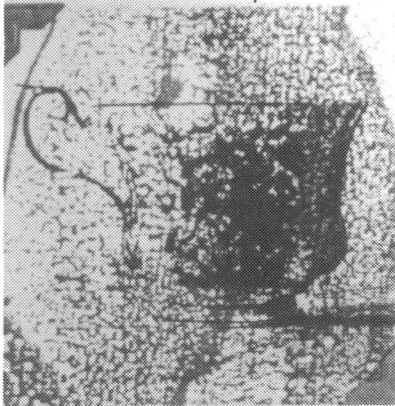
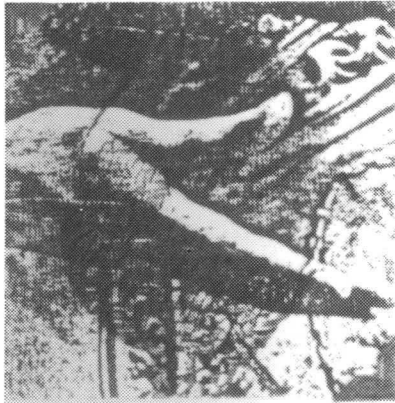


Interview



Dianne Pearce: Images of the Female Body as Goddess

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ORIGINALLY FROM ST. THOMAS, ONTARIO, Dianne Pearce has spent the last year at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma, where she was granted a scholarship to complete a master's degree in Fine Arts. This masters follows art studies at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, and Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Dianne recently agreed to grant me an interview by fax for *Atlantis*, so, thrilled, I sent her a barrage of questions about the symbolism in her work, the technique she uses to produce these drawings, and her thoughts and feelings about women and art.

Dianne read this "spirited and candid fax in a crowded streetcar at rush hour." In Mexico, she writes, "every bus and cab driver has a small shrine in the vehicle, and next to it a pornographic picture of a young female — blond, naturally." The shrines honour the Virgin and this "strange coexistence of the Virgin Mary and pornography" intrigues Dianne. The juxtaposition of veneration and degradation of women seemed contradictory:

until it became clear to me; the Virgin, in her five roles as Virgin, Queen, Bride, Mother and intercessor, provides women with an impossibly divided aim: virginity and motherhood. Thus the virgin is worshipped for her purity, the pornographic female nude for her sexuality, and the mother, neither virgin goddess nor porn goddess, for her childbearing.

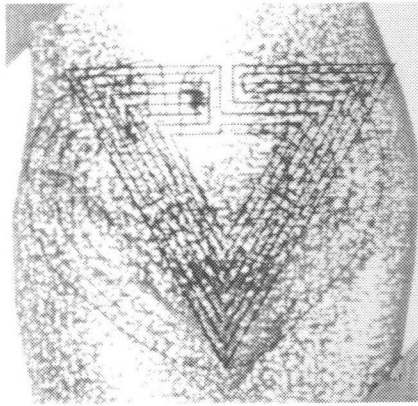
Being steeped in this culture which venerates Mary (et al.) seems ideal for Dianne; currently, she is studying images of the Virgin Mary from the third to the tenth centuries. Her interest is:

[in] the psychological necessity for the female archetype as it continued from goddess worshipping religions to Christianity, resulting in the appropriation of pre-Christian symbolism, mythology and rituals manifested in the representation of the Virgin Mary in art.

The series presented in this issue of *Atlantis* shows the germination of her current research and, as she puts it, "the beginning of my relationship with a woman who would fascinate me two years later." Have you wondered whose hands appear throughout *The Weaker Vessel* (I Peter 3:7)? They are "photocopied from religious paintings and sculptures of the Virgin Mary."

You might be wondering just what Dianne had in mind, combining staunch female figures with hands, teacups and high-tech looking labyrinths, and calling the work what she did. She tells me:

I have been criticized by women for using this quote, but I think their criticism derives from misunderstanding my intention. In 1984 I took a course on feminism and religion and really had no idea of the issues. It wasn't until about six years later that I reread the books and understood the two sides of the debate: women who believe freedom is articulated more freely and consistently within tradition than without, and hence search tradition for positive and constructive alternatives to sexist theology; and others who believe that pre-biblical or modern experiences provide more authentic sources of feminist theology and thus reject any loyalty to sexist traditions. I tend toward the second



school of thought and yet I am fascinated by religion.... The title was chosen intentionally and applied to this piece about female symbology, fertility and strength as tongue-in-cheek irony.

Creating art seems to be a crucial part of Dianne's own spiritual experience, bringing together her intellect, her insight and her desire to express.

You may recognize the staunch figures as they resemble early European goddess figurines, and the moon images so prominent among goddess worshipping traditions, both east and west. You may find the placement of labyrinths on female bellies intuitively familiar, as "the labyrinth represents the soul's journey into the centre of the uterine underworld and its return toward rebirth..." But what actually prompted these drawings? A combination of questions, glimpses of women's sacred experiences, and the joy of ritual.

Both series of drawings [*B(e)aring*, presented in the previous issue of *Atlantis*, and *The Weaker Vessel*] are influenced by Dianne's current intel-

lectual interests: *B(e)aring*, by her reading about pre-Christian goddesses and female idols; *The Weaker Vessel*, by "the concept of the female as vessel, a cup, a holder, a bearer."

"The teacup, for me, represented the vessel." This version of traditional cauldron, or grail, has enhanced meaning for Dianne.

When my mother gave me her china tea cups and saucers used years ago in her Monday bridge club, it dawned on me that they (the women of the bridge club) had a social "ritual" of tea-drinking among female friends during their "sacred" afternoons.

While Dianne says that the "series was pre-meditated and envisioned, as is customary of my way of working," the creation process itself seems to add an intuitive element. This is reflected in her description of the introduction of labyrinths:

I photographed the teacups and then photocopied the photos onto acetate.

Taking the photos from above, the cups were flattened and became labyrinth-like; I began with labyrinths.

Both series of drawings are done with a similar technique in which Dianne finds the ritual.

...made on polyester matte film typically used in architectural and engineering drawings, I discovered its beauty while working as a textile designer in Montreal. Its surface is silky smooth and takes the graphite willingly, making smudging easy. I was experimenting with various materials on the polyester and discovered that turpentine turned the graphite into a wash-like ink that, when held to the light, illuminated the image. With the graphite I was drawing, but with the turpentine I was painting. I liked that subtle difference of changing a drawing into a painting... The illumination was just what I wanted, for, in layering transparent images, I feel that I am, by way of accumulation, strengthening their meaning and multiplying their significance.

Once the drawings were finished and the photocopied acetates of symbols collaged, I began a ritualistic process of heating a large pan of beeswax to dip them in. I say ritualistic because it is a tricky process, and the combination of concentration and tranquillity with the nut-like scent of the wax is intoxicating. I dipped the drawings after work, in the cold nights of January ... in a poorly heated Montreal apartment. When the wax dried I began scraping and rubbing the surface, to create texture.... This process of collaging, layering, inscribing and re-working results in a tactile, sensuous surface which is integral to my work. I work obsessively, wanting the process oriented, ritualistic repetitiveness to mirror the rhythmic cycles of the body.

Dianne's interest in the body is dynamic. On the one hand, like many women, she is intrigued

with and concerned by the visual representation of women. On the other hand, she perceives a deep connection between the body and spiritual identity — a perception heightened by her experience of Crohn's disease which, for eight years, has imposed a feeling of "severance between body, mind and soul." She explains the impact of this experience which underlies her artistic work today:

...as I grew up, every Sunday, we went outside of ourselves and our homes to a special building housing our spirituality for us. We went to church. Once there, we relied upon a male leader to direct our spirituality yet further away from us, toward the sky. With this disease living within me, my life had become centred around my belly, my middle, my core; the disease controlled my body and disrupted its natural rhythms. In church, too, I began to feel controlled, to feel an inconsistency between these weekly spiritual rhythms and my femininity; I had the lingering feeling we should be searching within, towards the centre rather than without.

In pursuit of this inner search, Dianne is studying spirituality in various cultures, always with an eye to the pre-patriarchal traditions.

While living in Mexico Dianne has had occasion to reflect upon life in Canada as a woman artist. She comments that the high standard of living and level of support for both women and artists makes it possible for artists "to be artists." She also notes that "the most important contemporary Canadian artists are women [who] have a high profile in the Canadian embassy's culture literature [in Mexico]."

Dianne continues with the layering and "collaging" techniques while introducing new images, materials and colours to her work, including the application of charcoal to transparent papers by way of her own body as stamp. "Ultimately," she concludes, "my concern lies with the female body and the ... return to a time when the female body was worshipped for its inherent fertile qualities."