

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

### CELEBRATION OF WOMEN IN THE ARTS

An exhibition of work created by the women of the organization

Petro-Canada Exhibition Gallery, Calgary

October 2 - 26, 1990

Images of the Goddess: Demeter and Persephone Michelle Demers • Seeking Sanctuary Teresa Posyniak •  
 Murphy's Law/Split Second Laurie Cormack • Outerundergarment Valorie Webber •  
 Green Sweet Home and Mini Theatre for The Teenie Weenie Colleen Philippi • Trois Karen Maetche •  
 Only in B.C. (Walk in a Rain Forest) Del Darling • Polly Cook Linda Anderson-Stewart •  
 Yvonne on a Green Stool E.J. Marr • The Great Silence of Angerona Elizabeth Menzies •  
 Self Portrait as Lady on a Balcony Linda Hawke • Beauty and the Beast Helene Burt •  
 Matriarchs #114 Carol Johnston • Early Morning Light Susan Elkins • Sheila Na Gig II Dawn Heiden

Compiled by Jane Evans

This is not a review, at least not in the expected sense. In April of 1988, I wrote an article about the exhibition *The Spirit Slings* in *NeWest Review*. I argued that "the ideal is for each art to be judged by its peers. When women evaluate on the basis of a female aesthetic... then the evaluating will be valid." I would now like to extend this argument.

If I, as a white western female, had been making the decisions, doing the curating, writing the art history for the last thousand years, there would be a few major pieces missing from our contemporary bank of cultural objects. Because of my focus, I probably would have omitted the work of non-white women as well. And if that fictional history were behind me, supporting me, and I were making the decisions now, I might omit the John Halls, Don Koutmans, and Ron Moppett. Their work bores me. It does not move me. Oh, yes, I know it's quality. I was, after all, educated within the white western male tradition. Their tradition. But their work doesn't touch me. It doesn't speak to or from my heart, my head, or my gut. It's not a question of quality. It's a question of value. We each value art because it satisfies or appeals to our own individual set of aesthetics, and that set of aesthetics is a product of such things as gender, race, geography, education, and sexual orientation.

Interestingly, the statements of the artists in this exhibition whose work also bored me (Susan Elkins's *Early Morning Light* and Del Darling's *Only In B.C.: Walk in a Rain Forest*) made it clear that they did not share a certain set of aesthetics with the majority of the other artists whose work did excite me. Elkins's and Darling's work seemed to me to be clearly derivative of the white male tradition.

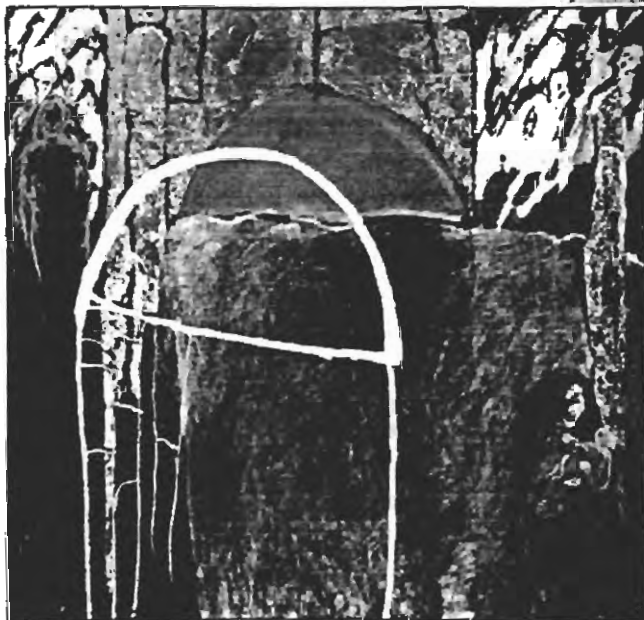
The work that excited me? Karen Maetche's *Trois*. Three great big authoritative canvases. So brave. The colors are either muddy or acidic. The acid green (acid rain?) slimes across the canvas. Initially I had some problems with this color, but on reading Maetche's statement, I realized that her use of color had grown organically, naturally, out of her content. The element of these canvases that thrilled me is the fact that they are painted. You know when you look at *Trois*, that whoever painted it, held a paintbrush in her hand all the time; that the brush was an extension of her arm, of her thoughts, of her gut. From my 1981 painting class of twenty female students at the University of Alberta, none are still painting. We work in other media, but we don't paint. Whatever happened to us has not happened to Maetche. As for the other two works I found exciting, E.J. Marr's *Yvonne on a Green Stool* is a sexually vibrating, pulsing drawing. Again

I felt as though the tool was attached to her soul. Colleen Philippi's *Green Sweet Home* and *Mini Theatre for the Teenie Weenie* are wonderfully blackly funny mixed media pieces. They rang bells in my memory, my intellect and my conscience.

How can we evaluate work which is developing out of these other set of aesthetics? Perhaps by applying a broad set of principles, and then allowing each artist their own argument. I believe that at this stage, for this group of women, and for these particular images, it is best if we listen to the women who made the work as they explain the how, where and why.

The set of aesthetics which artists other than Elkins and Darling shared is termed matriarchal by Heide Göttner-Abendroth in her article, *Nine Principles of a Matriarchal Aesthetic*.<sup>1</sup> Because most of the work falls within this set, and in order to place the work in some context, I have organized the artists' statements using Göttner-Abendroth's principles. The rest of this article is in the words of the participants. For each of their individual aesthetics there is an individual argument.

*"Matriarchal art demands the total commitment of all participants...it...does not recognize a division between author and audience..."*  
(Göttner-Abendroth, 4th Principle).



Seeking Sanctuary, Teresa Posnyak, mixed media on paper, 42" x 42", 1990

*"The erotic is the dominant force and not work, discipline, renunciation. The continuation of life as a cycle of re-births is its primary principle, and not war or heroic death for abstract, inhuman ideals."* (Göttner-Abendroth, 7th Principle).

*"When I first encountered the graveyards along the shores of the Upper Kananaskis Lake I was...almost brought to tears. These beautiful organic forms had been created by a violent, destructive and unnecessary act of man. Up to that time I had been dealing with images of war in my work so my immediate association was [with] that of the skeletal remains in the killing fields of Vietnam."* (Maetche)

*"I see the tree as a totemic metaphor for the human figure, often a form of self-portraiture, a matriarchal symbol for protection and new life. The tree thus becomes a nurturing and custodial mother symbol for security, guardianship, rebirth. The grid of trees or branches in many of the paintings serve to keep the viewer out, or the paradise in. In other words, they operate as a barrier to the viewer's complete access to the perceived utopia contained within. My intention is to continue painting with a strong commitment to explore my own personal convictions as well as to explore the psychological statement of being a Canadian, the whole notion of that Mystic North. There lies within me a personal urgency to protect the environment/paradise/self in an ever-changing, industrially and economically-charged world."* (Connack).

*"I believe that art can act as a catalyst for change. It is our ability to change which ensures our survival, and change must happen on a personal level before it can happen on a social or political level. Art can also play a visionary role; as an artist I feel I must have an understanding of history and a vision of the future in order to offer anything of real value to the present."* (Heiden)

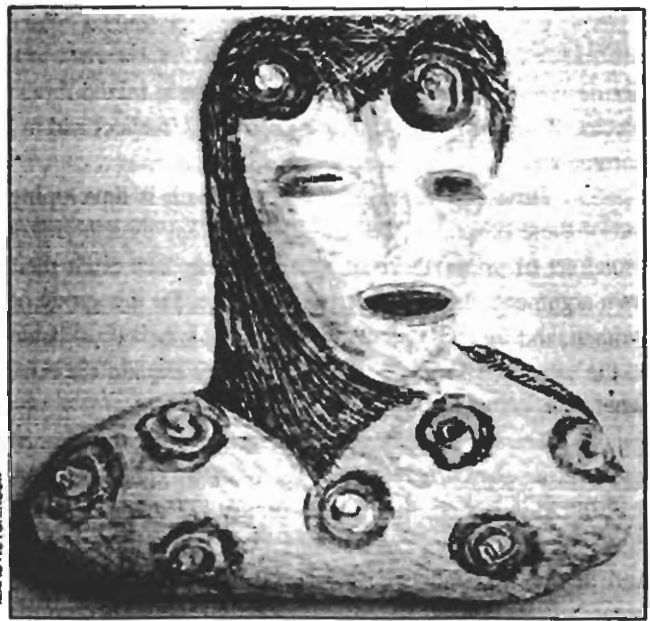
COURTESY OF ARTIST

*"Matriarchal art is located beyond the fictional...Magic intrudes into reality...and has the effect of changing reality." (Göttner-Abendroth, 1st Principle)*

"To create is to believe that play is alchemy...The memories of childhood play, and the toys and dreams which often facilitated that play, lead me to rediscover the mysteries of play. Memories of the old child and realities of the new (grown-up) child combine voices and sing rhymes and visual songs about the fear and excitement of pretending; playing with treasured objects, secrets and codes, games, and adult knowledge. The object of this art game is to make worlds which unfold from within their own reality and logic; each player creates within [her]self [her] own unique constellation of relationships. These are to be made with a child's impunity." (Philippi)

*"Matriarchal art is not 'art'...it is...the ability to shape life and so change it; it is itself energy, life, a drive towards the aestheticisation of society. It can never be divorced from complex social action because it is itself the centre of that action." (Göttner-Abendroth, 9th Principle)*

"*Beauty and the Beast* [was] inspired by the Victorian fairy tale of the same name. On a conscious level the fairy tale left me with three strong impressions; of incest; of the self-loathing of the Beast; and of the beckoning of the Hag to Beauty to look below the surface. My emotional reaction to the fairy tale metamorphosed through the creative process into something richer, I think. The snake...has historically symbolized both male and female. The Beast represents to me now the heavy but real feeling of Grief. The woman, like the ecstasy of St. Theresa, represents a merging, a one-ness with the wisdom of the universe. As an art therapist, I have spent a good deal of time helping others to paint. Currently I am trying to understand my own creative process." (Burt)



The Great Silence of Angerona, Elizabeth Menzies, handbuilt earthenware, china roses, h - 74 cm, w - 73 cm, d - 12 cm, 1989

*"The social changes which matriarchal art brings about override the divisions in the aesthetic sphere...allowing it to emerge as the most important social activity and bringing about the aestheticisation of the whole society." (Göttner-Abendroth, 8th Principle)*

"I am most interested in exploring the process of dualities through the human form, as it offers its own inherent contradictions. My drawings offer both a glimpse of reality as well as the undertones of a personal psychology...The use of objects within and alongside the figure are personal iconographic references. Some may be read in the traditional sense, while others are secret symbols referencing events of life...The drawings are a collection of thoughts from my life. My moving hand records these thoughts or ideas..." (Marr)

"Although I had many years of intense political involvement in women's issues...before immersing myself in art...I never found a way to express these ideas in art. I kept them separate. However, having two babies in the past three years has caused a dramatic shift in my work. Suddenly, I no longer aim for ambiguity and fluctuating interpretations. Although abstraction still plays a significant part in these pieces, the presence of the human figure...brings the ideas into a sharper focus. There is a sense of urgency for the need for protective spaces and the ongoing question, "protection from what?", pervades the atmosphere." (Posyniak)



*"Matriarchal art cannot be subdivided into genres because it cannot be objectified...the division between art and non-art is also redundant."* (Göttner-Abendroth, 6th Principle)

"It has always been my interest to examine our cultural definition of artistic activity...it [is] also a necessity to re-examine my view of media and practices that have previously defined my cultural image of woman and her place within society. [The] main areas of concern that presently I am trying to address in my work...are the avoidance of anonymity...[My] interjection of a signature is like an assurance that my existence will not pass unnoticed...the seemingly basic human need to decorate...and to link the previously exclusive activity of the artist with the actions of the uninitiated." (Anderson-Stewart)

"My mother used to save every scrape of fabric bigger than her fist. She used these scraps for patching things, making doll clothes, and to fill her sewing basket. I inherited her reluctance to discard. The scraps I save, worn out clothes too familiar to toss, pieces of curtain from my childhood home, found bits of cloth too beautiful to pass by, are like snapshots of my life. The beauty of each individual piece and the special meaning each has for me, overlap as I manipulate these pieces of cloth, allow them to overlap and take shape as a work of art." (Hawke)

*Matriarchal art transcends the traditional mode of communication which consists of: author-text (art product) - reader."* (Göttner-Abendroth, 3rd Principle)

"I use a wide variety of media: discarded and non-functional materials such as dress patterns, sheet music, Xerox, photographs, tissue papers, laces, broken toys, ornaments. Objects that have been lost, forgotten and judged worthless. I regroup, reorder and recontextualize these materials...In that I am a woman, the exclusion of domestic crafts in art or the naming of craft practice as being the domain of the female, is of great interest to me." (Webber)

*"Matriarchal art has an enduring and predetermined framework: the structure of matriarchal mythology."* (Göttner-Abendroth, 2nd Principle)

"I am beginning to learn about our early matriarchal roots and how language has developed throughout history which ignores, obliterates and denies these roots. Historically, women's voices have been silenced and now I am trying to listen and learn the language. I feel that the journey I am travelling follows the winding journey one must endure in attempting to penetrate the seven ring labyrinth...that being one of travelling back and forth, exploring both sides, changing and moving on, but all the while coming a little closer to the centre." (Menzies)

*"Matriarchal art does not correspond to an extended model of communication with the elements...[it] cannot be objectified."* (Göttner-Abendroth, 5th Principle)

"[My] work demand[s] honesty in experience, awareness, and critique...the subject's inner radiance...defines her worth and elevates her to the status of goddess. Here, woman and child are strong, loving, funny, sexual subjects, not sex objects." (Demers)

"I envision a future full of women who are free of shame and full of power." (Heiden)

"I hope that the people who see, experience, touch and live with my work can continue their own journeys knowing that they are not alone." (Menzies)

So do I. ●

FOOTNOTE

1. Feminist Aesthetics, Gisela Ecker, Editor, The Women's Press, 1985.