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SUBJECTIVE CURRENTS IN AMERICAN PAINTING OF THE 1930S

City University of New York

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SUBJECTIVE CURRENTS IN AMERICAN PAINTING
OF THE 1930S

by

MITCHELL DOUGLAS KAHAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in Art History in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1983

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1983

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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To my parents

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CHAPTER I

ASPECTS OF THE SUBJECTIVE ATTITUDE--A SURVEY

Defining Subjective Art

As the notion of aesthetic pluralism has gained acceptance in contemporary criticism of the past decade, historians have begun to re-examine the past in order to uncover the wealth of artistic variety previously submerged by notions of a mainstream. It is becoming widely recognized that the new developments in American painting during the 1930s consist of more than American Scene painting and its components, regionalism and social realism. As research into the period continues, other significant developments are being explored, in particular: a continuation of traditional studio painting; the development of both geometric and expressionist abstraction; and the growth of subjectively oriented art. The latter phenomenon, which explores private considerations almost to the point of rejecting involvement with the American Scene, is the topic of this dissertation.

Throughout the 1930s, but particularly after 1932, subjective painting turns away from the external realities of American society. This art insists on an intensely personal expression, sometimes to the point of appearing incomprehensible. Like most art during the 1930s, this painting is largely figurative, but because subjective content is more important than representation, there are abstract manifestations. That subjective painting can be both figurative and

abstract underscores that fact that its primary intent is not with appearances and events in the real world. Political viewpoints may be expressed, but the tendency of the subjective artists is to remain aloof from social involvement. These artists share a commitment to personal interpretation of their subjects, often emphasizing psychological phenomena or metaphysical speculation. The subjective art discussed in this dissertation is predominantly inner-directed; that is, the artist's inspiration comes directly from private compulsions, the need to satisfy personal goals, and the intention of creating an art whose primary purpose is to relate back to the artist himself. On the other hand, most American art during the Depression can be described as outer-directed, responding to forces in society--political, economic, civic, or religious--with the intention of relating to a large audience, a public audience.

The subjective art is self-involved and eschews the role of proselytizing. In contrast, the outer-directed art is often didactic and has an air of moral fervor. Whereas most American art during the 1930s deals with common experience and strives to be clearly understood, the subjective art frequently seems bizarre and ambiguous. Although the subjective art rejects common experience and current events, it remains a humanistic expression with definite content. Even in its most formalistic manifestations, it is not an expression of art for art's sake but is instead an attempt to extract meaning out of private experience and belief.

In the following chapters, I shall discuss four different approaches to the subjective. The first is a physically distorted, emotionally moody approach to realism, exemplified by Edwin Dickinson and Ivan Albright. This subjective realism has as its primary subjects

landscape, still life, and portraiture. During the 1930s, Dickinson and Albright remained aloof from the main centers of American art. They were not, however, unaware of contemporary developments but chose consciously to explore personal avenues of painting, avoiding identification with particular art movements or political philosophies. The two artists withdrew into the act of painting and away from an active role in society. Their efforts centered around their studios in worlds of their own creation. Paradoxically, intense visual observation was the springboard for images which are highly manipulated and appear decidedly non-realistic. The resulting art exists primarily as personal philosophy and explores concepts of indeterminacy and flux, immateriality and corporeality, mystery and revelation, dream and reality. It also focuses on the self's reconciliation with age-old questions of meaning, death, and self-fulfillment.

A second approach to subjective painting utilizes personal symbols of either a metaphysical or psychological nature. Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeborg, both in Los Angeles, have been chosen to represent this attitude. They developed a personal style of symbolism, which they called "postsurrealism," that made its debut in 1934 at an exhibition held at the Centaur Gallery in Los Angeles. Although insistent on the personal nature of their art, Feitelson and Lundeborg believed their symbols were universal ones and depicted metaphysical concerns belonging to all mankind. They were also committed to the depiction of psychological phenomena. Feitelson's paintings often express a Jungian viewpoint through the recurring images of the integration of parts into a whole, and through the emphasis on the relatedness of all life forms, whether human, plant, or cosmic. Freudian themes also occur in the paintings, especially in the

preoccupation with womb and birth. With only a few exceptions (such as Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, and Knud Merrill), Lundeberg's and Feitelson's interests were in decided contrast to their West Coast contemporaries who emphasized landscape, history painting, and social realism. Postsurrealism rejected visual reality and current events and embraced symbolism and speculation.

A third subjective attitude is typified by an abstract artist, Arshile Gorky. Gorky's continual experimentation with biomorphic forms and his ability to imbue them with highly emotional feelings relate his work to the subjective attitude. Although he worked in several styles during the 1930s, Gorky's biomorphism is examined here. The meaning of Gorky's forms and his mode of painting are the central focus of this discussion. His emphasis on intuition, the importance of individual genius, and on aesthetics divorced from social needs relate his work to the subjective approach. Fantasy, flux, transformation, dream, memory, and internal conflict are among Gorky's major thematic concerns. Though other American artists experimented with biomorphism in the 1930s, Gorky was by far the most determined to explore the full range of meaning behind these forms. The categorization of Gorky's Depression-era paintings as either American abstraction, imitations of Picasso and Miró, or full-fledged surrealism is not an issue in this dissertation. Though not necessarily proof of a subjective outlook, Gorky's internationalism is examined to underscore his distance from the chauvinism of the period and the widespread desire for art to relate directly to the realities of American experience.

A fourth approach, in contrast to those described above, unites social concerns with personal symbolism. Peter Blume, O. Louis Guglielmi, and Walter Quirt combine specific political comment and

fantasy. All three artists develop visual images that appear improbable if not actually irrational. They employ juxtaposition and ambiguous relationships as major pictorial devices. Their symbols may be partly understood, but they may also remain mysterious. The meaning of these symbols, unlike that of the postsurrealists, relates closely to the concerns of the social realists, and as early as 1936, the term "social surrealists" gained currency as a label for these artists.

These approaches to the subjective existed during the 1930s amidst several much better known artistic currents. The most influential group during the period were the painters of the American Scene. John Steuart Curry summarized their viewpoint: "The artist must paint the thing that is most alive to him. Thousands of us are now painting what is called 'the American Scene.' We are glorifying landscapes, elevated stations, subways, butcher shops, 14th street, Mid-Western farmers, and we are one and all painting out of the fullness of our life and experience."¹ Embracing both regionalists and social realists, the American Scene painters "rejected an elitist conception of art and, with it, Parisian modernism." They "longed for a democratic art integrated with the lives of ordinary citizens."² The term "regionalism" became popularly associated with Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry, whose art portrayed apolitical, rural subjects, often idealized or nostalgic. The

¹John Steuart Curry, "What Should the American Artist Paint?", The Art Digest, September 1935, p. 29, reprinted in Social Realism: Art as a Weapon, ed. David Shapiro (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), p. 108.

²Matthew Baigell, The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930's (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1974), p. 58.

social realists, on the contrary, drew attention to the urban scene, the plight of workers, and the effects of the Depression.

Abstract artists in America during the 1930s clung to a notion of "art for art's sake" and ignored the demand for relevance in art. They faced the criticism of being mere imitators of foreign culture and were thought to have turned their backs on the development of an authentic American expression. The older abstract artists, those associated with Stieglitz or with a cubist-derived art, retained their commitment to an individual vision which was to transform perceived reality through abstraction. The younger generation tended toward pure formalism in their art and often explored total non-representation. Both groups of abstract artists viewed their work as a realm unto itself and not a vehicle for propaganda, narrative, or documentation.

Traditional approaches to studio subjects such as still life and portraiture continued throughout the 1930s. The style employed might vary from traditional illustration to watered-down impressionism or a tamed Parisian modernism. While this art did not actively go against American Scene painting, it failed to make a commitment to relevance and what was thought to be typical American subject matter. Although outside the concerns of many critics, traditional studio painting remained an acceptable alternative because it occupied a middle ground which did not actively proclaim or reject either the American Scene or modernism.

An interest in surrealism and the practice of surrealist-derived approaches developed tentatively in the 1930s and is discussed throughout this paper, but especially in the next section and in Chapter V. For most of the artists and critics who were aware of

surrealism, its focus on the irrational and the subconscious made it unacceptable. Like abstraction, surrealism often earned the scorn of both conservatives and liberals.

The subjective artists shared with the American Scene painters the desire for an art with human content, but one that was personal and not social in its outlook. Unlike the abstract artists, the subjectivists explored human feelings and beliefs and did not place art in a unique position unrelated to philosophy, psychology, or spiritual issues. Departing from the simple illustration or documentation which characterized the still life and portrait painters of the 1930s, the subjective artists used traditional subjects for symbolic purposes and developed variations on traditional techniques. Like the surrealists, they explored the private side of man's existence, but the subjective artists rejected the glorification of the irrational and what might be called the psychiatric basis of surrealism.

It is important to distinguish between the notion of a subjective art and that of 1930s expressionism. The subjective is not simply emotional outpouring with a distinct personal imprint. It deals with the non-specific and the non-tangible. In a perceptive 1937 article entitled "Our Expressionists," Jacob Kainen explained the term "expressionism" in a manner which points out its differences from the subjective. Expressionism involves:

1. The attempt to reduce the interpretation of nature or life in general to the rawest emotional elements.
2. A complete and utter dependence on pigment as an expressive agency rather than an imitative or descriptive one.
3. An intensity of vision which tries to catch the throb of life, necessarily doing violence to external facts to lay bare internal facts.¹

¹Jacob Kainen, "Our Expressionists," Art Front 3 (February 1937):14.

Marsden Hartley and Max Weber are included among notable Americans working in that vein, artists whose interest in the external world was paramount, though they used the external world to express personal feelings and spiritual fervor. Expressionism demands a direct revelation of feeling, not the elliptical and ambiguous modes of the subjectivists. Kainen rightly speaks of catching "the throb of life" and "laying bare the internal facts." These suggest involvement in reality and a confrontational approach to subject matter. Hartley's paintings of Dogtown Common as complex evocations of the American Scene, modernism, and physical (even sexual) energy are an ideal example of the expressionism Kainen describes.

This paper discusses artists whose work matured by 1935 and follows this work until the turn of the decade. Though the paintings examined range from 1928 to 1942, primary attention is given to the years 1934-1940, when subjective expressions became more pronounced. Many influential artists arrived in the U.S. during this period, with important consequences for American art, but their development and influence is beyond the scope of this paper. By 1942, the interest in subjective expression--from veristic surrealism and romanticism to automatism and symbolism--had greatly expanded and was becoming the vanguard norm rather than the exception.¹

¹The developments of the 1940s have been discussed in great depth elsewhere and are continuously being re-examined. For a comprehensive look at the surrealist influence in America in the thirties and forties see Jeffrey Wechsler and Jack J. Spector, Surrealism and American Art: 1931-1947 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1977), a pioneering work; and Julien Levy, Memoir of an Art Gallery (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977). Wechsler includes photography and sculpture, a number of the prominent European immigrants during the 1930s--Eugene Berman, Pavel Tchelitchew, Gordon Onslow-Ford, Enrico Donati--and American Magic Realists who matured and were most significant in the 1940s. Peter Blume's and O. Louis Guglielmi's

The eight artists chosen for in-depth discussion are not necessarily the finest artists of the thirties, but they fairly represent the level of quality during the period. The work produced by Albright, Blume, and Dickinson during the 1930s is among the strongest of their careers and has assumed lasting significance for American art of this century. These three mavericks, unallied to prevailing trends throughout their careers, are exemplars of the independent stance which so often characterizes the subjective attitude. Feitelson's most important work may be that from the end of his career, which is certainly true for Gorky. Nonetheless, both of these artists were especially influential during the 1930s. Their work from this period thus warrants detailed analysis. Though practically forgotten today, paintings by Guglielmi and Quirt are examined as touchstones for then current issues rather than for the lasting importance of the work. Their output during the thirties remains the best work they produced. Paintings by Helen Lundeberg from the 1930s may well be the most accomplished work produced by a West Coast artist during the decade and are without doubt among the finest of her long career.

work is also considered in Wechsler's Magic Realism section. For the development of abstract expressionism and the influence of surrealism in the early 1940s, see Dore Ashton, The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), most recent edition; Irving Sandler, The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism (New York: Icon Editions, Harper & Row), most recent edition; and Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin, Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years (Ithaca, New York and New York City: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art and Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978; reprint ed., Cornell University Press, 1981). The newest contribution to the interrelationship of surrealism and American art is Melvin P. Lader's "Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century: The Surrealist Milieu and the American Avant-Garde, 1942-1947" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Delaware, 1981).

Certain artists who made a lasting contribution to the subjective approach are omitted from this study or discussed only briefly because their work is more firmly associated with a later period. Mark Tobey and Morris Graves come to mind, but their mature work is correctly associated with events in the 1940s. Young artists soon to be identified with magic realism--like Jared French, Alton Pickens, George Tooker, and certain works by Paul Cadmus (whose work falls most securely into the realm of social satire and American Scene painting)--are not discussed because most of their work relevant to the theme of this dissertation was produced in the 1940s and 1950s and is colored by different events and aesthetic developments.

Although several of the artists who are the focus of this dissertation are well known, an inquiry into the meaning of their work has, after several decades of neglect, begun only recently. This dissertation proposes for the first time that there are definite shared concerns between the wide range of works discussed. Two important concepts which characterize the subjective attitude are ambiguous meaning and personal concern; there is, however a range of adherence to these concepts. Their opposites, clear meaning and social concern, are useful in determining how far a certain work departs from a purely subjective approach. Dickinson and Gorky, for example, tend toward the extremes of ambiguity. Quirt, Guglielmi, Feitelson and Lundeborg offer an attempt at formal and conceptual clarity notwithstanding the subjective nature of their work. The dichotomy of privateness and social interaction (which might also be understood as a polarity between the internal and the external) is also useful in looking at these artists. Early work by Quirt and

Guglielmi rates high in its social preoccupations but tends more toward the personal as the decade closes. Blume usually combines both elements in a single work. An exception, The Eternal City, approaches the exclusively social. Feitelson, Lundeberg, Gorky, and Dickinson do not deal directly with social issues at all. Albright, in a few works from the 1930s--such as Heavy the Oar to Him Who is Tired, Heavy the Coat, Heavy the Sea, The Farmer's Kitchen, and a few landscapes--assumes a tangential relationship to the documentary aspect of regionalism and thus takes on the guise of an eccentric American Scene painter.

In the area of style, the polarity of realism versus abstraction is another indicator of the range occupied by the subjective attitude. Ivan Albright's paintings and the early work of Guglielmi are probably the closest to observed reality. Even though Feitelson and Lundeberg render individual images in a highly realistic style, their combination of images never depicts perceived reality. Neither are Blume's juxtapositions of images observable in nature, though his style is figurative and his schematized rendering recalls seventeenth century Flemish painting. Dickinson deftly combines observed objects with almost abstract passages of paint. Her overall dark tonalities and emphasis on insubstantiality provide a partial illusion of abstraction. Gorky alone approaches true abstraction, but even his work is not completely non-referential; sources in still life or plant and animal forms often exist. Of the artists examined in the following chapters, Gorky's attitude comes closest to the modernist exaltation of "art for art's sake."

The variety pointed out above makes it clear that the subjective cannot be defined by any one stylistic characteristic.

Abstraction and figuration are both equally viable styles. Realism for the sake of documentation, however, is not employed; and utter clarity of meaning is only a component when the idea being examined (like the relationship of man to cosmos) is itself a subjective concern. The relativity and variability of the subjective attitude is itself a characteristic and must be accepted from the outset.

Before moving to the individual chapters discussing the four approaches to the subjective, this chapter will present a summary of critical attitudes toward the subjective and surrealism and will also point out a number of older artists whose previously established styles are related to the subjective. An examination of work by these older artists demonstrates that an inner-directed art is not a phenomenon unique to the 1930s. With changes in emphasis, style, and inspiration, subjectively oriented art exists both earlier and later. Following these discussions, the second half of this introductory chapter applies the four subjective approaches to a broad range of art during the 1930s. It will become evident that many artists worked within the realm of the subjective at various times even if their major contributions were focused elsewhere.

Critical Attitudes Toward the Subjective and Surrealism

Even though the focus of this dissertation is not upon the influence of surrealism in the United States or the dependency of individual artists on European sources, it is important to examine American critical responses to surrealism because much of the subjective art under discussion was wrongly regarded as surrealism during the 1930s. Since surrealism was a suspect art, its reception

is crucial for an understanding of attitudes to subjective art. American subjectivists seldom espoused the interest in the automatic or intuitive gesture stemming directly from the unconscious, which was central to much surrealism. Nor did they embrace the irrationality which, in its formative years, was the watchword of the surrealist movement. But though the subjective art under examination here was not surrealism, certain of its attitudes paralleled those of surrealism. Both approaches were expressions hostile to objective description, utilitarian intentions, and the depiction of the physical environment. Their common concern was the expression of the private vision and not public opinion or shared values. Surrealism was, after all, a quintessentially subjective aesthetic despite Breton's efforts to codify it through manifestos. Finally, because the label of subjectivism is formulated a posteriori, and because the artists were young (many only reaching maturity in the early or middle 1930s), the contemporary critical appraisal of their work was limited. By determining what the surrealists had in common with the subjective artists and what American criticism said about those commonalties, we can augment the insufficient examination these artists received. The lack of critical comment on surrealist and subjective art during the early thirties signifies not only a dearth of exposure to and interest in these trends, despite the important Newer Super Realism exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Julien Levy Gallery, but also the fact that it was only toward the mid-thirties that these ideas came to the forefront of both artistic practice and criticism.

Perhaps the most salient shared feature of surrealism and the subjective approach is their concentration on the self. Their subject is the individual's, not the community's perception; and a primarily

personal, not social, expression.¹ This premise is essential to understanding why subjective and surrealist modes of artmaking were foreign to the interests of most Americans during the 1930s.

The idea of individualism, a motivating force behind earlier American history, was greatly undermined in the 1930s. This development was attended by the rise of regionalism in art and literature and by the growth of Marxism with its emphasis on communal needs and actions. Thomas Hartshorne, in The Distorted Image: Changing Conceptions of the American Character Since Turner, has charted the contradictory impulses of individualism versus community and their great conflict in the 1930s.² The success ethic, which had been so strong in the 1920s, was dealt a severe blow because the major avenue for individual attainment--economic success--was barely within the realm of possibility in the 1930s. This undermining of the individual success ethic, combined with President Roosevelt's consolidation of government power and expansion of social welfare programs, further increased communal efforts at the expense of individualism. Federico Castellon, a Spanish immigrant whose painting relied heavily upon Salvador Dali's veristic surrealism, recalled in 1965 that "the introspective and solitary nature of

¹It is true that surrealism often seeks to delve into a racial subconscious which is claimed to be universal. In addition, certain surrealist manifestations--such as Max Ernst's The Horde (1927, Stedelijk Museum)--resurrect primordial fears about social or environmental disaster. But even this type of expression is based on imagery which is an individual invention and not a commonly accepted symbolism. The attempt of surrealism to express universal concerns was not accepted as valid by many critics and artists during the 1930s. See discussion below.

²Thomas Hartshorne, The Distorted Image: Changing Conceptions of the American Character Since Turner (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968), pp. 127-29.

surrealism was antithetical to the materialism, competitive pressures, and social orientation of American society."¹

The Marxist, or at least the liberal, view of the 1930s toward surrealism is certainly the most developed in American criticism. This is partially accounted for because André Breton's adoption of Marxism forced the Marxists to confront the issue of surrealism. Being a vanguard political movement, the Marxists took an interest, at least for a while, in vanguard artistic movements in order to discover whether or not they were relevant to Marxist ideology. Conservative artists, on the other hand, tended to be less aware of surrealism and thus expressed their attitudes less frequently. A perfect example of this is seen in a 1934 article in Literary Digest by Blendon Reed Campbell, a forgotten landscape and genre painter, who wrote about a new school of native art which would use a sharply delineated realism in revolt against impressionism and French modernism. He proposed the term "surrealism" for this new style, as if the European movement did not exist.²

Marxism gained great currency in the 1930s though incompletely understood by artists and other creative personalities. It espoused a supremely anti-individualistic stance. In a 1940 interview on mural painting, David Alfaro Siqueiros summed up the motivating impulses of the previous decade. "We believe," he stated, "in the collective form of work as against the individual form of work, the artist working together with his fellow artists as well as with the masses for whom

¹Quoted in Marcia Tucker, "Social Surrealism in America: 1930-1940," M.A. Thesis, New York University, New York, 1968, p. 14.

²B(lendon) R(eed) Campbell, "Surrealism, New School of Native Art," Literary Digest, 15 December 1934, p. 19.

he is creating the art as opposed to working alone and isolated in his studio, and the mural painting as opposed to the easel painting."¹

Marxism was valued in this country during the 1930s partly because it promised the redistribution of resources and production to the control of the working class. Unlike surrealism and subjectivism, Marxism is oriented to the exterior world and subordinates the individual to the needs of society. Marxism is also deterministic. "Economic determinism" points to a final inevitable goal, while surrealism, existing primarily in the present, is neither causal nor teleological. Marxism posits a logical progression from one stage to the next. Surrealism asserts that there is no connection between things except as the individual determines. The failure of the economy and the impending war caused the surrealists to withdraw into themselves and to reassert individual consciousness as the measure of all things.

Many European and American leftists rejected surrealism as a viable expression despite Breton's claims for it as a Marxist art form. Their objections revolved around several specific points. One was the requirement that Marxism deal with reality. A theory based on the material world, Marxism claims reality as the conditioning factor which molds our beliefs. Samuel Putnam, a contributing editor to the leftist journal Art Front, expressed the primacy of this dialectical materialism and its total rejection of "any reference to a 'super-real'." "All knowledge," Putnam continued, "is nothing other than the reflection in human consciousness of a material sense-perceived world, existing independently, outside of consciousness, but of which that

¹Robert Mallary, "Interview with David Alfaro Siqueiros," Direction 3 (May 1940):15.

consciousness is an objective part."¹ Putnam rejected surrealism's claim to engender a revolution in consciousness which would precede the social revolution. "This is to assert, as Hegel does, that the march of thought determines the march of things; whereas the Marxist says, the march of things determines the march of thought." The surrealist "is being utterly false to Marxist principle, by asserting that consciousness conditions being, not being consciousness."²

In 1937, the Marxist Charmion von Wiegand (who, ironically, was soon to become a follower of neo-plastic principles) called both cubists and surrealists "modern escapists." "The art of the future," she proclaimed, "which will strive for a new humanism on a social basis, will inevitably turn its face toward the world of reality again."³ Louis Lozowick, converting from his cubo-constructivist orientation of the 1920s, concurred: "Like the artists of every age worth considering, the revolutionary artist proceeds from direct experience of immediate reality, knowing, however, that experience and reality have no meaning except in concrete connotation."⁴ Jerome Klein voiced a similar opinion: "...neurotically incapable of giving their effort a point of leverage in the real world, surrealists have dodged the vital issue of revolutionary art."⁵

¹Samuel Putnam, "Marxism and Surrealism," Art Front 3 (March 1937):10.

²Ibid., p. 11.

³Charmion von Wiegand, "The Surrealists," Art Front 2 (January 1937):14.

⁴Louis Lozowick, "Towards a Revolutionary Art," Art Front 2 (July-August 1936):12.

⁵Jerome Klein, "Dada for Propaganda," Art Front 1 (February 1935):7.

Another liberal objection applying to both orthodox European surrealists and American subjective artists was their expression of ambiguity. Writing in Art Front, Grace Clements offered a somewhat moderate point of view. Associated with Feitelson and the postsurrealists, she nonetheless combined social and subjective content in her work and objected to any art that was not comprehensible. She asked for an art with meaningful subject matter (thus eliminating abstraction) and also for "aesthetic unity": a coherence of meaning, content, and form. "But most important," she concluded, "we must direct the comprehension of the idea so that our meaning will be precise and clear."¹ Louis Lozowick saw in surrealism certain valuable methods which might be incorporated into a revolutionary art--a meticulous technique (thinking of Dali) and a juxtaposition of achronological events in a single space. However, "Where the surrealist postulates irrationalism and automatism, the revolutionary artist must substitute reason, volition, clarity."² This need for clear exposition of meaning was voiced throughout the 1930s, as will be seen in the chapters to follow. Certain subjectively oriented artists, perhaps because of their political sympathies, responded and attempted to create subjective yet unambiguous art. Clements, Feitelson, and Lundeberg are such artists.

A corollary to the need for clarity is the desire for order and control. Automatism thus became suspect, and it is not surprising that it is barely evident in this country before the early 1940s,

¹Grace Clements, "New Content--New Form," Art Front 2 (March 1936):9.

²Lozowick, "Towards a Revolutionary Art," p. 13.

Boris Margo and Gerome Kamrowski being the two exceptions. Clements concluded about surrealism: "Their weakness was their attempt to make an automatic art, uncontrolled by the conscious mind."¹ In this regard, she recognized the dangers of postsurrealism's subjective interests but claimed that a new art "must deal with subjective associative ideas, but ideas of extreme complexity which must be controlled by the head no matter how much fire the heart may contain. It will be a cerebral art rather than an emotional one; that is, an art calculated in its organization."²

To many, Salvador Dali was the "complete surrealist," and the leftist response to his work is particularly telling. Clarence Weinstock, an editor of Art Front, wrote: "Dali ends up with an idealistic, counter-revolutionary art, in which the images of personal inner conflict are exalted to the place of abstract human nature, the old bourgeois bogey man to fool the innocent bystanders."³ Earlier, in a review of a 1935 show at the Julien Levy Gallery, Weinstock wrote, "Dali's influence is both dangerous and unwarranted," his style "an anachronism" and his content "out of place, romantic in reference to the modern world."⁴ Harold Rosenberg, reviewing Dali's 1935 pamphlet Conquest of the Irrational (published by Julien Levy), criticized the awakening surrealist interest in social issues as superficial. He explained that Dali, "in order to keep the corpse moving," has grafted

¹Clements, "New Content--New Form," p. 9.

²Ibid., p. 9.

³Clarence Weinstock, "The Man in the Balloon," Art Front 3 (March 1937):10.

⁴Clarence Weinstock, "A Letter on Salvador Dali," Art Front 1 (February 1935):8.

into the surrealist vocabulary "political and social words, like imperialist and territorial...."¹ The most visible of the surrealists to the American public, Dali came to personify surrealism and became also the focus of anti-surrealist rhetoric. Amusingly, his art unsettled both Marxists and bourgeoisie.

From the vantage point of a modernist aesthetic, James Johnson Sweeney complained that surrealism offered images without ordering and showed "no adequate plastic organization."² Sweeney, an early exponent of modernism, conditioned by an admiration of Picasso, Braque, and their progeny, was not against fantasy per se and did feel that Miró and de Chirico successfully combined the visionary and the formal. However, his attitude typifies the modernist, non-Marxist objection to surrealism and the disapproval of the stream-of-consciousness mode. Alfred Barr held the most embracing attitude toward surrealism. Although many American artists of the 1930s felt that he differentiated between the paths American and European art should take, in 1936 Barr pointed out that surrealism was active in North and South America as well as in Europe. In a separate section of Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism, Barr reproduced work by Americans Peter Blume, Federico Castellon, Lorser Feitelson, Knud Merrild, and Georgia O'Keeffe, among others, calling them "artists who have worked along related but independent lines."³ Barr's distinction between surrealism and related art forms parallels the position of this dissertation.

¹H.R. Review of Conquest of the Irrational, by Salvador Dali, Art Front 2 (March 1936):14.

²J.J. Sweeney, "A Note on Super-Realist Painting," The Arts 16 (May 1930):611.

³Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed. Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 7.

From the conservative aesthetic corner, the mood paralleled American political isolationism and was actively anti-European in sentiment. A 1937 Gallup Poll showed that 70% of the respondents felt it was a mistake for the U.S. to have entered World War I, a partial testament to the pervasive isolationism of the 1930s. This political attitude was manifested in regionalism, whose foremost spokesman, Thomas Craven, asserted, "Art is a local phenomenon," not a shared international aesthetic. Because "art depends on local roots," he found Diego Rivera's murals far more important when executed in Mexico rather than the U.S.¹ Conservative writer Herbert Agar claimed, "the best traits in American life are not the traits we have copied faithfully from Europe but the traits we have freely adapted, or else originated--the traits which are our own." Celebrating the achievement of Thomas Hart Benton, he explained, "In so far as our art is a copy of French Modernism, it is colonial and inferior."²

A more open-minded critic, Sheldon Cheney, acknowledged our important artistic debt to European modernism, in particular to France. But he concluded that any American artist whose work evolved wholly out of French developments could not "be paraded as central to the national achievement."³ He lamented that the United States would not likely develop "an art so distinctively national as, for instance, the

¹Thomas Craven, "Art and Propaganda," Scribner's, March 1934, reprinted in Shapiro, Social Realism, pp. 93,89.

²Herbert Agar, "Culture Versus Colonialism in America," The Southern Review (July 1935), reprinted in Culture and Commitment: 1929-1945, ed. Warren Susman (New York: George Braziller, 1973, pp. 28-29.

³Sheldon Cheney, "Art in the United States, 1938," in America Now: An Inquiry into Civilization in the United States, ed. Harold E. Stearns (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 92.

Mexican," which he called the Western world's outstanding example of "a powerfully creative, exclusively racial style."¹

A vast majority of conservative Americans, artists and public alike, yearned for an art rooted in the local environment, and not in the individual artist's psyche. Even the numerous social realists felt dominated by the American Scene painters. Eleanor Quirt, an art student in the 1930s, recalled with some exaggeration, "You would go into the Whitney, and there was corn, corn everywhere."² Still, this memory sums up a widespread feeling at the time. The subjective artists wished to seek out private truths and personal solutions to metaphysical questions. "The middle class," claimed Walter Quirt, "could not tolerate an art which wished to find new meanings in life, but wanted one which assured it that its values and status quo were absolute."³ This may not be different from what the middle class of any period wants from its artists, but at this point in history, the middle class found a form of art, whether under the label of Americana or regionalism or American Scene painting, which, at its most insipid, "denied the existence of man's complexities, his weaknesses, and his mistakes, hiding the real human being behind a smoke screen of patriotic anecdote...."⁴

One need not guess at the attitude toward surrealism held by bona fide academicians of the 1930s, for the Museum of Modern Art's

¹Ibid., pp. 95-96.

²Eleanor Quirt, interview, Minneapolis, Minnesota (19 October 1977).

³Quoted in Oliver Larkin, Art and Life in America, revised ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960), pp. 453-4.

⁴Ibid., p. 454.

1936 exhibition Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism prompted them to form an ad hoc group, "Defenders of Democracy." An uncited newspaper article preserved in the Archives of American Art records their views.

Surrealism and dada, reported the newspaper, "were denounced yesterday by the Defenders of Democracy, 1 West Fifty-Third Street, as a new move by international communists in their war on standards in religion, industry, society and the arts." Furthermore, communism was seen to have given rise to, "poetry reduced to jargon; music to jangling discord; the dance to calculated ugliness and all other forms of art expression to the hideous, the discordant, the meaningless or the ludicrous."¹ The group was composed of conservative artists, such as members of the National Academy of Design and the Salamagundi Club.

For some, surrealism was not an important enough development to address. French modernism and the American Scene remained the crucial issues. In 1938 Sheldon Cheney wrote about twentieth-century American art and discussed its relationship to European precedents. He focused on art of the 1930s but did not once mention surrealism. And although he singled out over one hundred American artists, he did not mention any of the eight artists examined in depth in the following chapters. Their subjective art remained on the periphery of critical concern.² Whether from lack of interest or actual ignorance, Cheney's omission of surrealism from his discussion of contemporary American art reflects the posture of a broader American public.

¹Walter Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 572, frame 354, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²Sheldon Cheney, "Art in the United States, 1938," pp. 82-103.

Surrealism went against the American grain in other ways. The total freedom which surrealism espoused was contrary to the American notion of freedom. Breton's 1924 manifesto declared surrealism to be "dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern."¹ Even in the mid-thirties, when surrealism entered its dialectical or reasoning phase and Breton modified the notion of freedom, declaring, "the liberation of man to be the sine qua non condition of the liberation of the mind, and we can expect this liberation of man to result only from the Proletarian Revolution," the attitude was not acceptable.² This seemed "anarchy" to American minds. As Marcia Tucker has pointed out, "The fulfillment of ideals upon which American society had been founded was, in part, the goal of American artists and was quite removed from Breton's idea of a 'surrealism developed at the expense of the claims society would impose upon the individual.'"³ The subjective artists had no intention of forsaking control or reason; they only sought freedom of personal expression.

The popular linking of people like Lundeberg or Gorky or Albright with surrealism bore an unfortunate moral connotation, since surrealism was sometimes identified with moral perversion. Herbert Read defensively addressed the topic of surrealist immorality in his 1936 introduction to Surrealism. Read claimed that surrealism was

¹André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 26.

²Quoted in Tucker, "Social Surrealism in America," pp. 32-33.

³Ibid., p. 34.

against the current morality because it had become so debased.¹ Sexuality and eroticism, noticeably lacking in American art during the 1930s, except for the rather tame renderings of nude studio models, was a major concern for Giacometti, Dali, Miró, Masson, and Picasso. It is significant that the astute critic-artist Charmion von Wiegand noted of the Museum of Modern Art's Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism that it seemed a somewhat "sterilized view of fantasy, in which the extreme aberrations of the grotesque and particularly the erotic have been eliminated."² It is possible that the museum, knowing the very topic of the exhibition to be inflammatory, consciously selected works which de-emphasized erotic imagery.

By 1940, although the American Scene continued to dominate museum and gallery exhibitions, the subjective approach began to receive broader recognition. An Art News review by James W. Lane on the Whitney Annual reported: "three-quarters of the present display of paintings are taken up with the facts or implications of the American Scene." However, his claim that "abstraction and pure fantasy" have "been dying out" was incorrect.³ There was instead a burgeoning interest in subjective concerns. Marking this new interest, the 1939 World's Fair displayed the exhibition Mystery and Sentiment, organized by the Museum of Modern Art. And in his introduction to American Art Today, which accompanied another exhibition at the World's Fair, Holger

¹Herbert Read, ed., Surrealism (London: Faber & Faber, 1936; reprint ed., New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), pp. 85-86.

²von Wiegand, "The Surrealists," p. 12.

³O. Louis Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 249, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Cahill concluded, "a good many of the works exhibited indicate that Surrealist ideas and techniques have been assimilated into the stream of contemporary American expression."¹ In 1940, Robert Coates observed the new presence of fantasy and surrealist oriented artists in the Whitney Annual:

It's the surrealists who carry off the top honors in the show. They have suffered in previous Annuals, I think, from insufficient representation. Now they're out in force, and their work--from Peter Blume's "Weather Vane," so simple in its form yet so oddly disturbing in its implications, to Federico Castellon's sombre, stirring "The Dark Figure," not to mention such other fine pieces as O. Louis Guglielmi's poetically suggestive "Terror in Brooklyn" and Anton Refregier's stern "Let My People Go"--is generally of an exceptionally high quality. All together, it seems to prove that the American branch of the surrealist movement, so long ignored or laughed at, is at last taking on true direction--not the same as its French prototype, but in many respects a more valid one.²

By the beginning of World War II, surrealism--and with it the subjective--had begun to be assimilated and accepted.

Forerunners of the Subjective Approach

An established parallel to the subjective mode offers itself in the symbolic art of Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove, and Joseph Stella, and in certain mysterious images in a few paintings by other artists who reached maturity before the 1930s. An examination of their work suggests that the subjective mode existed before 1930 and that the Depression years may have actually stimulated the already developing subjective orientation of older artists. In the late teens and early twenties, Georgia O'Keeffe, Joseph Stella, and Arthur Dove all explored a romantic, often symbolic style. Still, the 1930s seems

¹Holger Cahill, American Art Today (New York: New York World's Fair, National Arts Society, 1939), p. 27, quoted in Wechsler, Surrealism and American Art, p. 22.

²O. Louis Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 249.

to have reinforced the subconscious and introverted aspects of their art. Though these aspects parallel characteristics of surrealism, it is not possible to establish a direct relationship between the surrealists and either O'Keeffe, Stella, or Dove. In fact, the Americans' imagery is certainly not as psychoanalytical, paranoid, or foreboding as much surrealist art. When sexual overtones appear, they are not disturbing in the same way as these themes in European art, but instead are universalized and made to seem metaphorical.

The artists associated with Stieglitz, especially O'Keeffe and Dove, remained relatively isolated throughout the 1930s, preferring to spend much of their time away from New York and uninvolved with the Federal Art Projects. Barbara Haskell writes: "In contrast to the younger art community in New York, the artists associated with Stieglitz retained their belief in the efficacy of individual enrichment over communal action and declined to participate in the WPA projects. This isolated them from the younger artists and limited their direct influence on the generation that was fighting to forge a new modernism."¹ Their failure to join the social movement in art can also be ascribed to their continued source of inspiration in nature. Dove and O'Keeffe rarely, if ever, painted the human figure. The relationship of their paintings to human endeavors remained metaphorical and thus opposed to the overtly or covertly propagandistic art of the American Scene.

O'Keeffe's major new development in the 1930s was the introduction of repeated skull images into her pictorial vocabulary. (See

¹Haskell, *Arthur Dove*, p. 69. See p. 70 for Dove's caustic opinion of the WPA. Joseph Stella, though not allied with Stieglitz, also resented having to work on the WPA, according to Irma Jaffee, *Joseph Stella* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 117.

ill. 1.) Perhaps as early as 1930 the skulls appeared, often in conjunction with flowers or landscape vistas. Their mysterious aura is similar to the moodiness of O'Keeffe's crosses, which she began to paint around 1929. The skulls have been variously interpreted, some critics finding them symbols of tragedy, others as positive statements on the melancholy beauty of death. A number of paintings display the basic surrealist trait of juxtaposing several objects whose relationships are surprising and inexplicable, for example, a skull and flowers floating above a desert landscape.¹ But O'Keeffe, like the younger Americans exploring the subjective, was not directly concerned with psychoanalysis or deliberate irrationality. Rather, she revealed the poetic mysteries which reside in certain forms. Like Lundeberg and Feitelson, her images assume the stature of symbols, suggestive and allusionary, private yet communicative.²

During the 1930s, Arthur Dove continued to create symbols of the natural forces with which he had concerned himself for years. But at the same time, his work began to make a more explicit appeal to the subconscious. Dove abandoned the literal collages he had made during the late 1920s and, like Gorky, addressed the notions of transformation, mutation, and the mystery of growth, so that a single form might concurrently assume the different identities of eye, sun, and moon.

¹Writers on O'Keeffe have often accepted her word that she neither knew nor was interested in the surrealist movement. Daniel Catton Rich, Georgia O'Keeffe (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1943), p. 33; Martin Friedman, The Precisionist View in American Art (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1960), p. 27; Lloyd Goodrich with Doro Bry, Georgia O'Keeffe (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970), p. 24.

²For a discussion of O'Keeffe's paintings from these years, see Rich, Georgia O'Keeffe, pp. 30-35; and Goodrich and Bry, Georgia O'Keeffe, p. 24.

The result is an expression somewhere between symbolism and surrealism. To Dove's earlier efforts at creating abstract equivalents for natural occurrences were added a strong sexual and emotional appeal, including evocations of fertilization and phallic penetration. (See ill. 2.) These paintings are not simply abstraction from natural forms so much as Dove's invention of potent symbols. Barbara Haskell, in a Jungian interpretation, ascribes Dove's many circular images from this period to his desire to achieve complacency and a feeling of wholeness amidst the wreck of his family's finances and the national economy.¹ The surrealist nature of certain paintings from these years deeply struck Paul Rosenfeld: "The mystery of the super-rational, the psychic, hangs over the clearest of Dove's images." Rosenfeld could not but feel, "The represented objects look at us. There is something behind them, which watches us inquisitively."² Rosenfeld may have exaggerated the effect of Dove's images, but he was correct in sensing the curious kinship between the artist and surrealism. Although Dove himself was not influenced by the Europeans, his viewers and critics were, and thus commented on the subconscious aspects of his paintings.

An interesting artist to consider in relation to both subjective expression and the art of O'Keeffe and Dove is Raymond Jonson, who lived in Albuquerque in the 1930s.³ His works of the 1920s had

¹Barbara Haskell, Arthur Dove (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1974), p. 73. See pp. 69-98 for illustrations and a discussion of Dove's work from the 1930s.

²Paul Rosenfeld, "The World of Arthur G. Dove," Creative Art 10 (June 1932):427-28.

³For a full discussion of Jonson's work, see Ed Garman, The Art of Raymond Jonson: Painter (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1976).

abstracted the New Mexican landscape into simplified cubist forms, somewhat reminiscent of Picasso's and Braque's L'Estaque paintings from 1908 but more descriptive and with rich rhythms and colors that seem almost to convey the spiritual effect of the vast New Mexican land. Jonson had in the early 1920s read and been deeply inspired by a 1914 translation of Wasily Kandinsky's On the Spiritual in Art.¹ In the 1930s, cubism, Kandinsky, and Jonson's own sense of color and design fused into a rhythmical abstract style. (See ill. 3.) His goal in art was to bring about "the fusion of matter with spirit," a parallel to the very act of biblical creation.² In the difficult political and economic climate of the 1930s, Jonson felt his art was a refuge, "a kind of oasis" or escape from the ugliness of reality into an ideal world of beauty and peace. Jonson's characteristic concerns during the thirties included biomorphic shapes with qualities almost of musical notation, and abstractions with Jungian associations of wholeness, love, entwinement, and growth. The spiritual meaning of organic growth was a frequent theme.

Morris Kantor, a well-known teacher at the Art Students League in the 1930s and the creator of a series of brilliant cubo-futurist compositions around 1920, began experimenting with a strangely disjunctive compositional mode around 1935. This work seemed indebted to both cubism and surrealism and offered a pervasive emotional tone of melancholy and abandonment. (See ill. 4.) Like Edwin Dickinson, Kantor offered fragments of real things in such a way as to suggest their immateriality and transience. Kantor, however, lacked the

¹Garman, *Art of Raymond Jonson*, p. 56.

²Ibid., *Diary entry of 1938*, p. xx.

psychological depth and compulsion that marks Dickinson's and Ivan Albright's art and which, in comparison, makes their work so successful. There is a sentimentality in Kantor's work which unfortunately characterizes much experimentation with the subjective. What is important, however, is not that the work is sometimes derivative or shallow, but that so much art of the time seems imbued with the spirit of mystery, privateness, intangibility, and other hallmarks of the subjective.¹

Joseph Stella was in Paris several times during the late 1920s and the early 1930s, but any surrealist contacts he may have had brought him little revelation. The enigmatic and haunting qualities of his imagery were characteristic of his art from the earliest Brooklyn Bridge paintings. Stella's description of subways as "subterranean passages to the infernal recesses" suggests a diabolic imagination almost as frenzied as that paragon of surrealism, Salvador Dali.² In fact, "Stella's writings, more than his art, has a distinctly surrealist quality, related perhaps to the equally extravagant writings of the futurists."³ In Stella's paintings from the late 1920s and late 1930s, nature is perceived ritualistically. (See ill. 5.) Palms become sacramental vessels; birds assume the posture of supplicants or guardians; vertical stems appear phallic, flowers like spiky pudenda. Their eroticism is a proper response to their exotic sources of inspiration.⁴

¹For a fuller description of Kantor's work in the years after his early cubo-futurist style, see Anita Ventura, "The Paintings of Morris Kantor," Arts, May 1956, pp. 31-33.

²Joseph Stella, Autobiographical Notes, quoted in Baur and Jaffee, Joseph Stella, p. 35.

³Milton Brown, note to the author, June, 1975.

⁴See John I. H. Baur with Irma Jaffee, Joseph Stella (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), pp. 48-50, for a discussion of the tropical paintings.

They are like religious hymns to the mysteries of growth, beauty, and life itself. Stella's work is a peculiar fusion of disparate sources: Parisian modernism; the much beloved heritage of Italian art; American energy and materialism; Catholicism mixed with pantheism; and perhaps a dose of pittura metafisica. Continually traveling abroad during the 1930s, he was atypical of most Americans at that time, but his work provides a valuable insight to the aesthetic tenor of the time. Stella's natural visionary impulse, like O'Keeffe's and Dove's, relate his imagery not only to traditional uses of symbolism but to the subjective and surrealism as well.

Oscar Bluemner and George Ault both painted works related to a subjective aesthetic. Bluemner's synthetic cubists views of architecture and landscape had always been informed by an eerie romanticism. An anthropomorphic quality sometimes characterized his buildings and trees, providing the sense of a world inhabited by spiritual forces. George Ault painted for a considerable time in what might be regarded as an actual surrealist style. His precisionist paintings of city night views had always been lyrically romantic, even portentous. But between 1935 and 1940, the emotional and subjective aspects of his art began to dominate the architectural and structural elements. (See ill. 6.) Reminiscent of De Chirico and perhaps Yves Tanguy or Albert Ryder, Ault painted cloudy night views of desolate landscape, often with architectural ruins and sharp rock formations. Apparently, these canvases were Ault's means of escape into a moody, quiet world. He wrote of them, "In my desert pictures I create a peaceful world in which to work."¹ Their peacefulness, however, is less

¹George Ault: 1891-1948 (New York: Zabriskie Gallery, 1957).

in evidence than their disturbing desolation and a melancholy portentousness.

There is an important difference between the tendencies toward subjective abstraction and symbolic figuration of most of these older artists and that of those developing during the 1930s. Stella, O'Keeffe, and Dove, heirs to a nineteenth-century American romanticism transmitted from Cole through Ryder and Blakelock, sought their inspiration directly in nature. Artists experimenting with abstraction and symbolism in the 1930s, rather than basing their forms directly in landscape, sought instead abstract ideas and metaphysical concepts. Gorky's cubo-surreal abstractions from still life are fundamentally different from Dove's pantheism, although Gorky was at times also inspired by landscape. The meaning of the 1930s works derives more from mental-emotional and psychological constructs rather than from naturalistically derived responses.

Subjective Realism

Subjective realism distorts perceived reality so that psychological, metaphysical, or spiritual concerns become dominant over visual documentation. Several important artists in the 1930s, such as Edwin Dickinson and Ivan Albright, employ a subjective approach to representation. Subjective realism, a term signifying both style and theme, is also useful in discussing the work of Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, both of whom were on the verge of breaking through to their mature styles. This approach also pertains to work by artists, such as Philip Evergood, usually far removed from the subjective mode. And the work of European artists who immigrated to this country after their mature styles were formed, such as Pavel Tchelitchew and Eugene and Leonid

Berman, might be illuminated by relating their work to subjective realism.

Mark Tobey, the preeminent American artist to come from the Pacific Northwest, developed his mature style in the late 1930s. In his detailed study on Tobey, William C. Seitz pinpoints Broadway Norm (1935, private collection, ill. 7) as the first work of Tobey's signature style.¹ Improvising upon his studies of Japanese calligraphy, Tobey played with an abstract linear web and upon finishing the work, "realized that it was Broadway, with all the people caught in the lights."² The web of lines simultaneously suggests an astronomical chart (the macrocosm) and the intertwined network of some minute organism (the microcosm). It is a paean to the notion of both spiritual unity and the interconnectedness of all living things. During the late thirties, Tobey moved away from depictions of the environment (whether nature or the city) to renderings of mood which were internal responses to the external environment. He came "to dematerialize the human form and image entirely, in search of a valid expression of the human spirit."³ Tobey employed pulsating white lines to describe not only physical forms but also a sense of energy and the idea of the spiritual unity that binds matter. The effect joined a particular place with a particular inner response--the melding of objective and subjective. All is in flux: forms are jumbled together; lines madly criss-cross one

¹William C. Seitz, Mark Tobey (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962), p. 51.

²Alexander Watt, "Paris Commentary," The Studio 162 (December 1961), p. 223, quoted in Seitz, Mark Tobey, p. 51.

³Seitz, Mark Tobey, p. 53.

another; the corporeal dissolves into immateriality; and clarity of parts is sacrificed to an overall effect. Tobey embarked on the path from controlled description to intuitive abstract gestures that bore a resemblance to automatism. Tobey's 1946 observation that "we have occupied ourselves too much with the outer, the objective, at the expense of the inner world," points to the concerns which motivated all his work after 1935.¹ Though fulfillment of these subjective concerns was not accomplished until around 1940, their resolution became Tobey's major goal after 1935.

Morris Graves explained, "I paint to rest from the phenomena of the external world."² Graves saw art as an expression divorced from actual objective facts, as a private retreat from the world into the self. In Graves' work, this retreat is not so much psychoanalytic as it is poetic in nature. He used images from the real world for their suggestive associations or else, as James Thrall Soby has pointed out, invented signs and omens.³ Graves' vision of abstract animals and plants floating in linear webs or dark, empty spaces did not completely develop until around 1940, but in the previous four years he explored various approaches to the subjective mode, some almost abstract, others of a romantic or socially conscious orientation, and still others of an abstruse symbolic nature. (See ill. 8 and 9.) Dark, abstracted

¹In Eric Protter, ed., Painters on Painting (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1963), p. 222.

²James Thrall Soby and Dorothy Miller, Romantic Painting in America (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), p. 48. For a lengthy analysis of Graves' work, see Frederick Wight, Morris Graves: Retrospective (Newport Harbor, California: Fine Arts Patrons of Newport Harbor, 1963).

³Soby and Miller, Romantic Painting in America, p. 48.

landscapes, distant horizons; primeval birds; and hovering symbols like gloves, urns, and chalices make up Graves' iconography during the late 1930s. The chalice or cup was repeatedly employed for its sacramental associations and suggestions of purification. Often, Graves' images were suspended in an ethereal space. As if ready to float away, they become eloquent expressions of the eternal and the transient, of the evanescent and the physical.

The interest in Zen Buddhism held by both Tobey and Graves was contrary to the dominant attitudes of the 1930s.¹ For both, the unity of forms within the picture plane became a spiritual metaphor for the physical unity of the world of nature (their animal images) and the cosmos (depictions of the moon, for instance). Graves sought "the meditative vision which comes from living alone with nature," wrote Frederick Wight. His primary responsibility was toward "lifting his own consciousness."² Individual spiritual growth took precedence over social involvement or responsibility. Paintings by both Tobey and Graves have their source in things seen, but the results are obviously highly symbolic. In this, their work is close to the metaphysical symbolism of Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg.³

Established social realists in the 1930s sometimes produced individual works which explored the world of the subjective. Philip

¹On the West Coast, however, more artists were devotees of Zen than elsewhere in the country, the most prominent being Stanton Macdonald-Wright. Substantial interest among artists in Zen did not develop until the next decade.

²Wight, Morris Graves, n.p.

³Graves also produced a brilliant series of drawings combining political content with poetic symbolism. These are discussed later, being similar in intention to those works designated as social surrealism.

Evergood is such an example. The vast majority of his work from the 1930s exists in the context of social realism. But the expressionist-symbolist orientation of his later works--with their strange distortions, dream-like psychological states, hieratic poses, and unnatural discrepancies in scale--can be noted early on in a work like Lily and the Sparrows (1939, Whitney Museum of American Art, ill. 10.) Unlike other paintings by Evergood from the thirties, it does not clamor against social injustice nor is it predominantly a document of the artist's social milieu. In retrospect, Evergood thought of Lily and the Sparrows as "a representative of a certain kind of realism in American painting," and having to do most with "Luks, Sloan, Coleman Bellows, etc.," the painters of everyday urban life.¹ But there is also in Evergood's canvas a sense of the bizarre: the close-up focus with its frontal orientation places an undue emphasis on the child's face, which itself seems oddly flattened. The head is enlarged to the point where the child seems retarded or hydrocephalic; there is overall a somewhat foreboding sensation. We are aware, as the artist wants us to be, of the social situation: a poor child, probably alone, looks out from a tenement window and compassionately feeds the birds. But one also senses something strange and almost frightening in the painting.

Modes of Symbolism

The use of recognizable symbols to convey ideas was renewed in the 1930s by both social realists and subjective artists. But the

¹ Philip Evergood to Katherine Kuh, 27 April 1965, Katherine Kuh Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

symbolism of the former was intended to be easily comprehensible. When Ben Shahn wrote that the introduction of symbols was a common desire of artists, the symbols he wrote about were "those that have an already acquired flavor and meaning," to which the artist would put his own imprint as if personalizing a convention.¹ In other words, one's symbols could not be abstruse. The postsurrealist group around Feitelson and Lundeborg were among the foremost exponents of another kind of symbolism--a metaphysical one. This is not to say that Morris Graves's birds, snakes, and moons are not also highly symbolic in a philosophical and psychological manner or that the skulls of Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings or the abstracted imagery of Arthur Dove are not also involved with symbolism. But there is a self-consciousness about the psychological implications of the postsurrealist group (and by the turn of the decade with some young artists who were to develop as abstract expressionists--such as Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko) which separates them from the basis in representational depiction and/or nature that characterizes Graves and the earlier modernists. It is also relevant to point out that one of the most advanced symbolists of the 1930s was Joseph Cornell, neither a painter nor sculptor in the traditional sense, but a fabricator utilizing the medium of collage and assemblage.²

The artists associated with Feitelson displayed a great variety in their aesthetic orientation. Lucien Labaudt's major

¹Ben Shahn, "How an Artist Looks at Aesthetics," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 13 (September 1954), reprinted in Shapiro, Social Realism, p. 285.

²For a thorough and illuminating look at this artist, see Kynaston McShine, ed., et. al., Joseph Cornell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980).

preoccupation was with images of mutation. His paintings were composed in a manner similar to some of André Masson's work from the late thirties. (See ill. 11.) Both artists combined different objects and types of imagery to construct entirely new humanoid forms. Jeffrey Wechsler appropriately calls Labaudt's works "a kind of figurative still life."¹ Probably owing a debt to de Chirico's assemblages of still life and architectural forms, Labaudt's paintings become a sort of poetry of objects. Not only does one thing assume the form of another in obvious homage to the idea of transmutation, but each object itself has metaphorical implications. In the background of Shampoo at Moss Beach (Marcelle Labaudt, San Francisco) is a group of playing cards in the form of a city, obviously evoking notions of transience. A wooden armature like a skeleton suggests mortality. Labaudt's rendering of human anatomy recalls Dali's women composed of drawers and also raises associations with human and animal forms. Overall, there is a poignant feeling of loss wedded to an appeal to memory and imagination. The title of another Labaudt painting, Spirit and Reality, makes explicit Labaudt's concern for fusing the physical and metaphysical through visual imagery.

Knud Merrild, a San Francisco member of the postsurrealist group, painted abstract works with archaeological and fetishistic connotations. The 1936 Archaic Form (Museum of Modern Art, ill. 12) depicts bone-like implements which double as amoeboid creatures.

¹Wechsler, Surrealism and American Art, p. 47. Wechsler also points out the likelihood that certain of Eugene Berman's paintings from the early forties depended upon Labaudt's work from the mid-thirties. For further discussion of Labaudt, see Diane Degasis Moran, The Painting of Lorser Feitelson (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1979; Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 8004614, 1979), pp. 122-23.

Suggesting primordial masculine and feminine forms, the images are superimposed, as if joining in procreation. Other work explores the theme of outer appearance versus inner reality. This concept of fusing polarities, such as masculine/feminine and inner/outer, is frequently employed by subjective artists during the thirties: Gorky's attempts to resolve structured geometry with organic biomorphism; Albright's concern for simultaneously depicting matter and immateriality, growth and disintegration; and Feitelson's search for the unity of macrocosm and microcosm. Like Labaudt, Feitelson, and Lundeberg, Merrild's attempt to seek meaning out of apparent disorder and to reconcile opposites should be viewed in relation to his contemporaries. He does not identify with political, social, or environmental concerns and the relation of man to a particular geographical place but presents an abstract consideration of morality and existence outside of actual experience, as titles such as Good and Evil and Alpha and Omega indicate.¹ Even Grace Clements, the most politically concerned of all the post-surrealists (her canvases include such themes as Eviction and Dialectic) also painted a Reconsideration of Time and Space and Cataclysmic Metamorphoses which seem to point toward two common subjective concerns--the ideas of personal perception restructuring reality and of flux and transformation.

Philip Guston (then Philip Goldstein) was only twenty-one in 1934 when he came under the influence of Lorser Feitelson, whom he

¹Diane Moran points out that Merrild's work was extremely close in feeling to European surrealism but was nevertheless admired by Feitelson for its use of montage; in Painting of Lorser Feitelson, p. 124. In the late 1930s and early 1940s Merrild went on to develop a different mode of painting which employed poured paint onto canvas in a manner which anticipated Pollock but with a far more decorative effect akin to marbleizing.

regarded as the most knowledgeable of the artists then working in the Los Angeles area. Guston, like Grace Clements, was simultaneously interested in metaphysical and social issues.¹ Apparently, Feitelson provided Guston and Kadish with their introduction to surrealism.² In 1935, Guston and Kadish worked on a Treasury Department mural in Duarte, California, at the City of Hope Research Center. (See ill. 13.) The mural combines elements of Renaissance painting, memories of the Mexican muralists, as well as postsurrealism. Symbolic images include an infant contained within a seashell; a falling, hooded green figure next to a broken eggshell; a man leaning through a trapdoor holding an object similar to an astrolabe; and a statue of a figure whose feet are encased in a marble block. The overall mood is one of solemn meditation verging on despair. It is a mannerist composition with perspectival oddities and a not very apparent theme of birth, creativity, growth, fulfillment, and struggle amidst the vicissitudes of life. In Francis O'Connor's words, "Fundamental human experiences are dealt with and there is no overt attempt to relate man's journey through life to specific social or economic impediments."³

¹Guston went to Mexico with Reuben Kadish in November 1934 to paint a mural, a plan arranged by David Alfaro Siqueiros. For an account of Guston's early work and the aesthetic outlook in Los Angeles at that time, see Dore Ashton, Yes, but...a Critical Study of Philip Guston (New York: Viking Press, 1976), pp. 25-34; the Mexican adventure is discussed on pp. 30-33. See also Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, pp. 111-12; and Francis V. O'Connor, "Philip Guston and Political Humanism," in Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics, ed. Henry A. Millon and Linda Nochlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1978). pp. 342-55.

²Reuben Kadish, Letter to Lorser Feitelson, 11 December 1934, Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeborg Papers, microfilm roll 1103, frames 24-25, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

³O'Connor, "Philip Guston and Political Humanism," p. 344.

It is interesting to look at the very early--and far less developed--work of another artist who, like Guston, was later to make a contribution to abstract expressionism, Adolph Gottlieb.¹ Gottlieb's 1939-40 Trylon and Perisphere (Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation) seems to be a strange fantasy on the well-known symbols of the 1939 World's Fair. The trylon and perisphere were designed to reiterate the theme of the fair, World of Progress, but instead are shown by Gottlieb in a place devoid of humanity. The supposed symbols of rationality and of man's ordering mind are seen to be lifeless. Mary Davis MacNaughton has written of Gottlieb's works from the early 1940s as consistently combining the rational and the irrational.² This polarity is also a hallmark of the subjective artists of the 1930s, especially the social surrealists. Gottlieb's implied destruction of the normal function of the trylon and perisphere can be viewed as a rejection of the very idea of progress and also of order, mental discipline, and rational control.

Working in a mode of symbolism which directly recalled Salvador Dali's hallucinatory Freudian imagery was Federico Castellon, who came to this country in 1921 at the age of seven. From 1937 through the early forties, the precocious Castellon produced his best work, psychological fantasies which eschewed the metaphysical symbolism of the above-mentioned artists. Castellon spent the mid-thirties in Spain, also traveling to Paris where he was in touch with Dali and Miró, but returned here in 1936 at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil

¹For an examination of Gottlieb's work from the 1930s, see Mary Davis MacNaughton, "Adolph Gottlieb: The Early Work," Arts Magazine, May 1981, pp. 128-31.

²Mary R. Davis, "The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb: A Synthesis of the Subjective and the Rational," Arts Magazine, November 1977, p. 141.

War. Castellon's debt to Dali is evident in his use of double imagery, small-scale works, a highly realistic oil technique, and the repetition of particular phobic images associated with pain, excrement, and eroticism. (See ill. 14 and 15.) Castellon's psychological precinct is that of an unreal world inhabited by nightmares. In an extensive analysis of Castellon, Jacqueline Barnitz has examined his reliance on "memories of childhood dominated by the Spanish landscape" and his recurrent themes of escape.¹ Castellon often explored themes of death, blindness, and eroticism. His linking of pain, fetishism, and sexuality was rare in this country during the 1930s, although it was a staple of certain European surrealists. Castellon reveled in the horrible and the enigmatic, leaving the viewer to construct his own Freudian interpretations of stunted figures, detached arms, ritualistic hoops, and cenotaph-like structures.

Biomorphic Abstraction

The number of artists successfully experimenting with biomorphic abstraction in the 1930s is substantial when one considers the overwhelming preponderance of figurative art during the period and the hostility to abstraction in general. The road traveled by Arshile Gorky from synthetic cubism to free-form biomorphic abstraction was repeated with less success and more tentatively by many artists during the 1930s. The visual language of biomorphism--with its organic suggestion of indeterminate form, movement, and flux--was for a short time explored by a number of artists most often thought of as committed to social causes or geometric abstraction. American

¹Jacqueline Barnitz, "American Surrealism in the Thirties," Seminar Paper, Ph.D. Program in Art History, City University of New York Graduate School, 1975.

experimentation with biomorphism developed as a result of exhibitions and magazine articles devoted to surrealism. Although the abstract or biomorphic strain of surrealism (exemplified by Miró, Masson, and Arp) sometimes was attacked by the figurative surrealists as being too close to pure abstraction, biomorphism was recognized early on as a direct offshoot of the surrealist notion of "pure psychic automatism." "The free and almost casual technique of Masson and Miró," wrote Alfred Barr in 1936, "belongs somewhat to the tradition of 'automatic' drawing and painting...."¹ The suggestive but abstract forms of biomorphism shared with the figurative dream imagery of the veristic surrealists a commitment to the metaphorical, the visionary, and the poetic.

From the early thirties onward, artists in New York were exposed to various forms of surrealism. By the time of the 1932 Newer Super Realism exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery, there had already been exhibitions that year of Miró, Masson, and Pierre Roy at the Brummer Gallery.² Those interested in abstract art had been reading Cahiers d'Art and Abstraction-Création. The former publication was especially involved with surrealism and also kept readers informed of Picasso's latest developments. Hans Arp showed at the John Becker Gallery, and Miró was shown as early as 1928 at A. E. Gallatin's Gallery of Living Art and then in 1930 at the Valentine Gallery, giving ample exposure of these artists to those interested in biomorphic form.³ In a 1936

¹In Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed. Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 12.

²Matthew Josephson, "The Surrealists," New Republic (3 February 1932), p. 321.

³Favorable reviews of the Miró exhibitions appeared in The

publication, The Significant Moderns and Their Pictures, Miró was claimed as the most important surrealist.¹ Still, it was hard for many abstract painters to accept the biomorphic alternative. Reviewing Cubism and Abstract Art, Balcomb Greene almost completely avoided discussing the abstract surrealists except to explain that Miró's work was based on the intuitive and the personal. He equated these concerns with anarchy, and anarchy resulted in an "ineffective" art. Greene also realized that the other side of the abstract spectrum--the constructivist tradition--was also fraught with problems and could become "mechanical and cold."²

In addition to Miró, Picasso and Léger should be considered the two other major influences on abstract art reflecting subjective concerns.³ Léger visited the United States in 1931, 1935, and 1938-39. His work from those years, like Picasso's, departs from his earlier synthetic cubist concerns to explore surrealist dream space, biomorphic forms, and erotic suggestiveness. As for Picasso's influence, the writer Edwin Denby, a close friend of de Kooning and Gorky, wrote,

New York Sun on 8 December 1928 and on 25 October 1930; reprinted in Henry McBride, The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticism of Henry McBride, selected with an introduction, by Daniel Catton Rich (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1975), pp. 243-44, 270-72.

¹C. J. Bulliet, The Significant Moderns and Their Pictures (New York: Covici; Friede Publishers, 1936), p. 107. Dalí was also singled out as of special importance. Interestingly, no Americans were included.

²Balcomb Greene, "Abstract Art at the Modern," Art Front 2 (April 1936):6.

³Masson was also of interest to a number of artists, but mostly in the early 1940s.

"Downtown, everybody loved Picasso then, and why not?"¹ Gorky and John Graham were also strong presences on the New York art scene, the one fulminating over the greatness of Picasso and aping his latest work, the other the dogmatic theoretician whose ideas did much to stimulate an examination of the interior or spiritual aspects of art as well as its formal side.

A false picture should not be inferred from the comparative wealth of visual information available in New York in the 1930s. Abstraction itself was still regarded as a bugaboo by many. While Balcomb Greene might claim that, "No revolt against tradition has been more inclusive than the 'abstract movement'," Clarence Weinstock of Art Front dismissed the relevance of abstract art for America as being anti-revolutionary.² Charmion von Wiegand, who was soon to come under Mondrian's spell, categorically claimed, "Abstract art then is a negation of reality, not simply an alternative, and for the Marxist, this is anathema. Reality is the fountainhead of philosophy and existence."³ She went on to say that Herbert Read's assertion

¹ He added rather amusingly in hindsight, "But what they painted made no sense as an imitation of him." Patricia Passloff, ed., The 30's: Painting in New York (New York: Poindexter Gallery, 1957), n.p.

² Balcomb Greene, "Differences Over Léger," Art Front 2 (January 1936):8; and Clarence Weinstock, "Review of 'Abstract Art in America,' Whitney Museum of American Art," Art Front 1 (April 1935):7.

³ Charmion von Wiegand, "Five on Revolutionary Art," Art Front 2 (September-October 1936):11. Two years later, she was to write a favorable review of the 1938 group show of the American Abstract Artists in New Masses. See Susan Carol Larsen, The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of Its Impact Upon American Art (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1975; Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 75-29687, 1975), pp. 258-59.

that the work of Miró and Mondrian was truly revolutionary was "not the method of dialectic materialism but rather old idealistic generalization."¹ One should also remember that powerful conservative critics like Edward Alden Jewell of The New York Times were also hostile to any kind of abstract art. Jewell, for example, was still antagonistic to Picasso and Braque as foreign influences frustrating the development of an American art.²

In analyzing reviews of exhibitions held by the American Abstract Artists, it is clear that American critics objected to the stylistic dependency on European sources. In a review of their 1938 show, Emily Genauer berated the work's European derivation as well as their lack of human emotion.³ Although Jewell had panned the 1937 show, as well as the Museum of Modern Art's 1936 Cubism and Abstract Art, he gave a positive review to the 1938 exhibition.⁴ But he continued to see abstract art simply in terms of design and decoration and wrote a year later that pattern and design were not enough to create a viable art.⁵ Adding to these censures those against fantasy, personal art, and surrealism, it becomes evident that the climate was hardly a receptive one. That so many artists experimented with biomorphic and metaphorical forms testifies to the need artists felt in the thirties, especially at the end of the decade, to explore private realms of thought and a more subjective

¹ von Wiegand, "Five on Revolutionary Art," p. 10

² Larsen, American Abstract Artists Group, p. 342.

³ Ibid., p. 302. ⁴ Ibid., pp. 304-5.

⁵ Ibid., p. 316. See pp. 253-61 for an extensive survey of critical attitudes toward abstraction.

aesthetic. This tendency, of course, was to reach its climax in a new but related development--abstract expressionism--in the next decade.

An important aspect of the type of abstraction discussed here is the concept of the pictorial space as a sort of dream space. Writing of European art, Robert Goldwater explained, "Space, movement, dream, constellation, and the cosmic; these terms seem to formulate the central concerns of much artistic thinking in the period between the two wars."¹ Though referring directly to surrealism, Goldwater's notion of an indeterminate space is relevant to much subjective American abstraction. The space is not that of the cubist studio, torn to shreds, but an unfamiliar invented space, often empty, in which dramas of flux and metamorphosis occur. The step taken by Gorky and other artists of the 1930s, and later by the abstract expressionists from synthetic cubist dislocation--which is an extension or analysis of real space--to the invented space of an alternative world is a major one. This free-floating, non-physical, non-tangible space is what Gorky sought throughout the 1930s. It is evident in work by Stuart Davis in the early thirties (mixed with synthetic cubism) and in that of Ilya Bolotowsky in the mid-thirties. In varying degrees, one finds artists like David Smith (in his drawings and paintings), Willem de Kooning, Byron Browne, and Alice Trumbull Mason all exploring this new concept of space and the corresponding ideas it implies.

¹Robert Goldwater, Space and Dream (New York: Walker & Co., 1967), p. 7.

Davis, de Kooning, and Gorky were among the many artists in the late 1920s who populated the studio of the Russian immigrant David Burliuk, sharing either aesthetic bonds or the sense of being outsiders in America.¹ It is not coincidental that all three were to explore the biomorphic form and ephemeral dream space in the next decade. In retrospect, this avenue appears to have been a logical step for the vanguard artists of the period.

While in Paris in the late 1920s, Davis' work had been in obvious debt to Léger (and also to Utrillo) in the use of a simplified synthetic cubist planar construction with bright colors. Davis returned to the U.S. in August, 1929, and by 1930 the first hints of a new mode of composition are evident. Still Life with Saw (1930, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.) is perhaps the earliest indication. Here, a typical cubist subject is marked with innovations. The objects seem especially unrelated, almost as if in a rebus rather than the related assortment of typical still life objects on a table. A saw, a mandolin, a pyramid, and a rope pose relationships with an inexplicable meaning. The very idea of a table still life is undermined by the inclusion of only one horizontal line in the background to indicate the tabletop. Even this line seems as much a horizon as a table edge, especially as clouds float by next to the pyramid. The objects themselves float through the space in a playful manner. The arm of the musical instrument seems like the cartoon form of a real human arm, and the rope snakes through the composition as if under its own power.

¹Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876-1976 (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1976), pp. 30-31.

In other compositions from 1931, Davis employs the characteristic interlocking planes of synthetic cubism and reminiscences of Léger in the new format of a floating, non-specific space. Simplified recognizable objects are placed in unlikely juxtapositions on a blank background. In paintings such as Artist in Search of a Model (1931, formerly collection of Downtown Gallery, ill. 17) and Television (1932, formerly collection of Kennedy Galleries), the influence of Miró is evident in the biomorphic shapes, bird-like people, and the usage of dotted lines to indicate movement. In both paintings, Davis' own synthetic cubist sign language still remains as his personal imprint in an uneasy marriage with biomorphic, surreal shapes. In Artist in Search of a Model, echoes of Arp and Ernst are seen in the abstracted figures with their plumed arms and heads. A giant canvas sprouts in the middle of a landscape; on it are masks and mechanical forms. Other paintings recall Arp in their curvilinear shapes resembling a hand, a floating eye, or clouds. (See ill. 16.) Although the forms of biomorphism and the concept of the dream space were discarded by the end of 1932 in favor of a flat, calligraphic arrangement of interlocking shapes, Davis' experimentation freed him from the hold of a descriptive synthetic cubism and encouraged a much looser and abstracted disposition of forms.

Willem de Kooning reached his mature style by experimenting with and combining modes of abstraction, synthetic cubism, expressionist distortion, and surrealism. A close friend of Gorky, de Kooning's flirtation with biomorphic form began as early as 1935 with an abstract mural designed for the French Line pier. The mural was done for the WPA either under the supervision of Léger or else as

Léger's assistant. Very obvious are Léger's characteristic spiky forms of the 1930s, combined with shapes like wings or kidneys. Painted conglomerations float on a flat ground as if in some ethereal space. The forms are totally non-referential but organically suggestive. A 1937 design for the New York World's Fair Hall of Pharmacy was by de Kooning's own hand. Recalling the Léger mural as well as Miró and Gorky, this mural mixed abstracted human figures, a biomorphic bird, and simplified mechanical and medical images. There is an unresolved, disjunctive placement of images which relates to both synthetic cubist still life and surrealist modes of symbolic juxtaposition. The images are, again, on a flat ground and seem to hover in space. In 1938 and 1939, de Kooning explored metaphorical abstraction with more successful results. In several untitled works from these years, ovals and breast-like forms hover in space. (See ill. 18.) There is a softness and sense of mutability more akin to Edwin Dickinson than to the aggressive abstraction of his colleagues of the late thirties. Works following in this style continued through 1942, when de Kooning's forms became more aggressive, energetic, and intricate.

De Kooning's work of the late thirties relates closely to that of Gorky, not surprisingly as the two were best friends and also the same age. Like Gorky, de Kooning was the continual experimenter, moving between abstraction and figuration, cubism and surrealism. Edwin Denby remembers of de Kooning: "no doctrine of style was settled at Bill's. He belligerently brought out the mysterious paradoxes left over." De Kooning's outlook made one realize that "the Marxist talk of the thirties was one-track."¹ Thomas Hess wrote of de Kooning's

¹Quoted in Passloff, The 30's, n.p.

abstract paintings of the late thirties and early forties:

In his abstractions, the space is a flat, slippery, metaphysical surface, related to that of some of Miró's of the middle thirties; there are also recollections of Arp. The forms are based on the stripe (usually vertical, related to Mondrian) and circles that have been forced into pointed or bulging ovals by the irregular pressures between shapes.¹

These concerns relate closely to the subjective attitude.

Although primarily a sculptor, David Smith made the same transition from cubist-derived structure to the free-flowing forms of biomorphism. Like Gorky and de Kooning, Smith was deeply influenced by Picasso's painting, but also by his sculpture, particularly the welded works executed with Julio Gonzalez and reproduced in Cahiers d'Art. Certain of Smith's drawings reflect the influence of Gorky. Black-and-white contrasts, cross-hatching, and biomorphic forms may depend upon Gorky's Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia series.² Other drawings--all studies for sculptures but existing as works in their own right--in pastel, ink, and tempera, utilize the formal language of Arp or Giacometti. Bird-like biomorphic shapes with holes for breasts and eyes alternate with constructivist-derived forms. The rectilinear and curvilinear, the symbolic and the literal, the corporeal and the intangible--concepts which were to inform his mature work--are tentatively approached in these works from the late

¹Thomas B. Hess, Willem de Kooning (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 25.

²For a discussion of Smith's work from the 1930s, see Paul Cummings, David Smith: The Drawings (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979), pp. 12-16 and nos. 2-10. See also Rosalind Krauss, Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1972), pp. 16-20, 35-37; M. Knoedler & Co., David Smith (1906-1965) (New York: M. Knoedler & Co., 1978); and Edward F. Fry and Miranda McClintic, David Smith: Painter, Sculptor, Draftsman (New York: George Braziller in association with the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1982), passim.

1930s. Smith's drawings and paintings on paper point to the presence of a surrealist influence and an exploration of the subjective which also was evident in his sculpture of these years.

Other sculptors--Ibram Lassaw, Charles Shaw, Alexander Calder, and Isamu Noguchi--also explored the subjective realm through the use of biomorphic forms. Ibram Lassaw explicitly combined surrealist and cubist forms in his work of the late thirties, reflecting many of the same preoccupations to be found in painting of the period. An Alexander Calder exhibition in New York in 1934 prompted his first experiments with free-floating abstract forms, sometimes inset in shadow boxes.¹ By 1938, he was producing biomorphic shapes suspended from rods or armatures. Friendly with Smith and interested in Jung, astronomy, and philosophy, Lassaw explored the "dialogue between interior and exterior."² Like Feitelson's paintings, Lassaw's cages simultaneously seem like metaphors for the macrocosm (the cosmos) and the microcosm (biological organisms). One senses the armatures as the physical containers of the visible exterior of a thing, while the freely disposed forms within appear like a glimpse into the inner being. During 1938, Charles Shaw also explored the use of biomorphic forms floating through space. He placed into shadow boxes painted wooden forms in relief, almost indistinguishable from those of Arp.³ Much better known are Alexander Calder's inventive biomorphic cutouts, his "constellations" composed of rounded forms suspended about poles

¹Larsen, American Abstract Artists Group, p. 131.

²Ibid., p. 588.

³For illustrations, see Marter et. al., Vanguard American Sculpture, p. 77.

or else free-falling, and his mobiles and stabiles employing Miró-like filaments to which are often attached suggestive abstract forms.¹ With a background in Oriental art, Isamu Noguchi produced, as early as 1932, an abstracted flying female figure imparting the sensation of a goddess-bird, an embodiment of spiritual and cosmic order. Throughout the 1930s, Noguchi moved between figurative and abstract sculpture. Echoing the accomplishment of painters like Gorky and the American Abstract Artists, Calder and Noguchi, concludes Joan Marter, "were the earliest to assimilate advanced trends in Constructivism and Surrealism in Europe, but both were not actively involved with American sculptors."²

The many artists involved after 1936 with the American Abstract Artists reveal the extent to which new surrealist-derived forms came to introduce a correspondingly new subjective expression in this country. Often highly emotional and seemingly intuitive, exploring the suggestiveness of metamorphosis and simultaneous figuration and abstraction, what might be called the expressionist branch of the AAA was not to make the most important contribution to art in the next decade, but their development did lay the foundation for much expressionist art of the 1940s. This aspect of the AAA was one tendency among several.³ The AAA was of course internationalist and

¹See Marter et. al., Vanguard American Sculpture, illustrations 115, 172, 173, 174, and 175.

²Joan Marter, "The Interaction of American Sculptors with European Movements: Alexander Calder and Isamu Noguchi," in Marter et. al., Vanguard American Sculpture, p. 117. For an extended discussion of trends in sculpture related to the subjective and biomorphism see especially chapters 6, 8, and 9 in the same book.

³Susan Larsen explains that the group was quite heterogeneous

looked to Europe--the Bauhaus, constructivism, cubism, De Stijl--at a time of great nationalism, but Larsen points out that by the mid-thirties there were important individuals in this country teaching and talking and encouraging the younger artists in their efforts toward abstraction: Gorky, Graham, Hans Hofmann, as well as the example of Burgoyne Diller, who was prominent because of his position as a mural supervisor for the FAP.¹ In fact, by 1938, the more expressionist orientation of people like Gorky and Hans Hofmann was to affect many members of the AAA. In the early 1940s, a schism developed between the more subjective expressionist-surrealist oriented artists and those disposed toward geometry.²

Marcia Tucker has concurred with Werner Haftmann's conclusion that "only the ideas of Veristic Surrealism, the ideas that could be utilized in the poetic interpretation of reality, were taken up in American art, which was too exclusively concerned with describing the contemporary scene to take an interest in the abstract aspects of surrealism."³ This assertion must be modified under the evidence of so much experimentation with biomorphic abstraction. However, it is correct in the sense that the art which has been described here is only that--experimentation--and few painters besides Gorky can truly be said to have worked consistently in this area in the 1930s. For example, Carl Holty had been a member of Abstraction-Création

in the theoretical approaches of its members, in American Abstract Artists Group, p. 267.

¹Ibid., p. 312. ²Ibid., pp. 320-21.

³Werner Haftmann, Painting in the Twentieth Century, vol. I (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1965), p. 300, quoted in Tucker, "Social Surrealism in America," pp. 2-3.

in Paris during 1931-32. By 1937 (he returned to New York in 1935) he was producing paintings placing biomorphic elements rendered schematically on a flat, empty ground to suggest human or animal forms. By 1939, however, Holty had abandoned any hints of the biomorphic shape moving freely through a dream space and developed a rectilinear geometric style.¹ Georgio Cavallon, who worked as an assistant to Gorky on the WPA Mural Division in the late 1930s, "found his love of sensuous painting confirmed in the ideas and work of Gorky, who also could not accept the supremacy of geometry in abstract art."² Cavallon experimented with forms deriving from Picasso and perhaps Miró, and his compositions moved from a sense of structure to one of freedom and flux.³ Alice Trumbull Mason, who had studied with Gorky in 1926, was in 1938 also midway between synthetic cubist notions of abstract forms interlocked to suggest a specific space and the more subjective space composed of forms reflecting movement, growth, change, and the dream space.⁴ Byron Browne was a friend of both Gorky and de Kooning. In the late thirties, Browne and de Kooning assisted Gorky on a mural done for a midtown nightclub.⁵ Browne worked from nature and often abstracted plant and animal forms "with an engaging sense of fantasy."⁶ During 1938-39, he also worked in a more strictly constructivist tradition.

¹Larsen, American Abstract Artists Group, pp. 91-92.

²*Ibid.*, p. 118.

³See illustration in American Abstract Artists: Three Yearbooks (1938, 1939, 1946) (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 102.

⁴*Ibid.*, see illustrations, pp. 63, 143.

⁵Larsen, American Abstract Artists Group, pp. 128-29, 543.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 128.

Of all the AAA members, it was probably Ilya Bolotowsky who provided the earliest use of what might be called a biomorphic-constructivist aesthetic. The structured, interlocking spaces derived from cubism were absent in his work. Instead, hard-edged forms on a flat, colored ground seem to float and to be connected only by thin lines. (See ill. 19) When asked about the influence of Miró on his work, Bolotowsky responded, "Well, I saw Mirós and Mondrians at about the same time, in 1933, and so at first I was trying to combine the two. I felt the necessity of combining the biomorphic and the geometric."¹ As early as 1936, with a mural for the Williamsburg Housing Project, Brooklyn, Bolotowsky suspended playful, energetic biomorphs against rectilinear, geometric forms. The beautiful oil sketch for a mural in the Health Building, Hall of Medical Science, at the New York World's Fair (collection of the artist, New York) summed up Bolotowsky's early experiments and was one of his last major works to incorporate biomorphic elements.² Certainly, Bolotowsky's leaf forms and rounded H-shapes did not offer the emotionalism and sense of mutation the forms assumed in Gorky's work. Bolotowsky's expression was somewhat removed from the psychological provocations of the subjective; nonetheless, he developed the idea of a fathomless dream space and a sense of free play and imaginative movement which is related to that of Calder, Arp, and Miró.

¹Interview with the artist by Louise Averill Svendsen and Mimi Poser, in Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Ilya Bolotowsky (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1974), p. 20. See pp. 15-20, 37, 38, 40, 103-8 for discussions and illustrations relevant to this thesis.

²Ibid., see illustration 5, p. 37.

The work of Charles Biederman--who was in Chicago in the late twenties and early thirties, and in New York from late 1934 to 1939 (punctuated with a seven-month stay in Paris in 1936-37)--offers a dramatic example of a devoted study of almost all the major European variations on a surrealist-biomorphic style.¹ Various works directly resemble those of Arp, Miró, Picasso, and Léger. Sac-like bulges, long appendages ending in points, organic shapes engaging in a delicate balancing act with one another, and dotted outlines and tendrils surrounding biomorphic forms characterize Biederman's output of 1935-1936. The spiky forms of New York, December 1935 (collection of the artist, Minneapolis, ill. 20) give a threatening aspect to the totemistic images, neither plant nor animal, but decidedly organic. However, like Ilya Bolotowsky, Alice Trumbull Mason and others, Biederman's mature work was to be in a geometric, rectilinear, and formalist mode.

Outside of New York, experimentation with non-representational modes was fairly limited. Knud Merrild's work in California has already been discussed in relation to the symbolist endeavors of the postsurrealists. His biomorphic shapes often suggest both the organic and the inorganic. Merrild's mysterious, magical forms transport us to some dim primitive past. They summon sensations of memory, history, and mutation between the anthropomorphic and the inorganic. Charles Howard, also in San Francisco, by 1939 developed a highly accomplished style which might be characterized as a dark and moody merging of

¹For a detailed analysis of Biederman's work from this period, see Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Charles Biederman: A Retrospective (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1976), pp. 13-18, 38-55.

constructivist and surrealist forms. Thin, tentacular lines connect flat, irregular forms and Arp-like shapes. A pensive, almost apprehensive aura radiates from his work, as in The Cage (1938, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, ill. 21). Often, a glowing center surrounded by darkness appears to offer itself as a place of revelation or source of spiritual energy. Other developing West Coast artists, such as David Park, were inspired by Picasso's surrealist works of the late 1920s and early 1930s.¹

Related to the use of biomorphic form was the use of pure automatism, an approach far less common in this country than in Europe, and perhaps explored by only two artists here prior to the American entry into World War II. Jeffrey Wechsler has analyzed the issue of early automatist involvement by Boris Margo and Gerome Kamrowski, the former a Russian who immigrated to this country in 1932 and the latter born in Minnesota.² Besides the well-known work of Jackson Pollock, William Baziotes was also deeply involved with automatism in the early 1940s, as were Knud Merrild and Margaret Tompkins on the West Coast (as well as Gordon Onslow-Ford who came here from England in 1939). The development of automatic gesture in this country pertains mostly to the early years of the 1940s rather than to a history of the 1930s, but it is significant that Kamrowski was developing various kinds of automatist methods in 1939.³

¹See Paul C. Mills, David Park (Newport Beach, California: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1977).

²Wechsler, Surrealism and American Art, pp. 50-52; and Jeffrey Wechsler, "Boris Margo: Experiment and Innovation," Arts Magazine (December 1977), pp. 88-92.

³Wechsler, Surrealism and American Art, p. 54.

Boris Margo's maturity occurred earlier. It depended heavily on his early training in Russia with Pavel Filanov's explorations of the fantastic and intuitive as well as with Margo's own interest in Hieronymous Bosch. In the U.S., Margo was friendly with de Kooning and Byron Browne and at one point was hired as an assistant to Gorky on a government-sponsored mural.¹ From 1935 on, Margo employed the decalcomania technique (placing a flat surface onto a wet section of canvas, pressing, and pulling it away to leave a pitted, swirling area of paint with an almost organic appearance). In the earliest mature works, birdlike people midway between Bosch and Ernst inhabit a fantastic and threatening landscape. By 1937, imagery had become almost entirely abstract--zoomorphic forms float, rest, and roll; abstract wraiths become actors in a decalcomania-formed landscape. Great blobs hang like curtains framing a procenium. We peer into an emphatically alien world whose energy approaches violence. By 1939, Margo's forms softened and became enveloped in diaphanous clouds. Matrix of an Unborn World (1939, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, ill. 22), "with its wispy atmosphere and glowing force-lines of light, shows one of the earliest examples of Margo's turn toward ambiguous space dramas."² The imagery and title of the painting point to a contemplation of the generative cosmic forces, an abstract and awesome parallel to Feitelson and Lundeberg's

¹Laurence Schmeckebier, in Syracuse University, The School of Art, Boris Margo: Graphic Work/1932-1968 (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University, The School of Art, 1968), p. 15.

²Ibid., p. 90.

cosmological speculations. The decalcomania technique itself declares the viability of chance and mutability.

In summing up the relationship of 1930s abstraction to the subjective attitude, it is appropriate to end with John Graham, who in 1920 came to the U.S. from Russia.¹ In the 1930s, he served the New York art scene as a theoretician, collector, artist, and as a vital link to advanced art in Paris. Gorky and David Smith were the most notable of the many whom Graham introduced to new art and stimulated by his unique outlook. Graham also knew Walter Quirt and Charmion von Wiegand.² Little of Graham's own painting from the 1930s survives, many works having been destroyed by the artist.³ Between 1932 and 1935, Graham apparently did not paint at all.⁴ However, this lack of productivity does not lessen Graham's importance, for his art theory, rather than his painting, was the prime basis for his influence.

System and Dialectics of Art, Graham's important treatise, was published in 1937 and dated "New York-Paris 1926-1936." This

¹Graham has been the subject of much recent research. For discussions of Graham's art, theory, and influence during the 1930s see especially the introduction to John D. Graham, System and Dialectics of Art, 1937; reprint ed., annotated from unpublished writings, with a critical introduction, by Marcia Epstein Allentuck (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971); Eila Kokkinen, "Ionnus Magus Servus Domini St. Georgii Equitus," Art News (September 1968), pp. 52-55, 64-66; Hayden Herrera, "Le Feu Ardent: John Graham's Journal," Archives of American Art Journal 14 (1974), pp. 6-17; and Hayden Herrera, "John Graham: Modernist Turns Magus," Arts Magazine (October 1976), pp. 100-105.

²Walter Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 387.

³Kokkinen, "Ionnus Magus," p. 54.

⁴Herrera, "John Graham: Modernist Turns Magus," p. 104.

colophon suggests that his ideas were gestating for a long period of time but also that the book expounds ideas which Graham had subscribed to earlier in the decade. Of course, it is also a typical artistic counterfeit to predate one's own work. Yet, the inconsistency of many of Graham's ideas--such as his fluctuating advocacy of the conscious versus the unconscious, or of control versus imagination--seems to reflect a reevaluation of his premises over a period of time. This ambivalence also reflects the aesthetic development of many of the people associated with Graham, most notably, Smith, Gorky and de Kooning.

Throughout System and Dialectics of Art, there is an appeal to subjective concerns:

The origin of art lies in human longing for enigma, for the miraculous, for expansion, for social communication (appetitus socialtatis), for continuity and consequently--life eternal. This longing for perpetuity engenders artist's desire to arrest the eternal motion.

Our unconscious mind contains the record of all our past experiences--individual and racial, from the first cell germination to the present day. Human beings lost to a great extent or never possessed the access to the wisdom stored in the unconscious. The unconscious mind is the power house, the creative agent. The conscious mind is the clearing house or controlling agent....

Art offers an almost unlimited access to one's unconscious. However, the only way to approach the powers of the unconscious is through our emotions and instincts. In this way art differs from craft--first is based on the powers of the unconscious, the second is based on the powers of the conscious mind.¹

In a later section, he explains:

...the highest power humanity has ever developed is the power of vision, divination, evocation, revelation, power unlimited, power procreative, power advancing directly from point to point without the tedious procedure of logical argumentation, the power of the unconscious organized.²

¹Ibid., pp. 101-2.

²Ibid., p. 160. In 1937, Graham repeated many of these ideas

Graham's need to order seemed to resist his desire for imaginative, free expression. While the above concepts were evolving, Graham was still producing an art indebted to cubist abstraction, and his appeals to the subjective were also accompanied by statements that, "Revelation through pure form (not style) in space" was the "Most important element in art."¹ He felt strongly that the "only legitimate abstract painting is the painting based on and departing from hard reality and not from imagination."² He was loath to abandon the real world for either pure fantasy or entirely nonrepresentational systems like neo-plasticism. As for surrealism, he found it a literary art movement. Dorothy Dehner recalls:

We went with Graham to the surrealist exhibition at Paul Eluard's house, where we saw the fur-lined teacup in its original setting. Although Paris was teeming with surrealism at that time, Graham maintained that it was a literary movement, not to be adapted to painted images. That he held this view is interesting in the light of his painting of the late forties and fifties, much of which had distinctly surrealist overtones, not to mention actual surrealist images. But polarities were a part of Graham.³

The format of Graham's treatise also reveals certain contradictions. Although often unclear to the point of being irrational, it takes on, as an appeal to logic, a Hegelian dialectical structure of question and answer. His preface states that the book is "an attempt to define questions of art exhaustively; to term them

in an article, "Primitive Art and Picasso," Magazine of Art (April 1937), quoted in Marcia Allentucks' introduction to Graham, System and Dialectics of Art, p. 78.

¹Graham, System and Dialectics of Art, p. 158.

²Ibid., p. 106.

³Quoted in foreword to Graham, System and Dialectics of Art, pp. xix-xx.

specifically; to formulate a dialectic method in art--a method of plastic, logical argumentation; to unite questions of art into a coordinated system."¹ How different these claims sound from the person who also states, "The origin of art lies in human longing for enigma" and whose preface begins with, "Art opens access to the unconscious mind, science opens access to the conscious mind."² The Socratic question and answer mode employed also appears preverely logical for someone who claims that the purpose of art "is to re-establish a lost contact with the unconscious...with the primordial racial past."³

His attempts to merge the intuitively felt and dialectically reasoned were revealed not only in Graham's theory but in his art and in that of the artists he influenced during the thirties. Graham combined synthetic cubist and constructivist forms with biomorphic ones, juggling contradictory styles as he did opposing ideas. (See ill. 23.) Gorky's widow remarked of Graham's book, "I can find the source of almost all of Gorky's erratic dictums in Graham."⁴ The confusion of both the art and the theory mirrors the multiple directions of the period itself. In the 1940s Graham turned away from abstraction, and his commitment to the subjective increased. He rejected Marxism and psychoanalysis to explore alchemy, magic, and a symbolic figurative art.⁵ Already headed along this path during the 1930s, in theory more

¹Ibid., p. 88 ²Ibid., pp. 101, 87. ³Ibid., p. 95.

⁴Herrera, "John Graham: Modernist Turns Magus," p. 105.

⁵For an excellent analysis of Graham's later approach, see Herrera, "Le Feu Ardent," and Eila Kokkinen, "John Graham During the 1940s," Arts Magazine (November 1976), pp. 99-103.

than in actual work, Graham appears to us now as both a reflection and a source of advanced aesthetic taste in the decade before World War II.

Social Surrealism

For a number of American artists in the 1930s who were socially concerned, polemical or documentary art was an art without poetry or individuality. These artists developed a hybrid approach which joined the social and subjective by employing symbolism and elements of surrealism. The artists who combined social and introspective concerns frequently shared certain themes. Fear, either from a political source or inspired by nature and the unknown; alienation, often mixed with sensations of fear; and conflict, whether between individuals, groups, ideas, or political bodies. These issues are found continually in works by Blume, Quirt, and Guglielmi and often, though erratically, in works by other artists, such as Grace Clements, Anton Refregier, Malcolm Roberts, and James Guy.¹ Unlike other subjective painters, such as Albright and Dickinson, most of these artists were keenly aware of surrealism and its potential for their own art. Grace Clements, writing in Art Front, explained that in addition to the use of psychological implications, a new social art could also take from surrealism the practice of montage. These elements could be appropriated to help convey the causes and effects of capitalism and injustice. She elaborated: "We too must deal with subjective associative ideas, but ideas of extreme complexity which must be controlled by the head

¹One of the most dramatic evocations of this mode, however, was not in painting but in David Smith's drawings and sculpture for his Medals of Dishonor (1938-39).

no matter how much fire the heart may contain."¹ By this, she meant that artists must employ conscious rather than subconscious symbols, and that their motivations should stem from the rational rather than irrational.

Although many American Marxists were hostile to surrealism, some critics felt that surrealist and subjective art could be socially relevant. Reviewing a 1933 John Reed Club exhibition in The Nation, critic Anita Brenner explained how personal symbolism and subjective perceptions might be employed for social purposes:

This connection between *surréalisme* and social revolution is generally forgotten or dismissed as irrelevant, for though the *surréaliste* mode significantly shifts weight from intellect to emotion and sensitivity, its expression is more often than not highly personal. Utilizing, however, the interests of subject as presented in dreams, fantasy, visions, and other "enlargements" of emotion and sensory perception, it throws wide the doors to personal and collective symbolism, to tragedy and passion in more than personal terms, to heroic connection between what is emotionally significant, superrealistic.²

Charmion von Wiegand also felt that certain technical aspects of surrealism could be grafted to a leftist art, although she found surrealism individualistic, unconcerned with physical and economic reality, and thus not humanistic in a social sense.³ Anita Brenner wrote in 1937 about Salvador Dali's recent attempt to embrace Marxism and favorably reported on the possibility of surrealism discovering "mental-emotional processes" that may be "useful for the purpose of social progress." She found the rediscovery of symbolism

¹Grace Clements, "New Content--New Form," p. 9.

²Anita Brenner, "Revolution in Art," The Nation (8 March 1933); reprinted in Shapiro, Social Realism, p. 77.

³von Wiegand, "The Surrealists," p. 14.

as a major contribution but wanted emotion, symbolism, and psychology used in a systematic investigation, as if one must somehow make objective these quintessentially subjective concepts.¹

Marxist objections to subjective art revolved around the disapproval of any art whose meaning was not immediately accessible and did not deal with social reality. In 1932, Diego Rivera explained that surrealist technique was that of the bourgeois and that although many surrealists had embraced communism, they were not ideologically true communists.² Clarence Weinstock, editor of Art Front, quoted from The Theory and Technique of Playwriting by John Howard Lawson on the nature of socialist writing. He applied Lawson's words to artists.

Socialist realism is opposed to either a subjective or a naturalistic method: the artist cannot be content with an impression or with superficial appearances, with fragments and odds and ends of reality. He must find the inner meaning of events; but there is nothing spiritual about this inner meaning; it is not subjective and is not a reflection of the moods and passions of the soul; the inner meaning of events is revealed by discovering the real connections of cause and effect which underlie the events....³

Not only in Art Front, but on the soapboxes of Union Square and elsewhere it was repeatedly stated that the lesson of Marxism was that art and thought must be based in reality.

¹Anita Brenner, "Surrealism and Its Political Significance," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 24 January 1937, p. 8C. Also quoted in Wechsler, Surrealism and American Art, p. 43.

²Diego Rivera, "The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art," Modern Quarterly 6 (Autumn 1932); reprinted in Shapiro, Social Realism, p. 56. Almost paradoxically, however, Rivera did feel (p. 64), "Of the recent movements in art, the most significant to the revolutionary movement is that of Super-Realism."

³Weinstock, "Man in the Balloon," p. 9.

Grace Clements wanted surrealism to be used for political purposes, even though she was associated with the speculative post-surrealists. The title of a 1935 canvas, Dialectic (unlocated), points immediately to her Marxist leanings. Her symbolism was meant to be socially relevant and easily comprehensible. Joseph Solman, reviewing the 1936 postsurrealist exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, gave only Clements his complete approval, because she was "the only one who gives a precise pictorial meaning to her social criticism."¹ James Guy, a friend of Walter Quirt, painted in what might be called a genuine surrealist style in the late 1930s. His mysterious, evocative, almost frightening canvases show distorted humans, suggestions of pain and desire, alienation, fear, and death. (See ill. 25.) Individuals roam through desolate, seemingly war-torn landscapes as if searching for identity or meaning. Guy's work from the mid-thirties was far more literal. Following Quirt's example, he employed a detailed handling which was reminiscent of Flemish painting and that of Salvador Dalí. These earlier canvases showed specific activities of a political nature (such as policemen beating strikers or KKK members lynching a Negro) but were imbued with an element of unreality due to odd spatial juxtapositions.

Anton Refregier was a friend of both Quirt and Philip Evergood. Identified primarily as a social realist, Refregier also explored fantasy in the late 1930s. A series of murals he executed at the Cafe Society in New York City reflected the abstract forms of Miró. Refregier's War (c. 1939, collection of the artist) showed several tall humanoid creatures, reminiscent perhaps of Masson's birds,

¹Joseph Solman, "The Postsurrealists of California," Art Front 2 (June 1936):12.

stalking through a desert landscape and carrying spears and paraphernalia of war. It is a psychologically disturbing work which depicts an imaginary world but comments on the real world. Boris Gorelick also briefly experimented with nonliteral approaches to social realism. In his lithographs, Negroes and Klansmen are seen disappearing into trees, buildings, and sky. Heads are simplified in a cartoon-like manner, figures and silhouettes are jumbled one upon another, and bodies are extremely distorted to dramatically express pain. Phil Bard used even more extreme biomorphic abstraction of human figures in a lithograph depicting a line of men leaving a pawn show.

Morris Graves' most political works, The Nightfall Series (1938, Museum of Modern Art), are not paintings but pencil and ink drawings utilizing the image of chairs in various styles to comment on the imminence of political chaos in Europe. (See ill. 24.) A Queen Anne chair represents England; a Louis XV chair, France; a Roman senator's chair, Italy; and a combined Biedermeier-Bauhaus chair, Germany. Metaphors for human forms, the chairs are variously broken, adorned with symbols, and entwined in a web of lines as if to suggest the imprisonment of individuals within their narrow nationalistic outlook. In these works, metaphorical symbols, literal signs, and political comment merge. They are meditative rather than polemical, visionary and poetic rather than factual.

A common image of the 1930s was the deserted landscape. Malcolm Roberts, a little-known artist from the Pacific Northwest, specialized in these wasteland visions. This image proliferated in regionalist depictions of arid farmland by figures like Texas' Alexandre Hogue or Missouri's Joe Jones, and in social realist images

of empty, blighted urban areas by artists such as O. Louis Guglielmi or Ben Shahn. Roberts' canvases show empty, outdoor views with a conglomeration of various discarded objects which take on symbolic meaning: dead tree trunk, a broken bathtub, a torso fragment. (See ill. 26.) Devoid of humanity, these are symbols of neglect, destitution, and loneliness and perhaps also of capitalist destruction. As mentioned earlier, George Ault also depicted deserted landscapes in the late 1930s, most often eerily moonlit scenes. Less concerned with psychological symbols than Roberts, Ault seemed more intent on evoking a certain mysterious and romantic mood; a mood, however, with definite overtones of loneliness and desolation. These works are subjective in their metaphorical evocations, their nonliteral imagery, and in the hallucinatory quality of a dream which they project. The paintings hint obliquely at social commentary, specifically on the sense of loss which characterized the 1930s. The European neo-romantics Leonid and Eugene Berman, and Christian Bérard, gave a more accomplished expression to these themes. Ravaged, burning vistas, empty beaches and vacant landscapes characterize their paintings of the 1930s and 1940s, after their immigration to the U.S. Rufino Tamayo, who was in this country during the 1930s and who worked on the New York City FAP, also produced moody, psychologically uneasy images of vacant landscapes but with more metaphysical rather than social overtones.

An equally popular theme throughout the 1930s was that of conflict, perhaps because, like landscape, conflict lent itself to both specific and metaphysical interpretations. A predominant theme of 1930s social realism, conflict--whether strikers,

revolutionaries, or non-specific images of combat and civil strife-- was as well a principal element of surrealism, especially for Masson and Ernst (as was the image of the ravaged landscape). Whether externalized or internalized, the idea of struggle was a sign of the times and relates both to those interested in political-economic and symbolic-psychological expression. An iconography of conflict developed depicting Marxist notions of class struggle, the fight against fascism, and the overthrow of capitalism. In subjective and surrealist art, psychological conflict was expressed--the dark forces of the human psyche, sexual needs, Jungian notions of opposing dualities such as good and evil or light and darkness. A confrontation with and expression of death becomes a logical extension of such concerns. These are a major aspect of the work of Guglielmi, Blume, and Quirt. It is their distinction to have produced images which suggest both the internal (mental) and external (environmental) aspects of these pervasive themes.

In the catalogue for The Museum of Modern Art's 1943 exhibition, Romantic Painting in America, James Thrall Soby described the romantic tendency as "a state of mind rather than as a cohesive tendency in art."¹ This concept applies equally to the subjective tendency, because it also exists as a mode of thought rather than as a style. However, unlike earlier romantic art in America, which took as its inspiration the mystery and divinity of nature, the subjective art of the 1930s is egocentric and introspective, though

¹Soby and Miller, Romantic Painting in America, p. 7.

not in the extreme clinical or pathological manner that characterizes some surrealism.¹

In contrast to the subjective tendencies, an insistence on the general as opposed to the particular, to the group as opposed to the individual, characterized the 1930s. In 1936, Holger Cahill wrote that the Federal Art Project "has proceeded on the principle that it is not the solitary genius, but a sound general movement which maintains art as a vital, functioning part of any cultural scheme."² Both capitalists and Marxists took this position. To Marxists, "Self-expression and anarchistic individuality were the result of the isolation and alienation of the artist in capitalist society."³ Subjective art during the 1930s went against these attitudes. Withdrawing into one's self, asserting that art is the individual's expression of imagination or the individual's personal accounting with psychological and metaphysical concepts, characterizes the subjective mode and the artists whose work is discussed in the following pages.

¹For an extensive treatment of romantic art of a visionary nature--the subjective approach of an earlier period--see Abraham A. Davidson, The Eccentrics and Other American Visionary Painters (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978). The last chapter brings the discussion into the twentieth century.

²Holger Cahill, New Horizons in American Art (1936; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press for Museum of Modern Art, 1969), p. 18.

³Shapiro, Social Realism, p. 15.

CHAPTER II

SUBJECTIVE REALISM--IVAN ALBRIGHT AND EDWIN DICKINSON

Subjective Realism

Ivan LeLorraine Albright and Edwin Walter Dickinson may be regarded as the speculative philosophers among the subjective painters under examination. Their art is a meditation on existence, time, mortality, and the impossibility of meaning. Their paintings depend on observation and representational depiction but use this basis for extremely personal comment and not as a means of recording perceived reality. The significance of Dickinson's and Albright's art lies not only in their chosen images but also in the very process of their painting. Their modes of construction, placement of figures in relation to ground, and the very manner of applying paint to a surface reflect attitudes which embody the subjective approach to art. It is significant that Albright and Dickinson are essentially studio painters, at least in their major works.¹ For both, however, reality is only a starting point. Representation of the seen is not their goal, nor is their concern primarily formal--that is, the establishment of pictorial relationships between objects. Instead,

¹Both also executed landscapes which can reflect other attitudes. While Dickinson painted landscapes throughout his career, Albright, with perhaps two exceptions, explored the subject only after the 1930s. Albright's landscapes are a respite from the main body of his work. Fine though they are, these works do not exert the visceral force or intellectual possibilities of the studio paintings. Rather, they exist primarily as depiction.

they wish to tap fugitive sensations and to stimulate psychological associations. In certain ways, their work may be seen as part of the romantic tradition discussed in the introductory chapter. Theirs is a world we might approach with familiarity but upon close examination find to be strangely foreign, a world of the artist's own creation.

Ivan Albright

Ivan Albright was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1897. As a twin son of Adam Emory Albright, a painter of doe-eyed children, Ivan and his brother often served as picturesque models during their childhood. The elder Albright had studied with Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; the maternal grandfather was a doctor with an interest in surgery. Frederick A. Sweet has found these two factors to be of more premonitory significance for Albright's artistic future than the actual paintings of his father.¹ He has also asserted--wrongly--that none of Albright's "art school teachers made any great impact."² Daniel Catton Rich felt that "Ivan learned more from advanced students than from men like Hawthorne and Seyffert. An exception was Henry McCarter."³

In fact, Charles Hawthorne's example must have been very important for Albright--an assertion that becomes more provocative since

¹Frederick A. Sweet, Ivan Albright (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago in collaboration with the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1964), p. 14.

²Ibid., p. 15.

³Daniel Catton Rich, "Ivan LeLorraine Albright: Our Own Jeremiah," Magazine of Art, February 1943, p. 49.

Hawthorne also looms as the major artistic influence on Edwin Dickinson's training. Hawthorne, Dickinson, and Albright produced portraits of individuals with a concentrated intensity of expression. Often isolating the figure against a dark background, these images assume mysterious properties. The term "haunted realist," used to refer to Albright, might equally be applied to Hawthorne and Dickinson. A native Gothic quality informs the three artists' work, whether it originated in New England, as in the case of Hawthorne, or in the midwest, as for Albright. The individualism which characterizes Dickinson and Albright can also be seen in the personalities they paint--often aloof, homely figures. And in Hawthorne's canvases, the same independence of spirit--a near cliché of New England rugged individualism--predominates.

For Albright, art exists not as a way of capturing visual sensations, not as a mode of comment on the environment or human affairs, but as a speculative endeavor, often pursuing both phenomenological and epistemological considerations. When in the process of painting, Albright refers to his canvases by their subject--The Fisherman, Ida, The Door--and not by their correct titles. The lengthy titles arise only after the works are completed; they reflect the sum total of the experience of painting and suggest what the artist discovered over a long period of work and contemplation. "I decide on a final name when a painting is finished," explains the artist.¹

The titles should not be considered appendages any more than those of Arshile Gorky. A title exists often as an integral aspect

¹Katherine Kuh, The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 28.

of an artwork although it is expressed in a different form--language--from the physical matter of the artwork. Generic terms like "portrait" or "landscape" add nothing to one's understanding of a painting, but titles may add extra meaning in the same way as an iconographical element, such as a snuffed candle, may add to a traditional Baroque canvas. "My titles?" Albright asks, "Oh, I get tired of things like 'Young Girl' and 'Winding Path.' Mine are intended to illuminate the pictures. A painting should be a piece of philosophy--or why do it?"¹ Albright's self-avowed goals are intellectual rather than purely formal: "What I'm really trying to do is make a coherent statement about life that will force people to meditate a bit. I'm not trying to make a pleasant aesthetic experience."²

In the late 1920s Albright completed his first mature works, a series of portraits which emphasize the spiritual and philosophical nature of artistic experience. Each depicts an extraordinarily serious-looking individual engaged in pensive contemplation: I Drew a Picture in the Sand and the Water Washed it Away (The Theosophist) (1927), I Slept with Starlight in My Face (The Rosicrucian) (1926, Mr. and Mrs. William Benton, New York), and I Walk to and fro through Civilization and I Talk as I Walk (Follow Me, the Monk) (1926-27).³ There is, as is often with Albright, an element of playful satire.

¹Quoted in Grace Glueck, "An Artist in the Flesh," New York Times, 7 February 1965, sec. 2, p. 20.

²Kuh, Artist's Voice, pp. 24-25.

³Unless otherwise indicated, all works by Albright referred to in this paper are in the collection of The Art Institute of Chicago. After their first citation, Albright's paintings will usually be referred to in shortened form according to their primary subject.

Nonetheless, the artist himself contemplates the issues suggested in the titles. Temporality and transience are represented by the action of the waves erasing the symbols in the sand in *The Theosophist*. The monk's never-ending trek as he searches for meaning relates to the artist's quest as well. Each portrait embodies a philosophical issue. These and other topics were to be explored by Albright for the next fifty years.

Albright's work should be seen as a continuum without sharp breaks rather than a series of stylistic periods. His style changes little between the early thirties and the early seventies. The few prints he produced were executed long after the paintings on which they were based. Self-Portrait at 55 Division Street was done in 1947. It is based on the 1935 Self-Portrait, with a few minor changes. Show Case Doll (1931-32) emerged as a print in 1954; Fleeting Time, Thou Hast Left Me Old (1929-30) in 1946; Follow Me, based on *The Monk* (1930), was printed in 1949. These reflect a willful evasion of contemporary notions of stylistic and artistic development. By using the paintings as a basis for prints many years later Albright seems to deny the influence of newly developing styles around him.

The importance of being an individual unallied to any group or ideology, whether artistic or political, has been fundamental to Albright. Perhaps because of this intention, his work cannot be easily labeled. His refusal to be attached to any historical movement extends to even the most basic categorization--he will not even consider himself a realist.

I know I've been called one, but I do not consider myself a realist. I don't consider myself anything. To join some general movement in art, whether of this period or that, is

to join in a buffalo stampede. I say, let the artist be the hunter rather than the buffalo.¹

Although every artist wants to be known as an individual and not as an example of a style, most will at least admit their affinity with others. Albright brooks nothing of the sort, insisting he has nothing in common with anyone. There is an element of contrariness in this insistence, similar to that shown by Gorky. Yet, if the stance is partly the result of a cranky personality or overblown ego, the pose is still significant.

The paintings themselves seem as self-contained and unreceptive to popular expectations as Albright's own insistence on selfhood. They are designed not to sell, not to garner enthusiasm from the public, goals which are precisely the opposite from those of most artists throughout the Depression. "I never think of it in terms of exhibitions or sales. In the purest sense," says Albright, "one must paint for oneself alone."² Albright's canvases always did arouse interest and may even be said to have been well-received considering the grossness of such works as And God Created Man in His Own Image (Room 203) (1930-33, ill. 27.)³ Still, these works were designed for neither private nor public delectation. As early as 1930, before the most horrific works were executed, the Chicago Daily News explained, "Not made to sell but rather for the sheer fun of painting them, his pictures may belong in museums rather than in homes."⁴

¹Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 25. ²Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 28.

³Albright's awards and the attention of the press are discussed later.

⁴"Albright, an 'Old Master,' from Illinois," The Art Digest, 1 October 1930, p. 1.

The few prints that Albright produced also attest to his contempt of the idea of selling art. The resurgence of printmaking in the 1930s was spawned largely by the WPA/FAP, whose Graphic Arts Division produced some 300,000 prints. Indeed, prints can be regarded as the quintessential art form of the thirties--cheap, easily produced, widely accessible--an art for the people. Albright's editions, however, were quite small. In the lower margin of Heavy the Oar appears "limited edition 10 prints," amusingly emphasizing its exclusiveness. Albright's prints may be multiples, but they are not meant for wide distribution. It was widely known that Albright demanded ridiculously high prices. That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do (1931-41, ill. 28) was often reported to be available for purchase in the late 1930s at the price of \$100,000. Albright could afford this partly symbolic gesture because he received financial help from his father, who had made wise investments in real estate. Later, Albright married Josephine Medill Patterson, the daughter of the wealthy New York Daily News publisher.¹

Albright has viewed painting as the quintessential individual experience. He explained, "I studied architecture but gave it up

¹Earle Ludgin, in an interview of 10 October 1977 in Chicago, Illinois, said that Albright did not have money until he married, and that is why he worked on the WPA for a short while. Jan Van Der Marck writes that the elder Albright's real estate ventures secured "a life-long steady income for his three children," in his article "Ivan Albright: More than Meets the Eye," Art in America, November-December 1977, p. 93. It is likely that the real estate did not pay off too well until the very late 1930s because of the economic crisis. Albright's residence and studio in the thirties was a spacious suburban property in Warrenville, Illinois, which he shared with his father and brother. During the belt-tightening years of the Depression, the artist traveled far less than he had in earlier years.

because I figured I might also have to become a salesman. As a painter you don't need a client; you can be truer to yourself."¹ Albright's attitude toward commissioned work reflects his fear of having to serve needs extraneous to his own. He has painted only one portrait commission, that of collector Mary Block (1955-57). Although Albright found her to be "a marvelous sitter," the value of the work was mitigated by the fact that a commission is by nature a "job" and not the self-analysis and philosophy which Albright sought. His sitters were always chosen for their closeness to his own psychological and spiritual outlook; each of them is in part a surrogate for the artist. With a commission, however, the sitter is imposed on the artist. Of the Block portrait, Albright explained, "I put the torn curtain behind her as a foil for the rest of the setting and also because I wanted to make the painting a real Albright."² In this act, he lay claim to an image which was not completely of his own choosing.

Albright developed an almost antipathetic stance to the observer, stating, "I don't care a bit what they say about it--unless they say it's nice. Then I'll try to see where it went wrong."³ He worried about achieving a complacent imagery that did not shock or goad one into thought, and public acceptance was a mark of such complacency. Sometimes, Albright mentioned controlling the viewer, a seemingly strange desire on the part of someone who affirms his unconcern for others.⁴ The explanation lies in Albright's attitude that the

¹Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 23. ²Ibid., p. 36.

³Glueck, "Art Notes," p. 20. ⁴Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 25.

spectator is a foreign element that must be subservient to the painting. The canvas becomes an independent entity with a will of its own and must exert influence on those who see it. This egocentric notion asserts that the artwork does not reflect the needs of the spectator nor does it need them for completion.

In Woodstock, New York, Albright's home displays none of his own work. "I've never cared to hang art on a wall," he explains.¹ This underlines his claim that art is the individual's attempt to create meaning. Art is not about picturemaking or decoration. It is a private act for the artist himself; it is his self-examination. Undespairingly, the artist admits that his work is of no earth-shattering importance because it does not really relate to the wider world. This truth contradicts the credo of so many other artists of the period, from Benton to Gropper to Shahn. Albright explained, summing up over thirty years' experience:

In one's dying moment one may wonder--is the shape of a chair important? How much good can a painting bring to the world? Art is a book exposing only the artist himself: who he is, what he is, what he thinks. Art is psychoanalysis, and he is his own psychiatrist, his life experience the theme he works with.²

The artist has often reiterated this point: "In essence, a painting is an astigmatized portrayal of you; it is your Rorschach with id and plaster cast."³ Following this approach, each sitter or subject becomes a surrogate self-portrait.

¹Ibid., p. 28. ²Ibid.

³Quoted in John I. H. Baur, "Ivan LeLorraine Albright," in New Art in America: Fifty Painters of the Twentieth Century, ed. by John I. H. Baur (New York: New York Graphic Society in collaboration with Frederick A. Praeger, 1957), p. 202.

Albright's paintings enter into a dialogue with one another rather than with the world at large. They are a hermetic production that counters the popular notion of social relevance which was common in the 1930s, for Albright's paintings exist in an ironic relationship to one another rather than to current events. Poor Room--There is No Time, No End, No Today, No Yesterday, No Tomorrow, Only the Forever and Forever and Forever Without End (1941-43, 1948-55, 1957-62, ill. 29) is an image of a window. The sequel to *The Door*, it is exactly half the size of the earlier work. Both are images of structures conventionally used for entrance or egress or as passages from interior to exterior. However, their function is blocked by psychological as well as physical barriers. One can not pass through the door, for not only is it closed, but psychological fears make one sense that what is beyond the threshold is undesirable. The door leads to the unknown, or to death itself. The Window also disallows its normal function, for it is densely packed with a conglomeration of objects which prevent looking through it. In addition, the typical viewpoint is reversed, for we are on the outside trying to look in through the window instead of being on the inside peering out.

This Ichnolite of Mine (1940, Earle Ludgin, Chicago, Illinois), a miniature painting of a door, was executed after *The Door* and before *The Window*. The small painting was once sent to an exhibition along with *The Door* because the artist wanted to display together both the largest and the smallest of his paintings.¹ In the

¹Ludgin, interview.

miniature, the door is blocked by a table upon which rest a number of objects: a pistol, an instrument of death; an apparently broken clock on which the passage of time cannot be measured; several small figurines, two of them obviously having fallen before the pistol. The figurines introduce an oblique human element into the still life and perhaps ironically comment on the French term, "nature mort." This small painting reiterates many of the themes of the larger door.

In reworking his paintings into lithographs, Albright reiterates his belief that art exists as a continuum and not as a progression of one style after another. This is opposed to both Marxist and modernist notions of art. Both assume progress. Albright's concept of the dialectic is manifest in thought, not action. The series of portraits from 1928-30 of various types of people and their way of seeking meaning in life depicts individuals engaged in contemplation, not activity. Even Maker of Dreams (Man with a Mallet, the Maker of Images) (1928) is lost in thought, although he holds a sculptor's mallet and is called a "maker."

Albright's participation on the WPA/FAP seems odd due to his insistence on the "aloneness" of art. "With spunky defensiveness he ridiculed the W.P.A. bias for pictures celebrating farm and labor, while painting exactly such a scene, The Farmer's Kitchen (ill. 30), for the U.S. Department of Labor...."¹ This contrary action points to Albright's ambivalence over his relationship to regionalism. The image of the farmer's wife seated in a kitchen chair slicing radishes

¹Van Der Marck, "Ivan Albright," p. 96.

presents, like most of Albright's portraiture, an unpleasant view of the sitter. Yet, if the painting shows a critical view of rural America--boring drudgery--it also takes a stand with American art. It ridicules the bias of the American Scene painters but also admits a grudging approval.

The Farmer's Kitchen reminds one that the subject matter Albright explores is not that dissimilar from his compatriot painters of the American scene. While Albright's interiors, figures, and self-portraits remove the images from their larger surroundings and their social relationships, they remain nevertheless somehow related to the midwestern experience. Not impressed with European art, Albright shared with Benton, Curry, and others a desire to make a new personal art reflecting his own experience. If he rejected the social context of his subjects and did not exactly pay homage to these subjects as did the American Scene painters, Albright still chose to render those images. Unlike the postsurrealists or the abstract artists, his canvases are based on things seen. Rebelling against the literal-mindedness of his contemporaries, Albright takes subjects they themselves might have chosen and views them with a self-critical and speculative eye. Although this chapter focuses on Albright's difference from the regionalists, a painting like The Farmer's Kitchen shows that despite the artist's insistence on his distance from American art of the period, his work does not exist in the self-created vacuum he sought.

A self-portrait by Albright, however, emphasizes his refusal to see himself in any of the typical artistic self-images of the 1930s. His most important self-portrait, executed in 1935, presents the artist

at a table replete with a mirrored cigarette box, a crystal vase, wine glass and decanter. (See ill. 31.) The artist is apparently in formal dress and presents himself as a dilettante or decadent connoisseur. Engaged neither in painting nor in thought, the artist is shown divorced from art in a sybaritic, high-society guise. Not shown as the "sensitive creator," or as the "socially committed liberal," or as a "man of the land," Albright rejects the normal roles of the 1930s painter. It is an ironic and intentional contrast to the common type of self-portrait in which the artist is depicted in the act of painting with the accoutrements of his craft.

Surprisingly, Albright was involved in a variety of activities during the 1930s: president of the Chicago Society of Artists in 1933-34, vice-president in 1935-36; chairman of the Artists' Ball in 1934, 1935, and 1936; and a member of the Artists Congress in which he heartily supported the demand for artist's royalties. In the 1940s Albright's employment in Hollywood painting a portrait of Dorian Gray for the film of the same name and his marriage to socialite Josephine Medill Patterson brought the artist almost a celebrity status. But these types of involvement were not related to any specific approach to artmaking or to a precise political orientation.

Albright's paintings question the fundamental nature of reality and pose the answer that reality cannot be truthfully perceived in an objective way. Comprehending this, we must then ironically regard Albright as a realistic painter who questions reality. He employs numerous mechanisms to announce that capturing reality is futile--that painting is the reworking of something observed into

a personal vision which is different from its source. To achieve this, Albright manipulates conventional representational means to depict something which is still easily recognizable but seems hallucinatory. Colors are intensified and their natural harmonious relationships are diminished to bring out their harsh contrasts. Sometimes the hues seem contrived. By viewing separate objects from different perspectives, the objects are made to appear unrelated spatially despite their close proximity to one another. In addition, there is often a sense of overcrowding in the images--the details of Albright's minute technique seem to battle with one another to claim their allotted space. Sometimes the changes of perspective make objects seem about to fall from what should be a stable position. Forms are always recognizable, but their edges and surfaces are soft or frayed as if aging, melting, or withering before our very eyes.

For Albright, perspective is in fact illusion. The implications of this stance extend not only to the physical objects but to a larger metaphysical realm. "In 1931," the artist explains, "I painted a canvas called Wherefore Now Ariseth the Illusion of a Third Dimension (ill. 32). Already there I was trying to give a clue to what I was after."¹ The painting is a still life, viewed more or less from above, in which the separate objects fit together uncomfortably. Jan Van Der Marck explains that Albright achieves his effects by, "endlessly manipulating the position of objects in relation to one another as well as to the viewer; by varying the light that falls on and bounces off each of the objects; by introducing arbitrary shadows and arbitrary positions to further confound

¹Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 28.

the viewer and drive home the antirealistic point that what we are looking at is not really what we are looking at."¹ Albright uses traditional painting techniques for rendering items three-dimensionally but shows that there are simply tricks and not truth. The question posed by the artist is basic: "How do we record objects?" His response suggests that we cannot record them accurately because what we see is illusion.

Albright affirms that depicting images is in fact the sum of a series of private choices, that there is no such thing as a generally accepted reality. He claims:

No, I'm not a realist. All I'm trying to do is achieve my end and that is certainly not realism. The reason I use an extremely minute technique is to tie down, to fuse, to crystallize various discordant elements so that my painting has a composite feeling. I take well-known objects and handle them so as to make you think this is the old familiar way you have always seen them--but in reality I am forcing you to walk into the picture and to see these objects only in my way.²

Although recognizable, the end results remind us of the personal, even quirky decisions made by the artist during the process of rendering. Painting the world on one's own terms leads to a corollary--that it is futile to try to accurately perceive and capture reality. Accepting this, we can then view Albright's images as symbols, not in the traditional sense of standing for certain ideas--such as the Trinity or Creation--but as a group statement that all things in the world are symbolic, not real, and cannot be truly perceived. Thus, each image takes on a secondary meaning beyond its literal sense as a figure or still life.

¹Van Der Marck, "Ivan Albright," p. 97.

²Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 25.

An undated poem by the artist posits the idea of artistic freedom in depicting objects as well as the concept that people see subjectively, not objectively.

And the sky is not blue to him
 As it runs over the meadows and trees
 And the river is not held within its banks
 As the colors swim over the land
 And the tree is not a tree to him
 But a song of beauty in the sky
 And colors are not just colors to him
 But each a dream in a fantasy
 That makes unreal this world of yours to him
 To this painter man.¹

Albright's poetry, in contrast to the years long genesis of his paintings, were spontaneous outpourings.² In this respect, they might seem to bear some relation to the European surrealists' interest in capturing a stream of consciousness in writing. However, Albright's poetry is quite traditional in its reliance on standard poetic metaphor. In the lines quoted above, the emphasis on the unreality of the world does parallel the surrealist interest in fantasy, but it is banal in comparison.

In 1943, Harriet and Sidney Janis wrote in the surrealist mouthpiece View:

For those who wish to penetrate further into the substance of his paintings, the fascination comes at a point where realism is left behind, where the experience communicated transcends verisimilitude. Here it forms a parallel to Surrealism, and the same contemporary spirit is conveyed through other parallels--compulsive fantasy, paranoiac imagery, automatic representation of submerged psychological processes, the "natural history" of the emotional life, the condition vividly described as "the iridescence of putrescence."

¹ Quoted from Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 36.

² Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 63.

The authors found these characteristics to be "part of an unwitting personal discovery of surrealist points of orientation, arising from attitudes which might best be brought together under the term Victorian Sachlichkeit."¹ They are wrong, for Albright is little concerned with activating his unconscious at the service of his paintings. His canvases may stimulate fears in the viewer's sub-consciousness, but his "paranoiac imagery" is the result of careful, considered intentions. Three years later, the Janises offered a more cautious explanation of Albright's relationship to surrealism: "It has taken virtually a surrealist conditioning on the part of the observer to bring Ivan's esthetic...into focus for understanding."² This more sensitive statement resists the temptation to make of Albright a surrealist but implies that a familiarity with the paintings of veristic surrealists helps to make Albright's work more accessible.

Albright's themes of death and their resolution into paintings may merit the term "paranoiac imagery," but the concepts of automatism and the unconscious are not relevant to Albright's methodology. His is a highly conscious way of painting and thinking. It depends on retinal stimulus and subsequent deliberate alterations of visual facts. If Albright paints two adjacent objects from different viewpoints, the resulting unreality is highly conscious and controlled, dependent upon a willful manipulation of conventional artistic procedures. The

¹Harriet and Sidney Janis, "Albright: Compulsive Painter," View, no. 1 (1943), p. 25.

²Harriet and Sidney Janis, "Ivan Albright," Art in America, January 1946, p. 48.

psychological associations are not submerged but are obvious. They have less to do with bizarre Freudian fetishes (although his concern with objects and materiality is indeed fetishistic in a general sense) than with broad philosophical premises: decay, growth, death, insubstantiality, transience, and reality. They have a psychological aspect as well, for they explore the psyche's ability to deal with traumatic and perplexing questions, but the subconscious is not their realm. In addition, the fundamental surrealist concepts of improbability and juxtaposition of unrelated things are not usually aspects of Albright's aesthetic.

Any depiction of fantasy, nightmare, or private vision--whether under the label of surrealism, romanticism, or simply metaphor--is successful only to the extent that it strikes some response in the spectator. An artistic expression that is predominantly subjective does not necessarily exclude emphatic response from the spectator. Albright's nightmare world hardly pretends to be unfathomable, a goal which was often self-consciously sought by the surrealists. In fact, we feel either drawn into Albright's world or threatened by it, or perhaps even implicated as part of it.

Albright's paintings address many issues: death and mortality represented by the passage of time; the conflicts implicit in all human endeavors; the impossibility of true knowledge and the triumph of the ambiguous; the duality which links opposing forces and ideas; and the desire to transcend the physical world. An examination of these themes aids our understanding of Albright's vision. Often threatening, but sometimes wryly humorous, Albright's world is based on our own, and comments on it, while existing apart.

The artist has spoken of a painting as "our legacy left by tomorrow's dead for tomorrow's living."¹ This is a restatement of the old adage that life is short, but art endures. In this view, art comes to embody the idea that man dies. This melancholy acknowledgment seems to pervade Albright's paintings. John Baur has explained, "His theme is the tragedy of mortality; his mood acceptance, but not defeat."² One of Albright's poems dramatically expressed his sense of an omnipresent death:

Dead men walk the floor
For I hear the sound as they rise from the grave
Above the wilted flowers
Above the mound
Dead men walk the floor

I hear the sound of dead men walking my floor....³

That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do, or The Door, is Albright's major work on the theme of mortality as well as his major painting of the 1930s. Begun in 1931 and completed in 1941, this image suggests man's entrance into the realm of death and may be regarded as a cipher for the entire decade of the Depression. Stories surrounding the painting, whether apocryphal or true, emphasize the death theme. Much was made in the thirties and forties of the fact that the painting depicted "a mouldering mortuary door."⁴ Rescued from a junkyard, the door was set by the artist on a tombstone.

¹Quoted in Baur, "Albright," p. 202. ²Ibid.

³Quoted in Michael Croydon, Ivan Albright (New York: Abbeville Press, 1979), p. 236.

⁴Time, 6 July 1942, p. 46; and Manny Farber, "Artists for Victory," Magazine of Art, December 1942, p. 276. The term "mortuary" describes not an actual door taken from a funeral parlor but an object pertaining to death.

He "tacked on its panel a wax funeral wreath which a Greek undertaker was unable to sell."¹ Furthering the death symbolism of the wreath is the shape of the bulging door itself, whose "tall warping format is made to symbolize a casket."² The Door is a visualization of the idea of a painting signifying the death of the creator. The scene is the entrance into a chamber of death, but not the representation of death itself. Our inability to see the fact of death further implies its mystery as the ultimate unknown.

The casket-like enclosure formed by the shape of the door was also employed in the unfinished Show Case Doll (1930, ill. 33). In this underdrawing on a large canvas, an elaborately dressed female doll lies upon a pillow in a glass case, her eyes confronting the viewer. A wry comment on death, the painting presents an inanimate object represented so as to suggest human inertness after death. Harriet and Sidney Janis appropriately found it a "death fantasy... the figure being laid out in a glass coffin."³ Although unfinished, Show Case Doll is an important work. In 1954, almost 25 years after its execution as a drawing, the image was made into a lithograph, having retained its meaningfulness to the artist over a period of several decades. In the 1960s, Albright included the drawing on

¹"Macabre Study of Old Door Wins Jestin Painter Prize," Washington Star, November 1941, in Artist file "Ivan Albright," Fine Arts/Portrait Gallery Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Daniel Catton Rich wrote, "An actual door was found and set up on a sill made from discarded tombstone," in "Albright," p. 50.

²Rich, "Albright," p. 50. ³Janis, "Ivan Albright," p. 48.

canvas as one of his most significant works.¹ He has referred to it as *The Dead Doll*, both mockingly and with an element of truth. The image suggests a gaudy Snow White asleep in her glass coffin and surrounded by tawdry tokens of her life--a compact, syringe, jewelry. Life everlasting is shown to be a cheap illusion in this apparently caustic look at human burial customs. Of all Albright's works, Show Case Doll comes closest to actually representing death. One can speculate whether this propinquity caused the artist to stop work on the canvas. It is likely that he found the image too direct an expression of death even though the subject is approached circuitously through the representation of inanimate objects.

Albright's ironic attitude serves to distance the artist from the portentous implications of his art. In this aloofness Albright goes further than simply putting serious thoughts into proper perspective. He attempts to assume a disguise of not caring in order to counter the seriousness of his work. This pose closely recalls that of the Dadas in Europe--an ironical affectation of detachment amidst serious malaise in the body politic. While deep emotional involvement typifies the passionate rhetoric of the 1930s, this approach is rarely present in Albright's paintings. His are gruesome, yet strangely impassive statements. The viewer may be repelled by the theme of death or by the manner of representation but senses that the artist himself is not. Developing throughout the 1930s, this attitude is less evident in Albright's earliest works, such as *Ida* and *Room 203*, where the artist's empathy for his subjects exists along with his

¹Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 28.

efforts to make them repulsive to the viewer. Ultimately, the effect may reflect the artist's own ambivalences. He seems to distance both himself and the viewer from the depicted images, yet leaves one aware that his subjects exist in a profound tragedy.

In much art of the 1930s, death is depicted quite literally, as in the culmination of Ben Shahn's series on Sacco and Vanzetti, in which we see the accused lying in their coffins. In Philip Evergood's American Tragedy, armed struggle and death are the visual focus of the painting. American Scene painting, with its emphasis on the constructive aspects of American life, did not usually depict death. When it did, death usually appeared as the work of nature or else in a historical guise, as in John Steuart Curry's murals at the Kansas State Capitol which depict John Brown fomenting rebellion above the bodies of dead soldiers. In The Door, on the other hand, the circumstances surrounding death are shown, and in Show Case Doll a still life becomes an analogue for death. This metaphorical, circumlocutory approach is characteristic of the subjective mode.

Meditation on the nature of temporality is an essential aspect of Albright's paintings. The presence of death in The Door suggests the transience of the present as well as the end point to which the passage of time leads. The title, That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do, evokes the regret of leaving something unaccomplished or of not having acted properly at some unspecified time in the past. Past, present, and the unknown future are joined in a continuum. For Albright, the present is not overly important; it is part of a continuing sequence. In contrast, for such painters as William Gropper,

Diego Rivera, or Reginald Marsh the present is of primary importance as the point in time in which one acts.

Requiring ten years or sometimes more to complete a painting, Albright's technical procedure underlines his unconcern for the present and the topical. It also affirms the subjectivity of seeing and suggests that one sees differently as time passes. Constructing elaborate models for his paintings, the artist nonetheless changes the positions of the objects as he paints. He will "constantly move them around, even varying their elevations and angles."¹ By introducing elements of movement (changing the positions of objects and thus their outlines and shadows) and time (recording the changes in surface effects such as the rotting of fruit or the addition of new objects) Albright alters the traditional notion of representational studio painting as capturing a slice of perceived reality.

Like those of Gorky, many of Albright's canvases convey a sense of conflict. There are no right and wrong sides to the struggles Albright depicts, as there are in Philip Evergood's American Tragedy, Russell Limbach's Kiss That Flag, or Peter Blume's Eternal City. The conflict is between objects and forces; it is metaphysical rather than social. In his interview with Katherine Kuh, Albright repeatedly stressed that "Everything in the canvas is fighting; I want to give it a feeling of frustration." His goal is "creating compositions

¹Ibid., p. 24. Amusingly, Albright has made literal the early critical interpretation of cubism, which saw the canvas as representing an object from different vantage points and over a period of time.

that are dynamic, moving, at war, in conflict."¹ Indeed, as Grace Glueck concluded, the canvases do "give the viewer a terrific feeling of upset."²

In Wherefore, Now Ariseth the Illusion of a Third Dimension (1931), Albright first made a conscious effort to employ devices which guarantee that the objects fight with one another. The shifting perspectives, objects abutting each other, things that seem to be unattached to any solid base but precariously tilt as if ready to float or fly, all contribute to the confusion. The viewer of Wherefore... feels thrown off balance. The tabletop is telescoped to appear only centimeters above the floor. A glass tilts inward; fruits seem variously resting on the table and falling from above. A compote seems to bend. "Some objects are falling, others rising, others are spiralling, others moving sideways--in a kind of controlled chaos."³ The artist focuses attention on the chaos and structures it even while accepting its dominance. Thus, within the structure of the painting, there is a destruction of order, a chaos which utters a statement about the nature of man's world--unpredictable, always at odds, perpetually offering startling and often frightening perspectives.

There are relatively few objects in *The Door*, yet there is such an overzealous attention to detail that each area of the painting seems simultaneously to demand attention. The detail on the door frame is continually in motion. Each scratch is highlighted equally.

¹Ibid., p. 25. ²Glueck, "Artist in the Flesh," p. 20.

³Ivan Albright, quoted in Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 25.

The main element, the wreath--which is at eye level when one faces the painting--attempts only half-successfully to be the focus. A highly worked surface spreads across the entire canvas. The result is an all-over quality, but one which lacks harmony and instead disperses attention to every part of the surface, making it difficult to examine the painting.

The similarity of Albright's surface handling throughout the painting would normally produce a homogeneous effect, but there are "conflicts and struggles in even the smallest objects and relationships" that destroy the sensation of wholeness.¹ Albright celebrates the dualism that forms can be united, yet be in opposition. In *The Door*, the amorphous shadow which extends up the right side of the door jamb contrasts dramatically with the jamb itself, rendered with distinct detail. Nevertheless, the two areas fuse and the section of detail becomes just as decomposed as the shadow. Patterned surfaces are perhaps the paradigm of ordered structures within which forms flow freely and seem to disintegrate the very structure they uphold. It is this device that is employed in the design of the door jamb. There is a fusion even while there is conflict. Albright claims that "forms flow into each other....But approaching all this from another point of view--take two lines on a piece of paper and immediately they're in battle."² The visual effect of *The Door* might be thought of as a figurative version of the experience felt before a canvas by Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning. There is an overall gestalt of seemingly flowing forms within which operates an unrestrained activity of wildly combatting forces.

¹Ibid., p. 28. ²Ibid., p. 23.

Much intellectual activity during the 1930s involved attempts to learn the meaning and causes of events. Contrary to this, the subjective approach stressed relativity and the inability to define completely. Albright and Dickinson both seized upon the ideas of ambiguity and confusion and virtually enshrined them in their paintings. Albright's statements are known for their contradictory nature. The artist will assert one point of view, then immediately state the opposite, not so much to deny the first assertion but to show that one explanation is never complete, and that meaning is relative and subject to either refutation or the application of special conditions. Jan Van Der Marck notes that each of Albright's statements contain "a paradox or cancellation clause."¹ In the artist's speech, as in his paintings, confusion and the impossibility of definitive knowledge reign.

The kind of knowledge that Albright challenges is of two varieties--knowledge that we receive from vision, and knowledge in the abstract as an understanding of meaning. The artist frustrates the ability of our eyes to decipher relationships and forms by utilizing changing perspectives in the rendering of objects and by changing the direction of the light source from one object to another. As has been pointed out, a single object may be depicted from two different angles or light sources.² It is ironic that Albright employs

¹Van Der Marck, "Ivan Albright," p. 96.

²John Canaday states a different view in "Meet Ivan Albright." New York Times, 7 February 1965, sec. 2, p. 19. The "true illumination emanates from his objects rather than falling on them." This is because the light, not shining consistently, seems only to be on the surface of the objects and not in the atmosphere.

traditional, naturalistic modes of rendering to achieve nonrealistic effects. We are confronted with an alternate mode of depiction which reminds us that conventional ideas of seeing and rendering are just that--conventions--and not absolutes. Albright's shock to our vision is made more surprising because his naturalistic depiction initially fools the spectator into recognizing the images; only later does one discover their unfamiliarity. Jean Dubuffet has written:

There are few paintings as alarming as those of Albright. Because what they represent to us belongs not to our accustomed world. Or rather, and this is what baffles so utterly, we see in them objects that we easily discern to be those which surround us but which are nevertheless unknowable....

We feel strongly in front of these paintings, that we live in a mirage, that our eyes, that all our vision deceives us, that all the notions on which we have until now based our standards of appreciation of all things--are erroneous.¹

For Albright, depiction of reality is subjective. A logical extension of this idea is that the experience of reality is also subjective. In a statement prepared for his 1964 retrospective, the artist insisted repeatedly on the inability of man to know by means of either his vision or his reasoning. Looking for explanations, he felt that one only discovered that "The answer is not in the eye, nor in reason."² It was in the 1930s, a decade which saw the professionalization of the social sciences and their rational application to the definition and understanding of human actions that Albright perfected a mode of painting which was to affirm for the next four decades, "Reason is based on falsehood....We have not one sure thing

¹"A Commentary by Jean Dubuffet," in Sweet, Ivan Albright, p. 7.

²"Reflections by the Artist," in Sweet, Ivan Albright, p. 16.

to hang reason on and, knowing nothing, realize not that we know nothing."¹ It is as if the artist, realizing the inability to know truth, has substituted his private vision, itself riddled with ambiguity.

Prevailing this concept of the limits of knowledge is a strong sense of man's ineffectuality. We "graspingly strive" in "our shadowy, slow-moving, half-feeling world," says Albright. "We are shadows of the real but not the real...."² This existential view of man displays an ineffectual being beset by doubt. Although voiced by the artist in the 1960s, this attitude applies as well to his work of the 1930s before the terminology to describe it even existed. The world view suggested in Wherefore, Now Ariseth the Illusion of a Third Dimension and The Door is one of riddles, unanswered questions, and hidden meanings. This viewpoint appeared as early as 1928 in the pathos-ridden portrayals of Ida Rogers (Into the World There Came a Soul Named Ida, ill. 34) and Mrs. Art Sanford (Flesh). These figures share a common mood with the woman in The Farmer's Kitchen and with the battered one-eyed portrait bust of Albright's father (Head of Adam Emory Albright). They are ineffectual and self-absorbed. Even when engaged in activity, such as primping or scraping radishes, these men and women remain resigned and pitiful. The viewer senses the emptiness in both their emotional and intellectual lives. If Albright's subjects seem to be victims unable to act, the painter himself offers another choice--for he acts by painting, thereby challenging the dismal inertia he depicts.

¹Ibid., p. 17 ²Ibid.

Albright's repertory of subjects in the 1930s is fairly limited: interiors, still lifes, single figures, and after 1939 an occasional landscape inspired by the artist's vacation travels. There is never any depiction of relationships between people.¹ This fact, uncharacteristic of thirties art in general, applies often to the subjective artists. Gorky seldom explored human relationships in his paintings, although his more personal drawings are full of images of a child with an adult or horse. Blume and Guglielmi juxtaposed unfeeling and uncommunicative individuals with one another to express the futility of human contact and interaction. In Albright's paintings, we find existence viewed as such a quintessentially individual experience that there is never even the possibility of depicting relationships. In works executed between 1928 and 1931, figures are presented singly in empty interiors (*Ida*, *Fleeting Time, Thou Has Left Me Old*, *And God Created Man in His Own Image (Room 203)* or else without any indication of space or place (*Woman*, *The Theosophist*, *The Rosicrucian*). Individuals are the icons of a sad and alienated philosophy. Suspended in rooms or in empty space, they seem timeless, motionless, displaced; they exist but do not act in the real world. In the former paintings, interiors are used not simply to comment on the person's location or activity but also to act in a delimiting function. They contain the figures almost to the point of entrapping them.

¹The one possible exception to this is a commissioned work which came later and was too appropriate for the artist to refuse--*The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1944-45)--in which horrendous female sinners grasp the Saint. However, this nightmarish vision hardly appears to depict humans.

The paintings mentioned above lead to That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do. It shares with the earlier works the theme of the room as container and as emblem of loneliness and alienation. An undated poem by Albright gives verbal form to these vague anxieties:

Burns the candle in the room
 Silent dripping thing
 Of tallow and flame
 Lighting the room
 I used to call home
 With one dark window
 With green shade drawn
 And a bare carpet
 Blue like a flower on the floor
 Burning candle--tell me
 Who now is in my room
 Is he as lonely as was I
 When I was on earth
 I have been dead a year now
 But I still find
 Myself in a new room
 And lonely--lonely.¹

The poem combines several ideas important to an understanding of The Door. The room is felt to be a container and is the location for both life and death. Instead of within a town or state, death and life occur within a defined, closed space. The dripping of the candle's wax marks the passage of time. It is significant that the burning flame continues as it did during the narrator's life. It becomes a symbol of time as a continuum. The passage of a year and a death has changed nothing; it has simply brought the narrator to another lonely room where all remains the same. The inescapable association of the room as the container of death is suggested not only in The

¹ Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 37. The poem applies as well to Poor Room--There is No Time, No End, No Today, No Yesterday, No Tomorrow, Only the Forever, and Forever and Forever Without End (begun in 1941) and may date from a time between the completion of The Door and the commencement of Poor Room....

Door but also in Room 203 and the later painting Poor Room..., three of Albright's most important works.

The loneliness which Albright evokes in the poem also pervades his painted figures. Whether or not this feeling reflects the artist's personal situation, the almost palpable isolation of his figures reveals a preoccupation with the theme in terms of its universal description of the human condition. Albright's manner of painting also conveys an impression of separateness. Compacted together, his images nevertheless seem unrelated. Jean Dubuffet has seen the effects of this haunting isolation expressed in Albright's inanimate still life objects:

It is uncomfortable to see revealed that our world is constituted of objects thrown into a terrifying isolation, which are neighbors without slightly knowing each other, each one obviously occupied with the expansion of its own being without the shadow of regard for the things of which it is the neighbor, and not even to those of which it is a component part. There results an impression of profound and irremediable solitude, which without doubt frightens one.¹

After an interview with Albright in 1942, a critic called him a "merry-minded artist of ultra-gloomy pictures...."² It is an appropriate summation of a serious artist surprisingly gleeful in person, an artist very much involved with examining polarities. Van Der Marck explains that with Albright, "Mock arrogance alternates with tongue-in-cheek humility in a rambling monologue running the gamut from self-deprecating humor to sly assertiveness."³ In repeated statements, Albright has described the dualism that he sees

¹"Commentary," in Sweet, Ivan Albright, p. 8.

²Time, 6 July 1942, p. 46.

³Van Der Marck, "Ivan Albright," p. 96.

rampart: "There is no sorrow like existence, but the thought of anything existing is so marvelous that I doubt its reality."¹ He speaks of examining the smallest things in the same breath as he speaks of the largest, of movement only in relation to stillness, and of the artist as both his own best friend and his own enemy.² Contradictions are accepted as a matter of course. Albright's most definitive statement on the coexistence of opposites appeared in John Baur's 1957 New Art in America: Fifty Painters of the Twentieth Century. According to the artist, "A picture is a house wherein all things are to be found, both material and immaterial; it is a place wherein, side by side, rest decay and the sublime, and children's laughter bruises the inner prayer." And further, "A painting is life and a painting is death, both making and lying in the coffin built for tomorrow's use."³ The artist writes of the painting as if it were a living organism or a paradigm of life itself. His comments corroborate the seething movement akin to growth that emanates from the canvases. Although a studied, self-conscious persona is reflected in these statements, they nonetheless suggest the kinds of issues Albright has tried to raise in his paintings.

An aesthetic philosophy formulated in terms of polarities inevitably raises the question of whether the oppositions can be resolved in some way. It does not appear as if Albright is concerned with resolving opposing concepts and proposing specific solutions.

¹Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 24.

²See "Reflections by the Artist," in Sweet, Ivan Albright, p. 16; and Glueck, "Artist in the Flesh," p. 20.

³Baur, "Albright," p. 202.

Rather, he seems to present dualities which may exist simultaneously. There is death in life and life in death. It is implied that structured form exists within chaos, just as there is perspective in even the most chaotic of Albright's canvases. Things generally considered as opposites exist together.

Among the most prominent dualities are the coexistence of growth and decay, life and death, matter and immateriality. When presented with the question of whether his work primarily concerned death and decay, Albright equivocally responded:

Not exactly. Let me answer by asking you a question. Are there such things as death and decay? In any part of life you find something either growing or disintegrating. All life is strong and powerful, even in the process of dissolution.... Let's say I'm equally interested in growth and death. How can you divide them?¹

Albright presents death and decay as metaphorical, frightening perhaps, but not perverse or disgusting. Decay implies change to the artist, and change is valuable, not the cause of despair. Reportedly, the glass of wine in the still life Wherefore, Now Ariseth the Illusion of a Third Dimension turned to vinegar as Albright painted it over a period of months. This change is an appropriate example of the assertion that in decay there is growth, for one form simply changes into a new form. Recently, artist Agnes Denes has grown molds in glass containers to determine if it is possible to establish the moment when growth ends and decay begins. It is her viewpoint, as it is Albright's, that the decay of matter is an alternate mode of growth.²

¹Kuh, Artist's Voice, pp. 23-4.

²A similar view is voiced in Janis, "Ivan Albright," p. 48.

Albright's concern with life as opposed to death is a metaphysical point, not merely an illustration of fact or a reference to day-to-day occurrences. The death of a group of strikers, the decline of the Great Plains into a dustbowl, or the growth of plants for food are literal applications of these principles, applications with which the artist is not directly concerned.

One of the perplexing paradoxes Albright presents is an insistence on the physical properties of things while simultaneously asserting their spiritual qualities. We sense that the external surface is but one aspect of the object, and that there is an internal life which the artist seeks to portray.¹ In certain instances, devices are employed to present images hyperrealistically; corporeality is stressed to such a degree that it appears unreal, and we thus look for symbolic meaning. In addition, the grossness of the subjects sometimes charges them with an otherworldly sensation.

The titles of Albright's early works emphasize the double existence of corporeal grossness and latent spirituality: Into the World There Came a Soul Named Ida and God Created Man in His Own Image (Room 203). They are, of course, ironic titles, pointing to the apparent lack of spiritual qualities in the ugly, semi-nude figures. Daniel Catton Rich has observed, "The 'soul' of Ida is overwhelmed with the opacity of flesh; the 'image of God' is forever caught in a

¹Albright's early interest in x-rays during World War I is a coincidental and amusing parallel to his later concern with that which is beyond the surface of the human exterior. Van Der Marck points out that Albright's interest in x-rays foreshadows his later fascination with the scientific aspects of painting--light and perspective, in "Ivan Albright," p. 96.

lava flow of matter."¹ Matter impinges on the spirit and entraps it. "The body is our tomb," Albright reminds us, and without it we might truly "be men."² One automatically assumes that physicality limits spiritual development. Even when depicting inanimate objects, Albright contrasts the physical and the disembodied. In the right half of *The Door*, the shadow along the door jamb becomes a dark haze of flowing, viscous black. It is not simply a shadow but represents the idea of the intangible, juxtaposed as it is with the very detailed rendering of the decoration on the wooden door.

There can be no doubt that Albright is deeply, almost religiously concerned with the minutiae of surfaces, shapes, colors, and shadows. An inventory of the objects in *The Door* affirms this love of rendering surfaces. Lace, wood, metal, skin, wax flowers, and the elaborate design on the door are all obsessively detailed. The full-scale models which Albright builds and from which he paints, and the incredibly long periods of observation and actual painting point to an almost fetishistic devotion to rendering objects and surfaces. One might compare Guglielmi's obsessive paranoia or Gorky's continual dwelling on his past with Albright's compulsiveness. All three of the artists place such stress on one element that there develops a withdrawal from normal conventions. One aspect is consciously overplayed to the point where it becomes an oddity. Albright's insistence on rendering objects--their corporeality, their perspective, their reflection of light--is so extreme that his pictorial reality

¹Rich, "Albright," p. 51.

²"Reflections by the Artist," in Sweet, Ivan Albright, p. 17.

becomes abnormal. Yet, in a paradoxical way, there is a deemphasis on the subject because it often stands for something else. Like reality, its meaning is flexible, and it is the assigned content which is of utmost importance.

Ultimately, the attitude presented in the paintings is confusing. Are they sympathetic or critical, celebratory or despairing? The mood of Albright's vision has been compared to "what Mid-western writers Edgar Lee Masters and Dreiser had done with words. His work has the despair of Spoon River Anthology and the compulsive detail of Sister Carrie. In these Scabrous faces and wrinkled, puffy hands, may be read the whole backwash of pioneer optimism."¹ In a discussion of Grant Wood's realistic yet caricatured style of the early 1930s, Matthew Baigell made a perceptive connection to a similar mode of early twentieth century American literature which actively described the harsh qualities of midwestern life. Baigell cited Edgar W. Howe, Sherwood Anderson, Herbert Quick, and Ruth Sickow. By the end of the 1920s, he noted, "writers and critics across the country, ranging from Sherwood Anderson to H. L. Mencken and the earlier Van Wyck Brooks" were describing American life with a pervasive cynicism.² Though his work is different from Wood's in many ways, Albright shares certain formative influences of geography, chronology, and cultural environment which may have inspired a common ironic cynicism.

¹Rich, "Albright," p. 50.

²Matthew Baigell, "Grant Wood Revisited," Art Journal 26 (Winter 1966-67):117-18.

Philosophical in the end, Albright appears to accept fate even if despairing of it. Although he renders subjects that are often morbid, some find his apparent cynicism tempered by a deep concern for the human condition. Katherine Kuh, close to the artist both professionally and personally for many years, has found his work to sympathize "with the human predicament he lays bare."¹ Earle Ludgin refutes the claim of Albright as a cynic and a recluse.² Daniel Catton Rich claims that the artist shows neither "cosmic bitterness" nor "a personal cynicism." This disclaimer is partly gainsayed by calling Albright "our own Jeremiah" giving form to a "moral indignation" over the state of human existence.³ "He is preoccupied with the corruption of the flesh, in parallel with the corruption of the spirit. Man is not to blame," concludes John Canaday, "but the very fact that existence breeds corruptibility."⁴ In this view, the artist is regarded as the witness of that inevitable putrescence.

Robert Coates wrote that Albright's attitude "is far from being compassionate or understanding; instead, it is generally a bit prissy, distant (even his close attention to detail argues a certain clinical detachment), and totally unsympathetic."⁵ One cannot but suspect that a tragic view is held by an artist who depicts his neighbors as unflatteringly as Albright did in *Room 203* or *Ida*. The

¹Kuh, "No Single Fact is as it Seems," Saturday Review, 11 February 1967, p. 26.

²Ludgin, Interview. ³Rich, "Albright," p. 51.

⁴John Canaday, "Meet Ivan Albright," New York Times, 7 February 1965, sec. 2, p. 19.

⁵Robert M. Coates, "The Art Galleries: Chaos," The New Yorker, 13 February 1965, p. 130.

figures there suggest an aging bum and a withered prostitute. Certainly the artist is detached and harshly penetrating. It then becomes uncertain whether one can conclude, as have some, that Albright's "prosiac half is full of compassion for...humanity."¹ Albright's realism is disturbing not only because it parades the decay of matter, as is often noted, but also because it questions our ability to know what we see. Yet, countering the despair is Albright's very act of painting, which may be viewed as his personal attempt to come to terms with the impossibility of knowing. It is worth reminding ourselves that Albright's subjects present themselves to us unself-consciously and unashamed. Milton Brown observes, "In all Albright's art, there is no judgment, only inexorable 'truth' as he sees it."² If the truth is frightening (especially because it declares the impossibility of knowing truth) it is nonetheless courageous to present it in an attempt to understand humanity and existence.

Edwin Dickinson

In contrast to Ivan Albright, Edwin Dickinson has remained loath to discuss the meaning of his art. But like Albright, Dickinson has remained aloof from the pressures of new stylistic developments. The paintings, some of which were labored upon for up to ten years, represent an amazing continuity of feeling and style over a period of almost fifty years. "I've always thought," Dickinson remarked,

¹Robert Lamb and Fran Weitzenhoffer, "American Surrealism and Magic Realism," Seminar paper, Ph.D. Program in Art History, City University of New York Graduate School, 1974, p. 15.

²Note to the author, August, 1981.

"regardless of seeming differences, that all my works stem from the same source and thus there's not much disconnection among them"¹ Dickinson's is an emotional yet pensive oeuvre, painted equally for the satisfaction of working out technical problems as for the philosophical speculation the forms engender. After speaking at length about the technical aspects of The Cello Player (1924-26, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution) and then asked if the painting was primarily about the skilled use of gray, Dickinson exclaimed in an uncharacteristic comment, "No Sir! I did it because I loved it, of course."²

Given his formal upbringing as the devout son of a minister in the wintry environs of western New York State, it is not surprising that Dickinson's art should be one in which great seriousness accompanies a sense of spiritual contemplation. Preferring the icy white of harsh winters to the comfort of summer days,³ it is no wonder his painted world is one of monochromes in which harsh faces suggest a stolid impenetrability like the strength of the craggy rocks which often appear in Dickinson's landscapes. The winter world, where forms merge into one another imperceptibly, laid the groundwork for an art in which gray shapes often slide by, fade, and disappear.

¹Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 69.

²"The Reminiscences of Edwin Dickinson," transcript of interviews conducted by Carol S. Gruber, November 1957-January 1958, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York, p. 127.

³According to Frances Dickinson, the artist's wife, in Burchfield Center, State University of New York at Buffalo, Edwin Dickinson Tribute Exhibition: Emphasizing the Buffalo and Sheldrake Years (Buffalo: Burchfield Center, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1977), p. 14.

Norman Geske has written of Dickinson:

....like American artists before him, Homer, Ryder, or Eakins, there is in him a deep vein of old-fashioned Yankee independence, an impressive capacity for finding out for himself what it is that he wants to do. More particularly, he might be placed in that special company of American visionaries, Ryder, Blakelock, C.S. Price, whose independence was well founded on open, varied, and commonplace experiences but whose preference was to remain within a strictly personal view of those experiences, which, on the whole, coincided little or not at all with the conventional view.¹

This description of Dickinson also fits Albright, and both have been related to the notion of the romantic loner or mystic.² Dickinson's interests in fossils, the Civil War, chess, nautical history, and meteorology somehow seem to relate more to 19th century concerns than to those of the 1930s. During the thirties decade, he must have appeared as one given over to taciturn speculation rather than to the passionately held stances characteristic of the times.

Dickinson had an artistic link to the nineteenth century in the person of Charles Hawthorne, with whom Dickinson studied during the summers of 1912-14 at the Cape Cod School of Art. Hawthorne is one of the most important sources for Dickinson's aesthetic formulations. The two later shared a studio for several years and were to remain friends until Hawthorne's death. In 1938, Dickinson provided the perceptive introduction for Hawthorne on Painting.³ Dickinson also studied with William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League from

¹Norman A. Geske, Venice 34: The Figurative Tradition in Recent American Art (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, 1968), p. 43.

²"The Visions of Edwin Dickinson, 'Lone Spirit'," The Art Digest, 15 April 1938, p. 13.

³See Mrs. Charles A. Hawthorne, ed., Hawthorne on Painting (1938; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1980).

1911-13. Though he thought highly of Chase as an artist, he found him uncommunicative as a teacher.¹ "In my experience," Dickinson recalled, "there's no one in the same class as Hawthorne as a teacher."² Hawthorne was genial, charitable, and open-minded toward many of the new artistic developments even while he continued to paint in the dark hues of a traditional old-master realism. In an interview, probably from the 1920s, Hawthorne explained, "One always welcomes something new."³ He certainly was much finer than Lloyd Goodrich's appellation "independent academician" would suggest.⁴ A similar receptive attitude to the new, even while adhering to traditional technical modes, was to characterize Dickinson's work. Fifty years after executing the 1914 Self-Portrait (estate of the artist), Dickinson recalled that Hawthorne thought well of it, an indication of the continuing respect for his mentor.⁵ It seems likely that the self-portrait was based on a similar painting by Hawthorne of figures set against a light source, perhaps By the Window (1912, unlocated).⁶

¹"Reminiscences," pp. 28-30. ²*Ibid.*, p. 31.

³Uncited newspaper clipping entitled "Artist Hawthorne, Master of the Human Touch, is a Human Person," in Charles Webster Hawthorne Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

⁴Lloyd Goodrich, Edwin Dickinson (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1965), p. 5.

⁵Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 69.

⁶In trying to affirm Dickinson's modernism in 1965, Diane Waldman erroneously suggested that he was "in conflict with his academic training" under Chase and Hawthorne. In "Dickinson: Reality of Reflection," Art News, November 1965, pp. 28-31, she cited Dickinson's statement that the 1914 Self-Portrait breached academic rules. It may have, but certainly not Hawthorne's. Even more unwarranted was her contention that Dickinson's forms contain "no message" but reflect only "painterly means," as if Dickinson's aesthetic validity depended upon his fitting into the formalist bias of the mid-sixties.

Both teacher and pupil shared a love of music. Hawthorne played the cello and Dickinson the viola, often performing together in quartets.¹ Their similar interests extended to their aesthetics. Both depict the same nocturnal sensation created by placing stationary figures against dark grounds. A feeling of aloofness and hardness of character is common to the people they paint. Hawthorne's The Captain's Wife (1924) displays the same cold distracted quality--one hesitates to say alienated--as the figure in Dickinson's Woodland Scene (1929-35; Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, ill. 35) or the portrait of Josephine Gilbert (1922, private collection). In the introduction to Hawthorne on Painting, Dickinson explained how Hawthorne "drilled into his pupils" the fact that "plane relationships are more representable through comparative value than through" contour or line. This precept was a basis for Dickinson's own canvases.

The formal implications of this mode of painting are diverse, but more interesting for this study are the resulting emotional overtones and psychological suggestions which this method imparts. In giving form to objects by subtle gradations of tone, Dickinson was able to emphasize the fluidity of shapes and their non-material aspects. The refusal to draw lines in favor of altering values gradually was used in a manner which rejected precision and emphasized suggestiveness. It is the emotional effects which Dickinson summoned

¹"Reminiscences," p. 32. This suggests that The Cello Player may in some way relate to Hawthorne, although the model for the musician was John Cordes, a neighbor of Dickinson. See Edwin Dickinson Tribute Exhibition, p. 25, catalogue entry no. 59, for a preparatory drawing of Cordes executed for the canvas.

²Introduction to Hawthorne, Hawthorne on Painting, p. v.

through such traditional procedures that separates his canvases from being mere exercises of technical virtuosity.¹

Like many of the artists exploring a subjective aesthetic, Dickinson remained unaffiliated with any artistic group. Although he found that his work reflected a general impulse to "thoughts romantic," he said it "never occurred to me to join a group which advocated a particular philosophy. It would have been unnatural to me."² Remaining in Provincetown or Wellfleet, Massachusetts, for seventeen out of thirty-one winters between 1913 and 1944, Dickinson was physically as well as aesthetically aloof from the artistic currents of those years.³ In the introduction to a 1970 catalogue for a Dickinson exhibition, John Chandler wrote:

The major difference between the work of the mainstream of the last quarter century and the eccentric work of Edwin Dickinson is like the difference between history and autobiography--the one is general, objective, impersonal, concerned with broad, international problems and movements; the other is particular, subjective, personal, concerned not with the issues of painting at this moment in history as much as with the perennial yet private issues of one's own work.⁴

Dickinson should not be considered a recluse, however. He led a very active social life, engaging in chess and musical performances

¹It can be argued, of course, that Dickinson's overworked canvases are but flawed attempts at technical accomplishment. The artist himself was the first to admit that the large paintings were often disappointing and thus left unfinished. Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 73.

²"Reminiscences," pp. 106-7, 109.

³Goodrich, Dickinson, p. 6. Although an artist's retreat since the early years of this century, Provincetown was until recently primarily a summer residence.

⁴John Chandler, in Institute of Contemporary Art and the Weeden Gallery, The Dickinson Family Heritage: Paintings and Drawings by Edwin Dickinson (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art and the Weeden Gallery, 1979), p. 5.

on the Cape, and traveled frequently back and forth to western New York and to Boston and New York City. In the mid-thirties, he actively collaborated with his friend Esther Sawyer to set up an Art Collectors and Artists Association for which artist-advisors were to choose art for exhibition and sale to collectors in Buffalo. In 1937, Dickinson himself acted as the "advisor."¹ Dickinson apparently enjoyed his role as a teacher, although he later felt that his teaching duties had too often taken him away from his art for too long.² He gave independent summer courses in Provincetown for many years and taught sporadically for schools and associations between the two World Wars.³ Not by any means asocial, Dickinson was determined, however, "to work by myself." He saw artmaking as a solitary affair, admitting that the presence of a model was "the only company allowable."⁴

Dickinson's paintings have frequently been seen to embody a sense of aloneness. Henry McBride, writing in 1941 of a recent Dickinson exhibition at the Georgette Passedoit Galleries, felt favorably toward the work. But, after extolling the technique and providing a synopsis of Dickinson's background, he solemnly concluded:

That, however, is all I ever care to know about an artist, that which his pictures tell me. In the present instance we certainly have an artist who leads an inner, Emersonian existence.

It is, in fact, so cloistered that I have a certain shyness, a sense of guilt, in opening the shutters, pulling the curtains

¹Burchfield Center, Edwin Dickinson Tribute Exhibition, p. 16.

²Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 77.

³See Geske, Venice 34, p. 47, for an extensive listing of teaching posts. It is significant that from 1930-39 Dickinson was not associated with any schools but had only private students.

⁴"Reminiscences," p. 112.

to one side and thus exposing to the chilling, critical inspection of the world, the work of a citizen who has got along fairly well so far in private and who might go utterly to pieces if jostled too severely by the crowds on 57th street who instantly put a pricemark on anything that claims to be a work of art.¹

There is no escape from the conclusion that Dickinson's gray world, peopled by expressionless faces, is cold and foreboding. The paintings bespeak withdrawal rather than interaction. In the darkness of Woodland Scene and the dreamlike stillness of Shiloh (ca. 1931, partially reworked in 1963, Commerce Trust Company, Kansas City, Missouri, ill. 36) is an introversion which concerns itself with the spiritual powers of the tenebrous. The artist acknowledged and accepted this. Writing to Esther Sawyer, he half-seriously lamented, "Only wish my things were 'pleasanter around the house'," realizing of course that he was neither willing nor able to make the changes necessary to create a pleasant art.² The same emotional and psychological atmosphere had characterized many of Hawthorne's portraits. Marvin Sadik described Hawthorne's paintings in words that apply equally to Dickinson: "Hawthorne's subjects, whether singly or in groups, almost always seem lost within themselves and are essentially alone. In the final analysis, there is a mystery about them which is as wondrous as it is ineffable."³

¹New York Sun, 5 April 1941, reprinted in McBride, Flow of Art, p. 383.

²Letter of 26(?) November, 1929, Esther W. Sawyer Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll 901, frame 847.

³Marvin A. Sadik, The Paintings of Charles Hawthorne (Storrs, Connecticut: University of Connecticut Museum of Art, 1968), n.p.

Also reflecting his desire for art to remain a private experience was Dickinson's attitude toward commissions. Like Albright, he saw commissions as impositions of external constraints on the artist's hegemony. He thought the painter forfeited not only the personal choice of a subject but also invariably felt restricted in exploring any new developments which might come about in the course of working on the canvas. In portrait commissions Dickinson objected to not being able to choose clothing, still life objects, and various other accoutrements which he felt to be of critical importance. (This recalls Albright's similar need to choose appropriate objects to surround his sitters in order to make them *bona fide* Albrights.) In addition, he felt one was never paid enough.¹ Dickinson agreed with the not uncommon artist's prejudice "that the chance that a commissioned portrait could be a work of art was practically zero."² After a lengthy attempt to paint a commissioned portrait in 1923 of his uncle, Secretary of State Charles Evan Hughes, Dickinson wrote to Esther Sawyer: "returned from Washington recently; the portraits were unsuccessful. I have no qualifications in that business and should do no more."³ Despite his protestations, Dickinson did attempt more portrait paintings and drawings, usually for monetary reasons. He wrote to his friend Barbara Brown from Chicago, where he was working on a commission in

¹Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 78.

²"Reminiscences," p. 130. See pp. 132-34 for a general discussion of commissions.

³Letter of 28 December 1923; Esther W. Sawyer Papers, microfilm roll 901, frame 701, Dickinson later wrote to Mrs. Sawyer on 17 February 1924 that the portrait had been refused (frame 707).

1928: "I am painting a portrait here; but Barby, I will never be able to paint a good commission I fear."¹

For Dickinson, art was a realm unto itself. He naturally drew "away from art having to do with anything but art...."² He was never to be allied to specific causes. At the outbreak of World War II, when artists began contributing canvases for the War Bond drives, Dickinson felt it ethically wrong to associate art in any way with war.³ He later explained, "I guess I think Artists for Victory is just a rather more unpalatable form than Artists for Democracy or Non-Democracy or what-not."⁴ At no time did Dickinson become particularly involved with current events, whether during the Depression or the Second World War. So deeply involved was he with his art that Dickinson had not even begun reading newspapers until the late twenties, at the time of his marriage.⁵ On one major artist's cause of the 1930s Dickinson did take sides. He was in favor of a rental policy for artworks lent to temporary exhibitions but added that the rental fees paid to artists must not result in inaugurating admission charges.⁶

¹Letter of 30 January 1928, Edwin W. Dickinson Correspondence, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll N68-102, frame 21.

²"Reminiscences," p. 115.

³Letter to Philip Malicoat, 6 May 1943 and 19 June 1944, Edwin W. Dickinson Correspondence, microfilm roll N68-102, frames 47, 54.

⁴"Reminiscences," p. 115. Considering himself a pacifist, he was appalled when approached during World War II to paint propaganda pictures, pp. 116-17.

⁵"Reminiscences," p. 40.

⁶Letter to Esther Sawyer, 25 March 1936, Esther W. Sawyer Papers, microfilm roll 901, frame 982. On 12 December 1936 (frame

If Dickinson was not engaged in politics per se, this is not to imply that he was non-humanitarian. The artist explained that he has "never had any interest in, as an artist, making social comments," but was quick to add, "Not that I have no feelings about those things."¹ In fact, he felt that social comment could be quite forceful and appealing, but that approach was simply not his path.² One's social concern could be evidenced on a personal level rather than through artist's groups or propaganda. The artist as an individual "should take part in the public need, whatever it be."³ True to his creed, Dickinson and his wife, financially strapped though they were, took in a child from the Boston Children's Aid Association during the summers of 1932 and 1933 in an effort to let poor children have a summer vacation.

Dickinson probably felt the economic difficulties of the Depression less harshly than artists in large cities. He had not previously sold much art, nor had he taught regularly; therefore, he was accustomed to having little money. His survival depended a great deal upon a monthly stipend provided between 1924 and 1944 by his friends Esther and Ainsley Sawyer.⁴ Only during 1933-34 did Dickinson work on the Federal payroll--for the PWAP, the first of the government projects. Painting in Provincetown, he was left relatively undisturbed, visited only infrequently by the government

1009, he wrote to Esther and Ainsley Sawyer, "I am for the rental policy, but am more interested in one or two less recognized issues." But he did not specify these other issues.

¹"Reminiscences," p. 51. ²Ibid., p. 115.

³Ibid., p. 82. ⁴Ibid., pp. 113-13.

supervisor. Despite his feeling that there were a lot of goof-offs on the projects, Dickinson found the government programs to be beneficial for artists and the country as a whole. The projects guaranteed that more art was made available to the public than previously; and by simply giving artists the time to develop their skills, it naturally increased the overall quality of American art.¹

In discussing or writing about his work, whether publicly or to his intimates, Dickinson primarily addressed technical and formal considerations. His topics included discussions of value, color, size, proportion, the amount of time spent on a work, the nature of the objects included, identities of sitters, the conditions under which the painting was executed, the privations undergone, and the sales, loans, and exhibitions transacted. Issues of content were never broached, and when confronted directly with questions as to the meaning of his works or their symbolic content, Dickinson's sincere answer was invariably, "I wouldn't be able to say," or perhaps that it was too difficult to explain, or that it could not be discussed because it would "come out wrong."² The artist would not deny outright that the works were symbolic but would simply evade the issue. It is as if the undisclosed content had a private and spiritual role which was impossible to discuss. Regarding Composition with Still Life (1933-37,

¹Ibid., pp. 85-87. Concerning the quality of the art generated by the projects, Dickinson wrote to Esther Sawyer with amusement rather than with indignation that, "Due to the necessary imperfections [sic] of so large a project, some have found themselves on the payroll who have I verily believe, painted scarcely ½ dozen canvases in their lives (Bohemian types you know)." Edwin W. Dickinson Correspondence, microfilm roll N68-102, frames 954-55.

²Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 73; "Reminiscences," p. 143.

The Museum of Modern Art, ill. 37) Lloyd Goodrich writes, "it is questionable whether any conscious symbolism was intended." He points instead to Dickinson's "atmosphere of hallucination" and "ultimate ambiguity."¹ This very ambiguity may be taken as a major aspect of the paintings' content, as will be shown. Dickinson's reluctance to discuss these matters--so obviously raised by the imagery and treatment--only reaffirms their importance. His evasion goads the viewer's interest.

As in the art of Albright, Gorky, Feitelson, and Lundeberg, distinct polarities characterize Dickinson's technique and content. His output forms two separate oeuvres: large studio paintings taking years to complete, and small sketchy canvases painted from nature in from one to four sittings of about three hours each. The paradox of the large canvases is that great care and deliberation is taken in their execution, while their effect is one in which objects and images appear under no rational control whatever. The artist plans and labors for years but leaves unfinished works bearing the record of incessant changes. James Thrall Soby explains that these are paintings in which a "Grand Style...has been so painstakingly built up, only to find its true grandeur in an unacademic and mysterious ruin."² Dickinson uses a studied technique to expose a lack of clarity. He paints in a romantic, Old Master tradition (redolent, for example, of El Greco) but creates a hauntingly modern, existential world. It is foreign to both his academically oriented and vanguard contemporaries.

¹Goodrich, Dickinson, p. 12.

²James Thrall Soby, in Soby and Miller, Romantic Painting in America, p. 46.

After viewing Dickinson's nocturnal world, where emotional and psychological concerns seem preeminent, one is surprised to discover his incessant dialogues on shape, proportion, perspective, color, and value.¹

Speaking as if he were a formalist, Dickinson has claimed his attitude to "still life is a very detached one," in which formal problems of composition and color and shape are the major considerations."² When planning a large canvas, Dickinson often stretched it months in advance of any actual work. He mapped out the general shapes desired and elaborately planned the value and color schemes. Only then would he finally select objects to put in predetermined spaces, claiming, for example, that the items in Composition with Still Life could easily have been exchanged for others.³ With such an elastic attitude toward his images, how is one to account for their haunting and powerful effect? In fact, Dickinson's claims of impartiality are belied by the emotional intensity and forceful presence of the figures in the large canvases.

The simultaneity of formalist interests and deep psychological and emotional expression is most evident in the drawings. They describe rectilinear forms yet are usually created without actual lines, employing instead changes in value to indicate boundaries. Things are usually rendered as parts, not as holistic entities.

¹See, for example, "Reminiscences," pp. 151, 176-77; letter to Esther Sawyer, 31 March 1934, Esther W. Sawyer Papers, microfilm roll 901, frames 951-52; and Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 79.

²"Reminiscences," p. 151.

³Ibid., pp. 176-78. This is also related by Elaine de Kooning in "Edwin Dickinson Paints a Picture," Art News, September 1949, p. 27.

While there is a suggestion of structure, it is left incomplete and thus haunting. This is particularly true of the works after the mid-thirties (however, as Lloyd Goodrich points out, the extraordinary ambiguity of the large canvases is not nearly as pronounced in the drawings).¹ Goodrich has regarded Dickinson as both classical and romantic, with the classic elements reigning in the drawings. "His preoccupation is with structure, pure and simple." The architectural drawings and drawings of windows show "an exclusive concentration on geometric form," he writes somewhat unconvincingly. He does admit that Dickinson's refusal to align the window frames perpendicularly with the edges of the paper gives a "strangely haunting quality" and sometimes "an air of fantasy."²

As an evocative device, Dickinson consistently depicts the part rather than the whole. The 1937 Nude (Art Institute of Chicago, ill. 38) is a seated figure whose head disappears into darkness above the neck. The left arm is also obscured. Similar fragmentation of the torso is extremely pronounced in the major canvases of the 1930s. The two nudes in Composition with Still Life have no heads. Their various appendages are hidden in shadow in such a way as to suggest that they may not, in fact, exist. In these effects is to be seen what may be called an iconography of concealment which allows us only to see parts of things. Obscured relationships and unclear boundaries become the surprising end result of Dickinson's incessant gaze and prolonged study of form. The result is a haunting sense of loss. A

¹The Drawing Society, The Drawings of Edwin Dickinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 12.

²Ibid., pp. 10-11.

psychological sensation of incompleteness accompanies the physical depiction of partial figures. Dickinson's tendency toward partial representation and concealment of forms assumes an even more sinister appearance in certain paintings where the partially drawn figure inescapably appears to have lost limbs in a violent manner. Composition with Still Life offers the most obvious expression of this effect. Nude figures seem to have been decapitated, with the result that the sense of loss is joined by the sensation of death.

Dickinson's small paintings are executed "à premier coup," to use his terminology. Spontaneity, immediacy, and an absence of prior planning characterize these works painted outdoors. The large studio paintings, on the other hand, are pondered upon for up to a year before actual painting begins; they suffer frequent revision and bear the imprints of great labor and careful work; they contain areas of detailed painting while the small canvases utilize a broad all-over application. The studio works are basically imaginary, composed of different objects in contrived and inexplicable relationships; the works à premier coup are based on actual sites.

Despite these differences, the two modes of painting share similar content. Dickinson himself thought all his works reveal basically the same inspiration and thus an intimate connection.¹ Notwithstanding differences in technical execution, both types are essentially unfinished, the small paintings obviously so. Having been reworked and altered so often, the large paintings are often felt by the artist to lose their cohesiveness and possibility to achieve fruition.² Work stops on them, but they have not

¹Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 69. ²Ibid., p. 73.

been completed. All the paintings describe a silent world of shifting forms dissolving into immateriality. Ambiguous boundaries seem to give the effect of matter being eaten away by atmosphere, whether the luminous blue-grays and silver-greens of The Brook (1930), Coast, Le Cride (1938, both Esther Sawyer Ewing), The Finger Lakes (1939, Chauncy L. Waddell) or the variety of dark grays which cover the large paintings. Sensations of flux and timelessness are the results. The landscapes appear as deformations of reality just as do the large works. Spiritual, almost mystical emanations characterize both modes. They are not intended to simply transcend reality by creating a dream world but chronicle a deep emotional response to the transience of the seen. The paintings à premier coup are not predominantly about capturing the atmosphere; if so, one would see in canvases completed while Dickinson was staying in southern France the crisp, clear air of the Mediterranean or the chilly snap of the mistral against the structure of the ancient cliffs. Instead, one sees, as in Rock of Port Issol, West Side (1938, Dr. and Mrs. James Jay, New York, ill. 39) vague, soft images. The bright light of the Mediterranean never washes the canvases Dickinson executed there. He captures not so much a physical sensation, but a psychic one, a point too long missed by those who have written about the small, sketchy canvases.

For Dickinson, the significance of objects lay not in their functional use in the real world but in their aesthetic potential as conveyors of ideas and feelings. In regard to Chair, Skowhegan (1956), Dickinson was asked why he painted the chair upside down. "It wasn't a chair to be sat in," he replied, "it was a chair to be

painted."¹ This sums up his lifelong attitude to reality; it is only useful when transformed to suit his special needs. For purposes of obfuscation, Dickinson even uses aesthetic elements traditionally used for clarification. "Light becomes a means to disguise, not to describe the subject," declared Elaine de Kooning.²

The combination of the observed and the invented is a characteristic of Dickinson's paintings. Objects are studied, then arranged in relationships that defy reality: floating figures above china vases, or luminescent light without apparent source. A spectral quality emerges from the combination of silence and darkness. That Dickinson was raised in a devout environment may have accelerated his spiritual concerns. They are, however, non-specific--non-denominational so to speak--and do not reflect specific credos or statements about God or the afterlife but simply reveal to us the immanence of existence. Articles from art magazines over the years reveal that this view was widely felt. Various titles include: "The Visions of Edwin Dickinson, 'Lone Spirit'," "Nostalgic Mysticism of Edwin Dickinson," and "Edwin Dickinson, American Mystic."³ These reiterate the notion of the artist as one who transcends the physical to enter a non-material world.

While reaching beyond the real, Dickinson continued to receive lifelong inspiration from nature. Admitting that his small paintings

¹Ibid., p. 79.

²Elaine de Kooning, "Dickinson and Kiesler," Art News, April 1952, p. 67.

³See respectively, "Visions of Edwin Dickinson," p. 13; "Nostalgic Mysticism of Edwin Dickinson," The Art Digest, 1 April 1941, p. 19; and Jacob Getlar Smith, "Edwin Dickinson, American Mystic," American Artist, January 1957, p. 54.

à premier coup "sometimes come out absolutely unrecognizable as being from anything on earth," he yet intended them "to be like nature."¹ His notebooks are filled with records of changing climactic conditions, virtually hour-by-hour notations. In letters to the Sawyers, he would often write of the weather and temperature, a natural enough preoccupation for someone who loved to sail but so obsessive in its particulars as to produce amazement. This close attention to the minutiae of nature cannot but seem paradoxical when regarding the canvases. Like Albright, Dickinson seems to have focused inordinate attention on the facts before him, only to create from them transformed and blurred images which suggest that what is seen is, in fact, unclear. Likewise, in regarding and rendering his human models, Dickinson depicts them in such a way as to destroy their corporeality.

Dickinson's concern with objects is especially evident in the repeated still life images which occur in the paintings. His sitters are surrounded by objects which relate in some way to the artist: shells and fossils recalling his boyhood excursions around Sheldrake's Lake Cayuga where they were collected;² cellos and fiddles and a death mask of Beethoven (in the 1926-28 The Cello Player) remind us of his love of music; and drapery sent by mail to Provincetown from Esther Sawyer.³ In both Andre's Balloon (1928, formerly Graham Gallery, New York) and The Finger Lakes (ill. 40) of ten years

¹"Reminiscences," pp. 109-10.

²Burchfield Center, Edwin Dickinson Tribute Exhibition, p. 14.

³In a letter of 21 March 1930, Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Sawyer, "These curtains fill a long felt need..." Esther W. Sawyer Papers, microfilm roll 901, frame 865.

later, a hot air balloon ascends above the cliffs. It recalls the time when Dickinson, as a child, often saw an acrobat perform on a trapeze suspended from a hot air balloon at a park on Lake Cayuga.¹ Although the artist stresses the notion that his objects only fulfill compositional needs, the evidence seems otherwise.

The rocks, cliffs, and shale outcroppings in many paintings recall the Sheldrake landscape where the artist's family had a summer cottage. They haunt the paintings executed in the Provincetown years, such as The Finger Lakes, possibly painted while on a trip back to Buffalo. Stranded Brig (1934, Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts, ill. 41) reveals not the expected arctic iceberg, which would fit Dickinson's description of the subject as being a polar scene, but gray-green shale deposits. Woodland Scene (1929-35, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University) and Composition with Still Life depict the dark, cool glens which also filled the area. Transformed into mysterious recesses, places from Dickinson's past become the stage upon which are enacted silent artistic dramas. The artist intentionally chose images with personal connections--images which may not have a specific symbolism but which are somehow related to people or places to whom the artist was close. In the two major works from the 1930s--Woodland Scene and Composition with Still Life--the darkly shaded spaces and objects should be regarded as the artist's retreat into his private world and to his personal memories.

Several portentous images recur in the large paintings of the 1930s: a fully blossomed rose, a partial nude, and a rotting wooden bridge. Dickinson has offered brief comment on the rose image. It

¹"Reminiscences," p. 166.

first appeared in the early 1920s in Two Figures (1921-24, Metropolitan Museum of Art), an oil study for An Anniversary (1921, Albright-Knox Art Gallery). Here, a rose rests upon a woman's chest. Later, it appears in The Cello Player and in the 1930s in Woodland Scene, Composition with Still Life, The Finger Lakes and a fine pencil drawing, Two Roses (1939, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Benjamin; reproduction in Goodrich, Dickinson, p. 13.) Asked why he repeatedly used the flowers, Dickinson explained that they have no special significance except that they are universally considered beautiful and can be made any color the artist desires. He added that he had used both artificial and fresh roses but preferred the latter.¹ But the evanescent beauty of the blooms--cut from their roots--exists also as a potent symbol of transience. It is difficult to see Dickinson's wispy flowers without also thinking of them fading, and Dickinson, an enthusiast for Baroque art, would probably have been aware of that traditional symbolism.

Clinical psychologist Eliot Adler notes that the rose is a classic symbol for the female genitals but explains that in Composition with Still Life the manner in which Dickinson presents the rose and other typical sexual symbols--"empty, abandoned, useless, dropped--conveys a sense of impotence, frigidity, or death rather than any vital sexual concern."² The rose in Composition with Still Life is positioned directly beside the open mouth of a pitcher and beneath

¹"Reminiscences," pp. 167-68.

²Eliot Adler, "Observations on Edwin Dickinson," ed. with a note by Matthew Baigell, Arts Magazine, April 1982, p. 126. This article is one of the most insightful and fascinating studies on Dickinson.

the end of a drill bit. The pitcher lying on its side may recall the eighteenth-century convention of the broken pitcher as the symbol of lost virginity, and the proximity of the rose to the phallic but recumbent drill (a more modern sexual symbol) seems to complete the symbolic depiction of exhausted or dead sexuality. Other images in the painting may also have sexual connotations: the rolled sails appear somewhat labial, the broken tree trunks seem like torn human appendages, and the positioning of the nudes focuses attention on their pudenda. Adler also notes that "the concentric circles in the water at the bottom right are...an ancient symbol of the life-giving womb."¹ Symbols of the womb and exhausted sexuality are combined in what Adler describes (referring to the symbols of furled sails and water) as a "picture of journey's end or of the last harbor."²

In Woodland Scene, the rose is pinned to drapery which covers an upside down female. The manner in which the figure is draped suggests both an evening gown and a shroud--beauty and death. The rose is positioned under the figure's right breast and close to the pubic area. As in the later Composition with Still Life, there seems to be a clustering of the concepts of death, sexuality, and melancholy beauty. Adler suggests that the sexual symbols be regarded as general expressions of "birth and womb symbolism" (not libido).³ Birth and womb symbolism would thus join with suggestions of death to offer a meditation on the life cycle.

In both paintings the nude or semi-nude female figure is a dominant element. Except for the self-portraits, Dickinson's figures

¹Ibid. ²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 125.

after 1930 are almost exclusively women. The linking of the female with the rose and death in Woodland Scene and with the vaguely genital symbolism of tree limbs, drill, rose, and wrapped sails in Composition with Still Life seems to reinforce Dickinson's nexus of concerns-- beauty, death, and a sort of exhausted sexuality which might in fact symbolize the waning of life itself. It is significant that the vaginal areas of the nudes are so prominent, although not the least bit libidinous since the figures appear dead. Even in rendering the area of the human womb, Dickinson gives the impression of total enervation. Instead of suggesting procreation, the sensation is that life forces have been spent. The nudes seem deathlike in their motionless, disembodied state, alluding to eternity and timelessness.

The image of a rotting, wooden bridge is employed in both Stranded Brig and Composition with Still Life. In the former, the bridge has collapsed over an abyss, while in Composition with Still Life, the bridge crosses a pool of water but shows signs of deterioration in the broken planks and handrail. Both images offer the possibility of danger and/or death were the bridges to be used. The deteriorating bridges seem almost ancient, embodying the very idea of time's passage. In addition, they are literal images of decay, and in this they parallel a major theme explored by Ivan Albright.

All of the recurring images exude a definable emotional resonance which seems almost to speak in melancholy tones about the passing of beauty and time. Dickinson's evocation of the fugacity of time is central to other aspects of his work besides the imagery. The surfaces of the large paintings bear pentimenti deposited over several years and many sittings. When completed, any painting is a discrete

object existing independent of specific moments. But Dickinson's paintings, in addition, remind one of the very passage of time. The viewer is extremely aware of the overpainting, the labor, and the repeated changes.¹

Dickinson would often combine places and things from different locations into the same canvas. Frances Dickinson, the artist's wife, has pointed out that The Fossil Hunters (1926-28, Whitney Museum of American Art, ill. 43) was painted in Provincetown but is a reminiscence of the artist's youth in Sheldrake, New York. In the canvas is "a stream and a glen painted from memory" and recalling (but not describing) youthful pursuits. During the 1930s, this reminiscence of separate times and places became more complicated, as a number of locations and events fused into one canvas. Stranded Brig relates to Dickinson's longstanding interest in polar exploration. But, as pointed out earlier, the scene is strangely green and gray, not white, and rocks, not ice, entrap the vessel. The artist's wife writes:

As the work progressed, however, and he was composing the rock cliffs on which a stricken ship was supposed to have been cast, the cliffs he drew were drawn from the memory of another of the crucial natural influences on his work: the shale rock formations familiar to him from his youth in Buffalo and Sheldrake, New York.²

Yet, Dickinson himself wrote, "It is, I suppose, an historical scene, the final stranding of Dr. Kane's brig "Advance" on the Greenland coast."³

¹Albright and Blume also worked for long periods of time on canvases, and Gorky shares with Dickinson the trait of repeated change, indecision, and repainting.

²Frances Dickinson, in Burchfield Center, Edwin Dickinson Tribute Exhibition, p. 14.

³Letter to Esther W. Sawyer, 31 March 1934, Esther W. Sawyer Papers, microfilm roll 901, frame 950.

Though Composition with Still Life includes canvas sails wrapped around a mast, the locale suggested is the woodland glen where Dickinson, as a child, explored the small falls and rock outcroppings around the Finger Lakes. A setting from the past, it displays images culled from the present and coalesces into a scene of things close to the artist's heart. It also contains two china pitchers and an elaborate mirror provided by Esther Sawyer's mother.¹ These elements were included when Dickinson had brought the canvas to Buffalo and was painting in Esther's studio. The images thus fuse place (Cape Cod, Sheldrake, and Buffalo) and time (present and past). It is non-sequential and non-objective--an art in which cause and effect as well as placement in specific time and locale are of little importance.

The emotional depictions of suffering, violence, strife, and conflict that inform so much of the art of the Depression finds poetic, non-specific enunciation in Dickinson's oeuvre through the spectre of death which the paintings continually summon. In 1938, Howard Devree noted that there clings to Dickinson's paintings "a curious impression of morbidness and a monastic air combined with something grimly Spanish in spirit."² It is no coincidence that El Greco and Velasquez left a lasting impression on Dickinson when he visited Spain in 1920.³ For Italian and southern European art Dickinson could garner little enthusiasm, but in Spain he unexpectedly found

¹Burchfield Center, Edwin Dickinson Tribute Exhibition, p. 16.

²Howard Devree, "Four Solos," Magazine of Art, May 1938, p. 309.

³de Kooning, "Dickinson Paints a Picture," p. 50; and Goodrich, Dickinson, p. 6.

the harshness and sobriety which also characterized the art of more northern climes.¹ The mystery, intensity, and darkness of Spanish art excited Dickinson. Although the artist would never express such a sentiment, one realizes that the fatalism of the Spanish ethos must also have exerted an attraction.

In The Fossil Hunters, the recumbent figures with closed eyes become human fossils, dead organisms whose form remains preserved. A survey of Dickinson's figures reveals that they are almost always lying down or rigidly posed in chairs. Confined physically, radiating stillness, they appear in dream states or in death. The fact that the figures seem dismembered in Woodland Scene and Composition with Still Life reinforces this deathliness. The paintings would actually be grisly were the pervasive mood not so dreamlike. Lassitude and melancholy, rather than horror, surround these implied deaths. Nonetheless, James Thrall Soby has seen in these two large canvases the mark of implicit violence. Describing Composition with Still Life, he wrote, "Its general effect is that of a well-furnished studio exploded into disorder, as if Géricault's Raft of the Medusa had struck a mine while it was being painted."² Adding to this effect are the broken tree stumps, perhaps destroyed by lightning but eerily suggestive of manikin-like human appendages.

¹Letter of 14 May 1938 from Paris to Esther Sawyer. He also wrote of his trip to Rome: "Comparatively speaking, I never have and cannot yet warm to the Italian or South European...." Esther W. Sawyer Papers, microfilm roll 901, frame 1089.

²James Thrall Soby, in Soby and Miller, Romantic Painting in America, p. 46.

Ancient and still, the old woman in the center of Woodland Scene seems a harbinger of death.¹ A mood of acceptance surprisingly reigns, an attitude that also characterizes the orthodox protestantism of Dickinson's youth. "The pervasive melancholy of the subject pictures," wrote Joe Shannon in a recent catalogue, "suggests that dwelling in Dickinson there was a depression, whether mild or deep, that was indispensable to all his best work, including the landscapes."² This extreme viewpoint seems shocking yet inescapable.³ In the self-portraits especially there is a strong expression of a deep resignation which suggest death in life. One from 1941 (estate of Earle Ludgin, Chicago, Illinois) has even been described as "like looking down into a coffin."⁴

The resignation evident in Dickinson's world has been compared to the almost spiritual fatalism of Emily Dickinson and Eugene O'Neill.⁵ The O'Neill comparison is especially meaningful. As in O'Neill, a

¹A woman posed for the figure; the effect of a bearded face is caused by the light source.

²Joe Shannon, Edwin Dickinson: Selected Landscapes (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1980), p. 16.

³Although this paper deals with the personal nature of Dickinson's art, it could be argued that there also exists a social dimension to the work. The mood of the paintings might also reflect the traumatic years of the 1930s. The darkness which invades them is as ominous as the threat of war which hung over Europe, and the gloom cannot but reflect the economic depression as well. Countering this social interpretation would be the assertion that Dickinson's work of the 1920s was already developing along these lines, and that his later work also reflects the same foreboding sensations.

⁴"Nostalgic Mysticism," p. 19. Other self-portraits are described in detail below.

⁵*Ibid.* It is an interesting coincidence that O'Neill had been involved with the Provincetown Playhouse on Cape Cod.

sense of the past and the tragic pervades Dickinson's work. A respect for the traditions of classical theatre was transformed with a new expressive symbolism by the playwright, most notably in Mourning Becomes Electra. Likewise, Dickinson's academic training and love of the Old Masters was channeled into the creation of something quite untraditional. The same inward fatalism distinguishes their approaches. The two share an expressionism based on deep-felt and repressed emotions rather than the openly expressed attitudes typical of the 1930s. In personal confrontation with Dickinson's paintings, one is impressed by a sense of loss, of futility. The darkened images disintegrate into voids, denying our ability to possess them through sight or touch. O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms develops similar themes of frustration. Although mainly couched in terms of sexuality and ambition, O'Neill's play also explores the frustration of communication.

Stranded Brig eloquently expresses the sensation of futility to which the other paintings allude. Having begun it apparently in 1933, Dickinson decided he would continue on the canvas after joining the PWAP and use it as his quota of work on the government payroll.¹ Painted in the absence of any models, Stranded Brig was the last of Dickinson's polar disaster paintings. Two Brigantines in Ice and Bible Reading Aboard the Tegetthoff were both executed in 1926. The former is an imagined disaster whose details were concocted by Dickinson and his friend Dr. Richard Parmenter, an oceanographer. The latter is an ode to an actual occurrence of 1874. Stranded Brig

¹Letter to Esther Sawyer, 20 February 1934. Esther W. Sawyer Papers, microfilm roll 901, frame 948.

depicts the Advance caught in the rocks. Alongside is the worn mast of a previous victim. According to the artist, the painting contains an abandoned stairway that "of course couldn't be;" rocks which fall threateningly from "Heaven knows" where; and "a weasel in a trap down there" at bottom left.¹ Violent death and entrapment are thus depicted in several ways.

Adler's assertion that the ship must symbolize some aspect of Dickinson himself underscores the author's supposition that Dickinson intentionally personalized the historical scene by placing it in a setting which recalled Sheldrake and his own past, as discussed previously. "The fact that Dickinson had a life-long love of the sea," Adler writes, "and that his first preference for a career was as a sea captain, cannot be without significance for the understanding of this picture." Although the ship is threatened with destruction, "A sense of emotional turmoil, violence, and passion, not of hopeless resignation, characterizes this scene."² Perhaps the snared weasel, which literally represents the situation of entrapment, also stands as a surrogate for the artist. Risking overinterpretation, one might see the stairway at right as a possible symbol for escape. The stairway, positioned near the mast of the threatened ship, would thus support Adler's feeling that the painting does not represent utter hopelessness. In contrast to the stairway is the broken footridge at left, hanging perilously over an abyss in which an earlier ship had long ago been destroyed. Falling rocks complete the sense of

¹"Reminiscences," p. 160.

²Adler, "Observations on Edwin Dickinson," p. 126.

total destruction at left, while the right side of the painting, enveloped in mist, seems to remain in a state of uncertainty, and thus perhaps potential salvation. In this light, the painting then becomes not merely a posthumous recording of a specific event, but a moving ode to destruction and death. Symbolic of some personal voyage or situation, the tone of the painting is one fraught with anxiety. In Adler's words, "the ship (the self) is being buffeted and smashed about, trying to resist the fury of these forces [unconscious forces or some particular moral turmoil] and the direction in which they are pushing it."¹

Still Life with Flowers and Irish Blue Vase (both 1936, collection of Frances Dickinson, Wellfleet, Massachusetts) are small but important paintings in Dickinson's output during the Depression, exemplars of his interest in visual obfuscation. In the flower paintings, the vase is set before a dark space which seems to be a void, though one suspects it actually to be drapery. All edges are soft and blurred. In Irish Blue Vase (ill. 44), the ceramic object itself is barely visible. Standing before them, unable to perceive the images clearly, one experiences a haunting sensation of loss, for that which is normally material and tangible totally eludes our grasp. The fragile beauty of the flowers is barely glimpsed. As they disappear before our eyes, a sense of emptiness sweeps over the viewer which parallels the painted void in the canvas.

Although Dickinson would ponder over a painting for up to a year in advance of its actual commencement, he did not execute

¹Ibid.

preliminary drawings.¹ The color value and various locations for objects were determined before work began on the canvas, but the actual painting procedure involved continual changes as the visible overpainting reveals. Even the size of the canvas itself could change. Woodland Scene, for example, began as a 62 x 72 inch canvas, had strips of new canvas sewn on to make it 72 x 84, and was completed as approximately 72 x 68 inches in size. The paintings undergo "numerous transformations and permutations," wrote John Chandler in 1970. They "are a fluid record of a changing, fleeting world and the artist's ever-changing perception of it."²

The disorder and variability of these paintings reflect attitudes which were present but not desirable in the thirties. In Paris, expatriate Henry Miller, continually reflecting on his former homeland, expressed a similar attraction to the unregulated. Like Dickinson, Miller should be regarded as a subjectively oriented artist and not as a surrealist. In his writing, a kind of stream of consciousness prevails, but it is tangential to surrealism. The same holds true for his imagery, with its wild and haunting qualities. "He who would create order...because he is imbued with will, such a man must go again and again to the stake and the gibbet," Miller wrote in the early 1930s. "I am proud to say that I am inhuman, that I belong not to men and governments, that I have nothing to do with

¹Statement by the artist, in Lee Nordness, ed. Art USA Now (Lucerne, Switzerland: C. J. Bucher, distributed by Viking Press, 1963), p. 55.

²John Chandler, in Institute of Contemporary Art, Dickinson Family Heritage, p. 5.

creeds and principles."¹ Exalted by chaos and confusion, Miller might be viewed as the satyric opposite of Dickinson's monasticism, reveling in subjective ideas similar to those which Dickinson plaintively explores.

Dickinson's interest in perspective, like that of Albright's, involves some interesting paradoxes. Employing a system devised by man to accurately record visual facts, Dickinson simultaneously revealed that perspective is an arbitrary mode at the same time as he showed that representation itself is subjective and dependent upon personal artistic choices. Like Albright (and Cézanne), Dickinson would tilt objects in his still lifes, toying with reality. Though much more subtle than Albright's rearrangements and multiple viewpoints, Dickinson's perspective is accompanied by blurred images and merging forms to create a similar effect of confusion and lack of clarity.

Depiction of an object as a stable, solid form with distinct boundaries necessarily implies man's ability to "know" that object. Depiction is, in the most basic sense, an assertion of knowledge and possession--whether conceptual or physical. Dickinson challenges the ability to know, attacking the premise of seeing and possessing.

In a period during which most were too uncertain to interpret, documentation became the first step toward an assessment of the social fabric so recently in disarray.² One view of Dickinson

¹Henry Miller, Tropic of Cancer (Paris: 1934; reprint ed., New York: Grove Press, 1961), pp. 253-54.

²Documentary photography of the period may be regarded as one of its greatest achievements in the visual arts. This is the premise of William Stott's Documentary Expression in Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). On p. xi of the introduction, the author asserts "that the primary expression of thirties America was not fiction but fiction's opposite."

and Albright might consider them as providing neither documents or interpretations of the social climate of their day. Instead, by using traditional means--representation, perspective, still life, figure painting--they assert only that we cannot know. They neither interpret nor offer solutions like the more nationalistic American Scene painters and urban social realists. Neither do they record as did the various federally-funded writers, photographers, and filmmakers, and certain of the more objective painters of the American Scene. Rather, Dickinson and Albright peer into themselves as well as their subjects. What they discover is the relativity of things. They conclude that certainty is an impossibility.

Withdrawing from social reality, Dickinson's art enters the realm of the dream, the nocturne, and the vision. "This is an internal imagery," Norman Geske wrote of Woodland Scene, "whether of dream or hallucination. It is pure romantic imagination, the free invention of psychology and emotion. One is reminded of such artists as Fuseli or, in our own tradition, of William Rimmer."¹ The Finger Lakes has been described by Lloyd Goodrich as "a landscape seen in a dream."² Newspaper critic Diana Loercher has observed that most dreams occur in black and white rather than in color, and the close to monochromatic effects of Dickinson's spectral grays and gray-greens enhance the dream-like qualities of the paintings.³ The images in the canvases reinforce the association of dreams through both their

¹Geske, Venice 34, p. 45.

²Goodrich, Edwin Dickinson, p. 14.

³Diana Loercher, "A Picture with a Secret," Christian Science Monitor, 21 August 1975, p. 24.

spectral qualities and odd compositions. Sometimes, as with the roses, objects are out of scale. Dickinson's is "an unreal world-- a world inhabited by lean-faced men and white-breasted women," wrote another critic, where "gusts of smoke, fog or fire may be perceived in...abysmal regions."¹ Villa and Alice (1941, Mr. and Mrs. Daniel W. Dietrich II, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania, ill. 42) is dependent on the premier coups of villas and cottages executed in France in 1937-38 and explores the dream sensation to the fullest. A sleeping figure is lightly sketched in the lower right corner. It appears as if she is imagining the eerie, double-peaked house floating in the background. A combination of monochromatic color, fuzzy outlines, suspended images, and ambiguous meaning encourage a reading of the painting as a dream. This is perhaps the only canvas by Dickinson to combine the mode of the premier coups with the sleeping figure, a staple of the labored studio paintings.²

It is inevitable that Dickinson's art be compared to surrealism, although the artist was by no means dependent upon contemporary European sources either in style or imagery. Dickinson's large canvases, however, share similarities in their psychological effect, in the lack of plausible relationships between objects, and in the dream quality. Goodrich has pointed out that "Dickinson freed imagery from naturalistic limitations," but he does not suggest specific associations for the objects he depicts. This is fundamentally different from the veristic surrealists, with their very

¹"Visions of Edwin Dickinson," p. 13.

²Shannon, Edwin Dickinson, pp. 14-15.

specific sexual fetishism or psychological implications. Goodrich feels that "Dickinson's imagery remains unfathomable," presenting an ultimate ambiguity.¹ His achievement lies in his ability to describe the transition from material to the immaterial without insisting on a sense of the impossibility typical of the naturalistic branch of surrealism.²

The artist has said that his early works of around 1914 and 1915, with their strange juxtapositions, might be considered surrealistic. Although there is no direct aesthetic or temporal relationship, he acknowledged the common denominators. The artist explained his combination of seemingly arbitrary objects:

Consistency among objects as being the consistency of their ordinary use never fitted a painting of necessity, to my mind. I've done lots of paintings--not lots, quite a number--with still life on the bottom that is of course heterogeneous--put in without regard to its being naturally so. More as you see things on a town dump, a very enjoyable juxtaposition of objects

¹Goodrich, Edwin Dickinson, p. 12.

²With the rising tide of formalist criticism during the late forties and early fifties, Elaine de Kooning described Dickinson's efforts in a manner which minimized his content and psychological intentions. She took at face value his assertions of interest only in the technical aspects of painting, although her formalist view was not nearly as extreme as Diane Waldman's of thirteen years later. In "Dickinson and Kiesler," p. 67, de Kooning wrote in 1952: "...Dickinson's panoramas are not literary conceptions illustrated in paint. His compositions unfold in terms of visual not dramatic situations. If nude figures, elegantly and inexplicably twisted by death or sleep, lie in opulent interiors; if shadows lop off their heads and limbs; if walls melt away to reveal stormy skies, shattered tree-trunks, masts at sea or falling boulders, these effects are always based on the formal requirements of the two-dimensional spectacle the artist is creating, not on incidents he wants to suggest to the spectator. Allowing any suggestions to take hold, however, once his design is achieved, but never probing into his own intentions as they unfold on canvas, Dickinson is not a surrealist."

completely unassociated in one's experience, just staring you in the eyes.¹

Dickinson realized that the surrealists also put together "all kinds of things that haven't normal association, as has a kitchen knife with a kitchen spoon."² His images do not and are not intended to provide the same intensity of irrational psychological stimulation. However, one can still assume that there exist symbolic purposes for the objects chosen by Dickinson. Just as he found ordinary perspective unchallenging, he found an ordinary combination of objects tiresome. (In part, the statement cited above also reflects the modernist notion of a still life as being an arrangement of parts for aesthetic purposes rather than documenting a functional or symbolic purpose.) Although his claim for these deviations from the ordinary might be to insure the stimulus of novelty, Dickinson's departures from convention also imply the validity of the unconventional and the personal.

In Europe, attracted most to older art, Dickinson spent much of his sightseeing time in museums. In Paris as a student (1919-20), he sought the Louvre, not the Left Bank.³ In France and Italy in the late 1930s, he again sought the art of the past, spending as much time as possible in the Louvre. He called the newer art in the Luxembourg a "miserable display." In Arles, Dickinson explored the Roman ruins which were to furnish the subject of Ruin at Daphne, finished only in 1953. Making a pilgrimage to Florence, Venice, and Rome, he examined the architecture and sculpture. His romantic response was dramatically different from Peter Blume's political one,

¹"Reminiscences," p. 105.

²Ibid., p. 106. ³Ibid., p. 43.

as a comparison of Ruin at Daphne and The Eternal City will make obvious. Although aware of new developments in this country in the teens, Dickinson did not attend the Armory Show but heard about it from friends. He read French art periodicals and Simplicissimus during the teens, but these did not have much effect on his work. Although he admired Picasso immensely, Dickinson regarded him from a distance.¹ Picasso had little influence on Dickinson's paintings during the 1930s, although those of the teens experimented with an eerie cubism. The early work suggested figures torn into shreds, not unlike Duchamp's first endeavors in a cubist vein.

Dickinson owed his greatest allegiance to El Greco. "I had his name and dates engraved on a gold watch just to have it around," he explained.² And it is to the Spanish mannerists that Dickinson can most accurately be compared. The distortions of space and form, "the tipped-up picture plane in which there is little depth, and objects...arranged on top of each other, and also the restless drapery," are all mannerist devices, wrote Allan Weller.³ In the middle forties, Dickinson copied El Greco's View of Toledo in the Metropolitan Museum, later hanging the copy in his living room. Referring to a 1920 trip to Spain, he told Elaine de Kooning: "When I saw the Burial of Count Orgaz, I knew where my aspirations lay."⁴

¹He did make one attempt to visit Picasso while in Paris during the late thirties. In the fifties, Dickinson called him the most important living artist. "Reminiscences," p. 217.

²Ibid.

³Allan Weller, in Nordness, ed., Art USA Now, pp. 55ff.

⁴Quoted in de Kooning, "Dickinson Paints a Picture," p. 50.

The similarities move beyond compositional and procedural modes. Dickinson's paintings with their dark swirling forms exude a similar intense emotionalism and spirituality which intimates an other-worldly existence. It seems especially significant that Burial of Count Orgaz was of critical importance to Dickinson's development. Though more mystical than funereal, its theme of death combined with the baroque quality of its old-master technique must have exerted a dual attraction on Dickinson. The painting offered both a content and a style to which Dickinson deeply related. But Dickinson is quiet and introspective, contained, whereas El Greco is expansive.

Dickinson's paintings are revealing not only in the realm of the philosophical and speculative but also on a more personal plane: they reflect aspects of his personality. These emotional and psychological characteristics in turn complete the circle and guide the art. It is in the self-portraits perhaps that these factors are to be most easily discerned. Dickinson's reasons for completing over twenty-five self-portraits are partly practical. As he has pointed out, a "model is always available" for a self-portrait "and eager to rest at the same time as you do."¹ Like still life objects, self-portraits are convenient and do not require a model who must be paid for posing. Along with these obvious and somewhat humorous reasons, there seem to be other less practical motives for Dickinson's interest in the self-portrait. These can be discerned by an examination of canvases from the 1930s and early 1940s. As has been noted, Dickinson will not address the meaning of these works,

¹"Reminiscences," p. 138.

feeling that their significance would be difficult to express and that his explanations might not be accurate.

Shiloh (1931) depicts the artist in Civil War uniform lying prone, as if dead, "evidently on a shield, with both my swords. I suppose I was simulating a casualty," Dickinson explained.¹ This tentative explanation seems inappropriate for what seems obvious. "To paint oneself as dead means to identify with the dead," writes Eliot Adler, who also noted that the figure in Shiloh looked to him very much like the head of Count Orgaz in El Greco's painting.² Thus, it may be that in Shiloh, Dickinson's interests in El Greco, the theme of death, and the preoccupation with the past (the Civil War in this case) all come together in an image of the artist's self. The 1942 Self-Portrait in Uniform (ill. 45) presents the artist again in a Civil War uniform; a 1940 self-portrait reveals the same three-quarters view. In both, the head is erect and the gaze is one of intense, almost angry concentration. For an artist passionately against war, one wonders at these warlike self-portraits. Perhaps they express the inevitability of strife and conflict. In a time of war, Dickinson appears as if preparing for battle, but he is resigned and melancholy, not eager for the fight.

Although executed slightly after the years examined in this paper, Dickinson's numerous self-portraits from 1940 to 1943 are a key to understanding his conception of the artist's role. The Self-portrait in Gray Shirt (1943, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, ill. 47) contains an awkward combination

¹"Reminiscences," p. 141.

²Adler, "Observations on Edwin Dickinson," p. 125.

of two elements. A shirt, too large for the artist, seems to be unattached to his body but floats before it. Most strange is the blurred face, as if seen through gauze. It is positioned frontally, with eyes closed. The artist looks inward, not out at the external world. Of another self-portrait (from 1941, estate of Earle Ludgin, Chicago, Illinois), Dickinson later remarked upon seeing a photograph of it, "I guess I was less happy and optimistic right then than I usually am. It certainly doesn't look very happy, I must say."¹

The painting is extraordinarily powerful. With gray vacant eyes and mouth slightly open and empty, the figure seems to silently speak into a void. The person we see is enervated and alienated. Elsewhere (a 1940 self-portrait in the collection of T. E. Hanley, a 1942 Self-portrait in Uniform in the collection of Edward L. Shein, and a 1947 Self-portrait in the collection of Dr. Alexander Halperin, Washington, D.C.), the image is forceful and challenging, even to the point of being threatening.

These paintings support a notion that art is self-reflexive, a concept especially significant in a time of unprecedented world crisis. They are metaphors for self-reflection made literal, for Dickinson repeatedly used mirrors to do these paintings. They are not remembered images, nor were they done from photographs. The artist always depicts himself in concentration, not in the act of painting. There are no easels, no brushes, no models. Neither is the artist seen within a social framework, either with friends or

¹"Reminiscences," p. 42.

in a more public role.¹ Neither indoors nor outdoors, Dickinson usually appears against a dark gray void. Only in the Ludgin self-portrait is a background element indicated, and one is at a loss to determine if the roofs depicted there are a view through a window or a painting on a wall. The artist is presented in all of the self-portraits as a visual fact, almost a thing; it is as if he is shown in contemplation of that very fact of existing. Angry, pensive, or wracked in deep thought, these canvases represent the artist confronting himself in spiritual and mental isolation. In some of the paintings, Dickinson's face stares out of the canvas as if regarding both himself and our world; the mood is bleak and without optimism.

Katherine Kuh has found "anxiety with almost unbearable nostalgia" in certain of Dickinson's large canvases.² Indeed, these paintings transmit a sense of frustration, hope, and ultimately disappointment which the artist himself felt in facing them. "My large pieces were a disappointment to me," he has admitted, "but they were the best I could do and I was going to do them for better or for worse."³ Part of the reason for these sensations experienced before Dickinson's major canvases is that the paintings themselves are unresolved. Dickinson explained:

¹ Philip Evergood's 1934 Nude by the El in the Smithsonian Institution's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden offers an excellent comparison. It shows the artist painting a picture of a nude, the model, an entire studio, two friends, and through the window the city of New York. The artist views himself within a set of relationships to people, place, and function.

² Katherine Kuh, "Art without Isms," Saturday Review, 4 March 1961, p. 45.

³ Kuh, Artist's Voice, p. 70.

None of the large paintings is really finished. There comes a time when I stop--because to go on would mean reorganizing the canvas from bottom up. I can't throw away the investment of so many years--nine years in the case of Ruin at Daphne. So I make the best of a bad job by finishing them as well as I can. In other words, they all topple over when they're about three-fifths done.¹

There are degrees of remaining unfinished, however. Dickinson felt that Composition with Still Life was more successful than Woodland Scene and was determined not to abandon it as he had the earlier painting.²

The paintings themselves record Dickinson's varying ability to finish them. They bear the marks of continual overpainting and the evidence of the time taken in scraping away passages to be reworked. Dickinson's slow working methods led him into a circular dilemma: as time passed and he continued on the same painting, he found that his ideas changed. "One starts to disapprove of the earlier work," he explained. Instead of moving onto a new canvas at that point, Dickinson would doggedly return to the same painting to revise it. The result is a keenly felt by any sensitive spectator. Frustration and a sense of the incomplete are the paintings' legacy. We witness a reexamination of decisions and an application of new but soon to be superceded solutions. For Dickinson the canvases remain unfinished and exist as provocative laments at the inconclusive nature of art. But they are not emblems of defeat. On the back of his last major work, Ruin at Daphne (1943-53), is written, "Unfinished, Not

¹Ibid., p. 73.

²Letter to Ainsley and Esther Sawyer, 12 December 1936, in Esther W. Sawyer Papers, microfilm roll 901, frame 1009.

Abandoned."¹ This epitaph applies to all of Dickinson's paintings and suggests that although definitive resolutions do not exist, there is no cause for despair. Dickinson's canvases are an acceptance of relativity and indeterminacy; they are the negation of the planned, the fixed, the absolute.

¹Goodrich, Edwin Dickinson, p. 19.

CHAPTER III

THE USE OF SYMBOLS--

LORSER FEITELSON AND HELEN LUNDEBERG

Background

Lorser Feitelson, born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1898, was raised in New York City. Encouraged by his parents, he studied art in this country and, during the 1920s, in Paris. From an initial approach dependent on cubo-futurist influence (developed during the later teens), Feitelson turned in the 1920s to a neoclassical figurative style. Typical of this phase is Diana at the Bath (1922, The Brooklyn Museum). A series of classically stylized peasant women and children followed, such as Two Peasant Women (1925) and Peasant Interior (1929).¹ In the late 1920s, Feitelson moved from New York to Los Angeles. By 1934, he had evolved the style which would come to be known as postsurrealism--a figurative mode utilizing juxtaposed objects which take on symbolic and associational meanings.² Helen

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all works by Feitelson are in the collection of the Feitelson Revocable Trust, Los Angeles.

²The name of this style has been spelled different ways at various times; "postsurrealism" as one word is used in this paper, except for quoted material, where the author's usage is followed. In her doctoral dissertation on Lorser Feitelson, Diane Moran points out that Feitelson and his associate Helen Lundeborg originally

Lundeberg first knew Feitelson in the 1930s as his student at the Stickney Memorial School of Art in Pasadena. Born in Chicago in 1908, Lundeberg moved with her family to Pasadena as a child. By 1934, working closely with Feitelson, she had also begun to produce mature work in a postsurrealist mode.¹ Feitelson and Lundeberg married in the 1940s.

Feitelson's move from New York to Los Angeles points to a basic motivation for the entire group of subjective artists in the 1930s. Disenchanted with the art world politics of New York and the hostilities resulting from group affiliations, Feitelson found Los Angeles a pleasantly isolated place in which to pursue his own artistic path.² The art world there was scattered, with the result that there was no oppressive domination of one school, whether regionalism or modernism. The physical layout of the city contributed, as it still does, to the relative isolation of the artists. Feitelson explained, "If there were a couple of artists, and if you wanted to visit them, you have to take two or three days--one lives out here, another very far in the opposite direction. Very few even knew of each other, or

preferred "Subjective Classicism" or "New Classicism," although "Post-Surrealism" and "postsurrealism" quickly became the most commonly used designations. Painting of Lorser Feitelson, p. 11.

¹Joseph Young cites Persephone (1933, unlocated) as Lundeberg's first postsurrealist work in "Helen Lundeberg: An American Independent," Art International, 20 September 1971, p. 46.

²"Lorser Feitelson Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," 2 March 1974, Oral History Program, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, p. 11; and Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg, interview in Los Angeles, California, p. 11; and Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg, interview in Los Angeles, California, 24 October 1977.

if they did, they never saw each other."¹ Until the WPA, at least, artists in Southern California "had no audience, no patronage, and if they liked it out here, they'd better paint for their own satisfaction!"² This emphasis on the artist's aloneness was not necessarily a liability, for it demanded self-direction.

Feitelson's description of the Los Angeles art scene should not be taken to imply that the city existed in a total cultural vacuum. By the early thirties especially, there was a great deal of artistic activity: Hans Hofmann taught briefly at the Chouinard School of Art; Orozco was painting his mural of Prometheus at Pomona College; Siqueiros was actively involved in murals at Chouinard and elsewhere. Later in the decade, Rico Lebrun, Hans Burckhardt, and neo-romantic Eugene Berman arrived on the scene.³ In addition, Walter and Louise Arensberg had retreated to Los Angeles from the East, bringing with them this hemisphere's largest collection of Duchamp and Brancusi, as well as a host of paintings by Picasso, Braque, Gris, Gleizes, Klee, and Kandinsky. In the late twenties and in the thirties they also acquired works by the surrealists, particularly Ernst, Miró, and Tanguy.⁴ The vitality of the scene, however, in no

¹"Feitelson Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," p. 3.

²Ibid., p. 4.

³These facts have been pointed out by Joseph Young in "Lorser Feitelson and Los Angeles Modernism," Artweek (Los Angeles), 21 October 1972, p. 10.

⁴For an extended discussion of the Southern California art scene, see Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, pp. 100-110; Ashton, Yes, But...A Critical Study of Philip Guston, pp. 11-30; and Henry T. Hopkins et al., Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1976), pp. 28-32; 83-107.

way contradicts Feitelson's assertion of the lack of a dominant direction. Henry Hopkins feels that throughout this century the Los Angeles art scene has remained characterized by a lack of homogeneity.¹ It is precisely this kind of situation which often gives rise to highly individual artistic expression.

Feitelson was probably more knowledgeable about current art than any artist in Los Angeles. In Paris and New York during the 1920s, he knew and was impressed by de Chirico's work and had met Siqueiros during the Mexican's first trip to California in 1931.² Feitelson and Lundeberg often visited the Arensberg's collection, rich in dada and surrealism. In 1934-35, Feitelson was director of the Stanley Rose Art Gallery, a space at the rear of the Stanley Rose Bookshop. The exhibitions there displayed contemporary art and included both Americans and Europeans. From 1935 through 1937, Feitelson directed his own Hollywood Gallery.³ As a prominent teacher well-traveled and sympathetic to new tendencies in art, Feitelson was regarded by his fellows as an authority on the subject of surrealism.⁴

Feitelson and Lundeberg disapproved of the "organizer" types of the thirties, particularly those who espoused left-wing attitudes

¹Hopkins, Painting and Sculpture in California, p. 28.

²Feitelson and Lundeberg, interview.

³Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, pp. 116, 280-81.

⁴Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, then only 19 years old, wrote to Feitelson from Mexico in 1934 requesting information on surrealist methods of composition, explaining, "we feel that you must have evolved new forms that are of interest." Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg Papers, microfilm roll 1103, frame 525.

as a necessary component of artistic expression. They sought self-realization rather than group philosophy. Feitelson had even been opposed to the anarchist Ferrer School in his New York days, claiming that having a building was the first step toward institutionalization.¹ Feitelson felt most akin to his early artistic models--the painters of the School of Paris--who were unconcerned with organization. "In Los Angeles," affirms Diane Moran, it was left to Lorser Feitelson to carry the banner for a personal kind of art with no 'social' implications."² Given these attitudes, it comes as a surprise that Feitelson was a mural supervisor for the Los Angeles WPA/FAP and that he and Lundeborg organized the postsurrealist group in 1935. Feitelson also supervised the FAP easel painting section at one time.³ This apparent contradiction is somewhat resolved by knowledge of the artist's actual ambivalence toward these efforts. Feitelson claims to have taken the mural supervisor's position for financial reasons and with the stipulation that he be free from the numerous regulations then in effect. Regarding the apparent collective mentality which led to the formation of the postsurrealist group, the distinctive variety of their work in style and content (except for Feitelson's and Lundeborg's work, which is closely related) and their emphasis on individualism separates the group from others based on more dogmatic beliefs. The abstractionists and social

¹Feitelson and Lundeborg, interview.

²Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, p. 113.

³"Helen Lundeborg Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," 4 June 1974, Oral History Program, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, p. 33.

realists, in particular, were involved in regular meetings and policy pronouncements. "As a movement, Post-surrealism was a loose association of congenial artists with similar but not identical aims who banded together chiefly for the purpose of exhibiting their works," Moran has explained. "There were no regular meetings nor any manifestoes."¹

Feitelson worked not only in the administration of the WPA/FAP but also as a muralist himself. The murals were done in an acceptable 1930s style and referred back to Feitelson's neoclassic figurative style of the 1920s. These works, such as Hendrick Hudson Welcomed by the Friendly Indians at the Hooper Avenue School in Los Angeles, were especially uninspiring and bear little relation to Feitelson's provocative postsurrealist works.

Over the course of a sixty-year career, Feitelson developed a number of styles which relate in content but are dramatically different in their visual appearance. His early cubo-futurist works as well as his late paintings (which seem to address formalist questions on the use of line, energy, shape, and emotion through abstract form) share with the work from the 1930s certain commonalities: a commitment to an art "which would transcend extremist politics and concern itself with permanent aesthetic and human values;"² dynamic rhythmic organization; an interest in polarities of

¹San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg: A Retrospective Exhibition (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1980), p. 13.

²Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, p. 83.

geometry/curvilinearity, kineticism/stability, mystery/clarity; and an appeal to both the retinal and the conceptual.¹

Lundeberg worked extensively on the mural project and in the easel painting section as well. At one point, she was an assistant on one of Feitelson's murals. Between 1933 and 1941, Lundeberg completed murals at the Los Angeles Hall of Records, Venice High School, and Centinella Park. Works such as Jedediah Smith near San Gabriel--1826 are simply narrative illustrations. She has explained:

At the time I liked them well enough. I don't have much desire to go back and look at them again. You know, there's something very stymieing about....In the first place, your subject matter is assigned to you. Then you know it's going to have to be approved by non-art people; the sponsors of the thing have to like it, or at least they can find fault with it. And then you don't do the whole thing yourself, either. And there's no chance for reconsideration. You make the sketch and it's approved.²

Lundeberg complained that as the designer of a mural one did little painting and actually spent most of the time watching the assistants "to see that they don't do anything horrendous."³ There was nothing personal in the murals; "it was a job."⁴ One supervised the crew and worried about deadlines. The large scale demanded by the murals was also something Lundeberg disliked. She began around 1942 to

¹Feitelson himself partially felt that postsurrealism broke with the concerns of his other works. Evidence of this attitude lies in an analysis of paintings which were shown in exhibitions during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1959, at the Paul Rivas Gallery in Los Angeles and in 1962 at the Long Beach Museum of Art in Long Beach, California, works from the 1930s were not exhibited while examples of Feitelson's work from both earlier and later periods were shown together. During these years--the heyday of Greenbergian formalism--the postsurrealist paintings were unacceptable.

²Ibid., p. 29. ³Ibid., p. 28.

⁴Feitelson and Lundeberg, interview.

concentrate on very small canvases as "a reaction to all these great big impersonal things that I'd been doing."¹ Lundeberg's own mural work was not only inferior to her privately done easel paintings but also totally unrelated to her overall conceptual approach at the time.

For a short period before working on the mural project, Lundeberg worked in the easel painting division, which she found an especially uncomfortable experience. Although allowed personal freedom to choose a subject, one still worked on the project's premises in a semi-public environment. For some artists this was acceptable, but for Lundeberg making art was a private act. "There was something discouraging about that kind of thing," she explained, "working in a place that's as public as that doesn't appeal to me."² She found much more amenable the experience of working in the lithograph division, a place that traditionally demands that the artist work in the company of craftsmen. A surviving print from this effort, Enigma (1937, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution) differs from Lundeberg's other WPA/FAP pieces and relates to her important easel paintings of the 1930s and 1940s. (It is discussed in detail later.)

Relationship to Surrealism

The term "postsurrealism" obviously denotes that the art under its rubric bears some relationship to European surrealism. The designation both asserts independence from surrealism and at the same

¹"Lundeberg Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," pp. 43-4.

²Ibid., p. 32.

time acknowledges an affinity simply by the incorporation of the word "surrealism." This tangential relationship was pointed to in the 1936 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism. Feitelson, Lundeberg, and their colleague Knud Merrild were included and in the catalogue were placed under the heading "Artists independent of the Dada-Surrealist movements."¹ Diane Moran, however, claims that postsurrealism "was antithetical to Surrealism in intention, content, and form."² The most important difference between surrealism and postsurrealism is that the Americans employed fairly explicit symbols, analogies, and metaphors. They dispensed with the illogical and the irrational in favor of making specific points. They wished to remain subjectively oriented at the same time as they tried to establish meaning for themselves. Examining an interior world unrelated to social events, Feitelson and Lundeberg nonetheless reflected the general American tendency of a need for meaning and structure even as they moved away from objectivity. They hoped to postulate a coherent metaphysical attitude, while the surrealists accepted a plethora of unreconcilable ideas. As early as 1935, Feitelson had come out strongly against the automatic aspects of surrealism. Arthur Millier quoted Feitelson as saying, "Surrealism was bound to die quickly...because it attempted to make 'automatic' art, uncontrolled by the conscious mind."³ Lundeberg

¹Other Americans in this group were Peter Blume, Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Federico Castellon. Except for Castellon, all were indeed independent of surrealism and may accurately be described as belonging under the "subjective" label.

²Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, pp. 117-18.

³Arthur Millier, "Is This the World's New Art Trend?", Los

also insisted on this point: "The pictorial organization was supposed to be subjective and to involve association of ideas and so on, but still it was a structured thing; it was no automatic recording...."¹

Surrealism, however, did offer certain attractions. Feitelson was particularly drawn to the surrealist intention of giving multiple meanings to a single image and by the rich associations which resulted from the juxtaposition of different objects. These methods were common to both surrealism and postsurrealism. In 1941, when Feitelson was reevaluating his artistic stance, he wrote at length of the relation between the two movements. His words reflect a less biased view than in previous years when he was overly apt to stress the differences:

The provocativeness of ambiguous forms is only one of the psychological phenomena exploited by Surrealist and Postsurrealist alike. But Postsurrealism should in no way be identified with the Surrealists' Dadaistic denial of the universality of the aesthetic. Postsurrealism is the antithesis of the introspective illustration of the popular expressionist-Surrealists. The graphic objectification of conscious and sub-conscious psychic meanderings in itself does not create art. Only when the introspective activities are integrated into an aesthetic pattern do they become legitimate elements of art.²

Ambiguity and multiple implications are shared characteristics, but postsurrealism insists on the artist as the formulator of aesthetic meaning, not as a vehicle for the pre-existing subconscious.

Poet and critic Jules Langsner, a close friend of Feitelson and Lundeborg, wrote in 1935 that postsurrealism "affirms all that Surrealism negates"; that is, "impeccable aesthetic order rather than

Angeles Times, n.d., probably 1935, in Lorser Feitelson Artist File, Fine Arts/Portrait Gallery Library, Smithsonian Institution.

¹"Lundeborg Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," p. 73.

²Feitelson, "What is Postsurrealism?", p. 6.

chaotic confusion, conscious rather than unconscious manipulation of materials, the exploration of the normal functionings of the mind rather than the individual idiosyncrasies of the dream...."¹ To the list of differences already mentioned, he adds a particularly American note by pointing to what Americans regarded as the pathological interest of the surrealists. Langsner affirms that the postsurrealists were concerned with the normal. The differences between normal and abnormal are often merely a question of degree, but in this case they are clear. Contemplation and examination, not fetishism, characterize postsurrealism. Specifically, Feitelson and Lundeberg deal with genesis rather than sexual intercourse, morphological similarities rather than dissection, and the function of actual vision rather than visionary fantasy. Lundeberg has stressed this viewpoint in affirming, "Post-Surrealism was an effort to make a reasonable use of more or less normal processes that go on in the mind, not the fantastic dream sort of thing."² Ultimately, surrealism should be regarded as a fertilizing influence on postsurrealism, which blossomed under the example of surrealism's subjective and associative imagery.

Despite their disavowals, Feitelson and Lundeberg were regarded as surrealists by the popular press. The Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express illustrated Lundeberg's Enigma in 1939 and termed the artist a "Surrealist Painter."³ A cartoon in The New York Times

¹Quoted in Seldis, introduction to La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, Helen Lundeberg (La Jolla, California: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1971), n.p.

²"Helen Lundeberg Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," p. 72.

³Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express, 21 February 1939,

from 20 December 1936 responded to the postsurrealist exhibition in Brooklyn with a comical illustration of a painter engaged in work while being sprayed by his assistants with laughing gas and cocaine gas. The caption read, "The Post-Surrealist."¹

Postsurrealism

Feitelson and Lundeborg rejected involvement with social reality in order to explore private concerns. By establishing a conscious and comprehensible symbolism they examined universal themes of birth, death, growth, and memory. Natural phenomena interested them greatly, especially biological and psychological processes. Though reaction to this art by conservative elements is not easily discovered, the left-wing attitude can be seen in Joseph Solman's writing for Art Front. His detailed review of postsurrealism was occasioned by a group exhibition in 1936 at the Brooklyn Museum entitled The Post-Surrealists.² Solman found Feitelson "floundering among outworn pictorial trappings and the usual grandiose symbols of Genesis, Conjugation, and Death." His objections centered on the content of the works, which he found "full of religious-

n.p.; in Helen Lundeborg Artist File, American Art/Portrait Gallery Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

¹Also in Lorser Feitelson Artist File.

²The Brooklyn exhibition included thirty-five paintings by Grace Clements (6), Feitelson (7), Helen Klokke (1), Lucien Labaudt (7), Lundeborg (11), and Knud Merrild (3). Of the group, Clements was probably the least like Feitelson and Lundeborg. She was critical of abstract art for its lack of content and disapproved of surrealism for its lack of unity. In general, she was sympathetic to Marxist ideas.

philosophical connotations which are a complete negation of the great class-struggle today."¹

Despite their unconcern for the realities of day-to-day existence, Solman could not resist being attracted to Lundeberg's canvases. He criticized her romanticizing tendencies but waxed rhapsodic over her finely wrought compositions and sensitive coloring. Calling her a "high priestess of astrology," he wrote of paintings such as Red Planet and Cosmicide (1934 and 1935, respectively, both collection of the artist, Los Angeles): "She dreams about planets, attracts them to her room and drinks in their topaz light."² Still, he concluded that Feitelson and Lundeberg remained too close to surrealism. Explaining that cubism, mainly a formalist studio experiment, was transformed by the likes of Orozco and the graphic designer Cassandre to become a socially utilitarian force, Solman announced that postsurrealism must do the same for the mysticism of surrealism. Of the artists in the Brooklyn show, Feitelson and Lundeberg were accused of "conserving their mystical purity while the others are trying to make their symbols speak in terms of an acute social criticism." The only way for postsurrealism to become a vital aesthetic statement was to totally "reject the hallowed spaces of surrealism and replace its dead symbols with living ones."³

Despite Solman's assertions, Lundeberg's and Feitelson's symbols were extremely vital then and remain so today. They are, however, symbols of an introspective nature and thus antithetical

¹Solman, "Post Surrealists of California," p. 12.

²Ibid. ³Ibid.

to the role for art sought by the editors of Art Front. The theme of self-involvement and self-examination is paramount in two of the major postsurrealist works of the 1930s: Lundeberg's Double Portrait of the Artist in Time (1936, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, ill. 48) and Feitelson's Filial Love (1939, ill. 46). Filial Love is, like many of Feitelson's works from the thirties, a meditation on procreation and growth. In the left foreground is a one-quarter profile of a man; it is a self-portrait.¹ Before this figure, a conglomeration of images, plausible and implausible, rests on a table. A partially visible canvas reveals the lower half of two nude female torsos in an embrace--a larger mother figure and a smaller adolescent one. A sketch to the side of the canvas shows a child caressing her mother's face. On the table by the artist's left hand lies half of a peach, split open so that the pit falls out as if emerging from the womb. The right hand of the artist points to strangely interlocked abstract forms--bone-like biomorphic shapes--suggestive of female anatomy as well as of certain surrealist sculpture. In the background is a group of boulders nestling together, the smaller ones cleft down the middle to give a vaginal appearance. A globe resting on the table completes the imagery.

There are several specific inferences. On the personal level, the artist meditates upon the actual family he has fathered. Images of conception are prominent: the womb-like peach and elongated forms interlocked with curvilinear ones. Biological promulgation is equated with artistic creation: the canvas and the drawing which the artist has made bear literal images of procreation. Filial Love suggests

¹Feitelson and Lundeberg, interview.

that creation and the creative act are the very substance of art. The subject of the artist is not the external world in which he lives but an abstract and internal world where the artist speculates on his role as creator.

For Lundeberg's work, speculation and meditation are also essential themes. Within these broad concerns is a concentration on one special subject--the self. Developing differently from Feitelson, Lundeberg has far more often included her own image within her canvases. Usually this takes the form of a profile or full-face view, as in Microcosm and Macrocosm (1937, collection of the artist, Los Angeles, ill 49) and Double Portrait of the Artist in Time. Often, the artist's own hand appears to perform some action, as in The Veil (1946). For Lundeberg, self-examination is the essence of art. One of her earliest mature works is a Self-Portrait (1933, collection of the artist, Los Angeles, ill. 50). Unlike most self-portraits, the artist is not presented looking at the spectator but in profile against a mountainous, rocky landscape whose colors reiterate those of the figure's clothing and skin. Similarities are suggested between the mountains and the figure. Lundeberg does not present a typical self-portrait because she does not look at herself; in other words, she has not examined herself before a mirror. Instead, the artist presents her own image as an icon symbolizing "woman," "self," or "strength." The canvas is not primarily visual observation but a symbolic rendering of the artist's self-conception.

The frequent inclusion of self-portraits reinforces the personal nature of Lundeberg's speculation. Her concerns are self-reflexive and highly subjective. Critic Henry Seldis has written, "Introspection is

the basis of her motionless art. But the very fact that it can move us to greater awareness demonstrates that her paintings are far more than a progression of metaphorical self-portraits."¹ A literal sign for the self-reflexive nature of Lundeberg's art is the mirror. Repeated many times since it appeared in oil in Enigma (also titled The Mirror, 1934, collection of the artist), the mirror is a standard symbol for self-reflection, but rarely is it employed by Lundeberg to literally reflect the environment. The mirrors in her paintings display symbols rather than reality, not the real but the subjective. The image contained within the mirror's frame--a lightbulb in most cases--suggests not so much the bare lightbulb hanging in the center of the artist's studio, but the concepts of illumination, seeing, and mechanical creation (as opposed to human creation).

Concerning their postsurrealist paintings, Feitelson and Lundeberg have stressed two points repeatedly: the significance of psychology for their work, and the importance of using symbols which can be readily interpreted by the viewer. Their mode of symbolization has been briefly described above. Their attitudes toward psychology are much more complex, even contradictory, and are perhaps not fully realized in the paintings. Yet, an attempt to understand the psychological motivations and effects of postsurrealism is important in further establishing its subjective nature. The psychological thrust bears a tangential relationship to surrealist aesthetics while also pointing out inherent differences between the two subjective approaches.

¹Henry J. Seldis, in La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, Helen Lundeberg, n.p.

For Feitelson, psychology was the major scientific discovery of the twentieth century.¹

Feitelson and Lundeberg were not adherents of any one psychological orientation. "We were not interested in Jung, Adler, or just Freud, but introspection itself," they explain.² However, as Diane Moran points out, postsurrealism is in fact more closely related to Jung than to Freud and the surrealists, for Feitelson and Lundeberg rejected the value of the mind's automatic meanderings in the unconscious.³ It was the process of self-examination which motivated them, but not only in terms of a psychoanalytical self-examination. They sought as well to express various processes such as the mechanisms of sight (visual psychology), the ways in which one makes mental analogies between function and structure, and the meaning of gestures and eye movements. They also explored more speculative realms which moved beyond the borders of psychology to become philosophical in orientation. Feitelson's Genesis #2 (1934, ill. 53) posits the essential biological similarities between all natural things. Lundeberg's Microcosm and Macrocosm suggests the relationship between cellular structure and cosmic structure.

Feitelson has written of his interest in psychology:

The interest in psychological phenomena is responsible for the definitely subjective tendency of the newest art expressions.

¹Lorser Feitelson, "What is Postsurrealism?", 'Spanish Village' Quarterly, Spring 1941, p. 6; and conversation with Diane Moran, 15 August 1977. Feitelson was wrong in his assumption. His neglect of profound developments in physics and electronics reveals more than anything his own preoccupation with psychology.

²Feitelson and Lundeberg, interview.

³Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, pp. 119-20.

The direction is the antithesis of the previous modern efforts toward classicism....

The psychological properties, which differentiate Post-surrealism from the purely perceptive organizational principles of earlier classic masters, necessitate a wholly unprecedented aesthetic order. The Postsurrealist endeavors to direct an ordered flow of movement of the observer's attention through a planned series of objects, or configurations of objects, which unfold and develop a universal idea in a manner analogous to the development of a poem or symphony. Contemplation of the sequence of the introspectively related objects dictates rhythms which are "thought-unity" rhythms, rather than actual graphic lines. This introspective order constitutes a new aesthetic structure in art.¹

Feitelson intended that one not simply view the different symbols in his paintings and think of their respective meanings, but that the images should flow together in a rhythmic manner because of their placement and relative size; one contemplates the symbols as a whole. Moran has elucidated this statement to show how postsurrealist symbols are not merely iconographic but must be interpreted in a more subjective way. "A lily in one Post-surrealist picture might well have a subjective function entirely different from its function in another depending upon its interaction with other objects in the same work. Its meaning is synthesized within the psyche of the viewer according to its associative role within the individual work."² Feitelson intended this to be more than a semantic distinction. For example, the planets in Love: Eternal Recurrence (1935-36, ill 54) suggest creation and infinity. In another context, they relate more to scientific or biological endeavors, as in Lundeberg's Cosmicide (1935, collection of the artist, Los Angeles, ill. 52).

¹Feitelson, "What is Postsurrealism?", p. 6.

²Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, p. 118.

Psychology was a pervasive influence in the 1930s among the intellectually inclined, and there was often a great deal of psychological talk about art which in fact contained little psychology. This was true of the postsurrealists as well. For Feitelson and Lundeberg, who were not adherents of any specific credo, the importance of psychology was predominantly as an impetus for their art to be involved in examining mental associations and the interpretation of images. Poet-critic Arthur Millier, conversant with Feitelson's ideas, wrote in The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly: "The length or size of an object depicted is not determined as in the prevalent mode of composition, by the space in the picture it has to fill or by naturalistic proportions, but by the object's psychological importance in the whole picture, both as it effects the spectator and as it relates to the other idea-conveying objects in the picture."¹ Millier complicates a simple issue and affirms psychological motivations where there are none. The size of the objects has to do rather with their importance in terms of meaning and is a fairly traditional usage.

Feitelson and Lundeberg hoped that their images would be neither transparently obvious nor so abstruse as to require detailed analysis. They hoped that "contemplation" would somehow produce a cerebral understanding in an almost subconscious manner. They did not seek to create pictures which required an exegesis, although some of the less successful canvases appear to warrant such. Millier spoke for Feitelson in 1936:

¹[Arthur Millier], "Californian Art," The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly 23 (July 1936), p. 146.

Instead, you will stand in front of it [the canvas] and enjoy a sequence of optically apprehended thoughts which total up to a universal idea. It is not, he claims, literature miscast as painting, because the ideas are aroused by forms instead of, as in book, by words. Neither are the ideas something which are explained when written down. Their meaning comes to the spectator through contemplating analogous or antithetic forms, which by the way the artist combines them, arouse the idea.¹

This goal must be regarded as only partially attained. Despite the artist's protestations, the images are literary--they exist as a visual language with precise correspondances in spoken or written forms. Some works, however, are more suggestive and less explicable than others. Lundeberg's The Red Planet (1934, collection of the artist, Los Angeles, ill. 55), for instance, conveys a non-specific sense of the mystery of gravitation and of terrestrial and extra-terrestrial existence.

An examination of the various themes in Feitelson's and Lundeberg's paintings reveals ideas which have been important to other of the subjective painters: flux and growth, ambiguity, romanticism, duality, introspection, and memory. Of special importance to Feitelson and Lundeberg was the theme of birth and genesis, which was examined repeatedly from 1934 to 1944. Feitelson was also fascinated by classical art. This interest led not only to the creation of structured forms but also to the actual emulation of Italian mannerism, a favorite art historical period for the artist. The elements of mannerism complement Feitelson's concerns with ambiguity, complicated structure, and dynamic movement.²

¹Arthur Millier, article from Los Angeles Times excerpted in "Post-Surrealism," The Art Digest, 1 October 1936, p. 14.

²In the thirties, this dynamic figurative style was prominent among a variety of artists, from the academic muralists and the social realists to the regionalists Benton and Curry.

Writing on Feitelson's early cubo-futurist drawings, Jules Langsner explained that the artist "wanted the figure to appear to expand and contract, advance and recede, and occupy space equally subject to states of flux."¹ This statement characterizes as well Feitelson's non-figurative paintings of the 1960s and 1970s, with their undulating colored lines creating whiplash effects against solid grounds. The structured forms of the postsurrealist paintings surprisingly offer similar characteristics, for a kinetic quality is found in Feitelson's work throughout his career. Flight Over New York at Twilight (ill. 57) and Love: Eternal Recurrence (both 1935-36) reveal this kineticism. In the latter the figures are viewed from a close vantage point, and the canvas is divided into three vertical sections. On the left, two partial figures are seen. Below them are pictured the miniature forms of a couple walking hand in hand. Architectural forms give way to a panorama of a cemetery in the center, and on the right is an infinite recession of space. It is a view of the cosmos, within which floats a strange scroll-like sheet of paper.

The tripartite structure of Love: Eternal Recurrence also functions as a way of simultaneously presenting three analogous interpretations of the eternal recurrence of both love and death. Earthly love on the left, perhaps love beyond the grave in the center, and on the right the presentation of the cosmos with its alternate suggestions of creation and eternity. Moran regards the tiny image of a couple embracing on a precipice, "the strata of which are exposed, as suggesting the endless generations that have shared the same

¹Jules Langsner, "Permanence and Change in the Art of Lorser Feitelson," Art International, 25 September 1963, p. 73.

experience."¹ In this case, an exegesis should only be considered tentative, for Feitelson believed that "there are certain things that are beyond comprehension," and these things were often what he hoped to express in his art.² In his rendering of the universe with the odd, uninterpretable scroll weaving across stellar space, we see the unfathomable. The cosmos is both literally and figuratively "the unknown."

A work from 1935, Susanna and the Elders, provides a more literal use of the tripartite format to present analogous expressions of the same theme. The canvas is a tentative exploration and less successful than paintings like Love: Eternal Recurrence. Arthur Millier described Susanna and the Elders:

It begins with a broad picturization of this favorite old-master subject done in the Venetian-Renoir tradition. The next panel interprets the essence of the subject in terms of two pairs of spectacles, a bent fork and a peach, very realistically painted. The third version reduces the theme to those provocative abstract forms beloved of the ultra-modern painters.³

The peach obviously represents the luscious Susanna about to be plunged into by the fork, which signifies the hungry elders. The image capitalizes on a symbol of penetration and on the Freudian idea of relating oral gratification to the sexual act. The three different styles used to represent the scene are a premonitory summation of Feitelson's development over a fifteen-year period from 1930 to 1945: classical realism, symbolism based on depictions of juxtaposed

¹San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Feitelson and Lundeberg, p. 14.

²"Feitelson Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," p. 117.

³Arthur Millier, "Oh Susanna!", Los Angeles Sunday Times, 29 September 1935, in Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg Papers, microfilm roll 1104, frame 591.

recognizable objects, and suggestive abstractions derived from natural forms. Though awkward and somewhat trite, the painting sets out a number of pictorial devices Feitelson was to explore in the next decade.

Although his form changed dramatically through the years, Feitelson retained many of the same motivating aesthetic concerns. In 1919-20, he had attempted to create an ambiguity of form by rendering the human figure in a cubo-futurist technique. In 1934, the interest in indeterminate form again became paramount. Pears: Organization of Perceptive and Introspective Forms (ill. 56) is an important transitional work from this time. It combines synthetic cubism with the developing postsurrealist approach. A person seated at a table with a paper comprises the primary cubist elements. The postsurrealist aspect includes the symbolic pear, realistically rendered, and the suggestion of an impregnating seed traveling along fallopian tubes in what is ostensibly the schematic outline of a table. The profile of a nude woman and the image of clouds fecundating the earth through rain reinforce the fertilizing theme. It appears that in developing postsurrealism Feitelson returned to his work of fifteen years earlier, utilizing its emphasis on partial representation, dynamic line, and ambiguity. To this he added a new meditative atmosphere and an array of vital symbols. The subtitle of the painting, "Organization of Perceptive and Introspective Forms," suggests the rationale behind the new approach; the perceptive (visually apprehended external forms) is combined with the introspective (mentally conceived ones). In an

almost humorous way, the "abstract, ideational" figure is shown "contemplating an object of the real, visual world."¹

A second transitional work from 1934 strongly underscores the postsurrealist concern with ambiguity and flux. The abstraction Narcissus (ill. 58) bears little pictorial resemblance to works from the later thirties, but it is a harbinger of the forms and mood developed by Feitelson during the 1940s in the Magical Form paintings--biomorphic abstractions based on human forms. The artist said that Narcissus was directly "concerned with ambiguity. This can become a line; it becomes a female: self-love, Narcissus." He intended it to be "a humorous picture, playing with the color patches of divisionism, but for mood at the same time."² In Narcissus, heavy black lines interweave to create biomorphic shapes vaguely suggesting animal and human forms. Most prominently discernible is a breast and nipple toward which floats a small, red amoeba-like form with two eyes. Additional breast-like forms are created by the twisting lines at the bottom of the canvas. The title relates to the manner in which the hand-like shape curves back onto the torso form as if caressing itself. More important, the canvas is concerned with Feitelson's recurrent birth theme and, as in Genesis #2, the breast is associated with its nursing function.

¹San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Feitelson and Lundeberg, p. 14. Moran has also pointed out this aspect of Feitelson's aesthetic: "Feitelson did not hesitate to juxtapose objects of inconsistent realities--the perceptual and the conceptual--to enhance his meaning." In Painting of Lorser Feitelson, p. 139.

²"Lorser Feitelson Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," p. 106.

Although Narcissus is unusual for the time due to its biomorphism, the way in which one shape intimates several meanings is typical of postsurrealism and was consciously sought by Feitelson. In the 1930s, fruit imagery was often employed to simultaneously suggest human organs. Moran has noted this usage of double imagery in Feitelson's work as early as 1920, when pears and apples suggested torsos and buttocks in several semi-abstract canvases.¹

Birth and the cycle of life were the overriding themes behind Feitelson's works of the 1930s. Even before the postsurrealist paintings, the subject of motherhood and the life cycle had become apparent in the classicizing paintings of peasant mothers and their children, such as Maternity, exhibited as late as 1933, and Two Peasant Children.² These sentimental canvases gave way to more speculative efforts, such as Life Begins (1933-34?), a collage with paint. Comprising three distinct images, the work includes a photo of an exploding star or perhaps a comet flaming through the galaxy. Also presented are painted images of a peach half and a doctor delivering a baby. In this way, the artist presents human life, plant life, and life on the cosmic plane.³

¹ Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, p. 19.

² Maternity is listed as number 13, 14th Annual Exhibition of Painters and Sculptors, Los Angeles Museum, Exposition Park. Two Peasant Children is reproduced in Feitelson and Lundeborg Papers, microfilm roll 1104, frame 582, and also in Touring Topics (Los Angeles), July 1933 in the section entitled "Arts California." It is interesting to note that in 1934 when Feitelson was still showing fairly conservative paintings, his student Helen Lundeborg was already exhibiting works with spiritual and symbolic overtones, such as Persephone and The Mirror (unlocated). These were shown in the 8th Annual Exhibition of Southern California Art at The Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego. At the same show, Feitelson exhibited a 1929 Peasant Interior.

³ The original Life Begins was lost and only a photo of it

The major works on the theme of birth are appropriately named Genesis #1 (ill. 59) and Genesis #2 (ill. 53), both dating from 1934. The first version is an ode to the fertilizing power of womankind. Within the canvas, a human body is juxtaposed with a heavenly body seen through the open window. The roundness of the woman's womb is reflected in the mirror and is repeated in the spherical planet. "The ensemble," wrote Jules Langsner, "conjures awareness of the mystery of the processes of creation linking the life force and matter in distant space."¹ The oval of the pit in the split avocado duplicates the form of the chicken egg at lower right. Their identical shape stresses the unity of the life processes in the plant and animal worlds. The oval of the female's buttocks may be seen to bring the analogy to the human realm. Diane Moran writes of the painting:

The viewer is led by the precise arrangement of these forms, analogous in both appearance and function, to contemplate the interrelationships between cosmic, animal, plant, and human life sources, and the ensemble thus takes on meaning which is greater than the sum of its parts. The painting is characterized by an overall silvery tonality, its palette restricted to cool and elegant neutrals--meticulously measured ochres, whites, and grayed blues. Feitelson intended to create a psychological unity of color, one that 'belonged to the world of the mind rather than to the pleasure of the eye.' Moreover, he sought a neutral surface, eschewing the expressive effects of brushstroke. Indeed, a cool atmosphere conducive to meditation is conveyed....²

remains. Feitelson reconstructed the piece later, altering the format by presenting the images on a shaped ground rather than a rectangular one.

¹"Langsner, "Permanence and Change in the Art of Lorser Feitelson," p. 75.

²Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, p. 128.

Genesis #2 offers a greater variety of imagery and posits more complicated ideas. A painting of the Immaculate Conception can be seen through the imaginary outline of a mother whose breast is distended toward a mask which represents a suckling infant. Melon seeds, baby birds, and an abandoned eggshell complete the imagery associated with fertilization and birth. There is a pear-shaped, glowing light-bulb, a recurring image in Lundeberg's paintings as well as Feitelson's. A seashell rests on the table, its cave-like opening suggesting the mystery of the deep as well as making a structural analogy to the female vagina. Again, there is an analogy between cosmic forces and terrestrial life forms; the two are linked by the telescope-microscope which conjoins macrocosm and microcosm. This concept, "that the largest forms such as aerial views, even cosmic constellations, have often the same shapes as the world's smallest forms," is described by Jim Jordan as a "favorite avant-garde idea of the 1930's." Writing in relation to Gorky, he cites D'Arcy Thompson's 1917 On Growth and Form as a source for the concept and as a book that was read by avant-garde artists in the thirties.¹ The structural similarity of macrocosm and microcosm was also a favorite theme of Lundeberg's and is employed in several of her paintings, most notably Cosmicide and Microcosm and Macrocosm (1935 and 1937 respectively, both collection of the artist, Los Angeles).

The Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express quoted Feitelson concerning Genesis #2:

¹Jim M. Jordan, "The Place of the Newark Murals in Gorky's Art," in Ruth Bowman, Murals Without Walls: Arshile Gorky's Aviation Murals Rediscovered (Newark, New Jersey: Newark Museum, 1978), pp. 55, 63.

The theme is, in my opinion, the most important that man is capable of contemplating, for, metaphorically, it deals with the scheme of all things. The group on the left, while impeccably portrayed in the objective sense, is deliberately arranged to stimulate an introspective synthesis of the idea of human genesis.¹

Feitelson sees in the unity of matter--whether human, organic, or inorganic--the mark of an ideal world in which everything is related. The theme of the life cycle was a deliberate attempt to treat a universal theme relevant to all. The paintings are certainly very personal in their choice of imagery, composition, and color, but they also transcend the personal. There is a distinctive Jungian approach which posits the unity between the individual and the universe. The most strikingly Jungian aspect of Feitelson's paintings is the linking of different forms to one another based on morphological similarities: seed, lightbulbs, eggs, avocados, and wombs are all related formally as well as by their symbology. As always in post-surrealism, these items gain their meaningfulness through their relationships; if rendered in separate paintings, they would not convey the same ideas.

Death, the obvious end of the life cycle, is seldom pictured in Feitelson's and Lundeburg's paintings. When death themes are included, they are subordinate to the far more important theme of birth. A suggestion of death appears in Genesis #2 in the form of the bowl-skull propped upon two books. It vaguely recalls Renaissance and Baroque conventions of the skull as memento mori. Love: Eternal

¹Quoted in Alvin May Cook, "Post Surrealists Exhibit Art in Hollywood Gallery," Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express, 20 October 1935, in Feitelson and Lundeburg Papers, microfilm roll 1104, frame 591.

Recurrence presents a fuller panorama of the human life cycle. The central section is a cemetery covered with crosses. In the foreground is a wooden structure, perhaps a catafalque, draped with a shroud-like cloth. The scene does not depend upon conventionally seen reality. The imaginary wooden structure contributes an ominous air and acts as the counterpart to the adjacent section with its lusty depiction of an entwined couple. The two sections present a view of life and death, to which Feitelson adds in the third section a view of infinity--the cosmos. The sum is thus a positive note which allows that life and death become one and exist forever.

Lundeberg's themes from 1933 through the early forties deal frequently with astronomical and biological topics, the immanence of mystery, memory, and meditation. A romantic, nostalgic quality informs the paintings. Self-Portrait (1933, collection of the artist, Los Angeles), Double Portrait of the Artist in Time (1935, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution), Enigma (1934), and The Tree (1938, both collection of the artist) all convey a gentle introspective quality. They are concerned with thought rather than action and with evocation rather than with description. Despite her figurative and fairly detailed style of painting, Lundeberg has said that she regards her work as being closer to the traditional notion of romanticism than to realism.¹

Lundeberg's most often repeated image has been that of a chair within a room--presumably a studio--upon which rests a mirror, drawing board and paper. In 1934, she executed an oil painting on the theme, Enigma (this canvas has also borne the title of The Mirror). A similar

¹"Lundeberg Interviewed by Fidei Daniele," p. 74.

image done as a lithograph was completed in 1937 on the Federal Art Project. In 1951, the image recurred in The Mirror (#2); and an abstracted version was painted in 1959, simply titled The Mirror (Honolulu Academy of Arts). In the 1934, 1937, and 1951 versions, the mirror reflects a pear-shaped lightbulb, a form which wavers between the mechanical and natural worlds. A scalloped seashell rests on the chair. In The Mirror (#2) geranium leaves and what seems to be an Italian tomato or eggplant replace the shell. The overall mood is close to the muteness of Pittura Metafisica paintings. There is a hint of Magritte in the odd suspicion one has that the mirror is not a reflective surface but a window to another space. The actual meaning of the objects is unclear. There may be an equation between artistic creation (the drawing board and paper), and natural generation (the shell and fruit), and mechanical energy (the lightbulb). This interpretation relates to Feitelson's paintings based on the theme of genesis, for both Feitelson and Lundeberg share the notion of the unity of human, animal, and inorganic forms.

Plant and Animal Analogies (1935, ill. 60) is Lundeberg's major treatise on the postsurrealist belief in the unity of all organic life. Sectional diagrams show the relation between the internal structure of a cherry and the female womb. These, in turn, are compared to realistic, three-dimensional renderings of a cherry and a sculpture of a female torso. The bisymmetrical structure of the human respiratory system¹ is shown to relate to the interior form of

¹Moran identifies this image as a fetal brain in San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Feitelson and Lundeberg, p. 25.

a bell pepper. Tree growth resembles the appearance of human arteries and bronchial tubes. In the background of the canvas, a woman aids a child in its first steps. This detail is another expression of the recurrent postsurrealist motif of genesis and is the logical extension of the foreground image of the womb. One would suspect such literal comparisons as these (aided as they are by dotted lines and arrows lest the obvious relationships be missed) would seem foolish by scientific standards and self-obvious by aesthetic ones. Such is not the case. Lundeberg's skill in creating a serious meditative tone makes poetry from what in other hands would be mere illustration.

In several paintings, Lundeberg has combined a general concern for introspection with specific musings over time, memory, and the recurrent theme of growth. Artist, Flowers, and Hemisphere (1934, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, ill. 61) depicts the artist in profile holding a small flowering twig. She contemplates a globe of the Earth. The globe is split in two, not from destruction, but as if having hatched like an egg. This entire painting is included as part of the background in a larger canvas, Double Portrait of the Artist in Time. As in the recurring themes of Albright's and Gorky's paintings, there is a dialogue between each of the canvases by Feitelson and Lundeberg. They relate to one another in a sometimes introverted manner and function as emblems of abstract conceptions rather than as comments on everyday activities or practical concerns of human life.

In the foreground of the Smithsonian painting sits a child two years and three months old, a self-portrait of the artist copied from an old photograph. The child's exact age is indicated through an analogy: the clock on the table reads a quarter past two. She

holds a budding branch. The long gray form of a shadow links the portrait of the child with that of the adult in the painting behind the child. In Surrealism and American Painting, Jeffrey Wechsler has written of this double portrait:

What connects them--and separates them--is the intellectual concept of time. The baby is the Helen Lundeberg of the past, yet she is 'real' in the picture. The Helen Lundeberg who was actually living at the time of the picture's creation, the young woman, is 'unreal' for she is only a painting....the metaphysical framework of the painting is apprehended due to the presence of that de Chirico-like shadow joining the figures in this enigma of time.¹

The painting deals with past and present and unites the two into a holistic entity. Time is presented not as a series of disconnected parts, but as a continuum. Lundeberg's concept is opposed to the idea of causal time, of a series of events acting upon one another. Her conception differs from the Marxist notion of time as a progressive chain of events leading to a future ideal state. Rather, we have a Jungian notion of the essential similarity and union of past with present. Equally irrelevant is the motivation behind landscapes by Curry, Benton, or Wood which often romanticized and idealized the present. Lundeberg's paintings exist outside of time; their unreality links them to both past and future. They depict images but not actual events; states of being are rendered rather than actions.

The notion of a suspension of time, or existence outside of causal time, is also essential to several of Lundeberg's paintings which are based on biological and astronomical subjects. The Red Planet (1934) and Microcosm and Macrocosm (1937) depict recognizable locales--the former a room, the latter a landscape. Both also include symbolic

¹Wechsler, Surrealism and American Art, p. 46.

elements which contradict any sense of reality--the hovering sphere in The Red Planet (which is actually a golden doorknob) and the floating organisms and suspended figure of the artist herself in Microcosm and Macrocosm. Both works are icons for contemplation. The inclusion of the artist, rapt in thought, makes this point perhaps overly obvious. In The Red Planet, time is literally suspended, for the sphere/doorknob seems to hang in mid-air, halted in its movement. Adding to the non-temporal quality are the paintings' spatial ambiguities. The figure of the artist in Microcosm and Macrocosm is poised above a seascape which might conceivably be a table. The red marble/sphere indicated in the title of The Red Planet could be floating, resting on a table, or it could even be the golden sphere's shadow.

Another painting, Cosmicide (1935), reveals no actual setting. A group of images are rendered against a soft, empty space which suggests infinity. The painting has no strong relation to veristic surrealism, for the images are immediately grasped as being symbolic rather than fantastic--they do not inhabit real space, nor are they involved in a sequence of events. The artist does not care to make the improbable probable. The works attempt to go beyond both the real world and that of surrealism to a higher understanding on a spiritual and metaphysical plane. Moran has aptly summed up the painting:

In contrast with the picture's meaning, its ravishing color ranges from the cold blue of the sky, where the moon is proposed as a "dead planet," through intermediate violets, to the hot reds of the landscape below, where a few selected objects--Japanese matchbox with rising sun, potted cactus, and overturned toy horse--conjure up a torrid desert where life is a struggle for survival. To the left, whimsical bird-like pliers extract a vermiform nail from its life-sustaining pool, and in an ironical

image exemplary of the artist's wry humor, the graceful pitcher plant brings death by drowning an unwary fly.¹

Lundeberg's concern with biological themes is probably a result of her study of biology in college. This interest is most pronounced in Plant and Animal Analogies and Eyes (1938-39, unlocated, ill. 63), paintings which make morphological comparisons between human eyes, the knots of a tree, and the eye-like formations of clouds.² Biology and astronomy are spheres of interest unrelated to the pressing needs of the 1930s, social reform and economic redevelopment. It was the social sciences--political science, sociology, psychology, and the philosophy of education as preached by John Dewey--which gained the attention of artists in those years and which offer a key to understanding the mainstream art of the 1930s. The postsurrealist interest was in the realm of pure science--science as a speculative endeavor--rather than applied science and its practical uses. Lundeberg's interest in biology and astronomy should be contrasted with the other branches of science that gained the attention of artists during the 1930s. A fascination with psychology was, of course, of deep interest to Feitelson and Lundeberg. Their approach concentrated on what is today called perceptual psychology--the manner in which an individual understands information. They were not concerned with

¹San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Feitelson and Lundeberg, p. 26.

²Eyes is a beautiful though conceptually obvious painting which conveys less speculative content than surrealist fantasy. In this regard, it is somewhat atypical of Lundeberg's work. Perhaps the artist felt likewise, as it appears not to have been shown in any of her exhibitions since 1942. For a reproduction, see Wechsler, Surrealism and American Art, p. 46.

social psychology (the individual's interaction with other people), a major issue for the period under discussion.

Postsurrealist paintings by Feitelson and Lundeberg create a duality between the opposing tendencies of objectivity and subjectivity. This duality does not depend on the use of specific imagery but is a part of the content of postsurrealism itself. The paintings contain both romantic and classic overtones. They possess qualities which strive toward order, clarity, and structure; these very qualities contradict the basic orientation of subjective painting. Another duality relates closely to Jungian concepts: the desire to acknowledge the essential unity of all things, and the corollary that completion and wholeness lie in the pairing of opposites. In an article on Helen Lundeberg, Joseph Young wrote that the postsurrealists attempted "to reconcile the unconscious with the conscious, the subjective with the objective, and the irrational with the rational...."¹ To this should also be added a concern "for the synthesis of antithetical forms," such as part and whole, curved and straight forms.²

A manifestation of the postsurrealist interest in dualities is seen in Feitelson's preoccupation with "masculine" and "feminine" expression in art. Writing in 1972, Henry Seldis found that the non-representational works conveyed feelings both masculine and feminine in their use of hard and soft curves. "Throughout his oeuvre," writes Diane Moran, "there is evidence of his desire to synthesize the

¹Young, "Helen Lundeberg," p. 36.

²Moran, Painting of Lorser Feitelson, p. 27.

geometric and the sensual-curvilinear."¹ Seldis noted Feitelson's obsession with "the line that starts off masculine and becomes feminine."² It is a Jungian notion of the reconciliation of opposites--particularly sexual opposites. The theme was a major tenet of medieval alchemy and was an important element of Marcel Duchamp's work, the latter source being available for Feitelson's study at the Arensbergs.

In Feitelson's painting of the 1930s, there is an insistent use of themes which would today demand the rubric of "feminism." These concerns appear extraordinarily odd in the context of the 1930s and especially as the product of a male artist. Birth, images of the womb, and motherhood are repeatedly seen in Feitelson's postsurrealist works. These concerns may be seen to express the feminine quotient, that which Jung terms the anima. One could speculate that Feitelson's work on the Federal Art Project as administrator and muralist (painting scenes of conquistadors and Western settlers) be regarded as an expression of the animus. In this view, the public side became the masculine expression; the private easel works explored the feminine in art. (In the later abstract works, this hypothetical separation of male and female approaches was not evident.) This is not to say that the duality of male-female did not appear in the postsurrealist paintings. Love: Eternal Recurrence (1935-36) explicitly addresses

¹Diane Moran, "On Lorser Feitelson," Art International 21 (October-November 1977), p. 35. This tendency was most pronounced in the last twenty years of Feitelson's life.

²Henry J. Seldis, "Pioneer Modernist: Forty-five Years of Lorser Feitelson," Los Angeles Times, 27 August 1972, p. 52; reproduced in Feitelson and Lundeborg Papers, microfilm roll 1104, frames 790-92.

the theme of the union of male and female and combines it with a consideration of the opposing forces of life and death.

Paintings by Feitelson and Lundeberg present the dichotomy of creating a harmonious whole from images that are often unrelated to one another spatially or functionally. Without conventional perspective, some objects appear larger than others, whereas in reality they would be smaller. In Plant and Animal Analogies, a bell pepper is equal in size to the lower half of a human torso. A form which reads as arteries or branches of coral is as large as a tree. These provide intentional fragmentary sensations and an abnormal visual sight.

Critic Henry Seldis found Feitelson to be consciously seeking the creation of tension without destroying harmony, to be composing with fragments that somehow create a totality.¹ Harmony is, in fact, the result of "deliberate dichotomy."² This dichotomy depends on both the objects the artist paints, which seem to be quite different from one another at first appearance, and the structural and spatial dislocations. However, a new unity is created, as Seldis points out, because the meanings assigned to the objects relate to one another.

The concern for unifying opposites was at one point in the 1950s to become the basis for a group of canvases by Feitelson. The "dichotomic organization" paintings were ostensibly based on a system whereby the canvas was divided into two equal halves and presented "as separate containers enclosing different orders of shapes, or else weighted on one side and void of forms on the other," wrote Jules

¹Henry J. Seldis, "Lorser Feitelson," Art International, 20 May 1970, p. 48.

²Ibid., p. 52.

Langsner. "Such paintings produce a disquieting 'togetherness', and a unity where, optically speaking, a unity should not exist."¹ These works of the 1950s appear to be formalist exercises. However, their content is identical to many of the earlier postsurrealist paintings. The division of the canvas as an expressive and formal element relates to earlier works such as Love: Eternal Recurrence, Flight Over New York, and Susanna and the Elders. In these canvases, the divisions are forceful and obvious, but even in other of Feitelson's postsurrealist paintings there is some type of proportional division provided by rectilinear elements. The mirror and window in Genesis #1 form these relationships, as do the edges of the tabletop and canvases in Filial Love.

Lundeberg's The Tree (1938, collection of the artist, ill. 64) and The Veil (1946, collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Loew) affirm the concept that wholeness is the result of combining oppositions. The Tree depicts a gnarled and aged tree growing from an outcropping high above a valley. Composed of two intertwined trunks--one living, the other rotted and dead--the tree divides the canvas in two. On the side of the living tree it is day. The fertile valley below has produced a luxuriant crop. Saplings grow from the ground near the trunk. On the other side of the canvas, it is night, and the outcropping has eroded. Below, the valley discloses an abandoned farmhouse and drought-stricken fields. The canvas shows us the intermingling of life and death, growth and decay. Just as night and day are two halves which comprise a continual cycle, so do life and death, fertility and

¹Langsner, "Permanence and Change in the Art of Lorser Feitelson," p. 76.

barrenness. This point is made clear by the fact that the single tree is composed of two trunks which gracefully arc across one another. The Veil, although from the mid-forties, relates closely to Lundeberg's work of the thirties and repeats the theme of night and day being one entity. A magical hand enters a canvas depicting a daylight mountain scene. It pulls away the sky as if it were a curtain and reveals the same scene under the moon's gentle presence. Joseph Young found in the painting the "concept of the daytime as a veil which hides another world."¹ The notion of the mystery behind that which is seen is only part of the painting's meaning; the interrelation of opposites is also significant. Suggested as well is the theme of the macrocosm-microcosm by presenting views of both the earth and the cosmos (the moon).

Postsurrealism allows private choice but demands clear meaning. This striving toward clarity should not be regarded as divesting postsurrealism of its status as subjective art. The very contradiction of the lucid and the subjective acknowledges the paradoxical complexity of artmaking. Feitelson's drawings from the 1930s graphically illustrate the romantic-classic or subjective-objective struggle. They often combine figurative and biomorphic styles with a result not unlike that of the small oil painting Narcissus, except that the drawings are more realistic. In them, stylistic features of the Renaissance masters whom Feitelson adored merge with a surrealizing mode. In a 1941 article Feitelson directly addressed the contradiction of coexisting subjective and classic elements in his work. Insisting

¹Young, "Helen Lundeberg," p. 47. The canvas is related to a later painting, The Wind That Blew the Sky Away (1951) and ultimately was executed in three different versions.

that the psychological interest in the newest art expressions "is the antithesis of the previous modern efforts toward classicism," he then asserted, "Postsurrealism is the twentieth century form of classicism." The resolution of this apparent impossibility lay in the effort of Feitelson and Lundeberg to order subjective psychological interests.¹

An important aspect of the postsurrealist interest in duality is Feitelson's and Lundeberg's desire for an art that would be simultaneously classic and romantic. Classicism and romanticism are terms which apply not only to mood or to formal considerations but to subjects as well. Seeking to explain the unity of man and the cosmos is a metaphysical endeavor which seems both classic and romantic in its motivations. Post-surrealism seeks order and an explanation of what seems random and unrelated and thus reveals a tendency toward classicism. Yet, it also speculates on the unseen and the intangible, often creating works with mystical overtones. In this respect, it partakes of the romantic attitude.

As a collector and curator, Feitelson indulged his penchant for both the clarity of the classic and the more personal aberrations of the romantic. His taste in Old Master drawings favored dynamic mannerist works, including drawings by Michelangelo's students that are dramatically distorted. Powerful visualizations of Renaissance order gone haywire, these works echo Feitelson's own interest in personalizing the rational. "I said I like things that are discordant and eccentric, almost Godawful," he informed an interviewer in 1974,

¹Feitelson, "What is Postsurrealism?", p. 6.

"like in my collection of drawings."¹ The artist ascribed part of his interest in disparate ideologies and styles to having been exposed as an adolescent to many different kinds of art through his father's art library.² In the thirties, Feitelson arranged shows at the Stanley Rose Art Gallery of work by Juan Gris, Emil Nolde, and Jacques Villon. Later in the thirties, at the Hollywood Gallery of Modern Art, he arranged an exhibition of Paul Klee.³ Over a period of years, especially in the forties, Feitelson assembled a group of surrealist works by Tanguy, Magritte, and others.⁴ He acquired these works through William Copley, for whose gallery he acted as an adjunct curator in the 1940s and for whom he organized shows of Ernst, Tanguy, and Magritte. Around 1948, Feitelson put together a de Chirico exhibition for the 20th Century Gallery.⁵ These interests in modernists and surrealists combined with his love of Old Master drawings, such as the works by Cambiosio and Tiepolo that he owned (these were probably bought in the 1950s). Feitelson has been quoted as saying that Durer's Melancholia was "the greatest surrealist picture ever made."⁶ The two

¹"Lorser Feitelson Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," p. 111.

²Ibid., pp. 115-16.

³"Lorser Feitelson Interviewed by Fidel Danieli," pp. 19-20.

⁴Feitelson and Lundeberg Papers, microfilm roll 1103, frames 590, 1120; and Feitelson and Lundeberg, interview.

⁵Feitelson and Lundeberg, interview.

⁶Quoted in Arthur Millier, "Surrealists Take Time by the Forelock and Stage Exhibit," Los Angeles Times, 25 November 1934; reproduced in Feitelson and Lundeberg Papers, microfilm roll 1104, frame 583.

modes--classicizing Old Master and romanticizing modern-day surrealists--were equally attractive to Feitelson.

Lundeberg has also been strongly attracted to an art that is simultaneously romantic and classic, perhaps even more than Feitelson. Phrases which accurately describe her art assert this duality: "intellectual and emotional," "cerebral and evocative," "structured and expressionistic." Her intention has been to present evocative forms which are placed in carefully organized spatial relationships to create a sense of structure while affirming an emotional sense of freedom. Feitelson has explained that Lundeberg's emphasis on line underscores this dual function: it provides plastic order, yet its sinuosity and softness affirms something almost spiritual.

For the exhibition Americans 1942 at the Museum of Modern Art, Lundeberg wrote a statement about her work. Like Feitelson, she affirmed postsurrealism as revealing a classic subjectivity:

I am, apparently, a classicist by nature as well as conviction. By classicism, I mean, not traditionalism of any sort, but a highly conscious concern with esthetic structure which is the antithesis of intuitive, romantic, or realistic approaches to painting. My aim, realized or not, is to calculate, and reconsider, every element in a painting with regard to its function in the whole organization. That, I believe, is the classic attitude.

In contrast to the surrealist program of intuitive expression and subconscious automatic recordings, Postsurrealism explores the field of psychological science to create a classic subjective expression. The pictorial elements are deliberately arranged to stimulate, in the mind of the spectator, an ordered, pleasurable, introspective activity, resulting in a configuration, or subjective unity, which is the esthetic order of the painting which makes possible the long-discussed ideal integrity of subject matter and form.¹

¹Helen Lundeberg, statement in Dorothy Miller, ed., Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1942), p. 93.

The concept in postsurrealism that is so antithetical to Breton's surrealism is the intentional stress on order. The Americans do not accept the love of irrationality. They wish to communicate subjectively through the emotions and through suggestion and metaphor, but they also wish to be comprehensible in their symbolism. Feitelson often opposed his art to the surrealists and to Dali in particular, who represented total self-indulgence and private fantasy.¹

Lundeberg's interest in classicism was not with the aspect of traditional classical form, but with structure as opposed to the intuitively designed. While classicism is concerned with ordering, the romantic-surrealist mode often celebrates chaos and disorder. Lundeberg affirmed that given a choice between romanticism and realism, she would definitely consider herself a romantic. Despite this assertion, there is a calmness and repose in her works which definitely points to a classical ideal of harmony. That the romantic attitude asserts itself within this classicism reflects the intention of postsurrealism to be both classic and romantic, objective and subjective.

In sum, postsurrealism should be viewed as an isolated but by no means minor incident in the history of American art prior to World War II. Lorser Feitelson's canvases of the 1920s had responded to themes of social significance--love, family, and survival--but were removed to a world of classicized appearance and a peasantry from a foreign land. These were a stilted and sentimental effort at resolving eternal questions of existence with earthly reality. In the

¹See "Postsurrealism: the Supermodern," Literary Digest 11 July 1936, p. 23; and Cook, "Postsurrealists Exhibit Art," n.p.

1930s, the reality quotient was further minimized, and the quality of the art improved. Together, Feitelson and Lundeborg attempted to pictorialize the metaphysical and the speculative while many of their colleagues were involved with terrestrial realities. Notwithstanding their subjective concerns, the two artists responded to the American need for clarity and objectivity. In fact, they shared with the majority of American artists a desire for significant content and its clear communication. But by calling themselves postsurrealists, they drew attention to the fact that a new artistic phenomena had developed on the American West Coast that valued subjective meditation over objective documentation.

CHAPTER IV

ARSHILE GORKY AND THE BIOMORPHIC ALTERNATIVE

Attitudes to Abstraction

Abstract painting in the 1930s labored against much the same opposition as did both subjectively oriented art and surrealism imported from Europe. Louis Lozowick voiced a typically critical leftist attitude to abstraction in 1936. Although among the forefront of the precisionist abstractionists in the mid-twenties, ten years later Lozowick declared:

Certain elements in the Cultural heritage such as religious genre and pure abstraction are not usable at all. Other elements may have to be radically modified. The problem of how to utilize the cultural heritage will best be solved in practice--revolutionary art being still in the process of formation. As an extreme instance [of that art which would have to be radically modified] one may take the revolutionary artist who has recourse to the method of surrealism.¹

Lozowick found abstraction to be of no use to a socially oriented art. Surrealism was regarded as within the realm of possibility but not as particularly desirable. And a corollary was implied: that abstraction coupled with surrealism, in the form of biomorphism, would be anathema.

During the 1930s, abstract art had already begun to be interpreted from the formalist viewpoint usually associated with later decades and the criticism of Clement Greenberg. Stuart Davis' introduction to the Whitney Museum's 1935 Abstract Painting in America

¹Lozowick, "Towards a Revolutionary Art," p. 13.

is an excellent example. He wrote that a painting "is a two-dimensional plane surface, and the process of making a painting is the act of defining two-dimensional space on that surface."¹ For experimenters with abstract art, and especially for Gorky, aesthetics and form were extremely important.

The view that abstract art was the realm of pure form without content was particularly held by leftists. Recently, Jacob Kainen explained that during a time when circumstances "had driven us to think of social change...a more than passing concern with aesthetics was tantamount to frivolity."² More sympathetically, Peter Blume clarified the formalist principles of abstraction, explaining that "their logic lies within their own framework, not on an outside system of thought."³ He concluded that the formalist bent of abstraction denied the possibility of involvement with human feelings. Blume complained of Picasso's 1928 Painter and His Model (which was an important influence on Gorky): "Lacking all trace of the elemental human passions, it is the skeleton of a great picture." Though admitting the very real achievement of abstract art, Blume still concluded, "Abstract art has maintained a clinical aloofness from the struggles of life around it. It has rarely yielded to the pressure of human problems. It is a 'social anomaly' because of these

¹Stuart Davis, Introduction to Abstract Painting in America (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935; reprinted in Stuart Davis, ed. Diane Kelder (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 113.

²Jacob Kainen, "Memories of Arshile Gorky," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 97.

³Peter Blume, "Will Abstract Art Survive?", New Republic, 19 April 1939, p. 308.

shortcomings, not because it contains evil in itself."¹ Even the confirmed abstractionist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy was moved by events of the time and by his experience at the Bauhaus to advocate a greater educational stance for art. By 1936, he reached the conclusion that to fulfill this role "in the midst of the vast social controversies of our age we can no longer afford a 'l'art pour l'art,' an art of escape."² Although Moholy-Nagy continued to work in an abstract vein, he felt compelled to posit some social purpose for his art. Abstract artists were previously willing to argue a l'art pour l'art stance. Under the influence of the Depression and the rise of fascism, many began to claim a social content for abstraction.

Clarence Weinstock expressed the leftist viewpoint that abstract art was viable only within "relatively undisturbed societies, or where an artificial stability has been temporarily built by a small section of society, rich patrons and dependent creators." In a society such as our own, social conditions demanded that the artist's attention and his art must include "not only the forms of nature, but the meanings of events."³ Unlike Weinstock, another Marxist writer for Art Front was sympathetic to abstraction and the American Abstract

¹Ibid.

²Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, The Studio, 1936; reprinted in Moholy-Nagy, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 42; and quoted by Larsen, American Abstract Artists, p. 278. The reason for mentioning Moholy-Nagy is that he came to Chicago in 1937 to direct the New Bauhaus. Not all the immigrants from Europe in the 1930s and early 1940s were apostles of surrealism, as the history of early abstract expressionism leads one to believe.

³Clarence Weinstock, "Contradictions in Abstractions," Art Front 1 (April 1935), p. 7; also referred to in Larsen, American Abstract Artists, p. 239.

Artists. Charmion von Wiegand was able to convincingly juggle a respect for Mondrian with a desire for social relevance in art. In opposition to Weinstock, there were socially conscious artists who defended the radical role of abstract art, claiming that by its very nature, abstract art was revolutionary. Stuart Davis and Balcomb Greene were among the best known advocates of this opinion. Echoing the earlier position of the Russian abstractionists, Greene claimed, "No revolt against tradition has been more incisive than the 'abstract movement'."¹ Davis affirmed that "all abstractions were the result of a revolutionary struggle relative to the bourgeois academic traditions of the immediate past and even the present."² This viewpoint, however, was that of a distinct minority.

Besides criticism of social irrelevance, abstraction faced the equally severe onus (as did surrealism) of being identified with foreign influence. In the 1920s and early 1930s American chauvinism had been the result mainly of narrow-minded boosterism and isolationism in politics. If the thrust of its rationale changed in the later thirties to a chauvinism justifiably based on the fact that American society was better than the horrid turmoil of Europe and the Far East, this did little to allay the foes of abstraction, who continued to see anything imported from Europe as unviable for America. In 1937, critics still objected to the stylistic derivation from foreign models evident in an American Abstract Artists exhibition.³

¹Balcomb Greene, "Differences Over Léger," Art Front 2 (January 1936), p. 8; also quoted in Larsen, American Abstract Artists, p. 239.

²Stuart Davis, "A Medium of Two Dimensions," Art Front 1 (May 1935), p. 6; reprinted in Stuart Davis, ed. Kelder, p. 114.

³Larsen, American Abstract Artists, pp. 253-261, provides a summary of these attitudes.

Despite the fact that the Museum of Modern art championed the European avant-garde, American artists felt it was unsympathetic to their native abstraction. Ilya Bolotowsky complained of Alfred Barr: "The museum's point was this: that such a movement [the American Abstract Artists] historically cannot be in the United States. Because it didn't go through all the stages as in Europe, and so that this country would have to go in the direction of regionalism and social scene painting."¹ Though overstated, Bolotowsky's charge can be partially substantiated by an examination of MOMA's collection of American painting from the 1930s.² As late as 1940, Albert Gallatin was still very defensive toward the popular notion that abstract art was a foreign import. In the introduction to the catalogue of his collection he emphasized that the people of the United States come from many cultures and nationalities and that our art must also reflect this. Asserting that influences from other countries are always necessary for art, he seemed to address himself to the American Scene painters in claiming that "subject matter as a rule plays an almost negligible part" in defining American art.³

Carl Holty reflected the outlook of the American Abstract Artists, when he claimed, "It was unthinkable to merge Surrealism with

¹Interview with Susan Larsen, New York City, 29 January 1973, quoted in Larsen, American Abstract Artists, p. 513.

²Barr did, however, defend Gorky's model for the Newark murals, claiming they were excellent decoration appropriate for the airport. See Ethel K. Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky (New York: published for Whitney Museum of American Art by Macmillan Co., 1957), p. 76. A maquette of the murals, with one completed panel, was shown at MOMA in 1936 in a show of WPA art, New Horizons in American Art.

³Philadelphia Museum of Art, A. E. Gallatin Collection, pp. 9-10.

abstraction in the thirties."¹ The prospectus of the AAA explained that their own "art is to be distinguished from those efforts characterized by expressionism, realistic representation, surrealism, etc."² Although paintings by Miró, Masson, and Tanguy were well known in the New York art world of the 1930s, their relevance to developments in this country was hardly considered. It is perhaps germane that Harold Rosenberg's review of Alfred Barr's Cubism and Abstract Art was favorable but ignored the section about abstract tendencies in surrealism.³ To Americans, veristic surrealism dominated the image of the movement.

Working in this unfavorable climate, Gorky's mode of abstraction--including biomorphic shapes, violently expressive emotional and sexual images akin to Picasso, and hints of Miró and Masson--removed him further from artistically acceptable modes. The kinship of his forms to European surrealism was to be a mark of isolation throughout the thirties. Despite Gorky's status as an aesthetic outsider, his themes of mutation, flux, internal conflict, eroticism, and memory, often presented in a visual language that is akin to surrealism, reflect pervasive subjective trends in this country during the Depression.

¹Quoted in Passloff, The 30's, n.p. Holty also expressed the view that the eventual merger of the two in abstract expressionism diluted both elements.

²Quoted in Larser, American Abstract Artists, p. 232. George L. K. Morris later recalled that a surrealist entry from one member was not accepted for the organization's first show; p. 251.

³Harold Rosenberg, review of Cubism and Abstract Art, by Alfred H. Barr, in Art Front 2 (June 1936):15.

That Gorky's mode was abstraction rather than figuration should not obscure a shared content.

Arshile Gorky

Arshile Gorky explored a variety of artistic directions between 1931 and 1940, a period which began with a large number of still lifes based on George Braque's compositional principles, and included abstractions directly inspired by Picasso or recalling Léger, and the focus of this study, emotionally charged organic abstractions melding surrealist biomorphism, Miró, and Picasso's evocative and tangentially surrealist paintings of the early 1930s. It is this last group which leads directly to the Garden in Sochi series (1940-1942), which have rightfully and repeatedly been regarded as central works in Gorky's oeuvre and as the first great paintings of his maturity.¹

Gorky never identified with the small group of abstract artists who formed in New York in the second half of the 1930s. Appearing at the first group exhibition of the American Abstract Artists in 1937, he brought an Ingres reproduction and claimed it to be "more abstract than any of the pictures on the walls."² He was vehemently against total non-figuration as well as the proselytizing

¹For this viewpoint, see William C. Seitz, Arshile Gorky: Paintings, Drawings, Studies (New York: Museum of Modern Art in collaboration with Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 1972), p. 27; William S. Rubin, "Arshile Gorky, Surrealism, and the New American Painting," Art International 17 (February 1963); reprinted in New York Painting and Sculpture, ed. Henry Geldzahler, (New York: E. P. Dutton in association with Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969), p. 381; and Harry Rand, Arshile Gorky: The Implications of Symbols (Montclair, New Jersey: Allanheld & Schram, 1981), p. 81.

²Larsen, American Abstract Artists, p. 253; quoted from George McNeil, "American Abstract Artists, Venerable at Twenty," Art News, May 1956, p. 65.

and communal nature of the AAA. Gorky intended to do his proselytizing alone. He had attended two of their organizational meetings but generated hostility by attempting to assume leadership and by insisting that the group act as a forum for discussion and theorizing, and not as a means of exhibiting.¹ Reflecting his enormous ego, Gorky insisted that a gifted individual, not a group force, must lead the path to acceptance of abstract art.²

Gorky had been friends with several of the younger abstract painters, including Vaclav Vytlacil, Rosalind Bengelsdorf, and Byron Browne.³ But he became increasingly disaffected with them and apparently thought the AAA was moving toward the geometrical branch of abstraction. Vaclav Vytlacil recalled, "He felt the pressure was narrowing the act of painting down towards geometric form. In other words, like the Russian suprematists, Malevich and the others. He was against that because he...liked the painterly. He loved sensuality and sensuality in the treatment of his calligraphy as he painted. Flat things irritated him...."⁴ Despite the attitude expressed above, Gorky himself did experiment in the mid-thirties with geometric abstraction, although he never approached the truly non-objective. Organization

¹This was also the approach recommended by Harry Holtzman. See Larsen's interview with George L. K. Morris, February 2, 1973, in Larsen, American Abstract Artists, pp. 223-26, 481-82.

²Ibid., pp. 226-27.

³Larsen, American Abstract Artists, pp. 122ff.

⁴Interview with Susan Larsen, January 19, 1974, New York City. Quoted in Larsen, American Abstract Artists, pp. 578-79

(1933-36, National Gallery of Art, Jordan 146, ill. 62),¹ Composition with Head (1936-37, private collection, Jordan 163), and Still Life on Table (ca. 1936-37, private collection, Jordan 164) all derive from Picasso's most reduced geometric paintings.² However, William Seitz observed that even in these paintings, "in retrospect one can see the breathing shapes, the ideographs of eye or breast, the high emotional tension that continued to be hallmarks of his paintings."³

Gorky's murals for Newark Airport, Aviation: Evolution of Forms Under Aerodynamic Limitations (1936-37, Jordan 141, ill. 65, 66) present an interesting use of abstract geometry in combination with the curvilinear biomorphic shapes of Arp and Miró. But the forms have been stripped of emotional and metaphorical content and reduced to flat decorative shapes. These were derived from photographs of airplanes taken by Wyatt Davis for an earlier photo-mural proposal for Floyd Bennett Field.⁴ The forms also suggest Léger's machine abstractions. The colors--rich blue, red, deep yellows and blacks--are also those

¹Unless otherwise specified, titles, dates, and reference numbers accord with Jim M. Jordan and Robert Goldwater, The Paintings of Arshile Gorky: A Critical Catalogue (New York and London: New York University Press, 1982).

²As has often been pointed out, Organization derives from Picasso's 1928 Painter and Model in the Museum of Modern Art. Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 23; Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, pp. 52, 54; and Diane Waldman, Arshile Gorky, 1904-1948: A Retrospective (New York: Harry N. Abrams in collaboration with Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1981), p. 42.

³Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 23.

⁴Jim M. Jordan, "The Place of the Newark Murals in Gorky's Art," in Murals Without Walls: Arshile Gorky's Aviation Murals Rediscovered, ed. Ruth Bowman (Newark, New Jersey: Newark Museum, 1979), pp. 58-59. Two panels belong to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey; the eight other panels are presumed to be destroyed.

of Léger.¹ Gorky's murals were regarded at the time as "modern" and "abstract" but not as surrealist (interestingly, they are not murals at all but large paintings attached to the walls). These terms alone were enough to raise objections. Frederick Kiesler wrote about the pressures against even nominally advanced art appearing in public places, explaining that Gorky's work "isn't abstract, but it looks like an abstraction and that alone doesn't fit into 'the art of all great periods'," which had to be figurative.² Stuart Davis remembered how the FAP organized a group of artists to go out to Newark and pressure the airport authorities to approve the project, which they considered too extreme.³

Although the Newark murals predominantly reflect the geometric-abstract side of Gorky's work during the 1930s, they also hint at aesthetic devices which can be associated with his subjective and surrealist paintings. The images themselves float in the empty space described by Robert Goldwater as the surrealist dream space.⁴ Ethel Schwabacher noted--but overemphasized--the affinity of the murals to surrealism. She wrote of the "isolation of the wing removed from" the plane as "the dislocation which was one of the cardinal theories

¹ Ibid. See p. 56 for a more detailed comparison of the murals to Léger's 1919 The City, which was available to Gorky in the Gallatin collection at New York University.

² Frederick T. Kiesler, "Murals Without Walls: Relating to Gorky's Newark Project," Art Front 2 (December 1936), p. 11; also reprinted in Murals Without Walls, ed. Bowman, p. 33.

³ Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 78.

⁴ Robert Goldwater, Space and Dream (New York: Walker & Co., 1967, pp. 7, 8, 26.

of surrealism."¹ Diane Waldman correctly points out that the sense of disjunction also depends a great deal on the original conception of the mural as combining painting with photo-montage.² Overall, one can agree with Jim Jordan's conclusion that the tentative biomorphic forms which do appear in the murals "avoided the more unsettling, subconscious implications of these forms."³ The dislocation also attests to Gorky's continuing interest in synthetic cubism. The general style of the mural may relate to Gorky's flirtation at that time with the AAA and also to the "decorative" nature of the commission itself.

In downplaying the psychological and emotional content which characterizes the easel paintings, the murals are quite unusual in Gorky's oeuvre. Harold Rosenberg summed up their role:

An anthology of "new design," they are an evasion of the then current Left mural art of Rivera and Orozco, on the one hand, and of the liberal patriotic reminiscences of Benton, on the other. As a commercial job in the latest modes of decoration (including photomontage), they are superb; as art, they were, by the standard of Gorky's easel painting during the same years, nil.⁴

Jordan, on the other hand, unconvincingly writes that the murals are on the same level as the highly refined Organization and are a "masterful balance of the geometric and the biomorphic."⁵ Gorky's later mural design for the Marine Building at the 39 New York World's

¹Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 74.

²Waldman, Arshile Gorky, p. 38.

³Jordan, "The Place of the Newark Murals in Gorky's Art," p. 56.

⁴Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, p. 90.

⁵Jordan, "The Place of the Newark Murals in Gorky's Art," p. 62.

Fair was more obviously biomorphic but embarrassingly weak as art. The saccharine imagery of a picturesque tugboat in a harbor was combined with forms lifted from Stuart Davis and Miró (particularly the multi-colored moon and the clouds) and rendered in an unsuccessful hard-edged style. Even more than in the Newark murals, the failure lies in the use of biomorphic forms as decorative elements lacking the metaphysical and psychological associations typical of the easel paintings. Unlike Davis, whose stylized curvilinear abstractions imparted a thrilling dynamism, Gorky was unable to imbue similar forms with a convincing energy and originality.

One mural study, however, is a particularly successful work of art: Architectonic Panel: Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia (1936-37, Art Institute of Chicago). It appears to be a later transposition of several earlier drawings entitled Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia (ills. 66, 67) for placement as a series of panels in mural form. It does not seem likely that it was conceived from the beginning to serve as a mural. This accounts for its far more radical look, and probably as well for its aesthetic success. When designing the various murals, Gorky evidently felt himself under certain constraints which restricted his creativity. The role of painting in a public context does not appear to have fired the artist's imagination. We may assume that Gorky associated the hard-edged, less emotional shapes (similar to those of Léger) with a decorative function and a public context. It was in works created by himself and for himself, however that Gorky excelled.

For Gorky and other interested New York artists, there were opportunities from at least the early thirties to follow the newest

developments in Europe, especially surrealism. Ilya Bolotowsky recalled that Gorky was an avid reader of Cahiers d'Art in the mid-thirties.¹ Gorky once told Reuben Nakian, "You have to know the latest things being done. Even if the latest is bad, you should not be unaware of it."² Gorky "loved to prowl for hours at Weyhe's bookstore, where he would quite probably have seen the earliest articles and books on surrealism."³ He knew about the latest published works of Braque, Picasso, and Miró. He haunted Julien Levy's gallery after it opened in 1931 and would have seen surrealist paintings by Picasso, Ernst, and Man Ray which were exhibited there as early as January 1932.⁴ Levy's apocryphal story of Gorky's eager reading of Surrealism (in the back of the Julien Levy Gallery) when it first appeared in 1936 is well known.⁵ As early as 1927, Miró was shown at The Brooklyn Museum, and then in 1928 at the Valentine Gallery, and in 1933 in an exhibition in Rockefeller Center. Miró and Masson were exhibited at Pierre Matisse beginning in 1932; Giacometti at Levy, and Arp at Becker in 1934.⁶ John Graham, the Russian-born artist and theoretician, was another probable source for Gorky's

¹Interview with Susan Larsen, New York City, January 29, 1973, quoted in Larsen, American Abstract Artists, p. 521.

²Reuben Nakian, interview with Karlen Mooradian, Stamford, Connecticut, 5 May and 3 August 1966; in Karlen Mooradian, The Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky (Chicago: Gilgamesh Press, 1980), p. 173. For typical examples of Gorky's borrowings from Picasso via the pages of Cahiers d'Art, see Phyllis Rosenzweig, Arshile Gorky (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1979), pp. 22, 24, 26; and Waldman, Arshile Gorky, pp. 28-29.

³Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 32.

⁴Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 7. ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 41; and Waldman, Arshile Gorky, p. 47.

knowledge of surrealism.¹ Some of Gorky's earliest contact with surrealism was possibly through Stuart Davis, who began in 1930 to tentatively employ Arp-like forms, bird images, and distorted fantasy figures recalling Miró. (See ill's. 16, 17.)

Gorky, unlike most of the other subjective painters included in this study, was an unabashed adherent of European art. John Graham was only one of the people included in Gorky's circle of friends who was not insistent on an American notion of art. Others were David Burliuk, Willem de Kooning, Joseph Stella, and Frederick Kiesler, men who neither aligned themselves with any particular artistic trend nor saw European art as threatening. Significantly, many of Gorky's friends were immigrants, for instance, the Soyfer brothers and all of the artists mentioned above.

An intense study of European surrealism can be seen in certain of Gorky's works which are close approximations of Picasso and Miró.² These "imitations" of the two Spaniards living in France should not be viewed as attempts to become either a cubist or a surrealist. Bolotowsky explained that Gorky was "a very humble student who would go to the best sources to learn. Which is more of a Renaissance idea

¹Noted also in University of Maryland Art Department and Art Gallery, The Drawings of Arshile Gorky (College Park, Maryland: University of Maryland, 1969), p. 18. Although acknowledging surrealism as an important artistic development, Graham assumed a more antagonistic stance as the thirties advanced. Simultaneously, Gorky became more and more involved with certain aspects of surrealism, a harbinger of their eventual parting. See Kainen, "Memories of Arshile Gorky," p. 97; and Jordan and Goldwater, Paintings of Arshile Gorky, pp. 38-40.

²Gorky's relationship to Picasso is examined in depth later. The works closest in feeling to Miró are the Garden in Sochi paintings.

of apprenticeship.... He approached art in a scholarly fashion like earlier artists who were studying with the masters and getting the best out of each master."¹ For similar reasons, Gorky had earlier "apprenticed" himself to Cezanne. One might regard Gorky as having "absorbed" rather than "copied" Picasso and Miró. Harold Rosenberg writes:

In his oils of the late twenties and early thirties, coats of paint are brushed on top of one another between the outlines of the shapes with such eagerness for exact effect that they come to form thick slabs of pigment. If anything, these paintings are overfinished. It is to this quality that they owe their individuality; in reproductions they seem mere imitations, but on a wall they are immediately recognizable as Gorkys.²

As for their similarity to Miró, Schwabacher rightly has pointed out, "whereas Miró's objects seem to float in front of a backdrop, Gorky's appear to be cut out of it."³ If the forms resemble those of other artists, the marks of Gorky's strenuous effort to find his own mode of expression are always visible and remind us that these works are by an artist who is searching and analyzing, not mimicking.⁴

In 1931, Stuart Davis asked Gorky to write an article on him for Creative Art.⁵ Davis recalled the invitation as having

¹Ilya Bolotowsky, interview with Karlen Mooradian, in Mooradian, The Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 111.

²Harold Rosenberg, "The Art Galleries, Art and Identity: The Unfinished Masterpiece," The New Yorker, 5 January 1963, p. 70.

³Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 59.

⁴At the time of their execution, however, these differences were not always noticed. Rosalind Bengelsdorf recalled thinking that certain of Gorky's paintings were by Picasso, and at other times, "he would do things so much like Miró that you would think they were by Miró." Interview with Susan Larsen, 7 January 1974; quoted in Larsen, American Abstract Artists, p. 555.

⁵Gorky's article, "Stuart Davis," was published in the September 1931 issue of Creative Art, pp. 213-17.

"indicated how sure I was of his friendship and sincere liking for my work."¹ In the article, Gorky defended modern art, flatness (a surprise considering his later attitude to the flat image), and especially cubism, rhetorically concluding, "Has there in six centuries been better art than Cubism? No."² Along with this defense of abstraction and the affirmation of Davis' "cool and intellectual world" so far removed from Gorky's own passionate one, there was this claim: "Yet, there are large numbers of critics, artists, and public suspended like vultures, waiting in the air for the death of the distinctive art of this century, the art of Léger, Picasso, Miró, Kandinsky, and Davis."³ This list of modern masters not only provides evidence of Gorky's early admiration and knowledge of Miró but shows also that he valued artists who had combined expressive and emotional content with abstract form. It may be that Gorky, by placing Davis in the company of Picasso and Miró, was actually thinking of Davis' most recent quasi-surrealist works rather than the constructivist and synthetic cubist works of the twenties. Gorky's spirited defense of cubism and Miró in the same breath seems especially relevant to Gorky's own works.⁴ It suggests that Gorky was at an early date considering a reconciliation of abstraction with free play of the emotions and fluid spatial relationships. On the page immediately following the essay on Davis was an article on Léger with illustrations of

¹Stuart Davis, "Arshile Gorky in the 1930's: A Personal Recollection," Magazine of Art, February 1951, p. 57.

²Gorky, "Stuart Davis," p. 213. ³Ibid.

⁴Stewart Buettner has pointed this out in "Arshile Gorky and the Abstract Surreal," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 86.

Composition and Keys and Figures. Among Leger's newest works, these displayed free-floating images against empty backgrounds and a juxtaposition of unrelated objects that recall surrealism and not the classicism of Leger's paintings of the twenties.

To call Gorky a surrealist is misleading rather than helpful. However, in surrealism Gorky did find an approach which aided him in evolving new forms and imagery, a legitimization of memory and fantasy, and a justification for bringing psychological and emotional concerns to canvas. Writing of Gorky's work from the early thirties, Julien Levy affirmed that the surrealists "made Gorky realize that his most secret doodling could be very central. He found his fantasy legitimized...."¹

Aspects of Gorky's art in the 1930s relate to surrealism as well as to subjective art in general. The chronicling of Gorky's stylistic sources during the 1930s in European art--that of Miro, Picasso, Leger, Ernst, Masson, and Tanguy--is not the purpose of this

¹ Julien Levy, foreword to Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 8. In Harold Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky: The Man, the Time, the Idea (New York: Horizon Press, 1962), p. 102, the author stresses that in the 1940s the presence of the surrealists encouraged Gorky to explore the new realms of imagination and nature instead of his earlier concern with other art. That this is true is doubtless, but it must also be acknowledged that the concern with imagination and fantasy already existed (though perhaps to a lesser degree) in the 1930s. See University of Maryland Art Department and Art Gallery, Drawings of Arshile Gorky, p. 18 for a discussion of surrealism's influence on Gorky. Brooks Joyner points out the following: Gorky's "abstract surrealism" of the early thirties in his drawings; the use of psychic automatism, mainly in the forties; an improvisational method in the notebook drawings of 1938-40 and in the mid-forties; an interest in dream, memory, and eroticism. Many of these points are developed below. An incident from Gorky's personal life further points to his interest in surrealism during the 1930s. In 1936, Gorky had drawn from Levy's Surrealism passages of Paul Eluard's poetry for use in love letters. See Levy, Arshile Gorky, p. 24; and Levy, foreword to Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 8.

chapter; rather, it is to show that Gorky used forms similar to those of the above artists to depict the same themes as other subjective American artists of the period.¹ Besides the development of abstract biomorphic forms and their accompanying subjective content, Gorky developed a highly evolved imagery of eroticism in the 1930s, an unusual imagery in the U.S. before the early 1940s. As well, Gorky began to use memory as an aesthetic component, summoning from the past subjects which became transformed by time and psychological mechanisms. This poetic approach to subject matter had little to do with confronting the present realities of the time. It affirmed the past of the individual, rather than the shared past of a group, as a basis for art. Opposed to the civic ideal which found expression in the historical murals and paintings which covered 1930s America, Gorky championed the realm of psychology over that of history.

While Gorky relied on the transfiguring powers of memory to help create certain images (discussed in detail later), his method was not identical with the automatism of the surrealists. Harry Rand explains that paintings of the 1940s were not automatic "in the sense of retrieving hitherto unconscious images from levels normally unavailable to the conscious mind," because Gorky's art was one of "familiarity with his wishes, images, and longings, rather than an art of self-revelation. Gorky did not discover his desires in painting but confronted them."² This description applies as well to work of

¹Diane Waldman makes extensive and illuminating comparisons of specific Gorky paintings with works by Picasso, Miró, Ernst, and Masson. Arshile Gorky, pp. 24-29, 46-47, 29, and 43, respectively.

²Harry Rand, "The Calendars of Arshile Gorky," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 78.

the 1930s. In these earlier years, however, the sense of familiarity with his needs is less. As a result, greater frustration, conflict, and unresolved aesthetic choices are evidenced in the paintings. The intensity of these qualities makes the early work intellectually and emotionally exciting, even though the tentativeness and inconsistency of the paintings ranks them below the extraordinary originality and resolution of those from the 1940s.

Gorky was never a bonafide surrealist. Ethel Schwabacher has pointed out that he did not accept a great deal of the surrealist approach to art: its anarchy, automatism, Dali's "paranoid faculty for the double or triple image," illusionary representation of dreams, the surrealist object, the incorporation of language into art, or any of the various technical developments such as fumage, decalcomania, collaborative compositions or montage.¹ This evaluation applies to works of the 1930s as well as to those of the 1940s. Harry Rand has insistently opposed Gorky's interests to those of the surrealists. "Gorky's art was not speculative. He meditated on what he knew, often depicting his family, both the living members and those he had to recall from memory."² Rand makes the distinction that memory, not imagination, motivated Gorky, and that Gorky was attentive to John Graham's assertion in System and Dialectics of Art that abstract painting should develop from "reality and not from the imagination."³ Rand assertively disassociates Gorky from the surrealists, citing Gorky's "reportorial" tendencies and his "methodical development of imagery,

¹Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, pp. 90-91.

²Harry Rand, Arshile Gorky, pp. 135-36.

³Ibid., p. 43.

which was anathema to the...central notion of automatism at the heart of Surrealism." He finds Gorky "coherent, even narrative, in a rational way," and opposed to surrealism's "pursuit of a nondiscursive level of poetic evocation." In addition, "Gorky's commitment to unravel the events of his own world in his art precluded Surrealism's frequent incorporation of political or quasi-political references."¹ Although Rand's concern is primarily with the paintings of the 1940s and his decoding of Gorky's images is in many cases revelatory, the notion of Gorky as a "reporter" who is "finicky in the accuracy of his details" ignores the basic motivation behind the artist's work of both the thirties and forties: the need to abstract into suggestive, non-descriptive forms whose ambiguity is a dominant feature.

Perhaps the aspect of surrealism which Gorky most opposed was its playfulness. Grooming himself in the mold of "the great artist" Gorky was unsympathetic to the elements of humor, play, and satire in surrealism. Harold Rosenberg has noted that Gorky, always ready to draw upon Picasso, never was attracted to his "lampooning of art itself. Self-conscious as he was about becoming an artist, levity about painting was beyond Gorky...."² This observation applies equally to Gorky's involvement with Miró, whose playful images and joyful fantasy were never imitated. Whereas the eroticism of Picasso and Miró is often joyful, even silly, Gorky's expression of eros is serious and often pained. In a widely quoted letter of 17 January 1947, Gorky wrote about the surrealists to his sister Vartoosh: "Their ideas are quite strange and somewhat flippant, almost playful. Really they are not as earnest about painting as I should like artists

¹Ibid., p. 212. ²Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, p. 72.

to be. Art must always remain earnest. Perhaps it is because I am an Armenian and they are not. Art must be serious, no sarcasm, comedy. One does not laugh at a loved one."¹

Gorky was devoted to painting as an art form and not as a vehicle for extra-aesthetic concerns, whether political convictions or psychological theories. This does not mean that the paintings categorically do not reveal these things, for all art does. Rather, Gorky did not envision or create art as a means for consciously diagramming these extra-aesthetic ideas. In the 1947 letter quoted above Gorky explained:

Beloved ones, Surrealism is academic art under disguise and anti-aesthetic and suspicious of excellence and largely in opposition to modern art. Its claim of liberation is really restrictive because of its narrow rigidity. To its adherents the tradition of art and its quality mean little. They are drunk with psychiatric spontaneity and inexplicable dreams. These surrealists. These people are interesting to a limited extent. We do not think alike because their views on life differ so much from mine and we are naturally of opposite background.²

Certain of these criticisms--in particular that the surrealists were against modernism, quality, and aesthetics--are feelings borne out of Gorky's relations with the surrealists in the U.S. during the 1940s and do not reflect his more open and unprejudiced views of the previous decade. It is also possible that Gorky was referring primarily to the veristic branch of surrealism, particularly Dali, Delvaux, Roy, and Magritte. Part of Gorky's objections, however, reflect a lifelong adherence to traditional forms of drawing and composition, conscious

¹Karlen Mooradian and David Kherdian, eds., Ararat 12 (Fall 1971), p. 39. Also quoted in Harry Rand, Arshile Gorky, p. 213; quoted in part in Barbara Rose, "Arshile Gorky and John Graham: Eastern Exiles in a Western World," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 67.

²Ibid.

control, and an insistence on the utter seriousness of the role of artist and the act of painting. Milton Brown suggests these concerns as part of the reason for Gorky's friendship with the Russian circle of David Burliuk, the Soyers, Chaim Gross, and others, despite their figurative orientation.¹

Gorky's almost solemn approach finds parallels in the American art world as a whole in the 1930s, whether in the insistent dogma of the social realists, the pathos of the studio painters (Pascin, Bishop, Soyer, Miller, and others), or the lyrical but serious chronicles of the regional painters. Usually, satire is the closest art comes to approaching humor in the 1930s. But even the satire was seldom as comical as that of other periods (such as the 1960s with its pop art); more often than not, it is bitter and expressed within the framework of specific social comment.

In the 1930s, socializing influences were dominant, and there was pressure to form group efforts, whether toward amelioration or criticism of existing institutions. The decade also seems to have valued a straightforward attitude in all manner of personal expression and in politics. In contrast, the 1950s might be characterized as a period in which conformity and satisfaction with existing states was encouraged, while other periods might be regarded as times of overwhelming individuality of expression. The thirties achieved a median in which social, shared efforts reigned, yet room was allowed for criticism and dissatisfaction within a framework of seeking truth. Truth, objectivity, and clarity were important goals of the thirties.

¹ Note to the author, December 1981.

Gorky, in his personality and in his art, refuted these. In his plagiarism of Gaudier-Brzeska, Eluard, and Breton in letters; in his falsification of dates on his paintings; and in his portrayal of himself as a Russian refugee, Gorky intentionally obfuscated the truth.¹ These personality traits reflect the same goals as Gorky sought in his painting: the camouflage of fact in order to evoke a more romantic, speculative, or creative vision.

Gorky eschewed the popular role in the 1930s of the artist as worker. The ideal of the artist as worker has been widespread in twentieth-century American art history partly because the alternative roles of aesthete and intellectual were not popular. In the second decade of this century, John Marin spoke of art as a "lusty thing," claiming "that painting is a Job--a Job in paint...."² In the 1930s, the notion of artist as worker was seen in the modeling of artistic organizations on workers' unions. To be a member of the popular Artists' Union implied at least a tentative Marxist attitude of identification with the working class. In relation to the early development of the abstract expressionists, Hayden Herrera has noted:

In a society dominated by the work ethic and suspicious of artists, some of the Abstract Expressionists defended their roles as painters by donning paint-spattered overalls, insisting on creativity as a form of work. A tough-guy stance was assumed in order to counter the attacks on their art as effete. Gorky,

¹For plagiarism, see Nick Dante Vaccaro, "Gorky's Debt to Gaudier-Brzeska," The Art Journal 28 (Fall 1963), pp. 33-34; Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 8; and Levy, Arshile Gorky, p. 24. For dating, see Elaine de Kooning, "Gorky: Painter of His Own Legend," Art News (January 1951), p. 40.

²Selected Writings of John Marin, reprinted in Readings in American Art Since 1900, Barbara Rose, ed. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 66.

on the other hand, retreated to the romantic role of the artist as misunderstood genius.¹

Gorky did not accept the idea of the artist as a being concerned with the physical and social environment. During the thirties, portraits, still life, memory, and other art stimulated Gorky's imagination. A utopian identification with the American people, the American landscape, or the urban scene did not exist for Gorky as it did for so many artists of the period; natives and immigrants alike. Neither did the educational role of art find a defender in Gorky. He may have worked almost continually on the government projects, but the mission of the New Deal efforts toward public edification had little relation to Gorky's vision of art as the experience of the individual.

Other abstract artists, though popularly regarded as elitists, were nonetheless involved in organized propagandizing, of which Gorky disapproved. Regarding Gorky's disagreements with the American Abstract Artists, Balcomb Greene explained that Gorky wanted "a fellowship which would paint together and discuss professional problems, but which would not hold exhibitions or publish communications to the outside world."² Gorky sought an atelier-like situation which was to stimulate individual creativity, not a group which was to educate the public or even take it into consideration. To his sister Vartoosh Gorky wrote: "Some view and cannot understand because in never having experienced they cannot conceptualize complexity. Must aesthetic art

¹Hayden Herrera, "Gorky's Self-Portraits: The Artist by Himself," Art in America, March-April 1976, p. 56. This point has also been made by Dore Ashton in The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning (New York: Viking Press, 1973), pp. 7-8.

²Balcomb Greene, "Memories of Arshile Gorky," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 110.

be brought down so they can understand? Better that they be raised up to understand great art. Complexity suffocates when reduced to popularization."¹

Although Gorky's work closely followed European models, Gorky himself insisted that individuality was of paramount importance.² Gorky began the cultivation of his individuality early. Bolotowsky remembered that Gorky always "wanted to be on his own. And he wanted very much not to get mixed up with a group...." In Bolotowsky's words, Gorky was "a decided egomaniac,"³ This psychological factor buttressed the intellectual ideal of artistic individuality. Both Harold Rosenberg and Dore Ashton have explained how the arrival in New York of Breton, Matta, and Ernst, among others, was an impetus in the early forties for Americans to find a renewed faith in the value of individual creative effort.⁴ For Gorky, however, the arrival of the surrealists did not create, but reinforced, a previously existing commitment to a unique personal and artistic identity.

Arshile Gorky felt that the historical circumstances of his own time were a particular threat to the traditional role of the artist as a creative individual pursuing a private struggle for aesthetic truth. In the essay "My Murals for the Newark Airport: An Interpretation," the artist wrote primarily of the gestation and

¹24 November 1940. Quoted in Karlen Mooradian, "The Letters of Arshile Gorky," in Mooradian and Kherdian, Ararat, p. 25

²See Herrera, "Gorky's Self-Portraits," for a discussion of how the self-portraits relate to Gorky's notion of individualism.

³Interview, in Larsen, American Abstract Artists, p. 515.

⁴Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, pp. 98-102; and Ashton, New York School, pp. 99-113.

meaning of the abstracted forms in the mural. He also explained that he did not want them to be seen as decoration and that this demanded that they not be part of the wall (that is, real murals) but be applied as distinct panels. Then, suddenly mixing his metaphors, he posed a parallel situation in social terms: "In these times, it is of sociological importance that everything should stand on its own merit, always keeping its individuality. I much prefer that the mural fall out of the wall than harmonize with it."¹ Gorky was not interested in the mural as an educational tool for communication with an audience but as an aspect of aesthetics which might exhibit genius. He equated individuality in style with a refusal to popularize and a refusal to be involved with mass social movements. It is especially significant that Gorky executed the entire mural himself, without the customary help of assistants.² The creation of art, whether on the easel or on a monumental scale, was to be the product of the solitary individual.

Gorky's political viewpoint has been summed up by Barbara Rose, Harold Rosenberg, and Hayden Herrera. The latter described it as "a sort of leftism based on general sympathy for the down-trodden."³ Rose concurred explaining that both Gorky and Graham believed in a "'spirit of the people' uniting the masses in a common spiritual bond."⁴ It is an attitude similar to that of Gorky's

¹Bowman, Murals Without Walls, p. 13.

²Jordan, "The Place of the Newark Murals in Gorky's Art," p. 62.

³Herrera, "Gorky's Self-Portraits," p. 57.

⁴Rose, "Arshile Gorky and John Graham," p. 67.

Russian namesake, Maxim Gorky.¹ Rosenberg viewed Gorky as having "nosed cautiously around the Left."² That "Gorky was part of the activity of the Artists Union"³ may not be as accurate a sign of his political activism as this fact might normally suggest. One of Gorky's friends from the 1930s explained that, "The meetings were organized mainly to protect jobs" and to control working conditions on the federal projects.⁴ Gorky's membership might also be construed as having fulfilled psychological needs, not merely political ones. Rosenberg asserts that Gorky "had a continuing emotional interest in politics for its own sake, particularly in its drama."⁵ Gorky's sympathy to political revolt appears to have been confined to the hope for the eventual political autonomy of Armenia and not to events in America. Gorky's first daughter, Maro, was named "in honor of Hunchak revolutionary heroine and wife" of Gorky's friend Nazarbek.⁶ As an Armenian refugee, the artist felt himself to have experienced

¹Milton W. Brown, note to the author, December 1981.

²Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, p. 88

³Rosalind Browne, interview with Karlen Mooradian, New York City, 7 May 1966; in Mooradian, Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 113.

⁴David Margolies, interview with Karlen Mooradian, New York City, 25 July 1966; in Mooradian, Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 166.

⁵Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, p. 88. It is relevant here to point out the hostile feeling that Rosenberg's book engendered among some of Gorky's friends. Milton Resnick claimed that Rosenberg hated Gorky, "and you ought to discount that book he wrote because it's downright malicious." Interview with Karlen Mooradian, New York City, 21 July 1966; in Mooradian, Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 196.

⁶Mooradian and Kherdian, Ararat, p. 5.

the agonies of survival infinitely more than any American. This country's political struggles were minor in comparison to the tragedy of the Armenian republic.

The elitist notion of art as a special arena for those of great sensitivity and accomplishment was held by Gorky during a time when neither the popular nor the minority art groups gave the view credence. Gorky's often quoted remark that the New Deal efforts succeeded only in creating "poor art for poor people" was his biting rejoinder to those who would make of art a social instrument for change or an art that was to edify the public.¹ As late as 1946, Gorky was still concerned with what he regarded as the bad influence of social realism. Writing to Vartoosh, Gorky explained:

Vartoosh, dearest, practical or functional drawing is another type [of picturemaking]. It has two motives, as I see it. One is commercial illustration which is designed for commercial purposes such as advertising. The other is of political motivation such as social realism. I do not oppose the objectives of social realism for I believe that the lot of the peoples must be bettered and that there is a place for such representation to inspire them to help their fellow man. To produce more, work harder, learn better and thereby aid their societies and respective countries. But I disagree with the view that such works as they now exist are aesthetic. I have argued with other artists in New York on that point. I am not opposed to the existence of social realism and much prefer it to commercial illustration. But its existence should not be at the expense of real art.²

Herrera feels that Gorky's elitism existed in combination with vague social ideals, such as those indicated above concerning the "betterment

¹Gorky's remark is quoted in: Karlen Mooradian, "The Philosophy of Arshile Gorky," Armenian Digest 2 (September-October 1971), p. 73; Kainen, "Memories of Arshile Gorky," p. 98; Greene, "Memories of Arshile Gorky," p. 110; and by Gorky's wife in Herrera, "Gorky's Self-Portraits," p. 57.

²Letter of 3 June 1946. Quoted in Mooradian, "The Letters of Arshile Gorky," in Mooradian and Kherdian, Ararat, p. 36.

of the peoples" through harder work and learning (hardly the typical view of the Marxist, but the idealistic one of a previous generation of immigrants). Rose explains that "concrete political action was not a prime concern" for Gorky.¹ One could even go so far as to say that Gorky's view of art held no room at all for politics. And of his presence at the Artists' Union meetings, Balcomb Greene recalled, "He considered it his mission to instill into the rank and file of the organization a respect for art and a suspicion of the political adventurer."²

Although Gorky was interested in certain aspects of surrealism, its political side--its sympathy to anarchy--did not at all appeal to him. Ethel Schwabacher remembered sitting at Jeanne Reynal's where "paintings by the European surrealists hung in conjunction with Pollock and Gorky." Gorky expressed his dislike of the European "attraction to nonlogic and anarchy," but his attraction to their "poetry."³ He stated definitively, "just as I do not believe in anarchy in politics, I do not believe in anarchy in art."⁴ Gorky was eager to look anywhere to any creed if it seemed likely that there was some possibility it might offer a new insight into art. Rosenberg tells how Gorky once took the initiative in arranging a group discussion to relate a Marxist approach to painting, not that

¹Rose, "Arshile Gorky and John Graham," p. 67.

²Greene, "Memories of Arshile Gorky," p. 109.

³Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 136.

⁴Letter of 26 September 1939 to the Mooradians, in Mooradian, "Letters of Arshile Gorky," p. 23.

he was seriously interested in Marxism, but because he wanted to find out what the others knew that he perhaps did not.¹

It is particularly ironic that Gorky's studio from 1930 until his death was located at 36 Union Square. Popular with artists because of its low rents, Union Square was also a political arena. Amidst this fervent hotbed of artistic and Marxist organizing during the 1930s Gorky withdrew into the sacred domain of art. It is as if, in typically dramatic fashion, Gorky set himself up intentionally in an unreceptive environment in order to appear all the more iconoclastic. Harold Rosenberg noted the disjunction between Gorky's philosophy and that of his neighbors: "For a neighbor of the Co-op Cafeteria on Union Square, its walls covered with huge square-cut workers and gear shapes, to entitle a painting Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia was to make a public declaration of being out of step. Throughout the thirties Gorky's work constituted an actual testing of the degree to which art could enclose itself within its own realm."² There were also other reasons, personal and psychological, for Gorky's commitment to art enclosing "itself within its own realm." His alienation in this country, his insecurity, and his deep struggles with self-conflict (all of which are discussed more extensively below) buttressed certain aesthetic decisions. If his personality had not thrived on the sense of being alone yet superior, he would not have been equipped to develop as the aesthetic lone wolf that he was during the Depression.³

¹ Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, p. 88.

² Ibid., pp. 87-88.

³ For comments on these various topics, see Mooradian, "Philosophy of Arshile Gorky," p. 61, discussing alienation; Mooradian and Kherdian, Ararat, pp. 22, 49 and Mooradian, "Philosophy of Arshile

Artist-immigrants to America made distinct contributions in the 1930s. In analyzing the immigrant experience, one is struck by the preponderance of foreign-born artists among the social realists. In an appendix to Social Realism: Art as a Weapon, David Shapiro lists ninety social realists, over half of whom are of either immigrant or minority status (black or Jewish), often both.¹ This frequency dramatically reveals that many of the "have-nots" were eager to enter the political arena. They sought and found a new group identity in devoting their art to egalitarian goals. The conservatives who saw social realism as a foreign import and found in Thomas Craven their most vocal support were partially founding their prejudices on fact. Another aspect of artistic expression was fostered by immigrants newly arrived in America. If they were often eager to assimilate, they did not, luckily, totally refute their heritage and were able to infuse American art with a vital emotionalism which it seemed to have previously lacked. Of this contribution, Barbara Rose has incisively written:

a battle over cultural hegemony in America has been raging ever since the first waves of immigration brought ethnic minorities who were totally out of sympathy with the prevailing bias toward factual, narrative, and illustrational art. In the visual arts especially, the interaction of immigrants and refugees from Mediterranean countries and those from Eastern Europe like Gorky and Graham injected new cultural values of paramount importance. As opposed to native Anglo-Saxon reserve and Puritan repression of emotion and sexuality, which extended even to prohibitions against dancing and "risibility," these new populations--coming from cultures stressing ecstatic religious mysticism and overt,

Gorky," pp. 53-54, on the subject of loneliness; Mooradian and Kherdian, Ararat, p. 53, and Mooradian, "Philosophy of Arshile Gorky," p. 73, for the issue of struggle and conflict.

¹Shapiro, Social Realism, pp. 315-16.

often physical emotional expression--introduced new attitudes responsible for shifting the aesthetic basis of American art from narrative to formal, rhythmic, and expressive elements.¹

It was in this aspect of the immigrant contribution--and not that of social involvement--that Gorky was to participate.

Gorky's position was precarious because America was in a crisis and seemed on the brink of withdrawing the very security it had promised. This unstable situation had a powerful psychological effect, one which may also have influenced Gorky's art.² Insecurity plagued him in his artistic struggles and in his personal identity. "To be an Armenian is to be no one," he lamented.³ To solve this lack of identity, Gorky presented himself in the late twenties as Russian and a relative of radical and writer Maxim Gorky. The refugee artist was hoping to establish a pedigree--one with connotations of great individuality and creativity as well as social preeminence. Apparently, the writer's political radicalism was to have its counterpart in the painter's aesthetic radicalism. Gorky's assertions of artistic superiority and unique sensitivity could not but alienate him even further from others. Insecurity and an exaggerated pose of superiority are frequently corollaries to one another, and in Gorky these pathologies found vivid expression.

Gorky's nephew Karlen Mooradian has published many of the artist's letters and has written extensively on the effect of Gorky's

¹Rose, "Arshile Gorky and John Graham," pp. 65-66.

²Rosenberg concurs, in Arshile Gorky, p. 30.

³Mooradian, "The Unknown Gorky," Art News, September 1967, p. 67.

Armenian heritage upon his spiritual and artistic growth.¹ Mooradian's repeated theme has been Gorky's romantic identification with his heritage and with the vicissitudes of both the Armenian people and his immediate family. Mooradian has asserted that the struggle of the Armenian nation and Gorky's own physical survival in escaping the Turks gave him sustenance in the artistic and spiritual struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. Mooradian's view is substantially based on Gorky's declarations of love for his ancestry, which were written to his sister. However, Gorky sometimes concealed his Armenian identity in New York, and it may be that he overcompensated for this deceit in his effusive, nationalistic letters. Ethel Schwabacher warns, "it would be a mistake to give too much importance to these 'statements'...."² However, it would be extreme to conclude, as has Rosenberg, that the "Armenian childhood became...a decorative motif on the identity he chose for himself in deadly earnest; that of vanguard artist."³

Gorky's Armenian heritage was not a "decorative motif" but a potent inspiration for his New World role. While this author feels that the actual artistic heritage of the Armenian people was

¹See Bibliography, Part V. Mooradian's Arshile Gorky Adoian (Chicago: Gilgamesh Press, 1978) is helpful despite its strong biases and impenetrable prose. The Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, also by Mooradian, is especially useful for its lengthy interviews with Gorky's family and friends.

²Ethel Schwabacher, "Further Thoughts on Gorky," in University Art Museum, University of Texas at Austin, Arshile Gorky: Drawings to Paintings (Austin: University Art Museum, 1975), p. 88.

³Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, p. 30.

not of great importance for Gorky's own work,¹ the Armenian heritage-- both as emblem of being an outsider and for the memories it provided-- was of supreme importance to Gorky. A former lover of Gorky, Ruth Mussikian, was more typical of the young immigrant to America--she wanted to forget the painful experiences of the past and pursue a new life in a new land. Gorky, on the other hand, clung to the past. Mussikian explained, "His painting memories were all of Armenia, nothing of America. Gorky thought everything in America was vulgar. That was his favorite word. He was really living in Armenia here in Greenwich Village."² Gorky turned his Armenian past into a very special sort of fantasy. What he remembered seems to be less the reality of his experiences than an idealization of them. The past became a personal myth which continued to inspire the artist throughout his life in America. In a similar way, Gorky's art was based upon things seen and experienced but transformed through imagination, fantasy, longing, and love. Willem de Kooning perhaps came closest to understanding the actual function of Gorky's Armenian past. Of those times when Gorky spoke of his parents and the old country, de Kooning explained, "It was like folklore."³

Gorky's preoccupation with his past encouraged an alienation from his adopted country. He felt that his Armenian heritage was in

¹Mooradian heatedly disagrees; see his Arshile Gorky Adoian, pp. 162-212, for discussion of Gorky's interest in various Armenian artists. Despite any nostalgic and aesthetic interest in Armenian art, the evidence of its influence on Gorky in America remains slim.

²Ruth Mussikian, interview with Karlen Mooradian, 10 December 1972, Los Angeles, in Mooradian, Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 223.

³Willem de Kooning, interview with Karlen Mooradian, 19 July 1966, The Springs, East Hampton, New York, in Mooradian, Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 218.

conscious opposition to American ideals and motivations. While other immigrants tried to assimilate, Gorky continued to emphasize his outsider status. His performances of "peasant dances" and his sharing in John Graham's diatribes against Anglo-Saxon civilization were manifestations of this insistence.¹ Enforcing an alienation that was artistic as well as psychological, he offered allegiance to a foreign tradition--to Picasso and Miró, themselves foreigners in France.² Gorky's earlier discipleship had been to another European, Cézanne, who also played the part of rebellious outsider in the art historical drama. In sum, Gorky's social alienation seemed to find reinforcement in his vanguard artistic path.

While other immigrant artists often sought their subjects in the environment, Gorky chose a different repertory composed mainly of still life and portraiture. The still life, whether in a synthetic cubist or biomorphic mode, continued a tradition of the studio picture. It suggested that the subject of art was to be found in the studio itself or in other art. Gorky's involvement with still life reflected a strong interest in the formal qualities of picturemaking. It may also suggest that for Gorky subject matter was less important than perfecting his own style. Unlike many of the other studio painters of the thirties (whether foreigners like Pascin or natives such as Isabel Bishop), Gorky insisted on an advanced French style for his

¹For a description of these kinds of acts, see Rose, "Arshile Gorky and John Graham," pp. 65-66.

²Frank O'Hara noted the parallel of immigrants Gorky and de Kooning being so strongly influenced by two other émigrés in his introduction to *Museum of Modern Art, Arshile Gorky: Drawings* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1964-65) n.p.

paintings. The sources were a mixture of Léger, Picasso, and later on Miró, Arp, and Masson. This represents a divagation from the normal development of American studio painting.

Like his still lifes, Gorky's portraits also reflect an artistic and social estrangement. It is not coincidental that Gorky's finest and most important portrait of the 1930s is The Artist and His Mother (1926-ca. 1936, Whitney Museum of American Art, Jordan 115). Labored upon throughout the decade, it is a recreation of the artist's past in contemporary artistic form. Long before the Garden in Sochi series (which might be viewed as the penultimate transformation of the past into art) Gorky sought in the past and in his memories a vital subject matter. This portrait hints at Gorky's later discovery that the path to fulfillment was to be found in personal experience.¹

Image in Khorkom (ca. 1934-36, private collection, Jordan 147, ill. 70) and its numerous pen and ink studies stand midway between the two interests discussed above--memory and personal experience. (See also ill. 71, 72.) They graphically reveal the transformation from still life forms to zoomorphic and landscape forms which derive from a meditation on the past.² Once again, Gorky's estrangement from his fellow Americans is reflected in his art by the employment of a foreign style and a title which insists that private memories

¹A detailed account of this painting appears in Rand, Arshile Gorky, Chapter 2; and Jordan and Goldwater, Painting of Arshile Gorky, pp. 49-53

²The word "Xorkhom" used in the title for many years was Gorky's variation on "Khorkom," the village of his birth. In Arshile Gorky Adoian, Mooradian writes, "In attempting to phoneticize Khorkom...Gorky chose the Greek "X"=chi (Xhorkhom)....", p. 58.

of the past are the presumed inspiration for the artist rather than the realities of the present.

Specific imagery from Gorky's childhood found expression in works of the 1930s, as if making literal his assertion to Vartoosh concerning "Our beautiful Armenia which we lost and which I will repossess in my art."¹ In various simplified line drawings of a horse and a boy, or the two presented with a mother figure or an adult male, Gorky combined past and present. He created figures which suggest both his nephew Karlen (who was born in early 1935) and himself as a child. The female figure might be both Vartoosh (Karlen's mother) and Gorky's own mother.² Child of an Idumaen Night (1936, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Jordan 165, ill. 73) depicts a horse and rider as well. It is based in part on Composition (The Raven) (ca. 1934 in the author's opinion, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Jordan 97, where it is dated 1931), in which a tail seems to sprout from one of the horse's two heads. In the painting, the horse and rider are abstracted in such a way as to produce fantastic creatures which harmonize with the mysterious title. Though the reference to Idumaea is not specifically in Armenia, the Near Eastern source suggests that the artist himself is the child. It is important to note that the forms might also be a mother and child, or perhaps

¹Letter to Vartoosh Mooradian, 22 April 1944, in Mooradian, "Letters of Arshile Gorky," p. 32.

²In the Art Institute of Chicago's collection, Armenia's Khorkom Dream III, 1939, no. AGd16, shows Karlen and the horse Asdgh; Armenia's Khorkom Dream II, 1938, ostensibly shows Karlen, Vartoosh, and the horse Asdgh but perhaps also represents Gorky, his own horse, and his mother.

a child and his pet. This ambiguity is certainly intended.¹ One should also relate this horse imagery to Gorky's yearning for a return to the agrarian life of his childhood. He hoped, for example, to make enough money to help his father buy a farm in the country.² In the 1940s, Gorky himself retreated to the Connecticut countryside, although it was a highly cultured rural environment that Gorky chose, with Peter Blume and Malcolm Cowley as neighbors. In addition to these personal associations, the horse image also relates to Gorky's admiration for Uccello, whose Battle of San Romano hung in reproduction in Gorky's studio.³ The horses also recall those of the Parthenon friezes, which the artist had copied in line drawings very similar in style to the drawings discussed above.⁴

American society in the 1930s, seeking explanations and solutions to common problems, attempted to reintegrate individuals with the social community. This was manifest in the government's New Deal programs, the development of strong regional pride and identity, the growth of religious revivalism, and in the intense commitments to political ideologies whether radical or conservative. While the New Deal formulated a policy to achieve order on a large scale, artists

¹The image in these works has also been described (erroneously in the author's opinion) as "birdlike," with a figure on a platform, which may have been derived from Picasso's metal sculptures of 1929-30, especially Woman in the Garden." Rosenzweig, Arshile Gorky, p. 26.

²Karlen Mooradian, "The Unknown Gorky," Art News, September 1967, p. 66.

³Vartoosh Mooradian, in Mooradian, Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 38.

⁴A good example is Parthenon Horse, ca. 1939, Mr. and Mrs. Walter L. Portnoff, New York.

attempted to seek a new order for art, a program for a specifically American art. Usually, they sought concrete solutions, or at least they offered specific criticisms if not solutions. Paintings such as Philip Evergood's American Tragedy, Charles Burchfield's Parade, and Ben Shahn's murals at Roosevelt, New Jersey, show aspects of the struggle for justice in a literal manner and depict human beings engaged in shared endeavors. Gorky explored a vastly different terrain; his allegiance was to the non-specific and the non-social, to metaphors rather than the actualities to which others were geared. His expression was internalized and rendered in terms of private experience. The disorder, the struggle, the conflicts in his work could only indirectly relate to a broader social condition. The increasing stylistic affinities of Gorky's paintings to European surrealism was a reflection of allegiance to a mode of thought at odds with the intellectual and popular sentiments of this country. In surrealism resided a celebration of the unpredictable and the suggested, of the fragmented and the juxtaposed.

Carl Jung writes of the process of individuation as a major goal of maturation. The personality seeks to resolve its separate aspects and create a coherent whole. For example, a desire for socialization finds a compatible mix with the needs for overt displays of individuality; tendencies toward aggression and those toward passivity are welded into a harmonious compromise, and the individual develops a sense of self-satisfaction and self-acceptance. This notion of opposites striving for reconciliation can be applied to both Gorky's personality and his art. For Gorky, the Armenian past and the American present were ultimately an unresolved polarity,

as was his notion of the struggling, passionate, artistic genius and the contented agrarian nuclear family. In his art, Gorky tried to combine the traditional and the radically new. The abstract-surreal paintings of the 1930s are often based on still life. The abstract paintings of the 1940s are rendered in an innovative style but are traditional in their subjects--landscapes and interior family scenes. They also employ the traditional method of squaring off the drawing to enlarge it for an oil painting.

Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia (ca. 1933-34, private collection, Jordan 120, ill. 69), Enigmatic Combat (1937, San Francisco Museum of Art, Jordan 176, ill. 74) and related studies reveal a persistent attempt to resolve opposing forces into an unstable equilibrium. In Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia, a polarity of black and white predominates. Executed after numerous pen and ink studies (which apparently continued after the painting as well), Gorky chose not to add much color to the painted version. In Ethel Schwabacher's opinion, the starkness stands as a dramatic image of the "shifting emphasis between the two colors most expressive of the eternal constants--life and death...."¹ Though perhaps an overly dramatic reading of what is essentially a biomorphic still life resting on a table, Schwabacher rightly suggests the portentousness which can be conveyed by even the most ordinary of Gorky's canvases. The pen and ink drawings on the Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia theme are extraordinary in their range from dark to light. The virtuosity lies not only in the finely drawn lines but also in the deep black voids and the startling whites. Many of the drawings reveal white forms

¹Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 52.

emerging from black grounds. A drama is enacted between the darks and lights, either through opposition or through their comingling.¹

The drawings for Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia contrast rectilinearity with the free flow of linear biomorphism. Objects (1932, Museum of Modern Art, ill. 75) places against a firmly drawn grid floating curvilinear forms which resemble palettes, seeds, bone , and organs. Some are rendered in two dimensions; others are shaded and suggest volume. Their drama is one of ordered space versus space in flux. Another persistent mode of contrast involves Gorky's rendering of the circle as a hole in a flat surface. He constructs a plane which is then punctured to reveal a deep space, as in Painting (1936-37, Whitney Museum of American Art, Jordan 173, ill. 76), Composition (1936, Minneapolis Institute of Art, omitted from Jordan, ill. 77), Composition (1936-37, Mr. and Mrs. I. Donald Grossman, New York, Jordan 174), and Image in Khorkom (1936, Mr. David Anderson, Jordan 148).²

The notion of opposites also applies to stylistic categories. Gorky's development throughout the thirties witnessed a concurrent involvement with cubism and surrealism, and with abstraction and figuration. Not until the forties were these polarities resolved. If the confused dating of many of Gorky's paintings can be accepted tentatively as follows, the result is an unusual stylistic path. Painstakingly rendered portraits of Gorky's mother and various friends

¹See especially nos. 7, 10, 13, and 14 in Jim M. Jordan, Gorky: Drawings (New York: M. Knoedler, 1969).

²Employing the circle as void is different from the usage of similar forms to suggest eyes and breasts. Here, the contrast is formal and/or metaphysical rather than psychological or sexual.

were executed in the same years as surrealizing biomorphic works. Expressionist portraits of Jacob Kainen and Vartoosh Mooradian coexist chronologically with Image in Khorkom, Painting, and the two canvases entitled Composition. The most jarring of these contrasts even occur in the same work. In Untitled Drawing (Museum of Modern Art, no. 6 in Jordan, Arshile Gorky: Drawings) and in a related untitled painting of ca. 1936 (Christopher C. Schwabacher, New York, pl. 54 in Waldman, Arshile Gorky) a vaguely classical bust of a man is seen to gaze at abstract zoomorphic forms. Differing modes confront one another as opposites, yet as equals.

The gestation of Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia, Painting, and the Grossman Composition progressed from an early still life conception related to synthetic cubism to one which hardly suggested still life or structured relationships but instead utilized forms akin to those of Arp, Miró, and Picasso's work of the 1930s.¹ The 1937 Enigmatic Combat, as Stewart Buettner has written, seems to specifically address the "combat" between surrealism and cubist abstraction in which Gorky was engaged. In this painting, undulating forms of breasts, organs, eyes, and appendages are placed against a cubistic backdrop.² Diane Karp has given the same interpretation to the painting but erroneously reads the right side as representing the surreal vein (with the "palette/liver ideogram") and the left side as the cubist approach.³ As to the

¹In Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 25, the author suggests that Painting was first conceived as a still life.

²Buettner, "Gorky and the Abstract Surreal," p. 87.

³Diane Karp, "Arshile Gorky's Iconography," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 84. She opposes cubism as "a modern unfeeling art to which Gorky had long been a devoted student," with "the tenderness and

victor of the combat, one might agree with Buettner that, "After 1937, the probable date of Enigmatic Combat, almost all quotations from Cubism pass from" Gorky's paintings.¹ In the development of Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia into Painting there is a change to a new kind of space, a blank space through which objects float and where the cubist grid is absent. It is the dream space which Robert Goldwater has described as a characteristic of surrealism.²

In any study of American painting of the 1930s, an iconography of conflict assumes a dominant place. The images of social struggle and physical conflict loom large. Philip Evergood's American Tragedy and many works by William Gropper captured the American imagination by giving form to social actualities as well as to unfulfilled yearnings. In all corners of American art during the thirties, even in supposedly non-militant art, the image of direct confrontation and political struggle was often depicted. In John Steuart Curry's murals in the Kansas State Capitol, the most powerful section depicts the insurrection of John Brown. Although Curry might paint lyrical landscapes in his easel paintings, a monumental conception necessarily summoned a grander historical theme. It is appropriate that one of the most pertinent and powerful historical images at this time should have been this depiction of a prior epoch's violent quest for social justice. Thomas Hart Benton's murals for the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City

sensitivity of Gorky's soul...." She wrongly suggests that Gorky was interested only in Picasso's hard-edge synthetic cubist works and forgets the compelling attraction for Gorky of Picasso's work from the late twenties and early thirties.

¹Buettner, "Gorky and the Abstract-Surreal," p. 87.

²Goldwater, Space and Dream, n.p.

also made reference to the strife of the Civil War. And throughout the United States, in post office murals created under the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture and the Treasury Relief Art Project, history scenes often dealt with conquest and struggle. These provocative themes were, however, frequently in the company of historical scenes benumbed by cloying sentiment.

In European art, and in that of Gorky, similar issues were also manifest. André Masson's themes of conflict and violence, Picasso's Guernica, and Dali's Boiled Beans: Premonition of Civil War were all impelled by the contemporary violence of the political world. In Germany, the pained images of Otto Dix and Max Beckmann continued to reflect their surroundings as they had in the 1920s. They were a mature vision akin to that developing in England in the work of Francis Bacon and Graham Sutherland. For Arshile Gorky as well, struggle, conflict, and torment were important thematic concerns. They were, however, internalized as expressions of private compulsions and did not openly relate to social conflict, as did Guernica, for example. More like Masson, Gorky's use of abstract forms was not only a stylistic choice but also implied an abstraction of these themes from reality. They were conceived metaphysically and rendered metaphorically. Like Mondrian's asymmetrical grids or Burgoyne Diller's suspended rectangles, Gorky's images intended to be universal and not related to specific events.¹ Unlike neoplastic abstraction, Gorky's paintings are highly emotional--visceral rather than ethereal. And instead of proceeding from the universally felt to the personal, Gorky's paintings

¹Mooradian claims that Gorky did not deal with violence but "supplants violence by tragedy and therein lies the great Armenian tradition." Arshile Gorky Adcjan, p. 42.

describe individual feelings which may then be applied to a broader context.

The dramatization of struggle through pictorial means seems to have been a conscious act for Gorky. He extolled the "primordial force, the passion for struggle" of the Armenian people, which he felt had conditioned his art and contributed to its high quality.¹ Although Gorky was against anarchy in art, struggle was natural. "Great art derives from complexity," he explained, "from the clash of many new and opposing ideas."² His language constantly employed words which envisioned the world in terms of conflicting forces: "Advanced societies have the greatest potential for great art because of their complex confrontations." In the same letter, Gorky wrote of "chaos and problems, education, science and progressive ideas and ideals," indicating that great achievement was arrived at only by a tormenting path.³ For the artist as an individual, struggle was also necessary. Gorky posited a series of steps in the artist's development, and the middle steps were ones of great confrontation. "Such a confrontation is required for fruition," Gorky wrote in 1946. "The struggle, the turmoil of the ordeal to learn more cannot be resolved through half-hearted endeavors. The search is too painful. It is too deep. It requires zeal and intensity. There is also a

¹Letter to Vartoosh of 3 July 1937. Mooradian, "Letters of Arshile Gorky," p. 19. The entire quote reads, "Beloved ones, I love the primordial force, the passion for struggle, the searching qualities and the mature tenderness of the art of our Armenian peoples who first unify sadness with beauty and thereby grasp the full reality of life."

²Letter to Vartoosh, 29 November 1940, Ibid., p. 24.

³Ibid.

need for heartless self-criticism."¹ In the 1940s, this vision of personal angst was adopted by a whole generation that made a mythology and a new art from the quest for self-fulfillment.

Gorky's pictorialization of struggle is expressed in the repeated thick layers of pigment on the major canvases of the 1930s: Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia (c. 1933-34), the series of Khorkom paintings (ca. 1934-36) Enigmatic Combat (1937), Painting (1936-37), Composition (1936-37), Organization (ca. 1933-1936) and Composition with Head (1936-37).² Robert Reiff has explained that, "The paintings at this time are inchoate, as if the outcome of a struggle. The final work was only the last layer to be applied in most canvases and not a sum or distillation of several layers."³ In this post-action painting interpretation, the formal process of making the picture has become a record of its struggle. Unlike the lyrically drawn and washed canvases of the 1940s, the earlier works reflect a complex interaction between the process of creation and actual artistic indecision.⁴ In addition, the paintings are an extreme version of

¹Letter of 11 October 1946. Ibid., p. 38.

²The last two canvases listed above are predominantly abstract geometric works which echo the concerns of the American Abstract Artists and Gorky's flirtation with their aesthetics rather than the surrealist or subjective modes.

³Robert Reiff, "Arshile Gorky's Object Matter," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 91.

⁴It has also been assumed that this effect might have indicated a technical inability on Gorky's part. This notion seems to have arisen from Harold Rosenberg's idea (based on a statement made by de Kooning) that Gorky found it difficult to duplicate the tentacular lines of Miró using wide brushes. Greenberg has recently dismissed Rosenberg's assertion, affirming that Gorky did indeed employ pointed brushes for certain effects. See Mooradian, Arshile Gorky Adoian, p. 39, for Greenberg's refutation.

a typical stylistic device of the period which employed heavy impasto and overpainting. This approach was practiced by Picasso as well as by influential American figurative painters like Hartley and Evergood. In Gorky's work, layers of different colors are piled upon one another; numerous pentimenti act as an unintended but ultimately welcomed textural element; paint is thick and forcefully applied with none of the tenderness of the 1940s work or the line drawings of the 1930s.

This violent, indecisive mode of painting intrinsically counters the classical art which Gorky admired. His love for Uccello and Ingres in the 1930s thus represents an artistic dilemma--an intellectual attraction to one ideal but an actual practice which approaches its opposite. It is not surprising that the paintings which resulted should be so dramatic and so emotional. In this dichotomy, there is a compelling parallel to Cézanne, whose art intended to convey structure and permanence but often revealed shifting forms, transparent planes, and in the bathers, awkward gestures and a heavy emotionality. Although the visual evidence of Gorky's admiration for Cézanne had disappeared by the thirties, this interesting parallel remains and may suggest some of the reasons for Gorky's original attraction to Cézanne.

In analyzing certain paintings of the 1930s, interpretations based on Jungian archetypes, Freudian analysis, myth, and allegory are all relevant.¹ Gorky gave to the dramatic Enigmatic Combat and the lyrical Battle at Sunset with the God of the Maize (1936, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Jordan 167, ill. 78) titles which summon

¹In "The Calendars of Arshile Gorky," p. 79, Harry Rand's disclaimer of these approaches in relation to the Calendar series is not applicable to the earlier paintings.

Jungian associations. Suggestions of primordial struggle and myth signify in words what the artist attempted to capture in paint. In style and emotional impact, the classical element which interested Gorky had disappeared. A primitive, instinctual side of the artist was unleashed, what Freud called the "shadow" aspect of the personality.

Almost identical to the concept of conflict is that of opposition. It is also a basic Jungian concern. In the works under discussion are found an extraordinary range of oppositions, which often give rise to the sensations of conflict and struggle. Balcomb Greene has commented on certain of these opposing modes, explaining that Gorky could create, "by a geometry that he sometimes feared was Picasso-like or Léger-like, a space-order conflict. The early drawing shows the architectural stage upon which the shapes conceived by other men maneuver."¹ Greene suggests two different kinds of opposition. One describes the dilemma of the artist creating his own spatial configurations but peopling them with forms based upon those of other artists. (Gorky's ambivalence between originality and mimicry is discussed later). The second conflict is between ordered space and freely delineated space, a combination of opposing modes previously discussed in relation to the drawings for Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia. This conflict is finally resolved in favor of the freely flowing dream space and manifests itself in its first mature phase in the Garden in Sochi paintings.

Conscious oppositions also characterize stylistic features of the paintings. A horizontal format with opposing, strong vertical

¹Balcomb Greene, "Memories of Arshile Gorky," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 109.

elements is the overriding impression of Study for a Mural, a 9½ x 29 inch pen and ink drawing (pl. 4 in Levy, Arshile Gorky). Throughout the work of the thirties spare lines counter large broad shapes, as in Organization, Painting, and the studies for Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia. In these, black bands surround the forms and emphasize their contours to create a sense of restriction and containment. The strong outlines seem to oppose the flowing forms they contain. Gorky's mode of composition--in the biomorphic paintings at least--is basically one of juxtaposition rather than coherence. If the paintings try to achieve order and stability, they succeed more in conveying tension and the impossibility of a more arcadian goal.

Gorky's almost fanatical fascination with certain phases of Picasso's oeuvre is extremely relevant to an understanding of Gorky as a subjective painter. What attracted Gorky to Picasso was somewhat different from that which appealed to other artists, for Gorky's response was firstly to his "poetry" and only secondly to his form. Gorky's indebtedness to Picasso was well known and earned the jibes of critics and artists alike. Jerome Klein complained that Gorky's entry in the Third Whitney Biennial showed "hardly more than his learnedness in the ways of Picasso."¹ The aping of Picasso went further than the realm of painting, for Gorky seems also to have patterned aspects of his lifestyle after the older artist. In the 14th Street studio were plaster casts and a stringed instrument

¹Uncited article reproduced in O. Louis Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., roll N69-119, frame 227.

reminiscent of Picasso's studio furnishings.¹ Gorky's insistent pride in his physical strength parallels Picasso's vanity about his physical prowess. The themes of potency and impotency which Gorky embraced in the 1940s also recall important subjects which Picasso had earlier addressed.

An early painting and accompanying print by Gorky directly appropriated these forms and themes from Picasso. Blue Figure in Chair (1931, private collection, Jordan 130, where it is dated 1934-35, ill. 80), the related print Painter and Model (1931, National Museum of American Art, and given the title The Creation Chamber by Karlen Mooradian, ill. 81) may be construed as showing not one figure in the model's chair, but two. Artist and model are entwined as they make love in the studio. The image is a vivid equation of artistic and sexual creation and is inspired by Picasso's works on the same theme. It is no coincidence that in the left background of Gorky's print appears a direct copy of a synthetic cubist collage by Picasso, Head.²

In the 1930s, Picasso's combination of the structural and the metaphysical in one work was especially noteworthy. He pursued both formal and psychological goals. Other artists besides Gorky were aware of this. Charmion von Wiegand's 1937 article on surrealism distinguished Picasso as having "made his contribution to surrealism" but also as having preserved "a profound analysis of form" in even the

¹According to Stuart Davis, in "Arshile Gorky in the 1930's," p. 66.

²Probably from 1914; no. 8 in pl. VII of Roland Penrose's Picasso: His Life and Work (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). Waldman notes the similarities of Gorky's main figures to Picasso's two versions of Seated Woman from the late 1920s, in Arshile Gorky, p. 28.

most fantastic works.¹ More recently, Jacob Kainen explained, "It was natural that he should come to worship Picasso, who combined in one outlook the classical draftsmanship of such masters as Uccello and Ingres, the physicality of Cézanne, and the irrational dream world of the surrealists."² Picasso's earlier work--the blue and rose periods, analytical cubism, and the classicism of the early twenties--had much less interest for Gorky. For his classical interests, Gorky delved further into the past--to Ingres, Uccello, and directly back to the Greeks. From Picasso, he sought emotion. The themes of conflict which inform Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia and Enigmatic Combat were not to be found in analytical cubism. They contain a tension (almost a violence rather than the equilibrium of analytical cubism), which recalls Picasso's work from the late twenties and early thirties. Of Picasso's earlier work, only the primitivistic, pre-cubist paintings truly excited Gorky. A Portrait of Vartoosh (1937, Sotheby's, New York, Jordan 188) imitates Picasso's 1908 African style, with its browns and greens, segmented facial features, almond eyes, and broad flat nose.

Gorky was inevitably drawn to those phases of Picasso's work which were fraught with tension. The thickly painted, fractured forms of the thirties paintings, enclosed in black bands, is a device conscientiously developed by Picasso beginning in the late twenties.³

¹ von Wiegand, "The Surrealists," p. 13.

² Kainen, "Memories of Arshile Gorky," p. 96.

³ This has also been noted in University Art Museum, University of Texas at Austin, Arshile Gorky, p. 24; and Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 56.

Appropriated by Gorky, the style employed "heavy black outlines, prismatic structure, the definitely determined background and foreground plane and closed spaces," and saw its culmination in Enigmatic Combat, a painting that has been seen to mark "the triumphant climax of a long apprenticeship."¹ But in copying this style, Gorky invested the lines with a more tortured feeling. The flat spaces seem caught between the enclosing bands, and the borders themselves do not act as transitions from one space to another. Enigmatic Combat is the most extreme example. The tense web of Gorky's forms reminds one that the artist was still struggling to achieve a mature style, while Picasso was already an accomplished artist experimenting with variations of an established approach. Diane Waldman feels it is possible that Gorky simply did not want as great clarity of form or control of color as Picasso.² More likely, Gorky's precarious economic and psychological position contributed to the fragmented, almost torturous forms in the paintings.

Gorky so admired a 1939 book on Picasso by Robert Melville that he requested a proposed volume on his own work be modeled after Melville's approach. Gorky's attraction to the book and its interpretive bent offer means of determining precisely what Gorky valued in Picasso. The book appeared in 1939, even as Gorky was moving away from Picasso's example. Nonetheless, it summed up Gorky's retrospective attitude to the master he had studied for the past decade. Melville took a viewpoint opposed to what has been considered the standard

¹Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 56.

²Arshile Gorky, p. 25.

pre-World War II interpretation of Picasso, that is, Alfred Barr's 1936 Cubism and Abstract Art. Melville asserted that although cubism was essential to Picasso's originality, it was only after the cubist phase that Picasso's greatest originality prevailed.¹ This was particularly relevant for Gorky because at that time he felt himself to have passed through cubism to something more important. Melville also stressed Picasso's linearity and classicism, other appealing subjects to Gorky.² Melville emphasized his own subjective reactions to the art: for example, the way in which Picasso's example stimulated his own creativity. Most importantly, Picasso was presented as the embodiment of mystery and deep emotional content--hence the very title of the book, Picasso: Master of the Phantom. The author wrote of the play of "light and dark" as "the impassioned antagonists" in Picasso's world.³ This pairing of opposites relates strongly to Gorky's own Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia. Retrospectively examining cubism, the poet Melville pointed out "a mystery which pervades every phase of cubism" which "is the result of his [Picasso's] strange power of transmutation."⁴ It is a surrealist, or at least surrealizing, interpretation. Melville affirmed, "Picasso's art is always in touch with the uncanny...."⁵ The master artist is described as allowing his sensibilities a free rein as he "paints in a trance--a trance which has all the acuteness, the visual definiteness of a dream."⁶ This view of Picasso is certainly close to Gorky's

¹Robert Melville, Picasso: Master of the Phantom (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 26.

²Ibid., p. 27. ³Ibid., p. 18. ⁴Ibid., pp. 15-16.

⁵Ibid., p. 20. ⁶Ibid., p. 41.

conception of himself. Melville was committed to seeing Picasso as a painter of emotion rather than as an intellect or a formalist. This viewpoint was held in the 1930s by some in America, but it was not widely endorsed.

Melville's comparison of Cézanne and Picasso also has bearing on Gorky's development. "Cézanne's concern was with substance; with the stabilized," wrote Melville. "Picasso's interest is concentrated upon mutations of substance; upon the unstable...."¹ Although the schism between the two artists is overly exaggerated, it is evident that Gorky himself was conscious of the two approaches. His own path was a slow progression from an attempt to fuse substance with the ethereal to a maturity in which the unstable held free reign. Gorky's move into the total world of the ethereal is dramatized in the Garden in Sochi paintings, where the model is no longer Picasso but Miró, an artist who had completely abandoned the world of the physical and the real. This transition is the climax and the resolution of much of Gorky's aesthetic struggle of the 1930s.

Painted from 1941 to 1943, the Garden in Sochi series leads to Gorky's mature work.² In sum, the related group of at least six paintings reveal the progress from the heavily overpainted biomorphic

¹Ibid., p. 22.

²For in-depth discussions of the Garden in Sochi paintings, see William S. Rubin, "Arshile Gorky, Surrealism, and the New American Painting," Art International 17 (February 1963), reprinted in New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970, ed. Henry Geldzahler (New York: E. P. Dutton in association with Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969), pp. 381-89; and Jordan, Paintings of Arshile Gorky, pp. 79-81, for a detailed analysis of the respective dates of the paintings in the series. See Rand, Arshile Gorky, pp. 74-78, for a discussion of their imagery. See Waldman, Arshile Gorky, pp. 47-48, for excellent comparisons to Miró.

forms of the mid-thirties through images and style inescapably recalling Miró to a looser, scumbled type of image in which the delicate black outlines of forms are separate from the areas of color within their boundaries. The series moves from the impastoed, almost granular and dense Picasso-like surfaces to a new concept of space which is elegantly atmospheric and unrelated to cubism. It is likely, as William Rubin suggests, that Miró's first retrospective in 1941 was the important stylistic inspiration for the group.¹ William Seitz' accurate observations of twenty years ago explained the paintings as "the alchemy of Gorky's memory and imagination" blending the image of the Garden of Wish Fulfillment on the family farm in Armenia with Miró and with his longtime love of Uccello's Battle of San Romano.² Furthermore, "The Sochi group makes several crucial readjustments, among them the absorption of Picasso's influence in that of Miró, which in turn, from first version to last, is finally assimilated; and the replacement of a close-up studio-and-still-life scale by a return to the proportions and ambiance of landscape."³

Gorky was also somewhat drawn to the art of André Masson. Rosenberg explains, "Both artists were on their way out of cubism by the same route: the evocation of visual metaphors," in particular, the suggestiveness of biomorphic form.⁴ In addition, Masson was preoccupied with themes of passion, force, and struggle, as was Gorky. Enigmatic Combat and Battle at Sunset with the God of the Maize summon

¹Rubin, "Arshile Gorky, Surrealism," p. 384.

²Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 26. ³Ibid., p. 27.

⁴Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, pp. 81-82.

reminiscences of Masson's Battle of the Fishes (1924, Museum of Modern Art). Gorky's Battle at Sunset with the God of the Maize especially reveals that mingling of forms which simultaneously suggest plant, human, and bird shapes. Masson was employing this style as early as the late twenties, as in his Metamorphosis (1927), a sculpture shown in Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism.¹ Analyzing Gorky's biomorphic forms in the Khorkom works, Waldman found them based "upon Masson's characteristic heart and kidney shapes." Gorky also appropriated "the French artist's cursory and spontaneous calligraphy, whipping line divorced from form, and his sense of weightlessness."² Masson's abstracted eroticism, often more violent and less real than Picasso's, also appears to have influenced Gorky. The hard-edged, curvilinear shapes of Masson from the early thirties are like leaves or hearts and are especially close to the shapes employed by Gorky in the studies for Composition No. 7 (1936, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Jordan 157). However, Gorky's colors are quite different: black and white in the studies; red, yellow, white in Composition (the colors of Picasso's work from the thirties) as opposed to Masson's reds, browns, and grays. Whereas Gorky's Armenian past served to provide myth-like fertilization of his art, Masson found in classical mythology many motivating themes.

The eroticism of Gorky's art may also be identified with the subjective approach. Though not literally depicted, eroticism is suggested in abstracted mammary and vaginal imagery. This type of

¹It was no. 1423; illustrated in Rubin and Lanchner, André Masson, p. 126. The shared bird imagery is discussed later.

²Waldman, Arshile Gorky, p. 43.

imagery has commonly been assumed to develop only in the 1940s.¹ Robert Reiff has even denied Gorky's explicit erotica, claiming, "If the erotic does exist in his art, it has been sublimated or transformed into color and form."² This blindness to visual evidence is inconceivable to anyone who has carefully studied The Liver is the Cock's Comb (1944, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Jordan 281), with its prominent phallic and vaginal forms. Rand has also downplayed what he calls the "supposed eroticism" of Gorky's work.³ Mooradian, on the other hand, acknowledges the sexual symbolism but feels compelled to ascribe it solely to wholesome Armenian sources and not at all to Gorky's personal concerns: "His sexual symbolism relates to fertility and nature's reproductivity in that sense common to peasant, land-rooted societies whose livelihood requires mother nature's bounty rather than orgasms."⁴ In fact, the fecundity of human beings and mother nature serve as dual inspiration for Gorky's images of sensuality.

In the 1940s, sexual imagery becomes more important for Gorky than previously. One of the reasons for this is, as Harold Rosenberg has suggested, Gorky's close association with the expatriate surrealists and especially with Matta.⁵ The beginnings of these erotic themes,

¹Levy, Arshile Gorky, pp. 23-24; Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, pp. 103, 106.

²Robert Reiff, "Arshile Gorky's Object Matter," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 93.

³See Rand, Arshile Gorky, p. 211.

⁴Mooradian, Arshile Gorky Adoian, p. 58.

⁵Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, pp. 23-24.

however, occur in the 1930s, even if their rendering seems rather cold and schematic compared to their impassioned later appearance. The symbol of the circular breast seems almost diagrammatic in the early years, for example. Schwabacher has described the omnipresent breast shape as Gorky's "fetishistic symbol for woman," and the tube-like shapes on stems as "flowers which suggest flight or imprecation."¹ These forms are evident in the 1940-41 Garden in Sochi paintings but also much earlier--in Image in Khorkom and particularly in various drawings.

In the works on paper, Schwabacher has also noted the "wide range of erotic symbolization."² Waldman has found in the Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia drawings "a dark, rich eroticism" and an "almost obsessional imagery suggesting breast, phallus, seed and seductively reclining curvilinear forms."³ In the drawings Gorky gave free reign to the long, wavy tentacular lines appropriated from Miró, who used them as signs for hair. The studies for Khorkom particularly developed this. In two unusual charcoal drawings of 1937-38, Untitled and Untitled Double Drawing (nos. 50 and 51 in Jordan, Gorky: Drawings), biomorphic abstractions of people are seen in a coupling pose. These recall the themes of sexual and artistic creation in the earlier Painter and Model. In X on Brown Paper (1937, no. 49 in Jordan, Gorky: Drawings), the Ernst-like birds are seen with perhaps the first

¹Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 98.

²Ethel Schwabacher, in Whitney Museum of American Art, Arshile Gorky Memorial Exhibition (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1951), p. 17.

³Waldman, Arshile Gorky, p. 29.

manifestation of the phallus symbol which was to be widely used in the 1940s. Shaped like a cannon with two rounded protuberances, it is close to the cannon-phallus which preoccupied David Smith in drawings of several years later.

The use of erotic imagery, even in abstracted form, was foreign to American art in the 1930s. Representations of sex were often equated with probing into the Freudian unconscious, an act which would lead to art like that of Dali. Times were far too serious to allow for excessive physical enjoyment in art. One thinks of Reginald Marsh's exuberant sexy women on 42nd street and Coney Island as practically the only images from the 1930s with any degree of cheerful sexuality. In a sense, these were escapist images, and the more realistic aspects of sex were taboo.

Many of Gorky's forms from around 1931 until his death are fluid curvilinear shapes, repeated from one work to the next with subtle changes. The fluidity of these shapes, their metamorphosis from one depiction to another, and their rendering as if to suggest floatation and movement, must all be seen as part of the content of the paintings. The progressive changes in the three Khorkom paintings--Image in Khorkom (Jordan 147), Image in Khorkom (Jordan 148), and Khorkom of several years later (Jordan 212) or the closely related Organization No. 2 (Jordan 175), Painting (Jordan 173), and Composition (Jordan 174)--are not merely revisions of form but are also transubstantiations in which outlines reorient themselves and relationships organically shift. Forms which suggest the head of a bird in Image in Khorkom become separated from one another in Khorkom and seem to form a palette shape and a boomerang. (See ill. 70, 71.) In all of these works, an

energetic movement imparts a life-like quality. In the 1940s, movement is suggested by blurred edges and washes of color played against alternately thickening and attenuating lines, as in the last version of Garden in Sochi (1941-44, Museum of Modern Art, Jordan 283) and The Liver is the Cock's Comb. In the 1930s, movement is created by aggressive pressure of heavy forms acting against one another. Painting and Enigmatic Combat are good examples of the earlier mode. There is also a lyrical use of curving borders and long trident-like appendages, as in Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia.

Relating to this process of metamorphosis is William Seitz' explanation of the origin of Painting as a still life:

In scale, arrangement and setting (as the rough pen sketch makes clear) this is a still life. A table top, rear wall and moldings, recalling the cubist paintings of the twenties, can be identified; the central group resembles an arrangement of plants, vases and such objects, with leaves strewn on the table or projecting downward. Note also the curious tridentlike object at the left, containing a dot, which becomes a tassel or bird's head in the paintings. But of more value than seeking the origin of each unit is an understanding of Gorky's metamorphic method. As he proceeded he was willing to substitute any one ideogram for another, or to abandon it completely. Instinctively, he seems to have been moving toward the realization that a given configuration can resemble, let us say, a leaf, the wing of a bird, or a pointed Armenian slipper: that behind the practical catalogue of specific objects and organisms lies a convergent vocabulary of universal forms.¹

This approach stresses the process of creating as much as the final outcome and relates to both surrealism and later abstract expressionism. By the early 1940s, this mode had become accelerated. Mojave (ca. 1940, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Jordan 242, ill. 79), akin to and probably executed slightly before the Garden in Sochi series, is a landscape which seems to depict both plant and animal life in the same image. Argula (ca. 1938-39, Museum of Modern Art, Jordan 218)

¹Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 25.

shows similar forms. This metamorphic mode may have found a natural spokesman in Gorky by virtue of his background. Mooradian notes that an essential part of Armenian tradition embraces the concept of hylozoism: the doctrine that matter and life are inseparable. "The hylozoism of the ancient Armenian peoples, to which Gorky so passionately subscribes, rejected absolutely the separation of inanimate and animate."¹

Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia, the related drawings, and their eventual appearance as an untitled mural proposal might be read as an extended essay on this metamorphic mode that capitalizes on multiple associations. (See ill. 69, 75, 82.)² Seitz has regarded these works as "farther than Picasso in the direction of biomorphic abstraction" and probably inspired by Arp and Miró. The shapes have dissolved into a play of curves "that resemble an artist's palette with its eye-like perforation, or the patterns that in cubist still life function as shadows, or represent bowls, musical instruments and

¹Mooradian, Arshile Gorky Adoian, p. 76; see also pp. 41-51, 75-93, for development of this idea.

²The dating of all these works is problematic. Several authors have given the drawings a 1929-31 date: University of Maryland Art Department and Art Gallery, The Drawings of Arshile Gorky (College Park: University of Maryland, 1969), p. 20; Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 50 and figs. 10-14; Jordan, Gorky: Drawings (New York: M. Knoedler & Co., 1969), nos. 7-10. They were thought also to be from 1931-34: Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 20; and Levy, Arshile Gorky, pls. 61-64. Seitz dates the final painted version as ca. 1934. It now seems likely that many of the works (or at least the painting if not the drawings) are from 1933-34, for they relate closely to a mural design proposed by Gorky to the PWAP in December 1933, as pointed out in Francis V. O'Connor, "The Economy of Patronage: Arshile Gorky on the Art Projects," Arts Magazine, March 1976, p. 95. Rand dates the final painted version 1934 in Gorky: Implications of Symbols, p. 55; Waldman dates it 1933-34 in Arshile Gorky, catalogue no. 43. Jim Jordan dates the drawings 1931-33 and the painting 1933-34, in Paintings of Arshile Gorky, pp. 43, 251.

gourds."¹ Jim Jordan has written: "Some images seem to change and evolve. A classical bust or profile becomes an abstract biomorph; a bird skeleton turns into that of a fish; and the most elaborate and polished abstract configuration, that to the left of the head in several of the versions, seems to have had its beginnings in a curious dove-like image."² There is a compelling obsessiveness in this series of related studies, "redone in more than twenty almost identical versions, in several variations, and in combination with other images."³ As the probable original subject--a still life--disappeared, Gorky likely became increasingly involved in the changes of form and the reorientation of the motifs as an actual part of the meaning of the work. In sum, there is not an explicit narrative but a confluence of evocative symbols.

Analyzing the Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia drawings, Harry Rand reads the bird-like forms at right as two breasts and the whole image as a nude resting on a claw-footed couch. The entire series, when assembled into the three-part mural study (no. 51 in Waldman, Arshile Gorky) is perhaps over-interpreted as a meditation on "the artist alone in the city, a solitary in his art, a single man yearning for a family and the affections of a wife."⁴ One cannot but feel the futility of positing such specific interpretations. Gorky himself apparently wanted the multiple interpretations which often make

¹Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 20.

²Jordan, Gorky: Drawings, p. 6.

³Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 20.

⁴Rand, Arshile Gorky, pp. 58, 64, 69.

scholars uncomfortable. Breton's effusively poetic warning of 1945 should still be kept in mind:

Truly the eye was not meant to take inventory like an auctioneer, not to flirt with delusions and false recognitions like a maniac.... Easygoing amateurs will come here for their meager rewards; in spite of all warning to the contrary they will insist on seeing in these compositions a still life, a landscape, or a figure instead of daring to face the hybrid forms in which all human emotion is expressed.¹

Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia may in fact derive from an image of a woman on a couch, but it must also be recognized that it might be a still life or an organism, and that denying one in favor of another strips the work of its intention as well as part of its true meaning. That Gorky sought a multivalent image is borne out even in works as early as 1929-32. Waldman points out how Gorky's variations on Picasso's synthetic cubist still lifes disguise their abstracted forms even further, resulting in a form that may be based upon a guitar but becomes "part face, part boot."² An untitled pen and ink drawing from about 1932-34 is perhaps the most explicit early clue to Gorky's interest in multivalent or double images. A sort of still life, the drawing pictures a butterfly or moth in whose wings are visible two profiles, as if set in a cameo. To the right of this image is a leaf, whose center contains a large eye reiterating the shape of the leaf. One suspects that Gorky, observing the natural markings on the leaf and the butterfly, saw other images hidden within. The leaf is also an eye; the butterfly is also a human face. This method of making images was to remain with Gorky for the rest of his

¹Originally published in 1945 for a brochure accompanying Gorky's exhibition at the Julien Levy gallery. Quoted in Levy, Arshile Gorky, p. 34, and Waldman, Arshile Gorky, p. 58.

²Waldman, Arshile Gorky, p. 58.

life. One thinks foremost of the two great paintings of 1944, The Leaf of the Artichoke is an Owl (Museum of Modern Art, Jordan 287) and The Liver is the Cock's Comb, where the artist's titles specifically draw attention to the multiple images--and meanings--in a given shape.

In the progression from drawing to painting, Stewart Buettner has seen a loss of "concern with nocturnal dreams and musing." The paintings became more pronounced still lifes.¹ This might be explained by assuming that Gorky felt more freedom when exploring new forms in pen and ink. It may also suggest that the paintings were in fact executed earlier and that the drawings may be codas, just as Picasso had painted Demoiselles d'Avignon and then proceeded to explore the ramifications of the new style in smaller oil paintings and drawings. In any event, sensations of flux and metamorphosis are particularly suited to the fluency of the drawing medium.

Gorky's drawings stand on their own and are not merely preparatory or ancillary works. As early as 1932, he tried to show Julien Levy his drawing portfolio, an indication of the faith he placed in the works on paper. Brooks Joyner has explained, "Gorky never felt the control and articulation of shape in the oil medium that he felt in his drawings. Indeed, his paintings of 1945 became essentially drawings on canvas with the pigment spread over the surface in transparent washes."² In fact, the combined painting-drawing mode of the

¹ Buettner, "Arshile Gorky and the Abstract-Surreal," p. 87.

² University of Maryland Art Department and Art Gallery, Drawings of Arshile Gorky, p. 2.

mature work is one of Gorky's major contributions. A spontaneity similar to that of the later paintings is also apparent in the drawings of the 1930s. Gorky certainly appreciated the directness of the drawing medium, and it appears that drawing was probably a relief to him after the difficulties of painting. The acknowledgment of Gorky's love of drawing is important for an understanding of the thirties work. It is a myth to suppose, as have Schwabacher, Seitz, Elaine de Kooning, and Rand, that Gorky drew in the early and mid-thirties because he had no money for purchasing paint supplies.¹ His poverty was probably a contributing factor, but the probable truth is that Gorky "invariably concentrated in obtaining painting supplies before food or clothing," as Karlen Mooradian relates.² Both Willem de Kooning and Reuben Nakian recalled Gorky's studio in awe because of its size, its cleanliness, and its well-stocked art supplies.³ Stuart Davis never could understand how Gorky "acquired this truly impressive stockpile and kept it replenished."⁴ Nakian suggests the answer in explaining, "he was always five months behind in his rent."⁵ Rosenberg is probably correct in saying that people believed too literally Gorky's role as the destitute "great artist."

¹Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 50; Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 20; de Kooning, "Gorky: Painter of His Own Legend," p. 64; Rand, Arshile Gorky, p. 5.

²Mooradian, "The Unknown Gorky," p. 67.

³Willem de Kooning, Letter to the Editor, Art News, January 1949, p. 61; Reuben Nakian, in Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America 1876-1976 (Washington, D. C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1976), p. 196.

⁴Davis, "Arshile Gorky in the 1930's," p. 56.

⁵Quoted in McCabe, The Golden Door, p. 196.

The environment Gorky created in his studio was definitely not "consistent with the bleak despair and soul-crushing isolation he is said to have suffered in those years."¹

The resolution of whether necessity of free choice inspired the hundreds of drawings from the Depression years is important. "It is possible," Diane Waldman concludes, "that Gorky freely chose to restrict himself, as he did again for periods in 1943, 1944 and 1945, because drawing allowed him to change rapidly; it was his means and perhaps his impetus for change."² The truth is that Gorky loved drawing. Recalling the 1930s, a former student of Gorky explained that "in those days people thought of him as a draftsman rather than a painter."³ It should be asserted that Gorky intentionally concentrated on the drawings as a way to free his hand and mind from synthetic cubist restrictions and from obsessive intellectual control. The drawing mode relates directly to the surrealist admiration of automatism and free association. Gorky's method of creating his images in the 1930s should be seen as a combination of abstraction from nature and a subsequent use of free association to articulate these forms. It is significant that some of Gorky's apparently most spontaneous works of the 1940s are actually transposed from drawing to canvas by the traditional mode of squaring off the canvas into grids: Dark Green Painting (ca. 1948, Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd, Jordan 354),

¹Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, p. 70.

²Waldman, Arshile Gorky, p. 29.

³Revington Arthur, interview with Karlen Mooradian, Stamford, Connecticut, 5 May 1966; in Mooradian, Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 96.

The Limit (1947, private collection, Jordan 318), and The Betrothal (1947, Yale University Art Gallery, Jordan 340), among others. This method had been used as early as the late 1920s in The Artist and His Mother. The combination of an apparently surrealist effect (the automatic drawing) and the actual use of an academic and highly structured process is a paradigm of the two natures which Gorky struggled to meld within himself: the dramatic, emotional and uncontrollable urge to free expression; and a classical side disposed to design and order. The latter aspect finally took second place.

Although Rosenberg has written that Miró's automatism of the 1930s had little effect upon Gorky, one may see in the drawings a profound attempt to approximate Miró's floating spaces and whip-like filament line. This fetishistic line can be seen in several of the studies for Image in Khorkom. In studies for Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia, suggestions of Miró are to be found in the dark backgrounds against which birds and palette shapes float. The repeated image at lower left--perhaps a star, seed, or egg, from which radiate tiny hairs--suggests embryonic growth and may derive from Miró. These characteristic devices combine to create an overall effect of metamorphosis and growth. Harry Rand has suggested that Gorky culled from Miró "his sense of reductionism, a tendency to begin with a closely observed study and eliminate more and more details in successive treatments." This is often seen in depictions of the human figure, which was condensed "to a few abbreviated symbols."¹

The concept of "floating space," or to use Robert Goldwater's apt term, "dream space," is appropriate in reference to both surrealism

¹Rand, Arshile Gorky, pp. 44-45.

and Gorky's work. The empty space in which images seem to float suggests flux and tends to dematerialize the images depicted within. Whether abstract or realistic, they become symbols existing independently in space without direct relationship to one another. In such a space, forms often have no cause-and-effect reaction upon each other but seem unrelated and kept from any interaction which might hint of real-life relationships. The use of floating space found its most potent expression in the 1940s, but tentative steps in this direction can be seen in the *Nighttime*, *Enigma* and *Nostalgia* drawings. There is an alternation in the depiction of the background between a black tabletop tilted upward and a black space which is empty. A few years later, with the *Khorkom* paintings and studies, the move toward the empty floating space accelerated. One suspects that a base or horizon line was once in the picture but was overpainted. With the *Garden in Sochi* series the transformation became complete, and the images began to gently float unanchored to any ground.

Among the characteristic forms that Gorky employed, the shape of the "liver-palette" is omnipresent in the 1930s. Its significance has been analyzed by Diane Karp as doubly signifying the liver as the traditional seat of the soul and the palette as the practical and symbolic tool of the artist. The liver-palette thus represents a merger of creative inspiration (or feeling) with physical action.¹ This is typical of what have been termed Gorky's "ideograms"--suggestive shapes which are often repeated and connote multiple but fairly specific associations. If the palette-liver is, as Karp

¹Karp, "Arshile Gorky's Iconography," pp. 83-84.

suggests, both the artist's soul and his palette, then we may see its use as a surrogate presence of the artist himself. In a metaphorical way, the artist places himself in the painting. In a more literal interpretation, Rand has pointed out an abstracted figure in several works from the Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia series which suggests a man climbing a staircase. The figure, claims Rand, "surely represents Gorky himself, climbing the dark stairs to his studio."¹

The images in the Khorkom works suggests many things: animals with long hair-like strands, or perhaps the tendrils of plants. The ease with which one sees these images becoming flora or fauna is a type of free association on the part of the viewer. The paintings also tentatively suggest landscape spaces. In this, they act as transitions to Mojave and the Garden in Sochi paintings. The Khorkom paintings have also been seen to contain shapes inspired by human forms. Besides the "abstracted birds, leaf shapes, and the ubiquitous palette and eye motifs," Seitz points to the figural shape at the top right of both the pencil Study for Khorkom and the oil Image in Khorkom, concluding, "Interlocked with phallic projections, they have the generalized concreteness of a dream; and it is quite apparent that the abstract, hard-edged configuration at the upper right of the drawing has become a voluptuous, large-breasted nude."² Schwabacher viewed the same shapes as suggesting a ritualistic image of a woman in Image in Khorkom (Jordan 147) and that of a bird in Khorkom (Jordan 212).³

¹Rand, Arshile Gorky, p. 63, see also pp. 64-66.

²Seitz, Arshile Gorky, p. 24. ³Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 85.

The largest, lightest in color, and probably the last in a series of four related works, Khorkom (ill. 71) presents the device of cut-out images against a background of white empty space. The suggestion of a tabletop that remained in the second Image in Khorkom (Jordan 148) has been discarded. Shapes edge their way out of the whiteness which surrounds them in an almost organic manner. Gorky is not concerned with constructing space with artificial shapes--as Charles Shaw, John Ferren, and A. E. Gallatin were then doing--but with giving them life forces and human characteristics. Mideastern murals, perhaps consciously in Gorky's mind, may have reinforced his efforts to eliminate the latent suggestion of background structure. The Armenian muralists' mode of superimposing figures against a solid gold ground is a pertinent parallel to these paintings, especially those whose themes are ostensibly derived from reminiscences of Armenia.¹

Another important image in Gorky's pictorial repertoire of the 1930s is that of the bird. In many of the drawings from the early part of the decade, there seems to appear the form of an abstracted bird, head thrown back, jaws gaping, as in Untitled, Drawing, Composition with Abstract Still Life and Bust (Art Institute of Chicago), Still Life Drawing (nos. 7-10 in Jordan, Gorky: Drawings). Other major forms in these drawings are a skeletal fish structure and a classical bust which is sometimes replaced by nonrepresentational shapes. In a drawing in the Art Institute of Chicago Mooradian

¹Karlen Mooradian has extensively treated the issue of Armenian art influences on Gorky. See especially Mooradian, Ararat, pp. 33-34, letters to Vartoosh of December 1944 and 14 June 1945; and Mooradian, "Philosophy of Arshile Gorky," pp. 66-69; and Mooradian, Arshile Gorky Adoian, pp. 131-33, 168-255.

Collection entitled Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia (no. AGd2), a triangular, beaked bird seems to stand guard at the upper right. In Painting, the bird images emerge "singular, savage and somehow suggestive of a harshly primitive stolidity. The curious staring bird eye...appears no less hauntingly as the 'eye' of the palette, as the 'knot' of the tassel, as the 'eye' of the leaf, strangely transformed into a bird head."¹

One thinks of several contemporary artists Gorky admired-- Picasso, Miró, Masson--and of their attraction as well to the iconography of the bird. Picasso's are often a symbol of pity, peace, or hope. This approach finds a reflection in Gorky's Valentine with Garden in Sochi Motif. Miró's more lyrical, almost flirtatious birds are imitated in the chirping, colorful creature in the second version of Garden in Sochi (ca. 1940-41, private collection, Jordan 247), where it is perched in the anklet opening of the so-called Armenian slipper.² X on Brown Paper (reproduction in Jordan, Gorky: Drawings, no. 49) offers a literal though simplified bird and a separate bird's head juxtaposed with a cannon-like form suggesting genitalia. This is a threatening kind of eros which characterizes Masson's and Ernst's bird iconography. In the Khorkom paintings, a variety of wings, necks, and beaks emerge and sometimes combine with the palette forms.

¹Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 56.

²By the late thirties, the Museum of Modern Art owned two canvases by Miró with prominent bird imagery: Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird (1926) and The Hunter (Catalan Landscape) (1923-24). These may have inspired some of the imagery in the Garden in Sochi paintings. William Rubin, in "Arshile Gorky, Surrealism, and the New American Painting," p. 384, suggests that other early Mirós seen in the 1941 retrospective at MOMA were also important for Garden in Sochi.

The overall feeling is one of movement, energy, and mystery, without describing any specific activity.

Like all of Gorky's best paintings, the very ambiguity of the images in the works discussed above recalls the reason for Gorky's admiration of Rimbaud. In his statement on the murals for the Newark airport, the artist explained, "Rimbaud has epitomized for me the function of the artist when he wrote: 'The poet should define the quantity of the unknown which awakes in this time, in the universal soul.'"¹ Gorky made palpable that sense of the unknown. In his work, explained Balcomb Greene, it is "almost as though you're seeing living things except that you can't quite recognize them enough to give them names."² Gorky was not concerned with quantification, identification, and specificity. He sought that which he did not fully grasp in an attempt to come closer to his own personal truth. "Man likes what he understands," Gorky wrote to his sister. "Might it not be interesting and informative for him to also like what he does not understand?"³

¹Arshile Gorky, quoted in The Newark Museum, Murals Without Walls, p. 17.

²Balcomb Greene, interview, Montauk, Long Island, 1 August 1966, in Mooradian, Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 146.

³Letter to Vartoosh, 9 February 1942, in Mooradian, Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky, p. 277.

CHAPTER V

SOCIAL SURREALISM

Introduction

A number of artists in the 1930s explored simultaneously the inexplicable and the objective in an attempt to create a personal comment on the social climate of the period. Peter Blume, O. Louis Guglielmi, and Walter Quirt span the range of artists who fused the personal with the social. The three also represent a range of prominence, quality, and content, and in this they reflect the nature of this so-called "social surrealism." While Blume has seemed, and rightly so, the most accomplished of these artists, Quirt's art is noteworthy for the sincerity it reveals in coping with the widespread dilemma of the committed Marxist who also felt the increasing attraction to fantasy. Guglielmi, as an artist working both privately and on the WPA, is interesting for the way in which his work shuttles from a type of regionalism to social realism to fantasy in separate and often powerful paintings. If the achievement of their art sometimes appears uneven, it is because their fusion of fact and fantasy, of the social and the personal, is often unresolved, mirroring a confusion of intellectual commitment not uncommon during the Depression.

Blume was usually reticent in expressing his political sympathies, either through his art or through public statements. His overtly anti-fascist painting The Eternal City is, of course, a major exception and is discussed in detail below. Quirt, on the other hand,

was outspoken in expressing Marxist concerns through both the titles and images of his paintings. Guglielmi offers an art inspired by a broad humanitarian impulse rather than specific political sympathies. Their respective expressions of subjective content reveal as broad a spectrum as their social content, from Peter Blume's fairly consistent intermingling of the metaphorical with the real, to Quirt's transition over a period of years from clear social indictments to somewhat frivolous private fantasies, to Guglielmi's indecisive expression in one painting of a present reality and in the next a private vision.

Peter Blume

Peter Blume's Parade (Museum of Modern Art, ill. 83) ushered in a decade which was to be fraught with struggle--ideological, economic, physical, and political. Begun in 1929 and finished in January 1930,¹ it was the first painting in Blume's mature style and a forerunner of the oblique approach which much of his art was to take toward events of the decade. Parade is a comment on the past and the future in both style and subject. Its rendering reflects elements of 1920s precisionism and of Blume's own style of the late twenties: schematic rendering with strong outlines, simplified shapes, and inconsistent perspective evocative of a primitive or untutored painter. Frank Getlein has described Blume's images in the painting:

"Parade" brings together a number of Blume's interests at the time and for the first time brings together elements seen at different times in different places. He was spending a good deal of time along the Hudson River piers, sketching the ships at dock there, with special reference not to the overall graceful shapes, but to individual shapes in metal. He was also interested in the industries in the neighborhood east of the river where may be

¹Kennedy Galleries, Peter Blume, essay by Frank Getlein (New York: Kennedy Galleries, 1968), n.p.

found the enclosed conveyor passages over the streets, which appear in the picture. He was also currently fascinated by the magnificent armor collection at the Metropolitan Museum and recording armorial details in his endless sketching. Finally, the faintly oriental-looking man in the right foreground is actually Malcolm Cowley, the critic and editor, who was an early admirer of Blume's and has been a lifelong friend.¹

Parade might be compared to Charles Sheeler's Upper Deck (1929, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University) and to Charles Demuth's My Egypt (1927, Whitney Museum of American Art), major works by two of the most conspicuous precisionists.² Whether or not there was a conscious dialogue with these contemporaneous works, Blume would have known the work of both Sheeler and Demuth. Parade inevitably calls to mind their ordered forms and visions of a geometrized environment. As in certain works by Demuth, Blume's canvas shows an ambivalence which counters the generally optimistic tone that the clean geometry suggests. Rejecting an idealized cubo-futurist style, Blume has chosen to depict things more accurately in a manner akin to Sheeler, whose machines are rendered whole and unfractured. However, in the relationships between objects, Blume has thwarted the structural unity suggested by the crisp rendering of each element. The funnels at the upper right are only tangentially attached to the airshaft; the arched shafts at left of center may or may not serve some utilitarian function. The conveyors which connect the grain elevators criss-cross one another to create a maze from what at first glance seems ordered, but they

¹Ibid.

²Sheeler's painting does not seem to have been exhibited in 1929 or 1930. Demuth's may have been shown in April-May 1930 in a group show at An American Place, or in an early 1931 show there of March 16-30, after Blume had finished his painting. It was in the Whitney's collection by the end of 1931.

barely attach to the buildings behind the vented airshaft. A stair railing, strangely anthropomorphic, snakes down the center of the stairs and attaches itself to the flooring. It seems a beautiful and ironic comment on the international style architecture of the day. The figure of Malcolm Cowley, with one yellow and one green shoulder and with multicolored cuffs, adds another fantastical element.

While the painting may evoke Blume's style of the 1920s, it also suggests some sort of progression into the future. The title "Parade" indicates a spatial movement forward and also suggests a temporal movement. The ground plane and the wall at right thrust diagonally forward, and the marching figure walks out of the front end of the frame. Similar to the way in which the perspective thwarts the stylistically implied logical structure, the suit of armor held aloft on a pole counters the notion of progress suggested by modern-day industry and contemporary style. The armor becomes a spectre, grinning snidely, its head ironically more alive than that of the living being below. It is a startling and foreboding image of the future as well as the past, and it is a wry antidote to the pristine and glowing beauty of a painting like Sheeler's Upper Deck. Blume seems to say that we are moving forward into the past.

Charles Buckley concludes the following about the juxtaposition of the armor and the industrial background: "And in the [Metropolitan] Museum's collection of European armor, he found parallels between the technology of an earlier age and that of the twentieth century, symbolized by the machinery and the architecture of the ships."¹

¹Charles E. Buckley, Paintings and Drawings: Peter Blume in Retrospect: 1925 to 1964 (Manchester, New Hampshire: Currier Gallery of Art, 1964), p. 13.

However, it is not simply the parallels between the technology that Blume explores but the implications of that technology. The armor shaped in human form is ironically as anti-humanistic as the geometric twentieth-century industrial forms. There are other portentous implications: the grimace on the face of the armor; the empty, lost expression on the man's face; the approaching storm; and the erratic machines which do not fit together harmoniously. The one representation of the human race--the figure at lower right--is a rather cartoon-like image, equally as hard and impersonal as the industrial environment.

Blume's oils from the previous few years had laid the groundwork for Parade. In such works as Home for Christmas (1926, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts) and Winter, New Hampshire (1927, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), there is an original combination of simplified precisionist forms with a charming primitive feeling.¹ These works also hinted at the two new developments which were pursued in Blume's output of the 1930s--social content and nonlogical juxtaposition of images. Another painting from the late 1920s, The Boat (1929, Museum of Modern Art), depicts four black figures on a flat-bottomed barge; one of the men fishes while incongruously dressed in a suit. The barge floats next to an odd, paddle-wheeled commercial fishing boat, unmanned and at anchor but sending forth steam from its smokestack. The setting is the industrial riverfront of the New York-New Jersey area. Already,

¹Blume was also familiar with trends in abstract art. According to Frank Getlein, the artist had seen "modern Russian drawing and painting" at the Metropolitan Museum and was a frequenter of the progressive Daniel Gallery. Kennedy Galleries, Peter Blume, n.p. Blume attended the 1926 Brooklyn Museum International Exhibition of Modern Art where he was particularly impressed by El Lissitzky, as Ruth Bohan has kindly informed the author. Telephone conversation between Peter Blume and Ruth Bohan, 3/31/76. The same exhibition displayed recent surrealist works by Arp, Ernst, and Miró.

Blume shows interest in narrative that is only partially explicable. There is probably some irony in this depiction of both poor and middle-class blacks fishing in an industrial landscape. The scene could be based on an actual visual experience, but it intentionally provokes our interest into deciphering the artist's intention. The painting has been exhibited in the past under the title Showboat, which would certainly add social bite to its content--for its visual reality is far from the romance of a picturesque nineteenth-century Mississippi riverfront where a real showboat would have plied the waters. Instead, the artist depicts gas tanks, warehouses, and factories.

In early March of 1930, after completing Parade and after a solo exhibition at the Daniel Gallery, Blume left New York on an extended automobile trip south. As he later explained to Emily Genauer, when she interviewed him in Malcolm Cowley's apartment in 1934:

I cruised through the coal fields around Scranton, down to the steel mills in Bethlehem and finally down South by way of the Shenandoah Valley to Charleston.... I thought about all the things I had seen--the mountains of waste coal around Scranton, the deep quarries and sprawling coal breakers with little locomotives puffing busily in and out of them; the old false front houses lining Main streets that grow up overnight and died the next morning [sic]....¹

Stopping at many points and with frequent layovers, Blume reached Charleston in early April. Charles Buckley has explained that when Blume left Charleston in June 1930 for Connecticut, he brought back five drawings. By late in the year, after long planning, he began

¹Quoted in Emily Genauer, "Carnegie Prize Awarded to Unknown for 'Mystery Painting'," New York World-Telegram, 19 October 1934; reproduced in Whitney Museum of American Art Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll N647, frames 211-12.

work on the canvas for South of Scranton (1931, Metropolitan Museum of Art, ill. 84), which was finished only toward the end of October 1931. It was then shown at the Daniel Gallery, receiving satisfactory reviews. Unsold, the painting was left with a friend when the gallery closed for financial reasons. In Spring of 1934, it was shown at the First Municipal Art Exhibition in Rockefeller Center.¹ In the Fall, South of Scranton was invited to the Carnegie International.² Blume's own account of the trip and the painting based on it was published in The Carnegie Magazine in 1934, when the painting won first prize at the International.³

The two major questions to be asked about South of Scranton are firstly, what is the meaning of the iconography (that is, what do the leaping sailors, warship, coal mines and street scene signify in the context of the early 1930s); and secondly, what is the motivation for the structural format of the painting, with its spatial and temporal discontinuities? The answers, it seems, are that the painting contains veiled social comments in tune with the "objectively" oriented artists of the thirties and that these comments are given a personal symbolism and visual format suggestive of surrealism.

Blume's paintings of the 1930s are never simply records of visual experience but memories of experience fused with fantasy and personal associations. Blume was conscious of the fact that an artist's

¹Several artists refused to participate in this exhibition because of the destruction of the Rivera murals by Rockefeller. Sidney Geist, "Prelude: The 1930's," Arts, September 1956, p. 55.

²Buckley, Paintings and Drawings, pp. 13-14.

³See Peter Blume, "South of Scranton," The Carnegie Magazine, October 1934, p. 155.

choice of images immediately indicated certain predilections and that a painter "may not always be conscious of the symbolic content of his works."¹ In this case, the artist made the choice not to paint the vernal beauty of the South as it burst into Spring, as he might easily have done, for nature often furnished him subjects for art. Rather, the harbor of Charleston with its visiting German warship drew his attention--not the azaleas and magnolias nor the city's picturesque historic homes which would have been an appropriate counterpart a few years earlier to Blume's quaint paintings of New England (such as Winter, New Hampshire, 1929, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and Home for Christmas, 1926, Columbus Museum of Art). The coal districts of Pennsylvania also found their way into the painting, not the Amish countryside nor the Shenandoah mountains through which Blume passed after leaving Pennsylvania.

Frank Getlein has explained that Blume's refusal to ally himself wholeheartedly with any of the then current artistic trends was one of the reasons that South of Scranton caused a great deal of consternation in the mid-thirties. It engendered frustration and anger since it "could not be read any more easily as a tract on the urban agony than it could as a hymn to an American region" and "mirrored not one but a sequence of views all pulled together in a visually impossible combination."² That the artist's sentiments were not easily discerned aroused dissatisfaction. Getlein himself found

¹As reported by James Thrall Soby in "History of a Picture," Saturday Review of Literature, 26, April 1947, p. 32.

²In Kennedy Galleries, Peter Blume, n.p.

ominous implications in the juxtaposition of the human figures at right with the industrial scene opposite:

The human figures, therefore, are being compared to the slag heap which is the waste of the machine age. Like the slag, the leaping men are the product of the machinery of our time. They exist and perform in a wholly mechanical, metallic setting. The machines, on the left engaged in pushing about the mountains of industrial waste, on the right have produced a new kind of human waste, the mechanical man.¹

One can posit even more specific social comment by examining the current events during which Blume's canvas was executed and through a thoughtful examination of the images in the painting.

By the late 1920s, the coal industry and its recently formed unions were in a decline. Their slump seemed to grow worse after the stock market crash.² During 1931, when Blume was working on the painting commemorating his trip, there were hundreds of headlines on the coal industry with numerous articles on the strikes in the eastern coal mining states. This year witnessed the height of violence in Harlan County, Kentucky, with public figures Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser actively involved. In Pennsylvania, twelve months after Blume passed through, three thousand men were on strike at the Glen Alden Coal Company at Wilkes-Barre, directly south of Scranton. The strike ended in October 1931, about the time that Blume was finishing his painting.

The presence of the German warship in South of Scranton is particularly significant. Art criticism of the period continually

¹In Kennedy Galleries, Peter Blume, n.p.

²David Donald, gen. ed., The Making of America, American Century Series, 6 vols. (New York: Hill & Wang, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1965), vol. 6: The Urban Nation, by George E. Mowry, p. 70.

emphasized that the ship was indeed German, as the question of German rearmament was quite newsworthy in the early 1930s. Germany was also constantly in the papers because of its terrible economic state. Americans were concerned with Germany's rapid domestic inflation and its threat of failure to repay loans to foreign creditors. The German government was insisting that its naval fleet was quite small, but when in May 1931 the battleship Deutschland was launched, there was worried discussion about the future security of France.¹ Blume pointed out to Emily Genauer that the ship in South of Scranton was the Emden, a new vessel which mysteriously (at least to Blume) had entered Charleston harbor "and for some reason remained there clamped to the wharf."² It is not unlikely that Blume felt the threatening implications when he was in Charleston in 1930, a year in advance of the concern voiced in The New York Times. In 1931, when Blume was engaged on the painting, ominous articles appeared describing the possibility of a new poison gas war and the existence of a firm in Germany which was selling gas masks to housewives in preparation for such an event.³ The entire Fall of 1931 saw combat in Germany between National Socialists, Communists, and Social Democrats. The year witnessed continuous rioting between communists and fascists which

¹"Government Allows Picture of Fleet to be Taken to Prove It is Small," New York Times, 26 April 1931, sec. III, p. 4, col. 2; articles on the Deutschland launching appeared in The New York Times on 17 May, sec. IX, p. 7, col. 1; 19 May, p. 8, col. 2; 24 May, sec. II, p. 10, col. 1; 24 May, sec. III, p. 3, col. 8; 24 May, sec. IX, p. 3, col. 4.

²Quoted in Genauer, "Carnegie Prize Awarded to Unknown," frames 211-12.

³New York Times, 22 March 1931, sec. III, p. 3, col. 8; and 17 May 1931, sec. III, p. 4, col. 2.

caused the University of Berlin to be closed in late June and early July. Anti-semitism was also on the rise in 1931, with organized attacks on Jews occurring in March and in the Fall on the Jewish New Year.¹ Blume, being a Jew, was probably especially sensitive to such issues.²

The odd structure in the left foreground of Blume's painting, a fortification of some sort, seems particularly meaningful. Reminiscent of a "castle" in a chess game, it is posed between the coal scene and the German warship and guards the entrance to the working class street. Standing above a chasm, the fortification implies a bleak commentary and perhaps is a harbinger of conflict in both the coal industry and the national political scene.

In the U.S. as well as in Germany, fascism was on the rise. The elections here in late 1931 posed more of a fascist threat than a communist one. George Mowry reports that many were proposing a non-communist dictator in the U.S. and that Mussolini's autobiography had been popular here in the late twenties. In September of 1930, Atlanta spawned an "American Facist [sic] Association and Order of Black Shirts" to which, "A year later the American Legion in its national convention gave encouragement if not precise support."³

¹New York Times, 29 March 1931, p. 1, col. 8; 31 March 1931, p. 26, col. 3; and 24 September 1931, p. 15, col. 6.

²In the thirties, Blume contributed a photo of himself for publication by YKUF, an international Jewish organization. Louis Lozowick Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington, D.C., microfilm roll D-245A, frame 156.

³Quoted in Donald, Making of America, p. 79.

That Blume would have been sensitive to the political implications of his art, and to the social and current events in general, seems assured. His background was like that of many socially oriented Jews of the 1930s. He had been born in Russia in 1906, son of Harry Blume, a radical who had taken part in the Bread Riots of 1905. In the U.S., Harry Blume joined the newly formed cloth cutter's union but in general was far less politically active than in Russia.¹ Peter arrived in the U.S. in 1911, studied at the Educational Alliance from 1919-1924, apparently part-time at first, later full-time.² At the Art Students League, Blume studied with Boardman Robinson, who had contributed to the socialist Masses until it was suppressed in 1916, and who was a contributing editor for New Masses when it appeared in 1926.³ During the 1930s, Blume was involved with numerous liberal causes, including the Artists Congress, to which he devoted much time.⁴ He had read Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution and apparently based a scene in The Eternal City on an incident from the book.⁵

¹Kennedy Galleries, Peter Blume, n.p.

²Current Biography Yearbook, 1956, pp. 63-64, reports that Blume studied there from 1919-1924; Buckley, Paintings and Drawings, p. 43, indicates that Blume began in 1921; Kennedy Galleries, Peter Blume, n.p., reports that the artist enrolled full-time at age 15 (which would have been 1921).

³For Robinson, see Milton W. Brown, American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 32, 187.

⁴Letter to Julian Levi, 18 September 1935, from Gaylordsville, Connecticut, in Julian Levi Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll 483, frame 334.

⁵James Thrall Soby, "Peter Blume's 'Eternal City'," Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art (10 April 1943):5.

Blume was also a backer of an artists' movement demanding rental fees for exhibited work. In April 1936, Art Front reported Blume to be among several well-known artists who were refusing to send their work to the annual Carnegie International unless they received a 1% rental fee. Others were Max Weber, Joe Jones, Reginald Marsh, Arnold Blanch, and Yasuo Kuniyoshi, not exactly a roster of communists but a predominantly liberal and socially committed group. This act reflects Blume's commitment to artists' rights and his sense of belonging to a social community. The popular issue of artists' rights was a "key to much of the 'political' motivation of many nonpolitical artists of the period."¹ Issues such as those of rental policies and employment impelled non-Marxists such as Ivan Albright to join crusading organizations like the Artists Congress. The issue for many artist members of liberal organizations was self-advancement rather than alteration of the political or social structure, but at least a communal identity was implied.

Blume supported the Spanish loyalists during one of the most celebrated causes of Depression-era liberals--the Spanish Civil War.² Blume's longtime friendship with Malcolm Cowley, the writer, editor, and critic, also casts light on the artist's political

¹Milton W. Brown, note to the author, December 1981.

²On 31 May 1938, Blume's wife Ebie wrote to Julian and Jean Levi, "But we have been told that Russia has sent a new batch of planes to Spain and we are delighted." She also explained how the Edgar Kaufmanns, with whom she and her husband had been staying in Pittsburgh, triumphantly persuaded the Pittsburgh YMHA, against conservative opposition, to lend their hall for a meeting to raise money for the Spanish loyalists. Levi Papers, microfilm roll 483, frames 479-80.

inclinations. Blume contributed two articles to the New Republic,¹ of which Cowley was editor. Cowley subscribed to the view that the Left "would enable the artist to find a new audience, a new subject matter, and a new view of himself, as well as a new relationship to the dying and decadent ruling class."²

In September 1934, South of Scranton was awarded the first prize in the Carnegie International, and a critical furor erupted when the painting went on view October 18. The objections rested on three major counts: (1) the painting was felt to be poor as art, (2) it held undefined but suggestive and undesirable political content, and (3) it imitated surrealism and was thus incomprehensible. The jury was composed of Gifford Beal, Alfred H. Barr, and Elizabeth Luther Cary of The New York Times, a sophisticated trio whose taste cannot be said to reflect popular sentiment of the period. However, their choice of an American, and a rather little known artist at that, hints at a kind of latent chauvinism on their part which might be seen as a response to the growing forces of regionalism. It was as if they compromised by choosing something both American and modern. Critic Edward Alden Jewell saw the painting as "a purist essay in the mysterious realm of *surréalisme*," thus combining surrealism with experiments in pure painting and plastic values. Jewell seemed confused by the canvas but nonetheless felt it technically accomplished.³

¹"After Superrealism," 31 October 1934, and "Will Abstract Art Survive," 19 April 1939.

²Shapiro, Social Realism, p. 6. Shapiro's summary of Cowley's attitude is based on information in Daniel Aaron's Writers on the Left (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), p. 286.

³Edward Alden Jewell, "Prize Winners Announced for Carnegie

The Art Digest ran South of Scranton on its cover on 15 October 1934 and featured a lead story entitled "Surrealist Work Wins First Prize at Carnegie International." Henry McBride described the painting as "a thin tinpanny imitation of French 'machine-age' art by a young American who tried hard to be in the latest fashion but didn't succeed."¹ In McBride's opinion, anything suggestive of unassimilated foreign art was bad. He could appreciate Miró and other European modernists but does not seem to have wanted to grant Americans freedom to explore the same alternatives.

Uninformed opinions in the Pittsburgh Press called the painting a "libel on Scranton" and the men in shorts "a psychological repression--that is the way men hope to play when the New Deal gives them a chance to enjoy life." Furthermore, "It seems reasonable to conclude that the cannon atop the queer turret is symbolic of capitalism."² The Pennsylvania Post-Gazette quoted a clergyman who saw in the discontinuity of the images a moral: "Mr. Blume is saying the democracy of America is like unto this picture, 'South of Scranton'....If Mr. Blume has experienced nothing else in America, he has experienced the fact that chaos is king, having driven out God."³ These hostile and sarcastic reactions indicate that the social and political implications of the painting were sensed even if not fully understood.

International," New York Times, 19 October 1934, p. 21; and "In the Realm of Art: Carnegie International Opens," New York Times, 21 October 1934, sec. 9, p. 8.

¹Quoted in Buckley, Paintings & Drawings, p. 9.

²Quoted in Soby, "History of a Picture," p. 31.

³Ibid., p. 32.

Blume's painting became renowned despite bad reactions in the popular press, and it was in demand by museums for loan shows throughout the 1930s; but ironically, it was not bought. South of Scranton was shown about fifteen times between 1931 and 1940 and reproduced twenty-five times, according to a 1941 brochure put out by the Downtown Gallery.¹ The Art Digest called the painting "one of the landmarks of the [previous] decade" when it was reproduced on the masthead page in 1942.² The first prize award attracted a much greater attention to the painting in 1934 than it would have received otherwise, but part of the renewed interest and controversy may have been because the social implications of the painting were more threatening in 1934. The anti-German content seemed more obvious (and deserved) because the Fascist party had gained power and rearmament had escalated.³ The domestic implications of South of Scranton would also have been obvious in 1934. One of the worst coal miners' strikes in history had occurred in 1933, with 100,000 men out of work in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia in September. In November 1933, 40,000 men had struck in eastern Pennsylvania around Wilkes-Barre. All these events must have been in people's minds in Pittsburgh

¹The brochure accompanied an exhibition at The Downtown Gallery from May 6-30, 1941. Peter Blume Artist File, National Museum of American Art/National Portrait Gallery Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²Downtown Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll ND61.

³One reviewer pointed out that the second prize for painting went "technically to Germany, although Karl Hofer, its creator, has found it convenient to move to Switzerland out of the Nazi's reach," in "Carnegie Decides Blume's 'South of Scranton' is Best," p. 19. In this light, the second place award may also be construed as having political implications, although the painting itself, Pastoral, did not.

when they viewed South of Scranton in October 1934. Ironically, the passage of time had made the painting more topical, which accounts for the vehement responses in the Pennsylvania press.¹

The provocative images and their careful placement in South of Scranton offer a resolution between visual reality and the dream process which dislocates events in time and space. Blume was quoted in Newsweek as saying the jumble of images had "lost their logical connections, as they do in a dream" to which the reviewer concluded, "For this form of painting, art critics have a mysterious word--surrealism."² However, Blumes' dream world is not that of surrealism, for the remembered images "grew out of visual experiences."³ The images have not evolved from the subconscious but from reality. In the 1930s, Blume does not delve into the unconscious, utilize automatism, or pursue Freudian psychology; yet, in his use of fantasy and personal symbolism, he is related to the various trends of the time which were anti-objective. When Blume depicts the illogical it is not to shock us into seeing the impossible like Magritte, who renders the impossible as the real. Magritte's dialogue with reality

¹Although Blume explained to James Thrall Soby in 1947 that he had not intended the political and moral meanings that had been assigned to South of Scranton, this attitude must be seen in the light of the post-war period in which Blume's art had changed. In addition, the statement appeared in an article in which Soby was trying to defend the quality and the non-subversive content of paintings then being sent abroad by the State Department. He cited Blume's painting as an example of a work previously considered both subversive and poor in quality that was neither. Soby, "History of a Picture," pp. 30, 32.

²"Carnegie Decides Blume's 'South of Scranton' is Best," Newsweek, 27 October 1934, p. 19.

³Statement by the artist in Museum of Contemporary Art, Peter Blume (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1976), n.p.

intentionally confounds expectations, assaulting logic and meaning. Blume's improbabilities are foremost symbolic and understood as such by the viewer; the "fantastic" is not the primary consideration.

That Blume was termed a surrealist by the popular press indicates that he was viewed as somehow apart from American art of the period.¹ He was not considered a natural American phenomenon, and surrealism was in fact not that inappropriate a rubric in which to place this maverick artist. Blume was certainly aware of surrealism, as discussed previously. He would have seen surrealist paintings at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926 as well as at the Daniel Gallery where he showed his own work. Surrealism seems to have represented to him the possibility of liberation from the need to describe. It was an indication that the artist could use realistic images for their personal associations. This freedom of association as well as the ambiguity of the imagery in surrealism must have greatly appealed to Blume.

An early article summed up Blume's unique combination of qualities. "Preoccupied as the artist may be," wrote Ulric Godsoe, "in this case with the expression of a purely personal vision through the use of carefully real symbols, he has, nevertheless, maintained a splendid balance between the mystery of the personal and a state of visual reality...."² Although Godsoe relates Blume to both "German

¹The titles of reviews explicitly make the surrealist connection: "'The Eternal City,' Anti-Fascist Painting by Peter Blume, Surrealist, on View," Washington Star, 2 April 1939, uncited clipping in Peter Blume artist file at American Art/Portrait Gallery Library, Smithsonian Institution; and "Surrealist Work Wins First Prize at Carnegie International," Art Digest, 15 October 1934, p. 5

²Robert Ulric Godsoe, "Peter Blume--A New Vision," Creative Art 10 (September 1932):11-12.

expressionists" (by which I believe he meant Dix and Grosz rather than the earlier generation of the teens) and to surrealists, he rightly points out that Blume is not, like Roy or Viollier, attempting "the real dramatization of the unreal."¹ Like the social realists, Blume felt the need "to put ideas together too," and not just place "shapes and colors together on canvas...."² In this respect, abstract art was unthinkable--it had no direct human subject. Yet, the ideas had to remain flexible, not codified to the taste of any doctrine, Marxist or otherwise. When asked by Louis Lozowick to provide a brief credo of his art for publication in YKUF, Blume replied, "I confess I have little regard for 'credos,' especially short ones."³ He did not want his intentions circumscribed by the prevailing dogma of the 1930s but still insisted on art with implications for human endeavors.

Light of the World (1934, Whitney Museum of American Art, ill. 86) seems the most inscrutable of Blume's major paintings of the decade. Yet, it also exists as a provocative comment on the human condition. While South of Scranton related to specific events, the later painting is a more general musing on the state of mankind. In conjunction with a related drawing, Museum (1932, Museum of Modern Art, ill. 87), the meaning of the painting becomes clearer.

Museum depicts artistic remnants from past civilizations. Four figures are placed on a diagonally receding grid, dwarfed among

¹Ibid., p. 12

²"Putting Ideas Together, The Rock," Time, 19 January 1949, p. 73.

³Lozowick Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll D2544A, frame 146.

fragments of objects from past cultures whose relative sizes are not realistically depicted. A Gothic church, apparently Notre Dame de Paris which Blume admired,¹ and a niched figure of Christ frame the drawing. Further back, various classical cornices are stacked one atop another and surmounted by a bundle of lotus leaves in the form of an Egyptian lotus column. Behind this stands a garbed Roman figure somewhat reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. The title "Museum" suggests that the objects are relics of bygone ages, inapplicable today. Once bases for moral, religious, political, and aesthetic world systems, they are now inoperable. Their values are foreign and bear little meaning to the vapid, uncomprehending people in the drawing who gaze at them. The inclusion of Gothic, Egyptian, and classical images is significant. In a 1952 lecture, the artist explained that the Gothic period had produced "the greatest treasures and reached its highest level of achievement," to which he appended the remark that perhaps only Greek art could "equal it."² Of the Gothic cathedral in Northern Europe, Blume exclaimed, "There is nothing equal to it in originality and inventiveness. There never were such brilliant structural solutions as their pointed architecture [sic] excepting the Egyptian, which made such full use of sculpture or created a more successful union with it."³ His admiration for this art was not simply aesthetic but was dependent on the fact that it

¹See Peter Blume, talk delivered at Museum of Modern Art symposium, "Modern Artists on Artists of the Past," New York City, 22 April 1952; reproduced in Whitney Museum of American Art Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll N647, frame 195.

²Ibid., frames 192-93. ³Ibid., frame 195.

(and all great art) was integrated into the social fabric of its time. For Blume, the Gothic was so admirable partly because with it, "a new social era was opened with the growth of the communal movement and the powerful craft guilds."¹ The inclusion in Museum and Light of the World of the cathedral can thus be seen as a reminder of this aspect of past art--an art for which we have no use today. There is also the suggestion that the "new social era" which Blume mentioned has receded. The conclusion is inescapable that the artist feels we have ignored, or have been unable to achieve, the same heights as this early art.

In the oil painting, several new images of contemporary significance have been added. Nestled in the cliffs to the left is a factory, and to the right are a landscape and several buildings from Blume's home in Sherman, Connecticut.² The glass globe was inspired by that of the Highland Light at Cape Cod, which "Blume visualized as a kind of giant flower, inspired by feats of science and engineering."³ Standing before the central shaft is a miniature version of a machine for erecting an obelisk; it is a remnant of archaic engineering. Settled between the cathedral and a nondescript shed-like structure are two men and two women who gaze toward the globe evidencing (respectively from left to right) concern, fear, wonder, and anxious expectation. All are placed on a multi-colored grid. Timeless in its associations, the grid suggests both recent neoplasticism and ancient

¹Ibid., frame 193.

²Buckley, Paintings and Drawings, p. 10.

³Ibid., p. 10, 14.

Roman mosaics, the present and the past. In the painting, the figures from the drawing find themselves no longer in a museum but in the real world, where the world views of the past have obviously been superseded. Light of the World appears to indicate that religion, as well as classical democracy, has given way to a spurious faith in technology; even the idyllic countryside has been invaded by factories. The inclusion of Blume's own farm in the background suggests that the artist himself is a victim of this technological encroachment. Within this new world, a groping, lost population waits for direction from their technological guiding light. Aside from the portentous symbolism, the temporal and spatial discontinuities add an awkward, discomforting effect.

Compositionally, there is an interesting relationship between South of Scranton and Light of the World. Despite their common use of an inconsistent perspective, both paintings are constructed with a number of diagonal axes leading to the center. In South of Scranton, they lead to the empty space at the end of the receding street over the water. The axes in Light of the World point dramatically to the electric globe.

In 1932, Blume was traveling in Europe. Toward the end of the year he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship which made possible an extended stay in Italy. In 1933, he began drawings which led to the painting The Eternal City (ill. 85), itself begun in October 1934 and completed in 1937.¹ The drawings occupied much time, and several made their public appearance long before the completed painting.

¹Ibid., p. 16

Fascism and Ruins appeared in New Masses in October 1935 and in the New York Post as well, probably later.¹ As in South of Scranton, Blume utilized his travel experiences as the basis of a major painting with pronounced social comment. Like the earlier paintings, memories are combined with imagined events, but this time in more plausible spatial relationships.

Blume's trip to Italy in 1932 had coincided with the 10th anniversary of the fascist march on Rome, a time when military spectacles and Mussolini's visage were in more than usual abundance.² According to conversations between James Thrall Soby and the artist, the head of the dictator was probably "Blume's reaction to a papier mache image of Mussolini which thrust out at the traveller from a wall of the Exhibition Hall in the Decennial Exposition in Rome."³ The background setting was inspired by the Roman Forum, and the shrine with the Christ image is "related to an experience that the artist had in the church of San Marco, in Florence, where there was a shrine favored by military men."⁴ In the foreground are the Roman catacombs and stone fragments from the classical past.

The Eternal City is an indictment of fascism. Mussolini's head is as revolting in its bilious green as it is threatening in its

¹New Masses, 1 October 1935, p. 31; New York Post, undated article reproduced in Whitney Museum of American Art Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 647, frame 215. The publication of this caricature depicting Mussolini's head set against a background of ruins indicates Blume's willingness to lend his art to leftist causes, at least in this obvious instance.

²Buckley, Paintings and Drawings, p. 15.

³Soby, "Peter Blume's 'Eternal City'," p. 3.

⁴Ibid., p. 3; and Buckley, Paintings and Drawings, p. 15.

insistent and domineering stare. Blume was quoted as saying, "my choice of this barbarous green for the head was deliberate. It is malign in color."¹ It is a vulgar and frightening eminence presiding over a city in which Blume has represented not the glories of fascism but its shame. The city is physically crumbling; its republican past lies metaphorically shattered in the foreground. A military confrontation with civilians occurs in the Forum. While other citizens escape from the catacombs, a portly businessman and a fascist black-shirt seem quite content there and gaze gleefully upward at their leader's visage. The church structure lies in shambles as an embarrassed Christ weeps in His shrine, less due to His Passion than from the humiliation of the military tributes and gaudy trinkets which have been offered Him. The artist may also have included a protest against Japanese fascism and expansionism, for on the accordion folds of the jack-in-the-box are emblazoned the image of an oriental style dragon. The jack-in-the-box image itself is ambiguous.

In an interview with The Daily Worker, Blume was quoted extensively on the political implications of The Eternal City. "Of the section showing the Italian people struggling to climb out of the darkness, the artist said: 'They clamber toward the light, and aspire to the land and sunshine, beyond the barrier set up by military rule.'"² Blume's political leanings assume in this statement a rather uncharacteristic fervor which should be regarded in the context of their presentation in a daily journal which was the official organ

¹"The Symbol of the Suede Glove: Peter Blume, Famed American Artist, Clarifies Controversy of 'The Eternal City'," The Daily Worker, 11 January 1938, p. 7.

²Ibid.

of the communist party. The article ends with an assertion that Blume did not mean to satirize the church or any other institution and only hoped "that the message in this painting will not be interpreted to mean anything but an artist's indictment of fascism."¹

As in Light of the World, The Eternal City offers an insistent contrast between past and present. Blume explained, "It troubled me very much...to see the ancient ruins and art objects despoiled and used as billboards for the cartoons and posters of Mussolini."² In this way, the art of the past inadvertently takes on political meaning for the present. The past, which Blume saw rather optimistically and naively, is signified by the conjoined heads of two lovers; they are presented next to an emblem of the present, the pitifully maimed beggar. Both the catacombs where Christians once hid and the Forum where Roman citizens once met are now used for immoral purposes. While there is much ancient art depicted in the painting, there is none from the present, suggesting the aesthetic barrenness wrought by fascism.

The Eternal City also presents an extremely anti-clerical (but perhaps not patently anti-religious) statement. A preparatory drawing for the Christ shrine, Elemosina (1933, Museum of Modern Art) offers a clear view of the tiny figure in the painting. Not only have the military supplicants profaned the shrine with their blood offerings, but the religious structure of the country also seems implicated. Though Christ himself may be innocent, the Church is not. In the wide variety of epaulets which create a halo around Christ are suggestions of flagellant devices, and in the crossed swords intimations of the

¹Ibid. ²Ibid.

Holy Cross. These perversions of religious articles reflect on the religion itself.¹ The Christ figure is based on sacred images carried in processions to which the faithful pin money, or else is a variation on the statues of Christ common to Catholic churches throughout Italy. Nonetheless, to an American audience the shrine might ironically resemble the kind of carnival attraction into which one puts money, then manipulates a crane in order to pull trinkets off a statuette.

In the upper right corner of the canvas, two monks flee along a balcony. They avoid the confrontation in the Forum not because of immediate danger but, even more cowardly, to avoid witnessing injustice. While the military regime actively denies human freedom, the religious servants in their passive acceptance of the injustice must be judged equally guilty. When the painting was first shown, there were attempts to deny the anti-clerical implications. Blume himself was quoted in The Daily Worker: "I actually saw this shrine in Florence and it seemed to me incongruous that Christ should be associated with things of war. But this picture, it must be emphasized, is not anti-religious but anti-fascist."² Nonetheless, the lack of religious empathy was obvious, and one critic complained, "There is nowhere evident the great transfiguring principle itself of Christian love and Christian sacrifice."³ Of his stay in Italy," James Thrall Soby explained, Blume had in fact

¹In The Shrine, 1950, Blume painted a religious statuette of Christ which focuses on the physical suffering and ~~goriness~~ ^{goriness} of the Passion: scars, blood, and pain. Christ's cloak is adorned with paltry trinkets. In this painting, the earlier intimation of religiously condoned sadism has become explicit.

²Ibid.

³Quoted in "Image of Italy," Time, 6 December 1937, p. 65.

"been disquieted by the casualness and venality of worship as practiced by some of the people."¹ Blume's upsetting observation found a highly critical depiction in The Eternal City, contrary to disavowals made at the time due to the volatile political climate.

The Eternal City might also be viewed as an indictment of all those who, like the monks, refuse to fight fascism. On the same balcony as the clerics is a "woman tourist who watches the scene, greedy for extra-guidebook attractions."² This rebuke against non-involvement might be extended to apply to all the figures populating Blume's canvases who stare aimlessly into space, such as the uncomprehending people in Light of the World and Museum. They share with the woman on the balcony a lack of engagement in the moving issues of the day. And the artist does not exclude himself from these ruminations: in Light of the World, Blume depicted his own house. In The Eternal City, the light green tree bursting from within its stone enclosure is a willow from the artist's own property in Gaylordsville, Connecticut.³ This tree is not only an example of Blume's method of composing a canvas from numerous visual sources but also reflects the artist's involvement with symbolism. The tree itself angles away from the clash in the Forum; only a broken limb reaches out to the melee, offering no protection. As symbol, conscious or unconscious, it suggests itself as a surrogate for the artist--an art student in Rome studying the past, conscious of the dilemmas of the present but unable to offer real assistance.⁴

¹Soby, "Peter Blume's 'Eternal City'," p. 3.

²Ibid., p. 5. ³Ibid.

⁴Despite its vision of suppression, the painting also offers some hope of eventual freedom. Soby writes in "Peter Blume's 'Eternal

When The Eternal City was finally exhibited in the fall of 1937, after four years in preparation, the reviews were mixed. Henry McBride felt it a misguided waste of time for a painter to labor "so hard to lampoon the leader of a foreign government," while C. J. Bulliet found the painting "great propaganda and amazing prophecy.... one of the great paintings of modern times...."¹ The painting obviously achieved some type of notoriety, for Time reported that "gallerygoers stood in line to look at Peter Blume's version of the Ruins of Rome."² For The New Republic, Kenneth Bruke wrote a penetrating review describing the painting as

...the painting of a surrealist, turned social propagandist. But one must hasten to modify. It does not trifle with enigmas, as so much surrealism does. And, as propoganda, it extends its range until a total personality is encompassed; the propagandist element merely takes its place as one function in a broad texture of consciousness, having much more scope and complexity than the artist could possibly include if he conceived of propaganda as a purely utilitarian act (to "sell" this policy against that policy).³

What makes the painting acceptable to Burke's liberal viewpoint is that it avoids enigma, which would weaken its value as social art; that it reflects the artist's own personality rather than being a mouthpiece for a party legitimizes it as art.

City'," p. 5: "Beneath the head of Mussolini the common people of Italy file through the underground corridors of the Colisseum; away from the Duce's henchmen, the capitalist and the Black Shirt gangster, upward toward the sunlit Forum where the armies of Fascism are beginning to break ranks. The men of Italy exhort the troops from a distance."

¹McBride is quoted in Buckley, Paintings and Drawings, p. 16; Bulliet's article appeared in the Chicago Daily News, 1 November 1938.

²"Image of Italy," p. 65.

³Kenneth Burke, "Growth Among the Ruins," New Republic, 15 December 1937, p. 165.

In certain quarters, however, The Eternal City was considered far too blatant a political statement. Rejected by the jury of the Corcoran Biennial in 1939, the painting was shown at a private gallery in Washington concurrently with the Corcoran's exhibition. Although the jury routinely announced that the painting had been rejected for artistic reasons, it was nonetheless obvious that they were reluctant to imply approval of Blume's political views. The artist wrote the painter Julian Levi: "The Washington papers have been to date hostile to aloof. One publisher when approached was said to have remarked, 'When you put both these together in one picture,' pointing to the head of Mussie and the running monks, 'I am against showing it in Washington.'" ¹ Blume seemed to relish the controversy which erupted over the Corcoran rejection. He wrote gleefully to Levi that about 1000 leaflets had been distributed at the museum opening to announce that the painting could be seen at the Bookshop Gallery. ² Controversial in 1939, The Eternal City was viewed from a different light a few years later after the U.S. entered the war against the Axis powers. In 1943, when the Museum of Modern Art bought the painting, Soby asserted in the MOMA Bulletin: "Today, Blume's courage and conviction deserve thoughtful reappraisal." ³

In Blume's drawings and paintings of the Depression years, there is an absence of communication between the depicted individuals.

¹Letter of 30 March 1940; in Levi Papers, microfilm roll 483, frame 555.

²Ibid., frame 554.

³Soby, "Peter Blume's 'Eternal City'," p. 3.

The refusal to act, graphically criticized in The Eternal City, is linked to the larger problem of being unable to understand or communicate. Blume's characters are victims of a pervasive anomie--an alienation based not on personal pathology but in a failure to become integrated in society or to share its values. In South of Scranton, the tumbling sailors are watched by another figure, yet there is no actual interaction between them. The streets are empty. In Parade, one person is depicted alone among urban forms. He stares vacantly, looking neither inward toward his own thoughts or outward at his environment. People are helpless, like the beggar in The Eternal City, who lies totally outside of the structures of society, or like the supplicants at the shrine to her left, who put misguided faith into an anachronism. The pitiful couple offering their prayers to a Christ who turns away may be equated with the figures in Light of the World who wait futilely for some similar spiritual illumination.

Dennis Adrian has explained the sense of hopelessness in Blume's paintings:

In fact, a painful moodiness permeates a good deal of Blume's work. Man in the environment of both natural creation and his own works seems lost and bereft, at the mercy of accumulated forces of historical time and inevitable decay. Nature itself seems closed and hermetic, obeying laws and exhibiting its unknowable processes of growth and decline. These are the visionary aspects of Blume's art. He does not exteriorize an inner fantasy which is strange and enigmatic, but he is blessed (or cursed) with the ability to see separate aspects of reality as metaphors of a larger--even cosmic--actuality in which man's position is helpless, sad and irrelevant.¹

Blume's figures are schematic renderings of human beings. They wander

¹Museum of Contemporary Art, Peter Blume, n.p.

unawares through the drama of life just as they walk unknowingly through the spaces in Museum. Their deadpan expressions or exaggerated grimaces are caricatures of feelings. Stylistically, there appears to be a tendency in the 1930s to depict a figure as a generalized suggestion of humanity, but this often seems to backfire, and the result is a bland outline of a human being.

In the early 1940s, Blume's work moved in several directions. Responding perhaps to the increasing presence of European surrealists on American shores, he experimented with what he called "doodles"--small, automatist drawings executed in colored pencils on paper. Their forms suggest abstract and biomorphic creatures not unlike those of Masson and Tanguy. Around 1941, Blume produced several paintings revealing a less fantastic biomorphism: Weathervane (private collection on loan to the Birmingham Museum of Art), Buoy (M. D. S. Dobson, South Kent, Connecticut) and Key West Beach (James Thrall Soby, New Canaan, Connecticut, ill. 88). These are masterful explorations of the anthropomorphic connotations implicit in natural objects. Rocks, seaweed, and driftwood assume comic yet threatening personalities.

These works were regarded as full-fledged surrealist fantasy.¹ But this seeming move into the realm of fantasy also included Blume's other abiding interest: nature. Not the product of an exteriorized inner fantasy, as Dennis Adrian explained, these works have their origin in nature and refer to the poetic suggestability inherent in natural forms. Blume's major work of 1941, a large mural for the Post Office in Geneva, New York, was also a nature study. The mural

¹See "American Painting Seen Strong and Vital in Virginia Biennial," Art Digest, 15 March 1942, p. 6; also a review of the Museum of Modern Art's Realists and Magic Realists in O. Louis Guglielmi Papers, frame 268.

showed a meandering grape vine and a panoramic view of the area around Geneva, a subject chosen by the artist and not by the Section of Fine Arts, for whom the mural was painted. Blume increasingly turned to images of nature, an interest which culminated in a series on the seasons executed during the 1960s.

The fantastic flora paintings of the early forties reveal a total withdrawal from the human world and a retreat into a world of nature where things are malleable and changeable and sometimes as ominous as the man-created world. However, these mutated forms are the exception in Blume's oeuvre. They reflect a time of uncertainty and change, foreboding and indecision, in American life. They are also, perhaps a final delayed engagement with the biomorphic aspect of surrealism that Blume had not confronted. These paintings are a consummation of his earlier flirtation with surrealism and a disengagement from the social problems he had considered in the previous decade. This phase was followed by a return to a more recognizable world, but one where man's struggle for survival was viewed through the workings of nature rather than politics.

O. Louis Guglielmi

In a period of about seven years, from 1935 to 1942, O. Louis Guglielmi created an eccentric body of work varying from fantasy to social realism to regionalism. All of this work, however, is characterized by an omnipresent sobriety sometimes bordering on the morbid. In 1943, writing for the Museum of Modern Art's American Realists and Magic Realists, Guglielmi described his social motivations and development during the 1930s: "The drama of the plight of humanity caught in

the law of change was the necessary stimulus. The loneliness of the artist began to dissolve in the understanding of people."¹ The artist visualized himself as having undergone a process of acculturation by moving beyond personal needs to showing an interest in others. Guglielmi further explained that his social concerns were coupled with a need to express things metaphorically. Art, he felt,

...is an essentially imaginative production, in some instances completely so. I have never used a model. If at times my work becomes surreal, with the use of an added non-existent object, it is really a valid device to play with poetic suggestion and the haunting use of metaphor. I thoroughly believe that the inner world of our subjective life is quite as real as the objective.²

Even as early as 1938 Guglielmi was aware of the multiple motivations of his art and his sometimes inconsistent results. In a book of essays about New Deal art projects, published only in 1973, Guglielmi summarized his many changes of style: (1) a translation of French art, particularly surrealism, (2) a more literal depiction of his environment, both in New York City and New England, (3) a depiction of urban poverty while on the WPA, and (4) a return to fantasy and surrealist-inspired work.³ Although the artist might easily categorize his work, there remain strong social overtones in many of the surrealist paintings and, likewise, mystery and unreality pervade images of the urban scene.

¹Statement in Dorothy C. Miller and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., eds., American Realists and Magic Realists (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), p. 38.

²Ibid.

³See "After the Locusts," in Francis V. O'Connor, ed., Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 113.

John Baker has written of Guglielmi that, "the real issue is not what category or categories to place him in," but to see his work without the various labels attached to it in the past, whether magic-realist or surrealist or social realist.¹ What is significant in the present study is to understand how the artist combines and varies the relative dominance of social comment (whether anti-fascist, anti-clerical, or anti-capitalist) with personal expression (alienation, obsessions with death, fantasy). The need to balance privacy and community, or the personal and the social, was expressed by Guglielmi in a comment he wrote about his residency at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. "I do not believe in complete seclusion," he explained. "I do believe, however, that there are times when it is important to find seclusion in which to develop our work."² One must also acknowledge that the private concerns are often related to the social ones. For example, Guglielmi's anti-clericalism may be regarded as both a response to childhood and as social criticism.

Both Guglielmi and Walter Quirt were labeled "social surrealists" in the 1930s, a term which acknowledged their combination of the real and the fantastic. For Guglielmi's first solo show at the Downtown Gallery, Edith Halpert distributed a press release

¹John Baker, "O. Louis Guglielmi: A Reconsideration," Archives of American Art Journal 15, no. 2 (1975):16.

²"A Note on the Adams Studio," O. Louis Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll N69-119, quoted in John Baker, O. Louis Guglielmi: A Retrospective Exhibition (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Art Gallery, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1980), p. 5.

which described the artist as "a leading exponent of the school of imaginative realism based on social consciousness," a press release which carefully avoided calling Guglielmi either a surrealist or a social realist.¹ The exhibition was basically well received. It contained works of a wide variety from 1935-1938, including Persistent Sea No. 2 (1935, collection of the late Nelson Rockefeller); Relief Blues (1937, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution); and Mental Geography (1938, Barney A. Ebsworth, St. Louis); that is, works spanning the range from fantasy to urban realism. In the New York World-Telegram Emily Genauer applauded Guglielmi for being simultaneously socially conscious and imaginative. She wrote: "That socially conscious art, art exposing the evils of the present system, need not necessarily be literal and unimaginative stuff--in which case it is not art at all but documentation--is proved once again in the Louis Guglielmi exhibition at the Downtown Gallery."² One reviewer explained that Halpert did not want Guglielmi "damned" as a surrealist; and he was not, most critics agreeing that his art was a careful blending of surrealism with social concerns. In a review of the third Whitney Biennial of Contemporary American Painting, Jerome Klein wrote that, "surrealism has been given a new and vital social bearing in the radical enigmas of

¹Uncited article from Design, December 1938, reproduced in O. Louis Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll N69-119, frame 234.

²New York World-Telegram, 19 November 1938, reproduced in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 234.

Guglielmi and Quirt."¹ Klein also felt that various expressionist styles of painting had been revitalized by becoming involved with social issues.

In print, Guglielmi was several times compared to Quirt, although at that time Quirt was far more militant in both his politics and his art.² At least one critic, Harry Salpeter, did point this out in an article in the popular magazine Coronet.³ That Guglielmi was not a bona fide surrealist was a positive note for the American critics and public. One reviewer wrote, "Much as he has in common with the Surrealists, Guglielmi certainly differs from them in his refusal to wallow in the subconscious and his insistence on coping, however circuitously, with malevolent forces external to him."⁴ In sum, the contemporary criticism suggests that by 1938 the public was perhaps tiring of militant, often depressing social realism and that a personal, imaginative point of view was welcome as long as it did not become too esoteric.

Guglielmi's reasons for pursuing an art of social import has as much to do with his poverty-stricken upbringing as it did with the

¹Jerome Klein, "Gropper of Radical Camp Reaches National Peak," New York Post, undated article; reproduced in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 227, also quoted in Baker, Guglielmi: A Retrospective, p. 12.

²Emily Genauer called Guglielmi and Quirt "two of America's outstanding social surrealists," in the article in the New York World-Telegram, 19 November 1938.

³H[arry] S[alpeter], "About O. Louis Guglielmi," Coronet, March 1937, p. 182; reproduced in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 226.

⁴New York Post, 10 October 1937; reproduced in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 227.

economic and political situation of the 1930s. The son of an itinerant orchestral musician, the artist was born in Cairo, Egypt, in 1906 of Italian parents. His most important recollections, though, were of his adolescence in East Harlem, "a poor section of foreign-born...."¹ Guglielmi wrote, "The tenement jungles of Harlem must have had a tremendous impact on the sensibilities of a child. The lusty primitivism of the new milieu must have dimmed the memory of an ordered Geneva or a Milan.... The everrecurring theme of the day of the poor in my work is, I suspect, due to the abrupt change."² "That phase of my life," he explained, "was to be the subject matter of the majority of my pictures."³ Although uprooted when young, Guglielmi did not display the yearning for the past that plagued Gorky. Instead, the New World neighborhoods where he was raised remained in Guglielmi's mind. Predominantly immigrant ghettos--Italian Harlem and the Lower East Side--were to reappear frequently in his paintings, attesting to the artist's concern for the immigrant's plight.

In "After the Locusts," written for Art for the Millions, Guglielmi stressed repeatedly a rather hard-line Marxist view that the WPA had freed the artist from the private gallery and collector and made art accessible to the public. "I feel it is necessary to create a significant art and not merely some super-deluxe framed

¹O. Louis Guglielmi, "I Hope to Sing Again," Magazine of Art, May 1944, p. 175.

²Statement in Miller and Barr, American Realists and Magic Realists, p. 38.

³Guglielmi, "I Hope to Sing Again," p. 175.

wallpaper to decorate the homes of the wealthy," he wrote. "The private gallery is an obsolete and withered institution. It not only encouraged private ownership of public property, but it destroyed a potential popular audience and forced the artist into a sterile tower of isolation divorced from society." To this, he countered the role of the WPA, which "cleared the path toward a brighter future."¹ Although it seems as if Guglielmi was trying to flatter his federal supporters, it is true that he threw in his lot with the "class-struggle artists" in the late thirties. Guglielmi was included in an article by Jacob Kainen in The Daily Worker entitled "Revolutionary Pro-Labor Artists."² The artist was also a member of An American Group, described by critic Robert M. Coates as "frankly a crusading outfit" which "often tried to aim its annuals at one social problem or another, such as bad housing or artists' roles during wartime."³ Even as late as 1944, when Guglielmi was moving from both fantasy and social comment to abstract cityscapes, the artist still voiced a commitment to a social function. "I believe that an

¹Guglielmi, "After the Locusts," pp. 114-15. One suspects that the artist had not yet joined the Downtown Gallery when this was written.

²Undated article, c. 1934, in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 223.

³Undated article in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 270. When founded in 1931, however, the group was apparently more heterogeneous and included artists of different persuasions who grouped together mainly for the greater possibilities of exhibiting. See Ernest Brace, "An American Group, Inc.," Magazine of Art, May 1938, pp. 271-75.

artist creates within the frame of a society," Guglielmi explained. "He cannot separate himself."¹

The tragic atmosphere of the thirties which Guglielmi skillfully evokes is crushingly apparent in those paintings of his which can be termed urban scene or social realist. Relief Blues (1937, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution) chronicles the empty lives of city dwellers without jobs. Spring Comes to Fourth Avenue (1936, Museum of Modern Art), Hague Street (1936, Newark Museum), and View in Chambers Street (1936, Newark Museum) all depict working-class people in a bleak, if not hostile, urban environment. Loneliness, alienation, and a lack of beauty or culture characterize this world. An indigent, a sign for a junk shop, and ill-clad figures are typical images which indicate a state of poverty.

In their pervasive psychological depression, these canvases seem excessive compared to other social realism of the 1930s. The figures in the paintings are victims of the economic depression as are the people in paintings by Gropper, Evergood, or Marsh. But Guglielmi's insistence on their psychological helplessness, their acceptance of their plight as victims, makes these paintings quite unacceptable from the standard social realist-Marxist viewpoint. In Wedding in South Street (1936, Museum of Modern Art, ill. 90), Marcia Tucker found that "Forces rather than individuals dominate, so that a feeling of 'dehumanization' pervades a scene which might, but for

¹Guglielmi, "I Hope to Sing Again," p. 177. This verbal and written commitment to a social role long after the art has abandoned such concerns is not uncommon and characterizes Walter Quirt also.

national events, be a joyous one."¹ The psychological state in these paintings is tied to social conditions but also relates to Guglielmi's own past. For the artist, they are "not only common experience, but...essentially autobiographical." They are his own "attempt to recapture the past in terms of the present" and therefore, to come to terms with the past.² His images of the poor might be seen as painful attempts to exorcise his own insecurities and fears. An example is the image of the Brooklyn Bridge. Though often a symbol of the glory of New York, it was for Guglielmi an overpowering presence about the Lower East Side, looming ominously as if to crush those beneath. In the original state of Deserted Bridge with Figure (1934, Whitney Museum of American Art, ill. 91), the Brooklyn Bridge was totally unpeopled and became an emblem of emptiness. John Baker notes that the pier in the foreground "has a quality akin to cemetery architecture."³

Wedding in South Street presents a gloomy scene after a working-class wedding. Guglielmi's avowed purpose was a social one: to point out how certain customs reflect a pitiful imitation of the rich. "This accounts for the hired wedding gown, the hired clothes and automobile," and the irony of "the showy Victorian stoop" against a background of warehouses and the Brooklyn Bridge.⁴ The atmosphere is also tinged by Guglielmi's own personal phobias. Baker correctly

¹Tucker, Social Surrealism in America, pp. 42-43.

²Guglielmi, "After the Locusts," p. 113.

³Baker, Guglielmi: A Retrospective, p. 9.

⁴Guglielmi, "After the Locusts," pp. 113-14.

describes the figures and their expressions as "types one could expect to find in a depiction of a funeral rather than a wedding."¹ A sense of foreboding obviously colors the scene. The street is like a canyon--dreary, closed-in, almost deserted--and the hearse-like limousine adds a sense of paranoia and imminent tragedy.

Guglielmi depicted other, more caustic images of the plight of the oppressed. The Tenements (1939, Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia) and a nearly identical second version called One Third of a Nation (Tenements) (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, ill. 92) show black coffins lying in the street and along sidewalks with poor housing for a background. The paintings commemorate President Roosevelt's statement that fully one-third of the country could be said to be living below the poverty level.² Man of Vengeance (1941, unlocated) depicts a cripple raising his crutch in protest against the injustice and misery which surrounds him. In other paintings, the artist suggested how the working class became victims of injustice while upper-class crime went unpunished. One reviewer described two paintings in this vein:

In The American Dream, a well-dressed businessman complacently descends a staircase accompanied by a nude prostitute, while a uniformed guard strikes down a picketer. An eerie, dream-like atmosphere of surrealism pervades the square in which the scene is placed. Memory of the Charles River is

¹Baker, "Guglielmi: A Reconsideration," p. 17; and Guglielmi: A Retrospective, p. 13.

²Guglielmi contributed to Roofs for 40 Million, an exhibition held by An American Group as their response to the government "campaign to eradicate slums and replace them with livable buildings." See "Artists Show Housing Needs, Recommend Improvements," Architectural Record, April 1938, p. 76.

a social document shrouded in the language of surrealism, this time protesting against the Sacco-Vanzetti affair.¹

Religious satire and anti-Catholic comment were also a part of Guglielmi's social statements of the 1930s. The nuns in Sisters of Charity (1936, unlocated, ill. 93) look anything but charitable as they emerge from a butcher shop. The masculine nuns with their clutching fingers and sinister expressions are juxtaposed with the posterior of a cleaning woman and a painted image of a pig's head. A young girl watches the scene with as much wonderment as an actual gallery spectator might display. A cross hangs askew above the pudenda of the closest nun, marking the spot with an "X" as a vulgar sexual innuendo. When exhibited at the FAP Art Gallery, the painting provoked a protest from a Long Island resident which was published in the New York World-Telegram. Objecting to government sponsorship of insults to religious institutions, the irate citizen concluded that Guglielmi's sisters "were caricatures of the worst possible taste, and clearly showed the artist's disrespect and hatred."²

In Terror in Brooklyn (1941, Whitney Museum of American Art, ill. 94), one of Guglielmi's finest paintings, there is a complex and less obvious religious comment which links Catholicism with death. Three women, enclosed in a bell jar, wear heavy veils, perhaps from mourning or simply because they are coming from church. Held by gauze strips and nailed to a wall before them are a pelvis

¹"Guglielmi's First," Art Digest, 15 November 1938, p. 20.

²Undated clipping in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 227; also quoted in Baker, Guglielmi: A Retrospective, p. 16.

and vertebra. The image inescapably suggests a modern-day crucifix; there is even a lance to pierce the body of Christ in the form of the broken shaft of a streetlight. Interestingly, as in Sisters of Charity, there is an association of religious satire and food imagery: the crucified pelvis hangs above a sign for a diner. This brings to mind the custom at Mass of eating the host, that is, Christ's body.

Compared to Blume's or Quirt's religious criticism, Guglielmi's is highly personal and is presented without a specific political context. This mirrors Guglielmi's social criticism, which also incorporates personal psychological associations. Even at late as 1953, when his art had assumed a quite different flavor, Guglielmi's poetry still revealed his use of religious themes within the realm of personal phobia:

fleet is the bird to the cemetery
 blowing
 leaves
 wind-whirled
 Spring sun
 quickens jellied blood
 January noon-day bench
 3 hail marys¹

A "cemetery," "jellied blood," and "3 hail marys" punctuate Guglielmi's description of the inevitable march toward death, with "jellied" recalling the artist's strange association of food with mortality. Funeral at Woodford (1933, University Art Museum, University of Texas at Austin) illustrates in a much more literal manner the equation of the Church with death. In this winter scene of mourners outside a

¹Poem from 18 January 1953; in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 369. Parts of this poem are referred to by John Baker in his discussion of the artist's interest in death themes, in "Guglielmi: A Reconsideration," p. 16.

country church, there is a suggestion that the coffin is about to be placed into the gaping hole of the church's vestibule rather than in the cemetery, which is nowhere pictured.

A number of paintings by Guglielmi depict subjects that would normally call for the term "regionalism" due to their chronicling of New England small-town settings: Martyr Hill (1933, National Museum of American Art); Land of Canaan (1934, Barney A. Ebsworth, St. Louis); A Connecticut Autumn (1937, National Museum of American Art, ill. 89); A New England Landscape (1934); and Funeral at Woodford, described above. However, these paintings are so often tinged by the spectre of death that they bear little resemblance to the more optimistic, celebratory paintings by Grant Wood or Thomas Hart Benton which popularly signified regionalism.

Guglielmi's preoccupation with death has been examined at length by John Baker, who notes among the artist's subjects "coffins, funerals, mourners, grave monuments, bones, memorial wreaths, and corpses." And when not actually depicting these images, the artist may still "lead the spectator to the contemplation of death through somber moods and grave facial expressions rather than through explicitly deathly subject matter."¹ It is obvious that Guglielmi transforms the most common urban scenes into reflections on mortality. The mundane sight in El Station (1937, Paul Klapper Library, Queens College, City University of New York) develops new overtones when it is noticed that the delivery boy entering onto the train platform carries a wreath. In A Muted Street (1942), a barbershop entrance is

¹Baker, "Guglielmi: A Reconsideration," p. 17.

rendered to look like the entrance to a crypt. Even Guglielmi's own efforts as an artist were thought of in deathly metaphors. For the catalogue of American Realists and Magic Realists, Guglielmi wrote, "I left art school, like a gravedigger in a hurry to bury an unclaimed body."¹ This obsession with death takes on a role similar to that of the phobias and phorias cultivated by the surrealists, Dali's procophilia being an extreme example. The difference is that Guglielmi's obsessions assume implications for others than himself. By suggesting that life is overwhelmed by death, he makes plausible his own neurosis by depicting it as having an effect on a larger social scale.

The haunting melancholy and overpowering but deserted architecture of Guglielmi's paintings seems undeniably related to the work of Giorgio de Chirico from the early teens. Although Guglielmi's spatial distortions and combinations of unrelated objects are far less bizarre than de Chirico's, Guglielmi seems to have emulated de Chirico's ability to invest buildings, streets, and statues with symbolic meaning. While de Chirico's empty streets and plazas are scenes of possible menace, Guglielmi's are emblems of isolation and loneliness. A painting like Memory of the Charles River (1935, Julian Levi, ill. 96) appears especially indebted to de Chirico. Its long arched bridge with a vertical obelisk as a foil could have been taken from de Chirico's Mystery and Melancholy of a Street, where an arched arcade ends in a tower.² Guglielmi seems

¹Quoted in Miller and Barr, American Realists and Magic Realists, p. 38.

²Baker compares Mystery and Melancholy of a Street to Guglielmi's South Street Stoop (1935), in Guglielmi: A Retrospective, p. 11.

to have used de Chirico's cylindrical tower as the motivation for the grain silos in the background of his own paintings. A wheel, a torso, a gravestone and the heads of Sacco and Vanzetti growing from flowers complete this de Chirico-like memorial to the martyred Italian immigrants. The end result, however, is far less elusive than the mystery of de Chirico.

A final parallel to de Chirico offers itself in Guglielmi's repeated image of the bridge in the backgrounds of many urban scenes. Like de Chirico's vision of a distant puffing train (which recalled de Chirico's father), the bridge may be a symbol of Guglielmi's father, an idea which is discussed later. Whether or not this specific interpretation is correct, the bridge serves a similar function to the trains appearing so often on the horizons of de Chirico's paintings. Icons of the early industrial revolution, the bridge and train act as nearly outmoded symbols of travel and change, but also of portentousness, lurking over the present as vehicles to an unknown future.

The repetitive blank stares peering out of Guglielmi's canvases, as well as the very lack of people in city scenes, suggest the same pervasive anomie that characterizes the figures in paintings by Peter Blume. Economic problems are certainly the primary cause of the disaffection visible in these paintings, but the omnipresent melancholia also assumes broader implications. The environment itself is implicated. In Guglielmi's words, the individuals represented are victims of

...a culture dictated by salesmen and Babbitts. A county [sic] of ravished countrysides, of ugly towns with building [sic]

but no homes. The great American comic strip of conforming faces. Stupid senators and golf players, crooks small and big, vicious gunmen. A sectarian myopic people arrogant and insecure hiding behind gracious myths or wealth.¹

In this indictment, Guglielmi conjures an image of the world which oppresses the people in his paintings yet implies that their own weakness and passivity (their "conforming faces") allows such inequity.

In the mid-forties, Guglielmi described the artist as a special victim of alienation. Because his social role had been thwarted, "The American painter of today seems to be a...frustrated member of society who wants above all else to contribute to the enhancement of life and ornament the environment with visual dreams."² This retrospective view takes into account the failure of the social goals of the 1930s, but it also represents the frustrations actually felt throughout the Depression. The scenes depicted by Guglielmi in the thirties--the empty streets, the looming buildings with blank windows--attest to the artist's frustration in contributing "to the enhancement of life." Rather, the artist was a cipher who succeeded only in mirroring a dark world.

Guglielmi most successfully combines social implications with personal fantasy in The Various Spring (1937, Whitney Museum of American Art; promised gift of Flora Whitney Miller), Izaak Walton in Brooklyn (1937, Museum of Modern Art), Mental Geography (1938, Barney A. Ebsworth, St. Louis), and Terror in Brooklyn (1941, Whitney

¹From an undated essay, c. 1946, "Space, Myth, Expressionism," in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 345.

²Ibid., frame 344.

Museum of American Art). In The Various Spring (ill. 97) are numerous images reeking of death and disaster: a snake crawling along a cornice; a barracuda-like fish beside the railroad bed; and fetus-like children presented as if victuals on platters, surrounded by food-stuffs. The image of the dead child, repeated three times, bears a "29" emblazoned on her chest, most likely a reminder of the stock market crash and the onset of the Depression.¹ Baker suggests that the bizarre use of the ominous platters on poles is derived from two paintings of the 1560s by Peter Breughel the elder, The Triumph of Death and The Land of Cockaigne.²

Though quite small, The Various Spring is one of Guglielmi's major works, for it combines many of his most frequent themes and images into a moving yet morbid lament. The abandoned factory and kite-flying boy from A Connecticut Autumn are reunited in this strangely discontinuous narrative along with buildings typical of Guglielmi's urban and small-town New England paintings. The water improbably encroaching upon the railway harks back to Guglielmi's most completely surrealist work, The Persistent Sea paintings of 1935. The enormous figure of the blue-collar worker is drawn from earlier social realist paintings similar to The Mill Hands (1934, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign). Like a portentous dirge, The Various Spring intones sounds of loneliness, poverty, danger, and death. Prefiguring the later Terror in Brooklyn, food, death, and impalement are conjoined in a grotesque ritual offering.

¹Baker concurs in Guglielmi: A Retrospective, p. 19.

²Ibid.

Izaak Walton in Brooklyn (ill. 95) repeats the image of water appearing in an unlikely situation, but this time with decisively social overtones. The inexplicable appearance of a stream in a warehouse district accentuates the inorganic quality of city life, perhaps suggesting a need for mundane pastoral pleasures which are denied the city dweller. It is a strange revelation of opposites--brick and water, solid and liquid coming together in a highly inappropriate setting. The painting also seems to contrast reverie with reality: the fisherman lost in thought but surrounded by the imposing forms of industrialization. As John Baker points out, the title clearly and ironically refers to the 1653 Compleat Angler, a fishing manual by Izaak Walton which is "a celebration of the pastoral way of life." But Baker's assertion that the painting seems to affirm the triumph of man's imagination over distressing facts of reality is difficult to accept.¹ Rather, Izaak Walton in Brooklyn appears more like another lament on the depressing isolation of contemporary man and his pitiful inability to change his environment or escape his condition.

Mental Geography (ill. 98) envisions the Brooklyn Bridge as it would appear after a world-wide conflagration. The artist explained, "painted during the Spanish Civil War, I pictured the destruction after an air raid; the towers bomb-pocked, the cables a mass of twisted debris. I meant to say that an era had ended and that the rivers of Spain flowed to the Atlantic and mixed with our

¹Ibid, p. 16.

waters as well."¹ Certain elements of fantasy are obvious symbols of the destruction wrought by war and serve as protests against injustice: the woman with a bomb protruding from her back, the devastated bridge, and the distant group engaged in a lynching. On the whole, the painting "deals with malevolent forces external to the artist, rather than the purely subjective materials of his individual consciousness."² However, a harp-playing figure with miniature skyscrapers for a head, and a suit of armor entangled in the cables of the bridge are more mystifying elements. Perhaps the harpist offers a dirge to accompany the demise of the city, yet the result appears to be a mixture of the inexplicable with the understood. As in other paintings, the bridge might be read as a reminder of poverty and as a symbol for the Father.

Mental Geography virtually demands comparison with Peter Blume's The Eternal City. In fact, Guglielmi was compared to Blume several times in various reviews during the 1930s.³ Echoing Blume's anti-fascist sentiments, Guglielmi wrote "Loudspeakers of Fascist

¹Guglielmi, "I Hope to Sing Again," p. 175.

²Baker, "Guglielmi: A Reconsideration," p. 16.

³An article in the New York Herald-Tribune, 10 October 1937, compared The Various Spring to Blume's work. An undated review from the same paper found that "Guglielmi throws off occasional hints of admiration for the work of Peter Blume." Both are reproduced in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frames 227 and 233, respectively. Harry Salpeter, in "About O. Louis Guglielmi," p. 182, compared South of Scranton to Guglielmi's Memory of the Charles River. In Guglielmi: A Retrospective, p. 12, John Baker relates the two artists, concluding that, "The social surrealist tendency in Blume's art is a forerunner and probably a source for both Guglielmi and Quirt." By 1940, both Blume and Guglielmi were represented by Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery.

destruction scream out the bombing of another city...yesterday Toledo, the Prado. Tomorrow, Chartres--New York--Brooklyn Bridge is by the process of mental geography a huge mass of stone, twisted girders and limp cable."¹ This statement is more general than Blume's, and the implications of fascism for America are more dire. This is partially a result of Mental Geography having been painted later in the decade, during the Spanish Civil War. That Guglielmi's painting is more subjective and depends on improbability more than Blume's is obvious. A suit of armor trapped in the cables of the bridge directly suggests Blume's Parade. In both paintings, the armor suggests the early technology of war and acts as a foil to that of the present. Both artists share a use of social symbolism (often veiled), a simplified rendering of their figures, a non-painterly application of pigment (much in contrast to the expressionistic side of social realism exemplified by Gropper, Grosz, and Evergood) which is reminiscent of the earlier phases of Northern Renaissance art. In contrast to the detailed Flemish realism of Grant Wood or Paul Cadmus, Blume and Guglielmi often paint flatter and broader.

Terror in Brooklyn is also a dual expression of private fear and public tragedy. In a letter to Sidney Janis, the artist wrote elliptically about the painting: "The painter finds the poet. The fleeting shaft of sun is the dusk of the world. The terror of the three pelvic beatitudes in the test tube of a bell. The street;

¹Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119.

a reflected image of itself. A premonition of war and tragedy."¹

The first sentence suggests that the work is a reverie in which paint has found poetic form, perhaps a merging of the personal role of poet with the more public one of painter. Throughout the painting are images of Guglielmi's abiding fears. The figures in the bell jar show a claustrophobic terror of containment as well as fear of the spectre of death which appears on the wall before them. Trapped in their transparent cage, the women's futility of escape is reiterated in the street vista which reflects back on itself, suggesting that there is nowhere else to go. The whole is a phobic fantasy addressing containment and isolation within a limiting environment. Death and the repressiveness of religion, as seen in the crucified pelvis, also underlie the women's fears. There may also be a broader social dimension to the painting, with the small-town Brooklyn setting serving as a symbol for "Anywhere, U.S.A." However, the motivations which Guglielmi claimed for the painting-- "irrational events in the objective world," such as murder in the streets and war--are not clearly evident.²

Paintings such as those discussed above were criticized for being too subjective. As late as 1943, a critic wrote, "Perhaps with program notes his pictures would take on a new and greater public significance....It is not enough to discover in a title

¹Ibid., frame 347.

²Guglielmi is quoted from a statement on an acquisition form for the Whitney Museum, in Baker, "Guglielmi: A Reconsideration," p. 17. Baker feels that the social dimension of the painting is not successful and that the work "appears initially and ultimately as a personal statement in a personal idiom."

that a social rather than a psychoanalytical significance is intended. And when...he attempts a straightforward image of reality, his meaning is enervated by a haunting sense of unreality."¹ Seven years earlier, Guglielmi and Quirt had been rebuked in Art Front for the same reasons. Margaret Duroc had viewed their personal fantasies as pathological manifestations separating the artist from his audience. Reviewing a John Reed Club exhibition, she complained:

Who could gather strength for the revolution from Guglielmi's "Portrait and Background"? [See ill. 99] The picture is probably inspired by the notion of Opposites, much used at one time by the Soviet artists and now happily discarded, in which the New and the Old were contrasted. It is an adaptation of the Surrealist technique--a photograph of Lenin leaning on an industrial tower is contrasted with a pile of debris (a skinned arm, a Tyrol can, bricks, etc.). The picture does not clarify capitalism, nor arouse in the spectator the swift response, "We are the proud builders." As a matter of fact, "We" are not there. The painting is an abstraction, not a chunk of life.²

Guglielmi's more imaginative paintings prompted similar opinions throughout the thirties. Upon viewing Mental Geography, Jerome Klein speculated, "It will be interesting to see whether Guglielmi in the future will take the "metaphysical kink" out of his work and make it more directly intelligible to the people for whom it is obviously intended." For Klein, the ambiguity of the paintings was "a basic problem."³ That Guglielmi was appreciated for his creative

¹Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-11, frame 268, from an undated review of American Realists and Magic Realists.

²Margaret Duroc, "Critique from the Left," Art Front 2 (January 1936):7. The painting she refers to is actually Phoenix, (1935, Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection).

³Undated article from the New York Post, in Downtown Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll ND63, frame 724.

approach to social comment is not in doubt, but paradoxically, this same approach was felt to render the art less effective.

If the surrealist quotient in Guglielmi's paintings made them suspect in the eyes of the leftists, it also made the paintings unacceptable to those conservative forces in the art world to whom the suggestion of foreign influence was anathema. The Chicago art critic C. J. Bulliet was often quite broad-minded (he liked Peter Blume's work), but he remained something of an American chauvinist. He discounted an entire exhibition at the Federal Art Gallery in Chicago, "Not because it is a WPA art show but because it is a feeble American imitation of something wholly foreign to American habits of thought and emotion."¹ The exhibition, Trends in Modern Art, included Guglielmi's New England and was variously called an "abstract art" exhibition and a "surrealist show."²

Persistent Sea No. 1 (1934) and the almost identical Persistent Sea No. 2 (1935, Nelson Rockefeller estate, ill. 100) are Guglielmi's most orthodox surrealist works. Their debts to Magritte and Pierre Roy are obvious. A view of an entrance hall depicts the blue-carpeted stairway outdoors rather than indoors; a sandy beach invades the entryway, and the walls dematerialize into sky. Clearly a poetic fantasy, the paintings fuse interior and exterior, house and sea; yet they appear to lack the artist's own personal stamp. The result is a highly accomplished exercise in the

¹C. J. Bulliet, in "Trends in Art," Chicago News, 26 November 1938; reproduced in O. Louis Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 238.

²Uncited article in Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 240.

mode of improbable juxtaposition. Of all Guglielmi's paintings, these are the closest in spirit and appearance to those of Magritte. Later works, however--such as The Various Spring and Izaak Walton in Brooklyn--utilize surrealist elements in a style and iconography which is identifiable as Guglielmi's own. This accounts for their power. The images are imbued with the pallor of death and the mark of alienation, while the beautiful Persistent Sea paintings remain poetic evocations of a European style.

The Bridge (1943, Earle Ludgin estate, Chicago, ill. 101) was one of Guglielmi's last efforts at a social surrealist mode. Its meaning, however, was clouded by an almost incomprehensible imagery. The painting seems to combine personal psychological concerns with the image of the overpowering city. John Baker has postulated that Guglielmi's transformation of the Brooklyn Bridge in this painting makes it into a symbol of the "Father." The cables of the bridge support the bow of a violin, gigantically enlarged, and doubtlessly recalling the artist's violinist father. Baker points out that Firenczian psychological theory has noted the identification of the bridge as a symbol of the father's sexual organ.¹ As a symbol of the city of New York, the Brooklyn Bridge overwhelms the viewer, thrusting upward and dwarfing human scale. In its simplest meaning, a bridge is that which connects one thing to another. Guglielmi's bridge imagery might also be seen to represent the need for "connection," a need for reintegrating the various fragmented

¹John Baker, "Uses of Fantasy in the Surrealist Paintings of O. Louis Guglielmi," Paper presented at the 66th Annual Meeting of the College Art Association, American Art Session, New York, 28 January 1978.

parts and people that inhabit his wasteland world. That Guglielmi never depicts the other end of the bridge which completes the "connection" further suggests his own lack of faith in seeing this integration fulfilled. In sum, the bridge becomes an image of obsessive domination, the insecurities associated with Guglielmi's childhood dependence on an itinerant father, and finally, the hopelessness of completion.

Guglielmi agreed that this painting had elements of many different styles: surrealism, magic realism, romanticism, and expressionism. He accepted all these terms in part but explained that his goal had been "to create in each picture an atmosphere and a sense of its own reality." He regarded his "use of fantasy in an otherwise orderly and objective representation" as simply a mode of symbolism, a "method as old as painting itself."¹

As it did for Walter Quirt, Guglielmi's bleak outlook posed an unresolved problem for his political conscience. There is an insistent conflict between the ominous, threatened world depicted in their work and their desire to feel they could somehow contribute as artists to the betterment of society. There was a widespread feeling in the 1930s, especially on the Left, that simply bemoaning the present system or chronicling its injustices was not enough to change that set of conditions. A more affirmative voice was necessary, and Guglielmi, like many artists, wanted to believe that he was not among those whose viewpoint was only negative. This affirmation, however, is not evident in the paintings. In "After the Locusts,"

¹Guglielmi, "I Hope to Sing Again," pp. 175-76.

Guglielmi wrote, "The time has come when painters are returning to the life of the people once again and by so doing are absorbing the richness, the vitality, and the lusty healthiness inherent in the people."¹ In these sentiments, Guglielmi parallels almost exactly the 1935 statement by John Steuart Curry cited in Chapter I, page 5.

In 1941, Guglielmi responded to an attack made on Salvador Dali by Walter Quirt. Quirt indicted Dali as a fascist because of his negative outlook, to which Guglielmi explained that "negativism" was to be expected, as it was a reflection of the emotional tenor of the times:

Quirt's basic premise is that negative thought is directly related to fascism. It is better to say that negativism colors the character of the period and of the class in society that in its decay created fascism. The bulk of modern art, from fauvism to the non-objective and Surrealism inclusive, was revolutionary purely and only in a negative aspect. Anarchism and the attempts at new forms shocked the static and respectable mind. In this manner the artist was a rebel....

Dali is one of the last of the exponents of the negative artist, and he appears at the tail end of a social and cataclysmic period. Dali's negative attitude is expressed mostly in obscure symbolism rather than the plastic concepts of the painters preceding him.²

Guglielmi refused to classify himself among the artists of Dali's persuasion, even though he admitted that the paranoiac attitude "colors the character of the period." Earlier, he had written a similar opinion in the manuscript for Art for the Millions:

Faced with the terrors of the realities of the day, the artist in the 30s could no longer justify the shaky theory of individualism and the role of the spectator. As with many other creative workers, I reached out for a more positive and objective basis of thought to displace the inadequate and

¹ Guglielmi, "After the Locusts," p. 114.

² Quoted in Art Digest, 15 December 1941, p. 3.

destructive negativism that so deeply pervaded all thought and aesthetic production at that time.¹

Guglielmi's mode of expression did succeed in communicating with his audience. In the end, however, the artist's own efforts to reach out remained colored by the "destructive negativism" he deplored.

In the 1940s, like Quirt, Guglielmi embarked on an only partially successful attempt to find new "plastic values." Derivations of synthetic cubism and borrowings from Stuart Davis were applied to city scenes with disappointing results. This fallow period was a retreat from Guglielmi's obsessive vision of the 1930s. By the end of the 1940s, with abstraction developing as a new concern, Guglielmi looked unfavorably on his earlier approach. He wrote, "To hold a neurotic mirror to a disordered world is to reject maturity and to infect the audience with malaise. Storytelling, illusionary realism and the melancholic, simulated classic is a winding-sheet for the sick and the disillusioned. For an artist it can easily be the evasion of the painter's craft."² Guglielmi failed to realize that the "neurotic" preoccupations of the thirties had in fact provided the impetus for a number of powerful paintings that expressively and creatively mirrored their disordered world. His attempts in the post-war years to return to "the painter's craft" unfortunately signaled his own artistic decline.

Walter Quirt

Walter Quirt's artistic odyssey of 1934-1941, from militant leftist to fantasist and expressionist, always bore the imprint of his

¹Guglielmi, "After the Locusts," p. 113.

²In Guglielmi Papers, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 346.

personal predilections. Born in 1902 in the mining town of Iron River, Michigan, Quirt studied in Milwaukee at the Layton School of Art. After a stint at the McDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire (summer 1928 to spring 1929), he settled in New York City for most of the next fourteen years, then returned to the midwest for the remainder of his life. As a young man, Quirt was an avid outdoorsman whose love of nature made him especially aware of the unsightly mines around Iron River, which both "impressed and depressed" him. By the time he was living in Milwaukee, Quirt and his first wife, Martha Perce, were already involved in left-wing activities.¹ His early interest in social welfare seems in part a response to the conditions he had seen as a youth and partly as an expression of the same mid-western populism that informed the regionalists.²

By 1931, in New York, Quirt became involved with the John Reed Club, and by at least 1936, he was working on the WPA/FAP.³ Of the various radical groups in New York, the John Reed Club was certainly one of the most strongly Marxist, although it did

¹According to Mrs. Walter (Eleanor) Quirt, interview, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 19 October 1977.

²The populist element is noted by Milton W. Brown in the foreword to University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Walter Quirt: A Retrospective (Minneapolis: 1979), p. 9.

³According to James Guy, statement in University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Quirt: Retrospective, p. 11. Robert M. Coates, in Walter Quirt (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1960), p. 18, indicates that Quirt was on the WPA during 1936 and 1937. Quirt worked on and off for several years after and was terminated 30 June 1942, as indicated in Walter Quirt Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll 572, frame 268.

not advocate violence. The membership application graphically set forth the principles of the club:

It recognizes the irreconcilable conflict between the workers and the capitalists as two contending classes, and concludes from it the necessity of developing a cultural movement devoted to advancing the interests of the whole working class. The John Reed Club opposes all support of capitalism by cultural workers; it aims to clarify and crystallise the creative problems of literature and art in relation to the revolutionary movement, and considers its specific task the development of new worker writers and artists, as well as the aligning of all artists, writers, and intellectuals on the side of the revolutionary working class.¹

In February 1933, Quirt participated in "The Social Viewpoint in Art," an exhibition sponsored by the John Reed Club which included much that was hardly left-wing. Eminent social realists as well as the artists Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry participated, an inconsistency which attracted much criticism.² Quirt, however, was among those artists in the show for whom "the social mood became a militant message, a call to arms."³ For a time, Quirt was secretary of the John Reed Club and was apparently on the exhibition committee as well, helping to write announcements and calls to exhibit. These announcements were literally diatribes against capitalism, imperialism, and fascism, and often paeans to the Soviet Union. A draft for one of the calls to exhibit (with notations seemingly in Quirt's handwriting) proclaims that the "Soviet Union is the country that has worked consistently for peace, for it does not desire surplus profits or exploit

¹In Philip Evergood Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., box 1, 1 March 1933. This information has been provided by Dr. Kendall Taylor.

²See Shapiro, *Social Realism*, pp. 66-80, for several pertinent reviews.

³Gertrude Benson, "Art and Social Theories," *Creative Art* 12 (March 1933): 216-18; reprinted in Shapiro, *Social Realism*, pp. 79-80.

markets and workers. Its one aim is to build up Socialism."¹

Quirt drew illustrations for New Pioneer, a Marxist magazine for youth, and for New Masses, which also reproduced several of his paintings.² He was a close friend of Charmion von Wiegand, artist and critic for Art Front and wife of New Masses editor Joe Freeman.

At the Julien Levy Gallery in 1936, Quirt's first solo exhibition (February 18-March 9) displayed paintings whose content was either explicitly Marxist or else broadly humanitarian. Traditions of May 1, Morals for Workers, Instruments of Production, and Opium of the People closely followed the guidelines for "revolutionary art" set out by Jacob Kainen in the accompanying catalogue. The paintings affirmed the artist's identification with "the working class, because that class is the great instrument of social change." They also depicted more general "needs of humanity" in such paintings as Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread (1935, Wadsworth Atheneum, ill. 102) and Salvation.³ Kainen, an editor for Art Front, interestingly makes no mention of Quirt's surrealistic pictorial juxtapositions, although he does admit the dilemma of contemporary painters "expected to pictorialize political sermons for the masses, on one hand, and to develop fresh new plastic methods on the other."⁴ Perhaps this

¹In Walter Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 571, frame 365-68.

²In Quirt Papers, see the untitled illustration for New Masses, microfilm roll 570, frame 1105, the reproduction of Morals for Workers in the issue of New Masses for 24 March 1936, microfilm roll 572, frame 1337; the reproduction of Opium of the People in the 15 December 1936 issue of the same magazine, published in conjunction with an article by Theodore Dreiser.

³Jacob Kainen, introduction to Julien Levy Gallery, Exhibition of Paintings by Quirt (New York: Julien Levy Gallery, 1936, n.p.

⁴Ibid.

commisseration is a tacit admission of Quirt's unorthodox presentation of orthodox Marxist ideas. In a review for The Daily Worker, Kainen addressed himself directly to this issue and affirmed that Quirt's paintings were a conscious form of symbolism and not surrealism. He attacked those who compared Quirt to Dali and pointed out the influences of Orozco instead. In fact, both these influences seem to be pertinent, although Kainen's Marxist viewpoint compelled him to deny the connection to Dali.¹

Quirt's Marxism is especially revealed in his attitude to mural painting, the quintessential Marxist art form because of its public accessibility. The artist explained, "The first task of a mural is ideological: it must reach many people of various views, differing social concepts, and political outlooks."² By the late 1930s, this outlook was tempered by a need to express more personal feelings, "a language of the emotions," capturing people's fantasies and shared dreams.³ A still strong political commitment prevented Quirt from speaking only of his own fantasies but rather to emphasize those of the popular imagination. Nonetheless, he was moving away from a militant Marxist attitude. "Our real job," he explained in 1939, "is to take common experiences and make them articulate in

¹Jacob Kainen, "Revolutionary Surrealism," The Daily Worker (26 February 1936), p. 7; reproduced in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 1096.

²Walter Quirt, "On Mural Painting," 1939, in O'Connor, Art for the Millions, p. 78.

³Ibid., p. 79. Arshile Gorky expressed the same opinion in 1941: "Certainly we all dream, and in this common denominator of everyone's experience I have been able to find a language for all to understand." Quoted in Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 79.

emotional terms, not exclusively intellectual ones."¹ Quirt was hoping somehow to tap the common unconsciousness and express his findings in murals: "Therefore, if we could put onto our wall some of the fantasy of people, their doubts, anxieties, yearnings for love, life, death--all their emotional urgings as they operate in relation to our society we would be able to say that this is the basis of a mural art."² The statement is an attempt to combine the private with the public. Lingering traces of surrealist psycho-analytical thought are redirected to function in a social role reflecting the needs of all people.

Quirt's paintings from 1934 to 1937, when his production was reduced due to illness and psychological problems, treat a wide range of social issues. Instruments of Production depicts a group of urban poor, including a naked child in an empty cityscape with a background scene of bombed buildings. On one side lies an unconscious bum; nearby a prostitute is being fondled.³ The drama depicts the fate of workers under a capitalist regime in which the proletariat receive none of the benefits of production. Devolution of the Species (1935) juxtaposes large, well-built workers with a collage of fantastic symbols, some rendered with biomorphic distortions, which represent the degeneracy of the present society: a policeman, a "Boss," a dismembered torso, and a prostitute. The title ironically shows

¹Walter Quirt, "On Mural Painting," p. 79.

²Walter Quirt, lecture from 1939 which was repeated almost identically in 1940, "Fantasy and Mural Painting," in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 571, frames 31-32.

³For a reproduction, see Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 572, frame 573.

how Marxist notions of economic progress are reversed under capitalism.¹ Morals for Workers (1935) mocks flag-carrying patriots and traditional American values of thriftiness, piety, justice, and hard work. It reveals that poverty and humiliation are the final outcome for workers in a capitalist society who follow its outworn precepts.² The iconography is typical of Quirt's work as well as that of many social realists. To the left, a poor couple in their shanty are viewed behind the seated figure of a rich capitalist counting his money. A picture of Lincoln rests on the ground in front of an adolescent reading a book, an allusion to the American belief that those who study and work hard will be rewarded. Instead, one sees in the background the true future in store: a child with a wooden sword aping nearby soldiers, civil strife between citizens, and a worker weighted down by the heavy form of a timepiece hung around his neck.

The Future is Ours (1935, Quirt family, Minneapolis, ill. 104) develops the theme of war and its relation to capitalism. The title suggests that the proletariat will in fact triumph. Three citizens--a white man and woman and a black man--stand amid a group of soldiers and a gallows which has been torn down. Before them is a conglomeration of semi-figurative symbols for capitalism: gold coins, bombs, trapped human beings, girders and pipes. Quirt tentatively explores abstract symbolism here, most obviously in the form of a tubular arch

¹For a reproduction, see Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 572, frames 545 and frames 554.

²For a reproduction, see E. M. Benson, "Walter Quirt--Socialized Surrealist," The American Magazine of Art, April 1936, p. 259.

which is half black and half white, a metaphor for the joining of the two races. The arid landscape in which the entire scene is placed is common in Quirt's work of the period and is a device which was widely employed throughout the 1930s, from regionalist paintings by Alexandre Hogue to surrealizing works by Malcolm Roberts and George Ault. The bleak landscape is repeated in Quirt's Burial (1934, Museum of Modern Art, ill. 103) and Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread (1935, Wadsworth Atheneum).

In Quirt's paintings from the mid-thirties there is an emphasis on both the causes and effects of injustice, an approach which closely follows Marxist social realism and is of course the opposite of the subjective approach that Quirt was soon to develop. One of the earliest of Quirt's mural projects was very much in the style of the Mexican muralists. Executed for a John Reed Club mural competition, it showed an even stronger allegiance to the Marxist pictorial ideal. One panel caricatured John D. Rockefeller (surrounded by an oil refinery and a bank), white workers in factories and sweatshops, and dispossessed migrant workers. The section entitled Negro Revolts Before and After the Civil War (ill. 105) is a collage of vignettes depicting the figure of Lincoln above that of a Negro chained to a post, a KKK lynching, and a scene of John Brown surrendering to federal troops. A scene of a slave auction at left is balanced on the right by a revolt of blacks which appears to take place under the inspiration of Lenin, whose portrait is in the background. All of these images were intended as a catalogue of capitalist injustices. The style is directly indebted to Orozco's 1933 frescos at the New School for Social Research, both

in the general division of the mural into collaged sections and in the handling of individual figures with a simplified but volumetric blocky style. The inclusion of hortatory signs and slogans reinforces the Marxist intention that a mural be instructive, comprehensible, and capable of exhorting the viewer to action.

Another painting from the mid-thirties, Salvation, shows a downtrodden populace placed beneath Christian symbols, emblems of the oppressive religious thinking that controls them. One figure holds a cross and a skeleton (or skull).¹ A second anti-religious painting, Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread (ill. 102), is a frieze-like view of the sick and indigent in various gestures of desperation. Floating in the sky are crippled and deformed figures of the dead and several capitalist figures--a satirical play on the idea of angels--who sport emblems of "salvation": shafts of wheat, bags of money, and food. Like a Renaissance vision of The Last Judgment, Quirt's people pray for salvation as they await death. However, they are victims, not sinners, and receive little consolation from Christianity. Nude, bandaged, and abandoned women roam the inhospitable landscape. In the background, a farmer has hung himself, and the skeletal form of his nearby mule indicates the reason.

Throughout Quirt's social surrealist paintings, there is the repeated image of the cross as ineffective or actually oppressive. Here, one figure dies clutching a cross, and a second vainly prays to another. In The Future is Ours, (ill. 104), a huge upended wooden cross lies in the background. It is as if Christianity has

¹For a reproduction see Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 572, frame 547.

been toppled, not by the forces of evil but most likely by the rebellious citizens in the foreground who have also torn down a gallows (which, not coincidentally, resembles the cross). The Marxist nature of these anti-religious statements is even more explicit in Opium of the People, whose title reiterates Marx's statement made famous by the Bolsheviks during the Russian revolution (originally published in 1844 in Introduction to a Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right.)

Conscious of the plight of minorities, Quirt found Negroes and Jews to be the outcasts of society.¹ An early mural study titled Unity (1933?) envisioned the resolution between fractious social groups that would be possible under a new social system. Against a background of KKK members at a lynching, Quirt presented a four-part sequence of the eventual harmony which would come to pass between blacks and whites.² In paintings from the mid-thirties, Quirt often depicted black and white workers side by side, as in The Future is Ours and The Clinic (1935, Wadsworth Atheneum). Burial (ill. 103) shows amid a barren landscape the depressing funeral of a poor black worker. Black mourners surround the coffin, and a strange collage of black and white faces is suspended above the open casket. The Clinic (ill. 106) is a searing indictment on the racism of the educated classes in our society (as opposed to the industrialists). Doctors take the measurement of a black man's skull to compare it with what is presumably the skull of a white man.

¹Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 571, frame 359.

²For a reproduction, see Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 572, frame 539.

While a scholar in mortarboard and academic gown observes the examination, another academic figure ignores the situation and instead reads a book. His veiled face suggests his blindness to injustice and also disturbingly resembles a Klansman's hood. Above is a bound and garroted black man.

As the paintings discussed above indicate, Quirt was rarely a surrealist or abstruse symbolist in the early and mid-thirties. His mode of juxtaposition recalled surrealism less than it did Orozco or Rivera's frescos in the New Workers School. Quirt's images are specific criticisms of capitalism. What confused critics was the artist's tendency to depict everything as if in a nightmare; for example, images are jumbled together or else floating in a darkened sky. There is a distinct unreality about these paintings; but they are hardly incomprehensible and read rather like a catalog of social illnesses.

Still, the distorted figures flying through empty spaces are borrowings from the surrealist vocabulary, and in the thirties Quirt was widely regarded as combining rational critique with surrealist fantasy. Elizabeth McCausland found his unusual combination a mature attempt to reconcile new aesthetic explorations with topical intellectual concerns. After writing disapprovingly of Charles Biederman and his imitations of Miró, she added:

The contrary is true of Walter Quirt, whose exhibition of surrealist canvases with a social consciousness ended last week. Social content is the war cry of the present for creative workers in all mediums. Propaganda, proletarian themes and revolutionary works of art are on every tongue when the arts are discussed. In other words, the critical pressure of world events has been felt even in the once cloistered sphere of the arts. But often this concern is a theoretical or verbal one;

it finds little expression in form. And this problem, intellectual and esthetic, is one the best-intentioned revolutionary artist must face and solve if his art is indeed to be a weapon.

In another review of Quirt's 1936 exhibition at the Levy Gallery, E. M. Benson voiced reservations about the efficacy of the revolutionary themes, but he did find them at least comprehensible. Benson concluded that "the adaptation of a rational Surrealistic approach to socialized subject matter is an important motivation, and Quirt has carried it further than anyone else."² He also commented:

There is a strong temptation to compare Quirt with Dali because of certain superficial resemblances: a miniaturist technique, a velvety picture surface, etc. There the parallel ends. For Quirt, unlike Dali, prides himself on his ability to function as a rational human being, not as a reflex mechanism for his irrational thoughts and feelings.

There is never any doubt about the meaning of Quirt's pictures.³

For Emily Genauer, Quirt represented a middle ground between the "meaningless trivia" of the surrealists and the propaganda of the social causers.⁴

The two attitudes were evident on the question of whether Quirt succeeded in his socially motivated subjectivity. Writing in Art Front, Clarence Weinstock concluded: "Here the enemies are known,

¹Elizabeth McCausland, "Rash of Exhibitions in New York Galleries," uncited clipping from 14 March 1936; reproduced in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 1094.

²Benson, "Walter Quirt," p. 260.

³Ibid.

⁴Emily Genauer, "Quirt's paintings at the Levy Gallery," uncited clipping, 1936; reproduced in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 1097.

the bankers, the generals, the officials of firms." He added, "Quirt owes really little beyond suggestions to the surrealists.... If he dreams, it is not after an induced reduction of the intelligence, but over manifestos and resolutions. He is interested in socialist poetry."¹ Unlike the Europeans, who seemed interested in surrealist efforts to unite Marxism and the fantastic, American approval of Quirt often accompanied a denial of his surrealist connections or criticism of the viability of surrealism itself. Elizabeth McCausland wrote in this vein:

But instead of merely imitating the motions of that style, he has sought to put its technical prestidigitations to the service of a social purpose. He makes no bones about the fact that his symbols are taken straight from Marx. The emptiness and sterility which are meaningless in the surrealists in Quirt's work are condemned in terms of an organic social philosophy.²

One critic found that Quirt "reveals a successful effort to blend or compound surrealism and realism into a medium for oblique commentary on the state of the Union, with special reference to the blighted areas."³ E. M. Benson disagreed, finding Quirt erratic and unsuccessful: "I doubt whether Walter Quirt, who claims to be a working-class painter, will ever be appreciated by the working class." Of the paintings themselves, the critic wrote, "They have a calculated

¹Clarence W[einstock], "Quirt," Art Front 2 (April 1936):13.

²McCausland, "Rash of Exhibitions," in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 1094.

³Uncited review, 1936, reproduced in Walter Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 1088.

and rather lugubrious intellectual quality which might provoke thought but not feeling and certainly not action."¹

In Art Front, Margaret Duroc reviewed a John Reed Club exhibition and attacked the lack of clarity and the distortions of reality in Quirt's work. She found these indicative of true psychosis:

Quirt is represented by "Nightmare of Capitalism." Here, the application of Surrealism seems a possibly happy one, for Surrealism is certainly the technique of nightmares. But Quirt is actually painting as a Surrealist. How else explain the distortion of the skulls of mangled soldiers into sexual symbols? Or the leering eyes which are not related to any specific feature of capitalism, but possess only the nightmare quality? Surrealism is a false medium for the revolutionary artist. It uses an occult language which needlessly separates the artist from his audience. And the sexual interpretation of the disorders of the present system is certainly to be rejected.²

Certainly, Quirt's identification with surrealism, and with Dali in particular, was overinflated in the thirties; but to understand the objections to Quirt one must know that they were substantially based on his being regarded as similar to Dali. The technique of painting on gesso panels with precise rendering was early on felt by critics to be the influence of Dali.³ Quirt's approach was also

¹Benson, "Walter Quirt," p. 260.

²Margaret Duroc, "Critique from the Left," Art Front 2 (January 1936):7.

³For example, see Edward Alden Jewell, "Paintings of Quirt Recall Dali's Art," New York Times, undated, ca. 1936, reproduced in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 1089; Jerome Klein, "Quirt, American Surrealist," Art Digest, 1 March 1936, p. 16; and an uncited clipping in the Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 1090. However, the latter review also pointed out that Quirt did not "wander about in the creepy regions of the subconscious." The second review indicated that despite Quirt's kinship to Dali, "instead of painting nightmares, he concerns himself with the Negro question, strike breakers and the unemployment problems."

an aspect of the renewed interest in Renaissance techniques among many artists during the 1930s. Renaissance art was an important influence on the mural revival, of which Quirt was an active participant. The source of Flemish art for the miniature-like technique of Quirt's easel paintings is obvious. In her catalogue on Quirt, Mary Swanson explains:

Dali had his first one-man exhibition in the United States at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York . . . just a little over a year before Quirt's sixteen small panels were shown at the same gallery. However, it is also likely that Quirt was influenced by the emotional exaggerations in the figures and landscapes of Northern Renaissance masters, such as Matthias Grunewald or Quattrocento Italian masters, filtered through the works of de Chirico and Dali.¹

Quirt's personal problems of the late thirties involved a failed marriage, hospitalization for a duodenal ulcer, psychoanalysis, and a questioning attitude toward his art of the past few years.² Undergoing Freudian psychoanalysis with Dr. Margaret Fries in New York culminated, appropriately, Quirt's own interest in Freud. The artist felt close to "free association as a creative mechanism,"³ a device advocated of course by Freud and more recently by the surrealists. It is appropriate also that Quirt's first murals were destined for the psychiatry lecture rooms at Bellevue Hospital in New York. According to Mary Swanson, the murals were

¹University Art Gallery, University of Minnesota, Quirt: Retrospective, p. 35.

²Eleanor Quirt, interview.

³The quote is taken from a 1941 text, "Wake Over Surrealism," delivered at the Pinacotheca Gallery and selectively distributed.

executed in 1937-38, while the artist was still in analysis.¹ The Bellevue murals are didactic; they show the development of medicine but do not espouse any particular social view. In this, they reflect Quirt's move away from leftist involvement.² Yet, the murals partially fulfill a Marxist role since they are instructional, functional, and appropriate to their audience. The theme of the murals--the development of medicine from primitive times to the present--parallels the Marxist notion (and both are dependent upon Darwin) of the evolutionary way in which a society progresses from a primitive state of mercantilism to the ultimate state of socialism. Other murals in the hospital (due to their placement in public spaces) were only intended to be decorative, according to muralist Lou Block.³ Quirt's mural had the distinction of being educational, at least from a metaphorical viewpoint. Stylistically, The Growth of Medicine from Primitive Times combines expressionist distortion with Bosch-like images of primitive man, dream landscapes, and ritualistic operations. Schematic renderings of cells and organs are superimposed over certain areas, and an architectural backdrop is used in several places. On the whole, modern medicine seems to play a lesser role; the artist let his imagination run free in the past.

In a group of 1938 drawings for a lost mural, the roster of images and styles reveals a blending of fantasy with social content:

¹In University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Quirt: Retrospective, p. 19. The murals were later overpainted.

²Mary Swanson dates the end of Quirt's alignment with the Left to early 1939. Ibid., p. 37.

³O'Connor, Art for the Millions, f.n. p. 81.

realistically depicted figures in various states of suffering; imaginary creatures with biomorphic bodies, some with double faces recalling Picasso's women of the early 1930s; a head which becomes part of a machine; a pole piercing a skull; and a person emerging from forms which suggest both fauna and hardware. All of the images are locked into rectilinear labyrinths and are combined with geometric and mechanical structures. The mural indicts the situation which causes workers to live in poverty and be destroyed by their work. In reference to Roosevelt's comment on the vast number of Americans living in poverty, the mural was titled One-Third of a Nation (ill. 108).¹

One-Third of a Nation is a crucial work in Quirt's development. Whereas The Growth of Medicine from Primitive Times had employed a fairly straightforward depiction using the stylistic framework of Bosch, the later mural moved further into the realm of abstraction and more ambiguous symbolism. It develops imagery initially explored in Quirt's Conflict (1935, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Baker, Minneapolis, ill. 110), where the forces of inhumanity seem to be arrayed against the stoic suffering figures of common citizens. Two devices employed in Conflict were to become important at the end of the decade: the use of biomorphic creatures and an architectural armature to enclose separate groupings of images. In Conflict, the armature takes the form of walls, courtyards, barriers, and wooden framing. In the mural, the architectural forms are more abstract in most instances and seem derived from nonrepresentational painting. Again, religious symbolism, in the form of miniature crosses and a bizarre crucifixion, is included

¹ Several drawings are reproduced in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 572, frames 360-61, 363-64, 579.

to suggest that the Church is allied with the oppressors. In the next phase of his work, Quirt eliminated the architectural elements to concentrate on the fantasy forms of human and animal creatures.

Although Quirt wrote in 1939, "I'm developing a love of the irrational comparable to Dali," he was also intensely critical of the Catalan painter.¹ An attraction to fantasy was tempered by a simultaneous fear of the negative aspects of the irrational. Criticism of Dali concerned two major points. Firstly, Dali deliberately cultivated "gruesome and repugnant fetishes," instead of allowing his unconscious free play."² Secondly, Dali expressed "fear" and "negativism," two emotions which Quirt labeled as fascist, since they result in inaction and self-pity rather than progress.³ In this denunciation, Quirt gainsaid his own efforts, a fact which he apparently realized when he destroyed many of his paintings and began to explore a more lyrical fantasy world concerned with metaphysical questions rather than the bitter social criticism evidenced in his earlier work. In 1942, Quirt claimed that a use of

...the Unconscious is not synonymous with being a surrealist. Psychologically, surrealists are those painters who use unconscious impulses to stir their neuroticism into action and the play is between these two, never projected outward toward a synthesis with reality. That is why their work is unintelligible. But the Unconscious doesn't contain destructive

¹Letter to Eleanor Quirt, 23 July 1939, in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 183.

²Walter Quirt, "An Analysis of Salvador Dali," ca. 1940, in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 571, frame 393.

³As related by Anita Brenner, in "Surrealism and Its Political Significance," This attitude is also shown in Quirt's "Dali a Fascist."

energy only, but also contains the healthy impulses too.
Men who know this have work free from the taint of surrealism.¹

In regard to this statement, one must view Quirt's own work from the mid-thirties as the embodiment of the "destructive energy" that he was later to censure. His earlier vision dwelt upon the horrors of contemporary existence. Realizing this must have been one of the major factors which led the artist to destroy much of his work from the years before 1940.

By the end of the decade, fantasy had begun to assume a primary role in Quirt's painting, a transition repeated in the work of many other artists around the country. Quirt's friends Anton Refregier and James Guy went through a similar reorientation. The developing group which was to become The New York School--Guston, Pollock, Gottlieb, and Rothko--were also about to retreat from their more traditional beginnings. It had been fairly easy for Quirt to reconcile mutations of form and temporal/spatial dislocation with social implications, but he began to move away from an obvious combination of these elements. The Marxist content typical of his work from the mid-thirties became barely visible. This change was cause for uneasy reflection by the artist, who was loath to admit the new turn in his art. If something were already real, he rationalized, then it became fruitless to attempt to render it, for how can one make something "more real than real?"² The artist's

¹Walter Quirt, letter to Robert Coates in response to the latter's article in The New Yorker on Quirt, Masson, and Darrel Austin, 5 March 1942, in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 654.

²Quirt, "On Mural Painting," p. 81.

task, then, was to tap the common unconscious and render it.

Suggesting inescapable parallels to Jungian psychology (although his own analysis had been strictly Freudian), Quirt stated:

As human beings we all have essentially the same fantasy life. Our biological needs and impulses, our unconscious worlds with their conflicts and desires, our dreams and symbols are common to all even though individually we may hold opposing political or social views that are not harmonious with those of others.

The fact that people generally do have a fantasy life, that this fantasy life constantly demands release, and that our fantasy worlds are all pretty similar offers us the key with which to unlock the emotional responses of people. It is the common denominator of this period in history. Its scope is as wide as Man and Man's world, embracing all aspects of life: political, social, economic, the concrete and the abstract. What the artist must learn to do to evoke this response is to learn to release his own fantasies, release them completely and uninhibitedly, free from self-censorship and intellectualization whether they revolve around a factual problem or an imaginary one, for, reiterating the point, art is a language of the emotions.¹

In this way, the artist could pretend that his private world was not really private or inaccessible to others. Arshile Gorky, explaining the ability of the public to understand the abstract forms in his murals, echoed the same opinion: "Certainly we all dream, and in this common denominator of every one's experience I have been able to find a language for all to understand."²

These sentiments did not find wide support in the art world, especially among critics on the Left. The fantasies and dreams of which Quirt and Gorky wrote actually demand absorption with the self, not with shared experiences. Anita Brenner criticized this self-involvement when Quirt, joined by Dali and Hulsenbeck, participated

¹Ibid.

²Quoted in Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, p. 79.

in a symposium at the Museum of Modern Art in 1937. Brenner condemned the egoism of the panelists and their inability to communicate their ideas with others, a problem which she found typical of surrealism in general.¹ James Guy recalled the John Reed Club's reaction to his and Quirt's work by 1938-39: "Both of us had trouble in the Club over the ambiguity of our images since we disagreed with the notion that a socialist worker's art should be as obvious as a portrait of Lenin...."²

In a 1940 speech to An American Group, Quirt delineated three kinds of artists: those who address life in general, those who address specific groups or classes, and a third group who paint primarily for themselves.³ He explained that a humanitarian art might favor a social group or cause, but that it could also be predominantly private and remain a humanitarian expression. According to Quirt, "Not all art is directed outward toward society, and that which is is not necessarily directed toward all of humanity, but may be and often is, biased in favor of one group or another, or is strictly personal."⁴ An interesting sidelight to Quirt's new broad "humanitarian" approach was his immersion during the late thirties in the writings of Walt Whitman. He identified strongly with Whitman, even to the point of signing his letters "WW," ostensibly for Walter Wellington, his first and middle names. Hoping to

¹Brenner, "Surrealism and Its Political Significance."

²James Guy, *Reminiscence in University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Quirt: Retrospective*, p. 12.

³Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 571, frame 425.

⁴Ibid.

illustrate a volume of Whitman's verse, Quirt wrote, "Whitman lends himself easily to pure fantasy--in fact I can't see any other way of illustrating him and hope it possible to so convince the publisher."¹ The poet represented to the artist the ideal of a free imagination combined with a universal humanitarianism. Whitman's ability to harness and make coherent his intense emotionalism with the goal of soothing mankind's troubled psyche also became the goal which Quirt set for himself.

Quirt flirted briefly with the penultimate surrealist mode-- automatism. A 1944 article reported that in the late thirties, "overwhelmed and depressed by a long period of ill health and tremendous personal unhappiness," Quirt created "a species of automatic drawing, putting to paper everything that came into his head."² Although the author exaggerated the extent of these automatist works, Quirt did create a number of drawings whose distortions and rapidity of execution reveal the influence of surrealism. They also show the influence of cartooning and Quirt's close friendship with William Steig at the time.³ In their originality, however, these works are nowhere near that of the surrealist cadavre exquis or the fantastic creatures of Miró, which they recall to a certain extent. Quirt's automatist explorations exist midway between doodles and cartoons.

¹Ibid., microfilm roll 570, frame 189. Letter to Eleanor Falk.

²Uncited article by B. D. H., "Quirt's Paintings Interpret Modern Living," 17 December 1944, reproduced in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frames 800-801.

³For reproductions, see Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 572, frames 339, 352.

The series of automatist drawings led to a resumption of painting and the appearance of numerous fantasy images. The artist seemed to admit that these paintings were a type of escape, or at least an avoidance of an unpleasant reality. He explained, "Perhaps the harder it has been to fulfill normal wishes in reality the more we have yearned to experience the impossible. This might account for the emphasis upon subjective imagery in art, imagery which permits both painter and audience to find a spiritual substitute."¹ This acknowledgment, instead of the earlier rationalization of some type of shared common fantasies with social implications, comes closer to expressing the attitude toward fantasy held by Quirt's contemporaries. A good part of Quirt's inspiration for fantasy came from northern Renaissance art, which he relied upon for style, imagery, and composition.² Quirt's paintings had, interestingly, been described by Charmion von Wiegand in 1936 as reflecting Bosch and Breughel and not contemporary European surrealism. These artists remained important for Quirt even as his work turned away from a social content.

A partial justification of Quirt's work from the 1930s is that art necessarily reflects its own time; one cannot but expect that art from the 1930s should often express the instability, the emotional trauma and the hopelessness that we see in both surrealism and in so much social realism (to the dismay of many Marxists).

¹Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 571, frame 412.

²The artist wrote in summer 1939 of his admiration for the "Flemish paintings rich in fantasy" that he had seen at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 1555.

Charmion von Wiegand acknowledged Dali's paintings as the inevitable result of world turmoil. "He has dramatized in correct, academic perspective--the more concretely to realize horror--the obsessions and neuroses of society today," she wrote. "His work mirrors the festering sores of society, the murderous sadism, the pompous bombast, the cold violence which finds its physical outlets today in the methods of Fascist persecution and violence."¹ Anita Brenner concurred with this viewpoint:

Most of the surrealists do express fear, despair and terror (especially Dali), and, as Quirt pointed out and the surrealists fully realize, in so doing they express the general feeling of the classes jeopardized by mass revolutions. They hold up a mirror to the society in which they live, painting despair and confusion, but we do not see why this is any more a fascist act than a description of a piece of social degeneracy--such as, for example, a study of the housing problem or of the Black Legion or of a medical racket.²

Even if irrational art mirrored a similar state in human affairs, it still did nothing to change conditions and thus had limited value for the Left.

The Very Great Lion Hunters (1939, Quirt family, Minneapolis, ill. 109) reveals Quirt's profound reorientation. To quote a sarcastic reviewer, "Quirt, who three years ago was one of the sociology boys," was now exhibiting drawings filled with Miró-like creatures which "flit about the papers trying to tell you a surrealistic story."³ Social involvement had given way to pure fantasy and ethereal settings peopled by cloyingly tame Indians (reminiscences

¹ von Wiegand, "The Surrealists," pp. 13-14.

² Brenner, "Surrealism and Its Political Significance."

³ L[ane], J[ames] W., "Surrealist Prurience in Quirt's Drawings," Art News, 4 November 1939, p. 12.

of Quirt's midwest heritage perhaps). Although the background landscape remains as forbidding as the desolate settings of the earlier work, a new kind of fantasy--humorous rather than morbid--is evident. It seems that the people are flying in the sky to escape the lion below rather than for any symbolic purpose. The influences of cartoons and Bosch are combined with a new calligraphic quality (in the trees and in the whiskers on the figures) that distinctly recalls Miró. Although the subject matter is inconsequential in comparison to Quirt's earlier work, the themes of the hunt, warriors, pursuit, and escape may relate metaphorically to the worsening world political situation of 1939. Quirt had begun to feel that in a world of sadism and destruction, his negativism and cynicism only reinforced the problem. The combination of successful psychoanalysis and falling in love again apparently laid the path away from an antagonistic attitude toward society to a more optimistic one. Quirt's newly found identification with Walt Whitman also helped him to see the world's problems with more compassion.

The Tranquility of Previous Existence (1939 or 1940, Museum of Modern Art, ill. ill) is a meditation on the inner world of the psyche. Quirt suggests a world of the past or perhaps means to imply a previous incarnation. The title is certainly escapist--a celebration of the past and a retreat from the present--as is the painting itself, with its pastel colors, floating dream-like spaces, and imaginary dancing figures. The same type of imagery used in The Very Great Lion Hunters is expanded here, with the substitution of an amorphous dream-space for the landscape in the background of the

former painting. Indians, Miró-like bird creatures, and bizarre humanoids caper across the canvas. Despite the inclusion of arrows and shields, the theme of combat is trivialized. The whimsical appearance of the painting--like an animated cartoon--seems particularly inappropriate as a response to the onset of World War II. Only two years later Quirt was to chastise the approach of paintings such as this--with its obvious debt to surrealism--claiming, "Surrealism acted as a narcotic . . . during the difficult days of the thirties. If outer reality was cruel, the inner world was at least fascinating."¹

Though usually prone to dogmatism and specifics, in 1940-41 Quirt devoted himself to broader but still social issues, such as death, destruction, and sadism. In her essay on Quirt, Mary Swanson lists no fewer than four distinct stylistic approaches in these two years, ranging from expressionist distortions to bright and hard-edged curvilinear abstractions.² The Miró-like creatures and empty dreamscapes of the previous years disappeared. A work like Mutation (1940, Whitney Museum of American Art, ill. 112) is only tangentially related to surrealism, if at all. Its emphasis on change and flux, however, is a common subjective theme shared by Gorky, Albright, and Dickinson. The technique, with "the obvious action of the brush in defining and melding figures into environments"³

¹Quirt, "Dali a Fascist," pp. 6, 14. Swanson dates The Tranquility of Previous Existence as 1941, following the dating by MOMA, but a slightly earlier date would place the painting closer in time to others similar in appearance and would make Quirt's 1941 attack on surrealism more plausible.

²Swanson, in University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Quirt: Retrospective, p. 39.

³Ibid.

accentuates the theme of mutation and flux. Mutation reveals an ominous, almost prescient vision in suggesting the mutation of humans due to war and seems a harbinger of nuclear destruction. There is an unpleasant metamorphosis of figure into landscape, rendered in horrid yellows, blues, red, and green.

Although Quirt was to abandon precise social comment, his art did not leave the subject of human behavior.¹ Emotional expression along with a general comment on human needs informed work that was formerly quite militant. His opinion on the role which he foresaw for the Artists Congress reflected the new approach: "the Congress ought to turn to cultural matters exclusively, the political elements and needs flowing from that--rather than the other way around."² Quirt's broader humanitarian interest was also coupled with the development of new "plastic" schema.³ But with the U.S. entry into the war and the world under siege, Quirt's desire for an optimistic, humanitarian art was challenged. Conflict, hate, and sadism reappeared for a time in his paintings. The 1941 work, The Experience of Tragedy Yet to Come (reproduction in Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 572, frame 587) heralded the change, which continued in a later series from 1943-44: Compulsion to Anger, Shipwreck, The Crucified, and The Damned. All are rendered in bright linear ribbons of color, densely packed

¹In a letter to Sam Kootz, 9 December 1942, Quirt stated that his main interests for art "come from human behavior." Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 570, frame 1060.

²Letter to Julian Levi, 29 April 1940, in Levi Papers, frame 583.

³This subject was developed in a talk ca. 1941-41, entitled "Old and New Attitudes," in Walter Quirt Papers, microfilm roll 571, frame 442.

and imbued with a sense of movement. These paintings have little to do with either surrealism or socialism but are expressionist metaphors for common suffering.

The paintings by Quirt done from 1934 through 1941 participate in certain of the sloganeering movements of the thirties without conforming totally to their rules. The artist's own dogmatism prevented complete assimilation of any one approach as did his desire to see himself as a sort of lone wolf pursuing "his truth wherever it would take him."¹ Quirt viewed his work as being outside the normal conventions of the period. This somewhat inflated self-appraisal reflects his personality, which tended toward contrariness. As for Quirt's achievement, it appears that his work fell short of its goals. Especially after his 1938 move toward fantasy, there seems to be less conviction and originality. An increasing sentimentality and derivative quality appear, characteristics which were to plague the work of Quirt's later years. While Quirt "never managed to reconcile his social theories with surrealist aesthetics," as Milton Brown correctly points out, the artist nonetheless "assumed intellectual leadership in the John Reed Club, was active in the formulation of social realism..., and was a social-realist painter of undeniable talent. He was one of the early American converts to surrealism, and his pioneering effort to transform it into social surrealism seemed a daring and original conception at the time."²

¹Mrs. Walter Quirt, interview.

²Milton Brown, foreword to University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Quirt: Retrospective, p. 9.

Quirt's midwestern background appears not to have alienated him from the artistic and social values of the East, according to the artist's wife.¹ Nevertheless, Quirt did feel the pull of his roots and after the war returned to Michigan and then moved to Minneapolis, a large city with a climate and accessibility to countryside like that of his youth. While Quirt's odyssey of the thirties was fraught with anger, he did at least achieve a humanitarian art involved with human needs. In 1940, he wrote to Julian Levi about the Artists' Congress as if summing up a period in his own life as well as a special time in history: "We had shown to the world that artists were responsible adult human beings in a very reputable profession in contradistinction to the very prevalent belief that we were freaks, childish, and evaders of responsibility."²

An examination of paintings by both Quirt and Blume from 1940-41 and by Guglielmi from slightly later reveal a marked decrease in the amount of social content. Blume's organic fantasies and deepening humanitarianism (balanced by an awareness of nature's cruelty), Quirt's developing commitment to broad questions of human emotion and behavior (sometimes expressed almost as stereotypes), and Guglielmi's playful fantasies on urban forms all move away from hard-line leftist attitudes that characterized so many American intellectuals before the war. If criticism of American institutions had been quite spirited and justified in the materialistic years of the twenties and during the economic collapse of the thirties, by 1940 this country seemed far

¹Mrs. Walter Quirt, interview.

²Letter to Julian Levi, 29 April 1940, in Levi Papers, microfilm roll 483, frame 582.

more acceptable than war-torn Europe or Asia. In America, A Re-Appraisal, the formerly caustic critic of American society Harold Stearns offered in 1937 an early expression of an attitude that was to gain currency among American artists in the early 1940s: "If what we have seen during the last four years in Italy, Spain, France, and Germany is a true expression of European civilization, then I prefer to take my chances in backward and hidebound, capitalistic America, for all our abuses."¹ Sparked by the purges and the disillusionment which followed the Soviet-Nazi alliance of 1939, American intellectuals began to acknowledge the inequities of Stalinist communism. Their disenchantment combined with the growing threat of world fascism to make American social systems seem bearable, and indeed preferable.

¹Harold Stearns, America, A Re-Appraisal, (New York: 1937), pp. 17-18; quoted in Hartshorne, The Distorted Image, p. 110.

CONCLUSION

The subjective themes examined in this paper include personal struggle, genesis, the relationship of man to cosmos, fear of the unknown, sensate and psychological disorientation, flux, metamorphosis, the establishment of individual identity, and the development of a metaphorical but social expression. These issues did not disappear with the end of the Depression nor with the dramatic stylistic changes in the 1940s but, in fact, flourished and became major issues in the post-Depression years. The art examined in this paper deserves dual recognition for its role as a predecessor to these later, highly acclaimed trends and for its staunch support of a personal, individual vision in a time of enormous political turmoil.

Perhaps the major issue for artists during the 1930s was to determine the proper role for art. The previously important considerations of quality and style were replaced by a demand for relevance. Although the subjective artists for the most part rejected relevance as the primary goal for art, they did not proclaim the stance of "art for art's sake," nor did they justify their new art by pretentiously proclaiming it a reflection of a new social structure. Instead, like most artists during the 1930s, the subjectivists emphasized content and thus created a humanistic art in the broadest sense. They differed from the realists in their insistence on a content that was personal as opposed to social, and circumspect as opposed to direct. In this regard, the subjective artists were

closely allied to the most innovative, subjective, humanist art of the 1940s--abstract expressionism. Where abstract expressionism differed, of course, was in its effort to bring subjective content to exclusively nonrepresentational art.

Although only Arshile Gorky's work relates to abstract expressionism in both style and content, he is not the only subjective painter whose motivations parallel it. All of the artists examined above create art concerned with individuality, personal vision, and the rejection of a predominantly social purpose. For that reason, their art was important for developments in the next decade. Of the many artists who sporadically pursued subjective interests in the 1930s, Philip Guston, Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, and Ibram Lassaw were to become part of the movement known as abstract expressionism, while Mark Tobey and Morris Graves were to be peripherally associated with it. The pervasive themes of flux and metamorphosis shared by Gorky and the abstract expressionists were also important for Dickinson and Albright. The abstract expressionist concern with both psychological themes and cosmic metaphors directly parallels the dual focus of Feitelson and Lundeberg. The postsurrealists' hope to develop universal symbols was taken up in the early 1940s in an abstract mode by Gottlieb, Pollock, and Rothko. Though different in style, paintings by both these abstract expressionists and postsurrealists communicate ideas which have less to do with surrealist psychoanalysis than with the more metaphysical realm of Jungian speculation.

The abstract expressionists and the subjectivists also shared common sources. Picasso, Miró, and Masson were important for Gorky as

well as for Pollock, de Kooning and Motherwell. De Chirico was an influence on the postsurrealists and Guglielmi, and also on Gottlieb. And John Graham, influential on many artists in the 1930s, remained an éminence grise for the new developments of the early 1940s. While veristic surrealism was especially influential for Lundeborg, Feitelson, Blume, and Quirt, the abstract branch of surrealism was an important influence on abstract expressionism. For both the subjective artists of the 1930s and the abstract expressionists, the first generation of American modernists--Hartley, Dove, Marin, and O'Keeffe--stood as exemplars of individualism.

The subjective artists of the 1930s were also important for later figurative art. Ivan Albright, Louis Guglielmi, and especially Peter Blume are forerunners of Magic Realism and related figurative trends of the post-Depression years. The art of George Tooker, Paul Cadmus, Jared French, Clarence Carter, and the still lifes of Aaron Bohrod seem particularly indebted to Blume and Albright. Walter Murch's moody still lifes implicitly recall Edwin Dickinson's paintings. The more socially concerned figurative artists of the 1940s and 1950s--Hyman Bloom, Bernard Perlin, Leon Golub, and Henry Koerner--continue the personal, almost eccentric approach of the social surrealists.¹

Subjective painting, though varied in style, reflects a coherent viewpoint which was an important contribution to American painting during the 1930s. Work by the eight artists discussed in

¹For a thorough examination of postwar figurative art, see Greta Berman and Jeffrey Wechsler, Realism and Realities: The Other Side of American Painting, 1940-1960 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Art Gallery, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1981).

detail in the preceding chapters represents some of the most exciting work produced in the Depression years. Much of this work has not received its due, in part because it does not fit easily into the main categories which are commonly applied to American art of the period. Neither does subjective painting directly accord with developments in Europe. Nonetheless, it is a potent art, rich in meaning and ambitious in its intent. An appreciation of this work and its place in American art better allows us to understand the complexity of twentieth-century art in this country and reminds us that the factual, pragmatic orientation of American art which has often been heralded is in fact only one strain, and that a speculative, romantic, even metaphysical current also infuses the flavor of our culture.

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The bibliography is arranged chronologically and is divided into eight sections as follows:

- I. General
- II. Ivan Albright
- III. Edwin Dickinson
- IV. Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeborg
- V. Arshile Gorky
- VI. Social Surrealism--General
- VII. Peter Blume
- VIII. O. Louis Guglielmi
- IX. Walter Quirt

Where appropriate, each section is divided into two parts: books, periodicals, newspapers, theses, and talks in the first part; and secondly, archival material and interviews. Certain footnotes found in the pages of the Chapter I survey may not be listed in the general section of the bibliography but in other sections which more specifically pertain to the material cited.

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