

THESIS

TRADITION & INTERPRETATION

Submitted by
Kari Lennartson
Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall 2003

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

October 29, 2003

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY KARI LENNARTSON ENTITLED "TRADITION & INTERPRETATION" BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

1. **Advisor**

2.

3.

4.

5. **Department Head**

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

TRADITION & INTERPRETATION

I am of the belief that the human mind is hardwired to create order out of disorder. I begin each work with a rhythmic web of marks, lines, and colors which stretch across the painting surface. It is important to integrate the unexpected into my work: with every misstep which occurs, there is an opportunity to take the image in new directions. As I am interested in creating a varied and complex surface, I work back and forth between the addition and subtraction of materials. I liken my subtractive process to the excavation of earth which an archeologist undergoes when searching for remnants of the past.

Thematically, my artwork echoes several motifs found within Old Norse folk art and literature, appealing a deep yearning for other worlds, remembered and imagined; nostalgia is a potent force within modernism. Motifs utilized include valkyries, telemark skiing, viking longboats, and the spiritual in nature. Archeologist Marie Louise Stig Sørensen relates, "material culture is at the same time active and pliable, meaningful but not absolute." The historical and mythological motifs explored within this body of work recognize the limitations and malleability of interpretation in regards to both Scandinavian historiography and contemporary art. The imagery which emerges from my artistic process owes its inspiration and existence to the initial marks, lines, and colors, and to all of the subsequent layers in between.

Kari Lennartson
Department of Art
Colorado State University
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This thesis is dedicated to my husband and best friend,
Ryan Lennartson,
for his brilliant love and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

i	Title Page
ii	Signature Page
iii	Abstract
iv	Dedication
v	Table of Contents
1- 6	MFA Thesis
6	Bibliography
7-14	Images

Kari Lennartson
MFA Thesis

Tradition & Interpretation

"All tradition is change."¹
-Barbro Klein & Mats Widbom

CONTENT & MOTIF

The idea of tradition in terms of art, culture, and history constantly undergoes change. Due to its living and malleable nature, these areas of study inspire widely differing interpretations. As an artist, the ways in which I relate to tradition are subject to this fluctuation. This propensity was addressed by John Berger, in his 1972 book, Ways of Seeing, in which Berger discusses the mystification of art. Mystification is the process by which reality is deliberately obscured. Berger points out that "History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past".² Our inability to understand and qualify the present often creates a dubious idealization of the past. Consequently, historical artwork is often endowed with inflated authority and influence. In the words of Stuart Piggot, "What they [historians] perceive and construct is a past-as-known within the limits of the evidence available, and their own

¹ Klein & Widbom, Swedish Folk Art, 7.

² Berger, Ways of Seeing, 11.

capabilities, inadequacies, and background. "³ The same applies to artists who garner ideas from art history and other areas of academic inquiry.

My own artwork is intimately involved with an investigation of history and tradition, its archetypes and implications. As a second generation American whose family continues to honor the cultural traditions of its ancestors, I have inherited a desire to recreate this cultural identity as it applies to my own life. Scandinavian folk art and culture is a foundation upon which my own artwork rests. Many of the motifs found within folk art, both historical and contemporary, communicate both ritual and spiritual elements. I admit that these images appease a deep yearning for others worlds- remembered and imagined. It has been said that such nostalgia is a potent force within modernism. In exploring historical and cultural motifs in my artwork, I have sought to align myself with the river of story, of the unconscious, of memory, and of sensibility which pour through me, and help me to understand these traditions on a personal level. This process allows me to actively seek and create a cultural identity which is inspired by, yet distinct from ancestral culture.

As a woman, I am particularly interested in historical and cultural images of women. The presence and significance of female imagery in my artwork represents a blurry continuum of myth and history. In relation to my own personal journey as a woman and as a Scandinavianist, I am interested in women's journeys. Historically, this includes powerful Viking women as well as 19th and 20th century Scandinavian immigrant women. In 1912, at the age of

³ Piggott, The Druids, 11.

19, my grandmother Thora Augusta Rom was infected with the America Fever, as it was commonly known, and immigrated to the United States. Her bravery and strength, like that of so many other immigrant women, inspire me to investigate the aura and nostalgia which halos their memory. The courage inspired by these examples is also echoed by mythical figures including the enigmatic valkyrie, or battle maiden. Valkyries represent another motif prevalent in my artwork. "**Sleipnir & Valkyrie**" (Image #1) depicts a valkyrie accompanying Odin's⁴ horse to Valhalla, the hall of the slain. Nostalgia for worlds imagined is illustrated by "**Valkyrie- The Dream**" (Image #2); the female figure in the foreground imagines herself a valkyrie darting overhead.

In conjunction with the real and imagined journeys of women, I incorporate the motif of the longboat, a quintessential symbol of Viking culture. Although most Viking warriors were men, archeological and contemporary historical accounts attest to the presence of Viking women, albeit a rarity within Old Norse society. In addition, boats were traditionally female engendered objects, and often given feminine names. For me, the longboat vessel represents both historical and mythical references to women. "**Maiden Voyage**" (Image #3) represents a lone female figure standing at the prow of a viking longboat.

PROCESS & TECHNIQUE

Chaos is wonderfully fertile ground upon which to explore the ideas of tradition and change. Although I intentionally create a chaotic surface, I gradually translate that surface into what I prefer to call *organized chaos*. I

⁴ Odin is an Old Norse god.

begin each work with a rhythmic web of marks, lines, and colors which stretch across the painting surface. It is important to integrate the unexpected into my work: with every misstep that occurs, I am given new opportunities to pull the imagery in fresh directions. I am of the belief that the human mind is hardwired to create order and meaning out of disorder. The analogy that I often use describes my experience growing up in a log cabin in Minnesota. Just before sinking into sleep each night, I would search for faces in the texture of the wood grain in the logs adjacent to my bed. This search is equivalent to my hunt for imagery within the web of marks upon my paper. In "**Annikki**" (Image #4), remnants of this process remain, hinging together a sense of past and present.

The layering of mixed media also contributes to the exploration of imagery. I am interested in creating a richly complex surface of smooth versus rough, and shiny versus matte qualities. To create this surface I work back and forth between the addition and subtraction of materials. I liken my subtractive process to the excavation of earth which an archeologist undergoes when searching for remnants of the past. In my artwork, the old layers often emerge through the physical scratching of the paper surface. In "**Saunalle**" (Image #5), this technique is incorporated throughout the piece. A close-up (Image #5a) reveals the texture created by this process. In a sense, my method of layering materials is akin to the process of mystification. Once again, mystification implies the deliberate obscuring of imagery and/or ideas. As such, my artwork spans a continuum between abstracted imagery and non-

objectivity. I intentionally veil and unveil my imagery in order to impart a sense of mystery and the unexpected in my work.

I use a variety of materials to create my artwork, including acrylic paints and mediums, pumice, mica, glass beads, charcoal, conte, pastel, ink, graphite, cattle markers, oil bars, and collage elements. Generally, I prefer to work on paper. I enjoy the fragility and flexibility of paper, as well as its smooth surface. Sensitive to archival considerations, my artworks begin on carefully selected pH neutral paper which I triple prime with acrylic gesso in order to give the paper surface increased durability and imperviousness.

The methods I use to present my artwork harkens back to the tradition of folk art. I sometimes choose to adhere my works on paper to a wooden box frame, thus creating an art object. An example of this is "Heidrun", (Image #6). Another method I employ, especially for larger works on paper, is to hang the artwork like a woven tapestry, as in "Oseberg I" (Image #7). Here, the artwork hangs loosely out from the wall and is reminiscent of the way in which traditional textile art is displayed.

To conclude, archeologist Marie Louise Stig Sørensen relates, "material culture is at the same time active and pliable, meaningful but not absolute."⁵ My works on paper concur with Sørensen's statement on two levels. First, the historical and mythological motifs explored within this body of work recognize the limitations and malleability of interpretation in regards to traditional Scandinavian culture. Secondly, the use of paper, the intensive layering of materials, and the scraping away of the surface signal the flexibility of the

⁵ Sørensen, Gender Archeology, 81.

process and the variability of its outcomes. The imagery which emerges from this process owes its inspiration and existence to the initial marks, lines, and colors, and to all of the subsequent layers in between.

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Klein, Barbro, and Mats Widbom, Swedish Folk Art, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, New York, copyright 1994

Piggot, Stuart, The Druids, Praeger, New York, copyright 1975

Sørensen, Marie Louise Stig, Gender Archeology, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, MA, copyright 2000



Image #1 "Sleipnir & Valkyrie" 2002
42" x 43.5" Acrylic & Mixed Media on paper on Wood



Image #2 "Valkyrie- The Dream" 2003
9" x 7" Acrylic & Mixed Media on Wood

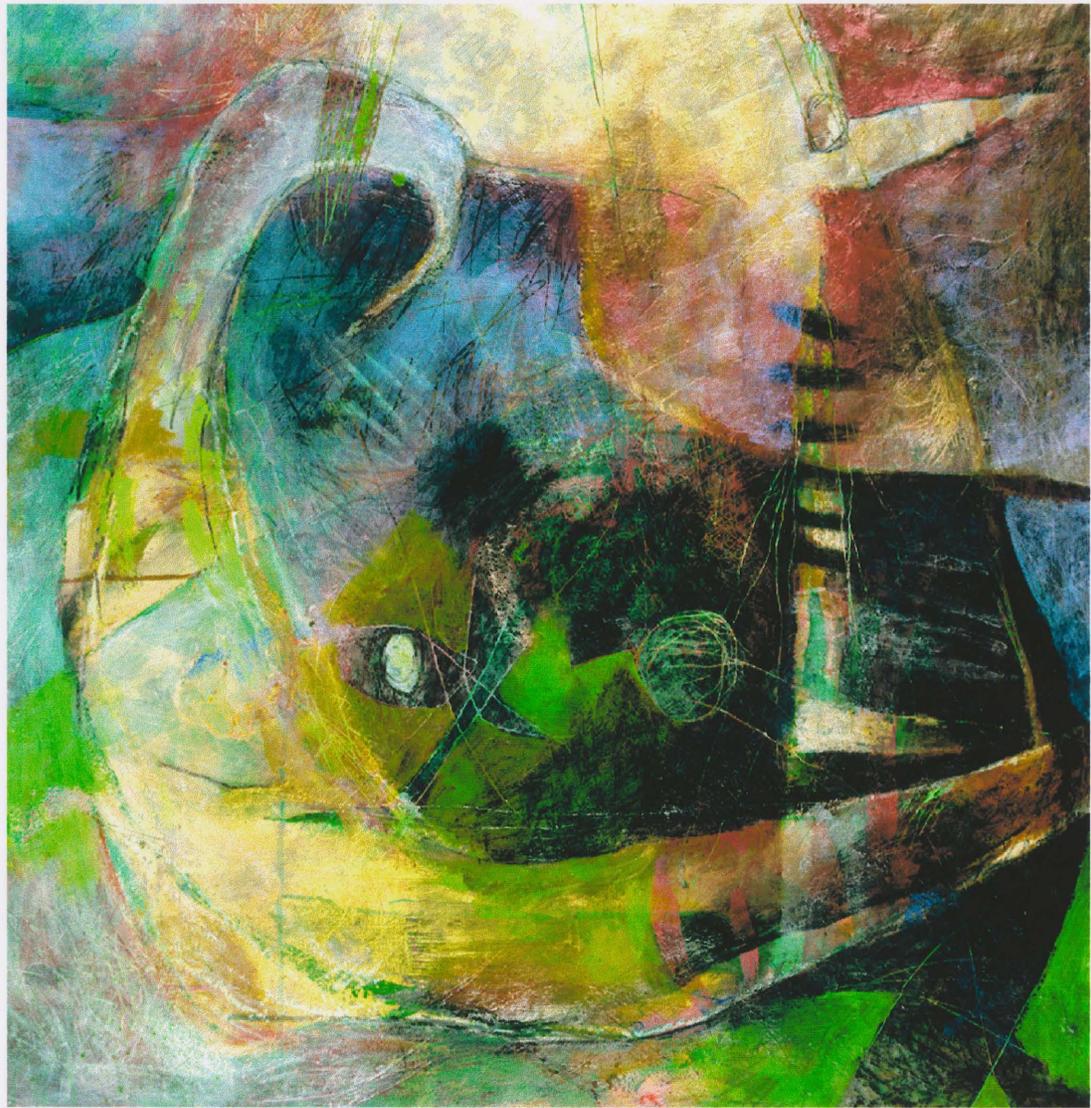


Image #3 "Maiden Voyage" 2002
42" x 43" Acrylic & Mixed Media on Paper on Wood

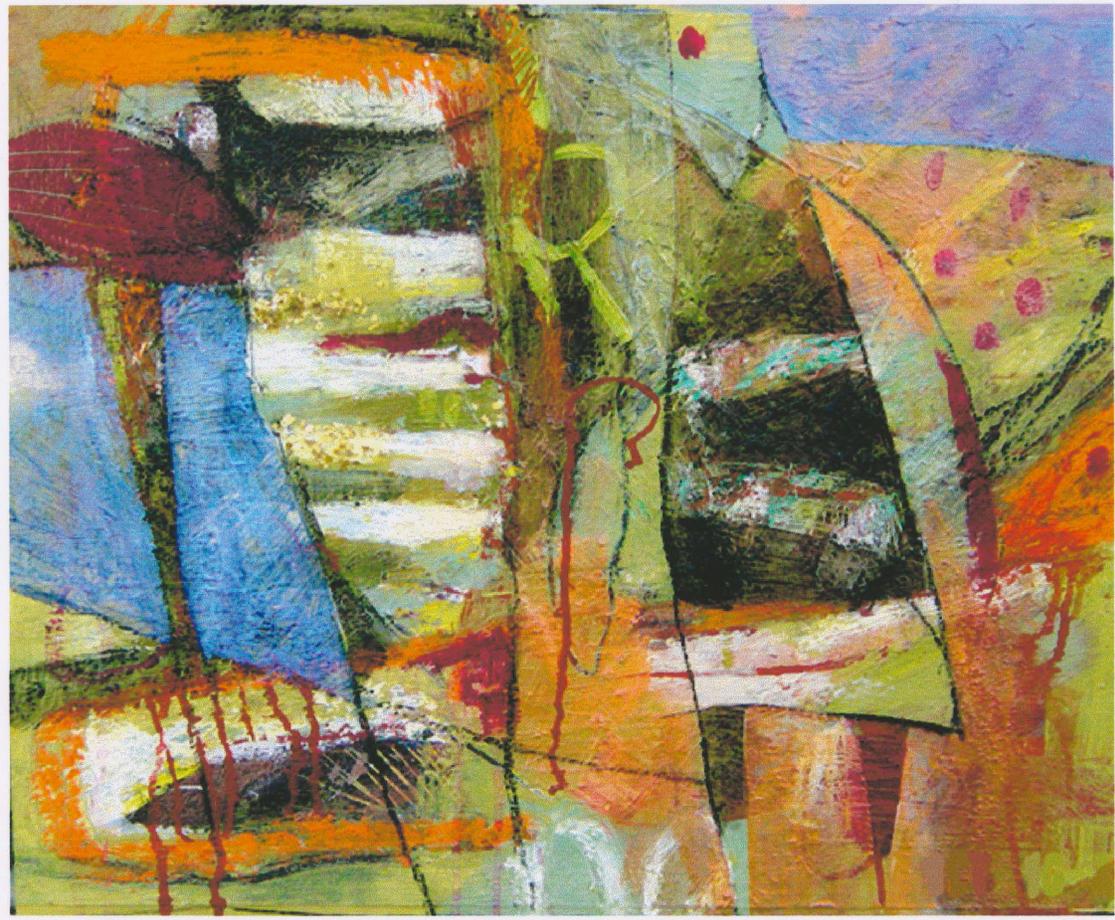


Image #4 "Annikk" 2003
18.5" x 20.5" Acrylic & Mixed Media on Paper on Wood



Image #5 "Saunalle" 2003
20" x 22" Acrylic & Mixed Media on Paper on Wood

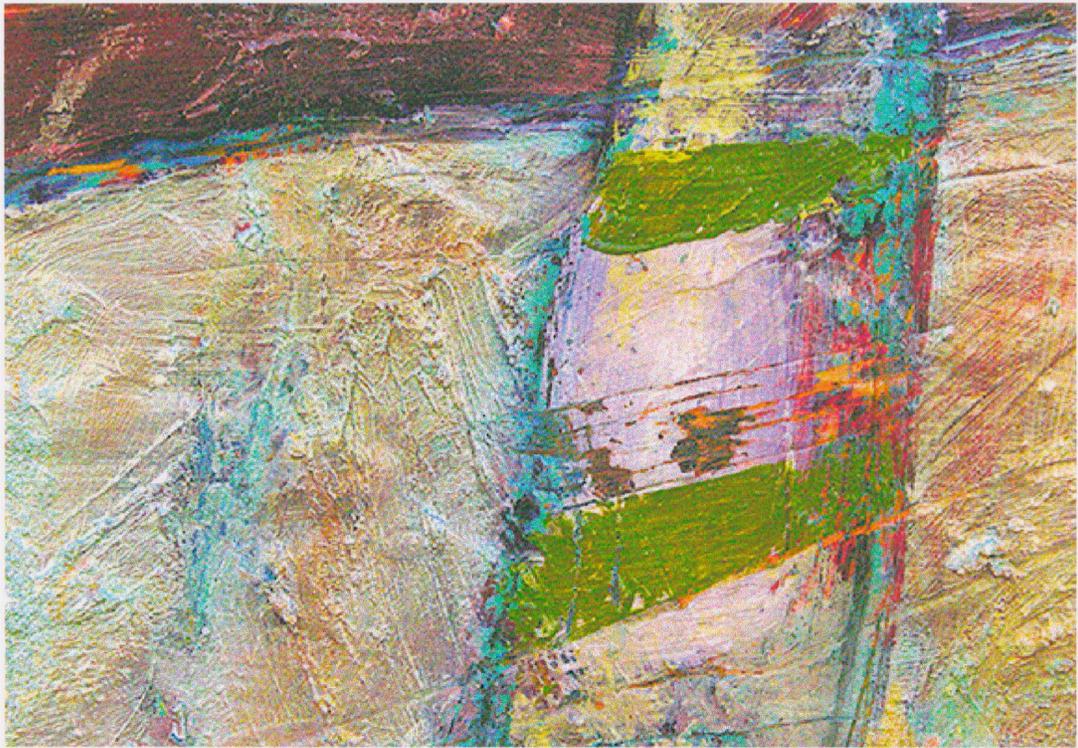


Image #5a "Saunalle" (Detail) 2003

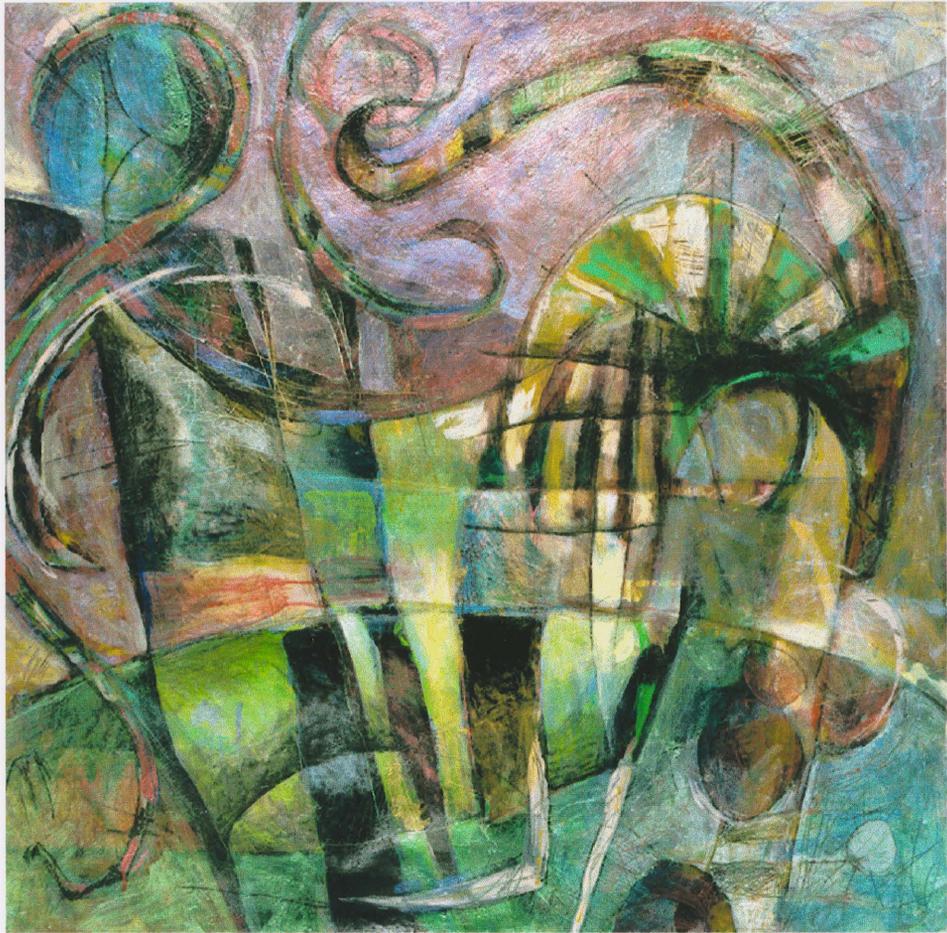


Image #6 "Heldrun" 2002
42" x 43.5" Acrylic & Mixed Media on Paper on Wood



Image #7 "Oseberg I" 2002
42" x 57" Acrylic & Mixed Media on Paper