Painting a metaphor

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PAINTING A METAPHOR

by

Joel Smith
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to take this opportunity to thank his parents, without whose patience, understanding and assistance, this paper would not have been possible. He would also like to thank Ben Shahn, a man whom he has never met, but a man whose words have meant a great deal to him.
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INTRODUCTION

It was in the middle of 1965 that I became increasingly interested in a particular visual concept, and began, tentatively, to investigate it. The concept, as I saw and felt it, had probably found its greatest expression in the early works of the English painter, Francis Bacon. The technique offered enormous potential for expressing a certain kind of artistic rhetoric — the kind I needed to communicate.

A short time later, I hit upon what I thought was an excellent subject for painting: prize fighters. (The reasons for this I have outlined in Chapter III).

And then it occurred to me that these two ideas, the visual and the intellectual, would work together, or rather, could work together, to create a viable synthesis, and perhaps, a very exciting one. So it was that I determined to do a series of paintings based on a visual idea and a subject: boxing.

Making a successful synthesis, however, was more difficult than conceiving it. Unconscious feelings and old habits of painting combined to alter my original intention. I applied myself to the problem conscientiously for two months, and learned, finally (among other things), that the artist is to the painting as the father is to the son: he gives life, and he gives whatever character he has, but in the final analysis, it is the son, or the painting, that speaks.
CHAPTER I.

I want to be free to be painstaking if I want to, to be responsible, to be involved; to be free to exercise whatever intellect I may have, and consider both discipline and craft indispensable to freedom.

Ben Shahn¹

I would like to undertake here an examination of material I consider relevant to a fuller understanding, and hopefully, appreciation of the paintings involved.

*   *   *

Let me begin by saying that artists do not share a common belief regarding the extent to which the artist may properly impose his will on a painting. By this I mean that a painter like Michelangelo conceived of a painting, and then executed it exactly as planned; whereas a painter like the contemporary Jack Tworkov simply picks up a brush and proceeds to "liberate an as yet unknown painting." Tworkov says: "To will decision and clarity is to invite getting stuck with the mere appearance of it."² To compare Michelangelo and Tworkov here is, I think, legitimate, for in essence, their attitudes reflect the attitudes of their respective times.³

Nevertheless, there are painters working today who insist on thinking of themselves as creator (conceiving of an idea and plan before painting) rather than as "medium" (as Tworkov sees himself - a liberator of a painting). I consider myself to be somewhere in the former camp. Sometimes I do take advantage of a situation created accidentally, something implying more or other than what I had intended, and incorporate the new idea in the painting. This may seem inconsistent with my position - which is, fundamentally, the essence of a painting precedes its existence - however, it is not. Ben Shahn has this to say:

From the moment at which a painter begins to strike figures of color upon a surface he must become acutely sensitive to the feel, the textures, the light, the relationships which arise before him. At one point he will mold the material according to an intention - perhaps his whole concept - to emerging forms, to new implications within the painted surface. Idea itself - 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. So one must say that a painting is both creative and responsive. 4

Thus there is a certain tension between initial intent and the demands of the creative process.

I am a content painter. I value thinking - before and during the creative process. This is not to say, however, that I approach a painting coldly and intellectually.

4Shahn, The Shape of Content, p. 57.
I  lg

The text appears to be a mixture of random symbols and letters, making it difficult to discern any coherent meaning or context. It seems to lack a clear structure or topic. Without more context or a clearer format, it's challenging to interpret the content accurately.
I felt that symbols, metaphors and myths were requisites in my painter's vocabulary. I would effect these devices, I hoped, with insight — for my paintings would ultimately succeed or fail on their validity.

The problem was not, and is not, an easy one. For most practical purposes, a young content artist today is without a viable tradition. He lacks symbols which are meaningful in terms of the mid-twentieth century in the West. Being without a common visual language, the art world today is a veritable Babel. The young artist may well suffer from existential anxiety: all things are permitted. And yet, one must make a commitment — even if it is a trust in "no commitment." Jack Tworkov writes: "If I have a slogan, it is no commitment; at a moment when there is admittedly little common ground, the best morality is not to have any." 10 That sounds suspiciously like a covenant to me.

In Conversations With Artists, Larry Rivers is quoted as saying: "No contemporary person knows what he is after." 11 This is, I think, especially true in the arts today. I know I do not know exactly what it is I am after. I am overwhelmed by the complexity of life, but as Jack Levine says in that same book: "Trying to cope with the complexity of life is one of the responsibilities of growth." 12 I agree with him, and therefore, my art is my response; it is both the result of my observation, and of my thought, and of my effort to communicate this vision to others. I think I have no illusions about my

11. Seldon Rodman, Conversations with Artists (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), p. 120.
12. Ibid., p. 200.
art as the conveyor of my personal vision: I know I have set a very difficult task for myself.

The moving towards one's inner self is a long pilgrimage for a painter. It offers many temporary successes and high points, but there is always the residuum of incomplete realization which impels him on toward the more adequate image. 13

A content painter, according to his temperament, his intelligence, or convictions, may fall into any one of a number of pitfalls. His paintings may be overly sentimental; his statements may not be made strongly enough, or, conversely, behind his big, bold paintings may be little or no idea; then too, the artist's idea may be strictly literal and not lend itself to pictorial representation, or the design of the picture may all too obviously be subordinate to the literal end. The content painter must know of these pitfalls if he is to manage to avoid them.

There is today a widespread, though unwritten prohibition on "literary" painting. I think this is so, essentially, because of something Clive Bell, an aesthetician, wrote some forty years ago.

The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful, but it is always irrelevant. For to appreciate a work of art, we must bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its affairs and ideas, no familiarity with its emotions. 14

13 Shahn, The Shape of Content, p. 42.
The image contains a page with text that appears to be a mix of Greek and English. The text is not legible due to the quality of the image. It seems to be a page from a book or a document, possibly discussing a scientific or philosophical topic. Without clearer visibility, it's challenging to provide a meaningful transcription or translation.
express their feelings through their art; and finally, that success in this endeavor is not easy to achieve.

Speaking of content painting, or realism, John Canaday had this to say: "It is an area where social consciousness is a large element in the investigation of human nature and where human nature is more important than aesthetic theory, where unless you are very good indeed, you are not nearly good enough." 16

"When I hear it objected that there are few good realists today," says Leonard Baskin, "my answer is that it's damn difficult to say something meaningful and original about the world you see!" 17

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16 Canaday, *Detached-Critics*, p. 156.
17 Rodman, *Conversations with Artists*, p. 169.
CHAPTER II

It was not my purpose in these paintings to make people angry, or to make them sad; neither did I wish to charm them, amuse them or mock them. Although it may be that I am something of a moralist in private life, I did not seek with these paintings to moralize.

For example: the painting called Invictus I is a picture of a prize fighter, bloody, down, suggesting, perhaps, a bull in a corral, but looking all too human.

Another example is the painting I call Invictus II. In this picture a man in his late 60's is seated on what may be a stool, or on a couch, in either a boxing ring, or, perhaps, in a cathedral, in either boxing trunks, or, perhaps, in his shorts; all of this is uncertain and it is uncertain because I intended it to be so - because I wanted it provocative.

Still another example is the painting, A Part of the Game. The title itself is ambiguous: what "game" am I referring to? A Negro prize fighter and a society woman, complete with cocktail, pose together for their picture. Why are they so large? Why so "frontal?" What do their faces, their gestures or attitudes seem to indicate? These are questions I want the viewer to ask himself.

I am not unaware that a painting like A Part of the Game may make some people angry and/or sad, but it is my hope that this picture will not only make people feel, but also imagine, and think. I am not using this painting to moralize.

A Part of the Game is social commentary; most of my painting is not. I am unable to find in myself any of the passions relating to "Justice in Society" which seemed to motivate many of the artists of the thirties and forties. John Baur, writing
of fairly recent work by certain content artists had this to say:

Various kinds of suffering and oppression may be implied in these canvases, but the villains themselves are absent, and one cannot escape the feeling that the true theme is our common humanity. 18

I rat or think that this, our common humanity, is my theme as well.

Most of the paintings are metaphorical, or, at least, contain symbols. Lacking "a rhetoric with which to encompass modern life" and rejecting, for the most part, traditional symbols (I feel they've lost much of their force and meaning), I was obliged to create my own symbology. The precision of my symbols, their impact, and their validity, are for the viewer to judge.

A metaphor is an implication; it is several thoughts overlapping and therefore, it is more of an intrigue than an exposition. "What is a metaphor," asks Frederic Taubes, "but an embodiment of ambiguity, for it conceals a meaning by disguising an object to pose as something else." He goes on to say: "Ambiguity can apply to a work with many meanings, or to a work of many aspects and intentions...." 19 Since my avowed purpose was not only to make people feel, but also imagine and think, I felt that metaphor could be used to good advantage.

The quality and quantity of ambiguity varies in my painting. It is greater (in quantitative terms) when I consciously "supplement" the metaphor (thus bringing the painting closer to a state of allegory,) as I do in Invictus II and Part of the Game. It is lesser when the ambiguous content is restricted to the inherent property in the metaphor as in Invictus I and Battle.

CHAPTER III

I selected prize fighting as the conceptual omnibus for my painting. I did this for several reasons. First, I like to paint figures. Second, I like the boxing ring in probably the same way Degas liked the ballet: the visual excitement, the energy and movement, and the drama. Third, and possibly the most important reason, I saw in prize fighting a metaphor about the human condition.

It is necessary to understand what is connotated by the prize ring. It is "sport" in the same way that bull fighting or cock-fighting is; but these are men, and each is trying to knock the other unconscious, or at least beat the other sufficiently to obtain the "judges'" approval. Not only are there judges, there is someone there to see to it that each man observes the (humane) rules. Under hard and bright lights each man struggles for ascendancy over the other. One man must lose; one must be defeated.

But boxing is more than a "sport." It is a means of livelihood. Men who ordinarily would not have access to the professional world because of race, or lack of education, enter the prize ring hoping to cover themselves with glory and money. The great majority find that in the end, if they are covered with anything at all, it is with scar tissue and perhaps debts as well.

In the ring, the arena, without trappings of society, without reward for good manners, where there is no pretense, each man calls upon all of his strength, his cunning and instincts to protect him, and to help him emerge victorious. The struggle is presented, and in a short time—sometimes a very short
time — the drama (the metaphor) is unfolded. All kinds of
"players" may be found among prize fighters: there are gentlemen, clowns and workers; there are those who are vicious and
those who are lazy. So well is the drama played that from time
to time, unfortunately, a death occurs in the prize ring.

But if the hazards are great, and the life brutal, so are
the rewards great for the chosen few. This then, is the meta-
phor.
CHAPTER IV

The greatest tyranny bequeathed us by the artists of the late 19th century, is the sacrosanct concept of the flat picture plane.

Valerie Petersen 20

I see no logical reason, nor do I feel any compulsion, for the flat or shallow picture plane. The argument that, after all, the picture plane is flat, and to create deep illusionistic space on it would therefore be dishonest, is specious. Neither do I feel compelled to be especially "painterly." I confess that I do prefer an animated surface to one seemingly free of brush strokes (although this is not always true), but I resent being shackled in the first case by a seventy year old tradition, and in the second case an attitude, which, though not necessarily new, holds the rank, almost of dogma in the present unofficial academy.

My technique varied somewhat from painting to painting. This was partly because the content varied from painting to painting, and since the content should determine the style (as well as be shaped by it), the style, and therefore the technique varied. My technique also varied because on occasion I "yielded intention to new implications which appeared on the painted surface."

One technique which I did utilize frequently was that of staining the canvas. The object was to preserve the tooth of the canvas as much as possible, and at the same time have a

20 Valerie Petersen, "U.S. Figure Painting Today: Continuity and Cliche," Art News (Summer, 1962), p. 51.
what I hoped to accomplish

...
Figure V
BOOKS


ARTICLES AND PERIODICALS

Petersen, Valerie. "U.S. Figure Painting Today: Continuity and Cliche," *Art News,* Vol. 61, No. 4.
