

THESIS

GARDEN MANDALAS

Submitted by
Jean L. Jones
Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University

Summer 1995



018401 8839845

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

June 7, 1995

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER
OUR SUPERVISION BY JEAN L. JONES ENTITLED *GARDEN MANDALAS*
BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

Laural Macagno Sheng

DAVE YOST

Tom Lundberg

David L. Osterman
Adviser

Philip E. Rasmussen
Department Head

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

GARDEN MANDALAS

Since my early childhood I have had a dialogue with nature; these works come from my side of that relationship. While they reflect my interpretation of a specific form of plant life, they also symbolically illuminate my inner world—my journey through self-knowing. This symbolism influences the subject matter, size of the work and the choice and handling of the medium. The symbols evoked by the garden are revealed in the studio. My time in the garden is a visual feast, my imagery chosen intuitively for its formal challenges and metaphoric potential. I look for plants full of pattern, color and movement that emerge from the darkness to touch the senses and celebrate the light.

Jean L. Jones
Department of Art
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523
Summer 1995

DEDICATION

To my son, Jason Wiley Jones
Mashallah

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GARDEN MANDALAS

Introduction

For as long as I can remember there have been these two fascinations for me: plants and fabric. They are the warp and weft that form the tapestry of my creative expression. Whether in the gardens of my life or in the embroidery, whether of leaf or lace, I am compelled by the visual and tactile quality of surface design: veins and cells, stitches and seams.

As children, my sister and I spent Saturday mornings in fabric stores with my mother, making choices for the dresses she would make us. These stores represented abundance to me. Growing up in the fifties I lived with tropical printed fabrics in vibrant combinations of color—reds, pinks and greens from maroon to chartreuse. The leaves were repeated patterns of palm fronds or dark green elephant ear philodendrons with veins of light. I would lie in bed in the morning, watching the sun come up through curtains of a particular tropical print, and find things there—faces, figures and landscapes.

During my childhood, I watched my father plant trees and create gardens. As an adult, I dug into my own gardens, turned and worked the soil, planted seeds and bulbs and watched as they came

miraculously to life. I worried over insect life, weeds and weather. There were summers when the garden was the first place I went in the morning and the last place I left at night. Gardens make my soul feel nourished and whole.

As a child, and an adult, leaves grew in my paintings, flowers bloomed in my poetry and vines twined in my dreams. These plants have served as my self-portraits. Looking at the artwork I created during troubled times, when I occupied roles that didn't fit me, I find plants confined by pots, struggling to prosper. As I've grown into my life the plants have pushed everything else out of the picture plane, expanding its boundaries and growing beyond them, symbolically measuring and mirroring my own growth. If the artwork were a stream of water, the plants were a footpath of stones through it.

In the Garden

It is late summer in the garden and I search for subject matter to photograph. My intention is to create a series of all-over compositions that will harmonize disparate elements: figure and ground, abstraction and representation, lights and darks, microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects, the picture plane as a window for three dimensional illusion and a skin for decoration. I look for pattern on the leaves and of the leaves, with here and there a bright flower or a dull fruit. I look especially for glimpses of soil between the twisting stems and curling leaves to create a rich, dark counterpoint, and then I see the cabbages with their amazing color.

These purple cabbages are a leap outside my green world, their color combinations offering another voice in the harmony. They are not ubiquitous symbols like the lotus or the rose, therefore they can be infused with my personal symbolism. They offer an easy invitation to visual metaphor, like billowing clouds on a summer day or the fabric patterns of my childhood. They hold the darkness within their forms and become both figure and ground. Finally, their centrality plays against the compositional over-all nature of their veined, celled, unfolding circle of leaves.

Between Garden and Studio

Carl Jung, as discussed by Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers in The Power of Myth, said "the circle is one of the great primordial images of mankind and that, in considering the symbol of the circle, we are analyzing the self."¹ In his exploration of this archetype, Jung studied the mandala, a centrally organized Eastern artistic motif, which has both personal and cosmic meaning. Creating mandalas is a spiritual "discipline for pulling all those scattered aspects of your life together, for finding a center and ordering yourself to it."² The center is the illumination while the peripheral aspects are its manifestation.³

¹Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth*. New York: Doubleday, 1988, p. 268.

²Ibid, p. 271

³Ibid, p. 271

These cabbages with their strong central and circular order function and emerge as mandala imagery for me. They are visual materializations of my artistic origins and search for inner balance. Their rich, dark centers, echoing female biological structure, are thresholds inviting us into the mystery they hold of rebirth. Their outer leaves, with beautifully complex patterned surfaces growing spirally about the core, are the continuing manifestation of that renewal.

In the Studio

Regarding the paintings, only *FAMILY* the first one I did, and *JOSEPHINE* who shares her space with the outer leaves of another cabbage, contain more than one character; all the others have singular and central focus. As I worked on the paintings their centers became, more and more, the motivation for organizing my approach to the work. *FAMILY* is again the exception; it progressed from the darkest areas to the shapes that carried the lightest washes. I painted *TWINS* and *SHADOW* from the outer leaves inward, but all the others I developed from the inside of the cabbage heads to their outer leaves. In addition to strong psychological motives, there were practical considerations for centering and balancing; both the size and the medium dictated that I work flat, moving my materials around my working surface, painting, at first, the center, then slowly moving to the sides, the top and the bottom.

By altering size I also alter the viewer's relationship to the object being portrayed. What was timid, quiet and overlooked now commands one's attention, time and involvement. The object is altered as well. The profane becomes sacred, the humble monumental and the microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects of the piece unfold.

To a large degree these paintings are visual meditations on shape—shape distinguished by value, color and line. The greatly enlarged size, diminished or no horizon, and exaggerated pattern contribute to the abstract nature of the images. As I paint them, I think of them in terms of shape, not as leaves or veins, shadows or sunlight. They *emerge* as illusions of reality because I follow specific elements in my photographed sources: placement and characteristics of objects, value structures, hard edges and sharp focus. When distancing from the work, the viewer becomes the focusing lens; from *that* vantage point they are cabbages. Up close however they are invented worlds, with the rivers and hills, mountains and caves, trees and fields the viewer finds there, and it is watercolor that animates these territories.

I lay the paintings out first as drawings—networks of delicate contour lines. These "maps" serve as the roots, but, like a leaf responding to water, nutrients or sun, the watercolor often has its own expression: the granulation of pigments composed of chemicals, metals and gems; subtle and sharp color shifts; the bleeding, blooming diffusion of complex hues in wet brushstrokes or wet-into-wet application. The translucent quality of watercolor enables me to set down layers of color, light washes and areas of rich pattern

through which the white paper still glows. This replicated sunlight shines through the water-filled, transparent leaves, disclosing their intricate interiors, or gleams on top of them, revealing their surface design, playing against the velvety shadows I create with mixtures of dark staining pigments: phthalo greens and blues, alizarin crimson and mauve.

While creating my mandalas I ask myself a number of questions. In addition to my concerns regarding subject matter, size and medium, I explore the origins of my attraction to plants' expression of, and fabrics' ground for pattern and shape. Even as the cabbage root is hidden beneath the soil yet mirrored in the veins of the leaves, and the drawn structure determines yet hides beneath the watercolor in the paintings, so are my own roots unseen, but indicated by my work. The fibers of my artistic expression come not from me, but through me.

My grandparents imparted through their children, my parents, these gifts to me. From my father's family, who lived on the land, came a reverence for things that grow, from my mother's parents, a cobbler and a milliner, the reward of things made. At their most elemental, these are the essentials of life: food and clothing.

These essentials represented survival to my grandparents, renewal to my parents (my father in his garden, my mother at her handwork) and transcendence to me. Just as the garden is my external benefactor of spiritual nutrition, creating my artwork is my internal giver. During the act of creation, at its very best, I enter a state of grace in which there is neither measured time nor ego, and I become the paintings. I offer these works as meditations to the

viewer. They are poems, they are paeans, they are prayers to the only thing I know as divine: the spirit of nature.

PLATES



PLATE I: *FAMILY*
watercolor on paper, 50" x 78"



PLATE II: *TWINS*
watercolor on paper, 50" x 78"



PLATE III: *SHADOW*
watercolor on paper, 77" x 49"



PLATE IV: *ANGEL*
watercolor on paper, 78" X 49"



PLATE V: *JOSEPHINE*
watercolor on paper, 48" x 48"



PLATE VI: *EMMA, LACEMAKER*
watercolor on paper, 49" x46"

REFERENCES

Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth*. New York: Doubleday, 1988.