

This volume contains accompanying media (slides, audio recording, etc.) which was not scanned.

The accompanying media is available with the original print version of this volume. Ask at a Library help desk for information on how to obtain the print version.

Due to age, some media may be deteriorated or unusable.

IN SEARCH OF AN ART

by

EUNICE WILSON STRUNK

B.F.A., Kansas City Art Institute, 1973

A STATEMENT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Art

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1981

Approved by:


Major Professor

A11200 395139

SPEC
COLL
LD
2668
R4
1981
S77
C. 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
In Search of an Art	1
Bibliography	
Copy of Program of Study	
List of Exhibitions	

The earth is new each day, although it is the same old earth. Water flows continuously under the bridge and everything has become new with each glance I make at the stream, yet it remains water, not the same water, but water still. I recognize the new by my remembrance of the old; consequently, the transformation loses its terror for me and I can accept the flux knowing there is nothing new under the sun.

For that reason words like truth and beauty, art and reality have meaning for me still, although these are meanings which have changed with time and will change again. Nor would I attempt to define them verbally, except in a very personal way and in an indiscreet moment. These are the sort of words that mean everything and nothing and for that reason have been thrown on the dungheap by some. To me, they are like small jeweled arrows that give a certain direction to my life. I do not expect them to lead to exact destinations; they merely indicate possibilities. They are private words, more like compressed dreams which cannot be forgotten. They resemble a quest for the Holy Grail which began for each Knight of the Round Table from wherever he was at that moment; there, he entered the forest where it was thickest to begin his search for the holy relic.

Joseph Campbell in his The Masks of God: Creative Mythology calls this age one of "unbridled, headlong adventure," for it is a time that forces us to build our own individual mythologies and quests. Because many of us have lost the defences of a traditional mythology, we have no choice, he states, but the one he has proposed: that we perform an inward heroic search for our own being. "Since in the world of time every man lives but one life," he writes, "it is in himself that he must search for the secret of the Garden." Like those knights of old, he explains, "we today...must (*italics not mine*) enter the forest...the pathless way is the only way now before us."

That pathless way introduced me to art, an art which has given order and meaning to my life. I did not recognize immediately its importance, for it was an awareness that took place over a period of years. My definition of art and of myself has been a progressive one and has encompassed a lifetime of education, only part of which has been conducted in the classroom. Art has become for me a skill, a wrap and a world; and while I have been making it, it has made me.

It took me half a childhood to admit that brownies, elves, fairies, angels, nymphs and dryads were not to be discovered in the woods and open places and not even a lifetime has reconciled me to their absence. Art, I think, has something to do with that feeling.

It is a half-remembered dream, a moment of sudden color, a ripple of iridescence sweeping under the bridge that we can catch and hold in our consciousness for only a brief unmeasurable time, for moments so limited that we can recollect only the pain of recognition and not the substance. Unexpected as they are, we cannot even prepare for them; they awake us and are gone, leaving us only with feelings that cannot be put into words. We gather baskets of these impressions which we cannot name and try to translate them into visual images, musical scores or choreography, remembering Heraclitus who wrote that: "The fairest universe is but a heap of rubbish piled up at random." Unlike Heraclitus, however, I have not been able to see the rubbish.

Words and books more than people have been influential in my life and always a bit too late because learning what to read takes time, and much of what I have learned in that manner might have been accomplished more easily and quickly within a more intelligent environment. A particular book or books can generally be related to important decisions and changes I have made and the story of my life is almost synonymous with the story of my library card. One such book was W. H. Auden's Van Gogh A Self-Portrait which I read several years before entering the Kansas City Art Institute. For a while it served me almost as a Bible and many of its passages I read aloud to my family at the dinner table,

something akin to a brief meditation or like the evening prayers that once were a part of my youth. I shall never forget his words:

"Love what we love, (italics not mine) how superfluous a warning this seems to be, and yet it is justified to an enormous extent! For how many there are who waste their best efforts on something that is not worth their best efforts, whereas they treat what they love in a stepmotherly way instead of yielding wholly to the irresistible urge of their hearts.

"And what is the doctrine I preach? My friends, let us give our souls to our cause, let us work with our heart, and truly love what we love."

I can remember much exhortation as a young person, but nothing that ever intimated trusting one's own being to love what was right for oneself. The effect of these words startled my friends as they watched me rearrange my life in order to investigate as surely as possible what I discovered then in myself.

The first artist I met in a painting class was Henri Matisse and a copy of his Spanish Shawl of 1909 was one of my first oil paintings. Wassily Kandinsky was the next artist whom I encountered. His Blue Mountain of 1908 held for me one of my most unforgettable experiences when I saw it at the Montreal Exposition of 1967. Its color was the

most magnificent in my experience; I was reminded of Gothic stained glass windows as I imagined them to be. Rodin's Burghers of Calais stood nearby. The two works held me fast, particularly the painting, and I could not leave. After gazing at the painting, I would rest my eyes on the Rodin piece, walk about it, and turn once more to the Blue Mountain. The vision of that work was to me a visitation of something divine. On my return home, I made a copy of the Blue Mountain, not knowing that my task would have been easier if I had related the size of my masonite to that of the painting, but I was intent on the color. Next, I copied Emil Nolde whose color seemed extraordinary to me. These paintings were done during my early days at art school: one was of a flower garden against a sunset in blues and oranges and the second was of a rough North Sea.

It sounds trite to speak of the importance of beginnings; still, they often set the course for further development, and I was fortunate in my early choices of mentors, including one remembered from my youth, Lyonel Feininger, whose cathedral painting at the Walker Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, had been the most beautiful painting I knew until the Blue Mountain. The former painting had sparkled with a most wonderful colored light. As a young person, unknowing and without the means of integrating my personality to a purposeful activity, I often stopped for long periods of time to bask

in the beauty of its light. It became something of a religious icon to me and if a work of art can administer comfort of some sort, it did. I think it became something more to me, a symbol of what I wanted life to be, a work of art. It became one of the first signposts of a quest not even known at that time.

I did not begin art school with any intent to become a certain kind of painter. I wanted only to plunge into the study of painting. I had no idea of style or direction, but wanted to learn and to try everything. I visualized myself in a room filled with flowing paint of brilliant hues, making form with the movements of my body. There were times, however, when I discovered that learning how to paint was not altogether the glorious experience I had anticipated, but one that entailed a discipline and dedication that could accept clumsiness and failure. It meant beginning over and over again on the same canvas. It was the search and not a finished painting that was encouraged by my instructors and it is that orientation which still appeals to me.

Although our painting and drawing concerned the figure, the environment often included still lifes and interiors. I appreciated the still life most; it could be arranged more exactly with specific shapes, colors and lights. I felt ill at ease with the figure which tended to dominate compositions that might have done better, perhaps, without

lives seems an excellent solution which I did not follow. I thought at one time of making the figures very small, like figurines, but was too intimidated by the atmosphere of the school to proceed in such an independent manner. My purpose there was to acquire the traditions and the practice of an art that could not be called naive and I feared that some of my inclinations were 'incorrect.' Yet, I ended by drawing the figure more than adequately well and not sorry that the skill had been acquired only at the cost of much diligence, concentration and discouragement. My electives were spent in drawing classes which held very little joy for me until my senior year.

After my graduation from the Kansas City Art Institute in 1973 and our move to Manhattan, I set up problems to do in still life and attempted landscape painting for the first time, thinking then of gaining mastery of my craft. My education in painting has been a long one. In that pursuit and in the search for a form believable to me, I have been ready to experiment in more than one direction.

This openness to experiment and a certain pragmatic attitude toward my painting appears to be consistent with my work from its beginning, not on the canvas itself, but in my relationship to it. I felt no need to paint only still lifes, although they became my first successful paintings. I suppose the feeling is related to that of a

mountain climber who would object to climbing the same mountain over and over and over again. It is true that there are new things to be discovered on familiar terrain, but the stimulus of a new mountain is like getting a new pair of eyes and a renewed spirit.

When the Master of Fine Arts program was initiated at Kansas State University, I applied in a letter stating my purpose as having something to do with whether or not I had anything to do with art. My skill was apparent to me, but I had become bored with its application. I had discovered that the basis for my art was not imitative and self-expressionism meant equally little to me. Before I had begun my course of study at K-State, I had decided to reach back to when I had first begun to paint, to try to pick up from those beginnings that which had first caught my attention. Color and all its magical properties had early fascinated me. Some of my hardest lessons in art school had dealt with my propensity to paint from other than what my instructor and I could both agree was visually before us. My oranges in a still life were painted with cadmium orange straight from the tube and shadowed with cerulean blue, neon lit, not the sort of oranges to be peeled and eaten. The excitement of that juxtaposition was more appealing to me than the exact imitation of the arrangement, but I was finally persuaded to pick up the second challenge for which I have not

ILLEGIBLE

**THE FOLLOWING
DOCUMENT (S) IS
ILLEGIBLE DUE
TO THE
PRINTING ON
THE ORIGINAL
BEING CUT OFF**

ILLEGIBLE

been overly sorry. Nevertheless, in returning to a non-objective style of painting, one involved primarily with the properties of color, I have returned also to essential parts of myself which were first stimulated on my entry into the world of art.

I think, then, I began first in a quest for that which I did not know and have improvised, clue by clue, to a point where it appears, perhaps, that I did know. It is the sort of knowing I prefer to the kind that begins knowing. There is a search that seems more sure to me than a file case brimming with hypotheses.

My Broken Lines series began as improvisation. I was trying to translate a copy machine 'happening' into paint, canvas and a much larger format; the translation, like so many translations, became something original from the original. As I worked, the lines curved; the effect was interesting to me and a yardstick was ignored. The marks were not of uniform length which suggested variation of widths. The resulting rippled surface pleased me and the discovery then became a conscious effort. I had thought first of using only grays, cool gray blues and off whites which do fill most of the painting. More than half way through the work, the idea of a contrasting warm blue occurred to me and it was added. While musing over whether to paint lines over the entire surface or not, a student looking in advised

me to stop at that point. Her advice seemed excellent and was taken.

Other knowledge gained from that work includes the vertical, irregular lines which accidentally occurred when wider spaces were left between marks, a phenomenon used deliberately in later work, and the rhythmical action of the applied paint caused by the variation of the amount of paint in each brushstroke, the first stroke being the heaviest of the three or four which could be obtained from one brush load. This, too, is a color effect which has been made a part of later work, but could warrant an investigation of its own.

Broken Lines 1 became a veritable mine for me as have several other works, including Broken Lines 2, which was a first attempt to use these lines in a diagonal construction. My red and green tape paintings and a number of drawings had used a diagonal construction which I found dynamic and very appealing. No structure was definitely envisioned, however, either compositionally or colorwise, when Broken Lines 2 was begun, and as the painting progressed it definitely called for decisions not foreseen. Like the warm blue in Broken Lines 1 which had not been planned, the more intense oranges and the use of the ground color in the foreground became necessary as the work developed. What I thought of as 'mistakes' had to be integrated and through that integration

Openness involves risk. It is always possible that the work cannot be realized, and such a way of working engenders a certain amount of anxiety as to whether or not chaos will be ordered and a painting will occur. The final result can look very cool, calm and collected and the idea of risk very distant from it, a result that I like, but the risk taking was in its very making.

A book, Wisdom of Insecurity by Alan W. Watts, was recommended to us as freshmen in art school. Watts advocated 'real' faith, the sort of faith that exists in spite of safeguards and dogma and not because of them. To a certain degree and without realizing it until recently, I have been painting in that manner. If so, it is a reflection of living as I have experienced it which seems more full of accident and sudden decision than of rational forethought.

Albert Camus wrote in The Rebel that our reason for liking novels is the joy gained from seeing the harmonious whole of a character's life, something we cannot ascertain from the fragments of our own.

It would seem that I have been trying to make paintings from the fragments of mine. "Art is expression," wrote Theo van Doesburg in Principles of neo-Plastic Art; "It is the expression of our artistic experience of reality."

"The (truly exact) work of art," he concluded, "is a

Myths which were called public dreams by Sigmund Freud contain the great metaphors by which past civilizations explained themselves and the universe and provided meaningful contexts for its people who did not doubt the efficacy of these traditions. Today, we are in a state of flux without that sureness in which to take refuge, and so we invent our own metaphors and quests.

The artist invents his visual metaphors out of sundry materials and his life often becomes a quest similar to that of ancient mythological heroes who had to slay or be slain, except that his is on a metaphysical level and the monsters he slays are those from within. Vincent van Gogh has become the prototype for the artist who follows to the end his dream, his Holy Grail, regardless of poverty, neglect and tragedy. It is such a private dream that each artist in our time pursues.

For me, too, art has become that vehicle of self-knowledge which leads to the universal. It has become a quest which has led me into a world I did not know and my work is a record of that journey. To others, I hope, my paintings will communicate a reality that in some measure can recompense them for the mythology and culture and world which we have lost.

Henri Matisse said many things about art which have been of value to me. One of his most beautiful statements was in an interview with Jacques Guenne when he stated,

"Slowly I discovered the secret of my art. It consists of a meditation on nature, on the expression of a dream which is always inspired by reality."

I believe that the expression of that dream is the dream every artist sets out to create in his or her own way.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Auden, W. H. Van Gogh A Self-Portrait. Greenwich, Conn.:
New York Graphic Society, 1961.

Campbell, Joseph. The Masks of God: Creative Mythology.
New York: Viking Press.

Camus, Albert. The Rebel. New York: Alfred A. Knopf,
1954.

Doesburg, Theo van. Principles of neo-Plastic Art. London:
Lund Humphries, 1969.

Flam, Jack D. Matisse on Art. London: Phaidon Press
Limited, 1973.

My work has been exhibited at:

Black Hills Multi-State Art Competition of 1979

Black Hills Multi-State Art Competition of 1980
First Place in Acrylic Painting

Salina Art Show 1980
Honorable Mention

21st National Sun Carnival Art Exhibition

Unitarian Gallery in Kansas City, Missouri

Manhattan Public Library

Kansas State University Farrell Library Browsing Room

Reserach paper:

Topics in Art History: on the subject of color; more
specifically on its role in painting since the time of
J. M. W. Turner