

Sacred Wild: Opening to Shakti

curated by
Suzi Gablik

May 25 - June 25, 2005

Othello Anderson
Hank Foreman
David T. Hanson
Kathy Pinkerton
Fern Shaffer
Jane Vance Siegle

Suzi Gablik is an art critic, artist and teacher. She is the author of *The Re-enchantment of Art, Has Modernism Failed?*, and *Conversations Before the End of Time*.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Wed, May 25, 6-8 pm

Opening reception with brief presentations by the artists

Wed, June 15, 6:30 pm

Panel Discussion: *The Ritual of Altars*
with Eddie Stern (co-publisher/editor, *Namarupa*)
and Peg Streep (author, *Altars Made Easy*)

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Cover: Jane Vance Siegle, *Water: The Great Churning*, 2003
Oil and antique cloth on linen, 48 x 84 in. (detail)



A great debate has been making the rounds in artistic arenas for at least a decade now in relation to the question, "Whatever happened to beauty?"

According to the critic Arthur C. Danto in his 2003 book, *The Abuse of Beauty*, beauty rarely came up in art periodicals from the 1960s on "without a deconstructive snicker." He asks provocatively, "How can beauty, since Renaissance times assumed to be the point and purpose of the visual arts, have become artistically contraindicated to the point of phobia in our own era?" Danto attributes the origins of this phobic response to the Dadaists in Zurich, who, in 1922, pronounced beauty dead as a moral protest against the ugliness of war. In noisy defiance of the horrors unfolding on the world scene, Dadaists refused to make beautiful objects for the gratification of those they held responsible for the Great War. Creating beauty was considered tantamount to sleeping with the enemy.

By all rights, anyone could argue that in our own globally challenged and terror-stricken times, when bleakness colors the world emotionally, the world is more than ripe for another massive rejection of beauty. As a culture, it would seem that we have lost much more than just the outward scintilla and sparkle of beauty. What we have lost is the ability to feel the divine in all things. Institutionalized religion in our lifetimes has once again become a war-making tool. How, then, do we get past our embarrassment about God? Everything in modern society has progressed except our spiritual understanding. We

have yet to learn, for instance, that we can't survive without beauty, and that the loss of it is killing us. But before offering up any big Molly Bloom "yes" to its recovery, we ought to ask what really matters today about beauty. In what ways is it important? Is its influence conservative or innovative? And why is the modern world so indifferent to the spiritual power of beauty?

This exhibition is not, after all, just "about beauty." In the confrontation between the oppressive and tyrannical fundamentalisms of today—Muslim and capitalist Christian, each convinced that its view of the world is the only legitimate and true one—what we find here is an elaborate and personal message from artists who work from a different level of consciousness—a consciousness of inclusivity and interconnectedness that appreciates and honors the contributions of all cultures. The art presented here is "worldcentric": it embodies an expansive and nuanced spirituality, liberated from rigid ideologies and the stultifying dogmas of organized religion. Let us say that it explores ways to weep beauty back into the footprint of our flat,



David T. Hanson, *Kailasa Temple, Ellora, India*, 1999
Chromogenic development print, 15 x 18.25 in.



Hank Foreman, *Black Madonna Altar 1*, 2005 (detail)
Created and found objects, dimensions variable

pragmatic, one-dimensional world. Pivotal to my own sense of the meaning of beauty is a deeper mystical awareness that beauty is linked to the recovery of awe. Specific worldviews stifle or promote the cultivation of awe: ours openly avoids it, preferring logical, linear modes of knowing. We are immune to awe in our institutions. How, then, do we learn to practice awe in our lives? And if we don't already feel it, how can we awaken it? Maximizing flow and abundance and all the wonderful nuances of life, how do we recover what Umberto Eco calls "lay religiosity?"

Awe-based consciousness instills mystery, magnificence, and bedazzlement into the pale, inert plurality of our material-minded society. "Ultimately what most satisfies the soul," Thomas Moore has written, "is that which is captivating, spellbinding, and full of charm." Sensitivity to enchantment is the common theme that unifies all the art in this exhibition: seeing the whole of creation as a single living organism, self-creating, flowing, abundant, and imbued with a deep spiritual significance.

In a world that mistrusts and rejects magic, the making of altars and shrines affords noble, wild prospects for the soul as an expression of the way we arrange things. You can make an inspired one

with nothing more than the glow of a single marigold, your love of a handmade doll, or the ash heaps generated by prayer. Making altars has nothing to do with making a living. Altars are not an aid to careers in the marketplace. Beloved objects cross-fertilize, combine, inspire, and grow into something new and fantastic. Altars have talismanic power, nudging us toward an older, half-forgotten mode of consciousness. They speak the language of enchantment.

David T. Hanson, well-known for his earlier photographs of damaged landscapes and toxic wastelands across America—the inevitable consequence, he now believes, of our working without imagination and affection—has switched over to what he calls "a geography of hope," photographing ritual spaces that humans around the globe create to express what they hold most sacred. These images range from primitive rural shrines to ornate temples and abandoned chapels.

In their ritual work designed to focus attention on protecting the environment, Fern Shaffer and Othello Anderson, who have been collaborating as artists since 1980, view the earth itself as sacred, invoking it as an altar and transmitting healing energy to specific landscapes under threat. Wearing a garment of raffia and string, Shaffer dances herself into a visionary state and offers prayers. The artists have written about their work: "We recognize the forest in which to meditate. We recognize the necessity of lighting the fire. We acknowledge the importance of special



Fern Shaffer and Othello Anderson, *Ritual #8*, September 9, 2003, Photographs, 72 x 96 in. each

prayer. We understand the imperative of listening. We believe it is helpful to believe in miracles. As we love and protect ourselves so shall we love and protect the earth."

For Kathy Pinkerton, making altars is based in a love of this world. They allow an appreciation for the world's spirituality that does not have to be part of institutionalized religion. You don't need a creed or a definable god to feel the presence of the divine in all things. "Altars are my ultimate art because I use everything I have absorbed from my entire life for them," she says. "In return they provide healing, play, joy, and spirituality."



Kathy Pinkerton altar, 2005 (detail)
Found objects, dimensions variable

In the language of enchantment, nothing is "merely" random. There is an underlying order to the universe, and if you are able to attune to its natural flow, you will find the webs of connection, the sympathy that exists between things: the linking principle that integrates spirit and matter. Composing by means of these "fractal explosions of interconnectedness," represents, for Hank Foreman, a way of "allowing all the different facets of my personality to come into play, so I can be religious and scandalous at the same time."

Opening to shakti-life as a flow of energy and consciousness often hauls Jane Vance Siegle's work off to heaven. With her multiple metaphors and colliding images, all the

realms mix and merge in a radiant form of free expression. Imagery grows with the excess, profusion, and fertility of a plant. "I remember a time," she says, "walking down a single street in India and thinking, wow, this man is working as if in the Bronze Age; ah, this is pre-history; here's a cyber-café; here's the eighteenth century; here's colonial England. There were all these simultaneous moments in history, not to mention races and religions, tolerating each other well, without judgment, without condescension, and with some understanding of each others' talents and traditions. Those layers, co-existing in one place, have always seemed to me like healthy bio-diversity, and are represented in my paintings in the melange and sheer profusion of imagery."

In the language of enchantment, there is this sense of a living continuum that cannot be cut up or divided because of the symbiotic interactions and interpenetrations of everything within it. The lexicon is enormously wide, its spheres of reference global. Everywhere, categories overlap. Surprise synchronistic connections lead us into spell-binding ecstasy. Things configure in their own way, woven together as if in some divine aesthetic kaleidoscope. This is not doctrinal religious practice, but an aspect of "opening to shakti"—the dynamic life force that animates everything. One could say that these works are beautiful, except that the word itself all but vanishes in the glittering of a thousand refractions. Beauty here is not an end in itself, but has become a conduit for the living reality of signs and wonders and meaningful coincidences. Allusive repetitions come into play, and the world is no longer lifeless, inert, and without soul. Penetrated by powerful rhythms and by "the pattern which connects," with unparalleled cunning, it comes back to life.