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Airbrush and the Abstract Image

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AIRBRUSH AND THE ABSTRACT IMAGE

by

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B.E.S., St. Cloud State University, 1981

Creative Work

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

St. Cloud, Minnesota

November, 1982

This creative work submitted by TyRuben Ellingson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree Master of Arts at St. Cloud State University is hereby approved by the final evaluation committee.

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School of Graduate Studies

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AIRBRUSH AND THE ABSTRACT IMAGE

The ambition to become an artist is something I have lived with my entire life. My earliest reasons for drawing sprang from my interest in representing the things around me and the ideas and images I thought of in my head. It was always important to me, no matter what subject I chose, that my drawings were an accurate representation of reality. I took much care in modeling them as they would appear if I had them in front of me. Proper perspective and dimension pleased me, so I strove to achieve it. Though I was exposed to much non-representational art at a young age, I was most impressed with work that showed a high level of proficiency in fooling the eye.

The images I adopted to represent on paper as a young child were very whimsical and varied from Batman to my younger brother. My father, who instructed me, showed equal interest in either image, so what I learned about tone, perspective, and rendering from real life, I also applied to the fantasy realities I created.

In about 1967 my subject matter made a definite shift, a change that has affected my image even up to today. Through a number of show catalogues and a small lithograph, I was introduced to the work of Robert Nelson. Nelson's work exemplified everything that interested me most about art. The imagery was mostly people and animals, but they were treated in a fantastic, fantasy way. His drawings contained Buck Rogers and other space themes with exaggerated features, mechanical devices and whimsical encounters. The technical expertise of the work was very

exciting to me. The drawings contained the full range of tone from very light to full black (something my drawings lacked). Letters, cut outs, photos, and many drafting techniques were also adapted in the drawings. I immediately began using the same things in my own work. Although I would eventually give up much of the fantastic, fanciful subject matter, I have retained many of the techniques.

My interest in the reality around me began to override my more unconventional subjects when I reached high school. I did a number of drawings from photographs and became more and more interested in capturing this kind of photoreal look. It was at this time that I was first introduced to the airbrush. I had seen it used for commercial use, (posters, album covers, race cars), but never in any fine art applications. After receiving an airbrush from my father, I began using it in my work. I would use many stencils and many colors, and then draw over them. I was excited for a while, but my lack of knowledge of how to use the tool led me to use it less and less. Near the end of my senior year in high school, my father and I were viewing a display at the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis, Minnesota where I saw a painting that totally changed my perspective about the airbrush. That painting, "Carol and the Paradise Wall" by Jerry Ott, executed entirely in the airbrush technique, exposed art as I had never seen it before. I immediately tried to imitate the realism this painting possessed. However, I became very frustrated because the technical skills were too far beyond my reach.

By chance, during my first year at St. Cloud State University,

Jerry Ott was invited to be a guest artist. I spent much of my time in his studio. At first he was rather stand-offish and reluctant to do much talking. This proved to be rather beneficial to me, though, because many of the students that came around to find out about the airbrush soon became bored and left. I just observed him and tried to understand his technique. After a time it became obvious to me that I had been using the airbrush in the wrong manner. My approach had been to use it as a large hammer, when in fact, it was to be used as a very sharp surgical tool.

After Jerry became more relaxed with my presence, He began to verbalize on some aspects of the airbrush that I was still not familiar with, and these filled the gaps of my observations. I set out with my new insight and tried to apply it. At this time, my foremost interest was to develop my skill with the airbrush, the subject was secondary. I started out simply adopting similar images to those Jerry was using, those being Playboy centerfolds. After I finished each painting I would take it to Jerry for his comments. Though his ideas about art would be very important to me later on, these initial critiques were mostly technical in nature.

As my skills with the airbrush became more refined, I began to be more selective with my imagery. Though my intent was still to fool the viewer into thinking the painting was a photograph, I began to combine images that I thought set up interesting comparisons together, those being painted collages. (Plate 1.) I also started to use the airbrush in a number of my assignments for other classes. This helped me to get a feel for the range of the tool.

The year that Jerry Ott had been at St. Cloud State University a video tape was made of him for the Learning Resource Center. He talked about his past, his work, and his ideas about art. In the interview he made a comment that I did not really take to heart until almost two years later. He stated that "The person who can come along and combine the slickness of the airbrush with the abstract thought would have the potential to do anything". So, in the fall of 1980 this became my goal. I started to experiment with many different medias and techniques, and also tried to compose the work so that it would convey an over-all cohesive message. I still maintained some photo-images, but simply tried to make them less important. Thus, they became merely a small part of the whole. "Awaken by Nightmares" was my first real success towards this goal. I chose the Vietnam War as my theme after being very much affected by the Francis Ford Coppola film, "Appocolypse Now". I searched out source material in old National Geographics, and formulated a composition. The idea of finding a theme and then finding images I think are interesting and that also reflect that particular theme is a method I continually use. However, if I come across a photo or image with a potential theme, I reverse this process. "Awaken by Nightmares" is an example of a theme I found images to fit. "Acetabulum", on the other hand, was executed around a photo rather than a theme. It was at this point that I finished my undergraduate work at St. Cloud State University.

At the start of my studies toward my Master of Arts Degree, my painting process had changed very little. My first paintings were very much like those I had done the year before. My first painting in

my Masters program, "Involuntary", was developed from the theme of the many things our bodies do with no continuous thought. The format was the collage look again, yet there were two basic differences. The first difference was a more complex use of shadows to cause the different elements to look more three dimensional, and the second was the use of fields of spiraling colored pencil. I used these differences in "A Delicate View" and "Green Pool" also.

After completing a number of works in my established manner, I desired to try something new. First, I enlarged my working surface. I worked on two, thirty by forty inch panels, about two inches apart. I wanted the two panels to work together as one piece but still be somewhat individual. I tried to use a wide range of medias, but at the same time, not allow one to be more dominant than any other. Hopefully this would bring the viewer in for a closer look. The resulting painting, "Marlon Brando Redefines Two Laws of Physics", was a culmination of the kind of images I had been working on up until that point.

A constant idea that I have been trying to portray in all of my paintings is that of fooling the viewer into thinking that my paintings are three dimensional. Airbrush shadows are placed beneath the different elements to give them dimensionality. This technique can be seen in all of my work. My father suggested pushing this dimensionality idea by cutting up my working surface. I composed a small painting for a trial of this idea. The painting "States" resulted. It was done on cut masonite which was prepared for painting with gesso. This painting excited me, so I did another on a large scale which I call "Overview". I tried to push the dimensionality further by arranging the elements of

the composition so that they overlapped the outsides of the picture plane.

With the success of this painting I took the next logical step, to actually cut up the picture plane and raise areas so that they would throw their own shadows. This process can be seen in my recent paintings.

The work that I have done, and am working on at present, shows my commitment to the creative process, and a growth in my work. I feel that I am making continuous progress toward the goal I set for myself four years ago, that being to combine the slickness of the airbrush with the abstract thought. This goal is one that I still find exciting and plan to continue towards as thoughtfully as possible.

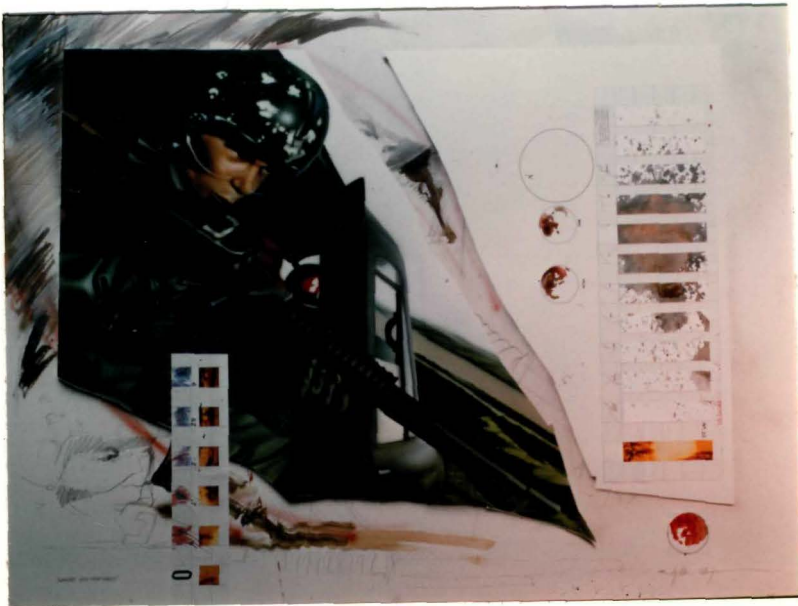


Plate 1. Awaken By Nightmares
Acrylic, Airbrush
30" x 40"
1980

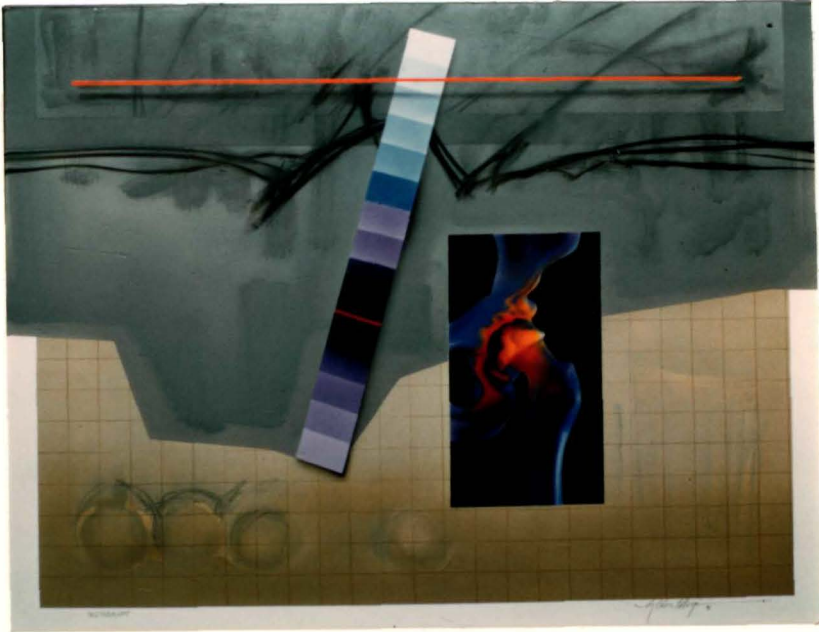


Plate 2. Acetabulum
Acrylic, Airbrush
21" x 27"
1981

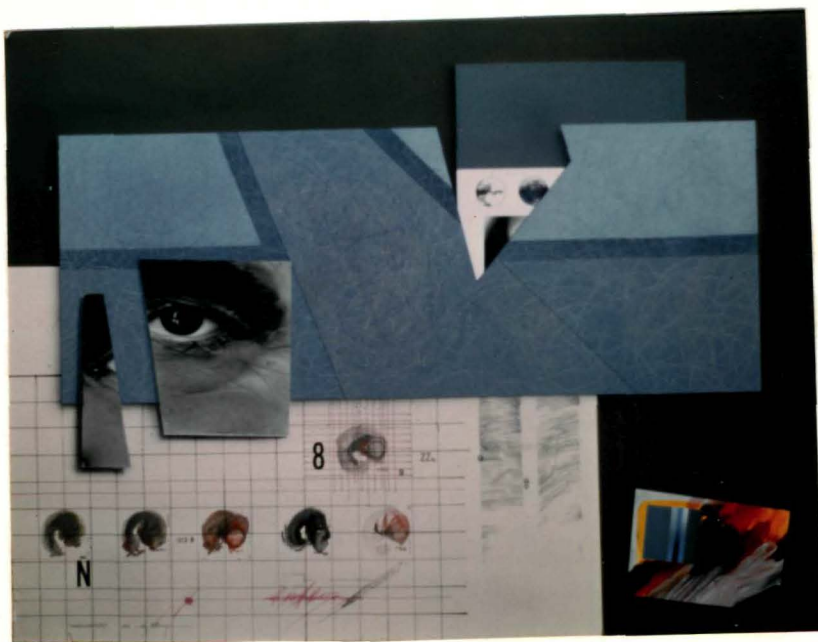


Plate 3. Involuntary
Acrylic, Airbrush
23" x 30"
1981

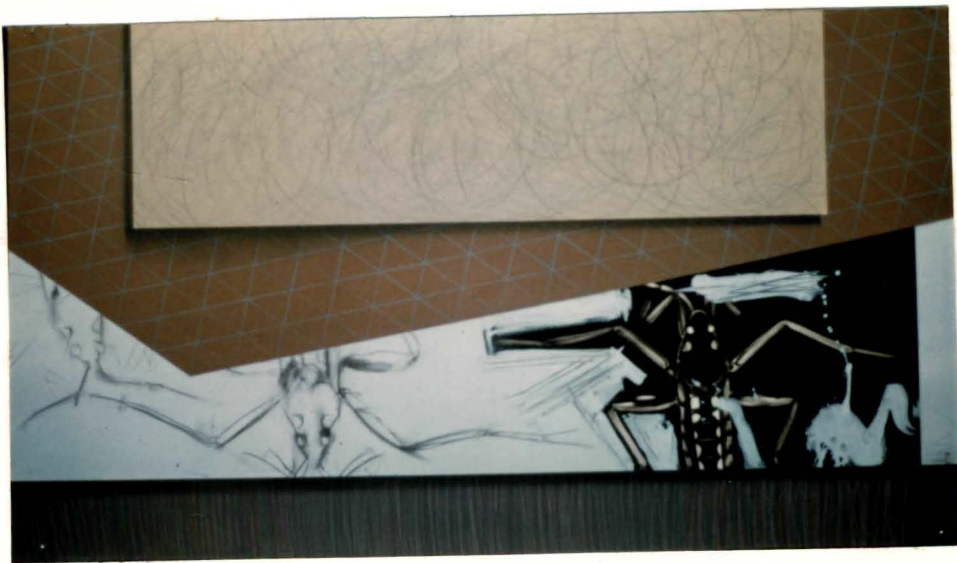


Plate 4. A Delicate View
Acrylic, Airbrush
17" x 30"
1981



Plate 5. Green Pool
Acrylic, Airbrush
19" x 21"
1981



Plate 6. Marlon Brando Redefines Two Laws of Physics
Pencil, Acrylic, Airbrush
Two 30" x 40" panels
1981

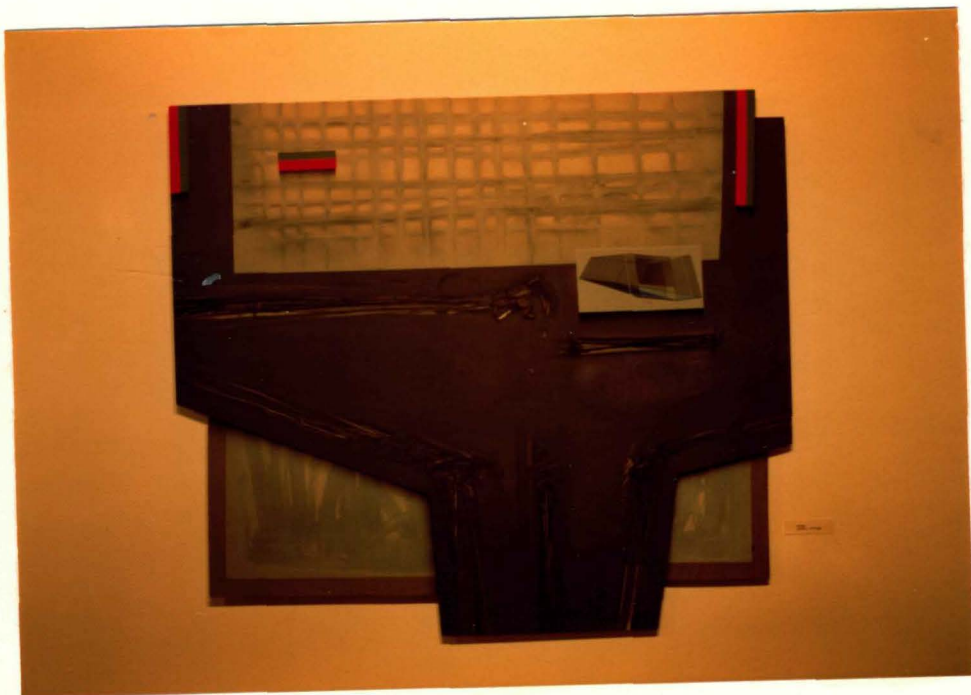


Plate 7. States
Acrylic, Airbrush
30½" x 34½"
1982



Plate 8. Overview
Acrylic, Airbrush
64" x 48"
1982