

NC 0040736 4



T173

Copy 2
Copy 2.

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

IN THE REALM OF ABSTRACTION
KANDINSKY AND KING

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART & DESIGN
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE B.A. DEGREE -
ART AND DESIGN EDUCATION

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

BY:
CAROLINE MARY BOND

MAY 1982

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

A	Landscape and Tower 1908	Kandinsky
B	Church in Murau 1910	Kandinsky
C	Blue Mountain 1909	Kandinsky
D	Railroad near Murnau 1909	Kandinsky
E	Composition 4	Kandinsky
F	Composition 7	Kandinsky
G	Night Mist	Pollock
H	Forgotten Dream	Adolph Goltjeb
I	Evening Ringsend	King
J	October 1956	Hilton
K	November 1964	King
L	Baggot Street	King
M	Berlin Suite	King
N	Sounion	King
O	Verge	King
P	Park at Saint Cloud	Kandinsky
Q	Improvisation 14 1910	Kandinsky
R	Thought-Going-Line 1923	Kandinsky

PLATO: "I do not now intend by beauty of shapes which most people would expect, such as that of living creatures or pictures, but....straight lines and curves and the surface or solid forms produced out of these by lathes and rulers and squares...These things are not beautiful relatively, like other things, but always and naturally and absolutely".

INTRODUCTION

The term 'abstraction' has since its initiation caused severe difficulties for both the Artists concerned in creating it - to justify it, and the observers presented with it - to understand its meaning and see its relevance. Kandinsky and King are two artists who have worked and are working in the realm of abstraction. Their work seems poles apart both in time and product.

The major intent of this thesis is to look more closely at the works of both artists and discover 'what' if any comparisons or contrasts exist, how they gradually evolved a vocabulary of abstract forms and what where the circumstances and intellectual interests that synthesised these forms and brought into being entirely new concepts, forms and methods, of which are now existing realities in painting.

CHAPTER 1

THE NEED FOR ABSTRACTION

The term 'abstraction' must be the most ambiguous categorization for any Artist to be listed under. It does not consist of a set of rules or a manifesto under which the Artist must stick to the outlined principles. Abstraction is not a 'style' for no stylistic definition however broad can cover and enclose the works of Artists such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Itten and more recently Roger Hilton, Leen Zack and at present in Ireland, Cecil King. Abstraction can only be described as a 'change of understanding'.

Abstraction, rests primarily on the extent to which Artists accept the value of the pure elements, materials and tools of art, the intensity of the communicating powers of these elements, manipulated and juxtaposed under the protections of a generative idea - a concern with the unknown within themselves, not only to give a different weight and focus to the general viewing of the work, but also to encourage preconscious or unconscious reactions within the observer.

The crucial years involving the evolution of abstraction came between 1910-20 and to comprehend what this 'change of understanding' means it is necessary to examine:

- (a) How did Artists gradually evolve a vocabulary of abstract forms. The 'how' here meaning not just the method of working but also the circumstances and intellectual interests revealed by the Artists own statements about their work.

(b) Why was there a need for this development of painting without objects.

The need for abstract art arose from the general synthesis of feelings by painters, writers and critics who 'wanted' this and did not 'want' that.

Under 'wants' they could not see why the 'pure' elements of painting, mainly colour, form and line could not form a strong structural foundation and at the same time, just as rich an expressive vocabulary as the 'pure' tones of music. For example a base chord in Beethoven's symphonies would send a thrill down anybody's back, regardless of race, creed and time.

On the negative side they did not want painting to depend for its worth on moral subjects intended for instruction, nor allegories, or indeed any kind of narrative. They did not want the natural resources of painting 'diluted' as Leger put it,

'by the need to tell a story'¹

By the 19th Century there was a school of thought (Impressionism, early Fauvism, Cubism, which felt that it was not the case for painters to concern themselves with narrative or even meticulous observations of nature - for if they did, there was a danger of ruling out the aesthetic response and leaving the viewer back in his/her normal everyday manner of looking at the world. Painting as one critic put it should:

'offer nothing but its own merchandise'²

This remark was made against the background of the rising tide of Impressionism. The Impressionists not only dispersed with the conventional treatment of subject matter, but also tried to define more clearly what the 'merchandise' peculiar to painting was - by studying elements of colour theory, psycho-physics with perceptual psychology. Again these concerns were taken up and re-studied by 20th Century artists in an attempt to fully understand exactly what were the resources from which the visual artists creates, The very fact that they even did so indicates how much they desired to find a basic ordered system for a kind of art which subject matter, even the depiction of nature was coming to play an increasingly less important part.

Despite the highly abstract appearances of many cubists canvases, Cubism did not lead towards abstractions but remained rooted in external reality in the world of natural appearances. In some respects the further development of cubism even represents a turn away from the possibilities of abstractions. Picasso and Braque certainly seem consciously to have rejected the idea that the painter should push the analysis of form yeond the furthest limits of recognisability. The fact that cubists failed, at least in the eyes of a whole-hearted abstractionist like Mondrian - for the philosophies on which cubism rested in, contained nothing of that 'other wordliness' that mystical tendency that might have lead artists to turb their backs on imminent reality.

So in order to confirm and sustain abstractions, a quite different conception of reality and of the function of art was necessary. In some cases, this conception of reality - what might be termed 'higher reality' took the form of mystical belief. In an interview

published as early as 1909 Mondrian stated his conviction that;

'Conscious spiritual knowledge will have an increasing influence on the work of painters...should the painter so far evolve that he attains concrete first-hand knowledge of the higher regions through development of his finer senses - then his art will become uncomprehensible for humanity which is not yet familiar with these higher regions'³

Mondrian's quote has proved in time to be astoundingly close to the view held by many that abstract art is a joke and not a very funny one at that. Williams Packer, Art Critic, Financial Times, London, describes the situation aptly in an introductory paragraph to a Ten Year Retrospective Exhibition of Cecil Kings, (Kilkenny 1975)

'It seems so empty, arbitrary and sometimes very easy and the thought occurs to many that they might almost be able to do as much with very little effort. Part of the trouble is, that work which refers to the outside may always be interpreted at less than its full self. The literal mind can enjoy literal illustrations or descriptions without ever being confronted by purely visual physical or aesthetic qualities. It can enjoy and think it understands the intentions of the artist without ever approaching them. And the removal of the easy ploy provokes a crisis'

What else is left, apart from the evidence of one's eyes'

The next question to pose is 'what is this evidence that the detective observer must seek and synthesis in order to comprehend and apprehend the intentions of the artist. The artist becoming apparently more austere difficult and ambiguous, offering the observer no easy formula by which to interpret itself. Only by looking hard, thinking hard, undergoing the visual evidence and experience on its own terms, by giving ground while the 'object'

may gain in beauty and authority can 'we' the observers achieve our objective to capture an understanding and then reap the benefits it offers.

This view was also reinforced with the theme held by the Constructivists - the idea of art which must not reflect imagine or interpret, but really build and the idea of art as a spiritual activity. To explain this further in a literary context, in the works of the Russian - Futurists Poets - 'build' was related to the structure of language, to the roots and rhythms of words in use. Poems were constructed from units which hinted at meanings without necessarily being completed words of the kind listed in dictionaries. These verbal pieces provided the incomplete yet public material of the construction of poems. The process of putting them together involved a language more suggestive than explicit, a language which only half explained itself, which investigated as well as employed the syntax, rhythms and roots of spoken or written language.

Its importance for the visual arts was considerable, as it provided a precedent and a parallel for the works of Malevich and Tatlin, the two most influential and innovative figures to rise to prominence. Malevich had begun to approach painting as an investigation of a pictorial language. He had begun to employ fragmented visual imagery in a manner reminiscent of the fragmented words in the works by his poet colleagues and further investigated art as a kind of language with its own usages and elements.

CHAPTER 2

KANDINSKY - BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

Wassily Kandinsky had begun studying Law and Political Economy in Moscow in 1886 which he completed in 1892 before entering a University career. As a schoolboy he had already painted and his interest developed and grew as a student. At an exhibition of French Impressionists in 1895 he discovered Monets 'haystacks' which fascinated him because he could not at first detect any object in them. The problem of art without objects preoccupied him from then on.

In 1896 did did not take up a full time position in Dupont University but instead devoted himself entirely to painting and moved to Munich. Munich had become one of the most important places for artistic training in the last decade of the 18th Century and particularly attracted young artists from Eastern and Northern Europe. The town was at the same time the centre of Art Nouveau. In 1895 the Journals Jugend (Youth) and Simplicissmus had been founded and artists like Herman Obriest and August Endell were preparing the ground for an art that was to 'signify nothing depict nothing and remind us of nothing'

In his early years Kandinsky painted landscapes in a crude paintilless manner and scenes containing many figures from a fairey world drawn from history or folklore. At the same time he was deeply interested in Art Nouveau Woodcuts. In order to widen his range of visions he went on several journeys - Venice, Odessa, Moscow and Tunis for several months. He now assimilated numerous

influences in particular, Cezanne, Matisse and Picasso. The elementary power of colour was released in his many landscapes Landscape and Tower 1969^A. His encounter with Bavarian folk art provided additional methods of simplification. Areas of red, blue, green yellow emerged from hastily applied patches and short strokes they form stark contrasts and only serve to a limited extent to describe the subject matter. Kandinsky was as the way towards a synthesis between external reality and the inner world experienced by the artist. He believed that the task of art was not to communicate images of the external world but

'events of the inner character'⁴

the view shared by Mondrian and Franz Marc whom Kandinsky met in 1910.

'Reality was not to be confused with the external appearance of nature, nor with the perceptual act, the reality of truth was to be found not outside but rather within

the artist - art comes from necessity not from ability'⁵

That year Kandinsky completed his manuscript 'concerning the Spiritual in Art' which had been written over a period of years. Concerning the Spiritual in Art is divided into two parts. The first containing general views on the spiritual basis of creation

'proclaiming the liberation of art from the crushing burden of materialistic doctrines'⁶

and he asserts that it should press forward and be visionary and prophetic, that is, its object is not to capture the concrete appearance of the object but the essence. In the second part, Kandinsky takes painting as an example and discusses the conditions for its achievement. Kandinsky spoke of colour as the key touched by the artist to obtain the appropriate vibrations from the soul. Harmony is achieved when, the touch is effective and complies with the 'principle of inner necessity - Kandinsky also sets out an

experimental system of concordances, the horizontal, flat and cold, is the plane on which man moves and its colour is black; the vertical stands for the right angle, the upright form, and corresponds to warmth; the diagonal intermediary between the two calls for colour etc. and the forms resulting from them have their own special qualities and is characterised by different colours.

During these years, having completed his manuscript Kandinsky paintings still began with a subject but he subordinated natural shapes to a process of 'rhythmification' so that they now only had the function of building up the picture, Church in Murau, 1910^B

He remained, however, uncertain whether the artist could abandon representational forms entirely and still communicate with his audience. In a statement written as late as 1914, he still lays stress on the importance of recognition and writes of his own inability to

'experience purely abstract forms' without

'bridging the gap by means of objects'⁷

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABSTRACTION FORMS

In reminiscence, Kandinsky criticised his earlier landscapes painted mainly around Munich during the early 1900's as 'unsuccessful attempts to capture the energy of nature' at which time Kandinsky used palette knife techniques breaking down light into tangible malleable lumps, instead of trying to catch the fleeting flicker of light on natural surfaces as the impressionists had. This tended to produce a dotted static effect far removed from the expression of natural energy.

"In painting sketches I let myself go. I thought little of houses and trees, with my palette knife I spread coloured strips and spots as the canvas and let them sing as loud as I could... Later, especially at home, always a profound disappointment. My colours seemed to me weak, flat..."

The colours were too weak and flat to 'sing' very loud; and it was the rhythmic, melodic-harmonic energy of music that he wanted to achieve. In 1908 he at last found himself able to do this. He placed strongly pulsating rhythm and to produce complex harmonies and discord. Melody was still absent or on a much lower emphasis. Melody in painting is essentially linear and the line plays a relatively unimportant part in the works of 1908-9 (Blue Mountain^C and Railroad Near Murnau 1909^D)

Throughout this time, Kandinskys oil paintings were abstractions from figurative themes. There are familiar symbols which appear again and again in the works. The most interesting is the leaping horsemen which is gradually abstracted to a hieroglyphic configuration of black lines and also the group of robed elders (wise men) who appear as the two reclining figures on the right hand side of Composition 4^E. Blue for Kandinsky was the 'heavenly' or spiritual colour. The Blue Rider (or leaping horsemen) seem to symbolise the spiritual element which must combat the forces of materialism.

In 1908/9 Kandinsky drew the different strands of his early works together and a sudden and dynamic reorganisation of the elements took place. The over worked, contrived effect of his early landscapes has gone and is replaced by an ease of execution, a fluency of colour and line. Kandinsky had now realised that for him, the human figure was in no way a representation, but a symbol of certain qualities and facets of human character and

landscape, a symbol of elemental forces that may be used either to help or hinder human endeavour. Out of the interaction of these he created his early master pieces like Composition 4)^E Kandinsky in Composition 7 1913^F has eliminated the allegorical image completely. The effect is direct. The colours and lines no longer stand for symbolically but communicate directly by the powerful impact of assembled colours and their interactions with each other (harmony and discord) and the energetic Tensions of line and forms and their interaction with and on the colours.

"I should like to say 'what the picture tells me is itself' That is, its telling me consists, in its own structure in its own lines and colours"⁸

Form is generated by the impingement of one colour on another, on the edge of a colour on the white of the primed canvas. Colour is a more basic sensation than line and would be experienced in a world withouth objects, but in perception, the line of primary importance because it is a transition from one colour area to the next and hence the basic of our perception of form, Kandinsky wrote:

"Form is the narrow sense, is the boundary between one surface and another; that is its external meaning"⁹

Kandinsky seemed to have had a great natural gift for colour. Form and line did not come so easily, he had to strive for a full understanding of these. But it was the complete awareness of the function and relationships of different graphic elements and their interactions on each other in a complex pictorial situation that he sought for.

In the early years at the Bauhaus, he struggled and so grappled with the problems experimenting all the time with the relationship between curved and angular graphic forms, above all with those between triangle and circle, and how their relationships were affected and

modified by the dynamic energy of colour.

NOT OUGHT OR MUST BUT NECESSITY

A phase that occurs again and again in Kandinsky's writings is INNER NECESSITY OR INNER NEED. Kandinsky does not define this phase exactly, but uses it to describe the essential process in the creation of a work, but he also uses it to describe the nature of form. Thus in concerning the spiritual in Art, Kandinsky says:

"Form in the narrow sense is the boundary between one surface and another; that is its external meaning. But it has also an internal significance of ranging intensity; and properly speaking FORM IS THE EXTERNAL EXPRESSION OF INNER MEANING"¹⁰

Presumably Kandinsky is implying by his two uses of the phase that the way a work of art comes into being is a basically similar process to the way we perceive forms; the end product of both process is the external expression of an internal necessity. In the perceptual process the external expression is form; internal necessity is dynamic organisation, or the inner tensions that determine form perception. In the work of Art the external expression is the form of the work, the internal necessity, the inner tensions within the artists mind a soul which demand to be formulated in external terms.

"The artists wishes to express himself and chooses only forms which are sympathetic to his inner self. The artist may use any form which his expression demands, his inner impulses must find suitable external forms"¹¹

"A work of art consists of two elements, the inner and the outer. The inner is the emotion in the soul of the artist; this emotion has the capacity to evoke a similar emotion in the observer.

Being connected with the body, the soul is affected through the medium of the senses - the felt. Emotions are aroused and stirred by what is sensed. Thus the sensed is the bridge, i.e. the physical relation which results in the production of a work of art. And again what is sensed is the bridge from the material (the artist and his work) to the immaterial (the emotion in the soul of the observer). The sequence is: emotion (in the artist) - the sensed- the art work emotion (in the observer). The two emotions will be alike and equivalent to the extent that the work of art is successful"¹²

This is closely related to T.S. Eliott's restatement;

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlation' in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked"¹³

However the process involved are not so strictly clear cut, and Kandinsky later realises that this is a much more complex process which cannot be reduced to quite such a neat and generalised formula. For example the words we use can have a 'feedback' effect and influence the way we think. In the same way the forms the artist uses can influence his inner necessity. For just as when one form is perceived in relation to another form the

relationships between the two forms (or colours for that matter) alters the character of (or "tensions within") these forms. So too does the form as an embodiment of the Artists internal necessity on the picture plane immediately begin to assume a different character as soon as it is released. The artist cannot determine what exactly the compound effect of the forms demanded by the inner necessity will be once they are on the picture plane. Kandinsky realises that very careful attention must be paid to the way in which forms interact and behave in relation to each other within the artificial confines of the picture-plane, and how the influence of these confines can be overcome if need be.

A statement from Kandinsky in Concerning the Spiritual in Art which seems to anticipate in particular the principle of proximity:

'A slight approach to, a withdrawal from other forms may affect the structure...nothing is absolute, Form composition is relative depending on:

1. Alterations in the relation of one form to another, and,
2. Alterations in each individual form, down to the very smallest.

Every form is as sensitive as smoke, the slightest wind will fundamentally alter it"¹⁴

In other words we may abstract a shape from an object that has this shape by disregarding colour, weight, texture and even size, but for the total effect that is an artistic form, the colour matters the thickness of line matters and the appearance of texture and weight. A given triangle is the same in any position, but to an artistic form its location, balance and surroundings are not indifferent. Not only does Kandinsky objectifies the subjective but co-relates and realises the tensions already existing within the forms that he uses.

CHAPTER 3

ABSTRACTION - THE BREAKTHROUGH

The term 'breakthrough' is often used to assess a major accomplishment of an artist, the works in which he first achieves an undesirable advance. But what does a breakthrough really signify?

In Kandinskys case the breakthrough came with a thorough understanding of the volume of the understructure of the painting - how the abstract elemental composition serves as the skeleton of the visual force - crucial to its meaning. The more representational the visual information the more specific its reference, the more abstract, the more general and all encompassing it is.

In visual terms abstraction is simplification towards a more intensive and distilled meaning, but more important it does not end there. Abstraction can exist in visual matters not only in the purity of a visual statement stripped down to minimal representational information but also as pure abstraction, which draws no connections with familiar things.

To explain;

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) American abstract expressionists ('action') painter - notably for the delight he conveys in the art of painting and the advantages taken of random effects which one welded into harmonious unity. He studied at Los Angeles and was influenced for a time by Picasso and the surrealists, but about 1946 evolved a distinctive abstract method of his own from which all figurative associations was excluded. His method has been described as a purely haphazard process - the streaking

of paint over a canvas stretched on the floor, and the seemingly random distribution of dripples of sand, nails and pieces of glass in the mass of pigmented. His own words give some inkling of what he was trying to do - not to convey personal emotions like the German Expressionists but to create a living substance Night Mist^G

"When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes destroying the images, etc. because the painting has a life of its own"¹⁵

Pollock is only one of a considerable number of painters who have devoted themselves to an All-out freedom of effect. They include Adolph Gottlieb who with the use of symbols or signs executed on a very large scale, concentrating effect with a massive physical impact - the pictorial sensation is an intensely simplified form. The large paintings by Mark Rothko of uneven rectangular patches subtly merging one with another capable of including a state of unwordly mediation, if that is, the observer is ready to enter into the spirit in which they were produced and not mentally to oppose some different conception of what painting is for Forgotten Dream^H

The remarkable thing is that each manifestation of Modern Art in the last half of the Century, from cubism to surrealism, has eventually arrived at an abstract conclusion, whatever its initial intentions may have been and in spite of the example given by certain individual masters. Picasso, for example, whatever distinctions he may have used, has always been a painter of human beings, animals, birds, landscape, yet the cubists and surrealists movements with which he is associated eventually, produced new

figurative results. It might be assumed that forces were at work independently of individuals shaping the country's art, sending it into directions parallel with the advances of a mechanised civilization, the speculation of science and the nature of city life, the growing network of communications linking nations and making for a similarity in their products. What is beyond doubt is the rise of an international abstract art, in which there is no essential differences between the products of one country and another, though much individual variety.

In Ireland abstract painting did not begin to establish itself until the last 1950's. The lyrical qualities in the work of Nano Reid (b. 1905) in *Tinkers* and *Slieve Breagh*, in which we are aware of the rich subtle colour and the texture of paint. She has turned away from straight forward representation, but the colours are reminiscent of bogland. Nano Reid abstracts, but is not an abstract painter. This near abstract approach to landscape has been seen more recently in the work of Camille Souter (b. 1929) in such paintings as *Bedends in the Yard* and *Waiting to go to the Canal*. Abstract painting in which there is no reference to recognisable objects can be seen in the work of Patrick Scott (b. 1921) in *Gold Painting 34 (Bank of Ireland, Dublin)* of 1965. He relies for effect on the relationships of simple angular shapes on rectangular canvases - four attached together and on that of gold paint to the natural colour of the ground. Colín Middleton, whose work in the 1950's was savagely expressionistic has developed a manner in which strong abstract patterns emerge from figure or landscape compositions as in *Leitrim Hells* 1971 (Ulster Museum).

It is from this background of rising international abstractions that Ceil King is now discussed.

CHAPTER 4

CECIL KING

BACKGROUND

Born in Ireland in 1921, Cecil King was originally a business man but graduated to his present artistic career by first becoming a collector of pictures. A keen observer travelling constantly particularly during his important formative years he was always seeking out new stimulation. He received no formal Art Training but related closely to Barbara Warren and Neville Johnston and between 1954 and 1963 had three successful oneman exhibitions in Dublin before abandoning his business career in 1964.

INFLUENCES AND DEVELOPMENT OF ABSTRACT FORMS

His earliest pictures the Ringsend Series of Dublin Quays dating from 1954 have an extremely delicate touch as if images barely visible in the gloom of the sea mist.

"I saw strings in terms of shape, a sort of cubist approach and got over the problem (which has probably got something to do with my age) of eliminating detail and not being fussy. Most people when they start painting have the problem of exact representations"¹⁶

In Evening Ringsend 1957^I rich contrasts of texture are combined with varying degrees of architectural shapes receding into the depths of space. The harmonicas balance results from the careful juxtaposition of highlighted and accentuated planer shapes against flat subtly varying background.

Two years later, as a result of his travels abroad, King came into contact with the works of Roger Hilton. The most extraordinary qualities of Hiltons work and that which greatly influenced King was the final compositional calm which the visually wild, expressionistic jesticulating scribbles of brush and knife strokes finally settled into. The elemented components of Hiltons work can be seen to be topsided ragged and explosively expressive yet the total configuration of the design is resolved and complete October 1956^J

Hilton seems certainly to be concerned with manipulating actual space rather than creating the illusion of pictorial space and what results is a set of forms so powerful that they appear to be projecting themselves bodily out from the surface of the picture into the actual space of the room.

His influence on King can be clearly seen in "November" painted in 1964, which derives from the experience of Kings painting development rather than direct observation. Here forcefully, pigmented and textured forms are suspended within an area of smoother paint which not only implies a spatial dimension but in the words of James White commenting on the picture;

"Recalls the spiritual rather than the substance of Life"¹⁷ November 1964^K

King is now concerned with the way separate parts of the paintings work independently and as a whole and is not looking for any story to be told or explicit instructive meaning in the picture. This is not to say that the picture does not carry ideas or that it is not instructure. Simply in an abstract painting the images are not descriptive. It may convey qualities such as perhaps, "Brutal Strength" or "Determination or Purpose" or it

may however, have no such meaning-fullness but operate in relation to the viewer purely through a language of shape, line and colour. The very absence of recognisable features from the familiar external world in this case makes this experience all the more powerful. However, life is never simple and many paintings are never wholly representational or wholly abstract, but are a combination of the two. But what is most important is for the viewer to remain alert to what the image or shape or brush stroke on the canvas contributes to the whole.

This is important when it comes to view Cecil King's pastels. These are inspired by the Circus, yet at first glance, there is no concrete form, no reference to excitement, people, colours, nothing that would indicate such an obvious response. What appealed to King was the intangible elements of Circus life, its tensions, its discipline, strain and rhythms.

On seeing the pastels for the first time, one is fascinated by two elements, the forward the colour and how King has combined both with such purity. The colours integrate describing the forms (similar to Kandinskys work around 1913) achieved by the technique in the use of the pastel medium. The over-flow is executed in the most subtle way and the surface which seems uniform form far away, but on closer examination reveals a variation of colour creating an intimate relationship of subtle shapes. Then with the uppermost timing and balance of a trapeze artist, there emerges from behind, the thrust and swing of a line. Its placing and relationship aptly depicting the tensions involved.

King does not set out concisely to achieve this effect, but allows

the concrete experience of the circus atmosphere to flow intuitively from his personality. He has developed a highly sensitive control over his medium and leads himself into a new field.

"That in which he finds a figuration which corresponds to reality but yet is not inspired by the visible"¹⁸
Again the influence of Hilton can be seen in the interflow of colours and dominance of line.

"Hilton had a very big influence in my pastel works. It was the great freedom and spontaneous response of his work which I admired most"¹⁹
King's Baggot Street Series re-affirms and carries the circus motif to a strong climax. In King's own words:

"If you look at the pastels, there you will see over the years that there was a pairing down, getting the simpler statement all the time and the Baggot Street was the first really hard edge painting, but it comes very much from the swing of the trapeze"²⁰

The result of this refinement is an intensity in the relationship of his forms on a flat surface. King transfers his flat surface into an environment, an illusory space in which he as a painter commands the events and happenings within it. He does so by his serenity of design and scale, in placing a few simple elements, disposed elegantly and economically referring across the surface to each other and simultaneously to their movement away beyond the picture plane.

In example Baggot Street^L, King's Abstract rectangular form protrudes strongly and definitely into the surface plane and is balanced with delicate precision by a connecting point of an intruding jettison of a harmonious but contrasting elegant slender linear form. The

effect is one of concentrated intense tension.

The Baggot Street series was shortly followed by the more sombre theme of the Berlin Paintings. Simple yet profound in that they are a very personal reaction to Man living under tension and the enclosed claustrophobic pressures of a divided city - the only excess being from the top. His visit to Berlin made a deep and lasting impression upon him.

His response to his experience can be seen in Berlin Painting^M where King bounds the surface of the canvas on three-sides with tense taut lines and the sombre colour variations introduce the cities subtle changes in mood. Any change no matter how slight would;

"cause the collapse and disintegration of the whole composition"²¹

In his paintings King strives continuously for a simplification of his statement. In Sounion^N King dynamically controls the space of the surface by geometrical forms and colour. Spatial planes are indicated by the apparent recession of the background form implying deep pictorial space hollowed out within the predominating colour of the repeating geometrical columns. Nothing in this painting is static and each element appears in a particular spatial relation to every other one. The protruding space of the column like forms is balanced by the dominance of the flat picture surface. King forms, however they may appear to glide are painted in flat colour that resolutely emphasise the surface flatness of the painting. Across this flat expanse the conflicts and contrasts of his elements provide a strong rhythmic structure.

In Verge⁰ this structure is provided by the decisive repetition of linear bands of colours against the steeply vast background and King leads the viewer back into intricate and deeper illusionistic space.

"This work thus deals on one level with some of the control preoccupations of modern painting, the duality between surface and pictorial space"²²

Rather than using purely classical and traditional methods of perspective implying depth, artists were experimenting with methods of colour combinations and flat planer levels of forms and colours, respecting the flatness of the canvas surface, in order to create a receding and protruding sense of depth.

Kings articulation of forms in his paintings is crisp. Enormous emphasis is placed on the relation of one form to the other and to the whole. It results from years of loving observation by the artist to the physical relationships in nature and emotional and psychological states of man. In this way, certain behaviours are used not however to any representational end or as a means of demonstrating relationships but more for their power as metaphor and pretext towards a sensuous visual tactility. To be successful, the painter had to liberate the vital force or essential 'life' hidden within the material. The orange needs peeling before its fruits are revealed. The reward is that when it does work, there is a degree of freshness and invention difficult to equal.

Sven-Claude Bettinger in writing the Introduction to Kings first One-Man Exhibition in Galeria Manika Beek, Schwarzenacher Saar, 1974 (Germany) concluded by making a beautiful comparison between Cecil Kings work and T. S. Eliott's "Heraklet of the Four Quartets".

"Don't they both receive their convincing force from their
simplicity, their limitation to our humanity and its problems?

Overall time we find this beauty of the calms described in

T.S. Elliot's "Heraklete of the Four Quartets"

"Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future

And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present.

All time is unredeemable.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSING BOTH ARTISTS

When both artists are examined with an eye to classifications, consistent patterns begin to appear.

Kandinsky in concerning the spiritual in art identifies three different sources of inspirations for his own work. When he is especially interested in some quality of the objective world and seeks to represent or imitate nature he calls his creations "Impressions". This natural inclination is discernable and endorsed in his creative work up to around 1909.

In the Park at Stain Cloud^P 1906 can be seen his representational level of what could be called visual intelligence, which is strongly governed by direct experience. There is no intervening coded system needed to be employed to facilitate understanding no decoding to delay comprehension. Together with fluidity and delicacy of colour, contrasting textures, Kandinsky achieves a clear understanding of his subject matter and hings at a poetic transcription. Similarly, Cecil Kings early work, the Ringsend series, the environment has been depicted in painting, we can learn about things we are prevented from experiencing directly through looking at the visual media. In Evening Ringsend, King uses colour to express the forms, each variation of surface turned to or from light, has its own special line. Colour conveying some atmospheric mood of the environment, has a factor of growing importance, and that the interest of detail in the objects was only secondary, instead a sort of colour poetic view is depitced.

Kandinsky notes next what he calls his "Improvisation". It is a media dominated activity in which the expressive qualities of a medium are played and exploited almost entirely for their own sake, and in contrast, is the painting which deliberately makes use of the seeming accident. Possibility and the transcendence of man impression-taking is the nature of this new game. It is highly characteristic of Kandinsky's work between 1909-10. In Improvisation 14, 1910^Q it is just about possible to distinguish references to figures and landscape, though they are so twisted and distanced that they are becoming increasingly unrecognisable and by and by only a few dominant lines broken curves, angles, stresses and touches of colour remain. The forms have become divorced from the content and each makes its own impact.

Again comparing the works of Cecil King between 1951-65 and illustrated by November 1964.

Representational elements have receded or disappeared altogether and concentration on his control and involvement with the qualities and creative energies of his medium predominates.

"I experiment and disregard, but I find that one thing leads to another in the search - very often it is accidents which are interesting, which will lead me on to something and I try to allow them to develop themselves rather than trying to control them"²³

Here both artists move instinctively into a period of 'effects' looking for new formal possibilities, testing media in ways that would have been impossible earlier in their aesthetic development. This period for both artists is not only verging increasingly on the abstract but, is on the way to developing a synthesis between the external world and the inner world experienced

by the artist.

The third context used by Kandinsky to describe his own work is "Composition". By this he means a noted and especial emphasis upon the considerations of form and structure as content. Here the later works of Kandinsky - abstraction with a mathematical basis and which the sequences of Malevick and the rectangles of Mondrian geometrically conceived paintings are also examples. A number of artists are still working on these lines, seeking effect by large and simple shapes of definite outline. This has come to be denoted by the terms 'hard-edge' and the present work of Cecil King are included in this. In Kandinsky's "Through-Going-Line" 1923, he studies composite forms made up geometrical and free ranging elements and the composition and organisation of forces expressed in the tensions between them. He achieves a sense of rhythm by repetition and alteration of different types of lines at equal or unequal intervals. The curve plays an important part, it is a straight line bend by a constant pressure; the stronger the tension the more it is inclined to close in on itself. Straight line and curve oppose and balance one another, as do triangle and curve. Black lines, varying in thickness and emphasis are of prime importance and tend to express the direction of forces and sometimes jut forward in exuberant imbalance. All these features exist in a void, hanging there like skyborne scaffolding. They have often been compared to constellations and showers of meteorites, but Kandinsky himself has warned against such interpretations:

"They are simply rich combinations of
totally abstract forms evolving on
different planes at varying distances"²⁴

In the 'hard-edge' painting of 1968 onwards, Cecil King uses straight lines curving across void areas of the canvas to create an effect of high tension. A limited colour range and no sensuous exploitation of paint. The lines are so hard and the colour so smoothly applied, that our attention is concentrated on the geometry of the structure. He creates symmetry only to displace it. Lines end abruptly- edges tilt. Meticulous order under threat. To a degree there are similar variations on certain key elements involving both artists. Repetition of lines, illusionistic feeling of different planes, projections occupying space. Kandinsky's paintings, however rich and crowded are adjusted with absolute precision, order and taste. Similarly with Cecil King, the components qualified by appropriate colours are perfectly distributed and produce an impression of dazzling simplistic and inspiring harmony.

Both artists are deeply involved in the way in which forms interact and behave in relation to each other within the artificial confines of the picture-plane and how the influence of these confines can be overcome if need be. Their prime concern is not abstracting a shape from an object that has this shape, by disregarding colour, weight, texture and even size, but concerns for the total that is an artistic form, as mentioned before, the colour matters, the thickness of line matters and the appearance of texture and weight. A given triangle is the same in any position, but to an artist form its location, balance and surroundings are not indifferent. Not only does Kandinsky and King objectify the subjective but both co-relates and realises the tensions already existing within the forms that they use.

Abstract painting has become divided between the formal or

geometrical with a certain relation to Architecture and the 'informal' known as 'action painting' the free product of instinct. But to distinctly classify both these painters in either of the two categories, is a judgement based on a misunderstanding of their original source of personal power - the source that inspired and produced their 'art'.

In 1931, Kandinsky wrote:

"My few attempts to work exclusively in accordance with reason from the beginning to the end has never lead to a final solution. For example, I used to draw a picture in two dimensional space, calculated by the rules of mathematical proportions, but colour began to alter the proportions of the drawing to such an extent that it was no longer a solely mathematical problem"²⁵

in other words feeling must correct the brain.

The appearance of Cecil Kings hard-edge paintings seems dominated by control, self discipline, conviction and meticulousness in short by rationality. But his feeling for natural light effects, his response to distance, depth and height his understanding for colour, line and form and their interaction has in his own words:

"all come completely natural, completely intuitive to me. I never try colours out before me, I have always found them in the force of the work"²⁶

I refer to what Herbert Reed in Redemption of a Robot discusses as - their 'aesthetic judgement'. Acts from a necessity of some kind' (other than purely social or moral necessity).

"Throw open the whole visible world to the child, arouse as many desires as you like, but don't let him be overwhelmed by them. Teach him to discriminate among the host of sensations which are aroused in him. Make him realise that he has within him an immeasurable store of willpower which he can release when and where and how necessity dictates. The necessity that dictates will be determined by his aesthetic judgement his innate taste".

But the essential and most important thing is that both Kandinsky and King have succeeded to place their 'aesthetic judgement' in such relations of circumstances that has gradually excited its vegetating and germinating process to produce new fruits of thoughts, new conceptions - imaginations and ideas.

Since the product of the final development of Kandinsky's work and the present works of Cecil King are in appearance so completely contrasting Kandinsky's work the latter so richly endowed and complex and King's so purely simplistic in conception, King comes after the development of a painter's open-ended attitudes towards the process of painting in which self-definitions occurred as an uncalculated result and not intended outcome. The difference between the formative periods (Kandinsky's work) and the abstract art as we commonly think of it in the late 40's and 50's occur in the increased scale and abstractions of the later paintings.

By the fifties, the majority of these artists (including King in the sixties) dropped mythic overtones in favour of abstract titles, probably because they intuited that the large size of their works which were intended to be seen from a distance of only a few feet, would encourage peripheral vision. That is, the sense

of being enveloped and surrounded by the painting (as opposed to the art of scrutinising an object). In other words the viewer shifts from one focal point to another focal point where there are sublime instances when the viewers vision is out of focus, or in standing before a large canvas and the total view is out of focus, so initiating preconscious or unconscious reactions. This particular experience forms part of the reality in viewing Cecil King's longer 'hard-edge paintings'.

What makes Kings art different from Kandinskys work is perhaps its sense of simplistic intensity and immediacy to communicate the sublime. Kandinsky 's work has usually more forceful and less elegant. In looking around him, Kandinsky saw that Universe - nature - knows what to do where a stone drops in water, everything seemed beautifully co-ordinated. He thought that nature possibly had one co-ordinate system, a most economical, arithmetical and geometric system with which to inter-account all transactions and transformations. If he could find nature's co-ordinate system, it would be very simple and always natural. When we look at Kandinsky's work and writings we see a determined stride to communicate in a language that could be understood - hence traditional elements put together in new ways.

However, the change that differentiates early abstract art from its more abstract descendants and so King from Kandinsky is not just the case of what the new language should be, but how the viewer will read it. Cecil King in the background of Kandinsky's works is now using conventional elements put together in ways which reflect a growing understanding of the nature in Man.

For King, the subject matter serves as a lever to pry loose the visual vocabulary at hand from its original associations. But the subject matter exists only on the fringes of the mind and vision. Once he makes his concerns concrete in designately visual terms, he relinquishes the lever, subject matter to emphasise his discovery. His is the understanding and comprehension of the need to synthesise the relationships between the intuitive rational and innovative nature found within himself - as the artist, but the simplicity and ambiguous of his composition allows the viewer a new way of seeing, to stand alone and emphasis and interpret on his own groud.

CONCLUSION

The gradual evolution of abstract art and the continuous work by descendants in the realm of abstraction, can be seen to be a conscious and determined attempt to devise a kind of universal language based on the truths of nature which was intended to be comprehensive and valid anywhere and in many kinds of application.

Man is the generator of form and searches in nature for a rationale to justify his creations. How can he look in nature without seeing himself not just his dimensions but his nature of humanity. In other words before he can learn to recognise Man in nature, he must first learn to comprehend Nature in Man.

Kandinsky's approach to the problem of creation has been primarily a deep personal psychological and emotional one. More over he belonged to a cultural tradition, reinforced by readings of philosophers and psychologists that advocated independence as the only legitimate pursuit for responsible individuals. He responded by being primarily concerned with the unknown within himself, how the concept of the source of art being the unconscious and developing a thorough understanding of the problem and structures of painting with the pure elements - the merchandise of painting.

In his attempts to be non-objective, Kandinsky escaped into the realm of geometric fantasy - and himself discouraged people from seeing suggestions of objects and figures in his later works. He was afraid people would mistake these for descriptive or referential properties.

But one can never entirely escape from the associative properties of form, however abstract or general the form may be. The more complex the form, the greater the possible associations. Works full of highly complex forms, therefore, like Kandinskys last paintings, are very rich in such associations.

Cecil Kings paintings are responsive to a deep sensitive concern- the humanity of man, and the nature within the artist himself. His forms are comparatively uncomplicated and have fewer obvious associations. But the manner in which the larger scaled paintings are viewed (peripheral vision) balances the simplicity of forms and allows freer innovative interpretations by the viewer.

These two artists who's work initially seems poles apart both in time and product are linked in art by another kind of similarity. Their's is a similarity of inner feeling in the whole moral and spiritual atmosphere, a similarity of ideals - capturing the energies of human nature and realising its dynamic explosive forces on a canvas as a kind of objective co-relative for inner tensions and hidden emotions.

Finally, they have synthesised their ideals and techniques to attain and express the intuitive and spiritual in art - they speak of mystery in terms of mystery.

-----0000-----

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- | | | |
|-----|--|-------------------|
| 1. | The Redemption of the Robot | Herbert Reed |
| 2. | Neo-Primitive on Naive Art | Roger Cardinal |
| 3. | Bauhaus Catalogue | TCD |
| 4. | Observers Book on Modern Art, | William Gaunt |
| 5. | Abstraction Towards a New Art | |
| 6. | Concerning the Spiritual in Art. | W. Kandinsky |
| 7. | The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922 | Camilla Gray |
| 8. | Catalogue Cecil King Retrospective | Municipal Gallery |
| 9. | The Language of the Eye Kandinsky | Paul Overy |
| 10. | Roger Hilton, Cat. Serpentine Gallery
London March 1976 | |
| 11. | Architecture in the Age of Reason | Kaufman, E |
| 12. | Towards a New Architecture, | Le Corbusier |
| 13. | Theory - Design in the First Machine Age | |
| 14. | Transcript of Interview with Cecil King | January 1982 |
| 15. | Abstract Expressionisms - the
formative years | Hobbs and Levin |

FOOTNOTES

No.

1. Ferand Leger
Functions of Painting (NY 1973, p. 14)
2. P. G. Hamerton
Contemporary French Painting (London 1868, p. 37)
3. Quoted in R. P. Welsh, Piet Mondrian's Early Career.
The "Naturalistic" Period (NY and London 1977, p. 160)
4. Kandinsky "Reminiscence" in Herbert 1964, p. 26
5. August Macke - Franz Marc
(Cologne) 1964, p. 9
6. "Kandinsky" by Jacques Lassaigne, p. 54
7. Kandinsky, Und Gabriele Muntz van
Ursprunger Moderner Kunst (Munich 1979 p. 4)
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein - Philosophical Investigations
Blackwell 1958
9. Concerning Spiritual in Art Wittenburg Edition p. 47
10. " " " p. 47
11. " " " p. 53
12. Artists on Art - Goldwater and Treves
(London 1947 p. 229 - 30)
13. Hamlet (1917) frequently reprinted in
collections of Eliot's essays.
14. Wittenburg Edition p. 110
15. Observer Book of Modern Art p. 95
16. Interview held January 1982
17. The then Director of National Gallery of Ireland.
18. Jane White: Exhibition Catalogue on Cecil Kings works
Nottingham University Art Gallery December 1968.
19. Interview January 1982
20. Interview January 1982

21. Ethna Waldron, Curator Municipal Gallery of Modern Art.
quoted from Introduction of Berlin Suite Retrospective
catalogue 1981.
22. William Packer. Art Critic Financial Times London
Quoted from Retrospective Catalogue p. 11
23. Interview January 1982
24. Kandinsky by Jacques Lassaigue p. 98
25. Kandinsky Cahiers D'Art 1931 p. 78
26. Interview January 1982