

A PERSONAL OBSERVATION OF PAINTING SINCE 1945

by 6791

WILLARD LEON HOTTMAN

B. A., Southern Colorado State College, 1966

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree

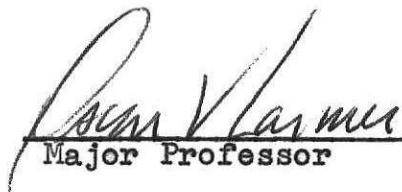
MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Art

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1971

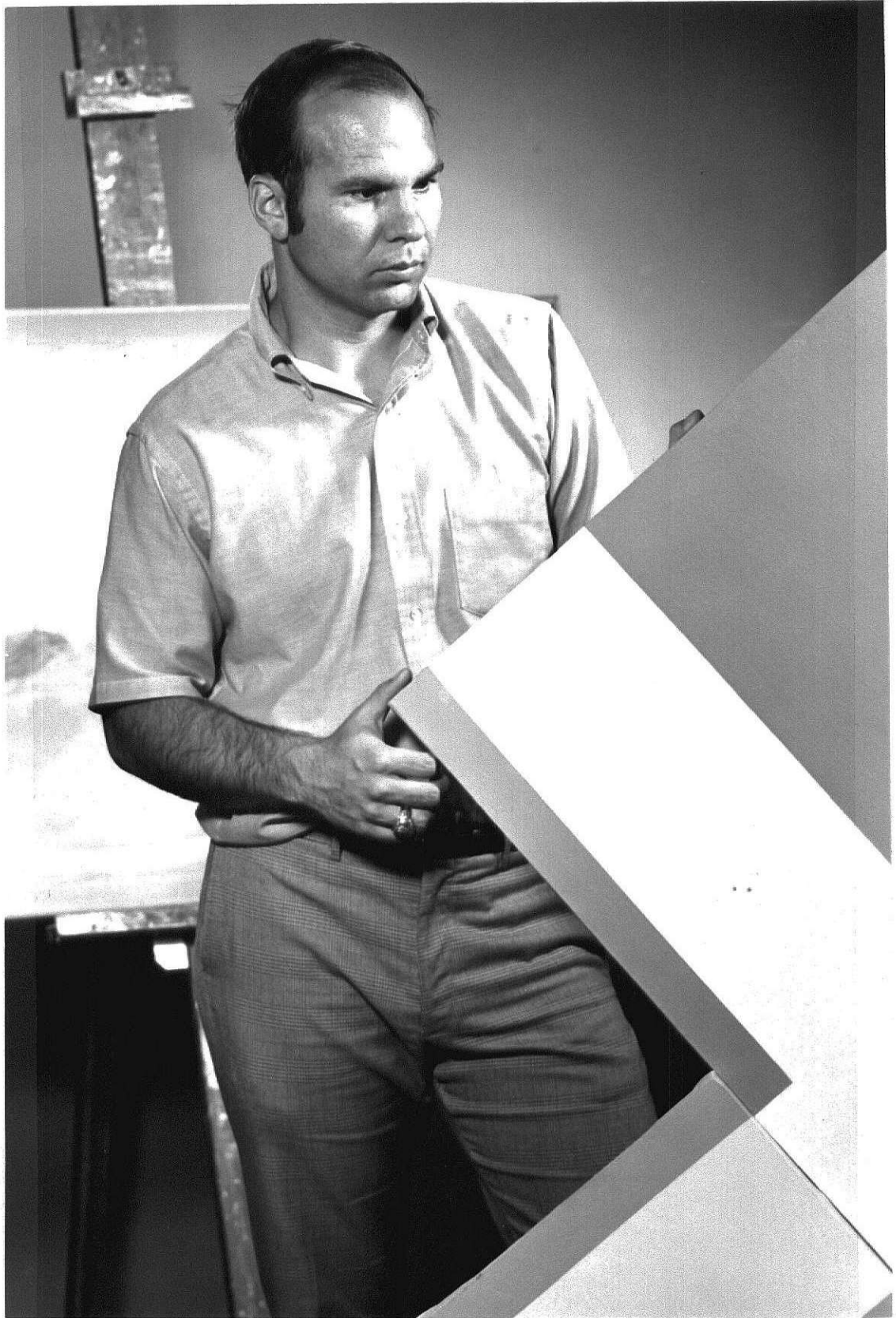
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PLATE I

The candidate



## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my appreciation for the patience Mr. Larmer has shown me and the encouragement he has so graciously passed my way. I would also like to thank Mr. Tomasch and Mr. Vogt for serving on my committee and for their worthwhile criticism.

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The past experiences of an individual will determine how he will think and therefore how he expresses himself. Man is a product of his experiences and these experiences are unique for each individual. If these statements are considered, the scope of man's creativity becomes unimaginable. This train of thought is expressed more clearly by the following quote of Gyorgy Kepes:

From our earliest youth, we sense the fundamental laws of gravity, statics and dynamics, the behavior of solids and liquids, tensions, compressions, and torsions. Stored in our memory, this knowledge grows with us and accompanies us throughout our life. From our childhood we register and coordinate the different sensory perceptions of our surroundings in an effort to interpret our habitat and to explain the phenomena that puzzle us.<sup>1</sup>

By 1945 the artist was free to experiment with paint and its application in any way he desired. The only factor that inhibited the artist was the artist himself.

Taking this state of mind, the candidate will give his personal observations of painting during a time which affects him the most. This time is between 1945 and 1970. The author will not touch on all movements of painting, but just those which seem to have an influence on his work.

If we are to discuss painting of the past 25 years, then the artists which influence this period must be mentioned. The works of Cezanne, Picasso, and those of Matisse had a strong influence on the direction that painting was to go after 1945. H. H. Arnason writes: "Even the principles of light and motion in

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<sup>1</sup>Gyorgy Kepes, Education of Vision (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 175.



sculpture were laid down in the 1920's and 1930's by Gabo, Duchamp, Moholy-Nogly, Calder, and others."<sup>2</sup> The influence of Francis Bacon can be traced back to Cardinal Filippo Archinto and his painting Attributed to Titian. All the movements that have had a bearing on painting of this era are too numerous to mention.

In the author's opinion, the criterion for the development of painting is two-fold. The first criterion is dependent on a reaction against the preceding movements of painting. The second criterion is dependent on the influence of a society or a reaction against that society.

By taking an over-all look at painting after 1945, it becomes evident that painting can be divided into two large groups. The first group of painters are those who are interested in painting for the sake of beauty. These artists use properties such as color and large scale canvases to give painting the impact they desire.

Mark Rothko used large colorful shapes that seem to become a total environment for the viewer. This type of color-field painting becomes an overwhelming type of beauty.

The second group of painters are involved in making some philosophical statement about their existence. This statement may be made with the subject matter or with the material. A pop artist such as Andy Warhol uses common place subject matter to convey his message. The statement is usually obvious to the viewer.

The abstract expressionist or action painters were dominating in the early part of the fifties. They were considered to be the

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<sup>2</sup>H. H. Arnason, History of Modern Art (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1968), p. 487.

most powerful original movement in the history of American art.

Many of the different movements of painting derive from a reaction to preceding movements. Abstract expressionism is an example of one such movement. The action painters were reacting to the social realist and regionalist. They were developing new concepts of painting. Through their experiments of applying paint, they gave painting a new dimension.

Pollock gave paint an energy that it never had before. For the first time paint was becoming the subject matter. His paintings appear to become full of energy, never starting and never ending. Many critics of his day questioned whether this kind of painting was controlled or not. Henry Geldyahler is quoted as saying:

The error his critics made was in underestimating the control the artist has in his hand and wrist. There is as much personal signature in the dripping of fluid paint as there is in the wielding of a brush.

Geldyahler goes on in his book by quoting Pollock . . .

When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.<sup>3</sup>

It is as if the excitement is felt within the artist and then transposed to paint and revealed on canvas. One finds it an impossibility to look at Pollock's work without feeling this excitement (Figure 1).

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<sup>3</sup>Henry Geldyahler, American Painting (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1965), p. 183.



Figure 1

Jackson Pollock. Lavender Mist. 1950. 7'4" x 9'11"

Looking at a painting by Willem De Kooning one can feel the strength that the action painters experienced. De Kooning used jagged, brittle lines as if he were slashing at the canvas with his brush (Figure 2).

There were other abstract expressionists who were not as interested in transposing energy to canvas as they were in transposing serene beauty. The color-field painters were concerned with openness of structure and pure color shapes. Their canvases, surrounding the viewer with color, were enormous.

One can study the Mark Rothko painting, White and Greens in Blue (Figure 3) and enjoy the large shapes receding and projecting from the surface of the canvas. This becomes a relaxing experience, unlike looking at a Pollock.



Figure 2

Willem De Kooning. Composition. 1955. 79 1/2" x 69 1/8"

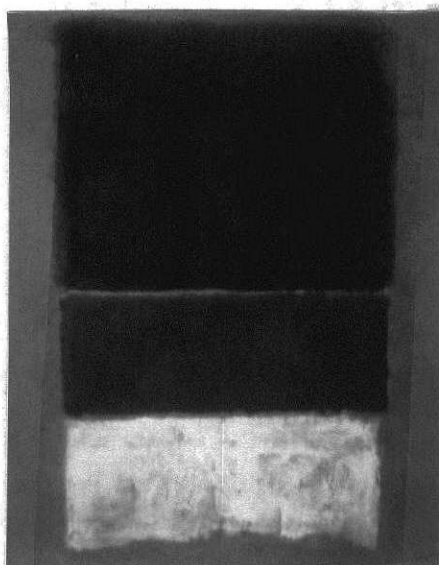


Figure 3

Mark Rothko. White and Greens in Blue. 1957. 8'4" x 6'10"

These large scale paintings introduced another concept into painting, that of size, which differs tremendously from the easel paintings. These painters were aware of the importance of permitting the viewer to participate with the painting.

Francis Bacon worked with the figure, placing it in a sort of fantasy environment. Seeing one of Bacon's grotesque figures boxed in with a transparent material gives one a feeling of suffocation or silence. Bacon makes a strong statement which appears to have a social context. His figures looked as if they were trying to say something but no one would listen (Figure 4).



Figure 4

Francis Bacon. Head Surrounded by Sides of Beef. 1954. 50 7/8" x 48"

The CoBra group were making a statement similar to Bacon but in a different way. They have been described as throwing paint in the public's eye.

The CoBra group used bright colors with strong brush strokes. The subject matter ranged from folk art to children's art. They were opposing the order and harmony of concrete art.

Karel Appel (Figure 5) is noted for his violent forms and brilliant color. Drawing seems to be unimportant to him, as a result his figure seems childlike and simple. One must look past this simplicity and into the colors. It reflects how much the CoBra group reacted to the followers of Mondrian.

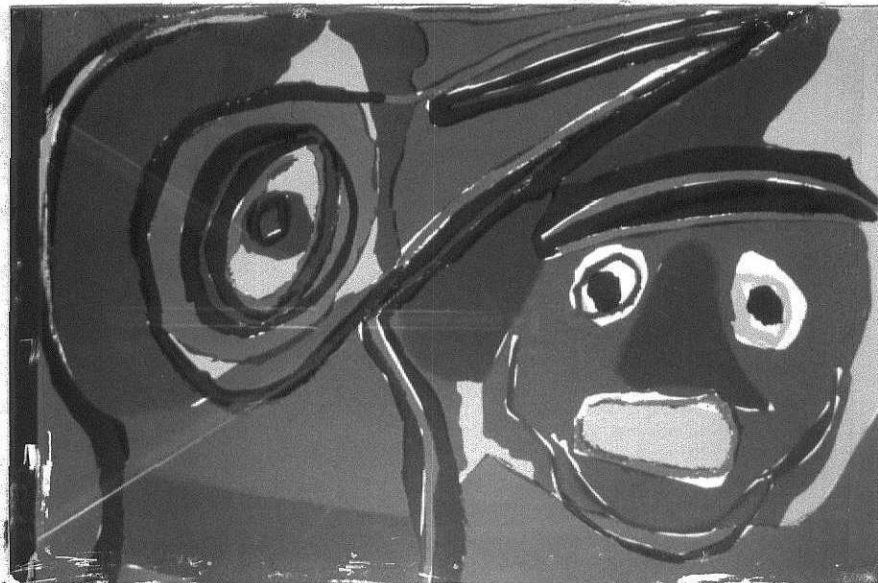


Figure 5

Karel Appel. 1956. 51 1/4" x 31 2/8"



Cornelle, also in the CoBra group seems to purposely use primitive shapes in his paintings. Looking at figure 6, one can see how he omitted all perspective in his work. With the use of these crude shapes, one gets the feeling that some influence of the Anti-Art movement is felt here.



Figure 6

Cornelle. 1957. 32" x 18 1/2"

Observing the works that are familiar to the writer, he questions whether a work of art is represented by this group. Their statement is definitely against order. It makes the awareness that order exists even stronger. If order and harmony exist at one end of the scale of painting, then one can assume it will not exist at the other extreme.

Poliakoff was not interested in figurative painting. His art is simple, geometric, and rich in color. Red and Blue

Composition (Figure 7) is a somber, quiet picture. He used textured shapes to create effects of crude forces pushing and pulling against one another.

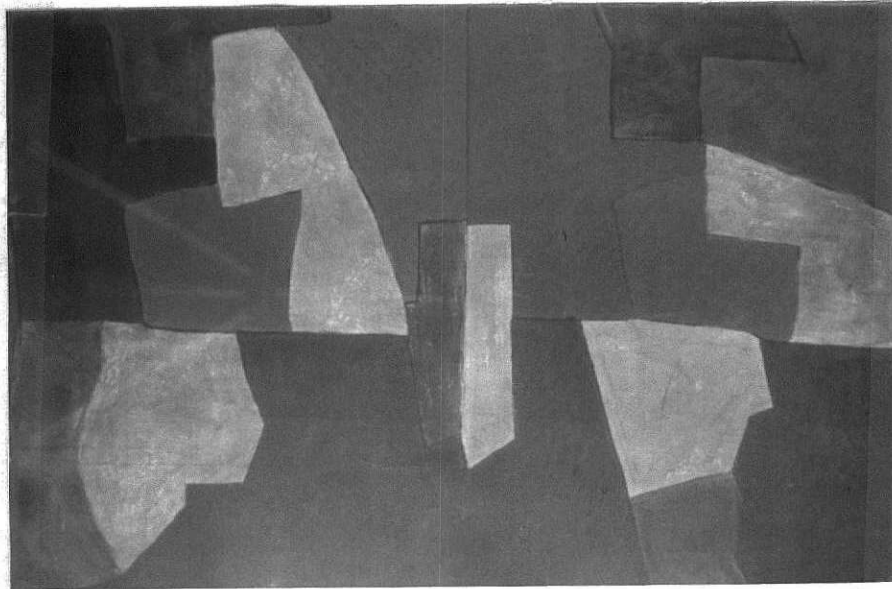


Figure 7

Serge Poliakoff. Red and Blue Composition. 1950. 51 3/8" x 38 1/4"

Poliakoff's work resembles that of the color-field painters. The most significant difference between the two groups is the scale of their work. The easel painters could not expect to get the emotional impact the color-field painters did.

Motion pictures, comic strips, and sign boards were some of the elements responsible for the pop art movement. This was a reaction against the abstract expressionist.

This new super realism got its start in New York and London. It probably started in America because of the high standard of living we enjoy and the emphasis we place on materialism. We are



more interested in how much something costs or tastes than how it actually looks. We are bombarded with gorgeously colored and bigger than life advertisements which is all part of the world's highest standard of living. The author finds this idea expanded by Maria Amaga.

Perhaps it is for this reason that American Pop-ists have concentrated deeply on supermarket or drug-store food. Wayne Thiebaud paints popsicles, and rows of layer cake and sandwiches in glass cases; Andy Warhol paints soup tins; Jasper Johns casts beer cans; Robert Indiana constructs electric-light "Eat signs"; Roy Lichtenstein does comic strip versions of ice-cream sodas; Tom Wesselmann constructs huge plastic oranges, soda-pop bottles and stacks of display food.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that nature is not symbolized by the pop artist. We seldom see him paint a tree, a bird, or an animal. He is concerned only with man-made objects. With the growth of our cities these objects became common place in the environment of the artist.

The pop artist made some statements which were very similar to that of the CoBrA group. However, in the opinion of the author, it is done with a more aesthetic quality.

It appears that the pop artist had a definition of order all their own. The "old" concept of order and harmony is not very obvious in much of their work. The author observes that anything can become a work of art if a strong philosophy is formulated to defend it. There seems to be no other criteria behind Jasper John's sculpture of the beer cans and Jim Dine's Toothbrushes on Black Ground except philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup>Maria Amaga, Pop Art -- and After (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), p. 63.

The pop artist creates an aesthetic experience by taking objects out of one environment and placing them in another. Toothbrushes, for example, are not aesthetic in a bathroom but they might be if placed on a canvas and put in a gallery. This is a good example of the importance the gallery plays in today's art.

In some respects Pop Art could be described as a Neo-Dada movement. It shared Dada's charm with found-objects and its pleasure in the ridiculous. The most obvious difference between the Dada movement and the Pop Art movement is the sense of humor society developed between the time these movements were presented. In other words, a social change took place.

Adopting a philosophy quite different from the Pop Artist, the minimal painters were reacting to the early abstract expressionists and junk sculptors. They were representing the impersonal environment in which they lived. All human qualities were left out of their work, sometimes going so far as to hide the construction of their canvases.

The minimal artists considered themselves to be realists; using paint as real paint and canvas as real canvas. Their philosophy was strong, but it did not seem to inhibit their creativity. They progressed to the shaped canvas trying to make their statement even stronger. The shaped canvas is a search for new forms of expression. The artist's desire to express himself is in a continuous state of flux. He is always searching for new statements to make and new ways of making them.

The Conceptual Art movement is a good example of the artist's struggle to express himself. Rejecting the establishment and formal gallery shows, they formed a relaxed and informal situation in which they were free to experiment with such common things as a telephone ringing across the street to the resonance of a gunshot. Many feel that the people involved in this type of art constitute the most Anti-Art establishment of any artist of this time.

The conceptual artist may be compared to what is happening in modern dance. The dance is composed of movements that are common among all of us. For an example the dancer may wipe his forehead or put on his shoes. These movements are done with grace; and therefore, have aesthetic value. Using these common place actions of man is evidence of the artist continuously examining his surroundings. It becomes a Micro Art. He is looking at every detail not permitting anything to vanish without exhausting it of all aesthetic qualities.

The author finds it difficult to anticipate where painting is directed, or for that matter where painting is at the moment. There is evidence that a type of unity is being attempted by the leaders of art. This is a total unity. This unity is of viewer with subject matter, artist with viewer, media with subject matter, painting with sculpture and man with his total environment.

The effective artists are those who have made a total commitment. It is this total commitment that will keep art ever changing in a forward direction.

Art is a sequential thing in that it builds from preceding and present ideas or attitudes. John Berger states that . . .

"A new style in art evolves - if it is not artificially stimulated - to meet the problem of treating new content born of social change."<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the potent artist will always be experimenting with or inventing new ways to express himself.

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<sup>5</sup>John Berger, Art and Revolution (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), p. 150.

## EXPLANATION OF AUTHOR'S WORK

The importance of the different movements in art is relative to the need of the time the movements are presented. An awareness has been made; the times are represented.

A student of art owes it to himself to experience as many of these movements of art as possible. That he is successful or not is not the question. The question is does he feel what the impressionist may have felt, what the cubist may have felt, what the members of the Dada movement have felt. In other words, has he become totally involved?

The author looks at the development of painting much as he looks at the development of man. Man supposedly started on all fours. He eventually learned to walk upright, learned the use of tools, and a language. A modern day infant's development is very similar. He learns to crawl before walking upright, and develops enough to use tools and a language. This same thinking can be compared to the development of painting. The artist first had to learn the tools of painting, perspective, and mixing color. After he learned to use these tools, he mastered realism. Then he learned the importance of composition. Subject matter became secondary and other movements developed. There was some overlapping, but basically these movements were developed with a certain amount of order. A new one started usually after the preceding movement was understood.

The author feels that a student should learn to "crawl" before he "walks." For this reason the candidate has attempted

paintings to represent many of the different movements in art. He is not saying they are successful, but hopes they can at least be considered representative.

The reader will find art objects influenced by Cezanne, Bacon, and that of Picasso. The candidate has experimented with minimal art and the shaped canvas, trying to gain a deeper insight into what these movements are trying to accomplish.

It is the candidate's desire in the future to work with the two dimensional surface using sensitive color relationships with subtle rhythms of brushworks. The statement is beauty with the spontaneous addition of brushstrokes and line. The paint will take on a life of its own, perhaps not yet experienced by the viewer. Line will be used, but very carefully. Its use will add richness to the subtle transitions of color. A typical example of this direction is represented by (Plate II) Seascape I.

Whether this direction is a profound one or not cannot be interpreted by the candidate. Time is the deciding factor that will select the great works from the ordinary, the movement which will be forgotten from the movement which will predominate.

How a painter reveals his interpretation of the world is his personal choice. The amount of ways that this is done must total to a staggering amount. There are literally thousands of painters going in thousands of different directions.

The challenge of the creative painter then is to work in a positive direction. He should at least work from his own past experiences trying to make his statement in a way that is unique

from any other painter. He will be influenced by history, but the finished product must be the artist's own creation.

## PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS ART OBJECTS



## PLATE II

## Two Figures

(acrylic on canvas, 30" x 18")



Plate III

Seascape I

(acrylic on canvas, 34" x 60")



## PLATE IV

Kansas Field Number Three

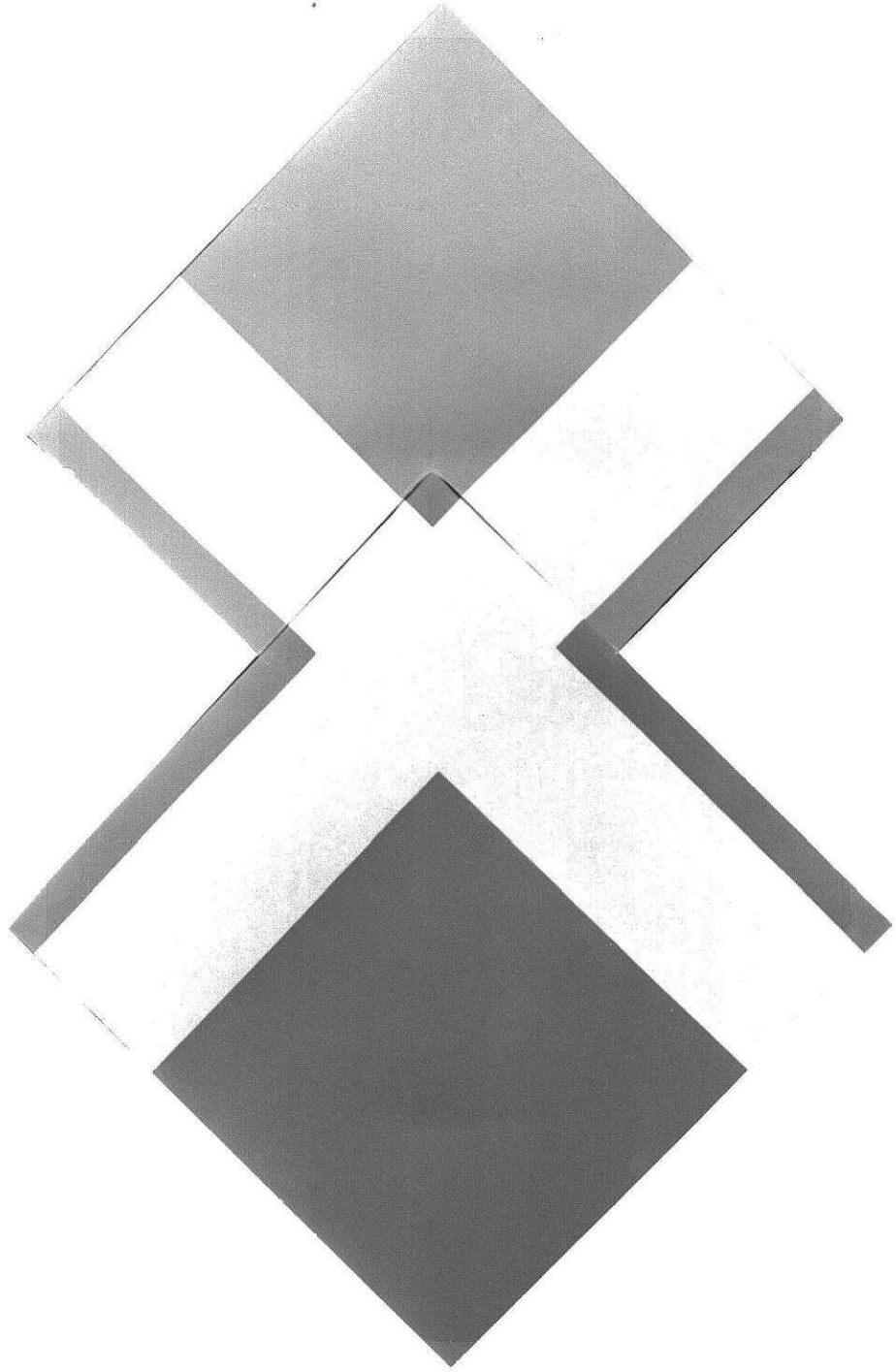
(acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36")



## PLATE V

Shaped Canvas IV

(acrylic on canvas, 67" x 43")

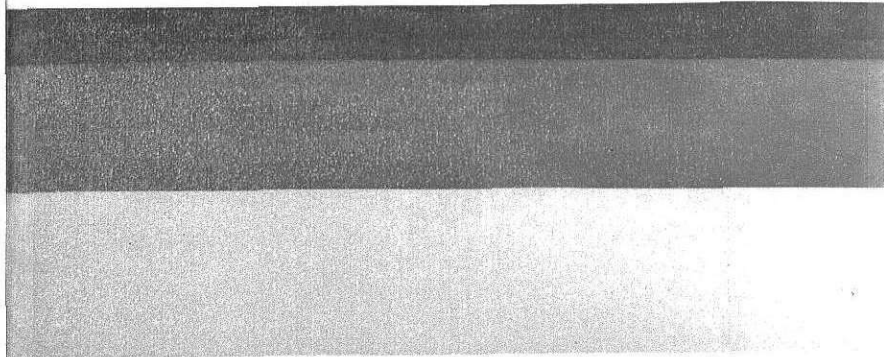
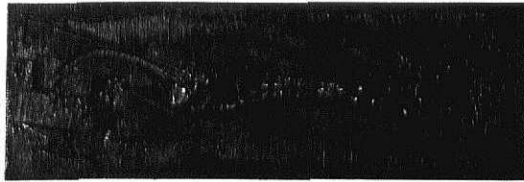




## PLATE VI

Composition With Black

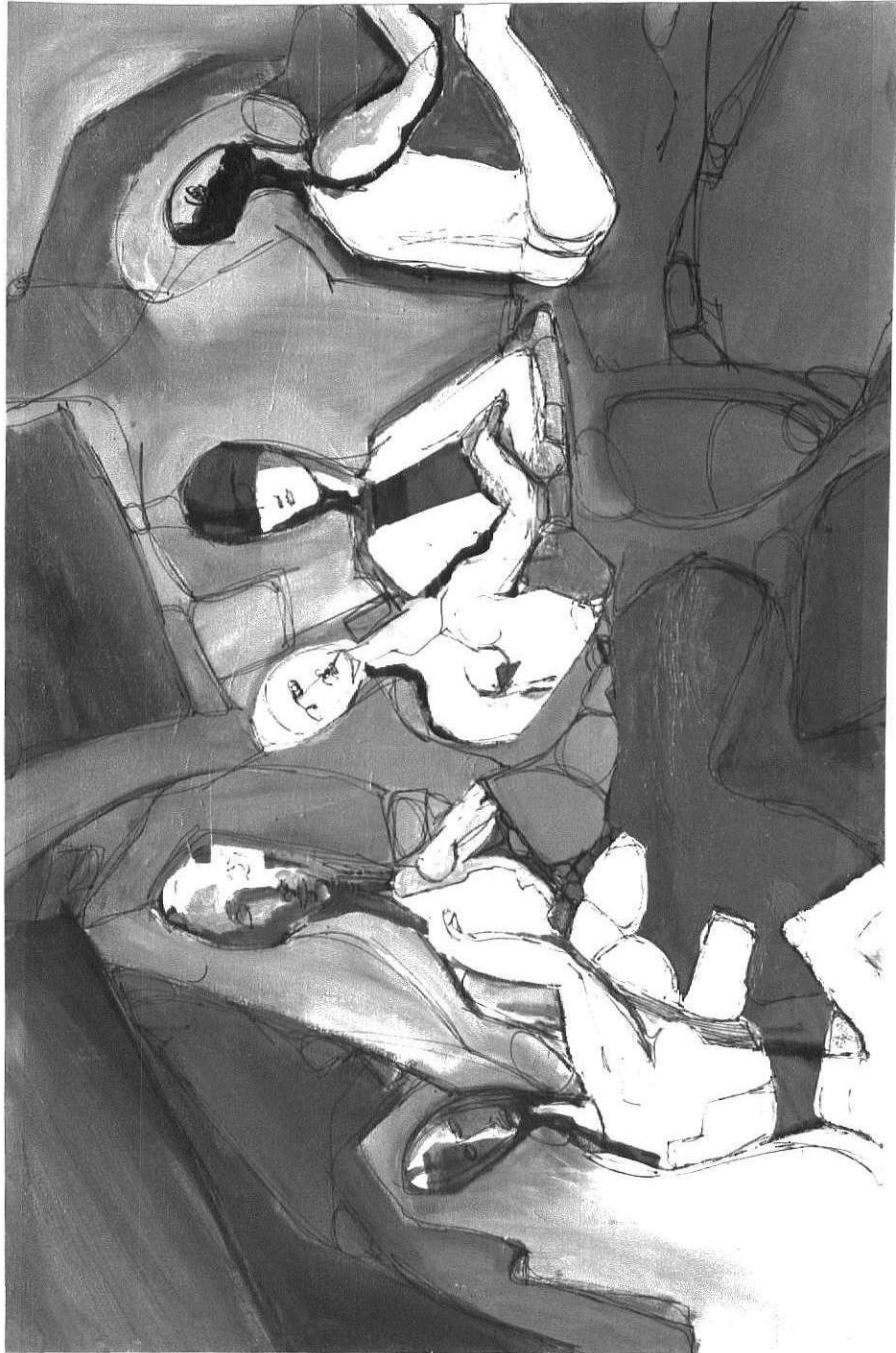
(acrylic on canvas, 32" x 52")



## PLATE VII

After The Damage

(acrylic on canvas, 32" x 48")



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This report reveals the candidate's personal observations of painting since 1945. It is his intention to translate these observations into a comprehensive interpretation.

Generally speaking, the development of painting depends on two factors. The first is the reactions against preceding movements of painting. The second factor is the influences of society or reactions against that society. An artist will learn from history. He will accept or reject those movements to which he is exposed. This acceptance or rejection will determine the direction that he will eventually pursue.

The works that an artist produces will depend upon the material with which he has to work. Many of these materials give art new dimensions not dreamed of in past years. The art gallery is also playing an important role in art today. It is being given the credit it deserves by the artist.

In the final analysis it seems a type of unity is being attempted by the leaders of art. This is a total unity of viewer with subject matter, artist with viewer, media with subject matter, painting with sculpture and man with his total environment.

Art is a sequential thing in that it builds from preceding and present ideas or attitudes. For this reason, the potent artist will always be experimenting or inventing new ways to express himself. How a painter reveals his interpretation of the world is his personal choice. The number of ways that this can be done must total to a staggering figure. There are many painters expressing themselves in thousands of different directions. The challenge to the

creative painter is to work from his own past experiences endeavoring to make his statement in a way that is unique from any other painter.