

THE CATHARTIC THE ART OF CIRCLE

MARCH 2001

FEATURING

CARMAN
BLOOMER
BRANSTNER
BRIENZA
DEMEULENAERE
DESLOOVER
FRAGA
GALBREATH
HAGEDORN
PIET
SMITH
STAMLER
VIAN
ZIMMERMAN

SUE
JEFF
HOLLY
JOYCE
CARL
ROSE
ED
LYNN
CHRISTINE
JOHN
NELSON
MICHELLE
RICK
MARILYN



Meadow Brook Art Gallery

College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Art and Art History
Oakland University
208 Wilson Hall
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DRAWING

PAINTING

SCULPTURE

PHOTOGRAPHY

FILM

INSTALLATION

PERFORMANCE

MUSIC

ART OF

THE

CIRCLE

CATHARCTIC

THE

THE CATHARCTIC CIRCLE:

SUE CARMAN
JEFF BLOOMER
HOLLY BRANSTNER
JOYCE BRIENZA
CARL DEMEULENAERE
ROSE E. DESLOOVER
ED FRAGA
LYNN GALBREATH
CHRISTINE HAGEDORN
JOHN PIET
NELSON SMITH
MICHELLE STAMLER
RICK VIAN
MARILYN ZIMMERMAN

The Catharctic Circle is an ensemble of individual Detroit visual artists. Over the last two decades, under the leadership of Sue Carman, they have produced an extraordinary body of performance art and films:

1984

Adoration of Breakfast - Performance

You Say Tomato - Performance

1985

Welcome to the Moulin Rouge - Performance

1987

Out of the Blue - Performance

To Give is to Receive - Film

Out of the Blue - Film

1990

Greenhouse - Performance

Cross Dressing - Film

1995

Heaven - Performance

Hugging - Film

Comfort Burns - Film

Mirrored Date - Film

2000

It Takes One To Be One - Performance

Tableze - Film

Drawing, Painting, Sculpture, Installation Art, Photography & Film by Artists of THE CATHARCTIC CIRCLE

March 9 - April 8, 2001

CURATOR & EDITOR
Dick Goody

MEADOW BROOK ART GALLERY

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cover: still photograph of Sue Carman
from the film & performance, *Heaven*, 1995,
photo: Michelle Stamler

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PERFORMANCE ART

Performance Art, as it moves through time and space, has the immediacy and vital presence to evoke a powerful imprint on memory. Indeed, Performance Art, like life, is but a memory. In essence, humanity is a construction of memories. It is our capacity to remember vast amounts of information, as we move from one ephemeral moment to the next that makes us each unique spiritual beings. And if we do not remember, there are always libraries and museums to jog and enhance the path of our recollections. In the museum, a favorite painting can be visited weekly, daily, hourly. Before the modern age, part of the function of the artist was to bolster memory by creating true permanent likenesses in commemoration of the ephemeral: a flower in bloom, Helen of Troy or the Boston Tea Party.

Contemporary life is an inundation of changing images. Living in the eighteenth century (or any time before), one would have seldom, if ever, traveled more than seven miles from one's birthplace. Imagine the profoundly intimate familiarity one would have enjoyed with landscape. In contrast, human memory at the beginning of the third millennium is clogged with prosaic likenesses to be experienced again and again, churning in endless reruns. What can artists do amid such banality, and what reason is there for them to merely record life when life has been so effectively digitally remastered?

Contemporary artists either embrace the chaos of inundation or reject it by turning inward. Andy Warhol was an avid commentator/commemorator, Jackson Pollock an introspective visionary. Pollock envisioned a new kind of painting that was so free from representation and commemoration that it was almost completely ephemeral. His paintings are a record of the fleetingly ephemeral heroic act of creation, albeit a failing record. An archivist's nightmare, like fifty-year-old pressed flowers they are paradoxically turning to dust.

Performance artists are transient operators. More than anything, they seek the ephemeral creative moment, the sacred memory immune to digitalization. Over the past decade and a half, Sue Carman and the artists of *The Cathartic Circle* (*Cathartic* is the correct spelling), have successfully joined forces to create an astonishing sequence of ephemeral images to be consigned to the core of memory. The rich iconography, sound and texture of these extraordinary performances penetrate the consciousness and continue to reverberate long after the final curtain.

Here, at last, is an opportunity to see, to visit and adjust to their individual, more concrete declarations. In addition to paying homage to the diligence and fortitude of the artists of *The Cathartic Circle*, this exhibition is an authoritative testament to the vigorous power of art in Detroit. In this, the three hundredth anniversary of the city, we can reflect proudly that painters, sculptors, photographers, filmmakers and performance artists are flourishing, adding significantly to our cultural welfare.

QUESTION:

"Should I go, or should I stay?" – meaning: should I stay here or advance to New York? It is a conundrum that plagues artists living in Detroit. The artists that comprise *The Cathartic Circle* chose to stay. Paradoxically, their choice to remain - to linger, skulk and loiter - could not, at the time, have been conceived as a decision to shun the avant-garde, but certainly the curiously idiosyncratic character, which marks their art, makes it all the more compelling.

HOW TO SURVIVE AS AN ARTIST - TWO NEGATIVE VIEWS:

Industrial rustbelt icon, hockey town, *Motown*: Detroit. Not even on the main highway - Toledo claims that honor, straddling Interstate 80, New York beckoning one way, Chicago the other. In their uncouth self-inflicted isolation, sulking Detroit artists are pathologically incapable of throwing anything away or envisioning anything new; instead, they fester like pack rats in a mire of bitterness, harboring unfulfilled desires, taking refuge in melancholic narcissism.

Manhattan, an oblique salon where artistic expression has, on the one hand, devolved into a pathological collection of inane, hybrid, spasmodic snapshots of contempt, and on the other, constructed an aloof, conceited Modernist academy of professionalized auteurs. This cynical assembly of enfants terribles and grandees has successfully annexed the general public from any meaningful rapport with contemporary art.

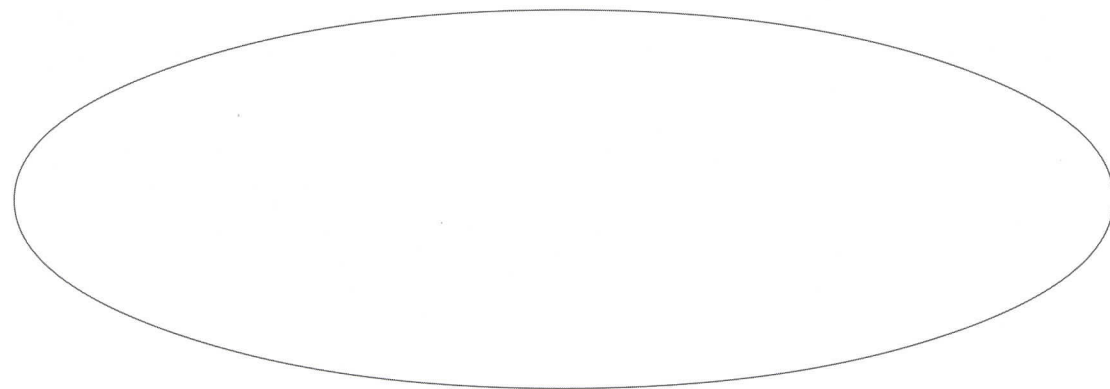
These two caustic views, exaggerated though they may be, hint at the ebb and flow of desire and loss affecting artists working in Detroit. Great artists require great audiences and the greatest audiences in the world inhabit New York City. But Detroit artists have the great advantage of living the life of visionaries, for were they to be replanted in New York, were they to *arrive* and undergo that crucial metamorphosis from visionary to elitist, they would lose the greater part of their integrity. Is this too harsh? Without elitism, the art world's infrastructure would crumble. Think of Jan van Eyck. He was afforded the possibility of becoming the single most important visionary artist of the fifteenth century largely because of the patronage of the Duke of Burgundy. Within the elite sanctum of the court van Eyck's art flourished to rise above the clumsy and mundane, initiating a new epoch, a new language for painting. Yet, think of Vincent van Gogh. Never part of any elite sanctum, his visionary, revolutionary paintings still reverberate and astonish one hundred years on.

DETROIT AIN'T NO NEW YORK

New York is the center of the art world. Lament or deny it, the statement is true. Detroit is a province (in all things except in the manufacture of cars and the occasional success of its sports franchises). The choice is to celebrate its provincialism or abandon it - move to New York or stay put, living vicariously through art magazines, half believing that, yes, Detroit is part of the global village, or really stick it out without any reservations. The truth is that this regionalism is what makes Detroit art unique. The chief reason that *The Catharctic Circle* has succeeded, both as performance artists and artists in their own right, is encapsulated in their choice to work it out in the rustbelt. Younger Detroit artists may see Detroit only in relation to not being New York, but members of *The Catharctic Circle*, for the most part, by living and working here successfully, have essentially outgrown the problem. They have a sense of their own history in a city that has a history worthy of reflection, with a world-class art museum and quorum of highly respected contemporary art spaces.

THE ONLY PROBLEM

The only problem with Detroit, apart from those political in nature, is that it has far too few collectors. More than anything, a credible visual arts community needs a population rich in art collectors. For their part, artists must have enough humility not to be so aloof that they shun the general public. The art mandarins must make the expansion of patronage a top priority, because what Detroit requires more than anything are larger audiences and a more evolved fabric of corporate and municipal largesse necessary to make it a truly viable place for artists to flourish.



THE GROUP

In 1985 a group of Detroit artists began a collaboration uniting their disciplines in the act of making performance art. They were an unlikely group; not all were painters, there were sculptors, photographers and filmmakers. Neither were they a single sex collective. There were also significant differences in age, ethnicity and religious affiliations. Some had full-time jobs; others led a hand to mouth existence, barely surviving off the sale of their art. There were always discussions about whether they should make a living to make art or make art to make a living. On the surface it seemed unlikely that such a miscellaneous group would gel into *The Catharctic Circle*, the leading collaborative performance art entity in the region.

THE LEADER

In the early days, *The Catharctic Circle* was something of a social club. The hub in those years was the Atlas building, a former furniture store on Gratiot across from the Eastern Market. Several members of the group lived there in the warren of artist's lofts. The hub within the hub was Sue Carman's studio.

All the performances by *The Catharctic Circle* have been conceived, written, directed and underwritten by Sue Carman. Over the years, the cycle of these sprawling works (which seem to follow a gestational pattern of about three years) have transformed her successive living spaces into theatrical nurseries, given over in their entirety to whatever performance is in progress. Paintings, drawings, wall hangings, costumes, props and fixtures become the backdrop of her studio landscape.

Carman is a painter. Her paintings depict a world close to ours, but it is a *sleepworld*, a world in which orchestrated desires are played out ritualistically with a sort of absurd comic restraint against the vast nameless cyclorama of a flat milky tundra. These silent paintings of flying, dancing and sleeping figures are the source of her performance art. If her paintings are the root of conception, her vigorous drawings convey the chattering monologue of her ideas. They reveal themselves with vivid urgency as unruly storyboards. Her drawings and paintings present a formidable body of work. They stand alone requiring no bolstering validation. That she should have the desire to make performance art above and beyond her work as a painter defines the breadth and magnitude of her power as a visual artist. And beyond all this, what is truly remarkable, given that artists are notoriously reticent about allowing other activities to encroach upon their art, is the fact that Sue Carman has sought out

and persuaded a credible group of artists to give up their time to help fulfill *her* vision.

No performance by *The Catharctic Circle* can be reviewed without first examining the pivotal role of Sue Carman's filmmaking. If her paintings are gestation pools, her films are the nascent voice of her vision. Before each performance is staged work begins with a film, which will eventually function as the central entity within the performance. In many respects, the films are more grounded in reality than either Carman's paintings or performances. In the films she wields greater control than elsewhere; not that elsewhere she is *uncontrolled*. Her performances have a spontaneous vigor born of collaboration and her paintings exercise the brio of direct painterly expressiveness. In her films she is methodical and vigilant. Each scene is carefully assembled and shot. She takes full advantage of the cutting room. Invariably her films have a vital musical component that often forms the narrative vertebrae. The films are short, succinct and convey a riveting whimsicality, not unlike the conviction encapsulated within an arrested dream, emphatically recalled upon awakening. The success of her films, which have won several awards, owes much to her joint collaboration with Jeff Bloomer. Bloomer, a fellow occupant of the artistic burrow on Gratiot in the early days, is an award winning independent filmmaker in his own right. Over the years, Bloomer has collaborated on direction, set design, shooting and editing. Bloomer's creative instinct and scrupulous technique have permitted Carman's vision to remain seamlessly intact.

The performers in the early films, particularly Carl Demeulenaere, Ed Fraga and Holly Branstner acted with a self-possessed theatrical aloofness. Their somnambulistic movements gave the films an air of remote, unsettled otherworldliness. This disquieting sense of alienation was not transferred to Carman's next body of work. The subsequent films used the narrative incantation of their more buoyantly engaging soundtracks to engender a sense of blithe mischief. Carman's most recent film bubbles with exuberance and idiosyncratic high spirits. Cheerfully focusing on the etiquette of dining, in a seemingly unending dolly shot, down an apparently infinitely long extended table, Carman's posse explores table dynamics. This piece, conceived in storyboard form on an equally long scroll of paper, not unlike the Bayeux Tapestry, carries the same allegorical richness as her paintings. And, of course, always at the center of these filmed sequences is Carman herself. For it must be said that ultimately, whether in the embodiment of painting, film or performance, these works are fragments of Sue Carman's besieged psyche - a consciousness caught in the rapture of elegant grace, small intricate Viennese pastries, and resigned Armenian Orthodox rectitude.



Sue Carman: *You are the Center of the World*, 2001, oil on canvas, 48" x 48"

THE PLAYERS

JEFF BLOOMER

Adamant, arch and somewhat fanatical, Jeff Bloomer is strictly a backroom boy; were it in the offing, despite certain macabre proclivities, the presence of his own corpse on stage would cause him considerable distress. Jeff Bloomer expresses himself most clearly through the machinations of film. Although, it must be said, that despite his circumspection, in private, he is gleefully damning of anything vague or superfluous. On his best days, Bloomer is an irreverent puritan. He can laugh with cheerful cynicism one moment, and scream in outrageous disgust the next. Bloomer revels in the contrast of black and white, even in choosing his wardrobe of black outfits, with the occasional addition of a white summer shirt. Indeed, in appearance, he possesses the air of an *Orwellian* visionary. Bloomer's films, invariably shot in stark chiaroscuro, project a gloomy apocalyptic view of the world. His wasteland outlook, which is actually more of an *inlook*, is transformed into intricate stop action animation sequences that explore themes of betrayal and redemption. Murky doomsday backdrops and sordid decaying interiors are the *mise en scene* of his vision, and they are the work of a perfectionist. In recent years, his cinematic revelations, comprised of obsessive, painstakingly crafted sets and props, have overflowed into the creation of intricate sculptural constructions. These extraordinary boxed-in artifacts present machinery and anatomy in a state of ongoing decay and reveal an ominous fascination with entropy. Conveying the same invocations as medieval morality plays, these new works intone and confine, within a compressed space, a sense of remorse and atonement, perhaps for the underlying infamy of the twentieth century. Their desiccated compartments function as contemporary reliquaries, reminding us that we are not so very far removed from our ancient, earthy past. Recalling 15th c. panel paintings, Bloomer points an allegorical, accusatory finger at the obscured base of human nature.

HOLLY BRANSTNER

Holly Branstner was a constant and devoted player in the early and middle years. Her pale platinum physique, invariably mute, would float across frame or stage with a particular trancelike aloofness. Branstner is a panel painter. Her work recalls the introspective, deliberateness and northern aesthetic of the work of Cranach, Drüer and Grünewald. The chief vehicle of expression in her paintings is the figure. Her work reveals the exquisitely painted body placed against a background. Recently she has worked exclusively as a portraitist. Her chief focus, invariably topographical rather than formal, is refined and realized in the exploration of the head, shoulders and hands of the sitter. Often, the taut surface tension in her paintings is supported and enhanced by decorative, carved frames recalling German Expressionist wood block printing.

These frames, also made by the artist, stress the iconic authenticity of the work. Her backgrounds, while not as crucial as the scrupulously, analytically rendered flesh, are a significant component because, clearly they are not meant merely as passive backdrops. The settings in her paintings are essentially depictions of weather. These, often acute, swirling meteorological conditions are employed as devices, enabling the sitter to be juxtaposed against an intensely vibrant palette. Swirling lemon yellows and cadmium reds vie with metallic Prussian blues, enveloping the pale translucent skin tones, thereby amplifying the sitter's schism from the surroundings. This provocative shift, from object (sitter) to ground (landscape), is what cleaves these powerful paintings from their Teutonic origins, transforming them into powerful contemporary statements. Not all Branstner's paintings hint at this reverberation between sitter and ground. Her cooler paintings place the figure neutrally against frigid *winterscapes*, amid the fenestration of an icy, northern skyline. Regardless of the weather, there is something aloof about the demeanor of the women in Branstner's paintings. This introversion, this reticence, perhaps alludes to the absurd, contradictory tightrope that divides objectivity from sycophancy across which all good portraitists must traverse. The tendency is amplified when Branstner paints a self-portrait, a theme for which she exhibits a considerable propensity. Her visage never betrays one scintilla of vulnerability and in some of these paintings she is rendered with closed eyes. The effect is startling and curiously beguiling. By denying us her eyes, the very thing we desire from a portrait - the realm of consciousness - is withheld and we are left wanting. These brooding, meticulously executed paintings, crafted with utter devotion, encapsulate a deep conviction that the refined, dignified mortal image is the necessary vessel to convey the uniqueness and authenticity of the human spirit.

JOYCE BRIENZA

Joyce Brienza is another performer, not a star turn, not a brooding prima donna, but a good all-rounder. She has appeared in both films and performances, often in proximity to her friend, Marilyn Zimmerman, whose playful enthusiasm ignited her latent exhibitionism. Brienza was trained as a painter, but if someone were to challenge her identity, she would concede with alacrity that her work imposes few boundaries. Certainly she is a drawer, but she cannot merely leave it at that. A fiddler and fusser, she hems and haws until a sense of resolution is achieved. There is a supposition in her work that, actually, it may *never* be completely finished. This does not imply that it is *unfinished*; it implies that Brienza could well stumble upon one of her paintings after twenty-five years and add a bit more. Brienza works in layers. If she could not do so, she probably would not work at all. These layers, veils, or skirts, as they have been called, are the result of a visceral constructive method of concealment and revelation. In this process of *dressing-up*, which has much in common with the additive processes and incantations in the creation of a fetish,



Jeff Bloomer, *Untitled*, 1998, oil, wood, found objects, taxidermy, 15" x 15"

Brienza can never have a complete inkling of how these works will progress. What interests her initially is the stimulation of embarkation. A new work might begin with a doodle - a comic fragment from popular culture. Next might come a sequence of artful outlines. Brienza works sequentially in lines, like writing on lined paper. She works in stripes, frieze upon frieze, one band on top of another. Only the briefest set of regulations hold sway: *begin with something recognizable, draw it, paint it, pummel it, sew it, smother it in layers of hybridity and use every possible color* (except the murky ones). Pure primary color is tinted slightly with white and used to isolate separate forms, rather like mid twentieth century maps, where sovereign states are distinguished by the presence of no two colors appearing contiguously. It might be construed from these descriptions of color and sewing and friezes of fabric, that these are pretty pictures. They might float and dance, there may be the suggestion of olive oil and southern warmth, but they are not merely decorative. These works, with all their complex post-feminist significations and pop cultural iconography, are powerful narrative statements. They also have a compelling narcissistic streak. They speak, like all good painting, between the lines, between the layers, by gradually revealing their deeper associations and meaning, and they do so with verve and conviction.

CARL DEMEULENAERE

Perhaps the most devoted member of *The Cathartic Circle* is Carl Demeulenaere. The appropriate place for Demeulenaere is under a powerful spotlight, glowing slightly, center stage. He wears the finest costumes and receives the loudest applause. Offstage he is reflective and chooses his words carefully. Like Ed Fraga, he has survived as an artist chiefly from selling his work. He is aware of the sacrifices he has had to endure. A bachelor, Demeulenaere travels extensively, applying for residencies and retreats, returning to Detroit to brood over his future. The term bachelor is arcane, but apt; there is something of the old world, something of the gentleman about Carl Demeulenaere. The color drawings, seldom bigger than 4" x 5", that comprise his work are painstakingly produced over long periods, mostly after dark. As his name suggests, he is of Flemish ancestry, and consciously or not, his work exhibits a powerful connection with 15th c. Flemish painting. Essentially, Demeulenaere is a miniaturist. His principal subject matter is the male portrait. His drawings are flawlessly beautiful. He would take issue with this latter description. He is constantly attempting to improve himself, and he uses his art as the chief barometer of his success or failure. Not content with making drawings of exquisite quality, Demeulenaere makes plans, years in advance, to build complex installations as reliquaries for his jewel-like miniatures. These constructions, when realized in their full, yet restrained, grandeur, with their gothic arches and votive candles, have an ecclesiastical dimension. The male images in his drawings (it is almost impossible to tell whether they are drawings or paintings) convey either goodness or wickedness - the poles of being. When conveying the

former, they do not necessarily depict sacred persons, but rather are iconic in the sense that male beauty is held as sacred. To describe them purely as homoerotic would devolve them into mere sexual entities. Although they encapsulate a rumor of desire, they emanate more eloquently a sense of self-sacrifice. What they imply through their meticulous execution is a sense of moral acumen, a very high standard where discretion and abstinence are the paragons of virtue. These works are chivalrous acts emoting with resolute nobility that there is honor in being a man. The majority of his drawings fall into this category. Occasionally, however, Demeulenaere delves into the world of infamy. Perhaps in doing so he is subconsciously exhibiting a deconstructionist bent. By privileging virtue, he is aware of the imbalance he might be spawning. Instead of suppressing wickedness, he addresses it head on by depicting an ignoble profile, a weak chinned nave, an archetype of vanity. In a recent drawing he apparently chose to depict himself in full narcissistic folly, robed in red with rouged lips. As expected, Demeulenaere earnestly keeps himself in check.

ROSE E. DESLOOVER

Many of *The Cathartic Circle*'s performances have taken place at Marygrove College, Detroit, under the watchful eye of Rose E. DeSloover. Almost all of the artists in the Cathartic Circle have shown their work at Marygrove Gallery where DeSloover is director. As far as the performances are concerned, she is behind the scenes in production. DeSloover's expertise, like that of Sue Carman, is in bringing people together. While she might unite artists in earnest collaboration, her art is set apart from that of the rest of the circle. Essentially conceptual in nature, her work speaks an entirely different language. This begs the question: what is the language of *The Cathartic Circle*? There are some common strands; their work is generally figurative, and while it is not objective, it is intrinsically realist in its formal presentation. Fundamentally autobiographical in nature, their work is tempered by a sort of surrealistic intensification. Their work may be idiosyncratically personal, but the disclosure, veiled with surreal augmentation, stops short of total exposure, as if such frankness would be too tactless and immodest. However, their anecdotal anguish is powerful and resonant. This *ad hoc* descriptive summary becomes awkward when applied to the work of Christine Hagedorn, Rick Vian and Michelle Stamler, but certainly their work is closer to the others than that of Rose DeSloover. Only Nelson Smith's use of text bears some resemblance to DeSloover's work, but it is brief and passing. It might be a perverse suggestion, but DeSloover's work, which exudes a profound and comforting sense of order and control, is at heart concerned with containing chaos. Her work is essentially about the presentation of text, but once the text has been singled out, framed and offered for perusal, what do the bare words say? Actually the words appear as fragments of text or in the form of linguistic riddles. DeSloover catalogues these fragments by genus and genre; birds of a feather are classified, listed and stored. DeSloover is a religious compiler of lists. In



photo: Tim Thayer

Holly Branstner, *The Golden Path*, 1998, oil on panel; frame: wood and gold leaf, 30" x 34"

recent years, for instance, she has been fascinated by the whimsical, sham names of household paint colors. The cunning copywriter who invents these confectionery nouns does so to titillate, to incite us to buy. DeSloover appropriates these morsels and catalogues them with dutiful conceptual devotion. The resulting austere presentations hint at the capriciousness of language. From a structuralist perspective, words are notoriously slippery and inconstant. In her grids, shelves and structures, DeSloover attempts to hammer them down. Structuralism informs us that words bear no physical relation to things they describe. Word/signifiers, when read aloud, produce an acoustic sound image, but the concept suggested by the word/image is a purely arbitrary association. For example, the words, *powder & blue*, when put together summon in the mind's eye a light dusty blue, but they can only do this when placed in tandem, because *powder*, alone, does not suggest paleness - put *powder* with *gun* and you have something dark and dangerous. Ultimately, such groupings are absurdly specious. All is chaos, but Rose DeSloover captures these random associations and linguistic slip ups, and documents them with soundless, obsessive order. Consequently her work has a refined quietness, a sort of official comforting authority. It invites us to read, to whisper and to make the official linguistic connection.

ED FRAGA

In the milieu of *The Cathartic Circle*, Ed Fraga has been a skillful performer. On stage he is all business, the embodiment of sublime authority, but in person he is more often the outspoken, immodest jester. But there is nothing bathetic about his paintings. Fraga is a painter of sublime narrative images. Like Holly Branstner, he is essentially a panel painter, but there is something of the muralist in his panoramic vistas. Something else he shares with Branstner, as well as Demeulemaere, is that, at heart, he is a romantic, but also like them, he holds his romanticism in check. As acts of subjugation (acts of curbed romanticism), the scale of his paintings is more grandiose than those of his compatriots. The burden of this acute moderation, this sense of ritualized abstinence, is invariably revealed in the acquiescent eyes of Fraga's fastidiously rendered subjects. Exuding a feral unpredictability, these beings are never really quite human. Their eyes might convey a sense of resignation, but it is that of the incarcerated. Who are they? It is impossible to say exactly, but they are undoubtedly part Fraga. Each time he paints a human being, he leaves a residue of his person in the painting; his ephemeral being is revealed in suspended animation, somewhere between life and loss. Whoever or whatever these depicted beings are, they are exposed wearily, in quasi-purgatory, as if spied enduring the ordeal (or ecstasy) of somnolent rapture. The surreal landscape of the sleeping is a recurrent theme in Fraga's work. How appropriate that of his exquisite painting at the Detroit Institute of Arts is uncovered in the topography of bed linen. As in Carman and Branstner's work, Fraga's painted narratives unfold against semi-barren northern tundra,

but in his case the vast landscapes are painted after the thaw, greening, not as painterly backgrounds, but as atmospheric hemispheres, a firmament capable of supporting an intricate convoluted scheme of stratagems, idylls or sagas. Lately, Fraga has been making works on paper. In some ways he has been getting away from himself, or at least away from his self-image. This work is mining another seam of Fraga's psyche, that which pertains to his Mexican heritage. On his mother's side, he is essentially Northern European in his outlook, certainly in terms of faith and aesthetic posture, but his father's Mexican influence beckons and tugs. In fact, it always has. His Mexican inheritance has often mocked and contradicted his deep-rooted sense of sobriety and subjugation. In the past, the protestant was firmly in control, but with maturity the visceral tendencies of his Latino inclinations are more fully asserting themselves. His older paintings explored the melancholic province of isolation, repression and sacrifice; the new work embraces inclusion, ritual and veneration of things outside the psyche of Ed Fraga. The creation of images that operate symbolically on a spiritual plane has always been a powerful force to assuage or embrace. For Fraga it is the engine, leading to the act of faith, which when successful, has the power to transcend the veracity of existence into myth.

LYNN GALBREATH

Lynn Galbreath has spent many hours working behind the scenes of *The Cathartic Circle* performances creating costumes, working backstage and designing print support material. A contemporary of Carman's from the Wayne State days, the earnest presence of Bob Wilbert is apparent in Galbreath's painting. Her desire as a painter has always been to find a balance between honest, truthful rendering of form and the richness of a heavily impasted surface. Her early painterly aspirations stemmed from attending Wayne State on the tails of the *Cass Corridor* scene. The question: *is it about content or paint application?* was particularly crucial back then. She made a whole series of luxuriantly worked fish paintings, incorporating decorative patterning with thick paint application. Her compulsion to paint fish came from her distress over the environmental catastrophe in Michigan's waterways and the consequent decline in the fish population, particularly the grayling in the Au Sable River. Eventually, the thickness of paint, applied in long energetic strokes, became more and more central to her work. At the same time, each piece echoed and underscored a growing frustration concerning the balance between her dedication as an artist and her filial responsibilities, revealing the question: *why does one create?* Galbreath turned to drawing for a year in search of a fresh visual vocabulary. Her quest was rooted in the need to articulate a more direct investigation of formal structure. She began a series of gestural drawings on paper. The sense of liberation gleaned from these dynamic new works gave her license to begin a concurrent series of more intimate images in graphite on the *imprimatura* of mylar board. These produced an intriguing counterpoint to the vigorous, larger drawings. Their intimacy was



photo: Tim Thayer

Joyce Brienza, *Hard to Stand*, 2000, acrylic and pastel on paper, 31" x 23"

evoked chiefly through a telescopic reduction in scale. The use of iron forms surrounding the drawings accentuated this miniaturization. These were not merely adornments or framing devices; they worked as integral parts of each piece, opening up a new avenue of expression. Largely chosen for their formal content rather than decorative implications, these retired machine parts served to enhance Galbreath's passion for materials. With this intact, she was free to focus her adroit mark-making predilection directly on the imagery under scrutiny - the still life. These compelling pieces are, in a sense, still life surrounded by still life. There is a startling empathy between the objects rendered within the still life and the object/entity as a whole. Galbreath divides her time between the intimate and the gesturally expansive. Now, all the things she draws and paints receive their significance not only from their intrinsic narrative power, but also from the sum of their associations within the collective still life and from the rich landscape of marks connecting them. Amid the drag and pull of mark making, Galbreath creates pictures where triads and quartets of objects bunch together. The marks are teased out with urgent speculation, revealing surfaces abundant in *pentimenti*. Mundane objects are transformed into charged images. The choice of what to paint has become vitally important. These are exciting times for Galbreath. After years of objective guard duty, unexpectedly she has discovered, with instinctive chutzpah, a way to extract meaning from the interaction of the objects that haunt the everydayness of life. The beauty of the object, transformed through the fluency of drawing, is revealed in all its authoritative formal resonance.

CHRISTINE HAGEDORN

Christine Hagedorn's work in *The Catharctic Circle* may have given voice to certain intuitive, spontaneous impulses, however, her role in *It Takes One To Be One*, that of the blue-haired punk girl was actually a proficient, well crafted piece of work. She could have hammed it up, but the role was dispatched with restraint and intelligence; by degrees, she carefully teased out the character's vulnerability. Her approach to making sculpture engages the same blend of subtle intuition and measured intelligence. Ostensibly, upon perfunctory perusal, Hagedorn's sculpture summons the object/image of a boat. Simultaneously there is an awareness of the presence of acute craftsmanship. Put them together and what ought to coalesce is the text fragment: *boat building*. Not so. Her work summons a myriad of object/images: wings, wingspans, trestles, cantilevers, cuttlefish and antennae - usable things. Subsequently, formal considerations emerge: structure, line, composition, symmetry, balance, mass, tone and translucence. Then more random associations coalesce: tracery, tissue, tension, fatigue, flight (the Wright Brothers!) and so on. Her work is an amalgam of object/image and process, but the more it is contemplated, the less prevalent and imperative becomes the object/image connection. What begin to emerge are the metaphorical implications. Because clearly these works are not specific objects (things), their power is in their allusiveness; they suggest states of

mind rather than mere utilization. The artists of *The Catharctic Circle* are of the Northern Hemisphere and there is a powerful assertion of the north in Hagedorn's constructions. They belong to the land of butter rather than that of olive oil. They suggest northern preoccupations - they are metaphors for sobriety, order, reason and rectitude. Such classical, economic structures allude to the fundamental human imperative to assemble structures of shelter, security, and faith. There is order to them; their lean construction follows a logical pattern. They are *rood* symbols, which remain slightly beyond reach, not floating, yet set in space, erect and tensile. They are judicious yet visionary, their passion is refined and immutable. Unlike most of the art of *The Catharctic Circle*, Hagedorn's work is neither narrative nor figurative (not referring to a specific noun). It does not present finite, specific scenarios to be interpreted within certain parameters. It requires visiting hours; it invites speculation. Within Hagedorn's structures there are infinite tracts of space. Although initially reticent and concise, it is the space within these austere elegant structures that invite our imagination, which allow us to think of departure, rapture and refinement. There is something morally improving about this ebb and flow of metaphorical and formal interpretation. Hagedorn's sculpture emits a powerful and resonant influence upon both space and intellect.

JOHN PIET

John Piet collaborated on the creation of a large piece of sculpture for the *Heaven* performance in 1995. He has never been on the performing end and likely will remain only a logistical operator. Nonetheless, over the last ten years, Piet has had considerable presence at the table of *The Catharctic Circle*'s club-house, offering both moral support and his inimitable brand of tempered sardonic wit. Piet's Eastern European, no nonsense level-headedness has also added a measure of centered common sense to the more ephemeral, quixotic machinations within the group. His thirty-five year career as a sculptor connects the group historically to the days of the *Cass Corridor*. His prolific drawings, many of which are large-scale works, heavy with the inflection of charcoal dust, convey a sense of expressive urgency. Their raw vitality communicates the fervent exhilaration he experiences during the seminal act of drawing. The ideas contained in these nascent works of exploration are distilled and reconfigured in his three-dimensional work. Taking a longer view, and requiring the assured diligence of a man completely secure in his sense of craftsmanship and use of material, his sculpture is more ponderous and shrewd than his shoot from the hip two-dimensional pieces. Of course, this is understandable, they require considerably more time than his drawings. Part of their authority lies in the measured ancient processes endemic to the fabrication of sculpture. His latest sculptures are smaller in scale and enshrine a condensed lucidity that is uncut and potent. They ingeniously hint at the dichotomy between intuition and intellectuality, a paradox that has always been a powerful catalyst in the process of making art. Heavy forged and welded metal,



photo: Ewolf

Carl Demeulenare, *Los Penitentes*, 2000, (detail of diptych), colored pencil on paper; velvet and brass in Avonite frame, 3" x 2.5" (image) 11" x 8" (framed)
Courtesy of Russ & Barbara Bunting

with all its implied crude energy, is manipulated and wrought into vessels or devices of impartation. These structures function subversively as stands or lecterns, implying a powerful collegiate or ecclesiastical pull, and hold in their grip, appropriately, weighty ancient books. These composite works are something of a new departure in Piet's sculptural mission and hint at a fresh, perhaps more contemplative course ahead.

NELSON SMITH

A hallucination? A man, hair askew, windblown, boiler-suited, glistening with perspiration, amid a cacophony of cyber-music and staccato flashing lights, methodically intent upon proving a cryptically difficult aesthetic hypothesis. This vision, this picture of Nelson Smith is almost impossible to shake. Despite being typecast as the boffin of *The Cathartic Circle*, Smith is, in fact, the most versatile utilitarian member. Something of an artistic and technological polymath, Smith is well suited to speak the many tongues of the performance artist. An adept pianist and painter, it is perhaps in the realm of working his instruments and containing his mania for repetition and regulation that Smith finds his visionary excellence. His paintings are the blueprints and training sessions for his performance work. Unlike his performances, they have an immutable quality. They emote silently. Text and imagery conspire to threaten, to speak, to shudder, *to perform!* But, of course, they cannot make noise or move through space. They have something of the home and hearth of Chardin too, albeit a hi-tech updated version, replete with small electrical appliances. On the other hand, their strict frames confer the cachet to go head to head with commercial advertising - they function like memorials to free enterprise. But they mock rather than commemorate, subversively undermining the sacredness of the product line with delineated cursive graffiti. Nelson Smith does not require the endorsement of *The Cathartic Circle* to guild his cage. He is perhaps the preeminent artist working within the discipline in Michigan. His work is authoritative and formal with an almost religious sense of austerity. In his work, technology barely tolerates a human presence. In Carman's work, human beings barely tolerate technology. The very incongruity of these two powerful magnetic forces is what compels them to collaborate. And, of course, Smith needs a little comic relief, and *The Cathartic Circle*'s performances are nothing, if not choreographed hysteria. When Carman and Smith meet, hysteria and mania attract and repel perfectly, causing a seamless balance of wit and sequencing. Smith's other great contribution to the group, which cannot be understated, is his music. The narrative momentum of *It Takes One To Be One* was maintained and regulated by Smith's driving energetic original score. He invented a whole new musical genre, which is best described as *immigration engine music*. Imagine a long voyage to America, confined under the waterline with a squabbling quintet: a Polish Jew, melancholic Jamaican, paranoid Hungarian, tearful Italian and, of course, Nelson Smith rocking backwards and forwards, anticipating the beat, and there you have the

sort of sound one might imagine floating up from the engine-room.

MICHELLE STAMLER

Imagine a photographer who must leave the shores of America before she can even begin to conceive of making a photograph and you will have envisioned Michelle Stamler. The one exception to this rule is with her body of work emanating from *The Cathartic Circle*. For twelve years Stamler has been the chief chronicler of the Circle's off and onstage antics. This is not so surprising; *The Cathartic Circle* is, after all, something of a foreign country. As a photographer, Stamler is primarily a documenter. Her method, beyond the actual intellectualization of planning to arrive at a destination, is largely intuitive. She is fundamentally interested in photographing people and the locations they inhabit. As a documenter, she is something of an anthropologist. The sort of remoteness crucial to fulfill her vision requires traveling quite far afield: through the mountains, down dirt roads - a wake of dust aft, and into communes and settlements, upsetting the chickens and livestock that are sure to be blocking the road. There is not exactly hazard in these ambiguous sorties, but there is unquestionably a sense of anxiety, an uneasiness to which she must subject herself before she can remove her lens cap and surreptitiously begin shooting, because it is a slightly clandestine process. Stamler certainly does not want her subjects posing for her. On the other hand, imagine this light skinned woman (curly hair, shorts) this incongruous *gringo*, traipsing through your village, camera cocked and ready. Something of the wariness of her subjects is reflected in their eyes - rightly they are slightly perplexed. There is a resigned awareness also, a sort of honor among thieves: *if you can capture me before I dodge out of the way, then you win*. It is invariably too hot and humid to work up the momentum for anyone, photographer or photographed, to express affront. Is a photograph of another human being theft - appropriation without permission - soul stealing? Is this larceny she is up to? She is very fast and crafty. She hangs on street corners, just outside people's peripheral vision. She captures them before they have a mind to object. Often, slyly using her wide-angle lens, her subjects only have a peripheral suspicion of what she is really doing. Stamler *never* asks permission. She wants to show what these human faces have to reveal about themselves without contrivance or artfulness. This is the region of her interest. This is why she has to travel across continents. The camera savvy minions of the industrial north are too hard-boiled, too cynical, too aloof, to reveal anything primordially relevant. Stamler has a genuine affection for her subjects. Often, but not until after she has captured them on film, she will strike up a conversation; she speaks enough Spanish to establish a rapport. It is not empathy or compassion so much as the envy of never being able to experience that sort of plain life. Not that she would want to live out her days in the sleepy obscurity of these remote frontier places. Like the rest of us, she needs electricity, technology and clean linen. However, the

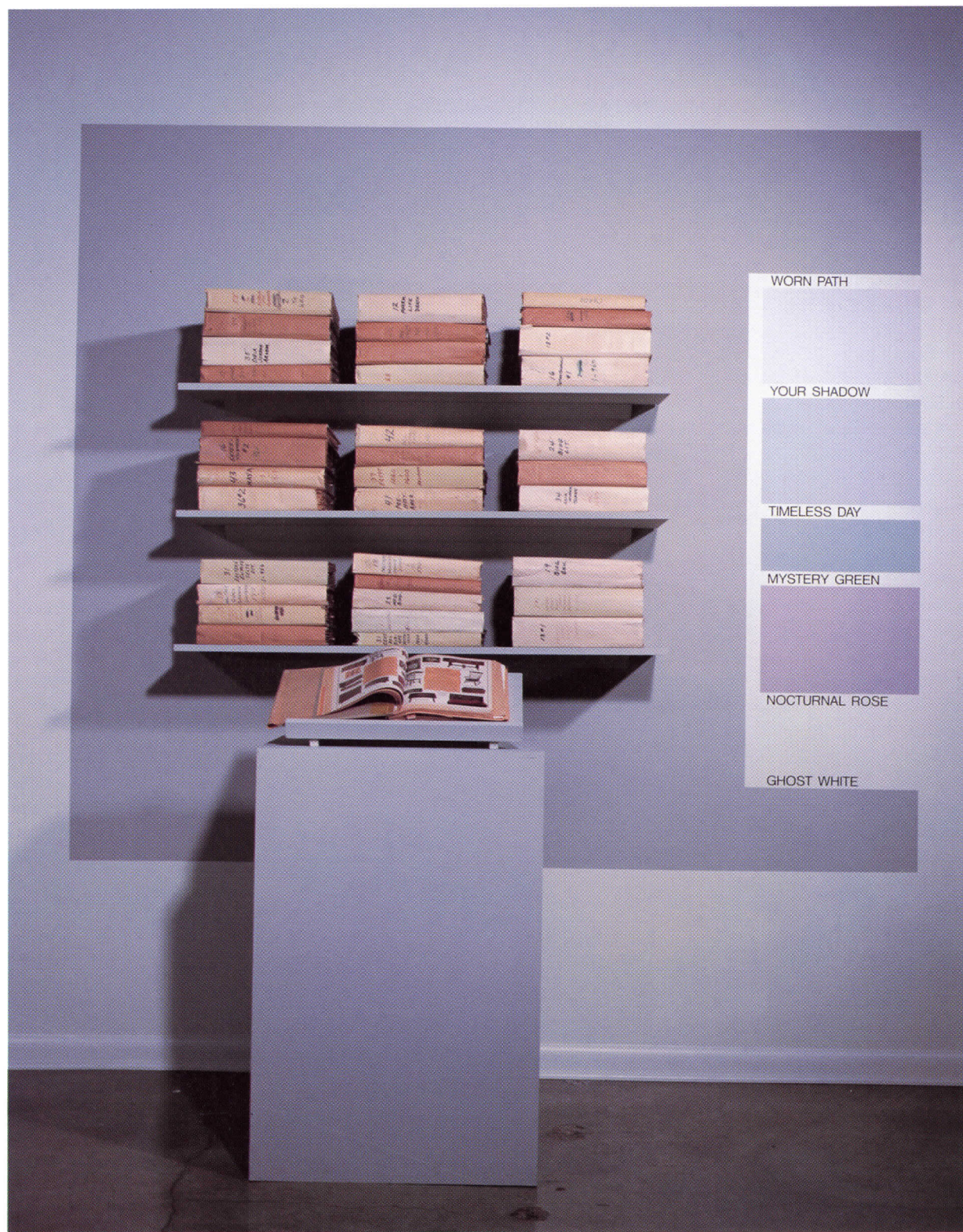


photo: Bob Stewart

Rose E. DeSloover, *Ghost White: The Scrapbooks of James Mitchell*, 2000, acrylic, vinyl lettering, mixed media, 8' x 8'

milieu of most social documentary photographers is that of the voyeur, and voyeurs cannot operate with the complicity, acquiescence or indifference of their subjects. No one in the rustbelt cares who is watching them anymore. So Stamler has to rough it, again and again, making the pilgrimage to capture people who hold their image sacred, going through roll after roll until the time comes to leave. Nonetheless, this crusade is merely the first part of the process. It is not until she returns to the darkroom that she begins to transform these nascent images into photographs. Stamler has but one rule: her photographs have to be full frame prints (i.e. printed showing the black verification border of negative frame). No corrupting cropping is permitted. Many hours are spent testing, burning in, and working up her final statement. There is something pure, something poignant in these extremely well crafted frontier photographs, something heartfelt to remind us that the human race is comprised of people other than us. People living simpler, yet more mysterious lives, annexed though they may be from the Eden of technology.

RICK VIAN

Rick Vian comes to *The Cathartic Circle* by the direct route of marriage; Vian and Carman were married in 1995. An accomplished jazz drummer, Vian worked with Nelson Smith on the music for, *It Takes One To Be One*. He has also been conscripted into making many of the props and objects, which appear and disappear throughout a Circle performance. Vian is the most formal and least narrative artist in the group. His paintings show a dogged determination, adoration of materials, and a rejection of anything that might suggest surplus babble. If there is a sense of austerity in all this, it is a sophisticated asceticism rather than that of the breadline variety. Vian, the ascetic, actually keeps a remote cottage in the U.P., a place of refuge where he can indulge his need for solitude and reflection. Chief among Vian's painterly pursuits is drawing, indeed, whether using paint, or any of the array of materials in his drawing arsenal, he is an avid lover of line. With Vian, line has a primacy over all other things. He does not fuss with his lines; he is utterly dogmatic about them. They form the grids of his vision. Working accumulatively, he builds up his abstract forms by constructing numerous linear frontiers, outwardly and inwardly. The forms are invariably subservient to their outlines. There is a jerry-built, constructivist grittiness in these subjective abstractions recalling the days of the *Cass Corridor* - deduced also, in the keen surface tension and reduced palette. The process of abstract painting is stridently revealed across the webbed, ribbed, vaulting surfaces of Vian's boxed-in compositions. The structure (and structure is at the core of his art) is revealed through the linear object-ness of the whole. Sometimes this structuralizing is so urgent that he is compelled to paint around the corners, transferring his lines onto the sides of his paintings. All this would be very straightforward were it not for the fact that in addition to his absorption in serious formal abstraction, he has a powerful penchant for making drawings from life. Neither slight nor passing, this proclivity,

when compared to the abstract work, might seem somewhat schizophrenic. Will the real Rick Vian please step forward? This becomes more confounding upon the realization that his figurative work is rigorously objective. However, his focus on his objective work is as exacting as that of his abstract work. His determination as a figurative artist is revealed in the sublime image of a northern tree line, specifically trees of pine. As in the abstract work, primacy of materials remains a powerful force, and, of course, there is no superfluous blather. The drawings are raw, intense and vigorously worked. Vian is currently creating a body of large drawings of pine trees using industrial strength graphite; his studio floor is a perilous black ice rink. These highly physical drawings (barring no resemblance to Detroit art, circa 1970) have the same linear prowess as his abstract works, but they have something additional: they evoke a profound devotion to landscape. They recall the *savage* landscapes of Thomas Cole and allude to a similar sense of pantheism and an incantation of American nineteenth century aesthetics. Vian has been making these figurative works on and off for over twenty years. This is not a minor struggle. Is Modernism engaged in a grave, deadlocked battle against objectivity? Regardless, Vian's formal maneuvers in the trenches of Modernism have served him as master classes in drawing, making the tree work resonate all the more. This new substantive body of work eruditely and unashamedly evokes the austere beauty held captive in the primeval Northern American forest.

MARILYN ZIMMERMAN

The most vocal and politicized artist to have worked in *The Cathartic Circle* is Marilyn Zimmerman. This facility made her a natural *dramatis personae* in the early years of the Circle. Her gender-bending appearance as *The Blue Boy* in the *Out of The Blue* performance is particularly memorable. Zimmerman is also the most conceptual of the artists, in that her work is concerned with ideas rather than with the polished object. This does not mean that she cannot render or capture an image in all its cohesive finality. She can and has, but, more than anything, Zimmerman is a perpetual searcher. Her work is about the process of looking and challenging, because she is more interested in challenging us than in finding anything absolute. One thing Marilyn Zimmerman would take issue with strongly is being categorized within the limitations of traditional hierarchical system. Above all, she is inclusive, egalitarian and democratic. Fortunately, neatly putting Zimmerman's oeuvre in one box is a futile exercise. Her mission as an artist, educator and activist is to explicate cultural deficiencies such as gender, race and class barriers - to subvert harmful doctrines. Zimmerman is a dissident maverick. She is driven to make art because it is one more way she can express herself; it is an act attesting to her conviction, a means of going on record. And why art particularly - why not journalism or poetry? Here is the crux. Visual art speaks in many tongues; it speaks above, below, between and beyond the lines. Zimmerman embraces this ambiguity because her vision of the world is not fixed. It speaks

Ed Fraga: *The Radish*, 2000, color pencil on paper, 22" x 30"

photo: Tim Thayer



the language of inclusion, it is flexible and it can be compassionate or angry, buoyantly optimistic or grave. Zimmerman's chief instrument is her camera, and like her vision, it is flexible. It is the perfect vehicle to capture her fast thinking, fast roving range of ideas. Also the immediate accessibility of the photograph is useful to her. It is, after all, paramount that her images are able to convey her ideas, so that they might, in the eyes of the onlooker, incite the possibility of social change. Sometimes she uses the camera as a weapon, but she does so to expose the wound in order for it to heal. Zimmerman sometimes gets into trouble. It is inevitable. She will not be bound by cultural conventions nor submit to narrowly confining bourgeois values. It is a life's work, without beginning or end, an evocative/provocative exploration of the challenge of being a visual artist.

THE ART OF DETROIT

The Cathartic Circle presents a cross section of art in Detroit at the beginning of the third millennium. Certain tendencies reveal themselves. The work is deeply rooted in the revelation of seeing. The majority of the artists are profoundly concerned with rendering the figure in pictorial space, revealing a powerful link with the figurative tradition of western narrative art. Above all else, these artists create images for us to feast our eyes upon, to read, to be engaged and astonished by. There is an elevated respect for technique, a deep knowledge and adoration of the craft of converting complex materials into transforming visionary images. The conversion process is tied to manual dexterity rather than mechanical or technological means. Generally, the art is non-ironic - it means what it says, and in most cases, it is earnest - it wants to be taken seriously. The majority of the work is autobiographical. It is a form of self-revelation that embodies a powerful mythicizing aspect. The revelation is exposed with surrealistic intensification. The exposé is veiled in idiosyncratic augmentation, a partially obscured hybrid of truth and invention, as if total candor would be crude, indiscreet and conceited. Such morphing of fact and fiction, such distillation of the psyche, can be seen particularly in the work of Bloomer, Branstner, Brienza, Carman, Demeulenaere and Fraga. They are perhaps saying: *This is who I am, a person you could never fully understand because I am haunted, but I leave the door slightly ajar...* Ephemeral and allusive though it may be, the revelation is potent enough to elicit a connection, to draw a conclusion, or to render an ominous mental picture. Art before the modern period revealed much about the moral milieu under which artists worked; the artists of *The Cathartic Circle* till similar soil, revealing much about their own moral disquiet. This is an apt metaphor because these artists work among the roots of moral consciousness. They are deeply interested in the opposing spheres of human spirituality and human nature; they cultivate the region of

thought and desire, the center of moral consciousness. This place was once the exclusive realm of the visionary. It seems almost inappropriate to use such arcane terminology in this, the age of digital dumbing-down, but these artists genuinely reveal imperative imprints of contemporary significance. The artists singled out above are at the heart of this allegorical investigation. They reflect not just on contemporary America - they owe their allegiance as much to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as they do to Modernism. To them, ultimately, Modernism was a flash in the pan. Perhaps Postmodernism presents a more viable connection, but again, to these artists it is a brief and fleeting one.

The remaining artists, the quasi-modernists, Hagadorn, Galbreath, Vian and Piet, while not inhabiting the autobiographical realm, orbit, pierce the center or diverge from it at will, occupying a more formal, purist realm where hybrid structures conspire and coalesce into pure inspired formations. Stamler makes equally intricate compositions out of her human material, exposing America's latent xenophobia. And the mavericks, DeSloover, Smith and Zimmerman reside in the conceptual sphere, where ideas contract and expand making connections or shooting into another dominion of the mind.

A striking aspect of all the work is its absence of cynicism. This does not altogether imply that contemporary art has been marked by cynicism. Generally, art is in recovery after the sardonic, sneering nadir of the eighties, apart from that of the dumbed-down, instant fix variety - rumors persist that the avant-garde is still chiefly indulging its anti-aesthetic bent, churning out work that is ugly, awkward and dumb. *The Cathartic Circle* rode out the last two decades with an earnest declaration of skeptical optimism.

Before the modern age, it was endemic for artists to make work that was worthy of God. This is no longer universal and is a decidedly unfashionable concept, particularly amongst the avant-garde. Work by artists of *The Cathartic Circle* betrays no particular sectarian bent, neither it is evangelical or sentimental, but at its center it is strikingly spiritual. It is created with a profound affection for the process, ethos and the sentiment of bringing forth a visionary image.

The extraordinary *Kick Out the Jams* exhibition at the D.I.A. in 1980 was a lasting testament to the vigorous power of art in Detroit. The raw intrinsic energy of Detroit found its true expression in the barbed, painterly *Cass Corridor* constructions. The same energy prevails today, but has shifted its emphasis away from the inscribed, assembled and retinal. Contemporary Detroit artists are placing greater stress on the narrative human image, pictorial space and the revival of a honed, crafted use of materials, engendering a more pensive, rhetorical and cerebral approach to making art.

New York is one of the great cities on earth, but it is another country. They say Detroit is real. In the seventies, the reality was espoused in coarse urban geometry where mark and gesture ruled supreme. Two decades on, a new realism has emerged, revealed in work that is highly crafted, lucid, fabulous, richly allegorical and uniquely compelling. Long live art in Detroit



Lynn Galbreath, *Untitled*, 2000, graphite & gouache on Mylar, antique bullet loader
5" wide x 3" deep x 25" high

THE CATHARTIC CIRCLE DIALOGUE

Dick Goody: *How many performance artists does it take to change a light bulb?*

Nelson Smith: Performance artists don't change light bulbs – they work in the dark.

D.G: *It's been said that a performance is actually a group of artists on a field trip – an exhibitionist's field trip perhaps; are performance artists exhibitionists?*

Joyce Brienza: We're all quietly exhibitionists or we wouldn't be here.

D.G: *A performance is a three dimensional work of art that moves through time. What makes a good performance more than merely theatre without a plot?*

Marilyn Zimmerman: Well, what differentiates performance from theatre is the interaction and engagement with the audience. So it's happening in real time. That's what Sue's gift is: the inclusiveness of not only the group, but also the whole audience and the whole energy of that group dynamic.

Sue Carman: It's more conceptual than theatre. It's more like what you use when you're painting.

Joyce Brienza: It's all about images.

Rick Vian: It's like poetry to me. It's abstract, yet it has images.

Marilyn Zimmerman: And it's coming off the stage - traditional theatre is contained on the stage.

Joyce Brienza: But what is the difference between performance and avant-garde or experimental theatre?

Rick Vian: Performance art has more of a visual component.

John Piet: Effect/affect.

D.G: *Sue Carman said recently that making art is about dealing with rejection. Do you think she's right?*

Carl Demeulenaere: Lately, I've been looking at my art as a correction of mistakes - endlessly correcting the mistakes of my life.

Joyce Brienza: Isn't the root of those problems rejection?

Carl Demeulenaere: It's one of many.

Michelle Stamler: Marilyn and I would like to say that that's where painters differ from photographers.

Marilyn Zimmerman: Photographers are much more engaged with reality. They document reality. They engage the community and give voice to people who aren't heard. They are more inherently inclusive and connected to a cultural critique.

Michelle Stamler: Painters are engaged in something more personal.

Joyce Brienza: That's the result not the cause. We're talking about what makes you make art.

Marilyn Zimmerman: Oh, I think it is the cause.

Joyce Brienza: You're saying that photographers are less introverted than painters and less narcissistic? But this still doesn't address rejection, because certainly, certainly Marilyn...

Marilyn Zimmerman: laughs

D.G: *The Cathartic Circle was born and went through*

its adolescence during the 1980s. How would you describe the eighties as an artistic epoch?

Nelson Smith: I think adolescent sums it up.

John Piet: In 1980 Nelson was only nineteen.

Nelson Smith: That's true.

Marilyn Zimmerman: There was Ronald Reagan.

Sue Carman: We were trying to rise above all that.

Carl Demeulenaere: The eighties were an overly inflated time for the arts. Selling prices on the big celebrity artists were outrageous. Then there was a plunge in the market.

John Piet: I don't think that has stopped at all. They're still pushing the blue chip artists.

Ed Fraga: There was a lot of figurative art: David Salle, Julien Schnabel, Eric Fischl.

Nelson Smith: There was a lot of revisiting shock, especially in the performance arena you had people like Karen Findley. I think people were reflecting on what happened in the sixties when performance was truly revolutionary. In the eighties, a lot of people couldn't figure out how to make it revolutionary any more so they tried to push the envelope of shock.

Marilyn Zimmerman: The Guerrilla Girls happened during the 1980s; they were very effective in being revolutionary.

Nelson Smith: I think they were more political – reflective of a reaction towards Reaganism.

D.G: *Compared to the eighties, art in the nineties seemed very deadpan and banal. One thing that stands out in recent art is a sort of disengaged aloofness. For instance, many artists, who might otherwise have been painters or something else, have chosen mechanical reproduction as a means of presentation. There is a preponderance of ink jet images and so on. Artists who don't seem particularly interested in photography have produced these huge, full color, blown up images, albeit in a kind of clinical anemic color, merely as a form of presentation to document their art. Perhaps photography is the perfect vehicle for recording such deadpan Nihilism. Marilyn, working in this frontier town, isolated from the pressure of making the novel artifact, do you feel that your work is more vital because you don't have to pander to the pressures of New York role-playing?*

Marilyn Zimmerman: I think that that sort of thing happens to people who prematurely achieve success early on and they need to have very consistent work. You see it throughout art history. I have the privilege of being an artist/educator whereby I have a means of living. I can freely move through ideas. I'm not bound by being consistent. I can explore ideas. It's been very freeing. I can take a lot of chances. I can make art that takes risks and is engaged in social activism.

D.G: *What about the regionalism of being in Detroit?*

Marilyn Zimmerman: People from the outside come to Detroit and say Detroit is one of the best-kept secrets in the country.

Christine Hagedorn: You're absolutely right – it's always

Christine Hagedorn, *Implication*, 2000, wood, screening, needles, thread, 12" x 72" x 9"



said, every time someone comes.

Marilyn Zimmerman: I still have a relationship with the arts community in Chicago and I'm affronted by the fact that in the "Second City" they think they have to have this cutting edge mentality. Being in Detroit is very freeing because we're very authentic. There is eclecticism and a lot of diversity here. Rather than pay tribute to the Cass Corridor, we should celebrate what's here now.

Rick Vian: And everybody knows what's going on everywhere else anyway. You'd have to be an idiot not to know what's going on.

Marilyn Zimmerman: With all the mass communication, media and global interconnections, regionalism is not an issue.

Michelle Stamler: I think people in New York would beg to differ.

Christine Hagedorn: There's a Detroit style that's maybe a little more urban, harder edged, with a use of materials that's rougher - things being found and assembled. I think there's something you can see in Detroit art. Does that make it provincial? No, but there's an influence.

Marilyn Zimmerman: Look, we have to acknowledge that the D.I.A. is a world-class institution. There are people going through there (exhibiting and lecturing etc.) and I've gotten commissions from all over the world, so, I don't feel isolated.

D.G. Holly, do you think that within the global village there is a place for regionalism? If not, what significance does geography have on your work. What might happen to your work if you moved to New York?

Holly Branstner: Whether there is a place for it or not, it will hopefully always be there. I'm sure I hope in vain. That (global village) is not something that I think is necessarily a good thing. I like regional differences; when we lose them, the world will become much too homogeneous and bland. It's already on its way. America is bland; pull off the road on a trip and you could be anywhere, it's the same, same, same! As far as geography goes, yes, it has definitely influenced my work and my life. If I were to move to New York City at this point in my life, I really don't think my work would change in any other way than I want it to now, which would be growth in what I'm doing. Not a stylistic or drastic conceptual change, but that's hypothetical, one never really knows.

D.G. Jeff, there has been much talk, in the face of our increased exposure to excessive media banality, of our culture dumbing-down to the extent that our ability to understand matters of aesthetics and matters of culture has atrophied. Do you believe that the population is more ill prepared to experience art than ever before?

Jeff Bloomer: Yes. (long pause)

D.G. Okay... Christine, recollecting your celebrated role in "It Takes One To Be One," -the naïve, blue-haired punk, how do you reconcile such loud work with the fragile framework of your sculptured vessels?

Christine Hagedorn: Two sides of the same coin... perhaps. I think no one who knows me would think I'm a fragile vessel. I'm pretty loud. It was fun to be the loud, stomping,

blue-haired wild girl.

D.G. Holly, do you think there is a common thread running through the work of the artists of The Cathartic Circle in a thematic or stylistic sense?

Holly Branstner: Absolutely. The common thread is what brought us all together in the first place. We were of like minds when it came to the figure being a major component in our work. We had similar needs from our work - those being: self-exploration, spiritual themes, the narrative aspect and working our lives out through our art. I am speaking of the original core group. Also, a total love of the extroversion that was new and needed to break out. A lot of that was our "growing up" - allowing the buried to be unearthed. Sue, of course, was the instigator and coordinator of the general mayhem, but we didn't need our arms twisted. Stylistically, similarities have come and gone as with any group of artists.

D.G. Can you describe the significance of the frames bordering your paintings?

Holly Branstner: I'm definitely excited by German Expressionist woodcuts and sculpture. The act of carving becomes an expressionist release for me. It is very physical and a perfect foil for the restraint in the paintings. The texture or imagery in the frame becomes a counterpoint or accentuation of the imagery within the painting.

D.G. Sue, as the chief impetus behind The Cathartic Circle, where does the idea for a performance begin?

Sue Carman: It's so hard because it comes out of thin air, but it's something that keeps recurring.

D.G. So you don't fall out of bed one morning and suddenly have this idea?

Sue Carman: Well, I do sometimes have to write down something that has been hitting me.

D.G. So it's a sedimentary accumulative process?

Sue Carman: Yes.

D.G. Ed, in the beginning, how did you justify performing? It must have been a commitment that ate into your studio time.

Ed Fraga: In the eighties, I think it was during the *Out of the Blue* performance, in some ways I didn't want to invest all that time, but as a result of putting the energy into it, a lot of it came out in my paintings. I remember doing several pieces - one of them was called "Dance of the Blue Dress," which was really based on Sue's dress in the performance. Because I was so involved with Sue's ideas, and working with everyone else, I think I allowed it to have an effect on my work and it did.

D.G. Carl, the first time I heard about you, about fifteen years ago, you were walking down Gratiot in a huge red dress. Can you tell us who was in the first performance and how it came about?

Carl Demeulenaere: That must have been *You Say Tomato*, in the mid eighties and it was in a studio in the Atlas Building. I was a theatre in that piece - I played a stationary theatre. Sue, wasn't that your Master's statement - your thesis statement?

Ed Fraga: No, that was the breakfast performance.

Sue Carman: Even before that when we were all in Italy, we



John Piet, *Would Turn to Her Own Perfection*, 2000,
welded steel, cast bronze, terra cotta, mixed media,
approx. 24"h x 28" x 14"

knew there was something theatrical going on. We all dressed up as saints.

Ed Fraga: That's right - your angel thing - you paraded through Rome wearing an angel's costume!

Sue Carman: But my first real one was my thesis piece at Wayne State.

D.G: *Who was in the breakfast performance?*

Ed Fraga: In *You Say Tomato?* Sue, Carl, Holly...

Carl Demeulenaere: And my mother was in it! (laughs) She was flipping pancakes!

Sue Carman: And burning toast! The way it came about was, I thought, how am I going to teach all day and paint all night and survive and get a grade? So, my favorite thing was breakfast and I just focused on that. You wanted to know where I get my ideas. That was actually pretty simplistic. So, all the paintings I did were about breakfast or to do with the morning. All the instructors sat around this last supper-type table and Carl was behind a medieval puppet stage with a syrup bottle - and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* played in the background.

Carl Demeulenaere: That's the only piece where I was concealed, otherwise I was pretty much an extravert. I was out there doing a lot of crazy things - the piece at St. Andrews (Hall, Detroit), the glam-rock thing - I was dancing and gyrating.

D.G: *But you would only behave like that while performing?*

Carl Demeulenaere: Being an extravert, you mean? That's pretty much the case - only while performing - that's a good description of my character.

D.G: *Joyce, your paintings are layered, multimedia extrapolations dealing with iconic pop clichés, but at the same time they are loaded with post-feminist significations. They are so inundated with references that they could almost be deemed two-dimensional performance pieces in their own right. How is performing in front of an audience different from making and exhibiting your own work?*

Joyce Brienza: Well, making art is solitary, so you're in private. There's not that kind of pressure. There's not a pressure to perform; you're performing for yourself.

D.G: *Yes, but there's kind of an extravert quality in your paintings - they shout, they don't whisper.*

Joyce Brienza: I actually like performance better than painting or two-dimensional art. I get much more excited by it, I mean, as a viewer. Maybe I'm trying to make that kind of expression, without the sound, without the movement. I describe my paintings as three ring circuses, so I guess it's the same thing. I never thought about this before, but there definitely is a sense of orchestrating a lot of different things going on at the same time, which is what happens in performance.

D.G: *Ed, like everyone in the circle, you've been married to your work for a quarter of a century; how do you manage to maintain the vigor and vitality of making something, twenty-five years after the initial flirtation?*

Ed Fraga: Obsession.

D.G: *Can you describe that obsession?*

Ed Fraga: Trying to get better but never being satisfied, always having the best piece in my head. I've yet to bring it to life.

D.G: *Christine, as an artist who has enjoyed considerable commercial success in the last year or so, how are you influenced by the art market?*

Christine Hagedorn: I hope I'm not. It's my fervent prayer.

D.G: *Do I detect a suspicion of doubt?*

Christine Hagedorn: Oh yes, there's always a suspicion of doubt with me for everything, but I hope there's no influence.

D.G: *Nelson, when we think of your performances, we think of you interacting with machines and technology. Sue's work is more about human interaction. What's the chief difference between collaborating with The Cathartic Circle and your own performances?*

Nelson Smith: (smiles) Well, Sue's performances are a lot more fun.

D.G: *Why?*

Nelson Smith: Because of Sue and all these people. My interaction with technology is a logistical necessity rather than a specific choice. Sue's been very fortunate - there's a certain kind of magic with this group in the way that the people just keep coming back together regardless. I confess that after doing several pieces that were self-contained and used a lot of technology, I feel a little cold when I look back on them. Sue has influenced me with that unabashed self-deprecating humor...

D.G: *Wearing a diaper on stage?*

Nelson Smith: Yes. Exactly. I wore a bathrobe on stage once.

D.G: *Rick, did you embrace the idea of performance art when you met Sue or did you have to be converted?*

Rick Vian: I immediately embraced it - in the sense of someone else doing it. I don't need any conversion as far as the validity of it is concerned, but I don't think I could ever actually do it myself, other than the music. I'd be too afraid of screwing up. In the last performance it was hard enough just playing music - if I thought the audience were looking at me, it would have been impossible.

D.G: *Joyce, you left Detroit for New Jersey... and then you came back! You're the only one that's been away - everyone else has stayed. Perhaps this gives you a measure of objectivity. Do you think that any of these people would have engaged in performance art were it not for the creative energy of Sue Carman?*

Joyce Brienza: It's true that Sue's the focus - she's the fulcrum. She gave everybody license to be involved in this. Sue is like a social director. She's someone who combines art and life - the community and art - I think the reason it's called *The Cathartic Circle* is because it is about a social, personal interaction - everyone in this group helps each other, inspiring each other to keep making art, performance or otherwise.

D.G: *Like a support group?*

Joyce Brienza: Right.



Nelson Smith, *Beautiful Misunderstanding*, 2000, oil on panel with text, 23.5" x 18"

Michelle Stamler: Sue has an innate ability to find out what people are best at and the ways in which they thrive in a group dynamic. She plugs people into the right niche, and she just lets them go with it.

Christine Hagedorn: That's the thing that's amazing, the letting go!

Michelle Stamler: She knows exactly what she wants and she's able to convey that to us – she knows people's instinct – she knows they're going to act in a certain way.

D.G. Nelson, you composed the music for *It Takes One To Be One*. The music was the vehicle that carried the performance from A to Z. Can you tell us how it happened?

Nelson Smith: Actually most of the music stuff in Sue's performances starts with the film. Usually there's a film. The films usually happen first and they need sound, so we create it and that becomes a kind of armature for the score.

D.G. Does the music come first or the film?

Nelson Smith: The film. In the last performance, the music was done around the film.

Sue Carman: The film has to be done at least a year before the performance.

Nelson Smith: The long table (a sequence where the camera made a dolly shot along an elongated, thirty-foot, dining table) in the most recent film indicated the need for a repetitious, almost monotonous piece with some variations and humor – I call it vernacular music. So that was the springboard for the fake polka music – fake minimalist polka music, pseudo calypso – what did you ask for originally, Sue?

Sue Carman: Baroque tango music.

Nelson Smith: The best I could come up with was reggae. I like Sue's projects – I feel liberated – I can explore that kind of sound more than in my own work. My own work doesn't relate to those kind of vernacular settings.

D.G. Marilyn, do you think that there ought to be something morally improving about a work of performance art?

Marilyn Zimmerman: You mean, performance art as opposed to other forms of art? I don't see a hierarchy in terms of types of art. Artists are people who actively develop their intuition – it's something they hone; it's one of their skills. Artists are the moral visionaries. They always have been. They're the tricksters. Through their humor and umbrella vision, which we all strive for, they are a group that can let their humor go free; they challenge the status quo. As visionaries, they conceive of Utopian structures – from economics to social structures to human relationships. We are special beings. We are more childlike and much more sophisticated. That's a dyad that some people cannot understand. It gives us a special vision and a special personality that gives us this lightness of humor, playfulness and sophistication at the same time.

D.G. Holly, what are the biggest challenges facing visual artists at the beginning of the new millennium?

Holly Branstner: Probably the reality, or fear, of society changing at such a pace in regards to attention spans, technology and the seeming lack of concern for a serious focus

in life. To me, it seems there is too much of a desire for instant gratification. How can we expect today's youth to get off staring at a Rothko for two hours? Because, I actually believe they'd get it – they just don't get asked often enough.

D.G. Speaking of tortured painters, Michelle, do you think that certain kinds of artists fulfill certain stereotypes, for example, are painters more narcissistic and indulgent than photographers?

Michelle Stamler: I think narcissism is universal. It's not particular to one group of artists over another. I don't think one is more narcissistic as a painter than as a photographer.

Joyce Brienza: Isn't narcissism about inward dwelling?

Rick Vian: It also depends on the subject matter of your art. If your art is about yourself, you're going to be more narcissistic. When I'm doing an abstract painting, I'm not thinking about myself – they don't have anything to do with me.

D.G. John, it's possible that you can look at a painting or sculpture for thirty seconds and have an epiphany. Some people say that performance art is indulgent and boring. Would you define a bad piece of sculpture by the same criteria as a bad performance?

John Piet: Absolutely. An incompetent painting is the same as a redundant sculpture. There's no mystery – there's nothing to take me into the work.

D.G. What about the time element? When you see a performance, you're exposed to it for about an hour, but you can walk past a sculpture in seconds. Does one have to be amused for a whole hour during a performance? There's a certain pressure on a performance artist to make their work stimulating.

John Piet: Performance is a lot like dance. You have to perfect it to a particular level, but it exists only for the moment. If you don't have a videotape, it doesn't exist after the performance, not in itself, only in your mind.

Christine Hagedorn: But neither does a sculpture when you walk away. So you're left with the same amount of residue from each experience.

Joyce Brienza: But you can go back to the sculpture.

Christine Hagedorn: You can, but you spend more time with a performance.

John Piet: Ultimately it's about the way in which a work pulls you in.

Nelson Smith: It's also because the average person encounters a sculpture and either dismisses it or absorbs it in seconds. In a performance, you're kind of holding them hostage.

John Piet: Every time I look at Bill Viola I fall asleep...

Ed Fraga: I don't.

Joyce Brienza: I love it too.

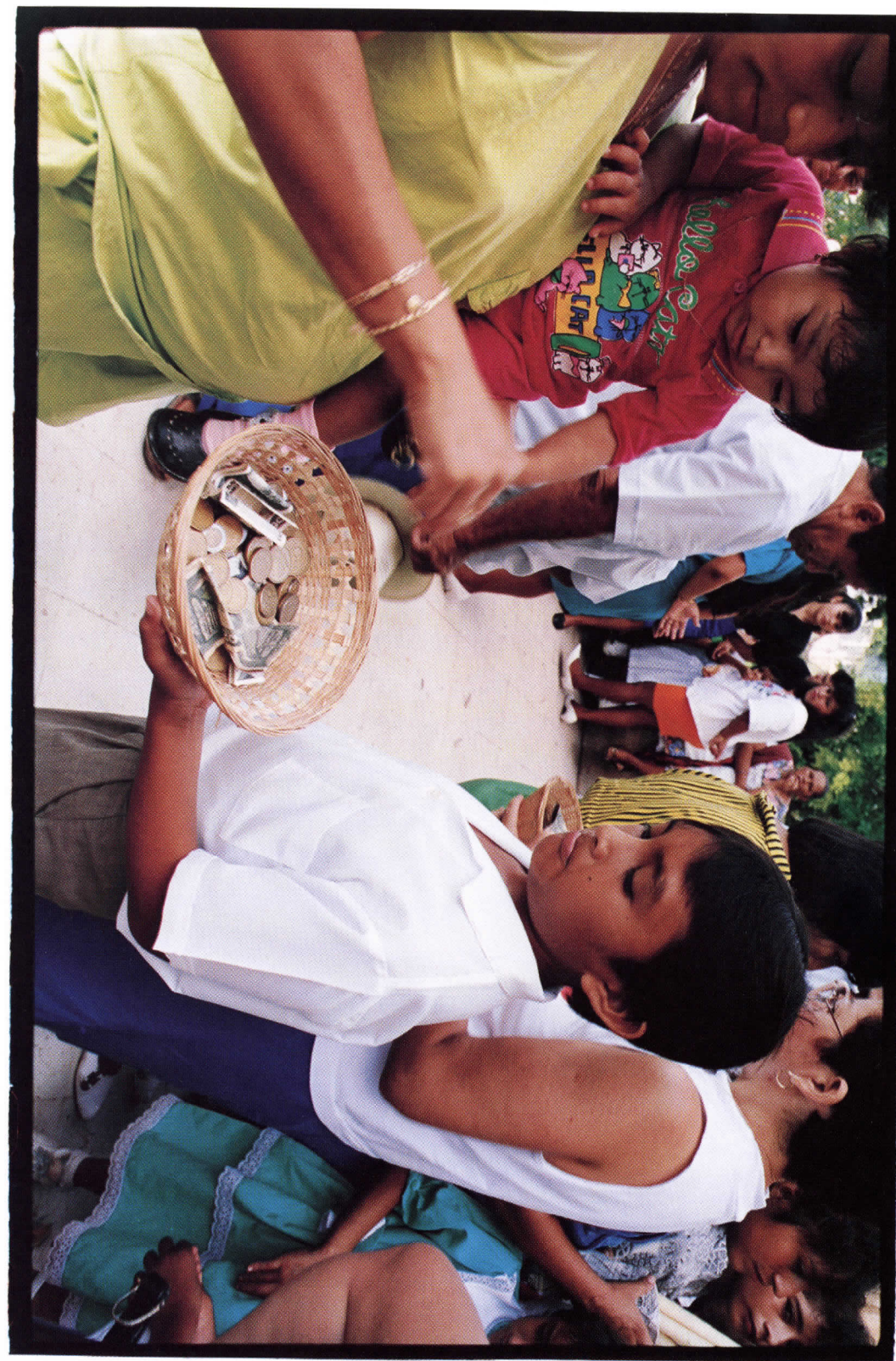
Nelson Smith: It disturbs me.

Joyce Brienza: You get disturbed by it?

Nelson Smith: Yes.

John Piet: What, we're supposed to be excited by being bored?

Ed Fraga: Actually there's a lot going on. I saw his retrospective in New York. It was phenomenal.



Marilyn Zimmerman: I think he tries to strive for a quietness that we're not used to experiencing.

Ed Fraga: And I think he's using a medium that's easy to pass off as being technologically banal, but really it isn't, it's just a guise to get you into it.

Nelson Smith: Plus, Bill Viola is related more to painting than he is sculpture.

Michelle Stamler: Let's get back to the point: we're talking about the difference between a person watching a performance and somebody looking at a sculpture. With a performance it's the feedback of others around you, a collective reaction. But with sculpture you look at as an individual.

Ed Fraga: I sort of disagree. When you're observing something, you're seeing through your own eyes.

John Piet: I like watching people looking at art. When I was in the *Interventions* show (at the D.I.A. 1996), I could watch people's reaction to the painting and my work without them knowing who I was. There was a different audience relationship with the work.

Christine Hagedorn: Yes, but what's the difference between looking at a performance piece and a piece of sculpture? In the end you might see the piece of sculpture in Phoenix or New York or Rome, I don't know. You don't always get to look at again, just like the performance piece. I think when it sticks with you – when you're running over in your mind how you felt the surface, how you felt about the questions raised in the performance – any time you're rethinking it, and it won't leave you alone, then I think that that's the piece that was successful.

Sue Carman: I agree.

Ed Fraga: Any time you're looking at a work, it's what you're left with – the conceptual part – the part that stays.

Nelson Smith: When we've done performances, and we've all experienced this, the audiences affect the performance. During the last show, the audiences were completely different. There was one night that the audience was really hot, people were with the show – you can be doing the exact same music and one night the audience will be with you and it'll be like magic, and the next night they're not affected the same way.

Christine Hagedorn: And you don't feel like you're doing anything differently.

Nelson Smith: Yes, but you're influenced by the fact that it's a cold audience.

Michelle Stamler: When you do a painting, as opposed to writing a performance, the motivations are different – you want an individual response – with a performance you want a group response.

Carl Deleulenaere: If you're an installation artist, you're banking on a group response too.

John Piet: The installation pieces I've done elicit a completely different response.

Ed Fraga: In performance art, I always wonder how much people are responding to the gimmicks – like the lighting and so on. It's a way of seducing.

Sue Carman: The way it's choreographed.

Joyce Brienza: It's a hook!

Ed Fraga: Yeah, all these things are hooks

Michelle Stamler: There are different visual hooks in painting than there are in performance.

Rose DeSloover: The other thing, of course, is that you're planted in a seat and you're there for an hour. Then there's this idea that you look at a sculpture and get it in a few minutes. I think the same thing happens in the performance but it keeps going and there's one more thing, and one more thing and it pulls you along. Since we're talking about things we don't like, I got stuck in a Mathew Barney film and I was ready to hang myself, if I'd had guts I would have gotten up and left, but I kept thinking...

D.G: *We have more free will when looking at a sculpture.*

Rose DeSloover: That's one of the reasons it's sometimes hard to get people into a performance – they know it's going to be forty-five minutes, but what if they don't like it?

Rick Vian: Like *A Clockwork Orange* where you're strapped in with your eyes propped open and you've got to watch this movie.

Ed Fraga: The fact that you find Mathew Barney difficult relates to the fact that it's non linear and it disturbs you – you're not watching the plot unfold. In performance art, you have to be willing to be lost in its non linear quality. If you expect to come out having this plot/story – scene one, act one, well it's not like that with performance art, it's conceptual and it's hard to grasp. What I like about Mathew Barney's pieces is that they're really not like going and watching a film. They are really difficult and challenging and you have to be willing to –

Sue Carman: But should they be filmed then?

Christine Hagedorn: Well, they were filmed –

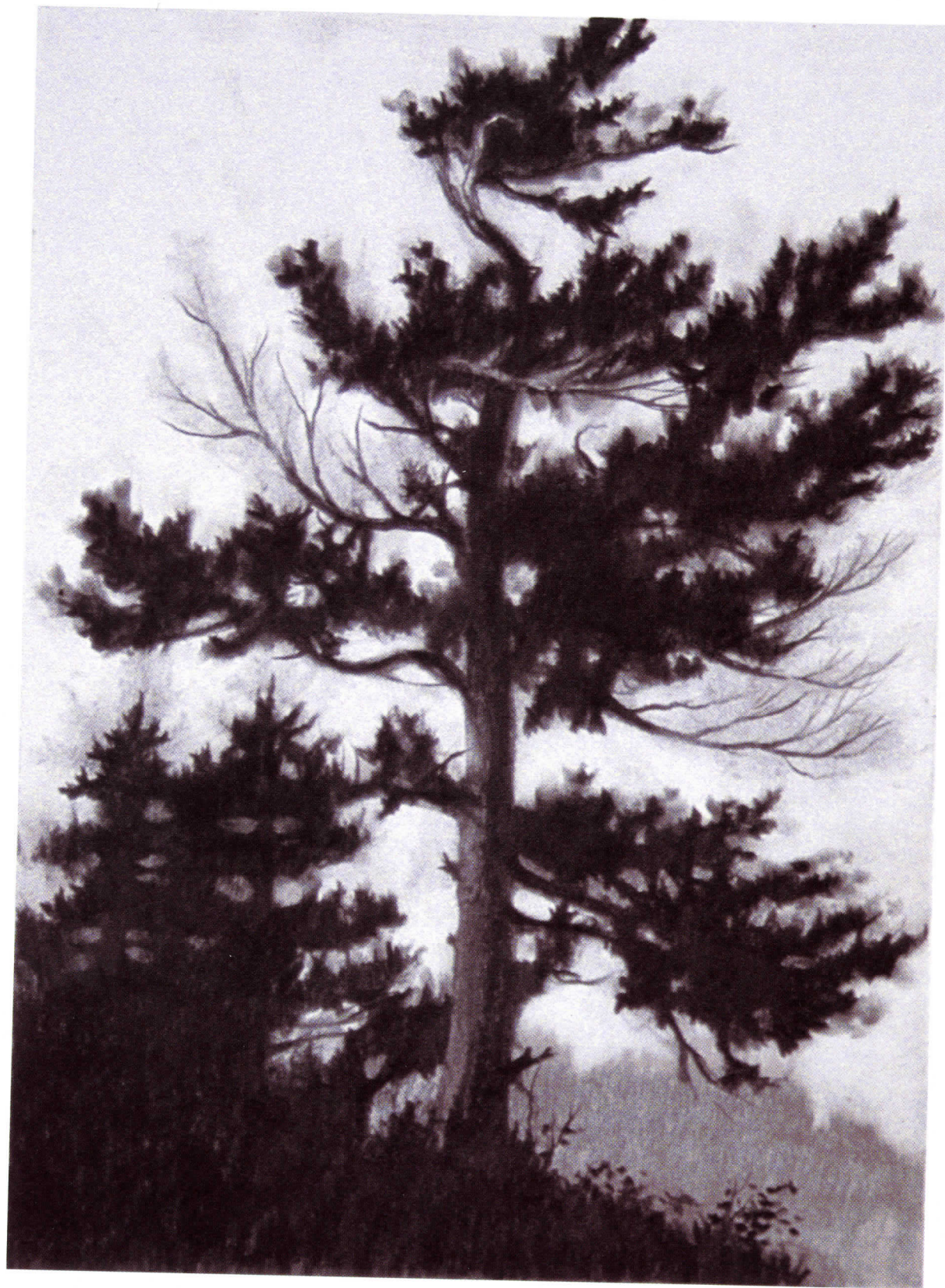
Ed Fraga: What's challenging about them is that you're forced to look at something just like when art broke tradition, you were forced to look at something –

Christine Hagedorn: Where nothing's happening!

Ed Fraga: Yeah, but it's challenging your visual language.

D.G: *Carl, changing tack, when you work on your own art, working for hours and hours, meticulously celebrating perfectionism on a piece of paper the size of a post-it, how does such a slave to perfectionism deal with changing gears, I mean the thrust and parry of a performance? Do you feel, for example, liberated by the performance because you know that unlike your drawings, it can never be perfect?*

Carl Demeulenaere: I think that plays some role in it. The word that keeps coming to me is extravert. I'm allowed to vent my feelings about life, just raw and emotional feelings, and not to have to be myself totally – to lose myself in someone else's concept of me, or in their own individual ideas about life – their life. I think of the performance work I've done with Sue as a total release to let out all my inhibitions. Because my work is so emotionally draining at times, the outlet that's given to me through Sue's work, where all the little specifics do not have to be necessarily remedied or worked over and over and over again, well, I kind of enjoy that. You could call it a lack of perfectionism –



Rick Vian, *Nind Andjinagwi* (I transfigure myself *Ojibwa*), 2000, graphite on paper, 11" x 14"

Michelle Stamler: However, I just want to say that I've seen Carl backstage and he does not lose all his perfectionist characteristics.

Rose DeSloover: When he goes into make-up you mean.

Michelle Stamler: I'm telling you, he's always there, Carl the perfectionist, Carl, Carlotta, whoever he is.

D.G: *Sue, when you are writing a performance, how often do you think about the audience in terms of their reaction?*

Sue Carman: Oh, every line, every concept, every angle.

D.G: *So the performance is never self-contained in that sense, it's always going to react with the audience?*

Sue Carman: Right, I have to have a strong sense that they're really going to react.

D.G: *Nelson, do you feel the same way? Do you think about the audience or are you more circumspect?*

Nelson Smith: I ignore the audience, more or less by necessity. I'm not a natural performer.

D.G: *What about in the writing?*

Nelson Smith: When I'm planning it, I basically ignore them. I'm in my own world. I admit it.

Michelle Stamler: I think that everybody here that has seen Nelson and Sue's performances wouldn't disagree with that.

Nelson Smith: I also think that that's something unique about performance art, in the sense that naturalistic theatre involves a whole science about romancing the audience and communication. People in legitimate theatre don't understand this about performance art.

D.G: *Lynn, your behind the scenes work has been instrumental in creating the "right look" for many performances. Have you ever had the desire to go out there and belt out a song?*

Lynn Galbreath: No, not at all. I'm not like Sue in that respect, I'm rather shy. But even when I see her out there she does kind of bring that out in me.

D.G: *But you're not shy with students—you perform for them.*

Lynn Galbreath: That's true, but it's not the same.

Rick Vian: (ironically) You don't sing?

Joyce Brienza: I think teaching is performance.

Lynn Galbreath: But it's not on a stage - the audience is completely different. They're at your mercy.

Joyce Brienza: (laughs) They don't clap.

D.G: *In the last couple of years, art and commerce have merged. Art has become increasingly slick and entrenched in presentation, at the same time, advertising has taught itself to mimic artistic expression. The chief temples of our culture are shopping malls and movieplexes. Sue, have you ever thought about doing a performance in a shopping mall?*

Sue Carman: Not in a shopping mall. I've wanted to do things like rent a bus. Put stuff on the bus and drive through New York City.

D.G: *When you do a performance, they have to come to your location. It's not as if you're getting passing traffic. Malls are horrible places, but it could be an interesting idea. I mean, if you wanted to convert people—I*

don't know if there's an evangelical aspect to performance art. If there were, a mall would be the perfect place to start.

Sue Carman: It would be very distracting. The people wouldn't know how to act.

D.G: *Yes, it would be like working in street theatre.*

Joyce Brienza: Maybe it would work in Windsor.

John Piet: Or Venice, California...

Marilyn Zimmerman: Didn't someone go to the New York Stock Exchange and throw out dollar bills?

Sue Carman: You could do things like that. It would have to be very simple—something that anyone could take in.

Christine Hagedorn: No text.

Marilyn Zimmerman: It makes you think of Renaissance theatre, Renaissance performance right there on the street.

Joyce Brienza: Kusama did performances where they got nude somewhere in New York (*July 14, 1968 at the New York Stock Exchange and other locations*). There are pictures of it. It's documented.

D.G: *And the Beatles singing "Get Back" on the roof.*

Rick Vian: It's like putting up billboards too.

Joyce Brienza: But those are different spaces than a mall.

Lynn Galbreath: All of those are different audiences than a mall.

Sue Carman: A billboard is almost like public art.

Ed Fraga: Like public sculpture.

D.G: *Michelle, with your camera, over the years, you have diligently documented most of The Cathartic Circle's performances. I have two questions somewhat unrelated to that: When does a photographer become an artist? And, if an artist has the desire to make a photograph, is there any difference between that and the work of an artist/photographer?*

Michelle Stamler: "When does a photographer become an artist..." From the get go...

D.G: *Yes, but there are some photographers who are photojournalists—*

Joyce Brienza: A photographer is an artist. They don't become an artist.

Christine Hagedorn: When they look through the lens and choose...

D.G: *Yes, but we have to all become artists. We're all artists in this room—we weren't born to it, we had to go through a process. You don't just wake up one morning and say: "I'm an artist!" There's procedure. Every person that picks up a camera doesn't make art.*

Michelle Stamler: Certainly the consciousness of it is a huge factor.

D.G: *Some photographers are very contemptuous of photojournalism.*

Marilyn Zimmerman: But the best photojournalists transcend the category.

Michelle Stamler: Absolutely.

John Piet: Yes, that photograph by Robert Capa of the Spanish civil war partisan who's just been shot...

D.G: *Right, that's art, but the photo by your next-door neighbor, what about that?*



Marilyn Zimmerman, *Honoring the Crone: Maxine, My Mother*, 2001, silver print, 3'9" x 5'4"

Marilyn Zimmerman: I think it's the consciousness of the person using the media. I think, increasingly, that all these categories are permeable barriers. It doesn't matter whether it's painting, sculpture or photography. There's a high and a low, that's the important thing.

D.G: *I'm bringing up a hierarchical argument - I probably shouldn't, but that's the way I was trained.*

Marilyn Zimmerman: Right. It's very Modernist training to make everything departmentalized. Now, in the year 2001, it's not just deconstructionalism, it's larger than that. The world is this integrated whole system. Somehow we divided everything up. But now we're realizing that maybe some of these things are related.

D.G: *I like some of those divisions though.*

Marilyn Zimmerman: Because you're an elitist.

Nelson Smith: I think all artists are elitists by nature.

Michelle Stamler: Are photographers in that group of artists? Dick, you've always put painters at the top of the list. Only a painter would distinguish between fine art photography, photojournalism and social documentary photography.

Nelson Smith: All artists at some point become elitists. As soon as they establish that: "I have something unique to present here and now, at this moment! Hey, look at me, standing up on this soapbox - all attention must be paid to me!" It's elitism.

Marilyn Zimmerman: You're talking about being a visionary. I am adamant about this because there are artists who use their media to give a voice to the people - to give a sense that this is an unequal world.

Nelson Smith: But they're still elitists.

Marilyn Zimmerman: No it's visionary, it's not elitism.

Nelson Smith: They're the same thing.

Marilyn Zimmerman: No they're not.

Michelle Stamler: I think that Marilyn is unique -

Marilyn Zimmerman: But it's not just me -

John Piet: Marilyn is... she's... a *visionographer*! (laughs)

Michelle Stamler: Marilyn embraces... she's the least elitist - one of the least elitist people I know.

Ed Fraga: Actually, you cannot be an elitist unless you're a visionary.

Nelson Smith: There is a kind of snobbery surrounding the idea of being a visionary. In order for a visionary to put himself outside the world - to stand apart and get his global visionary radar working, he has to put himself outside everything.

Marilyn Zimmerman: Like Gandhi and Martin Luther King? The best visionaries are at the service of the people. Nelson, you're not thinking about how the end of any paradigm goes full circle and eventually becomes the other. It's like the symbol of ying and yang. Everything is the seed of its opposite.

Nelson Smith: Okay, I think we agree - like the good *Kirk*/bad *Kirk* in *Star Trek*.

Joyce Brienza: To get back to the difference between photographers and painters, it's the issue of the art with aura. I just gave my students an assignment to go look at the Bill Viola videos and then to look at a painting. They had to talk

about the difference between video art and painting, and the whole issue of "how is painting valid in the age of technology?" Every single student said that the videos were nice, but that anyone can run a camera, and that painting will always be valid because it's made by the hand - and that's where the aura is, in the hand. That's what people feel.

Michelle Stamler: That's bizarre.

Joyce Brienza: The touch is what they're talking about. They feel that anyone can pick up a camera and use technology, that it doesn't require the same talent.

Lynn Galbreath: That's because they've never taken a video class.

John Piet: There's an interesting discussion about digital images - if people don't like them they delete them. But with conventional film, years later someone discovers negatives of Lee Harvey Oswald... If you erase it, if you digitalize it, it's gone.

Michelle Stamler: Well, painters paint over paintings.

Rose DeSloover: Joyce, if the students you're talking about had taken a video class, they might have come back and said that the videos were better.

Marilyn Zimmerman: Let's not negate new technology. Any artist will tell you: it's not the media, it's how you use it. It's not about liking technology or not liking it. You have to see it as another huge arena for us to communicate with.

D.G: *What's interesting is that suddenly, in the 1840's we get this new thing called photography. There was nothing to compare it to, no prototype, no canon, no academy...*

Marilyn Zimmerman: It's not about photography it's about the intent and the usage - it's the consciousness behind it. We're experiencing a breakdown in the hierarchy of media. There are permeable barriers between everything - economics, political structures, communication - it's breaking down - that's what AIDS did for us. We all have blood. We all have to have a consciousness about everyone else's health. A hundred years from now there are going to be categories of art we can't even dream of. For this discussion to be based on nineteenth century definitions of hierarchies of art... it's like, get rolling!

Nelson Smith: We're going to have a whole new set of hierarchies.

Marilyn Zimmerman: That's right. We're not going to know if that's Michelle I'm sitting next to or if it's her clone.

D.G: *Carl and Ed, around 1992 something happened in the Circle. It wasn't exactly like the break-up of the Beatles, but there was a definite chill in the air. What change was in progress?*

Ed Fraga: (trembling) I was too demanding - I wanted top billing.

Nelson Smith: (laughs) That's when I started getting involved. **Carl Demeulenaere:** I was fortunate enough to perform with not only Sue, but with Nelson, and I think there was an overlap for a while. There were changes in our lives. Some of the people in the group chose to be involved in a lesser capacity, maybe behind the scenes rather than to be the extravers they had been. I opted to continue being an extra-

vert. I can't recall any disagreements, I think we just kind of changed – maybe getting more involved with our own work. Some people stepped aside. I didn't. I was consistently enthused.

Ed Fraga: I agree with Carl. I was one of the people who decided to slowly ease out of it and work more on my own projects. It was gradual. I talked to Sue about it – it wasn't like: (*theatrically*) "I don't want to be in your performances any more!"

D.G: *But actually it was a bit like the Beatles because everybody was living in the Atlas Building – it was a bit like "Help!" and everybody started moving out.*

Sue Carman: Yes, we felt support living there, we needed that support – it was a lot tighter.

Carl Demeulenaere: You moved too.

Ed Fraga: Some of us moved to the Brooklyn Building. (*Ed Fraga, Holly Brantsner, Sue Carman*)

Michelle Stamler: If we're going to be candid, I think there were some relationships in the group that became strained –

Sue Carman: But even despite that –

Michelle Stamler: It's like on *Behind the Music*. If we're all honest, for those of us that can cast our minds back to those times, there were feelings about people, which influenced whether or not people wanted to participate.

Ed Fraga: (*dramatically*) I want names!

Joyce Brienza: Spit it out!

Michelle Stamler: I think it had less to do with Sue moving to the Brooklyn Building and then to Birmingham. There were those who felt slightly competitive or disenfranchised or just generally pissed off, whatever. However, I do think that we were able to come together and work in spite of it, which is significant, but there were definitely strained relationships –

Sue Carman: Some of it had to do with finding our personal selves too.

Ed Fraga: Part of it was the time commitment. In my case, it was taking time away from my work and I was getting self-ish about it.

D.G: *Sue, if you had to, which would you give up first: filmmaking, painting or performance?*

Michelle Stamler: *Sophie's Choice.*

Sue Carman: Maybe performance – because I could perform in the film. I'd like to still make films, but performances are beginning to take their toll on me.

John Piet: Pictures are forever.

Sue Carman: That's right. And performances don't seem to generate a bigger audience, they just seem to be stay at a certain number of people.

D.G: *You can only fill a theatre with three hundred people, but a film can travel and reach more people.*

Sue Carman: Yes.

Ed Fraga: Speaking of film, one thing I will say is that Jeff's contribution to Sue's performances has been an amazing amalgamation of the two personalities – Jeff's darkness with Sue's lightness... all those award winning films.

Sue Carman: I had a real energy sitting there and cutting films together in that little teeny place.

Joyce Brienza: You mean editing?

Sue Carman: Yeah, sitting there kind of in a secret little spot with all of you (looking around) you know, on that little screen and that music. It's like a whole art world on that little editing screen. It's amazing.

D.G: *Jeff, your recent work has been in a more the three dimensional realm. Outside of being a filmmaker, do you see yourself as more of a painter or sculptor?*

Jeff Bloomer: A sculptor.

D.G: *Your constructions have a spiritual dimension. Can you describe it? Is their meaning universal or are individuals with a certain spiritual bent likely to be more receptive?*

Jeff Bloomer: The spiritual element in my work is meant to be universal. My black boxes are modern day icons of a loss of spiritual faith that I see within society. They are remnants left over from a dying society. I have spent eleven years living in the inner city of Detroit. This time spent in the city is a direct reflection that is carried out in my work.

D.G: *What is the single most important message you wish to impart to the youth of America through your art?*

Jeff Bloomer: To use art as a means of learning something about yourself and determining what your part is within the world.

D.G: *Lynn, many new artists coming out of New York maintain, as Marilyn suggests, that there is no longer any need to adhere to a proscribed tradition in the visual arts. They say that since all art is now hybrid in nature, to be a painter is an anachronism. You've been experimenting with different modes of expression; where's it leading?*

Lynn Galbreath: I've been trying to combine drawing and painting.

D.G: *Making hybrid forms –*

Christine Hagedorn: And they're even sort of sculptural.

Lynn Galbreath: I'm trying to take it to a different level, which is a challenging thing to do, but the combining of drawing and painting has to do with hierarchy. What's more important, drawing or painting? What medium do you work best in and how do you bring that together in a serious yet entertaining format? That's what I'm trying to figure out.

D.G: *Joyce, I think we'd all agree that you're someone who is definitely not a prima donna. You're very even tempered and so on. Who is the biggest prima donna in The Catharctic Circle?*

Joyce Brienza: Hah! So I get to answer this... (*feigning trepidation*) I get to be in trouble...

Ed Fraga: Are you incorporating all the years?

Carl Demeulenaere: Let's not diverge from the question!

Joyce Brienza: Carl wants it answered!

Carl Demeulenaere: I am really curious about this...

Lynn Galbreath: I can answer this. Carl is the biggest prima donna, but he's also the most talented on stage.

Carl Demeulenaere: (*thoughtfully*) We've had a few tantrums, but we always work them out...

Michelle Stamler: Wait a minute, we're still waiting for Joyce to answer.

Joyce Brienza: I think it's almost a tie between Carl and

Ed... but I think... in the end... Ed wins... and he never thought he was even in the running! (*laughing*) Isn't it amazing how things follow you through life!

Ed Fraga: God, what a reputation! I was going to say you!

Joyce Brienza: Leave me alone!

Nelson Smith: I never got my special chair!

Michelle Stamler: Just a second... we're looking up prima donna in the dictionary... oh look! It's Ed's picture!

Joyce Brienza: Oh God, Ed's going to hate me! He's going to hate me forever! (*reading from the dictionary*) First definition – this isn't the bad one: the principle woman singer in a concert or an opera.

Carl Demeulenaere: (*feigning conceit*) That's me...

Joyce Brienza: Second definition: a temperamental, vain or arrogant person! (*laughing*)

Ed Fraga: Okay, that's alright... temperamental...

D.G: *... a question for Rose! Rose, you've overseen many of The Catharctic Circle's performances. Is The Catharctic Circle a dysfunctional family?*

Rose DeSlover: Actually, when you were asking about there being something in the air with the group, I thought to myself, this is the perfect group, the perfect circle, because some organizations get caught up in the organization – you know, you have to have a secretary, you have to have a structure. This group has never really had a structure. Not a defined structure where you're expected to do to this or that –

Joyce Brienza: It's autonomous.

John Piet: It's consensual.

Rose DeSlover: There's this kind of fluidity to it; people are called upon to do things, either like Nelson with the music... or sometimes a person is called on to do something they thought they could never do. Thinking about all the other art groups around in the Detroit area, some of them, well, they fight all the time because so and so didn't do something for someone, or they didn't include them. The Catharctic Circle is kind of the way, I think, art groups were in the past, where different kinds of people with different talents came together, liked each other, argued, but were fascinated by what the other person was doing. In this group, everybody is an individual.

Joyce Brienza: That would be more like a functional family.

Rose DeSlover: Right.

Michelle Stamler: People's egos are quite secure.

D.G: *Sue, once you know how to do it, surviving as an artist is perhaps easier in a practical sense than it is intellectually – once you have put food on the table, how do you sustain your artistic vision?*

Sue Carman: In this room is one reason; this is food for my self esteem.

D.G: *As an artist, you have to be able to eat and have shelter before you do your work. A lot of us do other jobs besides making art. I think the only people here that don't have other jobs are Ed and Carl. Everybody else is doing something else. Ed and Carl don't have families. Do you think it's easier being on your own?*

Ed Fraga: In some ways. In Carl's case, he gets residences. He has the freedom to be able to apply for things – one thing leads to another.

John Piet: You have to have the need; you have to have the desire and the attitude that whole family can go to hell – and dinners can go cold. The only thing that's important is the art that you're making.

Marilyn Zimmerman: For all of us, we can say that making art has been the deciding force in our life, okay? So, our creative expression has been the organizing force of our lives and has forced some of us to make conscious sacrifices. At the same time, a lot of us are carrying on as educators, heads of households, parents or as caregivers to our parents. We interface with the community, with institutions and with other artists. Serving the art community is a very important aspect for a lot of the people here, and for Sue, who's a grade school teacher – a lot of her magic comes from how she relates to those children. The other aspects of our lives shouldn't be compartmentalized away from our art making – it's the heralded force in our lives and it permeates every aspect of our existence.

Ed Fraga: Part of it is the idea of sustaining yourself just on your work. One of the downsides of being in Detroit, or a place unlike Chicago – where you can maybe establish yourself as an artist because there's a network of collectors who support art – it's harder to do that here, but there is an underground audience that will support your work. It takes work to develop that. Like with Carl or myself, you generate interest in your work and there are people out there interested in buying. A lot of it has to do with adopting a more business-like manner; being savvy and being able to promote yourself. The more business minded I am, the better I do.

Rick Vian: I've always tried to figure out how to make a living to support myself so that my art can be completely independent. So I can do whatever the hell I want – because there's always a temptation of making more of something that sells. I don't want to do that. I want to do what I want to do right now!

Michelle Stamler: Rick, isn't part of that because you had a family that you had to support?

Rick Vian: Before I had the family I had no stomach for making art with the idea that "I think this is going to sell," like a gallery owner saying, "Don't use yellow, I can't sell yellow."

Ed Fraga: You can make art and get it out there and still be true to yourself without compromising your values.

D.G: *In that the tape is about to run out, let me ask one last question: who should have the last word?*

Sue Carman: All of us should.

Carl Demeulenaere: Can I say something else?

Michelle Stamler: I think it's important to note that there's never a last word.

Carl Demeulenaere: After Michelle...

Michelle Stamler: Oops, sorry, Carl.

Carl Demeulenaere: The idea of success, since people were talking about my work – I'm striving for success. I don't consider myself successful in the least. I'm endlessly striving for a kind of success and it often doesn't include the outside world. It's success within myself.

Nelson Smith: He got the last word!

THE ART OF THE CATHARCTIC CIRCLE

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