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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

AMBIGUOUS ENVIRONMENTS

By

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July 1984

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INTRODUCTION

The title "Ambiguous Environments" refers to two main concerns dealt with in my prints and drawings. One is the depiction of an object existing within an unspecific three-dimensional space. The other is a concern for surface mark on the picture plane. "Environments" refers to the two-or-three-dimensional space in which the objects exist. By trying to isolate these concerns, I chose a title that seemed appropriate yet unspecific. Prints I believe are essentially drawings, albeit special ones, with their own intrinsic beauties and inherent characteristics. They speak the language of drawing but in a voice unmistakably their own. It is in drawing, in this broader sense where my thesis production lies. Although the prints and drawings deal with these same concerns of space and surface, they explore the differences of their individual mediums, thus have their own points of departure.

The drawings are generally 30" by 40", and consist mainly of graphite, sometimes in combination with printed elements. They develop a wide range of value exploring at once dark infinite space and shallow surface texture. Color is used rather sparingly. The bulk of my prints are lithographs. Though somewhat smaller in size than the drawings, they use color much more liberally and explore a noticeably shallower space. Emphasis is given to characteristic qualities of liquid

tusche and lithographic crayon. A layering of transparent and opaque inks produces ambiguous spatial layers of floating shapes. Some of the prints are also in combination with other media to further extend the type of surface mark or the space depicted.

While the final production developed from the initial proposal, the body of work expresses my artistic interests at this time. It is my hope that the following paper will elucidate some of my thoughts about art, showing what perceptions contribute to my art making. Various aspects of art are discussed in an attempt to explain what art is for me, while trying to avoid a singular definition which may not apply in all instances.

WHAT IS ART ANYWAY?

While we were discussing some pieces of contemporary art, my brother once asked me for an operational definition of art. What is and is not art? (Not what is "good" or "bad" art.) I could not recall an all-inclusive, objective definition that has consistently survived the test of time and the sometimes hostile attacks of critics. I stopped for a moment trying to think how one could respond to that basic yet loaded question. Great thinkers from the past have often disagreed and contradicted one another on questions of art. People are still disagreeing today.

Some have thought of art as an imitation of nature while others have said that art is for its own sake. Beauty has long been associated with art, but is it a quality of the art object or in the eye of the beholder? Certainly not all art could be called beautiful, as most people speak of beauty. Sometimes it is unsettling, aggressive, maybe ugly. Picasso's "Guernica" might be called ugly because of its angularity and sharp distortions, yet it is moving and powerful in its expression. Obviously beauty is not the only quality of art, perhaps not even a prerequisite, but to speak of art in terms of beauty, one must first define beauty.

Art is communication, a visual language, a process of expression. It may be universal or cultural and many levels of understanding and appreciation can exist simultaneously.

Susanne Langer has said, "A work of art is an expressive form created for our perception through sense or imagination, and what is expressed is human feeling."¹ Art may communicate different feelings or ideas to different people. They may enjoy a particular piece for completely different reasons.

Art is more than just communication or expression, it is many other things as well. One single definition never seems to cover all aspects of it. My brother spoke up, "If you can't tell me exactly what art is, how will you ever know when and if you are producing it? Shouldn't you be more sure that you know what you are doing?" All discussions of art seem to suggest that an individual understanding of art is necessary. Art does not mean the same thing to everyone. Interpretations vary, as well as what is enjoyed or appreciated.

If art is a search and I believe that it is, an exploration of self and how that self fits into society, how can anyone be sure where that search may lead? The excitement of discovery is one of the things that make life and art so interesting. One continually learns through searching. Yet in any search there are uncertainties. I did not want to admit to my brother or to myself that much in art is uncertain. Sandro Chia has said that, "Painting today is an act of faith."² It requires faith in one's creative impulses to produce art. Marcel Duchamp thought that it was important for

¹Susanne K. Langer, "Expressiveness" in Art and Philosophy: Readings in Aesthetics, ed. W. E. Kennick, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964) p. 79

²Sandro Chia, interviewed by Gerald Morzorat, in "The Last Hero," in Artnews 1983, p. 59

the viewer to interpret an artist's work because the artist himself did not fully understand the significance of his work. Art requires an audience for there to be communication. It is a human activity.

The concept of art and its definition is continually being challenged and expanded, touching many aspects of human endeavor. To define it may be to limit it, to constrain it may be to disallow some aspect of it. Art should be allowed to expand and contract with the breath of man. I would rather leave the question of art to intuition rather than formula or definition.

Art's role in society has undergone considerable modification within the last century. Not only has the look of art changed, but the idea of what it is has changed as well. Joseph Kosuth in Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects, says that the question of art's function was raised in modern times with Duchamp's "ready-mades," thus the birth of conceptual art.

Perhaps I never really answered my brother's initial question of what art is with a single definition, but by introducing several partial definitions, I have tried to discuss some of art's aspects. Thinking about art in terms of faith may be reassuring, and help the artist deal with the uncertainties in his work. It must remain important for the artist to create work not worrying whether it is art or not. Donald Karshan said it succinctly when he said, "It is the young artists who will determine what art will be by "redefining" it with each generation.

Art is the definition of art."³

³Donald Karshan, "The Seventies: Post-Object Art," in Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects, ed. Donald Karshan, (New York: The New York Cultural Center, 1970) pp.1,7

THE LIFE OF THE DRAWING

Of the many forms that art can take, drawing contains a vitality and life that I do not find elsewhere. Traditionally regarded as a "minor" or more appropriately, a "supportive" art to the more important painting or sculpture, drawing has emerged as an art form in itself. And rightfully so. Drawing may be the quickest, most direct way of developing a concept into a visual reality. Like the artist himself, it maintains at once a personality and life, but the life of the drawing (not its life span) is difficult to isolate from its individual formal elements. It is something that disappears with polish and overwork. Spontaneity is part of that life, and it is difficult to develop a piece without altering that spontaneity. A piece keeps changing, becoming something new with each stage in its development. It is important to know when to stop, to know when it is finished.

To help explain that life, picture Michelangelo's series of slave sculptures. Twisting, tension-filled bodies writhe in pain trying to free themselves from the marble. Michelangelo felt that sculpture was a releasing of form, a form that already existed within the block. His job was to remove the inessential stone. I try to think of drawing in Michelangelo's terms, but by adding and erasing elements. Slowly an image appears and a life emerges from the lines, tones and erasures. The life is a combination of these elements. It can be obvious or subtle,

abstract or realistic, but it exists to some degree in all drawings. Successful drawings are not lifeless ones, they speak visually to the viewer. They are not boring.

So what is a successful piece? A successful piece of art lies somewhere in between the idea and its expression. The translation is the art object since nothing can quite duplicate the idea as it exists in the mind. Art is the interaction between viewer and object. It does not exist without people. The successful pieces offer new insights with each subsequent viewing. For me it seems that to produce a successful piece requires struggling through many attempts that may not appear successful to others. Even then one is never totally satisfied.

Success is somehow related to intent, something the viewer may never know. Sometimes the artist may not be sure of his intent until after the piece is well underway or finished. For me the solution is in the search, the surface, the ambiguity, the contradiction, the personal symbolism, the introspection. Art should be a catalyst for thought not merely a visual reality. It brings minds together. Drawing is a search for art through intuition and visual responses to markmaking. It is the revealing of a life on an animated surface.

The life of the drawing is what excites the viewer. It is what causes a response or reveals an insight.

INFLUENCES: DEGAS TO JOHNS

There are many artists whose work contains the life that I have mentioned, and have had an influence on my thinking or image-making. Degas is one such influence. He admired the rendered naturalism of Ingres, while at the same time loved the freedom of line and color of Delacroix. His own work shows these influences. Degas was not an Impressionist although he sometimes exhibited with them, and he was a close friend of Manet. Degas pursued his own approaches which were as progressive and modern. For example his practice of leaving severed forms cropped on either side of his compositions shows the influence of photography on his work. I appreciate his attention to naturalistic form while maintaining a freedom of line, unlike Ingres.

His drawings and prints most interest me. Degas' monoprints are among the finest produced. Through them he confirms his love for drawing. Norman Laliberte and Alex Mogelon in their, The Art of the Monoprint, say that, "His principle reason for developing his monoprint techniques was to extend the life of the unfinished sketch or drawing... for as long as humanly possible. Apparently his paramount concern was keeping the composition alive or in a state of flexibility with rag and ink until he was totally satisfied."⁴ He often would pull a second or "ghost" impression

⁴Norman Laliberte and Alex Mogelon, in The Art of the Monoprint, (New York: Hudson Hills Press, Inc. 1974), p. 31

from the plate without re-inking with the intention of reworking it with pastel, as is evident from the many reworked prints of dancers or women at their bath.

Elements in my work are combined from various sources. Illusionistic space, (i.e. three-dimensional form depicted on a two-dimensional surface.) is contrasted with automatic, gestural marks which often speak of surface and deny the illusion of space. These marks bring one's attention to the surface of the page, out of the space created. In my "Untitled with Bird and Chairs," gestural lines seem to hover in front of the suggestion of a dimensional bird form. This interaction I find exciting. I enjoy the illusion of depth, and at the same time, enjoy the gestural line as a character in itself, as in the work of Cy Twombly. I like the way such a line can exist in a three-dimensional space. Contradictory elements can exist together, adding to the visual excitement of the developed surface.

Surface therefore is important. The process of markmaking is the activity of drawing, whether depicting space or not. In printmaking, artists are usually conscious of such technique. Due to the inherent characteristics of the materials, one can identify pieces by them: mezzotint, drypoint, lithograph, silkscreen. Sometimes the seductive nature of these looks become the artistic statement. They are about process. Although important, I feel that somehow the artist must go beyond the activity of markmaking to convey a more personal mood, thought, or concept. It is easy to become trapped with one's use of technique. Rodin thought that drawing in itself was not beautiful, only when it

translated "truths and feelings." Many artists avoid printmaking because of the processes involved. They fear the technique or the entrapment thereof. That fear can be overcome. The print mediums' inherent beauties and unique characteristics extend the possibilities of drawing, far exceeding their limitations.

The concerns of content are however, as important as the concerns of form. Ultimately the problem of the artist is one of balance, to keep in check the contradictions and the relation of artist's intent with what the piece seems to be saying. A piece must work visually and be able to sustain the interest of the viewer. Viewing art is not easy. It takes time and energy and concentration on the part of the viewer just as it takes the same from the artist.

Getting back to influences, Jim Dine uses inanimate objects in a personified context. Simple objects of personal significance assume a life of their own, handled in a detailed yet "loose" manner. His tool series immediately come to mind. Saws and hammers float in a simplified suggestion of space. Jasper Johns deals with this similar problem of objectness with his targets, numbers or Savarin cans. These objects become symbols with personal significance but they are handled within an environment in which the primary consideration seems to be surface.

These similar yet distinctive approaches I think are significant influences on my printmaking, in that I follow a similar train of thought. My work tends to be object-oriented, maintaining the integrity of the object to some degree even if

simplified or distorted. A space is suggested by working the environment around the forms. Objects and/or gestural marks become the main characters. I have used the personified object, namely the chair motif, in many prints and drawings over the past two years. Sometimes they are used simply for their interesting shapes while at other times they act as stand-ins for people. The chair image has allowed an interesting shape help to define the illusion of space with its dimensional qualities while also acting as a metaphor for people because of its associations with the human form. I can create situations and confrontations compositionally without directly depicting people.

FORM AND CONTENT (Subject vs. Surface)

Form and content are generally inseparable qualities of a piece of art. A concept cannot be expressed as visual art without taking some form, so obviously what the form is becomes an important consideration. Content is a much less tangible quality. Some pieces may be said to be more concerned with one or the other, but most art falls somewhere in between.

Through my exploration of the interrelationship of form and content, my search led me to an essay which addressed Jasper Johns' stripe paintings from the 1970s and 80s. Charles Harrison and Fred Orton were not satisfied that these apparently decorative works lacked a significant subject or content, judging from their knowledge of Johns' earlier work. They quote Johns by saying:

Art excludes the unnecessary.
I have found it necessary to paint stripes.
There is nothing else in my painting.
I am not interested in expression or sensitivity.
I am interested in the necessity of painting.
What you see is all there is.⁵
Art is something you look at.⁵

Johns is stressing the necessity of painting, the process. To a great extent, form is the content. Harrison and Orton responded by saying that painting of the last 120 years has been a struggle between subject and surface, or form and content.

⁵Jasper Johns, from Charles Harrison and Fred Orton's, "Jasper Johns: Meaning What You See," Art History vol. 7 No. 1 (March 1984) pp. 79-80

Gradually form seemed to win out over content, or surface became as important as subject.

I often find that a piece changes considerably while working, not just its appearance but how I am thinking about it. The subject may become a point of departure for the visualness of the piece. For example in my print "Persona, Personae," I began with an idea about the prescence or personality of a single dominant chair form. When working the environment around the form with layers of brightly printed tusche washes, I noticed that the color was as important as the object, as was the shape or the texture. By changing the print slightly and printing in different colors, a new variation was produced that interacted well with the first printing. Presented together, the two chair forms demanded their own recognition while the color, texture and line brought one's attention to the paper surface. The print seemed to be much more exciting when interacting with a repeated form and not by itself. Formal concerns played a major role.

Form and content both contribute to the impact of the piece. If the result is an exciting, evocative print, perhaps it is at least somewhat successful. Associations and interpretations vary from person to person. Everyone perceives art differently, so what the artist sees may not be what the viewer sees. Sometimes the artist perceives the final product before it is started, but more often than not, for me the concept has developed and changed from the initial idea so that at completion, I am seeing it for the first time.

The Irish poet Richard Kell deals with the form-content

dilemma in the following way.

The artisan didn't collect his gear and say
"What beautiful object shall I make today?"

The poet didn't fondle a phrase and gape,
And think, "What elegant structure can I shape?"

The artisan made a gatepost
So that a certain gate could be opened and closed.

The poet started a poem
So that a meaning could reveal a form.

The gatepost is itself, sturdy and straight:
Precisely this gatepost for this gate.

The poem is itself, the form-in-content:
Exactly these words for what was meant.

The gatepost is rough, distinct and lovable,
Untouched by the purpose that made it possible.

The poem is plain, final, able to please.
Clear of the hungers that made it what it is.⁶

A piece was started so that, as Kell has said, "... a meaning could reveal a form." The idea is expressed by a form that had not existed before. The artist searches for a form that expresses his idea and is visually satisfying. Form relates to the expression of some creative idea or impulse, the content. It is the vehicle of content, the object of the artist's search.

⁶Richard Kell, "The Makers," in Contemporary Irish Poetry: An Anthology, ed. Anthony Bradley, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 173

THE LANGUAGE OF FORM

Communication has always been a basic human need and art has often been referred to as communication, a language of non-verbal forms and symbols. What that language communicates however, is not universal. The forms and symbols can be interpreted in different ways.

Human emotions and instincts have not significantly changed over the years that have witnessed phenomenal technological advances and man's increased knowledge of his world. He has always needed to express himself and interact with other people for his sense of belonging, yet at the same time, he has also needed to be recognized as a unique individual. People express their individuality in countless ways while also searching for their own identity. (Art is part of that search.) Therefore as the need arises for new expression, new words arise to accommodate the ideas. The same is true for the formal elements of visual art. They likewise develop. The problem lies in the fact that often these forms are foreign to the average viewer non-versed in this language of form.

With each artist develops a unique vocabulary of form which becomes associated with that artist's style. The elements may be personally significant, but may not lend themselves to literal interpretation. Art may become confusing to the viewer looking to find what a piece "means" when in fact it may only "be." But for a viewer schooled in this language of form,

interaction with the piece and the subsequent dialogue may be more comfortable. The viewer may be capable of appreciating the piece without having to determine what it means or what the artist was thinking at the time. Interpretations certainly will vary, but this is accepted on the grounds that a literal interpretation may more properly be delegated to the role of illustration.

In my work, if a piece can be reflective, introspective, it has at least been somewhat successful. If it can be appreciated visually or conceptually, it has also been somewhat successful.

PRINTMAKING

One thing that appeals to me about prints is their characteristic "look." There are many factors which contribute to that look, one is a certain richness that the ink produces. Ink is quite different from paint, pastel or graphite. It can have an extremely wide range of values, from intense blacks to subtle lights with an unlimited variety of color possibilities. Graphite is limited in the intensity it can achieve. Although a wide range of values is possible, dark blacks fall short of those possible with other media, and there is a characteristic shine or glare. Mixing media can extend the possibilities of drawing. For example in my "Untitled Chair Landscape," a cut-out chair printed in litho extends the tonal range of the graphite and the india ink, while adding a three-dimensional quality by actually lifting from the surface of the paper.

The possibilities of printed color also contribute to the look of the print. In my "Two Disagreeing Chairs on Blue," the shapes of color are stacked on the paper suggesting the illusion of a shallow space. The shapes overlap, some are transparent, some opaque, some light, some dark, some warm, some cool. The shapes interact in a way that would not be possible if done in any other medium.

There is a physical closeness in printmaking like that of drawing which can be quite different from that in painting. I like to touch the surface of the paper or stone while working,

those long brushes seem to push me away from the canvas.

When one prepares for printing, there are steps during which creative decisions must be made before any color variations are considered. An idea can be allowed to grow through the processing, or can be followed through without alteration. There is however a difference in the look of the print from the stone or plate due to the change from drawing materials to ink. In some instances, technical problems may even open up creative possibilities that would otherwise be overlooked. For example a random splatter or an unplanned texture, even a darkened image may at times be more desirable than the initial drawing.

Certain things about prints are attractive for me, their characteristic looks due to materials, ink density, the paper itself. Printmaking is sometimes derided by other artists because of its necessary process, while others are attracted to the processes. The tradition of the master printer may suggest a link to craft, which some artists may wish to avoid, but it also allows artists to take advantage of the print's creative potential without having to deal with the technical problems. I rather like the physical nature of printmaking and enjoy the union of the process with the aesthetic.

CONCLUSION

Art is a way of dealing with life and emotion. It is a growth process where faces change and images mature. Printmaking or drawing, painting or sculpture, music or literature, all are individual approaches to art. Art for me is somewhat like the idea of time. It is perceived and felt but often difficult to explain. Can anyone adequately define what art is? It is so many things and constantly changing. Throughout this paper I have mentioned a dozen or more things that art can be, none of which could singularly define it. Defining is not the point. Intuitively we all know more than can be expressed in words. Why would visual art be necessary if everything could be expressed verbally? Louis Armstrong once was asked what jazz was. He put it succinctly when he responded to the effect that, 'If you don't feel it, you ain't never goin' to know.' Art is intuitive and personal. One has to find for oneself what things most excite them in the broad realm of art, and explore those aspects.

Art also is a way of confirming one's self worth. It is a way of revealing one's identity. The thoughts that run through my mind while working on a piece sometimes confuse and alter the image. Other times they make it so clear to me how to proceed. Through this silent dialogue I produce my pictures.

John Sloan once said, "Seeing frogs and faces in clouds is not imagination. Imagination is the courage to say what you

think and not what you see."⁷ Through drawing and printmaking I am searching for images that for me, are visually and/or conceptually exciting. Through art I am producing images that relate to the things that I imagine, to my environment, to what I perceive. Through art I am teaching myself what I want to say.

⁷John Sloan, from The Gist of Art, (New York: American Artists Group, 1939) p. 189



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



f11.4



fig. 5



fig. 6



fig. 7



fig . 8



fig 9



fig. 10



fig. 11

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APPENDIX

1. Persona; graphite
2. Persona; etching
3. Persona, Personae; lithograph
4. Two disagreeing Chairs; graphite, acrylic
5. Two Disagreeing Chairs with X; lithograph, india ink, conte'
6. Two Disagreeing Chairs on Blue; lithograph
7. Untitled Chair Landscape; graphite, india ink, lithograph
8. Untitled with Bird and Chairs; graphite, spray paint
9. Pre-flight; graphite, lithograph, spray paint
10. Disassembled Chair; graphite, india ink, spray paint
11. Rudolf's Toupee; lithograph