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E. E. Cummings, Painter

Rushworth M. Kidder

“ONE’S TASTES have not, I fear, materially changed: am still convinced that am primarily a painter . . .”¹ So Edward Estlin Cummings — who in later years was to receive America’s major honors, not for his painting, but for his poetry — wrote from New York to his father late in 1923. For five years their correspondence had had a persistent theme: Estlin’s interest in painting. From his various Paris addresses in 1921 and 1922 he had written in detail about his painting and sketching, often spending much more space describing his artistic than his literary endeavors. “Climate excellent,” he wrote on 17 April 1923, “for painting - of - the - conventional - stand - by - the - river - with - one - eye - open - and - your - face - screwed - sideways - squinting - along - a - brush - held - between - thumb - and - variety. I am acquitting myself of . . . various small (but let us trust worthy) carton editions of the metropole (or is it -polis) as well as the usual five million drawings a month and now and then a sentence or three, sometimes suitable for ‘poetic’ consumption that most hideous of diseases.” Earlier (19 June 1922) he had written that “what I have already published in the Dial (drawings, poems, essays) and shall publish in the future (Watson [co-owner of *The Dial*] has taken more, here in Paris; besides a great bunch of drawings which he bought for himself) is worth 30 (trente) Enormous Rooms to me.” Reverend Edward Cummings, approving his son’s literary bent, had reservations about his artistic enthusiasms. Never openly objecting, the father patiently discouraged the painting and encouraged the writing; never committing himself to one or the other, the son diligently pursued both. By 1923 — in his thirtieth year — the direction of Cummings’ talent was by no means clear. As a writer, he had behind him one book of poems (*Tulips and Chimneys*), one prose journal (*The Enormous Room*), and several essays and uncollected poems. As a painter, he had

¹ Unpublished letter in the Cummings Collection of the Houghton Library, Harvard. References to unpublished letters, notes, and sketchbooks are to material in this collection.

already been seen in at least four exhibitions in New York City, and was known to the readers of *The Dial* equally as a poet (twenty-five poems between 1920 and 1923) and as a creator of line drawings (eighteen published during the same period). It was in this context, then, that he reached the decision to be "primarily a painter."

As it happened, the prophecy was not to be fulfilled. But the failure is not to be attributed to any lack of consecration or diligence on Cummings' part. As Charles Norman wrote in his biography of the poet, "he has painted more than he has written, and he has painted—for more than half a century — with an intense, undeviating passion."² Editorial comments, remarks by friends, and notes in news stories call attention to his two interests; his own letters and essays are dotted with the self-descriptive phrase *poet and painter*. In describing, for example, the characters in *Eimi*, his journal of a trip to Russia in 1931, he billed himself as "tovarich (comrade) peesahtel y hoodozhnik (writer & painter) Kem-min-tz (Russian for Cummings)."³ At the Metropole Hotel in Moscow he was asked, "For what do you care?" "My work," was the reply. "Which is writing?" "and painting."⁴ As is to be expected, his introductions for the catalogues of his own one-man exhibitions insist, however glibly, on the thoroughness of his interest in painting. "Why do you paint?" asks the questioner in the dialogue Cummings wrote for a 1945 catalogue. "For exactly the same reason I breathe," is the reply. Asked where he will live after the war is over, he quips, "in China . . . Where a painter is a poet."⁵ And in a 1954 article accompanying several reproductions of his paintings in the *Arts Digest* he wrote that "For more than a half a hundred years, the over-
signed's twin obsessions have been painting and writing."⁶

Readers of Cummings are well aware that one of these "twin obsessions" accounted for the production of nearly seven hundred poems, several plays, and numerous pieces of prose. Few, however, are aware that the other obsession produced a volume of work which, less public, is fully as impressive. Between 1920 and 1927 *The Dial* reproduced twenty-two of his line drawings, four of his wash drawings, and two

² *E. E. Cummings: The Magic-Maker*, revised edition (Indianapolis and New York, 1972), p. 239.

³ 4th ed. (New York, 1958), p. ii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵ George J. Firmage, ed., *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised* (New York, 1965), pp. 316, 317.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

of his oils (Plates II and X).⁷ In 1931 a collection of black-and-white reproductions of his work was published, the letters of whose title — *CIOPW* — stand for the various media represented in the volume comprising five charcoal drawings, thirteen ink drawings, forty-nine oils, nine pencil drawings, and twenty-three watercolors. His line drawings, often accompanying his essays, appeared in various publications. To his friends and through his exhibitions he sold a number of paintings. And at the time of his death in 1962 he had in his possession, besides an uncounted number of drawings ranging from rapid sketches to full-page studies in careful detail, more than sixteen hundred watercolors and oils.⁸

What are we to make of this impressive output? Did he engage in painting as a wholehearted creative experience or (to use Churchill's phrase) as a pastime? Did he make a serious study of the techniques of painting, devote intellectual energy to it, and spend much time actually painting and exhibiting? What was the response of the public and its critics to his work? What changes of style and outlook did he undergo as a painter? Our answers will bring us closer to an understanding of Cummings, not simply as *the writer* or *the painter*, but as the Renaissance man who strove for mastery in all things aesthetic — as "the artist," who, as he wrote to his mother, "is merely the earth's most acute and wiley observer of everything-under-the-sun."⁹

That Cummings was completely serious about his art, treating it not simply as a pastime, is indicated in an exchange of letters with a Washington, D.C., gallery. Asking Cummings to exhibit in a showing of poet-painters, the owner wrote (3 August 1960) that the painting of

⁷ Identifying numbers in the plate captions beginning "bMS" are call numbers for sketchbooks in the Houghton Library. Those beginning "GBM" refer to the catalogue (*E. E. Cummings: Paintings and Drawings*) prepared for the Fall 1973 exhibition at the Gotham Book Mart Gallery, 41 West 47th Street, New York. This two-volume catalogue lists, describes, and prices 930 items; some have been sold, but most (by this writing) are still at the gallery.

Photo credits: author, Plate I; Fogg Museum, Plates II (*Rapallo*), III, IV, V (pencil sketch), X (*New York, 1927; Noise Number 13*). All others: Douglas Faulkner.

⁸ The paintings and drawings in Cummings' estate were given by his heirs to The Luethi-Peterson Camps, Inc., of Barrington, Rhode Island; the Camps then commissioned the Gotham Book Mart to act as agent for the sale of these works.

⁹ *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings*, ed. F. W. Dupee and George Stade (New York, 1969), p. 52.

poets seems often, as in the case of Henry Miller, to be "tentative," to be less vocation than avocation. Cummings' response, a draft of which is scrawled on the envelope, stated pointedly that "as it happens, I do not consider my painting 'tentative,'" that "I've painted all my life," and that the work is to be taken "more than seriously."

What was Cummings' background in art? That he had the opportunity, even as a child, to be serious in his drawing is indicated by the large number of sketchbooks and single sketches surviving from his early childhood. Before he was six, his father had given him a sketchbook, complete with a tooled leather cover and a loop for storing the pencil, inscribed "ESTLIN from FATHER January 1900," which he filled with stick-figures and rough semblances of animals. By 1907 his sketchbooks sported crayon drawings of circus animals, locomotives, still-lives, battling knights, heads and figures of family members, and soldiers from the Russo-Japanese War. At the age of eleven he was capable of accurately proportioned and convincingly shaded ink drawings of "My Dog Rex — September 24, 1908." Later, on frequent European visits beginning during the First World War, he made regular use of pocket-sized sketchbooks; within their thousands of pages he recorded such things as a shoreline at Rapallo, a Dutch landscape, a street in Mâcon, and his impressions, fleeting or detailed, of various individuals (Plates II-V). His care and skill were not without precedent. Reverend Edward Cummings, a man competent in many crafts, also did drawings and watercolors. A surviving sketchbook of his, probably used on a trip to Norway with his friend Estlin Carpenter, contains a number of well-turned and thoroughly finished renderings of castles, cathedrals, and country landscapes. Apparently feeling that some of the Norway sketches were worth-while works, Reverend Edward Cummings had them framed for hanging in the family home in Cambridge on his return. For all his own ability and appreciation of art, however, the elder Cummings discouraged his son from treating it as anything but a diversion, feeling that, while there might be a living to be made as a writer, there was none to be made as an artist. Estlin's training, as a result, was his own doing, unaided by formal lessons in art.¹⁰

Perhaps this attitude was less a hindrance than a help to a man of

¹⁰ Information in this paragraph is assembled from materials at the Houghton Library, the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, and the Gotham Book Mart, as well as from an interview (22 June 1973) with the poet's sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Cummings Qualey.

so independent a temperament as Cummings. For, as he was later to write in *The Dial* about his friend Gaston Lachaise, "the man who by the gods has been fated to express himself will succeed in expressing himself in spite of all schools; . . . the greatest artist is the man whom no school can kill."¹¹ Cummings was never in danger of being killed by the schools; he never got involved with them. "I started, some years ago," he wrote to his sister from Paris in 1922, "against the continuous advice of my elders, to paint as I saw fit."¹² And although he counted painters and aficionados of modern art among his friends, he seems never to have studied formally with any of them.

But the absence of formal training cannot, in Cummings' case, be equated with a lack of careful study. The extent of his self-teaching is nowhere more evident than in his approach to portrait painting. Although he had sketched heads and figures from childhood, and although he often entered portraits and self-portraits in exhibitions during the 1920s, he apparently decided to devote himself to a thorough study of human figure-drawing sometime after 1930.¹³ Accordingly, he produced over fifty pages of typed and handwritten notes, illustrated with a neatness worthy of an undergraduate's laboratory notebook, on human anatomy. Apparently copying from a textbook — page numbers appear regularly beside the headings in these notes — he drew in minute detail the bone and muscle structures of arms, legs, shoulders, and torsos, labeling the individual parts of each. On one of the pages, he reduced his studies to a list beginning "Pelvic Girdle — *immovable joint*" and "Shoulder Girdle — *movable joint*," and proceeded to catalogue the particular differences between these parts of the body. That he was not anatomizing merely for anatomy's sake is shown in the number of sketches in which he applied the results of his studies. One page, containing forty-three separate renderings of the eyeball, seems a companion to three sheets, each with a single study of eyes and nose, that are respectively labeled "David," "Antonello da Messina," and "Michelangelo." Another page presents a face-on nude — a subject that was to become an overwhelming favorite of the painter in his later years — with a scale of inches totaling seventy-two along one margin. On it, various proportions are worked out and

¹¹ *A Miscellany Revised*, p. 16.

¹² *Selected Letters*, p. 84.

¹³ The notes mentioned here probably date from the early thirties, as evidenced by the frequent recurrence among them of sketches of the face of his third wife, Marion Morehouse Cummings.

noted down under a column headed "Same distances" — showing, for example, that the distance from what he called "pit of neck" to navel was the same as that from crotch to knee.

Not surprisingly, some of Cummings' most able works are portraits. That he was a methodical craftsman, carefully planning and executing each portrait, is evidenced by the number of preliminary studies he was willing to make. Many of these, like the oil sketch of his mother (Plate V) still survive. The final work took time and patience: William O'Brien, a friend who sat for him in the early thirties so that Cummings could practice, recalls that his portrait required some twenty sittings. O'Brien also remembers that Cummings, in straitened circumstances, painted some portraits on commission. And of course he painted and sketched those close to him: Scofield Thayer, Anne Barton Cummings (his second wife), Little Joe Gould, his mother (Rebecca Haswell Cummings), his daughter Nancy (Plates III, V, and X). Among the most striking, however, are the numerous ones of himself — done with great skill and patience, and usually portraying a pensive and sober aspect (Plates I and IX) — and of Marion, a former model of whose poised and noble beauty he never tired, even when, after the manner of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, he lets nudity jest with the formal conventions of portraiture (Plates VI and VIII). Even the portraits painted on narrow shirt-cardboards sent home from the laundry — for there were days, apparently, when a canvas was beyond his budget — were serious endeavors. With his usual care, Cummings signed and dated most of them.

Investigating methods as well as subjects, Cummings taught himself the various techniques required by the different media in which he practiced. In oils, he worked sometimes with large patches of color thinly applied, sometimes with a stippled patterning, and sometimes with pigment laid on generously with a palette knife. Although some of his work is non-representational, he was capable of an almost photographic realism: among his most carefully crafted paintings are the still-lives, usually of a bunch of flowers in a vase. In many, the background is nearly ignored, while the flowers are detailed petal by petal; in others, backgrounds of open windows, hats, and tables — even, in one, a red checkered tablecloth whose folds and fringe are carefully reproduced — have absorbed his attention nearly as much as the flowers they embellish (Plate VII).

His watercolors are generally landscapes; and, just as Marion was his

chosen subject for oil portraits, so in watercolor (and occasionally in oil; see Plates VII and IX) he often turned to Mount Chocorua, which rose rather grandly in front of his summer residence in Silver Lake, New Hampshire. Often he would sketch out the composition before painting it, and some watercolors still bear the nearly invisible pencil lines beneath the color; on at least one, in a hand so faint that the words disappear from a few feet away, Cummings has written the names of the colors he would later apply to particular areas when he finally took up his brush.¹⁴ With landscapes as with portraits, he studied his subjects carefully before painting: still in existence, for example, is a series of large sheets bearing ink and pencil sketches of Mount Chocorua, made, according to their labels, at different times of the day, and each showing a slightly different shading.

But as numerous Sunday painters have no doubt discovered, an acquaintance with technique is not necessarily synonymous with a serious and intelligent commitment to art. That Cummings was no mere dilettante is suggested not only by his interest in the technical but by his studious concern for the theoretical and aesthetic aspects of painting. This concern, which dated at least from his undergraduate days and continued throughout his life, appears in his essays and in the notes he apparently wrote only for himself and in which he developed and organized his theories.

Even a cursory reading of Cummings' essays reveals a persistent reference to artists and their works. His earliest published essay — a commencement address entitled "The New Art," which he delivered at his graduation from Harvard in 1915 — shows his serious (if perhaps overly simple) response to the art of his time. Informing his audience of new developments, he spoke of Cubism and Futurism in terms which suggest that he was striving to define a useful critical vocabulary for dealing with contemporary art. "The name Cubism," he announced, "properly applied, relates to the work of a small group of ultramodern painters and sculptors who use design to express their personal reaction to the subject, i. e. — what this subject 'means' to them — and who further take this design from geometry. By using an edge in place of a

¹⁴ This method is similar to — perhaps an adaptation of — a practice he occasionally used in oil paintings. He would first make a rapid sketch — a Paris street scene, or the inside of a burlesque theatre — and annotate it with the names of colors to be used for various areas. Working from the small sketch, he would do the oil. In several cases, both the initial sketch and the resulting oil survive.

curve a unique tactual value is obtained." Speaking of Brancusi's "Mlle. Pogany" as it appeared in the Armory Show of 1913 he noted that "the flow of line and volume is continuous" and that "In this triumph of line for line's sake over realism we note the development of the basic principles of impressionism."¹⁵ Moving from recent art to recent music, and from there to contemporary poetry, he drew parallels among them. That he was more superficially assertive than profoundly incisive can be charged to immaturity. The essay, nevertheless, shows a concern for an aesthetic that would bring together all the arts — a concern that he carried with him throughout his career.

Significantly, the first essay he published in *The Dial* (February 1920) was not a study of poetry but an explanation and appreciation of the sculpture of Gaston Lachaise. More solid than his Harvard address, this essay used his friend's art as a platform from which to expound many of the ideas that would come to characterize Cummings' thinking in later years. Undertaking to analyze the basis of the sculptor's appeal, he wrote:

. . . Lachaise's perhaps favourite (French) word is *simple*. Applied to his work, it means something quite different from, as in Brancusi, a mere economy of form through the elimination of unessentials; it means form which completely expresses itself, form that perfectly tactilizes the beholder, as in the case of an electric machine which, being grasped, will not let the hand let go.¹⁶

The language is a poet's. Evident, however, is Cummings' interest in the development of terms with which to comprehend not simply the particulars of any one art but the generalities of aesthetics. These words, in fact, describe his own most successful paintings and poems.

It was in this essay on Lachaise that Cummings first began to elaborate on the one quality — intelligence — that became for him a requirement for all genuine aesthetic response. Attributing to Lachaise a "hate of insincerity" and a "hate of superficiality," and finding him "inherently naif" and "fearlessly intelligent," Cummings applauded qualities that would later be part of his own reputation. Expanding on Lachaise's fearless intelligence — on what he called "the intelligence functioning at intuitional velocity" — he elevated it to a central principle of art criticism. Commenting on the work of Zorach, he defined the role of the intelligence in distinguishing between the artistically

¹⁵ *A Miscellany Revised*, pp. 5, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

honest and the pseudo-artistically fraudulent — a distinction that readers of his poetry will recognize as a pervasive theme.

Our intelligence is as it were temporarily numbed into inactivity by the work's "emotional appeal" — but only temporarily, since it is obvious that no art which depends for its recognition upon the casting of a spell on the intelligence can, except in the case of an undeveloped mind, endure beyond a few moments or a few hours at best. The spell wears off, the intelligence rushes in, the work is annihilated. Herein is discovered the secret of that "fakey" feeling with which we are inevitably left by the designs [of Zorach].¹⁷

Perhaps because Cummings' poems give the appearance of spontaneity and of a frankly emotional response to his surroundings, he has been lumped, by R. P. Blackmur and others, with the anti-intellectuals in modern poetry. But the tenor of his prose, from this early essay onward, suggests that Cummings had a sharp sense of the necessity of the analytical intelligence as the one defense against sentimentalism and "that 'fakey' feeling." Without that intelligence, he recognized, "the work is annihilated." Two of his finest satires, published in *Vanity Fair* in the mid-twenties, indicate his feelings about those artists and critics who risk annihilation because they refuse to exercise this intelligence in aesthetic matters. "The Very Latest School of Art" — a dialogue between "an unconsciousist painter" and "a kindly critic of ye olde schoole" — reveals Cummings' keen sense of the limitations of those artists who would try to compose solely by uninhibited instinct. The artist, "a pallid youth whose mouth is crammed with brushes, chalk, charcoal[,] palette knives, pencils, etc." stands in a cellar "splashing, slashing, scraping, smudging, at a gigantic canvas." He tells the critic that "In order to create a picture, I am first of all forced to eliminate my conscious mind and will."¹⁸ He paints in total darkness; on finishing, he destroys the canvas with an axe before turning on a light. Such, Cummings seems to say, are the nihilistic fruits of those who view the unconscious as the sole source of creativity. In a later satire on a modern sculptor whom he delightfully names "Ivan Narb," Cummings ridicules the type of artist who works in "a bewildering variety of media . . . (tincans, sealing wax, hay wire, candlegrease, birch-bark, bottle glass, gingerbread, chewing gum, etc.)." His final and most cutting piece of mock praise for Narb's work centers on its "perfect unanalysability." "Once analysis is applied, all is lost. Either you in-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 17, 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

stinctively feel the beauty inherent in these occult forms, wrought by the mysterious hand of genius from lowly materials, from humble substances which have never before been called upon to bear the lofty message of aesthetic emotion, or — to put it bluntly — you do not.”¹⁰ Those who do not feel it — those who demand something more of art than mere superficial effect — are those who, with Cummings, insist on the place of the intelligence in aesthetic matters.

It is in his unpublished notes, however, that the inquisitive and intelligent aesthete makes his most genuine appearance. These notes, most of which are written in his scrawled cursive and many of which are also typed out, form, with his numerous sketchbooks, a body of commentary on Cummings’ thinking that runs into the thousands of pages. They are the workshop in which he developed, articulated, and illustrated his aesthetic theories. Filed away by their author, they eventually were acquired, unedited and undated, by the Houghton Library at Harvard.

Even the most casual examiner, glancing through the notes, cannot fail to be struck by the tremendous amount of energy and thought Cummings devoted to painting and to the study of painters and their work. “Cézanne did not imitate the visual aspects of lemons,” he wrote; “he painted the noise each lemon would make if it fell off the table.” A delightful and epigrammatic insight, this sentence combines the two major areas of thought that appear regularly throughout the notes: Cummings’ interest in analyzing the techniques of painters he admired, and his interest in defining the relationships between the sensations evoked by painting — “the visual aspects of lemons” — and the corresponding sensations — “the noise each lemon would make” — evoked by music, speech, and poetry. Of the painters he cites, Cézanne has the most prominent place. An unfinished essay on the French post-impressionist, in extremely rough draft, is titled in part (the rest is torn away) “Cézanne & his Circle.” Cummings distinguishes the style of Cézanne from that of Renoir, and ultimately condemns Renoir as “an artist who has become only sensuality and only delectation”: “Because his delectation flows like milk and honey, without the tragic drop, he appears to a burdened age too sweet.” Defending Cézanne from any charge that he, too, was concerned only with “soft things,” Cummings wrote:

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 184, 188.

. . . in the search for the softest thing, the hearer comes by chance into a danger, the danger of confounding cause (reason, motive) and effect (operation) and of seeking Cézanne in the sphere of feminine things. Then one remembers that in reality he is extremely not so soft or thick, thick as Rembrandt; at bottom a cool thinker, immovable constructor; at bottom a brutal person, beside whom Courbet's animal manhood appears weak and confused; at bottom the manliest French artist.

Admiring these qualities in Cézanne, Cummings may well have seen a similarity between the French artist's background and his own history: "His father," he wrote, "a well to do banker, gave in to the mother (who, like all mothers, believed in the calling of her son), allowed in 1861 the emigration to Paris, and tried — as the young man was so careless the next year as to spend the holidays in Aix — yet once again and all the more energetically to chain him to the banking house." If for a moment his interest in Cézanne seems merely personal, it quickly returns to the artistic; by 1863, he tells us, Cézanne "became definitely painter" and "the so-called head-studies" begin, which he describes in this way:

With fist-thick crossstrokes and obliquestrokes of the palette knife faces become pasted; faces of unbelievable rawness . . . The first self-portraits, too, belong with the heads, among these one of 1864, of which one could say with more right what a Munich critic at that time maintained of the early work of our Mares: painted with the brick-mason's trowel.

Cummings had obviously schooled himself in the details of Cézanne's life; more important, however, he had studied the works themselves. It was with a painter's eye that he perceived the elements of the technique which, with his characteristic turn of metaphor, he assessed in this later paragraph.

The pasted heads stop, but the black baroque motif goes further and pastes itself, if the expression is allowed. The baroque loses the crumbliness, stretches itself out to droll curves, built, sprouted, swung, and in the swing torn pointwinkishly; the dream of an anyhow gagged visionary, whom the pictures of Daumier and Delacroix [sic], of Tintoretto, Greco, frighten; gagged but anyhow musical. Already there is something. The colour stretches itself out, loses all blisteredness, the dark sunders as shining black against other deep tones, orders itself to strong contrasts within a shrunken, but noteworthy, sonorous toneworld. One confesses the efficacy of the colours, even if the interpretation of the motif escapes. The eye sucks itself full of broad spots of green, deep green, darker than emerald, bananayellow, cold blue, fat glistening white, revels already, in advance of the understanding . . . conceived. The understanding seeks the title: "Break-

fast in the open"; if one should judge by the colours, a stupid banter on Manet's "D[éjeuner] sur l'H[erbe]" . . . How should one say, if one could turn from the colours. But therefrom it is not allowed us to turn, there remains not much, if one turns therefrom, but it were for instance impossible to constitute the colours otherwise. They are wholly unthinkable in another drawing. The harmony does not let itself loose from the picture, the colouring is not from the colours alone created. Already the instinct dawns: the distribution of masses is perhaps just-so important, perhaps still more important; already solely the mixing of the light with the dark, already the togetherness of graded and swung forms.

This focus on color and this interest in "the mixing of the light with the dark" echo throughout the painting notes, even when the subject is not primarily Cézanne. One typed page, for example, begins with a study of the colors Cézanne used: "A scale comprising — between Black and White — 4 blues, yellow red green blue[,] 17 colours, 5 ys 6 reds 3 greens 3 blues or, of 16 intervals — 18 including Blanc and Noir." The real subject of this investigation, however, is the relationship of color painting to black-and-white photography. He continues, "supposing it [the color scale] be photographed, successively deepening (or lightening) degrees of GREY will be revealed — with White at one end and Black at the other." He devotes the remainder of the page to an extremely careful and detailed development of the relationships between the color scale and the gray scale. His conclusions are useful to a painter whose works are being photographed, and he states them concisely: "if (thru mixing with its complement) any moment of the c[olor]-scale be diminished in respect to its hue-difference-from-all-others, its 'intensity' so-called, and this mixing be increased, the colour will approach the NEUTRAL grey which is a denial to colours of their hue . . ." In a penned summary beneath the typing he notes: "GREY has 2 functions: 1) it is the equivalent of that particular colour which is situated midway in the scale of colours (between White and Black) [;] 2) it is what happens to any colour which has lost its intensity — ∴ is a common denominator."²⁰

The interest in method apparent in the Cézanne essay reappears regularly in Cummings' comments on the artists and periods of art he studied. Not concerned simply with a painter's biography, influences, exhibitions, or development, he shows a single-minded interest in

²⁰ According to Cézanne, "grey is the only colour dominant in nature. But it's fearfully hard to get." Letter to Camille Pissarro, 23 October 1866; quoted in Sandra Orienti, *The Complete Paintings of Cézanne* (London, 1972), p. 13.

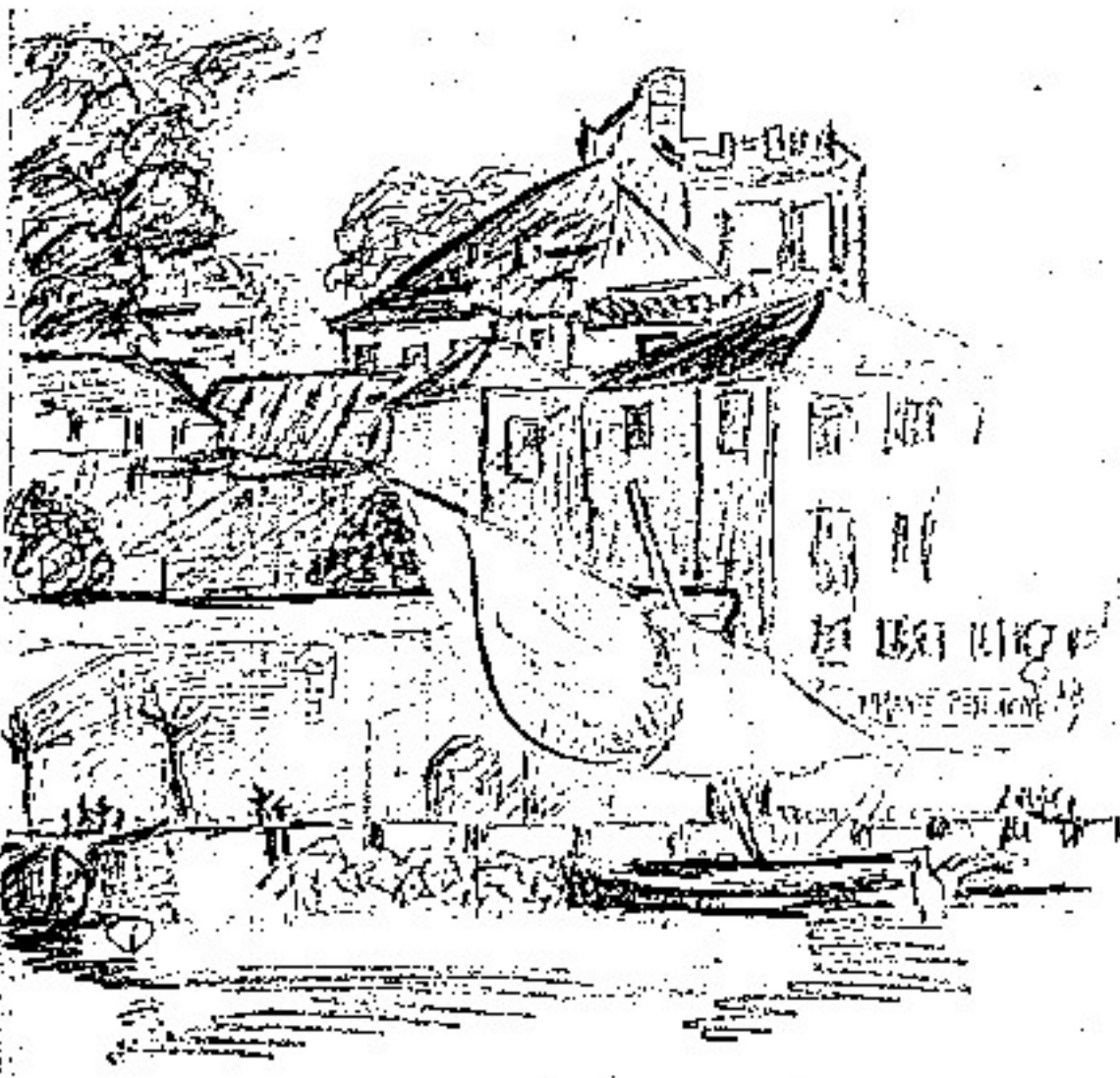
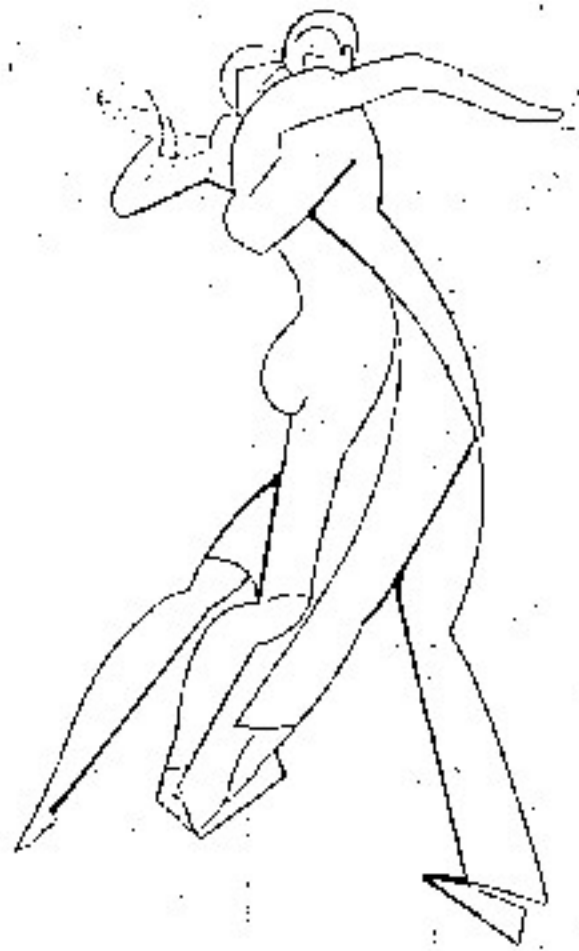


PLATE I

Self Portrait in a Hat, October 3, 1950

Oil on canvas, 16"x20" (GBM 327; R. W. Davidson Collection)

*For information on the location of originals,
permissions, and photo credits, see footnote 7.*



Rapallo

PLATE II

ABOVE LEFT: *Charlie Chaplin*. Ink, 19½" x 25½"
(Reprinted in *The Dial*, March 1924, and in *CIOFW*)

ABOVE RIGHT: *Dancers*. Ink, 18" x 24" (GBM 280)

BELOW: *Rapallo*, ca. 1921. Pencil, 4¾" x 7⅛" (bMS Am 1823.7 [38])



PLATE III

ABOVE LEFT: *Anne Barton Cummings*, ca. 1928. Pencil, 4 1/8" x 7"
(bMS Am 1823.7 [34])

ABOVE RIGHT: *Pool Player*. Pencil, 4 3/4" x 7 1/8" (bMS Am 1823.7 [93])

BELOW: *Seated Couple*. Ink, 7 1/8" x 4 3/4" (bMS Am 1823.7 [93])



PLATE IV

LEFT: *Macon*. Pencil, $4\frac{1}{8}'' \times 7\frac{1}{4}''$ (bMS Am 1823.7 [91])

RIGHT: *Holland*, ca. 1928. Pencil, $5'' \times 7\frac{1}{2}''$ (bMS Am 1823.7 [28])



PLATE V

LEFT: *Rebecca Haswell Cummings*, ca. 1928. Pencil, 5 1/4" x 8 3/8" (bMS Am 1823.7 [35])

RIGHT: *Rebecca Haswell Cummings*. Oil on canvas, 16" x 23 3/4" (GBM 438p)



PLATE VI

LEFT: *Marion in a White Dress*. Oil on canvas, 12"x16" (GBM 88)

RIGHT: *Marion, 1937*. Oil on canvasboard, 12"x16" (GBM 99)

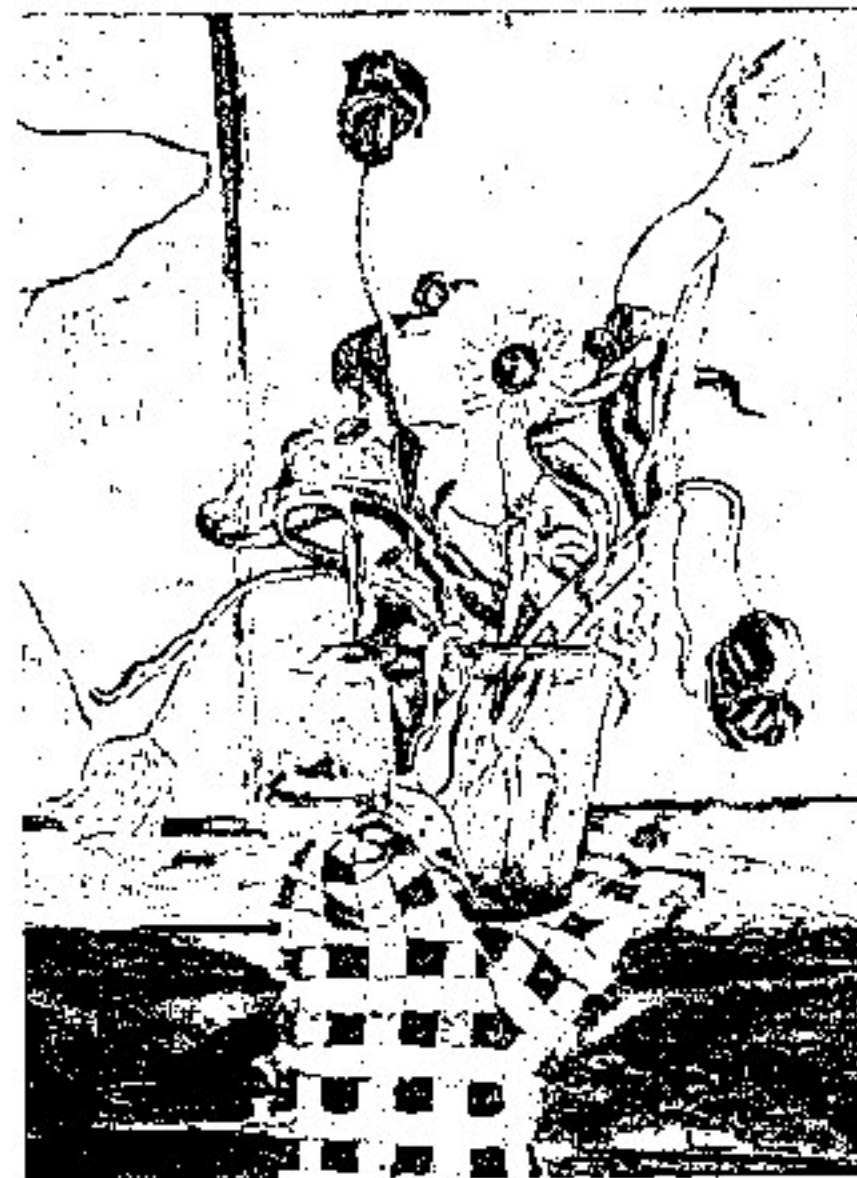
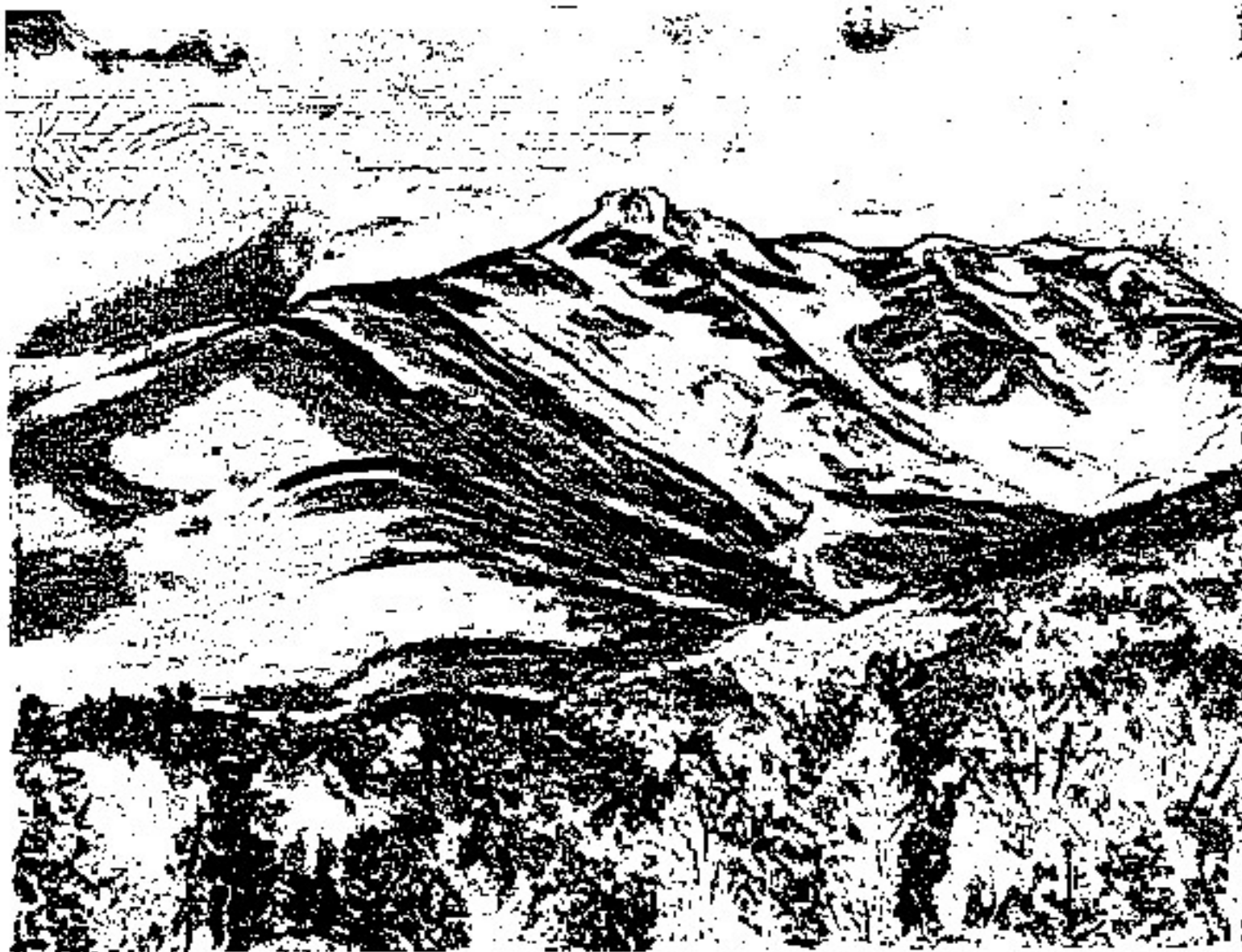


PLATE VII

LEFT: *Chocorna*. Oil on canvas, 16"x12" (GBM 154)

RIGHT: *Flowers in a Clear Vase*, March 29, 1939. Oil on canvasboard, 9½"x14" (GBM 163p; R. W. Davidson Collection)



PLATE VIII

Portrait Sketch of Marion, 18/3/40.

Oil on canvasboard, 10"X14" (GBM 92; R. W. Davidson Collection)



PLATE IX

ABOVE LEFT: *Self Portrait with Green Background*,
March 2, 1958. Oil on cardboard, 8½"x14"
(GBM 79p; R. W. Davidson Collection)

ABOVE RIGHT: *Self Portrait in Blue Tie*, May 1958. Oil on
cardboard, 8½"x14" (GBM 80p; R. W. Davidson Collection)

BELOW: *Joy Farm and Mount Chocorua*. Oil on canvasboard,
16"x12" (GBM 157; R. W. Davidson Collection)

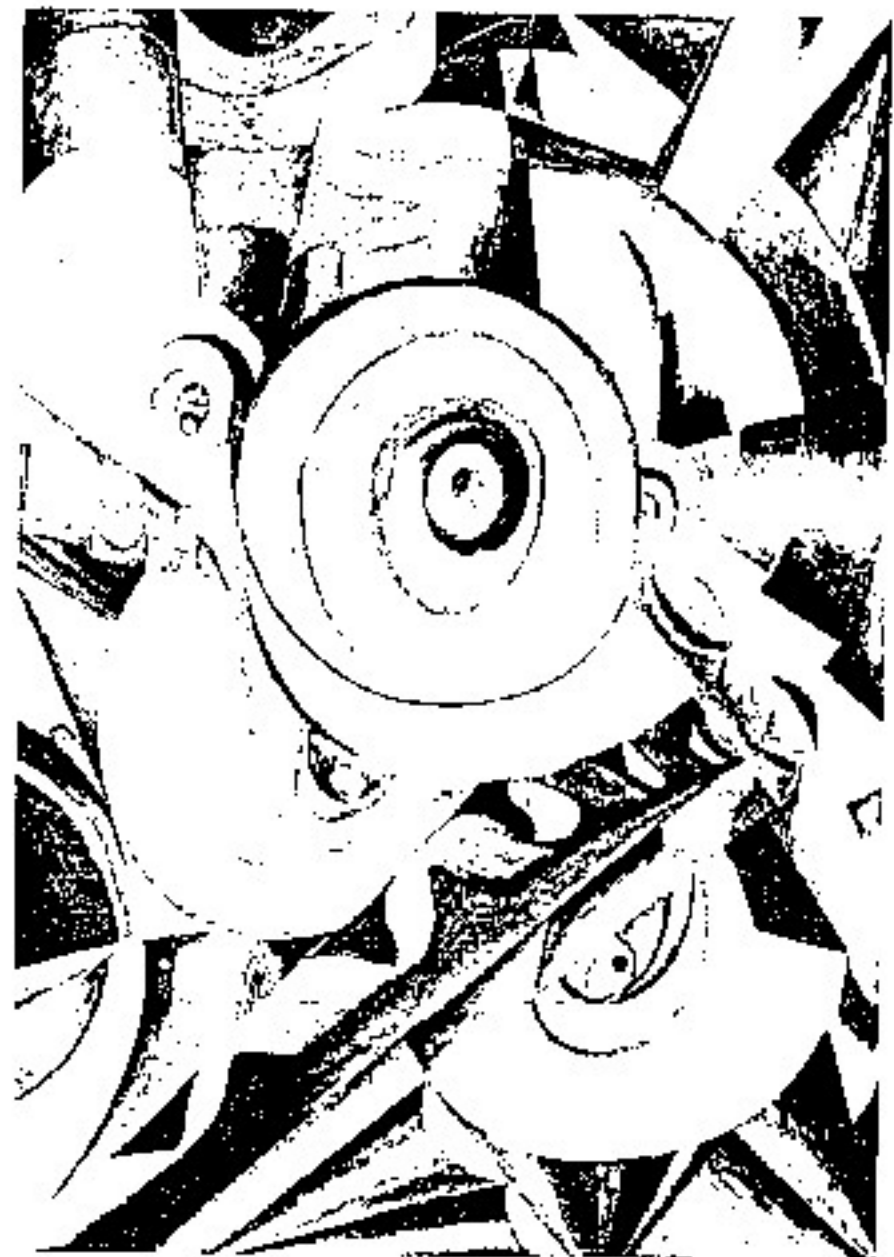


PLATE X

LEFT: *Portrait*. Pencil on wove paper, 8½"x12½" (GBM 230)

CENTER: *New York, 1927*. Oil on canvas, 42"x67" (Reprinted in *CIOPW*; GBM 19)

RIGHT: *Noise Number 13*. Oil on canvas, 43"x59½" (Reprinted in *The Dial*, August 1927, and in *CIOPW*; GBM 20)

mining the artist's technique and in carrying away, for his own use, such gems as he unearths. His mode of investigation is commonly one of organizing his subject into categories — often, as in his poems, opposite categories — and then drawing conclusions. Here, for example, is a fairly typical example of his logical schematics.

- 1) Venetians — lights thin
 shadows thick
 underpainting: of dead colour . . . substantial deadecolouring,
 alterable at will
 design laid in rich transparent pigments, thru wh the (light)
 ground shows thru as wished
 . . . overpainted w successive
 Glazings (— repaintings w transparent colours)
- 2) Rubens — lights thick
 shadows dark
 shadows first laid in . . . underpainting of transp
 brown monochrome (Flemish)
 into which
 , while it's still wet, hightones & highlights are
 painted; in coloured-pigments-mixed-with-white
 . . . overpainting of
 Transp or semiT colours, but lights loaded with
 thick Opaque colour (vs: Flemish — lights thin)

His conclusion — reconstructed here from the shorthand of ditto-marks, equal-signs, and wandering lines of words that make these pages challenging reading — is as follows: “if the Underpainting = the Unconscious, then in (1) [the Venetians], the Unconscious is opaque, solid — & the Conscious is tenuous[; whereas in] (2) [Rubens], the Unconscious is transparent, tenuous — & the Conscious is solid.” Typical, too, is the fact that this sheet turns, after painting, to music: at the bottom are some notes towards a comparison of “the 8vc” and “the spectrum.” The notes, in fact, are full of pieces of musical notation and of comparisons between colors and the sounds of vowels; it was, as he said, “the noise each lemon would make,” and the noise's relation to the color of the fruit, that interested him.

The evidence of these notes suggests that Cummings' investigations into the theoretical relationships of colors, like his studies of anatomy, were no mere academic exercise. The ideas he worked out in his notes in the evening seem to have had their genesis in his studio during the day, and seem intended for use in the studio again. “Certain colours

come out at us," he recorded, "[while] others carry our vision inward"; as examples, he mentioned that "Orange PUSHES us over backward" and that "Blue PULLS us so that we topple forward." Again, his observations on the "Colours & Shape & Form" seen in a flower market read less like theoretical speculations than practical hints for the painter. He noted that "as we proceed along the banks of hues, we are struck directly (primarily) by *Colour*; only secondarily (thru attention, consideration) are we concerned with Shapes." In his usual schematic fashion, he wrote that

we take in, optically, a number of hues at once: according as the hues in any given instant of vision obtain, we may be affected by

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| (A) a number of yellows, e.g. | Chrome
Lemon
Naples | } are felt as variants of
1 hue (y) |
| (B) a progression is felt, e.g. | Vermillion
Orange
Chrome | } motion,
cohesion |
| (C) contrasts occur: e.g. Red, green — | each colour lending
brightness (Int) to its Comp. | |
| (D) Dissonances: harsh chords — | → jumpy; no cohesion. | |

These aspects of the relationships of colors — variants, progressions, contrasts, and dissonances — absorbed much of his attention, not only in theory but in practice as well. Among the notes is a piece of brown paper, blobbed with pigment and stained with oil as though it sat beside him while he painted. On it, in pencil, is a listing of sixteen pairs of colors; opposite is a column indicating the effect paired colors have on one another —

Colours together	change due to contrast
R	purplish
O	yellowish
R	purplish
Y	greenish
R	brilliant
BG	"

— and so forth. And among his paintings is a shirtboard filled with twenty-seven rectangles of color, on which, it appears, he worked out similar relationships.

The notes, then, present Cummings the painter — like Cummings the poet — as a concerned craftsman and a conscious experimenter. A canvas or shirtboard was not simply a space upon which to imitate a piece of the natural world or to represent the design of an inner vision. It was a laboratory in which to investigate his theories, research his ideas, and support or refute his hypotheses; it was a workbench on which to build and test the models he erected in his thought. Again and again he painted the same subjects — Marion, Mount Chocorua, a sea- and skyscape, a single tree and a sickle moon — but in each he was attempting to convey some different aspect of his subject, some new detail or insight, by applying his expanding knowledge of his art. His sunsets, for example: seen as subjects, they are merely repetitious. Seen as experiments, however, they speak directly to his theories. It was here that Cummings elaborated on the idea that orange pushes and blue pulls, here that he built up the strata of colors rising from horizon to sky that demonstrate the effects of progression, contrast, and dissonance, here that he tested the “change due to contrast” which he so carefully worked out. Like Monet’s haystacks and waterlilies, and like Cézanne’s paintings of Montagne Sainte-Victoire, these works bear witness to a mind intent on examining the science, rather than merely the superficialities, of his art.

Cummings the painter, then, was nothing if not serious. For the majority of critics who reviewed his shows, however, intention was not enough: their comments ranged from the mildly enthusiastic to the frankly annoyed. Almost to a man, they called attention to the complexity of his poems and objected that the paintings, in contrast, were simple. Cummings caught the drift of their remarks; in a fictional dialogue between an interviewer and himself he wrote:²¹

. . . your poems are rather hard to understand, whereas your paintings are so easy.

Easy?

Of course — you paint flowers and girls and sunsets; things that everybody understands.

I never met him.

Who?

Everybody.

²¹ *A Miscellany Revised*, pp. 316–317.

The reviews, largely of shows held during the latter part of his career, usually focused on later work. His earliest paintings and drawings, however, could hardly be considered "things that everybody understands." In fact, the current of Cummings' development as a painter ran counter to the direction one might expect of so experimental a poet: beginning as a creator of abstract canvases, he ended as a representational painter.

His first serious pieces clearly reflect the Cubist traditions of the post-war years (see Plate X). In an unpublished letter to his father dated 26 June 1918, he wrote that he had been working on "a fairly large organization of spinning jerking and generally petulant chromatic planes the effect of whose mating upon the gentle spectator might be said to produce a sensation analogous to that obtained by peering into a dynamo-room of a large electric-station," and that he was trying to create "a really unique production" for his friend Scofield Thayer, who "from the first expressed himself as extremely desirous to corner a sample of my 'CRAZYQUILT' technique."

In what was probably his first show — at The Penguin Gallery in New York in April 1919 — this technique became public. He exhibited "Sound Number 2," the title of which places it in the numbered series of large abstract canvases which culminated in "Noise Number 13," a painting later published in *The Dial* and in *CIOPIW* (Plate X). The owner of the Penguin "contented himself with asking me if I minded his asking which side up my pictures went." But, wrote the painter to his mother in great excitement, Albert Léon Gleizes ("the 'first cubist' — probably the most individual, though somewhat cold, abstract painter in America") was greatly impressed by his works and "said later on that they were the 'best things in oil' that he had seen 'in America.'"²² In the 1920 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists — one of the come-one-come-all non-juried shows held each year at the Waldorf — Cummings entered at least three pictures. One, called "a striking bit of post-impressionism" by the critic in the 12 March *New York World*, was titled "Soft Shell Crab Defending Its Mother." The reviewer for the *Evening Post* of 12 March, who seemed to enjoy himself thoroughly, mentioned Cummings' work among "those odd canvases that give this exhibition a sparkle," and gave him several sentences of left-handed approbation:

²² *Selected Letters*, p. 58.

E. E. Cummings entitles one of these [canvases] "Noise No. 5" and the other "Sound No. 5." Of the two we preferred the noise; both of them are interesting. Of course, these irregular patterns of sharp positive color are banners of a small army of theorists, and the theories will either entrance you or set your teeth on edge, according to the bias of your own theories. But if the paintings can be looked at with the eye, if they can be seen as frankly as one sees the pattern of a roll of linoleum, they are bound to be admired.

In the 1925 exhibition of the Society he entered more "linoleum" — an abstract painting which, he told his mother (6 March 1925), measured thirty-nine by sixty inches. By the 1929 show, however, he was content to enter a pair of works simply titled "Portrait." And the 1930 show saw two works ("Garden — Madison Square" and "Garden — National Winter") which, if they were at all like surviving oils depicting the insides of these theatres, were thoroughly representational.

The transition from abstract to representational painter was occurring, then, in the late 1920s. One of the few dated paintings in *CIOPW* — an oil entitled "New York, 1927" — stands as a kind of bridge between his early and later styles (Plate X). It is a nude, probably of Anne Barton, set on a background of swirling buildings and swelling curves in the manner of the "Noise" paintings. The contrast is abrupt: the nude is thoroughly representational, the background more expressionistic. From then on, as Cummings' work became more generally representational, portraits and landscapes replaced noises and sounds. His publications mirrored the change. *The Dial*, which had published his early line drawings and, in "Noise Number 13," the only abstract painting in its history,²³ reproduced nothing of his after 1927. By 1931, the works chosen for *CIOPW* were nearly all representational. Perhaps the poet, nearing his fortieth birthday, underwent an accession of conservatism; perhaps, on the other hand, he mastered the disciplines of perspective and portraiture and turned to representational painting as the more challenging mode. Whatever his motives, he clearly renounced his youthful enthusiasms. In a letter written to a fellow artist twenty-five years after his "New York, 1927" painting, he asserted:

your hunch is correct: am 101pe contra "nonobjective" "art" (NYCity, also, is bursting with untalent). Incidentally, seems a trifle odd that all these super-

²³ Nicholas Joost, *Scofield Thayer and the Dial: An Illustrated History* (Carbondale, 1964), p. 224.

submorons should worship Picasso; who used to make pictures, & once declared there's no such thing as "abstract" painting & cried out "respect the object" . . .²⁴

Two years later he wrote to his German translator: "As for my pictures, they are little known: possibly because an artist who truly 'pushes abstraction beyond the abstract' returns to Nature; & this I long ago did, whereas contemporary America wallows in 'nonrepresentational' 'art.'"²⁵

Renouncing abstract art, Cummings also renounced his standing with the critics of his day. Or perhaps the reviewers, a thoroughly professional lot, felt that a man so established in one field could be making only amateurish forays into another. For by 1931 Cummings the poet was indeed established: the ninety-nine paintings and drawings made public in *C/OPW* were already overshadowed by five volumes of poetry, a play, and a prose journal, and the choice between a career as poet and one as painter had, apparently, been made for him. In any case, the review of his show at the Painters' and Sculptors' Gallery in 1931 was one of the last completely favorable ones he would get. The reviewer in the Sunday *New York Times* of 6 December liked it because, like the poetry, it was "modern."

The ellipses and distortions in the canvases, like the ellipses and distortions in the poetry, transcend rather than violate established rules. . . . The fine self-portrait against a figured curtain, the lovely New Hampshire landscape called "day" (all the titles are lower-case) which recalls Cézanne in both its technique and composition, show what Mr. Cummings can do with oil and watercolor. . . . Failing a ready-made device — such as the substitution of lower-case for traditional capitals — with which to flabbergast the Rotarians, Cummings imparts an outré air to his drawing by startling eliminations and equally startling emphases. In the A-B-C-D landscape series he lets himself go in a synchromatic orgy; in the portrait group — "eyes," "face," "hair," — he tries an interesting psychological trick. Here, after all, is the keynote of the show. Cummings the painter, like Cummings the poet, is first of all an intelligent experimenter.

Reviewers of his later shows, contrasting poetry and painting, applauded less. A critic for the *New York Sun* (3 February 1934) wrote that "you never could imagine [the paintings] to be by the author of 'Eimi.' They are thin, uncertain and separated by some curious wall of inhibitions from the medium." The 1944 exhibition at the American British Art Center — a full-blown event, complete with an eight-

²⁴ *Selected Letters*, p. 217.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

page glossy catalogue listing the forty-five oils and fifteen watercolors and even reproducing a photograph of one — elicited only mixed response. The work, according to the *Herald Tribune* (27 February 1944) was largely “slight and indeterminate”; although in several of the paintings “he seems to know exactly what he is about and paints to good purpose,” the critic lamented what he called a lack of “solicitude for craftsmanship as such.” The reviewer of the *Times* (5 March 1944), while noting that many of the paintings were “completely charming: delicate yet firm, imaginative yet coherent,” had little else to say. Even Henry McBride, art critic for *The Dial* during the years it published Cummings’ work, had difficulty assessing the show. In an extended piece in the *Sun* (4 March 1944) he compared the watercolors to the work of John Marin and noted with some surprise that “The paintings are not so very difficult . . . In fact they are not difficult at all, for, though some of the best of them are done in the abstract manner, a whole new company of believers in the abstract have appeared here this winter and will readily grasp the painter’s intentions and say ‘Yes.’” Trying to account for the distinction between the writing and the painting, McBride speculated that “The paintings . . . are secret growths. They have the purities of mushrooms blooming in darkness. Isn’t that curious?” Whatever his curious metaphor means, he found himself politely talking about other things — Cummings’ prose, Freud, and our relations with Britain, for example — instead of the paintings.

Of the next major New York show — again at the American British Art Center, in 1949 — the critics had even less to say. On 22 May, polite notices appeared in the *Times*, noting the lack of “dazzling cleverness” in these “unpretentious, oddly moving evocations,” and in the *Herald Tribune*, observing the “tidy and rather fragile spirit, touched at times by a sudden gust of passion.” The critic for the *Sun* (20 May 1949), finding his work “full of charm and distinction,” and noting that “it is apparent that E. E. Cummings the painter could have had a career of note independently of E. E. Cummings the writer,” touched the pith of reviewers’ attitudes during these years: “he is a personage of known stature and the paintings he does in his off moments . . . could be less than they are and yet take considerable rank for their ‘association interest.’” That these are the products of “off moments” and only of interest because of their association with the famous writer — that Cummings, in other words, was something other

than a genuine and dedicated student of painting — was an idea that echoed throughout much of the criticism. Always taken primarily as a writer, Cummings never quite convinced his public that he was also, and seriously, a painter.

The fifty-one paintings in the 1949 show were the last the New York critics were to see during Cummings' life. He found a more congenial atmosphere for his exhibitions in Rochester, where, with the large private collection of his works assembled by his friends Hildgarde and Sibley Watson as a base, he had several shows and poetry readings. There, critics were more appreciative, and Cummings, to judge by their response to interviews with him, was inclined not to worry about his work. "The poet-painter," says a reviewer in 1954, ". . . talked of 'recognizable things' in paintings — trees, for instance. 'I like trees,' he said, with the happy air of one long ago liberated from [the] school of non-representational painters, and now merrily painting as he pleases . . ." Like their colleagues in New York, though, the Rochester reviewers also insisted on treating Cummings not simply as a painter but (in Charles Norman's phrase) "as a man who 'also paints.'"

Even William Carlos Williams, in the *Arts Digest*, managed only a page on Cummings' paintings before retreating to a discussion of his poetry; and even that page suggests that Cummings was "disinclined" to devote enough time to painting because "he has other fish to fry."²⁶ The later reviews, from the devastating one by Brian O'Doherty of the 1963 retrospective show ("his best period . . . was when he was around 7") to the thoughtfully disappointed assessment by Hilton Kramer of the 1968 Gotham Book Mart exhibition ("the impression conveyed here is exceedingly fragmentary and unprofessional"), sang the same refrain: Cummings was primarily a writer and only incidentally a painter.²⁷

As early as 1923, Gorham Munson announced with prophetic insight that "A complete study of Cummings should take penetrating account of his painting and drawing, and no estimate of his literary work can begin without noting the important fact that Cummings is a painter."²⁸ What are we to conclude about Cummings' paintings?

²⁶ XXIX (1 December 1954), 7.

²⁷ *The New York Times*, 30 October 1963 and 16 March 1968.

²⁸ *Secession*, No. 5 (July 1923), 2. Reprinted in S. V. Baum, ed., *ESTI: e e c: E. E. Cummings and the Critics* (East Lansing, 1962), p. 9.

According to his friends Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska, he was in later years an avid reader of art criticism and reviews, and found little that he liked: an article would often impell him into fulminations against the contemporary trends. Perhaps there was a touch of envy in his response, the envy of a man who, having achieved a remarkable success in one discipline, longed for recognition in another. For Cummings chose to be an Artist — not merely a man excelling in narrow specialities, but a practitioner of art conversant with all of its manifestations. He established himself in prose, poetry, and drama; he schooled himself in oil, watercolor, pencil, charcoal, ink, and pastel; his notes reveal his ardent interest in music, both in its history and its theories. Much of his writing reveals his concern for political and social developments, his keen ear for the accents of his fellows, and his sense of humor. Here, as his poems reveal, was a man striving to unite what the world so often fragmented.

By way of comparison, perhaps it is not unfair to say of Cummings that he tried to embody in himself the same qualities and interests that marked the unique journal of the arts that gave him his start — *The Dial*. Its editors, Watson and Thayer, encouraged and promoted his work; and "Their method," in the words of a recent student of *The Dial*, "was to publish, as if at random, the best available work in the new psychology, the new history, the new anthropology, the new philosophy, the new poetry, criticism, painting, and sculpture. Their aim . . . was to create a magazine which displayed the value of imagination in an age of science, the uses of art in the realm of ideas, the nature of spirit in the family of man."²⁰ The same concern for form and detail, the same insistence on taste, that marked the journal also marked Cummings' approach to his work; the description of the magazine might well be a description of those things he most valued. It was with a musician's ear, a poet's thought, and a painter's eye that he worked, constantly improving his sense of the intercommunication among the arts. Unrestricted by the boundaries of a single art, he welcomed aesthetic insights wherever he found them.

And he found them, it seems, everywhere. There is a page among his unpublished notes that stands, perhaps, as a portmanteau of his various interests. On it, he first philosophizes on the meaning of the word *feeling*. He next adorns the margin with a sketch of a seated

²⁰ William Wasserstrom, *The Time of The Dial* (Syracuse, 1963), p. 2.

nude. And finally he writes a definition that nicely describes the eclecticism of his own work:

a painting, a poem, should be like a pile of jackstraws: a heap of strains, of stresses, enormous and minute, each necessarily and incredibly through its neighbor related to and responsible for an entirety fortunately existing through the impossibility of a single dislocation or subtraction, whose niceness easily defeats the merest tool of thought, so that down comes the bungled breathless whole.

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