

ASPECTS OF REALITY IN MY PAINTINGS

Stephen Greene*

I have always felt the need as an artist to introduce both objective and subjective aspects of reality in my paintings, especially in the form of signs or symbols of the mystery and of the passion of human life. Therefore, in my compositions I deal with images that convey conventional meaning and that are enigmatic.

My earliest paintings, made around 1947, were influenced by the Renaissance painters but, whereas they were much concerned with the representation of the actual visible world, I was essentially interested in my own psychological interpretation of it. Also my fascination with the theatre led me to invent a cast of symbolic personages who were depicted on the two-dimensional 'stage' of a painting. At times, the figures were maimed and, in most of these paintings, they took part in events centred on Christ's passion in a general way. I did not use another period's esthetic mode but I tried to deal with the possible meanings of hallucination. I was haunted by the practice of genocide in our time and with the guilt and witnessing of crime. I still use coffin shapes, however my concern is in the psychological 'death' of the living. In my first works bone forms, bars and the crutch were used as symbols and I usually divided the canvas with cross forms. These symbols are still present in my current works but the works are quite removed from illustration or realism, for I would not be content only to mirror aspects of the moment of history in which I live.

My works since 1960 moved from public iconography to a personal mythology [1]. I prefer my symbols and their combination to give rise to more than one possible interpretation of meaning. I am not interested in simple geometric forms or in non-figurative compositions. Such works can be splendid in having a totally concentrated oneness but they also can through such extreme distillation become over-simplified and arid. For me, a form must not only be able to exist independently as one area of color or as a particular circumscribed form but also it must have a psychological significance in the particular drama I want a painting to convey to viewers. Whatever changes have occurred in my work over the years, and there have been many, some of them of a radical nature, a few constants do

remain. They derive from the core of my early haunted concern with crime and guilt.

I have been concerned mainly with space that is limitless and free of objects and with its opposite, space that is cramped and cluttered with things. I imagine that an imprisoned man must envision freedom as a vast expanse of blue. In 1954 I was in Tunisia and was particularly moved by the sight of Sidi-Bou-Said, a town not far from Tunis. The blue Mediterranean is at the base of the town, each house is white and all doors, balconies and shutters

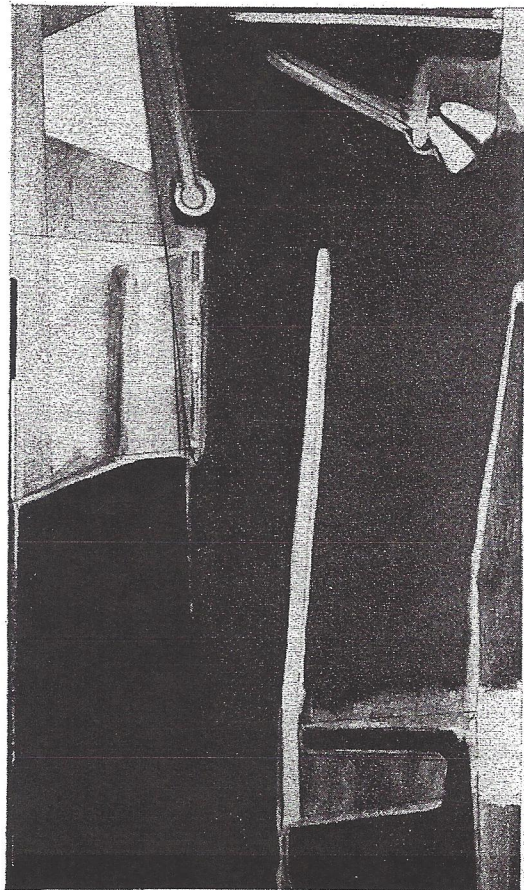


Fig. 1. 'Night Fever', oil on canvas, 88 × 50 in., 1971. (Photo: W. Rosenblum, Long Island City, N.Y., U.S.A.)

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are cerulean blue. I think of this incredibly saturated blue color as space, as atmosphere, but I would not want to use it to illustrate a particular place. There is always a difference between what may be an artist's initial inspiration and how he makes use of it. In 1957-58 I began using large areas of one color with incidents or details depicted in corners and at edges. In 1960, I began my series of essentially blue paintings.

Many believe that drawing has become of lesser importance to the painter than in the past. But it seems to me that although line is less and less used to circumscribe a form it has now become an independent agent in a composition. Therefore, I do not paint lines but draw them with charcoal or pastel colors so that their independence of the painted areas is assured. A line a few inches in length can play an important role in a composition, denoting direction and distance. Drawing remains, for one, a mark of identity from the first lines one made as a child to the more sophisticated signature marks of maturity, whether drawn freely or with the aid of a ruler on paper or on canvas.

There are two words that occur again and again in the titles of my paintings; they are 'light' and 'night'. These polarities are at the heart of my personal mythology [2] (Figs. 1 to 3) (Fig. 4, cf. color plate). Although as a starting point I use ideas from personal experience, they undergo radical transformation as I work. The ideas always involve abstractions of psychological aspects of love, passion, anxiety, terror and pleasure within an environment that is enchanting and, at times, beautiful.

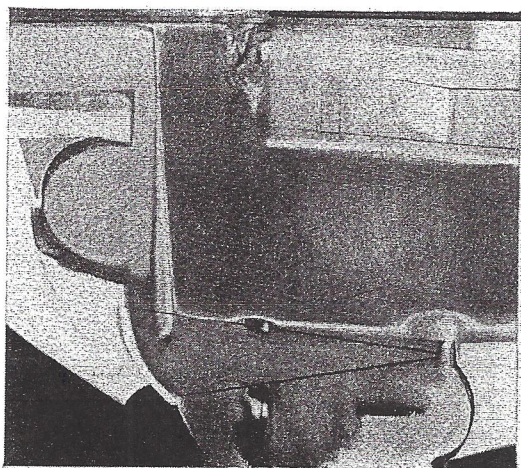


Fig. 2. 'Aftermath', oil on canvas, 88 x 68 in., 1971. (Photo: W. Rosenblum, Long Island City, N.Y., U.S.A.)

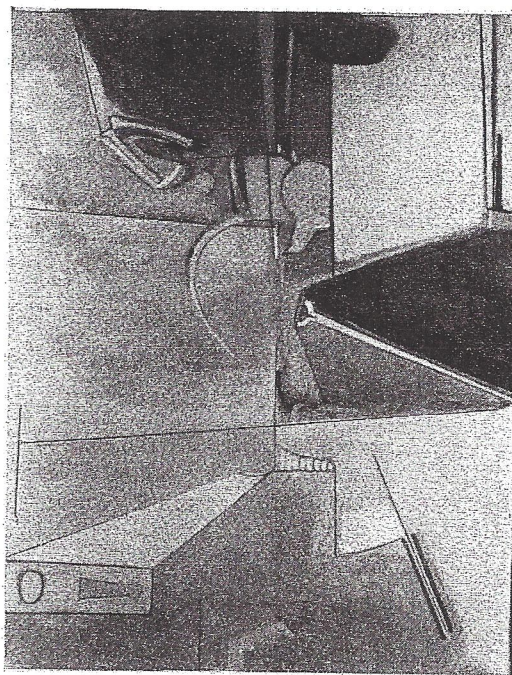


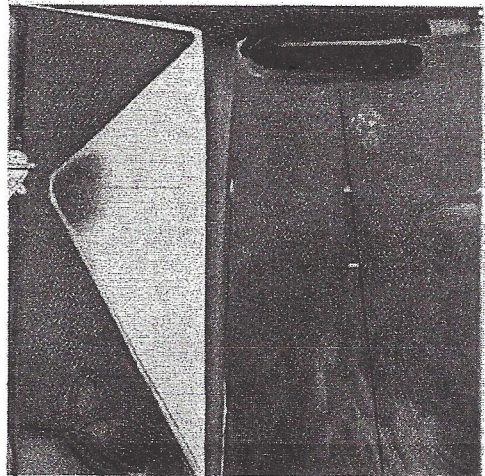
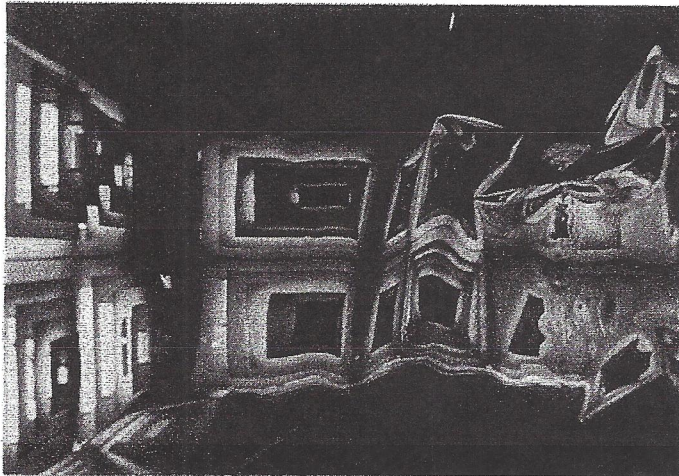
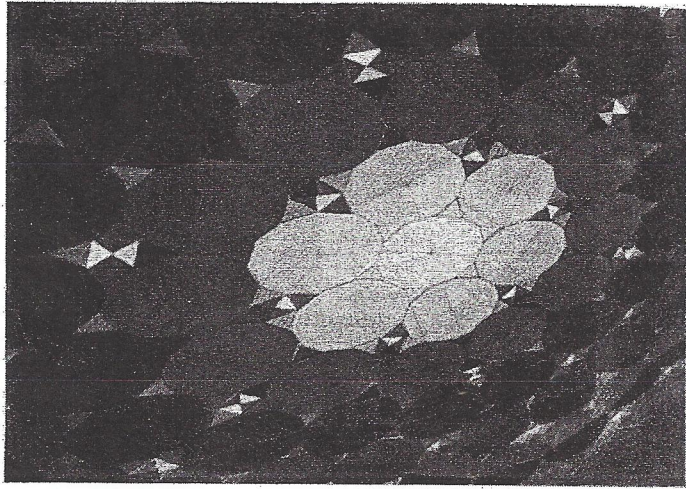
Fig. 3. 'Cythera No. 2', oil on canvas, 32 x 36 in., 1971. (Photo: W. Rosenblum, Long Island City, N.Y., U.S.A.)

I remember while at art school walking out of a class on color theory and refusing to return. I had an early premonition that for myself the meaning of color had to be arrived at through personal experience and that I had to avoid known rules, no matter how valid for others they are. I would like to live long enough to put together colors in such a way that no rules could be formulated on my procedure.

Finally, my work first and last has to be a visual feast in which is imbedded a reality subject to recall by a viewer. At times, I have referred to myself as a Symbolist painter but I am somewhat uneasy about this classification, possibly because of its all-embracing literary connotations. My link with painters of the earlier part of this century is not only with the Surrealists but also with non-figurative painters. I would prefer to make paintings that are sufficiently individual to be granted their own place.

REFERENCES

1. S. Greene, *Retrospective exhibition catalog* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1962).
2. S. Greene, *Exhibition catalog* (Edmonton, Canada: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1972).



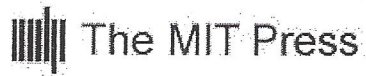
Top, left: John Safer, 'Implication', smoky-gray Plexiglas on an anodized aluminum base on a black Plexiglas pedestal, 84 × 18 × 18 in., 1973. (Photo: Y. Okamoto, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.) (Fig. 6, cf. page 211.)

Top, right: H. P. Nightingale, 'Family of Hexagons', crayon, 11 × 15 in., 1955. (Collection of H. Levy, Wimbledon, England.) (Fig. 5, cf. page 217.)

Bottom, left: Robert Preusser, Relief planes illuminated from the rear and distorted in a semicircular Mylar wall. (Photo: N. Bichajin, Dept. of Architecture, M.I.T., Cambridge, Mass, U.S.A.) (Fig. 10, cf. page 205.)

Bottom, right: Stephen Greene, 'The Garden of Night', oil on canvas, 49.5 × 49.5 in., 1972. (Courtesy William Zierler Gallery, New York, U.S.A.) (Fig. 4, cf. page 240.)

[facing p. 218]



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