

NEW VISIONS IN PAINTING

contrapuntal painting

art as visual conversation

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I call my work contrapuntal painting. In music, counterpoint is the coexistence of two or more independent melodies or rhythms that simultaneously function as the harmonies to one another. Each shape in my paintings is like a note in a musical composition. I combine these note/shapes to make visual melodies. Because each shape has multiple properties, or scales, several different melodies are created simultaneously. The "chromatic" scales of each shape include hue, temperature, value and intensity, size, and contour. A visual melody is significant by virtue of the intervals between the note/shapes and the nature of its interaction with the other melodies.

These several visual melodies playing simultaneously are metaphors for human interaction within a marriage or a family, and between communities and nations. They are also metaphors for ways of thinking about oppositions. They are voices in a conversation. I am suggesting that thinking itself is an inner dialogue and that the quality of our thinking depends on the quality of that dialogue. If one thinks of each of the separate wills in the universe as a melody, life can be seen as a complexly ordered contrapuntal composition. The answer to the question of who composes it depends on one's idea of the balance among a divine control, random fate, and human initiative. The interweaving of these three elements becomes itself a subject of counterpoint in my work.

These paintings are indebted to Johann Sebastian Bach, whose name is practically synonymous with counterpoint. Edward Rothstein has asserted that Bach also used counterpoint to represent a vision of human interaction: "His fugues construct musical orders in which each individual voice is playfully free — maintaining its identity but capable of the most fantastical diversions — while having its position verified and reinforced by other voices. The fugue establishes a community of like minds and distinct parts, very different from the polyphony of the Renaissance, where the focus is less on individual voices than on the overall texture."¹

I am painting a community of minds as I see them in the late 20th century with a unique potential for individuality and interdependence. Each shape in the painting has a certain size and contour, which corresponds to the duration of a note of music, and visual rhythms are generated by the ordering of these time intervals.

In painting, a fundamental creative tension exists between positive and negative space. In a painting of a vase and the space around the vase, the vase, the object, is "positive" and the space around it, the background, is "negative." Even the words sound as if they are imposing a value judgement. Yet Matisse said that the art of painting begins when the painter sees the vase and the space around it simultaneously. That means that the negative space takes on a life of its own, a shape of its own, and that the painting does not exist until both the positive and negative shapes are in a creative tension. The oppositions are conversing in counterpoint.

The Fundamental Conversation

The creative tension between masculine and feminine is, I suggest, the fundamental conversation. I think of the opposites as two irreducible properties, like blue and orange, that color our every trait, such as strength or nurturing, but are not themselves these traits.

The essence of masculine and feminine is a mutual attraction that can be defined only by itself. Even though men are masculine and women feminine, each sex finds its identity by its inner dialogue with the other. Stereotypes stymie the flow of language. For example, the person who thinks that strength is "masculine" and nurturing is "feminine" will be limited in the kind of conversation he or she can invent. Each contrapuntal conversation is an attempt to release ourselves from stereotypical thinking.

Counterpoint begins where hierarchy leaves off. No matter how large or small, pale or bold, wild or tame the shapes in a contrapuntal painting may be, each is an independent visual melody listening and responding to the others. This kind of conversation is an act of creation between equals, however different they may be.

The subtle movement from light to dark in a Rembrandt painting or Seurat drawing portrays a thinking process that appreciates nuance. Some ways of thinking, and some paintings, are better; that is, more truthful, more creative, more life-giving, more pleasurable, more moral, than others. Dynamics are what make a shape or melody a whole, something with a beginning and end. They give it drive, impulsion, a reason for being.

Rhythm, melody, interval, and counterpoint are the tools of the trade. Yet how do such "abstract" terms become potent vehicles for human feeling, thought, and vision?

I think the artist transfers to the process of making a work of art the feelings, the attachment, that a patient transfers to an analyst in a successful therapy. Freud said this transference is a requirement for catharsis, for then the patient is no longer "just talking about" her problems, but rather experiencing them as real, as if the therapist were in fact tormenting her (as she felt her mother did) or thwarting her (as she perceived her father to do). The cure comes when the patient and therapist see the problems as *their* problems and resolve them with each other.

The work of art is born when the artist experiences the work as the locus of her problems and their resolution. Tradition, paint texture, subject matter, and scale become the anxieties that demand transformation. There is no other way for inanimate paint, worn-down brushes, or a piece of board or canvas to become imbued with nothing less than life, with all its complexities, sorrows, and transcendence. Art is not a kind of therapy, though therapy is a kind of art.

Tradition vs. Inspiration

One opposition with which artists always grapple, onto which great artists have transferred their life, is the use of tradition vs. inspiration. How does she balance the past, someone else's ideas and identity, with her own, which she probably doesn't even know yet? Does she want to incorporate it completely into herself? Does she want to abandon the past and listen only to her own voice? Is that voice her own? How does she know?

The conversation with her artistic precursors begins where the conversation left off; that is, she begins with the kind of thinking about oppositions that she has acquired. In the process of working, tradition and inspiration find a way of talking with each other.

A woman's most fundamental struggle with her father is to own herself, just as the woman artist's is with tradition. Until she reclaims her territory, a woman slowly loses her will to be the mistress of her self. Without an independent voice there is no counterpoint.

Yet tradition, however it has subjected the woman artist, is still her tradition. The artist cannot live without that conversation. What does she do with it? She talks with it, she loves it, she invents what it means to be human, she fills in the gaps until that tradition becomes fit to be her husband. Her conversation between tradition and inspiration will be an act of invention and reconciliation. In the language of counterpoint, she composes her own melody, one that plays with and against her precursor. It turns out that the masculine can amuse as well as the feminine.

Inventing Each Conversation

With which of her precursors will the artist who is a woman converse? The paintings of Mondrian, Vermeer, and Stuart Davis have spoken to me about counterpoint, perhaps more clearly than any others. These are elaborate structures of intertwining melodies with no extraneous notes. No matter how few or many elements in the painting, new connections reveal themselves. These artists are men who, through their paintings, have had visions of masculine and feminine conversations that have shed some of the stereotypes.

In many ways "men's" art is human art, but to the extent that tradition imposes hierarchy and stereotype on its voices, it could be said that our culture's art is less than fully human. In that case, our tradition is less potent a voice for any artist, man or woman, who prefers conversation to conquering. The problem is beyond the

forms needed for men's or women's experience. Counterpoint is a vision of a common ground between men and women that has not been so deeply explored by either sex. Up to now, men have had a voice, however uncontrapuntal. Some people want a voice in tradition with which they can converse in a more interesting fashion.

Interactive Relationship

Perhaps I have chosen abstraction because of an uneasiness with the female nude as the embodiment of my voice. Many tomes have been written by now about the oppressive male gaze. But the artist must ask what the painting needs. The subjected woman is not enough of a subject for my conversation. Substituting a male body hasn't worked for me, either. From a positive perspective, abstraction has been the most direct means for exploring counterpoint in painting.

Many of my paintings are diminutive, intimate, three to five inches in either direction. Rather than physically overpowering (as many men are to women), they suggest a more interactive relationship with the viewer. Smallness in art may be coming under a more favorable star, but in my lifetime size has mostly been a directly proportional measure of importance and, though no one would admit it, quality.

The small works are painted on paper. Arthur Danto has aptly pointed out that paper, since it is so expendable, is considered a less "serious" medium than canvas, panels, or walls, and so has become associated with the artist's "intimate moods."² Paper and women have a lot in common in that they both have developed a reputation for being less than serious but good for intimate moods, and maybe even expendable. I take these stereotypes, these preconceptions, and play with them. I draw on the bare paper — actually four-ply museum board — and then apply multiple layers of a gesso wash to protect the painting from the board. This way I can be serious, intimate, expendable, and conservable all at once.

Progress takes the form of composing contrapuntal conversations between laughter and seriousness, permanence and impermanence, tradition and inspiration. They will be different from another artist's compositions, and the value of each of our works will be measured by how valuable our ways of thinking are to our fellow human beings and how completely we have transferred our conversations into the medium of painting.

The time has come for art, which is not ideology or theory, to offer us a greater vision of human potential. My paintings are saying that the quality of that vision is not dependent on size or material, though they take advantage of both. They say this simply by being as good as they are — however good that is — and small. That is, the intervals within the painting, not its size, are a measure of quality.

A verbal language has developed simultaneously with the visual language of my paintings. Not only have I written about contrapuntal painting, but also each image has a poem connected with it. Words have helped me focus my interest. I see the words and images as different facets of the same stone. The language and

the paintings try to live up to each other. There are dangers in such a pursuit; for instance, the language could limit the paintings. I could become so committed to a verbal idea that the visual ideas are subordinated to it, or cannot flourish in their own way. This is itself a contrapuntal conversation.

1. Edward Rothstein, "Bach's Secret: The Earthly Man and His Heavenly Music." *The New Republic*, June 24, 1985, p. 27.

2. Arthur Danto, "Works on Paper." In *State of the Art* (New York: Prentice Hall Press), p. 106.

Judith Seligson '72/'73 is represented by the Jane Haslem Gallery, where she had a one-person exhibition in May 1991. Her paintings have also been shown at the Lillian Heidenberg Gallery, New York City, in 1991 and 1992.