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Painting meditation on the human form

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A PAINTING MEDITATION ON THE HUMAN FORM

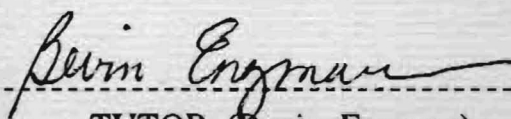
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HILLARY ELLEN KANE

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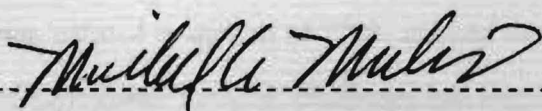
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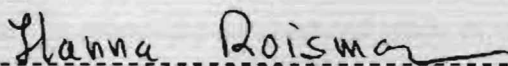
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"...psychology is expressed in the wholeness of a work rather than in the singularity of its composite figures."¹

The arching limb of a tree defined a periphery of space from which the gentle curve of a sleeping figure arose in my mind, barely emerging from the surrounding atmosphere (fig. 1). This painting, painted in the fall of 1995, marked my initial interest in the human figure as a subject of formidable intrigue, challenge and inspiration. The human form, by its immediate relationship to a human audience, posed a source of emotive expression and psychological introspection that I felt could strike a resonant cord in the sensitivity of the viewers. Admiringly pouring over the works of Kathë Kollowitz, Gustav Klimt, and Vincent van Gogh, I experienced the psychological evocation of emotion of which works of art were capable. In proposing an extended study of the figure, I was grasping for the

¹ Nordland, Gerald. *Richard Diebenkorn*. New York: Rizzoli, 1987.

impact of universal human experience that I perceived in the paintings of so many great artists working in the figurative tradition.

In retrospect, my initial explanations of the capacity of a painting to evoke responsive feeling have shifted entirely. I had presumed that visceral emotion in figurative painting could be projected by focusing on a series of canvases, each embodying a single sentiment. I had choreographed the figure as if I could evince an emotion by its literal translation into an illustrative, archetypal gesture that functioned separately from the act of painting itself. I had not yet realized the distinction between looking and reacting to a subject as psychologically charged as the human body and actually perceiving that subject as one element within a defining atmosphere. Reflecting upon my development, the formal aspects of my exploration in oil paint have proved to be the greater focus of my study. While the figure is a part of a grand tradition, it has become more a point of departure for me. The physical technique of painting has instead far overshadowed my preliminary, more illustrative conceptual approach.

An analysis of my evolution in intent and approach to painting the figure recognizes that each painting pursues a range of technical avenues. Indeed, the considerations of figural treatment, composition, physical technique, color modulation and the manipulation of light, occur simultaneously in any given canvas. Although for clarity I have traced each formal dimension separately in the collective body of work, they remain inseparable, and to a great extent have been subconscious achievements that I recognize and distinguish as independent only in reflection.

Evolution of the figure:

My original notions about the derivation of psychological introspection and expression were rooted in an idea that the physical gesture of a figure could convey emotion. My previous work (figs. 2-4) is testimony to the sort of classic, old-fashioned movie drama in which an archetypal pose sets a narrow definition of mood. A stricken

figure standing before a tunnel archway, extends her hands into the viewer's space in an effort to project a vacant loneliness (fig. 2). Similarly, a figure gowned in translucence, and crowded by hooded darkness attempts to illustrate the powerlessness of innocence (fig. 4). These gestures become clichés that present little more than the illustration of emotion. They remain didactic: telling the viewer how to feel by establishing the visual appearance of a feeling, rather than allowing the viewer to arrive at a personal revelation.

At the outset of this year my approach to the figure continued in this vein of declarative emotion (fig. 5). Tentative poised fingers and the tilt of the head with closed eyes suddenly seemed contrived and imitative, and I turned my attention to small head studies (figs. 6,7). Facial expression as well, quickly seemed too specific and personalized to extend beyond portraiture. The paintings progressed from then on with a sustained anonymity. Faces were turned away with only the outline of the jaw or cheek protruding (figs. 9,10, 17), or they were seen in profile, diminished by shadow or partially hidden in the nook of an arm or bulge of a pillow (figs. 11, 19, 20, 22-24, 39). Even the figures facing the picture plane remained masked (figs. 8, 12, 14, 18, 26, 29). Detail and description were renounced in favor of a broader human familiarity.

While the particulars of facial expression diminished, my attention was focused instead on the figure in its entirety. Essaying to avoid typified, sentimental postures, the body became an assemblage of formal structures. Hands and fingers were likewise abstracted and generalized into recognizable shapes (figs. 10, 14, 25). Seated or reclined, gently curled or resting on an elbow, the figure was placed in various positions and studied from various vantage points. Challenging my drawing skills and perspectival accuracy, I began to confront more specifically the technical issues of painting (figs. 9-16). At this point, the predominant consideration in my address of the figure was still its rendered illusion, and my ability to convey volume and mass with anatomical conviction.

It was particularly while working from a professional model (fig. 13) that I began to recognize the sterile, academic appearance of the figure in my work. The painted figures

retained an aspect of detailed study, indifferent to and isolated from their immediate surroundings. A feeling of artificial detachment, as from the model in a life drawing class, lingered in each canvas. Even when architectural elements of the studio were included (figs. 10, 15), a sense of vitality and naturalism of a human form interacting with its environment seemed lacking.

The inevitable distance and affectation was due in part to studying the figure in a vacant and dim lit studio. I realized that my interest in painting from life is connected to natural situation or circumstance. I attempted to consciously *humanize* my approach by several means. Placing the figure in a natural setting (in my house or situated at least within a background of some complexity) facilitated this process (figs. 12, 20). Immediately, there was a recognizable ease in the relationship between the model and its environment. At times I had tried to affect a "setting" in a corner of my studio, but I was never satisfied by the contrived quality that remained. A model placed in a sort of still-life arrangement seemed calculated and distilled from reality, and far from the root of my interest in the human form.

Natural movement was integrated with studying the figure in a familiar setting. Approaching the figure became far less a process of placing the model in a static pose, and far more a discovery of a person in the setting engaged in some quiet, unselfconscious activity. A hand falling limp in a moment of contemplation, or a torso slumping with the weight of unconcealed fatigue became captions of intrigue (figs. 22, 25). For the most part, I chose restful activities of repose with a mug of coffee, relaxing with a book, or dozing off to sleep, in place of more fleeting, active gestures. This allowed substantial time for painting directly from observation (figs. 22-25), while retaining the vitality of an unstaged situation. As my control in predetermining a set position relaxed, so did the need to have the model remain perfectly poised and immobile. Increasingly I enjoyed the movement of natural shifting of weight, turning of a page, or settling more fully into sleep; and I allowed it to influence a freer, more gestural observation of detail (figs. 19, 26, 29).

My repetitive choice to study from a nude model was a critical element adding to the pervasive *academic* feeling of the earlier paintings. The nude served its purpose to an extent. It enabled me to learn from the references of a great tradition in art history, as well as to study the subtle modulation of flesh tones. However, I relinquished the mystique of the conventional treatment of the female body, and turned my attention to clothed figures instead. I brought the figures into the reality of my world which permitted engagement with a setting. Clothing enabled me to encounter the figure participating in its environment as I began to visualize the body as a set of interlocking forms. A wrist became a rectangle of yellow (fig. 24) while knuckles were caught between cuff and counter top in a swatch of orange (fig. 29). Having friends serve as the subjects of my paintings further personalized and humanized my relationship to the canvas studies without interfering with the anonymous treatment of the human form.

By personalizing the figure in a natural setting, I sought to integrate its physical form with the structural arrangement of the entire rectangle. I found that believable space was dependent on the realization that a composition is made up of a series of forms from which a figure emerges, but cannot be dislocated. With this recognition, the figure became less isolated and singular, and in turn, no more significant than any other part. As my approach to the figure evolved, the human subject became a point of departure, while the formal elements of the painting directed my focus (figs. 29, 34). My endeavor in treating the human figure now is toward a cohesive strength of composition, technique, color and light. Psychology and emotion resonate only because of the interactive behavior of all parts.

Evolution of Composition:

Compositional construction is a formative element of every painting whether it be considered intentionally in preliminary planning or clarified in the making. My awareness of compositional disunity in my early work related directly to the dissonance I observed

between the figure and the ground (and its resultant *academic* isolation). Two troublesome variants of composition seemed to emerge. In one, the figure was placed in front of an empty backdrop of color, where it remained isolated and floating (figs. 9, 11). Likewise in another, the elements of ground were constructed independently with no direct, nor inherent relation to the subject (figs. 13, 16). In both cases, I have been struggling toward a holistic awareness in the most literal sense: a treatment of the rectangle of canvas as a whole.

I formed several techniques of confronting the compositional discord limiting the development of many of my paintings. A series of drawings made specifically to determine and to clarify composition proved very informative (figs. 13, 14), especially so when the painting was in mid-development. Using only line, I was able to map out a structural interlocking of space within the frame. (For example, manipulating the angle of the cloth to echo the angle of the torso and arm, the linear structure is reiterated in the chair seat, whose back follows a line through the forearm and directs attention to the face. A scaffolding of implied line supports compositional unity (fig. 14)). Using the inherent strength of linear drawing, the figure could be treated as a series of formal shapes amongst other integral pieces, while color and paint handling need not interfere. Deeply influenced by attributes in the drawings of Richard Diebenkorn (fig. A), I also worked intensively from preliminary sketches (figs. 34, 36). Most importantly, however, was a shift to a small scale (figs. 17-19; 22-25). The inherent accessibility of a reduced canvas size demanded that I treat foreground and background as simultaneous elements in my initial approach to the composition.

Toward that end, the artifice of placing visual impediments between myself and the model offered another solution to the challenge of integrating the figure into the overall composition. This tool began fortuitously by leaving a chair in my line of sight to the model (fig. 14). It continued intentionally as a means of using context to impose on and reconfigure the figure. A chair, a table, a book, or a ledge (figs. 18-20, 22-26) projecting

into the viewer's space created a distance between the viewer and the figure. The viewer was therefore positioned to understand the painted figure *within* a space, no longer surrounded by architectural-like forms (figs. 13, 15), but rather, imbedded in them. The structure interrupting the view, functioned as a liaison into the viewer's space while compartmentalizing the figure itself, as had been similarly accomplished by the use of clothing.

Utilizing the benefits of reduced size, I worked as small as 5" x 8" on a series of oil studies of two larger works (figs. 26, 29) and from these, had a revelation of the breathing space around the figure that was largely absent in my previous work (figs. 27, 28, 30, 31). In review of earlier pieces, I realized how often the heads are segmented and the figures are compressed by the frame (as would be seen in an elongated mirror)(figs. 9, 11, 15, 24). My tendency was to bring the figures to the utter surface of the picture plane in order to avoid confronting undefined emptiness in the composition. Any suggestion of deep space was negated by this maneuver. Following the success of the small painting studies, I consciously set out to allow the figure compositional room (figs. 36, 39, 40), although my concern for illusionist space was minor. The act of balancing abstraction with ongoing representation continues to be a prevailing source of intrigue. Toward this end, I have essayed to reconcile spatial illusion with the effect of a flat surface by allowing the shapes delineating negative space to act as forcefully upon the picture plane as those of the figure (figs. 26, 29, 34).

Time constraints with the model have effected my effort to achieve a holistic awareness in my approach to painting. A tendency to isolate the figure by focusing solely on the model during a sitting, caused an implicit separation of figure and ground, to the detriment of other compositional elements. I have found some relief to this problem in my technical handling of paint.

Evolution of Physical Manipulation of Paint:

Just as a child cannot run before she knows how to walk; the knowledge of how paint functions as a medium, and how to best exploit its physical attributes, has been as definitive of this meditation in painting as has my choice of subject matter. I have striven to become more adept at handling paint itself. The evolution of my technical manipulation of the oil pigment has revealed further challenges and discoveries.

At the outset of this year, my work remained stilted in a prior habit of relying on turpentine to dilute the paint, leading to an overworked layering of transparent washes (figs. 3-5). Rather than employ paint for its thickness and opacity, my early works used oils like watercolors. My basis of evaluation remained similar to drawing with a charcoal pencil: a study in value shifts (creating a monochromatic gradation from dark to light) and an insubstantial suggestion of the medium. In a concerted effort to relinquish my dependence on a thinner, I sought a deliberate record of the brush stroke and gradual build up of surface (figs. 9-12). Immediately I saw the positive results to this more "painterly" approach in technique. The figure seemed to convey a vitality itself in correlation to the new energetic freedom of my brush stroke. However, as I began to study from the model in a series of successive, two-hour increments spanning several weeks, I recognized a tightening in my use of the brush (figs. 13-16). Fear of "losing" the figure by reconsidering a previously established form on the canvas, as well as an unfamiliarity with working back into dry paint, limited me to a rigid use of brush and paint. My use of small brushes on a relatively large frame further inhibited my approach. The small brush strokes behaved like drawn lines, rather than painterly gestures. Correspondingly, my academic treatment of the figure and its detachment from the composition, along with the growing tightness of my technique, reflected a mentality of preciousness about the works in progress. Although I was working deliberately on simple sheets of gessoed canvas taped to masonite board, rather than spending the time and energy to stretch and prepare a canvas, a feeling of fussy attachment developed in spite of myself.

It was at this time that I began working on very small studies in an effort to efficiently work through the above mentioned problems. Three major shifts occurred as a result. I made a transition from painting on a relatively large scale with a brush on canvas, to painting small studies on prepared panel with a palette knife exclusively (figs. 17-19). The diminished scale likewise diminished my sense of attachment to each work; I perceived them as studies rather than as finished pieces. Reduction of the overall scale in turn implied an increase of the relative size of each applied paint stroke to the whole. In combination with the hard, non-absorbent paneling, I had begun to use a palette knife thickly loaded with paint. As a result, an immediate and fluid treatment revitalized the rectangle. The surface itself became an intensely gestural exploitation of the sensual and tactile quality of oil paint, (a sustained interest of mine throughout the works that followed (figs. 20, 23, 25, 34, 36...)).

The spontaneity of technique coupled with the moderate amount of time spent on each piece, assisted greatly the development of my recognition of the entire rectangle as a set of interrelating parts. This facilitation of compositional awareness and holistic approach to shape making was realized more fully (if unexpectedly) in the first small studies (figs. 17,18) than in many of my later pieces. It remains however, a tremendously meaningful step in my development.

From even the earliest canvases, my paintings are evidence of my interest in allowing the process of painting to be visible (figs. 14, 23, 25, 26, 29). Blocks or brushes of color established by built-up layers, reflect underpainting and revision, scraping down and then working from the "ghosts" of pigment left behind. These visual pentimenti connect the viewer to the tactile and sensual process of painting. Beyond subject matter, thematic approach, and technical skill, painting is about creating, and thinking and recreating continuously. A visual record of this allows the stages of creation to be recognized and celebrated as perhaps the most significant element of the painting.

I do have a sense that I could work on a canvas interminably, but I also have reminded myself that moving on to a new painting can be extremely important, although the previous effort may remain highly unresolved (figs. 13, 14). Making a discovery in the process of working on one painting, and applying it to another piece without lingering on the first, allows for growth while limiting a sentimental attachment. In lieu of my recurrent feeling of tightness about the figures, I deliberately instituted *reworking* as an essential part of the process. I began working initially from the figure to capture a sense of composition. Soon I departed from a visual reference of the model and nailed several paintings to the studio wall to be developed simultaneously (figs. 26, 29). Working roughly and with no reservation, the paintings approached a number of new directions, free of the preconceptions, the attachment, and the tightness that had limited the development of my previous studies.

Handling a palette knife loaded with paint encouraged me to approach the use of the brush with great abandon. This gestural treatment proved that the brush could function as more than a mere modeling tool for color. The combined use of the knife and brush on the same canvas (figs. 26,29), led to a breakthrough piece: (fig. 32). For the first time, I had painted with a brush, and yet sustained a loose, impasto quality that allowed the paint to revel in its tactility. In my most recent works, some using only a brush, I have maintained a looseness and spontaneity that reveal visible pentimenti and a tension of layers resonating beneath one another (figs. 39, 40). In other recent, large pieces the use of a palette knife has led to repetitive scraping down of layers. Through both means, my earlier reservations have given way to a greater sense of familiarity, comfort, and technical control (fig. 5-7).

Evolution of Color and Treatment of Light:

A great deal of my development in the mechanical and formal aspects of painting has been in response to an overarching concern for trying to understand light and its effect on color, and the ensuing formal command of both. Early on, my treatment of the figure in

paint reflected a habitual palette I ascribed to "skin tones" that was limited to muted, tonal variations in a vaguely yellowish-brown hue (figs. 1-4, 5). As in a value study, I equated white with light, and black with dark; the range in between remained simplistic, monochromatic, and lifeless.

I used a heavily tinted, red theater gel directed at the figure in order to explore color relativity, the relationship of light and shadow (which is one of complement opposites), and the distinction between warm hues and cool (fig. 9). The intense, warm light cast on one side of the model imposed an optical illusion of opposing complementary shadows that glowed with an equal intensity (saturation). I found bold encouragement in the saturated palette of Pierre Bonnard's interior scenes of the nude figure. For Bonnard as well, orangey-red skin faced off against cool turquoise-blue depth, yet the relationship remained believable (fig. C). From this inception of color, my palette expanded from stagnant monochromes into a full range of hues (fig. 10). No longer solely reliant on white, my use of color became richer and deeper; my awareness of subtle complements underlying local color became more acute.

In order to further facilitate my comprehension of color theory and to enhance my perception of color in cast shadows, I often prepared a canvas with a ground color against which any other color would react (fig. 12). I had begun to challenge my use of "mechanical mixing" of pigment (where two parent colors are physically mixed on the palette creating a new and independent, third color). In its place, I began increasingly to explore the technique of "optical mixing" (in which two colors lay adjacent to one another to fuse within the eye, creating the illusion of a third, separate hue. The brush strokes however, remain autonomous). My eyes and my interest were animated by the visually active surface generated by an "optically mixed" palette.

The proximity of the subject to a light source, and the corresponding effect upon color seen in either ambient or projected light became an untiring fascination. It remains still, a subtlety of perception I have only recently begun to visually comprehend. While

colors in direct (or projected) light remain saturated and distinct (figs. 11, 13, 15), in ambient light the colors are fused and the character of the colors is subdued (figs. 12, 14). As I began to recognize these distinctions, I became intensely interested in the actual behavior of light and its presence seen coming from within a painting, rather than from the cliché of an illustrated light source. I also began to detect that the above mentioned dissonance between the figure and the ground was to a great extent due to the contrast between colors. I questioned whether there was indeed a way that the use of ambient light might better serve my goal of having the sensation of light appear to resonate from within the canvas. In a more diffused light, in which hues become unified by lack of harsh light and shadow, the full range of my palette seemed to contradict the perception of a single light (fig. 16). (For example, cool blue cloth and a similar steely background could be found nestled beneath a warm orange figure with no explanation of this contradiction (fig. 10).) Likewise, many of my smaller studies, when viewed side by side, seemed repetitive, rather than cohesive worlds of color (figs. 22, 24, 25).

Realizing that the unity of a painting springs from a single, cohesive light condition, I employed the artifice of a physically limited palette in order to train my eyes to work in a limited range. Quite incidentally, the success of such a limitation arose in an early palette knife painting using the remainder of half-mixed pigments that were left on my palette from a day's work (fig. 18). The crimson violet shifts slightly to blue, and then into a similar neutral without contradiction in light. In another limited palette painting, where the figure and its surroundings appear drenched in an cool, neutral ochre, the same unity occurred by the fortuitous chance-mixing of one hue with all the other hues on the palette. I also began working in specific reference to the palette choices I had so admired in the paintings of Richard Diebenkorn (fig. B).

Forging a step beyond the contrivance of physical limitation or borrowed palette, I sought to invent a more personal light, to visualize it clearly in the mind's eye, and expand my palette while remaining within the proximity of the established condition (figs. 26, 29).

The paintings struggled through various stages, and the difference between a "color-filled" painting and a "light-filled" atmosphere (in which a multitude of colors may exist, yet are unified) became more apparent. The possibility of casting a single situation in a cool light, or in a warm glow with equal conviction was realized in the two corresponding, miniature light studies that I composed from each large work (figs. 27, 28, 30, 31). In these several small studies, the details became more broadly and freely rendered blocks of color. They seemed to have finally achieved a resonant unified light, while at the same time retaining a sculptural intensity and palpable freshness about the paint handling. While the larger works (figs. 26, 27) may have moved past a point of clarity, they produced moments of discovery along the way. In their saturated intensity, they do capture a single light condition. Comparing one painting in progress with another, enabled me to retain a sense of singular light in each.

Although I had limited my palette to an extent by way of physical parameters, conceptual boundaries, or a combination of both, my treatment of color remained highly saturated. I found the subtlety of neutrals and the slightest shifts in temperature fascinating, as I struggled to bring the color toward a more subdued, ambient light condition. A hue that alone would appear as nothing but flat gray, may take on the *behavior* of an orange when placed next to a subtly more saturated blue, or vice versa. Delicate complements vibrate against one another, just as a shadow on a golden arm brings out a rare hint of green. These neutrals, which function outside drastic value shifts, are the hardest to find (fig. 36). It is enlightening to trace my technical development full circle around the color wheel--from limited value study, to intense high-key color, to neutral once again--only this time a neutral flooded with light.

Beyond any other formal consideration, I discovered that the emotional content in my paintings resulted from a condition of light. Emotion cannot be prescribed by illustration, but neither can it be fully understood by the individual elements of composition, physical technique, or even treatment of the figure. Mood is understood

upon the occasion that an atmosphere of cohesive, sumptuous color invites the viewer to enter, and to experience personal emotion through contemplation. By shifting the act of summoning feeling to the viewer, the painting is relieved of its didactic quality. It becomes, rather, a place for meditation upon the human form.

Concluding Remarks:

For the most part, this extended focus in painting has been about learning to critique the formal elements of my own work, and to discover a greater comprehension of, and ability to utilize, the technical aspects of the medium. By forging through periods of frustration, I have realized the value of persistence. In those selected moments of epiphany, when fluidity and visual awareness seemed to hum within my fingertips, I knew that my grueling perseverance had come to fruition. Likewise, I have learned that risking letting go of something valuable, for the unknown that may be gained, is integral to the process of artistic development. These paintings I have generated are merely studies.

I know that I seldom fully realize the end I set out to achieve initially; I, rather, only see glimmers of its actualization in retrospect. However, it is these flickering hints of accomplishment that light the very beginning of my life's work.

Note: The following images of the author's paintings have been scanned from slides.









































