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ORGANIC FORMS IN ABSTRACTION

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ORGANIC FORMS IN ABSTRACTION

by

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THESIS

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ORGANIC FORMS IN ABSTRACTION

In the fifteen paintings which comprise the visual aspect of my thesis, I have proposed to abstract the human image and paint forms and combine them with geometric and non-geometric forms.

On a compositional basis this was a challenge which involved the embodiment of a belief concerning man's relationship to his environment. The human body is of a different form than the geometry of buildings in which man dwells or the landscape in which he moves. Sometimes he has power over his environment but more often he is contained by it, moving from one space or form to another. I do not think there is a consensus concerning the positive character of man in our time. In my opinion, we do not see him as subservient to God nor hold the ideal that he should be. We do not see him as powerful, except in destructive ways. We see him as brutal, childlike, partially destroyed, isolated, lonely, powerless, machinelike, sometimes grand, sometimes noble, but only in flashes. If man were at peace with his soul; if we could agree on the possibility of perfection in any form, then we could use the natural image of man and charge it with that possibility. For now, an abstracted image seems truest. It implies possibilities without defining them.

The problem of relating the abstracted image of man to his environment in a pictorial manner took various forms in the evolution of the paintings. There were two major sources of influence in my works. One, the formal consideration, was the work of other painters. This will be discussed as it arises, in relationship to particular paintings. The other was the reading of two books concerning myths of the world. The major book is Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces; the other is a slender volume based on an exhibition of symbolical art with related text, conceived and prepared by Dorothy Norman entitled The Heroic Encounter. In both the mythological hero is presented as following a cycle of threshold crossing, struggle for mastery of forces within or without himself, apotheosis, and return flight. This cycle became the conceptual source of a number of paintings in which I struggled toward mastery of a new form. Some paintings deviated from the generalized myth source as the artistic impulse led me to develop forms based on pictorial considerations.

The paintings are of varying sizes, from 20" by 26" to 5' by 6'. Nearly all are of acrylic paints but some have an overlay of oil paint. Specific information concerning materials and techniques will be found at the conclusion of this paper.

The titles of the paintings were given as an afterthought for identification but also as an indication of the conceptual base of the images, such as "Hero" and "Two in Space." In the following discussion, the paintings are grouped when they relate to each other pictorially and conceptually.

I have never abandoned the human form. For years it was the prime stimulus for my painting. The presence of a posed model was necessary in beginning stages. The drawing of a person on the canvas provided a vehicle for the expression of emotion. It also became the major form in relation to which all other forms on the canvas were ordered. There are only two paintings in the thesis group which use plant forms to the exclusion of a symbolic figure image. The stimulus for these paintings was a pictorial consideration: the problem of composing around an empty center area. They have led to later paintings with a freer use of space and an imagery more fully integrated with the total composition.

In the conception of the first painting, Enigma, the shadowed profile of a girl struck me as an interesting shape against the geometric lines of a building and wall. This was painted from a model and a building. Shadows and other forms were arranged in relationship

to these forms. Depth was created by foreground images overlapping the middle ground and by the drawing of shadows in diagonals. The two-dimensional surface was emphasized by the brightest color, orange, placed in the middle ground and the dark and light contrast of shapes in the upper portion of the picture. There is an unreal quality in the color, there being secondary hue relationships with intensities exaggerated from reality. A mood of isolation of the figure is created by the ambiguity as to whether the girl belongs to the outside where she is standing or to the inside to which she is related by color and shade.

Three paintings, Hero, Symbiosis, and Sentry, involve a greater abstraction of the human image than Enigma. A series of black and white acrylic and charcoal studies on paper preceded the three paintings and represent the development of the formal considerations. The myth concepts from The Hero with a Thousand Faces and The Heroic Encounter find their first expression in the studies and in these three paintings. The figure in Hero is straining against a barrier as a form of threshold crossing. He is enclosed yet asserting himself against the enclosure.

Hero is a vertical composition using a diagonal build-up of organic forms countered and stabilized by geometric bands.

The figure and shapes directly below it form an elongated, reversed "z." The horizontal banding at the top is reflected in a blue stripe at the left and a red stripe near the bottom. The vertical on the right united the top and bottom as much by its color as by shape and contains smaller organic shapes which relate to the figure. The color is limited and reflects the fact that the picture was first conceived in black and white values.

Symbiosis is the title of a painting which shows organic forms in a kind of struggle, overlapping and twisting. One is dark, and the other light, indicating a dissimilar nature. They are watched by the face in a large circular form. A poetic association is intended with the interpretation left to the viewer. The viewer may identify with the face; he may consider the face a symbol of a more powerful being than the two intertwined figures; or he may enjoy the composition by itself without finding meaning in the forms.

Symbiosis has a background plane composed of three major divisions which sustain the twisted and flowing forms of figures interlocked. The circular shape on the left contains a painted-out self-portrait. The circle is echoed in other parts of the irregular forms. Horizontals are emphasized in the dark band at the top,

the white band on the right, and the leftward sloping horizontal of the figure group. The widening of the yellow-orange background trapezoid toward the top would normally make the upper part advance. However, the interruptions of the figures and the dark upper band hold it back. The value relationships are strongly contrasting, and again reflect the fact that the picture was composed in black and white originally. The major problem during the course of painting was making the yellow-orange of sufficient brilliance to counteract the receding elements and thus preserve two-dimensionality.

Sentry was also conceived without color. During the painting process the composition was radically rearranged, turned upside down and parts painted out. Despite compositional changes it retained the original conception. A newspaper photo of a soldier aiming out of a fox hole served as model for the first black and white study. It was loosely interpreted in the study and the painting. An abstracted figure which is powerful in relationship to its environment appears as a kind of guardian. The forms around it are turbulent, and there are indications of barriers in which the figure is contained.

As a finished painting it is looser than Hero and Symbiosis and color is more significant in its own right. The upright figure

is dominant by virtue of its dark color and distinct outline. This vertical is repeated in the orange band at the left and by black stripes. Horizontals are expressed by loosely painted black bands at the bottom and middle left; the central orange and the white in middle and top. The hue tonality is warm, suggestive of excitement.

Three in Space and Two in Space bear a relationship to myth in the sense of figures on a voyage. They also represent men on a space trip. The figures appear floating but are constrained by certain forms. It is intended that they appear to be leaving one kind of space and entering another.

These two pictures were developed in sequence, with Three in Space preceding. The compositions were studied in ruled line drawing on paper. The value and hue were decided upon during the painting process. Here the objective was to use figure symbols, organic in shape, and compose them against strong geometric forms. In Three in Space acrylic blue was applied thinly over a primed surface, then the edges were taped and areas painted in a variety of textures. The blue, allowed to show through, helps unify the total composition. Tension is created between the forward and downward thrust of the figure group and the upward and inward

thrust of the light band on the left. Space is achieved by diagonals, the overlapping of shapes, and by the natural tendency of the color blue to appear to recede. In contrast, the two-dimensional format is asserted by the uniform painting of some areas, notably the ferrous violet in center, and the vertical and horizontal bands.

In the small acrylic on paper, Two in Space, red was applied in a thin wash first. This conditions the quality of color in the areas painted over it. In some places it is left uncovered. The contrast of the figures with the geometric forms is strong. The texture of paint application unites them with the cerulean parts of the background. The thinness of the red gives it some spatial depth, while the hue causes it to advance.

A problem in both of these paintings is edges, or "stops." The onlooker's eye is stopped by the sharp demarcation between shapes as well as by the strong value contrast; and tends to jump from one light area to another or from one dark area to another. The figures also have strong value contrast within their outline, as well as sharp, though less geometric edges. The "stops" form a consistent pattern with the figure areas and the geometric background.

Unquestionably the efforts of Francis Bacon to abstract a figure and integrate its shape into a two-dimensional composition

with three-dimensional implications has influenced these last two paintings strongly. In the course of painting Three in Space I found a magazine reproduction of Francis Bacon's Triptych, 1967 and deeply admired the central panel. In Bacon's work horror is a significant effect of the abstraction and isolation of his figures. There is a certain brutality inherent in most abstractions of the human body but the qualities in my abstracted figures are more those of isolation, drift, and struggle.

Another consideration of mine as I painted was how to create with a minimal influence of Cubism. I wish to compose well on the two-dimensional surface to retain the integrity of shape and to imply three-dimensionality. Although Bacon usually has a definite exterior shape for his figures and places these against flatly painted areas, he employs elements of Cubism within his figure shapes. These may be multiple views, the fading in and out of certain areas and the breaking of outlines. My study of this pictorial problem has involved Medieval and Trecento painting, particularly the works of Duccio and Giotto in the latter period. Two of my papers written for earlier courses reflect my study of this problem. They are: "Form and Function of Architecture in Italian Painting from Duccio

to Piero della Francesca" (Art 362k), and "Unit Shape and the Picture Plane, Reflections of the Italian Trecento in Matisse, de Chirico, Sutherland, and Bacon" (Art 386). In both of these composition was studied particularly in regards to planes versus figures and the organization of elements two-dimensionally and three-dimensionally.

Creation I and Creation II painted a few months apart have the same basic figuration but with different solutions to the problems of space and pattern. As in the earlier paintings the composition and tonal problems were thoroughly worked out on paper before the painting of Creation I. The idea for these paintings is from Indian sculpture where Creation is personified and shown with many arms standing in a flaming circle. Ignorance supports the circle and is represented as a child in fetal position, the embodiment of forgetfulness. A compositional problem here was the division of the canvas from edge to edge, making compartments while maintaining its unity by color, texture, and shape. The figure of ignorance becomes in the painting an abstracted figure, cocoon-like, surrounded by a black area. Creation is a pregnant form with outward thrust of flame-like shapes, wing, and bones. Although the painting once had a large arc

on the left, this was eliminated for simplification and for providing a more homogeneous color in the top and bottom background areas.

Creation II is more freely painted and has some important changes. Ignorance is further simplified and has changed direction. The black shape sustaining Ignorance moves upward and backward in a diagonal from left to right. This is balanced by the brown shape at the top of the painting behind Creation with its edge on the light making a strong diagonal downward and inward. Creation is more simple and has dropped the wing. The background flows through this central image. Depth is created by overlapping and by diagonals. The red-orange in the background is the most brilliant and dominant color in the picture and tends to advance, lessening the sense of depth.

Two quite different paintings, Figures and The Game are efforts at a closer integration of the background and figure form. The original painting on the canvas of Figures was blocked out much in the manner of Three in Space. In fact, it was begun shortly after that. However, the jumps from one area to another caused by edges and the precise isolation of shapes disturbed me and I began a painting over it. Showing through the loosely applied light blues and dark

shades are the vertical bands of burnt sienna and black and the horizontals of white and ferrous green. One black figure on the right retains its partial shape, while another red oxide and yellow ochre figure on the left is cut apart by a black streak. The central gray shape knots the loosely painted parts of the composition together and also reflects the shape of the heads of the original figures. The colors employed were arbitrarily chosen in the cool range, plus black and white, in contrast to the warm-hued colors of the majority of my paintings.

The Game retains the integrity of the shapes as initially planned on the canvas. However, in the course of painting the textural qualities of the various shapes were greatly enhanced and tonal variations within them were introduced. The hues chosen here are warm, orange to magenta; there are also neutrals of dark and light value. This example was painted on unprimed cotton duck, so that the sunken-in dark areas would provide some spatial movement.

The concept of The Game originated from newspaper and magazine photographs. In these violence is frozen and suspended. A moment of action is caught by the camera, and may appear to the viewer as a patterned, ritualistic dance. In my painting the figures are dark with suspended gestures somewhat in the form of a swastika,

an ancient symbol of creation. The brilliant color and painterly variations of tone provide an excitement and movement in contrast to the stiff qualities engendered by definite shapes and edges.

A return to the more loosely organized image is The Dream. The spatial composition was carefully worked out in a pencil drawing on paper to create the effect of a room. But it was loosely painted to provide a flow of tones and to counteract the recessive forces created by the angles of the box-like room. More than Francis Bacon, Matisse is a strong influence here, as well as the Trecento painters. I have always admired The Painter and His Model of 1917 by Matisse, with its clearly delineated room and view through the window. At the point of farthest recession Matisse used an area of black, painted flatly, covering wall and floor, to counteract the depth and reassert the picture plane. In The Dream blue is used to imply the window and red and yellow to emphasize two-dimensionality. A floating figure, as well as a red tone moving from back wall through the floor, breaks the area of recession. The concept is from an actual dream with the unreal floating qualities of a reverie.

Begun about the same time as The Dream is Garden, followed a little later by Spring. Plant forms are abstracted instead of the

human figure. The pictorial challenge was to create space in the center of the pictures and compose the shapes around it without making a void. In Garden an overlapping of shapes was used, beginning at the bottom and progressing upward. The careful adjustment of all colors was difficult. The objective was to have the colors interlock as well as the shapes. Each hue change called for a studied readjustment of all others. There had to be a balance between one area and its adjacent area and the others to which the eye skipped while picking up similarities. Although it was begun in acrylic, oil paint was applied over some areas because I could not get the desired color and textural quality otherwise.

Spring began with the idea of two broad vertical bands of color on a horizontal format with a large central area of muted, neutralized tones. This came to mind from driving down the road on a gray day, the sky forming a hollow in front and passing streaks of brilliant flowers and plants on either side. In the painting the forms were conceived to interlock as pattern and also spatially. It was intended that the viewer could reverse the positive and negative aspects of certain areas of related forms. Some Cubist elements were used, notably in the orange vertical on the left where a grayed

streak fades out toward the top. The central area with its circular base became difficult to stabilize and required much reworking. The original surface was not primed but was sprayed with an acrylic burnt sienna, using a cartridge sprayer. This raised the nap and provided a textural base for the early coats of paint worked in with a brush.

A spray gun on an unprimed surface was used on The Bear Smelled Peanuts. Much acrylic medium with the paint helps to make firm the raised nap, so that further brushing retains the nap. Since the sprayed surface tends to make a continuously amorphous form, collage from previously painted canvases was applied. The imagery is from sketches of animals at the San Antonio zoo and the composition was worked first in acrylic color on paper. The objective was to provide a continuum in the background tones and to have the smaller areas of color advance and recede in different illusions of depth. The dark blues and browns recede more than the brighter colors but are often bounded by or contain brighter colors.

The title of The Goldfish is an allusion to Matisse's Goldfish of 1915. The goldfish are replaced by a human form and the original goldfish moved to the side. Although there are certain obvious

similarities in composition, notably the dark vertical on the left, space is conceived in a totally different way, as is color. A pun is intended; man is a goldfish, contained and restricted. The goldfish are freer than he. The color and texture are deliberately played upon as strange and unreal.

This canvas has a sprayed and brushed surface. I used a compressor and paint sprayer, varying the quantity and viscosity of the paint. The composition was established on the unprimed cotton duck and the vertical dark strips on the left and the green shapes on the right were brushed in before spray paint was applied. Again, the acrylic medium supplied the toughness necessary to retain a raised nap and to sustain brushwork without destroying the texture.

The lyrical forms of the figure are reflected in the lines of the background and other small shapes. The verticals and horizontals contrast and provide stability. The spray paint itself tends to create an illusion of depth which is enhanced by the directional movement of the figure and the variations of tones in all areas.

The evolution of the paintings is from a more specific stimulus and conception to a more general one. The earlier paintings are smaller in format and began with a definite composition, usually composed on paper in preparation for the painting. The organic forms

of the paintings through Creation II separate from the background while the later paintings beginning with Figures are more integrated. Color became varied and more freely applied as the series developed.

Experimentation was a factor in the painting of a number of the pictures. I made a deliberate effort to expand my pictorial forms. The goal was always to be aware of the composition on the two-dimensional surface but also to create depth by drawing or by tonal variations which would act in tension to the two-dimensional design. In Sentry and Figures the painting as originally intended was reworked by loosely applying paint using intuition rather than conscious intention. Revisions were studied and executed after this but a rich and varied surface was achieved in this manner.

The change in method of applying pigment from brush and palette knife to spray gun and brush was part of the experimentation and served to enhance the tonal variations and the texture. Rather than inhibition in first using a new method, the spray gun gave me a sense of greater freedom since it could cover a large area in a short time. Also, the dispersion of the spray along the edges of an area provided a blending of tones which would have required separate color mixtures if done with brush only.

In the course of working on the thesis pictures I felt a broadening of my repertoire of pictorial forms. I felt greater mastery over composition and an expansion of my ability to achieve textural and tonal variations.

... of liquid glass. The composition was achieved with charcoal and then changed to an acrylic based paint. These colors were limited to all paint, because of the previous color tested. Brushes, rollers, and other brushes were used.

... Utrecht Belgium. These colors of a reaction factory... worked over white pine woodwork and... with... of liquid glass. The composition was achieved with charcoal and painted in acrylic based paint... with... brush. Brushes and other brushes, and a painting with... used. The red area was created with oil pigment to... across the right side.

... 30" x 40". These colors and materials are in... The... area was repeated with oil pigment to achieve... quality of value and tonal diversity.

... 30" x 40". These materials and materials are in... acrylic.

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUE

Enigma 36" x 46". Utrecht Belgium linen canvas of a medium texture was stretched over white pine stretchers and primed with two coats of Liquitex gesso. The composition was sketched with charcoal and then blocked in with acrylic tubed paints. Some areas were finished in oil paint, because of the precise color needed. Bristle, nylon, and sable brushes were used.

Hero 30" x 48". Utrecht Belgium linen canvas of a medium texture stretched over white pine stretchers and primed with two coats of Liquitex gesso. The composition was sketched with charcoal and painted in acrylic tubed paints mixed with medium or gel. Bristle and nylon brushes, and a painting knife were used. The red area was repainted with oil pigments to achieve the right color.

Symbiosis 30" x 40". Same methods and materials as in Hero. The yellow-orange area was repainted with oil pigment to achieve the quality of color and luminosity desired.

Sentry 30" x 36". Same methods and materials as in Hero but finished entirely in acrylics.

Three in Space 36" x 46". Utrecht Belgium linen canvas of a medium texture was stretched over a frame ordered to size and primed with two coats of acrylic gesso. The composition was drawn and ruled in with charcoal which was then brushed off leaving traces of the design. A thin layer of acrylic paint mixed with water was brushed over the surface and left to dry with the canvas horizontal. Areas were taped with masking tape to insure sharp edges and the paint was brushed or worked in with a painting knife, paint, and gel.

Two in Space 20" x 26". A textured cover stock white paper was washed over with acrylic paint and water and left to dry horizontally. The composition was drawn in with pencil and painted with acrylic paint, medium, gel, nylon brushes and a painting knife. Some edges were taped. The finished picture was drymounted on heavy mat board.

Creation I 36" x 46". The same materials as in Three in Space were used. The drawing was made in charcoal and brushed off. Acrylic paint, medium, and gel were worked with nylon and bristle brushes and a painting knife.

Creation II 36" x 48". The same materials as in Three in Space were used. Some glazed layers of acrylic paint were applied with nylon brushes, acrylic medium and water as dilutant.

Figures 36" x 48". The same materials and method as in Three in Space.

The Game 50" x 60". Utrecht white cotton duck was stretched over Craft Cut heavy duty white pine stretchers. The surface was left unprimed. The drawing was made with charcoal and loose bits were brushed off. Acrylic paint, medium and gel were applied with nylon and bristle brushes. Some edges were taped or masked with patterns cut from heavy paper. The soaked in paint remains in some areas and others are built up with layers of acrylic paint.

The Dream 52" x 60". The same materials and methods were used as in The Game. However, there are no taped or masked areas.

Garden 36" x 48". The same materials and methods were used as in Hero. The blue central area and some related areas were painted over in oil paint using bristle and sable brushes.

Spring 5' x 6'. Utrecht white cotton duck was stretched over Craft Cut heavy duty white pine stretchers. The surface was sprayed

with burnt sienna acrylic diluted with water and gel in a cartridge sprayer. The composition was drawn in with charcoal and painted in with acrylic paints. The central area was reworked with oil paints, in light glazes using a medium of damar varnish, linseed oil and turpentine.

The Bear Smelled Peanuts 5' x 6'. Utrecht white cotton duck was stretched over Craft Cut heavy duty white pine stretchers. The surface was sprayed with a mixture of acrylic paint, Hofmann acrylic medium and water. This was put into a blender and strained into the container of a De Vilbis paint sprayer. A large tank compressor was used at approximately 40 pounds of pressure. Later, some areas of the surface were sanded with a medium grade sand paper. Paintings with surfaces brushed or applied with a painting knife were cut and glued onto these areas with acrylic gel. Acrylic paint was worked over parts of these and other areas with a brush.

The Goldfish 4' x 6'. Utrecht white cotton duck was stretched over Craft Cut heavy duty white pine stretchers. The surface was sprayed with acrylic medium and water mixed as in The Bear Smelled Peanuts. Approximately 40 pounds of

pressure were used in the compressor, but the pressure was varied up to sixty pounds when thicker paint was applied.

Some masking of areas with heavy paper stencils was used.

Nylon and bristle brushes were used to vary the paint surfaces after the sprayed paint had dried.

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VITA

Mary Harrell McIntyre was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on October 27, 1928. After completing her work at Tudor Hall, Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1946, she entered Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts. During the summers of 1945 and 1946 she attended the John Herron Museum School, Indianapolis. During the summer of 1947 she attended the Jerry Farnsworth School of Painting, North Truro, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. During the summer of 1949, she attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and was awarded first prize in painting. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Radcliffe College in June, 1950. She attended the Brooklyn Museum School and the Art Students' League in 1950 and 1951. She was employed as a commercial artist for station WTTV, Bloomington, Indiana, 1952-1953. In the winter of 1953 she worked as a photographer for the Don Carlson Studio, Boulder, Colorado. She was employed as General Illustrator and Statistical Draftsman, Central Radio Propagation Laboratories, National Bureau of Standards, Boulder, Colorado, 1954-1955. From 1964 - 1968 she served as Educational Director of Laguna

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Gloria Art Museum School, Austin, Texas. From 1968 - 1970 she taught classes in art history to adults and in applied art to children and teen-agers at Laguna Gloria Art Museum School. She attended classes in the Art Department of The University of Texas, Austin, from 1959-1962 and in 1967. In January of 1968 she entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas.

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SYMBIOSIS 1968
30"x40" acrylic + oil



SENTRY 1969
30"x36" acrylic



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CREATION I 1970
36"x46" acrylic

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