Sculptural Paintings
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Sculptural Paintings

Bram Bogart

Abstract—After discussing his attitudes toward art, the author describes various aspects of his sculptural paintings, which consist of thick layering of paint, and the path which led him to it. He outlines the important phases and periods of his artistic evolution, emphasizing his consistent quest for both rest and tension. The techniques for producing sculptural paintings are described.

I. THE WORK OF ART

Many terms have been used to describe my work: *peinture relief, peinture mixed, peinture sculpture, peinture Baroque, peinture matière.* More important to me than terminology, however, is the ever-returning problem of how to make good paintings.

I believe that a true work of art is good, regardless of its technique or structure. Yet the technique and structure of works of art that have withstood the test of time are almost perfect. This was true for the primitives, and remains true for today's artists. Take, for example, Flemish painter Dirk Bouts (1420–1475), Vincent van Gogh, Piet Mondrian. Despite their differences, they all made paintings with a strong structure, i.e. they frequently used vertical and horizontal lines. This is, of course, a typically Nordic element. Rubens, who had visited Mediterranean countries more often, had a completely different view of structure in a painting: his lines (figures and nudes) intersect the plane or follow its contours.

An artist is always influenced by such factors as tradition and environment. As a painter I often make use of horizontal and vertical lines [1]. Still, the freedom and flexibility of my materials sometimes lead me to take a completely different course. Nonrepetition, whether within one painting or a group of paintings, is important to me. The artist is constantly trying to find new ideas, i.e. to use the same material to make new works that are totally different, in form and colour, from the previous ones. A contributory factor has been the influence of abstraction, which, since 1900, has allowed works of art even more freedom.

In addition to structure and technique, the artist's 'handwriting'—the brush strokes—are also important in the work of art. This 'handwriting', whose significance has always been obvious to the Japanese, became important in American and European painting only in the fifties with action painting and Tachism. Although painters soon lost interest in it, I believe it will regain our attention at a later stage. Good 'handwriting' consists of lines or touches that are nonrepetitive. Since my own painting is still more or less informal (*'art informel'*), I continue to pay particular attention to the 'handwriting'.

II. SYMMETRY

In 1950 I introduced symmetry into my landscapes and still lifes in an attempt to give them a certain balance. An older painter once told me that the best way to give balance to a painting was through symmetry. Others, by contrast, have claimed that symmetry and painting are incompatible. Although the word symmetry seems rarely to be used these days, many of my present paintings are symmetric (see Fig. 1).

III. THE PLANE

It is difficult to control the empty plane in a painting. Although empty planes are monochromatic, the paint's skin remains full of life, and the tension of the touch is preserved. Using knives that range in width from 0.5 to 1 or even 2 m, I make furrows in the paint. To me these furrows are both planes and touches (see Fig. 2).

I have spent a long time trying to master the empty plane. In the forties, when I was painting landscapes, I wanted the sky to be a plane in order to draw all the attention to the landscape itself. Often I was unsuccessful and ended up painting cloud clusters instead. What disturbs me about French painting is that neither figurative nor abstract artists seem to have mastered the plane. This is probably why Rodin, a sculptor, remains my favorite French artist.

IV. THE SIGN

It can be argued that everything in nature, in a simplified form, leads back to

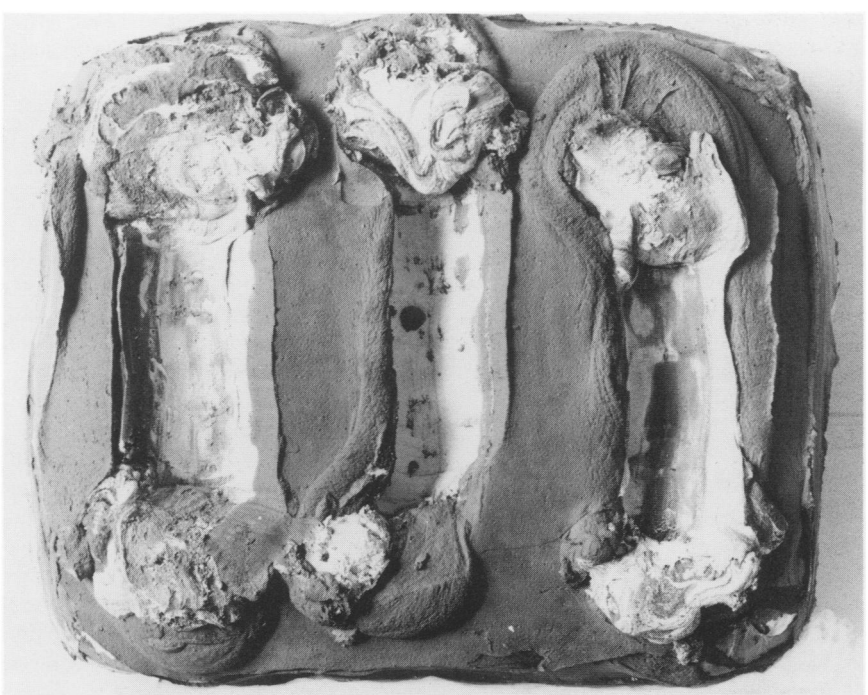

Fig. 1. *Rosebaanwit*, mixed media, 75 × 92 cm, 16 cm, thick, 1980. (Photo: Harry Shunk).

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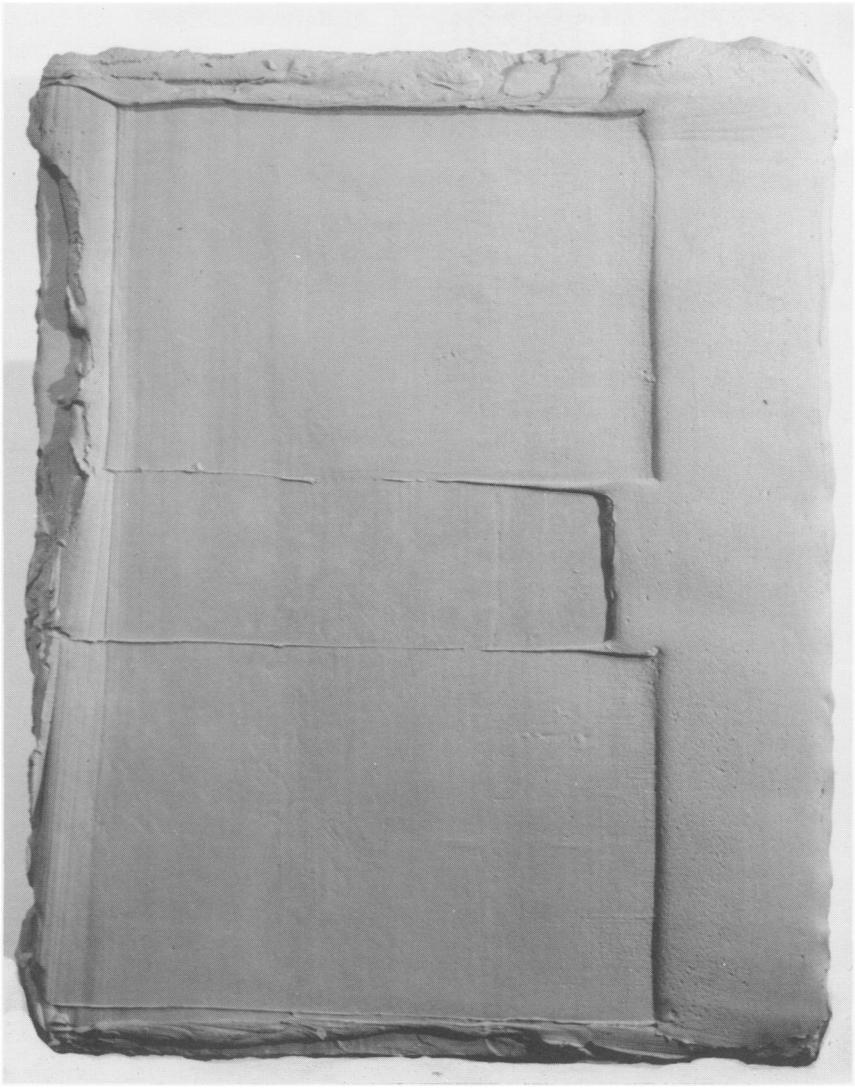

Fig. 2. *Abrahamsred*, mixed media, 250 × 210 cm, 18 cm thick, 1979. (Photo: Harry Shunk).

the sign: rectangle, square, cross, circle, etc. These are forms which have had considerable impact throughout the development of my work. From the end of 1950 to 1953, I painted pictures of small size that were covered entirely by various signs. At the time, I probably did not attach great importance to this, but later—between 1964 and 1970—the sign reappeared in my pictures, so much so that it began to fill up the entire canvas; in my work since then, crosses, squares, circles and other signs have spread out over surfaces of up to 200 × 260 cm.

V. MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUE

Artists using only a pen and a pot with India ink can obtain excellent results using these simple materials. Think of Rembrandt's drawings for example: a pen, water and ink. For my own work I buy 25–40 kg of powdered pigment, in all colours, which I then mix in big barrels with poppy-seed oil (for white), linseed oil, boiled oil and quick-drying oil. After thoroughly mixing and rubbing them, I leave the mixtures alone for some time so that the oils can blend well.

When I start working on a painting, I mix equal amounts of the colouring matter (the colour I intend to use for my painting) with water or oil. The two, the oil paint and the watercolour, constitute the main part of my material. I then add mixing varnish, a quick-drying agent, and whiting for thickening. I also may add any of these materials to the surface of the painting, depending on whether I want it to be rough or smooth.

The first step is to make the panel itself which provides an essential support for the jute canvas. Because of the weight and liquidity of my materials, I work flat on the floor. Without the panel, the canvas would collapse under the weight of the paint. Because the thickness of the paint layers varies from 5 to 10 or 15 cm, a large painting can easily weigh up to 300 kg (see Fig. 3).

VI. PRECURSORS TO MY SCULPTURAL PAINTINGS

In late 1939, under the influence of Belgian expressionist Constant Permeke and van Gogh, I started painting my first landscapes. I found landscapes fascinating because they gave me more freedom than portraits or still lifes. Landscape painting allowed me to have the paint (the material) play a more important role and to consider the empty plane as essential.

Later I became fascinated for a while by form—light and shadow in the portrait and the still life—and had to relinquish some spontaneity. Still, a painter has to make mistakes in order to learn, and in the years to come I would go through many phases.

VII. AN ARTIST'S ODYSSEY

Paris–Holland–South of France

After spending a few months in Paris in 1946, I remained in Holland or in the south of France until 1950. In 1948 I suddenly moved away from an expressionistic style of painting and began using cubist–geometric lines and rather bright, sometimes even burning, colours. I was working in The Hague at the time, and it was during this period that I moved toward symmetry.

In mid-1949 I returned to the south of France, left abstraction, and painted landscapes in bright colours. The old, weather-beaten walls and the basement where I was working (and where I had found some African objects) were my main sources of inspiration then. I started finding the bright colours less attractive, went on painting in greyish whites, and made many still lifes, of pots and jugs using chalky paint layers (Fig. 4).

Too much oil in the paint can make the latter dark and cause cracks. In creating these pot and jug paintings I found I had to mix things in a more consistent way, and I have not changed my technique since. Influenced by my geometric period and the few African objects I had found, I gradually came to incorporate the small signs I have previously mentioned.

Paris

In 1952, after having moved to Paris in mid-1951, I tried to simplify the signs in my paintings and thus arrived at greyish paintings in almost one colour. I did not like them, however. Mondrian once said that paintings are to disappear in the future [2]. In other words, there are no more new things. During this period, I entirely shared this opinion.

In 1953, however, I started using signs in a freer way and began to paint precise streaks and specks across the entire plane, using paint diluted with turpentine. The drippings of this thin paint were important to me then. The thickness of the paint was increasing, and in the course of the same year I started implanting my signs into the material: the material and the movement of the lines had become one. This is a Tachist–expressionistic way of painting, one in which the 'handwriting' plays an important part [3].

The Horizontal Line

In 1956 I brought the horizontal line back into my paintings. For example, I made paintings with a black plane above and a brown one below, separated from each other horizontally. Sometimes along the sides, sometimes in the middle, I would include a gesture made with thick material.

From 1953 to 1959 I made these Tachist–expressionistic paintings either in brown with black, grey and ochres, or in white and black, but rarely in different colours. The word '*informel*' was used a lot at the time in reference to abstract non-geometrical works. Around 1959–1960 I made a number of paintings whose strokes seemed to be moving over the plane with a certain regularity. Each individual stroke was different from the others, but seen from a distance the painting seemed to be one great plane. This contrasted with previous paintings in which, to render the tension of the painting, I had been drawing patches of paint across part of, or the entire, plane.

1960–1961

During these years my work underwent considerable changes. Perhaps because I moved to Brussels. Perhaps because the grey of Paris had influenced me somehow and left its traces. The cubist movement, which came into existence in Paris in 1910, also had been strongly influenced by its surroundings. However, this did not stop artists like Sonia Delaunay from making colourful paintings.

Whatever the reasons, my colours did change in Brussels, and the easel paintings, which I had been making until 1961, were replaced by jute canvas on panel. Because of the weight and liquidity of my materials, I had to work on the floor. My work now became more expressive, and I was able to enhance the colour by applying paint masses with a brush or a knife. Although I made mainly large size paintings, they never exceeded 200 × 300 cm. In my opinion, the painter is to remain master of the plane and should dominate it at all times. Formats must not be given too much importance as the contents of a small painting (50 × 70 cm, for example) can be much stronger than those of a huge work. I must admit I prefer Rubens' smaller works to his bigger ones.

Ohain

In 1964 I left Brussels for Ohain, in the countryside, and here my paintings became more rigid and simpler. I painted them mainly in three colours, which I put next to each other like large planes. The material was less thick, but the colours, which I saw as one or two large planes, became brighter. The lozenge, the circle, and the rectangle came back en masse. I followed this procedure until 1970.

Then came a period, similar to that of 1952, marked by a style of painting which was too cerebral, too perfect. Although I had colour planes and obtained well-made circles and rectangles, the element of painting was being lost. That these works lacked something became apparent when I compared them to a painting of 1963.

Since 1970

After 1970 I continued to paint in a conscious, yet more playful style. Having the material exceed the edges of the panel is of paramount importance to me now, in that it helps me break the rigidity of the square. I see it as a kind of sketchiness. As a result of this more flexible technique, I increased the thickness of the material. This forced me, around 1978, to add wide boards to the large panels.

In my most recent works, I am again using the circle or oval (Fig. 5) and even the sign, which has now become one round, coagulated movement. This precise and tense application of the strokes is the movement I have always strived for.

VIII. CONCLUSION

What makes a painting a work of art?

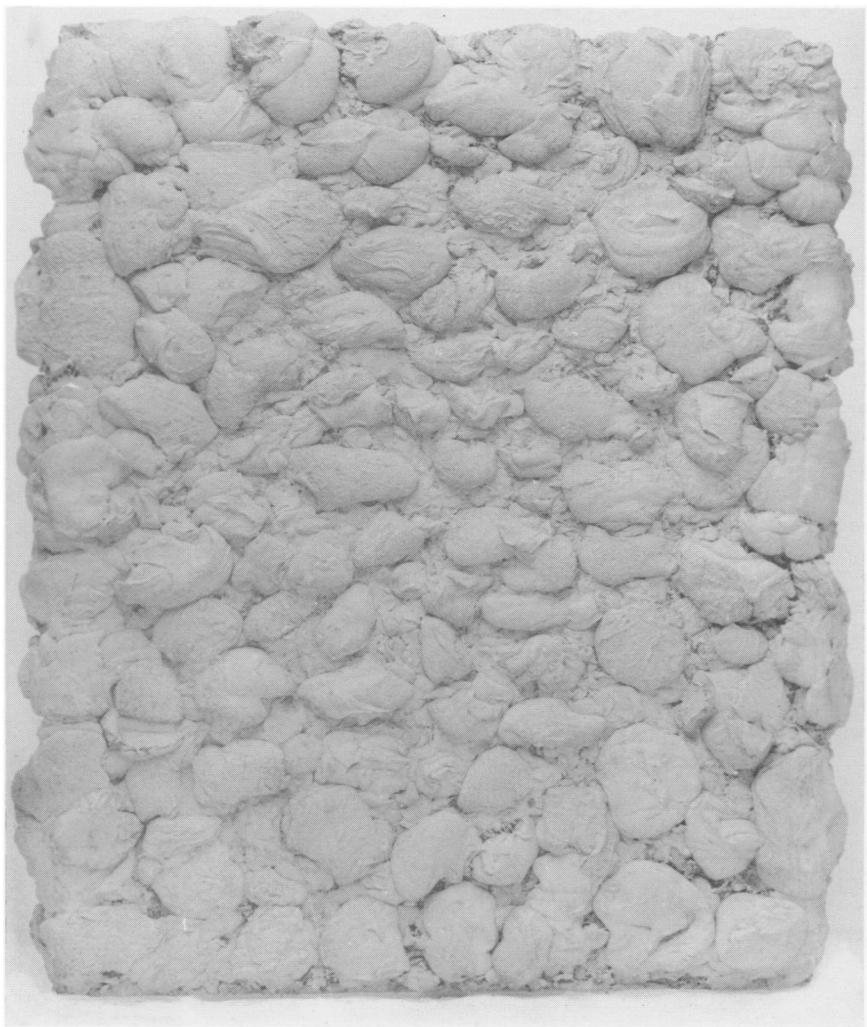

Fig. 3. ***Yellowjaune*****, mixed media, 205 × 180 cm, 18 cm thick, 1976. (Photo: Harry Shunk).**

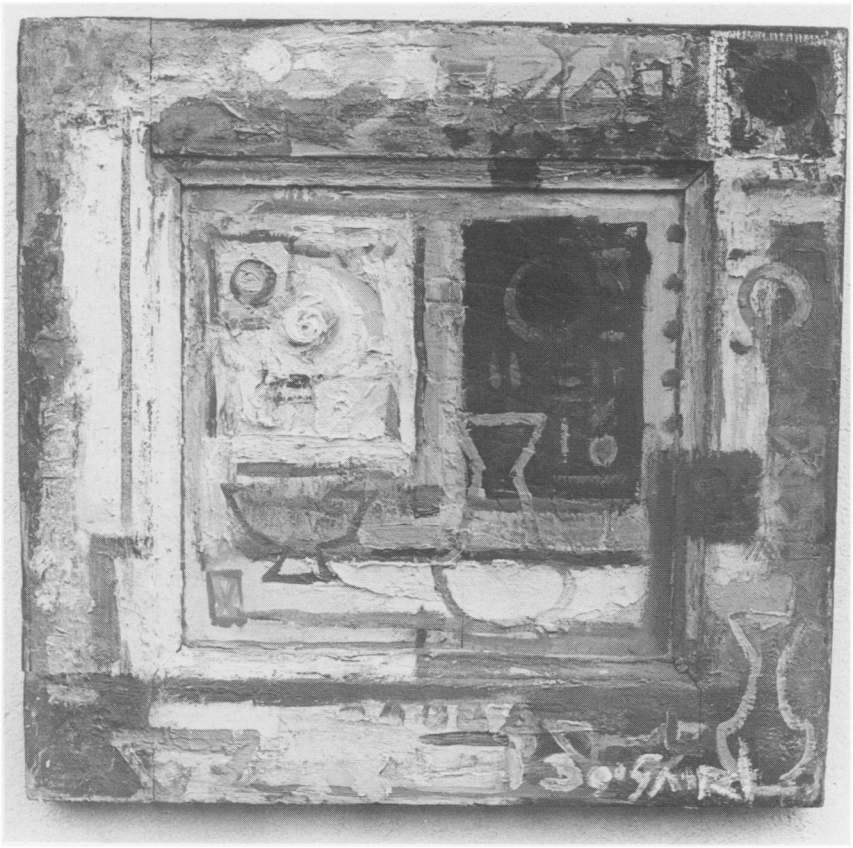

Fig. 4. *Tekens en Potten*, mixed media, 47 × 49 cm, 1951. (Photo: Harry Shunk).

Perhaps that it was difficult to make, or that it shows the artist's virtuosity? I would say both. To move forward or fall backward, to me both are signs of constant activity. Who is to judge art? The test of time and the painter's own understanding. I have set aside paintings about which I had had my doubts. But when I took another look at them 10 years later, I started considering them my best works.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. See G. Careri, "Horizontal and Vertical Lines in Science and Art", *Leonardo* **16**, 310 (1983).
2. Ferdinand Louis Bercklaers, *Piet Mondrian, Life and Work* by Michel Seuphor (pseud.) (New York: Abrams, 1957).
3. In February 1955 an exhibition, with more than 100 of these works, was held in Paris at the Creuze Gallery.

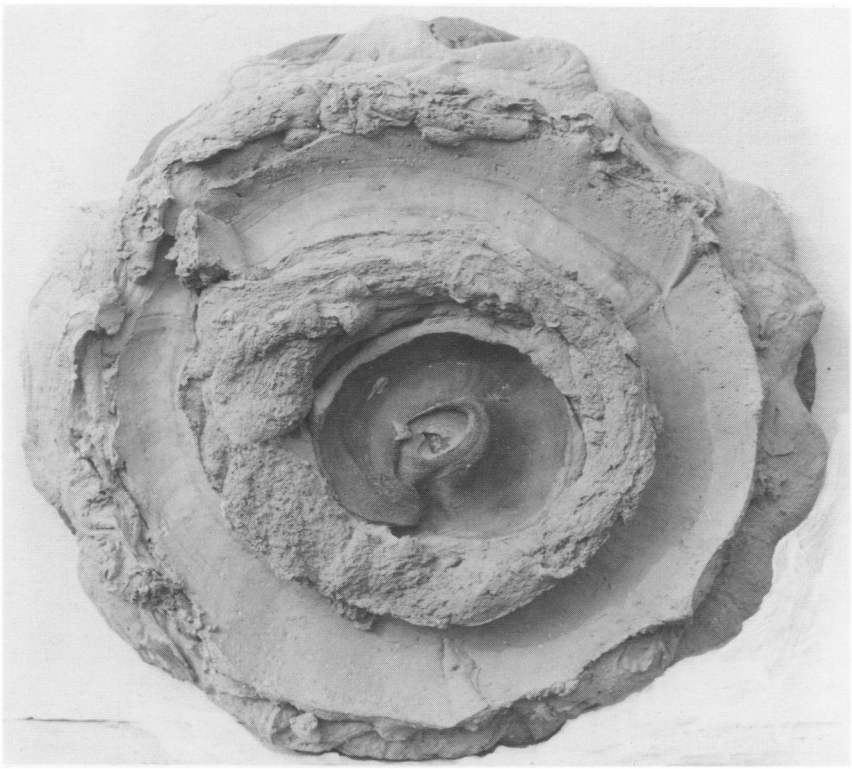

Fig. 5. *Bluedarling*, mixed media, 98 × 110 cm, 16 cm thick, 1982. (Photo: Harry Shunk).