



George Morrison Papers

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During the spring of 1980, when I was recuperating from a heart ailment, I started several small paintings that I eventually called the "Small Painting Series". This was during a period of physical setbacks that began in 1976 and culminated with Castleman's Disease in 1985. There were times when I did work in larger scale, usually with assistants, on wood reliefs and structures, but alone it was easier for me to do small canvases, mostly small canvas scraps on board, and working at a table with my materials in a more relaxed manner.

It was also a time when I was beginning to think of legacies, documentation, and re-evaluating my life work. I was thinking of a show of these small paintings and I began to work in earnest - finally doing sixty-one paintings. My idea was to do a good presentation, with my own style of framing, having a catalogue with color reproductions and with some critical essays by friends that would sum up thoughts of my painting past and present.

I consider myself a painter above all and I have always continued with my own extension of the traditions of painting - the expressionistic, surreal and abstract interpretation of nature. Although I have had success with wood collage and sculpture, and in recent years have also been experimenting with stone, bronze and other mixed media, I regard painting as the thing for me.

During this period of the small paintings I have done some medium easel-size canvases that relate to the small series in imagery and technique. I eventually wanted to do some of these in large scale. In general, some of my paintings and especially my drawing has been going back to older imagery. Coming to mind are paintings done in 1946, of "Starfish" with a horizon line and impasto surface; "Quarry", with mosaic-like sections and shapes; "Aurora Borealis", painted in 1955, with a more intense style and technique which would be evident in later wood collages and acrylic paintings. These show thick overlay of paint to gain the impasto surface which has become a characteristic of my work.

The horizon line became more of an obsession around 1967, and I have been using it deliberately ever since, as a focal point to identify the landscape, the division of sky meeting water and land; to define the broad expanse of landscape. There is a strong fixation in one's mind about this line that divides sky and water; it makes an indelible image that for me stems from being born and growing up near the edge of the lake. Later it was reinforced by spending many summers on the Atlantic shores at the tip of Cape Cod near Provincetown, Massachusetts. It became a symbol of the forces of nature meeting the universe, the "edge of the world"; of trying to see beyond the "unknown". I am fascinated with the ambiguity, the change of the many moods and colors, the sense of sound and movement above and below the line. Therein lies some of the mystery of painting: the transmutation, the choosing and manipulation of pigment that becomes the substance of art.

The title for the show, "The Horizon: Small Paintings, 1980-1987", comes from a depiction of the sky, water and shore imagined as I worked from the vantage point of our home-studio in Grand Portage, a stone-throw to the water of Lake Superior. Two exceptions are (13) "Ice Flow. February: Lake Superior Landscape" and (51) "Ice Break: Lake Superior Landscape". These were done from direct drawings, the cold color remembered and painted later.

There was a deliberate attempt to vary techniques in this series, to gain a wider variation, using the tricks and methods of applying paint that I had acquired through the years. These range from the one thick layer of oil on acrylic in (60) "Ingot Compression. Red Rock Variation: Lake Superior Landscape" and (16) "Paradisaal Waters: Lake Superior Landscape", to the stippled and pointilistic-like short strokes of paint over alternate layers of cold or warm color in (17) "Beyond. The Mist. Red Rock Variation: Lake Superior Landscape", or letting the paint flow uniformly over rough layers to get a shimmering and bumpy effect as in (29) "Alpenglow: Lake Superior Landscape".

Other variations are an emulsion of water added over wet paint for the fluid look in (26) "Morning Storm. Red Rock Variation: Landscape", and the swirling quick movement effected by the blunt edge of a paint brush in (31) "Phenomena Against The Crimson: Lake Superior Landscape". (25) "Red Rock Crevices, Soft Light: Lake Superior Landscape" was the only one done with added finely etched ink lines to gain the craggy, cracked look of north shore facades.

The depiction is not specific but the titles suggest inspiration from the locale. Red Rock is the name of the area where we live although the reddish brown rock is common along the north shore. Most of the paintings refer to Red Rock and there was the notion in my imagination to capture the infinite variations and changes of moods that are always there at different times. Toward this end there was a shift in techniques and size to avoid monotony and to achieve as rich a variation as possible. I wanted to suggest the poetic and romantic in applying the titles and I feel that the paintings can evoke many lyrical thoughts that pull in reference from a diverse range: Shakespeare, James Baldwin, Chippewa mythology, or a hidden reference in memory to Franz Kline.

Many other facets are here too, to define this group of paintings. The color range is exaggerated in the expressionistic sense. I have always used the primaries in the pure state, but here I have used also a muted palette to catch a range of light after sunrise and before sunset. I have a preoccupation with textural surface. I am also interested in the phenomena of paint and the act of painting. Using some of the surrealist ideas and techniques, I let images emerge, sometimes subconsciously, from masses of color and paint, so that there may be many hidden associations that can become real for me in the final mark. In this search for my own reality, I seek the power of the rock, the magic of the water, the religion of the tree, the color of the wind, and the enigma of the horizon.

George Morrison