

1969

# Social Comment as a Phase in the Development of a More Personal Expression in Oil Painting

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SOCIAL COMMENT AS A PHASE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MORE  
PERSONAL EXPRESSION IN OIL PAINTING

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate Faculty  
Central Washington State College

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Art

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by  
ISAAH JAMES BOODHOO

June, 1969.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful appreciation is offered to the thesis committee for their invaluable assistance in the preparation and development of this study.

To Dr. Louis A. Kollmeyer, Dr. Richard Doi and Mr. William V. Dunning I offer thanks.

My special gratitude is extended to Mr. William V. Dunning for his advice and tutelage and to Dr. Louis A. Kollmeyer who made the entire experience possible.

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"There is only one man in the world  
and his name is All Men.  
There is only one woman in the world and  
her name is All Women.  
There is only one child in the world  
and the child's name is All Children."

Carl Sandburg.

"Many a man has a bonfire in his heart and nobody  
comes to warm himself at it. The passers-by notice  
only a little smoke from the chimney, and go their  
way. . ."

Vincent Van Gogh (July, 1880)



## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM AND THE DEFINITIONS OF THE TERMS USED

Art is expression. It is a means by which man comes to terms with himself and the world. It helps him to define himself in terms of matter and idea. His personal aims of expression might be magical, didactic, emotional, or indefinable, but whatever it is, he is constantly seeking methods of expressing his inner life and reactions to the sensory phenomena through the medium of words, sound, movement and creations of a plastic nature.

Art is communication. It is a clarification of one's thoughts, concepts and emotions. It is, in a manner of speaking, a form of soliloquy for it is the process of giving external form to intellectualization or, as Paul Valery states, it is the giving rise "to discussion, if only between the mind and itself."

Art has never been an attempt to grasp reality as a whole, it is not even an attempt to represent the totality of appearance; rather it has been the piece-meal recognition and patient fixation of what is significant in human experience motivated by an intense drive to manipulate and re-fashion his world.

In the field of painting, art has gone through many stages - stylization, realism, abstraction. Some of these not only existed simultaneously, but were practiced by the

same artist as is evidenced in the work of the prehistoric cave artist who drew stylized human forms but naturalistic animals.

Painting has gone through various styles with various purposes utilizing different media and techniques developing these through experimentation and innovation. It has not been in the nature of an evolution moving from lower to higher forms of expression but has merely broadened the realm and the sources.

There has always been motive in art - whether it has been ritualistic, propagandistic or merely art as art, existing for and by itself. And all its motives have been valid. It is perfectly justifiable for the artist to concern himself with whatever form or manner he chooses and it is not incompatible to have these manners of expression existing side by side.

Because of the existence of the motive factor this candidate feels that painting as social comment is not only legitimate but vital and necessary in this world of paradoxes; of unprecedented inhumanity as well as tremendous concern for human welfare; of fantastic powers of creation as well as the power of total annihilation; of wealth in proportions hitherto unknown and of poverty that makes the possession of such wealth obscene.

There are some men who can, as it were, isolate themselves from the world and work at their particular problems. There are artists who can be solely concerned with technical aspects of painting or sculpture- with the negation or creation of space or with evoking the senses in some particular way - with art as an end in itself. This candidate envies those men since he is one of those who are totally involved and cannot separate himself from the world and its social injustices, inhumanity and posturing.

For the purpose of this study the candidate has chosen subjects that are topical yet have some universal meaning. He has tried to take an apolitical stand and has drawn his sources from news items, magazine and newspaper illustrations and from his own experience, having spent his life time in a colonial society and in under-developed countries.

The paintings will be primarily two-dimensional, that is, there will no be attempt at incorporating three dimensional objects in the paintings in the manner of Rauschenberg collages or the sculptural "paintings" (or painted sculpture) of some contemporary artists. They will be expressionistic utilizing various established technical elements peculiar to the use of the medium of oil paints such as line, space, form, colour and surface qualities.

## I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. The purpose of this study is (1) to examine the presence of social comment in painting from a historical point of view, (2) to support its validity as a theme in art, (3) to use this theme in the creation of a number of oil paintings, and (4) to develop through this means a more personal expression in painting.

Importance of the study. The artist exists in the climate of his profession as well as in the environment of the society in which he lives. His choice of artistic course is determined by both. He may pursue artistic problems from a purely technical standpoint or he may choose to make statements about society through artistic means. In any event, he arrives at independent conclusions as to the most functional and effective technical means of achieving his desired expression. This candidate believes that re-examination of one's goals is a periodic necessity and hopes that this study would improve his ability to achieve greater effectiveness of expression.

## II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Social Comment. Works of art that make statements on the condition of man and his attitude to his fellowmen with the intention of pointing out the poverty and suffering

and other effects caused by man's inhumanity, political oppression and economic exploitation. Through this it seeks to bring about a better society.

Social Realism. Painting usually from a politically liberal view-point. The movement goes back to Courbet. It is practiced by many contemporary artists such as Ben Shahn, the Ashcan School in the United States and John Bratby and the Kitchen Sink or New Realists of Britain.

Socialist Realism. The official art style of the U.S.S.R. and of the Communist Party generally. It is academic in the old tradition and is intended to express the aspiration of the peasant and the country and to glorify both. It seeks not to create new styles in art but a new society.

New Realism. It includes the Social Realism of the 20th Century, but more specifically refers to the very contemporary use of real and entire objects such as cars, plaster casts of living figures in real-life situations in art. The work of Edward Kienholz is an example of this type of art.

Plastic Elements. The characteristics that go to make a good painting: space, line form, colour, and surface qualities.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### I. INTRODUCTION

This study takes cognisance of the fact that social comment in art has been practised by artists of the past as well as those on the contemporary scene. Artists in many countries and for many centuries have used this theme to make statements, that, though centered on particular incidents in their own time and place contain universal application; that various media have been used both singly and in combination to render the statement more effective; and that not only the artists but the public have, by their acceptance, encouragement and practice justified the use of this theme.

Considering the volume of literature available on art, not much has been written on this aspect. Authors have concentrated on the historical development, styles and movements; the lives of artists, and analysis and criticism of art works. It was therefore necessary to do considerable research in order to find material relevant to the study.

Most of the books on art have been written during the last thirty years when there was the increasing tendency and involvement with abstraction. Allusion to content was considered more and more to be extraneous to the work and

not of much value. Critics following on the heels of the innovators extolled the most recent trends hailing the new-found freedom. Even the artists themselves in praise of this trend criticized such tendencies in other artists.

Jackson Pollock says:

". . . Shahn and Levine are. . . illustrators."

and: "With the Realists of today, nothing HAPPENS beyond the story they are telling. The surface is not alive. It is not TODAY." (13:82)

Adolph Gottlieb maintains that there will follow now a thousand years of non-representational painting."

"Representational painting," he says, serves no social function at all, has no utility value - as in times past." (13:91)

## THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the broadest sense, all works of art perform a social function since they are created for an audience. There are, however, narrower and more specific meanings for the social function of art than the fact of its being created for the ultimate acceptance of audiences. These relate to the kind of response effected by the works resulting from the direct intention of the artist. Art concerned with social comment aims at influencing the collective behaviour of people by expressing a view of a social or political character.

Because of the number of artists who have utilized this theme, it was decided, for the purpose of this study to limit the artists to a few of those whose work primarily reflected this quality.

Among such artists are Pieter Bruegel and Hieronymus Bosch, the former being the most gifted painter of his century in depicting the daily life of the Flemish peasants.

"A humanist, he regarded Art as a means of recording his study of man." (4:188)

"He was the most important satirist of the Netherlands after Bosch." (11:32)

"His 'Blind Leading the Blind' exemplifies the satirical approach superbly. An excellent social philosopher, not only with the bad elements of humanity, but the better side as well, as in 'The Wedding Dance.'" (3:558)



Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) was perhaps the greatest master of fantasy that ever lived. With "The Hay Wain" and "Ship of Fools" his theme seems to be that of "all flesh is grass". All mankind is shown to be in fond pursuit of its illusions in his sequence of incidents of daily life viewed by a mocking, ironical and critical eye. His was a nightmare world: a mad world of flying fish and walking angels, spikes, spines and arrows, swords, knives and daggers; malignant flowers, fiery thorns, broken eggs, flying fetuses, armour plated scorpions; hideously deformed men in lewd banquets. All is foundering in a cosmic shipwreck. (15:65)

Among the Spanish painters two stand out as having made forceful comments on war and human viciousness - Goya and Picasso. However, Picasso's most important contribution is "Guernica" which is considered by Edmund Burke Feldman to be the most monumental and celebrated work of social and political expression of our time. (4:47). Picasso's painting is a terrifying document of the devastation of human values and it shows his reaction of shock and personal pain at the bombing by General Franco's troops of the Spanish town of Guernica.

Francisco Goya (1746-1828) was a great painter, etcher and draughtsman who recorded in the tremendous series of etchings called "Los Caprichos", "Proverbs" and "The Disasters of War" the most scathing denunciations of man's

inhumanity, vanity, prejudice and self-degradation. "The Sleep of Reason," he wrote in an ink drawing of the same title, "produces monsters." One of his most dramatic paintings is of Napoleonic soldiers executing citizens of Madrid.

"When Francisco Goya painted "The Execution of the Madrilenos on May 3, 1808," he did not choose to record a battlefield scene. . . . His painting is a manifestation of partisanship, not as a Spaniard but as a human being protesting brutality and injustice." (4:275)

It was possible for Goya and even Picasso to think of war as a catastrophe which has individual consequences. Now, in an era which began with World War II, which saw the holocaust suffered by many cities culminating in the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the human mind has accommodated itself to the expressions of "overkill" and "first strike capabilities" made by the military, implying the death of fifty to eighty million casualties in a day! This, no doubt has led to the use of an abstract and dehumanized form-language by artists to cope with modern modes of obliteration.

At the cost of personal imprisonment and the official prohibition of his political caricatures Honore Daumier (1808-1879) was the most outspoken critic of the French State. In fact, he was imprisoned in 1832 for representing

King Louis Philippe as Gargantua. With his thousands of drawings, prints and paintings taken from daily life, Daumier is one of the first artists for whom the attitude "one must be of one's time" became a life-long ideal. His lithograph "Rue Transnonian" (April 15, 1834) is a stark disclosure of the murder of a worker and his family by government troops in retaliation for labour's defiance of the state.

Historically the religion of humanity comes closest to explicit realization in the art of the last century.

Daumier was in close touch with the social and political ferment produced by the rapid development of an urban industrial civilization. His keen insight, coupled with his sympathy for human beings, was constantly expressed in his work. One of his most powerful paintings of the social scene is "The Third Class Carriage."

Satire is an art form with a definite slant. In extreme forms it serves as an excoriating denunciation of human vices and evils. It expresses, in the most part, a negative report on human conduct. Yet satire aims at constructive criticism and improvement, not through kindly persuasion, but through a bludgeoning of people to mend their ways. Because it involves exaggeration, it is usually seen in lesser light than paintings of beauty, for while beauty titillates and pleases, truth hurts.

The satirist expresses disappointment when faced with poor performance especially in the face of the high standards of human potential. What disgusts him is that the performance is poorer than necessary.

"His commonest complaints are against the dearth of goodwill, intelligence or even commonsense in human affairs, He cries out against malevolence, muddling, sloth and downright stupidity."  
(2:558)

The outstanding satirists in the history of art have been relatively few - Bosch, Bruegel, Hogarth, Daumier and a few lesser men. In our own century George Rouault and George Grosz have been prominent. The coarse, heavily textured surface of Rouault's paintings gives emphasis to his savage characterizations.

Satire is significantly absent in the art of Egypt and Asia and in primitive art. Its heyday coincided with the period of political ferment that started with the Renaissance and gradually produced modern democracy. The perfect satire stresses not only the incident or character in a certain context having relevance only to a given time and place, but are non-political and treat, instead, the broader human failings that seem to be part of human nature with a significance applicable to all time.

The perfect medium for satire seems to be the mass media - newspapers and magazines with the cartoon and caricature being the best means of expression. The political

satirist at his best is shown in a cartoon by David Low of England entitled "The Angels of Peace Descend on Belgium". It deals with the German Gestapo or secret police which followed the Nazi armies into conquered countries organizing looting and extermination of resistance leaders. Among the most accomplished and effective social satirists in this vein today are Jules Feiffer and Al Capp of the United States, the former being the more subtle.

Today, the political and social comment cartoon is part of thousands of newspapers and magazines throughout the world and the numerous practitioners of this art-form have made this medium of expression so effective that it has blunted the edge of such designs in the field of painting.

Among the most powerful social commentators of this century are the Mexican painters Diego Rivera, Jose Orozco and David Siqueiros whose work has been, in the political sense, frankly revolutionary.

Dr. Atl believes that the impetus for this evolution began in the Autumn of 1910 when he organized an exhibition in honour of the centenary of Mexican Independence. Political revolution broke out in November that year - a theme which has been in the centre of Mexican art culminating in the declaration of a social and political manifesto by artists such as Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. It was based on a socialistic concept and sought to go beyond the normal

functions of art to the marshalling of the people to overthrow an inhuman system of exploitation by foreign capitalists which had gone on for centuries.

MacKinley Helm, in his book "Modern Mexican Painters", includes part of this manifesto which reads:

"We repudiate the so-called easel art . . . for it is essentially aristocratic, and hail the monumental expression of art because art is public property." (8:32)

They sought to socialize artistic expression and to destroy bourgeois individualism. Their paintings, many of which are in mural form and of gigantic proportions, deal with themes like the poverty-stricken conditions of the Mexican masses, the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish invaders, and the exploitation of peasants by avaricious landowners. Besides the political and propagandistic paintings there were those which dealt with human suffering as the dominant theme. "Echo of a Scream" by Siqueiros is a striking and deeply emotional work expressing the idea of poverty and deprivation. A screaming child is depicted in a deserted, industrial wasteland with an overpowering echo of the agonized face repeated for emphasis.

A particular caustic social comment is evident in Orozco's "Gods of the Modern World" in which an almost completely dissected corpse is shown surrounded by skeletal academics who are observing the birth of an infant skeleton.

It is a comment on education in the university which seems mostly to be concerned with what the philosopher A. N. Whitehead called "inert knowledge".

The art of Diego Rivera is as equally committed as Orozco's to Marxist philosophy but as Edmund Burke Feldman says in "Art as Image and Idea":

"He is perhaps the best designer and artistically the most sophisticated of the Mexican artistic 'troika'." (4:41)

Rivera is, though, too propagandistic and direct in his approach, lacking an obliqueness and subtlety, as is evidenced in his painting "Night of the Rich and Night of the Poor".

While these artists were protesting the capitalist system hoping to achieve a kind of idealistic socialism there was being firmly established in Russia a more practical socialism, which, in the field of art as in other fields, exerted a firm control over the population, the motive being a betterment of the human condition. Having rid itself of the predatory system of capitalism the country began, in the face of tremendous pressure from enemies of the new system who would like to see a reversal to the "free enterprise" system, to build itself anew.

Because there was a need for a total drive in every facet of activity, the declared policy in art was that of Socialist Realism and is not to be confused with social

realism or with social comment. This tendency has been unequivocally condemned by artists and critics foreign to the philosophy of socialism. The artist of the socialist society, in the majority of cases, willingly suppresses his inclination to go his own way and subdues his individuality for the achievement of a greater goal shared by all.

Robert Kudielka, in an article in "Studio International" published in September, 1968, states the Marxist standpoint thus:

"Abstract art demonstrates the moral indifference of the capitalist society." (6:64)

He further condemns "the commerciality of exhibitions" and states:

". . .the capitalist system needs the cultural affirmation of art exhibitions. . ." (6:63)

The socialist standpoint, he says, views with disdain

". . .the accumulation of art as capital investment and objects of speculation. . ." (6:63)

However, such official direction of art is reminiscent of Nazi Germany and, as was evident in the exhibition of Russian art seen in London in 1960, a certain excitement seemed to be lacking in the works as a whole.

The various movements of art in recent times cannot be dismissed as having no social value. Some of them,



especially Op art and Minimal art, are not concerned with content but it is evident that today, more than ever, artists are at the forefront in making statements relevant to the time. No longer is social comment relegated to a minority. Along with works of an exploratory and artistically creative nature, seeking new concepts and new means of expression, today's artist is deeply involved in social issues.

The Pop Artists have made vital statements concerning the preoccupation of people with the mundane. Like The Dadaists before them, the prevailing theme is nonmeaning, the absurd, or anti-art. But the choice of poster fragments, of banal or sentimental photographs, and of material from the world of display provides some indication of the ideological realm in which the work dwells: it is imbued with a fascination and disgust with the visual environment, particularly as it is manifested in hard-sell advertising, packaging, labels, trade-marks and other of the more obtrusive paraphernalia of today's culture. As Edmund Burke Feldman says:

"An enormous slice of pie by Claes Oldenburg; a magnified comic strip by Roy Lichtenstein; a bread and catsup ad by Tom Wesselmann - these drive home with all the subtlety of a hard-sell radio commercial the blatancy of our visual environment."  
(4:336)

Alan Solomon, in his article "The New Art" in a book of the same title edited by Gregory Battcock describes the attitude of the new artist:

"Contemporary man sees himself in his art, not as an idealized god-like figure, in the manner of the classical tradition, but as a disrupted, contorted victim of the modern cataclysm, torn by forces of a magnitude beyond his comprehension, a grim figure, full of despair and anguish, entirely without hope." (1:68)

The matter is still the human condition. The work may be of paint, collage, assemblage; it may be two-dimensional, three-dimensional or a combination of both; it may be created from established art materials or it may be merely the exhibiting of one single manufactured object. It is still creating a confrontation of viewer and object.

The objectives of art have not changed, they have merely been broadened. So have the boundaries. Nothing is too sacred, nothing is spared. Of his "Washington Crossing the Delaware" Larry Rivers says:

"I wanted to take something corny, something which had become, through familiarity, slightly ridiculous, and imbue it with life." (13:119)

This is exactly what Jasper Johns does with his "Flag". All the emotional and sentimental associations normally accompanying the Stars and Stripes are purged from it and the flag is depicted for what it is in shape, form and colour.

# THE INVESTIGATION AND THE RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

## I. MATERIALS USED

The medium used in this investigation consisted of artists' oil paints of standard quality. The ground is of canvas treated with at least two coats of gesso, the number of coats being determined by the quality of "sealing" and non-absorbency achieved.

To effect the proper drying process and in order to achieve fluidity and a retention of the fresh quality of the oil pigment, a mixture of equal parts of linseed oil, copal varnish and turpentine was used.

The shapes and sizes of the canvases depended upon the dimensions and proportions of the sketches and the desired effect. In some cases the theme, and the way in which it was proposed to be handled, necessitated the use of a large canvas.

## II. THE INVESTIGATION

At the point in which this investigation began, a position had been reached by the candidate where every painting seemed to have a certain quality that came with easy facility. They were mainly abstract and semi-abstract and somewhat tight in composition and fairly rigid in execution; too self-conscious and laboured, lacking in a certain freedom and fluidity. They were inspired by the landscape in the northern part of Trinidad, West Indies - thickly wooded mountains scarred by geometric shapes where the land had been cleared for cultivation; sugar-cane fields that intersected in perfect rectangles that changed from green to grey to brown then to the reddish earth after reaping; and paintings of human figures - especially women - with the emphasis on the interplay of forms.

There was a growing desire for a new direction and it was thought that the impetus for this might come from a change in the environment. The United States was chosen because there never had been an opportunity to see American art at first hand; furthermore, there seemed to be existing in that country a certain self-generating atmosphere in the arts which was evident in the American art magazines.

A deep involvement in social and political issues had hitherto found outlets in writing which was a catharsis that seemed sufficient. In only one or two paintings did this concern manifest itself.

On arrival in the United States there was a period of emotional adjustment caused by the moving into a society that was in many ways different to the home country. This was not ameliorated by the atmosphere of unreality that seemed to permeate life here. The strangest paradoxes existed. The prevailing ideas of the world outside its borders and the misconceptions that had developed in the face of the mightiest array of information media was most disconcerting.

Concepts of freedom, democracy, foreign aid, and subversion were limited to a uniquely American connotation. Expressions like "communist aggression", "Viet Cong (or Arab or Castroite) terrorists", "the Free World", "the Chinese Threat" and "The American Way of Life" were being freely used and seemed to have a special meaning. These were being kept alive by the popular news and entertainment media, and periodicals such as "Time", "Newsweek", and "The Reader's Digest".

Every day war reports came from Viet Nam with their gruesome body counts - the number of the "enemy" dead and the "allied" casualties; the number of bombing "missions" and the tonnage of bombs dropped. The television network showed pictures of the bodies and the fighting and the destruction while in the newspapers there were periodic protests at the violence portrayed on fictitious television

programs. Student "violence" and black agitation were viewed with horror in many quarters.

To a native of a small country where one billion dollars represent its national budget for six years and could transform it into a paradise overnight, it was disappointing to discover that the war in Viet Nam swallowed this sum every two weeks!

Arrival in the United States coincided with the race for the presidency. With its bunting, banners and buttons it seemed as unreal as any Hollywood epic. The platforms skirted every major issue of the day and the candidates concentrated on meaningless rhetoric. A man who was rejected as governor of a state became the president of the most powerful state in the world.

Waves of dissent rose and fell. It was tolerated only if it did not upset the very thing at which it was aimed.

Some of the young people and intellectuals, concerned with human problems, expressed desires to make the world better, not in the image and likeness of the United States, but according to the aspirations of its many peoples.

The experience of growing up in a colonial society such as the West Indies, being fed from birth on rightful respect and adulation of the colonizing "Mother Country" and the denigration of one's own ethnic background and culture, can only breed rebelliousness in the sensitive.

In "Visual Arts Today" edited by Georgy Kepes, the writer states the problem thus:

"Industrial civilization has propagated conditions that poison not only the body but the spirit of man. We are justifiably alarmed about the dangers of radiation fallout. But the smoke, the dirt, the meagerness of the space in which men are forced to live, the lack of colour and light, the corrosion of the best qualities of man's creative work - these are a fallout at least as dangerous." (9:8)

"We worry very little about mitigating the boredom of repetitive work - a killer of the spirit. We make no move toward arresting the waste of creative energies devoted to inane gestures or toward restoring the fading courage of man amid his progressive isolation. For the tragedy of democracy is the chaos of communication; the three-hundred-ring commercial circus of advertising, public relations, slick magazines, and fatuous entertainment. To most people ideas and values are imparted by middlemen whose objectives are crassly narrow and nonsocial. Our sensibilities have been so starved as to have become in general untrustworthy. Some of the discourse in these pages would have been obviated if the contemporary scene were not so vast, noisy, confused, and contradictory, and also if its values were accessible, if we could all cope with its tangle of communications, uncompromised by exposure to the sights and sounds of a crudely commercial civilization." (9:8)

In such an atmosphere there is no escape from the personal feeling that, as far as one's work was concerned, it should not exist merely to entertain and gratify the

senses but must seek to edify. So long as there are political and social injustices that require change, some art must participate through visual education and persuasion in the development of popular attitudes which can lead to a better society. It is man who is enduring, not nations - for nations are a temporary phenomena.

The problem then, as far as the artist is concerned, and pursued as a purpose of this study, is how to translate this feeling of concern and involvement into plastic form that would not appear trite, superficial and sentimental. It would be futile to paint allegories in the socialist realist manner. It was necessary to find the right mode that would follow in the natural style of one's development for, as Joseph Glasco says:

"With or without subject matter the problem is the same - plastic relations." (13:112)

It was also necessary to move from semi-abstract and abstract work to a more defined content, for social content as a theme in painting requires a certain element of visual realism. But there was a subconscious desire to avoid more superficial representation.

The first few paintings were merely attempts to break away from the self-conscious, arbitrary shapes which had occurred so naturally in previous work. Large canvases were used with the paint applied in a fluid manner with out-sized



brushes. There was a deliberate attempt to avoid the use of all conscious references to form. Then came the approach towards content in an abstract expressionistic way.

The new direction developed slowly at first and the initial breakthrough came from a drawing that was inspired by the presidential elections. It was a large painting of a politician and was successful in concept but lacking in definition and colour. Then followed a series dealing with death; three pictures of dead heroes - not heroes in the national sense but in an all-encompassing human sense. The reluctance to define content was ever present but was being gradually overcome.

An experiment with "hard edge" followed, the purpose being to do one painting with content as the main aim. This was a painting of President Nixon in his favorite victory pose and was successful for the most part, especially in the scope this method of painting has for depicting symbolism. But this style did not bring complete satisfaction. It seemed too abrupt and foreign. A series of mothers and children followed.

At one point it was felt that some drawings should be included as the methods of this media are so varied and the sources numerous. Furthermore, some good drawings were appearing - drawings of mixed media utilizing graphite, oil-pastels, turpentine, photograph transfers and collages.

However, it was decided to continue in oil painting for that was where the problem lay.

The critical examination of the work that follows, in the order of its development would point more clearly the direction taken by the study and the attempt at resolving the problem.



FIGURE I  
"LANDSCAPE FORMS"

This painting, (Figure I) measuring 28 inches by 22 inches was done in April 1968. It was included to show the

point that was reached in painting prior to this investigation. It is very decorative in character and points forcibly to the development that had taken place by the end of the study.

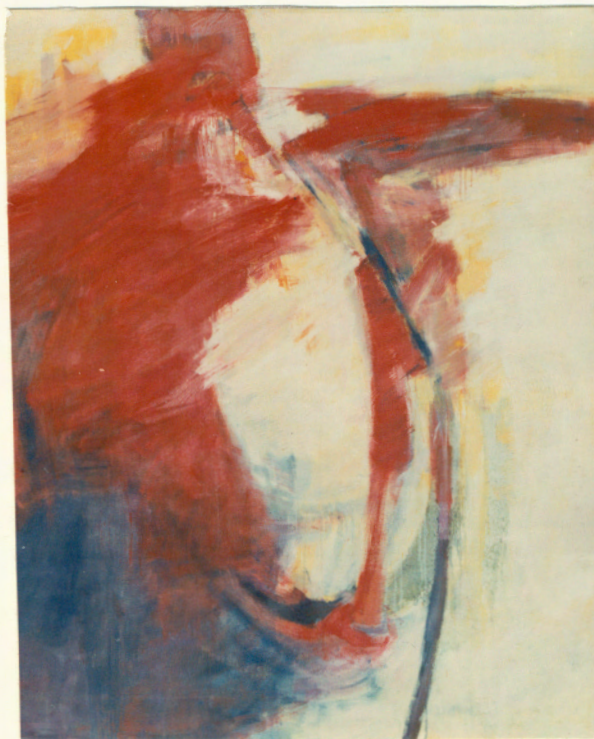


FIGURE 2

"THE POLITICIAN"

This painting (Figure 2) measures 69 inches by  $56\frac{1}{2}$  inches and was completed in November, 1968. It attempts to portray the politician in a typical flamboyant gesture. He is shown as fat and dissolving as a symbol of decay. The size of the canvas was of such dimensions as to capture the "larger-than-life" quality that such men aspire to.

In attempting to avoid self-conscious shapes and achieve a more expressionistic style there is present a lack of sufficient definition.

The second painting in this study, measuring 34 inches by 24 inches, is based on the death of Che Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary, which was allegedly engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency and Bolivian troops in Bolivia. It was completed in December, 1968 and is entitled "Death of a Hero" (Figure 3).

The body of the dead guerrilla occupies the greater area of the picture and is treated as landscape signifying an association of the revolutionary and the land.



FIGURE 3

"DEATH OF THE HERO- 1."

There was an attempt at monumentality in a small painting. The result was fairly successful.

Measuring 40 inches by 32 inches "Death of a Hero- 2" (Figure 4) was finished at the same time as the previous painting in December, 1968 and is of a dead Vietnamese guerilla. The technique is the same with the symbolic cold-hot contrast in colour and the dead figure as landscape.

In this effort, as in the previous one, there was an attempt to put more control into the painting as a remedy against the all too vague "Politician". The result was a bit tight but the overall effect was one of a certain calmness in the tragedy. In both paintings the topic required a much larger canvas. Anything attempting to portray a hero should be, to some degree, monumental in scope.



FIGURE 4

"DEATH OF A HERO"- 11.



FIGURE 5 (DETAIL OF FIGURE 4)

Based on the murder of Robert Kennedy, the third in the Death of a Hero series "Who is the Slayer and Who the Victim?" (Figure 6) measures 54 inches by 46½ inches. It was completed January, 1969.

More violent and dramatic in concept, it depicts a twisted, lying figure clutching the throat while an Arab-type figure stands symbolically in red. In this painting a closer interaction between content and abstract expressionist style was accomplished.

The next painting measures 34 inches by 26 inches and is of two children at play. It is entitled "To Reach for the Moon" (Figure 7) and was done in January, 1969. It symbolizes the idealism of youth.



FIGURE 6

"WHO IS THE SLAYER AND WHO THE VICTIM?"

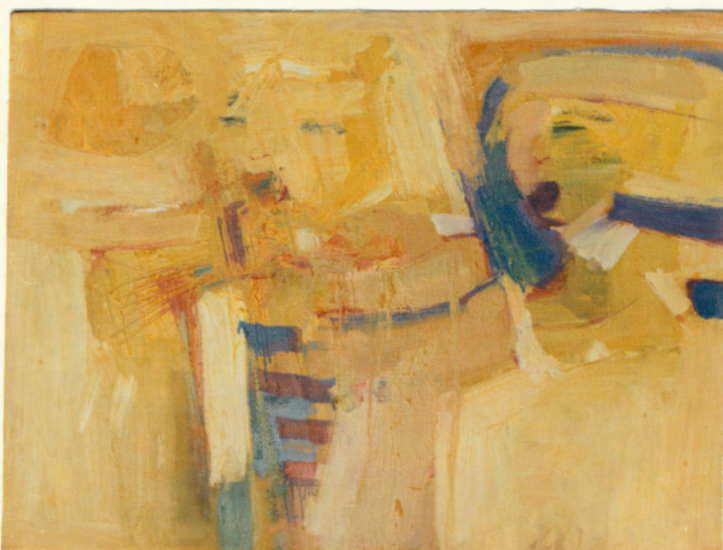


FIGURE 7

"TO REACH FOR THE MOON"

Figure 8 is a painting of two nudes and is entitled "Two Women". It measures 46 inches by 32 inches and was done in January, 1969. It came as a result of a drawing and shows the desire to paint subjects unrelated to the theme although it has undertones of lesbianism.



FIGURE 8  
"TWO WOMEN"

"Flesh of my Flesh" (Figure 9) is the first in the Mother and Child series and is based on the universality of motherhood and the theme of overpopulation among the poor. It was completed in January, 1969 and measures 39½ by 35 inches.





FIGURE 9

"FLESH OF MY FLESH"



FIGURE 10

DETAIL OF FIGURE 9

Figure 11 is entitled "The Victor and the Vanquished" and measures  $58\frac{1}{2}$  inches by 50 inches. This was the first experiment at "hard-edge" painting. The subject was arrived at by a collage of photographs from "Time", "Ramparts" and "Life" magazines.

It is filled with symbolism, most of which might be apparent. The colours are sombre, for the most part, and seem to belie the gesture of victory.



FIGURE 11

"THE VICTOR AND THE VANQUISHED"

The curve on the left could be part of the arch of a church or a bomb; the cerulean shadow behind the President's head contains the silhouette of an Indian with his left hand,

that is also the President's left, making a "peace" sign. The shapes in the lower portion of the picture are of negro heads. The Nixon girl contains the shape of a protestor while the red in the drapery of national colours forms part of a sun the brightest part of which is already set. The inclusion of the protestor seems forced and trite and could have been more subtly conceived.

The experiment was satisfying to some extent as well as useful. It certainly would not be the last in this vein.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

### I. SUMMARY

"In serving his vision of truth the  
artist best serves his country."  
John F. Kennedy. Amherst College.  
October, 1963.

At the outset of this investigation the candidate was well aware of the work of past and present painters engaged in social commentary, as well as the various media and methods used in the execution. It was not the intention merely to travel imitatively along these roads but to try to achieve a more personal expression.

There was an understanding of the term Social Comment in painting but a full comprehension of its potential as a theme became greater as the study progressed. On the other hand there was the occasional and natural desire to paint for the sake of painting. This was due to the increasing exposure to statements by both artists and critics of the contemporary scene to pursue art for art's sake. But it was felt that both purposes could be pursued simultaneously although it meant an avoidance of total involvement in the chosen theme.

However, this study was meant to be a phase in the candidate's development and as such there is a feeling that a certain measure of success has been achieved.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The objective being limited to the development of a particular attitude toward painting through an involvement in a specific theme, the problem is solved. However, there is no absolute solution, for the artist is continuously seeking out new problems which seem to arise even from the solution of each problem. His goals are forever like mirages, for even while attempting attainment of one he sets himself other goals which, in turn, never fully satisfy him upon achievement except for a brief instant; for self-satisfaction is his nemesis. His faculties for criticism are always ahead of his achievement and so his quest goes on.

A direction for further study, experimentation and expression has already been determined as a result of this study. An awareness of the techniques of oil painting had already been achieved through a thorough academic background in the subject but much has been learned by the experience of study and painting in the United States. A more meaningful relationship has developed between drawing and painting and the superficial, self-conscious quality of previous work has been replaced by a greater personal expression.

This candidate has found sufficient evidence to support his attitude toward painting. Many writers and artists have validated his theme. There was great satisfaction in seeing the development in the painting style and in finding a greater relationship between his ideas and his work.

The new direction has been set and will lead to further exploration of abstract expressionism and "new-realism" with the inclusion of collages and paint. The desired impetus has been found and there has been a degree of excitement generated toward the continuation of the theme.

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