

THESIS

PROSAIC MYSTERY,
PENTIMENTO IMAGES

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION
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ENTITLED PROSAIC MYSTERY, PENTIMENTO IMAGES

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS
PROSAIC MYSTERY, PENTIMENTO IMAGES

The idea began with depicting places/landscapes that I feel an emotional affinity for; this initial interest was in expressing, by the subject matter and the marks, the intense feeling of a certain place and my relationship to it. Beyond the landscapes, which involved the places that I had lived, I then felt it necessary to add the images of people that I had known, who were intimately and inextricably tied to these places. The figures and the structured landscapes were interwoven in overlapping structures, resulting in phantoms of remembered places and pentimento figures; some clearly delineated, others merging with the architecture, or fading into grass fields. These distanced symbols of passing people and places, I saw as embodying the temporal nature of life and thus something of our common mystery. In these prints, I strove to represent what is of importance to me, personal symbols of people and places filled with the personal moment, which is specific; and in this very specificity, embodies the universal.

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DEDICATION

To the Lord, for His enduring compassion,
And to Gene and Emerson.

The reproach of your widowhood
you will remember no more.
For your Maker is your husband, . . .
The God of the whole earth he is called.
For the Lord has called you like
a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
For a brief moment I forsook you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I
will have compassion on you.

--Isaiah 54:4-8

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PROSAIC MYSTERY, PENTIMENTO IMAGES

Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment, . . .
but my salvation will be forever,
and my deliverance will never be ended.
--Isaiah 51:6

In reflecting back on my prints of the past four years, I see that they are about change: changing life, changing people, changing places. Within this change, a pattern emerges; a pattern that is so complex and intricate that I, as a part of it, cannot conceive of it in its entirety. Yet, even if I cannot see the pattern in its entirety, it is pattern; it is structure.

The idea began with depicting places/landscapes that I feel an emotional affinity for: initially places that I saw, that I felt emotionally moved by, and then later, more intimately, places that I have actually lived and grown to love. This initial interest was in expressing, by the subject matter and the marks, the intense feeling of a certain place and my relationship to it. But within the expressionistic stroke or line, was the need to embody the form with a rational structure: to order the landscape, to count the windows on the barn, to arrange the cows in a diagonal movement, to bring structure to a highly emotional statement. This breaking up of the landscape in a fractured, geometric way involves the intellectualizing of the personal, symbolic subject matter.

The interest in the landscapes which are specific, personal depictions of special places, goes beyond physical description in a search for the symbolic--that which as a visual sign stands for more than mere appearances. In using symbolic language, the artist can communicate by means of community acknowledged and accepted symbols on the one hand, or simply by the manner in which the work is done. In other words, for lack of an accepted set of symbols, the artist could in a totally abstract fashion communicate by means of the formal qualities alone, i.e. the shapes and the marks. However, in my work, I have chosen to communicate through an expressive brushstroke or line (whether it be the brushed lithographic tusche, an engraved line, or the line of cut paper) and recognizable symbols to reiterate and emphasize the meaning. For I felt like Shahn that ". . . in the abstracting of an idea one may lose the very intimate humanity of it. . . ." ¹ The marks I make visually portray feelings with a certainty that is in itself a deep mystery; but beyond this, I can use a symbolism of recognizable objects which directly refers to my life and enriches the content of the work. This symbolism expresses itself in architectural forms: churches, homes, farms, which contain a multiplicity of different meanings to each individual and thus universally to society as a whole. In these prints, the represented image becomes more than just that particular place at that specific time; because it is a unique and exact place, in its very individuality, it strikes a universal chord. Ben Shahn describes the universal as "that unique thing which affirms the unique

¹Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 28.

qualities of all things. The universal experience is that private experience which illuminates the private and personal world in which each of us lives the major part of his life."²

Beyond the landscapes, which involved the places that I had lived, I then felt it necessary to add the images of people that I had known and who were intimately and inextricably tied to these places. The figures and the structured landscapes became interwoven in overlapping structures, image upon image. These emotional images are not tied to one place and one time, but are made up of inner vestiges of many events; this company of phantoms, of remembered images impresses itself, until as an integral part of self they are expressed in visual form. The changes come and go quickly, so that in looking back the images of different times pile on top of each other; some taking a clearly defined form, others becoming almost lost. And some changes completely alter the form, so that it is completely unrecognizable and irreconcilably changed forever. This is true in art and in life.

In looking back at my work and the subject matter which has motivated me--compelled me, I see that there is a critical balance between involvement and detachment. L'Engle knows that, "Detachment and involvement: the artist must have both. The link between them is compassion. . . . Compassion means to suffer with, but it doesn't mean to get lost in the suffering. . . ." ³ My first year as a graduate student I saw the work of Käthe Kollwitz and I still remember the moment I saw her woodcut, The Widow I. She had captured what I,

²Shahn, p. 47.

³Madeleine L'Engle, A Circle of Quiet (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1975), p. 69-70.

in detachment, had seen in myself, the young hands laying long and white, motionless, holding nothing, the face turned away in an inner sorrow. I remember that at the time, I was totally immersed in sorrow, but yet there was a part of me that stood outside and watched. In utter detachment, that part took note of the immensity of sorrow, the form of pain; and though I noted the shape of it, I could never express it directly in my own work. Perhaps because it was too close; perhaps it will always be too close. So, it came out in distanced symbols of passing people and places, in tender and delicate grays, in overlapping transparencies embossed from the collagraph. In the opposite fashion it expressed itself as a great anger at the unanswerable question of why? How can it be, a mystery so great and yet so common? In these other works, it expressed itself in the form of dark, intense movement, in broken brushstrokes and fractured structure.

When one of my professors mentioned the term, *Pentimento*, from Lillian Hellman's book of the same title, I found that she described the changing and passing images of people that I had sought to express in my later works, such as: Netherlands II and Late Afternoon Johnstown Farm Interior.

Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, That is called *pentimento*, because the painter 'repented,' changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again.⁴

⁴Lillian Hellman, *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1974), p. 1.

In my works, in fact all of the prints with figures, I wanted to see what was there once and at the same time what is there for me now. This resulted in pentimento figures, some clearly delineated, others merging with the structured architecture, or fading into grass fields. (All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people is grass.--Isaiah 40:6-7).

H. R. Rookmaaker explains the position and purpose of art in society:

Art always gives an interpretation of reality, of the thing seen, the relationships, the human reality experienced emotionally, rationally. . . . Art always shows what man--the artist and the group to which he belongs, the time in which he lives--sees and experiences as relevant, as important, as worthwhile. . . . To represent something means that one thinks it to be of importance. . . . Honesty can be called subjective truth. An artist must show his own insight, his own vision, his own understanding.⁵

This is how I feel about my prints, I have strived to represent what is of importance to me, personal symbols of people and places filled with the personal moment which is specific, It is filled with joy; it is filled with sorrow; but it embodies the universal, the whole burden of man's eternal sorrow is in the personal moment. Like the bitter joy of the snowfall after my son was born by Cesarean or the times in spring when the new life reminds me most of Duane's death, these full and intense moments are part of life, part of our common mystery. This common mystery which is life, which is change, which is death.

⁵H. R. Rookmaaker, Modern Art and the Death of a Culture (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 236-238.

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DOCUMENTATION



Figure 1. Morgan Farm. Lithograph, 30" x 41", Spring 1982.



Figure 2. The Shepherd and The Dreamer.
Collagraph, 22" x 26", Summer 1982.



Figure 3. The Great Black and White at Winds.
Lithograph, 22" x 30", Summer 1982.



Figure 4. Garden Farm. Color Lithograph,
15" x 23", Summer 1982.



Figure 5. The Johnstown Farm. Lithograph,
22" x 30", Fall 1982.



Figure 6. The Johnstown Farm II.
Lithograph, 22" x 30", Fall 1982.



Figure 7. Goodbye to the Johnstown Farm (variation).
Color collagraph, 22" x 30", Fall 1982.



Figure 8. Goodbye to the Johnstown Farm. Color lithograph and collagraph, 22" x 30", Fall 1982.



Figure 9. Thornbush, Grand Rapids. Lithograph
(two black plates), 22" x 30", Fall 1983.



Figure 10. The Same Tree or Easter Thornbush, Grand Rapids.
Color collagraph, 22" x 30", Fall 1983.



Figure 11. Netherlands II. Color engraving and collagraph, 4 3/8" x 7 1/2", Spring 1983.



Figure 12. Late Afternoon, Johnstown Farm Interior.
Lithograph and chine collé, 22" x 30", Spring 1984.



Figure 13. Mother and Child, Indianhead Estates.
Engraving and mezzotint, 12" x 16", Spring 1984.



Figure 14. Summer Light II, Indianhead Estates.
Lithograph, 15" x 22", Fall 1984.



Figure 15. Silverleaf Maples, Before the Storm. Color lithograph and collagraph, 22" x 30", Fall 1984.

TECHNICAL PRINCIPLES

Collagraph--is a print pulled from a collage plate. Almost any material which may be glued to the plate and run safely through the printing press can be used in making a collagraph plate. I personally used different textures of paper: Domestic Etch, Rives BFK, and adhered my cut images to a polymer coated mattboard. I found that with the elegance of line from the cut paper and the expressive brushwork of the polymer gloss medium, that I could achieve an unimaginable range of textures and marks with these simplest of collaging materials. For more intense darks, I sprinkled the finest grit carborundum onto wet polymer medium; for delicate incised lines, a certain amount of 'engraving' into the mattboard is possible. I intaglio wiped my collagraph plates and printed several in succession or even added lithographs and engraved copperplates to build up a subtle layering of images.

Chine Collé--is the process whereby different paper, usually lighter weight, is adhered to the supporting print paper. To size the chine collé paper, I used the Tamarind's formula: one part wheat paste to sixteen parts water; I have also used methyl cellulose with more consistent results. Different colorations, thicknesses, and textures of the various rice papers make this process an exciting way to subtly change the printed image. The chine collé paper can be the same size as the plate or it can be used in an almost collaging fashion where specific chosen areas are transformed by the welding of the rice paper to the backing paper.