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THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Skin Boat

A written accompaniment to the thesis exhibition

by

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## Abstract

*Skin Boat* is written in support of the thesis exhibition of the same name. Section One takes a biological approach to art and discusses humans as aesthetic animals. Psychoanalyst Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and Joseph Campbell's beliefs about the artist's role in disseminating myth are discussed. Art criticism is examined from a Darwinist perspective. Section Two focuses on the exhibition, charting the course of *Skin Boat*. The exhibition paintings use archetypal imagery, principally the boat, as a metaphor for the human life journey. *The Beginning* compares the creation of the world, as told in myths, and our own watery beginning in the womb. Land, sea, and sky, what we refer to as landscape, is referred to in *The Destination*. *The Journey* describes the road I take when creating a painting, using *Treasure* as an example. Finally, location of meaning in my work is explored in the chapter *Cargo*.

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*for Karl*

*It is the poem itself that is the answer.*

(William Carlos Williams)

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## **Section One: A Biological Approach to Art**

### ***Introduction***

My background in biological research (I have a B.Sc. in biology) has made me receptive to view art from a biological perspective. When I studied biology, I found myself doing medical research, weighing out chemicals, and conducting experiments. These experiments, however, had very poor results, frustrating inconsistencies, involved torturing animals, and contributed little to a community of knowledge. Additionally, I felt no closer to the positive aspects of life study that had initially attracted me to biology. Up to my elbows in blood and human tissue, my work devalued the human experience to me and focused on the body gone terribly wrong. Undeniably, medical research, as a whole, is progressing forward in the fight against disease. Many biological discoveries have changed the course of human life for the better. Personally, however, I felt that there was more to life than survival. There must also be a reason to live, and I found myself wishing I could express myself creatively. I wanted to paint.

Art Critic Ellen Dissanayake, in her book *Homo Aestheticus*, argues that humans actually need meaning and beauty in their lives. These were qualities that I felt were lacking in my previous career choice. Painting attracted me because I find the creation of physical objects fulfilling. I enjoy the plastic qualities of oil paint, its ability to create infinite colours and surface textures. Until recently, I enjoyed making patterned work that facilitated the combination of many different colours next to each other in one painting,

in my attempt to achieve a canvas of richness and intensity. My work has simplified more recently. I favour a composition of one object in a larger field that symbolizes the earth, the water, or the sky. This reflects my current interest in spiritual matters. I believe that the creation of beautiful surfaces is my translation of the sense of wonder I have of existence. It is the best tool I have to make poetry out of mystery.

Research into some of the subjects I enjoy painting has uncovered layers of meaning that are universal to humanity and cross cultural boundaries. Discovering this web of meaning has led to three authors who have compelling theories about objects of universal appeal: Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Ellen Dissanayake. These authors help explain humanity's interest in universal objects.

Because art-making itself is universal, we can view it as a fundamental human behavior throughout the four million year history of human development. This approach offers a broader perspective than recent art criticism. We can also compare the behavior of art-making to other human behaviors to see how it improves our lives. For improve us it must, to have survived thousands of years of evolutionary selection.

~ One ~

### The Aesthetic Animal

If a declaration that art is fundamental to humankind is to be more than just political rhetoric or wishful thinking, it is necessary to frame one's thought within an understanding of human nature as it has evolved by natural selection over the past three or four million years. Only by knowing where art comes from biologically will we know what it is and what it means.<sup>1</sup>

Charles Darwin did not have art in mind when he wrote *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. However, his findings have provided a feasible explanation of how every living thing on this earth came to exist in its present shape, including human beings. Darwin argued that every action we perform, every behavior that any plant or animal exhibits, has survived hundreds of thousands of years under very competitive and difficult circumstances. Therefore, this behavior must somehow improve our ability to survive, or it would have disappeared long ago. It would have died out with the unfortunate animal that exhibited this behavior. Darwinism describes a biological process where traits that contribute to an animal's survival are over time selected, while those that hinder gradually reduce in number.<sup>2</sup>

Humans are the only animals that create art. Along with language, reason, and the use of tools, art-making is a fundamental part of defining humanity. Art-making is a human

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus* (Seattle: University of London Press, 1995), p. xix.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 176.

behavior that warrants viewing under Darwinist terms, because its universality suggests that it is important to survival. Dissanayake argues that art benefits a person's biological fitness.<sup>3</sup>

Dissanayake believes that what we call art today is only a limited part of something she terms *making special*. Other human behaviors that she includes under this umbrella term are play and ritual. These three behaviors benefit a person's biological fitness by bringing attention to something important to survival.<sup>4</sup> Art, play and ritual overlap, but they all are *making special*.

There are commonalities in art, play and ritual. Until two hundred years ago, art and ritual in particular were almost inseparable. Some characteristics that ritual and art have in common are that they are both compelling, nonordinary, stylized, formalized, socially reinforcing, bracketed, and make use of symbols.<sup>5</sup>

Until very recent history, art was created in our society in the context of popular arts and crafts, political sponsorship and especially under the auspices of the church, the wellspring of our society's rituals: baptism, confirmation, marriage, and final rites.

Rituals bring attention to important activities that ensure the continuation of the species.

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<sup>3</sup>Dissanayake, p. 1

<sup>4</sup> Dissanayake, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Dissanayake, p. 46.

Even final rites ensure the continuation of the species, by bringing attention to the importance of the deceased individual and their valuable efforts in society. It is a time to remind ourselves to value and support those remaining in our community.

In all societies, art is always used, in some form, in ritual. Art's purpose in ritual is to add gravity, through special art objects, to the rite of passage. Art, like ritual, is a container, or molder of feeling. It structures the viewer's response and gives form to feeling. For example, formal ceremonies can become the occasion for individuals feeling and publicly expressing their sorrow.<sup>6</sup>

Turning our attention to the similarities between art and play, we find that they both have a metaphorical nature, a make-believe aspect that something is, in reality, something else. Much of folk art fits in the category of toys made originally for the family's children. Toys help children to play, often by miniaturizing adult implements that help children practice what will become a serious pursuit in their adulthood for survival. Many artists, myself included, feel that art-making is very close to playing at times, when one is enjoying unstructured experimentation with materials, for instance.

Separating art from ritual and play occurred only recently in history. Art as a purely aesthetic object has existed for only two hundred years. Historically, objects for making

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<sup>6</sup> Dissanayake, p. 46.

special were not for purely aesthetic reasons, but decorated buildings, dress, pots, or used in some form of ritual or play.

I think that we have unnecessarily divorced art from other aspects of making special, perhaps in an effort to be taken more seriously in a culture that undervalues aesthetic considerations. Dissanayake writes that, "...creativity, self-expression, emotional intensity, beauty and seriousness...are fragmented or denigrated or lacking in contemporary life and art."<sup>7</sup> She feels that while a scientific world view has brought many comforts and liberties to modern society, it ignores that we as humans actually require beauty and meaning.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dissanayake, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Dissanayake, p. 3.

~ Two ~

## The First World Wide Web

The psyche is not of today; its ancestry goes back many millions of years. Individual consciousness is only the flower and the fruit of a season, sprung from the perennial rhizome beneath the earth; and it would find itself in better accord with the truth if it took the existence of the rhizome into its calculations. For the root matter is the mother of all things.<sup>9</sup>

Long before computers connected the globe with the internet, there were images of objects essential to our survival possibly encoded in our genes. These images are archetypes. The Oxford Dictionary defines archetype as "a primordial mental image inherited by all." Our archetypal imagery developed through the millions of years that humans roamed in small migratory groups over the African savannah, hunting and gathering for food. The conditions of that time are mainly responsible for the shape of our minds and bodies. Our bodies evolved to ones that survived most optimally under those rugged conditions, and the instincts and abilities of our minds were also developed under ancient conditions much more basic than our current urban life.

Archetypal expert Joseph Campbell believes we are genetically endowed with archetypal information, knowledge common to all humans. Campbell relied heavily on psychoanalyst Carl Jung's research into archetypes earlier in this century. Jung believes what he terms our *collective unconscious* stored archetypal imagery. Jung and Campbell

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Jung, *The Portable Jung* (New York: Viking Penguin Ltd., 1976), p. xxi.



argue that various art forms and religious activities tap archetypal imagery. Campbell thinks that our society looks to art and religion, principally, to study the unconscious.<sup>10</sup>

Jung's research into the connection between our minds and myth began when he read a series of fantasies of a schizophrenic person. Their mythological character impressed him. He then read widely in Egyptian, Babylonian, Hindu, Classical, Gnostic, Germanic, and American Indian materials. He found that archetypes are common to the human species and felt they were expressive of common human needs.

Jung developed a theory that the unconscious compensates for what may be lacking in consciousness. Dreams and fantasies not only try to correct this want but also give clues to what archetypes the psyche wants recognized.<sup>11</sup> If a person departs from species norms and psychological imbalance ensues, fragmented myths appear in dreams and fantasies. These give clues to what is lacking in this person's life.<sup>12</sup>

How does this relate to the artist's role in society? A person seeking help from a psychoanalyst is desiring change. An artist, on the contrary, is not (necessarily) imbalanced or in need of change. They are, however, researching their unconscious and expressing it visually, interpreting stores of myths for the rest of society. Artists reveal

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p.107.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Campbell in the introduction to *The Portable Jung*, p. xxii

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Campbell in the introduction to *The Portable Jung*, p. xxi.

what Campbell calls, "the prospect of unfathomed wonder to which all myths and rites—in the way of great poetry and art—introduce and unite us..."<sup>13</sup> Art can reflect a sense of wonder at the miracle of existence.

Society looks to art to see a reflection of the experience of life. Campbell observed, "People say what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive..."<sup>14</sup> This makes sense when viewing art. We do not seek the meaning of life by looking at one painting, but rather we seek a connection with the artist. We feel the thrill of recognition when seeing something that we have felt, but have not seen or heard in the physical world. We feel connected to something greater than ourselves.

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 1.

~ Three ~

**The Tangled Web: A Darwinist View of Art Criticism.**

My approach to art-making is what my supervisor, Marcia Perkins, calls an intuitive one.

I paint whatever moves me, and later the meaning becomes apparent, rather than the other way around. I often produce contrived, lifeless and uni-dimensional paintings when I try to research subjects first and then paint them.

Dissanayake suggests that postmodern art criticism has also been approaching art from the wrong way round, by asserting that people are the products of their culture, rather than culture being a product of people's needs. The Darwinist approach asserts that culture is created by human beings to aid them in their survival.

The postmodern argument is an understandable reactionary movement to the analytical predominance of the modernist period. It is an alternative view to the scientific, rational approach that has dominated western culture since the Enlightenment. Unfortunately it takes its argument too far and rejects both positive and negative aspects of modernism.

### ***Modernism***

Philosophical modernity that began with the Enlightenment (1687-1789). It championed a belief that science could save the world. Philosophers such as Rene Descartes believed that through reason scholars could establish a foundation of universal truths.<sup>15</sup> It was not long before people began to attempt a system of universal truths for artistic evaluation, one that could encompass what was essential in art.

Artistic modernism began roughly during the 1880s, under the banner of "art for art's sake." Around this time photography began to usurp the painter's role of recording the accurate translation of three-dimensional objects onto two-dimensions for posterity. Clearly this role that painting fulfilled was no longer necessary, and yet painting continues. These new paintings had to be about something else. English critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry introduced a new theory, Formalism, in the 1920s to allow cross-cultural evaluation of art, from any place or time, based solely on form. Form, comprising of line, colour, texture, composition, shape, became the essence of painting, what all the good paintings were about, regardless of the narrative present. The essential painting, gradually stripped of unnecessary bodies and realism, was hotly pursued through the first half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>15</sup> Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Art* (California: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1994), p. 109.

Barnett Newman was the ultimate modernist. He rejected "props and crutches that evoke associations, and resisted the impediments of memory, associations, nostalgia, legend, myth."<sup>16</sup> Newman's work attempts to encapsulate the modernist ideal, to create the essential painting. Unfortunately, he does not convince all of us of his success. He claims to resist the impediments of associations. However, his titles such as Voice of Fire invite association of his large abstract canvasses to physical realities. In rejecting his props and crutches, Newman takes out of painting almost everything that draws me *to* painting—texture, myth, association, organic line, and luscious surface. Cracks begin to appear in the road that led to modernist paradise. Art historian Karsten Harries argues that modernism in art was doomed from the start by its own nihilistic definition. He states, "...art, [submitting to] the aesthetic approach, has to strive for a purity incompatible first with representation and finally with all meaning..."<sup>17</sup> While formal considerations are given the limelight, other essential ingredients that contribute meaning meet with disapproval.

Bell's formalism analyzes art from all over the globe with a theoretical approach that applies everywhere. However, in the end formalist concerns in painting only cover part of the picture. Meaning generated outside formalist concerns is also essential to judging the quality or success of the piece. Works tied up entirely in formalist concerns can become

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<sup>16</sup> Barrett, p. 114.

<sup>17</sup> Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church* ( New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 254.

decorative, superficial, sterile, or empty exercises in virtuosity. That is not to say aesthetics are irrelevant. On the contrary, aesthetics are a major part of the content in art, but are not the whole content. The narrative of an art piece also generates meaning. I believe this narrative is a reflection of the way the artist experiences life.

Part of the problem of applying modernist ideals is that art is not solely a rational process, although partly one. Universities now teach art. Instructors emphasize the rational aspect of art partly in an attempt to gain respect from other academic fields of pursuit. Efforts to equate art with science, however, contribute to a postmodern rebellion. Freud and the whole psychoanalytical field, including Jung, undermine modernism by showing that powerful psychological forces, not bound by reason, shape society and individuals.<sup>18</sup>

There were other differences between art and science. Northrop Frye wrote that, "science progresses from the outside world towards imagination. Art is vice versa. Science evolves and progresses, art does not."<sup>19</sup> The supposition that art progresses leads to the idea of the avant-garde. Proponents of the avant-garde believe that art forms based on older traditions are passé, while new technologically-based art forms are better because they

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<sup>18</sup> Barrett, p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1963), p. 7.

are on the leading edge. However, as Frye points out, art does not progress, it only evolves to reflect the changing environment of the artist.

### *Postmodernism*

Postmodernism rejects the idea of progress. The claims of one *-ism* to be better and more advanced than the last appeared absurd and evoked the understandable postmodern desire to end these *-isms* once and for all. Postmodernism claims to end all movements, to reflect a rootless, pluralistic society of infinite viewpoints.<sup>20</sup> While I sympathize with this desire to quash the art-progress myth, I think that we will continue to see different movements coming and going, as artists react to and reflect their environment.

Postmodernists find the fundamental unit of human behavior in culture, learned rather than inherited. I think they are too extreme in saying we are nothing but the products of our language. Darwinists believe that there are genetically endowed universal human needs, potentials, and tendencies.<sup>21</sup> Dissanayake argues that language is the product of a species need, the need to communicate.<sup>22</sup> While all communication is flawed, biased, opaque and often misleading, it is the only way we have to connect with another human being. Postmodernism itself is writing, based on writing that subverts and sabotages

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<sup>20</sup> Dissanayake, p. 199.

<sup>21</sup> Dissanayake, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Dissanayake, p. 211.

writing. Yet, for most of human history we were making art, but could not read or write at all.<sup>23</sup> It would appear that art-making is more integral to human need than written language, as it has a longer history. Such a predominantly literary theory of explanation cannot contain the larger and universal behavior of art-making.

Jacques Derrida, the preeminent postmodern theorist, insists that the language of literature better expresses philosophy than the scientifically derived analytical approach that mainstream philosophy embraces. To this end, Derrida favours poetic tools such as ambiguity, indeterminacy, pun and metaphor.<sup>24</sup> These forms supposedly alert the reader to the opacity of language. Oddly enough, he and other postmodern theorists like Roland Barthes continue to use some negative aspects of science, such as reliance on dry jargon like Barthes' infamous *sign*, *signified* and *signifier*. Barthes couples jargon with the above mentioned poetic tools, but without the poetic attempt at beautiful sentences. What results is something difficult to read which offers no aesthetic rewards. The following excerpt is from the ironically titled *The Pleasure of the Text*, by Barthes:

Especially, of course (here is where the edge will be clearest), in the form of pure materiality: the language, its lexicon, its metrics, its prosody. In Philippe Sollers's *Lois*, everything is attacked, dismantled: ideological structures, intellectual solidarities, the propriety of idioms, and even the sacred armature of syntax(subject/predicate): the text no longer has the sentence of its model; often it is a powerful gush of words, a ribbon of infra-language. Yet it all collides with another edge: that of (decasyllabic) meter, of assonance, of plausible neologisms, of prosodic rhythms, of (quoted ) truisms. The dismantling of language is intersected by political assertion, is edged by the age-old culture of the signifier.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Dissanayke, pp. 204-211.

<sup>24</sup> *Oxford Companion*, p. 188.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang: 1975), p. 8.



Barthes is himself immersed in language theory, and has perhaps overstated its importance in the development of human psyche.

Ultimately communication seeks connection with the other, and postmodernism's connection is dismal. It is a communication based on disconnection and distrust of all writers, including its own. There are some positive aspects of the movement, however, including a healthy distrust of authority and a widening of the definition of art to include non-formalist meaning.

Postmodernism's distrust of authority imparts valuable lessons. We do well to take the author's agenda into account when reading anything, to view any person as a product of their position in society. However, I do not agree that we should abandon Platonic ideas of beauty and truth, just because they do not exist perfectly here on Earth, nor abandon language and its imperfection. While we need be wary of rhetoric, the pursuit of truth and beauty is a basic human desire. Dissanayake writes, "...even when we are told that 'beauty' and 'meaning' are socially constructed and relative terms insofar as they have been used by elites to exclude or belittle others, most of us still yearn for them."<sup>26</sup> To me, discussions of art going beyond beauty are taking art out of the realm of art. After all, beauty is defined in the Oxford as a combination of qualities that delights the sight. Visual art is directed primarily to the sense of sight, and so it is important that the visual

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<sup>26</sup> Dissanayake, p. xix

aspect of art is carefully considered. Art is not a kind of cue or symbol for an accompanying book of literature, however much literary theorists maintain that this is true.

Overall, I object to the nihilism pervading postmodernism. I dislike postmodernism's rejection of all things past, its pervasive negativity, and its complete democracy in questions of quality. Postmodernism's tolerance of everything and anything amounts to indifference. If everything is equally valuable, then why is anything worth doing?<sup>27</sup>

One positive aspect of postmodernism's democracy has been to widen the definition of art to include meaning outside formalist concerns, and to include voices outside of the dominant culture. I hope that society will swing back to accepting traditionally privileged voices as deserving their fair share. Even though Michaelangelo was both white and male, we can still gain something from his point of view. I think we should strive to view art with an awareness of the bias involved in every movement, including the dominant movement of our time: postmodernism.

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<sup>27</sup> Dissanayake, p. 202.

### *The Darwinist Art Critic*

A Darwinist approach to art criticism, as exemplified by Dissanayake, shares with modernism a rather scientific approach. Darwinism is analytical and rational. It defines art as making special, a behavior that highlights objects and activities important to the species survival. Everyone participates in making special and so Darwinists are democratic in their attitude toward art. Darwinists do not believe that art progresses, only that it evolves to reflect the artist's environment. Artists are doing essentially the same thing as their predecessors did thousands of years ago.

The difficulty I have with the Darwinist approach is in questions of quality and specialization. Dissanayake believes that we should *not* as a society value everyone's efforts equally. She also believes that art, or a creative expression of some kind, is important for everyone to practice without censure. These two beliefs seem to contradict each other.

My admittedly inadequate answer to the difficult question of quality versus universality lies in the person's level of seriousness. Everyone can run (almost everyone!), but not everyone deserves a place in the Olympics. By encouraging participation in sports at the universal level in schools, however, we produce the best runners for the national team.

Art has its own Olympics, but unfortunately the stopwatch is of no use to us in judging quality.

Quality in artistic pursuits will remain a difficult and subjective judgment, but important to attempt, to everyone's benefit. Artists have a specialist role in society, and *quality controls* (competitions, juried shows, portfolio requirements, etc.) aid the artists themselves in improving their work standards. We need competition and goals to become the best we can be.

\*

In this section I have argued that we should view humans as aesthetic animals, making special that which is important to species survival. Millions of years of evolution shaped our bodies and minds, leaving a rich legacy of archetypal imagery in what Jung termed our collective unconscious. Campbell believes it is the role of the artist to interpret these archetypes, attempting connection with the viewer's innermost being and reality. I support the Darwinist view of art criticism, which takes into account the vast history of art-making. It supports the idea that art is for all people, not only for the few who understand modern and postmodern theory.

## Section Two

### Skin Boat

Kissing your stomach  
kissing your scarred  
skin boat. History  
is what you've traveled on  
and take with you.<sup>28</sup>

Originally the meaning of skin boat was literal: a boat made with stretched animal hide. However, Michael Ondaatje brought to my attention the potential metaphorical meaning in the words *Skin Boat*. For him, and now also for me, the body is merely a vehicle that takes us through our lives, carrying us like a boat. I feel this is a fitting title for my work, because whether I paint boats, houses, or vessels of whatever kind, I consider them representations of a person on their life journey, an object anthropomorphized.

This series of Skin Boat paintings, begun in April of 1997, employs the boat, primarily, as a metaphor for the human body. Boats speak of the journey of life, from birth to death. Because of our need for drinking water to survive, humans settled in close proximity to water. As a mode of transport and a means to fish, the boat was one of our earliest inventions. Long before we had domesticated animals or mastered agricultural and pottery skills, we were able to build and use water transport.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Ondaatje, *Secular Love* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1984), p. 81.

<sup>29</sup> Sean McGrail, *Ancient Boats* (Haverfordwest, Great Britain: C.I Thomas and Sons Ltd., 1983), p. 5.

Humanity's relationship to water has a rich mythology built around it. Our relationship to all of nature, our separateness and our connectedness to it, is a common subject for North American artists, perhaps because of the vastness of this continent. Water was my starting point in this series, and I discovered that water is at the beginning of not only our creation myth from Genesis, but also in the Hindu. I would like to introduce Kali and the magnificent story surrounding this ancient Hindu goddess of creation.

~ One ~

## The Beginning

### *Kali*

The ancient Hindu god Kali, the mother god of all gods, is often referred to as the *primordial womb*. Kali Ma means the *Dark Mother*, and she is the Hindu triple goddess of creation, preservation and destruction. The Brahmins assigned Kali's three functions to three gods whose names are more familiar to the West: Brahma-the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. The following excerpt likens gods to rivers, "...just as rivers and lakes are unable to traverse a vast great sea, so Brahma and other gods lose their separate existence on entering the uncrossable and infinite being of great Kali."<sup>30</sup> Kali has been described as the menstrual ocean of blood at creation.<sup>31</sup>

The Kali symbol, the Yoni Yantra, is a double-pointed oval. It is also called *vesica piscis*, meaning "vessel of the fish." The Yoni is symbolic of the vagina, Yoni meaning "vulva." The Yoni is the primary tantric object of worship, and can be symbolized variously by a triangle, fish, double-pointed oval, horseshoe, egg, or fruit.

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<sup>30</sup> *The Nirvana Tantra*, quoted in Barbara G. Walker's *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), p. 488.

<sup>31</sup> Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), p. 488.

The Christian fish symbol, although slightly different, has possible parallels with Yoni. Mary's name written with the Hebrew ideogram meant both "sea" and "mother." The ideogram is similar to the letter "M" and mimics the waves of the sea.<sup>32</sup> Another way to envision this famous mother and child is as a fish swimming in the sea. Many myths describe creation occurring in the watery womb of chaos. This image could draw from lack of differentiation between self and one's mother experienced in the womb. We may subconsciously remember this experience throughout life as an archetypal image.

### ***Kali, Yoni and Their Relevance to My Work***

Being a female painter I have wondered at times whether there is a feminist context for my work. I had concluded that my work is about being human, and not specifically feminist in content. However, there are some curious themes and characteristics that run through many bodies of work that are possibly the result of my gender. The boat shape that attracts me, for instance, is certainly similar to the Yoni symbol. This shape attracts me in pattern, boats, birds, windows, and many other configurations. I have produced a series of soup tureen paintings that depict an egg-like shape (Figure 1). It is also interesting to view the boat paintings as a portrait of Kali with her Yoni symbol floating on top.

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<sup>32</sup>Walker, p. 313.



I also have many things in common with Lucy Lippard's list of typically female imagery, described here as:

a unifying density, an overall texture, often sensuously tactile and often repetitive to the point of obsession; the preponderance of circular forms and central focus (sometimes contradicting the first aspect); a ubiquitous linear 'bag' or parabolic form that turns in on itself; layers, or strata; an undefinable looseness or flexibility of handling; a new fondness for the pinks and pastels and the ephemeral cloud-colours that used to be taboo."<sup>33</sup>

My depiction of the water in paintings such as *Cormorant* (Figure 2) is an exercise in overall texture and unifying density, as well as very loose mark-making. While I do not consider myself a feminist painter, I definitely am a female painter, and my use of the Yoni symbol, overall texture, egg-like objects, and loose mark-making may derive from my gender biologically.

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<sup>33</sup>Lucy Lippard in Barrett, p. 19.

~ Two ~

**The Destination**

The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere.<sup>34</sup>

What is the destination, the purpose for which life was created? We have many creation myths, most of which begin in a watery place. Some believe that water is such a prevalent archetype because we came out of the mother's womb and spend the rest of our lives trying to return to it and the feeling of complete connection to another being. Others take it even further, that creation of life probably began in the ocean, and that our goal is to return there. Why return to the place of creation though? Perhaps to meet our maker, or in Buddhist terms, to encounter the infinite.

Buddhists view our perception of ourselves as individuals with our own souls as an illusion. This illusion can be conquered over the course of lifetimes by the meditation of the oneness of all creation. In *The Unknown Craftsman*, Japanese artist Soetsu Yanagi states that every artist knows he is engaged in an encounter with infinity, and that work done with the heart and hand is ultimately the worship of Life Itself.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Peter Pauper Press, 1966), p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman* (Japan: Kodansha International, 1972), p. 89.

Campbell spoke of artists reflecting wonder at the miracle of life. This too has similarities to Yanagi's statement, that the artist is engaged in an encounter with the Infinite. I attempt to portray infinity juxtaposed against an object symbolic of the individual. In *North Sea* (Figure 3), the ocean depth is symbolic of the infinite with the tiny boat afloat on top. In *The Lookout* (Figure 4), the infinite is playing the role of the Northern Lights above the lookout cabin.

In Alberta, the infinite is most obvious in the prairie sky. The pioneer farmhouses still dot the Alberta hills from a century ago. Settlers were arriving in rural Alberta at their stakes via covered wagon as recently as 1910. The rural surroundings, combined with the simple cabin, impart a feeling that the occupants are one with the earth. They seem to be *of* the earth, belonging more to the sky and the prairie than to other people and society.

I chose to depict in my paintings the "Ontario" style house. A peaked gable crowning the main entrance characterizes this house. This style suggests the pride of the builder to raise himself above the shape of a mere shed-like shelter, but still simple enough to embody the most basic of lifestyles. The peak suggests a kind of pointing to the sky, a feeling of optimism, spiritualism, or hope.

I have expanded my archetypal imagery to include trees and birds as well as houses and boats. Trees seem to reach up to touch the sky, and birds, of course, fly in the sky. It is the sky, then, that interests me again and again. In the following chapter, I discuss how I generated the painting *Treasure*, one with both tree and bird imagery.

~ Three ~

**The Journey**

*The Painting Process, Using Treasure as an Example.*

I have chosen *Treasure* (Figure 5) to exemplify the process I go through when generating a painting. I had previously completed *China Boat* (Figure 6) and enjoyed its economy of imagery. This painting possessed a combination of line and form in the cloud, slight shading in the boat and subtle texture in the background. The background texture was gained through rubbing a glaze onto organically applied gesso. I wanted to attempt another work incorporating some of these aspects. I also wanted to explore the bird as a symbol, which seemed a natural choice for me given that birds fly and represent the spirit symbolically. I like to depict objects floating in the air or somehow raised above the ground. This may be to express a spiritual, unearthly state. I also think that objects that are floating, as opposed to buried or heavy-feeling objects, are more joyous and optimistic in feel.

In my sketch book I drew some small thirty-second pen sketches of various bird and other animal compositions: one of a squirrel running along an electrical wire, a bird alighting on an electrical wire. These satisfied my desire to have a linear element and an object in the composition. However, the number of elements still seemed too sparse and I wanted to activate the bottom edge. I tried showing some branch tops of trees. I decided that

these satisfied the linear element and the electrical wire was not necessary. I preferred to have the bird flying in a direction off the edge of the canvas, giving some sense of movement away from the centre where the bird was placed.

At this time Marcia came in and we had a studio visit. She told me of her use of magpies and she lent me *A Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, a book that describes them as oracles of the future. She also told me of an artist who insisted that gold frames made her work sell faster. I thought this was similar to the way magpies are attracted to shiny objects and line their nest with candy bar foil or anything shiny. I decided to portray my bird as a magpie carrying a piece of gold foil and to call the piece *Treasure*.

I rubbed several layers of glaze on the background. Here I wanted to create a glowing, golden atmosphere that would resonate with the gold leaf in the bird's beak. I completed several small sketches of the magpie, none of which were to my liking. The bird was too big and lacked grace. I was trying to recapture the delicacy of the birds that I had painted in an earlier painting, *Shiva* (Figure 7). The *Shiva* bird mimicked the Mughal style of drawing animals with their limbs and body curving sensuously in pleasing *S* configurations. Campbell thinks the stylization of animal figures refers to their spiritual, not to their merely physical characteristics.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 115.

*Shiva* had many elements in it, including three birds swirling around a large figure. I had often thought it would be nice to isolate the bird and give it a greater role in a painting of its own. I decided to abandon the magpie sketches and recreate the *Shiva* bird.

The *Shiva* bird brought with it a very light blue eye that I felt symbolized blindness at the time I painted it. The *Shiva* painting was inspired by a time when several birds came into my house through open doors. Another perplexing little bird kept pecking at the windows as though it wanted to gain entry. Now I think the blind eye is symbolic of an eye seeing into the unconscious, or the unknown, an eye seeing into another reality.

After I had all the elements in the painting it struck me that tree buds are also sometimes called eyes. I put those eyes in the tree and changed the colour of the eye of the bird to the same light green colour. I think that these identical eyes in the tree and bird point to the similarity and union of all things.

~ Four ~

**The Cargo**

*Location of Meaning in my Work*

A large amount of the meaning of my work comes from the pleasure I have in creating beautiful surfaces. I pay attention to the formal aspects of painting and aspire to create simple compositions that nevertheless have enough tension between the various elements to hold the work together. I want my paintings to have simple, handmade appeal, somewhat like the folk art objects of untutored artists.

Dissanayake has observed that many artists across different cultural boundaries share a desire to create rustic and unsophisticated objects.<sup>37</sup> Artists may do this by borrowing artifacts from other, more primitive, traditions, concerning themselves with archetypes or elemental subject matter, using natural materials, or imparting a raw or unfinished quality to their work. Of these practices I feel drawn to archetypal subject matter and wish to achieve a directness in my work. I also use, or mimic, elemental substances in my surfaces, such as the rust I used in *Cusp* (Figure 8), the tarnished copper effect in *Tarnished Copper Sky* (Figure 9), or the natural wood grain showing through in *The Ark* (Figure 10). I also like to depict meteorological elements, such as the cloud in *China Boat* (Figure 6).

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<sup>37</sup> Dissanayake, p. 6.



The attraction of these elemental or rustic materials is not easy to define. Perhaps it is a desire towards purity that is similar to the modernist ideals. Simple, unsophisticated art has a direct kind of sincerity to it. There is no attempt to trick the eye. Musically, I liken my work to folk singers like Iris Dement or Bob Dylan in its intent to communicate earnestly, and unlike Mariah Carey with her baroque trilling, albeit with gifted vocal cords.

My boat paintings were originally created without conscious thought or knowledge of the many layers of meaning that I discovered during the course of writing this paper. This reinforces my belief that archetypal imagery comes from deep inside us. The myths surrounding these archetypes indicate that they have been favorite subjects of humanity through the ages. Discovering the writings of Jung, Campbell and the Hindu myths of the goddess Kali and her symbol, *Yoni*, have enriched the meaning of my paintings *to me*.

While I do plan and think about my paintings before I execute them, meaning develops in my mind and adds to the pieces as they progress. Often, however, meaning is illuminated to me by a viewer long after completion. Therefore, I am not in complete control of the meaning at a conscious level. This is what some refer to as the work "painting itself," seeming to come from another source, other than my own conscious mind. My research has led me to believe that the paintings are explorations into something akin to Jung's collective unconscious.

An example of the evolving meaning of a painting is seen in *North Sea* (1997; figure 3).

In *North Sea*, I wanted a large body of water that would envelop the viewer so they would be symbolically under water when viewing the piece. I wanted to depict the tenuousness of existence, the fragility of our little lives, represented by the small boat against the monster forces of nature.

After reading Campbell, however, other interpretations became possible. The small boat can also represent the ego, the directing force of our conscious lives, bobbing on top of the real force directing our lives, our soul, which resides in the unconscious.<sup>38</sup> The unconscious is represented here as the depth of the ocean. Campbell said that when we dream, we are fishing in some vast ocean of mythology that goes down infinitely.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p 116.

<sup>39</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 45.

## Conclusion

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The master's degree program has been a challenging intellectual experience that I hope will feed my creative work for years to come. It has encouraged me to explore ideas, the artistic process, and the mechanisms of teaching and learning. This support paper summarizes areas of thought that have occupied me. I have clarified my own definition of art and how it functions in society.

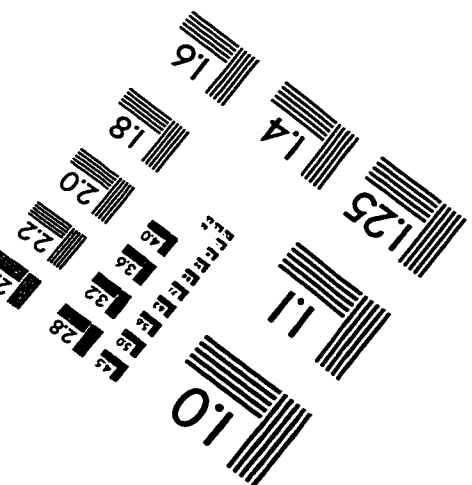
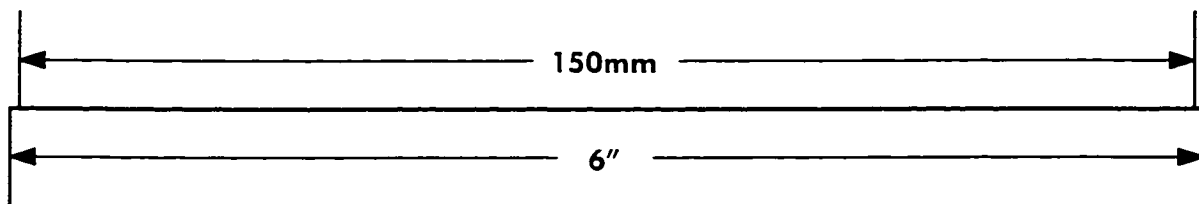
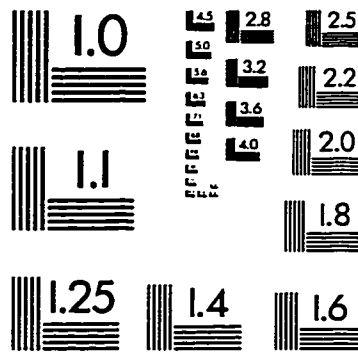
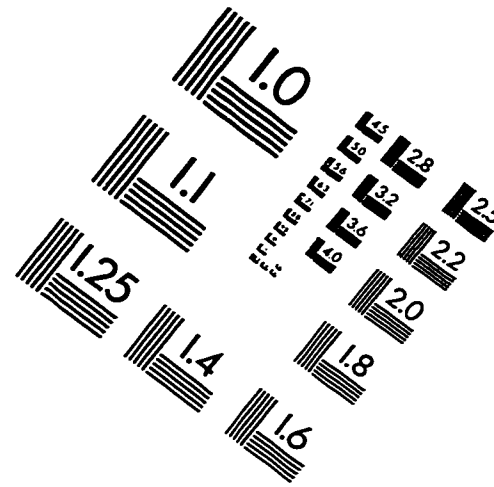
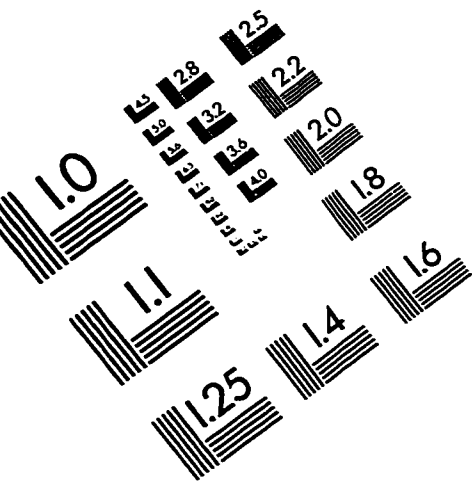
Within the studio I have pared down my work to fewer elements. I try to produce simple, beautifully textured paintings that symbolize the physical world. My paintings in *Skin Boat* are not rendered realistically, but rather are abstracted, which I think suits their abstract themes of the larger questions facing humanity. I have attempted to portray encounters with the infinite, whether that is in the sky, the sea, or in the forest. I celebrate the external life of the physical world and the internal life of the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional. Painting is the expression of my connection to the universe. It tells you what it feels like for me to be alive.

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