

Representation and Abstraction

What is the difference between representation and abstraction?

In the last section, we began to explore the topic of visual literacy by considering the relationship between words and images. Words and images are two different systems of describing the world. Words refer to the world in the abstract. Images represent the world, or reproduce its appearance. Traditionally, one of the primary goals of the visual arts has been to capture and portray the way the natural world looks. But, as we all know, some works of art look more like the natural world than others, and some artists are less interested than others in representing the world as it actually appears. As a result, a vocabulary has developed that describes how closely, or not, the image resembles visual reality itself. This basic set of terms is where we need to begin in order to talk or write intelligently about works of art.

Generally, we refer to works of art as either representational or abstract. A **representational** work of art portrays natural objects in recognizable form. The more the representation resembles what the eye sees, the more it is said to be an example of **realism**. When a painting is so realistic that it appears to be a photograph, it is said to be **photorealistic** (see *The Creative Process*, pp. 34–35). The less a work resembles real things in the real world, the more it is said to be an example of **abstract** art. When a work does not refer to the natural or objective world at all, it is said to be completely abstract or **nonobjective**.

Albert Bierstadt's painting *Puget Sound on the Pacific Coast* (Fig. 2-6) is representational and, from all appearances, highly realistic. However, even when it was painted in 1870, a writer for the *New York Evening Mail*, reporting on his visit to Bierstadt's studio to see the work, worried that it might be more fanciful than realistic: "It is, we are told, in all essential features, a portrait of the place depicted, and we need the assurance to satisfy us that it is not a su-



Fig. 2-6 Albert Bierstadt, *Puget Sound on the Pacific Coast*, 1870. Oil on canvas, 4 ft. 4½ in. × 6 ft. 10 in. Seattle Art Museum.

Gift of the Friends of American Art at the Seattle Art Museum, with additional funds from the General Acquisition Fund, 2000.70. Photo: Howard Giske.

The Creative Process

Abstract Illusionism: George Green's . . . *marooned in dreaming: a path of song and mind*

Throughout the last three decades of the last century, George Green painted in a distinct style that came to be known as Abstract Illusionism. It was characterized by images of abstract sculptural forms that seemed to float free of the painting's surface in highly illusionistic three-dimensional space. In the last few years of the 1990s, he began to make these paintings on birch, using the wood's natural grain to heighten the illusion, so that it is as if one were looking at a photorealistic painting of an abstract wooden sculpture.

Over the last decade, this process has evolved into a series of canvases of which . . . *marooned in dreaming: a path of song and mind* (Fig. 2-10) is exemplary. Like the earlier Abstract Illusionist works of the late 1990s, these paintings begin with a single sheet of raw birch (Fig. 2-7). Green then paints a highly illusionistic frame and mat onto the birch (Fig. 2-8). The frame is an example of what we call *trompe-l'oeil*, French for "trick or deceive the eye." As opposed to photorealism, in which the painting is so realistic it appears to be a photograph, *trompe-l'oeil* effects result in a painting that looks as if it is an actual thing—in this case, an actual frame and mat. If one looks carefully at the lighter wood grain of the birch board at both the left and right edges, it becomes obvious that the shadowing created by the beveled edges and concave surfaces of the molding are painted onto the flat surface of the wood. But Green's frames are so visually convincing that on more than one occasion collectors have asked him if he would mind

Figs. 2-7, 2-8 and 2-9 George Green, . . . *marooned in dreaming: a path of song and mind, in progress, 2011.* Top: Raw birch ground before painting. Middle: Second stage, painted frame and mat. Bottom: Third stage, painted frame and seascape. Courtesy of the artist.





Fig. 2-10 George Green, . . . *marooned in dreaming: a path of song and mind*, 2011. Acrylic on birch, 4 ft. × 6 ft. 10 in. Courtesy of the artist.

if they changed the frame. (They can't, of course—the frame is an integral part of the painting.)

The third stage of Green's process is to paint a photorealistic seascape into the frame and mat (**Fig. 2-9**). While these seascapes are based on actual photographs taken by the artist, they are, upon further consideration, anything but photographic. In . . . *marooned in dreaming: a path of song and mind*, the clouds are too purple, the sea too garishly green. The aura of the sun behind the clouds lends the scene a quasi-spiritual dimension. And the lightning looks more like airborne jellyfish than an actual atmospheric electrostatic discharge (that said, photographs of actual lightning storms are every bit as unbelievable as these). For all its ostensible realism, in other words, the painting evokes a sort of otherworldliness. Writing about Green's work, the photorealist painter Don Eddy puts it this way: "The totality has the quality of an altered state that I

find deeply reminiscent of movies that are heavily dependent on CGI [Computer Generated Imagery]."

Finally, Green overlays the entire composition with a filigree of scrolls and arabesques intertwined with planes of color, globes of wood, and even snapshots of landscapes—all painted on the surface. They are meant to evoke the unrepresentable—the "look" of music, or the flight of the mind. It is as if these elements have been painted on a sheet of glass set atop the painting and frame beneath. They create, at any rate, another surface, closer to the viewer than landscape and frame, and in their total abstraction, they insist on the artificiality of the entire composition. As Green's title suggests, the artist is alone with his own mind, and that mind works between several worlds—the world of actual objects, the imaginative dreamscapes of fantasy, and the unrepresentable sounds of song and music. These are, he suggests, the very layers of imagination.

perb vision of that dreamland into which our much admired painter has made at least as many visits as he has made among the material wonders of the West." Bierstadt, in fact, had never visited Puget Sound, and this painting bears no resemblance to the Puget Sound landscape. Bierstadt's painting is naturalistic rather than realistic. **Naturalism** is a brand of representation in which the artist retains apparently realistic elements—in Bierstadt's case, accurate repre-

sentations of Western flora and fauna, as well as Native American dress and costume—but presents the visual world from a distinctly personal or subjective point of view, in this case, a formula that he used in painting after painting of the American West: a waterfall tumbles down a precipitous mountainside into a lake (in this case, Puget Sound); storm clouds gather; light filters through from above. In fact, the play of light in Bierstadt's *Puget Sound* bears a strong resem-



Fig. 2-11 Wolf Kahn, *Afterglow I*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 41½ in. × 5 ft. 6 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Kahn. Art © Wolf Kahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

blance to that in Willem de Kooning's *North Atlantic Light* (see Fig. 2-1). But where Bierstadt's painting retains strong representational elements, de Kooning's is much more abstract, as if de Kooning is engaged in a sort of dialogue between representation and abstraction.

While still a recognizable image of a landscape, Wolf Kahn's *Afterglow I* (Fig. 2-11) is far more abstract than Bierstadt's *Puget Sound*. The painting consists of four bands of color. In the near foreground is the edge of a field, behind it a band of trees in dark shadow, and behind the trees a blue cloud and an orange-hued sunset sky. For Kahn, the less realistic the detail, the better the painting. "When a work becomes too descriptive," the artist told an interviewer in 1995, "too much involved with what's actually out there, then there's nothing else going on in the painting, and it dies on you." In fact, like both de Kooning and Bierstadt, his paintings could be said to be more about light than the actual landscape.

Although Australian Aboriginal artist Old Mick Tjakamarra's *Honey Ant Dreaming* (Fig. 2-12) is, in fact, a landscape, it is not immediately recognizable as one. The organizing logic of most Aboriginal art is the so-called Dreaming, a system of belief unlike that of most other religions in the world. The Dreaming is not literally dreaming as we think of it. For the Aborigine, the Dreaming is the presence, or mark, of an Ancestral Being in the world. Images of these Beings—representations of the myths about them, maps of their travels, depictions of the places and

landscapes they inhabited—make up the great bulk of Aboriginal art. To the Aboriginal people, the entire landscape is thought of as a series of marks made upon the earth by the Dreaming. Thus, the landscape



Fig. 2-12 Old Mick Tjakamarra, *Honey Ant Dreaming*, 1982. Acrylic on canvas, 36 × 27 in.

© Aboriginal Artists Agency Limited. Photo: Jennifer Steele/Art Resource, New York.

itself is a record of the Ancestral Being's passing, and geography is full of meaning and history. Painting is understood as a concise vocabulary of abstract marks conceived to reveal the ancestor's being, both present and past, in the Australian landscape.

Ceremonial paintings on rocks, on the ground, and on people's bodies were made for centuries by the Aboriginal peoples of Central Australia's Western Desert region. Paintings similar in form and content to these traditional works began to be produced in the region in 1971. In that year, a young art teacher named Geoff Bardon arrived in Papunya Tula—literally “Honey Ant Dreaming” place—a settlement on the edge of the Western Desert organized by the government to provide health care, education, and housing for the Aboriginal peoples. Several of the older Aboriginal men became interested in Bardon's classes, and he encouraged them to make paintings using traditional motifs. At first they painted on small composition boards, but between 1977 and 1979, they moved from these small works to large-scale canvases. Old Mick Tjakamarra's painting *Honey Ant Dreaming* depicts the landscape of Papunya Tula itself, where honey ants live in abundance. The ants store nectar in their distended abdomens, and hang from the ceilings of underground chambers, sometimes for months, until the ant colony needs their stored food. Here, the concentric circles represent three honey ant colony sites and the U-shaped forms around them represent people digging at the sites. The softly curved shapes represent hills or ridges. The black-stemmed plant is native to the region and is used to make pigment for designs etched on the ground during Honey Ant Dreaming ceremonies.

Form and Meaning

How does form contribute to the meaning of a work of art?

As mentioned above, abstract works of art that do not refer to the natural or objective world at all are sometimes called nonobjective. One example, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (Fig. 2-13), is concerned primarily with questions of **form**. When we speak of a work's form, we mean everything from the materials used to make it, to the way it employs the various formal elements (discussed in Part 2), to the ways in which those elements are organized into a **composition**. Form is the overall structure of a work of art. Somewhat misleadingly, it is often opposed to **content**, which is what the work of art expresses or means. Obviously, the content of nonobjective art is its form, but all forms, Malevich well knew, suggest meaning. Malevich's painting is really about the relation between the black square and the white ground

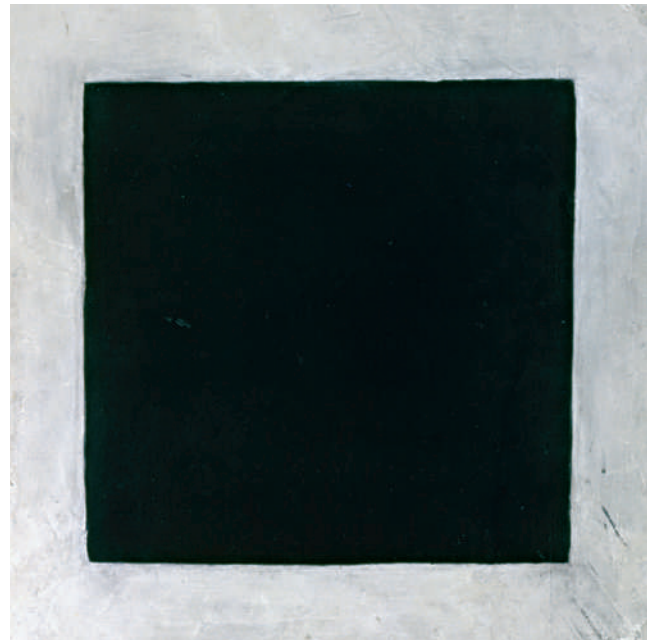


Fig. 2-13 Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, ca. 1923–30. Oil on plaster, 14½ × 14½ in. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Inv. AM1978-631. Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Jacques Faujou.

behind it. By 1912, the Russian artist was engaged, he wrote, in a “desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity.” To this end, he says, “I took refuge in the square.” He called his new art Suprematism, defining it as “the supremacy of . . . feeling in . . . art.” He opposed feeling, that is, to objectivity, or the disinterested representation of reality.

Black Square was first exhibited in December 1915 at an exhibition in Petrograd entitled *0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings*. The exhibition's name refers to the idea that each of the ten participating artists were seeking to articulate the “zero degree”—that is, the irreducible core—of painting. What, in other words, most minimally makes a painting? In this particular piece, Malevich reveals that, in relation, these apparently static forms—two squares, a black one set on a white one—are energized in a dynamic tension. At the *0.10* exhibition, *Black Square* was placed high in the corner of the room in the position usually reserved in traditional Russian houses for religious icons. The work is, in part, parodic, replacing images designed to invoke deep religious feeling with what Malevich referred to as “an altogether new and direct form of representation of the world of feeling.” As he wrote in his treatise *The Non-Objective World*, “The square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling.” What “feeling” this might be remains unstated—that is, totally abstract.

~~The work of contemporary Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes is likewise founded upon formal relationships.~~