THE FUNCTION OF AMBIGUITY IN MY PAINTING

by

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While working on my thesis I have become increasingly aware of certain relationships between my paintings. From my efforts to understand the possible significance of these relationships I feel that I have gained a certain insight into myself, and into the nature of a conflict which has characterized an important body of my recent work. This essay is an attempt to consider certain paintings from my thesis in the light of that insight.

Because I usually need the resistance of a visual subject in order to become satisfactorily involved with a painting, my work has generally been figurative. I have not, however, been satisfied with simply faithfully rendering what I saw. My commitment to other artistic concerns has always led me to limit the amount of my attention to a complete and detailed description of the motif. The degree to which I have limited my attention to description has, I felt, always been based upon the nature of my response to the motif.

I have noticed, however, that, as the body of my work has developed, I have tended to make more and more use of a relatively ambiguous mode of description. This, I felt, was explained by the fact that my real subject matter was not so much the things I described as certain relationships which existed between them. These relationships are most apparent when the eyes are not permitted to focus sharply on any

one object, when one's awareness is diffused over a much larger area than the area of precise focus at the center of the visual field. No single element viewed in this diffused manner is clearly seen in detail because nothing is clearly focused, therefore, such perceptions yield ambiguous information about the exact appearance of any particular element. Only the relationship between the elements is clearly seen. I, therefore, felt that the ambiguity of description in my paintings reflected a similar ambiguity in certain of my perceptions.

For example, in the second acrylic painting in my football series (Fig. 1) my concern was for the feeling of impact between the two players, a sort of dynamic equation of opposing forces. In watching such collisions in actual football games I have never been aware of much detail about the figures of the players. I know they are football players because I saw them at rest before the action began, but while they are moving my perception provides me with very little information about their precise appearance. I may not be aware of this while watching a game because, since I know they are football players, and I know what a football player looks like, I am never led to wonder about the nature of the inarticulate figures I actually perceive while the players are moving. It seemed natural, then, to paint my football players in an ambiguous manner. They are, in fact, so ambiguous that, even in the context of the other football pictures, most people do not recognize them as figurative at all. I think, however, that the dynamic feeling of impact is felt, and that the ambiguity does no harm. On

the contrary, I have come to realize how it definitely enhances the picture.

Anton Ehrenzweig offers a fascinating explanation for this effect. He suggests that

> Up to a certain limit the artist's work remains a 'primary' process which merely supplies the inarticulate form material characteristic of the depth mind; it is left to the public to project a more articulate and at the same time more esthetic structure into it. The artist cannot rigidly determine the future 'passive' enjoyment of his work by the public; he merely stimulates within limits secondary articulation processes by presenting the public's perception with inarticulate material itself unsuitable for articulate surface perception; hence the public is at liberty to project a new articulate structure and rational meaning into the work of art. . . . Hence we shall describe it as the artist's primary task to disintegrate the articulate and rational surface perception and to call up secondary processes in the public which will restore the articulate structure and rational meaning of surface perception.[1]

It would seem clear then that beyond a certain point any effort to clearly reproduce the articulate image presented by surface perception would act to restrict the secondary processes of the viewer and consequently reduce his involvement with the painting. This is perhaps borne out by the frequency with which a sketch seems more vital and expressive than the finished painting.

I have also noticed that, as my paintings tended to become more and more vague in their description of specific forms, they also tended to have a greater measure of certain qualities of plasticity and vitality. Before

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1. Anton Ehrenzweig, The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing (New York: Julian Press Inc., 1953), p. 13.

I began consciously to consider the role of the inarticulate statement in a work of art I attributed this wholly to an increasing tautness in the relationships between the elements of my paintings. The fact that my description was relatively vague I still attributed to my attitude towards the subject matter. In the series of studies of a figure and a single light source (Figs. 2 and 3), for example, I was concerned with the powerful unifying effect of light. The series was inspired by a particularly intense perception of color harmony, a perception which was, because of the intensity of my color awareness, necessarily vague in other respects. It was natural, then, to limit the amount of my attention to an exact description of the figure and its surroundings.

The light series is a special case of a more general interest I have had in the relationship between a figure and its environment (Figs. 4 and 5). I have been concerned with achieving the plasticity and vitality of which I spoke, and with capturing a sort of mood inherent in every perception of a particular person in a particular situation. These concerns have led me to ignore most detail and to greatly simplify what I saw. The resulting pictures are full of relatively ambiguous elements which can be considered descriptions of specific objects only in the proper context. If I did not consciously appreciate the positive importance of their lack of clearly articulate detail, I was, at least, not troubled by their ambiguity because the pictures did achieve something of the mood and plastic vitality I wanted.

Because the faces in these figure-environment paintings were either unclear, or entirely absent, they could not be considered portraits. I thought, however, that they might become portraits with a little more attention to the faces. A picture could, I felt, be both a portrait and a study of the sort with which I was involved. With this in mind, I accepted a portrait commission and precipitated a conflict in my work which I have yet to resolve.

I have always been interested in portraiture and have usually found it easy to get a reasonable likeness. During the years between my undergraduate studies at the University of Arizona and my return to do graduate work I had some success as a commercial portrait painter. However, apart from the financial side, I found it to be a frustrating experience. The paintings I did were, for the most part, empty descriptions. I felt myself to be a machine, a sort of organic photographic enlarger turning out a special variety of mechanical image. For this reason I gave up commercial portraiture.

Still, I felt that the demands of an enlightened sitter might not be incompatible with my commitment to my other concerns in painting. I therefore set out to paint a commissioned portrait that would also satisfy me as a work of art. Every effort proved most frustrating. In my attempts to resolve the conflicts that appeared I worked on four portraits: two of my client, and two of my wife. They all followed a similar pattern in their development. I would establish the image in a spacious sketchy way that

held promise of the plasticity and vitality I wanted, and then I would concern myself with the face. As a minimal sort of portrait likeness emerged I began to feel an intolerable split between the figure and the rest of the painting. In an effort to reunify the picture I began more clearly to articulate the various elements of the environment; and with this, I noticed, all the spaciousness was drained away. The picture had lost all promise of plasticity and became rigid and dead. No amount of shifting about of shapes, or adjusting of color intervals seemed to help in my efforts to revitalize the image.

Alongside these unsuccessful pictures, perhaps as a sort of relief from the psychological pressure of my unsuccessful efforts, I did a few figure studies (Figs. 6 and 7) in which I held the demands of description to a minimum. These paintings have, perhaps, the least clearly articulated rendering of any I have ever done and yet they seem to have the most plasticity and vitality. At first I was baffled by them. I could not understand why I could not achieve their plasticity and vitality in the portraits. I was probably too involved to be immediately open to the significance of these relatively ambiguous figures. As I studied them, however, it began to dawn on me that the plasticity and vitality I found in them depended to a very great extent upon their ambiguity. It occurred to me that it was into the ambiguous rendering of the figure that I projected the vitality and feeling of presence. It was into their loosely articulated structure that I projected the plasticity of my tactile understanding of space. Why should this

increasing ambiguity, almost to the point of losing the image, have the effect of heightening my esthetic response to the picture? Again, Ehrenzweig provides an answer.

> It might be the secret unconscious struggle between surface and depth perception which animates the surface gestalt, as though the threatened surface vision had to endow itself with special gifts of grace and power to keep attention fixed upon itself. The greater the danger to be overpowered by depth perception the more lively and plastic appears the surface gestalt.[2]

If, then, the heightened vitality and plasticity of these images is directly related to their relative ambiguity, it is clear why the portraits did not work out. Beyond a certain point, my efforts to reunify the figure with its environment by an increasingly clear articulation of elements robbed the painting of its vitality.

It may be that the synthesis I sought in those portraits really is impossible, but, still, I think not. The small still life of a bean can full of brushes seems to me to hold out hope for the future. In it is combined something of the plastic vitality I sought with enough precise description to satisfy the demands of portraiture. It occurs to me that the reason why the still life succeeded may simply be that in its development no conflict arose because my conscious and my subconscious minds were in harmony. In the portraits, on the other hand, my subconscious form control mechanism, which seems responsible for whatever plasticity and vitality I get into my paintings was, perhaps, frustrated by my conscious efforts to make a

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2. Ibid., p. 37.

portrait. If that is the case, then the conflict apparent in the portraits might reflect the conflict between two levels of my mind rather than any real incompatibility between the demands of a likeness and the demands of plastic vitality. The seeming impossibility of a solution would result, then, not from the nature of the problem but rather from the nature of my approach to it. If I had devoted my attention to finding a less clearly articulate way of achieving the likeness the results of my efforts might have been more successful.

This, then, is the burden of the insight I mentioned in the first paragraph, that the relatively ambiguous descriptions in my paintings function in a positive and enormously important way. I feel that I have long understood this at a subconscious level, and that my work has, more and more, been controlled by that subconscious understanding. To realize this consciously, to recognize the importance of the ratio between the articulate and the inarticulate elements of art has been, for me, something of a revelation. It not only sheds new light on old problems, but it also reveals new horizons for future exploration.

APPENDIX

Fig. 1.--Football, acrylic, 32/36.

Fig. 2.--Oil, 16/20.

Fig. 3.--Figure, oil, 16/20.

Fig. 4.--Figure, Watercolor, 12/16.

Fig. 5.--Figure, Watercolor, 18/24.

Fig. 6.--Figure, acrylic, 26/32.

Fig. 7.--Figure, oil, 30/32.

Fig. 8.--Still life, acrylic, 16/20.

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