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Image development through process

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IMAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PROCESS

by

JEAN HANDWERK LEE

A Thesis Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

PAINTING

Portland State University, 1983

TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH:

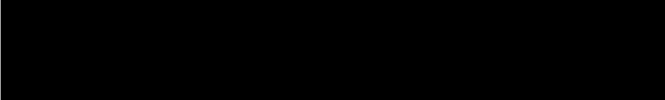
The Members of the Thesis Committee Approve the Thesis and Report of Jean Handwerk Lee presented May 11, 1983.



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I entered the M.F.A. program with the vague assumption that I would continue to do the type of work I had been doing - studio nudes. It was, after all, on the basis of that work that I was admitted into the program. So I continued painting the figure, over and over, in a variety of styles, being influenced by everyone with whom I talked, read about or whose work I had seen. Each art history class gave me a banquet of ideas and an art history term paper inevitably brought about a surrogate painting of whoever's work I had been studying. My work was so obviously not mine that even I began to realize it.

My approach to the figure was basically classical, and through all my experiments with stylistic devices, it remained so (Fig. 1). One day a professor asked me how many times I thought I had to paint the figure in this way in order to prove my competency. I realized that that was exactly what I had been doing, and was finally set free to do my own work.



Figure 1. Woman With a Hat



Figure 2. Otto

CHAPTER II

TRANSITION

In the first half of the second year of the program, my painting became more personal and expressive. My interests grew to include the personality of the subject and the relationship between the subject and the surrounding space, with space treated as an area of movement, an aura containing atoms, electricity and creative energy. A portrait of my father (Fig. 2) is an example of work done at this time. The face has no mouth, which is in keeping with my father's lack of sociability. I never had a conversation with him in my life. He was an extremely inventive person and I used lines to express the creative energy coming and going from his body. Although the portrait was fairly successful it lacked cohesiveness, as did the rest of my paintings, individually or as a body of work; I continued to struggle with this problem.

During this time I had been making monoprints which I began to do in my studio. In the printmaking room, I had been using the proper tools and techniques but subconscious images of Piranesi intimidated my creativity. However, in my studio I experimented with whatever paint and paper I had at hand, applying the paint to a metal plate with brushes, fingers, brayer, or by dribbles, and transferring it to the paper by rubbing with a spoon or fist. I felt

free of propriety, and the images I produced were spontaneous and unified.

Because of the process I was able to let go of the compulsiveness of accurately reproducing anatomical parts. The monotype process does not allow for detail either in terms of time or application. I worked in series and, due to the nature of the monoprint process, each successive print became more and more abstracted. An unconventional approach had helped free me of the historical ghosts in printmaking, so I set out to try using this same approach in my painting.

CHAPTER III

THE PROCESS

In my painting, I constructed a rather complicated set-up using a padded base on which the unstretched canvas was anchored. Plastic was used for the plate which was secured at one end so that layers of color could be added without losing register. At this time I was not sure how far I could go with the printing technique or at what point I would have to abandon the set-up and proceed with a brush. I experimented with this process in order to examine its possibilities and limitations. I used both oil paints and enamels. When returning to a painting the next day I wet the entire canvas with turpentine or varnish so that I would not be painting on a dry area. Most of the brushes I used were two or three inches wide, huge when compared to the brushes I had been using, the largest of which was less than one inch wide. I had to work quickly in order to keep the paint wet enough to transfer it from the plastic surface to canvas. The combination of speed and the unreliability of the print made preconceived imagery impractical. Instead I looked to the printed canvas for suggestions of form and developed the emerging images I found there, a kind of Gestalt approach. The source was in the process, not in the observed world.

Cynic (Fig. 3) was one of the first paintings I completed using this process. Although the line does not work well in some areas, I was pleased with the boldness of the color and encouraged by the possibilities which the process presented. With Smooch (Fig. 4) I experimented further with line, trying to create a feeling of movement and energy, and with Beyond Reason (Fig. 5) I went in another direction, working with color areas and no line. In painting Beyond Reason I went back to using a stretched canvas and found that I could use the plastic printing method without any set-up. Embrace (Fig. 6) began like the other paintings but it was finished with a series of glazes. It is the least defined of my paintings and has the most interesting surface. I tried to capture some of these same qualities in the next painting, Red Dress (Fig. 7), but this painting is dominated by vibrant color tempered by black line.

As I began this series of paintings I did not realize what an impact the process would have on my work. When I was painting in a traditional manner, standing at the easel, using a palette, I was obsessed with the formal concerns such as color, composition, and balance. I realized that I had already assimilated those concerns, and did not have to be conscious of them anymore.

The more I worked with this new process the less important the actual printing became. What the print method had given me was a realization of the importance of process in my paintings. Just as in printmaking, what became important in painting was keeping a totally wet surface, working quickly and not relying on preconceived images.

I no longer planned a painting; the figures emerged through the process. It was my subconscious that recognized the images suggested by the paint surface. It was from my past however - attitudes, experiences, education, emotions, ideas - that the subjects developed. I was free now to concentrate on developing the image. Once again an unconventional approach was freeing me.

CHAPTER IV

REALIZATIONS

When I began this program I was still not over the idea that I had to try to excel in every area of figure painting. If something was difficult for me, then that was the thing I would work on. I focused on details, things that had little meaning in terms of what I wanted to say. I ignored what came easily. I felt I was being judged by some rather vague standard of excellence - vague because the standard depended on the person with whom I was talking and his or her personal preferences. But I came to realize that even if it were possible to become "perfect" in every area of painting, to paint the "perfect picture", and to please all the critics, it would probably not be successful because it would be boring to me.

I think it is our imperfections that give life to our work. Again, it was the process which, forcing me to work spontaneously and not allowing time for censorship, allowed my imperfections to surface and my individuality to emerge. I found a passage by James Ensor from Les Escrits, translated by Herschel B. Chipp and Nancy McCauley, which best expresses this idea.

Let us work with love and without fear of our faults, those inevitable and habitual companions of the great qualities. Yes, faults are qualities; and fault is superior to quality. Quality stands for uniformity in the effort to achieve certain common perfections accessible to anyone. Fault eludes conventional and banal perfections. Therefore, fault is multiple, it is life, it reflects the personality of the artist and his character; it is human, it is everything, it will redeem the work.



Figure 3. Cynic.

¹Herschel B. Chipp, Theories of Modern Art, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 112.

CHAPTER V

INFLUENCES

Living in the Chicago area for most of my life has had an influence on me. There is an energy and tension there that pervades my work. When I first came to the Northwest I had trouble adjusting to the slower pace of life. I had to learn to slow down and to be more patient with people. I think that my paintings reflect a nervous energy that I have not been able to overcome. Big city people and their lives are the subjects of such work as The Back Room (Fig. 8), which is a statement on Chicago politics.

Other influences in Chicago were my attendance at the Art Institute, the Picasso Show there in the late 1950s and the city's abundance of art, music, and theater in general. One experience from my Chicago period that has been extremely influential is my work in silk-screening, a process which I was involved with for some twenty years. For ten years prior to leaving Chicago I owned my own silk-screen business. Color, which is so important to my work, was vital to my business. It was necessary to learn to achieve perfection in color matching. My sense of color became so acute I could look at a color and know its components. Because of my skill in this area, I was commissioned to do jobs such as Jack Youngerman's environmental murals, which required 54 color matches in acrylic inks. This job took nine months to complete.

Large, flat areas of color which are so often found in silk screened prints are also important elements in my work. This relationship of silk screening to painting had not occurred to me until I began to use the print method in my work.

Business taught me that one cannot be afraid to fail. If one never takes any risks one never gets anywhere. I found the same to be true in personal relationships. I know I have said and done things which have shocked people, but the level of mutual understanding and trust that evolved from them were worth the risks I took. I have found the same thing to be true in art. The more I am willing to expose my self the more I am able to communicate.

I had an experience in communicating at my thesis show opening. A man came up to me and told me how much he liked my painting Harvest (Fig. 9). I was surprised because, although it has meaning to me, I did not think anyone else would relate to it. I told him it was a portrait of my Finnish Aunt Emma who lived on a farm in South Dakota. I lived with her during half of my early years. She was large and strong, physically and spiritually. She is depicted nude because of my vivid memories of her in the sauna; I was fascinated with her abundance. The windmill is there not only because a windmill was important to a farm which was still without electricity when I

was a child, but because windmills were the only breaks in the otherwise flat Dakota landscape.

The man I was talking to said that his mother was also Finnish and from a farm in the Dakotas. My explanation had validated his emotional response to the painting.



Figure 4. Smooch

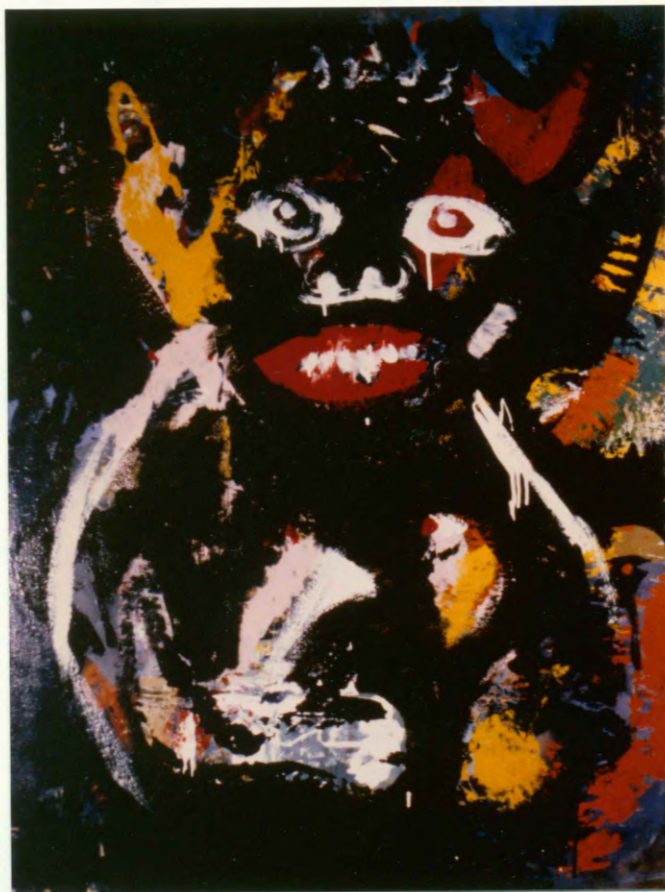


Figure 5. Beyond Reason



Figure 6. Embrace



Figure 7. The Red Dress



Figure 8. The Back Room



Figure 9. Harvest

CHAPTER VI

CONCERNS

There are many things I want to express in my work. One that I have thought about for a long time is the reality beyond reason. I think there is more to reality than what is visible. Our scientific society demands proof in order to have belief and disregards other realities. I have painted things that I have not seen but that I know exist; I have painted things that I have seen but which do not exist.

I first became interested in other realities when I was young and my Uncle Angelo came to live with us. Angelo was brilliant, sensitive, artistic and kind. He also was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. He could carry on two conversations at the same time, one with the family and one with someone or something else. When I asked him about his other world, he explained how, at night, he was transferred to another level of existence where he worked on different projects. For example, he had helped build many of the churches in Rome during his lifetime of 732 years. During the many years that I was close to Uncle Angelo, his beliefs made me question the nature of reality - what is real and what is not. I began to question the way we think.

Western thought is based on accepted theories, such as those espoused by the church, the government, society in general. I think it is important to remember that these theories are just that, theories, and there is as much evidence to dispute them as there is to support them.

Our reality is based on logical Western thinking, but some realities, equally valid, include beliefs such as magic. On June 22, 1979, I was in S. Pedro Manrique, a small town about 60 km northwest of Soria, Spain, watching the fire walkers. Men walked through red hot coals without getting burned. I have studied firewalking and know it is a scientific impossibility, which is why I went to witness the event. What kind of thought or beliefs enables men to do the impossible? I think we limit our thinking by demanding rational explanations to things which cannot be explained rationally. In my paintings Beyond Reason (Fig.5) and Fire Walkers (Fig.10), I attempted to explore other levels of reality.

At the time I was working on Beyond Reason, I had two other paintings which also had demonlike images. The subject matter disturbed me. I tried to change the images but they kept appearing, so I decided to accept and work through them. While these images troubled me, they represented in part some of my thoughts about life.



Figure 10. Fire Walkers



Figure 11. The Realist

CHAPTER VII

MERGING OF IDEAS

One of the most important consequences of this project was the bringing together of the dualistic nature of my art. I have always drawn. I cannot remember a time when I did not. But I did two kinds of drawings, one private and one public. The public drawings were to show to my family and teachers; the private drawings were for me alone. My family encouraged me to develop my art and I attended classes at the Art Institute when I was in grade school. I took figure drawing at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts when I was 14, and studied with Albert Pounion at Barrett College in Lake Forest, Illinois, when I was 15. Although my work pleased my parents and teachers, they never saw the work that had real meaning for me, my private art, the art that expressed my ideas and feelings about life.

The dualism started when I was very young. I was raised by two sets of people, my parents, who lived in Chicago, and my aunt and uncle in South Dakota (mentioned in reference to Harvest). My parents fought a lot and I tried to be a calming influence; I was determined to make no waves. Any feelings which I had that would have disrupted the family I expressed through my drawings, which I completed and burned. With my aunt and uncle the problem was different. They were a very close couple but

fanatically religious. Everything that was not hard work was wrong, evil or dirty. So with them, too, I could not express my feelings which did not always meet their standards.

My grandfather was an artist and my father had also attended the Art Institute of Chicago and liked to draw but he was an engineer. He drew pictures in a rather rigid but confident line for my sister and me when we were young. When I was in high school I found a group of drawings, done in this same style, but the subjects were pornographic; I discovered that Father, too, had his private art. In the process of developing this series of paintings my private art and my public art have merged.



Figure 12. Playing Without a Full Deck

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

My work has continued to be figurative but the whole focus has changed. In the beginning I painted studio nudes using the objective figure as a compositional source. I was concerned with set-ups, the position of the figure, background colors and the like. Through my experiments with monoprints, I was able to put these traditional issues aside. Instead of being concerned with anatomical details, the figure became a vehicle of expression.

Through the process my work came together. I put away old ideas, old concerns, for new, more important ones. My paintings became emotional expressions instead of illustrations. There were times when I grew tired of the process and wanted to try other techniques. However, the necessity of creating a unified body of work forced me to develop a self-discipline which enabled me to focus and grow. I feel that I have only begun to explore the possibilities of this process which has released me of my artistic and personal inhibitions and has allowed true expression.



Figure 13. The Dance



Figure 14. Primitive Future



Figure 15. Circus



Figure 16. Ecstasy

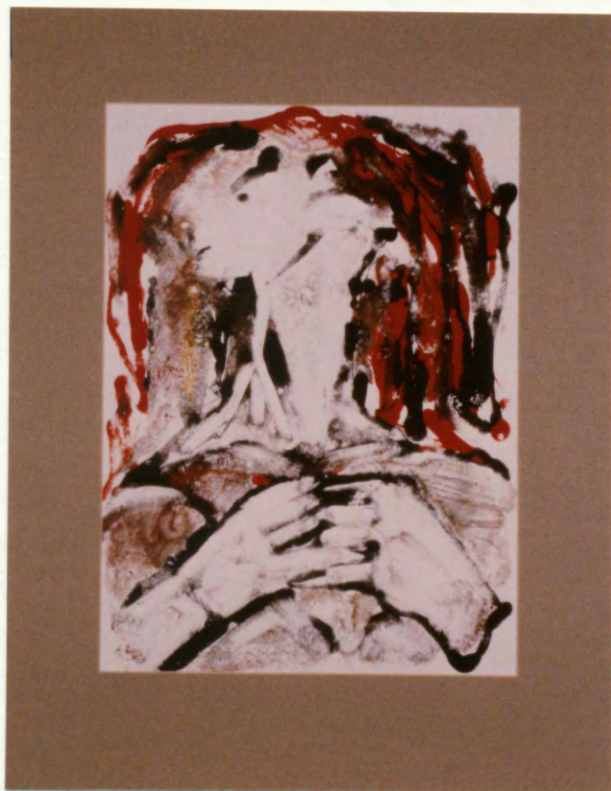


Figure 17. The Dream



Figure 18. Undecided



Figure 19. Reaching



Figure 20. Bundle of Joy

SOURCES CONSULTED

Chipp, Herschel B. Theories of Modern Art. Berkeley:
University of California Press, 1968.