ARTISTIC REVELATIONS THROUGH THE MARVELOUS*

*IN OHIO (OF ALL PLACES)!

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by

Nancy L. Greco, B.S., M.S.

The Ohio State University
1978

Approved by

Charles Massey, Jr.
Adviser
Department of Art
To Angelo, I wish you could be here now...
And to Robert, who is.
Thank you
Charles
Sid
Bob
Pheoris
Tom
Carlyle
Helen
and Michael...

For helping me through these
Two years in
Columbus.
When I moved to Ohio in 1976, I brought with me a small bird skull, a few feathers, a forked twig, my white eighteen inch gloves with three pearl buttons at the wrist, and some wishbones I had collected over the years. For some reason unknown to me, I wanted to use these objects in my drawings and prints. I did not quite have a concrete idea then, but of course, I never do before I compose a drawing, a poem, a letter, or this thesis for that matter...only disconnected images fading in and out of my mind.

For weeks (it seemed like forever), I sketched and rearranged the elements that had attracted me. Still, no real idea possessed me, no spark of inspiration flashed between my objects. The objects remained a still life. I had yet to find that element which would bring life to the objects and dreams that obsessed me.

As I remember, I was becoming increasingly frustrated. It was already October and I still had not developed any sort of imagery. It seemed that the more I tried to make sense of my ideas, the further I was from a solution.
I thought about death, life, cycles and similarities as I examined the objects which surrounded me in my studio. I felt that if I could only bring these thoughts together with my found objects, something significant could result.

It seemed like a waste of energy to sit for hours, waiting for an idea to come, so I occupied myself with tasks that I had been neglecting and walks that I had been taking only in my mind. I made a beautiful pair of draperies for the dining room, painted every room whether it needed it or not and began to make bread every other day. I enjoyed watching the dough rise. Kneading was a great release for my frustrations and the shaping of each loaf of bread became a sculptural experience. Birds, leaves, and clouds went into my oven. Somehow in the process of baking, the breads lost their detail and I could not distinguish a leaf from a bird. They both had the same basic shape. I remember thinking back to my French Surrealism class where I read a poem by the French poet Rimbaud, a precursor of the Dada Movement...

...I saw very plainly
a mosque in place of a factory,
 a school of drummers composed of angels,
 open carriages on the roads of heaven...

At that moment, I saw what Rimbaud was saying; everything
is connected in some way to everything else, that one image has the potential of triggering a series of associations. I thought of the bird skull, and decided to draw it. I placed the small skull on a piece of white paper and began sharpening a pencil. I found myself staring at the white plane of the paper underneath the skull. Suddenly I saw a flash of a painting by Dali. What occurred is difficult to believe...I could not remember which painting it was so I simply grabbed the first Dali book I spotted in my bookcase and opened it to the exact page where "Dali, at the Age of Six When He Believed Himself to Be a Young Girl, Lifting the Skin of the Water to Observe a Dog Sleeping in the Shadow of the Sea" was reproduced. There was the plane I had remembered. I loved the way Dali let water become a two-dimensional surface casting a shadow on the beach. I began to draw.

The drawn skull looked like a cavern. Looking around my studio, my eyes came to a stuffed hummingbird on the windowsill. Perfect! Two live birds examining the skull---life examining death. After drawing the birds into the composition, I thought of the breads that had lost their identity in the process of baking, but still sharing the same rough outline. Here was the additional
element I needed to demonstrate the puzzling connection between life and death. I imagined leaves, feathers, bones, and birds teeming together in a decaying mass—a fertile ground assembled within the limits of the paper's shadow supporting the structure above. To further enhance this image, I decided to define the hummingbirds' shadows as leaves. What had begun as a rendering of a bird skull developed into the print "On Either Side" (plate 1) which involves many of the basic elements, ideas, influences, associations, struggles and discoveries that make up my subsequent imagery.

Sometime later that November
I was walking with Robert
my husband.
It was Sunday.
The sun was shining.
Shadows defined the naked arbor.

(I am smiling)

I remember Robert saying,
"Look, be careful...",

And in the shadow of our bodies cast before us,
A pair of pinnate leaves
Lay together
In the shape of a
Bird. 3

What I felt at that moment can only be explained by a Dada-Surrealist term, "the marvelous". Rimbaud compared
the marvelous with the proverbial lightbulb igniting above one's head when one gets an idea, a "flash beyond understand- ing" that reveals some mystery of life. Baudelaire spoke of hieroglyphics, or signs, in this world. If one could recognize them, one would be closer to understanding existence.

As I saw the pinnate leaves, I remembered my father's flower shop. I saw my father "making up" a funeral piece on a small, round table. Laurel branches had fallen to the floor. Our parrot, Junior, laughed and fluttered his feathers in his cage. My father sprayed the finished flower arrangement with a fine mist and then wrapped it in translucent, waxed-paper tissue. Some of the laurel branches poked through the paper.

Then I began to manipulate the images in my mind, both consciously and in dreams. I remember the dream I had just after I saw the leaf bird:

Many people are in a small room with six, long tables. The people fill the periphery of the room, busily murmuring among themselves. A bearded man enters, carrying bolts of fabric. He begins to distribute the fabric to the people: beautiful satins, rich tapestries, calico prints and the finest silk—until the people are gone and there is only one piece of fabric left, a sheer, translucent silk. I take the material and wrap it around my body, covering my dark clothing. But it is not my clothing at all, it belongs to my dead grandmother.
I am outside in the cold. All of the people have taken their places in a carriage. There is no place for me. I walk in darkness to the first horse and mount. I am the figurehead of the carriage. The road is muddy and the rising of each hoof makes a sucking sound. There is a fine mist obscuring my view, but I am not afraid. We ride into the damp mist and stop in front of a vacant house whose yard is flooded with three feet of water. I alight from the horse and step into the yard. I enter the water, but it is not wet. I see an iridescent green leaf among the underwater bushes and pluck it off its twig. A light breeze ripples waves over my back, the leaf trembles in the palm of my white glove. The mist dissolves into the white clouds drifting apart from the blazing sun which warms the iridescent form and in my hand a sleeping hummingbird awakes.5

What had begun as a natural phenomenon or chance occurrence of the leaf bird had crawled into the recesses of my mind and emerged as a dream. What had first been a bird suggested by the placement of two leaves became a transformation—leaf changed into a hummingbird. The mood, environment, and the other elements appearing in the dream, such as the fabric, the contradiction of water not being wet, all have an effect on the associations that I made as the idea for a drawing evolved in my mind. The translucent silk wrapping my body in the dream became the supporting plane in "On Either Side", the tissue wrapping of the flower arrangement from my memory, and then a suggested backdrop where a drawing exists as a three-dimensional illusion in "Twig Bird, Leaf Bird" (plate 2).
"Twig Bird, Leaf Bird" explores a transformation of objects using similar outline, texture, and structure as its thread of continuity. Both the leaf bird and the twig bird emerge from a plane, this time vertically positioned. The central twig gives the illusion of puncturing a two-dimensional surface. However, looking closely one may notice the texture of the maple leaf is similar to the twig bird's feathers. The beak corresponds to the stem of the falling leaf.

I used the two-dimensional plane again in "The First Wish" (plate 3) to establish a contradiction between the drawing on real paper and the drawing rendered against a drawn, or illusory plane. A hummingbird is perched on a wishbone which punctures the paper and becomes a pair of branches. The bottom branch of the wishbone supports a maple leaf- the mirror image of the bird's shape. The superstition associated with the wishbone has always fascinated me:

When two people pull a wishbone apart, the one getting the longer fragment will have his wish granted.  

For me, the wishbone seems to possess magical powers. In "The First Wish", the wishbone takes on the power of allowing the configuration to exist free from the reign of
logic. The title "The First Wish" may imply that the drawing is the wish. My wish is that the configuration exist not only in my mind or on the piece of paper, but in the viewer's mind as well.

I am pleased with "The First Wish" drawing. It developed smoothly from "Twig Bird, Leaf Bird", transforming the forked twig (or divining rod) into another magical object with a similar shape - the wishbone. "The First Wish" led to the creation of the suite of miniature prints: "Three Wishes" (plate 4). In this suite, I used the same set of elements: altering their arrangement, transforming them, and changing their function. In "Three Wishes: Three", the bird, wishbone, and leaf are drawn without alteration of their forms. Instead, their placement on a paper folded like a letter suggests a message in visual terms. "...what counts above all is not so much the configuration in itself, but the idea, the 'new idea' which a change of thought associates with a customary object...".

Size is an important factor in the suite. I believe that the preciousness of the idea of wishes demands an intimate encounter. Such precise detail in a small image area (two inches square) requires one to view the prints at extremely close range and thereby to become involved
with the total composition of each print without having to change the position of one's eyes.

Subtle detail is also an important factor of my work. In the print "Air Mail" (plate 5), I present three different interpretations of reality: the photo-lithographic image of the real hummingbird; the drawn hummingbirds inside the envelope (the plane has now become a definite, recognizable form as an envelope); and the two-dimensional illusion of a stamp—a print within a print. The configuration of elements on the stamp is repeated in the larger configuration; the photo-hummingbird is to the envelope as the hummingbird is to the flower on the stamp. The stamp is actual sized and hand-colored to give the illusion of being a "real" stamp.

I have always admired the tautological effect or repetition of elements that Salvador Dali employs in many of his paintings. One painting in particular, "Portrait of Gala"⁸, allowed me to see that not only shapes, structures, and outlines repeat in objects, but also in configurations or entire compositions. I do not believe that tautology implies "unnecessary repetition"⁹, but rather it strengthens the composition by adding another dimension.

The photomechanical techniques in printmaking were a
challenge to me, since I found it necessary to integrate the photo-image with my drawing technique and retain the concept of the piece. In this respect, "Air Mail" is quite successful. The photo-image of the hummingbird is believable because we have learned that photographs depict "concrete" reality. The drawn hummingbirds inside the envelope persuade the viewer that he is looking at a three-dimensional world, although the stamp on the envelope is two-dimensional. In actuality, the entire composition exists on the two-dimensional plane of the paper. The composition is itself an illusion of something which does not exist in "reality".

After experimenting with a mirror image etched onto a pre-sensitized lithographic plate ("Moving Away From Home: Two"), I became very interested with the symmetry that resulted. Using the mirror image idea as a springboard I began drawing an aerial view of a perfectly symmetrical bird skull. I proceeded down the center of the plate, positioning various parts of a bird (including two birds back to back) while also showing the transforming of the "live" birds into their skeletal structures. From the ribcage I drew a leaf which has the same central structure in the arrangement of its veins. I scanned my studio and
found a collection of feathers and leaves all of which had the pinnate structure. The plane found in the previous prints and drawings again surfaces. However, this time it is implied by a configuration of leaves and feathers. These define a plane in one point perspective with the vanishing point at the top of the pole in "Totem Pole" (plate 6). The leaf bird reappears, this time mimicking the "real" bird in flight, changing into a feather which lands in the supporting plane for the totem pole. The theme presented in "Totem Pole" is similar to that of the earlier print "On Either Side". Dead objects support the icon above— the giant bird skull in "On Either Side" and the totem pole in "Totem Pole". I believe that the living are a result of the dead, just as we all are.

Every time we pick a leaf of lettuce from our gardens, every time we separate wheat from chaff, we kill just as surely as the knife that slits a lamb's throat. Every time we turn on a light, we make contact with the billion year old dead, hardened into coal or liquified into oil. Our cars run on melted fossils. The sun runs on combustible hydrogen turned inert by fusion. And as we live, so we die into the interminable will of nature,
to feed others that they may feed us at some other time or place in the universe.

Obladi, Oblada, Life goes on...la,la,la,la
Life goes on...10

I found a budding, forked twig early in the spring and saw it as an object with much potential. A series of six drawings begin with the "real" found object that I snapped off of the tree. While I felt sad that I was killing that innocent twig, I justified my action with the promise of letting the twig live again in a drawing suite. I had imagined a delightful development which demonstrated in six steps the creative process that I employed in metamorphosing a "real" composition into an imaginary one with "spring" as the theme. I saw the buds as fetal shapes having the potential of becoming not only leaves, but birds which have the same basic contour. Now, looking at the suite, I see it as a continuing metamorphosis which can be supplemented in an infinite number of ways...introducing new objects, additional themes, altering the planes from which the objects are beginning to emerge in the sixth drawing...(plate 7).

I think I would remain with an idea for a much longer
time if it were not for those ideas which incessantly flood my mind. Of course, there are times when I sit for hours, days, even weeks before I begin to draw. But it is not because I do not have an idea. Actually, it is because one idea triggers another, and another, and before I can complete an idea in a drawing, two, three, or more ideas pop into my imagination, thus altering my original idea.

"Crucifixion" (plate 8) is a prime example of this progression of ideas. In "Crucifixion", I originally drew a small bird being reeled in or flown by a large white glove. On either side of the "string" is a contrasting value which changes midway between the bird and glove when a half moebius strip metamorphoses from feathers (from the bird's tail) to pinnate leaves to palmate leaves emanating or descending into the glove.

This print changed drastically in a subsequent drawing. The bird became larger in order to more equally oppose the glove. The contrasting value structure was made more subtle by allowing the dark background to gather around the white glove, and the light to exist at the top of the piece with the bird. After studying Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's break up of space in his etchings and
paintings, clouds were substituted for the smooth value gradation, appearing only where the composition needed contrast.

At present, the size of the bird in relation to the glove that holds it by a suggested string is vital to the meaning of the piece. In the first composition, the glove holds all. The tiny bird cannot escape this master force constructed by the negative space surrounding the dark paper ground. In the second composition, the fantastic bird attains the same strength as the glove, effectively opposing it, and making uncertain the outcome of their "tug of war". The second composition suggests, therefore, a more permanent relationship—a kind of symbiosis—between the bird and the glove, rather than one of control. I believe the two forces may be the very ones which support Earth in orbit and for this reason may not surrender one to the other for millions of years.

Who knows what force it was that drew me into a discount store in downtown Columbus, down the escalator and over to the toy section where I found a bag of bird-shaped balloons. As I removed the bag from the metal hook, I flashed to a play within the novel, *Nadja*, by André Breton.
"Silence. A BALLOON FALLS IN THE ROOM. Silence."\textsuperscript{12} I remember reading these words over and over again, thinking how strange it was that words could create such a weird atmosphere. And there in my hand were bird balloons. From nowhere. I knew that I would have to fit them somewhere in my imagery. So far, I had remained with a natural image of a bird. It would be a challenge to introduce a new, "inanimate" object into my compositions.

Without preliminary drawings or compositions I began directly on a lithographic plate. (It was amazing. It was as if the drawing drew itself...that my hand was being guided by some force outside my body). The drawing took only three days to complete—a mere fraction of the time I usually take to make a comparable composition. I drew the balloon first, lying on its side on the bottom plane of a two-dimensional illusion of a cube or room suspended in space. The balloon is the subject of seven birds' consternation as it lies passively, bathed by a ray of light filtering in through the balloon-shaped hole in the wall or buried in the floor of the room. I have no explanation as to the number of "real" birds, or the entire composition of "A Balloon Falls in the Room" (plate 9).

Other images are just as mysterious to me. In a later
piece, "Souls in Limbo" (plate 10), many birds hover in a suggested space between the dead baby bird resting on the leaf, and the same bird repeated in the distance. Unconsciously, I reversed the elements used in "A Balloon Falls in the Room". This time the balloon birds hover ever so quietly over the still, dead bird whose configuration is repeated against the far wall of the "room". The balloon birds seem to represent all that is amorphous—neither hellish or heavenly, neither birds or man-made flying things. Their animating force is indefinable. For me, the balloon birds are symbolic of the soul: the immaterial essence— the unknown.

In "Resurrection" (plate 11), I took the configuration from the back wall of "Souls in Limbo" and defined the elements into a symbolic statement about life and death.

He was young
Lived fast and
Died quickly
When his motorcycle collided with an oncoming car
In southern Ohio,
As Robert and I
Were getting married
In the Durham woods
Of Connecticut. 14

"Resurrection" is the only piece in which I intentionally used symbolic elements. I saw the two events expressed in the poem connected by all the coincidence and mystery which
shroud any explanation of what this life on Earth is all about. In "Resurrection", a dead baby bird is connected to a "spirit" bird formed by negative space in a tonal backdrop. The "spirit" appears to be two-dimensional until the thread, which develops from the vein of the leaf the dead bird is resting on, pierces the "spirit". This spirit-plane seems to hold the secret of life and death, for it is through the presence of the plane that the dead rises as a spirit, and changes into a configuration of leaves at the top of the plane. I believe the spirit of my dead friend Charlie exists; perhaps in another form, perhaps in the branch of leaves, or perhaps only in my imagination. "Resurrection" portrays life and death as a never-ending cycle. One form gives rise to another.

One idea triggers another. While driving to a movie one Sunday afternoon, I glanced out of the car window and saw a wire fence with paper and leaves caught flat against the grid. That extraordinary feeling— the marvelous— came over me in that moment. I knew I had happened on an idea for a drawing.

I became intrigued by M.C. Escher's preoccupation with periodic surface division demonstrated in his woodcut "Day and Night". I used the diamond shape of the fence grid as the shape of pinnate leaves and of feathers. The
similarity of structure again took precedence in my imagery as I sketched my idea. While periodic surface division developed between the fencing, leaves, and feathers, a metamorphosis from fence to wishbone to thread to bird-head developed until "Needle Wish" (plate 12) was drawn. It is impossible to explain the piece. I drew it because I was compelled to. The energy came from my dreams, fantasies, and objects that attract me and the chance occurrences that become vivid memories.

I constantly attempt to blend the outside world with my inner thoughts and dreams into a total expression of myself. As an artist, I believe there is no distinction between the imaginary and the real. My intent is to set a stage suggesting the mysteriousness and "the marvelous" through accurately rendered objects that obsess me in my interior and exterior world. I am concerned with how the real, identifiable objects exist in the composition, and how these objects can relate to each other. I bring together specific objects: birds, feathers, leaves, bones, paper, twigs, gloves, balloons, and more recently, I have been considering the similar stripe pattern of zebras and woodgrain.
Just as stripes suggest "zebra" or the essence of zebra, woodgrain patterns suggest "wood" or the essence of wood. I begin with an undecipherable gesture as the ideas, the memories, the past, the relationship of objects flood my mind. I keep sketching, rearranging objects, reconsidering ideas, until the pieces fit together in a print or drawing.

I am a 20th Century artist, a fact which enables me to express myself in an astounding variety of modes. I might have been a Photo-Realist or an Abstract Expressionist or perhaps a color theorist. In the face of all these possibilities, I chose a realistic mode, although not one of "point for point" reproduction. I utilize that branch of Surrealism called Magic Realism, which is the precise delineation of recognizable objects, distorted and transformed, but nevertheless presented with a ruthless realism that throws into shocking relief their newly acquired fantasy.¹⁷

At this stage of my artistic development, I am drawn to color as well as to a similarity of texture in animate and inanimate objects. My tentative plan is to strengthen my future black and white prints with hand coloring, and to experiment with oil glazing on linen. With these
techniques, I feel I can communicate that much more of "the marvelous" to those of us who have given up seeing all but the ordinary. And to the more sophisticated viewers of my work, I will offer still more of life's puzzle for consideration. As long as I can perceive this marvelous experience and feel the desire to communicate it, I will make art.
PLATES

1  "On Either Side"  Lithograph
2  "Twig Bird, Leaf Bird"  Drawing
3  "The First Wish"  Drawing
4  "Three Wishes"  Lithographs
5  "Air Mail"  Photo-Lithograph
6  "Totem Pole"  Lithograph
7  "Spring"  Drawings
8  "Crucifixion"  Lithograph
9  "'A Balloon Falls in the Room'"  Lithograph
10  "Souls in Limbo"  Lithograph
11  "Resurrection"  Lithograph
12  "Needle Wish"  Lithograph
plate 2
plate 11
FOOTNOTES


5 Nancy L. Greco, Dream Diary, 1975-1978.

6 _Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary_, p. 1035.


9 _Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary_, p. 904.


11 *pal-mate; resembling a hand with the fingers spread,* _Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary_, p. 607.


13 _Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary_, p. 834.

14 Greco, Sketchbook.

16Ibid., p. 38.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


