

Of Monkeys and Machines

(Continued from Page Two)

ometric, cubist paintings executed in his later periods. The uneducated believes that the contemporary painter does nothing more than smear paint on a canvas with his fingers as he would mud on a wall, or stands a few feet from the easel and throw paint at the canvas by the fistful with no thought. It looks easy. That is why I hear innumerable times from some of the viewers of the works in the galleries, "I could do that." But it is far from easy. Smearing paint with the hand, even "throwing" it at the canvas, is a perfectly legitimate way of painting. Many professional painters do just that. But to be able to do it so that the result is aesthetically and technically pleasing is the test. To be able to do it so that there is a strong compositional arrangement, an illusion of space, a three-dimensional relationship of forms through a relationship of colors, and a technical proficiency in the application of paint is the proof.

With a little practice, just about anyone with one arm and one eye could reproduce nature, as closely as the medium allows, in a drawing or painting, some better than others, but there are cameras for this purpose. Today, creativity goes beyond merely copying nature. Copying nature as closely as possible with no deeper feeling is not art. Besides it is dull. If one wants to look at a landscape, he does not have to look at a painting. He can see the real thing merely by looking out his window.

Today, naturalistic subject matter means nothing.



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The emphasis is on emotionalism, heightened excitement. The contemporary painter is more ego-centric, more concerned with the way he feels, more intent on his own experiences than he is with his environment, but this is not to say that he has lost touch with his surroundings, because it is from his surroundings that his feelings are derived. It is this endeavor to express his feelings, an intangible, invisible thing, and a reliance more or less on the help of his subconscious which results in abstraction.

So what? So what the hell do we care how the artist feels, or felt, or why? That is not the point. We do not care how or why, and prob-

ably, neither does the artist. It is the end product, the result of the artist's experience that we are interested in. You may say "so what" again. You cannot recognize anything in it that you know to be true, but you do not have to. Abstraction is a visual experience like anything else—like the movies, or looking at the physiognomy of a beautiful female. Beautiful form, color relationships, and shape can be pleasing and exciting in themselves whether we recognize anything in them or not. An abstract painting can be just as stimulating, if not more so, as anything Norman Rockwell ever did. Why do we look at a vase full of roses and think "My, my, aren't they lovely," then in turn look at a well done abstract painting and feel either insulted or revolted? What is the difference? What are roses but shapes and elegant color? Is the difference in the fact

that we recognize roses as roses and refuse to accept anything that we cannot recognize, no matter how beautiful it might be? It is pretty ridiculous. There is no doubt that there are individuals who are insensitive to the beauty of form, recognized or not, and even to the grace of the female anatomy which has been a traditional subject for many ages. Most people though, are more perceptive and sensitive than that and with a little understanding can gain greater pleasure in life through the visual arts.

A middle-aged woman walked into the gallery office one day and asked me, "what's it all about? Can you explain these paintings to me?" I asked her if she understood music, to which she replied, "certainly." When I asked her why, she could give me no answer. When I mentioned that music could be thought of as being audible abstraction,

that it is not composed of naturalistic sounds — bird twitters (with the possible exception of Martin Denny's arrangements), the wind rustling through trees, the sound of a babbling brook—and that it could be compared to abstraction in the visual arts, nothing happened. She looked just as blank as ever. When I then, by chance, mentioned "expression," the key word, her eyes lit up as if she had been hit by the greatest insight. This induced me to elaborate. Think of contemporary art, I said, first, in terms of a visual experience, secondly, as emotional expression, and thirdly, in terms of symbolism and simplification. This small bit of information seemed to make her quite happy and I felt a sense of satisfaction because I thought that I might have gained another convert. From the smallest understanding can come the greatest benefits.



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