Object with Pattern/Rubberstamps and the Metal Cutout

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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

OBJECT WITH PATTERN/RUBBERSTAMPS
AND THE METAL CUTOUT

by
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May 1985
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Tom Cunningham, David Dickenson, Robert Heischman, Beatrice Nettles and Jan Marie Spanard.

Special thanks to Lawrence Williams for all your encouragement and support.
I am an Italian. I am nurtured by the Italian atmosphere, Italian myths, history, superstitions. There is always the nuance. I can recognize my Italianicity and describe it in my work - I am capable of detachment. But an artist - has no real nationality. He has a certain psychological character. It's like a child. An American child is similar to any other child. The artist is the same thing. We all live in the same territory.

- Federico Fellini
INTRODUCTION

To fully understand art, one must understand the creative process. Psychologist Irving Taylor writes on understanding the nature of the creative process, "This understanding must be more than intellectual; it should be understood and experienced as an emotion, a point of view, a deep-seated attitude and a way of life." The artist works from his experience and in each new work created, a piece of his life is given. He records sensations, fantasies and visions, giving an emotional life to his work.

In turn, the art work has its own life, living through those who experience it. The viewer brings to it his own experiences, prejudices and fantasies, allowing for unique personal interpretations of the work.

This giving of life to a new object or state of existence is the very magic of the creative process. Dr. Taylor states, "The core of the creative process lies in the ability to mold experiences into new and different organizations, to perceive the environment plastically, and to communicate the resulting unique experience to others." Communication is the soul of art. In order for an artist to create, he must reach into his innermost self and communicate his personal experiences to the world. Jim Dine observes, "Something appears on a page not because I consciously want it to appear but because I've got a storehouse of ideas, knowledge, feelings, all kinds of things and therefore it
appears for that reason. It's coming out of twenty years of unconscious absorption of the culture and personal trauma of what I want to do and say about my relationship to the culture and how I live within it."^{4}

Unable to communicate his internal passion, the artist finds himself in constant uproar and frustration. Uncreative periods lead to extreme guilt and despair. A true artist has no other choice but to work. He cannot live with himself if unable to produce. A sea of tensions and unrest develops within him. No one knows as much anguish as the barren artist.

Many theories have been established connecting the creative genius to mental disorders. Freud recognized a great similarity between creativity and neurosis, each being attempts to solve basic biological conflicts. Artists have been portrayed as irrational, uninhibited, impulsive, eccentric, hypersensitive, temperamental and antisocial. Depression, alcoholism and suicide have been common to the artist. Curtis Bill Pepper, writing of de Kooning, states, "The lives of great artists often seem haunted by psychic demons that can drive them to heights of achievement or to depths of despair, or to both at the same time. In de Kooning's circle of friends, the self-destructive element vied tragically with the creative. Gorky was a suicide; so was Rothko. Pollock's end almost suggested a courting of death. Whatever the dark underside of de Kooning's genius, the torments he suffered took a heavy toll."^{5}
Restlessness, confusion and anxiety are prevailing conditions in an artist's life, each state being essential to the creative pursuit. The creative person is constantly searching for new answers, solutions and states of existence. A willingness to investigate the unknown and courage to accept the possibility of failure, criticism, isolation or rejection are essential. The artist must be extremely dedicated, constantly pushing himself beyond his limits. He must take risks, switching directions to avoid repetition, continually seeking to achieve growth.

This perpetual pursuit of the unexplored places the artist in a precarious position. Film maker Federico Fellini, in describing the life of an artist, states "The artist is someone who lives in a very dangerous territory between the unconscious and the cultural canon. These two things are always against each other. The artist tries to transform the unconscious into the conscious with order, laws and systems. To do that he must go into the unconscious hell and translate it into something understandable. He has to put himself in a territory in which he should not be. He has to have a vocation, the strong defense of a wizard or a magician, or a very strong seeker." 6

To live the life of an artist there must be extreme passion. He must learn to live with fear, build from failure and deal with the resistance from society. A constant stand against the temptation for wealth, power and approval are necessary in order to maintain a pureness of motive.
Creativity must come from one's soul; it cannot be motivated by external sources. Making art with the intention of achieving wealth and fame are in direct opposition to one another.

The artist cannot yield to societal pressures. People have been, and always will be skeptical of what they do not know. They want to dance to music that they have heard before, eat foods they have tasted, sit in seats where they have sat before. The tendency towards familiarity is universal. Familiarity protects us, comforts us from the challenge of the unknown. When the artist presents the unfamiliar, the public is threatened. They do not know how to react, how to feel, or what opinions to take. People do not wish to take such risks. They want to be told what is good and what is bad. They want to follow along with everyone else, participating in the latest of trends and rejecting the old as it becomes passe.

Illustrated here is the artist's dilemma: does one work to satisfy the public's appetite, or does one work without this tendency towards trend, challenging the public with things they do not understand? Ghisler writes, "Whatever the cause, the tendency to distrust the widest and freest ranging of the mind is so strong that the changes necessary for the development of human life could not be attained without the efforts of the more daring and ingenious of mankind." A brave and honest representation of the creative process is always individual and can never result in imitation.
PART I: THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The artist puts himself in a special state in order to create. Psychoanalyst Ernst Kris suggests that this state falls somewhere between the conscious and the unconscious, a condition he calls the preconscious. Silvaro Arieti explains, "Conscious mental activity may hinder the creative process by the rigid use of symbolic functions. The unconscious may hinder it with an even more rigid anchorage in reality."8 This state between the unconscious and conscious parts of the psyche is where creative inspiration originates. Kris, in agreement with Freud, explains that creative inspiration is the result of what he calls "regression in the services of the ego,"9 the ability to regress to primary thought processes.

Primary, or primitive, thought is associated with unconscious phenomena such as dreams, fantasies and psychic experiences. It is the first stage of our mental development. The second stage, or secondary thought process, is the conscious state of the mind, involving logic and reality. Once the creative inspiration is generated in the preconscious, logic and conscious manipulation come into play. The creative impulse cannot, however, appear from conscious calculation; it occurs only when the mind is free from preoccupation. Inspirations can occur at any fleeting moment and the artist must learn to listen to these impulses, setting them aside for future use. Ghiselin expresses this
beautifully when he states, "Yet though the exciting elements may not at first lead to any clear development, their whole aspect is of promise . . . One must learn to seize and hold them without insistence, letting them agitate the mind when and as they may and make their own development, relinquishing them as they fade or fail of effect and taking up others to be cherished without attachment in the same way, shaping the expression of the growing insight critically - that is, consciously and rationally, drawing upon all resources of craft and understanding - insofar as that may be done without arresting spontaneous development, always preserving the stir of the excited mind out of which the development issues."10

Since creativity follows the movement of thought, it is impossible to preconceive the end result. The artist must proceed blindly, drawing from instinct and intuition. The more creative the pursuit, the more blind the flight.

The documentation of a thesis is an examination of the creative process. Joseph Wallas developed a theory in 1926 stating that the process unfolds in four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination and verification.11 In the beginning stage, preparation, the artist allows his mind to wander freely, collect information and search for new inspiration. During this stage the conscious state takes an active role in the creative process. The preparation is essential, for inspiration cannot be received by an unprepared mind.
The second stage is one of incubation. This is the period of time when the creative person is unconsciously processing, reorganizing and cultivating the information brought from within. This phase may occur in conjunction with other stages, for information is continually being stored and processed throughout the sequence.

In the third stage, the illumination period, the mind is enlightened by ideas and solutions. These ideas usually develop from a vague notion or concept which has to be caught and directed. Somewhere between this phase and the final phase, of verification, ideas are experimented with, elaborated and refined. During verification, the artist must draw again from his conscious as well as his unconscious state. Here, the artist must rework, criticize and evaluate the tested solutions.

Many theories have been developed in support, as well as in criticism, of the creative process evolving through a succession of stages. I have chosen to use the four stages described above to trace my thesis development, noting that a clear separation of stages is impossible. I believe that at points throughout the entire creative process ideas and information are collected, arranged, formulated and evaluated.
PART II: PERSONAL THESIS DEVELOPMENT

The initial proposal for my thesis was the isolation of images on etched metal cutouts. These cutouts were to be translated into a series of monoprinted works. A variety of print techniques, both experimental and traditional, were to be explored and an interpretation of childhood, both universal and individual, expressed.

During the preparation stage for these works an array of images were sought and collected. Images of children in stiff frontal poses were the beginning focus. References included childhood photographs of my nine siblings and I, and later, photographs of friends and strangers. Snap shots that seemed to capture the essence of a child were chosen.

Next, images of objects to represent middle class youth in America during the 1950s and the 1960s, the era of my childhood, were collected. Images were found from old postcards, circus auctions, advertising, flea markets and personal memorabilia. Swimmers, divers, fish, dogs and the circus were chosen as personal symbols.

During the incubation period, images excavated from my childhood and those newly collected were brought together. The realization developed that an attraction to similar images ran throughout my life.

Fish, swimmers and divers represent a strong personal identification with water and are reoccurring elements. The fantasy of being able to live underwater has existed
for me since childhood. Freud felt that the experiences of childhood and fantasy were extremely important elements of creative work. Similarly, Silvano Arieti writes, "Just as the child finds wish-fulfillment an improvement over reality, in play and games in which he generally impersonates the role of an important adult, the adult creates a work of art in which he can satisfy his daydream wishes."  

Reoccurring images from childhood are found in Federico Fellini's films and in the works of Jim Dine. Fellini uses the themes of the circus and the Catholic church to represent his youth. In the film "Amacord" (I remember), Fellini portrays himself as a youth, using a boy wearing a Catholic school uniform and cape. This same image of the filmmaker as a boy is represented in "8½," "Roma" and "La Strada." As a small boy Fellini ran away from his Catholic boarding school and stumbled upon a small traveling circus. As a result of having fetched a pail of water to aid an ailing zebra that had eaten a chocolate bar, Fellini was allowed to stay behind the scenes. Fellini's memory of that experience has been immortalized in "I Vitelloni," "La Strada," "Nights of Cabiria," "La Dolce Vita," "8½," "Amacord" and "The Ship Sails On."

Fellini wishes that the images in his films are observed "not with cultural preconceptions and theoretical biases, but with the innocent eyes of children."  

He states, "It is necessary to understand childhood as the possibility of maintaining an equilibrium between the unconscious and the
conscious, between 'real' life and the life of memory," adding that what is important now is not the actual past but what that past means now and how it affects the present.

Jim Dine chooses images of hardware, housepaint and plumbing fixtures to represent his youth. The objects portray memories of play at his grandfather's hardware store and work in his father's plumbing and paint shop. For Dine, these objects become personal metaphors, self-portraits. Like Fellini and Dine, the subject matter I have chosen has been lifted from childhood experiences. Ghiselin, on the topic of subject matter, writes, ". . . it is organic need rather than will that must determine the choice of a subject. To select a subject against inclination and force the mind to elaborate it is damaging and diminishing."14 Unless the subject is filtered from within, no elaboration, no matter how extensive, can give birth to creation.

During the illumination stage, investigation into various print processes and manipulations occurred. Like Jasper Johns and Jim Dine, I chose to work with isolated images. In order to achieve this, images were etched on metal and cut out individually. Initially, images of children were drawn directly onto a metal plate. Later, images were drawn on acetate and photographically etched into the metal. This allowed for mirrored, positive, negative and multiple print variations of each image.

Further visual variation was achieved with both photo-
graphed and rendered etchings of objects and animals. Changes in scale and expression of mobility began to alter the original stiff frontal poses. In all, a collection of some fifty or more images were etched and cut out.

Working to create unique expressions to these individual images, presented endless directions to follow. My concern was to exhaust all the possibilities that came to mind. Writing my ideas down in a journal, daily, developed into verbal sketches.

The initial idea was to recreate environments for these images of children based on the information found in the original photographs. As in Plate #1, "Riccardi's 1958," the images of baby shoes and porcelain chickens, floating in the surrounding border, were found in a family snapshot. This idea was then expanded beyond the limitations of the photographs to renditions of childhood memories.

In plate #2, "Kate and Me," images of a sister and myself are lined up with child-like images of a tree and house. Here, my primary concern was with childhood innocence and memory.

Wanting to further expand the idea of innocence, I began drawing with crayons. I pursued the spontaneity of a child while drawing, which is lost in the technical process of printmaking. Hilton Kramer, writing on the topic of drawing, expresses, "There is a freedom and velocity of expression to be found in drawing that can never be entirely equalled in
the more protracted and inhibited labors requires for the realization of disciplines like printmaking. To a drawing, an artist is free to confide every sort of flight of fancy of the imagination as well as corrections, afterthoughts and idle notations.  

Unfortunately, as an adult the expressive and kinetic approach to drawing that a child has, had long been gone. Challenged with this, I tried to contrast my controlled images with the fresh approach of a child. Due to the loss of childhood, only a few of these drawings could be achieved before they, too, lost their spontaneity and became contrived. Plate #3 and #4 are two examples of these monoprints. In both, color was applied with crayon on a heated surface then transferred to an intaglio print.

As further exploration with the metal plate evolved, problems with negative space became apparent. The organization of multiple elements within a large picture plane developed as the main design problem. An attempt to resolve this with illusion to space was executed in plate #5, "The First Communion." Here, the individual plates were arranged and false wiped to suggest shadow and a carved rubber stamp was used to create cloud formation. This was the first work in which rubber stamps were incorporated.

With the use of a vulcanizer, a rubber stamp could be made from the metal cutout. Since the plate for a rubber stamp needed to be deeply etched, as well as a negative, the line etchings of children proved to make poor rubber
stamps. The stamps made from photo etchings achieved a far clearer image. As a result I chose to use only etched photographs for stamps.

The next problem that arose was the integration of the stamped images with the etched cutouts. The rubber stamps allowed for numerous printing variations and manipulations. Amounts of ink charged on the stamps could be altered, blocked out, blurred, reregistered, faded and so on. In contrast to the etched cutout, infinite printings of an image could be achieved on a single surface. The flexibility in printing arising from the use of rubber stamps led to the investigation of patterning as a possible solution to the problem found with negative space.

The diverse results obtained from the many print techniques investigated made it difficult to arrive at a homogeneous monoprint series. Silvano Arieti writes, "Creativity is not simply originality and unlimited freedom. There is much more to it than that. Creativity also imposes restrictions." The need for limitation in order to achieve a cohesive body of work became clear. As Steven Sondheim states, "If you have limitations and boundaries, you can leap about." 

The beginning of the verification stage resulted from the effects of rubber stamps on printmaking paper. Michael Crichton wrote, "That creation is only a process; that what counts is the acting-out of an idea in relation to some medium that offers resistance and allows chance and uncon-
scious factors to come into play."18 While testing stamped patterns on strips of arches paper I discovered the surface to be too soft. Instead of the inks settling on the surface, they seeped into the paper, causing the images to lose information. I had stamped diagonal and vertical patterns of red and blue bumper cars driven by Jimmie Dean and rearranged them into a random pattern. The softness of the printed images reminded me of the fabric of children's pajamas from the 1950s.

As if controlled by a magical force, I found myself at a sewing machine, stitching an outline detail of a pajama top over the pattern and applying red buttons. The visual result was an immediate awareness of pattern from which the object gradually appeared. With this mono print, plate #6, "Jimmie Dean's Pajamas," the idea for my thesis show was born. The title for the show would be "Object with Patterns."

I now found myself in the critical and conscious stage of my thesis, the solution had finally been found. The poet Rimbaud wrote, "I witness the breaking forth of my thoughts, I watch them, I listen to them. Hard work and logical thought do not enter the creative process until after the idea is born. Then it must be written down, painted, composed, transmitted."19 The idea now had to be worked out both consciously and unconsciously, into a homogeneous series. The common elements would be the metal cutouts and rubber stamps; the formal concerns, objects with patterns.
Expanding on the use of paper strips, I chose to use panels for my second thesis monoprint, plate #7, "June and Joan." This piece expresses the friendship between myself and another. Two synchronized swimmers move through the panels in a counter-direction to a school of embossed fish. The use of panels creates the illusion of movement and adds the element of time. The swimmers are the objects and movement is the pattern. The negative space creates the illusion of water.

In the third monoprint, I returned to pajamas for my object. The shape of pajama bottoms was cut out and embossed with a random pattern of cars. The pants were then torn into equal, vertical, two-inch strips. Next, detail was stitched with blue thread showing an open fly, and snaps were attached. The pants were adhered vertically on a full sheet of arches cover size 29" x 41".

The negative space was printed with blue and silver stripes set two inches apart and stopping at the pant edge. Additional strips of 7/8 inch arches were applied on top of the background space revealing the printed color underneath the torn edge. The color and background strips stopping at the edge of the embossed pants allowed for a separation of object and background. In this print, I was able to present the object equal to and separate from the background, while contrasting random pattern with controlled vertical direction. This mono print, plate #8, is titled "Blue Pajama Bottoms."
Feeling the need to deal more with the ideas explored in "Blue Pajama Bottoms," I decided to repeat the image. The integration of foreground and background felt exciting and a strong urge to continue in this direction developed. De Kooning, in an interview with Curtis Bill Pepper, said, "It's never right, you know, because it doesn't have everything in it. So you keep going until you've put everything you can into it, and then you're out of it. Then you go on to the next one." As with Jasper Johns and Jim Dine, I felt a desire to rework and refocus on the same image. The image, for me, represented far more than could be communicated in one piece. Field, writing on Jasper Johns, states, "Much of the creative work of our time grows out of making and remaking. In other words, the physical act of embodying a banal form or object focuses attention in such a way that unconscious elaborations are encouraged." 

In this monoprint, plate #9, "Red Pajama Bottoms," pattern is found outside of the object as well as within. The same pant silhouette was cut out, reversed and embossed with vertical lines. The pant detail is stitched with orange thread, showing a closed fly and orange buttons on top. The pants, this time, are left whole rather than cut up. They are adhered diagonally onto the same size sheet of arches. Printed on the arches are vertical rainbow stripes of reds and oranges. Strips of arches are again adhered on top of the background, revealing color through the torn edges. The top strips of arches pass under, as well as stop,
at the edge of the pants, creating a figure-foreground ambiguity. A vertical pattern of red greyhound dogs runs across the background, disappearing under the pants.

As with the monoprint "June and Joan," pattern is used to create the illusion of movement. The pattern appears to have run off the object onto the background. In contrast to the previous random patterns explored, direction is more controlled with organized vertical, diagonal and horizontal patterns.

The fifth monoprint of my thesis show, plate #10, "Me," employs patterns created by several different images. For the background, I use all small scale cutouts arranged in a controlled narrative order. The image of myself as a child, surrounded by four embossed cars, is encircled by my nine brothers and sisters. The background then begins to break up and become less controlled until it reaches a free flowing, underwater environment. This break-up of organization creates the illusion of mobility against frozen images. The composition was printed twice, once in a range of reds and oranges, the other in a range of blues and greens. The two prints were then laid on top of each other and a giant fish was cut out of each. The fish were then cut up to make gills and fins, with details stitched in white thread. The fish were interchanged to the alternate colored backgrounds. The fish is the object, and it also represents me, while the background pattern serves as a portrait of my childhood.

The final monoprint, plate #11, "Past, Present, Future,"
incorporates the metal plates and rubber stamps made from photoetchings of circus banners. An embossed circus tent dominates most of the picture plane serving as the object; various printed circus images float on top, serving as the pattern. The tent opening is pulled back to reveal an interior scene, creating depth. Again, the background is broken up with diagonals which stop at the object's edge, revealing a black paper surface below.

This monoprint utilizes many of the printing techniques previously explored. Some of the stamps were printed directly onto the embossed paper, revealing the textured surface below, while others were stamped on arches satin for a contrasting, clear, sharp image.

The metal plates were printed by rolling as well as wiping the surface, creating further visual variations from a single image. Several different black etching inks and rubber stamp inks were used to even further the variables. Some of the banner images were attached to the larger surface only at the top, allowing a second image to appear below.

The conclusion of my thesis leads back to the proposal. Planning to investigate specific print techniques, both traditional and experimental, and working them into a body of monoprinted works, a great area was probed. The issues grew to be many, all of which could not possibly be solved without setting limitations.

Hilton Kramer writes, "In following the development of
certain artists, there is almost nothing more interesting than to watch the way a personal disposition – a tendency of the mind and emotions to incline in a certain direction, and to resist alternatives – reveals itself – even before the forms that finally prove essential to its definitive realization have been conceived.”

Since art is drawn from life’s experience, unique personal interpretations and directions occur almost as if against our will. The buried memories and experiences that each of our pasts hold, result in a personal body of work that only one individual artist could create.
TECHNICAL INFORMATION FOR RUBBER STAMP MAKING

In order to make a rubber stamp, an image must be etched deeply into a metal plate. The recesses of the plate should be at least 1/16 to 1/8 of an inch. The image can be directly drawn onto the plate or photographically applied. The problem of directly drawing on the plate is that a negative image is needed to make a stamp. Drawing on frosted mylar and photographically applying the image tends to be less confusing.

When using film, an enlarged negative must be made. This is achieved by contacting a blown-up positive to a sheet of Kodalith High Speed Duplicating film. Do not use regular copy film, for you need an obvious grain. The trick to this process is the high grain. Shooting with Tri-X film pushed to 800 ASA is suggested.

When developing the Kodalith, continuous tone should be sought. Develop the film in a mixture of one part Dektol, one part Kodalith A, and one part B, to six parts water. The film should be underexposed and overdeveloped. Agitate the film for the first 30 seconds and let it stand for the remainder of the two minutes. A good source of reference can be found in Bea Nettles' book, Breaking the Rules, A Photo Media Cook Book.

Step two involves photosensitizing the metal. The KPR resist attaches much easier to a zinc plate. Copper must be thoroughly stripped of all grease and its sheen
brought down to a dull surface in order for the resist to take. Rubbing down the surface with a fine grit followed by a weak, one-minute acid bath will do the trick. It is also important to apply the resist thinly and evenly (too much resist will lift off the plate in the acid bath). After the photo resist has dried, bake the plate for twenty minutes to increase resistance.

Step three involves exposing the image onto the sensitized metal plate. This is done by contacting the Kodalith or Mylar drawing onto the plate employing an arc lamp. Plate exposure will vary with the density of the Kodalith. Average exposures run anywhere from one to two minutes for film. Exposure time for mylar drawings is only 15 seconds, any longer will burn the image out. An additional asset of mylar is that drawing reversals can be obtained. Due to the high contrast nature of the photoetching process, line drawings interpret best into stamps.

Follow regular photoetching procedures, developing the plate for two minutes in a standard KPR solution. After developing, bake the plate for an additional twenty minutes. When using zinc, a fine layer of powdered aspultum should be baked on the plate as well. Due to zinc's tendency to undercut, this serves as a precautionary method. Copper achieves a far cleaner cut than zinc. For very fine line images only copper etched in a Dutch Mortant solution should be used. Due to the depth required for a stamp, etching time can take hours. If impatient, images can be commercially etched by a
rubber stamp manufacturer.

Once the plate has been etched, a negative mold must be made. This is made from a matric sheet that can be obtained through a rubber stamp supply company. Using a vulcanizer, the matric is placed on top of the metal cut and, under heat and pressure, a mold is formed. The setting time for the mold in the vulcanizer is ten minutes.

Once the mold has been made, a sheet of uncured rubber is cut and set on top of it. Following the same procedure as the matric, the mold and rubber are placed in the vulcanizer. Under heat and pressure, the rubber is cured in ten minutes.

The final step involves cutting the image out of the rubber and adhering it to a rubber cushion. The cushion is then mounted to a wooden block. The cushion backing should be cut to the same size as the rubber stamp. A rubber or barge cement should be used to adhere stamp to cushion, and cushion to wooden mount. Wooden mounts, matric, cushion and rubber can all be obtained from the same source.

In caring for your stamps, only inks which can be cleaned with denatured alcohol should be used. Solvents will ruin the rubber. There are several stamp inks available. If interested in obtaining more information on rubber stamps, The Rubber Stamp Album by Joni Miller and Lowry Thompson is a good source.
Plate #1: "Riccardi's 1958," 7" x 11"
Plate #2: "Kate and Me," 15" x 24"
Plate #3: Untitled, 5" x 9"
Plate #4: Untitled, 18" x 24"
Plate #5: "The First Communion," 18" x 29"
Plate #6: "Jimmie Dean's Pajamas," 29" x 18"
Plate #7: "June and Joan," 29" x 60"
Plate #8: "Blue Pajama Bottoms," 29" x 41"
Plate #9: "Red Pajama Bottoms," 29" x 41"
Plate #10: "Me," 29" x 41"
Plate #11: "Past, Present, Future," 29" x 41"
FOOTNOTES


3 Ibid., pp.66-67.


9 Ibid., p.24.


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