Red, Black, and Blue

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RED, BLACK AND BLUE

A Thesis
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in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in
The School of Art

by
Ellen S. Burgin
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MANUSCRIPT THESES

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2. BlackLung/BlueStomach . Acrylic on Paper ...... 53" x 79" ...6
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Abstract

This body of work represents the struggle to find the truth of myself, my reality, and my understanding in the medium of paint.
In an interview with Selden Rodam, Jackson Pollock said, "...painting is a state of being. ... Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is" (O'Connor p. 73). Every time I make a painting, I am painting to discover who I am. I am painting to understand what I feel. I am painting what is inside me. I am painting myself into existence. My color palette, the size of my work, the handling of materials, and the forms that emerge and that are submerged reflect this struggle down into myself. In her book, Borderlands, Gloria Anzaldúa describes her writing as a similar process: "When I write, it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart -- a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body" (pg. 73). My struggle with paint is a metaphor for the struggle to find the truth of myself, my reality, my understanding. Painting is my visual vocabulary. The brush strokes, the colors, the textures can give meaning, reality, and power to my visions that language cannot.

I begin painting with a vibrant, primary color underlay that I inevitably build into a moody atmosphere in which the images merge, float, rest, pull, move and decay. It is as if I am painting from my happy, perky exterior down into my musty, deep, viscous, curdled interior. Beginning a painting with warm and cool colors establishes a vocabulary of opposites that I will use to build the painting. Colors, forms and textures push and pull against each other--
oppose each other. This theme of duality runs through my work on every level and represents me—my person, the outside and the inside.

The picture plane provides a space in which I can explore the inconsistencies and intricacies of myself. Unlike the superficial reflection of a mirrors surface, the picture plane reflects a deeper, more internal reality. When I was younger, I would sit and stare at myself in the mirror. I realize now that I was literally looking for me, my “self”. I no longer sit and look in the mirror for myself, I find it in my painting (slide #1).

The mirroring of the human dimension is reflected in the organically shaped forms that exist in the dark, mysterious atmospheres. The inspiration for the organic shapes is detailed in a selection of some words I have written in my sketch book while working: lump, postures, closed vessel, gut, gums, bending over backwards, swallow up, fist in the middle, spore, tender spot, sucker lips, swells. The forms evolve through a series of intellectual and instinctual decisions. Some forms evolve in a more literal way as in the painting, Black Lung/Blue Stomach (slide #2. Others have a more intangible reference to a state of being or an atmosphere as in Bombs Dropping on My Nerves (slide #3). Often, I use images from memory or imagination to help create the shapes. Other times, as in the painting, Yoke (slide #4), the forms are inspired from specific shapes from nature. The hump-back form and the stretched, knobby form were inspired by a cypress knee that I found. The knee had two wonderfully shaped, sensuous hump forms
growing on it. I took the basic idea of that form and distorted it to encompass my intentions.

The distortion that my shapes undergo as a result of intended meaning and process of applying paint is a metaphor for how I see the world and myself in that world. Like the mirrors in a fun house, my perceptions of reality can be radically warped. When this happens it is frightening and fascinating. The picture plane provides a place to experiment with those notions of distortion and normalcy. In the painting *Yoke*, the viewer is presented with two opposing states of one form. The top form perches upon the horizontal bands, creamy, bulky, and whole in its adolescence. It exists in opposition to the bottom form which has been pulled to extreme tension; its taut knots echoing the curvaceous, supple, round shoulders of the upper form.

Some decisions about forms are instinctual, some are made purely for compositional reasons, and others happen out of the process of working and reworking an area numerous times. Often, I will work a painting up to a finished state, only to realize it is not right. Those forms will then provide a sub-structure for the next image. Individual shapes and whole images are often submerged beneath layers of paint. Sometimes, I leave residual images or parts of images from earlier efforts in the finished, new painting (slide #5). Leaving parts of previously painted layers exposed provides additional history in the painting. They build upon one another to create a spatial depth, and they conceal and reveal hints of past images which speak of the struggle in the search for the right color or the right form. Just as
different experiences form our personalities, leaving hints of past images creates a richer, more complex painting. The process of layering the paint, the physicality of the materials, and the size of the paper all contribute to the final character of the forms.

The format of my pieces is usually large and vertical. The vertical format allows me to relate my body, physically, to the painting. This format functions much like that of a mirror -- an idea that has been explored by Gestalt psychology. “For Gestalt psychology all vertical fields will -- like a kind of mirror -- already be structured according to the body’s own organization, with a top and a bottom, a left and a right” (Krauss, pg. 303). I can relate to a vertical format much better than a horizontal one. A horizontal orientation implies landscape and restricts my entry into the piece.

When I work, I need space in which to move around -- to flail about, to explore, to make mistakes, to give up some control and some energy. The larger scale provides room in which I can lose myself. I am completely surrounded when I am working on a piece, and when I am at brush’s length I can see nothing but the colors and the brush strokes on the paper. Mark Rothko said that he worked on a large scale because, . . . “However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn’t something you command” (Mark Rothko, p. 7). I have to put forth strenuous effort to compete with the space of the large picture plane. I am constantly climbing up a ladder and down a ladder to reach the entire surface, moving away from the painting to see the entire area, turning the painting upside down, moving closer to continue the work. This
dance of process creates a rhythm which, like chanting, sustains a level of consciousness from which I work.

The element of color is as important to my paintings as the element of form. Just as the tone and the cadence of an utterance can carry clues to the speaker's emotion and word's meaning, color can provide certain meaning and emotion in painting (Sacks, 82). While I use many colors to convey ideas and feelings, two primary colors, red and blue, appear consistently in my paintings. In general, the two colors are symbolic for the two extremes of pitch out of which I function, blue being the lowest extreme and red being the highest extreme. I use these two extremes of color to do certain things in a painting. They pull you towards an inside or an outside, a cold space or a warm space, a deep space or a shallow space, a seductive space or an uninviting space.

In the book, Breakfast at Tiffany's, Holly Golightly describes her red and blue emotional states: "The blues are because you're getting fat or maybe it's been raining too long. You're sad, that's all. But the mean reds are horrible. Suddenly you're afraid, and you sweat like hell, but you don't know what you're afraid of" (Capote, 39-40). Unlike the passive, melancholy color of blue, red injects my pieces with energy, life, tension, and struggle. Red is the extreme I confront in myself, it is the manifestation of the fear that is inherent in the process of discovery -- of looking into the painting at myself. The "mean reds" are always somewhere in my paintings, buried underneath skins of acrylic paint or pulsing out of the surface. Gloria Anzaldúa describes the
process of writing down her "... images from my soul's eye" -- a process that is a struggle in red:

I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre. I write in red. Ink. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the insides of trees. Daily, I battle the red. Daily, I take my throat into my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the struggle (page 71-72).

Like Ms. Anzaldua, I find my voice is red.

Every time I make a painting, I lose myself to find myself. Through this process, I reach levels of awareness that are unattainable to me in any other medium. The picture plane offers me a space where the dualities of myself are not in conflict. I play the differences off each other to create a new formula of strengths and weaknesses, stark contrasts and subtle similarities, weightlessness and overwhelming weights, painful presences and playful presences. It takes much determination and energy to face the conflicts in myself and my work, and at times, it is as exhausting as it is rewarding. The first thing people say when they see my work is that it is not what they expected. They expect to see flowers and landscapes and instead they are looking straight down into me -- the mirror image of my soul.


Ellen Burgin was born in Morganton, North Carolina on May 4, 1969. She grew up in Marion, North Carolina, at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. She received her undergraduate education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is currently a candidate for a Master's Degree of Fine Art in painting at Louisiana State University.
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