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PAINTING EXPERIENCES

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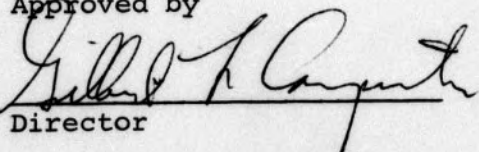
James Ho Coffie

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

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Approved by

  
Director

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APPROVAL SHEET

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

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Date of Examination

COFFIE, JAMES HO. Painting Experiences. 1966.

Directed by: Mr. Gilbert F. Carpenter.

This paper is part of a thesis for a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Painting. It is a statement of Mr. Coffie's main painting experiences of which the poem is an integral element.

Four important experiences were: "delimitation," "consciousness of the picture plane," "the logic of color," and "the logic of structure."

Twenty paintings were exhibited in Weatherspoon Gallery, University of North Carolina at Greensboro during May-June 1966, fulfilling the major requirements of the degree.

35 mm color slides representative of his work are on file in the UNC-G Library.

In a short paper of "seven or eight pages," what? One point generalized or a generalized development of my painting? The latter will serve better. Therefore, four things will become apparent: the experiences, a chronology, the vocabulary and some speculation. This means that events happened to me in time and appear here within my meanings. Each experience was arrived at as a discovery, however prefaced. This paper then may indicate an approach to painting and a few basic steps therein. If so, my personal achievement could be a social contribution. Hence, into the generalization.

To me living is the highest art and to practice it, it has been necessary for me to bring light, order, liveliness and fulfillment out of darkness, chaos, dullness and potentiality. This process has been facilitated by painting, and it is the way my time, energy, imagination, intellect and resources developed. The action taken has afforded me an affirmation of life and thereafter further extensions. The expression gained by this discipline led to a freedom which is not license, accident, anarchy, confusion or distortion. This freedom in painting first came from esthetic insights and from being relieved of representational abstraction. That freed the brushstroke, and thus paint became free. I had found a way of painting.

To paint, to see, are major drives; and those paintings that help me see, I call creations. It is that one sometimes paints more than he knows. There can always be a solution to a design problem, but a creation can not always be painted. It is here that my personal achievement may become a social contribution. Someone else may see as the forms reveal the esthetic and spiritual meanings. My paintings are not primarily concerned with the empathetic or theoretical.

The forms and meanings are arrived at after training: through delimitation of materials, moods, feelings and ideas; after periods of incubation; then through intense bursts of concentration; with spontaneous irrational logic and action which varies with general awareness and the weather. I can not paint when I am cold and stiff. I can not paint without delimitations.

These delimitations have resolved themselves within a major esthetic type called The Beautiful which is concerned with the qualities and variabilities of the materials and with the flights of the Spirit in painting. Once my paintings became "happy," they grouped themselves thusly: 1963-The Signatures of the Spirit, the first, freest and most directly painted calligraphic brushstrokes; 1964-The Depths, an effort to create an over-all space in depth with only slight success; 1965-The Lyrics, which have bits of literature built in and use the brush to a minimum; 1965-The

Jewels, a variation on The Lyrics due to a technical difference in the preparation of the picture plane. The Beautiful as in the case of The Signatures of the Spirit is not an abstraction of anything. It is the pure play of paint on the picture plane with the purpose of giving pleasure and possibly invision. The Lyrics and The Jewels are slight abstractions but they must stand as things-in-themselves and not because of the representational abstraction involved. I have made attempts to paint within other major esthetic types, but I do not care to spend my time there.

I was mainly attracted to The Sublime because of its usual relationships with the size, activity and grandeur of Nature. Then other attempts were made to paint within the Tragic. This aspect of life I have seen too much of in prisoner-of-war camps, in combat, and in normal times. I know the despair, degradation and destruction of Man, why paint it? A near opposite is the Comic, which though delightful, does not sustain me. There is one other major esthetic type that needs more than a passing reference to clarify my delimitation to The Beautiful. It is the Characteristic.

The Characteristic and its sub-categories are overworked. Each new batch of "esthetes" wallows in heaps of paint, sand, clocks, dresses, paper, screen, glass, mattresses, mannikins and general other junk. These items

arranged into new positions are more often "characteristic" than meaningful. Admittedly, the Characteristic is a work of art as in Rembrandt's portraits; but these have qualities of materials, skill, insights that a junkman or junkwoman could never arrange, let alone collect. Within the Characteristic, one can be easily diverted into the anxious, the guilty, the "serious," and the opposite, the flippant. Worst of all one could give way to self-pity and despair; and these cesspools I care not for, to me they are mistakes. Here, also, it is so easy to drop into fashion, fad and fade. As a consequence, we have everything from Pop to Pubism and a catering service to cliques in the visual arts. Propaganda and Social Realism would be within this type and/or sub-categories. Neither of these attract me for I have no ax to grind and have no desire to be burdened with carrying a crusade. The Characteristic along with Tragedy and Comedy are not for me. So, with rare exception, I have painted only for myself and then within The Beautiful.

Therefore, my approach, by choice, eliminates much of what has been and is called painting. It also eliminates preaching, superficiality and pretentiousness. In fact, while working towards freedom of expression within the discipline of painting, I had to become almost exclusively concerned with the fundamentals: space, the principles of visual structure, the elements of pictorial form, pure color and the picture plane. The choice of materials was deducted



from this, and my technique developed as a logical consequence. The whole process was and is assisted by an innate vitality and a strong and stubborn will. This coherence was achieved mainly during the year 1963.

Prior to 1963, representational abstraction in paint gave way to fantasy (I was never attracted to geometrical abstractions). Fantasy was more imaginative, but the whimsy was not enough. I never thought of life as absurd. While working with the fundamentals of painting, without imitation, without fantasy, I found the realities of pure paint best. Painting became a pleasure. This development concurred with an attitude that I arrived at and expressed at least as early as 1957--that Man's natural state is happiness (though it may be short). I found The Beautiful, the "happy" are possible in the reality of paint and without abstractions. But first . . . . .

Is not distortion equated with incompleteness, immaturity, misinformation, lack of information, impossible logic, confusion (insanity) and complicatedness (the norm) at least? Is not complexity a state of sanity (however brief) with the concurrent right attitude, control, knowledge understanding and use? This based on these kinds of thought: right thought, wrong thought, fantasy, memory and sleep. I think that the realities of life and paint are in the complexity of starts, textures, stops, colors, rests, structures, directions, intentions, intensities, etc. lived

and painted more easily with growing control, harmoniousness and achievement. Also, simplicity should enter with a diminishing of diversions and distractions, but simplification wrongly done will not be right. Thus, the realities of painting were arrived at by dwelling more and more on fundamentals and simplifications which equal delimitation.

What were some of the delimiting steps? I will illustrate with the way I developed into The Signatures of the Spirit; then give my poetic response to them; next, I will relate three direct esthetic experiences.

During the Fall Semester, 1962, at the University of Hawaii I was given a painting assignment that proved curiously helpful. I was to copy El Greco's Storm over Toledo full size - 47 3/4" x 42 3/4". Then an interpretation of it was to be painted. Soon, I became involved in a psychology so foreign that the "project" became insufferable-- the exact opposite of what I had supposed painting to be. Work, concentration, yes, but not drudgery. All my painting that semester seemed to ail because of The Storm. The beneficial result was that I was driven to search elsewhere. I went to Matisse: books, reproductions and an original painting (it was a pleasure to find Matisse so well represented in Greensboro).

Between semesters, 1962-1963, I dwelled on Matisse's color and particularly his patterning of the picture plane with figures. I did about one hundred and twenty-five

18" x 24" figure drawings within a few days. I started to draw women; but soon although the figures were still there, I was actually using them to divide up the picture plane into patterns and depths. As in so many painting experiences, over-thinking on an assumed problem kept me from seeing and doing, and only with a great effort did I work through to a delimitation. Ten of those drawings provided the basis of a projected series of small paintings of approximately the same size.

At the beginning of my Senior year, Spring Semester 1963, I started to work on the ten canvases. On the first canvas, a figure did appear in short, wide brush strokes. Next, I began to work on the other nine canvases--together. As I did so, the figures began to disappear; and I slowly realized I was working without representational abstraction or fantasy. I had begun to paint; and the brushstrokes became long and curvilinear--calligraphic. Doing away with the figure was a delimitation. Other delimitations were: the choice of the canvas and its size to work on, the use of thin and pure oil colors, the use of brushes only to apply the paint, and painting only in concentration and spontaneity. With this I was at a beginning of "my" painting.

A working paradigm  
 A grateful way  
 The development of  
 Representation immediate  
 in session  
 Calligraphic expectation.

Nothing grows always  
 Connections  
 That this is not all  
 However wonderful it be  
 ---expectation  
 ---post-intention  
 and---calligraphy

HERE IT WAS--

Is; I in

The realm of

The Beautiful

Working with

Calligraphic brushstrokes

Giant restlessness

Alivening

Of every moment muscle

Tendon--each nerve fired

In continuous dynamics

Like freedom--

Pop, boom, flash, shine.

Not only in exhilaration of

The show but

Constant connotations to

Expectation.

I instantaneously

In glory,

A seed in the soil,

And in that vast mass

Between

With its shimmer and sheen--

A persistent planter

A growing gardener

A grateful man.

The development of

Improvisation immediate

In restless

Calligraphic expectation.

The exquisite hesitation

To savor

My fluid mass in energy

In motion, in creation;

This alternation brief

And other being--

Apparently chaotic in

Randomness functions from

A precise center

Of consciousness

Here and now.

Thus,

Given to Man, me

An integrate detachment

We, I see

Where in this given

Unfoldment flows--there

Is no grandeur greater

Than that to be,

Where the spirit luxuriates;

It cuts its course

Skater-like

And never expends itself

In renewal but from

Nothing grows always

Conscious

That this is not all

However wonderful it be

-----expectation

-----restlessness

and----calligraphy

The calligraphic canvases became one kind of The Beautiful and were entitled The Signatures of the Spirit. It was while painting these that two additional esthetic experiences occurred. The first direct esthetic experience arrived in a flash while I was walking up the front steps of the University of Hawaii's art building. It was late fall 1962.

After nearly three years at the University, I gained the consciousness of the picture plane--this had to do with seeing the picture plane as it is. Hanging a one point perspective on a picture plane is only one of its possible uses. (It is also used to hang mattresses on; but, by definition, a mattress is three dimensional and designed and therefore is not a creation, however attended to.) It is that the picture plane be neither destroyed nor perverted, for the picture plane is the space on which the color and structure of the form are fixed. In a painting, color and structure must combine with space to be a form within itself, to be a complete, even if segmented, reporting of the spirit of Man. The idea and sense of space seemed to be ingrained in me and that may be so for I have lived my life in the western United States, on the Oceans, in the sky and in the greatest space of all--that between the ears.

The next direct esthetic experience dawned slowly. It developed in the spring 1963 while painting on the emerging Signatures of the Spirit. I call it the logic of color. This was recognized as the figures on the ten small

canvases gave way to the pure relationships of color as it differs in hue, value, tint, shade, tone, size, direction and emotion ("It's a happy painting.") in space. This logic can be directly perceived and known in the sense that the paint works. There is no necessity to reason or conceive or associate or so on, for one can see the paint work and feel the spirit lifted up. I had to paint and see before I knew and felt.

The last direct esthetic experience that forms my basic sense of painting is the logic of structure. Similarly, I had to see the logic of structure and did while casually looking through a book by Dr. Gustav Ecke, Domestic Chinese Furniture, Peking, 1936. This experience was a sudden convergence of instruction, example, study and practice. It was simply a knowing that there was a right way for things to go together in regards to materials, size, color, finish, intention, ability and so on. Unexpectedly, it fulfilled a statement-question-exclamation Dr. Ecke would put before his class, "What can Ming furniture do for you?"

At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro a few Signatures of the Spirit were painted in oils and in increasing sizes to 6' x 12'. Then oils were laid aside in favor of acrylics, and additional means other than the brush were used to apply the still thin and pure paints. The Depths have not been properly explored. The Lyrics and The Jewels appeared and are indicative of the pleasures in

painting I found there. Pleasures based on direct esthetic experiences, delimitations, hard work within The Beautiful, a philosophy that holds painting to be a disciplined way in the art of living and an affirmation of life.