

THESIS

PAINTINGS TO BE LOOKED AT:  
AN EFFORT TO UNIFY CONCEPT, FORM, AND PROCESS

Submitted by  
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER  
OUR SUPERVISION BY MICHAEL REUBEN REASOR ENTITLED  
PAINTINGS TO BE LOOKED AT: AN EFFORT TO UNIFY CONCEPT,  
FORM, AND PROCESS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### PAINTINGS TO BE LOOKED AT:

#### AN EFFORT TO UNIFY CONCEPT, FORM, AND PROCESS

The three major components of painting are concept, form, and process. The thesis paintings are the result of my effort to unify these three concerns. The works are intended to possess a quiet beauty that encourages extended visual interaction.

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The three major components of painting are concept, form, and process. They deal with the questions of why a painting is done, what is created, and how it is accomplished. Often the elements become isolated from each other or one is made dominant at the expense of the others. When that happens, a necessarily interdependent relationship is destroyed. Since it is my belief that neither idea, organization, nor the act of creation is capable of successful independent existence, my effort was to unify these three elements in an appropriate and fruitful way.

The results of the effort are paintings to be looked at. Extended visual interaction is especially rewarding as it helps the viewer penetrate the apparently reserved surface of the paintings and begin to comprehend the complexities of structure and process. The paintings are intended to be visually rewarding after long and repeated observation. To invite extended attention the paintings must be sources of visual pleasure.

I paint primarily to create communicative objects of beauty. The paintings express, among other things, my values as they apply to the purpose and function of art. If successful, the paintings possess a quiet beauty. To create objects of beauty is to be perceived by many as exercising empty facility and to practice understatement is to assume that the work will be overlooked. It is my contention that an art of tranquility and well-being can be as valid as one of anxiety and that an art of subtlety can, when given a chance

be as potent as one of agitation. Matisse said

What I dream of is an art of balance of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.<sup>1</sup>

It is my goal to create art that soothes, not in a deadening way but in a stimulating and sensitizing manner.

There is definite yet indirect influence of the natural environment on my work. The paintings may be reminiscent of specific subjects because the form is based on natural form, pattern, and color. Although changes in the environment have a visible effect on the paintings, they are not based on direct observation but on largely unconscious and removed responses to the essential characteristics of nature.

My work has evolved from representational landscapes painted on location to images invented entirely in the studio. Each step in the evolution can be seen as an attempt to break free from the limitations of referential painting. The most recent step, as seen in the thesis work, is a definite break with representation. With fewer external references and preconceived ideas against which to compare the appearance of the paintings I was free to make aesthetic decisions based on information contained within the painting. Paintings free from recognizable images cannot easily be taken on a narrative level. There are no suggestive titles, objects to label or stories to read therefore the interaction with the paintings must be visual rather than verbal.

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<sup>1</sup>Henri Matisse in Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Matisse: His Art and His Public, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), p. 122.

Working non-representationally also gives freedom from the recurring question of what to paint. Even when working in a representational way, subject matter was not of great importance beyond its ability to serve as a vehicle for the more important conceptual and formal considerations. Eventually, it seemed sensible to stop painting things and start painting paintings.

The two-dimensional structure of the thesis paintings begins as divisions of space and indications of directional forces. As the painting develops the geometric superstructure is altered, softened, and in some cases eliminated. The major divisions act as a foundation for the complex activity of the finished painting. Whether evidence of the structure remains or has been obscured it has had an important effect on the development of the painting.

The three-dimensional structure is a carefully controlled manipulation of illusionistic space. In most cases the manipulation appears as undulations of an organic surface that lies generally parallel to the picture plane. There are no horizons or areas of deep or infinite space, but subtle relationships between strokes and colors within the immediate surface.

At a distance each painting makes an almost monochromatic color statement. The full range of color is revealed only upon closer inspection. Small color strokes are used because of their organic characteristics and their ability to mix optically to create the general tonality of the painting yet still retain their color identity when singled out. Adjustment of the value and intensity of the colors helps create the unified appearance and allows for the multiple function of the strokes. The size, color, and direction of the strokes is an element



in both the two and three-dimensional structure of the paintings. The individual strokes can follow or counter larger structural movements, establish areas of emphasis, and help in the creation and manipulation of spatial illusion.

The works were painted with oil paint on stretched canvas. A toned ground of acrylic gesso eliminated the usual stark white surface and the need to cover it in the initial stages of painting. A painting and glazing medium of turpentine, damar varnish, and linseed oil was used. The proportions of the mixture were adjusted according to the stage of the painting's development and the desired drying time. The paintings were started with thin washes and continued with alternate applications of opaque and transparent paint.

Until recently, painting had been complicated by technical problems, personal limitations and a frustrating disunity of concept, form, and process. The technical problems and inabilities were overcome through a more intense and extended involvement with the painting process. With a better understanding of color and the properties and possibilities of paint, the physical problems no longer stood in the way of unified personal expression. The disunity of painting stemmed from a gap between the idea for a painting and the actual execution. If I made preliminary drawings or color studies for a painting, I had little interest in working further. It seemed as though all creativity had been spent in the preparatory stages and to finish a painting at that point was empty rendering. It appeared the problem was either an impatient desire for immediate results or a legitimate question about the proper development of a painting.

Through continuous painting I found that the next best thing to immediate results was a concurrent development of the concept and form of the painting. Instead of concept and form being discrete, almost unrelated aspects of painting, a reciprocal relationship was developed wherein concept and form had modifying effects on each other. The idea and form of the painting develop from beginning to end with no individual stage determining the final appearance of the painting but affecting decisions made in following stages which may confirm or contradict previous assessments.

Process is incorporated into this unity by working in a way most appropriate to the concept and form. The concept and form deal with soft organic beauty and the process deals with the soft beauty and plasticity of oil paint. The development of the painting is one of organic growth. The painting grows as one layer of paint gives rise to another. The process shows evidence of the development and allows for continued development without total destruction of what has gone before. Working with paint of varying degrees of opacity, the old is incorporated into the new. Just as concept and form are affected by previous decisions, the paint is altered by the color and quality of paint on which it is placed.

If concept, form, and process are unified, there is little time spent rendering or finishing a painting. There is no point at which creative involvement has ended but the painting is yet to be completed. The painting develops until the dialogue between painter and painting is exhausted and the product of that dialogue is an object of lasting beauty, capable of delighting the mind and senses.



Fig. 1. Untitled Painting #8201 - oil on canvas - 42" x 52".



Fig. 2. Untitled Painting #8203 - oil on canvas - 43" x 53" .



Fig. 3. Untitled Painting #8206 - oil on canvas - 43" x 53".





Fig. 4. Untitled Painting #8209 - oil on canvas - 43" x 53".



Fig. 5. Untitled Painting #8212 - oil on canvas - 43" x 53".



Fig. 6. Untitled Painting #8302 - oil on canvas - 43" x 53".





Fig. 7. Untitled Painting #8304 - oil on canvas - 43" x 53".



Fig. 8. Untitled Painting #8305 - oil on canvas - 43" x 53".



Fig. 9. Untitled Painting #8306 - oil on canvas - 43" x 53".





Fig. 10. Untitled Painting #8307 - oil on canvas - 45" x 53".



Fig. 11. Untitled Painting #8308 - oil on canvas - 43" x 53".