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Kathryn Marohn

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FAMILY GATHERING:  
AN INSTALLATION OF PAINTED CUTOUTS

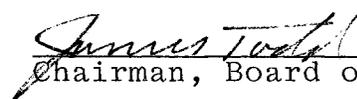
By

Kathryn Marohn

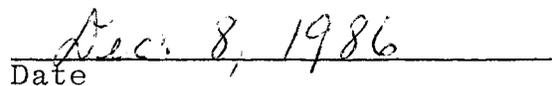
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## INTRODUCTION

The paintings in my thesis show consist of ten figures organized and hung on one wall so as to be seen as one large piece. The wall functions as a frame for the painting, and is incorporated as the space in which the figures exist. It is painted black to isolate it from the other walls in the gallery. Formal decisions, such as size and number of figures, as well as color choices have been made with this specific space in mind. (See figures 1 and 2.)

The painted figures are life-sized or larger, and cut out of masonite. The cuts are made at the edges of the figures in order to emphasize their particular gesture. Each gesture has been chosen to express the psychological condition of the figures. This reflects my interest in non-verbal communication, and gender identification and the readability of personality types through posture. Bright colors are used to create a painted surface with exposed layers of paint underneath. The areas revealed agitate or energize the surface of the figure. The figures represent specific members of my family and are painted from memory with the aid of photographs. Figurative features are blurred to illustrate the lack of focus involved in remembered images.

The cutout format allows me to dispense with the establishment of the usual figure-ground relationship by removing

the figures from the ground plane. An ambiguous situation is created because the figures are painted illusionistically and give the suggestion of a fuller, rounder figurative shape which conflicts with the actual flatness of the painted object.

They are mounted an inch away from the wall to emphasize their flatness. Space is explored primarily in an illusionistic manner and actual space is only employed in a limited sense.

By creating figures that are life-sized or larger, and by removing them from their usual boundaries I intend to have them exert a strong presence, almost a confrontation with the viewer. However, the feeling of a shared space between viewer and art work is not fully exploited. The paintings do not stand in the room as the viewer does, they hang on the wall, maintaining a sense of distance. The black wall creates a sense of a void in which the figures exist in an ambiguous state. I have given them no environment; no narrative or explanation for their presence. They merely exist as figures to be analyzed for their relationship to each other and to the viewer.

#### HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Large-scale painting has been employed throughout the history of art. Frequently, large paintings have been used as a medium for communication in a public space. Frescoes created during the Italian Renaissance and American mural paintings from the first half of the twentieth century are examples of this application of large-scale paintings. The

immediate impact and communicative potential of large images have been recognized by many contemporary artists. Paintings by such artists as Alex Katz, James Rosenquist, Leon Golub and Robert Longo utilize large-scale, figurative images to express issues of urban conflict, the influence of the media, the abrupt juxtaposition of public and private space in urban society:<sup>1</sup>

The large work involves the spectator more directly in a physical sense. He shares its space; he cannot escape it; it shuts out everything else and has the power to absorb him completely in his contemplation of it.<sup>2</sup>

An interest in environmental or installation art developed as an outgrowth of these concerns during the 1960's. Artists moved into human spaces to create art which interacted with these spaces and eliminated the separation between art and life. Installation artists, such as Judy Pfaff and Jonathon Borofsky, are not concerned with the creation of an art object, but an event or moment which is impermanent and discarded once the moment has passed in time. Installation is used in a limited sense in my work, to create the sense of a frozen moment in which these figures have assembled. They have been created specifically for this space and formal decisions have been made accordingly.

Alex Katz is an important influence for me in his use of the cutout. Though he paints in a highly defined and realistic manner, the use of the cut edge makes the gesture of the figure more important in conveying a sense of the

subject than the specific features. The silhouette is no longer merely an outer contour, but a precise source of information for the illusion of volume and the physical identity of the figure. The gesture, simplified into one flat shape becomes instantly recognizable, even from a distance, whereas the more descriptive physical features take longer to comprehend. The re-emphasized gesture gives his cutout figures a stronger sense of immediacy than is found in his traditional format paintings. An example is the cutout titled Howie (See figure 14.)<sup>3</sup>

Emphasis on the gesture is also a primary element in the painting of Francis Bacon, who for many years has had an important influence on my painting. Bacon's painting is an observation of human attitude without illustration or narrative. The interest is only in physiognomy, and a fleeting moment of expression. Bacon has said, "I wanted to paint the scream more than the horror."<sup>4</sup> (See figure 15.) Bacon's form of blurred representation has impressed me tremendously. I have attempted to achieve a similar effect to combining naturalistic representation of the figure with emotional expression.

#### TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS

I have developed a technique which allows me to combine two different types of activity which are traditionally associated with painting and drawing respectively. Layers of

flatly-applied acrylic paint are alternated with layers of oil crayons, drawn on top of the paint in an expressionistic manner. When each layer of oil crayon is covered with a layer of acrylic, a resist occurs. It is then possible to scratch away the acrylic paint which has been prevented from bonding with the underneath layers by the oil crayon. The paint underneath is exposed in the shape of the marks created with the oil crayon. It is in this way possible to recall each layer painted and each series of marks drawn.

The finished product becomes a composite of several drawings and paintings. This process allows a gradual building of the figure both formally and in terms of content, constructing from the interior skeleton to the exterior skin. The final layer of paint is applied in a more representational manner, with a modeled surface to suggest three-dimensional illusionism. A razor blade is used to scratch through, exposing the structure underneath. The process of exposure becomes an important metaphor for the uncovering of the individual's psyche. (See figure 13).

#### CONTENT

The figures represent members of my family, and the sources for the images are photographs, many that I have taken myself and carried with me for a long time. I have chosen to represent people that I know very well and feel strongly about, but have not seen for some time. In this way

I am dealing mostly with memory in attempting to arrive at a portrait that "feels like" rather than looks like the subject. The frozen and blurred image existing in a dark void is an approximation of how these people appear in my memory. I have chosen to represent them in particular states that reflect their relationship to me, gestures and attitudes that express how I feel about them. They may have changed in time or may never have actually existed in this way except in my mind. Yet I feel that they are recognizable, in that they express feelings and attitudes that are understood for their humanness and universality.

The figures have been assembled in particular groupings, expressing a dynamic interaction or shared attitude among the figures in the groups. Two figures appear twice, expressing different elements in their personality and my relationship to them.

Reading the figures from left to right, the first is a grouping of three figures. The first two represent my sister, appearing at her current age of twenty-two, and as an eighteen-year-old. (See figures 3 and 4.) These figures are placed together expressing the trauma of coming of age and fear of sexual maturation. In both figures she turns her back to the viewer as a form of self-protection. The older and younger figures represent the masculine and feminine side of my sister. The child is feminine and vulnerable. The adult is masculine, defensive and menacing. Both figures

wear shorts, and the exposing of legs represents vanity and a preoccupation with sexuality, yet the vulnerable regions on the front of her body are hidden and protected from the viewer. The third figure in this grouping is my grandmother, painted to emphasize old age; stooped shoulders, sagging breasts, unsteady posture. (See figure 5.) This juxtaposed with my sister as a child to portray a child's view of old age as frightening, monstrous and an image of decay. The three figures represent the beginning and end of the sexual-reproductive cycle.

The next group of three figures, "John," Gay" and "Judi" are additional or extended members of my family. They are seen here acting out various stages of sibling rivalry. The first figure, John, has isolated himself, withdrawing from the other two. He is stooped, hesitant, uncertain whether to advance or retreat. (See figure 6.) Next to him, Gay and Judi are in the process of a dialogue in which they alternately reach out and pull away. Gay is androgenous, with fairly masculine features, though a slight suggestion of breasts. She pulls her arms back in a passive, vulnerable gesture, yet her right forearm is emphasized as large and powerful, with her hand clenched in a fist. (See figure 7.) Judi reaches out tentatively, but her body remains closed to the viewer. She appears more feminine than Gay, but her breasts are covered by her left arm and a red purse hangs in front of her genital area, emphasizing yet making inaccessible her

sexuality. (See figure 8.)

Following this group is a large male figure who stands alone. This is my father. He is threatening due to his large size, but he is not aggressive. He twists to face the viewer and raises his hand to his face, frozen in a moment of indecision between speech and silence. His overall appearance is clown-like. (See figure 9.)

The next two figures are my mother and grandmother. My grandmother appears again representing an alternative view of old age: spry and lively, though faded, almost ghost-like. She is clearly feminine, assuming an exaggerated pose, both at ease with and poking fun at her femininity. (See figure 10.) My mother approaches from out of the shadow, dynamic, assertive, with an ambiguous masculine/feminine quality. Her large hat symbolizes strength, authority and adventurousness. She approaches the viewer in an open gesture but appears in three-quarter view, slightly held back. (See figure 11.)

The final figure is my brother, adopting a casual attitude of confidence and egocentricity. His sexuality is emphasized in the open posture of the lower half of his body and the emphasis on the curves of his bare legs. However, his upper body is closed expressing an amount of emotional reserve. His hands are active and assume the gesture of conversation. (See figure 12.)

Although I have outlined my specific intentions when formulating the content of my paintings, I am aware that

these intentions are not particularly apparent. I have been most intrigued by the complexities of expression in gesture and body language. I feel my interest in sexual roles is expressed and that some figures seem more approachable than others, but beyond that I have left more specific interpretation up to the viewer. Blurring the image makes the identity uncertain, making it more possible for the viewer to recognize these as people they may know. Any face can be inserted. It is through facial features that we make a positive identification.

#### CONCLUSION

I have attempted to create a large-scale painting comprised of several figures incorporating a painted wall and the space of the gallery in the composition. A relationship is established between the viewer and the painted objects through a similarity in size. However, the result is a confrontation between the viewer and the figures, which allude to reality yet are clearly two-dimensional. Though the sources for these figures are members of my family, representation is generalized to facilitate a more personal identification for the viewer. While the viewers' reactions seem to be varied, they are aware of entering a different kind of space, confronting images of people and responding to them from their own experiences.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rosenblum, Robert, "American Painting and Alex Katz," from Berkson, Bill and Sandler, Irving, Alex Katz, Preager, New York, 1971. p.8.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, Ellen H., Modern Art and the Object, Harper and Row, New York, 1976. p.128.

<sup>3</sup>Lippard, Lucy R., "Alex Katz is Painting a Poet," from Berkson and Sandler, p.3, 102.

<sup>4</sup>Trucchi, Lorenza, Francis Bacon, Abrams, New York, 1975. pp. 2, 25.

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