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## An exploration of some aspects of mystery

Terry Foster Thompson  
*Portland State University*

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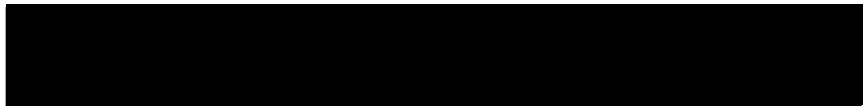
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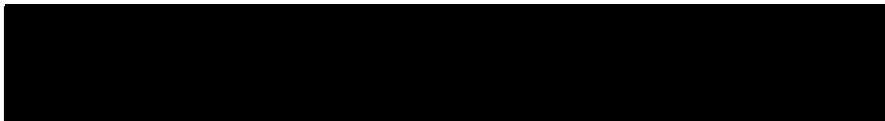
AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Terry Foster Thompson for the  
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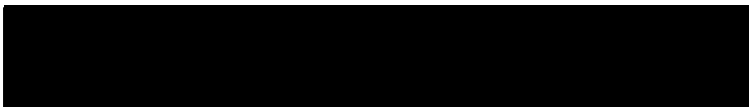
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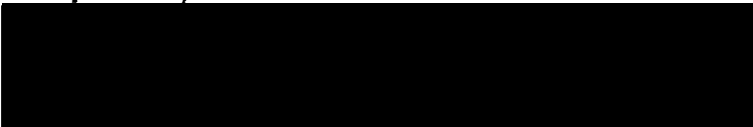
James S. Hibbard, Chair



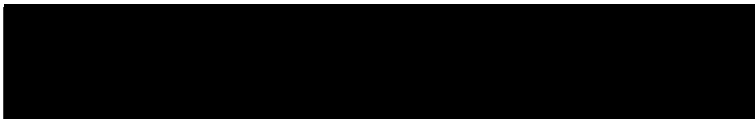
Craig G. Cheshire



Byron J. Gardner



L. Robert Kasal



Linda B. Parshall

This thesis project consists of twenty-four paintings,  
drawings and lithographs dealing with three sub-themes of  
the larger subject of mystery: the mystery of existence;  
the mystery of religion; the mystery of the unknown.

These themes are explored through manipulations of light, color, compositional arrangement and painting and drawing techniques.

AN EXPLORATION OF SOME ASPECTS OF MYSTERY

by

TERRY FOSTER THOMPSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
in  
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Portland State University  
1990

TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of  
Terry Foster Thompson presented May 8, 1990.

[REDACTED]

James S. Hibbard, Chair

[REDACTED]

Craig G. Cheshire

[REDACTED]

Byron J. Gardner

[REDACTED]

L. Robert Kasal

[REDACTED]

Linda B. Parshall

APPROVED:

[REDACTED]

L. Robert Kasal, Chair, Art Department

[REDACTED]

C. William Savery, Interim vice Provost for  
Graduate Studies and Research

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis project is based on three general themes, each dealing with a different aspect of what I have chosen to call "mystery." The first theme involves the mystery of one's existence. I chose to use self-portraits for this theme. The second deals with the mystery of religion. This explores the concept of a supernatural world and its relationship with suffering and death. I chose Christian images to explore this theme. The third is the mystery of the unknown. I used featureless, anonymous figures for this last theme.

The choice of mystery as a subject for my paintings, drawings and lithographs was partly the result of my experience with the deaths of first my grandmother and then my mother. I saw both of these women go from being healthy and active to being unable to get out of bed. Although my mother had an amazing peace about her circumstances, my grandmother went from an attitude of acceptance, to being angry at God, and then back again to acceptance. Watching loved ones having to confront physical infirmity and the inevitability of death led me to reevaluate my own existence, to ponder who I am, what life means to me and why we all suffer at one time or another and finally die.



## THE THESIS WORK

In developing my subject matter during the two-year program at Portland State University, I first chose the elderly (Figure 1). This was obviously because of the recent experience with the death of my grandmother. I first did several drawings of a figure, old and ill, lying on a bed, followed by several paintings of elderly people, yet none of these works seemed to take me anywhere. I realize now why these works were not successful for me; I unconsciously wanted to work with the broader issue of mystery.

I moved next to another subject that had interested me for some time: motion. During my undergraduate studies I had become acquainted with an artist who treated the subject of motion in her artwork as a way of depicting some of the drastic changes that had taken place in her life. This started me thinking about change and how it relates to all of us. I did a number of paintings and drawings dealing with the idea of motion. The last painting incorporating this idea was a self-portrait (Figure 2) in which I juxtaposed two figures with slight positional changes from one to the other. Compositionally, the right edge of one of the heads is approximately at the center of the paper with the motion being shown by a pulling and



Figure 1. Elderly woman



Figure 2. Self-portrait in motion

blurred movement to the right where a second portrait is seen. The way motion is depicted in this painting is connected to a photographic technique called "panning" which simulates motion in a still photograph.

The illusion of motion in this self-portrait was created by lifting paint away from the surface with a rag and then working back into that area with a paint brush. I had painted the two portraits in such close proximity to each other that there was no negative space between them. One figure has his head up and gazes straight at the viewer, while the other figure has his head tilted to the side, his eyes closed and head bowed. The gaze and positioning of the heads gives the painting a contemplative, introspective aura. The wiping away of paint allows the white of the gesso to show through, creating a glow. This, to me, lends a spiritual or transcendental quality to the painting. My previous self-portraits had dealt only with physical appearance. For the first time I had done a painting that revealed a part of me that was not merely physical. This painting pointed toward the theme: the mystery of existence. The spirituality or transcendental feeling that the painting expresses caused me to realize the possibilities of expressing more of what was going on inside me as not only a physical being but also as a spiritual one. By concentrating a large part of my work on

self-portraiture I felt it would be possible to explore what the mystery of existence means to me. Because of my belief in a personal relationship with God, the spiritual side of me took on a great amount of importance in my work and I realized that the self-portrait was a way of discovering more about myself. This seems to be what I wanted to do from the beginning but I realized it only by first trying other possibilities, such as aging and motion. Instead of working with such subjects, I had a resource in my own experiences and thoughts.

The self-portrait in motion was the first painting I had done on gessoed paper rather than canvas. Since the paper was taped to a firm surface it gave me a sensation that was very similar to drawing. Because of this similarity to drawing, I felt confident to experiment more freely in the way I often do while drawing. Painting had always been inhibiting to me. One of the main reasons was that with drawing I could deal only with black and white while with painting I needed an understanding of color. My use of color seemed often to be successful but I lacked effective understanding of why it worked. Another reason I resisted painting was because of the character of the materials. Brushes and canvas are soft compared to drawing materials such as charcoal and paper. These provide a resistance and give the kind of crispness and bite to my work that I like to see.

Perhaps because I was becoming too content and secure with the drawing materials and the drawing process, I felt compelled to experiment with the qualities of oil paint. I had always covered all areas of the canvas while painting, but with this self-portrait I did not feel the need to do so. Sections were left completely bare of paint. To achieve even greater variety in the painting surface both Byron Gardner and Jim Hibbard urged me to experiment with different thicknesses of paint and with the type of marks the paintbrush could leave on the surface.

My great affinity for drawing probably goes back to my earliest experience of creating art at about the age of six or seven. My family was on vacation and to entertain me one day my mother gave me a piece of charcoal from an outside grill, an eraser, and a piece of paper to draw on. By the time I had finished my drawing, the paper was covered with charcoal; some areas were very dense and some areas were modified with eraser marks. Looking back at that early experience of drawing I see that I am still working in a similar manner. My technique of drawing is still to first cover the paper completely with vine charcoal. From that ground I build up with compressed charcoal sticks and pencils and then subtract with a gum and pink pearl eraser. This way of working gives me the sensation of carving or sculpting into the paper. When working on sheets of paper covered with gesso, I get this

sensation even more strongly because of being able to sand away areas and scratch into the chalky surface of the gessoed paper.

In my finished drawings I avoid areas of flat value. What I mean by flat value is an area of value that is created by using the side of a stick of compressed or vine charcoal, so that no lines are present. What I like to do is create value by building up lines or marks with a charcoal pencil or a tip of a stick of compressed charcoal. In this way the marks and lines create an energy different from that of flat value areas.

The marks I use in my drawing could be described as sometimes aggressive and almost violent, but they have a very natural feel to me. The marks appear very angular or geometric and are applied almost in a stabbing or slashing manner. As value areas are developed the violent appearance of the marks on the paper is modified to an overall energized surface. For me, painting on canvas has never been as satisfying as drawing, but occasionally in painting I have come close to the quality in my drawings. One of these times was with the painting that followed the self-portrait in motion.

About this time I took a course with Craig Cheshire to better understand color. He set up problems for me and palettes to use. Never before had I taken time to understand color and how to choose a palette. I painted

still lifes under controlled lighting so the painting process could be understood more clearly. Limited palettes such as viridian green, Mars violet and yellow ochre forced me to find intelligent equivalents within the palette for the wider range of color in the actual still life. We discussed the use of warms and cools and how they affect the light and shadow areas. This exploration of color helped me feel more confident about painting.

In the next painting I started with the general subject of the mystery of existence in mind (Figure 3). The painting is of myself seated on a green chair with an orange background. In an attempt to create the appearance of introspection and inquiry, I used dramatic lighting on the face. Light is received on both sides of the face, and a dark amber appears on the center of the forehead, suggestive of a smoldering fire or a storm cloud. I wanted to imply the psychological part of our human make-up that deals with the question of the meaning of one's existence, a question that we all encounter in our lives.

In addition to a more deliberate attempt to focus on the idea of the mystery of existence, I believe this painting was a technical breakthrough because I dealt with paint much more loosely than I had in the past. The self-portrait in motion also has this loose quality, but I believe that is because it is on paper. I feel drawings on paper are less intimidating because they are more





Figure 3. Self-portrait on green chair

disposeable if not successful. The figure in a chair was on canvas and that inhibited me. I got around this problem by introducing drawing into the painting. Soaking vine charcoal in linseed oil allowed the charcoal to adhere to the oil paint so I could draw into the painting with a tool I was comfortable using. Another way of introducing a sense of the drawing process was to prevent myself from tightening up on the application of paint. I left the gestural brush marks, drips of paint, and scumbling as part of the finished piece.

This painting also made me aware of the strength of a symmetrical composition. It was a way of creating a more direct confrontation with the viewer. Also, rather than having the viewer's attention divided between the figure and other objects in the composition, I painted no distracting objects in the space around the figure. All the viewer is presented with is the central image of the portrait.

Similar to the seated self-portrait painting is the charcoal self-portrait (Figure 4). The figure is alone in a frontal, symmetrical arrangement. It is presented to the viewer to be scrutinized and understood as an individual, one with his own unique way of looking at life and all that exists around him. In an attempt to convey this to the viewer, I drew the figure large. The self-portrait touches all four sides of the paper and even extends beyond to

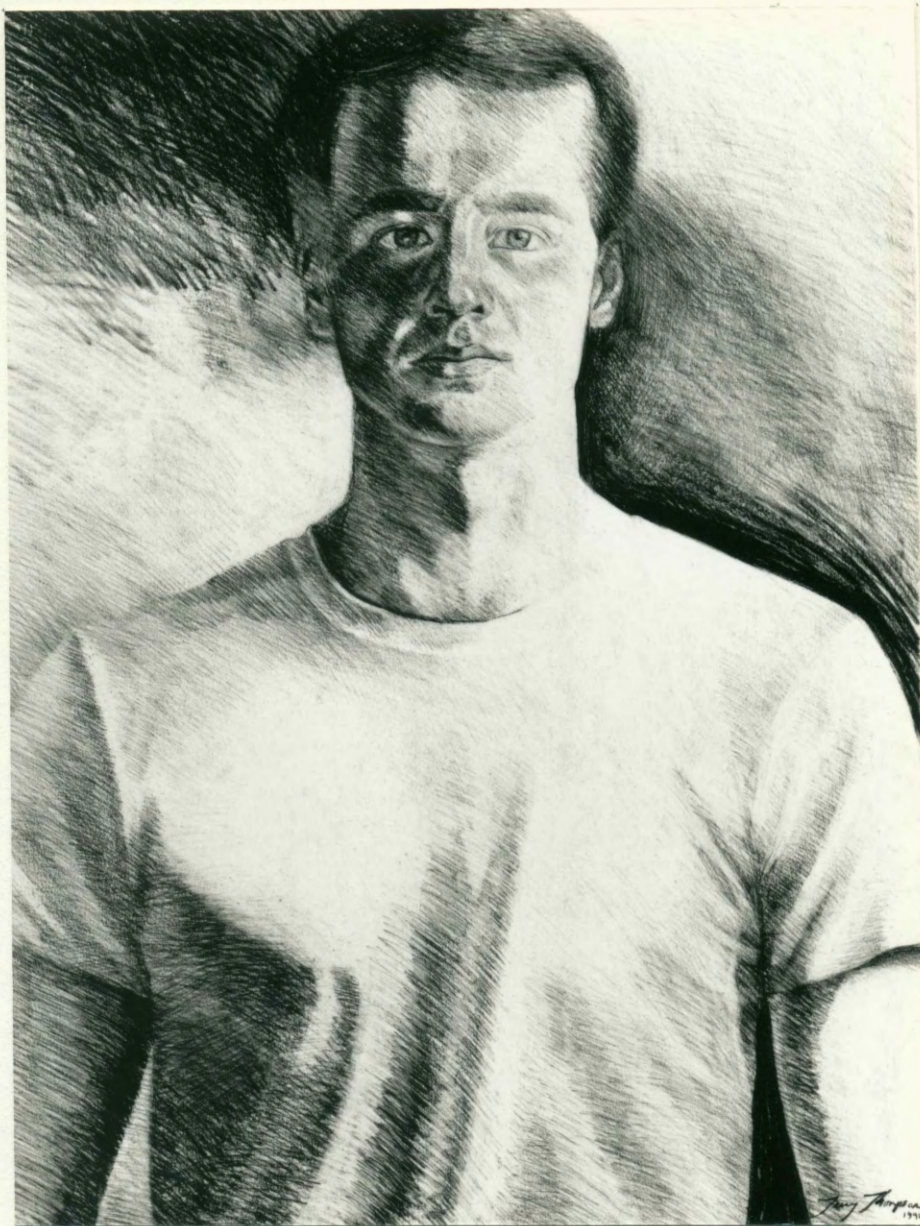


Figure 4. Self-portrait in white T-shirt

CRANE'S CREST

heighten its monumental quality. Another device I used in this painting is dramatic lighting across the face and body. Some lines and sections of value were eliminated because of this strong lighting. These undefined areas were intended to force the viewer to become more involved in completing the image in the drawing. Examples of this are the eyes that do not have a continuous crisp line around them, but rather only a few areas intensified with line. Another area is the section of neck that meets the white T-shirt. Along most of the shirt's collar there is a clear distinction of where the shirt ends and the neck begins, except for one section. This was accomplished by placing dramatic light on the shirt and skin so that both are left the white of the paper.

The next theme that I was drawn to was the mystery of religion. Images such as Christ's descent from the cross, the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, and the Crucifixion make up this group. The scenes that show suffering and death were chosen because of their relationship to the deaths of my mother and grandmother. These two women impressed me greatly throughout their lives with their Christian faith, and their deaths caused me to question the reason why committed Christians must suffer and die. To better understand the reason for this I searched for Christian figures, biblical and non-biblical, who had suffered. I used images of saints and even Christ Himself to help me

cope with the loss of these two loved ones. After contemplating the deaths of other Christians who had also suffered before dying I was able to better understand that suffering and death must be part of all our lives.

I try to suggest a religious aura in these pieces through composition, lighting and the presence of objects. For example, Saint Sebastian in the woods (Figure 5), is like many of my self-portraits: the figure is centrally placed. Furthermore Saint Sebastian is placed in the upper half of the composition. This gives the viewer the sense of gazing upward at the image, which adds to its feeling of monumentality and importance. I wished the figure to appear swelling with a spiritual strength that comes from within. The lighting from above suggests the watchful presence of God, as is traditional in religious art. The arrows entering the figure's body suggest the fear and mystery of death. The elements such as lighting and composition are intended to suggest the mystery of the supernatural. The thicket of trees and shadows repeats the sharp spiked shapes of the arrows and helps create a threatening, nightmarish effect over which the spirit ultimately triumphs. This nightmarish effect was to be an analogy of suffering.

The last theme is the mystery of the unknown. For me this theme is best represented by a featureless, dark figure. I believe every individual at some time or another



Figure 5. Saint Sebastian in the woods

CRANECASTLE CREST

has experienced the fear of being awakened at night by an intruder standing in his darkened room. I believe one of the major reasons for this fear is the inability to see the intruder's face, thus the intruder is an unknown. The unknown for most people elicits anxiety, even terror. The dark figures I have drawn were influenced by the prints and drawings of the nineteenth-century German artist, Kathe Kolwitz. Kathe Kolwitz's work often consists of themes such as death, violence and injustice and the images she uses to evoke these themes often consist of dark figures. I have been aware of her art since I was a child, and I now see in my drawings of dark figures a close relationship to this artist's images. Mystery, which my dark figures personify, is also very much present in Kathe Kolwitz's work. I can see now that my early awareness of her work inspired a large part of my desire to deal with mystery during these past two years.

The drawing of the dark figure with a dog (Figure 6) deals with this theme: the mystery of the unknown. The figure is centrally placed and is large enough so that the top part of his head and lower part of his legs are cropped. This was done to create a monumental and powerful figure that would aggressively confront the viewer. The head and body turned frontally augments the possible psychological relationship between viewer and figure. I aimed to create a ghost-like quality for the image by using



Figure 6. Dark figure with dog



gestural lines that repeat the form of the figure. I also erased into areas of the body and drew forms and shapes in the interior of the figure to make him semi-transparent. A dark edge around the picture allows the light existing near the figure to appear as an aura. All this was done in an attempt to create visually the mystery of the unknown.

## CONCLUSION

In all the drawings and paintings that make up this thesis project, it was my intention to search for expression of my sense of the mystery of human life. The three topics that I have chosen to work with, the mystery of self, religion, and the unknown, are ideas that are most important to me at this time of my life. I believe it will always be my intention to explore these subjects.