

THE POST-INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE: HOPELESSNESS AND BEAUTY

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DEDICATION

*For Joe, Elissa, and Ariel*

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## Introduction

What have we done to our world, and is there a possibility that we can change what increasingly appears to be a bleak future? Is there any evidence for hope? Is there a kind of melancholic beauty to this, and how am I to show both in my work?

My work explores my experience as a 55-year-old woman who has lived her whole life in western New York State, in a dying post-industrial city. It is also about my understanding of myself as a woman who is also growing older and experiencing changes in my mind and body as well as my life roles. Despite leading an admittedly upper middle class existence, the problems of a declining community have affected me deeply. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, my home is a microcosm of what is happening to our country and much of the industrialized world.

I am not interested in depicting this world that I have come from realistically. I have done that, and it has its limits. I transform my world into an abstraction in order to delve into it deeper emotionally and let the viewer bring his or her own preconceptions into it. This is one of the problems that I am working on: to transform my experience and distill it to its essence.

I have been vaguely aware of a transformation as I paint and make prints. My studio problem, in general, is finding a way to transform the image into an image that is not mimetic, but has properties that speak to both the ideas of loss and detritus. The resulting images must also speak to the viewer in a way that they

can relate to while being formally interesting and not easy to dismiss. In order to do this I must then speak to more specific problems such as the function of color, how I want to depict space and what kinds of other formal concerns I want to address.

Having been a social worker for 25 years, and having tried to help people change their lives for decades, I am not interested in having my work seen as political; it is mostly a vehicle for me to make sense out of the world I see every day. There are enough people trying to make a difference in the way man uses its world and I am not sure that the world can be saved. It feels important, however, to document my feelings about what man does to his world. It is also important to make objects. I make objects generally because I enjoy it, but it is a struggle to make objects that I feel have merit. So why do I have a drive to make objects rather than to write or do psychotherapy? Possibly there is the need to transform my environment into my own statement visually because I think visually. Doing psychotherapy is clearly for others; this is more for me than for an audience, although, the audience is clearly an important part of my work. I want my work to be seen.

There are two aspects of my work, the formal concerns and the interest of the post-industrial landscape as it pertains to my life, which is a microcosm of the life of mankind on our planet. What we have done to Upstate New York and the rest of the rust belt is being done to much of the rest of the world.

My work also explores what makes a painting successful on a formal level. What makes an abstraction successful? Why is it important for me to work abstractly? Attempting to get the essence of the image is a very important aspect of my work and a major studio problem. I have a tendency to put down much more than the essence; to extract the essence is a challenge. How does one do this?

I consider myself a young artist, not very familiar with what materials can do, especially with paint. How much do I let the materials work and how much do I work them? How much do I work intuitively and how much do I try to control the materials? As time goes by and with experience I expect that this problem will morph into a different one. Tom Nozkowski says he knows exactly what his paint will and will not do. His challenge in this regard is to keep fresh while my challenge is to learn the materials as well as learn how to let them do their work.<sup>1</sup>

### Conceptualizing the Post-Industrial Landscape and Modernism

One of the problems never confronted in my undergraduate work, while working in a two-dimensional medium such as printmaking and painting, was whether to work primarily imitatively, that is to work in a Renaissance-like “window onto the world” manner including perspective to simulate depth, or to work in a more blatantly two-dimensional way, which takes into account the integrity of the two dimensional surface. As I think about this issue, what do I want to keep in mind? I am not interested in only addressing the problem of the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nozkowski, Lecture Rutgers University, 1 March 2010.

two-dimensional plane. I think about several artists and movements such as Cubism, Charles Sheeler and the Precisionists, and Charles Burchfield. What does cubism have to do with my work? Hans Hofmann says that the moment of the decline of Impressionism and the birth of Cubism was an important revolution. Impressionism “rediscovered the full plastic significance of the picture plane as a two-dimensional entity.”<sup>2</sup> Cubism took this one step further and became plane conscious.<sup>3</sup> John Berger, in his essay, “The Moment of Cubism,” says that this revolution changed the history of art and the Renaissance concepts of painting. He says, “The idea of art holding up a mirror to nature became a nostalgic one: a means of diminishing instead of interpreting reality.”<sup>4</sup> This moment of Cubism is of interest to me for two reasons. First, I need to keep the dichotomy of representing something in nature on a two-dimensional surface and the integrity of the picture plane in mind as I work. Second is the link that moment in time has to my subject matter, which Berger elucidates brilliantly. Berger says that this was a time of great optimism. The world was transforming at great speed in a great many ways. Among other things, this was a time of the rapid increase in the industrialization of the world. Berger describes these changes as:

An interlocking world system of imperialism: opposed to it, a socialist international; the founding of modern physics, physiology and sociology; the increasing use of electricity, the invention of radio and the cinema; the beginnings of mass production; the publishing of mass-circulation

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real and Other Essays* (Cambridge MA: MIT, 1967) 46.

<sup>3</sup> Hofmann 46.

<sup>4</sup> John Berger, "The Moment of Cubism," *Sense of Sight* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 160.

newspapers; the new structural possibilities offered by the availability of steel and aluminum; the rapid development of chemical industries and the production of synthetic matters; the appearance of the motor-car and the aeroplane: what did all this mean?"<sup>5</sup>

For one thing, this meant that the meaning of time and space changed. All the above seemed to offer "... liberation from the immediate, from the rigid distinction between absence and presence."<sup>6</sup> For the first time, there was the realization that the world could be understood. The cubists changed the relationship between painting and nature and in doing so, articulated the brand new relationship between man and nature that was exploding at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

Artists such as Charles Sheeler and Charles Burchfield took the subject of industrial landscape and applied modern, cubist principles to their work. Sheeler and his Precisionist colleagues Charles Demuth, Ralston Crawford, and Paul Strand were impressed with the new industrialization that they saw in the United States.

Sheeler, in particular is of interest to me for several reasons. One of them is his use of photographs as works of art in themselves, but also as jumping off points for his drawings and paintings. Since I use photographs that I have taken as inspiration and a starting point for my work, it is very interesting to me how he modified and also did not modify the images when he painted or drew them. His photographs were taken with an eye toward a cubist perspective. On the surface

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<sup>5</sup> Berger 162.

<sup>6</sup> Berger 162-163.

<sup>7</sup> Berger 171.

there seemed to be not much need to modify them in his work in other media as far as the composition went. However, upon closer inspection, his paintings and drawings are clearly abstracted even further than his photographs. Sheeler has extracted the essence of his subject. Before coming to graduate school, I used the compositions of my photographs directly in my prints. I cropped the photographs, but changed virtually nothing else, faithfully reproducing them as prints. This was not done purposefully, but as a kind of default method of working. Since coming to graduate school, a large part of my work has been to explore ways of modifying and then abstracting my photographs. I also experimented with strictly non-objective imagery, but it became clear to me quickly that my subject matter was an important part of my work.

The time period that Sheeler worked was also very important in his view of industry. Sheeler worked the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As I have stated above, this was a time of great optimism about the possibilities of the industrial revolution. Building upon the cubist's work, Sheeler saw American industry in a positive light, never imagining what the great industries of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would have turned into at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century or the impact of industrialization on the world.

Burchfield's architectural work has influenced me as well. When I saw his work at D.C. Moore last year, the work made an impression. He also explores the age-old question of transferring the three-dimensional to the two dimensional surface. The cubists also influenced him; he simplified his work and looked

toward formal concerns. He also was influenced by the modern view of “Primitivism.”<sup>8</sup> These were certainly influences on his work, but the larger part, which makes the work distinctive and ultimately what attracts me to the work, is the beauty of the ordinary landscape that was his home. There is a sense of time and place, of the industrial character of his home. His mark making is both simplified and somewhat “primitive” and his palette in most of these architectural paintings is limited to more somber, muted hues. Seeing this show has helped to crystallize my thinking about my own work in terms of mark making and palette. Unlike Sheeler, there is not the clear adulation of this industrial character, but a more nuanced feeling about it. It runs akin to my ambivalent feelings about my home. The fact that these optimistic industrial days are long gone and we are left with the hulking ruins is mixed with the stark beauty of these ruins. Then there is always the optimism of possibility.

### Formal Concerns in Painting and Printmaking

As I have progressed through my graduate studies, it has become clear that my conceptual concerns have not changed. My formal concerns, however, changed dramatically. As I wrote previously, although formal issues were of concern to me as I composed or cropped my photographs, changing them into prints or paintings was merely a matter of reproducing what was already there by default. As I have progressed through graduate school, this issue has become an

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Burchfield, *The Architecture of Painting* (New York: D.C. Moore, 2009) 12.

important studio problem for me. If I am going to reproduce my photographs in my work, there has to be a conscious reason for doing so. I realized that I was not interested in doing this in particular. What I am pursuing is not a comment on photography or realism, but a way to get across to the viewer my experience without hitting him or her over the head with it.

At first, I began taking things out of the picture plane, selectively leaving in elements of the photographs and depicting them realistically. This, of course is a “one trick pony.” I needed more information on formal concerns. I needed to learn how to abstract and find the essence of my work. I began to read: Rudolf Arnheim’s *Art and Visual Perception*, Ben Shahn’s *The Shape of Content*, and Hans Hofmann’s *Search for the Real and Other Essays* as well as Kandinsky’s two books and James Elkins. I also started looking at art differently. I began to better understand what looking at art could do for me in my work. As Ben Shahn wrote, to be an artist one must “Know many artists. Look at pictures and more pictures. Go to all sorts of museums and galleries and to the studio of artists.”<sup>9</sup>

Arnheim’s book was a good place to start for me. He explains clearly the underlying principles of a successful visual experience. I had learned the elements and principles of design, but Arnheim’s explanation of how we actually see images and its impact on these principles helped cement these in my brain in a new way. As I was struggling to successfully abstract my work, I was very

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<sup>9</sup> Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (*The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*) (New York: Harvard UP, 1992) 130.

interested in his concept of directed tension. This concept is an important part of how I was to understand successful image making. Arnheim states, "Visual experience is dynamic."<sup>10</sup> To elaborate on this theme, Arnheim writes that humans and other animals understand a visual percept as "an arrangement of objects, of colors, and shapes, of movement and sizes. ...an interplay of directed tensions" ...and "because they have magnitude and direction, these tensions can be described as psychological 'forces.'"<sup>11</sup> Any mark on a plane (such as a piece of paper) activates the space, actually "mobilizes the space" and that visual perception is the observation of this action.<sup>12</sup> Directed tensions are perceptual forces are inherent in any space, for our purposes, a surface with a mark on it and they arise as our eyes try to make sense out of the push pull of marks on this surface. When I make an object now, this concept of push pull is never far from my thoughts; it is central to my work.

I have also been thinking about the concepts of simplicity and orderliness in my work. Arnheim writes that all great works of art, although often complex, have simplicity to them. They organize an intricate idea or thought into "...an overall structure that clearly defines the place and function of every detail in the whole."<sup>13</sup> These ideas are particularly important to my work because of my

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolph Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (New York: University of California, 2004) 11.

<sup>11</sup> Arnheim 11.

<sup>12</sup> Arnheim 16.

<sup>13</sup> Arnheim 59-60.

tendency to over complicate my work. If I want to extract the essence of my subject, it is imperative that I strive for simplicity and the resultant unity.

As I strive to abstract my work in a meaningful fashion, the notion of form has become important. I never thought about it until I read *The Shape of Content* in which Shahn wrote, "Form is formulation-the turning of content into material entity, rendering a content accessible to others..."<sup>14</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary defines form as: "the shape and structure of an object" and "the essence of something."<sup>15</sup> Being aware of how I shape my content; how I use my materials as well as the composition of my image has had an enormous impact on my work. When he writes about form, Shahn defines abstraction not as a rejection of content, but as a drawing out of the essential content, the essence of the object or objects being depicted.<sup>16</sup> When I read this, it became clear that this was how I see abstraction in my work. What I have been looking for is the essence of my subject, ideas, and experience. I am not as interested in paint or printmaking as material or abstraction for the sake of abstraction as I am interested in what the material can do for my work. What kind of form can I get out of my materials and processes? With that in mind, Shahn says "Forms in art arise from the impact of idea upon material or the impinging of mind upon material. They stem from the human wish to formulate ideas, to recreate them

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<sup>14</sup> Shahn 53.

<sup>15</sup> *The America Heritage Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 2000) 690.

<sup>16</sup> Shahn 63.

into entities, so that meanings will not depart fitfully as they do from the mind, so that thinking and belief and attitudes may endure as actual things.”<sup>17</sup>

Another formal concept that I had not been dealing with consciously in my work was the depiction of space. I was depicting space in a very representational, straight on, one-point perspective way. I am now much more conscious of the figure-ground relationship. Depth perception is an integral part of a two-dimensional work of art; either to consciously cultivate a sense of space and therefore depth in the work or to consciously flatten the space. It is also extremely important to be aware of the frame of the space. In representational work, the frame was thought to be “window onto the world,” that the picture frame was a piece of the world depicted within the picture. With abstraction, the picture frame is meant to be a world onto itself. As I ponder the implications of this in my work, I think that it is both. When I use images as reference, it is clear that they are only a piece of the larger scene. However, when I start to abstract these images, it becomes both an image onto itself and a “window onto the world.” I am still struggling with the issues of depth perception and perspective. I do not strive for my work to be flat, so it is important to use some kind of central perspective, as depth perception is a dynamic visual experience.

I have also learned that color is an important tool in the portraying of space. It is something that I have seldom dealt with in my work. When I have used color, it has been either local color, or some abstraction of local color. My prints are

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<sup>17</sup> Shahn 70.

usually monochromatic, printed in black and white or sepia. I have focused on form without bringing in the issue of color. Where to start? Clearly, choices of color or lack of color are important. Where do I stand on this issue? Is my not dealing aggressively with color an artistic choice or simply due to the fact that the issue of color was not addressed in my undergraduate work in any meaningful way?

When Hofmann talks about creating depth in a two-dimensional field, he talks about creating planes in that field. He says, "A plane is a fragment in the architecture of space. When a number of planes are opposed one to another, a spatial effect results."<sup>18</sup> Hofmann writes that a *push and pull* phenomenon is necessary for an activated two-dimensional space. He defines *push and pull* as "...expanding and contracting forces which are activated by carriers in visual motion. Planes are the most important carriers..."<sup>19</sup> He continues, "To create the phenomenon of *push and pull* on a flat surface, one has to understand that by nature the plane reacts automatically in the opposite direction to the stimulus received..."<sup>20</sup> Hofmann writes, "Color is a plastic means of creating intervals."<sup>21</sup> Hofmann defines intervals as "color harmonics produced by special relationships, or tensions."<sup>22</sup> In graphic arts, and I take this to mean traditional printmaking techniques that do not include color, an artist is dealing only with

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<sup>18</sup> Hofmann 44.

<sup>19</sup> Hofmann 44.

<sup>20</sup> Hofmann 44.

<sup>21</sup> Hofmann 45.

<sup>22</sup> Hofmann 45.

the problem of form. However, in painting, the artist has the added issue of color. In fact, form equals color in painting. So color is how the painter creates the push and pull, the tension of the work. This is also how a painter deals with depth. In addition, the issue of how different colors react with each other in the painting has much to do with the “qualitative content” of the painting.<sup>23</sup>

Hofmann’s writings have been very helpful in my quest to address the issue of color. Reading his treatise has led me to make some decisions about color that were made by default before. For the time being, I will continue to print in black and white. I think that a traditional printmaking approach works well to capture what I am trying to express. As I am trying to get the essence of detritus and loss in my paintings (as well as quiet beauty), my colors will stay subdued. However, I will experiment with colors other than local color and attempt to use color in my quest to inject tension into my work. Being aware of color in my work has led to a richness in my paintings that would not be there if I were not aware of Hofmann’s writings.

### Conclusion

As I reflect on the past year and a half in this graduate program, I realize that I have learned much about art and about myself. I have learned that my interest is in my home and the fact that it is a microcosm of many of the problems that we face in the world. In my work, I hope to transform this experience into a meaningful two-dimensional object/image. In part, this is a magical process. It is

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<sup>23</sup> Hofmann 45.

also partly something that can be learned. In the studio, I will continue to ask myself questions. There is the dichotomy of intuition versus a carefully thought out process. This push/pull is always going on in the studio now. Do I work to control the materials or do I let the materials start to control the process? I am striving to work more intuitively and permit the materials to guide me in the hope that this improves the expressiveness of my work. Another studio problem that I will revisit is my use of photographs as reference. I need to think more about what role photographs play in my practice, and why I would continue using them or not using them. One of the tasks that I have given to myself is to start doing plein air sketching and painting. The last dilemma that I am confronting currently in my studio is whether to use mixed media and if so, how much mixed media. I am portraying detritus; what role can detritus play in my painting? Or for that matter, what role does use of texture and impasto play? For the moment, I have decided against these additions, but I continue to wonder if there is a role for them in the future, and if so, how to incorporate them.

My work displays the decaying post-industrial life of western New York State. My studio concerns will help me portray the essence of the stark geometric beauty that remains of the once vibrant industrial landscape. I would also like to convey the mystery of whether our post-industrial world will decay into total ruin or whether there is hope for a vibrant future.

I leave Rutgers having learned and grown a tremendous amount as an artist and an individual. I look forward to (and I am terrified of) continuing to confront studio problems and the challenges that life inevitably brings.

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