

Keeper of the Flame-
An essay on Max Shertz and his Art of the Unconscious.
By Daniel Kaufman, Artist and Writer

Fine works of art, said Picasso, are created as freely as a bird sings or a flower blooms. When this freedom is reflected in a painting, it urges us away from convention and preconception so that we might be open, as viewers, to new definitions and a new understanding of art.

Max Shertz does indeed re-define words which have been central to a traditional understanding of art: creative, artist, unconscious, spontaneous imagination, abstraction, talent, style, technique seeing. Always Max pointed us back to the source of these words, to the pure, unconscious origins of the art process. Even “creative”, a sanctified word in art history, is identified by Max as the surface level, like “imagination”, and does not live in the world of true Genius within who needs no plan, no pre-conception and no intent. Max Said, “Fine art is always a movement outward from within, and is an expression of the Inner Artist”.

In breaking with the tradition of the preconceived and mechanical, Max’s paintings liberate us as artists and art appreciators from constraint, from theory and from convention. This art cannot be taught, for it is *already what we are* as human beings, and it is necessary only to remove the sticky veils of mis-education, of fear, neurosis and doubt, to meet the creator within whose natural tendency is to seek expression.

“I don’t teach a student how to paint”, said Max. “I want to teach him how to be a creator, and where it comes from, and how to never run out. Teaching is unleashing what you already know—it is in the spirit of man.”

Intention and Will

The question of “intention” and “will” in the creation of art ha preoccupied historians and critics and artists alike. To what degree is the final image attributable to the artist’s original intention? Is subject, form, color and line often dictated by an unconscious process which is, when given perfect service without the imposition of thought or plan, the real creator? This is

An issue that dominated, for one example, the thinking of Delacroix 140 years ago. That “realistic” painter finally came to believe that the true product of the artistic process was not an act of will, but a process analogous to the automatism of nature.

Picasso was writing about this subject when he said: “I consider a work of art as the product of calculations, but calculations which are frequently unknown to the author himself. It is exactly like the carrier pigeon calculating his return to the loft. But the calculation that turns out to be correct is unknown to him; it is a calculation that precedes intelligence”

In his book *THE CUBIST PAINTERS* (1912), Apollinaire makes an important distinction between artists who work on the conscious, “intentional” level who must plan every stroke and struggle with every line, and those artists who are guided by some “unknown being who uses them like an instrument... Their reason is powerless against themselves; they do not have to struggle, their works show no trace of it. They are, as it were, an extension of nature. Their works by-pass their intelligence. This is exactly what Jackson Pollock was talking about when Hans Hofmann asked him why he does not paint from nature and Pollock responded in a roar “I AM NATURE”.

As another example of this belief in the unconscious process, which is so central to the work and life of Max Shertz, Cezanne (in the 1880's) felt that he had suffered considerably in his failure to secure “the realization of wishes for the simplest things which should really come about of their own accord.” There seemed to be in Cezanne's thinking a conflict between his belief in nature and his faith in logic and reason. On the one hand he had “a mistrust of any movement in which the eye would direct the hand without reason intervening.” And on the other he felt that “Art is a harmony parallel to nature”, and that at its best a creation of art was almost automatic. One could read for “automatic” “guided” or “unconscious”.

What Max Shertz called “unconscious” other artists have called “intuitive” or “channeled”. Andre Breton, in writing about Picasso's flights of intuitive fancy, has called this process “pure psychic automatism”, the means of artistic expression free from the exercise of reason.

There are many artists, of course, who either fail or refuse to surrender themselves to any form of automatism or unconscious expression. Kandinsky, although a great painter who was often faithful to his unconscious, did firmly believe in what he called “the mathematical basis of aesthetic form”. He wrote that: “the final abstract expression of every art is number”. He claimed in 1912 that we were approaching a time of reasoned and conscious composition, in which the painter will be proud to declare his works “constructional.”

There is a trap, of course, in discussions of vocabulary or definition. One could, for example, mistakenly consider painting from the unconscious to be a “style” in which abstract and figurative elements co-exist. The faithful expression of the unconscious can and does result in any harmonious blending of shapes and forms, which may arise. It is not by plan or design or intention or pre-meditation that those elements sing together. Max called his way of speaking “instantaneous premeditation”. It is all in a moment. The creation of art exists outside of time, as we normally perceive it. And from that boundless dimension of timeless wonder the magical images appear in a flash, then fade away, then reappear.

Watching Max paint at the easel one became suddenly aware of a dance of form and color, where the subject is least important. The piece may change from moment to moment as he continually turns the paper or canvas. One senses the movement outward from within, the seizure of a total expression contained in that moment. When line

appears, it seems to come from a different dimension, and is so forceful that it does indeed seem that his hand moves with an energy and decisiveness that could never be generated by the conscious, planning mind.

In 1912 Kandinsky wrote: “When a line is freed from delineating a thing, and functions as a thing in itself, its inner sound is not weakened by minor functions, and it receives its full inner power.” In Max’s work, as in the work of the finest of the expressionist painters, line is independent of intentional representation and is thereby free to release the vibrant spiritual essence of form. Like Kandinsky, Max’s line is often metaphorical and symbolic, which is not to say that almost photographically realistic images do not frequently appear. Max’s work is filled with little epiphanies. In the

Art-abundant setting of his studio, the paintings create a translucent poetic world, luminous and generally without reference to external objects except in their vibratory or rhythmic nature.

In a very real sense, the truth of these paintings is more “realistic” than a photograph. It was Rodin who said: “It is the artist who is truthful, while the photograph is mendacious; for, in reality, time never stops cold”. From the subtlest contours of paint Max created a concerto of details—dancers and dragons and nudes and beasts and masks and trees and birds and skies. These elements blend magically together to form vivid images and scenes.

Max Shertz’s art extends the exuberant discoveries of the German Expressionists of the 1920’s and 1930’s—Nolde, Macke, Ensor, Beckman, Kirchner, Kokoschka, Kandinsky, Klee—and takes painting past the surface levels of the imagination back into the magical realm of the unconscious which is the true kingdom of fine art.

In the early years of the 1900’s, the savage colors of the so-called Wild Beasts set painting free of the boundaries of even impressionistic realism. The bold colors of the Fauves lit up the passageway into the unconscious that would, at their best, lead artists like Braque, Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee, deKooning and Pollock into uncharted regions of the unconscious. Each of these artists reduced dependence on objective reality, and through the ecstatic use of color and/or the evocative distortion of form they surrendered in greater or lesser degree to the mysterious images of their unconscious.

Symbolic of this change from objective representation to a more expressionist art was the important exhibition in 1905 at the Salon des Independents. This was the show, for example, that revolutionized the course of Raoul Dufy’s art because, in his words: “I grasped at once the new raison d’être of painting. Impressionist realism lost all of its charm for me when I saw this miracle of the imagination at play, in drawing and color.” The paintings that Dufy saw there and at the Salon D’Automne of Matisse, Vlaminck, Derain, Braque and Rouault awakened his imagination and repelled him from the strictures of realism.

It is important, however, in this discussion of Max Shertz's art, to keep in mind that "imagination" is still a surface phenomenon, less profound and more subject to imitation than the unconscious. Imagination, like technique, is not in the spirit of inner force, not in the pure spirit of wonderment.

Another early twentieth century artist who claimed to work from his unconscious with "automatic drawing" was Jean Arp. Arp felt that this process of automatic drawing "helped to liberate him from rational ideas about shape and composition" (John Elderfield). Both Miro and Pollock have also been influenced by this process of "submitting to the arrival of the unconscious" (in the words of Odilon Redon).

An interesting and often baffling corollary to "unconscious creators" is the artist who claims to be guided in his creations by "spirits" or "guides". Here is a fascinating statement by the artist Augustin Lesage (1876-1954) who was considered by spiritualists and many others to be a medium who channeled intricate visual images onto large canvasses.

Never before painting a canvas, have I had any idea what it would be like. Never have I had an overall vision of a picture at any point in the course of its execution. A picture comes into existence detail by detail, and nothing about it enters my mind beforehand. My guides have told me: 'Do not try to find out what you are doing.' I surrender to their prompting. I lay in the figures they make me lay in. I take up the color tubes they make me take and I mix them as they prompt me to, without knowing what tone will come out. I take up the brushes as if at random. Even my eyes go where they have to, independently of me. I know it sounds unbelievable, but that's the way it is. I follow my guides like a child.

Lesage was a miner from rural Northern France and was totally untrained in any Arts. He created nearly 800 large canvasses showing extraordinary mastery, and yet he never ceased to claim that his hand and arm were merely channeling "spirit guides".

This phenomenon is not exactly the same as "painting from the great master of the heart" as Max Shertz describes the unconscious. But it is a good example of art being created without the intervention of the conscious, planning mind.

It was not only the expressionist painters and other isolated artists who gave the unconscious a new significance in the act of creation. The antecedents of what Max called "The Creator Stance" are to be found throughout most cultures and in all periods of history. Over six hundred years ago the Chinese painter Wu Chen said: "When I begin painting I am in a state of unconsciousness; I suddenly forget that I am holding a

brush in my hand.” This artist spoke of “the moving power of Heaven” in a way exactly analogous to our present understanding of the unconscious.

In the Chinese classic RECORD OF FAMOUS PAINTERS written over one thousand years ago, we read:

Now if one revolves one’s thoughts and wields one’s brush consciously thinking of one’s self as painting, then the more one tries the less success one will have in painting. But if one revolves one’s thoughts and wields one’s brush without being conscious of painting, then as a result one will have success in painting. When the hand does not stiffen the mind does not freeze up, the painting becomes what it becomes without one’s realizing how it becomes so.

This Chinese ideal of “the Tao of painting” is beautifully parallel to much of what Max Shertz described in his effortless process of giving good service to the unconscious. The resonance of the life force, what the Chinese call “Ch’i” in a painting is what animates the rhythms and forms in a fine piece and brings to the viewer the experience of purity and truth so central to Max’s conception of art.

The real progress of contemporary art is that it is not a search for perfection of form or ideal beauty, but at its best springs forth faithfully from the naturally expressive depths of the unconscious and seeks without artifice or contrivance to reflect the rhythms and forms and shapes of the inner realm. The surface of life, the events and objects, the light and the landscape, the faces and figures and feelings of day-to-day, are celebrated by the unconscious through artistic expression. Great art is not the expression of ideas or emotions, but of the spirit of man. “There is something infinite in painting”, Wrote Van Gogh.

Art is essentially a spiritual rather than a worldly discipline. It is the exploration and expression of a great mystery and in the final analysis does not reflect the individual personality of the artist but a fragment of the spirit that burns within each of us. Art is the finite in search of the infinite, and, in Max Shertz’s words, “the unconscious is the keeper of the flame.”

