

THESIS

TEN REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTINGS

Submitted by  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado  
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY ALEX CANELOS ENTITLED TEN REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTINGS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### TEN REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTINGS

In my work I wanted to look into the possibilities of bringing together ideas on tone, hue, contour, and materials to represent three dimensional space on a two dimensional surface. My painting was guided by these speculative activities as well as the physical requirements of the moment, and was informed by both works of previous artists and personal experience.

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In this document of my thesis work at Colorado State University I will describe the ideas that served as a basis for the production of my paintings. These ideas will be presented under four categories: tone, hue, contour, and materials.

I learned about the division of color into tone and hue from the writings of Johannes Itten, and his distinction between contrasts of light and dark and contrasts of cool and warm; my ideas on the aesthetic differentiation between color and contour came from the writings of Heinrich Wölfflin, and his distinction between "painterly" and "linear" styles; and I encountered the division of painting into liberal art and craft in the writings of Leonardo, and his distinction between "scientific" work and "mechanical" work. In my work I wanted to look into the possibilities of bringing together all four of these categories.

My choice to pictorially coordinate tones and hues guided my selection and arrangement of subjects (both animate and inanimate). In Still Life with Plunger (figure 6), the middle tone red bowl, the light yellow plunger handle, and the dark green plant pot were set up in my studio so as to serve as a starting point for developing pictorially these relationships of tone and hue.

For almost every painting one or more small preliminary studies of local tones were done. Car (figure 12) came from a preliminary study of local tones -- as well as studies of local hues and local intensities -- and was one of the few paintings that was executed in the absence of the actual subject. Local tones will be taken to mean those tones that are perceived by the eye under existing lighting conditions. Based on the tonal study that I felt was most engaging, a tonal painting was developed. This stage of the painting - which was done in tempera - would reflect the local, or optically derived, shifts from light to dark. Local tone was used in Rosemary (figure 8). An example of this is the dark of the figure's sweater in relation to the pale wall behind her, as these appeared under the lights of my studio.

My use of tone in a more conceptual, systematic, way derives from that theory of representing three-dimensional form which clearly distinguishes between the highlights, lights, middle tones, darks, and reflected lights that occur when light rays from an idealized light source strike the surfaces of idealized, monochromatic, sculptural forms. This approach to tone was reinforced by my first hand inspection of paintings such as The Madonna and Child (figure 1) by Giotto (at the National Gallery in Washington D.C.) and Virgin nursing her Child (figure 2) by Paolo di Giovanni Fei (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York ). The Giottoesque approach to cross-hatching, a means of representing three-dimensional form by using gradual modulations of tone, is clearly described in D.V. Thompson's The Practice of Tempera Painting.<sup>1</sup> It involves the systematic mixing and layering of egg tempera, over a traditional gesso ground, to obtain small, yet distinct, increments of change from light to dark. In Blue Bulb (figure 3) I relied heavily on this system, as exemplified in the subtle gradation in the left section of the wall.

Based on the set up, and after completing the tonal underpainting, a local hue painting was done. The only exception to this sequence from tone to hue is the Still Life with Two Containers (figure 4) where, chronologically, the relationships of cool to warm came before the relationships of light to dark.<sup>2</sup> In all of the paintings, the local hues -- developed in oil -- would reflect local, or optically derived, shifts from warm to cool. A good example of this approach may be found in the face of the figure in Rachel #2 (figure 11).

Like the conceptual approach that was used for tone, a systematic approach to hue was employed, this time based on the idea of intrinsic color. This idea is presented by Itten in The Elements of Color.<sup>3</sup> According to Itten, the "whiter the lighting, the more purely the unabsorbed wavelengths [of this white light] are reflected, and the purer the

intrinsic colors [of the objects] appear." To this I would add that to get a pure white light, and thereby pure intrinsic colors, all reflections of color between the colored surfaces of these objects would, in theory, have to be eliminated. The fruit press, which serves as a base for the object in Fan (figure 7), represents this intrinsic color idea. There is no reflection, for instance, from the violet floor to the green fruit-press stand.

The third category centers around the use of contours in representing three-coordinate visual space on a two-coordinate visual surface. In this, several considerations were made. One of these has to do with silhouettes; for, in addition to tone and hue, the character of the silhouette also went into determining my selection, and arrangement, of the subjects. Each object would be valued for its potential to assume visually satisfying silhouettes when viewed from different angles. My interest in the blade-guard and blades of the subject represented in the Fan (figure 7) painting was an instance of this. Similarly, each set up would be valued for the visual satisfaction that came from *superordinate* configurations of contour, again, in relation to a definite viewing angle. This can be seen in the stacked containers in Blue Bulb (figure 3) where the contours that define the edges on the right side of each of the two objects are visually combined to form a larger unit. It is also evident in Rachel#2 (figure 11) in the combination of the T-shirt and duffel bag. This last example shows how emphasis was, at times, placed on the coincidence of contours that could occur between objects at different proximities from the viewer.

Another consideration having to do with the contours was that of perspective. The idea, for instance, of increasing my field of vision by simply rotating my position in relation to the set up, resulted in preliminary drawings comparable to those done using cylindrical or spherical perspective, or to photographs taken with fish-eye lenses; and, although I was not inclined to deviate drastically from a planometric representation of the subjects, I found that, as in Rachel #1 (figure 10) and Rosemary (figure 8), a slight shift in

my center of focus added a *perspectival contrast* to the aforementioned tone and hue contrasts.

A final consideration under this category involved memories of hand movements. By recalling the path of my hands as they travelled across the multi-faceted surfaces of actual objects, I could emulate it by drawing cross-contour lines on the picture plane. Blue Bulb (figure 3), for instance, evokes the path that would be taken in moving from the single facet of the back wall to the facets of light bulb. In addition, these cross-contour lines could also be used to emphasize that facet which is the two-dimensional surface of the actual picture. This can be seen in the floor of Rachel #2 (figure 11).

Under the fourth category I was interested in deliberately shaping, or compounding, the materials to conform to my pictorial ideas, as well as to the more widely accepted guidelines for the production of structurally sound paintings. This would apply to the construction of the panel, the preparation and application of the gesso, and the compounding and spreading of the paint. Through this, I gained a better understanding of certain technical procedures. I found, for example, that, to produce a gradated series from dark to light I could apply even, successive layers of a tempera white over a dark layer of oil paint. The back wall of the Blue Bulb (figure 3) panel, the blue jeans in Rachel #1 (figure 10), and the cups in the Still Life with Self Portrait (figure 9), are examples of this. On the other hand, to produce a gradated series from warm to cool I could apply a single layer of a series of carefully premixed oil colors over a tempera white layer. For example, the apple in Still Life with Self Portrait (figure 9). And, to obtain a gradation in the degree of opacity of a paint film I could either superimpose layers of dark over light to get transparent films, layers of light over dark to get semi-opaque films, or successive layers of the same tone to get opaque films. I learned about this last type of gradation from the section in Thompson's book devoted to effects of opaque and transparent painting. In my

own work, the effects of this procedure can most clearly be seen in the small white container of the Blue Bulb (figure 3) painting. In this instance, there was a direct relation between the degree to which the surface of this container was visually recognizable - under the existing lighting conditions - and the degree of opacity of the paint film.

I also wanted to allow the materials to disclose to me, moment by moment, their own characteristics, behaviors, and limitations. In this sense my use of materials was not only guided by speculation, but by physical interaction.

In attempting to coordinate all of these ideas in these ten paintings I've come to believe that a great deal more of practice will be needed to attain the degree of pictorial cohesiveness that I am seeking. My goal is to have the ways in which my paintings develop suggest both, the ways that nature unfolds, and the ways that men in the past have given form to their ideas and emotions.

## endnote

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel V, Thompson Jr., The Practice of Tempera Painting, Dover Publications, 19

<sup>2</sup> In this instance, I wanted to see how a change in the sequence of my application of the same four categories would visually come together in the finished painting.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Itten, The Elements of Color, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 19

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

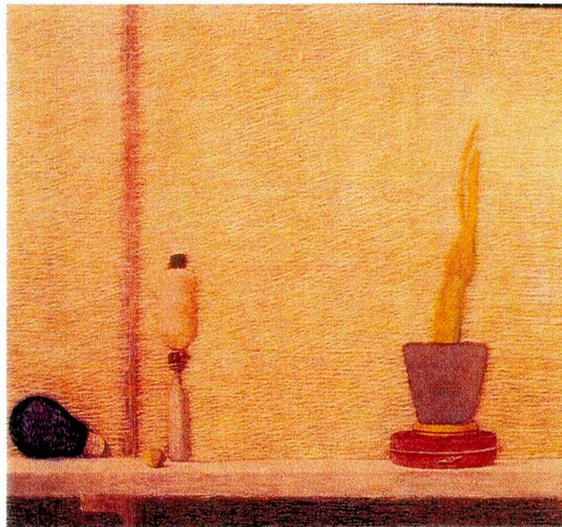


Figure 4

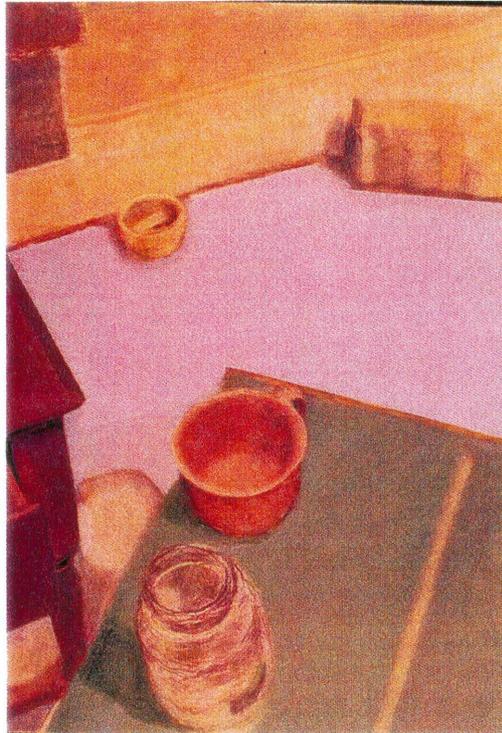


Figure 5



Figure 6

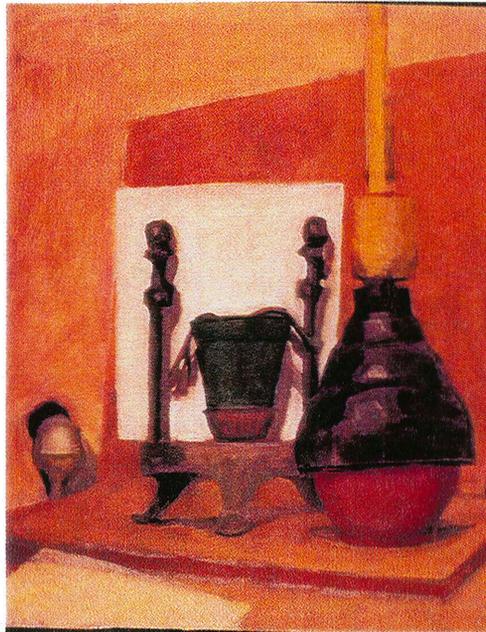


Figure 7

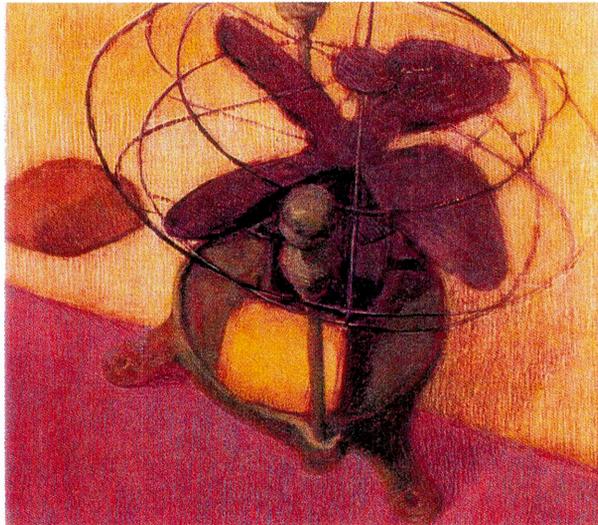


Figure 8



Figure 9

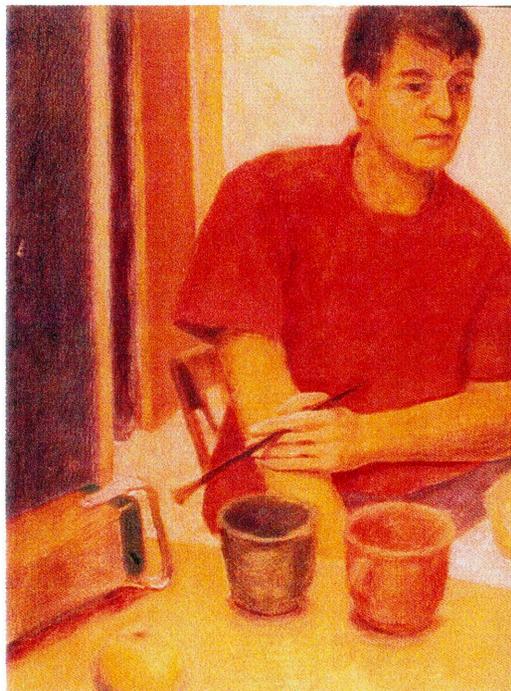


Figure 10

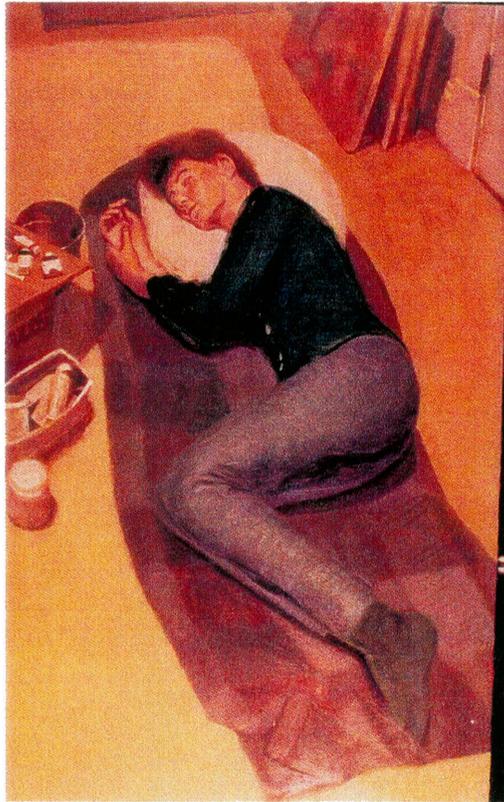


Figure 11

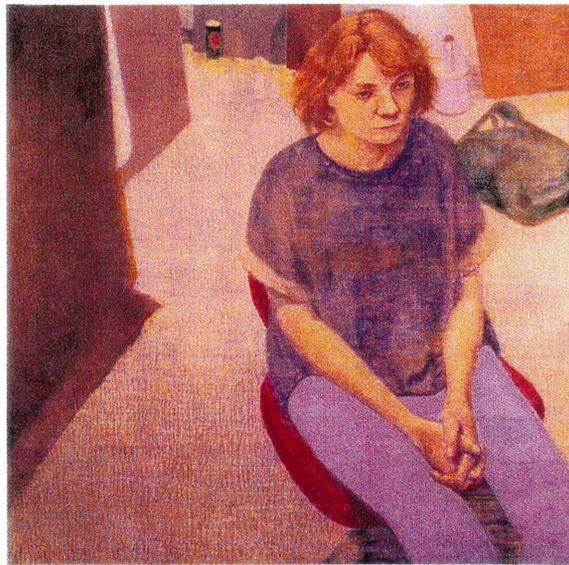


Figure 12

