THE VOID AND TENSIONS IN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

by

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PREFACE

This paper is written in order to clarify my own thinking and ideas about the paintings which I am doing, and to verbally interpret them. It is divided into three parts which correspond to the three main forces at work in my paintings. First, there is the deep affinity which I feel with nature and, in particular, with the landscape. I use the word "nature" meaning everything that we see—the landscape, the human form, plant and animal life, and inanimate objects. Unlike Kepes who uses the word "landscape" as synonymous with "nature", I reserve the former in its traditional sense of field, trees, rocks and houses. The second important element in my work is the use of a large central area. This may be referred to as a "void"; however, I will discuss why it is never completely negative or empty. Finally, I will present the many uses and philosophical implications of tensions—tensions between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional elements in my painting, between the horizontal and the vertical and between the "void" and the periphery. In addition, I hope to throw some light on the ways and means by which my vision works, and by which I present this vision in graphic forms.

THE LANDSCAPE

I believe that every artist must have a subject to paint, whether it be landscape, figures, still life, or himself. The relationship of the artist to the subject is more important than the subject alone. By painting what is familiar, what excites, what really means something deep inside oneself, something will be said which will concern others. And in my opinion, every artist wishes his work to concern others. Landscape is the subject with which I feel the strongest affinity. I believe that I see the landscape in a new way, which in turn may help others to experience it more fully. Paul Tillich has said: "There is something in this landscape which you would never see without the painter, and this is what art has to do, anyway."[1]

My paintings of a year ago and more began to be landscapes whether I planned them or not. My feeling is that the landscape is bound to be a determining factor on anyone who has been reared in a semi-rural location and who has taken frequent automobile trips around the region since childhood. Last summer I spent six weeks touring Italy by car. I found the heavily cultivated country side there tremendously exciting because of the patterns set up between vineyards, orchards, wheat fields, haystacks, trees, etc. The importance of landscape became so vital to me that I have been able

1. Paul Tillich, "Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art". Carl Michalson, Christianity and the Existentialists, (New York: Scribner, 1956), p. 135.

to paint no other subject since then. The first few paintings after my return home were Tuscan scenes, but, for the last five months, my paintings have been inspired by local Piedmont North Carolina landscape. The use of one strong horizontal line in practically every painting, initially shows a relationship to landscape and the horizon.

A primary function of the artist is to depict life and growth. To me the mysteries of life are more powerfully shown in the landscape than in any other form of nature. I endeavor to imbue my paintings with the same life which one senses in a radiantly sunlit hillside, for light is a part of life's mystery. We could not see nature nor could life exist without it. Plants grow toward the sun. I want to present the landscape in the most honest and direct manner possible, not veiled from our eyes by atmosphere or shadows, but fully lighted. I am indebted to science which has presented me with means of seeing, understanding and enjoying nature more fully. The automobile, the airplane, the telescope, the microscope, and the camera have lifted many veils from nature. Personally, I owe the most to the improved means of transportation, since they allow me to experience the landscape from many angles.

I believe that man is meant to have a close affinity with the landscape. In this respect, some accomplishments of science have come between man and his natural environment. The machine age compelled man to congregate in cities and, in some ways, made man himself mechanized. The individual has been forced to fit into patterns in society, which take away some of his identity. By painting my own emotional response to the landscape, I hope to give to others a sense of what is meaningful and alive around them and in them.

THE WALLED ENCLOSURE

On seeing my paintings for the first time, an observer must initially be struck by the fact that they all have a large centrally located "void" area. At first this void appeared in my work for no consciously conceived reason. The more I have worked, the more I have analized it, and the more necessary it has become. It is important both compositionally and psychologically.

The use of "void" areas is certainly not new with me. The artists at Pompeii and Herculaniun realized the need for large areas of rest, since their paintings covered whole walls. No one can view these paintings without feeling the power with which the artists executed their subtly magnificent compositions. The tremendous beauty and rightness, which I feel about these works, has strengthened my belief in the use of voids or negative space. In the fourteenth century the choice of landscape as a subject and the use of a central area coincided when the philosophical climate allowed the people to consider landscape a suitable place of joy and happiness. In this period the landscapes represented were gardens set apart from the world. These had a religious meaning, symbolizing Paradise. Paradise is the Persian word meaning "a walled enclosure". In medieval manuscripts the wall usually encloses a garden, and later, as seen in two small landscapes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, it encloses cities by the sea. The wall is a protection against the forces outside it.

Likewise, a field must have boundaries for protection against the flood. But a painting is more than a landscape viewed from a distance; one can project himself into the field or the central space. Once there he looks around to see what means most about the place which he occupies; what makes the immediate surroundings pleasant or mysterious; what are its boundaries? Just as a field must have boundaries for defense, the individual wears an armor of resistance against intrusion. Thus, the central area becomes a person. Does he have action within himself, does he only hold together what is around him, or does he relate powerfully with his surroundings? Some of us are introspective, and others of us are more involved with the world around us. Some are stable and others are unsure. If I am that person in the central area, I feel that I must relate to things in the world around me and at the same time remain an individual.

There seems to me to be some innate need in man for considering the void. Man feels within himself, and indeed within life itself, certain questions which he cannot answer. This need usually takes the form of a religion, either by filling the vacancy or by the worship of the void itself. The contemplation of voids is practiced in some forms of Buddhism, where one stares at a blank wall in order to free the mind of all thought. In the worship of Allah, the Mohammedans hold in veneration the void in the Kaaba at Mecca. This idea can even be found in the Christian religion. Quaker worship is conducted without a minister or planned order of service in an unadorned room. Indeed, in the present world situation, man seems to feel the emptiness inside himself perhaps more than he has in earlier periods. Many of the philosophies in which he has placed his faith have been shadowed before his very eyes. The two world wars were instrumental in this shadowing of faiths--particularly the faith in reason and in progress. For this reason, Henry Moore sculpts figures which are not completely whole. "Voids" are placed within the human form. In my belief, however, the void in man is not completely negative. Certainly fullness would have no meaning without emptiness. The emptiness in man compels him to reach out to other men and to God. Therefore, the "void" center in my paintings is never completely vacant or unrelated to what, in surrounding it, makes it. The individual derives his personality because of, and in opposition to, what surrounds him, just as the field received its identity by its boundaries.

TENSIONS

Nature is made up of tensions. Therefore, if one is to present life's conflicting forces on a canvas, he must study them in nature. I see them strongly at work in the landscape. The bramble is constantly encroaching on the alfalfa field which in turn has an inter-action with the forest edge. Each living thing, whether it be plant, animal or man, is fighting for its freedom—its room to grow. Living things are constantly in tension with one another.

I have already touched on the idea of tensions in my discussion of the individual and his relations to the world around him and later I will discuss this further. However, in order to give this very important word full meaning, I will begin with the more concrete forms of tensions in painting and work toward its more philosophical implications. Initially, tensions are set up by the very means of putting paint on the canvas. They are deeply involved with the composition and arrangement of objects or areas on the painting surface. Systems of presenting tensions are set up and then broken by newer systems. There are tensions between the painting and the observer. And finally a discussion of the balancing of tensions will be necessary.

Initially, tensions or pulls are set up between the very colors placed on a canvas. They can be made to blend into one another or they can be used to stand apart and have lives of their own. Light is generated from the picture surface through the use of dynamic color relationships. I often place the strongest colors at the edge of the canvas in order to set up a tension between them and the large central form of a less brilliant hue. Contrast may also be obtained by varying the brush stroke, by making some smooth and others rough or uneven. Thick paint makes thin paint say more, and vice versa. In other words, the very canvas surface can be given life by the choice of colors and the means with which they are placed there.

A discussion of tensions in landscape painting would be incomplete, I believe, without a discussion of Paul Cézanne. His discoveries in the relationship between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality have directly influenced me. Venturi has said about Cézanne's landscapes, " We feel the representation of the country in the distance, as if it were near, without ever loosing awareness that it is far; and that is one of the miracles of art."[2] Cézanne knew intuitively that paintings must have balance in the far and close, in and out relations. If the three-dimensional space was too important and things receded endlessly into the distance, as in much painting immediately prior to his time, the painting was weakened, becoming more of a window than a newly created object. Cézanne knew that the picture plane was important, and he used several means to keep the two-dimensionality of the canvas surface. First, in his paintings there is no difference in the manner of applying the paint between that in the distance and that in the foreground. Secondly, the size of objects is distorted. The

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2. Erle Loran, Cezanne's Composition, (Berkley: University of California, 1947), p. 32.

size and position of objects are dictated by their expressive qualities rather than by their relationship to the artist's eye. A third means is the turning of planes, so that they will be parallel to the picture plane. Almost every house in a Cézanne landscape has one side parallel to the picture plane. Tensions are present in diagonals which carry the eye back into the picture, but these are immediately balanced by other diagonals which bring the eye back to the picture plane. Cézanne also expresses the third-dimension through drawing. Thus, his use of line is in tension with his use of colors.

Like Cézanne, my desire is to make powerful oppositions take place on the canvas surface. I want to bring them as close as possible to the observer. In this respect science has aided the artist greatly in studying nature by making the eye mobile. I make a special effort to go up in airplanes as often as possible, because the contrast between one area of landscape and another—between pasture and plowed dirt—is greatly accentuated from above. Since I have often ridden in automobiles, used binoculars, and flown, I am able, even when I am sitting still, to project myself close to or even into the objects which I depict. I am no longer satisified to see an object in any but its most powerful and characteristic aspects. The thorniness of the bramble, the straightness of the trees, and the regularity of the corn stalks can best show their interaction when brought to the surface of the canvas.

On viewing a landscape, I immediately see one important area, and all the other areas relate to that one. But each area must complement the other—corn field versus dark pines, green alfalfa field versus brambles versus sunlit trees versus dark trees in shadow. The life of the individual area is important, but they must all have some working relationship. Like Piero della Francesca, who juxtaposed profile against full face, red against black, interior against exterior, I strive to juxtapose one part of the landscape against another. But primarily I wish to set the central area in tension with the surrounding areas. The pull between one peripheral area and another must enhance the pull between the interior and the exterior.

Sometimes it is profitable to study the landscape in a static position and here photography aids the artist. I often clip photographs out of magazines. "An old Buddhist technique was to imagine oneself as small as an insect and to view things from this perspective, and then immediately to become in imagination as large as a mountain and to survey insect and man from this perspective. Photographs... permit us, symbolically, to juxtapose the most diverse orders and dimensions of the cosmos, to look from below and above, to be inside and outside simultaneously. They can minister in this way to the strange but deep need of man to be great while being small and to remain small while becoming great."[3]

The relationship between the horizontal and the vertical is of great importance in painting just as it is in nature. The land is

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3. Charles Morris, "Man-Cosmos Symbols," Gyorgy Kepes, The New Landscape (Chicago: Paul Teobald, 1956), p. 99.

horizontal, while men and trees stand perpendicular to it. The canvas has two horizontal and two vertical sides which we call the format. Piet Mondrian has made painters and architects aware of the preeminence of the horizontal and the vertical, and their importance in design. If Cezanne made us aware of the picture plane, then Mondrian gave us the concern for the picture format. Again, I would like to refer to Roman wall paintings, the space relations of which are executed with the care and exactness of a Mondrian painting. These architectural paintings are intimately related to the horizontals and verticals of the rooms themselves. Indeed, their excellent design makes us wonder if the artists in the twentieth century have learned anything new.

Any line which one puts onto a rectangular surface automatically forms a relationship of tensions with the four edges. My large central area, particularly since it usually takes a rectangular form, is initially a relating to the picture format and to the blank canvas before it was painted. So it becomes a rectangle within a rectangle. No matter how "off" the composition may be or how strong the pull toward bright colors at the edge of the canvas, the central area holds one's vision within the format.

The objects which one chooses to depict, if presented in their most essential character, can have great symbolic meaning. Artists have often sought symbols of man and his search for security. Again, I would like to state that the large central area is, for me, a symbol of man himself in opposition to the world around him. It is like the eye of a hurricane surrounded by gigantic winds for hundreds of miles around it. Today, man seems to feel his essential aloneness more than in most periods in history. Perhaps he is really no more alone now, but it has been brought to his attention by the extensive studies of psychiatry. Some of the central areas of my paintings are emptier than others, just as some individuals feel their aloneness more than others.

The artist can never escape the Zeitgeist. However, he must continually evaluate it and keep some perspective in relation to it. The scientist is certainly the god of our time. His theories of relativity are intimately involved with what the artist today is doing. Initially the word "relativity" indicates that everything is in constant movement. Scientists tell us that exact measurements are impossible, because, by the very act of measuring, the size is altered. Before Copernicus, the earth was believed to be standing still in the center of the universe. Therefore, space was considered static, and the artist could present it from only one point of view. Today, we know that space is limitless and that everything in it is constantly shifting. We accelerate ourselves in order to absorb and comprehend as much as possible of what exists. "Quantity and measurement are no longer the central preoccupations of mathematics and science ...... problems of shape and relation now occupy the foreground of our organized thinking."[4] "When the wind traces its impact on the sand into waves and drifts, the sand pattern is not only a passive record

4. Kepes, The New Landscape, p. 173

of the wind's activity, it is an active contour which both separates and connects the forces of the wind and the resistance of the sand. It is not wind, nor is it sand, it is something new."[5]

Because I know that objects in nature are constantly shifting, I cannot paint them directly from life. I do not execute a finished painting "on the spot," so to speak. I enjoy watching nature shift before my very eyes. Observing the shadows move from one hillside to another in the landscape is as stimulating to me as watching a drama enacted on the stage. When I go out to view the landscape, I make sketches to remind me of what I have witnessed. This enables me to discard the unimportant elements and to let the main forces take concrete form. The image of a painting comes about slowly, often after "sleeping on" the "vision", and finally during the execution of the painting.

Although the artist is greatly indebted to science in many ways, he must fight some aspects of technology which it has brought to the forefront. The very life of the artist, by being an individual with the will to act freely, is in opposition to the machine age and the dependence on repetition which it has brought about. However, the artist must not think that he is immune to the patterning forces of science. Painting, too, can become a system, and the artist must constantly resist the temptation to work in a prescribed manner. Many painters in the last sixty years have come dangerously close to doing this. Perhaps the overpowering rapidity of the machine age has

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5. Ibid., p. 206

at times made the artist feel that he, too, must become a machine. Impressionism, Pointilism, Cubism, Futurism, De Stijl, Surrealism, Social Realism and even Abstract Expressionism all have their merit, but, to me, they make painting more of a science than an art. All great artists have eventually rejected systems and painted the life force as they personally see it.

CONCLUSION

My personal experience and the findings of science both point out to me the great mystery in the balance between conflicting forces. The waves washing up onto the beach are balanced by the under-currents sweeping them back out. In a forest many trees struggle for life and existance. Some must die to make room for others to live. These exemplify the balance which exists between conflicts in nature. We do not understand why these things work in the way they do. This is the mystery and the power which we sense in nature.

The power in a painting is very similar to it. By some means, which we cannot explain, a great painting balances conflicting forces. In other words, the greater the solved struggle the more mysterious the balance. This does not mean that paintings must be violent in order to contain a great struggle. A powerful conflict can be present in a calm and simplified painting. For example, a serene still life by Morandi can contain just as mysterious a balance of forces as does a turbulent painting by DeKooning.

At the present time, I see the forces of life which bring about balance more fully at work in the landscape than in any other form of nature. Later I may see them in another subject, and then my paintings will take on new characteristics. I hope that my eyes will never be closed to the mystery of nature and that I may continually develop new means with which to express my ideas about it and my personal reactions to it.

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