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Three Oil Paintings

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University of Iowa

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THREE OIL PAINTINGS

by

Byron Burford

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts, in the Department of Art, in the Graduate College of the State University of Iowa.

August, 1947
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. Stuart Edie, Chairman of my committee, Dr. Lester D. Longman, and Miss Mary Holmes, whose friendly and critical assistance has been invaluable.

Two important factors in the University of Iowa Art Department teaching methods have stimulated the process of learning for me; the practice of bringing in established artists from time to time, and the Annual Summer Shows and traveling exhibits which afford the student an opportunity to study directly the works of his contemporaries.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgment</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I - Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II - Solution</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate I</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate II</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate III</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter I
PROBLEM

In the Nineteenth Century the artist had only one major problem, that of reproducing the subject in as flawless a technique as the artist could master; the artistic discoveries of the early masters of Modern Art of the Twentieth Century made the formal aspects of painting important again. My problem as a young modern artist is to accept this formal responsibility and to attempt to synthesize this with an organic emotional content, not the literary and sentimental concept of the Nineteenth Century nor the regional and socially conscious illustration of the 1930's, but a valid and I hope sincere reaction to the world, conveyed in a plastic framework that does not illustrate the concept but intensifies it through the forms themselves.

There are inherent dangers in this course. One is to fall into the production of formal exercises using stock emotional symbols. A second is the latest form of commercialism in the Fine Arts,
the tendency of many artists to deliberately develop an easily recognizable style and to stick to it for reasons known to 57th St. dealers. I hope to be able to avoid these hazards, so that I can attempt each problem in a suitable technique and style. Picasso's tremendous flexibility and range is encouraging when viewing works by Darrel Austin, Karl Priebe, and others who have fallen into a repetitious rut.

A secondary and personal problem is my desire to be able to paint in a manner that is meaningful to laymen as well as artists and critics. I realize that this is virtually impossible in our society, but it is a problem artists must eventually face. It is simple to say, "away with the public." But the problem arises, for whom are we painting—and if it is only for other painters and a select few who thinks just as we do we might as well sit in circles and agree with one another indefinitely. This is not to say "paint down to the people," (the totalitarian countries provide frightening examples of what happens to art when this doctrine is applied)
but merely asks that one paints honestly, so that if a layman stands before the painting and is willing to put aside his prejudices and respond simply, there will be something in the painting for him to respond to.
Chapter II

SOLUTION

Only a certain phase of development in such a brief chronological period of painting can be discussed at present.

My painting has become more and more formal in concept and I feel that it will continue in that direction. I do not use the word abstract because I do not consider myself an abstract painter - I do not wish to deal with abstractions, but to intensify forms to their plastic-emotional fullness. My work is abstract only in the common misuse of the word, using abstract to connotate willingness to violate perspective laws, use arbitrary color, and to distort forms and proportion.

In the "Circus Workers" (Plate I), earliest of the three paintings, I had just made what was to me an exciting discovery, the possibilities of line in painting. Previously I had rarely used lines to reinforce or delineate forms, achieving an atmospheric quality but losing the strength and variety of pattern.
and emphasis of form and movement inherent in the line. Naturally I overdid it. I also made a timid effort to abandon the color range I had been employing and to vary and expand it by using new pigments and combinations. This attempt was made easier in long and frequent studies of the Beckmann "Carnival Triptych. Naturally I did not use Beckmann's colors, but his stimulating variety was an incentive to break away from a set palette.

The painting was too complicated, and at the excellent suggestion of Mr. Edie I attempted to rectify this by deliberately going too far in the same direction, so that there would be a natural reaction in the opposite direction. So in painting the "Reclining Figures" (Plate II) I overloaded the canvas as had planned, and I feel that this was effective as I have experienced a growing desire to paint as simply as possible. Again in this painting I tried to shake up my color sense. During this time I temporarily abandoned the painter's pleasure of "tickling" the canvas, exploiting all the interesting texture possibilities of paint, in hope of getting a more direct statement.
The painting "Vigilantes" (Plate III) is a bridge between the type painting in Plates I and II and what I hope to attempt in the near future. There is more simplification, the composition is stronger, and the color more intense. I am not satisfied with this painting and I hope to resolve the factors which disturb me through the paintings I am now attempting.
PLATE I
"CIRCUS WORKERS"
PLATE II
"RECLINING FIGURES"
PLATE III
"VIGILANTES"