THE RECONCILIATION OF MY ART AND LIFE

A Thesis
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by

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I would like to acknowledge the following people for their contributions:

My Mother, for sacrifices that I find unbelievable.

And to all people who took the time to stop by my studio and talk to me.
DEDICATION

To people who save half gallon milk cartons.
INTRODUCTION

One day a photographer randomly takes pictures of a man and a woman in a park. Later he is visited by that woman who demands the negatives. He begins to study the prints very closely. By blowing-up the prints he notices the expression of the girl's face. It is an expression of horror. Enlarging the print once again he notices that the man the woman is with is holding a gun. The final enlargement shows a dead body in the grass. A murder has been committed. The photographer then tries to do his own investigation of the murder. Since he hasn't heard any news of it in the media, he assumes it is still undiscovered. He goes back to the park and finds that the body is gone. No traces or clues remain. While driving, he notices the woman and begins a chase which ends in frustration. Arriving back in his studio he discovers that someone has stolen all prints and negatives of the murder. All proof of the murder is now gone. Or did a murder ever happen at all? This is the plot of the movie, Blow-Up, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni. The film critic William Bayer, in his thoughts concerning the thesis of this movie, stated, "Interpretations have been suggested ranging from the thesis that the more one looks at something the less one knows about it (the very process of blowing-up a photograph renders it increasingly
abstract); that life is an illusion while art is substantial; that the interaction between life and art is ambiguous and ungraspable; to the idea that it is impossible to know the difference between what is true and what is false in the contemporary world.¹ What is consistent throughout all of these interpretations is the idea of man failing in finding truth. My thesis leaves me in the same position as the photographer in the movie. I did not find any absolute truths about my work. What I did discover was the necessity to search.
I feel it is important to establish some sort of continuum that existed before my graduate study. This continuum began with my selection, in undergraduate school, of fine arts as my pursuit of study.

During the four years in undergraduate school, I became what could best be described as the greatest cake decorator of all time. I had developed the facility to create interesting visual surfaces on my canvasses. These visual statements represented, for the most part, my concern for abstraction. By working abstractly I could investigate pure formal principles without interference of representational images. I would use the techniques that I had been taught—wash, impasto, collage, etc. Then I would experiment with integrating them into some form of compositional solution. There was no specific formal problem. I would start a painting and let it develop. I would quit work on the painting when I was visually satisfied.

But one day while browsing through a Better Homes and Gardens Magazine, I found paintings in their interior shots of mod homes that resembled mine. These photos showed abstract paintings on the walls, which matched the furniture. In both my work and the paintings in the magazine there seemed to be a lack of soul or content. This realization marked the beginning of my first art anxiety. I decided to abandon this type of painting and
I began to seek new alternatives. In this search I did lot of reading, which lead me to a discovery of Marcel Duchamp. This marked a new major influence in my life. Duchamp seemed to speak directly to my painting anxieties. I found Duchamp's rejection of futurism to resemble my present situation. Duchamp said, "I was interested in ideas—not merely visual product. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind. This is the direction in which art should turn; to an intellectual expression, and painting should not be only retinal or visual, it should have to do with the gray matter of our understanding." These statements had a profound effect on me. I consider the word "retinal" applicable to my past work. The only sense that I was stimulating was the visual. My images were conceived and viewed using only the retina of the eye. It did not make a conceptual impact. I didn't feel that my previous work was a wasteful experience. An artist has to explore the physicality of paint, but it should not be the final concern. The ideas of Duchamp changed my life. I wanted now to start communicating.

At this time I met a group of painters who shared my disenchantment with pure formal painting. They offered an alternative which they called, "narrative painting". They felt that by using narrative themes pure content
would be communicated. The style of painting used was derived from the photo-realists movement of the late sixties. This included the use of brush, oil paint, and stretched gessoed canvas, but most importantly it included the realistic rendering of images. All of these elements plus a narrative theme, made a painting that defied formalism. This alternative I accepted as an answer to my painting problems.

I entered graduate school describing myself as a narrative painter. My first narrative painting dealt with the theme of woman's menopause (plate 1). This theme was significant at the time since my mother was experiencing her menopause period. I wanted to show how a magical act could be used as a metaphor for menopause. In both cases a change occurs. A stage magician is always changing something into something else. Lot of times the change is for the better. This is how I view menopause. There is a change that occurs but it is not the bad experience most people feel it is; it is a development of the person. I showed this by placing my mother on a natural grass stage bending slightly forward. In her hand she holds a magic scarf. Next to her is a jumping rabbit. She is performing her magical act. Thus the name of the painting, "The Beautiful 52 Year Old Magic Act".

After I completed, "The Beautiful 52 Year Old Magic
"Act", I entered another anxiety period. I was very disturbed over the great amount of time I put into just one painting. Most of the time was spent in the laborious technique of painting realistically. While I painted, a thousand new ideas ran through my head, ideas that I wanted to execute immediately. I knew I couldn't do that if I continued to paint in a realistic manner. I had to find a more suitable way of expressing my ideas more immediately. This lead me into a period of exploring different ways of painting. At this time still another problem surfaced. This dealt with my conceptual approach to painting. I had an inability to find something to paint. I wanted to communicate ideas but I was becoming overloaded with what I term the serious themes that I had been using for so long. Making serious statements somehow didn't seem to be relevant to me any more.

During this period of confusion a major influence entered my life. This was my interest in primitive painting. What I found particularly interesting was the way primitive painters related their personal lives to making art. An example is the primitive painter John Kane. He was a twentieth century painter who, for most of his life, worked in the mines of Ohio and Pennsylvania. Kane painted the industrial scenes in which he worked. He collected objects such as wood, cardboard and industrial
paint to make paintings with. Also, he talked about his work using the language of his construction background. Another example is Morris Hirschfield. For most of his life he was a clothing manufacturer. When he started to paint, he incorporated his knowledge of textural qualities gained from working with fabrics. This combination of life and art was something I felt I had to do with my own work. Somewhere in my life this combination had become separate. When I left the studio I left my art inside. I had an experience as a child that will help clarify this point. When I was seven years old I showed an aptitude for drawing, so my mother gave me a Jon Gnagy Art Set, containing a booklet which showed a method for making drawings. The model drawings were of a Thanksgiving still life, with a lake and a forest, and a little Mexican boy standing in front of his adobe house. All of a sudden the fun little drawings I was doing disappeared and I began to make serious work like the booklet wanted. Art and life became separate. Sixteen years later this separation became my biggest obstacle.

At this time of confusion concerning my painting I began to make films. The early films dealt with serious intellectual themes similar to those in my paintings. I was always telling stories of people hunting for some form of spiritual truth. The reaction to these films
was pure confusion. It was obvious I wasn't comfortable in handling serious dramatic films. My last film marked a break from this format. I made this film with the intention of it having a dramatic theme. It was about twenty people sitting in a room with paper bags on their heads. After a while the people started to draw faces on their paper bags. When they were finished they began to walk around the room with newly drawn masks. When I screened this film it became ridiculously funny to me, so, instead of keeping the dramatic format, a friend and I added a new soundtrack. The soundtrack consisted of my friend playing the part of a movie critic while I played the part of a director. He reviewed the film as if we were watching it for the first time in a screening booth. I played the feeble director trying to convince the critic how deeply psychological and socially relevant the film was. The film in many ways was making fun of my present position in painting. What is important to note about this is that the film was favorably received because the humor added impact. I felt comfortable using humor as a form of expression. This discovery eventually became the catalyst for a reconciliation with my art work.

"Humor and laughter-- not necessarily derogatory derision are my pet tools. This may come from my general philosophy of never taking the world too seriously, for fear of dying of boredom. Seriousness is a very dangerous
thing. To avoid it one must call for the intervention of humor."³ Once again the wisdom of Duchamp serves as a catalyst for my work. The seriousness which he calls a very dangerous thing is exactly what was hurting my work. When I stopped trying to be like a Jon Gnagy Set I began to make art about me and, like Duchamp, humor and laughter became my tools.

The first piece I did after this realization was "332 Milk Carton Painting Collection" (plate 2). This piece I consider my most important achievement in Graduate School. This piece successfully relates much about me. It is the first piece in which I feel my personal life and art life have become one. It began during the summer after my first year of Graduate School. I wasn't planning to save the cartons for any particular reason, but probably due to my laziness in disposing of them. One day as I was sitting at the kitchen table gazing at my collection of a dozen or so milk cartons, I picked one up and held it in my hand. It felt comfortable. I started to examine the carton closely. I found the top very interesting, especially the sides where it opens. I should say the one end which is supposed to open and the other which should remain closed. This closed end became my focal point. The arch created at the top of the carton made it look like a house or, better yet, a little temple. The milk carton became very important
to me. I had an inclination to paint on its temple walls. At the time I didn't have paint supplies so I borrowed my roommate's acrylic paint and brushes. I spent the better part of an hour painting my first milk carton painting.

I was in a very calm state painting the carton, it was an event that had developed without any pre-conceived notions. I could hold the carton in my hand and walk around and paint. If I had to go to the kitchen for something I wouldn't have to stop painting. It became a "mobile painting".

The first image I painted on a milk carton was a picture of an ocean and the sky. I repeated this for the second carton. The reason for this motif was my summer interest in swimming. After the second painting I began to have trouble in deciding what to paint. I wanted to find something that in some way was more descriptive of me. I decided to use my personal number systems. All the numbers that, at this time in life, described me. These would include numbers like social security, driver's license, address, telephone, etc. I painted each number on one milk carton. This continued until my driver's license number turned into a small abstraction. Instead of trying to go back and finish all my number systems, I just started to do small abstractions. From this point on I never had trouble in arriving at
something to paint. An image always seemed to appear naturally. Whatever I felt like painting, I painted. One carton might be painted with an abstraction and the next one a picture of a dog. Also the technique of using the paint was just as inconsistent. Some were done in thin washes while others have thick impastos. Some cartons look impressionistic, some cubistic, while others might resemble a child's painting. I began painting whatever came to mind in any style that came to mind.

I do not want to work in any consistent manner. It seems a lot of present day artists get involved with only one style of working at a time. If one's a realist he does nothing but realist paintings. I feel this consistency is too limiting. Some ideas are better expressed in abstract terms while others need more representational imagery. Still others demand the abandonment of traditional working materials (painting, drawing, sculpture, etc.) altogether. Duchamp has some interesting observations concerning consistency. He states, "Not to be engaged in any groove is very important for me, I want to be free for myself, foremost." Auturo Schwartz discusses this position taken by Duchamp. "It is a way of life-Duchamp's. Inconsistency is an attempt constantly to deceive life. In fact, life continuously places us between alternative situations,
between two doors both of which are marked entry, but neither exit. Having once entered we are compelled to go on to the bitter end. But Duchamp has invented the door which is neither open nor closed."

My color selection while painting a carton became a very spontaneous emotional response. I wasn't trying to work on any formal color or compositional problem. I just let myself react to color naturally. And I believe if one does this color will take care of itself.

To understand my work, it is important to discuss an artist who has served as an inspiration for me. The artist is Jonathan Borofsky. We resemble each other in our approach to what art should be for the individual. We both feel that art can be an excellent vehicle for opening up feelings. This is what my milk carton piece did for me. Borofsky also did a piece similar to my milk cartons. It was called "Counting". It's comprised of a solid tower of 9,350 pages of 8 1/2" x 11" paper standing 3 1/2' high. The lower portion is written with ball point pen on graph paper and is very neat. The top third is composed of different color papers and ruffled at the edges. Borofsky began the piece by simply marking the number one on a piece of paper and continuing this until he stopped at 9,350. Lucy Lippard has some interesting insights concerning this piece, "As an object, "Counting", is already esthetically acceptable, but more
interesting is the fact that it is a clear symbol of compressed energy, time and obsession." Borofsky explains his thoughts on this piece, "When I started it, I thought it would teach me all I wanted to know about myself and the universe if I would just stick to it. Go go go to the first million. At the first million, nothing happened, no light lit up. Self doubt set in. I wasn't goal-oriented any more. The top part, all rough; is part of a different lesson. The difficulty of sticking to one thing. How you're never happy with what you have." Borofsky feels that the "Counting" piece is close to a form of meditation. He explains, "It is still a daily struggle to continue or not. Usually I count for at least one or two hours during the day. I seem to be most comfortable counting when Benita is doing needlepoint and we are both watching television, although I sometimes like to do it alone and in perfect silence." From these comments by Borofsky I can see many similarities to my milk carton piece. The idea of the piece as a teacher seems very applicable to my cartons. The cartons rescued me from a severe art anxiety and rebuilt my confidence in painting. The idea of using humor and the concept of inconsistency all surfaced during the painting of this piece. Painting became important to me again. This discovery and growth can
be seen in the cartons. The cartons represent a ten month chapter in my life. They show an exploration of my personal self and my painting self and, eventually, the combination of the two. They can be described as a painting journal, a journal I used to define myself as a person. Through this identity search the milk carton piece became an image that represented me. It awakened my midwestern background and gave me a form of pride in my past. I had always before tried to play down my farm background. I felt it had nothing to offer in my life or work. I now use my past personal experiences as the main force in my work. Borofsky also mentions that his "Counting" was a form of meditation. I feel the same way about my milk cartons. They served as a release from the pressures of the day. I felt comfortable and free working with them. It had an unbelievably relaxing effect on me. I painted while watching television, talking on the phone or eating a sandwich. This way the paintings actually reflected aspects of my daily life, not just what I do in my studio. Also, like Borofsky's "Counting" piece, I envisioned the cartons going on forever. But I realized that after I had gained confidence in myself again the cartons had served their purpose. So I decided to set a predetermined date to stop painting them. I chose the opening of my graduate show, since I feel that this event
marks the end of my schooling and my entrance into the outside world, which I now feel confident in facing.

This confidence also came from the people who collected the cartons for me. Since I asked people for their empty cartons the piece involved more than one author. The devotion and support of these people helped me in executing the piece. When it was exhibited the people who contributed felt a sense of personal accomplishment.

When people view my "332 Milk Carton Painting Collection" I hope they sense the feeling of "gutty honesty" that I tried to paint into each carton. All the cartons that I painted are presented. I'm not hiding any cartons in my closet which I feel are bad. There are some cartons that I don't feel positive about but it would be dishonest to go back and retouch them. The cartons are in chronological order, this is an example of how a person falls in and out of love with certain styles of painting. The cartons I painted five months ago I may not like now but that's no reason to go back and retouch them (which I felt like doing in some cases). I accidently painted on the wrong side of three cartons, but I exhibited them anyway as a testimony to human error and a statement of my honesty as a painter. Marcel Duchamp once said, "But before we go further, I want to clarify our understanding of the
word "art", to be sure, without any attempt at a definition. What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion."9

A not unfamiliar response to my work is, "There is something funny about this piece." This statement says more about my humor than any explanation I could write. To try to find what is funny in my work seems contradictory to the very idea of its humor. This mystery helps give my work its subtle form of humor. It becomes less obvious. The viewer has to spend time looking at my work for the effect to work. This involvement by the viewer completes my work. I'm not trying to be serious, intellectual, intentionally funny or paint pretty paintings. I paint images that are in a state of senseless limbo. This realization makes my work funny. It's like being so bland to such an extreme that it becomes exciting. To me, the silent screen comedian, Harry Langdon, personifies this approach to humor. In the book, The Silent Clowns, the author Walter Kerr aptly describes the Landon style, "How does one function as a comma? This way. Harry Langdon style is standing in the middle of a very busy street. Traffic is bearing down on him. From the beginning of film comedy clowns had known what to do next. They could start
running for dear life, straight down the street at an accelerating speed with an onrushing car, engine steaming, hot on their heels; the zigzag, and the near-death, could go on for miles. Or they could let themselves be hit by the car in the first place, to go looping the loop high in air. The patterns were established.

What did Harry do? Nothing, more or less. He stood there, really too simple to quite comprehend the danger, one cheek tucked up into a chipmunk bulge, one half of a sweet smile skidding upward from puckered lips. A car whizzed by and missed him entirely. But a fraction of a second after the car had gone, Harry jumped a little jump, as though to get out of its way. A rather profitless jump-optional, as commas often are. Aftermath. Yet notice how it changes the rhythm of the sentence.

And it is, in its sublimely unfunctional yet thoughtful way, funny."10 What I find enjoyable about Langdon is that the humor remains ambiguous. You can't figure out if it is funny or not. What one might expect or be accustomed to, Langdon does not do. Walter Kerr explains, "The trick was to do nothing—or almost nothing—in a form that had always done everything, and done it fast."11 Langdon's humor, like my work, does not try to illicit laughter by being obviously funny. It tries to accomplish laughter by the absence of humor. I think the approach of Langdon and myself lends itself to a more conceptual
basis. The enjoyment is in the realization of its prepostorous premise. While watching a Langdon film or looking at one of my pieces, you might not belly laugh, but you might say, "There's something funny about this." And then strike a smile.

Looking at over three hundred half-gallon milk cartons with paintings on one side, has to eventually strike you as funny. Collecting milk cartons? Painting on their sides? Making milk carton paintings? Who wants those hanging over their sofa? I've heard of a boy and his dog but a boy and his milk cartons? I think by these statements one can see the absurdity of the selection of milk cartons as painting vehicles. Even though they mean a lot to my life, it's still funny. My life is funny, and the cartons show this. Sometimes I used the commercial design of the carton in an image I painted. For example, I might take the Borden symbol of Elsie the cow and leave her head but paint her a new body. There is often a lot of humor displayed in my color selection or composition. Sometimes I painted with the most obnoxious colors that might remind you of a bad window display at a cheap discount store. Many times I achieved this by using the colors already on the carton with my own. Many of the images on the cartons seem as if they were painted by a child or by a suburban women's art society member. Then
right next to this might be a painting showing my art training. This combination of diverse styles reflects my interest in all forms of imagery.

Another piece that would be important to discuss is the painting called, *Man and Woman Make an Arch*. (plate 3) It is painted on a 3' x 3' section of plywood. The ground of the painting reminds one either of a backdrop of a mod bar or the paintings of the commercial illustrator Leroy Nieman. In the middle of the picture are two figures (man and woman) about six inches high. They are painted in outline fashion with a grass green color. Their arms and legs are painted solid with a flesh tone color. Each of the figure's heads are circular and painted flat white. Connecting the two heads in an arch formation is a series of rectangular, square and round shapes of different colors. Around the figures is painted a blue line in a shape of a square. This blue line helps emphasize the importance of the figures. It does this by making the painting look like a television screen. This painting shows my humorous touch. The image of two people with balls and cubes forming an arch has to strike you as a bit absurd. How many men and women go around making arches with heads, balls and cubes? In many ways a surreal element can be seen in the work but that wasn't my intention. Also a sexual analogy can be seen, if one sees the arch as a form of intercourse.
The arch formation can also be seen as a form of intercourse. But I enjoy it for its ability not to be anything but a statement of pure ridiculous mystery. I make my work to read like a funny puzzle. Once again, to quote Walter Kerr on Langdon, "Langdon was the most ambiguous of all silent film clowns, and his survival depended on his maintaining that ambiguity, explaining himself not at all." ¹²

The figures in the painting, Man and Woman Make an Arch remind many people of illustrations from operating manuals or early attempts of beginning art students. The only difference is that I'm using them in a different context. I'm making fun of taste. I'm using what I have always been told could not be modes of expression for somebody with fine arts background. Cliche imagery can be seen in much of my work. I feel it says as much about me as any other form of imagery. That is why it is hard to talk about my work. The work is not slick, or pretty, but I believe communicates. Jonathan Borofsky deals in similar uses of imagery. Here is how Lucy Lippard deals with Borofsky's paintings. "Except in the most spuriously "avant-garde" sense, these paintings have little to recommend them in terms of esthetic consciousness. Borofsky having decided that personal content was all: "real communication has nothing to do with pretty color." The handling is too inept to be naively "good". and both
subject matter and inscriptions are, if often poignant, also embarrassingly corny, only in part because feelings are generally tabu in today's art. Yet the insistent primitivism is, of course a willful regression for someone who went to three art schools. The little paintings are actually art about art in the spirit of Roy Lichtenstein, but "without the shield", though perhaps their most interesting esthetic characteristic is the fact that the artistic intelligence is so well hidden."^{13}

Both Borofsky and I enjoy playing with the tastes of people. When you look at my work the question of good and bad taste arises. The answer, like my paintings, is ambiguous. In a sense my work relates to artists like Patrick Caulfield and Roy Lichtenstein. I enjoy their exploration of the distinctions between fine arts and mass culture but I'm not concerned with their formal investigations. This is what Lucy Lippard was talking about when she said Borofsky's work was in the spirit of Lichtenstein but "without the shield". She also made another interesting comment when she stated that, "feelings are generally tabu in today's art." This is where the Lichtensteins and Caulfields separate from Borofsky and myself. Their work is deliberately cold and removed, reflecting images of mass culture. The work of Borofsky and myself deals primarily with exposing ourselves. Lucy Lippard feels this autobiographical
art is based on the notion that, "if you can get deep enough into yourself, you will at least make art that is not the same as everybody else's." And I agree with her.

Another artist who has been influential in my work is William Wegman. Wegman does not limit himself to any one medium but uses drawing, photography and video tape. What I find interesting about Wegman is his humor and the use of subjects from his personal life to express that humor. In one video tape we find Wegman giving a spelling lesson to his dog Man Ray. Wegman is explaining idiosyncrasies of spelling such as beach as in going to the beach not Beech Nut Gum. Man Ray is very confused to say the least. In another video tape we find Wegman flipping a coin. When it lands heads or tails Man Ray's front and backside is turned toward the camera to show the outcome of the flip. In both, the deadpan humor of Wegman comes across. In these tapes he uses objects from his domestic environment, himself and his dog Man Ray. Also they show Wegman's interest in education, in which he has been involved all of his life. Art critic Maud Lavin has some thoughts concerning these tapes: "In his tapes which use education as a subject, learning appears as a boring and absurd confrontation with elusive information. The relationship between Wegman and Man Ray parodies that between Wegman and the viewer. Man Ray
assumes the viewer's role as he becomes the helpless victim of an endless pattern beyond his control. Wegman takes superficial reality or fantasy or an edited version and given it importance out of proportion it normally receives. He creates a new mundane world.¹⁵ I consider the word "mundane" applicable to my work. For example: a milk carton is something people usually pay very little attention to. But, by my selection and painting of them they are viewed in a new context. They become as Maud Lavin states, "a new mundane world." And as I see it, a very funny, funny world.
CONCLUSION

My work could be seen as being self-indulgent. I have turned all my concerns to exploring my anxious ego. Since doing this, painting has made more sense to me. It has become part of a revealing act that I use to understand myself and the world. The painting "Grandfather Gilday" (plate 4) illustrates this point. I never had a Grandfather Gilday, the name is one I adopted. I combined my birth name and my stepfather's name to make Gilday. I felt a void in not having any form of heritage connected with my new name so I decided to paint a portrait of my mythical Grandfather Gilday. I started with no preconceived ideas of what he should look like; I just let my deep feelings about this piece create the painting. Finally I reached a point where I seemed to recognize my grandfather. At this point I stopped work on the painting. I feel it is very important for artists today to deal with personal characteristics. This is what Jonathan Borofsky means when he states his desire to "get rid of cool art and show ourselves."\(^{16}\)

Lucy Lippard traces these attitudes to, as she states it, "a broad attempt to find in the cracks and crevasses of current art a way to escape the contentless sterility and monotonous sameness to which much of it has descended."\(^{17}\)

I consider myself a clown. A clown who goes around
making marks that I present for people to react to. I am so comfortable with my painting that I no longer worry about content in my work. As long as my art relates to my life, content will always be there. To strive for full comprehension of this content becomes an endless search. Carl Jung states, "One can paint very complicated pictures without having the least idea of their real meaning." So it becomes the artist's primary concern to create works and the viewers to investigate them. Rene Magritte states my feelings when he says, "Reality is a word devoid of meaning; space is not certain; the world has lost all consistency. My task is to evoke the mystery."
FOOTNOTES


3Ibid. p. 197.


5Ibid. p. 193.


7Ibid. p. 63.

8Ibid. p. 63.

9Schwarz, op. cit., p. 196.


11Ibid. p. 264-265.

12Ibid. p. 267.

13Lippard, op. cit., p. 63.

14Ibid. p. 63.


16Lippard, op. cit., p. 63.

17Ibid. p. 63.

18Schwarz, op. cit., p. 167.

"The Beautiful 52 Year Old Magic Act"

(plate 1)
"332 Milk Carton Painting Collection"
(plate 2)
"Man and Woman Make An Arch"

(plate 3)
"Grandfather Gilday"

(plate 4)
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


