

## NOTES AND ART 2000

As noted in previous essays, I started with the medium rather than with a set idea. I had stumbled onto what it could do in the course of fooling around, experimented with that more systematically once I recognized replicable maneuvers, inadvertently varied them, discovered a theme or compositional pattern within a given work, and thus created the basis for an artistic “idea.”

For example, my first lesson from oil based markers was drying time. I noticed that if I shaded in an area on the paper big enough to allow one section to dry, adding more color to that part left a slight ridge like demarcation line – even with the same color. I then experimented with bands the width of the pen nib, letting each dry before applying the next. In the process, I did not insist on keeping the bands straight as in a rigid experimental procedure. I allowed the variation to take me on a perceptual journey, as I began to see fantastic shapes and odd creatures emerging from these interacting bands. That line began a series of paintings and a series of marker discoveries, in terms of other interaction effects.

Even today, with a new kind of marker, I learn what it can do on a given surface before arriving at an “idea.” At times, I will have a specific image I would like to express, but use it only as a starting point, content to leave it for something more compelling in the process of trying to capture it. I might come back to it in the next painting or may just abandon it.

What facilitates the process for me is having a theoretical framework, well-defined artistic values and goals on the “macro level” (as an orientation) as well as a set of resources and a system on the “micro level” (hands on and on line).

### Theoretical framework

This sets the stage for the articulation of the theoretical framework. In its broadest terms, its fundamental tenet centers around the reconciliation of routine preparatory maneuvers and recognition of emergent forms. Put more simply, I am concerned with setting things up and being then attuned to letting things happen, that is, on the ***dialectical*** relationship between consciously directed implementable routine activities and the apparently magical discoveries that constitute the fruit of creative work. (The more one establishes the routine through practice, the more one is in a position to experience the emergent – provided one is open to transition points).

As mentioned earlier, the focus is not on describing the product, from either a technical or conceptual point of view, but rather on describing a process that links the routine with the magical/creative. Actually, the intent is ***prescriptive***, designed to put the reader in a position so that he or she can envision what takes place or so he or she can do the artwork. The issue is how much direction is necessary, in terms of defining various implementable acts, to put one in a

position where the magic kicks in, that is, where ideas flow, consciousness is raised, and the stage is set for decision making or shaping a flood of possibilities.

Structurally, this process is familiar: it has occurred for everyone in “good” social situations (an intense conversation, a feeling of connecting with someone), in which there is a “warm up” period of routine questions (“how’s the family?”) and activities (having something to drink or eat; take a tour of the house). The keys are having a baseline of implementable acts, including ways to keep things moving when they are not fluid (socially, people may still feel a bit uncomfortable or unengaged), until a transition point where the energy/magic takes over/kicks in. At that point, the event can go off on its own, although some monitoring or decision-making may help, now more fluidly accomplished as participants are in tune with it.

My framework defines an ongoing cycle within and between paintings, with stages of **initiating**, **positioning**, **connecting**, and **investing**. In the discussion of these stages, the terms “structure” and “punctuated equilibrium” will also be used.

*Initiating* means having a specific, but loosely defined, starting point. This could be an artistic problem or a medium problem: for example, the former might refer to representing some shapes and figures while the latter might refer to an experiment with markers and napkins. This starting point is often defined by a *structure* which describes the starting point in terms of color combinations, shapes, or figures, allowing for a certain amount of variability (hence, loosely defined). The structure need not be articulable. In my case, I have used such structures as “green brushstrokes, randomly applied, to be etched in by light/dark colors”; “lines at various angles surrounded by circles”; and “figures in various habitats.” When I begin with such a focus, there is a lot of latitude. That can vary from time to time. Ideally, a structure is rich enough to provide a well-defined place to begin, but open enough so that a variety of possibilities can emerge.

*Positioning* means engaging in various implementable activities in either a random or a systematic manner to move from the beginning stages of enacting the structure to its specific manifestation. The main issue here is application: as I find a specific outlet for the structure, i.e., as it moves from general description to particular manifestation, inevitably something unexpected will show up. This may be difficult to put into words. However, because of the built-in variability of structures, there is no one way to enact them. Consequently, any specific version has to represent a new link between it and the structure. This stage is still early in the process, so what’s on the paper does not typically suggest a finished product.

*Connecting* means the recognition of the germ of an idea through patterns of shapes or emergent figures or technical discoveries. This can come from

applying a structure, but it may also arise spontaneously or accidentally. It means “seeing as”: seeing the shapes or the figures as fitting into a whole composition, as being compelling entities in their own right. This is primarily a recognition issue, an internal event for the artist, with little external activity. But it is one that defines a direction for product completion.

*Investing* has two aspects: first, taking the acceptable direction, extending it and refining it, so that the idea comes to fruition. For example, I highlight an emergent image so that its presence is enhanced. The second aspect is more important for the ongoing process **between** paintings, toward maintaining creativity in general rather than one particular creation/product. It is based on the concept of punctuated equilibrium, a theory of artistic and scientific investment. Briefly, the idea is that progress between paintings is incremental most of the time. This means that the structure remains the same, but the manifestations change. So, I may try my “gray and purple swipes with figures as darker spots” or “outline the blottered figures on the inner sleeve” structure to produce one painting after the other, going back to it over and over again. This doesn’t signal any lack of creativity – actually, it points to the richness and variability of any one structure. There is also, however, punctuation in the sense of discontinuous change, as when a new structure emerges without intention, through the application process. As indicated, because of the variability, new links are constantly forged between structure and specific ideas: every so often, that process works in reverse as a link suggests a whole new structure. (Varying stretches the incremental changes until they twist enough to bring out a new overall format).

## Values

My core values are simple: I look for a heightened awareness and intensity of experience rather than focusing on product. The two cornerstones for that are engagement and discovery. Like the plumber who responded, “But I’m so engrossed” when I asked him to look at something else, I want to be really involved, immersed in the project. Then, during it, I look for a color, a shape, a figure, or a combination of any of them to hit me as something. It may not have a name, but it leaps out at me, it’s fresh, it’s a new connection between some general configuration/interaction and a specific version of it. It may not be what I set out to do, yet it is unexpected and I can flow with it. In fact, most of the time, I prefer the unexpected.

Implicit in all this is the valuing of an aesthetic, i.e., a sense of what pleases me and what feels new. I bring this to the experience; I can develop it further from the experience. I also value the medium itself: I don’t want to fight with it, but rather get to know it and take what it can give, as the primary initiating focus. (This is directly in opposition to solving technical problems by overcoming the medium.)

## Goals

The core goal is to look for interactions of color, shape, and figure as the broad “idea” of any painting. This might be labeled a “super structure”: while individual ideas change from painting to painting and structures change over time, this interactive structure remains fundamentally stable. When I say “interaction,” I could also be talking about composition as well: I want to see movement and connection on all three levels as well as between levels. A second goal is to keep things moving, so that one painting suggests the next. Structures do this. Using the end product of one painting as an unexpected structure to begin the next may also accomplish it. Another goal is to keep certain tensions in balance: systematic execution of techniques/random explorations; loose structures/specific commitment to a painting idea; deliberating ahead of time/deciding on the fly. For example, a structure indicating an experiment with the medium could be adhered to faithfully with little variation or could incorporate bold, random strokes.

The final goal is linked to the values mentioned earlier. To enhance perception as I work and later when others look at the painting, I aim for the “edge of ambiguity.” That is, in seeking out the individuals of the interaction, shapes or figures, I want to create a fluidity **between** levels first of all, e.g., it’s a face, it’s a round object, it’s a swirl of color, as well as to prevent clearly defined recognition **within** each level. The goal is to get myself and others to **experience** the shape or the figure, not to categorize it – not to be diverted into this other “brain mode.” The content is irrelevant, although interactions are broad enough to frame a context in which recognition can flourish. In general, we can restate this overarching goal as setting up a *process* in which experience is heightened, awareness enhanced, and connections fluidly accessed so that one chooses between an abundance – rather than scratching at a sparse field of dreams.

## The System

The system is the key to all of this. It makes the framework, values, and goals operational. It consists of various resources, activities, strategies, and transition points (to negotiate the cycle).

The *resources* are most notably a repertoire of color combinations, shapes, and figures, routinely executable, in addition to a set of techniques for how to execute them. For example, my marker – napkin techniques are mainly bleeding of color through time variance of application and blending of color with different tonal combinations. I also have a set of standard beginning structures, such as figures in an environment or various types of shapes.

There are other less obvious resources: facility with the medium; a well-defined compositional and aesthetic sense; experience; trust in oneself; an acceptance of the process, even if tacitly. In my case, with markers, I have had the ultimate of good fortune as the medium itself, the marker – napkin connection, is a resource,

in that it is extremely technically forgiving. So, although I had to develop some techniques on my own through the process already described, I could bypass an intensive technical training period, one that carries with it the limited and forced version of artistic development referenced in my background.

The *activities* go with each of the stages of the cycle. There are twelve that I could articulate:

#### INITIATING

- Extemporize: begin arbitrarily with no conscious focus
- Experiment: plan an investigation of media properties
- Extrapolate: start with an ending idea from a previous painting
- Extract: use a connection or discovery from a previous painting

#### POSITIONING

- Explore: arbitrarily “play” with the initiation plan; venture off if desired
- Execute: systematically apply the initiation plan
- Examine: check for balancing and movement; decision making

#### CONNECTING

- Extol: find a shape or figure or color combination pleasing
- Experience: make a discovery about the nature of the medium/structure

#### INVESTING

- Extend: accent the recognized color combination, shape, or figure
- Exercise: work on it by trying & then amending, refining color, shape, figure
- Expand: deliberate on result and make conscious plans

The strategies include the following:

1. Stay within technical ability: do only what’s implementable
2. Let the medium dictate what to do as a default position
3. Keep focus shifting from one level and from one variable to another
4. Create variables and shake things up; look for “accidents”
5. Keep timing micro
6. Stay local with connection
7. Reverse order in experimentation/technique
8. Do it and then make sense of what you did
9. Take “side trips” when they appear and use a plan only as default

The idea of the first strategy is the paradoxical notion that to find something new, a stretch, a break from the routine, stay within the routine. Combining that with #5, rapid shifts of attention and with #3, shifts of focus, I would find that I had enhanced my chances to recognize a new color combination, a new configuration of shapes, and a new cluster of figures. #2 speaks for itself and has already been discussed. Focal shifting is a key. It is not only a matter of moving one’s attention from color to shape to figure (in a micro way, #5), but also a matter of going from doing to looking to thinking (action to perception to reflection). Moving attention from color to shape to figure can be accomplished by seeing as: a figure as shapes; figures in shapes; colors in shapes, etc. And

within each level, one can shift attention to bring out the interactions. Creating variables comes from the medium. For example, I noticed that I had regularly used three kinds of edges; so I conceptualized for the future “edge” as a variable with three values. Staying local refers to seeing as locally, not globally: e.g., that’s a figure over in that corner. Reversing order is just that: e.g., if one technique is to put a light color over a dark one for bleeding, try it the other way around. The eighth strategy reverses the usual “understand/deliberate & then do” approach, also speaking to shifting between action, reflection, and deliberation in any sequence rather than in a preferred deliberation – action – reflection mode. Finally, when some figure or shape or color combination appears to come from out of nowhere (possibly because of being at a higher level of consciousness), go with it, even if you had “plans”: you can always go back to the plan for the next painting.

### **Transition points**

This takes us back to the cycle. It is critical to be fully in one stage while also fully prepared to leave it. This may seem like a paradox, but think about having a great social event: it does end and in the end, if you are truly satisfied, the transition can be seamless. So you can be fully there and fully prepared to go at the appropriate time. To do so, recognition is the key. In artwork, this especially includes awareness of the self: if I see that I am just going through the motions, I need to catch myself and make a change (in the routine/in what is routine). I also need to learn how to flow from consciously doing to letting go to being able to recognize to then going back to consciously doing. While this sensibility is not routine, it does come readily with practice and with awareness of its existence, i.e., knowing to look for it in individual works and ultimately to look for it inside oneself.

Some other transitions come from balancing, including the ones mentioned earlier. I also have found that I can benefit from routine shifting of activity from random to directed. I have, in many cases, allowed and even promoted a built-in arbitrariness to the color combinations, shapes, and images. Finally, I also transition from focusing on the marker and its physical feel to looking at the emerging ink flows, and thus from playing/having fun/being sensual to committing/recognizing/connecting. As I conclude this attempt to preserve my experience for myself and share it with others, I see that the next stage is to open the writing and make it less dense. Thank you.