

Foreword

In the nuclear age abstract or non-objective art is plainly prophetic. On the phone or on the air the user of electric services has no physical body. We are discarnate people, figures in an instantaneous and invisible ground of energy and vibration. This resonant and acoustic ground is discontinuous and man-made, deeply involving and subjective yet minus any point of view or personal stress. The work of York Wilson is a notable manifestation of the new awareness of nuclear man, the shift from sight to insight.

The paradox of visually representative art, the art of the copy, had been that the visual faculty had first to be abstracted from the human sensorium before the matching or copying of the environment could begin. The Greeks began it with their innovation of the phonetic alphabet. Twenty-four semantically abstract and meaningless sounds began the translation of the acoustic world of speech into the visual world of writing. This matching process of sound and sight had begun in Greece in the sixth century B.C., leading at once to the abstractly visual forms of Euclid and to the copy art of Plato's time. After the ages of iconic and multi-sensuous art of pre-literate man, visual representation was itself extremely abstract and novel.

E. H. Gombrich reminds us that *mimesis* or copying the pictorial effects of things, "the world of mirrors that deceive the eye", this new skill, was a recent invention of Plato's day which evoked his scorn as mere illusion. Plato was condemning "the great awakening of Greek sculpture and painting between the sixth century and the time of his youth toward the end of the fifth century B.C." (p. 116). The ground for this great awakening had been created by the spread of the unique form of phonetic literacy in the same period. Prior to literacy there had been centuries of non—representative art, which induced Gombrich to remark "Making comes before matching." The world of the audile-tactile is multi-sensuous and of age-old experience before the emergence of the alphabetic abstraction of the visual.

If a massive cultural innovation promoted the rise of visual and representational art in the fifth century B.C., an equal revolution in our twentieth century environment and perception must have occurred to create a bias in favour of non-objective

objective art in the age of phenomenology. From the time of Hegel to Husserl, and from Faraday to Einstein, there has developed an increasing awareness of the ground behind the phenomena we perceive. Our new environment is electrical and resonant rather than visual, evoking a sense of primal involvement and touch, rather than the visual sense of objective spectatorship. In the new acoustic ground we naturally tend to relate by pattern-recognition of *figures in a ground*, rather than by the matching of objects according to verisimilitude.

York Wilson is a key figure in relating us to both the old visual world of realism and to the new resonating world of touch and echo and pattern. His own words explain the transition we have experienced in the twentieth century from the pictorial to the iconic and the patterned:

“SUNLIT STREET was the major turning point in my painting. Before this time I could appreciate abstract painting, but unable to find the exact point of departure for myself It was while doing the sketch for this painting that the meaning of abstraction became amazingly clear. The whole scene in front of me became visually a related environment. The mountains had the same basic form as the roofs of the houses. The rebozos on the figures in the street repeated the same form. The markings on the street and sky and all the elements of the scene seemed to complement one another. Even though today this painting seems to be very slightly abstracted, nevertheless for me it was the key to abstracting form. This later led to my ability to also abstract colour.

It was shortly after this discovery that I began to study picture construction per Se. Prior to this time, a composition was limited to what could only be described as “tidying up the elements”. But now there was a conscious effort to orchestrate each painting so that even without any recognizable subject the painting would be complete as a work of art. En route to the Canary Islands in 1958, we spent many days at the Louvre in Paris and the Prado in Madrid. It is a fact that during the time spent in these museums I developed an insight into abstraction through the work of artists like Uccello, Piero della Francesca, Breughel, etc. The understanding that I derived from them was much clearer than from my contemporary painters.”

Behind this dramatic account of a transition there is a rich story of experiment and discovery and dialogue that emerged in an art that is calm, serious, and splendid.

Those acquainted with York Wilson recognize his joy in the intellectual exploration of the very complex world we share. That is why his work opens doors not only on art but on science. Anyone reading Lewis S. Feuer’s “Einstein and the Generations of Science” (Basic Books Inc., New York, 1974) will see how the work of York Wilson offers

many vistas into the world of Linus Pauling and Sperry and Bogen. Each of his paintings and murals is an encounter with current science and technology, and with the intense conversations they engender. Feuer makes it clear that the abstract science of Einstein's generation was built on a direct struggle to dislodge the old establishment of continuous and connected and rational space. The work of York Wilson represents a major endeavour to comprehend and to replace the established verities of visual space. Going along with this effort to update our awareness of the new scientific world was his sharing an intellectual dialogue with the educated people of his milieu. He also shared in the artistic benefits of his time of scientific change. As Feuer comments in words which apply to modern art:

“Generational rebellion is a powerful motivating force in the progress of science . . . In science generational rebellion widens the imagination, deepens the intuition, proposes challenging hypotheses, provokes laborious calculation and patient observation; but additionally, science has the common discipline and criteria of scientific method, which bind into a joint enterprise both intergenerational and intersubjective, the diverse hypotheses and emotional standpoints. ~‘ (pp. 88-89)

The painting of York Wilson is not based so much on new skills and techniques as on a new way of seeing and knowing the world. Such changes in perception go with long debates and questioning and doubting of our personal identities. The nisus toward creativity in art and science is generated by strong emotion. Einstein wrote:

“The normal adult never bothers his head about spacetime problems. Everything there is to be thought about it, in his opinion, has already been done in early childhood. I, on the contrary, developed so slowly that I only began to wonder about space and time when I was already grown up. In consequence, I pro bed deeper into the problem than an ordinary child would have done.”

York Wilson has been driven by the desire for precision, yet this has not diminished his capacity to individualize and to render his abstractions dramatic and majestic.

Marshall McLuhan