

SYNTHETIC REALISM IN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

by

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FOREWORD

One of the stranger facts of the contemporary art scene is that an artist who elects to paint in a representational manner finds it necessary to defend his position. Certainly, in the light of history, his position should be more secure; for representation in one form or another has been one of the most persistent qualities of art in all periods.¹

Nevertheless, so persuasive have been the exponents of "pure form" that it is now nearly impossible to include natural elements in a painting without inviting the most adverse criticism. In such a situation, one who is a realist by temperament is perforce required to search out an aesthetic justification for his natural expression.

It is just such a justification that is here proposed.

I must make it clear at once that I do not propose to invalidate the abstract or the non-objective. My approach is entirely positive - to re-establish the validity of certain types of representation and to demonstrate how these types may be used in practice.

The three paintings which I am submitting for this purpose are not intended to be profound. Whether or not they are aesthetically pleasing will quite naturally be determined by the individual observer. I sincerely trust, however, that in the aesthetic philosophy here presented will be found some measure of profundity; or at very least genuine significance.

1. Walter Abell, Representation and Form, p. 3.

THE TERM "SYNTHETIC REALISM"

Whenever anyone coins a new term, it is obviously his immediate obligation to define and explain it, at least to the degree that it will be workable in its intended context.

"Synthetic Realism" is meant to describe paintings in which natural elements are used with a minimum of distortion; but nevertheless arbitrarily arranged to create aesthetic form. The word "realism" is not intended to denote photographic transcription, while "synthetic" is meant in the true sense of the word without the connotation of ersatz.

So defined, this term might well be applied to Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Matisse, as well as such earlier landscape concoctors as Claude. Cezanne possibly would come closest to the idea of "synthetic realism,"¹ as the relationship between real and abstract seems in his case to dovetail most successfully. His distortions and modifications of objective reality are not at all extreme - a fact brought out surprisingly in Loran's remarkable analysis. Cezanne did, as I have attempted to do, use the real elements of a scene in a manner which emphasized their inter-relationships, i.e., he synthesized the components into an aesthetic whole.

However, Cezanne was not a synthetic realist within the full meaning of the term because of certain things he did not do. He did not, as a rule, add elements not already present in a given scene, although

1. Erle Loran, Cezanne's Compositions.

he did suppress those he wished to eliminate. And he did not invent imaginary realistic forms for either compositional or emotional effect.

The term "synthetic realism" more properly applies to pictures in which the real-appearing elements are largely re-assembled in a new pattern, or introduced imaginatively without regard to their original orientation. Color may be used quite arbitrarily, as Gauguin might have used it, in a functional manner not at all transcriptive. The term can be applied to much modern work, to a fair proportion of the better type of illustration, and to any picture which presents the aspect of reality without accurately depicting an existing scene.

Synthetic realism thus covers a lot of territory, and intentionally so. With the fragmentation of art into a multitude of "isms" there is most certainly no need for a new one. There is nothing exclusive about this concept - no doctrinaire palette, no prescribed method, no rigid adherence to a particular range of subject matter. Rather it should present a broad base on which to erect an aesthetic suitable for those who prefer the real to the abstract but are nevertheless fully cognizant of the modern form concept.

My Thesis paintings are intended to fit this term, but they do not exhaust it. Indeed, I believe that endless growth, experimentation, and expressive outlets may easily be discovered and developed within the general frame of "synthetic realism."

THE AESTHETIC HYPOTHESIS

Back of every work of art is an aesthetic philosophy. Even when, as is often the case, an artist has never verbalized his philosophy, this is still true. In every choice a painter makes - in choosing the size and format of his painting, the subject or lack of subject, the palette, the style, each brush stroke, even in choosing to be a painter at all - he expresses his inner beliefs about what art is and what it should be.

It is entirely fitting, therefore, that the student of art should seek to give conscious and verbal form to his own aesthetic beliefs. As a student he is rightly expected to operate on a higher conceptual level than a merely "intuitive" artist, and this is so no matter how effective the visual concepts of the latter may be. Whether or not such a formulation of aesthetic theory helps or hampers his work as a practicing painter is not entirely clear. The attempt must be made if only because without it the student, as a student, is incomplete.

My own aesthetic hypothesis has been developed over a long period of very serious thought on all phases of the Arts. I can scarcely remember a time when I was not aware of, and vitally concerned with aesthetic problems. It has been in the past decade, however, that my interests have centered on painting, and that I have read, studied and observed, to the particular end of resolving the problems and conflicts inherent in that special medium.

In my readings, as well as in innumerable discussions and conversa-

tions, I have discovered a wealth of material which confirms an inclination toward some form of realism. Of course I have encountered contrary opinion. Despite the size and force of the opposition, the support for my basic premises is sufficient in both quantity and quality to give a reasonable authority to my position.

It has seemed to me that painting is essentially a method of communication, and as a particular form of communication it has particular laws, limitations and advantages. The first step in discovering a truly sound aesthetic is to ferret out these laws, limitations and advantages and thus determine exactly the field in which painting can best expect to operate.

It at once becomes apparent that visual form is the sine qua non of any painting; that good, bad, modern or academic, every painting consists of forms made visual by the disposition on a flat surface of lines, colors, values, shapes and textures in definite relationships. Indeed, this is so apparent and so basic that it is amazing the proposition should ever be doubted on the one hand or made the sole basis of an aesthetic theory on the other.

The question, of course, is how to create with these formal means pictures in which the significance can be raised above mere exercises in either transcription or composition. It is exactly when this question is faced openly that the fallacies of extremists in both contemporary camps become apparent, and a necessity to reconcile representation and form arises. There must be, surely, a nice correspondence between the organic growth of forms in nature and the organic development of visual concepts. If this is true, it may well be that for many artists

the best means of communicating the mental visual concepts is to make this correspondence explicit.

There is authority in plenty for this view. Louis W. Flaccus has suggested that "...painting is in part a representational art, with the visual aspects of nature for its material. An attempt to do away with subject matter must remain a questionable step."¹

In an excellent little book on "Art and Reality," Fred O. Nolte says that pure form is, by itself, as sterile a concept as photographic imitation, for the reason that it is a prejudicial reaction from the imitative. Hence, he reasons, the pure form concept is narrowing because it removes all natural forms from the total number of elements useful to the artist.² Mr. Nolte presents this argument, it should be pointed out, after having already thoroughly discredited mere imitation.

The point need not be labored. It is sufficient to note that many modern thinkers are concerned with the place of subject matter in art, are attempting to re-evaluate its position, and are nevertheless not falling back into a sterile academicism.

Beginning with art as communication, it is logical to inquire into just what may properly be communicated and what is impertinent to valid art. It is convenient to start with the latter and eliminate the irrelevant.

1. Narrative: Nearly all modern authorities agree that storytelling is not a valid function in visual art. Historic incident, sentimental anecdote, and even religious narrative are not essentially a

1. Louis W. Flaccus, The Spirit and Substance of Art, p. 143.

2. Fred O. Nolte, Art and Reality, p. 132.

part of visual aesthetic response, and belong more properly to literature.

Even this sanction can be carried to an extreme, however. Illustrative paintings are admissible if the following qualities are retained:

- a. The plastic organization of the painting is not seriously violated in favor of the "story."
- b. The "story" required neither antecedents nor denouement; or the temporal sequence of the narrative is so well known (as in religious paintings) that the visual moment captured by the artist is self-explanatory.
- c. That the impact of the painting is, in fact, fundamentally visual, and that the "story" elements could not be so effectively verbalized.

2. Propaganda: Despite its prevalence in contemporary painting, it is hard to see how social uplift can in any way be equated with aesthetics. The person who would reform society has at his command far more forceful and widely disseminated media for this purpose. He need not violate a fundamentally aesthetic activity.¹

3. Imitation: Realism and photographic copying are in no sense the same thing. Even Aristotle did not imply that imitation should stoop to a slavish rendering of the actual.²

Quoting Nolte again:

Actuality is but the lowest, rawest form of reality, the form that has been least touched by human sensibility, least tempered by human sentiment, emotion and sympathy, and least enhanced by human imagination. It has been the

1. Fred O. Nolte, Art and Reality, p. 38.

2. Ibid., pp. 16-23.

fundamental delusion of Naturalism to assume that this sort of reality, the lowest and the rawest, is eminently fitted for art and literature.¹

4. Technical Display: Virtuosity for its own sake is not fundamentally artistic, especially when it is carried to the extreme of violating the medium. This is a modern truism. It is not, however, an excuse for sloppy work, or for charlatanistic affectation or lack of finish.

With the above elements safely eliminated, we can turn attention to certain other qualities whose relevance is in some question. What of the emotions - love, hate, fear, happiness, greed, pleasure and all the rest - and what of those objects the sight of which tends to evoke such feelings? Are all of them "adventitious," as Clive Bell would have us believe?²

I am sure they are neither adventitious nor non-aesthetic. Moreover I believe that no matter what the emotional response may be to an abstract organization of lines, shapes and colors, this response can often be heightened by the proper use of associative values.

The aesthetic response is, I think, neither a supra-human experience³ outside living emotions; nor is it the mere pleasurable excitation of vicarious feeling. The aesthetic response is, rather, the result of a successful communication between artist and observer. In painting the artist conveys certain feelings, using visual means to

1. Fred O. Wolte, Art and Reality, p. 36.

2. Clive Bell, Art.

3. Ibid., pp. 25 ff.

convey them. The empathetic recognition by the observer of both the feelings thus transmitted and the skill or force with which the transmitting medium is employed combine to create aesthetic experience.

One other aspect of aesthetic response must be considered before the picture is complete, and that is the response to nature. The theory that beauty in nature has a fundamentally different effect upon the beholder from that of beauty in art is often puzzling to the average person because in his own experience he has discovered no such distinction. The idea that such people are either incapable of genuine aesthetic response, or have simply not been awakened to it, scarcely seems credible.

I suggest that the response to the visual aspect of nature and to visual art is so similar as to be all but identical. Whether this is because in nature we discern the Hand of God, or whether it is simply that formal order is formal order regardless of the manner of its creation, can be safely left to the metaphysician.

That the aesthetic response may be occasioned by nature, however, does not mean that art can exist except as a humanly created entity. The response itself is human, even when the causation is not. For this reason when the artist beholds a scene in nature which moves him deeply, he responds in a creatively aesthetic manner; and when anyone at all thus responds he is to that extent an artist.

This aesthetic response to nature in all its multitudinous forms has prompted representational art in all ages. It is the aesthetic response to particular natural forms which has in one age prompted artists to paint plant forms, in another to glorify the human figure, in still

another to exploit landscape or still life. Anything that is aesthetically significant to the artist is a fit subject for his brush; and further, the artist (unless he has adopted an arbitrary theory or "ism") will tend to modify his subject only to the extent that it lacks this aesthetic significance.

Over the ages by far the greater number of artists have found natural forms aesthetically moving, and have used them in painting. In this age alone such representations are suspect. Because a return to previous styles is unthinkable, we must examine the problem in an effort to open up a fresh approach.

Probably the greatest flaw in representationalism lies in the fact that it has been so thoroughly linked with imitation. The very word precludes creativeness.

Some have endeavored to get around this problem by suggesting that the artist's job is to improve on nature.¹ Although helpful at times, this attitude has too often resulted in sentimentality or in an overweening idealism. Also, the most deeply moving things in nature are scarcely open to improvement, and the attempt is presumptuous.

One possibility seems to have been largely overlooked. It is this: that the artist may not use his art to enhance or glorify nature, but may instead use nature to enhance his art. It is in this last sense that a "synthetic realist" would use natural elements in paintings.

So considered, it becomes unnecessary to resort to extreme distortions or abstractions, because natural elements are chosen with the assumption of their original suitability in a composition. The critical

1. Louis W. Flaccus, The Spirit and Substance of Art, p. 157.

criterion would then be not "does this picture look like the subject," nor even "does this picture improve on the subject," but rather, "does this subject support and enhance the picture?"

While it is never possible to be all things to all people, I feel that this approach might greatly resolve some of the major paradoxes of contemporary painting. Art created within the concept would not be imitative or photographic; yet it would not be esoteric or enigmatic. It would utilize the visual facts of the world without specifically tying us to an unaesthetic rendition of them.

If, as some suppose, pure form is already becoming sterile and academic, such a re-introduction of nature may be the answer. It is this use of natural elements in painting that I have elected to call "synthetic realism."

THE PROJECT

Three paintings are submitted as examples of what can be done within the concept of synthetic realism. It has already been stated that these pictures are not expected to be profound. Also it is not supposed that they exhaust the possibilities of this aesthetic theory.

A certain similarity is naturally evident in all three pictures, as they are intended to fall within the indicated classification. To a certain extent this might be ascribed to personal style. The significant similarities, however, are those which spring from the basic philosophy. These are the factors which plainly mark the pictures as belonging to a single genre.

It is obvious immediately that all three pictures clearly announce themselves as definite scenes, viz., an industrial scene, a mountain landscape and a town-scape. The question of just what they are supposed to be does not arise. It should be almost equally obvious, though, that not one of the pictures is in any way an accurate transcription of actuality.

Another quality the pictures have in common is a sense that composition, conscious and somewhat intellectualized, had a major part in their creation. Perhaps the third most evident quality is the lack of effort to disguise paint as paint. The methods of application are not inhibited, and there is no attempt to conceal art with artifice.

These are the self-evident similarities. There are other common factors for which the observer must take the artist's word. For in-

stance, the casual observer could not know whether just such houses bordered the street in the city-scape, and whether they were painted in approximately the colors shown. He could not know, without searching out the exact spot from which the original sketch was made, exactly what the Catalina Mountains looked like to the artist, and so cannot judge the picture on grounds of verisimilitude. He might well decide that no such cranes ever existed as those in the San Manuel painting. Even so, only a personal visit to the scene would inform him as to the exact degree of reorientation and exaggeration.

In other words, one of the common facets of these pictures is the manner in which the real elements have been organized arbitrarily for the end result, yet without such drastic disorganization that the modifications are obtrusive.

These similarities in a large part establish the reason for terming them examples of "synthetic realism."

The differences in the three paintings are equally evident. It is probable - even certain - that still greater differences could be exhibited by other painters without removing their work from the present aesthetic hypothesis. In my own case the differences are fully intentional, just as are the similarities.

The most immediately obvious differences are in size and format. These were determined for the specific purpose of this presentation. Under other circumstances size and format would be governed by the immediate feelings of the artist and the demands of the scene.

A second difference is in subject matter. In the theory of synthetic realism, the governing factor in choosing a subject is its

aesthetic significance to the artist. A secondary but important consideration is the painter's own estimate of his actual ability to utilize his subject effectively. I have purposely chosen landscape because it not only appeals to me, but is most ready to my hand. There is no reason whatsoever why others could not use the human figure, groups of people, still life, animal subjects or anything else and still be essentially synthetic realists.

Before discussing the canvasses individually, these qualities may be considered as the major distinguishing features: size, format, subject, coloration, mood, style and the handling of space. Of these, style is the least important to the theory because it is so largely dependent on an individual artist's personal character. Possible variations of style within the concept of synthetic realism would seem to be almost limitless.

Beyond stating that my three pictures fall well within the prescribed limits of the concept, it is impossible to draw lines. Abject copying of nature would not do, nor abstraction beyond the point of easy recognition. Just how far abstraction may actually be carried will rest partly on the willingness of both the artist and his audience to accept contemporary conventions.

ANALYSIS OF THE PAINTINGS

Painting No. 1: The Smelter at San Manuel

This painting has already been recognized for what it is by several persons who have visited San Manuel. Yet it resembles the actual scene more in mood than in fact. Any engineer would at once realize that the two cranes have been enormously exaggerated in size. He might also find structural flaws. The complex of girders within the buildings has been drastically limited to a few horizontal and vertical members, which serve to compart certain areas within the picture, and provide static linear accents rather than depict the skeletal maze visible at the actual site.

In color, everything has been subordinated to the red-orange of one crane and the blue-black of the other. Not only have these cranes been exaggerated in size, but in color; and they provide the main dynamic thrusts against the static rectangles of the other elements.

The one other major accent in the picture is the great tower. Is it a smoke-stack? It doesn't matter. It serves pictorially as a foil for the two cranes both by its color and its massive verticality.

This compositional analysis establishes the plastic arrangement in the picture. Because of the basic philosophy with which it was painted, however, the effects achieved by the composition are important. The bigness of the man-made structures, their intrusion into the vastness of the mountains, and the sense of tethered power in the whole complex are as much a part of the picture as color, line, area and deep space.



Painting No. 1, The Smelter at San Manuel

Picture No. 2: Street in Tucson

Color is the essential ingredient of this picture. It is handled in an entirely arbitrary manner, without regard to anything existing in the scene itself.

In order to paint in this manner, I have devised a procedure which is entirely personal and not offered as a method necessarily to be adopted by others. My first step is to make one or more sketches on the spot, or at several spots, using a coarse-grained paper and black india ink. The sketching tool is a very large, soft Japanese brush.

Such a sketch is of necessity broad in handling. There is a minimum of attention to fussy detail, and color is non-existent.

In the studio, this type of sketch has, for me, several advantages. The lack of detail requires the use of imagination in converting the sketch into a finished picture. The lack of color allows the creation of an arbitrary color pattern without the inhibiting influence of the actual hues. Finally, working the original in undiluted black helps establish a value pattern at the outset, and thereby reduces the danger of the picture losing itself in ambiguous values.

The bright colors in the Tucson street scene were intended to convey the effect of sunlight and a general feeling of gaiety. If there was for me something dormant and slightly menacing in the idle machinery at San Manuel, the scene in the old section of Tucson gave nothing but pleasure. There is no particular significance in the arrangement of the color masses except that by their vitality and contrast they should express joy.



Painting No. 2, Street in Tucson

Picture No. 3: The Catalinas

Here is a subject made to order for the synthetic realist. The fact that one mountain scene in Southern Arizona is superficially much like another is of no consequence at all to the artist.

Here is the opportunity to make abstract, arbitrary, formal arrangements ad infinitum and still maintain the effect of realism. Mountain shapes are endlessly various. Colors are infinite within a subtly subdued range. Space is at once vast and limited; a condition which must have fascinated Cezanne as he contemplated again and again his beloved Mt. Sainte Victoire.

My present picture of the Catalinas was sketched from a single vantage point about half way to Oracle Junction from Tucson on the Florence Highway. This single sketch was the entire basis for the picture. Nevertheless, the painting is in no way transcriptive. Everything has been modified to enhance the effectiveness of the composition. The two giant rock promontories have been enlarged and emphasized by a greater delineation than was evident at the scene. The valley, which together with the mountain peak made an almost perfect diamond shape in the sketch, has been forced askew to relieve the too-obvious symmetry. Of course the sky was not green, nor the cliffs anything like the varied hues of the picture. Finally, no burst of vivid yellow-green was visible anywhere.

Yet all these arbitrary factors are important on two counts. As some would put it, they "work" compositionally, giving the painting a life of its own. Any resemblance to the Catalinas would be, in their eyes, purely co-incidental. But in a larger sense this composition is



Painting No. 3, The catalinas

the Catalinas, at least to me. The enlarged cliffs not only give the composition balance, they give the mountains scale. The greyed hues in the background are not merely a foil for the brilliant green spot in the foreground - they suggest the vast, silent spaces of the canyon.

It is in this way that I have attempted to resolve composition and the sense of reality.

CONCLUSION

"Synthetic Realism" is a term which I have coined to describe my own manner of painting, and which might well be accepted by any painters who find extreme abstraction unsympathetic. It is not photographic, but the basic sense of reality is maintained. It uses, rather than transcribes, nature.

In painting the three pictures which exemplify the potential of synthetic realism, I found that considerable latitude was possible. The logical conclusion is that even greater latitude would be possible for other artists. The lines cannot be finely drawn, but it is clear that to qualify a painting should not be drastically distorted and that the subject should remain clear and easily grasped.

The concept is not intended to invalidate either the abstract or the non-objective. These have their own laws, limitations and virtues. The essential point is that properly understood, representation can be completely valid even from the most contemporary viewpoint.

This validity is achieved by the arbitrary use of elements in a fully integrated composition. The integration is mainly plastic, but what the elements represent must support the plastic arrangement and be supported by it. A crane, if used as a dynamic compositional element, must also suggest the dynamic potential of a piece of giant machinery. Brightly colored houses may create a cheerful pattern, and so should suggest a pleasant place to be.

A complete fusion of form and content is intended. A large area

of neutral hue balances a full-chroma spot - and a massive cliff balances a bright green bush. The fusion should go even further, area balancing bush and cliff balancing color-spot. The shape, hue, mass and position of the plastic elements are inseparable from their natural characteristics.

I have learned that the creation of this fusion adds a challenge not present in either the photographic or the non-objective. I believe that to meet this challenge is certain to reward the sincere artist.

VITA

Born in Philadelphia on February 7th, 1910, I received all my formal education up to the second year of college in that city. I attended the Edwin H. Fidler school in Germantown, Philadelphia; graduated in June, 1927, from Germantown High School, audited courses in philosophy and English at the University of Pennsylvania, and completed two years of journalism at Temple University.

In the Fall of 1930 I started as a cub reporter on the newly-formed Main Line Daily Times. Four years later, I determined to open my own business, and with less than five hundred dollars' worth of equipment I founded The Eldon Press. This venture in job printing is still operating in the Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia.

My career as a printer was interrupted in 1942 when I entered the U. S. Army Air Corps. I first came to Tucson as a celestial navigation trainer operator; nearly three years later, in October, 1945, I was honorably discharged at the Davis Monthan Airbase. I had come to regard Tucson as home.

During the war I had sold my share in the Eldon Press. On returning to Philadelphia my wife and I attempted to start a publishing business, but were hampered by lack of capital. I then took a position as head of the mailing and direct mail advertising department of the John C. Winston Company in Philadelphia.

A latent interest in painting had been stimulated during my war-time stay in Arizona. Feeling that I should add art to my journalism and

printing experience, and that I should do so in the environment which had first stimulated me to paint seriously, I entered the Art Department at the University of Arizona. I have studied painting uninterruptedly since matriculating in January, 1951. I became a member of Alpha Rho Tau, University of Arizona art honorary society, in 1952 and served as president of that organization during the academic year 1953-54. In 1953 I was elected to Phi Kappa Phi. I received the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University in May, 1954, graduating with highest distinction.

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