

THE STRUGGLE FOR A PERSONAL STATEMENT

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PREFACE

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the ideas which have been developed by the writer in her own painting. This study is of a personal nature. It is based on the writer's reflections on and philosophical approach to her artistic growth during her years in graduate school. It represents the effort of one artist to come to grips with her particular problems in the hope of achieving clarity of thought and the ordering of ideas to strengthen her painting.

THE STRUGGLE FOR A PERSONAL STATEMENT

My paintings are a very personal way of sharing my life with other people. Each work is a visual statement based on my experience of a particular place, event, memory or idea. I concern myself with those forms, spaces and colors which stimulate a strong emotional response in me, and working with them I try to create the same response in the viewer. Painting has heightened my sense of self awareness and caused me to consider my uniqueness as an artist by examining my personal history. I have reflected on my childhood, my education, my interest in travel and literature, and my acquaintance with other artists as significant stimuli for my work.

I have always been intrigued with the landscape, with my sense of place. As a child, I remember imagining and constructing a secret hiding place where I would play out my fantasies. I remember each summer at the bay, walking on the beach and swimming in the Gulf of Mexico beneath the vast space of the sky. Reading and listening to stories about mysterious, foreign places stimulated my imagination and the fantasies I had about these places. I have always been enamored with my father's reflections on his youth. He is a marvelous story teller and always seems to depict his boyhood experience in Greece as if he were Homer narrating the Odyssey. He constantly embellishes the truth, which in itself, is already exciting. One of my favorite stories he tells is about his

traveling by boat from his home island, Mytellini, to the Turkish coast with his father, a merchant. He describes sailing across the vast blue waters of the Mediterranean to meet his enemies, the Turks, to trade and buy merchandise. His stories are narratives with an emphasis on place and adventure and made quite an impression on me as a child.

My education has been important to my growth as an artist. I have gained insights into how best to use my tools, to organize my sense of color and composition and to create the sense of illusion in the arrangement of form on a flat surface. In going to school, I have also been stimulated by other artists whose criticism and encouragement have given me confidence about my work. One particular artist, Willem deKooning, has been a real inspiration to me. I admire the directness of gesture that reflects his physical relationship to his work. I am interested in the image conveyed when he overlaps painted strokes, interweaving one line over another and creating a sense of dimension on the flat picture plane. The overlapping of varied lines is his means of hiding as well as enhancing forms. This mode of concealment is depicted particularly in his later works, where his use of a figure is disguised within the background and foreground of the canvas. This process is related to my use of overlapping colors. Through a conscious effort I create a visual metaphor for the depths of my subconscious. For me, the images of my psyche appear and disappear within the canvas. DeKooning has mastered this

illusion in his paintings. One painted color overlapping another becomes layers of space. When the paint is applied transparently, the resulting image creates multiple levels or dimensions in space.

When I had the opportunity to meet deKooning in 1977, I was impressed with his vitality. After talking with him, I understand why his paintings seem such a perfect expression of his vivacious and lively personality. I remember thinking that he was so honest and in touch with his environment. I came away from this timely meeting with a new respect for the relationship between this artist and his work. Thus, deKooning has been a critical factor in influencing a particular aspect of my paintings as well as my philosophy about art. I believe that an artist cannot divorce the "self" from his painting. By meeting deKooning, I realized that a sense of this personal spirit was synthesized into his work. This realization gave me greater confidence to rely on my personality and my own resources and experiences. The artist struggles to know his own personality. For it is the essence of this "person" that I consider to be an important aspect in each artist's work.

I painted three large canvases during the first six months of graduate school in 1975-76. These paintings were very similar to each other in color, paint quality and pictorial surface. I emphasized the dominant areas in the paintings with reds, yellows and blues. I began each painting with a thin wash of color. The thin wash was a field onto which lyrical

lines were painted and cut-out shapes of wood on canvas were collaged. I was trying to use different elements to create surface interest and a visual interplay between the various parts of the painting. I came to the realization, however, that rather than achieving interest through the use of many elements, the images were confusing and lacked focus and that the paintings failed to communicate a single thought to the viewer.

I was also having problems with color. The value in these paintings lacked strong contrast. This was frustrating for me because I wanted to create a pictorally deep sense of space through color. I wanted painted areas to appear as dense atmospheric fields of color rather than flat shapes which were two-dimensional. I recognize now that my primary problem was the profusion of ideas in my mind that tumbled onto the canvas complicating and cluttering my expressions.

I began re-evaluating my attitude about painting. I had realized that the proper use of one's technical facility did not constitute art. I wanted to step back and examine the influences in my work and then establish my own personal reasons for painting. I needed to look more intensely at my sources of inspiration. I was not sufficiently concerned with integrating my own visual and emotional experiences into my painting. I wanted my art to be a confrontation with my imaginative vision of reality for the viewer. During the summer of 1976, two personal experiences made me realize that it was the human qualities that had to be added to my understanding of form and color and be reflected in my painting.

While traveling in Europe, I visited the Musee de Marmottan in Paris which houses the late works of Monet. The physical experience of viewing these particular paintings was awesome. The paintings are abstract landscape paintings. They consist of layers of intense, lyrically painted surfaces. They appear spontaneous, yet are very controlled because all of the painted areas and marks within the surface relate to and work with each other. Monet used a variety of colors to create a total atmosphere. The paintings exude their own sense of being, encompassing the spectator in Monet's personal statement. I realized that his paintings went beyond formal issues. His content reflected an intelligent use of his tools to create a personal and emotional statement. Monet's content was simple, direct, and uncluttered.

I also spent a month traveling throughout Greece. I loved the landscape of the country because there was so much sky and a sense of openness. This openness of atmosphere was similar to that in the Texas landscape. The clearness of atmospheric light against the mountains, and the richness of the Prussian blue Mediterranean sea were overpowering.

The most powerful images I experienced were in Meteora where the Greek orthodox monasteries and convents are located. One monastery was situated on a high mountain cliff. I was aware that the monastery, as well as the surrounding area evoked a spiritual, mysterious quality. While walking through the monastery, I noticed a closed door with a mirror on the face

of the door. I remember looking at my reflection in the mirror. Later, when I returned to that particular door, it was open. Inside the room were skeletons and skulls placed one on top of another. The room was a sanctuary for the cleansed skeletal remains of the monks. I was aware of a strange mysterious presence affecting me emotionally. To this day, I still have a queer, distinctive visual memory of that room of skeletons, the monastery and the landscape.

When I returned from Europe I began a new series of paintings and drawings that were statements based on those moving experiences I had, looking at Monet and standing in the monastery. I began work on a series entitled "Bodies Buried Under The Ground," the origins of the images being my memory of the skeletons in the room at the monastery. I painted fleshy colored shapes that were abstractions of parts of the human figure--arms, legs and breasts. The figure was never conceived of as a whole. In my mind, I was seeing the figure dismembered, separated, then tightly reordered into a frame, just as I had seen the bones and skulls rearranged in a neat rectangular pile. For me the rectangle of the canvas was the shape into which the forms must be ordered.

I painted the parts of the body as if I were layering, placing one on top of another under the ground. Visually, the painted shapes take on a double meaning. They appear as parts of flesh as well as rock or mineral forms in the earth's surface. I wanted the round, awkward shapes to appear as

if they were squeezing next to each other. The paintings also reflect a sense of movement through my placement of the shapes and their close relationship to the edge of the canvas.

I wanted the painting to be more about life than death, so I painted the shapes in fleshy, pink and red tones. It was my decision that warm tones are more lively and reflect living qualities.

The abstracted figure shapes overlap through layers of opaque paint. The forms appear as if they are floating tightly in a dark, dense blue painted space. The paintings reflect a sense of atmosphere and place; a mysterious, horrifying atmosphere where living forms survive underground. But the most important consideration for me about "Bodies Buried Under the Ground," was the relationship they had to a real place I had experienced.

After this series, I continued to invent images which had some relationship to my experience of place, or which were derived from other art or literature. "Crazy Ladies I" is a drawing of a group of frenzied women with black wiry hair. The figures are all gesturing; there is a sense of them moving or running with their hands waving in the air. The manner in which I drew the figures recalls my influence from de Kooning's drawings. The drawn marks reflect my physical action in making the drawing. The figures are enclosed by lines that suggest barbed wire. The barbed wire symbolizes containment.

Another drawing that displays containment is "Hands Waving in the Air." Pink, fleshy hand-like or phallic shapes overlap one another in a soft reddish paint field. The idea of containment derived from my experiences with the landscape. While walking through a thick wooded forest of looping grapevines and oak trees, I felt restrained psychologically in the enclosure of the place. Wild grapevine growing in the woods seems to describe a secret place. Grapevine loops and leaps from one tree to another. Fragments of one atmosphere are both closed and free. In my paintings this is interpreted as tight, overlapping forms like tree branches crossing over one another. When I drive across the flat landscape of Houston, the vista of the open sky represents an infinite vastness. Clouds open and merge with the sky into a vast infinity. This vision represents an emotional sense of freedom and translates in my paintings as an open breathing field of color. These experiences of confined and open spaces in the landscape continue to be interests in my recent work.

I am also interested in the descriptions of exotic or mysterious places I discover in literature. The novel, A Wrinkle in Time by Madeline L'Engle, concerns a dark, hidden dimension where any adventure may occur. The atmosphere described involves mystery, a feeling of indefinable brooding horror. In this particular setting of outer space, the dark psychic dimension, two young children's spirits transcend to the fifth dimension in search of their scientist father.

There was a gust of wind and a great thrust and a sharp shattering as she was shoved through - what? Then darkness; silence; nothingness . . ."¹

This description of traveling through a dark, psychic space is a mood similar to the mood in my recent drawings. In my drawing "No Fear of Flying Cats," a young woman sleeping on a bed appears to be floating on a dark black field. Her dream occurs in an imaginary, dark, brooding space with cat-like creatures appearing faintly through the dark field above the bed.

Another quotation which influenced my work is, again, a description of a place from the novel.

. . . the main thing about their surroundings was exactly that they were unnoticeable. They seemed to be standing on some kind of nondescript, flat surface. The air around them was gray. It was not exactly fog, but she could see nothing through it.²

The surface from the passage becomes the surface of my canvases. by incorporating the gray atmosphere around the cat-like creatures.

My most recent work has been particularly influenced by Lawrence Durrell's The Alexandria Quartet. In reading these four books I get all kinds of visual images. It is his sensitive description of the landscape that is inspiring.

¹Madeline L'Engle, A Wrinkle In Time (New York: Laurel-Leaf Library, 1976), p. 57.

²L'Engle, p. 79.

Landscape tones: brown to bronze, steep skyline, low clouds, pearl ground with shadowed oyster and violet reflections. The lion-dust of desert; prophets' tombs turned to zinc and copper at sunset on the ancient lake. Its huge sand-faults like watermarks from the air; green and citron giving to gun metal, to a single plum-dark sail, moist, palpitant; sticky-winged nymph . . .

Summer: buff sand, hot marble sky.
 Autumn: swollen bruise greys.
 Winter: freezing snow, cool sand, clear sky panels, glittering with mild washed delta greens, magnificent starscapes.³

It is this sensual mood that I want my paintings to evoke. I have translated these descriptions of the landscape as well as characters into recent paintings. Durrell's description of landscape tones serve as my palette for color.

The paintings are not only inspired by the descriptions from the novel but also are conceived of in a form similar to the form used by Durrell when writing.

The Alexandria Quartet consists of four novels. They are intended to be read as a single work. Durrell presents the novel as if he were presenting a "word continuum." He inserts similar characters, facts and places throughout the four novels, thus setting up a disjointed relationship throughout the four stories. Each of the four novels, "Justine," "Balthazar," "Mount Olive" and "Clea" can be read separately.

³Lawrence Durrell, Balthazar (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1960), p. 13.

They are not designed to be read sequentially. They were conceived as a continuum of thoughts and descriptions; a passage of time in which characters and plots are introduced by the author in an intermittent fashion.

This idea of a continuum is similar to how I conceive my paintings--paintings that are descriptions of places. Each painting can be looked at separately or in a group. Each describes a passage of my time. They are not designed to be viewed sequentially. Rather, to be seen as a continuum of thoughts and visions.

I painted a series of paintings inspired by Durrell's characterization of Justine. Justine is a mysterious, dark woman fleeing from the reality of herself and her environment. The story takes place in Alexandria, Egypt. She is an extremely beautiful and desirable woman put on a pedestal by everyone. She is described by Durrell as an "arrow in darkness." The most successful of these paintings consists of very dark intense transparent layers of purples, blues and greens. The effect of layering transparencies creates a sensation of fluctuating shapes on the field. This effect gives an open-closed sense of space to the painting. Visually, there is a sense of mystery, dimension and density to the flat canvas. There are two round, dark hole forms floating across the surface of the canvas. These dark holes symbolize the "arrow in darkness." The forms develop through the overlapping of color. Thus, all the parts

are interrelated through the color scheme, as opposed to being separate shapes.

The painting provokes a sense of mystery and atmosphere. My theme is taken from a character, Justine, who is constantly trying to flee from her own instilled mental confines. I have tried to suggest the psychological space in which humans confine themselves.

The process of searching for new sources of visual inspiration is important to me. This constant search and continual re-evaluation of my resources as an artist is really the only manner in which I can grow through my art. It is this need for constant re-evaluation that compelled me to draw from my European experiences, the use of literature and reliance on natural color and landscapes.

All of the experimenting and research I have done in my work has helped strengthen my awareness of what my sense of ordering involves. The three years in graduate school have been a period during which I developed a more personal attitude in my painting. Simplifying my form, composition and color was a difficult evolution.

I am now limiting myself to using a maximum of three shapes in each painting. These shapes lack symmetry and I rely on color applied through a layering process to relate the shapes to each other. I begin by building a surface with an acrylic wash using very intense, vibrant hues such as hot pink, yellow, red or black. I then draw on the surface

of the canvas with oil crayons. The forms develop through the overlapping of color.

I utilize my own environment, feelings, and thoughts as sources for my work to communicate ideas of fantasy and mystery. It is my intent to allow the painting to develop its own characters and elements of surprise. I do not want my work to reflect conscious deliberation, but rather, to reflect an open attitude in which intuitive sense plays a critical role. I am interested in internalizing my impressions of reality and allowing them to become metaphors interpreted through paint. My interpretations are visual descriptions that emit a sense of mystery. The mystery is presented in my works as a continuing theme, as a pervading quality that has no sense of completion.

It is obviously difficult to come to any conclusions about my painting at this time other than to say that it reflects a constant or continuing search or re-evaluation of myself. I am experimenting with color, form and attitude. To grow as an artist it is necessary to be open to new influences and ideas and at the same time look introspectively for inspiration. It is a struggle but one that is necessary and worthwhile.