## ART HISTORY THESIS

THE IMAGE OF THE HOUSE IN ART: A REFLECTION OF ARTIST AND SOCIETY

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We think of the house as our primary place, the location of physical address from which the rest of the world radiates outward in every direction. It is not myself but my surrogate self, where I reside even when I am not there. A home . . . we all saw it this way and we all drew it this way: in the center of our page, the heart of our world, with horizon, trees clouds. The house is where you always begin and what you always return to, what disappears from view as you move away, around the corner, and what comes back into view as you get closer, with a door open, and the invitation to enter, with tables and chairs.

This paper is an investigation of the underlying symbolic meanings the image of the house has taken on through the ages in art and how those meanings reflect the attitudes of the artist and society. As historical background, we will examine images of miniature houses as used in the ancient civilizations of Greece, China, and Etruria. From there, we will move to images that have been used in the 20th century, specifically during periods in the 1920's through 1940's, and finally into the last twenty years. In this way, we will see how the house image in art has reflected the individual and social attitudes throughout history.

When discussing images of the house in examples of 20th century art, it was decided to separate the images in terms of artist's gender. However, in exploring this thought further, it can be seen that symbology is not something that can be clearly separated in that manner. While there is a tendency for male and female artists to envision the house in ways associated with their culturally and/or biologically experienced roles, this is not always the case. To leave out the entire issue of the image being masculine or feminine as we define those terms culturally

or biologically, however, would be negligent. This is especially so when we consider how the house has historically been associated with the female. In order to see where these house images actually come from, we will investigate general symbolism, the house as a specific symbol, how artists arrive at images today, and define some of the biological differences that could enter into the image making process.

Throughout history, we have used symbols to make our thoughts and feelings visual. Thomas Munroe defines a symbol as "any arbitrary, conventional, or non-natural sign. Although the symbolic image or sign is non-natural, it may represent a natural object such as a tree, the sun, or an animal." According to Carl Jung, "The history of symbolism shows that everything can assume symbolic significance: natural objects (like stones, plants, or animals), man made things (like houses, boats, or cars), or even abstract forms (like numbers or the triangle)." Jung goes on to explain, "Man unconsciously transforms objects or forms into symbols and expresses them in both his religion and his visual art."

These definitions of general symbols lead us to define specifically the symbol of a house. The Herder Symbol Dictionary gives several definitions including, "an ordered, enclosed area symbolizing the cosmos or cosmic order; . . . sometimes a symbol of the human body; . . . occasionally (as in psychoanalytic dream interpretation) the symbolic body-house relationship is developed in greater detail." These would include "the roof and attic

corresponding to the mind, the basement to the unconsciousness, the kitchen as a place of transmutation, and the windows and doors as body openings." J.E. Cirlot contends that "the house as a home arouses strong, spontaneous associations with the human body and human thought (or life, in other words), as has been confirmed empirically by psychoanalysts." These definitions help us to see and relate how the house itself has been seen in art of the past and to connect those definitions to the various expressions of the image today.

According to Mieczyslaw Wallis, in ancient times, the house and other buildings were often interpreted as "miniature replicas of the universe. Buildings used to be round or square shaped according to how people in a given culture area imagined the cosmos. The houses, round at first, became square shaped when opinions about the shape of the universe had changed." Direct evidence for the character of these ancient buildings has been discovered in the form of pottery models. These miniature models reflected cultural mythologies and played direct roles in rituals such as entombing and other funerary practices. Two of these miniatures have been found in the Greek island area, one at Perachora, a Corinthian settlement on the east shore of the Gulf of Corinth and another on the site of the temple of Hera at Argos. 7 (Fig. 1,2) Both of these date to the 8th Century B.C. Erwin Panofsky has coined the term "domatomorphic," corresponding to anthropomorphic, to describe the house-shaped Egyptian sarcophagi that are from about the same time. These imitated a

dwelling which in turn represented, on a small scale, the universe, much as the temple did. (Fig. 3) In some cultures, funerary urns were made in the shape of a house. "The custom of putting these small, painted clay models in tombs was fairly widespread, say experts about figures found in China from the Han period. (Fig. 4,5) In reference to pieces found in Roman excavations, Robert Wolf says, that early Villanova characteristically produced cinerary urns "either hut shaped or biconical in form with handles. "10 (Fig. 6) "These particular urns would sometimes have an opening above to permit the dead man's soul to enter and leave, " according to Mircea Eliade. He goes on to say, "The urn-house, in some sort, becomes the man's new body."11 These ancient practices reflect the use of the symbol of the house in ways true to people's beliefs and cultures, just as it mirrors our attitudes in 20th century Western culture.

In developing imagery today, the artist concerns him or herself with methods of using symbols to make visual expressions of important issues. As the contemporary artist develops his or her imagery, it is not from one source that ideas and concepts are derived. On this subject, Munroe says:

The artist finds most of his materials in cultural traditions he inherits and the things he observes around him. His task is to detach a few materials from their previous contexts and reform or reorganize them more congenial to himself than others. The same general types of experience recur again and again. Yet they are never quite the same in the lives of different individuals, or in the works of different artists. 12

In effect, he is saying that it is our individual experiences that we use as a base for establishing the images we use. He goes on to explain how the actual process of working and selecting these images takes place. "Used as a starting point at times, the artist may take certain symbols and use them as a tentative framework for thematic alteration. There is no correct order of procedure. He may think synthetically at times, analytically at other times, and by sudden impulse or unsought inspiration at still others."13 Finally , Munroe comments on how an artist will arrive at selected images: "He begins arranging the work of art, that is, emphasizing areas and de-emphasizing other areas in accord with his own inner impulses, interests, and purposes."14 It would seem that the image selection process for the artist is almost arbitrary in some ways. However, it is the underlying, even unconscious thoughts that we must also remember enter into the process.

An artist, throughout his or her career, is gradually setting up individual visual vocabularies. The symbols used in works, whether taken from conscious or unconscious personal experience, give artists the tools needed for imagery. It has been proposed that gender differences are determining some of this imagery. Judith Van Herik states, "Obviously, the contents of individuals' gender identities vary because they include fantasies, thoughts, behavior, needs, affects, and so forth which are related to but not necessarily resultant from or subsumed by

biological sex distinction." This could suggest that the artist's biological make-up is a factor when he or she is in the creating process. From the book <u>Feminist Archetypal Theory</u>, Estella Lauder goes further in describing this theory by saying:

Our proposed concept of the archetype requires that we consider the experimental context in which the image occurs. A central tenant of our theory is that image and behavior are inextricably linked; our images of possible behavior inform our actions, and our actions, in turn alter our images. The body, of course, is the place where these two facets of experience are joined. We need to understand the extent to which our female bodies determine our images and actions. Nancey Chodorow has proposed, for example, that girls develop less firm ego boundaries than boys do because of their differing early experiences of being mothered and their continuing experiences of the permeable boundaries of their bodies in menstruation, intercourse, pregnancy, and lactation. 16

In this, she is proposing an actual physical difference in the ways we think according to our experiences as a male or female. This, in turn, would result in different images and/or thoughts about a particular visual image.

As the roles of men and women have gone through changes in contemporary history, so have their feelings about issues concerning the house and home. Artists using the image of the house are reflecting these issues in their underlying concepts. The idea of our bodies actually determining how we experience certain situations and conceive images helps us to see how these images can be masculine or feminine. Judith E. Stein advocates that "feminist voices have espoused the notion that a woman's reproductive powers link her more closely to the 'life force' of

the universe."<sup>17</sup> Referring to a review of six women artists working with the land, she described critic April Kingsley's proposal that their art differed in "intent and content" from that of their male counterparts. Kingsley went on to say, "women may tend to interiorize values in certain art forms while men tend to use external (societal) values."<sup>18</sup>

Before the feminist movement, the roles of men and women in America were fairly well defined. The male acted as provider for his family and the female acted as caretaker of the children and house. He went out to work while she stayed home. It is easy to see how each would have somewhat different views of the house and home. Since he was away working all day, his view of his home was usually good, since that was where he could rest at the end of the day, and see his wife and children. On the other hand, it was the woman who stayed home all day doing household chores. Her view sometimes became one of being inside and not being able to get out. Scott Sanders wrote a story, "The Men We Carry in Our Own Minds . . . and How They Differ From the Real Lives of Most Men." He tells of a life growing up being very isolated from a woman's point of view. "It was not my fate to become a woman, so it was easier for me to see the graces. I didn't see, then, what a prison a house could be, since houses seem to be brighter, handsomer places than any factory. "19

As we begin looking at the images of the house from the art of the late 1920's and 1930's, we find another reflection of the time period. As a result of the Depression, the United States

government created the WPA, "a work-relief organization, formed to help artists survive. "20 There seemed to be no discrimination of men or women during these projects, as we see both involved. Since the idea of the project was to promote the spirit of a common American heritage and purpose, the image of the house was used in many of the scenes being created. Marianne Appel's Rural Highway, (Fig. 7) depicting a region near Middleport, New York, includes houses along a quiet back road. "The administrators (of the WPA) understood that the murals would not appeal to local audiences without regional imagery, and they believed that art had to come from the experience of a particular reality."21 J.A. Ward comments, "This work also employed symbols -- the family, the pioneer, the farmer, the worker-to tie people from scattered and often isolated communities together as a nation."22 It would seem natural that peoples' houses were included in various works during this time.

The American Scene painting of the 1920's and 30's, the prevailing esthetic of the WPA, contained many depictions of the house. As defined in the McGraw -Hill Dictionary of Art,

American Scene painting was "a reaction against abstract formalism, most of the artists were primarily concerned with the depiction of their chosen subjects." Although houses were included in many of these paintings, the ideas about these paintings were usually not specifically about the house. In some instances the houses became almost part of the background; a propused formally in setting up the scene. For example, in Raymond

Breinin's <u>Illinois</u>: <u>Landscape</u> (Fig. 8) and Karl Zerbe's

<u>Massachusetts</u>: <u>Houses on the River</u> (Fig. 9) we see houses as part
of the overall image, yet the landscape still remains most
important. Even in the work of Edward Hopper, whose <u>House by the</u>

<u>Railroad</u> of 1925, "a massively and pretentiously ornate house
seen from ground level behind a banked railroad track, implies a
non-blending with the physical world that contains it," according
to J. A. Ward.<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 10)

Later on, we see images of the house in the work of Louise Bourgeois in a series entitled <u>Femme Maison</u> (Woman House) that she was working on early in her career in 1946-47. She says about her work, "All my work from the beginning has to do with the relations of men and women." This statement in itself brings up thoughts relative to the premise of how images are considered masculine or feminine. As described by Deborah Wye, <u>Femme Maison</u> is a series of drawings in which a "whole family of females prove their domesticity by having houses for heads." (Fig. 11,12) She continues with her description:

In them, a woman's most obvious sign of identity, her face, has been replaced by a house. The implication is devastating. Domesticity becomes the very definition of these women, since they have no other means by which to speak. They are prisoners of the house and also hide behind its facade, thereby both denying and defining their female identity through this challenge to, as well as determination of, their wholeness. The Femme-Maison is truly a felt image of the self and thus, for Bourgeois, a perceived and felt depiction of reality.<sup>27</sup>

In commenting about her years of working in relative obscurity, Bourgeois says, "I had the feeling that the art scene belonged to the men, and that I was in some way invading their domain. Therefore my work was done but hidden away. I felt more comfortable hiding it." As a reflection of the time, this series of work epitomizes the feelings of many women. The issues these women were facing became very important to Bourgeois as she "establishes her thematic relationship to the house, building, home, and shelter." This "anthropomorphosized" architecture will recur again and again as she "delves into the romantic and symbolic dimensions of dwelling." This recurring image is seen again in a piece called Femme Maison '81 (Fig 13) where, as Wye describes it, a "powerful embodiment of a theme that previously expressed fear, withdrawal, and fragility . . .now a house balances precariously on top."

The changing roles of men and women in today's society is affecting the way we think, feel, and react to different situations. According to Noel A. Cazeanne, "Work and role scripts are key determinants of both personal identity and social structure. Nowhere is this more evident than in the changing gender roles that are currently challenging American society." These identity and social structure issues can be seen in cases where dual incomes have become necessities. From Intercultural Communication, Judy C. Pearson comments on the current trend:

There are now more dual-career couples in our society than there are single-career couples. While some of us applaud the fact that women now have opportunities to work outside the home as well as within it, we should

recognize what is occurring. To a large extent, dual career marriages are made up of two masculine individuals. Biologically, the marriages include a man and a woman, but behaviorally, the marriages include two masculine types.<sup>32</sup>

Today's economy is making it imperative in some cases that there be double incomes in many families. This can scramble what happens in the home, as far as traditional male and female roles are concerned, and can sometimes even reverse those roles. Pearson goes on to say, "The differences between men and women may be fewer than we once believed, that they may be based on factors other than sex as we have suggested, and that the rationale offered for the differences may be different from what we originally posited."33 Hence, we have begun to question the rigidity with which we have defined the terms masculine and feminine. Because now the roles of men and women are not always precisely defined in regards to house and home, the images of the house have also changed. Pearson explains, that these days it is not so easy to stereotype, assuming, for example, that "all men are cold and unfeeling and all mothers are nurturing."34 We can still see some images of the house by women leaning to the interiorized "woman's" side and some by men leaning to the exteriorized "man's" side, but we can also see some overlapping occurring.

Alice Aycock has used the image of the house in several of her sculptures. <u>Low Building with Dirt Roof (for Mary)</u> of 1973 was described by Patricia Phillips as:

. . . a wood-framed hip roof covered with dirt and

supported on low stone walls. Less than 30" in height, the structure requires a squatting motion to look at the interior. Altogether it has disturbing qualities of a damp, claustrophobic space that is roof and foundation, attic and cellar, at the same time. 35 (Fig.14)

This brings to mind those connotations of psychoanalytical dream interpretations referring to the different parts of the house corresponding to different parts of the body. Its description also relates to Nancey Chodorow's proposal of a woman's body determining the image as well as the permeable boundary of a woman's body entering into the concept. That was one of the points of the piece; to physically involve the viewer to the point of permeating that proposed boundary. In <u>Untitled (Shanty)</u> (Fig.15), Nancey Grubb describes Aycock using "the format of a house raised on a platform, with an open door on one side and an encompassing wheel on the other. By this, she is returning the viewer to the role of a nonparticipating spectator who may circle round the piece, but not enter it." Again, we see the house portrayed here in relation to the female body, a penetrable object, but in this case, impenetrable.

Miriam Shapiro's collaborative work with Sherry Brody on the piece The Doll House (Fig.16) was their contribution to the exhibition Womanhouse in 1972. Grubb also describes this piece saying, "Adapting the symbol of the house as woman, they peeled away the surface to reveal a private habitat patterned after fantasies of faith, fear, and anguish." The whole point of the Womanhouse project was to transform an actual house by using

different rooms in the house to deal with different women's experiences. Miriam Shapiro relates, "By transforming each room into non-functioning art environments we were able to remake the old house into a place of dreams and fantasies."

When looking at the work of Jennifer Bartlett we can begin to see overlapping into those gray areas in use of the house image. On one hand she is working primarily with the shapes and space to set up a visual repetition, as seen in <u>Small Boats</u>, <u>Houses</u> of 1987.(Fig. 17) James Yood, describing this piece says:

She renders on a single canvas a double image of a boat and a house; the perspective recedes on the right side. Precise sculpted replicas of the house and boat, constructed of wood painted a pristine white, are positioned on the floor so that from a calculated spot, painted and sculpted objects become exactly the same size. This interest in what constitutes a pictorial field, and how that field can be stretched to a point of crisis or resolution has long been a concern of Bartlett's.

On the other hand, Ken Johnson sees the house portrayed by Bartlett as more of an "archetypal image and an emblem of security and containment." As Jeff Perrone puts it, we see her houses as both a "...physical place (a house) and subsequently a psychological space. (a home)"41

When we begin looking at images of the house by male artists we find a similar dichotomy to that of females artists. In some cases, we see an approach that seems to be farther away from those values of security and containment. Here is where we see houses as more of a prop in some instances and at other times used only to make statements about other things. When the house

is used as a symbol by male artists, it seems to have more exterior values as opposed to the interior values established by women. On the other hand, Andrew Kimbrell comments on the new masculine role of today:

It has fostered a new image of men; autonomous, efficient, intensely self-interested, and disconnected from community and earth. Men are now in the forefront of the movement pushing for changes in the work place including more flexible hours, part time work, job sharing, and home based employment. By changing types of work and work hours, we could break our subordination to corporate managers and return much of our work and lives to the household. We could once again be teaching, nurturing, presences to our children . . . We can no longer passively submit to the destruction of the household. \*\*

These comments about "today's male" show that it is possible that many males can have a somewhat different view of the house than they have in the past. Perhaps men are becoming more psychologically attached to the house. In these shifting cultural perceptions we begin to see an overlapping of the male artist's image of the house to the traditional female experience of the house. But first, we will look at those images of the house by males that tends to stay on that external surface value.

In a marble sculpture entitled <u>Rice House</u> by Wolfgang Liab, rice and pollen have been poured over the top and allowed to run down the roofs (Fig 18). As Kathryn Hixon describes, "These essential symbols of safety—the home, food, reproduction . . . . combine to form distilled objects of safety and continuance that connect the human and the animal world in the larger scheme of things." In trying to find those connections that link animals

and humans, Liab involves himself in the physical process of gathering the pollens he uses in some of his pieces. When compared to the houses of Jennifer Bartlett and Joel Shapiro, Liab says, "The house as a house is not really the point."

Tim Collins Offshore Residence of 1988 (Fig. 19)
externalizes the view of the house literally and figuratively,
and uses the image to comment on societal values. As a means to
make a point about the current housing problem, Rebecca Solnit
says, this house becomes an ". . .ironic shrine, an inaccessible
house that seems to consist entirely of outsides." This also
places the piece in a category where the house is used to make a
point about something else. This is also seen in Richard Serra's
House of Cards (Fig.20) where the artist is using the image as a
way to present the idea of "disencumbering the work . .
.presenting very few ideas or physical facts or aesthetic
qualities in crystalline form."

In turning to the work of Joel Shapiro, we see that he began using the house as an image in the early 1970's. Ruth Bass describes some of these houses, saying, "Some were solid and impenetrable, some isolated on a shelf or field, some upended, some disrupted and sliced apart (Fig. 21,22,23). Others had openings, or walls partially removed, suggesting the possibility of union and psychic penetration." Roberta Smith points out that "this shape evoked an extremely ungeometric range of associations with home and family, with childhood and the past." Shapiro himself said that it was a "metaphor for past

or for experience digested." "In many of the houses and other small, geometrically constructed works . . .a dark interior space becomes a metaphor for the female as a source of physical and psychological comfort." In these statements, we can see that Shapiro is leaning to the female side of viewing and referring to the house as an image of security and containment, although for him it was a comfortable containment.

Throughout the course of this paper, we have looked at some very general topics which help us to understand how the image of the house has come to fruition in contemporary art. Some of these included the house defined as a symbol, including some of its psychoanalytical interpretations, ways in which artists arrive at images today, and proposals of theories that could possibly make separations of masculine and feminine images. At that point we saw how the image of the house was used in ancient cultures during ritualistic practices. Through these practices, we saw that the object had been selected because of specific feelings and attitudes about that object and how those attitudes were reflected in the practice itself.

From there, we began looking to 20th-century artists, starting in the 1920's with some of the houses depicted in WPA projects and American Scene Painting. In these images, we saw the house being used primarily as a prop, reflecting the ideas prevalent in that era, specifically the idea of the common people coming together as one nation. The feeling of these houses mirrored the attitude of the people. We saw both men and women

artists painting this type of house image in the WPA projects due to the "gender-blind hiring practices." 51

From there, we looked at the images of Louise Bourgeois in the mid 1940's. Her <u>Femme Maison</u> series of ink drawings included images of the house that reflected the feelings that many women of that period were experiencing in a "man's world." Women were hidden behind the scenes and made to feel inferior. As artists, women were discriminated against by their male colleagues.

Louise Nevelson recalls, "The men did not really include me as an artist at all." \*\*

Then during the early 1970's, at the point when roles of men and women began changing, we examined images of the house by various artists. Some artists saw the house as a place of security and containment, some used it as a metaphor for various feelings derived from past childhood experiences or the boundaries of a woman's body. Others were using the image on a completely formal level. Still others employed this imagery to explore social issues and concerns. At this time, traditional concepts of masculine and feminine, as expressed by artists of both genders, began to blur.

In a final observation, we see that most of the artists mentioned since 1970 have used the image of the house sculpturally. Why? Perhaps it is a statement that reflects an even deeper sentiment of current social conditions, leading us to yet more intriguing possibilities in regard to the image of the house in art.

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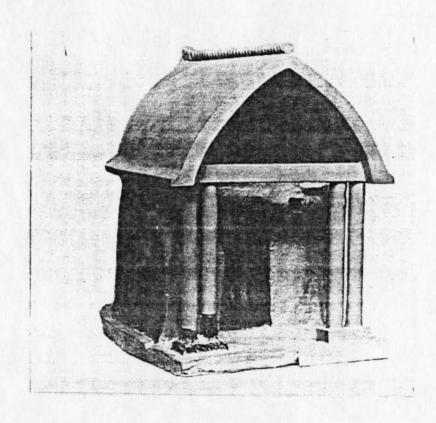


Fig. 1. Architectural Model of a Temple from Perchora. 8th century B.C.

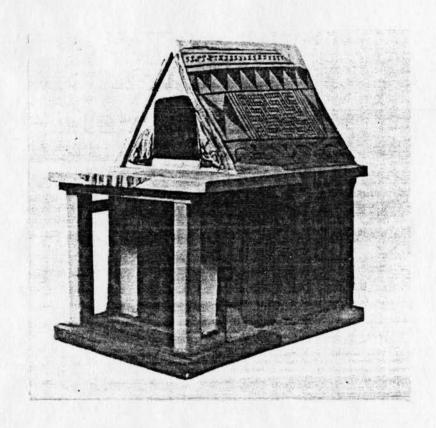


Fig. 2. Architectural Model of a Temple from the Heraion near Argos. 8th century B.C.



Fig. 3. Sarcophagus from Galgoi, Cyprus. n.d.

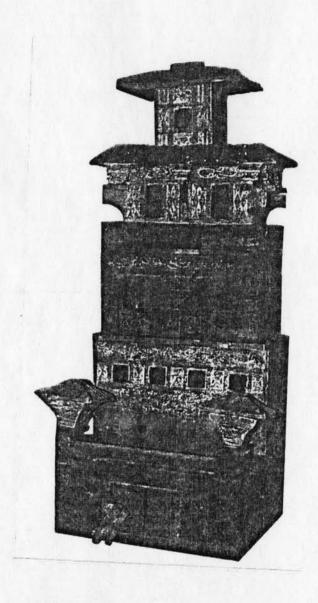


Fig. 4. Miniature model tower from China. Han period.

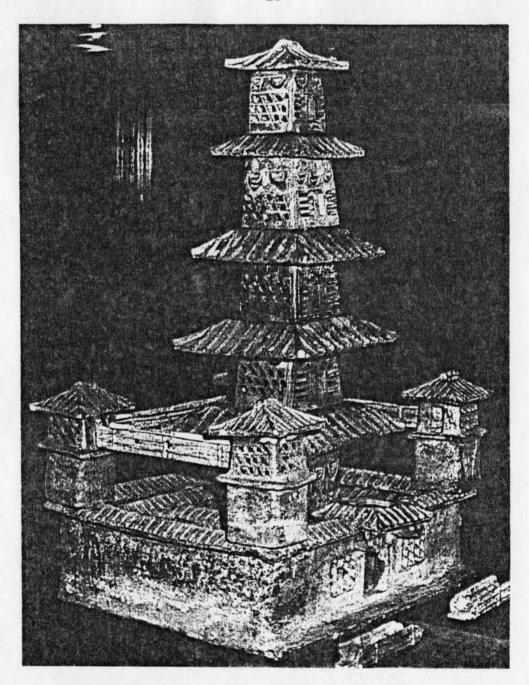


Fig. 5. Miniature model tower from China. Han period.



Fig. 6. Hut-shaped cinerary urn, from Vulci. 9th century B.C.

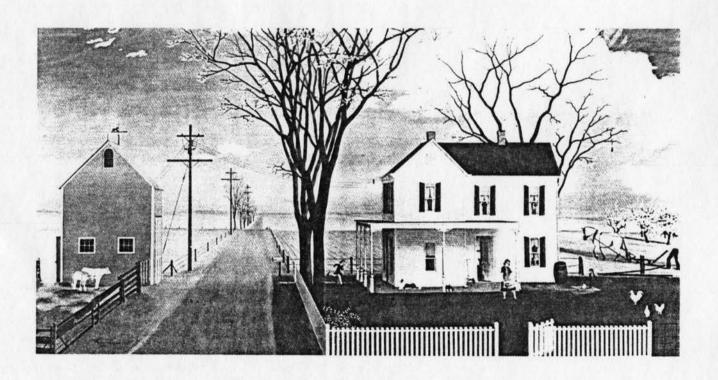


Fig. 7. Marianne Appel, Rural Highway 1941.

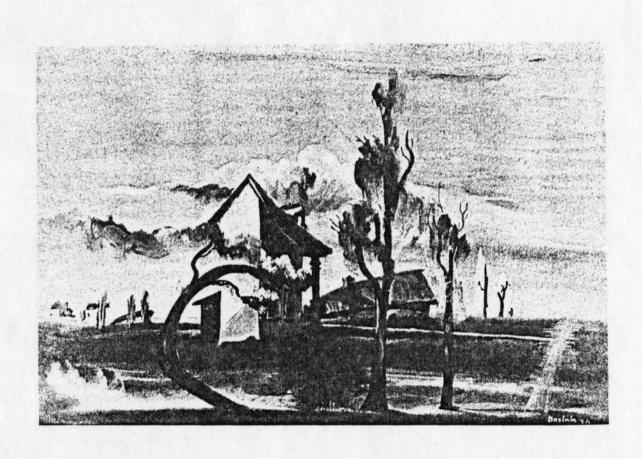


Fig. 8. Raymond Breinin, <u>Illinois: Landscape</u> 1926.

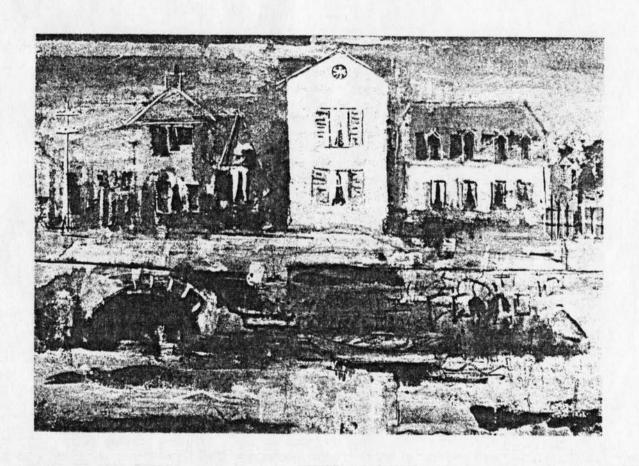


Fig. 9. Karl Zerbe, Massachusetts: Houses on the River 1928.

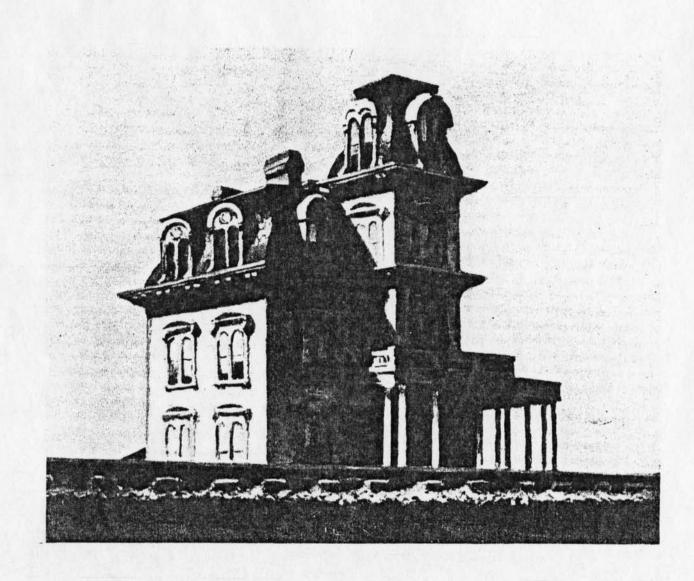


Fig. 10. Edward Hopper, House by the Railroad 1925.

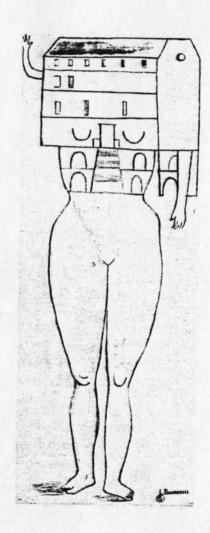


Fig. 11. Louise Bourgeois, Femme Maison (Woman House) 1946-47.

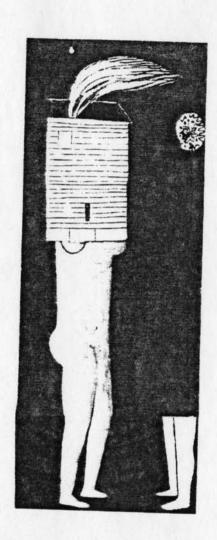


Fig. 12. Louise Bourgeois, Femme Maison (Woman House) 1946-47.

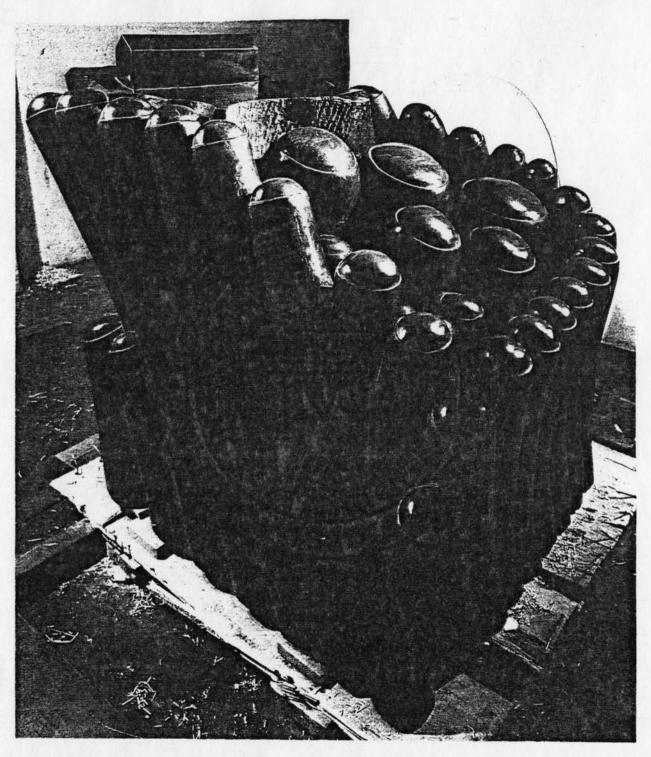


Fig. 13. Louise Bourgeois, Femme Maison '81 1981.

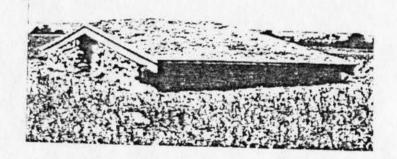


Fig. 14. Alice Aycock, Low Building with Dirt Roof (for Mary) 1973.

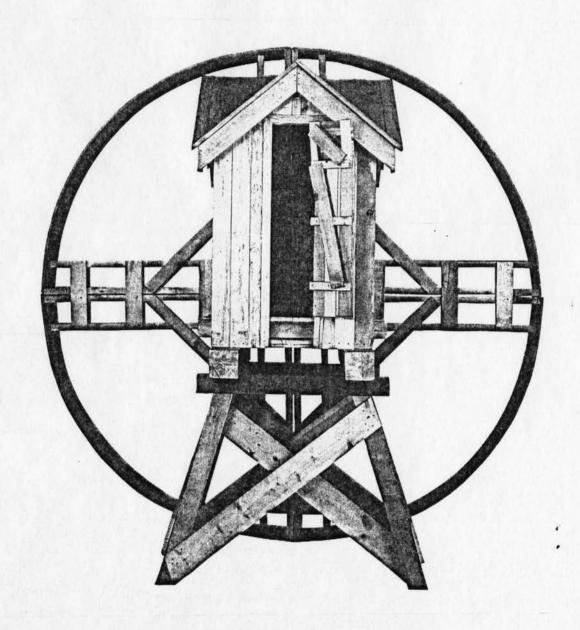


Fig. 15. Alice Aycock, Untitled (Shanty) 1978.

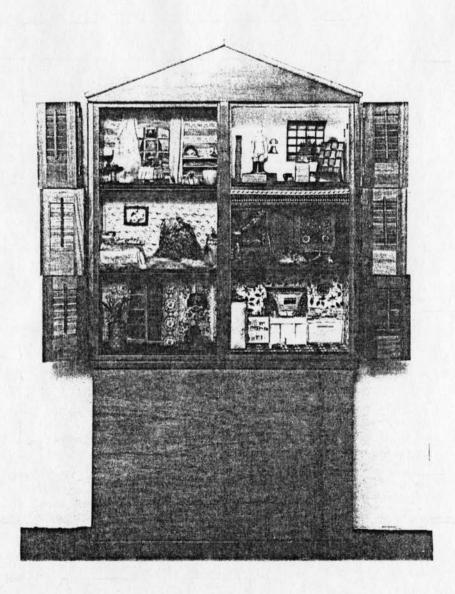


Fig. 16. Miriam Shapiro, in collaboration with Sherry Brody, The Doll House 1972.

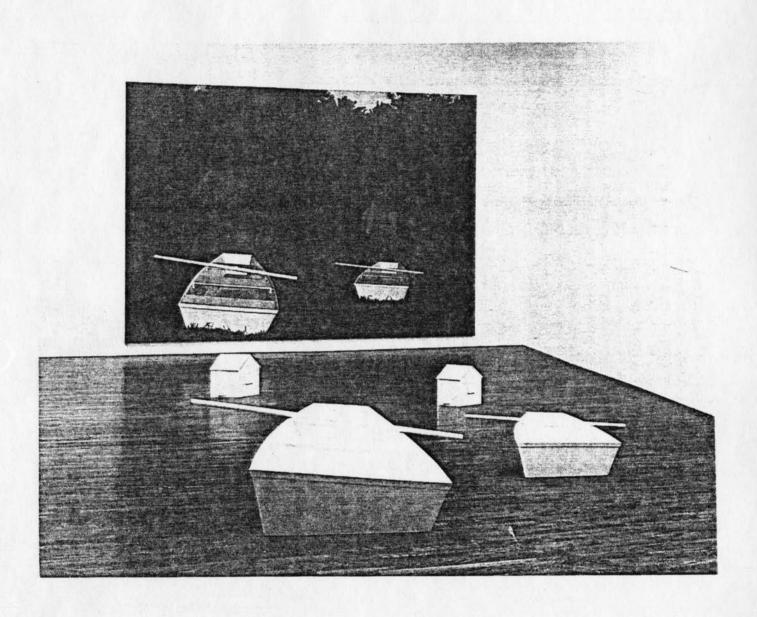


Fig. 17. Jennifer Bartlett, Small Boats, Houses 1987.

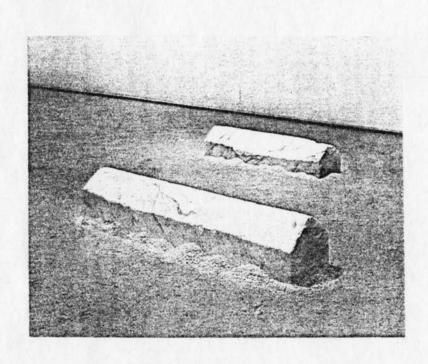


Fig. 18. Wolfgang Liab, Rice House 1990.

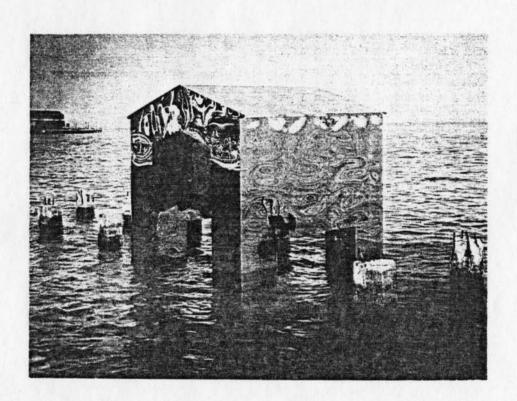


Fig. 19. Tim Collins, Offshore Residence 1988.

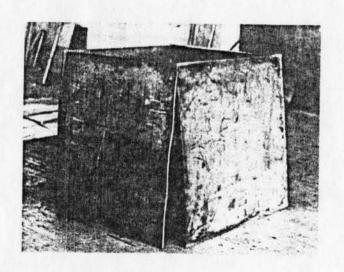


Fig. 20. Richard Serra, House of Cards 1969.

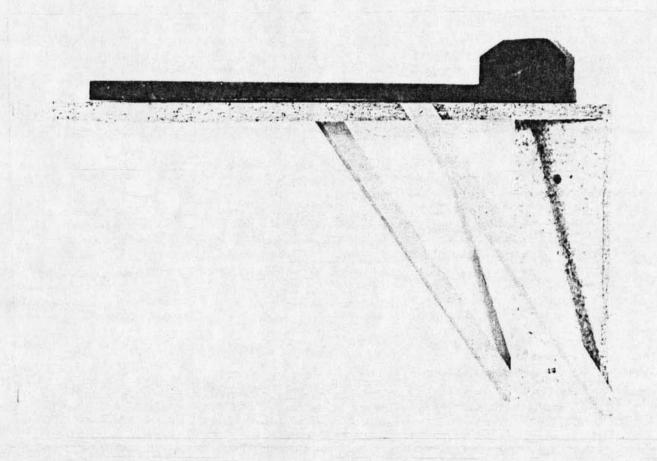


Fig. 21. Joel Shapiro, Untitled, 1973-74.

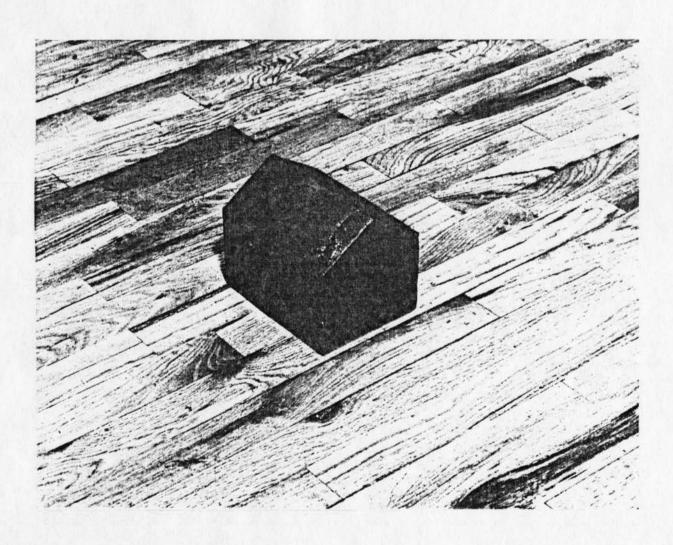


Fig. 22. Joel Shapiro, Untitled, 1973-74.

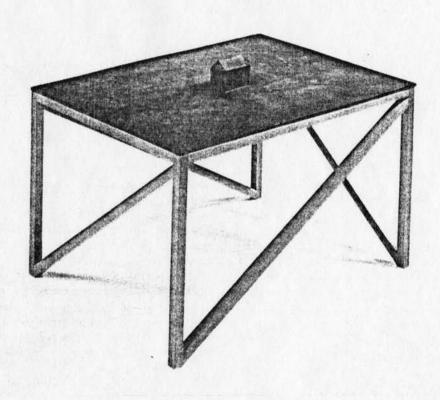


Fig. 23. Joel Shapiro, Untitled, 1975-76.