

Something concrete on the abstract

Talk by Frederick Hammersley

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You may have heard the small story about the little girl who wanted to know about penguins. She went to the library - went up to the librarian and said - I should like a book on penguins. The librarian being very thorough, and wanting to be helpful, gave her a very large book on penguins. The little girl thanked her and left. Much later when she returned the book, the librarian asked her how she liked it. The little girl thought a minute, then looked up at her and said - well, it was very nice, but it had more about penguins that I really wanted to know.

Now after that dinner, dessert, and now me - I'm not going to give you a very large book on penguins. I'm not going to give you a lengthy talk on abstract painting. Like my little story I intend giving you a point of view and an insight into the abstract that will give you something to consider, & maybe, give you pleasure. In my opinion pleasure is the coating on the pill of understanding. Or pleasure should be the coating on the pill of understanding. So, my pill begins like this...

There are 3 types of painting. They are - representational, abstract, & non-objective. There are sub classes that spring from these, but I shall confine myself to the 3. Understand, no one of these 3 is better than the other. They are all just different, and either one of them can serve as a legitimate source for painting. The first one - representational, means - pictures of objects we can recognize, such as portraits, still lifes etc. The objects painted have - names. It is an 'objective' painting.

The 2nd type is - abstract. This means that the painting is of objects, but they have been reduced to just the essentials, and, there

ASID = an introduction of interior design (a gentle introduction to the painting world)

are as many ways to do this as there are people doing it.

The 3rd type is - non-objective. This means - no, objects are represented. Lines, colored shapes, forms, patterns, etc are used, which mean nothing more than what they are. At the same time they may give you an insight into the relatedness of things, & also give you pleasure.

I remember reading about the time a lady had come to Picasso's studio to see his paintings. They were standing in front of one, looking at it, when the lady turned to Picasso and said, 'I don't understand it'. Picasso said to her - 'Madam, do you understand a rose?' What the lady was actually saying was that kind of painting was not familiar to her, and she didn't quite know how to handle it. A natural reaction, often happens, &, nothing wrong with it. However, Picasso's 'rose' remark may have stimulated her to look at her thoughts and feelings, and ask herself - am I enjoying the painting or not. It is as simple as that.

The idea is to let go, relax. Just look and let nature take its course. 'Nature' in this case means your glands. Let them tell you how you feel, and I'm convinced that you will often be unexpectedly surprised. In fact it's rather relaxing to know there are only 3 types of painting. And, when you are in that state you are in a position that will allow more things to come in, more insights, more fun.

While I've given you the accurate definition of the word- abstract, over the years it has been used to identify non-objective paintings too. So, anything that is not representational painting is now being called -abstract. It is not correct, but, so be it.

As you know there are some people who are just mildly interested in painting, and also those, who could care less. To these people the word - abstract can be unpleasant. An abstract painting can cause them

to feel uncomfortable & even annoyed, for they don't know what the painter is doing. I'd like to make known to them that some abstract painting makes me feel uncomfortable and annoyed too, for the same reasons as theirs, and, for others also. Nonetheless the principle of the new and different is a touchy and difficult subject. It depends upon how the subject is presented. And even after it has been presented well, it is still all right to dislike the abstract. What is very interesting and curious is that the abstract has been with us as long as there has been people. You, we, all of us engage in, and practice the use of abstraction every day. Do you realize that we are experiencing an abstraction this minute? I am converting my thoughts and ideas into words and disturbing the air with sounds of English. Earlier I clothed these thoughts and ideas with small black abstract symbols which I put on to paper so that I could refer to them, as I changed them into sound.

(Copejoy Auditorium)

Do you realize that one can go inside a very large building on campus just to experience an evening of abstraction. Some 2000 people can sit in this place, all facing one end of the room. There at that end a group of people sit, and, will blow into, beat on, pluck, and stroke specially designed instruments that create sounds - that represent nothing. To make these sounds they too rely on small black marks on paper, and, the guidance of one person standing in front of them. These sounds can represent objects and sometimes do, but for the most part they are made for the agreeable relationship of the parts. And, when those marks have been designed by a master, the resulting sounds can provide pure pleasure to all those people gathered in that room.

Do you realize that when you pay your gas bill you are sending in a small linear abstract drawing of how much money you owe? And in the lower right hand corner you invariably make a small linear abstract portrait of yourself. They won't accept your check unless they

can 'see' who's paying it.

We are surrounded with abstractions in our daily life, and, we accept them without thinking about them. But it is the abstractions that are painted on pieces of cloth that some of us are not too thrilled about. Often without knowing it you can have a good reason for not liking what you see, for there are many paintings that are not very good. But this automatic turn-off can preventⁿ you from getting a pleasurable experience when you are presented with a superior abstract painting. One of the secrets to handling the new, the unfamiliar, the abstract, is - time, which is another word for - patience. The secret is to allow the painting to do the talking, and, you listen. You cannot be telling your friend how big your gas bill was, while looking at a painting, or for that matter when sitting in Popejoy. You must give the painting a little time. Having done that, you will get one of 3 reactions - you'll like it - you'll feel so-so - or you'll not like it. If you like it - fine! If you feel like the other 2 - forget it and go on, look at something else.

What is very curious about experiencing something good, a painting etc, is that every good thing has one ingredient in common, and that is - it always gives you something. And what is remarkable, it gives you something each time you experience it. It never seems to run out of good. If we think about it, we often don't know just what has been given, and to me it doesn't really matter. We simply know that we feel good. The feeling can range from - good, to marvelous. I for one feel rich, and even flattered when I get it. We all feel very much the same I believe - good is good, and it is a most unexpected pleasure when we get a - good - from an abstract painting.

Now, let's get down to the nub of this talk - why abstract painting?

where do they come from? Why make them? The seeds of the abstract lies in reality, in the things we see every day, in objects, in people in landscapes, in everything around us. And for those who love to paint it usually comes naturally, it just comes. For some it doesn't come at all - and that is perfectly all right. For me it started in art school. I was lucky enough to go some top art schools in California and Paris. I was exposed to teachers who were giants in their field. The emphasis of my study was in - design, drawing and painting. It was like a full time job of drawing & painting still lifes, drawing & painting the figure for a period of over 5 years. It was a rich and marvelous ^{time} ~~experience~~. The last 2 years of art school I was invited to teach regular classes, as I was attending others. This too was an exciting time which was the beginning of teaching in art schools and universities for 20 years. I loved it. However toward the end of my training and odd and unexpected thing happened - while I could draw and paint reasonably well, I found I didn't know what I was doing, or why. So, in my free time I went back to beginnings - I did color experiments for a year, then black & white experiments for a year and a half. By this time I had left school and was teaching and working on my own doing self portraits, still lifes, trying to find my way.

And then one day I made a portrait of shapes, pieces that could be drawn with scissors, and a light turned on - shapes! There followed a series of portraits and still lifes of shapes. I simply followed where this idea took me. One day there came a turning point. I was going to do a portrait on a grid of rectangles when I 'saw' a blue in one rectangle. Yes, but I was going to a portrait. But what would happen if I painted that shape in blue? There followed a mental discussion - a portrait or that hunch of blue. I didn't want to waste a canvas, not having much money - a typical predicament for a new painter. I painted in the blue - after which I could see an ochre over there - and so on. Each shape

just 'came' until I was finished. I burst out laughing. My God if I can paint without thinking - this is for me. I prepared many canvases and continued to paint by 'hunch' shapes as I saw them, without preconceived ideas or drawing. I would look at a canvas and wait until I could see a shape, then squeeze oil color from the tube on a palette knife and apply - no mixing of colors. In time I had 75 tubes of oil paint, each a different color. This was my first experience in the use of that invisible logic called intuition. It was wonderful. Much later I realized that this intuition was the by product of all that art school training and experiments. I was spending a fund I had accumulated over all those years. The early paintings contained many shapes. As the paintings grew in number the number of shapes lessened. In time this system slowly evolved until I would often see the entire painting in my mind's eye, & draw it in a book and let it age awhile. If it ^{still} felt good after some weeks or months I would paint it. Afterward came framing and the title.

In the late 50's there were but 4 people in California painting in this fashion, that is, using flat colored shapes. By a stroke of good fortune an art critic in Los Angeles was helpful in initiating a show of the 4 of us - first in the SF museum of art, then in the Los Angeles museum in 1959. This was the first show of its kind ever shown in California - of hard edge paintings. A portion of this show then traveled to London and Belfast, Ireland in 1960.

Now I'll show you some slides illustrating what I've been talking about - representational paintings that contain the seeds of the abstract then, a cross section of my work starting with photographs, drawings & paintings that lead into the work I do today. Later I invite you to ask whatever questions you might have.