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The Life and Work of George Dombek

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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Lyon College
Bachelor of Arts in Art, 2004

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

George Dombek is an accomplished artist who graduated from the University of Arkansas with degrees in Architecture and Painting. His career as both professor and painter has taken him around the world and produced a substantial body of work. This work seeks to examine his art in a larger art historical context and consider the development of the subjects and style of his paintings over the span of his career.

Acknowledgements

This work has been made possible by the sacrifice of my loving family and the support and encouragement of the journalism and art faculties at the University of Arkansas. I'm grateful for their advice, feedback, and expressions of confidence.

Also, the cooperation of Mr. Dombek made this project a rare privilege for a fellow artist and art lover to be part of.

Dedication

This film and accompanying work is dedicated to the memory of my dad who taught me the importance and joy of education and tirelessly supported me in all of my pursuits.

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I. Production Narrative

This project began with the desire to tell the story of George Dombek, an accomplished and prolific artist, who is now in his seventies and continues to produce a large amount of original work as a watercolor painter. I sought to understand what events in his life had shaped him and his work. Had he been caught up in the flow of artistic styles during his life? Was there an artist that had captivated him and motivated him?

Because this was to be a biographical project about a living subject, I began by reaching out to the artist himself. Following a couple of phone conversations with him, I explored all of the available written literature about him and his work. Because he is often considered a realist painter, I conducted a literature review addressing issues of realism and photorealism in art with an emphasis on the impact of photography on painting. More information about this research is found in the Literature Review section.

The film was initially envisioned as a biographical exploration of Dombek's life told through the story of the completion of a single painting from his most recent series of barns from Arkansas. Over the course of production, it became clear that it wasn't possible to get the necessary footage and images to tell that story. The story morphed from a story about the artist to an exposition of his work. I was able to interview two experts who are familiar with his work and were able to provide insight into Dombek's development as an artist and the place of his work in a broader art historical context. Henry Adams is a professor of art history who took an interest in Dombek's work many years ago and has written a number of articles and a couple of books about his work. Laura Terry is an architecture professor who is familiar with Dombek's work and was able to provide unique insight about the relationships between his paintings and his

architecture background. Their interviews provided the opportunity to more broadly explore his work and give the viewer a chance to see his work in the context of his long career.

Dombek has historically focused primarily on one subject for years at a time creating dozens of paintings in each series. This film provides a chance for the viewer to see multiple images from each series and consider them in the context of the subject matter Dombek was exploring just before and just after producing them. This chronological history provided a natural structure for the film.

Having set out to make one film only to discover that it wasn't possible to get the necessary material to tell the story was a challenge. It was difficult to set aside the story that was compelling and likely would have made a terrific film and have to find another story that was attainable.

One of the key interviews that I knew I needed, the interview with Henry Adams, was all the more challenging because he is located in Cleveland. Making a film with no budget necessitated that I wait to interview him until I could meet him in Kansas City when he was there on business at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Thanks to the help of another professor, I was able to secure an interview location at the Kansas City Art Institute, but it was a studio classroom in use during the interview. It was noisy with people coming and going and bright windows in the background. It was a very difficult place to shoot the interview, but it was all I had in the very limited amount of time I had with my interviewee.

The other key interview with Laura Terry had to be redone because of a catastrophic memory card failure when copying the footage to a computer. The second interview went very well, but it was only possible because the subject was nearby and gracious enough to sit for a second interview.

The artist himself was very busy during production and often cancelled or rescheduled interviews or opportunities to collect footage. Ultimately, his unavailability forced the significant shift in story for the project.

I struggled with lighting and sound in all instances. Every bit of footage was shot in very difficult circumstances with mixed lighting and far too much ambient noise. My techniques have improved, and my filmmaking kit has been upgraded because of the troubles I encountered shooting this film.

When I shifted to a project about Dombek's work rather than about his life, I scrapped plans for narration and chose to rely on my interviews instead. Since most of the script is offering insight into and opinions about the work, there was very little left for a narrator to say. As the script developed it was difficult to decide how to include the voice of the artist, but I settled on including soundbites between segments that allow us to gain more insight into his thinking, process or story since he didn't want to talk about specific paintings.

With a focus on the artist's work, I had to include many different images of his paintings. Perhaps because of my experiences as a museum educator, I wanted to offer a film that allowed the viewer to see the paintings without unnecessary distractions. In some ways that made editing simpler. There wasn't a need to worry about jump cuts and continuity so much as pacing and connecting visuals with appropriate commentary.

Over the course of many different cuts of the film, I began to think of its potential audience differently. I began to see the film as something that would be appropriate for art students, museum goers, or people with a particular interest in Dombek's work. This allowed me to make a film that dives a little deeper into the imagery and discusses artistic issues that a general audience might not find as interesting while remaining accessible to someone who has

happened on one of his prints hanging in an office somewhere and wants to know a bit more about his work.

In the end, I've produced a film that is radically different than the film I set out to make. It is more exposition than narrative and has a slower pace than I had envisioned. I'm pleased with what it has become but can't ignore that there is a story out there that I want to tell but simply don't have access to. I spent a lot of hours collecting footage for a film that hasn't come to fruition, and I would love to have that time back. Each of my interviews could be improved in technical ways, and I've shot better interviews since. An expository film is more difficult to connect with than a narrative that includes a traditional story arc, and I believe that's a weak point of this film. However, I think it does a great job of providing a broad perspective on Dombek's oeuvre. It's rare to get to see such a broad selection of work by a single artist in such a short period of time, and it's been a privilege to live with that work throughout the production of this film.

II. Literature Review

According to Donald Harington, Professor of Art History at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Dombek is “one of the most highly respected and well known artists to come out of Arkansas” (Dombek & Harington, 1995, p. 82). His work is included in “over 800 museum, corporate and private collections” and has been exhibited in over 150 solo and group exhibitions (Dombek, 2011, p. 67) Most scholarly explorations of Dombek’s work have been done for exhibition catalogs and curatorial use such as those cited in this paper by Tom Porter, fellow of Oxford Brooke University, (Dombek, 2005), Henry Adams, Professor of American Art at Case Western Reserve University, (Dombek, 2011) and Donald Harington (Dombek & Harington, 1995).

In preparation for the film, a review of literature examining research that addresses strains of realism in art movements ranging from French Realism to American Photorealism and the influence of photography on realism in contemporary American art was conducted.

Dombek’s mastery of his primary medium, watercolor, and the influence of photography on his use of color and light have combined to produce images of subject matter that is easily identifiable (Dombek, 1977, p. 2). Tom Porter describes Dombek’s work as a fusion of the “super real with the abstract” (Dombek, 2005, p. 3), and Henry Adams describes the work as “an odd combination of ‘real’ and ‘not-real’” as it combines elements that are convincingly real alongside elements that are recognizable but stylized and abstracted (Dombek, 2011, p. 6). According to Donald Harington, we find “an ever-increasing faithfulness to optical truth” in Dombek’s work (Dombek & Harington, 1995, p. 17).

Russian philologist Roman Jakobson, in his seminal essay “On Realism in Art,” described the accepted definition of realism as “an artistic trend which aims at conveying reality

as closely as possible and strives for maximum verisimilitude” (Jakobson, 1987, p. 20). He went on to point out the potential problems this definition presents. The degree to which a work is considered realistic may rely on the “aspiration or intent of the author” or on the perception of the viewer (Jakobson, 1987, p. 20).

John Hyman, professor of aesthetics at the University of Oxford, was particularly interested in Jakobson’s idea that realism is relative to the observer (Hyman, 2005, p. 26). Hyman (2005) attempts to better define realism by distinguishing between realism in subject matter and realism in technique (p. 38). Realism in subject matter involves portraying “trivial or banal material without ennobling or idealizing it, or making it picturesque” (Hyman, 2005, p. 38). Realism in technique refers to the ability of an artist to control the technical resources being employed (Hyman, 2005, p. 40).

For the purposes of this research and in relation to the work of George Dombek, it is realism in technique that I am interested in and that this research concerns. Dombek’s work demonstrates a great deal of realism in technique with what Harington describes as a “heightened degree of technical facility” (Dombek & Harington, 1995, p. 17). Dombek’s chosen medium of watercolor is not traditionally associated with realistic painting styles. In fact, Dombek himself said, “If I wanted to be a photorealist, I wouldn’t use watercolors” (Dombek & Harington, 1995, p. 17). Yet, Dombek began in his thesis work to exert increasing control over the medium and produced more “calculated” paintings as time went on (Dombek, 1977, p. 8).

Hyman (2005) described the main elements of realism as technique as accuracy, animation and modality. Accuracy is asserted as “the accurate depiction of a kind of material or object or activity” (Hyman, 2005, p. 40). Animation “combines mobility with the expression of emotion, character or thought” (Hyman, 2005, p. 43). Modality, “the range of questions we can

ask about a picture's content," is said to be the primary measure of realism (Hyman, 2005, p.44).

Hyman describes modality by offering a series of questions one might be able to answer by

looking at a classical Greek painting:

“Is this man angry or impassive? Is he despondent or alert? Is he Semitic or Egyptian? Is he young or old? Is he fat or thin? Is his cloak made of linen or of wool? Is he standing in the shade or in the sun? Is he running, walking, jumping or standing still?” (Hyman, 2005, p. 44)

Kulvicki (2006), philosophy professor at Dartmouth, argued for a definition of realism similar to that of Hyman by emphasizing that a work is considered to be realistic if it depicts an object as that object and if it ascribes to the object a quality that is included in the perceptual conception of that object by the observer (p. 346). In other words, a picture is realistic if the observer recognizes what is being depicted and can answer questions about the objects depicted in a way that agrees with what they already know of the object from the real world.

According to Goodman (1983), “Realism, like reality, is multiple and evanescent, and no one account of it will do” (p. 272). He described three ways to understand realism: familiarity, revelatory ability, and depiction of actual rather than imaginary subjects. In some cases realism depends on familiarity, those images depicted in familiar modes of representation are considered more realistic (p. 269). For example, “a sketch of the Piazza Vecchio drawn according to standard rules of perspective is more realistic than another drawn according to reversed or otherwise transformed rules” (Goodman, 1983, p. 269). In other cases, realism depends on its revelatory ability. Those images that are depicted with a new or novel mode of representation such as we see with the introduction of standard Western perspective during the Renaissance and also the breaking away from that system later provide a fresh experience of the subject that is experienced as a revelation and is thus considered more realistic (Goodman, 1983, p. 269). A third form of realism is based more on subject than style. This realism depends “upon depiction

of actual as contrasted with imaginary beings, things, or events” (Goodman, 1983, p. 270) such as the “realistic” representations of imaginary creatures in Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Delight*.

Leuthold (1997) defined realism as “the reproduction or imitation of what one sees in reality: a portrayal of people, places, and objects as they ‘really are’ with a minimal imposition of the artist’s fantasies, visions, and imagination” (p. 71). He discussed the impact of philosophical realism on artistic realism by pointing out that “in classical realism artists sought to represent universals that philosophers assumed have an objective reality,” but “since the mid-nineteenth century, artists have simply attempted to represent material objects and social relations in themselves” (Leuthold, 1997, p. 71).

Hassan (2003) described the problem of settling on a concept of realism in visual imagery because of the necessary melding of interpretation and observation: “From the Ancient Egyptians, who thought they ‘painted what they knew’, to the French Impressionists, who thought they ‘painted what they saw’, both interpretation and observation melded in the images they asked us to behold” (p. 6). According to Hassan, realism is a “lucid mystery” (Hassan, 2003, p. 6).

In the late nineteenth century, after the French Revolution, an art movement came to be called French Realism. Realism was used to connote a form of naturalist art that followed the “naturalist credo that art should faithfully record ordinary life” combined with a socialist political message (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1011) Inspired by the French Revolution in 1848, artists such as Gustav Courbet became very interested in the plight of “poor and ordinary” people (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1011). This movement combined naturalistic depictions with ordinary subject matter as seen in Courbet’s *A Burial at Ornans*, depicting a funeral (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1012).

Across Europe, artists were influenced by the Realists disregard for compositional standards that reinforced social hierarchies by placing more important figures higher and nearer the middle of a composition and also by their shift to depictions of peasants and scenes of peasant life as subject matter (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1013).

This realism gave way to Impressionism in Paris in the 1870s. The Impressionists left behind the refined techniques and thoroughly worked compositions of their predecessors to capture the impression of a moment in nature (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1018-1019). Late in the nineteenth century, artists like Paul Cézanne began to seek more order in their compositions maintaining a bright palette as had become common among the Impressionists, but transitioning to more abstracted compositions that were even less naturalistic than the work of the Impressionists (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1030).

As political instability increased in Europe in the early twentieth century, artists moved further away from artistic conventions and experimented with new palettes, compositions and subject matter (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1060).

After 1900 the pace of artistic innovation increased in a dizzying succession of movements, or “isms,” including Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada-Purism, Neoplasticism, and Surrealism. Each was led by charismatic artists who promoted their movement’s unique philosophy through written statement, some of which took the form of manifestos. (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1061)

These movements were marked by a tendency toward abstraction with some presenting “recognizable subject matter in a distorted manner” and other presenting completely abstract compositions concerned with formal issues of line, shape, color, texture, and space (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1061). As modernism was taking hold in Europe, a strain of realism was coalescing in the United States around artists Robert Henri and the artists that came to be know as the Ashcan School because of their depictions of “gritty urban life in New York City” (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1082)

In 1913, photographer and critic of the Ashcan School, Alfred Stieglitz organized a show of modernist art known as the Armory Show. This show featured the work of European modernists such as Matisse, Braque and Duchamp and had a tremendous influence on American artists (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1083).

During the World Wars, many leading European artists moved to the United States such as Marcel Duchamp, a French Dadaist who moved to New York in 1915 (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1101). Dada sought to respond to the growing rationalist and formal tendencies of European modernism by emphasizing “individuality and irrational instinct” in its works that were often playful and irreverent (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1099). Surrealists such as André Breton sought to more programmatically carry out Dada’s desire to “free human behavior” (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1102). The Surrealists employed a number of techniques collectively referred to as automatism such as dream analysis, automatic writing and hypnotic trances to free the individual unconscious (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1104) They had a tremendous influence on American abstract artists who fused the formalism of Cubism with the automatism of Surrealism (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1130).

According to Vesely (2013), Surrealists were inspired by the works of Freud to believe that dreams revealed the mystery of life and thus a reality that was beyond objective reality (p. 315). Surrealism cultivated the representation of an individual’s inner world that celebrated the spontaneity and possible juxtaposition of contradictory imagery (Vesely, 2013, p. 315).

Hobbs (1985) contrasts the approach of European Surrealists and North American Abstract Expressionism as being “classical” and “romantic” approaches to explorations and expressions of the subconscious mind, “using ‘classical’ to mean the desire to create an order that is understandable by a group and ‘romantic’ to mean the distillation of perceived truth through the personal vision of the artist” (p. 299).

One could say that the Abstract Expressionists emphasized the generative, improvisatory aspects of art more than did the Surrealists. And unlike the Surrealists, they distrusted modernism and science, and hoped to restate the history of human culture by finding seeds of it within themselves, in their own unconscious. One might generalize, with the full realization that generalizations are only partial truths, and say that the Surrealists were reworking the Renaissance picture and intent on breaking apart its logical structure, while the Abstract Expressionists were returning to the very beginning of art and using cave painting as a necessary metaphor of renewal and continuance in their very apocalyptic era. (Hobbs, 1985, p. 302)

Abstract Expressionist artist, Adolph Gottlieb, described the movement as a reaction to “the excesses of the Social Realist painting of the 1930s that simplified art and turned it into thinly veneered propaganda” (Hobbs, 1985, p. 302)

In the middle of the twentieth century, representational art gained prominence as figures became more prominent in compositions and artists began to employ recognizable objects in their works (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1138). Pop Art in the 1960s appropriated imagery from American commercial culture in works of Warhol, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and others (Stokstad, 2002, p. 1142-1145). Movements like Pop Art, with its appropriation of everyday objects as artistic subjects, paved the way for Photorealists or Super Realists (Peariso, 2013, p. 745). Photorealists painstakingly reproduced images that they might appear to be the sort of precise visual reproduction that one would achieve with a camera (Peariso, 2013, p. 745).

Ivan Karp, an art dealer instrumental in the popularization of Pop Art, said the photorealists were not reacting to the abstraction that had become so common in contemporary art but were simply interested in treating objects as “emblems representing nothing but themselves” (Peariso, 2013, p. 746).

In her essay on the landscape paintings of renowned photorealist, Peter Holbrook, Katharine Tehranian quotes Holbrook in describing his work as a melding of the traditions of Homer, Eakins, Hopper and Sargent with the late twentieth century technology of photography (Tehranian, 1998, p. 318) An increasing reliance on photographs as a basis for compositions

seemed to provide a clearer standard against which to measure the realism of a given image (Peariso, 2013, p. 745). Artist Robert Bechtle said traditional realists were interested in the difference between the marks they could make and the thing they were trying to represent. According to Bechtle, the photorealists were not interested in that difference and were instead attempting to eliminate it as much as possible by making their paintings appear as much like their subject as they could (Peariso, 2013). According to Peariso (2013), the “adoption of photography asserted unmistakably that the artist’s eye had been fundamentally transformed by the technological developments of her/his time” (p. 747).

In his master’s thesis, Dombek (1977) said, “The camera has been a major influence on my work from the beginning, most notably in my use of color and light” (p. 2). This influence grew over time as he moved from making photographs “as one might make pencil studies” (Dombek, 1977, p. 2) to painting based on photographs (Dombek, 1977, p.3).

Dombek (1977) stated, “I am often moved by a visual experience. I have often tried to respond to that experience, but the end product has little to do with the subject matter” (p. 4). According to Henry Adams (Dombek, 2011), Dombek thinks of his paintings as abstract, interested mostly in the “flow of pigment” (p. 8). Yet his compositions contain immediately recognizable objects such as rocks, flowers, trees, grass and others painted with sophisticated draftsmanship and in “convincing” style (Dombek, 2011, p. 6).

III. The Architect of Watercolor Script

Opening (00:00-00:31)

[Title animation with watercolor flow effect and selection of images representing the scope of his subject matter]

[Soundtrack: score with nature sounds]

Introduction (00:31-03:14)

[Interview footage with cover of Delta show program and images of early crate paintings]

[Soundtrack: score under title]

ADAMS: George is an interesting example of someone who's both aware of art world developments and has pretty much developed on his own, and I guess it's, it's an odd career because for something like 30, 40 years he was supporting himself teaching architecture and sending these watercolors to exhibitions.

DOMBEK: I started entering all of these competitions and, uh, the, um, I found out real quickly that I was, um, being rejected, I was being reject... once I started this different way of working, I would, would be rejected from watercolor competitions because, they they're watercolor societies so they have certain ways, rules about how you paint, and, um, "Jesus, is that a, that's a oxymoron, rules how to make art." (chuckle) You know, so. (chuckle) But the other other shows would limit it to, um, watercolor. They were shows about art in common, and, so, those shows I had tremendous success.

The only bad thing about all that was it gave me a little too much confidence, and I think "Oh, this is easy. (chuckle) This is real easy." (chuckle) But, uh, It took me about another 17 years to figure out that it, well, no, I figured out real quickly it wasn't easy once I got out of graduate school, but it took me about 17 years to figure out how I could make a living even though I'd had a lot of success.

I was painting, um, vegetable crates, um, you know, and I'd paint quite a few of those inside barns, hay barns, and, um, I read a review about, uh, some place where that, that, was in a show, and somebody wrote, uh, uh, "George Dombek is fascinated with vegetable crates." And I thought, "Hmm, that's what they are."

TERRY: In the crate paintings, it seems that George was really interested in capturing light on the surface, and so the crate meant that there would be voids in a surface where obviously light isn't received, so there is this play of, of figure ground, of light and sh..., not even so much shadow but light and no light.

Early Work (03:14-04:04)

[Title slide, interview footage, cover images of fire escape and industrial building paintings]

[Soundtrack: score under title]

ADAMS: There's a general development where a lot of his early work had to do with architectural and manmade structures, and he did these things with crates. He did a whole series of paintings with fire escapes out in San Francisco. He did tobacco barns, um, and then when he

was in Youngstown he did these steel mills and steel foundries and there's often an imagery or or themes connected with that, I mean, for example in Youngstown he's clearly interested in the fact that this is a declining industry and these are, you know, this is a rust belt area, and what are these forms, you know, that are so huge but are disappearing.

Realism or Abstraction (04:04-06:28)

[Title slide, interview footage, cover images of barn and flower paintings]

[Soundtrack: score under title]

TERRY: I think there is that attention to, to realism, and when I say realism, um, I mean that in terms of light and shadow, color, form. I don't mean that so much in terms of the subject matter because in many of the subjects that George is painting there...whether it's a still life or whether it's the barn paintings, there there still is a fabrication. It's not it's not truly realism in the sense that you could drive out in the country and see this barn, but there is an interest in the texture of the of the barn wood or the texture of a flower petal in the case of the large gerber daisy paintings. There is an understanding of light and shadow and how that has the ability to convince one that it's real. I think that's really interesting. There's an illusion of reality even though the pieces are not about capturing a, a real place or real thing.

DOMBEK: You know at the same time Jackson Pollock is doing the drip painting, Norman Rockwell is doing these, um, Post paintings I guess, Sunday Sunday Post or whatever, those things had no effect on me, they were going at the same time, and I still don't have much of a kinship to that, to those realist painters, and they're very, even though I'm considered a realist, I don't connect with those painters very very well. There are very few. I still go back to abstract painters, and I'm still, um, course, all paintings is abstract. You know the painting, no matter how you, you're taking something, you're putting it on a two, two dimensional plane, and so everybody's doing abstract painting, sometimes it's it's just giving it a different label.

ADAMS: I think that the interplay between realism and abstraction is certainly one of the major issues of 20th/21st century art. Ya know. His art is very much about that, and I think that there's a conceptual side of his art, uh, that's, you know, very much in tune with what the art world is doing.

Tobacco Barns (06:28-09:50)

[Title slide, interview footage, cover images of tobacco barn paintings]

[Soundtrack: score under title]

TERRY: The barn has always been a, been a fascinating subject to architects and designers, as a vernacular element, a structure. This the idea that the structure is so pure. That it's only what's necessary to make the barn stand up. That it's only, you know, that it, or that it potentially is made of leftover materials or materials that that were available to the person building. That the person building is not trained or educated as a as a designer, as an architect. There is a purity about that that I think is, it really gets to us. It gets, it speaks to us as, as designers because it's, it's just so pure. So I think in those tobacco barn paintings there is something that compelled George as an architect to go inside, and to see the structure and to reveal that structure, to understand that a tobacco barn is is different than other kinds of barns because tobacco barns have to breathe, right, they have to allow airflow in order for the tobacco to cure properly. So

that, there's something I think that lured him inside as, and that was probably because he was still so close to his architectural education, still so immersed in architecture.

ADAMS: The tobacco barns are one of his most remarkable series and I think if you talked to George he would single them out as particularly important examples of his work. He's basically, well at that point he actually did a study where he was looking at these tobacco barns in terms of architectural history and going around and photographing them because of course, this is a kind of structure that used to be very common that is now getting knocked down because of changes in the way tobacco is processed and also, of course, you know, changes in attitudes toward smoking and tobacco and that kind of thing. Um. What's interesting about those paintings is that they're incredibly detailed and accurate in terms of the architectural understanding of structure but then the light inside a tobacco barn is very dark and you have these funny bright flashes of light that are cutting across the form. So, at once these paintings are very accurate but they're very hard to interpret and it's hard to figure out that you know this black line is continuing over here and it's a major beam that's holding the barn together. There's that tension between what's understandable and what's not understandable that I think makes those paintings very interesting to look at.

DOMBEK: I do paintings and I put 'em up, and I exhibit paintings and people get maybe certain satisfaction from that, but they don't get near the satisfaction from it as I do. Uh, producing something, the act, the physical act and being involved in painting something, um, is more fun for me than actually looking at the artwork.

Trees (09:50-13:56)

[Title slide, interview footage, cover images of tree paintings]

[Soundtrack: score under title]

TERRY: He's painting a very specific kind of tree and a very specific silhouette of a tree that I, so I think there is, this, again there is this relationship between the the tree that one could interpret is maybe in some state of dying or at least seasonally that it is in that moving from fall into into winter. Well it certainly provides the compositional structure, but, but even more than purely composition, it provides the, it provides the bones of the painting. And so in that regard it's almost like it is the, the grotesque thing that allows us to then witness the beautiful butterfly. You know, flitting around that that in somehow in that regard represents life. I don't know that George would ever talk about it that way. That seems completely unlike George, but there is a reason that he chooses to paint the trees without leaves or with very few leaves. And that to me is about the st..., the the fact that he is interested in structure. So, for designers, for architects, we're always looking at the structure of things. So the barn is that perfect subject matter, but a tree in summertime is not as interesting to an architect as it is in the winter when it's stripped bare and the, the beautiful structural quality is revealed. And that's, that is just fact (chuckle). That's just the way it is.

ADAMS: I find the trees fascinating in one of the issues there, which of course you don't, isn't conveyed very well in a book, but um, many of the tree paintings are quite large, and, um, they're about the largest watercolors I've ever seen and, in fact, it's very difficult to buy sheets of paper that are that large. The trees are about the size of a real tree and that gives them a different kind of impact. I've always been very fond of Japanese decorative screens and it seems

to me that there's a connection there that George is creating paintings like Japanese screens that are wonderful paintings but also can serve a decorative function in a room. They can, again it's almost architectural. If you put these paintings in an architectural space, they will change the whole environment. And of course if you've got a bunch of these paintings you can move them around the room in different combinations. And I think he is very interested in that kind of thing. How you can take a group of paintings and create an environment. There are often little kind of conceptual twists of that some of his work, certainly the twigs that look like, you know, famous sculptures or paintings, um, you know there he is playing mind games with you a little bit.

DOMBEK: It's fun. It's fun to this very day the, you know, the you put down the mark in it in graphite and it stays there on the paper. You put down a mark in pastel, you put down a mark in somewhat in oil paintings or even acrylics, but it, it lays there on a piece of paper or canvas. You put down pigment in water and boom! You know, the something happens that's special to that particular medium. And a lot of people, and even artists, don't like the fact that it does its own thing, and that's what, uh, is a pure joy. Fifty years, fifty-five years and counting I still to this very day have that, uh, surprise, the thing's happening, so, um, that's why I watercolor.

Rocks (13:56-15:37)

[Title slide, interview footage, cover images of rock paintings]

[Soundtrack: score under title]

ADAMS: You can look at many of George's paintings, both as realistic paintings and as abstract paintings. A good example would be his paintings of stones which were a lot of the time, um, either stones from, from, you know, by the ocean or by a stream. They're stones that have been worn smooth by water, um, but he creates these compositions out of stones and you can almost look at some of those paintings as abstract expressionist paintings. There's a lot of, um, rather daring use of pattern and brushwork and texture and that kind of thing that has a very abstract expressionist look, and he seems to know just how far you can push that so that it's abstract but it still looks like a stone, um, and you can kind of read it either way.

TERRY: They aren't compositional devices in the same way that some of the other paintings are because there's no negative space. George is really a, a master at composing the negative space, and in those paintings the, the, there is no negative space. The rocks fill the entire frame. So then it becomes about, I think, looking through something. It's like you're, you know, you're looking through water to see this world below.

Bicycles (15:37-17:14)

[Title slide, interview footage, cover images of bicycle paintings and Tour de Tree sculpture]

[Soundtrack: score under title]

ADAMS: George has a fascination with bicycles. I'm not even quite sure where that comes from because he started off doing paintings that are basically pretty realistic and straightforward of bicycles. I think he may have started them in Italy where of course they use bikes a good deal for transportation. Um, there's a little bit of a twist cause they're often you have a very realistic bike and then you have a shadow that comes in at some very odd angle and sort of gives the whole form a curious kind of distortion and surreal quality. I think he's again interested in the

idea that the most realistic effects also have a kind of surreal quality that they're catching our eye as unusual in some way. Um, and then of course he went to making bicycles out of twigs. Um, I don't even think he knows quite why he did it. At one point he started making a bicycle out of twigs and then that became a whole direction of his work. Of course it's a completely stupid idea. I mean, what can you do with a bicycle made of twigs? But um, you know, that's part of what's captivating about it.

DOMBEK: I've had writers, more than once, beg me to tell stories about the artwork. They want, "Give, give me a story. People want to hear a story." Screw it! I'm not giving stories, you know. People are gonna have to, I do the paintings, they gotta come up with their own stories, you know.

Ozark Portraits (17:14-18:32)

[Title slide, interview footage, cover images of Ozark Portraits paintings]

[Soundtrack: score under title]

ADAMS: An interesting series is actually the Ozark Portraits, which are just discarded bits of hardware sort of. Um, you know, machine parts and old pots and pans and he turns them into face-like creations where, and I think the art has to do with the fact that they're a little bit like faces but not entirely. So, um, you know, you're not quite sure whether the face is there or not.

TERRY: Even though these pieces are recognizable objects, I would still call them abstractions because they are taken out of a context, and they're, they're intended to be paintings that are only depicting what they are and yet they become narratives because these elements have been personified. George has found a way to take something so ordinary, abstract it, or take it out of its context, put it into a new context and then the average viewer still has a way in. That's, that's pretty difficult to do, and I think that is I think that's why there is a universal appeal to the work.

Flowers (18:32-19:29)

[Title slide, interview footage, cover images of flower paintings]

[Soundtrack: score under title]

TERRY: The flowers are interesting because they, you know, like the barn paintings they do fill the frame and yet he still uses negative space to capture that very specific form. The contour of the, the petals. And I think if, if he had zoomed in completely and not allowed there to be that negative space, I don't think the paintings would be as successful. But what I do appreciate about them is just that hypersaturation. I mean they, again they almost feel like velvet, you know, it's like he somehow has been able to capture the softness of the petal through watercolor, which is not easy to do. I don't, I don't know that people appreciate how difficult it is to saturate color in that way with a water based medium like that.

Barns (19:29-24:13)

[Title slide, interview footage, cover images of barn paintings]

[Soundtrack: score under title, nature sounds under early barn paintings with both score and nature sounds later in the segment]

ADAMS: The barns are interesting because most of them are hay barns, they're a kind of barn that people don't use anymore. Basically in that period you um, you put hay into bales and then you had to lift it up to the haddock of the barn with these fairly primitive kinds of lifts. George himself did that kind of work when he was in high school, and it's terribly hard physical work and of course it's hot and the hay is itchy and it always gets, you know, down in the back of your shirt. Um, and now they don't do that because they have got these techniques of um, making much bigger bales and then you just wrap 'em up in plastic and leave it in the field. And it's a whole different system. So I think what's interesting is that this kind of barn that you used to find everywhere throughout Arkansas is kind of disappearing and in fact, if you drive around on country roads you can see these buildings that are kind of collapsing, you know, while you go by. I think in fifty years there won't be that many of them left. Um, so that there's a sort of historical aspect to this that these are very modern designs, but they're also looking at the American past in a way that is sort of preserving that past. I think a lot of the impulsive art has to do with the realization that moments slip away from us and, um, and time passes and things change, and it's an effort to try to preserve those things, and you know, make something that will, uh, last into the future. So I think these barns have a kind of double aspect. They're both very modern paintings, but they're also, you know, looking at a way of life that's gone and of course one that means a lot to George because he grew up in this world that was, you know, technically pretty primitive in some ways, and probably not that different from the American frontier in some ways.

TERRY: In the making of those barn paintings he gets to, to act as both the architect and as the painter. He designs those barns. Those barns are manifestations of his taking different pieces and parts, putting them together understanding even though the structure isn't as revealed in these new pieces as it may have been previously. He understands the structure that's required to make the barn look that way. When you understand that those barns are constructs, they're not real places that you can visit. When you understand that he has documented, photographed, even recorded with his own eyes all these different barns, and what he is doing is he is assembling a barn in the painting. Then you start to understand that his real joy in, in painting is the composition and making the composition something that is visually appealing that will hold you there for a long time. The eye constantly moves through the composition. It's moving diagonally. Then the shadows will take you back another direction. Then there may be a framed view out into the landscape, so you're pulled deeper into the painting. That, that for me is the magic in George's work. He's much more interested in capturing the shadow, so it's, it's that cast shadow that becomes so figural. That is really interesting. So it's, the work is still about light, but it's just the early work was about the evidence of light present on a surface, on a material surface. And now I think it's evidence of light as a source that can cast shadow. I think that's why he hasn't, he hasn't exhausted the subject matter yet, and I think it's because it is this perfect combination of all the things that he is both as someone who grew up in Northwest Arkansas, someone who is, who is an Arkansan, who lives and loves rural Arkansas, as someone who was educated as an architect first and then as a painter. It is a subject matter that, that can sustain all of those things probably forever (laughs). I mean it just, it's, it seems, it's so potent. And every time he peels back a layer, what a physical layer of the barn's surface, there simply is more to reveal.

Conclusion (24:13-26:26)

[Interview footage, cover images of barn paintings early then images of tree with birds, rocks,

and tobacco barn]

[Soundtrack: score and nature sounds under barn images]

ADAMS: One of the things that interesting to me about George's work is a lot of um, contemporary artists do very good work for a while and then they take a wrong turn in some way. And I'd say that George, so far that I have known him hasn't taken a wrong turn. His work keeps getting better and you know that's not a straight upward evolution, but if you look at his work over a 10 year period I think, you know, this is someone who is still growing and developing.

TERRY: He is, you know, an artist's artist. It's like he paints what he knows; he paints what he sees. I think in, in some ways it's almost a compulsion. He has to do it. I don't know that he made the conscious choice but I think he just, he has to be authentic to who he is and what he knows and, I also think that he believes that he just has to keep painting it. You know, and he has to keep finding the way through his medium to capture it. He is someone who paints what he sees. And so, if he's in San Francisco, then what he sees is a very different kind of natural landscape than what he sees if he's in Italy or in Florida. One could look at the work and say, "Well, sometimes he is painting fire escapes, and sometimes he is sometimes he is painting rocks, sometimes he is painting birds in trees," and that may as an artistic linkage may not seem to be very clear, but when you understand that he is painting within his context within his given setting at any time, then it becomes obvious that he is looking for the same kinds of things in those different places. It's always about light. It's always about, you know, shadow. It's always about color, you know and very particular ways and how light and shadow play with color. Then I think it's easier to understand what otherwise might seem very, very disparate parts, very disparate subject matters.

DOMBEK: As long as I can lift up a paintbrush, as long as I'm alive, I will be painting. Uh, there's not going to be a stopping point.

Credits (26:26-26:52)

[Title animation with watercolor flow effect and selection of images from the opening animation]

[Soundtrack: score with nature sounds]

IV. Film Credits

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