

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Solid Objects

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

Philip Colin Sheil

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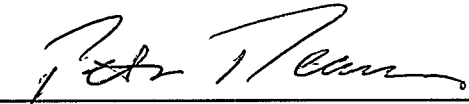
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The undersigned certify that they have viewed and read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, respectively, a Thesis Exhibition and a supporting written paper entitled "Solid Objects": An accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition, submitted by Philip Colin Sheil in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.




Supervisor, Peter Deacon
Department of Art




John Hall Department of Art



Gerry Hushlak Department of Art



Carol MacDonnell Department of
Art



Malcolm Edwards Department of
Music

SEPT 18 1995
Date

ABSTRACT

I have come to realize that my work echoes the manner in which I form an opinion and it reflects the method I use to reduce and edit available information. My understanding of description is that it too serves as a form of editing, that it also allows for the reduction of available information. I view personal philosophies in the same manner, I see them as yet another example of editing, an attempt to create an ordered description of the Universe. By producing my painting I incorporated certain details of my existence and overlooked others. Thus, my thesis reflects an attempt to understand my response to physical reality, to create order in a chaotic Universe.

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INTRODUCTION

I was born and raised in a country steeped in ancient history. Welsh legends, myths, and stories floated everywhere like a mist which hugged the crests of fortress topped hills, shrouded the sites of ancient stone circles and hovered, ghost-like, over every lake and valley. I was deeply affected by the reverence for the past there, that absolute belief in the unifying ability of the common ancestral narrative. The value of those old stories was not simply historical however, but cultural. They did not, after all, describe history with very much accuracy but rather provided their audience, the Welsh, with a measure of difference, a common identity or cultural bond.

Phil Sheil. Personal notes.

Stories have had a tremendous impact upon me throughout my life. As a result I have chosen to write this support paper in the form of a narrative, or rather several stories interlaced one over the other. One of these narratives describes the story of this paper's evolution. I have woven that story, however, into an additional narrative; one which describes my understanding of descriptions, stories, my own personal philosophy and their relationship to my work.

I found, during the process of writing this autobiography, that many forgotten memories resurfaced and entered my conscious awareness. As these memories solidified into comprehensible units I discovered, to my surprise, that there existed implicit connections between them, my recent work and/or the arguments I wished to present in this paper. These recollections, in fact, appeared to be so inextricably bound up with my graduate activity that I felt compelled to include them in this literary work. As a result, I have inserted "personal notes" within the text of this paper (the paragraph below is an

example). I was a little concerned, however, that such inserts might interrupt the overall flow of the main text and decided, as a result, to separate them using horizontal bars and italicized type. I view these inserts as snapshots, illustrations which the reader can choose to acknowledge or not and which are intended to provide color and context to the central topic. For similar reasons I have also chosen to include certain literary fragments--stories which reappeared in my memory and seem to me now to be implicitly connected to my studio work and this paper. Combined, these additions to the main text may provide the reader with further insight into the conceptual background of my studio activity--the flavor of my thinking.

The first book that I ever really remember, the one that sticks in my mind as having for the first time moved me in some way ,was Robin of Sherwood--I can not remember the author. I was in library session at the time, I was about 11 years old and the book had ended with Robin having fired the arrow that upon landing would designate his burial place. Thus, he lay dying in the mournful arms of the lovely Maid Marion. It was at that point that I began to cry. The strangest thing however was that I remember realizing at that very moment, that it was not the death of Robin or the Sorrow of Marion which had moved me to tears but rather, the fact that the story was ended, the spell was broken and the magic of the narration had been switched off.

Phil Sheil. Personal notes.

CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF DESCRIPTIONS

Standing at my studio window one cold January morning I watched as the falling snow began covering the surface of the empty parking lot below. Aimlessly I stared on, unaware that this unfolding event would drastically alter the way I viewed the writing of this support paper. Silently the minutes passed and more and more of the pavement's black, uncompromising surface became shrouded--its hard contours re-described by a covering of soft, white fallen snow. I noticed that as that white blanket accumulated, it gradually eliminated the details of the scene below. First the tiniest of variations disappeared, cracks and pot marks, slight changes in color and differences in texture. After only a short time however, the snow had reduced most of the empty lot to a single expression--every thing had become a measure of contour.

Perhaps as a result of the literary task in which I was then engaged, I began to see the above phenomenon as an analogy. The snow's tendency to blanket, to generalize, to reduce detail reminded me then, as it does now, of the characteristics of description. For descriptions also eliminate details I thought, they reduce things down to a convenient set of usable facts. My record of that morning, for example, acknowledged certain details and omitted others. I recorded the snow's whiteness, its softness and its tendency to blanket the ground. I could have compiled a more detailed description of course, one which included perhaps the time of the

event, the lighting conditions, etc. However, no matter how rigorously my list was compiled some details would inevitably have been omitted--no record of that morning could ever really be considered complete.

It was in this manner that I realized that descriptions are inevitably selective, that they omit certain details in favor of others. On further investigation I concluded that motive controls this selective process. I have described the snow above, for example, in a way that supports this story. In different circumstances I might have discussed the beauty of the phenomenon or the life-threatening temperatures which in some locations accompany it. In addition, other people with different languages, social backgrounds and literary skills would be able to construct entirely different descriptions. The Inuit, I am told, have over a hundred different ways of articulating the phenomenon's name alone.¹

I took a drama course once; the subject was story-telling. One morning the professor, Clem Martini, suggested that the details of a story are not important until they are re-incorporated into that story. It is only by re-incorporation that elements of a story become significant he said, that they become important parts of the narrative. Thus, the details outlined by a story are not inherently important in themselves. A little fat bear walking down a trail, for example, may pass several things, a tree, a rabbit, a fence post, a flower or a pot of honey. None of these items will be important until

¹ Professor Malcolm Edwards believes that this number increases every time it is referred to in print. Upon reading this sentence he stated that "It [the number of Inuit words for snow] used to be [not so long ago] twenty five. " This apparent reproduction phenomenon (pun intended), I believe is both interesting and amusing--perhaps even worth bringing to the attention of the Sociology or Visual Communications Department .

they are re-incorporated into the story until, for example, the little fat bear later meets the rabbit or trips upon the fence post or uses the tree to find his way back home again. Winnie-The-Pooh however, might argue here that even without its re-incorporation into the story the honey pot 's significance was beyond question--but that's Pooh, who had his own very particular agenda.

Phil Sheil. Personal Notes.

Eventually I began to suspect that descriptions have agendas or aims which control their content and style. Later I investigated this belief by constructing various descriptions of the same object using different motives--below are two examples. I should explain however, that before I produced the two proceeding paragraphs I first chose specific stereotypical modes of expression and then wrote a description of my work based upon those models. By constructing the two (tongue in cheek) descriptions below I illustrated clearly how motive can dictate both content and style, a conclusion which proved to have serious implications for the writing of this support paper.

Description #1: The Art Shark

Thrust into the limelight of the contemporary art circuit recently was an exciting young painter by the name of Philip C. Sheil. With more enthusiasm than we have come to expect from our stable of emerging artists, this dashing Welshman exhibited in the city this week, a series of highly representational images depicting what he deceptively referred to as "plain old machines and other simple objects of heritage." Upon transcending the initial and rather nostalgic connotations of these romantically handled industrial

metaphors, it is possible to detect significant common qualities which grope at greater depth than a less astute viewer might have at first predicted. In each case the mechanical subject was stripped of its environmental context and left naked within the central space of a dark, cold and uninhabited picture plane. This torrid metamorphosis from the brutal innocence of three dimensional reality to the unrelenting restrictions of two dimensional deception allowed the artist to control the object's scale significantly and provided him with a forum from which to confront the viewer with his proficient manipulation of pure geometric form. Sheil's extensive technical facility, evidenced by his proficient description of surface decay, is displayed for the viewer with uninhibited bravado, dramatically emphasizing the central components of these symbolic metaphors. Undoubtedly these works are analogous references to the deterioration of the male dominated industrial society and reflect the torment of young male artists who today are faced with ever-increasing pressure to conform.

Description #2: The Intellectual Would-be

Significantly Sheil's latest discourse signifies a progressive distillation of communicated logonomic understanding, a highly developed sense of textural layering and a complex utilization of syntactic conglomerates. This progressive and chronologically developed discourse can be mapped by a differentiation of utilized sign types. Gradually Sheil's work illustrates the discourse of the icon, it then advances with marked footsteps towards the inherent potential of the index and eventually exploits the full traditions of the

conventional symbol with Piercing deftness². Thus, Sheil acknowledges the crisis of the sign, its flux, and in reaction projects the metaphoric axis of visual language onto the metonymic dimension.³ Sheil's intent is to deconstruct the fallacy of the inherent problems of illusionary based discourse. But by implication he forces the viewer to acknowledge the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real. His work then attempts to sidestep the political problem of the parody of hyper simulation.⁴ Thus, alone in the hyper-world of the simulacrum Sheil investigates the allegorical impulse while refusing to expose the tyranny of the signified, the violence of its law and the brutality of the un-invited gaze.

The motives which I used to construct the above two descriptions are relatively easy to detect. It was not, however, the type of agenda that I wished to investigate with the above exercise but rather the controlling influence. In each case the motive I employed forced me to use a specific type of language, it dictated the details I incorporated into the description and also the overall content and flavor of the paragraph. In addition, each paragraph told a different story about the same body of work; a different description was produced because of a difference in agenda.

² The word "Piercing" here references C.S. Pierce who is noted, among other things, for his break down of the sign into the triadic relationship of Icon, Index and Symbol.

³ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," in *Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, (New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991.) p. 208.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, "The Process of Simulacra," in *Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, (New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991.) p. 266.

Thus, I illustrated for myself how descriptions tend to select and incorporate specific details, i.e., only those which are relevant and supportive of the overriding motive/s. Further, I realized that this activity is based upon a form of logic, one which organizes details like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle--the puzzler picking up only those pieces which efficiently support the motive. If the puzzler is skilled, I reasoned, the final arrangement will be convincing, all the pieces will appear to fit neatly together--a defensible argument is formulated.

The discussion above is not unlike the conclusions put forward by the semioticians, Hodge and Kress.⁵ In their book Social Semiotics they used the word genre to describe differing contexts, say the genre of science, philosophy, fictional writing or the chat show. Each genre, they suggest, dictates the type of discourse and text produced therein. A chat show, for example, will produce a different type of text from that of a scientific experiment. The chat show might produce pages of script, lists of items to be discussed, notes for the camera man etc. The text produced by the chat show, however, will be very different in style from the text produced within the context of a scientific experiment. The discourse of these genres will also differ dramatically. Thus, the genre, as Hodge and Kress have described it, dictates the type of discourse and text that is produced within it. In a similar manner Sheil suggests that agenda dictates the characteristics of style and content within the context of communication.⁶

⁵ Hodge R. & G. Kress, *Social Semiotics*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988.) p.7.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

Faced with the above interpretation it became increasingly difficult for me to imagine how any description, this support paper included, could be considered objective. To be objective, I decided, a description would have to be constructed without motive. Such a description would inevitably include all possible details since, without a motive, there could be no reason to choose one item over another. I further concluded that having omitted nothing the resultant list would inevitably be so overextended as to be rendered useless as a definitive tool. Thus, I came to view descriptions and stories (this one included) as similar objects--I saw them both as non-objective constructs which relate only one of many possible versions of the truth.

I conducted further investigations into seemingly objective approaches to writing and discovered that the type of voice used in a description is also, to some extent, dictated by an agenda. I noticed that use of the third person voice provides an air of objectivity in contrast to the subjective flavor of the first person voice. I arrived at this conclusion by considering identical sentences written in different voices. Consider for example the following sentence. "The radiating spokes of this large red painting drag the viewer into the heart of the composition with demonic force." In the preceding sentence the type of voice used suggests that the description is impartial, that it is objective and relates a shared or universal experience. In contrast the same sentence written in the first person appears to be relatively more subjective i.e., one among many

possible experiences. "The radiating spokes of the large red painting dragged me in to the heart of the composition with demonic force." The latter sentence tends to suggest that the experience described is a personal one rather than a universal phenomenon.

My conclusions regarding objective versus subjective styles of writing inevitably affected my approach to this support paper. If I wished to construct a seemingly objective argument, for example, efficiency would dictate that I utilize the third person voice. If, however, I wished to acknowledge the subjectivity of my description, then the first person voice would be a more efficient method to use. I decided, as a result, to utilize a first person style for the greater part of this story, thus shunning the defensive cloak of objective analysis.

CHAPTER 2

THE SEARCH FOR A TRUTH

I realized that my paper would inevitably have a motive which limited and controlled both its content and style. I would, for example, support the central argument (aim) with various details--I would incorporate these details into the story and point out connections between them. In addition, I would inevitably omit interpretations of my work which did not support the central topic efficiently--these details I would effectively dismiss by lack of acknowledgment. I would also leave out certain incidents and influences in my life--those which did not directly relate to my particular version of events. In the end, no matter how hard I tried, the reader would be given only one version of the truth when countless alternatives exist. Therefore, faced with the overwhelming number of options and the obvious limitations of this paper, I felt compelled to search for the most appropriate motive. I had to decide what truth I would construct and why.

Choosing a motive for this support paper proved to be no easy task for, as I have already pointed out, there were countless alternatives to choose from. As I searched for a basis upon which to determine this decision I investigated the preferences of trusted individuals--my friends, colleagues and members of my supervisory committee etc. As I conducted this investigation one point seemed clear, the options were definitely numerous. I could, for example, utilize any number of analysis models to discuss my paintings. I could discuss

the position of my work on an art historical, social, political, theoretical, or philosophical level. Alternatively, I could elect for a position of explanation, that is to say I could attempt to explain what I was investigating with my work and why. Yet another possibility might have been to investigate the implications of my research, the effects of my conclusions (again within any number of genres). In the end I decided that in order to support my thesis, this paper ought to explain the agenda of my paintings. The motive for this paper then, I concluded would be to support, by means of subjective explanation, the aims of my thesis.

Cumulus clouds formed heavily in the South like huge wolf packs heaped up in picturesque disorder. Under the influences of the breezes they merged together, growing darker, forming a single menacing mass. The raft lay motionless on the sluggish, waveless sea, and in silence he waited for the storm. ⁷

Along with the decision regarding the agenda of this support paper came the realization that my paintings alone would form the subject of the central topic: This thought was a daunting one to say the least. As a result, my first inclination, stranded as I was upon the shoreline of insecurity, was to retreat from my planned agenda; to construct instead a strong defense, one based upon previous, and most importantly, positive academic experience. In desperation then, I reviewed the successful papers I had written in university and prepared to sharpen those weapons with which my academic

⁷ Adapted from Rick Wakeman. *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, A.M. Records. 1978

experience had so far provided me. The prescription for victory was clear and well rehearsed. Armed with a monumentally sized bibliography I would construct as concrete and seemingly objective an argument as was possible in the time available. This argument would be based upon a solid foundation of scholarly research and be situated on top of a firm defensive bank of quotable quotes. My paper's academic agenda would then be reinforced, allied as it was with the context and agenda of the university. From such an indomitable fortress, I felt that I could easily orate an adequate defense.

And after he had been for some time in this case, he planned to build a castle lest he should be beaten by the alien nation as they had done before; and having searched the whole of the land of kymry (Wales), he found a spot suited for a castle in the place called at this hour Emrys, in the Yrri [Snowdon]. And when he had brought there many stone workers he began the making of the walls. Then as much as was built by day fell down by night.⁸

Late January found me closing the door on a room full of paintings and marching off to the library with a wheel barrow. Insecurity had encouraged me to re-search for a more defensible agenda. Along the way I began thinking how strange it was that I should need new material in order to defend my already completed paintings. This seemed somewhat like doing the research for a paper that I had

⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia Regum Britannia*, (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1977) p. 379.

already written. It was roughly at this point that the calming voice of reason entered my head and I realized that the research for this topic, unlike any other I'd worked on before, must already have been done. My thesis (the paintings) had been fully developed using my sum total of experiences and understanding of reality to date. To believe otherwise was, laughably, to consider that I actually lacked the knowledge necessary to make the paintings in the first place--a continual stream of accidents maybe. Thus, I smiled at the irony, put down the wheel barrow, and headed off back to the studio. ⁹

Once back in the presence of my paintings I began to consider what it was that I had done in this studio--what I had produced and why. What was it about these images that I had, and still did, find so compelling I wondered? How could I have spent day after day, night after night, painting sometimes so incessantly that one day intruded sleeplessly into the next? Had it been simply for the satisfaction of seeing yet another one done, another painting finished in an ever increasing series? What was it that I had got out of all this expended energy? What was the underlying agenda here I wondered?

For a long while I stared questioningly at my paintings, hung there like large monuments upon white-washed walls. Slowly I began to comprehend at least what it was that I had not attempted to achieve with my work. My agenda, I admitted, had certainly not been a noble one for selfless aspirations had definitely not motivated the

⁹ What appeared ironic at this point was the idea that in order to understand or interpret my work I should leave it and investigate instead the literary work of others.

movement of brush over canvas in my studio. I had not attempted to educate my fellow Homo Sapiens--illustrating for them via my work the so-far unforeseen shortcomings of our fragile social and political constructs. Of course, I assured my self, I am not the sort of person who looks on unconcerned when the latent inadequacies and limitations of our tired social conventions are made evident by others. I do, in fact, respond with disgust, shock or indignation whenever social injustices are at stake, when they are dressed up and sewn together for critical discourse (or was it main course). My work, however, does not function as a personal forum for such responses. Neither could I claim, I admitted, that my work is intentionally critical of any particular ideology, philosophy or current political agenda. The aim of my thesis, I was forced to conclude, was undoubtedly not a selfless one.

CHAPTER 3

MAKING SENSE OF THE BIG MISH MASH

As the sun went down that evening its warm hues burst through the studio windows bathing the walls in scarlet and spilling over my paintings in a multitude of oranges and reds. Unfortunately, as the evening wore on this crimson haze receded abandoning the room to the harsh white light of the fluorescent tubes. The starkness of this latter form of illumination chased away any remaining possibilities of a noble agenda and I saw my work clearly as expressions of self. I realized, in fact, that my paintings directly reflected my personal preferences, experiences and resultant agendas. Later I rationalized this response arguing that my paintings, in the absence of a noble agenda, had to be autobiographical in nature and therefore must reflect my personal understanding of reality. To understand my paintings then, logic dictated that I decide how I construct my version of reality and then outline some of the experiences which informed that understanding. This method of procedure seemed to be far removed from the production of an 'objective' description or analysis of my paintings. The resultant conclusions, however, I felt sure would provide me with an efficient model with which to describe my work. Thus, I decided to conduct an investigation into what I will call my own personal philosophy. I have outlined that investigation below.

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions-trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there;... Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged. . . ¹⁰

The next morning I began to realize that I had charged myself with a task of frightening proportions. An outline of my philosophy would entail an account of my understanding of the Universe, and the Universe appeared to be very unsettlingly complex. After a few calming words from my friends and a good dose of Douglas Adam's humor I realized, at least, that I was not alone in the above belief. Others, like Virginia Woolf (quoted above) for example, had also viewed the Universe as a very complex and unpredictable place.¹¹ Eventually I sank into a state of comfortable contemplation and arrived, as a result, at what seemed to me then to be a startlingly new idea. I came up with the *profound* concept that the Universe is a set of mind-bogglingly numerous conceptual possibilities.¹² When I related this profundity to my friends later in a bar, however, they

¹⁰ V. Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *Riverside Anthology of Literature*. Ed., Douglas Hunt, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988) p. 229.

¹¹ There is a theory, suggested Adams, "which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre. D. Adams. *Mostly Harmless*, (London: William Heinmann Ltd.,1992.) p. 145.

¹² The reader might prefer the word "probability" here (especially if they are followers of the theories and language of quantum mechanics). Such a change, however, can be made with little or no effect to the overall argument presented in this paper.

looked at me as though I was re-telling a very old and tiresome joke. This situation was not at all eased when I went on to explain that some of these conceptual possibilities I am able to mulch together in a way that supports and informs my personal beliefs. "I use them to construct my description of reality," I explained. Eventually, as sensitively as they could, they suggested that "I needed to get a grip on that reality, that I needed to develop a better sense of proportion."

Trin Tragula--for that was his name--was a dreamer, a thinker, a speculative philosopher or, as his partner would have it, an idiot. As a result his partner would nag him incessantly about the utterly inordinate amount of time he spent staring out into space, or mulling over the mechanics of safety pins, or doing spectrographic analyses of pieces of fairy cake. "Have some sense of proportion!" his partner would repeat.

In response Trin Tragula built the Total Perspective Vortex. This machine was able to condense the whole of creation--every sun, every planet, their orbits, their social history etc.,--into one tiny space. Thus, after being connected to the machine, it was possible to view oneself in relation to everything.

Upon completion Trin plugged the whole of reality into one end of the machine and into the other he plugged his partner. When the Total Perspective Vortex was turned on his partner became the first individual to experience the whole infinity of creation in relation to themselves.

To Trin Tragula's horror, the shock completely annihilated his partner's brain; but to his satisfaction he realized that he had proved conclusively that if life is going to exist in a Universe of this size, then the one thing it cannot afford to have is a sense of proportion. ¹³

¹³ Adapted from, D. Adam's, *The More than complete Hitchhiker's Guide*. (New Jersey: Random House Value Publishing, Inc., 1994.) p. 199.

After a little while I decided that though *my* new idea was not particularly *new* or particularly *mine* for that matter, the grasping of its implications would help with the writing of this paper. To arrive at a description of reality, for example, I had first to be aware of (experience) certain conceptual possibilities. Further that sense of awareness, I concluded, must have its limitations. This concept of a limited human awareness was illustrated humorously several times by Douglas Adams in his science fiction trilogy, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy"; below is one example.

How about now? Am I going backwards?'
 For once the bird was perfectly still and steady.
 'No,' said Random.
 'Well I was in fact, I was moving backwards in time.
 Hmmm. Well I think we've sorted all that out now.
 If you'd like to know, I can tell that in your Universe you move freely in three dimensions that you call space. You move in a straight line in a fourth, which you call time, and stay rooted to one place in a fifth... After that it gets a bit complicated, and there's all sorts of stuff going on in dimensions 13 - 22 that you really wouldn't want to know about. All you need to know for the moment is that the Universe is a lot more complicated than you might think, even if you start from a position of thinking it's pretty damn complicated in the first place.¹⁴

After reflecting upon the above quote I began thinking about my own conceptual limitations. The impetus for that self analysis had been the Bird Guide's attempt to illustrate for Random the complexity of the Universe. By doing so the bird had also suggested that there were dimensions in the Universe that Random could not experience (understand). I began to view the passage as a personal

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

analogy. I realized that I, like Random, would never be capable of ever experiencing the sum total of conceptual possibilities available. During my life, for example, I will encounter many different circumstances, many different people and their many different ways of looking at the world. No matter how hard I strive, however, I can never hope to experience all the potential beliefs, ideas, peoples, contexts, etc., available. I concluded, therefore, that my understanding is inevitably limited by my experience. My description of reality is both informed and restricted by my awareness of a limited number of the conceptual possibilities.

The definition of reality was a potential stumbling block for Sheil: One upon which the philosophical jugular of his support paper could have been exposed--splayed open to the unforgiving scrutiny of the academic rhetorical axe. With his faculties thus shadowed by that unnerving blade Sheil, maintaining a cool head, offered up the somewhat lighthearted sentiments of Douglas Adams. It was Adams who had previously defined reality as "the big mish mash of Life, the Universe and Everything."¹⁵ Throughout his support paper thereafter, Sheil relied solely upon Adam's definition of reality.

Having realized that my understanding had limitations I felt that the next logical step would be to investigate how I construct a description of reality despite that limitation. As it turned out, I concluded that the method used to develop this description was no different than that used to form any other story. Like the details of

¹⁵ D. Adams, *Mostly Harmless*, (London: William Heinmann Ltd.,1992). p. 26.

the January morning I outlined earlier, a description of reality entails a certain amount of editing. There are, for example, a great number of options of which I am aware. This number is so vast, in fact, that I can not successfully incorporate them all into one single story or version of reality. For example, I could look to any number of religions to explain my place in the world; alternatively, I could rely upon philosophers, scientists, the media or the explanation of a street kid, any source in fact with which I am able to communicate. All of the available sources, I concluded, could supply me with a different, and in some cases incompatible, story--a different interpretation of existence. From the vast array of alternatives available I must, therefore, select only those details which allow me to form a complete story. To form an opinion then, I reasoned, or to arrive at conclusions regarding my interaction with the Universe, I must first edit out certain options or possibilities (potential details in the story). After that, I must collate and interpret the remaining options in a manner that supports and informs a particular description of existence. The story I construct will be one which works for me; one in which all or most of the pieces appear to fit neatly together--sufficiently explaining my Universe. Further, I concluded, the resultant description of reality, like all descriptions, will have an agenda--one that controls the style and content of the story. As I digested this reasoning I began to remember a passage written by R. M. Pirsig. This passage, I remembered, provided a clear and simple analogy of the conclusions stated above.

We take a handful of sand (editing) from the endless landscape of awareness around us and call that handful of sand the world (reality).

Once we have the handful of sand, the world of which we are conscious, a process of discrimination goes to work on it. This is the knife. We divide the sand into parts. This and that. Here and there. Black and white. Now and then. The discrimination is the division of the conscious universe into parts.

The handful of sand looks uniform at first, but the longer we look at it the more diverse we find it to be. Each grain (conceptual possibility) is different. No two are alike. Some are similar in one way, some are similar in another way, and we can form the sand into separate piles on the basis of this similarity and dissimilarity. Shades of color in different piles--sizes in different piles--grain shapes in different piles--subtypes of grain shapes in different piles--grades of opacity in different piles--and so on, and on and on. You'd think the process of subdivision and classification would come to an end somewhere, but it doesn't. It just goes on and on.¹⁶

After re-reading the above passage I imagined myself completing Pirsig's mind-numbing chore. I concluded that the way I would divide up the sand (the types of groups I made) and the method I used for its division (physical movement and arrangement of individual grains) would be influenced by my perceptual and physical ability. I could not, for example, achieve orderly piles of differing colours unless I was able to perceive colour, was physically able to move the individual grains, and presumably suffered from an uncontrollable desire to follow in the footsteps of the great sand dividers of the past.

¹⁶ R. M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, (New York: Bantam Books, [New Age Edition] 1981) P. 71.

In addition, the manner in which I divided up the sand (its organization) would be limited by my previous experience. I would, no doubt, try and emulate the successful episodes of my sand dividing career so far and/or the methods used by the great master sand dividers of the past whose work I most admired. Thus, the types of piles I arrived at and the methods of classification I employed would be informed by my sum total of collective experiences. In the same way, I concluded, the conceptual possibilities available to me are determined by my own personal limitations and experiences.

Ferdinand Saussure, one of the Great Master Sand Dividers,¹⁷ described the knife which I use to divide up my own meager handful of sand. It is language he insisted, for language is nothing more than a system of distinctions.¹⁸ Later, another Master Sand Divider Jonathan Culler added philosophical weight to Saussure's words, explaining to me that language is "not merely a naive naming system but rather a complex device for dividing up of the spectrum of conceptual possibilities.¹⁹ So it was these two--along with the help of another Great Sand Divider, C.S. Peirce²⁰--who illustrated for me quite clearly how I, faced with an overwhelming amount of information, am able to arrive at an opinion--an understanding of my surroundings. How I am able divide my own personal handful of reality.

Phil Sheil. Personal notes.

¹⁷ J. Culler, *Saussure*, (London: The Harvester Press Ltd.1976) pp. 21&51.

¹⁸ F. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Translated by Wade Baskin Peter Owen Ltd. Eds., (London: Bally and Sechehay,1959) p.117.

¹⁹ J Culler. *Saussure*, (London: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1976) pp. 21&51.

²⁰C.S. Pierce. *The Philosophical Writings of Pierce*. (Dover Publications Inc., NY. 1955)

Interestingly, I realized that in order to divide my sand into colored piles, I must first ignore or tear down other already existing sub groups of sand (hopefully those I do tear down will have been made by smaller and less aggressive sand dividers than myself). I could not develop, for example, both colored piles and shaped piles, piles of opacity and piles of weight, piles of density etc., simultaneously.

Thus, my divisional rearrangement of sand at any given moment in time may well be different to that of another fellow sand divider. My collection and arrangement of conceptual possibilities then, may not and probably will not correspond to that of another member of the auspicious sand dividing vocation. This analogy suggested to me then the possibility for different and incompatible versions of reality; ²¹ each one a potentially valid method of division and each one potentially useful as a working description of reality.

The net result of the above reasoning was the conclusion that no one description of reality is better than another: Some simply seem more appropriate within a certain context. I must for example function as a living being, make decisions, choose what to eat for lunch, where to buy my clothes and what images as a painter I should make. In each case this is where the editing begins, where the knife goes to work. ²² Further, the form of editing which I choose will reflect my own

²¹ This fact has been illustrated quite recently by the inability of quantum theorists to interchange respectively, wave and particle light theories, historically and by the great store of differing ideologies available.

²² The trick perhaps is to find the most efficient method of editing in relation to one's aim.

sensibilities, desires and collective experiences--my own personal agenda.

Some experiences shape and reinforce my understanding of reality while others challenge or oppose it. This is a continual process and one which re-shapes or re-enforces my description of reality. It is by this process that I learn, that I continually re-evaluate my perceptions and understandings. As a result of this constant flux, however, I realized that I could never fully rely upon the whole phenomenon that is reality to follow any given single, logical and/or eternal pattern. I could never (as David Hume suggested of himself) "be sure of the real connections between cause and effect" ²³ With the relief then of someone who fears most the tyrant that is tedium I realized that my resultant Universe is *inevitably* surprising. As Guy de Maupassant more eloquently put it, life is full of "...inexplicable, illogical, and contradictory catastrophes, such as can only be classed as miscellaneous facts."²⁴ Without this dynamic quality existence, I concluded, would be as entertaining as the counting of bumps on a white stucco wall. It was then that Virginia Woolf's words floated back to me and I realized that she had summarized the above reasoning with one line. As Woolf stated, "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged."²⁵

²³ David Hume, in W.T. Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishing, 1990) p. 72.

²⁴ Guy de Maupassant, in the introduction, *Riverside Anthology of Literature*, Ed., Douglas Hunt. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988) p. 136.

²⁵ V. Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *Riverside Anthology of Literature*. Ed., Douglas Hunt, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988) p. 228.

In summary, as a result of my investigations so far I concluded that descriptions and stories etc., have underlying agendas or aims and that these motives control the content and style of various constructs. Further, an agenda can be seen as a tool which can be used to edit out potential options, details or additions to a particular construct. I also found that the same conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the way in which I construct my version of reality. I discovered, in fact, that I use a method of editing in order to form opinions, beliefs and conclusions about my surroundings. ²⁶

Interestingly my method of investigation in this paper has echoed my understanding of descriptions. For example, I first reviewed potential agendas. I then introduced a process of selection in order to choose from the colossal amount of options available. This initial strategy reflected an aim--a method of imposing order and value upon the available options. The result was a conscious decision, a goal, one which suggested the style and content of my final paper.

Phil Sheil. Personal notes.

²⁶ Some readers may prefer the word model in place of agenda. A model can also be viewed as an editing tool.

CHAPTER 4

DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS

Since I knew that my version of reality had been influenced and informed by my experiences, I decided that the next step in this investigation would be to analyze some of those experiences in terms of agendas or aims. In so doing I realized that I had experienced a number of image generating agendas, some of which I had used as a method of editing--for choosing which details to incorporate into my work. I realized, in fact, that my conclusions regarding the nature of descriptions not only related to the contents of this paper but also that of my paintings.

As a student illustrator, for example, I had familiarized myself with the aims of other illustrators. I had my favorites of course; I loved the spontaneity of Ralph Steadman's cartoons and the lighting of Brian Saunder's water colours. Liz Moye's pencil crayon illustrations intrigued me but most of all I lavished my attention on the fantasy illustrations of Brian Fraud, Frank Frazetta, Alan Lee and Patrick Woodroffe. If I was aware of fine art at all then it was generally the work of the more representational painters such as the Pre-Raphaelites, or the work of Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Gainsborough. All these works I viewed as potential styles. They were techniques which allowed the individual artists to edit and select specific details from physical reality. A way, for example, of choosing subject matter and surface detail etc. As a result of this purely technical analysis of images, many fine artists appeared to me to be lacking in skill and

discipline. I felt that some artists chose to work with inefficient methods of description. I was unaware, back then, of any possible method of editing other than the disciplined reiteration of a pre-selected set of physical details.

At the same time as I digested the work of other illustrators I had also begun to develop a love of weathered surfaces. I understood the attraction then, of course, simply as a visual phenomenon. The rich earthen colours of eroded stone and its enticing textural surface--a strong magnet for the visual artist within in me. I remember, with clarity, scrutinizing those ancient stones and attempting to describe the effects of the eroding powers of nature.

Thus, I became caught up with a desire to capture the visual qualities of old and textured surfaces, "time evidenced by corrosion, oxidization and acid rain." Back then I approached this task as would any well trained illustrator. I began with quality reference photographs--one or two overall shots and then some close ups for details. I would support this reference with accurate sketches, colour notations and then executed the rendering with as much observational accuracy as I was capable of.

My sketchbooks, for a while at least, told that story. In my spiral bound sanctuaries, garbage cans had spilled over into gargoyles, mail boxes shared their Mayfair home with stone monoliths and pages full of warehouse doors opened upon withered stumps of aged trees. All those surfaces, I had rendered side by side. Later I discovered the back streets and alleyways of Wales. There I would ignore the drunks and the acrid smells of rotting garbage and crouch, sketch pad in hand, and record relentlessly. It was there one day, that I found myself attempting to answer the innocent questions of a confused old man. What is beautiful about that old wall, he asked, why are you drawing it? In answer I shook my head, I couldn't conjure up an answer any more than I could incorporate the use of such subject matter within the constraints of the commercial art world. I had struggled desperately, in fact, to combine the love of weathered surfaces with the pressure to produce illustrative images, but a successful negotiation between the two I never realized. Eventually the pressure to earn a living prevailed and I walked away from that old man and those old weathered surfaces.

Thus I moved on to objects possessing more "commercial potential;" state of the art telephones, cutlery, wheel barrows and computer terminals, a whole host of lighter and more mundane objects. It is with regret then, that I remember leaving behind those old textured surfaces to deal instead with the slicker images of visual communications.

Phil Sheil. Personal notes.

Later as a professional illustrator I had learned to produce visual summaries, condensing with images the main events of a story or description. As a result I was able to edit a whole novel down to a single cover page, an editorial into one tiny visual statement or summarize a complex recipe with a single image of the final dish. I learned to tell these visual stories as clearly and economically as possible, with no visual fuss. A novel's cover page, for example, might have featured only its two main characters, or a single object which symbolized the entire plot. Thus, the agenda or the method of selection which I employed was one of efficiency; it dictated an economical use of detail and description.

Later in my career I began producing images for commercial packaging, cereal boxes and soup labels. Thus, I began to produce "visual one liners"--images which could communicate very simple ideas very quickly. "You only have their attention in the morning," my boss once told me, "for the few seconds they spend pouring out their cereal." Thus, I had experienced a slightly different agenda, one which called for an even more economical use of detail--a more severe form of editing.

The agenda that I had used as an illustrator had not been a particularly internal one. Instead I had intentionally allowed my work to be dictated by the agendas of others; by the art director, the client or a marketing department. In turn, their agendas had been dictated by the economic structures in which they worked. Thus, my work at that time had been rather non-personal; it was the product of a relatively external collective agenda.

It was roughly at this point in my career that I had my first inclination that other alternative agendas existed. During the spring of 1983, with aching feet and sodden clothes, I stood sheltering from the rain in the Tate Gallery. I had completed the obligatory illustrational tour, the Thumb Gallery's hosting of their annual flagship exhibition, "The Society of Illustrators," the Barbican, where an empty headed hostess was flogging limited edition prints of a piece in Ralph Steadman's "I Leonard" show. Then on to pound the pavements--racing to attend pre-arranged appointments with the omnipotent art directors of various Soho Agencies.

I didn't really see any thing in the gallery for the first little while--wasn't really looking in fact. As I said, I'd entered more out of convenience than anything. However, as my sense of awareness displaced the initial feelings of relief (at having escaped the downpour) I became aware of just what it was I was looking at. There on the walls were the sketch books of a fine artist whose name I knew well.

It's quite amusing now, when I think back, at that time I'd viewed Picasso as somewhat of a fraud--those abstract works of his that I felt even a child could do, those naive lines that I could have copied with less difficulty than I could down a pint of Guinness. He'd actually become famous--made it--and more irksome gotten rich doing it. Here he was in all his naked deceit, his sketchbooks splayed open across the gallery walls for all to see. Now this would be entertaining, I thought; now I could really ridicule this trickster's lack of drawing skills.

I searched for the beginning, not wanting to miss any of the fun, and it was there that this famous Spaniard defied me. These drawings are rather good, I thought. No, I corrected, they are really

good. The initial drawings in the exhibition exemplified every thing I then held sacred. They were very skilled--highly representational, even well proportioned and well rendered--there was no room for criticism here. Next came the pages where he'd begun to manipulate the image, where he'd pushed the ideas of space and form towards abstraction. It was a very simple progression to follow, even for an illustrator, and worse, Picasso's drawings showed exactly where my illustrational work left off--how far I was not prepared to go. In clear distinct steps Picasso showed in the pages of his sketch books where art--the investigation--began, and illustration--the statement--ended. I was devastated. This displaced Spaniard had completely pulled the proverbial rug from under my illustrational feet and I all I could do for the moment was stumble back to the drawing board and attempt to ignore one of the most important art experiences of my life.

Phil Sheil. Personal notes.

When I entered the field of fine arts I was made aware of a whole new range of image generating possibilities--a whole new set of agendas. I could aim at, for example, intellectual content in my work, critical analysis or philosophical commentary. My work, I found, could be a forum for my reaction to society, politics and social conventions. By producing images with such an agenda I could then, *supposedly*, educate others. Later this had appeared to me to be a rather pretentious agenda. It had suggested that I knew something that others did not, something important--a significant truth. It had implied, I realized, that my agenda was still, to some extent, dictated by an additional external agenda: It suggested that what I produced *ought* to be considered important and significant by others.

The latter experience then, shared similarities with that of my commercial career. In both cases had I chosen to utilize an external,

somewhat non-personal agenda.²⁷ It is conceivable, however, that having been schooled as an illustrator--taught to work towards the agendas of others--my first inclinations in the field of fine art had been to replicate that activity. Thus, I had utilized an external agenda, my initial choices in the realm of fine arts being limited to my sum total of experiences. ²⁸

As I progressed as an artist, however, I had begun to feel more and more uncomfortable with the agendas of others and so had begun to search for alternatives. This quest was similar to one that I undertook earlier in this paper; the question in both cases being, what agenda should I choose? The question in this case had been what could I paint that would be relatively more personal, honest or true to myself? It was at this moment of questioning, during my first year of graduate school, that I first came across Virginia Woolf's article (quoted below) entitled *Modern Fiction*.

...if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. ²⁹

²⁷ Such agendas can be seen as personal. The measure is a relative one; it depends upon the individual artist's intent. In my case however, the reliance upon external agendas was relatively more than it was upon personal choices.

²⁸ This point can be seen as an illustration of an argument that I put forward earlier regarding experience and understanding.

²⁹ V. Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *Riverside Anthology of Literature*. Ed., Douglas Hunt, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988) p. 229.

So often it seems memory has a tendency to soften the edges of past events; to gently massage together individual facts so that they appear to be of intangible stuff--indistinguishable fibers in the seamless material of existence. This is not how I remember my first reading of the above passage, however. It stands out in my memory like a stone pinnacle; its position on the horizon line of my personal influence as clear to day as it ever was. What would *you* do if you were free, challenged Woolf, what is it that *you* , Philip Sheil, would paint if released from the tyranny of your own Bond Street Tailors? I have outlined my answer to Woolf's question in the next chapter.

Bring...Bring...Bring...

At this moment in the story, Sheil's concentration was interrupted by the continued ringing of the telephone which sat inconspicuously upon the studio's refrigerator. This particular telephone was a relatively good humored unit, as telephones go. It prided itself in the fact that almost all of its functions still worked; its little orange light still flashed when incoming calls arrived from internal lines, all of its digits chimed the appropriate tone when they were pressed and its volume dial was still fully functional. In all, it was a fairly happy little unit, and apart from the inevitable art related fumes, it had enjoyed a fairly tranquil and pleasant existence in the graduate studio.

"Brrring, Brrring, Brrring"--Again, cheered by the thought of having once again fulfilled its mission in life to the best of its ability, the telephone shattered the pervading silence of the graduate studio, .

"Brrring, Brrring, Brrring"--The mechanical ringing rattled around the empty white walls, dragging Sheil out of an intense moment of self examination. Having reluctantly pried himself out of his chair, Sheil grabbed the receiver, listened intently and then began babbling out a stream of apologies. "Yes, that does sound like my wheel barrow, officer." "What? A threat to campus security?. I'm so very sorry... No, I just wasn't thinking, officer... No I won't do it again, ever... Yes...Honestly...I'll get it....I will get it ...I do understand. I do understand, really. Yes, right away..."

Sheil babbled on in much the same way for a few minutes longer, not noticing that the campus security guard had already hung up his receiver. Finally, realizing he was now talking to himself and angered by the less than assertive nature of his responses, Sheil slammed down his receiver. The force of the blow sent the telephone crashing to the ground--the unit's orange light went out.

CHAPTER 5

A CHOICE OF SUBJECT MATTER

The next stage in the quest for the agenda of my work, it seemed would be to outline the method by which I was able to choose one subject matter over another. How I had decided which details to incorporate into my painted descriptions. In response to Woolf's challenge I remembered thinking that I had always loved surface texture and objects that were old and mysterious. I also remembered deciding that it would be logical to explore this interest, to fully exploit its potential. I have since reasoned, incidentally, that by investigating my response to such qualities I would, in turn, have informed myself about my understanding and response to physical reality in general. Any resultant conclusions drawn from that investigation then would have informed me about my overall description of and responses to the Universe.

Virginia Woolf had provided me with a starting point from which to begin my thesis. As a result I went out in search of old objects, ones which I found particularly compelling. What I came up with were old pieces of farm machinery, things abandoned by their owners and left to the mercy of the weather. These objects had seemed significant to me, I had found them interesting. I was not sure (rationally) at that point why these objects held my attention, I was simply aware of a strong emotive response to them. This response had been sufficient, however, to have marked these objects as different from any other objects around me. They had seemed to be

so definite compared with the "vague sea and the hazy shore" of physical reality.³⁰

When the sand coating was wiped off, a green tint appeared. It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone. . . John turned it in his hands; he held it to the light; he held it so that its irregular mass blotted out the body and extended right arm of his friend. The green thinned and thickened slightly as it was held against the sky or against the body. It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore.

Solid Objects: Virginia Woolf. p225

Thus, like Woolf's character John above, I realized that I also had found some objects to be more significant or compelling than others. These types of objects I decided to call solid objects, those things in the physical world which possessed for me, a certain power or presence; an existence which I found compelling and very difficult to ignore.

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, "Solid Objects," *Riverside Anthology of Literature*, Ed., Douglas Hunt, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988) p. 225.

In Wales I once stood in the shadow a very big stone - a very big, heavy and very, very old, Celtic stone. Horizontally it lay, as it had for centuries, held aloft by three ancient uprights, its surface weathered, cracked and open to the merciless violence of the North Western coastal fronts. When I stood in the darkness below its impressive weight, tiny in my insignificance, I was very aware of its presence, of its power, of the seeming impossibility of its existence in time and space.

Phil Sheil. Personal notes.

This sense of power or intrigue with certain objects, to find them more solid than others, I concluded is the result of a personal response to reality. I viewed it, however, as an internal response rather than an inherent "supreme quality of beauty" in the external world. I would not have, therefore, used Joyce's words (quoted below) to describe such an experience. I would not have suggested that it was the result of a "Beauty" or "a light from some other world," unless that other world was firmly lodged within the individual.³¹ I would, in contrast, have chosen Joyce's words and described this experience as "an enchantment of the heart" and in describing it so I would have clearly identified it as a personal emotive response to reality.

The radiance of which he (St. Thomas Aquinas) speaks in the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing. This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the esthetic image is first conceived in his imagination. The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a

³¹James Joyce, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," *Riverside Anthology of Literature.*, Ed., Douglas Hunt. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988) p. 224.

fading coal. The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like to that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley's, called the enchantment of the heart.³²

Thus, unlike Joyce's character above, I saw my reaction to old objects as an example of a personal response to a particular aspect of the Universe. I concluded then that by painting those objects I may have conducted an investigation into my emotive responses. I reasoned that if this were true I would, by implication, have investigated, in part, my understanding of the Universe. The next logical stage in this investigation then, I concluded, would be to deconstruct the production of my thesis. Below then is a chronological outline of the production of my thesis.

³² Ibid., 223.

CHAPTER 6

A PROCESS OF INVESTIGATION

The first image I painted was "Truck Tire" and in this painting I explored my visual interpretation of the object's surface. I had been working prior to that moment on large rectangular panels and decided that I would again repeat that format. I was very aware at that point that I did not have a clear defensible agenda to support the production of the work; I had only an emotive response. I could not, for example, have explained why I was doing what I was and support that agenda with clear theoretical arguments.

I decided that the main form in the work *should* occupy the center of the format since it was the focus of my investigation. While conducting the initial drawing and trying out various sizes of image in relation to the format I found that the use of a large central image, one which filled the available space, most successfully reflected this agenda. Drawn in such large scale, the tire looked significant and therefore echoed my reasons for choosing it as subject matter. I used acrylic paint to produce this and subsequent images, a medium which I have found to be most suitable for detailed surface description and one which is particularly time efficient.

I used to eat red meat, it felt good and I enjoyed the practice. Later I decided not to continue on with this culinary activity.

Not eating red meat also feels good but this activity feels good because it seems like the right thing to do. There's a significant difference here.

Phil Sheil. Personal Notes.

Upon completion of "Truck Tire" I found that there were some significant similarities between my response to this painting and my response to old relics. This painting, in fact, encouraged an emotive response from me which had slight echoes of my emotive response to old Celtic standing stones and other ancient monuments in Wales. In addition, I realized that having drawn the image so large in relation to the format I had effectively cut out any environmental context for this object. This visual arrangement gave the object a certain mysterious quality. The object, stripped of any environmental relationship appeared not to be from a specific place or time. Its weathered surface and form, of course located the object in western society at a certain time period--one which had already passed. The painting, however, did not suggest whether this particular tire was situated in the past, the present or the future. The tire that I painted then, was vague and mysterious, it obviously belonged to the past but it gave little away regarding its potential location in time and space. Further it was a realistic-type painting despite its loss of context because it appeared believable, it possessed sufficient visual qualities to reference an old wheel. Thus, the painting "Truck Tire" became my first intentional probing into my response to a specific aspect of reality--one which I personally found significant.

One of the most important lessons I learned in that initial foray was that I could produce a painting which encouraged a specific emotive response from me. This was the first time I had ever been fully aware of, and receptive to, such a quality in *my* work. Prior to the

completion of "Truck Tire," I had always attempted to form an objective conceptual interpretation of my paintings, thus effectively ignoring or subduing any emotive response.

With the lessons Sheil learned from the execution of the work "Truck Tire" he then went on to other similar images. He searched for subsequent objects at Heritage Park, an area, in the City of Calgary designated for the storage of culturally significant relics. It is worth noting here, that only a certain type of object is stored at the above park: trains, farm machinery, trapper's cabins and Indian lodges, etc.,--those objects which have been deemed as appropriate symbols of a particular version of history. Placement of an object in that park then, marks that object as culturally significant. One could argue that by preserving an object in such a way society re-incorporates that object as a detail in the cultural narrative, thus imbuing the object with significance. It was these objects which Sheil used in subsequent paintings.

For my next object in the series I visited Calgary's Heritage Park. This appeared to be the most logical place to continue my search for solid objects. Obviously I would be looking for an old object again and the painting "Truck Tire" had informed me of a personal emotive connection to the preserved monuments of Wales. Thus, it seemed logical to continue my search in an area where culturally preserved relics existed--Heritage Park was both conveniently close and suitable for the above needs.

The next painting, "Unit 6682," utilized the same format as had its predecessor. With this painting, however, I explored the effect of context elimination further. The object filled the whole format, it went right to the edges, so that the painting appeared *Trompe l'oeil* in style. My intention was to investigate the effect of totally

eliminating the issue of context. I reasoned that such action would increase the depicted object's mysteriousness, reducing its relationship to time even more--what I learned was surprising. I discovered that by eliminating the *question* of context altogether I effectively eliminated the issue of its loss. Thus, the depicted object no longer appeared mysterious, timeless or without context. There was no question at all concerning "Unit 6682's" loss of context or its relationship to time because it appeared to belong to the present; it was a rusty old object in the here and now. Thus, the painting appeared to me to be either an attempt at a clever visual trick or, if the trick worked, not a painting at all. Like many good lessons this one seems obvious now, common sense even; it proved to be quite a significant break through in this series.

"Unit 6682" then informed my understanding of the function of context in these images. It also (by implication) informed my understanding of this series itself. I realized that these paintings worked like stories and needed to be recognized as such rather than mistakenly interpreted as physical objects. Conventionally, for example, the format of even the most outstanding realist paintings is sufficient to suggest that it is a fiction. When looking at, for example, a Richard Estes painting, I know that what I am looking at is an illusion, a very convincing *description* of reality--a description none the less. By producing a *Trompe l'oeil* painting I effectively subverted the above viewer-painting relationship. "Unit 6682" appeared to me not to be a description (a story of an object) but rather simply an object in itself.

In these first two paintings I used a circle as the dominant motif; the truck tire was itself round and Unit 6682 had a large raised circle at its center. I should explain here then, why I continued the use of the circle in these works, for it was in the next painting, "Loco Wheel," that I questioned my reliance upon this shape. I had been using the circle as the dominant form in my paintings for some time. I had various vague ideas concerning its significance but had not questioned it in any depth. In earlier paintings I had been using the figure and had investigated its relationship with forms such as the circle. I found, as a result of that investigation, that certain shapes appeared to stand in for (symbolize) various aspects of humanity. Further, some geometric forms (circles and ovals) tended to be read as female signs while other geometric forms (squares and rectangles) tended to be read as male symbols.³³ The paintings in my thesis did not utilize the figure, in fact, they had no direct suggestion of human presence at all. However, by implication human presence was suggested, by the large scale of the works and the manufactured objects I was depicting. The square format combined with the circle form also implied the presence of humanity both as conventional symbols (male/female) and in the form of an index (My paintings depicted man-made objects rather than natural ones). These two points then, the circle versus the square format and the manufactured nature of the objects I had chosen as subject matter

³³There are various conventions which promote this interpretation but that is of no issue here.

appeared connected. Though no figures were depicted in these works, human presence was suggested.

I arrived at this understanding as a result of using the square format in "Loco Wheel" This was the first painting in which I tested the format and as a result I was informed concerning the significance of the circle. In this painting I chose a square as opposed to a rectangle and I also reduced the overall size of the work. The new format I had hoped would have the effect of further centering the composition, and the fact that I had again chosen a circle as the main compositional element added to this formal quality. I found however, that the relationship between the square format and the circle motif implied the presence of people. Unlike in the earlier rectangular works of "Truck Tire" and "Unit 6682" however, the introduction of a square format in "Loco Wheel" appeared to balance the relationship between the square and the circle. As a result the relationship between the male and female implications also appeared relatively more balanced. This new format combined with a large centered circle symbolized for me, then, a non-specific male/female relationship. Thus, "Loco Wheel" advanced the suggestion of a non-specific cultural group, one intimated by the presence, form and construction of the object depicted and the formal arrangement of the painting itself.

"Loco Wheel" also strengthened the conceptual link between this series and my response to the ancient monuments of Wales. It also served to inform my understanding of reality. Stone Circles, for

example, suggest the presence of a forgotten or half remembered culture--in this case the Celts. Upon viewing such a monument, for example, it is difficult to ignore the fact that such objects were moved by long forgotten cultural group. I found here then a conceptual link between this painting's suggestion of a non-specific social relationship and the ancient monuments of Wales. Incidentally such reasoning had highlighted for me a significant aspect of those old Welsh Monuments i.e., that one of their important characteristics was their cultural implications. Thus, the production of "Loco Wheel" encouraged a redefinition of my understanding of reality.

In the fourth painting in this series I further tested the effects of format by increasing the size beyond any thing I had tried so far. "Traction Engine" measures 68"x 68" and features a large red wheel with radiating spokes and a small circular hub at its center. In this work I investigated (among other things) the significance of the centering effect of composition. Thus, I chose an object which had many spokes, elements which radiated out from the center of the work emphasizing the relationship between the center and the extremities of the painting. In addition the painting had a small dominant circle in the foreground and a larger circular form in the shadows of the background. I altered the perspective arrangement in this work positioning the vanishing point at dead center and far back in the picture plane; this, I reasoned, would further enhance the centering effect of the composition. As I predicted, this compositional arrangement did enhance the centering effect of the work. The extent, however, to which this simple device emphasized

the relationship between the center and the outside edges of the image was astonishing. Consequently I found that this arrangement dramatically affected my interaction with the work. It seemed that this particular painting invaded my space and that this phenomenon was most advanced by the central circle of the image. The radiating spokes of the painting appeared to drag my eyes into the work's center like a vacuous void and then, at the very moment my eyes hit dead center, I felt like I was being pushed back into the room with significant force. I found this to be an astonishing visual effect and one which gave this painting tremendous power and presence--it was a *very* difficult work to ignore. Thus, "Traction Engine" was the first in this series to mimic (experientially) the presence and power of the monuments which I have experienced in Wales.

In the next three paintings I questioned the effect of colour in these images. One of the dominant features in "Traction Engine" had been its colour. I had executed this painting almost entirely in bright reds, primarily Scarlet and Cadmium. Thus, I reduced drastically the colour in "Six Nuts in a Circle", executing the work almost entirely in a monotone of burnt umber. In the subsequent painting, "The Cog," I allowed a little colour to enter the image, applying the complementary colours of red and green with a palette knife over the monotone surface of the rendered form. I had, incidentally, in pervious paintings been experimenting with textured versus flat rendering techniques and in this painting I coupled this experimentation with the use of opposing colours. This contrast of both colour and paint handling again served to inform both my

formal and conceptual understanding of this series further. I found that I had been relying on binary opposites in these works to add formal emphasis, advancing certain forms and enriching certain shadowed areas. Not only could I identify the binary opposites of complementary colours but also texture/smooth paint handling, highlighted, foreground form/dark flat background space, the outer square format/the inner circular form, the weight of objects/ability to float in a dark void, these qualities, to name but a few, all fitted into the concept of binary opposites. Even in my experience of viewing "Traction Engine," its ability to drag me into the center and then spit me back out into the room, there appeared to fit into a binary opposite description of these paintings. Thus, I concluded that one of the successful features of these works was their reliance upon binary opposites.

CHAPTER 7

STORY TELLING

During the production of my thesis I arrived at the conclusion that my use of binary opposites was linked to my experience of story-telling. The Arthurian legends, for example, like other myths and stories I learned in Wales are riddled with polarized concepts such as good/evil, life/death, rich/poor love/hate etc. Binary opposites must be an integral part of story telling then, I concluded, and if this were so then the inclusion of binary opposites would be a useful avenue to explore in my work. Reading Kieran Egan's article titled "Teaching as Story-Telling", in which she describes binary opposites as the prominent structuring feature of a story confirmed this idea.³⁴ In addition, I found that Bettelheim also agreed; for in a discussion on fairy tales he stated that binary opposites provide a frame of reference used to evaluate reality.³⁵ Similarly Egan also concluded that the establishing of binary opposites is perhaps the commonest access to generating frames of reference between which meaning can be established.³⁶ Thus, I concluded that binary opposites were an integral part of a story's structure and that this characteristic was one shared by the stories I was constructing.

Armed with this awareness I decided later to attempt to capitalize upon the use of binary opposites. Thus, I began to increase the

³⁴ Kieran Egan. "Teaching as Story-telling: A Non-mechanistic Approach to Teaching" *J Curriculum Studies*, (Vol. 17, No. 4, 1985) p. 400.

³⁵ B. Bettelheim, in Egan. *Ibid.*, p. 400.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.400.

contrast in my work (highlighted versus shadowed areas). I also began to decrease the amount of detail in the background versus the foreground--eventually reducing the ground to a simple black space. The above had the effect of increasing the visual distance between the black of the background and most prominent surfaces of the objects depicted. Interestingly, this also increased the objects' mystery; they appeared now to be not simply floating but emerging from a darkened void. This characteristic suggested to me that the objects were even older, that they were emerging from some dark age, some long lost and yet half remembered time. I encouraged these characteristics wherever I could, I added fictional components, such as the domed and protruding central area of "Chain Drive," or the central sphere in "Drill Bit." I reduced the details of form and I intensified the light source which I aimed from directly above the object (rather than from the side). This addition provided an extra set of opposites; the object was depicted in both harsh light and dark shadow and the direction of the light emphasized the vertical dichotomy (up and down). I also discarded details that did not support the agenda of opposites. The images, though painted in a realistic manner became, as a result, increasingly abstract. Eventually my paintings evolved into dramatized representations of form--fictional images which bore little resemblance to their source object. The later works of "The Hub," "Three Bars," "Presence," and "Release" are perhaps the best example of this tendency towards abstract form. These later works also began to highlight another potential set of opposites, i.e., abstract versus fully rendered images or the detailed description of surface versus emphasis of geometric

form. Thus, as the series progressed I began to incorporate binary opposites as a means of producing a form of description that echoed my experience of stories. I also found that I could control the elements of a work so that it could provide me with a certain experience, one which suggested a presence or a power. I could produced images, I found, which were difficult to ignore--I had begun to produce Solid Objects.

These Solid Objects, it seemed, had a certain characteristic; they had a definite presence and it was this experience that I investigated in my thesis--or at least the visual equivalent thereof. I was attempting to produce and understand the kind of image which has a presence I can feel, a visual power that I measure experientially and equate with the monuments of Wales. To steal again Virginia Woolf's words, I wished to make a very definite object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore of my previous artistic activity.

I was once on tour in the engine room of a British Navy Frigate. The machines which run such a ship are very big, very loud and leave little room for anything else around them. I distinguished two different kinds of noise in that engine room, one was the kind of noise that was so loud it hurt your ears while the other was so deep, so strong and so powerful that you felt it as a sensation in your stomach. This second noise was so bass that you could almost imagine it had existed, and would continue on uninterrupted, for ever--that it came from beyond and transcended time itself. With the aid of ear plugs I was able to ignore the first noise, the noisy noise; but not so the second. This deeper noise seemed to penetrate my very being, it invaded my personal space, vibrated through my body and left me continually aware of its presence. From that

moment on, as I journeyed up through the ship's decks, I was always aware of that low hum--I was never able to ignore its power.

Phil Sheil. Personal notes.

Thus I concluded that my thesis was an attempt to reproduce and investigate a specific response which I experience as a result of my interaction with physical reality. The first paintings I produced in this series were similar to ones I had most recently executed. Soon however, I could feel the soft areas, those things that did not add to the painting's solidity. Thus, I altered the format, I played with the size and I manipulated the light source, etc., until eventually I could feel an increase in presence. So it was that I successfully edited, sorted and re-described selected parts of the physical world in a way that would create for me a feeling, an experience, a solid object.

CHAPTER 8

MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

As a result of the above description of my thesis' production I concluded that my paintings reference the conventions of story-telling, that they function as a tool for re-describing reality. Like legends, I realized, these paintings are derived from facts though they do not attempt to describe the Universe in a factual way. They do not, for example, attempt to capture or mimic (detail by detail) the object's physical identity. This point is particularly evident in the later, more abstracted works such as "Presence" and "Release". Those works do not accurately mimic their source objects in colour, form, size or surface detail. However, even the most "realistic" images in my thesis, "Truck Tire" for example, differ in size, colour and arrangement of surface detail etc. Thus, I concluded that these works exemplify a process of editing, one which reduces and re-orders the details of physical reality into a convincing story.

I attempted then to tell a *seemingly* complete story with these works, one in which all the pieces appeared to fit neatly together, where the images appeared logical. Maybe then, as the author of these works, I could have been accused of deceit. "You do not tell the truth," a viewer might have suggested. In answer I would have replied that indeed my work does not tell the truth but rather *a* truth, or at least my version of one. I would have further explained

that these paintings take some of the details of reality and re-constitute them into my own story.

I worked then, during the production of this series, in the tradition of realist writers such as Guy de Maupassant who constructed fictions in such a way, with such attention to minute detail, that the reader could be forgiven for thinking that what he described was in fact an actual event.³⁷ I (like de Maupassant) have dealt then in *a Truth* which in his words "consists of producing a complete illusion by following the common logic of facts and not by transcribing them pell-mell, as they succeed each other." ³⁸

Thus, I concluded, that my paintings are constructs. They are narratives which select details from reality and reconstitute them in a seemingly complete manner. It is worth noting, incidentally, that de Maupassant's goal was not to produce merely realistic stories; this would be a technical trick serving no purpose, suggests the literary critic Douglas Hunt.³⁹ Instead, "The realist (writer or painter in this case) finds the raw materials of his art in the external world but he discards much and reassembles the rest into some thing that Maupassant frankly calls a 'personal vision of life';"⁴⁰ Likewise the process which I used to construct my paintings involved a method of editing and the results informed my understanding of reality. My

³⁷ D. Hunt. *The Riverside Anthology of Literature*, Ed., Douglas Hunt. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1988) pp. 8-9.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

work then, represents a personal version of reality, one which reflects my understanding of description, my personal philosophy and therefore my understanding of the Universe.

It is for the above reasons that I would compare these paintings with stories and in explanation I will use again the words of Kieran Egan.

The story is one of the basic forms in which we organize events and facts to make them meaningful. The story form is something we impose on events to assert a beginning from which the meaning starts, through a middle which complicates it, to an end which satisfies us by establishing clearly the meaning of all the events that make up the story. Stories have this crucial feature, which life and history lack, that they have beginnings and ends and so can fix the meaning of events. The difficulties of our lives, or one set of difficulties, is that not knowing the end we cannot be sure of the meaning of the events which make up our lives... The story form then, is not a trivial thing meriting attention only if we are discussing fiction. It is a reflection of some fundamental mental structure. It is a basic intellectual tool we use in making sense of the world and experience. ⁴¹

Egan, then, suggests of stories what I have suggested of my work, that they are tools which enable the teller (or in this case the painter) to impose order on an order-less Universe; an intellectual device used to make sense out of the complexity that is existence.

⁴¹ Kieran Egan. "Teaching as Story-telling: A Non-mechanistic Approach to Teaching" *J Curriculum Studies*, (Vol. 17, No. 4,) p. 401.

By conducting the above investigation (my thesis) I informed my understanding of reality--I developed a personal story of the Universe. Thus, these paintings can be seen as stories. They are constructed versions of reality, ones in which all the pieces appear to fit neatly together--they are one of the tools, (Saussure's language) which I use to make sense out of the mind boggling complexity that is my Universe.

As long as I can remember I have been fascinated by things old and mysterious. I can remember vividly my trips as a young boy, sneaking through the grounds of Lord Trevor's Estate, risking the wrath of the game keeper, not to mention the teeth of his dogs, all for the pleasure of a midnight audience with the old leaden statue hidden therein. For me, of course, this was no ordinary statue. It stood alone upon the crest of a hill, surrounded by a dense growth of trees, mute and elevated upon ancient engraved stonework, substantial if not severe in its construction. This silhouetted hero intruded like a black finger upon the skyline; pregnant with possibilities. Its decayed body whispered and hinted at strange and secret stories--romance, mystery and intrigue--a veritable catalyst for the active imagination of a young boy in a rural Welsh village

Phil Sheil. Personal notes.

CHAPTER 9

AN OVERVIEW

When I look at my paintings I see material symptoms, physical evidences of my own personal philosophy, the result of a search for understanding and self awareness. By producing them I attempt to explore facets of my existence, my experience of my experiences and my beliefs about my beliefs. More specifically these works reflect my attempt to continually re-discover what it is that I feel I *ought* to be painting at a given time, what style, what media, what image, etc. By completing these works I was able to gain insight into what I find interesting and significant in the world around me and why. Thus, the paintings I have chosen to produce echo my fascination with the old monuments of Wales. The resultant images are laced with mystery and their handling reflects a reverence for old and ancient things. The objects depicted, floating in black voids, remind me of the mist shrouded standing stones of Wales. Like those stone monuments these objects no longer exist in their original context; it can only be guessed at. In addition, their form provides only limited clues regarding their original use or social significance. These qualities are part of the equation, that sum which together produces Solid Objects.

My paintings, however, are hypothetical, they do not represent the way things in the physical world are, but rather how I have chosen to portray them--they are my personal version of reality. Thus, these images are like stories or narratives, they reflect my attempt

to construct a believable description of my experience. They reflect then, a groping for order in a chaotic Universe.

Thus, these works can be seen as the result of my attempt to discover a personal balance and order, they reflect what Joseph Campbell has described as "my Center" that place where I feel I *ought* be.⁴² This thesis then questions, investigates and informs, and in so doing its production challenges and shapes my understanding of the Universe.

⁴² J. Campbell *The Power of Myth: with Bill Moyers*, Ed., Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday 1988) p. 59.

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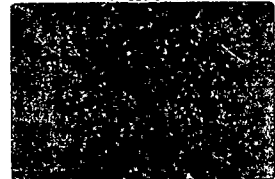
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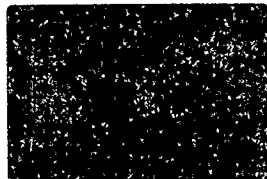
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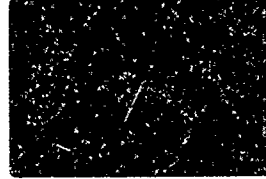
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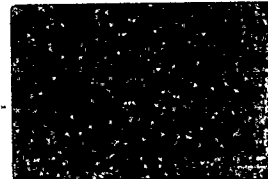
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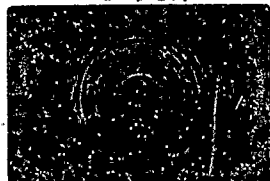
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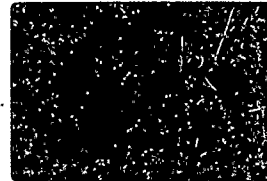
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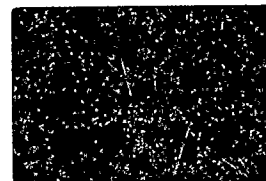
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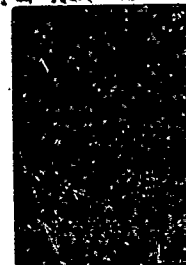
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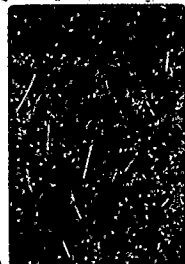
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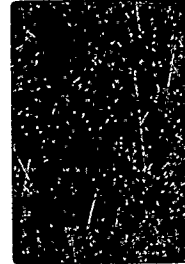
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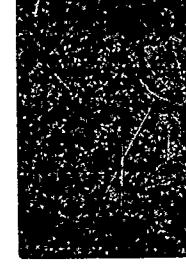
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