



3 / GETTING SADNESS IN THE FLESH OF THE BUILDING

Although social pressure — the desire to please others — sometimes makes it hard to reach the I, the difficulty is not mainly a social difficulty. It is mainly an artistic difficulty.

The difficulty arises simply because it is so hard to find that shape, that substance, which actually makes tears well up in me. To many people a roof is just a roof. A column is just a column. It takes a great effort of perception, conscious work, and concentration, to see that the subtle change of the column makes a difference to its sadness, or to its capacity to hold, and reflect sadness.

I look at the shafts of the columns in the Martinez House, while building them. I move them, change them, cut cardboard, modify the shape. At first they seem merely nice. I try to get the flutes that come down the four corners a little better — that means, at first, simply harmonious. Then I notice that the boards need to be a little wider, more substantial.

I try a line across the top. The line seems needed, but perhaps it is a bit too much. I stand

back in the room, a few times, to check it, also looking at the base. Simpler seems better.

Gradually, as I achieve a more harmonious shape, even in the plywood forms themselves, I begin to see something which nearly works, in that place. I begin to be aware that this column which I am making can be more austere — and that, as I strip away every bit which is too sweet, that I slowly leave the bare bone of something which can affect me, can make me — almost — choke tears in my throat. Of course, it is just a sensation, not actual tears. It is so slight, I have to watch the growing thing in the room very intensely to notice it at all.

But if I pay very careful attention to the feeling which is welling up in me, I do notice tiny differences, small sensations, and I do notice that threat of tears, that harshness in the back of my throat which moves me towards the shape of the column which will ultimately have a more serious meaning, which will enlarge life in that room, which will then, through its austerity, make more likely the experience of joy.



4 / SADNESS OF COLOR AND GEOMETRY

It is important for me to explain that what I call the quality of “tears,” the sadness that necessarily characterizes all living art, is inherent in the *geometry*, it is not only an emotion, but is a character of the geometry itself. I would like to try and explain this in a painting which is, on the surface “nothing but” shapes and color. Yet, I believe the painting does have this quality of tears in some degree.

Please look at the painting on the next page. What I want you to look at is the way the painting is put together. It goes on and on and on. You can't really take it apart, and you go on and on

and on going around in it. There's something in it, a living quality I'll just describe as a kind of shimmering. This shimmering exists on a formal level. In reality there is nothing there except paint, and the centers which the paint creates. At the same time one feels the endless connection quality in the thing and in the way it keeps on going.

Getting it took hard work, and the picture went through many versions. In this version that you're looking at there must be a hundred different yellows, and an equal number of different reds.

The variation is not frivolous. It isn't there to warm the painting up or make it interesting. It is there because at each point, at any given moment while I was working on it, I could see places (at such and such a spot) where the unity of the whole was dropping down. If I was looking with that open-eyed vision that I have spoken of, opening my eyes very wide and just looking at the thing, I could almost feel little grey spots of disunity.¹

While I was working, when I opened my eyes very wide to see only the whole, I could see where disunity occurs, where the seams occurred, and then realize — if I concentrated very hard — that a particular yellow had to be modified by a tiny fraction, or a red had to be modified by a tiny fraction. So I painted over that piece with that slightly different yellow, and then (sometimes, when I was lucky) what I am describing as this gray or vacuum spot which was disturbing to the whole thing went away. And then I looked at the whole thing again and said, "OK *now* where are there gray vacuum spots?"

And then I came back and repaired the painting again yet somewhere else.

The painting is based on a 12th-century pattern which I discovered in an ancient carpet fragment.² The fragment was heavily damaged, and hard to decipher. It took me five years to fully understand its pattern, and to draw it in this final form. Towards the end I began trying to imagine how to color it. I finally decided on two main colors — red and yellow — because I felt that this particular pattern would come to life most vividly with these colors.

I then began, at first, a process of trying to make a mechanical red and yellow photographic image by phototechnical processes — essentially using one red film and one yellow film, together with my black and white drawing — to get two films that I could superimpose to get a red and yellow combination. I had expected to get a very vivid image from this process, because I thought the colors would be sharp and clear.

But during this stage I failed completely. Although I tried many combinations, I failed to



Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 20 cm x 26 cm, Christopher Alexander, 1990

find a red and that yellow which gave the unity which I knew this design was capable of. It always came out either too electric, or just flat and tired.

Then I began painting over a print of the composite photographed red and yellow image, covering the photograph image with paint (gouache) to correct the colors that, though red and yellow, were not working. I knew that variations would be needed. But as I worked at the task of trying to make the shimmering unity I was trying to get, I found it necessary to use more and more subtle shades of red, more and more subtle shades of yellow — to such an extent that some of the yellows are almost as pink as some of the reds (though not those lying next to them), and some reds are almost as yellow as the pinkest yellows. There are at least a hundred reds and at least a hundred yellows. In placing them, day after day I worked in short concentrated sessions, trying to increase the light shining in the picture.

I was trying, essentially, to work my way towards a more and more indissoluble unity. Each time I added one dot of color, I tried to make it one which would increase the light, increase the unity which is felt on the page.

As I looked at the painting in its incomplete form, I half-closed my eyes, and tried to diagnose which particular spot was causing the greatest disunity I could sense — often I would see it like a wound, through my half-closed eyes. Then I could hone in on it, and see a particular bit of pink which failed to shine or somehow depressed the overall shining of the painting. Or I would see a bit of yellow that was too homogenous, too pink, too muted, too bright.

During the work of painting I touched the painting several thousand times, each time mixing the yellow and red just right, and trying to hit exactly that tone which I imagined and which I could see, in my mind's eye, as the most likely and helpful contribution to the shimmering unity of the whole.

It may be helpful to visualize the plate where I was mixing the colors. It was a plain white plate. On it I had three reds, light scarlet, a

Chinese red and a madder red. I had permanent white. I had lamp black. And I had three yellows, Mimosa yellow, Persian yellow, and Naples yellow.

From these eight colors on the plate I could make literally hundreds of different yellows and reds. In fact, sometimes I would get just the yellow, which would shine, in one special spot on the painting. Then, if I came back an hour later or a day later, and tried to find the same yellow which would — empirically — shine in the same way, it might take me ten or fifteen minutes to find it. I was using minute quantities of gouache, and a rather fine brush. But for each different yellow, as I mixed and mixed, I could tell, just by touching the tip of the brush on the paper, whether it did indeed create the light at that particular point on the painting.

The minute detailed work that was going on is quite surprising work and is not easily predictable. It doesn't follow any scheme. In my experience it was only possible to accomplish such a thing to whatever extent I could see the potential for unity occurring in me as a felt, seen, possibility.

In general, I think, to whatever extent it occurs you can try to get *that* far. You can't get any further. When your ability to keep detecting the gray spots — the dis-unity — stops, that's as far as you go.

I stopped when I could not find any spot of color which increased the unity of the painting further. Each additional spot that I added — no matter how I tried — made the painting lose light, instead of gaining it. At that moment I stopped, and called the painting finished.

And why do I say that there is, in this picture, a quality of tears? If you look hard, I think you can see it. The bright colors, reds and yellows, are not bright. They are almost somber, worn by the cares of the world, yet seeming to have the quality of family love, or old affection. And they, too, can be rubbed away. Yes, there are tears in these geometric patches of red and yellow, in the way they work — caused, of course, by the living structure which has been created there.