

# Anatomy of a brushstroke

How many of us ever look at telltale markings on a painting except perhaps to note in passing the artist's style or technique? How many ever think about the brushstroke as focal point of the painting itself? Blythe Bohnen does. To her, it exists as subject matter. Each gesture develops as real form, a separate entity unto itself rather than means by which something else is created.

Her roots are easily traceable to the work of Post-Impressionists Paul Cezanne and Vincent van Gogh, whose particular kinds of brushstrokes were fundamental to the very nature of their work. Cezanne's carefully calculated, block-like impressions created the illusion of incredibly solid masses. Vast open spaces became highly structured form under his hand. Van Gogh's familiar, emotionally charged dabs and swipes were an inherent part of his picture-making. Both artists painted recognizable forms, yet their methods, far more than their images, influenced generations of painters, who in turn, advanced the field of art to realms undreamed of three-quarters of a century ago.

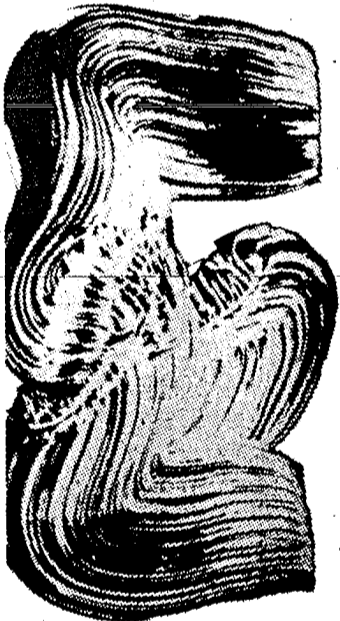
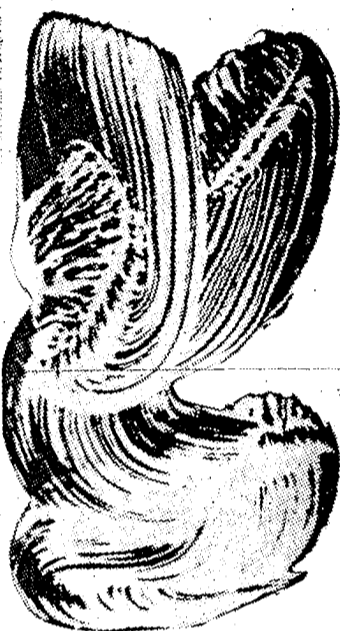
Bringing things up to date, we find that many contemporary artists are involved with process too. Bohnen, for one, studies the behavior of the brush as an extension of the hand and not the eye, of the heart and not necessarily the head. She considers it an integral part of the aesthetic experience, as vital as the completed work of art. She focuses on each manifestation as an individual statement, thereby emphasizing the act of painting.

It is a direct-line communication from herself to the spectator, relating each painting gesture. The brushstroke creates the image, and the image is of the brushstroke, and realism and abstraction combine into one single idea, revealing the anatomy of each organic movement.

This artist says, in effect, that since painting is made up of brushstrokes, let's isolate a few of them and see what they tell us. Placing an imaginary hand on hers we can sense the subtle rhythm and restrained action of each gesture, each wrist movement as the artist advances over the surface of the paper. Color is not important. Tone is deliberately muted so as to subordinate it to the action taking place.

The technique doesn't stop with the placement of pigment on the picture plane. After each composition of calligraphic-like forms is completed, Bohnen hops into the bathtub with her painting and scrubs it down. Excess paint is removed, leaving a kind of silvery, solarized effect familiar to photographers. It is strikingly ghostlike, soothing, even playful.

"Double Stroke — Simple Gesture" indicates that a simplification of form has occurred. The artist's restrained movement precisely defines this new handling of her tool. The basic verticality of each section is broken by sudden shifts of the paint-laden brush, giving the appearance of bending and twisting slabs that approach the third dimension. Less pigment has been scrubbed away, producing a heavier, deeper tone, sharper contrasts of light and dark. The brushstroke is thoroughly articulated so that each bristle is apparent and becomes, in part, a line drawing of itself



Pictures by courtesy of Blythe Bohnen

Detail of "Double Stroke — Simple Gesture": Acrylic on paper by Blythe Bohnen

Detail of "Triple Stroke — Compound Gesture": Acrylic on paper by Blythe Bohnen

The second painting, "Triple Stroke — Compound Gesture" shows us further development of Blythe Bohnen's idea. The title explains the exact number of parts to each form and cues us on its structure so that it is possible to reconstruct the entire painting as the artist conceived and developed it. By carefully noting subtleties like the vaguely pencilled-in linear structure in which the brushstrokes are suspended, we can understand the painting's keen sense of order. Its strength and vigor come from solidity of form, authoritative handling of the brush and sensitivity to change in attitude from one gestural expression to the next. Bohnen's completely unique painting style is a very personal expression — something true of all artists

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