

THESIS

A SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL INTEGRATION

Submitted by

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Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Fort Collins, Colorado

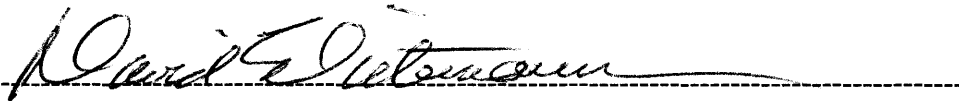
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY LISA M. KEYTON ENTITLED *A SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL INTEGRATION* BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### A SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL INTEGRATION

My paintings are about a spiritual journey. They act as a visual description as well as a vehicle for the journey itself. For me this journey has included an exploration of utopian visions and a spiritual ideal, as well as the struggle to integrate spirituality into my life. I consider contextual issues and the process of painting as being equally important and integral aspects of these paintings. Contextually this body of work represents an exploration into a "sense of place" and "ambiguous organic forms". This sense of place or environment is not physical, it is a phenomena I perceive while I am in a meditative state. The ambiguous organic forms in my paintings act as metaphors representing myself. Introducing these forms into a sense of place allows me to explore the relationship I have with my spiritual issues and my environment. For me the processes involved with painting helps facilitate the retrieval of memories, emotions and sensations, it soothes, stimulates and mesmerizes, creating a haven for expressing the inner recesses of my soul.

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Finding a unique voice with which to express oneself is a daunting task but it is one that all artists are faced with. My thesis paintings are an expression of my spiritual journey. Artistically this journey includes both process and the exploration of conceptual concerns. I find great personal meaning within the painting process. Not only does it offer me a vehicle with which to creatively express aspects of myself and my beliefs about life, it also provides me with a cathartic release which, I find necessary for my psychological and emotional well-being. These paintings represent both a description of my spiritual ideals and the struggles that I have faced (and, perhaps will continue to face) dealing with the integration of spirituality into my life. With this body of work, it is my hope to instill a sense of wonder, evoke contemplation on the mysteries of life and touch the spiritual recesses.

Many years ago I reached a decision about how I would approach art making. I felt that there was something about life, nature and myself that could not find expression in the literal or the observed world. Our inner workings are often difficult to describe by words alone. It feels as though we need to view aspects of ourselves from a different perspective. For me visual abstraction is that perspective. It provides me with a more direct response to the self beyond cognition, abstraction is more immediate and the language is more personal.

My reasons for painting have everything to do with both the content and the creative process involved with art making, and this thesis body of paintings implicitly reflects this. My life has taken many twists and turns as I have tried to make sense of my existence and come to terms with the world at large. I have always been an intensely emotional person, often plagued by a feeling of alienation from people but always comforted by and deeply connected to nature. The process of making art allows me to explore my inner feelings and search for what I believe is important and it provides me with a creative and meaningful life-line.

My art, like my life, reflects the growth, struggle, and changes I have experienced during the time I have chosen to make art. Although changes have occurred in some aspects of both my life and my art, certain elements of interest have not changed. In the context of this thesis body of paintings, it is important to exhibit the constants in my art and philosophy and show how these constants continue to influence my art. These constants are basically influenced by my feelings and ideas about life and nature. Because of my love of nature and feelings of connection to it, I have always been fascinated by, and in awe of, life. Life is a mysterious force that seems to interweave elements of energy, form and meaning with all living things. Towards this end, continued explorations in color, ambiguous organic forms, the affirmation of life, and the personal restorative response I have to the process of art making have always been an integral part of my art. My thesis paintings reflect this interest as well as an interest in the spiritual journey, my spiritual ideals, spiritual integration, and self acceptance.

Although there appear to be a number of issues and interests that could potentially take an artist in many different directions I have directed these issues into two basic areas- - describing a "sense of place" and "ambiguous organic forms". The sense of place is the place I go to within my own mind to find a connection with God and nature. The positive aspect of these places are accessible to me when I meditate, dream, am feeling God's comforting presence in my life, and sometimes while painting. This place is not always accessible sometimes I experience feelings of alienation or lack of integration. The spiritual journey, as with all aspects of life, does not follow a straight path. There are many times when one has made some major breakthrough in life only to find that, once again, it seems as if they know little about how to stay connected with what is important to them. That sense of frustration, fear and sorrow is as much a part of the journey as are the times of enlightenment and joy. In fact, sometimes it appears that

the impetus to press forward becomes much stronger in the face of despair, and greater changes are usually the result.

My paintings depict a sense of place in various ways. I find that as I continue to paint, the visual language and the ideas around these places continue to expand. Some of the places evoke the sense of landscape and nature, while others speak of interiors, often churchlike or mystical. The symbolic language that I have intentionally used to express of these ideas include the use of the arch shape as well as of the cross. I chose to use some imagery that isn't completely ambiguous because it is personally meaningful for me.

The cross and the arch are Christian symbols. The arch is not only the shape of a church window, it is also the window to the spirit. It provides a gateway for the spirit to enter into another realm of consciousness and being. With the arch, there is the element of another place waiting beyond the limited confines of the place one is now inhabiting. The arch is an invitation to keep moving towards the next level of growth or experience. The cross is used to describe not only a belief in God and us as his children but also to speak of the struggle I face in trying to attain a sense of integration with my spiritual ideal. As I express these struggles through the experience of painting, I realize that the struggle is symbolic of life, and it should not be interpreted as a negative aspect of the journey. The cross symbolizes sacrifice and sorrow, but it also symbolizes renewal and belief in something greater than man. The cross can be found in almost every painting within this body of work.

The ambiguous organic forms are forms that combine aspects from all of nature in order to depict life. These shapes are very personal and over time, and by processing



their relative importance to these paintings, I have realized that they are actually depicting me in these various environments that I describe. Often these shapes feel like a density of form and energy that is different and yet the same as the space in which this density of form resides. These shapes have continued to evolve from earlier works, where the ambiguous organic form was monumental within the scale of the painting. The evolution of these shapes into ones that are a part of, or struggling to integrate with their environment, demonstrates the struggle that I have had towards letting go of my beliefs about my separateness and my refusal to give up my own sense of power to a power greater than myself. In some of these paintings, particularly those that are most concerned with describing a sense of place, the ambiguous form is not particularly present or, if present, disconnected this sense of place. As this work continues, the ambiguous organic form begins to take on a new level of importance within its environment. It feels as if I have come full circle with the use of these forms, but with a new understanding of their importance to me.

The use of color has been and remains an important element of my paintings. Color provides a rich emotive means of expression that few other techniques can facilitate. My use of color reflects my abiding love for life, energy and nature. It is an affirmation of beauty, a response to my emotions while painting, and a wonderful vehicle for a pure intuitive response to the act of painting. It allows my spirit to dance within the creative process and bring forth areas of the psyche that otherwise would stay buried. The ways in which I respond to color are directly responsible for the interactive development of my paintings. My eyes and soul are stimulated by the continual possibilities of color interaction (color contrast and bright hue contrasted with muted color or neutral color). Examples of this are evident in most of my paintings, but to further illuminate this idea I will refer to fig. 9. This painting shows evidence of color use, scratching and glazing

techniques. The color interaction between the indian red/raw umber and the scratching through to an under layer of light blues and bright pinks shows an example of the bright color contrasted with neutral colors. Finally the left side of the painting shows evidence of transparent glazes both violet and thalo green. This area of the painting leaves evidence of an underpainting that is descriptive of space. My use of color is an intuitive response to the colors I am working with. Upon examination of my paintings there is evidence of a strong penchant for the use of contrasting colors or those within in the secondary triad (see figs.3,5,9and 10). My colors are often bright, seemingly infused with life and energy. As I have evolved as an artist, my palette has matured as well. Earlier in my painting career I choose to paint with bright colors in formats that provided no relief by way of neutral areas or large expanses of one color. This has caused me to realize that instead of creating images infused with spiritual energy, I was depicting chaotic energy. Thus the paintings held no contemplative resting places. In an attempt to create these contemplative, psychically charged tableaux, I have quieted my paintings by contrasting neutral and muted colors with areas of intense color and movement of line and/or brush marks.

The act of simplification has become increasingly important to me as I realize the significance of editing for contextual meaning and emotive response. Having the freedom to paint with all the energy and color I desire is important to my painting process. I have incorporated the use of glazing and subtractive scratching and rubbing techniques because working with these subtractive techniques gives me the ability to come back and select out the elements that feel right. This process helps me to get to the soul of the paintings. By coming back into a painting with transparent glazes I am able to

re-emphasize, omit or change the color-emotive qualities. Changing colors with this technique usually produces a deeper sense of space and may also impart a multidimensional quality to the painting. The use of glazing techniques also has the ability to evoke a sense of mystery and mysticism, as it can partially dissolve the under image without destroying it. Scratching and the use of rubbing tools to remove areas of color is important to my work because it allows me to respond to the underlying forms by to reach back into the history of the painting and reviving color and light, while simultaneously creating new forms. Because they are derived by elements of the underpainting, these new forms have the ability to be a part of the environment from which they are derived, as well as forms in their own right.

Although working subtractively has become an important aspect of these paintings, my process also involves the building up of images and colors. I continue to build where I want there to be thicker or more opaque areas of paint. This method is relevant to my process and the meaning of the work. I want to interact with my paintings in a variety of ways. This interaction keeps me from getting tight or stale which is a sure way of squeezing the life from a painting. Variety is not only more interesting to look at but also more engaging for the painter because it gives another source of interaction. I also have an interest in depicting a variety of surfaces and paint applications because they have the ability to confuse space. This desire to confuse space and create ambiguous forms is directly related to my ideas about nature and the spirit. There are no boundaries as energy, form and space are illusionary. These all are fascinating aspects of life and areas of exploration that I find relevant to my themes.

The process of art making is probably the single most important issue for me as an artist. Without that wonderful, creative, cathartic release and engagement with the paintings, I could not reach into the buried places within me that allow for the images

themselves to develop into paintings. When I paint, I expand and become somehow more open to myself. I become all that I am capable of being in that moment. It feels like the "self actualizing" experience that Abraham Maslow<sup>1</sup> describes in his theories about human nature. I believe in this need to continually push the boundaries and experience life. For me the act of painting is a vehicle for this endeavor. Not only does painting help me to experience all that I am and all that I am capable of being, it is therapeutic in its ability to heal through the act of expressing my innermost emotions. Being the serious person that I am, the challenges that I am faced with often seem insurmountable. Making art is but one of the means I use to understand myself and my world. At times, when I am unable to create due to time and energy constraints, I find that I become less happy, less aware, and less able to cope with the challenges I face.

These paintings reflect and are part of my life's spiritual journey. This journey incorporates the process of painting and my contextual ideas, including a sense of place and the ambiguous organic forms. I paint for my own gratification and to explore my existence. It may appear to some that to pursue this avenue of exploration is self serving and not worthy of serious consideration artistically. I believe that nothing we do is irrelevant. I concede that what I offer my audience may only be variations on themes previously explored by other artists, but I feel that we each impart a unique element to anything we do in which we offer ourselves as a part of the process of a thing's evolution.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Abraham H. Maslow, The Farther Reaches Of Human Nature, (Viking Press, New York) pgs.40-51

Figure 1



Figure 2





Figure 3





Figure 4



Figure 5

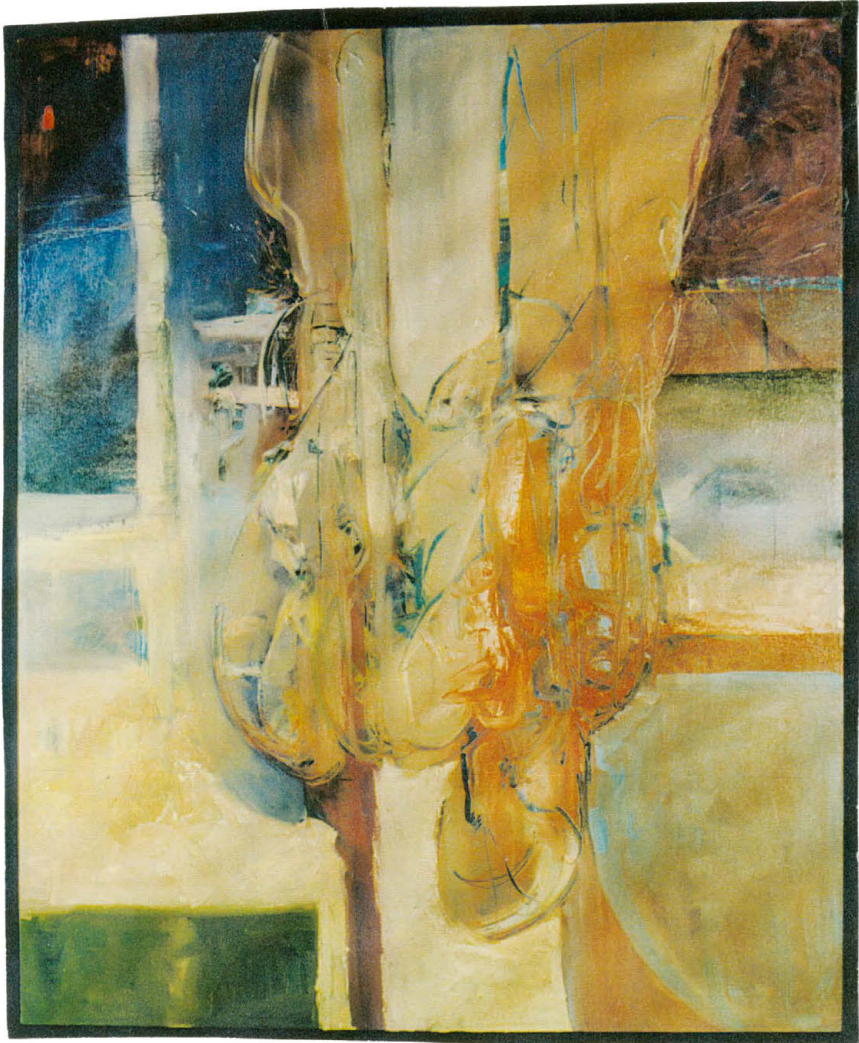




Figure 6



Figure 7





Figure 8

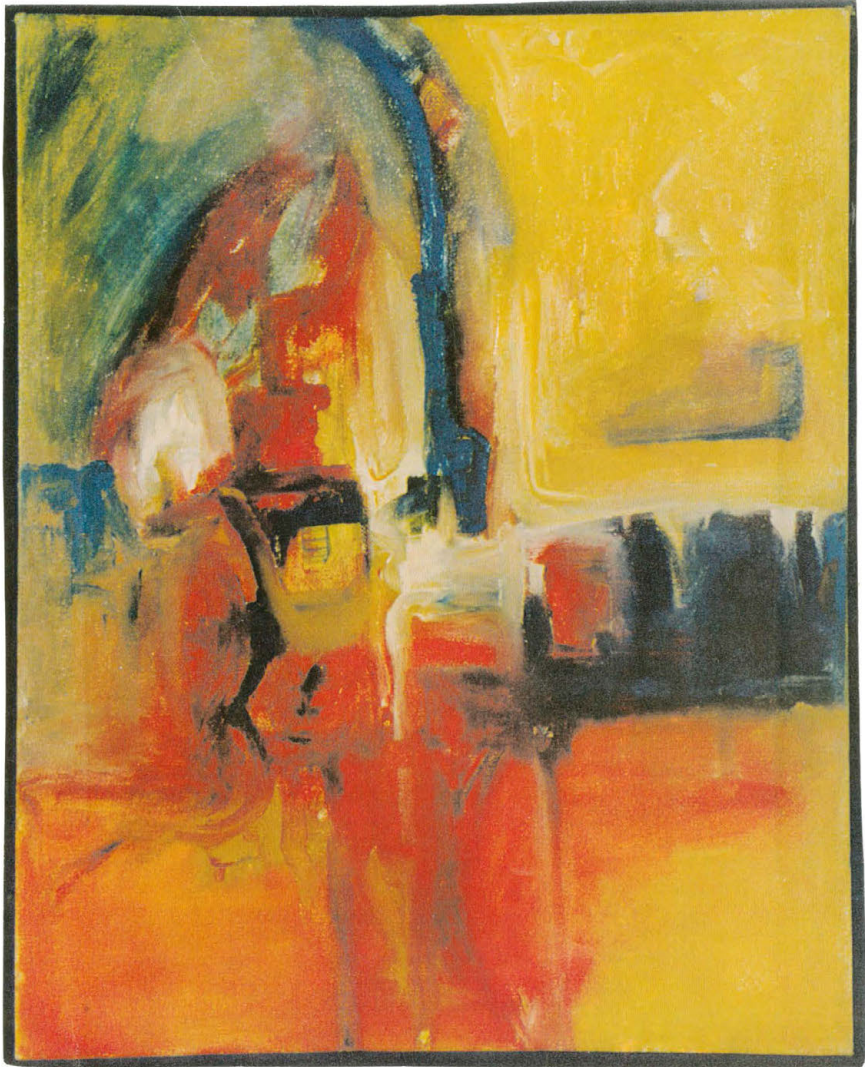


Figure 9

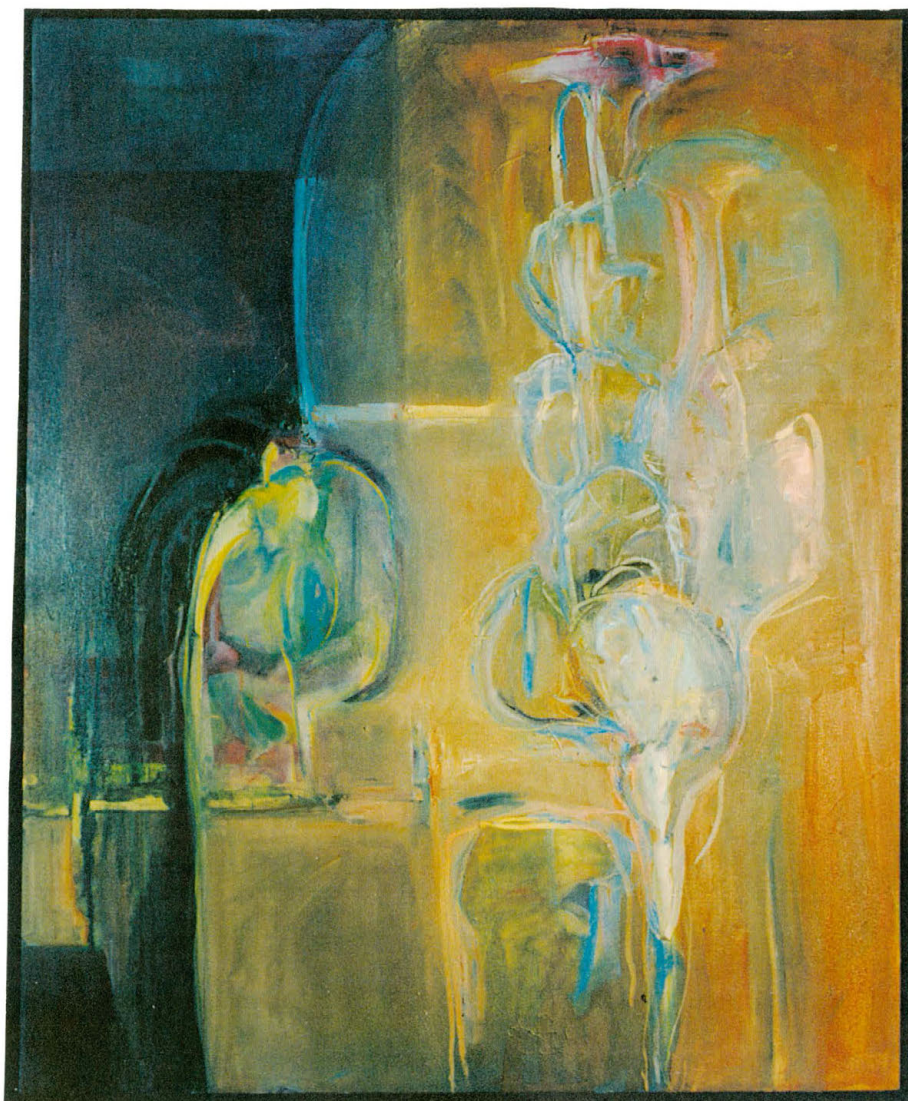




Figure 10

