



Romantic daydreams : visions of a new relationship with the natural world [slide]
by Richard Paul Faude

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
Montana State University
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Abstract:

The paintings in my thesis exhibition are based on memories, stories I have heard, and daydreams about the lake I grew up beside, and other bodies of water I have lived near. There are two sides to the paintings: their personal meaning to me and their meaning to other people who see them. This thesis addresses both sides of the paintings in four parts: a discussion of the psychology of the paintings, my relationship to the natural world, the socio-political relevance of the paintings, and the specific symbolism of the images in the paintings. The slides of the paintings in my thesis exhibition illustrate the final form and development of my art at Montana State University, that embodies the principles outlined in this thesis.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of
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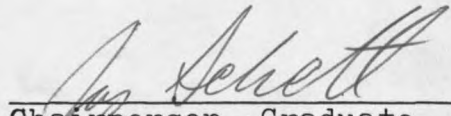
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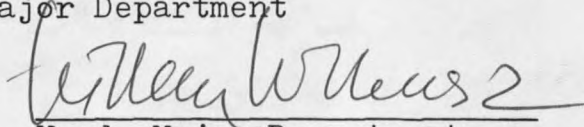
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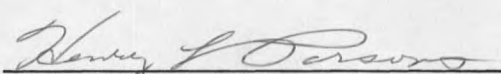
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ABSTRACT

The paintings in my thesis exhibition are based on memories, stories I have heard, and daydreams about the lake I grew up beside, and other bodies of water I have lived near. There are two sides to the paintings: their personal meaning to me and their meaning to other people who see them. This thesis addresses both sides of the paintings in four parts: a discussion of the psychology of the paintings, my relationship to the natural world, the socio-political relevance of the paintings, and the specific symbolism of the images in the paintings. The slides of the paintings in my thesis exhibition illustrate the final form and development of my art at Montana State University, that embodies the principles outlined in this thesis.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The two elements that formed the personality of the early Romantic painters were the authentic, immediate, sincere, and spontaneous experiencing of nature, and the transposition, frequently unconscious, of verbal poetry into pictorial poetry.¹ These elements form the foundation for the paintings in my thesis exhibition. The paintings serve as testament to the power of the imagination and to the beauty, majesty, and mystery of the natural world. I offer an idealistic vision of an alternative relationship with our world. My vision is one of harmony. My paintings were not intended as socio-political statements; they were the product of introspection.

The motive for my paintings was a group of photographs of the lake I grew up beside. Seeing the photographs started a flood of memories and emotion that caused me to speculate on my relationship with the natural world. The paintings play a double role; their personal meaning to me and their meaning to other people who see them. The distinction between the two roles is important. Making

¹ Marcel Brion, Art of the Romantic Era (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 47.

paintings about a subject as familiar to me as the lake I grew up beside, and other bodies of water I have lived near, was more than a study of nature or an exercise in making pictures; the paintings questioned my feeling toward the natural world and the relevance of this feeling to my art. The paintings are an allegory of my introspection, while they possess a broader meaning as an allusion to man's ability, through his imagination, to reshape the world around him. I believe man's treatment of nature is dictated by how he imagines his relationship to it; it becomes a question of conservation or conquest.¹

I will divide the examination of the personal nature and the political nature of my paintings into four parts: a discussion of the psychology of the paintings, my relationship to the natural world, the socio-political relevance of the paintings, and the specific symbolism of the images in the paintings.

¹ Keith Thomas, Man and the Natural World (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), pp. 269-87.

CHAPTER 2

MAILER

When first I thought of an approach to discussing my paintings, my logical side sought a scientific explanation for why I paint and why I made these particular paintings. It was Norman Mailer, in his book, Of A Fire On The Moon, who aided me in concentrating my thoughts about the relationship of the imagination to daydreaming and painting. Our subconscious, Mailer tells us, is directed by the Navigator. The Navigator determines the content of our dreams and daydreams, as well as making the thousands of decisions we face everyday.¹ To help the Navigator assimilate all the in-coming information and to formulate a plan by which to live, the Navigator has the services of the Novelist. The Novelist works out a "vast social novel by which (we) can make sense of society."² The Novelist is "forever drawing up social charts upon which the Navigator (can) make his calculations."³ Dreams are one type of social chart by which the Navigator makes decisions. Dreams

¹ Norman Mailer, Of A Fire On The Moon (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969), pp. 156-7.

² Ibid., p. 157.

³ Ibid.

are simulations that test possible social responses.¹ The Navigator can draw upon the information in dreams when confronted with similar situations when we are awake.² I liken painting with daydreaming because both share a similar, subconscious, working relationship with the imagination. For me, both daydreaming and painting conjure mental images that run their course in a seemingly haphazard way. But, as Mailer suggests, the images are possibly not haphazard at all; they are simulations for possible future outcomes. Painting, therefore, serves a similar function as daydreaming. When I made my paintings, I was running a series of simulations to determine my beliefs about myself, my art, social and political subjects, nature, mysticism, and religion.

Mailer's line of reasoning, which I have adopted and applied to my ideas about the role painting plays in my life, is logical, but does not explain why I chose the particular subject matter that I did. To this question I answer: if modern science has taught us anything, it is that it is often possible to explain how natural phenomena work, but not why they work. So it is with painting. I do not know why looking at the photographs of the lake led to making paintings about my relationship with the natural

¹ Mailer, p. 157.

² Ibid.

world. But, my interest in the mystery behind this decision making process is reflected in the mystery I see in natural events; like a Carp rising to the surface of a lake to die.

I intend to convey the kinship between the mystery in nature and the mystery in painting. One way I do this is in the manner I apply the paint, in certain areas of the paintings, that could be called loose or sketchy. In a review of the painting Manhattoes by Eric Fischl, Robert Berlind observes that the sketchiness of the painting becomes a metaphor for its coming-into-being.¹ Not so many years ago, a painting described as sketchy would also be described as unfinished in the same breath. It seems that the degree of sketchiness in contemporary figurative painting is, again, calling into question the quality and worth of paintings using this technique. Eric Fischl has often been accused of making shoddy paintings. But, I believe, as I suspect Fischl does, that the technique is dictated by the intention; and no rules may define what is right or wrong from one painting to another. My technique is dictated by my vision of how the painting will look and what I hope to convey through it.

¹ Robert Berlind, "Eric Fischl at the Whitney and Mary Boone/ Michael Werner," Art In America, May, 1986, p. 153.

CHAPTER 3

THOREAU

Making paintings about the mystery, beauty, and majesty of the water based on memories proved to be an enlightening project. The familiarity of the subject made the paintings an exercise in self-examination, more than a study of nature. My distance from the places I was painting, and the time that had passed since I was there, offered special challenges to my ability to recall my feelings and observations. Very important, too, was the kinship I felt toward the water and my love for it. Henry David Thoreau had a similar love for Walden Pond which he described in Walden:

"Perhaps on that spring morning when Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden Walden Pond was already in existence, and even then breaking up in a gentle spring rain accompanied with mist and a southerly wind, and covered with myriads of ducks and geese, which had not heard of the fall, when still such pure lakes sufficed them. ... It is a gem of the first water which Concord wears in her coronet."¹

Thoreau's sublime reverence for Walden Pond is inspirational. His suggestion that Walden Pond retained its

¹ Henry David Thoreau, Walden (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1960, originally published by Ticknor and Fields, 1854), pp. 123-4.

purity after the Fall of man is a startling allegory, and offers a Romantic attitude toward the natural world in a very personal way. Tantamount to Thoreau's powers as a writer is his ability to communicate his keen, but sensitive, power of observation without becoming banal. One of the elements that shaped the personality of the Romantic painters, as I said, was the transposition of verbal poetry into pictorial poetry. To avoid making retrograde Romantic paintings, I have tried to create allegories in my paintings of the same simplicity and beauty that Thoreau creates with words. The images that form the subject matter in my paintings are natural occurrences: a dying fish rising to the surface of the water, a summer storm passing ominously by a lake, a baptism, or an earthquake that forms a lake. The images, though simple and natural, become elements in allegories about the mystical nature of our world. The possibility of seeing natural events in a different way leads me to the discussion of the possible socio-political relevance of my paintings.

CHAPTER 4

TOLSTOY

My paintings are based on memories of natural occurrences, and my embellishments on those memories. I want to learn more about myself through my paintings; and the introspection that went into making my paintings was revealing. But, while my paintings are revealing of myself, there is another side to them that I think is of equal importance: their socio-political relevance to other people who see them. My paintings are not specifically intended to be socio-political statements. I would prefer that they impel others to introspection; thereby attacking the existing subjugation of the natural world on a personal, subconscious level.

Since I began making paintings, I have struggled to reconcile the personal and political sides of my art. I have cited the importance of Mailer and Thoreau to my thinking about the personal nature of my paintings. Just as influential to my thinking about the political nature of my paintings is Leo Tolstoy. Although the principles Tolstoy outlines in his book, What Is Art?, are in opposition to my beliefs to some extent, I have been influenced by some of the passages. Of particular interest

to me was a passage about the activity of art:

"To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling-- this is the activity of art.

Art is a human activity consisting in this; that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them."¹

Tolstoy perfectly sums up the balance I seek between self-discovery and political revelation. My paintings differ from the description by Tolstoy in this, that the feeling I evoked in myself when I began to paint my paintings was not one I had wholly experienced before. There was a feeling of indecision about the natural world when I started the paintings; making them helped me to marshal my feelings.

If there is a political message to be gleaned from my paintings, it is that our imagination has the power to shape the natural world around us. This power is potentially benevolent or destructive. So far, man has been particularly destructive to the natural world. Man's treatment of the natural world has been linked to the teachings of the classical philosophers and the Bible. Aristotle said, nature made nothing in vain and everything

¹ T. J. Diffey, Tolstoy's "What Is Art?" (Dover, New Hampshire, Crook Helm Ltd., 1985), p. 11.

had a purpose. The Stoics taught that nature existed solely to serve man's interests. The Theologians of the early modern period also subjugated nature to the service of man. They said, the Garden of Eden was a paradise prepared for man in which God had given Adam dominion over all things (Genesis, i. 28). Man lost this dominion after the Fall, but regained it after the Flood.¹ The motive for our treatment of the natural world goes back thousands of years; although much has been said, written, or made to alter our feeling toward it, it has had little effect.

I am advocating greater harmony with the natural world. The allusion to this interpretation of my paintings is, the relationship between the figures in my paintings to their environment. The landscape is not merely a backdrop for the figures. There is a balance between the figures and the surrounding landscape; both are equally alive; one does not serve the other. In some instances, the figures are the embodiment of the world around them. There is a physical connection between the figures and the landscape: some figures are immersed in the water, or dissolve into the atmosphere. My point is: the world is a living thing that we only have the vaguest understanding of; perhaps, after three thousand years of subjugating it, it is time to review our relation to it.

¹ Thomas, pp. 17-8.

CHAPTER 5

MERWIN

I discussed the two elements of Romantic painting: the sincere, authentic interpretation of nature and the transposition of verbal poetry into pictorial poetry; and how the interpretation of nature applies to my paintings. The second element of Romantic painting applies to my paintings, as well as the first. I cited the importance of Mailer, Thoreau, and Tolstoy to the concentration of my beliefs about my work. I now declare a fourth; a poet, who had great influence on my thinking and paintings. His name is W.S. Merwin and his poem, "The Last One" (Appendix A, p. 18),¹ changed the way I look at the natural world. The poem offers Merwin's vision of the world finally turning against the abuses of man and threatening to destroy him. The power of the poem, for me, comes from the images Merwin chooses to communicate his vision: man is referred to impersonally as "they", and the threat to man's existence comes in the form of a shadow. The shadow starts to swallow everything near it, so they try to fill in the shadow with stones, cover it, shine lights on it, and shadow it in

¹ W. S. Merwin, The Lice (New York: Atheneum, 1979), pp. 10-2.

smoke, but it does not go away. Finally, they go away and hope the shadow does not follow.

"The Last One" changed my attitude toward the natural world and to making art. It gave me cause to think about the potential power and interpretation of images. The they and shadow in Merwin's poem are simple, but hauntingly powerful. I have searched for a similar simplicity of images in my paintings that carry powerful meanings. The water in my paintings, particularly when it reflects, is a symbol of introspection. The human figures are symbols of man, myself, and harmony with the surrounding world. Sometimes, the figures are the embodiment of the world around them. The figure, "La Source", mirrors the symbolism of the adjacent painting, "Genesis (Apocalypse)". Both images symbolize the source of the lake. "Eve" symbolizes the consequence of "Genesis (Apocalypse)": a new relationship with the natural world that is serene. The figure in "Spring (Patroon)" symbolizes my respect for the Patroon painters of seventeenth-century, colonial America. The Patroon painters struck a balance between the figure and the landscape in their portraits. The figures in "Baptism" and "Sturgeon" symbolize man. The figures in "Summer (Passing Storm)" and "Autumn" symbolize their respective seasons. The figure in "Dying Carp" symbolizes the water and death; as does the figure in "Winter".

The dying Carp, Alewives, and Sturgeon symbolize the

life-cycle: what is born of the water returns to the water. This is an allusion to the religious symbolism of ashes to ashes: he who is born unto God returns to God. The four paintings, "Summer (Passing Storm)", "Spring (Patroon)", "Autumn", and "Winter" are a reference to the life-cycle. The symbolism of the seasons is best explained by the American Indian, poet, Black Elk:

"Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves."¹

My paintings can be interpreted as an allegory for my own life: the dying fish, and the seasons, being symbols of my mortality. The dying Sturgeon, Carp, and Alewives are symbols of man's subjugation of the natural world.

Obviously, many of the images can be interpreted in many ways. The potential for multiple meanings was what I searched for in the images; and it is what I find beautiful about poetry.

¹ William Least Heat Moon, Blue Highways (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1982), p. 421.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

I have detailed the sources of inspiration and the possible interpretations of my paintings. Contemporary poetry, personal experience, and literature were very important to their development; but, some attention must be given to the influence of art history and contemporary art.

When I was fourteen years old, my older brother gave me a book of painting reproductions called Fantastic Art. The book contained reproductions of the work of Hieronymus Bosch, Salvador Dali, Paul Delveaux, and others. One painter, and painting, impressed me like no other; that was John Martin and his painting, "Fallen Angels Entering Pandamonium". Perhaps it was the technical skill of Martin that impressed me, or it could have been the drama of the painting that reminded me of the Sinbad movies I saw at the Saturday matinees; but, regardless, the painting captured my imagination and compelled me to study other painters of the Romantic era. "Fallen Angels Entering Pandamonium" directly inspired the making of my painting, "Genesis (Apocalypse)".

William Turner and Eugene Delacroix both influenced the character of my work; Turner, because of the majesty and mystery he displays in his paintings of the sea, and

Delacroix, for his dramatic use of color and light. J.A.D. Ingres made me think about the potential of the human form to symbolize particular emotions and ideals. Three of the figures in my paintings are directly based on figures in Ingres' paintings: the figure in "Eve" is from Ingres' "La Baigneuse Dite De Valpincon"; the figure in "Spring (Patroon)" is from the portrait, "Mademoiselle Riviere"; and the figure in "La Source" is from the Ingres' painting of the same title.

Contemporary painters like Eric Fischl, David Salle, and Francesco Clemente have influenced me; mainly, for their style and technique, and, particularly in the case of Fischl and Salle, because their work is a reflection of cultural values and ideals. Their paintings are socio-politically engaging, while they remain aesthetically intriguing. For this reason, the paintings of Leon Golub are of particular interest to me, as well; but, while Golub's figures are symbolic of political power and violence, and Fischl's figures symbolize the middle class' alienation and sexual deviation, the figures in my paintings are hypothetical in contrast. My figures symbolize a Utopian ideal, rather than cultural phenomena. Though our cultural concerns are different, I believe my paintings address the same contemporary issues about the role of painting: Modernism versus Post-Modernism.

Proponents of Modernism believe painting should concern

itself solely with aesthetic issues: color, line, form, and edge. Modernism is art turning unto itself. Proponents of Post-Modernism believe painting can, and should, concern itself with other issues, beside those that are purely aesthetic. I have attempted to reconcile the personal and political nature of my art; and in so doing, I have adopted a Post-Modernist view of the role of my painting. The paintings in my thesis exhibition are the result of applying this point of view to my purer urge simply to paint.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX. A

"THE LAST ONE"

"THE LAST ONE"

W.S. MERWIN

Well they'd made their minds to be everywhere because
why not.

Everywhere was theirs because they thought so.
They with two leaves they whom the birds despise.
In the middle of stones they made up their minds.
They started to cut.

Well they cut everything because why not.
Everything was theirs because they thought so.
It fell into its shadows and they took both away.
Some to have some for burning.

Well cutting everything they came to the water.
They came to the end of the day there was one left standing.
They would cut it tomorrow they went away.
The night gathered in the last branches.
The shadow of the night gathered in the shadow on the water.
The night and the shadow put on the same head.
And it said Now.

Well in the morning they cut the last one.
Like the others the last one fell into its shadow.
It fell into its shadow on the water.
They took it away its shadow stayed on the water.

Well they shrugged they started trying to get the shadow away.
They cut right to the ground the shadow stayed whole.
They laid boards on it the shadow came out on top.

They shone lights on it the shadow got blacker and clearer.
They exploded the water the shadow rocked.
They built a huge fire on the roots.
They sent up black smoke between the shadow and the sun.
The new shadow flowed without changing the old one.
They shrugged they went away to get stones.

They came back the shadow was growing.
They started setting up stones it was growing.
They looked the other way it went on growing.
They decided they would make a stone out of it.
They took stones to the water they poured them into the shadow.
They poured them in they poured them in the stones vanished.
The shadow was not filled it went on growing.
That was one day.

The next day was just the same it went on growing.
They did all the same things it was just the same.
They decided to take its water from under it.
They took away water they took it away the water went down.
The shadow stayed where it was before.
It went on growing it grew onto the land.
They started to scrape the shadow with machines.
When it touched the machines it stayed on them.
They started to beat the shadow with sticks.
Where it touched the sticks it stayed on them.
That was another day.

Well the next day started about the same it went on growing.
They pushed lights into the shadow.
Where the shadow got onto them they went out.
They began to stomp on the edge it got their feet.
And when it got their feet they fell down.
It got into eyes the eyes went blind.

The ones that fell down it grew over and they vanished.

The ones that went blind and walked into it vanished.

The ones that could see and stood still

It swallowed their shadows.

Then it swallowed them too and they vanished.

Well the others ran.

The ones that were left went away to live if it would let them.

They went as far as they could.

The lucky ones with their shadows.

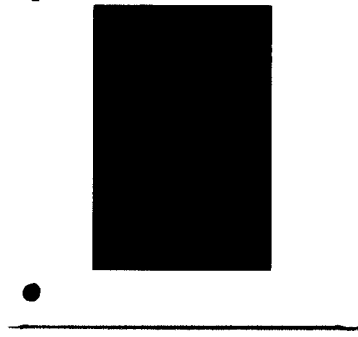
APPENDIX B

TITLES AND SLIDES

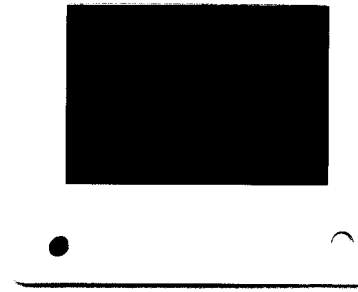
TITLES AND SLIDES

1. "Baptism", Oil, 82" x 94½", 1986.
2. "Sturgeon", Oil, 71" x 138½", 1986.
3. "La Source", Oil, 49" x 82", 1986.
4. "Genesis (Apocalypse)", Oil, 82" x 113", 1986.
5. "Eve", Oil, 49" x 82", 1986.
6. "Dying Carp", Oil, 81" x 120", 1986.
7. "Spring (Patroon)", Oil, 70" x 81½", 1986.
8. "Summer (Passing Storm)", Oil, 81½" x 82", 1986.
9. "Autumn", Oil, 69½" x 70", 1986.
10. "Winter", Oil, 57" x 70", 1986.

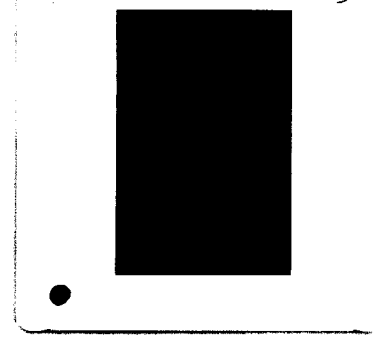
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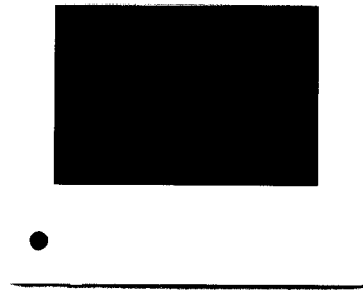
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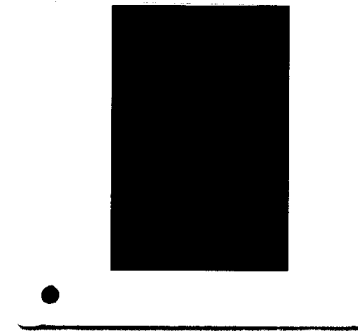
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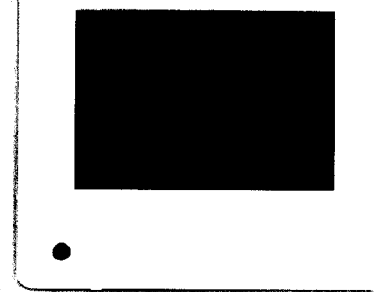
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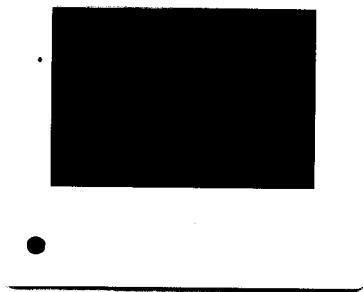
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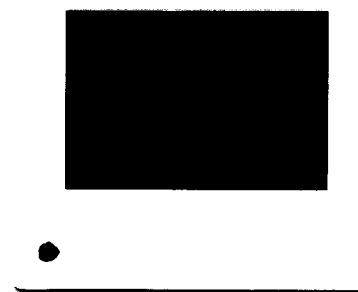
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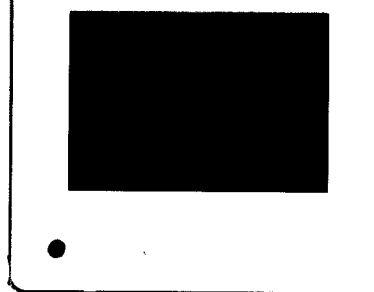
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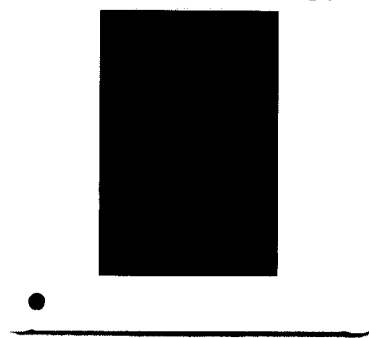
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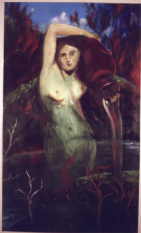


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