

THE EFFECT OF PAPER SUPPORTS ON  
AESTHETIC CHOICES MADE IN THE  
OIL PAINTING PROCESS

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### DISCUSSION OF PREVIOUS WORK

Paper, used as a support for oil painting, has been extensively explored by art students and economically insolvent artists, mainly as a practical alternative to canvas. The benefit of paper is that it is less expensive and easier to prepare. My decision to begin painting on paper three years ago was also a practical one. Painting landscapes from observation on gessoed paper made it possible to do small oil sketches quickly with little preparation time. However, I did not consider paper as a valid alternative to canvas at that time. I felt that paper would be adequate for smaller works; but a "real" painting, larger in scale, should be produced on a traditional support, the stretched canvas.

As I experimented and painted increasingly on non-traditional supports, such as masonite and paper, I gradually changed my opinion. A survey of my work during this period indicated that the stronger pieces were those on non-traditional supports, and this was especially true of those painted on paper. The particular strengths of these works may not be directly related to the support, but I

believe that there is at least this indirect relationship: since the surface and the format are the initial elements of a painting, all subsequent decisions must be effected by these elements.

My paintings, executed as a graduate student at the University of North Texas, have been produced on all three of the above mentioned supports. I have also experimented periodically with different grounds (traditional and acrylic) and different mixtures of painting medium. But the constants in my work could be found in style and subject matter. In a contemporary definition of the word my work would fall under the stylistic heading of "realism." Though the brushwork has loose and sensual qualities which makes the two dimensional surface apparent my intent is to represent three dimensions. For the most part my subject matter has dealt with different aspects of the "suburban landscape." The suburbs have always been my immediate environment, and what is most immediate to me is what occurs to me to paint.

I believe that it is my choice of style and subject matter (both having been explored extensively, but not exhaustively, by artists like Fairfield Porter and Alex Katz) that requires a search for a method of working which will allow me to paint in a manner unique to me, my time and my place. One of the initial steps in such a process is the selection of a support.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

I believe that an artist needs a mechanism(s) built into his or her working method out of which the greatest number of options may arise. I suggested that, for me, painting on paper could be one such mechanism. I wanted to pursue paper as a viable surface on which to paint and discover to what extent it would influence my choices in the working process. Questions I wished to address were:

1. What are the benefits (both technical and conceptual) of using paper as a painting surface?
2. What are the restrictions?
3. How do both the benefits and the restrictions effect my choices during the painting process?
4. What are the problems encountered in exhibiting works on paper, and what are some possible solution to those problems?
5. If exhibition problems do arise how will dealing with those problems affect subsequent paintings?

### METHODOLOGY

In an effort to answer the above questions I proposed a creative project involving:

1. eight oil paintings which would be executed on gessoed paper. The size and format could vary

from piece to piece and should have been a result of the characteristics of the paper support. For example, a large work might have necessitated combining several pieces of paper together.

2. there was to be written, a descriptive paper at the completion of the project. This paper would describe and discuss the works created, including a discussion of my aesthetic, technical, formal and/or conceptual choices.

## CHAPTER II

### A DISCUSSION OF THE WORK COMPLETED FOR THE PROBLEM

In the first three paintings of the problem series , The Ontological Significance of a Window, Habitat II and Habitat III, the initial decisions (such as size, format, type of paper and subject matter) were influenced, to a large extent, by the works completed just prior to them. I therefore felt it was necessary to briefly deal with these previously executed works before discussing those within the project.

Transfiguration was typical of the work produced in that previous body and will suffice as an example for discussion. The piece was painted on Murillo paper, made by Fabriano in Italy. It is a heavy paper (360 grams per square meter) with a 25% rag content and has a textured surface. The paper was available in 27 x 39 inch sheets and for this particular painting was torn down to 20 x 19 inch sheets. Transfiguration was a six panel work which incorporated two separate images. The image on the left, a car parked beside the garage of a house, was almost square in format (40 x 38 inches) and took up four of the six panels. The second image was a different view of the same

car, parked in the same place. It uses the remaining two panels and was an elongated rectangle (40 x 19 inches).

The two images read visually as a diptych though the work was made up of six separate pieces of paper. The logical question must then be asked, "Why was it necessary to have six panels when two or even one would have been adequate?"

There are two answers to the question. The first is that my original idea in painting the group of works, of which Transfiguration is a member, was that I might rearrange and combine the images to create abstract spacial compositions. After several attempts at this, I determined that it was an unproductive direction for me to explore. In retrospect, the second reason for many panels appears no more valid than the first. Piecing rectangles of the Murillo together was a way of getting a larger format while maintaining the ability to work on that ridged paper. This reasoning proved invalid when I found a larger even higher quality paper on which I could paint.

The use of several panels caused many problems. The most prominent of these was that in the absence of the funds to frame these pieces, displaying them became extremely difficult. The problem of storage also arose. I had to store the pieces flat, one on top of another, and since I did not have enough wall space to leave them up to dry properly, the panels began sticking together. Due to these

difficulties and the lack of a substantial reason for dividing the images into several panels, I abandoned the pursuit of that direction.

However in the process of painting the above works I became attracted to the 40 x 38 inch format. I looked for a paper that would be heavy enough for painting and larger in size than the Murillo. The first paper I found was Stonehenge, a paper made by the Rising Paper Company in the United States. It was available locally in 38 x 50 inch sheets, had an adequate weight (245 grams per square meter) to withstand the acrylic sizing, and had a 100% rag content.

The Ontological Significance of a Window, Habitat II and Habitat III were all painted on Stonehenge paper. The sheets were torn down to a 40 x 38 inch format (the torn edges seemed to be consistent with the deckled edges of the paper.) Then the paper was stapled to the wall and sized with one coat of acrylic gesso. When that was dry the paper was turned over, stapled to the wall and given two more coats of gesso. When the gesso dried, the surface was ready for painting.

All three of these paintings were painted from color photographs and were (as was Transfiguration) monochromatic works. The paint color was a mixture of ivory black and raw umber. The medium used for mixing was two parts stand oil to three parts paint thinner.

My process of working began by painting a heavy wash onto the entire surface of the paper. I then wiped the surface with a rag leaving a light grey ground on which to draw the image. The initial drawing was roughed-in with a black, oil pastel crayon. I then began painting on top of and wiping away the existing grey ground. White was never added to the paint. The white of the gesso ground served as the tint. Where I added more opaque layers of paint the value was darker; where I wiped paint away the value became lighter. The result was a study of value where the texture of paint determined not only the patterns of light and dark but the transition and movement between those patterns.

Because of the nature of my working method, it was necessary to complete the paintings quickly. Both ivory black and raw umber are fast drying paints. They usually dry over night. Added to the paint was a relatively volatile mixture of medium. Given these factors and the need for the paint to be wet as I worked it was necessary for me to complete the paintings in one day.

The first of these three paintings was The Ontological Significance of a Window. The title for the piece was arrived at well after its completion. During its production my immediate concern was with the dramatic patterns of light and dark in the situation in the photograph. The two glasses, one with a pair of sun glasses in it, the other empty, seemed to me to abstract the space behind them. That

space was both shallow (the window sill and frame) and deep (the world out side the window.) But within the confines and distortions of the glasses such distinctions have little relevance; there is simply abstract movement and form, though it is important to note that form was arrived at through the observation of real visual phenomena.

Habitat II and Habitat III were also titled after their completion, but unlike Ontological Significance the concept that gave birth to the titles was considered before they were begun. The photographic image of a bird house (an artificial habitat) hanging in a tree (a natural habitat) struck me as ironic. Along with this conceptual interplay were profound visual patterns, created by the branches of the tree, the bird house and their cast shadows. It was this visual aspect of the situation that sustained my focus throughout the work on the pieces and which gave rise to a visual integrity constituting the main content of the paintings.

What I mean by "visual integrity" is an emphasis on the visual form; no matter what literal, intellectual or conceptual concern might be involved in the piece, the consideration of the painting as primarily visual is maintained throughout the working process. The strength of the two Habitat paintings is not found in the irony of an artificial habitat placed in a natural one but in the visual power that is found in the event of that situation. It was

the consideration of the visual integrity that was lacking in the execution of the next six paintings in the problem series.

Those six works represent a tangent both in style and in purpose and are far less successful than the first three and the last three paintings in the series. It is interesting though and deserves to be noted that it was focusing on the use of paper supports that caused me to deviate into another stylistic avenue.

At this point in the problem it occurred to me that since the paper was easy to prepare and the paintings took no longer than a day to complete, the pieces could be considered much like work on the pages of a sketchbook. I envisioned a gallery full of large sketchbook pages running along the wall.

With a sketchbook in mind I began prominently combining aspects of drawing with painting. I placed several unrelated images in the same work as if they were drawn only as studies, and I purposefully left images incomplete to give them the appearance of a quickly drafted sketch. What resulted were confused works with none of the focus of the earlier paintings. The first of these works, which was untitled and was 40 x 38 inches, was a study of an antler and an orthodox cross. The cross I picked up on the way out of my house one day (it belonged to my roommate,) and the antler was given to me by a friend. I had no intention of

making any direct spiritual connection between the two objects, though I was quite aware of their power as religious symbols.

I began the painting by using ivory black paint and a black oil pastel crayon. But at a certain point I felt it was necessary to introduce another color into the painting. I added a little thalo green to the ivory black paint and used it to define the form of the antler.

In the next painting, also untitled, I used the cross again, but this time it was combined with the image of a potted plant. Both these paintings were produced on Rieves BFK roll paper, made in the United States. BFK is primarily a printmaking paper and is available in rolls 42 inches wide and of varying lengths. Its weight is 300 grams per square meter, and it has a soft, absorbent consistency. Both these untitled works, with hind sight, seem incomplete. They seemed to have necessitated a purpose akin to that exhibited in the first three pieces of the problem series. The fact that they remain untitled indicates a lack of concept.

The next four paintings incorporate a statuette, of a nursing madonna and child, as their most prominent image. They were painted on Coventry Rag paper which is made in the United States by Parsons Mill, weighs 270 grams per square meter, has 100% rag content and is available in 44 x 50 inch sheets. I used the whole sheet as a format for these paintings. Madonna I (with gold leaves) was the first of

these four works. Initially I drew the statue in a black oil pastel and ivory black paint. The madonna was placed under the leaves of a plant I had in my studio (the same plant that was in the previous work), and I depicted two of the larger leaves in the painting. I worked the drawing of the leaves for quite a while and could not get them to a point with which I was satisfied. It then occurred to me to paint the leaves with gold metallic paint. I thought the idea of a madonna painted under gold leaves was humorous. What resulted in the painting was a religious icon that seemingly was trying to be serious.

In Madonna II I began by painting the statuette just to the left of center. The image seemed too small in relationship to the large paper. I partially erased the image by scraping the paint. This had the effect of making the figures more vague. I then painted the statuette, larger, in the lower right hand corner. In an attempt to be humorous and to play with religious nature of the image, I printed my hand at the top center in gold paint, as if this were the hand of God coming down from heaven. But again this reference was visually vague and the lack of a strong emphasis was obvious.

Madonna IV is similar in its composition to Madonna II. The statuette was painted twice, this time in different positions, and the reference to the hand of God was made again. This time it was a painted hand but it was just as

vague. In Madonna III the orthodox cross was used in relationship to the statuette. I continuously considered the connection between the two objects as I painted them. However I was non-committal in the way I executed the work. Although the madonna and child were relatively apparent, the only part of the cross seen was the base. This indicated to me that I was not committed to the visual presence of the two objects and I had not clearly formulated the concept of their relationship.

At this point it bears mentioning that I was able to work through these paintings quickly. Because of the speed of preparation (i.e. gessoing the paper) there was little time in between the production of each piece.

After viewing these first nine paintings of the series with my major professor, he suggested that I try one more painting, using the madonna statue but with the purpose of giving it the kind of focus found in the first three works. I did as he suggested, and the result was so successful, I painted two more.

Assumption I, Assumption II and Assumption III placed the nursing madonna in the same venue as the glasses in Ontological Significance. In these paintings the statue was treated as an object in a real space and situation, rather than as an icon with religious importance. The monochromatic scheme is used again. The pieces were painted from photographs and the level of realism is akin to that of

the first three paintings. The madonna has been placed behind a tall narrow wine glass, and the statue was distorted in much the same way that the space was distorted in Ontological Significance. It was no longer necessary to understand the symbolic nature of the icon. The issues were, rather, the relationship of light and form and the tension between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. The Assumption paintings were the last paintings in the problem series.

### CHAPTER III

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

When I first proposed the above problem and methodology my expectation was-- that in the process of painting on paper dramatic changes in my method of working would result.

What in fact took place during the project was a reaffirmation of my existing working methods and the realization that subtle adjustment, not drastic change, was necessary to keep my paintings vital.

The conclusion does not invalidate the reason for the problem. It was not a revolution in my work that was proposed but a possible mechanism "...out of which the greatest number of options may arise." In working on the pieces executed for the problem I found that my decision making was greatly enhanced. This, for the most part, was due to the speed of working with paper. Because the surfaces could be prepared quickly the consideration from piece to piece was more consistent. An idea or option that occurred to me in the process of working on one painting could be carried through to the next with little time in between. This allowed me to work through a particular problem rather than thinking through it, and in that working process options that otherwise would not have occurred to me

arose. In other words, the idea of painting as primarily a physical process was exploited. The lack of expense, both in time and money, allowed me the opportunity to be experimental and to make appropriate responses to the specific visual information, rather than responding to it in a stock manner.

Both the speed and inexpense of paper were beneficial to the working process. I did not find any apparent restrictions with paper. There was at one point, however, a consideration that was detrimental, not beneficial, to the work. When there was a conscious focus on the paper support, less consideration was given to the integrity of the image. In the second group of works completed (the two untitled pieces and the Madonna series) there was the pretense to forefront the paper. As a result the images were less powerful because they were subordinated to an idea about works on paper.

In the best of all possible worlds the difficulty and expense of displaying my work would not be a consideration of its production; but I do not operate in an idyllic professional situation. I do not have the funding to frame many large pieces of work; so the option left open to me is to hang the pieces directly upon the wall. This consideration caused me to reassess the idea of producing the images on multiple panels, and thus affected my working process.

As a result of focusing on the nature of the paper support, the works produced in the second group of the problem were self-conscious. In the group of works of which Transfiguration is a member, the division of the images onto several pieces of paper is at least superfluous, if not distracting. Both these points lead me to conclude that it is the presence of the paper support, not the focus on it, that produces the most valid responses in the painting process. I intend to continue working on paper as a support for my oil painting. I will however use supports such as panels, canvas or other non-traditional surfaces when they seem more appropriate to my purpose.

ILLUSTRATIONS

























