils on paper

During the same time, I also worked with oils on paper with the theme of couples. I tried simple color fields and simple lines. My question was what effect is achieved by



WOMAN IN A CHAIR

various color fields in relation to size, position, and different hues of color. I was also concerned with the transition from one color field to another. Consideration should be given to hues: what effect does a warm color have when placed next to a cool color? Another consideration is the placement of shapes on the canvas: where and how is tension created by color or position, or by a line on the canvas? All of these elements are constantly being explored while painting, even though the artist does not think consciously about these things at all times. Here, I think, experience takes over, and often there is a manipulation to achieve a certain effect.

Oils on paper force me to carry through in one sitting - I like to approach both the woodblock and oil on paper works in this way. That forces me to make the choices and lines and stand by them. I am not trying to prove that one sitting is enough for a work, but rather dealing with the inner experiences which come together at these moments when the artist relies on all his knowledge and intuition to make the right decision. This adds to the work since it then achieves a sense of oneness and freshness, as well as spontaneity, a feeling which is then carried over into the paintings. I am always concerned with the total canvas, which means that all parts must be considered at all times, and yet each part must be dealt with on its own terms. The whole must always come through after each individual process on the canvas.

C. "Two Leaning Figures"

When I began working on "Two Leaning Figures", I wanted



OILS ON PAPER

to combine the element of surprise with naturalness. In this work, I dealt with local colors, that is, one color has a particular function within a given area. The yellow in the face, for example, could also be used to express atmospheric color. However, in my first working of the painting, I had the two figures in strong local colors: the one on the right was in various shades of blue/green, and the one on the left was in various shades of red/rosa pink. The facial colors of the figure on the right were tones of yellow/orange/green and the other figure more orange-red. I used the local facial colors on the bottom of the painting (that is, the lower half) as atmospheric colors and elements. I used color from the figure on the right as background colors on the top and then had a very gradual blend between the orange/yellow and the blue/green. The red or a variation of red/gray/cool gray was then used as a horizontal band in the top quarter of the painting. However, the combination, although pleasing, did not have the nuance that I wanted to achieve. I then changed the painting from the orange/yellow on the bottom half to green/blue tonal areas and afterwards went over this area again with red. I added pink tones to the top half.

After leaving the painting for a period of time, I reworked it, considering the problem of just two figures occupying the canvas: how to make sure they relate to each other and are aware of each other, their space, and their mood. The problem earlier seems to have been that I tried to work with two primary colors blue/red but could not resolve the impact each color area made on the other. It caused too much of a

TWO LEANING FIGURES



BEGINNING STAGE



INTERMEDIATE STAGE

TWO LEANING FIGURES



ADVANCED STAGE



FINAL VERSION

gulf and therefore did not work well in the painting. The background was another element of the problem, but I believe I got closer to resolving both the background and the images within the given space in my final reworking.

I neutralized the background and the images, working on the whole process at once, as I prefer to do. The background or "negative space" and the images or "positive space" were resolved simultaneously. The overall tone of the hues is neutral. However, within the large color areas I have worked gradations and variations so that the local color areas shift constantly and a greater harmonious balance is achieved.

D. "Three Figures"

In the painting "Three Figures", I also dealt with the element of a flat background and related and complementary color fields. The palette consisted of greens, blues, grays, orange, yellow, red, and pinks. Again I experimented with certain color areas and fields next to each other to evoke different effects.

As I reworked the painting, my concern was the tension that I can achieve through the positions of the figures and their relationship to each other, as well as through the use of color. Here I worked with variations of neutral color zones with a touch of intense color, specifically the use of blue in the outer right figure, as well as some complementary contrasts with variations of red and green in the big figure at the right, especially the color variations of green and yellow-green with a contrast of red and neutral gray-red. My intuition was to play those subtle gray tones, whether blues, greens, or reds,

in a contrasting way.

I was also concerned with the quality of line in some areas, especially in the figure at the right, and the absence of line in the figure at the left. The line is ambiguous: it is there and then again not there. The color areas overlap, and thus the figure on the left seems to have a strong outline in the bottom half toward the left corner but is more ambiguous (fading in and out) in the top left. This also helps set up tension in the figure on the right because tension is created on a diagonal line as well as vertical (that is, the figures in vertical positions). They act and react to each other, while the small figure reacts to the immediate figure as well as the distant figure.

Then there are also the color areas. The figure on the left has a cool tone area, and the figure on the right, a warm/cool tone area. The warm color fields on the top half of the painting are echoed in the bottom half. The line quality of the figure on the right echoes the non-line quality of the left figure. The diagonal running from the top left to the bottom right is also reinforced in the positioning of the two figures. The left one faces the viewer, and the right one gives an upward angular view, which is echoed in the smaller figure. The positioning of the hands echo the positioning of the head. The arms of the two figures form parallel diagonals as well. Those diagonals run from the middle left to the top right and act as a counterbalance or counterforce to the diagonal which runs from the top left to the bottom right (i. e., right arm and trunk of the left figure). Within these diagonals and



THREE FIGURES

verticals, I also consciously played with the illusion of horizontal bands (background). These muted color bands give the feeling of both distant and near space.

E. "The Couple"

The primary emphasis in the painting "The Couple" was to experiment strictly with the use of pastels on canvas. However, I did not use the pastels on an unprimed or unprepared canvas, rather I treated the canvas the way I usually prepare canvas for painting (two coats of rabbit skin glue, sanding between the coats, and two or three coats of oil priming white). Then I sketched out the image in pastels. However, I soon discovered that I could not fix the pastels on this prepared canvas; so my next step was to use some paint. The paint was very loosely applied. I was not concerned here in mixing a color scheme, but rather to block out all areas with gradations of paint. It eventually turned into a smudgy brownish/gray mass with some variations because I applied certain areas with lots of medium and others I wiped off with a rag. After waiting for about a day (this was in a rather cool place), I decided to work on the painting again, but I found the main paint application still a little wet. I then proceeded (quite by accident!) to use a very soft pastel and see what results I would get. To my surprise, the pastel could be applied, and it remained fixed to the canvas. Those areas which were already fairly dry I decided to fix with a fixative and then go over them again with pastels. Other areas which were still wet had a certain effect on the pastel: it changed in tone, mainly darker. After a while by working over these, I could



THE COUPLE

also see where I could directly blend and mix within certain areas, although the image dictated which areas should be treated as great expanses of color fields and what areas should be treated as mixed areas. The painting was done in a continuous mood, once I realized that the pastels would work, and that I could fix them in this manner. When finished, the work came off as a fresh, energetic painting. At the very end, I fixed the pastel once more with a fixative and decided to use a plexiglass cover over the painting as a final preserver.

F. "Intense Discussion"

The painting "Intense Discussion" has a mixture of oil and pastels. I worked with a combination of these two mediums, although in the final analysis, the paint quality dominates this work in certain areas, especially where I use solid color fields. I added the pastels with the paint in the red color field, and then later on I would fix it with a fixative and finally add a thin medium of glazing paint over it. However, the tone would always change, and I would have to compensate for it later by adding a lighter and lighter thin glaze over it. Thus, I found I could almost establish the true pastel color.

The other development that took place with the thin overglazing is that the area can take on a certain feeling and appearance of transparency, which produces a nice effect. My experiment with this technique of glazing, a variation on the technique used by the Old Masters, showed that I can achieve a look of transparency as well as a shimmery effect. Another element that may be used with glazing is the use of



INTENSE DISCUSSION

pure color during the finishing stages of a painting. I can make an area "warmer" by adding a thin glaze of pure warm color, or I can make it "cooler" by adding a cool color.

G. "Woman with a Blue Blouse"

In the painting "Woman with a Blue Blouse", I applied paint in a very painterly way, that is, using loose brush strokes and defining certain color areas with related tones and hues. The palette was in the brighter and warmer tonal range with enough accent to break the continuous color fields or related continuous color fields. I did this by adding a surprising color, a color which would not be expected, and which therefore adds tension to the work. It is, after all, the contrast or tension which gives life to a painting. The artist must also be concerned with the juxtaposition of form, color, and shape within the work; these elements must intrigue and capture the imagination of the viewer.

When I reworked the painting, I used a lighter palette and the play of gradations of color, mainly in the warm color range: orange, yellow-orange/red, pink red, dark red. The color fields must act and react to each other. In some parts of the painting, I used the line to separate the color areas, while in other parts where color areas are very close, these color areas play off each other and only gradation and variation within the given color family are used.

H. "The Embrace"

With "The Embrace", I tried working technically with pastels and oils. At first I again began to paint in a very painterly manner and also worked with the line. Where the



WOMAN WITH A BLUE BLOUSE

similar color areas can hardly be distinguished one from the other, I at first drew a line because the line was dictated by the form and the shape, and then I proceeded to block in areas. After a while, influenced by the effect of the underpainting, I decided to introduce pastels. Thus, I used oil pastels and paint at the same time. The result is that some loose and translucent areas are produced.

It is important to note that the painting very much dictated the use of pastels since this is a spontaneous action painting. The use of the line certainly defines the action here. Besides the line, there are also bigger color areas, some intense and others neutral, and they in themselves should create tension as they act and react. The selections of pastels are done so as to have complementary and clashing colors. By using a mix of these, a tension is achieved even within the given color areas.

The emphasis is on the main figures, the two embracing forms, and is achieved through the use of two intense colors surrounded by other intense colors within which I tried to produce a somewhat neutral tone. The intense colors may dominate at first, but the viewer soon looks beyond these and comes to the neutral colors. This juxtaposition causes a great deal of tension.

I. Use of woodcuts

As complementary studies after using intense colors, I like to revert to working with two very stark colors (black and white or red and white) which I do by working on woodcuts. They help ease the tension within me and psychologically



THE EMBRACE

prepare me for a fresh approach to the canvas. These woodcuts have provided an important outlet in my exploratory search for color and tension in painting. They are also useful because the artist is drawn back to a reality of extremes, black/white or negative/positive, and the way I approach the woodcut is quite simply at this level. It forces me to make that fundamental distinction of line or area, positive or negative. It is not supported by any intermediary shades, and the statement cannot get lost in the variations of different areas.

J. "Group Portrait"

"Group Portrait" was sketched out on scrap paper and then a quick charcoal sketch applied to the canvas, which was then covered with paint. This was done to see how the grouping and, in a limited sense, the color placement looked. My intention was to keep the painting in a lighter palette. Again I think that the painting dictates the mood and color - a carnival atmosphere with a touch of sadness.

Another aspect that I am dealing with is the relationship of each figure of the group with the other figures. I had to convey the idea that these figures occupy a given space, both a private space and also a broader space, and that each figure is aware and sensitive to its space and to its neighbors' presence and space.

In using a lighter palette with "Group Portrait", I have changed from the darker, more somber and mysterious palette I have used in some previous paintings. The mood here demands it, which, by the way, does not take away from the meaning and psychological depth of the subject matter. The general



WOODCUTS



palette involved light colors and lighter colors approaching white. Again I worked with related color fields, and the element of freshness and the overall color harmony had to be balanced. The colors leaned more to neutrals with accents of complementary or supporting colors in juxtaposition to each other.

Another element that I tried here is to go from white (bright) to black (dark), something that I have not done in any of my previous paintings. Although the black is a neutral or "passive" black, and the whites are toned down to cool whites, I also consciously used more of an immediate play between warm and cool colors. The emphasis is a balance and this play of warm versus cool. Light and dark colors at times contrast consciously, while at other times they seem to be played off each other subconsciously. The constant weighing of the color fields against each other, the use of cool or warm colors, and the use of line or form are decisions continuously confronted and worked out.

When I changed the painting, I decided to bring some color fields even closer together in tonal range (mainly the cluster on the center bottom). In the final version, this is well set off by the lighter color fields in the top half, particularly the top left corner. I consciously repeated this color spectrum in the bottom right corner in a muted way. My main reason for placing that color area there was to break the monotony of the vertical lines that were present in the images.



GROUP PORTRAIT

K. "Model with Two Figures"

In the painting "Model with Two Figures", I returned to the use of pastels in conjunction with oils. The experiment here was to combine the line quality in the forms. Not only is the line used in the images but also in the color fields and areas. It is not so much used to separate image from color field but rather to combine them. Just as the colors act as local and atmospheric colors, so the line acts to define and delineate a form, as well as to connect the form or image with the color field.

Another element that must be considered is the energy level that a line creates. The variation of a line -- thickness or thinness, whether straight or curved, whether jagged or applied rhythmically or broken -- all provoke a reaction in the viewer. The action I bring to the painting or work must evoke a reaction in the viewer in return. If I approach a line with hesitation and uncertainty, that will be transmitted to the viewer on an unconscious level. The energy level that goes into the work is reflected in the work itself. My approach is to be determined and to apply a line or color field purposefully with a life of its own. Each line or color field must have a reason for being in that place and with that energy level.

The painting again seemed to dictate my approach. The subject matter required line quality and seemed most suited as well to the use of oil pastels. Another reason for using them in combination with the oil paints may be the fact that I felt more comfortable and freer in using that combination at



MODEL WITH TWO FIGURES

this point. The style of my earlier paintings had a more conscious application of pastels. I would apply the pastels and then work the painting medium into it, but the results I was getting were not exactly what I wanted. It could be that I forced the issue too much, wanting specific results instead of letting the image and time dictate the medium. I now feel that the two paintings in which I used pastels seem more natural and less contrived than the earlier experiments with this medium. In some areas of this painting I worked the oil pastels right over the oil paints. In other areas the oil paint is applied over the pastels, and in yet other areas I let the oil pastels stand by themselves. I also mixed the paints and pastels on the canvas. The combination of uses gives the painting its feeling of immediacy and directness.

IV. Conclusion

This report shows how I experimented with the paintings discussed to achieve desired effects through line quality and tonal areas, with special attention to the question of the use of pastels. My search for harmony within a painting led me to explore the question of blending vs. contrast. I often work in the realm of neutral hues which provide a subtlety in the work as opposed to a type of dramatism. However, continuous color fields and related continuous color fields in a painting must often be broken by using a small amount of accent color (a surprising color) to give interest to the work. My work is a search for the right balance between pleasing harmony and movement/contrast. Contrasts should not shock; if contrasts are too brusque, the individual parts

of the painting cease to be a whole entity, that is, they seem to be fragmented and do not play off each other in the final composition.

Particularly important is the transformational quality of all the work. Each painting progressed through various stages as I experimented, searching for just the right line quality and interplay of tonal areas. This would be true of any body of work, and thus each painting represents one experiment in a continuing search.

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