

SIX WORKS--A DISCUSSION OF  
SUBJECT MATTER IN MY WORK

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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## STATEMENT AND PROBLEM

Throughout my study of art at the university level, the primary concern has been with the development of subject matter in imagery. During my undergraduate study, images were usually developed through a great amount of difficulty and misdirected effort. The subject matter of images in one work was seldom repeated in following pieces of work.

Upon graduation from undergraduate study in 1971, I decided to work independently on my creative concepts before continuing my education. For the next two years, I worked exclusively in drawing media. The drawings created during this time evolved into series of pieces containing images of related subject matter. The images were created with less difficulty and misdirected effort than before.

In 1974, I entered graduate school with a concentration of study in drawing and printmaking. During my first courses in printmaking, I noticed a repetition of similar subject matter contained in several works. The relationship of the prints to each other functioned in a series as did the previously completed drawings. This pattern of subject matter development was obvious in my later work as I proceeded through subsequent drawing and printmaking courses.

In my recent work, many images have been created which are not consciously related to a definite subject matter

stimulation. Distortions and changes may occur after the initial idea but prior to final image creation. This study will describe and discuss the origin and development of the subject matter in six pieces of my work. Three intaglio prints and three drawings will be investigated to answer three specific questions. The questions are:

1. Is it possible to isolate the source of subject matter in my work?
2. What effect do media and subject matter have on each other during image development?
3. Does my subject matter contained in an entire work contribute to the subject matter of my later works?

A personal diary was kept with notations relating to visual stimulation over a four month period from September 7, 1975, until January 16, 1976. Daily notations of seemingly meaningful observations and occurrences were recorded. On certain occasions, records were made of previous stimuli which did not seem relevant at the time of their occurrence but later proved important to the problem.

The three intaglio prints completed for this study included are within an "Oral" series. The three drawings are included within a "Landscape" series. Each of these works will be described according to the diary notations and records of personal recollection. In turn, each work will be discussed

individually in order to answer the three specific questions posed earlier in this project. Slides of the work are included in the accompanying appendix.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Aquatint--An intaglio process in which a porous ground of resin or other substances is applied to a plate, heated, and etched; produces a range of tonal values.

Edition--The total number of prints pulled and authenticated by the artist for distribution.

Image--A graphic form produced on the provided surface.

Intaglio--One of the four major divisions of printmaking, in which an image is either cut or bitten by acid into a metal plate. Ink is forced into the recessed image, the surface of the plate is wiped clean, and the print is made with the pressure of an etching press.

Series--A group of successive works having common aspects.

Value--Relative lightness or darkness of an area.

## DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION OF THE WORK

### "Hearts and Teeth" (see Appendix 1, Slide 2)

On September 9, 1975, the initial notation relating to the "Oral" prints was made. The notation was in reference to a dentist appointment which my daughter Alicia and I had on September 9. The notation read,

I went to the dentist at 2:30 p.m. I was very fascinated by the oversize plaster teeth in his office. Alicia was fascinated by them also. Alicia showed her teeth. There was a striking contrast between her sweet, little teeth and the large plaster ones.

On the following day, I had a conversation with another student about a friend of his at Oral Roberts University. The friend was doing art pieces derived from the "oral" stimulation of the university's name. This type of verbal pun was fascinating to me at the time of our conversation.

Previously, I had visited a Dallas gallery on September 7. A show of Jim Dine's prints was on display. I remember being very impressed with his images of the hearts. I had used hearts in my previous work, but not with the believability of Dine's images. I was most impressed by the sense of depth created by the modeled space of the hearts and their background.

From September 12 until September 29, I worked on an intaglio print entitled, "Hearts and Teeth." At the time I

created the print, I placed a great amount of symbolism in the imagery of the hearts and teeth. The teeth images were placed on the plate initially. While the teeth were being created, I began to realize a great sense of frustration related to my work. The frustration stemmed from material and institutional problems. Throughout the preceding spring and summer semesters, I became increasingly frustrated because no materials were available for use in the printmaking studio. This frustration was compounded by the fact that I felt a pressing need to work in color etching and lithography in order to add a more extensive selection of color prints to my personal portfolio. The symbolism of this frustration found form in the imagery of the teeth. I remember feeling the teeth to be very threatening and adverse. After completion of the teeth, I wished to symbolize a feeling directly opposite to that of the threatening teeth. I then placed the imagery of the fanciful hearts into the plate, thereby symbolizing the ideas which I wished to create in my prints but could not because of the before mentioned restrictions.

Two main subjects were included in the images of "Hearts and Teeth." Both images had a definite source of subject matter. The teeth images originated from the September 9 dental appointment. The hearts originated from the September 7 exposure to Dine's heart images.

The subject matter of the hearts and teeth had a definite effect on the media chosen to illustrate them. I chose



the teeth as a source of imagery before the choice of media was considered. The contrast which I had seen in the Dine prints was impressive to me. I was also impressed by the viability of modeled space which he created in the prints. Thus, my motivation to illustrate the subject matter with the same success as Dine's heart images contributed to the selection of the intaglio media.

"Hearts and Teeth" was the first work completed in this creative project. Therefore, a discussion of previous subject matter is not necessary. The influence of subject matter contained in "Hearts and Teeth" will be discussed in later works.

"Self Portrait--Oral"  
(See Appendix 1, Slide 2)

I began the second of the oral prints, "Self Portrait--Oral," on September 12. Whereas the first oral print had been developed over a period of approximately three weeks, "Self Portrait--Oral" involved only four days of involvement in the establishment of the imagery on the plate. Due to the short period of involvement, no notations were made in the diary specifically related to the significance of the teeth images other than the September 12 notation, "I am starting another print with teeth--a self portrait."

At the time I created the print, I was very surprised at the short length of time which I spent on the development of the images. First, the framework around the borders and

in the center of the print was established. I then placed the three sets of teeth in the upper portion of the plate. A small set of teeth was then placed in the lower area of the print. I remember feeling comfortable with the images within the print. Even though I did not understand the meaning of the small set of teeth in this print, I was satisfied to attach only a visual significance to the images at that time.

Later, I discovered another explanation for their appearance. One day soon after the print was finished, I noticed my dog peering at me through the lower portion of our storm door in the dark of the early morning hours. Each morning at the same time, I would see this same scene as I prepared breakfast. As part of this routine, I would informally notice her face at the door. The image of my face would be reflected in the upper portion of the door. The structure of the door and the position of the faces were quite similar to the composition of the print. I am convinced this scene was the origin of subject matter for "Self Portrait--Oral." The image stimulation was undoubtedly registered in my subconscious by the repeated exposure to this situation. I then recreated the scene on the plate without being overtly aware of the source of the resulting imagery.

"Oral Review"  
(See Appendix 1, Slide 3)

On September 29, I finished "Hearts and Teeth." The following day, I began work on the third oral print, "Oral Review." The notation for September 30 read,

began large print--aquatint over surface.  
(began work on "Henry Print").

The print began as a visual diary of my creative project, and went through many changes in imagery. On October 2, the print was conceived as a pair of hands holding a flower toward an open mouth. The October 2 notation read,

I decided to name my new print--"On October 2, Henry Ate My Flowers"--The print includes flowers (idea), teeth (mine), and hands (Henry).

The symbolism of this print was not unlike the previous "Hearts and Teeth" print as an analogy of the teeth and flowers to the teeth and hearts in the first print. However, I became dissatisfied with the flower image and removed it on October 14. The notation for that day read,

I blackened in all of the print except for the teeth and hands.

Thus, only the teeth and hands remained of the original idea. On October 23 I noted,

Committee Meeting--each mouth has a personality all unto itself.

During the committee meeting for my proposal, I became intrigued by the different mouths of my committee members. I decided to document the committee meeting in the imagery on

the plate. On October 24 I etched the mouth portraits on the plate. Daily notations concerning the development of the print continued until November 13, when the print was completed and editioned.

I believe the print, while being a documentation of my proposal meeting, also serves as an illustration of my development as an artist in the university atmosphere. This is evident to me because of the inclusion of another mouth structure into the print. Included is the mouth portrait of Rudy Pozzatti. Pozzatti is a printmaker who has had a great influence on my development as an artist. If his mouth image were not included in the print, it might appear only as a committee meeting documentation. However, since his mouth is included, I am certain that the print is a documentation of important personalities in my overall development as an artist.

My desire to work with the subject of mouths continued into this print. Again, the source of subject matter dictated the choice of media. I was convinced of the intaglio media as the best vehicle for the teeth images, therefore the media remained constant throughout the series of prints.

Teeth remained the basic subject of imagery in the print. The teeth images in this print were not general illustrations of teeth as in "Hearts and Teeth," but were portraits of particular mouth structures as in "Self Portrait--

Oral." Thus, the subject matter of the teeth remained constant throughout the series of oral prints.

"Landscape #1"  
(See Appendix 1, Slide 4)

On November 7, a significant subject stimulus was noted in the diary. It noted,

Drove to take work to San Marcos. Spent all day driving. Beautiful sky and clouds. Nice relationships exist between ground patterns of the fields and sky.

Again on November 11, I noted an interest in the color structure of the sky. The notation for that day read,

Again I noticed the contrast and the intensity of the junction of the sky and land. Blues are more intense with higher altitudes. . . . Bright colors predominate.

On November 14 I noted,

I think that a big change is going to take place in my work. I feel that scale, either extremely large or small is important.

Several other notations were made relating directly to the emerging concern for landscapes. On November 23 I noted,

I want to do some attractive work. I have done "anti-attractive" work for so long that I feel I must do some appealing work.

At this time, I was very concerned with the subject matter and lack of color in the subject matter of my work. In this previous diary notation, I equated "anti-attractive" work with the black, dark values found in the oral prints. The "appealing" work related directly to a bright, high-intensity color scheme.

For several months I had been working with a very dark value structure in my prints. The striking colors of the blue sky were interesting to me. I believed working with these colors could serve as a psychological relief from what I considered to be a depressingly dark value scheme.

On December 1, I finished my first two landscape drawings. The diary inscription for that day read,

. . . landscapes were quite fulfilling. The composition and materials were harmonious to my sensibilities. I got a good feeling from working with these drawings.

This first landscape drawing was noticeably different from the two later drawings because of the design structure of a landscape within another landscape.

I was not interested in drawing a specific landscape. My source of the subject matter for this drawing was the numerous landscape settings which I had noticed while driving. The drawing was simply a generalized image of many landscape settings which I had studied.

My primary goal was to reproduce the colorful subject matter of the landscapes which I had seen. Print media were unacceptable for this goal because of the inherent difficulty in color printing. Thus, I decided to handle the subject matter in drawing media. More precisely, I chose to use pastels as my primary drawing materials because of their intense hues. Therefore, the subject matter of the landscapes dictated my choice of media.

Although no teeth or hearts were included in this drawing, the previous prints did contribute to the subject matter of "Landscape #1." As noted earlier, a change was desired from the dark values of the previous prints. This change occurred in the bright color scheme of the drawing. The subject matter of the bright, colorful landscapes was chosen primarily because of this contrast to the colorless prints.

"Landscape #2"  
(See Appendix 1, Slide 5)

I was not entirely satisfied with the design of the first landscape drawing. Therefore, I created "Landscape #2" immediately after the completion of "Landscape #1." The primary difference in the second drawing was the exclusion of the complex design of two landscapes included within one composition. The shapes were simplified and the number of colors reduced in order to achieve a more simplified composition. I was much more satisfied with the simplified composition than with the previous visual organization of "Landscape #1."

The source of subject matter for "Landscape #2" was virtually identical to the source of subject matter for "Landscape #1." Both drawings were completed on the same date and no new source of stimulation was introduced between the two drawings. Thus, the origin of "Landscape #2" was the same as previously discussed in the first landscape drawing.

Virtually the same process of image development took place in this drawing as in the previous drawing. Again, I chose to illustrate the colorful landscapes in pastel drawing media. The effect of media upon subject matter was essentially the same in this drawing as before.

"Landscape #1" contributed to the development of "Landscape #2" through the simplification of subject matter. I believed the first drawing to be much too complex for the subject matter; therefore, I eliminated the smaller landscape from the design of the second drawing. Thus, many of the shapes were eliminated from the second drawing to give a less complex overall design.

"Landscape #3"  
(See Appendix 1, Slide 6)

Each day after the completion of the first two landscape drawings, more diary notations of the same nature as before were made concerning the color structure of the sky and ground. On January 17, I completed the final landscape drawing. "Landscape #3" was virtually the same as the second drawing in overall design of the subject matter. The main difference between the two drawings was the larger size of "Landscape #3." Whereas the first two drawings each measured 22" x 30," the final drawing measured 34" x 56."

The source of subject matter as well as the effect of subject matter on media were identical in this drawing as in



the preceding drawing. The primary reason for the creation of this drawing was that I wished to increase the size of the subject matter contained in "Landscape #2." The subject matter completely determined the creation of "Landscape #3."

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Through the discussion of diary notations, many useful observations may be made concerning the origin and development of subject matter in the work contained in this project. However, in reference to the three specific questions posed earlier in this discussion, a conclusion has been reached in each area of concern. First, it is possible to isolate the source of subject matter in each of these works. In each of the six works, the source of subject matter was traced to either a definite visual stimulus or to a series of related visual stimuli, as in the landscape drawings. Second, in each piece of work, the subject matter determined the choice of media used to create the resulting imagery. The subject matter was chosen prior to consideration of media for each print and each drawing. Third, the subject matter contained in each of the last five works was dependent upon the development of subject matter in at least one preceding piece of work. Each work followed a logical sequence of creation and each contributed to the creation of later subject matter.

Several other observations may be made regarding the origin and development of the subject matter in my work. Throughout the work created in this project, as well as in my previous work of the last three years, one observation is

dominant. My subject matter illustrates a pictorial diary of important events in my life. The resulting images may prove to be essentially symbolic of emotions as in "Hearts and Teeth," or they may be pictorially representational of a physical environment as in the landscape drawings.

Another observation is that frustration contributed to image development. Two distinct series of related images were created in the course of this project. In both instances, notations were made of frustrations which occurred prior to the initiation of each series of works. The oral prints followed a long period of media restrictions. The landscapes followed frustrations encountered while working with the "Oral" series. Upon re-examination of previous series of works, this sense of frustration preceded each major series of work completed during the last three years.

This project has also caused many of my subconscious processes of subject development to be consciously described and discussed. I have become more objective concerning the subject matter of my art work. Also, I now understand much more concerning my process of image creation in general.

I am not certain what effects this additional knowledge will have on my future art concepts. I am certain that I will be able to more objectively assess the development of my forthcoming images. Thus, I should be able to more accurately express my thoughts in the images which I create.













