

CRAFT AND THE IMPULSE TO ABSTRACT

by Warren Seelig

I believe that abstraction is a phenomenon we need to examine in order to understand the way form occurs in craft. The impulse to abstract is certainly not a behavior exclusive to craft, but it is tied inexorably to various media where there is a primal attraction and compelling need to work with materials. This impulse includes those painters who "ice" their canvases with a palette knife and then scratch through the colored skin to the interstices in the cloth beneath, or draughtsmen who are conscious of the feel of graphite pushing into the paper as line goes thick and thin. I am talking about those who are passionate about the physical world, who connect and find some bearing through contact with the substance and the elemental.

I like to think of this impulse to abstract as something alive within us and not merely as an historical theme in the orderly sequence of Western art history. I am concerned with abstraction as it refers to behavior: the impulse to abstract as an observable activity inherent in all of us. The impulse to abstract involves a certain intimacy with materials and requires manual labor. It draws on body intelligence. The need to discover must be so strong that we are able at times to short circuit the intellect and trust more the intuitive. The activity is especially visible in children, in those whose instincts are not dimmed by the intellect, whose sense of play has not yet been diminished by a mature adult attitude of purposeful, meaningful activity.

When I was thirteen years old, I enjoyed making small machines. Some of the motivation was an obvious attempt to be like my father, who was an engineer, a kind of Rube Goldberg inventor for a small textile manufacturer. I remember making machines that involved simple motions, using wood, springs and painted tin, later involving small electric motors, switches and colored electric lights. I was very excited in the eighth grade when the announcement came concerning our county science fair competition and I decided that I should make a spectacular machine for the event. With some help from my father, I went about building a machine with a giant rotary switch, powered by an electric motor that randomly energized many red, green, blue and yellow light bulbs mounted on a plexiglass backboard. Through the glass you could see a web of variously color-coded wires; in fact, you could walk all around the thing and see it in many different ways. You could see it, hear it and even smell the electricity. On the day of the jury, on tables in the high school gym were all the submissions, including my machine, which was proudly flashing, motor humming with sparks jumping off the rotary contacts. Although I cannot recall the various project categories, I do know that my work was placed in "other." The judges indicated that the machine looked great, but as far as they could fathom, it had no particular function, it didn't do anything! I left the fair confused, because it did something for me.

The word abstract conjures all kinds of reactions. There is always an element of fear associated with the notion of abstraction, because art (or a science fair project) lacking in subject is assumed to be meaningless. The word abstraction is also associated with a formal approach to art: being conventional, traditional and impersonal. When I was a kid and first thinking about art, I was taught in school that artists made pictures about the world, to glorify and to emulate nature, to tell stories, to capture on canvas, or in an object, certain aspects of reality. I understood that some pictures looked exactly like a landscape, and others gave you the feeling of a landscape, and yet others looked like nothing but attractive patterns. We were encouraged to paint, draw, carve and photograph things that were real: self portraits, figures, landscapes. That approach to artmaking was considered more serious and artistic. I liked to make designs: some were organic but most were geometric, those things that didn't seem to be about anything. The geometric pictures and organic globs were considered more playful than meaningful.

With children, this notion of impulse to abstract is easily identified through spontaneous activity. Put a child on a dirt pile or just about any natural

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environment and watch the impulse to abstract: the child seeing and touching and learning about the physical "stuff" around him or her, stacking, smearing, pressing, digging, marking, scratching, using the hands or simple tools or whatever is within reach. It is joyous play with no anticipated outcome, but at the same time serious play, often where first contact is made and where genuine self discovery and revelation occurs. The play may be less involved in contest and more in solitary day-dreaming: however, it is not passive activity. If permitted, the child actively grasps his or her reality, decides what is possible, and uses free invention, adoption and juxtaposition. Material and the physical world are another vocabulary to be learned and the child selects the parts and places them together in a personally meaningful way. I think that a child is capable of experiencing unfettered joy and something of the sublime, an experience that artists and others later attempt to rediscover through a similar process of play. The child makes intimate contact, right in front of their hands and eyes where the world is not an illusion. I speak of the impulse to abstract here, which is in contrast to the desire or need to imitate. The need to imitate is also a strong impulse in children, but it is very different

from the impulse to abstract. The need to imitate is more highly regarded in our culture because the product can often be understood; it is a picture that is clear, rational and verifiable. It is a linear process, connected with learning, training and achievement, less so with education through experience. The impulse to abstract involves all the senses, and especially the sense of touch, and the product of this behavior is far more intangible.

Whether a child at play or a student rediscovering the true meaning of play, materials provoke and initiate this impulse to abstract. The painter Antoni Tapies said, "material is our external reality and would have no existence of its own except as a projection of our reason or our psyche." For the craftsman, materials not only possess profound qualities that affect us subliminally, but are also loaded with associations derived from our mutual experience of them. Whether processed, synthetic, natural or raw, what materials mean is a fascinating and richly complex area of cultural discovery. Even the words that name materials have strong cultural resonance: polyester, silk, porcelain, pine, oak, platinum, tin. The words may instantly conjure not only thoughts but literal images of the objects and experiences we associate with those materials. Over time we take an intimate reading on the material, and so often react in an exaggerated way. It is the stuff, its materiality, the succulent, pliable, plastic, soft, hard, malleable, diaphanous, translucent, shiny, oily, glittery materials which instigate, induce, and tempt us. Our initial response is to the physicality, the sensual: it comes mostly from instinct and intuition. We are drawn to materials not because we have figured out or rationalized our need for them. The attraction comes from elsewhere. Rarely do we get so close to reality without imitation or representation — in other words a more immediate sense of the real world through abstraction.

It is an inestimable misunderstanding of craft to assume that materials are chosen primarily to ser-

vice ideas. To the contrary, I believe we select materials for the way in which they offer clues about form yet to be visualized. Understanding this concept may reveal something about the creative process among us. I believe that materials and their consequential transformation may be the first stage in the search for idea. I think that materials suggest ideas about form because of their inherent physical properties but also, and more importantly, because of the way that material seems to contain or to have absorbed unique information that is meaningful to whomever makes contact with it. The information contained by matter is not necessarily universal, for each of us will read and respond in our own peculiar way. In fact, the way we respond will give expression to a rich and eccentric experience of the world. ^{end} To make form that responds only to a material's physical properties — to what it can do rather than with it encourages us to do — more often produces results that are predictable and familiar. The artist's ability to discover qualities in materials that go beyond their scientific properties will provoke form with a far more convincing sense of expression. Some artists are unusually willing to allow materials to play a significant role in the discovery of form. Although this may sound overly simplistic, it is the essential and limitless source of inspiration for those who are material-oriented. Believing that the source of ideas may exist within the material is often in strong contrast to the established thinking in Western art, where more often, material is envisioned as a crude resource to be exploited, to be overcome by the will of the artist/creator: it is merely the stuff that bears the imprint of the artist's style and technique. The answer goes beyond truth-to-materials or the notion that material is merely a means to an end. Materials contain clues that allow us to discover our own personal sense of reality through a subconscious process, an intuitive, creative process in which material is an active partner.

The notion that materials have a personality, spirit, soul or whatever we use to characterize that with which we as human beings can identify, is a universal concept, dominant in Eastern philosophies, which can be traced back to primitive man. So-called primitive man was able to feel that his soul was not only something that dwelt within his body, but something that also lived in trees, in animals, stars, thunder and all other natural phenomena. I am not suggesting that we are capable of experiencing the world in the way primitive people did because they developed consciousness in a very different way. However, for the artist who has established a deep and intensive relationship with materials, the feeling of psychic identity, something of one's spirit becomes closely identified with the physical, is very real. The artist working with materials, over time, may reach a heightened reality. A deep and overriding commitment to a certain materiality will reinforce the notion that this stuff is other than inanimate.

Craft reinforces this empathy with material in its physiological dependence on process. Activity is rhythmic, repetitive, continuous: beating, turning, throwing, planing, scratching, burnishing, stitching. These processes have a direct relationship to making abstract form because of their often slower, more deliberate, focused, but at the same time meditative and mesmerizing qualities. This impulse to abstract is directly involved in the activity of making and is often in synchronization with natural body rhythms, with breathing, with

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heart beat, with soothing stroke, with the sexual cadence. The activity may induce some level of contemplation where the actual process remains on automatic pilot, but the decisions about shaping move into a state of mental freewheeling. That is, the process becomes second nature and decisions about shaping come

as much from the irrational as from the rational. It seems that not only the conscious but the unconscious is engaged in the process of making form.

Craft processes tend to be organic, closely associated with fundamental forces in nature. The physical shapes often grow or emerge by slowly adding or subtracting material. Certain processes, like weaving, layering, laminating, resemble sedimentation, and others, like carving, sanding, filing, relate to erosional forces. Both of these processes

involve building up or removing by bits and particles, by threads, chips and dust. Surface, shape and color in tapestry are realized by obsessive layering of threads, which eventually become cloth. In carving wood, massive amounts of material may first be removed in order to generalize about the form. The process often involves continuous chipping away, from large to small, scaled down, in some cases, to particles of wood dust being removed. Often the form emerges in slow motion, taking shape over an extended period, one thin layer added or one particle removed at a time. Somewhere in the process matter transforms.

There are few experiences in artmaking where

one is able to come closer to achieving parity between process and expression than what we find in the making of a vessel. In one of the ultimate archetypal abstract forms, the thrown ceramic pot, surface markings, spiraled edges, the overall vertical gesture and shape, are the expression as well as the process made visible. In throwing, there is an anticipation of expressing form that has not yet been visualized. As one throws, there is a state of mind about the making, where focused control is relinquished to the creative will; expression occurs and is profoundly recorded as the process. The path is clear and unfettered in the search for form. Removed are the constraints and distraction associated with realism and the need to render specific appearances. The same analogy exists with the vessel produced when blowing glass. The molten glass responds to all kinds of body dynamics: of the feet and hands moving in a certain way along with the glass inflating, expanding as breath is pushed into the bubble. The indirect touching and guiding, involving the whole body, in developing this illusive and volatile form is, again, recorded in the form. Most of these processes, as with metal raising, may be explained rationally but are experienced magically. The

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spread of metal is tranquil and fluid as the form lifts off and up. The material is continuously energized by the blow of the hammer as the walls of the vessel are urged to surround and define a volume; a finely dimpled complexion appears all over on the thinning metal skin. Form evolves

according to the artist's volition, with process and expression occurring simultaneously.

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much to the content or meaning of the work. So often when the subject is literal, the imagery seems cliched, an afterthought to the use of material, the gesture, the detail, which is seductive. In spite of the image, we are moved by a surface that is richly woven, brushed, colored, striated or patined. The subject itself is often a distraction from overwhelming attraction to nearly every other aspect of the work. At a moment when narrative and the figurative are call words everywhere in the arts, this reaction may seem blasphemous.

Wilhelm Warringer, in his book *Abstraction and Empathy* (first published in 1908), writes "the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world." We respond in a manner not unlike the way primitive people shielded and protected their psyches from what Warringer refers to as "the prevailing caprice of the organic." In the late twentieth century, our culture is reeling against the overwhelming forces of a world where technology is encouraging us to experience every day life as passive participants. Many makers are turning to narrative, to storytelling, to keep in touch with human nature, with our historical psyche. Abstraction in craft presents an antidote to the same problem but with an alternative means — more driven to the

sensual, to materiality, to the physical world as a way of coping. The impulse to abstract is a way for each one of us to discover and reveal what is within: the fantastic, the eccentric, the sublime.

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