

Norman J. Wagner, Professor Emeritus, Atlanta College of Art

Norman was born in Berwyn, Illinois in 1938. He studied printmaking and design at the Institute of Design in Chicago where he received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Visual Design in 1961 and a Master of Science Degree of Visual Design in 1968. During this time he worked under the guidance of printmaker Misch Kohn and designer-typographer Gordon Martin. While studying at the Institute he gained valuable experience working in the design laboratory of Container Corporation of America. In 1963, representatives of the Atlanta School of Art invited Wagner to begin plans for the development of a printmaking department and physical plant for the proposed Memorial Arts Center, which had not yet broken ground. In his subsequent years as department head, the printmaking facilities at the Atlanta College of Art developed to include separate studios for etching, typography, lithography, paper making, serigraphy, and a computer and laser printer station.

Norman has taught courses in drawing, etching, relief printmaking, lithography, serigraphy, paper making, book arts and interdisciplinary collaboration and has coordinated numerous printmaking workshops at Atlanta College of Art. He was co-coordinator for the Annual Conference of the Southern Graphics Council held at the Atlanta College of Art on March 6, 7, and 8 of 1986.

Norman considers his art to be experimental in nature, intuitive and introspective, yet not adhering to any particular mode of expression. His working repertoire includes; drawing, subtractive relief printmaking, lithography, serigraphy, typesetting-letterpress, aspects of handmade paper, assem-

blage, assemblage sculpture, installation art, and digital photomontage. He collaborated with Atlanta College of Art late colleague Bill Nolan in the design of Nolan's book, HANDPRINT, which chronicles 30 years of teaching art students, Copyright © 2010 by William I. Nolan. Norman has exhibited his work regionally, nationally and internationally.

Collections

Agnes Scott College, Atlanta

Arkansas State University, Arkansas

Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama

Brenau University, Gainesville, Georgia

Coca-Cola USA Fine Art Collection, Atlanta

Columbus Museum, Columbus Georgia

Fine Art Museum, Florida State, University, Tallahassee, Florida

Georgia Council for the Arts, Atlanta

Georgia Museum of Art, Athens Georgia

High Museum of Art, Atlanta

Institute of Design Archive, Chicago

Isabel Anderson Comer Museum & Art Center, Sylacauga, Alabama

LaGrange College, LaGrange, Georgia

Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, Georgia

The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta

Nelson Atkinson Museum, Kansas City

Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia

"It's unreasonable for the viewer to demand explicitness from plastic mediums that allow for perplexing and surreal juxtapositions of elements."

Norman J. Wagner

CONGLOMERATE ↔ INKLINGS ↔ UNAWARE ↔ FORM

LOOKING BACK INTO THE FUTURE...

a circuitous search for continuity

I am often confused by and have difficulty determining whether or not my artwork is the result of "Conceptual Thinking." I do rationalize that; if the creative processes of visual artists can in any way be likened to that of composers of music I might just have a way to justify what I do. However, I would never be so presumptuous as to place myself on the same level as those who seem to be the source of the emanation. What I do know is that one significant influence on my creative process stems from a statement I read that was made by Igor Stravinsky to Robert Craft in an interview titled, "*A Composer's good intentions have got to be paved with Hell*", published in the WFMT Perspective fine arts magazine in April of 1962. There he stated:

The composer works through a perceptual, not a conceptual process. He perceives, he selects, he combines and is not in the least aware at what point meanings of a different sort and significance grow into his work. All he knows or cares about is his apprehension of the contour of the form, for the form is everything. ¹

The artwork that I create assumes a premise I stated in 1963: there exists in life an inevitable interrelationship between all things. Its materialization of the past several years reflects contemplation of the natural woodland surroundings of my home in the Midway community north of Alpharetta, Georgia. Manifested in this work are interconnections of my perceptions of physical, sociological, and psychological experiences

¹ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft. "*A Composer's good intentions have got to be paved with Hell.*"_WFMT Perspective. II, (April 1962), page 39.

pertaining to that environment with my memories of the past. In recent years I have felt the pulse of a second cycle in my life. The experiences of this second cycle are strongly linked in a similar manner to the first cycle, a cycle represented by environmental experiences that impressed my boyhood. I grew up not far from Chicago in the rural surroundings of the Village of Stickney, Illinois. The region consisted of large prairies and marshlands historically known as the Chicago Portage. "Progressive changes" began to occur in this region beginning in the early nineteenth century—significant to be noted was the creation of the Illinois and Michigan canal in 1848. Well into the twentieth century the landscape of this territory was gradually transformed through industrial and residential development and environmental changes continued to occur during my boyhood, my adolescence, and early adult life.

THE CHICAGO PORTAGE 1673—1836

THIS MARKS THE WEST END OF THE CARRYING OR CONNECTING PLACE UNITING THE WATERS OF THE ST. LAWRENCE RIVER AND THE GREAT LAKES WITH THOSE OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER, ITS TRIBUTARIES AND THE GULF OF MEXICO. THE EARLIEST FACTOR IN DETERMINING CHICAGO'S COMMERCIAL SUPREMACY. AN ARTERY OF TRAVEL USED BY THE ABORIGINES IN THEIR MIGRATIONS AND LATER BY JOLIET, MARQUETTE, LA SALLE, TONTI AND THE FUR TRADERS OF NEW FRANCE. AN EARLY STRATEGIC POINT, IN THE WARS INCIDENT TO THE – WINNING OF THE NORTH WEST FOR THE SETTLERS + DISCOVERED BY JOLIET AND MARQUETTE IN 1673 ²

In late September of 1964, my wife Mary and I took up residence near Emory University. We lived in a garage apartment on Oakdale Road in Druid Hills, one of the oldest communities in Atlanta. The garage apartment was located in a pastoral setting on the

² Historical marker erected by the Chicago Historical Society in pursuance of a plan to give posterity the facts of Chicago's early history. The Chicago Portage National Historic Site is located in Portage Woods Forest Preserve and Ottawa Trail Woods Forest Preserve. Portage Woods Forest Preserve is located at 4800 S. Harlem in Lyons, Illinois, on the west side of Harlem Avenue (7200W) just north of the Stevenson Expressway (Interstate 55).

aging estate of George and Roxanne Steffner, who were our first landlords and at that time were both approaching the age of ninety.

In May of 1978, Mary, my son Matt (then twelve months old), and I moved from Druid Hills to the small Midway community north of Alpharetta, Georgia to reestablish a rural setting for our life—the beginning of the second cycle. Since that time these rural surroundings have also been transformed through industrial and residential development, although now it seems at a faster rate. During my boyhood, my adolescence, and early adult life, I played, explored and worked through the first cycle with enthusiasm—never waning, however, upon entering the second cycle as an adult I perceive the similar and rapidly occurring changes as intrusive and negative. By creating my artwork, I attempt to bring significance and meaning to life processes that are at times perplexing.

No Trespassing

For a while they dwelled in the buffer zone,
These two wood ducks,
Going in..., coming out...

This was the land of the Chicago Sanitary District. At the corner of 41st Street and Ridgeland Avenue, a portion of the prairie was leased to the Village of Stickney for a fee of one dollar yearly for a period of ninety nine years—then surveyed for a recreational area for the village children and adults. Most of the adults and youths who grew up there referred to this land as the Ridgeland Ditch. In the 1950's people called the first baseball field on the site 'Ozark Field'—named after a semi-professional baseball team, 'The Ozarks,' organized and managed by my father, Fred A. Wagner. The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, formerly the Chicago Sanitary District continues in this era to lease land to the Village of Stickney. A recreational area expansion, "Rench Park", on the 42nd block of Ridgeland Avenue consists of two

baseball fields that are currently used by the Stickney-Forest View Little League baseball teams.

It was there...

I played amidst the purple liatris

Profusely spotted with fluttering orange monarchs.

My small body plowed intensely

Through the tall thick mass of cut weeds.

I mashed them down and rested.

The cuts on my fingers burned.

I think of...

Arrowheads found, and horsetails.

How Aunt Anna's irises continue to adorn the earth with beauty

Down in Georgia.

I think of...

The day I filled the shoe box with spiny fruit balls

Fallen from a large sweet gum tree.

Were you there, Bumper?

Or was it you, Sinbad?

On our frequent walks together

We gathered vestiges from the crooked creek woodlands.

Where have you gone this time, Scrubby?

Last week in the vets garden we saw lantana beds

Filled with clusters of yellow swallowtails.

I think of...

Those ominous secret towers

Behind the chain link barbed wire fence.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

Quotations from Max Ernst, by William S. Lieberman

Certainly little Max took pleasure in being frightened by these somnolescent visions and later voluntarily provoked hallucinations of the same kind by looking at wood panelings, clouds, wallpaper, unplastered walls and so forth, to release his imagination. When asked, "What is your favorite occupation?" he always answered "seeing."³

Being a seer, observer or viewer is essential to my process of creating new imagery.

Enter, enter, have no fear of being blinded—One rainy day at an inn by the seaside, I discovered myself recalling how in childhood the panel of mahogany opposite my bed had served as the optical stimulant to visions in somnolence. Now I am impressed by the obsession imposed upon my excited gaze, of which had been deepened and exposed by countless scrubblings. I decide to investigate symbolism of this obsession and to aid my meditative and hallucinatory powers, I take from the boards a series of drawings. At random I drop pieces of paper on the floor and then rub them with black lead. By examining the drawings thus obtained, I am surprised at the sudden intensification of my visionary capacities.

*My curiosity awakened I marvel and am led to examine in the same way all sorts of materials that fall into my vision—leaves and their veins, the ragged edges of sack cloth, the palette knives' markings on a "modern" painting, thread unrolled from its spool and so forth—that end with a kiss (*The Bride of the Wind*).⁴*

³ William S. Lieberman, Max Ernst, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961, page 8.

⁴ Ibid, page 14

All of these works suggest an overwhelming sense of motion through time and space. They vibrate with the incongruous and irrational qualities generally attributed to dreams although artists know they are the original breath of reality. The elements of the collages, banal engravings from old books, are metamorphosed, transformed. Birds become men and men become birds. Catastrophes become hilarious. Every thing is astonishing, heartbreaking and possible.⁵

⁵ Ibid, page 18

Frottage

The impetus for each of the artworks created in the series, QUAGMIRE IN THE QUIET is the technique called *frottage*, and is well known and used by many artists, and others around the world.

Definition of *frottage*: the technique of creating a design by rubbing (as with a pencil) over an object placed underneath the paper.

To initially create a frottage I place or affix the paper using pushpins or small nails to stationary surfaces, such as textured floors, wood, walls, and the surfaces of tree bark, and the surfaces of dead, debarked trees. Drawing materials include: pencils, graphite sticks, lithographic crayons, and assorted color crayons. I study the rubbings (*frottages*) taken from the various surfaces, seeking imagery through a psychological phenomenon called *pareidolia* (*par-I-DOH-lee-a*). Images discovered develop and emerge and are gradually defined with drawing and watercolor. The end result is never predetermined, and up to completion there are always surprises.

Definition of *pareidolia*: SEEING IMAGERY IN PATTERNS, seeing recognizable objects or patterns in otherwise random or unrelated objects or patterns. It's a form of *apophenia*, which is a more general term for the human tendency to seek patterns in random information. Everyone experiences it from time to time.

Leonardo da Vinci wrote about *pareidolia* as an artistic device: “If you look at any walls spotted with various stains or with a mixture of different kinds of stones, if you are about to invent some scene you will be able to see in a resemblance to various different landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys, and various groups of hills,” he wrote in a passage in one of his extensive notebooks.