Toward improvisation

Sandra Janeen Howe
Portland State University

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TOWARD IMPROVISATION

by

SANDRA JANEEN HOWE

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

PAINTING

Portland State University, 1981
TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE


Professor Craig Cheshire, Chairman

Dr. Lisa Andrus

Professor Byron Gardner

Professor Frederick Heidel

Professor Michihiro Kosuge

Dr. Jae Num Lee

APPROVED:

Dr. Leonard Kimbrell, Head, Department of Art and Architecture
I. DISSATISFACTIONS AND DISCOVERIES LEADING TO THESIS PROJECT

The process which my painting went through during my first year in the M.F.A. program made the nature of my thesis project virtually self evident. I chose to investigate the relationship of color to composition in my painting. A discussion of the route which led me to this subject seems appropriate since all that has occurred in my work this year had its point of departure in the work I did at that time.

For much of the first year, I was dealing with concerns stemming from my dissatisfaction with the work I did during my first term in the program. Most important among my painting problems was a lack of color contrast and a rather overall, uniform distribution of the color, which I thought resulted in monotony and predictability within each painting and among the paintings. Oaxaca [Pl. 1.] is an example. Here I had placed such limitations on my use of color, in terms of value, hue and intensity, that the color could not possibly play a very large role.

Also, in the paintings from this time, I thought there was little sense of the color being a truly formative, essential part of my response which would strongly affect, perhaps determine the composition. Usually, in these paintings, the composition evolved more on the basis of design and drawing than on that of color. My observation of and response to the situation to be painted involved searching out and creating relationships of line and mass, shape, and directional movement across the two-dimensional canvas, all with an eye toward unity in composition. The color relationships, as a result of the limitations I inadvertently imposed, were subordinate to the design elements. Although the paintings Young Man [Pl. 2] and Oaxaca-#2 [Appendix Pl. 1] have perhaps greater color contrast and more evident particular color qualities than other paintings I did at this time, their
compositions derive from the precedence of design elements, the color functioning subserviently.

Once I had realized that my compositions were developed primarily in design and drawing terms, I became more aware of how color was actually operating in my work. Although my way of working was one of proceeding with the color and the drawing simultaneously, with no a priori drawing to which color was "added," the paintings often had the appearance of color filling in shapes. The color was hostage to the line.

The next two terms were devoted to grappling with these problems of color. Through numerous paintings and studies, I began to develop a better awareness of the interrelationships of color and became better able to use color in all its attributes to create relationships in my paintings. As a result, they began to exhibit greater color contrast.

As I continued to paint, I found myself searching for ways to cause the color to be a truly formative element and to no longer be entrapped within linear boundaries. By beginning to search my subject for color patterns and relationships which occurred as a result of the light on the situation, I found a possibility for getting beyond the boundary problem. I found myself on the lookout for the effects of light on the color in my subject, to use as clues in creating patterns in my paintings. Boundaries, areas and patterns would thus result as much from the color relationships I saw revealed by the light as from the linear relationships I saw. Reclining Woman-#3 [Pl. 3] was a seminal painting for me in this respect. In it, I found myself attempting to see beyond the boundaries between things in the subject and to look for light-created patterns involving groupings and contrasts of color-values, warm and cool hues, and intensities. By searching for what light did to the color of the situation, I found new ways of creating areas, compositional shapes, and patterns that went beyond the more obvious separations between things. Every painting and study I did after Reclining Woman-#3 was based
on a search for light-revealed color relationships which I could use to develop and determine the composition.

At this time I wished to increase my capacity for searching out these kinds of less obvious occurrences in my subjects. I found that viewing any situation through a mirror helped me to further this "searching seeing." Looking through the mirror, I could remove myself from the familiar, prosaic aspects of the subject enough to observe much better the light travelling unpredictably over it. This became and remains an important aid to my painting.

Continuing to paint, I found it becoming easier to discern patterns and relationships in the subject, and to use them as clues to create patterns and relationships on the canvas. But the practice of working in terms of design predominated against my will and I had to fight to get beyond it. By beginning to paint on gessoed illustration board, I found this tendency diminished, since the smoother, less absorbent surface of the board allowed me to push the color around much more and thus rather freely and openly develop patterns and relationships across the painting. From this point, for every painting I did on canvas, I did at least one or two studies on illustration board of the same subject, continuing to try to liberate myself to develop the compositions from the color patterns.

The six studies [Pl. 4, Pl. 5 and Appendix Pl. 2, Pl. 3] I did in relation to the painting, The Three Figures [Appendix Pl. 4], are examples of this attempt. In each, I approached the subject and the study openly, putting down areas of color suggested by patterns I discerned in the subject, allowing each study to evolve in its own way from the beginning. This was of immense interest to me, in that every study grew into a different composition in regard to pattern and color, as a result of my discovering and developing different clues in each of them, despite the fact that they all had exactly the same subject seen from the same vantage point. This demon-
strated to me that as long as I responded to the subject by using selected clues derived from the light on the situation, I could develop a number of unique compositional solutions from that same subject. And this meant that there were myriad possibilities in any painting situation which could be picked up on, developed, pushed, invented upon, etc. to create a number of particular, individual paintings.

At the same time, I became more conscious of the potentialities for painting that could arise from the effects of colors on one another. I found myself more and more working to create reciprocal color relationships, using colors in relation to one another to try to cause each to "sing," with the hope of giving the painting a resonant color quality. Color relationships in the painting might be made to differ from those in the subject in so far as the colors seemed to need to alter or change in response to one another in the painting, to effect that singing quality to which I referred.

Perhaps the catalyst for this growing interest was the figure set-up created by Frederick Heidel in his Figure Composition class. This involved the use of many reflecting surfaces, both juxtaposed pieces of glass with divers colored fabrics behind and beside them, and a number of mirrors, all of which resulted in a complex, unexpected and lively melange of color relationships which stimulated my response. This subject not only kindled an attempt to create color relationships, patterns which could have contrast in respect to all of the color attributes and the relative amounts of colors, but also allowed me to try to go beyond the more obvious, "given" colors. It made me try to generate relationships in which the colors might interact and relate to give that singing or lyrical quality. I did the six studies and one painting of this subject at that time, later doing two more paintings, of which The Three Figures-#2 [Pl. 6] is one. Although I consider none of them to be successful in truly achieving this quality, they are eminently important to me in that they
pointed the way toward a long-sought, primary goal. These paintings and studies, along with a large number of others that I did, brought me to the point of determining what my M.F.A. thesis project would be. It was as though the choices I had made, the things I had done up to that time, all had arrows in them, pointing the way. I wished to find ways to cause color to be a truly formative aspect, to take its fullest role in my painting. I wished to further my use of color to get away from a predictable, obvious response to the subject, toward one which would be unique and singular for every painting.

As I viewed it then, my project would center on the relationship of color to composition, exploring how I might push them toward the unexpected while remaining true to my response to the subject. As it turned out, I did indeed deal with these problems, but my exploration took me on a very different route than I had anticipated.

II. EARLY GROPINGS AND FRUSTRATIONS

During the first several months after arriving at the thesis project, I found myself groping in my painting for ways to deal with these problems I had set for myself. For a long time, no real openings or possibilities for propelling myself forward presented themselves. It was a discouraging period of unsatisfactory efforts that led nowhere. I was dismayed at the predictability of the color quality, the predictability of the compositions and the reigned-in appearance and lack of real breadth in the handling in the paintings I did at this time. Creek [Pl. 7] is an example of the problems I was having. Although my response to the place was strong and the resulting painting is pleasant enough, the painting had little of the excitement, liveliness or genuine uniqueness which I was pursuing. The problem of lack of freedom or breadth in the handling bothered me most because
it represented to me the nature of my problems. I was feeling somehow trapped. I began to think that if I could achieve a broader, bolder way of working, I would get onto a more fruitful track and make better progress. Thus, for a month or two, I put color aside and did only drawings. They were simplified drawings in which I concentrated on working with greater breadth and force to create rather simple compositions. Bank of the Willamette [Pl. 8] is one of these drawings.

After doing a number of these drawings, I returned to painting, approaching it in a broader, more open way. For a while, my paintings improved. My response to my subjects was stronger and showed itself in the color and handling. The color began to play a more definitive role in creating the compositions, as it had earlier in the year. I still was looking and searching for clues in the subject as revealed by light to develop patterns and relationships in the paintings. Creek-#2 [Pl. 9], Oakridge Summer [Appendix Pl. 5], and Columbia Gorge [Appendix Pl. 6] are examples of work from this time. But as I continued to paint, I found I still was not at all satisfied with what I was doing. Although there was improvement, the newest paintings remained far too predictable. I wanted each to be thoroughly singular in its existence. I was especially aware of and disturbed by a certain predictability in the handling. Leaning Woman-#6 [Pl. 10] is a prime example of this. I felt that in it, I was relying on a limited repertoire of brushstrokes, which gave the painting a uniform, soft look. At the same time, I was running up against my recurring problem of working on canvas, being less able to really push the color around, and thus tending to create boundaries rather than real color relationships. Again, and more than ever, I was disgusted and dismayed.
III. POINT OF NO RETURN

At about this time, I reached a point of no return. I decided it was necessary to re-examine my attitudes, my ways of doing things in painting. I started asking myself questions. "How am I really doing this?" What am I really doing as I proceed to make a painting?" I began to scrutinize my ways of working and became convinced that I would have to clear away old, habitual ways for fresher, more productive ones.

I did a number of paintings in which I tried to continue my pursuit of color determining the composition. Woman [Pl. 11] and Creek-#3 [Pl. 12] are examples. In them, I was trying to achieve unique color qualities by making the colors affect one another, in the hope of creating the kinds of colors and color relationships that I have come to call "un-nameable." By painting colors over one another, allowing earlier colors to show through in places, the resulting "color" becomes one which cannot be named, but which nevertheless has its own resonant color quality. The relationship of a color area such as this to the color areas around it necessarily becomes a unique, unrepeatable one. For example, in Creek-#3, there is an area approximately in the center of the painting that depicts the shadowed nature of the water between the rocks. The color of this area reads as a low-intensity, neutralized purple from a distance. As one approaches the painting, it becomes clear that the area is actually made up of a number of hues which together result in this somewhat mysterious color which has no name. Is it a warm color or is it a cool color? It seems to serve a changing role in that regard in its relation to the other color areas in the painting. The yellows in the rocks make it seem cooler, just as it helps bring out their warmth. On the other hand, the aqua of the water to the right makes it appear warmer, and vice versa.

I felt this was a promising step forward for my painting,
but was also very aware that a predictability persisted in terms of the handling. I continued to question my ways of doing things. For a long time, I had recognized that my figure drawings, which I had carried on throughout the M.F.A. program, were far ahead of my paintings in a number of ways. The drawings had greater liveliness, more direct, forceful execution, and more singular, less predictable compositions. Every drawing seemed unique from every other one [Pl. 13, Pl. 14, Pl. 15]. I decided to look carefully at my drawings for clues to how I might proceed in my paintings. I suspected that my drawings held keys for my future painting.

IV. NEW WAYS OF "DOING"

As a result of thinking about my drawing and in light of my dissatisfaction with my recent work, I arrived at a set of new intentions. I would use the clues that I derived from looking at my drawings as a catalyst for finding new ways to deal with my painting problems. I decided to concentrate to a large degree on drawing for a while, trying to pursue the unexpected without the complication of color. From this point, my primary criterion was that what I called the actual "doing" would be thoroughly evident in the drawing. Indeed, I intended to focus my attention on the making of the drawing, so that I could truthfully say that the drawing would simply be the tangible manifestation of that process of its being created.

In respect to these criteria, I determined to work quite large, to force myself to have to be really active, bold and broad in my doing of the drawings. Also, I decided to use large sheets of gessoed paper, stretched on stretcher bars, hoping this could serve as a bridge between the paintings, drawings, and studies. One might say I was trying to trick myself out of old assumptions by forcing myself to "draw" very large, using oil paint (transmitting the idea of "paint-
"ing" to my programmed brain), on paper (signifying "studies") which had been gessoed and stretched ("painting" again).

Another new intention involved my use of tools. Since I had been disturbed by the lack of variety in handling in my painting, I considered how I might best achieve greater variety. A look at the tools I had been using and the kinds of marks I could make with them, convinced me to try to find or construct as many new tools as possible and to experiment with employing them in diverse ways on these large drawings. I found myself fascinated with the vast possibilities that opened for me by using a number of tools in many ways on one drawing. I assembled an arsenal of sponges, knives, spatulas, sticks, feathers, rags, brushes and tools I made myself, using anything that came to hand.

As I drew, I saw a path open for me. The dots, scratches, scribbles, touches, streaks, etc., that I made with the different tools, the marks that in combination made up one drawing, were what really made that drawing unique from any other drawing of mine. Yes, this gave me the possibility for the variety and unexpectedness which I sought, but even more important, it gave me the start of a way of working that would promote, perhaps force, the process of making each drawing to be singular unto itself, necessarily unlike the doing of any other drawing. Thus, the resulting drawing would be closer to that essentially individual work of which I was in quest.

In respect to this, as I drew, I discovered more and more a connection between my response to my subject and those actual marks I made on the paper. I saw that if the marks and touches could be made truly in response to visual clues I discerned in the subject, the drawing's essential individuality would be thoroughly a result of my response. In writing this, I do not mean that there was necessarily a direct relationship of seeing a clue and then doing something on the paper equivalent to it. Very often, as I worked openly and freely, I found my hand working rather independently of my brain, making
marks, touches almost to its own demands, or so it seemed to me. I allowed this to happen, going with it as long as it seemed to further the drawing. I might make a particular kind of mark which in itself would stimulate me to make other marks in response to it, all of which might have little relation to the subject, but would nevertheless take their place in the making of the drawing. I would pursue such responses for the sake of the drawing, as long as they seemed fruitful. An example of this is Woman [Pl. 16], where in the upper right corner I made fairly large placements of darks, which serve to break up that area, to carry on the diagonal directional relationships which extend through the figure's legs and through her body toward the right corner, and to help to create a balance throughout the whole of the lights and darks. In the subject, there was nothing in that area to suggest a dark, a diagonal emphasis, or the kinds of marks I made to establish the area. Somehow, a line or mark I made in that section of the drawing suggested that I should carry this farther, that the drawing needed it.

One aspect of the subject of which I tried to be very aware, to use as clues for the process of my drawing, was the way the light revealed the situation, both in the value patterns created and in the definition of linear elements. As I worked, I tried to pick up on relationships revealed by the light, to help organize the drawing. While I was stressing contrast and variety over unity, I maintained in my working a kind of searching, balancing effort. I still demanded that unified composition be a goal, although now I was approaching it in a different way. For example, in Young Man [Pl. 17], I tried by the kinds of marks and their relations to one another to suggest the rhythmic light pattern I saw in the subject. Thus, the marks and the resulting drawing have a kind of swaying aspect, a product of the response and the balancing effort I brought to my "doing" of this particular drawing.
A danger of which I was aware was that by working directly from a subject, it was possible inadvertently to begin to make marks which had direct reference to what I saw, but did not contribute to the achievement of contrast, variety or unity in the drawing's composition itself. Thus, I made it a requirement that I would only carry each drawing as far as I could maintain my doing of the drawing in response to both the subject and the needs of the drawing. As long as what I did contributed to the drawing's gaining a life of its own, I would continue to work. When my attention would begin to falter and I would find myself making marks that weren't done for the sake of the drawing, I would turn the drawing upside down or sideways to try to carry it farther on its own terms. If I wasn't able to further it in that way, I would simply stop and call it finished. Devorah [Pl. 18] is an example of this. As this drawing developed, it seemed to be progressing well in terms of my criteria for "doing." However, at a certain point I found myself focusing intently on the facial characteristics of the model, and began to try to achieve a likeness, without considering sufficiently the effects such particular and defining marks would have upon the emerging existence of the drawing. Thus, the drawing had to be called finished, even though it might have been carried farther.

Also, in reference to the "doing" in response to the subject, I found myself working with an eye toward suggestion over definition. I preferred to put in as few lines or marks that defined the subject as possible, and instead create a suite of marks that, giving sufficient clues to the observer, would suggest the subject and cause him or her to become more actively involved in looking at the drawing. In these drawings I was not looking to create visual puzzles, however. Otherwise, I would have left out a lot more definition and concentrated merely on the marks on the paper. I wished, instead, to activate, by my feeling and response toward the
subject, as transmitted by my "doing," a similar feeling
and response in the observer. My effort was for the purpose
of making my feeling felt.

As I worked, I found it helpful also, to allow a lot of
what I considered unsatisfactory, unsuccessful marks, to re-
main. I tried to use these marks as catalysts or ways to
invent more and different kinds of marks that otherwise I
might not have created. I was temporarily suspending judg-
ment for the purpose of allowing the thing to grow, to evolve
organically.

The greatest consequence of this new way of working was
that it caused me to be thoroughly alert and focused as I
worked on a particular drawing. There would be few old
solutions to fall back upon. The drawing would be uniquely
itself from start to finish. I sensed, as I continued with
these drawings, that although many of them were not necessarily
successful, they represented the most valuable set of discover-
ies I had made yet in my work.

After doing a large number of these drawings, I arrived
at a point which was time to turn to color, to try to apply
my new found ways to painting.

V. COLOR IN TERMS OF "DOING"

When I decided to return to color, I was conscious that
I had a momentum going and so would need to carry it through.
Thus, in my first several attempts, of which Woman-Burnt
Sienna [Pl. 19] is an example, I began the paintings by treat-
ing them exactly as I had the drawings. I did what I had been
doing in the recent past, using transparent and opaque gray
and black oil paint on the large, gessoed, stretched paper.
I would develop these drawing/paintings to a certain extent,
again letting the response to the subject in terms of the tools
and the "doing" determine the drawing. At what was a fairly
arbitrary point of working, I would choose a color (in the case
of this particular drawing/painting, burnt sienna), and add it
to my previously monochromatic palette, to begin to introduce an element of color into the process. I would continue with that one color, sometimes mixing it with the black or gray, making marks with different tools in response to my observation of the subject and the developing painting. At another juncture, which naturally would vary from painting to painting, I would add another color to the palette (in this case, Payne's gray), which would usually serve as a warm or cool complement to the initial color employed. From this point the relative amounts of the two colors, the mixed colors, and the blacks and grays, would show themselves very clearly. Thus, I could control rather well the distribution of color through the painting from the outset. As with the drawings, I concentrated on getting as much diversity as possible in the kinds of marks I would make. I tried to put the color down in many ways, in search of variety. Also, I only allowed myself to carry a painting as far as I could on these terms. If I fell into working on one in a manner that resembled my old ways, I would stop.

One might be inclined to think that these particular paintings were merely "colored" drawings, but I believe that the way I was working didn't allow such a thing to occur, because the putting down of the color after the initial beginning in grays, was done as an integral part of the process. Since I was painting in such a broad, open way, with little definition, there was really no way that the color could merely fill in outlines or even appear to do so. The putting down of the color was a series of steps in the process. As the color went down, the painting's composition developed. The composition was not predetermined by the beginning in grays and black.

After experimenting for a while with this process of consecutive colors, I began to do some paintings in which I still started with the black and grays, but then went on to add other colors concurrently, using a fuller palette. I decided to allow the thing to develop in color by putting down with
different tools, in different ways which responded to the
subject and the evolving painting, colors in relation to
one another, which would also be in response to the situation
and the painting. Woman-#3 [Pl. 20, Pl.21] and Chuck [Pl.
22] are examples of this process. This was the painting situ­
atuation toward which I had been working. Here was where I
hoped all of the concerns with which I had been dealing would
come into play and integrate to show me a way to proceed in
the future. Indeed, this is what occurred.

I believe that the key to what I was after lay in the
relation of the color to what I continued to call the "doing."
By painting in this way, every painting necessarily was done
differently than every other one, by virtue of the series of
marks made in response to the situation and the evolving paint­
ing, and the color relationships created by those marks, also
in response. Thus, the colors and the marks that put them down,
the process of "doing," could be said to be the sum total of
all that was done.

This way of working also permits me to push the color
relationships farther than in the past, toward the less ex­
pected. As I work, I am naturally more aware of and attuned
to the effects that newly placed colors are having upon colors
already there. Consequently, I find myself altering and push­
ing colors when I consider that a change of a color would cause
the colors to which it relates to be more resonant. This oc­
curs in the painting Kelly [Pl. 23], in which color areas are
pushed beyond my original color responses to the actual situa­
tion, in order to try to achieve more effective color relation­
ships in the painting. The single bright fuschia-colored ver­
tical stripe to the right of the figure is an example of this.
Originally it was a low-intensity, warm, brownish color. But
the painting seemed to need a color in that area which would
amplify or enhance the large amounts of green. Thus, I changed
the color to a bright warm pink, which I believe does provide
the needed color contrast. Also, as I work in this way, one
alteration often leads naturally to others in response to
it, so that as I continue working, a new criterion emerges:
that eventually, as I paint, every color that I put into a
painting will develop into resonant relation with the other
colors.

This approach forces me to focus, to pay close attention,
and to be more aware of what colors are doing to one another.
The process in each painting becomes highly individual, the
color being put on and developed by means of layering, rub­
bing, scraping, painting, etc. I find that I do many more
things in an individual painting now and that I can never
predict what those things will be. This way of working also
promotes my response, making me better able to go on feeling,
investing more of that feeling into the painting by my doing.

As with the drawings which preceded them, the paintings
often ended up having greater variety than unity. Although I
was of course trying to create unified compositions, often
the marks and the color distribution would run away from me
and not necessarily help to unify the painting, but instead
would give it greater contrast and variety. Even though I
might have been able to carry some of them farther toward
more unified compositions, this does not seem to be the time
for me to focus my attention on unity. The discoveries I've
made during the last year point the way toward greater and
greater freedom for me in my painting process. I see possi­
bilities opening as I continue to work.

VI. TOWARD IMPROVISATION AND VISUALIZATION

I recognize now that what I am working toward is
improvisation. This process of "doing" in my paintings and
drawings, in response to my subject, becomes more and more
one of "having to adjust to what happens," of developing the
work frankly and spontaneously, from moment to moment. My
response is perpetuated as the painting proceeds, altering to
meet the continually changing conditions in the painting. The unexpected things which occur in the painting seem to stimulate fresher, more honest, and more spontaneous responses. In the paintings Woman-#3 (previously mentioned) and Camogli [Pl. 24], this was the process I employed. Each of these paintings progressed by means of my putting down colors with various kinds of marks, using a number of tools, in response to the things that happened during the process from moment to moment. By trying to be constantly alert to what was going on as I proceeded, I made continual adjustments, changes and responses, and thus, the paintings gained their existence.

A result of this is that I have become more receptive to the unexpected. Indeed, I welcome it. "When you improvise, it is axiomatic that you take risks and can't foretell results."* Improvisation becomes more and more central to my way of working. This is exciting to me, for I recognize in it, a kind of principle of growth. There will be no cause to repeat myself, if I hold to these new found criteria for working.

And yet, I am not at all satisfied with the degree of progress I have made in this direction. I realize that I must move further and further along this course. In my most recent work, I am concerned with trying to find ways to maximize this movement toward improvisation.

Visualizing is becoming an important aid in my work toward this purpose. In The Blue House-#2 [Pl. 25], I began by looking at a photograph which I had taken in Mexico a couple of years ago. Using the photograph and my recollection of the place as a point of departure, I began to develop the painting, allowing my process of working on it to carry it

into quite another realm from the literal image of the photo. By the time the painting was finished, it had virtually no resemblance to that original image, in color or composition. It had become another place, some place I had conjured by my "doing." Yet, as I look at the painting, it seems more like a real Mexican place that I might have seen, than do the paintings I did in Mexico on the spot. This way of working, by beginning with a rather literal, prosaic image and then allowing my process of painting to develop it into what I hope will be something more, helps to orient me toward the unexpected. It seems to set the improvising activity in motion. This, then, is the direction in which I am moving. I still hold to my objective of responding as fully as possible to the world I see around me, of trying to use all of my resources to achieve this. The ways of working which I have been developing and will keep on trying to develop, give me hope that I may continue to progress toward my goals.
Pl. 1 Oaxaca

Pl. 2 Young Man
Pl. 3 Reclining Woman-#3
Pl. 4  Three Figures Study

Pl. 5  Three Figures Study
Pl. 6  The Three Figures-#2
Pl. 11  Woman

Pl. 12  Creek-#3
Pl. 13 Seated Woman

Pl. 14 Kneeling Woman

Pl. 15 Jayne
Pl. 16 Woman

Pl. 17 Young Man
Pl. 18 Devorah

Pl. 19 Woman—Burnt Sienna
Pl. 20  Woman-#3

Pl. 21  Woman-#3 (detail)
Pl. 22  Chuck

Pl. 23  Kelly
Appendix Pl. 1  Oaxaca-#2

Appendix Pl. 2  Three Figures Study
Appendix Pl. 3  Three Figures Study

Appendix Pl. 4  The Three Figures
Appendix Pl. 13  Woman

Appendix Pl. 14  Kelly
Appendix Pl. 15  At the Window

Appendix Pl. 16  At the Window