

Art of Elegance
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On the subject of engineering elegance, French aviator and author Antoine de Saint-Exup'ery explains that "a designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."¹ Elegance is the refined. To be elegant is to be graceful in movement and refined in nature. I seek an art of elegance through simplicity. A task is only complicated by unnecessary actions that do not directly aid the end goal. Any undertaking can become burdened with the extravagance of process and the issue at hand becomes forgotten. Excess is detrimental to all things. For this reason, there is elegance to the simple – aesthetic in the minimal. Simplicity is, in part, reduction.

Art is a tangled web of discourse. There is no common subject, no common media, and no common theme to unify all forms of art. Art is an unbound beast. Art is chaos. In a time of new media and endless approaches to art, I continue to paint with the brush on paper and canvas. I find no other media as expressive as I find the paintbrush. I find no other media as austere.

Japanese Painters of the Edo Period relied on composition and juxtaposition of subject matter to depict concepts of peace, tranquility, chaos, order, and many other ideas related to life. Within the paintings of nature, trees, vines, and other plant life become a tool through which the artist creates his composition. In one scroll a grapevine elegantly cascades through the image. In another, a pine tree violently obstructs half of the painting. The branches of a plum tree with flowers in full blossom point upward like

¹ Saint-Exup'ery, Antoine de. *Wind, Sand and Stars*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949.

skinny fists raised to heaven. Seated on the violent pine tree is a hawk. Sparrows nest amidst the plum blossoms and over the crashing waves of a brutal ocean swallows fly. Detailing the imagery is secondary to the painters' cause. Generally, Edo painters employed brush techniques that yield a somewhat simplistic image. Paintings from this period are not burdened by an excess of detail.

Henri Matisse's endeavor was for "an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter."¹ When describing his paintings, he likened his work to a "good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue."² Matisse worked to make "the whole arrangement of [his] pictures expressive."³ Composition is Matisse's most valued tool of expression because "if in the picture there is order and clarity it means that this same order and clarity existed in the mind of the painter and that the painter was conscious of their necessity."⁴

When I look at Matisse's paintings, I wonder what it would look like if he freed it from the complications of imagery and color. Could Matisse have found the pure expression he sought to achieve through colorless and nonobjective means? Color was the mechanism through which Matisse found expression. Through color, Matisse reinforced the primitive character of the image. His tonal values create chromatic vibrations that echo the movement of figures through the composition.⁵ Imagery was a tool that helped compose image. Imagery gives the viewer something to look at – a place

¹ Chipp, Herschal B. *Theories of Modern Art A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984. p.135.

² Chipp, Herschal B. p.135.

³ Chipp, Herschal B. p.137

⁴ Chipp, Herschal B. p.141

⁵ Flam, Jack. *Matisse: The Man and His Art 1869-1918*. Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1986. p.283.

to sit within the painting. Perhaps Matisse's collage work was an attempt to expel imagery, but it was still bound by color.

I aim for an art of elegance. Through simplicity – perhaps even minimal – in my approach, I seek to achieve expression similar to that of Matisse. Unlike Matisse, I believe this expression is attainable through colorless means. Imagery and color complicate expression in art. Mark making is the essence of two-dimensional artwork. Many people have argued that pure painting is pigment on canvas, however, painting requires action on the artist's part. A painter must apply his or her paint to a surface through some means. The gesture an artist makes through mark can convey immediacy or it can slow the viewer down and focus on time. I aim for an art that is both immediate and timely – an art that expresses the purity of a single moment paired with the contrast of continued time.

The mark operates through the gesture – the artist's movement in space and time. The mark is a record of the artist's experience in the process of creation. Though immediacy is desirable in the appearance of the mark, mark making should not be entirely automatic. As an artist, I must be prepared to paint before I lay the brush to the surface. This requires time and patience. I am like the hawk in Ito Jakuchu's *Hawk on Pine Tree*. Art making requires willingness to be patient. Truly expressive mark making requires isolation and concentration. It is meditation. It is reflection. It is a process of preparation. At times it requires sitting on the floor with the brush in hand and paper in front of me as I contemplate each movement. Other times, I walk a set course before approaching the materials I intend to use. This process of preparation does not have to be so traditionally meditative. Preparation can be any action done with intent to focus and

concentrate my thoughts. It is important to not become constrained by one method of preparation as I seek a variety of expression that comes from all moments in life and not only the quiet peaceful times. Preparing before working is key to composing an image. Pre-visualization is the intent. There is nothing spontaneous about my process. Every mark and every possibility must be assessed prior to the actualization of the painting. Each piece must be thoroughly composed before beginning to work on the physical piece. Without proper preparation, the marks do not relate to the intended concept. The marks express nothing. Without proper preparation, the image lacks continuity. Every element of the image must unify to express the same concept and this requires the patience to contemplate and understand the concept prior to taking action.

I achieve simplicity through removing representational imagery from my paintings. I avoid painting form. Form distracts the viewer from the painting. When the audience begins to see recognizable forms in the painting, the painting becomes about representation. Representation is not elegance. Representation complicates painting. One of my first tar paintings was overly burdened by form. I painted a black circle at the top of the composition. A line cascaded down two thirds of the canvas. These two forms read as either a black sun and a tree or a head and a penis. All recognizable and complete forms within a frame will be interpreted by the viewer as imagery. I do not want to complicate my paintings with imagery and the interpretations of painting a form that resembles a penis directly next to a form that resembles a head. These issues are obstructions on the path to a refined art – elegance. For this reason, the size of my mark is critical. Dominating marks control how the viewer reads the painting. The viewer will

not impose his or her interpretations of form onto my paintings. Rather, the viewer will see what I intend to be seen in the painting – the mark and composition.

In the past, I asserted the importance of the figure in my work. The figure is still of great importance, but not in the same sense that I once considered it. I no longer claim to observe the human figure, but rather I am the figure. My work no longer deals with me (the artist) translating the motion I observe onto a surface plane. Instead, the marks I make are records of my movement and my existence as a figure in time and space. My observations are in the preparatory exercises I do prior to working. The reason I no longer claim to observe the figure is related to my belief that imagery is a burden on artwork. I continue to agree with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti that “in order to make the spectator live in the center of the picture... the picture must be the synthesis of what one remembers and of what one sees,” but this synthesis should result in nonobjective mark making.¹ It is necessary for the spectator to be capable of living within my work as my goal, second to elegance, is expression.

Jose Ortega Y Gasset argued that art – modern art especially – is an entirely inhuman pursuit. In *The Dehumanization of Art*, Gasset explains that the painter is as far removed from human experience as possible. The artist makes no intervention with the world. The artist participates in reality only through perception. Just as a photograph of a man is not the actual man but an image, a painting is not “lived reality.” Representational or not, a painting is “observed reality.”² Gasset chastises modern art for stylization and abstraction. Stylization, Gasset contends, is to “deform reality, to

¹ Chipp, Herschal B. *Theories of Modern Art A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984. p.296.

² Gasset, Jose Ortega Y. *The Dehumanization of Art and other essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948. p. 17

derealize; style involves dehumanization.”¹ To abstract reality is to take yet another step away from the human experience. Despite making nonobjective art, I agree with Gasset on the issue of abstraction. Gasset does not accept that there may be reason for the artist to deform reality – to intentionally dehumanize his or her own work. When dealing with the human experience, some aspects of life may be too real or too intense to approach by painting a representational image of an event. For an artist to deal with issues like death or his own imminent demise, imagery is too far removed from experience to convey such grave and momentous concepts. These are the aspects of life from which my work originates. Such serious matters cannot be approached through trivial images that “depict” what I witness. My art comes from a process of meditating on the issue. I agree with Gasset that art is dehumanized. Modern art especially tends to be removed from the human experience. For this reason, I find it difficult to appreciate and look to other artists.

My art is not intended to be “beautiful,” but it is not without an aesthetic. I assert that my work is elegant, but elegance and beauty are not the same. Beauty exists only in an individual’s perception and judgment. Beauty is how someone perceives something that he or she finds visually arousing. Beauty is physical and meaningless. Beauty, unlike elegance, does not necessitate any degree of refinement. In my past work, I depended on visually stimulating and appealing compositions to lure a viewer into my work. Finer details that are discovered upon closer examination maintain the viewer’s interest. These choices are made to attract an audience. I want an audience that finds my artwork visually interesting. I want my audience to find beauty in the variety of marks, in the compositions, in the simplicity. The audience should recognize the expressive nature

¹ Gasset, Jose Ortega Y. p. 25

of the marks I employ and hopefully relate on some level. Furthermore, finer details within the image create shifts of perspective. When the viewer realizes that there are multiple gradients of black, they begin to see depth. As he or she continues to look, they notice finer lines connecting and supporting the more bold lines. With a little more time, the viewer may notice that the image is has other paintings/drawings collaged into it. This conveys a multitude of depths to the expressions I aim to capture in my work. These depths convey the levels and shifts in perspective of expression. In my most recent work, I experimented with liquid asphalt – a tar based medium. Painting with tar is slow. The media resists when manipulated. There is no way for the action of painting with a tar based medium to be immediate. Control of the media requires my complete absorption into the task at hand. Similar to how ink demands intense concentration to control its watery nature, tar necessitates total attentiveness to ensure that the viscous material operates on the surface as intended. Furthermore, liquid asphalt asserts that my work is not intended to be an art of beauty. It is a very visceral and unpleasant material. The tar in the material has a strong industrial odor. Even once the liquid asphalt dries, it retains a gooey and tacky appearance. One imagines the medium sticking to his or her hands and adhering to them for days.

My goal is to attain pure expression through mark making. This requires simplicity and escape from the things that burden art such as imagery and color. My art is timeless and elegant. My art is refined. Even my most erratic appearing marks are graceful and distinguished. I achieve this through my process of preparation and pre-visualization. Every mark is made with complete intent. Every composition is created

with thoughtful concentration. Every element of the image is controlled. Thus, when I smear liquid asphalt over a surface, it is austere. It is illustrious. It is elegant.

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