Romancing the Flats: Cleveland Artists, 1920-1995

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One of the simplest approaches to understanding a work of art is to view it as it reflects the time in which it was created. This is because art marches right along with history. It becomes especially clear when many artists over a period of time create images of the same scene.

A perfect demonstration of the connection between art and history is the large amount of work by artists who, through the years, have been attracted to one particular space in Cleveland, Ohio. That particular space is called The Flats. Located along the meandering Cuyahoga River in a valley about a half-mile wide, it is the place where Cleveland was born. The river which flows into Lake Erie is a site of industrial growth, decay and revival, especially apparent during the period shortly after the end of the First World War right up to the brink of the twenty-first century.

A brief examination of the work of fifteen Cleveland artists illustrates two points about the relationship between art and history.

First, it tells the viewer a story about The Flats and the way it has changed over time. And second, it tells the viewer that making art itself takes on new forms over time. August Biehle (1885-1979) and George Adomeit (1879-1967) are two major Cleveland artists who frequently went to The Flats with sketchbooks, paints and easels. Skilled and talented, they had studied at art academies both at home and abroad. They certainly were aware of, and sometimes influenced, by Post-Impressionists, Futurists, Cubists, and Precisionists. Yet, during the 1920s they clung to their own vocabulary when they by-passed the political iconography of the European schools. Instead, both Biehle and Adomeit concentrated on artistic issues having to do with formalism, line, shape, color, light and harmony. Republic Steel Along the Cuyahoga (1924) by Biehle, for instance, is a realistic depiction of an industrial view on the banks of the river. The composition, almost bucolic in mood, is balanced not only by the placement of the images, but also by the use of color. Subtle shades of brown factory buildings move horizontally across the canvas and the blue sky is repeated in shades of blue in the river below. In contrast to the cool and somber pigment of the major elements of the composition, he has accented the center of the canvas with an orangey-red boxcar. George Adomeit also presents a recognizable scene of the same area in his painting titled The Bridge (circa 1920). He uses a more variegated palette. Applying his colors in thick overlapping layers of blocks of paint, he has achieved realistic textures in the surface of the steel and stone...
in the composition. The geometric shapes of the colorful tugs, barges, and outbuildings contrast with the fluffiness of the white billowing clouds of smoke from the factory smokestacks. Although both of these artists can be considered realists, their painting may also reflect the painting style of the Ash Can School popular at that time.1,2

Another artist of that same period who frequently painted scenes in The Flats is Carl Gaertner (1898-1952). An example of his eloquently expressive style is a scene of The Flats titled Steel Mills On the Cuyahoga (1928). The composition is framed by man-made objects such as buildings and bridges, through which, with daylight almost gone, the river looks beyond into the brightness of the setting sun and perhaps the fire of factory furnaces. Because of the time of day, the objects in very dark blue seem unreal. The device of placing a frame on the outer edges of a canvas through which the viewer looks was often used by nineteenth century artists of the Hudson River school. But Gaertner’s almost abstract painting of a scene at the edge of night foretells the beginning of a move away from realism.

Printmaking became a popular medium of artistic expression in the 1930s and Cleveland artists were involved in that phase of art history. Kalman Kubinyi (1904-1967) was in the forefront of printmaking revival during the 1930s. History tells us that those were the years of the Great Depression and Kubinyi realized that art which could be made in multiples could be sold for less money than a single oil painting. In response to that fact, Kubinyi founded the Print-A-Month Club with the hope of generating a public interest in the purchase of moderately-priced artwork. An example of one of those prints is a dry point etching by Kubinyi of a scene in the Flats titled Winter Quarters. In that print, Kubinyi has simplified the image by omitting details. But with judicious use of cross-hatching and parallel ink lines, he has created light and shadow. Another artist from the same time is Jolan G. Bettleheim (1902-1972). Her dry point etching is titled Under the High Level Bridge. For this print, she first made a black and white charcoal drawing. Remarkably, along with the sharp angles and struts of the composition, she was able to repeat the slightly smudgy aspect of the charcoal in her etching. The choice of her subject matter permits her to respond to the influence of Cubism.

In the late 1930s, the use of technology in the creation of art began to make an impact. The camera in the hands of Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971) emphasized the importance of the photograph as an art form. According to her biographer, Vickie Goldberg, “Margaret Bourke-White frequently prowled The Flats in a state of excitement.”3 The photograph titled James Davidson, Ore Boat In Dry Dock is an image featuring a boat in the Cuyahoga River. It reminds the view of Kubinyi’s dry point etching of a similar scene. But the photography, making use of technology, concentrated on design and composition and expressed the beauty she saw in the functional.
In addition to smokestacks and river boats, bridges have been important components of The Flats. Ora Colman's (1858-1940) oil painting titled *Dominance of the City* depicts the river with the raised bridge as a major element of his composition. In this painting the artist used delicate shades of gray-green and pale blue. He handled his brushes with such sophistication and finesse that it takes time for the viewer to see buildings emerge out of the mist. Colman made the industrial scene picturesque by the use of atmospheric perspective.

Martin Linsey (b. 1912) is another artist who, like Bourke-White, loved to prowl The Flats. He now lives in New Mexico, and when he returns to Cleveland for visits he continues to go to The Flats. He paints with water colors on site and one of his most compelling paintings is titled *The Flats* (1940). Like Colman who is from an earlier period, Linsey, too, depicts the drawbridge. Meticulously crafted with the use of a sunny palette, Linsey, formerly of the Cleveland Museum of Art staff, presents a timeless cheerfulness.

Early history of The Flats includes not only commerce and industry, but also the people who lived in that location. David Mink's (b. 1912) *Landscape Near the Flats* (1940) depicts modest residences on a winding street. He expresses the neighborliness of the community by crumpling the dwellings together as the street winds away into the distance. The palette this artist used is shades of gray, a metaphor for a rainy day. This is confirmed by wet pavement, as it mirrors a lamp post and the branches of leafless trees. The painting suggests a narrative which tells us that the lone person with a green umbrella is walking towards factories whose smokestacks we see in the distance.

Lawrence Blazey (b. 1902), though well-known as a ceramicist, frequently exhibited both water colors and oils in the May Shows at the Cleveland Museum of Art. An example of his attraction to The Flats is an oil painting titled *Grain Elevator Under the Hi-Level Bridge* (circa 1940). Like David Mink, Lawrence Blazey used neutral colors for this painting. But where Mink depicts a rainy day, Blazey emphasized light and shadow. The lines and angles of buildings and rooftops are accentuated by bright light from the right. This gives the viewer a hint of the precisionist Charles Scheeler who saw the industrial scene as serene and orderly.

By 1950 there is evidence that Cleveland artists, still presenting scenes from The Flats, were experimenting with non-realist images. A very clear example of progression into a more contemporary style is found in the work of August Biehle. His painting of 1924 titled *Republic Steel* (previously described) echoed the lush realistic images of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. But by 1950, a quarter of a century later, Biehle demonstrated his experimentation with modernity. He created two paintings of an identical scene, each titled *Sohio Cracking Plant Cleveland Flats*. Always a master draftsman, he fulfilled his promise as an outstanding colorist. The image of the cracking plant is of non-realistic, lush colors. He has taken what could have been a mundane industrial scene and created a cathedral-like structure.
The image is easily recognizable in spite of imaginative use of color. The second image, also non-realistic, demonstrates his experiment with style. He has altered the second painting with his version of Cubism. His method was to play with elements of the Golden Section, placing an overlay of rectangles, arcs, and triangles. It is almost as though the viewer is looking at the painting reflected in a shattered mirror.

Up to this point, the artists from early 1920s to 1950 presented images which included oil, water color, prints and photographs, most of them more realistic than abstract, timidly experimenting with Cubism.

Beginning in the late 1950s, the prominence of The Flats as an industrial center began to fade and it became a site of abandoned buildings, broken or boarded-up windows, rusting pylons, neglected pavements and shattered sidewalks. Artists with their sketch pads and easels turned to other sources for inspiration.

Then, after a little over a decade, some time in the mid-70s, rental rates became affordable, and The Flats became an attractive place for artists' studios. At the same time, a few commercial enterprises began to trickle back to the area. There remained some disorder and blight, but there was also a sense of revival. The area was emerging from desolation to development.

But just as the scene in The Flats had changed from the first half of the century, so had the world of the artist. Sophisticated cameras and advanced technology such as computers and xerography equipment had joined the sketch pad and the easel, sometimes replacing the easel altogether. The culture of the 1960s had freed the artist from academic strictures. For example, students were encouraged to expand their vision of the world, and to include everyday objects and everyday events. They were encouraged to explore an idea, to express an opinion in their art. The prophetic words of Paul Klee began to resonate among Cleveland’s late twentieth century artists. Paul Klee said, “Art does not reproduce the visual—it renders visual.”

Following that thought, the art community became more acutely aware of idea and process. So, by the time Cleveland artists returned to The Flats, it was different and they were different.

Now, in the second half of the twentieth century there are many artists whose work depicts the contemporary urban landscape of The Flats. A brief description of five contemporary artists tells the story of both the change in the scene and the change in the history of art.

Penny Rakoff (b. 1951), a professor of art at Akron University, makes her home in Cleveland Heights. Her favorite medium is photography. An untitled night scene at the site of the Eagle Street Bridge overlooking the Cuyahoga is in stark contrast to the earlier work of Margaret Bourke-White. She is less interested in “design and the beauty of the functional” as was Bourke-White. Instead, Rakoff shows snow-covered tires strewn on the river bank,
emphasizing neglect and abandonment. Because of the time of day, her photograph
emphasizes a mood of loneliness and melancholy.

Masumi Hayashi, born at the end of the Second World War in an Arizona relocation
camp, came to Cleveland in 1982. Now a professor of art at Cleveland State University, she
is widely acclaimed for her panoramic photo-collages which often depict the industrial
landscape. In the image titled *Steel Mill, Clay Road*, Hayashi, an environmental activist, leaves
no doubt about her dismay as she displays a vast stretch of parched earth with steel mills in
the background. She seems to be asking, “What is the connection between industry and its
effect on environment?”5

The esthetics of Hayashi’s work is dominated by both idea and process. Using a tripod,
focusing on the horizon line, she shoots a sequence of photos by rotating the camera slightly
after each shot. She repeats the process above, below, and at the horizon line. She shoots
scores of pictures for one composition. Each measures 3-1/2” by 5”. She creates a panoramic
view by collaging each small photograph. The completed montage can often measure 2 feet
high and 5 to 7 feet long.6

Laurence Channing (b. 1942) has been head of publications at the Cleveland Museum
of Art since 1985. His compelling pictures are charcoal drawings—a medium dating back to
the days of the old masters and he brings that technique into the 1990s. Many of his images
are almost photographic in their clarity. His drawing titled *Smoke Stacks* is an example of that
clarity. From the vantage point at the foreground, the viewer looks across a street into the
distance at silent smokestacks. They are silhouetted against a pallid sky, and beyond are the
steel-girded bridges.

Channing begins the process of creating a work when he uses a camera to take dozens
of color photographs. Using the photographs as models, he then re-invents and alters the
scenes so that the finished drawing is not identical to any specific site and the scene looks only
slightly familiar. Channing uses no pencil, pen or brush, but confines himself to ground-up
charcoal applied with various sized stomps which he makes from piano felts.7

Another example of late twentieth century art is the wall construction by Don Harvey
(b. 1941). After earning a masters degree from Tyler School of Art at Temple University in
Philadelphia, Harvey moved to Ohio in 1971. He worked at the Akron Art Museum before
taking a position to teach painting at the University of Akron. By the 1980s he had made his
home on the Cuyahoga River in The Flats. He was forced to move from The Flats when his
work began to outgrow the space. The environment of the area—especially its fragility—has
continued to preoccupy him and he expresses it in his work.

Harvey is among those contemporary artists who “make art” from an idea. Most of
the materials he uses do not have previous fine arts association. For example, he frequently
combines aluminum, steel, rubber and plastic. In addition, he often uses a camera, and through advanced technology, the image is printed on metal. His construction titled River and Lake is about 6 feet high and 9 feet wide. The photograph, which is on aluminum, is of a watery site—perhaps the mouth of the Cuyahoga River entering Lake Erie. A steel slab is on the left which supports plastic tubes filled with harmful fluid. On the same slab, he has printed a list of chemicals and in the image of the water he has printed a list of endangered fish. The piece is about industry and its effect on lakes and rivers.

Finally, the urban landscapes of printmaker Phyllis Seltzer (b. 1928) clearly demonstrate the theme that art marches along with history. Through happenstance, she chose the very site, Republic Steel, which August Biehle had chosen 70 years earlier. His peaceful, realistic depiction of a factory nestled on the quiet waters of the Cuyahoga was titled Republic Steel Along the Cuyahoga. Seltzer, on the other hand, titles her heat transfer print Hot Stuff. With brilliant non-realistic colors she focuses on the metal structures of conduits and towers. No longer does the viewer see smoke rising from smokestacks because the computer-run factory has eliminated pollution. Nor does the artist include the river; the viewer sees bright blue sky above the geometric shapes of sturdy metal buildings.

In addition to the difference in the composition, Seltzer’s technique has moved far beyond the oil paintings of early twentieth century art. Always fascinated with technology she began to experiment with xerographic equipment in the 1970s and by the mid-1980s she was able to combine both painting and printmaking. She uses her own oil paintings as plates for heat transfer prints. The process actually begins when she takes a photograph, then uses it as a model for her painting; next she proceeds to state-of-the-art copying and heat transfer equipment. The final image requires a great deal of hands-on finishing, including collage and touch-up. All of this is very time-consuming, expensive, and complicated. But the result is worth it. The print so closely echoes the painting that even the brush strokes are often visible.

In conclusion, we have seen that The Flats has beckoned artists from the early days when industry seemed a romantic and picturesque endeavor and it has continued to attract artists when industry seems ominous and threatening. Artwork has reflected changing styles of making art as the decades moved along. Through all this time, artists expressed beauty, optimism, caution, anger and hope, malaise and revival. These days, scarcely a week goes by without some item in both local and national news concerning The Flats. And Cleveland artists have always been its constant and caring spokespersons.
Endnotes


