

WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL

PORTRAITS, ISSUES AND INSIGHTS

CONNIE FOX - RECKONING WITH RECTANGLES

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Published in Women's Art Journal Spring/Summer 2013

"My paintings are about what you can make happen in a rectangle," says Connie Fox with a devilish smile. She knows she is touting a formalist line, one she's repeatedly crossed for fifty-odd years. With her inventive lexicon of symbols, metaphors and implied narration, Fox walks a taut tightrope, balancing cool abstraction with intense subjectivity. When asked, "How does this dichotomy square with your formalist creed?" Fox shrugs and says, "Dig up some sod."¹

That dig unearths a treasure trove of work by an under-sung painter who's as authentic and unique an artist as you're apt to find, one who willingly pays a price for her unorthodoxy. Forfeiting "iconic style" and the fame that often accompanies it, Fox deliberately undoes any emerging "signature" look. She prefers to explore paradoxes, asking "Can a hat operate as a geometric shape without losing its hatness?" "Can a grid be as open as sky and stay a grid?" Though her answers to these questions belie her ties to Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism—her major influences—her finessing of these genres explores uncharted terrain. The boundaries in a Fox rectangle are marvelously blurred places where reasoned geometry yields to intuitive gesture, where symbols lose their forms, and forms become symbols, where storytelling meanders into plots with baffling narration. Fox's formalist quip about "what happens in a rectangle," is thus a stunning truth; not the mockery of a mere jester, but a key to understanding both how she works, and how a complex work of art evolves.

Barry Schwabsky, art critic for *The Nation*, wrote about Fox's uniqueness in terms of her complexity, comparing her work to a Proustian sentence. He describes this complexity in paintings as:

... coherent multiplicity. A complex painting would be one capable of including many spaces...many qualities of light, of texture, of facture, a wide gamut of colors; it would allow for descriptive representation, schematic or symbolic representation, for geometric and gestural abstraction; and these would not simply coexist, but would somehow be coordinated.... And out of multiplicity would arise the work's sense of meaning."²

Schwabsky's Proustian description of the elements found in a Fox painting elucidates what many art world legends more simply say is Fox's sheer virtuosity. A number of them, interviewed for this article, came of age with Fox during the heyday fifties and sixties of American modernism, or during the Postmodern era that followed. They know her as an artist who dances a two-step away from the crowd; the same rail thin, clear green-eyed gal from Colorado who still, at age 87, paints with unrelenting passion what flows through her on any given day.

She begins her day, as she has for decades, at Sammy's Beach, a strand along the tidal bay, not far from the East Hampton, New York, home she shares with her husband, the sculptor Bill King. Years ago, she and Elaine de Kooning (1918–89) walked and sketched there, taking five dogs along for company. Yet for all the time spent at Sammy's, Fox didn't begin her extensive Sammy's Beach series—ten large-scale paintings and seventeen drawings—until 2007. She explains:

The most significant thing I did at Sammy's was to just be there. I walked, sat, looked. Most importantly, I swam. Why is it so important? Hard to say, but it has to do with getting "carried away" by physical energy that gives me back more than I put into it. It took thirty years of going (there) to want to do a series of paintings with reference to Sammy's Beach—not to paint what I saw vis-à-vis the landscape. My titles are never descriptive, just ... something cryptic ... coupled with the painting for all sorts of reasons or non-reasons.

This is why *Sammy's Beach III* (2009; Pl. 1) looks nothing like a recognizable beach. The painting consists of a cluster of magenta and iridescent-flecked black forms, here thick as sludge, there thin as soiled rain. Rising like mountains against a luminescent grid, they cradle a milky moon, wisps of delicate tendrils tickling its surface. Below they drip, like melting black glaciers, into a reflecting pool shot with dabs of color. To the lower right, a floral-shaped black spiral, aspin on a layer of ice-white, courts a glowing flash of orange on the left. This unexpected light source serves as counterpoint to all that is otherwise grim, dark, and static. This orange spark keeps the composition from sinking into an abyss. This orange cauldron is haunting and scary. Such is the

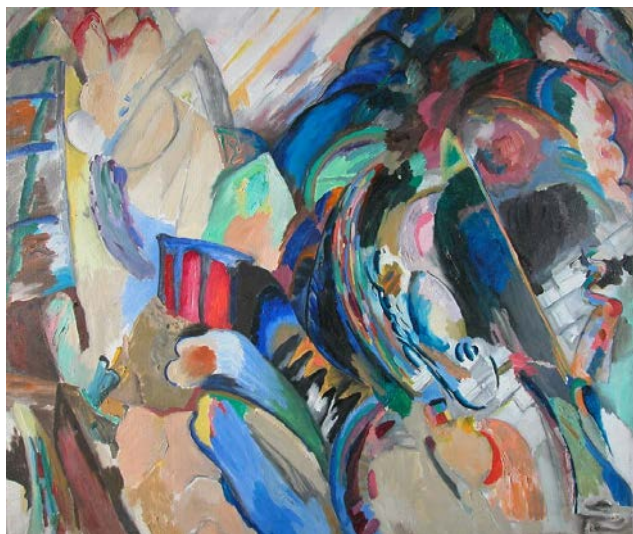


Fig. 1. Connie Fox, *Truches Bridge* (1973), oil on linen, 32" x 36". Photo: Connie Fox.

nature of a Fox painting, its character defined by provocation, paradox and contradiction.

To see how all this relates to Sammy's Beach, go there and glimpse what washed in with the last tide. All that seaweed, black, oozy, and piled high on sun-streaked sand, reflects Fox's black, light-flecked mountainscape. However, whatever caught and stayed in the corner of Fox's eye the day she began the work is peripheral to how and why she made the painting. "They are notations of things I saw at Sammy's, or details from photographs taken over the years."

So are these notations from an East Hampton shoreline but a mind-click away from the dust

storms roiling the midwestern heartland during the early 1930s. Born in the small town of Fowler, Colorado, in 1925, Fox lived her childhood on the edge of the "Dust Bowl," lands destroyed by severe drought that turned once arable earth to fine grit, easy prey for violent winds scooping up impotent soil by the acreful, and massing it into monstrous thunderheads. Called "black rollers,"

these vagrant paws tramped across entire towns, leaving in their wake a stinging skin of grimy orange fog. Fox remembers that “old ladies said the world was coming to an end, but as a child, I thought they were fascinating forms of swishhh.” The magic and horror of that coppery sear through black blizzards lingers seventy years later in the embers smoldering through the peaks of Sammy’s Beach III.

“These are primal memories,” remarked the art critic and filmmaker Amei Wallach, who met Fox through Elaine de Kooning in the 1980s. After a recent visit with the artist, Wallach observed that:

Movement and energy are at the core of Fox’s complexity. Her whole body of work can be seen as a declination of the varieties of energy as collision, energy as centrifugal force or as big bang. This energy is turbulent; it can be malevolent. And the paintings don’t just describe it. They’re like dispatches from within the field of energy— from within Fox’s memories of being encompassed in energy. There were the Dust Bowl storms that engulfed her as a child, the water that envelops her when she swims.³



Fig. 2. Connie Fox, *An Egyptian Temple For My Mother* (1988), acrylic on canvas, 60” x 75”. Photo: Connie Fox.

Fox who readily relates to that surround of energy, also describes a counterforce emanating from within:

When I was about five, I had a tricycle. I figured out how to take it apart and put the frame on upside down. It turned into a racing tricycle. I was seated way low and could really zoom around. It was the fun of working with materials; the direct relationship between visual information and emotion mixing together. It set early on, and was something I had to follow, like a sirens’ song.⁴

Wallach’s and Fox’s energized metaphors describe the combined visual and psychic twister careening, in many guises, through decades of Fox paintings. In *White Column* (1963) it appears as a tightly coiled rope lunging from the lower foreground of the composition to its upper edge. Ten years later it courses through abstract maelstroms of color, subsuming the architectural fragments of *Truches Bridge* (1973; Fig. 1). In the 1980s, it resurfaces as a cacophony of images invited to play havoc with painterly gesture. In *An Egyptian Temple for My Mother* (1988; Fig. 2), for example, intersecting frames containing a heart, a Greek temple, and a vine-wrapped pole collide with a mash of reds, blues and, a garish yellow swirl. And, in the recent *Sammy’s Beach* series, a cosmos of color, space, and form explode abstractions of earth, fire, water, and light. But what’s

most important, despite her allusions to nature or anything else, is Fox's consistent disregard for literal subject matter (as evidenced in her substitution of a Greek monument for her titled Egyptian Temple). Once Fox's stream of consciousness floats objects into her pictorial ring, they become compositional combatants, duking it out until she mediates a compositional draw.

Her shifts in style, from her early semi- abstractions and mature carnivalesque collisions, to the wizened silences now abiding the restive moods at Sammy's Beach, jelled over decades, one body of work distinctly different from, but consistently related to the next by virtue of their connections to nature, metaphor, and intuitive abstraction. Through time, these elements become richer, more densely layered, and more magnificently complex.



Fig. 3. Connie Fox, *Puerto Rico Red* (1970), oil on linen, 50" x 48". Photo: Connie Fox.

Fox didn't see much art until she became an artist. There were no museums in Fowler. But her loving family valued gender equality, self-reliance, and self-expression. She says, "My father assumed I could do whatever my older brother could do—he taught me to work with tools—and my mother painted tropical murals on our living room walls and bold flowers on the handmade dresses I wore to school." Those resonate in her explosive flower paintings of the 1970s, such as *Puerto Rico Red* (1970; Fig. 3).

After graduating from the University of Colorado, where she received a strong literary education, Fox studied at Art Center School in Los Angeles. "I didn't see 'real paintings' until 1949," she exclaims: "a Surrealist show featuring Magritte, Ernst and Matta, in LA." About that time, she also began reading Proust,

which she is still reading, and watching films by Cocteau and the young Fellini. To earn money, she hand painted neckties and waitressed at a local luncheonette.

That's where she met Wayne Andersen, a lanky farm cowboy and high school dropout who became a well-known art historian, writer, and scholar. She was his muse. Reached for this article, Andersen made available notes for his in- progress book, "Wild Artists I've Known." Fox occupies the first chapter:

Early one evening when chatting with Connie across the bar, ... she asked if I would like to go with her and hear Alvin Lustig lecture on his work (at a bookstore in Santa Monica). I had no idea who this Lustig was, had never attended a lecture, and hadn't even been in a bookstore, but a date with Connie would give good reason for a first time for anything. Connie converted me from Hudson's Green Mansions to Sartre's Being and Nothingness ... from a van Gogh-emotional to a Surrealist-intellectual focus.⁵

Andersen proposed. Fox said “no.” Instead, in 1950, she and two girlfriends took off on an eight-month, 1000-mile bicycle trip through Europe, stopping off first in New York, where Fox eyed her first Willem de Kooning painting. Europe, all rubble and still in post-war shock, was a dicey place for three young women to travel alone, but it is here that her heart throbbed in the staggering presence of Europe’s great architecture, Delacroix’s unexpurgated color, Cezanne’s anxious geometry, Masaccio’s silences, Redon’s mysteries, and Michelangelo’s breathtaking mastery of scale and space in the Sistine Chapel.

After the quick taste of Surrealism followed by this smorgasbord of great masters, Fox, in 1951, came home to a melting-pot brewing abstraction, American style. As art critic Rose Slivka wrote, “Abstract Expressionism was America’s last great spiritual movement.... In 1952 ... you could see all the exhibitions there were to be seen on a lunch hour, and still have time for lunch. What happened afterward, as Elaine (de Kooning) said, was beyond ... (everyone’s) wildest dreams.”⁶

Abstract Expressionism was spreading from New York to California and Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Fox headed for an MA degree at the University of New Mexico, in the spring of 1952. What she found there was “such freedom ... artists doing what hadn’t been done before. Richard Diebenkorn, Agnes Martin, Adja Yunkers, Robert Mallery, and Robert Dash studied there. In 1957, Elaine de Kooning came to teach, bringing New York’s energy. She’s the closest thing I had to a mentor, and we became the best of friends.”

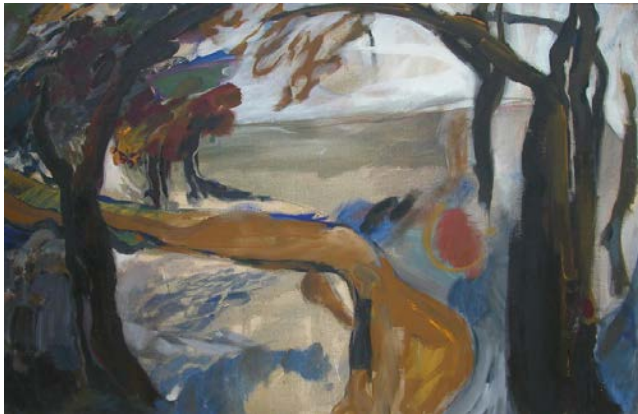


Fig. 4. Connie Fox, *Orange Road* (1953), oil on canvas, 33” x 49”. Photo: Connie Fox.

In *Orange Road* (1953; Fig. 4), an early New-Mexico semi- abstract work, Fox grapples with the abstract difficulties of rendering a landscape with depth, while respecting the flatness of the picture plane. Here, two sturdy trees press against the canvas surface, an orange road advances towards, and then retreats from the viewer, and a splotch of impudent red holds the middle ground. Unlike her later works, Fox stays true to nature in *Orange Road*, using translucent washes of color as pictorial glue to weave her forms through the warp and weft of

deep and shallow space. Her young daring presages her lifelong intuitive process of allowing compositional conundrums to point the way to new abstract possibilities.

Elaine de Kooning took early note: “Fox ... denies the general flamboyant tonalities of the Southwest. A magnificent draughtsman and colorist in that section of the spectrum where colors relinquish their names... Fox paints her starkly articulated mountains and trees, huddled birds and grandly isolated figures in elusive, cold umbers, ochres, blues, grays, and whites.” *Berkeley Flower* (1963; Fig. 5), another semi-abstract landscape featuring an “offish green” flower, with a moon

gliding between mountain peaks, fits de Kooning's description. With its glow of warm orange light, this composition also bears an uncanny kinship to the recent *Sammy's Beach III*, with one big difference: *Sammy's Beach III* bears no verisimilitude to nature.

When questioned about her interest in semi-abstract landscapes at a time when all hell was breaking loose with nonobjective, Minimal and Pop Art, Fox replied, "I just get ideas I want to run with. As Bill [King] said, they come from a wellspring that doesn't have much to do with what other artists are doing."



Fig. 5. Connie Fox, *Berkeley Flower* (1963), oil on linen, 30" x 40". Photo: Connie Fox.

This kind of independent distance from the avant-garde was not uncommon, according to Elaine de Kooning. She maintained that many of the New Mexico artists she met during her teaching stint in Albuquerque evolved differently from their New York and California brethren because of "a landscape so overwhelming that painters have to look inside. Here is strongly introspective art, stubbornly original and personal, yet not eccentric. Revealing an awareness of East- and West-Coast painting, the work of New Mexican artists reflects neither. None of the slashing brushstrokes of the former, none of the brilliant colors of the latter."⁸ These insights help explain Abstract Expressionism's impact on many who tiptoed around it.

"Elaine blew the lid off," says Fox; "her influence on me was profound. But all this energy ... where is this going to germinate and take root? It's exciting, but these energies don't necessarily go into paintings at the time ... they may later." The works of the eighties and nineties, for which Fox is best known, percolated for twenty years, in many ways fueled by the intellectual whorl she helped create. During her first marriage, to Blair Boyd (1954–66), Fox and her young family flitted between Berkeley, California, and Albuquerque. Some of the remarkable twentieth-century figures caught in her vortex are, like Fox, still around, going strong, and eager to share their compelling recollections about her and the mid-century American scene as they experienced it.

In a wonderful photograph (circa 1957; Fig. 6), the political activist Margaret Randall sits with Fox, Elaine de Kooning, the sculptor Herb Goldman and his wife, Jane, in a Juárez, Mexico, bar. Fox and de Kooning loved to sketch the bullfights, and would stop there during their south-of-the-border sojourns. As Randall recalls: "I was very young. The fifties were so repressive, and Connie and Elaine were diametrically opposed to the McCarthy people. The great poet Robert Creeley showed up at a party, given by Connie and Blair, with a fresh copy of Allan Ginsberg's new poem, *Howl*. He read it out loud and it turned my life around."⁹



Fig. 6. Photograph in Juárez bar (ca. 1957), L. to R., Connie Fox, Jane and Herb Goldman, Elaine de Kooning, Margaret Randall

Randall in Mexico co-edited with Sergio Mondragón an avant-garde bilingual literary magazine, *El corno emplumado* (The Plumed Horn). Any given issue could contain works by communist writers, Catholic priests, and guerilla poets. Three editions included Fox drawings. One delicate line rendering riffs on Albrecht Dürer's 1497 *Self-Portrait* (1967). Another surreal drawing, *Penis Nose* (1967) consists of a large flower shape with a humorous ribald face set within its center. These drawings, one fine, the other densely shaded, foreshadow Fox's later experiments with drawing as both an independent media,

and as a compositional element within a painting.

Sonya Rapoport, a conceptual artist and friend from the Berkeley days, knew the "California Fox" from a different, "very middle class perspective."

I went to visit Connie in this elegant neighborhood and I see this funky truck in the driveway ... glad it wasn't my street. That was the iconoclast, very un-bourgeoisie, Connie Fox. She was so professional, with a studio away from her house! I'll never forget that. Everyone was drawn to her. Elaine [de Kooning] came and stayed for weeks. Connie showed at Hanson Gallery. She opened worlds for me ... her works,

wonderful surprises ... such an original way of looking at things.¹⁰



Fig. 7. Connie Fox, *Steps-Shell-Moonface* (1964), oil on linen, 60" x 50.5". Photo: Hiroyuki Hamada.

Most of Fox's works during the sixties jockey between her surreal moon- and flower-face compositions and her voluptuous flowers dominating cubist-like landscapes. *Steps-Shell-Moonface* (1964; Fig. 7) combines a bit of everything: mountains and flora alluding to nature, a surreal moon face, and a geometric stepped bridge. This architectural element, like the cubist landscapes, prefigures the grids that would later play a dominant role in her compositions. But the most intriguing work of this period is the vastly different *Bull/Arena* (1969; Pl. 2). Its transcendent and

mystical ambiguities foreshadow the surreal and abstract-expressionist components of her mature compositions.

For decades, Fox completely forgot the existence of this large work on linen, until happenstance last summer unfolded it among rolls of early paintings. It took sleuthing to determine its origins, and to learn why so pivotal a piece spent decades in hiding. Rapoport who still has some linen Fox gave her in the 1960s, mailed a swatch to help her friend date the work. No match. But Rapoport did recall seeing a “tapestry-like painting on unstretched linen” when she visited Sewickley, Pennsylvania, where Fox had moved with her two children, Megan and Brian, and second husband, Max Braverman, in 1968.¹¹ “Her studio was in an old Pennsylvania Railroad station,” reports Rapoport, impressed with “its huge rooms, high ceilings and marble toilets!” The old relic belonged to Fox’s friend Diane George, an art-glass blower, who used it as a studio and to house her furnaces. She invited Fox to share her space. George not only remembered the large linen work but also reminded Fox: “That was when you discovered color!”¹²

“I took over an old waiting room with 23-foot ceilings that challenged me to work large,” Fox now recalls. The enigmatic Bull/Arena features, in a faint flowing outline reminiscent of her Dürer drawing, the figure of a large charging bull—a metaphoric field for the central image of a smaller,



Fig. 8. Connie Fox, *Hatting the Jack* (2004), acrylic on canvas, 78" x 84". Photo: Connie Fox.

more intricately rendered animal likeness. This one, softly modeled in washes of grey and cerulean, floats within a womb-like, pale yellow cloud, framed by a cobalt blue column and a distant onion-domed monument. Intrigued by the hefty animal’s gravity-defying lightness, Fox says she “wanted to capture the contrasts; the way delicate legs and hooves are repeated in the graceful elegance of the bull’s powerful horns.” It’s not clear if the central figure is protected within the belly of the mighty outlined beast or if it represents a vanquished creature’s soul. Fox leaves such transcendent questions transcendent. A

master of ambiguity, she formally extends it, using the drawn figure as a visual link to connect her precise imagery with color masses, splashed with expressionist abandon, throughout the composition’s open spaces. In a Fox rectangle, anything is possible.

A string of Proustian narratives deepens this work’s complexity. “I think about this marvelous beast ... beautiful and light, sailing across the sky. I also think of Cocteau’s film *Beauty and the Beast*,” says Fox, saddened that the fierce but fragile hairy creature morphed into a pretty prince. But more comes to mind: mighty Juárez bulls, dying with dignity, and Fox’s childhood recollection of horse

games played every year in Fowler; tournaments when fearless cowhands astride robust steeds raced through billows of yellow dust. Architectural elements providing structural support to the ethereal pale cloud clearly mimic the monuments Fox saw in Europe. And all those peripheral splatters of paint pay homage to Abstract Expressionism. *Bull/Arena* is about all of these things in general and none of them in

particular. "It transcends anything specific," says Fox.

Why did she forget it? Says Fox:

I think it satisfied my need to get into specific imagery and drawing—something I again hungered for much later, when it came to Sammy's Beach. But in the seventies I decided to work in different scales using intense color and spatial animation, as I did in *Pastel Rainbow* [1978]. Kandinsky influenced me, briefly. This is different from my study of Piet Mondrian, and how he related his geometry to the edges and proportions of the canvas rectangle. I still find fresh insight in his simultaneous use of complexity and simplicity.

This Mondrian connection becomes important and clearer later.

Fox lived with her children in Pennsylvania until they were grown, then, in 1980, at the urging of Elaine de Kooning and Robert Dash, she moved to East Hampton. Divorced from Braverman, independent, and bursting with renewed energy, she now embarked on a body of work so remarkable that it prompted de Kooning to purchase, then donate, *Bright and Restless as Flags* (1984) to the Albuquerque Museum. Her cover letter said: "I consider Fox a major American artist," and she praised her "highly inventive use of form and ... unique juxtaposition of scale and space."¹³ Tackling abstraction's relentless complexities in a wholly new way, gesturally, intuitively, and symbolically, Fox was on her way to becoming the Abstract Expressionist who wasn't.

Not the Man, Not the Tornado (1985; Pl. 3), a mural-sized diptych, typifies the churning of multiple energy fields that characterize the eighties paintings: water surges, wind blows, and solid geometries forfeit their bulk. An upward-twisting helix digs in, halting an aggressive horizontal from becoming an actual horizon line. Meanwhile, a wheel spins in two directions at once, and off to the right, an indigo blue grid aborts pandemonium's slide off the canvas edge. An outlined human form leaning into the foreground further sandbags chaos. Suggesting a humanity-nature theme, it revives the narrative content suggested in *Bull/Arena*.

Such is the nature of Fox's expressionist ride through the frame of a rectangle, where discord and harmony coexist like a couple wanting to stay married, but always needing to find a way to make things work. "It's a juxtaposition of alien forms that you don't think will work, but they do," noted Robert Dash.¹⁴

"Every great artist ... discloses ... leitmotifs—that appear in many embodiments, that recur in matters of inspiration as well as those of execution, in the choice of subjects as well as in the choice of color harmonies. They are elusive," wrote art historian Rene Huyghe.¹⁵ For Fox, these "embodiments of inspiration" become mutations that wildly re-invent and dislocate subject and "color harmony," Consider *Rainbow/Knife* (1984; front cover), a prototypical example of her

eighties paintings. Here a spontaneous impaling of pigment, shape, sign, and symbol unfold in pictorial space with the fractured cinematic effects of Fellini's 1963 film *8 1/2*, which ricochets through the time/space corridors of the director's mind as he struggles to make a film about the film he is having difficulty making.

Fox explains the anatomy of *Rainbow/Knife*, saying, "It began with my thinking about the horizontal and vertical proportion of the canvas rectangle." That proportion determined the division of *Rainbow/Knife* into two unequally sized verticals. A horizontal line implied one-quarter way down the canvas further divided the space into a succession of frames. On the right they evolve into groupings of dislodged, cross-shaped "windows," which in turn inspire a field of crucifix-like telephone poles that write this painting's elusive story.

The small shattered frames on the right teem with disjointed, geometric forms and eddying color. It's a chaotic space, but one bathed in light. To the left, in a large, dark, and macabre open space, a knife completes a large white X, a knife that halts the curve of a rainbow in its advance towards light. Fox's iconic twister unites the two spaces: It here appears as a spinning yellow coil, palpable and bold in the light of day, dissolving to liquid in the ink of night.

Each form hurled into these disparate spaces acts as a juggernaut animating a composition that blurs all reasonable perceptions. The suggestion of a cubist house in the painting's right foreground, for example, initially provides the viewer safe ground, outside the painting's inner whorl. But the unwitting outsider gets sucked in, hurled through a series of "window panes," and then catapulted to the dark side, where a cross eerily floats in the night. Thus do Fox's metaphors for day and night as light and dark, reach a crescendo in her symbolic redemption of pictorial space.

Fox explains her charged imagery with a grammar lesson: "painting is a verb, sculpture is a noun," she says. "Paintings elucidate, eradicate, and equivocate throughout ... so when it came time to finish off that big X in *Rainbow/Knife* ... I wanted to add something to give it more interest. The shape of a knife seemed right." It transformed a flat triangle into a three dimensional form, shaped like a chunk of cheese. It also tossed into the mix a narrative zinger about pain and sacrifice.

Amei Wallach refers to Fox's quixotic imagery as the work of the Trickster who "remakes experience through paradoxical intervention ... the Trickster described in Blake's poem 'Europe,' as the fairy who sings a mocking song about the five windows through which man ... experiences the world that holy men and artists transmute."¹⁶ That this is one of Fox's favorite poems and sources of inspiration is a reminder that the Trickster is but a metaphor for the disruptive play of memories and sensations flitting through an artist's consciousness in the process of making. In its smallest, most personal guise it may appear much as it did to Blake, a tiny imp poised on the petal of a "strek'd tulip." But writ large in the landscape of art history, this ecumenical jester's sleight of hand deftly wheedles eons of symbolic meaning from all imagery, even when that imagery vehemently disclaims any and all decipherable meaning.

Thus did the Trickster-as-trope for symbolic language, metaphor clenched in its cunning fist, spring it loose in the twentieth century for new masters who would, in their own way, have their way with it. Though Abstract Expressionism is an American phenomenon, its spirit owes much to this timeless rascal packing an international passport. Charles C. Eldredge, founder of the American Art Forum, noted:

The receptivity of Americans to Transcendentalism and Symbolist aesthetics was abetted by the late nineteenth century's interest in subjective states and mental process ... [and] the era's preoccupation with spiritualism ... Theosophy and other alternative creeds, ranging from Swedenborgianism to Buddhism. A fascination with psychology and aberrant personalities ... provided a heady amalgam for the generations of artists and thinkers whose conceptions would shape the new era.¹⁷

Robert Motherwell held close the imagery of French Symbolist poets and the Surrealist writings of André Breton. He helped Breton edit *VVV*, "a periodical devoted to ... poetry, the plastic arts, psychology, sociology ... the field of wonderful."¹⁸ Jackson Pollock drew inspiration from European Surrealism and the theories of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. And, Lucy Lippard, noting how American Minimalists, inspired by Rodchenko and Malevich found transcendence in the simplicity of form, said that: "the emptiness of silent painting or monotonal painting ... is really a form of spiritual expression."¹⁹

The Trickster as indefatigable muse also delights in tossing a few old masters into the lair of cocky young tigers. As David Anfam suggests, "for Pollock ... early mentors included ... Luca Signorelli, El Greco, Rubens.... In turn, Philip Guston engaged with Piero ... while Rothko utilized reproductions of works by Rubens. As Willem de Kooning wryly concluded, 'the idea that art can come from nowhere is typically American.'²⁰

Harold Rosenberg, a friend of Fox, well understood Abstract Expressionist metaphor as a loose cannon, capable of firing helter skelter through painterly space. Writing about Willem de Kooning's 'symbolic abstraction' he said: "It is still the rare artist who trusts his work entirely to the intuitions that arise in the course of creating it.... A half a century of abstract art ... made it possible for de Kooning to release his metaphors from specific objects and thus enable them to strike a much broader resonance of associations...."²¹

His comment cuts a clear path to Fox, who, in common with many Abstract Expressionists, never knows what a work will look like until it says "you're done." Carried along with her personal iconography are the symbols, metaphors, and symbolist resonances of Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, experimental film, Proust, and the European art and architecture that inspired her.

Yet no single art historical movement can claim her.

Artist Audrey Flack accompanied Fox and Elaine de Kooning on many plein air sketching outings. A highly accomplished banjo player, she also invited Fox and King to play violin in her Bluegrass band—The Art Attacks—that she organized in the eighties. Flack, who well understands Fox's work, made this observation: " She found her vision with Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism

early, and maintained it. She was like Franz Kline, who would draw a thin line, then wonder how



Fig. 9. Connie Fox, *Weeds 6 (Sammys Beach)* (2010), ink and charcoal on Stonehenge paper, 30" x 44". Photo: Jenny Gorman.

wide it had to be to become a form. But Kline maintained this 'form' as a line. Connie adds surrealist symbolism [as she did with the knife-line in *Rainbow/Knife*].” Pointing to one of her favorite works, *Hatting the Jack* (2004; Fig. 8), Flack praises its “symbolic overtones resonating emotional content within the abstract dynamic content of the work.”²² She refers to Fox’s sly manner of upending content as form and vice versa: a hat becomes a concave solid atop a flat circle; the jack, an oddity of pointy and ball-shaped parts, forgoes its upright spin to instead rocket sideways through space. These

objects vie with the rambunctious vividly hued pyramids and rectangles doing the emotional heavy lifting in this piece. Flack delights in the way Fox can make memories of a child’s reeling toy and an old uncle’s Homburg seamlessly merge with the painting’s formal elements.

“Had Connie just done abstraction she would be a second-generation Abstract Expressionist taking gesture and color to the nth degree, as artists of the sixties did,” notes contemporary sculptor Lynda Benglis. A close, long-time friend, Benglis says, “Fox is a symbolic Abstract Expressionist: she’s always been tied to nature and symbols. That she is doing her most creative work now is pretty amazing,”²³ she says, referring to the Sammy’s Beach paintings and the works leading up to them. They begin in the nineties, when Fox’s boisterous geometries simmer down to negotiate a new relationship. In *Postage Due* (1994; Pl. 4) they form an unruly checkerboard within a “squarish” form dominating a large rectangular canvas. Like the bull in *Bull/Arena*, a sea of washes, smears, smudges, and scratches of pigment laid on thin, lush, gentle, and rough surround it. So is there a narrative here, but it’s abstracted as an opinionated tiff among egocentric orange and dark-hued rectangles. They argue over shape as space, and negative space as form. All of which matters little to a streaked geometric grouping in the middle of the large square, or to the tight-knit clique of rectangles congregated in its lower right. As Barry Schwabsky observed, “Unlike many practitioners, Connie doesn’t use the grid to solve or eliminate her compositional problems—she uses it to generate them.... [They] open endless spatial possibilities undreamt-of by the formalism that was so prevalent in the sixties.”²⁴

But just as Fox’s gestural abstractions embrace then abandon Abstract Expressionism, so does her use of the grid bow to Mondrian as it exits his way of thinking. In *Still-life with Gingerpot I*, (1911) Mondrian used an irregular grid, and in *Gray Tree* (1911) a roughly implied one, to “unify the

pictorial field of his canvas ... to [bind] the depicted surface [of the object] to the literal surface of the picture."²⁵

Fox likewise uses the grid to respect the flatness of the picture plane, but unlike Mondrian, who proceeded to pure abstraction with tightly organized arrangements of horizontals, verticals, and pure colors, Fox adopts the grid to the exigencies of each painting. Her versatility with it is remarkably inventive. "It's like the invited guest who ends up cooking most of the meal and even cleans up," says, Fox in her lilting midwestern drawl that brings refreshing American pluck to aesthetic oratory. In *Fiore di Lisi* (2006; Pl. 5) she penetrates the grid by angling some of its squares and allowing them to intermittently drip their colors. A sepia fleur de lis, blowing in from the left side of the painting, recalls Fox's early flowers and Colorado thunderheads. Grid and flower are strange bedfellows, though they are far less combative than were knife and large white X in the 1980s. But *Fiore di Lisi*'s space is no less charged: here a pulsating marquee trumpets the arrival of a feathery femme fatale, destined to bring the house down.

"It surprised me to discover how the grid helps the painting breathe at the same time that it locks

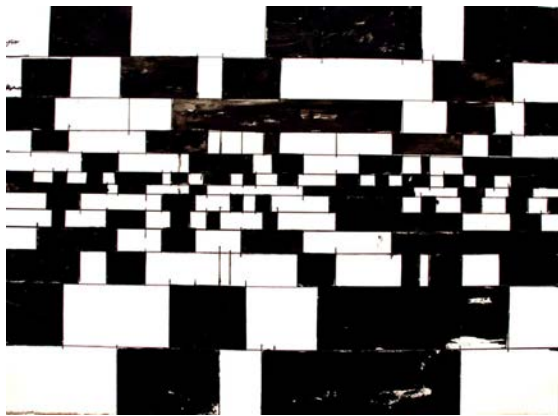


Fig. 10. Connie Fox, (2010), acrylic and ink on paper, 22" x 30". Photo: Jenny Gorman.

down the picture plane," remarked Fox, in reference to her *Sammy's Beach* series. In *Sammy's Beach I* (2007; Pl. 6), a grid extending two-thirds of the way down the pictorial surface defines the painting's overall structure, and serves as a backdrop for a rush of watery-blue simultaneously charging up and cascading down its façade. Fox has here successfully wedded the geometric grid to painterly gesture, but now she decides she wants more.

She wants to integrate drawing and painting, not as Jackson Pollock did, with his drawing arm one with his painterly "action," but by melding two different

media, so that they appear to be born from a single source. She accomplishes this by counterbalancing the flowing blue "water spout" with the brambly texture of the mountain-like form on the left. Then Fox unites these organic and inorganic grid elements by loosing across the surface, like a kite riding the wind, a graphically drawn white diamond shape. Her orchestration of textures—acrylic, brushed on or slathered with a palette knife, varied with different thicknesses of charcoal, blended and set with heavy gel—accomplish the difficult feat of making drawing and painting indistinguishable from one another.

In 2010 Fox decided to devote a sub-series of *Sammy's Beach* works as drawings—seventeen large independent works on paper consisting of twelve *Weeds* and five *Geometrics*, because, she says, "drawing maintains its own feel, its own language." She nevertheless achieves painterly effects with the medium. Lithe lines and a balled tangle in *Weeds 6* (Fig. 9) float upon white paper as if gliding in air. Irregularly sized and spaced grids in *Geometric V* (Fig. 10) oscillate through deep

and shallow space. Typical of Fox, these drawings perversely blur their own distinctions: What is controlled? What is spontaneously divined? Natural forms assume clean lines. Rectangles refuse lockdown in a grid. Taken together, these works on paper summarize what Fox has always been about: avowing her innate understanding that the dichotomies defining her craft are not dichotomies at all. The loose line is the yin to the ruler's sharp yang. Thus does Fox know her art as the sea knows the sky, and like nature, she deftly dissolves one layer of reality into another.

All of Fox's paradoxes explode like the most magnificent of fireworks in *Sammy's Beach X* (2012; Pl. 7). Vincent van Gogh, who marveled at Franz Hals's "twenty-seven shades of black," would, I believe, bow just as deeply to Fox's voluptuous ebony silhouette showering sensuous veils of opalescent white, bursts and drips of crimson, lavender, pink, and—as Elaine de Kooning said—“colors that relinquish their names.” All of which erupt against a grid that melts in a blaze of shimmering copper, silver and gold light.

Are we in the midst of another incarnation of fecund beachy foliage? The swish of black rollers? An encore by Fiore di Lisi? All of them? None of them? No matter.

If you've followed along you will recognize the joyous burst of amorphous form radiating within the iridescent light of creation. You will know its evanescently colored story. Those who haven't followed as closely needn't worry, for to re-phrase Fox's no-nonsense friend, Robert Dash, Connie Fox's works don't need lots of words, just pictures.

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Notes

1. All direct quotes by Connie Fox, except where otherwise noted, are based on taped interviews that took place between Sept. 1 and Dec. 15, 2012.
2. Barry Schwabsky, “Connie Fox and the Proustian Sentence,” in *Connie Fox Paintings* (New York: Brenda Taylor Gallery, 2006), Introduction.
3. All direct quotes by Amei Wallach are based on a Dec. 1, 2012 taped interview with her about Connie Fox.
4. Connie Fox, an excerpt from a taped lecture she gave at a program organized by Molly Barnes at the Roger Moore Hotel, New York, N.Y. Sept. 21, 2012.
5. According to Wayne Andersen's website, www.wayneve.stiandersen.com, the author of the anticipated publication, *Wild Artists I've Known*, is a Professor Emeritus of History, Theory, and Criticism of Art and Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Correspondences with Andersen, including receipt of the manuscript draft, took place by email.
6. Rose Slivka and Elaine de Kooning, *Elaine de Kooning, The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism, Selected Writings* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), introductory essay, 22–23.
7. *Ibid.*, 186.
8. *Ibid.*, 185.
9. Margaret Randall (b. 1936) is a feminist author, writer, photographer, and social activist. All quotes from Margaret Randall are based on a taped telephone conversation that took place on Oct. 24, 2012.
10. Sonya Rapoport (b. 1923) a conceptual/digital/new media artist, is considered a pioneer among those who used computer technology as a component in her art. All quotes by Sonya Rapoport are based on a taped telephone interview with the artist on Oct., 8, 2012.
11. Braverman was working as a biologist at the University of Pittsburgh. She established her studio in nearby Sewickley, and taught at Carnegie Mellon, where Elaine de Kooning also taught for a short time.

12. Diane George reminded Fox about the circumstances surrounding the painting during a telephone conversation with her in November 2012. She reminded Fox about a trip they had taken to the Barnes Museum in Philadelphia, where Fox purchased a "fat book" about Kandinsky. It was then that she began to work with color, and to experiment with her Kandinsky-inspired compositions.
13. On Dec. 14, 2012, Andrew Connors, Curator of Art, Albuquerque Museum of Art and History, confirmed by phone and by email the gift made by Elaine de Kooning. The cover letter, dated March 1986, is in the museum archives, and the painting remains in the museum's permanent collection.

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14. All direct quotes by Robert Dash are based on a taped telephone interview with the artist on Oct. 12, 2012.
 15. Rene Huyghe, *Art and the Spirit of Man* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1962), 150.
 16. Amei Wallach, "Connie Fox Doesn't Think Like You Think She Thinks," in *Connie Fox Paintings*, 18.
 17. Charles Eldredge, "Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley," in *The Spiritual in Art, Abstract Painting 1890- 1985* (New York: Abbeville, 1987), 116.
- April Kingsley, *The Turning Point* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 304.
- David Anfam, "Transatlantic Anxieties, Especially Bill's Folly," in Joan Marter, ed., *Abstract Expressionism, The International Context* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), 66.
- Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object* (Chicago and London: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), 109, 115.
- All direct quotes by Audrey Flack are based on a taped telephone interview with the artist on Oct. 11, 2012.
- All direct quotes by Lynda Benglis are based on a taped telephone interview with the artist on Sept. 20, 2012.
- Barry Schwabsky, "Connie Fox: A Different Sense of Complexity," in *Connie Fox Paintings*, 7, 8.
- Yve-Alain Bois, "The Iconoclast," in Yve-Alain Bois, Joop Joosten, Angelica Zander Rudenstine, Hans Janssen, Piet Mondrian (New York: Leonardo Arte in association with the National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1994), 314.