

PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH THE COMBINATION OF  
EXPRESSIONISM AND GEOMETRIC ART

by

DIANE ADELE DOLLAR

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Approved by:

  
Major Professor

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## INTRODUCTION

It is the intent of this thesis to present a personal philosophy of art combined with work produced in the studio which deals with the contradictions and solutions discovered by combining expressionist and geometric art. Because the primary concern presented here is not how one goes about the act of creating in a studio situation, but rather why and to what end, there will be no major attempt to go through a step-by-step account of the paintings.

As a culmination of the requirements for an advanced degree, it would seem more valid to establish my personal attitudes and understanding of the artist in general, and probe myself and my work for its relevance and merits in particular. The work presented here should not be confused with any other, or be thought in competition with it on any level other than that at which all art is judged. It is the creative act which is the result of a need to be performed. At the same time it should be understood that the direction taken did not come about merely by selecting a combination of existing disciplines. My choice of subject here no doubt differs from what it would have been had I continued on for an advanced degree directly after completion of the undergraduate program. It is an involvement unlike that which I might choose ten years from now. But the difference lies in the sum total of art experience and the point at which the thesis is written. The major dimensions of my work will change if only in the level of difficulty and the abilities required for the creation of each successive effort. I am engaged

today first and foremost in exploring an ever-enlarging world of visual experience. It is a way of life most demanding but simultaneously one offering great freedom.

There was an evolution during the time spent in the studio which began with Non-objective art, moved through a period closely related to a 'quietistic' style, and finally led to an interest in Minimal, Op, and Cool art. Exposure to the work of Hofmann, Albers, Poons and Riley provided the foundation for the involvement here. The resulting work is offered in terms of its own frame of reference, leaving an audience the alternative to accept or reject.

#### Awareness and Comprehension of the Artist

Before the fact is the dream. The artist, like the scientist is the dreamer. To become aware and to record in an individual and personal manner this insight, to have something to say and yet draw out others to think, to be passionately concerned yet respectful of other artists' innovations, must be the artist. He believes fiercely in his work and still remains flexible enough to accept the evolution that may occur in choosing among an infinite number of possibilities, not by any rule or system, but freely. He must use his knowledge and intuition and not let idealism become a cold creed.<sup>1</sup>

The world changes for better or worse. There is a constant push toward the unknown. As a part of this world the artist

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<sup>1</sup>Gene Baro, "Order in Freedom," Art and Artists, April, 1966.

cannot remain caught up in earlier accomplishments. The lessons learned, whether in school or by personal exploration, academic or individual experimentation with immediate concerns in art, serve only as stepping stones in the ultimate goal of the artist. There is a continual interaction of ideas, a residue of aesthetics and images recorded within that serve to stimulate semiconsciously, creating a tension that encourages the artist to do more, to search further within the framework of his interests.

### Intuition and Expression of the Artist

Understanding the value of predecessors' contributions is of academic interest to the artist. But the desire to create, to fulfill a personal need of the individual, cannot be dependent upon historical references. Lack of knowledge of his artistic heritage does not limit the artist as much as lack of insight. This does not refer to techniques and materials involved, although it might be well to make clear at this point that a lack of craftsmanship would be so distracting as to overshadow the validity of the work. Taken in the context intended here, however, it is the understanding that comes with realization of self, the needs and desires of the individual.

I do not feel it is necessary for me to delve into the reasons for one person's need to devote a lifetime to the creative arts as opposed to the individual who prefers selling shoes, even if it could be done on other than a superficial level. Certainly everyone knows people who have the intelligence, sensitivity, and facility of an artist but who are



convinced they have no artistic talent at all. Here I refer to society as a whole, as I know it, divided into groups by profession: scientists, salesmen, politicians, and policemen. One has to assume each individual finds satisfaction in his choice; each group compliments the other. And yet together, what they seek in life from the very beginning is satisfaction of various appetites and emotional needs. They desire a guide to life.

Guides to life, however, even before they are interpreted by individuals, differ so much as to be confusing. Many people give up all hope of ever finding such a clear, reliable guide very early, even though the desire remains urgent.<sup>2</sup> The Artist Group is no less susceptible to this need. I submit that those who can find success, not just monetary success or personal recognition but a spiritual wealth, discover a truth for all times. And with it comes the realization that it is through the continual expansion of the artist's intuition that man gains knowledge of human feeling and the realities of life. Understanding this, the artist must then admit he should not underestimate the importance of his place in society. Art plays such a decisive role in the accurate recording of a culture's worth that the censorship of all genuinely creative efforts is usually necessary under dictatorships.

Like a confused and often frustrated individual who may become a religious convert, the young student who finds intense appeal in a contemporary art direction will often go from a state

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<sup>2</sup>Joyce Cary, Art and Reality, p. 37.

of bewilderment to that of confidence and eagerness, realizing himself in the new world he has found. The artist comes to understand it is the work of art that provides the bridge between intuition and expression. And that man, in whatever group, is dominated by personal feelings. To possess the ability to translate an expression of feeling, not from one language to another, but from the sensuous impression to the reflective and critical act, is to possess the power to enrich the lives of those around him, an undeniably satisfactory realization.

In the Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, we are told:<sup>3</sup>

What is fair in men, passes away, but not so in art.

That painting surpasses all human works by the subtle considerations belonging to it. The eye, which is called the window of the soul, is the principal means by which the central sense can most completely and abundantly appreciate the infinite works of nature. . . .

## THE ARTIST AND THE SOCIETY

### The Gulf Between

During the time I have been painting and teaching, students who are seriously considering a career in art have often asked how one justifies a life devoted to this activity. An interested student becomes aware that there exists a breach between the professional artist and society. In a technologically oriented culture the individual sincerely involved in creative arts appears to some as an enigma. For the student a need simply to create often requires justification to himself as well as to

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<sup>3</sup>Pamela Taylor, The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, p. 73.

his contemporaries. There can be no promise that by expending all his efforts and devotion to art that the rewards will be commensurate financially with those possible in other fields. Even with the knowledge that his is a valuable contribution, the artist must still live in a society divided into two camps. On one side is the artist and recently, the critic; on the other side stands the public, part asking for enlightenment because it does not trust its own eyes and thinks of itself as uninitiated.<sup>4</sup> Another part, quite often the most valuable, is the most suspicious. Although they could not imagine a world without plastic arts any more than one lacking in music, which they accept more readily, they think of the artist, if at all, as someone who exists primarily to irritate them. Before the advent of Impressionism this group, always the largest, was too much concerned with their own lives and work which then left little time or energy for such matters. Art was for the aristocrat who could depend upon the critics to do his selecting for him. Art has always been modified by the social rank and educational background of those for whom it was created.

As the world shrinks, the audience expands. And with this growth, the artist, now dealing in expressions that are the product of a society in turmoil, faces this hostile section of public more directly than ever before. And they in turn, prefer not to be reminded of that of which they despair.

Because of this fear they prefer that the artist paint

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<sup>4</sup>Alfred Neumeyer, The Search for Meaning in Modern Art, p. 3.



something 'pretty'. Instead he distorts natural forms with a complete disregard for what they see as 'truth'. He seldom bothers to explain his work, even when facing the brutal difference between the public expectations of art and his own.<sup>5</sup>

In the face of this public and armed with a new freedom from external direction and control, there is added responsibility for the artist. He possesses the power to shape the forces of human existence. Yet when confronted by a public which not only has no notion of what he is trying to do but boasts of its ignorance as though it were some special badge of good sense and independence of thought, he is less and less concerned with his audience.

This observation regarding the artist's contribution to society and the attitude of a large portion of that society toward the artist provide the basis for an answer to the student, and myself, which is well stated in the Introduction to The Search for Meaning in Modern Art:<sup>6</sup>

Today's art, obscure as it may seem to many observers, is closely related to the experiences and sufferings of the modern age. It cannot be altered by critical verdict. For better or for worse, art is what we are, for it is born in a setting of freedom. Inasmuch as it constitutes a new way of looking at the world, it also projects a new content.

. . . . The Renaissance humanist Pico della Mirandola once said: "For what else does chaos mean but that matter is full of forms, albeit they be in a confused and imperfect state?" The artist of today expresses this confused

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<sup>5</sup>Amy Goldin, "Art in a Hairshirt," Art News, February, 1967, pp. 26, 65.

<sup>6</sup>Alfred Neumeyer, op. cit., p. 4.

and imperfect state of matter. . . and matter includes the artist himself. He holds the mirror up to chaos, he puts (like the doubting Thomas) his finger in the wound, and he heightens others' perception of reality through his own insight. Suffering, pain, and chaos are part of the human condition which is, and must be, shared by art if art is to be truthful and alive.

There is a second part to this answer which logically pertains to the society's responsibility to the artist. The audience for art must come to understand they can no longer be just passive observers. They must share the emotional or intellectual experience that prompted him to creative expression. They must recognize and enjoy the means used to articulate that experience. And finally, even if he cannot find a convincing and satisfying exposition of theory, the viewer should accept the fact that a serious, sensitive artist has reasons for doing what may seem strange or absurd and he honestly believes in his work. In many cases the artist previously made a better living doing commercial work for which there is a continual demand. This last observation is the least relevant, but often to some attests more convincingly for the artist's sincerity than any other.

## THE ARTIST IN THE STUDIO

### The Value of Training

There are considerations given in planning and executing a painting, beyond the mechanics of the act, that happen regardless of style. The accumulated knowledge of the artist forces decisions on him subjectively that are always present. Whatever the work of art there is an underlying perceptual organization

of forms, relationships which create the least irrational tension, the unity brought about by integration of visual similarities and dissimilarities. These are balanced through a dynamic stabilization of different or similar visual directions and weights. It is this intuitive sense, or sometimes studied analysis, that provides the first step towards a painting with aesthetic value.<sup>7</sup>

It may seem paradoxical to discuss possible common denominators at a time when one is constantly encountering a unique and unusual offering. I personally feel there are basic essentials, not necessarily of equal importance within all the works of a single artist, and never appearing consistently in value from artist to artist, which serve as a cradle for even the most abstract appearing work.

If discussing the intellectually perceptive qualities first suggests it is an area of greatest importance to me in judging my own or any other work, it is not intended. Accepting for the moment there is this area, I submit one responds first on an emotional basis to art. If the work lacks a discernible awareness it may be so ineffectual as to discourage further consideration on any level. If there is this emotive quality, and further analysis can be found to help generate that underlying mystery and power through the use of form, color, and design,

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<sup>7</sup>Norman B. Gulamarian, "An Outline of a Theory on the Assessment of Artistic Production," p. 3.

without relying too heavily upon any of them, it has what I refer to here as aesthetic value.

Most artists are the product of schools, most often those in which the education is entirely conceptual. To say one starts with no preconceptions is to me invalid. (We still must recognize the influence of earlier training and artists. It is just as logical as assembling the equipment with which one intends to work.)

From the time an artist enters school he is trained away from his intuition and encouraged to follow those concepts with which his teachers have been most strongly impressed by the teachers before them. He may, for awhile, emulate the style of a teacher for whom he has a great deal of respect. Then there comes the point at which the serious artist begins to regain the aesthetic intuition and can finally approach his work with far greater depth, richness, and originality. The major dimensions of his work from this time on will change if only in the level of difficulty and the abilities required for the creation of each successive effort. That which is significant this year will remain so as part of an evolution, a new discovery of ideas with ever expanding possibilities. To what end, passing through a life's cycle, we can only surmise. At the same time one assumes that the ideas yet to rise close enough to the surface to demand attention will subordinate those preceding.

## The Personal Involvement

The above judgment is offered as a means of clarifying my current interest in combining qualities of expressionistic painting with geometric art. The work of Hans Hofmann and Mark Rothko served to reveal the limitless range and breadth of feeling through expressive use of color. Josef Alber's use of color and exploitation of contrast led to an interest in other artists dealing with Op art. The compositional devices of Bridget Riley, the narrow, contrasting curved forms made me aware of the startling illusion of vibrating and shifting planes.<sup>8</sup>

The work of each of these artists is accepted as being of strong artistic merit. Each arrived at this point after years of personal, conceptual, and technical training. Each is a meaningful commitment for the artist personally. More important it is founded on intuition and original expressive power. If my own intuition serves me well the consequence of combining the qualities of these diverse styles will prove a meaningful experience for me with results that are more than a synthesis of a calculated attempt to produce an effect of originality.

Because the mass media publish the latest development almost before the artist's paint is dry, it is difficult to remain even on the perimeter of the art world and be unaware of the popular, fashionable and current creative activity. It is tempting for the viewer to assume any effort during a given period of search

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<sup>8</sup>Nathan Knobler, The Visual Dialogue, p. 121.



is simply a matter of finding what is being done and expanding on it. With the knowledge, training, and intuitive power mentioned above to provide a foundation, that search can produce more than a patchwork of ideas superimposed one upon another. The question is how to develop, to explore sources, to discover a personal vocabulary of form that is immediate and at the same time satisfying, and then to have the courage to set out on one's own.

This is less difficult if one realizes it is possible to feel sympathetic toward the main line of development as a whole while arriving at a genuinely personal, unique statement.

#### The Choice of Elements

In Abstract Expressionism the visual experience was purely a projection of the subjective frame of mind. There was the tendency to accept the fact that everyone's private experience was as valid as that of another. Self expression in undiluted doses was suggestive of monumental ego, the assertion of one personality over another. The essence of the painting was in the experience. Any discussion after the fact was apt to translate ineffectively. The interaction of color, compressed space, forms crammed into the surface, broken planes and open passages, all were presented as a visual experience which became a one-man super-happening. It was art of strong personal involvement.

In Op art we are shown great mysterious panels that seem at once to flow, roll, and slide. The maximum effort of the artist culminates in a minimal effect which leaves the viewers

to decide what they have seen. Quite often the result is the uncomfortable feeling of not seeing at all what is there. The appeal is vague and unknown, but not cold or completely intellectual.

Considering the spontaneity in Abstract Expressionism combined with the cool aloof Op art required taking stock of those meritorious qualities in each. Having already established some qualities of the former we can list the characteristics of Op as necessarily hard-edged, frequently dealing in extreme values and/or complementary colors which allow the greatest irrational tension between shapes which are frequently symmetrical. Too much diversity of form impedes the perceptual effect. Exaggerated emphasis on centrality and simultaneous attempt to avoid its tyranny are poles between which perceptual compositions oscillate.<sup>9</sup> Both of these directions in painting lend themselves to a monumental scale; however, the attitudes of Abstract Expressionism directed the viewer to move into the canvas and experience the painting in part as the artist did. The emphasis shifts in Op to that space between the picture plane and the spectator.

To gain control of such conflicting, contradictory elements and at the same time retain a sense of spontaneity forced me to consider all of these characteristics separately and conclude that the shapes would remain within a hard-edged vocabulary. An uncomplicated proportion ratio of surface dimensions seemed

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<sup>9</sup>William Seitz, The Responsive Eye, 1966.

another way to eliminate possible distractions in the design of the painting. I decided a four-foot square canvas allowed the size needed and at the same time offered a comfortable picture area as personally satisfactory as a circle.

While I felt a strong affinity for the work of both Albers and Riley, I knew there would be no personal satisfaction in setting about to produce a picture that was very closely allied to either. Therefore it was most rewarding to discover that even within the confines of distilled limitations, including minimum surface agitation, there could be the feeling of improvisation, and even more important was the result that I felt more representative of myself than of others. In some cases preliminary 'sketches' were executed half-size, in paint, without measuring or taping of edges. In these the colors were selected intuitively but not altered to the degree they might eventually be in the final painting. The results were not always conclusive enough to justify being expanded. Some ideas proved so rewarding in the sketch as to demand completion on a grander scale.

Another method proved more helpful in those situations which required more exacting 'sketches'. By using graph paper I found I could work out a variety of ideas, superimpose one on another, add and subtract quite rapidly until I arrived at a study that seemed significant. In this case, even with the planned drawing as a ready reference and the knowledge that once the picture had begun there could be little deviation from the original plan, the tense feeling of heightened anticipation

remained until the last area was painted. It was easy to become involved as a part of the whole, rather than a witness to it. And in those situations in which the colors were selected arbitrarily as the painting developed, and in others where the paint was altered only slightly with each area, allowing a slight control during the painting process, there developed a feeling that the painting and I were contributing equally to arrive at the most successful conclusion.

By using either complementary colors in closely controlled values or repetitive shapes, the optical quality was maintained. In addition a variety of possibilities presented themselves as foils to permit the feeling of a painting 'in progress' that was not pre-planned. Even though the actual creative process was painstakingly slow and carefully regulated the results I felt to be alive and moving.

#### CONCLUSION

I have tried, in the written part of this thesis to discuss the why, primarily, and then the what and how of my paintings. If it were necessary to reduce the why to a single thought, I would give as an answer a rather unexplainable need or desire to create. Some artists have messages they can send forth through paint, clay, or welded steel rods; specific statements of their approach to life, their despairs or fears. I have no such specific messages in mind. I feel my works reflect a pleasure taken in doing, and have an atmospheric quality suggestive of the tension felt in the still, yet expectant atmosphere

prior to a storm. Seen in their own frame of reference they will be judged in the future on the basis of how well I realized my aims.

It is gratifying to find that art can give us insight into ways of seeing and feeling other than our own. At the same time, when offered the opportunity, whether through fear or lack of concern, there are those who will ignore it. But they are to be pitied for missing so much so close at hand. This points up a fact which I find necessary in respect to the life of an artist. As long as he is physically able, and is willing to stay in 'tune' without trying to stay in 'vogue', and assuming his work has to some degree those attributes necessary to set the work above mere experimentation or purely physical adventure, there will always be a challenge to accept one more stage of continued development. And these efforts, if sincere and honest, will find a receptive audience which in turn will add impetus to go back to do more. It is a life that need never lose its meaning.

#### DISCUSSION OF PAINTINGS PRESENTED IN THE THESIS

It is hard to make choices but harder not to. Then you carry everything along from painting to painting. In order to make a choice between various hypotheses one uses reason. Memory serves us as history serves society. Without memory we face a world without horizons. Man in society has prejudices, conscience, and the ability to make judgments.

The paintings presented here are not representative of those which in Abstract Expressionism suggested spontaneous happenings.



I made choices and set limitations. I chose a mechanical process of rendering limited shapes and forms. However, the colors selected primarily from personal emotional response contribute that feeling of spontaneity I personally find lacking in black and white. From reading and experimentation in sketches it has become apparent I can bring life to a canvas by pure optical images. For Miss Riley this is possible and satisfactory as a personal statement in plastic expression. I certainly respect the cool, sensitive results she achieves. My paintings are touched with a lyricism of my personal prejudice favoring color. Yet they are not intended as very pure or strictly theoretical. There is a sense of place that does not invite the viewer into the picture. The paintings are made by the audience as much as by the artist. The images respond to the sensitivity of those who face them. They are kinetic art in reverse, making the spectator move while the painting stands still. There is an initial impression of dignified reserve while asserting the pressures of a time, a place, and circumstance. But the lack of literal image requires the time, place, and circumstance to be one of the viewer's choosing.

PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS PAINTINGS

PLATE I

"Veil of Winter"

(Mixed Media on Canvas

30 x 36)



PLATE II

"Daydream"

(Oil on Canvas

30 x 36)





PLATE III

"Raspberry Summer"

(Oil on Canvas

30 x 36)



PLATE IV

"Untitled"

(Acrylic on Canvas

48 x 48)





PLATE V

"Untitled"

(Acrylic on Canvas

48 x 48)

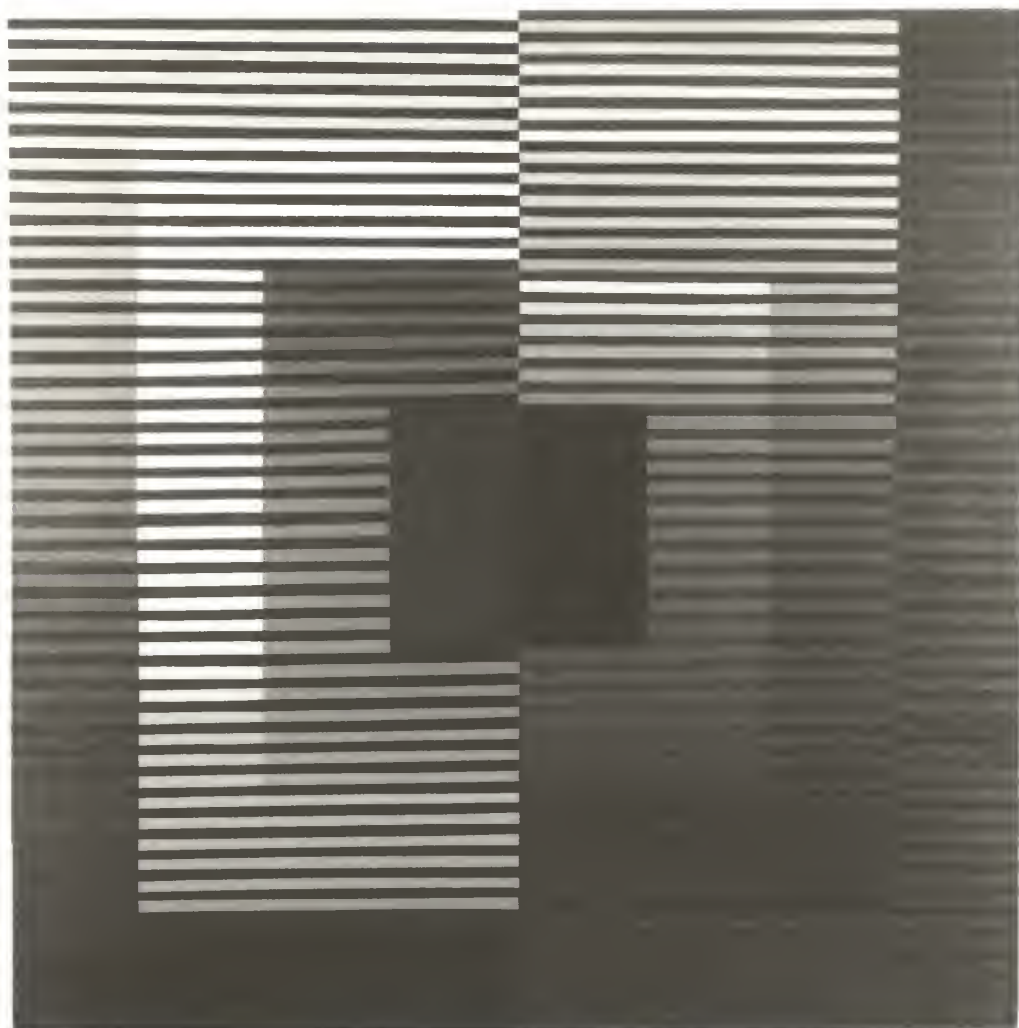


PLATE VI

"Adam's Rib"

(Acrylic on Canvas

48 x 48)

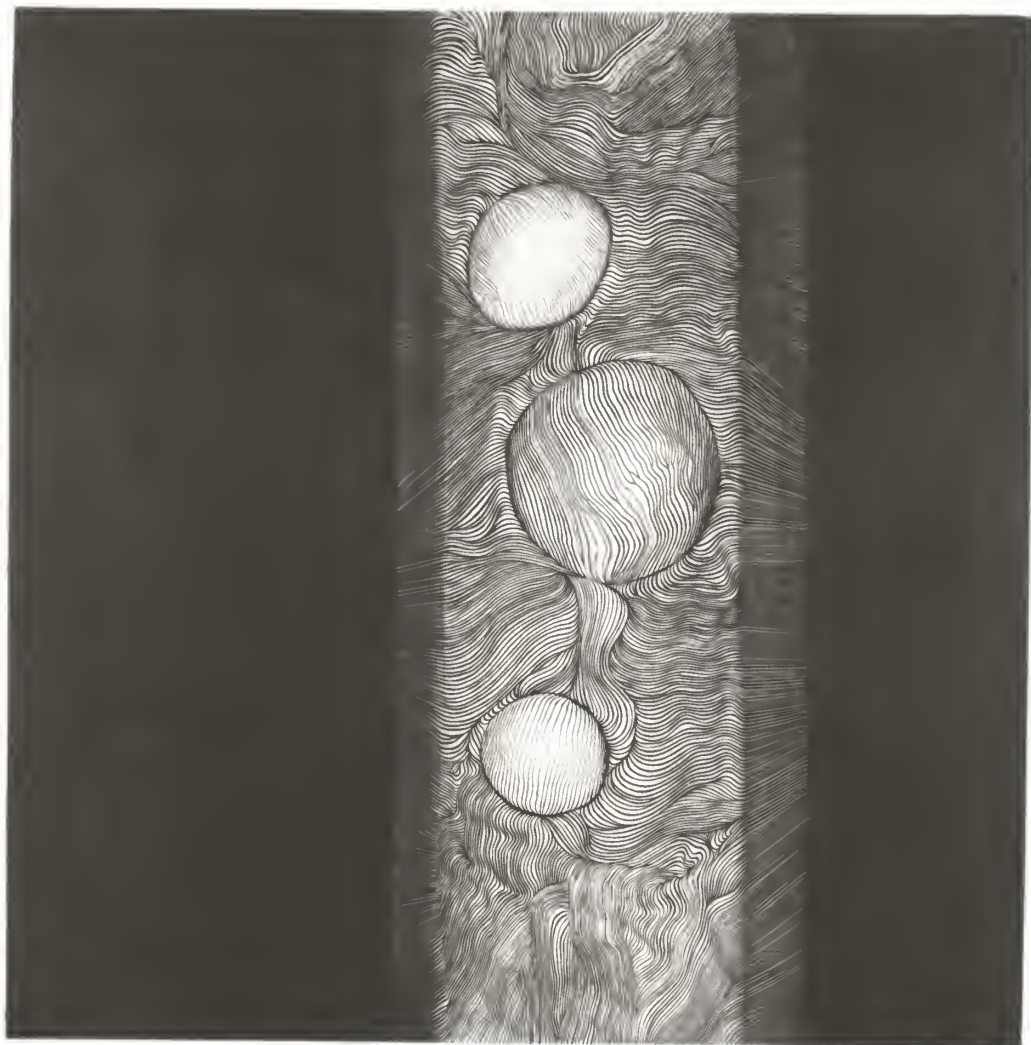


PLATE VII

"Trip Number One"

(Acrylic on Canvas

48 x 48)



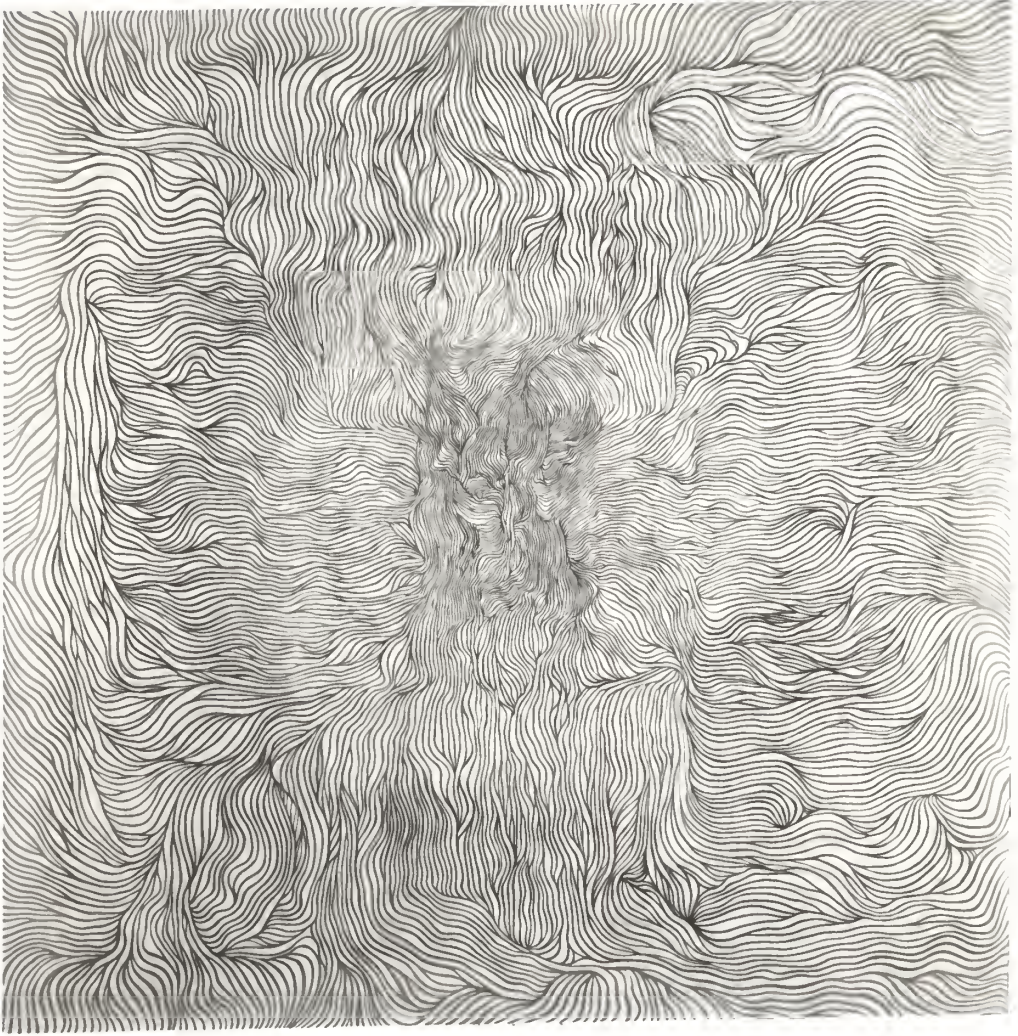


PLATE VIII

"Long Year's End"

(Mixed Media on Canvas

48 x 48)



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Grateful acknowledgment and appreciation are due Professor Gerald W. Deibler, of the Department of Art, for his invaluable assistance in the preparation of this candidate and this thesis.

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PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH THE COMBINATION OF  
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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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It has been my intent in this thesis to explain a philosophy of art that has evolved out of my class and studio experience, to establish what prompted my choosing the problem with which the paintings are concerned, and to a lesser degree, comment on how the works developed in the painting process.

There is an increasingly open attitude toward art and a greater freedom allowed in one's means of expression. Because our culture today more readily accepts new and unique forms of expression, the questions of the value of training and the assessment of quality have become more complex. At the same time there is, with this new freedom and greater acceptance, the result that a larger part of society is distrustful of its own judgment and often unwilling to place any great value on creative activity. It may be due in part to the demand by the artist for wider acceptance of new directions and, simultaneously, the lack of desire on the part of the artist to discuss his work when questioned.

In the future I might possibly place less importance on a formal education and judge less harshly. However, at the time of this thesis presentation I personally feel there are valid reasons for continuing a higher education and have maintained there is a yardstick by which creative work can be assessed.

The formal training which everyone receives, if only through the high school level, does indeed train the individual away from the intuitive sense with which he was born. The student absorbs from his contacts and teachers, attitudes and prejudices which are not necessarily his own and which he may never lose.

But just as a child reaches a stage at which he begins to select and discard in all his relationships, the artist should eventually arrive at a point of flexibility. He then uses his education merely as a foundation, and not the ceiling for his creative goals. It is possible he may never lose entirely the influence of his conceptual training, and that some of it may actually be detrimental to achieving a greater range of expression. But if he is able to trust his intuition and proceed honestly, to take advantage of earlier experience in a less conscious manner, then his work could be of great personal value and even have a more lasting place in the history of his generation. The yardstick then becomes one of uniqueness, honesty, and proficiency.

By permitting the public the satisfaction of knowing there is a means to judge, that the artist does have standards for himself, and by educating them to the idea that art today demands participation and not just viewing, I submit that there will be a bridge for the gap which now exists.

The work presented here is indeed related to my previous studio investigations, and also stems in part from insight into the work of artists who have made a strong impression on me. But I feel that in admitting this, the work should not be thought of as any other than my own. It is arrived at through the intuitive expression of my interests, the making of choices and deletions from my past experience. To the end, I feel the work is uniquely mine and an honest expression of my attitudes at the present.