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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN IDEA

Marianne Stikas

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by

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN IDEA

by

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B.F.A., The Maryland Institute College of Art, 1971

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of the Arts

of Virginia Commonwealth University

in Partial Fulfillment

of the

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# I

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN IDEA

This thesis is an examination of four of my paintings. These four paintings, selected from a body of work begun in the Fall of 1973, represent an exploration and a synthesis of certain ideas which have concerned me since Spring, 1973.

Prior to Spring 1973, my paintings consisted of overlapping vertical stripes of transparent colors of close value on a large format. At that time I was particularly interested in the range of effects afforded by the transparencies of color and their atmospheric, illusionist ambience. Pursuing this color structure over a period of several months, I became more and more frustrated and eventually dissatisfied with the work. The use of stripes as a vehicle for structuring color proved to be a problem: the stripes became a visual cliché thus narrowing the physical and emotional range of possibilities. Reacting against these limitations, I determined that what I needed was a more intuitive approach to painting. I found that working gesturally most directly facilitated a realization of this need and was personally a much more authentic way of working. Making this change was a difficult experience because rejecting the

stripes left me no place from which to structure my painting.

Confronting this dilemma by concentrating on the materials and the process of painting itself, I came to realize that despite my rejection of the stripes, there remained certain interests and attitudes from the early paintings that could still be useful to me in a gestural intuitive context. It was at that point that I initiated a radical change for my painting: to conceive, feel, and act directly through marking with color.

I think that the four paintings I am dealing with in this thesis statement are fairly representative of some of the conceptual and technical ideas that occur in my painting.

The marks are color; they are made with color and function on different spatial levels within a field of subtle color. Some are made initially on the surface of the raw canvas but are later partially or completely covered by subsequent layers of thin paint sponged across the canvas field so that these "early" marks finally exist only as texture. Some exist in a suspended state, obscured by the field of color and simultaneously emerging to its surface; others function completely on the surface of the color field. The gestural marks ("brushstrokes"), made with brushes of various widths and weights, yield a vocabulary rich in possibilities. A kind of "meditative" state is felt as I disperse the marks throughout the atmospheric, many-layered films of field color.

Precisely felt interdependence between the marks and the field constitutes the essential identity of each painting.

Coexisting with these marks are bands of color which are made as the painting develops by taping off certain areas. These bands sometimes function as a solid form (plate#1) or as a modulated form (plates #2, #3, and #4). Recently I decided that the modulated band functions in a much more exciting way: it acts as a different kind of drawing functioning on different levels within the painting similar to the way the marks do.

As I write about the process of making these paintings, I realize that generalizing about certain procedures I follow in order to produce certain results may tend to make my work seem systematic. Before I proceed any further I think it is important to note that while making a painting I feel a freedom to change, alter or rearrange processes at any time, thereby heightening the possibilities for discovery; in turn, these discoveries may or may not be incorporated as part of the process in the next painting. Whether I change or not, however, is an intuitive decision.

Throughout this paper I use the word intuition. Hans Hoffman talks about it as "the basis for confidence of the spirit."<sup>1</sup> He continues:

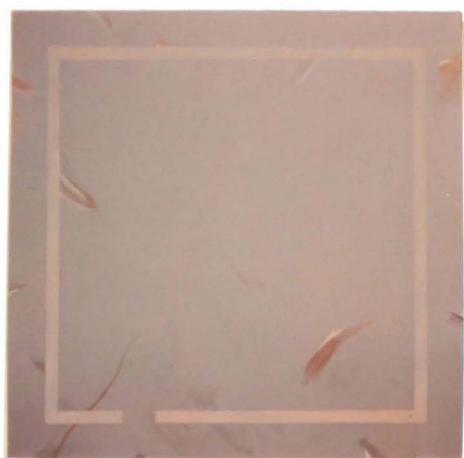
Art is a reflection of the spirit, a result of introspection which finds expression in the nature of the art medium. When the artist is well equipped with conscious feeling, memory, and balanced sensibilities, he intensifies his concepts by penetrating his subject and by condensing his experience into a reality of the



PLATE 1

Marianne Stikas

Untitled #1



spirit complete in itself.<sup>2</sup>

My paintings begin with a ground color, applied with a sponge directly on the raw canvas. I use acrylic paint with a medium of one-half rhoplex and one-half natrasol. This medium produces a basically mat surface in which degrees of gloss, if desired, can be attained and controlled by adding subsequent layers of paint. I have found there is a point where too many layers of paint built up on top of one another can cause a surface to "die"-making it too thick, too glossy, or seem too labored.

Instead of using a gessoed surface, I prefer to stain the surface of raw canvas with my initial color choice. By the time I have completed the painting, however, its surface will have the comparable feel of a gessoed canvas. The surface remains soft in relationship to the built up marks. At the outset, because my painting activity deliberately employs the fabric of the raw canvas itself, I am able to avoid the sensation of paint merely "resting" or "floating" on top of a foreign surface.

The ground color is usually crucial because it sets off a series of felt responses determining the subsequent layers of color. What I like doing is to make the ground color decision purely intuitively - what I feel like at the time.

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<sup>1</sup>Herschel B. Chipp, Theories of Modern Art, (Berkley & Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1968), p. 539.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid

After the first color is applied, I then tape off areas where I want a band. Depending on how much paint is built up and when I decide to remove the tape the band functions as either a color change or as a surface change. Regardless of its location within this first layer of color, the band always stays parallel to the edge of the canvas to preserve the integrity and holistic character of the field.

At the same time that the band is taped on top of the ground color, the initial marks are introduced. Each mark is applied very quickly and very gesturally across the surface, until a random network of various kinds of marks is established. Visually there is nothing permanent about any of these marks because as the layers of field color are applied any mark may be eliminated.

Slight variations of field color across the surface produce a modulated color field. In conjunction with the marks and band, this modulated field seems to open the space of the painting, setting up the phenomenon of a limitless expansion; the painting is finished when "all parts involved communicate themselves, so that they don't need me."<sup>3</sup>

The paintings shown in plate #2 is one of a series of essentially all-grey paintings. In this painting I varied the color overlays which occur in the field very slightly, keeping any shift in color close in value to its antecedent color. Any illusion of depth occurs more as a surface change

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 564.

rather than a color change. This is in contrast to the more ambitious color modulations that occur in the paintings of plates #3 and #4.

In plate #1, the band has a different function than in any of the other paintings represented here. Creating a rectangle within the rectangular shape of the canvas itself, the band runs parallel to all four sides. The marks remain very close in value to the field color, but the band does not. The marks are spaced around the outer edges of the canvas and occasionally touch on the band. I left the center of the painting void of marks. The effect of the empty center surrounded by a flurry of marks does not appear contained, static or isolated by the bands. The center void itself becomes a gesture. The field color in this painting also differs from the others in that it is not modulated but is rather an opaque all-over blue.

What made this painting (plate #1) different from the others was that I did not jump into it intuitively. The painting was thought out beforehand; decisions about its color, location of the marks and bands were all preconceived. This more systemic approach to painting presented an alternative to my previous activity. I was forced to re-evaluate and consider the direction I was to follow.

After working through the situation I decided to reject the systemic approach finding that it could not offer enough challenge to remain interesting for very long. I reasoned

PLATE 2

Marianne Stikas

Untitled #2



PLATE 3

Marianne Stikas

Untitled #3





that if I could preconceive a painting, there is no point in doing it. Plate #4, therefore, is a return to the ideas that are directly related to plate #1. This direction offers me constant challenges along with the freedom to explore and discover the different qualities of light that can be achieved through color.

PLATE 4

Marianne Stikas

Untitled #4



## II.

### CONCLUSION

Whereas certain people start with a recollection or an experience and paint that experience, to some of us the act of doing it becomes the experience; so that we are not quite clear why we are engaged in a particular work. And because we are more interested in plastic matters than we are in a matter of words one can begin a picture and carry it through and stop it and do nothing about the title at all.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that this statement by Baziotes has a great deal to do with the way I feel about my painting. Perhaps it is because I cherish the idea that in my painting, and in paintings that I respond to, there is a certain reality which goes beyond words. It is not that I feel painting cannot be talked about, it is that I feel some painting should not be talked about.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 565

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