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MOTION TOWARDS THE CENTER - AN ESSAY ON REALITY AS  
EXPRESSED IN FOURTEEN PAINTINGS

by

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This study aims to define in words what has been defined in paint by the painter's gift of color. From the habits of writing and painting are independent, inseparable activities, it is apparent that the effects will not be identical or even shared because of personal differences. In writing, it is easy to modify the flow of story or that a more intensive version could be said. It was decided to limit the modification of reality to abstract painting. Abstract painting is not intended as an attempt to reduce ideas, feelings, or objects to an essential or universal aspect as interpreted by the painter.

Great consideration will be given to the word reality since it plays an important role in this work. In defining reality, no distinction is possible, however, with reality, as with any other absolute, since expression is incomplete. Reality is rather a goal to which one strives and which one may reach. The only hope is that he may come nearer and be more aware of it. Words, then, are only a hint toward the possibility of the state itself. However, reality seems to encompass certain qualities that may be stated. Reality implies the

## CHAPTER I

### DEFINITION OF THE GOAL

At the center of man's world stands his god, his utmost reality. His whole life is a struggle to draw nearer to this reality. It is the aim of art to comprehend reality in so far as it is humanly possible and express it. Thus, art is one of the highest forms of human endeavor, because it enables man to approach God.

This essay seeks to define in words what has been stated in paint in the fourteen pictures it examines. Since the media of writing and painting are independent, irreducible activities, it is apparent that the efforts will not be identical or even equal because of personal limitations. In addition, in order to confine the field of study so that a more intensive search could be made, it was decided to limit the consideration of reality to abstract painting. Abstract painting is here understood as an attempt to reduce ideas, emotions, or objects to an essential or universal aspect as interpreted by the painter.

First consideration must be given to the word reality since it plays such an important role in this work. In defining reality, no exactness is possible, because with reality, as with any other absolute, man's conception is incomplete. Reality is rather a goal to which man aspires and seldom comes very near. His only hope is that he may come nearer than at first seemed possible. Words, then, are only a hint toward the composition of the whole cloth. However, reality seems to encompass certain qualities that may be stated. Reality implies the

existence of something beyond physical matter. It is the fullest expression of the spirit, and the fact that it cannot be proved scientifically does not deny its being. In addition, reality is meaningful for man only in the sphere in which it is considered. In other words, man's recognition of reality in art is not his recognition of reality outside of art, in nature for example. It is evident that if man's utmost reality is his god, then every part of God's creation will have its reality, but, as a prism has many faces each reflecting its own light, so each part of God's creation reflects its own reality drawn from the central core. Furthermore, each epoch has its own interpretation of reality which should be that of today and anticipating tomorrow and not that of yesterday. Also, because human conception of reality is always partly obscured by the subjective, it is possible that many concepts of reality may exist in art even in one epoch, each possessing its own kind and degree of validity as is evidenced by the diversity of creative painting in our time.

Reality in painting appears to be achieved by three inseparable components - the actual material of the work, the manner of organization of this material, and the meaning of this organization. The third ingredient is the most important and also the most elusive, because it exists entirely in the realm of the spirit.

The physical materials used in these paintings are self explanatory. They are masonite, canvas, and plywood panels, casein and enamel paints and gold powder. The role of the hand, the brush, the palette knife, and the nail and other items as the forming agent is also apparent.

Form, or the manner of material organization in art, has a physical being measurable to the eyes: the length of a line, the intensity of a color, the darkness or lightness of value, and the area occupied by a shape, but it also has a spiritual being. The possibilities of each element alone or in combination with the others are unlimited. The spiritual being of form is the content of art. It must be intuitively felt by both artist and spectator to render meaning to a work of art. The indispensable quality, of course, is a feeling of unity as produced by the component parts - a unity which by its own nature transcends the content of the parts and creates a new transcending essence, a new visualization of reality. As Gyorgy Kepes has stated:

Due to the laws of visual organization, no visual unit can exist in itself on the picture-plane. Each unit leads beyond itself and implies a larger whole. Thus units not only live on the picture plane; they also grow. They merge into wholes with a common function. Three musical tones have each its particular wave length, its individual tonal quality; but when the three are sounded together their individual characteristics retreat and something entirely new appears - the chord. Similarly, the optical units organized into spatial configurations become more than the sum total of their component parts. These larger wholes form with other groups a still farther-reaching unit, and this process continues until all possible relationships are exhausted; that is until the limit of attention is reached.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kepes, Gyorgy, Language of Vision (P. Theobald and Company, 1944), p. 51.

## CHAPTER II

### ANALYSIS OF THE PAINTINGS

Some general statements concerning the fourteen paintings under consideration may be made at this time. All of the paintings are easel pictures intended to be studied or read in a relaxed atmosphere. Each was constructed with a regard for the elements of line, color, value, and mass, and they are to be apprehended as such. Only those noted are to be considered with regard to any figurative feeling. These material associations came about, because some of the compositions at various stages seemed to suggest certain material associations, and these associations in turn suggested additions which were in harmony with and added to the relationships already established. For example, the City Themes in one phase were felt to be in the spirit of maps and aerial photographs of various urban centers. It is desired that the formal elements in the paintings will produce an emotion and perhaps an empathy in the spectator towards the paintings.

Most of the pictures are small - an intimate format being intuitively preferred by the painter. Subtlety of expression rather than heroics on a grand scale is sought, and the complicated and laborious manner of working lends itself to a smaller surface.

The elements employed most predominantly in the pictures examined by this essay are the black line, used to lead the eye over the entire surface of the paintings, to function as the edges of planes, and to emphasize and build the structure of the work, and the rectangular form,

used because it affords a pure contrast between vertical and horizontal movement and tends to unify and order the picture plane. The paintings vary in value; some lean slightly away from gray towards white, and others go in the opposite direction. There is no dominant color tendency although a richness of color was desired in all of the work, and the hues employed tend to be bright rather than grayed tones.

A few general observations may be made of those paintings titled City Theme. All are based on the repetition of a rectangular unit creating rhythm, balance, and unity. The similar forms afford a unity and diffuse the eye to all parts of the picture and produce equilibrium. These units are varied in size and in their relation to each other and to the picture plane in order to alter the basic rhythm enough to sustain the interest of the eye and produce dynamic movement. All of the paintings are treated in an all over manner. No part of any painting is focused upon at the expense of another part. This is a personal solution to the problems of motion and equilibrium.

The purpose in creating the City Themes was to extend the concept beyond the physical boundaries of each painting and to make the spectator conscious of expansive space as realized by modern man. This theme or feeling was chosen, because it resolves into an orderly space and form arrangement and is an excellent expression of contemporary life.

The painting City Theme I is a combination of casein and enamel paints. Its manual aspect is this: A white casein ground was coated with a mixture of thalo blue and green caseins lightened a bit with white. When this was absolutely dry, various colored enamels were applied quite thinly with a palette knife using a great deal of pressure. While the enamels were still wet, the small rectangles of white casein



and a yellow casein mixture of cadmium yellow light with Naples yellow were added with thicker paint and less pressure. The picture was still somewhat tacky when black enamel lines were dripped on with careful control by means of a small pointed stick. Then, gold powder was dusted on in planned areas. Several days later, when the surface was completely dry, it was sprayed with clear plastic.

Now, that the materials employed and their manner of application has been stated, the more formal elements of composition may be considered. The structural rhythm is based on a repetition of the same unit, the rectangle, varied slightly in a simple all over checkboard effect with motions from left to right and top to bottom and in the opposite directions. This is made a bit more complicated with forward and backward movement of the rectangular units by means of color, transparency and overlapping. The black lines serve to emphasize the structural arrangement and add a vibrant value note to the close medium value range of the color. The colors are all played a note lower than highest intensity.

The subjective theme for this painting is a feeling of oneness with a calm, happy city. The painting appeared suddenly and easily as a finished statement with little or no over painting. It was executed in a day's span as though it were abruptly released from the background.

City Theme II follows the same pattern as City Theme I with the following notable exceptions. It was painted on a cadmium yellow light yellow casein ground, and this is the only use of the casein medium in the painting. The enamel colors on top of the yellow ground were thicker and applied without much pressure on the palette knife thus rendering more of an impasto on the panel. The picture was much drier

than the preceding one before the gold powder was dusted on and the black lines added, some with brush and some dripped from a small, pointed stick.

The structural arrangement of City Theme II is somewhat different from City Theme I. The highly colored rectangular planes are held in abeyance by the powerful black line, and a much more dramatic tension is developed due partly to this line and partly to the strident color.

This is a more vibrant, highly complicated and less orderly city. It, too, came quickly forward in a day's time, but in some manner it did not achieve the complete statement of City Theme I.

The City Theme painting called Sleeping City was executed with casein and an inexpensive gold leaf. At first, the entire white ground was coated with several casein colors, black, red and more white, and various irregular forms were brought through by searching out individual color layers with steel wool. The board was then set aside for eight months, and upon resumption of the work, the whole surface was covered with gold paint, and brightly colored casein forms were laid on this background. As this organization was most unsuccessful, the board was placed under running water and vigorously scrubbed with a wire brush. At this time, the final form began to make itself felt. It was then thoroughly dried and brought into order and unity through the composition of groups of red, white and black casein rectangles. These were softened with more scrubbing with a wire brush and water and the entire surface was then coated with pale blue casein consisting of a mixture of white, thalo blue and green and cadmium orange. This was then most carefully rubbed with soft steel wool, and the expression was realized. Several days later, it was sprayed with clear plastic to preserve it and waxed to dull the surface somewhat.

The painting emerges from a pale blue rectangle which is quieted and softened by giving it rounded corners. It was enclosed in this form to terminate the dynamic movements of the smaller rectangles and give it stability and unity. The blue tone also enriches the central color scheme by means of contrast in value and hue. The purpose of applying the various colors and then partially removing them, and repeating this procedure was to mellow the color itself and to avoid too definitive an outline of form thus producing that feeling of rest and mystery which in a more subjective vein we call night. In order to render this effect visual, it was felt that the formal elements must remain unobtrusive so as not to make one conscious of them. The work was begun in February, 1952, and not brought to completion until February, 1953.

The order here was a long time making itself known--as though it were deeply buried in the panel. Perhaps this was due to the aura of mystery that surrounds it, but once this order was perceived, it was felt to be definite, and the work was completed within a month.

Yellow City is a statement made with the use of casein and enamel paints. Its white rectangles struggled out of a black background and were emphasized with red enamel lines, and the whole was covered in a heavy yellow casein and rubbed through with steel wool. This seems a rather simple technique, but it was actually quite complex. The material statement concerns only what is now present on the board and omits what has been covered over and removed. The painting grew for over a year, and endless procedures and investigations were conducted upon it, each leaving some slight mutation on the surface as it was eradicated or formed into something else.

The resulting composition is a deep muted orange yellow. It has a very limited value range, because the values were partially obscured by the final overall coat of yellow. Towards the edges, the yellow remains entirely opaque to limit space. The form, color, and feeling of mystery that make up this painting give it a slightly Oriental flavor.

Space Composition I was created on a dark blue casein ground varied here and there with merging areas of other color. On top of this chrome symbols were painted. Then a transparent wash of white casein was applied, and the final forms were established. Some were rubbed with steel wool. Finally, an irregular neutral area was added to surround this central movement.

The vermillion, turquoise, brown and black figures move on a mysterious dark background encompassed by an indefinite neutral area. The shapes are thereby freed in space, and their independent existence is remarkable. This and the following composition were an attempt at creating space without reference to a static observer - a planetary space of the outer world.

The bright whirling casein forms of Space Composition II are all established in a two dimensional manner on a plywood panel coated in black casein. The shapes themselves and the background are greatly broken and diffused by rapid textural effects. Planetary space has been sought here by opposing diagonal movement and by the texture. This and the preceding painting were started and completed together during January, 1952.

The two Line Into Plane paintings use similar materials, similarly employed. There are, of course, compositional and color

differences. The white ground was coated with a very dark casein red, gold, and black in the smaller work and green, red and blue in the larger. When this was dry, a heavy coat of white casein was applied to the surface and while it was still quite wet, the composition was rapidly drawn on with a sharp wooden end of a brush, bringing the dark color through the white as a linear pattern. A plan was then made for certain areas circumscribed by this line to exist as shapes, and these forms were either created by removing the white paint with steel wool or painting over the white with color or a more intense white. Before being completed, the paintings required many intuitive corrections. Alterations and adjustments had to be made with the addition of each new form.

In these pictures, line is not interpreted as line or direction alone but instead functions as the edges of planes which move sharply and freely into and out of the background. The color of Line Into Plane I is crisp - cadmium red light, Mars yellow, several different whites and black. While operating to form planes in many instances in this composition, a great deal of the linear quality is retained as line, producing, with the color and shape, vitality. The forms are irregular, often repeated in size, shape, and color for a stable and unified painting. The horizontal and vertical movement of line is carefully balanced.

Line Into Plane II is quieter in color and line play than Line Into Plane I. The color is rich and jewel-like with very dark green and a medium blue predominating, sparked only here and there with medium red and several different whites. This is a much more tranquil and less dynamic painting.

These two compositions were worked out intermittently with others of a different nature over a month's time. They are lighter and gayer in meaning and therefore more decorative than some of the other work. They illustrate well that it is possible to create a happy uncomplicated state of mind with the elements of line, color and form alone without regard to figurative representation.

Emerging Forms I is a casein painting. It was created over a year's span with many underlying coats being applied to the untempered masonite board in January, 1952. After a month's struggle, it was abandoned and work was not resumed on it until February, 1953. At this time, its statement was completed by covering the entire surface with white casein and rubbing through and arranging the structural form by the use of various grades of steel wool and soft rags. Each rectangular color area is patterned with small, irregular, active forms. The color is warm, bright, and very personal, largely oriented in reds and yellows with a few earth colors and dark greens. One of the satisfactions of this work is the fact that a conflict has been set up and resolved by the forms. The right angles oppose and complement each other. The color is kept behind the white structure which holds it in control. This painting is created in an almost totally non-figurative style. No conscious symbolism has been included. It therefore depends solely on the formal compositional elements to carry its meaning.

Emerging Forms II follows the same direction as Emerging Forms I. However, it was completed in a much shorter time and is composed of many media - enamels, casein, and gold leaf. The under painting was automatic. The manner of working was complicated and intuitive. Nothing was

logically thought out. So many processes have been applied to the board that it would be impossible to list them here, even had they all been conscious. The surface was worked over until it seemed to meet the requirements of depth, color, and motion that were desired, and then, the board was coated in white casein, and the rectangular pattern was brought through in the manner of Emerging Forms I.

Work on this composition was carried on at various times over a period of three months. Color is given full range and rather equally proportioned with the result that its appearance is mellow rather than bright. This painting and Emerging Forms I differ greatly in their balance of white against color. In Emerging Forms II so little of the white remains that it verges on a linear effect.

On Top of the Blue is a casein and enamel painting on canvas. A lively texture was created by building a heavy ground of thick casein and working this ground with the palette knife and the hands. Rectangular shapes varied by the introduction of five triangles and one circle were composed on the surface which had been coated with pale blue casein. Heavy black lines were then added with the purpose of emphasizing and uniting the structure and adding a deep value note in contrast to the bright color. With the exception of overlapping, the picture plane is kept at the two dimensional level.

On Top of the Blue is a clear simple statement that came calmly into view in several days' time as though it were patiently waiting expression in the depths of the paint and happy and content upon being released.

Ankh is a casein painting. The plan for it was more thoroughly realized before it was executed than any of the other works. Four of these paintings were done from drawings, and the one that best complied with the intuitive picture was chosen; the rest, destroyed. It required several weeks of thought and only an hour to paint. Two heavy black verticals balance a division of white and tan that becomes horizontal in effect. There are several circular movements in this composition, a black circle inscribed with a smaller black circle, two small coiled red circles and two very small black dots. All these forms give the appearance of standing free in space in front of the deeply receding white and tan background. Dynamic movement is captured and held for a moment as an eye in an unblinking stare.

Offensive is a bright automatic enamel painting on a white casein ground. On top of this, a rigid framework of Naples yellow casein has been set. This was an experiment in contrasting free intuitive forms with the rigid order of horizontal and vertical movement. It was struggled with for three months and never reached a successful statement.

The painting Enigmatic Line is the most mysterious and hardest to discuss of the group. This is probably because it is more fully realized spiritually than any of the others. Enamel paints in bright colors were first applied to the white casein ground. This was not satisfactory for the order here seeking expression, so while the board was still wet deep lines were savagely cut in it with a nail, and when it was dry, the whole surface was coated with white casein. Most of the casein was then removed with steel wool leaving only that paint which remained in the



carved surfaces created by the nail lines. An order of red enamel rectangles was then set on the board and black enamel lines were carefully dripped over it from a pointed stick. There was still no satisfaction, and the entire surface was once again coated with white casein. When dry, this was partially removed in certain central areas with steel wool, and the painting revealed itself as complete. The time consumed on this expression was about two weeks. It was worked straight through to its fulfillment without being put aside at any time.

The form of the finished painting emerges from a softened white rectangle as a faint grouping of red rectangles on a warm gray surface covered with a mysterious moving network of white and black line everywhere circumscribing itself, in some areas so dense as to create floating forms. The rectangular shapes and the negative space created by them form the solid construction of this painting, and the lines provide movement of different speeds for the eye thus producing rhythm and unity. The fluid form of this composition depends on a slightly changing development, a growing rhythm, rather than the repetition of a basic unit. The resulting organization must be apprehended as a whole held together by surface tension.

### CHAPTER III

#### CONCLUSION

On the basis of this period of study and painting, certain observations of reality may be made which have a personal validity at this time. For the expression of reality, several qualities are necessary. First, the striving toward absolute reality must be purified in so far as it is possible of the subjective. This is not entirely possible, because a painter is a person and limited by his personality, but he must constantly seek for universal forms and meanings if his work is to live. In order to bring reality into a painting, two types of experience are needed, the intuitive and the intellectual. The first is one of conception and should be intuitive in that it is recognized in the deepest part of a person's spirit. However, it should be carefully made manifest that it may be as objective as possible. The intellectual experience is needed to clarify and objectify. Secondly, reality requires dynamic movement or vitality. This is achieved by providing opposition or contrast in a composition. And thirdly, the problem of this contrast or movement must be resolved into an embracing pattern of order. As Klee states:

The organism of movement is a highly intricate scheme and demands a highly developed ability of expression. As basic norm for this composition, one may accept this definition: A coordination of organs into an independent, self-reliant, quiet moving, or moving quiet whole. This composition can

only be accomplished if movements are complemented by counter-movements, or if a solution to the problem of infinite movement is found.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, a word might be said of our attempt to interpret reality of today which is based on a new scientific philosophy. The psychological impact of such a philosophy on the mind of the artist has determined the form of contemporary art. Briefly, this philosophy is characterized by Felix M. Ibanez as:

. . . (a) a new science has been established - atomic physics - idealistic in its conceptions and so hypothetical that one of its basic factors, the concept of the electron, is purely imaginative; (b) as against observation and experimentation as bases of the biologist's work, and as against the physicist's measurements, the new mathematics accepts reason as superior to experiment for arriving at an integral comprehension of the universe; (c) the discontinuity of matter is accepted; (d) matter and energy have been proved identical; (e) it has been established that space is finite; (f) the relativity of time has been proved; (g) the continuity of time and space has been demonstrated; (h) it has been demonstrated that the universe is curved and four-dimensional; (i) it has been demonstrated that matter moves by leaps of energy, and the latter has been accepted as the basis of modern physics; (j) the substratum of mental life has been reduced to molecules and irreversible processes subject to physical determinism.<sup>2</sup>

Man's search for reality is but a start, but it is ever growing, ever changing, and ever hopeful.

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<sup>1</sup>Klee, Paul, Pedagogical Sketch Book (Mierendorf Gallery, 1944), p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>Ibanez, Felix M., "An Experiment in Correlation," Arts and Architecture, 70:31, January, 1953.

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