

THESIS

VESSELS

Submitted by
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR
SUPERVISION BY JENNIFER MCLERRAN ENTITLED VESSELS BE
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OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

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Advisers

Department Head

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

VESSELS

My artwork serves as a means of exploration of ideas and of representations of experience. I choose to deal with symbols because, as carriers of meaning in the context of various cultures, symbols afford an exploration of the varied ways in which meaning is made. Use of symbols from diverse cultures allows me to comparatively examine the systems of thought from which such images arise.

I intend to make no definite assertion in my work regarding the nature of symbol systems or of the meanings conveyed through such symbols. I only intend tentative explorations. The lack of definite assertion in my work is appropriate to its thematic concerns -- symbols of birth, images of time's passage and its manifestation in the process of aging, and conceptions of death and an afterlife -- since any understanding of these aspects of experience must ultimately remain tentative. I aim to express a sense of this mystery in my work, but to do so with a sense of irony.

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My artwork serves as a means to explore ideas and representations of experience. I deal with symbols of diverse cultures as a means of exploring the varied ways in which meaning is made. I intend to make no definite assertions in my work regarding the nature of symbol systems. I only intend tentative explorations.

My artwork deals with symbols as conventional carriers or "vessels" of meaning. The common appearance of boats in my work stems from the practical physical function of boats as carriers or vessels and their concomitant cross-cultural symbolic function as images corresponding to significant passages (or "rites of passage") of human experience. In many cultures, boats symbolize passage from one state of existence to another, passages both physical and non-physical which are often accompanied by elaborate, culturally-prescribed ritual. My work addresses such passages and often portrays the objects and/or environments involved in the rites accompanying them (for example, labyrinths, burial vessels, cauldrons, etc.).

The thematic concerns in my work -- concepts of birth, concepts of time's passage and its manifestation in the process of aging and conceptions of death and an afterlife -- are appropriate to explorations of the notion of context-bound determination of meaning. Dealing with a

number of mysterious elements of experience which are direct and unmediated and thus hard to characterize in words and images is appropriate to the non-definite, inconclusive explorations in my work. Rather than following a hypothesis regarding symbols and their meanings to a logical conclusion, I am drifting, never firmly anchoring meaning to an underlying, natural order. Meaning shifts with context and multiple contexts imply absence of a framing, delimiting viewpoint.

Not only is boat imagery appropriate to conveying such a sense of drifting, of lack of anchorage, but it is appropriate to a depiction of individual experience as characterized by such a dynamic, as well. The uncertain, unstable quality of the experience of life's passages (from childhood to adulthood, from adulthood to old age, from life to death, etc.) is often conveyed with images of boats. Notable examples include the American painter Thomas Cole's series of four paintings depicting childhood, youth, adulthood and old age, The Voyage of Life (1842), and the nineteenth century German artist Kaspar David Friedrich's painting The Stages of Life (1835). Images of the passage from life to death and an afterlife include Charon, the ferryman on the river Styx from Classical Greek mythology and the barques of Egyptian funerary art. Boat imagery is extended to portrayal of rites of passage of collective identities in the form of the ship. Notable examples are found in nineteenth century art (c.f. Gericault's Raft of

the Medusa, 1819) wherein the collective body of mankind was often portrayed as in troubled waters. Encoding the stages of life in boat and ship imagery constituted an expression of both personal and collective experience of the passages of life.

The passage through time is a common theme of other symbols I employ. The scythe is an attribute of Father Time and has come to symbolize death as the Grim Reaper, reflecting a view of death divorced from the original cyclic conception conveyed by the scythe as an agricultural implement. The hourglass, portrayed with wings to convey a stereotypical, humorous view of time as fleeting, is used. I often portray the moon in several phases in one painting, employing such a depiction as a conventional representation of time's passage. The moon is often portrayed in its various phases as an expression of the analogous permutation of the human body throughout a lifespan. It further conveys a view of cyclic progression as a characteristic of the physical world. Just as the boat commonly symbolizes life's journey, the passage through physical existence, and serves as a substitute for the body after death, carrying the soul into the afterlife, so the cradle (and especially the boat cradle) serves as a substitute for the physical body which the infant recently left, constituting the womb rediscovered.

I often employ a rather theatrical, or temporal, presentation in my work. The most obvious example of this

can be found in Even Death is Reduced to the Abstract, which extends from ceiling to floor, much like a theatre backdrop. Such a theatrical context implies a temporal context for the image presented, which is itself a symbol of time: the scythe. Symbols operate within a temporal context, their meanings changing over time. Any static presentation (as in a two-dimensional artwork) must freeze a moment in time, extracting and isolating an object from the temporal context which establishes its meaning. I hope to introduce an element of irony when I employ a symbol of temporality (the scythe) and present it in a manner reminiscent of a traditionally temporal artform (the theatrical) in an artform which, conventionally, is non-temporal.

In Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory, Lucy Lippard calls artists "natural archeologists."¹ Since, as she posits, symbols carry with them overlays of meaning due to an accumulation of diverse meanings ascribed to them in their passage through various cultural contexts, artists dealing with symbols act as archeologists, excavating layers of meaning, revealing multi-leveled contexts.

By creating a sandstone-like surface which is subsequently carved into, I hope to, first of all, convey a sense of something archeological, something old, something excavated. Carving into the surface to create images is analagous to the necessity of archeologic "excavation" to get to the past meanings of symbols. Secondly, I hope to

create forms resembling petroglyphs or pictographs. The petroglyphic, pictographic quality of the images, mostly devoid of modelling or other representational devices, stresses their function as symbols. Such a presentation is intended to cause a recognition of such objects as representations of abstract concepts rather than as illusionistic depictions of objects functioning in the physical world.

The use of natural contexts in my work, such as broad expanses of landscape or sea, refers to the use of a natural context to reinforce meanings of symbols which serve the ends of those prescribing the meaning. Often, in order to cause a particular view to be regarded as primary or "natural" it is represented as embedded in the "natural order of things."

Interpretations of what is perceived as "natural" behavior for certain groups of people have served dominant ideologies many times and in many varied forms throughout Western history. Gender-specific "natural" attributes too various to mention have changed drastically through time, but have always been perceived at the time of their application as natural and invariant.

The scythe used as the central image in Even Death is Reduced to the Abstract further addresses the function of world-view and context in determination of a symbol's meaning. The symbolic meaning of the scythe was originally tied to its agricultural function; however, in its passage

through cultural history its meaning changed dramatically, reflecting a changed world view. An attribute of the Roman god, Saturn, in Classical culture its reaping function reflected Saturn's role as the god of agriculture. Through a later confusion (during the Renaissance) of Saturn's Greek variation, Cronos, with Chronos, the god of time, Saturn and his attributes (including the scythe), once connected with the cyclic nature of time as commonly experienced in an agricultural context, became connected instead to the Grim Reaper.² The Grim Reaper, or Father Time, reflected a more contemporary view of death as a termination rather than as the beginning of a new cycle.

To summarize, I use symbolic depictions of human experience drawn from the histories of various cultures. I combine such images, juxtaposing historical periods and cultural mind-sets in an attempt to reveal the contingent and relative nature of the meanings commonly ascribed to conventional symbols. The indefinite, non-discursive nature of these images adds a mysterious element appropriate to the subject matter.

ENDNOTES

1. Lippard, Lucy. Overlay, Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983, p. 8.
2. Panofsky, Edwin. Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance. New York: Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 69-93.

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Lippard, Lucy. Overlay, Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

Panofsky, Edwin. Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance. New York: Oxford University Press, 1939.

PLATES



Plate 1. Even Death is Reduced to the Abstract.



Plate 2. Even Death is Reduced to the Abstract, detail.



Plate 3. Pearls of Wisdom.



Plate 4. Pearls of Wisdom, detail.

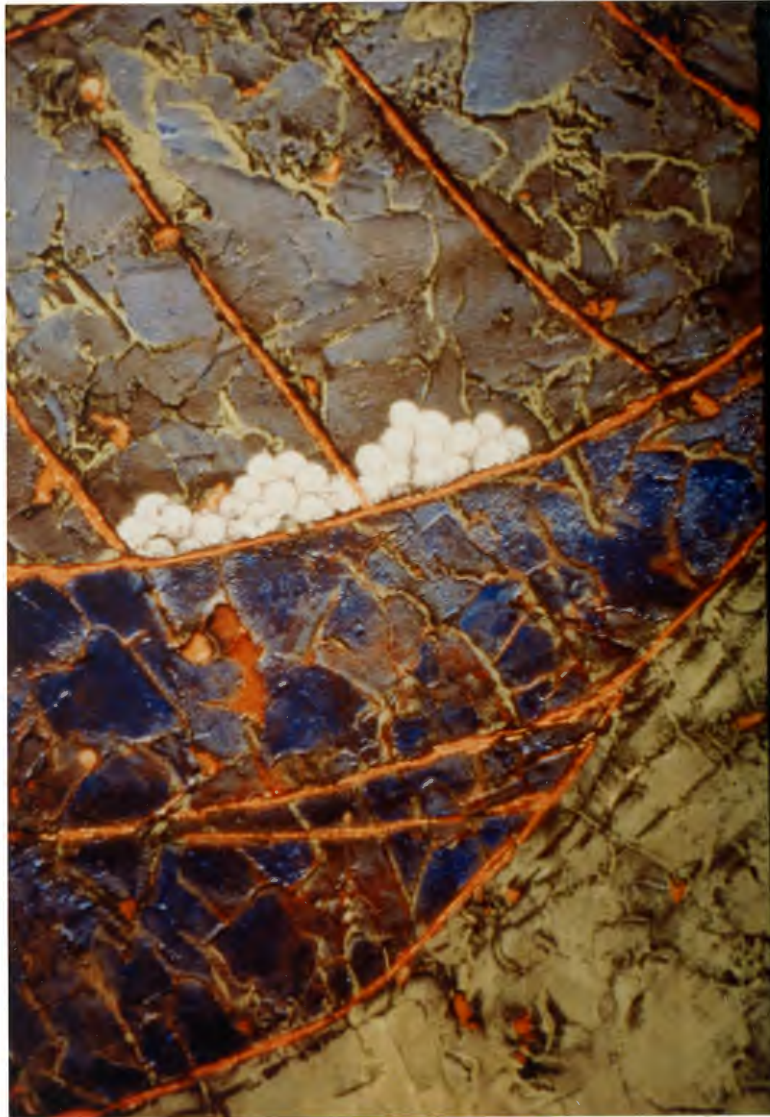


Plate 5. Pearls of Wisdom, detail.



Plate 6. The Hand that Rocks the Cradle.

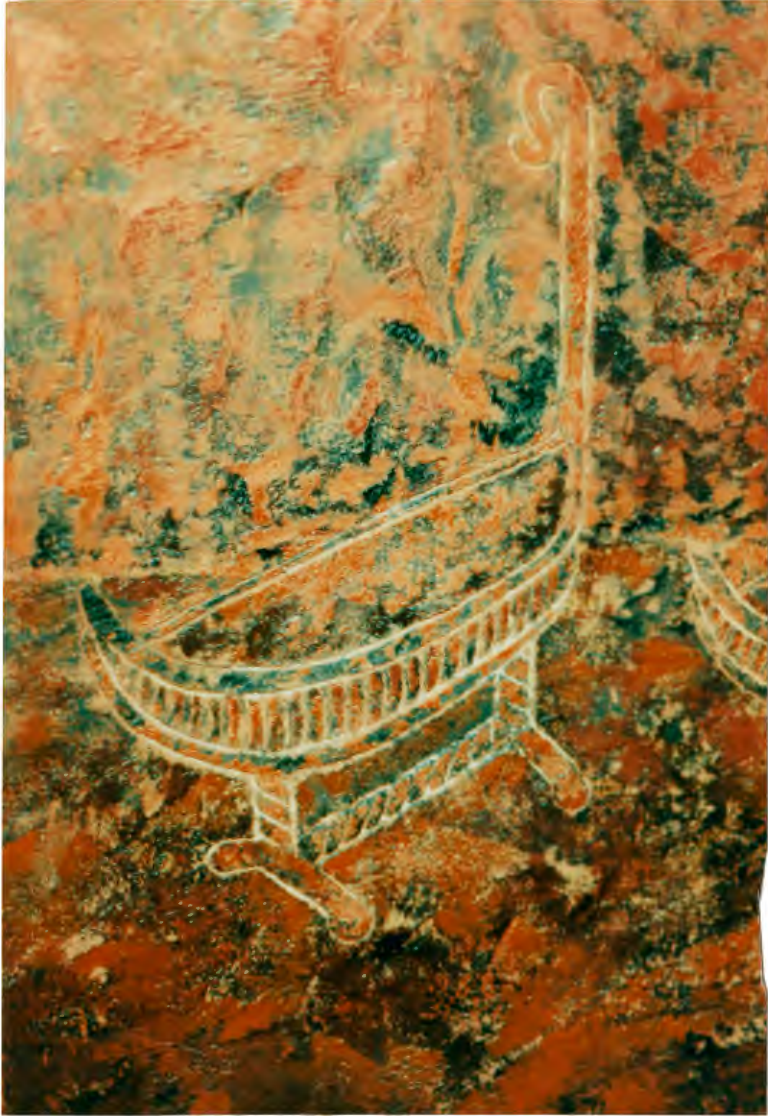


Plate 7. The Hand that Rocks the Cradle, detail.



Plate 8. Cerridwen.



Plate 9. Cerridwen, detail.

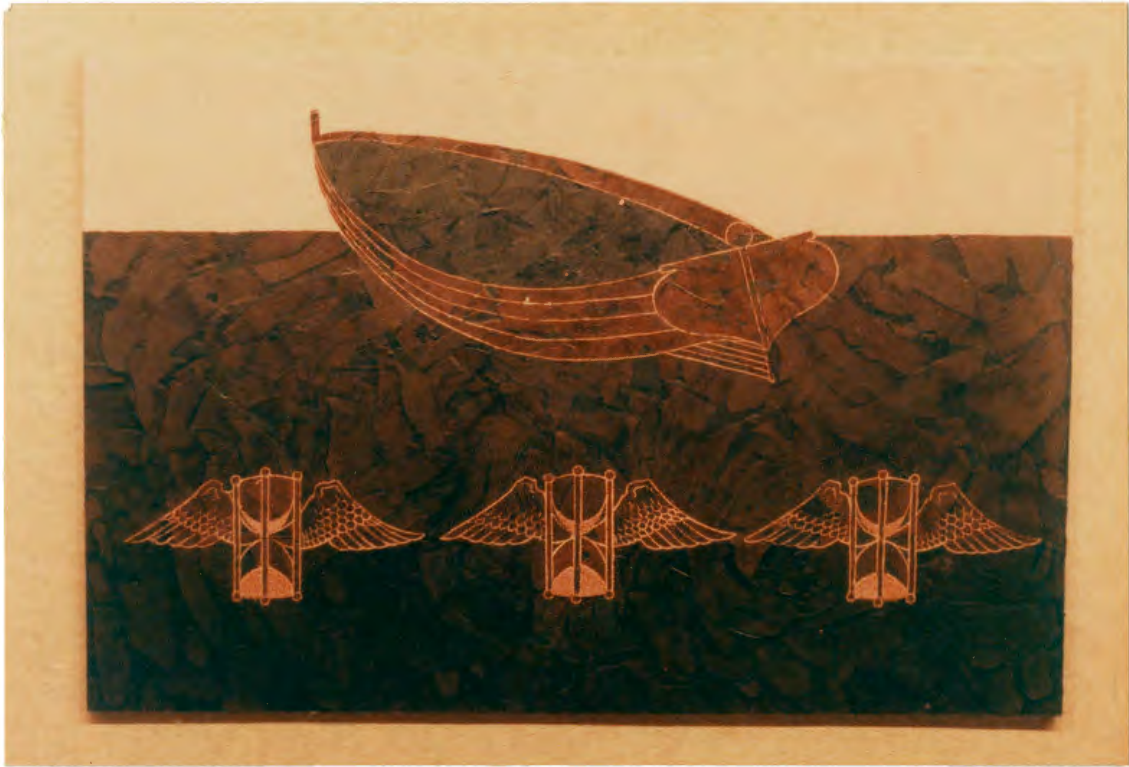


Plate 10. Time Flies.



Plate 11. Time Flies, detail.



Plate 12. Temporal Painting.



Plate 13. Temporal Painting, detail.



Plate 14. Maya.



Plate 15. Maya, detail.



Plate 16. Broken Vessels.



Plate 17. Pueblo Boat Burial.



Plate 18. Sushi Boat Burial.



Plate 19. Reed Boat.



Plate 20. Mummy Boat.