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PAINING AND COLLAGE: SEARCH, SURFACE, AND SURPRISE

by

Susan Moore

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Approved by

Robert E. Martin

Director

263700

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Thesis  
Director

Robert E Partin

Oral Examination  
Committee Members

Helen Thurnish

W. Sady

Miss Thelma Gougeon

Robert E Partin

May 6' 1963

Date of Examination

253700

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The quotation by Renoir has been taken from the book ARTISTS ON ART: Pantheon Books, New York, 1945: page 322.

The thesis of search instead of research is presented in THE INTERACTION OF COLOR by Josef Albers, published by Yale University Press, New Haven in 1963.

Mr. Barnett Newman's comment on the artist is quoted from an article about Mr. Newman written by Harold Rosenberg and entitled, "Barnett Newman: A Man of Controversy and Spiritual Grandeur": printed in VOGUE magazine, February 1, 1963.

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## THE NECESSITY OF SEARCH

### A Painter's Concept

Search from a painter's point of view is a pre-condition of personal creativity. If I knew all the ways of searching, I would be more than one person and that, of course, is impossible. The painter is ONE, one who moves in the direction of his choice.

Search is technical.

Search is spiritual.

Search is fundamental.

Search is inevitable in the life of a painter.

Often when a form is determined and a color harmony is established, in the revelation of a painting, there is a Fourth of July celebration in the painter's heart. In my life this celebration may last ten minutes. The statement which the painting is making is a success. I see the painting.

The painting sees me.

Barnett Newman has said that an artist paints so that he will have something to look at.

Yes.

The painter is concerned with search instead of research: the painter is concerned with learning through conscious practice. Josef Albers, the well known painter-teacher, has thus emphasized the necessity of search in the painter's life.

I would predicate a trinity which I am aware of as a personal commitment to the act of painting.

Searching for order in painting, seeking joy through painting are simultaneous experiences. Beyond these experiences known by the artist is the responsibility to find truth and to make known truth through painting.

In the year 1963 I am now far removed from the world of the Byzantine icon painter. I am not imagining that the Byzantine icon painter was without problems, and perhaps these were of a grievous nature. What I am suggesting is that the modern artist faces tremendous problems of a different nature. One of the most serious is the place or the position the artist assumes in modern society. I do feel that this is a serious problem. Whereas the Byzantine painter may have occasionally faced an angry bishop, the modern artist faces by and large an indifferent mass.

As the modern artist comes to know his reality, who he is and where he is going, he cannot escape the problem of audience.

Bearing responsibility to be oneself, to find one's true self in life as well as in art, and in turn assuming the awesome task of making a work of art, the painter must grit his teeth, and get on with it.

What he gets on with is given to the audience in a spirit of love.

I am aware of audience; and I always hope for an audience; but I always react to audience. Audience is not why I paint, but audience is outside of myself; and I am not painting for myself alone.

## THE TREATMENT OF SURFACE

### A Painter's Technique

In painting and in collage making one of the things the artist does is to commit himself to the necessity of search. As the painter brings order and joy into the world, he must choose the technical means for expressing his vision. The craft of painting and papier colle must be thoroughly learned by conscious and endless practice.

Craftsmanship alone will fail the serious artist.

The artist must reach beyond technical skill into areas of personal discovery and invention. In treating the picture surface, the painter gives us his accent, his touch. Also, the painter reveals his skill or lack of skill, his imagination or lack of imagination, his commitment or lack of commitment.

In the organization of the picture surface, in the exploration of surface effects, the artist is seeking to achieve quality.

However plain or elegant a particular painting may be, it must be experienced by the audience as a painting and not as an aesthetic problem. A painting may be a problem; but, if it is one, it exists as a problem that has been solved by the painter.

Without quality, the painting is only an eye exercise.

Without mystery, the painting is banal.

Without the touch of an individual and sensitive hand, the picture is lifeless.



"It is not enough for a painter to be a clever craftsman; he must love to 'caress' his canvass too," Renoir once said to Ambroise Vollard.

There is no doubt in the painter's mind that he is challenged both by his technique AND his vision to push beyond cleverness.

In determining the means of making a painting, the painter absorbs influences, attitudes, approaches, accents of countless other artists. One of the best ways to learn painting is to look at it. Touring picture museums, attending exhibits, visiting artists' studios is regular exercise for many producing painters. In an age which does convey a museum without walls, critical essays and reviews, as well as reproductions of art works, can be direct and subtle influences on the artist.

In my painting I am aware of the surface of the masonite panel, linen paper, linen canvas. I never want to destroy the natural surface of the material. I use three or four palette knives and upon a gesso ground apply a single coat of oil paint. Sometimes I am interested in the interruption of this single coat of paint as the palette knife scrapes down to the gesso ground. However, I intend this texture to be a subordinate part of the painting.

In my collages shapes often overlap; yet the edges of these cut shapes can assume functions of line and form.

I like using papers of all kinds, and one can draw with scissors.

## THE DISCOVERY OF SURPRISE

### A Painter's Reference

The painter is usually the first person to discover surprise in the finished picture. What is surprising is the way the picture has turned out to be. It is an unexpected thing. "Is this picture really finished?" asks the artist, as he sets about to prepare a new panel or canvas.

The prompting to make the picture has now resolved itself into the painted surface.

The painter is quick to feel a delight in an unexpected line, color, or form. And many studio walls vibrate with such discoveries.

As a personal reference to the factors of search and discovery in painting, I would like to make the following comments on ten pictures of my own doing.

The title, medium, and dimensions of each work are noted first.

COMPOSITION: oil on masonite  
9 x 12 inches

I feel that COMPOSITION has the mystery and feeling I am seeking to articulate in painting. Obviously, the style of the work is non-objective. I do not feel that the matter of style is important to know about. What is important is the matter of feeling conveyed by the picture.

The painting has been discovered by the painter through intuition,

NOT calculation.

SMALL LANDSCAPE: oil on masonite  
8 x 10 inches

SMALL LANDSCAPE evokes memories of Greece. I don't see a windmill in the picture. I do recognize an essence I would identify as Greek.

The most astonishing experience I felt in Greece was in reacting to the quality of light. The spectacular beauty of the country, seashore, mountains, islands all became spectacular and clear through this brilliant atmosphere and light quality.

So this painting appears to me as a sign of where I have been and where I would like to return someday.

LITTLE CIRCUS ARENA: oil on masonite  
9 x 12 inches

"I'm tempted to let go restraint  
Like splashing phosphorescent paint,  
And fill the sky as full of moons  
As circus day of toy balloons."  
from A-WISHING WELL by Robert Frost

All sorts of pictures appeared to my mind's eye as I read Frost's verse. The painting offers a visual complement to the poem.

Contemporary poetry interests me greatly; and I use it frequently as a source of ideas.

LITTLE YADKIN: oil on masonite  
8 x 10 inches

LITTLE YADKIN is a small composition in colors of red and brown. Although the Yadkin is a river, a river which traverses Forsyth County

where I live, this small panel makes no attempt to be a picture of a river.

The Yadkin river in color is usually reddish brown. I am entertained by the colors of the Carolina environment, especially the red clay colors of the Piedmont section.

I think it is quite marvelous to juxtapose areas of red, dark and light, and brown, dark and light, on the picture surface. What I am seeking to establish is a color harmony. The harmony established may in turn recall the Yadkin river of local environs; however, I have changed the scene, and have made a painting.

LANDSCAPE AND CIRCLE: oil on masonite  
39 x 48 inches

After painting many small pictures, I felt like attempting a large one. The circle and the colors absorbed from the Yadkin river color scheme carried over into the new work.

The painting was begun and finished in three weeks. There was little choice of a conscious nature. Every color and color space just announced itself with great seriousness.

There is a gesso ground and glue sizing on the masonite panel. Then the oil paint was mixed with zinc white and small amounts of poppy oil, and put on in a single coat with a palette knife.

STILL LIFE: oil on handmade paper  
19½ x 25 inches

STILL LIFE reflects my great interest in the painting of the object, of bottle as in Morandi, of flower as in Redon, of bird as in Braque.

This painting is executed in thin oil on a handmade paper. The paper is first covered with a thin coat of white lead paint. Sometimes I rub the painted surface with a cloth.

I use Blockx oil paint, and I mix with it amounts of pure beeswax. I like the matt effect this gives to the surface of the picture.

I am not concerned with disguising what I learn from others. Most of the work a painter does consists of looking, not doing. Sometimes after staring at this picture I see the billiard tables of Braque.

COLLAGE # 1: cut papers  
22 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{2}$

The COLLAGES are executed in three stages. First, a heavy Fabriano watercolor paper is covered with a coat of gesso liquitex. Second, the pieces of cut papers are pushed around on the white surface, in and around and overlapping each other. After a week or so of arranging the cut papers, the dynamic equilibrium that I am seeking is found. Finally, as I realize this, I glue the papers with wheat paste to the white surface of the Fabriano paper.

COLLAGE # 2: cut papers  
22 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$

A very lively interaction takes place when cut newsprint is introduced into the collage scheme. Often sentences in the newspaper are amusing and can be introduced into the collage. One I recall was from a story in THE WALL STREET JOURNAL in which the sales director of a certain company was exhorting his fellow workers to present a good image of themselves to the buying public. The admonition read as follows:

"Let's Keep It Clean."

Thereafter THE WALL STREET JOURNAL became one of my favorite sources of collage material.

COLLAGE # 3: cut papers  
22 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$

I like the authority of this collage. The statement it makes seems fairly simple and final. All the things that should not be there are not there. It is important to know what shapes to discard and ignore.

I consider collage making a discipline which in turn leads to technical and emotional growth in painting.