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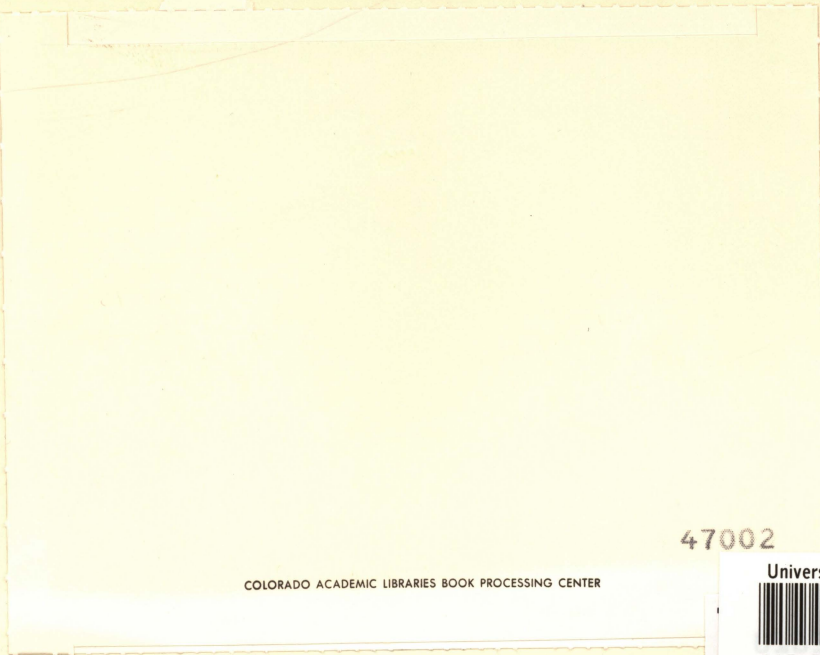
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AMBIGUITY AS A SOURCE OF MEANINGS IN
SOME CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACT PAINTINGS

by
Gerald Durwood Byerley

Gerald Durwood Byerley

B. F. A., Washington University, 1960

Fine Arts

by

Ernest E. Matthews

Date May 29, 1962

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of the University of Colorado in partial
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Master of Fine Arts

Department of Fine Arts

1962

Byerley, Gerald Durwood M. F. A. ...
Ambiguity as a Source of Meanings in Some
Contemporary Abstract Paintings

This Thesis for the M. F. A. degree by

Gerald Durwood Byerley

This thesis deals with the interpretation of some
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within them. To sense ambiguous levels of meanings in the

contemporary abstract paintings associated with the

more limited quantity of ambiguity in paintings which

contain a more descriptive Date May 24, 1962

are traced through the ambiguous levels in both kinds of

painting (i.e., abstract and object-descriptive). The

discussions are not only a guide to the paintings used as

illustrations but are also a starting point for further

associations with other abstract paintings of the present.

The discoveries of Cubism and Impressionism are the intuitive

disciplines for the contemporary abstract painter. Their

concrete of planar structure and light structure are basic

to contemporary abstract painting. A less stable or less

plastic plane in the conventional sense of Cubism exists in

contemporary abstract painting. The examples display these

Byerley, Gerald Durwood (M. F. A., Fine Arts: Creative Arts)

Ambiguity as a Source of Meanings in Some

Contemporary Abstract Paintings

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Eugene Matthews

This thesis deals with the interpretation of some contemporary abstract paintings through the use of the concept of ambiguity. No attempt is made to separate the abstract painting of the present from the painting of the past, but rather it is shown how both can be approached through the examination of the ambiguous levels of meanings within them. The dense ambiguous levels of meanings in the contemporary abstract paintings are contrasted with the more limited quantity of ambiguity in paintings which contain a more descriptive use of objects. Some meanings are traced through the ambiguous levels in both kinds of painting (i.e., abstract and object-descriptive). The discussions are not only a guide to the paintings used as illustrations but are also a starting point for further associations with other abstract paintings of the present. The discoveries of Cubism and Impressionism are the intuitive disciplines for the contemporary abstract painter. Their concepts of planar structure and light structure are basic to contemporary abstract painting. A less stable or less plastic plane in the conventional sense of Cubism exists in contemporary abstract painting. The examples display these

results of a very dense ambiguity that is dominated by the intangible properties of light. It is shown how the breadth of the emotional experiences of light in these paintings lend to them a feeling of unlimited space. The ambiguities within contemporary abstract paintings show the conflicts within contemporary man and of course within the contemporary painter. Ambiguity as a form for paradox can best contain these conflicts. Ambiguity in painting adjusts the unlimited forces of the human psyche to a form which is unlimited in its expressive potential.

This abstract of about 225 words is approved as to form and content. I recommend its publication.

Signed

Ernest E. Matthews
Instructor in charge of dissertation

Which is in the permanent possession of the University of Colorado and recorded with the Department of Fine Arts.

Approved by

Ernest E. Matthews
Co-Chairman of Committee

Robert H. ...
Co-Chairman of Committee

Head of Fine Arts Department

Date

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Figure 1



Figure 1

Figure 2 Jacques-Louis David, 'The Portuguese'



Figure 2 Georges Braque, "The Portuguese"



Figure 3 Juan Gris, "The Pierrot"







Figure 6



of nature, which includes man. The abstract painter

achieves forms which may remind us of the shapes, structures, and processes in nature (such as growth or metamorphic evolution).

This thesis is concerned with the introspective abstract painting of the present. Many "brands" of abstract painting exist today but to avoid lists or classification the term "abstract" painting will work as the best for the examples chosen; these examples will be used to demonstrate the occurrence of ambiguities in form which includes the subject as well as the pictorial elements. The term ambiguity will be used to mean the successful formation in painting of two or more levels of meaning at the same time. These levels of meaning may be clear or obscure, equivocal or sequential.

The contemporary abstract painter has the task of making an image with paint and canvas. This of course is essentially the same as with the painters of the past centuries. If this image is to succeed as a work of art, it must give visual reality to the painter's aspirations. Today the outer appearances of nature are more generally ignored or by-passed in an effort to attain the inner spiritual world of the painter. This inner spiritual world of the painter can be considered as at least part of the larger spiritual world of mankind, and so does not deal directly with a representation of the objects in the world of nature, which includes man. The abstract painter by the scientific attitudes handed down from the Renaissance

achieves forms which may remind us of the shape, structures, and processes in nature (such as growth or metamorphic evolution).

The contemporary trend, or speaking in a broader sense, the trend of art in the twentieth century, is toward abstraction. This Abstraction in the contemporary sense results in a de-materialization of objective pictorial expression because it has partly been an attempt to grasp the inner source of symbolic expression. The abstract painter has moved away from an illusion of material reality toward a preference for the intrinsic reality derived from the abstract elements of painting. The visual elements, shape, space, value, color, line, texture, are used plastically in abstraction. The expressive use of these elements may evoke a subject.

The concept of the subject must first be approached from the standpoint of the traditional representation of objects in painting; the subject is the objects or a story that they tell. In a later section it will be shown how the subject in some present abstract painting becomes identified with the plastic form of the painting. The existence of abstract form in the painting of past centuries is not to be denied but the examples and discussions to be used will attempt to show how a new awareness of abstract form has given a new subject emphasis to contemporary painting. It might be said that painters have become disillusioned by the scientific attitudes handed down from the Renaissance

culminating in quasi-scientific cults in art from the time of Impressionism. Since then, a conscious attempt has been made to regain the plastic intent in painting.

The question may be asked, "What is achieved by abstraction?" The most apparent answer in the twentieth century is a "new point of view" which is truly contemporary in its "vision."

". . . In the simplest possible terms, we are looking at art through glasses appropriate to the century we are living in, and not through those we inherit from previous generations. Whether people like it or not these modern 'glasses' exist and are nothing more nor less than 'abstraction.' However bitterly the schools and dealers might wrangle over the word's possible meanings, we see all art in terms of its abstract qualities, regardless of the degree of figurativeness or non-figurativeness, representation, or non-representation, objectivity or subjectivity."¹

This new point of view enables us to look more deeply into the painting, past the conscious levels of its "existence" and its "representation" into its deeper implied psychological realms. The ability to do this has been achieved by many of the twentieth century painters, some of whom will be discussed later, as a result of a somewhat new and currently very intense respect for the inner psychological workings of man.

". . . the psychoanalytic approach germinates out of the fundamental notion that man's behavior can be explained in terms of the working out of a complex of conscious and unconscious personality needs and drives, at least

Summary and Critique, *Aesthetics Today* (edited by Morris Philipson), New York, 1961, p. 280.

¹ Michel Seuphor, Dictionary of Abstract Painting, New York, 1957, p. 2.

of some of which are erotic, and all of which strive toward and often find symbolic expression, as in dreams and in the fine arts."²

Perhaps painting is in another period of a searching for new meanings which is spiritually akin to that of the period of the Romanesque.

"Through the present-day tendency in art to dematerialize the subject, we are enabled to look deeper into both the hidden and the manifest abstractions of Romanesque art, to recognize better its effect on the entire language of artistic forms, and to distinguish these effects in their individual, yet manifold degrees. Of course, Romanesque art aspires no more than any other historic style to that total abstraction which makes modern art such an unique phenomenon in the history of the human mind. On the contrary, it is completely dominated by its subject matter. But since, with an exclusiveness that was never to occur again, this subject matter is God alone--that is, a spiritual power in the highest sense--the shaping of Romanesque Art is by its very nature lodged in the sphere of pure imagination, and it is this that brings it so close to our modern sensibilities. For far removed as it is from traditional feeling, this modern outlook has created in its own way a work of pure symbols."³

The contemporary abstract painter is using the visual elements for psychological effects and generally avoids the representation of objects though his painting may contain a sense of them (or the actual object itself in the cases of assemblage and collage). The abstract concerns of the painter today originated in the abstract form of the painting

²Douglas N. Morgan. "Psychology and Art, 1950; a Summary and Critique," Aesthetics Today (edited by Morris Phillipson), New York, 1961, p. 280.

³Joseph Gantner (and Marcel Pobé). The Glory of Romanesque Art, New York, 1956, p. 10.

of the past that represented objects. That is, abstract painting today has the subconscious heritage of the abstract form in the painting of the past. The representation of objects in painting was "demolished" in a conventional sense by the Cubist painters, and this will be discussed after an exemplary analysis is made of some of the ambiguous levels of subject and form in a traditional painting that represents objects.

Paintings contain ambiguous levels of meanings in sequence and coherence (taking for granted that they are successful as works of art); an analysis of a painting can reveal them. The visual elements have perceptual and intellectual ambiguous relationships in painting, with varying degrees of importance among them. Of course the visual elements are bound to the subject, which is either the traditional representation of objects or the plastic abstract form of the painting or a combination of both. The result is the "form" of painting which may be defined as a plastic interaction.

Ambiguity in the past

Rembrandt's "Polish Rider" (see figure 1) displays what is meant by the "representation of objects" in painting. This is one level of its subject if only the primary level. The other levels of subject follow as horse, man, equestrian figure, landscape, sky and light. Objects may be identified: bridle, sword, arrows, hatchet, saddle, landscape? Is it dawn or dusk? It seems as though he has

clothing, and the larger category of objects: the horse, the man, and the landscape. A sense of objective reality pervades these things because of the lighting. There is more of a sense of brush stroke than there is a sense of the textures of the objects depicted, so this painting has that feature which is also characteristic of some painting today, the visibility of the painter's means. This quality is sometimes called "painterliness." Therefore Rembrandt's method of painting exists in an ambiguous relationship with the description of objects. In this painting that relationship is equivocal. We are aware of the objects described and the brush work at nearly the same time.

The subject of this painting is certainly more than the things listed, but what more? First of all, it must be re-emphasized that this painting represents (or presents an illusion of) the objects listed above as it is also the embodiment of some mystery of implied or disguised meaning. Despite the clarity of form and the exactness of detail there is a condition of romantic mystery here. Who is this "Polish Rider"? His features do not look familiar (i.e., a portrait is not felt here).

"Romantic mystery" implies obscurity which is one of the other meanings for ambiguity. In the case of this Rembrandt the boundaries of the subject are extended because of this obscurity. Where is he going? Where did he come from? Did he just appear out of that primordial, dark landscape? Is it dawn or dusk? It seems as though he has

been going somewhere and coming from somewhere for an eternity. His gaze is not one that recognizes us, but a gaze toward a timeless, eternal, or divine goal which is neither in the direction of his stare nor in the direction of the apparent movement of the horse but somewhere in a timeless realm to which this horse and rider only symbolize a journey. This mystery is embodied in the kind of painting which is called "object-representation" or "object-description."

The narrative of this painting is a horse and rider in a landscape and a mysterious journey and much more which is implied. These other, somewhat elusive levels of the subject can only be speculated upon with the imagination and skill of the scholar, philosopher and poet. However, the abstract form of this painting can be analysed at some length.

A very subdued complementary of colors can be felt here because the browns and grays contain in a cloudy way some of the conventional complementary schemes such as red and green or blue and orange. These are dispersed throughout the painting, allowing the eye to adjust freely. The color of the horse, the rider's elbow and some places in the sky lend the much needed cool notes to the warmish reds and browns. There is even more adjustment in the cold yellows. These are warmed a little by the gold objects: shoe, bridle, arrows. The simultaneous relationships of nearly equal amounts of cool and warm colors result in a neutral

temperature. This neutrality is certainly in keeping with the "neutralized" narrative. The color does not interfere with the mysterious, implied meaning in this painting but on another neutral level tends to enhance the mystery. Neutrality of color and neutrality of narrative give the condition of neutrality twice as much power; however, this is only so when contrasted with another and more dynamic level of visual perception within this painting.

Since the color is unobtrusive here, perhaps a more dynamic ambiguous relationship can be discovered in the value range and in the shape effect. The lighter valued horse and rider stand out against the dark mass of the landscape. The light mass of the horse and rider is adjusted to the lighter area of the sky above. Metaphorically speaking, the horse and rider could be thought of as "dropping" from the area of the sky because of the close abstract relationship of their tonal values. The tones of the horse's legs and the earth below are graduated so that they "connect," therefore arresting the floating or dropping action of the upper portions of the horse. The whole form of the horse is adjusted so that the represented movement is arrested in the abstract form. This final adjustment completes the pattern of ambiguous relationships in this painting. It started with the recognition of objects in larger and smaller categories; then came the recognition of the painter's means, mystery and neutrality of narrative and color, and then the dynamic relationships in the value

range. Therefore, the form of represented objects in this painting exist on abstract visual as well as narrative levels at the same time.

Rembrandt began with a representation of objects as subject matter and worked them toward an abstract solution. It must not be implied that Rembrandt consciously sought abstract solutions for their own ends as a philosophy for his art. These solutions are an integral part of the subject and may be considered as intuitively achieved.

Ambiguity in Cubism

Some painting of the twentieth century and Cubism in particular displays a degree of alteration of the representation of objects. With Cubism began a plan for seeing that was eventually responsible for the disappearance of the represented objects in abstract painting. This plan is more generally known as the system of "simultaneous viewpoints." Instead of the traditional way of organizing objects in picture space by means of the systems of perspective, the cubists juxtaposed various viewpoints in the same picture which gives it a peculiar vibrating effect of planes (see figure 2).

These "vibrating" planes have at least two ambiguous levels of existence: conceptual and structural. Conceptually, they exist as a result of a conscious attempt to display many viewpoints at the same time. Structurally, these planes exist as units of the form of the finished

painting. The intellectual ideas of Cubism had to be fitted to pictorial forms as the narrative subject of the Rembrandt was so adjusted. The subjects of Cubist paintings were more in the nature of formal solutions than in the area of narratives. The dominance of the appearance of planar analysis (and sometimes textural and pattern analysis) over the representation of objects used for this analysis characterized Cubism.

More ambiguous relationships can be shown by breaking down the "structural units" into parts. These planes as structural units affect the "life" of one another. Rhythmic patterns contain the forces of the combined planes and may have a jammed appearance or an empty appearance according to their quantity and relationships (i.e., forces and tensions). An example of this would be the plastic additive building of planar statements that finally make a Cubist structure of the many viewpoints. Ambiguous levels of meaning (sought through analysis and interpretation) add up to the conclusive effect of the painting.

"Cubism substituted a radically new fusion of mass and void. In place of earlier perspective systems that determined the precise location of discrete objects in illusory depth, Cubism offered an unstable structure of dismembered plane in indeterminate spatial positions. Instead of assuming that the work of art was an illusion of reality that lay beyond it, Cubism proposed that the work of art was itself a reality that represented the very process by which nature is transformed into art."⁴

⁴Robert Rosenblum. Cubism and Twentieth Century Art, New York, 1960, p. 9.

The earliest stage of Cubism which is called the "analytical" phase retains a great deal of the old systems of modeling forms with dark and light. Later, the Cubist approach is simplified and synthesized. The "Synthetic" phase results (see figure 3). Here there is less and sometimes no modeling of forms. Flat shapes are preferred which embody what might be thought of as distillations of some of the many "simultaneous viewpoints" into flatter arrangements that contain the essences of the objects and figures.⁵ The Synthetic paintings seem emptied of the vibrating spatial activity of the Analytical paintings. Analytical Cubist paintings were generally monochromatic in color. Colors and the matter of "collage" were used in the Synthetic Cubist paintings.

The premise of objects and figures still remains in the late paintings of the old Cubists, Picasso and Braque, but there seems to be a gradual progression away from their influence. Objects and figures have been used by Picasso and Braque for their plastic researches. Any emotions that these researches contain are the properties of the artists.

". . . the figure was kept (by Picasso and Braque) because the end of the painter's research was precisely the movement that disintegrated it. . . after the War (WWII) . . . Picasso, Braque and a whole generation of analysts had disintegrated figuration. What is left for the new generation is color, rhythm, fragments. They have no choice. Each must interrogate the new art for

⁵Guy Habasque. Cubism, Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1959, p. 41.

its ends and resources. 'The only concern of the artist must be art. Serious changes in all the arts are first material. The form comes last.'⁶

Painting has moved through the hectic formal analysis of Cubism and it now rests at a stage where it can use some of the knowledge of formal analysis for more deliberately artistic ends. In fact Cubism has become part of the formal discipline of most painters today and though they abandon the obvious surface structure of Cubism, it may still remain as a subconscious base. As the linear and planar analysis of Cubism remains as a discipline, so does the study of Impressionism. It is necessary to accept the existence of these two traditions as being on an intuitive level in the work of some contemporary abstract painters. In some contemporary abstract painting as the plane is used as a plastic and structural unit so is light used. The existence of the plane and of light is of a dual or an ambiguous nature. One is not possible without the other, yet one may dominate the other. The plane may "resist" with its "surface" or continue to recede because of its color or placement. The line made by the plane's edge may form part of a structure which unites with the two-dimensional surface of the painting. Light may "carry" through a sameness in tonal value of planes and it could also be enhanced by

⁶Quotation and subsequent paraphrasing by Dore Ashton from Jean Paul Sartre, "The Painter without Privileges," Arts and Architecture, vol. 78, No. 5, May 1961, pp. 4-5.

blurring the edges (lines) of the planes. There is any number of possible relationships of these two elements (plane and light) in painting today.

Ambiguity in the Present

Formally ambiguous presentations of the inner world of the artist loom within the formats of contemporary abstract paintings.

"Mining for their buried selves, the recent subjective painters are struggling in a mortal battle, quite as terrifying as the medieval battles with demons, in which for the first time in history they attempt to symbolize that which is 'different from the known and different from the unknown.'"⁷

The contemporary abstract painter tries to give us his new symbols and signs for this new territory of his expression. His symbology is in terms of contemporary psychological introspection. This analytical searching has resulted in an image which is of such a mystical nature that comment upon it is difficult.

The meanings in contemporary abstract paintings can be sought from several levels which are orders of study with vested interests. These are sociology, psychology and art history. Respectively each discipline asks: What is the relationship of abstract painting to society and the consequence of the relationship? What needs of personality

⁷Dore Ashton (with a quote included from the Upanishads). Arts and Architecture, vol. 77, March 1960, p. 10.

produce abstract painting? How does the contemporary abstract painting relate to the past and what are its stylistic elements?

These areas of study overlap, that is, each includes some of the others. For the sake of a nomenclature they could be listed in the following order:

Sociology - the larger order of needs

Psychology - the smaller order of needs

Art History - the specific classification and interpretation of styles

Elaine DeKooning in an article on the painters, Kline and Rothko, displays the three levels of interpretation. First of all she describes, in terms of art history, that their work is different from the past.

"The most obvious change from Past to Present in the work of both Kline and Rothko . . . was the apparent commitment to the Big Picture.⁸ . . . To meet the scale of his (Kline's) concept . . ."

The article develops into dealing with inward (psychological) reasons for the kind of format.

"Breadth of size and scale, in these works, are paradoxically the result of the artist's closeness to his painting--which he regards as a private act for a private view; and they are, at the same time, the means to insure privacy. The painting is a hiding place."⁹

Then, she begins to discuss the function of the new kind of format. This discussion resembles the order of sociology.

⁸Elaine DeKooning. "Kline and Rothko: Two Americans in Action," Art News Annual, vol XXVII, 1958, p. 175.

⁹Ibid.

"The magnified image here reverses its original functions and suggests a state-of-mind associated in the past only with small paintings---intimacy. Usually, the large painting has had a public expression: as a mural it was intended to project over distances; it was---even if the Day of Judgment was depicted---intended as decor."¹⁰

As painting can be dealt with from the outside with these three orders, so can the specific levels of the inner subject be dealt with in terms of its orders.

The formal and narrative levels of subject have dealt with the human figure in Western art and also with the environment of the human figure which comes under the classifications of landscape and interior. The environment may contain objects or "furniture" (other than the human figure). These objects are an endless list of things such as trees and mountains and dishes and tables. Objects may act out "roles" or take the expressive characteristics usually assigned to the human figure as in any of the "still lifes" of Chardin and Cezanne.

With a specific example, that of Phillip Guston's "Fable" 1956 (see figure 4), it can be pointed out how he has made an image and a subject which seems to include all of the phenomena of figure and environment in terms of his inner seeing of them.

Guston leaves out the traditional, scientific systems of linear perspective. We are presented here with something

¹⁰Ibid.

which more closely follows the Impressionistic systems of light (a system of broken color spots which give the effect of light) with an added usage of the half-tone--the phenomenon of seeing called the "figure and ground" relationship is easily discernible here.

"... any optical differentiation of a picture surface generates a sense of space. . ."¹¹

These forms which stand apart become the "figures" and the spaces which they stand out against are the "ground," yet Guston manipulates the two into an integrated whole.

"This organization of figures and backgrounds is repeated progressively until the whole visual field is perceived as a formal, ordered unity--the plastic image."¹²

The subject of this painting seems to exist on more ambiguous levels of meaning than the subject of the Rembrandt. The optical and then the psychical experiences which may be behind the creation of this work in a sense includes all the figures and ground relationships of seeing, that is, the possibilities of its meanings are infinite. The possible interpretations of the "Polish Rider" are only limited by the objective reality of the painting. For example: the horse-and-rider is not a tree. In the Guston the image implies an endless outpouring of ambiguity. Objects are suggested and the minds of the viewers make

¹¹ Gyorgy Kepes, Language of Vision, Chicago, 1944, p. 21.

¹² Ibid., p. 3

them into different things which can be given names as objects can be given names. In the Guston the plastic forms may be different "objects" according to the way each viewer "reads" this painting. With several viewers (or the same one on different occasions) there may be a chain of different viewing experiences linked only by the actual reality or existence of this painting (i.e., the physical existence of the painting itself).

This range of ambiguous levels of meaning implies a very general subject which should not be taken as meaning a bland or anonymous subject, but ideally it could mean a subject of immense scope. One of the definitions of fable is that of a narration which enforces some useful truth. It seems that the useful truth of this painting is that it could be any fable, or in an ambiguous sense all fables, past or present. In it are the implied mysteries of some primeval gathering of figures, beings, perhaps men, to enact some epic or archetype which is ever veiled in its meanings but vital in its emotions.

Guston has given his painting the sense of objects by the heavy weaving of the paint (which also reminds us of the painting surface). This is sensually akin to the feel or touch imparted by objects. Since the painting is paint and not objects the nearest analogy to the "touch" of objects would be the "feel" of the paint itself.

The visual concerns of Guston in "Fable" are not far removed from the concerns of the Impressionism, and in

particular Monet. Dore Ashton talks about how the painters (and Guston) are trying to "see themselves seeing."¹³

Monet's striving to record the purely visual or optical is like looking at the image on the retina. Monet's approach to recording the optical sensations appears cool and mostly unemotional. If Guston's image is an "impression" it is one that has been distorted by the inward and psychological seeing of it.

In psychological case histories distortion has been noted in the individual's perception of his own body; that is, his "image" of his own body.

"Emotional influence will change the relative value and clearness of the different parts of the body-image according to the libidinous tendencies."¹⁴

Surely Guston is painting some image of figures with which he is emotionally and psychically involved, imparting to them a resultant distortion.

Two other concerns which link Guston with Monet are the visible, "tactile" brush-stroke which is on the surface of the painting and reminds us of the two-dimensional expanse of the surface, and the apparent "measureless" in-depth space of the painting. Guston knows about the

¹³Dore Ashton, Arts and Architecture, vol. 77, March 1960, p. 10.

¹⁴Paul Schilder. The Image and Appearance of the Human Body, London, 1935, p. 170.

dissolving, distorting effect of light because it envelops the very soul of the image of his painting.

"By subordinating painting to optics, impressionist theory seemed to canonize man's subordination to nature; but in practice this theory of fidelity to the thing seen comes to mean fidelity to the artist's personality."¹⁵

If Monet did not paint what he knew about the Rouen Cathedral (i.e., the story of it) but only the optical sensations of it, then Guston moves a step further and paints what he knows about Impressionism. He seems to know it intuitively and it becomes a system for his image.

Guston's image floats like some animated Impressionist fog. This floating effect is the result of an attempt to hold the image there in the "field" of the painting and not to let it bog down in gravity. The force of gravity is held at bay by the vaporous qualities of this image which is not entirely like a vapour because it seems to have substance (the paint quality) and shape. Guston's image is like an "Assumption," one which has been achieved in such extreme abstraction that it has become mystical. Guston has projected his feelings so far into these "figures" that they have moved toward a de-materialized floating state of a purely psychological suspension.

Many of these occurrences are common to the painting of Rothko but in a different order of importance. We seem to have the schematical Impressionist light but here it has become a radiant color as well as light and we are not

¹⁵ André Malraux. The Psychology of Art, the Creative Act, New York, 1949, p. 154.

stopped at the surface by the "painterliness" but by a large dizzily dissolving rectangle on end. In the Guston a great deal of the power of its image is present in the black and white reproduction. The Rothko must be seen in color.

In Sketch for "Mural" No. 1, 1958 (see figure 5) a lush radiance of maroon and orange embraces the viewer. He is invited into the secret color joys of this immense painting (8'9" x 10'). Speculations as to the meanings of this work become so abstruse as to include again a generalization of the scope of the Guston, at least. However, the two paintings are of different characters in their fields of image. The Guston is more animate and has a larger quantity of specific of image or what might be called in painting of the past, more objects in the environment. The Rothko is a figure that is so large that it is a field. If the orange is taken as the positive form, it is soon discovered that the maroon "fills" the field up to the location of the orange and a puzzle results in trying to determine which is positive and which is negative. This is an ambiguous relationship of spaces as one might contemplate in a checker board.

"To perceive an image is to participate in a forming process; it is a creative act. . . . Independent of what one 'sees' every experiencing of a visual image is a forming, a dynamic process of integration, a 'plastic' experience."¹⁶

¹⁶ Gyorgy Kepes, Op. cit., p. 15.

The psychological language of contemporary abstract painting gives clues to the psychological state of contemporary man. Previously a point has been made of the large format of some contemporary painting (and all of the late abstract painting here discussed) as being a place for the artist to hide. What is he afraid of? Perhaps he is just protecting himself from the "self" of him. That is, that these psychological forces within the artist are so powerful that they must have a proper format in which to remain in healthy motion. They must run their course in invigorating circumstances. Their violence, if not tempered with imagination, will play havoc with over-used, or worn-out, traditional means which accounts for a great deal of "sick" reactionary art in our time. One of the contemporary writers comments on the nature of contemporary man.

"The Second World War presented a mirror to the human conditions which blinded anyone who looked into it. For if tens of millions were killed in concentration camps, out of the inexorable agonies and contractions of super-states founded upon the always insoluble contradictions of injustice, one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation (at least his collective creation from the past) and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature."¹⁷

The ambiguities within contemporary painting show the conflicts within contemporary man and in the contemporary

¹⁷Norman Mailer. "The White Negro," Advertisements for Myself, New York, 1960, p. 304.

painter. Ambiguity as a form for paradox can best contain these "conflicts".

It seems that contemporary man's nature is most acceptably expressed in abstract terms in painting today just because there is a balance. Abstract painting is impersonal enough to contain the seemingly mad, even the murderous frenzy of the nature of man without bringing harm to him. If the art holds this driving emotion then it will preserve the integrity of the psyche. Therefore, there is the balance between need and mode of expression. This is possible because abstract painting can be "destructive" and "harmless" at the same time through the adjustment of ambiguity of the form of the painting. The technique is highly emotional and the resultant image is dynamic in a pictorial or plastic sense, thus the emotional energy is useful.

Technique and emotion are the two areas which contemporary commentary on abstract painting is likely to cover. Dore Ashton discusses how Motherwell's painting technique seems to come from his work in collage and she also discusses in emotional terms the effect upon the viewer of his paintings.¹⁸

"In their schematic austerity these paintings move quickly to the center of the spectator's emotions, stirring them with the inexorable rhythm of the black progressions."¹⁹

¹⁸Dore Ashton. Arts and Architecture, vol. 74, July 1957, p. 4.

¹⁹Ibid.

In "Two Figures, with Cerulean Blue Stripe" 1960 (see figure 6), we have an obvious manipulation of the "figure and ground" principle advanced previously. This principle seems to haunt us in this painting. The black shapes at first appear as "figures" but after we look at them a while they become as holes and the lighter areas become as the positive shapes or figures, and thus again an ambiguous relationship of spaces. This seems partly to have been accomplished by the half-tone effect of the vertical shape on the left and the spot next to it. The edges blur and "bloop" with the effect of the brush and paint. This causes the "figure and ground," positive and negative shapes of black and white to lock together.

Motherwell has very carefully adjusted these forms to interlock in what appears to be a carefree flow of the brush and consequently a carefree flow of the shapes. This image is so carefree that it seems animated like some cartoon characters projected on a movie screen. One expects them to disappear in a flash.

Though bold and formal, Motherwell's image affects us as unstable. That is, the image reminds us of a form of situation that is not permanent. This floating, cinema-like image is fleeting in effect. This painting deals with a certain ambiguity of time. A particular scene and a particular time of day were dealt with by Monet, a time condition not unlike the unstable effect of the image in the Motherwell painting. The short space of time which produced the color

of the light in a Monet is about to pass. That is, we know that the conditions of that light are not permanent. We feel that the very image itself will change in the Motherwell. We may still be able to find the Rouen facade in the changing light but what will happen to the flashing image of the Motherwell? It has a permanent existence in the painting (as do the light effects in Monet) and will only change in the regard of the spectator which of course will have no physical effect on the painting.

"... The modern image is without distinct character, probably because of the tremendous proliferation of visual sensation which causes duplicates to appear among unlikes. The Renaissance man saw and visualized, let us say 'n' things. Today, fed by still, cinema and television cameras, we experience 'n' to the 100th power, and of course, the 'n's become similar because our brains become numb to their differences. Distinctions weaken. Finally the environment of the modern artist--the object which he names in his pictures--appertains to the picture only. The decision is neither one of purification or narcissism--it is, in its way, social comment."²⁰

The image of another painter is also unstable. Franz Kline's "Palmerton" 1960 (see figure 7) has a fleeting, pulsating image which seems to begin somewhere outside the format of the picture and move inward toward some unknown center in a rhythm of flashing lights. In the early part of this century Apollinaire predicted this kind of painting. ²⁰Thomas B. Hess. "DeKooning Paints a Picture," Art News, vol. 52, March 1953, p. 64.

²⁰Thomas B. Hess. "DeKooning Paints a Picture," Art News, vol. 52, March 1953, p. 64.

" . . . the new painters will provide their admirers with artistic sensations by concentrating exclusively on the problem of creating harmony with unequal light."²¹

The luminosity of the black and white of this painting (sometimes Kline "modulates" with a little brown) has a coloristic effect. One is reminded of the radiance of color or the "light" of color. A sense of light so pervades this image that the black is felt as a kind of light and its "plane" essentially is lost within that "light." The expanse of the image of the painting suggests a big painting surface but beyond that there is no "resisting" plane(s). The viewer is then in an immaterial world of black and white "lights" which are adjusted into an ambiguous relationship of quantities not unlike the checker board. Again "tensions" among the black and white spaces result in an emotional effect of movement.

In conclusion, it may be said of some contemporary abstract paintings that they seem to be the less plastic results of a very dense ambiguity and that they are dominated by the intangible properties of light. Plastic shape is present but the plane of that shape does not "resist," that is, become a tangible surface. This is due to the highly spiritual nature of the image which is the result of an intense, inner, subjective experience in the creation and in the viewing of the painting. These contemporary abstract

²¹Guillaume Apollinaire. The Cubist Painters, Aesthetic Meditations (1913), New York, 1944, p. 11.

paintings must be felt subjectively to some extent in order to give the impetus for being studied objectively. After a subjective involvement with these paintings, the ambiguity will begin to reveal itself to the viewer and then some of the meanings will become clear in these contemporary abstract paintings.

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