

Transcriptions from a journal that Walter Ferro kept before and during his Guggenheim Fellowship, with contextualizing notes by his daughter, Liz. Walter's notes are in italics. Section headings and artwork titles are in bold. Applied: 1971. Granted: 9/1/1972-6/30/1973

Part I The Process

After art school I worked as an art director in a small advertising agency. As a one man art department I was compelled to do everything from retouching to finished art and past-ups. The experience has proven helpful in supporting myself and family since freelancing.

I became interested in wood engravings and read every book I could lay my hands on. Norman Kent's "The Relief Print" was of particular help, because it detailed the actual methods of people like Lewis, Mueller, Landacre and Eichenberg.

I have never formally studied woodcutting with anyone. I located some old Harper's Wood blocks (Turkische end grain) which had been resurfaced. I used a spoon to print with. I found a proof press on Beekman Street...I have since gone back to the spoon for plank woodcuts.

The beauty of box wood and the sensation of cutting a design onto it can make an addict of any artist.

Working from black to white is now most natural to me. It feels rather like a sculptor who starts with a mass and removes everything that is not needed to create a design.

I use a felt pen to make rough sketches with and try to forget the fact that this will become a woodcut, allowing for a free translation when I cut. The design is traced onto the surface of the block(cherry or pine) or sometimes a piece of knotty Fulton Fish Market packing crate. The design is then inked in. Next I darken the surface with an oil color stain. This creates a lovely two color effect which becomes exciting when a brilliant white knife cut is made...then I offset the engraved design onto subsequent blocks. All blocks are shellacked to prevent warping, and to lock in the design.

Registration is made simple by an L shaped frame-two dies of the blocks must always be square. The paper used is Troya, Goyu or Mulberry for woodcuts, basingwerk or a coated paper for wood engravings. The paper is always positioned in the same place on the frame.I use printing inks and artist oil colors. The inks can be rolled to a satin smoothness and the oil colors give me the desired range.

I use the press for all wood engravings and woodcuts. Most printing of late is done by hand, and I am pleased by the variety of textures that can be obtained by hand printing.

I find myself using only a few tools, a good knife and two gouges. Cutting is the only part of the process of making a color print that can be a tremendous challenge.

Part II Preparing for Guggenheim

In the winter of 1969-70 Ferro painted a large group of watercolors in West Germany. He lived in Oberursel, a hill town in the Taunus about twenty miles west of Frankfurt.He was in Europe preparing an application for a Guggenheim fellowship. He was observing, absorbing and recording the impressions of his new surroundings.

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Ferro had always been interested in the textural quality of old European stone buildings. There was nothing like them in America.

The watercolors were painted over a short period of time—"seed impressions", meant to be translated later into color woodcuts.

The paintings were completed at the sites-without preliminary drawings and were not worked over at a later date. They are an uninhibited expression of what he viewed and as a result, his record of the way things were decades ago.

In a relatively brief spurt of activity, Ferro traveled through the small satellite towns of the Taunus mountains, stopping to paint along the roads and in the villages.

European submissions (1968-1969)

*Oberhochstadt**
*Ruppersheim**
Weilburg
Angbach
Taunus Village
*Bad Hamburg**
Oberursel Bleiche
Oberursel Market
Oberursel Church and Houses
Old Oberursel
Farm in Snow (Taunus)
Berghorst Farm in Westphalia

At Home submissions (1970-1971)

*Sunflower Seedling (1970)**
*2 Zucchini (1970)**
*Basilician (1970) **
*Niederland (1970)**
*Timber Shed (1970)**
*Pound Ridge Series (1970) Rock Walls**
*Canoe (1970)**
Deep Pond (1970)
*The Robin (1971)**
Salt Jar (1971)
R4 (1971)
R12 (1971)
R8 (1971)
*Helium Centrograde (1971)**
Munster (1971)
Linen Jar (1971)

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Walter's thoughts on the process to organize his portfolio

Dec 2, 1971

Idea is to do something new-different-yet within mainstream of modern art tradition and not a dead-end. Must not be artsy or crafty...

May 20, 1970

*Just finished the "**Coalescence**" print- noticed why I strive so hard to literally translate the delicious quality of watercolor to my woodblock prints. It seems to me that I need the discipline of the flat color- yet the color comes alive only through the manipulation of the tones-the hues and values-that is to say a brush stroke on paper is never even unless it is tempered- the luminosity of the paper is always there...*

May 22, 1970

*Finished **Niederland**. Name comes from Dutch elm disease although the trees are used as a model in New Canaan parking lot opposite the railroad station- was and and is alive...there is no foliage showing. The print was based on a very carefully done watercolor. I was particularly interested in the subtle tones of the tree and the simplicity of the forms- after the sketch was finished and transferred to the block- I connected the shapes on the block while in the parking lot...*

After working for a time on prints that are further removed from nature I found a certain pleasure in going back and almost literally translating from the material forms and shapes... yet I realized that this print has a strength and directness that might not have been possible a few years ago. The tree and it's very own way becomes an abstraction- the microcosm of the universe is evident in the direct and perfect way that the branches emerge from the trunk.

June 2

*Finished **Basilician***

June 9

The inspiration for the print came from watching the seedlings with their brilliant yellow green foliage pushing out from the small clay pots filled with a beautiful loam and it's rich brown color. In the print I actually use the earth to give a sex the grid the green is brilliant contrast to the purple to set up a vibration in simulation of nature.

July 30

*Just finished **Canoe** and realized the completion of the prints of the Pound Ridge series. The ten comprise a total of 37 blocks and 48 colors... quite a bit of work.*

Aug 12

*Finished **Salt Jar** which followed **Retreat**. The name is inspired by the retreats Mannesis (Greek artist) took. I have been aware that subliminally his work is very appealing until yesterday I had only seen the black and white illustrations in Artist and Book.*

*The **Salt Jar** I feel at least has an intriguing illusion from a distance- the dabs of color free you to examine more closely- it also has an air of mystery to it -the deep blues lend an air of dignity to the old salt jar...that give an inanimate object a feeling of being intimate with its surroundings and knowing and an*

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awareness that a portrait should have instead of a delineation of its forms. I think it is very successful... especially the blacks... the blues have a free look, but extremely controlled and very deliberate. The form is not lost and it is not literal and the background works with the whole. I was always too occupied with the shapes of things and used the setting as just that. Now that I free myself from the totally realistic image my colors work better and really function as a unit to reveal the form without the subtle shading. Even the whites- unprinted paper was deliberate and add sparkle to the print.

June 4

The Robin took 4 brush strokes about 10 seconds per stroke I think it is good- worth perhaps \$200...

June 8

My field of vision has a 50 foot radius the background it's creatures and forms anything that crawls flies or walks...to do book on these

I am interested only in the abstracts that work along the same pants as I am- then the artist me... I work in spurts

June 10

I am trying to peel off the layers of my mind to get a real stuff mystery is satisfying the obvious is like white bread taste good but it doesn't last

June 14

Explore the suggestions that present themselves when I make a mark on the paper even they stem from the first mark

July 4

The sunflowers are now 4 feet high I have 60 sunflower plants including very small ceilings that I've done from the year rejects from the bird feeder also 20 Morning Glory vines

Aug 20

Sunflowers bloomed early this week so largest is 7 1/2 to 8 feet tall and are beautiful thick stalks that have withstood harsh thunderstorms

Part III

Application Essay on Woodcuts for Guggenheim Fellowship, Applied 1971

The purpose of this proposal is to continue the work I began more than 15 years ago with color woodcuts.

Historically the oldest method of printing in color, the art of the woodcut has survived because of its directness and simplicity. At the same time it is a changing and evolving medium, following a natural path of growth and unfolding.

My intent is to develop a body of work that will have evolved in the same manner, and perhaps to arrive at a stage where some newer and higher perception may be realized.

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This plan uses nature as a point of departure, taking visual reality and fleeting glimpses of insight, retaining what is pertinent, filtering what is left through the mind and hand to reach a heightened sensation and deeper awareness of the original impression.

A means of explaining this goal might be to define my present working methods. The medium is austere and unforgiving, unyielding, yet capable of unimaginable subtleties and exploration. My work is centered on the investigation of color, through the use of transparent pigments, utilizing the intensity of light reflected from brilliant white paper.

The color passages are broken up by minute variations of the cellular structure of the wood. An illusion is created, of modulated colors, forms and lines that supplement and enrich each other as they lose their individual identity to a new ordering of the total structure.

Each color area, as it is put down, influences what comes next. As the work progresses, the flexibility of moving in a different path is presented. The hope is always to merge the inherent qualities of the woodcut: precision, decisiveness, dictates of the grain with the freedom of execution and choice. Impelled by deeper instincts to change, elaborate or simplify, to interweave intellect with emotion...all the while keeping the link to biomorphic shapes and forms and colors that are at the core of the effort.

The cutting of the blocks and the printing have no preconceived sequence. At times, certain areas previously printed, are cut away in effect destroying the block. Other sections may be overprinted several times until the desired result is achieved.

I look to "push" the medium and to fully examine the outer limits of its possibilities.

The woodcuts are printed by hand and the editions are small in number. The focus is not on producing a volume of prints, but to make greater use of all the senses in close contact with the materials-to bring into being a work that is truly vital.

The proposal outlined is wide in its ultimate intent but specific in its approach and methods. Despite the use of newer materials in the graphic arts, there remains infinite opportunity for experimentation in printing from a block of wood.

Indeed it is not contradictory of evolutionary laws to suppose this ancient medium might unfold newer aspects and concepts, just as new species and types slowly develop in nature.

Part IV

Guggenheim year Woodcuts/Watercolors

Blue Rock (1970)

Red Towel (1972) on site

Fudge Fenster(1973)

March(1972)

New Landscape(1972) maybe Rock Walls collection?

London Series(1972)

B69 (1972)

B71(1972)

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B70(1972)

B73(1972)

A Theology of the Earth (1972)

Sunflower Study(1972)

All of the following are from Jan 1973

Studio Still Life- Watercolor

Studio Still Life -Collage

Hearth- Watercolor

Loadstone -Collage with watercolor

Still Life with Cork- with watercolor

The Rock - Collage with watercolor

Inaugural- Collage with Watercolor

Black Rock- Collage

Curtain with Wood - Collage

Pewter Rack -Collage

Red Door - Collage

Iron Rock -Oil on Canvas with Iron Filings

Red Bottle-Oil on wood panel

Brown Jug-Oil on untreated paper

Grey Vase-Oil on untreated paper

Pin Cushion-Watercolor

OilCan on End Table-Watercolor

Landscape with Cardinal-Watercolor

Fence and Tree, First Snow-Watercolor

Black Form Enclosed-Watercolor

My Tree with Snow Covered Rock-Watercolor

Rock with Yellow Form-Oil

Blue Jar:Still Life-Oil

Avocado and Pot-Watercolor

Avocado and Liquid Shapes-Watercolor

Still Life with Cushion Fabric- Watercolor

Walter Ferro's Notes during Guggenheim Year

March 1972

*Today I had the time to print **March**; I feel fulfilled when I cut and print these things. I believe I've resolved all the problems and anxieties I had concerning my woodcuts. I am now alone in the field- no one to follow but my own instincts and almost everything I do is natural flow and progression. I am not hung up on the technical aspect of cutting slavishly. I no longer waste time bogged down in demonstrating virtuosity- the color statements are bright and yet deliciously subtle controlled with all the freedom I desired.*

June 1972

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In adjusting my thoughts I must still feel that the method I must stay with is to use the wood cut medium as a formal medium where I can refine shapes and colors in a methodical way. It is painting yet the curse of using prints as a secondhand way of multi art provides the idea I can use the first to produce the very small additions.

Dec 1972

Series made yesterday collages called London Series...paper was bought there. After looking at them I think everything I have been working for is falling into place- they have an authority and poetic quality about them. I mix the paste myself and they should look good after 100 years if anyone cares.

Also today I photographed earlier work. It's fascinating even to me to see how I gradually came to the work I am doing. Some of the end catalogs material is just as good as the more formal things. Perhaps even more so. The smallness is compensated for by the monumental quality that should be apparent when I photograph them in color.

Guggenheim is supposed to be for wood cuts but I am working slightly in a different direction. I think it's needed to free myself from copying myself. I think it is necessary to title the things...

December 1, 1972

See abstracts labeled B61-63

Matted series made yesterday, collages called London Series-paper was bought there. After looking at them, I think, everything I have been working for is falling into place. They have an authority and poetic quality about them. I mixed paste myself, they should look good after 100 years-if anyone cares.

See abstracts labeled B69 - 71

Worked on 69 and 71 simultaneously. 69 consisted of fragments of baskets-the large shapes were developed first-was tempted to leave it-but wanted a literal injection-I worked on it not to violate the nice strong colors...idea came from an article on St Nicholas relique to the Pope by Greek Orthodox Church in NY.

*No 70 **Spectroscope**-reminded me of machinery, somewhat like **Helium Centrograge**-this piece I slaved on-decided to mount it on plastic, then painted top passage-disaster-seems paint becomes muddy, less convincing. I collaged over it and worked on it until it responded-what I thought could not be saved now looks like the best of the lot. It also serves to prove what I am doing is not abstracting-indeed it is a very calculating and precise developing of the surface that is the heart of the effort. I am using fragile paper as well-avoiding the effete look that can trap the eye into believing some little old lady is indulging in a hobby.*

Guggenheim is supposed to be for woodcuts but I am working in a slightly different direction-I think it is needed to free myself from copying myself.

No 71 ...my work seems to have the same thematic rock and landscape earth and sky-I suppose it is from looking at the woods.

Dec 11, 1972 (see watercolors labeled 73,74)

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Worked on these watercolors as preparation for making collages. I need to return constantly to nature to dig up the right colors. Something always happens in these cases. The light seems important. I love the effects of watercolors-but the forms are difficult to hold...The medium is difficult but so seductive.

Jan 17, 1973 (1001-1003)

*In **Studio Still Life(1001 and Collage(1002)** I wanted to retain some of the subjective implications-yet try to avoid the ever present problem of creating a facile rendition that might look like it left the Walt Disney studio. I sometimes wonder how Matisse or Braque so successfully accomplished this.*

*For the Watercolor made of the fireplace called **Hearth(1003)**-my ebay was caught by the juxtaposition of the red and blue books with the brass fire log and blue screen.*

Jan 21, 1973

*I worked on three things(1004,1005,1006 in catalog) on finding and experimenting with colors and shapes. **Lodestone(1004)** made use of an idea I thought of while lying in bed. I used a circular magnet and a bar magnet strip, paper was placed over both and iron filings were placed on top. Then fixed and dried. Still like the idea but uncertain of overall results. **Cork(1005)** had to remove cork to press and mount-not sure if I will replace it. I like the way the ? functions-still need to work on the shapes. The marble-like effect on the bottom is interesting-accident when my hand fell on wet blue paint. I modified the shape of the jug with paper-also modified others. This I believe I need and the woodcuts are successful because I do modify-by overprinting and adding color. But this is much easier. **No 1006 The Rock** is most successful. Rock area from previous ink pattern, added corn husk and I think it comes close to the type of landscape I want-the bottom even more than the top area which becomes too decorative and Walt Disney like-not enough painterly quality. **No 1007-Inaugural** was sheer inspiration. I had a little paste left over from mounting and took four papers from the collage file and arbitrarily pasted them down-the modification came later. The immediate results were favorable but again too much like it came from a commercial studio for color TV. Last Night late I took it out again and added watercolor washes. I used what was there and made it work. I am sure I must always work this way, it is an inherent part of my nature. I am an adjuster, modifier, changer...a survivor.*

Jan 23, 1973 (1008,1009,1010,1011) Black Rock,Curtain with Wood, Pewter Rack, Red Door

I worked on four more collages using Elmers glue on different grounds- whatman paper, Arches book, Fabriano book and Carson. I still try to bridge the objective thing with the transformation-always without decorative or facile.

Jan 26, 1973 (1012-1015) Iron Rock, Red Bottle, Brown Jug, Grey Vase

Set out to try the transition from watercolors to oils. The one on paper is best. It really comes alive. The problem is the oils lack the light coming from the paper-I seem to need a smooth surface.

Jan 29, 1973(1020, 1021,1022)

*Today it snowed and I decided to make watercolors of the views from the house windows. These were the study of the tree- **1020-First Snow** wanted to capture the very subtle colors of background woods and sharp contrast of the white snow and deep blue grey trunk. The background colors fuse into a bright grey, slightly reddish mass with much intricate movement in the branches. Curious how the promise of spring seems to vibrate in the coloration. **1022 My Tree** is the swift study of the long late afternoon shadows. This one I like very much-it is direct as hell-with only the disciplined strokes of the brush apparent in the tree. I like the contrast of directness and exactitude. The shadow color is interesting. I don't believe my*

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*present watercolors would be as good without the work I have done with collages. **1021-Black Form** began as a palette for the two watercolors of nature-I liked the washes and tried to compose within a much more formal manner. In **1022** the grasses to the right of the rock reminds me of the mint I transferred last summer to discourage our woodchuck from eating the tomato plants.*

Jan 31, 1973(1023,1024,1025,1026,)

*I worked on two more oils, **1023 Rock with Yellow Form** was direct. **1024 Blue Jar Still Life** I reworked When I copy myself-it fails. The initial impetus must always be there. I would wish to be as direct in oils as I am in watercolors, but yet, there is the advantage of reworking-scraping and painting out as Kandinsky stated: "the artist improvises form out of his own feelings."*

*In the evening I made two watercolors **1025, 1026** of the avocado plant...I like the paper to absorb the washes. There is a delicacy and strong quality to these.*

Completed during Walter Ferro's Guggenheim year, the following pieces have no significant notes attached-just an indication of the title and the medium.

Feb 1973

1028-1029 Woodcuts

1032 Commissioned by Audubon Cardinal in Snow- Woodcut

1033-1036 Woodcuts commissioned by Audubon- Cape Cod

Shack by Water

Dunes

Chickadee by Dunes

Cranberry Bogs

March 1973

1037-1042 Watercolors made from sketches on Falmouth MA, Cape Cod