

# From Painting to Painting as Sculpture: The Journey of Lilian Thomas Burwell

Introduction by Jeanne Zeidler

Essay by David Driskell

*The Journey* text by Lilian Thomas Burwell

Photographs by Harlee Little except as otherwise noted

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Design by Lilian Thomas Burwell

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# Introduction

It is with a great deal of pleasure that the Hampton University Museum is able to present this special retrospective exhibition **From Painting to Painting as Sculpture: The Journey of Lilian Thomas Burwell**.

It is fitting that this retrospective, this autobiographical journey of discovery, takes place at Hampton. Since its founding in 1868, part of the mission of the Hampton University Museum has been to foster the appreciation of the creative potential and accomplishments of all people. During her more than forty year career as an artist and educator, Lilian Burwell has actively pursued her own muse, while encouraging others along their paths of self-discovery. By coming together with Lilian now and providing her an opportunity to share her artistic journey, the Hampton University Museum reaffirms its identity as a valuable cultural resource for the local community and the nation. We also play a part in the culmination of this fine artist's lifelong endeavors: sharing her own experience of exploration and growing understanding for the benefit of others.

It is also fitting that this exhibition is one which inaugurates the Huntington building, the new home of the Hampton University Museum. Lilian creates environments, mystical spaces which attract and interact with the viewer/participant. By exhibiting this kind of site specific installation art for the first time, the Hampton University Museum is stepping out into what for us is undiscovered country. We can hope for no better guide than an artist whose career has been devoted to exploring the creative force in all of us.

From the beginning this exhibition, this publication and the programs the museum has planned were conceived of as a whole, as an experience. We hope the experience is a positive one, and if so it is due to the contributions of several people. First, thanks must go to David Driskell for his insightful essay, and to Harlee Little for the beautiful images that illustrate this book. I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to the entire staff of the University Museum who work diligently to insure the success of our exhibits and programs. A special thanks to Lori Mirazita for her assistance on this publication, and to Jeffrey Bruce for coordinating all of our necessary tasks, and helping us to see opportunity where we thought we saw obstacles. Finally, neither the exhibit nor this book would exist without Lilian. Her energy, discipline and ability to work independently kept this project moving forward when we were weighed down with the endless concerns and crises of our impending relocation. Since its inception her vision and perseverance have shaped this project and encouraged its growth.

Lilian Thomas Burwell describes her career as an artist as a journey. This journey of personal discovery is one that everyone can and should take. The Hampton University Museum is pleased to have this opportunity to invite others to join her and, for a time, share her path.

Jeanne Zeidler, Director  
Hampton University Museum

# Thank you

There could not possibly be a more fertile soil in which to plant the seeds of an artist/teacher's convictions concerning the role of the arts than in the environment of a museum on a university campus. I am deeply grateful for having that opportunity offered to me by one of this country's finest such venues. The respect and fine custodial care extended by Hampton University Museum to the fine arts is rewarded by the broad influence felt in its immediate and far reaching community as well as its student body. Thank you, Hampton University for your profound role in this mission.

There could not possibly be a friend more incredibly patient and talented and generous of heart than Harlee Little. Without his ability to manufacture hours in the midst of countless busy days to be a teacher's teacher to me and a guiding, helping hand, this publication could not possibly be what it is.

Also, what you read here is in large part possible due to the expertise of Juliette Bowles, David Andrews, Virginia Mecklenberg, and Bernard Jarvis. They gave generously of their time and the advantage of their editorial insights from wide and varied points of view. Those who hold up the mirrors are the ones who make it possible to see with so much more clarity. Thank you, all!

# Dedication

The work of the artist is very much the visible evidence of the person of the artist. How the work is valued is therefore little less important than how the person is valued. During the last years of his life, the painter Felrath Hines spent precious time sharing his very private thoughts about his work and the world of art with me. I was as deeply honored by his confidences as I was enriched by his friendship. His respect for my thinking and for my work formed a critically important element in its growth. It became part of my confidence in my own way of seeing and working.

**I dedicate this exhibition and this writing  
to my beloved friend and spirit brother, Felrath Hines.**

Among the “conditions of the artist” that Fel and I often agonized over was the endemic state of artists misinterpreted, reinterpreted, misrepresented and misunderstood. We did not so much lament the uninhibited reactions of the unschooled. These are often as pure and on target as the child who saw no clothes on the emperor. Rather we spoke of the scholars and critics, the art historians and writers. These recorders of idea and opinion are often forced to rely on sketchily available and unfleshed skeletons of information . . . information largely established as much by repetition as by actual truth. We all know the game of passing words from ear to ear around a circle until the final version bears little if any resemblance to the first.

If the artist were to write for himself, representing himself, then others would at least have a point of subjective truth to use for comparisons, relativity, history. So here, in this work, is what I behold in the mirror of my own reality, and why I see it to be so.



*Triofolium, 1992*  
oil on canvas over wood 20x18x10"  
collection of the artist

## Soaring With a Painterly Voice

Lilian Thomas Burwell received the kind of education from childhood through graduate studies that gave her the mark of a creator, a visual artist whose eyes were destined to look beyond the contours of ordinary form and see a visionary world replete with inspired images. That she has been able to weave her artistry in and out of several media contexts, over many decades first in painting and then in sculpture that retains a painterly format, argues well for one whose services to the art profession have been equally exciting. Now approaching seventy, Lilian Burwell is still charting new courses in her creative oeuvre, doing those exploratory things with her art that one expects of a person many times her junior in both physical years and spiritual audacity.

I first made the acquaintance of Burwell in the early 1960s. I was concluding my studies for the Master of Fine Arts Degree at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Burwell had enrolled in the summer curriculum in the graduate program in art there in 1961. She was at that time teaching her art at St. Margaret School in Seat Pleasant, Maryland. But even then, with the rich exposure she had had to art and artists in New York City at the time when the winds of change from the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance were shifting to a new emphasis on social images that reflected the Black Power movement then underway, Burwell focused

her art on and within a post modernist plan, centering it on a systematic pursuit of organic form and relevant content that did not address social realism. Many Black artists at that time were caught up with the notion that they could change certain elements of social behavior in the majority white world if only they had a chance to showcase the images they created that addressed issues of racial bias and social inequities across the color line. Burwell was totally both socially and politically involved in the Civil Rights movement. But although she was aware of the impact that the movement had on artists of the period, she found her voice in art not in social realism but in a form of abstraction that explored form in an organic manner.

Since the 1970s, Burwell's art has moved progressively toward clarifying the rational relationship that a painted environmental object has with the spiritual space it occupies. There is an attempt on the part of the artist to show how the shape of content in a given work connects it to its own sacred space both earthy and cosmologically. In this sense flight . . . as we experience it being a physical form of levitation . . . is suggested in many of the recent works the artist has created. Few artists of our generation have taken the time to uncover the aesthetic corium to point their artistry in the direction of the cosmos, let alone emphatically state their intentions to do so. Of this idea Burwell notes:

"My issues are definitely with nature . . . and in the nature of spirit and of life as it relates to nature. I see no way for the spirit, which is essential life, to survive in these or any other times unless it can establish or reestablish its relationship to the natural world. I see my work as an attempt to call attention to the basic elements of that universality. Whether in the cyclical nature and rhythms of ebbs and flows, of soarings and restings, of color with light or shadow, or presence or absence, (and please Lord, peace) . . . the ying and yang does exist and produces life and feeling for life." (Lilian Thomas Burwell: "Environments of the Spirit, Mind, and Space: The World We Create," 1997)

This upward stride to artistic freedom that is implied in the placement of a shaped object in space begging to become airborne and skyward is exactly what Burwell has been working to achieve over the past decade. This personal formula of making meaningful spatial relations exist both physically and psychologically in ordinary materials such as sugar pine, shaped canvas and an often monochromatic painterly presence is not new to the contemporary art world. The Neoplastic artists of the post-World War I era tried their hands at articulating spatial ambiguities with linear emphasis in the attempt to give the illusion of geometric movement in space. Burwell has learned measurably from other twentieth century artists whose passion with form defines the object that gives a literal spatial illusion while making their work remain within the picture plane. Now she moves to enhance the work as an icon with personal references. Well patterned painted forms that rest between the world of nature and spiritual belief juxtapose themselves, . . . one against the other . . . in the recent works creating light and shadow both in an imagined and real spatial context. In such a quiet yet highly motivated atmosphere of change and exchange, light rules the order of time. Yet, Burwell is serious about rendering the essence of things, particularly those that are natural and real. It is in this sense that the temporal order that the work evokes becomes paramount in the visual delivery of those forms made by Burwell.

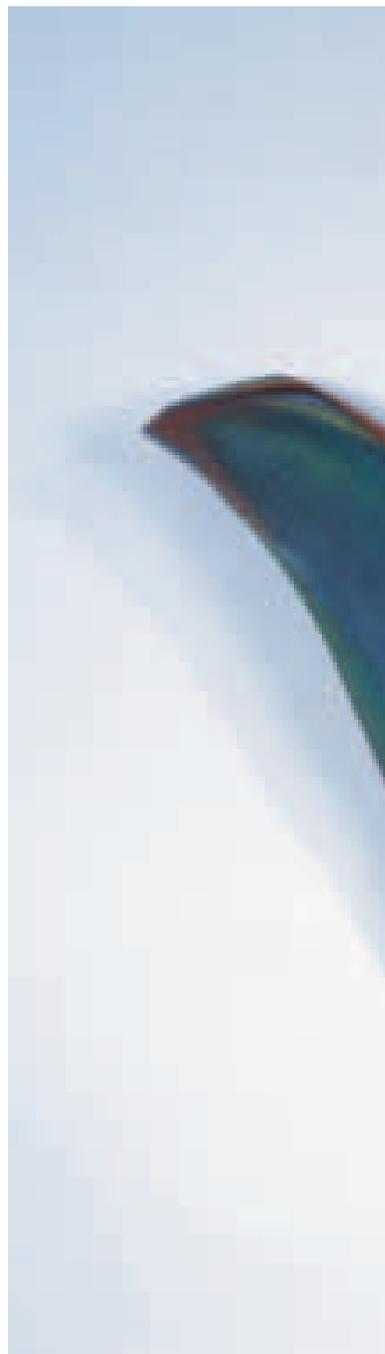
Of equal importance in the recent work is the notion that space is explored on more than one level in Burwell's art. It helps with a comprehensive understanding of Burwell's painterly journey. There is to be found in many of the shaped canvases a real feel for a spatial presence, a biomorphic factor that calls forth the notion of frozen water shaped and eroded by the winds of time. These handsomely crafted canvases confront each other in smoothly structured planes from within. They overlap and dissect each other gently, like a silk robe caressing the nude body of a beautiful woman. In compositions such as

*Serendipity*, 1993 (see p. 46), there is the presence of a contrasting encounter of formal figures moving gently away from the wall as though compelled by gravity to do so. *Trifolium*, 1992, delicately points downward, reminding the viewer that flight means descent as well as ascent.

While some may search for the mysterious process by which we literally engage ourselves in the influence of motion in these works, there is yet another dimension of Burwell's aesthetic corium that should not go unnoticed. The physical labor is a given. One does not make such beautiful forms without having sat at nature's feet watching her spiritual ways of making. It is in this sense that order from heaven and earth goes into the crafting and balancing of a handsomely made work such as *Paradisaea*, 1994-5. It all goes straight to the core of our being able to recognize and affirm within ourselves the desire to exit this earthly plain just as birds do when in flight. Dove-like in form, with wings that impose no restrictions on the creative imagination, *Paradisaea*, literally the peaceable kingdom, is indeed above and beyond our social plain. It soars in space like a bird in flight, resting only when forced to do so by the natural order of things.

These works that celebrate life on the spiritual plane of flight from and to the cosmos revolve around the artist's own good craftsmanship. Building or carving handsomely made wooden shapes over which pieces of canvas are stretched to perfection is another given. They are genuinely articulate in their attempt to teach an important lesson about structure in painting and in sculpture. The self-imposed images that result from the arrangement of light on a given surface add to the mystery of these works and to their success as cross-over compositions in a visual dialogue between the painterly and the sculptural. What we see in Burwell's work is neither traditional nor literally symbolic in an iconic sense; it is transcendental in showing stylistic diversity of earthly beauty and cosmic vision. There is the familiar yet understated elegant taste that we have come to associate with Burwell's work over a long period of time. The growth of Lilian Thomas Burwell's art with time and the reflections we bring to it combine to ensure a lively interest in the subtle yet graceful forms that she has made to soar with harmony and simple elegance.

David C. Driskell  
Distinguished University Professor of Art  
University of Maryland at College Park



*Paradisaea I, 1994-5*  
oil on canvas over wood 60x81x18"  
collection of the artist



# The Journey

by Lilian Thomas Burwell

*see references on p. 71*



The original intention of my entering the field of art education was to supply the bread and butter my body needed in order for me to be an artist. Fifty years later, now primarily the artist, I find that I have never recovered from being an educator. I feel compelled to pass on knowledge of the primary forces that have enabled me to find answers critical to survival as a woman, as an African American and as a person constantly needing to adapt to the new and threatening realities of our times. There is no doubt that one of those forces is the creative. I mean to encourage and inspire the pursuit of original and individual vision. Without this, there is no seed for a collective vision and action upon which hope for renaissance depends. I feel that people as a whole, and my people in particular have found strength in adversity largely by being true to their individual inner spirits. Those spirits are nurtured by community, but empowered by originality. It is the life force we do not dare deny. I believe that my experience can give one example, a documented piece of evidence, of how the creative potential of one person is in the process of being realized. **This is my story of the unfolding of the creative process as one of an evolutionary nature fed by life experience, belief systems, and yet somehow the seemingly separate life of the art itself.**

The retrospective begins at the point of the Abstract Expressionism of the early sixties. The majority of the two dimensional work documents the ensuing period in which I began a very deliberate search for a voice that was more deeply my own. My reaction to what was happening in my life and in the world I knew manifested itself almost immediately in the abstractions which then became specifically related to recognized forms. I now realize that even the subsequent transition in the dimensional form of my work occurred relative to very particular experiences and convictions.

**The most evident academic emphasis of the exhibit will show the evolution of the three-dimensional, often free standing work from that which had been only on the flat plane.** However, I consider a most important part of my mission to be that of intriguing and prodding the viewer to become a participant. I beg the observer not to be only an observer, but to become, by sometimes physically entering into the space of the work itself, a part of the work, and therefore part of its creation. On another level I seek to inspire the observer to pursue a separate, deliberate, creative action of their own. I am still teaching ... and I am a witness. As a witness I offer myself as evidence that the spirit can be educated and revealed through art. I see each stage of work and experience as just the beginning of the next. The subjectivity of this exhibition therefore exists primarily to demonstrate my position insofar as it forms a catalyst for the possibilities within each person.

**One of my primary purposes in this writing is to encourage you to discover a new self expression of your own. In demonstrating how the creative process has worked in me, I am appealing to you to pursue and realize the potential that is within you.** I believe that each individual has an important and particular character that requires a lifetime to realize. I believe that situations in life, whether they appear as losses or gains, are important material for growth and an inherent part of that realization.

If we each accept responsibility to walk our own paths even as they unfold in front of us, we would not have a society so abandoned to destruction and hopelessness. Our art would show itself as the expression of the particular person we are, the self reflecting its own sacred revelation. We would then see less of the imitative, derivative art that drowns and numbs our consciousness and undermines possibility. The follow-the-leader syndrome of a herd of buffalo plunging over a cliff in self-destruction would diminish considerably.

**Even as a practicing artist, I don't subscribe to the elitist theory.** I believe that we are all artists in that a distinct and widening realization is more than possible for each of us if we are true to the search for our own paths. Indeed creative quest is part of the purpose of life itself. What is necessary is that we not abandon the search. The search process itself is an inherent part of the answer. Sometimes the process is the entire answer. **For each of us the expression of the art will differ,** but just as certainly the experience of all will be broadened and enriched by it. The search will be cold and lonely sometimes. At times no one will notice, and at times it will seem no one is even there. The aloneness is actually part of the necessary climate, the frozen winter ground that will yield the fields of green in the spring. It is, after all, in the winters that root growth takes place.

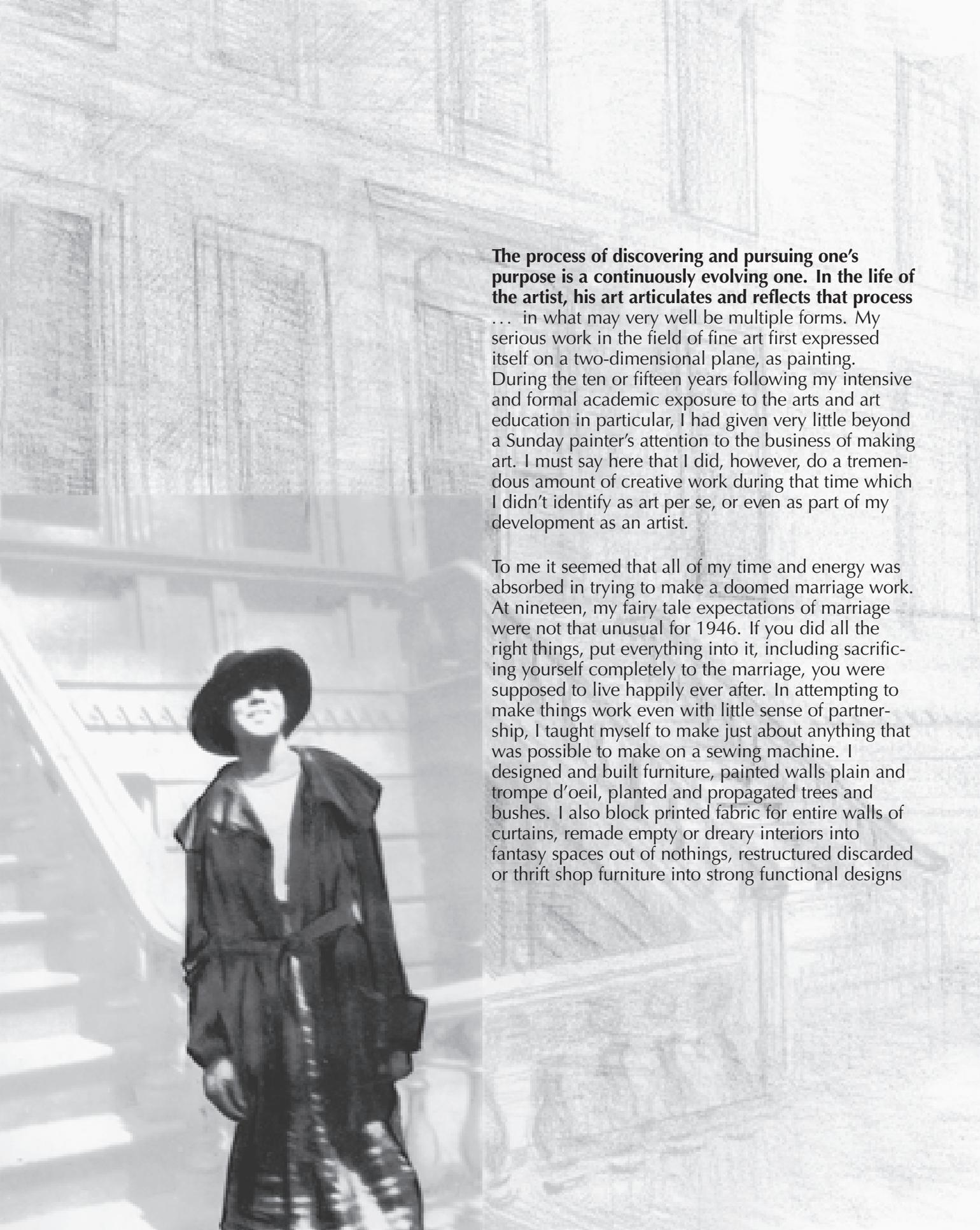
I want to lay out here in writing, in essence draw a map, of the way my own art has developed. By showing you how my art developed from itself, I hope to offer insight on how you can draw your own picture with your own tools. My art has been shaped by my history and my belief system. I find that **the circumstances and philosophy of life as it continues to evolve are no more or less important in shaping the work than the actual material components.** Evolution is usually seamless, but I do recall making a conscious decision at one specific time that affected my work profoundly thereafter. I remember deciding that I must at least try to do work that presented the beautiful, or at least elicited a feeling of beauty, as well as of peace and hope, all which run concurrent with or beyond whatever stark reality exists.

During the decade or so before I reached that point of resolve my work was abstract expressionist. A particular color movement, line or shape I put on canvas was generally a statement in response to what had preceded. A sort of visual conversation would continue to build with each application of paint. There was little restriction or limit to the possibilities. The process itself was exciting. Things poured onto the canvas from the conscious and the subconscious. I felt that I was merely a tool, literally a medium addressing the canvas. Life experiences came through much more strongly and specifically than when I was working with representational subjects. Amazingly, I had no idea what the work was showing at the time.

So it is that creative work, as an extension of ourselves, must continue to evolve as a reflection of individual experience and conviction. Our obligation to pursue the becoming of our own 'original' with integrity is owed as much to the broader world as it is to ourselves. Its realization is a very large part of how our world and our personal contentment will grow.

## Why Write



A black and white photograph of a woman standing in a grand, ornate interior space. She is wearing a dark, wide-brimmed hat and a dark, long coat with a belt. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background features a large staircase with a decorative railing and a wall with intricate architectural details, including a large window with a decorative frame. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights.

**The process of discovering and pursuing one's purpose is a continuously evolving one. In the life of the artist, his art articulates and reflects that process**

... in what may very well be multiple forms. My serious work in the field of fine art first expressed itself on a two-dimensional plane, as painting. During the ten or fifteen years following my intensive and formal academic exposure to the arts and art education in particular, I had given very little beyond a Sunday painter's attention to the business of making art. I must say here that I did, however, do a tremendous amount of creative work during that time which I didn't identify as art per se, or even as part of my development as an artist.

To me it seemed that all of my time and energy was absorbed in trying to make a doomed marriage work. At nineteen, my fairy tale expectations of marriage were not that unusual for 1946. If you did all the right things, put everything into it, including sacrificing yourself completely to the marriage, you were supposed to live happily ever after. In attempting to make things work even with little sense of partnership, I taught myself to make just about anything that was possible to make on a sewing machine. I designed and built furniture, painted walls plain and trompe d'oeil, planted and propagated trees and bushes. I also block printed fabric for entire walls of curtains, remade empty or dreary interiors into fantasy spaces out of nothings, restructured discarded or thrift shop furniture into strong functional designs

# A Part of Self Discovery

... and tried to produce my dream of many children. Only the first of many pregnancies reached full term and gave me the one child which proved the glorious partnership in the ultimate act of creation. Indeed all of this despite my extremely naive concept concerning the nature of creativity, was precisely that ... creativity ... spawned and manifest in the very process of life.

One must certainly consider influences before adulthood in order to examine how adulthood's more conscious evolutions occur. **The Great Depression, which sent former millionaires jumping from rooftops to their deaths, actually served my family well in many ways.** I certainly credit our loss of material advantage for encouraging an orientation to things that watered the roots of my personal creativity. I grew up believing that things came about by making them. My brother and I made toys out of wooden produce boxes discarded by Brooklyn grocery stores. I remember writing little story books on my own, reconfiguring images using patches of color from parts of old magazines that hadn't already been cut up to make paper dolls. With embroidery thread for smocking and colorful remnants from thrown away clothing used for giant applique flowers, my mother transformed the stronger remains of worn sheets into dresses for me that a princess might well envy. During the years that she taught crafts under Franklin Delano Roosevelt's WPA program, I benefited by sitting in on her classes at Columbus Hill Children's Center. Without the convenience of baby sitters after school, or escapes to the country for more than two weeks during summers, I gained also by watching relatives stencil yards of fabric or mass produce clothes in the garment district's sweat shops between my running errands. I watched and helped Cousin Marian make jewelry in a shop. But unbleached silk pongee curtains, decorated with Mother's handsome linoleum block prints, adorned our kitchen windows. In those days the beautiful silks from Japan came to the garment district in pongee sacs that were later thrown on the trash heap. My mother had used those discards to feed her need to surround us with the beautiful.

My father, whose own father sent most of his twenty-six children to at least some bit of college (albeit by working them in his tobacco and cotton fields), always said that **you can't make steel out of pig iron unless you put it through the fire. He taught me to question and challenge "knowledge,"** to search for causes and sources, to use reason and logic. Of course the female grandchild of a southern Baptist minister wasn't supposed to challenge her own father, so I was often in hot water.

As I matured, I learned that the thin line bordering disrespect which I bumped against also separated the field of the mixed and secret admiration he held for the rebel in me that he spawned. His poorly hidden approval was an important factor in my self determination, even though it was costly to me. Nothing of value is free. I have certainly found that the stubborn rebel can become the tenacious determiner of a dream realized.

I also grew up in a New York City so ripe with culture and magnificent becomings that I accepted them as ordinary. I thought that I had discovered Lionel Hampton and Leonard Bernstein in the early forties' Harlem. I didn't even know at the time that the blind uncle of my High School of Music and Art buddy, whom we would visit just because he lived lonely and alone, was W.C. Handy, Father of the Blues. I do remember being amazed that he was so very happy playing piano music while a couple of kids played double solitaire on the floor near his feet ... and he sounded so good!



*Mountains, 1996*  
oil on canvas 24x36"  
collection of Ola Parks

*Wintering, 1996*  
oil on canvas 14x24"  
collection of Mary P. McCauley

*Rockforms, 1967*  
oil on canvas 23x35"  
collection of Lorraine Atter-Jacobs



## The Play of the Unconscious in Abstraction



*Autumnal, 1965  
oil on canvas 20x14"  
collection of the artist*

**Again considering a person as being the sum total of one's experiences, it follows that if art is the expression of the person, then the art can well be evidence of experience.** However, expressing and being true to oneself in that expression is not necessarily an easy undertaking. The artist is tempted by his own basic needs to produce an art that is popular. But even beyond the courage required to overcome the expectations and currents of the society upon which one relies to make a living, there is the enemy of one's own self to overcome. There can be the hesitations of reaching out into unexplored waters. There can be the demons of self-consciousness that grab at the knees, that trip and freeze the feet. But happily, working in the abstract can present a means of liberation. When the artist is seduced by and absorbed in the process of the work itself, the art becomes a body to itself, a completely separate life. Even if the artist tries to hide himself, the work has a way of bypassing that conscious effort. In most of nature, the development of offspring occurs most healthily after only a short period of parental guardianship. An attempt to exert extended control can damage the spirit of independence and potential strength and thereby damage the essence of life, which is spirit itself. In art likewise, letting go is vital.

**Most artists acknowledge the phenomenon of the expression of the unconscious in their art,** even if it is not until brought to their attention. What surprises me is the dramatic extent to which this expression can occur. For the most part my awareness of it in my own work came gradually, as to a child in awe of what is obvious to others. There was a time, however, when it came as suddenly as an explosion.

During the thirteen years of my marriage, my few trips to canvas on easel had been superficial. I was a sometime painter, escaping into the painting of comfortable and pretty pictures. But shortly after the marriage ended, I took a job in a graphics section of the federal government doing the work of publication designer and exhibition specialist. I thought that at last I would be working full time and legitimately in a part of the field in which I had been trained and loved. However, the disillusion of discovering that my new job was seldom more than my being the visible extensions of others' ideas soon set in . . . hard. Sometime during that period I ran into Joseph Edwards, a friend since childhood. Joe told me that he'd been working in a couple of art classes, under Perlmutter and then D'Arista. He thought that both of us should let such an important force in our lives as the creative be given more serious attention. Had I abandoned my primary vocation? He'd heard that there was a phenomenal teacher holding studio classes at the Jewish Community Center. We should sign up!

Benjamin Abramowitz, THE phenomenal artist and teacher, showed me the opening in the earth through which Alice had discovered Wonderland. In Ben's studio class I was faced with a blank canvas and not a clue as to what to do with it. Ben had swept away my carefully arranged still life model. **That blank canvas became the magic mirror through which I stepped and an entry into everything that followed.**



*Emerald, 1969*  
*oil on canvas 39x36"*  
*collection of the artist*



*Black and Whites, 1968  
oil on canvas 35x41"  
collection of the artist*

*Establishment, 1967  
oil on canvas 34 1/2x41"  
collection of the artist*



Up to that point I had condescendingly discredited the hoopla surrounding the Action Painters of the fifties. I saw no academic validity in anything that they splashed on the canvas. Yes, Pollack was throwing paint on surfaces too large for anyone who knew no better to ignore. The wilder, the crazier the work of the new wave, the louder the applause. **Hadn't a gorilla riding a bike through paint on a canvas won the Art Festival at Cannes?** Typical of the influence of Hollywood running rampant throughout the world! But come now, wasn't my attitude really mashed and sour grapes poured out upon ignorance? For a decade I had done no painting to speak of. The decade before that one I'd been a student. I certainly owed it to those folks I so easily judged, no less than to myself, to try to learn from someone who was doing something in this world in which I wasn't actually participating. Ben was doing something. Ben is still doing something. He had both of his feet and his entire being involved in creating his own dynamic art expression. Ben did something for me that year. He opened up space before me!

It was during that following decade, from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, in which my work was so influenced by Abramowitz's abstract expressionist teaching and philosophy that those unconscious realities began to emerge. At the time I was completely unaware of what was transpiring. I do remember Ben remarking that I had a tendency to overwork, that he'd hate to be my child for fear I'd pick it to death. The canvases I was working on later revealed to me as well that his remark was only the tip of an iceberg submerged in deep waters. I've long since concluded that quite a good deal of abstract art is autobiographical self portraiture.

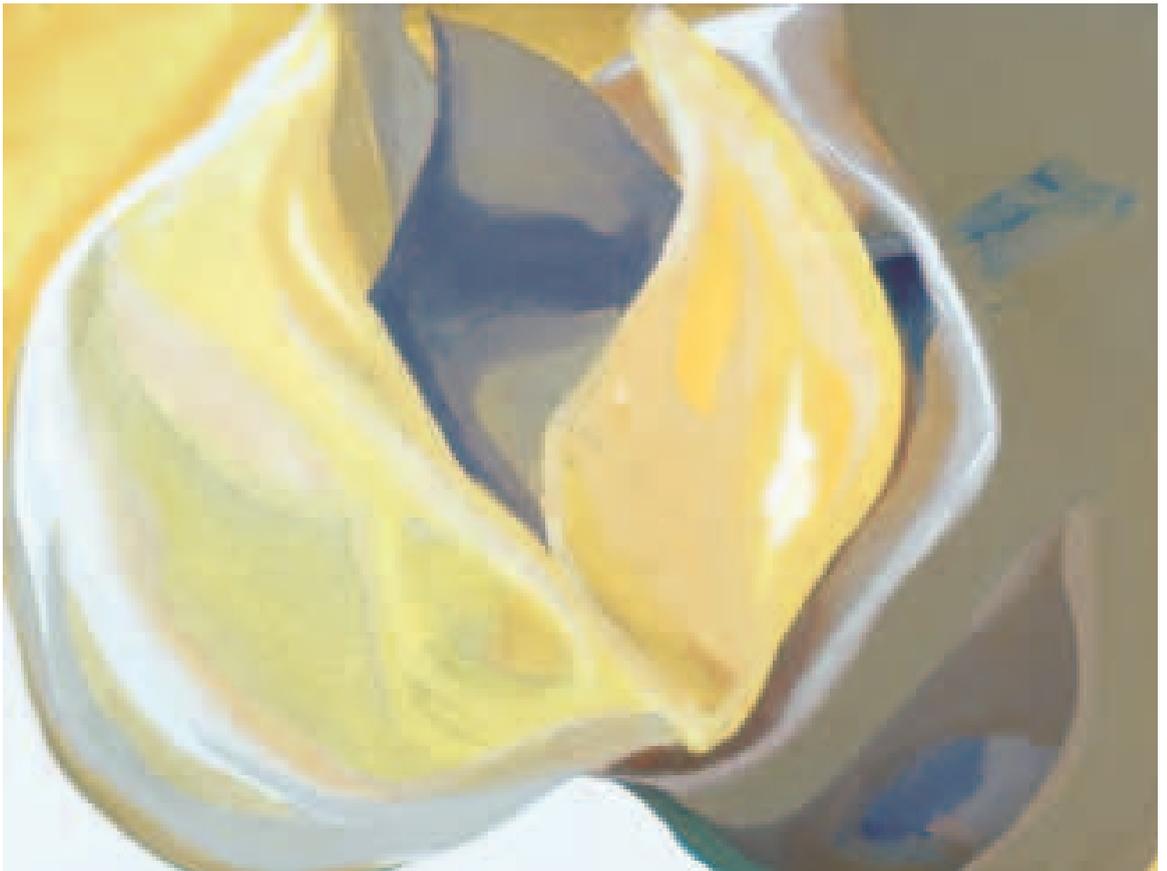
**In art as with faith and as with love, one must let go before the real magic takes place. Although intelligence and learning can bring us to the beginning of understanding, we seldom can grow much beyond that place without a vision of which we are only a small part.**

Many years after I'd returned to teaching, (this time only the teaching of art) I felt compelled to take a full year off just to paint. The simplest way to justify this, keep my job, and draw a small salary, was to pursue and gain a master's degree in painting during a sabbatical. I took the year.

A year or two earlier a young woman of sensitivity and intelligence, a friend whose opinion I had solicited, 'copped out' by saying she didn't understand art. She finally admitted that she was disappointed by what she saw. She said she thought she knew me and she simply felt that there was more to me than what she saw on the canvases. Was there? If the work seemed superficial, then I should reach deeper, perhaps. It stands to reason that any attempt to do so would be self-revealing if it were honest.

*Red Forms, 1970*  
oil on canvas 36x50"  
collection of the artist





*Red, Furling, 1976*  
acrylic on canvas 36x48"  
collection of the artist

*Daffodil, Growing, 1973*  
oil on canvas 31x40"  
collection of the artist

*Resurrection (aka Opens Spring, 1982)*  
acrylic on canvas 41x54 or 54x41"  
collection of the artist





*Winter White, 1980*  
acrylic on canvas 48x36"  
collection of J. Fletcher Robinson

*Leaflight, 1983*  
acrylic on canvas 44x48"  
collection of the artist



*Sungold, 1982*  
*oil on canvas 30x36"*  
*collection of Raymond Cutts, Jr.*



*Artic Flow, 1983*  
acrylic on canvas 48x36"  
collection of the artist



*Greening, 1983*  
*acrylic on canvas 48x44"*  
*collection of the artist*



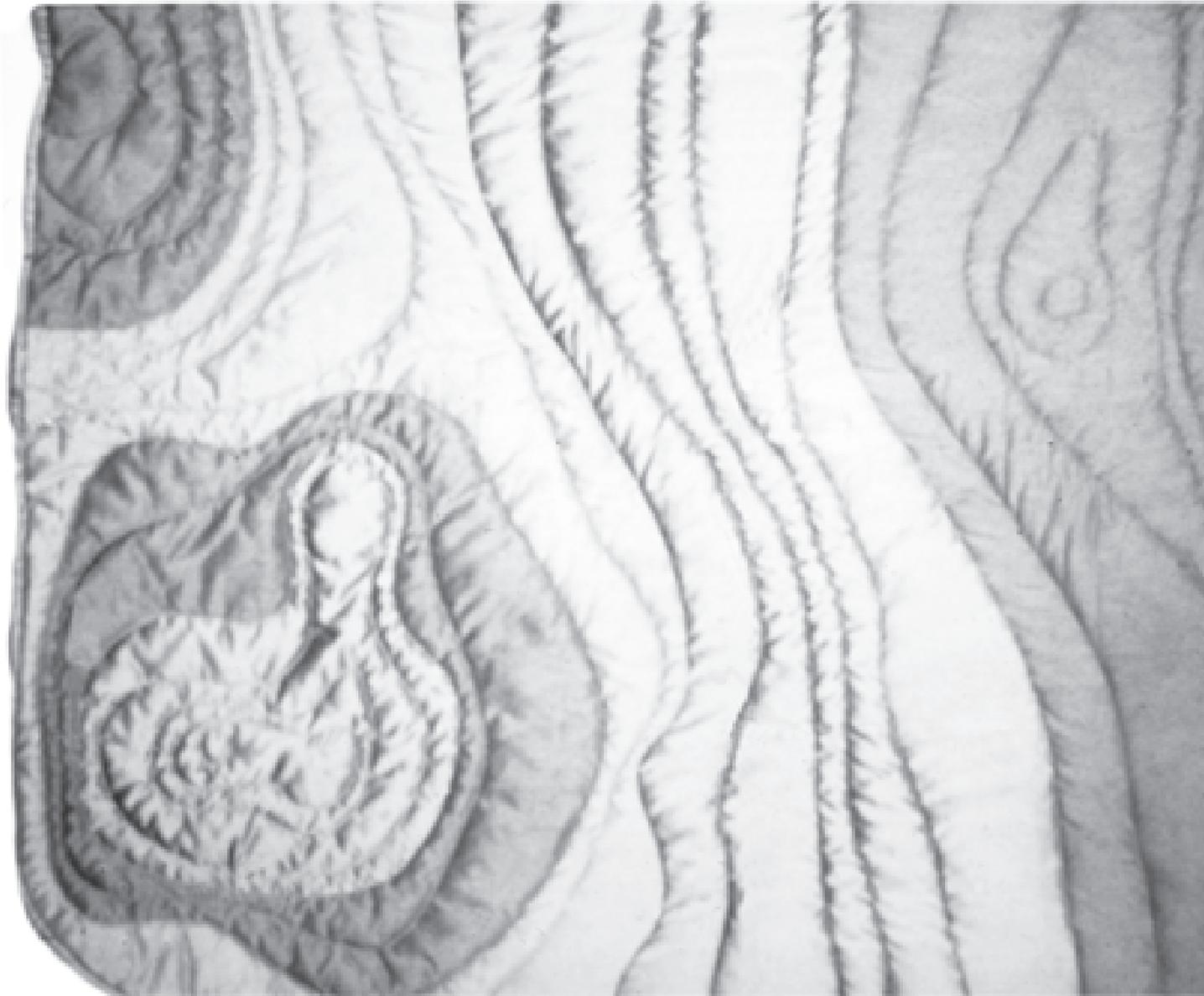
So there in 1974, painting full time in that sabbatical year, I began to pursue a deeper dimension in my work. For nearly two years I had retreated from as many outside influences as possible, so that I could find a 'truer self'. My work began to show the influence of the nature of the plants and flowers that I dug among and the affinity I felt in their cyclical disposition. These particular cycles reinforced the degree of my sense of the universality and infinity of all life. The sense I hold of the interrelationship of all matter and the spirit as containing ultimate answers had another proving ground.

*Mind follows plunging hands  
Turning and sifting cool earth.  
Nostrils filter heady moist pungents  
While branching them through to other senses.  
Before the very eyes mind regroups to witness  
Sequential phases of the journey of Infinity  
Spread out before it all at once.  
Root begets stem begets leaf.  
Then bud, then flower, then seed.  
AND YET IT'S ALL AT ONCE!  
And yet, and yet all returns to the earth  
To root, to sprout again transformed beyond,  
To rest only at the beginning of Endless Wonderment.*

I intentionally limited my color palette, painting by painting, so that I would be distracted by fewer academic concerns. A blue painting would run the gamut from the palest to the darkest blue, from the duldest to the brightest blue. Blue would run toward green just short of being green, toward purple just short of being purple. With considerations of color thus resolved by work saturated in color, I was freed of color being a conscious concern. My attention became centered in rhythms of point and counterpoint, again a kind of dance. My paintings began to become more themselves, less imposed upon. At the same time that they were becoming less cerebral, it follows that they increasingly reflected my sensibilities, becoming a natural vehicle for the intuition and the instinct.

One of the courses that I elected at Catholic University was Fibers and Related Media under Nell Sonneman, herself once a painter. To help me develop patience and a meditative dimension to my expression, I did a large quilt by hand ... essentially an eight foot by seven foot stuffed painting.

*Remembrance Quilt*  
*Antique satin polyester and fiberfill 84x96"*  
*collection of the artist*



At home my bedroom was small. One obvious way to make small rooms feel larger is to use light colors which are closely related. The room and its furniture were painted and carpeted in tones of rose, rust and apricot.

I repeated, modified, and extended these colors in the quilt-painting that would cover the large bed. The entire room would be a nest. I would enter into it and sleep as if in a painting. I layered color as huge applique forms of curvilinear masses, repeating shape within shape with lines of stitches like the contour lines in a cartographic depiction of mountains or lakes. The repetition of warm tones required a degree of contrast. I introduced a cooler goldtone, and a muted, yellowed green. Rose was reintroduced within the green to bring a balance to the composition. I was pleased enough with the expressionistic quilt to include it with the other paintings in my thesis exhibition. After the exhibit, it settled comfortably into the environment for which it was planned.

The many thicknesses sandwiched in for warmth retained the odor of the cleaning fluids. So **I hung the quilt by one of its edges on a clothesline quite a distance from the house to blow out in the Autumn air.** Settling down at the window overlooking the yard with a cup of afternoon tea, I glanced casually out at the scene . . . and immediately collapsed into tears.

**There, swaying in the breeze in front of my incredulous eyes, was the image of a forgotten grief.** There was the form of my lost child, the four-month old fetus that had been buried in the ground of my unconscious for nearly thirty years. I was burst wide open, without the smallest warning.

The art I had made was the sorrow I hid. It was a self portrait extended beyond what I was aware of on a conscious plane. I had been without the remotest sense of what I was depicting when I did the work. My only considerations had been aesthetic: color, form, balance, functional application. But there was the womb, there the birth canal, there the baby boy, almost as literal as I had seen him curled up in front of my screams those long years ago.

For years before, and for years since, I have been amazed over and over again by having my mind, my life, my known and unknown selves read sometimes literally by those who speak to me of what they see in my work.

Sometimes I can't directly associate with what others think they see as belonging to me or to my thinking. Sometimes I identify interpretations or reactions at a later time, perhaps when my own experiential awareness catches up with theirs. **Sometimes when sensibilities seem to overlap, although at some very extreme tangent, I then reaffirm to myself that we are all really one person, just different facets of the same Genius of Creation.** I don't believe in 'accident'. I do believe that we are much, much more than sparrows being watched.



## Conscious Decision

Earlier I referred to a point in the development of my painting when I made a marked decision concerning the work. It happened sometime during the late **Sixties when I visited a bookstore that was part of a larger artists' exhibition space.** An exhibit of artist books was in place. The majority of the work was quite strong esthetically ... but the material! Almost without exception it reflected a coming to grips with a need for struggle or with some ugly reality. Every piece seemed to present at least some suggestion of hopelessness. I saw darkness, dreariness. Dear God! Is that all there is? At that point I made that decision to deliberately show the other side of the equation, to attempt to be the conduit, through my work, of a more complete revelation and interpretation of reality. A rain puddle on a littered, cracked and dirty city sidewalk does still reflect the bright blue sky following a storm, after all ... if you look for it. A clay pot gorged painfully deep will be able to contain more nourishment, more libations, more joy. And it will do so even more lastingly when it has been through the fire ... **that fire of which my daddy Jim Thomas spoke** .... I would try to have my work somehow show this, how light exists in the deepest, darkest darks if you look for it, being even brighter because of the darkness! ... how hope can exist in despair and beauty in the apparently barren. I felt an urgent need to find the children's play sounds above the pain of their needs, **to show what exists on the other side of rain clouds, to be a part of the wind that blows those clouds away.**

I have no doubt that conscious philosophical decisions affect one's creative expression however indirectly or without apparent contrivance. After all, art is the expression of the person. I know for certain that with me whatever I believe, and certainly what I believe in deeply, I am compelled to express one way or another. This is especially true if that expression can help solve something for someone. My answer may not be theirs or yours, but at least let me show what has worked for me. I know that there is much beauty in

whatever world may be one's reality. I know that there is beauty in the spirit, no matter how deeply planted and covered up, no matter how crushed and small. That mustard seed still produces its massive life force behind a watering, a sunning. Couldn't I try to hold a watering can, or somehow serve as a reflector of a warming gentle light? I picked up my water can ... a brush.

As I now think over my work back to the point of that decision, I see my philosophy acted out. Many factors affect the evolution of work. Some are more evident than others and more specifically reflective of an attitudinal change. I think it was 1970 when a woman that I loved very deeply died. She was the mother of a man I had loved even more deeply. When she lay on her last bed, she had asked why I had taken so long to come back to visit her. What had I been doing? She had refused to eat very much during the almost two days since my last visit. I told her that I had been busy planting daffodils, one hundred of them. She wasn't much for flowers, but she nevertheless exclaimed wonderingly. One hundred daffodils! When spring comes, I must take her to my home so she could see them in bloom! When spring came she was seeing daffodils at the Source of all that is beautiful. But I painted a piece that represented those bloomings as well as her transformation. I named the painting *Daffodil, Growing* (p. 26).

Another painting shared similar sensing years later. I had visited a florist to help a friend choose wedding flowers for a daughter. While Carolyn was placing the order, I picked up a dried seed pod. I mused. If that dry, brown, seemingly dead form were buried in the earth, the ground would freeze over it. **When the frozen earth yielded to time and warming rains, the pod would open. The dull brown pod would yield a green and growing thing ... what seems like death becomes new birth.** I painted *Opens Spring*. I later renamed it *Resurrection* (p. 27).

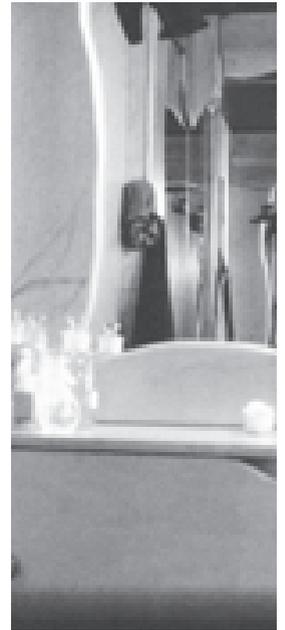
A musician often uses audience reaction as a barometer of performance, while allowing for interpretive variances. So it is that occasionally my antennae are extended to register feedback from my work. I cannot escape my need to know that I'm part of someone else's answer, so yes, I do need to share someone's same frequency. My observation has been that as my work continues to evolve, most of those who see it seem to be affected in a positive way. When that happens, I feel my mission is being accomplished. Often that is enough. Often it is just about everything. It can be the reinforcement, the validation, and the total purpose of the work. But even when the work falls short of vision, it is not defeat. That shortcoming, that need for resolution, becomes the force which propels toward continued growth.

# Resurrection

There are givers whose giving is as unselfconscious, as inherent a part of their essential selves as the mountain laurel that gives its perfume to the air. Kahil Gibran describes them in *The Prophet* as the salt of the earth. My mother was one of these. Conversely, it was difficult for her to accept sacrifice from others. So when changes in her blood cell formation indicated a pre-leukemic condition, I believe that one of her greatest difficulties was her accepting my bringing her into my home so that I could care for her as long as she was with us. The only way that I could convince her to accept was to let her understand that she would leave me with an unbearably heavy unpaid debt to her if she did not.

I had taken an early retirement at a much reduced annuity in 1980, just the year before. Mama knew that my entire life of teaching art had been originally pursued so that I could reach this point of being able to immerse myself completely in making my own art. At first the students had served as the patrons who fed me while I produced my work, but teaching had easily become as important to me as the art ... so much so that it required an enormity of energy and time that often depleted and drained me totally. How can one do anything lightly that one believes to be essential to balance, indeed to human purpose? Despite serious conflicts of conscience, the opportunity to retire early from teaching had been a providential burst of lightning for me. My mother knew it well. She had even helped me buy back time I'd worked into the retirement system, so that I could take advantage of the opportunity for an 'early out' brought about by the fiscal mess the city of Washington was in. I had bought my freedom papers with her help! So it's easy to see what a challenge it was to set the stage for working at giving birth to new art and caring for a dying heart at the same time. If I had succumbed to complaint or irritability, or was one degree unconvincing in my smiles or laughter or energy level, she would have known and interpreted it as her being a burden to me. The final truth is that it became a supreme joy. The effort was, however, wrenching until it became transformed. I did continue to work. I could roll her adjustable bed up to a position where she could look through the opened French doors leading to my studio and see me at my easel. The interruptions that the caring for her required became part of the rhythms I needed to return to the easel with a new eye each time. Our love for each other made it work.

When Mother died the creative paralysis set in. Grief had frozen the flow of anything that was a beginning. All movement was restricted to the barest survival minimums. Added to my sorrow was the frightening sense that my art, which was in many ways a sublimation and a means of my own survival, ceased to function as if it were essential to me. The fear precipitated greater fear. Had my own blood stopped flowing? Finally, struggling through the essentials of day by day and trying to find something that would precipitate action, I decided to use a huge mirror that had been in her last home as a means of increasing the visual space of my too small bathroom. Mounted, it looked too cold and rectilinear. Add a smaller, taller mirror to the opposite wall. Still too cold, too *straight*. Outline the mirrors with wood. Too framelike now, even though the shapes are irregular. Extend the wood to cover the remaining walls. Enclose the water closet, the basin, the cabinets in wooden forms, sculptural forms. What kind of forms? Listen to the wood. It will tell you. Let the grain suggest the direction of the curves. What about the dampness? Boats are wood. What do boatmakers do? Answers are pursued. Answers emerge.



There was a lyricism in working with the wood. Simple electric hand tools demanded little thought. New skills developed quickly. I followed the indications of the wood and the needs of the problem. The process was a therapy which freed a muse hiding in the wood of a tree along my path. What appears to be original evolves from and through experience.

*Photographs by the artist*

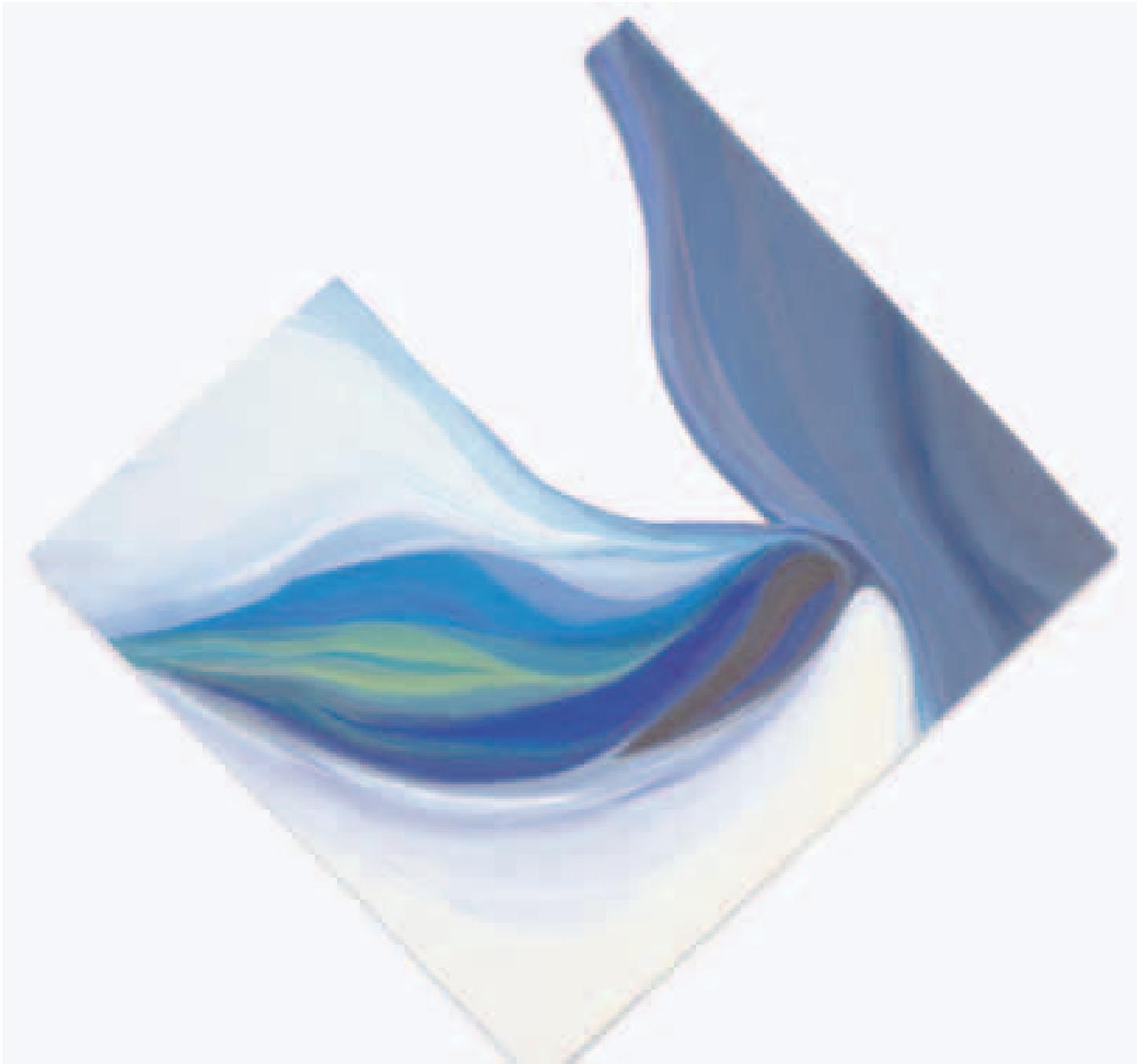
The painting on my easel, which had been abandoned to the wood in the bath, still presented a problem to me. My tenacity would not allow me to go to a new painting. This one called to me and begged to be solved. I returned to the area that I was working on when I froze. I tried to paint it light. It didn't work. I tried to paint it dark. No luck. I still couldn't find the life it needed. I read a bit of Rollo May that evening.

In *The Courage to Create* he referred to Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. He described the final stage scene which was so overwhelmingly dramatic in the pathos of its emptiness that the audience was moved to a soundless applause. That's it! I was trying to say too much. Cut the canvas away! You cut the wood away to allow shape to emerge. Why leave something in place that interferes with the rest of the canvas, doesn't serve it? A problem area can't exist if it isn't even there! Sure. I followed. I cut. Of course the canvas on its conventional stretchers collapsed, and I had to contrive an unseen support for the knifed painting. But to date that has been the last two-dimensional painting to come from my hand. Sam Gilliam came to my studio a few days later, and without asking, he turned the painting on its tip instead of its flat side. I silenced my objection to his act at the time, but later I found more than ordinary value in his action. I later suspended it from the ceiling. That canvas eventually became my first 'bird'. It had taken flight. Nothing I've done since has been restricted by what preceded. Whatever direction the work, or the wind, or the spirit chose, I followed. It is so important to listen to the work, to keep one's antennae extended in order to pick up the signals, the voices! If you work on the problem that the work itself presents, and not some forced goal, the answer can breathe itself out. The answer may be to add, to subtract, to try a different direction for a time, or for all time. Amazingly, in discovering what won't work at any given time or place, we can discover how even what seems to be death can reveal itself as only a phase in the continuum of life. Resurrection.

## From the Wall to Becoming the Space

**I am taken with the sense of art being something in which one participates and with which one interacts.** As such it becomes a broader reality to me of an actual totality, a unifying existence in almost a religious sense. I also see art as spirit in many ways.

I showed a copy of Chester Higgins Jr.'s *Feeling the Spirit* to a friend. In his "searching the world for the people of Africa," Higgins presents an overwhelming photodrama of people and places. My friend was profoundly affected by the associations that the photography summoned back from her travels. In an attempt to analyze the rationale for her response, I asked what made her reaction so extreme. Well, of course, she had been there, and Higgins is a master! Would she like to go again? The photography itself came quite close to accomplishing that ... along with her imagination and her remembering. Would she like to come even closer to reliving the actual experiences without any technological aids, without moving from her seat? I cupped my hands around the outer perimeter of a photograph that showed a lone figure leaning against a doorway, a "Door of No Return in the House of Slaves." The figure was silhouetted against an empty ocean seen through the doorway; there was nothing else in the photograph but the black and void interior of the quarters. When I lowered my face to my hands, I was there, chillingly part of the scene, the experience! A personal and virtual reality had been accomplished. I had literally entered the space in the photo. When Zenobia cupped her hands, her experience was much the same.



*Skybound, 1984*  
*acrylic on canvas over wood 44x48"*  
*collection of the artist*



*Sanseveria, 1982*  
*acrylic on canvas 72x36"*  
*collection of the artist*



*Snowbird II, 1983*  
*acrylic on canvas 60x48"*  
*collection of the artist*

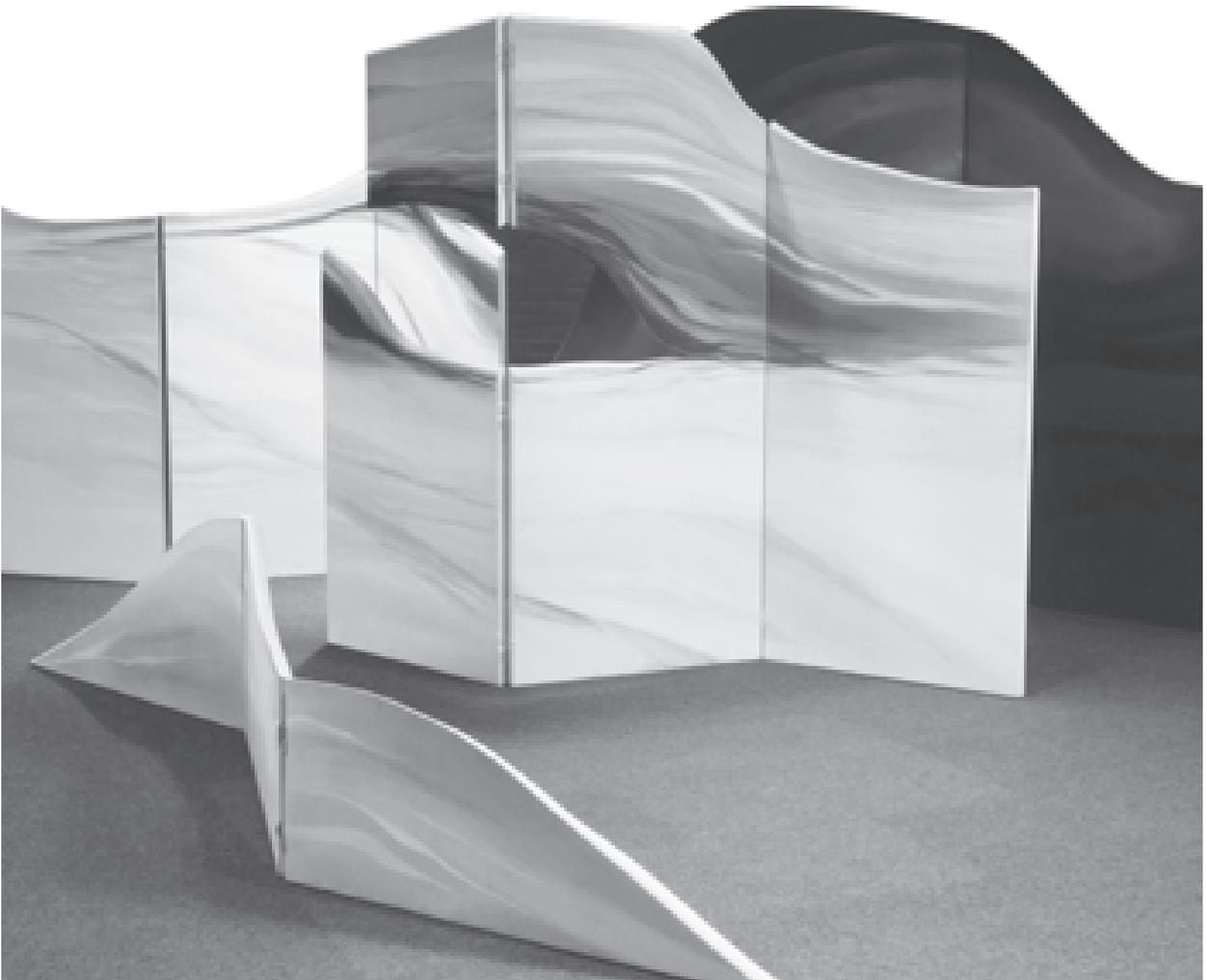
**By working large enough for a person to actually enter into a space and be surrounded by the elements in it, I am creating whatever world I choose,** restricted only by my own limitations. I can literally invite you to share a segment of any ideal I perceive. The scale of the work corresponds to human proportions. Moving through, you become an active, reactive part of the art itself. Your movement and response are the infinite element, the “live” part of what I have presented. We are as affected by environment as our sensibilities permit. I have chosen, or accepted, a mission of attempting to enhance or rekindle those sensibilities. I call it a survival necessity in these times. Everything that feeds life for me I truly want to share with you. We are all multiplied in whatever feeds our mutual subsistence. I cannot separate my philosophies and my convictions from my work. I certainly don’t choose to. In addition, everything that I have learned, all training, all experience, feeds into the work one way or another. In following the directions we follow in the making of art, there can be as many elements in the process that we are aware of as those of which we are not.

I certainly am aware of the day that I asked David Tannous, a former critic for Art in America, to visit my studio. I was very interested in getting feedback from someone “in the world” for whom I had a particular respect. He was also friend enough to tell me the truth as he saw it. **I had for quite a while deliberately hidden away from any exposure to what was happening in the outside world of art,** past or present. In attempting to find an expression as purely my own as possible, I had retreated. It was just as the seventies had become the eighties, just before my progression from two to three-dimensional expression. I myself was pleased with the work as a whole, but was eager for some objective feedback. The concept of the body of work had originated from my reaction to digging in the earth. I had watched and worked with the cyclical transitions in plant life and was filled with the relationships and rhythms and ever-unfoldingness of that life. Did my reaction translate in the abstract work? David liked the work, but he expressed what I interpreted as dismay at my not ‘letting go.’ “You are like someone who is at the top of a mountain, arms spread like wings, who doesn’t quite believe he can fly!” I knew exactly what he meant. It is one of the only ways . . . but to leap from terra firma into . . . space? I must say that I was somewhat depressed at hearing what he had to say at the time. I had become quite comfortable and satisfied with my work. However, my thirty-some years of teaching art had caught me often accusing my adult and graduate students of holding on to the comfortable perches and the predictable. I knew what he meant.

**If one is determined to fly, caution goes to the wind before all else but faith.** I would work SO LARGE that patience and pickiness would give way to abandon by mere force of space to be overcome. I purchased six flush doors made of a masonite skin over the usual wooden support system. With much reshaping and realigning of the inner supports, I cut into them and planned for a six-paneled shaped painting that was 6’8” at its highest point and spanned a width of eighteen feet. I decided that I could not give up the tactile sensuousness of the drag of the brush on canvas, nor any other qualities of the cloth. Even with the rigidity of the support of the masonite, I could not but cover the shapes with canvas. To prevent any possibility of a bleed-through or future warpage caused by using acrylics, I felt the need to seal both sides of the panels carefully before stretching them over with cotton duck. My anticipation and excitement would not allow me to wait for one side to dry before priming the second side, so I was caught with having to prop them up gingerly all over the studio to dry. At that point cousin Leonard Wesley came to Washington with his two young children . . . and was welcomed for a studio visit. While Leonard and I chatted away, the children took my huge studio for a playground. They whirled and ran in and out of my precariously placed pieces while we watched out of the

corners of our eyes. Finally Leonard couldn't handle it any more and stopped the action. But I was jubilant at what those two children had shown me! Those pieces would not comprise a six-panel painting! They were to be joined somehow to stand in space . . . to become part of the space. . . to be the space! They were to be interacted with. They would form whatever environment was indicated, was needed. And so forth and so forth. Work evolves like that . . . from many and unpredictable directions. If given its head, it will lead you into wonderlands. And so in the format of work sometimes larger than myself, I think I may have learned to fly.

*The Second Day, 1984  
acrylic on canvas over wood 60x48"  
an 11-section installation with parts  
up to 80" in height  
photograph by Gary Garrison*





*Serendipity, 1993*  
*oil on canvas over wood 21x30x9"*  
*collection of Jane Fitts*

*Flame Dance III, 1994*  
*oil on canvas over wood 26x16x6"*  
*collection of Lilian B. Cartwright and Ronald Washington*



# More Transitions

The excitement of a new way of seeing can in itself be the motivational force which propels the artist toward almost limitless possibilities. The force emanates outward like rays. To be part of the potential of that power, in order to use it and be used by it, one must first try to abandon former ways of seeing and moving. This doesn't mean losing anything that was gained through experience. It means simply letting go of the self consciousness in order to allow the now experienced intuition to flow. Then one works, with regularity and discipline, even when there is no apparent progress. These are the tools of discovery. This is when the message heard becomes the song sung.

**In 1982 I had been caught in that excitement of new vision when my paintings decided to become free standing and three-dimensional.** A year later, propelled further in that direction, I decided to explore building form into the plan from the beginning. I started out twice working toward some new possibility, but I was in no way satisfied with what was developing, so I abandoned those particular pieces. I had, however, confronted new technical problems, which I either resolved or learned from. And even at the time they were abandoned, the work had already served a very reinforcing purpose. I knew then without doubt that I would work from the concept of flat planes on a piece that became sculptural by changing the direction of those planes. At first I did my planning by making cardboard maquettes which I translated into wood, though now I no longer make models if I can avoid it. I prefer working directly, allowing the materials to follow the path of my inclination. For painting I still prefer that the texture of the canvas serve as counterpoint to the drag of the brush. So I continue to cover the wooden shapes with canvas before they are primed. These works are still very much paintings to me, although they are also sculptural in form. They are still minimalist, still with only a whisper touch of color. The scale at this point was much smaller than the six-panel painting which became eleven pieces and grew from ground level to seven feet in height.

It was 1985 and Michael Platt was teaching at Northern Virginia Community College. He dropped by my studio a day or two after I had completed two small sculptural paintings for the floor. I was happy with the outcome of the work. So was Mike. **“Wow, Burwell! What you DOIN’? I can see a roomful of these things. Can you do a gallery full? Gimme some slides of these things! I’ve got an exhibit at NOVA to curate ... and you’re IT. I want to show this new work of yours to the gallery committee and invite you to do the show.”** In order to fill a gallery with “these things” I envisioned the ones Mike was looking at as part of an entire environment of much larger shapes, forming a human scale painting into which one could walk. You see them here as ORISON PIECE (Prayer Piece). I really felt that I had found a new mission in this installation or at least a new manifestation of my original one.

I had always had problems with a certain “isolation” of the fine arts. The prevalent “attitude of Western art too often relegated its own masterpieces to positions of luxury and decoration, rather than treating them as supplements to and an extension of life. Work, often commissioned, was at the mercy of the taste of the patron or the owner. Art was for walls. Art was for pedestals. Separate it by glass. If it’s used as a functioning part of experience, then it is somehow diminished. It becomes crafts. It becomes industrial design. It can be interior decor, but not fine art. By contrast, in Africa and in the Eastern cultures, art has always been, both in philosophy and practice, as inseparable from experience and function as the spirit is from the mind and the body. I believe in this unified reality. I find no justification in separating an existence into separate parts that is inherently integrated.

The painting into which you walk becomes part of experience. I want my work to affect you, to make some difference to you. If that happens, then my human relationship with you is established. My art is not only what comes out through me. It is what you see in it, that I may not even realize. It finds its life in this coming together. Whatever I hold in common with you is what makes what you see in my work possible. The work is not complete for me until you bring yourself to it. Here, in this approach, one is literally and figuratively a viable part. Those “separate parts” may become that cohesive whole. Enter and join the dance, the show!



*This page: Section of Orison Piece*

*Next two pages: Orison Piece,  
a 32-section installation with parts  
up to 9 feet in height  
in addition to 2 separate sculptures*





# Gonwanaland

**It was Larry McNallen who saw them as Gonwanaland.** This theory of an evolutionary formation of the continents asserts that after The Big Bang, the smaller fragments of land masses floated toward each other on the face of the ocean and eventually formed the continents as we see them today. Larry saw a group of individual shapes I had built and covered with canvas during the time in which I was mindlessly churning them out without purpose or plan. I was building them more or less from energy born out of futility. The evolutionary theory just happened to play out and hold in the way that these studio pieces came to form larger compositions.

My “Big Bang” had been the devastating news about our building. A small group of artists had invested their scarce money, prolific sweat, and many months of time to bring three floors of unusable warehouse space to the point of housing six dream studios. We had redeemed scarcely a year of productive use of the ‘space’ when we got the news that the owner had sold the building. We had only a piggy back lease which did not serve us well. I had been the one who found the building and convinced the lessor to let us use the three stories that he couldn’t use. I had found the artists. I had spearheaded and directed the entire effort of rebuilding. I therefore felt the responsibility for the project caving in just at the point where we were home free. We had all known that there was a risk, but I was the one who had convinced the others to step out on little more than faith. I felt an overwhelming weight. Perhaps because of this I was the last to jump ship and watch its sinking.

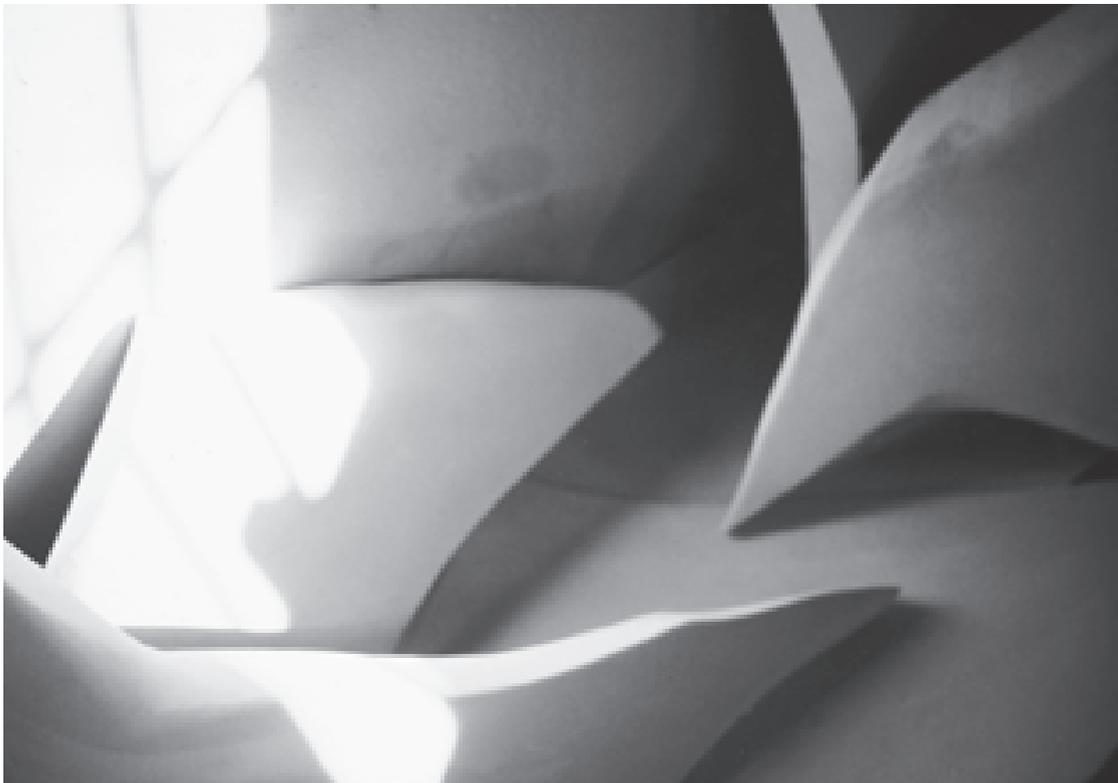
Even as the moving out and dismantling went on around me, I felt compelled to continue working at *something*. Spending money on materials or supplies was outside of possibility. The area in which I worked shrank by the day as the move progressed. I had no idea where I could move from there. But I had saved all the major scraps of wood from my large installation. This nearly discarded material was nothing more than the negative shapes left over from my installation ORISON PIECE, which had been conceived and brought to completion in that studio. I backed the scraps near the edges with 2x4 material and coaxed them into shapes which never fell far from the forms in which I’d found them. I stretched canvas over them and hung them on whatever nail I could find in the brick wall. Gradually the wall became covered with these disconnected pieces. It was at this stage that Larry saw them as Gonwanaland. **When I ran out of nails I would hang one shape over another. So they initially ‘came together’ almost on their own, as minicompositions without design. A new phase of work had emerged, a new continent discovered. A phoenix had risen.**

Eventually I was able to find studio space to share, affordable because of the generosity of Harlee Little, a photographer, and his family. Juliette Madison, Harlee’s wife, had been sidetracked from using the inner room of his studio for her own design work. As she had settled into a more lucrative career, they had also embarked on producing a wonder of a child who came to be called Adeola. We all gained.

To come upon a genius of a quiet man with uncanny sensitivity and visual perception peering at my work and studying it so often when I arrived in the mornings certainly intrigued me. I myself had earlier been intrigued by the subtle romance of how the light caressed the soft hills and valleys of these carved shapes. I introduced the paint to the canvas with a bare and minimalist touch that simply appeared to paint the shadows as they naturally fell upon the forms. The photographer's eye began to see where mine had stopped. Each time of day introduced different shadows at different angles. He saw different light playing on the existing shapings, on the shadows which I had recorded in paint and as the result of foreign lights artificially introduced from other sources. And so my own vision and the potential of my own work grew. Harlee is a gift. Enhancing one's own vision by seeing through another's eyes activates something as awesome as the beginning of a new life. Every step allows a new perspective, one not possible to experience from where we stood one step before.

**It is so important not to allow ego or fear to cause oneself to be closed to the vastness of the unknown, which is the doorway to one's own limitless potential.** And so what might have been Gonwanaland becomes whatever you think you see. The possibilities are as limitless as the thoughts and feelings and sensibilities of anyone who looks at anything with eye or any other sensor.

*Photograph by the artist  
Studio photograph of canvas stretched over  
shapes carved of sugar pine.*



*Two Fragments, 1986*  
acrylic on canvas over wood 34x48x6"  
collection of ARCO Chemical Company





*Interconnection, 1992*  
*Acrylic on canvas over wood 46x50"*  
*collection of the artist*

# An Example

**When I persist in encouraging people to seek out and address their individual creativity, many insist that they “can’t even draw a straight line.”** Well, it’s far from being just about lines, which can’t be drawn very straight without a straight-edged tool anyway! Sadly, lines are too often invented to separate our humanity into parts. When such a ‘convenience’ is accepted, then spirit, especially the creative spirit, is often relegated to a minor position. Human beings don’t need boundaries that inhibit spirit. Spirit is where we meet and spirit is where we can soar. Spirit is the life and energizer of all our “other parts”.

**The manifestation of the creative spirit in each of us is as individual as it is common in its source.** It may find its voice through the visual arts with some of us, in some it may be through music, in some through words. The sciences have neither humanistic nor progressive purpose without creative imagination as an active ingredient. It is with no less certainty that by discovering and building ourselves, we are better able to appreciate and lift each other up and thereby build a better society. Our modern schools need to return to the urgency of developing creative possibility at all levels of education, but especially in the early years. Without that, everything else we learn has no end but frustration. The muse of creation resides in all of us, even if she sleeps curled up in a far corner. We seem somehow to recognize her better if we can touch her through a visual example.

Art is easily the catalyst that binds and transforms the elements of our person into a whole person that continues to evolve. There’s a woman I know who once told her mother, an artist, that it made no sense to her to spend ‘big money’ on something to hang on the wall! Wouldn’t buying an expensive blouse make more sense? If you wanted something to hang on your walls, then you’d simply paint it yourself! I took the last statement as a sign that her muse was much more present than she had guessed. Her muse was not only awake somewhere deep inside, but probably had her arms folded and was laughing from her corner. I also remember that even years before, when this same woman was midway through college, she appeared on the doorstep of her home one weekend insisting that she needed her mother to make her another evening gown because everyone had seen the other two she owned. It was then her mother’s turn to laugh. Was she crazy? *This* mother had been going to work every day looking like Who Struck John in order to afford to support a Black American Princess away high tailing it at college. If the Ma could possibly find that kind of time, she would make something decent for herself to wear to work. That was the weekend that the mother left the house to do errands, returning hours later to find the screen door to the kitchen locked.

With arms full of heavy groceries, I yelled out to no avail. Finally, after hearing much shuffling and scurrying inside, the door slowly opened as if by itself.

Standing there was a cool smiling model of a young woman with a hand posed on one curvy hip. The gown she wore was one she had fashioned in less than four hours out of crepe, one of the most difficult fabrics to manage. The style was of Grecian gatherings, again one of the most difficult to cut and drape and sew. The only help that she had were the directions in a Vogue pattern, known for neither basic approach to construction nor simplicity of detail. The whole thing would have been the very last choice I would have made for a first and almost totally unguided sewing project. But the only input that I could have possibly laid claim to was the example of the years of my own completely separate activities which created an atmosphere in which nothing seemed to be impossible. Apparently this daughter of mine had never doubted the relationship between concept and actualization. Only her own personal need and motivation had been missing. On this fast forward Saturday morning she had convinced her grandmother to provide money for fabric out of which would materialize the muse that none of us ever knew existed. In front of me was an ultimate example of the manifestation of unchallenged possibility.

Almost thirty years later Lilian Elizabeth Burwell Cartwright Washington would abandon the lucrative corporate career in which she had found widespread success and acclaim to embrace her muse fully. Making admirable use of a hunger for lovely things, she now creates her own material world. She turns jewels of golden stars and autoptical orbs of many colored light into her own designs of beads of adornment to enhance and beautify in the mode of generations through the ages.

Even beyond the individual satisfaction of having one's vision realized, even beyond the joining of spirit to other persons and parts of life beyond us ... tapping the creative parts of ourselves is fundamental to the development of society itself, of which we are a part. We artists, which is to say each of us in one manner or other, are the magicians and the historians. In time we become the anthropological evidence of life and cultures past, present, and to be. Even if our systems of education continue to fail us, the discovery and cultivation of our personal muses is necessary if our world is to become whole. Do not betray the artist in yourself waiting to breathe life.

*Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, you can begin it, for boldness has power, genius, and magic in it.*

Goethe

*Notaway, 1993*  
*oil on canvas over wood 24x40x12"*  
*collection of Hampton University Museum*



*Masai, 1993*  
*oil on canvas over wood 40x32x12"*  
*collection of the artist*



# Chronology



## 1927

Parents met while both were teaching at A&T College in Greensboro, NC. In 1926 they left the faculty and married. James Burchett Thomas set up a photography business in Miami and bought a house for his new bride, Margaret Elizabeth Wilkinson Thomas. Margaret returned home to her mother in Washington, DC to deliver her first child, Lilian Virginia Thomas, born on June 7, 1927.

## 1929

The stock market crash of this year wiped the little family out financially and forced their move to the New York City area as part of the Depression era migration to the North.

## 1931

Brother James Burchett, Jr. was born on July 8. A sister Margaret Love, was born in 1929, but died in infancy.

## 1932-1937

Enrolled under scholarship in The Little Red School House in Greenwich Village, NYC, first school in the United States patterned after Thomas A. Dewey's design for progressive education. There was a strong orientation to an interdisciplinary curriculum based on problem solving.

Despite the tremendous educational and cultural advantages of the city and the family's strong values, Lilian remembers the embarrassment of standing on bread lines . . . and being seen there by schoolmates.

## 1934

Flew for the first time, and frequently thereafter . . . without benefit of flying vehicle, or wings of any kind. At the time it was thought to be a dream, very very vivid. But years later, when looking at a map of Manhattan, was astounded to know every configuration of the view, and could remember the details of every inlet. "I had definitely been up there before! Had I been a bird in another life, or was it an out-of-body experience?"

## 1937-1940

Attended PS46 on 'Sugar Hill' in Manhattan at 155th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue; then Stitt JHS at 164th St.

## 1940

Admitted to The High School of Music and Art in Manhattan. (HSMA)

## 1941

The family's apartment was destroyed by fire. Parents moved to Washington, DC with brother, Burchie. Lilian remained in New York to take advantage of the excellent education at HSMA and to avoid the segregated schools of the south. She lived with aunt Lilian Wethers and cousins Agnes and Doris on 162nd Street.

## 1942

Joined family in Washington, DC. During summer vacations worked as a multilith press operator and participated in WW II effort packing cartridge cases.

## 1944

As a high school senior, at age 16, completed first art commission by designing and painting twenty-six eighteen-inch wooden alphabet cubes to be eventually patented by Holgate Toys.

Graduated from Dunbar High School, then moved back to New York to attend The Art School at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Cooked and cared for "Aunt" Mena Downing, a friend of grandmother's, in exchange for room and board. Cost of education that wasn't scholarship, as well as art materials and books were contributed by mother's eldest sister Hilda Rue Wilkinson Brown and her husband, Dr. Schley Brown, who was also Lilian's godfather. If it had not been for this encouragement and sponsorship, the family could not have seen clear to foster this professional inclination . . . particularly for a NEGRO and a WOMAN in 1944! It was Hilda who told Lilian's parents that if she must be an artist, then let her teach it! Hilda, herself an accomplished artist, was THE art teacher at Miner Teacher's College in Washington.



*Sunbird, 1995*  
*oil on canvas over wood 21x46x9"*  
*collection of th artist*

*Turaco, 1995*  
*oil on canvas over wood 27x41x12" or 41x72x12"*  
*collection of Curtis Lewis*



Lilian participated in many student exhibitions while enrolled at Pratt, then considered the best art school in the country.

### **1945**

Taught at the Saturday Morning School at Pratt.

### **1946**

Left school, married. Gave birth to Lilian Elizabeth on May 13, 1947.

### **1951**

Moved again to Washington DC, the city to which her great great grandmother had come in 1865 before slavery ended. Worked for the Coast and Geodetic Survey as a cartographic draftsman until 1953. During this period, much time was spent doing free-lance commercial art jobs. Painted occasionally.

### **1955**

Began teaching at St. Margaret's School in Seat Pleasant, Maryland. Obtained miraculous results teaching 'hopeless' non-readers to read and to write little books through ART!

Was accepted into graduate art courses at Catholic University.

### **1959**

Separated from husband.

### **1960**

Over period of four years sheltered a sequence of folks in distress: several semi-orphaned children from a family of twelve; a displaced, elderly German couple; a troubled teen, a misunderstood lay teacher . . . and too late prepared to house the daughter of a West African prime minister who was massacred as part of a coup just before she was to arrive in Washington to attend Stone Ridge Academy.

### **1964**

Left St. Margaret's School to become an Illustrator/Exhibits and Publication designer for the Weather Bureau.

The restrictions of this position in large part were responsible for subsequent in-depth and compulsive search for an absolute freedom of creative expression. Began painting seriously under the excellent tutelage of Benjamin Abramowitz. The new voice was abstract expressionist. Remained in graphics until 1967.

### **1966**

First one-person show: Channel Gallery in Georgetown, Washington, DC.

### **1967**

Was conditionally exempted from completion of degree work, based on aptitude and experience in order to join the Art Department of the DC Public School System as a master teacher. Set up the art program in over a dozen schools, gave demonstration lessons and offered workshops in various art media to classroom teachers. Continued to teach on elementary level until 1974, then took a sabbatical.

### **1967, 1968, 1971**

One-person shows at DC Teachers' College; New Masters' Gallery, Alexandria VA; and Embassy of Ghana consecutively. Assisted Ambassador Ebenezer Debra of Ghana with his embassy art program.

### **1971**

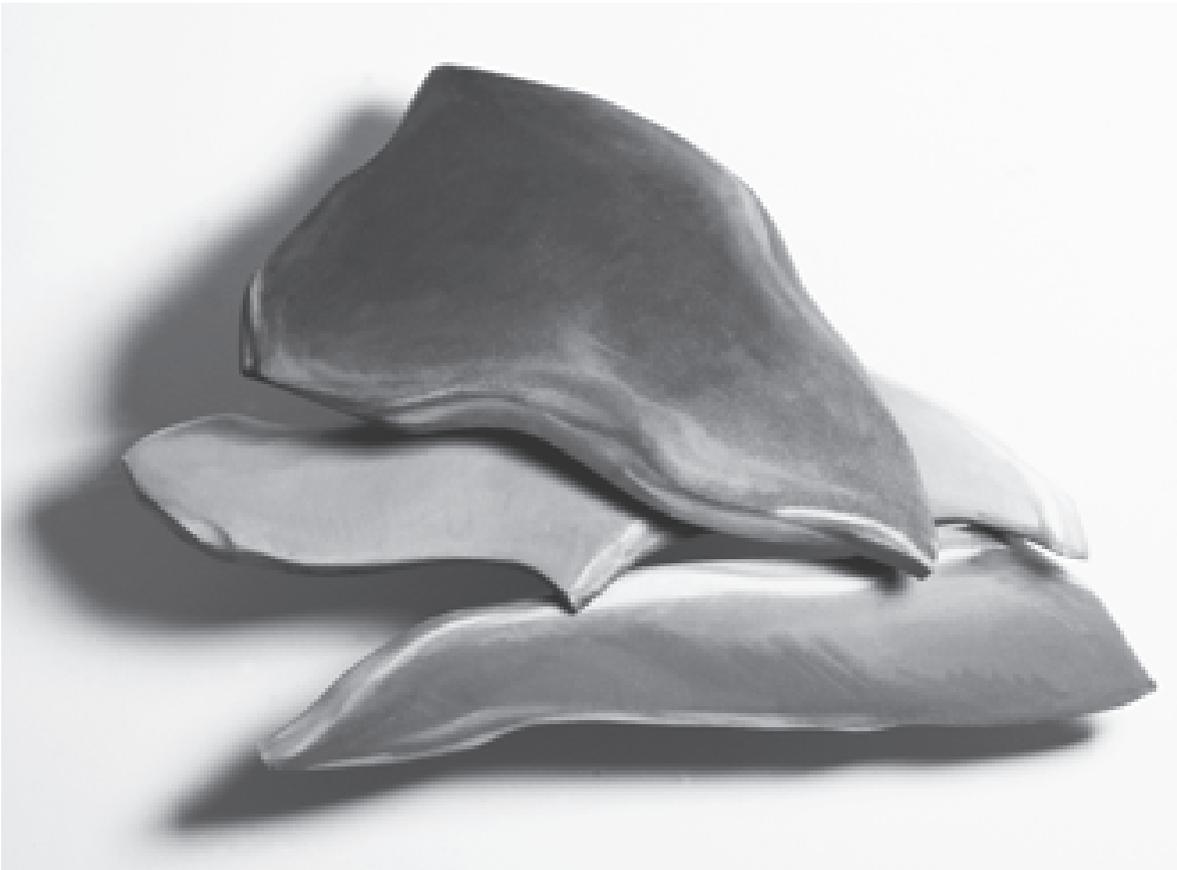
Father died; grandson Dorian came into the world to carry the torch!

Spent the summer painting, becoming local, and wandering hills in the small tuna fishing village which formed the peninsula of Isla Cristina in southern Spain, near Portugal. Painting style began to move toward forms more related to nature.



*Red Anatomy, 1969*  
*oil on canvas over wood 36x39"*  
*collection of the artist*

*Rock Spirit, 1992*  
oil on canvas over wood 20x28x9"  
collection of the artist



**1973**

Designed and set up a small learning center in Anacostia as part of an independent study to explore art as a means of unlocking the ability of students who had been systemically unsuccessful in learning to read. Theories which Burwell had held for years proved themselves out with great success in this “art laboratory.”

**1974**

Was granted BFA equivalency degree by DC Teachers’ College, now University of the District of Columbia. Designed her own MFA program in painting at Catholic University, in consortium with American University. Solo show at Salve Regina Gallery, Catholic University.

**1975**

Completed degree work for MFA work in May. Began teaching at Duke Ellington School of the Arts in September.

Designed studio built onto back of house, with sides constructed of glass patio doors. In a self-taught mode, began opening up house bit by bit by removing some walls and reconfiguring others. Continued practice of constructing built-in furniture elements in order to simplify and expand space. At times looked aghast at what she started, occasionally wept, but always eventually resolved problems in jubilant disbelief! *Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, you can begin it. . . for boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Goethe.*

**1976**

Initiated the formation of group of local artists who subsequently formed the exhibition/curatorial program at Market Five Gallery, a community supported, multicultural art center on Capitol Hill. Founding group: Joseph Edwards, Mary Ortner, Michael Platt, and Kenneth Young. Salary: No political interference, artistic or otherwise.

Participated in major group exhibitions.

**1978**

Showed paintings along with the pottery of Eleanor White at the Emerson Gallery in McLean, Virginia.

**1980**

Retired from teaching to devote professional time more completely to making art; nursed mother until she died the following spring.

**1981**

Began three year term as juror/panelist on visual art committee of the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. In service came into association with Bill Christenberry, David Driskell, Sam Gilliam, Chris Middendorf, Keith Morrison, and David Tannous.

Nominated for Mayor’s Art Award

Mother died in April, Aunt Hilda in May.

**1982**

Was convinced by Gilliam. . . “in order to be taken more seriously”. . . to take a studio away from home. Rented a studio at the Hanover Arts Group Project on “O” Street, in northwest DC. The physical separation from domestic considerations and the enormity of the space also in part fostered and allowed a new expansiveness in the sense and size of the work.

**1983**

Considered the founding directorship of The Alma Thomas Memorial Gallery an opportunity to exercise autonomy over the quality and substance of a public gallery and to free agent, Adolphus Ealey so that he could advance the interests of Burwell paintings. Even with a multidimensional mix of competent, easy to work with artists Yvonne Pickering-Carter, Adolphus, Martha Jackson-Jarvis, and Michael Platt as a co-curatorial board,

the work became too overwhelming to allow the time for the primary work of painting. Gallery closed after an extremely successful first year.

Curated first solo exhibition of Aunt Hilda's work in two of Howard University's galleries: *Hilda Wilkinson Brown: Washington Artist Rediscovered*.

Moved into a temporary studio above The Source Theatre on 14th Street.

### **1984**

Began three-year term on board of directors of the Arlington Arts Center; Served on the exhibitions selection committee.

Again nominated for the Mayor's Art Award.

Located an abandoned warehouse near 15th Street in northwest Washington. Coordinated its development as studio space for artists. Began the cooperative effort which produced a dream for six.

Completed *Second Day*, her first environment encompassing three-dimensional work. The installation was exhibited in sculptural show curated by Sam Gilliam for the Martin Luther King Library gallery space in DC the following year.

### **1985**

Decided to leave the house in Seat Pleasant, Maryland to find a small nest of an apartment in town nearer the new studio. "Recycled" it's equity into a complete restructuring of Aunt Hilda's LeDroit Park house into a bi-level apartment to live in and a separate apartment to rent out. (Out came just about ALL the interior walls this time!) For 18 months lived in a series of temporary places . . . ranging from a suite of rooms at Yvonne Pickering-Carters magnificent house . . . to a showerless studio. . . to a closet sized room near the renovation site. Two months before renovation was complete, the studio building on P Street was lost to speculators.

Installation *Orison Piece* (Prayer Piece) was completed. First 3-dimensional, free standing work planned to create its own environment. Exhibition opened at Tyler Gallery at Northern Virginia Community College.

### **1986**

Moved into partially renovated home w/o hot water or stove just one month before an electrical fire broke out in the upstairs apartment., leaving even the least damaged areas barely habitable. As guardian for another of mother's sisters, Ethel, Lilian carried the sorrow of Ethel's amputation and blindness with a very heavy heart. A ten-year period of weathering incredible difficulties served to turn what was once faith into absolute knowledge of the source of love and of strength. After going through such overwhelming trials one KNOWS that just about anything can be overcome! The source of the creative spirit is limitless and the work gives voice and proof to it. It all works together.

Work shown at Bethune Museum-Archives along with that of Hilda Wilkinson Brown, Elizabeth Catlett, May Howard Jackson, Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Lois Mailou Jones, Viola Leake, Debra Attiya Melton, Winnie Owens-Hart, Yvonne Pickering-Carter, Frances Raiford, Sylvia Snowden, Alma Thomas, and Denise Ward-Brown among other Washington women artists.

### **1987**

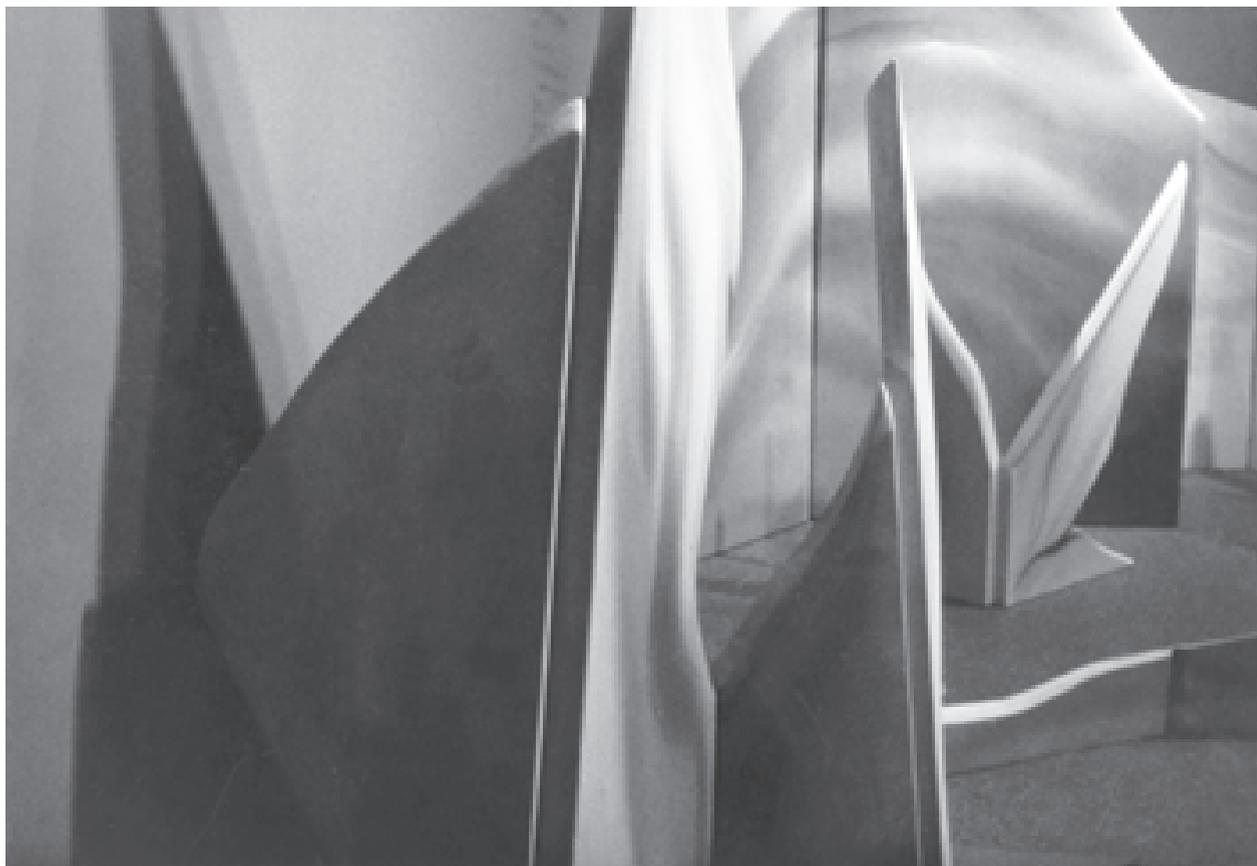
Served as curatorial consultant at the Sumner Museum and Archives in Washington, DC for one year.

*Orison Piece* became part of a two-person exhibition with Yvonne Pickering-Carter in Aurora, New York at Wells College on Cayuga, one of the Finger Lakes.

Group show with Ward-Brown, Pickering-Carter, Harris, Kennedy, Love, Martin, Platt, F. Smith, Snowden, and Stoval at George Washington University Gallery: *Afro-American Art Now*.

### **1988**

*Orison Piece* traveled to The Craftery in Hartford, Connecticut as part of a one-person exhibit including paintings.



*Section of Orison Piece, 1985-1986*  
*Photograph by the artist*

Recipient, individual artist's grant, DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

Included in *Coast to Coast: Women of Color* exhibit which traveled to Houston, NYC, Radford, DePauw, Baltimore, and Chicago from 1988 through 1990.

Used one of the studios of photographer Harlee Little up until the time that a 1907 caved-in brick carriage house was discovered five blocks from home. Well . . . you can guess the rest! Even though the rusted contents and the then partially roofed two stories looked as if it had been bombed, it had four twelve-inch thick walls and a decent foundation. The contractor who had used it for storage, was speechless when he saw what Granny had done with it once her sleeves, and those of a strange mix of sub contractors, were rolled up with a vengeance. The junked garage he sold hid a once-and-for-all-time dream. Studio nomad no longer!

### **1989**

Began three-year term on board of directors of Renwick Alliance, Smithsonian Institution. As education coordinator, designed and coordinated a giant public quilting bee in the Renwick's Grand Salon while Gladys Frye's Antbellum Quilts were on exhibit at the museum. Later arranged a forum style seminar exploring the interrelationship of crafts and the fine arts.

### **1990**

First and only Museum show in Europe: *African-American Contemporary Art*. Joined group of Washington artists to show at the Museo Civico D'Arts Contemporanea in Gibellina, Italy.

Showed at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum in *Gathered Visions* with 14 other Washington women.

Section of work purchased by ARCO Chemical Company.

Exhibited first body of sculptural paintings for the wall . . . shadow-like whispers of paint on canvas over carved shapes. Shown with Harlee Little's sensitive photography of the same pieces. O Street Studio Gallery in DC.

### **1991**

"Always a bridesmaid . . ." Nominated again for Mayor's Art Award.

### **1992**

*Lilian Burwell: Constructional Painter* exhibit at National Capital Park Service Headquarters at Haine's Point, VA. Featured as Woman of the Year.

### **1993**

In a two-person show at Isobel Neal's Gallery in Chicago. (Believes that need to present persona as no pushover may have brought the snap of strong color back into work!)

### **1995**

Jazz y Son, an exhibition of work by former faculty and alumnae shown at Pratt Manhattan Gallery and Rubelle and Norman Schafler Gallery at Pratt in Brooklyn.

Exhibition at Museum of Science and Industry. Members' Lounge Gallery, Chicago. Group show with Chicago artists.

### **1995**

One-person show at Arnold and Porter Gallery, Thurman Arnold Building, Washington, DC

### **1996**

Curated and participated in the exhibition *Environments of Spirit, Mind, and Space: The World We Create* at the Nathan Cummings Foundation in New York City. Showed with Sam Gilliam and Yvonne Pickering-Carter.

Completed first major commission, a sculpture for Northern Trust Bank in Chicago covering two stories of wall space in an open stairwell.



*on page 12:*

*top left: Red Anatomy, 1969 / oil on canvas 36x39" / collection of the artist*

*bottom left: Seabourne, 1982 / acrylic on canvas 44x54" / collection of the artist*

*right: Two Fragments, 1986 / acrylic on canvas 48x34x6" / collection of ARCO Chemical Company*

**The relationships of art to total space to life to spirit to nature continue to manifest themselves in her expressions.**

WE SEEK IN ART WHAT WE FIND NOWHERE ELSE. Potentiality inheres in such objects. Lilian Thomas Burwell's sculpted images induce an experience of heightened lyricism. It has been a constant throughout her career.

For me, Burwell's friend, the mystery from where the poetic quality is drawn is nestled in her individuality. We are invoked to see more, to have her reveal more. Her work is vested in possibility; improvisation conceals itself in the cloak of her metaphors. The precise delicacies that Burwell wrings out of humble materials, with implications barely whispered, reminds us that melody coexists... is entwined... with the dissonance of modern miasmas.

Expression in our age reflects unlimited aspects. Here is a love of nature, a note of the grace of movement, a respect and tenderness that approaches the devotional. Burwell avoids the easily achieved flashy eye-catching tricks and probes for an essential core of sense.