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THREE-DIMENSIONAL LANDSCAPE

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Arts of the Rochester Institute of
Technology

Date: 29 May 1968

Advisor: Professor Frederick Meyer

dedication

I wish to express my appreciation to those who have helped in the production of this book. . . .

- to Fred Meyer, for his valuable advice and guidance
- to Tom Taffel, for his patience in taking the photographs
- to Jim Youmans, for his painstaking reading of my manuscript and printing of the book.

S.B.C.

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I. PURPOSE OF THE THESIS:

The purpose of this thesis will involve the execution of three-dimensional constructions to include electric light and textures that relate to the landscape theme.

II. SCOPE OF THE THESIS:

The thesis will include six to eight finished works. The box-type structures will not be in motion, but it is hoped a feeling of kinesis will be created by using electric light in conjunction with mirror and textured surfaces. The three-dimensional paintings should impell the viewer to want to view the painting from every facet and become involved with each side as it relates to other sides. The compositions will be based around a landscape theme with reference and contrast to aspects of urban and rural environments. Inspiration and insight will be gathered from books dealing with art history, conservation, and philosophy.

III. PROCEDURES:

- A. Research, reading, and observation
- B. Preliminary sketches for three-dimensional constructions
- C. Construction of masonite boxes
- D. Treatment of textured surfaces
- E. Application of color
- F. Installation of electric lights and mirrors
- G. Formation and presentation of the thesis book

IV. ALTERNATIVE PROPOSALS:

1. Landscape paintings involving many views of the same scene in juxtaposition.
2. Paintings that depict and cast opinion on the war in Viet Nam.

I. The Problem

This year I have had the opportunity to concentrate on my painting more intently than ever before and now I can reflect and discover what has happened. My present direction in painting and my rationalizations for this direction follow a very logical pattern. In the fall my paintings were very decorative in color usage and complex in composition. Most paintings from that period could have been better executed on three or more separate canvases instead of one. There was something in those early creations, however, that deserved re-direction. Emphasis upon texture and creation of rich surface found a natural existence in my very earliest works. This could be attributed to my painter-sculptor inclination that emerged from my undergraduate work.

The works presented in this book are the result of much experimentation and adjustment in a personal struggle to express myself through landscape paintings. The very nature of landscape painting lends quite naturally to three-dimensional form. The textural elements in each piece are intended to relate to either an urban or rural feeling. The belief that the ever-expanding urban environment is quickly killing the natural rural environment is not completely unfounded. However, it seems to me that aspects of urban and rural environment can be linked together to produce a most satisfying and aesthetically pleasing landscape.

Urban life will be reflected in most of these works through the basic hard edge structure of the masonite boxes. I have chosen to place the basic simple rectangle shape as a limitation on myself. The use of mirror, glass, glossy paint surface, and flashing and static electric light will also contribute to the urban spirit. Rural elements will be introduced through the use of organic shapes and rough-textured surface. Subtle hints of nature's imagery will be present in most of the structures.

These paintings should prove that urban and rural environments need not fight each other for supremacy. A proper blend of each can produce a beautiful and deeply satisfying visual experience. Actually, beauty is a comparative and relative matter. The true beauty of urban and rural environments is best shown when they are contrasted side by side.

The “problem” exists in my ability to convincingly impart these concepts visually. The desired solution depends on the successful application of these concepts in the execution of the three-dimensional landscape paintings.

II. Formative Influences

The progression of my work from the flat canvas to the three-dimensional cube was almost inevitable. The flat surface did not enable me to make the visual statements I wanted to make. I built up impastos of paint and layered gesso paste until the canvases became so heavy it was not feasible to build them any higher. My work still had overtones of warmed-over abstract expressionism. Raised panels and added textures failed to lift my works above mediocrity. It was apparent to me that there had to be a better way to express my ideas.

During the year, I took the opportunity to visit as many galleries and museums as I possibly could. In New York City, I visited every major museum and gallery. There I found some interesting three-dimensional minimal sculptures. There seemed to be something significant in these basic forms but I was not ready to accept them for their purist qualities alone. In my opinion, there should be more substance to hold the attention of the viewer; at least, in my work, I wanted to present more than pure geometric or organic form.

At the Whitney, the shaped canvases, especially the Great American Nude # 90 by Tom Wesselman, fascinated me. Wesselman used the figure with landscape to great advantage. The rich surfaces of Karl Zerbe's paintings were particularly pleasing. The catalogue on Zerbe credits him for his unique combination of nature with a scientific flair for chemistry. His works seemed more decorative than I wanted mine to be, but I looked and I thought.

A look at landscapes by William Palmer gave me a better understanding of the romantic quality of landscape. He was saying, "landscape, beautiful lyrical landscape," but I felt the need for a deeper exploration. I was searching for a more complex and meaningful look into nature. Both Palmer and Zerbe said, "light, day, night, color, landscape," but I was not ready to stop yet. I continued to search.

Some interesting wood constructions by Robert Laden were observed. The artist created relief and assemblage sculptures from parts of forms having once served as elements in a chair, table, or old buggy. The juxtaposition of parts in the new reunited state were nice, but they were not completely removed from their intended functions. This visual experience was meaningful and gave me more to think about in relation to my work.

I was looking for a way to compare and contrast my landscape. I wanted to combine the simplicity of a Gottlieb landscape with the romanticism of William Palmer's work. I wanted to capture the insight and sensitivity found in Walter Meig's painting At Half Light with the basic geometric sculpture Wild Rice 1967 by Lyman Kipp.

Industrial designers and architects also seemed to have something to say to me about my problems in expressing my landscape. I was impressed by the construction of paper furniture and storage units designed by Protter Associates in San Jose, California, and Papp, Hanau-Main in Germany. The architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright seemed most pertinent to my investigation.

The formative influences started to have an affect. Slowly and yet deliberately, my solution began to appear. There were many problems left to conquer, but I knew that a three-dimensional expression of my landscape was the answer.

III. Research

FORM

Though it may seem strange, I have chosen to relate my three-dimensional landscapes to the architecture and theory of Frank Lloyd Wright. In my study of various artists, I found Wright's philosophy of design very closely related to mine.

As my constructions developed, I found the rich surfaces needed the contrast of subtle color. Simplicity became a necessary direction for me to consider. In his autobiography, Frank Lloyd Wright commented on the need for simplicity in his architecture.

“Organic simplicity might be seen producing significant character in the harmonious order we call nature. I loved the prairie by instinct as a great simplicity -- the trees, flowers, sky itself, thrilling by contrast.”²

Wright's earliest works had a yearning for a new sense of simplicity he called “organic”. The construction of the Winslow house in Chicago shows the first effects of this simplicity.

Simplicity alone, however, just for the sake of being less complicated, is not the answer. Absolute simplicity would have taken me back to the purist and minimal qualities that I wanted to rise above in my works.

²

Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography*, p. 139

“In architecture, expressive changes of surface, emphasis of line and especially textures of materials or imaginative pattern, may go to make facts more eloquent -- forms more significant. Elimination, therefore, may be just as meaningless as elaboration, perhaps more often is so. To know what to leave out and what to put in; just where and just how, ah, that is to have been educated in knowledge of simplicity -- toward ultimate freedom of expression.”³

The sculptural quality of my landscape paintings made it necessary for me to consider the structures as a unity, while maintaining a separate artistic merit to each of the sides. Wright talks about this problem in terms of plasticity.

“Plasticity may be seen in the expressive flesh-covering of the skeleton as contrasted with the articulation of the skeleton itself. If form really followed function as Sullivan said -- here was the direct means of expression of the more spiritual idea that form and function are one: the only true means I could see then or can see now to eliminate the separation and complication of cut-and-butt joinery in favor of the continuous surface. Here, by instinct at first -- all ideas germinate -- a principle entered into building that has since gone on developing. In my work the idea of plasticity may now be seen, as the element of continuity.”⁴

My landscapes would have to express this same element of continuity if they were to be successful. The greatest contradiction found in my comparisons to Wright's work exists in the use of the box. Wright's biggest challenge was the destruction of the box in architecture. He was dedicated to building structures that would break-away from the traditional box construction in an attempt to bring the environment of the outside inside and the inside outside. I chose to keep the box as a vehicle for expressing my feelings about urban and rural environment.

³ibid., p. 144

⁴ibid., p. 146

In the use of building materials, I tried to be consistent and use the found object and mechanical additions to the structures in a very direct and honest manner. The use of the porcelain flashing light fixture, plastic flower, and textures was an attempt to emphasize the contrast in the statements. Wright comments on the honesty and desirability of accepting things as they are.

“Architecture, after all, I have learned -- or before all, I should say -- is no less a weaving and a fabric than the trees are. And as anyone might see, a beech tree is a beech tree. It isn't trying to be an oak. Nor is a pine trying to be a birch, although each makes the other more beautiful when seen together.”⁵

LIGHT

Several of the structures employ the use of electric lights. In this area I have just begun to scratch the surface. The possibilities for application of electric light to painting and sculpture are numerous. Pioneers in the creative use of light include the American Thomas Wilfred, Hungarian Laszlo Maholy-Nagy and the Russian composer, A.N. Scriabine. The direct use of light can give an impression of actual movement. Artificial light is a relatively new tool for artists to use in visually expressing their ideas.

Insight and inspiration were gained by a visit to the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York. There I was able to view and study the works of several of the top artists dealing with electric and artificial light in the form of light boxes. The works that offered the most inspiration were works by artists John Van Saun, Donald Miller, Donald Zurlo, Ed Samuels, Julio LePard, Richard Hogle, and Earl Reiback.

In an article in the Architectural Record of May 1965, Gyorgy Kepes made the following statement that had particular significance in helping me to make electric light an integral part of my works.

⁵Ibid., p. 168

“Among the wide range of goals today there are many that could and should be of equal concern to painters, designers, film-makers, sculptors, and others. Themes that suggest themselves for the initiation of such a program include (1) The creative use of light; (2) The new aspects of environmental art -- the gearing of sculptural and pictorial tasks to the dynamic scale of the new wealth of technical tools and implements.”⁶

I have been trying to use light in the same way I would use a texture or any other element of design. Artificial light, woven into my compositions, would create a continuous transformation of space and form.

BACKGROUND

For today's man, it might be assumed that appreciation of natural beauty and landscape painting is a normal and enduring characteristic. Ruskin, in his third volume of Modern Painters, wrote a section entitled “Of the Novelty of Landscape” in which he claims that mankind has almost acquired a new sense through landscape painting. Until the nineteenth century, nature was found or interpreted in art in the form of symbols and usually portrayed very decoratively as background.

The fear of nature in early history is a reason we find it expressed so rarely. To the layman in medieval times, nature was not enjoyable - the fields meant nothing but hard work; the sea coast meant danger of a storm. Between the fields and sea stretched enormous unknown areas of forest and swamp. It is easy to understand why symbols of nature became so widely used in early medieval art and why natural objects bore such little resemblance to their actual appearance.

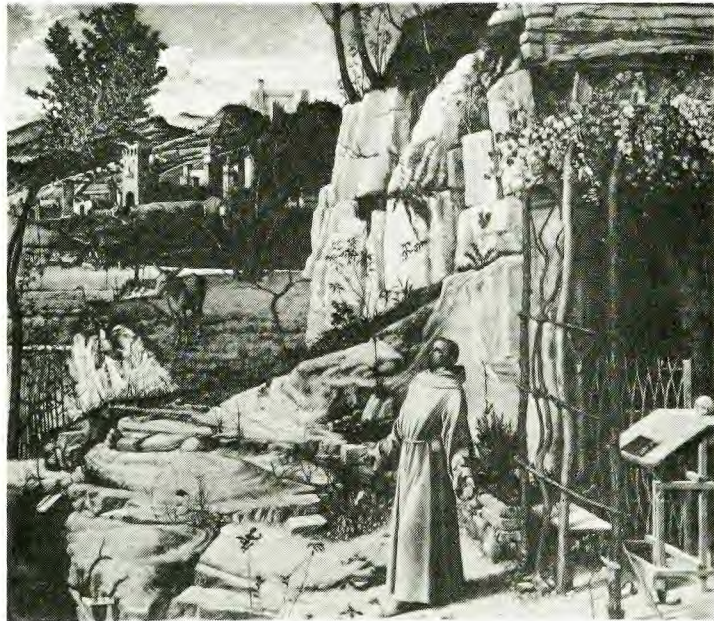
Early Christian philosophy suggests that the enjoyment of nature or landscape is sinful. St. Anselm in his twelfth century writings said things are harmful in proportion to the number of senses which

⁶Gyorgy Kepes, “Proposal for Collaboration : Creative Use of Light”, Architectural Record, 137:151 (May 1965)

they delight. Therefore, it is dangerous to sit in a garden where there are flowers and blossoms to satisfy the senses of sight and smell, and songs and stories to please the ears.

Most early epics, sagas, and Anglo-Saxon poetry regard nature briefly and in a hostile manner, tending to dwell on the horrors of it. Today, landscape art is accepted as a major theme in painting. The contemporary artist dwells heavily on praising the beauty in nature and continuously strives to create fresh interpretations of her many wonders.

One of the paintings that has affected me most is Bellini's *St. Francis*, which is in the Frick Collection in New York City. Bellini is one of the few artists prior to the nineteenth century who gave emphasis to landscape. Here is paint applied with a kiss of love in every brush stroke. Few other paintings contain such a quantity of natural details, all observed and rendered with remarkable patience. The painting is full of light, painted with a vigorous sense for the individual identity of forms. Bellini's later works have a more general atmosphere. However, it is obvious that Bellini knew nature and could respond to her many moods.



St. Francis in Ecstasy
Giovanni Bellini, The Frick Collection,
New York, 15th Century

After Bellini's painting, the landscape of fact disappeared from Italy, and it did not appear again until the mid-seventeenth century. Of course, the backgrounds of Giorgione, Titian, and Paul Veronese are full of great passages of observation. However, none of these people considered landscape as an end in itself. Theories of the time insisted that the value of a painting depended on the moral or historical importance of its subject.

Landscape painting today lives not by virtue of depiction of place or atmosphere, as it has in the past, but by virtue of the more direct facts of its abstraction, i.e., emphasis upon the plastic qualities which derive from its inspiration. The descriptive lyrical representations of landscape have no place in my paintings. Such recording is probably not very proper today, and, even if it is, it has a disturbing obviousness that draws attention away from the true beauty of the more suggestive features of sunlight, shadow, color, form, and texture. These should be the chief rewards.

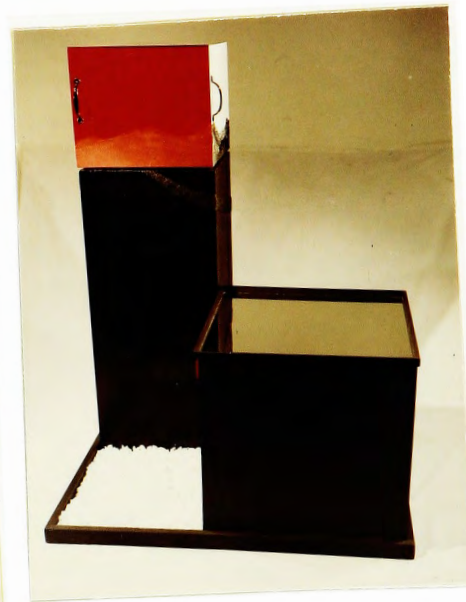
“Painting is of a dual nature. It is not the literal scene from life that we care for, else we might content ourselves with a photograph. It is not the material facts of earth or sky or sea upon canvas that afford us pleasure, else we might get these perhaps by a glance out of the window and so not need their imitation. What we seek for in every great picture is nature combined with the human element. The artist, his manner of seeing, his manner of thinking, his manner of telling, becomes an important factor in the picture of which we must take account.”⁷

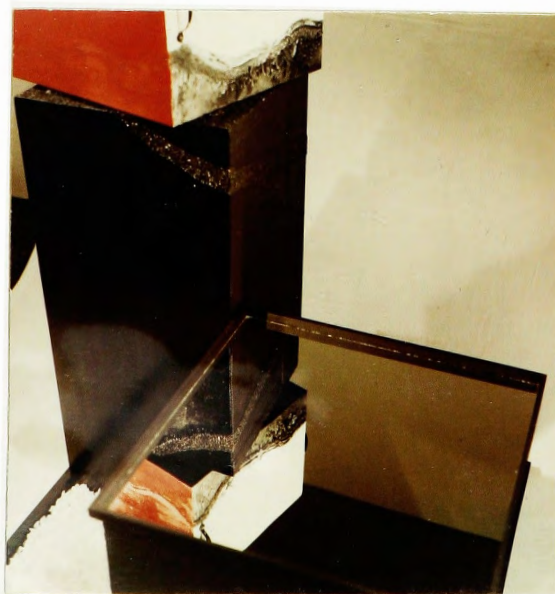
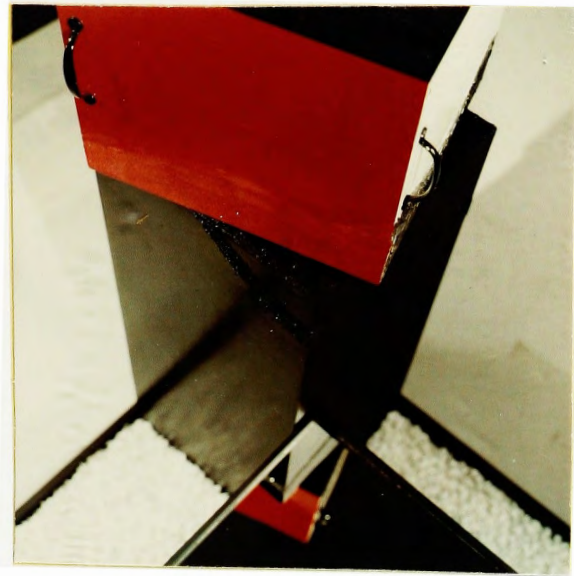
⁷John C. VanDyke, Art for Arts Sake, p. 30

IV. Photographs of Works

" The beauty of things--
Is in the beholders' brain--
the human mind's
translation
of their transhuman
intrinsic value." 8

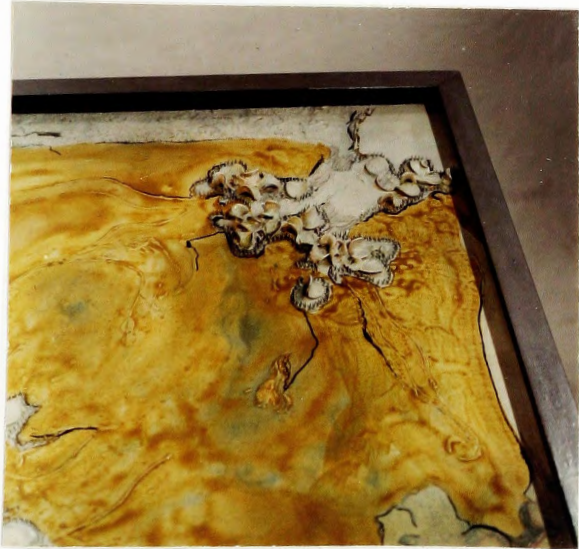
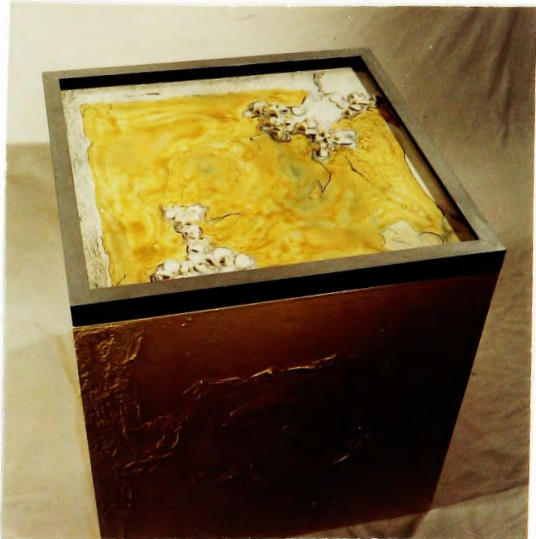
Robinson Jeffers

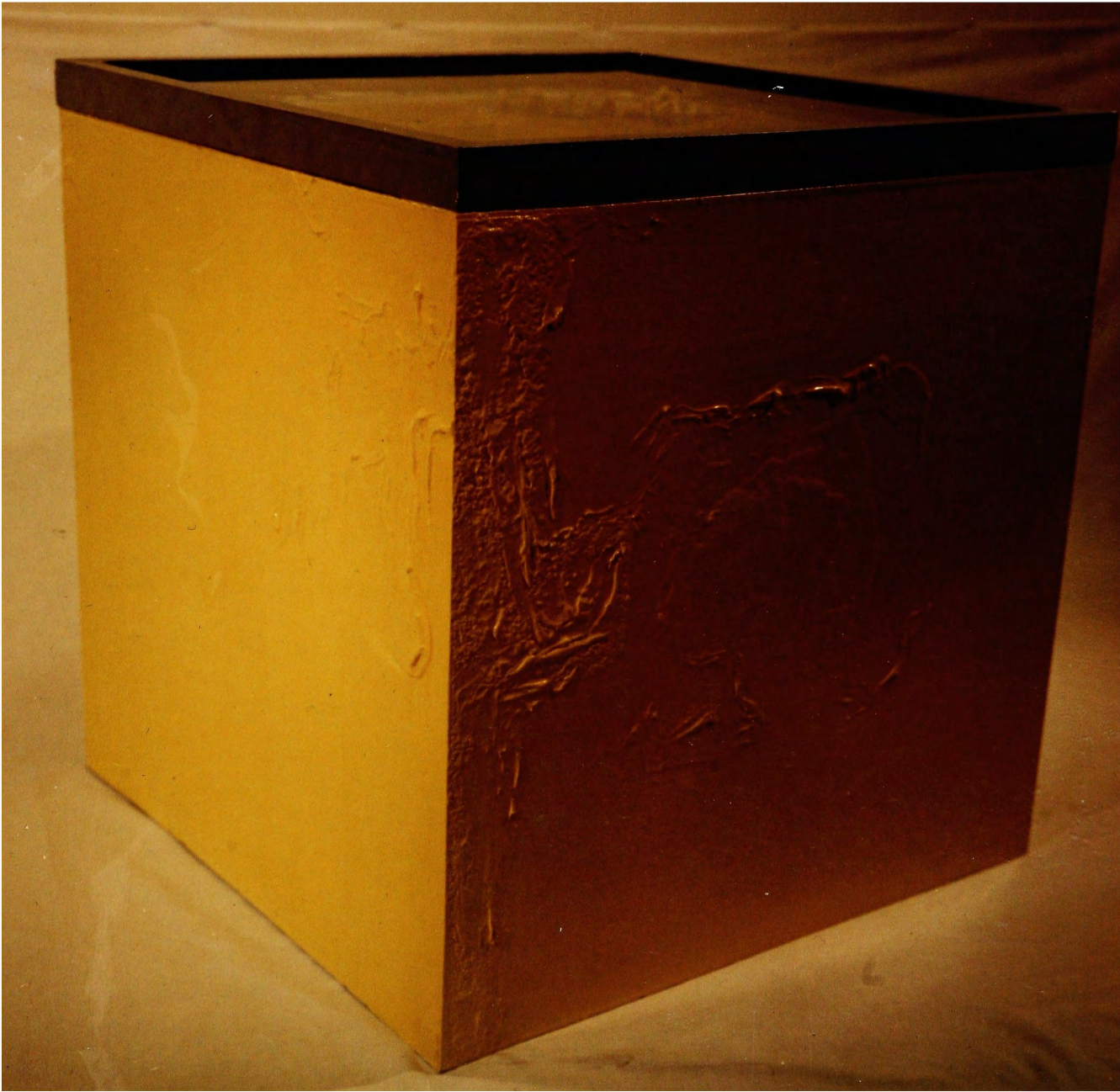




" . . . and we know
that the enormous invulnerable beauty of things
Is the face of God, to live gladly in its presence, and
die without
grief or fear knowing it survives us." 9

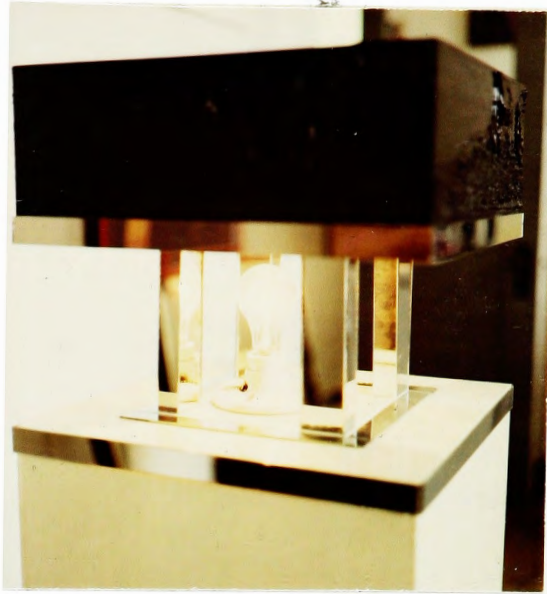
Robinson Jeffers





" . . . Whatever electron or atom or flesh or star or universe
cries to me,
Or endures in shut silence: it is my cry, my silence; I am
the nerve,
I am the agony,
I am the endurance. . . ." 10

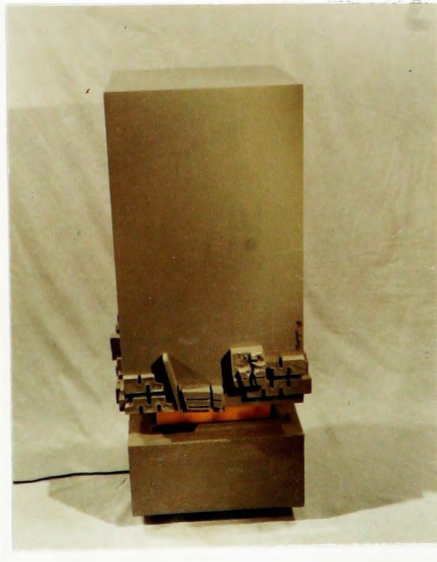
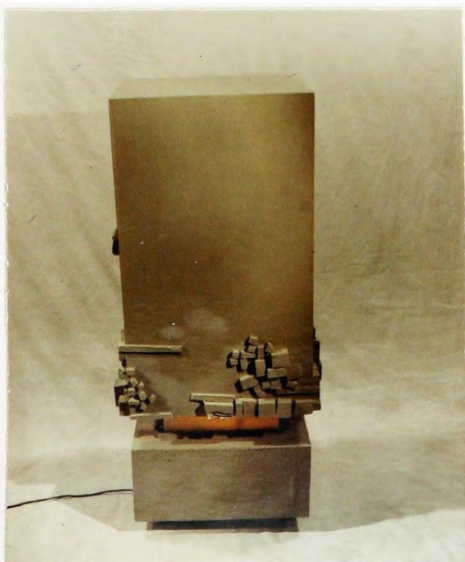
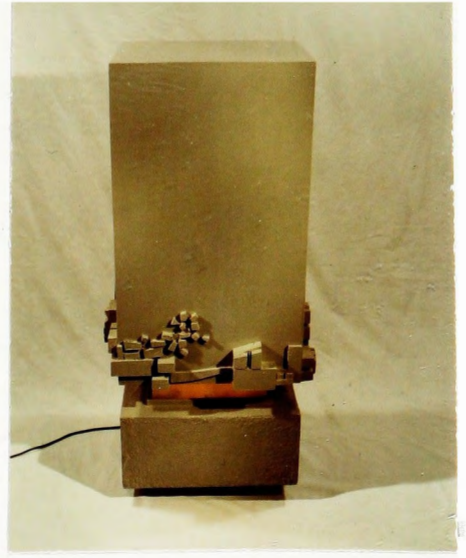
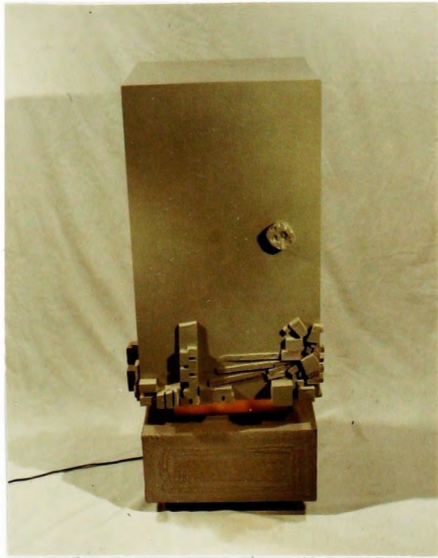
Robinson Jeffers



"Men suffer want and become
Curiously ignoble; as prosperity
Made them curiously vile
But look how noble the world is." 11

Robinson Jeffers

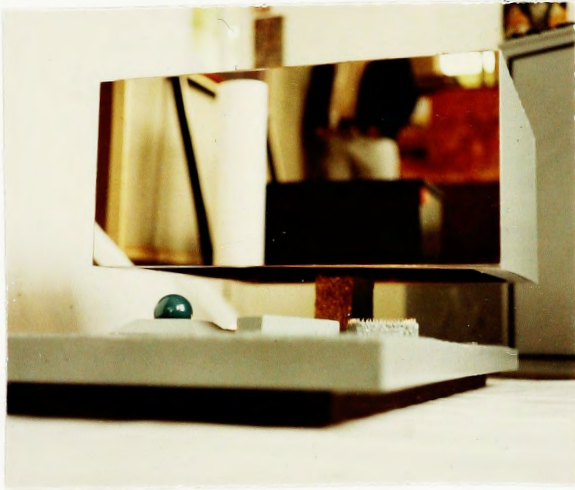
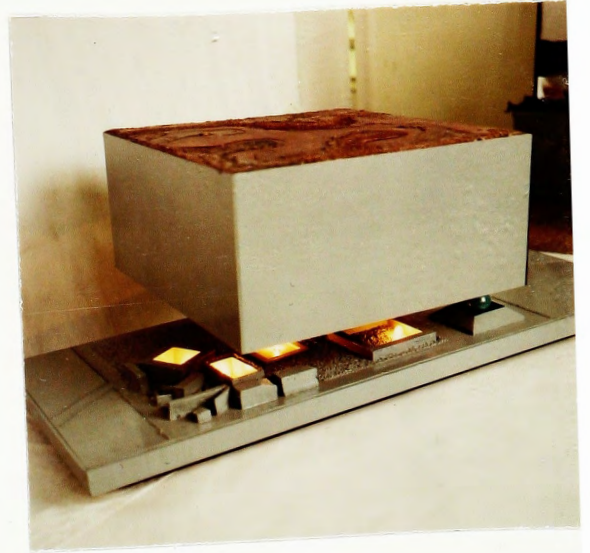
11. Ibid., p. 102.



"Here is a symbol in which
Many high tragic thoughts
Watch their own eyes." 12

Robinson Jeffers

12 ibid., p. 120



*“The Brutal destruction of our landscape is much more than a blow against beauty. Every artist, scientist, and philosopher in the history of mankind has pointed to the laws of nature as his greatest source of inspiration: without the presence of nature, undisturbed, there would have been no Leonardo, no Ruskin, no Nervi, no Frank Lloyd Wright. In destroying our landscape, we are destroying the future civilization in America.”*¹

Peter Blake

¹ Robert Wenkam, Kauai - And the Park Country of Hawaii, p



" . . . I remember the farther
Future and the last man dying
Without succession under the confident eyes of the stars.
It was only a moment's accident,
The race that plagued us; the world resumes the old lonely
immortal
Splendor. . ." 13 Robinson Jeffers



" The beauty of things--
Is in the beholders' brain--
the human mind's
translation
of their transhuman
intrinsic value." 8

Robinson Jeffers



" . . . A lonely clearing;
a little field of corn by the streamside;
a roof under spared trees." 14

Robinson Jeffers



" I have heard the summer dust crying to be born
As much as ever flesh cried to be quiet." 15.

Robinson Jeffers

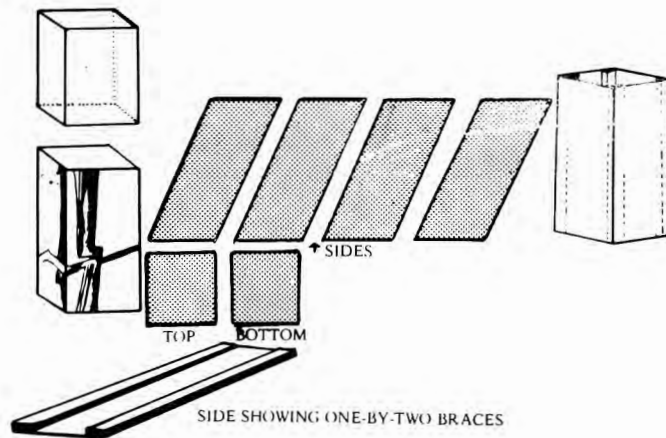
15 ibid. , p. 37.



Building materials used for the basic structures of the three-dimensional paintings were four-by-eight sheets of untempered masonite board, one-eighth inch thickness. This material was decided on after first trying several other types. The quarter-inch masonite was too thick, making it difficult to get a smooth edge. The tempered masonite was too heavy and also difficult to finish.

Inside, the structures were braced with one-by-two strips of clear white pine. The D-select grade of one-by-two is cheaper, but often warped; therefore, it is wiser to buy the better quality material.

Each seam on the structure was glued with Craftsman white glue and nailed. It helps to glue two strips of the one-by-two to two sides of the masonite, nail them, and let them set for several hours before attempting to join the other sides.



PARTS AND CONSTRUCTION
OF A 3-D FORM

When the sides were secure, the top was nailed and glued in place. Many of the shapes were also fitted with bottoms. The nail heads were all set and the holes filled with a Bondex product called Resurfo. This particular spackling paste seemed to be superior because of the excellent bonding quality as well as the ease in sanding the surface smooth again.

The framework for these cubes is almost too simple. However, problems of warping are always present when working with masonite and this very basic simple construction seems to have more strength and to be able to avoid warping better than a sturdy, complex inside frame would allow.

A minimum of tools were used. A regular hand saw, hammer, nail set, putty knife, clamps, plane, screw driver, and electric sander were essentially the only tools necessary. After sanding and re-sanding with various weights of sandpaper, the exterior surfaces were painted with gesso. Usually two and sometimes five coats were needed. Many thin coats proved more satisfactory than two thick coverings.

The textured areas were achieved in many ways. Care was taken to be sure that the textured materials used on the surfaces would bond securely. White glue was used to adhere materials not containing their own bonding agents. Glass and mirror surfaces were adhered with epoxy cement. Plastics were fastened with Testor's Cement for Plastic Models to join plastic to plastic and plastic to wood.

Styrofoam was used on several structures. It must be held in place with white glue. Any styrofoam used was sprayed heavily with a white plastic paint called Santa's Spray Paint, of all things, manufactured by the Plasti-Kote Company of Medina, Ohio. This paint coated the styrofoam so that an enamel could be painted over the surface without causing a chemical reaction to the styrofoam. Regular water-base paints can be painted on styrofoam after it is covered with several coats of gesso.

In structures using electric light, care had to be taken in construction to assure ease in replacing bulbs. Several of the landscapes are designed to be

lifted apart to aid in bulb changes as well as contributing to the mobility of the units. Extreme caution was taken to avoid making the light a "gimmicky" addition to the structures. The light is intended to be an element of the landscape that relates to the urban environment just as the organic-type surfaces tend to reflect the rural scene.

It should be mentioned here that the environment of the gallery of setting for these paintings should be maintained at normal or near-normal lighting conditions. In a darkened environment, the light of the painting becomes an overpowering element in the composition, and can cause too much harshness. A too-bright surrounding, on the other hand, can damp the effect, by underplaying the contrasts. (It is not felt, however, that the aesthetic qualities are destroyed under various lighting, only changed.)

The use of mirror on some of the structures is very interesting in the way it lends a humanistic quality to the works. In the studio during the construction period, there were many times I felt that the mirrored boxes were watching me! Movements in the room are reflected on the mirror surface and the reflection of the viewer is often an intentional device to relate the work more directly to him.

The painted surfaces have had various treatments, depending on the desired effect. Slick glossy surfaces were achieved by using enamel paint and epoxy enamel. Satin finishes and detail color areas were obtained with latex and acrylic paints.

One of the intentions of these constructions is to involve the viewer and cause him to move about and investigate the structures. For this reason, I feel it unnecessary to have the structures rotate on their bases. One construction, however, does include a ball bearing turntable. The use of the turntable in this piece causes the viewer to become more involved because of the way in which it creates so many additional combinations in the composition.

Found object and assemblage-type additions have been used whenever the aesthetic and emotional considerations have seemed to warrant them.