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Recommended Citation

Ross, Karl J., "Reconstructions : humor through the use of ambiguous images and color" (1981).

Dissertations and Theses. Paper 3512.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.5396>

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RECONSTRUCTIONS: HUMOR THROUGH THE
USE OF AMBIGUOUS IMAGES AND COLOR

by

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

SCULPTURE

Portland State University, 1981

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE:

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From a quick look at the title of this report, or at the work itself, one might ask; What is a reconstruction? How or why were they done? Or what do they mean? These questions, as well as others, are what this report is all about. It is hoped that from reading the following report that these questions as well as others will be answered.

Basically my reconstructions are made from items which have been mass-produced, consumed, and then discarded. I then take that item apart and build a single sculpture from the pieces. The sculpture is then painted. Next a gloss resin epoxy coating is applied over the entire structure to give it a unified surface and an overall "new" look.

How and why the sculptures came about are the questions which cannot be answered in a single paragraph.

The long story begins with the use of humor in art. Historically humor is an aspect of human nature with which relatively few artists have dealt. Artists such as Picasso, Calder, and Miro, as well as others, utilized humor in thier work. However, the artist as well as the viewing public has had the tendency to down-grade its use and have not taken it seriously as a suitable subject for works of art. Personally, I like to see humor in art. I also prefer to see it rather than many other forms of expression which I feel have been over-used in the past and the present. This desire to see humor in art has been transferred to a desire to see it in my own work.

With this intent in mind the question arose as to how to present humor in my work which was of a non-narrative nature. I decided upon a non-narrative mode because I feel that humorous art which is narrative tends to lose its humor as the subject matter loses its direct relevance to the viewer over the span of time. This belief meant that my presentation had to be a semi-abstract nature so that the viewer would perceive a feeling of humor rather than a specific message.

The nature of the humor that seemed to work best was a type based upon a combination of seeing the unexpected in a delightful way, the humor which arises from discovering ambiguities, and the effects of color in moods.

Through the use of deliberately ambiguous images an element of humor enters into a work as these ambiguities are gradually perceived. Within the work that I did for this project there exist three basic levels: 1) the original configurations of the sculptures (item); 2) their present three-dimensional appearance (reconstruction); 3) the use and effect of color.

The desire to see humor was accompanied by a strong desire to see through the solid forms and to explore the negative space within the form. The challenge of a sort of expansion of the image, but not the size of the work also presented itself.

An initial change in the direction of my work which helped to bring about this expansion of the image came with

my study of the trends and developments of modern art. Of particular interest were the theories and works of the Constructivists. Their definition of space and work with the relationships of objects in space seems to be just what I was looking for to change my emphasis from "form" oriented sculpture to work based upon relationships of objects in space thus allowing the expansion of the image. Also, like many other artists of the past I borrowed from the works of other artists, not knowing or caring who they were. From these readings, however, I realized that I wanted to create art which came from and reflected in some aspect the time in which I lived, addressing myself to contemporary issues and concerns.

Another major change came while working with a totally different media. Using an arc welder and scraps of metal which had been cut out and left in the metal sculpture studio by students I made a number of small sculptures. This spontaneous combination of the arc welder and a stockpile of scraps was excellent for working with existing shapes. In the making of these sculptures my concern was not to create works of art, but to generate ideas and to experiment with the relationships between the parts. The spontaneity of this method allowed me to produce a number of pieces from which I could learn and then compare to each other. From this learning experience I was able to develop a "sense" of working with combined shapes and of how visual tension could be created by their positioning. Later this experience would become very important in my work.

Around this same time I began remembering a number of things from my past. The first memory was from childhood, my favorite hobby then being to take things apart, an activity which I still pursue today. The second was of a number of early reconstructions done between the years 1975 and 1977. These pieces were the predecessors of the present thesis project. The difference was in their construction; which was done by attaching the parts by means of the existing holes and without adhesives. There is also the absence of color except where the manufacturer had applied it. The concept of the reconstructions then became the focus of my attention, so in the summer of 1980 I began their further development into the present sculptures.

This time with the reconstructions I employed at first the use of "Superglue", but since it was not so "super" I turned to five-minute epoxy, which was much stronger, but had a longer set-up time. Eventually I used industrial epoxy resin for an even stronger bond.

Initially, in addition to the "Superglue" I used a resin coating over the entire structure to gain added strength. However, no sooner had I painted the first coat of resin on the sculpture than I noticed its light reflective properties which visually unified the entire piece.

Within the parts and groupings of parts of the reconstructions I saw subtleties which I liked and wanted to draw to the viewer's attention. At this point I began to add additional color.

For a period of time I studied color and its effect upon the eye. How eye movement could be directed by color intrigued me. Of particular use in this study was Josef Albers' Interaction of Color and John Tovey's The Technique of Kinetic Art. (Tovey deals primarily with perceptual movement rather than actual movement.) Through these studies I was able to gather a better idea as to how to use color for my own purposes.

Through the writings of Vassily Kandinsky and his concepts of altering moods with the use of color and the bright primary colors of Calder's work I got an idea as to which colors to use.

With this study of color came the development of the drawings, some of which were included in the exhibition. These drawings began as a way to draw out possibilities for the sculptures through the use of parts diagrams. Their final development was to use cross-section drawings of appliances and other mechanical objects. I would then cut out "shapes" of lines and components from the diagrams, glue these down on a piece of drawing paper, then go back over the shapes using a pen and the cut-out outline of the image from where it had been cut out from the cross-section drawing like a template for the other lines in the drawing. Once a line drawing had been finished I had xerox copies made. I then used marking pens, working out compositions that I liked.

Through these color sketches I was able to develop a "sense" for these same combinations of color on the recon-

structions. As for the larger drawings, the original line drawing was then enlarged by means of an opaque projector and transferred to a larger piece of paper, using the same marking pens I had used with the color sketches. In the larger drawings there was more filling-in of detail after the primary movements had been transferred.

The reconstructions themselves, brush painted with acrylic paints and gloss acrylic medium, were done by applying several coats of paint. This procedure was necessary to ensure that the colors were "flat". Value changes were then caused by variations in the light hitting a particular color or shape, or by shadows cast by other parts of the sculpture.

With this early stage of development behind me I was now in a position to fully develop the reconstructions into the thesis project. My decision to use discarded items was one which also seemed to fit the criteria for social relevance. The use of appliances established a basis of common experiences with these objects between the viewer and myself. Finally, materials were quite easy to come by, it seemed as though everyone had something to discard.

Also within this realm of social relevancy I was now "recycling" these discarded items. I would take them apart, down to their smallest components or groupings of components, inspect, clean, and then store them away in a box out of sight. Next came an important incubation period during which I would think of the parts and mentally play with combinations for possibilities of structures and forget their original configurations.

The initial construction was done with the help of clips, clamps, and tape to hold parts in place. These parts then could be moved around or changed, then cemented into place. With the larger reconstructions the basic structure would be completed within a few days; the smaller ones, one or two days. The smallest works were then coated with an epoxy resin for extra strength, the larger ones were sprayed with white epoxy paint. Both of these coatings provided strength and a uniform surface over which paint was then applied. Another aspect of this first coating was that it tended to take away the parts' identity. For example, what had been a lawnmower was now a sculpture, with few clues remaining to trace its former identity.

As mentioned earlier, paint was applied by brush. This method and the decisions as to where and what type of movement I desired from the colors, was the phase of the sculptural process which consumed the most time. In all of the sculptures color was primarily used to enhance the sculptural composition of the reconstructions and to add additional visual movement and detail.

With any particular sculpture I would start with the major masses or sculptural movements when starting to paint. As the painting progressed I would add other colors and details to establish secondary movements. In this way I could draw the viewer's attention or eye to a particular movement as can be seen on the orange of "Guardian of the Vacuum" (figure 1).

At other times I would use the color to outline general shapes or to reflect other shapes within the composition, as exemplified by the red and blue of the "USS Grinder" (figure 2). At times I would also use the color to make shapes or lines within the sculpture disappear, as with the yellow on "Four Lane Friday" (figure 3).

Figure 1 "Guardian of the Vacuum"

Figure 2 "USS Grinder"

Figure 3 "Four Lane Friday"

In all of these reconstructions, I would use color in two ways: 1) to relate a particular shape or area to other shapes or areas of the same color; and 2) to enable color areas to interact with other color areas in the composition as with the orange and purple of figure 1.

Using acrylics gave me an element of spontaneity with color placement and changes. However, long contemplation was required to visualize how a color would look in a particular area prior to that color being painted.

After I had painted the reconstructions, I applied another gloss epoxy coating. On the larger works and on the really delicate ones I used a clear epoxy spray.

This gloss coating, in addition to its light reflective quality mentioned earlier, tended to "flatten" the colors even more. By combining these two qualities, it gave the work an over-all brightness, intensifying the impression that the color had overcome the isolation of the separate units and further unifying the parts of the sculpture.

The combination of color, odd shapes and the gloss coating are the elements that I feel make my work successful. The humor comes in partly through the ambiguity of the memory image of the item as it was compared to how it now appears. Seeing common objects presented in a way which is alien to their original conditions breaks down one's preconceptions about what that item was. To reach that stage the viewer must get through the "color image" to discover how the color has been used. These aspects are perceived by the unconscious;

yet they seem obvious once the conscious mind is aware of their existence. Recognition of the obvious and the bright multi-coloring to lift the general mood is what causes the humor. I cannot stress enough though the importance of the multi-coloring in its relationship to humor for had they been painted only one color the effect and what I had wanted the viewer to see would have been totally different.

Before winding up this report I would like to return briefly to the concept of social relevance, for with these pieces I am not only calling attention to the issue of recycling, but also to that of demystification of mechanical objects by taking them apart and rebuilding something non-functional in a utilitarian sense. This premise I recognize also runs the risk of becoming dated and losing its humorous aspects, but the concept of the color use and ambiguous images as a basis for humor is one likely to live on as a way to present humor in art. Doing the work also provided me with the spontaneity which I felt had been lacking in my earlier work.

I also feel that one should be able to learn from a work of art and I have found that even when my reconstructions are "finished" I come back to them weeks or months later and see something in them that I hadn't noticed before and this discovery brings out humorous feelings in me.