SHEEP TIPPING
(IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE)
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Problem in Lieu of Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
May 2001

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I believe that our individual religious experiences are just that, individual. Each of us has a different reaction to every narration, sermon, situation, and experience. Further, I believe these experiences are understood and maintained in or through abstract thought. In the parable of Jonah and the whale, what do you picture while reading the story? Most of what took place lacks any physical evidence of existence. The voice of the Spirit, the face of God, the sound of prayer in multitude, even the person begin swallowed by the fish, are all abstract in character. My paintings are visual investigations into the idea that most of our religious experiences and concepts are abstract in nature, thought, and experience.

Continuing my exploration of how my specific Christian experiences can be expressed through abstract painting, I investigated how the placement of the ellipse or ellipses as a dividing line affects the field and how surface development, layering and the expressiveness of high intensity colors affected the specific experience or Biblical narrative chosen.
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapters

1. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1
   - Statement of the Problem ......................................................................................... 3
   - Methodology ............................................................................................................ 3

2. WORK DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION ................................................................. 4
   - Psalm 23: Three Sheeps to the Wind ...................................................................... 5
   - Samson’s Lament: Burying the Bone ...................................................................... 7
   - Isaiah Forecasts Snow ........................................................................................... 8
   - Authority Over Pumpkin: The Judgment .................................................................. 10
   - Lazarus Rides Again .............................................................................................. 11
   - Three Days in the Hole .......................................................................................... 12
   - Four Up and Six to Go .......................................................................................... 12

3. CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................. 15
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The preacher sighs, and for the fifth time of the evening tells of parable where someone running from the leading of the Holy Spirit, ventures out on his own. This rebellion against the calling of God leads to his being swallowed by a giant fish. After three days in the belly of the fish, he repents and prays that he be restored to land in order that he may complete the task for which he was called.

As the parable is being told a person in the audience weighs his own life against the person in the sermon, realizing that he too is running from a voice inside himself.

The preacher winds up the sermon by making a call to the audience, “If anyone feels that they are themselves not unlike the person illustrated, they are invited to come to the front of the church and receive the spirit of forgiveness through their public confession and subsequent rebirth through prayer, grace and faith in God.”

The person wanders to the front, emotionally drained and exposed. People surround him. They put their hands on him and multitudes of prayers are offered in a whirl of sound. The world becomes blurry and depth is lost. The man falls to his knees and is swept up into a vacuum and stands alone before the throne of God. He asks for mercy and forgiveness. It is granted. As the man regains focus, the people have moved away. The church is silent and the light is on. Elation, joy, and a sense of ecstasy are felt. To him, the world doesn’t look the same.

What happened to the man? We could read this objectively as a religious conversion, but can we relate? If so, how? Was the man in the parable really
swallowed by a fish, or was it fiction? When the man that converted saw God, what did God look like? Was it really God? Does God look the same to every one?

I believe that our individual religious experiences are just that, individual. Each of us has a different reaction to every narration, sermon, situation, and experience. Further, I believe these experiences are understood and maintained in or through abstract thought. What did you picture while reading the story above? Most of what took place lacks any physical evidence of existence. The voice of the Spirit, the face of God, the sound of prayer in multitude, even the person begin swallowed by the fish, are all abstract in character. My paintings are visual investigations into the idea that most of our religious experiences and concepts are abstract in nature, thought, and experience.

In spring 1998, I completed a series of paintings related to this idea and based on the seven deadly sins. These paintings were all 6 x 5 feet and vertical in orientation. I used fields of drippy, wet oil paints in medium to high intensity in color. The fields were broken by drawn and painted in ellipses, some whole on the canvas and others broken by the activity painted onto the field. These paintings were successful in their attempt to draw in the viewer and carry them to a glimpse of the sublime through their size and color intensity. The paintings were meant to represent the idea of certain specific sins and our reaction to those sins. Assigning titles to each by way of number and not by name, such as Sin 1, allowed an in-route for the viewer. A road marker, if you will, while maintaining enough ambiguity to allow them to assign each painting to their own specific sin as contextualized through their own personal experience.

This new series of work carried on the ideas that I set forth in the Seven Deadly Sins Series with a few additions and changes. First, the ellipses or segments of ellipses
became more subdued and ethereal allowing them to exist less as objects and more as subtle breaks or divisions of the field. Second, I explored colors and color combinations that are high in intensity and contrast. Third, I used varying thickness in the layers of paint to build up the surface texture and quality in order to create depth and activity. Lastly, I made the paintings more directly related to my own specific Christian experiences.

Statement of the Problem

Continuing my exploration of how my specific Christian experiences can be expressed through abstract painting, I investigated how the placement of the ellipse or ellipses as a dividing line affects the field and how surface development, layering and the expressiveness of high intensity colors affected the specific experience or Biblical narrative chosen. The ideas for my paintings can be accessed through the following questions:

1. How do I use abstract paintings to express Christian experiences?
2. What specific effects do color, canvas scale/shape, and ellipse placement have on relating my specific Christian experiences?
3. How will the titles of each piece relate to the reading of it?

Methodology

I produced an evolving body of seven paintings. Through variances in scale, format, color and title the paintings relate it to a specific Christian experience or Biblical narrative. I kept a journal of source materials, inspirations, as well as support drawings as documentation. This project culminated in an exhibition of the work and this written thesis.
CHAPTER 2
WORK DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION

In December 1998, I began work on my problem in lieu of thesis. I discovered that my understanding and involvement with Christianity exists in and is enacted through an abstract understanding of God. I wanted my paintings to discuss my understanding of this type of faith. The problem was how to introduce a visual format for an idea that is so abstract? Throughout history, painters have tried to do this by creating metaphors or by attaching human identities to Christian events and situations. Artists of the past would paint the moment of a person’s transformation, such as Caravaggios’s *Conversion of Saul*. Or, they would use scale and placement to create a sense of the sublime, as in Casper David Freidriech’s *The Monk by the Sea*. I believe these paintings fell short in conveying a sense of the inner event, the transformation and ecstasy that happens during a religious epiphany within our subconscious and throughout our physical bodies. The physical and emotional impact of the personal experience is lost because their paintings represented a far-removed moment in time or were acted out by unfamiliar people. The removal of physical identifiers in my paintings allows the viewer to be brought through their own subconscious memory back into the emotional state of their own religious epiphanies. Through color, canvas shape and use of the ellipse to divide the fields combined with a specific title, I want my work to guide the viewer through a memory of his/her own personal experience with these religious instances.
Psalm 23: Three Sheeps to the Wind

The first painting came from a 5-part sermon by Pastor Ed Young, Jr. entitled “Leading Questions” that extensively covered Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.¹

This Psalm, written by David in the Old Testament of the Bible, is the “mission statement,” so to speak, for a Christian. It defines the role of God as the giver, sustainer, cleanser, and remover of life. I began Psalm 23, Three Sheeps to the Wind with the initial idea that the canvas color would be in a blue range to represent the water metaphor that David used in the Psalm. This painting began with running washes of dark thalo and mild spectrum blues on a 5 ft tall x 6 ft wide horizontally placed canvas, to relate the feeling of a landscape. Then I covered the whole canvas with more dark washes of blue and thalo green mixed to create an active field. Over that dark field I spattered, poured, dripped, and even threw many layers of intense transparent ocean greens and sky blues. In order to obtain the density needed for the oil paint to drip and run, I mixed in portions of alkyd medium and classic three-part medium (damar varnish, linseed oil, and turpentine). These mixtures also allowed me to create a transparent

¹ Psalm 23, NIV
paint from opaque hues, which was important in the layering of the colors. By layering different transparent colors of paint, I could gain an illusionary surface depth with the vibrations created between the different color combinations and exposed pre-colors. The result was an aqua blue field full of movement that vibrated with an intensity of cascading yet contemplative waters.

The ellipse that was an essential part of the my earlier series had in this canvas become a half ellipse, dividing the field across the lower third. The ellipse was painted and drawn into the canvas during the painting process whereby burying it into the living paint, dividing the field subtly like a rainbow divides the sky.

I discovered at this point what that ellipse was to me in all my work. The ellipse is the representation of a fence. A fence that separates our selves and our understandings of God from that which is God. The ellipse is to me the edge of a paradigm with God on the outside and our limited personal concepts inside. A paradigm of understanding that all we have is the tangent physical concept of God, and outside that slowly expanding paradigm is true understanding of the real living God that is, in actuality, already inside of us all.

In order that this painting, Psalm 23, reflects a more specific instance in my Christian walk, I gave it the subtitle, Three Sheeps to the Wind. This subtitle refers to the idea of being “drunk in the Spirit” which is defined as a time when you are in a state of religious ecstasy. I remembered the time period that I first understood God in the personification that is laid out in the Psalm and the subsequent joy in the epiphany was similar to being “drunk in the Spirit” for me. So I revised the old saying, “three sheets to
the wind,” changing sheets to sheeps to reference our God assigned metaphorical selves as sheep.

**Samson’s Lament: Burying the Bone**

For the second painting in the series, I decided to work on a theme that had also recently been lectured on at my church: lust. The personification of the idea of male lust and its inherent danger is in the Old Testament figure Samson. Samson was born to do great things for God but his lust would betray him and his purpose for all his life. The first words of Samson in the Bible reveal his intentions: “I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife.”

The problem was that Jewish law forbade him to marry a Philistine (a pagan). He persisted and did marry the Philistine. Eventually, this betrayal of his people’s covenant with God led to his killing 1000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass and his shacking up with another woman named Delilah. This would be his demise. Delilah would coax out of Samson the source of his strength, his uncut hair (his personal covenant with God) and deliver him to his death through the hands of the Philistines. The painting embodies this struggle, the one between flesh and our covenant, between the physical and spiritual.

I started with a vertically oriented canvas so as to insinuate a portrait, or at least to represent human presence. The color of the canvas I knew had to be a flesh tone and the final color would have to both represent the struggle and the struggler. This resulted in a seven foot tall by four foot wide canvas that is washed with intense powder flesh pink and fucia oil paint. The field was built with layers of thick running midnight

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2 Judges 14:3 NIV
blues overlaid with lighter crimsons and violets, simulating blood under our flesh, and finally moving into five or more top layers of a range of soft but intense flesh pinks. The ellipse in this piece moved several times within the painting process, ending up as a very light horizontal divider of the field near the top 2/3 of the canvas. Combining the height of the canvas with the ellipse placed high up in the field, the painting became overpowering in its presence. It stood tall and pulsing over the viewer. This was the best way to relate the ideas of not only Samson’s physical power, but also the enormity of his personal struggle.

For the title, I considered the whole story and experience of Samson. I settled on another 2-part title. Samson’s Lament as the main title with a subtitle Burying the Bone working as a double entendre referencing both his physical strength given him by God when he killed 1000 men with the jawbone of an ass, and to signify his main weakness of physical lust. The double meaning also served to add an element of humor to this work. The interjection of humor helped to alleviate some of the heaviness brought on by the theme of the work. By lightening up the tone I felt I could better reach an audience that might be distanced or even put off by the Christian overtones. I learned with some more experimentation to create more complex surface and color effects.

*Isaiah Forecasts Snow*

Moving into the third painting, although satisfied with the first two, I felt the field was too even, too monochromatic. I decided to work on a smaller canvas and explore the way I applied the paint, and how I could combine different elements that I had learned with some more experimentation to create more complex surface and color
effects. I wanted to roughen up the surface, make it shout, give it immense gravity to pull in the viewer, to do so meant more color, more layers and thicker, more transparently laid paint.

This third painting started as a formal exploration only 30 inches tall and 40 inches wide. This was small compared to all my other paintings thus far that year. I wanted to explore the different ways of creating drips and runs but in a controlled fashion on the canvas. I began painting in dark thickly laid brownish-yellow tones. The browns quickly developed into heavy drips of bright red paint. Then by using thicker and more controlled mixes of medium I found a way to make the paint run while maintaining its body, and maintain the ability to control each run. What resulted was a dense field of medium to dark red drips and exposed earlier drips of differing colors that vibrated and moved the surface of the canvas. I was elated with this result – I was on a path I felt I needed to be formally as well as conceptually.

The title of this painting *Isaiah Forecasts Snow*, which sounds like a tabloid headline, was inspired by a preacher I heard on the radio discussing the prophet Isaiah’s foretelling of the resurrection of Christ, Isaiah 1:18, “…Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are crimson, they shall be like wool…”[^1] Scarlet, or crimson, was the color of a deep red permanent dye and its deep stain was virtually impossible to remove. This deep stain represented our sin. The predictions (foretelling) by Isaiah assure us that if we are willing and obedient, Christ will forgive and remove even the deepest sin.

[^1]: Isaiah 1:18 NIV
The fourth painting was actually inspired by a Brice Marden painting entitled *Pumpkin and Plum*. The subtitle is a reference to Christ’ sitting on the judgment seat. I wanted the viewer to approach this painting in a prone position with the same feeling you would have standing in front of the judge in a courtroom. So I made the canvas extremely vertical, standing eight feet high and five feet wide. It is an incredibly intense orange painting with an approximately 12 inch complete ellipse in the lower center of the canvas. I used a complete ellipse in this piece to represent both the physical judgment seat and also to demonstrate how we stand alone in the time of judgment. The color dominated the whole piece and isolated the ellipse on the field, creating a feeling of alienation by fear of power.

There was a great amount of layering on this canvas, the most yet. I had discovered that through using high intensity transparent colors, some of the colors would actually change within the layering process. Towards the end of the painting, I wanted to change the straight cadmium orange to a more organic orange-green similar to the color of a real pumpkin and closer to the color of Marden’s painting. I wanted the orange to represent the heat we feel under judgment and the intensity as to which we are observed. I did not want it to insinuate too strong a presence of fire. I believe we are prodded by the idea that Hell is always present as a deterrent but I did not wish it to become an overriding factor in this piece, so I needed to cool down the color. To do this, I added a bright yellow green wash over the whole field. To my discovery, the green was absorbed over the drying time into the orange and eliminated. I tried adding more layers only to the same result – the orange assimilated the green. I eventually
had to change my approach to the final color. By mixing an opaque orange-green and applying it directly as an opaque wash, I accomplished the color I was intending.

*Lazarus Rides Again*

The fifth painting is about the resurrection of Christ of his three-days deceased friend, Lazarus. At this time, I was researching how the raising of Lazarus by Christ was a prediction of his own soon death and resurrection. The difference between the two is the fact that Lazarus, being completely human, would rot. That image stuck in my mind. I wanted to paint a picture that would represent both the awe and amazement of the miracle of resurrection and the grotesqueness of a risen, rotting human being. The painting, intended to represent a portrait, stood six feet high and two feet wide. It was to be the shape of a human standing. I wanted the final color to be an intense but gangrenous green color with a texture that would feel grotesque and yet watery or softly organic at the same time. In order to find a final surface texture that would represent my idea, I began experimenting with my chemical mediums and mixtures that would give me the effect I needed.

I began the painting with an alizarin and blue mixture – the same one I used in the Samson piece to create skin – then changing that to an opaque alizarin and while field then building into the many layers of greens and yellow-greens. Remembering a monotype technique I learned in undergraduate printmaking where splattering lithotine onto the ink caused it to draw, I mixed up a very wet medium of linseed oil and turpentine, mostly turpentine. When I applied this mixture to the surface, it created pockmarks, drawing off the paint and allowing wet runs that ate into some of the layers of green creating an effect of rotting flesh.
The ellipse was placed into the upper third of the canvas sweeping across the field horizontally, and it settled into the paint becoming less dominate but still a factor in the final overall look.

_Three Days in the Hole_

The next canvas, approximately the same size, carried on a theme of the resurrection. The painting represented the time that Christ was in the tomb. This painting spoke about inspiration even in a time of crisis. It was about faith and the conquering of death. Time in the hole is a reference to the prison term of time in solitary confinement, or when a prisoner was put into isolation for some act of defiance against the system that imprisoned him.

In order to reference the blood of Christ, which was symbolic of the purpose of his death, resurrection and redemption, I decided the canvas would need to be red. The all red canvas also played to connect the earlier red canvas _Isaiah Forecasts Snow_ fulfilling the prophecy. In this painting, I used much heavier textures, and thicker, more dense drips and brushstrokes as I had experimented with the _Judgment_ painting. The ellipse in this painting became buried deeper than all the previous canvases. I wanted to force the viewer, after viewing the other more prominent ellipses, to look long and hard, having to study to find the ellipse – thus forcing them to be saturated by the color of the canvas.

_Four Up and Six to Go_

The last painting in my thesis series was to be the largest. It would dominate the biggest wall in the gallery. The piece is made up of four panels spaced one foot apart, and stands overall six feet high and fifteen feet long. The initial idea was to be a
colossal painting about all ten of the commandments, something on the Cecil B. Demil epic level. I was going to paint ten separate panels each still 3 x 5 feet, representing one of each of the ten commandments laid out by God through the prophet Moses:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
You shall have no other gods before me.
You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.
You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.
You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.
You shall not murder.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.  

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Exodus 20:1-18 NIV
Considering the space that I had to show the work in, and upon further study of the Commandments, I decided to limit this piece to represent only the first four., saving the last six for another later installation. The commandments are divided into two distinct modes of direction. The first four are directed specifically at a Christian’s personal relationship with God, while the final six deal primarily with our relationship with each other and our interactions on this earth. The title became another double entendre, referencing the fact that the first four were on the wall and I still needed to paint the final six, and that the first four were also commands that directed our thoughts and experiences upward to God with the last six steering our relationships and movements on earth.

In choosing the colors for the work, I decided that by using the primary colors of the Munsell color wheel (red, yellow, blue and green), I could demonstrate the idea of the first four commandments as basic essential elements of a relationship with God. Also, it became another way of referencing some of my favorite paintings. More specifically, the painting Seasons by Brice Marden and Elsworth Kelly’s work, Four Colors.

The ellipses in this piece were completely and deliberately buried into the process of the painting. I wanted more than in any of the previous canvases for these works to force the viewer to create the ellipse with their subconscious and place it into the field just the same. I wanted the viewer to have to search and ask questions in order to find the division in the canvas much the same way we are all forced to search for God in this abstract canvas called life.
You walk into the gallery and are overwhelmed by the intensity of the colors of the paintings on the walls. You walk toward the first painting and are drawn into a familiar realm. The color, the texture, the movement of the paintings all create a symphony of emotion but what is that emotion? You look toward the titles for guidance. The titles all refer to a Christian narrative. You investigate further into the paintings. Looking deep into them, you are instantly absorbed into the fields of color that resonate the ideas of the narratives, but you sense there is more. The specific colors in the different paintings, such as the certain red chosen for *Isaiah Forecasts Snow* or the aqua of *Sheep Tipping*, reminds you of an experience, an understanding, of the topic that is prescribed. The vibrating fields such as the hyperactive oranges in *Authority Over Pumpkin* entrance you and pull you into a state of reminiscence. That which you thought you understood in physical form is now before you, abstracted. But that which appears abstracted before you can only be recalled in physical form. You notice an ellipse that divides the field, obviously in some paintings and very subtly in others, if not only an after-image as in the piece *Ten Up and Six to Go*. It is a barrier, a device that separates the field physically. You are forced to decide if you are inside or outside the division. You become introspective of your own understanding of and relationship with God. You vow to persevere in your struggle to live you life within the ellipse.

Though many questions remain, the preceding narrative describes best the ultimate goal of my work in the thesis and defines the efforts of my exploration in the future. The satisfaction I received from the formal growth throughout the process of this
thesis will allow me to continue to search for the right language to share my religious experiences with the viewer. Creating more complex surfaces and expanding my color pallet while searching for a way to communicate to my audience in a more direct way will be my challenges for the future.