EXISTENTIAL INFLUENCES ON THE USE OF SPACE
BY A CONTEMPORARY PAINTER

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

In addition to line, color, texture and shape, every artist of every age has worked with space. "Man takes cognizance of the emptiness which girds him round and gives it a psychic form and expression" (4, p. 515). Repeatedly throughout art history the psychic forms used have been predominately either two-dimensional or three-dimensional, depending at least in part on the purpose of the artist.

Some contemporary painters have combined aspects of the two traditional types of spatial expression. The aim of this study is to seek to determine the philosophic grounds which prompt this painter in particular to incorporate both two- and three-dimensional space within each painting.

The Use of Two-Dimensional Space
by the Australian Aborigine

The history of art contains numerous examples of the use of two-dimensional space in painting—i.e., painting without attempting to include depth, the third dimension.
Paintings by Australian aborigines are illustrative of this use of flat space. The aborigines offer some distinct advantages over other groups—primarily prehistoric peoples—who have used only length and width spatially. Since the primitive state of aboriginal culture is only now experiencing the impact of modern civilization, the artists themselves are available and able to comment on the work; thus, first-hand information regarding the function, philosophy and motivation of aboriginal art can be obtained.

The majority of art forms used by the aborigine have a magico-religious function. The art enables the aborigine to live securely within the natural world by linking him to the sacred mythological past and to the great spirit beings whose will controls all life.

Contact with the heroic spirits is considered essential to the continuation of natural life. This contact is maintained largely through the performance of established rituals which the aborigine considers his only possible contribution to the continuation of the fertility of land, animals and man.

The world for the aborigine is seen through the myth. Having no depth, the myth "unrolls itself always in the same plane and corresponds precisely to a vision of the world in two dimensions" (5, p. 139). The two-dimensional character of the aborigine's perception of space is variously shown.

In painting, figures are oriented in many directions, not on the vertical and horizontal axes alone. Rather than
seeing all objects in relation to himself, the totemistic aborigine perceives an underlying unity and relationship of all objects with each other (3, p. 194).

That aboriginal art is subjective, symbolic, and based on knowledge rather than visual appearances also adds to the flatness of the art (1, p. 64). The artist, in trying to capture the essence of the subject matter includes two eyes in the profile; often important internal organs are included as if the subject were transparent. Besides this X-ray technique, another device sometimes employed by the aboriginal artist for greater realism is the depiction of elements associated with the subject, as if they were actually a part of it. "Animals, for instance, are depicted with their tracks, reminding us that for these hunters they were a part of the animals' total reality" (6, p. 193).

Centered around the myth, a single painting rich with flat, decorative line often portrays a complex series of events from the Eternal Dreaming. To the aborigine, time and space are unreal mediums. Everything in the dream and in waking-life is reflected in art "within an eternal present, the perpetual interflow of today, yesterday and tomorrow" (4, p. 538).

The Use of Three-Dimensional Space by Renaissance Painters

In contrast to the flat two-dimensional space of the aborigine, the deep three-dimensional space of the Renaissance
represents a different world view. With the resurrection of the humanized man at the beginning of the Renaissance, came the rediscovery of space and the perfection of perspective.

The importance of humanism on the art forms of the Renaissance can hardly be overstated. Instead of seeing all things in relation to each other, "everything was dominated by the eye of the beholder and was graphically depicted by perspective projection" (4, p. 518). Clearly, man was supreme in the universe.

As knowledge grew, fear decreased; men thought less of worshipping the unknown, and more of overcoming it. Every vital spirit was lifted up with a new confidence; barriers were broken down; there was no bound now to what man might do. . . . It was an age of achievement, hope and vigor: of new beginnings and enterprises in every field; an age that waited for a voice, some synthetic soul to sum up its spirit and resolve (2, pp. 82-83).

The awaited voice appeared in visual form. The artists of the Renaissance offered in their paintings a vision of the ideal--the best, most dignified, and yet most characteristic generalization of man, embodied with all the hope and vigor that came with man's growing awareness of his seemingly limitless potential. With so many new areas opened to him, the Renaissance man was convinced that life had never before been lived with such intensity.

The Humanists perceived man to be a reasonable, intelligent being, and as such capable of overcoming superstitious fears and theological control of morality. Although allegiance to
the church had become a mere formality, there was a constant struggle between pagan and Christian ideals. That Renaissance art is somewhat lacking in the serenity of earlier art is attributable to the painful attempt of the Renaissance man to synthesize his concepts of love and beauty, his classic and Gothic modes of expression, his pagan and Christian ideologies (9, p. 343).

The result was the merger of the idealism of the Greeks and the pathos of the Middle Ages.

Widespread scientific curiosity led to the evolution of specific techniques and representational devices used by the artists. The Renaissance artist worked within the scaffolding of clearly described three-dimensional forms—pyramids, spheres, ovoids—to symbolize "the rationality of life, its capability of being reduced to systematic explanation and arrangement" (8, p. 400). The skillful use of chiaroscuro (light and shade) gave solidity to the three-dimensional forms.

Linear perspective is the most obvious means used by the Renaissance artist to emphasize man's newly discovered importance. Man is the measure of all things; as the distance between man—as the viewer of art—and objects increases, the objects diminish in size. Whether seen from above or below it, the horizon line always appears to be at the viewer's eye-level. The effect of linear perspective is reinforced by the use of color and atmospheric perspective, by
dulling the intensities of colors and diminishing sharpness of value differences as the distance between the viewer and the object is increased.

With the emphasis on formal values and the humanity of man, the Renaissance artist working with deep three-dimensional space "exploited his material and tool values as best he could, in the interest of the complete illusion of a plastic realism" (7, p. 73).
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CHAPTER II

EXISTENTIALISM AND MODERN ART

Existence Precedes Essence

Rooted in Greek tradition, Western civilization has been built largely on the rational part of man. Traditional art and traditional philosophy have looked for and clung to signs revealing a comprehensive orderliness in the universe. In the twentieth century both art and philosophy have broken with the tradition of Western rationalism, and have found instead of an orderly, intelligible world, a world that is dense, opaque, and inexplicable. Thus,

... the themes that obsess both modern art and existential philosophy are the alienation and strangeness of man in his world; the contradictoriness, feebleness, and contingency of human existence; the central and overwhelming reality of time for man who has lost his anchorage in the eternal (1, p. 64).

One of the basic tenets of existentialism is that existence—that a thing is—comes before essence—what a thing is. Man cannot exist until he is consciously aware of his own existence. Only after this awareness comes does man define himself. When man personally realizes that he has no predetermined essence, he finds himself in the face of Nothingness. By Nothingness the existentialist does not refer
to a metaphysical absence of being, but rather to a total lack of meaning. Possessing no inherent meaning, the individual must create his own meaning, determine his own essence, by the choices he makes. "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism" (8, p. 15).

Unlike previous periods in the history of art, the art of this century has failed to provide a clear-cut image of man. Rather, it has produced a variety of contradictory images. This suggests that the modern artist sees man as a creature who, because of his lack of a fixed essence or nature, transcends any image.

The contradictory images of man found in modern art echo the existential paradox with which every man must live. Man's subjectivity tells him that he is of absolute value in the world, that he matters; man's empirical reasoning at the same time declares that he is of absolutely no value, that he is nothing.

With Nietzsche's "death of God" the traditional meaning of life also dies. Modern art with the sensitivity of a seismograph has recorded the tremors of man in search of his essence.

The lack of an essence, while painful, is so rewarding. It is the agony we suffer in exchange for our freedom. . . . Even in our agony, we do not wish ever to find the essence of man. If we did find it, the whole human enterprise would come to a close and be over. There would be nothing left to do (6, p. 145).
Existence Transcends the Rational

Rationalism, which has controlled Western thought since the Middle Ages, has failed to solve the problems of man. The existentialist replenishes rationalism's concepts of the critical, empirical, and objective with concepts of subjectivity, possibility, contingency and meaninglessness. The existentialist does not disregard the rational, thinking part of man, but adds to it the intuitive, imaginative and feeling processes which are also fundamental to man.

The work of art is the meeting place of these two worlds. It is brought into existence in an interplay of the elements of concrete reality and spiritual reality. "In the perfect coalescence of feeling with image, it lends wakeful reality to the dream and dreamlike liberating spontaneity to wakeful life" (3, p. 60).

Existence Condemns Man to Be Free

Emphasizing self-created meaning implies that the individual's activity, feeling, and thought give the most significant clue to reality. In other words the existential individual must be free and self-motivating.

Freedom is the central experience in existential thought. But for the meaning man creates for himself by the choices he makes, the world is meaningless.

Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does (8, p. 23).
Living, choosing and acting on the moment without a backlog of absolutes is what is meant by existential engagement. In modern art existential engagement is apparent in the rejection of academic rules to solve the artist's aesthetic problems. The "rules" for each individual case come to be as the result of each preceding aesthetic decision the artist has made. If a painting obeys any laws at all, it obeys the laws of its own origin. The art-object is a free essence, product of the free acts of the artist (7, p. 100). The art-object "stands as a witness to the presence of spontaneous and free being in the midst of a world which resists and limits it" (3, p. 23).

Man Is Anxious in the Face of Nothingness

Leaving behind the illusion of an objective world containing objective truth, man is on the great abyss of Nothingness and thereby is forced into absolute freedom. That man is terror-stricken in the face of his awful responsibility is a necessary condition to man's progress toward authentic experience. The resulting despair is overpowering and brings the irrelevancy and meaninglessness of the world into awareness. Torn from traditional being, man confronts only Nothingness.

Existentialism has been called the philosophy of crisis. It concerns itself with the crisis of the contemporary world, focusing particularly upon the predicament of the individual
facing the crucial issues of life. The existentialist's total concern about ultimate destiny causes him to seek deeper and deeper into his own subjective moods until he is confronted with non-being. In this confrontation the responsibility of his freedom is overpowering to man.

In delving into his subjective moods, the modern artist is seeking reality. As he discards the facades, he finds he is left with Nothing. "Modern art thus begins, and sometimes ends, as a confession of spiritual poverty" (1, p. 45). The spiritual poverty is not the result of the decadence of the artists themselves, but rather, the result of the decadence of a society. What are recorded on canvas are the painful attempts of the artist to rediscover the sources of human vitality, the sources of being.

The art of this century has been marked by what Barrett (1, p. 50f) calls the flattening out of all planes, the flattening out of climax, and the flattening out of values. Visually, far and near are brought together; instead of the traditional centers of interest, all areas share importance; and, subject matter, when used, is often banal.

Existence Involves Estrangement

Traditional philosophy has looked for and discovered signs revealing a comprehensive orderliness to the world. The existentialist instead finds a world characterized by a sense of alienation and estrangement. In man's encounter
with Nothingness, things formerly familiar lose their meaning. Man's status is that of a stranger. With no basis for communication with nature or with the rest of humanity, man is forced into solitude. This is the crisis experience and yields anxiety. Totally alienated, man is in a state of complete subjectivity.

The subjectivity generally present in modern art is compensation for, and sometimes revolt against, the externalization of modern society. In self-defense man is turning inward. "The object, in the process of internalization, withdraws itself from proximate vision, and acquires a private meaning" (9, p. 63).

The circle, as a symbol of the psyche, and the square, as a symbol of earthbound matter, the body and reality, are considered primary forms. It is significant that in modern art the connection between the two forms, if present at all, is very casual. "Their separation is another symbolic expression of the psychic state of twentieth-century man: His soul has lost its roots and he is threatened by dissociation" (4, p. 249).

Existentialism Involves a Return to Immediacy

"Authentic love and a genuinely moral community rest upon a determination to treat one's fellow man as another self, as a person equal to oneself and entitled to the same freedom" (5, p. 94). Involvement is automatically implied.
The existential man is morally responsible for his fellow man any time his fellow man's freedom is threatened. But, it must always and only be the freedom of his fellow man—not freedom for him as the existential man or any one else conceives of it—that is the point in question.

To allow his fellow man this freedom implies that the existential man, secure in his own self-hood, has related to some otherness, realizing the affirmative being as a subjective self of this fellow man. This is Buber's "I-Thou," the intimate encounter of subject with subject (2, p. 11).

As the most intimate language of the senses, art is a direct linking of man to man. It offers a clear vision of the joy, despair, mystery, and possibility of meaning or meaninglessness of man's existence. Through art man is free to return again and again to his own spontaneous depths where lingers the memory of what it means to be.

There are such moments when life in its totality is viewed as we view the work of art. And it is in such moments that we divine the same pathos and nostos which deeply underlies both art and life. We sense then that there is defeat in every moment of living, sadness in every joy. . . . And like a promise recollected from the very depths of our uncertain being, there wells up the memory of Being Itself (3, p. 77).
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CHAPTER III

EXAMPLES BY A CONTEMPORARY PAINTER

Comments on the Group of Paintings

That the dilemma of modern man's existence has had a strong impact on both the art and the philosophy of this century is to be expected. It is not the result of the painters construing a philosophy so much as it is that the painter is ultimately concerned with the personal truth of being. After wrestling with this personal truth about being on canvas, many contemporary painters have "detached floating axioms to help them articulate what had already come about in their own thoughts and work" (1, p. 33). They have found that existentialism and modern art are dealing with the same things. Not only the philosopher but also the artist must face the flat inexplicable twentieth-century world. "When religion, science, and morals ... are shaken and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from the external to the deeper essence within him" (4, p. 26). Here in violent contrast to the incompleteness of the external life he finds submerged the memory of what it means really to be.

The paradox with which every man is forced to live--I matter ultimately to me, but I am of no consequence in
the total scheme of things—is significant in each of the paintings included in this study. Space used ambiguously is the vehicle employed to indicate man's relative importance. In each painting clues to its spatial reading are mixed. At first glance one plane is in front of the other in a shallow space; at the second viewing the positions of the planes have been reversed and now exist in a deep space. Like the two parts of the existential paradox, the two spatial readings are contradictory but both are true.

The germ of each of the paintings included in the study first appeared in sketch. Each veered from the original sketch as it evolved, created its own life or essence, in much the same way that existential man evolves in his essence-making process of becoming.

The rules for each painting were not predetermined or preconceived. The artist had complete freedom in the working process, but also complete responsibility for the result of each exercise of freedom.

The existential person recognizes both the rational and irrational aspects of man as valid. The basis for these paintings is a combination of the rational and the irrational. Decisions regarding technique were made on a rational basis, while in matters of form decisions were more often intuitive, eliciting response in the unconscious.

The paintings included in this study mirror one person's search to be a single, wholly present being. They partake
of what Fallico (2, pp. 65-78) terms pathos and nostos, suffering and return. These paintings are a visual record of the pain of realized meaninglessness, and of the renewal which comes upon a return to one's spontaneous depths.

When the world collapses around the existing man; when every project . . . becomes unconvincing and unelicitng of one's deepest and sincerest commitment; when a man's subjective and personal being becomes only externally attached to his own life-world like an airmail stamp on a meaningless letter returned to him, his spontaneous moments are all the justification that remains for his still "being around" (2, p. 115).

As has happened repeatedly in the past when man has not found in the external world the answers to his questions, he has turned his search inward. This inward probing for the profoundest truths about reality often is visually expressed through the use of symbol, which "appears only when there is a need to express what thought cannot think or what is only divined or felt" (3, p. 249).

The circle is an important element in each of the paintings included in this study. Psychology's description of the circle as a symbol of the self and the totality of the psyche fits well with the artist's philosophy. The artist views the recurring circular theme as a representation of the self within the cosmic framework. Hence, the relativity of the circle's spatial reading emerges. At one moment the self is thrusting forward, secure in its ultimate worth; with the next moment the self withdraws realizing its
lack of real value in the context of the eternal. In a sense all of these paintings deal with things eternal. Man fears that his subjective view of self may be a dream and his objective view of self reality. This possibility prompts the ambivalent treatment of space and the setting of timelessness. Thus, within the picture plane are merged the personal, temporal realm of the ego and the nonpersonal, timeless realm of the non-ego. This marriage transcends both ego and non-ego individually because it is the source of both—the self aspiring to live and grow.

"Shades of Gray"

The motivation for the first painting in this series was the desire to show visually that values are not absolute—that black is not always black, that white is not always white—but that the world of values for twentieth-century man is composed of shades of gray.

It was decided that this composition would be built upon a cobalt blue and yellow ochre color scheme. Subtleties in coloration were sought to visually imply the relativity of man's bases for valuing. The technical problems encountered in "Shades of Gray" were due to the artist's desire that the areas of color be very close in value, and to the chemical nature of acrylic paint which causes it to darken as it dries.

The shapes that evolved in this painting all tend to be quite fluid, thus lending themselves well to a fluid spatial
Fig. 1--"Shades of Gray"

reading. (See Figure 1, above.) While the light blue generally reads as background (a), the area of blue on the left that is enclosed by the middle value yellow ochre (b) tends to read as figure. The darker blue doughnut-shaped area (c) alternately appears to be positive and negative, with the enclosed yellow ochres (d and e) assuming the opposite role. The yellow ochres on the right side (b and e) are more stable and appear always to occupy space between the two blue planes (a and c).

"Engrain"

Underlying the coming to be of "Engrain" was the artist's desire to create a glow of colors that would affect positions in space. The palette was limited to two complementary
colors, cobalt blue and indo orange red. (See Figure 2, below.) The full intensity blue (a), was surrounded by a full intensity orange (b), with each hue being lightened slightly at their common border. The blue is repeated above the central orange shape (c) in a lighter value and below the orange shape (d) darkened and dulled in intensity by the addition of a small amount of the orange. The full intensity orange is repeated in the lower-right corner. It is also used as a glaze in the upper right corner to neutralize the light blue (e).

Spatially the composition is planometric with the possible exception of the glowing area (a and b). The glowing area with its borders less clearly defined pulsates and fluctuates between planes. The orange areas (b) project from the picture
plane while the blue areas (a, c, and d) recede. The neutral area (e), composed of both the orange and the blue, mediates between them chromatically and spatially.

"Return"

Since the cave-like shapes of this painting seemed to require rather somber tones, this canvas was first completely covered with gray. Only one area in "Return" remained gray, but the underpainting served to dull the luminosity of the hues which were then used.

The spatial planes in this composition are relatively stable. The order of their regression is fixed in most cases.
(See Figure 3, p. 22.) The purple (a) is in front of the green (b) and the green is in front of the gray (c). Only the plane of the pale purple (d) with its glowing yellow-green edge (e) is indefinite.

Value has been intentionally handled in a two-dimensional way in this painting; the lighter the value of an area, the deeper in space it has been placed. The result, while giving the illusion of limited depth, is much shallower than it could have been if the light-to-dark values had been assigned to the near-to-far shapes respectively.

"Enigma"

The geometric nature of this painting demanded greater technical perfection in its hard-edge treatment. The geometry included in the composition gives it the feeling of symmetry even though it is asymmetrical.

In "Enigma" the blue and green areas work as a unit; their combined mass balances the relatively small areas of orange. Tension is created between the small intense areas of orange.

As in the other paintings included in this study, in "Enigma" the positions in space of the various planes appear to be in a state of flux. (See Figure 4, page 24.) The light blue area (a) is the most stable area spatially, but sometimes the orange rectangles (b) displace it and assume its front-most position. The small accents of yellow-green (c) operate spatially with the orange because of their similar
Fig. 4—"Enigma"

intensities. Both the middle and dark blue areas (d and e) alternate between being positive and negative shapes. The
green areas (f and g) most often represent deep space, but they too are variable.

"Quiescence"

"Quiescence" was intended as a visual statement of the absurdity of death. The motif in the upper portion was taken from some earlier paintings in which life and birth were glorified. This painting, almost devoid of any chromatic content, utilizes a very limited value scale as well. Indeed, in the lower—or death—portion values are so close as to make the shapes almost indistinguishable. Though limited, the range of values in the upper—or life—portion provides enough contrast to render each individual shape distinct from any other.

![Diagram of painting](image)

Fig. 5—"Quiescence"
Spatially there are three important ambiguities included in "Quiescence." (See Figure 5, page 25.) The gray (a), although it is just one area, changes from figure to ground as it goes from the life to the death portion of the composition. The light yellow ochre (b) is both figure and ground in the upper portion and very indefinite figure in the bottom. A line (c) that is lost and found connects the two divisions of the composition. In addition to this function, the lost and found line adds weight to the left side.

Conclusion

The twentieth century is plagued by inconsistencies, not the least of which is the existential paradox. The man of the twentieth century, like the man of the Renaissance, feels that he is living in the most exciting age ever, and that as a man of this age his potential is limitless. As an individual he feels himself to be a person of ultimate worth.

Simultaneously, the man of this century, like the Australian Aborigine, feels that something external controls life. For the twentieth-century man the function of the great spirits has been assumed by an impersonal mass society run by computers. In this context, man as an individual has no real value.

Realizing that man of this century is at once of ultimate value and of no value, this painter finds that this paradox can best be stated in his paintings by incorporating both the
spatial language of the Renaissance man and of the Australian Aborigine. The nearness to the creative sources of the primitive two-dimensional painter has been assimilated with the self-importance and self-awareness of the three-dimensional style of the Renaissance.

In the paintings included in this study an attempt has been made to reflect the culture, the society, and the times in which they have come to be, and at the same time to reflect the artist's own will-to-form.
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