

# **Ernest J. Claycomb, Artist's Manifesto**

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Philosophy humbles. In my twenty-first year I came to the conclusion that: Mastery of an art form is extremely difficult; relating the intricacies of that mastery is impossible. It wasn't until this year that I bothered to read any philosophical writings and I discovered that Immanuel Kant had the same thought two hundred years ago! And surely was conceived before that. How could anyone have a truly original thought? Are some individuals just better with language? Do some just organize their thoughts with more clarity and purpose?

## **A Challenge**

The question was put to me, through the course of reading these works by lovers of wisdom, to write a manifesto; to lay out my aesthetic goals. I have considered carefully over the past several years just what I want to say with my work and have come to conclusions that in my present state of mind, have strong validity. I have created several to this point that I feel succeed in speaking to this fundamental aesthetic and now I've discovered philosophical writings that have helped to resolve and clarify this purpose.

First, it might be advantageous to state, briefly, those concepts of art to which I was exposed early and had the most influence on my development. As Plato would say: "Those forms which have had a lasting and indelible effect." As you know the thread of realism runs strong and deep in American Art; and, as my forefathers have been on this soil since 1753, I seem to have developed an aptic structure for it and the stylistic trends I have been exposed to for the most are predominately figurative.

Pop art was catholic when I was beginning to understand what art was all about; painting directly in that vein and at once discarding, unconsciously, the influence that earlier modern art had on this bright, bold, larger-than-life reflection of culture. The appeal was all too obvious. Being of the baby-boom generation; reared under the phosphorous glow of the video screen, I had already been thoroughly infused with the split-second imagery and the more-is-better attitude of my thoroughly American Way of Life. I was not yet versed on the deepest implications of pop art and just as the first American cubist painters could grasp only the decorative and surface effects of that movement, I jumped on the pop-image bandwagon glorifying comic book heroes. Manipulating mass media produced imagery in the name of "fine art" was as natural as compiling my yearly Christmas want-list. I was oblivious to the aesthetics of pop art but was mesmerized, as was the general public, by the chic and glitz that pop art offered. It was entertaining if not inquisitive; it was immediate if not provocative.

As I began to generate my own little patch of history, I came to realize that, indeed, art history was rich in experiences and concepts. Surrealism was next to appear in my window of consciousness. Surrealism utilizes the same object-images as consensus reality altering only their cognitive relationships. Referring to the "magic realist" side of surrealism, not having been exposed to the bio-

morphism of Miro and Gorky at this time. But these altered relationships were for me just curious and playful associations and I was not of the intellectual prowess to seek deeper meanings (as the surrealists must have intended). No, the magnetism I felt for the object-oriented surrealists lay strictly in their clarity of presentation and clear, precise rendering—just as the hard-edge line and brazen imagery of pop art had done. This was non-chronological growth; the dream-state associations showed how realistically rendered images could achieve much more than selling toothpaste.

As I said, the dream-imagery didn't coalesce to the extent that it must have in those who were reared in the first half of this century. The life of the baby-boomer thus far has been much too comfortable to be driven to understand the horrors of Dionysus unleashed save for the unfortunate ones who were made to handle the Viet Nam Conflict\*. But I was beginning to appreciate the existence of alternate realities therein. As if the guiding hand of Apollo pointed the way, along came Photo-realism and I am engulfed.

## **A Personal Aesthetic**

Now to subject this photographic object-ness to a more personal aesthetic. I envision three methods to find abstraction. First is the abstraction of associations as mentioned of the surrealists. Second, is the visualization of “imperience” - manifestations of willful, non-cognitive impulses derived from within. They are intuitive, strictly non-objective, “expressionistic”. This form of creativity has been construed in the Freudian as therapeutic and a process of discovering individual idiosyncrasies. Third, is to disassemble the object-ness of that which we perceive (specifically the visual arena). This sense of “abstraction-in-reality” is the definition I will refer to in explaining my aesthetic. Kant was explicit in posturing that “man is the author of himself”; the reality we live in is but a conscious construction of experience. The thrust of what I do is based rather pointedly on this assumption. As the conscious mind appears to be separate and distinct from that which it perceives (including all other forms of consciousness), it can't by this definition fully know, or be one with, that which it can only justify through the abstracted qualities it receives through the mediating senses. This abstraction or reality is valid if we consider that the senses encode all sensations and relay these coded impulses to the brain as electro-chemical transmission; the brain does not burn if we touch a hot stove nor does it become blinded by the flash of a camera. In these cases (as always, even if of less dramatic impact) the brain is “merely” recording and assimilating the encoded messages of an overloaded sense organ. If this is true then dreams, which are only (reassembled?) memories of sensational experience (as opposed to imperience) are every bit as “real” as perceived reality and “those forms received into the soul” that the mind cannot assimilate into purposeful or useful understanding remain in the ambiguous, misty category of the abstract (or the sublime, in the case of profundity), and these sensational experiences are, in the same sense, just

as real as dream images whose abstraction lies not in appearances but merely in association and juxtaposition with the sum and total of all other memories. This then is the crux of my argument: If realities are subjective, then my aesthetic purpose is to be a harbinger of the recognition of the infinite possibilities of the human consciousness in realizing and constructing alternate realities. I have espoused this idea on several occasions, first at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago in a discussion group with Frank Piatek and Richard Loving in the Spring of 1988 while I was working on *Reflections of the Illinois Centre* and *Reflections of School*. The idea must have coalesced in 1981 when I completed *Oil on Water*; the first piece to satisfy this ideology. At that time, I had not been exposed to the work of Paul Strand or the “straight photographers”, but as early as 1977 I was making “straight photographs”; beginning to disassemble the conscious categories in the same manner as Strand by using extreme close-ups and eliminating frames of reference.

## **Deconceptualized**

If consciousness itself is an analog of the real world, then I choose specific visual stimulations to capture an experience that presents itself as not being immediately conceptualized or having qualities that lend itself to easily disregarding these concepts. Infusing photo-realism with deconceptualized excerpt from my visual experience speaks directly to the essence of the human recognition of reality.

In utilizing only abstractions from “straight photography”, I am consciously limiting those abstractions to the third type mentioned above as my imperiences have no validity in attempting to describe external phenomena that, nevertheless, have no object-ness. The camera contributes no past experience or object-forming capabilities to the stimulus so I can rule out dream imagery also. The argument might be made here that despite the mechanical nature of the camera, the human eye must witness the composition and focus, but this seems problematic as the alternative would be random, mechanically produced images that would not necessarily provoke the requirement that the concept-forming attributes be minimalized (this does, though, present interesting possibilities for further exploration). Furthermore, I do not require that the spectator reassemble the photographic reality needing only to be aware that this image was, indeed, captured and presented as faithfully as the technical abilities allow. In fact, if the spectator understands this predisposition, then the free-play between understanding and the imagination can move uninhibited from a curiosity about the category of the original consensus reality to an infinite variety of alternatives. The point is this: This infinite variety is “in situ” and require only that we “see” as opposed to “look” (to borrow terminology from Carlos Casteneda’s *Don Juan*).

One further point must be made in reference to purpose. A spectator might ask why photography itself is not a sufficient plateau on which the aesthetic

creation might rest. We live in an image-oriented culture; the average person is inundated with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of images daily! This in itself is not necessarily a negative, but presents us with all the more desire to witness uniqueness; to be all the more receptive to individual efforts and unique objects. This is evident on the performance side of artistic endeavor in that a handful of popular actors and athletes are household names to several hundred million people, if not the entire world! This makes the unique work of art a “hero” among visual imagery. Furthermore, as the pop artists of a generation ago were criticizing mass media culture, the photo-realist who spends days or weeks painstakingly reproducing an image that was initially captured in a split-second, makes an obvious statement about the superficiality of much of what is produced (not necessarily the photographic image); about the built-in obsolescence of material goods, and about the underlying meaning and value of works created by the human hand. Finally, there is much evidence to suggest that a properly executed painting will far outlast the finest in color photography given that the pigmentation of color film is organic while that of painting is of mineral origin and much less likely to change its appearance through the ravages of time.

## **Musical Mood**

This leads to the rules of reproduction. David Hume has pointed out that “there is a flutter or hurry of thought that attends the first perusal of any piece, which confounds the genuine sentiment of beauty”. The same may be said of witnessing any stimulus. The mind is always not only forming concepts, but anticipating associations. This tendency is a direct barrier to the free-play mentioned earlier that is the ideal effect of the kind of imagery. The answer to this dilemma is to slow down these cognitive abilities and borrow from Schiller his “musical mood”. I wish to define this mood as a state wherein the “internal dialog” is suppressed; momentarily abandoned for this free-play to surface. A method I might suggest for finding this “mood” is to observe words themselves—perhaps the highest form of conceptualization. Forget their meaning; break them into syllables and then just consider letters—their shapes—the transitions from black to white. (There is an interesting discussion of concept attainment in “A Study of Thinking” by Jerome S. Bruner that is worthy of examination in this regard.) Here, an aspect of Kant’s first moment in “The Judgement of Taste” would be most effective for the artist, that of being in a state of disinterested satisfaction. The artist must not desire to find these object-less stimulations; therefore, not looking for associations which might “fill the need”. Perhaps then the artist would become, himself, a purposiveness without a purpose! Are we creating a paradox? Are we leaving this process to chance? Perhaps we have no choice. As Kant states in his description of genius (no claims being implied): “It (genius) cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products but gives the rules just as nature does. Hence the author of a product for which he

is indebted to his genius does not know himself how he has come by his ideas and he has not the power to devise the like at pleasure or in accordance with a plan, and to communicate it to others in precepts that will enable them to produce similar products.” Such is the challenge I ask of my work.

## **Technicalities**

In as far as technical prowess is necessary to represent, realistically, any object much less an attempt at photographic realism, certain “rules” of artistic visual production must necessarily come into play. Two reasonable assumptions come to mind. Without such criteria this entire aesthetic becomes ineffective, because a valuable part of witnessing a deconceptualized image is not being aware of the “signature” of the artist’s hand that would effectively interfere by proposing a category of “2-D surface distortion” (although properly utilized surface affect will contribute to a convincing illusion). Second, attributable to the purpose of uniqueness, the work cannot be reproduced without losing the essential qualities that separate it from multiple production imagery. In other words, the work must be witnessed first hand or lose the ideal effect on the spectator. This concerns the aesthetic of the unique work of art. A photo-realist image reproduced to the size of a commonly seen photograph is rarely noted by the uninitiated eye and is passed over by the same “flutter of mind” as are the countless other images we are continuously exposed to.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding scenario is an attempt at describing an “ideally effective” work of art under this aesthetic. I don’t, however, expect that each piece produced will meet the requirements, because we are and should remain in a learning process. I will undoubtedly produce photo-realist and geometric abstractions and perhaps occasionally attain the proper combination and produce a work that ideally indicates this allusion to an “alternate realism”.

Sincerely,

Ernest J. Claycomb

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