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Floral imagery

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TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH:

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FLORAL IMAGERY

by

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A terminal project report submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I

ATTITUDE

> If we were on the right road, having to leave it would mean endless despair. But we are on a road that only leads to a second one, and then a third one, and so forth, and the real highway will not be sighted for a long time - perhaps never - and we drift in doubt, but also in inconceivably beautiful diversity, so the accomplishment of hopes remains an always unexpected miracle, but in compensation, the miracle remains forever possible.
>
> Kafka to Klopstock

Though much time spent in the pursuit of art may be aptly described as drifting in doubt, I have tried during my graduate studies to keep to a basic premise: that art is an attempt to explore one's personal view, to explain in an individual way one's life and place in the scheme of things; that art concerns developing inner convictions with choices of form, medium and content becoming decisions in personalizing the work; and that this achievement might result in the unexpected miracle of self-realization. Emphasis on a personal view has been a guiding element in my explorations during the last two years. I intended to keep the work intimate, to recognize strengths and tendencies within the work itself and to determine its direction from that point. Recognizable imagery and what inner meanings they reflect became a central focus.

Each of us accumulates an image vocabulary during our lifetimes, experiences are condensed and tied to specific objects, thereby reinforcing or enlarging private interpretations. We keep souvenirs, snapshots and momentos as tokens of an experience, internally we harbor the emotion they have come to represent. Though it is unnecessary to explain them literally such images seem to heighten visual work and charge it with subtle references and implications. This visual vocabulary becomes a way of understanding an artist's inner reality.

Historically similar attitudes are evident. In ancient Chinese scroll painting where the form itself was traditionally prescribed and images connected directly to religious and philosophical beliefs, artists on occasion attempted to make a personal statement even within these boundaries, thereby extending conventional uses of imagery and touching upon private worlds. Such an artist was Master Ni Tsan of the Yuan era who infused his work with feelings of abandonment, isolation, and despair as a reaction to Mongol rule and suppression of Taoist beliefs during the 1300's. The greatest portion of Ni Tsan's landscape work dealt with nature in a controlled straightforward format. His subject matter is not unusual for its time; what differentiates his work is that through a restraint of choice and unsentimental

approach to visual appearance his images became selected symbols to reflect his inner nature.

In Francisco de Zurbaran's painting Still Life With Oranges of 1633, the same quality is achieved by limiting the choice of objects and placing them side by side in a solemn setting. This careful austere arrangement gave them a mysterious private meaning.

In contemporary art Jim Dine has approached a similar idea of personal imagery. Dine, associated with the Pop Art movement of the 1960's, used surrounding paraphernalia as a means of self perception. Tools and hardware explored extensively in his work were for him objects reminiscent of his childhood, while the bathrobe became a substitute for the traditional self portrait.

> ... I am concerned with interiors. When I use objects, I see them as a vocabulary of feelings. I can spend a lot of time with objects and they leave me as satisfied as a good meal... I think it's important to be autobiographical. What I try to do in my work is explore myself in physical terms - to explain something in terms of my own sensibilities.[1]
>
> Jim Dine

The similarities between these artists do not exist in choices of subject matter or philosophical beliefs. What allies them is a unique attitude toward the use of imagery. Reliance on imagery does not in these instances become storytelling or illustration but an intertwining of object and personal intention.

> (Art is a) method of opening up areas of feeling rather than merely an illustration of an object.
>
> The object is necessary to provide the problem and the discipline in the search for the problem's solution.[2]
>
> Francis Bacon, 1952

To allude to feelings and emotional states through the depiction of selected personal imagery is the thrust of my work. To speak of life in terms of surrounding visual imagery seems ultimately human and timeless.

CHAPTER II

IMAGERY

Selection of imagery was a great issue with me during the first year. Spanning landscapes, birds, figures, portraits of family members, pillows and finally flower forms, I tried to arrive at a commitment to a particular image. In the course of the work certain characteristics began to manifest themselves. (Figures 1 and 2)

1. All the images dealt with the figure directly or indirectly.

2. Extreme contrasts were set up either in color choices often black and white or in the image itself. In Figure 1 an isolated figure is seen against an imposing black background and in Figure 2, a soft form handled in a rigid geometric manner.

3. Shapes were flattened so that the object existed in a shallow two dimensional plane.

4. Compositions were formally traditional, relying on a frontal symmetrical format.

5. The work depended extensively on the development of draftmanship.

Realizing these characteristics as choices facilitated decisions of imagery and medium. It was necessary to discipline myself to stay within a predetermined set of boundaries, to explore in depth one idea. In choosing the vertical flower forms I intended to limit choices and

keep the pieces thematically consistent.

Initially flowers were seen as surrogates for the figure, for the human figure takes on its own presence in a painting, extending a psychological force into the space. The work becomes susceptible to the viewer's own interpretation of a specific person. Flowers as a substitute could be focused upon separately or in conjunction with other individuals. Certain flowers took on human qualities in themselves; iris, gladiolas, tulips and lilies combined delicate heads or blossoms with strong vertical stalks. One could communicate feelings about the human condition without approaching the figure directly.

Gradually my attitude toward use of the flower changed but their original purpose served in giving an overall unity to my thesis work.

CHAPTER III

PROCESS

Though I enjoy painting, I have always felt an affinity for drawing; there is a more immediate response to putting the work down in reaction to visual stimulii. Concern with draftsmanship led to an investigation of lithography as a medium.

Lithography is intriguing. Sensibilities toward the stone, its beauty as a surface, techniques of drawing, printing processes, and an appreciation of qualities of ink and paper, were compatible with my nature. Unfamiliar with lithography before entering the graduate program, my background as a graphic designer made it a logical choice in the transition between commercial and fine art. Thought processes and technical problems are similar: visualizing layers of color, creating separate plates for each, registering them accurately with the master image, and the exactness and patience required are much the same.

Lithography is a flexible medium. I felt ideas could be explored more rapidly and with greater satisfaction than possible for me in painting. My thesis work would consist of drawings, mixed media pieces and lithographs.

CHAPTER IV

THE WORK

Flowers are objects of beauty and carry a multitude of associations. They can be seen in a decorative sense as in Japanese album leaf painting; tokens of possessed beauty and opulence as in the Flemish still life paintings of Jan Brueghel; symbols of feminist art as the budding plates in Judy Chicago's Dinner Party; or as an emotional reaction to the minimalist art approach of the last decade, by "new image painters." Their soft organic forms can be given sexual connotations and are regarded as signs of love or fertility. In disclaiming this particular implication Georgia O'Keef wrote:

> Well ... I made you take time to look at what I saw, and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower ... and I don't.[3]

Though it is difficult to completely disassociate flowers from outside references, I attempted to present the flower form in a personal way. Flowers were chosen first as a private symbol and second for their formal aesthetic properties. (Figures 3, 4, 5)

In these drawings the flowers were handled not unlike the earlier figure painting--placed in an isolated atmos-

phere, the form centered, the composition severe and symmetrical. Flowers were admittedly a romantic choice; I hoped the simple vertical composition might offset their sentimentality. Color, though used with restraint, hindered perception of the image as a graphic form. The flowers became too beautiful, the viewer preoccupied with interplay of color and transitions of value. By eliminating color variations and returning to a monocromatic scheme, the forms of Figures 6 and 7 were strengthened.

To avoid color problems, I experimented with graphite, pencil, water color, washes. I enjoyed the subtle tonal qualities possible, the juxtaposition of light and dark, the contrast of tightly rendered areas against almost abstract forms. I felt the drawing to be a successful prelude to development of the lithographs. Rich blacks and crisp white possible with lithography transferred the flowers from beautiful objects to graphic forms. (Figures 8 and 9). In these works I became conscious of how the forms were placed; the frontal composition reminiscent of representative pictures in icon painting, where the spectator seems compelled to adopt a ceremonious attitude toward them. Religious icons were meant to be objects of spiritual meditation and reverence, as symbols of contemplation they give us visual access to thoughts of a spiritual existence. All art, in some ways, serves the same purpose--

a visual access to abstract thought.

Extreme light and dark contrasts reinforce a tension between the soft flower forms and the impenetrable solid backgrounds. This contrast was pushed to an extreme in the black lily, reversed out of grey it becomes a monumental black shape. How far one can extend such a fragile form is questionable: eventually the properties of flowers themselves must be taken into consideration.

The formal placement of the following prints (Figures 10, 11 and 12) seemed a ritualization, removed from their natural environment and placed systematically side by side. Negative spaces become as important as the flowers and a rhythm set up between organic shapes and open space. Though struggling to eliminate decorative overtones I was consistently designing with these shapes, their formal placement becoming more evident.

Elements in the last prints (Figures 13 and 14) were carefully arranged, the composition extremely formal and symmetrical, the flowers respected as a form, contradicted only by the loose application of wash. Though organized strictly, they took on an emotionalism that had been lacking or forced in earlier efforts.

Each piece has developed and changed from one to the other, as Kafka's road that led to a second one and then a third the works became a pathway of influences, attitudes

and feelings. The flower a concern during my graduate experience will not be the total direction of all future work. It is only a portion of the image vocabulary to be expanded upon in later professional efforts. As a center of focus it served its purpose, to present a direction, foster experimentation, and evolve as an element in a visual language.

FOOTNOTES

[1]John Gruen, "Jim Dine and the Life of Objects," Artnews (September 1977) pg. 38.

[2]Herschell B. Chipp, Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1968) p. 620.

[3]Georgia O'Keefe, Georgia O'Keefe (New York: The Viking Press, 1976) plate 24.

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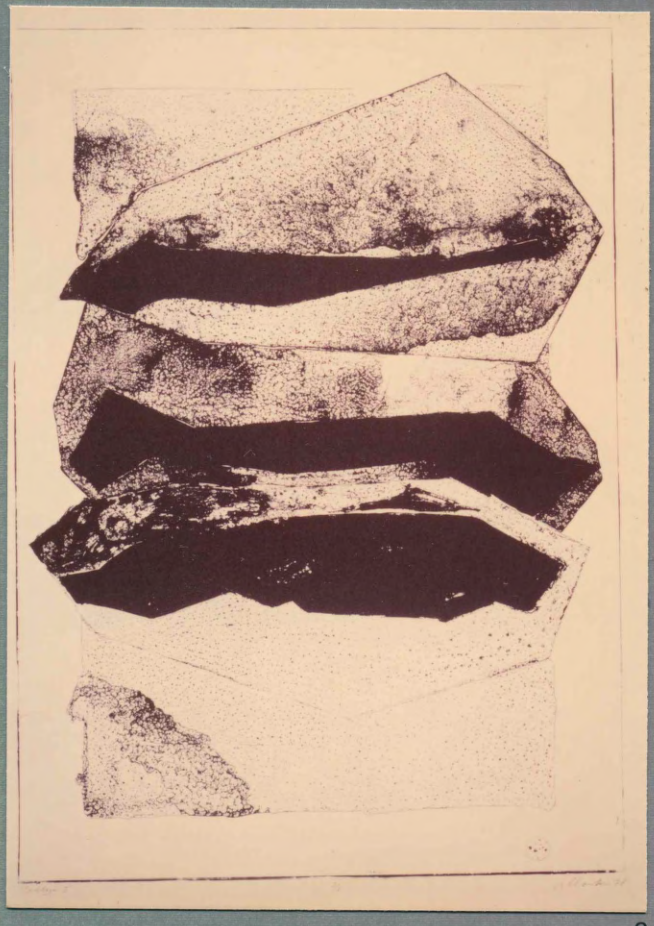

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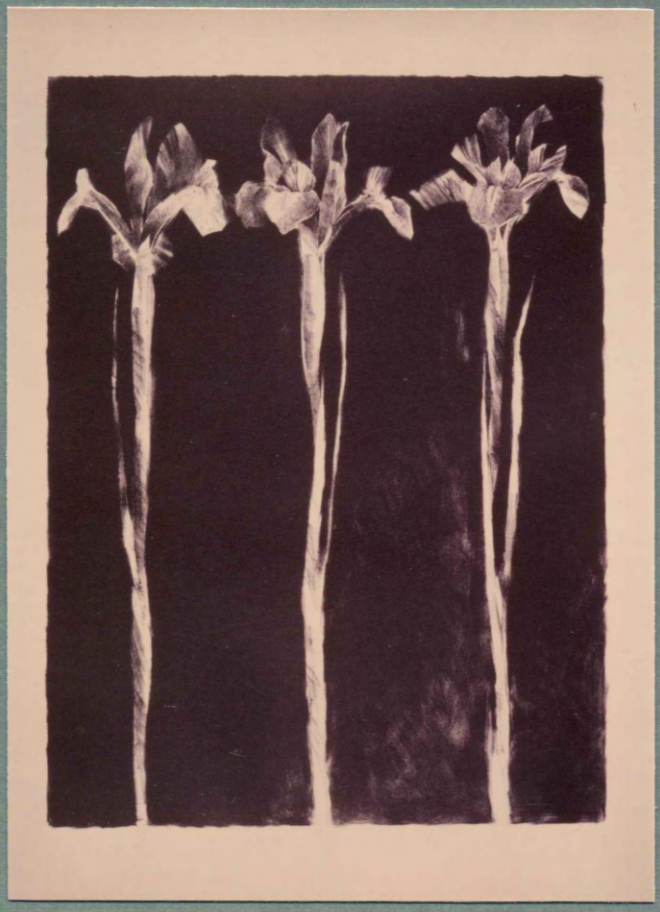

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