1964

Attempt at reconciliation

Michael Eugene Cadieux

The University of Montana

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AN ATTEMPT AT RECONCILIATION

by

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B.A. Montana State University, 1962

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

1964

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JUL 14 1964

Date
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INTRODUCTION

The painting series in this thesis is an attempt to incorporate two opposed approaches to the art of painting. The two approaches are a static Hard Edge approach contrasted with a dynamic Action Painting approach. An attempt is made to combine these two elements in single paintings, as opposed to the more traditional method of restricting each to individual works. By combining these opposing elements it is hoped that both the dynamic quality of Action Painting and the intellectual quality of Hard Edge painting will result.

It should be noted that attempts at reconciliation of these dissimilar elements in single paintings is not confined to the series under consideration here. The presence of these diverse elements is apparent in many paintings by numerous artists. Most important among them in modern times are Wassily Kandinsky (Figure 1), the Russian born co-organizer of the Blaue Reiter German Expressionist group, Hans Hoffman and Robert Motherwell (Figures 2 and 3). The latter two are of the Action Painting school now active in New York City and throughout the world. It is not this artist's intent to be unique or to present a significant innovation. It is his sole intent to offer a series of paintings which represents an aspect of his creative and technical growth to the present time. The series is representative of a phase in a creative growth process and in no way represents a terminus.
TWO DIVERSE ELEMENTS

The basic differences in the concepts which are an integral part of this series are disclosed in writings by artists and critics directly concerned with the schools of Action and Hard Edge painting. Hard Edge painting seems to be an art which denies the spontaneity inherent in the technique of most Action painters. Many painters working with the Hard Edge form feel that theirs is an art of restraint; they have no interest in the accidental approach to painting. Clarity has been defined by the critic Irving Sandler as being of the basic dissimilarities between the schools. Using Al Held (Figure 14), a contemporary Hard Edge painter, as an example, he writes: "The manner in which he arrives at his large, precisely-edged flat planes of strong color is direct and unpremeditated, continuing the tradition of Action Painting. But in his insistence on clarity he reacts against the ambiguity favored by his elders."2

Hard Edge painting has only recently assumed the proportions of a distinctive art movement, but has been in existence since the early part of this century. The major concern of Hard Edge painters seems to be their emphasis on a sharp definition of one painted area from another without the ambiguity of forms characteristic of Action Painting. They literally define one area of paint from another by using a

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concise, sharp edge—hence the name Hard Edge.

Action Painting is used to describe a loose free approach to painting, one which retains a look of spontaneity on the paint surface. This style of painting gained impetus immediately after World War II and centered in New York City. Action Painting is sometimes referred to as Abstract Expressionism, and for purposes of clarity the term Action Painting will be used with regard to this movement.

Action Painting implies physical involvement in the act of painting. The canvas has become, to the Action painter, an "arena" in which to perform. What was to be represented on the canvas was "not a picture, but an event." The Action painter appears to identify himself emotionally with the canvas through the personal process of painting. The Hard Edge painter seems to emotionally identify himself with his work through a controlled intellectual approach to a design problem.

It is important to be aware that the techniques involved in either Action Painting or Hard Edge painting are not revolutionary. Painters using these elements have appeared many times in the history of art. It seems that only when these elements become a conscious concern or intent of artists are they defined as art movements such as the two considered here.

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The dual approach to painting was arrived at by what this artist has termed suggestive reference. Suggestive reference means here that the dual nature of the problem was not chosen for the sole purpose of arriving at a convenient terminal project, but was implied in paintings completed before the selection of the present series. The opposing elements could be seen emerging in earlier canvases before a conscious attempt at their reconciliation was undertaken (Figure 5). One painting became the source of ideas for others to follow, or an individual painting became the source of idea for its own development. Ben Shahn, a twentieth century American artist and teacher, has written about painting as a source of ideas. Of the artist he writes, "ideas, many ideas move back and forth across his mind as a constant traffic, dominated perhaps by larger currents and directions by what he wants to think. Thus idea rises to the surface, grows, changes as a painting grows and develops."¹

Jackson Pollock, an Action painter, has stated, "When I am in my painting I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about."⁵ In order to satisfy the basic proposition, the reconciliation of diverse elements, it was necessary to exercise more control over the paintings


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than could be satisfied by Pollock's "get acquainted" period. A balance between the opposing elements had to be sought in order to attempt a satisfying aesthetic unity in the works. A very similar balance was pursued by Kandinsky in his use of what the critic and historian Herbert Read has called "conscious creation" in which every, apparently casual scribble or brushstroke in a composition is deliberately invented. Read explains, "What separates Kandinsky from most of the later 'informalists' is his insistence on the conscious control of the constituent elements of form and color." By "informalists" Read was referring to the Action painters of a later time. Following the reasoning of Ben Shahn, and to some degree Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock, this series was executed.

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PHYSICAL AND INTELLECTUAL INVOLVEMENT

Two types of involvement have been isolated in an endeavor to further demonstrate the various and contrasting components utilized in this series of paintings. The isolation of the two types of involvement also makes possible further verbalization of the visual phenomena of the paintings and offers a framework for discussion. In the following analysis, reference is made to various paintings composing the series in order to illustrate points. The two involvements are physical and intellectual; they will be discussed in that order.

Physical involvement is used here to describe the act of painting and seems to be more directly related to the tenets of Action Painting than to those of Hard Edge painting because of the anti-intellectual connotations of its unpremeditated character. In this series Figures 6, 7, and 8 show a seemingly greater concern for physical involvement than do Figures 9, 10, and 11 because of the predominance of bold brushstrokes and the careless appearance of the paint on the surface of the canvas. It seems that by reason of the "accidental" character of these paintings they are more related to Action Painting than to Hard Edge painting, despite the Hard Edge elements evident in the use of letters and rectangles of color in the compositions. These paintings are meant to convey an emotion of spontaneity and freedom of execution in a conscious attempt to emphasize the basic elements of Action Painting. It is important to realize here that the predominance of Action Painting elements in these works seemed to be
necessary in the attempt to reconcile Hard Edge and Action Painting components in an aesthetic unity.

Intellectual involvement is used to mean a thoughtful meditative approach to the painting process. This involvement has much in common with the philosophy of painting expressed by many Hard Edge painters. Ben Heller, an amateur New York collector having one of the most comprehensive collections of recent American painting, has indicated the impersonality and control so characteristic of Hard Edge painting. He believes, "There is no longer that total sense of identification with the work; rather there is a sense of discretion, of removal which says, 'I am no longer the painting and it me. It is there and it is what I say, but it is not all of me for I have something left outside of it with which I control it and the rest of my life.'" Figures 9, 10, and 11 illustrate more concern for Hard Edge elements than for Action Painting elements. These paintings reflect an extension of a static classic tradition with its stress on control as opposed to the spontaneous dynamic character of Figures 6, 7, and 8. In Figures 9, 10, and 11 no emphasis was placed upon bold brushstrokes and the "accidental" appearance of paint application. The Action Painting elements in these paintings may appear loose and accidental, but careful analyzation should reveal a lesser degree of unpremeditation than one discerns in examples used to illustrate physical involvement. While employing and attempting to reconcile physical and intellectual involvement it was discovered that a predominance of one or the other seemed necessary to achieve an aesthetic balance. It was realized that the extreme

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7Toward a New Abstraction, p. 8.
diversity of the elements used in the series prevented their employment in equal amounts; thus the result was a prevalence of one or the other in individual works as illustrated by contrasting Figures 6, 7, and 8 with Figures 9, 10, and 11.

The preceding discussion of the artist's involvement with his work was utilized to facilitate verbalization of the visual process of painting. The poet Rilke has declared, "If one paints it, then one cannot describe it."  

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ILLUSTRATIONS OF PAINTINGS
1. Wassily Kandinsky: YELLOW-RED-BLUE
2. Hans Hoffman: THE CITY
3. Robert Motherwell: THE FRENCH LINE
4. Al Held: NO. 2
5. FIGURE WITH BLOCKS
7. ASSIMILATION NO. 9
8. ASSIMILATION NO. 12
10. ASSIMILATION NO. 3
11. ASSIMILATION NO. 4
12. ASSIMILATION NO. 5
13. ASSIMILATION NO. 7
15. ASSIMILATION NO. 10
17. ASSIMILATION NO. 13
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It Is, Numbers 3 and 5 (Winter-Spring, 1959, and Spring, 1960).


