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Realistic Abstractions

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REALISTIC ABSTRACTION

by

KENNETH BAILEY

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Senior Scholar's
Program

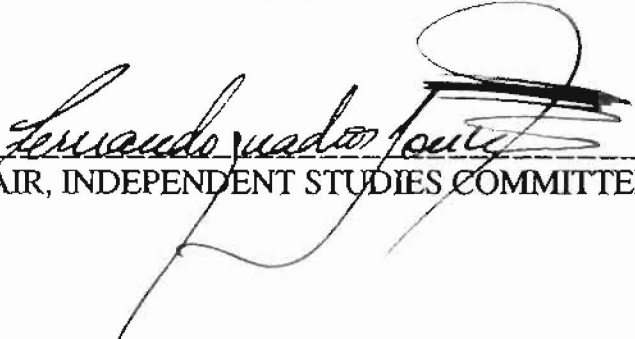
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This Senior Scholar project has been an attempt to develop an abstract style of representation. My title, "Realistic Abstraction", seems to be a contradiction, but I am using this terminology to refer to the degree of abstraction that I attempted to reach in my work, where the nonobjective elements are equally as important as the representational elements. I used my prior studies in realistic rendering as a starting point in a quest for a higher degree of abstraction than I had been previously using in my art. I wished to maintain an equal sense of reality and abstraction because I feel that the best art displays both the ability of the artist to create ideas and the ability of the artist to represent ideas.

The most important part of my previous study occurred during January of my Sophomore year. I conducted an independent study in drawing to develop my skills in realistic rendering. The main focus of my study was composition, trying to create drawings which were balanced spatially through the use of value. I began to get deeply involved in arranging still lifes and eventually found it impossible to create a good drawing composition without considering still life composition. The composition of my drawings became dependant on the organization of the still life. I developed an interest in the movement and shapes objects made when arranged a certain way and I organized them according to these characteristics rather than presenting objects to focus on their everyday identities.

For the Senior Scholar project, I wanted to retain a sense of the direction I had taken in my Jan-Plan experience and give myself a chance to explore new ideas. I chose to work in both drawing and painting. In my earlier studies, I found that drawing with charcoal is useful in keeping my

graphic skills fresh and it facilitates faster progress in compositional studies than if I were using paint. I also wanted to use drawings as studies for paintings and as works of art themselves. Painting is necessary to the project because of the medium's high potential for expression. In relation to the composition, I wanted to retain the real life qualities of my previous work such as recession, surface modeling, and shadows, and also start to push for a higher degree of abstraction by emphasizing movement and shapes.

I started trying to find objects to represent that would be more conducive to abstraction. I searched for objects that had a shape which could create a sense of motion in compositions. I excluded natural and living forms from still lifes, and instead, took interest in fabricated objects such as machine parts and automobile parts. I found the heavy industrial feel of these type of objects appealing and I hoped that they would provide my work with a mood of heaviness, decay, coldness, and lifelessness.

I concerned myself with composing drawings and paintings where the intensity of the motion was balanced throughout and began adding slight hints of imagined phenomenon. I extended the contours of objects beyond their surfaces so as to emphasize the motion in my compositions. I found methods for increasing the complexity of the composition, such as turning shadows of objects into other objects, and using mirrors to break up the space of the composition into planes. Eventually, I began to lose some of the edges of the mirrors so that planes turned into receding pockets of space, in which reflections of objects became objects themselves. This led to the creation of tension between the space within the mirrors and the space around. I chose to limit this spatial tension,

because the overuse of it can result in flattening out of surface. If too much pull is created between objects of different distances, it has the effect of pulling the objects together to the same distance. The result is not spatial tension, but rather, spatial confusion.

The way in which I used mirrors produced an effect that resembled the planar qualities of Cubist work. The Cubists developed a means of more fully perceiving objects by experiencing multiple viewpoints. The different viewpoints were worked into the composition through the use of planar shapes. My compositions also contain planar shapes which define different viewpoints, but I am viewing different angles by using mirrors. The use of mirrors allows for these views to become part of the actual still life. Because the mirrors reflected natural shadows and viewpoints, they allowed me to break up the space within the composition without losing the composition's sense of three dimensionality.

I began trying to represent objects in such a way that they could not be identified as real life objects with some sort of functional purpose. I attempted to reduce their texture so that the objects would not be linked with earthly materials, giving them identity. I started using tail pipes and mufflers from automobiles in my still lifes because their linear structure allows for direct control of movement. However, due to other characteristics of these objects, I found it impossible to lose their recognizability. The direction of motion they generated seemed inexplicable and out of control for the pipes to function as abstract forms. I realized that I needed to lose more than the texture and materiality of the objects to reach my goal. The objects must have no character to them that identifies them as real life objects or makes them seem too closely connected to reality. I needed to use shapes that are ideal and universal

because of their simplicity. It is only by the use of universal shapes that pictures can begin to look less like piles of junk and more like organized abstract forms.

I proceeded to use simple geometric shapes because they are the most basic and universal. Simple geometric shapes have a completely predictable motion in their surfaces because they can be defined by mathematical functions. Their mathematical relationship makes them more conceptual and less connected to reality. Universal laws define universal shapes. I used gears in my still lifes because of their circular structure. When representing them in my compositions, I neglected to render their teeth so that they turned into simple discs. I found arc shaped pieces of wood and depicted them without woodgrain and nail holes. I found tires and depicted them without treads. I used mirrors and pieces of plywood for planar shapes and straight compositional lines. I placed thin rods where I wanted lines in the composition that did not serve as edges of objects.

I did not intend for the simplification of objects to reduce the complexity of my compositions. I regard complexity as an important compositional quality because it leaves an element for the viewer to decipher in order to understand the circumstances of the drawing or painting. I compensated for the simplicity of the objects by arranging them in a complex manner. I wanted to have predictable shapes arranged unpredictably. One way of achieving this arrangement was to have all straight lines positioned askew from the frame of the composition. Lines parallel to the frame suggest that the surfaces they define rest on the picture plane, and this leads into two dimensionality and simplicity of space.

Too much unpredictability can lead to confusion. I tried to reach the point where there was a balance between unpredictability and organization. I found that the most convincing compositions were those that contained an organized scheme of patterns, lines, and designs, which was not so evident that the composition seemed at all contrived. For example, I had a series of lines emanate from center of composition so that they broke up smaller elements of the still life, but on a larger scale served to provide a sense of unity. In another composition, a system of lines swirled out from center. I also used the convention of having right angles and lines emerging from the top left corner. A common characteristic of all of these compositions was the use of motion spreading from an explosive starting point.

Towards the end of the first semester of study, I became so interested in creating still lifes as an influence for abstraction that the still lifes evolved into abstract sculpture. I had made my work abstract in relation to its three dimensional origin, but I still felt that in its final form on paper or canvas, the work could be considered very representational. I was still using the two dimensional disciplines to allude to real objects, thus creating art that was almost completely representational. In the further exploration of my Senior Scholar project, I continued to use the three dimensionality of sculpture as a study for drawing and painting, but I focused more on elevating the degree of abstractness in the two dimensional part of my process. In doing so, I distanced my art further from the still lifes, refined my process, and made my work feel more resolved.

In the first semester, most of the methods that I had investigated for creating abstractions from the still lifes dealt with manipulation of value. I learned to create ambiguity in my drawings by having different objects similar in value so that they are less distinguishable from each other, and I developed a system for emphasizing extreme value contrasts which made compositions more striking. I decided that in the second semester I wanted to focus more on painting than drawing because I felt that I had not explored the use of color to its maximum potential. I wanted to find ways of creating abstract complexity with color that were comparable to the complexity I was capturing in my drawings.

In painting, the range of colors is so extensive that it is hard to maintain relationships between different objects through the use of color. Using the real colors of the still life allowed for harmony in compositions, but made compositions too naturalistic. I wanted to develop a color scheme that abstracted from the real colors of the still life, so I made the areas of the composition that were taken from the still life fully naturalistic in color and then used variations on the natural colors in the areas I had invented. I found that emphasizing certain colors created more unity within the color scheme and gave them an abstract quality while still relying on the natural colors. I also increased unity by maintaining the same sense of warmth or coolness throughout the composition. Many of the objects I used had very little natural color, so I was forced to invent colors almost entirely. I painted the underlying layers as a grisaille, using shades of gray, and when the values matched the natural values of the still life, I glazed over the painting with invented colors, retaining the natural values underneath.

I decided that I had to have a stronger sense of recession because my work needed more spatial complexity, and this could be achieved through expansion of illusory space. I was finding it hard to invent a deeply receding space when most of the objects I was rendering were no more than five feet in front of me. I wanted to work the space behind the still lifes and find a way of creating deeper space without having to invent objects to fill the space. An increased number of objects would result in a composition that was confusing rather than spatially complex. I found multiple ways of pushing recession. I arranged composition by its contour lines to create balanced shapes. Then when I felt that the lines, values, and color balanced, I pushed contours back or pulled them forward by adding shadows to define three dimensionality. The shadows added a realistic element by pushing the recession and also added to the level of abstraction in my compositions because the shadows became new shapes within the surfaces of objects. A greater sense of recession was created by having the most distant objects enveloped in shadows, and higher in value. The objects closest to the picture plane were made to jump forward because they were lower in value. I also created recession by heightening the atmospheric perspective. I made closer objects appear to be clearer by tightening up their edges, and made the edges of distant objects hazier by softening their edges.

I started exploring atmospheric qualities in my paintings by using layers of thin glazes of paint. This allowed me to overlap receding forms and create a feel of translucency, gaseousness, and atmosphere. It gave the work a nonobjective quality which made its origin as still lifes less obvious and transformed them into landscapes. I began designing still lifes to stimulate landscape effects by treating them as small scale

models of places. I used contrasts between vacant space and space filled with matter to represent ground versus sky relationships. These spaces were defined and set apart by clear horizon lines which established a deeper sense of recession; a recession to infinity.

The presence of a horizon line in any image indicates large scale, life size events because of its reference to landscapes. Prior to using horizon lines, my compositions could be identified as having a fairly small scale due to the effects of artificial lighting and feeling of lightness in weight. The use of horizon lines in my work counteracted this, making the overall feeling of scale indefinite and creating spatial ambiguity.

The creation of a landscape environment marked the point where I had truly lost all recognizability of the objects of the still lifes. In order to regard the objects as completely separate from their use in real life, I assigned to them a meaning that had no relation to their real life foundations. I worked my images to the extent that piles of junk were turned into compositions of geometric shapes. Then I pushed them beyond being unrecognizable by having them hint at something entirely different, a landscape.

Soon enough, I found myself so involved in the creation of a landscape that I was focusing less on design elements and relying too much on the use of a horizon line to create deep recession. I wanted to maintain deep recession, but achieve it without depicting the infinite point where sky meets land, and in a way that would induce abstraction. I attempted to create deep recession by creating compositions where the horizon line was cropped by the picture plane, but I still found myself flattening out the composition as soon as I attended to design elements. Eventually, I found a resolution by composing a still life where the

concentration of mass rested at the center of the composition. This allowed me to suggest depth behind the mass without actually having to show a horizon line dissecting the composition. I was able to create space that did not have recession quite as deep as a landscape, and at the same time, was not as shallow as the space of a still life.

In the second semester of study, I increased the size of my paintings, and in doing so, several problems arose. When viewed at a distance, the paintings seemed to lack unity and conviction. I realized that larger images dictate a distance for viewing that is farther away than the distance I was comfortable with painting. I was standing close to the paintings and focusing on small portions of the picture. At a small distance, recession of individual elements in the composition can seem to work when the overall recession, as seen in a more distant point of view, does not work. If the smaller portions do not recede properly together, the composition flattens out at a distance and can interfere with comprehension of the composition as a unified image. I realized that I had to get used to painting at the same distance as people would be viewing the paintings. I started setting up my canvases a few yards from the still life, so that I could not paint anything without visualizing how it related to the entire composition.

I also created more conviction by using heavier paint and by being more aggressive in trying to cover the greater surface areas of my larger paintings. Many of the large sweeping curves I had painted had slight irregularities in them, making them less effective in leading the viewer's eye around the composition in the way that I had intended. The use of thicker paint gave more force and strength to the motion in my

compositions by forcing me to adopt a looser technique of painting. It allowed me to paint long, dynamic lines in one brushstroke without running out of paint, so that the motion captured on canvas related directly to the natural motion of my arm. I chose not to use thick paint in such a way that brushstrokes became visible because the movement of brushstrokes can confuse and conflict with the movement of the composition. I wanted the arrangement of the composition to be the source of all action, complexity, and motion in the paintings, rather than the artistry of the physical aspects of the paint or charcoal. I needed to have a balance between thickness and thinness of paint so that there was a contrast between heavy mass and light atmosphere. Thinness pushed recession by revealing underlying layers of paint which appeared as objects far away. Thicker paint allowed for a sharpness that made objects appear more detailed and thus closer to the picture plane. Use of thicker paint may be worth exploring to a greater extent in future paintings, because it may give some effects that I have not thought of yet.

This project has been about finding the point where abstraction is too much. At the beginning, my work was too realistically rendered. I had to rely heavily on the still lifes in order to create interesting compositions. As I progressed, I began distancing my art so far from the still lifes that I was bordering on too abstract. In the end, I was able to create a fairly even balance between objectivity and nonobjectivity. I retained the special quality of having something real that can't be invented and, at the same time, I found the proper way to emphasize abstract elements and used them to lead my art towards a non objective style. The result was the creation of compositions that could be read as

arrangements of abstract lines and shapes, or three dimensionally as space and objects. I feel that I have developed a style of art where the created ideas are equally as important as the represented ideas.











