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Journal of a painting process

Leila Autio

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A JOURNAL

of

A PAINTING PROCESS

by

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Approved by:

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Investigation of several artists’ working methods and painting theories would prove that these two matters vary from artist to artist, and that there are also similarities which are fundamental.

I. THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this painting project was (1) to show that repetition of the same subject matter can be used as a learning device; and (2) to execute a degree of abstraction which would eliminate all but the essentials yet still retain a personal meaning.

If practice makes perfect,¹ this method of repeat painting can be used not only as a learning device but also as a teaching aid. Each repeat transfers knowledge already gained and generates more ideas by variation and elaboration.

The use of abstraction in this study provided the theory on which to work. Each series of paintings was begun in a representational manner and abstracted progressively. An explanation of the choice of abstraction is given by John Canaday who says, "Whether he likes it or not, the contemporary painter works outside the demands and needs of society. The fact that he works only for himself and a specialized, essentially synthetic audience explains the prevalence of abstraction, the field in which

¹ Lawrence M. Stolurow, Readings in Learning, (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1953)
the artist is freest to investigate pure esthetics, which become an end in themselves."

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Abstraction  Abstracted work is defined here as that in which certain fundamentals are retained and irrelevant material is discarded. In this project, each repetition was abstracted progressively as reference to subject gave way to the manner of expressing it. In this way, the transition was made from a representational art to a partially abstracted one. However, there was an attempt to keep the paintings from becoming geometric exercises.

Repetition. In this experiment, subject matter was repeated in five series of paintings on the theory that if a subject is used frequently, it can be used more easily. The "law" of frequency is included in most theories of learning. Repetition of subject matter provided an opportunity for investigation of various possibilities as the painting progressed. Ideas which occurred during the execution of one picture that were not compatible with the painting in progress were used in a subsequent painting.

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CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Abstraction, an art movement of some 50 years duration, has provided much written material, and references to repetitive practices can be found in artists' biographies. Although no specific mention of the two areas combined could be found for this report, the artists mentioned here are known to be abstractionists and their working methods were not dissimilar to that of this project.

I. LITERATURE ON ABSTRACTION AND REPETITION

Some artists have spent their lives investigating a single theory by executing many similar paintings. For example, between 1914 and 1944, Mondrian explored the area of pure form and color with 200 paintings and notebooks to explain them. Kandinsky spent over 30 years devoting his energies to abstraction during which time he repeated many symbols and shapes again and again. A thesis concerning his experiments was published in 1912 under the title Ueber das Geistige in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art). During his Bauhaus period, he published another called Point and Line to Plane.

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In conversation with Matisse, Pissarro said of Cézanne, "Cézanne is not an impressionist because all his life he has been painting the same painting." Pissarro was referring to the "bathers" picture which Cézanne repeated so obsessively, pursuing and developing the same qualities of composition, light, etc. Matisse himself says of painting procedures, "Often a discussion arises upon the value of different processes, and their relation to different temperaments...I think that one can judge of the vitality of an artist when after having received impressions from nature he is able to organize his sensations to return in the same mood on different days."  

Matisse was known for his pertinacity in developing an idea. Alfred Barr says Matisse was dissatisfied with a limit of a month for a single pose of the model; he later hired the model to pose in the same position for more than 100 sittings during a period of three years. The Great American Artists Series has recently published the work of two important American abstractionists, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Pollock pursued a new method of painting through the 1940's and 50's called the "drip" technique which capitalized on the beauty of the accidental. The publication on de Kooning's work features

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7 Ibid., p. 122.
8 Ibid., p. 48.
42 paintings entitled "Woman" which were done between the years 1949 and 1955. The development of this theme goes from recognizable subject matter to complete abstraction.

Pablo Picasso has created some well known symbols in his paintings which he has used time and again: the cock, the bull and the horse. Of his painting procedure, he says, "When one begins a picture one often discovers fine things. One ought to beware of these, destroy one's picture, recreate it many times. On each destruction of a beautiful find, the artist does not suppress it, to tell the truth; rather he transforms it, making it more substantial. The issue is the result of rejected discoveries. Otherwise one becomes one's own admirer. I sell myself nothing!"

Barbara Butler explains abstraction in this manner, "...certainly neither people nor life are themselves abstract. But our experience of them is. Abstraction is difficult - to be sure. To reveal the essence of the multiplicity of reality is one of the continual and remarkable human achievements."


CHAPTER III

DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION

A description of each of the 24 paintings will be given here in regard to the composition and color. A subsequent evaluation of each series will attempt to determine (1) whether or not the paintings satisfied the desired degree of abstraction and personal appeal, (2) if the repetition brought any significant improvement, and (3) if in the entire series there occurred any areas for further development.

I. DESCRIPTION - "BOY'S FACE" (Series A)

1) The strength of this painting lies in its limited color range (mostly browns) and its bold shape which was reinforced with a black outline. In order to set off the face, the shirt was deliberately painted a deep shade of umber, and although the face itself is out of proportion to the body, its largeness implies a young child.

2) In the second painting, the shirt was broken into geometric color shapes and the background into stripes. Together they become a unified field to set off the plainness of the face.

3) Pre-painted pieces of paper were the basis for this composition. These were placed on the board before the painting was begun and an effort was made to relate them and still retain the boy's head. The effect is that of geometric flatness.

4) Behind the figure, areas were set at right angles to break space into directions down and across. The figure, close in color to the
SERIES A, "BOY'S FACE"
background, was kept simple; the face was left anonymous and the hair defined only by a brushstroke. Stripes of blue and green were placed to contrast the neutrality of the rest of the painting.

The materials used in this series include tube oil colors and house paint on masonite.

II. EVALUATION - Series A

The attempt toward abstraction without losing personal meaning was most closely approached in the second painting. Painting number one, in shades and tints of umber, provided future color references. The geometric division of number three became too impersonal; and the careful painting technique throughout the series was evidence of a cautious approach. The compositional structure of number four was useful in a subsequent picture.

Painting number three is typical of the one that goes beyond the artist's control to a certain degree. Ben Shahn explains that this happens even though the artist is sensitive to the relationships of color and shape. He says, "At one point the artist will mold the material according to an intention. At another he may yield intention - perhaps his whole concept - to emerging forms, to new implications."^{13}

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III. DESCRIPTION - "CHILDREN IN A ROOM" (Series B)

1) This painting, as a starting point for the others, included several decorative devices for later use: The geometric rug pattern, the striped couch cover, the window design, and the spotted pillow cover. Dark and light areas were laid out with umber as a basic color.

2) All but essentials were eliminated from this picture and the couch cover stripes were selected as a pattern on which to base the composition. Variety in the stripes was provided with color contrasts and varying lengths and widths. The colors were of a higher intensity and white, as a color, added brightness. The figures here were incidental to the design.

3) The stripes, used again, became stronger with the addition of neutrals (greys and browns) and this added weight gave the painting more substance. Accents of black, in a predominantly light color field, pointed up the figures. Having faces and details, the figures are no longer anonymous.

4) Painting technique here became more important and the figures are difficult to find. Even the stripes have been obscured in a new emphasis on brushwork.

Enamel and tube oil colors on masonite were used in this series.
SERIES B, "CHILDREN IN A ROOM"
IV. EVALUATION (Series B)

Satisfaction with the extent of abstraction was reached in the third painting where the figures became children and all reference to furniture and room was discarded. The two figures, in spite of loss of recognizable surroundings seem enclosed and comfortable in their striped environment. Through the series, the color rises in intensity from dull browns (no. 1) to bright yellows, pinks and oranges (no. 3) which changes the mood to one of lightness.

Painting number four was abstracted beyond the point of reference to subject matter, but it uncovered some ideas for future brushwork in this manner.

Repetition of this problem brought these things to light: intense color has more substance when backed by neutrals (depending on the problem); and the stripe can be used as a powerful design device.

Elimination of the furniture in favor of a pattern was a personal choice. The room and its belongings could have been repeated with value as a composition. On the subject of composition, Henri Matisse says, "In a picture every part will be visible and will play the role conferred upon it, be it principle or secondary. All that is not useful in the picture is detrimental. A work of art must be harmonious in its entirety; for superfluous details would, in the mind of the beholder, encroach upon the essential elements."14

14Barr, op. cit., p. 119.
V. DESCRIPTION - "TWO FIGURES" (Series C)

1) Painted from two photographs, this picture consists of two figures representationally executed. Compositionally, it has no unity and could be divided in half. Colorwise, browns, ochres and grey green constitute the major areas. Because of the simplified shading, the painting resembles a photograph. The dress decoration was incorporated for its design possibilities.

2) Details of the dress and hair were discarded here in favor of a simple compositional organization. The points of interest in this picture consist of (1) the boy's tie, (2) color shapes on the girl's neck and face, and (3) the outline brushwork in the mirror. White used in such large areas offered opportunity for easy color accents.

3) Weight was added to the composition by using an umber for the right hand figure and a darker blue for the background corner. Again, white provides opportunity for color accents; this time orange is used to outline the left-hand figure and a black line is used on the hand and hairline.

4) In contrast to the first three paintings which were dependent on white or colors tinted with white, this painting is limited to darker colors and close in value. The green figure needs the red line to separate it from the background, and the other figure is defined by blue and green lines.

Materials used in this series include house paint and tube oil on masonite.
Figure 1

Figure 2

SERIES C "TWO FIGURES"
Figure 3

Figure 4

SERIES C "TWO FIGURES"
VI. EVALUATION (Series C)

All three of the last paintings of the series fulfilled the abstractions requirement without losing personal reference. Repetition of the theme proved valuable (1) in creating a unity of the composition, (2) in using all detail as working parts of the composition, and (3) making freer use of the brush.

There was an attempt to attain a feeling of space by simplicity of forms and background planes which is seen currently in figurative paintings. For example, in paintings 3 and 4, the fingers of the hand are not defined, the second hand was eliminated and the face only briefly suggested. The area above the face may be hair or hat; definition gave way to importance of shape.

Of all the figurative painters on the American scene today, Richard Diebenkorn really enjoys the greatest prominence. His treatment of space is defined by Charles Kessler, "Diebenkorn's paintings since 1956 make capital of the illusion of a third dimension without in any way compromising the appeal of full-bodied color and painterly surface. Diebenkorn is not really a "new image" painter. His conception of a figure in space is in the classical tradition that inspired many of the early and best works of Matisse. One welcomes his daring blend of compositional freedom and structural integration." 

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VII. DESCRIPTION - "BAND BOY" (Series D)

1) The most representational of all paintings in the series, this picture purposefully contains information for later use. The trombone and the uniform decorations suggested ideas for development. The red, green and blue color scheme was carried over from the last painting in the previous series.

2) Careful painting of the first picture brought a reaction toward freer brushwork in the second one. Ideas for composition were uncertain so the decision was made to try a smaller picture size in order that the problem could be more quickly solved. While the trombone was retained for a horizontal break, the uniform decoration was discarded as too detailed. Importance was given this time to the background which now supports the figure.

3) With the figure as a vertical and the trombone as a horizontal, the composition was given a secondary interest in the form of a music stand. The idea of color relationships began to emerge here as it became easier to work on the smaller scale placing color against color.

4) Bright red, used as a dominant color for the first time, brought the rest of the color scheme closer to pure color. Variation in the colors has been limited and the design simplified.

5) Music stand, trombone bell and boy's face, all of orange, were starting points in the composition. Green, black and blue pieces were added. With the remainder painted white, the figure lost importance and the design elements became abstracted almost to non-objectivity.

6) Less precision and an attempt to soften the forms resulted
in a ghostlike costume. Red was again used to boost the color intensity and the music stand triangle and trombone are retained as design elements.

7) In this picture, the trombone was absorbed into the right hand design and the music stand took the shape of an umbrella. The colors, set off by black, became stronger: blue against black, red against orange, blue against violet. The red line of the trombone was used as a horizontal division.

8) Here the music stand became a round design composed of triangles and the trombone, although distorted, was used again for a horizontal support. Brief definition of the figure threw visual interest to the face, arm and umbrella design on the left.

In addition to enamel and tube oil colors, heavy duty plastic paint was used in this series.
SERIES D, "BAND BOY"
VIII. EVALUATION (Series D)

The value of this series was found in the use of the small size painting. Smaller paintings presented an opportunity (1) to analyze the composition quickly, (2) to limit the color value, (3) to change color values easily if necessary, and (4) to exploit brushwork without a great deal of paint.

The small size of the paintings also facilitated further abstraction in approximately the same amount of time. Use of a brilliant color initiated new ideas of color relationships. Every color which was added to the picture was dependent on the previous color or colors.

Of this color relationship, Henri Matisse said, "If upon a white canvas I jot down some sensations of blue, of green, or red—every new brushstroke diminishes the importance of the preceding ones."\(^{18}\)

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\(^{16}\)Barr, op. cit., p. 121.
IX. DESCRIPTION - "BACKYARD" (Series E)

1) The first painting of this series was not representational but rather a small sketch which was developed into the final paintings. Compositionally it is meant to define space by the use of a large field and small figures. Trees were used as a repeat pattern and the color scheme was kept close.

2) Two more figures have been added to the picture to supplement the design. One has shield, costume and sword to extend the design of the umbrella (which was borrowed from the previous series). A striped shirt on the right carries the black around the circle: dog, sword, umbrella and stripe. Trees in the background became design devices as did the dots on the girl's dress. A large field of green supports these highly colored points of interest.

3) A black line was used to divide the picture so the same value of green was used top and bottom. The figures, further apart than in number two, were tied together by using the dog as a link. The blue shadows are also pieces of the design.

4) Further abstraction omitted the smaller figure, the dog's head and the boy's sword. Black was used to tie the painting together and the brightest colors were only used once. Grey replaced the white dress in order to let the white interlocking design of umbrella and shield gain importance.

Heavy duty plastic paint and enamel were used in this series on masonite.
X. EVALUATION (Series E)

There was a return to large size painting with an improvement: the freedom gained in the brushwork on the small paintings was transferred to the large ones. Less concern was given to careful layout and more emphasis was placed on organizing the composition quickly and making changes quickly.

Reducing color to its fundamentals limited the color relationships and presented new problems to solve in intensity.

In spite of the new painting freedom and the limited color scheme, there was a lack of experimentation with personal detail on the figures.

Ben Shahn a social commentator through art, voices a pertinent theory on evaluation when he says, "An artist at work upon a painting must be two people, not one. He must function and act as two people all the time and in several ways. The artist is the imaginer and producer. But he is also the critic, and a critic of inexorable standards."\(^{17}\)

The selection of children as subject matter is a choice based on personal experience. In art, expression is most valuable when it is derived from personal experience.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{17}\) Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 34.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As a picture was executed again and again, there was opportunity to develop many ideas as they occurred. Each new discovery, in composition, color or painting technique, affected all subsequent paintings. Conviction itself was substantiated. Picasso says this in other words, "I make a picture and proceed to destroy it, but in the end nothing is lost." 19

The method of starting from representation subject matter and working through a series of gradual abstractions would be a logical approach to some high school teaching situations because this age group is most concerned with realism and the final product. 20 Evolvement of personal interpretation from representational subject matter would make use of natural inclinations of the adolescent and, at the same time, channel the pupil's efforts toward personal expression.

Trial and retrial is a basis for learning and teaching. Some of the elements of composition and color were mentioned in this study, but there were areas of perception which cannot be explained. About these areas, Ben Shahn says, "Teaching itself is so largely a verbal, a classifying, process that the merely intuitive kinds of knowing, the sensing of things which escape classification, the self-identification with


great moods and movements in life and art and letters may be lost or obliterated by academic routine. They are not to be taught but rather absorbed through a way of life in which intensively developed arts play an easy and familiar part."\textsuperscript{21}

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