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Variations on a painting theme

Nancy Neilsen Erickson

The University of Montana

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VARIATIONS ON A PAINTING THEME

by

Nancy Nielsen Erickson

B.A., M.S., University of Iowa, 1957, 1962

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Approved by:

Walter Hook

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

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I. PURPOSE

The purpose of this thesis is to describe and discuss briefly five consecutive paintings chosen as a section from a larger continuing series of works. The paintings themselves are experiments in composition and color utilizing different aspects of the human form juxtaposed with chemical symbols in a simple landscape setting. In an attempt to eliminate as many variables as possible, the paintings were kept approximately the same size, and color schemes were changed only gradually. The paintings are also experiments in the combination of somewhat incongruous objects and ideas with an illusionistic landscape hopefully resulting in a new visual experience.
II. MATERIALS

Twelve-ounce cotton canvas was stapled to standard 1 x 2 pine stretcher frames in all cases. One coat of Liquitex Gesso was used to size and prime the canvases, and, after sanding them to a relatively slick surface, the drawings for the paintings were laid out in charcoal. Preliminary charcoal and oil sketches were used extensively.

Because standard red pigments were not intense enough, Hi-Viz red-orange fluorescent enamel was used both alone and with other reds in Plate III, IV and V, with linseed oil as a medium. After completion of the paintings, Barniz Damar varnish in dilute form was often painted over areas to bring out depth and to create luster.
III. DISCUSSION

The paintings will be discussed with regard to the elements of color, perspective, composition, subject matter and possible influences.

An attempt was made to retain the freedom of drawing by using charcoal to begin the paintings, and by starting with wide contrasts in value, as in the sky versus ground in Plate I. Charcoal and gesso drawing is retained in the inset road and foot of Plate II, and in all the faces. The colors grow more subtle in value but richer in hue as the series progresses.

Value, line and size are used to indicate perspective: in Plate II, the road disappears in common linear perspective fashion, while the deeper values of the red skies in Plates III and IV place them behind the fluorescent arch. The triple heads in Plate III recede largely because of size. The small tanks and symbols in Plate III are all approximately the same size in contrast to Plate I, although the turquoise ground becomes deeper in value toward the horizon; in this way an attempt was made to make a two-dimensional surface pattern unite successfully with the three-dimensional ground. In IV and V charcoal and purple glazes were used respectively to create the desired depth.

Compositionally, Plate I is a traditional, off-balance type with movement from the large chemical symbols.
and fleeing child carried upward across the orange table
tops to the moon-face and down the horizon. Plate II uti-
izes only very simple forms: a blown-up benzene structure
from the first painting with only the foot of the pursuer
and a reduced running figure providing the action; both are
balanced by the suspended face. The white grounds are
neutral and unaffected. In this painting a few more colors
were introduced and an effort was made to use them in pure
hues. The benzene ring is expanded in Plate III, and the
white ground of the previous painting filled with forms
which bob about, but do not possess the direction of the
flights in I and II. Thus, for emphasis, a feeling of more
telescopic depth was required, so the purple glove was dis-
torted, and a many-imaged face extended backward into space.
Painting IV is structurally similar with all the faces being
small entities, and exhibits a purple, instead of white
(Plate II) ground. Compositionally, the blue hands expand
the focal points to the edges of the painting, and provide
a larger-mass contrast with the little heads. The benzene
ring doubles and becomes even more of a frame in the final
work (Plate V); the face is much enlarged and descends onto
the ground. An attempt is made here to stretch the compo-
sition apart as far as possible, and yet retain the unity of
one picture. The white areas at opposite edges split the
painting, while the baseball and hands direct the viewer's
attention inward to the central, empty area of the painting.
The subject matter chosen for the series of paintings grew out of early doodles of chemical symbols done intuitively, and thence enlarged into landscapes in watercolors. The generation of such images is probably very close to the automatism practiced by such artists as Joan Miro in the early phases of the Surrealist movement: the surface of the painting works as an evocative ground and forms are projected onto it and combined into a pictorial script. The small forms in paintings I and III arose in this manner. The use of the horizon line may also result from the influence of Yves Tanguy, and other Veristic Surrealists. The juxtaposition of these elements with familiar forms (landscapes, faces, running figures, and parts of figures) is also an idea which the Surrealists used; it was believed that an alien object appears unusual, “other,” or absurd only within the context of familiar things. The inset picture idea has been used by many contemporaries; Kitaj (in drawings) and Rauschenberg were immediate sources of inspiration for the compartmentalizing done in these paintings.
IV. CONCLUSION

A series of five paintings has been discussed with respect to structural elements and subject matter. As the series progressed the colors became richer, the compositions simpler, and the chemical symbols were transfigured into geometric forms unrelated visually to the original symbols. A few specific sources of artistic influence have been mentioned, but it must be stated that isolating such influences is in many instances a false procedure, for a multitude of images and ideas from memory and from the immediate present converge and coalesce in creating a picture. These paintings are only a section from a series which is continuing along the same paths, with new forms, colors and incongruities being slowly introduced.
PLATE II

I WAS THERE ONCE MYSELF
PLATE III

THE LAVENDER GLOVE
PLATE IV

INTO EACH LIFE

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PLATE V

THE BASEBALL MACHINE