

AN ATTITUDE TOWARD REALISM

A Studio Thesis

Presented to

the Department of Art

Kansas State Teachers College of Emporia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree


Master of Arts

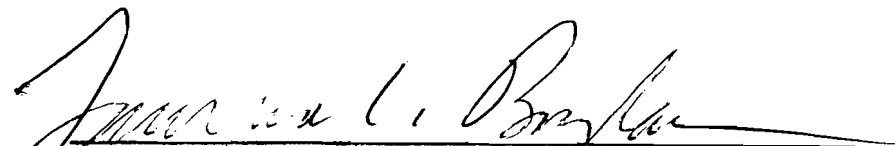
by

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PREFACE

This paper will portray the stylistic and imagimatic content in my graduate paintings. Using the works themselves, I hope to make my observations more effective. It must be noted, however, that when attempting such explication I find that the ideas do not translate from one form of communication to the other. I do not contend that there is no relationship between the visual and the linguistic; I must note, however, that an artfully constructed image has very little to do with words.

Many critics find that it is necessary to put a work being examined within the context of the vast written tradition of art history in order to have some sort of defacto structure from which to speak. The effect of such criticism does not maintain tradition, nor even make it clear when tradition is broken by an artist, but rather, it limits the range of possible abstractions to such a degree that the work is no longer being dealt with. The art work is instead being thrust into an appropriate vacancy or category.

I have no desire to do such a thing--especially to my own work. Therefore, I shall try to define, very generally, some of my direct intentions in the works which accompany this thesis. The reader may then draw his own conclusions.

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

I will discuss two aspects of my paintings: Space and Image.

I choose these areas for discussion because they are the most revealing aspects in my own work. They are also ideas for which there are ready definitions. "Space" implies two specific ideas which will concern me in this discussion: (1) The indefinite extension of a three-dimensional field, (2) the intuitive three-dimensional field of everyday experience. The word "Image" and its derivatives has two typical uses which apply: (1) A reproduction of the appearance of someone or something, (2) to symbolize or typify.

I would like to stress one other point. It is very important that when we attempt to make a statement about a work we remember that we are talking about an object or a series of objects. In this case it is something to be displayed in a place of prominence, to be hung on a wall for the personalization or restructuring of an environment. Throughout this discussion I will attempt never to lose sight of the physical reality of a painting or of the act of painting. I believe that my painting should be considered in this light, quite apart from a conceptual premise. This is an essential link in my approach.

PART II

SPACE-IMAGE RELATIONSHIPS

In the paintings reproduced here I consider the distorted space their most singular element. My consideration of this plastic component is generally limited to two levels. First, space in the literal three-dimensional sense relates an object to its environment. It is self-evident that a realistic or objective painter must consider the spatial attitude of the viewer as his most objective pictorial foundation. The artist is, after all, first a viewer. Secondly, the intuitive power in man senses an entirely different sort of space. It is not the realm of classical form but a spatial sense that allows an event or place to occupy a real existence outside of its immediate time-location isolation. Memory, unconscious association, sensual stimulation, and imaginary extension all accompany a strong visual experience. This is the "three-dimensional" realistic sense which accompanies most of the life function of a human. It is, I believe, the link between the artist's imagination and that of his audience.

I have always been fascinated by the power of a realistic image. As a field for invention and manipulation, it possesses certain powers that cannot be gained from the complete abstraction of an image. Initially this different potential comes from the location of a subject on the surface of a canvas or a board. This is in essence the iconization or creation of a votive object. The paintings herein are isolated segments of a sense of reality. They are not literal interpretations of reality as I see it, nor do I feel that they are attempts to deal with the environment of which I am a part. I am attempting to isolate, orchestrate, and re-create the effects of reality.

As the painter, I stand not between my audience and the subject, but between the reality I sense and the icon I produce. This attitude is demonstrated most clearly in the painting, "George's Aunt Fanny," Plate I. The painting uses George Bellows' "Aunt Fanny" which hangs in the Des Moines Art Museum in Des Moines, Iowa, as a model. Bellows employs a diffused light-to-dark background, mellow, rounded forms, and a sensitive rendering which reveals a tender affection for his subject. His painting is saved from overt sentimentality by a number of contradictions in his manner of handling the flow of pigment. Very often he denies the forms he uses the right to function in a visual three-dimensional sense. He flattens and abbreviates the shapes and volumes. He uses outlines and distorts shapes very adroitly. These distortions have the effect of balancing sentimentality against a strong two-dimensional vitality, much in the same fashion as Manet does in "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère" or "The balcony."

In "George's Aunt Fanny," my concern is almost diametrically opposed to Bellows' view. Initially using his painting as a subject, I am dealing with the reality which he creates. The tenderness with which he develops the work is not reflected in mine. What is important is his two-dimensional field and this is the part I chose to study. I rendered the figure realistically believable by isolating its shapes in an extremely dense, dark background. Nearly all the forms are flattened and the figure is delineated by the movement of brush strokes and the edges of shapes rather than three-dimensional modeling. Modeling where I do use it becomes a concession to the human form rather than the conclusive illusion around which the painting is built.

A similar attitude toward the two-dimensional surface can be seen in the painting, "The Hair-cut," PLATE II. In "The Hair-cut" there is one device which has not been employed in "George's Aunt Fanny." The view through the door into an adjoining room is most sonorous. This gentle handling, the soft shapes, rich colors, and flowing quality of the drawing isolates the passage more profoundly than does the outline of the door. It is an emotionally consistent environment which does not intrude on the harsh, abrupt realistic sense in the figures. If that same passage were less isolated, less consistent, it would intrude on the body of the painting, creating a highly chaotic state.

"The Hunters," PLATE III, exhibits once again an attitude toward shape and space which rules out the possibility of the artist's using atmospheric effects to unify the two-dimensional surface of the painting. The forms of the two men in the boat exhibit none of the linear perspective transitions and spatial location which are characteristic of a depiction of reality. They occupy an almost entirely two-dimensional environment.

This adherence to the configuration of reality allows my specific embellishments to assume the character of the caricature. The fact that there is very little atmospheric cohesion in most of my paintings allows the drawing quality and this caricaturing to exist quite independent from and simultaneous to a purely formal and structural approach towards representational art. It is my hope that in allowing diverse drawing techniques and character to stand quite independent from the entire image, the painting will be a good deal less static and staid. Instead they will have internal contradiction and vitality.

PART III

IMAGE AND SPACE

Thus far I have dealt with the manner in which the spatial inflection is capable of significantly altering the content of an image. To contend that spatial distortion is the most important element of my image would be an oversimplification. The image is obviously important. In a number of the works illustrated my subject is of particular interest to me. There are three self-portraits: "The Artist and My Father," PLATE IV; "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog," PLATE VI; and "The Wine Drinkers," PLATE V. Two of the portraits are of my father. PLATE X is entitled "Portrait of My Mother." My friends are represented in "The Lecture," PLATE VIII; "The Hair-cut," PLATE II; "Counterpoint," PLATE IX; and "The Wine Drinkers," PLATE V. It would appear that I am inordinately concerned with very personal references in my work. This is not necessarily the case. I will grant that many of these paintings are meager attempts at visual witticism and, of course, the joke is an "in-joke."

In "The Hair-cut," "The Lecture," "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog," and "The Artist and My Father" there is a satirical twist not only in the expression of the character of the subjects, but in the highly illogical color systems. The elements of the background are rendered in such a fashion as to force the subjects to occupy two-dimensional space only through the force of the drawing quality. In other words, the subjects remain stable only because the formal structure is just as illogical as they are.

I couldn't possibly deal with each one of these and explain the consequences or draw a conclusion about what I mean. Very often I mean only that one color is delightful when countered with another in the form of a diffusing line. My intention is often only visual delight.

"Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog" is the most graphic example illustrated of the relationship between image and space. The painting is a self-portrait. The background is a vista in Eastern Kansas with a forbidding-looking cloud in the sky. Rain is falling in the distance and some lightning can be seen. The foreground contains the self-portrait done against extremely intense permanent green. The painting is square and the horizon divides the canvas nearly into two equal parts.

It was originally my intention to fill the space occupied by the self-portrait with a smiling Beagle dog or perhaps an Irish setter. On my first attempt I found that I could not draw a Beagle dog. I had no photograph of one in my possession. It occurred to me that a picture of myself with exactly the same smile would afford much the same effect and I personally found it a great deal more satisfactory. Thus the image was constructed.

The landscape in the background is blatantly romantic. The colors are lush and the handling is very expressionistic. The romanticism is carried beyond the believable limit, however, because of the gross exaggeration of atmospheric effects. It was necessary to carry this handling as far as possible so that the landscape would be harmonious with the absurdly distorted self-portrait. In the two absurdities a very positive harmony is struck. This harmony is a development from the juxtaposition of types of images: the landscape versus the self-portrait;

the egocentric versus the overwhelmed, inspired soul. My objective is not to glean some vast metaphysical or poetic truth from this image. My purpose is to construct the image truthfully. Both the egocentric image and romantic, inspiring image are absurd in a realistic context. The artist must use his sense of reality to unite the whole in perfect harmony. He must deal with all things as fairly as possible. This is what I have attempted to do.

In "The Artist and My Father" the self-portrait is used as a counter to a study of my father. Here the self-portrait is de-personalized to the point that harsh color contradictions in the face seem to be embellishments on the surface of a mannequin. The pink on the cheek is very intense. When it is modeled with pale yellow and gray, the effect is less than endearing, perhaps even brutal.

The rest of the figure of myself exhibits little more sympathy. The area on the left remains quite flat in contrast with the portrait of my father. There is a transition made from the two-dimensional to a strongly modeled figure. The modeling in the face is so three-dimensional that it assumes the character of richly-colored limestone.

I do not necessarily believe that the form of surface manipulation employed lends great insight into the character of the subjects. On the contrary, this is an inaccurate picture of both of the personalities. It is, however, a very true rendering of the tensions that evolved in the construction of the image. The draftsmanship employed and the space that evolves reveals the psychological posture I assumed toward the subject. But I must develop the image allowing my contrary reactions to stand.

These contradictions are the vitality of this painting. The space is the matrix in which they exist. The subject owes its existence only to the manifestation of those complications in my mind. If the space is constructed in harmony with all these parts, only then can the painting stand as a whole.

PART IV

APPENDIX

(Photo reproductions)

PLATE I.

George's Aunt Fanny 1969

Oil 28" x 34"



PLATE II.

The Hair-cut 1969

Oil 40" x 40"

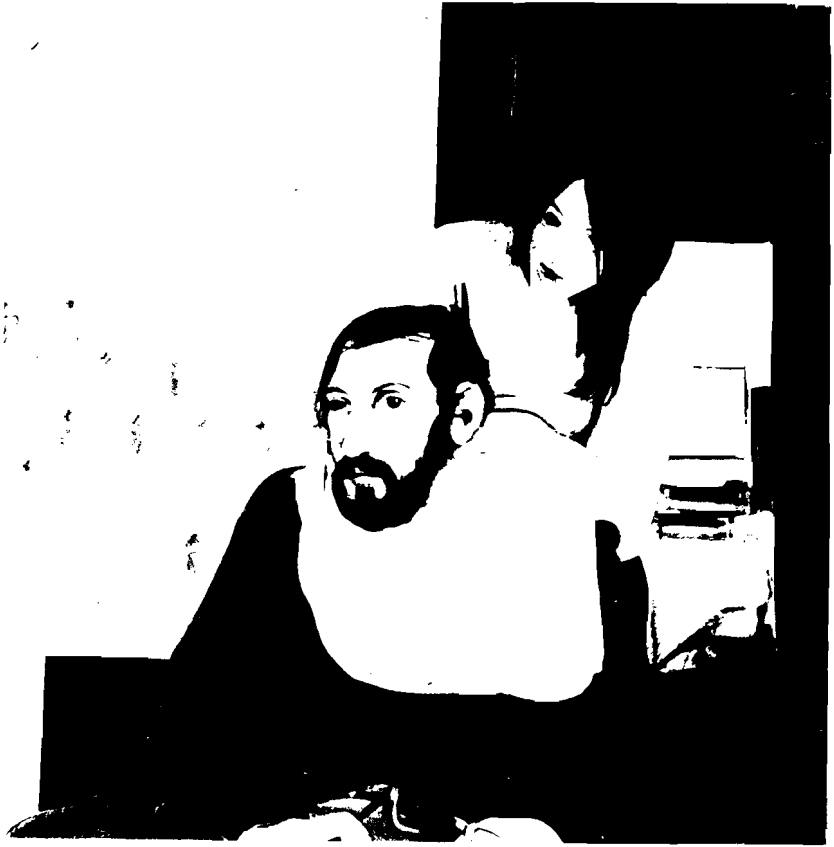


PLATE III.

The Hunters 1969

Oil and acrylic 40" x 50"



PLATE IV.

The Artist and My Father 1970

Oil 34" x 40"



PLATE V.

The Wine Drinkers 1970

Oil and acrylic 40" x 50"



PLATE VI.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog 1970

Oil 50" x 50"



PLATE VII.

No One Was Injured 1970

Oil 34" x 40"



PLATE VIII.

The Lecture 1970

Oil and acrylic 50" x 50"



PLATE IX.

Counterpoint 1970

Oil 50" x 50"



PLATE X.

Portrait of My Mother 1970

Oil and acrylic 40" x 50"



PLATE XI.

My Father 1970

Oil 40" x 50"





PLATE XII.

Figure Study 1970

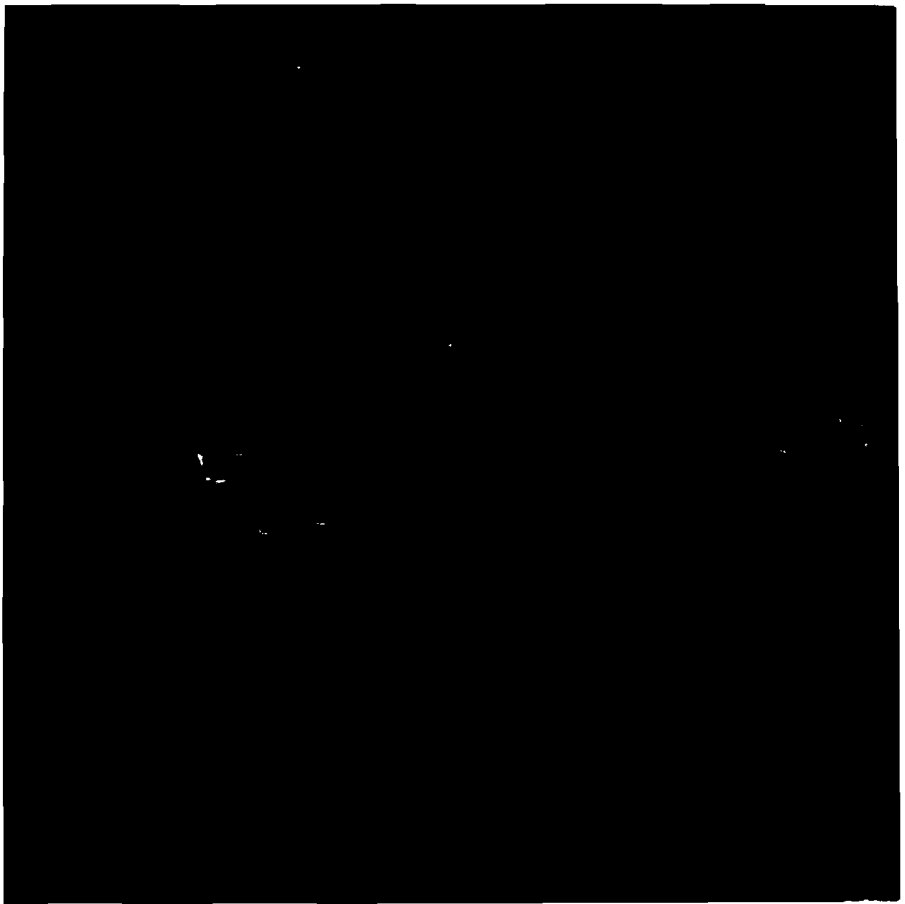
Oil 40" x 50"



PLATE XIII.

Kansas II 1970

Oil 34" x 34"



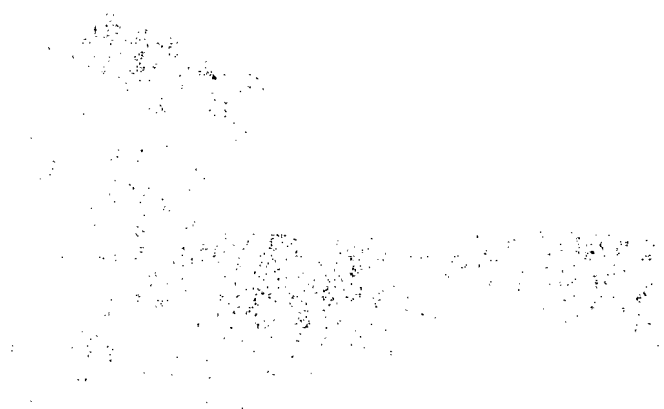


PLATE XIV.

Kansas III 1970

Oil 50" x 50"



PART V

CONCLUSION

In this discourse I have concentrated on the attitudes toward technique that I believe give my work vitality. I have not alluded to a philosophy of painting as such. The essential reason for this is my general distrust for them. I have in the past espoused several, but the affair generally produced more exciting conversation than it did good pieces of work. I want to make paintings, not morals. I can continue to work only if I acknowledge no value in art higher than the making of a painting.

I cannot see any cumulative value in my work for myself. Each work is the beginning and the end. The act of committing my time and energy to producing objects that will enrich my way of life and that of others is all the philosophy that is useful to me.