Artifacts of a Pink Childhood

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COLLEGE OF FINE AND APPLIED ARTS

"ARTIFACTS OF A PINK CHILDHOOD"

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF THE COLLEGE OF FINE AND APPLIED
ARTS IN CANDIDACY FOR THE MASTER
OF FINE ARTS DEGREE

BY ELIZABETH (BETSY) C. FEICK

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I

In 1973 I had a friend named Amy who was four years old. One morning I went up to her room and saw lying on her bed a toy that she had made. It was a 25 or 30 inch branch of Pussywillow with most of the fuzzy buds loved off already, and on it she had tied the ends of a dozen brightly colored hair ribbons, so that they hung down to form a sort of primitive banner. The thing was beautiful in itself, but became incredibly moving and round with meaning in the context of her bedroom, which was very small and pink and white and lacey everywhere: the perfect bedroom of a story-book girl child who never gets angry, or holds opinions of her own, or does things that girls aren't supposed to do. Colors mean things. Pink in particular is a color loaded with meaning, a passionless, passive color, a polite color, harmless. It was clear to me that the banner, in its colorful intensity, was a strong statement by an independent and creative mind, a bold cry of humanity in the midst of an environment designed to stifle and subvert that energy.

I spent much of my own childhood making things for myself, and not until well into my adulthood and my friendship with Amy did I understand that I have always expressed in my visual imagery part of my self that I was not allowed to act on in reality. During my adolescence I went through a period of drawing angry male faces in harsh black ink
lines with a big brush. In my present art work it has continued to be true that I find myself expressing feelings and experiences that come through my body, through a gut sense of my being, and not only through my head. My well socialized intellect, if left in charge of my work, tends to censor out those messages which, though they might be truthful, are not part of the network of truth and lies that we have all agreed to tell ourselves and each other. From this way of looking at myself and my work I have come to see that many truths are possible and that making art can be about naming and communicating an aspect of emotional reality which is apparent to me. That knowledge is visual, and is therefore beyond words. I hope it is contained in the tensions and energies set up in the work by the use of dark and light, form, color, line, transparency and other such devices.
"Western culture is founded on the oppression of women and of the values associated with them: wholeness, continuity, communion, humanism, feelings, the body, connectedness, harmony."¹

"I, for one, am convinced that there are aspects of art by women which are inaccessible to men and that these aspects arise from the fact that a woman's political, biological, and social experience in this society is different from that of a man. Art which is unrelated to the person who made it and to the culture that produced it is no more than decorative."²


III

Dear Rick,

Here are some brief notes in response to your last two letters, and especially your comments on Slater's book *Earthwalk*. First, the book is based on the perception that 20th century Western technological culture isn't working very well, and its failure is on two levels: 1) people who live in the culture exhibit many symptoms of distress, and 2) that we are on a course of environmental self-destruction that threatens to ruin us within a very short span of years. Now obviously if you don't think this is an accurate perception, then much of the book will read as nonsense to you. It is, however, not a "bias" in the sense of a blindness, but a perception upon which the book's arguments are quite clearly and openly based.

Now, if you want to argue that 1) and 2) are not in fact the case (in other words, that our culture is working well), then we surely have something to argue about. It's a massive argument, since if the evidence isn't clear to you, I don't know what can make it clear. You will have to give me a place to start. I will however offer these thoughts: how come an intelligent, creative and lovable man like you is having such a hard struggle in finding a lifestyle that meets your needs? I am suggesting here that you get away from blaming yourself, or your parents, and take a look at the structure of a culture that offers you the
option of being a financial success almost certainly at the expense of your clear, creative and centered self.

Since I didn't find in Slater the dislike of men that you complained of, a specific example from the text would help me. I hope that you are not going to try to argue that we don't live in a patriarchal culture, the rise of which has been based on the devaluation of those activities and traits which are relegated to the class of women (to the female stereotype). If you are, I need some pretty specific questions from you on the subject, because to me it is a fact so obvious and so implicit in everything that I don't know where to begin to talk about it.

Also, if you are the man who thinks that "reading, writing and photographing are the most important things in life" you are the person Earthwalk was written for. But I am assuming that, in spite of your musings on paper, you are well aware that people are more important than art. In fact, I think you are an unwitting participant in the process of changing toward a healthier society.

I hope that all of this gives you something to sink your teeth into. I love talking about this stuff, and a response to even part of it would be welcome. Things are going well for me now, and when we get together I'll have some sculptures to show you.

Take care,
IV

Making risks is important to me as I do my art work. I don't always know, when I get an impulse to put a shape or a line somewhere, why it seems important. Often, after I have done it, I see that I have said something honest, and to me, maybe even frightening, about the way I experience my body and my time. This is a gut sense of rightness, based on my unconscious preferences for certain shapes and arrangements, and on my ability to accept the unexpected things that emerge. I often do an image, or follow through on an idea, on impulse, knowing that I might dislike the result, or be too uncomfortable to share it with anyone, and that I don't have to share it if I choose not to. This is an interesting bargain because I also know that once I am really done with the piece, it won't matter to whom I show it. It is really the process (of emergence) that feels risky. I have a notion that if I put my best energy into my images, and take real risks in form and content, that what I know as a woman will manifest itself and can begin to make itself felt in the systems in which I participate. On a grander scale this is a notion that my society, and its male-dominated institutions, must absorb some of that women's knowledge, which it has ignored as unimportant or threatening for too long, if it is to save itself from self destruction.
"As every woman knows, and most men now recognize, the maps of our culture have been drawn by men whose vision was focused on their own experience of the world and who confused one landscape with the entire terrain."^3

Part of my personal history is as a member of the oppressed class of women, and part of our oppression has been the repression of our truth. Our writings, paintings and other creative offerings have been shoved into closets, drawers, and museum basements, denied to succeeding generations, so that it has historically been rare among us not to feel isolated and as though we must begin at zero to share what we know. Hopefully this is changing. Certainly I have a sense of myself in relationship to women's history, and to women artists in the present. As I do my work I have a sense that it can be seen and felt by other women in the context of shared experience. I hope that by being as truthful as I know how to be, I can create space for myself and others to acknowledge our full humanity, to know that even those aspects of ourselves which aren't allowed to us in the context of our assigned roles, are in fact real. When the truths that we share as human beings begin to change, our reality can begin to change, and our environment can become more suitable, psychically and physically, for human life.

This thesis is about a vision. Not long ago some of us worked hard together to make something, and when we made it, it was a fine thing, resulting in people talking together, sharing ideas and thinking in new categories. We were all high on the possibilities that are in all of us, that our hard work had let everyone see. Then someone said to those of us who had begun the work together, "You are visionaries." We laughed an embarrassed laughter, feeling fear at looking so closely at the power we all have over our reality.

"I wanted to express certain things I thought and believed. I was pushing the boundaries, internalizing the idea that a woman could shape values, shape culture, upset society."  

---

4Lippard, "Judy Chicago Talking to Lucy Lippard," From the Center, p. 219.
VII

I have a friend who can't read very well, and when she talks the words come out through a lump of pain inside her that makes them sound like simple words. But her eyes see clearly and she has the ability to watch until she learns a thing. All last summer she watched me work on a series of drawings that were preludes to my thesis prints. They were taking shape slowly, walking a thin line between success and failure. In their beginning and middle stages they didn't look very good, and were full of the awkwardness of new things stumbling to become more clear expressions: raw and unfinished compared to my old work, with jaggedness in place of the old slick and easy stuff. My friend, who usually came by in the evenings to use the phone, or to smoke and talk, watched this process all summer, listened to my talk about risk, feeling, energy, color. She talked about what she could see in the jumble of confused shapes on the paper, about what she was reminded of, and about her life. She never pretended to like or identify with what I was doing, nor did she tire of looking at it and hearing my talk. One evening late in August, when I had put several finished pieces on the walls in order to see them together, she looked without speaking for several minutes before saying, with a new edge of respect in her voice, "you know, when they are done they really do make pictures."
"'Chomo Uri' offers an outlet for women's creative expressions and perspectives on a changing society. We believe the arts are a vital educational tool in promoting awareness for women, and ultimately for everyone. We are committed to maintaining a relationship between artistic integrity and political expression."\(^5\)

Statement of purpose,

"Chomo Uri" magazine

Dear Laura,

It has been on my mind for several weeks to write you, and I am really sorry not to have taken the time sooner. I know your last letter was a hard one to write, and I have been wanting to let you know that although I was disappointed at the magazine's rejection of my prints, it hasn't killed me. I understand that a lot of your own upset about this came from your struggles with the magazine collective over the group's standards of judging visual art work, and I would like to say a few things on that topic in hopes of lending support and energy to you all in your attempt to get clear on the issues involved. First I want to say that it is true, as you said in your letter, that I am "actively exploring the integration of art and politics." I would like to add to this, however, that I am first and foremost

committed to my personal struggle to keep on coming from my center, both in my work and in my life, in the face of forces that act to keep me in my place, or to adjunct me and my energy to existing boxes of ideas (political polemics). I do not make art in order to proselytize, and in fact sense strongly that to do so would be to defeat the best of what I have to offer. I see myself, both as an artist and a revolutionary, as a person who is working toward claiming new psychic spaces for all of us to live in, out of the conviction that the old spaces don't fit our present reality, and are, in fact, self destructive to us as individuals and as a species. I work toward naming what I can know about me/us from the way I experience myself interacting with influences around me. In relation to my art work, this means that for me to at any point refuse to work with "phallic imagery" because it seems somehow politically incorrect, would be to cut myself off from part of what I know. After all, I live in a culture in which phallic imagery, as a symbol for power, is inseparable from daily experience. I think that the most radical political act that I could hope to commit with my life is in working to affirm what I experience and know as a woman and a conscious being, regardless of its acceptability or value to the people around me who have a stake in who I choose to be.

Hopefully this has brought me to a point where it becomes clear that the personal is political, and that
whatever standards the collective uses in choosing art for
the magazine need to be rooted in an understanding of that.
And, nowhere has the strongest visual imagery grown out of
an understanding of words, and that is why it needed to be
visual. I see a grave danger in measuring the success of
any art according to its alignment to a political polemic.

Well, Laura, it has done me good to write all of that.
I hope it makes sense and doesn't seem overstated. The
rest of the truth is that it seemed ultimately silly to
dismiss my work as phallic. I hope you are doing well out
there. I wanted to come to the opening of your show, but
because of my job I don't think I can make it. Take care.
I love you.

A poem by Alta:

to the movement women who want me to stop futzing around
with poetry and write plays-

anyone who tells me what to do
sounds just like anyone else
who tells me what to do.6

6Alta, I Am Not a Practicing Angel (Trumansburg, NY:
IX

The prints in my thesis are etchings in zinc done with a variety of methods. My favorite ways are: lift ground (tempera paint with about \( \frac{1}{4} \) liquid soap mixed in), soft ground, lacquer spray paint aquatint, line etching, some unusual effects with hard ground applied thinly in a painterly way, and some non-traditional acid resists such as China Marker, Crayolas, rubber cement; axle grease, El Marko permanent marker and litho pencils. I like working in the metal with the scraper and burnisher, and occasionally the burin. I like the feel of zinc to my hand, and can easily tell how the acid is acting on it when it is in the bath. I like to print and although I don't think easily in colors, I enjoy working with different blacks to pull out subtle nuances of meaning from the plate. For instance, by altering the stiffness of an ink, I can make it more or less contrasty, and by adding a touch of brown or blue to a black ink, I can make the print warmer or cooler in feeling.

My imagery is a set of symbols that have emerged from the searching process. The search itself is, I hope, often apparent in the imagery. As a whole, I hope a print reflects the chancy process of making it, the struggle toward an image that holds some force, some reality that transcends the print surface. It is this struggle that lets making art be meaningful work for me, and I hope that those values can be felt and shared with the viewer.
The questions "Can I do it better?" and "What would happen if I tried such and such?" have been important to me as I work. I have learned to be more aware and sensitive to feedback from the materials and tools, and to my own mind and body as it is in the process of working. Doing this has become increasingly important to me; it seems to result in a visual language of things seen and felt, not said, a language of the wordless body.

"Is it finished? What is it telling me, now (as viewer), in its present state?" This is another of my working questions. The decision to be done, to settle for what I have, seems almost arbitrary at times. I imagine that stopping at any point might mean that I will miss something interesting that could emerge from further struggle. On the other hand, if I go on working, I may lose the elegance, spontaneity and other characteristics that let me trust the piece as it is. Finally I look at the work and ask myself if it feels truthful, if there is any part of it that doesn't help hold together the force of the whole, and if it feels like a statement that I want to make to myself and others.

I hope that in writing about my work I have avoided giving advice to myself or locking my ideas into a rigid position, thereby talking about who I think I should be, rather than about how I really experience myself. These words then, if they seem tentative, are an attempt to reflect a process by which I seem to work and live. The
writing is very far from the visual images I make but attempts to be as straightforward as possible about what I do, given the inadequacies of words. Following are color Xerox reproductions of my prints, with a brief description of the process involved in making each one. I have included pictures of one work in its unfinished states, to show the variety of changes that I was involved in. I have also included copies of two of the drawings that I did previous to beginning the thesis prints, in hopes of showing even more about the history of the prints.
Untitled Drawing

This graphite drawing (on Arches Cover White, 29½" x 41") was the first in a series of works wherein I struggled with some new imagery and a new way of working. What was new to me was taking the freedom to put anything on the paper in response to a gut impulse. I was feeling much less concern for trying to guess the result, or what it would mean, and more concern with pulling out of myself the images that felt real. The marks of struggle are clear in the work: eraser marks and a feeling of immediacy about the way that the image emerges from the paper.
Untitled Drawing

This graphite drawing (on Arches Cover White, 29½" x 41") comes later in my series of drawn explorations. It makes better use of the possibilities of eraser marks and other elements of struggle, in order to lend energy and force to the image.
This print is 24" x 36" on Rives Heavyweight paper and is printed in a neutral black color. I took the plate through several states before arriving at an image that was important to me. I have included illustrations of earlier states of the plate in order to show the scope of the changes I made.
State #1

This is an early version of "October #41". I had begun with an original idea or impulse, found that I didn't like the resulting image, and then went into the plate with a variety of marks and fragments of images, planning that meaningful relationships would eventually emerge from the interactions. At this point the plate is showing the confusion that results from this approach.
State #2

This version of "October #41" shows how I choose a direction from the possibilities of the previous state. The textures in the scraped (negative) areas were unexciting to me and distracted from the relationships among the major shapes. I was very interested in the image at this point, but didn't feel quite satisfied with the strength of the whole.
SONG #2

This print is 24 x 36 inches on Rives Heavyweight paper and is printed in a warm (brown) black with a transparent pink color rolled on the surface of the center shape and palm wiped. It is the image that arrived most easily at a state that I liked. It was in and out of the acid only about six times, and is filled with unexpected effects. Most of the line work was done with a lift ground, the darkest areas were aquatinted, and the shapes in the upper right were made by a painterly (thin) application of liquid hard ground. I looked at the print for several weeks before I made the decision that the thinness of the print quality in fact works for the image.
SONG #3

This print is 24 x 36 inches on Rives Heavyweight paper, and is printed in a red-black ink which gives a very slight pink cast to the lightest areas of the plate. The directly drawn quality is achieved with the lift ground method. In earlier states, there were several more lines in the image, but I choose to simplify once I saw the relational possibilities of the marks and areas that comprise the finished print. I find the spatial ambiguities in this print particularly compelling and am intrigued by the sense of imbalance or stress shown by the forms.
SONG #5

This print is 24 x 36 inches on Rives Heavyweight paper and printed in a black ink with a sienna brown added to it. The plate metamorphosed from a much different image, traces of which can be seen faintly in some of the areas. I open bit the old image in acid, and worked over it with a scraper until I began to get a glimmer of the image as it is now. The edges of the shapes became important to me for their richly worked quality and their contribution to the tensions created by the shapes. I choose to print this in a very warm brownish ink in order to enhance the quality of internal, lighted presence that the image has.
DECEMBER 2

This print, on Rives Heavyweight paper, measures 24 x 36 inches and is double printed from an 18 x 24 inch plate.

The idea to double print the plate came to me when I saw two proofs of the plate hanging up and was moved to butt them together. I like the electric quality and the tensions that the repetition gives the image. The plate is printed in vine black because of its warm and transparent qualities.
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