HABITAT:
A SELF INSPECTION THROUGH THE ORCHID
AND BEYOND THE FLOWER

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree Master of Fine Arts in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

by
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* * * * *

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To My Parents
and
My Husband Dave
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF PLATES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THESIS TEXT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF PLATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLATES</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Untitled, Lithograph 14&quot; by 18&quot;, 1984</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Untitled, Lithograph with Mixed Media</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15&quot; by 20&quot;, 1985</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Orchid in Venice, Lithograph 20&quot; by 26&quot;,</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. At Home, Lithograph 22&quot; by 24&quot;, 1985</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Phalaenopsis Trilis by Night and by Day,</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithograph with Mixed Media 213/4&quot; by 373/4&quot;,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Untitled, Drawing with Mixed Media</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>211/4&quot; by 29&quot;, 1985</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Veiled Mystery, Graphite Drawing 20&quot; by</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>281/2&quot;, 1985</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. Encased in Glass, Lithograph 22&quot; by 30&quot;</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX. Habitat, Lithograph 30&quot; by 44&quot;, 1985</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X. Escape in a Whorlwind, Prismacolor</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing 26&quot; by 40&quot;, 1986</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI. Escape, Lithograph 22&quot; by 30&quot;, 1986</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII. Union, Pastel Drawing 26&quot; by 403/4&quot;,</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HABITAT:
A SELF INSPECTION THROUGH THE ORCHID
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Plant life can be simple or extremely complex. Plants hold their own life; they are self sufficient, given sun, water and soil. We as humans depend on plant life for our survival. Plants evoke many emotions, memories and feelings, as the first blossoms of spring may evoke the sense of renewed life and result in the uplifting of spirits in ones self.

I relate myself to the plant, sitting in the sunlight soaking up the warmth, the energy, becoming stronger and healthier. My mood and personality changes with the seasons, wilting and thriving with natures cycles. I need to express personal emotions, feelings and moods through art. This was a decision never consciously made, but somehow I was driven to accomplish. As Georgia O'Keeffe stated, "I found that I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way—things I had no words for."  

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Upon entering graduate school I was striving to produce works that held a certain life as in the character of certain plants. I had decided that my work needed to relay the feeling, fluidity and the soft sensual organic shapes that I found in nature. I discovered that these needs could be met through the use of the lithographic medium. My main interest in the medium was in how the washes metaphorically resembled the organic fluid feeling that I found in nature. This liquid medium contributed a natural flow to the development of my images. The tusche washes would settle in a natural formation or reticulation that created a skin-like quality which would enhance the plant-like images. These qualities provided a new dimension to my artistic vocabulary, which I was determined to develop more fully in order to aid my changing concepts.

Plant life had already been explored in many different ways by many different types of artists throughout history, for example, the works by Georgia O'Keeffe and Judy Chicago. I knew however, that plant life could be used metaphorically so many ways that I was determined to use this common subject in my own personal manner, exploring it for my own needs.
I can easily identify with Georgia O'Keeffe who stated that she felt encouraged "to find something on my own." O'Keeffe also explained "I paint what interests me and what I see. At times you can't find these shapes in your head and you have to find them as they are in the world." I also refer to nature to find the shapes for my expression.

The concepts of Judy Chicago differ from those of Georgia O'Keeffe and myself. Judy Chicago exploits a flower-like image in order to promote her feminist ideals. Judy Chicago states "All that matters to me is to keep on working and to keep on fighting through my work for women to be free." My work does not involve social issues but reflects strictly personal feelings of my private life.

My early works were studies of single plants or flowers, with simplified compositions. The studies were not just simple renderings of the plants, but were interpretations of them, almost dissections that took on a microscopic appearance, similar to a cross section slide. I looked at the flower, through the flower and beyond the flower.

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2Ibid, p. 192.
3Ibid, p. 192.
An Untitled lithograph is representative of these early works (Plate I). The microscopic appearance of the orchid is attributed to the manner of execution. I reduced the complexity of the image into a line drawing, delineating basic values and shapes. Each individual shape was assigned a specific wash indicating value and texture. The final print was of an image that had been translated into an abstract state that resembled a cross-section slide. This way of working is evident in my later works. However, the method does not remain as academic. The clarity of subject matter was secondary to the exploration of the lithographic medium and the development of my artistic vocabulary. These early works were approached with a concept similar to Georgia O'Keeffe's flower paintings. "Because of their unusual perspective and economy of means, they appear abstract, but are nature "minutely studied"."^5

The orchid plant was the primary interest and became the focal point of my imagery. My first exposure to the orchid plants occurred in a hothouse atmosphere; my investigations of the orchid were restricted to this artificial environment. The hothouse atmosphere can be related to my sheltered upbringing. The orchid plant is fragile and tempramental to raise in our climate, requiring close

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^5Fine, Women and Art, p. 192.
care and sheltering during its cultivation. As a child I too was closely sheltered. Even though the sheltering was in my best interest, it resulted in a lack of self confidence and a delay in independence. A plant that struggles to survive early on becomes strong quickly, that which is cultivated from the beginning will remain dependent upon others. The discovery of this fragile plant in this artificial environment led to many closer inspections of the subject and myself.

After producing numerous images of plants I began inspecting the relationship between the plant and its environment. A hanging orchid plant became the subject for an Untitled lithograph which depicts a hothouse environment with geometric structure beams enclosing the plant (Plate II). This man made structure seemingly contrasted with the organic fluidity of the plant. I became obsessed with the contrast between the man made geometrics and the organic plant life. At times I interpreted this relationship as harmonious, at times threatening. I did not restrict my concepts to a personal level. I also viewed the imagery on a more general level; man verses nature. I needed to express this co-existence in a more emotive way. I decided to give the orchid more character, to force it to take on more importance, to let it become a symbol, icon or metaphor, in which I could apply personal concepts. The outcome of these concerns
began to surface in *Orchid in Venice* (Plate III). I was highly concerned with the outcome of this print, towards which I worked with great determination. I focused on a heightened contrast between man and nature by placing the orchid in front of my interpretation of Venice. I was striving towards a harmonious relationship between the figure and ground, organic and geometric, while still allowing an undercurrent of conflict. Upon resolution, I felt that the print did not accurately represent my concepts. The underlying sense of conflict I was striving for becomes masked by formal qualities. I chose to render the geometric buildings in the same manner as the organic plant, with loose flowing washes, with similar textures. This created an overall synthesis of figure and ground within the image, and subdued the visual feeling of conflict to a point where it was almost non-existent.

Consequently I decided to use a greater variety of textures in order to emphasize the idea of contrast, maximizing the feeling of conflict. I also decided to apply color to my prints in order to add strength to the emotive power of the image. I felt at the time that color could relay my personal mood and also provide clues to myself in order to clarify my personal concepts. The outgrowth of these thoughts and concerns resulted in *At Home* a color lithograph and *Phalaenopsis Trelis by Night*
and by Day a diptych (Plates IV and V).

At Home represents a somewhat awkward yet harmonious balance between my present and past emotions (Plate IV). The setting, a place from my past home, depicts a sturdy trellis that represents a life support for three orchid plants. Here the number of plants is used symbolically representing the family unit. The awkward placement of the three orchid plants, teetering on a contrived representation of a man made trellis or barrier, clinging on for survival, is an expression of personal indecisiveness representing decisions in life, choices made, choices not made, choosing what to hang on to and what to let go of, both in my work and in my personal life, formally and conceptually. This element of indecisiveness is supported visually by the placement of the orchid plants in relation to the trellis; they are poised halfway through the trellis, not on either side of it.

I began the print At Home with the primary color pallet. I thought that the additive system of printing the transparent red, yellow and blue would create a complete range of colors. After printing these first three colors the print displayed a very crude looking appearance. The intensity of the colors were much too strong, causing individual areas to compete for attention. In an attempt to achieve a subdued atmosphere, I began adding numerous layers of color. The print became more complex.
I added white to the surface which simplified the color statement and aided in the resolution. However, the print maintained an awkward feeling.

I intended to apply local color to the images in *At Home* (Plate IV). But through the complexity of the color arrangements the print took on a surreal quality. Although this is not what I intended, in retrospect, it strengthened the emotive power of the image. A rather direct three color print evolved into a complex ten color print that involved months of mental and physical labor before I reached a final resolution of the piece.

I also chose to focus on a new conceptual element in this print, the orchid roots. The roots are photosynthetic, so instead of existing below soil they reach out towards the sunlight. I responded to the outreaching roots as if they were a part of myself reaching for an unknown freedom. On a more general level I was focusing on the concept of man verses nature. I chose a wooden trellis because wood will deteriorate, to represent the temporality of mortal man.

*Phalaenopsis Trellis by Night and by Day* advances a juxtaposition of conflicts (Plate V). With this piece I was expressing a sense of a struggle with the direct juxtaposition of the black and white print with the color print. Not only does the absence of color set up a dichotomy of states but the joining of the two images at
the center doesn't aline, emphasizing the awkwardness of union, which creates a strained emotional quality in the piece. I was striving towards a dramatic quality that would reflect my inner moods. This piece also represents the two different sides of my personality, which can be like night and day. The dark side of the print, night, is much calmer, less disturbing than the surreal type color arrangement of the day side. There also is less information given in the night side alluding to the restful feeling of nightfall when things aren't so clear, but during the day you are struck with the harshness of reality.

A formal conclusion that I reached upon the completion of *At Home* and *Phalaenopsis Trelis by Night and by Day*, was that the presence of color was not essential to the success of my prints (Plates IV and V). I found that color did not clarify my personal concepts or strengthen the emotive power of my work. The black and white prints I feel functioned in a manner that moved the common subject, flower, away from the common context, plant-life in nature.

My drawings at this time had a different visual quality than the prints. The drawings were more tightly executed than the lithographs. To contrast the loose flow of tusche washes in printmaking, I chose to use direct strokes of prismacolor and graphite to render the
drawings. The drawings were expressions of the compulsive side of my personality. There was a physical satisfaction through the hours of meticulous marking, contrasted by the immediacy of the spontaneous washes of my prints. The drawings and prints differ visually at this time but they retain the same source material and previous conceptual concerns. The drawings held a certain awkwardness, the prints an organic fluidity. The expression was the most important issue, the physical expression of marking and the emotional expression of concept.

An Untitled drawing of mixed media is composed of a single orchid plant on a natural piece of driftwood which is juxtaposed next to a man made wall which represents a tentative barrier (Plate VI). I intended the barrier to be almost atmospheric, not solid. A wall exists yet it is penetrable, allowing for the possibility of escape. Behind the plant I placed a window. The window becomes a dichotomy. On one hand it stands as a barrier suggesting a wall imprisoning its contents; on the other hand it stands for shelter and nourishment. The window permits the entrance of light to nourish the plant life contained within. This drawing is an expression of personal feelings in conflict. At times I feel I need more freedom and independence, less responsibilities. I feel trapped in societies conventions, but these feelings are always juxtaposed with positive feelings of security and shelter.
The drawings, even though not as conventional as the
prints technically, allowed more expressive interpreta-
tion than the prints. At this time I felt much freer
to change the drawings during their execution than the
prints. The drawings were a more direct means of evolv-
ing and extending the concept.

At this time, beginning with these drawings and con-
tinuing into the next prints, I set up staged environ-
ments or habitats with room-like settings. These draw-
ings and prints represent my personal emotional conflicts.
The room provides a shelter, a controled environment or
habitat to promote the life of the organism. But the
room or staged environment can also indicate a disturbing
view, perhaps of imprisonment or helplessness. There is
a fine line between the two emotions, like wanting to
escape but needing to stay without knowing why. It is
the presence of these two emotions in my work that is ex-
citing to me as an artist, that my art can mimic my feel-
ing. I felt that my intentions were evident to myself in
my work. However, they may have been unclear to the ob-
server, an issue that I confront in later works.

Vieled Mystery is a graphite drawing in which I
tried to create a cramped feeling (Plate VII). The
orchid plant with its numerous blooms is placed in front
of a deep dark space. A lace trimmed curtain falls heav-
ily in front of the plant hiding part of the plant from
view and also vieling the background. Here I am trying to create a feeling of mystery or of the unknown. Part of the plant is hidden like I hide part of myself from view, protecting my vulnerabilities. The lace curtain is weighing down the plant, cramping it into a small space, restricting its growth causing the last blooms to droop downwards, reflecting my inner feelings and mood at the time of the piece.

Encased in Glass, a lithograph, speaks of imprisonment (Plate VIII). The plant takes on a new characteristic at this point, which emphasizes the unhealthiness of being restrained or stifled. Disease attacks the foliage. The windows are soot covered, dingy, allowing only diffused light through; not enough light for a healthy organism. This plant is alone, fighting for survival in an unhealthy environment, raising its petals to capture all the sunlight provided for strength. My interpretation of this print echoed the feeling I had of being alone.

In Habitat, a 30" by 44" lithograph, the size becomes important (Plate IX). I felt that if the physical space that the print occupied was larger it would increase its emotive impact. I thought that the enlarged scale of the print would emphasize the presence of the plant, enveloping the viewer with the feeling I had for this imagery. In this piece I also chose to increase the
number of orchid plants. I created a feeling of community by multiplying the number of plants sharing in the controlled environmental situation. I realized that a grouping of orchids could amplify my feelings as well as provide a multiplicity rather than a singular set of interpretations.

The feelings of confinement, community and restraint, that were a part of the prints Encased in Glass and Habitat left the plant no room for escape, just disease (Plates VIII and IX). I felt a breakthrough was necessary. As a result Escape in a Whirlwind, a drawing, was approached differently than previous works (Plate X). I decided to open up the space, to offer the plant a chance for escape and provide myself more options for resolving the work. I was very selective with information, challenging the amount I felt necessary to address my conceptual concerns. I felt that this drawing was not as successful as my previous works because of the minimal aspects of the image. It lacked the extreme value contrast and the textural qualities that were important to my conceptual concerns. What I felt was important in Escape in a Whirlwind was the selective process of execution, minimizing excess visual information in order to clarify my concepts (Plate X).

I applied this selective process to the orchid image in the lithograph Escape (Plate XI). I limited the
visual information to necessary clues in order to support my concept. In this piece I set up a restrictive environment, as previously done, but I offered the plant a solution to the environment. The plant physically breaks through the boundaries of the image; the leaves spill into the borders. The root bound plant explodes the wire pot that used to restrict its growth. This piece reflects my feeling of bursting, leading into the concept of escape.

Upon the completion of Escape, and through a thorough analyzation of my self, I discovered that I really didn't need to escape (Plate XI). There was no tangible thing to escape from, only unrealized fears lurking in my subconscious or my imagination. I set up conflicts, confrontations and barriers in my mind and worked through them on paper, expressing them through my art.

After this discovery I developed Union, a pastel drawing, which reflects a newly found freedom (plate XII). The plant becomes healthy, free of disease, is no longer weighed down, floats freely away from barriers and leaves the past behind. In future works however, I do not intend to abandon past imagery entirely. I plan to use what I have discovered and learned throughout my graduate studies, build upon this knowledge and create even better works of art.
Habitat represented a self inspection through the orchid and beyond the flower. Throughout my works plants react to restrictive environments and develop through a circular cycle of relationships, (ie. harmonious, conflicting, breaking through, escape and back to harmonious). The works are interpretations of personal emotions, memories and feelings that are expressed through the lithographic medium and drawings.

The theme that I have continued to record, through the orchid and beyond the flower, becomes stronger and more efficient in the later works. For example, Union is more successful in evoking an emotion or feeling (Plate XII). The earlier works were closer to academic studies, such as Untitled (Plate I); they were successful formally but left something to be desired conceptually.

I feel that each piece is an important work. Even though some works are stronger than others, they are all expressions of self inspections. They mimic personal emotions, feelings and moods. I have learned and developed from each piece and I have grown and changed both stylistically and conceptually through these works. In future works I will strive to achieve a formal fluency in my work along with increased conceptual levels. My images are metaphors of myself and will continue to mimic my life in the future, changing and growing along with my self.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Plate I. *Untitled*, Lithograph 14" by 18", 1984.
Plate II. *Untitled*, Lithograph with Mixed Media
15" by 20", 1985.
Plate III. Orchid in Venice, Lithograph 20" by 26", 1985.
Plate IV. *At Home*, Lithograph 22" by 24", 1985.
Plate V.  *Phalaenopsis Trelis by Night and by Day*, Lithograph with Mixed Media 213/4" by 373/4", 1985.
Plate VI. Untitled, Drawing with Mixed Media 21\(\frac{1}{4}\)" by 29", 1985.
Plate VII. *Vieled Mystery*, Graphite Drawing 20" by 28 1/2", 1985.
Plate VIII. **Encased in Glass**, Lithograph 22" by 30", 1985.
Plate IX. *Habitat*, Lithograph 30" by 44", 1985.
Plate XI. *Escape*, Lithograph 22" by 30", 1986.
Plate XII. Union, Pastel Drawing 26" by 40 3/4", 1986