

AN EXPLORATION OF THREE-DIMENSIONAL
QUALITIES ON THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL SURFACE

by

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An Essay Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ART

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

In the Graduate College

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1964

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ABSTRACT

This essay and accompanying reproductions are presented as supplementary materials to the body of paintings and drawings which comprise the thesis.

As to method of treatment, a series of paintings was produced as a result of experimentation with materials to achieve textural qualities. These are accompanied by related drawings. The essay is presented as justification and clarification of the intent of the paintings. The processes of creativity are difficult and perhaps pointless to define and therefore more emphasis has been placed upon the attitudes involved than to the actual creative act. No attempt has been made to arrive at other than personal conclusions. A general tracing of attitude pertaining to the development of the problem proposed and executed is given in-so-far as it has direct bearing on the accomplishment of the stated purpose. A conclusion is given in which the personal value of the thesis work is ascertained.

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PERSONAL APPROACH

The development of a philosophy is not an end to itself, but rather an approach to the examining and the understanding of truths. Neither should it be expected to remain static once formulated, because ideas change as growth progresses.

Art has been said to be a search for truth. I believe it to be the attempt of man to penetrate into the mysteries of existence and in so doing place these truths into unity and order. I believe that the artist is engaged in a personal search for the true meaning of his existence, an understanding of human emotion and a relationship of self to environment. I believe that it is this striving for a unity or organization which leads man to produce art. The manner in which an artist goes about this search is individual. Vitality lies in the element of earnest striving rather than in the direction the striving takes. Elmer Bischoff states that "direction is a matter of personal choice, simplified and strengthened by an element of personal necessity."¹

Reality is a term which refers to the ultimate

1. Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), p. 65.

of elements as they exist. The definition of reality given by Webster is: "That which has objective existence, and is not merely an idea. That which is absolute or self-evident, as opposed to what is derivative or dependent; that which is ultimate." Within this concept, I have formulated my personal interpretation of reality. I believe that in art the ultimate of elements as they exist can only be found through nature, the force of which is the spirit of life.

Truth is defined by Webster as "That which conforms to fact or reality; that which is characterized by being in accord with what is, has been, or must be." In other terms, truth is reflective of the ultimate concerns of reality. In my opinion, any insight gained into these elements is a step toward the organization and unity which man seeks.

In our century, we have experienced an upheaval through scientific and technological change and through political and social turmoil. These factors have had a decided effect on our art. We are embroiled in a perpetual state of change in which no factor remains constant. As a result, we must put our existence into some sort of equilibrium, and we do this by searching out what we can accept as truth on an individual basis, which may be truth only for the moment. In relating these factors to myself, I have become a romanticist, searching for the elusive.

There are no universally absolute truths because reality exists individually for each man. Therefore each man

feels uniquely the presence of nature and interprets his relationship to it in a personal manner, depending on his philosophy of life and psychological make-up. This must ultimately affect the creative act.

I believe that the creation of art is more a product of the soul than of the intellect. However, the artist must seek to find the reasons for his existence intellectually in an attempt to establish his relationship to the total scheme. This has been a desire man has always attempted to satisfy. It is my contention that the artist must examine his relation to the forces and greater order of nature, but I also believe that he must reflect his times and react to the forces of the society in which he has been placed. I believe that in our society this is a significant point because the emphasis is upon the scientific and material rather than the natural and spiritual. I feel this situation is a negation of the spiritual quality of man. Creativity can only result from the natural and spiritual and I believe that art produced aside from this concept can only be artificial. It appears to me that these factors are the motivation for the creative act.

I do not think that intellectual awareness can be separated from the act of expression if the work is to achieve a unity within itself, and to communicate on a common level of emotion and experience. As no part of being, conscious or subconscious, can be omitted from the totality of the mind, so no aspect of consciousness can be omitted from the creation of art.

However, William Blake came to the conclusion that the personality of man was divided into "two phases, one adapted to material conditions and the other to the Spiritual." He regarded the former as of small importance in comparison with the "all important promptings from beyond the threshold of consciousness where dwells the spiritual essence of man."³ This is a viewpoint to which I strongly subscribe. Although I believe that in art, the intellect must function, I also believe that the intellect can inhibit contact with the grand simplicity of the forces of nature. I believe this is because the intellect looks to face for understanding while nature exists through an incomprehensible mystery. To quote Morris Graves, we must seek the "acceptance of nature, not the resistance to it."⁴ For this reason, I believe that the search for truth in art must necessarily be reached through a process of mysticism rather than through rational pursuit. I believe that art must come out of intense inner living and out of spiritual contact with nature.

I believe that man exists as a part of nature, although separated in a sense by his intellect. Until one becomes attuned to nature, he cannot express or hope to understand the fragments of truth to be gleaned from his intuitive pursuit in art. I believe that the truth exists for each man according to the

3. Short, Ernest H., Blake (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, Publishers, 1925), p. 78.

4. Candee, Marjorie Dent, ed., Current Biography Yearbook, 1956 (New York: N. W. Wilson Company, 1956), p. 233.

relationship in which he places himself in the greater reality. These truths expressed in a work of art are content.

The depth of content brings up the matter of integrity. It is my belief that the first responsibility of the artist is to himself. He seeks a greater understanding of the unknown and expresses himself through art primarily for personal satisfaction. Therefore his responsibility to others exists on the level of presenting his work sincerely and honestly. These qualities are subtle, indefinable elements in a work of art, but they can be discerned by the sensitive and the receptive. I believe that there should be involved in this presentation, a total commitment on the part of the artist.

It is my position that content in art is the personal awareness of truth; it is that communicable essence of a work of art. For me, the search for content is a mystical process. Therefore I find content to be elusive and seemingly defying verbal expression. I believe that content is communicated through empathy rather than by intellectual means.

In the paintings presented along with this paper, the content is hopefully reflective of my personal attitudes toward the reality of nature and the perpetual regeneration of life, which I believe to be the basis of existence. In this, I am in agreement with the poet Robert Graves who has said: "The subject matter of art has always been the same, and for the artist there has been no choice but the single theme of Life

and Death."⁵ I therefore believe that for man, in his search for truth, there are no solutions, but only searches.

I do not believe that content can be given literal interpretation. Morris Graves has said:

"If the paintings are confounding to anyone---then I feel that words would add confusion. For the one to whom the message is clear or even partially clear or challengingly obscure---then, for them words are obviously excessive. To the one whose searching is not similar to ours---or to those who do not feel the awful frustration of being caught in our individual and collective projection of our civilization's extremity ---those who believe that our civilization is constructively progressing---those who seeing and tasting the fruit and buds of self-destructive progress are still calling it good, to them the ideas in painting are still preposterous, hence not worth consideration."⁶

5. American Painting and Sculpture (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), p. 67.

6. Rexroth, Kenneth, "The Visionary Painting of Morris Graves," Perspectives, U.S.A., No. 10 (Winter 1955), p. 66.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The intellect demands gratification in a work of art and so we must consider the more concrete elements of art, the sum of which is form. Form is all of the visual aspects of painting and as such serves as the springboard of content.

In any consideration of painting, among other elements, one must consider color. There are traditionally two main points of view as regards color. The first of these is the scientific involving color theories, which was begun by the Impressionists; the other being color as a psychological phenomenon. However, I believe that the most important aspect of color is the psychological and humanistic one, with the psychological associations of color a part of the means of carrying the content.

My paintings at this point are done in black and the earth tones. I have found an empathy with these colors; and I do regard them as colors. Black carries its own specific connotations of mystery and darkness, and the earth tones retain simplicity and a sense of honesty to nature. Tworikov states:

"At its most elementary, you see the psychological approach in the pretense that red is a color and black is not...that blue is and white is not. While this idea has some basis in science when one speaks of light,

it has absolutely none in art; for one cannot see black in light, while one can see black in paint. The same goes for white. Also psychological is the presumption that 'color' is good and 'no-color' is bad."⁷

The psychological associations one has with color depend to a degree on personal associations, although it can be granted that the symbolisms of some colors are more or less universally accepted, particularly in the realm of the analytical approach to their use. My choice of palette is a purely personal matter, probably reflective of the following: The unknown exists in darkness, its presence felt rather than perceived. The darkness of my palette is reflective of this sense of mystery. However, when one considers darkness, one must also consider light. I believe that light is intellectual in the sense that elements become fact in light and are subject to rationalization. The same may be said of life; that part of life having been experienced, illuminated and seen as fact, but that which lies in the future existing in darkness and therefore mystery. In my paintings, I see areas as reflected light or as absorbed light, the tension between the two existing as a struggle between the known and the unknown. But the truth sought exists in mystery and darkness. Since I am not pursuing fact, but rather an understanding of the elusive, I am drawn to darkness whose psychological connotations are those of mystery. The unknown is nearly over-

⁷. Tworikov, Jack, "Color", It Is, Vol. 1, No. 5 (Spring 1960), p. 43.

whelming.

The contemporary artist with whose palette I have most sympathy is Ad Reinhardt. Probably this is because in his work as in mine, the color is dark and of great importance to the content. I also feel in harmony with Morris Graves because he deals with restraint and with the content which concerns me. As to the painters of the past, I am most drawn to the work of Ryder who was a mystic and a romantic. Ryder had a great respect for the spirit of nature and he, "seeing mystically, created form-equivalents"⁸ in abstract paintings which reduced form to mood.

I doubt that any direct influence of these painters has entered into my work because of the fact that I was not fully aware of them until I had begun to be concerned with the content I am pursuing. However, I feel in sympathetic harmony with them because I discern in them an affirmation of my own philosophy.

From light and color, one becomes aware of the surface treatment of a painting; in my own work, texture. This is particularly the case if one looks upon paint as material to be exploited as material rather than as color with its psychological connotations. Usually texture comes about in a work through the use of heavy pigment and the character of the painting implement. However, as in the case of my painting, the active surface may be created separately from the paint by

⁸. Cheney, Sheldon, The Story of Modern Art (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 426.

the preparation of a textured ground. In this, I have much in common with a number of contemporary artists (in particular with Antonio Tapiés, whom I feel has been influential on my technique).

The use of texture as an integral part of a painting borders on the sculptural and indeed it does incorporate into painting one of the basic properties of sculpture, that of mass. I do not feel, however, that this is a negation of the elements of either art form. In our society, the artist has become free from traditional restrictions in his technical approach and is at liberty to exploit his materials in any manner he deems fit in order to accomplish his particular aims.

I feel that the surface of a canvas or panel has an integrity of its own and so in order to preserve that integrity, I prefer to create not illusional depth but rather actual depth existing as a physical property of the surface. I am intrigued by the reaction of light on the surface which I feel creates a tension between painted areas of lightness in the composition and actual light falling upon or across the surface. This involvement of light, I believe, creates an interaction between the space existing in front of the picture plane and the surface and precipitates the physical involvement of the receiver. It is an involvement of the actual with that existing within the painting; a blending of elements.

A sensual involvement also exists on the tactile level, touch being one of the developed senses and play between rough

and smooth giving further physical stimulation, a quality of the three-dimensional art forms.

Texture is a structural element within these paintings and as such it is as integral a part of the process as pigment. According to Webster, structure is the interrelation of parts in relationship to the whole. In nature oriented art, this may be designated as organic unity. The whole may be designated as form; structure being the harmonious interaction of the elements, in the sense of design. Texture, in this context, becomes a structural element with play between rough and smooth functioning as a design element.

I tend to simplicity in the form of my paintings because I feel that simple shape and structure has affinity to the elemental truths I am trying to find. I believe that there exists authority of purpose and directness of statement in that which is simply presented. Complexity can sometimes cloud the issue and render the purpose uncertain. I feel a certain esthetic sympathy to that which is basic.

In any case, the technical approach to the production of a work of art is subordinated and secondary to the statement. It is the end or the content that is of importance, rather than the means. I do not feel that the presentation of new technique has much significance in any consideration of whether or not a work of art is of importance, except in the area of historical reference. The significance of a work lies in the statement presented.

Stimulation can be taken from technique and formal considerations, but these are meaningless without statement. In my opinion, the manipulation of materials for the sake of the materials alone becomes activity rather than art and borders on therapy. Control and purpose of medium are essential.

As to purely technical considerations, I have experimented with a number of materials in order to arrive at the one with which I feel most comfortable. Among these are resin, an asphalt and plastic compound, a clay-bodied material mixed with polyvinyl acetate, Perlite mixed with polyvinyl acetate and the more traditional collage materials, all of which I found either unfeasible for use as artists materials because of physical characteristics or because of incompatibility with my direction. The materials used in the process must not be a stumbling block to creativity; they should also be of a permanent nature. The paintings presented were executed by building up a textured ground from acrylic polymer mixed with marble dust. The texture is built up on a cradled, untempered masonite panel. This material was chosen because it provides a stable ground to take the weight of the texturing material and because its untreated surface bonds readily with the acrylic polymer. I have found this combination of materials to be of a permanent nature, the textured surface remaining flexible and inseparable from the panel. The material is versatile and does not present a limitation upon the possibilities for creative use more than does any other artist's material. I

have found it to be a suitable material for the technical accomplishment of my purpose.

HISTORICAL REFERENCE

The combination of the two-dimensional with the three-dimensional is not a new development in the history of art.

It must be stated that every art form has its unique characteristics. In the case of painting, this distinguishing feature is color and it is one of the most significant areas of that art form. In the case of sculpture, the most distinctive characteristic feature is that of actual mass. Mass may be implied in painting, or even incorporated through texture, but it is usually incidental and subordinated to color, being produced as a secondary result of the handling of material. In my work, I seek a fusion between the two, with each retaining their elemental characteristics and serving as elements reacting and interacting to each other. The physical properties of painting are usually primarily visual, while those of sculpture are basically physical. This is because painting is essentially implied substance, while sculpture is actual substance. I see no reason that the two should not complement and reinforce each other in a single work of art.

Painting and sculpture used in conjunction in the

same work has a long history. The cave paintings of the primitive man in France and Spain, among others, are some of the earliest of these. In these primitive and also sophisticated efforts, the form established by the paint also incorporates the texture and surface qualities of the cave walls on which they were executed and exists as a fusion between the painterly qualities of the pigment and the three-dimensional qualities of the uneven surface.

Cultures of later periods also used both art forms in combination. The Egyptians habitually polychromed their sculptural renderings. Those in-the-round bear less relationship to the problems with which I am concerned than polychromed bas relief. The same relationships apply to the art of the Greeks.

In later periods, the separation into diverse categories of painting and sculpture became generally much more rigid. However, in the Baroque period, the artist again assumed the freedom of the exploitation of his materials and proceeded to combine these art forms in an illusionary manner, as exemplified by the decoration in the Farnese Palace in Rome which was executed by the Caracci. However, here a separation still exists because the combination of the two-dimensional with the three-dimensional is accomplished by the proximity and optical illusion of the works in combination rather than by actual fusion of the two into a single work.

The most pertinent basis for present day attitudes

concerning the freedom of the artist to exploit materials and arrive at this end, as far as attitude is concerned, came with the advent of Impressionist thinking which made a rather complete break with the past, both in the handling of materials and in attitude toward experimentation. It was the Impressionists who opened up the door for later developments both in painting and in sculpture. It was this attitude which comprised the most significant contribution of the period. Experimentation became acceptable and even desirable for the most advanced artists of the time as opposed to the rigid academicisms which had long dominated the art scene.

The Impressionists set the temper from which the attitudes of the Fauves, Cubists and later movements emerged. In the consideration being probed here, this link was of very great importance because it opened the door for the more startling technical experiments which were to follow. The analytical approach to painting theory was not new, because this had existed strongly in preceding periods (example, the Neo-Classic), but the experimental thinking was an innovation.

Of much significance in the consideration of the development of a synthesis between sculpture and painting was the work of the Cubists. Cubism was very much concerned with the breaking up and reorganization of visual form as is apparent in the early works in this vein by Braque and Picasso. It might also be noted that in these early phases of Cubism, color became subordinated to consideration of the breaking up

of mass and hence, the work was concerned with the structural qualities and organization of form, as in sculpture, rather than with the primary aspect of painting, color. Color was in fact only a secondary concern to the early Cubists; its use important only in the definition of and the analysis of form and structure. This forced the range of color to extent only to the greys and browns.

This early phase of Cubism may be looked upon as a very basic step toward the reaching of a synthesis between the two art forms, although at this point, the third-dimension existed only as illusion.

One of the basic tenets of Cubism was that it rejected illusional depth by both atmospheric color and traditional perspective into the picture plane. However, during the first two phases of Cubism, the picture plane was intentionally violated by implied obtrusions from it. This sculptural quality was called the "fourth dimension" and is defined by Canaday as "movement in depth, or time, or space-time by the simultaneous presentation of multiple aspects of an object,"⁹ a presentation which is clearly at harmony with sculpture in that all sides of an object can be viewed. This is of much significance in the consideration being discussed here in that painting had traditionally remained limited to the representation of one view of an object.

9. Canaday, John, Mainstreams of Modern Art (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1961), p. 458.

This violation of the picture plane by obtrusions from it was further reinforced by the framing of the painting with the frame being flush with the picture plane, bringing the obtrusions forward, rather than contradicting them by placing them in a frame, which having depth, places a painting as a receding entity within it. I have found this to be an important point in relation to the manner in which my paintings are framed. The actual obtrusions from the picture plane would be counteracted if placed behind a plane established in front of the surface by a protruding frame.

Of importance in the work of the Cubists was the discarding and reorganization of external nature, which contributed to a further freedom for the artist to look within himself for his pictorial symbolisms. Apollinaire, in his book, The Cubist Painters (which amounts to a manifesto on Cubism), states that Cubism "is the art of painting new structures out of elements borrowed not from the reality of sight, but from the reality of insight."¹⁰ A bit later Mondrian wrote: "The surface of things gives enjoyment, their inwardness gives life."¹¹

This concern with the breaking up of the image into structural planes contributed to the development of collage, a logical progression of the direction pursued in Cubism. Collage may be called sculptural painting because it did in

10. Apollinaire, Guillaume, The Cubist Painters, Aesthetic Meditations, 1913 (New York: Wittenborn and Co., 1944), p. 14.

11. Selphor, Michael, Abstract Painting (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1961), p. 17.

actuality, combine elements of the three-dimensional with the two-dimensional in a single work by the placing of an element having actual depth in combination with paint. This is true even if the collage element has only the thickness of paper.

While the advent of collage was a radical technical development, it contributed much as the precursor of an attitude---the complete freedom of the artist to project his materials in an unprecedented direction---out from the surface.

It was through a natural outgrowth from collage that the art of assemblage was born. This art form merely carries forward the ideas advanced by collage. Here the artist is free to develop his work into space, combine whatever materials he sees fit, and arrive at a complete synthesis of painting and sculpture.

It is from the attitudes advanced through these phases that we are involved in the experimentation of the present. Freedom is indeed a great contribution in respect to technique as well as to content.

We have experienced an artistic climate in this orientation for the past century and a half which gives us a firm basis for this direction. The scientific climate of the present gives one impetus to continue in this direction if one is sensitive to the times. One cannot remain static in a society that is dynamic.

Technical advances have contributed to the execution of some exciting works in the area of textural painting. Our

scientifically oriented society has contributed substantially to technique in art through the production of new materials which can be adapted by the artist. Epoxy, many of the plastics, synthetic resins and other materials open new possibilities for experimentation. So many artists are experimenting in the area under consideration and in so many diverse directions that it would seem pointless to attempt an evaluation of them. However, those who seem to have exerted the most influence are Burri, Tapies and Rauschenberg.

The opportunities for technical experimentation has unfortunately given rise to the idea that the novel is good because it is new. This peculiar situation has been brought about by a society which is experimentally oriented and which has experienced technical change so rapidly that the new is often accepted without true evaluation of the merit involved. The art conscious public is being culturally awakened in a reaction to the mechanistic attitudes of the age, and lacking discrimination, seems quite willing to grasp anything which seems to be the product of an individual. The attitude may be vicarious reaction against conformity, but whatever the cause, it is an indication of a receptive climate for experimentation in the arts.

CONCLUSION

In concerning myself with the stated thesis problem, I have come to the conclusion that to be most effective, experimentation must be with one thing or a few things at a time; not in many directions indiscriminately. In this limitation, the thesis work has been most valuable. I feel I have developed the area of consideration into a very personal one which represents a stage in personal growth.

As I have stated, my approach to painting is intuitive. The realization of this factor has contributed toward an understanding of what I am striving after. As the painter Redon, who was also of this persuasion, once said, "I believe I have given in to the secret laws which have prompted me to create as best I could, things into which I put all of myself."¹²

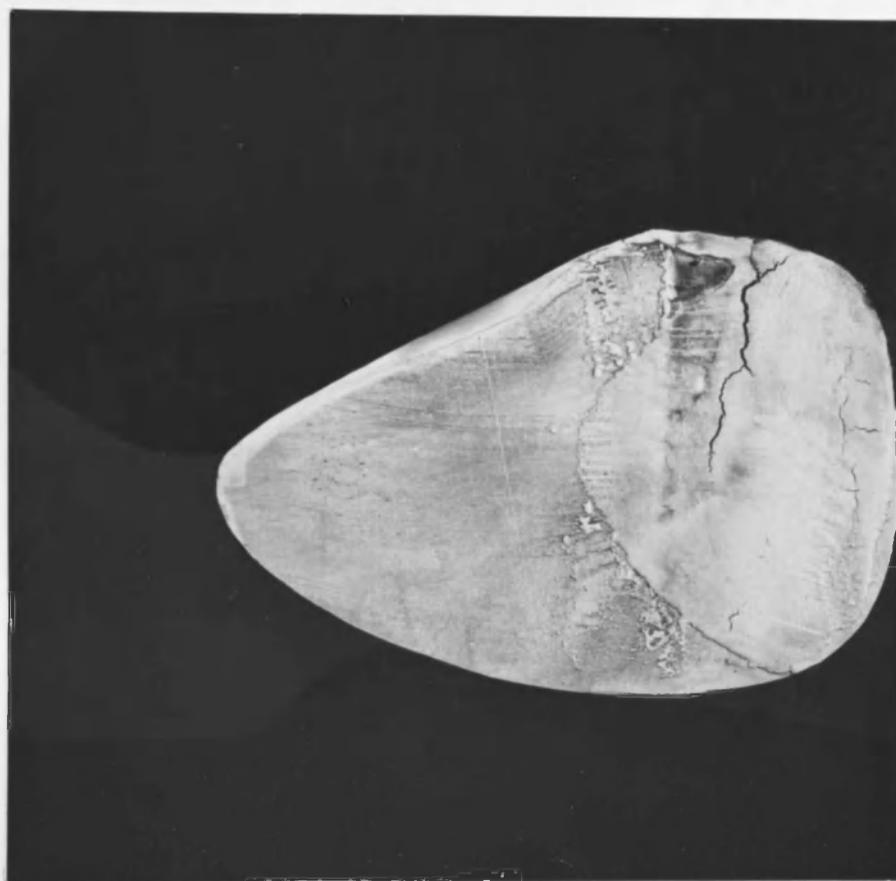
As I have also stated, I believe it is impossible for man to ever know absolute truth, but I have come to feel that it is important for man to search and to probe the unknown as deeply as he is able, in order to gain some understanding into the greater scheme of reality. My painting has become the

¹². The Museum of Modern Art, Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, Rudolphe Bresdin (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961), p. 11.

vehicle for this search.

If I have projected no final answers, it is because there are none.

PAINTINGS



"Urge"

48 x 48"



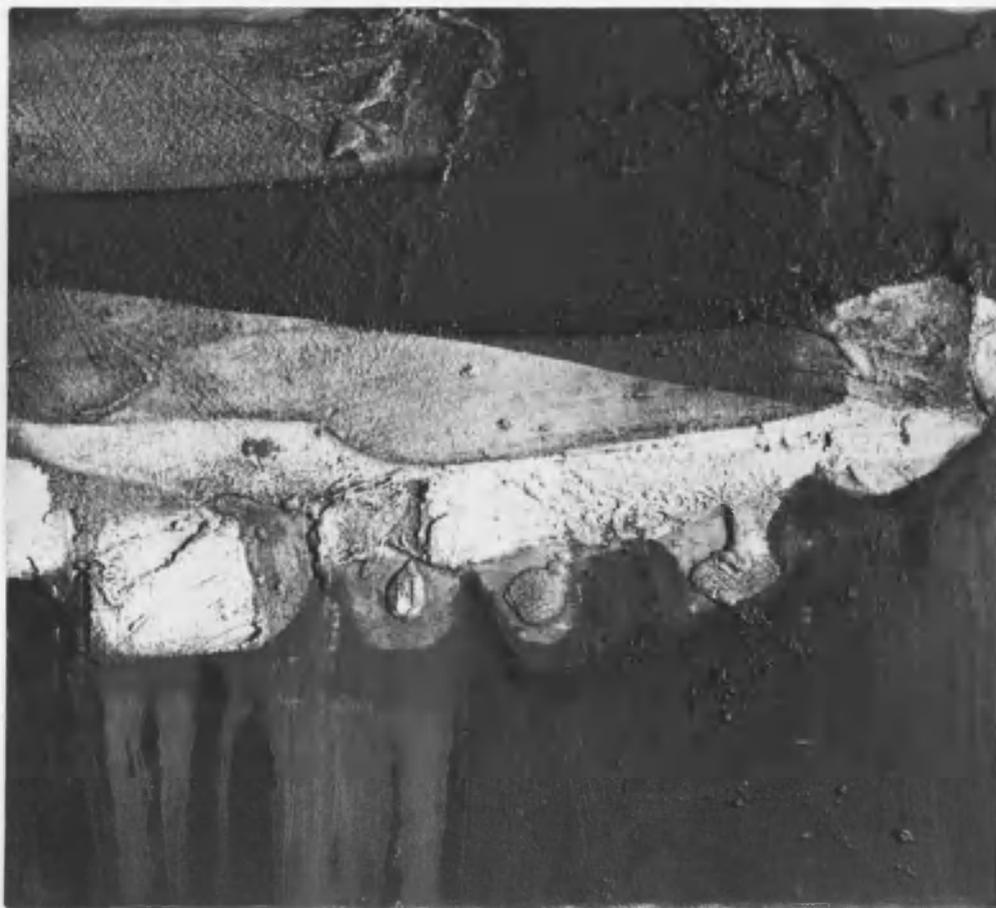
"Ecce Homo"

45 x 48"



"Moon Dog"
(Color transparency, no. 1, page 41)

21 x 21"



"Night Surge"

22 x 25"

(Color transparency no. 2, page 41)



"Sentinel"

27 x 28"

(Color transparency no. 3, page 41)



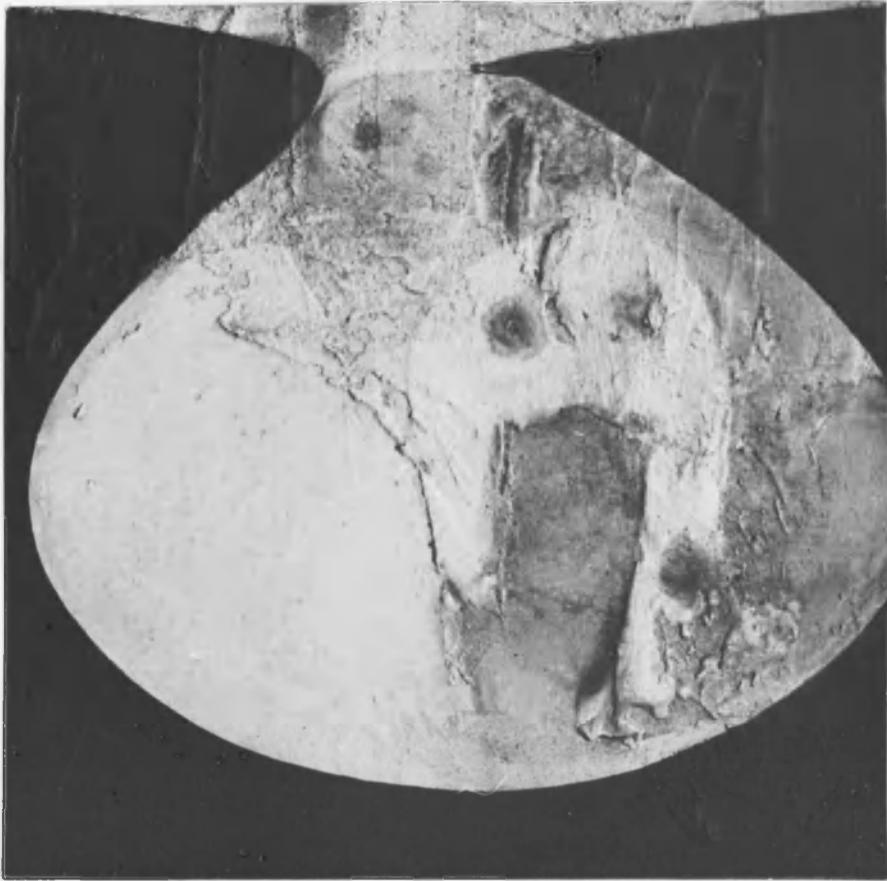
"The Godshhead"

48 x 48"



"Epitaph"

25 x 25"



"Soul Shelter"

21 x 21"

(Color transparency no. 4, page 41)



"To Bring Forth"

23 x 23"

(Color transparency no. 5, page 41)

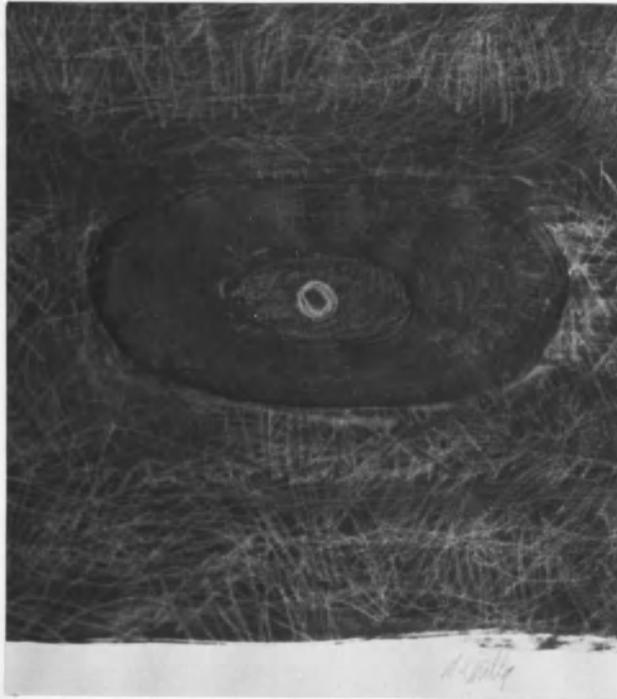


"Suspension"

45 x 45"

(Color transparency no. 6, page 41)

DRAWINGS



"Germination"

7½ x 8½"



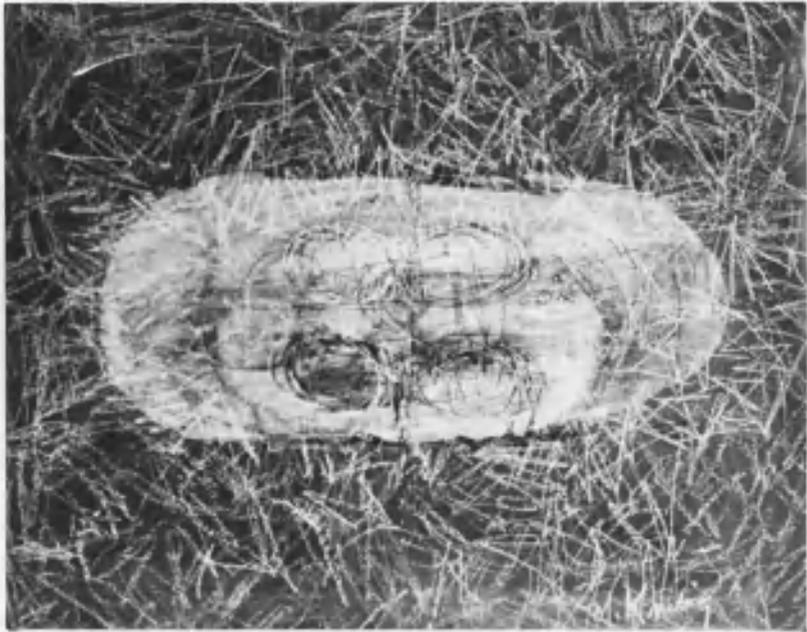
"The Awakening"

6 x 6½"



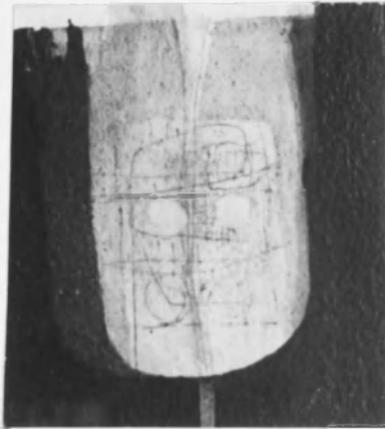
"Embryo"

9 x 9 "



"The Nesting"

8 x 10"



"Fountainhead" 4 x 4½"



"Emission"

8 x 8"

COLOR TRANSPARENCIES



No. 1, "Moon Dog",p. 26



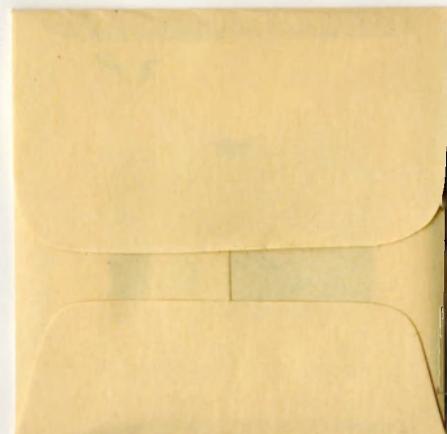
No. 2, "Night Surge",p.27



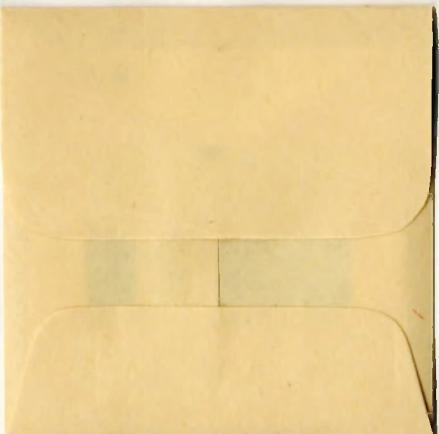
No. 3, "Sentinel",p.28



No. 4, "Soul Shelter",p.31



No. 5, "To Bring Forth",p.32



No. 6, "Suspension",p.33



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