



*About
the
Author*

Daniel Chard is a South Jersey native, spending most of his life in Gloucester and Salem Counties. His formal education included the University of South Dakota (B.F.A.) and Teacher's College, Columbia University (Ed.D.) After teaching in the Pitman and Cherry Hill public schools, he joined the Rowan faculty in 1968.

Dan began his landscape painting in 1979, exhibiting his landscapes for the first time in New York in 1980. He has exhibited regularly with O.K. Harris in New York as well as with galleries in Boston, Pittsburgh, Miami, Santa Monica, Birmingham, Scottsdale, Tulsa, and Santa Fe. In 1987, Watson/Guptil published his book, *Landscape Illusion*, which is being reprinted in winter 1993.

Arts Language: Another Way of Thinking



Daniel Chard

“I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like.” Although overused, such a comment remains a handle for art talk. This statement also reveals much about how we approach art criticism. It is something of a confession that criticism is about likes and dislikes. But personal likes and dislikes, however real and strongly felt, get in the way of new experience and the development of aesthetic sensibilities. Aesthetic experience can be aided by knowing there is no relationship between our likes and quality in art. We can dislike a painting, for example, and decide that it is a good painting. Further, all of the following propositions are plausible (Ecker and Kaelin 258) :

It is a good painting and I like it.

It is a bad painting and I like it.

It is a good painting and I don’t like it.

It is a bad painting and I don’t like it.

Thoughtful criticism can determine aesthetic merit independent of our likes and dislikes. Further, thoughtful criticism can increase the quality of our experience with art.

Rather than dwell on our established likes and dislikes, we should *experience* the art: encounter it, see new things, see things differently, and experience connections to other art forms and ideas. With art language, experience is the result of perceptual dynamics. These dynamics produce psychological energy (to the prepared spectator) through relationships of color, shape, line, and tone in space. These dynamics are explained largely by Gestalt psychology. Perceptual dynamics produce the phenomena that are avenues to the larger aesthetic meanings. Perceptual dynamics can tug, pull, and twist our sensibilities and bring art to life—much as it was experienced in another time.

Experiencing art requires an encounter with the phenomena in the art. We need to be as open to these phenomena as we are open to phenomena in nature. Further, we should understand that a perceptual language (as in the visual arts and music) is not a contrived language as is written language; with written language, there is no connection between the visual symbols (letters and words) and the things represented. In perceptual languages, our feelings are directly tapped by color, shapes, and sounds. To understand perceptual language, we may consider a fundamental difference that would appear in comparing an illustration of an apple with the word *apple*. The illustration is a visual analogy of an apple; the word *apple* has no connection in sound or shape to an apple. We have learned to connect the shape of the word and the sound of the word with an apple to the extent that we may have difficulty separating the word from the thing. This simple example doesn't begin to reveal the complexity of the language of the perceptual arts. The language of the arts is based on our elaborate spatial skills, sensitivities, and the nature of media. Meaning is evoked through the use of perceptual dynamics. Knowledge still plays an important role, but the fundamentals of the language are presented as perceptual dynamics.

The spectator's expectations for realism are often an obstacle to the perceptual language and the larger meanings.

We expect what we see in a painting to match our visual knowledge of the world around us. This knowledge is reinforced by our long and continuous exposure to photographic imagery. Realist imagery by itself is craft, technology, and science, but not art. Linear perspective and light and shadow as part of illusionism are only tools that may or may not lead to the aesthetic.

Written language has an enormous impact on our orientation to language. When the expectations for written language are transferred to an encounter with a painting, the expectation is literal realism. The well educated often have trouble getting beyond a literal interpretation of the visual arts. With this orientation, the fine arts are seen as mere illustration, and, as a result, twentieth century art is largely inaccessible. The kind of "left-brain learning" that has been valued in education encourages neither the experimental behavior, divergent thinking, or perceptual skills necessary to experience the phenomena of art. Further, the emphasis on "left-brain learning" produces little understanding or appreciation of the role spontaneous behavior can play in accessing our unconscious feelings and thoughts.

It is creative behavior that people outside the arts have difficulty understanding. Many people see art as something "thought up." Indeed, some art *is* thought up. But the rich and durable imagery that comes to stand for the most basic human feelings is the consequence of creative behavior. This imagery is unique because the perceptual arts are unique in their potential to tap the unconscious. Little understood is the manner in which people learn to behave or perform through these perceptual languages. Through facility with a medium, creative artists can access the deepest and most profound meanings in artistic expression. This is perhaps best demonstrated in jazz.

The imagery of the perceptual art forms is dynamic and comes to life for the prepared spectator, much as it was alive and dynamic for the artist. Dynamic art forms provide and sustain connectedness to our past and what we share with

other people in other times. Ideas are not merely described in the visual arts, but they are presented in perceptually dynamic phenomena, existing in their own form. They exist as cornerstones for civilization. Herein is the justification for a phenomenological approach to art experience. The meaning and the spirit of the past exist for us as phenomena in historic art forms. It is the appropriate starting point for the proper orientation and appreciation of a perceptual language. Moreover, this concern is at the core of arts education—another language and another way of thinking.

A Phenomenological Approach to Art Criticism

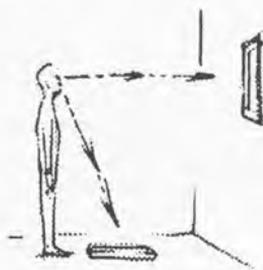
Art criticism can be thought of simply as talk about art. Just as writing can clarify thinking, so art criticism can clarify art experience. In each case, there is need for careful thought. Thoughtful application of art criticism to a painting can help us see the individual piece of art, as well as improve the quality of future art experience. The process of criticism can help us see more.

Anything can be given our aesthetic attention. What we see in art experience is determined by what we are ready to see. Do we open our eyes for the confirmation of what we know or the exploration of something new? Of course, we are somewhere in between. Aesthetic experience is in the mind; aesthetic forms are directed to perception and thought. Edward Bullough helped identify what we call aesthetic in his example of a fog at sea. The fog presents a very real danger and produces great anxiety as we watch and listen for “distance and unlocalized signals.” The ship movements and “her warning calls” take a toll on the passengers. For all the danger, however, the fog “can be a source of intense relish and enjoyment.” We may from moment to moment slip into a frame of mind where we consider the phenomena as a “veil surrounding you with an opaqueness as of transparent milk, blurring the outline of things and distorting their shapes into weird grotesqueness.” Bullough continues with his example: “the curious creamy smoothness of the water, hypo-

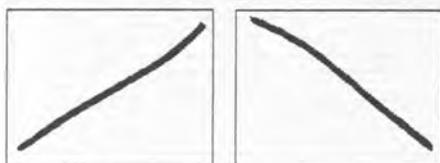
critically denying as it were any suggestion of danger; and above all, the strange solitude and remoteness from the world, as only can be found on the highest mountain tops." These are the characteristics of the phenomena that lift us beyond the practical world into the world of the aesthetic. Bullough describes this transformation as a moment "when our practical interest snaps like a wire from sheer over-tension, and we watch the consummation of some impending catastrophe with the marveling unconcern of a mere spectator" (Vivas and Krieger 640-41).

Natural phenomena in the practical world seem to take us more easily into an aesthetic orientation. A breathtaking vista can easily lead us to consider and reflect on the world around us. Snow-capped mountains and starry nights have a scale about them that forces us to reconsider our very existence. Art forms, however, are more tangible and finite; they cannot compete—nor should they compete—with the scale and the forces of nature. Art language is a language that speaks to the mind through concept and myth; artists do not seek to replicate nature in art form. The artist uses imagery from the world around us to articulate larger meanings.

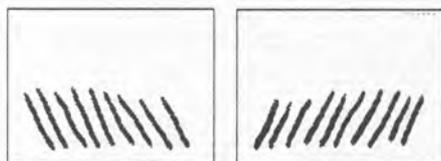
Art forms speak to us through the perceptual dynamics of the medium. These dynamics are complex. One example would appear in the dynamic of gravity as applied to a painting on a wall; placing the same painting flat on the floor will reveal a loss of gravity. We expect to see gravity at work when we look around us, but not when we look down:



Another example of perceptual dynamics is revealed in the tendency to read imagery from left to right. A diagonal line between bottom left and top right will appear to be ascending, while a diagonal line between top left and bottom right will appear to be descending:



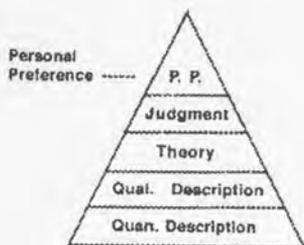
This illustration proves that we read imagery from left to right. Further, a set of vertical lines leaning to the left will appear more dynamic than lines leaning to the right because they oppose the left-to-right tendency. The following illustrations show the influence of picture plane dynamics on imagery:



These are only slight examples of the broad and complex language that is fundamental to aesthetic experience in the visual arts. Rudolf Arnheim has written about the elements of this language in *Art and Visual Perception*. We need not be knowledgeable about the underlying theories to experience the dynamics in the art. The experience is more valuable than the theories.

The Criticism Pyramid (shown on the next page) makes the criticism process more concrete by dividing the process into five discrete levels. It emphasizes engaging with the phenomena.

In criticism we tend to move from the top down, beginning with our likes and dislikes (Personal Preference). We might say, for example, “I don’t like it (Personal Prefer-



ence); it isn't a good painting (Judgment), because the use of color doesn't work, and the medium is not under control (Theory)," etc. This top-down approach does not give the phenomena of the painting a chance. The early engagement with likes and judgment derails the opportunity for a new experience. Rather than the top-down approach, the process of criticism should begin with what is seen, not with a reflection of the spectator's predisposition. Our predisposition always directs our aesthetic experience; it is not easy for us to acknowledge and identify the way it directs and shapes what we see and how we see. Even the most prepared spectator has points of view that reflect past experience, knowledge, personality, and beliefs. But if the painting is to have half a chance, we must spend some time looking and exploring rather than simply recognizing and classifying. Once a painting is recognized for its style, its use of content and use of media, it can be too quickly pigeonholed rather than appreciated. Criticism should move bottom-up on the pyramid rather than top-down.

We may begin by opening our attitude to the experience as though we have followed a mountain trail, through a narrow passageway that opens into a breathtaking vista. Approaching a painting as we may approach nature can make art experience an adventure. Early in the encounter, we may take inventory of what we see. The shapes, the colors, the space, the patterns—we can take inventory of all the visual features. Counter to the previous top-down approach, we could begin our criticism by listing our observations. In this bottom-up approach we must emphasize the Qualitative

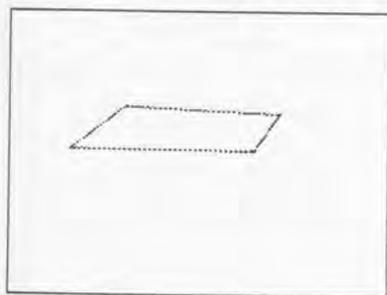
Description and the words used to characterize the phenomena. We will apply the Criticism Pyramid in considering "Fallen Tree," the painting which appears at the end of this article.

Quantitative Description (Taking inventory of the obvious features and characteristics) The painting is a horizontal landscape, 30" x 48", of water, rocks, logs, and some foliage. The medium is acrylic on canvas. The image is realistic but not photographic (this may not be apparent in the reproduction). The surface occasionally contains individual brush strokes. The image is mostly foreground to middleground. A background can be seen, but it has little contrast. Shadows and reflections are apparent. An obvious feature is a log that divides the painting horizontally.

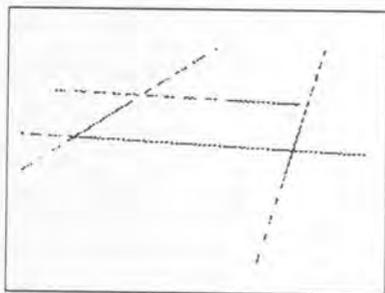
Qualitative Description (Identifying the phenomena of the painting and its parts) The painting presents a strong illusion of space. The stream *runs* toward us from the top middle of the painting, under the log, and off the left side and bottom of the painting. At times the horizontal log would appear *set in front* of the canvas, available for us to pick out of the painting; but this log has the *strength of architecture* as it is *secure* and *locked* into its position to the frame. Moreover, the strength of this horizontal has a *buoyancy*, lifting the log slightly upward in the picture frame. This contrasts with the *movement and flow* of the stream through and off the bottom of the painting. The image appears *tightly structured* to the flat picture plane and then becomes instantly three-dimensional, moving toward us and tipping away from us.

Theory (Explaining the art) The painting is highly structured as the horizontal log follows the rectangle's middle. Covering the top half of the painting will reveal the flatness of the bottom half of the painting. The section of a log in the bottom right corner, while realistic, contributes to flat-

ness. The illusion of space is in part the result of the shadow and reflection of the major horizontal log, but, most important, the result of a square shape laid in perspective, defined by the two horizontal logs, a third log pointing toward us through the bottom of the bush, and the water's edge on the left. On the two-dimensional picture plane, this shape exists as a parallelogram. The illusion of volume becomes dramatic because it is clear yet equivocal as it flips back and forth between the two-dimensional parallelogram and the three-dimensional square in perspective (*a* and *b* below):



a



b

The coexistence of such mutually exclusive phenomena is a major feature in aesthetic form. For no matter the explanation, the phenomena remain beyond our comprehension; they only exist in our experience.

Judgment (Considering the descriptions and theories to draw conclusions about the merit of the art) Readers may decide for themselves about this painting.

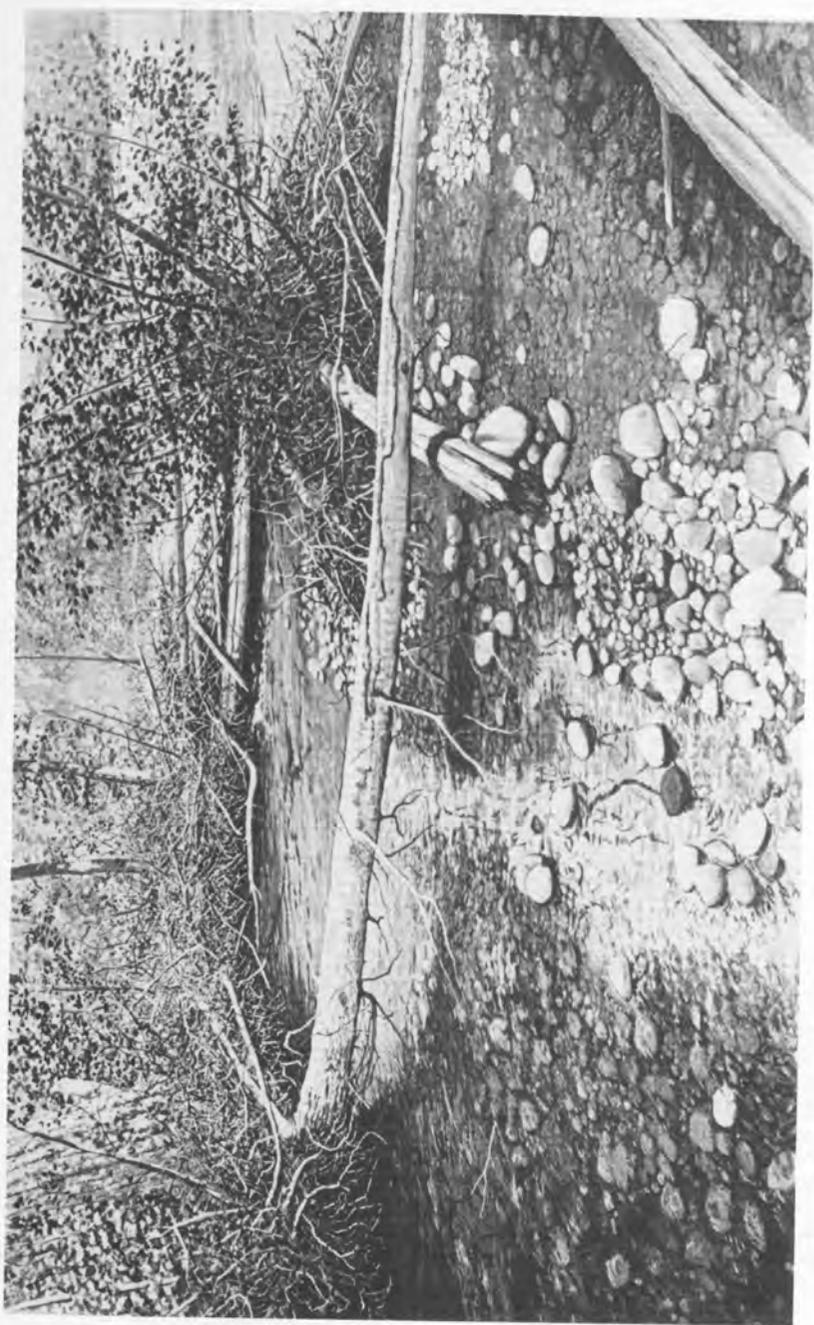
The explanation above is not the experience; it is a reconsideration of the experience. The phenomena may not appear that remarkable to the reader. Further, it takes time to develop one's sensitivity to this language. Working with others helps provide the opportunity to test our observations. The phenomena of the painting, as revealed in the qualitative description, can be a shared conclusion about the work. There is much room for creativity in finding the word or

phrase that best characterizes what is being experienced. Phenomenological criticism does not require the spectator to be knowledgeable about the work; the observations and criticism can begin at any level of sophistication. However, after a work of art is carefully considered, there are normally many questions about the work. These questions should be pursued before the next encounter. The observations and theories of other people can further shape and develop what we experience. There should be a give and take between our observations and our informed education. This activity will support our *theoretical* considerations and our ability to deal with our judgment.

The phenomenological approach to criticism makes art much more accessible. It doesn't mean we should like or feel comfortable with all art forms. It does mean that we will have a better chance to appreciate the established consensus on quality represented by museums and galleries. Further, a phenomenological approach to art criticism gives us a tool to appreciate and understand the visual forms of various cultures.

Works Cited

- Arnheim, Rudolph. *Art and Visual Perception*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1954.
- Chard, Daniel. *Landscape Illusion*. New York: Watson-Guptil, 1986.
- Ecker, D. W., and E. F. Kaelin. "The Limits of Aesthetic Inquiry: A Guide to Educational Research." *Philosophic Redirection of Educational Research, Seventy-first Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Vivas, Eliseo, and Murray Krieger, eds. *The Problems of Aesthetics*. New York: Rinehart, 1953.



Fallen Tree by Daniel Chard