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2017

Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms

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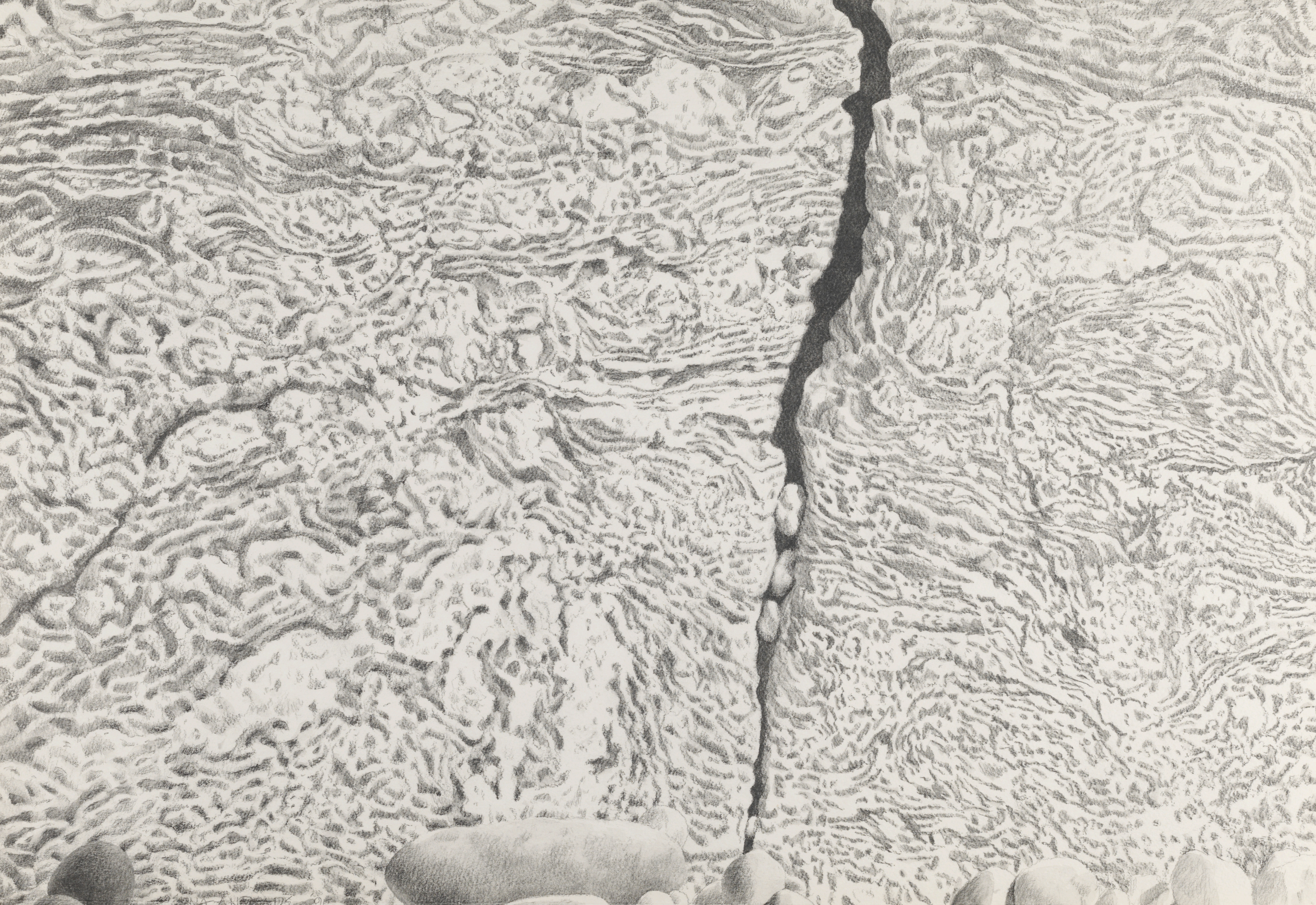
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BOUNDARIES**

FEMININE
FORMS



BEYOND BOUNDARIES

BEYOND BOUNDARIES FEMININE FORMS

Laurel McLaughlin *Mechella Yezernitskaya*

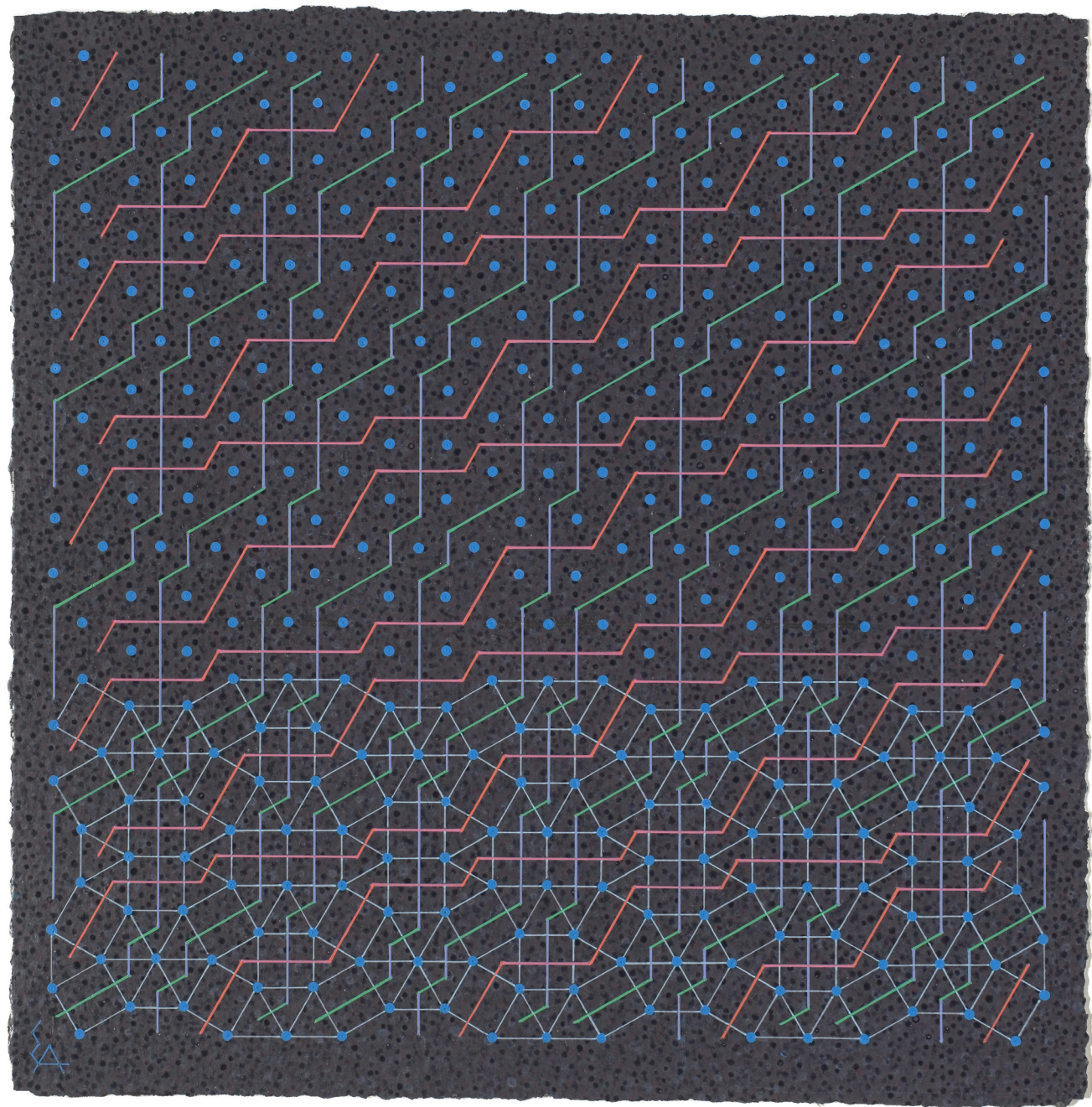
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**BRYN
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PAFA
Pennsylvania Academy
of the Fine Arts



Edna Andrade (1917–2008)
Indian Storm
1984

Acrylic on paper, 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.
Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists,
Gift of Bill Scott, 2006.1.26

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Kara Walker (b.1969)
Canisters
1997

Etched glass, each canister: 11 1/4 x 4 1/4 x 4 1/4 in.
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Art by Women
Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter, 2011.1.107

Sihn Ja Whiteley (b. 1941)
Balcony
1974

Linoleum-block print, 14 7/8 x 11 in.
Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists,
Gift of the artist, 2006.1.183



Foreword

Bill Scott's significant donation of works on paper by women artists to the art collection of a women's college that is dominated by the work of male artists, exposed and helped correct this omission. His addition of over 300 works moved the collection beyond a boundary—one all too typically upheld by the broader art world and its canon. But as the curators of this exhibition help us see, this important corrective gesture may at the same time impose a new boundary, one that insinuates that an artist's gender identity is the primary criterion not only for its inclusion but also for its interpretation. This limitation might not have been recognized at the time of the gift, becoming instead more apparent over the life of the collection into the 21st century at this women's college, when and where the criteria for the identifier "women" have increasingly been subject to questioning through gender studies and queer theory. Our institutional goal should not be to police this boundary for entry, but nor should it be to dismantle it and its indication of historically necessary efforts made in the advancement of women.

Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms proposes another course of action in the curatorial act of reinterpretation. While future exhibitions may renew or revise the interpretations offered in this iteration, the current exhibition takes its inspiration from the formal strategies used by the artists included in the collection. Curators Mechella Yezernitskaya and Laurel McLaughlin, graduate students in the History of Art at Bryn Mawr College, adroitly identify the spilling of paint over a work's edges or the doubling or tripling of pages to compose a single work as signs of the artists' unwillingness to be held to boundaries.

Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms is the first exhibition to unite two important Philadelphia collections of art by women: the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts' (PAFA) Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women and Bryn Mawr College (BMC) Special Collections' William and Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists. Laurel McLaughlin and Mechella Yezernitskaya, doctoral students in the History of Art at BMC, astutely observed the connections between these two collections and initiated this collaboration. They have curated an insightful exhibition that rigorously examines a wide range of issues related to female representation—a topic that has been addressed by artists for centuries and continues to resonate in our current political moment. In addition, their thoughtful interviews with Bill Scott and Linda Lee Alter for this catalogue give meaningful context to these groups of work and will be appreciated by art historians for many years to come. Lee and Bill share a generosity of spirit and a steadfast passion for art, which is apparent in these contemplative discussions.

This exhibition reflects PAFA's longstanding commitment to highlighting the importance of women artists in American art history. This dedication was further confirmed at PAFA in 2010 by Linda Lee Alter's transformative gift of her collection. Due to her gift and devotion to under-recognized artistic perspectives, PAFA is focused on broadening the history and understanding of American Art. We will be forever grateful to Lee—as will many future generations of museum visitors, students, and scholars. I thank her for so graciously taking part in this exhibition and catalogue.

The curators beautifully extend the formal strategy of the exhibition's artists to the dual siting of the exhibition itself. This crossing of institutional borders would not have been possible without the full and enthusiastic cooperation of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, especially Jodi Throckmorton, Curator of Contemporary Art, and Judith Thomas, Director of Exhibitions. Their courage in backing the vision of our students allowed the exhibition to move beyond the boundaries of the William and Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists and Bryn Mawr College to include the Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women and PAFA. The generous availability of collectors Bill Scott and Lee Alter to participate in published conversations with our students, included in these pages, was an atypical and especially meaningful opportunity that also enhances our institutional archives, contextualizing these gifts for generations to come.

The realization of this extraordinary exhibition involved many funders. Laurel's work over the previous school year was supported by PAFA as a Curatorial Assistant and by Bryn Mawr College's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences during the summer through a Mary Patterson McPherson Curatorial Fellowship. Mechella's work over the previous school year in Special Collections at Bryn Mawr College was also sponsored by a Mary Patterson McPherson Curatorial Fellowship. Her summer internship was awarded by the Friends of the Bryn Mawr College Library, who also covered expenses for the exhibition's installation and this catalogue, elegantly designed by Nathanael Roesch (PhD candidate). I would like to thank my colleagues in LITS and its department of Special Collections, especially Eric Pumroy, Associate Chief Information Officer and Seymour Adelman Head of Special Collections, for their enthusiastic support of this collaborative experiment. Museum Studies fieldwork intern, Tessa Haas (Class of 2018), along with Special Collections student employees, Maria Shellman (Class of 2017) and Nina Blomfield (MA candidate), also provided vital assistance. A significant program of events accompanies the exhibition, thanks to numerous sponsors across Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges.

It has been a pleasure to give over the role of curator to these dedicated graduate students and to support them through all aspects of this process. Providing students with such opportunities epitomizes my professional goals and our institutional mission.

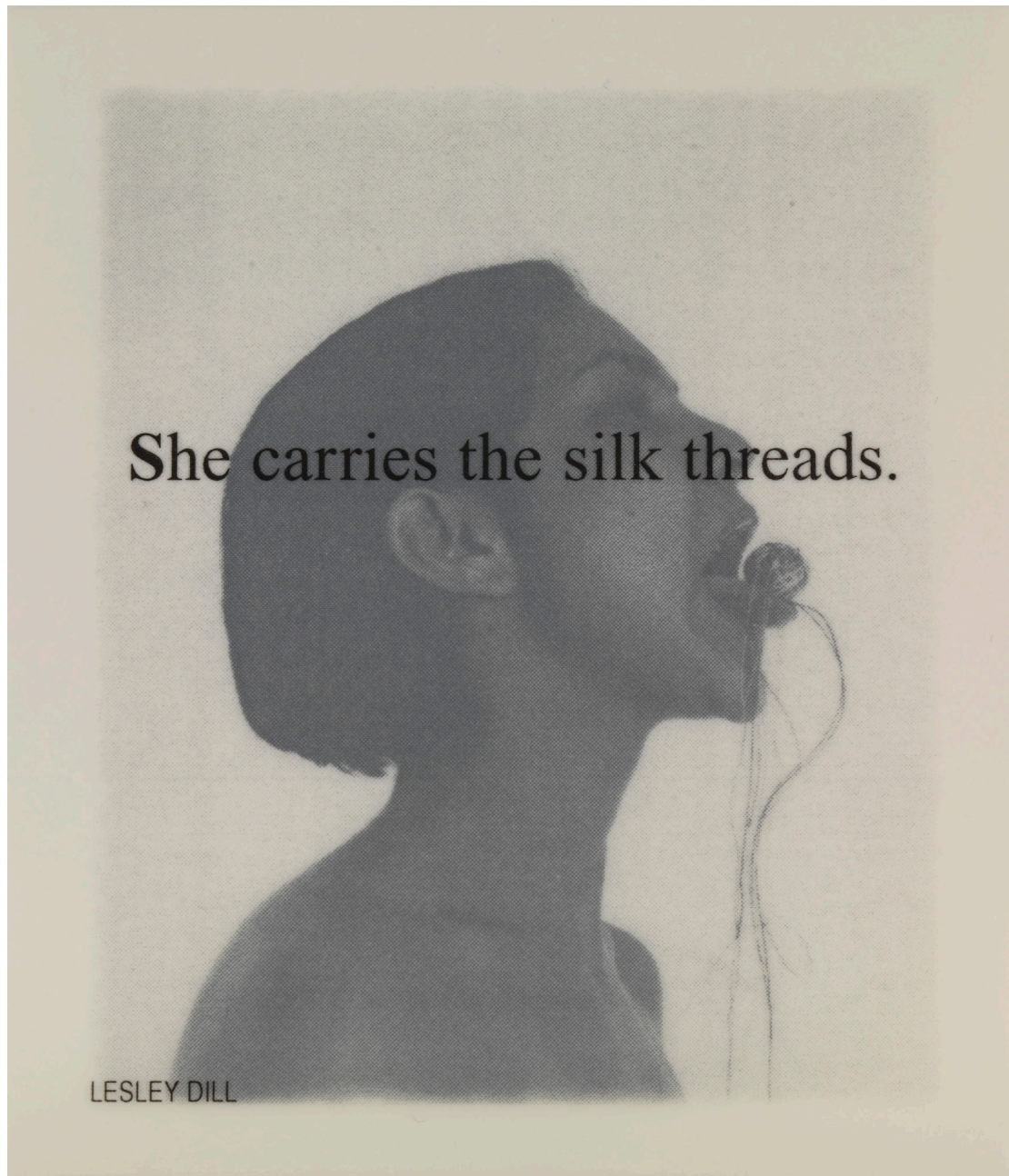
Carrie Robbins
Bryn Mawr College

I also wish to thank Bill Scott, a much beloved member of PAFA's community and the recipient of the school's Distinguished Alumni Award in 2006. A well-regarded artist, Bill's keen eye is evident in the works he selected for BMC's collection. He, too, kindly shared his time, as well as his deep knowledge of the featured artists with Laurel and Mechella.

PAFA's Director of Exhibitions Judith Thomas provided fundamental support at every stage of this project—without her none of this would have been possible. I am grateful for her artful diplomacy, critical advice, and editing prowess. I also wish to thank the the hard-working staff at PAFA including: Michael Gibbons, assistant preparator; Mark Knobelsdorf, chief preparator; Alexander Till, assistant registrar; Jennifer Johns, senior registrar; Barbara Katus, manager of imaging services; Elizabeth McDermott, conservation technician; Mary McGinn, paintings conservator; and Monica Zimmerman, director of museum education. With special thanks to President and CEO David Brigham and Brooke Davis Anderson, Edna S. Tuttleman Director of the Museum, who were instrumental in giving momentum to this project, as well as PAFA's vision for women artists. We very much enjoyed collaborating with Dr. Carrie Robbins, Curator and Academic Liaison for Art & Artifacts, Special Collections at BMC and hope for future opportunities to share resources and expertise.

Most importantly, I wish to thank Laurel and Mechella, who brought incredible focus to this project despite their many other responsibilities as graduate students. Their disciplined research reveals new insight into the work of these artists, as well as a fresh curatorial approach to the ever-expanding subject of women's experiences. I look forward to watching their continued growth as successful art historians and curators.

Jodi Throckmorton
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts



Lesley Dill (b. 1951)
She carries the silk threads.
from "Interviews with the Contemplative Mind"
2002

Photolithograph on paper, 4 x 3 1/4 in.
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,
Art by Women Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter,
2011.1.314b



Janice Becker (b. 1950)
Woman Disrobing
1980

Charcoal and graphite on paper, 29 x 23 1/8 in.
Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists,
Gift of Bill Scott, 2006.1.91



Introduction

Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms unites the William and Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists at Bryn Mawr College and the Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. This collaboration brings together two institutions, collections, and curatorial teams into a dual-sited exhibition that seeks to highlight each institution's inclusive efforts to collect work by women artists. The exhibition queries the rationale and continued relevance of such categorization, by substituting "feminine forms" for "women artists" as a way of describing a set of formative strategies these artists use to exceed the gendered aesthetic, biological, and cultural boundaries to which their practices have been held historically.

As curators of such an exhibition, we want first to acknowledge that the strategic essentialism of the "woman artist" framework brought much needed visibility to the underrepresentation of artwork by women in institutional collections. But, we wonder if this categorization has also had the inadvertent effect of constraining interpretations of this work within its gendered boundary. Furthermore, we want to ask who gets to count as a "woman artist" and how is this determined? In 2017, the category of "woman" is being actively negotiated to move it beyond its implied biological binary, while at the same time it is being legislated to be confined to that binary.

By using the adjectival descriptor "feminine" as opposed to the categories of "woman" or "female," we posit these artists' forms as deliberate performances or enactments



Emmi Whitehorse (b. 1957)
Over Flow (#1392)
 2005

Oil on paper on canvas, 29 x 40 in.
 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,
 Art by Women Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter,
 2011.1.126

of gender that can be put on, taken off, and endlessly interpreted. In this way, they defy the Platonic concept of form as something that is fixed and idealized by producing forms that are plural and constantly in flux. Doing so makes theoretical room for multiple identities, experiences, and practices.

Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms identifies seven formative strategies as interrelated thematic “constellations” across the two sister sites: (w)riting, musing, (not) at home, (un)earthing, (un)veiling, (r)evolving, and (de)forming. By no means an effort to be comprehensive of all possible “feminine forms,” these deconstructive arrangements identify and explore several strategies used by the artists featured in the exhibition to overcome inherited gender stereotypes. Through their subversive strategies, the works at once acknowledge the legacy of idealization and reimagine forms as mutable, multiple, and inclusive.

Inspired by Bill Scott and Linda Lee Alter, whose practices of collecting range from the fortuitously happenstance to the intentionally cultivated, this exhibition hopes to join their endeavor to remedy previous exclusions. As curators, we were honored to join collectors Bill Scott and Linda Lee Alter in conversations published herein as “Collective Memories” and “Righting the Imbalance.” Each collector reveals the original motivations behind his or her collecting efforts and shares his or her personal connections with the works. At the same time, they earnestly express the collective work that still needs to be done at both institutions if their efforts toward inclusion are to be better realized. They each acknowledge that this process is an ongoing conversation, practice, and endeavor—a sentiment we, the curators, share.

We continue the conversation with our essays, “Spilled Milk” and “Performative Forms.” These essays reflect upon two key challenges at the heart of this exhibition: how to think gender in relation to works of art and what is at stake in gendering or refusing to gender artistic forms. The essays are not meant to offer definitive conclusions or solutions, but rather to offer alternative ways of seeing and experiencing these works.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Carrie Robbins, Curator for Art & Artifacts, Bryn Mawr College Special Collections and Jodi Throckmorton, Curator of Contemporary Art, PAFA for their contributions to this catalogue. They, along with Judith Thomas, Director of Exhibitions, PAFA, offered guidance, support, and inspiration throughout this process. The formative conversations we had with Ruth Fine and the inspiring scholarly and curatorial model of Jo Anna Isaak were instrumental to this project. And finally, the exhibition would not have been possible without Bill and Lee. Their generous gifts, in addition to their rich perspectives, have sparked a conversation that will extend beyond the margins of these pages and the boundaries of this exhibition for many future generations.

Mechella Yezernitskaya
 Laurel McLaughlin



California Landscape 1, State 2 1910 With Mo 1985

Ruth Fine (b. 1941)
California Landscape 1, State 2
1985

Etching, 22 1/2 x 18 1/2 in.
Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists,
Gift of the artist, 2017.13.1

Collective Memories

A Conversation with Bill Scott

February 24, 2017

On an unseasonably warm morning in February, we meet in Bill Scott's home in Philadelphia. A salon-style hang of works by Bill, his friends, and mentors greet us as we settle down to tea to discuss the collection at Bryn Mawr College and beyond.

Laurel McLaughlin: Thank you so much for joining us for this conversation. How and why did you start collecting works by women artists?

Bill Scott: Well the collection was not really a "collection" per se. When I gave the first works to Bryn Mawr College in 1991, I had no idea it would become what it is now.

When I was little, we had a widowed friend who bought a nearby house that had belonged to the photographer, Ida Pritchard. When our friend moved into the house the entirety of Ms. Pritchard's work – photographs, albums, negatives, and photography equipment – was still there. Our friend, distraught by the tragic circumstances of her own life, announced her intent to throw away all of it. My parents and I knew this wasn't the right decision, so we packed it all up and brought everything back to our house where we stored it for years, but never really knew what to do with it.

Almost twenty years later my parents somehow met Carol Campbell, the Curator at Bryn Mawr College, and she told them Ms. Pritchard had been associated in some way with the College's community. Carol organized an exhibition of the photographs and at her request my parents gave everything to the College.

Shortly after my parents died, when sorting through their things, I found a few additional Pritchard photographs. I brought them to Carol and at the same time I offered the College a dozen or so sketchbook drawings and other works on paper I owned by artist friends whose works I admired. My parents did not collect art nor was there much of anything hanging in the house. Through my interest in art, they knew many artists, including all the artists of the works in the first gift. I felt it appropriate that those works be a gift in their memory. You have selected some of those works for *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms: Jan C. Baltzell's Snow in August; Jacqueline Cotter's Empty Nest I; Doris Staffel's Enfolding;* and Mary Nomecos' *Swan*. As so many of the initial works were sketchbook drawings, Carol proposed we call it a "study collection."

Mechella Yezernitskaya: Was it important to you that you were giving works by women to a women's college?

Carol was enthusiastic for the gift and until she pointed it out I had not realized the works were all by women artists. However, with the exception of a drypoint by Berthe Morisot and the suite of eight Mary Cassatt prints, Carol lamented that very few other works already in Bryn Mawr's collection were by women artists.

She immediately suggested that we present an exhibition and, were that to happen, I wanted to organize a larger and more comprehensive exhibition. I began writing and calling artist friends to ask if they would each donate a work on paper. Artists I knew gave and/or sent works, and many of them put me in touch with other artists who also offered works. I was amazed at how large, generous, and kind a community was unfolding in front of me. In hindsight, I'm not so in love per se with the idea of a collection devoted exclusively to women artists. Ideally, I wish it were all artists, but I think it was a good step towards the College's goal to have a much larger and more inclusive collection of works by contemporary artists. I hope someday it will serve as a small but vital part of a much larger whole.

LM: So, you're interested in seeing the collection grow?

I wanted it to grow and was actively trying to enlarge the collection from 1991 into 1995 – after that I stopped because the collections committee was making some changes and put a temporary freeze on acquiring new works. During the four years I worked actively with Carol, we organized three shows: *Works by Women Artists: Selections*

from the William & Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection, Part One, (February 17 – March 5, 1993); *Part Two: Photographs & Works on Paper* (February 16 – March 4, 1994); and *Part Three: Landscape* (October 26 – November 11, 1994). There was some good coverage on the collection in local papers as well as in a few national magazines. By the time I stopped approaching artists to ask if they would donate artwork, I think there were approximately 250 works or so by about 200 artists. Some artists asked me to give the works in my name, and others wanted to give their works themselves. Although I was orchestrating it with Carol, amassing the works and contacting different artists was a collaboration, a group effort involving many people.

MY: I'm interested in how a network of artists is brought together through the collecting process. Since most of these artists are based in the Philadelphia or the Delaware Valley area, were they affiliated with each other in some way?

It was a bittersweet surprise for me to learn how many of the local artists had followed and admired each others' work for years yet had never met. At the opening reception for the first exhibition, all the artists wore nametags and it was touching to watch as one artist approached another to introduce herself. The collection is not entirely comprised of local artists and includes works from a few artists from throughout the United States and from a few artists working in Europe. I felt high as a kite during a few day trips to New York to visit artists in their studios when Nell Blaine, Jane Freilicher, Nancy Hagin, Emily Mason, Louisa Matthiasdottir, Deborah Remington, Leatrice Rose, Nora Speyer, Hedda Sterne, Anne Tabachnick, Jane Wilson, and others each let me sift through their works on paper to pick something to give to the college. I think, because so many artists who I held in high esteem were eagerly participating, I felt even more inspired to continue the project.

LM: Did you ask artists for certain kinds of works? Did you have any formal, thematic, or collection-based criteria for your selections?

I always asked for a work on paper and, to emphasize it as a study collection, mentioned we already had a number of sketchbook drawings. Of course, a few artists who I wish had said, "yes," instead said, "no." Their refusals were usually based either on their unwillingness to give away anything or their fear of having their art "ghettoized" by being in a collection of works exclusively by women. I absolutely wanted a definitive example of each individual artist's work – if available, I asked for a self-portrait. I did not care if any of it fit neatly together. The College offered printmaking classes at that time, and Carol expressed her desire to bolster the College's collection of etchings, lithographs, and woodcuts. That was the reason for selecting two of the works in this exhibition: the color aquatint *Little Weeds I* by Joan Mitchell and *Tempus*, the color etching by Deborah Remington.

In hindsight, I think I was subconsciously trying to obtain works to illustrate the complex connections that sometimes exist between women artists in particular. Included in the collection there are a number of pairings where both mother and daughter are artists (in this exhibition Jan Baltzell, Deirdre Hubbard, and Emily Mason were the daughters of women painters). Other connections would include lesbian couples, a teacher and her influence on female students. It could be as simple as artists who simply showed together in the same gallery, as is the case with Janice Becker and Maria Pia Marrella (who exhibited concurrently at New York's Prince Street Gallery and whose respective works *Woman Disrobing* and *Figure of an Angel* are included in this exhibition). I often veer toward the underdog, so I was interested in the fact that some of the very best artists were the wives of much better known male artists. The painter Nora Speyer (herself married to a painter) gave the drawing included here, *Blue Woman*, by Linda Lindeberg. I'd never heard of Lindeberg, but Nora offered it knowing I loved paintings by Lindeberg's husband, Giorgio Cavallon. The collection continued to grow as artists recommended and introduced other artists to me: it began to feel as if I was organizing specialized group shows within larger group shows. For example there are works by Joan Mitchell's colleagues, Shirley Goldfarb and Shirley Jaffe, as well as a work by Joan's studio assistant, Frédérique Lucien, whose *Diptyque* is in this exhibition. The college already owned Morisot's 1889 drypoint portrait of her daughter, Julie Manet, holding a cat. Now the Morisot can be juxtaposed with Julie Manet's own landscape watercolor and with a pastel drawn by Morisot's niece, Paule Gobillard. Works by contemporary French artists came from Darthea Speyer, who gave works by five of the women artists represented by her Paris gallery.

MY: It seems as if your collection evolved through connections with these various artists and, as a result, acquired different meanings.

The collection is the result of numerous connections and encounters and a myriad of footnotes could accompany everything here. No one could know all those stories. As a result of our several conversations, I've looked at the entire collection on Bryn Mawr's TriArte website. It is both amazing and overwhelming. Twenty-five years ago, when gathering these works, I tried to document as much of it as possible, however by now I realize I have forgotten a lot of the details. Eventually all that passes and the story becomes the pleasure or burden for another generation to see and interpret through their own life experiences.

MY: I am also particularly struck by the role of the collection as a "memorial" to your late parents, William and Uytendale Scott, and their life experiences. It is not only a collection of works, but an evolving entity that represents and preserves your parents' memory through your collecting.

My mother's father and grandfather were commercial lithographers in Philadelphia. When I was little we had three of their lithograph reproductions: a painting of a ship, Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington, and a watercolor of Paris. It was uninspiring and there was no other art hanging. When the painter Harry Saviak died in 1984, the Philadelphia College of Art organized a raffle of artworks to help fund the publication of a catalogue for his memorial exhibition. My mother offered to buy a ticket and she won the gorgeous etching, *California Landscape I* by Ruth Fine that is included in this exhibition. Trudy Kraft (who painted *Night Letter*) and Patricia Mangione (who painted the acrylic on paper, *Mantra*) were neighbors in Haverford who both knew my parents. One of my favorite works is *Swan* by Mary Nomecos. I had known Mary and loved her work. When I was in high school she lent me a large canvas that I hung in our dining room. It became somewhat of a talisman for us in that it prompted us to talk about painting together. My mother was also related to Anne Minich whose graphite drawing *Twelve Rising* is included in this exhibition. However, I never met Anne nor saw much of her work until shortly after my parents died. The collection actually has very little to do with the life experiences of my parents. In hindsight, I realize organizing it was my way to diminish and distract myself from my own grief and sadness.

LM: How would you characterize the diversity in your collection, whether in a material sense in terms of its different media, or in terms of subject matter, or artists' life experiences?

The combined works include several generations of artists (born from approximately 1867 through 1967) using many different media: drawing, watercolor, pastel, and printmaking techniques. The collection is largely the consequence of who I met and when and of who said, "yes," and who said, "no." Almost everything included was a gift. It's a lot like life – I suppose it belongs to the moment when I was gathering it. That was twenty-five years ago and many of the artists are now dead. Had it been organized twenty-five years earlier or were it to be organized twenty-five years hence, it would, of course, be different. When we first met to discuss the show, you both pointed out to me that the works are largely abstract. That never occurred to me, but I never analyzed the collection in the way in which you might. It was the generosity of spirit on the part of the artists that was unique to me then and is what I think of and feel when seeing the collection now. The important thing to me is that you are interpreting the works in a different way than I might. I was gathering the artwork to fend off grief.

MY: It's beautifully poignant, actually, to think about the therapeutic capacity of collecting for you. I wonder if your grief isn't still palpable here. It may have opened you to what we're interpreting as some of the works' vulnerability. When some of the artists in this collection decide to participate in the established genre of the nude, for example,



Deborah Remington (1930–2010)
Tempus
1990

Color etching on wove paper, 21 5/8 x 14 3/4 in.
Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists,
Gift of the Artist, 2006.1.274

they do so aware of the female subjects' typically disavowed agency. They observe and reflect upon this vulnerability. In *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms* we are trying to show how these artists respond to and resist gendered stereotypes and interpretations that typically cast them in vulnerable positions.

LM: And this resistance, the breaking of boundaries, comes from a political place within feminism for some artists, while other artists refuse this alignment and instead recognize it as a formal strategy.

I think the success of any artwork is dependent on numerous things working in unison simultaneously. For me the painting process is largely non-verbal, but I suspect some of the artists represented in the Alter collection may not feel that way. As to inventing something new, if that is even possible, I don't think one knows they have invented something new until much later, after it is there. For both of you individually, I would presume there are a lot of reasons – both conscious and subconscious – for why you chose *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms* as the theme for your exhibition. I'm most drawn to the subconscious reasons. I love that you are juxtaposing these works with others from the Linda Lee Alter Collection and I'm curious to see the exhibitions. However, as we are talking the shows are still in the future, existing as an idea but not yet a reality. I can imagine all sorts of things, but whenever visual images are involved I have learned to wait until I actually see it before determining how I feel.

MY: The Scott and Alter Collections haven't previously been examined together before *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms*, but both represent historically important efforts to collect art by women. Were you inspired by other collections and exhibitions of art by women artists? Would you be surprised if this exhibition inspires future collecting efforts?

When I was a high-school student in Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts presented an exhibition called, *The Pennsylvania Academy and Its Women: 1850 to 1920*, (May 3 – June 16, 1973) and the following spring there was a city-wide festival, *Philadelphia Focuses on Women in the Arts*, and numerous commercial galleries presented solo and group exhibitions with works by women artists. Anchoring this was a large exhibition featuring eighty-one artists called, *Woman's Work: American Art 1974*, at the Museum of the Philadelphia Civic Center. Three years later the Brooklyn Museum organized *Women Artists: 1550-1950*. Unlike the two Philadelphia exhibitions, the latter juxtaposed American and European artists. The important thing for me personally was that the exhibitions were filled with paintings and much of it was unfamiliar. It was inspiring to me because I wanted to paint. Yet I felt like an idiot as it was the time when critics and curators repeatedly declared painting to be dead. In hindsight, those exhibitions probably filled me

with a subconscious optimism as so many of the women artists had successfully worked against numerous odds and struggled to be taken seriously as artists. If they could do it maybe I could too.

I suppose seeing those exhibitions may have served as one prompt that later propelled me to do this. Thirteen of the artists represented in *Woman's Work: American Art 1974* also have work in the Scott Collection. In presenting both collections, I think it's wonderful that Linda Lee Alter is also a painter who has collected works by so many contemporary women artists. One difference between the collections is all the Scott Collection artworks were offered as gifts specifically for Bryn Mawr, whereas, I imagine, Ms. Alter was able to purchase what she wanted. As I understand, she was building a true collection and had not selected a host institution until the collection was complete. It's ideal to see them side by side as everything I collected was made before or by 1995 and three-quarters of the works you have selected for the Alter Collection exhibition were made after that date.

LM: Looking back, how do you see this collection now and how do you see it moving forward in 2017?

I'm happy about it, I feel glad. Were I doing it now, twenty-five years later, I might sometimes push for an alternate piece. Yet there are some works that I can't believe the artists actually gave for the collection. There are a handful of works that had deep meaning to me that I had hanging in my own place and I now wish I hadn't let them go. I dream about them sometimes and miss the pleasure of seeing them everyday. Those works have a life at Bryn Mawr. Hopefully they will have a recurring life, as the two of you are now selecting and juxtaposing the works together in new ways for your exhibition.



Judy Chicago (b. 1939)
Untitled (Test Plate) from The Dinner Party
1976

China paint on porcelain, 24 x 24 x 10 in.
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Art by Women
Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter, 2011.1.10

Righting the Imbalance

*A Conversation with
Linda Lee Alter*

March 28, 2017

On a rainy afternoon in late March, we meet Linda Lee Alter in her home overlooking Rittenhouse Square. We are surrounded by new members of her personal collection as we remember those that came before.

Laurel McLaughlin: How and why did you start to collect “works by women artists?”

Linda Lee Alter: In the early 1980s, when thanks to my family I gained greater financial flexibility, I began to collect art by going around to Philadelphia and New York galleries and buying works that resonated with me. After a while, I realized that I’d only collected art by men! And this was because there was very little art by women being shown. Especially in those days, art by women was rarely visible in galleries or museums.

I felt disappointed in myself and angry, feeling that, as an artist, I should have been more aware. As a woman artist I’d lived it.

That’s when I made up my mind to collect only art by women as a discipline, because I wanted to help right the imbalance. By building a collection of art by women to give to a museum, I felt that I could do my part, and help outstanding women artists and their artwork be recognized.

Mechella Yezernitskaya: What criteria motivated your collection?

I decided that the collection couldn't just be art by women. It had to be art that I felt was outstanding and accomplished in its own way. Equally important, the artist had to be expressing her own personal unique vision through her art. I wanted each work to have integrity and passion and to reach out and communicate with the viewer. I didn't want to focus on one style or medium, because I wanted to show the breadth of what women artists can do.

I particularly like self-portraits of the artists themselves. Seeing who made the art helps the viewer relate more intimately with the artwork. It helps bring all the artwork to life for the viewer – it makes it real, not just a picture on a white wall.

From the beginning I wanted the collection to be inclusive. But being from a white, middle class, Jewish background, my limited knowledge of other communities hampered my efforts to do so.

Starting the Leeway Foundation was an education. Especially after my daughter became president and her broader vision led the staff and board to work with consultants and local institutions to broaden our understanding of diversity, so we could better reach out to underserved women and trans artists. Today, Leeway supports women and trans artists and cultural producers working for social change. Leeway's broader focus helped me to be more aware and to collect more inclusively.

LM: We're interested in rethinking the concept of the "feminine" in similarly expansive ways in *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms*. We hope this exhibition will help visitors imagine femininity beyond the signifier of a given body, and instead as a performative strategy that resists such boundaries.

MY: But this wouldn't have been possible without exhibitions and collections of art by women, such as yours, which acknowledge the agency of these artists. Were there any formative exhibitions, collections, or museums that inspired your collecting practices?

A few years before I started my collection, I made a special trip to New York to see *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago when it was first shown in 1979 at The Brooklyn Museum. I was among the thousands of women and some men who slowly and reverently walked through the exhibition. I hadn't heard of many of the exceptional women who were being recognized in this bold, exuberant, and beautifully transgressive way – an installation by Judy Chicago in collaboration with many women under her direction.

To see women and their accomplishments exalted in this way was one of the most moving experiences of my life. When I became able to afford collecting art, and decided to collect art

by women – *The Dinner Party* inspired me, and helped me be brave enough to make it my mission to collect outstanding art by women. To do my small part to ensure that women's art would be seen more often and recognized and appreciated more fully. Like the creation of *The Dinner Party*, I knew it would take me many years until my dream of a collection, significant enough that a museum would want to acquire it, would be realized.

A short time after I began collecting, I learned about a woman collector of art by women, Louise Noun. She wrote about the suffragettes and was inspired by their story to start collecting art by women. Seeing a catalogue of some of the art she'd collected helped me to feel that I could accomplish what I'd set out to do. I just had to keep at it.

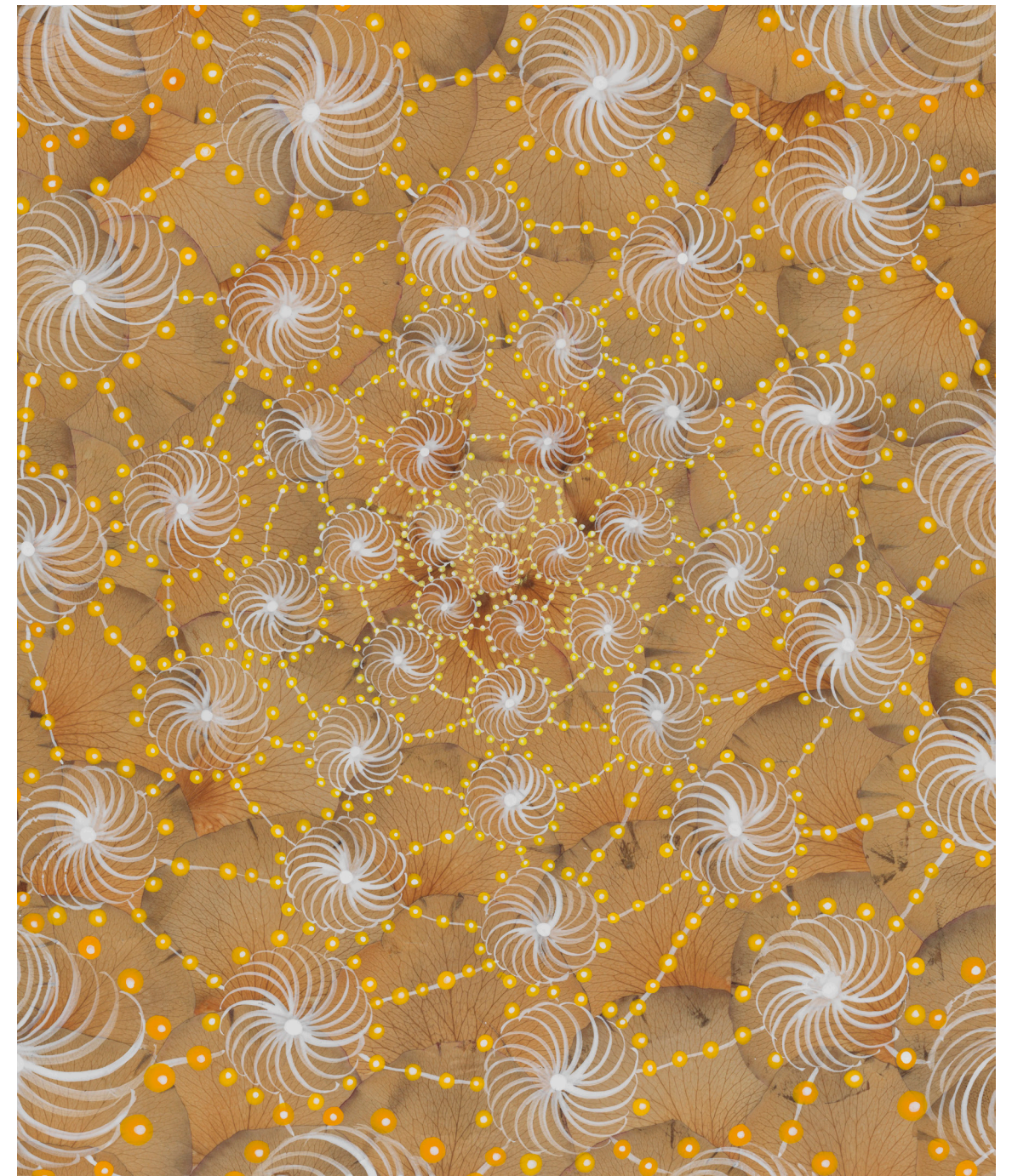
LM: And then your dream came true: a museum did acquire your collection. How did this happen?

My intention, my mission, always was to give the collection as a whole to an art museum that was enthusiastic about building their collection of art by women and fully integrating the artwork into the work of the museum and the school. After twenty-five years, I felt the collection was large enough and significant enough to offer it to museums.

Two dear people, close advisors, and I worked together for three years to find a good home for the collection. We wanted the collection to be well cared for, welcomed enthusiastically, and utilized fully. Several art advisors suggested that we consider whether we wanted to give the art to an institution where my collection would add to an already substantial collection of art by women (like the Smithsonian), or did we want to give the collection to an institution where it would be "transformational." We wanted to make a real difference.

The people at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) made it clear from the beginning that the collection would be important in helping them fulfill their strategic plan of greater diversity and inclusion in all aspects of PAFA. They were enthusiastic and specific about how they saw the collection furthering their mission and fulfilling mine. I wanted to help women's artwork make a real difference, to be respected and always on view. For these reasons I gave the collection to PAFA.

MY: I really admire your shared commitment to diversity and inclusion. There's so much to learn through the various experiences of people. People identify in different ways at different points in their lives. And I think we're constantly dealing with emerging vocabularies to help articulate those new formations. I hope our exhibition helps viewers to imagine new meanings for the "feminine" that are diverse and inclusive.



Barbara Takenaga (b. 1949)
Yellow Roses #2
2005

Acrylic on dried rose petals on wood panel, 12 x 10 in.
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Art by Women
Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter, 2011.1.148

Each of us, like a gem, has many facets. That's the way I feel about the work of each of the women artists. They capture facets of themselves – facets of us. I feel connected with all of them. We are represented in all art – everyone – all genders and all races and all religions. We can feel the power of the art of every century and every country. The art speaks to us.

LM: You've described the way you collected works that could reach out and communicate to the viewer, and this seems like a form of connection, of recognition. That's something that we're interested in for this exhibition. An opportunity to recognize sameness instead of only difference, not literal or formal sameness but theoretical connectivity, by forging analogies to create a sort of family or at least kinship. Was that what you were after?

I really feel a connection with the Buddhist philosophy of the oneness of us all. I want to represent that through the collection – that we have more similarities than we have differences. We're all human beings. We all have the same basic needs and desires. Showing that commonality through the artwork is important to me.

MY: And this theoretical model of the family is a beautiful way to think about a collection; doing so turns the works into agents, instead of inanimate objects. The collection was living in your home, part of your life, like a family.

In my home, these works of art emitted many strong voices, many emotions. My walls were full of artwork. Sculptures were on side tables and stands and on the floor. It was not always peaceful. I was glad to have a variety of voices – I wanted that. They all were part of a family. They had different voices but spoke to one another.

MY: This sounds like a neighborhood protest. Did you ever imagine your collecting practice as a form of activism?

My purpose in collecting has always been about being inclusive and diverse – and wanting different styles, points of view, and media represented in the art by women I collected. My focus was to help (in my own small way) right the unequal representation of art by women in museums. Later, I began to focus more on collecting even-less-visible art by women of color. More recently, I've widened my focus to include more art by artists across the gender spectrum (except for cis men, who are already well-represented).

And the activism is the keeping at it – in collecting and in my own artwork. I've always been more the tortoise than the hare.

As to how I see the art in my collection differently today – I still respond to each of the individual voices that speak through the art I began collecting more than thirty years ago. And as time goes on, I'm happy to see more varied members

of the human family being represented in other collections as well as my own. It gives me hope for the future.

LM: I love that you called your collecting a "discipline" earlier – that it's continual. It isn't just a singular gesture. It's activism that you lived with for twenty-five years.

Yes. Making a commitment in my own small way. And keeping at it. We all do it in our own ways. All our individual commitments are equally important in working to help others and to change things for the better. Especially now.

MY: Yes, certainly. It makes me think of that feminist slogan – "the personal is political." Your collection, I think, is an example of how the personal is political without it being a roaring lion, but something that is embodied, just like so many of the works are. It's a wonderful model to follow – for collecting and displaying art – a form of activism I hope our exhibition takes as well.

LM: I can't help but recall the way the inaugural exhibition of your collection at PAFA, *The Female Gaze* (2012-13), did this too. It countered the power and authority of the male gaze by activating the possibility of a female gaze, as its own form of active seeing even as its subject is also aware of being seen. Many of the works in the collection are portraits, which allow us to see the eyes of the artists as they are seeing the world. This visual agency inspired the concept of our exhibition to address other experiences beyond that of sight. How do these artists invite the viewer to identify with a bodily or intellectual experience that may or may not be understood as historically gendered in a particular way?

Speaking about the difference between the male and the female gaze, the male gaze often objectifies women, although less in recent years. When women make images of themselves or of other women, they are informed by their internal sense of themselves and their life experiences. The real woman comes through more diverse ways of seeing oneself. It's a fuller representation. That's what I want: I want people to see themselves and to see others different from themselves; how *women* present themselves – so it's real, not some story.

LM: This question of how women present themselves and their experiences is fascinating. Do they do so through acts of resistance against the status quo? Do they seek out opportunities to go beyond prescribed boundaries, to imagine new possibilities for representation? Instead of validating the singularity and unity of cerebral forms validated by patriarchal structures, do these artists activate a "feminine" strategy of multiplicity, fracture, and embodiment? Do they inherit the stereotypes to which their work has been subjected in order to subvert them? We hope the themes we've used in our exhibition, such as *(not) at home*, *(un)earthing*, *(w)riting*, and *(un)veiling*, to

name a few, help us recognize artistic strategies of the "feminine." How have these works helped you understand the concept of the feminine? And also, how do you see these works as a series of artistic strategies that subvert stereotypes about the female?

I take issue with your word "subvert." I think these women know themselves and speak for themselves, rather than against the male gaze.

LM: It's an interesting point, and I wonder if both things can be true. Does knowing oneself as a woman-identifying subject mean navigating and overcoming one's relation to the male gaze?

I like "overcoming" better than subverting. My personal response to each artist's work is to receive their images as a statement of who they are, and what is of consequence in their lives. I see the artists as asserting themselves through their art – as whole persons – speaking their truths to the world.

For instance, in Edna Andrade's *Crevice* she uses short strokes in small areas. She creates a monolithic rock, conveying age and strength that have survived many years and many storms. The rock is beautiful in all its "imperfections." The centered, dark crevice commands attention. The design is partially divided, but retains its wholeness. The division in this painting seems to allude to the female form – the dark channel suggests the vagina. I've always thought that the painting represents Edna in her old age.

Similarly with Vija Celmins' *Night Sky*, the image conveys the vastness of space, a birthplace to all that is – and will be – the universe. The deep darkness of the womb. It draws the viewer in.

Neysa Grassi's *(Untitled) Milk* painting, with its subtly textured, marked, built-up surface, seems alive. The central oval suggests an ovum. The milky surface calls to mind a mother's milk and all our early beginnings.

MY: What do you think of our pairing selections from your collection with others from the Scott Collection at Bryn Mawr?

Both collections were created by artist-collectors.

Each collection was built with a conscious focus on collecting art by women.

Each covers a similar period in time.

The collectors both decided to focus on art by women when women's art was mostly ignored and considered less worthy of collecting.

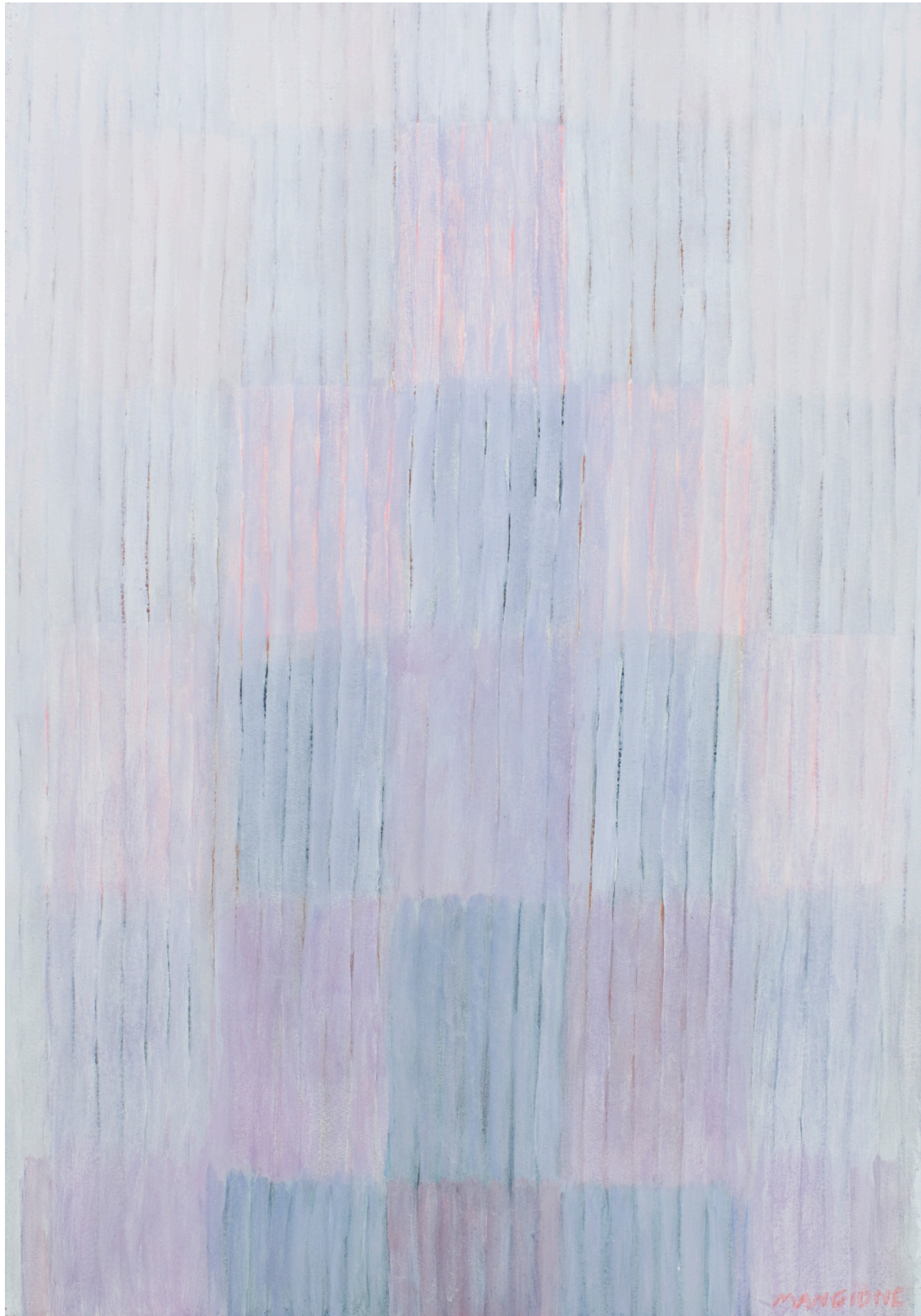
Both collections reflect the artistic sensibilities of their collectors.

There is a unified personal vision evident in the work the collectors each collect.

In both collections: women, women's forms, women's expressions, women's artistic talents are recognized and celebrated.

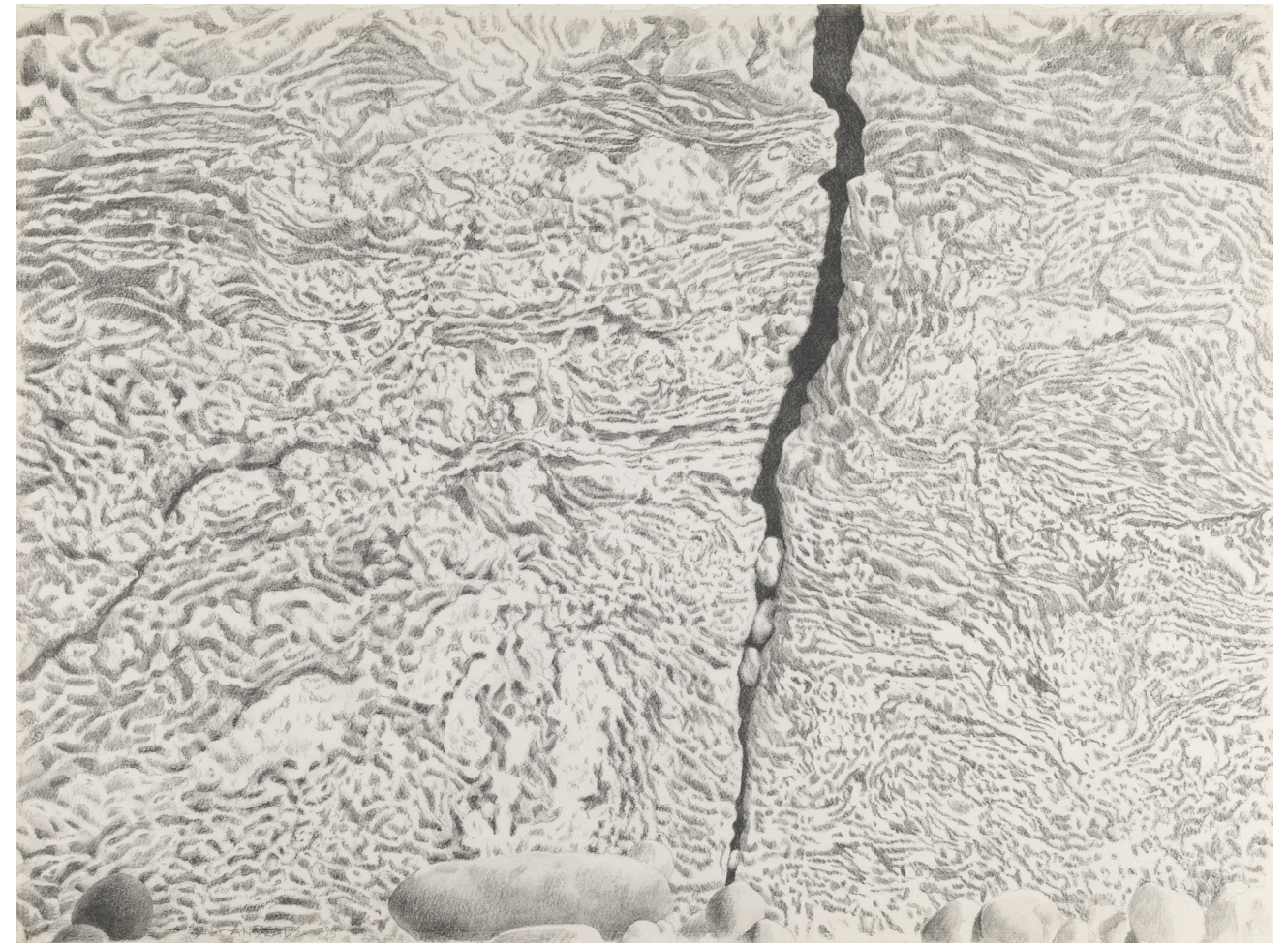
In conclusion, there is an abundance of outstanding art by women in the world. The Scott Collection, and my collection are very small samplings. By collecting art by women, I think the collectors are saying:

See the art! See the artists! See yourselves! And look beyond – there's much more outstanding art by women out there.



Patricia Mangione (1915–2002)
Mantra
1988

Acrylic on paper, 20 x 14 1/8 in.
Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists,
Gift of Bill Scott, 2006.1.86



Edna Andrade (1917–2008)
Crevice
1995

Graphite and acrylic on paper, 29 1/4 x 36 3/4 in.
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Art by Women
Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter, 2013.41.1

"She
writes
in
white
ink."

Spilled Milk

Mechella Yezernitskaya

*There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk.
She writes in white ink.*

Hélène Cixous¹

In her 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," French literary theorist Hélène Cixous, a key figure of second-wave feminism, sets out to find a mode of writing that might accommodate experiences, thoughts, desires, and instincts for which a normative, that is to say, patriarchal and masculinist, form of writing could not give voice. This "seminal," I am tempted to say "feminal," essay is thus an attempt to define and enact what Cixous describes as *l'écriture féminine*. And yet, its effort to establish "feminine writing" quickly runs into the obstacle of its own essentialism. Cixous tells us, "It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist."² To posit such a thing as "feminine writing" – and by extension "feminine form" – is to experience its resistance to this very theorization as too confined an enclosure or a codification. It is to experience excesses of meaning unwillingly constrained and bound, but which nonetheless continue to

exceed, and that is to exist. This exhibition, inspired by Cixous, proposes to locate “feminine forms” in the collections of two sister sites, the William and Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists at Bryn Mawr College and the Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. They are those which always already exceed this boundary.

When Cixous writes of “that good mother’s milk” as a “white ink” with which *l’écriture féminine* is written, she attempts to materialize such a thing as a “feminine form.” At stake for her are the otherwise unacknowledged written and spoken experiences of bodies masquerading in language that is not their own. And yet, right away she finds herself linking these experiences to femininity, these “herstories” to an essentializing and evocative substance – “mother’s milk.” While the critique might be valid, indeed it is recognized by Cixous herself, I think she chooses this material metaphor of thick, milky white ink for its destabilizing potential. If the text of history is materialized on the white canvas, white page, or across the white portion of a computer screen, milky white ink is rendered invisible and yet viscous, odorous, and nourishing. Its mutable materiality exceeds the formal constraints of patriarchal language, destabilizing its authority.

It is in this spirit of destabilization, we look for the milky potential of “feminine forms” to transcend the essentialist boundaries of this enclosure. In Neysa Grassi’s 2000 oil painting *Untitled (Milk)*, a dark orb or the letter “O” seems to be encrusted by a swirling crackle of thin white surface. She shows us the zero capacity of language to capture the lived experience of holding an infant at the breast. As such, the curdling white liquid helps us visualize the potency for reclaiming the feminine without reducing it to stereotypes. We join Cixous in locating other such strategies to reclaim the feminine which we describe as *w(ri)ting* but also strategies of *mus(ing)*, *(not) at home*, *(un)earthing*, *(un)veiling*, *(r)evolving*, and *(de)forming*. *Untitled (Milk)* deploys several of these strategies as its permeable, porous surface writes, muses, defamiliarizes, and unearths the dominant culture’s stereotypical and gendered expectations for art by women. Cixous’s “white ink” and Grassi’s “milk” may help us to make room for, even if not to contain, feminine material practices.

Through *w(ri)ting*, the artists represented in *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms* wrest language from the “name of the father,” a concept to describe the paternal function of language developed by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Artists such as Lydia Hunn and Trudy Kraft disrupt the rules and regulations of language through repetitions of form that obscure its legibility and rationality. Begun in 1970, Hunn’s *Invisible Drawing/Letter W with Leaves #3* (2006.1.185, Bryn Mawr College) repeats a stencil of the letter “W” from an alphabet book, turning it into pattern, over which she traces the outlines of leaves. She writes, “The first image is a print, made to look like a pencil drawing and the second image is an ink drawing that could appear to be a print.”³ This *trompe l’oeil* effect of confusing media for one another simultaneously resists forming a complete

word or sentence, revealing the illusory nature of language. Kraft’s 1992 *Night Letter* (2006.1.191, Bryn Mawr College) evokes the transgressive, illicit, and often nocturnal practice of graffiti. Composed in sumi ink, a material widely used in East Asian brush painting and calligraphy, the polychromatic scrawls and swirls suggest cryptic and clandestine messages that refuse to be deciphered. Like Hunn’s repetition of the letter “W,” Kraft’s illegible scribbles refuse the rational language of the colonial father and instead embrace repetition’s polysemous and polymorphic possibilities as feminine form.

While these artists *w(ri)te* as a form of resistance, Diane Pieri and Lesley Dill reclaim an alternative *w(ri)te* of passage from the subject’s entry into language to one experienced between the lines of language. In Pieri’s 1992 *Tears of Knowing* (2006.1.138, Bryn Mawr College), a strip of blue-dyed silk decorated with black and white teardrops joins two sheets of papyrus, a fragile paper used in antiquity as a writing surface, to form a flattened book-like structure. Pieri organizes pink and gold glyphic characters into columns to symbolize what she calls a “field of femaleness.”⁴ Our entry into this field is represented by two pairs of evanescent “hennaed hands of initiation,” which oscillate between surface and depth. Pieri’s ancient writing materials, symbols of initiation, and “tears of living” materialize an anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial feminine text and their symbolic orders of knowledge. Dill’s 2002 public art project *Interviews with the Contemplative Mind* imagines a language system that recruits photographic imagery to communicate the affective experiences of its subjects.⁵ Five gray-scaled photolithographs of individual subjects overlay image with text to explore interior and often unvoiced experiences. The texts *w(ri)te* the power of silence, the weight of silk, the openness to vulnerability, the desire for enlightenment, and the persistence of faith through ritual.⁶ As Dill has it, “thought, prayer, mantra are all the language of the inner murmur,” or the very mode of language Cixous sets out to accommodate with *l’écriture féminine*.⁷

Dill’s conjuring of “thought, prayer, mantra” helps us recognize another feminine artistic strategy in the act of *mus(ing)*. By shifting the masculinist fantasy of the objectified “muse” to the active gerund “musing,” we hope to expand the possibilities for artistic inspiration to include feminine forms. Patricia Mangione recruits the viewer in active and purposeful musing in her 1988 *Mantra*. In Sanskrit, a “mantra” is a word, sound, or slogan that is repeated in meditation or prayer. Mangione’s repetitive layering of milky vertical lines against an all-over pattern of lilac, pink, and blue rectangles demonstrates the way that the act of painting can also serve as a meditative “mantra.” Moreover, in the act of sustained looking, six blue rectangles might become a pyramid, reinforcing the transformative power that cultivating a mantra can have. Barbara Takenaga’s 2005 *Yellow Roses #2* takes its inspiration from both the celestial and terrestrial realms by painting an infinite matrix of yellow dots and white swirls directly onto the delicate surfaces of adhered yellow rose petals. Like each stripe in *Mantra*, each of the circular shapes in Takenaga’s dazzling abstract totality is achieved



Neysa Grassi (b. 1951)
Untitled (Milk)
2000

Oil on linen, 24 1/4 x 22 in.
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Art by Women
Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter, 2011.1.76

through a painstakingly deliberate repetition of a set form. While Mangione and Takenaga are methodical in their approaches, Mary Nomecos impulsively tears one of nature's most majestic muses from the pages of a 1985 issue of *Art in America* to reclaim its musing possibility. In her 1991 collage painting *Swan*, Nomecos submerges a reproduction of John James Audubon's (1785-1851) ornithological rendering of the trumpeter swan under strokes of pink, cobalt, and black paint. Nomecos is reacting to Audubon's masculinist authority over his subject as an artistic prerogative that gets taken up over and over again by artists from Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) to Jackson Pollock (1912-1956); indeed, this is the art historical argument expressed in the magazine article for which Audubon's swan is reproduced.⁸ By ripping the printed page from the magazine and canceling the illustration under her own energetic abstraction, Nomecos protects the muse, in this case, the swan, from the objectifying gaze of art and science.

Just as the previous artists avoid being cast in the role of the muse, the following artists in *(not) at home* refuse to be confined within the domestic sphere. Kara Walker and Sihm Ja Whiteley inscribe the domestic with discomfiting meaning as they metamorphize the ordinary into the uncanny, or *unheimlich* in the language of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, which literally translates to "un-home-like." Walker's *Canisters* from 1997 transform seemingly ordinary glass vessels, perhaps intended to contain milk or sugar, among other pantry items, into a miniature, carnivalesque slave narrative of violated and violating figures. While the canisters are clear, the etched scenes forbid the viewer to see through the glass without recognizing the enslavement of African Americans and the continuing labor inequities that deliver these commonplace contents to the home. Refusing to fill the canisters, Walker does not allow them to become props of the bourgeois housewife we might imagine to be at home, for example, in Whiteley's 1974 black-and-white linoleum print *Balcony*. The coarse lines, flattened planes, skewed and vertiginous perspective of this empty scene threatens to push one off of the ledge of the balcony. The precarious series of screens, shutters, and balustrades incites unease and a desire to escape the confines of the home.

Western tradition has aligned the realms of the domestic and of nature with the female, and, by extension, with attributes such as purity, bounty, and fertility, best exemplified in the personification of "mother nature." And, despite such fecund fantasies, Freud characterizes female sexuality as an abyss or a "dark continent," alluding to the colonial desire to explore and conquer the female body and psyche much like an untrammelled expanse of virginal land.⁹ Through *(un)earthing*, artists such as Edna Andrade, however, confront these erotic fantasies of domination with depictions of nature that conspicuously absent the nude female body. In its monochromatic exploration of the patterns of gray boulders, rocks, and pebbles, *Crevice* from 1995 poses a tension between the graphite striations of the swirling rock surface and the deep fracture rendered in gray paint. Freud's legacy might lead us to interpret the work's central

void according to the artist's gender and sexual anatomy, but Andrade resists fulfilling such patriarchal fantasies of penetration and exploration by filling it with four strategically-placed pebbles. Like Andrade's *Crevice*, and beyond its evocation of Cixous's white ink, Grassi's *Untitled (Milk)* might be read as the contour lines of a topographic map. Its coagulating accretions of painted impasto yield a tactile impulse to navigate the passages, turns, circles, and loops with our fingers. Such searching will not deliver us to a single or logical destination the way mastering maps insist that they ought to do.

Like *Untitled (Milk)*, the works in this exhibition can be activated across several of the organizing constellations we have proposed without being fully inscribed or defined by their boundaries. They spill over. We can recall how Grassi's *Untitled (Milk)* became differently meaningful as we orbited from constellation to constellation—from *(w)riting* to *(un)earthing*. We can imagine how "milk's" form shifts from ink or tears to a swan's plumage or the slippery passages of a text and a map. It is in this expansive and unruly way that these works become and, in the words of Cixous, "burst with [feminine] forms."¹⁰

¹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (Summer, 1976): 875-893, at 881.

² *Ibid.*, 883.

³ Lydia Hunn, description of object, 2006.1.185 object file, the William and Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists, Art & Artifacts, Special Collections, Bryn Mawr College.

⁴ Pieri produces explanatory diagrams for viewers to decode these symbols. Diane Pieri, diagram of "Meditation on my Daughter's Goodness," 2006.1.138 object file, the William and Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists, Art & Artifacts, Special Collections, Bryn Mawr College.

⁵ *Interviews with the Contemplative Mind* is a collaboration with the University of Colorado, the Naropa Institute, and the choral group Ars Nova. It involved collecting accounts of experiences and performing them through music.

⁶ Dill's text reads: "sense of silence / sense of space / Radiance"; "She carries the silk threads."; "I am innocent / I am pierced / I am unsure"; "I think that intensity of reading altered my life somehow."; "Faith a Long Line of Silence. It is a ritual of transparency." 2011.1.314a-e, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

⁷ Lesley Dill, *Lesley Dill: A Ten Year Survey* (SUNY New Paltz: Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, 2002), 53.

⁸ See John McEwen, "Audubon and His Legacy," *Art in America* (September 1985): 98-109.

⁹ Freud appropriates the colonial explorer Henry Morton Stanley's (1841-1904) same phrase to refer to Africa. Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis: Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. Nancy Proctor-Gregg (New York: Norton, 1950), 61.

¹⁰ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 876.



Mary Nomecos (b. 1943)
Swan
1991

Oil, graphite, pastel, and collage on paper, 11 x 17 1/2 in.
Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists, Gift of Bill Scott, 2006.1.146

Gender is
what is put on,
invariably under
constraint, daily
and incessantly,
with anxiety and
pleasure...

Performative Forms

Laurel McLaughlin

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.

Judith Butler¹

As feminist philosopher Judith Butler writes, "Gender is not passively scripted on the body;" and yet, the idealizations of female bodies within the art historical canon seem to insist that they are. The naked body used to represent Venus, the Roman goddess of love, asserts expectations for female bodily appearance since at least the 1st century BCE, if not longer. Its persuasive effect is disseminated upon us as we walk through the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts' (PAFA's) Historic Cast Hall and see a copy of perhaps the best-known Hellenistic marble sculpture of this subject, the *Venus de' Medici*. Reproductions of this figure continue to circulate around the globe, promoting this appearance of a female body that, in PAFA's case, is reduced to a sexualized torso.

Gender was not "passively scripted on [this sculpture's] body" either. The sculptor deployed particular forms, any of which could have been formed differently, and the



Alison Saar (b. 1956)
Nude Woman with Flowing Red
 2000

Color woodcut on paper, 12 x 10 in.
 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Art by Women
 Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter, 2011.1.260a

sculpture's audience has continued to interpret these forms in normatively gendered terms. Artists often embrace opportunities to articulate new possibilities for "feminine forms" in their artwork. Indeed, upon entering Bryn Mawr College's Class of 1912 Rare Book Room in Canaday Library, we are reminded that John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) achieved just this in his portrait of the second President of Bryn Mawr College. *Miss M. Carey Thomas*, 1899 (X.205), a commanding figure in black academic regalia, is a dramatic departure from Sargent's quintessential soft and bright portraits of society women. Such attire in the early twentieth century would have been gendered as masculine. But Thomas boldly dons the robes nevertheless, projecting her mission for the College to educate women in an era that focused on male scholarship. Sargent and Thomas understood how to perform gender in new ways, expanding their possibilities beyond societal constraints.²

The artists gathered together in *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms* understand this as well. As curators, we want to insist that there is not necessarily a natural correlation between the artists' gender identities or the artwork's inclusion in a "women's art" collection and what I claim in this essay as its potential performance of gender. However important such strategic essentialism may once have been for developing more inclusive collections, my reluctance to adhere to institutional "women's art" categories follows from Butler who warns about the ways that such classifications "script" gender. As Butler expresses, such typecasting within gendered stereotypes constrains more multivalent possibilities for interpreting these works.

My goal is to imagine possibilities for interpretation that exceed the boundaries of "women's art," thereby joining a mighty chorus of other curators and scholars who have resisted the effects of such strategic essentialism for decades. I aim to continue their efforts in relation to the Scott and Alter Collections in particular, employing Butler's revolutionary theory to rethink gender. This focus enables me to consider the artistic production of form as a performative gesture through which gender and the gendered experiences of artists may be expressed.

In order to continue the work of rethinking gender, I turn to the expanded terms first formulated in Butler's essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." Written in 1988 during what is now known as "third-wave feminism," Butler claimed that gender is active and continuously performed rather than being a static, natural condition. More specifically, she asserted that gender is performed through a "stylized repetition of acts," layered upon one another and interrelating with the structures of social life.³ As I suggested for both Sargent and the sculptor of *Venus de' Medici*, the artistic act of forming is a performance through which gender seems to take shape. Taken further, might some artists understand their artistic acts as performances of gender, used to articulate new forms and vocabularies as expressions of gendered experiences? That is to say that it does not matter that Sargent was male because gender

potential is not based on biology, but on a willingness (and certain daring) to bend social constraints in order to achieve new possibilities. To this end, I resuscitate "forms" as having the performative potential of Butler's "stylized acts." I also deploy the adjective "feminine," distinguishing it from the categorical noun "female" in an effort to imagine its active capacity to modify, rather than its authoritative naming or "inscription" in relation to biology.

Pointedly, Butler's concept of performance, what I am conceiving of as "feminine forms," deviates from Plato's *Theory of Forms*, which defines them according to their ideal Forms, or "essences." The patriarchal agenda that became embedded within Western canons of philosophy and art has coopted this thinking and expressed it in terms of gender. This has constrained interpretations of artwork, including those exhibited in *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms*. But what if, as Butler suggests, an "ideal" was excluded from the ideological production of a form? What if a form existed within a spectrum that acknowledged its past constructions but simultaneously embraced the ongoing subjective experiences or performances that constantly create it?

Although interpretively beholden to their immediate historical milieus, the works in *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms* continue to accrue meanings in the present – what Butler understands as the phenomenologically performative. Indeed, each viewer brings her own experiences of self and gender to the work, producing ever-expanding possibilities for its meaning. But to do this, each viewer must not feel that the work's meaning has already been tamed, for example by its categorization as a work by a "woman artist" and its subsequent vulnerability to stereotyping. The artists in this exhibition produce forms that exceed this boundary. Our curatorial effort is to articulate some of the strategies these artists have used to address and overcome this. I will use the remainder of this essay to suggest the ways that three of these strategies yield new "constellations" of meaning by way of: *(un)veiling*, *(r)evolving*, and *(de)forming*.

Artists use *(un)veiling* as subject matter in ways that resonate with Butler's understanding of gender performance. Acts of dressing or undressing reveal the metamorphic role of clothing in daily performances of gender. For instance, Janice Becker's *Woman Disrobing*, 1980 from Bryn Mawr and Liza Lou's [*Yellow Panties with tiny light blue polka dots*], 1994 (2011.1.42) from PAFA, show moments of both veiling and unveiling, in which the subject or the representative costume holds a place of power. Becker demonstrates such power in her figure's control over the gesture of *(un)veiling*, while Lou's bedazzled garment alludes to this same power as something that has been removed or perhaps not yet selected. Through the rendering of ambiguous or transitional acts of putting on and taking off, we comprehend the cogent role of such acts to construct gendered identities alongside notions of morality.

Nancy Grossman's *Two Heads – Front and Back*, 1968 from PAFA presents two views of a head encased so entirely in



leather, grommets, and zippers that it presumably cannot see, speak, or taste. Here, Grossman veils the head in a bondage hood associated with sado-masochism practices to ward off her childhood traumas. In this way, she (*un*)veils a certain vulnerability by dressing up in order to cover up. Turning the inside outwards through clothing, Grossman reveals the complex oscillation between interiority and exteriority within the performance of gender.

Neila Kun's print *Inside Out*, 1993, also improvises the connections between gender and cloth, interior and exterior, or as she puts it, "inside" and "out." Her work seems to appropriate a family snapshot of two young girls circumscribed in a re-cropped frame that isolates its subject matter to the vibrantly patterned fabric of their clothing rather than their faces. And yet, buried within the polka-dots, Kun overlays additional photographic material. Giving the illusion of being twice dressed, the layers paradoxically reveal an interior featuring enigmatic images of a bone, amoebic shapes, and a sliver of sky. These poetic evocations of an otherwise unseen interior render the image, and by extension, the young girls, unmoored from their culturally-understood and gendered symbolism. In turn, this (*un*)veils the work's potential to perform meaning through the slippery languages of color and shape. By way of veiling and unveiling, these artists subvert societal expectations, which control modes of feminine dress and undress, to reveal alternative possibilities for subjective performances of gender.

Due to the fact that getting dressed is a performance that we repeat every day, Butler embeds a temporal dimension in her conception of gender performance, namely that of continuity over time and repetition, but without implications of progression. This leads us to the next constellation, (*r*)evolving, in which a gender identity never reaches a point of stability, but instead "revolves" through repeated performances, turning and returning, "tenuously constituted in time," as Butler says.⁴ For this theoretical construction, Butler cites the foundational feminist scholarship of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, and her famous statement that "one is not born, but becomes a woman" – like a series of rehearsals that never end.⁵ The works in the constellation (*r*)evolving explore atypical temporalities in the face of the more dominant constructs of linear time or the patriarchal concept of progress. These works instead represent time in the (feminine) forms of accumulation or cycles.

Kate Moran (b. 1958)
Automata and Emissary Series, #II
 1996

Bronze, steel gears and photo emulsion, 13 x 7 x 5 in.
 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Art by Women
 Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter, 2011.1.139

Emmi Whitehorse's *Over Flow* (#1392), 2005, from PAFA, renders the liquid and temporal experience of spilling over as a "sedimented" abstraction, in registers of receding and projecting shapes that seem to defy spatial organization.⁶ Similarly, the dizzying abstractions of Deborah Remington's *Tempus*, 1990 and the calm oscillation of shapes in Lila Mehlman's *Rapidly*, 1991 (BMC, 2006.1.267), seem to contain an almost cinematic motion.

Artists such as Alison Saar and Donna Maria deCreft harness the imagery of menstruation and birth to connect the lived experience of some bodies to a cyclical concept of time. Rather than reinforcing such conditions as limitations or weaknesses, these artists propose them as modes of understanding. Even if we embrace the evocations of menstruation and birth in Saar's lithograph, *Nude Woman with Flowing Red*, 2000 from PAFA and deCreft's monotype *In Water*, 1993 (2006.1.162) from Bryn Mawr, we do so not to enforce the binary of sexual difference but to assert its cyclical temporality as a valid mode of thought and experience. This mode of thought allows us to acknowledge the revolutions, returns, and cycles that are at least as present in "clock time" as notions of progress or futurity. By expressing temporality as deep, chaotic, and cyclical, these artists promote inclusive "herstorical" revisions of patriarchal temporality.

The third constellation, (*de*)forming, combines the force of the previous two. If, as Butler proposes, gender is constituted through ongoing performances of and with costumes or other forms, then the subject enacting these performances appears in variously hybrid states of being. Instead of viewing such forms as unfinished or fragmented, might we see them as a teeming with potentiality?

In works such as *Automata and Emissary Series, #II*, 1996 and *Hand/Arm Vessel (Self-Portrait)*, 2000 (2011.1.58) from PAFA's collection, artists Kate Moran and Diana K. Moore galvanize strategies of fragmentation and "making strange" to challenge the patriarchal expectation of female wholeness or virginity. Schematic and ruptured, Moran and Moore's works render bodies come undone. And yet, they reference the systems they simultaneously critique. They tempt us to return to patriarchal modes of control – by turning Moran's crank, which may unite the disparate parts of the fragmented figure, or by touching Moore's hand, which in its large and synecdochal state, may help us feel mastery over its mysteriousness. But instead, these works require us to (*de*)form our normative comprehension of bodies in order to imagine nonconformist functionalities and marginal possibilities of desire.

Similarly, Frédérique Lucien's *Diptyque*, 1988–89 and Joan Mitchell's *Little Weeds I*, 1992 might entice us into seeing fruit and flowers, rather than the (*de*)formed potatoes and weeds that they actually depict.⁷ Celebrating lowly common household foods or garden nuisances, these artists resist representing luscious still lifes or garden vistas in favor of new forms. Absorbing the strange monologues of these humble subjects, we might conjure multiple identities,



Joan Mitchell (1925–1992)
Little Weeds I
 1992

Color aquatint, 9 1/4 x 21 1/2 in.
 Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
 Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists,
 Gift of Bill Scott, 2000.2.6a-c

Frédérique Lucien (b. 1960)
Diptyque
 1988–1989

Gouache on paper, 7 3/4 x 14 1/2 in.
 Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
 Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists,
 Gift of Bill Scott, 2006.1.8

stories, and futures for them. Shifting over time, they even appear to become sentient beings, rehearsing new worlds unbound by categories – wild and overflowing with possibility.

With “anxiety and pleasure,” as Butler says of daily enactments of gender, I have tried to fit the overflowing potential of her theory to the works in *Beyond Boundaries: Feminine Forms*.⁸ Like Butler, however, I have not attempted to remedy a flawed patriarchal system, which enforces essentialist gendered norms, but have chosen to see through it to an entirely new order. From this novel point of view, the concept of gender opens to vast prospects. The impact of such resulting new forms reaches beyond the boundaries of this essay and exhibition, challenging us to recognize the ever-expanding performances that compose an inclusive “feminine.”

¹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (Dec., 1988): 519–531, at 531.

² Whereas M. Carey Thomas imagined expanded possibilities for women that crossed social expectations for gender, these did not cross divisions of race and ethnicity. The weight of Thomas’s racism and antisemitism burdens us with grief and anger today, and these sentiments are not lost on us as curators. We wish to acknowledge her contentious place in history and within this exhibition.

³ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 519.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1952), 249. My emphasis.

⁶ Butler employs the descriptor “sedimentation” in order to illustrate the temporal and spatial dimensions of the performative within the everyday, “Performative Acts,” 524.

⁷ Bill Scott recalled a conversation with Frédérique Lucien in which she explained that the organic forms were conceived from potato subject matter. Joan Mitchell depicted weeds from her garden in Vetheuil, France rather than the flowers that pervaded Claude Monet’s work in the region.

⁸ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 531.



Neila Kun (b. 1951)
Inside Out
 1993

Dye diffusion thermal transfer print, 7 3/8 x 7 3/8 in.
 Bryn Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
 Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women Artists,
 Gift of the artist, 2006.1.213

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 Whitehorse, pg. 14–15; Sihm Ja Whiteley, *Balcony*
 ©Sihm Ja Whiteley, pg. 7.

FRONT COVER

Patricia Mangione (1915–2002), *Mantra* (detail),
 1988. Acrylic on paper, 20 x 14 1/8 in., Bryn
 Mawr College, The William and Uytendale Scott
 Memorial Study Collection of Works by Women
 Artists, Gift of Bill Scott, 2006.1.86

INSIDE FRONT COVER SPREAD

Edna Andrade (1917–2008), *Crevice* (detail), 1995.
 Graphite and acrylic on paper, 29 1/4 x 36 3/4 in.
 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Art by
 Women Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter,
 2013.41.1

INSIDE BACK COVER SPREAD

Nancy Grossman (b. 1940), *Two Heads—Back*
and Front, 1968. Pen and ink on paper, 10 3/4
 x 13 in. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,
 Art by Women Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter,
 2010.27.4

