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ART LANGUAGE AS AN ORGANIZATION OF MEANING

By

JASON PEARCE WILLOME

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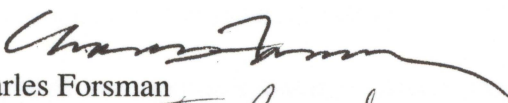
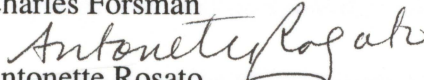
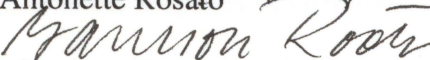
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This thesis entitled:

Art Language as an Organization of Meaning

Written by Jason Pearce Willome

Has been approved for the Department of Fine Arts


Charles Forsman

Antonette Rosato

Garrison Roots

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The signatories have examined the final copy of this thesis and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above-mentioned discipline.

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Willome, Jason Pearce (M.FA. Painting and Drawing)

Language as an Organization of Meaning

Thesis Directed by Professor Charles Forsman

Abstract:

There is more to the idea of language than what is understood as its textual and verbal forms. Language is in its most general sense an organization of meanings that are formed from memories of perception and experience. These meanings generate a lexicon of signifiers that can be composed into groups of complex meanings or phrases of meaning. Any grouping of meaning can be considered within the context of language and further more, can be thought of as a way of speaking. Artists occupy a unique position that permits them to recognize this idea of language, and draw from different vocabularies of visual and perceptual meanings, to form new meanings and works of art.

Utilizing extant visual lexicons to form new organizations of meaning

There are consistencies in the character of every artist's work that make them visibly distinguishable from other artists, but very few think of them in terms of a personalized visual language. The aspects of an artist's work that are most about language, such as process, aesthetic choice, and the relationship of aesthetic choice to its conveyance of the artist's idea/message, are often identified as merely stylistic consistencies. I suggest, however, that they are really a part of a vocabulary of visual or material metaphors that have been cultivated by artists over the course of their experience with their medium.

What is understood as their *medium* is in fact, a respective addition to the artistic language as a whole. Artist's *stylistic* endeavors and their personal discoveries of meaning in existing visual languages (concept) are contributions to this larger artistic language, a language system that formally encompasses all transactions of meaning. Kiki Smith, Antoni Tàpies and Matthew Barney use materials that reference the body, and although they each explore very different dynamics in their understanding of this metaphor, one could say they are each speaking a similar language. Duchamp's readymades illustrate a language process of identifying a lexicon of found objects, and drawing from this vocabulary to form new meanings.

The language use of artists such as Damien Hirst and David Wilson reveal a similar process. Both utilize the extant visual languages of science, medicine, and natural history, but they each explore these language forms in different ways, and emphasize different things in route. Wilson, for example, within the conventions of

the language of natural history museums, has created an entire institution, the Museum of Jurassic Technology, that is his work of art. This work is completely dependent on the extant language of such institutions, and utilizes the parts of this language to create a newly considered meaning.

Damien Hirst does something similar in his own work, drawing from the visual signifiers of science and medicine, identifying a lexicon of vocabulary that includes vitrines, formaldehyde, dissection and other visual aspects of clinical observation. These signifiers, when grouped, represent a structured form of visual language. With this visual vocabulary, Hirst organizes the various visual meanings into new whole meanings, just as a poet organizes words into sentences and phrases. This demonstrates that language is the sum of one's experiences or a collection of cultural experiences, and that their memory, as well as the act of conveying them and receiving them are not specific to verbal and textual forms of language, but that language includes all forms of organized meaning gathered through the senses. What is discovered here is a larger language.

The formalized system in such a language is the convention that is associated with each particular visual vocabulary. It is the formal practice that generates a visual way of organizing information, and it is this structure that provides the language context within which these artists' work. These are not merely conventions that Hirst and Wilson are working in, but ways of speaking. These artists have identified these conventions as language, and are using the language to form new meanings and to make art.

According to Webster's Dictionary, the definition of language ranges from a system of word-use among a community of people, to a set of formalized abstract symbols of meaning, to simple communication. The term *language* is used in a variety of circumstances, sometimes surprising or occasionally poetic. There is language as we commonly understand it, a transaction of meaning using verbal and textual systems, and then there is the larger scope of what language can be.

The potential discovered when realizing all organized meaning can be considered as a form of language, allows the idea of language to become applicable to visual and artistic situations. Aspects of artistic process that are not traditionally thought of as language processes, such as developing a vocabulary of personalized visual metaphors, as well as the many different approaches to art-making, can all be considered as forms of language. This revealed form of language, this larger and inclusive perspective, functions in a general sense similarly to the textual and verbal forms with which we are most commonly aware of and acquainted, but specifically can be identified as its own formalized system.

Through experience with any material, convention or process, one begins to develop a familiarity that eventually becomes a vocabulary. This vocabulary is what the viewer comes into contact with when looking at a work of art. Depending on the organization of the vocabulary into different orders, proximities, or hybrids, new meanings can be manifest, new levels of understanding reached, and new complexities achieved in the whole of artistic language.

Identifying different approaches to art-making as language

A problem I had at the outset when talking about the language of painting was how to define what that language or syntax was. One person may think that painting ended with Jackson Pollock, one person may say that anything after Impressionism leaves them feeling languid, and some are still making and talking about paintings in the manner of people who died hundreds of years ago. There are so many perspectives on what painting is, has been, and can be, that it seems necessary to find a context from which to inclusively describe all forms of painting.

Initially, through a series of conversations and arguments with teachers, fellow students and artists, several of us were able to agree that Painting had to be the sum of its entire history of approach, that to ignore or reject any element of that history would in effect be a great loss of potential, and that each movement or perspective in painting should openly be considered an addition to its burgeoning lexicon. A problem was, that though this approach represented an inclusive and progressive idea, there are many people who don't accept certain perspectives of painting, and we would have had to establish that all approaches to Painting had a valid place in its language

The first initiative was the creation of a painting context that organized the language into a hierarchy of constants (fig. 1); in other words, a definition based on the idea that in history, there were certain things that could be identified as Painting in every era, and these things when listed in descending order from most to least consistent, could provide a frame of reference that would allow us to pin down a definition. Therefore, awareness and consideration/activation of surface became the

first in the order, as every “painting” from the cave paintings in France, to Robert Rauschenberg’s *Monogram*, to Josef Albers’ color arrangements had this trait. Next came composition and design; third, material; and fourth, a counter-intuitive, but pointed designation of the visual (image/ illusion/ picture/ appearance) as the least important. With this hierarchy, what we sought to achieve was a declarative but formalized structure that revealed a painting as not necessarily a painted image, but the processes that created the painted appearance.

The weakness in the argument was that the equality we sought to gain by employing a hierarchy to break the paradigm, only created another one. However, the idea of an ordering of historical approaches to Painting, arranged evenly according to use of the language, was the part of the idea that seemed to make the best sense. Rather than a hierarchy, a scale or a spectrum-like structure could reveal different approaches as different elements of the Painting lexicon, showing degrees of difference rather than a new pecking order. In this spectral scale, visual manifestation moved from the clearly illusory or representational work (fig. 2), to more mark-based representational work, to material-based representational work. The line of reasoning then supposed, that at a certain point Painting progressed to become synonymous with art forms identifiable as Sculpture. Manuel Neri, Borofski, Antoni Tápies, and Rauschenberg were in proximity to one another. Rodin and Monet seemed to overlap. This was now an art language, and not a painting language, and the linear spectrum we were looking at seemed more likely a circular whole (fig. 3), organized by similarity in language use.

The amazing potential discovered in realizing all organized meaning can be language

With this idea of art language in mind, the idea began to extend to being inclusive of all forms of communication, in some cases seeming completely devoid of formalized rules. In a general sense, my understanding of language became more specific to the feat of interaction. What I found language to be, after stripping it of its strict attachment to text and verbal meaning, was a fluid method of exchanging information. However, on a more basic level of daily use, it is a way to convey what we mean that is limited only by the way we think or choose to think.

Consider the act of conversation. There is more to conversation than just talking to one another; there is level and tone of voice, inflection, choice of words, facial expression, and body posturing. In fact, more is communicated in the nonverbal forms of gesture than in what is being said verbally, and ultimately, a combination or juxtaposition of several forms of language is necessary to convey and receive an intended meaning.

Proof of this lies in people who have aphasiatic conditions. In Oliver Sacks book, the Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat, he offers the anecdote of several aphasiatic patients laughing uncontrollably at a televised speech of then U.S. president, Ronald Reagan. The reason, he came to understand, for their laughter, was that people with aphasia understand only on a visual and gestural level. In other words, they depend on body language and other forms of gestural expression to understand what a person means. When a person does not behave naturally, or restrains and controls their gestures, the meaning is either confused or lost entirely.

So the reason for Dr. Sacks' patients' laughter was not in response to what President Reagan was saying, but how he was saying it (Sacks, 80).

This demonstrates how communication can result from the smallest transaction of meaning with scant reliance on verbal signifiers or highly formalized textual symbols. The meaning is organized by gesture and tone, and it still can be expressed and understood. This leads me to believe that language in its most basic sense is the organization of parts of meaning so that they can be used to form new wholes of meaning.

In the work of my thesis show, the paintings are arranged in close proximity to one another, and suggest a grouping or whole made up of parts, the parts being each individual painting. This whole has just as much capacity to engender meaning as each individual painting, and because the whole conveys a meaning through the accumulation of its members' meanings, a survey of the whole in relation the parts, functions as words do in a phrase or sentence.

From another perspective, words, like paintings have a huge amount of meaning wrapped up in them, and extend the meaning of adjacent words when placed in a group. It is this line of thought that supposes that such a resemblance to what a phrase or sentence looks like, not only emphasizes the notion of a visual language, but that the viewer couldn't help but read the paintings as both a simultaneous whole and individual parts, resulting in the viewer participating in a language system whether they wanted to or not. This implies that the two phrases of paintings and drawings that are a part of my MFA Thesis show are unique to the organization of

their parts, and that another variation, or the inclusion of a different painting/drawing image would alter their perceived meaning.

When analyzing the language used in the paintings associated with this Thesis, one can identify two major lexicons of visual meaning from which I am drawing. One: photographic imagery specific to news-report photography, and two: a somatic, material language of the body. The first appears in the form of inkjet prints, made from scanning selected news photos into the computer and printing out larger versions on pieces of inkjet-printable acetate. The second serves as a means of embedding these images, or internalizing them in a new material presence. This process of encompassing one medium in another represents a change of aesthetic speed that can be seen as a change in language.

The news photo, which has the immediacy of a report or record of an event, and the urgent clarity necessary for communicating meaning very quickly in a newspaper, has been translated into the patient aesthetic speed of a painting. The result is that the image now requires the viewer to invest time and attention in the image's meaning, because it is not as easy to digest or as disposable as it was in the speed of the newspaper.

The reason I chose this method of embedding actual images in material, rather than simply representing them was a reaction to the problems I see in relying on representation to communicate honestly, and the honesty and closeness to reality that a photograph represents. As I see it, there are events that actually happen, and there are interpretations of events that spread through cultures of people, and among these interpretations, photographs represent the closest proximity to the true event. To

render the photograph in paint seems not only redundant to me, but also dishonest, in that it only shows my perspective on the event. However, to include the image and be forced to respond to its authority seemed an interesting prospect, and one where there would be a dialogue occurring in the painting between it and myself.

What became clear to me from this process was the notion of language I have described above, and the complex web that meaning and language really are. This and a desire to understand what was happening in my country and in its relationship to the world drove me to identify a specific lexicon in the *New York Times* newspaper. After creating several paintings from the image vocabulary the *Times* provided, I saw that the nature of the news photograph to express the content of the now began to permeate my work; that I was speaking in a language that reflected the daily events of the era in which we live. What I decided then, was to approach this language with a respect for its integrity, limiting my perspective to only the images I chose, and choosing not to alter them any further than imbuing them in the aesthetic speed of Painting. Therefore my paintings attempt to remain neutral, and try to open the meaning of the image by making them more paintings than photographs. For this reason, do I utilize a square picture plane, as it is neither specific to landscape, or to portraiture. The square format allows me to change the orientation of the image in favor of design, a feat that further slows the speed of the photograph. Furthermore, I tend to isolate some aspect of the image as a shape, using the image as a matrix that determines this shape, so that the familiarity of the image is made more unfamiliar, something that I think engenders interest in the viewer. Ultimately, these changes create a painting that represents a dialogue between myself, and the *language of now*,

and when organized as a language; create phrases that reflect the times we are in and our relationship to them.

Works Cited

Sacks, Oliver. The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat. New York:
Touchstone, 1985

FIGURES

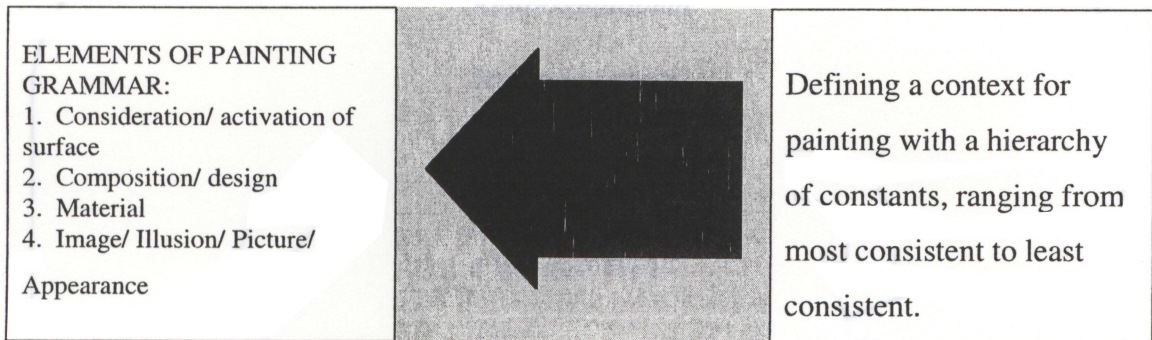


Figure 1

Illusory Representational (naturalistic/ realistic/ etc.)		Mark-based Representational (abstract/ impressionistic/ gestural-figuative/ etc.)		Material-based Representational (Matter-painters/ Action-painters/ Found-objects/ etc.)
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Figure 2

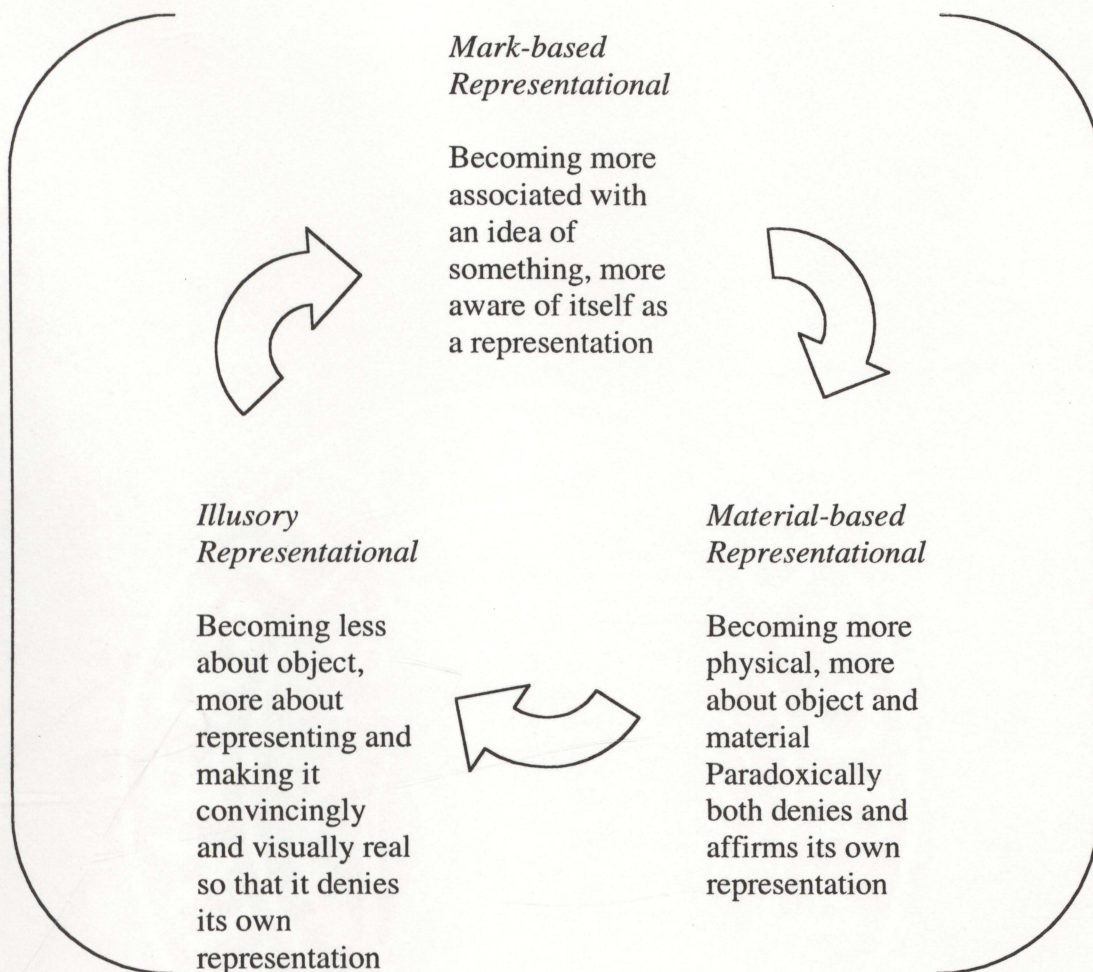


Figure 3

