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Beyond Aesthetics: A Contemporary Approach to Teaching Visual Language at
a Post Secondary Level

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

November 1998

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ABSTRACT

Beyond Aesthetics: A Contemporary Approach to Teaching Visual Language at
a Post Secondary Level

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Concordia University, 1998

Because present discourse focuses on the conceptual aspect of art, I am
concerned that the cognitive and affective aspects of visual language have been
neglected. In this study I introduced students to a revised approach to the formal
elements of art, that breaks away from the prescriptive nature of historical
formalism and its association with elitism. I adopted a semiotic approach as
developed by Fernande Saint-Martin built on psychoanalytical theory, on Jean
Piaget's findings on human construction of space, and on gestalt theory. This
approach is based on a notion of perception that incorporates other senses in
addition to vision; it adopts no particular aesthetic theory, takes into
consideration personal experience, leaves room for subjective interpretations; is
not judgmental, yet does not drift into relativism.

I posed the question: How will first-year painting students at Bishop's
University be able to utilize, or not, selected aspects of Saint-Martin's visual
language in the production and analysis of selected paintings. Students were
encouraged to use art materials and visual language not as a means for

expression of preconceived ideas, but rather as generators or facilitators of meaning. The teaching method is modeled on Donald Schön's reflection-in-action approach. The research method includes reflection-in-action together with phenomenography.

The most surprising finding is that the in-class analysis of the elements resulted in productions and dialogues echoing an expressive aesthetic. A disappointing aspect is that the students did not adopt the terms proposed by Saint-Martin. Instead, they used everyday inclusive terms (e.g. rough texture) rather than specific ones (e.g. granular, pointillist), thus often missing more subtle discriminations.

The study demonstrates that form and expression are intertwined, and that attention to form widens the students' visual vocabulary in painted images and in verbal expression. The assignments facilitated the students' use and understanding of abstract art, and in some instances led to the breaking of stereotypes about the nature of art. The frequent dialogues, class discussions, and collective projects created a congenial atmosphere allowing for freedom of expression in our classroom deliberations on art.

In Memory of My Parents

Shlomo and Paula Levi

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Elizabeth Sacca for her

encouraging guidance, Dr. David Pariser for his helpful commentary, Dr. Robert

Parker for joining the thesis committee on short notice, Dr. Michael Benazon for

his support and editorial advice, Prof. Jim Benson for his work on the

illustrations, and the students who so generously participated in the thesis

project.

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INTRODUCTION

In the course of many years of teaching studio courses at an undergraduate level, I have noticed that the dialogue which takes place during the making of an art object has concentrated predominantly on formal concerns. This dialogue takes place between the students and their work and between the students and myself. Attention to personal experience, or to wider cultural issues, usually arises at a later stage, during the process of reflection on and contemplation of the finished product. Oddly, as if by magic, all the previous concerns regarding the structure of the work disappear at this later stage. Instead, students focus on the content of the painting. Regardless of the weight accorded to the manipulation of the formal elements in the making of an art object, present-day discourse in the visual arts pays little attention to the formal, which is associated with historical formalism. I am assuming that the present negative attitude towards the formal elements of art is part and parcel of a backlash against modernism in general and against some extreme interpretations of "art for art's sake" in particular. Oscar Wilde's tongue-in-cheek diatribe on art in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* comes to mind:

To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. . . .

Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt

without being charming. That is a fault.

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the

cultivated. For those there is hope.

They are the select to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are

well written, or badly written. That is all. . . .

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is

an unpardonable mannerism of style. . . .

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

One can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he

does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless

thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless. (5)

This branch of formalist aesthetics caters to the elite, the privileged few who can

enjoy a life of leisure in a hedonistic, passionate mode as expressed by the

nineteenth-century English critic, Walter Pater:

Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy

and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity,

disinterested or otherwise, which comes naturally to many of us.

Only be sure it is passion--that it does yield you this fruit of

quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic

passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has

most, for art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the
highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those
moments' sake. (159)

Fortunately, this is not the whole story. Critics, philosophers, and practising
artists took a different approach to "art for art's sake." The artists' slogan of
épater la bourgeoisie is just one way of counteracting the elitist approach. There
were many more subtle interpretations, some of which will surface in the course
of this thesis.

I am concerned that the present tendency to diminish the role of the
elements of visual art prevents us from acknowledging the contribution of form to
expression whether of a personal or of a social nature. It is my intention to
validate the formal elements of painting by highlighting their contribution to
cognitive, emotive, and indirectly, to social content. I would argue that the
handling of the formal properties plays a major role in the artistic process; that a
skillful arrangement of formal elements should not be considered as a technique
only, but should be acknowledged on its own merit; that a formal analysis of a
universal nature can be applied to works of individuals and cultures at all times
acknowledging personal and societal characteristics. Although it is
commendable that the contemporary visual arts community partakes in and
contributes to the present progressive social discourse, one must not neglect the
sensual and cognitive aspects of art embedded in the pure visual elements.
Even Louis Althusser, a staunch advocate of critical theory, emphasizes the

legacy of the emotionally and intellectually charged perceptual side of art. For Althusser, the purpose of art is to "make us see," "make us perceive," "make us feel" something which indirectly refers to reality. Art in Althusser's vision is effective not by constructing a "whole" world, but by gaps and absences in the art work, gaps that may be filled by our thoughts and fantasies (qtd. in Johnson 125).

The illusive character of art brought several thinkers bearing a variety of philosophical stripes to place art in a vague zone in between other more easily defined concepts. Examples of this approach can be found in D. W. Winnicott, Julia Kristeva, and Norman Bryson. For Winnicott, art is located between the inner world and the external world "in an intermediate area of experiencing, to which the inner reality and external life both contribute" (Winnicott 2) and between the individual and his environment:

> It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never
>
> completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating
>
> inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by
>
> an intermediate area of experience (cf. Riviere, 1936) which is not
>
> challenged (arts, religion, etc.).
>
> (Winnicott 13)

According to Julia Kristeva, poetic language is "a distinctiveness admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer (for young children) or no longer refers (in psychotic discourse) to a signified object" (133).

Poetic language is "an undecidable process between sense and nonsense, between language and rhythm, between the symbolic and semiotic" (135). Elaborating on the social formation of art, Norman Bryson argues that knowledge (art included) resides in "an intermediate region" which he calls "practical consciousness," a "tacit or implicit" knowledge derived from the zone of the proverb. Although proverbs are part of an explicit cultural knowledge, "the knowledge that decides the exact condition in which the citation of a particular proverb is appropriate, the symbolic implications of its local appearance is of a tacit or implicit nature" (70). I assume that through experience and analysis of form we can acquire a fleeting insight into the illusive aspect of art.

On the issue of art and society, I endorse the structural approach practised by members of the Prague School of the semiotics of art, according to which personal and social content is not diminished by the preoccupation with artistic form. The structural approach is spelled out in a series of essays by Jan Mukarovsky, Roman Jakobson, Jiri Veltursky, and Ladislav Matejka assembled in *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contribution*. The Prague structuralists seek a link with social reality by suggesting that subjective states expressed by individual creations are part of a central core located in the collective consciousness. Since the individual artists are members of a collective of shared values, they inevitably influence society through the mediation of their work.

Thus I devised a course in which students were urged to search and find

meaning in the visible elements in painting. The students analyzed paintings as autonomous objects. It was hypothesized that after learning to derive meaning from the visual elements, without borrowing from other disciplines that comprise the humanities (such as philosophy, art history, criticism, sociology, and others), the students, nourished by the intangible component of art, would be better positioned to engage in a direct and meaningful dialogue with art works, myself, and with their fellow students.

I chose Fernande Saint-Martin's semiotics of visual language as a model for a contemporary examination of form for a variety of reasons. Because the meaning of art in general and the meaning of the formal structure in particular are illusive, most of the literature that attempts to explain the significance of form is convoluted and detached from artistic practice. Conversely, as elaborated in the following chapters, Saint-Martin's semiotics of visual language proposes an interpretation of form that is explicit, coherent, and directly related to artistic practice. In addition, Saint-Martin's approach is multidisciplinary; it is innovative; it proposes new basic units based on a notion of perception that incorporates other senses in addition to vision; it takes into account primary topological relations not subject to mathematical abstraction, thus breaking away from the traditional basic units of line, form, colour, symmetry, balance, and others; it is not prescriptive; it is not based on a particular aesthetic theory; it takes into consideration personal experience; it leaves room for subjective interpretation; it is not judgmental, yet it does not drift into easy relativism. Perhaps the most

attractive feature of Saint-Martin's interpretation of form is that she does not present the issue of form and content as complementing each other. Instead, she identifies two separate meanings: one derived from the formal constallation of an art work; the other, from the narrative or symbolic content--what she calls the iconic. In her view, the two are not necessarily identical; very often they contradict.

Although Rudolf Arnheim is better known in art education circles than Saint-Martin, I preferred to adopt the latter's approach to visual language over the one proposed by Arnheim in *Art and Visual Perception* for the following reasons:

Saint-Martin's elaboration of visual language is relatively recent, and as such it reflects the latest research in and approach to visual language influenced by linguistics and a renewed interest in psychoanalytical theory. On the other hand, Arnheim's visual language is mired in modernist language, reflecting aesthetic theories associated with historical formalism and elitism. For example, he often uses such terms as "great art," "great artists," "truth, " and even the infamous "significant form." For example, he asks: "why do some landscapes, anecdotes, or gestures ring the bell? Because they suggest, in some particular medium, a significant form for a relevant truth" (169). Arnheim, like his predecessors in art education, is still attached to a prescriptive approach to composition. Arnheim insists that "balance," "harmony," "orderliness," and "simplicity" are "indispensable" to good art.

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Although Arnheim extols the merits of the formal elements of visual language and does not deny artistry in abstract art, he gives priority to representational art and seeks an objective rather than a subjective interpretation to works of art. In fact, his book does not include a chapter on texture, which according to Saint-Martin's approach, best reveals an inner subjective content. Arnheim warns that

> high abstraction risks detaching itself from the wealth of actual existence. The great works of art and science have always avoided this limitation.... When contact with a full range of human experience is lost, there results not art, but formalistic play with shapes or empty concepts. (147-148)

Unlike Saint-Martin, Arnheim does not consider the formal visual elements as an autonomous source of meaning that can be different from the representational significance in a work of art. In his view, formal and representational meanings should converge:

> The visual form of a work of art is neither arbitrary nor a mere play of shapes and colors. It is indispensable as a precise interpreter of the idea the work is meant to express. Similarly, the subject matter is neither arbitrary nor unimportant. It is exactly correlated with the formal pattern to supply a concrete embodiment of an abstract theme. (460)

There are many more differences between Saint-Martin and Arnheim

which merit examination. But such a task is beyond the mandate of this thesis. Saint-Martin is familiar with Arnheim's work and gives him credit for some of his propositions, but she also engages in criticism of his vision of visual language, mainly his approach to space perception and his definition of the basic unit. Regardless of the different approaches held by Saint-Martin and Arnheim, there are similarities between the two because both draw on the gestalt theory of perception.

CHAPTER 1

THE THEORETICAL BASIS TO SAINT-MARTIN'S

SEMIOTIC OF VISUAL LANGAUGE

Saint-Martin constructs her theory of visual language using several sources: psychoanalytical theory, Jean Piaget's theory of the human construction of space and representation, the Gestalt theory of perception, and the linguistic branch of the semiotics of art. Saint-Martin, who followed recent attempts in the field of linguistic semiotics to establish general concepts for decoding meaning embedded in visual forms, concluded that these efforts have failed because the methods used were too closely tied to the nature of verbal, language. Thus, pictorial content, which rests on the visual elements that cannot be conceptualized in verbal terms, was ignored. Consequently, interpretations of art works were inevitably relegated to a discourse focused on the iconic features of the works--that is, on the recognition of objects of the natural world--a discourse that joins other textual domains such as literature, philosophy, religion, sociology, and politics. Saint-Martin set out to bestow an autonomous status to visual language, distinct from verbal language.

PSYCHOANALYTICAL THEORY OF VISUAL REPRESENTATION

Saint-Martin's visual language theory is based on the psychoanalytical premise that the search for a symbolic representation is the source of all activity and thought. By binding together experience, intelligence, knowledge, and gratification, human subjects are able to fashion a relation between themselves, their internal world, and the exterior reality (Klein 170). A psychoanalytical aesthetics enables Saint-Martin to make a direct connection between the bodily senses and the experience of space embedded in visual language, which is distinct and generally opposed to verbal language. This approach makes it possible for one to draw meaning from pictorial elements such as shapes, colours, and textures, regardless of what they depict in terms of the everyday familiar objects, ideas, symbols, or messages.

Saint-Martin summarizes and interprets the psychoanalytical contribution to aesthetics in her article "Sémiologie psychanalytique et esthétique." She points out that according to Freud, the organism is bestowed with two channels of expression: the representation by word, that is spoken or written language fashioned on a linear direction, and the representation by thing--symbolic objects or images. The latter is constructed by an interaction between the human senses and stimuli from the ambient world. The accumulated experiences of these encounters find an outlet in non-verbal languages: pictorial, sculptural, musical, gestural, etc. It is the biological life driven by an instinct for survival and

conservation that fashions psychic life through an interaction between "instinctual drives" and "representations." The psychic activity originates at the point where a mental image represents itself following an instinctual push or an "impulse." This activity occurs at an intermediate zone between the physical and the psychological. It is the moment of birth of a "pictogram," (an emotionally laden image), the first of all psychic activity bearing signification (161-162).

Saint-Martin points to Piera Castoriadis Aulagnier who elaborates on the production of a pictogram in the wake of Freud's definition of "impulse." The psychic mechanism, according to Aulagnier, metabolizes heterogeneous information coming from ambient space into material homogeneous to the particular psychic structure of an individual in order to represent itself according to its needs. Thus, an affect is linked to the representation. The psychic mechanism is a representation of affect and an affect of representation. The two cannot be dissociated from one another. The affect is co-existent with the representation (Aulagnier 47). A sensorial excitation is necessary to set off the production of a pictogram. An excitation is produced by an encounter between a sensorial organ and an exterior object possessing the power to stimulate the sensorial process. However, the person who gives birth to the pictographic representation resulting from the encounter is unaware of the duality of which it is composed. The image is perceived by the psyche as a representation of the object, but the psyche is unaware of the role played by the sensorial organ (Aulagnier 48).

The sensorial perceptions, which are at the base of the construction of a representation of things, refer to aspects of the world anchored in spaces produced by the nervous system which Piaget describes as oral, postural, thermal, visual, auditory, etc. The pictogram is thus a sensorial image linking three elements: the non-verbal experience of the body, a positive or negative affect, and a representation of thing which refers to the body and to the external world. The pictograms, once formed, continue to exist in the psyche throughout an individual's life span ("Sémiologie psychanalytique" 164).

According to Aulagnier, the aim of the psychic activity is never gratuitous; the energy it invests must be compensated for by pleasure. A subject generates a representation in pursuit of a pleasurable experience; it is an act of investment. The organism oscillates continuously between bi-polar activities: "the taking into itself" of pleasurable sensations and the "rejecting outside of the self" of unpleasurable experience. These two activities are part of the metabolization process in which the "*I*" (an individual) absorbs some of the information gained through excitation, turns it into corporeal material, and rejects the unpleasant residue. It is the sensorial systems that generate the mechanism of absorbing pleasurable excitation and information while rejecting that which is a source of displeasure. It is a two-fold rejection: rejection of the information and of the organ which is responsible for the excitation (54-55).

Thus, Saint-Martin reminds us that the organism, refusing to tolerate a disagreeable or an unpleasant representation, relegates the latter to the

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unconscious. However, the impulse or the energetic drive that generated and accompanied the representation remains active in the psyche as tension, and it is constantly looking for representations that will permit gratification. Without a representation, the biological arousal remains ignorant of its internal identity, hence the "obscure object of desire." Whilst the conscious "*I*" exercises a variety of defense mechanisms to conceal the "signifier" under pressure of social taboos and fear of reprisals, the drive keeps experimenting with representations that resemble those which existed at the onset of the impulse in order to release the tension and achieve satisfaction. However, these representations, which only echo the original experience, remain somewhat vague and always unconscious ("Sémiologie psychanalytique" 165-166).

Saint-Martin agrees with Freud that it is in the dream and in the process of symbolization that the "*I*" partially connects with the evasive signifier. It is through the construction of cultural objects that humans have appeased their on-going drives. A psychoanalytical approach to culture attempts to explain human cultural production by the existence of the unconscious, the seat of the most profound zones of the human psyche, which speaks of fear, suffering, frustration, trauma, destruction, despair, etc. The psyche, however, cannot sustain continuous suffering; it yearns to reach a state of well-being, of containment ("Sémiologie psychanalytique" 166). Thus, pleasure and displeasure exist simultaneously in human experience; they are at the root of the on-going confrontation between the moral conscious and the libidinous unconscious.

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Saint-Martin emphasizes that the *"I"* resolves the conflict between what is socially accepted and the demands of Eros by conceiving two modes of representation: the word and the thing (the image). The word serves to express a well-meaning and socially respected *"I"*; whereas the thing offers an outlet for the expression of forbidden affective needs generated by the instinctive impulses. Verbal signifiers are easily understood because a written text points to physical objects and life situations through the use of words. The visual signifiers, however, are elusive, because they reveal themselves by their spatial positions and by the energetic interactions among the visual elements in art objects, reflecting states of conflict and the most profound yearnings of the human subject ("Sémiologie psychanalytique" 170-171).

In her article "L'Inscription du sujet thymique dans l'énonciation visuelle," Saint-Martin suggests that verbal language is limited in expressing the totality of human experience because the censored material, lost in the unconscious, cannot be elucidated. Saint-Martin argues that the unconscious is communicated through visual language consisting of spatial position and internal interactions of energy-laden elements. Using Levi-Straus's terminology, Saint-Martin suggests that "factual" or visual language operates as "silent" communication between "unconscious to unconscious":

Cette relation inversée et symétrique du "myth verbal" . . . mène à

la conclusion que la communication "d'Inconscient à Inconscient"

consisterait en un échange généralement "muet" de messages

factuels, régis par des règles d'action "muettes" également, tandis que la communication de "Préconscient à Préconscient" consisterait par contre en un échange "parlant" de messages verbaux réglés par des "normes" morales explicites et symétriquement opposées aux "règles d'action." (126)

Saint-Martin postulates that the two forms of representation spring from two different sources of perception. The word is apprehended through the auditory perception and as such is subject to the temporal and continuous structure of the verbal language. On the other hand, the grasping of things or forms involves all the senses available to the human perception: the visual, the auditory, the olfactory, the kinaesthetic, the myriad of textual sensations, and others:

Le sens protéiforme du tact s'exerce à travers la position du corps (posturale et kinesthésique) et reconnaît le chaud du froid, le mouillé et le sec, le pénétrable et le dur, le rugueux et le lisse, le pointu et le massif, le lourd et le léger, le mobile et l'immobile, la limite et le continu, etc. Toutes les sensations/perceptions de l'organisme, produites sur un plan non verbal, amassent les matériaux qui forment les représentants de chose et, par suite, les langages non verbaux.

("Sémiologie psychanalytique" 162)

Thus, in Saint-Martin's view grammatically based verbal language, set in a

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logical and linear structure, cannot accommodate a conceptualization of the total experience of spatiality, nor can it articulate the existence of multiple elements in an autonomous organized visual form, foreign to the temporal succession. Unlike verbal language, visual language is anchored in the notion of space and as such is closely tied with a human subject's first experiences of reality. The manipulation of the body in space fuses with language in the process of the subject's construction of reality. These early spatial experiences coalesce as a primordial sediment lodged in the unconscious; they serve as a source for later spatial and pictorial representations, which enable both producer and viewer to indirectly relive early sensorial, emotive, and conceptual experiences, bringing them closer to consciousness (Sémiologie du langage visuel xiii-xvi).

SPACE AND REPRESENTATION

Saint-Martin elaborates on the spacial dimension in human art production in her booklet *Les fondements topologiques de la peinture*. Saint-Martin points to the close similarity between the variety of space arrangements devised by mature painters and the spaces that children naturally exhibit in their drawings and paintings at various stages of their development. Elasticity and continuity are the main characteristics of these spaces as they appear in children's as well as in artists' paintings. A mathematical conceptualization of this amorphous, elastic, and continuous space is found in topological geometry, a rudimentary

and primitive geometry, anterior to all other geometrical systems. Topological geometry attends to the invariant properties of matter, regardless of external deformations of shapes; it is the section of mathematics that deals with continuity, where space is conceived as a homogeneous entity with no internal ruptures (59-60).

Saint-Martin relies heavily on Piaget's findings on childrens' perception and construction of space. She situates Piaget's work in the antinomy of two visions of reality: the spontaneous and the scientific. She postulates that Piaget opened a path to a reconciliation between intuition, experience, common sense, and scientific thought by determining the modalities by which the process of experiencing reality has shaped thought from the dawn of human life. The decisive contribution of Piaget, according to Saint-Martin, lies in his demonstration that human representations, created for the purpose of communication, are not synonymous with direct experience of the world felt by human subjects:

> La contribution décisive des travaux de Piaget reside en effet dans
>
> la démonstration du caractère tout à fait différent qui existe entre
>
> l'expérience du monde que fait le sujet humain et les différents
>
> systèmes de représentation qu'il élabore pour en prendre
>
> conscience et établir une communication avec les autre sujets
>
> humains. Ces expérimentations soulignent irréductiblement le
>
> caractère illusoire de toute théorie de la communication fondée sur

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l'hypothèse de la "transparence", c'est-à-dire d'une adéquation immédiate entre l'expérience, sa représentation et son expérience, quel que soit le médium utilisé: gestualité, langage verbal, art ou mathématique.

(Les Fondements 21-22)

Saint-Martin points out that Piaget distinguishes two separate phases in human elaboration of the notion of space: 1. the direct experience of space, and the role it plays in the construction of reality; 2. the elaboration of the concept of lived space in representational systems bearing no correlation with the direct experience *(Les fondements* 21). It is this second phase that Piaget explores in his experiments that have relevance to the decoding of meaning in human expression.

Based on *The construction of Reality* and on *The Child's Conception of Space* by Piaget, Saint-Martin summarizes the role of space in the various developmental stages of the child's "sensori-motor" activity and intelligence from the initial undifferentiated stage to the time when they are capable of forming mental and physical representations of projective and perspective space. She points out that Piaget emphasizes the importance of the infant's early experiences that operate between his/her movements and the objects that lie within immediate reach, especially between himself/herself and the mother's body, experiences that originate from basic survival needs such as food and

protection. Regardless of later developments, the closeness first experienced remains the space associated with immediate sensorial, motor, and emotive experience. Following Piaget, Saint-Martin stresses that any spatial lived experience, whether that of the child or of an adult, will always be a prolongation of the fundamental practical and organic experiences of spaces--oral, auditory, visual, postural, kinaesthetic, etc.--transformed by intellectual operations (*Les fondements* 44-46). Children and adults will always return to the memory of their own signification emanating from the early lived experience as it occurred during the process when they were constructing their subjectivity for the satisfaction of their physical and emotional needs. Children can graphically produce forms known to them from touch only, without ever having been visually exposed to them. The origin of the process of representation does not necessarily stem from the need to mimic forms; it springs from a necessity to express the "sensori-motor" steps experienced at the time of the apprehension and assimilation of these forms. The child's drawing, from the scribbling phase and beyond, is not motivated by pure visual perception but by the total movements, anticipations, reconstructions, comparisons, etc. which accompany the entire multifaceted perceptual activity. The child's image is a symbol, a signified of the totality of the perceptual activity; it is a complete "sensori-motor" process (*Les fondements* 55).

Thus, the young child constructs spatial representations by tapping into the most elementary and fundamental intuitions of the spatial fields, which Piaget calls "rapports topologiques." Saint-Martin amplifies this idea by referring to

Jean and Simonne Sauvy's *La Découverte de l'espace chez l'enfant*:

> Les rapports topologiques recouvrent en particulier "les concepts
>
> de continuité et discontinuité, voisinage, régions et frontières,
>
> fermé et ouvert, intérieur et extérieur, disjoint et joint, avec ou sans
>
> trou" [Sauvy 33, 35], tout comme l'enveloppement, l'emboîtement,
>
> la succession, la distinction entre la gauche et la droite, le haut et
>
> le bas, la limite, etc.
>
> (*Les fondements* 60)

In *Les Fondements topologiques de la peinture* and in *Semiotics of Visual Language*, Saint-Martin situates Piaget's concept of spatial development in the child--the topological and later on the projective space perception--in the context of visual art. According to Piaget the experience of space in the early stages of development appears to disregard metric and perspective relationships; the child "reconstructs space from the most primitive notions such as topological relationships of proximity, separation, order, enclosure, etc." (*The Child's Conception* 3-4).

Piaget views *proximity* as the most elementary spacial relationship; it refers to "'nearby-ness' of elements belonging to the same perceptual field" (*The Child's Conception* 8). The concept of *separation* marks the child's ability to dissociate partly blended or confused elements. The child can "take account of different degrees of 'proximity' operating over larger areas, instead of being confined to the relation of immediate proximity" (*The Child's Conception* 7).

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Although the concept of separation appears at a later stage of development than proximity, the two are not precluded. *Order* or spatial *succession* refers to the infants ability to gaze or touch "a series of elements ranged from fixed order (such as the rungs of his cot)", or "when a series of habitual movements is guided by perception according to organized points of reference" (*The Child's Conception* 7). Order plays a fundamental role in the perception of symmetry. *Enclosure* or *Surrounding* occurs when the baby perceives one element as surrounded by others. *Continuity* refers to "knowing in precisely what sense the whole of the perceptual field constitutes a spatial field" (*The Child's Conception* 8).

Topological space is of a two-dimensional nature; it excludes three-dimensional projective space because the latter disrupts the continuity by creating empty space. In a topological space, forms touch one another leaving no room for a void. In Saint-Martin's view, topological spaces are at the core of contemporary art. Accordingly, the role of art is to elaborate a spatial experience stemming from the continuing and changeable interrelations of the subject with the reality on sensori-motor, affective, and intellectual levels commensurate with human evolution (*Les fondements* 91).

PERSPECTIVE SYSTEMS

Saint-Martin's elaboration of the various perspective systems is also

largely influenced by the development of space perception in the child as developed by Piaget. In the Introduction and Chapters V and VI of *les Fondements Topologiques de la Peinture*, Saint-Martin surveys the various steps in the evolution of the child's conception of space and how it relates to modern art in general and to the perception of perspective in particular. She points out that Piaget demonstrated that the child continues to make spatial representations exhibiting topological relations that reflect an egocentric perception until the age of nine or ten, when he/she gradually begins to represent objects from different angles and distances. The child becomes aware of a new dynamic operating in space apprehension: projective, or perspective space.

The child's transition from a topological space orientation to that of a projective space is gradual. At the beginning of this phase, the child acquires the ability to form mental images of objects as they may appear from his/her own mobile and changing position without yet imagining other observers' points of view, different from his/her own. The child's spatial representations will exhibit "deformed" objects in accordance with his/her particular position. Although the child accords a measure of "invariance" to objects, this constancy is still inscribed in a topological framework. Even when, later on, children grasp the existence of other peoples' points of view, their own angle of vision will remain dominant in their representations. Piaget considers the child's ability to co-ordinate among the various points of view as the essence of projective space

which shares with topological space the concept of a globalized totality. Both types of space always refer to an overall organization, whether explicit or implicit (*Les fondements* 106).

Following the original Greek meaning of the term "perspective" as "the science of the transmission of light rays" and influenced by Robert Klein's *La Forme et l'Intelligible*, Saint-Martin defines perspective as "any unified system, implicitly coded, that determines the choice and use of visual variables in precise interrelations, with a view of producing different types of distance effects" (*Semiotics of Visual Language* 118).

In her book *The Semiotics of Visual Language*, Saint-Martin identified over twenty systems of perspectives. An essential factor in perspective is the distance of the elements *vis à vis* the viewer. Saint-Martin refers to Edward T. Hall's book *The Hidden Dimension* for the classification of a variety of spaces based on distance effects: thermal, kinaesthetic, tactile, and visual .

In **thermal space**, objects are perceived not through the commonly used distance receptors (eyes, ears, nose), but through the mediation of a group of nerves located in the skin, enabling humans to feel heat, cold, touch, pleasure, and pain. Emotional states can be transmitted by means of changes in the skin temperature in certain body parts. Individuals positioned in thermal space with one another may be under a bodily chemical influence of each other's emotions. Since humans cannot control their thermal system, an increase or a decrease in body temperature can reveal intimate feelings which might otherwise go

undisclosed (Hall 52-55).

Kinaesthetic space is felt through the working of the muscles. The experience of this space is transmitted to the brain by nerves. It is through the body's movement and mobility that humans explore their surroundings. What people do in a given space determines how emotionally affected they are. Wide open spaces, whether in distance or in height, generate different feelings than closed quarters do. Space that can be traversed by walking conveys a different feeling than space limited to sight perception.

Visual and **tactile** spaces are closely related in childhood and remain interwoven throughout one's entire life span. Hall endorses Braque's characterization of "tactile" space as one which separates the viewer from the objects, and "visual space" as that which separates the objects from one another (57). Touch-oriented perception is the most immediate of all sensations, whereas sight-oriented perception can be remote and may contain unfriendly or dangerous objects. Textural sensations together with other sensorial channels are active agents in psychological awareness; they serve to notify the individual of emotional states in others, and they convey to him/her information from the environment (59).

In Hall's view, visual space is the most complex and the most important for human survival. The perceptual system does not simply record a neutral "visual field"; it creates instead a visual world which is a synthesis between retinal image, kinaesthetic experience, sensory data from other sources, and

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past experience: "As he moves through space, man depends on the messages received from his [her] body to stabilize his [her] visual world. Without such body feedback a great many people lose contact with reality and hallucinate" (62). Thus, in Hall's view, judging distances is a highly subjective activity, regardless of the existence of some supposedly accurate visual cues. Linear perspective, as the art of many cultures demonstrates, is not the only way to portray distances in pictorial representations.

Hall refers to art for clues to his perception theory. He relies on Maurice Grosser's book *The Painter's Eye* to articulate his own system of how objects are perceived in a variety of depth levels. Grosser points to such factors as touch, body temperature, focus, size constancy, stereoscopic roundness, distance, as well as psychological and cultural considerations, which both the artist and his/her model bring to the work. Grosser points out how in portrait painting the artist's distance from the model affects the psychological dynamics between the producer and his/her subject and the visual form ensued; the closer a distance between artist and model, the more intimate the interrelationship is. Hall elaborates on the implication of Grosser's observations:

> The significance of Grosser's observations is not restricted to the
>
> distance at which pictures are painted but lies in his [her] statement
>
> of the unconscious, culturally molded spatial frames that both the
>
> artist and his [her] subject bring to the sitting. The artist, trained to
>
> be aware of the visual field, makes explicit the patterns governing

his [her] behavior. For this reason, *the artist is not only a*

commentator on the larger values of the culture but on the

microcultural events that go to make up the larger values. (72)

Hall names and describes four categories of distances: intimate, personal, social, and public:

In **intimate space** the senses operate on an intense level. Sight interacts with such other senses as smell, heat, sound, and touch to create an involvement with another body. At this close distance the image is greatly enlarged; sharp vision is blurred; distortions in forms occur; details that ordinarily escape attention are put into focus; and peripheral view is limited (110-112).

In **personal space** people are positioned within touch of each other or of objects through their extremities. At this distance, visual distortion is no more present; forms recede; objects appear in their three dimensionality; surface textures are pronounced and highly differentiated from one another; and peripheral view is enlarged (112-114).

In **social space** the viewer is at a distance where he/she is no more able to observe details in an object. The size of the objects seems normal; sensorial operations such as smell and touch cease to play a role; the object is seen in its entirety; and the vision of details is somewhat reduced. People operate in this space during impersonal business relations (114-116).

In **public space** viewers lose sight of details; objects lose roundness and become flat; they appear undersized; colours fade; and peripheral vision is

greatly enlarged. People use formal style in their interaction in public space (116-117).

Thus the perception of distance and perspective is developed and maintained through a complex interaction between the various senses and the body's mobility. Consequently, depth perception is imbued with conscious emotion as well as unconscious affective residues.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE GESTALT THEORY TO SAINT-MARTIN'S CONCEPT OF VISUAL LANGUAGE.

Whereas for her elaboration of spacial relations Saint-Martin borrows from Piaget and Hall, she endorses a perceptual theory for a wider syntactic analysis of art works. Saint-Martin constructs her model for a syntactic analysis of visual language on the theory of sensorial perception developed by gestalt psychology. Critics and practitioners of art have largely acknowledged the contribution of gestalt theory to the perception and understanding of visual phenomena such as the figure-ground relationship, interaction of colour, and others. But in her book *La théorie de la gestalt et l'art visuel* Saint-Martin points out that writers on art have not sufficiently explored the potential contained in gestalt psychology for the widening of our knowledge of the process and meaning of art (*La Théorie* 16-17). Saint-Martin attributes this omission to the various accusations aimed at the gestalt theory, i.e. that it is essentialist and Cartesian, restricted to laboratory

conditions, rigid and dogmatic (*La Théorie* 2, 17, 18, 39), and inattentive to social values. Saint-Martin, who re-examined gestalt literature, claims that in its original form, the theory embraced none of these alleged accusations, and that the latter stem from erroneous interpretations of the work of the founders of gestalt. In this book Saint-Martin sets out to defend the theory by emphasizing those attributes of gestalt which are in tune with the most recent thought in the sciences and the humanities. According to her, gestalt psychology integrates Euclidean geometry with topological geometry. It embraces a holistic and a dialectical method in the examination of phenomena, leaves room in its "good form" for personal and cultural interpretations, is open to systems of values in human comportment, is aware of the constant perceptual changes that occur within the constancy law in perception, does not subscribe to a platonic aesthetics based on an ideal beauty achieved through precision, regularity, and perfect balance, and does not purport to have a recipe for a universal good form. Saint-Martin concludes that the most important feature of gestalt is its flexible nature: "Le message le plus fundamental de la théorie de la Gestalt est que la perception doit être definie avant tout comme engagée dans une fonction mobile, toujours partielle et constructive d'ensemble toujours changeante" (*La Théorie* 71).

Saint-Martin emphasizes that unlike the later researchers in gestalt who concentrated on the mechanism of ocular perception, the founders of gestalt theory acknowledged the role of internal physiological and psychological factors

in the perceptual mechanism. They considered sensorial perception as an on-going process of interaction between external objective stimuli and internal physiological and psychological responses. As such, any perceived entity cannot be considered as an objective structure (*La Théorie* 11). Furthermore, it is recognized in gestalt theory that the first stages of perception take place inside the nervous system on an unconscious level, a process which to this day has not been fully explored (*La Théorie* 13). The complexity of perception is further acknowledged by the revelation that the perceptual activity is not the work of a single sense organ such as the eye and its optical mechanism; it includes, rather, the contribution of multi-sensorial organs which assist in the apprehension of the senses of touch, smell, heat, etc. (*La Théorie* 15). Thus, there exists an affinity between the early gestalt tenets, Piaget's conception of space, and psychoanlytically based theories.

The basic premise of gestalt theory in Saint-Martin's view is that a spontaneous grouping of outside stimuli reaches the retina in the form of global units constructed in conjunction with an internal organizational mechanism of affective and cognitive nature. These groups, composed of a close interaction among specific characteristics of stimuli and appearing as strong and stable structures, are called gestalts (*La Théorie* 20). Each of the constituents in the construct of a gestalt serves a specific function in close relation to the other contributors. Any change in one or more elements of a gestalt imposes modification on the other components of the construct because each is defined

by its energetic interdependence with others (*La Théorie* 26).

The constituting forms of a gestalt act among themselves in a functional signification according to individual needs and perceptions. Thus, a certain element can serve different purposes in different gestalts without changing its appearance. For example, an identical line can be part of several geometric forms: a square, a triangle, a rectangle, etc. The gestalt postulates that the same mechanism that is at work in the structure of the external field also operates in the physiological and psychological realm. Both are produced in an energy-laden field, in which forms mutually adjoin, oppose, and transform. This mechanism is flexible, allowing for expansion and contraction. The course of perception is guided by electric currents, and the distribution of the current in the perceptual system depends on the forms of the percepts. For example, two identical forms placed in two different contexts may not look the same to an observer (*La Théorie* 24).

Conditioned by external stimuli and internal processes, perception is never stable and is always subject to transformations incurred by changes in the stimuli and in the internal perceptual mechanism as they react to one another. Thus transformations in the appearance of objects can be induced by either of the dual components of perception: the objective and the subjective. The perceptual process depends on the perceiver's readiness to invest in the object under observation, that is, the duration of the viewing and the number of eye centrations involved and the emotional and cognitive baggage he/she brings to

it. In the process of administering multiple eye centrations, the perceiver experiences changes in the appearance of the object and its components (40-41). Changes can be observed in any of the elements that construct the percept: size, density, orientation, colour, contour, depth, etc. Every repeat of fixation at a certain location in the visual field affects the perception of the entire set of variables that compose the object under observation, causing oscillations between the previously memorized percepts and the newer, later appearances (*La Théorie* 42). The visual field thus becomes a dynamic place, subject to continuous transformations without an actual displacement or change of elements in the external field (*La Théorie* 43). Consequently, the perception and apprehension of works of art differ among individual perceivers according to the trajectory and the number of centrations they use during the period they are engaged in viewing a certain artistic representation (*La Théorie* 50). In turn, this process is subject to fluctuations due to perceptual experiences, physiological needs such as hunger, fear, tension, etc., moral and ethical values, and emotions (*La Théorie* 54). Thus gestalt theory, contrary to its negative reputation of being rigid and detached from social involvement, appears to be sensitive to human behaviour and to the societal system of values.

Saint-Martin elaborates on three major features of gestalt which she incorporates in her semiotics of visual language: the movement of figure on ground, the search for "good form," and the laws of perceptual regrouping.

Elements in the visual field appear in an area of high density surrounded

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by areas of lower density. The area of high density takes on the character of a figure, while the one of low density serves as background. The region bearing the attributes of a figure appears, more or less, as a solid and well-defined construct, whereas the region which adopts the role of ground generally presents itself in blurred and, at times, hazy atmospheric form. The figure usually appears in the foreground (65). The figure and ground relationship, however, is unstable; it can reverse itself by a perceiver's change in eye movement or in focus, so that what was figure may become ground and vice versa (*La Théorie* 66). This flexibility of the perceptual mechanism causes multiple transformations of figure and ground relationships, whether by regrouping with other proximate regions and forming larger gestalts, or by focusing on a new figure inside a formerly observed one. These transformations, over time and space, create a dynamic visual field operating on an unconscious level and accessible to all the sensorial organs: vision, hearing, touch, etc. The figure and ground phenomenon is also the basic mechanism for the establishment of depth in visual representation on a flat support (*La Théorie* 67).

Regardless of the recognition of the mobile character of perception, gestalt theory also acknowledges the existence of strong and steady gestalts such as objects of the physical world and basic geometric forms. The gestalts are not haphazardly constructed; they stem from a perceptual impulse to assemble groups of visual stimuli in a unit resembling, as closely as possible, recognizable forms (*La Théorie* 74). The formation of iconic gestalts differs

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somewhat from that of geometric ones. In the first instance, a minimal scheme will induce the perceiver to identify it with familiar objects of the external world. In the second, the perceiver will regroup the stimuli into simple, regular, closed forms (*La Théorie* 75). The abstract good forms of gestalt are characterized by regularity, symmetry, unity, harmony, simplicity, precision, and concision (*La Théorie* 76). The good form offers stable internal structures of maximum cohesion, clarity, and simplicity relative to the surroundings and to the perceptual processes which apprehend it (78). The regrouping process, according to Saint-Martin, takes place at a lower level of the perceptual organization, in the realm of topological relationships of proximity, separation, envelopment, rhythmic succession, etc., linked to the notion of continuity and directly experienced by the sense organs. The search for a gestalt or good form is at the core of the dynamics of grouping and regrouping of new stimuli or of elements in previously established gestalts according to resemblances to memorized percepts (*La Théorie* 79-80).

Since the forming of a gestalt is partly due to external stimuli, the decision to observe a work of art entails a large number of "guided actions" by a motivated subject. The latter, conditioned by internal tension, interacts with the tension in the art work to produce successive changes in the internal experience and in the perceptual organization of the visual field. The search for good form is driven, according to Freud, by the "principle of pleasure" stemming from a wish to resolve tension (*La Théorie* 92). The subject, relieved from tension,

experiences satisfaction or gratification. As long as the excitation does not exceed the individual's tolerance level, he/she will experience gratification when the tension dissipates. Saint-Martin postulates that the aesthetic emotion is activated within the parameters of this model. Through a prolonged examination of an art work, the perceiver experiences mild tensions caused by what he/she perceives as unintegrated forms, which he/she continuously subverts into good forms in the service of pleasure. When the perceiver cannot integrate certain stimuli as functional elements in a gestalt, the stimuli are rejected by the perceptual organism; they remain, however, as resistances reflecting perceptual and emotional conflicts. The tension in the perceptual field tends to arise from the observation of open, odd, and out-of-context forms; sharp contrasts among the visual variables such as colour, texture, shape, dimension, etc.; fragmented geometrical forms or objects of the external natural world; unfamiliar perspectives, projection of different perspectives in the same visual field; and other irregularities. The viewer in these cases completes the forms according to memorized gestalts to restore balance and to experience pleasure (*La Théorie* 92-94).

Saint-Martin reminds us that the founders of gestalt psychology never endorsed an aesthetic based on good form. On the contrary, they pointed out that good form lacks tension and therefore does not provoke a dynamic perceptual activity. The perceiver quickly loses interest in a visual field devoid of tension. Side-by-side with the organism's impulse to control new stimuli in order

to arrive at a comfortable balance, there is a need for the system to search for new, previously unfamiliar stimuli. This dual mechanism characterizes perception as a cognitive activity amongst many others espoused by human beings, including aesthetic contemplation. By exercising multiple centrations over an extended period of time, the perceiver of an art work becomes aware of the dynamic interplay in the visual field. Such thorough contemplation brings to consciousness internal tensions and needs, as the viewer wrestles with successive new interrelations formed by the regroupings among the elements which constitute the art work. "Bad gestalts" in the visual field tend to attract the perceiver's curiosity and attention. In fact, the more artistically astute the perceiver is, the more he/she is apt to seek irregular and unstable constructs in order to engage in a rich perceptual activity. The perceiver constantly oscillates between a bad gestalt and its comparison to and subversion into a good gestalt. An active perceiver of an art work is drawn to areas of tension which he/she organizes, over a prolonged observation, into good or familiar gestalts. Consequently, what seemed initially as bad gestalts eventually turn into good forms. The push-and-pull between bad and good gestalts is at the core of the dynamics of the visual field shared by all human beings. However, the results of this process are different for each individual. Good or bad gestalts are not carved in stone since they are affected by cultural as well as individual preferences, and as such they cannot serve as a foundation for a system of value in an aesthetic theory (*La Théorie* 104-108).

Saint-Martin argues that art fulfills a primarily cognitive function rather than an emotional one. Emotions are only a secondary effect to the art work's content. The role of art is to supply "a field of experimentation" (*La Théorie* 110) for organizing and structuring experience, bringing to consciousness conceptual and emotional constructs. The art work can bring to awareness a wide range of subtle tensions through a dialogue between the observer's internal model and an objective external organization. The tension between good and bad forms and their resolution, as described by the Gestalt Theory, is one of the fundamental bases of the syntactic analysis proposed by Saint-Martin.

CHAPTER 2

SAINT-MARTIN'S VISUAL LANGUAGE IN THE

CONTEXT OF ART EDUCATION

So far Saint-Martin has not made her mark on the literature of art

education. Nonetheless, she has made significant contributions to the discipline

of art education. Saint-Martin taught at the Université du Québec à Montréal,

and she has been writing in the visual arts domain for many years. Her former

students, who are now teachers, disseminate her legacy in university studio

courses and possibly in high school classes. Saint-Martin's visual language,

anchored in linguistics, psychoanalytic, and gestalt psychology, fits into two of

the four historical traditions in art education categorized by Arthur D. Efland: the

expressive and the objective. Efland summarizes the expressive aesthetic

described by Hans and Shulamith Kreitler in *Psychology of Art* in the following

terms:

> Expressive theory in aesthetics says that art is the expression of
>
> the artist's feelings and emotions and is the primary source of its
>
> value. Correspondingly, psychoanalytic psychology views all
>
> human behavior as being in some way expressive of unconscious

needs and drives elaborated, compromised, and channeled into overt behavior by the ego (Kreitler and Kreitler, 1972, p. 67). The artist expresses his [her] subconscious desires in a sublimated symbolic form. The perception of works of art affords vicarious fantasy gratification for those unsatisfied wishes in a sublimated socially acceptable form.

("Conceptions of Teaching" 22)

Following Kreitler and Kreitler, Efland goes on to associate the objective aesthetics with gestalt theory:

Objective theory in aesthetics regards the work as a self-sufficient autonomous whole accessible to the viewer directly in perception. Correspondingly, gestalt psychology states that in human behavior the whole is more than the sum of its parts. . . . There is a striving in human perception for "good gestalts," or for the perception of the best gestalt given the conditions within the perceptual field. Gestalt researchers have attempted to show how the various elements of a perceptual field like that presented by a work of art are transformed into a unified whole in the percipient's experience, how the perception of relatively bad gestalts arouses tension, and how the mutual relations among the various elements of the work of art can best be understood through their role and position in the whole (Kreitler and Kreitler, 1972, p. 89).

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Although Saint-Martin espouses gestalt psychology and shares Freudian

tenets with theorists of the expressive aesthetic, she does not espouse an

expressive, objective, or any other aesthetic theory, nor does she belong to any

art educational theory. There is, however, an affinity between Saint-Martin's

endorsement of Piaget's topological relations and the work of Viktor Lowenfeld.

Lowenfeld, grounded in psychoanalytic theory, shares with Piaget and Saint-

Martin the notion that vision alone cannot account for the apprehension of space

in visual representation, and that it is the mobile human organism in relation to its

environment that is at the core of the construction of space. Hence the attention

that Lowenfeld accords to kinaesthetic experiences and the way these

experiences are reflected in children's drawings and paintings. In his books

Creative and Mental Growth and *Your Child and His Art*, Lowenfeld claims that

visual mechanism alone cannot account for perception. Lowenfeld stresses the

role of all the senses and kinaesthesia in shaping children's conception of space

as expressed in their drawing and painting. Invoking schemata of the

developmental stages of children's drawing, he demonstrates the close link that

exists between children's representations, their conception of space, and their

emotional development. Lowenfeld describes the kinaesthetic and sensorial

function in children's drawings through the developmental stages, from the early

scribbling phase where body, medium, and marks are fused, to the naturalistic

modes practised by older children, culminating in their attention to the visual

effects of mechanical perspective based on vanishing points and horizon lines. Lowenfeld shows how young children's emotional states of mind are expressed in the depiction of objects--in their shape, size, and colour. He particularly draws attention to the meaning of exaggerations and omissions so frequent in children's drawings. Lowenfeld suggests that children's exaggerations in the size of objects stem from their emotional attachment to these objects. Hands or legs may appear longer or shorter to accommodate the specific activity in which they are engaged. In the same vein, children may omit what does not seem important to them:

> The visual experience of diminished sizes for distant objects is then completely wrong for the sense of touch. In fact, the diminished size of distant objects constitutes a complete distortion for the sense of touch.

> Distortions are not only relative to our senses, they are also relative to our emotions. What to the eye seems large may be completely insignificant to our emotions, and vice versa.

> (*Your Child* 163)

Lowenfeld points out that the placement of objects in the overall plan is another indication of the link between children's perception of space and the state of their emotional development. When, in the early phases of drawing, children position objects randomly on their working surface, they express a conception of space as something which surrounds them. A more developed

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spatial conception is revealed in the insertion of objects along a base line. Children now conceive themselves and other objects as standing on the ground. They are aware that the sky is above and the ground is below, and accordingly they draw the sky at the top of the page and the ground at the bottom (*Creative and Mental Growth* 119-120). The phenomenon of a folding-over perspective is another manifestation of spatio-kinaesthetic experience. In this mode, drawn objects appear upside down or sideways. This happens when children visualize themselves in the centre of a scene facing objects on base lines around them (*Creative* 151-153). X-ray pictures are another mode of "non-visually" conceived representations. When what happens inside objects is more emotionally charged than the outside surface, the latter turns transparent. Subjective space is also evident in the appearance of more than one base line and in the presence of a mixture of plan and elevation views in a single work (*Creative* 160).

All these distortions, in Lowenfeld's view, originate intuitively and often subconsciously in bodily or muscular sensations, from the importance of a particular object, or from its emotional significance. It is in the description of Lowenfeld's haptic type that his views on the link between bodily sensation, emotions, and art are summarized:

> The main intermediary for the haptic type of individual is the *body self*--muscular sensations kinesthetic experiences, touch impressions, and all experiences that place the self in value relationships to the outside world. In haptic art the self is projected

as the true actor of the picture whose formal characteristics are the result of a synthesis of bodily, emotional, and intellectual comprehension of shape and form. Sizes and spaces are determined by their emotional value in size and importance. The haptic type is primarily a *subjective type*. Haptically minded persons do not transform kinesthetic and tactile experiences into visual ones but are completely content with the tactile or kinesthetic modality itself.

(*Creative* 261)

I should point out here that later research in children's drawing does not support Lowenfeld's claim that all deviations from a standard representation are a result of an expressive impulse. Other reasons, related to production factors play a role in the distortions.

Both Saint-Martin (following Piaget) and Lowenfeld draw on the psychoanalytic tenet that the image is not a direct outcome of the visual mechanism but a product of perception, which is a complex sensori-motor activity; consequently, mental representation is a product of the tactile experience translated into visual data. Vision and movement are forever entwined. This is the core of Piaget's conception of topological space and topological relations: "The image is an internalized act of imitation, a copy or transfer, not of the object as such, but of the motor response required to bring action to bear upon the object" (*The Construction 294*). Although Saint-Martin

and Lowenfeld draw from a common source, they use it for different ends--

Lowenfeld for the elaboration of a theory of emotional development through art,

and Saint-Martin for the construction of her theory of a semiotic of visual

language.

VISUAL LANGUAGE SYSTEMS

It is not within the mandate of this thesis to compare the various visual

language systems that were used by art educators at one time or another.

However, it is possible to draw a few general conclusions as to what these

systems have in common and how they compare with Saint-Martin's visual

language. Perhaps the most obvious common denominator spanning the visual

systems briefly surveyed in this chapter is that they are prescriptive. They

directly or indirectly presume an aesthetic ideal. Words such as beauty,

harmony, unity, symmetry, proportion, significant form, and the like refer to a

classical aesthetic and to a good gestalt. Another common trait shared by these

visual language systems is their classification of basic forms--line, circle, square,

triangle, and others--disclosing a mathematically based Euclidean geometry

subject to exact measurement. In Saint-Martin's view these basic shapes are an

abstraction of the visual field, and not a direct perception of it.

Examples of the prescriptive approach in art education are abundant in

the literature. Preoccupation with principles of design began in the middle of the

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nineteenth century in the English industrial schools of design in England. Teachers and writers advocated the use of exercises based on designs derived from the logic of mathematical geometry that adorned historical masterpieces. Art educators such as Richard Redgrave, Ralph N. Wornum, Owen Jones, and Walter Crane recommended the use of strict and rigid principles of design for teaching purposes. Although the systems they devised vary from one another, they all endorse similar aesthetic standards such as beauty, unity, balance, proportion, symmetry, and they suggest a similar course of exercises for use in classrooms.

Redgrave lashes out against "novelty" in design and calls for adhering to classic beauty:

> Grecian ornament has come down to us with authority like that of Scripture, rather than of tradition, and all the after efforts of artists, who have adopted and adapted it, have failed either to improve its elegance, or to add to its beauty. . . . Heaven and earth are racked for novel inventions, and happy is the man who lights upon something, however *outré*, that shall strike the vulgar mind, and obtain the "run of the season."

> (Redgrave 60)

Redgrave calls for the teaching of geometry, perspective, and mechanical drawing. He proposes that drawing be taught in the following progressive order: outlining of flat areas, shadowing of flat forms, drawing of solid forms, and

shadowing them (162).

Like Redgrave, Wornum points to "the flat and the relieved" in design (8).

He emphasizes symmetry, contrasts, and repetition of stylized natural forms on a

geometrical grid: "I believe this law of symmetry to be so important, that there is

no form or combination of forms whatever that, when symmetrically contrasted or

repeated, cannot be made subservient to beauty" (14). Wornum's symmetry is

inspired by nature: "It seems to be a law of nature, that every individual thing

shall be composed of two similar parts in its outward appearance . . . this

similarity of externals would appear an evidence of the *design of beauty*" (13).

Trees, flowers, roots, leaves, branches and many other natural objects

symmetrically constructed should serve as a model for the designer.

A shift away from Redgrave's and Wornum's concept of design was

expressed and implemented by Walter Crane who argued that the root of art lies

not in flat design but in the production of handicrafts. In his book *Line and Form*,

Crane suggests principles of design that go beyond decoration such as outline,

silhouette, movement, texture, rhythm, balance, counterbalance, contrasts, and

others (Macdonald 313).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the handling of structure in art

changed direction due to the advent of gestalt theory and the articulation of a

formalistic aesthetic generated by Clive Bell and Roger Fry. Attention to the

visual language of art became the new focus of the objective or formalist tradition

in art education. Works of art were perceived as autonomous objects created or

interpreted independently of references to nature and to past cultural traditions. The meaning of art was to be sought in form rather than in the symbolic content of social, political, and economic significance. "Significant form" became the criterion for good art, yet the term eluded definition. Efforts to explain significant form became entrapped in tautology: significant form is art; thus art is significant form. The objective tradition of art education was fed by the writings of Bell and Fry, by art educators' activities in the United States (John Dewey, Albert C. Barnes, A. W. Dow, D. W. Ross), and by the Bauhaus school of design.

Influenced by his studies of Japanese art, Arthur Wesley Dow rejected the academic style of production and instruction in drawing and painting:

> The followers of academic ideal relegated design to a secondary
>
> place under the term "decorative art," and sought to explain the
>
> beauty of design by an analysis of historic styles. Courses in
>
> design became a study of styles, just as courses in drawing
>
> became a study of nature.

(*Theory and Practice* 3)

Dow proposed the adoption of a flat, two-dimensional system of design to replace the illusionist three-dimensional space which has its origin in Renaissance ideology. Dow singled out three basic elements--line, dark and light (Notan in his terminology), and colour. In his words:

> In the space-arts the elements are but three:
>
> LINE--the boundary of a space.

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DARK AND LIGHT--the mass, or quantity of light. COLOR--the

quality of light.

These constitute a language for all forms of space-art

whether representative or decorative; architectural, sculptural or

pictorial.

(Theory and Practice 5)

Dow rejects the distinction between representational art and design. He argues

that "design is . . . the very beginning, the primer of art, and there is one sense in

which all good space-art may be called design" (*Theory and Practice* 5).

Success in form lies in the ability to express ideas through a harmonious

arrangement of line, form, and colour. Dow, more than his predecessors,

attaches high value to "personal feeling, the fresh individual way of expressing

ideas in art form" (*Theory and Practice* 7). In addition to the visual elements,

Dow proposes five syntactic principles for the achievement of beauty and

harmony--opposition, transition, subordination, repetition, and symmetry. All five,

in turn depend on the general principle of proportion and good spacing

(*Composition* 21).

A contemporary of Dow, Denman W. Ross, devised a scientifically based

design model which he describes in his book *Theory of Pure Design*. Ross

defines design as "order in human feeling and thought and in the many and

varied activities by which that feeling or that thought is expressed" (1). By order

he means three things--harmony, balance, and rhythm. Beauty, in his view, is

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not a principle of design, but is "revealed . . . in the forms of Order, in the modes of Harmony, Balance, and Rhythm" (4). Ross proposes a teaching method based on a system of progression from the simple to the complex. He proceeds from a single dot on which he builds a web of constructs based on the investigation of position, direction, distance, and interval (Efland, *A History of Art Education* 179). Less known in art education circles is Jay Hambidge, who published several books on a system of design based on "Dynamic Symmetry." His system draws on mathematical geometry and the exploitation of the dynamics of the golden section for the achievement of a proportional and harmonious composition (McWinnie, "Jay Hambidge and Art Education").

The various design models devised by early art educators were prescriptive; they meant to provide the designer of utilitarian objects with formulas for good design based on the prevailing taste of the time.

A strong boost to the formalistic attitude, and a change in its course, came from the Bauhaus school in Germany. The teachers in the Bauhaus--Walter Gropius, Johannes Itten, László Moholy-Nagy, Josef Albers, and others--were dedicated to the development of a basic design for visual education. The Bauhaus school devised basic and foundation courses with an emphasis on materials and texture. An examination of books on design published by the major players in the Bauhaus (Itten, Moholy-Nagy, and Albers) reveals that, compared to their predecessors, they do not propose a set of strict directives for the creation of good design, but rather they suggest an "outline of a general

system of elements" (Moholy-Nagy 54). Moholy-Nagy rejects the classical notion

of harmony. Harmony, for him

> means tranquillity, the crystallized position of the elements. The
>
> new kinetic form of creative work implies a steady flux, sometimes
>
> a rapid change, a constant shifting of the position of the elements.
>
> Geometric rigidity comes to an end.
>
> (Moholy-Nagy 55)

Nonetheless, Moholy-Nagy is not totally free from giving advice for the

accomplishment of "effective relationships" of forms. They include contrasts,

deviations, variations, shifting and dislocations, repetition in series, turning, and

mirroring (Moholy-Nagy 55). Itten's approach to design is systematically

constructed proceeding from point to line, plane, and volume in so far as form is

concerned. The rest of the visual elements are organized in contrasts: large-

small, high-low, thick-thin, broad-narrow, transparent-opaque, smooth-rough,

rest-motion, much-little, contrasts of directions, light-dark, soft-hard, light-dark

(*Design and Form* 10-11). Itten's colour system is also largely organized around

contrasts based on a hierarchical colour theory. Albers focuses on the instability

of colour. Unlike Itten, Albers claims that his book "does not follow an academic

conception of 'theory and practice.' It reverses this order and places practice

before theory, which, after all, is the conclusion of practice" (1).

Although the Bauhaus teachers encouraged experimental activities and

made room for self-expression, their main preoccupation remained with rational

design strategies. They may have rejected classical aesthetics but did not succeed in shaking off aesthetic standards; they created their own distinctive style. The Bauhaus teachers encouraged a measure of self expression in the early stages of their students' development and did not prematurely impose on them projects for which they were not ready. More recently, in his book *Varieties of Visual Expression*, Edmund Burke Feldman formulates a set of visual elements and principles of organization derived from gestalt psychology and design systems. Line, shape, light and dark, colour, and textures are the visual elements to be organized according to the principles of unity, balance, rhythm, and proportion.

Although art educators progressively loosened the early strict prescriptive formulas and made room for personal expression, they nevertheless remained attached to the traditional principles of organization: unity, balance, and proportion. Thus they did not eliminate the prescriptive element from visual language.

Regardless of the emphasis on the rational aspect of the formalist movement, the link between expression and form was not foreign to Bell and Fry, the apostles of formalism, nor were they oblivious of the bond that exists between life and art. Their work was focused on what type of emotion is expressed and experienced through visual art objects. Because both Bell and Fry emerged on the art criticism scene in the same period, and because both

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struggled with the meaning of "significant form," there is a tendency to confuse

and fuse one with the other and to attribute Bell's facile interpretation of the term

to both men. In "Roger Fry et Clive Bell: Divergences fondamentales autour de

la notion 'Significant Form'," Pierrette Jutras (a former student of Saint-Martin)

disentangles the knot which ties the thoughts of the two critics. In the process,

she reveals an aspect of Fry's thought that is not very well known. Jutras argues

that unlike Bell, who reduces the issue of emotion in art to a short-lived aesthetic

emotion, Fry grounds the emotional aspect of art in life-long emotional residues

of past experience. Jutras supports her argument with extensive quotations from

Fry's writings, reflecting his view that design expresses emotions that spring from

the primary physical needs of human beings:

> it will be noticed that nearly all these emotional elements of design
>
> are connected with essential conditions of our physical existence:
>
> rhythm appeals to all the sensations which accompany muscular
>
> activity; mass to all the infinite adaptations to the force of gravity
>
> which we are forced to make; the spatial judgment is equally
>
> profound and universal in its application to life; our feeling about
>
> inclined planes is connected with our necessary judgments about
>
> the conformation of the earth itself. . . . It will be seen, then, that
>
> the graphic arts arouse emotions in us by playing upon what one
>
> may call the overtones of some of our primary physical needs.
>
> (qtd. in Jutras 99)

Fry further comments on the issue of art and everyday life:

> Now, from our definition of pure beauty, the emotional tone is not
> due to any recognizable reminiscence or suggestion of the
> emotional experiences of life; but I sometimes wonder if it
> nevertheless does not get its force from arousing some very deep,
> very vague, and immensely generalized reminiscences.
>
> (qtd. in Jutras 99)

Fry suggests the existence of two forms of life, the imaginary and the real:

> Man has the peculiar faculty of calling up again in his [her] mind the
> echo of past experience . . . of going over it again, "in imagination"
> as we say. He has, therefore, the possibility of a double life; one
> the actual life, the other the imaginative life.
>
> (qtd. in Jutras 100)

Fry asserts that human beings can look at themselves and their environment through art and retrieve deep-rooted emotions that normally escape consciousness. He attributes the spiritual life to "those parts of the subconscious being which have filtered down through our conscious life and consist of the abiding residue of innumerable sensations, feelings, predilections, aspirations, desires, judgments" (qtd. in Jutras 100). The generally accepted interpretation of Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's conception of formalism was also challenged in the domain of art eduction by H. J. McWinnie in his paper "Clive Bell, the Doctrine of Significant Form and Visual Arts Communication."

The quotes from Fry indicate that the perception of formalism as a movement based on intellectual tenets only is erroneous. Formalists acknowledged a measure of subjective elements in art. However it would be safe to say that formalist thinkers and artists leaned towards a rational and objective analysis of art. The affinity among the various systems of formalistic visual languages in the first half of the twentieth century is apparent not only in structural resemblances but also in the interpretation of art works. The art work was perceived by formalist systems as an autonomous object subject to predominantly rational analysis and comprehension without recourse to the external world. This is at the root of the controversial issue of whether or not the formal elements of an art work are in themselves capable of carrying and conveying meaning. It was generally accepted that the arrangement of the formal elements in a visual field calls for either a superficial scanning to appreciate "significant" form (in Bell's language), or for intellectual operations. In his account of the historical traditions in art education, Efland casually remarked that "the Bauhaus experimental inquiry was always directed by an overriding rationalism" ("Concepts of Teaching" 31). He went so far as to urge teachers to discourage students from expressing their feelings in the course of learning the principles of design. In the last paragraph, however, Efland discloses a faint softening of his position by cautioning against a strict adherence to one aesthetic orientation only. A few years later, in his address to the Penn State Conference, Efland offered a new structure for art education which takes into account a

plurality of styles. He called for a model in which formalist and expressionist theories would be combined for the advancement of children's development, their creativity, and their spontaneity (McWhinnie, "A Consideration" 18).

Expressionism and formalism may well have been opposing movements in the history of style and in art education theories, but in the process of art production, the expression and the manipulation of visible variables are inseparable. Saint-Martin attempts to show that contrary to the general perception in critical and art historical literature, it is precisely in form that the most profound human emotion is embedded, an emotion that comes close to consciousness through form in art. One cannot fail to see that Fry's pronouncements on art and emotion recall the Freudian subconscious and the role it plays in Saint-Martin's underlying premises of her visual language. In Saint-Martin's view, visual form is not a product of intellectual operations detached from life, nor is it a tool for expressing well-defined emotions. Saint-Martin's work on the interpretation of form in painting is a comprehensive attempt to bridge the gaps between form and affect and between emotion and cognition. It is time that art education makes peace with visual formalism and re-examine the educational values derived from engaging students in the manipulation and interpretation of form *per se*.

Saint-Martin's interpretation of the role of visual form from a psychoanalytical perspective, her revisionist approach to gestalt theory, and her non-prescriptive approach to composition enable art educators to embrace a

modified approach to the use and interpretation of the visual elements free of the old stigma. Saint-Martin's reading of visual form represents a shift of emphasis from the rational and universal to the subjective and emotive. Perhaps the most important contribution of Saint-Martin's visual language is her elimination of the cognitive/affective dichotomy. In her view, the act of perception is simultaneously cognitive and affective. Formalists relied heavily on gestalt perception for their rational interpretation of form. Saint-Martin does not perceive gestalt theory as strictly rational, and she sees no contradiction between gestalt and psychoanalytical theory. On the contrary, she explains the formation of gestalts using psychoanalytical assumptions. Saint-Martin suggests that a thorough investigation of form in itself is a valid subjective activity that engages the participant in a cognitive and affective exploration of a deep internal reality that cannot be accessed otherwise. Saint-Martin's complex method of apprehending form makes intellectual and emotional demands on the perceiver. Thus, art educators can now engage students in a rigorous investigation of form from a subjective and non-judgmental perspective without drifting into easy relativism.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH AND TEACHING METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH METHODS

I developed a research methodology to suit the goal of the thesis: how to teach visual language in an introductory painting course. It is composed of a combination of phenomenology and action research included within the general umbrella of humanistic or qualitative research. As noted by several writers on the development of art education research, mainly Kenneth R. Beittel ("Art Education") and Elliot W. Eisner ("Educational Connoisseurship"), humanistic inquiry surfaced as a reaction to the scientific approach to research prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s. Eisner defines scientific research as follows:

Scientific research may be regarded as inquiries that use formal instruments as the primary basis for data collection, that transform the data collected into numerical indices of one kind or another, and that attempt to generalize in a formal way to some universe beyond itself.

("On the Differences" 5)

Beittel draws attention to a few major books published during the 1970s

which opened the field to a pluralistic approach to research. These include H. G. Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, M. Dufrenne's *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, C. R. Hausman's *A Discourse on Novelty and Creation*, and E. B. Feldman's *Becoming Human Through Art*. Beittel points to the broadening of the epistemological basis of art education research through the use of such things as the combination of intuitive and formal knowledge ("soft" and "hard" research methods); the alignment of different aesthetic approaches; and the combination of psychological and philosophical research methods. In effect, it amounts to a pluralistic approach ("Art Education" 160). Of the various categories of research summarized by Beittel, the research method chosen for this thesis falls within the category of qualitative and phenomenological inquiry.

Whereas Beittel perceives qualitative inquiry as one among many humanistic research methods, Renata Tesch perceives qualitative inquiry as part of a "naturalistic inquiry," which has its roots in ethnography and phenomenology. She indicates, however, that there is only a narrow distinction between the naturalistic and the qualitative inquiry: "In a sense . . . naturalistic inquiry is a term parallel to the term qualitative research, where qualitative research is meant to denote all research not concerned with variables and their measurement" (43). Tesch perceives the relationship between naturalistic and qualitative inquiry in the following terms:

> From a definitional point of view it does, in fact, make more sense to say
> that using qualitative methods is a way of conducting naturalistic inquiry,

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rather than to say that using naturalistic inquiry is a way for doing

qualitative research. (44)

Following Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, Tesch lists the characteristics that

define naturalistic inquiry:

Natural setting; human instrument; utilization of tacit knowledge;

qualitative methodology; purposive sampling [instead of random];

inductive data analysis; grounded theory; emergent design;

negotiated outcome [negotiated with the study participants]; case

study reporting mode; idiographic interpretation; tentative

application [instead of generalization]; focus-determined

boundaries; special criteria for trustworthiness. (brackets inserted

by Tesch).

(Lincoln and Guba qtd. in Tesch 44)

At the same time that educators increased the use of qualitative research

methods in the naturalistic inquiry--mainly in the United States and Canada--

another group of educational researchers in Europe developed the

phenomenological approach to research based on Edmund Husserl's

philosophy. Tom Beekman, a student of the Dutch educator Martinus

Langeveld, introduced the phenomenological method to a group of researchers

in Ann Arbor in the late 1970s. From there the use of phenomenological inquiry

has spread among educational researchers in North America and beyond (Tesch

47). According to Tesch, the difference between the ethnographically oriented

naturalistic inquiry and the phenomenological approach is that the latter puts

emphasis on the individual, and on subjective experience. Rather

than studying the impact of a program designed to facilitate the

integration of minority students, for instance, or studying the culture

of the multi-racial classroom . . . phenomenology would study what

the experience of being in a multi-racial classroom is like. (48)

In comparing the language and attitudes used in the definitions given to

phenomenology in Art Education doctoral dissertations, Marilyn Zuhrmuehlen

notices a certain likeness, "a kind of intersubjectivity" (4), which she attributes to

shared sources (Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty).

She argues that researchers begin their writing with no preconceived knowledge

of the conclusions similar to the manner in which visual artists and writers

produce their art product; they employ a certain focus in their observational

system in order to record the most characteristic perceptions for the topic under

research; following Husserl, they begin with the subjective and the particular in

order to extract essences; they wrestle with the manner in which to translate the

phenomenological method into practice; they use intuitive judgment based on

previous experience in assessing their subjects and in establishing

intersubjective understandings. Although Zurmuehlen points to what is common

among practitioners using phenomenological methods of research, she also

makes it clear that they are varied and that the personality of the researcher and

the kind of questions he/she asks determine the kind of methodologies that are

chosen.

For my own research I used a branch of phenomenology labeled Phenomenography. Phenomenography was first developed in the Department of Education at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden during the 1970s. The goal of this type of research is spelled out by Ference Marton:

> The aim of the research program . . . is not to classify people, nor is it to compare groups, to explain, to predict, nor to make fair or unfair judgements of people. It is to find and systematize forms of thought in terms of which people interpret aspects of reality-- aspects which are socially significant and which are at least supposed to be shared by the members of a particular kind of society; namely, our own industrialized Western society.
>
> This kind of research . . . is complementary to other kinds of research. It is research which aims at description, analysis, and understanding of experiences; that is, research which is directed towards experiential description.
>
> ("Phenomenography: Describing Conceptions" 180)

More specifically,

> Phenomenography [is] a research specialization aimed at the mapping of the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, practice, and understand various aspects of, and various phenomena in the world around them.

("Phenomenography: Exploring . . . Conceptions" 178-179)

Phenomenography does not describe the world as such or the people who

perceive the world. It does, however, pertain to the way people think about the

world. It "falls between human beings and the world around them . . . and

between the science of mental life and the science of the world such as physics,

biology, political science, and economics"; it tries to map the "hidden world of

thoughts" ("Phenomenology: Exploring . . . Conceptions" 179-180).

Marton makes the following distinction between classical phenomenology

and phenomenography:

1) Husserl's phenomenology is grounded in empirical research in a first-

person enterprise format. The researcher is asked to "bracket" his/her personal

preconceptions and scientific thinking in order to experience the studied

phenomenon in its immediacy, without any personal prejudice. In the

Phenomenographical mode the researcher tries "to describe the relations

between the individual and various aspects of the world, regardless of whether

relations are manifested in the form of immediate experience, conceptual

thought, or behavior" ("Phenomenology: Exploring . . . Conceptions" 143). The

individual's preconceptions are not masked but rather incorporated in their

perception of the world around them.

2) The strict form of phenomenology does not tolerate a separation

between that which is experienced and the experience *per se*. For example, in

investigating people's experience of political power, the phenomenologist will

examine either the constructs of political power as such, or how people experience things. Phenomenography, however, will explore how people experience the political power ("Phenomenography: Describing Conceptions" 180).

3) The "essence" in phenomenology refers to the common intersubjective meaning of an aspect under investigation; that is what remains constant regardless of the variations that make up the essence. Phenomenography explores the variations and allows for elucidating the structure of the variations ("Phenomenography: Describing Conceptions" 180; "Phenomenography: Exploring . . . Conceptions" 193). The phenomenographical approach implies that "in between the common and the idiosyncratic there . . . exists a level of modes of experience, forms of thought, worthwhile studying" ("Phenomenography: Describing Conceptions" 181).

4) Phenomenological investigation aims at unveiling pre-reflective, preconscious reality, whereas phenomenography

would deal with both the conceptual and the experiential, as well with what is thought of as that which is lived. . . . [It] would also deal with what is culturally learned and with what are individually developed ways of relating ourselves to the world around us.

("Phenomenography: Describing Conceptions" 181).

The most relevant aspect of phenomenography to the kind of research I conducted is that it validates descriptions as much as their regrouping and

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analysis. This research methodology recognizes the value of the experience *per se*. Whereas in traditional phenomenological research the descriptions serve as a background for categorization and generalization, in phenomenographical studies descriptions are as valid as the generalizations that may follow ("Phenomenography: Exploring . . . Conceptions" 180):

> The source of variation has practically always been superordinate to that which varies (i.e. conceptions of a certain aspect of reality). What we are arguing for here is a shift of perspective by means of which we might turn the classificatory system on its axis and begin to use conceptions of various aspects of reality as the superordinate categories instead of those sources of variation which give rise to variation in the conceptions (such as individual differences, development, learning etc.) This focusing on conceptions of specific aspects of reality, i.e. on apprehended (perceived, conceptualized or "lived") contents of thought or experience, as a point of departure for carrying out research, and as a base for integrating the findings, is in fact the most distinctive feature of the domain labeled "phenomenography."
>
> ("Phenomenography: Describing Conceptions" 188-189)

In their writings Beittel and Eisner reflect a measure of endorsement of phenomenography without labelling it as such. In *Alternatives for Art Education Research* Beittel advocates a form of research based on the "Roshomon" [sic]

effect, in which reality lies in personalized accounts of events. Research, therefore, should concentrate on what is unique in individuals:

> Let the accounts of the unique proliferate, and let the viewpoint of the person reporting define his [her] own relation (unavoidable, though called "contamination" in some behavioral studies) to the events he is trying to understand.

<div align="right">(Alternatives 9)</div>

Generalizations in Beittel's view "are pale reflections almost out of touch with man's [woman's] artistic life, and under a world-view of objective-mindedness they tend to be reductive of man's [woman's] artistic life itself" (9). Thus, to probe into the artistic process, Beittel devised a procedure by which the researcher, acting as a personally involved "participant observer," studies psychic realities of the aesthetic experience in the process of the student's art making.

In his article "On Differences Between Scientific and Artistic Approaches to Qualitative Research," Eisner advocates a phenomenological approach to research. Some of his assertions echo the phenomenographical position: research in art focuses on the experience of individuals rather than on their behaviour; the researcher-observer is expected to be able to project him/herself into the experience of another person in order to understand the meaning embedded in the experience of the latter; generalizations are extracted from data of non-randomly selected individuals--what is learned from particular data can be

applied to similar situations; the content of the art work is in its form; artistic investigation is not objective, for it selects and emphasizes according to the researcher's intention; the investigator is the major instrument of the research he/she conducts. Since Eisner's phenomenology is geared towards the arts, it is less formally constructed and more open-ended than phenomenography, which serves a larger and more diversified field of investigation.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the kind of research used in this thesis also falls within the action research model sometimes labeled as reflective teaching, teacher as researcher, teaching as inquiry, and critical praxis. Unlike the strictly academic research model which focuses on theory, action research is oriented towards practical educational problems arising from particular class situations. Projects undertaken inside the framework of this methodology spring directly from teacher-pupil interaction on a moment-to-moment and daily basis. By its nature, action research is qualitative and interpretative and rests on ethnographic field oriented methods such as note-taking, observation, diary keeping, interviewing, and dialogue. This methodology allows teachers to

> attend to the nuances they often miss in the blur of routine practice,
>
> try to become more conscious of what they are thinking and feeling
>
> as they plan for and engage in effort to understand what sense
>
> students are making of their learning.

Wanda T. May briefly traces the origin and history of action research. Interest in action research appeared first in the United States in 1946 following a model devised by K. Lewin. It received sporadic attention during the 1950s but was put aside and remained dormant until the 1980s. The model, however, gathered momentum in England by the activities generated by L. Stenhouse during the mid-1970s. Action research was further developed in Australia by W. Carr, S. Kemmis, and R. McTaggart. Because the action research model lends itself well to research connected with social issues, it was adopted by researchers interested in social politics. Action research was rekindled in the United States in the 1980s and has been widely used until recently (May 120-121). However, in the 1992 update of "Art Education" in the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, George W. Hardiman and Theodore Zernich point out that the number of studies based on action research has sharply declined in recent years (259).

TEACHING METHODS

While my research methodology relies mostly on phenomenological techniques as elaborated above, my teaching method is mostly anchored in the concept of reflection-in-action as elaborated by Donald A. Schön. In fact, Schön's model provides a bridge between the research process and the

teaching methodology I used; the students and myself were concomitantly engaged in a process of reflection-in-action. Schön developed a method of teaching the applied professions based on his assumptions that the professions are practised in the real world--commensurate with the nature of any given practice. He examines the manner in which professionals perform their *métier* and suggests a method of researching their craft through the mediation of education. Schön's key concept is knowledge-in-action and reflection-in-action.

Schön defines knowledge-in-action as knowledge "inherent in intelligent action" (*The Design* 21). Practitioners in any professional domain exercise know-how in a spontaneous manner, without conscious reference to a prior intellectual operation. Knowledge-in-action is tacit; it often escapes verbal description (*Educating* 25). Schön warns against confusing descriptions of tacit knowing-in-action with the action they purport to expound. Descriptions, in his view, are "constructions" contaminated by the type of languages used and the "values, strategies, and assumptions that make up our 'theories' of action" (*Educating* 25). Schön characterizes knowing-in-action as dynamic compared to the static nature of facts, procedures, rules, and theories (*Educating 25*).

A reflection-in-action is grafted to the knowledge-in-action when a practitioner encounters a "unique and uncertain situation" (*The Reflective* 130), a "surprise," (mentioned several times in *The Design Studio*). Using the example of a designer, Schön describes how, in the course of manipulating a complex process involving materials and language of a specific medium, the practitioner

produces unexpected effects and reflects on and reacts to the unintended development. In such circumstances, the designer evaluates the new situation in accordance with his/her previous moves and his/her final intentions. It is a process of making reflective conversation with his/her materials. Schön ascribes an active role to the unexpected outcome:

> the situation "talks back," and he [the designer] responds to the situation's back-talk.
>
> In a good process of design, this conversation with the situation is reflective. In answer to the situation's back-talk, the designer reflects-in-action on the construction of the problem, the strategies of action, or the model of the phenomena, which have been implicit in his [her] moves.
>
> (*The Reflective* 79)

Schön views the appearance of a surprise, and the practitioner's reaction to it, as the cornerstone for what he calls "artistry" (*The Design* 27). Surprises break the ease, certainty, and predictability that a skilled practitioner enjoys. They are often associated with conflicting values and cause tensions. Uniqueness, uncertainty, value-conflict, and tension create what Shön calls *Intermediate zones of practice* (*The Design* 25). At these junctions, the practitioner reflects on the surprising phenomena, while he/she continues to work with the spontaneity that characterizes knowing-in-action, in order eventually to make sense of the uncertain and confusing situations. It is at this stage that the

practitioner gives an artist's performance. Schön describes artistry as

a capacity to combine reflection and action, on the spot, often

under stress--to examine understandings and appreciations while

the train is running, in the midst of performance. It is artistry, in the

sense, that enables some individuals to be competent in situations

that do not fit the preconceived categories of technique, theory or

rule of thumb, that make up the corpus of "professional

knowledge."

<div align="right">(The Design 27)</div>

Schön views reflection-in-action as a chain of internal conversations in the

process of solving problems that arise in the course of any professional activity.

The resolution of problems calls for reframing the situation which, in turn, creates

new surprises or uncertainties:

The process spirals through stages of appreciation, action, and

reappreciation. The unique and uncertain situation comes to be

understood through the attempt to change it, and changed through

the attempt to understand it.

<div align="right">(The Reflective 132)</div>

Reflection-in-action differs from knowing-in-action in that it involves a measure of

conscious activity; "it converts tacit knowing-in-action to explicit knowledge for

action" (The Design Studio 25). Reflection-in-action is distinguished from other

forms of thinking in that it takes place in the "action-present" (The Design 25), at

<div align="center">70</div>

a time when the thinking has a bearing on the final product.

Schön attributes a critical dimension to reflection-in-action in its questioning the assumptions of knowing-in-action: "It involves judgments about what is 'nice,' 'good,' 'interesting'" (*The Design Studio* 64). The practitioner analyzes the process that brought on the undesirable effect and constructs strategies for reaction. New strategies require what Schön calls "*exploratory experimentation*"(*The Reflective* 145). Exploratory experimentation is experimentation conducted without a hypothesis in mind. "Exploratory experiment is the probing, playful activity by which we get a feel for things. It succeeds when it leads to the discovery of something there" (*The Reflective* 145). The practitioner tries several moves guided by the question "what if?" After a process of trial and error, he/she finally accepts the move that answers in the affirmative the question: "Do you like what you get?" (*The Reflective* 146). Similarly to knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action escapes verbal articulation. However, one can produce a description of the reflection-in-action and, in turn, reflect on the resulting description. Indeed, Schön proposes an hierarchy of several layers of reflection-in-action in his book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner.*

Schön's method of teaching the applied professions is based on his assumptions on how the professions are practised in everyday situations. He perceives the teacher as a coach whose role is to guide students with their process of knowing-in- and reflecting-on-action. The teacher, acting as a

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professional, also applies his/her artistry imbedded in the knowing-in- and reflecting-on process. In addition, the teacher as researcher applies the same techniques for the purpose of evaluating his/her professional performance.

Among the professions that Schön elaborates on, design is the closest to art production. According to Schön, the teaching of design comprises three factors: the practicum, the teacher/coach, and the student. He describes the practicum as

> a virtual world, relatively free of the pressures, distractions, and
> risks of the real one, to which, nevertheless, it refers. It stands in
> an intermediate space between the practice world, the "lay" world
> of ordinary life, and the esoteric world of the academy. It is also a
> collective world in its own right, with its own mix of materials, tools,
> languages, and appreciations. It embodies particular ways of
> seeing, thinking, and doing that tend, over time, as far as the
> student is concerned, to assert themselves with increasing
> authority.

> (*Educating* 37)

Teachers, students, and materials co-operate within the practicum. Learning is taking place through doing and through interaction between student, coach, and fellow students. In Schön's view, groups of students working together are often as important as the coach. Although the coach may teach some rules of the profession, he/she primarily guides students to go beyond stable rules to

discover new methods of reasonings, constructs, and strategies of action through the process of reflection-in-action (*Educating* 38-39).

Because design, grasped as a whole, is a holistic concept, it cannot be taught in a piecemeal manner. Consequently, the beginner student must plunge into a design project with no previous experience. Thus, in the early stages of training, students may feel mystified, confused, and anxious. The coach, too, is in an awkward situation. He/she cannot tell the students what design is because of their limited background and because of the lack of stable rules. The first meaningful interaction between coach and students begins when a student produces something that provides a first occasion for a dialogue to emerge (*Educating* 100, 158-169).

Schön discerns three essential features for a dialogue: "it takes place in the context of the student's attempt to design; it makes use of actions as well as words; and it depends on reciprocal reflection-in-action" (*Educating* 101). From the initial efforts of the student's design, the coach assesses what the student already knows and understands and what his/her difficulties are. The coach can then take any of several steps: he/she can show or tell, demonstrate, offer a model to imitate, use questions, descriptions, advice, and criticism to help the student find a solution to certain features of designing. Schön emphasizes that

> Whatever the coach may choose to say, it is important that he [she]
> say it, for the most part, in the context of the student's *doing*. He
> [she] must talk to the student while she is in the midst of a task

(and perhaps stuck in it), or is about to begin a new task, or thinks back on a task she just completed, or rehearses in imagination a task she may perform in the future.

<div align="right">(Educating 102)</div>

For his/her part, the student tests the suggestions made by the coach through a process of reflection-in-action. In turn, the coach responds to the student's interpretations with additional showing and telling, thus inducing the student to improve the design. This process continues until the student finally produces a competent design (Educating 101). Schön characterizes a good design coach as someone who

> has at his [her] disposal and is capable of inventing on the spot many strategies of instruction, questioning, and describing--all aimed at responding to the difficulties and potentials of a particular student who is trying to do something.

<div align="right">(Educating 105)</div>

Schön warns that in order for learning to succeed, there has to be the right kind of communication between coach and student. Both parties must adopt a "stance" (Educating 119), an attitude that will facilitate reciprocal reflection-in-action. For Schön, the stance is a broad concept that includes attitudes, feelings, ways of perceiving, and understandings. Schön puts the onus on the students. Regardless of the risk of losing control and self-confidence, they must put themselves in the hands of the coach, abandoning for

a while what they already know and some of their values. The students are asked to put their trust in the studio coach, be willing to try his/her approach, follow his/her instruction to the extent that they become dependent on him/her, yet retain a measure of ability for reflective self-education (*Educating* 120). The coach is not to take advantage of the students' vulnerability. He/she must be able to actively search for a convergence of meaning between him/herself and the students through a dialogue of reciprocal reflection-in-action (*Educating* 138). Schön brings several detailed examples of a mutual reflection-in-action-based dialogue between student and teacher in *The Design Studio*.

In my pedagogical activities I relied heavily on Schön's practical propositions:

1. I assigned open painting projects in which the students became engaged in the practice of tacit knowing-in-action and in reflection-in-action. The latter occurred when the students seemed to hit a "surprise" or an impass. Rather than telling the students how to overcome the problems they encountered, I encouraged them to examine the new situation and find creative solutions that would perhaps lead them to change some of the preconceived ideas they may have had at the onset of the project. Thus, the students had to question their assumptions embedded in their knowing-in-action and embark on experimentation. By devising exercises that originate in visual language, I involved the students in a reflective conversation with the materials. During the

production of each project and on its completion, I engaged the students in their knowing-in and reflection-in action in the form of dialogue with individuals and a class discussion.

2. Class set-up and activities corresponded to Schön's description of the practicum. Learning took place through an interaction between the students and myself and between students and their classmates. The students worked in a well-equipped studio facility with materials used by art professionals. Yet they were sheltered from the competitiveness of the art world. Together with the students, I managed to create a non-threatening atmosphere where students could perform risky experimentation, evaluate the results they obtained, and eventually develop a sense of independence.

3. In conformity with my holistic approach to art, I endorsed Schön's assertion that art cannot be taught by a progression from the easy to the complex. Consequently, the students were asked to produce a painting before they knew how to paint; they had to plunge into making a painting with hardly any previous experience. As a result they first displayed hesitation and insecurity. They managed to overcome these feelings in the process of interacting with me and with their fellow students.

4. My dialogue with individual students matched Schön's model of reflection-in-action. I engaged the students in a reciprocal reflection-in-action based on their individual experience. I used questions, descriptions, telling, demonstrations, and criticism as teaching instruments all within the context of the

actual painting activity. At the same time I encouraged the students to evaluate my suggestions and to propose solutions that fitted their intention. I will evaluate these efforts in the last chapter.

CHAPTER 4

PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITIES

In order to examine the effectiveness of the application of Saint-Martin's visual language to the teaching practice as outlined in the previous chapter, I recorded the class procedures over the duration of the course by notes, and by audio and video tapes. I received a written consent from the students to participate in the study. I used fictitious names in order to assure anonymity. Unaccustomed to combining teaching with research, I encountered a number of technical shortcomings. As a result most of the videotapes and a small portion of the audiotapes were unfortunately lost, but I compensated for this by making detailed notes at the end of each class.

Following the ideas expressed in the previous chapter, I devised a painting course that would enable me to integrate Saint-Martin's visual language in my teaching practice. The teaching section of the thesis took place within a *Painting I* course offered by the Department of Fine Arts at Bishop's University presented in two, three-hour weekly sessions totaling seventy-two hours over twelve teaching weeks. The Fine Arts programme follows the University's liberal arts orientation to impart a general education in art in both its academic and

studio manifestations. As such, it is not tailored to train artists or other art professionals. It is worthwhile mentioning that no previous experience in or knowledge of art is required of students who register in the Fine Arts programme. Furthermore, there are no prerequisites for the painting course. Students can enroll in a first-level painting course with no previous experience in studio practice. The present study was conducted in the winter term of 1995. The class was composed of fifteen students who had only a scant experience in painting, acquired during a brief session in acrylic painting within the framework of a multidisciplinary Foundation Course.

In this course I intended to give priority to visual language over verbal language by reaffirming the significance of the formal elements of painting. In the choice of the painting projects and in the discussions on the finished work, I engaged the students in a specific practice: how to search and find meaning in the formal elements in images on a flat surface. The students participated in painting projects, discussions on their finished paintings, analysis of paintings along the lines of selected aspects of Saint-Martin's visual language, written assignments on selected exhibitions, and a final take-home exam.

Except for the first introductory project, the majority of the painting projects were designed to encourage students to use materials and visual variables such as form, colour, texture, etc. as a starting point and inspiration for their paintings; to raise awareness of how the shape and size of the pictorial surface (the Basic Plane) affect the evolution of the painted image; and to

explore the expressive character derived from the various perspectives. The last project was a modest attempt to guide students into making a link between the expressive content rooted in visual language and their personal experience.

Students executed ten painting projects:

1. Have you ever been in a situation in which you felt the urge to paint a scene you have observed or imagined? If this is the case, try to fulfill your wish using the materials at your disposal.

2. "A painter takes the sun and makes it into a yellow spot. An artist takes a yellow spot and makes it into a sun" (Picasso). Guided by Picasso's statement, choose a pair of complementary colours using black and white for tonality variations. Create a painting in which the colours determine the content of your work.

3. Create a painting by manipulating masses of painted areas. Proceed from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, i.e., starting from the global and gradually filling in the details. Work simultaneously on the entire painting support.

4 & 5. For the next two paintings, prepare your painting surface by applying a variety of textures using materials to create slight relief effects. Let the texture guide your subject matter. The two projects will be carried out by a) using a variety of suitable materials, b) using acrylic modeling paste.

6 & 7. Inspired by Matisse's cut-out works, prepare large areas of hand-

coloured sheets of paper; cut them into shapes and assemble them onto a support surface in conformity with a chosen theme. There are two projects: a) an individual collage, b) a group collage.

8 & 9. Using a life model, create a painting that will reflect your personal interpretation of the person in front of you. The two projects: a) a female model, b) a male model.

10. Produce a painting associated with a meaningful personal experience.

The importance and emphasis I accorded to the manipulation of materials is validated by Norman Bryson. Bryson warns against the trend in contemporary criticism of ignoring the techniques and materials in the analysis of paintings in favour of preoccupation with social content. Bryson argues that

> besides the codes of the real, there are codes specific to the
>
> material signifying practice of painting; codes which cannot be
>
> mastered, so to speak, simply by inhaling the atmosphere of a
>
> given culture. To approach the image from the sociology or
>
> anthropology of a given *knowledge* is to risk ignoring the image as
>
> the product of *technique*. If the concrete nature of technique is
>
> overlooked, analysis of the image falls into immediate implification:
>
> only its semantic or iconological side is noted. (16)

On presentation of each painting project, the students received brief instruction on the painting task and on the techniques to be used. Except for the mural, which took two weeks to complete, students worked one week on each

project (two three hour cessions). The students painted mostly during class time, enabling them to interact with fellow students and with me. During the painting period, in addition to reacting to questions addressed to me, I often engaged the students in a dialogue concerning either the work in progress, or on any of their finished work. At the completion of each painting project, students were engaged in a class discussion on their paintings. The discussions focused on:

1. the general reactions to the project, or to a particular painting chosen by the students;

2. the visual and verbal language and the nature of the interaction between the two;

3. the contribution of art materials to the production process and to the content of the work, and the link between the materials and the visual language;

4. the visual variables and their interaction;

5. the structure of the students' work: local (sections of paintings), and global (the entire work);

6. the students' satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the results of their work;

7. the students' reflection process during and on completion of their work;

8. the students' confidence or lack of it in their art production;

9. the expression of emotions and pleasure;

10. the presence of sensorial manifestations other than sight.

The dialogues with individual students and the class discussions served as the

primary source for the description and interpretation of the pedagogical activities throughout the thesis.

In addition to the painting projects, the students executed four written assignments: a short report on their first project, an extensive account of an exhibition of paintings by David Sorensen guided by a questionnaire (see appendix 1), a short statement on an aspect of the visual language of a painting (individually selected by the students) from an exhibition by Marie Cuerrier-Hébert, and a take-home exam in which students wrote an extensive analysis of one of their paintings (see appendix 3).

Parallel to the painting projects and the written reports, the students were systematically introduced to selected aspects of Saint-Martin's visual language through a brief oral presentation, use of blackboard, and reproduction of paintings in poster form. The presentation was followed by engaging the students in a short drill in which they were asked to indentify on the posters the selected aspects of visual language. The instruction of the visual language was not directly linked to specific projects; that is, the students were not asked to demonstrate the theory in their paintings. The theoretical instruction was given in ten units spread over the semester:

UNIT ONE: VISIBLE VARIABLES

The visual variables include: colour, texture, boundary/form, dimension, vectoriality (direction). The study of colour included: chromaticity, saturation,

tonality, luminosity, and interaction of colour.

Chromaticity: A distinction of thirteen chromatic poles: red, blue, yellow, green, orange, violet, ochre, purple, brown, rose, white, black, and gray. Unlike traditional theories hierarchically constructed and based on light rays or mechanical printing, the chromes correspond to the way colour is experienced by light reflected on an opaque surface, relevant to the artist's experience.

Saturation: A maximum level of intensity and vibrancy of a colour. Saturation is affected by the interaction of a given colour with its surroundings.

Tonality: The quality of light and darkness.

Luminosity: The vibration of luminous rays that dematerialize the support surface and suggest the presence of a film of colour. Luminosity is attained by the saturation of certain colours, by the way colour is spread, by the surrounding area, and by the manipulation of colour and texture.

Interaction of colour: Complementary and other simultaneous contrasts of colours and tonalities.

Texture: Differentiation of textural effects such as hard, soft, rugged, smooth, shiny, opaque, flat, and many others. Distinction between texture of the prepainted support and that which is produced by pictorial intervention.

Boundary/form: A demarcation between neighbouring groups of variables: i.e., between two visually differentiated zones. Distinction between open and closed forms. Forms enclosed by linear elements are closed forms. When the boundaries of a mass are almost indistinguishable, they suggest open

forms.

UNIT TWO: THE BASIC UNIT: THE *COLORÈME*.

The *colorème* is a group of visible variables perceived within the parameter of a single glance of the eye. Because of the nature of perception, the *colorème* is structured as a topological region open to multiple changes in size and form. The *colorèmes* appear in continuity; they are never separated by voids or silences. Since the *colorèmes* exist in a state of constant transformation in a field of energetic forces, the laws by which they regroup are flexible to suit the dynamic milieu in which they operate. The *colorème* is an autonomous unit with global characteristics that differ from the visual variables.

UNIT THREE: REGIONS AND SUB-REGIONS

Division of the visual field into a maximum of six highly contrasted regions for the purpose of syntactic analysis. Division of regions to sub-regions.

UNIT FOUR: TOPOLOGICAL RELATIONS

Identification of the topological relations among the regions and sub-regions: neighbouring, separation, order of succession, envelopment, and encasing.

Neighbouring: The perception of a continuity in a neighbouring field. The establishment of an immediate link among elements that could otherwise be

seen as independent from one another.

Separation: The perception of contrast or disjunction among groups of *colorèmes* caused by some of the visual variables.

Order of succession: A relationship among *colorèmes* in which some of the visual variables are repeated and thus create rhythm.

Envelopment: An interrelationship between a colorème surrounded in part or in full by other *colorèmes*.

UNIT FIVE: GESTALTIAN RELATIONS

Junction and disjunction among regions in a given visual field on the basis of similarity/dissimilarity among six visual variables: colour, tonality, texture, dimension, contour, vectoriality. This exercise is facilitated by the use of a table specially prepared for the task (see appendix 4).

UNIT SIX: THE BASIC PLANE

The active underlying physical support for any visual representation. The Basic Plane is an energized material plane which pre-exists any visual representation. It contains a gestaltian structure which affects the pictorial marks inserted by an artist. The origin of the structure is located in the meeting of the vertical and horizontal lines, creating intense regions and sub-regions according to their position on the infrastructure of the Basic Plane: corners, edges, diagonals, crossings of horizontal and vertical virtual lines.

UNIT SEVEN: PERSPECTIVES

Observation of perspectives, globally and locally, according to the distances between the producer and the symbolic field, the angles of vision, and the type of vision solicited by the viewer (close/far). Evaluation of distances among the objects. Identification of disjunctions in distance and contradictory viewpoints.

UNIT EIGHT: "GOOD"/"BAD" GESTALT

Naming of regions/sub-regions bearing iconic connotations and analyzing their characteristics of "good" or "bad" gestalt. Assessment of the perceptual distances established by their position on the Basic Plane. Comparison with the spatial logic of the natural world.

UNIT TEN: SUMMARY

A co-operative effort in performing a comprehensive formal analysis of Chagall's painting, *My Village*.

How these activities unrolled within the context of the class dynamics is documented and interpreted to form the core section of the thesis. I ask the question: how will first-year painting students at Bishop's University be able to employ or not employ the selected aspects of Saint-Martin's visual language in the production and analysis of selected paintings?

CHAPTER 5

THE QUEST FOR THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION

OF THE NATURAL WORLD

For the first painting project of this course I looked for an assignment that in my assessment would meet the students' expectations of a painting class. Over the years I have noticed that students expect me to teach them how to imitate or represent scenes or objects of the natural world in as faithful a manner as possible. Hence the eternal questions of how to make sky, lakes, sea, waves, waterfalls, clouds, mountains, people, and a very long list of other items. Naturally, I did not want nor was I able to provide the students with formulae--i.e. what amounted to a bag of tricks.

I noticed that when students were challenged to reflect on and assess the measure of success attained in their painting, they often focused on the resemblance of the painted scenes or objects to the way they are perceived in everyday three-dimensional space. Students without previous painting experience thus drew the conclusion that for lack of talent or skills they had failed to produce an adequate painting. They tended to overlook the fact that the

objects they depicted were subject to the constraints and advantages of the painting materials. Therefore, during the first few classes of my present course, I tried to shift the focus away from images faithfully representing external reality to an expression of internal reality embedded in the manipulation of the materials, and in the visual elements of painting, i.e. to give more prominence to visual language than to verbal language (to use Saint-Martin's terminology).

Since I feared that this approach would not succeed with students who have different expectations, I challenged them to paint what I presumed would satisfy them. I hoped the difficulties and frustrations that they would encounter would prepare them to accept a different and easier route to achieve gratification, more attuned to their present skills and in conformity to my personal approach to art making and art instruction. Although the exercise was geared to an expression usually associated with verbal language, I casually interlaced the discussions with considerations pertaining to visual language.

The Assignment

> **Have you ever been in a situation in which you felt the urge to paint a scene you have observed or imagined? If this is the case, try to fulfill your wish using the materials at your disposal.**

The Response

As expected, the students' paintings consisted of familiar scenes and objects. The images they portrayed, whether from memory or from the imagination, were drawn from their daily surroundings. The students painted landscapes, plants, human figures, animals, a house, cars, and the like. Only two students produced non-objective paintings. A glance at the paintings, however, reveals that whether intentionally or for lack of skills, the students' paintings did not reflect an exact depiction of the scenes and objects as they appear in the natural world. During the painting process and in their reflection on the finished products, the students' dialogue initially focused on the similarity/dissimilarity of the painted objects to their mental perceptions at the origin of the painting activity. The students perceived deviations from exact imitation as mistakes caused by failure of memory or lack of technique.

An extreme example of the tendency faithfully to imitate worldly objects was evident in Jasmine's behaviour. Instead of embarking on the assigned project, Jasmine was busy gessoing several masonite boards. When asked to explain her uncalled-for activity, Jasmine replied that she could not paint the person she wished to portray without the presence of the live model. Jasmine promised that she would paint at home, where she would have access to the subject. On the suggestion that she paint from memory, Jasmine dabbed her brush in blue paint and spread it on a large section of her painting board. She

then decided to turn the blue area into a representation of water (sea or lake). Before long, Jasmine expressed dissatisfaction because the water did not look "real" (*Personal Teaching Journal* 15 Jan. 1995: 2). In a similar vein, Brenda, who has also been preoccupied with the resemblance of her painted landscape to the actual scene in the natural world, agonized over how to paint the sky. Brenda too became annoyed at her inability to depict the intended time of day (noon), the conventional linear perspective, and, in general, a faithful imitation of nature (*Teaching Journal* 17 Jan. 1995: 5).

Milder disappointments in failing to imitate reality were reflected in other students' remarks on their work. Jacob, who painted a surrealistic scene, observed that he had failed to endow his cars with a sense of motion and his objects with an appearance of three-dimensional depth. He overlooked the motion created by the rhythmic effects of the teeth and the broken yellow line. Unlike Jacob, Krista was satisfied with the way she painted the trees because "they look like trees" (*Teaching Journal* 22 Jan. 1995: 8). However, she was disappointed in her endeavour to depict a dead tree, in part because she did not possess a clear image of a decayed tree. She therefore eliminated this item from her painting altogether. Even Mary, who on the whole disregarded the logic of the natural world in her semi-abstracted surrealistic scene, struggled to make the bird appear as if it were just about to take off.

Regardless of the overwhelming effort invested in imitating scenes and objects, the students did not escape an overt as well as a covert awareness of

the visual language which they expressed casually during the process of the production, and later on, in a written account of their first painting.

During the production process Jasmine painted a blue surface before she invested it with a verbal meaning: water. Jacob remarked that the support (the masonite board) he had been working on was too small to accommodate a sense of movement. Krista departed from her original mental image by adding a "sun" and a "yellow background to fit the trees" (*Teaching Journal* 22 Jan. 1995: 8). Krista's use of the term "background" instead of "sky" is indicative of her reference to visual language. Moreover, she emphasized her satisfaction with this part of the painting without providing an additional reason other than it looked right. When Nadia's memory of a section of her family's garden failed, she resorted to working on the "green mass" in the lower section of her painting with no reference to the original. She, first introduced "contrasts" in the "dull green" and later added red flowers "to enliven the area" (*Teaching Journal* 22 Jan. 1995: 8). Nadia felt restricted in her choice of colours as she struggled to reproduce a scene from her garden. Eventually she resorted to improvisation, answering to compositional demands rather than remaining faithful to a memory of everyday reality. Mary, whose image developed during the painting process, was not preoccupied with any sort of imitation, except for the posture of the bird on which she was working. Mary expressed satisfaction with her painting but had some reservation about the "water." Because a red background is not usually considered to be sky, I suspect that Mary's dissatisfaction did not stem

from a lack of resemblance to water, but rather from the somewhat awkward appearance of the blue area in the bottom half of the painting. Suzanne, like Mary, did not follow a clear mental image in her painting. But, unlike Mary, Suzanne produced a painting with no apparent reference to worldly objects. Yet she pointed to a certain dissatisfaction with the "white mountains" (*Teaching Journal* 22 Jan. 1995: 9), meaning the white jagged area which evoked an association with mountains, a process by which the visual language gave rise to verbal language. Rita qualified her own landscape painting as "bland." She expressed the wish to paint "free flowing lively forms" similar to the work of Suzanne and Mary (*Teaching Journal* 22 Jan. 1995: 10).

In their written assessments of their paintings, the students displayed a much higher level of awareness of the visual elements than they did in the oral discussion. Krista's report focused on contrasts among the visual elements as well as on structural considerations. She explained how

contrasts of saturation and tonalities: the "luminous yellow" and "brilliant blue" in opposition to the "dull" green of the trees;

texture: "the blue with its glints of white" against the yellow monotone;

form: the open forms of land, sea, sky, and trees versus the sun with its red rim;

and direction: the horizontality of the land, sea, and sky intersecting with the verticality of the trees

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--all contributed to an overall harsh painting. But Krista found some relief from the harshness in the texture of the trees and their vertical direction, claiming that both contribute to a softening effect on the yellow-blue contrast (*Students' Analysis of Project 1*:1).

Lorna emphasized the special effect caused by the juxtaposition of complementary colours. She observed that the orange-coloured cheese enhances the blue of the sky and that the yellow patch in the mouse heightens the intensity of the purple. Lorna added that the contrast between the closed forms of the mouse, cheese, and castle as against the open forms of the surroundings causes the objects to appear somewhat detached from the landscape they inhabit (*Analysis* 1).

Judith too focused on colour interaction; she remarked that the redness in the sun and sky, together with their reflection in the water, complement the green in the trees. She also observed that "the wildness of the trees is shown by the rough strokes that the brush left behind." In an awkwardly worded section, Judith explained how her choice of predominantly monochromatic colours created harmony, regardless of the contrast between these "warm" colours of red, yellow, and brown set against the green trees (*Analysis* 2).

Brenda used the assignment to criticize the lack of mimetic accuracy in her work. She complained that the green mountains appeared as if they were inserted in the white mountains instead of jutting out in front of them. Brenda attributed the wrong perspective to the heavy texture applied to the white

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mountains compared to the soft textural treatment of the chain of green mountains. I pointed out to her, however, the more obvious reasons such as colour, tonality, and dimensional contrasts. She went on to complain about the inconsistent distribution of light, the density of the cluster of trees in the distance, their blending with the mountains behind, and the lack of volume in the mountains. Brenda noticed that the chain of triangular shapes that made up the mountains created a horizontal movement. "The open form of the grass" was the only part of the painting she approved (*Teaching Journal* 11 Feb. 1995: 35a). It is evident that Brenda examined the visual variables in terms of their effectiveness in creating illusionist space. Sabrina, however, was not disturbed by the odd dimension of the figure in her painting because the rest of the painting "is [equally] not real" (*Analysis* 2). Jacob briefly observed that the contrast between the closed form of the mouth and the open form of the tongue "livens up the painting" (*Analysis* 3).

My reaction to the students' papers took the form of conversations with individual students addressing some obvious mistakes or omissions on their part. In addition, in my chats with them I threw in a few hints about elements of visual language to be introduced later on during the course. For example, I pointed out to Jasmine that a) true to her observation, the house is indeed an open form, but so are the land and the sea; b) the house contains closed forms; c) the section of house that borders on the edge of the painting appears closer to the viewer than the opposite side of the house; d) the part of the crow which overlaps the house

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seems to protrude, whereas the part which borders with the sea recedes because of the diverging backgrounds. In the same vein, I indicated to Brenda that the chain of white mountains tend to push forward not so much because of the pronounced texture as because of the low tonality, the large area they occupy, and their positioning parallel to the top edge of the painting. I alerted Mary to errors in terminology because she did not properly differentiate between colour, tonality, and luminosity. Mary failed to mention the luminous atmospheric effect in the oval-shaped pink/white area behind the bird--a fact I couldn't overlook, since such an effect rarely appears in student work.

For the duration of the first painting project, I kept a low-level contact with the students so as not to risk intimidating them at a time when they may have felt vulnerable. I limited my task to a formal presentation of the assignment together with reassuring remarks to individual students as I made the rounds of the classroom. The purpose of my unsolicited interference at that stage was to demonstrate interest in the students' work and to validate their effort. However, in response to their questions, I began to steer them toward an awareness and use of a visual language. For example, when Mary struggled to give her bird a sense of taking-off, I suggested that she look for a solution in the context of the larger painting, i.e. in the elements surrounding the bird, and not exclusively in the bird's posture, thus anticipating the chapter on rhythm and movement in visual language. Following my advice, Mary painted sun-rays in the direction of

the bird's intended flight. Mary expressed satisfaction with this solution. However, she later on proudly announced that she had added a new wing to the bird that further accentuated the sought-after flight direction. When Brenda manipulated the blue paint at the top of her painting to obtain the illusion of a receding sky, I suggested that she first bring to par the sections of the painting that were still at an initial stage. I implied that changes to these areas may result in pushing the sky backwards, thus alluding to the contribution of colour-form interaction to the creation of depth.

Throughout the first project my pedagogical activities led the students to focus on the visual variables. However, the students' perceptions remained superficial: they overlooked roughly half of the visual elements; they made mistakes in vocabulary; they lacked the verbal skill to describe the visible variables; and they were content only to list them. On rare occasions, when the students managed to describe texture or colour, they were also able to attach meaning to them. For example, rough texture was perceived as harsh or wild, and light texture evoked softness. On the whole, the students succeeded in detecting contrasts, but they were not sensitive to subtleties. They focused on the perception of colour, texture, and closed and open forms; they paid less attention to the shapes and dimensions of the forms. The students' inability to articulate form can perhaps be linked to the fact that most of the forms depicted in the paintings were objects of the natural world. There was therefore no need to give these objects visual language attributes. It is more natural to say the

water, the sea, or the lake than the blue rectangular horizontally positioned mass at the lower section of the painting. Although the students constantly referred to the recognizable objects and agonized about faithfully rendering them, they never expressed emotional or aesthetic attachments *vis à vis* these objects, nor did they invest them with conceptual meanings. In most cases, the students appeared determined to imitate scenes or objects with no apparent reason other than to make them look "real."

As expected, the task of painting a preconceived image quickly made the students realize that they did not possess the necessary skills to execute their ideas; hence the tension exuding from behind the easels. The students were stiff: they kept to themselves, showing little interest in a personal interaction with me or with their fellow-students. This reserved attitude may, in great part, be attributed to a sense of apprehension at the start of a new academic year. The students seemed overwhelmed by the task of picking a topic from an infinite array of possibilities, by the lack of technical guidelines, and by the daunting task of transposing a virtual image onto a two-dimensional surface, using materials they were only vaguely familiar with. Nadia categorically stated that she did not like the painting because she worried too much during the painting process. Similarly, Brenda was stressed and worried as she was driven to paint "all the details" making sure that "everything was in it."

Because of the rather defeatist attitude that the students exhibited, I assumed that they were disappointed with their work. To my surprise, on asking

them to assess their satisfaction with the finished product, most of them displayed a modest level of pleasure and satisfaction. Suzanne and Mary, however, who did not aspire to imitate worldly objects, seemed less critical of their work than those students who failed to portray what they perceived as a realistic image. The lowest level of contentment was expressed by Brenda who more than anybody else, insisted on reproducing the appearance of the "real world" in her painting.

It may be safe to conclude that in this exercise I achieved at least two of the goals I set for myself at the beginning: 1) the students realized the limitations of their painting ability; 2) I managed to draw their attention to and their engagement with the visual elements of painting. Whether or not the students were ready to follow a different direction is addressed in the next exercises.

CHAPTER 6

THE SHIFTING OF GEARS: FROM EXTERNAL TO

INTERNAL REALITY

In contrast to the first project, and perhaps in reaction to it, the second

project was conceived in order to urge students to use visual components, a pair

of complementary colours, as a starting point and inspiration for their paintings.

The purpose of this exercise was to upgrade the visual elements from their low

status as tools in the service of a verbal thought process to the status of equal

partnership in a dialogue that accompanies the creative process.

The Assignment

"A painter takes the sun and makes it into a yellow spot. An artist takes a yellow spot and makes it into a sun" (Picasso). Guided by Picasso's statement, choose a pair of complementary colours using black and white for tonality variations. Create a painting in which the colours determine the content of your work.

The Response

A close observation of the students' painting activity together with brief interactions with them revealed how they used the visual elements to guide the content of their work. Several students described the process by which their choice of complementary colours, and the way they intuitively or deliberately applied them, shaped the evolution of their work.

Mary began her painting with four small red and green squares in the middle of her painting board. These squares evoked the image of a mandela, which she decided to pursue further. Not tied to a preconceived plan, Mary went on creating her images at times guided by "mental images" and at other times by "the direction of the brush strokes." For example, an oval shape she intuitively created suggested an eye. As she continued to "carry the black paint," another oval presented itself, hence the second eye. Mary emphasized that she did not paint the second eye to complete a pair of eyes in conformity with the natural order, but rather that the accidental appearance of the second oval form evoked once again the image of an eye (*Teaching Journal* 12 Jan. 1995: 12).

Similarly to Mary, Sabrina started her painting with a blue dot which "immediately suggested a blue eye" (*Teaching Journal* 12 Jan. 1995: 12). Accordingly, she proceeded to paint a face that covered the entire masonite board. Sabrina was so absorbed in manipulating a variety of blue tints and shades that she was reluctant to introduce the complementary orange. When I pointed out that she had not been working with complementary colours, she

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answered that she would introduce the orange in due time. However, later on, she asked permission to omit the complementary colour and to continue working with the blue only (*Teaching Journal* 24 Jan. 1995: 12). Sabrina finally added the orange colour in the form of lobster claws positioned around the edges of the painting after she associated the large area of blue with sea. Sabrina painted the claws rather than the full lobster for lack of skills to render the latter and possibly because she didn't want to cover the blue face. These were also the reasons why she placed the claws as open forms around the edges of the painting. In comparing her work with other students' paintings, Sabrina observed that she had limited her palette to "pure" blue and orange colours, whereas some of her fellow students mixed the complementary colours to obtain a variety of derivative hues (*Teaching Journal* 29 Jan. 1995: 17a).

Like Sabrina, Jacob spent a great deal of time "playing" with nuances of blue paint that he had spread over the entire painting surface. Eventually, the lower part took the shape of a table top. Satisfied with the blue background, he added a clump of oranges in the middle of the table (*Teaching Journal* 24 Jan. 1995: 13a). A few days later Jacob added two or three oranges and a plant rising from behind the oranges. When asked the reasons for the later additions, Jacob replied that he made the changes in his painting in order to "take away from the background--there was too much of it" (*Teaching Journal* 29 Jan. 1995: 20a). Jacob justified the insertion of the plant in the painting by pointing out that the green colour, which is a product of a blue and orange mixture, blended well

with the rest of the painting, and that its placement behind the oranges created a sense of depth. The added oranges, according to Jacob, contributed to a better balance. Jacob painted the oranges one at a time until he achieved the desired equilibrium. Regardless of the improvements, he was not completely satisfied with his painting because "there is still too much blue" (20a). When asked how he would paint the same painting if he were to do it again, Jacob replied that he would make the oranges larger. Jacob was, however, highly satisfied with the "dynamic background" (20a). He commented that his attitude towards the exercise shifted from feeling restricted by a limited palette in the early stages of the process to learning to appreciate the subtleties that resulted from it.

Brenda began her work with three wide horizontal strips of orange and blue, which she later converted to a seaside scene of sand, sea, and sky. After overcoming some technical obstacles (keeping the orange and the blue "clean"), she noticed that there was "too much sky and water" (*Teaching Journal* 24 Jan. 1995: 12a), and therefore she expressed the intention later on to add "something alive" (12a); hence the figure. Brenda enjoyed the process of painting the second landscape because by allowing the manipulation of colours to generate a design and subsequently an idea, she felt released from the tyranny of imitation. Brenda observed that her seaside landscape was simpler than her first attempt at scenery painting and acknowledged that she was nonetheless satisfied with it.

A common pattern surfaced in Krista's and Rita's paintings: the marks they initially made on the boards quickly suggested simplified landscapes which

they painted in unorthodox colours, colours that do not conform to those of the natural world, nor with conventional landscape paintings. Krista first painted two rows of stylized purple waves along the lower periphery of her masonite board and yellow snake-like forms on the upper section of the painting. She later added the sun in order to indicate "the source of the reflection" (*Teaching Journal* 29 Jan. 1995: 20). Because the sun had to be yellow Krista changed the background into a light purple, creating a luminous surface. Later on, at home, Krista decided to add "a monster" whose "curvilinear" lines would interact with the yellow "sun rays" (20). Krista "did not like the monster" (20). But she did not take steps to alter the creature or to eliminate it altogether.

As in her previous assignment, Lorna did not plan her painting in advance. However, after she had done some "finger painting" and taken a "peek at Suzanne's painting" (*Teaching Journal*, 29 Jan. 1995: 20), she decided to paint a gold fish. Pleased with the emerging image, in the middle of the process, Lorna wondered if her painting had become "too busy," and she asked advice on how to simplify it. I suggested that she cover the scattered areas of yet unpainted white sections before considering major changes. I alerted her to the effects of the exposed white gesso on the overall composition. Lorna followed my advice and was delighted with the results; she did not need to change the feature figures in the painting

Mary, Sabrina, Brenda, Jacob, Rita, Krista, and Lorna, all shared a similar approach: they closely followed the theme of the exercise, i.e. they allowed the

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two selected complementary colours to play a leading role in the determination of the visual and iconic content of their painting. Celine, Judith, and Nadia did not comment on their work. However, since their paintings had no reference to recognizable objects, it would be safe to suppose that they too were guided largely by the visual elements, rather than by a preconceived plan.

Naturally, not everybody followed this path. A few students remained attached to the more conventional formula of selecting a topic first and manipulating the visual variables accordingly.

Jasmine missed the major point of the exercise by trying to portray a preconceived image of an orange sunset over a blue sea. She consulted several postcards in order to make sure that the water in her painting looked natural. She spent almost the entire class-time trying to give the sea a natural look, totally oblivious to the fact that she had not introduced the complementary colour: the orange. Jasmine even seemed unaware that the very postcard that she tried to imitate contained bright orange highlights.

Sharon painted a blue silhouette of a woman in a highly saturated flat blue on a highly saturated flat orange background. Disappointed that the orange colour lost its lustre after it had dried, Sharon pondered whether she should add some texture to enliven her painting. After adding heavy texture to the background, Sharon discovered that the flatly painted silhouette advanced frontwise from its previous position, and that the background receded. I used the opportunity to remark to her that, all being equal, flat surfaces tend to advance,

whereas textured surfaces tend to recede.

It is evident from the students' response that the majority among them gave priority to visual cues, especially during the early stages of the painting process. Some students associated visual marks with scenes or objects that they continued to paint with various degrees of persistence. Mary's black oval shapes and Sabrina's blue dot were transformed into eyes. But while Sabrina incorporated the eye in the context of a face, thus moving into the object realm, Mary never made a connection between the eyes she had portrayed and a human or animal face. On the contrary, she emphatically stated that she had not intended to represent a pair of eyes. Brenda's, Rita's, and Krista's horizontal bands yielded seascapes. Lorna's fish appeared by chance and was gladly endorsed.

A second group of students--Celine, Judith, and Nadia, whose paintings had no reference to recognizable objects--remained exclusively within the realm of the visual language. Only Jasmine deliberately set out to paint a blue and orange seascape as close to the natural world as she could possibly master. A third group of students--Sharon, Suzanne, Jacob, and Natasha--did not elaborate on the origin of their images. However, in their exchange with me they disclosed mainly visual concerns: Suzanne expressed satisfaction with the presence of a rich array of grays in her painting; Sharon discovered the effects of texture on depth perception; Jacob searched for harmony and balance and appreciated the subtle colour nuances he had produced.

During a general class discussion to review the finished paintings produced in this exercise, the students made the following observations:

- some paintings feature extreme contrasts, whereas others are subdued;

- the combination of purple and yellow is chosen more often than other complementary pairs (the paintings of Krista, Celine, Judith, Esther, Nadia, and Rita);

- there is merit in using touches of a complementary colour to enliven a large area of colour (in the paintings of Natasha, Nadia, Jasmine, Suzanne);

- the mixture of pure colour with black and white yields tints and shades i.e. contrasts of tonality (the paintings of Sabrina, Sharon, Krista, Celine, Judith, Esther);

- the mixing of two complementary colours produces unexpected colours (in the paintings of Jacob, Nadia, Brenda, Suzanne);

- the use of a restricted palette forces students to discover subtle colour combinations (in the paintings of Jacob, Suzanne, Brenda);

- put side by side or in close proximity, complementary colours enhance one another (in all the paintings);

- the overlapping of complementary colours before they have a chance

to dry may yield a dull and messy-looking hue (in the paintings of Brenda, Natasha, Sabrina, Jasmine);

- working within a limited framework helps students to focus their attention and forces them to expand their creative ability (all students).

Judging from the nature of the students' representation of the objects, and from the account they gave regarding the painting process, one may conclude that the students channeled their effort into the organization of the visual field rather than into the depiction of items taken from the external world. Compared to the previous exercise, the students decreased their pursuit of images that closely resemble the natural world and with it an excessive preoccupation with detail. The recognizable objects depicted in their work were executed in a stylized and schematic form (Krista's waves and sun-rays, Sharon's silhouette, Natasha's minimal portrait, Suzanne's blank face of a woman, Jasmine's seascape, Rita's seascape or landscape, and Esther's flower). Only Jacob made an effort to bestow a natural appearance on the oranges and the plant behind them. The students adopted a globally oriented and simplified mode of production which, in turn, reduced the amount of anxiety that they had previously experienced. While it is reasonable to suppose that the relief in tension during the painting process was due in great part to the reduced demand on the technical skills, the positive outcome is that the stimulation of complementary colours forced the students to resort to creative devices originating in visual language.

It is difficult to assess the students' emotional engagement with their work because they possess only a limited range of verbal vocabulary to express their emotive reactions or even to describe the visual elements that might have triggered their reaction. The most common verbal outlet for an affective arousal was "I like this painting or a certain feature of it." Lorna "likes" Natasha's painting because of "the way the red is in the green and the green is in the red" (*Teaching Journal* 29 Jan. 1995: 17), and because of the application of the thick paint Krista appreciated a painting that "shows a lot of movement" (17a). Jasmine, referring to Jacob's work, was impressed by the "depth" and by the "three-dimensional look" (17a). Nadia, who elaborated extensively on the process of the production of her painting, made only one comment about the finished work: "I like the texture"; and Rita, referring to Suzanne's painting, liked the "mix that made the painting very rich" (*Teaching Journal* 29 Jan. 1995: 19).

The students spoke in affective terms when they contrasted the pleasure and satisfaction they experienced during the execution of the complementary colour exercise with the tension they felt during the previous project. Nadia expressed more forcefully than others what caused her to prefer the second project over the first: "I worked in abstract, something that I have never done before; it was fun. I always worked on something illustrative, specific; I felt much more liberated" (*Teaching Journal* 29 Jan. 1995: 18a). Several other students relayed similar experiences, all linked to a sense of liberation and freedom. It

appears that the mood that accompanied the process directly affected the students' evaluation of their finished product. Nadia, who had laboured over her earlier garden scene, "did not like the painting," a painting which was positively reviewed by her peers. Nadia clearly preferred the two abstract works which she had executed very quickly, after putting aside her technical skills. Yet these paintings were less appealing to most of the viewers. Nadia was elated to discover a new way of working. She expressed it unequivocally by pointing out that these were the first abstract paintings that she had ever made and by proclaiming that the garden painting is "something that my mother would like" (*Teaching Journal* 29 Jan. 1995: 19), i.e. a work appealing to a conservative taste as against the free and liberal approach, which Nadia associated with a non-objective mode of painting

Like Nadia, several other students also expressed affective attitudes to their work by emphatic and repetitive statements. Mary forcefully defended her position that the eyes were not conceived as a pair, and Krista reiterated her displeasure with the monster in her painting. The students were not able, however, to explain the reasons behind their feelings. In a few cases, their affective link to their work was expressed by drawing the viewer's attention to certain features present in the work, by vivaciously and at times repetitively describing sections in the painting and by elaborating on certain phases during the production process. Brenda, more than once described how she managed to keep clean the few orange highlights that she painted over the blue area.

Jacob mentioned several times the pleasure he derived from working on the blue background, his satisfaction with how it turned out, and the thrill he felt in the discovery of the colour subtleties. (He used emotionally charged words such as "intense," "rich," and the like). It is indicative that the students did not express a personal attachment to any of the objects they had painted. When they voiced an affective reaction to their own painting or to those of their classmates, they pointed to visual elements as the source of their feelings. The only exception was Krista's emotional rejection of the "monster" that she added as a second thought to her painting. But Krista's dissatisfaction can also be interpreted in terms of visual language, i.e., that the added figure disrupted a certain pleasing order previously established.

The students who produced non-objective paintings evaluated the measure of success and satisfaction with their work according to the interaction of the visual elements in their painting. It is more complex, however, to evaluate the source of pleasure/displeasure among the students whose paintings included objects of daily life. The question that arises is how much gratification springs from manipulation of the visual field and how much from a sense of accomplishment after successfully representing familiar objects. Whatever the source of gratification, it is evident that the worry-free attitude espoused by the students, the freedom of expression that they experienced, and the lack of a self-imposed unattainable objective all contributed to the students' positive disposition *vis à vis* their work.

In contrasting the level of satisfaction they experienced during the two first exercises, the students voiced a definite consensus that the project entailing a visual reproduction of remembered scenes of the natural world was too challenging for beginners, and that the level of stress they had endured reduced their freedom of expression and consequently their enjoyment.

The students shifted attention from an excessive preoccupation with imitation to a balanced integration of verbal and visual language. Moreover, they became familiar with the effects of complementary colour contrast and colour interaction in general; they reported a decrease in tension during the production stage; they expressed a measure of affective involvement with regard to the visual elements; and they expressed a higher level of satisfaction with their last paintings than with those produced in the first exercise. The fact that the students attached more affective language to the pure visual elements than to the naturalistic objects is easily reconciled with psychoanalytical aesthetic as enunciated by Saint-Martin.

CHAPTER 7

THE SHIFT FROM THE PART TO THE GLOBAL IN
SEARCH FOR SPONTANEITY AND STRUCTURE

Encouraged by the increased attention to the visual factor that the students displayed in their work and discourse, I decided to enlarge the scope of their use of visual language in the present exercise. I noticed that in the first two exercises, the students focused on sections of their painting or on details related to the depiction of external objects, paying little attention to the overall structure. In this exercise therefore, the students were instructed to abandon their habit of painting section by section and to endorse a practice of building cumulative layers of painted areas over the entire painting surface. Since I endorse the position that the use and meaning in visual language stems largely from the subconscious, this exercise was also designed to help students retrieve images lodged in a deep layer of their being.

The Assignment

Create a painting by manipulating masses of painted areas. Proceed from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, i.e., starting from the global and gradually filling in the details. Work simultaneously on the entire painting support.

The Response

As was the case in the previous project, a number of students abandoned themselves to the flow of colours and forms which they intuitively created for an extended period of time; their painting activity never gave rise to recognizable worldly objects. They thus experienced a prolonged undifferentiated state (Jacob, Nadia, Mary, Suzanne, Sharon). Others began their work by manipulating colours and forms until objects emerged, at which point they shifted their attention to the latter (Lorna, Brenda, Krista, Judith). Only two students disregarded my instructions and chose to work with preconceived objects in mind (Sabrina and Natasha).

The students who closely followed the instructions for the project quickly painted the entire surface of their board. They were then faced with the dilemma of how to proceed working on a painting that appeared to be finished. Faced with the notion of overlapping layers of paint, the students expressed concern

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over losing what they had already painted or sections therein.

More than others, Suzanne expressed anxiety over superimposing additional layers of paint over her quickly painted background. She was reluctant to "lose" the effects produced so far. In order to reduce her anxiety, I pointed out to her that a covered area was not necessarily lost to the finished product nor to the painting process. For one, it keeps exercising an effect on the top layer; and for another, it contributes to the on-going dialogue between the producer and the materials used. Suzanne was not convinced; she retorted that "it takes time before it happens" (*Teaching Journal* 31 Jan. 1995: 23), meaning that she was not yet ready for it. However, she agreed with me that an on-going dialogue between oneself and the visual material takes place during the making of an art object--"I never feel alone when I paint" (23). I also pointed out to Suzanne that she covered with bold white brush strokes a highly subtle area to a degree that it was now hardly visible (Was she covering traces of sensuous expression?) Suzanne put the brush aside and continued working with her bare hands trying to retrieve certain effects that she had lost. Later on, when once again she expressed her reluctance to "lose" painted areas, I suggested that she experiment on another surface before returning to her original painting. Suzanne followed my advice and seemed relieved.

Like Suzanne, Jacob worked with the "flow" of paint. But, unlike Suzanne, Jacob seldom asked my advice. Yet, he called my attention to a section of the painting which he disapproved of. Jacob uttered repeatedly that he "did not like

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the pink triangle" on the left section of his painting. That side, according to him, is "wrong" since it does not match the "flowing" effect on the right side. "It is the pink spot that blocks the flow" (*Teaching Journal* 31 Jan. 1995: 23a). Jacob repeated the term "flow" several times, a term I associate with an undifferentiated state of existence. Reflecting on the finished painting, Jacob expressed satisfaction with the "beautiful centre." He pointed to "the open forms, almost branches that hold the central circle--the focus is on it. It also has an upward movement" (24). I expressed my delight with the vibrancy of some of the muted colours that would appear dull in a different context, thus drawing attention to the effects of colour interaction.

Mary repeated the pattern she adopted in her previous painting. She started by painting large areas of yellow and purple, and gradually developed open shapes as she progressed in her work. Mary particularly "liked" the "wheat plant" (*Teaching Journal* 5 Feb. 1995: 27a) which emerged from an arched form. Nadia seemed to continue relishing the newly-gained freedom in leaving behind the rigours of emulating external objects. As in the previous exercise, Nadia worked fast and uncritically.

A different approach was taken by Rita. The treatment of her painting can be situated between the two major patterns that emerged among the students: those who functioned within the non-objective world all the way through and those who, following associations triggered by intuitively painted forms, gravitated towards giving a measure of attention to mundane forms, though

never to the extent of imitation. Rita seemed to be genuinely confused in retracing the source of inspiration for her painting. At first she insisted that the dispersed round-shaped forms originated from the faintly visible brush-marks left from the application of the gesso, but later on admitted that she also had a vague cloud scene in mind. It remained unclear at which stage the cloud image kicked in. Rita valiantly defended her position that her work was not open to objective interpretation. She described how she was reasonably satisfied with the way her painting developed until "everything was spoiled when people started to ask questions: What is it?. . . I don't want to think about something definite. People said: it is this, it is that, and I could not paint anymore" (*Teaching Journal* 7 Feb. 1995: 30). On the whole, though, Rita was content with her work. It appears that part of the reason was because that painting represented a change from a long-standing habit of "doodling with fine line" (30). She enjoyed working with a wide brush spreading translucent paint over large areas. She finally felt relieved from the compulsion to prove to herself that she could render objects precisely through the use of a pencil. Pointing to her present work Rita exclaimed: "This is the opposite; it is spontaneous" (31). Rita traced her colour combination in this painting to Gauguin's use of complementary colours: "big patches of somewhat muted colours in the background . . . colours that do not scream out" (31). Rita was also inspired by a blue and orange landscape painting she saw recently, in which "large areas of muted colours were applied" (31). It is indicative, though, that Rita never completely discarded

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the squiggles from her painting. At the last minute, using a fine brush, Rita added a linear design spread over the entire painting surface.

Ever unintimidated and gregarious, Lorna recounted how she began her painting "with wide brush strokes that early on revealed an eye and the form of a woman" (*Teaching Journal* 5 Feb. 1995: 27a), and how she went about developing this image. Lorna pointed out that because she used only two brushes of contrasting sizes, her painting contains "large painted areas and very small ones: dots" (27a). During the recess Lorna expressed her satisfaction with the method of "starting with materials which bring on images never thought of before" (27a).

For the second time Brenda started a painting in which she featured an extended blue area that was quickly labeled as sky. Brenda planned to introduce a new element in her work: the use of a round support board instead of the common rectangle. However, not being presently able to shape her masonite board, she traced a hexagon in the middle and painted the negative area a neutral gray-brown. Having settled on a sky, Brenda naturally interpreted the rest of the painting area as land. As in her previous painting, she worked alternately between the two main sections of her present painting: the sky and the grass. The flowers were added at a later stage "to get colour: the yellow and the pink" (*Teaching Journal* 5 Feb. 1995: 27). During the production of her painting and in reflecting on it, Brenda alternated between attention to the natural world and to the visual elements, mainly colour. Unlike her first painting, Brenda

was less concerned with the realistic reproduction of the sky; instead, she was struggling with retrieving "the pink that she lost" (27). Half way through the process Brenda painted the negative area of her board black. When she was ready to saw this section off, I warned her that the removal of the black area might drastically change the perception of the colours within the circle. Rather than upset the colour interaction, Brenda chose to leave the hexagonal frame as a "window effect" (27). She mused about adding texture to the stark black surface. I warned her that this too would change the colour perception within the interior section of the painting. So she repainted the frame in a neutral colour.

Krista too inadvertently found herself faced with a landscape scene. At a certain stage she noticed that her painting was split into two separate areas of green and red with not enough visual connection between them. To remedy the situation, Krista contemplated adding a green tree, but on second thought found the idea of a tree "inappropriate" (*Teaching Journal* 31 Jan. 1995: 23a) without citing reasons. Instead, she introduced a house. However, rather than evaluate the contribution of the house in resolving the initial problem of the split between the upper and lower sections of her painting, Krista criticized the house for its "wrong proportions" (23a). Finally she added a yellow kite as a last-ditch effort to bridge the two sections.

Two students distanced themselves from the main thrust of the exercise. Sabrina struggled nonetheless with visually oriented issues when she attempted to situate the hands of the female figure on two different depth planes.

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Natasha's work had nothing to do with the nature of the assignment.

It is evident from the above report that the students succeeded in working in an undifferentiated mode with various degrees of persistence. They had no difficulty in conjuring up images through a dialogue between themselves and the materials or the visual elements. Judging from the students' accounts, it is reasonable to suppose that on several occasions, for the sake of convenience, they used terms borrowed from the natural world to express visual concerns and vice versa. Brenda's mention of the sky actually had more to do with blue and pink than with the concept of sky. The same can be said about the flowers and the butterfly that she introduced in order to adorn the painting with highlights of contrasting colours. Rita was not quite sure in what context to situate her clouds. Painting the clouds in white with touches of orange but with no blue for the sky around them indicates that her clouds were inscribed in visual language rather than in an external reality. In trying to resolve a visual problem, Krista found herself dealing with figurative concerns (a house and a kite), and in the process of figuring out a realistic representation, Sabrina fell into a visual quandary. It appears that purely visual concerns and concerns associated with verbal language were interwoven, regardless of what the initial intention was: visual or verbal. However, often, when visual concerns could be defined in verbal terms, the latter prevailed. Even paintings of a purely visual nature often gave rise to associations with familiar objects as in the case of the students' reaction to Rita's painting. Rita, however, resisted talking about clouds until the very end of her

reflection on her work, when she finally and perhaps reluctantly succumbed to the cloud version.

As we noticed in the course of the second exercise, emotional attachment to the work was often emphasized by repetitions. Rita several times repeated her annoyance with viewers who tried to interpret her painting at an early stage. It upset her to a degree that she was rendered incapable of continuing her work. Yet Rita was more gracious at the last stages of the painting process, when she accepted suggestions for minor visually oriented improvements to her work. At that stage she was confident that her work was not about to be derailed. Jacob too several times repeated his disapproval of the pink triangle in the wrong place and the imbalance it caused to the overall composition. Lorna repeatedly mentioned how she liked the fish and the blue background from the previous project. Krista constantly referred to the split between the two sections of the painting and experimented with a variety of solutions. I noticed, though, that the changes she introduced were minor and never actually resolved the problem. Somehow that split was stronger than her attempts to attenuate it.

Another occasion in which students expressed an emotional state of mind occurred in the course of trying new ways of painting. In the last two projects students repeatedly stressed how satisfied they were with the discovery of new techniques or new approaches to painting. Almost all who tried working in an abstract manner for the first time enjoyed the experience mainly because they

could relax on details in favour of the entire structure. During the initial stages of her project Rita was satisfied that she could paint without the "squiggles" she had been addicted to. The students' emotional reaction to their work was often reflected in their expressed preference for certain sections. Mary singled out the wheat form that emerged at the centre of her painting, and Jacob stressed his satisfaction with the round circle nestled in between the two branch-like forms. Brenda too focused on the centre of her work. She started working at the centre from which she alternately painted the sky and the grass. It is indicative that the students never exlplained why they liked or disliked sections of their paintings. This could be explained by the unconscious nature of the use and perception of pure visual elements.

Hand in hand with the decrease in the tension during the painting activity, I observed a noticeable increase in dialogue between the students and the visual elements as well as a broader exchange among the students and between myself and the students. The most evident case was the students' interest in Rita's painting regardless of her negative reactions, and her acceptance and implementation of some of their suggestions. More than previously, I allowed myself to probe into the process of the students' work as well as to express my own satisfaction with sections of their paintings. As before, I refrained from offering solutions to the problems they raised. Instead, I helped them define the problems and encouraged them to experiment with a variety of possible resolutions. I often made them aware of the consequences of the various steps

they might undertake.

In this exercise the students extended the periods in which they worked in an undifferentiated mode; they exhibited concern with structure; they extended their attention to visual concerns; they used visual language to refer to verbal concerns and verbal terminology to point to visual attributes more than previously noticed; and they increased the interaction among themselves and with me.

CHAPTER 8

THE EFFECTS OF TEXTURE IN ESTABLISHING

MEANING

During the three previous exercises, I noticed that the students paid more attention to colour than to any of the other visible variables. In the present exercise, I attempted to shift their attention to texture and its effects. For this purpose, I instructed them to apply texture to two painting surfaces prior to the painting activity--one, by using a variety of materials not conventionally linked to art materials, the other, by using traditional art supplies, mainly modeling paste and gel medium.

The Assignment

For the next two paintings, prepare your painting surface by applying a variety of textures using materials to create slight relief effects. Let the texture guide your subject matter. There are two projects: 1) using a variety of non-conventional materials, 2) using modeling paste only.

The Response

This exercise, featuring the textural element in painting, is somewhat similar to the previous exercise, in that students were asked to create images emanating from the visual elements rather than from familiar scenes and objects. Consequently, a similar pattern to the previous project emerged. Some students functioned consistently throughout the process within the realm of the visual elements with no extraneous references (Jacob, Suzanne, Rita, Natasha). Others pasted texture-forming materials and spread paint in an intuitive manner until a familiar image emerged (Brenda, Sabrina). Yet others created their painting around scenes and objects of everyday life (Krista, Jasmine, Nadia, Lorna).

Although the students repeated a previous pattern in the conception of their images, this time around they revealed a more complex attitude regarding the nature of the visual *vis à vis* the verbal expression. Whereas in the past the students chose to tend to either the visual aspect or the verbal expression, they now became aware that the two can be interwoven, interchangeable, and at times, even conflictual. Natasha heavily textured her board with mostly vertical flame-like forms of various lengths and widths. She later painted the background yellow with a few touches of orange and the protruding forms, blue. Reflecting on her

work several days later, Natasha expressed regret for not "painting the background blue and the relief yellow, because it would look more like a curtain" (*Teaching Journal* 7 Feb. 1995: 29). What began as a free play with texture, colour, and form would have turned into a curtain, if only the colours could be reversed. Unlike Natasha, Krista who associated the blue forms with flying birds, approved of the repartition of yellow and blue in the painting. "It is like all kinds of birds caught. They are all screaming and screeching. You can stare at it for hours. It is like staring in the clouds" (*Teaching Journal* 12 Feb. 1995: 37a).

Mary wrestled with the visual and the verbal aspects long before she finished her painting. At some point during the painting process she asked my help in integrating a piece of embroidered cloth adorned with a flower design that looked out of place in the lower left corner. Mary explained that she had a theme in mind: war, a ship, and the beauty of life. The embroidered piece was to represent the latter. However, Mary quickly dismissed this idea, because "these things are not connected" (*Teaching Journal* 17 Feb. 1995: 31a). Mary, thus, had no hesitation giving up the theme, but insisted on resolving the visual inconsistency caused by the visual isolation of the cloth piece from the rest of the composition. Mary expressed her displeasure and disappointment by saying: "It is just sitting there doing nothing" (31a). My guiding questions were intended to get Mary to recognize that the root of the problem lies in

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the texture rather than in the colours or the forms as she initially suspected. Mary realized that the quasi-geometrical form of the cloth was repeated elsewhere in the painting, and so were the colours: white and light brown. The problem was that the texture had no reference elsewhere in the painting and was of a different character than the rest of the visual elements. Consequently, Mary attenuated the textural effect of the cloth piece by only partially covering it with a dark brown colour, leaving the lace part to show through. Somehow she was reluctant completely to give up the lace effect, even though it was foreign to the rest of the painting visually and thematically. Mary later added a couple of final touches: she stuck the word "energy" (32) somewhere in the middle of the painting and added white highlights to the black squiggle (at the bottom of the painting). Mary gave no reason for the written word addition, but expressed satisfaction with the white highlights because they created a contrast.

A perceived conflict between the visual aspects and the verbal expression was also Sabrina's dilemma. Sabrina painted a scene featuring a castle and a road leading into it. During the last stages of painting she expressed the wish to add an orange colour to the painting, but she couldn't logically justify it, claiming that neither roads nor castles are normally orange coloured. In a gut reaction I said to her that nobody would walk on that road, implying that conformity with the natural scene is

not necessary, and that painting leaves room for personal expression that may, at times, surpass the worldly reality. However, shortly afterward, I added that instead of painting the road or the castle orange she could add orange highlights to other sections of the painting that could potentially enhance the existing colours. Sabrina decided to paint the sun light orange and to garnish the road sides and the moat with red highlights.

Using a horizontal oblong painting support, Nadia painted two hands parallel to one another in a more of less natural position. After completing her work, Nadia cut her board into two sections, each containing one hand. Nadia cited three reason for changing the shape of the board: 1) to eliminate the warping that had developed; 2) to change the relationship between the two hands "because when it was in one piece it didn't work. . . . I didn't like the way the hands were placed" (*Teaching Journal* 7 Feb. 1995: 33); and 3) "to experiment with something different" (33). Nadia was satisfied with the outcome of her drastic act. She announced that "the new approach is completely right. . . . When I looked at it, it had a completely different composition" (33). After experimenting with various possible placements of the two sections, Nadia settled on vertically positioning one board on top of the other, leaving no space in-between. Although Nadia's iconic image is of a verbal nature, her action and discourse were rooted in visual concerns such as the shape of the board, the relation between the two boards, and the

effect of the various positions on the overall composition of the painting. Nadia gave no indication of attaching any symbolic meaning to the hands, and she never expressed concern whether the individual hands were faithfully rendered, nor whether the relation between the two conformed with normal human hand movements.

Rita's reaction to her painting was emotionally charged. The painting underwent a variety of metamorphoses, but it wasn't until she added some gold highlight that she finally declared that she liked it. In her account of the progression of the work, Rita referred to visual elements as well as to associations related to some of the abstract forms. She attributed these associations to remarks her children made. Later on, with no obvious connection to her report, Rita recounted how when she was driving to school, looking at the sun and the clouds, she observed "a beam of orange come together" (*Teaching Journal* 7 Feb. 1995: 34), which she wanted to emulate. She barely finished the sentence when she dismissed the incident saying: "Let's forget about it" (34a). Is there a connection between the orange beam and the gold highlights? The fact remains, however, that Rita briefly delved into the verbal realm before and after the painting process and not during the execution of her work, and that she was quick to downgrade the role it played

Whereas Mary, Sabrina, Nadia, and Rita alternated between the visual and the verbal in a random manner, Lorna and Krista became

aware of the possibility of using visual language for the purpose of verbal expression. Lorna, who painted a face over the entire painting surface, posed the question of "how to show that the right side of the face is a lot closer than the left side" (*Teaching Journal* 14 Feb. 1995: 45). Rather than offering Lorna suggestions on how to achieve the effect she was looking for, I reminded her of what we have already learned about the phenomenon of depth perception in two-dimensional surfaces. I asked guiding questions to prompt Lorna to realize that practically all the visual elements play a role in the manipulation of topological depth perception: colour contrasts, textural treatments (flat areas tend to advance), dimension (larger areas appear closer than small ones), and position on the Basic Plane (open forms, bordering on the peripheries and corners jut forward). Lorna then had to use her knowledge to create the sought-after effect. Lorna used mainly tonality and size contrasts to bring the right side of the face close to the viewer. Lorna never commented on the face distortions that ensued from her use of the visual strategies.

The issue of the interaction between the texture and the rest of the visual variables came to the fore in Suzanne's painting. Suzanne, began her painting by applying massive forms of contrasting colours. She quickly recognized that the imposition of strong contrasts eclipsed the effectiveness of the underlying texture. Suzanne hypothesized that toning down the colour will bring back the lost texture. But the application of a

lighter colour did not yield the desired outcome. Suzanne had relentlessly been seeking to repeat the effects of a successful interaction of colour and texture attained in a previous painting. After several unsuccessful attempts, she gave up in desperation.

It was during a class discussion on the finished paintings that the issue of the effectiveness of texture and its interaction with the other visual variables came to the fore. Following a close observation of the paintings, supplemented with guiding questions, the students noticed their tendency to paint forms that follow the outline prefigured by the texture, and that such procedure affected the appearance of the texture. It was also noticed that, in most cases, the relief part was designated as figure, and the flat area as ground. This practice was most evident in the works of Natasha, Jacob, Rita, Nadia, Mary, and Jasmine. The question that emerged was whether such treatment gave prominence to the texture or relegated it to a subordinate position vis à vis the coloured form. After a short discussion, the students concluded that judging from the works under observation, strong forms diminished the effectiveness of the texture and that texture, showed best in diffused forms and in light-coloured areas.

In this exercise more than previously, the students showed an awareness of the topological relations and how the placement of objects on the Basic Plane affects the perception of depth. The conflict between

the objects depicted in the painting and the visual elements expressed by Mary and Sabrina validate Saint-Martin's claim that verbal expression is of a different nature than visual expression, and that the two do not necessarily coincide.

It is difficult for a teacher to evaluate the students' satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their work beyond their own assessment expressed in terms of whether they "liked it" or "didn't like it." Yet, superficial as such statements may sound, they englobe a wealth of affective residue that for ethical and professional reasons cannot be subject for exploration through the application of psychoanalytical symbolism. Students invest a great deal of time and effort to produce a painting, and they are most rewarded when the outcome meets their expectation; conversely, they are deeply disappointed when they fail to draw satisfaction from their work. Thus, statements such as "I like my work " or "I don't like it" could not be taken lightly. Superficial as they may sound, these statements may reflect a reaction to an emotional residue lodged in the unconscious made accessible through visual language. Any direct probing into the students' feelings *vis à vis* their work, or why they like or dislike a certain piece yield, for the most part, trivial answers. A better way to gain insight into students' affective input and output, during the production process and in the aftermath, is to observe them at

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work, engage them in casual, non-threatening dialogue, listen to their account of how their work has progressed, and be attuned to the tone of speech, facial and body expression. Suzanne's struggle to balance texture and colour seemed emotionally charged. First, she became "bored" (*Teaching Journal* 7 Feb. 1995: 28) with applying texture ahead of paint, and she asked me to allow her to work with colour and texture simultaneously. Later on, as her frustration grew, Suzanne became discouraged, and out of the blue said that "she will still be enjoying painting" (28), implying that this is not presently the case. And finally, not being able to fulfill her expectation, Suzanne remained somewhat withdrawn and insecure until the end of the course (she thrived, however, in the next semester, in my printmaking course).

Jacob's experience was happier than Suzanne's. Jacob enthusiastically recounted how he experimented with different materials in order to create a variety of textured surfaces. Jacob was particularly excited over his discovery that when paint is applied to texture, the speed of absorption and the visual effects that follow vary according to the chemical composition of the textural material. For example, when he applied water-based acrylic paint over texture created by salt grains, the paint was quickly absorbed causing the salt grains to dissolve and consequently to effect a slight alteration of the texture. Jacob expressed his satisfaction with the discovery he made in the following statement:

"Before, I used to create texture by using gel and modeling paste. Now, instead of just creating texture by traditional painting derivatives, I can stick on different materials." Jacob expressed his pleasure by simply saying: "I liked what I did." Jacob's biggest surprise, however, was his discovery that his last two paintings contained similar features. In comparing the two paintings, Jacob focused on the circle: "I still have that circle. I didn't realize it until I was looking at it now, that circle is in the middle in both paintings" (*Teaching Journal* 7 Feb. 1995: 33, 33a, 34).

Jacob also noticed that the distribution of weight is similar in the two paintings, i.e., that the bottom right side is heavier than the top left one. When asked where in the painting he would feel most comfortable to place himself, he unhesitantly replied: "in the middle." When asked which section he would avoid, he pointed to the black elongated form on the lower right side of the painting saying: "It is very rough--it is almost like a core of reefs--you'll go in and you'll cut yourself. There (the middle), is more sandy" (*Teaching Journal* 7 Feb. 1995: 34). Jacob summarized his experience during the last two projects saying:

> I was a bit apprehensive starting a painting without a preconceived idea, but I am happy with it. Sometimes it is nice to have a preconceived idea. What I found out is that you don't always have to have a preconceived idea. It helps a lot. (34)

Rita's reflection on her painting was also laced with affective

statements. First, normally critical and dismissive of her work, Rita now

solemnly announced that she "liked her painting." Second, overcome by

the apparent change in her style, she declared that she "didn't recognize

herself in this painting" (*Teaching Journal* 7 Feb. 1995: 34). Rita thus

welcomed a breakthrough in her usual practice. She attributed the

modification in her style to a long discussion she and Lisa had been

engaged in during the painting process. Rita added that she perceived

painting as a personal expressive activity, in which what matters is not

what you intend to do, but what you actually do" (34). Thus Rita

considered her latest work as a personal expressive interpretation of the

aforementioned discussion with her classmates, a revelation that emerged

during the act of painting. Another reason for her positive feeling towards

this painting was the "fun" she experienced listening to her children's

remarks, especially to their account of the various images that her

painting evoked.

Less confident than Rita, Brenda, at first, "did not like" her recent

painting, "because it is violent" (*Teaching Journal* 14 Feb. 1995: 46a).

However, reflecting on it a few days later, she became more receptive to

the imagery, saying that "looking at it from a distance, it looked O.K"

(*Teaching Journal* 21 Feb. 1995: 49). Brenda was able to reconcile with

the odd creatures and the distorted face as long as she kept a safe

distance from them, possibly because from far away she could enjoy the

overall effects of the composition rather than focus on the unpleasant objects. This constitutes another example in which the verbal expression is different from the visual one. Like Rita, Brenda observed a change in her style. But unlike Rita, Brenda was not quick to embrace the change; she did not quite approve of her painting, but at the same time she didn't take steps to mellow the effects of the unpleasant images. Brenda espoused an ambivalent position towards her painting.

Jasmine is the only student who continued to insist on painting "more realistically" (*Teaching Journal* 21 Feb. 1995: 50) regardless of her lack of skills to achieve such a goal. Reflecting on her finished painting, Jasmine expressed the wish to "do more with the water to make it real." (50). When I asked her whether she was pleased with her painting in general, she answered affirmatively. She added, however, that she cared "what others will say: that it is not finished" (50). To boost her self confidence, I commented on some of the merits of her painting such as the effectiveness of the texture, the overall coherent structure of the painting, the sense of depth achieved by sparse devices, and the like. Jasmine perhaps expressed what other students may have felt but never openly admitted: that peer approval is a relevant ingredient in an individual's satisfaction with her art production.

In addition to learning about the textural effects in painting, the students displayed an increased awareness of the interaction among the

visual variables and how they correlate with worldly concerns in

generating content in paintings. The students realized how the visual and

verbal elements became interwoven, interchangeable, and even

conflictual in a search for meaning. In the process, the students displayed

a wider expression of cognitive laden affect than in the previous

exercises.

CHAPTER 9

EXPANDING THE AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE: A CLASS VISIT TO AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY DAVID SORENSEN

During the four first projects I noticed that although the students displayed a considerable affective involvement with their work and the work of their fellow students, they were deficient in expressing their felt experience, in particular the component embedded in the visual elements. I therefore planned a class visit to an exhibition by David Sorensen at the Cultural Centre of the University of Sherbrooke, an activity which would require the students to respond to non-objective paintings. The purpose of the visit was to stimulate the students' affective response to pure visual cues, and to prod them to make a link between their personal experiences, real or imaginary, and the visual language used by the artist. The exhibition was composed of paintings of large format on rectangular, square, and shaped canvases. The paintings contained colourful geometric forms grouped largely in grid structure. A large number of the paintings contained a distinct band around the edges of the canvas. The

students were instructed to explore the exhibition with the aid of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to encourage the students to give expression to inner feelings, wishes, and thoughts aroused by the visual elements. The students had to execute five tasks and report on them in writing.

The questionnaire was based on "Responding to Art: 2c & not 2 b: That is not a Question," an unpublished paper by Stan Horner. Horner proposes a method of responding to art, which encourages a dialogue between artists and viewers' individual scenarios through interaction with a work of art. In Horner's view, a dialogue is an on-going never-ending interaction: "one continues to find new proposals being made by the art object . . . to which one continues to find new responses . . . which in turn exposes new responses" (Horner 2). The viewer is encouraged to participate in creating meaning in the art work rather than deciphering a message unilaterally constructed by the producer. This approach corresponds to a major assumption on which this thesis is based, that making and contemplating art are closely linked to covert and latent desires as formulated in psychoanalytical theory and by Saint-Martin.

The Assignment

> **View the paintings in this exhibition by yourself or with one or two of your fellow students. Select a painting that moves you. Based on the painting of your choice, follow the instructions in the questionnaire.**

The Response

This assignment is composed of five tasks based on the phases in the process of responding to art proposed by Horner, each highlighting a specific stage.

Task I:

1) Select a painting that moves you. Pretend that you are taking a journey in the painting's space. What is the route you take? At what places do you stop? What place do you skip? Where do you feel comfortable? What areas make you feel uncomfortable? What places did you visit more than once? Can you have a dream inside the painting? A wish-fulfilling dream? A nightmare?

2) Write the story of your journey in the painting's visual space: Was it difficult or easy to enter? Where did you enter? From above? From below? From near? From afar? What was your itinerary? (the order in which you moved from place to place). What did you experience at each stage? Did you have a dream? If so, can you narrate your dream? At what places did you feel estranged? Comfortable? Can you differentiate between the experiences originating in the work and those emanating from inside yourself?

Horner argues that during an imaginary personal journey, the viewer puts aside preconceived notions and is open to fresh personal experience:

The journey provides students with a means to focus inside the work, to take the natural attitude with them, thereby enabling them to discover their assumptions in action and to sustain essential continuity.

(Horner 5)

Horner sees this dialogue as a "fusion-dialogue" between an "inward eye" (the viewer) and an "outward image" (the art work). The first two activities are based on Horner's concepts of the "*Forgetting*" and "*Remembering*" phases in the process of responding to art works:

What they are Forgetting in this first encounter is, at least at one level, the fear of failure or of being wrong or of getting caught in a dead-end, or that there is such a thing as vested interest. This experience has its analogue in the omnipotence of early infancy (Winnicott 1971), that initial period when each of us was able to ride along inside the illusion that anything we wished for was available at our fingertips.

(Horner 5-6)

The Response:

The students' response to the journey appeared to be candid. Students described how they hovered or hopped over mountains and valleys; swam in lakes, oceans, and rivers; were swept away by underwater currents; soaked by

torrents of rain or waterfalls; floated in the sky amid the clouds; flew like birds; wandered in the desert; suffered from famine and thirst; faced exhaustion, death, and other cataclysms; visited exotic locations; met "nice" or "mean" people; enjoyed eternal peace and freedom; exercised power over people or the natural elements; and in general found themselves in impossible, exceptionally pleasant, or extremely "scary" Situations. Water and rugged landscapes appeared often in their journeys, and expressions such as "floating," "swimming," and "bouncing" were often used. Esther's account went so far as to say that "the liquid smoothness, I imagine, is what it felt like to be floating in my mother's womb before I was born. Just gliding and floating, not knowing which direction, if any, I was floating in." Students seemed to seek liberation from the pull of gravity. Krista, who, "drove on a four-wheel, all-terrain vehicle about the size of a small ant," described her imaginary means of transportation as "a powerful beast capable of thwarting the natural forces of gravity."

The students' stories reflected pleasant, foreboding, or extraordinary situations, in which they were either blithely elated or frighteningly threatened; acting as heroes, victims, or both: certainly the stuff of dreams. Nightmares were not always an unpleasant experience. For example, Nadia "was scared by the colours, the anger, the loneliness. What was once an interesting piece turned into a grid of nightmares . . . but I loved it all the more. Love--hate." Celine, who experienced death, assessed her dream as "more or less comfortable." Except for a few, whose journeys were not closely linked to the originating painting, most

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of the students made a clear connection between the dream and the visual elements that triggered it.

Faced with an abstract painting, the students used the visual elements to guide their imaginary itinerary. More than before, the students pointed to a wide gamut of visual vocabulary: colour with its variations of hue, value, saturation, and luminosity; texture; shape; depth; dimension; direction; movement; rhythm; and location.

Attracted by the yellow expanse in *Amarillo,* Jacob expressed difficulty in entering the area because of the blue border along the painting's peripheries. He was faced with a similar difficulty moving from one square to another: "Movement within each of the squares was more secure than the movement from one square to another. This is due to the blue [thin] lines that divide the squares" (*Students' Report on Sorensen's Exhibition* 1).

Colour was a guiding light in Sabrina's journey in *Mystery:*

The colour is hidden behind the black around it, so to enter it means to enter its depth. Once inside, I would wander from the large colourful spot onto the smaller patches of blue and red. In doing this, I would hop from spot to spot. . . . I would visit all the colourful spots in order of their size and brightness, beginning with the largest, brightest ones.

(*Students' Report* 1)

When Sabrina hit the "sharp angle" of the frame at the upper corner of the

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painting, she was first thrown out of the painting, but later rested "in this dark concave-shaped corner", where she "remained stuck" until she "made it back to the centre, where most colours are concentrated" (1).

The diagonal lines that criss-cross *Actualization* affected the direction of Lorna's travel: "I began my adventure as a little gray diagonal line at the upper right-hand corner. I began to travel diagonally down towards the lower left side along the Basic Plane . . . at times fast, at others very slowly." Lorna continued her travel by entering the depth of the painting:

> In parts of the painting I was sucked backwards; I peeked out at
> others. Then I realized that when I was in the blue square I felt
> closer to the surface, and vice versa for the orange squares. The
> saturated lines of orange and blue seem closer than the pale
> orange and blue background. Yet the saturated orange on the pale
> blue background seems closer than the saturated blue lines on the
> pale orange background. This creates several layers of depth in
> the piece.

> (*Students' Report* 1-2)

Making her way through *Rouge Indien,* Esther, like Jacob, perceived the squares as blocking the flow of movement: "To enter into a different square so as to move throughout the painting can only be done at the point at which squares meet at the corners." Esther's movement was also influenced by colour and the thickness of the paint:

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I tried to move through the sections of colour that were purple and blue, very luminous. It was harder to move over the lighter-toned spaces; there was less paint on those parts, and it felt like I had to walk, to make an effort, instead of just floating along.

(*Students' Report* 1)

The bright green border around *Rouge Indien* delayed Krista's entry into the centre of the painting: "I whizzed clockwise around the green outer limits a couple of times. The energy of the brilliant green track made my vehicle go faster and faster." She subsequently entered the inner parts of the painting via the upper left-hand corner "because it had the least obstacles to pass" before reaching what she perceived as mountains and puddles. A final plunge was then taken "over the colourful abyss" (*Students' Report* 1-2).

Hues and tonality contrasts characterized Natasha's voyage in *Double Gate and Flood Diptych*: "The sequence in which my eyes traveled the space was from the dark side to the light side, impeded by the large bands of oppositely shaded colours." Later on she was attracted by "two bands of bright colours at the uppermost segment of the painting: one yellow, the other blue" (*Students' Report* 2).

Jasmine reveled in the depth she perceived in *Cobalt*:

The visual space of "*Cobalt*" . . . appeared to be three dimensional and encompassed such picturesque depth. This was due to the brilliant orange variations that formed a grid-like pattern over the

vibrant tones of blue, ranging from a very light blue that was almost

white and a dark blue not far from black. There appeared to be a

difference in depth between the grid and the display of blue,

despite the fact that the two forms of colours were painted on the

same flat plane or canvas.

(*Students' Report* 2)

Jasmine focused on the centre of the painting which she repeatedly

visited: "The route of my journey ran all over the place, but the focus remained in

the middle or centre of the painting" (2). Since *Cobalt* has no particular focus of

its own, one can assume that her attraction to the centre was largely triggered by

the energy imbedded in the Basic Plane. Mary's journey through *Double Gate*

with Flood Diptych was halted by the depth she encountered: "It felt as though

the paint on the surface continued through and through with very much depth.

So I was stuck there" (3).

The structure of the painting and colour influenced Judith's journey in

Water Resonance:

I found my eyes wandering over the canvas looking for a reason as

to why the six separated boards looked so appealing together in

the shape that they were in. I entered the painting easily in the

middle of the top four blocks. . . . My eyes started moving from the

centre to the brighter spots of purple skimming over around the top

four blocks.

Celine, like Judith, followed the panels that form the odd shape of the painting

and the colours in her journey through *Water Resonance*:

> I get in with light strokes. Then I am pushed down to the right of
>
> the first panel. I bounce to the right limit, and then I go up to the
>
> second panel. I feel like a ball that has to find a passage through
>
> the limits of the first panel. . . . Light beam, the red is more
>
> present, the red is comforting. I still bounce but at the right of the
>
> second panel I fall with a lighter purple line. I stay in the light
>
> purple, and I feel attracted to a fire red at the right side of the third
>
> panel. I go up to that colour slowly with a wave motion.

Focusing on the gates and the flood, Sharon was more influenced by the

title of the painting--*Double Gate With a Flood Diptych*--than by the visual

elements. She noticed, however, the presence of the horizontal and vertical

lines. Rita's account had little to do with the painting that triggered her reaction.

She did not describe a sequential journey; instead she wandered into a fantasy

world far removed from the visual elements present in the painting. Rita gave no

indication why she visualized *Lateral Drift*, a black and white painting, as a "lush

tropical rain forest".

Whereas in the past the students shied away from disclosing personal

experiences, during the present journey, they expressed affective attitudes that rose from the close observation of the purely visual elements and the associations that they invoked. Several students spoke of unusually fearful rides over forebiding landscapes. The yellow in *Amarillo* was "too overwhelming" to deter Jacob. His difficulties in crossing the blue lines and his long sojourn in the yellow area became a harrowing trip in the desert:

> The tiles with their tonal variations were desert sand dunes. . . . In
> the bottom squares, the blue is the mirage of water. Just as I felt I
> was going to die, I reached a great river, the blue border, and
> quenched my thirst.
>
> (*Students' Report* 1)

For Krista, the interior of *Rouge Indien* was a scary rugged landscape scene. In contrast, the green band around the edges reminded her of a race track. Krista was thrilled by both the natural and the human-made settings. She made a direct connection between the visual cues and the way she felt:

> This landscape is filled with mountains, ravines and monstrous
> puddles. Surrounding this landscape is an energy-filled green race
> track. The greater the saturation of the colour, the higher the
> reddish-brown mountains loomed, and the deeper the blue puddles
> sunk. The ravine's depth was determined by the brightness of the
> rift: the brighter the colour, the deeper and scarier the ravine.
>
> (*Students' Report* 1-2)

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Referring to the green band, Krista described a frightening ride on a fast-moving vehicle.

The contrast between soft areas and hard-edged ones also affected Natasha's feelings (*Double Gate with Flood Diptych*):

Initially my voyage was very enjoyable; the colours were soft; the shade and tones change delicately, leading my eye to a supplementary space yet to be discovered. Nevertheless, as I reached the upper section of the painting, I found myself confronted with two bands of bright blue and yellow. This discommoded the flow of my journey. I found myself disturbed by these long and bright rectangles. After a while, these are the only elements my eyes could see, though they merely occupied an unessential fragment of the painting.

(*Students' Report* 2)

Jasmine's reaction to *Cobalt* was tinged with fear:

The painting reminded me of a tunnel leading to the far depths of the other side, as if I were falling out of an airplane directly towards the centre of the painting. At each stage I experienced a vision of depth and volume, of clouds and moving spirits.

(*Students' Report* 2)

Several students concentrated on singling out pleasant and unpleasant areas. Esther pointed out that she did not like the lightly painted areas in *Rouge*

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Indien: "When I had to walk I could feel the canvas; it was prickly and rough. I liked the smooth liquid feeling of the areas of the painting which were heavy with paint and colour" (*Students' Report* 1). Judith felt most "comfortable" in the two blocks at the bottom of *Water Resonance*, but "uncomfortable" in the top section of the painting. Brenda avoided walking on an imaginary dark road (in *Lateral Drift*) because it made her "insecure"; as if she were "falling into the unknown." She also wanted to avoid "looking at the [virtual] straight strong lines at the bottom" because it made her think "of a bed of nails" (11).

Scary, inviting/uninviting, secure/insecure, comfortable/uncomfortable, pleasant/ unpleasant, and similar expressions were used to express affective dispositions along the students' journey. Most of the students were affected by the sharp contrast between the diffused forms applied over most of the surface of the paintings and the straight lines that form the grid and the borders. They considered the straight lines as impediments on the path of their journey, and they experienced discomfort crossing these lines. In contrast, the students conceived the soft open forms as pleasurable spaces where they could smoothly hover in every direction. For example, Jacob experienced difficulty crossing the blue band around the painting, but the "yellow expanse was inviting." Esther could travel from square to square only at the points where the squares were diagonally connected. Krista "whizzed" around the green border several times before she was able to plunge into the interior space of the painting. Natasha felt "discomfort" when she was "confronted" with the blue and yellow bands. But

she enjoyed her sojourn in the section painted with "soft and delicate colours." The students oscillated between extremes of comfort and discomfort, vulnerability and security, submission and heroism. Several students described the satisfaction derived from overcoming challenging situations.

The students' description of their journey on the painting's surface and depth is consistent with Saint-Martin's notion of topological space. The connection the students made between their bodily sensations and the visual elements correspond to Saint-Martin's claim (following Piaget) that vision alone cannot account for perception.

Task II:

Imagine yourself as an element in the painting: a specific brush stroke, a certain form or colour. How does it feel to be there? Can you enter into a dialogue with your other self in the painting? Can you play more than one role? Which role did you like best?

These questions were based on the *Reflecting* phase in Horner's "Responding to Art." At this stage, the students were encouraged to step out of the fusion stage and to reflect on their recent experience. According to Horner, "The fusion that was 'one' has split to become the 'one' and the 'other'." The students were guided to observe their "other self" as it was revealed through the *Remembering* phase.

The Response:

Not surprisingly, several students identified their "other" self with visual elements only (Jacob, Natasha, Jasmine, Krista). Others incorporated visual and associative elements (Nadia, Judith, Sabrina, Celine). A small minority remained exclusively within the associative realm (Sharon and Rita). Whereas most students succeeded in mirroring themselves in the painting, only one student managed to develop a dialogue between the two selves: the one embedded in the painting and the one gazing from the outside. During this phase, more than in the other ones, the students revealed their affective attachment to the paintings. Although the students' reactions varied, two clear patterns emerged: 1) the students oscillated between polarities in the situations they found themselves in and consequently in the feelings generated by these extreme situations: peace/agitation, comfort/discomfort, good/bad, centre/edges, light/dark, crowd/isolation, trapped/free, security/danger, hope/despair, natural world/heaven or hell, water/air, strength/weakness, life/death, depth/surface, soft/hard, and others. 2) Empowerment and distinction were the major issues in the *Reflecting* phase.

Jacob envisaged himself (in *Amarillo*) as a "brown square in a sea of yellow and orange" (*Students' Report* 16). He felt distinct, but not without connection to the other squares. Although his colour separated him from the crowd, the tinges of yellow inside the brown square and the sharing of the texture with the rest of the squares prevented him from isolating himself: "The

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yellow islands within me make me part of the overall image. . . . The strokes of the knife [which were] used to create me are the same as those used to create the other squares." Jacob attached importance to his distinctive character: "It is this difference that makes me a vital element of the work. I highlight the yellow" (16).

Distinctiveness was also Natasha's motivation in mirroring herself as the yellow stripe on top of *Double Gate with Flood Diptych*. She chose this element because the "contours are quite determined, and the colour is bright" (*Students' Report* 15). Like Jacob, she emphasized the uniqueness of her chosen figure: "It feels bizarre to be there because the forms and colours are so distinct when compared to the rest of the painting" (15). Natasha felt empowered and inspired: "The influence that I have--being this yellow line--on the other forms and colours is purely inspirational" (15). Both Jacob and Natasha felt empowered by their special status in the painting.

Krista too expressed an assertive attitude playing the role of the green line around the *Rouge Indien*. She perceived the green band as "energetic and cocky. The green would shout at all of the other colours: 'I am the brightest, most energetic of all of the colours and you are all dull'" (*Students' Report* 14). Instead of a dialogue between herself and the green line, Krista staged an argument between this line and a number of other elements in the painting. Not surprisingly, the green line won the match. The "aggressive green repelled" (15) all the other colours.

Unlike Jacob and Natasha, Jasmine's choice of being the white brush stroke in *Cobalt* was motivated by a yearning for peace and security: "It feels very relaxing to be here because I feel as if protected by the orange grid just as the earth is protected by the ozone layer. I feel very peaceful" (15).

A sense of strength and security was expressed in Nadia's reflection in the green line around *Rouge Indien*:

> a strong green presence in a vast emptiness. I would feel safe
> here, impregnable. My surrounding neighbours do not threaten me
> at all. I am safe, and I am strong. I feel like a beacon of light
> beckoning to lost souls to come in and rest, to eat from my rations
> and drink from my seas. I offer security and offer peace and I am
> safe.
>
> *(Students' Report* 15)

Nadia imagined herself as a source of strength for those who may not share her sense of security.

Judith experienced both security and vulnerability in *Water Resonance* when she identified herself with two separate sections of the painting: 1) "at the bottom two blocks"; 2) "at the very top left-hand corner of the top left block" (*Students' Report* 16). Situated in the area of her first choice, she felt secure and safe:

> I felt that the bottom two blocks were like a team leaning up
> against each other to hold the rest up, balancing the whole painting

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which they could only do while they are together. They would be

nothing if they were separated. (13)

Spending time in the section of her second choice made Judith feel "insecure."

She feared that she "might tip and fall off the block" she was sitting on.

Surprisingly, she preferred the danger of the second situation over the security

associated with her first experience: "I liked playing the dangerous role the best"

(13). As in the journey phase, Judith focused on the structure of the painting.

Brenda also chose to inhabit contrasting elements. When she imagined

herself as one of the dark brush strokes in *Lateral Drift* she felt "dominant and

surrounded by people who are listening and looking" at her (*Students' Report*

16). But when identified with the white strokes, she became "nothing; lost and

not understood" (16). Becoming the black background made her "mean" (16).

Brenda preferred to be the white background. As such, she wouldn't "have to

worry about the other one trying to push" (16) her, "laughing" at her, or "trying to

get people to believe" (16) in her. She could "just float, live and let the others

live and be free" (16). By choosing to be incarnated as the white background,

Brenda showed her preference for the middle way over the extremes.

To a lesser extent, Sabrina too expressed contrasting feelings. She saw

herself as a blue brush stroke on the upper section of *Mystery*, distinct from the

other colours. As such she felt "content," empowered but "lonely":

The black strokes around me are omnipresent, but they are

meaningless to me. I push them off me like pests. I can also be

the lonely blue stroke, choked. I have wandered away from the

crowd, and I feel like the current is dragging me away. . . . I am

swimming against the current. . . .

<p align="right">(*Students' Report* 16-17)</p>

Celine was the only student who developed a dialogue between herself

and the red spot which she associated with fire and heat (*Water Resonance*).

She described the fire as "so hot that everything around . . . melts down." The

fire is "noticeable and undeniable, unbearably strong." Celine explained that this

dialogue exposed the "devil", or "temptress" in her:

--fireme: come and touch me

--me: no I can't

--fireme: come

--me: I can't, you are painted, you are art

--fireme: come I am going to warm you

--me: I can't

--fireme: I'm not art, I am a gentle fire

--me: you are burning, you are making everything melt around you

--fireme: touch me, you are going to be me. We are going to

consume ourselves

--me: I want to but I can't

--fireme: come . . . closer . . .

--me: OK

--fireme: touch me

--me: nooo

--fireme: you want to be fire. You want to burn and make all things melt around you. I'm evil, temptation, and good at the same time. Touch me. You want to be me. You want to be irresistible and powerful

--me: yes

"The role that I wanted to play the most was the "fireme" because I was so powerful" (16).

Celine's dialogue is somewhat confusing. Her closing remark suggests that, on second thought, the "me" and the "other" changed roles. However, like several other students, she put herself in danger, and felt empowered through it.

Unlike the other students, Sharon at first did not identify herself with any particular visual element nor with any object associated with it (*Double Gate with Flood Diptych*). Instead, she inserted herself in an imaginary and exotic Chinese scene she had conjured; a scene in which she was at the centre of interest. Yet, like some of the others, she felt safe, free, and independent. Later on, Sharon took the identity of what she presumed was the gate. She described the gate as an "almighty power" that "represents peace and strength and protects the village" (*Students' Report* 14).

In the course of performing the first two tasks the students used uncompromising terms to describe their experience; events or feelings were

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positive or negative; there was nothing in-between. Sharon felt safe in her Chinatown dream. The gate represented peace, strength, and almighty power. It protected and kept her free, not trapped, and at peace. Esther "did not like the lightly painted spaces of the painting. When I had to walk I could feel the canvas. . . . I imagined myself at the deepest liquid colour I could, it was directly near the centre" (*Students' Report* 9). Krista postponed her visit to the scary, bright coloured ravines, favouring the calm puddles. Calm followed Krista's hectic experience. On the whole, she felt content. Suzanne was hopelessly attracted to the centre (in *Lateral Mantra*). Nadia was utterly alone, far away and fearful during her stay on the red dark colour associated with dry scorched earth until she reached the green section, where she felt serene, safe, and secure, "a little piece of heaven amongst a whole lot of hell" (12). This section felt soft and comfortable. Jasmine felt estranged in the dark areas and comfortable and relaxed when placed in the warm tones of the yellow, white, and green colours. As a white brush stroke, Jasmine felt relaxed and protected by the orange grid. She felt peaceful and almost heavenly surrounded by the "colour variations." Mary stated that the hues originating from the work influenced how she felt. The purple felt heavy, but hopeful because "it had a quality that breathed" (13). Mary was happy there. Judith kept coming back to the middle of one of the panels. She felt secure and safe in the bottom two blocks, but insecure in the top left corner because of the dark, heavy colour. Judith feared she might tip and fall off the painting. However, she liked playing a dangerous role. Brenda felt

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comfortable in the middle of the right panel of the painting. The dark side made her insecure. The bottom right area was scary because it made her think of "a bed of nails" (14). Natasha, unlike Brenda, preferred dark areas over light ones. She felt cold in the white section. Celine felt warm and hot in the red area, and deadly threatened in the dark section. Sabrina was not comfortable in the dark painting. She felt alone and unsafe in the darkness. Sabrina blamed the colours for making her think that she is "a little crazy" (14). However, isolated in the blue, she felt content.

Distinctiveness and empowerment were the prevailing themes in the student's Reflecting phase. Sharon rejected the offer to be carried by the people in the Chinatown scene saying: "Oh no, I can carry myself" (*Students' Report* 14). By taking the role of the gate, Sharon conferred on herself an almighty power. In addition to feeling at peace, Sharon envisaged herself as a protector of the village. Krista described an aggressive power struggle between the colours, a power derived from their distinct colour and size. Suzanne acquired wisdom described as "close to eternity" (15) in contemplating *Mantra*. Nadia saw herself as a green area endowed with a strong presence. She described herself as "strong and a beacon of light to lost souls who would come to her for rest" (15). Nadia offered security and peace. Natasha, who imagined herself as the yellow enclosed in "determined contours" at the top of the painting, felt opposed to the other elements, and distinct from the rest of the painting. Natasha was inspired by the influence she exercised over the entire painting. Judith, who

placed herself in the bottom two blocks, described how she secured and supported the massive painting. Celine felt "noticeable, undeniable, and unbearably strong" (16). Sabrina isolated herself from the rest of the elements. Annoyed by the black strokes, she managed to "push them off like pests" (16). Jacob was safe in the middle of the painting. He felt more secure moving inside the individual squares than from one square to another because of the blue lines that separate the squares. By choosing to be the only brown square in a "sea of yellow and orange," Jacob isolated himself from the rest of the squares but he was not totally separated from them. Jacob declared that being different made him "a vital element of the work" (16). Brenda was ambivalent about her ability to feel powerful or to exercise power. When she assumed the identity of one of the dark brush strokes, she felt dominant. When she became the lightest brush stroke, Brenda became nothing, lost and misunderstood. Taking the role of the dark background, Brenda felt mean "laughing at the white background, trying to push it away with force" (16). Brenda eventually chose to take the role of the white background and feel free. The expression of mostly extreme situations by the students can be interpreted as revealing feelings that are not socially welcome. Admission of fear and weakness on the one hand and extreme self confidence bordering on arrogance on the other is rare among students in everyday life. It is reasonable to suppose that in the course of browsing in the paintings students inadvertently gave vent to feelings emanating from deep-seated fears and wishes buried in the unconscious as postulated by Saint-

Martin.

As expected, the students' journey enabled them to act in an illusionary space, where there were no impediments to their wishes. It confirms Horner's assertion that "Art, being itself an illusion (a framed context), enables us to re-experience empowerment without, at the same time, having to worry that our everyday real survival might be in jeopardy" (Horner 6). In Horner's view "forgetfulness" is the only way that adults can come close to the experience of the infant's omnipotence.

Task III:

Would you attempt to produce a painting inspired by the one you have just contemplated? If so, what would you keep and what would you eliminate? Would you redo it in your own style? Would you actually make a painting or just imagine doing it? Would you make a comparison between your painting and the original painting? Are there sections in the original painting that you would like to change?

This task was based on the *Revealing* phase in Horner's "Responding to Art." At this stage the viewer is able "to escape from the aura of the immanent experience of object/image/event." Influenced by his/her own response, he/she is invited to revise another artist's work.

The Response:

Responding to a sense of movement, Lorna, whose journey in

Actualization consisted of repetitive runs up and down the diagonal lines, wanted to make a painting in which the lines would be replaced by animate or inanimate objects: human figures, animals, escalators, slides, stairs, ladders. Lorna would also replace the present dull colours with brighter ones. Nadia would eliminate some of the borders:

> I find them far too restrictive and enclosing. I almost feel
> claustrophobic when looking at this piece. I also did not truly like
> the grid effect because I felt that I could not leave them [the
> borders] to explore other areas.

(*Students' Report* 18)

Jacob was not inspired to produce anything similar to Sorensen's *Amarillo*. Although he enjoyed the work, he felt shut out of it. It is pertinent to remember that during his journey, Jacob had a lot of difficulty navigating from the bottom right side of the painting to the top. Sharon, who spent most of her journey time on the darker side of *Double Gate with Flood Diptych*, would leave this part intact. But she would add a few purple touches to the white section of the painting in order to "bring" herself to that side. Sharon would also reduce the white section to half its present size. She would keep the white stripes and add yellow to the rose colour. If Sharon were to reproduce this painting, she would "ignore the left-hand side altogether because it does not fit her personal vision" (18).

Similarly to Sharon, Sabrina claimed that she could not paint anything that

did not suit her nature, which she "would like to think is colourful and bright."

Sabrina also "feared" that she would not be capable of creating the colour and

depth effects she discovered in Sorensen's *Mystery*. Sabrina added that she

would not paint on an irregular shape because it "takes attention away from the

colours and is difficult to balance" (*Students' Report* 19). A different approach

was expressed by Krista who distanced herself from Sorensen's *Rouge Indien,*

declaring that she had no intention of creating a painting in his style. However,

she offered Sorensen a few suggestions: "have more continuation in the lines;

don't dissect the outer edge so much; dissect the inner areas more. This would

create more danger in the central regions and make exploring more exciting"

(19). On the other hand, Suzanne was quite eager to produce a painting similar

to *Lateral Mantra*. She would use the same "intense, deep, and high in

saturation" colours, change the upper left side, but leave intact the interior side

"to reproduce the same feeling of the right side, so there will be more places to

explore" (19). Adopting a global approach, Natasha (in *Double Gate with Flood*

Diptych) would be inspired to make a work that "reflects abstraction depending

on very limited forms" (20). Similarly, Jasmine would retain the idea of a grid

superimposed on a monochromatic lightly textured background (*Cobalt*). Mary

objected to the top yellow and blue stripes. She also recommended that the two

sections of *Double Gate with Flood Diptych* be separated from one another

because each "is perfect in itself" (20). Focusing on structure and colour, Judith

would make a painting consisting of two distinct sections of contrasting colour

values (light and dark). She would "keep the colours and the movement throughout the painting" (20). Judith would also try to paint on shaped canvases (*Water Resonance*). Brenda would consider making a similar painting to *Lateral Drift*, using other colours than black and white. She was not sure whether she "would keep those imaginary nails at the bottom of the painting." But like Sabrina, she was "scared" that she might fail in her endeavour. Satistied with her dialogue, Celine' claimed that there was no need for her to produce a painting because her "fireme" dialogue is her creation inspired by Sorensen's work (*Water Resonance*).

As expected, the students expressed a personalized critique of Sorensen's paintings. Their critical remarks touched on structure, shape of the canvases, form, colour, texture, depth, technique, and style. Generally, the students appreciated the artist's ability to create a sense of depth using a combination of subtle colour variations and texture. There was less agreement on the use of the geometric forms, the subtle as well as the harsh ones. Although the students answered the questions in this section, most of them didn't take full advantage of the opportunity to fashion a critical position. Some students viewed the idea of making hypothetical changes to a painting as sacrilege. Others limited themselves to generalities, i.e., that they would create a similar painting in their own style, or infuse their own feelings. It is clear that the students who went further in their revision and succeeded in expressing critical opinions were highly influenced by their personal experience in the

previous tasks.

Task IV:

1) Describe the visual variables in the painting: colour (hue, saturation, tonality); complementary and simultaneous contrasts; form/contour; texture; dimension; vectoriality (direction); pictorial depth.

2) Can you discern a certain basic structure in the painting? (e.g. large areas that share similar variables such as colour, shape, texture).

This task is somewhat different from the *"Describing" and "Structuring"* proposed by Horner. Whereas Horner proposes to describe small units of a painting, I asked the students to depict the visual elements. I wanted to examine their perception of and use of visual language after they had gone through the four previous tasks.

The Response:

The students managed to list the visual elements with various degrees of thoroughness and precision. They focused on colour more than on any of the other visual elements. The majority of the students described in detail the hues, saturation, and value featured in the painting they reviewed. They pointed to contrasts of hues, value, saturation paying particular attention to simultaneous contrasts caused by the juxtaposition of complementary colours. Moreover, they often described the effects produced by a variety of colour contrasts. Nadia, Lorna, Jacob, Sharon, and Suzanne noticed the effect of colour on the

perception of depth. Refering to *Rouge Indien*, Nadia wrote:

> The layers are incredible!. . . I could almost feel the layers. The
> first layer was probably a rich blue, fully saturated. Then an Indian
> red was smeared-on while the blue was still wet, creating depth
> and areas of bright and dark. Then, acrid, electric lines of yellow
> and green which almost jump out at you. It's strange because he is
> using complementary colours, but they are of such different value
> that they have little simultaneous effect on one another. The
> muddy red vs. the neon green, for example. They are truly
> clashing colours. The effect of anger and conflict is evident with
> this combination.
>
> (*Students' Report* 4)

Lorna also observed that the "artist used complementary colours to get
the depth effects he created" (*Actualization*). A push and pull effect was
detected by Jacob who pointed out that the layers of colour create depth, but it is
hard to discern which colour is in the foreground, and which is in the background.
This makes the depth of the work constantly changing" (*Amarillo*). Depth was
also the focus of attention for Sharon in *Double Gate with Flood Diptych* and
Suzanne in *Lateral Mantra*. They perceived more depth in the dark areas than in
the light ones. Subtle effects, produced by juxtaposing small areas of mildly
contrasting colours, were observed by several students. They mentioned other
factors that played a role in the perception of depth. Nadia attributed some of

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the depth perception to the grid lines in *Rouge Indien*: "They have a sort of three-dimensional effect when you stand close to the painting" (4). Referring to Cobalt, Jasmine also emphasized the grid's role in achieving this illusion: "The pictorial depth was exceptional. This was obviously due to the grid and the blue. There appears to be almost a centimeter between the grid and the blue shapes" (7).

The square was often mentioned as the basic unit, and the grid as the overall structure. Jacob described the grid structure more articulately than the rest of the students:

> The structure of the work *(Amarillo)* is very similar to that of a building. A variety of different sized squares (bricks) are used to create the overall form. These squares are closed forms with a variety of different textures. It is the different texture of each square that makes it unique. But it is the way that the squares relate to each other that created the overall structure. There are no squares that dominate the work. They are all of similar sizes and shapes. They share similar colours and similar textures. It is the way in which each square fits into the overall image that makes it unique.
>
> *(Students' Report* 5)

Several students made a connection between the grid and a sense of direction and movement. Some perceived vertical and horizontal motion. In

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Nadia's words: "As the grid is the most outstanding figure, it dictates direction. Basically up/down and left/right. It draws the eyes all over the canvas" (4). Others perceived movement spread from the corners to the centre or vice versa in accordance with the energy embedded in the Basic Plane. Accordingly, Jasmine perceived a circular motion: "The direction was either from the middle to the outside and back or in a circular direction counter-clockwise" (*in Cobalt*). Natasha pointed to the

> peculiar composition at the interior right hand corner of the painting. This space consisted of squares within squares and rectangles. These forms were condensed into approximately a fourth of the painting. However, the artist was able to balance the forms by including large rectangles on the right side of the painting (*Double Gate with Flood Diptych*).
>
> > (*Students' Report 7*)

A few students commented on the distribution of weight in their description of the painting's structure. They called attention to the weight on lower right side of the painting where the pictorial plane conforms with the Basic Plane. Nadia noted:

> It is not top heavy; it is not bottom heavy, but the grid lines do tighten up in the lower right-hand corner area adding weight to that portion of the canvas. This is the only aspect that creates that heaviness, as the colour is rather monochromatic throughout

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(Rouge Indien).

A similar explicative observation of *Amarillo* was made by Jacob: "The weight of the painting seems to be the bottom right. In this area the squares melt together creating a larger block of colour, thus giving this section of the painting more weight" (5).

It is natural that in their description the students featured the visual elements that they encountered in the first two phases of their response to their chosen painting. However, the second time around they adopted an objective approach by looking at the painting as outside observers. Nonetheless, a couple of students referred directly to their personal experience of the earlier phases or to feelings related to the experience. At the end of her description of the colour scheme, Nadia added: "The muddy red vs. the neon green, for example, are truly clashing colours. The effect is anger and conflict" (4). And in relation to the structure (*Rouge Indien*) she remarked: "The colour adds a general darkness and even a foreboding atmosphere. The square shapes create strength, sturdiness, and power" (4). In describing depth in a section of *Rouge Indien*, Esther alluded to a womb experience: "It feels like I am floating in liquid as deep as the earth's centre" (9). Brenda mentioned again the virtual lines straddling the "bed of nails."

Task V:

Do you perceive this painting differently after you answered the questions? If so, in what way?

The Response:

Without exception, all the students stated that they benefited from the tasks they had performed in the course of their visit to the exhibition. The majority of the students acknowledged that by the end of the exercise, they had come to perceive the painting they had worked on quite differently. Students cited affective and cognitive aspects that played a role in their newly acquired perception.

Judith "liked *Water Resonance* better after answering the questions" (21). But Sharon confessed: "I no longer liked the painting (*Double Gate with Flood Diptych)* because of the left-hand side of the painting which I had not realized was part of this piece" (21). Lorna played on *Actualization,* the title of the painting she analyzed, hinting that the process of viewing the painting was a process of self-actualization: "Going through the steps of actualizing this painting, I found that it made me think and feel many things" (21). Nadia expressed mixed feelings: "Yes, I didn't like it anymore. I was scared by the colours, the anger, the loneliness. What was once an interesting piece turned into a grid nightmare . . . but I loved it all the more--love-hate" (21). Sabrina felt somewhat shaken by the experience but tried to remain non-judgmental:

I remain uneasy looking at such a painting, but much like a good

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movie that is shaking, [sic] I can appreciate it now for what it is. It

was never meant to make me feel good and light, and this, I am

finding out, is okay too. (21)

Throughout the process, Esther never extricated herself from the *Forgetting* and

Remembering phases:

> After answering these questions about this painting I don't really
>
> think that I perceive this painting any differently. When I first
>
> viewed it I felt like I was floating in smooth liquid in some parts and
>
> walking on rough surfaces in other parts. Just gliding and floating
>
> in the depths. Where it is thick paint, it gives a water effect
>
> because the lines on the canvas look like waves, a very smooth,
>
> gentle water-like effect.
>
> *(Students' Report* 21)

Celine, Rita, and Brenda enjoyed the imaginary component of the exercise:

Celine appreciated "the use of imagination within the imagination of someone

else. . . . The stories, dreams, dialogues all came from my mind after looking,

examining and feeling the painted story that came from David's mind" (21). Rita

compared her experience to "Alice through the looking glass" (21). Brenda

mentioned that she was "ready to start a new imaginary voyage" (21).

Other students stressed the progress they made in performing a visual

analysis rather than their emotional experiences. Jasmine pointed out that she

"learned a great deal about different styles of painting and how to analyze or observe a painting in a gallery" (21). A similar attitude was expressed by Suzanne, Jacob, and Mary. Suzanne was grateful that in the process of examining the painting she "refined" her "understanding and appreciation of the different elements of the painting" (21). For Jacob, the painting "was no longer just a big yellow canvas. There are little nuances such as texture and the use of blue as a border that helps to accentuate the yellow" (21). He found the painting more interesting after "looking at all the different elements" (21). Mary appreciated the fact that in the process of analyzing the painting she observed new aspects that she had neglected to pay attention to in the past. She particularly enjoyed the interplay among the layers of colours.

In commenting on the effects of the exercise on their perception of the painting, the students touched on their experience and their feeling through the various phases of the exercise. Some students highlighted the imaginary aspect, others the purely visual elements, and a few tended to form associations with the appearance of the external world. In the process, they readily disclosed affective attitudes.

When I handed out the questionnaire, I feared that the students may perceive the tasks to be performed as eccentric or somewhat childish, and that their reaction to it may not be sincere. Their first reaction to the exhibition was negative. Most of the students expressed dislike of the works and apprehension as to their ability to make any comment on the paintings. However, faced with

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the questionnaire, they settled down to answer the questions in a most sincere manner. At the end of the exercise, several students expressed a high level of satisfaction; a few were exhilarated. However, some students felt that it was not right to inject one's own feelings and imagination into the work of somebody else. They believed that their imagination may have gone too far. I had the feeling that they expected to explore the artist's message rather than their own free interpretation of it. However, regardless of these reservations, the students succeeded in enlarging their affective vocabulary derived from purely visual cues, an achievement that accompanied them for the rest of the course.

CHAPTER 10

THE SHAPE OF THE PAINTING SUPPORT AND ITS

CONTRIBUTION TO THE PAINTED IMAGE

I noticed that in their analyses of Sorensen's paintings, the students hardly paid attention to the dynamics ingrained in the empty support (the Basic Plane). Even students who examined paintings of unusually shaped canvases failed to mention how these shapes affected the interaction among the visual elements. Consequently, the purpose of this exercise was to draw the students' attention to how the shape of the Basic Plane affects the nature of the image that emerges on it (the pictorial plane), in both verbal and visual terms. For this purpose, I set up a simple still life composed of a few pots of different textures (ceramic and glass) and colours and a few pieces of fruit. The students were assigned to produce three still life paintings on three differently shaped masonite boards: an oblong rectangle that could be used vertically or horizontally, a proportional rectangle, and a square. The students were given freedom to use any of the displayed objects and to rearrange them as they saw fit in accordance with the shape and size of their boards.

The Assignment

Using the objects on the stand, compose a still life painting on three differently shaped boards: an oblong rectangle that could be used vertically or horizontally, a proportional rectangle, and a square.

The Response

Through dialogues with individual students and class discussions, it became apparent that the shape of the board affected the students' selection of objects, their size, shape, and their placement on the Basic Plane, and to a lesser degree--the choice of colour and texture. In addition, I observed that the order in which the paintings were produced often had a major effect on the images that came forth. For example, students were too bored to repeat the same subject for the third time, and they resorted to a variety of improvisations, mainly simplifications.

Jacob explained how the painting on the oblong board, positioned in a vertical direction, led him to choose the "taller forms" and to place them in a receding order (one on top of the other) rather than side by side. "I placed more at the top because the board is vertical. Everything is going up with the rectangular board" (*Teaching Journal* 4 Mar. 1995: 54a). On his second rectangle (the proportional), Jacob decided "to paint the objects all horizontal,

like a landscape." Jacob found it necessary to paint one of the bottles lying horizontally on the table. He used texture to accentuate the horizontal and vertical positions of the objects. The square-shaped board, which Jacob painted last, underwent a series of transformations until it ended as a minimalist abstract. Jacob elaborated on how he arrived at this image:

> In the third painting I kept all the objects together. I have first done
> it very realistically, like the other paintings [traces of it can be seen
> in the texture]. I didn't like it because I have done it already. I
> wanted something different. Because the square shape can be
> divided nicely [evenly], I made the three identical rectangles.
> Originally the objects were grouped similarly to the second
> painting, i.e. horizontally.
>
> (*Teaching Journal* 4 Mar. 1995: 54a)

The students' response to Jacob's three paintings was a mixture of visual observations and affective reactions. Judith "liked" the dark tones of the horizontally constructed painting. So did Lisa: "because it is dark, there is a feeling of quietness and intimacy--it's almost like by candle light" (53). Nadia observed that Jacob's three paintings became progressively darker and more abstracted. Brenda "liked" the curves on the bottom right side of Jacob's oblong painting: "It gets me in really fast, and then I get into the green bottle and it shuts me in. I stay there because of the white around it. There is a lot of movement, I like it" (53). Lisa, like Brenda, finds

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the foreground interesting and inviting. I get into the foreground

and then slide back around the red thing, which is probably an

apple. And there is something about the yellow line; I don't like

going there. I notice the light around the bottle and the slanty thing

in the corner. It is interesting because it holds you in the painting.

The yellow also keeps you in.

(*Teaching Journal* 4 Mar. 1995: 53a)

Through a series of questions I got the students to examine the

producer's point of observation. Lorna declared that the painting "makes me feel

like a little person standing on top of the table" (53a). Nadia stated: "I'm floating

above the table" (53a). Brenda said: "It makes me feel like I am flying" (53a).

But Lorna noticed a discrepancy: "I can't see the top of the bottle" (53a). [that

should be seen in a flying position]. Lisa added that the table is "slopey" (53a).

The students realized that several perspectives can cohabitate in a single

painting. They noticed that the painting's perspective is partly top view and

partly front view. The works of Cezanne and Matisse were mentioned as

examples of multiple perspectives. To my question as to how both the basic and

the pictorial planes affect the depth perception in the paintings, Nadia pointed

out that the yellow bottle "comes forward, because it is an open form on the edge

of the board, and because of its yellow colour" (53a). She observed that "the top

right corner has a lot of energy because of the corner; something cuts right into

it" (creating a triangle). Nadia concluded her remarks by pointing out that, unlike

most paintings that are bottom right heavy, Jacob's work is top heavy. Lisa supported Nadia's arguments by comparing Jacob's oblong painting with Nadia's three paintings in which the objects are concentrated at the bottom right section of the paintings. Krista observed that Jacob's square-shaped painting is "composed of three open forms, as if the forms keep going out of the painting. That does not make it a quiet painting" (54a).

Nadia first painted the vertically positioned oblong-shaped board because she "likes" very long narrow pieces. "I was very excited and energetic about it, so I started with bright colours" (*Teaching Journal* 4 Mar. 1995: 57). Nadia chose to paint only one bottle because she "did not like very crowded scenes" (57), and because she wanted to "concentrate on details" (57). Only later, did she add a few pieces of fruit, "just to add more colour and texture" (57). In the proportionally shaped rectangle board, Nadia added a horizontal piece in order to create a contrast to the upright green bottle. Nadia wanted this painting to be softer than the first one. And, indeed, the painting progressed very well until she added the "fruit in the middle. It blew everything away because it was so bright. But I liked it and kept it like that. The painting is more like underwater floating effects. It is like light filtering through water" (57a). Like Jacob, Nadia had difficulty painting the square-shaped board. Nadia attributed the difficulty to the fact that she had never before painted on a square format and because she "got tired of all the fabric going everywhere" (57a). Nadia wanted the painting to be "very simple and very quiet, just a cement wall with a bottle. . . . It is not finished,

but I may not finish it" (57a). Nadia was not comfortable with the table, "it really cuts the painting. I didn't know how to approach the corner because it was a square" (57a). When I asked her to focus on how the shapes affected her paintings, Nadia replied that, faced with the oblong board, it was clear to her right away that she was going to paint the green bottle, and that it was going to be positioned "right there" (points with her finger). The table came next. But as far as the other elements were concerned, Nadia experienced some confusion "because it is a long narrow shape" (57a). Nadia also knew that she "wanted a lot of light" (57a), possibly to fill the space at the top of the painting. "I saw right away that I cannot fill the top of the oblong canvas, and I knew that I was going to put light right away" (58). Accordingly, since the second painting didn't have to be filled with an extensive background, Nadia thought that she could do with less light. Instead, Nadia introduced more drapery. Nadia observed that "it sits better than the first one" (57a). In other words, it is more stable. Nadia and Lorna disagreed on how close the objects featured in both paintings are to the viewer. Nadia argued that, being in close proximity to one another, the two horizontal borders in the oblong painting push the bottle forward. Lorna, on the other hand, took an intuitive approach, claiming that "in this one [the oblong], I feel that I can reach out and grab the bottle. In the other (the proportional rectangle), it makes me feel that I am peeking through a doorway" (58).

As in the review of Jacob's work, much of the students' reaction to Nadia's work was focused on the visual and affective aspects of her three paintings. In

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fact, more than ever before, the students were able to articulate the link between the visual and the affective. Judith found that she is "most comfortable in the middle painting because of the colour and the use of light texture" (*Teaching Journal* 4 Mar. 1995: 55). According to Brenda's taste, the first painting has "too much contrast compared to the second painting. The red of the background is isolated; it does not reflect on the bottle" (55). Brenda preferred the second painting because it is more harmonious. She also related well to the third painting because "it is all calm around her, and if I envisage the bottle as a person, it is standing on something, and it is not going to fall; it is solid" (56). Mary likes to be in the first painting because "it feels warm" (58). Jacob was taken by the light: "I find it interesting how the light comes in the left corner; it is almost like the light of God. The light is slowly spreading; it is like looking down at the bottle" (56). Lorna is "drawn to the bright colours in the first painting. I find that the angles go like this and like that [she gestures]; you dance around the bottle" (56a). Lisa finds both the first and the third paintings "disturbing. That red is completely separate. It does not reflect in the orange, nor in the blue. I am not comfortable in the painting at all" (56a). Talking about the square painting, Lisa proclaimed:

> It is a disturbing painting in a lot of ways because the bottle is quite realistic, and then you have the non-realistic outlines of forms, and then you have the windows, and there is nothing there but the sky. Where are you? In the moon? Very twilight zone. (56a)

Unlike Lisa, there were a few students who liked the calmness and the simplicity of Nadia's square painting. In fact, Nadia's decision not to "finish" her work was largely influenced by the students' interest in this painting. Either because both Jacob's and Nadia's first two paintings featured a source of light coming from the top left corner, or because of a depiction of a window on that same spot, the students agreed that the blue window is a source of light--in direct contradiction to the visual clues. This is a clear case in which the verbal perception overpowered the visual. The window's blue is significantly darker then the light yellow that permeates the wall, yet none of the students challenged the assumption that the blue of the window is the source of light. The concept of the window overrode the visual perception.

Lisa, too, chose to work with the oblong form first because she likes unusual shapes:

> I don't want to get caught up in reality at all, partly because of the
> phase I am in, and partly because I am interested in the outlining of
> shapes using a dark colour. I therefore decided to go with
> simplified geometric shapes. I paint with a palette knife more than
> with brushes, and you cannot be precise.
>
> (*Teaching Journal* 4 Mar. 1995: 56a-60)

Faced with the oblong horizontally positioned board, Lisa had a kitchen shelf in mind when she "jammed and cluttered" (60) her canvas with kitchen ware. Lisa had a hard time painting on the square-shaped board. As a result, she was

"completely off reality. I didn't know how to make an arrangement on it, so I thought I will just put shapes" (60). Because Lisa used diffused forms, her paintings drew remarks pertaining to pure visual elements. Students remarked on contrasts of colour, texture, and size; on open and closed forms; and on predominant directions (horizontals, verticals, and diagonals). Nadia pointed out how the painted forms created a diagonal direction which divided the square painting into two triangles.

When Natasha was asked how the shape of the boards affected her image, she first answered that she never paid attention to it. However, after further observation, she remarked that "the texture in the oblong painting has more vertical lines; the horizontally positioned rectangle has more horizontal lines; and the square has an equal quantity of horizontal and vertical lines" (*Teaching Journal* 6 Mar. 1995: 61).

Sharon was not able to say much on how the shapes affected her work other than to point out that the square painting was the most difficult to execute: "How do you deal with a square? It is so perfect and symmetric. How do you place the objects" (61a)? The students remarked that Celine, perhaps more than the other students, used the shape of the boards in a most logical manner. Krista observed that Celine "tailored the position of the objects to fit the shape of the boards" (*Teaching Journal* 11 Mar. 1995: 64). Lisa pointed out that the square is the most appropriate form to accommodate a circle. Krista, who often challenges what is said in class, disagreed with the observation made by the

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students, according to which Celine's square painting is the most stable of her series of three. Krista's challenge was based on a verbal notion rather than on a visual analysis:

> In the square-shaped painting you don't see what the object is on.
> Is it floating? What is it attached to? As for the bottle, in the
> rectangle painting, you see--it's got this big area on which it is
> plunked. It takes all the guess work out. (64a)

Most students agreed that the-oblong shaped boards used vertically were the most unstable, whereas the boards used horizontally and the square ones were the most stable. Krista added that the stability/instability is not determined by the shape of the boards only, but also by other factors such as the painted image or the pictorial plane.

It is apparent from the students' paintings and from their accounts that the shape of the boards affected their verbal and visual orientation as well as their affective disposition. In fact, the students perceived the empty board, before any mark was traced on it, as laden with an affective component. Most students chose to work on the preferred shape first, whereas a few opted to first tackle those shapes they considered difficult to handle. The square shape was the least popular among the students. The reasons given were: 1) that it is a shape the students never worked on before; and 2) that the shape is too symmetric for creating an interesting placement of objects on it. Several students noticed that the style of painting was affected by the order in which the paintings were

produced. Generally, in the first painting, the students tried to represent the still life in as close a manner to the natural look as their technique could allow. Each subsequent painting, however, contained fewer details, and in some cases it was treated in an abstract manner. One student qualified some square paintings as "strange."

This exercise succeeded in drawing the students' attention to the shape of the painting boards, first during the painting process and later while reflecting on the finished work. However, the students did not limit their comments to the main issue of the discussion. They continued to point to the visual elements and to express affective attitudes using techniques borrowed from the previous assignment: the analysis of Sorensen's paintings.

CHAPTER 11

HOMAGE TO MATISSE'S CUT-OUTS: THE INTEGRATION OF NEGATIVE SPACE IN THE PICTORIAL COMPOSITION

I noticed that it is common among students to pay little attention to the background of a painting. The background is often perceived and treated as a subtraction of the deliberately painted forms from the painting support. In fact, very often the background is regarded as a nuisance, as something to add after the painting is finished. The first purpose of this exercise was to encourage students to integrate forms bearing similarity to the figure in the background. Students were prompted to incorporate cut-out leftovers considered as negative space in the context of the paper they were cutting and apply them to form positive space in the collage. A second purpose was to increase the students' awareness of colour-form interaction. The use of simple cut-outs (closed forms) is most effective in helping students to perceive the unstable nature of colour. For example, forms carved out of an identical colour sheet may be perceived differently in terms of hue, tonality, and saturation depending on their size,

background, and placement on the Basic Plane.

The cut-outs project was composed of two sections: 1) the production of individual collages; 2) the creation of three murals, each by a group of five students.

The Assignment

> **Inspired by Matisse's cut-out works, prepare large areas of hand-coloured sheets of paper, cut them into shapes and assemble them onto a support surface in conformity with a chosen theme. There are two projects: 1) an individual collage, 2) a group collage.**

The Response

1. Since one-to-one discussions with individual students did not take place, students' feedback on the individually produced cut-out works was gathered solely in a class discussion. The issues addressed during the general discussion focused on the students' experience of working with cut-outs, and what they observed and discovered in the process. In this exercise, perhaps more than in the previous ones, the students were able to point to the following visual phenomena:

a) that the collage method is conducive to experimentation with a variety of compositional possibilities by shuffling forms around until a satisfactory

combination emerges;

b) that colours cannot be blended, and consequently the contours are of a hard-edge nature;

c) that there is no clear-cut distinction between positive and negative forms, i. e., that left-over pieces (negative space) can be used as positive ones. Rita pointed to sections in her collage made of both negative and positive pieces (the green and yellow areas). Sharon too showed how she took advantage of both types of forms. Students recognized that balancing negative and positive forms is necessary for the creation of harmony.

d) That hues, tonalities, saturation, and size of forms change in relation to their surroundings. Lisa remarked that the green forms in Rita's painting appear differently when juxtaposed with the yellow than when they are juxtaposed with the blue: the green that borders on the blue is perceived to be lighter in tone than the one next to the yellow. Looking at Lisa's work, a number of students agreed that the tone of the yellow curly form seems different when juxtaposed to the blue area rather than to the white one: the yellow on the blue appears lighter than the yellow on the white. Sharon added that the blue and yellow appear different in hue and saturation in accordance with the width of the coiled form and the blue background: the colours appear dark and low in saturation in the narrow stretches and lighter and brighter in saturation in the wider sections. The students observed the same phenomenon in the dancing figure: the red appears light and highly saturated on the blue background and darker and lower in

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saturation on the orange area. The same red elsewhere appears lighter against the dark blue background. Krista's painting featured a similar concentric form in which students could observe how the brown form on a green background reflected a rosy tinge as a result of a complementary colour contrast. Jacob, unlike most of the students, observed a green tinge on the brown, as if the green were invading the neutral colour.

A number of students focused on their affective experience. Lisa expressed pleasure in "randomly painting sheets of papers" (*Teaching Journal* 11 Mar. 1995: 65). In so doing, she conjured up an image of dance and celebration, which she decided to follow as a theme for her collage. With this theme in mind, Lisa "intuitively cut out any old shapes" (65). She was then faced with the task of selecting "which ones work together and the whole process of composition, which is very different here than in conventional painting" (65). Mary and Sharon felt that the cutting-out process triggered a specific type of expression. For Mary "it feels more of an expression of yourself, like a child" (65). For Sharon, "it is crafty: you are making something, cutting it and pasting. It feels like you are making something from nothing; it is more tangible" (65). An affective attitude was also expressed by Krista who observed that the works were "mostly abstracted--there are no details--so you don't have to fuss. I don't like fussing. It took a lot of the worry of painting from me" (65a).

2. In the second phase of the paper cut-out project, the students were

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assigned to form three groups for the purpose of collectively producing three murals, one by each group. Each group had to agree on a preconceived topic for its mural. A first group (Brenda, Sabrina, Rita, Mary, and Suzanne), instructed to work with flatly prepainted sheets, chose *Architectural Constructs* as its topic. A second group (Nadia, Lorna, Lisa, Celine, and Judith), directed to combine both flat and textured surfaces, opted for an *Underwater Scene* as its subject. And a third group (Jacob, Jasmine, Krista, Natasha, and Esther), assigned to use painted textured papers, chose to portray *A Picnic Gone Awry*. The groups will be referred to in the text as Group I, II, and III according to the order in which they were introduced above.

The purpose of the group project was twofold: 1) to draw the students' attention to the interaction of colour and texture; 2) to bring them to verbalize some of the normally silent processes that operate during the production of an art work. Whereas in an individual production the thought process is silent and can only be partially retrieved after the fact, in a group effort some of the thought process is audible through the fragments of dialogue among the participants. In some cases, students voiced their thoughts without addressing anybody in particular. This type of dialogue reflects a non-linear stream of non-articulated fragments of thoughts. Although the dialogue that accompanied the students' actions as they constructed the mural may sound incoherent when detached from the visual information, it nonetheless reflects their concerns during the production process.

The follcwing are examples of excerpts of dialogue during the assembly phase (full text in appendix 2):

Group I (*Architectural Constructs*):

-- where does the sun go? Here?

-- on the side? Inside?

-- up here?

-- that's too far

-- maybe a small one at the back

-- it's the logic, the lost city of Atlantis

-- the green thing can come here

-- it looks like all water

-- I like something to cover it anyway

-- it seems like a piece of the land

-- these mountains, they are cool there

-- I don't like this

-- it's getting pretty messy, it's getting hairy (laughter)

-- this thing is getting real confusing

-- don't worry about the logic of it

-- this is a good contrast

-- where are we going to put this?

-- this floats in the air

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-- is this better?

-- it is too crowded here, she looks better there

-- this big thing so huge in the back

-- there is a big red spot here

-- we can move this

. . . .

<div align="right">

(*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 85-86)

</div>

Group II (*Underwater Scene*):

-- the submarine

-- I like it

-- it is pretty good

-- this can go over here

-- do you want it down?

-- how about the lobster, it should go right into the green

-- we should put it on an angle

-- on the coral, we should put stuff on it. It looks so small

-- what if we took it from here and put it there, what will happen?

-- everything we put down now will reflect on everything else

-- there is the big fish

-- that one has a lot of texture

. . . .

<div align="right">

(*Teaching Journal* 11 Mar. 1995: 79)

</div>

(Lisa suggests the composition be rearranged because it looks "busy and crowded." The rest of the group members agree.)

-- that's nice

-- mermaid, divers

-- I like that better

-- the red and the green

-- I like that texture, it is really nice

-- we could put it in the top. It will be detailed without being destructive

. . . .

(*Teaching Journal* 11 Mar. 1995: 79-80)

Group III (*A Picnic Gone Awry*):

-- that's the tablecloth

-- it has to go on the plate

-- what's the blue thing?

-- this is grass

-- bird's eye view

-- put it at the bottom

-- on the blue

-- what about the weeds?

-- we should wait until everything else is on

-- right in the middle

-- sounds good

. . . .

(*Teaching Journal* 18 Mar. 1995: 76)

A quick browse through the seemingly jumbled dialogue reveals the students' concerns during the assembly phase of the mural production. The dialogue shows that the students combined the pieces they had previously prepared in a manner that reflected their chosen topic, satisfied their visual expectations, and more or less respected the logic of the physical world. The students' attention to the topic is reflected in the repetition of words such as house, column, stairs in the dialogue of Group I; in the use of terms related to undersea life: mermaid, fish, submarine, clam and others in the dialogue of Group II; and in the references to food items: sandwiches, cake, pizza, quail, and the like in the dialogue of Group III. Naturally, since the dialogue took place during the time the students were engaged in arranging the cut-out pieces into a worthy composition, the students' focus was on the placement of the individual components. The deliberations among the group members reflected their preoccupation with purely visual concerns as well as their attachment to the familiar order of the physical world.

The students' visual concerns were conveyed in the frequent references to colour: hues, tonality, and saturation; texture; size of forms; position of the individual pieces in the overall composition; depth; contrasts; perspective; and structure--local as well as global. In fact, visual concerns, attention to worldly

order, and manifestations of an affective nature are closely interwoven and interchangeable as the following example will show (after major changes to the mural):

-- it was busy and crowded

-- that's nice

-- mermaid, divers

-- I like that better

-- the red and the green

-- I like that one better--the red and the green

-- I like that texture, it's really nice

-- we could put it at the top. It will be detailed without being destructive

-- I don't like it there because there is red next to red

-- I like it, I like it, I like it

-- that thing at the top, it looks like the fish is going to the sub

-- it's like making voices

-- I like that, but I don't know where to put it

-- too close to the yellow

-- I like it on the blue, and I liked it on the side here. That looks nice

-- it's cute

-- it's going to make it clustery

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-- finished, I like the way this works with this; it looks so subtle.

. . . .

Whereas in Groups II and III the students used visual and everyday worldly concerns in a more or less complementary manner, Group I treated this issue in a somewhat conflicting manner:

-- it's too far because she is too big

-- it makes sense because it is behind

-- it is too dark there

-- maybe a small one at the back

-- the tree cannot go here logically

-- things cannot only go logically

-- do you have some more green?

-- the green thing there does not go

-- no, I like it

-- don't worry about the logic

-- its getting to be all confusing

-- we'll put the blue here

-- this will contrast nicely

-- the grass beside the mountain

. . . .

It is practically impossible to accurately separate affective, visual, and verbal meanings. Any attempt to do so would involve speculation and guess work. As observed in the first few chapters, very often students used visual terms to convey verbal meaning and vice versa.

A class discussion following the completion of the three murals focused on: 1) the production process as experienced by each group; 2) the experience of the individuals within the group; 3) the group dynamic; 4) the students' affective involvement and their reflections on the finished murals; 5) the effects of the chosen theme, texture specifications, group dynamic, and students' affective attitude on the final product.

1. The Production Process as Experienced by Each Group

All three groups followed a similar pattern in the production of the murals: after a short discussion, they agreed upon a theme, proceeded to paint the paper sheets, cut the various forms, and finally assembled them onto a large, heavy, brown paper. It is in the assembling stage that the students observed differences in procedures. Groups I and II first spread the support paper on the floor, and after trying a variety of arrangements, settled on a tentative composition. They then mounted the work on the wall and proceeded by adding the last details as well as introducing some minor changes. Group III skipped most of the floor stage by hanging the support paper on the wall soon after

introducing the checkered background. From then on they worked directly on the wall, leaving no room for major changes.

Group I agonized more than the two other groups over the placement of the architectural structures, sections of landscape, and the two human figures. Two assertive personalities in the group, Brenda and Rita, reflected different approaches to composition. Whereas Rita emphasized the interaction among the visual elements and the general structure, Brenda gave priority to the logic of the physical world.

Group II first planned to make a garden and use blue as the dominant colour. However, influenced by the expanse of the blue, they changed the garden theme to an underwater scene. The strategy was to paint an extended textured blue background and place large flat areas--the octopus and the submarine--together with assorted (flat and textured) small marine creatures. Working more methodically than the others, the members of this group planned their mural in advance and executed their work in a most co-operative manner. At one point, following Lisa's suggestion, they unanimously agreed to remove a number of cut-outs at the price of sacrificing a few cherished pieces. At the end of the project, all five of them testified that the final image came very close to what they had first envisaged. Nadia attested that "the group didn't really put things down until we were all happy. We envisaged it exactly. I am so surprised that it came out exactly how we envisaged it, almost every aspect of it" (*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 94).

Group III, after pasting in the background, hung the support paper on the wall and proceeded directly to glue the cut-out pieces. Good-humourdly, members of this group marched back and forth announcing their wares: sandwich, cake, and other food items, as they randomly glued on the pieces. Rita (in class discussion) invoked the image of "invading ants" in her description of the scene. After running out of space, Jacob took the lead and easily obtained the group's consent to use an overlapping technique for the purpose of creating a measure of depth perception. On the whole, there was only minimal group discussion during the production phase: at the beginning, in order to establish the colour of the background grid, and at the end on Jacob's initiative. Krista recounted: "we spent a lot of time discussing the background. We finally decided on red and white because Jasmine was pushy and because we all ended up having more or less the same red" (*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 98). In Jacob's words:

> We were preoccupied with the background. We decided how we wanted it, and then we all started putting things here and there. Toward the end, we discussed it because it didn't look quite right until we started to overlap things. And then, once the depth was created, it really helped to finish it off. Only at the end, when we discussed the overlapping, it finally got together. (97-98)

2. The Experience of the Individuals within the Group

All the students appreciated the complete freedom they enjoyed in fashioning the individual pieces for the mural. Sharon described how she "had fun making different textures on the sheets of papers" (96), regardless of what they may serve at a later stage. Krista felt that the fact that her group was engaged in minimal discussion left room for individual members to work "instinctively." Jasmine was disappointed that most of the background was covered by the food items. (It may be recalled that she was responsible for the choice of the colour for the table cloth). Jacob told how he

> just cut the pieces. I didn't care whether they looked like picnic
> items. I hoped they would fit. I definitely did not have a
> preconceived idea. I didn't know how it will work. I cut mine as
> triangles, kind of pink flesh-colour triangles. I saw them eventually
> as sandwiches. (96)

Krista just looked at the colours of the painted papers and thought: "what will that work as?" (97). Natasha intermittently juggled the raw materials and the items she was about to create. Lorna enthusiastically described how she discovered the technique that produced the bubble effects in the water. Rita lamented the loss of part of the stairs that she had created. Mary insisted that "Barby and Ken" (104) be incorporated in the mural. For that matter, all the students seemed to be attached to the pieces they had prepared; a few expressed disappointment at not being able to include them in the final product.

3. The Group Dynamic

A certain insight into the working of the group dynamic was already mentioned in the section describing the process of constructing the murals: members of each group collectively arrived at a topic after a brief discussion, they worked autonomously on the individual pieces, and they discussed the placement of the individual pieces on the mural's support base. Yet regardless of the common pattern, there were subtle differences in the interaction among the students within each group. The members of Group I agonized more than the other two groups over the placement of the various pieces, spending time on good-natured clashes between two strong personalities: Rita and Brenda. In contrast, Group III adopted a light-hearted attitude that minimized discussions and encouraged individual rather than group expression. Group II displayed the highest level of discipline and co-operation among its members: they meticulously planned their mural in advance; they closely co-operated in the preparation of the individual pieces to a degree that two or three members worked together on an identical object; they easily arrived at a consensus on how to combine the various elements into a satisfactory composition; and they were highly satisfied with the finished mural. The strong co-operation and camaraderie among the members of this group is reflected in the insertion of a cartoon-like portrait of themselves perched in the windows of the submarine.

Lorna, in particular, was very proud of it. She exclaimed: "we are all in there: Celine, Lorna, Nadia, Judith, and Lisa. We made sure that we are in the submarine" (*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 102).

The overall nature of the interaction among the students in the groups can be qualified as friendly and cordial: the students respected the views of their peers, were open to their friends' suggestions, were ready to make compromises, and generally proceeded in a spirit of solidarity and co-operation. Naturally, regardless of the wide sharing of tasks, the workload was not always evenly distributed--some students were more active than others. Students often mentioned the compromises they made. Jacob, from the onset of the exercise, "had no preconceived notion [of what he would cut] because whatever you have in your mind--how it is going to come out--it is not what the guy you are working with has in mind" (96). Krista too was aware of how the group situation predisposed the individual to modify her usual style in order to leave space for the intervention of other participants: "when you work with other people, you are less of a perfectionist, because we see things as a whole; we cannot control what everybody is doing anyway" (99). Rita, not taking into consideration other people's input, moaned: "I visualized a skyline, just up to two thirds of the way up. When people came up with houses and stuff, I had to compromise" (102-103). This was not Rita's only compromise: "I wanted to see the stairs, it was so rich, I had to compromise" (104). It was harder for Rita to compromise than for those who adopted an attitude similar to Jacob's and Krista's. Whatever their

degree of readiness or reluctance, all students made the small concessions in a spirit of camaraderie and generosity.

The emergence of group leaders was the most unexpected finding in the unfolding of the group dynamic. All three groups admitted to naturally and unintentionally following the guidance of one of its members. Group I perceived Rita as its leader. Whereas Brenda attributed Rita's influence to her domineering attitude, Sabrina welcomed Rita's initiative: "it is good that somebody took a lead. I was less careful where I put things." Rita denied any intention to impose her will on other members:

> I just wanted everybody to look at major things before they put their pieces on. I didn't say what's to go where. I just wanted everybody to tape, then stand back and think about it. That was important to me.

> (*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 103)

Lisa, of Group II, assumed leadership when she suggested revamping the entire composition for the sake of simplification. Despite a reluctance from the group members to part with some cherished marine figures, they endorsed Lisa's proposition. Judith, of Group III, recounted how Jacob was made leader:

> Jacob became kind of our leader. All along, even though he was here like us, for some reason we always asked him questions. It didn't make any sense, he was just like us, but we asked him questions and he gave us answers [laughter].

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When asked whether he noticed it, Jacob replied:

> Yes, maybe it is me, because I get the same thing at work. People
>
> always assume that I have an answer [laughter]. I am just used to
>
> it. I also noticed, when we worked, that people were passive
>
> towards what others were doing. When somebody makes
>
> something we say O.K.; we just accept it. (99)

In Jacob's perception, he simply filled a vacuum.

It was during the last phase of the mural production that the leadership factor became evident. The three students who became leaders seemed to pay more attention than the others to the overall composition or an aspect of it. Jacob felt uneasy because of the lack of depth and the indifference among the group members. Lisa pointed out that the mural contained too many items and therefore appeared too busy, and Rita constantly reminded her group-mates to stand back and examine the entire work. With no intention to elect or appoint a group leader, all three groups ended up with an informal leader who naturally emerged during the process of the exercise.

4. The Students' Affective Involvement During the Process and in Their Reflection on the Finished Murals

The most obvious manifestation of an affective attitude during the production process is the frequent recurrence of "I like it" in the sketchy dialogue

that complemented the actual manipulation of the materials. A wider range of revelations of an affective nature surfaced during the reflection on the finished murals. Gathered in front of the murals, the students recognized early on the humorous nature of their work. Most students nodded their heads affirming Nadia's observation that "all three collages have a comical approach in the end product. We didn't start them that way, but when you look at them they have a sense of humour" (92). When asked for the source of this common trait, Nadia replied: "It is like kids; you get scissors, papers, and glue. It feels like we went back in years, and this is what brought it out" (92). Nadia added later on that she envisaged the marine mural as "a page in a children's book in a story about underwater pollution" (102). Students often used such terms as excitement, fun, happy, and the like to describe their pleasure during the production phase as well as during their contemplation of the final works.

However, there were just as many utterances of displeasure and regret. Lorna, who often expresses herself in a theatrical manner, waved her hands in all directions as she made the following remarks about the picnic scene:

> I was nervous about the way the colours are in that corner. It makes
>
> my eyes go like this, and then, the opposite way (crossing her hands
>
> and eyes). So to me, it makes the objects seem as if they are flying
>
> everywhere like crazy.
>
> (*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 105)

Disappointment mixed with resignation was a recurring feeling expressed by a

number of students whose cut-out pieces were not included in the final product. The biggest loss of pieces occurred in Group II. Nadia admitted that the rejected pieces would not fit, but she said: "I still would like to add these pieces. . . . I would definitely add more pieces: the stuff we already had and didn't know what to do with. It would be more lively, more like the sea" (104). Judith added: "underneath the three fish. I really liked it. I visualized how it would look" (104). To a lesser extent, members of other groups also expressed disappointment over omissions of or changes to their cut-out pieces. Rita kept repeating her disappointment over the loss of part of the stairs that she had prepared, while Jasmine was sorry to see her tablecloth completely covered with food items. She would "make the checkers show at the edges" (105).

A more intimate expression of feeling occurred when the students were asked to point to sections of the murals in which they would feel comfortable to spend time, and sections they would avoid visiting. Lorna said that she would feel safe in the submarine, but immediately realized that "this is going by objects" (107) rather than by visual impressions. Nadia would feel "safe in the water, above the octopus" (107), and Judith in the "fluid, free middle, sitting there with the frame around; it feels safe, you are inside something. It feels uncomfortable in the background" (107). Referring to the picnic mural, a number of students expressed reluctance to stay anywhere in it. Judith joked that she would be comfortable as a fly "because I could fly away, get out" (108). Brenda "feels as if I am going to be pushed out" (108). Students who, like Sabrina, found a few

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quiet sections also stressed the "crazy" nature of the mural. It is indicative that the only safe places in the picnic mural were on the periphery. In Nadia's words: "Because the edge has more stability, the only place that has solid things. It is hard to focus on anything in the picnic, the eye tends to go to the side" (108). In the other two murals, most students chose sections in the middle as the most inviting. As they did in viewing Sorensen's painting, the students displayed a close link between their body, the paintings' topological space, and their deep-rooted feelings.

5. The Effects of the Chosen Theme, Texture Specifications, Group Dynamic, and Students' Affective Attitudes on the Final Product

It would be risky to try to establish a cause and effect sequence in the interaction between the chosen theme, the texture specification, the group dynamic, and the affective factor. There is, however, enough evidence to conclude that there existed a strong correlation between the four contributing factors involved in the process of the mural construction.

Brenda, of Group I, was the first to notice that "the subject matter had a lot to do with the differences among the groups" (*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 95). She pointed out that unlike the two other groups, where subject matter allowed for casual placement of the prepared pieces, in her group, whose topic was Architectural Structures, it was not possible to "put things wherever we wanted" (95). Brenda pointed out that by the nature of the topic, students

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working on the *Picnic Gone Awry* could legitimately scatter the food items in a random manner, while group members engaged in the Underwater Scene could be lax in the placement of the various marine creatures because these things "are floating." However, Brenda did not make a connection between her group's mural and the somewhat tense relations between members of her group and the group leader. It may not be unreasonable to suspect that the criteria for arranging the individual pieces was more demanding on the players of Group I, who juggled architectural structures, than on the other two groups whose topics permitted a more fluid composition. In fact, Nadia remarked on how meticulously Group I had worked: "they really organized it; they pushed things around until they were happy" (95). It may not be imprudent to suppose that the fact that Group I was assigned to use only flat texture may have contributed to an increased awareness of the contrasts, thereby rendering the final product open to scrutiny.

As already mentioned, Group II ran a smoother operation than the other two groups. In an assured voice Nadia declared:

> we knew right away where the submarine and the octopus are
> going to go, especially when the background was textured. We
> had no problem adding solid to the texture. We knew that the
> background is so uniform, we could put it [the pieces] anywhere; it
> was just the matter where we all wanted it to go.

> *(Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 96-96)

There was less certainty in determining the texture of the small pieces. Nadia is somewhat unclear in her story:

> As far as texture is concerned, we didn't know what it is going to be. There are more things that are flat: the seaweed, the clam down there. The textures, we didn't know what they are going to be; we just made them and started to match. We didn't know how to put texture with flat. It is in the background that we put the texture. We knew this will work. (100)

In fact, it is during the placement of the various forms on the background that the fate of the texture was determined. Nadia considered her group lucky to be able to work with both flat and textured surfaces because it helped to create depth. She remarked that "the flat colours are jumping right out at you; the textured ones blend in" (106). Nadia was not unaware that other factors contributed to the depth perception. She pointed out that the size, the strong colour, and the position on the mural (close to the corners) contributed to the forward movement of the yellow submarine and the octopus.

The students of Group III agreed that *A Picnic Gone Awry* was a suitable theme for the use of texture. Because of the somewhat extreme approach adopted by these students, the correlation of the chosen theme, texture specifications, group dynamic, and students' affective attitude was most evident here. Krista observed that "the other murals . . . all have the same look, but ours, no" (*Teaching Journal* 94)! Krista attributed this difference to "the fact that

we were using mostly texture, so that we have very different things put together"
(94). Brenda pointed out that the subject has a lot to do with the disorderly look
of the mural. Jacob expressed a similar opinion: "maybe it was the subject
matter; it didn't matter where things were put, so we didn't care so much about it
being confusing" (94). Several students observed that the members of Group III
did not consult among themselves prior to the placement of the individual cut-
outs. Sharon (a Drama Department student) saw a pattern rather than
confusion:

> I have learned something working with the art designer. When you
>
> do something random, you kind of place it random in a certain way
>
> that when you see it as a whole, it looks like a pattern which didn't
>
> go awry. It is all placed in such a way that it's not looking like
>
> random anymore.

> > (*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 95)

Krista speculated that the casual look of the mural stemmed partly from the
personal style of each of the group members and partly because of the loss of
personal control for the sake of compromises.

The class discussion added a few insights into the issue of visual and
verbal content. In addition to the frequent mention of visual terms in reference to
all three murals, it became evident that in two of the murals: *The Picnic Gone
Awry* and *The Underwater Scene*, the question of the logic of the physical world

played a minor role only. When a tornado strikes a picnic scene, pieces do not fly in a predictable manner, nor do marine creatures move in fixed directions. Thus, it would be safe to assume that the students followed mostly visual considerations. Sharon's remark that the so-called random placement of figures constitutes a pattern is invaluable; it is in fact in line with chaos theory. It would be pertinent to remind the reader that the only consultation among Group I members was over the depth issue that Jacob mentioned more than once, an issue that was resolved by overlapping figures.

The gutsy decision to eliminate many pieces from the marine scene had nothing to do with the reality of underwater life; it was certainly a decision based on visual considerations. It is in the *Architectural Constructs* that the issue of the visual versus the verbal played itself out. Several times during the process, Brenda, sensitive to maintaining a natural order, clashed with Rita, who emphasized the visual aspects. However, Brenda was not insensitive to the purely visual component. In her words: "For me, it was the colours, to put certain colours everywhere, (spread them around). When they put the red all at the top left, I said why not put it in the middle because it is big and it needs to be central" (104). Later on she stressed: "the whole was the most important" (104). The placement of the female human figure under the column supporting the bridge, as if she is carrying the massive construction on her head, is certainly not a logical decision. In fact, members of the group did not notice it until it was pointed out to them by other students. At that point they interpreted it as a slip.

It is in the position of the human figures that the verbal vs. visual approaches clashed. Sharon, endorsing a thematical attitude, did not approve of the inclusion of the figures in the architectural theme. She raised the question "how does the figure relate to it?" (93) Nadia, adopting a visual angle, justified the figure and its position claiming that, "next to the green, this is the brightest contrast compared to the more subdued hues. It really stands out, especially the pink. I like it" (93). Lorna agreed with Nadia, pointing out "that it [the pink figure] ties all the other things" (93). Brenda's dual concern with the visual and the verbal is summarized in her remark concerning the figures and the house:

> I am glad we put the pink in the middle because it brings in light.
> Otherwise it is too dark. And I'm also glad about the house that we
> didn't put on top of the black mountains because we would not see
> it. We can see everything now.

> (*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 104)

Sabrina revealed her inclination towards the visual by warning that "once you start following the logic of the real world, you tend to continue, and it distracts you" (105). Sabrina observed that meaning expressed by pure visual elements does not go hand in hand with expression derived from the depiction of objects, thus exemplifying Saint-Martin's claim that visual language expressed through pure visual language is different from verbal language.

Perhaps more than in the previous projects, the students were confronted with the complexity of the production of and interaction with an art work: the

materials, the topic, the forms, the global structure, and the people involved--their needs, tastes, and experiences. Students were sensitive to and respectful of the concerns of their fellow students. It is indicative that by the time the students had to face the demands of this complex project, they felt secure and self-confident enough to reveal a part of their inner selves and to stand up to the demands of their classmates.

CHAPTER 12

DEPARTURE FROM THE NORM AS A SOURCE OF

EXPRESSION

Until now I have placed considerable emphasis on the expressive

characteristics derived from the interaction among the purely visual elements.

The purpose of this project was to direct the students' attention to how 1)

distortion of form, and 2) the painter's/viewer's distance from the painted subject

affect the expressive message in a two-dimensional art work. Since most

students in introductory courses lack the skills to faithfully render human figures

or other objects, they tend to dismiss their work as faulty and unworthy. Showing

students how these inaccuracies embody meaning, could reduce their anxiety,

and at the same time prepare them for the interpretation of much of modern art

(provided they don't adopt a cynical attitude). I assigned two life-model painting

projects: one with a female model, the other with a male model, and a written

assignment on an exhibition of nude female figures at the Bishop's University

Artists' Centre.

The Assignment

Using a life model, create a painting that will reflect your personal interpretation of the person in front of you. There are two projects: 1) a female model, 2) a male model.

The Response

In the class discussion following completion of their projects, the students' first reactions to their own paintings and the work of their classmates was to make comparisons. This reaction may have been triggered because of the crowded manner in which the works were displayed in the studio. The students remarked on the variety of approaches to the project: the placement of the figure; its size; position; the inclusion of the whole or parts of the human figure; background treatment: incorporation of surrounding objects, monochromatic atmospheric texture, a single flatly applied colour, etc.

During the discussion, the students first focused on issues that were familiar to them such as colour interaction, shape characteristics, depth, balance, and other visual aspects. Pointing to Jasmine's painting, Jacob remarked that the extensive yellow and blue masses change saturation and tonalities when juxtaposed with different colours. Other students expanded on Jacob's remark by pointing out that when tonal contrasts are diminished, the outlines appear blurred: the contours delineating both the blue and green sections appear sharp

next to the yellow, whereas the borders between the extended blue and the red sections and those of the blue hat and the green background become progressively blurred. Commenting on Krista's painting, Jacob mused over the spatial position of the hat against the window. Jacob perceived tension between the hat and the window's tendency to "push forward because of its bright colour, its location on the corner, and the contrast between the rectangle and the circular forms"(*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 109). Brenda, intrigued by the two dripping streaks (blue and red) and by the unusual background in Sabrina's painting, wanted to know how they originated. Sabrina's answer to the first part of the question was that "there was no special purpose to the drips; it just happened" (111), and to the second part: "I made those lines, but they were too bright, and I covered most of it. It does not mean [represent] any particular object" (118). She did not react to the accidents as mistakes; she accepted the drips at face value and proceeded to subdue the harsh lines in order to create a distant background effect.

As students were pondering over the unusual treatment of Jacob's male portrait, a discussion on balance arose. The students deliberated over the degree of symmetry needed to achieve a balanced work. Some expressed the opinion that Jacob's work is well balanced; others suggested that more symmetry was needed. There were several suggestions as to how it could be achieved: by placing the two rectangular bands at an equal distance from the peripheries; by moving the circle to the left, to a spot parallel to the middle of the small black

rectangle; by painting the two long bands in an identical colour; and other suggestions. Tired of the arguments, Lisa declared that for her, "everything falls together, never mind why" (113). Nadia's remark was timely:

> The eye tends to distort things. Look at things in museums. The bottom may look differently than the top. The eye does tend to create optical illusions to ourselves. Although it may not be mathematically balanced, to our eye it is balanced. (113)

This discussion on balance demonstrates Saint-Martin's claim that although there is agreement among viewers over the perception of strong gestalts (the rectangles and the circle), the perception of how they interact is subjective.

Intrigued by the hard-edge style Jacob used in his portrayal of the male model, the students were curious to know why he chose this route, and how it is connected to the model. Jacob replied:

> I really wanted to make a minimalist production. Also, I wanted to do something that I have never done, and that most people don't expect me to do. Before, when I looked at paintings like that, I asked myself: "what are they thinking?" Now I realize what they are thinking.

> (*Teaching Journal* 25 Mar. 1995: 111)

Jacob forgot that he had done something similar in the still-life painting. It is not clear whether Jacob's interpretation of minimal art was cynical, naive, or whether he genuinely expressed satisfaction from gaining new insight into the "minimalist"

technique. In response to the second question, Jacob explained that the circle and the short black rectangle represent the head and the torso, the red-coloured circle reflects the red shirt, the yellow horizontal rectangle stands for the chair the model was sitting on, and the vertical band represents an easel in the background. Krista expressed a cynical approach by impugning Jacob's motive: "I know why he did it: it is for daring" (111). Lisa, however, took Jacob's gesture more seriously: "It takes courage to reduce complex shapes and colours to what is essential" (111). Krista, who frequently compared paintings, drew attention to the students' individual styles:

> You can point out who did what by their style: Brenda by her
>
> flowers, Lisa by her beautiful background, Sharon has got her dark
>
> colours, and Jacob by his pinkish white. It is only the last paintings
>
> that cannot be easily identified, because the project required a
>
> different approach. Students were asked to paint something
>
> different than what they were used to.
>
> *(Teaching Journal* 1 Apr. 1995: 114)

The transition from a preoccupation with the visual variables to attention to the effects of distortions on expression occurred when Krista expressed her difficulties in the course of painting the male model. Frequently frustrated because of her inability to paint "realistic" representations, Krista resolved her dilemma by introducing highly exaggerated distortions (mainly in the "little figures"). Dissatisfied with how the sitting male model turned out in her painting,

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Krista decided to completely cover him with blue paint "because the model wore blue jeans." Krista was satisfied with the results because

> it does not antagonize what I like in the painting. I like the little figures, the red in the figures, the black. It is not going to be something that is attempting to be real and does not quite get there. If you make something real, it should be real. In your own mind, when you see something that you want to paint, it should look the way you envisaged it. My little figures, I like them better, because they look it.
>
> (*Teaching Journal* 20 Mar. 1995: 81)

Thus, in Krista's mind, the blue patch does not attempt to represent anything anymore. As a blue shape it fits well with the rest of the composition. Krista "likes" the blue and pink colour combination because "it stands out. Then, the blue, and the green, and the ground, and the little bits of yellow." Visual considerations overrode verbal content.

Not surprisingly, it was Brenda who raised the issue of disproportion. Referring to her own painting, she expressed satisfaction with her treatment of the model, but disappointment with how the flowers turned out, "because I didn't have a model. I didn't know how to make the flowers, how to put them at the back. . . . The man is not precise enough; he is distorted. I don't think that it is in good proportion" (*Teaching Journal* 1 Apr. 1995: 114). Nonetheless, Brenda "likes" the way the model turned out. When the class was asked to examine how

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disproportion and other distortions affect expression, Lisa made a comparison between her and Jasmine's painting:

> There is a contrast between my painting and Jasmine's. It is a similar colour scheme in the clothing, and we both took a semi-realistic approach. Her head is really small and mine is really big in proportion to the body. It is an interesting difference, but I don't know what to make of it.
>
> *(Teaching Journal* 1 Apr. 1995: 115)

In Rita's view, departure from normal body proportion produces an impression of either aggressiveness or passivity. She perceived Jasmine's close-up take of the figure as aggressive. With a bit of coaching, I led Rita to observe that the viewer finds himself in what Edward T. Hall defines as personal or even intimate space *vis à vis* the man in Jasmine's painting, whereas in Lisa's painting, the viewer keeps a social distance (in Hall's terminology) between himself and the model. Rita realized that getting too close to a person can be interpreted as an aggressive gesture. However, this was not Nadia's impression: She "does not feel the man is aggressive." On the contrary, "he has this teddy-bearish look; I would like to snuggle-up with this person" (115). Although interpretations may differ among students, Lisa stressed the fact that "distortion and expression go together" (116). Asked to identify other examples of a link between distortion and expression, Judith pointed to the blurred face in Natasha's painting. In Judith's view, inability to discern facial details, regardless of the proximity of the

figure to the viewer, creates a sense of frustration and tension (116).

A wider discussion developed over Jasmine's painting of the female model. Nadia was bothered by the lack of demarcation between the hand and the face, a fact that made her feel uneasy. Brenda did not appreciate the absence of the legs, nor the miniature size of the head--distortions which reflected a feeling of hiding and shyness. Lisa claimed that "the whole thing is a distortion; you cannot see the body parts." Brenda added: "we know it is a woman because we saw her, but if we didn't know, we wouldn't know that it was a woman" (116).

A VISIT TO MARIE-CUERRIER HEBERT'S EXHIBITION

To observe further the effects of distortion on expression, the students were assigned to visit an exhibition by the local artist, Marie Cuerrier-Hébert. The exhibition took place at the Bishop's University Artists' Centre. It was composed of paintings portraying nude female figures in various unconventional poses. Based on a painting of their choice, students were asked to respond, in writing, to the following topics: 1) Describe in what way the artist departs from the natural form. 2) How does this deviation affect the way you react to the painting? Do you perceive this particular treatment as enhancing the expression or detracting from it?

Mouvance was, by far, the most popular choice among the students. Judging from the title of the painting, it is not surprising that all the students who

chose to comment on this painting highlighted the movement effect. However, there were subtle differences in describing the origin of the movement effect and the feelings that it evoked. Brenda saw the repetition of the limb lines as a major distorting element. When she first looked at the painting, she "thought that the model was bent with one arm down to her left foot, but then, I thought that it looked as if there was a third leg" (*Students' Response* 23). The lack of a "real life" context in the background was mentioned as another factor that separated the figure from everyday reality. Brenda concluded that the repetition of lines invoked the feeling of constant movement and body mutation. Brenda liked the painting, but she wouldn't take it home because she "wouldn't feel comfortable staring at it every day. I don't feel comfortable in this painting because it is not stable enough" (25). Natasha stressed the liveliness of the figure: "it makes me feel as if this figure is alive. . . . The lines make my eyes travel throughout the entire work of art" (19). Sharon interpreted the movement as "the torment of the individual" (21). Yet in the next paragraph Sharon seemed to contradict herself by stating that "the disfigurement of the shape set against a murky background helps to show movement, and to show the figure as universal rather than individual" (21). Lorna pointed out that

> the artist shows the figure from many different angles at the same
>
> time. The legs overlap each other in a ghost-like way. . . . The
>
> figure's head is unnaturally large. To the left, there is an echo of
>
> the figure. It looks as if the figure has moved from there to where it

is now and has left an impression of a light colour. (22)

Lorna perceived "the translucent echoing of the figure" as a dance. She did not hesitate to state "that this treatment absolutely enhances the piece. Instead of seeing a figure of women, I see one figure dancing and moving and shifting her body" (22).

Judith commented that

> by departing from the figure's natural form, the figure moves freely
> giving the feeling of movement and harmony. By making the traces
> of the figure become a part of the background, the viewer feels as if
> the figure is alive and belongs to the space that it occupies.
>
> I feel very comfortable putting myself in the painting. There
> is a sense of peace and strength. It is easy to feel comfortable,
> even though the figure departs from its natural form because it still
> possesses much beauty and grace. The traces left behind act as
> soft movements or gestures.
>
> *(Students' Response* 28)

In Natasha's view, "without the deviation, the painting would have no purpose and no meaning; the deviation is what brings the painting to life" (19). Mary is the only student who did not interpret the repetitive limb lines as movement. Instead, she perceived them as contributing to the effect of an unfinished painting. Her perception changed as she gazed at the painting:

> At first the deviation seemed only slightly strange to me. Yet

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afterwards it added richness to the work and gave other

dimensions to it. . . . One senses warmth and feeling of familiarity

and oneness with the artist. . . . There is energy and vulnerability

to the figures. I really sense this. (20)

While most students noticed the mobility of the figure, they interpreted the

phenomenon differently. They all expressed the opinion that the disfiguration

enhances the expression, regardless of the fact that some of them did not feel

comfortable with the distorted image. It is worth pointing out that some of the

references to movement in the students' remarks were of a visual nature rather

than verbal, such as their observation that the repetition of lines create a sense

of rhythm. But often the students used verbal and visual terminology

indiscriminately.

Commenting on *Doute,* Rita described the distortions of the body and the

resulting expression:

The head is too small for the rest of the body. The shoulders are

very wide; the right arm is unnaturally long. The head hangs

toward the left shoulder, giving the figure a look of hopelessness, of

desperation. The pose that the figure has assumed is highly

exaggerated. This would not be possible in the natural world.

Leaning heavily on her left foot, in a kind of controposto, [sic] the

subject seems deformed. This distortion overemphasizes the look

of desolation. . . . The subject's left hand holds a line which

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disappears into the darkness of the bottom right hand corner. This assists the interpretation that the figure is solidly placed. She will not topple over, nor is she likely to float off!

<div align="right">(*Students' Response* 14-15)</div>

Rita added that the use of the complementary red and green colours "gives the figure a dramatic effect" (15).

Examining *Someil de l'hiver*, Jacob observed that

the facial features are not defined, nor are the genitalia. These distortions give the figure an ambiguous feeling. . . . The figure, I feel, is meant to represent everyone and the way our minds get clouded and sleepy in winter.

<div align="right">(*Students' Response* 5)</div>

Jacob concluded that "even though Marie Cuerrier-Hébert used distortions in creating her figure, they are necessary to the meaning of the work" (5).

Sabrina and Lisa looked at *Rêveries*. Lisa described how the figure appears small at the top left side of the painting and how it becomes progressively larger and disproportionate towards the bottom right part of the painting. "One gets a real sense of the weighty relaxed body. . . . The thoughts of the dreamer are far away" (3). In Sabrina's view the small head, the elongated arms, and the slightly bent position "makes the woman and the whole image seem light or carefree, and shy. . . . There is nothing offensive in the painting. And I chose it because it pleased me" (4).

Although the students felt uneasy about the distortions of the human body, they were not deterred from appreciating the expressive qualities of such an approach. The students recognized that the expression is in what Saint-Martin calls "bad gestalt." The students did not differ much in the identification of the distortions, but they certainly differed in the interpretations given to the deformations. It appears that the students applied some of Horner's techniques they had learned in the examination of Sorensen's paintings.

CHAPTER 13

COMING FULL CIRCLE

After a series of exercises focusing on visual language, the last painting

assignment of the semester was a modest attempt to help students make a

conscious connection between visual language and their own life experience.

This assignment is somewhat similar to the first one in that both originate from a

preconceived intention, except that whereas in the first exercise the students

were challenged to paint something they had observed, the present assignment

focused on an experience the scene of which is to be invented.

The Assignment

> **Produce a painting associated with a meaningful personal experience.**

The Response

Except for Lisa's and Jacob's paintings (Jacob's second painting in this

project), in which the experience consisted of the production of a painting similar

to the previous exercises, all the rest of the students' experiences were grounded in locations and objects of the natural world. At the same time, none of the students ever let go of the visual language in their description and interpretation of their paintings. Naturally, the process of translating an experience into a painting differed from student to student. Although a few did not differentiate between the present exercise and the one assigned at the beginning of the course, most students succeeded in conveying an experience either of a lived or of an imaginary nature.

A significant location, whether real or imaginary, was the theme in several of the paintings. Jacob chose his home as the place to embody a summer experience. A visit to his grandparents evoked memories of "hanging around" with his friends on the beach. Jacob was straddling the fine line between reality and imagination--between what he intended to paint and the way his intuition, imbedded in the visual elements and materials, carried him. Reflecting on his painting, Jacob commented:

> I could not decide if the scene is of an early morning, because the
> water wasn't dark or light. I didn't want it to be right in the middle of
> the day, because I didn't want too bright colours. I can't determine
> if it's early evening or really early morning, like pre-dawn.
>
> (*Teaching Journal* 27 Mar. 1995: 122)

Jacob's primary concern was the use of colours of a certain tonal value, which he eventually succeeded in implementing. Only later did he try unsuccessfully to

connect those colours to a particular time of day. Jacob then realized that he was

> trying to remember all the colours that were in the beach: the sand,
>
> the grass, and the way they intermingle; the way the sand comes
>
> out between the grass. I was trying to cover up the grass that tries
>
> to come back. (122)

Jacob conveyed an imaginary territorial dispute between the grass and the sand, between the green and the yellow. He expressed disappointment that regardless of his intention to make the sea darker than the sky, there is not enough contrast between the two. Once again, Jacob wove a worldly explanation. Realizing that there is more movement in the sky than in the sea, Jacob concluded that it is "more of a night scene, because at night the water calms down a lot." Jacob chose to alter the story rather than to change the visual elements to suit the narrative. After resolving the literary meaning of his beach scene, Jacob described the expressive, intuitive journey:

> I started with the blues in the middle, and I worked my way down
>
> and up until both sections came together. I didn't mean to make
>
> them so similar in texture and colour; I wanted to differentiate
>
> between sections. I find now that the green section [at the bottom]
>
> and the top blue one are similar, and the two middle sections are of
>
> a different texture. I realize now that the top and the bottom are
>
> the same. They are just slightly different in colour. (122-123)

Jacob was now ready to merge his visual and the verbal concerns:

> When I started, I didn't want it to look exactly like in nature. I didn't
> want to create a realistic image. I don't think that a faithful-to-
> nature image would convey the mood of this place. If I wanted to
> make it look like a photograph, I would blend the sky really well,
> there would be less motion and movement, and I would really be
> worried about everything. I wouldn't be happy with it, but with this
> one I am happy. (123)

Judith too linked her experience to a location where she had spent an extended period of time. Like Jacob, she commented on her painting using verbal and visual language alternately. She chose to express her experience of working in a safari park. Judith decided to paint giraffes because "there were a lot of them, they were unique, and because they will be a good colour scheme to work with. I like to work with warm colours" (132-33). Judith explained why she didn't paint the spots on the giraffes:

> I thought that it will make it look cluttered, or too confusing, and you
> wouldn't be able to see the forms. That's why I used different
> shades instead of spots. I used tonal contrasts to create three-
> dimensional effects. (133)

Judith added:

> Originally I wanted them to stand on grass. But because the
> texture in the background is so soft, the grass would look too hard.

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I thought that water will be more wavy and will go well with the background. (133)

Judith combined three panels in order to create a large vertical painting. When asked whether this format affected the image she had painted on it, she replied that it affected the choice of topic as well as the placement of the giraffes. After further probing, Judith noticed that despite doing the best she could to blend the three sections, the background in the three panels differed in texture. Judith, nonetheless, would not make changes to the background: "I like the background. I like the way it changes. I like the way it is going horizontal here and more vertical down there [top and middle sections]" (134).

A tree under a moonlit sky was Lorna's location of a meditative experience. She remembered an occasion when she "was perched on a tree for a long time" (134). In her description of the tree, Lorna referred to the "cradled branches" (134). Lorna emphasized the effort she made to make the tree look "massive and strong" (134). To achieve the effect of strength, Lorna painted a large trunk with "darker spots" (134). In addition, Lorna mentioned that the tree is located at the bottom right corner of the painting, "because it is the heaviest spot [on the Basic Plane]" (134). In fact, she "started painting the tree from that corner", because she often "feels comfortable starting a painting from there. I have done it before" (134). Lorna realized, though, that "the focus is on the moon (135), " which is characterized by "open spiral forms creating a spiral motion" (135). When asked where would she place herself in the painting, Lorna

answered passionately:

> In the centre, and that is because of the dark branches. I am used
> to working more in detail. This felt really good to me today. I
> worked with it as it changed, and it changed in my mind as I went
> on. I find that feels more comfortable.

(Teaching Journal 27 Mar. 1995: 135)

Lorna associated the comfort of placing herself at the centre of the painting with the "comfortable" experience that accompanied the production of the painting.

The location of Sabrina's experience is a café she wandered into on her trip to San Francisco. Sabrina "tried to convey something mysterious. It is kind of dark there; it is smoky; everybody is drinking coffee; there is music playing. I tried to portray it, but it is pretty hard" *(Teaching Journal* 124). She explained that the figures in the painting do not represent anybody in particular. The unusually high table came about because she had "to make room for the window at the top, the title at the bottom, and to avoid painting much of the figures' bodies" (124) for lack of skills. Sabrina who was very self-critical, was not satisfied with the way her painting turned out. However, she approved of the background, the cups, and the title. Sabrina never consciously learned to enjoy the visual language *per se.* Throughout the course, she expressed disappointment at not being able to portray scenes, people, and objects closely resembling their appearance in everyday life. Consequently, she was critical of the course.

An imaginary location was also the choice of Krista and Brenda. Krista titled her painting *Some Place I Want to Be*. The painting features three ranges of mountains and a distant city view. Krista specified:

I wanted the trees and the city in the background, and I wanted to be in the picture. I see myself there [pointing to the hill just slightly off centre], where I would like to go to sleep hidden by the trees. I didn't want to draw the figure, maybe because I didn't feel comfortable with it. (131)

Krista wrestled with the problem of how to create the illusion of receding depth in the mountains. Through some probing, Krista came to realize that despite the relatively small area occupied by the city skyline, the latter protrudes because of the sharp contrast between the white and the dark blue, and because of the relative light texture in both these areas. This phenomenon prevented the mountains from receding into the distance. Krista managed to make the foreground appear closer and to create the illusion of distance between the mountain ranges by introducing tonality and textural contrasts. Later on, Krista painted a couple of trees resting on the lower periphery line, causing the mountains to recede and further accentuating the distance between the mountain ranges. Krista painted the borders in order to indicate the imaginary, virtual nature of the scene.

Brenda, who said that she always dreams about a vacation she cannot afford, depicted a scene near a motel. Working from a photograph, she added

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objects that were not featured in the original picture. When asked why she departed from the photograph, she answered: "that's the way I feel when I go on vacation. I feel free" (128). The freedom felt on vacation was translated into freedom to alter the picture at will. Brenda inserted herself and a friend in the painting. For the first time during the course she was not worried about wrong proportions or other departures from the worldly norm. She was very satisfied with her painting.

An experience based on events rather than on a location is embedded in Sharon's painting. Sharon's first reaction to her finished painting was disappointment over the way the principal colour changed from a vibrant to a darker muted shade after drying. She planned to coat the painting with gloss medium in order to restore vitality to the colour. Sharon's painting is an experience of a weekend visit to a boyfriend during which, in Sharon's assessment, she "grew in some way" (125). The painting was made of a minimal form suggesting a female torso wearing a necklace. The colour of the painting is of a monochrome green turquoise. Doubting whether viewers will recognize the content of her painting, Sharon pointed out that "this is actually supposed to be a shoulder," then she went on to recount how the painting evolved:

> I started in a very conventional way--a sketch of a dress. I tried to
> make it look like a photograph, but that was not working, and I
> hated it. I then tried to break it down to just simply what I tried to

stress: the line, the neck, and the necklace. These are very important, especially the necklace, because I wore it the whole year long. And the colours that surround it are the colours of that whole time, not just where I was, but that age and what I was wearing all the time. Those were the colours I liked.

(*Teaching Journal 27* Mar. 1995: 125-26)

Speaking of the structure of the painting, Sharon pointed out that "the necklace breaks up the circular forms and the swings in the rest of the painting. It is so strong and solid in its verticality" (126). Sharon noticed that the torso "is a little strange, because it is placed on the edge, but this serves to focus on it" (126). Sharon called attention to how the location of the necklace in the middle of a line very close to the edge helps to highlight it. Sharon's last remark was a repetition of her main concern: "I wanted it to be darker. If I gloss it, it might show better" (126). Sharon accepted her technical shortcoming of not being able to produce a photographic image; she then comfortably settled for an impressionist production, though she could not easily accept the wrong colour.

Nadia's painting is of an allegoric nature: titled *A Fight,* it depicts a flamboyant horse. Nadia explained:

When you have an adrenaline rush, you feel like [you should] either take flight or fight. This is the motion to fight, to stand-up, stand ground. Instead of making a human, I made an animal. It shows more raw natural emotion. A horse is also my favourite animal. I

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like horses very much. I chose red because it is the colour of anger; it's fiery; it's what you feel. The sky is dark because the event is happening at night. It was very scary; I didn't know whether to run or to stand up. At that moment I chose to stand up, and the feeling I felt was like a horse who stands ground; there is no fear or weary caution.

(*Teaching Journal* 27 Mar. 1995: 127-28)

Nadia never elaborated on the actual scary event. However, Nadia also pointed to a calm area in the horse's neck where she could imaginatively insert herself.

Finishing his painting early, Jacob decided to produce another one in which he would immerse himself in a new experience: working with a pallet knife. "It is something I wanted to do because I never used the pallet knife before. It is more like an exercise for myself, to see some different effects" (130). Jacob enthusiastically recounted the process he followed and the lesson he had learned:

I started off by just dragging spots across here and there. You can do a multitude of things with it. You get a lot of texture. It is more solid than the paint brush. There is texture with almost every stroke of the pallet knife. It is choppy, but it is a new experience. First I put all the paint on the board, then I mixed it all together with the pallet knife. I didn't have much control on how the paint would mix. (130-31)

Jacob realized that working with a big pallet knife is more appropriate when working on a much larger support than on his present small board. As for the image that emerged, Jacob ended up with a "spiral open to the edges, getting further away in the middle. The square form is conducive to making a circle" (131). Jacob's self-devised exercise is in tune with the spirit of the course, his inquisitive mind, and his risk-taking practice.

Lisa too sought an experience in a painting adventure: making a diptych using two large horizontally shaped canvases. Lisa's original idea was "to use two horizontal canvases and create a movement of progression from light to dark colour across the two sections" (129). Lisa was not able to control such a large area. She encountered no end of difficulties in obtaining the sought-out gradation effect and in linking the two canvases into one unit. Disappointed, Lisa did not bring the painting to completion during the course period.

Although the students' experiences and resulting images were varied, they followed a similar pattern: The students painted a place or objects bearing the flavour of their experience; they portrayed recognizable figures with various degrees of resemblance to the natural surrounding; they paid attention to the visual elements using the knowledge they had acquired during the course; they expressed everyday emotions rather than various versions of "I like;" they orally expressed emotions associated with the outside world instead of verbalizing deeply felt inner feelings. The latter were, however, subtly woven into the

students' various proclamations: Lorna talked about "cradled branches," Jacob, Lorna, Krista, and Nadia chose the centre of their painting as a sheltered yet prominent place, where they would imaginatively insert themselves. In general, students willingly sacrificed resemblance to the worldly reality for the sake of expression through visual language.

The course ended with an exam in which the students analyzed one of their own paintings. I have not elaborated on the exam in a separate chapter because the questions were modeled on topics that were discussed previously, similar to those the students addressed in their visit to Sorensen's exhibition. I do refer to the exam in the evaluation.

CHAPTER 14

EVALUATION

To evaluate this teaching/research project, I assessed the degree to which the procedures that took place during the course served the set goals and how successful they were. To remind the reader, in elaborating my thesis intention, I stated that I would explore the meaning embedded in the formal elements of painting as they emerge in the students' work in the process of making the object, as well as in the reflection on the finished work, and I would examine how Saint-Martin's elaboration of visual language might tie in with students' personal experiences, and perhaps with their perception of society. Because art making and teaching are by nature fluid and changeable, and at times unpredictable, I also addressed additional phenomena that the students and I observed in the course of the semester that may be helpful to art education. For this task I relied on my observations and interpretations. In order to counteract my subjective approach, in this final evaluation I included the students' voice by reporting as closely as possible their personal perception of and experience in the course as expressed in their final exam and in a special class discussion conducted, in my absence, by one of my colleagues. In order to

remove any anxiety on the part of the students that their opinions may prejudice their grades, they were assured that I would receive the tapes after the deadline for marks submission. I decided to present the remarks they made during the discussion anonymously because I was not present at the discussion and was not able to accurately identify the students' voices. I was also concerned that revealing their names would amount to a breach of faith.

It was in the last question of the exam that the students had an opportunity to briefly express their experience in the course: "Did you gain new insights about yourself through the careful examination of this painting and/or through the entire painting course?"

In their answers to the exam question, fifty percent of the students addressed the issue of expression through form that does not necessarily conform to the natural world. Judith wrote:

> I started to recognize how I always want to simplify things and
> explain my feeling the fastest way possible. Throughout the
> course, I learned that there are many ways to express myself, and I
> do not always have to have it make sense [in the real world].
>
> (Judith's Exam 3)

Jacob expressed relief from the tyranny of perfection: "I no longer worry about getting everything perfect. The lack of perfection is what makes everything perfect" (Jacob's Exam 7). Lorna drew an "emotive experience" from the "bluish tones resulting in a relaxing mellow atmosphere with the slight chill of the night"

(Lorna's Exam 2). And similarly to Judith and Jacob, she learned that "in order to convey a message, I don't need to go into great detail when representing a form. I realized that I can capture the essence of a form by approaching it in a simplified form" (Lorna's Exam 7). Relief and a sense of liberation from a mimetic approach was also Rita's experience. She attested that "it has been a liberating experience not to have to use a pencil and eraser to create a realistic reproduction whatever." She also expressed a long-standing profound attachment to the colour purple.

The issue of verbal versus visual expression was voiced by Mary, Nadia, and Sabrina. Mary realized that she could express in painting a verbally undefined expression:

> I feel the painting expresses something in me, the desire for more
> pronounced personal expression; perhaps some anger and vitality
> that is seeking an outlet. Perhaps the process of painting could be
> an outlet for me.
>
> (Mary's Exam 3)

A surprise disclosure came from Nadia who referred to her short concentration span. She observes that the act of painting reflects her

> struggle with Attention Deficit Disorder more clearly than any verbal
> definition ever could. The struggle between focus and distraction,
> the frustration of chaos and instability. The yearning for guidance
> and peace. It stands out . . . almost screams at me more than ever

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before.

Sabrina made an insightful comment regarding the visual versus the verbal in her comment:

> I learned most of all that what I consider "bad" is not necessarily
> bad, and the same for "good." Some things are appealing
> aesthetically but not in a cognitive sense, and vice-versa. I cannot
> say I have yet found a balance between what I paint and what I
> see; but some general ideas always seem to work better, such as
> working on the whole [surface of the painting], and layering [of
> paints].

Texture and colour played an affective role in Sharon's observation: "I had a highly emotive experience with this painting because of its choice or texture, the primary colours aspect of the painting, and the general placement and the intensity that it brought" (Sharon's Exam 2).

Several students commented on the pleasure they derived from the act of painting and from the contemplation of the finished product in its entirety or sections within. Judith commented that, through the course, she realized that she likes to "paint pleasures in [her] life" (Judith's Exam 3). Jacob too stressed the pleasure he derived from applying texture and from the freedom he enjoyed in painting whatever he wished. Krista discovered that she "can create

something artistic" which she "likes" (Krista's Exam 6). Lorna "liked" the "strong contrasts" and the intense region" Lorna's Exam 2) in her painting. Suzanne, who experienced a great deal of frustration during the course, nonetheless wrote that "painting is kind of fun" (Suzanne's Exam).

A reflection on the relation between the production, contemplation, and analysis of a painting was advanced by Sabrina, Krista, and Mary. Sabrina commented:

> My strongest areas are not intended, but this does not make me
>
> like it less; it only makes me see that looking at a painting and
>
> painting are two very different things. It is hard to tell which is more
>
> representative of my work: the process and ideas while I make it, or
>
> the analysis.
>
> (Sabrina's Exam 6)

Strong minded as ever, Krista admitted that she has a very set view about looking at a painting:

> When you are planning and working on a painting it is changeable,
>
> your own creation. You are in the midst of creation and the
>
> thoughts that provoke you to paint as you do are unique to the
>
> moment and to the actual act of painting. When you have declared
>
> the painting finished, you are no longer in a creative mind; the
>
> painting is no longer changeable. If there is something that you
>
> don't like, then create another image that incorporates these new

ideas as well as the ideas that you liked from the past work.

However, the [present] work is unchangeable. You can now start

to interpret why things are the way they are.

(Krista's Exam 6)

Mary pointed out that the present analysis shows us "how to analyze other

painting," and that it is "quite important for understanding the structure and style

of a work [of art]" (Mary's Exam).

As they did throughout the course, several students reiterated their

appreciation for being given the opportunity to work in a safe, non-judgmental

environment, a setting that facilitated risky experimentation in techniques,

materials, styles, and ideas. Jacob often set personal challenges for his

paintings in addition to the class project. In the texture exercise, for example,

Jacob's side project was "to be able to accept what occurs no matter what it may

look like." He pointed out that the way he handled materials changed throughout

the painting course, and that he "no longer fear[ed] experimentation. I can do

whatever I want regardless of what other people say" (Jacob's Exam 7). Brenda

wrote: "I am now much more confident in myself; I don't worry about succeeding

or not; I just paint to learn more" (Brenda's Exam 7). Suzanne had a similar

comment: "I felt really free to express myself, and I certainly gained a good

knowledge of how to start a painting by different approaches, mostly without fear

of making a mistake" (Suzanne's Exam 3). Mary expounded:

Through part of the course I wasn't sure I would measure up to the

other students. But as I began to feel more comfortable, I did not

feel judged; I could freely express myself in my work. I feel that

having taken this course opened a new door for me onto future

experimentation with art, something very important in my life.

(Mary's Exam 4)

Although less intimidated than before, Nadia pointed out that she is still

constrained by her past experience: "I feel far freer than before, yet bound by

inhibitions and pre-conceived ideas. The struggle with these ideas will create

interesting and challenging pieces in the years to come" (Nadia's Exam 4).

A sense of security fostered by a safe studio environment emerged as

one of the most appreciated aspects of the course in the students' course

evaluation discussion. The students talked about gaining confidence in their

work, being able to work independently, creating "something they like," feeling

liberated", not being forced to make changes or improvements against their own

judgments, in general, relishing the experience of a wide personal space.

Although the students enjoyed a measure of freedom, they were also aware of

the existence of guidelines to direct them. One student remarked that she

"appreciated to be left alone, especially not hovered over" (*Course Evaluation* 2),

but that she would not be able to work without receiving some guidelines.

Another student claimed that the teacher "taught us how to take control of our

painting" (2). And yet another student said that "she [the teacher] gave

structured exercises, yet everyone did something different" (1). One of the students expounded on the issue of freedom versus guidance:

> She [the teacher] lets you paint what you wanted but she gave set boundaries. She just asked why did you take this or that approach? . . . She respected your ideas and your use of the colours and forms, but she questioned you, maybe to better understand you and make yourself question too. She tried to get us away from our conventions. However, she didn't squash them, just expanded on them. (3)

One of the students voiced some criticism:

> At one point, because the conventions were not squashed, everything was right, just broadened. At the time I thought that if everything is good then why even try? The things I did looked freaky, but it worked out in the end. I felt there were no boundaries and no expectations, that's good. But that's also kind of scary. (3)

On the whole, the students perceived the course as a satisfactory balancing of acquisition of knowledge, structure, and personal freedom of expression.

A major part of the discussion was focused on what the students learned in the course. The students remarked how their techniques, style, and the general attitude towards painting changed considerably during the course. The majority of students pointed out that they now work simultaneously on the entire pictorial plane rather than on a separate section. They agreed that they feel

comfortable with this approach, and that it somehow brought on a change of style. One of the students described the transformation that occurred in his painting technique:

> The turning point came when we had to paint starting with five or
> six large areas and work all over the painting and not stay in one
> area all the time. That's where my painting changed completely
> because until then I did a lot of the same, and all of a sudden I was
> working all around the painting, and it just got a lot better from then
> on. It opened up, and from then on every painting was different. I
> didn't stay in one style. (3-4)

Other students also commented on how their painting style changed over the duration of the course:

> I find that I was able to approach many different styles of painting.
> She [the teacher] encouraged us to try something else for each
> new painting instead of being limited to one style or one subject. It
> really opened up your whole idea about painting, and your style
> must have changed completely. (1)

In the words of a second student: "I am approaching painting so differently now." And yet another student: "I have learned to paint things from my mind. I always used to paint from pictures or visual things." Several students commented on how they gained a new way of perceiving painting. This is how one of the students described it:

I find that I look at paintings in a completely different way than

before. After learning about structure, form, and the like, when I

stop to look at a painting, I think of the discussions, thinking: look at

that, she is right. . . . Even when I look back at paintings that I did

years ago, I say: this is exactly what she [the teacher] said, and it

makes so much sense. (1)

The visit to Sorensen's exhibition played a role in the students' perception

of abstract art. An extreme changeover was expressed as follows:

I see painting differently now. I used to hate abstract painting so

badly that I did not even look at them. And now, when I go to

galleries, I look at abstract art and say: "look at that, isn't it nice?"

Oh, my God, I can't believe what I said. I understand now what

painting is all about. (1)

"It is the art gallery visit that made me like abstract. I hated it at first but liked it

after answering the questionnaire" (2).

Other students agreed:

At first we were all reluctant and grumbling. And then, wow, people

started to say: "Did you see this? Did you see that?" It completely

changed our approach following those questions. I have done

those things in other classes. (2)

Even those who did not express enthusiasm with abstract art appreciated the

experience of interacting with it. As one student confessed: "I still don't like this

art, but I liked the questions. It helped to get through very difficult pieces. It was so creative in terms of writing about the painting" (2).

A similar idea was expressed by another student:

> The way I see other paintings changed after we went to see the exhibition at the University of Sherbrooke. I just explored the paintings. It made me understand what abstract art is about. I didn't like it before. I didn't like what I saw there more, but I just understood. (4)

The students appreciated the kind of interaction that developed among themselves and how it affected their progress:

> I was very relaxed. We all know each other by now pretty much. I was relaxed enough not to worry about people walking around watching my painting, whereas before, I wouldn't paint in front of anyone. In other classes, I would put myself in the corner and just stay there. It was nice that people were walking around and talking to each other about their painting. It wouldn't have been like that if not for the discussions. I think that it opened us up a lot. (2)

Another student summarized the merit of working in a group: "we learn from each other. You work alone on your ideas; then you bring it to the group, and you help each other." A connection was made between working in a group and the establishment of a sense of freedom, camaraderie, and interest in a fellow student's work:

It gives people freedom to walk around. People came to me and

encouraged me. They were interested in what you did just as

much as you wanted to know what they were doing. I think that

had to do with the class discussions. (3)

Working as a group was considered as one among other methods of learning:

"We all learn differently. Some learn from talking, some from looking at their

work, some from talking about other paintings, and I think that this course gave

us all of the opportunities. It opened a lot of doors" (3).

As far as the mural project was concerned, the students remarked that

working as a group on a shared project taxed their ability to compromise with

their fellow group members: "First I thought it was almost like kindergarten. Then

I had fun. We had to compromise ourselves as artists and work together, which

opened up new opportunities. It was really good" (3). The students also

appreciated the group dynamic: "it was also interesting to see who was

dominant. It was nice to see arguments between people [about] what goes

where" (3).

The harshest criticism of the course was directed against what most of the

students perceived as "too much talk." Although they appreciated what they

learned from the discussions, they complained that long discussions robbed

them of precious painting time, and that, at times, it disrupted the continuity of

their working process:

I just wish we had more time to paint in class. Some days it was

fine to stop and to go back because it explained what we were doing; sometimes it cut into what we were doing. Sometimes it was helpful and sometimes it was not so helpful; it depended on how long we had been painting. When we got a whole class of painting, it was a treat. (1)

One of the students observed that the discussions eased tension:

The first couple of classes it was really quiet. I felt anxious. When we did talk it helped to relieve the anxiety. I understand now that we are all trying to create something of our own, and that some people are better than others. I do feel that talking opened us even though I feel there was too much talk. (2)

The discussions seemed redundant for some students:

Talks were too long. It seemed that we knew the answers or felt that they had something to say, but we did not feel [the need] to vocalize it. In terms of learning, I did learn from the discussions, even though I felt they were a bit lengthy. (1)

An extreme criticism was expressed by one student who said: "Learning about the structure was a waste of time. Too many terms and vocabulary" (3). However, there was a chorus of students who, regardless of their objection to the length of the discussions, expressed an appreciation of what they had learned from them: such as 1) a new way of seeing paintings: "I feel that the talking opened us all a lot. We all looked at our work. We went over some of the stuff a

lot, but we learned it; we were not going to forget it" (1). Or, "I see now, when I go to the galleries, I remember what she talked about and her enthusiasm, even though I will not remember the exact terms" (1); 2) an awareness of personal development:

> It tells a lot about myself knowing the terminology and how I used it in painting. It tells a lot about any artist when you look at any painting. If this had just been a straight painting class with one or two discussions on our own painting, I don't think that any of us would look at paintings the way we do now. It is like taking two classes in one: a lecture class and a painting class. I find that that was very helpful. (1)

And in a similar vein:

> I had a hard time separating what's me and what's the course. It seems like everything that I have done was just painting. But then, I do know that I was taught theory. I would consider it well rounded because of that, because I never felt estranged from it. I just was changing through it. (2)

An observant student pointed out and assessed the merits of two types of discussions:

> There were two types of discussions: 1) on our work; 2) terminology [visual language]. I learned more from the first than from the second. We grabbed a little bit of both. It was just

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dissecting paintings. I didn't think of it when I was painting. (2)

A few students summarized their perception of the combination of
structure and acceptance of student individuality in my pedagogical approach:

> She didn't interfere in our paintings. A lot of professors interfere a
> great deal, and it gets to be so frustrating. She did give structured
> exercises, but everyone did something different. . . .
>
> > I felt she set the tone for the class when in the first class she
> > said: "paint something you always wanted to paint and didn't have
> > a chance to do it." I realized then that she would be very open.
> > She encouraged us. We were afraid of abstract. She taught us
> > how to take control of our painting. (1-2)

She never told you: "do this," or "I don't like it, fix it." Similarly:

> There are certain teachers that have a love for the subject that they
> teach; they are very accepting for what you do, and that just goes
> into their enthusiasm for the subject. Whereas there are other
> teachers who have a set of ideas of what they think the subject is,
> and they want you to conform to that. Ophra falls in the first one.
> She has a definite love of art and nothing we did was wrong. She
> did encourage us to explore as far as we could. I think that's the
> best kind of teacher. (4)

A third student added at the end of the discussion: "She was present, she was
really there" (4).

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Although it is rewarding to hear this kind of positive feedback from students, it raises the question of whether I have been too accepting of their endeavours. Freedom of expression seems to be one of the aspects of the course most appreciated by the students. However, one must be cautious of students' evaluations because of the particular circumstances and the context in which they are gathered. It is possible that the students, knowing that their evaluation will affect my thesis, wanted to please me, or that compared to other restricting courses that they happened to take, this one gave them an exaggerated sense of freedom.

There could be another element that played in my favour. In the course of my teaching, I have observed that every class has an unofficial leadership of two of three influential students. If the teacher gains their confidence, the rest of the class follows; if she fails, there is no end of struggle. Luckily, or for whatever other reason, in the present course, the leadership was strongly behind me. However, regardless of these reservations, it is evident from the students' comments that, from their perspective, the course fulfilled the goals I set for myself. However, it is also clear that the students expressed some mild but valid criticism. The students disapproved of the amount of time dedicated to discussions; they questioned the usefulness of learning Saint-Martin's terminology of visual language; and they felt somewhat insecure for the lack of pointed criticism of their work.

I believe the students when they say they preferred to paint rather than

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spend time on discussions. However, it was not possible to cover the material otherwise. Because Saint-Martin's visual language is complex, I had to spend time explaining it, bringing examples, and doing a bit of drilling. Part of the problem stemmed from the short class periods. Although we met for six hours a week, the fact that each class was composed of a three-hour period did not leave the students enough painting time. I am not, however, ready to do penance for the sin of shortening the amount of time they could paint in class; it didn't hurt them to do some homework. The two other issues the students raised were issues that have preoccupied me throughout the course and that, to this day, I have only tentatively resolved. The two main issues are: 1) the link between theory and practice; 2) my critique of the students' work.

1. It is clear from my first chapter that I espoused a theory of art in general and painting in particular which I intended to follow for the duration of the course. I had no difficulty in devising projects that corresponded to the tenets of the theory. The problem I faced was how much, if any, of Saint-Martin's theory and visual language I should teach the students and how to teach it. Because of the complexity of Saint-Martin's theory of visual language, I decided to simplify it by selecting the most relevant aspects in order to help the students grasp the concepts through explanations and demonstrations. It was not my intention to impart theoretical knowledge *per se*, but to have it serve as a guide along the lines proposed by Elliot W. Eisner:

Theory plays a role in the cultivation of artistry, but its role is not

prescriptive, it is diagnostic. Good theory in education, as in art,

helps us to see more; it helps us think about more of the qualities

that constitute a set of phenomena. Theory does not replace

intelligence and perception and action, it provides some of the

windows through which intelligence can look out into the world.

("Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism" 140)

Judging from the take-home exam, the students proved that they were

capable of analyzing a painting along the lines proposed by Saint-Martin when

they were in a writing mode. There is also ample evidence from the students'

statements that what they learned about visual language affected the way they

perceived paintings. But how much of it affected their painting activity is not very

clear. Unfortunately, in the class discussions on the students' paintings and in

the individual exchange I had with them during the painting process, the students

seldom used Saint-Martin's vocabulary, even though they mostly focused on

visual concerns; they used their own less precise language. As mentioned

before, a couple of students commented that painting and analyzing works of art

are two different activities, and that they do not think of visual language while

they paint; they just use it directly. Shall I take the students' statements at face

value? I would like to believe that an intelligent perception of works of art affects

the judgment of the creator and consequently the quality of his/her production,

whichever way this quality is defined. Eisner's concept of "connoisseurship" may

be of help here:

To be a connoisseur of wine, bicycles, or graphic arts is to be

informed about their qualities; it means being able to discriminate

the subtleties among types of wine, bicycles, and graphic arts by

drawing upon the gustatory, visual, and kinesthetic memory against

which the particulars of the present may be placed for purposes of

comparison and contrast. Connoisseurs . . . appreciate what they

encounter in the proper meaning of the word. . . . Appreciation

here means an awareness and an understanding of what one has

experienced. Such an awareness provides the basis for judgment.

("Educational Connoisseurship" 140)

Thus, exercises in analyses may have helped the students to develop

subtle perception, enrich their visual language, and sharpen their critical

capability. These aptitudes, once internalized, can become a source to be

drawn upon during the knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action phases in the

process of painting as described by Schön. That said, I was nevertheless

bothered by the fact that the students never fully endorsed Saint-Martin's

terminology. In my opinion, failure to use the precise idioms also meant failure to

observe the subtleties they illuminate, such as precision in describing the variety

of line, colour, or texture qualities; recognition of topological relations such as

rhythm, envelopment, and others; observation of subtle contrasts and the like.

2. It is taken for granted in university studio courses that it is the teacher's

role to criticize and evaluate students' work. The students I taught over the

years expected me to tell them what is "right" or "good" in their work, what is "wrong," or "bad," and to correct their "mistakes." However, because of the lack of measurable standards for establishing quality in art, and because of my approach to art and to education as demonstrated in the thesis, I could not render them this service. Yet, students need some form of criticism as guidance for future actions and for the development of a sense of confidence. Both Schön and Eisner advocate the use of some form of criticism in the course of teaching. Both stress that criticism and evaluation must be based on the intrinsic nature of the object under criticism.

Although my pedagogical approach shares a lot in common with Schön's reflection-in-action concept, I had to part ways with him somewhat in the approach to criticism. Schön's pedagogical proposals are geared towards the "preparing of professionals for the demands of practice" (*Educating the Reflective Practitioner* 3). Schön attributes a measure of artistry to all the professions. He does not confer a special status to art. However, art as a concept is not a profession, even though art practitioners may gain their living through it. The applied professions must function in real life situations; their product must fulfill a practical function where success and failure are not difficult to establish. The professions have standards against which the proficiency of their practising members can be assessed. The teaching of design is the closest Schön gets to art. Although design has much in common with pure art, unlike art, its product must function in everyday real life. For example, a bridge has to

be strong enough to support circulation, or a school must accommodate the activities and services particular to it; failure of design may be catastrophic. Because of the responsibility the designer carries, the teacher of design has a measure of authority over his/her students. Schön demands that, at least at the beginning of the pedagogical activities, the students must entrust themselves to the teacher at the expense of giving up personal values and risking loss of self-confidence. This is not necessary in the case of teaching art, and I did not demand this kind of surrender from my students. However, I endorsed the technique of reflection-in-action and the kind of criticism that arises during the numerous dialogues between teacher and students. I mainly interfered when students expressed disappointment in their work or when they were at a cross-road situation, "stuck," to use their terminology. At times, I agreed with their negative assessment and either helped them improve it or suggested that they give up in unredeemable situations; at other times, I helped them see the merit of some aspects of their painting that they had rejected. As one student put it: "Mistakes were handled as opportunities." I also frequently expressed my own pleasurable or unpleasurable experience emanating from their work.

Eisner's approach to criticism is probably the most suitable for my approach to art and education, except that I could not exercise it in the context of the course. Eisner perceives criticism as the art of disclosure of connoisseurship: "What the critic strives for is to articulate or render those ineffable qualities constituting art in language that makes them vivid"

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("Educational Connoisseurship" 141). In other words, criticism as another form of art. Unfortunately, in the flurry of teaching and researching, I couldn't deliver an artistically crafted criticism.

On the whole, the course unfolded more or less the way I envisaged. However, the greatest irony is that a course that aimed at teaching the formal elements in painting ended up as a course closely related to the self-expression aesthetic. Although I constantly appealed to the students' cognitive faculties, they nevertheless slipped into self-expression. Perhaps this is a case in which the action theory, the initially declared theory, was not commensurate with the reflection-in-action activities. I do not have the kind of data that can verify this hypothesis--data gathered through a systematic anthropologically structured research--which as a teacher and sole researcher I could not undertake. A simpler interpretation, in harmony with Saint-Martin's view, is that the cognitive is an integral part of perception and expression, and that the expression is indeed in the form. The students had the need, at this early stage of painting, to freely express themselves in image and in words before they were ready to invest in an intellectually demanding dialogue.

This teaching method demonstrates that form and expression are intertwined, that attention to form widens the students' visual vocabulary in painted images and in verbal expression, that it induces students to experiment with painting materials, facilitates their understanding of abstract art, creates a congenial atmosphere for a non-threatening dialogue among students and

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teacher, breaks stereotypes about the nature of art, and permits greater freedom of expression in art and in everyday life.

I have taught this course several times since 1995. Following the students' recommendation, I have considerably reduced the length of time spent on formal class discussions. For obvious reasons, mainly because I don't collect data anymore, it is impossible to compare the course taught in 1995 with the ones that followed. However, my impression is that by eliminating the theoretical component, the intellectual demand on the students has diminished. The student exhibition reports I now receive tend to be superficial both intellectually and emotionally. At the present time, a new pattern of viewing student work has emerged. Instead of dedicating time to formal discussions, students now view their work in an informal manner. After the paintings are put on display, the students act as visitors in an exhibition. They exchange views among themselves, ask questions, voice criticism, and express pleasure and displeasure. At the end of this period, I point out aspects of visual language that the paintings on display afford.

Personally, I prefer the 1995 model of teaching, mainly because it was challenging and rewarding. I managed to know the students well, and I enjoyed the close rapport with them.

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APPENDIX 1

EXPANDING THE AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE: A CLASS VISIT TO

AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY DAVID SORENSEN

The assignment

> **View the paintings in this exhibition by yourself or with one or two of your fellow students. Select a painting that moves you. Based on the painting of your choice, follow the instructions in the questionnaire.**

Task I:

1) Select a painting that moves you. Pretend that you are taking a journey in the painting's space. What is the route you take? At what places do you stop? What places do you skip? Where do you feel comfortable? What areas make you feel uncomfortable? What places did you visit more than once? Can you have a dream inside the painting? A wish-fulfilling dream? A nightmare?

2) Write the story of your journey in the painting's visual space: Was it difficult or easy to enter? Where did you enter? From above? From below? From near? From afar? What was your itinerary? (the order in which you moved from place to place). What did you experience at each stage? Did you have a dream? If so, can you narrate your dream? At what places did you feel estranged? Comfortable? Can you differentiate between the experiences originating in the work and those emanating from inside yourself?

Task II:

Imagine yourself as an element in the painting: a specific brush stroke, a certain form or colour. How does it feel to be there? Can you enter into a dialogue with your other self in the painting? Can you play more than one role? Which role did you like best?

Task III:

Would you attempt to produce a painting inspired by the one you have just contemplated? If so, what would you keep and what would you eliminate? Would you redo it in your own style? Would you actually make a painting or just imagine doing it? Would you make a comparison between your painting and the original painting? Are there sections in the original painting that you would like to change?

Task IV:

1) Describe the visual variables in the painting: colour (hue, saturation, tonality); complementary and simultaneous contrasts; form/contour; texture; dimension; vectoriality (direction); pictorial depth.

2) Can you discern a certain basic structure in the painting? (e.g. large areas that share similar variables such as colour, shape, texture).

Task V:

Do you perceive this painting differently after you answered the questions? If so, in what way?

APPENDIX 2

HOMAGE TO MATISSE'S CUTOUTS

Group I (*Architectural Constructs*):

-- where does the sun go? Here?

-- on the side? Inside?

-- up here?

-- that's too far

-- maybe a small one at the back

-- it's the logic, the lost city of Atlantis

-- the green thing can come here

-- it looks like all water

-- I like something to cover it anyway

-- it seems like a piece of the land

-- these mountains, they are cool there

-- I don't like this

--it's getting pretty messy, it's getting hairy (laughter)

-- this thing is getting real confusing

270

-- don't worry about the logic of it

-- this is a good contrast

-- where are we going to put this?

-- this floats in the air

-- is this better?

-- it is too crowded here, she looks better there

-- this big thing so huge in the back

-- there is a big red spot here

-- we can move this

-- I kind of like it

-- it's too squished down here

-- it should go by the colour

-- I just love this

-- you don't like it?

-- I find it looks good

-- beige here, beige there, beige here, it is well distributed

-- I liked it there, it was really nice

-- move it that way

-- let's not worry about logic

-- this house, we can put it like this

-- it does not have to be logical

-- that's the kind of shape we had before

-- this is the same colour as the pillars

-- this one behind

-- why don't we stand up and look at it again for a second. I think it's
  good

-- this here, I don't like

-- it's not a big contrast

-- I like to break up this whole

-- this is fine because it looks like water

-- I love this, it is water

-- bring the trees down

-- it loses power if the trees are not put together

-- are we ready for the details?

-- the big one, the small one

-- he deserves to be stuck

-- not touching here and not touching there

-- don't cover the gorgeous stairs, they are so nice. It gives the whole
picture a kind of stability

-- we can make it smaller

-- try it here, try it there

-- I like the green

-- yes, it looks like we are stuck now

-- we have a lot of stairs

-- I almost don't want to touch it

-- we need something big here

-- this and that is so nice

-- but if you are looking at the whole thing, there is something missing, a big form here. There is nothing here

-- just try it, behind the green

-- we see the house

-- no, not there

-- we need green here

-- I don't like it there

-- bring it up front

-- bring it down

-- I thought you don't want to hide the stairs at all

-- I liked it better before

-- move it here

-- how about lowering?

-- this was the trickiest piece

-- the trees should come down

-- the girl

-- I think you should stick them to the columns

-- I think the girl looks good here

-- I won't touch it

-- there are not many possibilities

-- put them together, close

-- I am going to do the house

-- keep them together, seriously

-- put them both down

-- maybe there, because there is nothing there

-- I like the people there

-- put it lower

Group II (*Underwater Scene*):

-- the submarine

-- I like it

-- it is pretty good

-- this can go over here

-- do you want it down?

-- how about the lobster, it should go right into the green

-- we should put it on an angle

-- on the coral, we should put stuff on it. It looks so small

-- what if we took it from here and put it there, what will happen?

-- everything we put down now will reflect on everything else

-- there is the big fish

-- that one has a lot of texture

-- the fish looks lost

-- it is too bright

-- I like it, I like the fish in the boat

-- I love this! I like it!

-- the mermaid has no hair

-- she is symbolic

-- these two things are nice, the sea horse, I like the sea horse

(Lisa suggests the composition be rearranged because it looks "busy and

crowded." The rest of the group members agree.)

-- that's nice

-- mermaid, divers

-- I like that better

-- the red and the green

-- I like that texture, it is really nice

-- we could put it in the top. It will be detailed without being

destructive

-- I don't like it there because there is red next to red

-- I like it, I like it, I like it

-- that thing at the top, it looks like the fish is going to the sub

-- it's like making voices

-- I like that, but I don't know where to put it

-- too close to the yellow

-- I like it on the blue, and I liked it on the side here. That looks nice

-- it's cute

-- it's going to make it clustery

-- finished, I like the way this works with this; it looks so subtle.

Group III (A Picnic Gone Awry):

-- that's the tablecloth

-- it has to go on the plate

-- what's the blue thing?

-- this is grass

-- bird's eye view

-- put it at the bottom

-- on the blue

-- what about the weeds?

-- we should wait until everything else is on

-- right in the middle

-- sounds good

-- maybe it should go up, off the top

-- no, it's a cake

-- cover some of the brown

-- solid on top of the red and the white

-- here, maybe here, right in the corner

-- the blue is watered down

-- maybe overlapping on this one

-- across the rock

-- the same angle

-- where is the other person?

-- the pizza

-- it looks like she is going away

-- there is the blue. Up here? Up there?

-- how about a blue one? A green?

-- if it is a tornado everything is flying around. It does not have to be in the

right place. People are holding on together for safety

-- we are running out of room

-- how about getting rid of some of the red?

-- more foliage up there

-- ominous sky hanging down like this

-- overlap the blue one

-- yellow

-- foliage

-- where else do we need grass?

-- over there with the people

-- we'll run out of red

-- no, nasty sandwich

-- we like it like that

-- there is a bit more space here

-- sandwich with the...

-- quails

-- they are about to be devoured

-- the weeds will help up here

-- it's kind of crowded here

-- good

-- right behind

-- potato salad

-- we don't have a lot of depth

-- let's overlap

-- two planes on the top, this will be the third

-- that's all the foliage

-- could these be together?

-- somebody have this stuff to go here?

-- put it higher or lower?

-- I kind of like it here

-- we can put it across the top

-- that's better

-- you want this at the bottom?

-- yes

-- that really works

-- it looks really funny

APPENDIX 3

FINAL TAKE-HOME EXAMINATION

Answer the following questions in the suggested order. Your answers should be written clearly, using precise terminology, whether taken from your own vocabulary or borrowed from the reference texts distributed during the course. Some questions will require careful consultation of the reference pages.

The exam is due on Monday, April 22,1996.

1. Pretend that you are taking a journey in the painting's space. What is the route you take? At what places do you stop? What place do you skip? Where do you feel comfortable? What areas make you feel uncomfortable? What places did you visit more than once?

2. Imagine yourself as an element in the painting: a specific brush stroke, a certain form, or colour. How does it feel to be there? Can you enter into a dialogue with your other self in the painting?

3. Divide the painting into highly contrasting regions naming them R1, R2, R3, etc. Divide the regions into sub-regions naming them R1a, R1b, R2a, R2b,

etc. Draw a general sketch of the regions and sub-regions.

4. Identify the topological relations formed among the regions and among elements inside the regions.

5. Describe the visible variables in your painting: hue, tonality, saturation, texture, form/contour, size, vectoriality (direction). Use the names of the regions and sub-regions to indicate the areas you describe.

6. Establish in the table 1) the similarities/dissimilarities among the regions according to the visual variables, and 2) indicate which of the visible variables are the most responsible for the similarities/dissimilarities among the regions.

7. Describe the most intense regions/sub-regions according to the infrastructure of the Basic Plane (the corners, the edges, the diagonals, the crossings of the horizontal and vertical virtual lines, etc.).

8. Describe the perspectives built into the work (globally or locally) according to the distances between the producer/perceiver and the painting, the angle of vision, suggested distances among the regions or sub-regions, etc. Are there any contradictory viewpoints?

9. Name the regions/sub-regions containing objects of the natural world. Analyze their characteristics of "good" or "bad" gestalt. Assess the perceptual distances established by their visual variables, their position in the Basic Plane,

etc. Compare it with the spatial logic of the natural world.

10. Point out the producer's emotive and cognitive experience based on what you discovered through questions 1 to 7.

11. What regions or interrelations among regions do you "like" and what regions do you "like less"?

12. Since you are the producer, did you discover new meaning in your painting after this exercise? Can you describe it? In the light of what you have learned now, would you make any changes to the original painting? If yes, what would you change and why?

13. Did you gain new insights about yourself through the careful examination of your work and/or through the entire painting course?

APPENDIX 4

ILLUSTRATIONS

The photographs are arranged in the order they are discussed in the text

THE QUEST FOR THE VISUAL
REPRESENTATION OF THE NATURAL WORLD

JASMINE

BRENDA

JACOB

KRISTA

285
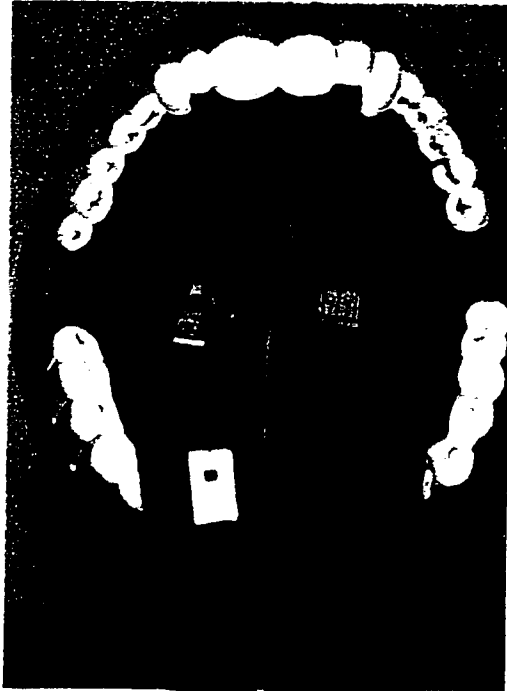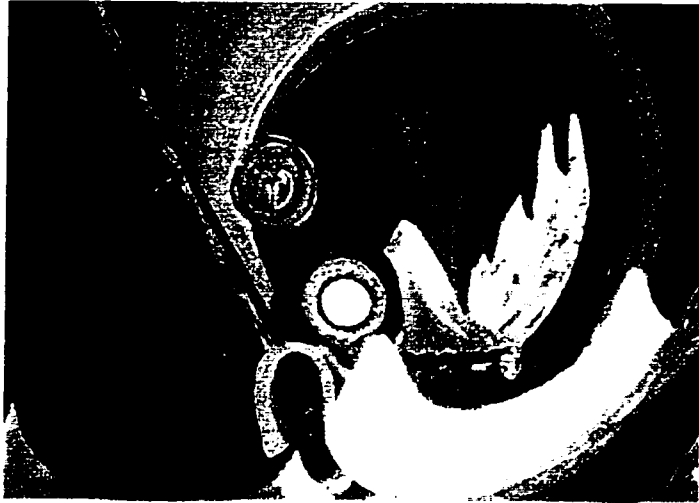
MARY

NADIA

SUZANNE
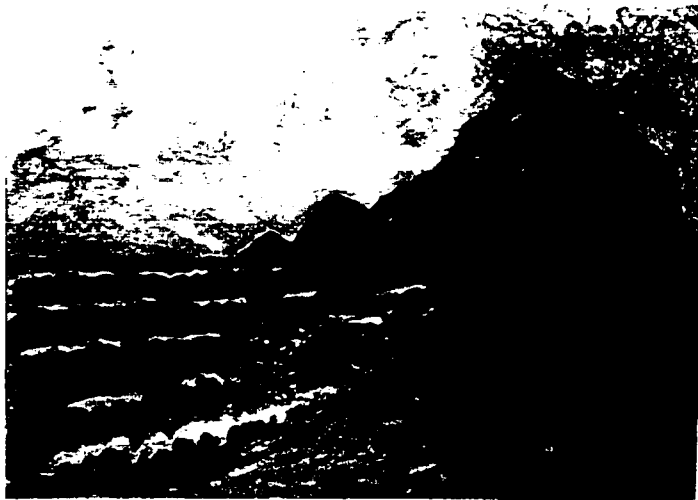
RITA

LORNA
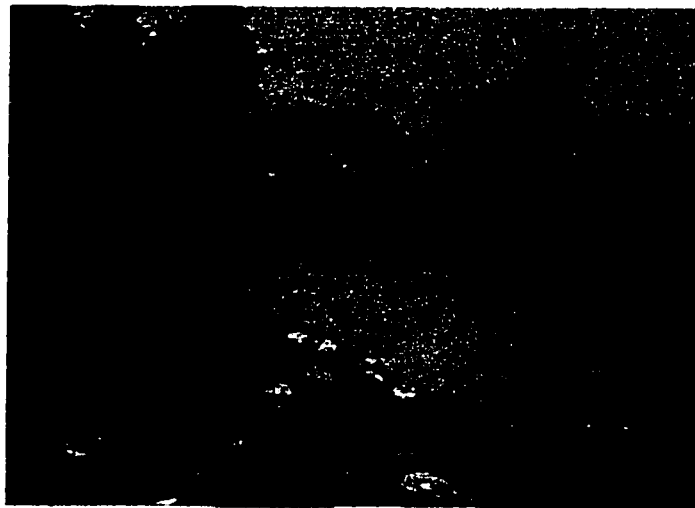
JUDITH

SABRINA

THE SHIFTING OF GEARS:
FROM EXTERNAL TO INTERNAL REALITY

MARY

SABRINA

JACOB
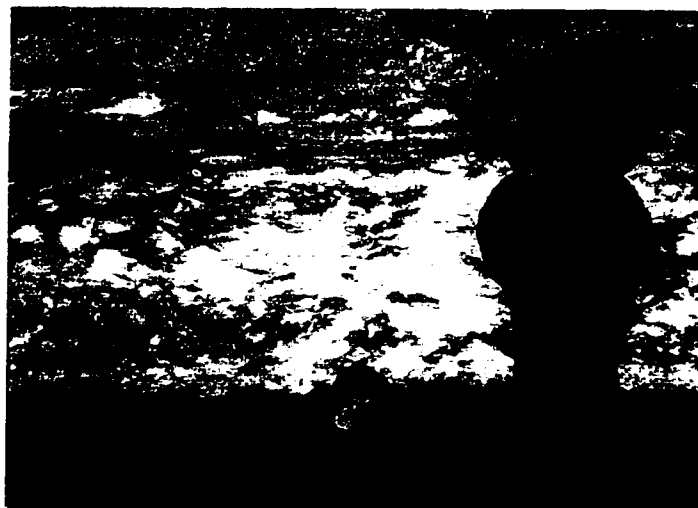
BRENDA

KRISTA

RITA

LORNA
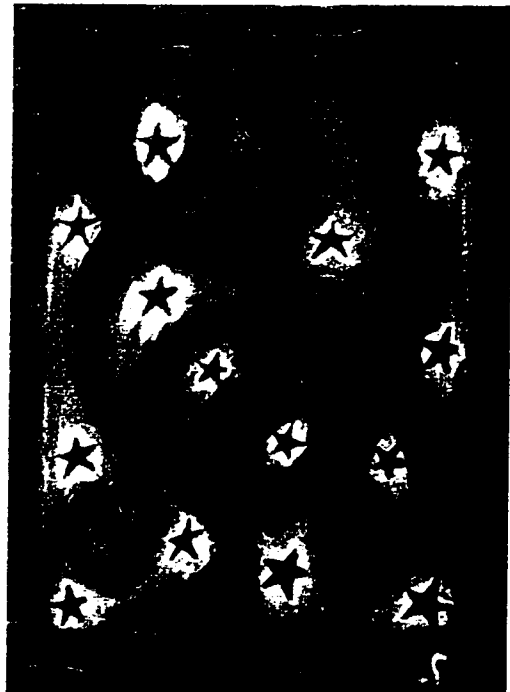
CELINE

JUDITH

NADIA

294
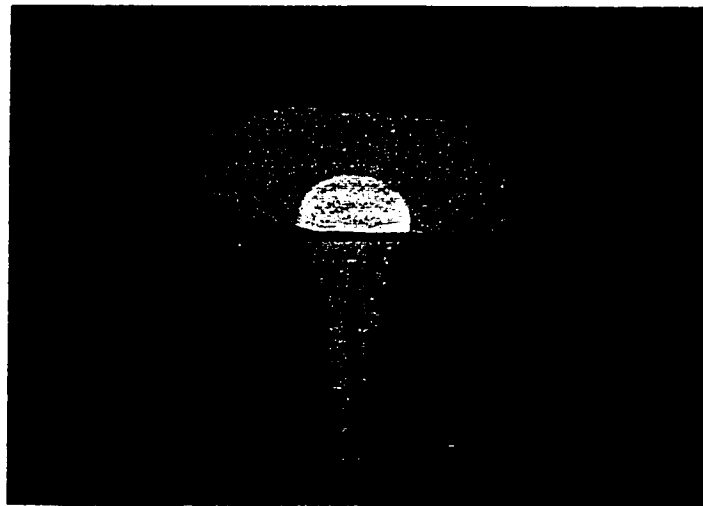
NADIA

JASMINE

SHARON

THE SHIFT FROM THE PART TO THE GLOBAL IN
SEARCH FOR SPONTANEITY AND STRUCTURE

SUZANNE

JACOB

MARY
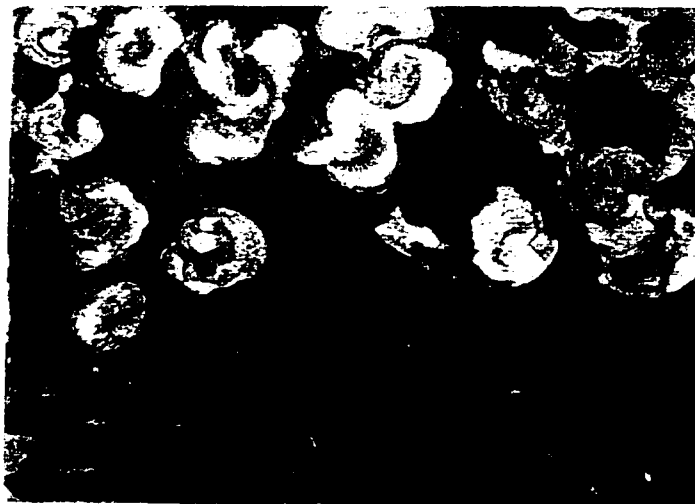
RITA (PHASE 1)

RITA (PHASE 2)

LORNA

299

BRENDA

KRISTA

300
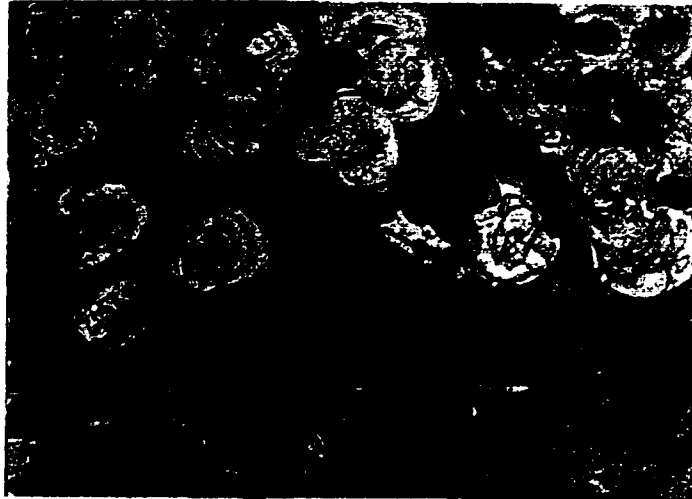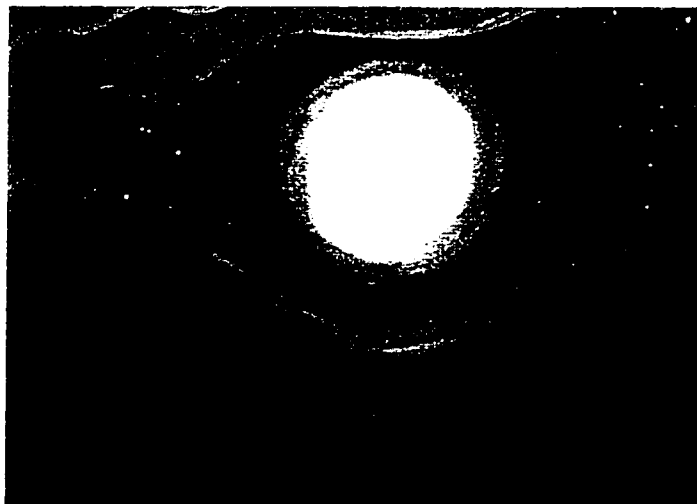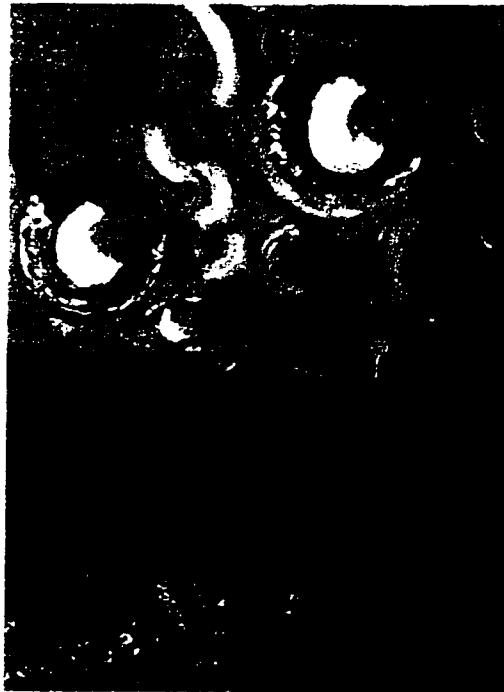
SABRINA

THE EFFECTS OF TEXTURE
IN ESTABLISHING MEANING

NATASHA

MARY

302

SABRINA

NADIA

303

RITA

LORNA

304

JACOB

BRENDA

305
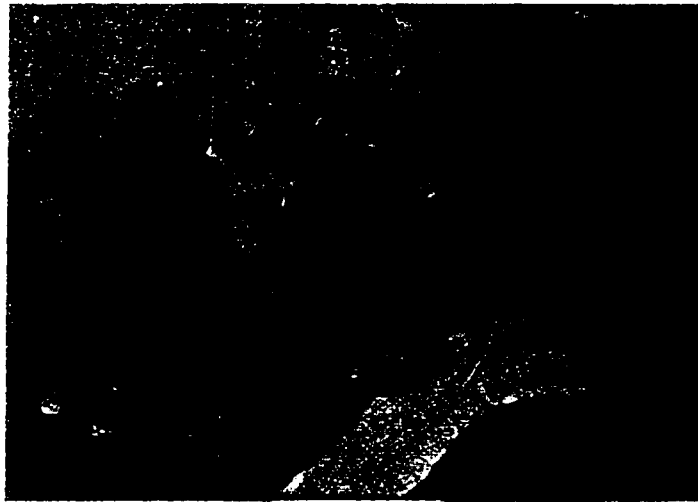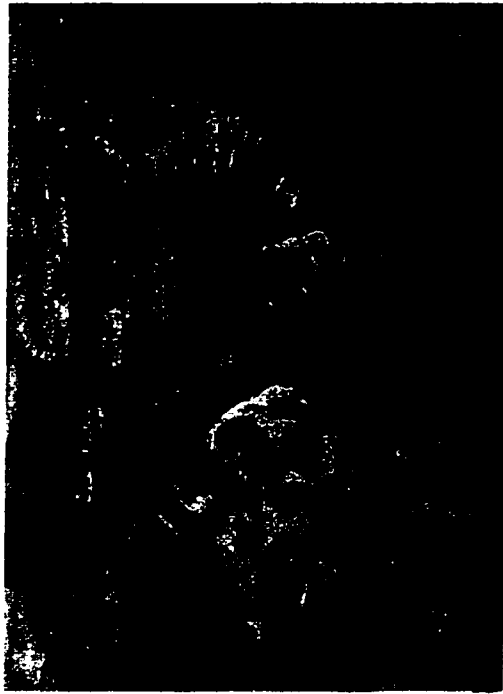
JASMINE

EXPANDING THE AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE:
A CLASS VISIT TO AN EXHIBITION
OF PAINTINGS BY DAVID SORENSEN

AMARILLO

MYSTERY

308

ACTUALIZATION

309
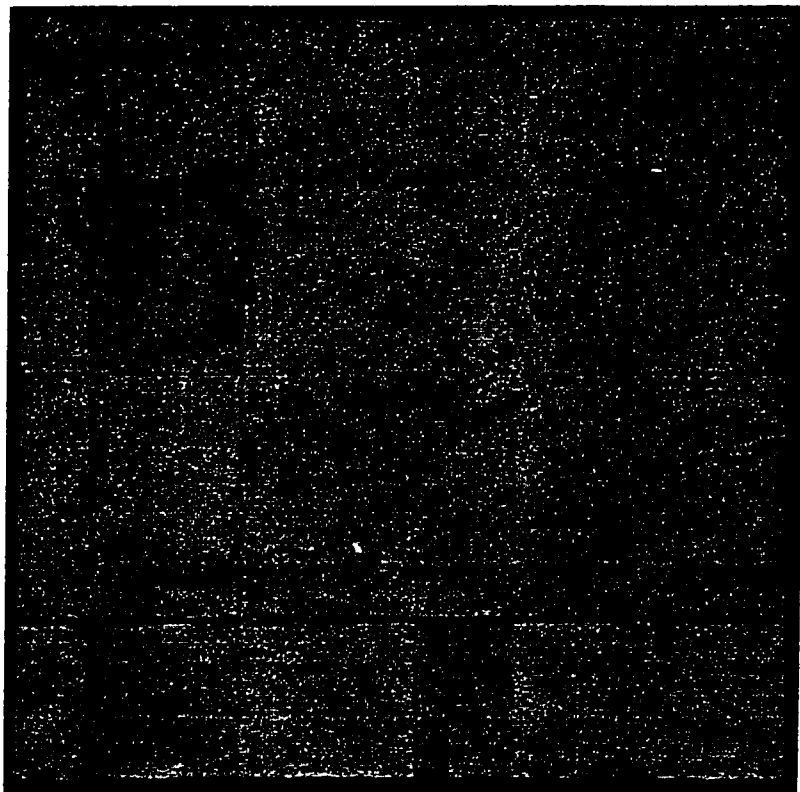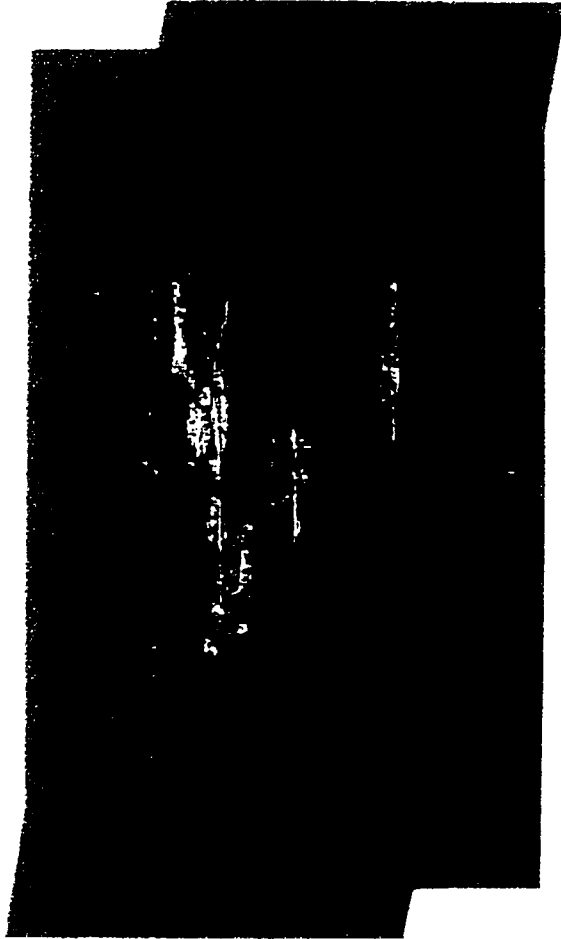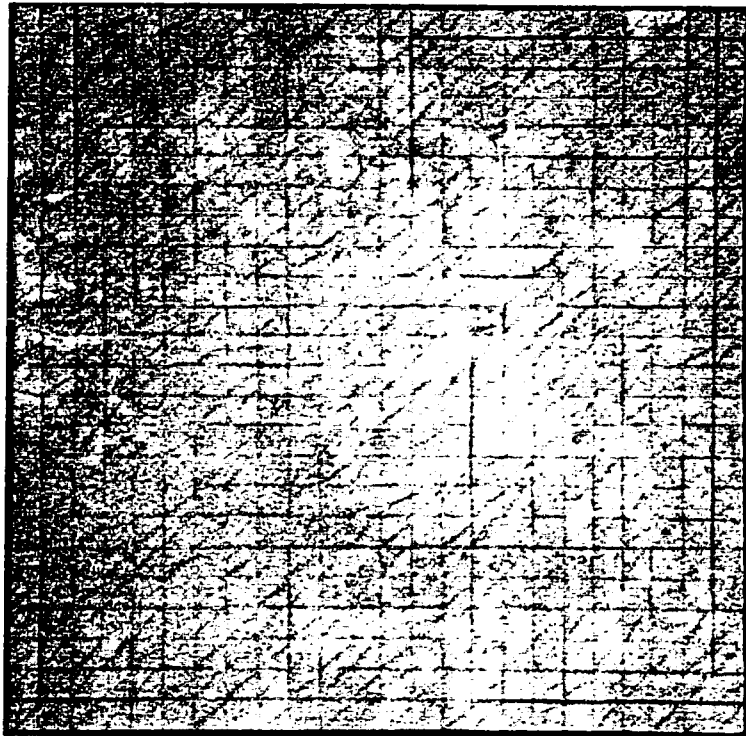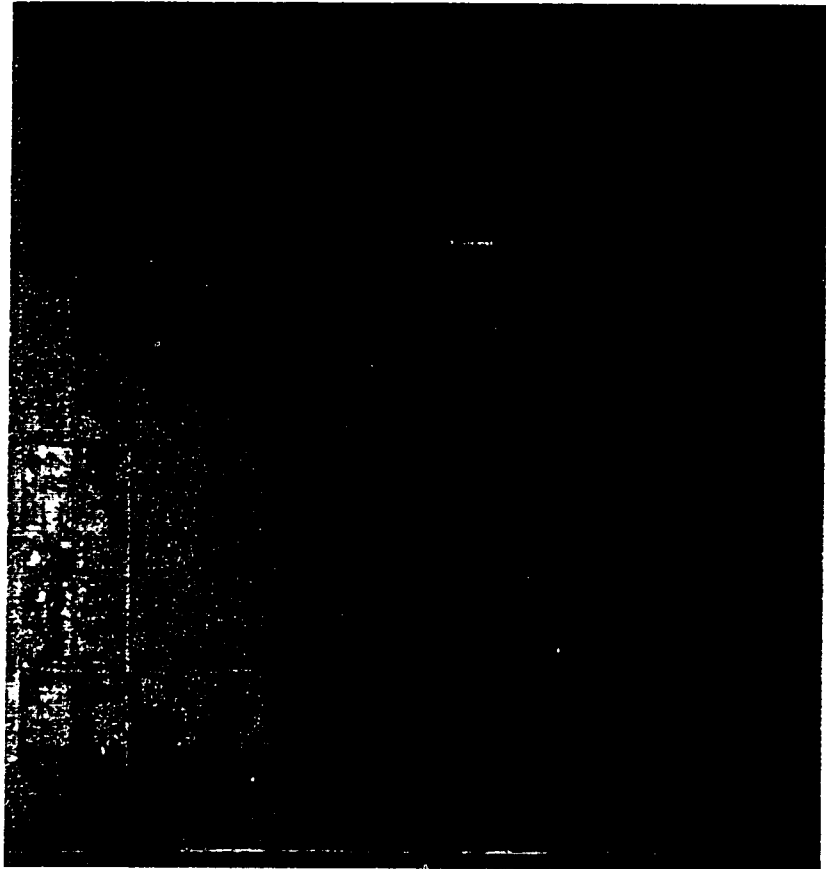
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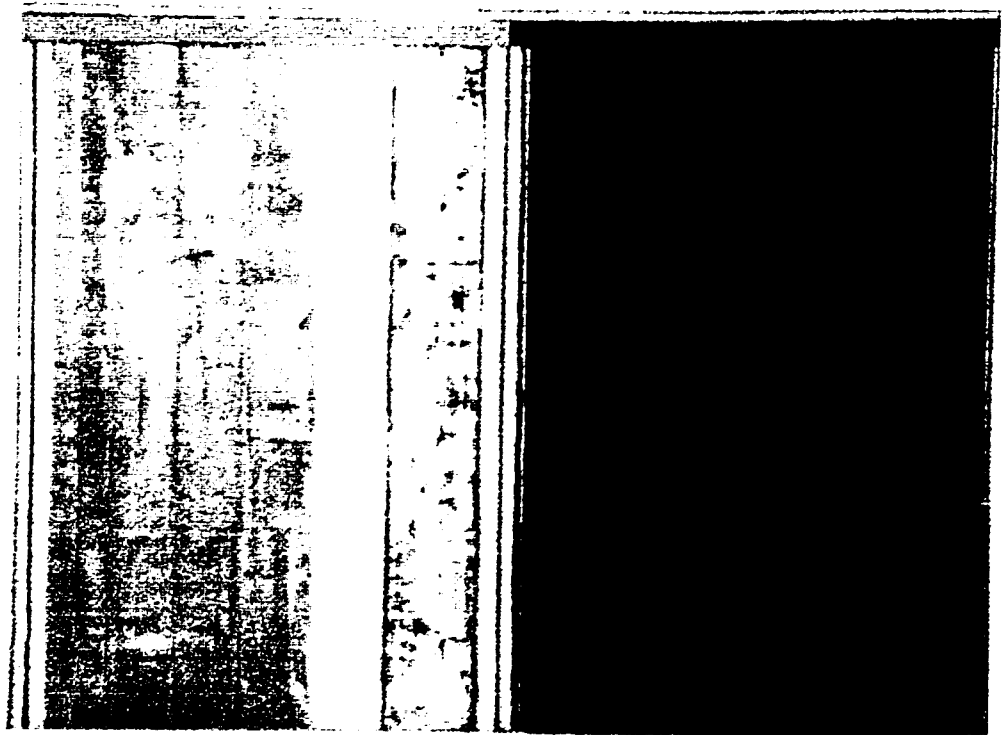
DOUBLE GATE WITH
FLOOD DIPTYCH
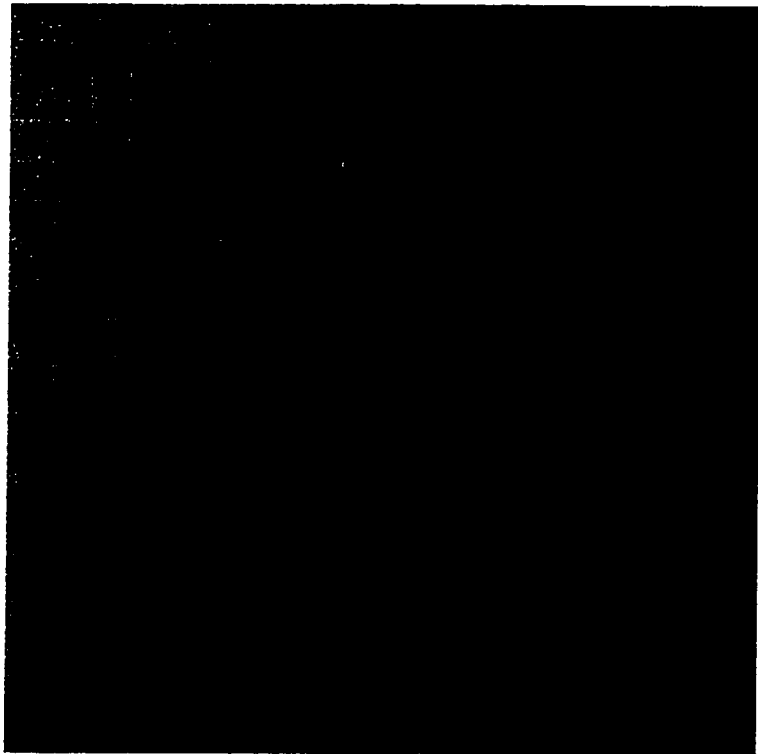
COBALT
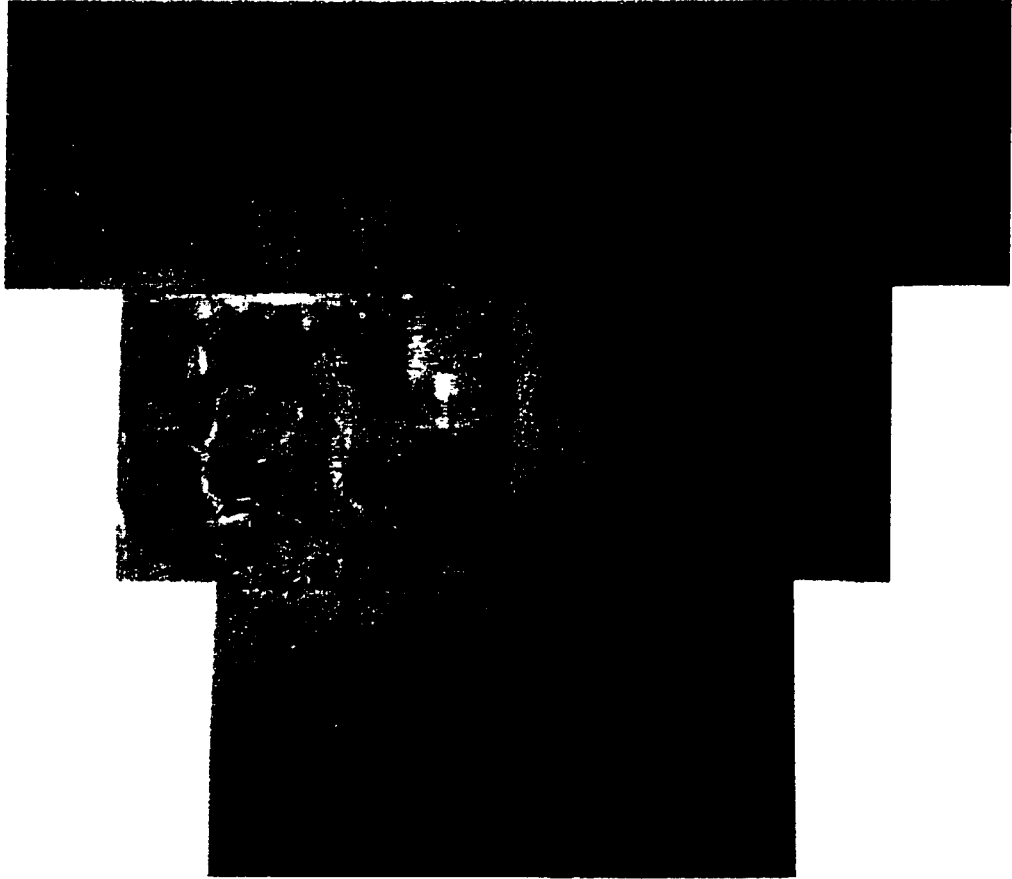
WATER RESONANCE

LATERAL DRIFT
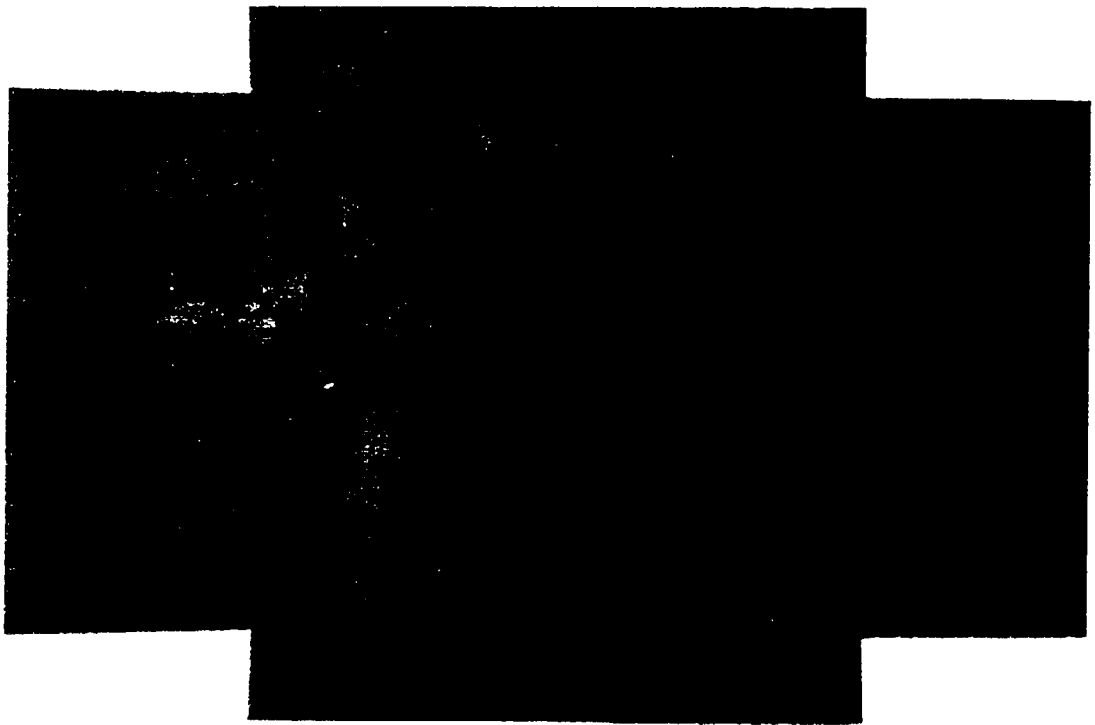
314

LATERAL MANTRA

315

316
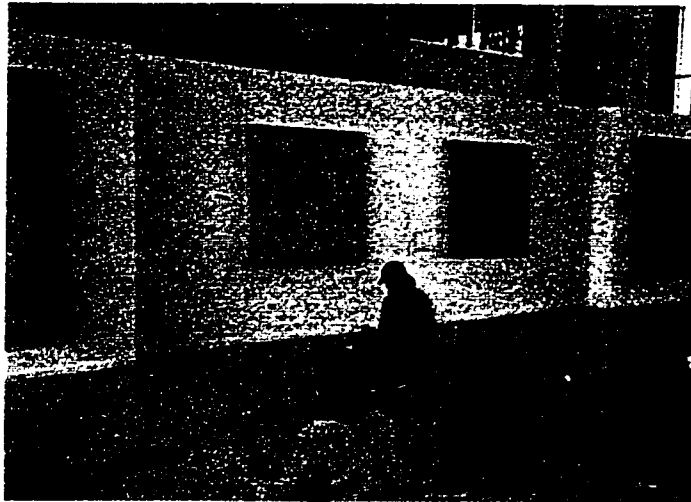
THE SHAPE OF THE PAINTING SUPPORT AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE PAINTED IMAGE

JACOB
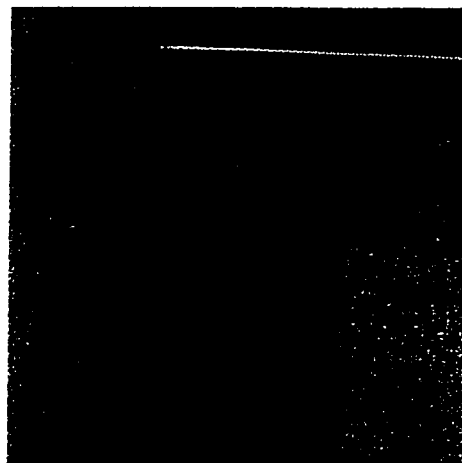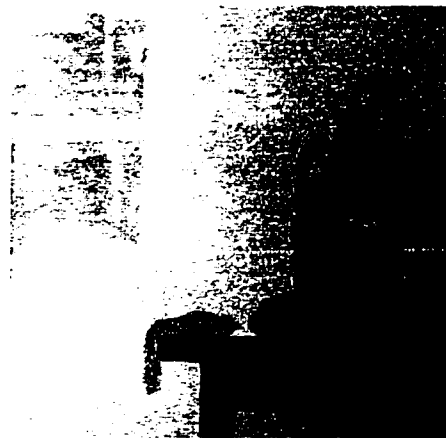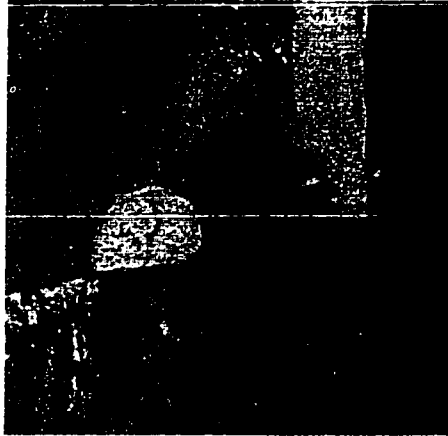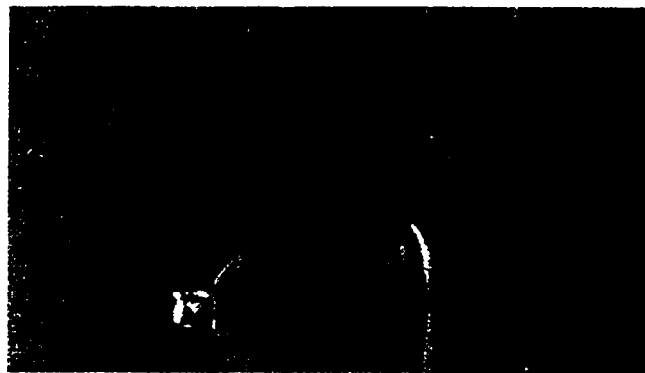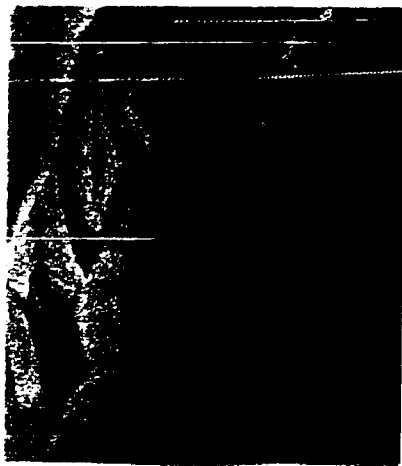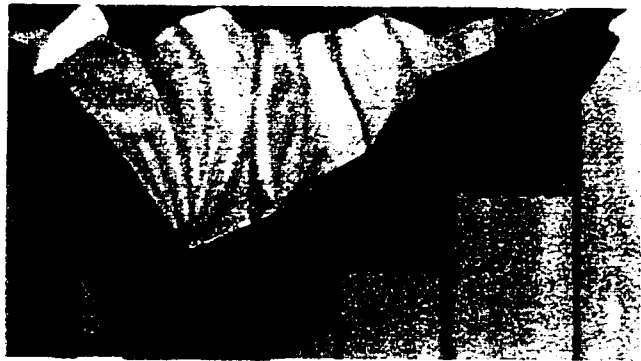
LISA

319

NATASHA

SHARON

321

CELINE

322

HOMAGE TO MATISSE'S CUT-OUTS: THE INTEGRATION OF NEGATIVE SPACE IN THE PICTORIAL COMPOSITION

RITA

SHARON

323

LISA

KRISTA

324
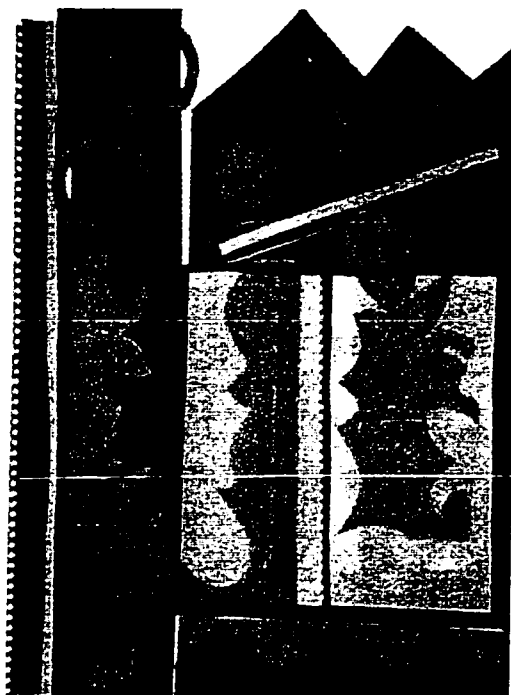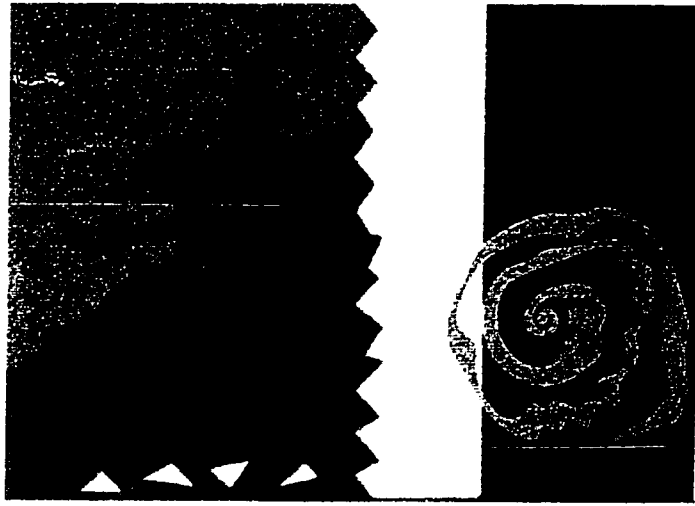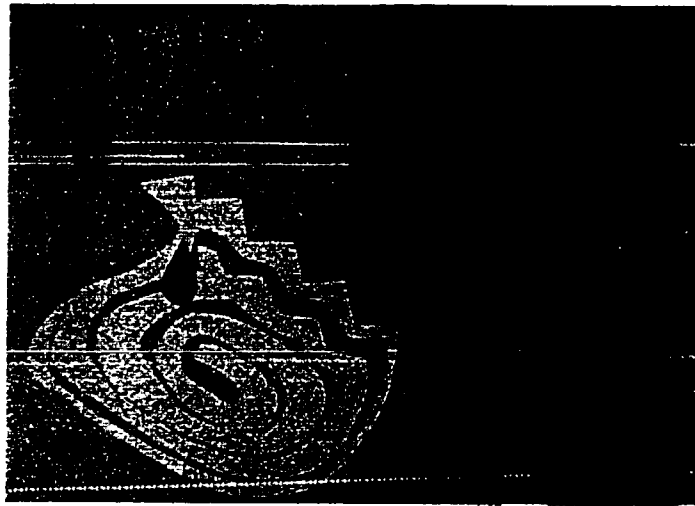
GROUP I

GROUPE II

GROUP III

327

DEPARTURE FROM THE NORM AS
A SOURCE OF EXPRESSION

JASMINE

KRISTA

328
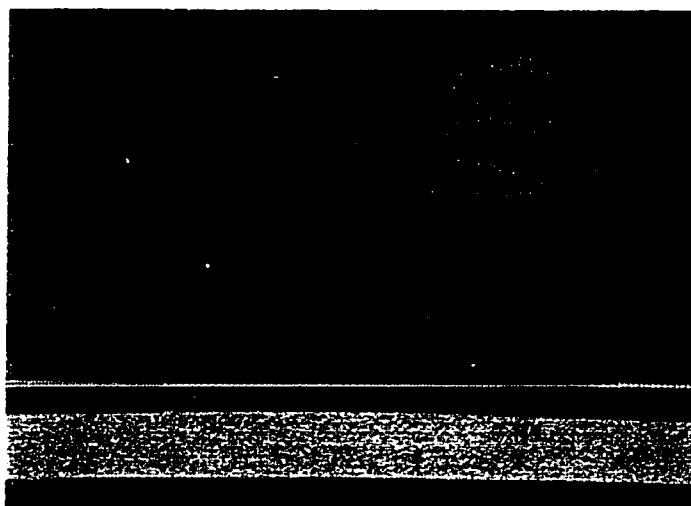
SABRINA

JACOB
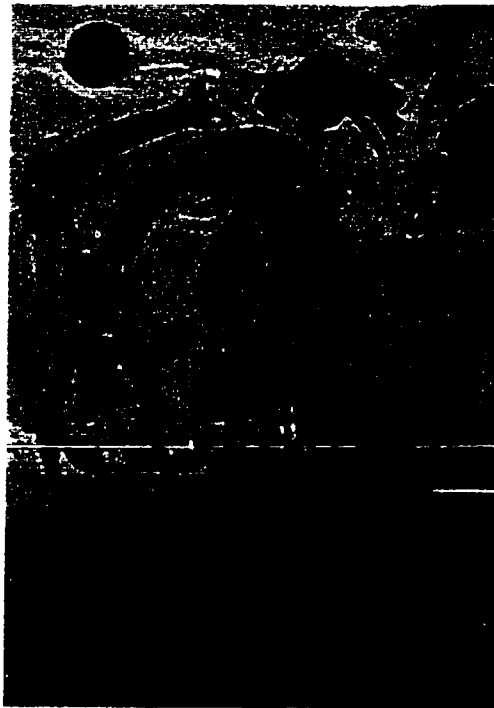
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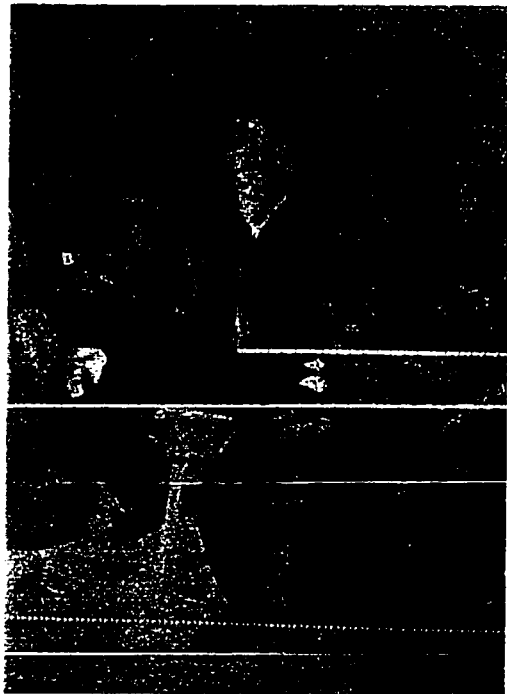
BRENDA

LISA

NATASHA

331

MOUVANCE

DOUTE

SOMMEIL DE L'HIVER

REVERIE

COMING FULL CIRCLE
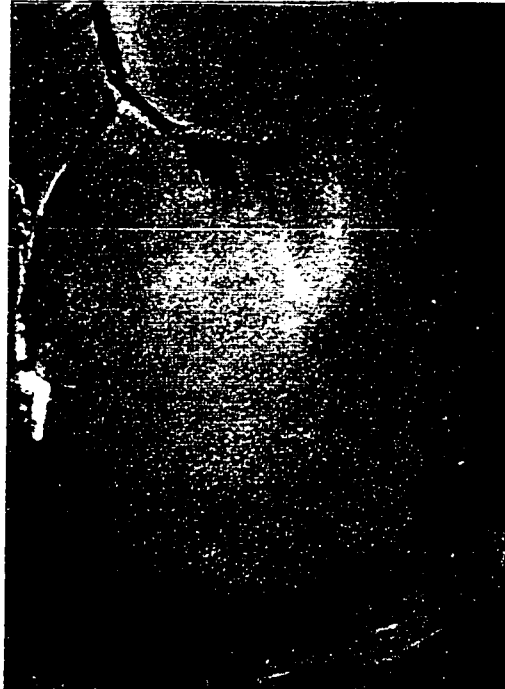

JACOB

JUDITH
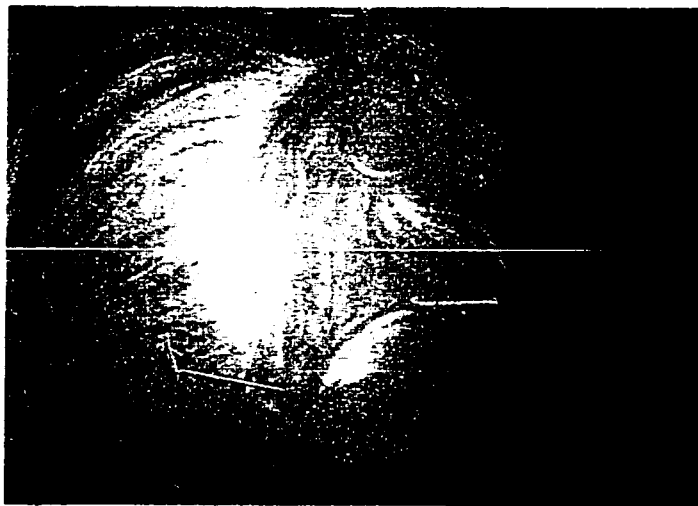
LORNA

SABRINA

337

KRISTA

BRENDA

338

SHARON

NADIA

339

LISA

340