

PASCAL



Dep	Mod	Ran	Sect	Shelf	Tray	Item
P	1	07	06	20	10	004

PASCAL

~~ART~~
J
1996
J133

My Method of Diagrams, or,
How to Recognize Birdsongs

By

Ethan Jackson

B.A., Williams College, 1992

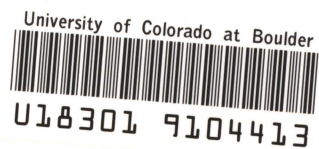
University of Colorado Libraries - Boulder

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
the Graduate School of the University
of Colorado in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Fine Arts, Creative Art

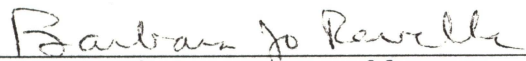
1996



This Thesis for the Master of Fine Arts Degree by

Ethan Jackson

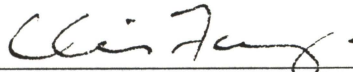
has been approved for the Department of Fine Arts by



Barbara Jo Revelle



Alex Sweetman



Claire Farago



Phil Solomon

Date

When I began taking pictures, the problem I encountered most often was one of organization and articulation. I found myself seeing an organized image in the world before the camera, and trying to understand how to use the camera to apprehend that organization. The difficulty of arresting my ideal of interested vision, using the dumb instrument of the camera, flowed through my every endeavor and was of greater importance than any of the whims that generated the particular content of my images. I think that as my skill and familiarity with the problem increased, I became able to use the medium actively as a way of organizing my understanding of the world visually. It strikes me that the camera, as it becomes a useful tool, also becomes a handicap. Perhaps I mean that I am able to see certain ideas much more clearly by participating in the language of the photographic image, but the same language limits my horizon of understanding, or the kind of things I am able to understand. Does the adoption of a complex and specialized grammar offer advantages that outweigh its liabilities? I think the question should rather be how do I cooperate with the chosen language to overcome limits to my thoughts and understanding; for I am unable and unwilling to use any other form.

Part of my reason for making pictures with the optical device of the camera has been to throw a screen between the raw world and my visual understanding. The camera organizes images on the ground glass which is a hard, safe

surface inscribed with rules which are square and true. The lawful behavior of rays of light passing through a lens assures me that what is recorded from the intensities of light at some cross section of the lens's projection is a true record of the physical situation before the lens. Its is as objective a record as it can be (not especially) and it is a mask for the desires that aimed the camera and chose the moment of exposure and changed perhaps infinitesimally during the time of exposure and heaped objects together in front of the lens.

A brief history of my brief images.

My earliest work with any important relationship to the current show consisted of icons and predellas, the form of a traditonal altarpiece, in which a relatively objective landscape image was accompanied by a series of images of the same space with inconsistent material. Intimate landscapes were accompanied by vignettes which revealed them to be infested by images from woodcuts. Here is one of my solutions to the problem of imagining more than the camera can see: simultaneous presentation of a technically lawful recording by the camera, and a simple illusion produced by forcing an incompatible form of representaiion into another kind of objectivity. I believe that forcing these two modes together produces a surface which reveals me, translates my enthusiasms and reluctances into a

seeable form. By merit of its indirectness it delineates more than I could possibly decide to explain.

Simultaneity was at the heart of the work with which I applied to Graduate School. This work had increasingly begun to hinge on formal sympathy between the above and below, between gestures in the figure and arrangements of objects on a table top. It was suggested to me that I try to deepen my engagement with this simultaneity, now understood as a spreading out of *content* over more than one image and thus over more than one space, by trying to accomplish the same effect in a single composition. What became most interesting to me was the necessity of returning to fundamental issues of form and composition in the articulation of objects in space, gestures among figure and object, and graphic qualities of the image. This necessity kindled a continuing interest in and respect for the problems of grace and harmony in composition, and a similar interest in formal matters more particular to the photograph, such as tonal scale, rectification, focal plane, etc. The result of compressing two simultaneous images into one space was to open the possibility of any number of kinds of simultaneity in a single image. The further result has been to diffuse the content of the image in such a way that it resides in several places or spaces at once. Space in the images proliferates with only a passing regard for the traditional rational space of the photograph.

The work at hand.

A new departure in the photographs in the thesis exhibition is the use of written text within the photographic image. I had hitherto avoided the addition of text, because of my difficulty in finding a textual voice in which I could trust. I had always looked to myself for the words, or to an author whom I trusted or believed. George Woodamn reflected, during a discussion of my use of text in the current work, that I treat it like any other object in the world, an apple or an orange. This has been the solution to my need to appeal directly to the idea of text and the ideas in text without entrapping myself in a text.

George's comment seems to appeal to a simple fact in my working: everything I encounter is a richly multivalenced thing: a physical substance, a projecting image, a grammatical system susceptible to interpretations, a pointer to an idea. In the hermetic surface of my pictures, I want to open all of these routes to understanding. In the hermetic surface of pictures, I see all of these ways of knowing and experiencing happening simultaneously. In the impressions on the surfaces of pictures, a bundle of ways of simultaneously experiencing things is recorded. It is the leakage between these ways of experiencing things that causes poetry, that produces something (joy, rapture) from nothing. [herein lies an

alchemical relation: sublimation from one form of experience to another releases the volatile in an instant]

The interior and the exterior are cardinal examples of complementary ways of experiencing, and have become a consistent theme in my recent work. I used the metaphor of the invisible man recently to describe a method of implication, or revelation, that occurs where inside and outside meet. The bandages that cover the skin of the invisible man reveal his surface, they point an arrow of implication at the place where they touch the invisible flesh. The bandages are banal, convenient. The flesh is sublime, an invisible container of a self. Definition, or the occurrence of a sensible idea, occurs on the infinitely thin surface borne upon from opposite sides by the flesh and the bandage. In this way, all meanings occur on surfaces where an inside, secret and delicate, with infinite potential and little visual form (a visual form that is either absent or conventional), meets a consensual physical realm, loaded with objects familiar and specific, dense and durable enough to withstand the attention of many eyes. Meanings are transactions across the surface and they leave their trace upon it.

One of my ways of speaking about the content of my work has been to talk about these inside and outside spaces as simultaneous components of the photographic space of the images. By this I intentionally invoke the idea of literal space as we experience it in the world, and the various

metaphorical uses of space, as particular regions of discourse. The idea of a discursive space is very visual; it implies a limited part of the universe filled with certain kinds of things. These things are subject to a grammar and a hermeneutics that vary from space to space. For instance, the discursive space of still-life, which has a rich and varied history, admits only a very selective set of ways of looking, kinds of objects, and produces a small set of meanings. With this idea of spaces in mind, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* provides a springboard into a deeper discussion of images.

The Poetics of Space.

In the *Poetics of Space*, I find a treatment of the Image (the Poetic Image) unlike the optical ones with which I am most familiar. Because Bachelard speaks of literature, his images are divorced from the act of physical sight; they are disembodied visions, memories of sight recurring on a psychological field in the mind of a reader who is a dreamer. My enthusiasm for the photographic image has a similar orientation towards the physical sight which the camera simulates and approximates: In the act of photographing, my imagination is mostly responsible for my responses to the scene and material before me, and I take satisfaction in imagining in spite of the inevitable casual boredom of the world. By imagining I

spite the banality of mere objects in space and escape the rigors of optical physics.

The images in Bachelard's study are born from any visual experience, and are subject to intrusions from any quarter. The sight of an attic, the representation of a shell, the experience of a drawer, find common form in the mostly visual, barely optical poetic image. I suppose that the point of this rambling is that I see the photograph as a husk shed from an event.

This event: mostly located at the time of exposure. This event, a node with strong or weak but essential connections to other events. This event having always in some measure the characteristics of the psychological, the mental, the emotional, the visual, the sensory. This event is a node to the extent that the contents of its various characteristers acheive a sympathetic density. As the compositional strength of the image coalesces, a system of positions and relations comes into being, and the nature of the occupiers of these positions comes to the surface. What can occupy positions: gestures, objects, shapes, symbols, text, words.

A bare arm, reaches from the left into a block of text balanced on a tabletop. The space of still-life blankets the image, effecting the sense of a microcosm, replete with gravity and an obscure margin leading to an outside which does not concern us. The text occupies a place reserved for objects, behaving vertrically like most printed text,

explaining a Venn diagram which is cut off by the edge of the table. The text stands on the table graphically presses against the surface of the print; gravity pulls it flat to the table top as leaves of papers. The combined effect could be surface tension. The arm further interferes in this encounter between spaces, by pressing down on it from the margin of the still life and reading the words by touch, sensing the texture of both surfaces, the print's and the table's, and the point at which they peel away from each other. In three-space, the intersection of two non-parallel planes is a line. The gesture is one of spanning and linking, perhaps on the verge of squeezing. In the three-space of still life, it reaches over from the shadows, the territory of increasing irrelevance, to rest on a phrase and a design. In the space of the printed page, the hand reaches through the truncated diagram to apprehend a single word. The diagram, subject and referent of the text, is broken off and the fracture admits a hand, sensory and manipulative organ. The text sings its own inadequacy to the diagram, and the hand glosses the song casually, in the language of the diagram.

How then is this a node? (For that is the reason why I embarked on my description.) Composition, always present in an entropic and diluted form, thickens to a sensible presence, allowing for both the representation of a scenario transpiring on a table top and an atmosphere and surroundings. Iconic material, always present in a

disordered state of weak and aimless signification, froms itself into a semblance of a display, using the vocabulary of still life: the room is one used for storage, and the table is one used for arrangement, manipulation, and the actions of consumption (eating, seeing, reading).

Simultaneously, and on a parallel course, words (always present in the stream of mental dialogue) form themselves into an explanation, and a desire to rhetorically simplify the information present. Finally, lines (another order of composition, always present or implied by the physical nature of vision) curve and harmonize in an arabesque design, a unit of symbolic material. Composition, Iconic representations, Words, lines, all thicken at the moment of exposure to produce palpable content, and all of the contents react with one another in a certain way, perhaps orbiting briefly as they go in different directions, sympathetically producing harmonies in one another.

What are these harmonies? The economies of exposition and display, explanation towards revelation of obscure content for the consumption of the analytical mind, display for the delectation of a purchaser, an eater, a desiring subject to be catered to, wooed, seduced. My mind longs to be seduced by illusions of wholeness, understanding, consistency.

"We have seen how freely the imagination acts upon space, time and elements of power. But the action of the imagination is not limited to the level of images. On the level of ideas too, it tends toward extremes, and there are ideas that dream. For instance, certain theories which were once thought to be scientific are,

in reality, vast, boundless daydreams." (Bachelard, p 112)

This closely describes my attraction to the scientific, technical and mechanical. There is a fantastic logic to all abstract reasoning, which hides behind the sense we eagerly try to apprehend. Theories, abstract reasoning, philosophising, all attempt to wrest from the chaos of everything an orderly view. but the sense they make and their function as ways of thinking seem always more closely tied to pragmatics. The craft of the engraver makes more impact on the life of the ideas of alchemy than the ideas themselves, the inspired whimsy of Lewis Carroll inflects the study of logic in such away that it becomes a metaphysical tool that operates on the emotional humours as well as the *set of all books* . All disciplines of thought have margins at which underlying imagination begins to show through. As much as it is necessary to build over it a rational structure. the imagination is the warehouse of raw perception, the keeper of the enigma of experience, the infinitely amazing fact that we can sense, or, more amazingly and essentially, that we can remember sensing. But all memories are translations of experience into a manipulable form, as I think photographs are: they are related to an original experience, but they are durable, a solifdication of the fugitive spirit.

In making the work for My Method of Diagrams, I feel that I have just begun to master some methods and ideas which open up the process of imagining to some kind of

scrutiny. It has been my intention to articulate the imaginary in terms of my own experience, my emotions, my history. This has necessarily meant configuring images, objects, and ideas from entirely disparate realms in a reflection of the nature of the imagination in an individual. Having completed this work it is now obsolete, and I only look forward to making new work using what I have learned here. I have just barely begun to suggest to myself the depth of work which I am interested in making.

Sources

- Bachelard, Gaston. The Poetics of Space. Boston, Beacon Press, 1994.
- Krauss, Rosalind. The Optical Unconscious. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1993.
- Carroll, Lewis. Symbolic Logic, Part I, Elementary. New York, Berkeley Enterprises, 1955.
- Schulz, Bruno. The Complete Fiction of Bruno Schulz. New York, Walker and Company, 1989.
- Stewart, Susan. On Longing. Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 1993
- Stewart, Susan. Nonsense. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree Master of
Fine Arts

Ethan Jackson

has submitted this wwritten thesis as a
supplement to the creative and 20 slides
which are in the permanent posession of
the University of Colorado and recorded
with the Department of Fine Arts.

Approved By

Barbara Jo Revelle
Chair of Committee

Cliff Jang
Member of the Committee

[Signature]
Member of the Committee

Philip Solomon
Member of the Committee

Chair, Department of Fine Arts

Slide Inventory:

1. (Arm with Peppers)	31" x 40"	1995
2. (How to Recognize Birdsongs #2)	5" x 5"	1995
3. (How to Recognize Birdsongs #4)	5" x 5"	1995
4. (Inhalation)	5" x 5"	1995
5. (Venn Diagram with Touch)	5" x 5"	1995
6. (Ouroboros)	5" x 5"	1995
7. (Mutilation Preparation)	31" x 40"	1995
8. (Muting It)	5" x 5"	1995
9. (Pears)	5" x 5"	1995
10. (Alchemical Figure)	5" x 5"	1995
11. (Labyrinth)	30" x 39"	1995
12. (Bilateral Diagram with Bottle)	5" x 5"	1995
13. (Bilateral Diagram with Roots)	5" x 5"	1995
14. (Venn Diagram with Hearing)	5" x 5"	1995
15. (Arm Touching Shell)	28" x 36"	1995
16. (Lemons, Volatile)	31" x 41"	1995
17. (Pears, Volatile)	31" x 39"	1995
18. (Yawn)	5" x 5"	1995

