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RECTANGULAR STRUCTURE IN MY MONTAGE PAINTINGS

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Abstract—*The author describes his change from being a student of mathematics to that of being a painter, after studying with George Grosz. Through Grosz, the author was led to study Brueghel, and the Dutch masters and their art, together with Byzantine mosaics and African sculpture, have remained a major influence in his work.*

A study of the paintings of De Hooch and Vermeer was also helpful from the point of view of the way those artists were able to control their large shapes, even when disparate elements were included within these shapes. Also, the author describes the influence upon him of examples of Chinese paintings and his method of working with mounted layers of torn papers.

Both the similarities as well as the differences to Cubism in his style are described in detail, with the hope that the structural content of his work will be understood and even more valued than its social message.

I

When I first started to make pictures I was particularly interested in using art as an instrument of social change. As far as I was concerned at the time, which was in the mid-1930's, art techniques were simply the means that enabled an artist to communicate a message—which, as I saw it then, was essentially a social, if not a political one. My original objective as an artist was to become a political cartoonist. I was an undergraduate majoring in mathematics at New York University when I started producing a steady stream of caricatures and satirical sketches for *The Magpie*, the campus magazine of humor; by the time I received my degree I had already become something of a semi-professional cartoonist with a weekly feature in the Baltimore *Afro-American*, a Negro newspaper of nationwide reputation and circulation.

It was my search for better ways of getting a social message into my cartoons which led me to the works of Daumier, Forain and Kathe Kollwitz, to the Art Students League and to George Grosz. The artists in the 1930's were deeply conscious of social problems, and Diego Rivera, José Orozco and David Siqueiros in Mexico, and Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood in the United States were then at the height of their popularity. But what impressed, engaged and challenged me most were the corrosive line drawings and the watercolors of Grosz.

It was during my period with Grosz, under whom

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I began studying several months after graduating from New York University, that I began to regard myself as a painter rather than a cartoonist. The drawings of Grosz on the theme of the human situation in post World War I Germany made me realize the artistic possibilities of American Negro subject matter. It was also Grosz who led me to study composition, through the analysis of Brueghel and the great Dutch masters, and who in the process of refining my draftsmanship initiated me into the magic world of Ingres, Dürer, Holbein and Poussin.

I had decided that I wanted to make painting, not mathematics, my life's work, but it was not until several years after leaving the League that I managed to do a group of paintings with any stylistic continuity. The subject matter of almost all of these paintings was drawn from Negro life. This is also true of my painting now, but at that time my emphasis was more on the rural south of the United States, than the urban north. Everything that I have done since then, has been, in effect, an extension of my experiments with flat painting, shallow space, Byzantine stylization and African design.

All of my first paintings were done in tempera. I completed about 20 before going into military service in 1942. When I returned to civilian life in 1945, I began a series of watercolors based on such themes as the Passion of Christ, the Bullring and the Iliad. My temperas had been composed in closed forms and the coloring was subdued, mostly earthy browns, blues and green. When I started working with watercolor, however, I found myself using bright color patterns and bold, black lines to delineate semi-abstract shapes. I never worked long on a
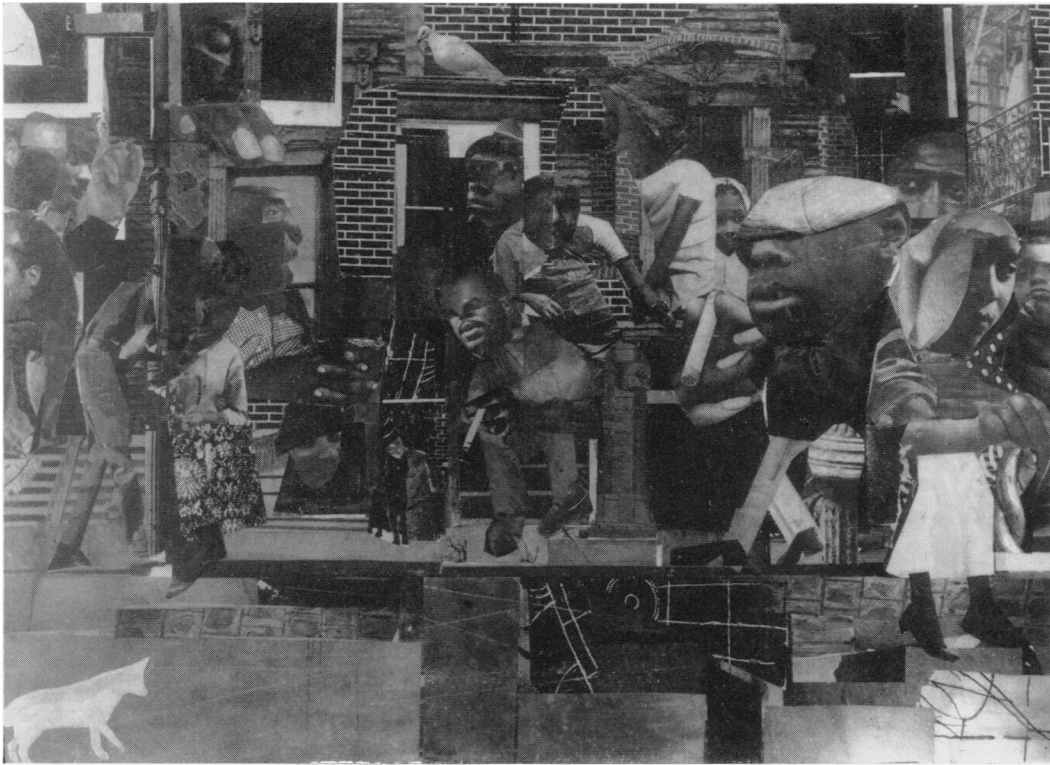
Fig. 1. *'The Dove' (Projection), montage painting,* 35 × 48 in., 1964. *(Collection of Cordier–Ekstrom Gallery, N.Y.C.)*

painting with this method or made many corrections. I had not yet learned that modern painting progresses through cumulative destructions and new beginnings.

When I started to paint in oil, I simply wanted to extend what I had done in watercolor. To do so, I had the initial sketch enlarged as a photostat, traced it onto a gessoed panel and with thinned color completed the oil as if it were indeed a watercolor.

Later on I read Delacroix's *Journal* and felt that I too could profit by systematically copying the masters of the past and of the present. Not wanting to work in museums, I again used photostats, enlarging photographs of works by Giotto, Duccio, Veronese, Grünewald, Rembrandt, De Hooch, Manet and Matisse. I made reasonably free copies of each work by substituting my own choice of colors for those of these artists, except for those of Manet and Matisse when I was guided by color reproductions. The Rembrandt I chose, 'Pilate Washing His Hands', gave me the most difficulty. While studying this masterpiece, I found so many subtle rhythms and carefully planned relationships that I finally surrendered the work, having learned that there are hidden, mysterious relationships which defy analysis.

II.

In 1950, I went to Paris on the G.I. Bill, for 18 months. During that time, however, I was much too busy visiting museums, galleries, and studios to get any actual painting done. But I was undergoing a change in my thinking nevertheless, and when I returned to New York I began experimenting in a radically different way. I started to play with pigments, as such, in marks and patches, distorting natural colors and representational objects. I spent several years doing this, until I gradually realized the tracks of color tended to fragment my compositions. That was when I went back to the Dutch masters, to Vermeer and De Hooch, in particular, and it was then I came to some understanding of the way these painters controlled their big shapes, even when elements of different size and scale were included within those large shapes. I was also studying, at the same time, the techniques which enable Chinese classical painters to organize their large areas, for example: the device of the open corner to allow the observer a starting point in encompassing the entire painting; the subtle ways of shifting balance and emphasis; and the use of voids, or negative areas, as sections of pacivity and as a means of projecting the big shapes.

As a result, I began to paint more thinly, often on natural linen, where I left sections of the canvas unpainted so that the linen itself had the function of a color. Then in a transition toward what turned out to be my present style, I painted broad areas of color on various thicknesses of rice paper and glued these papers on canvas, usually in several layers. I tore sections of the paper away, always attempting to tear upward and across on the picture plane until some motif engaged me. When this happened, I added more papers and painted additional colored areas to complete the painting [1, 2].

Fig. 2. 'The Street' (Projection), montage painting, 38·5 × 54·5 in., 1964. (Collection of Cordier–Ekstrom Gallery, N. Y.C.)

Fig. 3. 'The Baptism' (Projection), montage painting, 34 × 48 in., 1964. (Collection of Cordier–Ekstrom Gallery, N. Y.C.)

Fig. 4. '*The Approaching Storm*', *montage painting*, 48 × 30 in., 1967. (*Collection of Cordier–Ekstrom Gallery, N.Y.C.*)

When I begin a work now, I first put down several rectangles of color, some of which, as in a Rembrandt drawing, are of the same proportion as the canvas. I next might paste a photograph, perhaps of a head, in the general area where I expect a head to be. The type of photograph does not matter, as it will be greatly altered. At this stage I try only to establish the general layout of the composition. When that is accomplished, I attempt ever more definite statements, superimposing other materials over those I started with. I try to move up and across the surface in much the same manner as I had done with the torn papers, avoiding deep diagonal thrusts and the kind of arabesque shapes favored by the great baroque painters. Slanting directions I regard as tilted rectangles, and I try to find some compensating balance for these relative to the horizontal and vertical axes of the canvas.

I do not burden myself with the need for complete abstraction or absolute formal purity but I do want my language to be strict and classical, in the manner

of the great Benin heads, for example. In that sense, I feel my work is in the tradition of most of all the great exponents of flat painting. I have drawn on these styles, which I feel are timeless and historically durable, to control my images in pictorial space. I have incorporated techniques of the camera eye and the documentary film to, in some measure, personally involve the onlooker. Without going too far beyond selected aspects of reality, I try to transform them, often as they are perceived conventionally, into an intense aesthetic statement.

Some observers have noted that the apparent visual basis of my current work, through the use of overlapping planes and of flat space, is similar to Cubism. In the actual process of composition, however, I find myself as deeply involved with methods derived from De Hooch and Vermeer, as well as other masters of flat painting, including the classic Japanese portrait artists and the pre-Renaissance Siennese masters, such as Duccio and Lorenzetti. What I like most about the Cubism of Picasso.
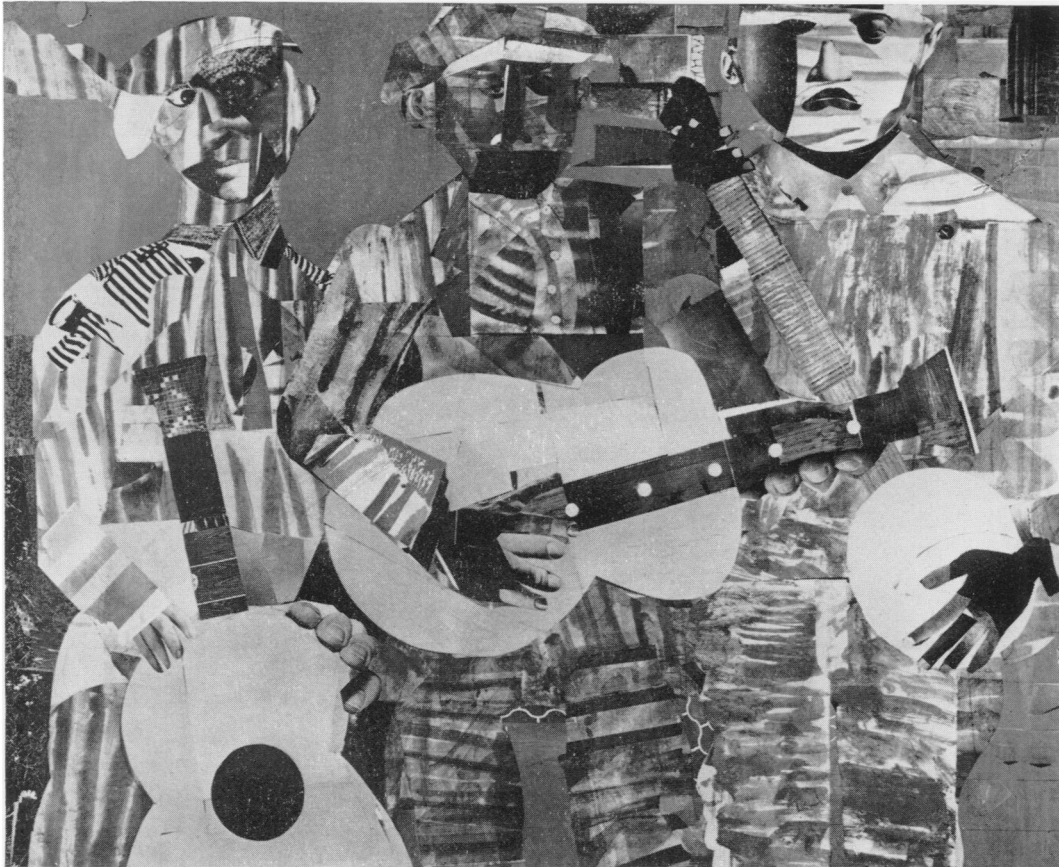
Fig. 5. 'The Folk Musicians', montage painting, 44 × 56 in., 1967. (Collection of Cordier–Ekstrom Gallery, N.Y.C.)

Braque and Léger is its primary emphasis on the essentials of structure. Nevertheless I also find that for me the Cubism of these masters leads to an over-crowding of the pictorial space. This accounts for the high surface of the frontal planes, so prevalent in some of the most successful early works of the Cubists. In fact, such exceptions as the collage drawings of Picasso in which emptier areas are emphasized, only point up what is otherwise typical. Much of the agitation in Juan Gris' 'Guitar and Flowers', for instance, is the result of the violent diagonal twist of his planes away from the stabilizing rectangle of the surface. Even the early Cubism of Mondrian, who was in many ways a descendant of De Hooch and Vermeer, contains a number of small brick-like, rectangular shapes which strike me as being more a concession to the manner of the time, than essential to his austere conception of space and structure [3–11].

Although I find I am increasingly fascinated by the possibilities of empty space on a canvas, in 'The Dove' (Projection) (Fig. 1) and 'The Street' (Projection) (Fig. 2) I was working for maximum multiplicity, without the surface fragmentation which I object to in the early Cubists paintings. Both of these works, which I call Projections, were first done in a size not much larger than a sheet of typing paper, then the original was enlarged photographically and dry mounted on masonite

board. The subjects are drawn from crowded urban street-scenes but in 'The Dove' the variety of the scale in the human figures is such that some of the faces really function as areas of pacivity. The robes in 'The Baptism' (Projection) (Fig. 3) fulfill a similar function in the counterpoint of occupied and empty areas. Zurburan, in some of his great figural compositions, employed flatly modeled drapery for the same purpose. 'The Baptism' is a recollection of the fact that during the warm weather the shallow streams in the Southern states were frequently used for baptismal purposes. In this picture, the train represents the encroachment of another culture.

III

One of the technical problems with which I am now involved is the interplay between a photograph and an actual painting so that I find myself adjusting color to the grays of the black and white photo-graph. This adjustment to an over-all gray is, of course, not new to the art of painting. Even in what remains of some Pompeian frescos it appears apparent that in spite of the orange-red back-grounds, the figures and drapery were painted in tones of black, white and gray, with the flesh tints glazed over this gray range of colors. The deep browns and reds, which we associate with the great

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Fig. 7. '*Conjur Woman as an Angel*', *montage painting*, 40 × 30 in., 1964.
(*Collection of Cordier–Ekstrom Gallery, N.Y.C.*)

frescos of the Casa Misteria in Pompeii, actually emanate from a merging of the background with the grayed figures and objects. Before full color methods of printing were established in the early decades of this century, the old two-color process had a more extensive range of color than one would have thought possible because of a similar inter-action of colors.

In many of my paintings I use either a blue-gray or a green color to harmonize with the gray, since I feel both of these colors are intimately related to gray. Sometimes, in order to heighten the character of a painting, I introduce what appears to be a dissonant color, as in 'The Approaching Storm', (Fig. 4), where the reds, browns and yellows disrupt the placidity of the blues and greens. I found, when

I was working on this painting, in which various colored papers were mounted directly onto masonite, that these dissonant colors gave an entirely new significance and character to the other colors and forms. Therefore, in order to unify the composition, I was obliged to both emphasize certain colours and shapes and to mollify others.

Similarly, the heavy red in the ground and upper right-hand areas in 'The Folk Musicians' (Fig. 5) was called for by the brightly colored orange guitars of the musicians. The figures in this painting are, for the most part, painted in oil. The relations of the other colors and shapes to the bright orange, which is certainly the most dominant color, produced some unusual effects. The figure on the far right is quite ghost-like, probably because of the contrast
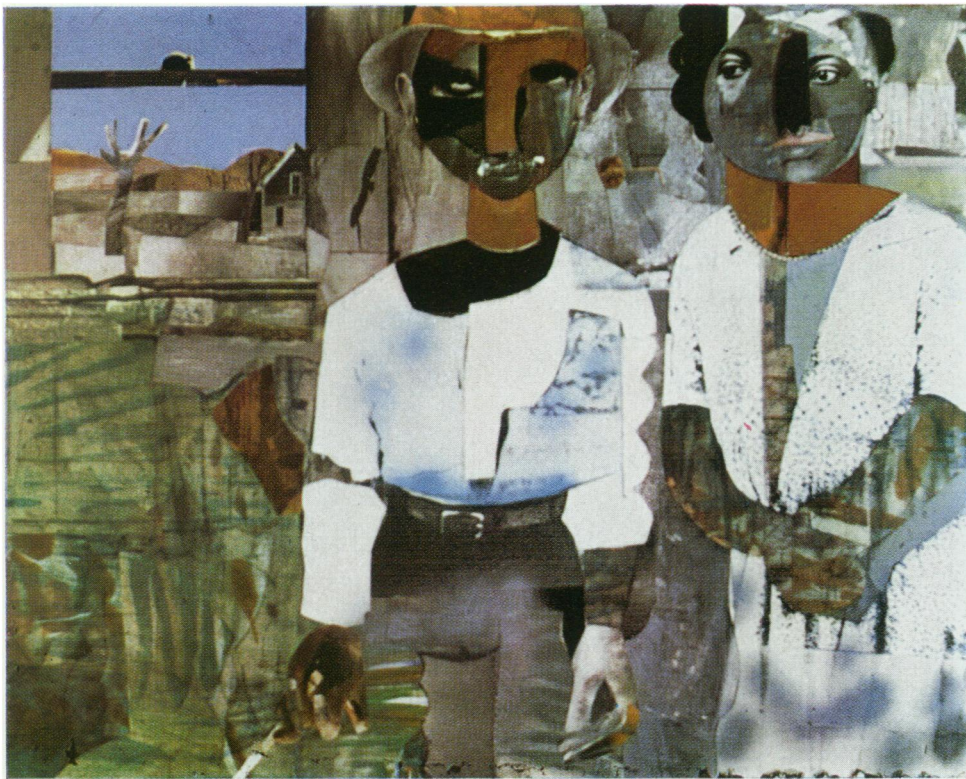
Fig. 6. '*The Old Couple*', *montage painting*, 30 × 40 in., 1967. (*Collection of Cordier–Ekstrom Gallery, N.Y.C.*)
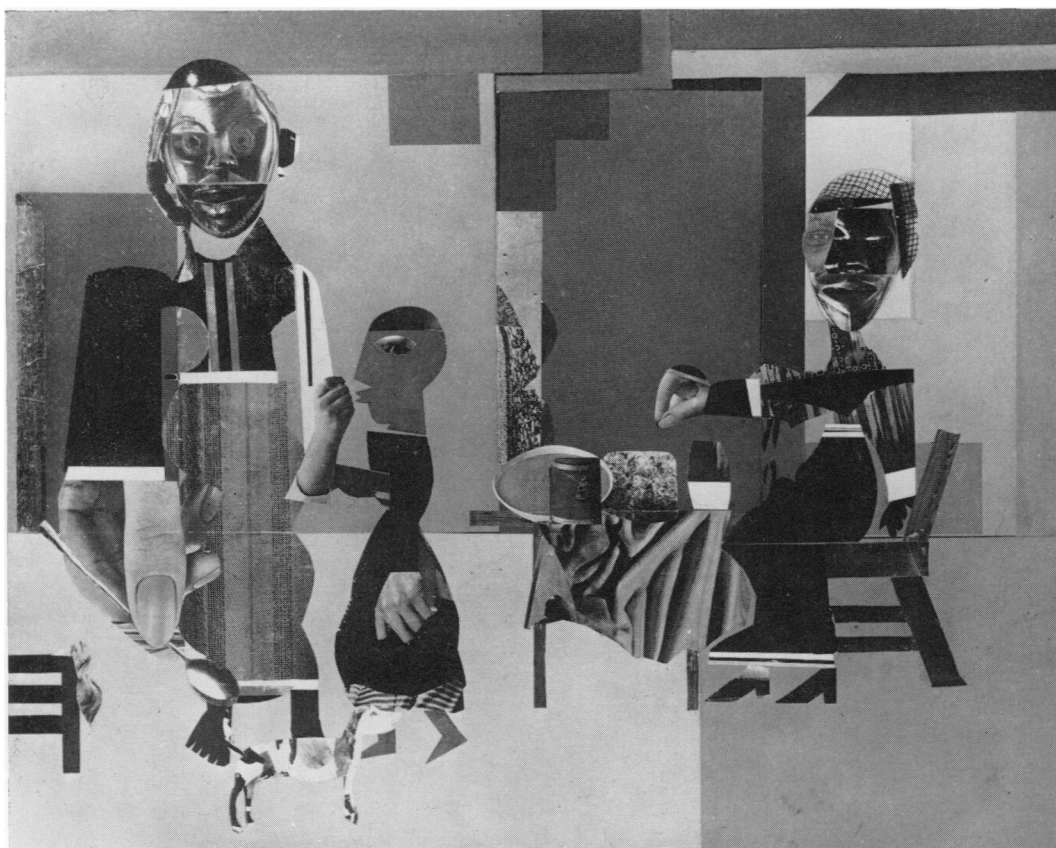
Fig. 8. '*Illusionists at 4 p.m.*', *montage painting*, 30 × 40 in., 1967. (*Collection of Cordier–Ekstrom Gallery, N.Y.C.*)

with the red brick wall and, also, because of the opposition of the more solid appearing central figure, which is both light and dark in value.

On the other hand, the simple whites of the blouses on the two figures in the gray, white and blue painting, 'The Old Couple' (Fig. 6) hold their place in a decidedly more reticent manner. I think it is worth observing that mcst of the background in 'The Old Couple' is painted in oil and that throughout the painting there is an interchange between the photographic material and what is painted.

This is also true in 'Conjur Woman as an Angel' (Fig. 7), where the nude figure of the young woman was freely painted and the photographic components were imposed afterwards. A conjur woman was an important figure in a number of southern Negro rural communities. She was called on to prepare love potions; to provide herbs to cure various illnesses; and to be consulted regarding vexing personal and family problems. Much of her knowledge had been passed on through the generations from an African past, although a great deal was learned from the American Indians. A conjur woman was greatly feared and it was believed that she could change her appearance.

Much of the material used in the abstract elements of my paintings (particularly in the construction of faces) are often parts of photographs as in 'Illusionists at 4 p.m.' (Fig. 8), where the faces of the women are related to African masks.

IV

Two fundamental assumptions underlie my attitude to my work. First, I feel that when some photographic detail, such as a hand or an eye, is taken out of its original context and is fractured and integrated into a different space and form configuration, it acquires a plastic quality it did not have in the original photograph. In most instances in creating a picture, I use many disparate elements to form a figure, or part of a background. I rarely use an actual photograph of a face but build them, for example, from parts of African masks, animal eyes, marbles, corn and mossy vegetation. In such a process, often something specific and particular can have its meaning extended toward what is more general and universal but never at the expense of the total structure. In this connection, the thumb of the woman on the far left in Fig. 8 has as much to do with integrating the painting as a whole, as with representing the 'handness' of hands. And in 'Two Women in a Courtyard' (Fig. 9), I try to show that the courtyard was as important to American southern life, as indeed it was in the Holland of De Hooch, Terborch and Vermeer.

Also involved in the process of fracturing, as I conceive it, is its purpose in extending the larger rhythms of the painting. For instance, also in Fig. 8, the way the lower section of the standing woman's face is cut, corresponds to the horizontal rhythms that stretch across the top of the painting.

*Fig. 9. 'Two Women in a Courtyard', montage painting, 40 × 30 in., 1967.
(Collection of Cordier–Ekstrom Gallery, N.Y.C.)*

Secondly, I think a quality of artificiality must be retained in a work of art, since, after all, the reality of art is not to be confused with that of the outer world. Art, it must be remembered, is artifice, or a creative undertaking, the primary function of which is to add to our existing conception of reality. Moreover, such devices of artificiality as distortion of scale and proportion, and abstract coloration, are the very means through which I try to achieve a more personal expression than I sense in the realistic or conventionally focused photograph. The initial public reaction to my work has generally been one of shock, which appears to rise out of a confrontation with subject matter unfamiliar to most persons. In spite of this, it is not my aim to paint about the Negro in America in terms of propaganda. It is precisely my awareness of the distortions required of the polemicist that has caused me to paint the life of my people as I know it—as passionately and dispassionately as Brueghel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day. One can draw many social analogies from the great works of Brueghel—as I have no doubt one can draw from mine—my intention, however, is to reveal through pictorial complexities the richness of a life I know.

I am afraid, despite my intentions, that in some instances commentators have tended to over-emphasize what they believe to be the social elements in my work. But while my response to certain human elements is as obvious as it is inevitable, I am also pleased to note that upon reflection many persons have found that they were as much concerned with the aesthetic implications of my paintings as with, what may possibly be, my human compassion.

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La structure rectangulaire dans mes 'montage-paintings'

Résumé—L'auteur explique le changement qui s'est opéré en lui, transformant l'étudiant en mathématiques qu'il était en peintre, et ce, après avoir étudié avec George Grosz. C'est ce dernier qui l'incita à étudier Brueghel et les maîtres hollandais. Leurs œuvres, ainsi que les mosaïques byzantines et la sculpture africaine, devaient toujours avoir une influence primordiale sur l'auteur.

L'étude des tableaux de De Hooch et de Vermeer allait aussi lui apporter une aide précieuse, dans la mesure où elle lui montra comment ces artistes ont pu garder le contrôle de leurs grandes formes, même lorsque celles-ci contenaient des éléments disparates. L'auteur décrit aussi l'influence de la peinture chinoise sur sa méthode de travail avec des couches superposées ou des papiers déchirés.

Les similarités entre son œuvre et le cubisme, comme les différences qui les séparent, sont exposées en détail, avec l'espoir que le contenu de son œuvre au point de vue structure, sera encore mieux compris que le message social qu'elle contient.