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ASPECTS OF RESTRICTED SPACE IN MY WORK

BY

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This support paper for my M.F.A. degree and exhibition is an attempt to verbalize and partially clarify some of my ideas as such ideas relate to the actual work. In researching and writing the paper, I came to realize that many of the ideas and concerns behind the work had been on my mind prior to the initiation of the paper and that others evolved as I continued to work on the paintings.

In this paper, I take into consideration such things as physical format, influences, matters of form and content and even "inspiration." It is not a conclusive statement. Rather, it touches upon various aspects of my present working methods which do change as the paintings evolve.

CHAPTER 2

Formal Concerns

a. Reasons for Using the Square Format

My paintings from December 1986 to the present are acrylic and oil on canvas, measuring 5 1/2' square. The initial reason for the 5 1/2' format was a pragmatic one - I had purchased a roll of canvas that size. Later, I realized that these dimensions suited me as they approximated my own height and reach. I was thus able to make my imagery life-size and at the same time remain physically within reach of all parts of the canvas.

The choice of the square was intuitive rather than conscious. When I attempted to paint on a horizontal or vertical canvas, it simply did not 'feel' right. It is possible that this 'gut' reaction had something to do with problems of balance or symmetry. However, the neutrality of the square suggests neither horizontality nor verticality and therefore permits a choice of emphasizing either of these directional forces in the picture. I am able to determine my own axis for each work within the strict

confines of the four equal sides and to exert more control over basic composition.

When beginning a picture, I arrange certain compositional elements so that they are more or less evenly spaced from one another and from the edges of the canvas. Although precise measurements and exact mathematical proportions do not concern me, I try to create a sense of visual order through an intuitively selected location of each shape and its counterparts.

Ad Reinhardt's 5' square black paintings from the 1960's were indicative of his obsession with repetition and uniformity.[1] To a lesser degree, my continued use of a standard format suggests a concern for familiarity, repetition and consistency, and the elimination of problems related to each painting's shape and size. It is unnecessary to adapt to a new format every time I start a picture, and consideration of shape is eliminated from the initial stages of the painting process.

Aside from the shape, there is little similarity between Reinhardt's use of the square and mine. Whereas Reinhardt's black, tri-sected canvases express "emptiness as a spiritual space,"[2] I utilize the four equal sides to frame a scene of confusion and congestion. Because life is often chaotic and unpredictable, the use of balance and symmetry is an attempt to gain greater control over existence or, at least, one's perception of such existence.

Eugene Delacroix wrote in 1823: "Cultivate a well-ordered mind, it's your only road to happiness; and to reach it, be orderly in everything, even in the smallest details."[3] Because the square is ordered, my use of it is indicative of a desire for order and consistency.

In Reinhardt's 'Art-as-Art' philosophy, he preached that his square paintings were objects in themselves with no reference to anything else. In my work, the square format is a neutral starting point. I introduce both geometric and organic shapes that refer to things other than themselves. Simply drawn horizontal and vertical forms are further developed into recognizable architectural elements such as pillars, walls, ceilings, floors, or windows. These structural components offer the viewer a visual indication of places/environments that could exist in real life. Whereas Reinhardt insisted that the barely visible vertical and horizontal divisions in his black paintings referred to nothing other than themselves, I allow and encourage my forms to objectify or at least suggest reality.

In summary, I work on a square canvas because of its uniform shape. I derive a certain feeling of control from the symmetry which, in turn, exerts a kind of order upon the work. The neutral starting point seems to increase my options regarding directional forces in the composition due to the non-vertical/horizontal characteristics of the square. Despite the equivalent symmetry found in the

diamond or circle, I avoid these formats not wishing my paintings to be shaped canvases.

b. Colour

Prior to December 1986, my paintings contained bright primary and secondary hues, the major influence coming from Matisse's fauvist colours, flat patterned compositions, and attainment of harmony through proportion and hue. He wrote: "My choice of colour does not rest on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences."[4] Like Matisse, I was more interested in achieving order through the harmonious balance of intuitively selected colour than I was in depicting space.

Despite the everpresent desire for order and unity, my work ironically appeared to present a chaotic view of life. Colour, instead of achieving a quiet harmony as in the work of Matisse, seemed only to add to the chaos and confusion of my scenes. This increasing contradiction between intention and result forced me to examine the effects of colour in the work. In spite of the use of vivid colours that were jumbled together in equal degrees of intensity and which enhanced the flatness or non-illusion of the scenes, the subject matter still seemed more significant than these colours. My strongest response was to the compositional elements and narrative components rather than to the

relationships of hue. My choice of colours was even more arbitrary than I had imagined. This led me to believe that colour was secondary in the painting and that the emphasis on its importance was exaggerated. This questioning brought me to the first stage in the development of the recent work.

Early in 1986, I began a series of black and white paintings in an attempt to gain more control over imagery. In addition, reducing colour was one way to minimize decisions regarding spatial and compositional elements. Philip Guston, whose work I have studied, described a certain period of his work as follows:

> Well, certain definite things can be said about the work of the last three years. It began developing earlier, but in the last years there's been, obviously, no color. Simply black and white, or gray and white, or gray and black. I did this very deliberately, and I'll tell you why. Painting became more crucial to me. By "crucial" I mean that the only measure now was precisely to see whether it was really possible to achieve - to make this voyage, this adventure...without any seductive aids like color, for example. Now I've become involved in images and the location of those images, usually a single form, or a few forms. It becomes more important to me simply to locate the form. So I use the most elementary way of making a mark, which is black on white.[5]

Conversely, Delacroix warned: "Painters who are not colourists practise illumination, not painting. Unless you are deliberately setting out to do a monochrome or camaieu painting in the proper sense of the word, you must consider colour as one of the most essential factors, together with chiaroscuro, proportion, and perspective."[6]

In terms of colour being an essential factor, I partially agree with Delacroix's advice. However, the deliberate limitation of my palette to black and white was instrumental in that it led to a strong interest in depicting three-dimensional space through the illusion of shading and perspective. Thus, by simplifying one aspect of the painting process, (i.e. colour selection), I was then able to recognize an obsession with space I never thought I had. Furthermore, limiting the palette to black and white aided in clarifying certain images. Having gained a clearer idea of what I wanted to paint and realizing perhaps as Delacroix did, that the exclusive use of black and white was restrictive, I again began to incorporate colour in my paintings. However, rather than reverting to the use of brilliant colours which I often felt flattened out the composition, I reduced them in intensity.

Colour choice is still somewhat arbitrary. It serves mainly to distinguish certain objects or areas from one another. For example, colour glazed over black allows the different blacks visually to separate slightly from one another, thus adding variety and depth to the surface. Besides enhancing variety, colour can be used to emphasize emotional or psychological aspects of a work. However, I use colour in a very general sense with little attention to the specific meaning or associative symbolism of any one colour. I am primarily concerned with the formal use of

colour relationships. Making an object stand out by painting it with a brighter hue is more important to me than deciphering a colour's meaning. I do admit to the potential emotional effect that colour can bring to a painting, but in my case these effects are fortuitous as I am only relating the paintings' physical characteristics to our natural environment.

Therefore, colour, even when used in a limited way, gives a certain amount of life to the work but I do not wish to invite any symbolic interpretation of that colour. The choices are incidental rather than purposeful and in many cases, one colour would work just as well as another.

c. Form and Content

My paintings are more narrative than they are painterly. Often, concern for surface marks, colour, line and shape are secondary to the narrative elements. This tendency in my work is not intentional and it is my goal to achieve a personally pleasing balance between style and content. I agree with Matisse's statement: "A work of art must carry within itself its complete significance and impose that upon the beholder even before he recognizes the subject matter."[7] Similarly, Francis Bacon, in an interview with David Sylvester, commented, "...an illustrational form tells you through the intelligence

immediately what the form is about, whereas a non-illustrational form works first upon sensation and then slowly leaks back into the fact."[8] Like Matisse, Bacon's concern is one of capturing and presenting a deeper meaning that touches the viewer's subconscious even before his conscious begins to see the picture. Delacroix, in a comparison between painting and music, described the union between subject and form as follows:

> ...if it were only a question of arranging lines and colours to create a visual effect an arabesque would do as well, but when you add to a composition already interesting on account of its subject, an arrangement of lines that heightens the impression, a chiaroscuro that grips the imagination, and a colour scheme suited to the characters, you have solved a more difficult problem and, moreover, you are moving to a higher plane. Like a musician, you are adapting to a simple melody the wealth of harmony and its mutations.[9]

Delacroix's, Matisse's, and Bacon's remarks pertain to the importance of the balance between a painting's form and its subject matter. One of my concerns is to achieve this balance, as Giorgio de Chirico did in his Ferrara period, because I believe that the formal elements of a work of art are as important as the subject matter. The meaning of a painting and the form it takes are inseparable. Whether vivid colour, abstract shapes, or super-realistic representation are employed, both the artist's intended meaning and the spectator's interpretation of the work are usually derived from the form that the painting takes unless

there is information outside of the work of art that can be read and which may alter or add to an individual's response.

The form of a painting serves the artist's purpose in that the formal elements can be employed singly or in combination with an awareness of their associative and connotative values, thereby instilling meaning in the work. My paintings contain meaning both in the way they are painted and in what they depict and I am in agreement with Andre Masson when he states: "...plastic rigour cannot be replaced by even the richest literary imagination."[10] In discussing one of de Chirico's 1914 paintings, David Rubin wrote:

> The power of the Song of Love is also inseparable...from the extraordinary plastic intensity with which the image components are configured - and without which its pictorial poetry would be reduced to "literature." Hence, though the translation of the Symbolist poetic principle into pictorial terms was de Chirico's primary, most influential and most easily discerned -contribution, it would not in itself have sufficed to give him the important place he occupies in twentieth-century art. The latter depends no less on the pure plastic power and originality of that style which the artist perfected as a pictorial vehicle for his poetry in the two years preceding the extraordinary Piazza series of 1913.[11]

My paintings contain bizarre and fantastic images which represent various feelings, emotions, and ideas. Painterly distortions of real objects add to the otherworldliness of the scenes. Because many of the images are so intangible, I contextualize them among recognizable structural elements

such as steps, pillars, walls, windows, floors, or posts. In this way they become more credible as `life' forms. Similarly to the British artist Graham Sutherland, I am concerned with the way I paint the objects: "Sutherland does not, like the `abstract' artist, give up imitation in favour of a new pictorial reality; on the contrary, he seems to imitate objects with the most literal accuracy; only these objects have no material existence. And yet they convince us that they could exist....there are signs in Sutherland's later work that his creatures are trying to claim full human status."[12]

Because I am so obsessed with the portrayal of particular images, painterly aspects are often neglected in my work and the emphasis rests on what is seen rather than how it is painted. Each time I am finished with a painting, self-criticism focuses on treatment of surface and use of paint. In future paintings, I hope to place more emphasis on paint-handling than is present in my current work.

CHAPTER 3

The Element of Restricted Space/Giorgio de Chirico

There are many modern masters such as Graham Sutherland and Philip Guston whose work I have studied and no doubt have been influenced by. However, in the course of my research for this paper, I became particularly interested in the Ferrara period of the Italian artist, Giorgio de Chirico. His works from this period are of special interest to me due to certain similarities with my own recent work. I will address de Chirico's concerns and relate them to aspects of my own paintings to date.

In his memoirs from 1945-1960, de Chirico wrote: "It is certain that the circumstances of life and one's surroundings count a great deal in the development and career of an artist."[13] This statement reflects a basic idea that is behind much of my work. My paintings are essentially about my life. There are certain aspects of the work that I can relate to personal experiences and this realization has prompted comparisons to the work of de Chirico's Ferrara period.

When de Chirico was nine years old, he witnessed the gruesome war between the Greeks and the Turks. When later referring to this traumatic childhood event and to the subsequent world wars, he remarked that he had been "a witness to many frightening, agonizing, moving, distressing and sometimes even repugnant sights..."[14]

In the summer of 1915, he was assigned to military duty in Ferrara, Italy and due to a recurring illness, was unable to withstand the drills and was transferred to a clerical position. He resumed painting in the Fall but a year later again became ill and was required to spend more than twelve months in Ferrara's military hospital. After his release from the hospital, he remained in Ferrara during which time the spatial quality in his paintings changed. Previously, his scenes of courtyards and piazzas were open and empty, filled only with a statue, the illusion of great distance, and deep, dark shadows. Now these vistas disappeared and were changed into crowded street scenes, evolving into claustrophobic interiors.

In an essay for the Museum of Modern Art catalogue on de Chirico, William Rubin noted that "...wooden scaffoldings became elaborate and complicated in the paintings of 1916."[15] In a second essay from the same catalogue, Wieland Schmied wrote:

> The space that de Chirico painted during his metaphysical period (1910-19--until 1915 in Paris, then in Ferrara) is characterized by a

> dialectic of emptiness and constriction, or, more correctly, by a gradual development in the pictures from emptiness to constriction. The claustrophobia of the Metaphysical Interiors of 1917 appears as the inevitable consequence of the constant and unalleviated horror vacui of the early Piazza pictures. Constriction replaces the void.[16]

De Chirico himself commented on this "horror vacui": "The hideous discovered void has the same soulless and tranquil beauty as matter."[17]

In making a comparison between de Chirico's Paris to Ferrara transition and my own experience in the past three years, I would compare my working independently in a private studio to the somewhat formal atmosphere of an M.F.A. program in a university. My work prior to graduate school was very open as compared to the recent work which is restrictive and confining. An analogy might be drawn between my two contrasting environments in terms of their effects upon my work and in terms of de Chirico's move from Paris to Ferrara. I would not go so far as to extend this analogy to include de Chirico's war experience with the insulated world of academe, although conflicts do exist in my ivy covered halls.

Prior to university and alone in my studio without scholastic demands, I experienced a kind of freedom, but a freedom with certain hardships. The discipline required to accomplish work had to come from self-motivation. Being new to the city of Calgary, I did not have any contact with

other artists and at times, felt extremely isolated. I lived in a sort of "hideous discovered void." My paintings depicted wide open valleys and skies littered with metaphysical triangles, wedges, periscopes, and light bulb shapes, all of which seemed to linger in stillness, waiting for something to happen. Although these compositions offered vast breathing spaces, tension was created by the atmosphere of the eerie calm before the storm.

Leaving the solitude and freedom of the studio, I returned to university for formal art training. My compositions changed from open exterior spaces into claustrophobic interior scenes. I began to crowd shapes and leafy-like creatures into new architectural settings. Perhaps initially I felt somewhat uncomfortable to be constrained within a structured environment and, therefore, painted images of barricades in the work to, in a sense, restrict intruders. This is not to imply that I interpreted the environment of the university as a negative change in my life. However, even as a positive step, interaction with others required some adjustments. This effort may have stimulated my need to construct protective barriers in the recent paintings in order to protect my privacy or autonomy. According to the philosopher, Otto Weininger, who de Chirico often quoted, "Space is...a projection of the self."[18] By blocking off the space in my canvases, I shut out the exterior world.

In de Chirico's case, Ferrara seemed to have had a direct impact upon his painting. For example, an adapted account of James Thrall Soby's description of de Chirico's painting, The Faithful Servitor 1916 or 1917, reads: "The fact that de Chirico was obliged to spend much of his time during World War One in the military hospital in Ferrara seems to have had an effect on his art."[19] (Illustration #1) The Faithful Servitor is indeed claustrophobic and oppressive. It reflects the artist's feelings about the war and his confinement to Ferrara's military hospital.

In his memoirs, de Chirico described Ferrara in two ways. In the first instance and in a metaphysical manner he called attention to the fact that "certain aspects of Ferrara interiors, certain windows, shops, houses, districts, such as the ancient ghetto, where you could find certain sweets and biscuits with remarkably metaphysical and strange shapes," inspired him.[20] These observations of Ferrara were recorded in his paintings from that time. For example, he often included sumptuously painted delicious desserts and other items he may have seen in the above mentioned shop windows. The paintings: Evangelical Still Life, Regret, War, and Metaphysical Still-Life, all from 1916, contain sweet biscuits. (Illustrations #2 - #5)

Although de Chirico described Ferrara as one of the most beautiful cities in Italy,[21] his second description

related to the people who lived there and was less complimentary:

> I worked as well as I could, in spite of the little time at my disposal and my perpetually irritating way of life, due to the military surrounding, so alien to my nature. I knew a few people living in Ferrara. What struck me most of all among the Ferrarese was a kind of more or less latent madness which could not escape an acute observer, such as I have always been. Apart from this latent madness...is their mania for gossip and indiscretion; no sooner do they know someone than they want to know at once where he comes from, where he is going, where and when he was born, what is his civil status, who are his parents, what is his financial, emotional and sexual situation....[22]

The anxiety in this scathing account of life in Ferrara was translated into de Chirico's paintings as greatly complicated spaces.

Architecture, which played a very important part of the Paris period, became secondary to de Chirico at this time. Rather than portraying public buildings and squares, he concentrated on close up views of unusual interiors. He moved his imagery indoors, perhaps pretending to escape the madness of the Ferrarese. According to his wife, Isabella Far, de Chirico felt comfortable in a room.[23] He questioned, "Where is the room, the nice room where one encloses oneself, the curtains drawn and the door closed, and especially, where are the corners of rooms and the low ceilings..."[24] This sentence has particular meaning for me as I often feel truly comfortable when enclosed in a room

with low ceilings and shut drapes. This sensation of being secure in a sort of encasement is one thing I paint about.

Shadows play an important part in my work. They establish form and space while adding drama and mystery to the scenes. As late as 1968, de Chirico wondered: "I was thinking of the ceiling illuminated by the light from outside, occasionally a shadow passed over the ceiling. Why does the mystery of shadows attract me?"[25] I have asked myself this question many times as well. I can understand the formal uses of shadows in a painting but I have yet to know what fascinates me beyond that.

It would appear that shadows were important to de Chirico because they were one way of indicating an object's form or depth of space and its solidness or substance. Wieland Schmied asserts that: "The crucial problem in the art of Giorgio de Chirico is the problem of space. Here - in the understanding of the peculiarities of the space he created - lies the key to the understanding of his oeuvre.."[27] Rather than depicting space in an atmospheric or modulated fashion, he relies heavily on line to describe shape and form and to define space.

Similarly, my paintings contain strong linear elements and overlapping shapes used to establish form. In both de Chirico's and my work, harsh side lighting adds to the drama and creates shadows which then solidify the forms. Massimo Carra explains de Chirico's use of light and shadows as a

way to add magic to the narrative elements and thus, combined with strange images and 'impetuous colours', to accentuate the theatrical component of the paintings.[27] Wieland Schmied emphasizes the spotlight illumination, hard shadows, and stage-like space of de Chirico's metaphysical paintings.[28]

Besides light sources, geometry and perspective are the two most important formal aspects of de Chirico's work. Although some works have an appearance of classically derived perspective, the converging lines do not share accurate vanishing points. When actually measured, the linear perspective in de Chirico's works is illogical and haphazard. His concern was not with perspective truth but with the distortion of it. In this way, he was able to convey an altered view of reality in which geometric shapes took on a life of their own.[29] This disturbing disruption of known space allowed him to portray a truly metaphysical world. Like de Chirico, I purposefully alter the perspective to add to the otherwordliness of my scenes. In order to make the unreal credible, however, de Chirico painted his scenes with dedicated clarity of form. Like Graham Sutherland, he was determined to represent his internal vision with the utmost of his technical ability. I feel that this concern for quality of paint application and surface is something that I still have to deal with in my work.

De Chirico's painting emphasizes the metaphysical aspect of art. He strove to bring everyday objects into a new light. He believed that the ability to see these metaphysical qualities was rare and clairvoyant.[30] Through strange angles and distorted perspective, de Chirico delighted in the bizarre animation of everyday objects. He declared: "...we who know the signs of the metaphysical alphabet are aware of the joy and the solitude enclosed by a portico, the corner of a street, or even in a room, on the surface of a table, between the sides of a box."[31] I can relate so well to this statement as I derive great pleasure from looking at things. I sometimes wonder if certain people endeavor to instill life into objects in order to have company without having to relate to other people. They animate still-life as if it were truly alive. I frequently paint non-human things as if they have a kind of life of their own and furthermore, these visual personifications are quite likely to communicate with me through my imagination. I regard this somewhat unusual practice as one similar to the way a person might become so fond of an ornament that they actually give it a personal name as if it were alive.

As I enjoy imbuing certain non-human forms with a life-force, every compositional element is alive to me. The long straight bars that reach from one edge of the canvas to another either guard their space with a vengeance or lovingly protect the objects within that space. Likewise,

de Chirico's easel-like vertical structures stand before us in their crammed interiors with calm dignity and introspection while they block our way into the picture.

Although artists are influenced by many sources, de Chirico has been of particular interest to me both in terms of the restrictive element present in his work and in terms of the formal devices he employs to develop and emphasize not only these restrictions, but also the metaphysical aspects of the objects he chooses to depict.

CHAPTER 4

Stimulating Creativity

Various painters have used different methods to create pictures. While Franz Kline stared at his blank canvas for hours before making that first crucial mark, Robert Motherwell sometimes draws blind contours of his immediate surroundings to begin a collage or painting. At times, I start a painting by covering the canvas with a series of random thin stains and gestural marks. When studying these non-representational smudges and blurs, semi-recognizable forms such as architectural components, objects, and creatures emerge from the darkness and lightness of the varied surface marks. I can begin a painting this way without a preliminary image or idea, or I can combine this method with a scene firmly implanted in my mind.

In a comparison between art and sound, Leonardo da Vinci advised the artist:

> Look at certain walls dirtied with various stains or with a mixture of different kinds of stones. If you have to invent some scene you will be able to see in them a resemblance to various landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills. You will also be able to see various battles and figures

> in quick movements and strange expressions on faces, and costumes, and an infinite number of things which you can then reduce into separate, well-conceived form. With such walls and mixtures of different stones the same thing happens as it does with the sound of bells, in whose pealing you may discover every name and word that you can imagine.[32]

In this way, Leonardo discovered "for himself a process to stimulate the imagination."[33] Max Ernst, being aware of Leonardo's words, found a similar method. Rosenberg describes it as follows:

> Ernst's techniques for producing drawings and paintings through rubbing, scraping, overlaying, dripping bear a resemblance to the weathering, singeing, growth, and decomposition employed by recent 'process' artists. In both instances, chance and the unforeseen play a decisive part. The art image or object is brought into being by procedures unrelated to any specific intention of the artist; he trusts the inherent characteristics of his materials to give rise to more or less unpredictable visual effects....the paper or canvas is activated...in order...to draw to the surface messages believed to be lodged in a physical matter.[34]

Unlike Ernst who relied upon frottage elements to motivate creativity, the British painter Francis Bacon worked from marks he made himself on the canvas. However, their intent was very close. Bacon commented: "...I think that you can make, very much as in an abstract painting, involuntary marks on the canvas which may suggest much deeper ways by which you can trap the fact you are obsessed by. If anything ever does work in my case, it works from that moment when consciously I don't know what I'm doing."[35] Ernst stated: "I emphasize the fact that in the course of

a series of spontaneously exposed suggestions and transmutations..., drawings obtained by frottage lose more and more of the character of the material explored (wood, for example) to take on the aspect of unexpectedly precise images whose nature probably reveals the initial cause of the obsession or a semblance of that cause."[36] The emphasis in both cases is upon an automatic or spontaneous working method as a means to explore original intent. However, Ernst was less able to see himself as the author of his work. Upon completion of a painting or collage, he would then allow the work of art to have entirely its own life. In this way, he considered himself as serving the purpose of a medium through which universal phenomena passed on their way to becoming works of art. He was the ultimate translator or messenger.[37]

Bacon, on the other hand, takes full responsibility for the finished work. Even though his best results are realized when he is working in a subconscious state of mind and with spontaneous physical gesture, he believes that the produced effects are from his inner self and that he is the sole author of the work.[38]

My working methods are closer to Bacon's in that my random marks stimulate creativity. When adhering closely to the image in an illustrational way, my painting begins to look contrived and stiff. As I relax and allow my inner self to function, the images become real, or at least,

closer to what I am trying to convey. Unlike Ernst, I sense that the finished painting represents something that is a part of my self and that I am indeed the author of the work.

Often, I work on pictures by drastically altering the existing images. For example, a huge red chest filled with creatures outlined in thin white lines, was changed into a carpet while the back wall opened up into a window. Every alteration influences the next step. Instead of only relying on random marks, I generally use recognizable imagery to stimulate creativity. There is a certain freedom involved in being able to obliterate parts of paintings in order to achieve visual clarity and unity. At times, I may not take this method far enough in that I hesitate to sacrifice certain parts of a painting that are beautiful even if these parts do not add to the overall unity of the picture. This compromise between cosmetics and truth results in lack of harmony, which in turn lends an unfinished or hesitant aspect to the work. Being aware of this tendency, I constantly endeavor to loosen up and see the painting as a whole unit rather than as a disjointed puzzle.

It is in this respect that Picasso's following advice describes the ultimate method I would like to employ in my painting:

> When you begin a picture, you often make some pretty discoveries. You must guard against these. Destroy the thing, do it over several

> times. In each destroying of a beautiful discovery, the artist does not really suppress it, but rather transforms it, condenses it, makes it more substantial. What comes out in the end is the result of discarded finds. Otherwise, you become your own connoisseur. I sell myself nothing.[39]

The transformation, condensing, and substantiating of which Picasso speaks can only be achieved through a consistent effort of improved painting methods coupled with an awareness of certain habitual traps to be avoided. De Chirico advised: "...if a man faithfully reproduces the strange sensations that he feels, this can always give new joys to any sensitive and intelligent person."[40] Furthermore, "The truly profound work will be drawn up by the artist from the innermost depths of his being.[41]

CHAPTER 5

Image and Content

> Basically the artist likes what reminds him of certain visions that he has in his mind and in his instincts, and which are his secret world that no one can take away from him.(de Chirico) [42]

"...I paint what I want to see,"[43] Philip Guston said in 1970. In essence, this statement describes my approach to painting. I try to capture an image that is before me in my mind. In other words, out of several images that enter my mind, I select one that I want to see on my canvas. Sometimes the image pops directly into my head while at other times, I derive an image from what I actually see around me. Isabella Far stated:

> The mental effort that goes on in a painter's brain is almost always preceded by a visual impression. Something seen is at the basis of his thoughts and sets his creative impulse in motion before he reproduces on his canvas what he has seen. A painter sees poetry, lyricism, nostalgia; he sees first of all with his eyes and only then does he feel and react. One may say that sentiments are actually images and not emotional reactions. His eyes are the prime movers that stimulate his brain to react.[44]

The mental image that I choose to translate with oil paint on canvas does not always remain static. As I focus on this

image, it moves around in my mind and often changes slightly. It fades away or becomes disconnected dream-imagery. I seem to see the same sort of image over and over again. Often, I will be able to match a particular incident or mood to the image that has entered my mind but the literal translation always arrives after the fact. This occurrence is similar to analysing a finished painting and recognizing certain things that the artist was unaware of while he was working on it.

Concurrent with my transforming mental images are the many physical changes that the painted image is subjected to during the painting process. Furthermore, each alteration that is made on the canvas can suggest further changes to the overall image. Therefore, my method of painting is a combination of direct observation (translating what I see either in my mind or what is physically around me) and my spontaneous or automatic reaction to each new physical phase of the painting. (This process is not a totally subconscious activity, as many decisions regarding the images are purely aesthetic. However, in general, my work is more spontaneously arrived at than consciously plotted.)

Picasso in describing this process stated: "A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While it is being done it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it is finished, it still goes on changing according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it."[45] This is not

to say that the first basic idea or feeling behind a painting is altered throughout the physical changes: "...there is one very odd thing - to notice that basically a picture doesn't change, that the first 'vision' remains almost intact, in spite of appearances."[46] I believe that Picasso intended the word "vision" to mean a painting's soul.

Francis Bacon, who often talked about the 'appearance' of a thing, also found that throughout the physical transformation of painting, the image would be more poignant if he avoided translating it an illustrational way. Freeing oneself from the actual physical image was in a sense becoming freer to express personal truth:

> I've often found that, if I have tried to follow the image more exactly, in the sense of its being more illustrational, and it has become extremely banal, and then out of sheer exasperation and hopelessness I've completely destroyed it by not knowing at all the marks I was making within the image - suddenly I have found that the thing comes nearer to the way that my visual instincts feel about the image I am trying to trap.[47]

For me, this "trapping" of the image is critical. However, as stated on page 23, the source of each image is unclear.

Initially I agreed with David Salle's notion that art did not begin with an idea but with an image.[48] However, after a recent discussion with a professor in which he suggested that ideas and images "are both the same to the extent that they both have their being within the awareness of the thinking or imagining subject,"[49] I realized that my initial mental image for a painting was indeed inseparable

from any idea that coincided with that image. Upon knowing this, I then tried to discern which came first: the actual visual image from my mind or the thought behind it. Unlike Isabella Far's description on page 20 which argues that the visual impression almost always precedes the mental effort, the order of my process varied according to each painting.

The same is true of my present working methods. For example, in certain works, a visual image such as a section of a dark basement or a fragment of a stairwell enters my mind's eye in a dream-like fashion with no preceding thought. Consequently, I begin to think about this image, wondering what it means and where it comes from. In some cases, I might associate some form of emotion with the mental image. Other times, the process is reversed and feelings will generate certain mental images.

Before I begin a painting, I examine the image that is before me in my mind and I try to focus on certain objects contained within that image. Although these objects are transformed as I attempt to organize them into a coherent mental picture, the initial overall vision seems to remain intact. I then begin to paint what is seen in my mind. Sometimes, during this first stage of my painting process, a strange thing takes place. With the mental image firmly fixed, I paint something entirely different. For example, the mental vision of a dark corner of a cluttered room was transformed into the physical painting of a tangled mass of

ropes and ribbons wrapped around an object which hung above a vast expanse of dark blue water. The reasons for the manifestations of the original images from my mind and subsequent transformations of these images on the canvas are unknown to me.

The initial image that enters my mind represents more than a physical setting. By translating this generally dark and claustrophobic setting from my mind into something or someplace else on the canvas, essentially, I am creating a metaphor out of a metaphor. The visual encounter of an image in the consciousness is often times a metaphor for an idea or emotion. When attempting to capture this image on canvas, I translate the mental picture into a tangible figuration.

Culvert, a recent painting, illustrates this process. I knew my mental image related to a specific emotion. In sketching on the canvas, the image began as a tiny black square in the center of the canvas with converging lines leading symmetrically to each corner of the square from each corner of the painting. The overall sketch was a huge "X" with a tiny square in the center. I drew a roof on the square and it became a small house. I then added a line that spiraled around this house and swirled outward from it to the edges of the canvas. (Illustration #6) It occurred to me that this image was a metaphor for a certain elusive or distant feeling I was experiencing. The tiny house was

myself, and the converging lines and swirls were expressive of my mood. Left in that state, the painting could have been analysed as a metaphor or symbol for a painful emotional state.

For some reason, I was compelled to go beyond this initial image and to transform it. Perhaps I felt that the subject matter was too revealing or obvious. Or perhaps, I simply felt that the painting was, for whatever reason, unfinished. In any case, I decided to continue working on it. Using more colour and thicker paint, I changed the tiny house into a window at the far end of a water-filled dark tunnel which looked out to a distant landscape. Barricades in the form of wooden spears and poles were painted in and a wooden figure, bent backwards, became partially submerged in the colourful yet murky water. The total scene appeared to be a dark watery sewer tunnel that opened up to a landscape scene far away. Many swirling geometric objects blocked the view in the cave-like tube.(Illustration #7)

This painting underwent many physical changes until I felt that it was completed. Starting with a mental image that represented a feeling, I created a tangible image on the canvas which then changed drastically as the final picture emerged. The final version was initiated by the first "tiny house" metaphor that represented my feelings of being far away. The painting was and still is a metaphor, but one born out of an initial metaphor. The work is not

only a metaphor for distant feelings, but also for the tiny house caught in the "X" shape. To make matters more confusing, it also encompasses other emotions occurring from each day that I worked on it.

In Golden Secret, I wanted to make a painting about worship. It began with a strange floral bulb shape sitting on a series of steps that led to a glass altar filled with flora and fauna-like creatures dancing in exotic reverie. Out of the bulb shape grew long ribbon-shaped leaves that curled over the entire picture-plane. A railing surrounded the sides of the altar.(Illustration #8)

After working on this piece for some time, I knew that I would have trouble completing it. I studied this image for many weeks wondering what to do. I began again to work on it and eventually altered it to the point where it became a huge swirl of thickly painted expressionistic white, black and green lines. I predicted to myself that I would scrape off all this new paint as well as the months of work that I had put into altering the original image. I was correct. I was left with an interesting surface and vague references to the first image. I stared at it for another week. Nothing occurred to me until finally, in frustration, I did something I had never done before with any of the square paintings. I turned the painting sideways and saw new possibilities that coincided with the original feeling of the work. I realized that I did not want to completely lose

the first image as this would be like starting an entirely new painting.

I worked on what physically remained in the painting and continued to think about the initial idea of worship. Concentrating on a prayer aspect, as it related to worship, a new idea about secrecy began to surface in my thoughts. Conjuring up images of cage-like confessionals and deep silent tombs, I tried to relate the secretive and sometimes frightening aspects of the unknown to more tangible mysteries. I painted a dimly lit golden mummy-figure on the canvas and surrounded it with crawling worm-like plant fingers and strange architectural elements. This barely discernible mummy encased between a door-like frame and a window filled with gauzy string-like creatures and a curling veil became the keeper of all my secrets.(Illustration #9) Thus the original metaphor for worship - a plant creature on an altar - became a metaphor for silence and secrecy; another example of making metaphors out of metaphors.

The images that finally emerge on the canvas can be interpreted in various ways. The recurrence of densely cluttered, gloomy interiors filled with strange creatures suggests both fear and comfort in that the contained spaces are mysterious and foreboding; but at the same time they offer protection and seclusion by virtue of the many physical barriers or obstructions set up to keep things out.

The creatures seem poised as if waiting for a cue and the dark constricted setting magnifies their inability to act.

I often relate this moment of suspended animation to a concept of dread which I feel might be similar to experiencing panic or terror without actually crossing the thin line between sanity and insanity. Immobility caused by an emotional or psychological state of mind is fascinating to me and however difficult these intangible forces are to translate into visual images, I simply allow subconscious feelings about dread and despair to manifest themselves in the work.

My imagery is not meant to be read as real in the sense of this world. The theatrical and bizarre stage-like interiors represent a separate reality which exists in my mind and I view these confined and constricted settings as places of escape or protection. At times, I imagine myself in the paintings. Pretending to exist in a theatrical scene is analogous to donning a mask; once I am with my bizarre creatures in the strangeness of these scenes, I imagine myself unrecognizable to other humans. No one can see the real me as I hide behind the many illusionist barriers present in the work. However, why I would want to envision such anonymity of self when surrounded by others is beyond my knowledge. It is a strange game I play with the paintings.

The constant element in all the work is the depiction of confinement or restriction which, in many cases, I interpret as comfort or protection. The bars, posts, pillars, sticks, walls, and ribbons all occupy a space somewhere between the viewer and the scene beyond. Although I do not intentionally paint about captivity and confinement, I am able to interpret my paintings in the context of such psychological content. If space is indeed a projection of the self as Otto Weininger claimed,[50] then one could assume that I am erecting these barriers for self protection and therefore, comfort.

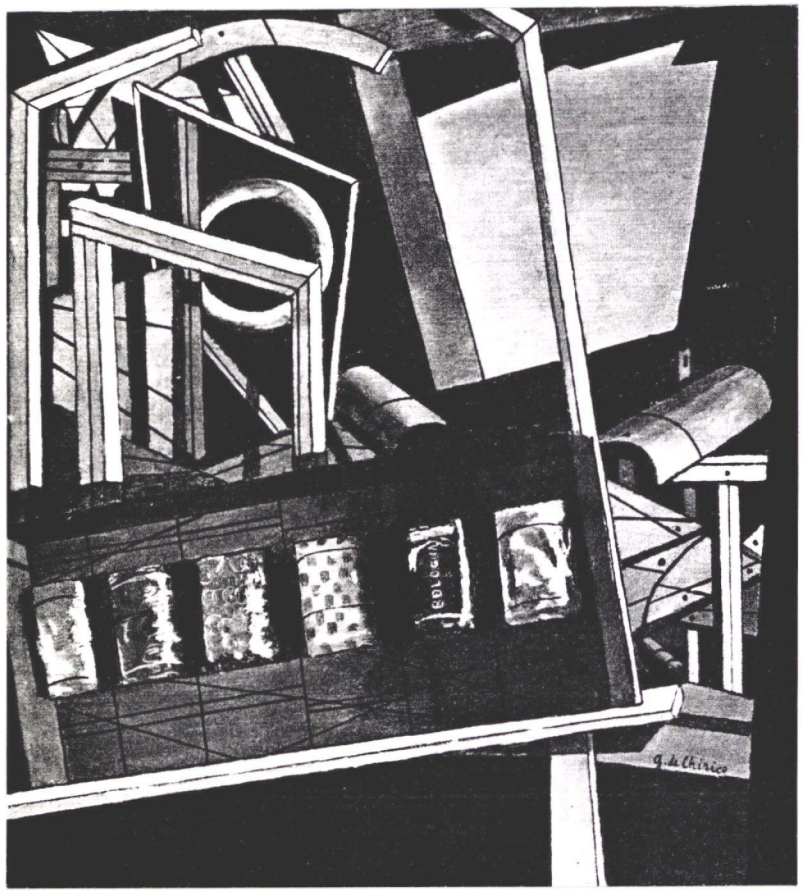
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

This support paper has dealt with formal concerns, with my reaction to the work of de Chirico, with some aspects of my painting process, and with image and content.

Another way to express myself is to state that I just paint. In other words, I do not think about my images or processes too much when I am working. Most of the time I will paint a picture basing it on my imagination or emotions. Because there is really no clear cut explanation or even pattern to my painting process, I do not logically understand a lot of what I do. In fact, a good word to describe what I truly think of my paintings and the reason why I paint is "bewilderment." At this stage of the development of my work, I can only be certain of one thing: painting is something I must do.

ILLUSTRATION #1

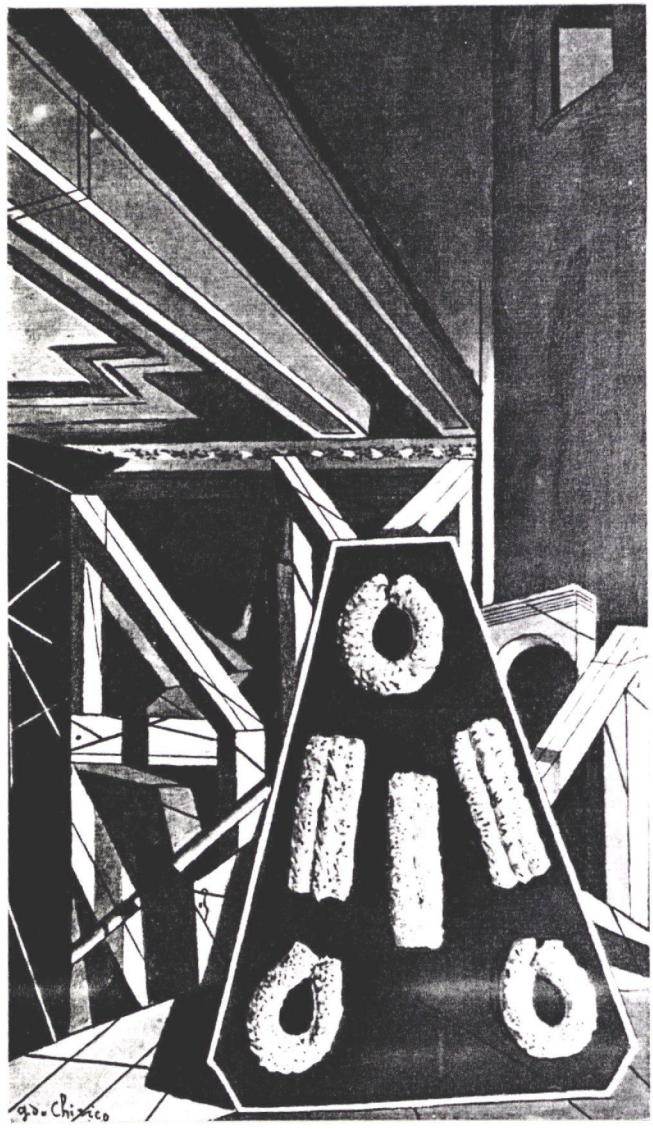


The Faithful Servitor, 1916, 15 1/8 x 13 5/8".
Private collection, New Canaan, Connecticut

ILLUSTRATION #2

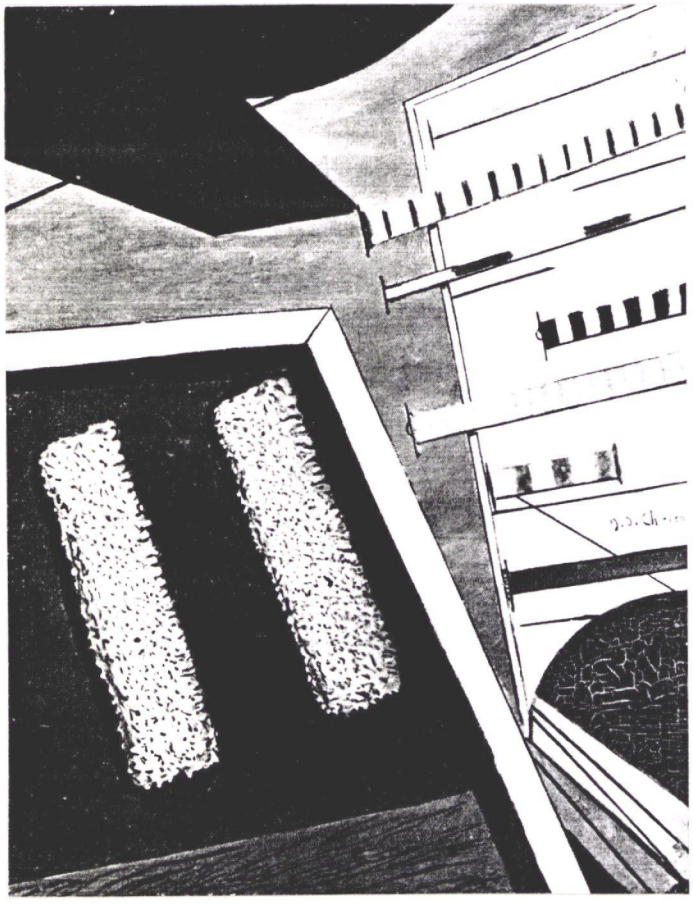
Evangelical Still Life, 1916, 31 1/2 x 28". Collection, Sidney Janis, New York

ILLUSTRATION #3



The Regret, 1916. 23 1/4 x 13".
Collection, Munson-Williams-Proctor
Institute, Utica, New York

ILLUSTRATION #4



The War, 1916. 13 1/2 x 10 1/2".
Collection, Gordon Onslow-Ford,
Mill Valley, California

ILLUSTRATION #5

Metaphysical Still Life, 1916.
Private collection, Paris (?)

ILLUSTRATION #6

Culvert, oil on canvas,
5 1/2 x 5 1/2', (1st. stage)

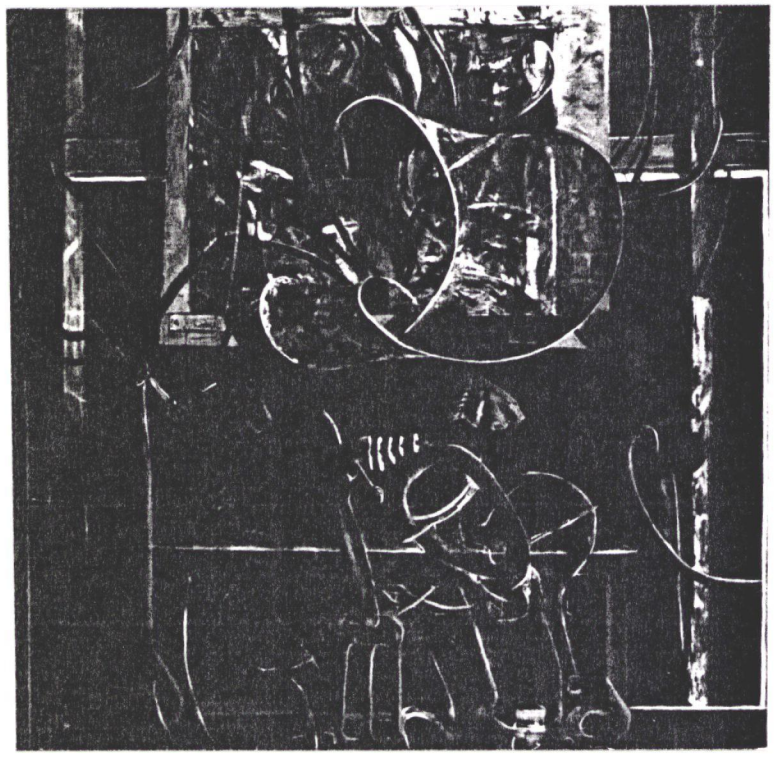
ILLUSTRATION #7

Culvert, oil on canvas, 5 1/2 x 5 1/2'

ILLUSTRATION #8

Golden Secret, oil on canvas,
5 1/2 x 5 1/2', (1st. stage)

ILLUSTRATION #9



Golden Secret, oil on canvas, 5 1/2 x 5 1/2'

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