

PAINTING IN BLACK AND WHITE

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Art
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by

Terry Elkins
December, 1978

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to present the reasons why I work in black and white rather than with the spectrum of colors, the ideas I have about my work, and the actual finished paintings.

Sometimes thoughts overlap. In this written body of the thesis, I have tried to divide into chapters the historical framework, physical and technical approach, philosophical attitude, and the symbolic meanings in reference to black and white. These different aspects work together to form a personal definition of black and white.

The actual writing of the thesis has been most important in helping me to organize the many thoughts I have on black and white and to bring these thoughts together in one clearer picture.

CHAPTER I

THE USE OF BLACK AND WHITE BY SOME ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISTS.

A search for new themes and techniques has occurred in art since its beginnings. Painting in black and white is not a new way of working, but was discovered again with such great renewed strength and creative awareness by American painters in the late 1940's and early 50's that it became a foundation and a key part in the making of Abstract Expressionism.

"Grisaille painting" is monochromatic painting in black, white and grey. It is a limited medium in the sense that, instead of colors, an artist has only value contrasts to work with. Therefore, by seeming to restrict the possibilities for making a painting, grisaille presents itself as a true test for the artist. As grisaille painting evolved throughout the centuries, new purposes for working in this medium and new ideas about painting took place. Often studies for paintings and underpaintings were done in grisaille. Problems of spatial depth, proportion of the figure or com-

position were worked out in grisaille. They were like sketches done with brushes and oils instead of pencil on paper.

In Jan Van Eycks' GHENT ALTERPIECE, 1432, the representation in grisaille of the figures in the extreme upper left and right panels of the exterior is painted so realistically that the figures almost appear to be small dimensional statues. Van Eyck presented himself a problem which is a true test of his skill as a painter. The 18th century French painter, Francious Xavier Vispre imitated a drawing of a torn engraving under broken glass within the limit of the grisaille palette, that might not have fooled the eye had it been in color. Some of the late works by the 20th century painter, Rene Magritte, were surreal landscapes painted in greys that appeared like dreams that are void of color. Paradoxically his subject matter is rendered solid and stonelike in texture as well as color.

The ideas of using grisaille as opposed to black and white as Van Eyck or Vispre did, or as Magritte did, to suggest a surreal landscape, changed radically by 1950 when Jackson Pollock did his "poured" or "dripped" paintings. These paintings have been described as large drawings because they have continuous lines made by the application of black paint on unprimed canvas. Pollock's paintings have reached

a more evolved state in the conception of what a painting is, within the context of black and white, as compared to his precursors. While grisaille is used for a kind of realistic illustration by those painters before Pollock, Pollock uses black and white to illustrate an emotional and psychological aspect in painting.

One of the most dramatic and influential black, white and grey paintings of the 20th century has been Picasso's GUERNICA, 1937. The Spanish Republic's Government in Exile commissioned Picasso to paint a mural for its building at the world's fair in Paris. GUERNICA became a message to the world. It was a profound political statement against what the fascists (Italians and Germans) were doing to humanity. The painting describes symbolically the complete destruction of the small town of Guernica and the murder of all its inhabitants through saturation bombing.

The incident provided Picasso with inspiration and subject matter. The agony of death, the horror and shock of sudden destruction, the distraught expressions of the survivors and questions of "why" on their faces, are illuminated from a dark background of unseen but not unfelt destruction. This strong contrast of light and dark brings to mind the powerful and traditional connotations of good and evil, God and Satan,

victory and defeat.¹ Picasso presents fragments of the facts about war, destruction and death, boldly in front of the viewer. Using light and dark, Picasso realized that by eliminating color he could vividly express his subject matter. We already know the color of blood, fire, smoke and the pale lifeless colors of death. The strong contrast and his choice of subject matter take advantage of human response to color and mood without color being present.

Important also was the painting's large scale, some 11½ x 25½ feet. Its size alone is overwhelming in reference to man's scale. With the bold message-making power of black and white, and the overwhelming presence of the painting's size, GUERNICA influenced painters for a long time to come as well as those New York painters like Pollock, who were working shortly after World War II.

By the late 1940's, what was to be known as Abstract Expressionism, the most important artistic movement in the 20th century American art, was emerging. At one point, many of the paintings by such artists as Willem deKooning, Pollock, Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell were primarily black and white. The use of black and white helped in providing

¹Rudolf Arnheim. Picasso's Guernica: The Genesis of a Painting, University of California Press, 1962, p. 25.

discoveries that would enhance meanings and affect the formal properties of Abstract Expressionism. Within the style of painting that evolved, there was seldom any representational content, but rather an emotional expressionism resulting from a strong reliance on automatism, improvisation, and the universality of symbols. Artists were searching for a new language in painting appropriate to their time. They were revolting against affiliations with traditional styles, prescribed technical procedures and renouncing the idea of a finished art product subject to traditional aesthetic canons. These artists possessed an aggressive spirit of self-determination, and strongly demanded a spontaneous freedom of expression.²

The artists' identification with their materials in paintings which were like large drawings, and the development of their individual styles often depended upon the exclusive use of black and white. Their ideas thus changed the approach to painting. Painters became especially concerned with the physicality of paint. They were aware that paint has a dynamic viscosity in that it can be worked in many different ways; it can be used thick or thin, opaque or transparent, and applied with or without a brush. They took advantage of

²The Oxford Dictionary and Companion To the Arts.
Edited by Harold Osborne, Oxford, at the Clarendon Press,
1970, pp. 3-4.

the richness of oil. It enabled them to become freer and to control the paint with greater variety. By reducing their palettes to black and white, painters were more aware of and more responsive to qualities of drawing and invention in the use of oil paint.

Important also, was the large scale which many artists worked in. For them, large paintings added impact to an already bold contrast. Working in color on such a large surface would have slowed down their spontaneity. The use of black - not on the scale of the sketch, but on the scale of large oil paintings - extended the sharp and momentary characteristics of the sketch to the scale of painting.³

Their work was also called, "Action Painting," emphasizing the new importance attached to the physical act of painting. A gestural style developed; the liquid quality of the paint allowed them to work faster, making quick gestural strokes. Body movement and paint fluidity worked together. Almost like a signature in the individuality of each painter's manner, an "existential message" was expressed that placed the meaning in the act of creating, rather than in the finished product.

³"Sign and Surface: Notes on Black and White Painting in New York," Lawrence Alloway. Quadrum, No. 9, 1960, p. 53.

The individuality and the diversity of Abstract Expressionist work combined to produce an art tending to stimulate visions and feelings rather than to gratify standards of finesse and good taste. One such artist who exemplified this attitude was Willem deKooning. His paintings of 1946-48 are early and influential examples of the use of black and white.

Using only housepainter's black enamel, Ripolin, and Zinc white, deKooning was able to achieve a high degree of control and sensuousity in the handling of paint. He drew directly into the paint with a heavy stick of charcoal, or replaced brushstrokes with thin, dripped or poured lines of white paint. By this method and by the simple reduction to black and white, he was able to create an ambiguity in the content of his work. The crowded, compact, organic and figurative forms on his canvases are shown as varied shapes and intertwining lines. Negative and positive spaces intermix and dissolve into their opposites. Therefore, white was as important as black, rather than serving only as a ground for the figure.

Barnett Newman said, speaking of deKooning's work, "Black is what an artist uses when he is trying to break into something new, when he is clearing the decks for an ex-

periment, when he wants to find a new way to use his image and a way out of the restrictions his old paintings have imposed.⁴

Yet, black and white was not in itself, the subject. These tones helped deKooning to integrate more completely the human figure into the content of his paintings. DeKooning continuously used segments and suggestions of the figure in his style. The figure is a universal subject, and communicates to all mankind. There are shapes, lines, forms and movements within that suggest the figure, without the figure being completely present on the canvas. These fragments were reassembled on the canvas. His paintings look like he had taken drawings of the figure, cut the drawings up till the parts were unrecognizable and rearranged the pieces into a composition that only reminded you of a figure. In fact, deKooning did work in this way, sometimes combining drawings with collage elements.

Without color, the idea of exposing the process of making a painting was clearer. The quality of drawing remained because, in part, drawing had a definite part in the work. Color would have made the issue more confusing.

⁴Barnett Newman, Thomas B. Hess. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, 1971, p. 61.

DeKooning worked in black and white for a reason similar to the fact that a book is printed in black ink on white paper, his ideas and process of working were easier to "read," not only for himself, but for the viewer as well.

Jackson Pollock also explored the use of black and white. From 1949-1951, Pollock began to limit himself to black paint on unprimed canvases which substituted for white. He had already developed a style of painting and a method of working. The canvas about to be painted was rolled onto the floor of his studio. Thin, intensely black paint was applied with amazing control by dripping and pouring the paint from sticks, brushes, or directly from the can. Pollock spoke about liking the resistance of the hard surface of the floor when he painted. Perhaps, in a sense, limiting himself to black and white may have been yet another form of self-imposed resistance.⁵

By eliminating the problems of color, Pollock simplified matters considerably. With the physical action that was involved with painting, a gestural style was produced that was automatic and autographic. "I approach painting the

⁵Jackson Pollock, B. H. Friedman. McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, New York, 1971, p. 61.

same way I approach drawing - that is, it's direct...the more immediate, the more direct, the greater the possibilities of making a statement."⁶ With this character of line, (the intricate haptic rhythm in application - the repeating motion with which Pollock dripped and poured the paint in swirling lines on the canvas), his paintings looked like large drawings.

To Pollock, drawing was the most direct and spontaneous means of self expression. His expressive instinct and emotion, other than a conventional esthetic, were engaged in his painting. This may be why the entire canvas needed to be filled. The paint did not always completely cover the canvas. It was applied from edge to edge. There is an acceptance of empty space, "negative" space, the void, but the voids are so evenly integrated that they read positively. This was a way to draw out the imagery. The associative levels of his paintings, the black and white, negative and positive, drawing scale, etc., brought Pollock's work to a full and complete state - physically, emotionally, and visually. It could not have been so in color, because it was a step beyond the use of color.

⁶Jackson Pollock, B. H. Friedman. McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, New York, 1971, p. 182.

In the early 1950's, Franz Kline created positive white shapes as well as black. Working from drawings done with a 3" housepainter's brush and black enamel on newspaper,⁷ he moved to working on canvas. His paintings look like large abstract signs or silhouetted constructions because of the linear brushstrokes of black that at first seem to be on top and in front of the white background. Black often appears to be the positive form, and white, the negative in this case. But in many paintings, the positive and negative interchange. It becomes hard to define whether it is a black shape on a white background or just the opposite.

Kline used both black and white as positives and negatives, first strengthening one, then the other. As he put black down, the need for white increased; as the white was added, it pushed against the black and so on, until the competition ended in mutual containment.⁸ His building of a pictorial structure is like the meeting of opposing forces. This use of black and white is not only a visual contract, but encompasses the complex meaning of this new movement in art. The work transmits the idea of the gestural and physical

⁷Irving Sandler. The Triumph of American Printing, Praeger Publishers, New York, New York, Washington, D.C., 1970, pp. 249-250.

⁸"Sign and Surface: Notes on Black and White Painting in New York," Lawrence Alloway. Quadrum, No. 9, 1960, pp. 53-54.

action of painting and the metaphorical, narrative battle of opposing forces that unfolds and ends in a draw. (No pun intended). It maintains the symbolic connotations of black and white.

In an interview and discussion regarding the restriction of his palette to black and white, Kline said, "It wasn't a question of deciding to do a black and white painting. I think there was a time when the original forms that finally came out in black and white were in color, say, and then as time went on, I painted them out and made them black and white. And when they got that way, I just liked them, you know."⁹

In the same conversation, speaking of Josef Albers, he said, "Of course, I like his color paintings, but when I see a black and white such as THE HOMAGE TO A BLACK AND WHITE SQUARE, I like that best."¹⁰

Robert Motherwell used black and white in another and completely different expressive manner. The important metaphorical content of his ELEGIES TO THE SPANISH REPUBLIC

⁹"Sign and Surface: Notes on Black and White Painting in New York," Lawrence Alloway. Quadrum, No. 9, 1960, pp. 53-62.

¹⁰Ibid, pp. 53-62.

was expressive both of personal emotions and major themes. These paintings were, in part, antifascist memorials, a way of communicating his feelings against the violence and oppression in Spain, that before World War II would lead to the destruction of Guernica. Motherwell drew inspiration from circumstances similar to that of Picasso's when he painted GUERNICA. His feelings and ideas of oppression verses freedom represent an emotional contrast and are contained within the symbolism of black and white. These paintings physically confront the viewer, and subconsciously, there is an emotional meeting. Gloomy, ominous black shapes, linear and loosely geometrical in structure (like a combination of rectangular and circular forms) fill the canvas. Sometimes these shapes seem to extend beyond the frame; they are not contained by the edge of the canvas. They stretch from top to bottom and side to side, as if to present a barrier between freedom and imprisonment.

Motherwell, who wrote an introduction to an English edition of Vasily Kandinsky's, "Concerning the Spiritual In Art" in 1947, wrote three years later: "The chemistry of pigments is interesting; ivory black, like bone black, is made from charred bones of horns, carbon black is the result from burnt gas...Sometimes I wonder, laying in a great black stripe on a canvas, what animal's bones, (or horns), are

making the furrows of my picutre."¹¹ White for Motherwell, as he said in the Kootz catalogue of 1950, is linked to the studio procedure and rooted in the creative act: "A fresh white canvas is a void, as in the poet's sheet of blank, white paper."¹²

With Abstract Expressionism new meanings were placed on black and white. It was a message not only from the artists to the viewer but a message to the artists themselves - it was a vehicle for new ideas about "how" and "what" to paint. By avoiding the problems and complexities of color, painters were able to grasp a better understanding of new ideas. This moves their art from the analogy of contrast of values to a form of universal communication. Without the involvement and use of black and white, Abstract Expressionism would not have had the metaphorical and visual power it inevitably did.

I feel I have been greatly influenced by the Abstract Expressionists not only in the handling of paint, but in my

¹¹"Sign and Surface: Notes on Black and White Painting in New York," W. Kandinsky: Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Quadrum, No. 9, 1960, p. 62.

¹²"Sign and Surface: Notes on Black and White Painting in New York," Robert Motherwell, Exhibition Catalogue, Samuel Kootz Gallery, New York New York, 1953, p. 62.

attitude about what a painting should be and what should be represented. I used to look into the meaning behind the way the Abstract Expressionists painted, but only identified with visual aspects such as the dynamic viscosity of paint. I dipped, poured, used small and large brushes, washes and thick brushstrokes of paint, and drew into wet or dry paint with charcoal. As I learned new ways of handling paint, as I discovered by looking at the work of the Abstract Expressionists, I became aware of how painters before me had done some of the same things - only better.

When I asked myself why I painted this way, I began to form some ideas and answers of my own. I discovered that these painters before me also had similar ideas and attitudes about painting. I noticed that black paint applied over white was similar to drawing and that black and white also alluded to symbolism. I began to form my own fundamental ideas, and visually, but abstractly, tried to express them.

By using only black and white, I was able to avoid the problems and complexities of color. This enabled me to work on larger canvases. In a way, I was also doing what Barnett Newman described when he was talking about deKooning's work - breaking into something new, finding my own image and a way out of the restrictions old styles imposed.

CHAPTER II.

ORIENTING TO THE USE OF BLACK AND WHITE

My first experiences with black and white were mostly visual. These experiences were with drawing and printmaking. When I first began studying art, drawing and printmaking were my favorite subjects. I liked drawing because of an identification with the immediacy of the materials which most of the time were charcoal and paper, and printmaking was a favorite because of my experiments with collographs which were always in black ink.

Drawing is basically a black and white medium. The first time I ever drew was with a pencil on paper. Lines came first, the shading was added and my technical ability at drawing began to increase. Lines could be thin or fat, light or bold. The lines made from pencil or charcoal could be rubbed as a technique that helped in shading areas. These were simple discoveries within this medium. By sticking to one medium (charcoal, pencil, conte crayon) on paper, I was able to better understand the simple beauty of drawing. The reason I sensed this was because of the black of the crayon

and the white of the paper. It was an easy medium to understand and enjoy because of it's clarity.

Later, I began doing prints and discovered the collograph, thanks to Mr. Stanley Lea, who was a creative innovater in this medium. The collograph print is made from a 1/8" untempered masonite plate in which a collage of textures are glued to the smooth side. After the textural surface is coated with lacquer, which helps when inking and wiping the plate and allows for a consistent image from print to print, the plate, with paper on top, is run through a press. The texture that the plate makes on the paper or print is an interesting aspect that this medium has to offer. Different textures produce different shades of black and grey or no black at all on a warm, white paper. I believed that you did not need color to enjoy the texture, a major part in the making of a collograph print.

It was not until I started graduate school in 1975 at the University of Houston that I began to study painting. In my first year of graduate studies, I worked in the mediums of drawing, painting and collage. I used color, but began to avoid it once I began to concentrate on painting. As an

undergraduate, I had done some sculpture and when I began painting, I became interested in sculptured forms on the canvas. The subject matter of the first few paintings was a figurative, stonelike, sculpture painted on the canvas. Stone implied a monochromatic color tone to my thinking, so I began mixing a black from ultramarine blue and burnt umber that could be mixed with white to produce a warm or cool grey, depending on the ratio in amount of brown to blue.

In my second year, I took a life drawing class with Ed Hill. Working from figure drawings, I translated the idea of my drawings onto canvas. The sculptured forms disappeared and in the paintings that followed, I concentrated on shapes, lines, forms, and movements that were identified with the figure. This approach was combined with the handling of paint. By using only black, white and grey, I was able more easily, to handle these elements and discover the richness of oil paint.

After two years of dealing mostly with the figure and painting with only black, white and grey, I started to ask myself "why" I was using these values instead of colors and "what" did they mean to me. One question was, "What is all this grey made from?" The answer was - black and white.

Another was, "What is black and white and what does black and white mean to me?" This is when I began using black and white for what they were as paint to define them in a personal way.

My paintings changed from figurative to non-objective. A new series of paintings was done on paper with only black paint and the white of the paper as its opposite, and sometimes pure white paint was used. The format was rectangular and horizontal. The top half would be black and the bottom white or vice-versa. There would be variations on the amount of one that would oppose the other.

From these works, I discovered that black and white can have symbolic meaning which, in turn, led me to develop my own symbolic imagery. My discovery was a way of identifying with and adapting to black and white.

CHAPTER III.

HANDLING PAINT

Being a physically active person to begin with, and more visually oriented to art than to writing or conceptualizing, I identify most with the physicality of painting. In handling the paint, I am not afraid to get it all over me. I like seeing the many different ways paint can be applied, worked with, and surfaces that can be built. I even like the smell of oils and turpentine, the medium I work in when painting or drawing.

Paint has a dynamic viscosity. The consistency of the paint can be made to be applied in thin washes of oil or turpentine with a small amount of pigment, or used as it comes in the tube, about the thickness of peanut butter. Paint can be mixed with certain oils to appear shiny or flat. Paint can be applied with a brush, dripped or poured. A canvas that is completely or partially wet with paint can be worked with brushes holding more paint. Surfaces can be squeegeed or smoothed with a palette knife, rubbed with rags

and fingers or hands. Turpentine can be sprayed onto wet paint to wash out areas. You can draw on or into paint with pencil or charcoal. These are some of the ways that paint can be physically handled. Paint can become opaque or transparent, depending on how thick or thin the paint is or how much pigment is used with a transparent dryer like gel medium. (Gel medium in oils is added to paint to allow the paint to dry faster. It is transparent, the color of linseed oil, and almost the consistency of tube paint). Transparent layers of paint applied over other layers of paint allow the bottom layer(s) to be seen behind and through the top layer(s). Wet paint can be painted on or into with more paint so that in one brushstroke of paint, two or more colors of paint can be seen that are not mixed but move in the same path of one stroke. The many ways paint can be used should be apparent.

Different surfaces may be used to paint on. I work mostly on canvas, stretched on a stretcher and primed with gesso, or paper that is stapled to a wall or flat surface. There is a difference here in the smoothness of the surface; the weave of canvas vs. a sheet of paper. But even canvas and paper come in different surface texture. Also, there is the flexibility of the canvas on a stretcher vs. paper with a hard flat wall behind it that does not allow the paper to move.

The paint also begins to form its own surface on a painting. In this respect, the different ways the paint is applied and it's thickness or thinness come into operation. The paint may be smooth from the application of many layers of paint or rough from thick brushstrokes. The weave of the canvas may show through or the overall surface of a canvas may vary within one painting.

When working with paint or handling it as described above, there needs to be a degree of control. I enjoy the spontaneity and surprise of seeing what happens when I try washing out a wet area with a spray of turpentine or applying paint over an already wet area and wiping that area with a rag or squeegee. I know what is going to happen technically, but I do not know exactly what will happen visually. If there was not a certain amount of control, the painting could be overworked or underworked. For instance, if I do something on the canvas and like it, it stays, and if I do not like it, I wipe it off while it is wet or later, I might come back when it is dry, decide I don't like it and paint over it. In working this way, I am able to see what I am doing. I decide when to stop and when to keep painting.

CHAPTER IV.

DRAWING AS RELATIVE TO BLACK AND WHITE

Drawing is an important part of the work I do. Basically, I think of drawing as line, shade, value, and the visual contrast of a dark pencil or brushmark on paper or canvas or it can be a white brushstroke on a black ground. I do not use drawing as a preliminary sketch to produce a painting from. I feel that a drawing is a work by itself. Also, drawing can be an element within painting.

From time to time, I do "drawings" in the medium of oils on paper. The paper is usually stapled to a wall or flat surface and gessoed before working on. Most of the time I use only black paint, applied with a brush. I try to keep the paint thin, avoiding a build-up of paint on the paper. The paint is directly applied, may be washed with turpentine, squeegeed or wiped off with a rag. This produces brushstrokes, washed out areas, runs of very liquid paint, washed and rubbed out areas on the paper. Occasionally, I will go back over some areas with white. Most of the time,

white is transparent (depending on how thin the white paint is) and the lines or areas of black that are underneath the white show through.

In these drawings and paintings, drawing becomes an element of the work. Sometimes, I make a single black brushstroke or series of brushstrokes across a large white area, or white across a black area of the canvas. Brushstrokes by themselves are actually lines of paint made by the brush. The length of a brushstroke or group of brushstrokes may determine the length or width or other variations of a line. Drips and runs of liquid wet paint running down a canvas can also be lines. Lines can be positive or negative. Positive lines are directly made, like a black brushstroke on a white painting. I see negative lines as areas that are defined on both sides by more positive shapes. For instance, I take a white canvas and paint both sides black leaving a thin underpainted area of the white canvas from top to bottom. I have made a line without having actually made a direct mark for that line.

Because I deal with the triangle or triangular compositions a lot in my work, I often describe them in a linear fashion. One line or group of lines will make one side of a triangle. Many times different areas of the canvas

will together form a triangle by shape and placement. An area may not be linear by itself. If a white area of the canvas is overlaped or next to black, a line is made by their simple visual division of area they occupy. One area may be the inside and the other the outside area defining a triangle.

The physical act of drawing with paint on the canvas is like sketching. I can sketch out a triangle on the canvas and then paint it in or simply paint. Drawing is a necessary element in the way I work, I have always felt that drawing could be a spontaneous way of working. With paint as a medium, drawing adds spontaneity to painting. Also, working in black and white lends itself to the basic idea of drawing - that is as simple as pencil on paper.

CHAPTER V.

THE VISUAL AND THE NONVISUAL

The subject matter or motif of a work of art and its intellectual, aesthetic, spiritual and narrative values may be considered separately from the artist's formal accomplishments or the excellence of his techniques. A work of art can be viewed, for purposes of intellectual clarity, as consisting of two elements which are form and content.¹³ These two elements can be thought of as visual and nonvisual: visual - what is seen with the eye and nonvisual - what the artist or viewer is thinking about the painting when working on it or viewing it. I think good work should be balanced in this way. A painting should carry pictorial interests as well as meaning behind it.

I deal with two kinds of content in my own work. One is visual or pictorial treatment and the other is an under-

¹³A Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques.
Ralph Mayer, Thomas A. Crowell Company, New York, New York,
L.C.C. 69-15414, 1969, p. 92.

lying element of reference. I think a painting should be just as interesting for one viewer to enjoy on a purely visual level as another viewer to contemplate the meanings behind the painting. An important reason why I try to handle the paint in many different ways, (drips, pours, washes, etc.) is because I believe in bringing out this "viscosity of paint" in as dynamic and visually interesting a way as possible. This is to show the viewer how much can be done with paint. Working in black and white helps me, and hopefully, the viewer, see clearly that paint does have a dynamic quality. Color might overshadow this idea. Just as important is the idea of painting as a medium for the expression of thoughts and ideas. While working on a painting, I am thinking of the intellectual aspects as well as technical. I may be thinking about handling the paint and "how to" make the painting visually interesting (viscosity, composition, etc.). I may also be asking myself questions about my ideas other than technical and the way those ideas relate to the work. For example, I may ask myself, "Can I have a simple yet complex thought about polarities and express that idea visually by the symbolism and imagery of black and white?"

Visually, my feelings and beliefs are abstract on the canvas, and I also think there is a narrative value or aspect to my work. The narrative, however, becomes more

apparent after thinking about the symbolism of black and white which I discuss in the following chapter. Basically, though, black and white are contrasts or opposites. These polarities take form in spiritual, political, social, ideological, physical, etc. forms. Each opposite plays out a role, a real life part in the world in which we live. I think about these contrasts whether or not I am painting. They are an important aspect of my work. These polarities play a role in the paintings.

The thought behind the work is the reason I do the work. It directly affects my attitude towards painting. It helps me make a better painting in the way I judge that painting and what values I judge it by whether I am thinking in visual or nonvisual terms. Developing an idea behind the work helps to formalize and or visualize the idea. The visual helps give existence to the nonvisual and vice-versa. They back each other up and test each other out. This should be a 50/50 deal going on within good work.

CHAPTER VI.

SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY IN BLACK AND WHITE

When I first began working in grisaille, I did not think about symbolic meanings. I was more interested in handling the paint. As I began to ask myself questions about why I was painting in grisaille, one focus of interest was that grisaille painting was the sum of black and white. At this point, I decided to paint only in black and white and use black and white in as simple a way as possible. With this in mind, black was represented by black paint. White was represented by white paint. In this idea, black and white represented a contrast. The contrast was visual on the canvas, black next to white, but in the minds' eye, these contrasts became symbolic.

Conventionally, the use of black and white has been symbolic of polarities. It is representational of opposites in physical, emotional, and spiritual, opposites as simple but inevitable as life and death, day and night, truth and falsehood, joy and grief, God and Satan. Attached

to these opposites is a connotation of black and white. Vasily Kandinsky wrote, "White is not taken without reason to symbolize joy and spotless purity, and black, grief and death."¹⁴ These meanings, I think, are inescapable.

Most important in my work is the idea that light and darkness have an acute spiritual bearing and influence on men. At times, this meaning is unrecognizable, unacknowledged, but by no means, not there. Its meaning is basic. "In the beginning...darkness was upon the face of the earth...and God said, let there be light." This is not to say that the sun turned on like a great lightbulb in the sky, but alludes to the relationship between God and Satan, light and darkness, truth and falsehood, everlasting life or eternal damnation. Black and white is symbolic of this idea.

With the first work in which I began to use black and white in as simple a visual way as possible, there was a symbolic relationship of black to white. In the first series of paintings done in black and white, the format was rectangular and horizontal. The composition was simple,

¹⁴"Sign and Surface: Notes on Black and White Painting in New York." Lawrence Alloway, Quadrum, No. 9, 1960, p. 62.

horizontal - the top half would be black, the bottom half would be white or vice-versa. There would be variations of the amount of one to the others. The series was called, "The Second Coming" series. White represented Christ or God returning to a world of darkness, represented by black. Black and white played out a narrative role of good vs. evil. Each painting was different because there were variations of how much black there was within the composition compared to white. The same can be said for good vs. evil.

In the works that followed, the meaning of black and white remained and a simple imagery evolved. This imagery evolved into a triangular composition. The triangle represents a stable structure, a force. In Christian iconography, the Trinity is represented by the triangle. Three was called by Pythagoras as the number of completion, expressive of a beginning, a middle, and an end.¹⁵

In the paintings I have been working on since "The Second Coming" series, the triangle has been important both compositionally and symbolically. In all the paintings,

¹⁵Signs and Symbols in Christian Art. George Ferguson, Oxford University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1959, p. 92.

a large triangle fills the composition from top to bottom on the canvas. These large triangular motifs project upward. The base of the triangle is at the bottom of the canvas. This is symbolic of a projecting force, dividing good and evil.

I also think of triangles in a geometric/mathematical way. In solving a problem of constructing a triangle, the right answer has to be found to complete the problem. You either find the right answer and solve the problem or you get a wrong answer and miss. It's a black and white analogy, completely subjective, but also a way in which I think and relate thoughts and ideas. These ideas have to do with the triangle being thought of in black and white terms. In my work, the symbolic meanings of black and white come into play in the content of the work both visually and nonvisually.

CHAPTER VII.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to say something about my thoughts and philosophical attitude of seeing things in black and white, and how this kind of thinking has helped me to produce paintings. I believe the ideas or concepts behind the work are just as important as the finished work. In other words, thinking is integrated with, as well as, parallel to working. I view the world I live in as basically, black and white. The aspects of these opposites are apparent in many forms around me. These opposites are as simple as night and day, life and death, or good and evil. Because many of the things I see going on around me fall into this idea of contrast, I believe that a deep basic level of black and white exists. Although there can be no 100% documented proof that God and Satan exist, the idea that they do is a foundation of the world in which we live. My viewpoint is personal, but shared by many others. I try to bring out a point of view in my work that this kind of contrast exists. This allows me to become as personally involved in my work

as I can get because I am painting from my own vision of the world I live in.

How I see determines how I can define black and white. This way of thinking helps make my paintings happen. In the chapters of this thesis, I have discussed different aspects of my work based on historical and visual influences leading through my own development and thoughts, in order to define what black and white means to me and "why" I believe that to be so. There is a certain amount of ambiguity, also, in defining black and white. It is almost like trying to define God Himself. There are many unknowns and mysteries and no physical proof that there even is a God. I paint because I believe God does exist and I have to say something about this belief. Being a visually oriented kind of person, I just happen to say it in paint.

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