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Variations on a painting theme II

Nancy Neilsen Erickson

The University of Montana

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VARIATIONS ON A PAINTING THEME II

by

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1969

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Purpose</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Materials</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Discussion</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Summary</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLATE</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Under the Living Room</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Endless Road</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Dream March</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. I Love My Kitties, Too</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Through the Keyhole</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Flying Siamese</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. PURPOSE

This paper describes and discusses a few works from an M.F.A. thesis show of paintings, drawings, prints and fabric sculptures. The works chosen relate to each other in structural elements and are experiments in color, composition and two- and three-dimensional form. The paintings deal with the juxtaposition of human and cat images with interior and exterior settings, the trend being toward richer color relationships and bolder, more definite forms, finally resulting in three-dimensional paintings.
II. MATERIALS

Twelve-ounce cotton canvas was stapled to standard 1 x 2 pine stretcher frames in all cases. One or two coats of Liquitex gesso were used to size and prime the canvases. After sanding the surfaces of the canvases smooth, sketches were drawn in with graphite or a burnt umber wash. Small preliminary oil drawings were also referred to. When the completed paintings had dried, Damar varnish or Soluvar matte picture varnish was sprayed or painted on. Frames consisted of Drip cap siding and ordinary molding.
III. DISCUSSION

The paintings will be described with regard to the elements of composition, color, and subject matter.

In Plate I, a large rectangular form presses down upon a couch in a room which in turn pushes the floor of the room onto the heads of various types of creatures imprisoned underneath. The tilt of the rectangle and slight interaction of the forms under the floor provide the only movement in the painting. "Endless Road" (Plate II) is structurally very similar; a large landscape with a road rests upon a head (also contained in a rectangle) which then rests upon the floor. Movement, however, is introduced here by using a figure running on the highway who gestures toward the horizon. A small suspended sun above the road's vanishing point keeps the viewer's eye from leaving the frame entirely and directs attention toward a procession of cats which advances in exaggerated fashion from the horizon, down the road, out of the landscape picture, past the head, onto the floor and out of the painting. Plate III expands the march of the cats. There are more
cats and they are larger. The middle unit of the painting this time is a reclining woman, who, looking toward the left, is seemingly unaware of the procession. Continuing along the woman-cat theme, in Plate IV the woman (now in pink and reclining on a sleigh-like couch) gazes off at cats crawling around her and cats leaving the picture on the lower right-hand corner. The road becomes an inclined plane on which she appears to be sliding upward. The angles of movement in this painting are more acute and the painting is less static than its predecessors. In an effort to again change the compositional format from the rectangle, a keyhole-like structure was used in Plate V to focus the forms. This keyhole was suspended in front of a simple landscape (two different values of lavender) and inside the keyhole a white cat with a blue head moves back into the center of the painting, attacking a lavender-headed cat emerging on the left. This action is balanced compositionally by a large striped tail which waves out of the right area of the painting. Orange bowls of fruit (or whatever) disappear gradually from the center to right side of the painting, performing the function that the cat processions held formerly. Plate VI depicts a canvas form
stuffed with newspaper, covered with gesso, suspended by a fishing line, then stuffed. The observer, released from the confines of the rectangle, is allowed to see a form (resembling slightly an airplane with two wings) in mid-air, which is still a painted, two-dimensional surface. Except for the painted Siamese cat on the underside of the mobile, the painting is unrelated to the series just described.

The hues of orange, violet, and green are approximately the same in Plates I through V although the intensities change from painting to painting. Plate I is subdued in value and the colors of the faces muted by green glazes. In the second painting, white and bright greens are handled freely with thick paint in the upper section in order to force stronger tones in the lower areas of the picture. "Dream March" (Plate III) has a more controlled, tighter color scheme. Plate IV uses subtle values on the road's centerline and in the sky. In Plate V, the tonal variation near the white cat's foot creates a stronger modulation of form without the use of thick trailing paint (Plate II). The stuffed form shown in Plate VI is mostly white with an illusionistic cat, star, bullets and lemons painted on its surface. It does not provide the same type of color
transitions as found in "Dream March." The colors here are applied more as linear elements in the cat and can be contrasted with the gradual variation in blues on the nose of the plane (as in parts of Plate V), and the textural, stark surface of untreated gesso ground.

The subject matter for the paintings evolved through extensive drawings of cats and people and from observation of objects about the house.
IV. SUMMARY

A series of paintings has been described with regard to the elements of composition, color and subject matter. In order to concentrate the emotional impact of the images the compositional format was changed late in the series from a rectangle to a keyhole shape (which contained the subject matter) on the usual rectilinear canvas. It is believed that this procedure increased the impact of the painting. Assuming that a painting which could be viewed from all sides would provide a further strengthening of the visual effect, a three-dimensional canvas was stuffed and painted. The painting was hung from the ceiling so that the whole form would move in addition to the shapes on the surface of the form. The painting was successful as a mobile unit, but the painted images did not really enhance the form, nor did the form relate to the images as well as could have been hoped. Also, the overall lumpiness of the shape tended to interfere with its effectiveness.

In order to limit the number of variables in the series the hues were kept much the same from one
work to the next. Color values were changed to provide alterations in mood. The subject matter, human and cat forms combined in various ways with familiar landscapes and still life objects, remained constant throughout, thus again limiting the number of variables in the thesis.
PLATE I

UNDER THE LIVING ROOM
PLATE II
ENDLESS ROAD
PLATE IV

I LOVE MY KITTIES, TOO
PLATE V

THROUGH THE KEYHOLE
PLATE VI

FLYING SIAMESE