



Ball State Teachers College

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MEMO TO DEAN J. FROCK

This is to certify that Alan K. Patrick has satisfactorily completed an acceptable honors project paper in 499 during the Spring quarter, 1964. In this particular case the paper constitutes a partial fulfillment of the project since the major portion of the project was Mr. Patrick's one man show in the Ball State gallery.

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cc/ File

Prints and Paintings

Honors Program Senior Project

Alan Patrick

May 11, 1964

Mr. Ronald Fenkoff, inst.

Preface

This paper was written as an introduction to my honors exhibition of prints and paintings. Such an introduction, representing a partial fulfillment of the project requirement, is intended as a supplement to the actual paintings. Because the nature of writing is so different from visual expression, discussion was necessarily restricted to a brief resume of my relationship to certain prevailing attitudes among painters today and to major influences from the past.

For my honors program Senior project I produced a series of paintings and prints which had common or banal objects as subject matter. From the outset the project was planned as an open-ended excursion into a kind of genre painting. Although this essay produced a body of work that represented no more than the foundation of a form of expression, some definite discoveries were made that could be noted as conclusive. There was no attempt to find one correct way to paint the banal object. Therefore, not all avenues of investigation were exhausted and the paintings executed represented only the beginnings of an ongoing process. This apparent limitlessness was very encouraging because it indicated that my discoveries were not superficial and that I was entering into a rich field of work.

Various media, including oil paintings and lithographic prints, were chosen when I thought they were most appropriate for my study. In each media I relied on techniques which were traditional and occasionally utilized new techniques when they were needed. These techniques were not major developments and my purpose was not primarily an investigation of technical problems; so my discussion is limited to pictorial objectives.

The study became a multi-sided proposition. That is, each painting in the project represented only a part of a total philosophy--one facet

in a many sided stone. My influences from the past and my attitudes toward present day trends could not all be demonstrated in any one painting. Therefore each painting, although it made a complete visual statement, represented only one or two ideas and attitudes. Some of these attitudes were expressed in several paintings; so that each painting was related to the whole body of work. This interrelationship of ideas and attitudes gave individual paintings a depth and richness because each was only a small reflection of a larger and richer philosophy.

Genre Art

To the casual observer banal subject matter such as match boxes, bits of wallpaper, or road signs may not appear to be promising material for the production of an art of great consequence. An object's potential as subject matter, however, lies in the artist's familiarity with it. These genre objects are completely familiar to me because they are common. Thus their potential as material for the production of great art is as high as that of any other object.

According to Webster, genre art is "painting, in which subjects of everyday life are treated realistically."¹ This general definition relates only little to my particular genre expression. Webster could have been defining almost any advertising art. Genre objects can be painted in so many different ways that any definition serves only to categorize the painting generally and not to explain its meanings or purposes. Therefore the fact that I used everyday objects as subject matter in my paintings is of little consequence in itself. My reasons for using these subjects can be better understood by relating my paintings to Pop art, Realism, and Magic Realism.

1. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, (G.&C. Merriam co. Springfield Mass., 1960.) p. 346.

Pop art, Realism, and Magic Realism

A new interest in genre subjects, especially those which depict or glorify the blatant and crass aspects of our culture, has resulted in a vital art form. This movement, variously called Pop art, New Realism, and Neo-Dada, took as subject matter images from popular culture. Barbara Rose recently examined the attitudes and practices of this group of artists in an article which appeared in Art International. She said that this young generation of Pop artists, aged 25 to 40, grew up in a world of atrocities. As children these artists had known the depression, the WPA, World War II, the bomb, and an uneasy peace. The Pop artists have grown to maturity in an affluent, post-war America. In the opinion of Barbara Rose an early contact with atrocity and hardship coupled with a passive position forced on these artists by their relative youth left them with an ironical acceptance of the world.

Their art did not take the form of protest simply because they felt that protest was useless in an era so completely accustomed to megatons and overkill. According to Barbara Rose, the Pop artists had also inherited a shock proof audience of affluent sophisticates. The "shocking" art of the first half of the Twentieth Century had resulted in a heritage of complete freedom of technique and aesthetics. Their permissive, blasé audience readily accepted any kind of art; therefore protest was ineffective because it moved no one. So refusal to protest became the primary factor in governing the Pop artist's lack of committal. Although the Pop artists used the subject matter of the mid-Twentieth Century, they did not become personally involved with it. Indeed they were indifferent to their subjects and attempted to render surface appearance objectively and without feeling.²

2. Barbara Rose, "Dada Then and Now," Art International, VII/1 (January 1963.), p. 23.

This objectivity was not used in order to comment intellectually. Rather, the Pop artists had withdrawn from active participation in life and were pointing a non-committal finger and saying "look". Their subjects, the soup cans, coke bottles, signs, comic strip panels, and hamburgers, were all presented without comment or personal commitment. As a leading Pop artist, Wayne Thiebaud said, "The new realists, or Pop artists, say its possible to be cool, not have a personal feeling for the object. The new artist is saying maybe you can do your art with ease, without any involmment at all."³ Banality, harshness, and commercialism were all used to reenforce the pointing finger, to focus the attention of the viewer so that he saw the common objects anew.

"By relentlessly focussing the attention of the spectator, the new Dada artist requires him to think again about what he is seeing."⁴

In the paintings executed for my honors study some of the objects were presented in a straightforward objective manner, painted realistically and without comment like the Pop aritsts. These images, however, formed only part of larger compositions and were never meant to stand alone as he complete paintings. These separate objective parts were brought together so that they could be compared and interpreted in combination. Each image acted as a modifier for the others; consequently, objectivity did not lead to indifference as it did for the Pop artists. Of course Pop art never intended to go "beneath the surface" of its subjects; I did. In this I was much more traditional then the Pop artists because artists have historically been concerned with meaning and personal interpretation.

Also I shared the Pop artists' interest in the fleeting and the impermanence represented by many contemporary objects. According to

3. "They Paint; You Recognize," Time, vol. 83 (April 3, 1964), p. 14.

4. Rose, op. cit., p. 25.

Barbara Rose, the Pop artists' interest in these objects was one of nostalgia for a ^Fleeting present that so quickly became the past.⁵ While Pop art reflected this in its use of soup cans and newspaper cutouts, I used similar disposable objects such as match boxes and cigarette packs. My match box paintings, for example, show objects that are as quickly gone as any flower. They were bits and pieces of life at some single moment, but my interest was not in these objects' nostalgia. Rather I was interested in an organic process, almost a life cycle, exhibited by these little disposable objects. The match boxes and cigarette packs were transient. While they existed, they were harsh and blatant, but they were so soon gone-only to be replaced by identical objects- that their banality was almost acceptable.

Realism is a form of art that represents nature exactly as it is. No face-lifting or idealization is ever permitted to transgress the sacred appearance of the subjects. Of course this attitude correlates with science, and indeed many realistic artists have also been scientists.⁶ Genre may have been considered the perfect form of realism because there was no temptation in the common subject matter used to inject lofty ideals or noble sentiments. In this way genre art grew to be the homely cousin of Realism. As genre art gained more and more in popularity it came to be regarded as an important classification of art in its own right. The Dutch still life painters of the Seventeenth Century were thought of by their contemporaries as the most competent of the genre realist of that time. However, these painters seemed to be very personally involved in their subjects. Even though their images were objectively rendered, they had a presence more commanding than the actual objects. Recently the name, Magic Realism, was given to painting which

5. Ibid., p. 26.

6. Fra Angelico and Leonardo da Vinci are two examples of artists with a distinct scientific bent.

employed meticulous realism in order to attain a personal involvement with the subject.

The term, Magic Realism, has been a vague label at best, and there were any number of artists whose work remained on a borderline between Magic Realism and Realism. Rembrandt and Vermeer both achieved an intense personal style that completely transcended simple imitation of appearance. Vermeer did this through exceptional technical means and Rembrandt by an indefinable sympathy with the subject. In the Twentieth Century there have been painters with quite disparate styles all classified as Magic Realists. Painters as unlike as Andrew Wyeth and Walter Murch have been classified together. These Magic Realists have been thought of as a group only by critics and writers who needed categories and systems in order to chart the directions of contemporary art. In reality these men were quite individual in their purposes and means.

During the course of my investigation in painting I found that part of the appeal of Magic Realism resided in its use of implied detail. Although the objects in Magic Realist paintings appeared to be rendered in minute detail, a close inspection revealed that the detailing was very selective and not really photographic. The Realists also had been selective in their use of detail, but their attitude generally had been to paint only enough detail to represent the outward appearance of the object and then to stop. They rarely carried detailing to the extreme of being minutely photographic. On the other hand, the Magic Realists started at the point of being photographic. Their detailing became selective only when they could imply this photographic effect. In part they were able to make this implication by a careful consideration of abstraction. This abstraction never violated the objective appearance of the subject but was used to reinforce it.

itself and description would only be redundant. This simplicity is very austere; the objects chosen must be exactly right in order to imply all interpretation. This choice ultimately depends on an intuitive response to the objects and not on logic or intellectual concepts. Also, just as the Magic Realists depended on abstraction to give their work impact, the formal considerations, rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, etc., gave a great impact to the Haiku poem.

I shared this interest in objectivity and austerity with the Magic Realists and the Haiku poets. Although some of the subjects of my paintings were akin to the Pop artists' use of the images of popular culture, these match boxes, cigarette packs, signs and packaging were not presented indifferently. The subjects were presented objectively, but interpretation was implied when the objects were combined into a complete image. I was also concerned with implying detail like the Magic Realists to allow the abstract structure to add to the force of the image.

One of my smallest paintings, Best Wishes, is a good example of the position I take in relation to Pop art and Magic Realism. This painting juxtaposes a common match box with three miniature oranges. The surreal effect created by the miniature oranges adds impact to the painting which is intended to comment on the transient quality of both the fruit and the match box. I feel that any attraction which fruit or flowers may have is closely related to its organic and momentary quality. These transient objects have so soon changed or ceased to be that I never have time to tire of them. Many disposable objects in our culture, such as match boxes, have this impermanence, but many people completely ignore them or consider them valueless. Possibly this unresponsiveness is a result of the very disposable nature of these objects.

What is thrown away is considered worthless. By using these objects as subject matter for a work of art I have forced the viewer to see them out of their ordinary context and to consider them for what I think they really are. The Pop artists attempted to force the viewer to see their subject matter anew. Unfortunately they were indifferent to their objects and never made the metaphors likening them to fruit or other objects. This metaphor is an important difference, I think, and points up decidedly my opposition to their neutral attitude.

Another of my paintings, Three Together, invites this comparison of objects by a compositional device. The three objects to be compared, an onion, a section of wallpaper, and a package of garlic, are each given a separate panel. The comparison itself is complicated, and I'm sure one look at the painting will tell the viewer more than I can say here. However, I have utilized some general concepts about composition that should be discussed.

Any two rectangles brought near each other create an implied relationship or closure. If they touch, as in this painting, the near proximity results in a line or relationship that leads to new inter-relationships between the two. In compositions of this sort the whole is more important than the sum of the parts because the inner relationships result in a compositional unity in which each part depends on all of the other parts for support. I found this type of composition to be useful because of the disparate nature of my objects in Three Together. It was necessary that each object be seen as complete in itself--a full-blown onion, a garish bit of packaging, a weathered bit of wallpaper. Yet to invite comparisons among them I needed to establish a compositional unity. Placing these objects in a conventional still life would merely return them to their ordinary context and not

present them as something worthy of examination. For my purposes they must be taken out of context and isolated so that their garishness or impermanence can be seen anew. Then their proximity in this type of composition invites analogy.

The separate panels of my painting then act as a device to isolate these objects and the composition serves to establish relationships between them. These relationships take ^{of} the form of visual metaphors. The impermanence of the onion is like the disposable quality of the packaging. The fading wallpaper can be likened to the life cycle of the onion. All of this is contained in the painting as a whole; each panel contributes to the image and is acted upon by all of the other panels.

I think that this painting also demonstrates another of my quarrels with Pop art. Exception should be taken, I think, to the Pop artists' frequent use of the paste-up or collage technique. Many of their paintings contain more paper than paint. For example, Mr. Tom Wesselmann, one of the better known Pop artists, recently exhibited two paintings in the Chicago Art Institute. Both are partially collage paste-ups of lithographic posters. In my opinion these paintings fail ^{on} of two counts. First, their surface is a distracting medley of paint, paper, and even tin. This could be an asset if the various surfaces had been used to advantage. However, these various materials receive light in such different ways that the entire picture can never be seen at one time. Second, the collage technique seems to me to be an easy way out. Great quantities of these pictures can be produced quite readily, almost like reproductions. But the images seem not to require or to be intended for wide distribution. Because it is easy, this collage technique also seems to degrade the objects represented rather than to

give them importance. The Magic Realists have found that patiently rendering an object gives it an importance. Since the Pop artists have stated that they are interested in attracting attention to their images, they should not ignore this fact. Of course they are indifferent to their objects; so it is not inconsistent at all that they should be unwilling to expend much effort on them.

All of the above discussion is relevant to the "road theme" that appears in some of my paintings. Road 32 South, probably the best example of my road paintings, contains hints of the garishness of Pop art as well as the objectivity and implied detail of Magic Realism. It is also related to the Surrealist technique of juxtaposition. The Surrealists often juxtaposed shocking and unrelated objects or changed the scale of objects in order to remind the viewer of a dream world or to call up primordial psychological images. In my painting, Best Wishes, I gave importance to the objects by confusing the scale. As a result the oranges are often thought to be pumpkins and the match box seems three feet tall. Road 32 South is a reversal of this. Instead of bringing together unrelated objects I have separated an existing combination in order to show its natural juxtaposition. Road signs in their everyday context are unnoticed or accepted as part of the landscape. This is changed when they are presented for contemplation as contrasting elements in a composition. The signs can be seen as man-made objects in a world that reproduces itself and as garish, banal objects in contrast with the somber and dignified land.

In intent and structure the painting, Road 32 South, closely resembles Haiku. The structure of the painting consists of three images objectively reported. This is similar to the simple naming of objects

without the use of adjectives in Haiku. Like Haiku the objects in Road 25 South are carefully chosen for all of the implications they contain. The road theme was chosen for its reflection of the speed, loneliness, and mobility so characteristic of our age. These qualities are all inherent in the contrasts mentioned above, but they are vague. They were never intended to be clear statements, just as Haiku poems are not clear statements. The intentional ambiguity resulting from the use of implications is meant to intensify the image. The image itself, however, results from a sensed response to the objects and not from a rational analysis of their implications. The objects were painted factually and without interpretation in order that their austerity could add emphasis to the total effect and that the images could be reduced to their bare essentials. Thus the use of implication and objectivity allowed ~~me~~^{me} to say much more in my paintings. As Glenn Hughes said, "There is a kind of force gained from the expression of this emotion once and once only through an appropriate image."⁹ If the image is somewhat unclear, this is appropriate, for the world is also unclear. This very ambiguity is part of what I wish to communicate and art is the only vehicle which can encompass it. Perhaps my philosophy is closest to Albert Camus' statement in The Rebel:

"It is impossible to give a clear account of the world, but art can teach us to reproduce it--just as the world reproduces itself in the course of its eternal gyrations. The primordial sea indefatigably repeats the same words and casts up the same astonished beings on the same seashore. But at least he who consents to his own return and to the return of all things, who becomes an echo and an exalted echo, participates in the divinity of the world."¹⁰

9. Ibid., p. 6.

10. Albert Camus, The Rebel (New York, N.Y., 1956), p. 73.