

INVESTIGATION OF LINE IN THE ABSTRACT

A Thesis-Exhibition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

By

Grayson J. A. Bowen

Director: Richard Tichich

Director, School of Art and Design

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Committee:

_____ Director

_____ Dean of the Graduate School

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In dedication to Ciara Pickering for believing in me.

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ABSTRACT

PERSISTENCE IN PROCESS: INVESTIGATION OF LINE AND FORM IN THE ABSTRACT

Grayson J.A. Bowen, M.F.A.

Western Carolina University (December, 2009)

Director: Richard Tichich

My creative research has been an investigation of how different characteristics of line quality convey emotions or feelings in purely abstract work. The line quality that is used in the figurative work of Frank Auerbach (Berlin, 1931) conveys a completely different energy from that of Sam Messer (American, 1955). When these linear elements are used, the figures hold different feelings based on the artist's expression and method. The work of Jackson Pollock (American, 1912 – 1956) explores the same feelings that a line can create, but in a purely abstract work. I intend to further exercise how line can evoke different emotional reactions from the viewer in abstract forms. Studying how line can describe figurative drawings in different ways will continue to inform my method of abstract expression. Training myself to not only be a viewer of my work, but to understand how my feelings alter my work during the creative process will allow me recognize how the different emotional characteristics take form themselves in my work.

TRIAL AND ERROR

A strong element in my work is experimentation. This concept goes hand in hand with investigation. Trial and error is persistent in my work through my willingness to make marks that go against a natural sense of good composition. A line that seems arbitrary creates a problem for which there are multiple solutions. This dichotomy of linear relationships gives way to an artistic language with a diverse vocabulary. In this way I have discovered that there is no line in my work that is compositionally incorrect.

Every line creates a rhythm within its composition. Allowing the line in my work to develop itself in reaction to previous formal elements is another characteristic of my persistence as process. An instinctually based line can sometimes create an error of composition. However, my investigation begs for a way to understand what instinct was driving that line. By understanding this I am able to create a purely expressionistic piece of art.

Although the expression “trial and error” usually conveys a means to find a solution through experimentation, I find that it is extremely important to contain the error as well as the success side by side in my work. I believe that the error in my art is an important element contributing to a successful finished piece. The initial “error” is redefined as I find a solution for the problem it presents. It then becomes a crucial factor in the success of my piece.

INVESTIGATION AS PROCESS

I welcome the challenges that new compositional problems present. The knowledge I gain from working towards the solutions to these problems is the reason I create art in this way. My investigation grows as I create intentional errors and work to resolve them. I believe that there is always a way to transform awkward forms or lines that could be called “mistakes” into completely unique and valid compositions. Overworking a drawing on purpose gives me the opportunity to learn and shed light on fascinating elements that would not otherwise exist.

I am also searching for different emotional connotations within my own work. As I understand more emotional connotations in the work of figurative artists, I have drawn parallels between this figurative work and the lines in abstract forms that also carry such feelings. The figurative work of Sam Messer is extremely dense with personality, while that of Willem deKooning (Dutch, 1904 – 1997) is very scattered and torn. I intend to isolate the characteristics of the lines that describe both Messer and deKooning’s emotive qualities and use it in an abstract form. My investigation is not far removed from that of Jackson Pollock. My aesthetics may differ from Pollock’s, but the common improvisational process reveals a kinship.

With each piece I create I learn how linear elements can be unique to my own emotions I wish to express. Understanding my emotions through my drawing process is very rewarding. This is what I call a catharsis. When I get to a point where my thoughts are overwhelmed by the formal elements of a piece, I lose my cathartic focus. This takes away from the integrity and honesty of my investigation as well as the quality of my expression.

PERSISTENCE AS PROCESS

A large part of my process comes down to the element of persistence. The success of my drawing often relies on what happens over time. I feel that any drawing can be successful as long as I continue to play with compositional elements. I believe this is so because the compositional density of mark is an effect I am exploring. When I lose myself in my drawing my work becomes complex with a large spectrum of line and space. A large part of my process involves letting myself become obsessed with the trial and error aspects as opposed to focusing on creating a finished piece.

Using persistence process enables me to work through challenging compositional problems and find successful solutions. I have learned that there are multiple answers to any problematic element. My perseverance through linear elements helps me to discover as many different solutions as possible. This is my way of learning as much as I can from each drawing.

Often this linear variable is in reaction to a previous action. It is similar to a building a house. For example, I build a foundation and then I build on top of it. These improvisational marks allow that structure to grow more organically. I deliberately make an effort to experiment with the marks that I create. Due to this versatility, all of my “structures” are unique. The challenging nature of some of my marks can depict how much time the particular drawing will require and how much persistence I will put forth.

This obsessive method acts as a very dear relationship to the drawing itself. This process frees me so that I am able to treat the art however I feel. For example, when I am experiencing anger I can draw angrily: the fast, gestural, and careless marks I make then evokes the emotion I am feeling as it takes form on the paper.

The method that I use to create subsequent marks can be understood by comparing it to automatism. The kinship between my drawing process and automatism exists because of the use of stream of consciousness thinking that I use to create line. Over a period of time the automatic drawing tends to manifest itself in a density of line. It is this obsession that I refer to as persistence as process.

VIEWING AND UNDERSTANDING FIGURATIVE WORK

The figure in a piece is a vehicle that can be used to display almost any feeling. The figure can also be a platform used by artists to perform their dramas and convey a wide range of emotion. My interest lies in the specific ways that people such as Willem deKooning, Max Beckman, and countless others alter the figure to depict slices of life for the viewer to relate to and understand. I believe that by understanding the reaction to different formal elements, I will increase the versatility of my own artistic language.

Part of my investigation includes viewing and understanding figurative elements, particularly conveyed with line. I aim to isolate those impressionable and distinctive characteristics and utilize them in my abstract work. I find that this gives me an understanding of the natural significance of the figure. Within the surrealist movement, figurative work dictated narratives, concepts, and commentaries. For example, within Joan Miro's (Spanish, 1893 – 1983), *Nude with Mirror*, there is homage to cubism as well as homage to the simplicity of Henri Rousseau (French, 1844 – 1910). The narrative of a figure gazing into a mirror with her eyes half closed provides such commentary that it would be difficult for an abstract work of art to produce the same feeling clearly.

I look to Willem deKooning and Jackson Pollock to evoke life's complexity without the subject matter of the figure. Without a figure the work loses a sense of

specificity but gains an open-ended interpretation that can speak to many people in different ways. My intent is to study how figurative work and abstract work speak to one another as well as how they can be unique.

SPECIFIC EMOTIONAL INFLUENCES IN THE WORK

When I express myself visually I do not only benefit from the catharsis; the act of expression itself solidifies my thoughts into tangible objects. Not only does this emotive imagery affect the viewer, but it also helps me to learn about myself. An essential reason for me to create is that I may single out aspects of my life and emotions use my work to communicate them to the viewer. When I do this, my life experiences and emotional outlooks leave my metaphorical fingerprint on the imagery and, in turn, on the viewer. In this fashion my work tells the story of how I feel in the given moment

In order for this to happen I must first communicate to my drawing. Drawing with feeling creates imagery for me expound upon. A core reason why I draw is to interpret the ebb and flow of human emotions. I am not aiming to create something that is necessarily aesthetically appealing to the eye. I am essentially creating art to cope with intense feelings.

Due to my method of channeling my emotions, my drawings become autobiographical. This leads me to place high value on what I create. I value autobiographical artwork because it reflects how the changes in society, as well as different mental and emotional states, affect people's outlook on life.

INFLUENCES AND ARTISTIC RELEVANCE

Throughout my artistic evolution Igor Compagno (Italian, unknown) has been reflected in my work because of his strictly linear drawings. Compagno is a contemporary artist who can be characterized as a modern abstract expressionist. There is a clear emotive quality to all of Compagno's work.

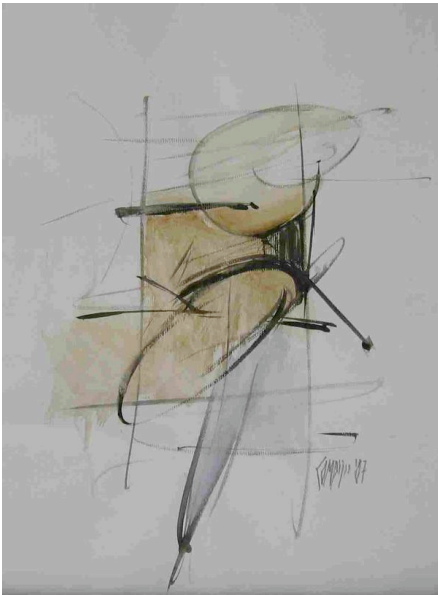


Figure 1



Figure 2

Compagno is an example of a contemporary artist that uses a similar process to my own. For example, the subject matter in this drawing, (Figure 1), by Compagno is stripped down to improvisational line and emotion as my drawings are. The subject matter in my drawing, (Figure 2), is clearly similar to Compagno's because of the expressive movement of the line. There is a strong similarity that lies in the tonal space that is created by line

in both drawings. It is also clear that the density of line intersections creates a sense of contrast in the final composition in both figures. In both drawings improvisational line manifests itself in the form of a grid.

Although the figure is important in Frank Auerbach's work, the line carries an expressionistic quality often found in self-portraits.



Figure 3



Figure 4

The figurative work of Auerbach exhibits the hectic and emotive line quality that I am investigating. Although the subject matter in this drawing done by Auerbach, (figure 4), includes a figure; the line quality is clearly an expression that speaks of the mentality of the artist. The dichotomy of figure and expression is something that informs

my work. My drawing, (Figure 5), is a departure from this idea in that it is a reflection of my emotions but is without the structure of a figure.

The work of Jackson Pollock carries a kinship to me because of the similar process of persistent improvisation. Jackson Pollock's paintings are riddled with angst and rage. The way in which figure 5 is carried out is honest and has a cathartic affect that I find in my own work.



Figure 5

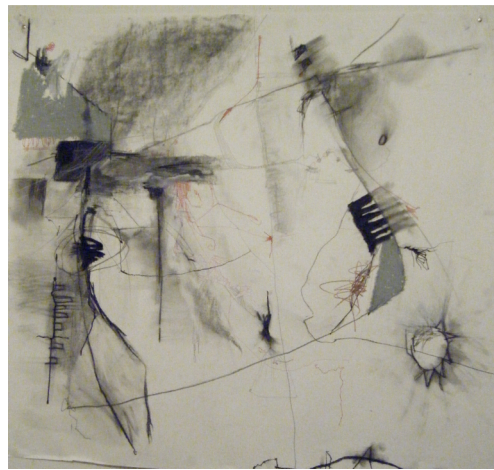


Figure 6

Action and reaction is a strong element of the persistent process in both Pollock's painting, (Figure 5), and my drawing, (Figure 6). The similar abstract nature of Pollock's work and my own allows for our art to communicate in a similar fashion.

I am interested in the relationship between the abstract art of deKooning to his figurative art. The dichotomy represented by these approaches from the same artist runs parallel to the development of my own artistic investigation.



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

The parallel effect evoked in the viewer by non-objective art of figurative expression and abstract expressionism shed light on my intention of proving that non-representational work can evoke emotion from the viewer in the same way as figurative work. It is clear that the two paintings done by deKooning both display a gestural movement throughout the composition. My drawing, (figure 10), contains similar shapes as deKooning's as a result of having fluent motion throughout the drawings.

In conclusion my aim is to further understand the universal effect of line when used in non-objective as well as figurative art work. My process of drawing consists of expressing myself emotionally within a purely abstract subject matter. My body of work displays a valid emotive quality due to my honest way of communicating in my art.

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