

THE SONG WITHIN

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INTRODUCTION

“There are moments in our lives, there are moments in a day, when one seems to see beyond the usual. . . . At such times there is a song going on within us, a song to which we listen. It fills us with surprise. We marvel at it.”¹

I grew up watching my father paint and listening to people talk about art. It was exciting and intimidating. My head was full of the formal elements the artist considered when creating and the multitude of philosophical positions which could motivate the artist. When I began painting about eight years ago I was not conscious of any personal purpose motivating me—if anything I painted with an abundance of trepidation. The sensuality of paint and colour seduced me, but beyond that confusion and awkwardness reigned.

During the past two years “the song within” has begun to manifest itself on occasion and I am beginning to understand what I am painting and why. To articulate the motivation and the process is another matter. How I love the suggestion Matisse made: “He who wants to dedicate himself to painting should start by cutting out his tongue”² However, for a man with such a conviction, he certainly talked a great deal about his own work and art in general!

MOTIVATION

Clement Greenberg suggested that the Cubists “. . . sought for the decisive structure of things that lay permanently under the accidents of momentary experience.”³ Although this remark is certainly an oversimplification of what the Cubists were after, it clarified for me something which motivates me in my work. I am drawn to the ever-changing appearance of nature. It is the energy which vibrates in nature which fascinates me, not the possibility of permanent structure underlying it. Physicists talk of indeterminate matter and random activity at the sub-atomic level—concepts which do not suggest permanence or decisive structure. They also speak of the inter-connectedness of everything in the universe which is in agreement with the manner in which the Cubists organized the picture plane.

When I paint I have no desire to break nature down into geometric components and bypass the “accidents of momentary appearance.” It is true that I do, in a sense, control nature by freezing my interpretation of it on the picture

plane, but I try to suggest some kind of energy which continues to move and change. I do not mean to imply that I do not believe in structure of any kind. One need only look at a leaf, moth or the human body to see structure, to see symmetry or asymmetry. Any form has structure. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that it is the changing dynamic between structures which inspires me. Yet that is still not enough. A painting can be beautifully composed, expertly executed, in other words, formally sound, and yet be without spirit, without spark.

In the writings of Bergson (1859–1941) he defines intuition as “. . . the sympathy by which one transports oneself to the interior of an object in order to coincide with its unique and therefore ineffable quality. . . . Intuition, by the ‘sympathetic communication which it establishes between us and the rest of the living, by the expansion of our consciousness which it brings about, introduces us into life’s own domain, which is reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation.”⁴ Bergson describes far more poetically than I can a sense of something which I am striving for in my work.

Matisse, whose joyous work is a delight to me, held a belief very similar to Bergson’s. “Matisse, conceiving of existence as flux, and perceiving happening in a fashion similar to Bergson’s *durée*, wanted intuitively to evolve forms that would express the elusive ‘present’ even as it was being eroded by the mutual interpenetration of past and future. The goal of the process is to arrive at an absolute which, paradoxically, has only relative validity; that is, for a given situation.”⁵

Nature does not mind how I paint it. The clouds and trees carry on their infinitely variable dance and I am free to feel what I feel, see what I see and learn. There is a meadow up north which I know and love. It is my Garden of Eden. As long as the meadow is not destructively interfered with and can carry on its dance of life and natural death, then I feel hopeful. I dreamt of a different and timeless meadow once; a meadow of long grasses undulating in a warm wind, surrounded by trees and yet stretching into the distance. The luminous colours, the unbelievable richness and peace made me weep with longing. And so I paint, in my own way, to partly satisfy a personal yearning and to partly communicate something of my love of life, desire to understand, and hope that the infinitely variable dance be allowed to continue.

PROCESS

My exhibition consists of paintings on paper, on canvas, drawings and mixed media. Other than the physical exploration of various media, the ongoing struggle for me is in the area of control versus freedom, between pre-conceived idea and discovery. The paintings on paper particularly embody this battle. In almost every case I started painting with a preconceived image in mind, failed to achieve my vision and in frustration began to push the paint around at random. Out of this confusion things began to take shape, as if my subconscious (or unconscious) self began to show me what I really wanted and finally recognized. This process is not planned because I cannot decide to fail so that I may discover alternatives to my original idea. Painting this way is very exciting, and frightening at the same time, because I feel out of control until I resolve the painting eventually. The uncertainty of this unplanned process fascinates me and I hope it continues. I feel the paintings on paper are my strongest work, however awkward and crude they appear. It may also be true that I have not yet allowed myself to lose enough control.

My pen and ink drawings represent another facet of my personality, my desire to be in control and my attraction to intricate detail. This kind of drawing is a form of meditation. It absorbs my attention like the repetition of a mantra which empties the mind of chatter. For me there are no serious risks or surprises in working so carefully. I feel safe and peaceful as I am drawing, but I do not believe this way of working is without merit for me. *Meditation II* was an old weathered, washed-up tree trunk and roots which I saw from a distance on Cranberry Flats. Coming close, it became an intricate world within worlds. The tree was no longer a tree but a microcosmic landscape. The more attention I paid, the more I saw, and it filled me with wonder. I suspect that the more attention we pay to the world, the more we care about it, and the less likely we are to take anything for granted and treat the gift of this world carelessly.

Ceremonies

The ash tree drops the few dry leaves it bore in May,
stands naked by mid-July.

When each day's evil news drains into the next,
a monotonous overflow,
has a tree's dying lost the right to be mourned?
No-life's indivisible. And this tree,

rooted beyond my fence, has been,
branch and curved twig, in leaf or bare, the net
that held the sky in my window.
Trunk in deep shade, its lofting crown
offers to each long day's
pale glow after the sun
is almost down, an answering gold—
the last light
held and caressed.

Denise Levertov

The large canvases in the exhibition represent another struggle. In my smaller paintings I rarely worry too much about whether there is enough information in them to hold the viewer's attention. If anything I have a tendency to put too much in and so I try to simplify. However, working large raises this issue. If I work out of my head mainly, as I did in *Wild Wind* I fear there is not enough there. Perhaps there is mood and energy but not much more. In an attempt to deal with this concern I painted *Ode to Mendel Cacti I and II*. The first attempt is perhaps too cluttered and stiff, with not enough evidence of taking pleasure in the paint itself. The second attempt is, for me, more successful. The forms are more monumental and the paint more felt. I love the potential freedom of the larger scale but I am certain the issue of enough content (not necessarily literal) will continue to plague me.

The work I chose for my exhibition represents a number of quite different personal styles. Maybe in time I will reach a balance between the desire for control and a willingness to relinquish control and my work will become more consistent. It is also possible that I will continue to satisfy different aspects of my personality by working in different styles. What I do hope is that the work, regardless of its technical variety, communicates something about who I am and what I care about. I do not expect the viewer to feel what I feel or know what I intend because I so often don't know myself. As long as the viewer is not completely bored or indifferent to my work, then I will feel that I have succeeded in some way to communicate.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

My inclination to work in a number of different personal styles makes it

difficult for me to see where I might fit into a historical context. Clearly some of my work fits within a realistic tradition. My attraction to intense feeling and realms of the imagination probably makes me partly a Romantic painter. Also my love for the sensuality of paint, strong colour and exaggerated form perhaps echoes back to the Fauves. Some of my paintings on paper, in which I do not adhere specifically to a particular subject matter, but work more intuitively, fit perhaps into the European Expressionist tradition. Although I never paint completely abstractly, there is abstraction and a two-dimensional flatness at times which would begin to put the work into a modernist context. If formal considerations were my only concern, and no attempt was made to create an illusion of depth, then I might consider myself a modernist. Formal considerations are always at work when I paint but, as I have stated earlier, such concerns are only part of my motivation. My love of nature, what it has to teach me about itself and about myself in relationship to it, and my worry about the destruction of our planet, are all factors which inspire me. My recognition that I am not separate from society, nor do I wish to be, that my social, economic and cultural background partially influences the what, how and why I create the way I do, probably puts me into a post-modernist category, however indirectly. As Suzi Gablik puts it: "In dialectical terms, the tension between traditional and modern values is resolved by the creation of an interesting synthesis of elements from both."⁶

I think we would all agree that labeling and categorizing can limit and bias our perception. There is no question that historical awareness is beneficial and necessary. Keeping abreast of current art criticism and practice is essential as well. However, my major concern, when it comes to my own work, is whether I am communicating at all and whether my work can hold up under serious criticism in a formal sense.

CONCLUSION

"The best modern painting, though it is mostly abstract painting, remains naturalistic in its core, despite all appearances to the contrary. It refers to the structure of the given world both outside and inside human beings. The artist who, like the Nabis, the later Kandinsky, and so many of the disciples of the Bauhaus, tries to refer to anything else walks in a void."⁷ Greenberg speaks of structure, Bergson about intuition and sympathy. Both men are talking about

nature, of which we are a part. John Berger argues that the artist and the viewer are both intimately influenced by the culture in which they live, their life experiences, economic and otherwise, and that what is often considered good art is determined by the art critics, galleries and the buyers. As a result of all these influences, historical and otherwise, many female artists have been overlooked as has the art of indigenous people in our own and other cultures. Weaving, tapestries, ceramics, etc. are only just beginning to come into their own as legitimate art forms. The New York modernist tradition in particular appears to have considered only painting and sculpture to be worthy of notice. The present post-modernist trend is trying to redress the narrowness of the modernist focus. Let us hope this openness continues without becoming too theoretically obscure or militant in its approach. Although I still believe that great art transcends the temporal and contains a timeless spirit, without negating temporal reality, it would be foolhardy not to pay attention and learn from the points of view put forward by people like Greenberg and Berger.

I am inspired by any art form which is animated by the "ineffable" quality Bergson talks about—that spark which causes me to look again and feel enriched in my mind and heart. Formal concerns are essential but the "spark" cannot be explained in material terms. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

It does not matter to me whether an art form is realistic, abstract or otherwise. Matisse is an inspiration, as are late Rothko paintings. Lachiaise takes my breath away, Giacometti quietly fascinates me. Louis, Pollock, Kiefer, Beuys, Motherwell, Bonnard, Muntz, Gauguin, Van Gogh, middle period Kandinsky, have all created work which demands my attention. The list can be endless for all of us.

Every time I look at Kathe Kollowitz's drawing called "Dead Child" my heart feels torn out of my body. Wagner's "Love Dance" from Tristan and Isolde makes my spirit soar. Mahler's 3rd and 5th Symphonies create visual images of incomparable sadness and beauty. Denise Levertov writes poetry which touches my soul. In whatever manner we choose to express ourselves, we all probably hope that whatever we create will one day warrant a second look and add a nuance to the dance of life.

Where are we going?

Always home.

Novalis

NOTES

1. Henri, Robert, *The Art Spirit*. Harper and Row, New York, 1923. p. 45.
2. Flam, Jack D., *Matisse on Art*. E.P. Dutton, New York, 1978. p. 9.
3. Greenberg, Clement, "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting." *Partisan Review*, 1949. p. 272.
4. Flam, p. 33.
5. Flam, p. 33.
6. Gablik, Suzi, *Has Modernism Failed?* Thames and Hudson, New York, 1984. p. 126.
7. Greenberg, Clement, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

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