

PHOTOGRAPHY VERSUS DIRECT OBSERVATION
AN INVESTIGATION IN PAINTING

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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May, 1977

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As an artist, I work with subject matter, presenting in a realistic manner aspects of a subject that intrigue or interest me. For many years, I worked primarily from direct observation. I did not use the photograph in my work. Over the past four years, use of the photograph has become more common in my studio work, where I have found it invaluable as a time saver, using it instead of sketches, and as an aid in seeing. In the year preceding the initiation of this project, I found myself using the photograph almost exclusively as a source for my work. These photographs were almost always black and white snapshots, taken by myself, of a subject that interested me.

To some extent, I began to depend upon the photograph as a source for the evolution of a work of art. I became aware that this dependence disturbed me somewhat. I began to wonder if I was reaping the full benefit of the subject by using a photograph as a source instead of the real thing, or if maybe I needed the photograph to physically remove me from the subject in order to see it clearly. I resolved to consciously examine the effect of the photograph on my studio work, to determine as precisely as possible its influence

in the evolution of a work of art. To do this, I felt, would greatly strengthen my own awareness of the process of this evolution, as well as increase my understanding of my work.

In arriving at this determination, I executed a series of six works, three from photographs and three from direct observation. I proceeded to accomplish these works in pairs, working in three different subject categories: landscape, the nude figure, and portraits. In each category, two paintings were done of the same or similar subject, one from a photograph and one from observation. To clarify this investigation, certain questions were formulated to guide the research. These were:

1. Is the working procedure markedly different when using a photograph as a source for a work than the procedure used when working from direct observation?
2. If different, does this working procedure affect the final outcome or product?
3. Whether the working procedure is similar or dissimilar, is the end result, i.e., the work of art, affected by the method used? That is, will the style of the works done from photographs be different from the style of those done from direct observation?

The studio portion of the investigation was begun in mid-January, and extended through late October, 1976. This part of the investigation consisted of the execution of the six paintings. During the working period, a personal progress of each work was kept to note any differences in working procedures. Each work was kept separate and not compared

or analyzed with its companion piece or any other piece of work in the series until all pieces were completed. The written notes on the progress of each piece were not compared or consulted, but were filed with the completion of each piece. Work was allowed to flow naturally and each painting was approached as a separate piece of work, the only difference from my normal way of working being the maintenance of a written record.

Upon completion of the last painting of the series, working notes were compared and analyzed, differences and similarities noted. The paintings were then lined up as a group and compared and analyzed in relation to companion pieces and to the group as a whole.

CHAPTER II

DISCUSSION

Before beginning the initial stage of this investigation, I favored the idea that the photograph exerted almost no influence upon my work. It was just a tool that I used because it was a time-saver and more convenient and less expensive than hiring models or persuading people to pose. I felt that I was in control of the photograph and that it did not influence me in my endeavors, especially because I was, in most cases, also the photographer. The results of this investigation, however, have caused me to revise my opinion somewhat on this matter. I found that the photograph does affect the outcome of the final product in ways that will be related in the following.

Differences in Working Procedure

In the photo-derived works, the camera is used to lay out a composition from which the painting is composed, i.e., the photograph. This composition is small and on a flat surface. Use of this method separates me from the subject, tending to make me place the subject more at a distance compositionally from the viewer, as illustrated in all three paintings in the photo-derived work.

In the direct observation method, the composition is worked out in direct confrontation with the subject matter. I am in direct contact with the subject so that I tend to concentrate on what interests me most about the subject. I "zoom in" on the subject and do not really lay out or plan a definite composition but let it develop as the painting progresses. In the photo method, composition is already worked out before actual painting begins.

The photo process is a subtractive process as the camera sees and reproduces a whole scene; objects and many details usually have to be eliminated from the small, flat, already existing composition of the photograph to arrive at a satisfactory solution in the painting. The direct observation process, however, is more of an additive process as I tend to put in the composition only what is necessary to the solution of the painting.

The photo method does not call upon my draftsmanship as much as the direct method. Tracings of the photograph and an opaque projector are used in most instances to lay out composition on the canvas. The direct observation method does call upon draftsmanship, as no mechanical devices are used, only the eye and hand.

In the photo-derived work, I am faced with the conversion of a life-size, three-dimensional image to the small, two-dimensional image of the black and white snapshot. This

image must then be enlarged to a full color image on canvas. The direct observation method, however, consists of converting a life-size, three-dimensional image to a two-dimensional in one step. This image can be either larger, smaller, or the same size as the original.

Working from a photograph is more convenient for me than working from direct observation. I can work whenever I have the time or feel like working. The camera stops an instant in time, freezes it, so that it can be referred to at leisure. The direct method must be at a specified time, arranged with the model or when the light is right out of doors in a landscape.

Nothing is ever exactly the same in each session when working with a model, whereas in the photograph, conditions leading to the composition and the composition itself remain the same within the confines of the photographic image.

In a life situation, there is always some interchange with the model or subject; no matter how analytic or objective I try to be, there is always the awareness that the subject is alive and breathing and has a life of its own. When a photograph is used, however, it is easier for compositional elements of the painting to take precedence over the empathic elements.

In the direct method, I am more conscious of the passage of time, whereas with a photograph, the subject is always waiting.

The photo method is an indirect process consisting of several stages of development before the actual painting begins. I am separated from the subject and use a photographic image to construct the painting. The direct observation method is a direct process of concentrated effort in which I am in direct confrontation and rapport with the subject during specific intervals of working time.

I feel that the above discussion in working procedures and their effect apply in most instances to all the paintings in this series. Below, each of the three categories is discussed individually.

Landscapes

(Figure 1)
"House Across the Street"
(48" x 56")
Oil on Canvas

This is the first piece in the project. It was done by using a $3\frac{1}{4}$ " x $3\frac{1}{4}$ " black and white photograph as source. The house was drawn on the canvas with the aid of a straight edge. Approximate measurements were converted from the photograph. Trees, lawn, and shadows were sketched in free-hand, using the photograph as a rough guide, until composition was deemed satisfactory. Colors and values were

arrived at, filling the basic shapes composed earlier, until the painting was brought to completion.

(Figure 2)
"Windows and Bushes"
(36" x 56")
Oil on Canvas

The companion piece to "House Across the Street," this painting was done from an $8\frac{1}{2}$ " x $5\frac{1}{2}$ " pencil line drawing done by direct observation. Composition was worked out in the drawing, then transferred to a canvas proportionally equivalent to the drawing. The subject is the same house from the same viewpoint, however, the house now fills the canvas and runs off the edge on top and both sides, with only a few inches of lawn at the bottom. Whereas, before, the shadow of the tree on the lawn was the dominating shape in "House Across the Street," now the windows and plants in front of them are the major shapes, interacting with each other against the horizontal pattern of siding on the house. The house has become the canvas upon which the windows and bushes have been painted.

Many of the working differences and their results are not as apparent in this case as in the other two cases, still they are there, with the possible exception of draftsmanship being of less demand in the photo-derived painting. As tracing and the opaque projector were absent, drawing ability was equally essential in both paintings.

The Nude Figure

(Figure 3)
"Nude on a Red Couch"
(26" x 30")
Acrylic on Canvas

This is the first painting of the second pair done in this series. It was done from a 2 7/8" x 3 3/4" black and white polaroid snapshot. A wash and line ink drawing, 10 5/8" x 14", was done from the photograph, defining the composition and major value changes. A simple linear contour was then traced from the photograph. This rudimentary tracing was only detailed enough to establish major shapes and contours of figure, couch, etc. This tracing was then projected on the canvas by means of an opaque projector. A pencil was used to transfer the projection to the canvas. The painting process was then initiated, using the photograph as reference.

(Figure 4)
"Nude in a Red Chair"
(26" x 30")
Acrylic on Canvas

This painting is the companion piece to "Nude on a Red Couch." It was done from the same model as the earlier painting, in irregular one to one and one-half hour sessions over a period of three weeks. The canvases have the same dimensions, however, Figure 4 is a vertical composition, whereas Figure 3 is horizontal. The composition was worked out directly on the canvas in paint with no preparatory

studies. The difference in the two works is striking, the most noticeable being the life-size image of the later painting. In the earlier painting, the figure is much smaller and almost totally contained within the confines of the same size canvas. This is due, I feel, to my separation from the subject by the camera in the photo-derived painting and the direct confrontation of the subject in the direct method.

The photo-derived work seems more exciting compositionally than the direct work. This is apparently a result of the composition being worked out before the painting was begun. I feel that the direct work, however, is more emotionally satisfying. The photo-derived work deals more with the visual appearance of one aspect of the subject or one part of the subject's personality, whereas the direct observation painting deals more with a multi-faceted personality. This is due, I feel, to the camera fixing one instant in time to be dealt with, while with the direct method, I was in contact with the model over a longer period of time during which both myself and the model went through a number of moods, changes, and interchanges.

This is not to say that I feel one painting is better than the other, only that they say different things, none of which I was conscious of when painting. I was reacting to the subject matter, a flat, small, composed photograph and a

living, breathing person. Figure 3 is more of an intellectual derivation and Figure 4 is more of an emotional reaction.

Portraits

(Figure 5)
"Man in a White T Shirt"
(20" x 24")
Acrylic on Canvas

This is the first painting in the third pair of this series. It was done, using myself as a model, from a mirror-image in irregular sittings over a period of two weeks. Composition was worked out directly on the canvas in paint with no preparatory studies. The image almost completely fills the canvas in larger than life-size vertical composition.

(Figure 6)
"Smiling Girl with Blue Eyes"
(20" x 24")
Acrylic on Canvas

This last painting of the series was done on the same size canvas as its companion piece, however, it is a horizontal composition done from a 2 7/8" x 3 3/4" polaroid snapshot. A linear tracing was done of the subject in the photograph, establishing major shapes and contours. This tracing was then projected onto the canvas by opaque projector and composition was arrived at by manipulating the image from the projector until a satisfactory arrangement

was achieved on the canvas. The image was then drawn onto the canvas with pencil. Painting was then commenced using penciled outlines on canvas and the photograph as reference. This work was done in irregular sessions over a period of two weeks. The subject is life-size, smaller on the canvas than its companion piece, with more of the figure in view.

In this pair of paintings, again, the one done from life is larger on the canvas, more of an emotional reaction than an intellectual composition or arrangement of paint. This is due to the same reasons mentioned in the nude studies, compounded also by the fact that the direct observation study is also a self-portrait.

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the preceding discussion, the diversities mentioned are subtle distinctions, not glaring differences. They are finely drawn perceptions of dissimilarities I feel do exist within the works to a greater or lesser degree in each of the three cases. However, I do not believe these dissimilarities referred to constitute a marked or drastic change in the total impact of each work as an entity. Each work, isolated from the others as a single example, stands up to scrutiny as being of the same style.

Working procedures are different, as related in the discussion. The most evident differences are the multi-stage operation in getting onto canvas the photo-derived image and the straight-forward attack upon the canvas in the direct observation method.

Perhaps the most important fact to take into account about differences in working procedure is the physical size and presence of the sources: one being a small, flat snapshot, the other being a life-size, three-dimensional object. These are sources from two opposite poles, with different problems, used to find a common solution on a common ground. This difference in sources and working procedures must, at

this time in my work, be considered to affect the final product.

Summary of Differences
in Working Procedure

<u>Photograph</u>	<u>Direct Observation</u>
1. Camera is used to lay out a composition from which painting is composed.	1. Composition is worked out in direct confrontation with subject matter.
2. Artist is separated from subject except at the time photo is taken.	2. Artist is in direct contact with subject during entire process.
3. Composition is worked out before actual painting begins.	3. Composition develops as painting progresses.
4. More of a subtractive process.	4. More of an additive process.
5. Draftsmanship not as critical as direct method.	5. Draftsmanship is essentially more critical as no mechanical devices are used.
6. Multi-step method of putting image on canvas.	6. One step method of putting image on canvas.
7. More convenient than direct method.	7. Less convenient than photo method.
8. Conditions leading to composition and composition itself remain the same within the photo.	8. Nothing is exactly the same in each session when working with model or other subject.
9. Less conscious of time passage.	9. More aware of time passage.

Finished paintings were affected by the above differences in working procedures in the following ways:

Photograph

1. Subject is placed more at a distance from viewer.
2. Compositional elements tend to dominate empathic elements.
3. Work is more impersonal, not as intimate.

Direct Observation

1. Subject is placed compositionally closer to viewer.
2. Empathic elements tend to dominate compositional elements.
3. Work is on a more personal level, more intimate.

The most basic consequence of this investigation, for me, has been the discovery of two tendencies of which I am now consciously aware and will try to integrate. These are the direct, intimate, more emotionally satisfying results obtained through direct observation and the more exciting compositions obtained when using a photograph. This is not to say that I feel the photo-derived works lack emotional satisfaction or that the direct observation works lack visual stimulation, quite the contrary; however, I do feel that they both have their respective tendencies due to the working procedures involved. As a result of this investigation, I feel that by my conscious realization of these two factors, my creative progress will now be much more assured.











