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### Painted Conversations

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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

PAINTED CONVERSATIONS

by

Deborah J. Felix

May 11, 1983

## THESIS PROPOSAL

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Page 1

Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Fine and Applied Arts  
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Painted Conversations

Submitted by: Deborah J. Felix

Date: September 30, 1982

Thesis Committee:

Chief Adviser: Donald Bujnowski

Associate Advisers: 1. Max Lenderman  
2. Sheila Wells

Departmental Approval:

Date: 9/30/82

Approval, Assistant to the Dean for Graduate Affairs:

Date: 10/10/82 ✓

Final Committee Decision:

Date:



I will create a series of flat surface designs utilizing various dyeing, painting and resist techniques. Each textile design will be directly related to my current figurative studies as a source of inspiration.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my husband, Robert Malkemes, for always supporting even the craziest of ideas, knowing that those wild flashes of inspiration would some day become a reality.

I would also like to acknowledge "Mr. B.", "Max" and "Sheila" for letting the creative messes in the back of the studio produce some wonderful ideas.

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## WHY TEXTILES

In observing my thesis work Painted Conversations, the viewer might ask himself just why did I choose the use of textiles instead of painting on canvas. Actually there is a very sound reason behind my conscious choice of fibrous materials as a medium for expression. Robert Rauchenberg stated what hundreds of artists have also agreed upon; painting is a lonely process. When a painter paints a painting, the end result is usually just that, a painting, a statement that is to be stretched across a canvas and hung upon a wall. Paintings have an aura of preciousness that surround them. Many paintings even have signs that accompany them and denounce people who dare to try to touch them.

Textiles on the other hand, beckon people to make contact with their surface. The initial reaction a person has when he sees a fiber piece is to touch the surface. Most people like to feel what the artist used in creating the art work. As the creator of the thesis work I made a painterly statement through the use of color and composition. Yet one is aware that I chose fabrics instead of paint. A viewer is invited to inspect the surface embellishments or to instinctively run his hands over the fabric. A textile artist's audience can easily relate to the artist's choice of materials. Most people have experienced the thrill of a soft, warm piece of fabric, however, few people can relate to the layering of paint on a canvas by an artist. Therefore, it is easier for the viewer to relate on a personal level to the thesis work Painted Conversations because of its association to objects that may be in most homes. Many of the thesis pieces can be imagined as a quilt thrown

over a bed or as an article of clothing, besides being a wall hanging. A painting is always a painting.

No matter how one looks at the thesis work Painted Conversations there can be no denying that I am concerned with the same questions a painter is concerned with: composition, technique and the use of color. In the thesis work there is an attempt to make each piece step beyond the initial picture frame that encompasses a painting and reach into the world of touchable art, textiles. A person no longer has to live in fear of being caught while touching a piece of art work as the guard glances away. Fiber art was made to be felt, touched lovingly and caressed gently.

## INFLUENCES

Every artist is influenced consciously or subconsciously by his surroundings, environment, past experiences, and by other artists. An artist must acknowledge past and present artist's work and incorporate this knowledge into his own experiences. By utilizing books, museums, schools, travel etc. . . an artist will never lack a source for his inspirations.

Painted Conversations stems from an academic background in the arts with an emphasis on drawing and painting. Each wall piece is flooded with bits and pieces of Matisse, Picasso, DeKooning and David Hockney, all lurking in the background. Even if the influence of each artist isn't visible his spirit exists in each wall hanging.

Each artist has a deep rooted desire to portray life as he sees it; Matisse's, Picasso's, DeKooning's and David Hockney's art work shows a unique vision of one's surroundings which reveals a passion for life as the artist sees it. Each piece in Painted Conversations is also based on an artist's view of life. People, places, rooms, chairs and colors all have been combined into different perceptions of daily events.

Matisse led the way to the use of pure and intense color. In Matisse's paintings there is an instinctual sense of color relationships that deny all color theories, yet somehow work harmoniously because each color comes from Matisse's intense love of color. "This art reflects an existential happiness subject only to instinctive, non scientific laws of color harmony."<sup>1</sup> In looking at Matisse's work there is no doubt that

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<sup>1</sup>Reneta Negri, Matisse and the Fauves (New York, Lamp Light Publishing Inc., 1975), p. 3.



he knew all the rules for color vibrations or optical illusions but he also understood the rules so well, that he could put a bright pink color next to a lime green with no other reasoning behind the choice of colors other than that they look right.

It would be nearly impossible to recreate the colors used in Painted Conversations because each dye bath was created by a combination of dyes, inaccurate measurements and by bright visions of color that only I could see. My academic background is reflected in each piece and takes part in the total composition. A purely instinctual visual sense however, rules in my final color choices. A love for color is apparent in each wall hanging. The need to express life in terms of color is meant to overwhelm the viewer and fight for his attention. Matisse's passion for life and my own zeal for life was recaptured and put into each wall hanging. I hope that others will see what both Matisse and I saw when describing various subjects.

The human figure is an obsession for past and present artists. To define one moment of pain, weariness, anger or joy and leave a lasting impression after the gesture is gone is the object of a great many artists search. Matisse, Picasso, DeKooning and David Hockney drew over and over again, one person after another, in order to create a line, that would represent something that is alive and has the capabilities of feeling. One mark can make a painting great or make it fail miserably. The subject matter is important in a piece of art work, but even the greatest composition can't work if the basis for it isn't sound. There has to be an understanding of the human anatomy before it can be abstracted or represented in the form of a piece of art work. Matisse's dancers, Picasso's cubist women, DeKooning's smears and



David Hockney's nudes in the shower are all based on detailed observations and an insatiable desire to represent man in the form of a gesture.

Matisse's, Picasso's DeKooning's and David Hockney's art work has had an immense influence on other artists. Even though the human figure is not a new subject each of these artists has portrayed his subjects in such a way that they have motivated other artists to look at their surroundings and try to express what it is they see. The most ordinary task could be taken for granted if an artist didn't take the time to capture the task, and make a person really see the beauty that lies beneath the gesture.

Illustration 1



Charcoal on photography back drop paper

Illustration 2



Charcoal on photography back drop paper



Illustration 3



Charcoal on photography back drop paper

## EVOLUTION OF THE WORK

Before any of the thesis work was created there was a great deal of sketching done that eventually became the foundation which Painted Conversations was based upon. Visions of people in rooms with plants, chairs and tables were of concern to me, but they had to be life size compositions or larger in order to make an impact on the viewer. This is how the first large charcoal drawings were started, which later inspired me to carry the theme of people in rooms into a textile medium.

Each pre-thesis drawing (illustrations 1, 2, 3, pages 6, 7, 8) was influenced at the time by the contemporary photo-realists who were involved with describing an actual fragment of time and place. I had a need to forego all use of color except black and white. Color in a drawing often influences how a person interprets the events shown. I wanted to make a statement, void of color but still keep intact the initial idea of recording the time, place and action that occurred.

Drawing directly from 3"x5" photographs I blew up each photo to a human sized scale so that the viewer could relate on a personal basis to the actions described within each drawing. The technique of using a photograph as a reference was later carried into the thesis work. Instead of making literal translations from the photographs I combined my own images and segments from the photos to create a composition. The drawings which were exact renderings of a photograph were incomplete in describing what I wanted to express about ordinary events in a person's life. Each drawing became a stiff and mechanical exercise in copying. This is when I felt it was necessary to take the ideas of a fragmented picture, ordinary events and a moment in time



Illustration 4



Heather

Quilted and appliqued wall hanging using cotton and cotton  
blended materials, technique batik, machine stitchery and beads

size 60"×60"

Illustration 5



Three Chairs  
Machine stitchery on silk, painted with Deka dyes  
size 40"x60"



and describe these ideas in a textile medium. Hence, Painted Conversations was created.

The first wall piece, Heather, (illustration 4, page 10) incorporated the use of a photograph, but took the idea of a person isolated in a room and made it more than just a black and white drawing. Color was added by using the technique called batik, which requires the use of numerous dye baths. The result of this technique was a wide range of color variations. A total of 15 dye baths were used in Heather. The addition of fabrics to the surface of the piece made the total composition take on a three-dimensional quality the charcoal drawings lacked. Surface embellishments, such as threads and beads, were added causing the viewer to come right up to the surface and look at the detailing. I purposely set up a contradiction of terms by inviting the viewer up to the picture plane yet arranging the figure so that there was no facial expression. The lack of expression should have caused the viewer to look at the figure yet be drawn away from it at the same time. In looking at the wall piece a person may have wondered just why the figure is located in that particular setting and what it is the figure is looking at outside the picture frame. The idea of a figure in an isolated situation was maintained throughout the entire thesis.

The next thesis piece, Three Chairs, (illustration 5, page 11) goes even further in its idea of isolation. Two people are seen in a room that is purposely distorted in perspective and offers no details as to where the room is located. Each figure is gazing off the picture plane and into an unknown area. Another important detail to this work in relation to the pre-thesis drawings is the minimal use of line and color



Illustration 6

Hawaiian Dreams

Hand dyed silk and cotton fabrics, appliqued on  
commercial fabric, batik fabrics

size 57"×82"

Illustration 7



Eighty Three Women I Once Knew  
Hand dyed silk, french dyes, oil crayon

size 91"×79"



and how they define different shapes. The viewer is once again invited to look at the surface stitching and treatment of color but is then turned away by the trance-like stares of the figures. Each figure is also treated with equal importance to the chairs in the room emphasizing my intention of only recording the entire scene, as a record of place and time.

Hawaiian Dreams (illustration 6, page 13) still relates to the idea of recording the time and place yet the idea is expressed in a different manner than Three Chairs. There is an explosion of color and pattern that shouts to the viewer to look at what is happening in the picture frame. The picture frame has been purposely exaggerated in order to attract the viewer's attention. However, once the viewer observes the total composition he suddenly realizes that the figure's face, which is suddenly turned towards the viewer, is expressionless leaving the viewer once again looking back and forth to the figure and its surroundings. The use of bold cut out shapes and equally intense colors cause the viewer to stand back and look at the composition as a whole.

Eighty Three Women I Once Knew (illustration 7, page 14) is a recreation of all the women I have seen or envisioned at one time or another. Drawing in a spontaneous, gestural motion recreated the feeling of trying to recapture an action before it changes. The idea of momentary action and recording how quickly it changes was important to me when I created this piece.

The choice of colors are warm and bright and are supposed to evoke a feeling of sensuality. A field of colors are to be the first thing a viewer sees, then he is to notice that there are figures within each block of color. No one figure is meant to stand out more than

Illustration 8



### Thin Thighs

Dyed cotton, batik, hand stenciled, stitched, stuffed

size 10'x11'



Illustration 9



Table Talk  
Silk, French dyes

size 40"×61"

another. Each drawing could be a complete composition in itself yet every drawing is an integral part of the total composition.

A spontaneous reaction to my obsession of the human anatomy was the creation of Thin Thighs (illustration 8, page 16). This piece relates to the previous thesis pieces, and goes beyond the picture frames that encompass the past works. There is a frame around the piece, but now there are words stenciled directly on the surface. David Hockney described the necessity for words once that directly relates to Thin Thighs. "The presence of a word created a feeling about a picture that was more specific."<sup>2</sup> ". . . the writing brings the viewer closer to the surface of the work and forces him to read the painting in terms of a written message, or code."<sup>3</sup>

As the artist of Painted Conversations I wanted the viewer to feel the enjoyment that I had in making each piece, through the use of color, subject and composition; however, my feeling of rejoicing in the creation of a piece of art work exploded in Thin Thighs. I also wanted the viewer to laugh with me and at my total obsession with human gestures, love of bright colors and passion for living.

The playfulness of subject matter and use of intense colors that are displayed in Thin Thighs are also shown in Table Talk (illustration 9, page 17). The wall hanging speaks of what textiles is or can be. There is a combination of all the elements that I felt were necessary to express in the thesis work. I wanted to represent my love of color,

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<sup>2</sup>David Hockney, 72 Drawings by David Hockney, (New York, Viking Press, 1970), introduction.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., introduction.

line and figure on an elegant piece of fabric that a viewer would be unable to resist in touching.

## CONCLUSION

An artist must have patience, the ability to be flexible, and a sense of humor when creating a body of work. I relied upon all of these character traits in order to produce Painted Conversations. In producing the thesis work, patience, flexibility and humor were combined and helped me to convey my feelings for life.

Three Chairs could not have been created if I wasn't patient in doing the tedious machine stitchery, that in the end, made the piece more beautiful and interesting to look at. Before the thesis work I was impatient in creating the artwork, which often resulted in a solution that wasn't always the best for that particular piece. There are still moments of impatience and impulsive actions, but these moments are becoming less and less each time a piece is created. I have found, through the evolution of the thesis work, that it is necessary to take the time to create a great design, dye the exact color or painfully hand stitch a seam in order to achieve the desired effects that I want. Patience was and always will be a characteristic that I will struggle with but will conquer in time.

Flexibility in ideas has offered me many outlets for my creativity. I have discovered that being open to all possibilities is necessary to cultivate a fertile mind. Very often one idea will lead to another and soon even the most remote idea will become a reality. This theory is proven true in the thesis work. Who would have ever thought that a toaster cover with arms and legs would lead to the creation of a 10'x11' piece called Thin Thighs? Each thesis work evolved from a discovery in the previous piece. It would be difficult to say that from now on I will only produce wall hangings. A range of ideas like clothing, three-



dimensional objects or even a production line are all ideas that I am flexible and open to, for use in the future.

Of all the previous traits stated, patience, flexibility and humor, I relied upon a sense of humor the most. A sense of humor was essential to the production of Painted Conversations.

Why Thin Thighs? It all leads back to toaster covers, the human anatomy. Legs are nice especially thin ones. In a moment of desperation one of those Thin Thigh magazines was bought and hence, Thin Thighs became an obsession. If I can't have them I'll create them. When I create them they'll not only be beautiful but also bright and beautiful! Beautiful thin thighs. What about shoes to embellish the thin thighs? Naturally what looks greater than thin thighs with great looking shoes?!

Consequently a sense of humor has enabled me to stand back and enjoy what I have created in a flash of wild inspiration!

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