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Layered field painting

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LAYERED FIELD PAINTING

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As a student in the master's program, I was introduced to several painting concepts which seemed both interesting and relevant to me and which I took as the framework and stimulus for the paintings done in the terminal project. These concepts can be stated briefly: a work of art as a record of a process or experience, the idea of field painting, and the technique of layering. Although these several aspects of painting are not identical, they are related: layering is an on-going process, which if done in a consistent way results in a continuous field. It seemed to me, therefore, that one could suitably combine these three concepts in a series of works. Many of the meanings of this commitment occurred to me only in the course of painting. I did not start with a "world view" and proceed to make paintings to fit. Rather ideas about painting and its relationship to reality have evolved as the processes unfolded. However, certain personal biases predisposed me strongly toward these ideas, even if all the implications were not apparent at the outset.

I have always felt myself to be a "northern" person by virtue of cultural heritage as well as geographic location. The world, as I first saw it and have always

seen it, is composed, not of single shapes or masses bathed in revealing sunlight, but of myriads of surfaces and textures emerging from the gray mists of a northern coastal climate. My perceptual set has no natural horizon, no sharp distinctions, but is composed of twigs, brambles, pebbles, sands. Likewise, my semi-rural childhood provided many experiences of an additive nature—shelling peas, stacking wood—one thing at a time until the job was finished. I have been left with a strong feeling for this type of process, the slow accumulation of one's efforts, culminating in a sense of completion.

Thus, paintings dealing with layering, process, and field have been deeply satisfying to me, corresponding to my sense of visual reality as well as to my sense of "the way things are done."

CHAPTER II

FIELD PAINTING HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHIC CONTEXT

Although no consistent thread called "Field Painting" can be pulled out of the extensive fabric of western art history before mid-twentieth century, there are, from time to time, works and groups of works which communicate a predilection for field experience. As I searched the literature of this tradition for kindred spirits, I found myself focusing on art, the overall quality of which, came about as the result of the proliferation of parts (as opposed, for example, to color field paintings), in which gesture interrupts gesture, line intersects line, dot overlays dot, or stroke adds to stroke. I found the extreme particularization in these works compatible with my own experience and emerging world view.

The idea of an indefinite extension of a field is most clearly seen in the style of Islamic art, in which allover pattern is extended in all directions ad infinitum. The rhythmic composition of these overall patterns reflects a sense of infinity and a strong impression of enduring time.[1] In the western tradition the Celto-Germanic style of the seventh and eighth centuries was distinguished by dense organic interlaces. This style also contains the suggestion of indefinite continuity, but unlike the

Islamic style, is based on a spiral with a specific origin in its center, so that its expansion has a positive direction.[2]

The works of the English Romantic landscape painter, William Turner, have overall qualities of whirling spiral movements suggested by elemental forces. These "airy visions painted with tinted steam"[3] were admired by the Impressionists. The Impressionist viewpoint often resulted in the breakdown of solid forms and in "flickering networks of color patches,"[4] particularly in the paintings of Monet.

The artists of the Suprematist movement, particularly the Polish painter Strzeminski, further developed the active field as the basis of pictorial experience in the 1920's.[5] Strzeminsk's theory of "Unism" stated that each work was a fragment of the cosmic whole and that even differences between non-objective forms and the field would destroy the integrity of the painting.

Although many early twentieth century artists dealt with energized space and dematerialized objects,[6] the position of Strzeminski proved to be extreme, and the unified field did not become a major painting form until mid-century. The awareness of the possibilities of field painting was dramatically reawakened by a much different impetus. Jackson Pollock's drip paintings spread visceral impulses across huge surfaces. These gestural layers

formed interwoven networks with a strong overall feeling. Mark Tobey's single surfaces, filled with calligraphic brush strokes, arose from a philosophic position committed to the discovery of universals. Bradley Walker Tomlin's "petal" series are comprised of the non-compositional distribution of brush strokes across the canvas.[7] None of the works of these painters has the degree of indefinite extension that can be seen in Strzeminski's paintings, but they are nevertheless characterized by an overall quality of the surface which is stronger than any configeration within that surface.

Since mid-century, field painting has taken many forms. Jules Olitsky and Richard Pousette-Dart have created allover canvases of shimmering color particles. Milton Resnick's "holistic" paintings are reworked layers of heavilty built up pigment, an intensely textured allover field. Following the minimalist movement, painters such as Brice Marden and Marcia Hafif have used allover monocramatic canvases to emphasize painting processes.

Correspondences can be seen between the field concepts in the visual arts and other areas of knowledge, which view a phenomenon, not as an isolated event, but as an element in a larger context. As is well known, the physical sciences have a tradition of field theorists. Both Faraday and Einstein viewed the world as one unified field, matter being but one aspect of the field, and disparate

forces, such as gravity and electricity, considered to be field configurations.[8]

In the social sciences, Kurt Lewin and his followers suggested that the proper unit of study is not the individual, but the individual in a "life-space," and that behavior should be considered the result of field forces.[9] Even contemporary studies in perception focus on perceptual processes as occurring within an environmental medium.[10]

It seems clear that the unified field is one appropriate symbol for our time. We perceive phenomena not with a single focus nor resulting from a single cause, but in the context of networks of relationships of systems and processes. The unified limited field is one way of attempting a whole vision in the face of the vast proliferation of physical, social and personal interactions of which we are a part.

CHAPTER III

THE PAINTINGS

MATERIAL AND TECHNICAL LIMITATIONS

During the course of the terminal project, I limited myself to traditional oil painting materials for several reasons. Primarily, I felt that the transition I had made from representational to non-objective painting offered sufficient challenge at this time without exploring alternate materials. Further, I enjoy the natural qualities of these materials; fibers of cotton and linen, wood, and pigments from the earth. I also enjoy the feeling of being part of a painting tradition, using the same materials that have been used by painters since the Renaissance. I decided to accept, as a given, the traditional rectangle and square as canvas shapes, much as a biologist might accept the shape of a microscope slide as standard. I have experimented somewhat with scale, and the canvases vary from 18" x 18" to 108" x 60". Since some of the paintings can be indefinitely extended, their sizes can be somewhat arbitrary. However, the relationship of scale and surface needs to be considered in each instance.

In general, it was my intent to keep the color low keyed throughout the paintings, using just as much color

and value variation as I felt I needed for the purpose of distinguishing the layers. Small shifts of hue, value, or temperature seemed more perceptible with low intensity colors, and I believed subtle color statements to be less threatening to the unified quality of the work. Beyond these factors, my initial concerns in the project were not with color interaction nor with color statement.

IDEAS AND PROCEDURES

In the painting, Early Gray, (Fig. 1) whatever differences may occur from top to bottom, from side to side, or from layer to layer are less than the overall qualities of the surface. Once having decided upon the method of paint application, the general tonality, and the hues, I continued to brush on the paint, layer after layer without deviation.

In many ways I found this method of painting very satisfying. By eliminating many of the variables normally involved in painting, those remaining seemed to take on greater authority. The coloristic restraint and uniformity of brush stroke allowed the surface to emerge as the predominate force. The concentration of surface gave particular emphasis to the physical qualities of the paint, thus stressing the material of which the painting is made as well as the process of making it. The avoidance of figure

Figure 1. Early Gray

ground considerations assured a strong sense of unity, the greatest differentiation being that of the painting from the environment. I enjoyed the process of painstakingly building up the layers of paint, the feeling of being involved in a process similar to one of organic growth or the accumulation of mineral deposits. Philosophically, I was interested in the lack of any claim to completeness of vision. Made up of fragments, the painting remains a fragment, one section of a reality which could be indefinitely extended.

As I was working on Early Gray, I became aware that the layering process endowed the painting with a strong temporal or historical dimension. Each layer was a record of a certain time, and the accumulation of layers became a statement of the passage of time. I began to experience this painting as a temporal as well as substantive fragment.

Having undergone the experience of applying consistent layers of opaque paint resulting in a uniform field, I began to consider expanding the possibilities. It seemed to me that layering held the promise of combining a variety of experiences in a given painting without disturbing the uniform field. In other words, instead of juxtaposing varied materials, as in a composed painting or collage, I would try superimposing them in an effort to combine a certain richness and diversity

of experience while maintaining the unity of the work. The paintings subsequent to Early Gray have been efforts to find ways of doing this.

In Intersection (Fig. 2) I used a series of incomplete layers, each one extending only partially across

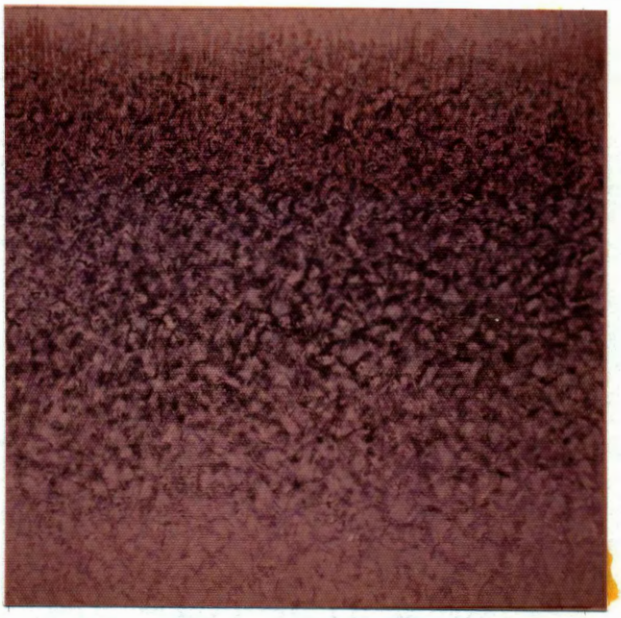

Figure 2. Intersection

the canvas. In order that this might be apparent, I made discernible color and value changes from layer to layer. However, these changes resulted in surface ambiguities which developed associations with landscape space. Although I pursued this relationship between

surface and space further in the next few paintings (Figures 3 and 4), I decided to put it aside for the time being in favor of other possibilities which seemed more compatible with my initial ideas.

Figure 3. Gaia

Figure 4. Earth and Sky.

The paintings, Looking Back I and Looking Back II, and Dark Sliver (Figures 5, 6, and 7) are based on the idea of changes of density. The color and value are kept constant throughout each layer, although the color varies somewhat from layer to layer. Each layer extends across the entire surface but with variations in the openess of paint application. The final appearance is the result of different color quantities which are allowed to penetrate the surface. Each layer serves to destroy the completeness of the preceding layers, which can, thus, only be experienced partially. However, the sense of the existence of the separate layers is more insistent in these paintings than in Early Gray due to the changes in color and greater openess. While the concept these

paintings present, that of immediate experience fragmentizing the perception of past experiences, is of

Figure 5. Looking Back I.

Figure 6. Looking Back II.

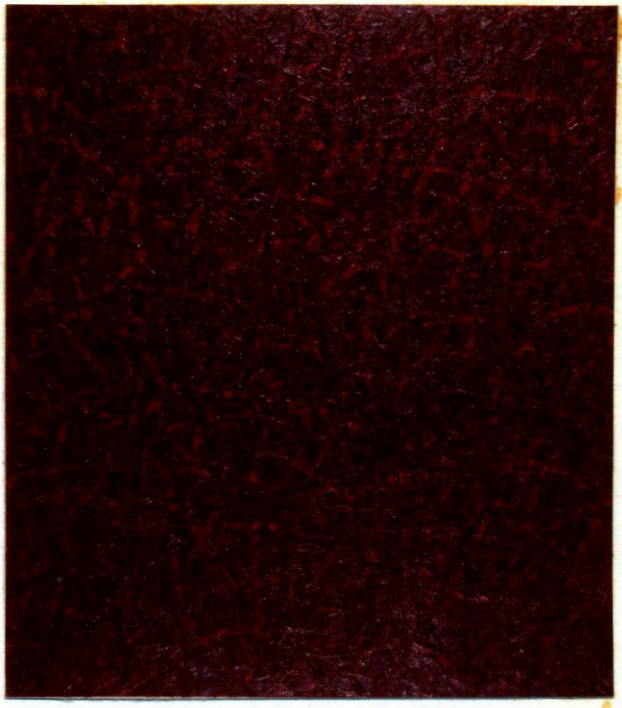

Figure 7. Dark Sliver

great interest to me, I feel that considerable surface unity has been sacrificed. This may be less true of Dark Sliver since the overall dark value separates the painting strongly from its environment and establishes its own unity.

A later solution which perhaps results in a greater feeling of unity may be seen in the painting, Manjaram (Fig. 8). Definable strokes of the palette knife are sandwiched with calligraphic brush gestures. This seemed to be a meaningful combination to me, a way of combining order and deliberation with unpremeditated

and spontaneous experience. I became aware of how drastically each layer could alter the painting without upsetting the overall field. The brush stroke lines fragmented the shapes of the palette knife, and the shapes interrupted the flow of the lines. The way in which this happened and the degree to which it happened changed as the paint layers began to accumulate. As satisfying as it was to integrate two very different painting experiences, I did not feel that the final surface communicated enough of the interesting things which had happened along the way.

Figure 8. Manjaram.

Six Steps (Fig. 9) is an attempt to overcome this limitation and represents the most recent solution to the problem of unity and variety. It shows six stages in the process of making a layered field painting. The painting has perceptible boundaries within it and must be considered a series of unified surfaces rather than a single field. The idea, in part, came from the perception that some paintings seem to gain meaning from being considered in relation to another or others (Fig. 10). Although I began Six Steps alternating between gestural brush strokes and deliberate palette knife shapes, the palette knife

Figure 9. Six Steps.

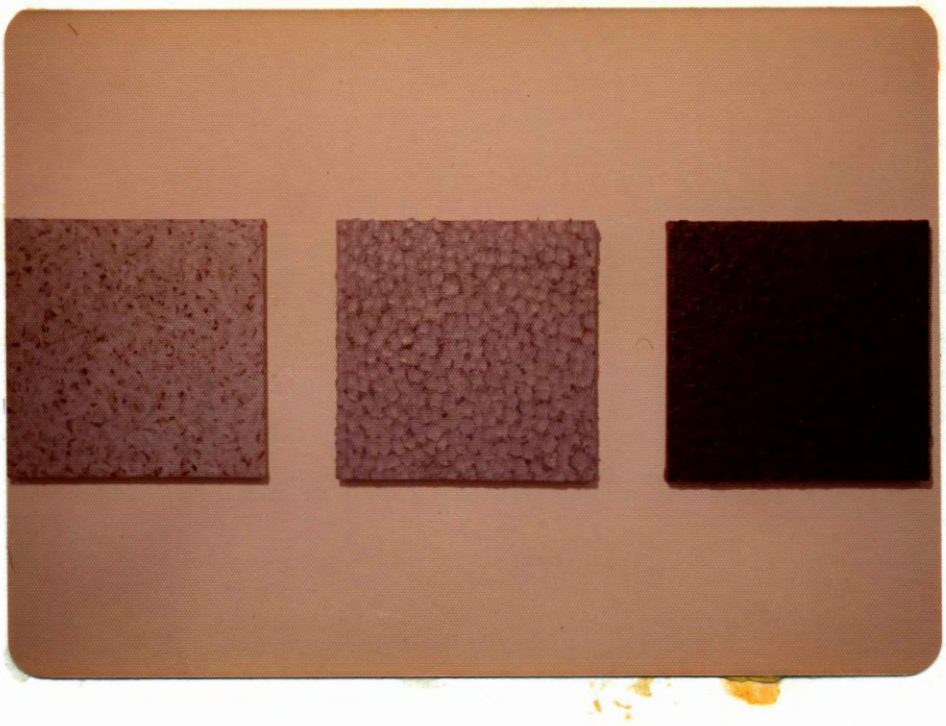

Figure 10. Formerly Brown. One More Time. Formerly Red

took over as the painting progressed. As in many life processes, the unconscious gestural forces became increasingly obscured by layer after layer of deliberate conscious activity. I felt, however, that by the sixth panel, the individual conscious mark had merged into the highly textural surface, and a quality of obsessive gestural force had re-emerged.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Whether or not the group of paintings done as the terminal project are completely successful as paintings, or as a solution to the problem I set out to deal with, that is combining layering and field painting, I am not sure. As I move toward a satisfying visual form for my ideas, the path seems strewn with trials, errors, and partial solutions. What I am sure about, however, is that the direction my paintings have taken has been compatible with my own perceptual, experiential, and philosophic tendencies. I particularly enjoyed the process of layering, feeling that it is a truer mode of organization of experience through time than is the juxtaposition of elements. I feel that reality is so complex, so dimensional, that it can be perceived, at best, only partially, "through a glass darkly", that events come in and out of focus, and that figure and ground are interchangeable. These perceptual and philosophic biases have made it easy for me to become so immersed in layered field painting.

As I have experimented with various ways of layering and the relation of these ways to a uniform field, some of the qualities of the first painting of the series

have been weakened. The sense of indefinite extension is much less in Figures 2 through 6 than it was in Early Gray. This extendibility became more pronounced again in the later paintings, but whether or not it is more significant to me than the possibilities of greater surface variation, I am not yet sure. In Six Steps, particularly, I felt satisfied that I was beginning to find ways of expressing ideas about painting that reflected a sense of reality meaningful to me.

More important, however, than any particular conclusions that may have resulted from this series of paintings has been the sense of sharpened awareness of the possibilities which painting holds for me. I feel my ability to conceptualize and bring to fruition a series of works has been enhanced. Through my involvement in the terminal project I have come to rely on painting as a means of better understanding myself and the world around me.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Charles Rufus Morey, Mediaeval Art (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1942), pp. 10-11.

[2]Ibid., p.9.

[3]H.W. Janson, History of Art (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. and New York: Prentice Hall, Inc. and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1962), p. 469.

[4]Ibid., p. 492.

[5]Andrei B. Nakov, "To Be or to Act, On the Problem of Content in Nonobjective Art," Art Forum, XV (February, 1978), p. 42

[6]From a lecture by Claire Kelby at Portland State University, April, 1978.

[7]David Bourdon, "In Praise of Bradley Walker Tomlin," Art in America, (September, October, 1975), p. 59.

[8]William Berkson, Fields of Force (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), p. 317.

[9]Joseph de Rivera, Field Theory as Human Science (New York: Gardner Press, Inc., 1976), p. 74.

[10]James J. Gibson, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), p. 17.

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