

Frank Herrmann: Modernist and Primitivist

A decade in the new century has passed, and Frank Herrmann remains enthralled with the same painting images that came to him at the beginning of the new millennium. Did the millennial fever that swept the world operate on this artist and force the changes in his thought and practice that have now yielded an astounding body of work? Any serious artist would be thrilled to benefit from an epiphany like the one that struck Herrmann in 2000. His son gave him a book about Asmat art, and he suddenly recognized that he had been doodling and sketching Oceanic motifs for quite some time.

With the accumulated analytic skills of a painter and a professor of art, one who must be equipped to help his students articulate the sources of their ideas, Herrmann recalled the original impact of seeing Oceanic art in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1984. The collection of the late Michael Rockefeller went on display in new galleries created to house the former Museum of Primitive Art that was established by his father, Nelson Rockefeller. Sometime later Herrmann framed some small drawings he had made of abstract motifs based on Asmat art. In 2000, he identified his memories of the Rockefeller collection in these drawings and began the systematic research that would lead him to paint with a new inspiration.

Elsewhere in this catalogue are accounts of Frank Herrmann's investigations of the Asmat people living in Indonesian New Guinea and the creation of his personal collection of their art. Here I would like to consider what Herrmann's achievement represents through a critical analysis of a series of Herrmann's paintings that we selected together. Using these works as examples, I would also like to suggest that we should evaluate Herrmann not only as a contemporary artist, but instead as a 21st century modernist and a "primitivist."

Contemporary artists are generally thought to be concerned primarily with the issues of their own time and this leads to work that frequently expresses political

and social opinions through its content as well as its form. The modern artist, on the other hand, participates in a tradition inaugurated in the late 19th century that is more deeply concerned with the nature of art and art making. The coexistence of the contemporary artist and the modern artist creates a lively art world with room for all in our museums and galleries, and there are lots of “cross overs” making the critic’s work most engaging.

When Frank Herrmann decided to bring Asmat art and artifacts into his studio, he joined the company of such painters as Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, Kirchner and the German Expressionists who were active in the early 20th century. Like them, Herrmann began a profound cultural relationship with what is known today as Primitive art. Shopping in the flea markets and curio stalls of Paris, Berlin or Amsterdam early modern artists brought home carved statues and unusual objects to decorate their studios. Typically, these items were of unknown origin and probably came from the packs of sailors who brought them from the coasts and islands they had visited. Images of the artists’ purchases found their way into paintings and gave complex meanings to their still life and interior scenes.

The motives of these artist-collectors and the meaning of their choices were studied exhaustively by the late curator and scholar William Rubin. In 1984 Rubin published a two volume catalogue, coinciding with an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, entitled “*Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.” Rubin and his collaborating authors constructed the history of the influence of Primitive art and the development of “primitivism” that I will use to discuss Herrmann’s paintings.

Primitive art began to be recognized in Europe during the 18th century when exotic objects collected on voyages of discovery during previous centuries emerged in exhibitions and collections of “curiosities.”¹ Enlightenment scholars explained these works as testaments of an artistic spirit that unifies all of human

society. Later art historians began to develop systems for classifying and valuing them and defining their characteristics.

Simultaneously, the French *encyclopédistes* had defined the word “*primitif*,” signifying “first,” for which they found varied meanings and usages. By the late 19th century, art historians were canonizing the earliest Franco-Flemish and Italian painters as Les Primitifs because they were active in the centuries before the Renaissance, and so came first, that is before, the acknowledged 15th- and 16th- century masters. This usage was abandoned when the history of the Renaissance became better understood.

Meanwhile, in the writings of French anthropologists and ethnographers, a member of an uncivilized society was defined as a primitif. It was from this second meaning that the art produced by tribes in the distant archipelagos of Micronesia and Oceania, as well as the continent of Africa, began to be called Primitive art. For the purpose of his studies Rubin defined “primitivism’ as, “the interest of modern artists in tribal art and culture, as revealed in their thought and work.”²

In *Primitivism* Rubin lamented that the words “primitive” and “primitivism” have been criticized as ethnocentric and pejorative. These words survive today even in our post-modern climate of political correctness since we now praise cultural diversity in all its appearances. Much has been done to value Primitive art in part because primitivism became an affirmative characteristic of artistic style through the works of Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, Bracque, Brancusi and many others. These artists implicitly agreed with the opinion of anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss: “A primitive people is not a backward or retarded people; indeed it may possess, in one realm or another, a genius for invention or action that leaves the achievements of other people far behind.”³ Having quoted this view, Rubin continued by saying that these artists, “were aware of the conceptual complexity and aesthetic subtlety of the best tribal art, which is only simple in the sense of its

reductiveness — and not, as was popularly believed, in the sense of simple mindedness.”⁴

To explicate primitivism Rubin established a methodology for analyzing the similarities and differences between the Cubists and the Surrealists based on their approaches to Primitive art. Empowered by conversations with Picasso and others, and fortified with all the photographic resources now available to scholars, Rubin made direct comparisons between paintings and sculptures by these artists and the objects that were likely sources of their primitivism. Enumerating the examples of tribal arts that they collected alongside of those they could have seen in museums and art galleries and the collections of scholars and amateurs, Rubin determined that the Cubists were most influenced by the arts of Africa while the Surrealists preferred the arts of Oceania. “Cubism, like African art, was rooted – despite varying degrees of abstraction – in the concrete reality of the visible world; Surrealism, like much Oceanic art (at least in Melanesia), opted primarily for the world of the imagined, for the depiction of the fantastic rather than the visually derived.”⁵

Rubin’s differentiation between the Cubist’s primitivism and the Surrealist’s primitivism is a subtle and lengthy discussion, and while he used some clever generalizations to make his points, the visual comparisons he provided are very persuasive. Rubin also observed that Oceanic tribal arts arrived on the scene after awareness of African arts had become well established, that is, during the 1920s when Surrealism had taken root in advanced intellectual circles. His conclusion was that Cubism, Surrealism and all the abstract tendencies are evidence of the widespread 20th-century commitment to conceptual modes of imaging as opposed to the pictorial modes that were reality based and had previously predominated.

When we look at the work of Herrmann, his ‘primitivism’ is apparent. He has chosen to try to understand the Asmat artists through a close analysis of their

works and studies of their techniques, which he has then imitated using contemporary methods and materials. After reading deeply in the ethnographic literature about Asmat culture, he has tried to imagine their creative states of mind even though these are totally foreign to an American artist living in an urban, academic milieu. To recognize the nature of his accomplishment, I want to suggest that Herrmann's primitivism can best be understood through a comparison with the first primitivist, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903).

Gauguin is the primitif of modern primitivism, wrote Kirk Varnadoe in Rubin's publication. "Other artists before him may have known of the arts of Primitive societies, but Gauguin was the first to appreciate in such forms a significant, potentially transforming challenge to Western ways of depicting the world."⁶ Gauguin, the self-proclaimed "savage," went to live as a "primitive" in Tahiti. His late paintings, sculptures and ceramics as well as his books, prints and letters demonstrate the commitment he made to breaking away from the Impressionists' style in which he had begun his career as a follower of Pissarro. He wanted to live in a simple way among simple people as a means to understand his own creativity.

Before he left France to begin his legendary island adventures, Gauguin was recognized as a competent, if somewhat eccentric, landscape painter. Prior to first trip to Tahiti (April 1891-July 1893), Gauguin had abandoned the established conventions of perspective and local color. Although his paintings puzzled and even outraged his contemporaries, not long after his death Gauguin was recognized as a master. His use of color and pattern to represent space in landscapes was best understood by the next generation of artists, the Fauves and the Expressionists, who passed the legacy on to modern abstract artists.

Mahana no atua, 1894, (Art Institute of Chicago,) was painted between the first and the second of Gauguin's Tahitian periods (1895 – 1903.) Despite its small

size (approximately 26" x 35"), it is an exemplification of everything Gauguin set out to do and what he achieved for the benefit of modern artists.

The Gauguin scholar Richard Brettell described the three horizontal zones of *Mahana no atua*: the background dominated by the statue of a god where figures seem to be practicing a ritual; the middle ground of beach with a bathing woman and attendants lying in fetal positions; and the foreground that is a field of brilliant swirling color.⁷ Brettell analyzes this field as "a sacred pool that reflects not the world of appearances, but the ultimate essence of form and color. The left portion of the pool reads as a flat plane perpendicular to the surface, within the illusionist world of the picture. The right side, however, is totally flat parallel to the picture surface and its dialogue of colors has few precedents in the history of western easel painting."⁸

Mysterious, vividly colored, even hallucinatory paintings by Gauguin have influenced successive generations of abstract artists who, like Herrmann, progressed through naturalism in landscape art and onward into abstraction. Speaking of his own evolution, Herrmann said he felt he had always been a landscape painter, even when his paintings became totally nonobjective essays in contrasting form and color. When Herrmann began to think about the Asmat artists, he instinctively pictured them in a natural world. Based on his readings and conversations with collectors, he visualized their society and the context of their art making, which takes place out of doors within their villages. Aided by photographic studies published by ethnographers who had visited the Asmat region, Herrmann created an abstract landscape within which he could arrange the cultural objects and symbols that were capturing his imagination.

THINKING: Churinga, Chains, Form and Scull, 2000, was the first canvas into which Herrmann introduced Asmat artifacts within an abstract setting vaguely resembling a landscape. The central form is presented like a trophy, that is an ornamental group of symbolic objects arranged for display, known from the

monuments of ancient Greeks and Romans. Herrmann's trophy is composed of a skull with an Asmat nose ornament set upon a pedestal and surrounded by a chain. Atop the skull is the *churinga*, an oblong stone club with inscriptions. The *churinga* is an Australian aboriginal sacred object, and, in the case of this painting, it is a remnant from Herrmann's broader initial studies of Oceania. Surrounding the central trophy are patterns that signify organic plant growth, cosmic constellations, and passages of blue and orange sky that make up a natural environment, but with no perspective or receding space. Instead, everything crowds against the picture plane in a menacing way.

According to Herrmann his painting began uncertainly: he was *thinking* as the title suggests, thinking his way out of one way of painting and into another.⁹ Evidence remains of a truncated painting based on a photo of his son's head in a thinking posture. It was sketched in the lower third of the canvas, but was painted over as Herrmann began reading about the Asmats who commemorate their ancestors by decorating their skulls

Right from the start Herrmann wanted to give monumentality to his Asmat paintings as a testament to the respect that he developed for the artists from whom he was borrowing. All of Herrmann's Asmat paintings are large nearly eight by eight foot square canvases heavily worked with acrylic paint, gel mediums and collaged materials so that the surfaces have a raised relief dimension. They are more like physical objects and not easel paintings that might go into a frame. The forms have always had a larger than life-size scale and massiveness within their settings.

THINKING: The Origin of Motif, 2002, shows the next step in the evolution of the Asmat series. Herrmann demonstrates to us how he believes these Stone Age people might have begun their art making after some kind of apocalyptic event. This event takes place in an environment, not quite a landscape, but with some natural features and some spatial depth. In the upper right corner, there is bright

blue sky and from it pellets of matter are suspended above the darkness of a storm, or is it a cave? A spectral skull floats near the top of the canvas and from its mouth (as well as the truncated head to the right of the glyphs), a whirlwind of energy spirals forward from the deep space of the atmosphere. Herrmann marks the skull's speech balloon with markings that stand for communication. In the dark bands of the glyphs the word, *wowipits* is written repetitively. The Asmat people have no written language. Their aural language has been recorded and translated by foreigners and is used in studies of their culture.

The skull's utterance is surrounded by examples of the Asmats' art. On the left, is the schematic depiction of an Asmat shield decorated with the motif of the *tar*, or fruit bat, which frequently is found carved on these objects. By the time of this painting Herrmann had begun his own collection and so was able to take rubbings from Asmat shields in his possession and transfer them to the painting. At mid-right there is a profile of a head looking into the painting like an observer on the perimeter of the action. The profile image comes from an Asmat shield and might stand for the artist himself confronting the challenges he anticipates in his new paintings.

On the opposite side, at mid-left there is a schematic drawing of the top of one of the *bis* poles which are the most elaborate feature of Asmat architecture. The bis poles are used to construct the men's house, the *jeu*, where rituals take place. Beneath these two images are more examples of ornamental motifs Herrmann acquired from rubbings of shields. At the very bottom of the canvas is a frieze of water motifs taken from a shield in Herrmann's collection. By cataloguing the various Asmat motifs in his paintings Herrmann has wished to show that these motifs are the means of communication, the real "language" that the Asmats created for personal expression.

The complexity of *THINKING: The Origin of Motif*, 2002 can be contrasted with a somewhat simpler painting from the following year, *Safan II*, 2003. It is also an

environmental painting that could be called an abstract landscape because of its division into two clearly marked fields. Herrmann's title suggests this: the word *safan* is the Asmat word for holy land or heaven so a division between earth and sky is intended here. The lower field, the earth, is painted reddish orange to reference the source of the pigment that Asmat artists use for their painted ornaments and the oppressive heat of the equatorial climate. Their red paint is made from local clays, and their white paint is made of pulverized shell. In the upper field, or sky, the background is white and floating within it is a frieze of red symbols taken from shield rubbings that are thought to represent water or an extremely abstracted human figure. The same pigments are used for the carved wooden objects -- shields, bowls, statuettes -- and for body paints that are applied at the time of rituals. There is nothing in Asmat art that resembles Western landscape painting, but Herrmann has found a way to honor their environment and their aesthetic means in this powerful painting.

Three years into the Asmat series Herrmann was well versed in Asmat lore and scholarship. He understood the importance of the Asmat carver, the wowipits, a sculptor in wood and highly respected tribal figure. Before the arrival of the foreign traders, the woodcarvers used sharpened stones, rat teeth and bone chisels to fabricate the wooden shields and utilitarian objects that supported their tribal life. Herrmann, like others who have studied the Asmats, was deeply impressed with their skillful use of a symbolic language and recognized the recording of tribal mythologies in their recurring motifs. He had come to recognize that his challenge would be to use the Asmat objects and symbols in ways that respected their authors and inventors, while demonstrating his admiration and affinities as a 21st- century primitivist.

THINKING: CusCus Motif, 2003, makes use of a landscape format that is more clearly recognizable. The background is an aerial view of the New Guinea coastline that Herrmann has come to know from photographs. Bands of ocean blue and muddy yellow coastline edged occasionally by jungle green, the tropical

forest represent, the Asmat region known officially as Irian Java. At the bottom of the canvas a large, nose protrudes from a covering that displays an Asmat shield motif with a very unusual rectilinear design that may be similar to those found on a bark cloth. This woven material has a geometric design that differentiates it from the organic designs more typical of Asmat art. Herrmann has identified the nose as his -- he is found in his “thinking” artist-persona, the one he has adopted for his Asmat paintings. Asmat motifs are scattered beneath the shield covering and in the left corner is the partial image of an Asmat shield from the remote Brazza District. Above the head are large floating images of the *cuscus* symbol, an S-shaped motif that symbolizes two joined tails of the cuscus, an Australian marsupial similar to the American opossum. The Asmat lands lie directly north of the Australian continent, and it has been assumed that migrations and cultural transmissions occurred across the Arafura Sea. The cuscus motif has the attractive linear form of an arabesque, a graceful space-filler, useful for endless repetition, representing continuity.

The four *THINKING* paintings summarize Herrmann’s early period of knowledge acquisition. During this time he strenuously questioned his motives -- not motifs. Why was he so mesmerized by the Asmat artists? What could he begin to do with what he had learned that would not be a violation of their art and their specific intentions? The answer was suggested in a 2004 painting, *Asmat Specimen*.

An Asmat shield with a figure on its top is presented on a stand with a square base like a museum object. The setting is most likely an interior with a floor or platform and a wall behind the figure creating a spatial box. The painting has the airtight quality of a museum display, but that display is still in preparation. On the pink platform floor, beneath the shield we can read the word “asmat” as a stencil-cut piece of cursive lettering. The word **recedes** away from the picture plane and toward the back of the box, its curling edges showing that it has been cut from another image, the stencil master, shown not far away. And then it is possible to

recognize that on the floor itself there is the shadowy painting of a word: all this play with lettering tells us there is an unseen light source as well as a guiding hand trying to arrange an exhibition.

With *Asmat Speciman* Herrmann began to explore more deeply the issues that had bedeviled him as he proceeded with the series of paintings. One obvious issue was language and the fact that the absence of a written Asmat language meant that their thoughts and ideas could only be communicated through the interventions of others, the Dutch first of all, and then the foreign missionaries and more recently the Indonesian authorities who have taken over their lands and administer them according to their concept of international colonialism sanctioned by the United Nations. The Asmats are protected, but their rights to self-determination have been curtailed: otherwise, the UN and Indonesia might find themselves sanctioning headhunting. So his questions were, who are the Asmats today and what can be said about them both seriously and sensitively? Most importantly, what would they have to say about the exploitation and suppression of their culture?

Squeezing gel medium out of a tube and onto a work table, Herrmann began to write the Asmat words that he had learned from his readings: *asmat*, the word for the people and their land, *wowipits*, the woodcarver, and *fumeriwipits*, according to the Asmat creation myth, the first woodcarver who carved figures which came to life and became the Asmat people. To Herrmann these gelforms became talismanic representing his communication with the Asmats. When dried these words could be lifted from one surface and transferred to another. They became collage elements, part design and part content signifiers, and were used in a group of paintings.

Herrmann was never a fan of *Lettrism*, or word art, the incorporation of words and texts within a work of art to enhance or underscore, even to exist as a meaning. Lettrism enjoyed a revival in the decades of Conceptual art where the

insertion of words, in fact whole paragraphs, became the art itself. Lettrism is a valid attribute of modernism, widely practiced by the Cubist and Surrealists with whom Herrmann has affinities. Even Gauguin, who was cited above as an influence, had made use of writing in his canvases to stress their exotic origin.

But, it was not Gauguin who sprang to mind when Herrmann began to understand how the absence of a written language would lead to misinterpretation of the Asmat culture and beyond that to exploitation of their art. Instead, he turned to the example of an artist colleague, the Anglo-American painter, John Walker, whose work he had long admired.

Walker has used words in his paintings for a long time. He first noticed the words in the paintings of David Hockney, Jasper Johns and the Pop artists. Bruce Nauman, another artist of that generation, uses words in paintings and sculptures and all of these applications of lettrism are interesting and valid to Walker. In an Internet posting from 2008, Walker said:

‘People have said you can’t use words in painting. Purists have said this. But “pure art” has been bastardized for a long time now -- cubists used words, in the 50’s Kaprow, Rauschenberg, assemblage – all this roughed up painting and bastardized it, introduced other media into painting and it all became problematic.’¹⁰

In the same posting, Walker spoke of his use of poetry in his paintings, how when he painted he “touched the words” and experienced the meaning that they held for him. “It’s a highly selective process,” he said, “I have to care about the words.”

Herrmann has certainly also begun to care about the words. To him, “asmat” is a powerful signifier and its several appearances in **Asmat Specimen** are noteworthy. The “asmat” to the left of the standing shield is shown in perspective,

retreating from the picture plane in a recline/decline position. Herrmann said this “asmat” originated in a photo he had taken of the word laying on the table in his studio. He had just spoken on the phone with his collector friend Steve Chiaramonte, who had just sent him a DVD made by the Indonesian government. The DVD showed the collector searching for sites where there was still significant Asmat carving activity. Chiaramonte said he had to go deeper inland and further up river, past villages with satellite dishes and people in Hard Rock Cafe t-shirts to find anything of value.

Herrmann asked Chiaramonte if the culture was in decline? Chiaramonte said “No, it is evolving.” While he spoke, Herrmann looked at the thin-edged piece of paper forming the word “asmat” in recline/decline and felt it had to appear in the painting. Herrmann accepts that Asmat culture no longer exists in a pre-contact state, that is, before the explorers, the missionaries and the government altered their way of life, proscribed head hunting and rendered their art unnecessary. The vanished declining, receding, culture is the one that had originally captured Herrmann’s interest and imagination. He has no interest in the Asmat art now being produced essentially for the tourist market.

Asmat Specimen encapsulates many ideas about Herrmann’s series of Asmat paintings. The spiritual content of their work has reached out to him, to the artist and to the connoisseur, but it will not change his life. There is no reason to go there now that the culture has been so altered. He is not moved to make the strenuous journey to New Guinea and become an explorer after the tragic example of Michael Rockefeller who died there in 1961 while on a quest to create a collection. Instead, Herrmann will continue to use the recorded Asmat motifs to create new imagery and interpretations consistent with the modern artistic practice he has established. The stencils he cuts come from a computer-driven laser-cutting instrument. Herrmann can make multiples of Asmat motifs to transfer to painting surfaces. The collage process combined with paints and gels results in the highly textured surfaces he wants to obtain.

Yupamakcain Motif Field, 2004, was an experiment in the making of an allover painting: repeated motifs of the Asmat shields cover the surface, floating against an atmospheric background. The surface is heavily grooved like corrugated packing material and gives the work more the feeling of a weaving or a textile than of a painted canvas. Although the pattern is flat, the corrugated surface catches light and shatters it so that the painting glows and sparkles. Corrugated paper was a favored collage material of the Cubists and Surrealists. For them it was a *trouvé*, a find, taken out of the everyday world and incorporated into art. In this painting, the corrugated surface is a vehicle to Herrmann's reinterpretation of Asmat motifs in an original context.

Through his studies Herrmann has been intrigued by the fate of Asmat objects. It has been reported that the wowipits, the woodcarvers, will work for weeks to create all the objects that are needed for an Asmat ceremony, and in the process through chanting, they will invest them with the ancestral spirits that they represent. But when the ceremonies end, the works are simply discarded, left to rot where abandoned, or more recently, sold to tourists as if their symbolic value has evaporated. In what might be called another of the "thinking paintings" **Pile and Motif**, 2008, Herrmann has imagined a great hill of discarded Asmat art accumulated on a beach near a broken coastline. Close by a single motif, unfettered and enlarged, seems ready to roll across the foreground seeking out a resting place.

Pile and Motif is the most ambiguous of this group of paintings. It seems closely related to the final work I will discuss, **Pile and Forms**, 2009. This painting, like the previous one, has a valedictory quality: in both Herrmann seems to be turning away from earlier attempts to define the work of the Asmat artists in which his borrowings more closely reproduced their style. In the **Pile and Forms** painting, the contorted red motif, isolated in the foreground, has grown much bulkier and looks like a relief sculpture. Positioned on a ledge it thrusts forward against the

picture plane assertively. Just to the left of it, there is the bottom portion of an Asmat shield with the stylized fruit bat (tar) motif, but its background is yellow and the carvings are rendered in grey and black. From the top of the canvas, there descends a dense cloud of swirling forms made of laser-cut twill and collaged to the surface. This cloud curtain with the texture of a quilt, hangs oppressively over the red “sculpture,” making space for it within the painting, but also menacing it. Or is it a fog that is arriving to obscure and, thereby, conclude an artistic passage? Is it a painting about contradictions, or is it about nostalgia?

The Asmat paintings have begun to raise deeper problems for Herrmann. He says, “I find myself concerned with the evolving Asmat culture, the slow loss of their rituals and practices as well as the decline of significant woodcarving.” From the beginning of this body of work, Herrmann asked himself a number of questions. Beyond merely borrowing or imitating through appropriation, he wanted to know what a painter could learn from conceptualizing the making of Asmat art. He was translating from three-dimensional objects to the flat picture plane, and he was transferring the significance of objects made for a primitive headhunter’s culture into works of art for a gallery or museum exhibition. Because the process was satisfying, because the results were critically appreciated, Herrmann was able to still the voices of self-accusation that might have turned him away from the project. Instead, he listened for the voices of the Asmat artists with whom he longed to communicate.

NB: ENDNOTES FOLLOW ON THE NEXT PAGE

¹ Philippe Peltier, "From Oceania," in Rubin, *Primitivism: 1984*, vol.1, 99-100.

² Rubin: 1984, Introduction 6.

³ Ibid. 6.

⁴ Rubin: 1984, Introduction, 7.

⁵ Rubin: 1984, Introduction, 41.

⁶ Varnadoe, 'Gauguin,' in Rubin, *Primitivism: 1984*, vol.1, 179.

⁷ Richard Brettell, *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, 1988, National Gallery of Washington, 363-365

⁸ Ibid. 365.

⁹ All statements attributed to Frank Herrmann come from studio visits conducted in the winter of 2009-10.

¹⁰ Dana Frankfort, *The Highlights*, April 24, 2008, online.