THE ART OF CHANCE

Doracy Testa
Ph.D., University of Southern California, 1980

PROJECT

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ART
(Art Studio)

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

SPRING
2010
THE ART OF CHANCE

A Project

by

Doracy Testa

Approved by:

______________________________________, Committee Chair
Ian Harvey

________________________
Date
Student: Doracy Testa

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this project is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the Project.

_________________________________, Graduate Coordinator

Ian Harvey

Date

_________________________________, Graduate Coordinator

Robert Ortbal

Date

Department of Art
Abstract

of

THE ART OF CHANCE

by

Doracy Testa

The purpose of this investigation is to provide an insight on what I try to convey in my artwork. I will discuss the reasons why abstraction interests me, and how it may potentially influence the experiences of the audience. The viewers are addressed with regard to how abstract art can qualify their lives. Since my work is anchored on assumptions about the reasons why I utilize chance, or randomized procedures as a starting point for generating images, such conjectures will be stated and clarified. Bearing in mind that confidence in non-rationality has been present to varying degrees in the works of Dadaists, Surrealists, Abstract Expressionists, and in the art of the followers of the Fluxus movement in both Europe and in the United States, a review of literature will include books and commentaries of scholars who, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, dedicated their time to the study of aleatory procedures as present in many artistic undertakings. The exploration of the art of chance in painting, metaphorically symbolic of alchemy, points to the work of Carl Jung, who proposed allegories and theories of the psyche. The discussion of the art of chance finishes and simultaneously opens the doors for further examination of the theme.

____________________, Committee Chair

Ian Harvey

____________________

Date
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Professor Ian Harvey, my advisor and mentor, for his firm guidance and valuable insights, which were important stepping stones in my development. He taught me the language and nature of abstract form; Professor Sarah Flohr, who inspired and encouraged me to pursue more advanced routes in the domain of art. She was an early stimulation for me as a student; Professor Tom Monteith, for welcoming me into his dynamic painting classes and showing me a new way of seeing. His constant assistance was indispensable for my progress as an artist; Professor Elaine O’Brien, whose brilliant teachings facilitated my understanding of what I try to convey in my artwork; my special friend Susan Silvester, who invested her time, energy and knowhow to help me problem solve technical matters and arrive at the end of the program. In the aggregate, I thank all the faculty, staff and administration of the Art Department at Sacramento State University, Sacramento, California, for their strong leadership.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................ v
List of Figures .............................................................................................................. vii
THE ART OF CHANCE ................................................................................................. 1
Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 11
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Figure 1  <em>Untitled</em>, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 72 x 60&quot;</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the spirit of my work is the conviction that abstract art elicits responses that can reflect the inner perceptual capacity of the viewers, and propel their critical thinking and latent projective material. The intention is to create paintings that promote the understanding and appreciation of the enigmatic language and mysterious semiotics of the abstract imagery. While working in the field of clinical psychology, with attention to the areas of perception and personality, I became aware of the value and power of projective techniques. Projections are personal inner attributions mirrored in the outside world. They facilitate insight into the nature of characterological traits, needs, desires and goals, by triggering the mind with unstructured stimuli, such as abstract visual imagery. Vague and ambiguous information can elicit an individual’s characteristic modes of understanding and perceiving the world through their own projective interpretations. It is my belief that a good knowledge of our makeup is an important step towards becoming a better person, qualifying our lives, and adding to our social community in more significant ways.

My contribution to the viewer is offered in the form of visual images that are, at times veiled, deconstructed or disfigured, to make possible the surfacing of personal projections and the promotion of individual perceptions. By this means, I hope to help the viewers enrich their quality of life. I find abstraction stimulating and valuable due to its potential to contribute to the self-knowledge and experience of the viewer. My intended audience is the everyday man interested in facing the uncertainties of the unknown, as echoed in
abstract paintings. I trust that the process of questioning instigated by the paintings will influence the values of the audience in a positive manner.

My paintings suggest a vision that is not preplanned, that has no theme or motif of its own, and yet is produced with intense motivation. The artwork engages the audience by diversifying paint application, and imparting variegated forms with considerable physicality and substance. The ambiguity, secrecy and surprise discovered in the imagery can add interest to the viewer. The abstract vocabulary puts forward a variety of forms and colors that conjure up a world of perceptions, emotions and ideas. Transformational moments, mystic invocations, rituals, amalgamation of forms, veiling of features and anonymity are some significant features of my work.

I utilize chance as a starting point in my paintings. I believe that randomized procedures free the artist from constraints of excessive rationalization. My assumption is that artistic freedom, essential for the creation of a unique body of art, relies on the most direct use of our intuitive potential, which, in turn, offers augmented opportunities for immediacy of insight – premonitions of what is unfolding. From this generally uncontrolled beginning, capitalizing on serendipity, I progress into more elaborate and conscious choices as I approach the final product. Ultimately, the unification of the whole will announce a voice capable of engaging the viewer in the abstract grammar of the painting.

*Untitled*, 2010 (mixed media on canvas, 6x5 feet), exemplifies a nonthematic work that was not pre-planned and did not have a motif. The aleatory paint application
generated forms that appear to be gestural and directional. The language is ambiguous and secretive, since nothing can be clearly identified as distinct images or objects. In the distance, there is a luminous backdrop of space in which forms freely intermingle. Fragmentary images emerge from this ground to prefigure the forefront arrangement. There is an accidental mutational character in several forms that appear to undergo transformations. Some forms seem to convey creatures while at the same time suggesting forces of nature. Other forms are veiled, to increase the ambiguity of the content. The motion of the brush entails an elusive activity of mystic invocation, or a ritualistic dance implied by circular strokes that compose the pictorial field. While the selection of forms challenges the thinking process that searches for meaning, the choice of colors is intended to elicit emotions. The large scale canvases aim to magnify the overall appearance of the artwork, and produce a sense of splendor and dimensionality. While the painting components are unified in a big picture, they remain inexplicable and mystifying in the whole. For the viewer, this is an opportunity to make use of projective and perceptual capacities, to gain insight into their introspections, and to enrich their experience.

The utilization of aleatory procedures for the exploration of space, order and chaos, and for the making of an art that is unexpected and challenging is the nature of the art of chance. Reliance on non-rational actions and intuitive decisions increases the probability that a genuine creative moment will be generated. Freedom is the condition necessary for the development of an authentically artistic mind. Art that uses chance or randomized procedures as a starting point tends to lead to freedom from the known and of what has already been done. The final result is more likely to be fresh and authentic, and to reveal
novel territories. Confidence in non-rationality has been present, to varying degrees, in the works of the Dadaists, Surrealists, Abstract Expressionists, and the art of the Fluxus movement. The ideas of Duchamp, the writings of Andre Breton, the automatism of Pollock, the performances and multiples of Joseph Beuys, and the legacy of John Cage and George Brecht, in music, exemplify the art of chance.

The acceptance of random actions in art can be traced back to Dadaism. Tristan Tzara, a Romanian poet who pioneered the movement, selected this name by the casual dropping of a knife into a dictionary. In collage, for example, papers were glued where they were allowed to fall. The arbitrary arrangement on the ground facilitated more evocative results. Allowing chance to interfere with the work so directly, the artist was remarking on the deterministic conditions of the world, in which destiny had outdone the resolve of human plans. This aleatory method is considered quintessentially Dada.

Marcel Duchamp, among many others, accommodated the use of chance in his art. He let thread fall on the ground and used the resulting curve to produce a customized ruler for building part of The Large Glass, 1915-1923 (Mathew Gale, 47-87). Rene Passeron described how Dada combined various kinds of non-rational procedures. For example, Hans Arp produced automatic drawings and collages in 1916. For one of his collages, he released torn paper to the floor and used the pattern to paste the material on canvas to produce Accordance with the Laws of Chance, 1916-1917 (Rene Passeron, 41-48). The movement thrived within an energetic popular culture uncompromised by the French canons of high art.
Mark Polizzotti indicated that Dada seemed the most intellectually inspiring current that emerged from war. Its inherent message – that there were no prospects, no salvation even in nonconformism – responded to the French writer Andre Breton. Breton was devoted to Dada, but eventually came to the conclusion that Dada had succumbed to a confused superficial theatricality. He then started to put his energy towards another path, namely Surrealism. In his Manifesto, 1924, Breton classified Surrealism as pure “psychic automatism”, and included, in the definition, the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral preoccupation (Polizzotti 114-209). Lucy Lippard added that, for Breton, chance was a “form of manifestation of exterior necessity that prepares the way into human unconsciousness (Lippard 2080).” According to Michael Carrouges, the essential character of Breton’s work relied on the discovery of a natural link between “personal subjective automatism and universal automatism”, a phenomenon known as “objective chance” (Carrouges 7). Breton was influenced by psychoanalytic techniques, particularly by Freud’s theory of the unconscious. The deterministic view that fate had defeated the tenacity of human plans was strongly entertained during the war times in Europe, with ramification in the worldwide art community (Matthew Gale 218).

In the United States, a novel movement started to call the attention of the artistic group, under the designation of Abstract Expressionism, during the mid-twentieth century. Sometimes called the “New York School”, Abstract Expressionism included subgroups such as Action Painting, with Jackson Pollock, a post-World War American artist, as one of its major exponents (Yenawine 113). Pollock’s most representative art
consists of haunted drips, holding strongly to the principles of automatism, defined by Hopkins as “a kind of elevated doodling deriving from unconscious urges.” At that time Pollock had entered Jungian analysis due to his troubled personal background (Hopkins 10). There is abundance of documentation about Pollock’s utilization of chance work, previously explored by Dada and Surrealism. In fact, Clement Greenberg had already written that major art was almost impossible without incorporation of the major art schools of the previous periods (Greenberg 210).

Ultimately, a new art direction was founded by George Maciunas, in 1962. Maciunas coined the name Fluxus to this movement suggesting a continuous change. This international current incorporated some principles of the art of chance. Peter Frank expressed his fascination for Joseph Beuys, a main representative of the movement who believed in art-life fusion. Beuys was considered “the most fascinating of enigmas (Frank 51).” Roberta Smith indicated that Fluxus was a movement intended to be transient and off-beat. In his performances, named multiples, Beuys used a chalk board, stuffed hare, fat, honey and wax, reaching the absurd “as if pigs had wings”, a metaphor used by Smith (Smith 82).

Lizzie Borden reviewed Beuys’ drawings, focusing on configurations of words, maps, diagrams and notations rather than pictorial creations. The works pointed towards revolution through creativity, “the leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom”, quoting Joseph Beuys. Borden’s opinion was that “the content of the drawings was inconsequent, but the relationship between concepts constituted Beuys’ poetics”, reflecting the acceptance of mysticism against analytic investigations (Borden 76).
Meyer added considerable information concerning the understanding of the Fluxus movement, which she identified as an international radical art movement interested in far-fetched poetry, music, happenings and other ”disruptive” events. Meyer talked about Beuys’ unorthodox techniques and revelation of private mythology and shamanism. In his *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965, Beuys stated that he did not want to explain pictures to people, due to their obstinate rationalism. Beuys impressed Meyer as a man of enormous complexities and talent to manipulate events (Meyer 56). He stated that, in places of high learning such as universities, the hallmark was to speak rationally. Therefore, Beuys found it necessary for an enchanter to appear (Stachelhaus 13-41).

John Cage, a disciple of the Fluxus School in the field of music, utilized silence, noise and randomized sounds in his compositions. He tried to increase unpredictability of sounds and encouraged people to cultivate a “similarity with the chaos of the surrounding ether.” He made use of coughing, laughing, clapping, slapping the table, brushing hair, blowing nose, hissing, sighing, gargling, yawning, humming, all sounds interspersed in his lectures (Cage 162-195). In his publication *Tacet, any Instrument or Combination of Instruments*, 1960, he successfully introduced silence. The Tacet was titled according to the total length of the work, which was composed of three parts. Each part began with the closing of the lid of the piano and finished when the pianist opened the lid. The traditional beginning was transformed into the end of the concert, and vice-versa.

Jill Johnston reported, in 2005, the event *The Motor Vehicle Sundown*, 1960, dedicated to John Cage. Composed by George Brecht, a student of Cage, the event was
orchestrated by Larry Miller, in Germany. The Motor Vehicle Sundown event can include any number of performers, each operating a motor vehicle. They are provided with a set of directions to be executed, such as turning headlights on and off, opening and closing doors and trunks, sounding horns, accelerating motor, and turning the radio on and off (Johnston 112-119). A Brecht retrospective during 2006, in the Museum Ludwig, Germany, indicated a surge of new interest in the Fluxus movement. Brecht was born American, but moved to Germany in 1971 and adopted a German last name (Yve-Alain Bois 274).

In recapitulation, this review of literature explored the use of chance in art. Methods of randomization were present in the works of Dadaists such as Marcel Duchamp, in the beginning of the twentieth century, followed by Surrealism and the writings of Andre Breton. In the United States, Jackson Pollock utilized automatism in Abstract Expressionism, during the mid-twentieth century. Ultimately, George Maciunas founded the Fluxus movement in 1962. Joseph Beuys and his multiples typified the Fluxus current in performances and other visual events, while, in music, John Cage and his student George Bretch experimented with silence and aleatory sounds.

The investigation of abstract art and the art of chance is not to end here, for what is to come refers to the study of alchemy and the teachings of Carl Jung. Elkins defines alchemy as a medieval chemical laboratory method having as its aims the transmutation of something liquid into gold, a seemingly magical process. As in painting, Elkins teaches that the means are fluid and the ends are solid. Alchemists were concerned with the same range of half-liquids as painters are. From the muddle of poorly known
materials, artists and alchemists make their choices more or less in an aleatory manner. In part they discern what they want, and in part they just observe what will surface. Elkins asserts that every randomness typically conceals some covert orderliness. For the viewers, the meaning is a projection of their personally articulated internal states. James Elkins maintains that what is significant in painting is the opportunity for transcendence, as art conveys its place between order and chaos. Art and alchemy are metaphors for the scuffle of daily life. In that respect, the psychoanalyst Carl Jung emphasized a meaning of alchemy, in pursuit of spiritual allegories and theories of psyche, reaching the realms of archetypes, and personal and collective unconscious, so well represented in the art of chance (Elkins 37-75). These are the novel avenues suggested by this thesis, as a contribution to future studies concerning the use of aleatory procedures in art making.
Figure 1  *Untitled*, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 72” x 60”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


