

E•N•V•E•O•P•E

## GALLERY TALK: "Live the Questions Now"

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Round Top Center for the Arts; October 24,2003

First, let me thank Genetta McLean and the Board of Round Top for making this show possible. I am grateful for Genetta's quiet confidence and enthusiasm for the work when she first visited my studio in Portland, and for her support in hanging the show. I am also grateful for the wonderful exhibit space in which we now gather; it is a real gift to the mid-coast area and to artists who exhibit here.

What makes me tick as an artist? How do I work? I am glad to be with you tonight to share some of my three-year long journey in creating this body of work: the particular ideas, media, and processes I explored in pulling it all together.

### TWO RIVERS

Sometimes I imagine there are two rivers flowing in me. One is the swift River Poetry; the other is the deep River Art. When I go for a swim in Poetry, I see lovely words in its riverbed, and I dive down to get a closer look. I come up gasping, holding beautiful stones in each hand. As soon as they reach the air they dissolve into pure color and line and become the banks of the River Art, into which I fall until I see stars and the night sky and the words again, each one a stone in its heavenly place. There have been times in my life when I have wanted to leave one river for the other. But that would be like leaving half of myself behind. I have always been writing: stories, poems, plays, from a young age, and I have always been drawing, painting, cutting and gluing since I can remember. When I was 19, I went to Paris to study. I was on a Junior Year Abroad Program with Sarah Lawrence College. After the initial shock of realizing that I would not have to choose one over the other, I plunged into both art and poetry. Between more traditional classes at the Sorbonne, I took studio art (painting, drawing, etching) at L'Atelier Goetz near La Rue de la Chaumiere, and then hopped the Metro to the flat of Ives

Bonnefoy, to share my own poetry and to learn to translate French poetry from Bonnefoy, a contemporary poet and translator of Shakespeare. I swam happily in both rivers. In the intervening years I have spent more time in the River Art, near its limpid (some would say shallower), more tranquil banks, painting landscapes. Then I found a tributary that led me back to words and to a new way of making art that begins with printmaking and incorporates many different mediums along the way. The art in this show evolved from my internal dialogue with several poems: "The Envelope", by Maxine Kumin; and poems by the 13th c. Sufi mystic, Rumi; the 15th c. poet/mystic of the Bhakti tradition, Kabir; and the early 20th c. German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Several of the pieces you see on the walls take their titles from these poets, like "Rumi I and II", or lines of their poetry, such as "Live the Questions" (Rilke), "The Flute of Interior Time" and "The Breath Inside the Breath" (Kabir). I will speak more about these poems later, but first I would like to talk about my process in making art.

## PROCESS

Last weekend I met a young artist from New York named Sean "Z" Murray. He used to paint with brushes and pigment, but now he works exclusively with pixels, which is to say, he's a digital artist. His only hand tool is a kind of stylus that records on his electronic pad, the layers of color, line and texture that he imparts to his elaborate, highly realistic and monumental paintings. These works are e-mailed and enjoyed on other screens, and reproduced in magazines, but they remain forever locked in the computer. We had a lively debate about the nature of art in the digital age, and I found it clarified how important the physicality of art is to me. The act of manipulating the medium is what draws me. I want to handle, shape, and work the material until I unearth the meaning embedded in my life at the moment. In Rilke's words, I want to "live the questions now", and I do this best by hand. For over 20 years, I used layers of transparent watercolor to represent the solidity of stone, the fluidity of water, the density of foliage. Then I found a way to move beyond representation to something more directly physical, which ironically released me into a more conceptual, abstract way of working. I found a home in printmaking. I was not so interested in making editions of things,

as in the endless possibilities of monotype. I took a painterly and unconventional approach to printmaking, built my own plates for collographs, added marks, mixed media, and eventually followed the paper off the wall into 3 dimensions.

Printmaking is fundamentally about making an image through weight. It is about the resistance of the soft paper to the extreme pressure of the press as it covers the hard plate that lies on the press bed, and the marks left by that encounter. I have always been drawn to things that have left their imprint through weight:

- Ammonites, those 3 million year old creatures preserved in stone
- The weight of memory, images in the mind
- Genes, the press of information carried at the cellular level from generation to generation
- The cliffs of Monhegan, with the dykes of liquid rock showing white between the granite
- The Standing Stones of the British Isles, which press upward against the sky, downward into the earth. They are often circles, the universal symbol of eternity (see Angeles Arrien, Signs of Life), and from the ground they look like upright bridges connecting the earthly to the spiritual realm.

Printmaking allows me to work with this idea of weight and imprint.

MONOTYPES, MONOPRINTS, COLLOGRAPHS, & ETCHINGS: the confusing nomenclature of printmaking media.

Most of the 2D works in the show are monotypes or monoprints, with the exception of the etchings in the "Healing Stone" series, which are really more like monoprints because of the variable use of color and monotype under printing. Confusing, isn't it? Here's a definition: pressing an inked, marked plate onto paper makes a monotype, offsetting the image once. Although the same plate may be layered over that image in successive pulls of the press, the final print is usually signed 1/1 because the artist wipes the plate clean afterward (unless she makes a ghost) and no more images of that kind can be made. A monoprint can have a

repeated image because the artist uses a more permanent reusable plate, but the variation from print to print is so great that they are still considered "mono". A series of monoprints with a repeating matrix image may be numbered using Roman numerals, depending on the number made in the grouping (e.g., I/VII, II/VII, III/VII, etc.), as I did with the "Marriage Pot Lid" suite. A large number of works in this show are monoprints, such as the "Inner Terrain" series, and I have chosen to designate them as collographs to refer to the technique I used to make them. Here's how it works:

- I start with a rag board for my plate.
- I paint gesso on the plate.
- While it is wet, I mark it, or embed things in it for the line, texture and image I want. Fine sand may be added to create areas of greater ink pick-up later.
- I let it dry.
- I seal it with shellac. Let that dry.
- I ink the thoroughly dried plate with etching ink, and wipe the excess with tarlatan cloth to create the color transfer and density I want.
- I invert the plate and print onto a dampened sheet of BFK Reeves or Somerset paper, using an etching press (at Peregrine Press I use a French Tool press; at Maine College of Art and Vermont Studio Center, I use a Charles Brand press).

### "LIVE THE QUESTIONS NOW" (Rilke)

The point, for me, is not what you name the process, but how well the process "lives the question". This is a phrase from a quote by Rilke that has become a touchstone for me in my work. Like the poet Rumi, I have plenty of questions. Rumi asks some of them for me in his poem, "Who Says Words with My Mouth?" (Translated by Coleman Barks)

All day I think about it, then at night I say it.  
Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?  
I have no idea.  
My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,  
And I intend to end up there...

The day is coming when I fly off,  
But who is it now in my ear, who hears my voice?  
Who says words with my mouth?

Sometimes, I find an answer, in another poem, as when Kabir answers his own question in the poem "Breath":

Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God?  
He is the breath inside the breath.

The Breath inside the Breath is the title for the triptych/collograph you see to the right. I lived this question several years before I made that piece. The poem is short. Let me read you the whole of it. I invite you to close your eyes and imagine that you are a student and Kabir, the teacher/ poet, is speaking directly to you.

Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat.  
My shoulder is against yours.  
You will not find me in stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms  
Nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals:  
not in masses, nor kirtans, not in legs winding around your  
own neck, nor in eating nothing but vegetables.  
When you really look for me you will see me instantly---  
You will find me in the tiniest house of time.  
Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God?  
He is the breath inside the breath?

Could we each be "the tiniest house of time"? Could God be as close as our breath? Who can tell? It is a question to live. In whatever way you create, be with your breath. What issues forth may surprise you.

#### ART IS RELATIONAL

Art is one way to live the questions. For me, art is spiritual as well as physical. And there is a third aspect of the art I make. Art is relational. The Envelope Project and the collaborative book that came out of it are examples of this relational aspect of art. In the early 90's I read a book by Suzy Gablick called The Re-enchantment of Art. It had a profound influence on me. It helped confirm my disbelief in the artist as a lonely, tortured

independent genius shut up in his ivory tower, and affirm my growing conviction that art could be the connective tissue of a society, a force for building and sustaining relationships. This is what Gablick says:

To see our interdependence and interconnectedness is the feminine perspective that has been missing not only in our scientific thinking and policy-making, but in our aesthetic philosophy as well... By re-defining the self as relational rather than as self-contained... we could actually bring about a new stage in our social and cultural evolution.

(She is paraphrasing David Levin, in *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Post Modern Situation*) Gablick continues: The restructuring of the Cartesian self, and its rebirth as an ecological self-plus-other or self-plus-environment not only thoroughly transfigures our world-view (and self-view), but it is also the basis of the re-enchantment of art.

The Envelope Project grew out of my desire to understand more deeply a primary relationship, that of a daughter to her mother. When I was on my first residency at the Vermont Studio Center, I read the poem "The Envelope" by Maxine Kumin. The poet explores her relationship with her mother, who, though dead, still lives within her. She turns the metaphor of mother as container for the daughter around, by envisioning daughters as envelopes for their mothers. Her line exhorts us to "carry our mothers forth in our bellies". And she speaks of the continuity of our mothers through us to our daughters. That poem moved me to turn my gaze inward, to explore the interior landscape, the ground of my being, and the fundamental nature of woman as envelope. On a physical plane, we carry what is essential in our bodies for future generations; as we age, we lose the eggs of possibility, but we create an inner spaciousness in which wisdom gestates. There is a sacred, protective quality to the envelope. It is the feminine principle in men and women that harbors the enduring truths of human connectivity and interdependence with each other and the natural world. Just as an envelope of air surrounds our earth, making life possible, so do we become living envelopes of what is good and true.

I made the 3D "Earth Envelopes," with this in mind, and I reached out to other women for the making of the "Envelope Book". Twenty-one other artists and writers responded to my invitation to participate. I sent them each Kumin's poem and an empty envelope. They sent them back to me filled with words and images about their mothers. I then bound the envelopes into the two-volume book you see on the table behind us. As I sewed each one to the accordion binding I saw the entire book as an "envelope" for our stories. The individual envelopes in this book are meant to be opened and read by all of you who bring your own experiences of "mother", further emphasizing the relational aspect of this work.

I would like to end with a thought about my own mother, who died a few years before I went to Vermont and read the poem. Last week, on my birthday, I sat by my altar and wrote her a letter. Here is part of what I wrote:

*I am grateful for your willingness to love me, to bear me, to bring me to a world that brims with the beauty from before time. Today I sat in my octagon watching the still blue air hover over the courtyard garden late roses, the little fountain plashing off the far wall near my 'Spirit Figure' sculpture, which reminds me of you. I ate my oatmeal and listened to the jays' shriek and the crows' caw, and the little knife voices of the pine siskins. Many people have been moved by the work I have done for my show. This is the greatest honor--- to be received into another heart and to be understood. There would have been no show without you, and your willingness to love me at the beginning of my life, throughout, and beyond.*