

1992

Memory and observation| Synthesizing sensation

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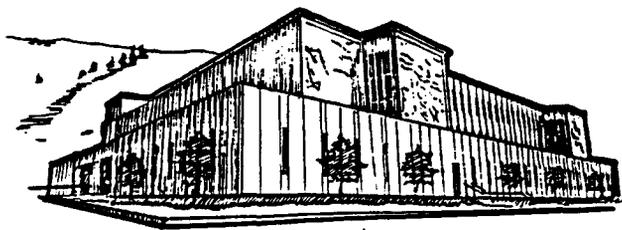
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University of
Montana

**Memory and Observation
Synthesizing Sensation**

by

Gene Rumpel
B. S., Oregon State University, 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1992

Approved by



Chair, Board of Examiners



Dean, Graduate School

Date June 5, 1992

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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

These paintings and drawings represent part of a body of work done in the last few months that explore the boundaries of my memory and my perceptions. They investigate my interest in the landscape as a source of emotional tone and sense of identity.

They are landscapes of the mind in the sense that they are studio work. But, as landscape they are necessarily part of my empirical sensations from daily observation and remembered information. The paintings and drawings influenced each other. Some paintings are done from drawings, some drawings were done from the paintings, and as days change, some pieces reciprocally changed each other over time.

All works started with a mark of charcoal or paint on canvas or paper abstractly instigating an image not of a place, but a sense of place. Each one is an abstraction.

Both the paintings and drawings use light as substance and light as form. The light itself can become solid. Conversely, light also denies form, creating flux and instability. One is a transcendental light, the other momentary. I have tried to combine both in this work. Color is used in the paintings in an attempt to reveal form as a solid and as a dematerialized sensation. Color serves as an ingredient to articulate space and deny it.

These pieces attempt to read the code of the landscape out of the immediacy of perception and the distance of memory.

The paintings also use color as light which transfers form to a sensation of form. Color is also used to articulate space and at the same time deny it.

The marks of charcoal, eraser, or paint are meant to be a physical metaphor for the wavering of the landscape before our eye, the changing resonance of its space and the degree of our emotional connection to it. I have attempted to show silence without stasis, movement without noise, stability with change.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This work is influenced very broadly by the notion of landscape as a worthy subject in itself. I feel the work is in line with the Romantic sensibilities that began with the 17th century Dutch painters insofar as it is about the internal 'code' of the landscape and its effect on our sensibilities and not about imposing an ideal as concept or form.

Depiction of reality is part of the interest of this work, not reality as a concept of the literal, but rather as a way of seeing and sensing. The

paintings and drawings become their own reality in response to both the ocular impression and one's memory of the sensation of landscape.

The painters who have influenced me are ones whose search for light, or color as light strike a responsive chord for my interests in painting as a response to the actual physical landscape. Within these brackets then, there is an historical trail of painters who approach landscape in one of two ways, plain air and conceptual. The first are mostly European, the second mostly American. Chronologically, (not particularly the most influential or favorite) I admire Daubigny for his sense of quiet, mood, and the physical quality of his paint surface that should contradict his sense of silence but does not. Adolphe Montecelli (1824-86) also interests me for the physical impasto of the paint structure and the abstractions his images become as they are dissolved by light. Paul Cezanne and Vincent Van Gogh, both influenced by Montecelli have influenced me for oddly the same reasons. Van Gogh again is important for the physical quality of his paintings and for the attempt to use color as a symbol for the mental experience of the mood and the transcendental reality of his surroundings; to make his experience solid. Cezanne (and Van Gogh) attempt to transpose the mundane into the monumental. Cezanne is especially influential in his combining of classical yearnings with the "realizing" of his sensations. I admire his structure which

is realized from the fitfulness of seeing and atmosphere, and not a result of Renaissance rules of atmospheric perspective and conceptual rules of construction.

Monet's work is significant to me for the drama, air, and light it contains. I have admired his ability to vary his mark or touch in seemingly endless variations to express light, form and texture.

The American luminists, specifically Fitz Hugh Lane and Martin Heade, were an early influence on the work. I have borrowed their selective and measured use of the vertical against the horizontal to structure space. I also wanted to embody their effort to make light solidify forms and space and to transcend the momentary in my own attempts to render a sense of place.

Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer have also interested me because of their luminist structure and the weight and solidity of their light. John Marin has had an effect on my work in the way he combines conceptual luminist light with the air and movement of momentary sensation. I am referring specifically to the Maine Coast seascapes.

Fairfield Porter interested me in his use of color as light in his landscapes and the way he abstracts perceptual reality. His viewpoints on

painting have also influenced me in that he "came to view painting and, for that matter, art criticism as functions of percepts, rather than concepts." ¹

Finally, and perhaps the most apparent are the influences of Elmer Bishoff, David Park and Richard Diebenkorn, and their figurative expressionist paintings. I have been influenced by their scale and movement of paint as a part of the act of painting. Their paintings have also had an effect on me in the way they become a kind of visual record of the search for an image as a result of overpainting. I have also admired their ability to generate light within their paintings that reads as an experience of place that is not necessarily literal. It seems to me that this search on the canvas or paper is fundamental to the idea of accumulative internal experience that becomes memory and sensation realized. I would also include Willem DeKooning for the same reasons and for his play between painting as drawing and drawing as painting.

MATERIALS AND TECHNICAL CONCERNS

The paintings are essentially built on an alla prima oil approach on primed cotton canvas stretched on heavy wood bars,

Paint was applied both wet on wet and drybrush. Glazing was also done with a very direct approach over both wet and dry paint, sometimes

with turp only, sometimes with a simple damar or stand oil medium. The amount of either varied with the need at the moment for more or less fluidity. For more fluidity more medium was used if the paint underneath was either thick enough or wet enough to cause too much mixing or dragging into the glaze layer being applied over the top. I used less if the layer underneath was dry enough to allow the glaze to slide over it. I always used less, rather than more medium or turp in order to keep the paint out of the tube less diluted, so as to retain its chemical structure. The biggest percentage of paint was applied without additives. If it was possible the axiom of thick over thin was given consideration as a technical concern for paint bonding.

There was a desire to retain a reasonable amount of good mechanical structure between paint layers. This desire was always at the service of either the surface effect or the momentary rhythms of physically realizing the image.

Paintings were also worked on reciprocally if possible to alleviate the technical concern for drying time, but this also speaks to the process of keeping a working dialogue going between different images on different pieces. This approach grew out of my recognition of a need to keep physical and mental rhythms going while working on some of the earlier drawings.

Brushes, palette knives, rags and fingers were all used to apply paint. Tubes of paint were occasionally used to apply paint directly to the surface.

Mixing of tones was done both on the palette and on the canvas. Tones that were meant to act as a glaze tended to be mixed more on the palette but were also applied directly to the canvas and spread out over areas to cause a shift in the light from dark to light or cool to warm. Scumbling was also variably applied as loose color mixtures or mixed as singular tones.

Rags and fingers were used to apply, blend, and pull out areas of paint. The technical concerns were interwoven with what I felt was a need to be responsive to a shift between the various techniques as a function of style. The style is essentially a gestural response to memorable sensations and the ongoing dialogue with the painting's voice.

The drawings are done in a straightforward manner with vine charcoal on relatively inexpensive drawing paper. Three or four hardness of vine sticks were used and two sizes. Pieces were broken into different lengths suitable for the mark. Pink pearl erasers were used to pull out areas of charcoal or make marks. Erasers were sometimes cut to points or wedges to allow for varying mark making ability. Some layering of charcoal or mark on the surface was done by alternating hard and soft charcoal or pushing the

charcoal on the surface with fingers or dirty erasers. A minimum amount of workable fixative was used to the same end and to fix the final image.

FORMAL APPROACH, STYLE, CONTENT

Laying-out both the rectangle and the shape of the basic horizontal to vertical axis was an important beginning to some of the work. This approach relates to the luminist influence mentioned in the historical background. There is also an element of stream-of-consciousness in both the beginning and the progression of any piece as part of the desire to keep the possibilities as open-ended as possible as a particular image emerged. This approach was somewhat parallel to the methods of DeKooning and the California figurative mentioned in the historical background. The combining of these two approaches was an attempt to temper the solidity of the transcendent moment with a sense of flux and movement of physical sensation.

Amy Goldin, in an article on Willem DeKooning states, "Abstract Expressionism tried to abandon an intention and to reach a no-man's land where the ephemeral and the eternal become one."² It seemed to me that this intention with or without 'form' was in line with my own attempt to decipher meaning or content in the landscape.

A thought from Elmer Bischoff also served as a model for style and intent; " Ideally, one would wish to do away with the tangible facts of things seen--of people, houses, paint on canvas, the rectangle of canvas--and deal directly with the sensation of feeling. One dreams of moving free of the shapeliness of shapes and the colorfulness of colors."³ This comment was made in reference to both his abstract-expressionist and figurative periods.

The critic Thomas Albright put it a little more clearly, commenting on Bischoff's paintings; " A unity of feeling is the principal end and what you present in a painting is something that is immediate. If it makes a total impact people are not going to pull it apart for anecdotal references. They're going to be hit--engulfed to experience this world of the painting. What is most desired in the final outcome is a condition of form, which dissolves all tangible facts into intangibles of feeling."⁷ Style, given that kind of aesthetic as a goal, was for me in this work at the service of feeling as memory and sensation, and therefore an integral part of the content. There was also a need to transfer information between paintings and drawings that demanded a flexible approach.

This general description of approach holds for all of the paintings and drawings with modification. One stance may have been more paramount in

the beginning or at other times during the evolution of the piece than others, and shifts were made somewhat arbitrarily.

The vertical format of the painting " Vermillion Sky" was a reference to the verticality of the sections of the "Sojourn" triptych and the drawing "Big Blue" was done from the painting "Big Blue". The first an example of a response to the formal aspect of the design of the vertical picture plane and its reference to the viewer as vertical. The second, an example of the need to continue the dialogue about light as a sensation of physical and mental impression and explore the marks and surfaces of the painting.

As the work progressed I became aware that tearing down and building up surfaces as part of style and approach was in fact a physical realization of trying to combine memory and observation as flux and stability. Also, it became apparent that the process was very involved with editing. It became very important to set up the space and placement of objects to evoke the best possible sense of place.

For example, the drawing "Three Poplars" used up two Pink Pearl erasers over a period of ten days or so until the image could be resolved.

The painting " Big Blue" was a model to some extent for later work as it helped me to see how the physicality of paint could be used to stop or start movement with the use of responsive gesture. There are areas in both

the land and sky of the image that become more knotted, or knitted and intimate compared to larger more freely brushed areas. This was an important guide for me in finding a surface as style. It was also a guide for understanding that patches of light or contrast, or a sudden articulation of paint as an almost arbitrary emphasis was a corollary to the arbitrary qualities of memory and perception. I felt I was getting closer to a satisfactory editing between the nebulous and concrete character of memory in order to realize an image as a sense of place. Also, the paint seemed to be serving more of a mimetic purpose in combining memory with the naturalness of seeing space and form in flux when that seeing is not bracketed by conceptual rules of atmospheric perspective and gradual recessions of space.

Another example of this articulation that is meant to read as natural space and observation is in the paintings of the Sojourn triptych. It is strongest in the right panel where flashes of lighter or busier areas stop the eye and read as more specific. These cause the surface of the painting to be more aggressively flat as painting but they also are meant to show the sensation of the fluxation of real space. This quality of seeing and concern as a part of perception and concern for painting as a surface is applicable to all the paintings and drawings.

One aspect of these pieces that I would like to discuss is the use of verticals as compositional devices. All of the work contains verticals either as trees or tree groupings or passages of light that cross the horizontal. These have a formal element as in "Along the Road, Jack" where the tree on the right hand side serves as a part of the fulcrum for the weight of the horizontal space that travels to the left behind it. It also serves as part of the repetition of vertical rhythms of light passages that start from the left and across to it.

Other paintings and drawings such as "In the Fields" use tree groupings, single trees or vertically oriented light paths for the same purpose. The sky on the right is a light area becoming part of a dark area in the land, with the verticality of trees as a passage between. The left side of sky and land are a reverse of that. These vertical connections of light or form are meant to connect distant and near space but also serve as a structure that is meant to mimic both the natural push of space toward the eye and formally imply the flatness of the painting.

The vertical compositional devices have another function at least in intent. The vertical, as light and form, is a reminder of the verticality of the viewer as a kind of reflection of the viewer's presence. They have a meaning in the sense that they are a part of the experience of human verticality in the

landscape and they serve as a threshold to pull the viewer into the space of the painting or alternately--push into the viewer's space--and incorporate the viewer into the content of the landscape.

This is more defined in some paintings and drawings than others. In the right panel of the painting "Sojourn" vertical shapes run all the way from the top of land formations with the singular tree becoming a passage to the bottom of foreground. The left panel also incorporates positive and negative reversal of shapes to form verticals from the top of the sky to the immediate foreground with the tree forms as passages in between.

In the painting "Vermillion Light" vertical passages of light in sky and clouds illuminate shape down through the middle ground and into the immediate foreground. Again these connections of light and form serve to attach top to bottom and front to back spaces while reinforcing the verticality of the format and the viewer's stance.

Other pieces are less aggressive in this manner. The painting "Green Light" repeats the light and shape of the vertical column-like clouds in the foreground foliage. The scale of the trees and spots of light in the middle ground passages is smaller, making the connecting passages less obtrusive.

The verticals of the trees began to have another meaning for me as the work progressed. I began to feel an identification with them as

anthropomorphic form. They became a kind of stand-in for the absent figure in the landscape. The singularity of the trees or distant groupings are not only markers of space but a portrait of the sparse human presence in landscape of the West.

I say this not as a desire to critique landscape as a part of social cultural systems or as a biography of landscape, (i.e., who planted the tree, was it part of a whole forest, or 'naturally' seeded?). I do feel that social, cultural, or other questions are valid in interpreting both landscape and paintings of it. My intent is to offer up the feeling of the landscape in as truthful a way possible so that the viewer can ask questions out of their own experience and reactions.

Another part of the dialogue with the work that involved the anthropomorphic feeling I had about the placement and treatment of the gesture of the trees was an identification with memories of family or friends. For instance the foreground trees in the drawing "Young Trees" was a response to thoughts about my children and my wife and I as children. As I worked on the structure and stillness of the tree groupings in the background they had a feeling to me of grandparents or great-grandparents half remembered-watching, from a different space.

SUMMARY

I would like to include here thoughts on the work as a part of a continuing experience. It occurred to me at one point while working on these pieces that I had a feeling of being in the work. That is to say in synch with the work as part of my past, present and future. It became apparent to me that the work was satisfyingly not a finished product as an end in itself. I have started to feel comfortable with the fact that although the work as a thesis has a beginning and end, it is part of an ongoing exploration. I do not have to begin entirely anew. I haven't used up my interest in the content or finished exploring the means to explain it.

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