

THE ESSENCE OF AN IMAGE: IMAGE AS MEMORY

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Modernist painters such as Picasso, Ernst and Matisse were among others who incorporated what was then considered “primitive” art, mostly from Africa and Oceania, into their works. Prior to this, European artists had appropriated Greco-Roman themes and characters. These appropriated elements were consequently recreated without their cultural context and content, altered to reflect more current themes. In most cases, attention was directed toward the recreator, the author of the new work of art, not the creator of the artifact. In contrast, Post-Modern artists, including myself, have reproduced appropriated elements virtually unaltered as a way of denying authorship and emphasizing a more conceptual format. Appropriated imagery has been a tool for me in my work. Additionally, both figurative and abstract elements play significant roles since I consider juxtaposition of elements to be a strength. The challenge of fitting these elements together has enabled me to develop a style of painting that seems uniquely mine. The formal issues of style and content figure heavily in my endeavor to capture a moment in time; something lost forever except for its persistence in memory. These reflections are often imbued with personal icons, arcane text and symbolic drawing that weave in and out of the landscape. Endemic to my work are the following: (1) abrasion/erosion of surface areas of the canvas; (2) partial imagery broken or skewed; (3) appropriation of historic subject matter or archaic brand images; (4) symbolic drawing; ie. hats as containers or landscapes, ravens that infer vigilance; and (5) a palette of complex colors resulting from overpainting with other colors to the point of becoming almost undecipherable. Subject matter is based on my own personal history and life experiences as well as my reaction to current happenings.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background Information

According to Thomas McEvelley, “The myth of continuity in Western art history is constructed out of acts of appropriation.”<sup>1</sup> Modernist painters such as Picasso, Ernst and Matisse were among others who incorporated what was then considered “primitive” art, mostly from Africa and Oceania, into their works. Prior to this, European artists had appropriated Greco-Roman themes and characters. These appropriated elements were consequently recreated without their cultural context and content, altered to reflect more current themes. In most cases, attention was directed toward the recreator, the author of the new work of art, not the creator of the artifact.

In contrast, Post-Modern artists, including myself, have reproduced appropriated elements virtually unaltered as a way of denying authorship and emphasizing a more conceptual format. Appropriated imagery has been a tool for me in my work. Additionally, both figurative and abstract elements play significant roles since I consider juxtaposition of elements to be a strength.

Having been a graphic designer for over 20 years, I have dealt with elements of composition that were seemingly incongruous. The challenge of fitting these elements together has enabled me to develop a style of painting that seems uniquely mine. The formal issues of style and content figure heavily in my endeavor to capture a moment in time; something lost forever except for its persistence in memory. These reflections

<sup>1</sup>McEvelley, Thomas. *Artforum*. v. 23 Nov. 1984 p. 54 – 61 “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief”

are often imbued with personal icons, arcane text and symbolic drawing that weave in and out of the landscape.

Endemic to my work are the following: (1) abrasion/erosion of surface areas of the canvas; (2) partial imagery broken or skewed; (3) appropriation of historic subject matter or archaic brand images; (4) symbolic drawing; ie. hats as containers or landscapes, ravens that infer vigilance; and (5) a palette of complex colors resulting from overpainting with other colors to the point of becoming almost undecipherable. Subject matter is based on my own personal history and life experiences as well as my reaction to current happenings.

Since 1995, my work has focused on capturing the essence of memory. Life experiences are represented by halftone snippets of old family photographs. Obscure images appear in windows to be viewed, as well as western hats, often appearing as symbols of my regional heritage. Additionally, heavenly bodies orbit and wobble as if to celebrate man's connectedness to the cosmos.

In a recent show in February at the 500X Gallery in Dallas, I was able to observe a body of my work in an ideal environment. This experience enabled me to determine what elements in my work most strongly supported my philosophy and intent.

Working with a subtractive process, constructing the composition and then deconstructing it by abrading the image, overpainting that and eroding it again begins to create a very complex tapestry. Exposed subsurface layers encourage the viewer to ponder the possibility that previously painted images have been overpainted, suggesting the transient nature of life – the present continually becoming history. The partial or skewed imagery may relate to a dream sequence, which when reviewed logically, does not make complete sense. Sometimes the presence of appropriated advertising imagery, text or brand names/logos can trigger a memory in the same sense as do pictures in an old family photo album or school yearbook.

Symbolic drawing of pots, vessels, flying cowboy hats and cosmic blips has become part of my visual vocabulary. My use of complex mixtures of overlaid color place an emphasis on mood.

I have narrowed my artistic research to the work of five 20th-century artists with the goal in mind to infuse my work with more color and drama – consequently, more edge and immediacy. The first of these is René Stout. I am fascinated by the compositional strength and power of her cultural constructs. I have long been an avid fan of Robert Rauschenberg. I passionately enjoy the power and physicality of his work. I like Rauschenberg's notion that art should be life. I am enamored with the process which encompasses the work of Jasper Johns. The appropriation and subsequent superimposition of imagery by David Salle is compelling to me. I also admire Cy Twombly's child-like, yet erudite scribbling which possesses a freshness and freedom that I hope to achieve.

Through the process of examining these artists' works, I hope to uncover a seminal link between the the elements I relish in their work and mine, in order to uniquely fuse them into my own. I also hope to gain insight into my own style.

#### Statement of Problem

My problem was to encapsulate the essence of memory in a more ethereal environment whereby the symbolic becomes forefronted in a two dimensional plane, in a painting. My intent was to achieve this by the overlaying of personal signs or regional cultural icons. This enhancing of the visual language was intended to establish a more transparent process, whereby the viewer would be able to see into the painting, to experience its roots and to enjoy the layering process. The appropriation of historical imagery has been prevalent in my work, however; I believe that my future work should rely less on appropriation of imagery and more on personal iconographic drawing.

The metaphoric use of personal icons was researched. I see the mind as the container of spirituality, power and magic. The hat, consequently, is to be seen as the

container, the protector and the landscape that surrounds the mind's eye.

The notion of reliquaries stems from my studies of tribal ancestral figures that contain sacrificial material and “muti” pouches which contain powerful magic for, among other things, healing or warding off evil spirits. How this relates to my own personal experience and to my personal vessels is a major emphasis.

Exploring the effects of color, texture, scale and content has revealed insightful information about what combinations work best. By doing small detail paintings as well as large pieces, I have discovered new ways to solve compositional problems.

My intention to create surfaces that entice one to touch, yet compel one to look beyond was, I now believe, quite successful. In doing this, I had hoped to achieve a natural, material presence that draws one in and involves one in the experience of the work. I planned to establish within the works, a central theme in which visual metaphors reside.

In this process I have addressed the following questions:

1. What effect does supplanting appropriated imagery with symbolic drawing as the dominant element have on my work?
2. How does the use of visual metaphors such as reliquaries and vessels affect my work?
3. How are they used to illustrate my own personal experiences?
4. How is the visual language in my work enhanced by color, texture, content and scale?

#### Methodology

I have produced a body of seven paintings, one on canvas and six on wood along with three small works as detail based on this research. I have observed the relationship of the visual language with regard to color, texture and content. I explored the impact of various scales on my work and how they affect the visual language.



The pieces that I produced ranged from approximately. 2' x 2' to 8' x 8'. I have kept a journal to document the process and to record my thoughts and ideas along the way. This project culminated in an exhibition of my work and a paper.

## CHAPTER II

### INTERPRETATION OF PAINTINGS

#### Artist's Characteristics

It's insightful for the viewer to understand how an artist approaches his work. It is also insightful and prudent for the artist to be conscious of what criteria are to be considered and consequently, what is to be discarded. This awareness enables the artist to focus on the general direction the work should follow and still allow for serendipitous evolution.

I have made a sincere effort to link several of the elements that have become an integral part of my visual vocabulary. Specifically, they are: (1) the reductive process caused by removing layers of previously applied paint; and (2) the laying down of personal icons by drawing into freshly-applied paint as well as drawing over dry and abraded surfaces in this body of work. I have downplayed the appropriated imagery and integrated it into the field rather than forefronting it. It is my intent at this point to lay the groundwork for the pieces that follow to reflect upon the continuity of my initial effort.

I will address the four questions posed in my methodology and discuss how I think each piece provides answers to these questions. Although all the questions will be not applicable to all the pieces, at least some will deal with all four, whereas others with two or more.

*Indigenous Hyperbole, Diptych*

This large-scale 8' x 8' mixed media painting consists of two 8' x 4' wooden panels. The left panel reveals a random assortment of screws strewn across the middle of the panel and bleeding off the right side and into the right panel. These screws are rendered in a posterized fashion in grays and blues partially outlined in black. The field on which they appear is a flat, buttery cream. A black and white checkerboard grid runs across the top and butts a black bar on the right panel.

The right panel is a rather busy, stream-of-consciousness melange crested by a black horizontal bar that extends from the left edge to the right edge and down for about four inches. Since the slightly taller left panel was added after the right panel had been started, the horizontal bar was then added to the right to make them the same height. A black and white checkerboard grid continues across the left panel along the same line. Along the left side of the right panel from top to just below center are wingless, cartoon-like black birds, images of flying hats and a mouth that appears to have been snagged by a fish hook. The figures are poised on a light yellow field broken by black arc lines. Below these figures is the uniformed, decorated body of an old soldier in a coffin. He seems to float in a sea of yellow. To the right of the old soldier, beginning at the bottom, is a plant of unknown origin that grows between the dead hero and a group of acrobats forming a human pyramid. One acrobat holds what appears to be a fish while the uppermost two acrobats support a bus-like rolling checkerboard. Above the bus is a cosmic sequence of rotating celestial bodies, wobbles and flying hats. The large hat form is echoed by a broad brush stroke that moves to the center and seems to drive the action in the piece.

I think this painting responds to the first question regarding the effect of supplanting appropriated imagery with symbolic drawing as the dominant element. A bold attempt was made to establish a new dialogue between familiar elements of personal iconography. The

incorporation of flying hats, ravens, circus acrobats, dead heroes and body parts capable of communication opens the door to more liberal interpretation by the viewer.

How do these visual metaphors affect my work? These elements seem to personalize the visual experience while building and retaining the visual vocabulary inherent to my prior body of work. The left panel of screws and its juxtaposition to the right panel not only creates irony, but hopefully provokes additional questions of content in the mind of the viewer. Instead of the traditional window box that normally appears in the center of other works, emphasis is more upon the visual dialogue. One of the enigmas of this piece is the way some of the imagery crosses the panels while other imagery is stopped by the adjoining edges of each panel.

How do these visual metaphors illustrate my own personal experiences? I'm not sure I can answer that. It's easy to see, for instance, the reoccurring themes and images in Jasper John's work; however, access to meaning is limited. Although not obvious, but significant, was my use of house paint from the reconstruction of our home that burned in 1996 as well as the oak panels on which the painting is done, that came from the old living room.

Concerning the question of visual language enhancement with regard to scale, color, texture and content; the size of this work proved to be more challenging and I enjoyed that aspect. Because of the larger format, the brush strokes became more obvious and required the use of several different-sized brushes to break up the large areas of color, which consequently added interesting textural elements. Working in larger areas also allowed for more conspicuous variation in the blending of the paint.

Additionally, the colors in this painting, predominantly yellow and black, have an ominous look about them. There is a certain sense of foreboding in these seemingly whimsical images. I like that.

### *Time in a Bottle*

This 36" x 36" painting, done in mixed-media on wood can best be described as a visual and verbal collage. The color field is a warm mid-range gray which appears to be the base color; however, abrasion reveals sub-surface colors that betray the field's simplicity. It's difficult to tell just where this painting begins or ends. The gray field is broken by an overpainted area of dark blue which starts at the top, just right of center and flows down curving toward a canted center box that appears to be an old produce label at first glance. Closer scrutiny reveals that the label reads "detritus." To the right of the label is the small negative image of a woman and some cryptic writing. The dark area then curves left into a horizontal sweep and exits center left. There is a red/blue/yellow horizon line about nine inches above the bottom of the piece that seems to disappear close to mid-point and reappears about nine or ten inches from the right side of the painting. Near, around and on this horizontal plane, pots and vessels can be seen. Their presence is defined only by outline. An orange-brown wash moves in from the right along the line, becoming muddy just to the right of mid-point and vanishes into the dark blue area just to the left of vertical center-point. Weaving in and out, over and under are old hardware store ledger entries. Beginning at the top left portion of the piece is a partially obliterated body of text that rambles down to just below mid-point before disappearing in the sweep of dark blue. Stenciled images of cotton bolls overprint both the black center and the blue above and below. A dangling phone receiver hangs from the top center of the piece down about 12 inches just to the left of the blue area.

In this piece, all of the imagery was either drawn or created by me. My original photograph became the computer-manipulated negative that appears in the center. I also created the stencils, drew the vessels and originated the text.

The visual metaphors in this piece, specifically the cotton bolls, are indigenous to my youth. Also symbolic are the reliquary vessels and the dangling receiver which signifies

an attempt to communicate. The theme that seems to be constantly replaying itself is that of being or wanting to be connected, whether it be the past, future, the earth or the cosmos.

These drawn images seem to have a positive effect on the work, making it more personal and yet more enigmatic. The colors, texture and content in this piece are rich and filled with energy, which greatly enhance the visual language of this piece. I think it is one of the most successful.

*Hello, Central*

This piece, a 49.5” x 49.5” mixed-media painting/assemblage done on a wooden panel features a cosmic diagram peppered with snippets of period architecture, archaic cuneiform writings from the Rosetta Stone and an inset center box containing a resin mould of contorted faces and forms. A set of earphones is attached and sits in the box, leaning against the mould. The cord is plugged into the mould. A pencil also rests at the base of the box. There is a pale yellow field that surrounds the box and remaining constant through the piece. This field is cut by circular lines and grids intersecting areas that become alternating light and dark shapes to further echo the importance of the grid. There is a geodesic dome hovering just above the inset box that appears to be beaming individuals up into it.

The connectedness theme abounds in this piece and reaffirms my belief that the visual metaphors are both compelling and enigmatic. Alphabet characters that appear to be diagrammatic, skeletal bones with hardware connections and grid patterns suggesting memory and passage of time are some of the allusions to things and ideas that have a conscious link. This piece seems more like a personal journey that invites the viewer to jump on board. The color scheme is almost monochromatic, suggesting an arid, barren plain which, in turn, supports and enhances the content. I think the scale of this piece is good because if it were larger or smaller, I sense that some of the content would be lost. As it stands, it retains its intimacy works well on several levels of interpretation. I like it a lot.

The creation of shapes and their relationship to the space around them is becoming more important to me. I've noticed this in the last two or three paintings while attempting to define a particular item in the work and opting instead to define a shape that had previously been created by intersecting lines or brush strokes.

### *Vanishing Point*

This small detail painting, 24" x 24" and painted on fiberboard, frames a center box about 3" x 5" containing an old photographic image of two children, a boy and girl of about six or seven years standing on a sidewalk, circa the late 40's. The lavender framed box is positioned on a medium gray field that surrounds it and bleeds off each side of the piece. The picture is a photographic solvent transfer. A text narrative suggesting a running dialogue runs across the top of the piece. The text is black vintage typewriter type on a white background which covers the top third of the piece. About four inches from the bottom is a warm red bar that runs horizontally across from left to right. A narrow irregular yellow line separates the red bar from the gray field. Graphite grid patterns emerge at various spots all over the painting and then disappear into the background again. Just above the yellow line more text can be seen. This text is larger, more emphatic and succinct.

This piece is an experiment with alternative surfaces, incorporating a solvent transferred photograph accompanied by a text narrative and the addition of new colors to my palette. The text and the image create the visual dialogue, each relating to the other. It is a significant response to the question of color, texture, content and scale. The modest size of this piece tends to draw one in. Its strength lies in its simplicity of execution. I believe it also illustrates the use of visual metaphors and how they relate to my personal experiences.

*Vanishing Point* evolved from an old photograph of myself and the girl across the street. This bit of personal history encapsulates a period of time and notions, prejudices

and jargon picked up and passed on with little knowledge of or regard for meaning, intended to produce a reaction or express either approval or disapproval. The text is a dialogue, suggesting that the viewer read between the lines, to re-experience the naivete of children. Although visually quite simple, I think this is a strong piece.

*The Most Beautiful Bird in the World*

This large-scale mixed-media, canvas painting (67" x 49") features an enormous central image, that of a large penguin-like bird bearing broad horizontal stripes and tailored tuxedo, head thrust upward and mouth agape, extending from near the bottom all the way to the top of the piece. The field upon which it appears is broken horizontally just below its head by a narrow red stripe that separates the yellow field above from the blue field below. Juxtaposed to the right and cutting into the body of the bird is a mosaic sphere of different sized grids. Dark blue plays against a soft Naples yellow. Larger red-brown squares play against lighter, more complex colored blues. The head and shoulders of the bird are tightly rendered; however, as the image graduates down, it becomes outline brush strokes where the sphere intersects.

In this piece, I have supplanted the appropriated imagery with my own iconic drawing, thereby addressing the first problem question. The symbolic bird unquestionably dominates this work, accentuating the drama and increasing the appeal. I think that this transition from appropriation to drawing had a very positive and successful outcome.

The treatment of the painted surfaces upon closer scrutiny adds another layer to the visual experience. The surface abrasion only becomes obvious from a closer viewpoint. The color is more vibrant than in prior work and the scale magnifies and illuminates the content.

This particular work draws heavily from mythology, albeit much latitude is taken. The idea of a penguin-like raven, signifying a phoenix, adds an inane slant and



sets the stage for multiple interpretations. This addresses the question of supplanting appropriated imagery with symbolic drawing. I believe this was a good transition.

There is a lot to look at in this painting. The imagery and content work on multiple planes. The large central figure draws one in, consequently revealing the color and texture which have become significantly complex, resulting from surface abrasion and overpainting. The checkerboard pattern, under closer scrutiny, becomes a mosaic of subtle color variations.

I enjoyed the painting process in this particular piece very much because I made decisions about color and placement that seemed intuitive and worked well. The addition and treatment of the checkerboard grid were particularly pleasing.

#### *Saints Preserve Us*

This 49.5" x 49.5" mixed-media painting was done on a wooden panel. The inset center box in this piece features a line engraving of numerous gear wheels of various sizes suggesting machinery. A field of pale yellow surrounds the framed box. In the field are historic parochial figures, also of various sizes, reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition. These images seem like multiples of the same image, varying only slightly in their configuration. There is one ominous dark figure that dominates the left side of the painting, bleeding off the left side as well as top and bottom. Within this figure is a black and white checkerboard. A stylized crucifix appears in the right side of the piece.

*Saints Preserve Us* is a very enigmatic piece that relies heavily upon symbolic drawing and color scheme. The relationship of the figures to the machinery, the black and white checkerboard suggesting strict adherence to doctrine, are just two of the symbolic nuances incorporated in this work. I believe the visual metaphors in this piece significantly enhance the visual experience and address question one and two in a positive way.

This painting became more painterly as it progressed and I began to think that the shapes were becoming more important than the images. I then concentrated on reworking the shapes and forgot about the images. This is the point where the piece began to really

come alive and go its own way. I especially like the colors in this painting. This is a good example of how the visual language can be enhanced by color and content.

*Zeitgeist*

This 36" x 48" painting/assemblage was done in mixed media on a wooden panel. The clay-colored field contains transparently overpainted areas of slate blue and a misty green. These areas are also collaged with vintage ledger pages, one containing a ghost-like image of a woman. Horizontal gray lines overlay the clay field. In the lower left corner, a large circle drawn in black with an oil crayon, surrounds an attached vintage steel stoveplate. A large gestural brushed arc cuts through the piece from top to bottom. To the left of this arc, collaged text reads "What is the price?" To the right of this arc are two dangling spheres superimposed over another ledger sheet and surrounded by a dark green wash. This area is encompassed by a flat black area that starts at the top right corner of the piece and with a reversing arch, begins to fill the the painting, but stopped by the first gestural arch. A white-outlined hand reaches out of the flat black field in the lower right corner as if to grasp something in the foreground.

While painting this piece, I felt as though I utilized my drawing skills very well. The line work seems to compliment the bold gestural look. The drawing seems to breathe life into a piece that might otherwise have become dense and static. In this light, I think it serves to positively reinforce my efforts to supplant appropriated imagery with symbolic drawing as the dominant element. I believe this is a successful piece, although I think that it suffers from its small scale. The field would be drastically more effective had the piece been done at least twice size, maybe even larger. Since I enjoy the earthy mixture of the colors, I think that a larger format would insure more emphasis on its complexity. I guess I first became aware of this after seeing the huge Diebenkorns at the Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art.

## CHAPTER III

### SUMMARY

This body of work that I have chosen to exhibit and write about is essentially all new work, completed in 2000. My motive in doing this was to present the cumulative product of a metamorphosis that initially began in 1995. I have selected seven pieces of the nine completed to exhibit, space being the limiting factor. I believe these seven pieces reflect the many different facets of my particular style in different ways. I will explain by referencing specific works that best illustrate my points.

I initially approached this project with the idea in mind of drawing into sharper focus several components of my work while intensifying the color schemes and building upon the more successful elements. These components include a more succinct narrative, more compelling imagery and a more discernable visual dialogue. I was concerned that there was an inherent muddiness in my palette that was undermining the potential for color richness. The most successful elements of my prior work were the reoccurring themes, the symbolic images and the obvious allusion through surface abrasion to the implied passing of time. Also worthy of inclusion was the grid or matrix, symbolic of memory and the central box, a window for the viewer to peer into or through. Consequently, I hoped that these elements could be cognitively pulled together to create a more dynamic body of work.

As I began to work and write, some interesting discoveries about the painting process started to take place. The imagery that I introduced in conjunction with the drawing that I applied began to form abstract shapes created by the junctions of intersect-

ing lines. This first became apparent in *Saints Preserve us* and again in *Hello, Central* where I was able to take better advantage of it. Once I had made that discovery, my process became immediately more painterly, less controlled. I enjoyed this.

In *Time in a Bottle* and *Zeitgeist*, I discovered a bravura effect while overpainting the abraded areas. These two paintings were initially done during this summer, but neither had the visual impact that I had hoped for. Not until I had completely reworked them by adding decisive elements to each, did they become effective solutions.

The “detritus” label was added in *Time in a Bottle* as well as more bright color to offset the prior muddiness created by the surface abrasion. The addition of the large gestural black field on the right half of the painting *Zeitgeist* and the drawing of the hand changed the dialogue completely through the elimination of some of the prior busyness.

The large diptych, *Indigenous Hyperbole*, was one of the more problematic pieces partly because of its size. The muralistic nature of this piece allowed for more gestural painting, although compositional problems resulted in its transformation from diptych to single piece and back to diptych. I think the final resolution was a good one and now feel that there is strength in the fact that there is not a consistent flow from one panel to the other.

I think the piece *Vanishing Point* is a really strong piece. While the painting appears to be secondary to the text and image, it never-the-less speaks to the content. The gray field relating to gray matter being subsequently modified by the subtle grid snippets alluding to thoughts and memory.

In conclusion, I’m quite pleased with the results of this project. I think that one of the obvious strengths is the diversity within the different pieces included in the exhibition. It was my firm conviction not to include prior works in order to present a more

cohesive and current presentation. I think this was a sound decision and am convinced that this goal was accomplished while maintaining diversity.

I believe, in retrospect, that this body of work reflects my endeavor to overcome some of the obstacles created through my inherent drive to compose, perchance to overcompose! This in no way negates the validity of the works as good compositional pieces nor their cohesiveness as a body of work. Their strength lies in the largely unanticipated outcome of each piece, while still retaining a common thread.

Within all of the pieces, juxtaposition of imagery, text and color, grids, surface abrasion and often, assemblage or collage consistently combine to create a dialogue. This mix remaining constant, the works begin to diverge.

I sense that *Saints Preserve Us* and *Hello, Central* represent a new painterly direction with shapes dominating imagery. *Time in a Bottle* and *Zeitgeist* appear more gestural and spontaneous, relying on drawing skills as does *Indigenous Hyperbole*, which alone belongs to the stream-of-consciousness genre. *The Most Beautiful Bird in the World* is symbolic and painterly, similar to the large diptych, but more precisely painted. *Vanishing Point* is nearest to being a stand alone piece save for the common elements of text and window box. Together, I believe they represent a diverse, yet cohesive body of work.