

Making Art

I have been fortunate in my work with markers, first oil-based and more recently, water-based, able to produce several hundred of them. In the process of doing these paintings, I have been able to enjoy myself and to immerse myself in the work. In other words, on both internal and external levels, this activity seems to be a success. My friends would ask me how it all came about. And it turns out that I was asking myself the same question. My need to know is even greater than others': I don't want to lose the essence of the painting, the keys to the venture. So I embarked on some extensive self-study in order to articulate what in fact allowed me to produce these works.

In the process, I found myself exceedingly frustrated. Understanding the issues was much harder than doing the paintings! I could come up with a lot of insights and even some prescriptions, but I found it difficult to organize the information into something coherent and articulable. Finally, I came up with a scheme that I can live with and I present it here.

The fundamental question people (and I myself) ask is "where do your ideas come from?" I wonder if they assume that I must have developed the idea, the details they see in the painting and the theme that seems to emerge, prior to the activity of doing the work. In fact, I believe that for most people, this is a tacit assumption rooted in a model of innovation loaded with misconceptions. I can relate to thinking this way because I used to -- until I started turning out the paintings!

The other piece to this way of thinking is a comparison that always leads to idealizing the creator and demeaning the self. When I was the observer and saw someone artistically successful, I assumed that he or she had a special ability, one far above my own. I assumed there was a technical expertise necessary and some sort of almost mystical visionary process that allowed the person to come up with the ideas. Over the years, I had heard nothing to invalidate my assumptions. Most successful artists spoke of working hard, developing a technique and a style, and then just getting lucky -- ideas seemed to just come, although hard work and preparation were important in making for a fertile soil. Again, I came away from any discussion with these individuals with the feeling, "I could never do something like that" -- or perhaps it's really "you can't ever know, or control, success in such a venture because even if you do work really hard, you may not have the ability or the luck of the draw."

So these are the preconceptions with which I began my own artistic endeavors and which I assume plague others admiring any of my subsequent efforts. How can I dispel them and how can I bring some information to bear on the creative processes -- information that will give individuals a sense of hope, that they too could do it, that it isn't so much ability and luck. What I want to communicate

here is that one can systematically put oneself in a position where ideas will flow. It's the system more than the ability.

So what is this system? How can we analyze what's going on artistically? I don't know if what I have to offer is entirely generalizable, but I do think it spells out enough so that observers can understand the generation of ideas.

The way I have proceeded is to set up five levels of analysis: **conceptual framework; theoretical basis for action; strategic basis for action, process model of action; and procedures/techniques for action initiation and implementation.** I don't expect these terms to feel initially comfortable, so I will explain how I am using them as well as how they help explain the paintings.

By a conceptual framework, I mean an explanation of the basic terms associated with the enterprise of painting (with markers, in particular; perhaps, painting in general). By a theoretical basis for action, I mean the operating assumptions, often initially tacit, that underly what I do. In my own case, I have articulated five such assumptions. By a strategic basis for action, I mean the on-line general decision-making principles informing what I do. Perhaps, these could also be termed "basic tendencies." They are really more than that -- they have an implicit decision rule behind them. Continuing with these elaborations, by a process model of action, I mean the general sequence of steps I take to move from a blank piece of paper to a completed product. In particular, the word "process" (as opposed to "procedure") assumes that I cannot move immediately and automatically from one to the other. Instead, I must take certain mini actions (which may themselves be automatic) and allow certain things to happen -- inside me and on the paper -- so that I can then see how to continue. Finally, by procedures/techniques, I refer to the *specific* maneuvers I make with the marker that I can control -- the actions themselves. I want now to look at each of these in some detail.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In going over the critical elements of the paintings, I came up with a list of terms that needed to be brought out. They are the following:

- **medium;**
- **levels;**
- **structure;**
- **connection;**
- **composition;**
- **expression;** and
- **idea.**

Some of these may sound familiar and may even be obvious, but I will proceed nonetheless.

The Medium

The medium consists of the artistic implement and the artistic surface, or canvas. That's all. In my case, this means a set of markers and a pad of small (4" x 6") and porous memo paper. The paper's absorbency properties are critical. It cannot be fancy "art paper" because the techniques I have developed will not work. I shouldn't say "cannot": perhaps that thicker paper will lead to a whole different set of techniques. But in my case, I prefer the cheaper paper; it helped me use the markers in a particular way, taking advantage of certain of their chemical properties that then allowed techniques to evolve.

Levels

The term "levels" is less obvious the way it is used here. It refers to three aspects of any painting -- the colors used, the (geometric) shapes, and the specific forms (figures, objects). I arbitrarily separate them because one can focus more on one than on the others. But I note that a splash of color automatically delimits a shape and often a form; that any form has both a shape and a color; and that any shape has a color and may be seen as a form (as a Rohrschalk, if nothing else). So there is an obvious interdependence between these levels of focus.

Structure

The term "structure" refers to a set of implementable instructions on one or more of the levels. For example, a red rectangle in juxtaposition with a blue circle, with random dots in the blue would define a structure on the level of both color and shape. Structures are intended to be broadly defined and general, allowing for further elaboration "within them": they do not spell out details. Instead, they pave the way for the next term, connections, the link between the structure and a specific version of it. For example, the yellow dots in the blue circle may cluster and form a certain recognizable shape or set up a certain mood. Once I take the general prescription implicit in the structure and begin to enact it, details emerge -- and therein is the connection. Fundamentally, the term refers to a feeling of recognition, of seeing something specific and often unintended within the structure.

Composition

By composition, I mean the overall interaction on each level: specifically, the *texture* on the level of color (referring to the feel of the colors' merging and the way they subdivide the paper); the *pattern* on the level of shape (recurrent shapes and the way they relate to one another); and the *movement* on the level of form (the way figures and other objects relate to one another in terms of spacing and weighting). By expression, I mean how each of these levels, color, shape, and form, contributes to a total feeling or mood within the painting, i.e., to defining the particular "world" established. Finally, by idea, I mean the sum total of the details (the end product), in addition to the compositional and expressive "theme" put forth. Ideas have both summary components (that's a landscape) and full data representation (all the details).

THEORETICAL BASIS FOR ACTION

With these terms roughly defined, I can embark on the more interesting parts of the explanation, beginning with an articulation of the operating assumptions. These will be odds with many preconceptions many of us have.

My actions in painting are based on the underlying assumptions of:

- the value of experience, of the activity per se, rather than of the product;
- dialectical thinking;
- idea generation through action;
- a dynamic relationship between thinking, doing, and seeing; and
- acceptance of indeterminacy.

Finding value in the activity of painting and seeing experience as primary, brings with it the assumption that product development (the idea, in this case) flows from positive experience. Two main aspects (of experience) can be identified in the artistic context: (1) having new connections; and (2) having aesthetically pleasing vignettes. I introduced the term "connection" earlier: the reference here is to seeing something that strikes you, that jumps out at you as new, an unexpected link between the general and the specific. For example, I may sketch in some preliminary figures, but I'm waiting until a bend in the line framing them hits me as a certain movement or representative of a certain mood. Then I react to that (more later in process). The other aspect of experience is having pleasing visual moments: something just looks good. That guides me -- I may try to repeat the shape, form, or color, or use it in some other way.

Seeing new connections heightens my awareness and my consciousness. It forces me out of the mood of simply categorizing what I perceive. I begin to look for the sensuality of it, for the experience of it -- rather than to understand and name what's in front of me. We are all so trained to say "that's a such-and-such" and then move on (mastery of the world around us) -- pure visual experience is discouraged in everyday life. So, it takes something to jolt us out of our usual consciousness; it takes something like a new way of looking at what we might normally dismiss as "oh yes, there's a face in there." One way to accomplish this is to "dance on the edge of ambiguity": working with structures that allow for a variety of renderings. The process model introduced later also puts one in a position of receptivity to novel connections. It allows me, for example, to wait longer before proclaiming, "that's a face"; it lets me wait till the second or third face appears, giving me a choice because I don't act out of fear and grab at the first opportunity for recognition.

Not only do I look for new connections to sustain myself while I paint, but I also seek them out as a way of communicating to the audience the perceptual orientation that artwork enhances. I try to leave what I've done "on the edge of ambiguity" -- it's a figure, it's a shape, it's a swirl of color. What I'm saying through every one of these paintings is that this way of seeing is the rationale for the work -- both for me as the creator and for you as the observer. Both parties benefit from a consciousness/perception raising, which means only that we stop visualizing as a way of categorizing and start visualizing as a way of purely experiencing. The specific content doesn't matter because it's only a vehicle to put ourselves in a position where we shift gears perceptually.

Dialectical thinking deals essentially with the reconciliation of apparent opposites. It is most present in my work in the balancing of and transitioning between the analytic and the intuitive; or more precisely, the scientific and aesthetic sensibilities. For example, part of the time I behave like a scientist, systematically investigating certain properties of the markers; at other times, I behave like an curious museum goer, latching on to what intrigues me and appeals to me. I train myself to shift gears periodically, if it doesn't happen naturally.

Another example concerns the relationship between routine acts and discoveries, i.e. new connections. Instead of viewing standard visual representations (routines) as nothing like the striking new connections that help define the "idea," one can see combinations of such shapes and forms as setting the stage for the discovery, for the emergence of something unexpected. And once the discovery has been made, it can be replicated or routinized: the end product of one painting can become the beginning point for another. Dialectically, the more one utilizes routine prompts, the more one is in a position to make discoveries (provided there is a transitions in focus). And the more one routinizes discoveries, the more likely one is to recognize further discoveries. The process model outlined later will indicate more specifically the sequence of steps that move me from routine acts to new connections.

Finally, in reviewing previous paintings to find aspects that can be used as starters for new ones, I find myself transitioning from systematic cataloguing to spontaneous selection. Again, I bring a scientific algorithmic approach to the problem of generating future paintings: pick out a small section of a previous work and amplify it. But the choice for selecting these sections resides entirely in the aesthetic side -- I see something that looks appealing, something I want to repeat, something I want to use as a base. The end point of one part of one painting is thus used as the starting point for a whole new painting. As a starter, it may be entirely lost in the process; it is in fact only a vehicle. Sometimes, when that happened, when a starter became submerged because something else came along equally compelling, I would go back to it and use it to start yet another painting.

The pivotal theoretical assumption is that **ideas come from doing**; they are not prior, they are emergent entities elicited by a system of strategies, processes, and procedures. For example, a standard line of thought might proclaim that one gets a great idea and then looks for a way to articulate it, for a medium through which to express it. The position taken here is that one starts with the medium and makes friends with it, investigating it. In the process, ideas develop. The position assumes that resources (in the form of this system as well as other aids) exist to put one in a position of receptivity to peak experiences (of having connections, of being aesthetically pleased). These experiences lead naturally to the idea simply through combination, selection, and elaboration. When ideas are used as starters, they are seen as only the initiators of a process that will undoubtedly lead elsewhere. It is important to emphasize this point: normally, we tend to think of the idea as prior, as fueling the action; this theory holds that the action fuels the theory. One might object: how do you get started? This is where the process comes in, as we will see shortly.

Action, deliberation, and recognition are not seen as separated aspects of the process of painting. Typically, one might imagine a sequence in which the artist deliberates and comes up with an idea; takes action and paints; then takes stock, sitting back and recognizing what has gone on; and finally deliberates again on how to correct or improve upon that. The theoretical view presented here not only rearranges the sequence, as we just saw, but also eliminates the **separation** between these aspects. Specifically, the artist does something for a while, then sees something, then does something else, maybe then thinks of something to try, then sees something, etc. There is no specific sequence and the transition timing is much more "micro."

The acceptance of **indeterminacy** flows from the notion that while a process can be utilized to set up the experiences sought for, specific predetermined connections and ideas should not be expected. It can be almost guaranteed that some ideas will be forthcoming, but which ones cannot be predicted: an idea, not the idea. That's the idea! Another aspect of indeterminacy is the seeking out of inadvertent and accidental "happenings": using the dialectical thinking introduced earlier, even when one intends to proceed in a certain direction (and intentionality is necessary for movement, even if it is later abandoned!), as soon as a more striking alternative arises, it is usually possible to reroute oneself and embrace the alternative -- however inadvertent or accidental it may be. These "byproducts of intentionality" provide a fertile source of new ideas.

STRATEGIC BASIS FOR ACTION

Strategies are presented here as essentially decision-making prescriptions: under certain circumstances, orient yourself a certain way or make certain

maneuvers. They are still fairly general, but at a higher level of specificity than the theoretical.

The five strategies are as follows:

- **stay within yourself**; do only what's implementable; (
- **let the medium dictate** what to do;
- **set up broad enough structures**;
- **create variables**; and
- **shift focus** regularly between levels.

"Staying within oneself" is a phrase often associated with coaching in athletic contexts, such as marathoning; it is also associated with such practices as meditation and yoga. The point here is not to be heroic and aim for technical feats beyond one's ability at the moment. (One can grow into them: at some point, they will no longer be feats). This sounds simple, but it is critical. One needs to identify what one can enact, what one can routinely implement. Individuals at times take this as a prescription for avoiding growth; it is not that. Growth is possible, paradoxically, when it is not directly sought. By adopting a process and keeping within what one can do, one finds that it is possible to do more.

Allowing the medium to dictate what to do is tantamount to listening to one's body (in health care contexts). Accepting the limitations of the medium and learning to work with it without preconception takes more discipline and commitment that might be realized. It is important to clear one's mind and just begin at the ground level, with the medium itself. For me, this meant when I changed over to water-based markers, that I had to relearn everything the marker could do. My favorite techniques of color interaction no longer worked. I had to discover and rediscover what the markers were capable of. But once a person does this, he or she will be rewarded -- for then there is no fight, no separation between idea and medium. Ideas flow from what the medium allows; they are not free standing entities thought up outside the medium and then imposed on it. This is another aspect of letting the ideas emerge from a process.

Setting up broad (enough) structures takes some feedback. The idea here is again to dance on the edge of ambiguity -- to have enough structure so that forms and shapes emerge, but not so much that they are irrevocably determined and so that no others could be imagined. One does not aim for definiteness; one seeks a context in which many specific images can arise. And when they do, they are striking, new, and visually pleasing. A lot of this can be done on the level of shapes. At some point, there is enough feedback so that one senses when a structure is adequate or not.

Creating variables is a medium based concept. In the course of discovering what the marker can do (in my case), I would "manufacture" distinctions, however arbitrarily. For example, I would redefine positions of holding the marker, so that "holding the marker" became a variable with three values (straight up, on the side, and almost parallel to the paper). As another example,

I noted that when I used certain swirls, I got some jagged edges. They were visually pleasing some of the time, but I sensed I needed to balance them with rounded edges. So, effectively, I had created the "edge" variable with two possible values -- jagged or rounded. Once variables are found, I look for balances within them. Conversely, if I sense a need for balance, I may locate a new variable within which that balance inheres.

Finally, the focus shifting strategy is vital. It may occur naturally to *do* so and so, to *look* at such and such, and to then *think* about something, as was suggested in the operating assumptions section. But it is also helpful to have a plan in one's head to regularly move from one level to the other (between levels) and from one color burst, shape, or figure to another (within levels). By moving, I mean simply refocusing or literally looking somewhere else on the page. So, in the middle of sketching a figure, I may shift my gaze to other parts of the drawing; or I may reorient and see the figure as a shape, focusing on the patterns that begin to emerge. I shift figure and ground, choosing to look at the spaces between figures. Just looking without naming what I see or trying to figure out what to do allows a plan of action to emerge; I begin to know what to do as my eyes literally tell my hand how to proceed without my conscious deliberations interfering in the least.

A PROCESS MODEL OF ACTION

These strategies along with the underlying theory give me a basis for action. But I still need to have more specific guidelines that allow me to get started and keep going -- to be in a position where I can apply the theoretical and strategic fundamentals. These guidelines are what I call a process model: they consist of a series of steps that put me (or anyone else) in a position to do, to see, and to think effectively and synergistically. In general, a process is just such a sequence, with each step a routinely implementable one, designed to spark a "critical mass" of experience so that the net result is a non-routine "transformation." This is the dialectic. In other words, the road to the creative burst is paved with simple "everyday" maneuvers; with enough of them properly spaced, a rhythm is established (in terms of action, perception, and reflection), ultimately leading to an unexpected result (the transformation).

In my process model, there are several steps and several iterations of those steps to be expected before large and small transformations evolve. In general, I orient myself toward "micro" timing (quickly moving from one step to the next) and to alternating between doing, looking, and thinking. I want to see what happens and then think about how to respond after I do "X". Here are the steps:

(1) **Begin with an experiment** (a systematic investigation of a medium-based variable) or a structure and/or a procedure (a standard implementable maneuver), inspired by or based on a previous painting or some issue of interest; for example, I might say to myself, "I wonder what would happen/what it would

look like if I varied the interface between light and dark colors, overlaying one with the other";

(2) **Find/look for an inadvertent or accidental effect**, or an unexpected connection, or something of aesthetic value, however small; allow it to divert you away from the experiment, which need not be completed! This involves a shift of gears from the enactment of the experiment to the aesthetic experience derived from looking at what has been put down so far;

(3) **Highlight that aspect** with a known technique; elaborate and play, arbitrarily adding colors, shapes, and forms;

(4) **Examine the result** of that highlighting, elaborating, and playing, checking the aesthetic value of the colors, shapes, and forms and the balancing of the variables involved;

(5) **Make a "mid-course correction"** based on that examination and continue on; ...

Repeat steps 2-5 until a clear direction emerges -- a mood is established (the expression) and the texture, patterns, and movement are balanced (the composition) ... elaborate and highlight as necessary.

Step 1 involves action; step 2 perception; step 3 action; step 4 reflection; and step 5 action. Thus, the "thinking" part of all of this is relatively minor compared to the systematic use of doing and looking. The idea here is that if you look in the right places, you will find something; you need to do certain things to establish those right places.

REPertoire AND TECHNIQUES

A repertoire is a set of shapes, subjects, and color combinations that one can fall back on in an almost automatic way to get started/set up a structure. It comes from experience, the codification of all the inadvertent discoveries and routine maneuvers. Perhaps 90% of what I do is based on the repertoire but only 20% of the time do I stick to what I've started. Each new discovery enlarges the repertoire as it turns into a routine that I can control.

Ultimately, I had to take a marker and put something on paper. I had to have a repertoire and technique. By techniques, I refer to the actual physical motion of taking marker in hand and moving it along the paper; I also refer to certain predictable effects. For example, the marker has a conical shaped nib and can be held on the side or with the point down. The effect of streaky lines can be created by a side grip with a quick motion across the paper so that it is not in full contact much of the time. The effect of bleeding can be achieved by overlaying one color with another, provided they are not tonally too far apart.