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Reconstruction of Childhood Nostalgia Using Mixed Media

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RECONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD NOSTALGIA

USING MIXED MEDIA

(TITLE)

BY

WILLIAM H. CHRIST, JR.

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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PREFACE

The subject of children and adults within spatial environments in two and three dimension, all are included to form the basis of this thesis project. The paper describes the subject matter by means of procedures, references, and methods of presentation.

Chapter I explains the overall problems, the materials incorporated, and shows actual photographs of the work. Chapter II provides historical precedents relevant to the topic chosen. Chapter III involves a presentation which uses three separate aspects inviting the spectator to join in and by participating, relate to each experience in his or her own way.
INTRODUCTION

A topic such as Childhood nostalgia which is removed from the psychological and emotional aspects, and reconstructed into an art form offered a challenging problem in terms of presentation.

Through interest in and through working with children, the author has learned to become aware of those events which a child's memory is likely to retain. These events or happenings are experienced by a majority of children. Children relate to familiar things easily. However, youngsters better understand these events and their usefulness as they mature.

This thesis project involves a form of visual communication. Included are actual reconstructions of familiar childhood environments in two separate dimensional pieces of art. They incorporate the use of mixed media throughout. The material of plexiglass cut to 12 x 18 inch dimensions, provides a foundation and transparent illusion that is essential to my overall theme.

The materials also assist in relating the topics and various parts to the spectator. The topic evolved in two separate forms: a stationary form and an interchangeable form. Both structural parts relate to each other, but can be viewed separately.

There are four basic childhood experiences presented within these constructions. "A Birthday Party" reveals a child within his own peer group. The piece uses six panels of plexiglass
in a fixed base. The remaining three topics are: "A Child's View of Mother's Day", "Grandfather's Visit", and the "Gift Exchange at Christmas". These are presented on eighteen panels of plexiglass which are all interchangeable by the hand of the spectator. This construction includes a back projector to illuminate the plexiglass panels from the back.

Other art media used included: drawing, collage, painting, and acrylic transfers. Childhood nostalgia, through these media, will be explored and presented in two and three dimensional surroundings.

Since its conception, this thesis has presented a problem of presentation. The object selected must satisfy the overall theme and adapt itself to the individual viewer. The object should be constructed to exhibit transparency and mobility and also be an art form for the critic regardless of the individual's age, education, or experience in the field of art.

Analyzing and experimenting with small scale models during the past months revealed the best material for the project was plexiglass. These sheets of clear plastic allowed for transparency and versatility in addition to the use of art media applied directly to them. Plexiglass enables one to draw attention to the entire structure or to individual panels leaving the spectator free to relate to the structure piece by piece or as a whole.

Upon each of the twelve by eighteen inch panels of plexiglass small individual drawings, reverse style paintings, collages,
and acrylic transfers have been incorporated. Some of the panels are similar; others vary in color and composition. Together or separated, these panels reveal four nostalgic childhood scenes. These scenes are believed to represent highlights in almost any child's growth within his or her family environment.
THESIS PROJECT
Each of the four childhood experiences come from the pages of a family photograph album. It is within these pages that one can choose the most popular and attractive situations involving children. Photos of children with their peers and pets are to be found within these albums.

The topics: "Mother's Day", "Grandfather's Visit", and the "Gift Exchange at Christmas", involve children with adults. The adult is not the predominant element in the child's eyes. Other things or even insignificant objects may become the predominant preoccupation for the child. For example, "Mother's Day" would not be experienced if the mother was not the center of attraction all year. This particular day is set aside to honor her. Within my plexiglass setting, the little girl's card which she has so proudly made by hand plays a major role.

Grandfather is talking about his years in college football. This framework reveals that the young people are listening with one ear while thinking about their roles in the forthcoming game. The grandfather helps to bring the youngster's thoughts together.

The center of attention in the Christmas environment is the magnetic attraction of those fancy ribbons and brightly wrapped gifts. Here the adults help to create the setting by
providing everything necessary to make this the best Christmas ever for those children.

The three interpretations just described are done on eighteen 12 x 18 inch panels of plexiglass. Also included are three panels which denote the seasons of Spring, Fall, and Winter. These panels are assembled in a wooden frame but are completely interchangeable by the spectator; besides these panels are symbolic family situations; that is, the elders are present and the children's attitudes are visually expressed. The spectator is free to construct his own family setting. He can even build an abstract collage involving forces, places, and things.

The fourth representation is entitled "The Birthday Party." It takes on a separate dimension. First, it is stationary. None of the six panels is interchangeable. The spectator may view the entire scene from the front or from the back. Secondly, it involves three children. No adults are present to supervise. It is within this framework that peer group acceptance takes over. Without the other children present, the young girl would still have a birthday, but without a party or special treats and gifts. This project was constructed as a separate piece, to help emphasize the point of the interchangeable quality of other sections of the thesis project.
Plate number one
"The Birthday Party"

Plate number two
Topics together in the master base
Plate number three
Individual Grouping

Plate number four
Back Projection
HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS
Mixed media has recently become an increasingly popular art method and especially in the Pop Art era of the 1960's. Artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Cornell, Enrico Baj, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and George Segal seem to enjoy employing mixed media in varying degrees to satisfy their needs.

Throughout the 20th century, mixed media and especially collage, have displayed an enormous appeal as an art technique for the young as well as older artists.¹ Collage incorporates a wide range of materials that can be used easily to express ideas that are quite different from conventional art forms.

Collage involves the gluing of torn or crumpled paper or other everyday materials including: textile, scrap, metals, or cut-outs to a prepared surface. Within this thesis project collage is applied directly onto individual 12 x 18 inch pieces of plexiglass.

These constructions were developed with the use of felt tip marking pens, acrylic paint, colored tissue paper, and watercolors. Mixed media provide the various background elements accents, and heightens the collage; together they provide the major design elements for the project.

This entire operation seems to stem from Pop Art, which was a reaction against Abstract Expressionism. Surrealism with its appeal to the subconscious, was replaced by Dada. These forces were used to push artists towards new modes of expression. Abstract Expressionism with its prevailing interest in textures led artists to new materials, some to the use of acrylic paint, others to collage. Collage provided an interesting "ready-made" texture. Marcel Duchamp's idea of the "ready-made" was one of the central innovations of Dada.²

Dadaists and Surrealists greatly extended the range of collage. In the hands of the post-war generation, collage developed into the art of assemblage. It was the creating of works of art almost entirely from existing elements. Assemblage was important for another reason, it provided a means of transition from Abstract Expressionism to the apparently very different style of Pop Art. Assemblage also provided for an increasingly important aspect to the Pop artist: the environment and the happening.³

Practitioners of assemblage included Joseph Cornell, "Eclipse Series" c. 1962, who constructed boxes with the focal point as the juxtapositions of objects. Enrico Baj in his "Lady Fabricia Trolopp" of 1964, created a comic sort of collage.

³Ibid., p. 122.
From assemblage there arose other artists who modified and created a "Neo-Dada" group. Among them were Robert Rauschenberg, "Bed", 1955, and "Barge", 1962 and Jasper Johns, "Numbers in Colour", 1959. Rauschenberg is more the inventive of the two and began to move towards "combine" painting with various objects which are affixed to that surface. Sometimes the painting developed into a free-standing, three-dimensional object. He also has used photographic images which were silk-screened onto the canvas.

Jasper Johns' work gives the impression of greater discipline. Johns is chiefly known for his use of single images: a set of numbers, a target, a map of the United States, or the American flag. The objective of these images is largely to show their lack of point. The spectator looks for a specific meaning, but Jasper Johns is for the most part concerned with creating a surface.

Another aspect which should be included within this framework is one of environment. With the rise of Pop Art, the environmental idea took on a special importance.

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5 Edward Lucie-Smith, op. cit., p. 123.
6 Ibid., p. 123.
7 Ibid., p. 125.
ialized in the "given." This led artists to experiment with the literal reproduction of reality. George Segal's sculptures hover on the edge of it. "Women in Doorway", 1965, uses a plaster figure and actual doors. The George Segal's work entitled "Cinema", 1963, is of special interest for its use of illuminated plexiglass.\(^8\) There was a growing insistence, perhaps derived from these sources, that all of the spectator's senses should be engaged, not merely that of sight, but those of hearing, touch, and smell. Pop Art presented itself as a play on various stimuli.\(^9\)

An art process used in the thesis constructions is one of "Reverse Painting." This technique can be traced back to Post-Revolutionary America. The painted scenes from this date were mostly confined to small glass panels under the dials in clocks. These panels were called a "Tablet", and in the part of the 19th century measured seven by eleven inches.\(^10\)

These small picturesque scenes first appeared on case mantel clocks (1800-1820) and in circular sections of banjo clocks (1800-1820). These clocks were made in New England, and the tablets were painted by local unknown artists commissioned by the clockmakers. The reverse painting on glass usually depicted a beautiful landscape including a large home,

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 251.


ships at sea, or even a portrait. Later, the Federal Symbols of the Eagle and Flag were painted on the clock tablets. By the 1850's, these clocks were a focal point within the Victorian home. The reverse painting took on floral designs along with geometric patterns influenced by the earlier Pennsylvania Dutch. The Pennsylvania German Folk Art involved painting brightly colored symbols of everyday events of life. These painted scenes were titled "Moon Wheels."

Folk Art was also expressed in illuminated manuscripts and these had a distinct effect on dial decoration in Pennsylvania. A reverse landscape required the artist to paint in the following order: the shrubs, trees, the surrounding grounds, the house, windows, trim, house colors, shadows, the scenic mountains in the distance, the clouds, and finally the sky colors. Usually dark colors were applied first over the outline sketch, with brighter colors following. Oil paint was used on panes of glass. American clocks became very popular, and currently are highly valued in the antique market.

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13 Car W. Drepperd. op. cit., p. 106.


15 Ibid., p. 70.

16 Ibid., p. 148.
It is believed that the technique used in these thesis projects is a revival and a new interpretation of the old clock painters. Upon separate sheets of plexiglass portraits of children and adults have been painted using the reverse style. Acrylic paint was used as the medium. Upon completion, the back of the picture was coated with the acrylic gloss medium. This process helps to prevent peeling and assists in adhering the paint to the plexiglass surface.
PRESENTATION
Having described the use of collage and reverse painting, there remains one other technique used in this project, the acrylic transfer process. Since the development and promotion of the acrylic paints in the last fifteen years, many artists have experimented with acrylics to find new ways of expression. Unlike "pencil rubbings" of magazine or painted material, the acrylic gloss medium, when applied in a three coat thickness over the printed surface, will lift the entire picture from the page onto the acrylic and page paper may be removed after soaking it in hot water. This transfer reveals the inked picture on a thin, transparent piece of dry acrylic. Another coat of the medium, still wet, will enable the transfer to be glued to the plexiglass. This technique is used throughout these constructions. These transfers place special emphasis on photographic images of familiar objects which relate to the environments created.

On the following pages are three separate drawings. These plates show the construction of a base or foundation for support of the plexiglass panels used in this project. All three structures were designed to assist in an easier and more flexible presentation. The structure are built of wood lattice and plywood, cut to proper lengths and nailed or glued in place. Stain or paint covers each base and all contain some type of hardware for easy handling.
Plate number five

Having a base dimension of 10½ x 19½ x 2 inches, this structure supports six fixed plexiglass panels. The top corners of plexiglass are held in place by two 10 inch pieces of quarter round. The wooden base and top spreaders are painted silver.
Plate number six

This master base was designed to hold eighteen 12 x 18 inch plexiglass panels. The panels can be re-arranged on this structure to allow variation or removed to base number three for a projected view. This structure is stained dark oak and has an overall dimension of 19½ x 32 x 13½ inches.
Plate number seven

This design serves to support two plexiglass panels removed from the larger master base number two. It is the smallest measuring $3\frac{1}{2} \times 21 \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ inches. A separate light source behind this base will project the images on the plexiglass onto a wall or screen. This support is painted yellow ochre.
SUMMARY

This project began with the intention of perhaps capturing, through the art of mixed media, what a camera catches on film. The sequence of childhood related events which developed are presented in such a manner to not only picture a scene with children and adults within a fixed environment; but, rather a changeable environment into which the representation of people may be included or removed.

The approach of presenting nostalgic themes in mixed media was influenced by the American Pop Art movement of the 1960's, 18th century clock painters, and working in classes where both painting and constructions were encouraged.

The problem of presentation was solved through the use of plexiglass, both in stationary and movable forms. Reverse style painting and collage were also incorporated into this project. The use of back light projection enables the separation or combining of themes.

Spectator participation is invited in this project since themes and environments may alter in the hands of the spectator.

A final dimension arises by removing any two of the eighteen different plexiglass panels from the movable construction. These two panels can then be placed side by side in the base provided
(see plate number seven). A powerful light source from the side will project an interesting two dimensional collage effect on a wall or a screen.

This process of changing the dimensions from three to two forms a modified photo picture which served as the original source of inspiration.

Throughout the constructions, transparency has been stressed. This factor enables the spectator's eye to merge the floating forms into believable environmental settings.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


