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Less is more II: towards a minimal automatic calligraphy

Ruth Bindbeutel Brown

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

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SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

LESS IS MORE II:

TOWARDS A MINIMAL AUTOMATIC CALLIGRAPHY,

1969

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS SUBMITTED TO ME BY SUBMISSION
BY Ruth Bindbeutel Brown

ENTITLED Less is More II: Towards a Minimal Automatic Calligraphy
by

(Ruth Bindbeutel Brown)
Bachelor of Fine Arts

BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF Master of Fine Arts

[Signature]
Dean of the Graduate School

(A Thesis Paper Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Master of Fine Arts Degree.)

(Faculty of Art and Design
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville, (Campus)
(August) 1969.)

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Graduate School

August, 1969

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION

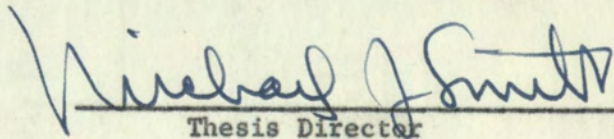
BY Ruth Bindbeutel Brown

ENTITLED Less is More II: Towards a Minimal Automatic

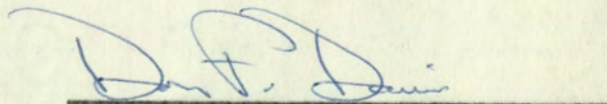
Calligraphy

BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF Master of Fine Arts



Thesis Director



Faculty Chairman

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I should like to acknowledge the help of Mr. Michael Smith for his patient assistance and guidance in the formative work of the studio project, to Mr. Donald Davis for his aid in the presentation of the exhibit and to Dr. John Adkins Richardson for his help with the written document and his criticism of studio work. Moreover, I must thank Dr. Harry Hilberry who was called upon for lengthy counsel and gave freely of his time, attention, and erudition.

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Harvey Klosser, *Less Than One: The Art of Structure*, translated by D. G. Stephenson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc.: 1965), p. 10.

The project grew from an awareness that there were qualities intrinsic to line and form which might be valuable in themselves, but had gone previously unexplored. The first paintings in the project, which dealt with

LESS IS MORE II:

TOWARDS A MINIMAL AUTOMATIC CALLIGRAPHY

The purpose of the project was to determine whether it is possible to maintain, in paintings independent of any figurative reference, the organic quality of line and form inherent in pictures of the human figure. The goal, in other words, was to convey a full sense of life without relying on representational figurative forms for qualities of liveliness. It was further hoped to achieve this vitality using the least means possible, so that all visual elements would grow from, and be a direct result of, the inner structure of the lines and forms.

The unswerving determination to dispense with all accessories and to make only what is essential, the object of the creative work, the determination to confine oneself to clear structure alone is not a limitation but a great help.¹

¹Werner Blaser, Mies Van der Rohe The Art of Structure, translated by D. Q. Stephenson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc.: 1965), p. 10.

The project grew from an awareness that there were qualities intrinsic to line and form which might be valuable in themselves, but had gone previously unexplored. The first paintings in the project, which dealt directly with figurative references and appreciation of the lines as visual means, relied upon the revelation of the figure. Therefore, in order to present with great clarity the independent properties of line and form, the drafting function of the line and the function of the forms to build figurative images had to be diminished to the point at which the figure was no longer necessary to the aesthetic quality of the painting. Obviously, the simplest way to achieve this was to eliminate the figure altogether. But, of course, to do that and only that would reveal nothing that the history of abstract painting has not made clear even to laymen. Only in relation to a given figurative style would an analysis of this nature make sense. Thus, the candidate and her major advisor determined on the following procedure. Taking the figure as a starting point, there would be a gradual depreciation of its importance in a series of twenty paintings and a corresponding increase in the intuitive expression of the line itself.

The painting, Number One (Figure 1) is a figurative composition which is consciously arranged so that the figurative element is of primary interest. The lines direct the eye to anatomical sections and are calculated to reveal various images

so that they function as figure contours and depend for importance upon their illustrative service. Paintings, Number Two (Figure 2) and Number Three (Figure 3), deal with the human figure, but their execution depended largely on intuitive decisions. Suzanne Langer explains intuition as follows:

What I mean by intuition is essentially what Locke called "natural light" (with, possibly, some reservation about intuitive self-knowledge). Intuition is, I think, the fundamental intellectual activity, which produces logical or semantical understanding. It comprises all acts of insight or recognition of formal properties, of relations, of significance, and of abstraction and exemplification. It is more primitive than belief, which is true or false. Intuition is not true or false, but simply present. We may construct true or false propositions involving its deliverances, just as direct sensory experiences may be involved in true or false propositions. But that is a large epistemological topic which we need not pursue here.²

²Suzanne K. Langer, Problems of Art (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons: 1957), pp. 66-67.

Following a series of preliminary sketches, where an attitude toward the subject was established, pictures were approached more directly than before. Then the paintings developed a line which tends to be quite varied and can sustain interest independent of its drafting function. This suggested that an intuitive approach was effective, perhaps even necessary. To suppose so was scarcely radical. So esteemed an observer as Anton Ehrenzweig explains that an artist should "make conscious visualizations purposely vague and ill-defined to bring in the more efficient scanning process of the subconscious to guide (the) search."³ He feels that an artist should avoid specific visualizations which would end his work prematurely by relying on the subconscious.⁴ And Robert Preusser points out that:

Chance observations have been instrumental in forming concepts and unpredictable experiments have led to discoveries. . . . Involvement in this process, which is vital to art and science,

³Anton Ehrenzweig, "Conscious Planning and Subconscious Scanning", Education of Vision (Vision and Value Series, ed. George Kepes. New York: George Braziller: 1966), p. 29.

⁴Ibid.

authenticates the unpremeditated and intuitive phases of conceptual thinking.⁵

The value of deliberately assuming an intuitive approach was that a wide range of possibilities could be explored quickly. Preliminary sketches could not only suggest ways of using line yet untested, but could eliminate those possibilities which were unnatural and of no genuine value in the long run.

Painting, Number Four (Figure 4), is one of the first real breaks with the figure. For, although the figure (or portions of it) is still present, its interest is considerably less important than the character of lines and forms used. The lines have an autonomous strength which becomes the real subject matter of the painting. The painting is also the first to break completely with a preconceived order and to develop intuitively or "automatically" from start to finish. It was painted in quick, violent strokes which create rather tightly active groups that are, in turn, relieved by the spontaneous character of the strokes. The elliptical shapes do not depend on their figurative origin and can stand on aesthetic merit regardless of figurative content.

⁵ Robert Preusser, "Visual Education for Science and Engineering Students", Education of Vision (Vision and Value Series, ed. George Kepes. New York: George Braziller: 1966), p. 210.

The fifth painting (Figure 5) leaves the figure completely, even though the overall expressive quality is more organic than in the previous painting. The forms doubtless have figurative connotations, for the painting followed a long series of figurative efforts, but they are so subconscious an expression as to have lost specific anatomical references. There appear again the short, jabbing strokes characteristic of these early intuitive efforts. The painting, Number Six (Figure 6) is largely non-figurative but does contain some indications that organic forms were the basis upon which the composition was conceived. The lines are less aggressive than in Number Five and have a greater feeling of natural growth or change. This painting seems to the writer to show a new ease of working in an intuitive, or automatic, way.

Regressions did occur, and Number Seven (Figure 7) reverts to forms used earlier by the candidate in redundant efforts to find an automatic expression. The progression from the figure was not always an easy one, for there was a constant temptation to retain that which was familiar rather than to venture into unknown territory. If less than monumental, Number Seven is an intuitive and spontaneous effort and serves as an example of relief needed in so strenuous an artistic project as a thesis.

It was at this point in the project that the lines finally broke away from all previous developments and succeeded in

functioning as strong individual elements. Particularly influential in creating the subsequent visual products was the discovery of an oriental method for evaluating organic possibilities. The technique of arriving at an organic sense, using the least means possible, now became a principle aim of the thesis. There was not, however, any attempt to transform a western mind into an eastern soul, nor to arrive at a scholarly level of understanding oriental art history. The candidate simply wished to make use of an oriental attitude which would allow for a spontaneous experience in integrating line and form to expose their organic possibilities. The Way of Zen by Alan Watts was a valuable aid in creating an atmosphere for work. He describes Taoism (the inward liberation from conventional patterns of thought and conduct) as being concerned with "unconventional knowledge" that leads to a direct understanding of life which will restore "original spontaneity."⁶ The oriental notion of naturalness in thought and action was also important.

To be unconscious of one's feet implies that the shoes are easy. To be unconscious of a waist implies the girdle is easy. The intelligence being

⁶Alan Wilson Watts, The Way of Zen (London: Thames and Hudson: 1957), p. 10.

unconscious of positive and negative implies that the heart is at ease. And he who, beginning with ease, is never not at ease, is unconscious of the ease of ease.⁷

The most impressive factor, however, was the discovery of the "Broken Ink" school of painting. This Chinese school which flourished in the twelfth century, evolved techniques for creating painterly effects not seen before, by breaking the density of line so that the ink and brush could create various values and forms within the line itself. Although the candidate rejected the methodology of such Broken Ink painters as Wang Wei and Ying Yu-chien, their attitude toward line and the flexibility, variety and expressiveness of line characteristic of their work was a major influence on the calligraphic elements which developed in the remainder of the project.⁸

Number Eight (Figure 8) and those which followed concentrated on the quality of each individual line and were explorations of the potential of lines which vary within themselves. The lines become forms, and the forms are the life-giving quality of the

⁷Alan Wilson Watts, The Way of Zen (London: Thames and Hudson: 1957), p. 26.

⁸Fritz Van Briessen, The Way of the Brush (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company: 1962), pp. 118-123.

lines which through gradually increased ease of handling became satisfying organic characters, totally independent of all figurative notions. The spontaneity of working in this way was genuinely rewarding by creating, at once, unique experiences in themselves while yielding new possibilities for future painting. The strokes became more relaxed than those used before, and the quality of life intrinsic in line was there, now only to be dealt with, not to be created by the artist.

Using raw canvas and acrylic paint instead of primed canvas and oil permitted the work to go more quickly and the paint to react in new ways. Most of the following paintings were done in this way. Unlike primed canvas, the raw canvas could either absorb or repel the paint depending upon the manipulation by the painter, and applied to raw canvas, the acrylic paint seemed more controllable when dry-brushed or watered down as a wash. Such handling not only resulted in more dramatic contrasts of line quality, but led to the resolution of a somewhat problematic color dilemma. If a wide variety of colors were used, then the minimal qualities of calligraphy were diminished. The acrylic paint on raw canvas could create the changing densities of color and eliminate using excessive paint and color schemes; the color contrasts and subtleties could depend entirely upon the variations in line density, thus exploiting the full potential of calligraphic

handling of paint, and new techniques of application were

qualities using minimal means. Color became part of the organic character inherent in the line.

The paintings Number Eight through Number Twenty (Figures 8 through 20) are so closely related that individual discussion of them seems quite excessive in this paper. They are no longer steps toward discovery of a nonfigurative organic line; they are all part of the experience which was the goal of the project. They deal with line as line, using the possibilities for expression and life which line can yield. Line is both the minimal structure of the composition and the visual detail. Further, the paintings are not just combinations of lines, but each line has been exploited as an individual entity, worthy of merit. Although the paintings vary in appearance, each in its own way expresses the attitude toward line and form which might have marked the end of the project. Their extent and variety serve only to indicate the infinite possibilities of perceptual experience with organic lines.

The candidate must consider the thesis project a success, for it fulfilled the needs of the candidate. A new sensitivity to line was attained and new visual means were developed which have increased the painterly vocabulary of the candidate. The nonfigurative works gave insights into compositional and color problems which would not have been realized without them. New spontaneity and freedom was experienced through a less studied handling of paint, and new techniques of application were

discovered. The intuitive processes which the candidate followed allowed for a fresh perception into visual problems which will provide new and meaningful direction for future work.

Figure 1	<u>Number One</u>	Oil	30 1/4" by 42"
Figure 2	<u>Number Two</u>	Oil	32" by 39 3/4"
Figure 3	<u>Number Three</u>	Oil	36 1/4" by 43"
Figure 4	<u>Number Four</u>	Oil	42" by 38"
Figure 5	<u>Number Five</u>	Oil	40 1/2" by 32"
Figure 6	<u>Number Six</u>	Oil	33" by 40 1/2"
Figure 7	<u>Number Seven</u>	Oil	9 1/4" by 11"
Figure 8	<u>Number Eight</u>	Acrylic	41 3/4" by 41 3/4"
Figure 9	<u>Number Nine</u>	Acrylic	25" by 30"
Figure 10	<u>Number Ten</u>	Acrylic	33" by 45"
Figure 11	<u>Number Eleven</u>	Acrylic	42" by 42"
Figure 12	<u>Number Twelve</u>	Acrylic	42 3/4" by 42 3/4"
Figure 13	<u>Number Thirteen</u>	Acrylic	29 3/4" by 42"
Figure 14	<u>Number Fourteen</u>	Acrylic	33" by 44 1/4"
Figure 15	<u>Number Fifteen</u>	Acrylic	42" by 33 1/4"
Figure 16	<u>Number Sixteen</u>	Acrylic	42" by 42"
Figure 17	<u>Number Seventeen</u>	Acrylic	35" by 42"
Figure 18	<u>Number Eighteen</u>	Acrylic	30" by 26 1/4"
Figure 19	<u>Number Nineteen</u>	Acrylic	43 1/2" by 36 1/4"
Figure 20	<u>Number Twenty</u>	Acrylic	30" by 42 1/2"

CATALOGUE OF PAINTINGS

Figure 1	<u>Number One</u>	Oil	30 1/4" by 42"
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Figure 19	<u>Number Nineteen</u>	Acrylic	42 1/2" by 36 1/4"
Figure 20	<u>Number Twenty</u>	Acrylic	30" by 42 1/2"

Leaves 12-17 have been replaced by this new leaf 12 and leaf 13 which is a slide saver pocket sheet. Figure number twelve is missing.

The Bindery 10/2013

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- Watts, Alan Wilson. The Way of Zen. London: Thames and Hudson: 1957.

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Thesis Title (Include name of adviser)

Less is More II: Towards a Minimal Automatic Calligraphy
Adviser: Michael J. Smith