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Color as a subjective tool of poetic images.

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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

"Color as a subjective tool of poetic images."

by

Carlos O. Torres

November 18, 1985

Approvals

Adviser: Professor Fred Meyer/

Date: *Jan. 13, 1986* Philip W. Bornarth
(for Prof. Meyer)

Associate Adviser: Professor Dave Dickinson/

Date: *Jan 7, '86* David C. Dickinson

Associate Adviser: Philip Bornarth/

Date: *Jan 13, 1986* Philip W. Bornarth

Special Assistant to the Philip W. Bornarth
Dean for Graduate Affairs: Professor ~~Fred Meyer~~/

Date: *Jan 13, 1986* Philip W. Bornarth

Dean, College of Dr. Robert H. Johnston Ph.D.
Fine and Applied Arts: Dr. Robert Johnston/

Date: *1/21/1986*

I, Carlos O. Torres, prefer to be
contacted each time a request for production is
made. I can be reached at the following address.

Calle Eugenio Duarte

INDEX

Dedicatory Inscription. p. i

Thesis Proposal p. ii

Poem Dedicated To Professor Feliz Bonilla . . p. iii

Special Thanks. p. iv

Introduction. p. 1

The Artists' Influences p. 5

Reflections On My Own Work. p. 11

End Notes p. 19

Bibliography. p. 21

Dedicatory Inscription

To my beloved parents,
all my friends and
to those that in one way
or other have been related
to my life, because all these
relationships have given me
the opportunity to grow and
learn how to understand
others as well as myself.

Through these experiences I've
been able to reach my goals
and to develop a more authentic love
and understanding of humanity and
of God.

Thesis Proposal:

The purpose of this Thesis is to evolve a personal style of color and tone which does not come from the subject but from my own feelings about the subject.

In representational art, color serves to identify objects and to create the effect of illusionistic space. I intend to create a more expressive quality by disassociating the color surfaces in the painting from the object to which the color surfaces supposedly belong. In place of objective color, an entirely subjective color treatment may be substituted. The use of nonobjective colors and their relationships become the idea of this exploration.

This work will be realized in a series of paintings on canvas with acrylic paint and Krylon spray paint.

Poem dedicated to Professor Feliz Bonilla

— A ti, isla querida. —

Isla naciente de olas y caracolas
que en medio de la mar
fuiste paraíso...
imagen de sueños dormidos
al sol naciente
despiertan tus colinas...
y tras el oscuro manto de la noche
tu dulce reposo
es contemplado por la luna...¹

26 de Septiembre de 1985

Rochester, New York

A Feliz Bonilla
por la jaca,
la finca y la hembra...
imágenes
llenas de vida y color...

Special Thanks

To Professor Philip Bornarth for his advice on readings and suggestions on the writing procedure of this Thesis.

To Professor Mary Theresa Stahl in gratitude for her encouraging support to fulfill my goal.

To Professor Maria Isabel Nadal for her advice and friendship.

To my special friend, God, that have made all possible.

INTRODUCTION

This work reflects an expressive quality from a rich Spanish cultural background.

This inheritance is abundant in visual poetic images that reflect an expressive emotive character. The poetic written texts are an example of this descriptive quality. On the island image appears as a genteel maiden, surrounded by beautiful flowers. Even the poetic image can be found compared to a shining pearl in the middle of the Caribbean Sea. Through these images the island becomes as if it was able to talk, sing, laugh or even love.

Beside these poetic images, the variations of color that are reflected all over the landscape of the island come across as an intense rainbow because of the effects of the sunlight. Whoever lives on Puerto Rico island cannot escape its colorful influence.

The intense poetic images and the variations of color are the two qualities of my culture that have become aesthetically part of my painting.

It cannot be denied that this poetic influence affects the visual organization of color and form in the development of the work.

Up to a certain degree, the form was determined by an expressive color that implies an emotional effect. Aside from this, the association with the poetic image has formed

the structure of the paintings, influenced at the same time by color.

The visual poetic world represented by the paintings brings an immediate recognition of reality. Because shapes of images remain with some traits of reality, the use of color is subjective. These two contrasts between poetic image and subjective color use are distinct. At the same time the subject matter produces a visual order with respect to the color quality.

While the color contrast change is a perfect fundamental for the pictorial field, the motifs are used as an entirely subjective expression to define a poetic attitude.

The colors used in the paintings have their own significance.

Usually the colors are related to a specific definition in order to symbolize a corresponding meaning.

The use of color in the present work intends to have a direct emotional effect upon the viewer as associated with a symbolically poetic feeling.

Within the Symbolist movement an important point is made concerning this association of color and its emotional effect and symbolic poetic feeling. Edward Lucie Smith states:

Born of the Symbolist movement, Modernism has nevertheless been hostile to the symbol as a means of visual communication. The use of abstract art, in particular, has tended to focus our attention upon the work as a thing in itself, wholly identified with the art-process. Any art which can be described as symbolist must necessarily reject such an attitude. Behind the shapes and colours to be found on the picture-surface, there is always something else, another realm, another order of meaning.²

These statements expressed here were based upon the development of a style to fulfill a precise idea and this can be seen reflected through the examples of paintings shown in the enclosed photographs.

THE ARTISTS' INFLUENCES

There are many studies throughout the history of art which confirm that the search for subjective color treatment is not unique. Many painters have approached painting with an emotional reaction toward the color they use. The Post-Impressionist painters particularly painted subjectively. Among the painters that most impressed me were Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, with their powerful color and synthesis of reality. Their use of color was completely expressive.

As stated by John Rewald, author of Post-Impressionism, From van Gogh to Gauguin:

Vincent van Gogh was then especially preoccupied with the suggestive power of color and meaning or to create specific moods through contrast, harmonies, or slight variations of tones. When he wrote to Gauguin that he wished to suggest poetic ideas through his coloration, the latter replied that he agreed, though he himself professed to know nothing of poetic ideas.³

'I find everything poetic,' Gauguin specified, 'and it is in the dark corners of my heart, which are sometimes mysterious, that I perceive poetry. Forms and colors, harmoniously established, produce poetry by themselves.'⁴

van Gogh was deeply grateful for such pronouncements, vague as they were, having always admired the poetry he discovered in Gauguin's work.⁵

After seeing some of their paintings reproduced in books and galleries, I, as a young artist, have found an intriguing use of color in their images. These were not first impressions. The various images which result from poetic expression were not overpowered by my initial reactions to their paintings. After slowly absorbing these images, I was infused with an urge to discover ways of realizing emotions that express a poetic-cultural background through color use.

Color in nature led me to a greater awareness of the potential for poetic expression. I wish to use color to express visual poetry, as did van Gogh and Gauguin.

The problem is how to determine the kinds of feeling which can produce a dependable form that expresses the character of the composition. For this reason it is better to develop a color composition than to be schematic about the forms that are to be expressed.

After gaining knowledge of color relationships, it is possible to use them as an element of form. Color has become a tool that I use subjectively to evoke the poetic image I wish to express in my paintings.

It is said that a drawing is a necessary tool to express the forms. It is so because the drawing seems to contain the ability to create the aesthetic qualities.

These drawing qualities appear to be a disturbing characteristic in my work, because these qualities create tension within the painting. This is because the main force is based on the colorful execution of the form.

We can see this in van Gogh's work as John Rewald states:

— Zouave Lieutenant Milliet
stated of van Gogh:

He drew quite well, but he replaced drawing by colors, painting too broadly, paid no attention to details.⁶

John Rewald pointed out this drawing aspect which van Gogh stated in a letter to his brother concerning subject matter:

I have now reached the point, at which I have decided no longer to begin a painting with a [preparatory] charcoal sketch. It leads to nothing; one should attack a drawing directly with color in order to draw well.⁷

An artist cannot escape the fact that he is a creative person. This creative impulse is the inside voice that allows the artist to overrule his technical knowledge.

As a painter, I have found that the term representation really means to copy from what you see. But the objects should be re-created through the emotional response in order to gain a fresh and vivid image. Realizing this has led me to discover that there is no such thing as a

correct procedure for originality. There is no basic "right" or "wrong" way to create and communicate ideas and feelings. These can be appreciated in the development of the artistic styles of any culture throughout the world.

Of these aspects of creativity Rollo May, when quoting Picasso, stated:

Whenever there is a breakthrough of a significant idea in science or a significant new form in art, the new idea will destroy what a lot of people believe is essential to the survival of their intellectual and spiritual world.

— as Picasso remarked:
'Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction.'⁸

There are many painters and thinkers throughout the history of color that disclose an independent style in the use of color as Faber Birren established in his book Color Perception in Art.

Some of their studies were of luminous effects, others on broken tones, or based on simultaneous and alternate contrast, and on the study of the science of coloring.

Faber Birren pointed out that at the beginning of the twentieth century Fauvism was taking place. Even though it didn't last long, its contribution to the development of the study of color was making its use free and uninhibited. During this time the Expressionist movement was developing

the use of "candent" (incandescent) hues. After these movements, Orphism started to show up, using an abstract and semiabstract composition of spectral hues, "but they were hardly original or daring after Fauvism" as Barren said.⁹

Scientific study and work upon color variations as well as the work of artists with their modes and expressive use of color, have become the evolution in the use of color.

There is no doubt that all these great men and their knowledge were an influence upon the world of color. In the course of a long period of discovery they developed marvelous studies and techniques.

The profound analysis of natural light phenomena and illumination are a remarkable contribution to technical examples for scientific as well as aesthetic examination of human perception.

But this study, based on poetic images and subjective color, does not pretend to go as far as those great men did. This is a study to define my goals and direct my search as a painter in this phase of my life. It might remain the same through my life, as a continually growing goal, or I might find another, more complicated direction.

REFLECTIONS ON MY OWN WORK

Through color my personal creative emotions are expressed. These are part of my reaction to life and the surrounding environment, but do not necessarily represent or pretend to be descriptive of common real life images.

The use of color has become my principal tool to create a poetic mood in my paintings. This is simply because I have found that in one way or another we are emotionally affected by color.

Color has an appealing quality that makes one aware of his own senses. This power of color is used to symbolize ideas in order to emphasize their meaning. Color and its relationship serve to create a direct emotional effect upon us in conjunction with the symbolic poetic meaning in paintings. This colorful poetic effect can become descriptive of the images and their mood.

This poetic attitude about the use of color can be seen in van Gogh's work, as John Rewald mentions in his book, Post-Impressionism, From van Gogh to Gauguin, that:

It became clear from van Gogh's own commentaries that each subject he chose to paint released in him specific emotions or associations of ideas which he sought to express by means of composition, of simplification, and especially of color. Each amplifies its literal, obvious value with a hidden, symbolic one that adds another dimension. (64) In a certain way, therefore, van Gogh's paintings done in Arles are like a diary, a record of his changing moods and inspirations of his hopes and desires.¹⁰

However, the paintings seem to be more obviously based on a representation. The subject matter used is not important in itself. The subject is merely a stimulus to develop the creativity of subjective color. The colorful way in which the subject is presented is the important idea. Its character has been interpreted removing it from what the observer sees in an original subject. This character interpretation has been fulfilled by qualities of color but not necessarily by traditional color associations.

Vincent van Gogh found himself working with the same idea as he has said in a letter to his brother Theo:

'I am always hoping to make a discovery there,' he informed Theo, 'to express the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementaries, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. To express the thought of a brow by the radiance of a light tone against a somber background. To express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance.' (59)¹¹

About these words expressed by Vincent van Gogh, John Rewald concluded that:

With real passion van Gogh explored the possibilities of expressing different moods through color combinations.¹²

Being a creative artist has lead me to experiment with a multitude of approaches in order to develop a per-

sonal style using color through a process that works together in a subjective manner according to my own feelings.

Expressing and exploring a diversity of color effects gives me more ways of expanding the use of color in its interrelationship with images. This color interrelationship with images makes me look towards the evolution of a personal style using color to determine the final appearance of my paintings.

At this point it has been necessary to analyze the components of color, emphasizing adjacent colors and their reaction to each other. This analysis defines a mood that arises out of an exploration essentially based on making one color look like two, or two different colors look alike.

The experience gained through this exploration shows that there is a difference between physical response and psychic effect, which arises from visual perception. It can be compared in a way with Op Art that was drawn largely from the field of psychology as Faber Birren states in his book Color Perception in Art. Most of its basic source and rules have come out of textbooks on such themes. To a great degree, Op Art is based on the study of simultaneous and alternate contrast. The visual effects of color studies upon nature are optical and can be described.

Information on this subject of changes in color effect can be obtained through two books of references. One is The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Color by M. E. Chevreul and The Interaction of Color by Josef Alvers.

Looking at the photographs of the paintings, one can see simultaneous areas of different values of the same color and areas of the same value of different colors placed side by side. Depending upon the width of the area, the eye perceives a modification of color. This modification influences the intensity of color, and at the same time the optical composition of the two juxtaposed colors. This is done to make the areas of color appear different from what they are. If the adjacent color has a dark value, a light value placed upon it will appear lighter, and a dark one will tend to look darker. The effects of chromatic colors upon one another tend to tinge each other with their separate hues. This effect will happen immediately because of the influence of the afterimage. One sees the variations of color and their values because the surface of the canvas reflects light. The color seen will be determined by the amount of opacity or reflection of a given area. It is reflection that determines how the different areas of color affect each other. The intention is to enhance the contrast of images and shapes by using

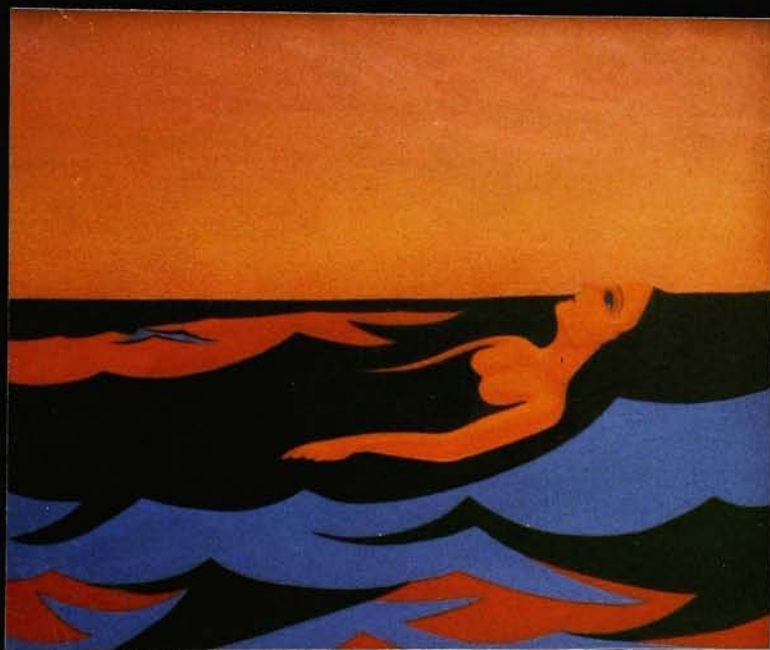
contrasting colors. The colors are ordered with respect to the pictorial field; one can sense the variations which appear among the images.

The awareness of these changes in color should make one realize that the color will not be used to create a specific feeling, but for a cohesion of the relationships of the composition.

By gaining a fundamental knowledge of the basic facts of color relationships, I have found a more interesting way to create a poetic mood with color. I have learned to use color as a vehicle for personal expression in order to symbolize my ideas.

Creativity is an art of organizing ideas. As an artist I have been able to combine elements introducing a pattern of my own among the forms of things, evoking sensations based on color. These sensations are hidden from the observer as explicit subject matter.

The paintings are unique because they are different from objects and incidents of everyday association. The use of such objects or incidents as subjects, the creative process fulfilled, gradually obviates the representation of nature as a primary goal. However the initial response to subjective color and the way in which it is presented in the paintings are what becomes important in my work.



"Isla naciente de olas y caracolas."



"En medio de la mar fuiste paraíso."



"Imagen de sueños dormidos."



"Al sol naciente despiertan tus colinas."



"La noche trae tu dulce reposo."

END NOTES

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4. Ibid., John Rewald, p. 185.

5. Ibid., John Rewald, p. 185.

6. Ibid., footnote by Rewald #58, p. 261. Milliet quoted by P. Weiller "nous avons retrouvé le zouave de van Gogh, Lettres Françaises..." No. 561, March 24-31, 1955.

7. Ibid., footnote by Rewald #54, p. 199. Vincent van Gogh to his brother, (Arles, Sept. 1888), *Verzamelde Brieven*, vol. III, No. 539, p. 312.

8. Rollo May, The Courage to Create. W. W. Norton O. Company Inc., New York. First Edition, copyright 1975, by Rollo May. Published simultaneously in Canada by George J. McLeod Limited, Toronto. Printed in the United States of America. Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data May, Rollo. The Courage to Create includes bibliographical references. 1 Creation (literary, artistic, etc.). I. Title BF 408.M33 1975 153.3'5 75-23055. ISBN 0-393-01119-4 Preface by Rollo May, p. 63.

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10. Ibid., footnote by John Rewald #64, p. 211.
Vincent van Gogh on England. Compiled from his letters
by his nephew, Amsterdam, 1968, ill.

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12. Ibid., John Rewald, p. 211.

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