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"TRANSPARENT LANDSCAPE"

by

ELIZABETH HARRIS

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

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS
in
PAINTING

Portland State University

1985

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As my thesis work began to take form, persisting ideas and strong personal preferences came into focus for me. Recurring themes intrigued me and I used them as a starting point. One of the emerging themes which runs like a thread through the work to be discussed is that of memory. I have incorporated memory associations into compositions which are in one sense exploitations of the qualities of transparency and opacity of oil paint. My paintings are experiments in traditional processes which I have found sufficiently challenging as a means to an end. These paintings can be seen as experiments in the incorporation of my memory, associations and knowledge into the subject matter of landscape. For the most part, I have used traditional painting processes as a means to this end.

As I began painting on various grounds with oil glazes, I found that the mediums with their various drying times were leading me into possible subjects to involve in my paintings. The transparency of the glaze mediums suggested transience and atmospheric light effects. This suggested a way to communicate not the thing, but the effect it produces. In other words, the medium and its use led me to consider effects of temperature and season as possible painting subjects along with the subject matter of landscape.

CHAPTER II

DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS

Early on I began to identify concerns and preferences for materials and surfaces which were to become part of the process by which I would develop my thesis work. As Robert Motherwell has observed, and I agree, "Painting is a process whose content is found...the subject matter is feeling: art is not a science. Painting that does not evoke feeling is not worth looking at."¹ I trusted that through my exploration of traditional oil painting process I would find a new way of working and making paintings that would radiate emotion.

I began experimenting with surfaces to paint on which would be permanent, responsive and which involved tried and proven formulas based on tradition. As I had never had the opportunity to experiment with grounds before I began with such recipes as could be found in Mayer's The Artists Handbook of Materials and Techniques. , I toned grounds, mixed sizes for paper, canvas, linen, and wood and generally found that something in the process of mixing my own gesso-grounds suited my temperament. I enjoy reading about and experimenting with the choices of adaptable formulas for specific surface qualities.

¹Robert Motherwell, "Motherwell: Call of the Sea and Window of the Soul," Arts Line Vol. II, No. 2 (June 1984), p. 38.

For stable surfaces I found that calcium carbonate-hide grounds and half-oil grounds were rich and interesting. The calcium carbonate grounds were an appropriate and willing surface for dry pastel work, but were much too absorbent for oil painting, too brittle for canvas and linen. Toning the grounds to a mid-value allowed me to explore the potential color effects of transparent glaze mediums and to create a sense of temperature and atmosphere from the surface up. The subject of atmosphere and its elusiveness interested me in the first painting to be discussed.

These seed-ideas I referred to earlier began to accumulate when my technical painting processes became more familiar. "Ideas are like those minute particles of seed which are wafted across the ocean and plant themselves in the most unpredictable soil."²

²Kenneth Clark, Landscape Into Art (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 175-176.

CRANE'S THESIS PAPER
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CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF SELECTED PAINTINGS

"Rain-Thick"
28" x 36"

During winter visits to the north Oregon coast and on drives home along the Columbia River, I observed atmospheric conditions, rain squalls and translucent lighting effects unique to the region. These left impressions like layers of image or memory deposited. It was my

intention with "Rain-Thick" to create a sense of movement and transparency. By turning the painting around continually as I painted and allowing changes to work in a useful way, I altered cool light and cool dark bands of paint to interlace, heightening the painting's sense of atmospheric perspective. I was satisfied with the effect.

I decided with this painting that landscape would be the focus of my work with one condition; I would try to paint not specific places and views, but the essence of mental landscape that occurs when memory comes into play. I wanted the subject matter to be landscape while I explored possible underlying subjects of more personal or introspective nature.

These subjects began to surface as ideas which I kept returning to in my notebook. Among the most persistent were: 1) the reference to a condition of passing time, past time, evidence of geologic time; 2) the reflective and interior views of land forms, surfaces and atmospheric conditions affecting these forms; 3) references to what has been lost, layered, absorbed, deposited; 4) metaphors for time and impermanence; and 5) illusion becoming reality.

The physical glazing process of my paintings began to suggest the real subject of memories layering up and overlapping. These visual landscape memories and longtime associations with time passing and the river seemed right. The layering of images after memory has worked on them continued to intrigue me. Using the process to communicate about the dimension of time as it is evidenced in the landscape continues to challenge me.

"Blue Remembers"
48" x 54"

Within the context of memory landscape, I wanted to construct a narrative which would recall the interaction of water and light, the reflective qualities of light washing over and through Greek sites I visited several years ago. Into a quiet composition I wanted to combine both architectural and natural forms, water, land and mask images from Mycenaean burial sites on the Peloponnese, all of which I would unify by light and atmospheric perspective. My memories and emotions surrounding the Greek landscape were beginning to find a new form in this painting. I had never tried to paint these memories before so I didn't know what they would look like outside of my

imagination. My responses were easy enough to identify, but finding forms which communicate them to others as visual thoughts has been difficult.

It was important to me that the viewer's mind complete this painting. While I wanted to be able to communicate about the imagined qualities of the landscape and its mystical or spiritual capacity, I didn't want to trap myself into painting specific places. The color blue, which sometimes is associated with the spiritual and introspective, has predominated in this painting as a unifying element. Water recedes into and through the rock forms. I wanted the cuts and overlays to be transparent and to act as rhythmic counterpoints allowing for variations on the theme of repose and harmony, the silence of past time. I worked for a unity of the formal elements of color shape and line flowing together. The natural linen sized with hide glue gave a toned-ground effect subduing the colors. I worked toward giving the painting a sense of mystery and quiet. I reworked and strengthened the architectural elements, tried to think of value shifts as unifying elements which dissolve and reemerge, describing more than separate shapes. As the painting developed, I realized I was better able to blend and control the major value shifts as rhythmic organizational elements. Light and dark areas began to recall one another. I began to feel more comfortable with the large size of the canvas. I found that I could, through shifts of scale, slow down the viewing time in keeping with the subject of time passing by.

"Wide River" and "The Dalles"
48" x 64" 48" x 64"

I began two vertical 48" x 64" canvases on white grounds with the idea of juxtaposing water and land motifs. I had never worked this large and I began the paintings spontaneously. Problems began to ensue over the foreground and background relationships. I was repeatedly unable to resolve these elements after much changing and repainting. I decided to clarify what it was about the concept of the paintings that interested me in the first place and to get a fresh start from there. Ursula LeGuin made the statement about her working process in a newspaper interview, "First comes the idea... I wanted to

start from the heart"¹ I needed to talk to myself about this painting's central idea, its heart. What would it be about besides the juxtaposition of water and earth? What were its sustaining ideas?

What interested me about the river was its smooth wideness in contrast to the hills. Both water and hills had translucent and reflective qualities in their opposition to each other. I struggled with painting about their transience, dramatic light and dark forms, moodiness and the movement I always feel in the hills.

John Constable writes about the "Chiaroscuro of Nature" in his letters, about the sparkle of light and the drama of light and shade that underlies all landscape compositions to give the feeling in which the view was painted.² This perceptual approach seemed valid to me as I was relying on observed landscape, but somehow as these paintings evolved, they got more complex. Painting pure visual representations does not sustain me now. It doesn't allow me to transpose my responses. Kenneth Clark said "Art is concerned with our whole being--our knowledge, our memories, our associations."³

I am interested in the associational nature of the paintings. The compelling image for me seems to be that which asks for my imagination. I am using landscape as a vehicle of self-expression.

Again the subject matter of regional landscape presented itself during a painting class in Bend taught by Byron Gardner. The very

¹Ursula LeGuin, "First Comes the Idea," The Oregonian, (January 13, 1985), p. 5.

²Clark, p. 175.

³Ibid., p. 176.

different atmosphere of dry clear light, monumental, aged rock formations (not at all unrelated to those I had been seeing along the Columbia River) gave me a fresh look at possibilities for narrative paintings involving rock surfaces as forms. The watercolor studies done on sight that summer and drawings of the Deschutes River and Crooked River have served to remind me of geological time told in the desert as well as the evidence that man had been there. Markings on the rocks all around were evidence of that.

I began "The Dalles" painting before I had done much reading about the geologic structure of what I was trying to paint. The painting process became difficult because I was not able to organize the image with dominant warm and cool hues. Hue was not describing either the forms of the hills or the atmosphere I wanted. I glazed over the intense warms of the underlying hills with cool and warm darks and lights in an attempt to create a sense of the region's atmosphere and movement. A greater sense of atmospheric interplay began to occur in the painting. Over the layered hills I imagined time as a veil lifting and obscuring. I focused, as if with a magnifying lens, the forms to see beneath their surface. I am aware that the hills are folded, uplifted, compressed, eroded and windlaid, deposited through millions of years of time. As I continued to paint from the Columbia River landscape, I realized that my mental visualizations were more vivid and useful than the technical skill I had to express them. I constantly reworked for stronger dominate darks and lights attempting to bring the painting up to my expectations, believing that if I could visualize the effect mentally, I ought to be

able to paint it on canvas. The exploratory routes I took became metaphors in themselves for my imagery, the "landscape" of each being puzzle-like, elusive and reflective of occurrences in the time it took to do the painting. The process involved respect for taking time and allowing, not pushing, the work to develop from my initial direct observation to the memory impressions later. I began accumulating resource materials in and around my notebook--fossils from the geology department, snapshots and books trying to understand how I could better fix separate elements into a form that included knowledge, associations and memories.

"Early Beginnings"
32" x 40"

Still thinking about the river and how I could compose a mental landscape conveying or provoking the earliest beginnings of the river, I began a painting in dark tonalities. I imagined a state of ponding and murky atmospheric conditions in which fishes were forming. I could see into this window of time. What is important to me about the composition with its high horizon line is that it focuses on the rhythms beneath the water. I have imagined an ancient misty place both crystal clear and blurred. It attempts to show time passing, geologic processes in motion. It is fluid and mysterious. Hopefully, it causes the viewer to sense that some occurrence or change is forthcoming.

This painting helped me resolve another river-vision I had in process in that the palette remained pretty much the same and I felt that I was building on a theme or idea which interested me. That idea had to do with that time of day when there is ambiguity in the air, at dusk or in the evening. I called it "Landscape Metaphor."

"Landscape Metaphor" and "River Visions"
26" x 34"

26" x 34"

Referring back to Motherwell's statement that painting is an evolutionary process, I continued to collect source materials and ideas for another painting with narrative possibilities. The smooth sanded shell-like surface of the calcium carbonate ground panels suggested cool moonlight and tranquility. Moonlight creates a purposeful ambiguity. Kandinsky has said, "content must never be too clear and too one-sided; the more possibilities for interpretation the better."⁴

⁴Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (New York" Wittenborn, 1947), p. 50.

Both the moon and the earth are reflective--the moon of the sun, the earth of the moon. The moon's waxing, waning and disappearing can be a metaphor for the principle of becoming and changing.

As I began the moonlight landscape, I imagined I was looking through a window. I thought of the landscape as an altar and the cool blue-green colors might recall introspection and spirituality. Further the evidence of man and his marks on the landscape might complete the cycle: the sky (spiritual) earth (reality) and man's markings which seem to imply a desire to keep track of time, like keeping a personal history or calendar.

In order to convey moonlight, I began laying out sequences of cool greens and blues for the land and dark blues for sky and underground. This relatively cool dark palette needed some contrasting hues to excite it visually. I chose warms and cools in the red-orange range, recalling the burnt sienna tone of the gesso-ground. These earth tones were used for the petroglyph images in the foreground.

To me, petroglyphs and pictographs represent mystery and spiritual contact. They were not done self-consciously for future interpretation, but as expressions of emotion over some event or experience, a fixing of a thought into form. My inclusion of underwater markings in the painting makes reference both to what is lost underwater and to what we know is still there--an ancient notion, secured in form. These marks on the landscape became an object of my interest--they are further evidence of passed time.

The traveler who is curious; who sees only the depth and width and length of the Gorge and neglects its fourth dimension, which is time; who is content with the Gorge as a still picture, and fails to recognize that the present scene is only one changing frame of a moving picture, the earlier frames of which can be equally vivid;... This traveler has seen the Gorge only with his eyes not with his mind.⁵

Desert Forms: Relationship of Two
26" x 34" each panel

The format I chose for "Landscape Metaphor" acted like a window through which I could fix and analyze relationships and light effects. The stable smooth surface was reminding me of smooth rocks or shells.

⁵J.H. Mackin and A.S. Carey, Origin of Cascade Landscapes, Washington Division of Mines and Geology, No. 41 (1967), p. 35.

It helped me in reworking two earlier toned panels into compositional studies of the desert--light and dark skies against desert rocks. The transparent aspect of glazes allowed for reddish undertones to be unified into dark areas. Definition, stratification, and form developed from the overlapping shapes. The formal borders on the outside one light, one dark helped me see the studies as windowed compositions which demonstrated optical effects at different times and temperatures of day and night. In resolving these two pieces, I found that often in my attempts to unify and cluster forms, I was separating them. What I was not aware of was that the "lines" I was creating between color-shapes were functioning to define the edges of the forms instead of taking on additional significance as indicators of pathways running through the forms. As I altered these passages of transparent shadow, they became more effective as expressions of temperature and light (time of day). It was my hope that viewed together the two (light and shadow) would convey the transitory and show a reciprocal relationship between forms. It was my hope that shadow and highlight would clarify and obscure, reinforce and deny. I intended for the paintings to involve the idea of the interplay, of forms invoking each other, being reciprocal, always changing.

CHAPTER IV

SYNTHESIS

Within the body of my report, I make reference to the elusive effects of light and quality of color in landscape. There is much more to understanding color quality and how to use it in landscape than any one year study can explain. My attempts to paint the effect of color, to record momentary and cumulative images of landscape and my desire to make paintings that others can respond to in some personal way is the real purpose undertaken here. I do feel that in the process of developing this body of paintings and resolving its problems, I have communicated that purpose.

The underlying motive has been one of personal revelation and assertion of my wishes and needs. These painted perceptions of illusion and reality and the transitory qualities of landscape have been technically experimental for me and the exploration of processes has been extremely useful to me. The experience has caused me to take my own ideas more seriously and to respect that the process of change and insecurity leads to a stronger sense of conviction and confidence. The job of examining one's own responses and attitudes and declaring them through a body of work has been rewarding. I am a much more effective working partner to myself now. I understand better how to question my process so that I can overcome my own obstacles. I have changed some bad habits. I am much more aware of the content in my

painting. I am more aware of the questions I can ask of my work to clarify my intentions. I have a framework which I did not have before for sustaining my commitment and expressing myself visually. I care more.

The process I've used, of drawing upon accumulated and associational memories, knowledge and emotion transcribed onto the landscape, has been very revealing. The distinction between simply seeing and carefully observing has been clarified for me. Like memory, this can never be taken away.

The various approaches to painting which I have set aside for the time being should be of use to me later. I am, at least, aware of the false-starts that for some reason didn't work. Some confused me and created curious images, but not sustaining ones--images that were expressionistic and fresh, but somehow not interesting to me for very long.

What I've arrived with through the process is a personal syllabus of questions worth asking, principles I can rely on and believe in--a content beneath the surface and stronger sense of my own abilities to convey fundamental ideas through my process of painting.

CHAPTER V

PHOTOGRAPHS OF PAINTINGS NOT PREVIOUSLY DISCUSSED

"Wallula Gap"
50" x 60"

"Pendleton Hills"
38" x 42"

"Cove Palisades, Deschutes"
22" x 30"

"Wide River I"
30 x 43

"Wide River II"
30 x 43

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