1983

Images from the Horse Heavens

David Thornock
Portland State University

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE:

The Members of the Thesis Committee Approve the Thesis and Report of David Thornock presented April 25, 1983.

[redacted]

James Hibbard, Chairman

[redacted]

Byron J. Gardner

[redacted]

Richard Muller

[redacted]

Michihiro Kosuge

APPROVED:

[redacted]

Leonard Kimbrell, Head, Department of Art and Architecture

IMAGES FROM THE HORSE HEAVENS

by

DAVID THORNOCK

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

PAINTING

Portland State University

1983

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

The Horse Heavens and the surrounding region in central Washington mean a great deal to me. It is where I was raised. The contents of this exhibition deal mainly with this area and the characteristics it contains which reflect and illuminate my evolving concept of reality.

The Horse Heavens is a semi-arid desert with rolling hills, sage brush, wide open spaces, and vast horizons. In my earlier work, I depicted its qualities in a very realistic way. My motives for working this way were very clear; I had never seen the desert depicted the way it appeared to me. I believed that the desert had significant features which were being ignored. These elements were: muted color combinations, visible temperature, opaque atmosphere, and pervasive dustiness. Colors in the Horse Heavens are extrememly subtle. Color recognition came about through a series of close observations, and I came to realize the shifts and changes gradually after prolonged exposure to the landscape. In the desert, the temperature is visible, not just by the way heat radiates from the sandy floor, but also by the way it burns the color and dries the air. Cold makes the rocks resonant and separates the hills from the sky with a clear, clean, fractured line.

Atmosphere has a certain weight. Looking across open ground, I noticed that landscape components seemed to exist in separate planes. The air is milky, not clear, which increases the separation of these planes. The substance of the desert is dirt. Everything is incrusted with dust. Even after a rain, the color of the brush is heavily tainted with sterile, fine dirt. I painted the desert landscape while closely observing these elements because I wanted to reconstruct a likeness of the Horse Heavens.

Approaching the landscape with a set of goals to accomplish can be a rewarding experience. I watched as my depictions of the desert developed gradually into paintings which achieved some of these goals. By 1978, it seemed done. For whatever reasons, I found myself unable to continue. Three years later, I was accepted into the MFA program here at Portland State University.

MATERIALS

Most of the work for the terminal project was done by applying paint to stretched canvas. It suggested itself for several reasons. Preparing linen or cotton by hand-stretching and priming requires effort and personal involvement. A rapport is established by handling the materials, forcing them to take a certain form. I felt I had a personal relationship with the structure that I would later work on.

Oil paint has qualities I admire. Something about the coarseness of scrubbing the paint around on the surface of the canvas appealed to me. I used the paint to build layered glaze areas, to form densely textured areas, and to scrub into the canvas like a stain. This medium also has the ability to record the process used to develop the image. Even something as delicate as the quality of a brush stroke can be preserved. Oil paint makes change simple and easy. I like the freedom that it gives me. I can add paint and still be free to revise and respond to the ideas and directions that come to me as I paint. I am involved in a process of painting that affords me the freedom to improvise as I paint rather than planning the entire composition before I can start.

I also chose traditional materials because I wanted attention focused on the imagery in my art rather than on

the medium. Oil paint and canvas are such common materials that the audience doesn't question their use or validity. Thus they become essentially "invisible" components of a painting, so that what I did with the medium becomes more important than the characteristics of that medium. I hoped the viewer would concentrate on the images in my work without spending his time wondering what materials I had used and how or why I used a particular medium.

Traditional drawing materials were used for many of the same reasons.

WORKING METHOD

My first year in the program was like a baptism. I was determined to find a new, clean approach to painting. Encouraged by my instructors to experiment with different materials, methods of application, and modes of depiction, I set about revitalizing my imagery. This strategy threw me into a kind of questioning position that I found both difficult and exhilarating. Change for its own sake, without a defined purpose or intent initially felt insignificant and unsubstantial. The alterations which I could accept were not dramatic. I found that changing or even attempting to modify enduring patterns lead to many unsuccessful results. Part of the time I was reaching beyond my own sensibilities, using forms and structures with which I had no relationship. At other times, I was resting on personal cliches that required no effort.

Nevertheless, some of the work was comforting, and I was determined to find out why. What was I responding to in the work? By now, I had developed the practice of keeping the walls covered with work, and I spent a lot of time looking at these pieces. It was research for me. Studying the work clarified some of my veiled interests. It also separated the process of doing and producing from the act of examining and questioning.

Knowing that the work would receive a proper scrutiny at some later point, I was free to develop and nourish ideas in collaboration with the motions of the creative act. On examining the work later, a determination was made as to whether or not the painting was successful and if it worked on the many levels demanded of visual art. Sometimes, I felt I could work back into a painting, that the specific ideas and feelings I had about the work were still sharp. Other times, I realized that if the painting hadn't worked, it was too late because I no longer had the same clear idea. At still other times, directions and ideas, developed during the painting process, crowded out my original intent, and provided the work with a new thrust. Separating creative action from critical examination, or integration, is an important working method for me.

When I work, I paint what I feel I must. I get flooded with ideas, impressions, and images. The canvas provides a format for release. Coordination, interrelationships, balance, unity, and variety are all by-products.

Byron Gardner, standing in my studio, said, "These pieces are all so quiet, aren't they?"

Jim Hibbard talked endlessly about a kind of empty space which surrounded still life objects.

Sitting in a theater, watching a Japanese movie, I was confronted with a peculiar hollow space which I felt the movie producer had stolen from me. I watched the characters on the screen take on the qualities of the landscape.

I walked into the studio, my hair matted and soaking wet. I had left a watercolor sitting in front of an open window. It was also soaking wet. On picking it up, a kind of adolescent excitement overcame me.

In the library one day, I was looking for Thomas Mann, but I found Gertrude Stein.

I found the space contained in Morandi's work and saw that it was a lot like the textured, tactile field of Pollock and the open expanses of Rothko.

I remember reading something Rothko said:

> The familiar identity of things has to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite association with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment. 1

At PCVA, I entered the North Gallery and faced David Salle's painting. His work contained many fractured and

displaced forms. Five minutes later, I left, feeling confused and frustrated.

"Grandview" was one of the first pieces that contained the major components that are important to the works of this exhibition. These components are: displaced and indeterminite forms, space which is an invocation of silence, formation of the fragment, and a weakened narrative content. I began to realize that these components were found in the Horse Heaven Hills, and that they were also very important to me.

Figure 1. Grandview.

In Grandview," shapes were alterations of landscape forms. My fascination with their ambiguities made me

realize that I was using shapes as surrogates for ideas. The open section in the middle was intended to invite the viewer into the space which surrounds these shapes, hopefully in the same way that Morandi draws the viewer into his still life through an opening between the objects. The flat, pastel tone of the drawing was also intended to make the space seem calm and non-threatening. Although the shapes were fragmented and dissected by the painting's boundaries, they maintained definite identities, and these identities began to converse. I think it was this narrative quality in the piece that bothered me most.

Figure 2. Sunnyside.

With "Sunnyside," the forms become more monolithic, entities separated from their environment. This was a step toward the kind of displacement for which I was searching. The shapes were developed enough to take their place as objects in a setting, while at the same time being color areas. The forms were similar and seemed to come from the same family. Their dissimilarities could be seen as a gender difference. Because of their relatedness and the interaction with an architectural backdrop, the dialogue is intense. Again, I found this put the piece in a narrative context. All the associations with story intrigue, developed plot lines, and complex character relationships were present. This gave the piece an air of the surreal - an area, however interesting, that I was not prepared to explore.

I was very disheartened. I was using shapes that carried the meaning and weight I had intended for them. I was comfortable with the color and texture, but the combination of these elements was not what I had wanted. I knew that these elements had little in common with my ideas about the desert.

Subsequently, I spent three or four weeks stumbling through what felt like a series of exercises. Then I painted "Mike's Rock," and it pulled me around the corner.

"Mike's Rock" clarified some of the feelings and concepts pertinent to this body of work. By establishing a high horizon line, a distance can be perceived, yet it is also easy to call the background a wall. The edge of the rock-like form describes a searching, indecisive, undetermined movement, yet the form itself is contained. The rock shape is a piece or fragment. It is one of several pieces which makes the whole. The dialogue is becoming less active. The painting is essentially a view, not a story, and this was becoming very important to me.

Figure 3. Mike's Rock.

I wondered if I had introduced too much space and atmosphere by the loose brushwork in the background. I

also felt that the rock itself might be too heavy, solid, and identifiable, but I was pleased by the movement created by the suggested light source and the interaction between the violet and red colors. I introduced a smudge of the background color over the rock to create a confusing tension between the surface of the object and the background. I determined to place more emphasis on the edge and to flatten the rock shape in my next piece.

Figure 4. Outing With Earl.

In "Outing With Earl," the rock-like form has volume but does not demand a three-dimensional interpretation. It rests near the surface along with the dark space which surrounds it. Although it is basically a flat shape, some

volume is suggested by the orange streak along the upper left side and by the blue undercut on the bottom right. Words like "megalith," "dolmen," "monolith," and "menhir" come freely to mind. This mute object is intended to serve as a metonymical incident, but it also pleases me that it can be a rock, a symbol, or many other things. I think this happens because the volume is not defined, the edge is halting and awkward, and the space is quiet and not confined to the size of the canvas.

Figure 5. Bolder.

In "Bolder," the large "rock" loses most of its objective meaning. Its shape describes more movement than the previous paintings. It is not attached at the base.

The rock and the background color exist on approximately the same plane, which is right on the surface. They are balanced elements. The smaller rock form appears more voluminous than the large one. The blue area that contains it is more illusionistic. I wanted the forms to exist independently, so I emphasized the differences in their volumes, edges, colors, and surroundings.

CONCLUSION

I was raised in the desert country, and when I first started painting it, I felt it had been misunderstood. For some reason, it was very important to me that other people came to see the desert as I knew it. There were aspects of the landscape which, although subtle, were strong, and I found it important that they be addressed.

The experience of the first year in the program reaffirmed the importance of this area to me. And so I found myself returning, as Marcel Proust says:

> The work of the artist is to seek, to discern something different underneath the material,... for art will undo and make us retrace our steps and return to the depths of ourselves, where what really exists lies unknown to us. 2

The work of this show, in many ways, depicts the similarity between the Horse Heavens and my personal identity. I came to realize that by painting the landscape, I was really painting self-portraits. Although the apparent subject matter is the Horse Heavens, personal ideas and feelings are of major importance. Many of the paintings are interpretations of incidents and observations of daily life. And so in this work, a realistic presentation of the landscape has become subordinate to an expression of my ideas.

The master's program has been very successful for me. I have many ideas which I hope to develop in the future, and I feel I have a renewed purpose and a working method which will help bring about this development.

Figure 6. Standing Rock.

Figure 7. Union Gap.

Figure 8. Marcel's Gap.

Figure 9. Hoof Split.

Figure 10. Fin.

Figure 11. Older Couple.

Figure 12. Apart.

Figure 13. Bickleton.

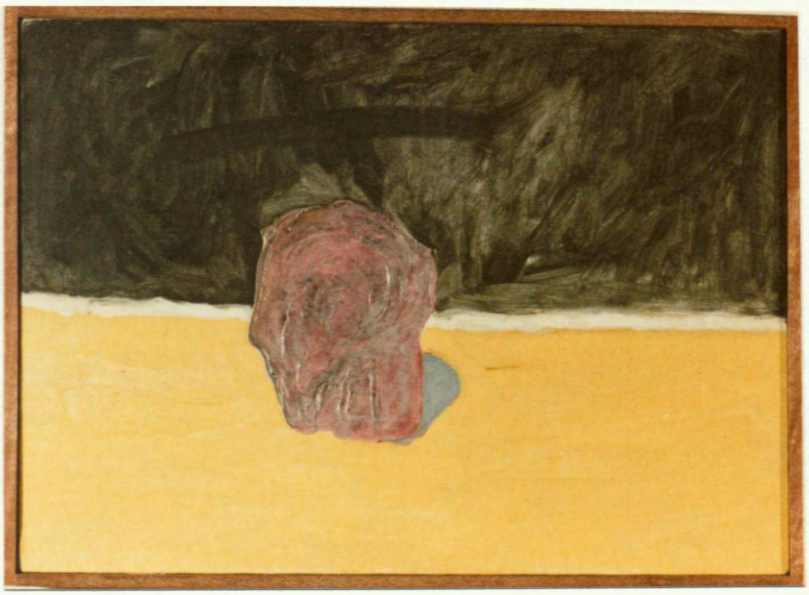

Figure 14. Prosser.

Figure 15. Toppenish.

Figure 16. Dayton.

Figure 17. Sisyphus.

FOOTNOTES

1 Herschel B. Chipp, Theories of Modern Art (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 549.

2 Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past Vol. II (New York: Random House, Inc., 1981), pp. 1013-14.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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

Proust, Marcel. Remembrance of Things Past. New York: Random House, Inc., 1981.