

Agnes Murray
Artist's Statement

When I was a young artist I became aware of a search in which I had been engaged all my life. This awareness began to develop and grow at a time when I simultaneously involved myself more fully in activities of my own choosing, in intensely pursuing my visual images and in philosophical and theological interests. When I made this commitment to work of my own choice, when I took on that responsibility and began to understand the depth of involvement required, seemingly separate parts of my life began to merge and unify. I could no longer separate any activities of my life. Everything I do affects everything else. R. G. Collingwood, in his book *The Principles of Art*, says, "Every utterance and every gesture that each one of us makes is a work of art (285)." He defines the "aesthetic experience, or artistic activity" as, "the experience of expressing one's emotions; and that which expresses them is the total imaginative activity called indifferently language or art (275)." In her notes for the lecture "On the Perfection Underlying Life" Agnes Martin says, "Work is self expression," and additionally, "Self expression is inevitable."

My ability to free myself, or my first awareness of the possibility of freedom seems to have begun with a study of the sexism which permeates our culture. Through readings, projects, discussion, by focusing on this one cultural aspect, the awareness of its insidiousness and arbitrary nature hit full force – and continues to do so today. Such an external exploration led to an internal one – a search backwards through the experience of accumulated cultural limitation – imposed from outside but accepted within. Agnes Martin said:

"Everything we know and everything everyone else knows is conditioned. The conditioning goes all the way back through evolution . . ."

The narrowing process of this conditioning is one issue that I explore, which has led to a more general understanding of cultural limitations, maintained not only through direct oppression, but more insidiously through self-imposed acceptance of those limitations by those suffering from oppression of all kinds.

In formal terms, two-dimensional representational imagery in my work explores the interplay between surface and illusion of space. I was first attracted to printmaking by its relationship to direct hand drawn images and to the unique intensity of ink on paper. When I introduced photo-derived imagery into my work in a range of drawing, painting and printmaking media, the images were hand drawn from photographic sources. My first use of photo-derived imagery was a series of autobiographical works from family snapshots, exploring the underlying intention (conscious or not) to document life events and rituals as reinforcement of identity-forming processes, including sex-role sanctioning. This series included image sequencing along with the use of "found" photographs, that led to a study of photographic form per se. After two early series using these family snapshots I developed my photo-derived imagery from my own photographs, which I take in places of deep personal association. Underlying issues of my relationship to a place informs the work.

Even as I engaged in the exploration of women's roles and the larger structure and functioning of oppression more generally, I felt the limitations of such an ideological source, its potential to prevent the deep and exploratory immersion into unknown territory by the artist that is necessary for work to become resonant for the artist and the viewer. My first reading of *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf began to help me articulate some of my reservations and facilitated the extension of my images to less overtly ideological sources. In discussing the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen she says, "Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching (68)." By contrast, in discussing *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë she points out a specific passage in which Charlotte Brontë speaks directly through the character of Jane Eyre of the restraints she felt in her ability to act in a larger setting than that allowed her as a woman, followed by an awkward transition back into the narrative. Virginia Woolf says that Charlotte Brontë

may have had “more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks . . . that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire (69).”

Slains Castle inspired the images for my artist’s book, *Letters*, which I began in 1985, whose text is from Rumi’s *Masnavi*, translated by Zahra Partovi and published by Vincent FitzGerald & Co. in 1986. I first visited Slains Castle in 1984 with my husband, his parents, who lived nearby, and our twin babies. It is an old ruined manor house, dramatically situated on a cliff overlooking the North Sea. *Letters* is a poem about love. The subject of love, and the relation between human and divine love expressed through the poem resonated deeply when Vincent first presented me with the text. The contrast of the decaying human structures of Slains Castle with the seemingly eternal natural setting of land, sea and sky was striking. Using the studies I had begun in Scotland I drew and hand-printed multi-color lithographs, which form the visual art interpretation of the poem. The association of a specific place and the images that eventually came together to form the artist's book *Letters* happened through the creative collaboration of artist, translator, Zahra Partovi, calligrapher, Jerry Kelly, and the publisher, Vincent FitzGerald, resulting in a limited edition artist's book that is included in numerous major collections.

In 2010 my husband and I returned to Scotland and revisited Slains Castle. His parents have passed away and the babies have grown up. We could no longer drive up the rutted dirt road to just outside the ruin, but had to walk a long distance from a car park. As I took that walk and re-photographed the ruin I became more aware of my working process of walking, looking, taking pictures – and then in the studio creating sequential juxtapositions. Each work is drawn by hand, taking a day or months to complete, depending on which medium is chosen. Large-scale monotypes form the core of the exhibit and I used my printmaking expertise to develop a monotype technique to hand draw these prints, using large rollers as well as brushes as drawing tools. This and a number of other series created in a similar way have been conceived of as a whole sequence of works that rely on each other for their full impact. Yet in my own reaction to individual works and the reaction of others I have begun to see that each image also stands alone and holds a suggestion of the completeness of the sequence.

In exploring the ruins, some of the shapes that I was drawn to evoke the house-shaped house. As Gaston Bachelard says in his influential book, *The Poetics of Space*:

“If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths (6).”

Yet, despite origins that are deeply personal and images that can stand on form alone, increasing levels of meaning will emerge in works of art. The grandiose structure of the old social order manifested in piles of stone could not be sustained, and the ideological will reassert itself.

Works Cited

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