

ART IS AN OLD MAN'S GAME . . .

It was in Louisville, Kentucky, in the early 1950's when I first met Ken Young. It was in a one-light-bulbed back room of a failing retail record shop with its peeling-blue-paint facade and newly painted bright red sign out front proclaiming: "New Sounds, Inc." that we first met. The establishment was located on the then notorious Walnut Street in the heart of the city's oldest black ghetto; it was here that several of us would meet with church-like regularity and devotion, weekly, to explore, debate, and expound upon the esoteric qualities of jazz, and to speak of philosophies and of matters of culture. We met mainly, however, to extoll and defend the virtues and verities of some favored contemporary jazz artist, the coolness and sweetness of his latest sound – the continuity of its mood, its movement; the artist's ability to balance color and tone against a rhythmic background, and particularly, the degree to which he was able to express through the abstract mysteries of jazz the truths we all knew and recognized, those derived, and commonly shared from our mutual ethnic backgrounds of experience.

Although it was a mixed bag of individuals – "off the block" heroes, a few jazz musicians, an occasional artist, sundry undergraduates mainly from the then newly integrated University of Louisville – the group was seemingly spontaneous and mutually compatible. It was from the undergraduate group of which Ken was a representative, that heated debates on philosophy, culture, and the arts became intermixed with the cool nuances of jazz – and yet all was good format for everyone present. A sage street hipster could shoot any poorly devised system of logic to pieces in a minute. For each member was a compendium of certain respected information or a certain point of view, and all were endowed with the notable ability to achieve that kind of expression which would demand the attention, the interest, and the respect of his peers. This seemed to give a rightness to these occasions and to our lives as well at the time. Such meetings as these proved to be the arenas in which many of our ideas, dreams and notions about the world were first tested; and so we met.

Kenneth Young was majoring in physics at the time; he was identified more so for the purity and quiet persistence of his views which often placed him at the center of a heated controversy. His contemporaries and friends – the late Bob Thompson and Sam Gilliam, both of whom were art majors who were later to achieve national recognition in the arts – formed a triad from which the most definitive and persistent discussions – sometimes lasting for weeks – arose. Unbeknownst to each other, each was acting then as an intangible catalyst upon the other in ways that are yet unfolding. Gilliam and Thompson acted as nemeses to each other's intentions in the arts. Ken Young and Sam Gilliam waxed and waned between intense rivalry and inseparable friendship. Like two tenor men of equal stature trying to out-blow each other, so did they later compete in their art.

These were the times in which all things were possible. For each of us every projected idea and enterprise was but yet another beginning adventure. These were the halcyon days of soaring ambitions in which we would become the ideas we projected, or assume the mantle and stance of the heroes we championed — Piero della Francesca, or Michelangelo; Satre or Miles Davis; Diz, Raphael, Picasso, Kant, Charles Lloyd Wright or Fats Navarro. Our sense of blackness was unselfconscious, more actual than rhetorical, a sort of day-to-day innocence wrapped up in an insulating life style not yet knowingly threatened, challenged or analysed, but a ready resource, a touchstone, at our mutual disposal.

We were limited then only by the extent of our individual reason, compassion, genius, and ideas about our talents, all of which at that time had yet to find their limits in experiences. It was no surprise to anyone, therefore, when Ken Young announced that he was going to change his major to art and become a painter. After all, had not our local colleague Bob Thompson informed us a year earlier that he was going to New York "to set the town on its ear" with his paintings, and had he not, in fact, done so?

Bob Thompson's successes and his subsequent untimely tragic death brought all youthful dreams to a crossroads. Our intimate knowledge of his meteoric career electrified our individual hopes and dreams, revealing to us not only the unique facility of his prodigious talent but something of the necessary drive and of the crucial "paying of dues" that would be required. A deadly element had been added to our notions of becoming artists frightening some, but inspiring most.

Kenneth Young graduated from the University of Louisville with an outstanding record as a fine art major; he then began to put his career as an artist together with care and untiring effort. Two years after graduation he gave a successful one-man showing in Louisville, establishing himself as a master of a figurative abstract expressionistic style. He then moved to Washington D.C., taking a position with the Smithsonian Institution as an exhibit design specialist. He moved there mainly to join his friendly rival, Sam Gilliam, who had already begun to receive some early recognition and who was well acquainted with most of the coming young white artists in the area. It was in this eastern cultural stronghold that they planned to fight the art wars of the east, together, and become successful.

Although during this time there was considerable public notice of Gilliam's progress, there was a strange silence regarding Ken's. Was he not ready; was he found wanting? This was a period not of inactivity for him nor was of creative drought. He was carefully appraising the contemporary Washington scene and its art trends — hard edge, optical effects. And although he respected them he turned away from these styles. It was a period of extensive experimentation and soul searching for Kenneth Young. He frequented the galleries discovering and absorbing nuances of past masters and contemporaries whom he admired — much of this he had missed in having been exposed only to text book illustrations before. A notion about his own art was beginning to take shape.

He realized that he had been longing to do a kind of painting that would truly be sublime: it would have to be a personal reflection of his own interests, knowledge, truths and background. In no way did he want it to be limited, however. He longed for a kind of painting that would speak with the immediacy of recognition heard in a jazz solo, in a language unique unto itself, but recognizable that would still allow him to express all that he had learned and discovered from studying and experimenting.

In a sense, the style that he evolved is all of these things. Young seemingly began with a style reminiscent of the late Morris Louis, a Washington, D.C., painter who masterfully exploited a technique involving the placement of thin veils of pure color on raw canvas. Starting with the basic idea of this technique, Ken Young has developed it into a personal and different vocabulary of color and form that can only be termed uniquely his. Regarding his own technique he says:

"I put the color down with a brush on raw canvas (which is sometimes dampened in places); I use acrylic dyes. I spray water on it to thin it in places. . . . I take a sponge and take out the excess water in other places. Edges are important to me – the edges of the forms and shapes; the edges of the stretcher itself. Beginnings and endings are important to me [speaking about the shapes and forms]; also, disappearing – when to make things disappear. Movement on my canvases is mainly what I'm all about now."



With quiet, steady and a seeming unhurried persistence, Ken Young has enlarged and intensified the quality of this technique. He began exhibiting it at a time when it was neither 'chic', nor current and has endured to see it become 'in vogue' and capitalized and exploited by other contemporaries. In this sense he has become a leader in this school of colorist painting in the Washington area.

As Washington critic Paul Richard states:

*"His work . . . has grown sweeter and more lyrical. He still builds his abstract paintings out of swooping dots of moist dissolving color; but his colors are now richer, brush strokes more confident and his images are more coherent than they've ever been before."*¹

His compositions now seem to possess for him the same abstract mysteries and dynamism, the same rhythmic systems of balance tone and color of his beloved jazz. He often works in his third floor ghetto studio in the midst of blaring jazz music. There seems to be a sublime continuity in regard to his earliest loves and interests and to what he is expressing now on canvas.

In many ways he is still a purist, however. During his early years of success as an artist Ken would not allow any of us to refer to him as a painter. He would state that "Art is an old man's game." He believed that the title of "painter" should not be bestowed lightly; that beginning to paint seriously did not earn it, but that it should be accorded to those who have made consistently articulate and complete statements in painting. In this regard, Kenneth Young has more than lived up to one of his sternest personal criteria: he is a painter and a formidable one.

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¹ "An Eye on the Past," *The Washington Post*, November 28, 1972. [Paul Richards, commenting on a Studio Gallery Exhibit.]