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The Elements of an Art Form

Gregory A. Gobberdiel

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This paper is in correlation with my Master of Arts in Education
presented to Lindenwood College in 1983 at the Lindenwood College
of the Fine Arts Building, Lindenwood College, St. Charles, Missouri,
and is in partial fulfillment for the Master of Arts in the
visual arts.

THE ELEMENTS OF AN ART FORM

Gregory A. Gobberdiel

April 1983

Thesis
G535e
1983



This paper is in correlation with my Master of Arts Exhibition presented November 29 thru December 16, 1982, at the Lounge Gallery of the Fine Arts Building, Lindenwood Colleges, St. Charles, Missouri, and is in partial fulfillment for the degree Master of Arts in the visual arts.

I do not intend to narrow my focus to any one particular area, but will rather use the work as a medium. I hope to address the overall concerns of my work. These concerns, as I see them, are those of my inspirations and influences, my appreciation for art and the direction of my work.

Influences and Inspirations

For the artist studying in an academic situation, the art of the past will likely have great influence upon his work. This has been true in my case. I have not tried to isolate my work from a particular artist or period, but have rather learned techniques and approaches from many sources. Many artists have other favorite artists they admire. I have no one particular artist or group that I am absorbed with, but have attempted to absorb from all periods and regions - art. Contemporary work

An Introduction

In addressing the concerns of writing a composition about my work in the visual arts, I found myself questioning what it is that needs to be expressed that does not already exist in my work and why it needs to be expressed. The obvious answer is that I am asked to do so in order to fulfill my requirements towards a Master of Arts Degree. This is a concern of academics but by far the most important reason is so that I may investigate the work I have completed in order to heighten my own awareness of my success and failures. In so questioning my work and in communication it in a different manner than it is already communicated, I hope to enlighten myself as much as those who ask it of me.

I do not intend to narrate what I feel each piece "accomplishes" but will rather use the work as examples. I hope to address the overriding concerns of my work. These concerns, as I see them, are those of my inspirations and influences, my approaches to art and the directions of my work.

Influences and Inspirations

For the artist studying in an academic situation, the art of the past will likely have great influence upon his work. This has been true in my case. I have not tried to fashion my work from a particular artist or period, but have rather learned techniques and approaches from many sources. Many artists have other favorite artists they admire. I have no one particular artist or group that I am absorbed with, but have attempted to absorb from all periods and regions of art. Contemporary work

has also been of great importance to me and I have tried to keep abreast of new work through the many art journals as well as by viewing exhibitions at galleries and museums. I feel I have not been influenced as much as I have been inspired by art history. An example of this is the wall piece entitled Tapestry. This piece is derived from Matisse's work with paper cutouts and the decorative motifs of that work. Matisse's piece entitled The Swimming Pool employs similar devices as I used for the work Tapestry. Being a large (90½" x 64 5/8") continuous wall hanging, intended to be used on the walls of a room, The Swimming Pool¹ has figures "swimming" across the picture in a wavy motion. I applied this concept to a different medium, that of relief printing. Tapestry acts as a decorative art object in that the design is repetitive, one repeating itself every eighteen inches. Degas' use of dancers, as in his pastel Dancer reproduced in Drawings by Degas by Jean Sutherland Boggs,² inspired me to draw from live dancers and I began drawing in the dance classes, subsequently many drawings were done, often quick sketches, but my ability and sensitivity to capture the human form in motion was heightened. In both instances, I was not attempting to copy a style, but was inspired by their work to work with the same concept or source.

Another important source of inspiration was my study of Japanese art. Dean Eckert's class The Art and Culture of Japan allowed me to study Japanese art fully for the first time. I came to appreciate and understand their art and borrow from their ideas and devices. During my study of Japanese art, I researched Ukiyo-e printmakers. It was valuable to see reproductions of

many works by these great relief printmakers. The traditional Japanese print employs sharp crisp lines and patterns and often bright bold colour combinations. The sensitivity of the line is of utmost importance. Japanese drawing styles, much borrowed and transformed from Chinese traditions, are striking for their economy of line and colour. The poetic quality of Japanese work has perhaps had the strongest influence on my work as in my water-colour Phantom. Having studied Japanese prints, I also studied their traditional print technique. The tools and materials they employ are similar to Western approaches, except in the way they apply colour to the printing block.

They use brushes and water soluble inks, whereas the traditional Western practice is to use rollers and oil-based inks. The brush technique allows for extreme control of graded colour areas. To duplicate this with the use of rollers, overlapping of colours can be employed or a varigated roll could be used, a varigated roll being one using two or more colours on the inking surface. By rolling these out with a single roller, it allows them to blend together, creating a gradual transition from one colour to the next (one would perceive this as a rainbow-like effect.).

The painting Packing Room was painted as an exercise in depth illusion. The contemporary realist William Bailey and his work with simple still life paintings, such as Large Umbrium Still Life,³ was a source of inspiration for this piece, but I was not attempting to emulate Bailey, but rather, feeding from his idea. Bailey uses simple ceramic vessels for his source, in some respects

they reflect Morandi's work with still life objects, but Bailey's work has an incredibly clean, crisp quality about it. His colour usage reflects the natural colours of the unglazed fired clay objects he uses as a source material, natural red earth colours, dusty whites and yellow ochre, as well as burnt and raw umber.

Packing Room begins with the idea of shallow space reflecting the depth of objects within this space, its source being that of corrugated cardboard boxes. They overlap one another, creating shadows falling over various levels of surfaces. Packing Room is relatively clean and succeeds in creating the illusion of depth.

Colouristically it is much brighter than Bailey's work.

My palette was limited only in the number of colours used in mixing. The primaries, (cadmium red medium, cadmium yellow medium, cobalt blue) and white were the basic colours. The colours reflect the colour of cardboard but the colours are more varied in tonality than those of Bailey.

A great inspiration I cannot overlook is that of nature. Landscape painting and drawing is an enjoyable experience for me. From nature, I feel we derive our sense of colour and light. The human mind constantly compares art to nature or the environment primarily because both are a visual experience. I tend to "change" a landscape that I record either by colour changes or the positioning of a particular tree or landmass to better suit my composition. In this way I'm abstracting it, yet retaining qualities that exist in nature. The was crayon and charcoal drawing Silhouette was derived from looking at a landscape photograph I had taken and choosing

the best elements from the photograph, as well as returning to the sight to familiarize myself with the land in order to react to it. The drawing is an exercise in chiaroscuro and sfumato approaches.

A constant natural source, as exemplified by a majority of my work, is the human form. The human form is an immediate source that one's audience can quickly identify with. The human form is capable of expressing tremendous emotion. To capture this emotion is of foremost importance to me. Egon Schiele's work is such a powerful example of emotional impact that it bears mentioning here.⁴

I viewed a showing of his watercolour and gouache portraits at the Sabarsky Gallery in New York City in December of 1982. Having seen much of his work in reproductions this exhibit was truly rewarding. Schiele uses an angular sure line to describe the figure, his knowledge of the anatomy being evident by his work. His figures are often puppet-like in their starkness. The figure is used as a graphic device upon the page, the lines acting to compartmentalize flat and swirling colour areas. Schiele's figures are often grotesque and distorted. The watercolour Despair: Man of Sorrows, that I exhibited in my show, is a prime example of the emotion the human form can convey. The use of space as an abstract element within the picture plane, defined by the human

form becomes a key to this work aesthetically. The charcoal line describes the form as well as the motion of the figure. The heavy mass of colour at the top of the page reinforces the burdened stooped pose of the figure, a figure crumpled by the weight of worldly concerns, a figure in anguish and despair.

A contemporary artist working with this theme is Robert Longo whose work I saw at a group exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, June of 1982. His life-size charcoal drawings are derived from film stills of gangster movies. The figures are often in contorted violent poses as a result of having been shot or punched, and are seemingly falling. The figures are often cropped as in his latest lithographs. The lithograph entitled Mark contains such a figure.⁵ The solid rich blocks of the figures clothes create interesting shapes upon the page, quite angular and harsh, relating to the figure's pose. A pose that appears almost as an "x" or inverted check-mark. A pose that appears to be perhaps crumpled upon the pavement. What I find intriguing about these works is the way the artist uses the figure as a compositional device, but because it is representative of a figure it conveys physical and psychological emotions, forcing the viewer to react beyond the aesthetics of the composition.

Of great interest to me is the design work of primitive art derived from nature. A good example would be the totem poles of the Northwestern American tribes or the masks of the Iroquois. This powerful imagery has had great influence upon 20th Century artists, such as Modigliani's portraiture. The formal simplicity, bold colour usage and reliance upon natural materials make for compelling mystical images. Their religious nature and use reflects their appearance in many ways, as in fertility charms and in depictions of gods. The largest influence upon my work is most apparent in my fascination with natural materials. I am fascinated with the richness of wood, its texture, grain and colour. Pandora's Box reflects some of those concerns. The use of used lumber for the drawer fronts and trim and their treatment to heighten the natural colour and texture of the wood was accomplished by preparing the surface by sanding and then using a finish of boiled linseed oil and turpentine. The linseed oil absorbs into the wood and the turpentine acts as a drier. Linseed oil naturally imparts a slight yellow-orange colour, but mostly brings out the natural aged colour of the used pine flooring utilized for the drawer fronts. Other elements include the use of drawer handles that literally reflect the unseen inner chest cavity. Again they are

finished naturally in the same manner as the drawer front. The sides, top and back of the chest were built out of enamelled fir plywood. I chose an enamel finish that reflected the colour of the natural wood elements. The use of artificial and natural elements, the enamelled surfaces versus the oiled wood surfaces, produces a contrast that heightens one's awareness of the surfaces.

All of these influences and inspirations are important no matter how little or much they have affected my work. As an artist the constant bombardment of my senses forces me to react in many ways. This stimuli enters my work consciously and unconsciously. Without my reaction to the things around me, I would not produce art, for I feel art is a reaction to something directly or indirectly. Whether I'm responding literally to an event as if editorializing or whether I'm responding to an image aesthetically my experiences will constantly influence my decisions and choices. Afterall, I am a being of sensory perception, this being the way I must gather my data and respond to all things, such as artwork, mine included.

An Approach to Art

What good is a formalist approach to Art? There are few firm rules in a formal approach because of the relativity of its elements. The reaction of these to one another is often predictable,

but it depends upon the location and attitude of these elements. An example of this relativity is the colour work of Josef Albers, and his approach to colour theory. In Albers' text, Interaction of Color, he begins the introduction "The book ... is a record of an experimental way of studying ... and ... teaching color." His approach is not an academic one but rather an effort to develop one's colour sensitivity. He further writes that "... color (is) the most relative medium in art." I agree with Albers, and since this statement is a qualitative one, I believe Albers would agree that all art elements are relative, color being "...the most relative...".⁶ Therefore, I see formalism as nothing more than a theory of art, and perhaps the greatest thing a formalist approach gives to art is a vocabulary with which to communicate. The professional jargon that has evolved is an important tool in which we may critique work in a unified way. For me, a formal approach is a starting point from which to explore and to ignore this formal tradition would be to ignore the discoveries of the past.

As important as this knowledge of a formal vocabulary is, the artist must be able to apply this to his craft. No matter how well one may be able to visualize and create imagery unless he can put it down on the space before him, he can not complete the

all important link between himself and the viewer - the art object itself. Therefore, the importance of the mechanics of producing art can not be denied. There also exists the importance of craftsmanship, which to me is the command of the technique required to produce lasting work. A well-crafted object commands a certain respect. I feel an art object that commands its own space and fulfills its goals of sensual communication, becomes its own being, separate and apart from its creator.

An art object, by communicating and "living", becomes a mystical object, an object that communicates certain intangibles that cannot be described. This intangible mysticism is part of why I create art and find it such an exciting experience. I have asked myself if in creating art I intend to immortalize myself, but I have never consciously thought of this as a goal. Perhaps subconsciously this idea exists to support an artist's ego, but who is to say? I do enjoy showing my work and more importantly, sharing my work and talking of it to enlighten people as to the techniques or the approaches I have taken.

As important as good technique is, one can not overlook the importance of experimentation. I am constantly experimenting with new materials and techniques. I feel this is important in furthering

my craft and when I master a new approach, it broadens my capabilities and sensibilities as an artist. In my opinion, any method, approach, or technique that fulfills the artist's intentions is a valid approach, no matter how traditional or non-traditional it may be. The key is to command this new approach so the artist and not the materials are in control.

Experimentation has played a great role in my work and attitude towards art. Experimentation with materials and techniques leads to new ideas and allows my work to remain fresh. For example, my relief print Sticks and Assymetrical Memories are a product of similar materials. Sticks includes double impressions without re-inking which gives a softer image. Assymetrical Memories relies upon solid clean impressions. Experimentation allowed for the development of an idea. I feel it is important to push an idea to its limit and experimentation with materials is one way to achieve such a goal.

Directions

Perhaps the most important element of this writing is where I see my work and how it will manifest itself in the future. An important aspect of my being at Lindenwood is the transitions

that have occurred. Chiefly, I have shifted from intaglio to relief printmaking, and have improved upon my drawing skills. Having set out to improve my drawing skills, especially figure drawing, I was able to work in three drawing classes under different instructors each time. An important aspect of having had three drawing instructors was their different approaches. All were encouraging and gave me fresh approaches to drawing. An important approach learned from John Wehner was the use of highly organized space. He encouraged me to be bolder and more graphic in my separation of foreground and background. Art Kanak encouraged a greater degree of modelling and volume description, especially through the use of contour lines built up over the surface, while Judy Thompson emphasized experimentation and manipulation of the media through such techniques as erasing and smearing. She encouraged a greater freedom and variety of line. A medium I used in all my drawing classes was that of watercolour.

Watercolour has intrigued me for some time. Having first seriously studied it at the University of Missouri, I had hoped to continue my use of it at Lindenwood. I was fortunate in having had Frank Stack as my watercolour instructor at the University. His use of water colour for figurative work is untraditional, but

his influence led me to continue the use of watercolour for figurative work. The intimate yet expressive figurative water colours Despair, Man of Sorrows, Standing Nude, Figure Studies and Phantom are perhaps the most "poetic" of the works in the exhibition. The first two mentioned employ subtle colour washes and line work describing volume. The second two, Figure Studies and Phantom employ a line technique learned from Frank Stack. A line gotten by abrading the paper with the shaft of a brush or a hard graphite pencil and then allowing the colour of the wash to heighten this at first invisible line. The abrasion allows the paper to absorb and channel more of the colour and therefore darkens it as compared to the other areas of the wash on the flat paper.

This scratching of the page can be done before the wash is applied whether the paper is wet or not, or after the wash has been applied. I enjoy what can happen accidentally when using watercolours but find that a planned approach works best for me, not a firm definite approach, but a generalized idea of the colours to be used, the line techniques to be employed and method of application of paint.

Several of the works in the exhibition are forays in new directions and I intend to continue to pursue those directions. The relief

print on cloth entitled Tapestry was my first experience with printing on cloth. By repeating an eighteen-inch block over the course of the two eighteen-foot lengths of linen, I not only printed a sizeable edition, but had to alter the printing procedure in order to print on a continuous length. Further possibilities exist in designing these hanging prints for specific spaces, as this print was designed for the lounge galley space at the Fine Arts Building.

My fascination with found object printing has led to the use of many new materials, such as the laminated plastic, lace, discarded matboard and twine used for the print, Tapestry. The relief print Sticks, is also composed of various elements including masonite, lace, polymered matboard and asbestos floor tile samples. These found objects allow me to produce blocks quickly and cheaply and open up new possibilities and ideas. The prints utilizing these objects are literally printed collages.

I hope to continue to use found objects in an effort to push their possible applications to extremes. As I mentioned before, my fascination with wood has led me to formulate ideas in which found objects and fabricated wood could be combined to create objects along the lines of Kurt Schwitters' Merz 1926, 3 Cicero or Joseph Cornell's shadow boxes.⁷ This fascination with wood

has also led to an interest in furniture design and construction.

Pandora's Box was my first attempt at enamelling on wood.

I had seen the rich enamelled surfaces of Wendy Maruyama⁸ and had wanted to explore the medium. The idea for the enamelled grid pattern arose from the boxes cubed shape. It seemed to be a pattern that would restate the function of the box, as it is primarily designed as a "map-chest" to store paper and works on paper.

The painting X-one is so called because of its experimental nature. It was an extension of an earlier work using spray paint and mixed media on paper and cardboard. This piece is spray enamel and acrylic on canvas. The use of spray paint expanded my palate. Masking devices were also used to produce X-one. The sprayed areas were heightened with brush painting. They suggested texture and method of handling. Overall the piece reflects the illusion of deep space. Areas within this painting could be developed on their own illusionism, this aspect mirrors the experimental nature of this painting.

Through experimentation new directions will evolve, as well as new experiences. For any visual artist, I feel that seeking new approached and new angles, whether it be to a single idea or to many ideas, is important. The artist is taught to visualize

and communicate that vision by way of an art object or performance, but the artist cannot stop learning or stop teaching himself by way of experimentation and personal experience. The long-term direction one takes may have a sharp focus, but little can be seen of the eventual outcome or the reaction that its communicative power might have. Personally, I have extremely diversified interest and often wonder if this is a help or a hindrance. My ability to pull ideas from other areas outside the visual arts must certainly be helpful, but perhaps a sharper focus would produce work of greater impact.

Summary

Having looked at facets of my experience in the visual arts, I feel that I have had a worthwhile experience here at Lindenwood. I feel more confident in my approach and judgment of art. I will come away with the confidence to say that my work has matured. I have developed a style and focus in many ways, yet through experimentation and the notion that one can always improve, I again am on the verge of an exciting challenge, an effort to create new things and improve upon old ones. I was challenged by new ideas and approaches at Lindenwood, but perhaps most important, I challenged myself to improve. So I will end with a simple proverb:

There is nothing Noble about being superior to some other man. True Nobility is being superior to your former self.

Hindu

John S. Sweeney, *The Life of Lord Krishna* (New York: George Braziller, 1950), p. 200.

John Sweeney, *The Life of Lord Krishna* (New York: George Braziller, 1950), pp. 197-198.

William H. Hall, *Lord Krishna* (New York: George Braziller, 1950).

Allan R. G. Fisher, *Lord Krishna* (New York: George Braziller, 1950).

John Sweeney, "The Life of Lord Krishna," *Life*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 100.

John Sweeney, *Lord Krishna* (New York: George Braziller, 1950), pp. 1-2.

John Sweeney, *Lord Krishna* (New York: George Braziller, 1950), pp. 1-2.

John Sweeney, *Lord Krishna* (New York: George Braziller, 1950), pp. 1-2.

John Sweeney, *Lord Krishna* (New York: George Braziller, 1950), pp. 1-2.

John Sweeney, *Lord Krishna* (New York: George Braziller, 1950), pp. 1-2.

Footnotes

- ¹John Elderfield, The Cut-outs of Henri Matisso (New York: George Braziller, 1978), p. 76-77.
- ²Jean Sutherland Boggs, The Drawings by Degas (St. Louis: City Art Museum of St. Louis, 1967), pp. 197-198.
- ³William Bailey, Large Umbrium Still Life, City Art Museum of St. Louis, St. Louis, Mo..
- ⁴Allestrandra Comini. Egon Schiele, New York: George Braziller, 1976.
- ⁵Ronny Cohen, "New-Edition: Robert Longo," Art News, April 1983, p. 86.
- ⁶Josef Albers. Interaction of Color (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 1 & 2.
- ⁷Werner Schmalenbach, Kurt Schwitters (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1967), p. 173.
Edmund Burke Feldman, Varieties of Visual Experience: Art as Image and Idea. 2nd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1971), p. 500.
- ⁸"Portfolio: Wendy Maruyama," American Craft, Vol. 41 No. 5, Oct. - Nov. 1981, p. 44.

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LIST OF SLIDES

1. Tapestry, Relief print on linen (2) 18" x 18"
2. Invitation, Relief print, Xerox on cardstock and envelope
3. Untitled, Lino and woodcut 7" x 9"
4. Solar Power, Reduction woodcut 11" x 14½"
5. Sticks, Relief print, artist proof 10" x 15"
6. Packing Room, Acrylic on canvas 20¼" x 32.3/4"
7. Sunbather, Serigraph 26" x 30 3/4"
8. Three Figures: Acrobats, Pastel 19" x 24"
9. Figure Study, Conte' crayon 18" x 24"
10. Pandora's Box, Fir plywood, pine, cottonwood, enamel and hardware
11. Checkmate, Serigraph 7" x 10"
12. Opposition, Pastel 18" x 24"
13. Despair: Man of Sorrows, Charcoal and watercolour 9" x 12"
14. Standing Nude, Watercolour and pencil 9" x 12"
15. Figure Studies, Watercolour (2) 8½" x 11"
16. Phantom, Watercolour 8" x 10¼"
17. Silhouette, Charcoal and wax crayon 20" x 26 5/8"
18. Sky, Water, Pastel 20" x 26 5/8"
19. X-one, Acrylic and enamel on canvas
20. Machine Man, Serigraph 12" x 14"
21. Assymetrical Memories, Relief print 12" x 14½"