

# At the Edge of Meaning

Text Stephen Zaima, Professor of Art  
Associate Dean, Syracuse University

**"I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you" Cézanne, 1905**

Clarity, serenity, beauty: That is what Max Cole has achieved in her paintings. As a friend and fellow artist, I know enough not to try to dissect the particular mix of talents and life circumstances that allowed Max to create her impressive body of work, but I do feel that I have gained important insights into her work and glimpses of the possible origins of her creative impulses.

Looking back over our nearly ten years as neighbors, I can see how each of our many long, often late-night, after-dinner conversations, were like chapters in a long, intimate portrait of an extraordinary woman and artist. Through our conversations and my observations of her approach to making art, I have developed a profound admiration for Max's artistic achievement and the honesty that she brings to the always inscrutable process of creating art. I have come to realize that Max is an artist whose everyday life is in many ways inseparable from

her artistic life. **"In Max Cole's work, a very important factor is that her way of painting is not an isolated fact from her whole life and person. It doesn't constitute an aesthetic manifesto but something very different and totalizing. Painting, working is her participation in a reality that defies all definition. It's not the work of a visual artist, who leads a normal life and at certain times of the day goes to the studio and paints."** From ,Interview with Giuseppe Panza di Biumo' by Laura Mattioli Rossi 2000

Understanding and looking at the art in front of us, places us at the edge of what we know and what we do not know. Being **at the edge of meaning** is where I begin to examine Max's work. Yes, the surfaces of her paintings are precise, but they are never measured. At first glance it might appear that a straight edge or

## At the Edge of Meaning

ruler is used, but by examining Max's paintings, drawings and prints closely, and especially from the side, it becomes apparent that the lines are not straight. The surfaces of the works are organized, but never predictable. The works share many qualities, but are never the same. The quality and style of Max's work over the years have been astonishingly consistent, and yet each work has its own internal structure and clarity of purpose that makes it a unique and compelling work of art. There is a spiritual quality to Max's work that provides the attentive viewer with a glimpse of insight and clarity that can be difficult to translate into a verbal equivalence. As with many serious works of visual art, the seeming simplicity of the surface belies the depth of understanding conveyed about the process of seeing. **"I believe that nothing can be more abstract, more unreal, than what we actually see. We know that all we can see of the objective world, as human beings, never really exists as we see and understand it."** Giorgio Morandi

In Max's work, the horizontal lines look straight but never are, and the verticals help bear the weight, like those countless fence posts holding up endless barbed wire that you see across the flat desolate landscape of the state of Kansas. That's where Max was born and spent her childhood. It was a harsh environment, made even more punishing by the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, two destructive forces that brought with them for Max and her two sisters the added burden of growing up with little in the way of financial security. Perhaps the deprivations of her youth in some way inspired Max to achieve in her art what life does not always provide: clarity, serenity and beauty.

Of course, great artistic achievement can never be explained solely by one's circumstances in life. Max's artistic achievement can also be examined in relation to the artistic currents that Max experienced in her formative years. For instance, I see a relationship between Max's work and the timeless structure of Alain Resnais's films (*Last Year At Marienbad*) and the meticulous writing of Alain Robbe-Grillet (*In The Labyrinth*), and both I would argue are germane to her paintings and drawings. The story seems to start somewhere in the middle with no reality outside itself. No part is more important than any other part, with an absence of symbolic allusions. One could argue the beginning and the end are more important, but it would be an academic point, and does little to uncover the essence of the work. **"It is correct that there is a relationship between my work and Robbe-Grillet. I was drawn to his rhythmic use of language and the abstract nature of plots. The structural style is something I relate to because he has thrown all conventional form that most writing is based on."** Max Cole 2011

There are also some relevant parallels in the music of Steve Reich (*Music For 18*)

## At the Edge of Meaning

Musicians) and Erik Satie (Vexations). The depth of the work, either by layering or length, make for an unconventional mesmerizing experience. Subject and narrative remain elusive at best, so the works are never prescriptive or instructional. The lack of named references and a linear narrative make the seeing, reading, and listening a task without the semiotic markers to guide us to what we

think we know. All of these practitioners, including Max Cole, are less interested in making road maps to describe the work, but are more interested in making work that has never been experienced or imagined before.

Max Cole has seemingly created certain restrictions for herself by employing limited formal elements in her paintings, such as line, texture and space. It is her great aesthetic accomplishment to have used these restraints to produce works that are both alluring and nuanced. Max expressed it best: **,I've focused on the border of possibilities and perception, and I believe that the most restrictive limitation is when you abandon focus and admit all possibilities. The result is chaos, which cannot possibly express clarity. The important thing is focus. The limits I work within are not restrictive, because it's like going through a wall into a void that expands infinitely.'** From *Dialogue with Max Cole* by Magni, Rossi, and Poletti 200?

Max's paintings exude a quiet power and a sense of effortlessness. However, having been Max's neighbor for nearly ten years, I can attest to the enormous effort that goes into creating her paintings. Max has many interests and personal connections, but she also has long periods of intense, almost single-minded devotion to her work. Max has tremendous powers of concentration, along with the physical and mental stamina to devote long, uninterrupted periods of time to her work. The simple fact is that it takes tremendous concentration and time to produce her paintings, and I found Max's capacity to work for long, uninterrupted periods to be remarkable. I once asked Max about her seemingly limitless capacity for work, and her reply was unhesitating and simple: **"I think I would die if I stopped working"**

Max also has an appreciation for what an essential role solitude can play in the artistic process. Max once told me that for her, solitude is a treasure. A more important lesson from her I may never know.

As implied in the opening quote by Cezanne, I believe that Max does strive to deliver the truth in her art. Even so, as set forth so eloquently in Merleau-Ponty's article **Cézanne's Doubt**, the contradiction and dilemma is that artists often are at the same time full of doubt and yet driven to deliver the truth. Max Cole has had the courage to stare down the inevitable doubts, and the results are ours to savor.