

a

statement

by

the

artist

J O H N S C H U L L E R

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I am creating an event out of the forces of nature that I understand. And this event, if its implications, both emotional and intellectual, are understood, should throw light on nature.

Every artist consciously or unconsciously takes a stand in regard to his external world, even if it is to exclude it from his consideration. My picture world — my light, my color, texture and form, my commentary, my moods — has derived specifically from my subject matter. This subject matter has been determined by my growing awareness of my own relationship with nature.

Nature is all around us, minute and massive, swelling from a cosmic past and generating an infinite future. And I myself am a complex, moving, growing part of an ever changing, ever living universe. Nature is an immense continuum of birth, life and death. The motion of it never stops, nor does the emotion of it, for birth and life are passions, as is death. I feel the moving, shifting, changing relationships of birth, life and death as a complex of emotions which, in my work, I resolve into an image. This image is the visualization of my perception. To the extent that this image is emotionally charged and is alive, it

becomes real. To the extent that it is valid — both to itself and to nature — it realizes my vision.

Presumably I could work from a commonly observed visual situation such as a nude, a landscape, or a still life, wherein certainly is evidenced the rhythmic pulse of which I speak. Yet the burden of cultural interpretation has forced us to regard such events as static, and this very burden imposed on the viewer would restrict his vision, would hinder his seeing beyond the nude or still life to my area of perception. Moreover, the artist himself, by virtue of his minute relationship with an arbitrary horizon or a seated figure is inclined to see only the particular of that instant rather than the implications of past and future. This tends to freeze the emotions to that instant. But it is precisely the opposite, the movement and rhythm of life, which I project.

Even though we continually attempt to tie our emotional awareness of life to the fixed security of a static image as it appears in only one infinitesimal point in time, yet we become aware of the highest drama and deepest emotions in terms of the unfolding of an event. The inexorable movement of all life, whether of a fading galaxy or an imprisoned atom, is both the most mysterious and the most evident fact of our existence. A huge drama, of eons of time and trillions of light years of space, seen at a given point of time seems static; yet emotionally understood in terms of its titanic motion, it becomes

as alive, pulsating and climactic as an orgasm.

For me, the division of life into the animate and inanimate poses an inherent contradiction. It forms the blindfold to vision, the prison for imagination, which is often the end result of attempting understanding by means of categorization. Whatever the scale, whether it be the part or the whole, the convulsive formation of a universe or the flowering awareness of a child, life is born of passion and continues as an emanation of emotion. The orgasm is its beginning, and, could its poetry be understood, suggests the form of its drama and the vast quiet of its death even as it foretells its regeneration.

To understand matter, one must understand that man — in all his aspects, all his complexity — is part and parcel of matter. Moreover, emotion as well as the consciousness of emotion, is part of matter. And so man's emotion is part of all emotion, his consciousness part of all consciousness.

Both the image in my painting and the process by which I create it must inevitably be organic. Visually and physically it must be growing, shifting, changing in size, color, shape and structure. And in emotional content. Thus the tide of emotional awareness and perception rises with a kind of pulsating power as the individual painting comes to fruition. The individual picture is part of a long succession of works in which an image shifts into sharper focus as it reaches the climax of a theme, at times becomes more complex as it blends the knowledge of many

themes. The image changes from picture to picture as symbol changes to fact, as truths become more powerfully realized, as the false or misleading or the clumsily stated is recognized and eliminated.

The growth of a painting from the beginning is organic, taking on a life — more and more realized — with each stroke of the painting knife. Physically, I regard the painting as an ever evolving embryo. Like a child growing from a spark in the womb to manhood, its lines and configurations grow out of those preceding, and in turn, no matter how seemingly distorted, become determining factors in the final image.

Even the image of an individual painting is only part of the continuum of my thinking. It arises out of the paintings and thoughts preceding it, and suggests the images and ideas which will grow out of it. I consider my life an immense symphony, composed of many movements and of diverse contrapuntal ideas. Not only can the rhythms be discerned in an individual painting, but ultimately will be evident in the work as a whole — when the day comes for its conclusion.

Understand, I am not trying to achieve a literal illustration of an abstract idea. There is much that I know through something I shall call, for lack of a better term, identification. When I study the line of a woman's face, the movement of masses of people as they form in spreading clusters on city streets, the growing energy of a towering cloud, or, more imaginatively, the expanding

dimensions of all life — from atoms to universes, I emotionally identify with this line, this movement, this energy, this growth, and feel profoundly its nature. Before my canvas I re-experience the emotional terms of this identification and by translating the energy aroused in my being into the visual terms of paint I create the image seen in my work.

Because the essence of my statement is life — energy, vitality, movement — quivering with expectancy even in repose — I use pigments as I do. Out of the painting experience I came to understand that the most telling moments for me were when the spirit somehow transcended paint. But to transcend paint and yet to have the paint responsive to my own particular sensitivity, I had to come to the point of accepting the material in its basic, thick reality. The heavy substance of it symbolized an important physical fact to be recognized, worked with and ultimately to be overcome by sheer imaginative strength. For my own purposes, a gentle modeling of the medium to make it look like something else was, at least for a time, impossible in terms of my statement. I wanted to infuse life into its substance rather than draw and color a reflection of life. I wanted the image to be a living thing in itself.

I do not consider my image abstract. That is, my *ideal* of painting is not abstract, but a concrete image, perfect, true, and real unto itself. Then, even as one can look into the soul of a man to understand much about men, one can look into a particular

artistic creation to understand the continuum of creation which surrounds us and of which we are a part.

Insofar as certain signs, tokens, movements, forms and paint manipulations are symbols to me of a reality which I perceive beyond them, to that extent my painting is abstract. When the time comes that I create a visual reality, complete, authoritative, alive and true in every detail to its own demands, then my painting will no longer be abstract. I will have reified my vision.

Painting can be an act of thought — thought on the highest possible level, enjoining every fiber, cell and vibration of being. So, often when I have finished a painting I find that I have passed a step beyond the premises with which I started. Then, studying the painting, I can reduce to verbal terms that which I have created during a time of complete and transcendent awareness.

But more than this — it is as though what I know today, having finished a painting, I had always known, although this knowledge had become obscured, screened by whatever cultural burdens I had accepted, twisted by distortions and partial truths, rendered dormant by inadequacies of expression.

When I study a painting at any given stage of its development, or, more particularly, at the end, I judge it in the main by what I term "validity." In other words, I ask the question: is it valid in the terms of living that I understand?

I consider my own life most valid, most meaningful, most profound, at those times when I really open myself to a person or an event, shedding briefly the shackles of fear, caution, preconception, tight rationale.

I understand best movement and change, for these seem to characterize reality far more than their opposites. That which is static is only seemingly so, and that sense of security based on the unchanging can only be false. Even a picture alters in time — both physically as it fights the elements and spiritually as it acquires new dimensions and meaning in the minds of succeeding generations.

I understand, too, a quality of uniqueness in all things. Most obviously, all fingerprints are similar, but the same only to those who will not look. Ultimately, I can imagine that the individual atom has its own character. I will expect in a painting that each stroke, though having my imprint, will have something of its own uniqueness. Particles will have their own diverse shapes, even when of a kind. Distances between one and another will be ever varying, because they arise out of the tensions and movements of life. Every event on the canvas will have something of its own peculiar quality, as will the individual canvases themselves — even as my moment of personal life right now is somewhat changed from that preceding it. Moreover, I cannot emotionally or intellectually tolerate an absolute confining of dimensions in my canvas. Rather, the image forms from beyond the edge,

and projects to some infinity of activity; it may be but a fragment of some grander image beyond. And emotionally I sense great depths of space so that to me an image cannot be ultimately or rigidly fixed in any dimension.

I am concerned also with warmth, because warmth comes of motion and vitality and life. And I am concerned with the spirit, for the only meaning in life that I can accept is that there shall be moments when my spirit as a man will lead me to perception that will pierce the fogs of self deception.

And finally, I am concerned with morality — a morality which functions in terms of these realities of change and passion and contradiction and individual uniqueness — a true morality, changing and growing in itself, rather than a moral code rigidly imposed without regard to the life it supposedly protects.

Beyond all this is the final mystery of a painting wherein it talks in silent music, music which reaches and affects the spirit in a manner which can never be translated into words. Herein lies the greatest validity and the deepest message of a painting — in an area of creation and comprehension which is far beyond the limits of verbalization, certainly of rationalization. This is why inevitably of men there are artists — to express that mystery of spirit wherein lies the most profound knowledge.

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