Painting, an expression of the desire for clarity
by Judith Nesbit Marchwick

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Of
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Montana State University
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Abstract:
It is my belief that the creative act is an expression of man's desire for self-knowledge and clarity. In an attempt to investigate the nature of clarity, however, the problem of definition arises. The statements I make are based on my own understanding of certain terms, which I will attempt to define, and are not intended to represent universal truths.

This thesis reflects responses' and conclusions that I, as an artist and an individual, hold at this time and this place. Since my own endeavors have involved me in the area of painting, I have formed my thesis around that medium in order to express myself more clearly; the creative act, however, is performed in many kindred areas, and the medium is important only as the vehicle of the artist.

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ABSTRACT

It is my belief that the creative act is an expression of man's desire for self-knowledge and clarity. In an attempt to investigate the nature of clarity, however, the problem of definition arises. The statements I make are based on my own understanding of certain terms, which I will attempt to define, and are not intended to represent universal truths.

This thesis reflects responses and conclusions that I, as an artist and an individual, hold at this time and this place. Since my own endeavors have involved me in the area of painting, I have formed my thesis around that medium in order to express myself more clearly; the creative act, however, is performed in many kindred areas, and the medium is important only as the vehicle of the artist.

INTRODUCTION

Unity is, as the word implies, a oneness. It is an harmonious working of all parts, but more than that it is the dependence of one element upon another to produce this "oneness." To translate this idea into the area of painting, we may consider that a painted surface has unity not just if the visual elements go together, but that they are all necessary to one and another. It is impossible to imagine, for example, one of Franz Kline's paintings without just those lines and dynamic thrusts.

The word "clarity" presents a multitude of problems, as there are no satisfactory dictionary definitions. One may find "freedom from obstruction or hindrance," or "lack of uncertainty." To be sure, clarity has to do with a lack of visual hindrance, but the idea of clarity is a positive thing, and it is disturbing to hear it defined as a "lack of" this or as "freedom from" that, which seems to define the word in terms

of its negation.

If the painter achieves clarity in his canvas, his senses tell him he has made a statement -- complete, personal, and positive. It is the affirmative nature of this response that most closely resembles the idea of clarity.

Man has a desire for unity and clarity. As confusion is an unhappy state of mind for man, so is it an unhappy state on a canvas. There are those for whom the statement of chaos is an end, but if one sees confusion as a comment on his environment or even his existence, then it is a positive perception for this individual. His very negation of apparent order has clarity for him. The very fact of his translation indicates the artist's attempt to clarify something in his own mind, and the creative act, that interaction between artist and canvas, is the process by which he does so.

The direction of a canvas is irrevocably tied up with the

artist's own responses. The artist responds to what he sees or feels; he projects this response on canvas. He must then respond to his own response, so to speak, as it appears on a canvas. For example, the artist may perceive a landscape in such a way that he has projected an abstract equivalent of this landscape, but from that point on his concern is with the surface itself; he pushes the forms and colors, patterns and values back and forth, acting with an intuitive sense of placement which is in itself a response to that expression of himself that he has translated onto a canvas.

This "intuitive placement" is in fact the artist's search for clarity. Obviously he has something to say or he would not be painting. His problem is to achieve a statement of total clarity. If the surface is complete and clear, the eye and the intuition will tell him so. If not, there will always exist that uneasiness which accompanies a lack of certainty.

Such a discomfort is not present if a painting has clarity.

At this point I am speaking of the artist and his sensitivities and responses to his own work. The uninvolved viewer will experience something totally different from the artist, perhaps even a definite displeasure. Whether one likes or dislikes a painting, however, has nothing to do with its having or lacking clarity. One might even say that if a painting lacks clarity, there is nothing there to like or dislike, as it is nonexistent in terms of a whole. If one accepts a work as complete in his own mind, then for this person the work has clarity. It is far more difficult, however, to express something with clarity than to accept as clear something another has produced. This is understandable, since the artist has an involvement that the viewer cannot share.

When one's eyes are confrcnted with an image or images,

a response results, a response being a reaction to something that touches the senses. Presume that a person looks at a painting; his eye may be pleased or offended, or he may be disinterested in what he sees. Any of these reactions, even disinterest, is a positive response, in the sense that the viewer is reacting after a split-second acceptance that what is before him is complete. If the eye or intuition rejects the image as lacking or incomplete, it cannot accept it as a finished statement and thereby make a decision. If the eye is puzzled as to the conviction of a statement, the eye and intuition are therefore confused; in this event it may be said that the painting lacks clarity, and since it is the nature of man to insist on order, the painting is either unfinished or unsuccessful. Visual response, then, is an indication of unity - or lack of it.

Whether or not one responds favorably to Jackson Pollock,

for example, there is no question that the viewer is responding to a completed statement. Pollock's paintings convey a tremendous amount of tension, perhaps, but never disorder. They are as complete and controlled as a Rembrandt or a Velasquez. His creation of controlled yet frenzied movement is an enormous accomplishment. The drips and spatters of color are just that, but drips and spatters placed in exactly the desired location. His eye, his intuition, told him when the canvas was complete and clear. It is this response to the finality of a surface that makes the artist stop. He goes no further because he cannot. He may have a new statement to make, but he will start a new canvas.

If we could somehow know ahead of time what an artist was trying to do or say, we would have a standard, for that artist anyway, by which to decide whether or not he was successful in that particular problem. This, however, is rarely the case,

and even if a painting were an unsuccessful solution to a given problem, it would not necessarily follow that the painting was without value. It remains an expression of the artist; an expression of himself at a given time, a given place, and under given circumstances.

Though it is tempting to take the safe course and refrain from making statements which cannot be ultimately resolved and perfectly defined, I feel that I must insist that a work of art, while it may not be judged fairly in terms of "good" or "bad," must contain certain elements without which its validity is open to question. Otherwise, one could assume that any scribble on any surface could be submitted as a work of art, and this premise I find unacceptable. Clarity and conviction must be present. The artist gives to his work, even as he takes from it. I do not feel that it is possible to create a work of art without this interaction. Mr. E. P. Richardson

expresses it well: "Good painting...like good art of any kind, rises from very deep sources in the human soul, deeper than words can penetrate; and it speaks to the wordless depths of others."[1]

Does the artist, then, paint for himself or for others? The artist must satisfy his own need for clarity. In this sense he paints for himself, though in a larger sense this desire for clarity springs from the need to communicate and be understood; thus he appeals to the intuition, the "wordless depths of others."

As I look at a painting, it is my intuitive response that matters. When an artist has touched my soul through clarity in expressing his own, I experience an insight I cannot share verbally. Nicholas de Stael and Andrew Wyeth, among others,

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[1]E. P. Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," Atlantic Monthly, vol. 213, June 1964, p. 71.

have touched me in this manner. I cite these two artists because they are painters who on the surface have little in common, yet there are many similarities, though each resolves his problem in ways unique to his own intuition, and the clarity they achieve appeals to mine in turn.

My own sense of clarity, then, is not dependent on bright colors, sharply defined forms, a mood, or any other device. If it were possible to evoke a desired response solely by technical means, one could establish a formula for painting, and this would of course eliminate any of the communicative possibilities and destroy the very meaning of the creative act.

The more one increases his awareness of nature, of man, and of himself, the more he is aware of obstacles, and it is a further characteristic of man to try and surmount them. The more the artist is faced with complexity, the greater becomes his problem of maintaining order in his search for solutions,

for clarity, and for self-knowledge.

THE PAINTINGS



fig. 1

LANDSCAPE WITH RED HILLS

acrylic and collage; 22 x 30



fig. 2

LANDSCAPE

oil; 21 x 28



fig. 3

THE BINGO PLAYERS

oil; 36 x 36



fig. 4

SEATED WOMAN

acrylic; 10 x 17

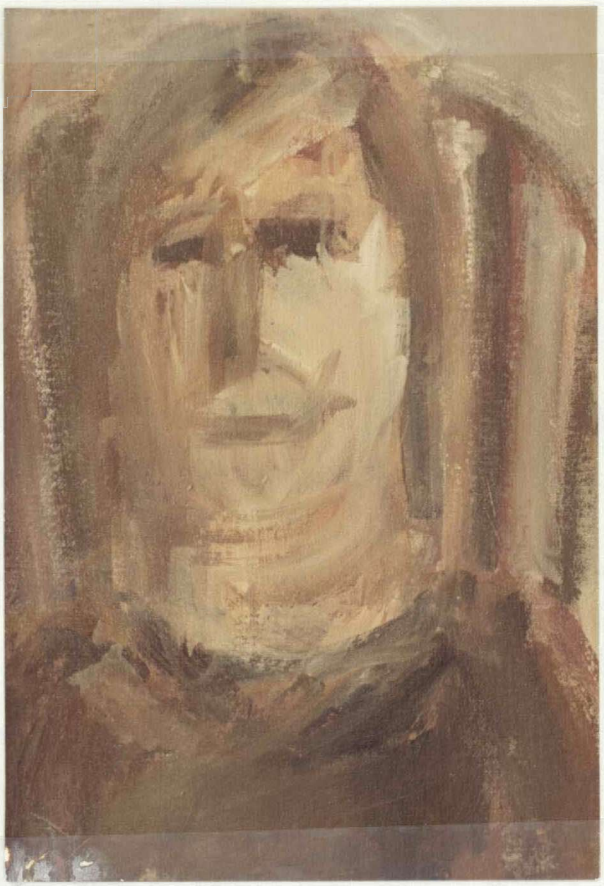


fig. 5

SEATED MAN

acrylic; 12 x 18

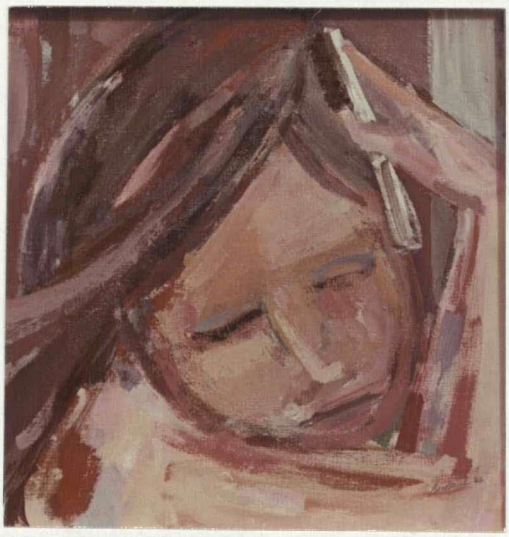


fig. 6

VANITY

acrylic; 16 x 17

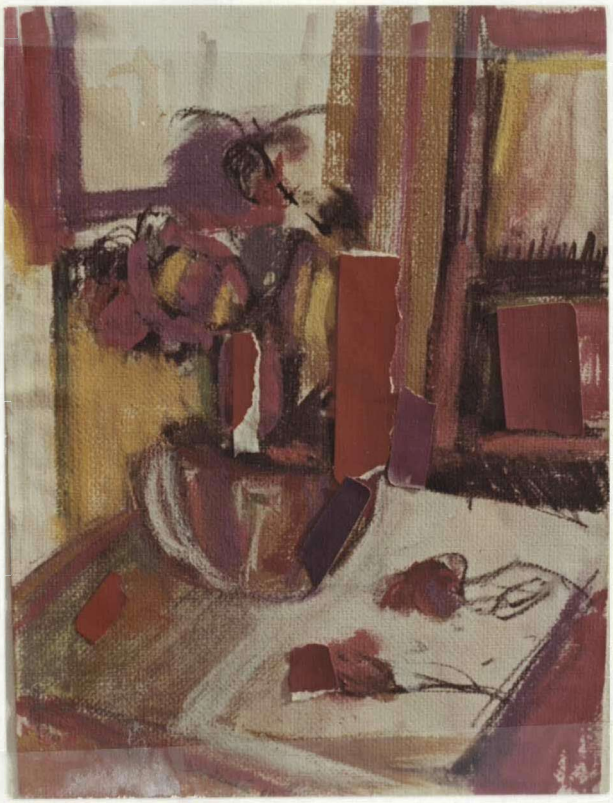


fig. 7

FLOWERS

pastel and collage; 9 x 12

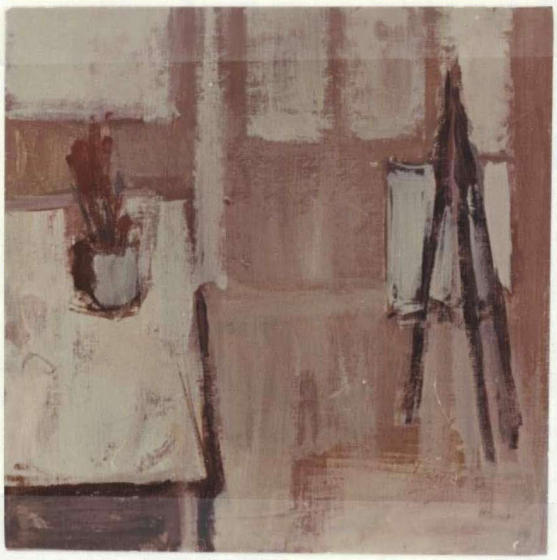


fig. 8

STUDIO

acrylic; 15 x 15

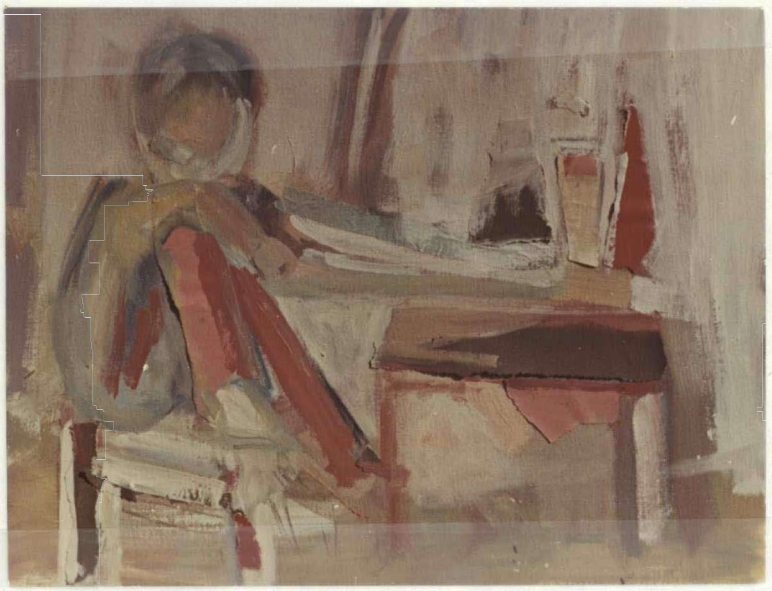


fig. 9

GIRL SEATED AT TABLE

oil and collage; 16 x 20



fig. 10

INTERIOR WITH FLOWERS

acrylic; 24 x 36



fig. 11

MORNING

acrylic; 18 x 24



fig. 12

GREEN LANDSCAPE

acrylic; 24 x 30



fig. 13

FARM

acrylic; 22 x 30

CONCERNING THE PAINTINGS

One of the most frightening - yet exhilarating - sights to have before you is a blank canvas. It is the responsibility for the initial commitment that is awesome. Once this commitment has been made, the intuition of the artist takes over, and he is performing the creative process.

The artist's beginning may be a direct move on the canvas, or he may have an idea from another source. So far, my own source has always been in nature. Even in a painting which seems to be an assemblage of forms and colors for their own sake (fig. 1), the root has always been a figure, a landscape, a still life or an interior.

It can be hazardous to have too much of a preconceived idea of the surface. I painted at length on one canvas, a landscape to be specific, with too strong an idea of my intent, and had no success. Finally, I gave up and turned to another surface, producing in a short time Landscape (fig. 2).

From my previous endeavors my mind was full of the idea of Landscape, so I perceived my result as such. It was a successful painting because I allowed my intuition to take over; my responses worked with what was happening on the painted surface. When I reached a certain point, I simply stopped; I had reached that affirmative response to what I had painted.

Obviously time is not a factor in producing a work of art. There is no gaurantee that after so many hours one will be successful. There are many paintings under The Bingo Players (fig. 3), for example, and yet it took moments to produce Seated Woman (fig. 4). Each painting is a strong statement; the former an oil, the latter an acrylic, yet each is complete and clear.

When I began to experiment with the new acrylics, I did a number of smaller paintings, among them Seated Man (fig. 5), Vanity (fig. 6), Flowers (fig. 7), and the most successful of

this group, The Studio (fig. 8). Small paintings are easier to control than large ones, to be sure, but I also had not done any small paintings, hence I tried two new dimensions at once. I discovered that I prefer to work on a larger scale.

For a while I began paintings with a thin wash, developing the forms until I saw something emerging. I then increased the intensity as my surface took shape and the forms developed; sometimes I used collage. Though I painted in this manner for some time, only one canvas was really successful, the Girl Seated at Table (fig. 9), an oil and collage. Though this approach had merit in that I painted a great deal (I worked on three or four canvases at a time), it is a method not generally suited to someone of my temperament. I repeatedly found myself trying to hold onto certain areas at the sacrifice of the canvas as a whole. Not only that, I felt a definite need to begin with an intention, rather than respond to a

coincidental surface that resulted from my wish to destroy the white of the canvas. If this need seems to contradict my aforementioned convictions, I repeat that a painting is always and unavoidably an expression of the artist, regardless of his approach. Nonetheless I have a respect for control of my medium, and though I have no objection to "letting things happen" on a canvas, I wish the choice to be mine. Without the ability to control the medium, the artist depends on after-the-fact perception. It remains, of course, an expression of an under level of his consciousness, and it may be fairly argued that such a statement is more true than one tempered with an acquired discipline. It is for the artist to decide in what manner and by what means he will express himself. His action is important because it expresses his desire to understand and be understood.

While I have commented on the possible dangers of too

strong a preliminary idea, there are at least two of my paintings in particular that would have been impossible to paint had I not had the control with which to project them, the Interior with Flowers (fig. 10) and Morning (fig. 11). I had a strong idea of paintings dependent on clarity of color. The hand and the eye do not always project the image in the mind, however, and without a healthy respect for my medium, the achievement of what I wanted where I wanted it would have been unlikely.

It will be apparent that I favor experimentation. Since the artist must be responsive to changes in himself and in the world, he would do well to try new approaches. He may ultimately reject or absorb new mannerisms; he may adopt new techniques, or reassert his own direction with a greater conviction.

I experimented with sharply-defined forms, and the Interior with Flowers (fig. 10) was the most successful of that group. I find the technique too sterile for my own expression, and

though I like this painting, my affection for it is dependent on the illusion of flowers. They cannot be identified as a type of flower, but speak of the nature of flowers. I may add that I did not continue to paint in this sharp-edged manner, for I conceived a blank canvas as a logical extension of this technique. While it is conceivable that such an end result could have meaning, I am personally too involved with the excitement of painting to find this technique satisfying. It is the interaction of other elements that moves me; the action of the brushstroke, the tactile quality of the paint, the subtleties of color within a form.

There is frequent - and tiresome - reference to the so-called artistic temperament. None of us is precisely the same person at all times, but it is perhaps true that the artist, who is struggling daily with the problem of his existence, is frequently a person of some intensity. He is quite literally

faced with his problems and, if he would develop, he is constantly examining and analyzing his paintings, and thereby himself. A series of changes from the original idea does not matter except as developments toward the completed canvas. They are, after all, responses on responses, and this very personal action of the artist translates a part of himself onto the canvas.

It will be noticed that up to this point there were almost no landscapes. I had been dealing with confined or shallow space, and though there were good paintings to come out of my endeavors, it was not until I began to explore landscapes that I felt truly free of inhibitions and confident of my intuition. In the better ones, Green Landscape (fig. 12), Morning (fig. 11), and Farm (fig. 13), I found a fluidity of expression that I had previously attained in only a few paintings.

It is difficult to put aside consciousness of the creative

act - perhaps confrontation with deep space impressed me so much that I was able to put aside this consciousness, and allow my intuition to function freely. At any rate the landscapes are my clearest statements to date; as projections of my ideas at the time they were made, they are clear.

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