

My Approaches to Painting

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My art education began in my early childhood. I was first taught by my father, who was then a teacher in public school. When I was 10 years old, I was spending a great deal of time copying from reproductions of Raphael and French neo-Raphaelite school. I learned the "feel" of chiaroscuro at this time, using thick applications of watercolour.

By the age of 12, I was able to make fairly accurate renditions of external and internal objects and images, both in drawing and painting. My media were pencil, crayon, pastel and watercolour on whatever paper was available. I remember this age well, for in that time I finally acquired the ability to transfer the image of a 3-dimensional object to a flat surface.

When I was 14, I received instruction from a Mr. Ono, then a budding artist of the Hokkaido art scene. His technique was based on the classic western method of painting using watercolour. (Material for oil painting was simply too scarce for student use.) The feel of body manipulation of pigments and mechanical perspective applied to scenery were major focal points during his teaching.

I have to acknowledge great help on technical and aesthetic subjects given me by my father during this period. He tutored me on western art history particularly the Great Renaissance three: Michelangelo, da Vinci and Raphael.

I remember a rather detailed description of da Vinci's "Last Supper", along with a photograph of it, which to my later surprise appeared in somewhat different form in a later-day version. This suggests to my mind that some restoration work had been done in the earlier part of the twentieth century. The same book also introduced me to El Greco, Tintoretto, Rembrandt, Cezanne, and others.

The Picasso exhibition, held to celebrate the opening of Kamakura Art Museum, one of the postwar masterpieces of architecture in Japan, featured lithographs of a female child.

Around 1960, Kenzo Okhara was said to be active in the New York art scene with his theory of "Yugenism" a graceful relative of action calligraphy, The great Isamu Noguchi has having a considerable influence on Japanese art.

Thereafter, the aesthetic tendency of modern Japan has been associated with the organic refinement of objects. This aesthetic tendency was originally the regional style of Zen-influenced art.

At about the same time, Yoko Ono was featured in monthly Japanese art magazine *Bijutsutecho*. She had made a successful debut in London art scene.

My own favorite at the time was Dali. To be able to paint like him have been the apex of my life's dream. He was a magician of art, strongly influencing much of later schools of fine art.

I was busy trying to integrate the theoretical propriety of contemporary art, such as the colour theory of pointillism, multiple focal points of Cubism, dislocation of perspective focal points, as seen in constructivism, and synchronization, dislocation of time and/or space as in surrealism and Egyptian wall painting); with the classical western method of painting, which I was majoring in. "Daphne" (oil, 48" by 60") my graduation work, reflected most of my effort in this respect.

Two books which affected me most at this time were "Education Through Art" by Sir Herbert Read, and "Methods of Painting" by Conrad, an American.

Read had a profound influence on my entire generation. His application of autonomous (noncommercial) artistic expression to the problem-solving aspects of the human condition was a major influence on Japanese art education.

The general tendency of the art world in Japan during my student years (1954-1958), was essentially that of the French *Avante Garde*. At least this was so in Tokyo. Salvador Dali, Picasso, Miro, Mies Van der Rohe and le Courbusier represented the "establishment" side of the art scene, while San Francisco of the American West coast school had just become the subject of much conversation in Tokyo coffeehouses.

This new tide from America, then somewhat representative of the Beatnik cultural scene, was called "concretism" in contrast with abstractionism. Later this movement evolved into "action painting", and "body painting" heralding the pop art of the 60's.

The utmost spearhead of culture then was Andre Malraux, later minister of culture during the deGaulle "occupation" of Paris. Dali and Picasso were the the giants of the art world, reflecting the Americo-Russian political reality of the time.

In Japan, later day politician Sintaro Ishikawa's first novel, "The Season of the Sun", was revolutionizing artistic sensibilities with its open approach to the "western way" of sexual expression.

My own most memorable experiences of my student years were one Van Gogh exhibition held in a small but prestigious gallery in the Ginza, Tokyo, and a Picasso exhibition held in the Kamakura Art Museum. The van Gogh show deeply impressed me with the brilliance of his yellow pigments. Later, I was surprised to learn the yellow in one of his works a depiction of a

bridge, was aureolin, then easily available in the student shop at my college, the Womens College of Fine Arts.

The treatment of colour has curiously been my weakest aspect in my artistic endeavors. After my father had painstakingly made me understand the phenomenon of the multicolouring effect made by the interplay of light and reflected light on snow, I painted the scene more or less in autumnal splendour.

Fortunately or unfortunately, this attempt led me into the jungle of spectral complexity and mystery. During this period, my paintings (watercolour), were executed by the application of the opaque pigments juxtaposing and/or overlapping each other in a sort of barbaric pointillism. I won two poster contests with works done in this manner.

Around this time, a poster-art show by Soviet youth was brought to a nearby town. I was transfixed by some of the works' technical excellence. I particularly recall a 14 year old boy's watercolour or casein execution of a railroad scene on the Russian steppes. I wondered whether two years from then (I was 12 years old) I'd be able to paint as well as this boy from a foreign land.

This experience of awe was the factor which drove me to an obsession with detail, for the boy's painting, aside from its interesting perspective of flat plains, flat sky, flat side view of the railroad, nothing vertical other than a few stalks of grass meticulously true to nature, seemed as impressive as Da Vinci's sceneries in its technical perfection.

Here, however, was a vista totally alien to the coziness of European nature, with a technical idiosyncrasy exuding the vitality of the new age with its candor.

Perhaps the interest in producing "Triumphal Return" one of my works executed in 1970 in New York, was planted in my bosom at this time, although the two paintings, one done by a 14 year old child, the other by a 34 year old woman, may hardly bear any resemblance to each other at all.

I experienced a similar, though not as powerful, reaction when I was first acquainted with the works of Ivan Albright of Chicago in 1965. One, called something like "Things I always wanted to do, but never did", reproduced in a small book called "Ten Young American Artists" that I found in the US Air Force library at a base in West Germany, carried an impact as massive as Rodin's "The Gates of Hell".

His enlargement of the psychological, visual horizon created a striking effect in which numerous objects gush out of the pictorial dimension. This experience was also integrated into my Triumphal Return.

Triumphal Return 60 x 50

Triumphal Return was done in that epoch when the Viet Nam War was at its zenith. The most vocal of public sentiments were those of opposition to the war. The immediate experience that inspired me occurred when I, by chance, attended the yearly ceremony of the local American Legion in Long Island, NY. The entire procession was conducted in seemingly utmost diffidence and in a strangely hastened-up way. The national anthem was sung in hushed voices in disarray. Their white military caps looked forlorn.

Something in this must have moved me deeply. I plunged into production of this work, which demanded four months of total concentration. I worked solely at night.

Preparation of the painting surface was done with a mixture of inexpensive opaque regular oil pigments (Grumbacher and Windsor and Newton) which eventually took on the hue of reddish dark brown. The canvas was commercially prepared small grain cotton. I created a surface approximately 1-2 mm thick.

After sufficient dryness was achieved, I transferred my final sketch of the scene, using medium strength charcoal. Three coats of fixative were then applied before the final execution of the underdrawing (cartoon) by oil colour using burnt umber and prussian blue in various composition ratios for the purpose of shortening the drying period. Pure turp was used as the medium.

When this underdrawing was sufficiently dry to accept overlapping pigment applications without surface damage, I began the first application of molding paint. Pigments used were burnt umber, prussian blue and yellow ochre. (On later works I used Naples yellow because of its larger covering strength and fast drying speed.)

After adequate surface dryness of the so far monochromatic skeletal first coat, (at this time the entire pictorial plane was equally developed), the second coat was applied to achieve chromatic mapping according to the psychological and aesthetic atmosphere desired.

I began this by using opaquest pigments such as yellow ochre, cobalt blue, burnt sienna (all of similar strength), and quick-drying umbers, Prussian blue and Naples yellow, mixed with turp and linseed oil using a 2 to 1 ratio of turp to linseed oil.

At this point, the entire effect of the painting still presented a monochromatic, relief-like quality, although the proper hues were assigned to the major areas of the composition. I call this stage, "the view at dusk", for its similarity in chromatic effect.

Now the painting began to look "realistic". As the canvas dimensions were rather large (50" X 60"), the earlier application became dry enough to accept further application by the time this coat was finished.

Once this stage was achieved, the important part of the painting began: rendering of the objects with utmost objective fidelity.

The method I used for this purpose was glazing. I employed pigments of high transparency, such as alizarin crimson, ultramarine, Prussian blue, veridian green, chrome yellow, aureolin, zinc white and ivory black. I found out later on that the "halo" family had good glazing properties. Thalo violet was especially intriguing in its chameleon-like adaptation to the underlying hues. With this one pigment, one can develop several nuances upon surfaces depending on the hues used in prior applications. The halo family was considered by some authorities such as Ralph Meyer as comparatively safe, though not time-tested. (If the surface of *Triumphal Return* crumbles, the halo family should be buried with it:)

When the entire surface was covered and safely dried, I used larger brushes, such as 1" or 1 1/2" flat and fan-shaped sable and pig bristle brushes, to go over the entire canvas, employing "wash" techniques similar to the second coating, to achieve thematic and pictorial unity. When adequately dry, I applied four coats of "retouch" varnish, which brings out sunk-in colours, over the entire pictorial surface.

CELEBRATOR

Celebrator was inspired by the then-waning "counterculture" era. Woodstock, Haight/Ashbury, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and other elements of the time were receding into the collective past, though oriental religions, psychedelic drugs and Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf* were still "in". Ennui and "internal exile" within oneself had begun surfacing. The theme of decadence is seen in the absence of the celebrator himself from the picture.

The composition places an emphasis on symmetry. I had been influenced by a visit to Japan, where I'd met a Japanese art student from the same college I had attended 15 years earlier. We'd been introduced by a visiting Kenyan artist, there on behalf of his government. The art student used meticulously balanced and measured symmetry over the entire pictorial surface of her drawings. I was impressed by her mirror-like composition.

In **Celebrator** (50" x 60"), I tried to create an internal interaction of mirror images by the interplay of identical forms, one "positive", one "negative". This was employed to connote an undercurrent of "karma" or metempsychosis. I had originally planned to duplicate the background environment of the basement room within the portrait inside the painting,

obtaining the echoing effect of self-reflection. The idea was discarded because of fear of overcrowding the composition, which might obscure my thematic contention.

In the picture, the artillery shells (from the battleship Maine, property of Mr. Robert Riker, Long Island, NY), reflect the fall of the Vietnam War into history, while the Celebrator, himself a self absorbed image, sits surrounded by glittering objects in a bleak basement room, dimly lit by a single candle.

The actual dim lighting of the painting is at least partly a result of working under intense lighting, which consisted of five floodlights and four fluorescent tubes. Consequently, it is best viewed under strong light.

The final varnish, using finish-varnish, was applied much later; after, in fact, the first exhibition of the work at the 1st New York International Show was over.

The above describes the painting method I have generally employed for my major works. There are minor alterations, such as heavier employment of naples yellow, flesh and titanium white, changes of hue and tonality of the first coat depending on the thematic need, more use of fan-shaped brushes and use of congo copal painting medium #1 and #2. I have found that at least two of my works of 15 years ago, "Celebrator" and "Ah!" are holding up well, maintaining their original surface qualities.

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Ah!

Ah! was inspired by the second Egypt-Israeli war. The cracked and broken shell of the lobster symbolizes the torn armor of the many Egyptian and Israeli tanks vanquished in the bitter fighting in the Sinai desert. Also to show how war devours its participants.

I exhibited it at an outdoor show in Brooklyn, New York, where it was seen by a member of a Manhattan Orthodox synagogue. Deeply affected, he asked permission to hang it in his synagogue during a time of prayer and mourning for the lives lost in the middle east. The picture stayed there for two weeks.

I had originally planned to fill the blank wrapping paper with the New York Times newsprint, which featured a story about the desert war. The plan was later abandoned as the upcoming date for the exhibition, the Long Island Art Show, 1974, would not allow time for the execution. Later the newspaper intended for use was lost, and the white paper remained white.

"Still Life", "opia!" and "Barbara and the Fortune Teller" being each a female protagonist, are counterpoint to the aforementioned three paintings, genderwise.

Chronologically, "Still Life" was painted immediately after "Triumphal Return". My main interest in executing this painting was an attraction toward technical pursuit. In spite of baptism by contemporary tendency of contempt for technical aspects of art, the influence of the milieu in which my artistry was cultivated seems usually to win the battle.

In that milieu, Balzac's "Unknown Masterpiece" still holds ultimate mystery (and victory at the same time) of technical virtuosity. What I really wanted to know through painting "Still Life" was my own limitations against this literally external pursuit.

Still Life

The objects in "Still Life", were collected chiefly because of various challenging aspects for technical execution (e.g., peeling on back board, intricately woven straw of the hat, the many-layered effects of transparent materials etc.) Thematic pathos is that of the so-called "working class people" whose lifetime ticks away while working through major hours of the day, and finally the major days of life itself.

In that life, the life envisioned as "fantastic" seems to come only vicariously, as symbolized by the party girl in the photograph. Yet, "still" it is a life - yet, so still. Thus the title of the painting.

-opia!

-opia! was painted after "Still Life". It and Barbara and the "Fortuneteller" should be considered more illustrative expression than not.

-opia! was inspired and based on a dream I had. For some time, I had been contemplating giving vent to a strange feeling of desolation I was struck with when I saw, for the first time, the decaying buildings of Harlem, in the middle of busy New York City. The overly gaudy visual atmosphere of the surrounding areas accentuated the ruinousness of the skeletal appearance of the dead structures.

My intention was to create the feeling of the aftermath of destruction without depicting actual dead bodies. I was making a considerable number of sketches and some clay models in order to construct a reasonably adequate composition.

During this period I had a dream which seemed to solve all the problems, pictorial and otherwise, with one stroke. In the dream I was inside a cave-like place when suddenly the entrance stone was removed and I saw intense light of utmost brilliance. In the midst of the extraordinary flood of light, there was a young woman engulfed in white flame shrieking in a high voice "help!" At the same time, I could see the walls on both sides of me, in momentary

illumination against which, silently stood corpselike figure looking into empty space, totally undisturbed by the occurrence outside of the cave. At the spot nearest the entrance sat a stone figure of a woman, somewhat reminiscent of a sitting statue of the Virgin (without child).

Mainly because of technical difficulties I could not solve at the time, I did not choose to create a faithful depiction of the dream. The flaming woman was turned into a stone statue and a stone statue into a living figure with flaming hair. The corpses were relocated to "outer side" and turned into buildings. A psychological monologue perhaps I alone can enjoy.

Barbara and the Fortune Teller

Barbara and the Fortune Teller followed "-opia!". Barbara is the name of the young lady who modeled for both "-opia!" and "Barbara and the Fortuneteller". This is a story in which a militantly clad youth departs from a fortune teller, assuming form of the establishment as a decorated old woman, leaving behind in her previous seat an artificial flower without leaves, symbolic of the sad incongruity of superficial reality. Emancipation and accompanying uncertainty is the theme's pathos.

End