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AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS  
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by  
Elizabeth Rean Watson  
(Betty Watson)

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of  
the University of North Carolina  
at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro,  
North Carolina

May, 1965

Approved by

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7073

APPROVAL SHEET

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280043

WATSON, ELIZABETH REAN (BETTY WATSON) . An Exhibition of Paintings. (1965) Directed by Mr. Gilbert Carpenter. pp. 9.

This document is a record of a thesis exhibition held in the Weatherspoon Gallery April 25 through May 15, 1965. The thesis is an exhibition of two pieces of sculpture and seventeen oil paintings chosen from among the works I have completed as a graduate student. All of the pictures are produced on canvas except one, "Winthrop with the Rout of San Romano," which is painted on a small wooden panel. Portions of this painting are taken from three famous battle paintings of San Romano by the Italian Renaissance artist, Uccello. Thirteen of the canvases are stretched across wooden stretchers, but three of them, which I have termed "mural panels," hang in the exhibition somewhat in the manner of tapestries or scrolls from the ceiling. They are attached both above and below to wooden cross pieces, but not at the sides. These three panels are sections, which I have selected for the exhibition, of a continuous wall decoration, for an entire room, which is at this time partially completed. Eventually these panels will be affixed permanently, with others, to the walls of that room. One of the sculpture heads was fashioned directly in clay from a model. The other head was cast in plaster in a mold of fourteen pieces made from the original clay one. Each of them is painted in oil colors, one predominantly in yellows, the other in blues.

The catalogue gives precise statistical information about the paintings and sculpture: titles, exact dimensions, media, and dates of completion.

As a supplement to the thesis I have included a paper outlining sources, influences, and compositional problems. I have mentioned a few artists with whom I have studied, briefly describing their attitudes toward art, and mine. The paper also points out some of the problems which I have found difficult to solve in painting.

I have taken color slide photographs of my works as an additional record of the thesis exhibition.

Finally a program of the exhibition with a small etching reproduced on the page is included in this document as an appendix.

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## Catalogue

### Oil Paintings:

- |                                                               |             |      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|------|
| 1. Golden Figures                                             | (45" x 60") | 1965 |
| 2. Orange Figures                                             | (40" x 60") | 1964 |
| 3. Children on a Swing                                        | (40" x 48") | 1964 |
| 4. Winthrop with the<br>Rout of San Romano<br>(on wood panel) | (16" x 32") | 1965 |
| 5. Figures in a Dream                                         | (10" x 12") | 1964 |
| 6. Yellow Yard                                                | (20" x 24") | 1964 |
| 7. Green Yard                                                 | (45" x 60") | 1965 |
| 8. Girl at a Window                                           | (16" x 20") | 1963 |
| 9. House at Twilight                                          | (10" x 14") | 1965 |
| 10. Yellow Figures                                            | (40" x 60") | 1964 |
| 11. Trees, Fields, People                                     | (30" x 50") | 1964 |
| 12. Yellow Landscape                                          | (10" x 12") | 1964 |
| 13. Lady in Red                                               | (40" x 50") | 1963 |
| 14. Laurie and Jay Hopkins                                    | (40" x 50") | 1965 |

### Mural Panels: (Oil on linen canvas)

- |                     |              |      |
|---------------------|--------------|------|
| 1. Child in Water   | (40" x 109") | 1965 |
| 2. Children Running | (47" x 109") | 1964 |
| 3. Woman Watching   | (36" x 109") | 1964 |

### Sculpture:

- |                          |                   |      |
|--------------------------|-------------------|------|
| 1. Girl with Yellow Hair | (clay)            | 1964 |
| 2. Girl with Glasses     | (cast in plaster) | 1964 |

### Sources, Influences, Compositional Problems

I will not try to advance arguments here in defense of my paintings. Paintings themselves might be thought of, I suppose, as attempts to persuade --- to persuade the viewer that the world might look as it is set down on canvas, and to lead him to think of appearances in that way. Although I do have a few ideas, or to be more exact, strongly held prejudices which reassure me in working the way I do, I will spare the reader, because selfishly, I think it would be unsettling rather than helpful for me to arrange these ideas --- scattered and intuitive --- into a logical "thesis." Why? Because the thesis would be a substitute for paintings, a quite separate construction, an attempted work of art if you will, in a medium in which I am not at home. Alternatively, a critical analysis seems a restatement of the paintings to me, perhaps a misleading one, and possibly quite pretentious besides.

I'd like instead as a supplement to my exhibition to give a sketchy history of my education and to indicate a few of the perennial questions, mainly practical ones, which have perplexed me in painting.

When I started in high school going into New York City for Saturday classes at the Art Students League, we were taught simply a way of transcribing in strong light and shadow on the paper the appearance of an object or person, of what was placed before us. This suited me. As many young artists, what I did well was to draw deftly, but without a sure ordering sense of style, persons and places so that they looked alive, present, like themselves and no others. At the League, as generations of students have done, week after week we made drawings of nude models --- leaning against a drape on a rickety screen, or arranged on a



paint-spattered stool in a wonderful dusky room with a skylight high over head. We used charcoal, or sometimes pastel, and concentrated on the very narrow problem (although at that time I did not realize it was narrow) of recording the exact shapes and degree of light and dark of the tones which composed the model and the space immediately around her or him. This registering of tones and shapes, in drawings and alternately in oils, was a problem that occupied me almost solely for a number of years following and seemed problem enough. I did not at that time worry about the subjects, though some were more interesting than others; the compositions seemed to take care of themselves as did the color. I was able to focus with undivided attention on the aim of creating with accuracy, directness and economy of means, impressions of forms in light and shadow.

For two summers, when I was sixteen and seventeen, I studied near Gloucester, Massachusetts with a portrait artist from Boston, Margaret Fitzhugh Browne, who had painted dozens of celebrities, most notably, following directly in the footsteps of Goya, the King of Spain. Her paintings, no Goyas (but then who has equalled Goya?) had these virtues: they were clear in color, never muddied or murky, and broad in handling, unfussy, as I remember them, superb in a limited sense. As an artist, she insisted on a cool objectivity, a detached and appreciative study of the subject with all one's intelligence and feeling directed toward recording it accurately. The conception of art was one of which Velasquez and Vermeer are the supreme masters. Several years later, after graduating from college, the instructors I chose from many possibilities at the Art Students League were Louis Bouche, Edwin Dickinson, and John Macpherson, all of whom subscribed, in their teaching at least, to the same general conception of painting. I studied in this fashion for two years. What one knows about the subject is not permitted in this view to intrude on what the artist actually observes before his eyes at a particular moment. For example, the innumerable details a

primitive artist might include, or even invent, out of sheer love--- tiny flowers, blades of grass, separate strands of hair, the pearls on a brocaded dress --- all these would be suppressed if the light or shadow of a particular place and moment obscured them. Similarly the understood structure of anatomy, muscles studied to bring out form, as in a Pollaiuolo or Michelangelo, would not be elaborated on, if not seen. No super heroes here! It would be hard for the decorative artist to reconcile liberties taken for the sake of design with this subservience to subject. The highly imaginative artist, a Chagall, for instance, would find no place here at all. What are the values of this kind of instruction? It offers one clearcut way of organising and setting down visual impressions. The world is unbelievably complex and full. To get an impression of it down on canvas, the artist must select and abstract in some way. For example, he may record simply in terms of lines, or record only the shapes of objects as primitive artists do. In the approach I have been describing light is the unifying agent, the close observation of light and shadow producing an ordered view of the world. The best paintings that I did, that my friends did, in this way had a clarity, a luminosity, and an uncomplicated logic that I still find very beautiful indeed. Our paintings were all quite distinct in style, too. The artist's originality emerges in the portion of the scene he chooses to put down, in the range and angle of vision, in the way he composes the painting, and most unmistakeably in his touch, the way he applies paint, the kinds of shapes he makes, which are as personal as handwriting, and in his intuitive use of color.

I was in sympathy with this approach to painting, though it was surely academic, (many today would disapprove), because it suited any talents which were not especially inventive and my aims at that time. Once we accept the idea that the portion of the world we choose to paint is beautiful or interesting --- desirable to catch fast, hold, and keep forever, this discipline offers one way of accomplishing this.

What was especially exhilarating to me during these years was an absorbing sense of specific time and place that occurred when I worked, and sometimes a feeling for the beauty of the model (though the models were often conventionally unbeautiful) and the room or landscape as they appeared in the light and atmosphere. The scene before our eyes was frozen, very still for a time, and we worked with furious concentration to get it down, make the feeling permanent. This is an experience that my husband Robert Watson, a poet, not a painter, has understood so marvelously and so precisely in his poem "Odalisque." (A Paper Horse, Atheneum, 1962.)

During the same general period I had been studying art in a very different fashion at Wellesley, majoring in art history. Gazing up at the procession of slides thrown up on a screen in the lecture hall, we students through the years fell in love with every style, one by one. I had wonderful opportunities, too to study original paintings at the museums in Boston and New York. And though preserving a favored corner in my enthusiasms for early Corot, for early Degas, for much of Manet, because I identified with their painterly approach, and another for early Titian, Bellini, and especially Gauguine because I had a special feeling for the calm, poised and ordered world they give us, at the same time I was wildly admiring all sorts of radically different artists. I especially enjoyed putting myself under the spell of rich and hypnotic colors which one finds in art but hardly ever in ordinary appearances. I did not at all understand how these other paintings come to be, how the artists conceived them, and though I loved them, because they did not correspond with my own direct impression of appearances, I said "All that is something else" and put them out of my mind when painting, still do for that matter.

Every young artist, in effect, chooses his influences. Only a very very intense enthusiasm, a genuine feeling of necessity

for producing certain experiences can explain why each of us stubbornly paints one way rather than another. I discovered these feelings were completely ignored in the painting courses at Wellesley. They were called "laboratory courses;" I later taught a similar course at Barnard for three semesters. The students were asked to experiment in various media that had been used historically: we made mosaics on the walls of the art building basement when studying Byzantine art; little frescos along with Renaissance classes, as well as mixing up batches of egg tempera; planned original designs for stained glass windows along with the Gothic period. In fairness to the course of study and to our professors, the aim was to clarify art history, not to develop artists. I found these projects stultifying because in each case one was forced to invent some unfelt unexperienced subject matter to fit the technique. The work I produced there never once proceeded from a genuine personal experience or enthusiasm, was depressing for me to look at or even think about.

At the time I simply felt this without particularly analyzing why it was so. What genuinely excited me, I now believe, was the sight of objects, especially people, in certain lights, which explains why the instruction at the League was so appropriate for me, and also why I nearly always felt anxious to paint in the wonderful north light of its studios, but often confused or uncertain in the rapidly changing sunlight outdoors and apathetic in the dark crowded Wellesley cellars, closed in with pipes and furnaces. I still can hardly bring myself to paint in artificial light in a room without windows, or in a small closed-in space. All this is extremely personal; other artists have their own sets of likes and dislikes. But if our best work comes, as I believe, only from the most intensely felt enthusiasms, then we had better pay strict attention to anything that interferes with them.

If intrigued with the way light falls across objects, I was also rapidly discovering that I liked some objects far better

than other! Necessarily absorbed in the processes of mixing colors, of applying them, if I had been a different person, at this point I might have become even more involved in painterly problems and carried away, as some of my friends soon were, into exciting innovations in technique. As it was, I felt relatively happy with the paint quality, the formal look of my pictures. Some of the paintings however, I loved and wanted to keep; others painted over or threw away. In part my judgments had to do with the objects or persons one presented, the subjects. Some of the models, whom of course had not chosen some of the poses, which we students had little part in arranging left me uninspired. Why lavish all this effort and care on a subject one does not care about anyway? One would have to be a fool not to ask eventually what's the point?

At a certain time, if he has not done so already, an artist must face up to himself, his inclinations and biases, must ask himself what they really are. In order to do this he had best follow the repeated advice of Rilke to the young poet Kappus: "Go into yourself." I had to ask myself what my predilections as to subject really were. But this had to be answered, partly --- and still is being answered --- through trial and error. It dawned on me rather slowly that I painted inanimate objects (the usual still life, even clothing) indifferently because I had no patience with them; that I had no patience because I was infinitely more interested in the human face and figure. As for landscape, I did much the best work when the scene included and enveloped people. In this way I learned I was not at all a purist, objective enough to love forms and shapes in themselves regardless of their associations. If I were to paint close-up, part of the back of a chair, a human arm across it, a table top beyond, a napkin crumpled on the table, and these shapes lost their original identity and arranged themselves into an abstraction as shapes often will, then the painting would become a new thing, its associations would be lost for me and I'd no longer care very much

about the painting. But having in mind certain subjects, wanting to see them whole and comprehensible, can be troublesome if one is as tied to the immediate subject as I was. For example, one summer during college, I spent two months at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, which moved to the countryside for July and August. There daily, the entire school painted nude models outdoors. The beauty of the outdoor atmosphere around the figures, associations with nature, escape from civilization, the appeal back to Gauguine, to Titian, the Arcadia of Poussin, to Renoir and Cezanne, all my favorite artists, affected me very much. Nonetheless from a practical point of view, need I elaborate on the difficulties, on one's own, away from a school situation, in the city or suburbs of hiring models and painting outdoors?

My instinct was to go out in the world with a viewer in hand, like a cameraman and find new subjects that matched my inner imaginative requirements. And, as happens sometimes, changed circumstances gave me a whole new range of opportunities to do this. I married, moved with my husband to Baltimore, and then the following year to Williamstown, Massachusetts. In a series of exciting but often ludicrous adventures working outdoors, I then painted city streets, stores, row houses, mountains in winter, railroad yards, and neighbor's children. I found one difficulty which had to do with style. As artists know, the seasons, sun in the eyes, wind, bugs, and talkative watchers all make concentration outdoors more difficult than in the studio. The light changes constantly. One feels hurried, rushed, requires a shorthand style. To complete these complex outdoor subjects, I tended to adapt a nervous, looser, freer way of applying the paint. Attractive enough in itself, it did not represent the kinds of feelings; the mood of gravity and stillness I wished to convey in my paintings. To allow a more spacious, open, less cluttered view, I then expanded the size of the canvases themselves, and these much larger canvases were most awkward to take outdoors.

I had been disturbingly aware of course, that the immediately present subject was not only a necessary inspiration for me, but a crutch. But I hadn't the least idea how to do without it! For up to that time, any sureness and strength I had, all the special qualities I strived for were lost when I worked from imagination. I had found, and still find, I've never been able to concoct a single shape, or combination of shapes, that has the vividness, distinction, and fascination for me of shapes originating in my direct observations. It was simply impossible for me to work completely from imagination, as so many brilliant artists have done. I therefore began making sketches from life, and then translating these into paintings, which is the way I most often work now. For these sketches I found for a time in Baltimore new subjects, cliches really, borrowed probably from Lautrec and others --- a night time world full of people: carnivals, dancing girls and men leaning on bars. These impromptu sketches, many of them, were fresh and alive, as artists' direct drawings so often are. The classic problem though was, and is, how to carry over this freshness and vitality of feeling into the painting, a new and different work on a larger scale --- how to sustain the feeling of the original experience. Another question: how to invent and imagine colors, where one had automatically observed and matched them before?

Attempting to solve these problems at least liberated me somewhat from dependence on the actual presence of a subject. Rearranging the figures in the sketches, changing the shapes of the world which encircled them, I was able to insist more on forms which dominated in my imagination and to suppress or abstract the less important. I also tried to intensify the world of the pictures by a more brilliant and unreal color than the quiet silvery tones I had unconsciously depended on before.

On the color question I was helped a great deal by a familiarity with abstract expressionism. We had seen a Jackson Pollock

one-man show in Williamstown in 1952. I loved the striking directness, and spontaneity of these pictures, qualities which in a different form I tried to capture in my work, and the gorgeous color, in which I was deficient. Through John Opper, a professor at this college, I learned something of the methods and rationale of the leading abstract expressionists, such as De Kooning, Rothko, Philip Guston and Opper himself. And though I never adopted their premises, I did learn from them ways of inventing on the canvas a bright color structure which is an equivalent of natural appearances, rather than a direct imitation of them.

In spite of changed emphases in my painting, I still retain the same desires I originally had; to create the illusion of forms, forms which are human and understandable to me in simple human terms, bathed in the mystery of light. I've mentioned a few questions but have given no answers here. The individual canvases represent attempts to answer them.

- 1 Girl at a Window
- 2 Sunset at Twilight
- 3 Yellow Figures
- 4 Trees, Fields,  
      People
- 5 Yellow Landscape
- 6 Way in Red
- 7 Maria and Jay Hopkins

#### SCULPTURE

- 1 Girl with Yellow Hair
- 2 Girl with Glasses



# Betty Watson



## PAINTINGS

- |   |                                          |    |                          |
|---|------------------------------------------|----|--------------------------|
| 1 | Golden Figures                           | 8  | Girl at a Window         |
| 2 | Orange Figures                           | 9  | House at Twilight        |
| 3 | Children on a Swing                      | 10 | Yellow Figures           |
| 4 | Winthrop with the Routs<br>of San Romano | 11 | Trees, Fields,<br>People |
| 5 | Figures in a Dream                       | 12 | Yellow Landscape         |
| 6 | Yellow Yard                              | 13 | Lady in Red              |
| 7 | Green Yard                               | 14 | Laurie and Jay Hopkins   |

## MURAL PANELS

- 1 Child in Water
- 2 Children Running
- 3 Woman Watching

## SCULPTURE

- 1 Girl with Yellow Hair
- 2 Girl with Glasses