

Fifty Years of the Undulating Fundament

The Birth of the Undulating Fundament

In the last few years you seem to have returned more to your work from the 60's, more towards abstraction than the story telling and figurative work. Why is that?

My work of the seventies, eighties and nineties, at least the story telling part, was probably driven partly by nostalgia for and a certain wish to chronicle people, times, places and events that stood out in my memories, partly in a way those times that were great but now seemingly gone forever.

I was traveling a lot in those years through many countries and many 'scenes' so the paintings and drawings were an attempt to help digest all these amazing experiences and impressions... great material, really.

In recent years I have been traveling less, sticking around home more, and just tending my own garden, so to speak. There's not so much nostalgia fuel for making paintings, perhaps, since I'm mostly hanging in one place these days.

The return to the earlier work is partly based too on the fact that though I had ceased presenting this type of material after my departure for Europe from the New York scene which was the home of certain potent seed ideas about painting, which I did not accept entirely without reservation, but were never the less presenting the parameters of a game I was attracted to, it turned out that after returning to America and retrieving from storage some trunk loads of drawings and photos of earlier works, I was again confronted with my own thinking from an earlier time. And in fact, though I had stopped making so much of the physical product there was still an inner process whereby new ideas, new possibilities and variations had been occurring to me anyway right along. So, looking at those older works plus many ideas never carried out in the past 'just made the cheese more binding' as my mother used to say. In a way the old ideas were becoming new again. More and more unexplored possibilities had been piling up and from time to time I had made small drawings on the side, little notes, possibly to be pursued at a later date. In fact I seem to remember thinking when I closed down my Gand Street studio that maybe one day I'd take another shot at all this.

Can we call this more recent work 'abstraction' though? A lot of it seems to lack the purity of real sixties abstraction whether hard edge abstraction or minimalist abstraction or flat two dimensional abstraction, geometric abstraction or at least totally non-referential painting and you seem to enjoy violating the limitations imposed by the more strict forms of abstraction.

Not always pure abstraction. That is correct. I suppose that one can devise endless labels for one's productions even in the realm of Abstraction. Retarded Reductionism. Morphing Minimalism. Attention Deficit Disorder Dislexic Numerically Challenged Systemicism, Disintegrating Constructivism. The one tendency you do not mention is so called Systemic Painting, which was a movement that I thought had a lot of promise back in the dawn of 60's post Abstract Expressionism Abstraction, but seemed to fizzle out before it could get off the runway. I always felt very at home with the notion of systems, especially ones that were flexible enough to permit variation or even violation and contradiction, but then one can also adhere strictly to a system in order to violate the impulse to contradict the system - break the rule that insists that you break rules, in other words.

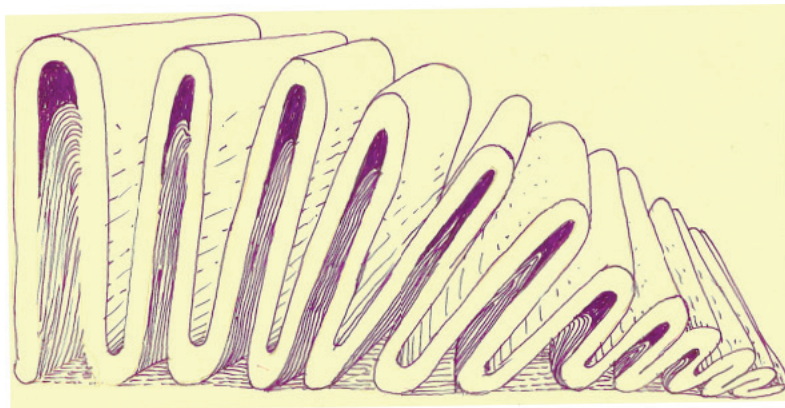
Then is the 3-D development, adding another dimension by fooling the eye, adding even another dimension, the dimension of content in addition to form?

One might well say that the more recent pictures involving the so called 'gyrotaters' are not merely two dimensional but often have a 3-D effect and could be seen as real objects or depictions of real objects of some sort - space stations, satellites, atoms, molecules, sea creatures, pollen balls, diving bells, space craft...depending whether you want to go micro or macro,

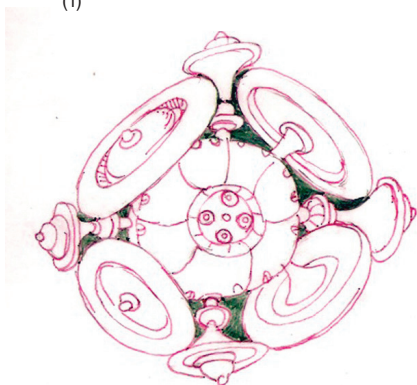
depending on what medium you could imagine they are floating in. So they are often not purely without possible external references, though rarely is that specifically spelled out.

Are you ruling that out, being more specific, I mean.

Not necessarily, I even specifically titled one series of Gyrotaters «Alarm Clock Lantern Trapsets» because they look like or are suggestive of lanterns, alarm clocks or old fashioned drum sets. At the same time, for a while, it's been interesting to let the spectators provide their own stories. Some of them are often quite good at that. Some Spectators like to become Speculators.



(1)



(3)

(1) Leaning Fundulator 2005, Ink on card; (2) Alartralan Jaune (Alarm Clock Trapset Lantern Gyrotater), 2009. Guache and pencil on paper on cardboard; (3) Valis, 2004, ink on paper.



(2)

Does the move into a third dimension of abstraction violate the taboo against illusionism, not to mention external references in avant guard abstraction? And if so why have you chosen to break out of that mold, so to speak?

Well, the convention in favor of flatness in abstraction probably came from cubism or maybe the last paintings of Matisse, although cubes are not flat, come to think of it, and then too moving into the 60's, was a sort of reaction against the free-for-all of expressionism of the forties and fifties. The 2-D restriction was a useful discipline, providing a certain structure within which to play and also provided an opportunity to exercise a certain self restraint and an environment for experimentation within clearly defined limits. These were and are

valid conventions, however it is probably inevitable that at some point other interesting possibilities appear.

As far as the taboo against illusionism is concerned, that probably stems from the assumptions of 19th century empirical science which fought hard to undermine the established world views of the day which were not verified by actual evidence, and is also a reaction against religious institutions that proclaim reality to be thus and so without that proper evidence - flat earth, the geocentric model of the Solar System, Papal Infallability and so on (fooling the eye and the mind); however, we must also remember that sometimes imagination and intuition are ahead of what science can discover and prove, although that is no reason to throw out empirical thinking.

At times both the taboo against empirical investigation of unquestioned assumptions and condemnation of pure speculation about uncritically accepted assumptions, speculation not supported by, so to say, a "smoking gun", have both been attempts to suppress truth.

Still, in a world of phantasmagoric beliefs and illusory, handed down, untested truths, one clear, coherent, simple statement is likely going to eventually find wide spread acceptance among the open minded, i.e.: the Earth is a round planet like the others we see, fluoride in the water supply is toxic to humans and so on.

Which came first the Gyrotater works or the Fundulators?

The Fundulators appeared first.

And when and how did that come about?

Well, that was I think New Year's Eve 1963 at the Chateau de Ravenel in Picardie, France. I was 22 years old. Most of the other Chateau tenants were gone somewhere for the Christmas holidays and I was in my room and had just loaded up my coal stove on a snowy evening and had laid out a note book and some brushes and black india ink on a table, and I sat down to see what I could come up with, and in so doing I was kind of wondering what would be the simplest pathway for a brush to cover the whole page with a brushed pathway of black ink (focusing on the swath or the trail that the brush leaves behind), starting at the upper left hand corner and proceeding down the left edge of the page. Well you come to the bottom of the page and it makes sense to turn around and go up the other way right next to the path you have just made, or at least it made sense to me.

Well, the outcome of that evening was that back and forth pathway that came to be called The Undulating Fundament or The Fundamental Undulation of the Undulating Fundament or The Fundulator for short.

Was there any doubt in your mind about this being a profound discovery?

O, definitely, and there still can be. At the time though I was quite ecstatic looking at the result and then really got into it and made a lot more Fundulators immediately, filling up the notebook. I decided to step outside to see what they looked like from a distance through the French chateau windows and once outside was shocked to find that the whole room was full of a green fog of coal smoke from the coal stove which I had not realized was backing up. So the whole thing could have been due to oxygen deprivation and the inhalation of toxic fumes.

Or could it have been merely a replay of some Frank Stella stripe imagery picked up in your subconscious from the time you spent in his class at Dartmouth?

Oh, ouch! But then, of course, certainly. I make no claims to originality here and I was mightily impressed by Stella's work. The first Stella I ever saw was visible through a window on a wall in an architect's office on eighth street in New York on the Lower East Side and I used to pass it walking across town, not knowing it was a Stella. I decided to stay for summer school after I graduated when I found out he would be teaching there and after I found out the picture in the architects office was from him. This is rather strange because before I collided with Frank I was officially opposed to abstract art.

But what was it that changed your mind, and is not this abstract work a complete contradiction to the work you are already known for?

Well, I was struck by the incredible impact of his work, which was the result of such simple processes and working methods, though it did not rely strongly on reference to specific outside or external phenomena - naked ladies, flowers, advertising imagery, historical events, autobiographical events. He sort of proved the case for abstraction by showing us he could make heavy stuff without all the baggage of meaning and comforting references.

A Stella painting of that era was some wood with canvas stretched on it in a shape that matched the pattern painted on it. It is what it is and that's all.

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Then too, being a fledgling musician at the time (I had been a jazz drummer in college), I did recognize the value of music with words but also music without words and in fact as a great admirer of Bach, I actually preferred his instrumental music to the Cantatas, so I related to abstraction as a form of frozen instrumental music - *that* I could relate to...

Does making referential imagery preclude making abstract imagery? Are they two warring camps, one or the other of which must be chosen? This is probably the case for some, but personally I'm not a strict believer in one over the other. I find it interesting to make vocal music and instrumental music. Not only interesting but also enjoyable.

Another thing was that when I arrived in France I had not yet heard of or seen Barnett Newman's abstractions and when I made that notebook of the first Fundulators I had just seen my first Newmans in an art magazine I bought in Paris which again sort of underlined that the funda-

mental act of painting with a brush without any refinements or bells and whistles or even the fundamental act of drawing with say a pen, is to lay down a path with that brush or line with a pen and again in musical terms that is sort of like one clear note from a trumpet, so I guess I wanted to begin at the beginning and the fact that others had started at that one note kind of thing did not deter me in the interest of not repeating what had already been done, in the interest of being the first on the planet earth to do something. I was actually willing to follow in the footsteps of those who were ahead of me and getting good results.

Would it be a step too far to wonder if perhaps your rather more casual attitude towards abstraction was encouraged by your experiences with Dieter Roth?

When I arrived in Europe in '77, I bounced from one safe house to another and in each new house there seemed to be Dieter Roth pictures on the walls, Dieter Roth books in the library and sometimes Dieter Roth jewelry on the ladies' hands. I soon got the idea that he was at the center of a certain community. When we finally did meet again in Zurich I found that he and I had shared a certain feeling of constriction under the restrictions of constructivism. He had taught at Yale when Albers was there, and I believe this was an influence he had had some work to process.

I remember Dieter and I spent an afternoon in a sort of institute in honor of a certain Swiss hard edge, geometric abstractionist, and I made the remark that one of his paintings looked like a refrigerator teetering on the edge of a cliff and I'm not so sure that the art critic who was hosting us found this remark so amusing.

I would say that Dieter's work in general was an encouragement to following the spontaneous inclinations of one's own inner voice, and, as a person, he was incredibly encouraging to many other artists, myself included.