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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE AESTHETICS OF HEALING

Joining Feminism, Autobiography and Landscape

by

Patricia Elaine Chandler

November 23, 1993

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For my daughter, Lee, writer and computer consultant; my daughter, Melissa, designer, illustrator, and painter; and my son, Glenn, musician and father of Nolan (two months old today).

INTRODUCTION

". . . The third companion, what you do, your work/ goes down into death to be there with you/ to help. Take deep refuge/ with that companion, beforehand."--Rumi

Taking deep refuge with the work, while there is still time, beforehand, was the purpose of this return to school at age 53. To have two years of unbroken work time was my short-term goal. The long-term goal was to embark upon a disciplined course of work from which a unified theme and related ideas could emerge. Through the course of the MFA program three ideas took shape in my paintings: a study of women's visual work and feminist theory and criticism; realism; and intuitive abstract and semi-abstract images connected to autobiography and/or nature. This paper will describe how those separate directions arose and began to interact and intersect with each other. This is just the beginning of my work along these three lines, and each equally interests me. Their points of convergence have produced new ideas, promising opportunities for research and discovery.

I. Philosophy of Work: My Approach to the Studio

Intellectual positions and self-conscious politics are antithetical in my studio. I attempt to recreate, as closely

as possible, the state I was in when, as a child, I went to a solitary spot with pencil and paper. It was play then, and something more. Susan Suleiman says about "playing" that:

Playing, as Freud and Winnicott (among others) have shown us is the activity through which the human subject most freely and inventively constitutes herself or himself. To play is to affirm an "I", an autonomous subjectivity that exercises control over a world of possibilities; at the same time, and contrarily, it is in playing that the "I" can experience itself in its most fluid and boundaryless state. Barthes speaks of being "liberated from the binary prison, putting oneself in a state of infinite expansion."⁷⁸ Winnicott calls the play experience "one of a non-purposive state, as one might say a sort of ticking over of the unintegrated personality"--and adds a few pages later that it is only here, in this unintegrated state of the personality, that that which we describe as creative can appear." ¹

Theory, if it has any value, makes impressions which emerge subconsciously. Whatever meaning I see later in the shapes, colors and lines of any image will have come from an ordering, synthesizing faculty compared to which the mind is slow and plodding. I refer to the "opposites" Roger Lipsey talks about, "Self and self":

The artist knows, up to a point, what he or she wishes to express but also feels it, senses it--feels and senses it so strongly that something like awakening has occurred. The ordinary self that entered the studio is still there, but someone else is there as well. Toward that other, false respect and formality can be an impediment. Self is a friend and one's own deep resource; a rigid relationship can undo the surprising creativity that might occur. This is [a] pair of opposites: Self and self, what one is ordinarily and what one is more fully. ²

In the studio the deeper questions which arise in that fuller self--and are often ignored--are given free play. I

wish to allow that part of the mind its freedom to seek resolution.

But always there is the struggle, which every artist recognizes, with the external things of life. This is the process of art, the struggle between two levels. In this sense, the studio is a sacred place, like the zendo where one engages in an inner struggle to achieve and to maintain a receptive silence in the mind--in spite of the itch at the hairline, the intrusion of financial worries, the thought of supper, the anxiety about this or that relationship, the pain in the leg. It is possible to get past all this physical and intellectual noise to real silence, where other things enter that are not of that self. This reality is deeper and truer. The senses are alert but detached, a finer discrimination is present, and it is this state in which the line, shape, and color become true to the whole; their meaning consists only in their relationships to each other and to the whole. It is unknown to my ordinary mind, but known to the finer discrimination that is at work.

II. Personal Process During the Two Years at RIT

The intellectual and artistic process of these two years can be summed up this way: in attempting to paint, I encountered a block behind which I felt an unknown area; the attempt to probe there caused great anxiety; I decided to explore other women artists' experiences and investigate

feminist theory; there was then a period when dreams and writing began to reveal the contents of this dark place; and finally, there was painting activity which brought light and resolution into that darkness. It stands, with other passages, among the most meaningful events of my psychological and creative life. Whether the paintings were good or bad was not the important thing; it was the resolution of life experiences that had constituted a blind, fermenting source of difficulty. If "therapy" is one function of art for the artist, then this was that function at work. It was a necessary barrier to cross if I was to do art that was meaningful.

During the first year I could not even approach the state of working that I describe above. I became increasingly aware of resistance--it was as if I were struggling through a tangle of emotions to confront a solid wall. The paintings were simply awful, and I would leave the studio in anger and frustration. Everything was in question, but the most painful questions were these: Is this what I should be doing at all? Has my whole idea of myself as an artist been self-deceit? These are questions I am sure every artist confronts at times, and they had arisen before for me, but never so deeply. I talked to instructors, to mentors, and to friends. I investigated the possibility of art therapy as an occupation, and contacted a local facility to inquire about their program of training and education in the field.

At that time, I began to talk with a professor, Tina Lent, who, in a film course I had just taken, had introduced us to feminist art criticism. We agreed upon an independent study course, during which I would study women painters in conjunction with the exploration of feminist theory and criticism. I chose, as my first readings, the following books: Alice Neel, by Patricia Hills; Dawns and Dusks: Louise Nevelson, by Diana McKown; Through the Flower, by Judy Chicago, and the journals of Anne Truitt, Daybook and Turn. These were all written by women my age and older, and it was comforting to learn that they had struggled in the same way and had encountered obstacles similar to mine. Reading works by feminist artists, art historians, and scholars began to free me from narrow concepts of art and from the pronouncements I had absorbed in undergraduate school in the early sixties. Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" and the spreading circles of feminist discourse which had emerged from her ideas, and those of others, were new frontiers for me, opening up territory which illuminated and explicated my experiences as a woman artist.

My undergraduate education precisely coincided with a significant shift in the American cultural consciousness. It began as the avant-garde movement of the "beats" was experiencing its ultimate decline and ended during the birth of the radical anti-war political movement and, in art, the focus

on popular media embodied by Pop. At Rhode Island School of Design, I listened as many of my professors denigrated the changes happening in art in New York City, condemning as idiocy a movement whose significance they did not yet understand. While the scathing comments effectively served to pique my interest in the new developments, it is a tribute to the effectiveness of exclusion that it never occurred to me to notice the absence of women artists. Susan Suleiman explains the process by which women were excluded from the dynamic periods of every avant-garde movement, and admitted a place only when the movement had begun to lose its force:

It should come as no surprise, knowing what we know about earlier avant-garde movements and their historians, to learn that the first writings about postmodernism made absolutely no mention of the work of women. One could argue that if early commentators like Irving Howe and Leslie Fiedler, whose prime examples of the postmodern were the Beats (Fiedler also included Pop art in the visual arts), did not mention women's work, it was because there was little or no such work around to be mentioned at the time. Restated . . . this would mean that the Beats and the Pop artists were male avant-gardes similar to Surrealism, excluding women during their most dynamic period. In fact, there were a few women active in both movements, if not at the very beginning, then close enough to it Still, as in the case of Surrealism, one can ascribe the early critics' silence not only to ordinary sexism ("not seeing" women who are there), but also to a real scarcity of women's work in those movements.³

Consequently, during this period, the only prominent women artists I was aware of who were active in current movements were the expressionist painters Helen Frankenthaler and Grace Hartigan, and a little later, loosely associated with Pop, Marisol. Two others, who would later be recognized

as important Abstract Expressionist painters, Elaine de Kooning and Lee Krasner, were then entirely submerged in the shadows of their husbands, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Suleiman goes on to say:

Critics who started to write about postmodernism in the 1970's or 1980's had less of an excuse for excluding the work of women; for in what I take to be a genuinely new . . . historical development, women's participation in experimental literary and visual work during those two decades reached a level, both in terms of quantity and quality, that could no longer be ignored. Some critics, of course, even among the most brilliant, managed to ignore it, as late as the mid-1980's; others, less brilliant, went so far as to theorize its absence.⁴

Suleiman supplied an original insight into the relationship between the Beats, the beginning of the era of postmodernism, and feminist art theory and criticism--movements which affected my life from the late teens on. I now began to understand what had transpired in art theory during my long years of child-raising and absence from contact with either schools or cultural centers. Attempting to make sense of art criticism in journals during the seventies and eighties, I found myself hopelessly mired down in new jargon. It was indispensable to my other reason for returning to school now--to provide two years of relatively uninterrupted studio time--that I gain a sound understanding of developments during the last two decades. I relished Suleiman's exploration of how feminist activity joined postmodernist debate, each strengthening the other. Labelling it a "conceptual leap", she cites Craig Owens' 1983 essay "The

Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-modernism" in which he "theorized the political implications of the intersection between the 'feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation':5

By linking feminist politics with postmodernist artistic practice, Owens provided the pro-postmodernists in the debate with a precious argument, whose advantages they were quick to grasp. Feminism provided for postmodernism a concrete political edge, or wedge, that could be used to counter the accusatory pessimism of a Baudrillard or a Jameson: for if there existed a genuinely *feminist* postmodernist practice, then postmodernism could no longer be seen only as the expression of a fragmented, exhausted culture steeped in nostalgia for a lost center. Indeed, such a view of postmodernism, with its sense of irremediable decline and loss, could now itself be shown to be implicated in the Western, patriarchal logic of the "grand narratives"--the very logic that feminism, and feminist postmodernism, contested. As Hal Foster, in an essay that I read as response to and development of Owens's argument, eloquently noted: "Here, then we begin to see what is at stake in [the] so-called dispersal of the subject. For what is this subject that, threatened by loss, is so bemoaned? For some, for many, this may indeed be a great loss, a loss which leads to narcissistic laments and hysterical disavowals of the end of art, of culture, of the west. But for others, precisely for Others, it is no great loss at all".6

Suleiman continues:

Andreas Huyssen, around the same time, was arguing that feminism and the women's movement, together with anti-imperialism, the ecology movement, and the growing awareness of 'other cultures, non-European, non-Western cultures,' had created a new 'postmodernism of resistance' that would 'satisfy the needs of the political *and* those of the aesthetic.' Most recently, following up on these arguments, Linda Hutcheon has spoken of the overlapping agendas between postmodernism and 'ex-centrics': blacks, women, and other traditionally marginalized groups.7

So there began to arise a sense of kinship not only with other women, but with artists in other marginalized groups. In an article entitled "Both Sides Now: A Reprise", elaborating on the opinion that feminist artists must also be concerned with racism, Lucy Lippard says this:

I remember Barbara Ehrenreich pointing out that we all have several alliances in and out of the feminist community; we might simultaneously be a woman, a Chicana, a wage worker, a Catholic, a lesbian, a mother, and a socialist. We don't want to iron out all those honorable wrinkles, but to understand the various ways in which we and other women experience our multiple identities, and how our priorities are constructed. 8

My reading was a process of following instinct and clues offered up by the texts. Far from being random, all of this new information tended to fall logically into an integrated pattern. The organization and absorption of the material was incalculably facilitated by written papers and conversations with Professor Lent. In the second phase of my independent study course, I read and submitted papers on the following books: Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, by Whitney Chadwick; Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo, by Hayden Herrera; Unexpected Journeys: the Art and Life of Remedios Varo, by Janet Kaplan; Jennifer Bartlett, by Goldwater, Smith, and Tompkins; Women, Art, and Power, by Linda Nochlin; and Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology, by Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker. I also read several other books and many articles and essays related to these subjects. The most significant of these sources are listed in the bibliography.

I benefited from an increasing sense of the brilliance and energy in feminist scholarship. Without knowing how to incorporate the ideas in my art yet, I trusted that eventually they would find their way into the paintings; and it was not ideas alone, but also a sense of kinship with other women artists which gave me renewed courage. Many women artists of my generation had struggled painfully with marriages and children, attempting to live beside the art, and I found that quilt and a sense of failure were shared by all of us. Younger women artists wrestled with these problems, too, and many had a whole new set of conflicts to contend with, including those which had arisen within the feminist movement. It became impossible to deny the effects on my own art of brutality in sexual relationships, deaths of loved ones, and unsolvable conflicts regarding motherhood and other feminine roles, real or imposed. I could see that reference to these facts of my life experience often caused embarrassment when I was attempting to explain the work I was doing. It was not polite or correct, it appeared, to speak of experiences this personal in a discussion of the work. I decided not to allow this to deter my speaking and painting about them. The block, I was discovering, consisted of a long denial of my life experiences, experiences rarely shared by male artists. Their model was not my model, and the feminist readings became crucial to this shift in consciousness.

At the end of the winter quarter of the 1991-92 school year, I had a number of dreams which pointed the way to a series of autobiographical paintings. The first of these seemed almost to burst forth, so insistent and clear was this image of a child. From my dreams came the paintings of the child, which was an image of myself at about three (Fig. 1); a house, symbolic of an era of dissolution in my adult life (Fig. 2); and my mother as I had perceived her in the years before her death (Fig. 3). By the end of the spring quarter they were complete, and other ideas were stirring. These were the paintings I hung as a triptych in the spring graduate painting show at 50 West Main Street, and which I named "Maine Stories" (Fig. 4). Later, I removed the painting of my mother from the triptych, named it "Mother's House," and hung it with the painting of my father's death, "Skating at Night," (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6) as another diptych.

During the summer I continued the reading and plotted the second independent study. I was deeper into the feminist material, and became interested in the women artists associated with the Surrealist movement. My interest in them focussed on their writings, the relationship of their work to that of the leading male figures of the Surrealist movement, and in the importance of their friendships with each other. The direction of their work in most cases seemed markedly different from that of the men. In her study of the women Surrealists, Whitney Chadwick brought to the gender

differences a balance and understanding aided by historical perspective:

The paths followed by male and female artists seeking the reintegration of all aspects of the human spirit in the work of art have often diverged. Neither side could shed layers of history and conditioning at will. The fear that male Surrealists have of woman's natural proximity to the inner sources of creation is frequently expressed in images that symbolically attack woman's creative, reproductive function. . . . Conflict over woman's closeness to the inner sources of creation, in life as well as in art, served to perpetuate contradictory roles ascribed to women in Surrealism. In the external world, women were extolled for their courage and daring, praised for their uninhibited behavior, and encouraged to create and exhibit their work. But when it came to internalizing an image of woman, the *femme-enfant* and the erotic muse prevailed, images that could be absorbed into the male act of creation, completing it without competing with it.

Women artists also struggled with this conflict. Recognizing, as Gloria Orenstein has pointed out, that the needs of the *femme-enfant* and those of the mature artist are incompatible, and often isolated from the theoretical, ideational, and political issues that provided focus and group support for their male colleagues, they asserted their own inner reality as paramount and defended themselves against the fear that its resources might prove finite. Their work originates in the "telling" of this reality, and it is this need that provides narrative thrust and structure to the work of many women artists. Although they believed in an androgynous creative spirit, their work reveals a sensibility that arises, at least in part, from their own understanding of the reality of their lives as women. Their exploration of the personal sources of artistic creation marks a milestone in the development of twentieth-century painting and sculpture and has validated the path taken by many women artists in later generations.⁹

This was validation much needed by someone who had lived through decades of the Modernist sensibility and had practically no sense of identification with it. The real and present need to join the personal--the reality of my life as a

woman--with my art had always precluded what I experienced as a masculine dialogue *about* art. The sculptor, Isamu Noguchi, apparently felt similarly when he made the following statements:

I don't think art comes from art. A lot of artists apparently think so. I think it comes from the awakening person. Awakening is what you might call the spiritual. It is a linkage to something flowing very rapidly through the air, and I can put my finger on it [he raises his finger as if to connect with something above him] and plug in, so to speak. Do artists need a spiritual way or do they need art? You can say that one is the same as the other. Everything tends toward awakening, and I would rather use the word "awakening" than a word derived from some system--because there are many systems.¹⁰

In terms of feminism, Lucy Lippard says in a moving statement, "'Spiritual' to me means not only the 'kinship among women' that Suzanne Lacy exhorts, but a sense of the ungendered possibilities of a far wider psychic field than conventional disciplines can cope with. But that's another story, even harder to integrate into global feminism than the essential and the postmodern."¹¹

Noguchi's concept of "something flowing very rapidly through the air" and Lippard's "far wider psychic field" seem to be attempts to articulate the same creative moment: the inflowing of energy and intelligence so much finer than we ordinarily possess that we will work years without it just to experience it once more. Gregory Gillespie, a realist who falls also into the category of surrealism and who is one of my favorite painters today, refers to "looking without having

art in the way".¹² He states, "I know that there are other structures of reality, existing there at the same time that we can't see. I know that, and I want that to be in the painting, too".¹³ Frank N. Goodyear speaks of Gillespie's "striving for another reality, an attempt to perceive a deeper consciousness".¹⁴

In my own process in the studio, the reading was serving the purpose of affirming that whatever directions I had been drawn to throughout the years were authentic directions that many had taken before me and were still engaged in today. All the inner and outer voices that had been suggesting that I "should" be doing something else were receding, and were being overlaid with those which said to keep on with what had always interested me. Although the exploration of the personal needed completion, it would not necessarily be a path followed forever, or even for long; I was very sure, however, that there was no other way to get from the art I had done before to an authentic direction for future work. I felt some of the old block when the school year began again. Taking a large canvas which had been prepared the previous school year, I began a realistic self-portrait in the studio. I was feeling enormous pleasure in being back in this room, painting in the open window seven floors up. The first quarter was spent on that large canvas, which I called "The Seventh Story" (Fig 7).

Returning then to the series that I had begun in the spring, I wanted to do a painting about my father's fatal

accident, an event that shattered our lives with its suddenness, horror, and violence. As in the beginning of the previous year, the painting was terrible and the old anger and frustration arose. Suddenly, there was a quieting, the painting became an abstract symbolic ordering of the event, a synthesis of the elements both of the occasion and of the painting. This is the painting entitled "Skating at Night". The rest of the final year was occupied by a series of landscape paintings that begin to bring in some of the intellectual ideas absorbed from the studies--ideas that had gone through the filtering process and emerged in a sensible relationship to my feelings about nature. The work which emerged as most important is a two panel piece called "Ocean Diptych" (Fig.9). There is a solid sense of completion to this two-year process. There is, as well, a sense of beginning new work, work which I couldn't have envisioned two years ago.

III. The Work

Although they are not in chronological order, I will begin the description of the paintings with the self-portrait, "Seventh Story" and a landscape painting, "Walks with Jan", (Fig. 8) incorporating an overlapping portrait of a friend; in their realism and ideas they are tangential to the main body of work.

During the summer of 1992, I had been looking at realism. I have worked realistically all my life, at times feeling

uncomfortably out of fashion. Yet there has always been in realism an apprehension of mystery which comes directly from that quality in nature, whether it is a landscape or a human visage I am studying. At other times it is a meditative act, cool and objective, which is intensely pleasurable. There is always attention to the abstraction inherent in the realistic image, but the realist artist loves things as they are. In a defense of realism entitled "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," Linda Nochlin states:

[On] the whole, realism implies a system of values involving close investigation of particulars, a taste for ordinary experience in a specific time, place and social context; and an art language that vividly transmits a sense of concreteness. Realism is more than and different from willful virtuosity, or the passive reflexivity of the mirror image, however much these may appear as ingredients in realist works.¹⁵

Although realism involves an enormous realm of divergent styles and concerns, her statement defined what I wanted to do at that particular moment. I was experiencing a sense of *place*, in Rochester, in school, away from nature in an urban setting, in the new studio, in the present. It was to be an objective record both of the segment of Rochester visible from the window, framed by the window and the balcony railing, and of my figure, foregrounded on one side; it was to convey no particular emotional content. Of the realists, I was drawn to the unpretentiousness and apparent simplicity of Catherine Murphy and William Beckman. One element of the scene from my window which struck a personal note was the distance of the

two small squares of wooded landscape framed by the city's buildings--so far away, and as familiar as my body. Looking at the distant hills, I felt both at home in the city, and misplaced. Could there be some balance of feeling in the jeans and blue shirt, the green woods, and the warm static geometry of the streets and buildings? The morning light was warm, casting a slice of sun on the intersection and soft irregular reflections on the facades. The clouds were flat-bottomed, receding over the distant landscape. I wanted the mood of lightness and peace that I felt being there painting in the mornings of late summer. It was to be a record of a particular moment in a particular place, as had been self-portraits at other times, in other studios.

I began with a turpentine wash, laying down the composition, getting the sense of scale. The figure faced the interior of the room, looking out of the picture plane into an interior space. The sense of interior/exterior space was important. There were two different kinds of light--that of the outdoors on a bright morning, and the warmer light reflected from walls within. Scale was exaggerated, the size of the figure enormous beside the small buildings on the street below. The balcony railing provided a middleground and a step into the space above the streets. It was a struggle during the drawing stage, primarily because this was a larger canvas than I had worked on before, and the figure was so large. In three or four days of washing out and starting

again, I had an exciting composition that seemed correct in terms of scale. Other considerations at this stage were the balance of warm and cool hues, the design of darks and lights, and the overall color and lightness of the surface. Once these decisions were tentatively made and indicated in the wash drawing, the work then proceeded to the details of the subject, much of which was done with ruler and pencil. There were numerous corrections to perspective at this time. The next stage was to begin painting with oils diluted with a mixture of stand oil and turpentine. I wanted a smooth surface, virtually free of brushstrokes. I was inspired by a description in the Nochlin essay of "Jan van Eyck's stubborn fidelity to the visual facts, his obvious joy in punching a hole in the picture plane, his uncanny ability to crystallize natural light in the oil medium and his refusal to leave behind traces of his personal handiwork"¹⁶. For the rest of the quarter, it was a matter of painting what I saw--the shadows in the corners of window casements, the repetitive decorative frieze on the roof of the courthouse, the stately presence of churches between more modern buildings, like announcements of another necessity. Workmen worked, then disappeared from the roof immediately below. As I was in the process of painting a solar disk that had beautiful modulations of light, it disappeared from the rooftop for good between one afternoon and the next morning. But the clouds, surprisingly, looked the same day after day, and the wedge of

sunlight at the intersection moved only slightly from 8:00 AM in early September to 8:00 AM in late October. The leaves changed from deep green through shades of yellowing to orange and ochre, and the distant hills grew mellow. But I kept the greens from early September.

For someone who has lived close to nature for a long time, especially next to the sea, time means felt changes, a present sense of the turnings of things--of seasons, of colors, tides, and light; markings on calendars and clocks belong to a shallower experience. Natural changes bring sensual memories from other seasons and places. Noting the changes that occurred in the natural elements in the scene from my window caused a desire that often arises, the wish to capture them somehow. In the original idea for this painting there was no provision for this impulse, but as I felt it, I thought about ways it might be done. There were artists who had found ways to suggest memory and time: Peter Milton in his etchings, Robert Rauschenberg in his paintings and prints, and certainly the Surrealists. This was the strength of my attraction to their work. There is great vitality in the inner world of overlapping images, emotions, time, and place, and I wanted to think of a new way to indicate that world.

"Walks with Jan" began as a landscape painted with thick colors straight from the tube. The source was a photograph of a corner of the stream which flows out of the woods near my house in East Blue Hill, Maine; the fall foliage was at its

most brilliant, the water and rocks covered with fallen poplar leaves, and the ferns on the bank bright shades of sienna and ochre. A large white, lichen-covered rock protruded diagonally from the upper right corner, forming a wedge shape that I have used often in my images. I had been walking there with Jan on the day of the photograph, and was thinking of her as I painted. One afternoon, a strong gust of wind took the photograph out of the window. I looked around on West Main Street, but couldn't find it. Another painter dropped pieces of paper from the window while I stood below trying to calculate where the picture would have fallen. The wind meeting at the buildings corner caused a draft which blew the papers first out and then in toward the building again, and they seemed to be landing on some ledges above the lower windows. I found that those windows had been tightly and permanently nailed shut precisely because of the strong air currents there. So I was without my source, and the painting was just developing. Without much hope, since the pictures were taken in about 1985, I looked at home in a large box of old photographs and negatives; within five minutes I found an envelope of those negatives, and found that among them was a negative of Jan sitting on the very rock I was painting. Such unexpected fortune solidified the decision to include a portrait of my friend in the painting somehow. I had an enlargement made, and then needed to decide whether to make a diptych or to invent a way to make an overlapping image of her

on the original painting. Settling on the overlapping image, I bought a sheet of plexiglass, cut it into an irregular shape which would extend somewhat from the edges of the painting on the right and top, and did a loose portrait of her in acrylic. Her face was done in some detail, obviously from a candid snapshot of a woman smiling in the sun, but the body and background were rendered minimally in loose, flowing lines. To join it to the painting, I bought a length of clear, solid plexiglass rod, had it cut into four two and one-half inch pieces, and had a machinist drill a threaded hole into both ends of each piece. Then I drilled corresponding holes through the masonite and the plexiglass paintings; the short rods held the plexiglass two and one-half inches in front of the painting. In painting the image of Jan I didn't attempt to fit it in any precise manner to the image behind her. Her figure exists there in its own space, but since the plexiglass painting is spare, much of the background painting shows through, creating spatial ambiguity.

This painting and the self-portrait were the two ventures into realism, very different from each other in style and feeling. I am interested in continuing to explore different styles of realism, especially those which contain elements of mystery bordering on surrealism. Nature has an oneiric quality for me--the awareness of a mysterious parallel life of which we see only an occasional privileged glimpse, and

without which human life would be so diminished as to be impossible.

In the previous spring of 1992, at the time when I was considering putting aside studio art in favor of art therapy I began to have powerful dreams, the most vivid of which was of an uncle who was bringing me, by appointment, many pictures of my childhood. Except for one, they were all pictures from family albums, some I recognized and some I had not seen before. He brought them in large bunches and we looked at them together. The exceptional one was a large framed photograph on his wall of a child (myself) at three or so, standing in the shade of a bower of trees. The top part of the face was in shadow, and the dress had irregular slits in it. She was clutching something I took to be a doll. She stood just slightly turned, but obviously looking at the spectator. The deepest impression was of the dress: both the shape of it and the idiosyncratic, torn quality of the holes in it affected me powerfully. At the end of the dream, he removed the picture, which was large, from the wall and gave it to me. I was overcome with emotion and gratitude. When I awoke, I knew that this was the painting that needed to be done--in the dream it *looked* like a painting. We were in between quarters at the time, and I had just had four masonite panels prepared. When I applied the gesso, I sketched the image of the child into the gesso so that it would not be lost. It was an unnecessary precaution since it remained

extremely vivid. I knew that this image made reference to an early experience of incest by an uncle--an experience I had no conscious memory of but which had been admitted by him to a member of my family. The importance of the dress with its peculiar shaped holes left no doubt about its meaning.

I began by sketching the image in acrylic and then, with modelling paste, began to build up the surface, striving for the quality of the image of the dress. It was the dress which somehow carried the emotional content of the entire image. The painting was finished in oils, deep, blackish greens for the bower of leaves and shadow, greys and other neutral colors for the dress, a line of bright red down the back edge of the dress, a glowing pink mouth below the facial shadow. The doll was modelled slightly, and was left the bony color of the paste. Without conscious intention, the figure of the doll emerged as a combination mummy-skull totemic bundle.

Slicing into the cool, dark colors on the right-hand side is a knife-shaped area of sunlit landscape which becomes the beginning of the second panel. It was not until the drawing naturally spilled over onto the next panel that I planned a diptych. What began to emerge like an extension of the memory was an image of an old house, long abandoned, that I had taken many photographs of in the mid-eighties. In reality, the house had a peaceful quality, and I had done a series of paintings from the photographs then, returning again and again to the house itself. I do not indulge in this kind of

imagination often, but I felt as if I either knew the women who had lived there or had lived there myself. At any rate, there was a strong connection with the feeling of the place, perhaps only because in my childhood I had seen and visited many such typically Maine houses on the edges of fields and woods. But as it developed in this painting, it had a different feeling--neglected in a violent way, badly used. The emerging image became associated in my mind with the years of my life between 25 and 36, when there was a wild, uneven descent into the illness of addiction. There was sometimes violence, mine or others towards me, terrible hopelessness and sadness, terror, hope of dying, rending guilt regarding my children, and bewilderment about what had become of [this house] my self. There were also moments here and there of beauty and light, but the house was crumbling nonetheless, and we all knew it. This is the symbolism of this part of the painting, and it is connected to the event in the child painting, like the tree is connected to the seed.

I then began a painting of my mother and the house of her childhood. It is another of the four foot square panels. I began by building up thick texture along the bottom with modelling paste and paper applied with glue to the masonite. Into the texture I drew an image of my mother's body as I remember her looking just before she died. Above her on the right side of the painting is a flat image of the side of a house with a small diamond-shaped opening through which show

the branches of a tree. On this facade there is a loosely drawn shadow of a bare tree. The left-hand side shows a rectangle of landscape: a sunny field bordered by woods, across which lies a large felled white birch. Toward the top the sky is thickly painted with gestural strokes of darker, greyer colors. The landscape portion refers to a memory of four or five years old, when my mother and I visited my grandfather. He had just cut down the old birch, and sat me on it while he and my mother talked. It is a very pleasant vivid memory, perhaps because it occurred to me for the first time that my mother was also a daughter. His house had a diamond-shaped window that made it different, for me, from any other house. The painting is about time--the span of my knowing my mother, from early childhood until her death; and about memory--my imagination of her connection to that house and landscape. Her personhood had more to do with that house than it had to do with her relationship to me, and I placed her there in death.

In the spring student show of 1992, I hung it with the child and house panels as a triptych. In the thesis show, it was hung above the abstract black painting I will describe next, and this was a more successful way to show it. I think this painting is one of the weaker pieces, and I intend to do some more work on it at a future time; nevertheless, in the painting of it there was the weaving together of some stray elements of grief, memory, and love.

The next painting began as the attempt to put down pieces from my imagination of the event of my father's death. I drew with acrylic violent, expressionistic images of glaring lights, motion, and impact in a night landscape. This was very difficult emotionally and entirely unsuccessful visually. But specific symbolic elements began to assert themselves and literal ones to be discarded. Over the garish images I painted the entire panel black and then both scraped through the black and added drawn lines to the surface. Colors showed through subtly and textures strongly from the underpainting. Near the top edge is a band of graphite and above that six straight white lines. There is a lot of activity throughout the panel, but the overall image is very simple. In the center, I gouged out three straight narrow grooves in the masonite and glued in edgewise three wedge-shaped pieces of plexiglass which are painted and engraved with lines. This painting, "Skating at Night," is the least literal of the works and the most effective. It is the one which points the way for future work, where content may be condensed and contained in symbolism. As someone said of this painting, the essential experience is communicated without the necessity of knowing the details. This indicates a direction away from telling too much, of finding the way, in abstraction, to resolve, synthesize, and communicate the strongest experience.

The black painting ended the group that dealt with unresolved feelings. The next two panels began another theme,

that of relationship to nature. I shall enlarge upon the statement which I used to accompany the thesis show, because, although it has relevance for the other paintings in the show, it most closely relates to the meaning of these last paintings:

The events of one's life take place, *take place*. . . . Events do indeed take place; they have meaning in relation to the things around them. . . . I existed in that landscape, and then my existence was indivisible with it. I place my shadow there in the hills, my voice in the wind that ran there, in those old mornings and afternoons and evenings. . . .17

I will never be separate from the landscape where I grew up in Maine. When I speak of mystery, darkness, presence in landscape, I am speaking of what I have experienced there. "Ocean Diptych" began with an acrylic wash of a large image of a round rock half submerged in sea-water, with masses of seaweed curling around it. The rock occupies nearly half of the 4'x4' panel, and the composition is strongly diagonal in both directions. For a while, I played with light, bright colors, overpainting sheer layers of acrylic. Gradually, as the image went deeper, the pigment got thicker and deeper in tone. Finally, the panel is divided into areas of stippled textures and thick ropery strands. Body metaphors began to be evident, and I began to perceive a strongly sexual theme. It is a close-up, magnified presence, sensual in color and movement. Its other panel is divided into two equal sections vertically, each suggestive of another aspect of the same entity, one abstract, but suggestive of a broad vista, perhaps

a stretch of shoreline seen from the air. The other half is literal but seen from a psychological distance. It consists of repetitive marks laid down on the surface, a perspective view across the surface of calm water, a bay. It is all surface and no seeing into, when the water looks like metal. I meant to shift around between different languages or marks, different ways of speaking about things, and different ways of being with things. I think the painting begins to succeed, but could be much clearer in its intention. I was feeling my way to something new; I could sense it quite acutely at times, and then it would recede. But left with this image, I believe it will be possible to pick up the clues and develop the ideas further. In this painting as in the one previously, there was more detachment. It is evident that the process of dealing with literal events and releasing potent hidden emotions, the stuff of which blocks are made, permitted progress into cleaner psychic territory. These last two paintings comprising the diptych were very enjoyable to do; I experienced buoyancy in my mind, a feeling that the studio was clearer space than before. Although I still thought of the painting as autobiographical, there was psychic space rather than the feeling that I was engulfed by it.

I strongly identify with the painter Sylvia Mangold when she says, "Everything I paint is some extension of my life. I use what I see around me. I don't go searching for a subject."¹⁸ Judith Stein remarks of Mangold's work that

"[the] fluent, near-abstract landscapes, . . . banded by simulated tape, direct us to consider not only nature but also the nature of the artist's vision."19 As the final two paintings indicate, this seems also to be an aspect of one major direction that emerged for me during the work of these two years. When the degree work was ending, I was beginning four new four-foot panels, all landscapes, but highly abstracted: a warm-toned image with a large central form, loosely triangular and highly textured; a simple image in blues and greens split by a curving line; a dark blue and black painting similar to "Skating at Night," with drawn lines forming a central square; and an image reminiscent of a boiling sea and lowering clouds, with a warm-toned structure on one side. All are drawn from memories of the way things look in Maine.

Conclusion

The following is an excerpt from "To the Rescue of Art: Twenty-Six Essays" (University of California). It was dropped off in my studio by one of the painting professors, and unfortunately I do not know the author; however, it is so relevant to my thesis that I wish to quote a portion of it here:

Art as a helper in times of trouble, as a means of understanding the conditions of human existence and of facing the frightening aspects of those conditions, as the creation of a meaningful order. . . these most welcome aids are grasped by people in

distress and used by the healers who come to their assistance. But the blessings experienced in therapy can reach further: they can remind artists everywhere what the function of art has been and will always be.

It is the function of art, more than any individual life, that is important. In feminism and multi-culturalism I am finding hope that the healing and communicating functions of art will replace its commercialization. The masculinized, intellectualized art of former decades need not be replaced but joined by other orders of perception. It is to be hoped that it will never again be so difficult to find those alternatives, that they will simply take their place as equals alongside what has heretofore been the dominant mode. Far more than I could have imagined, all of the research and liberal arts courses, all of the people, and all of the painting that has been part of my Master's Degree program have enriched my knowledge and my life. I owe a major debt of gratitude to those who helped me decide to stick with it, and to Professor Lent, who offered a direction. Feminist scholarship as it relates to visual art is relatively young, and its conjunction with my painting seems a broad and exciting direction for the future.

ILLUSTRATIONS

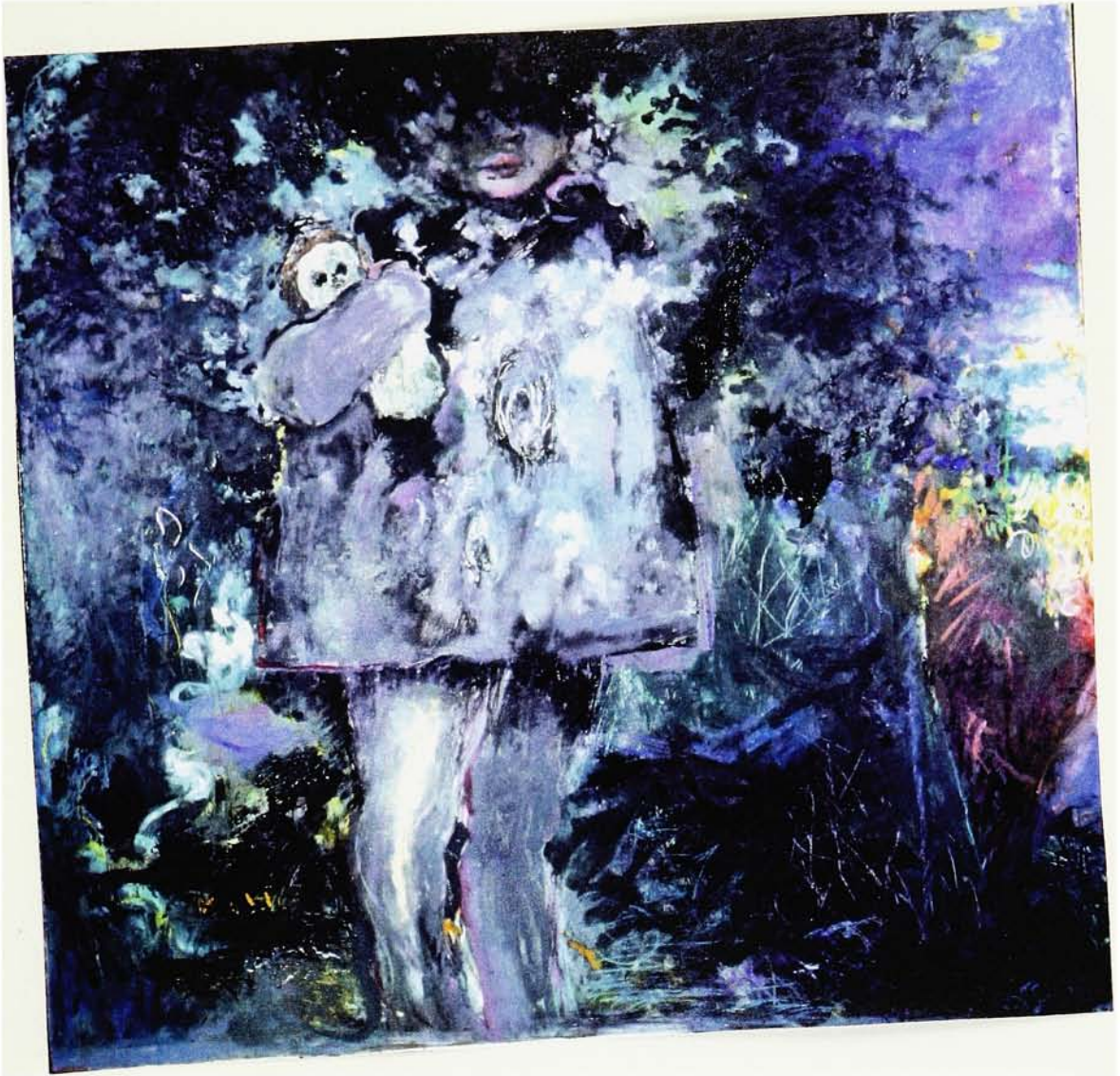


Fig 1. Child. Left panel of the diptych, "Maine Stories."
Mixed media on masonite. 4'x4'.



Fig 2. House. Right panel of the diptych, "Maine Stories."
Mixed media on masonite. 4'x4'.



Fig 3. "Mother's House." Mixed media on masonite. 4'x4'.

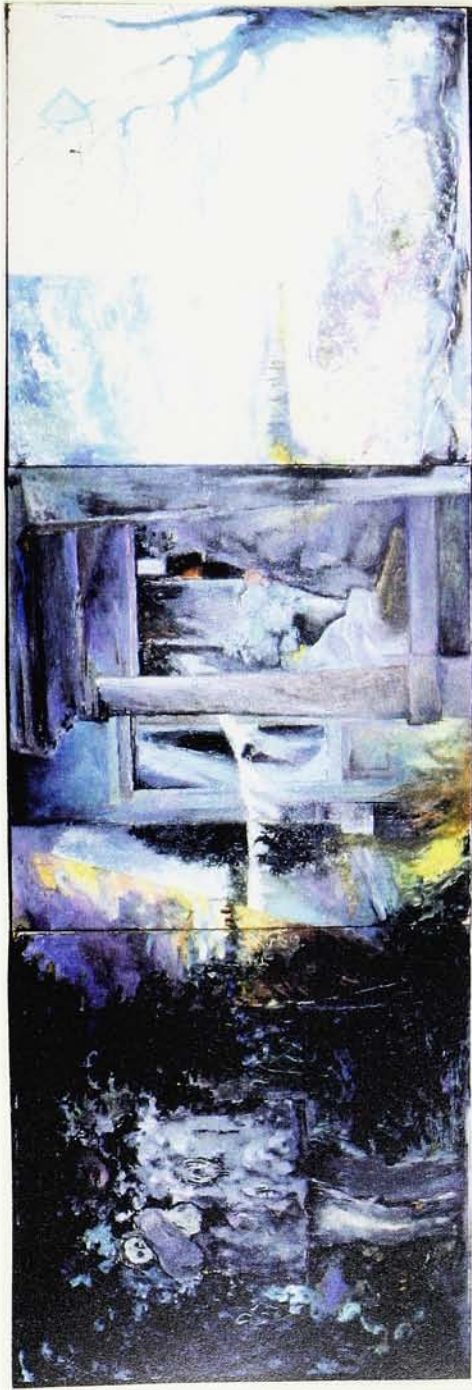


Fig. 4. "Maine Stories." Originally hung in the Spring show, 1992, 50 West Main Street, as a triptych. 4'x12'.

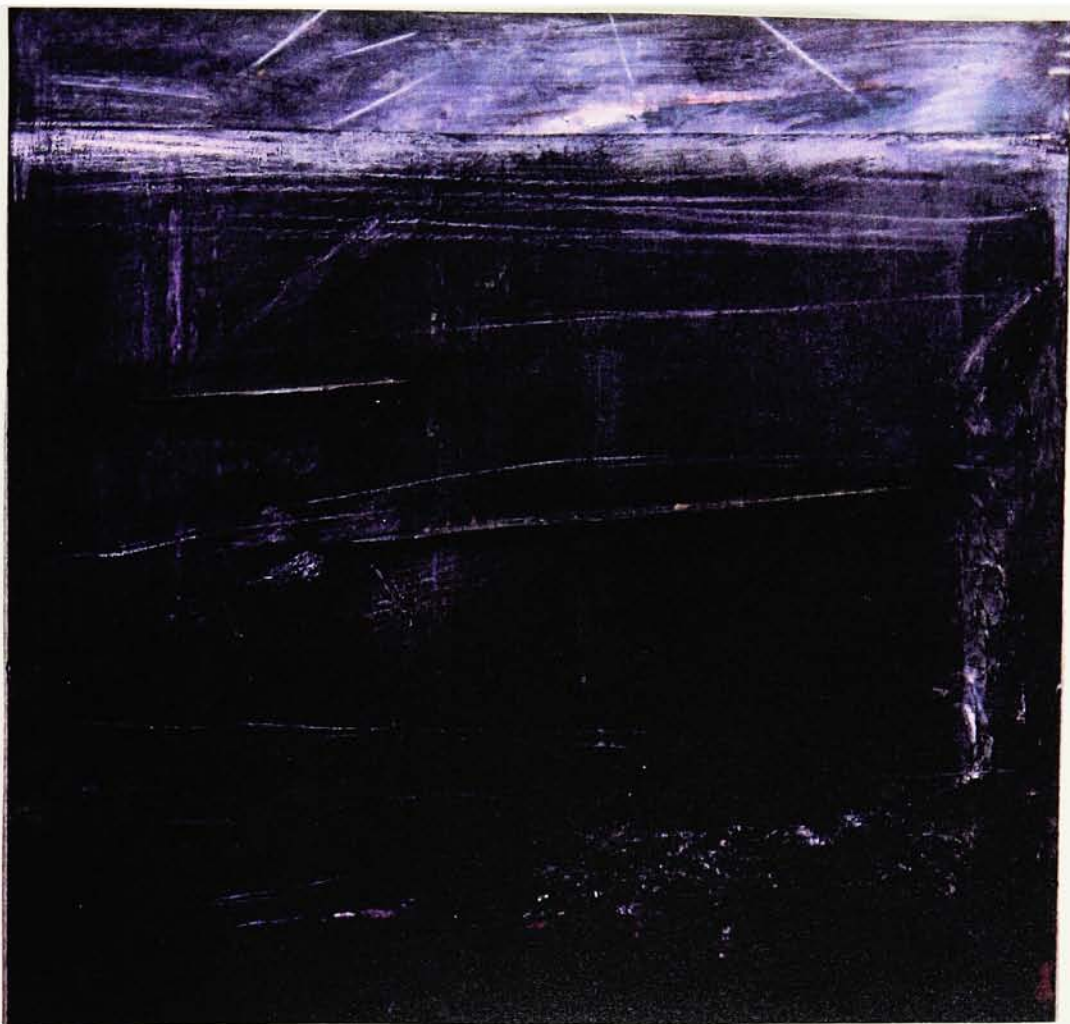


Fig. 5. "Skating at Night." Mixed media on masonite.
4'x4'.

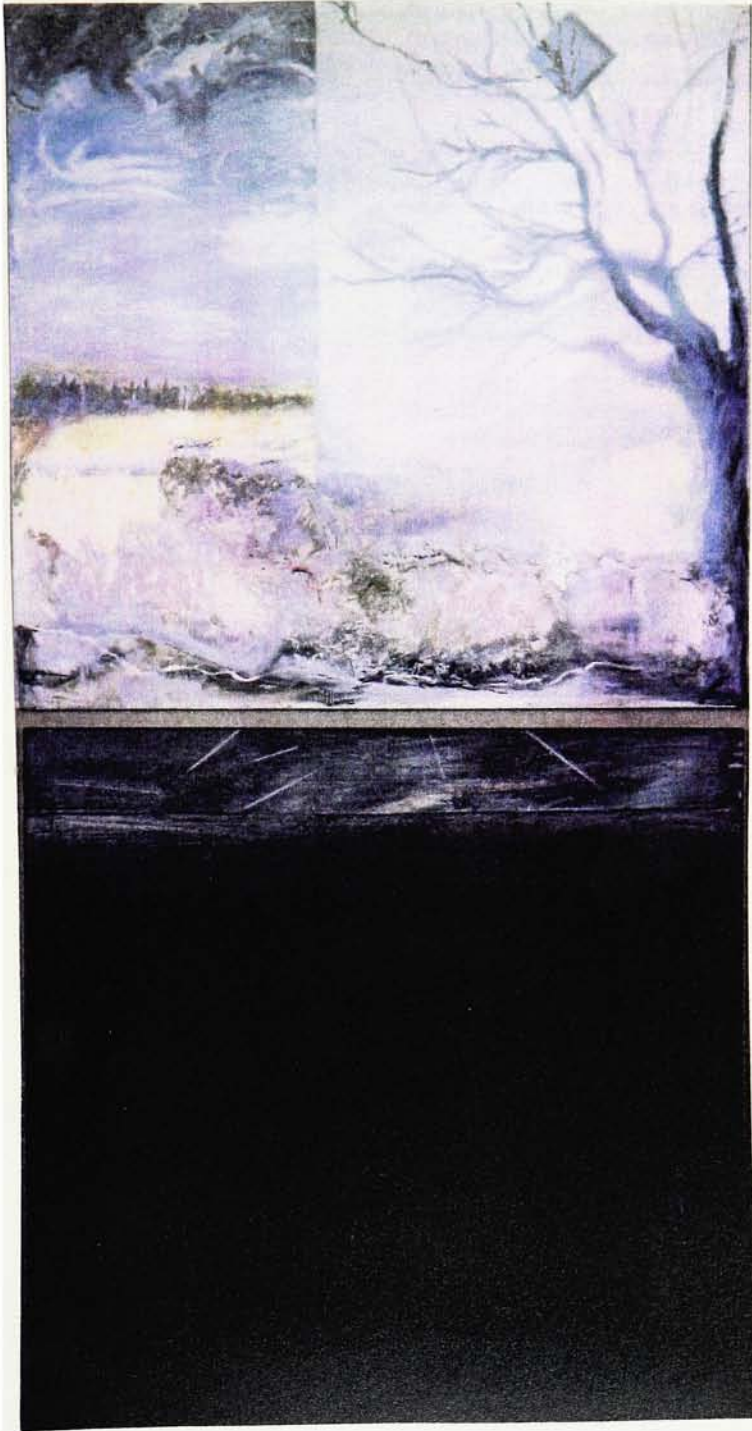


Fig. 6. "Mother's House" and "Skating at Night" hung as a diptych, thesis show, May, 1993.



Fig. 7. "The Seventh Story." Self-portrait. Oil on canvas. 54"x72".



Fig. 8. "Walks with Jan." Oil on masonite panel, with attached acrylic on plexiglass panel. 48"x56".

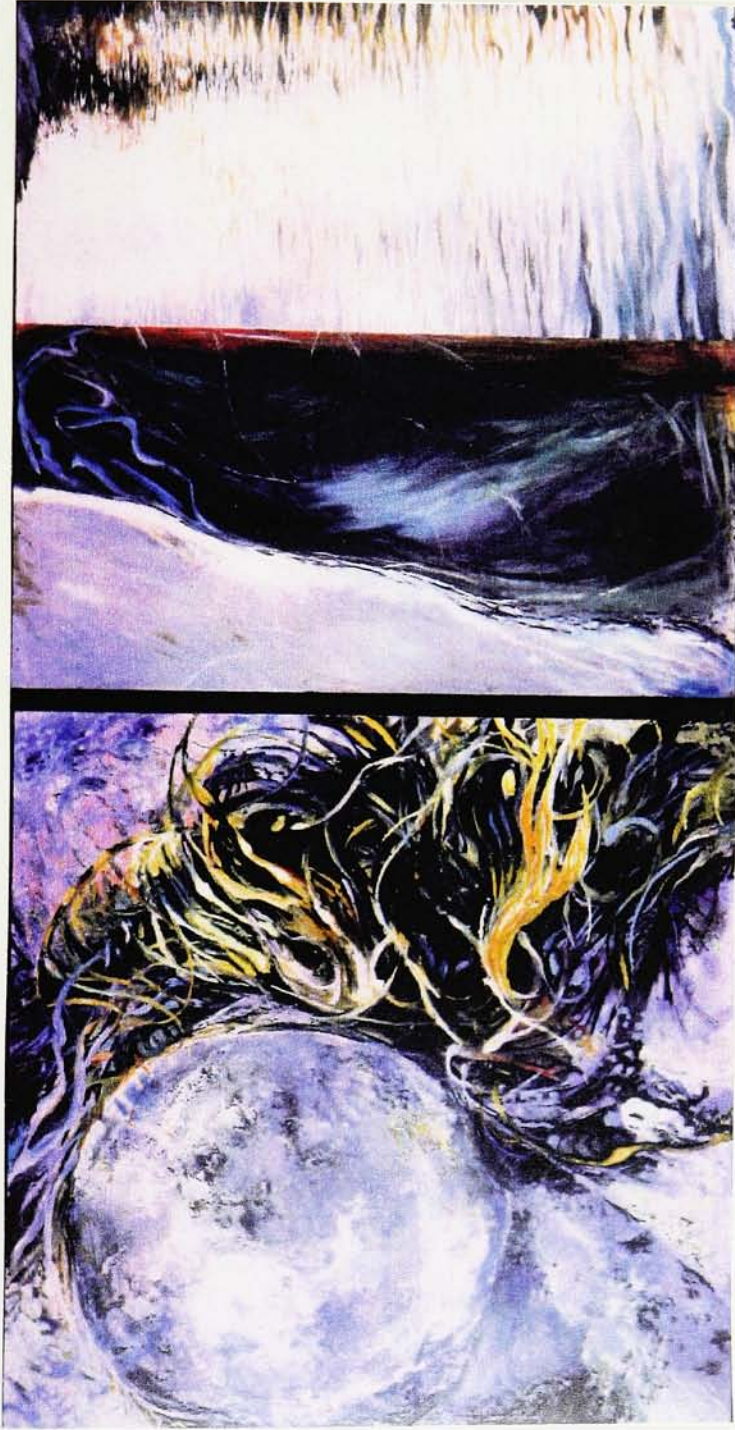


Fig. 9. "Ocean Diptych." Mixed media on masonite. 4'x8'.

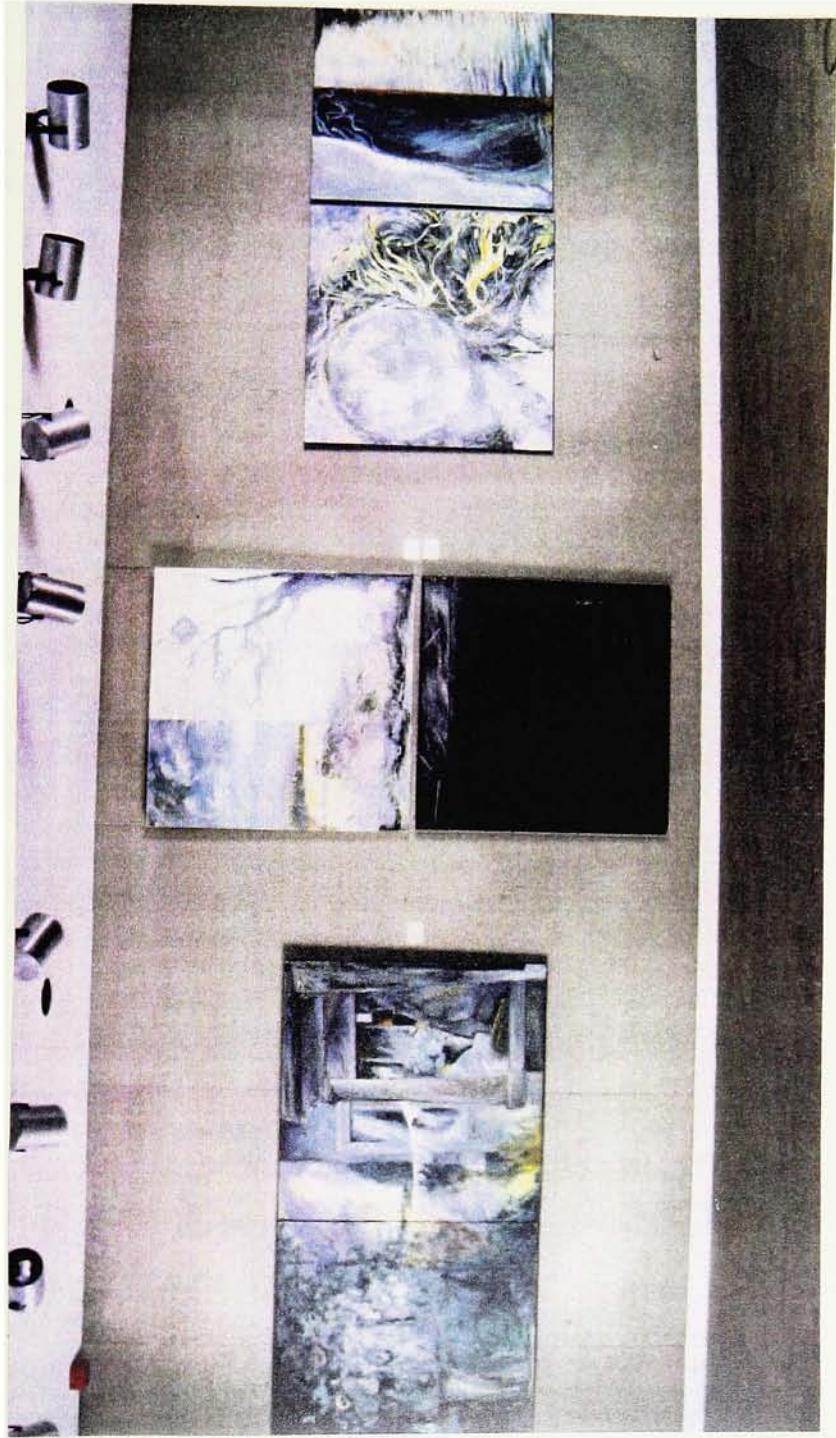


Fig. 10. Three diptychs, Thesis installation, May, 1993. ("The Seventh Story" was also hung, but was not photographed; it hung to the left of the diptychs.)

NOTES

1. Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*. Harvard University Press, (Cambridge, 1990), p. 179.
2. Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*. Shambhala Publications, Inc. (Boston, 1988), p.
3. Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, pp. 186 and 187.
4. Ibid., p. 187.
5. Ibid., p. 188
6. Ibid., pp. 188 and 189.
7. Ibid., p. 189.
8. Lucy Lippard, "Both Sides Now: A Reprise." *Heresies* 6, no.4 (1989): 29-34.
9. Whitney Chadwick. *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*. Little Brown and Company (Boston, 1981), p. 58.
10. Isamu Noguchi, quoted in Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own*, p. 355.
11. Lippard, "Both Sides Now."
12. Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., *Contemporary American Realism since 1960*. Little Brown and Company (Boston, 1981), p. 58.
13. Ibid., p. 58.
14. Ibid.
15. Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law", from Richard Hertz, *Theories of Contemporary Art*. Prentice Hall, Inc. (New Jersey, 1985) p. 26.
16. Ibid., p. 39.
17. N. Scott Momaday, *The Names: A Memoir*. Harper and Row (New York, 1976), p. 142
18. Judith E. Stein, in *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream*, Abbeville Press (New York, 1989), p. 111.
19. Ibid.
20. "To the Rescue of Art: Twenty-Six Essays".

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