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A painting process: a journal

Kenneth Alexander McAshan

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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A PAINTING PROCESS:
A JOURNAL

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Kenneth Alexander McAshan
B.A., Tulane University, 1999.
August 2004

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is presented in journal format and represents a process of painting initiated September 2001 at Louisiana State University. The basis of my paintings can best be described as *image oriented mark making*. Initially figural images are taken from life drawings then used as starting points to investigate the forms through changes made to their visual properties. Fragments of the images are traced onto paper, manipulated, and then reassembled. This process provides a spring board, a shift from what was recorded earlier by direct observation to images not confined by the requirements of representation.

A PAINTING PROCESS:
A JOURNAL

September 30, 2001

Robert Storr, formerly curator of painting and drawing at the Museum of Modern Art in New York is the visiting artist. His first visit to the painting studios was for about thirty minutes. He begins by asking what artist(s) were of interest to me. Willem DeKooning's name comes up immediately. The conversation goes on to describing his paintings and what they are based on and how they are developed. Mr. Storr asks if there is an interest in knowing DeKooning's method of painting and the steps he goes through in developing his art work. After his brief description, my sketchbook is handed over and he begins drawing three very elementary drawings. The first shows a rendered line drawing similar to what DeKooning does from pure observation. The second references splitting or taking apart of the original drawing using tracing paper, and the third example is a dissection of the previous one. At first, this concept appears to be very simple. It is not, because its significance and understanding is not fully realized until I use it first hand and over a period of time.

November 14, 2001

To be in a painting review for the first time is overwhelming. To be questioned *on-stage* and attempt to explain a process of going from one step to another later becomes an integral part in developing my painting process. Using the tracing paper; the life drawings are used as spring boards and serve as maps for reference

and a stage for introducing new ideas and images. The experience of painting is grounded in a drawing from direct observation, taken apart, and later reassembled. Since “Making art now means working in the face of uncertainty; it means living with doubt and contradiction...,”¹ the discomfort does not deter my determination. Once the painting achieves a resolution, an image never before seen, it allows me the opportunity to look at it, absorb it and later include it as a part of my visual vocabulary.

March 8, 2002

During these three years in school many questions had been posed to me, such as *where are you (in your work)? What do you think is common to all of your work? What are you looking for in a finished’ piece?* How does someone answer these questions? Does one reveal the more personal fundamental parts of their *selves* and if so, how? How does one know if the question is actually being answered and even, why answer it? I later realize these questions are not necessarily to be answered. “Answers are reassuring, but when you’re onto something really useful, it will probably take the form of a *question*.”²

1. David Bayles and Ted Orlando. *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1993), 2.

2 Ibid, 113.

May 13, 2002

Self portraiture is re-initiated and, at the same time, pages in the journal begin to be divided in half, and a dialogue begins to appear of an ongoing conversation taking place.

immature, naïve, intuitive
spiritually based

pre-conceived
knowledge based

Does not matter. Underlines the
de-emphizing of 'likeness' and the
benefits and pitfalls of that pursuit

compliment- what is that?

it frees one up and opens the whole
world to another

To a more personal interpretation

... stop thinking
It is only an idea
... paint first then put it to words
afterwards

try to continue with an idea

Is it painting?

Isn't it sculpture?

Does it matter what it is?

It doesn't matter what it is. What
matters is the how it's done.

Don't know ... yet.

Bottom line-
Depiction of image
Depiction is forever seeking the
transcendent
interpretation
"The masterpiece"
Has this method been done before?

Individual

Why do you need to know? To make
it valid? If this method has been
done before

what does it look like?

Is there doubt?

No.
No because you are going

Yes.

somewhere. Somewhere unfamiliar.
The feelings are normal

Yes, but very uncomfortable, because it
can't be preconceived, thought out, and
I want to "know."

Don't worry or try not to worry.
It will work itself out. Just do it, and
remember you will never 'know'
until you do.

August 8, 2002

You haven't even started producing
shit and you're killing, doubting, and
questioning it to a point where
you don't know what you're talking
about and becoming obsessive!
with trying to make it fit. Such as
"can I get away with this?"

they don't feel comfortable.

The doubts will remain and if they
are allowed to confront and stop you,
you will go somewhere else.

It's so unknown

and the only way to lessen or satiate
the unknown is to paint.

This verbal exchange or *ecstasis*, the early Greek word for *a being beside itself*, occurs during the painting process and again after the work is *finished* when nothing will be done to change or adjust the final results. This type of conversation brings to mind the subject of ventriloquism and is best understood when Edgar Bergen is used as the example. It was during the Depression and being without work when Bergen decided to make some significant changes to his act with his puppet Charlie McCarthy.

Unemployed but resplendent in white tie and tails, they slowly broke into Chicago's supper-club circuit, getting a week's tryout at the Chez Paree nightclub. Coming onstage at three o'clock in the morning for their final performance before an almost empty club, Charlie suddenly turned on his master, asking, 'Who the hell ever told you you were a good ventriloquist?' Telling Edgar to go back to the farm, the dummy refused to be shushed by a blushing Bergen; Charlie ... then spun on the stunned customers, declaring them a disgrace to civilization, rattling on as Bergen propped him on a chair and slowly backed away.³

Charlie McCarthy, the dummy by itself, was lifeless, but when it was used it came alive and gave Bergen the license to speak the unspeakable and allow the strange voices to be heard. Bergen's career soon took off, and whatever persuasion the audience generated towards Bergen, he was able to overcome the possible failure through his work in progress or as David Goldblatt calls it a "ventriloqual exchange."⁴ This exchange is later referenced in John Dewey's analysis by saying:

the expression of the self in and through a medium, constituting the work of art, is *itself* a prolonged interaction of something issuing from the self with objective conditions, a process in which both of them acquire a form and order they did not at first possess.⁵

In Martin Gardner's book *The Ambidextrous Universe* he brings forth the concept "that anything nature does in a left-handed way she can do just as easily and

3 Candice Bergen, *Knock Wood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 29.

4 David Goldblatt, "Ventriloquism: Ecstatic Exchange and the History of the Artwork," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 51 (1993): 389.

5 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: C.P. Putman's Sons, 1934), 65.

efficiently in a right-handed way.”⁶ He uses the human body, galaxies, suns, plants, animals, crystals, molecules and carbon just to name a few as references and demonstrates that “so far, outside of earth’s living forms, no such single-handed habits have been found.”⁷ I thought to try this as an exercise and found the technique of using both hands expands the vocabulary of my mark making by naturally providing a greater diversity not compromised by the habits of the more dominant hand.

Summer 2002

Graduating from undergraduate school with a major in sculpture provides prior experience using both hands simultaneously. While the physical transition to painting with both hands is easy and the emotional response unsettling, the paint is applied deliberately and without restraint.

As soon as I become consciously aware of what the paint is doing my involvement with the painting is weakened. Paint is at its most eloquent when it is a by-product of some corporeal, spatial, developing imaginative concept, a creative identification with the subject. I could no more fix *my* mind on the character of the paint than ... an alchemist could fix his on mechanical chemistry.⁸

Fall 2002

6 Martin Garner, *The Ambidextrous Universe* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1979), 181.

7 Martin Garner, “Is Nature Ambidextrous?” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 13 (1952): 210.

8 James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think About Painting Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 74.

I discover the representation of images diminishes the effect of the paint itself. My eye would become fixed and locked in to the image and not have the same experience of freedom when viewing abstract works of art. This whole semester was spent searching for a balance between the image and color, looking for the combination that reaches a point whereby an *exchange* begins to be meaningful and is added to my own language of painting.

Spring 2003

It is after my final critique when the visual experience itself provided the solution to the question of how much of the image should be kept and of what parts are discarded. I had to see it before any description, explanation, or resolution could be made. The approach of using the representational image as reference remains, but the paint material has become the priority. Since an image does not need much for it to be recognized, and

According to a research at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letter be at the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole.⁹

⁹ Graham Rawlinson, "The Significance of Letter Position in Word Recognition," an unpublished PhD Thesis, 1976 <www.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/~matt.davis/Cambridge/index.html> (22 Mar 2004).

Gestalt (form) theory was promoted to explain psychological phenomena by focusing on the relationships of the whole form versus its individual parts. The character and function of any part is determined by the whole. While developed from a more basic approach of respecting the simple, strong, and spontaneous responses of children, primitive people, and animals,

the human being should preserve; an attitude which refuses to reserve the capacity of synthesis to the higher faculties of the human mind, but emphasizes the formative powers and ...the “intelligence” of the peripheral sensory processes, vision, hearing, touch, etc., which have been reduced by traditional theory ...¹⁰

January 2004

Looking back over my years here at Louisiana State University and at creating my artwork in the face of uncertainty the drive I have to seek out beyond what is known still remains. There is an innate desire to “respond to other instincts (and to) ... satisfy other desires,”¹¹ and to show as clearly as possible images that most represent my mind at that time. My work has progressed and has become more abstract. The images I start with still have glimpses of their individuality and the overall approach has not changed except in the final reassembling stage whereby the referenced image has become less and less important.

¹⁰ Rudolf Arnheim, “Gestalt and Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 2 (1943): 71.

I am allowing the application of color to go beyond the subject matter's visual appearance to explore further interpretations previously unknown that at times appear uncanny. Sigmund Freud's interpretation of the "uncanny" is defined as being ghostly, secret, obscure, inaccessible to knowledge, hidden, unconscious, and dangerous.¹² It is appealing that what at one time was familiar is suddenly and inexplicably strange and alien.

However; the most difficult part of this process is to believe that

Without some starting point, some initial schema,
we could never get hold of the flux of experience
... it matters little what these first categories are
... the starting point of a visual record is not
knowledge but a guess conditioned by habit and
tradition.¹³

11 Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics" *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub. 1998), 81.

12 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. (New York: Blackwell, 1998), 157.

13 E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 88-89.

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VITA

The author is a native of Houston, Texas. He attended boarding school at Avon Old Farms and earned a bachelor's degree from Tulane in 1999. He is currently a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Louisiana State University.