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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SELF DISCOVERY AND PERSONAL CREATION

By
Peggy Kehoe

May 23, 1991

Advisor: Philip Bornarth / _____

Date: 6/7/91

Associate Advisor: Edward Miller / _____

Date: 6.6.91

Associate Advisor: Lawrence Williams / _____

Date: 24 May 1991

Special Assistant to the Dean for Graduate Affairs: Philip Bornarth

Date: 6/7/91

Dean, College of Fine and Applied Arts: Dr. Peter Giopoulus

Date: 6/10/91

I, _____, prefer to be contacted each time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the following address.

Peggy Kehoe
54 Lodge Drive
Rochester, N.Y. 14622

Date: May 24, 1991

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"So Gerald set himself to work, to put the great industry in order. In his travels, and in his accompanying readings, he had come to the conclusion that the essential secret of life was harmony. He did not define to himself at all clearly what harmony was. The word pleased him, he felt he had come to his own conclusions. And he proceeded to put his philosophy into practice by forcing order into the established world, translating the mystic word harmony into the practical word order."¹

- D. H. Lawrence
Women in Love

The key to the problem is obvious, Gerald "did not define to himself at all clearly what harmony was." He was not the meditative kind. He employed order forcefully, but without reflective contemplation. In the years that I have prepared for my thesis, I have found that the hardest problems an artist faces are to define his purpose and discover his theme. This requires serious reflection. The mystic harmony that D.H. Lawrence speaks of expresses the goal of many artists. To achieve it, contemplation must be mixed with action.

Gerald was aware of the importance of harmony, but he never paused to understand it, always plunging forward without thought. It is an easy trap to fall into in our busy lives. We struggle to get things done, not stopping to think about what it is we are doing and why. What purpose does my work serve? What will it mean to other people, and where does it lead? These are the questions I ask myself as I work.

¹D. H. Lawrence, Women in Love, (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987), pp. 300-301.

My Thesis project is about self discovery and personal creation. I believe that contemplation and imagination are essential not only to the artist in creating his art, but to every man as he creates his life. I am interested in the primary purpose that art once had; the subtle magic that primitive artists invoked, hoping to protect, to change or to heal the inhabitants of earth. In my paintings, I want the inner world of the mind to marry reality, the two combining as powerful evocations of man's creative potential.

On these pages, I will first explain the purpose of my work, which is to stimulate personal creation through fantasy. Next I will discuss my working process, concentrating on how the imagination is involved. I will conclude by sketching my goals for the future. Throughout this paper, my Thesis work and quotations from my research will serve to illustrate my philosophy of personal growth through art.

SECTION ONE: MY PURPOSE

THE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF A CREATOR

In my readings about the unusual career of Philip Guston, I became familiar with the Jewish legend of the Golem. In his book about Guston, Robert Storr explained that the Golem was a human effigy sculpted out of red clay by Cabalistic Rabbis in the middle ages.² These small figures were made only in times of great need, as wards against evil. Guston was keenly aware of the duality of this act. The making of this graven image was "considered a reenactment of the creation of Adam."³ Guston saw it as both "an objectification of man's power and a manifestation of his corruption."⁴

In my mind, the image of the Rabbis creating their saviour is a poignant portrait of man's struggle between maintaining faith in his God or taking matters into his own hands. It presents a question about how much responsibility we should take in creating our own lives. To Guston, the Golem, like Frankenstein, represented man's dual nature. He saw in this legend a correlation to the relationship he had with his art. Guston struggled with the consequences of breaking away from the abstract work of his mid-career. He felt that the formalist prohibition of figuration in painting during the 1960's was similar to the religious doctrines that made the Rabbis guilty of hubris by making their clay figures.⁵ He said that his "creative freedom

²Robert Storr, Philip Guston, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 60.

³Storr, p. 60.

⁴Storr, p. 60.

⁵Storr, p. 60.

required acknowledging the monstrosity of his own imagination."⁶ By rejecting the formalist agenda in his paintings and addressing his imagination, he took on the profound moral responsibility of being a creator.

The story of the Golem is important because it points to the ethical irony that permeates man's creations. Guston focused directly on the significance of his acts. Concerns such as his cast a troubled gaze on the act of creation by men. But the classic moral struggle that his reflections revealed, imbues his work with rich universal meaning.

The positive aspects of self creation were examined by J.R.R Tolkien in his short story Leaf by Niggle. The protagonist, Niggle, was an artist who worked obsessively on his painting which started as a mere leaf, and became a tree. As his imagination about the tree and it's place grew so did the painting. It kept growing and never seemed to end. Always a new leaf must be added, or a distant hill in the background. Niggle became so fixed with his project that he neglected his responsibilities to his neighbors and his community. He was eventually taken away by a higher power and he was made to reflect on his life and work. Niggle was redeemed in the highest way possible, by being sent to the place that he painted. He was able to live and work in the world that he had imagined. His creation continued to grow through the work that he did there. He literally imagined and created his own life.⁷

⁶Storr, p, 60.

⁷J.R.R. Tolkien, "Leaf by Niggle," Tree and Leaf, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), pp. 87-112.

It worked out well for Niggle, because he was unhappy in his old life. In his new life he was able to balance his vision with his responsibilities. Tolkien's story offers a formula for renewal through imagination, reflection and action. The reader is made aware of the accountability that each man has in the development of his own life. Artists like Philip Guston remind us of the alternative of fulfilling the darker of man's fantasies; his perverse, evil or violent imaginings. I recall Guston's comments about empathizing with the Klu Klux Klan when he made his Klan paintings: "The idea of evil fascinated me....I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan. What would it be like to be evil? To plan, to plot."⁸ He sensed the shadows of man's imagination. I wonder if Guston would have wanted to go so far as Niggle did in living his fantasy? In each case, we are shown how intensely the imagination can permeate life. The artist must confront the horror or the splendor of his thoughts as he risks losing parts of himself in them.

⁸Storr, p. 56.

ART AS PRAYER, ART AS BIRTH

"What is her dream, this slender lady just out
of her teens,...Because what her dream is, that her children,
and my children, or children's children, will become. It is
the very ovum of the future soul, as my dream is the sperm."⁹
-D.H. Lawrence
"Making Love to Music"

To actively try to affect the world with our artifacts, can be thought of as being faithless. But, attempts to gain strength through ritual or by making tokens of safety or luck have been common throughout man's history. In fact, such acts automatically acknowledge the artist's faith in a higher power. The tradition of man expressing his faith through art has forever paralleled the one that tries to magically control a world that often seems chaotic and can be frightening and unpredictable. I find this parallel fascinating. I too am absorbed by the question of morality in creation, as well as the potential affect that art may have on the world and it's events.

Man has forever gained power from the material world, we obtain physical nourishment from it, we have acquired most of our knowledge from it, and through art, we have for thousands of years tried to gain spiritual strength from it. By depicting a plant, we somehow have a finer grasp on it. But by overlapping our own ideas upon it, we transform that knowledge. Our intent is self created, we use our imagination and our experience to envision a use for the

⁹D.H. Lawrence, "Making Love to Music," Sex Literature and Censorship, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1953), p. 44.

plant. The potency of the image and its inference is conceived in our minds.

The use of various materials in my painting *To Be the Best*, such as the fishing line grid on the surface, the twine, or the sculpted border, makes the viewer more aware that it is a fantasy being depicted. (see figure 1). Materials from the real world collide with the imaginary plant. The focus is not on the details of the species, but on the invention, on what the forms and the ideas that are presented might suggest about life and growth and how a plant's struggle to succeed parallels man's efforts in life. The sense of reality combined with the concession of contrivance, creates a sense of the magic intent of the picture. My attempt was to extract the essence of the natural form and then recreate it to suit my needs. It smells of magic, like some ritual building of power.

I characterize my motive in making art by its likeness to that of the alchemist. I want to transform common things into precious ones. I will take wood, wire, fishing line or leaves, and attempt to give them eternal meaning. I depict plants or places with the same motive in mind. Paul Waldo Schwartz, in his book Art and the Occult, discussed how Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp developed a hybrid meaning for the word alchemy, not "lead into gold, but matter into spirit into elevated spirit."¹⁰ They are examples of artists trying to make something more of nature.

¹⁰Paul Waldo Schwartz, Art and the Occult, (New York: George Braziller, 1975), p. 3.

Another artist who has influenced me because of his devotion to art's "natural growth and movement" is Paul Klee.¹¹ In his famous painting *Around the Fish*, the flattened images that are present in the table setting reminded the scholar, James Smith Pierce of the European folk art of inlaying onto a dinner table images of full glasses and plates of food. He described it as "a gentle form of sympathetic magic to keep the table well provided."¹² My artistic efforts are prayer-like as well. I think about what I want to achieve in life. Painting images that evoke those ideas, can only help me to fulfill them in reality. My working process helps me to clarify my real needs, and makes me aware of my capacity. In saying a prayer I worship my creator, give thanks for what I have, and I attempt to define and disclose my desires. My purpose in painting is virtually the same. In the effort of depicting a plant, I simultaneously praise it's creator and applaud it's presence on earth. In using my imagination to interject my own ideas upon it, I am communicating my personal needs, fears and goals.

By recognizing man's obligation to awaken God to his needs, I can justify the act of creation. Artwork is a vehicle that can be used in the forming of our lives. The artisans who inlaid images of full plates and wine filled goblets onto their tables, believed that it would help bless their table with constant abundance. Their artistic acts were both thankful and hopeful. In the making of artifacts with such an

¹¹James Smith Pierce, Paul Klee and Primitive Art, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976),

p. 155

¹²Pierce, p. 20

intent, we inherently recognize a higher power who can bless or punish us.

In order to conclude my statement of purpose, I will return to Tolkien's story Leaf by Niggle. After the "Overseers" allowed Niggle to ascend into his self-created life, the people he left behind in his old community occasionally talked about him and his artwork:

"Of course painting has uses," said Tompkins. "But you couldn't make use of his painting. There is plenty of scope for bold young men not afraid of new ideas and new methods. None for this old fashioned stuff. Private day-dreaming. He could not have designed a telling poster to save his life. Always fiddling with leaves and flowers. I asked him why, once. He said he thought they were pretty! Can you believe it? He said pretty! "What, digestive and genital organs of plants?" I said to him; and he had nothing to answer. Silly footler."¹³

The purpose of Niggle's painting was not realized in the life he left behind. It was not recognized as a desperate call for spiritual growth, or as a vision that defines utopia as a living, growing thing. Like Paul Klee, Niggle was "concerned with becoming rather than being, with the universal forces that form nature and man rather than with the outward form of any particular moment."¹⁴ This is the spirit in which I too, approach art making.

¹³Tolkien, pp. 110-111

¹⁴Pierce, p. 155.

SECTION TWO: MY WORKING PROCESS

MATERIALS AND THEIR MEANINGS

"When the stories were being shaped, we are given to understand, little distinction had as yet been made between the real and the unreal. The imagination was vividly alive and not checked by the reason, so that anyone in the woods might see through the trees a fleeing nymph, or bending over a clear pool to drink, behold in the depths a naiad's face."¹⁵

-Edith Hamilton
Mythology

In her preface to the Greek myths, Ms. Hamilton has described the departure from reason that one must attain in striving for undiluted fantasy. In reflecting about my working process, I have discovered that my imagination plays the primary role. It is very important to try to achieve the abandonment of reason that Ms. Hamilton conveyed.

I frequently indulge myself in fantasy. My daydreams are often short imaginings about places or people, but occasionally they extend themselves into long stories that I return to for several days on end. Like a good book that I cannot put down, these stories will obsess me, so that I cannot wait to lay down for the night and attempt to develop a satisfying resolution for the tale. The stories in themselves are not important, or particularly interesting to other people. Their primary purpose for me is surely to achieve release from daily pressures. But on examining them after the fact, I have discovered that the different

¹⁵Edith Hamilton, Mythology, (New York: Mentor, 1969), p. 13.

narratives almost always have common themes, and I recognize that they help me to define what I want in life.

Paralleling these musings is my fascination for certain real things that I see in the world. Often I will be suddenly struck by some plant or natural configuration. I see in it some metaphoric relationship to a human condition. In approaching my artwork, I begin by analyzing these two different tendencies; to create fantasies, and to project ideas upon nature. In analyzing my fantasies I pare them down to very minimal thematic ideas, sometimes pulling only one or two visual elements from the story which objectify the theme, or have symbolic significance. I do the opposite in contemplating the things that fascinate me in nature, applying stories and thoughts to them. On the one hand I extract icons from my imagination, and on the other I bestow ideas upon natural elements. In this process of reflection, my aim is to uproot something of myself that will have universal meaning to others.

My painting *Chestnut Oak* exemplifies this process most clearly. (see figure 2). The daydream part of my method in this piece, involved a story in which a wall was built to divide a room. The image of a barrier dividing a room was an important symbol. The room or whole space referred to the self, consequently the wall implied a division of the self. The application of this idea to the leaf, which has a natural symmetrical separation, was intended to soften the implications of the statement, suggesting that the division of self is perhaps natural. The friction between these two ideas pleased me. The two real leaves, literally applied to the surface of the work, have been modified by fantasy as well, with the image of burning matches

painted on them. The fire suggests that it is possible to destroy the wooden barrier that has been erected in the central space. The forms of the room, and the match of course have sexual connotations. The barrier may symbolically inhibit or accommodate sexual fulfillment. There are two matches, one for each side of the wall, so there is a satisfying, though troubling order about the arrangement. Still, the fire's potential to destroy the barrier could thereby achieve the standard idea of wholeness. What I am offering in this painting is an alternative to that standard conception of completeness, proposing that maybe a division of self is as natural as the divided symmetry of the leaf.

This painting clearly illuminates the process with which I combine images from my personal fantasies with objects from nature, in order to make a universal statement. It also typifies my deliberate use of various materials in achieving my desired end. I enjoy the fluctuation between the real and the imagined. The large drawing of a leaf is combined with the application of real leaves that have drawings on them. I chose to compose this painting upon four sheets of paper. The vertical seam coincides with the middle line of the large leaf, and the horizontal seam, more apparent and arresting, further imparts the sense of the division of a whole (in this case the painting). My use of copper wire sewn around the border, expresses an effort to hold together the totality despite it's divisions. Often the use of materials such as wire represent an action as well as an idea. It is like a ritual. The act of piercing the painting's surface and strapping on wire or cord becomes important because it is evidence of a process. In addition, the border is a metaphorical boundary, protecting the image

I have used grids of wire, cord or fishing line, in other pieces as well. This device can denote several concepts. The first is evident in the painting *Last Year's Basil*. (see figure 3). Here it works as a metaphorical net that captures and holds in reality, something imagined. That is the essence of what a frame does for a conventional picture. Any two dimensional image, no matter how realistic, has been digested through mindful processes and ultimately it belongs to the imagination of it's creator. I have accentuated that idea by painting the image onto and across the grid. The wires participate directly with the image. The fictional nature of the image is punctuated by this device, and the network becomes a kind of trap for the idea.

The grid in *To be the Best*, functions differently. (see figure 1). While it literally has seized the paper and strapped it onto the wooden structure, it also sits above the painting, acting as a barrier between the fantasy and the viewer. The function of borders and barriers as protective devices in art has been of interest to me throughout my Thesis work, fitting well with my concept of art as prayer.

The third way in which I have dealt with the reference of the grid is exemplified by the sculpture, *Last Year's Leaves*. (see figure 4). The wire structure in this piece functions as a representation of order; of the intellectually imposed framework, as well as the natural patterns found in falling leaves. It was my hope that the viewer might reflect upon the man-made explanations for natural processes while also considering the subtle and specific natural orders of leaf structures and the cycles and dynamics that make them grow and fall.

The painting of images on leaves has best allowed me to call attention to the ambivalence between the imagination and reality. In *Chestnut Oak*, *Last Year's Leaves*, *The Children of Edward and Elin Collins*, *Four leaves*, and *Space for Two Leaves*, I have incorporated real leaves into the painting or drawing. (see figures 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7). By saddling the leaves with painted images or pasted pictures, I call immediate attention to the imaginative essence of painting. The illusory images are juxtaposed against the common and real leaf. This partnership between fantasy and reality serves to bring the leaf to a higher realm in the light of standard human values. These leaves which are taken for granted because of the sheer numbers of them that grow and fall, really are unique individuals. But that is not directly recognized without taking pause for reflection. Painting on them gives them differentiating identities. I touch on the human value scale that equates embellishment with worth. Most importantly I believe that, in painting on leaves, I attain my goal of making people stop to contemplate the specifics of nature and how beautifully it's structures are linked to the mind and to human emotions.

What I try to achieve with the images that I overlap onto the leaves is related to Paul Klee's meditative studies that were concerned with the spirit of nature. He was not as committed to the precise depictions of individual species as he was to "the imaginative recreation of their essence."¹⁶ His search was for a way to transmit his "poetic ideas in a pictorial language which paralleled, rather than duplicated nature's own."¹⁷ His partiality for the painting of ideas

¹⁶Richard Verdi, *Klee and Nature*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), p. 3.

¹⁷Verdi, p. 6.

which are influenced by nature, is akin to my own. The pensive, ethereal qualities that he achieved in his work are an inspiration to me, and an example to which I aspire.

MY INFLUENCES AND PRACTICES

Because my work is so closely aligned with my beliefs, and the activities that I participate in throughout the year, I will devote this section to explaining how these endeavors are linked to my working process.

It is by now, obvious that I have a commitment to nature. I enjoy gardening in the Summer. I fish, camp and canoe from early Spring to Fall, and I hunt in the Winter. I am affected very emotionally by the change of seasons. I welcome each minor change with excitement, but I also acknowledge the passing of each different plant's bloom as a sobering reminder of the shortness of life. In late August I eagerly welcome Fall and I celebrate the beauty of the naked trees in winter. The seasons affect me as constant reminders of the cycles of life and death in nature; of the passing of life, and of renewal through death. I walk through each year as a spectator in awe of this magnificent and ancient saga. In my outdoor travels, I gain constant inspiration for my artwork.

Throughout the year, I also take great pleasure in reading novels. Of particular interest to me during the time that I developed my Thesis was the work of D.H. Lawrence. His heady and passionate descriptions of nature, and his use of plants and natural cycles as symbols of human conditions were extremely influential to me as I worked. I literally read every novel that he wrote and most of his short stories, during my years at Rochester Institute of Technology. Other authors that I read during this time were, Jane Austen, John

Steinbeck, J.D. Salinger and Anne Rice. I mention my readings here, because I believe that they enhance and affect my imagination quite strongly. I enjoy books that have beautiful and involved descriptions of places and people. I believe that the best way to become literate with symbols is to experience their use as much as I can.

During my outdoor excursions, I often come across places or plants that provide a respite for contemplation. I will be struck by the poetic qualities of a scene. This happened when I sat in the place for which I named the painting, *Phillip's Creek Clearing* . (see figure 8). I was impressed by the configuration of the fallen tree and the lone, tall dried flower in the midst of the grassy field and against the backdrop of the dark pines. The painting's scene derived from nature but was modified quite drastically by my imagination. I believe that my readings help this imaginative process to evolve. I have been able to formulate and refine my vision much more successfully by combining my reading which stimulates my imagination, with my experience in nature which helps me to discover powerful statements of my own.

My working process is made complete by my practice of drawing from memory. When I see a scene outdoors that I am interested in, I concentrate on it for some time, trying to etch it's most intriguing details in my mind. Back in my studio, I draw these scenes as I remember them. My drawings help me to develop the ideas that I will use in my paintings and constructions. Notable examples of these, are *Study for Phillip's Creek Clearing*, *Fall Buds*, and *Leaf Spores* . (see figures 9, 10, and 11). The sketches of spores that I noticed on the back of a fern leaf, led to the painting *Hi Tor Spot* .

(figures 12 and 13). And, the spore metaphor was further developed in the *Bound Tree* sculptures. (figures 14 and 15).

The spores provide good examples of how my imagination transforms ideas that originate in nature. I applied the reproductive symbol of the spores to different leaf shapes, and directly to the branches of a tree. But, the way I began depicting the spores alluded to other ideas. For instance, they started to resemble mold, which suggests decomposition, the opposite of their natural renewal function. I find contradictions such as that very interesting in art. In the bound trees, I was working with the idea of man forcing his own order onto nature. I strapped the branches together, towards a single channel of movement. The spores with their unnatural color and the nails holding them on, were evidence of the artist trying to force her own version of life onto a dead remnant of nature.

My working process is not always logical. It is organic in form, and casual in nature. I rely heavily on experimentation with ideas and materials. I am reminded of George J. Becker's comments about D.H. Lawrence's organizational style. He explained how the author, using his memory of real events, assembled them through "the nonlogical process of recollection." He structured the events using a method that involved "repetition and violations of temporal and logical order."¹⁸ His works are impressionistic and relaxed in structure. He created his own order. Through the serious process of contemplation, imagination and experimentation while working, artists can best

¹⁸George J. Becker, D.H. Lawrence, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1980), p. 39.

achieve their own distinguishing visions. The discovery of this 'formula' has been significant in the development of my Thesis.

CONCLUSION

In D.H. Lawrence's novel, Women in Love, Gerald was the character who epitomized what Lawrence saw as the destructive forces of technology. His actions were mechanical and his nature was like the cold hard metal of a machine. But somewhere buried in his psyche, was a small kernel that held traces of distant emotions. It caused a subconscious doubt to arise in him about his life and his work. He was never fully satisfied. In response to his unfinished feeling, he strained even harder to establish order. In the end he was lost to it entirely.

The tragedy of Gerald's life was that he never discovered how to achieve fulfillment until he died. In fact, death itself provided his only hope for realization. In his story, Lawrence delivered the good and the bad sides of self creation. Gerald's counterpart, Birkin and his wife Ursula, found hope and renewal in the prospect of building their lives. Their search was for the "mystic harmony" that Gerald overlooked. And they were constantly seeking it. The contemplation of nature played a major part in their pursuit.

Whether we realize it or not, we create our lives. We are like growing plants, struggling to survive and to fulfill our purposes; to bloom beautifully, to propagate, or to rise above all the other plants in the field. Any gardener knows that there are many ways to help a plant thrive. With my art, I am taking imaginative responsibility for my outcome. I am cultivating my goals. I believe that art can play a fundamental role in the formation of reality. I will continue to probe the concept of self creation throughout my life.

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Figure 1
To Be the Best
48" X 36"



Figure 2
Chestnut Oak
48" X 36"



Figure 3
Last Year's Basil
40" X 25"



Figure 4
Last Year's Leaves
9' X 4' X 6"

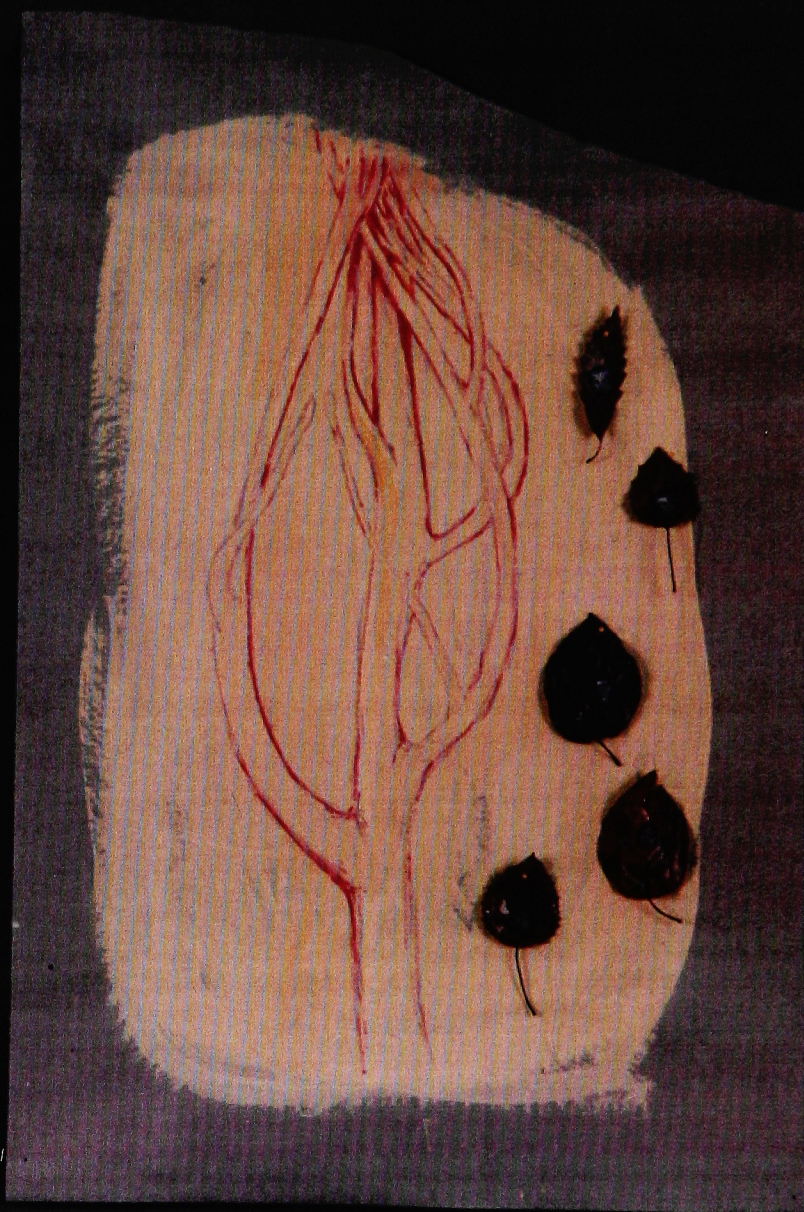


Figure 5
*The Children of
Edward and Elin Collins*
36" X 24"

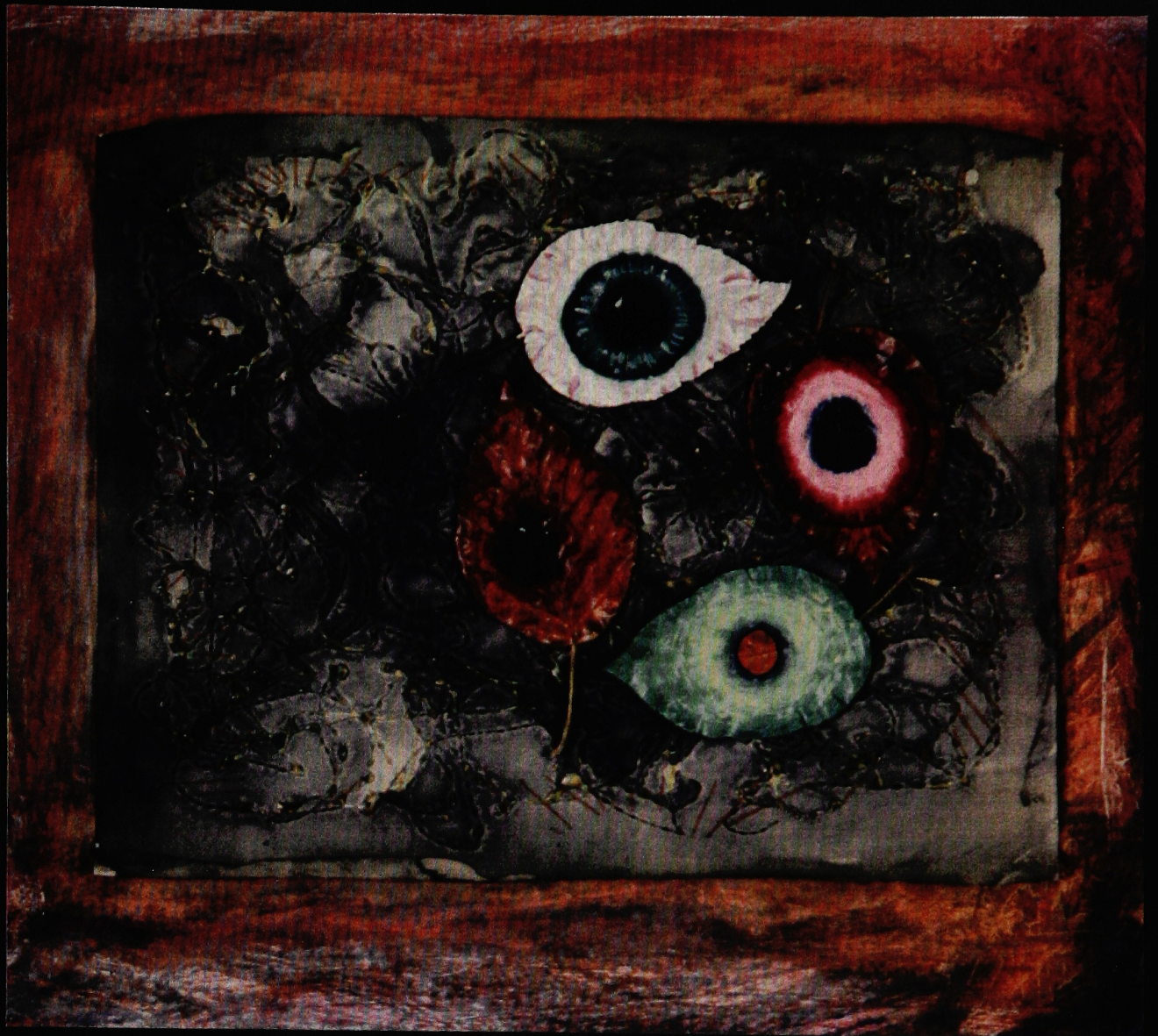


Figure 6
Four Leaves
19" X 20"

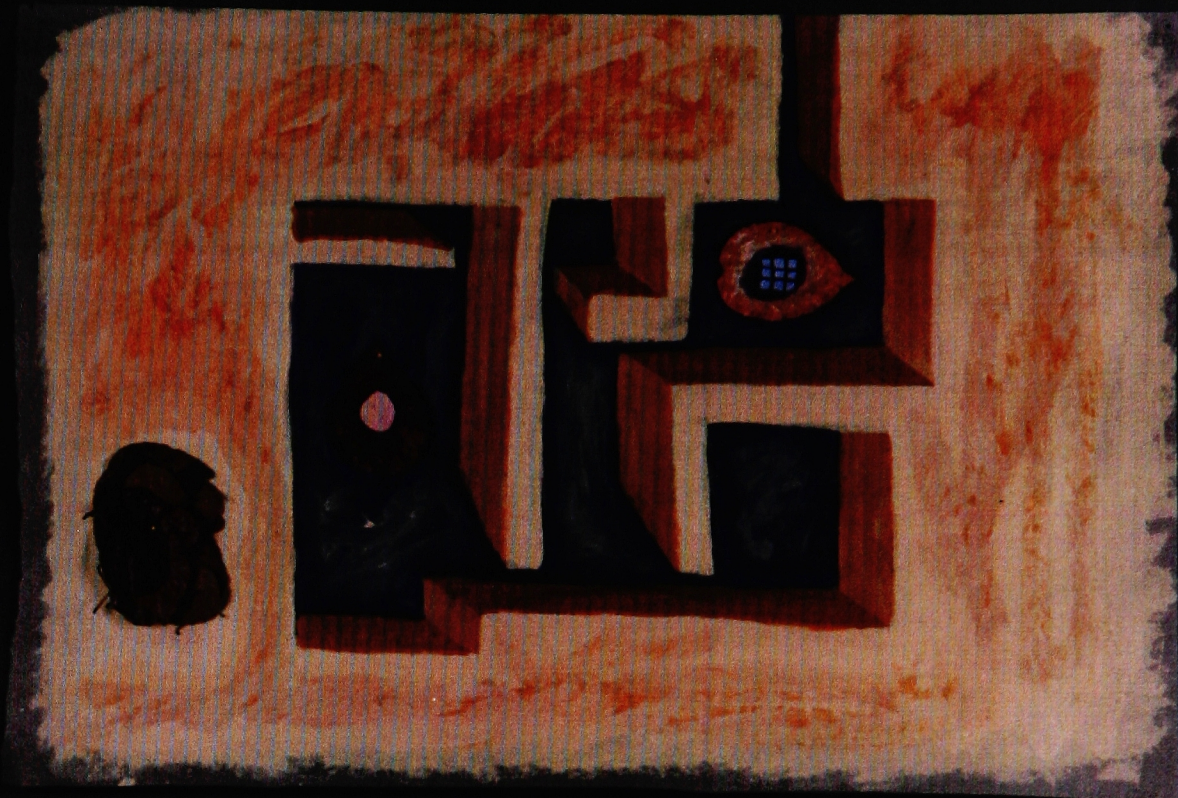


Figure 7
Space for Two Leaves
 24" X 36"

Figure 8
Phillip's Creek Clearing
 29" X 52"



Figure 9
Study for Phillip's Creek Clearing
16" X 24"

Figure 10
Fall Buds
24" X 36"



Figure 11
Leaf Spores
41" X 29"



Figure 12
Hi Tor Spot
 40" X 18" X 12"

Figure 13
Detail, Hi Tor Spot



Figure 14
Detail, Bound Tree



Figure 15
Bound Tree Sculptures
8' and 12' tall

