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Dissertation

**CHARLES SELIGER: REPRESENTING  
“THE STRUCTURE OF BECOMING”**

by

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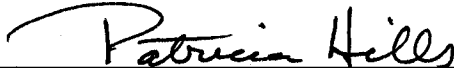
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**CHARLES SELIGER: REPRESENTING**

**“THE STRUCTURE OF BECOMING”**

(Order No.                    )

**MICHELLE DUBOIS**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2009

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**ABSTRACT**

Charles Seliger’s high-density, abstract, metaphysical paintings convey his perceptions that despite eternal change, there is an underlying order or set of eternal laws that shapes all of reality. Since Seliger’s paintings first came into the public eye during the era of Abstract Expressionism scholars tend to characterize him as an overlooked Abstract Expressionist or as *sui generis*. This dissertation on Charles Seliger differs from past scholarship on his oeuvre and on mid-century abstract painting in general. The small size, the order conveyed by his work, and his philosophical subject matter, are qualities that clearly relate to the work of artists with whom he exhibited at the Willard Gallery in New York, from 1950 until 1970. By articulating the formal characteristics and philosophical content pursued by Seliger and his Willard Gallery peers, we will have a more nuanced and focused picture of abstract painting at mid-century. Hence, through a study of the work of Charles Seliger, this dissertation seeks to identify and articulate another strand of American abstraction.

Chapter One explores how Seliger developed the artistic philosophies and formal approaches of the Surrealists-in-exile in New York into his own unique idiom. Chapter

Two presents a contextual analysis of Seliger's work – both the common features and the differences – with that of the emerging Abstract Expressionists. Chapter Three examines the philosophy of Marian Willard, a student of Carl Jung and Seliger's dealer, who selected artists who she believed referred to a universal collective unconscious in their work. This chapter includes comparative analysis of Seliger's paintings with other Willard Gallery artists. Chapter Four considers Seliger's late career and his interest in an epistemological approach to knowledge formation called Complexity Theory, a methodology that looks at patterns and the relationships of seemingly random phenomena.

Seliger was neither an isolated figure in art history nor was he an overlooked Abstract Expressionist. His paintings belong to a smaller, more meditative counterpoint to Abstract Expressionism, to a category awaiting fuller investigation.

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## Introduction

Since the 1940s, Charles Seliger has been producing dense, small-scale abstract paintings depicting his imaginary view of the complex spheres of nature that reside beyond human vision. Using the Surrealist-inspired technique of automatism, Seliger starts each painting by applying paint, scraping it off, and applying another color of paint and so on for weeks or even months. When certain shapes in the layers of paint suggest some organic form to Seliger, he consciously intervenes in the painting process. He completes his painting by meticulously applying ultra-fine calligraphic markings, densely covering the expressionist paint layers, in a manner that suggests a myriad of tiny, swarming forms. His paintings are highly intricate evocations of the teeming realms of micro-organisms, cells and molecules, as well as the bodily viscera of humans, animals and insects. His work simultaneously evokes the macrocosmic sphere, dense with planets in the process of formation and destruction. His paintings suggest that these realms are, ultimately, the same. The unpremeditated, unplanned manner in which Seliger applies paint to surface simulates randomness and chaos. Yet, because of the very meticulous calligraphic lines Seliger laboriously applies to his paintings, his paintings ultimately transmit the sense of an ordered, structured, albeit complex world. The invisible realms of nature that Seliger depicts begin in what seems to be a state of chaos and the inchoate, but are ultimately revealed as bound by order.

The imaginary natural worlds that Seliger depicts are in a perpetual state of metamorphosis. Borrowing a phrase from the philosopher Edmond Husserl, Seliger

describes his paintings as representing the “structure of becoming.”<sup>1</sup> The dialectic embodied in this phrase perfectly summarizes Seliger’s career-long quest to forge a reconciliation of opposites in his work. In each and every painting, he enacts and depicts the struggle between chaos and order as it occurs in nature, as well as in the creative process he personally undergoes when he produces a painting. Charles Seliger’s paintings representing what lies below or beyond the visible in nature fundamentally convey the nature of his own subjectivity.

Though his career has intersected with numerous historical epochs and stylistic fashions, his working methods, subject matter and philosophy have remained remarkably consistent for over sixty years. Seliger’s paintings have always been at odds with the reductionist tendencies of modern art; indeed, in his paintings Seliger represents the concept of the complexity of nature and of human nature. Seliger’s art-making process, the formal qualities of his work, and the subject matter all function together and serve as a part of his quest to convey his vision of the existence of a drive to order in nature, as well as in human nature, and in his own, personal, creative process.

### **Seliger’s Artistic Career**

Charles Seliger began reading about art and experimenting with making art as a teenager. Seliger never had formal art training; he is an auto-didact, having taught

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<sup>1</sup> Journal Entry of December 1, 1980, in which Seliger wrote, “I found a wonderful phrase while reading *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* by Edmond Husserl, a phrase which I think states the nature of my painting in a most exact way: ‘The Structure of Becoming,’ two aspects of my work, so clear to me, in such a simple phrase. My paintings are always concerned with the most minute relationships and structure yet always remain in flux, in a state of becoming, never (in spite of the intensity and detail) to arrive at a final and recognizable form.”

himself about art by reading and experimenting.<sup>2</sup> In 1943, when he was just seventeen, Seliger went to Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery, submitting two paintings for the Spring Salon show, a juried exhibition. Though his work was not selected for the show, this move was a fortuitous one, for on that visit he met Jimmy Ernst, the son of Max Ernst. Jimmy Ernst was in the process of opening his own gallery, the Norlyst Gallery, which he invited Seliger to join. Seliger met many artists because of this association, including a number of the eminent artists in exile, such as André Breton, Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp. Finding himself in the company of these mature and well-known artists, Seliger was galvanized to learn as much as possible about modern art, especially Surrealism. This he accomplished by reading books and the "little magazines" *View*, *VVV* and *London Bulletin*. Seliger's lifelong artistic quest to depict the invisible realms of nature, to depict the structure of becoming, or metamorphosis, as well as his use of automatism to unleash random forms upon which to build a painting, were all established at this early and pivotal moment in American art history.

The Surrealists in exile influenced Seliger and a number of other abstract artists in New York during the 1940s, many of whom would go on to become Abstract Expressionists. For several years in the mid-1940s, Seliger's paintings were consistently

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<sup>2</sup> Note that I do not use the term "self-taught" because that has fairly specific connotations. Briefly, as outlined by the sociologist and art historian Gary Fine, the important variables of artists in the "Self-Taught" category are those artists who: (1) usually have race and/or class constraints which deny them access to, or even knowledge of art-world institutions; (2) are "discovered" by other artists or important people in the art world, and then this "myth of discovery" becomes important to the narrative and reception of their work; (3) biography plays a critical part of the understanding of the art of self-taught art; self-taught artists need to describe why they make art, what in their life caused them to produce art, and this drive is often referred to as a calling or an obsession. Trained artists are not made to explain this, as art is their profession. See Gary Alan Fine, *Everyday Genius, Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). None of these characteristics apply to Seliger, thus I use the term "auto-didact."

shown in a number of exhibitions of the nascent, still unnamed Abstract Expressionist group. These artists borrowed a little from Surrealism, and from Expressionism, and in the process produced a new form of abstract painting. Critics and dealers were at a loss as to how to describe this new painting, whether to emphasize formal characteristics, content, or both. However, for a number of years, critics and dealers considered Seliger's work as representing one component of the many that comprised this complicated new form of abstract painting.

In the late 1940s, a number of these artists (such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Willem De Kooning and others with whom Seliger associated), began painting on very large canvases and their work had a spontaneous, raw, unfinished look. At about this same time, Seliger made the decision to paint on a very small scale, and to make paintings dense with form and line. Due to these critical decisions made by Seliger in 1948 and 1949, when Abstract Expressionism was essentially solidified as a group, his work was no longer included in the same shows or written about in the same context as his former artistic peers.

Although Seliger was not considered to be an Abstract Expressionist by critics or dealers in the 1950s, he was not *sui generis* as some scholars have called him (more on this below), nor was he a loner in the art world. For nearly twenty years, during his mid-career, Seliger's paintings bore much in common with a small group of abstract artists who were all represented by Marian Willard at the Willard Gallery. Marian Willard had a specific philosophical lens through which she selected artists to represent, shaped by her training with Carl Jung in Zurich in 1937. Willard represented artists whose work she felt

in some way embodied a universal, spiritual content, derived from a collective unconscious (per Jung's theories). Though a number of Abstract Expressionists shared these characteristics, Seliger and other Willard Gallery artists (including Mark Tobey, Norman Lewis, Lee Mullican and others) produced work that was different from Abstract Expressionism both formally and in terms of content. Willard Gallery artists tended to work on a smaller scale using controlled calligraphic gestures. These formal qualities contributed to the meaning of their work, which can broadly be characterized as illustrations of their perceptions of an ordered and holistic state of being in the universe. The paintings by Charles Seliger and other Willard Gallery artists are another strand of mid-century abstraction, concurrent with and related to Abstract Expressionism as a smaller, quieter, more polished counterpoint.

After Marian Willard left the art business in the late 1960s, Seliger went through a period of nearly fifteen years when he continued to paint, had gallery representation and sold paintings; however, his type of personal, expressive painting was not in favor in the art world. This was a quiet period in his professional career that did not change until the late 1970s and early 1980s, at which point there was a wholesale reconsideration of the definition of Abstract Expressionism. A number of scholars sought to reassess and revise the framework that structured these artists as a group. In this process, many scholars began to dig into the historical record to look at the early stages of the movement, to investigate who had been excluded from the group and to consider why. With the renewed consideration of Abstract Expressionism came a renewed interest in Seliger's work.

In the late part of his career, Seliger became aware that his quest to depict the struggle between chaos and order in his work and the drive to show order as dominant, dovetailed with a contemporary interest in the arts and sciences in a method for interpreting information and knowledge called Complexity Theory. This is a broad, interdisciplinary epistemological framework for looking at patterns in the universe at multiple levels and is a theory to which Seliger subscribes. Complexity Theorists believe that modernity and the contemporary realm is defined by ever increasing amounts of knowledge and the discovery of ever smaller particles, ad infinitum. They also believe that there is an underlying order in the universe.<sup>3</sup> In a remarkable way, Seliger's life-long artistic project to portray the dominance of order over chaos and to depict the structure of becoming (which relates in Complexity Theory to the concept of "emergence"), intersected late in his career with this new mode of apprehending our reality.

### **The Importance of a Monograph on Charles Seliger**

Numerous short essays have been written about Seliger's paintings in exhibition catalogues. Works from early in Seliger's career, when he was exhibiting with the Abstract Expressionists, and late in his career, when the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery represented him, are the two periods in his career that have received the most consideration to date. Many paintings and bodies of work, especially from the 1950s until

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<sup>3</sup> Though this might sound like the Theory of Intelligent Design espoused by many fundamentalist Christians, it is not the case at all. This is a highly scientific mode of looking at pattern production in the universe, using mathematical models and computers to discern similar patterns and formal orders which occur across a wide range of disparate phenomena.



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