

Audrey Frank Anastasi

Q. You are a working artist, curator, gallery director, educator, and arts advocate, with a long list of exhibitions and awards to your credit. When and how did your fascination with painting begin?

A. I absolutely cannot remember a time when I didn't have a pencil or paintbrush in my hand, so I can't say I actually remember beginning it. It's always just been a part of who I am and how I spend my time.

Q. You've been described not only as an artist, but also as a "tireless and dedicated working artist." It seems as though you have exhibited your work every year since the '90s. How have you managed to maintain such a presence?

A. Well, that's a good question. You just keep working and opportunities arise. Sometimes you pursue them; sometimes they come your way. I'm involved with artists, and being involved with so many

different aspects, opportunities to get the work out in public happen. I think it's really important for artists to do that. I call it "completing the communication." You have to work if you're an artist. It's in your DNA; it's in your makeup. There are poets like Emily Dickinson whose work went in the drawer for her entire life and never connected with the public. But I think that if it's possible to get your work out in public, it creates dialogue and relevance,

and that feeds on the creative process even more. So if it's possible, I do like to get my work out.

Q. You are well known for your figure drawings, and have a fascination for capturing the human image, especially the human face and form. Please explain this fury with which you tackle your work.

A. Did you say fury? That's a good word. I've never used it but that's what it feels like. I feel most empathy painting people, especially women. You relate to it and, in

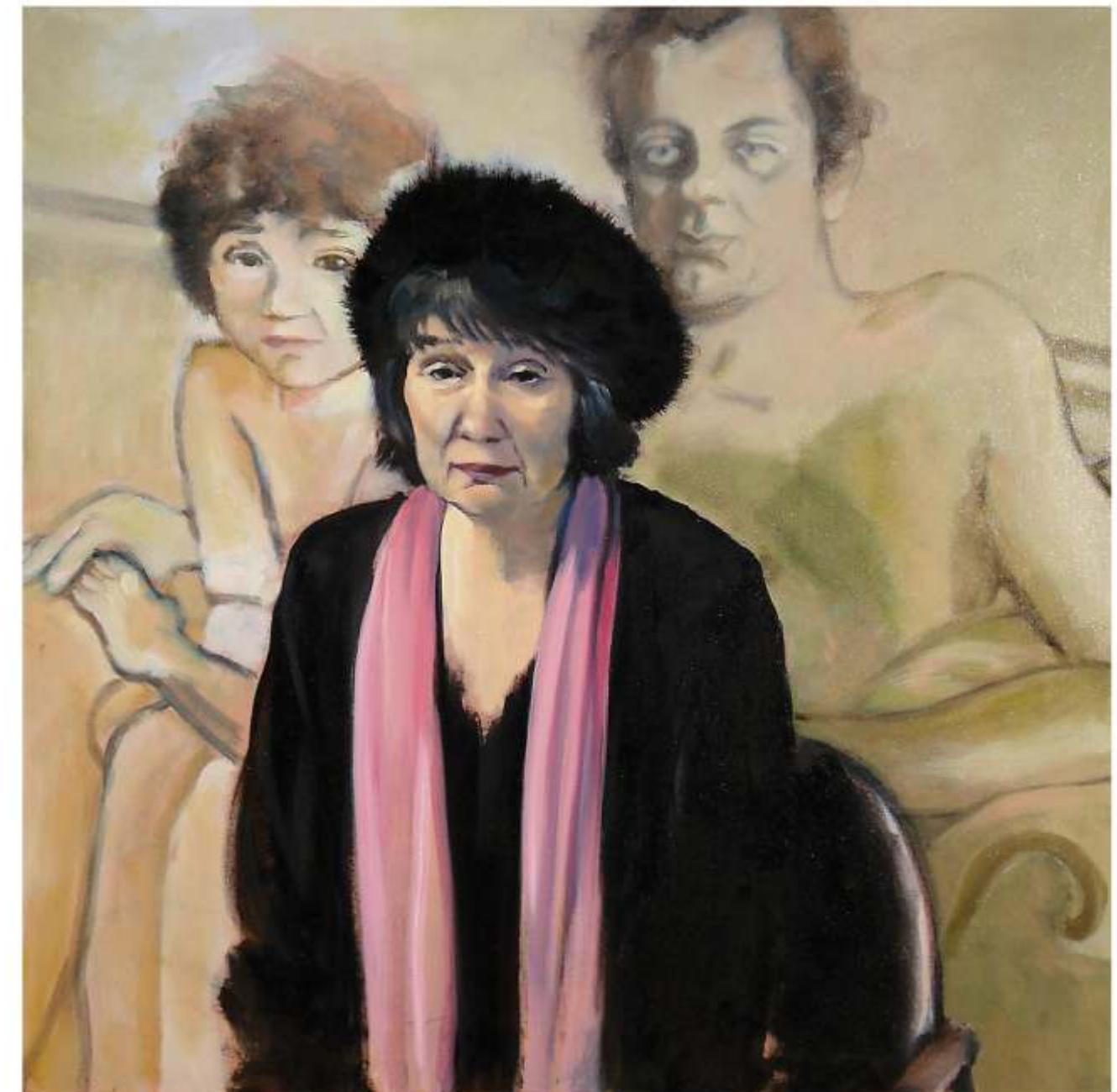
a way it becomes a self-portrait, because I really believe that all humanity is connected. I look into someone's eyes; I look at their face and their form. That's all innate. We all move around; we all carry our burdens in the world; we all carry our joys, our challenges, and that's really what stimulates me. I really do love working from life, connecting with people. I have to say it's very intimate in a wonderful way.

I did a project many years ago where I met community leaders [in Red Hook, Brooklyn] and the idea was that I was

going to paint their physical form, and then they would contribute something. They could give me something that I collaged in, or they could actually draw something directly onto the canvas. Some of these people were strangers to me, but the kind of things that we talked about in the process of painting them one-on-one was just such a revelation. And I love that process. I really do.

Q. Let's talk about the painting of you and your mother in which she has been

Audrey Anastasi at the American Museum of Natural History



Portrait of the renowned art critic Cindy Nemser entitled *That was Then, This is Now* referring to the background image of Ms. Nemser and her husband, Chuck, painted by Alice Neel in 1975. 36 x 36 in. (91.44 x 91.44 cm) Private collection.



Keyhole Chair, Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in. (121.92 x 91.44 cm)

described as a "looming and intimidating authority figure." Interestingly enough, the painting is titled "Psycho-Drama Mama." What's the story behind this painting?

A. OK, mother and daughter. I wanted to paint a portrait of my mother and myself. So I put a mirror on the floor. It was just sitting there and I thought I was just going to paint us both in the mirror, because I wanted it to be from life. I didn't want it to be from a photograph. To go back to the word you used before, "fury." That painting is one of a series of left-handed paintings. I am right-handed, but I made a decision to paint with my left hand for a number of different reasons. It seemed to reach the soul of the matter for me. There's immediacy.

So here I am, planning to do a left-handed painting with my mother, and it's a large painting—60"x48"—and she sits down and crosses her arms, and I see myself as little in the mirror. Although I wasn't conscious about it 100 percent,

I did try to trust that unconscious intelligence. Something is very powerful there. Basically, it's me being tiny and my mother being looming. I'm glad I didn't stick to my original concept to make us both in a painting together because I don't think that would have had the same psychological impact.

When people see that, especially women, they really do take a breath because it's them. In the presence of our parents, there's a part of us that's always a child. It doesn't matter what's accomplished or how intelligent or responsible we've become as adults, we can all, very quickly, feel like children in the presence of our own parents. They call that "pushing buttons." So I'm just fortunate that I recognized the psychological impact of it in the moment, and painted it in that way.

My mother was a cheerful person, with a fabulous sense of humor. The sense of intimidation that comes through

the image, though it certainly expresses a fairly universal emotional reality, is a fiction, in that it does not reveal the whole truth about the person or about the relationship. Thanks for asking that. That's a painting that means a lot to me.

Q. Your paintings of women in a variety of reflective moods and sexualized poses are very appealing. What is the message you are attempting to convey with your *Women* series?

A. Throughout most of Western Art History, women were sexualized in the sense that—and I'm not being judgmental—the sexuality was usually that of someone peeking in on the nude female, of her being observed from outside. Being a woman myself, the sexuality is part of what is being projected—of what I can relate to. So there's a little different point of view and that's why the subjects are always looking directly back at me, because there's that connection. It's not



Shark Bait, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm)



Afflicted, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.44 x 121.92 cm)

that I'm interested in being the naughty onlooker. I guess it's a bolder sexuality.

Q. I particularly like the paintings titled *Hooked* and *Leaving* from your *Women* series. What influenced you to do these?

A. Those both happen to be of one of my favorite models. I considered her a muse in a way, because whenever she would pose for me, it would be a very exciting performance. I like painting performers. In *Hooked*, she just wore a straight skirt with zippers and I put a red light on her so that there would be hot light on her skin. As she turned away from the canvas, it was just that. It wasn't that face or expression, but you feel a sense of a psychological weight with it. It's called isolation. It's not sensationalist, but you have a sense of a psychological intensity.

With *Leaving*, she was getting ready to pose. She sat down on the edge of the tub and I just liked the way it looked. I

moved the easel and everything into the bathroom. It was a little bit of an unusual setting, but it suggested a story without giving too many details. She's in her own world. She looks like she's getting dressed, as we all do. You know, we all go into the bathroom and put on our finishing touches or whatever. So there was something very domestic about it, but also psychologically suggestive. That seemed like the correct title for it.

Q. You also have a fascination with animals and nature as evidenced in your *Birds*, *Animals*, and *Burning Water* series. Where do you go to capture these images?

A. I go to my bird feeder. Again, that's part of my sense of empathy, of connecting with different forms of life. I used to teach anatomy for artists; one of the interesting things is that all the different animals have basically the same bones as we do. They are shaped differently. I think

I'm correct in saying that a giraffe and a mouse have exactly the same number of vertebrae in their neck but they are shaped differently.

I was actually drawing recently at the American Museum of Natural History and I was amazed with the dinosaurs. Basically, we have the same scapula and the same humerus, the same single bone at the top [of the arm] along with the double bone and all its variations. For me, it's almost a spiritual issue with the connectivity of life. And I do some photographic references for the birds—you know, they're not running wild in my studio—so I will do that, but I try not to get too wedded to it. I don't want to become merely a copyist, but I don't see a problem in using a reference for accuracy.

Q. I know one of your challenges was to begin painting with your non-dominant left hand instead of continuing with the



Waiting, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.44 x 121.92 cm)

ease of using your right hand. Why did you make that choice and what has been the outcome?

A. I was teaching at Parsons School of Design and one of the things I used to challenge my students to do was draw with their non-dominant hand. In the spirit of honesty, I wanted to know what that felt like because I was giving them something that they were just cringing at. And one of the things I noticed is that, when you don't have that fine motor control that you have with your dominant hand, you have to go with what's essential (because you're really working more from the arm or the wrist). So there's an automatic physicality: You can't get to draw in every little eyelash, because it's not going to end up where it belongs. Yet, if I'm painting the pupil of an eye, I'm going to concentrate to put that brush down right where it belongs. I'm not erasing because I'm getting it wrong, because I'm using

my left hand; I'm just really starting to stay connected with the essential, physical and—I'm even going to use a crazy word—soulful.

I'm trying to get beyond perfecting things, because it's sort of that element of not being perfect where I think we connect. I think it's a little deeper kind of communication. I started painting with my left hand as an experiment, but I liked what I was seeing from the very first time.

My first painting using my left hand was from a sketch. I just pinned my sketch on the wall and painted it with my left hand. Of course, my right hand wanted to take over and make it easy. But I pushed it, and there was just something in it that felt like what I really wanted to do—I can say, almost being reborn in a way. I just couldn't wait to start painting and painting more and more. And the next painting was from life. Ever since then I've worked

predominantly with my left hand because I like that tension between the intuitive and the controlled.

Q. Are there any major challenges you have had to overcome as a painter?

A. Not any different from other painters or artists. It's a hard life. There's a lot of rejection. There's a lot of being overlooked. There are moments of joy. It's great when an artist and the public connect, and they see what you're doing. They respond in a way and you say, "Wow, I hit the mark!" It's not like being a musician where everybody knows and can relate to your music. A lot of people don't even know that they can relate to visual arts. It's a little bit intimidating in our culture, and you always hear people say things like, "Oh, I don't know anything about art." Well, nobody says, "I don't know anything about cinema, but I go to the movies." They don't say, "I don't know anything



Rain of Snakes, Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in. (121.92 x 91.44 cm)



Eve Fleeing the Garden, [after Masaccio] Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. (91.44 x 121.92 cm)

about music theory but I have a CD or I download music." People just don't say that, but when it comes to the visual, there's the aura that there are some intellectual secrets—that if you haven't studied, you're going to sound dumb, or you're going to be dumb to make a purchase, and that's really unfortunate.

Basically, visual art is almost like a still from a movie. It's one moment that you want to experience over and over again, that you're happy to wake up to and say, "Hmm, I love owning that today." Even though it might not be pretty—it might be something disturbing—you're moved by it and you want to be moved by it. That's why I actually encourage young people, and adults too, to select something—not with all the nonsense that it might

become valuable (that's a whole different way of investing, that's something else)—something to live with, wake up to, to have in your home or your office, to look at every day. That's a whole different kind of approach.

Q. As co-director of Tabla Rasa Gallery, (with your husband Joseph), what types of artists do you represent and what do patrons to your gallery expect to see?

A. Well, we are not really in a position to have exclusive representation. We are in an out-of-the-way location. The people who come here come back. It's that first trip that's a little bit challenging sometimes. What we look for in an artist—and again it's very hard to quantify—is a sense

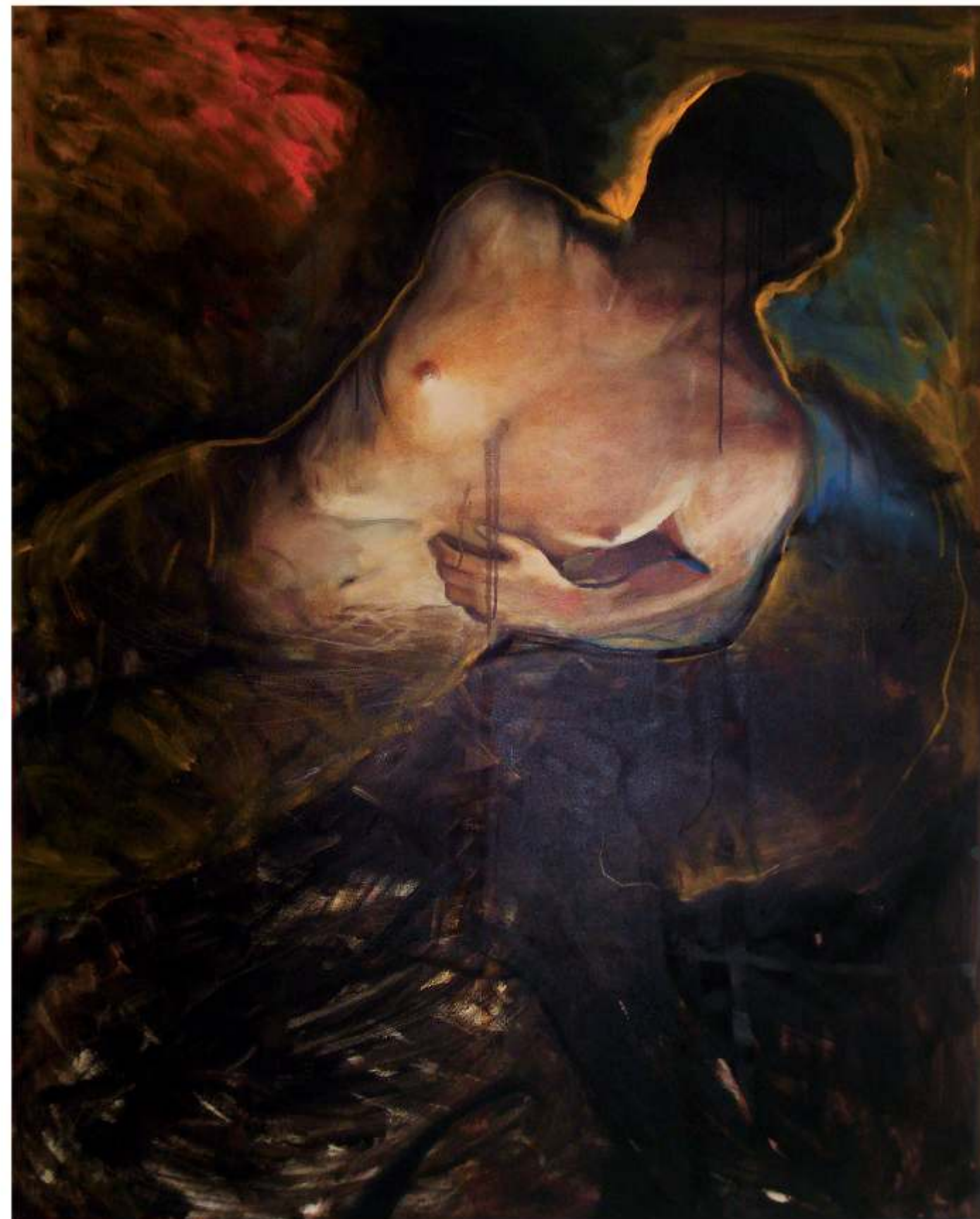
of the work not being based on trends or what someone thinks is a hot thing to be doing at the time.

Can you put your finger on it? What is that ineffable quality that makes the work seem like the artist is really dedicated—that it's not a lot of hype? It's really hard to describe what that is sometimes. It's the craft, but it's not the craft alone. There are a lot of artists who can do wonderfully crafty work that just seems a little cold, that doesn't really speak to you. That's basically what we look for—the craft, the voice, a point of view.

We mostly do thematic shows. We did one called Animutations, with these different variations of animals. The current one is called *Intimate Forest*, different variations of trees. To be on the wall, it



Never, Forever, Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm)



After Icarus, Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in. (152.4 x 121.92 cm)



Lacey Grey, Mixed media on Canson charcoal paper, 19 x 25 in. (48.26 x 63.5 cm)

has to fit the theme that we are doing, but it has to be art first. Each artist has a distinct voice. It's not that they are good at branding or something that is really obvious that you can say, "Oh, this is the artist that does XYZ." They can be a broadly interesting artist, but there's a character that makes it art before it's a picture of a tree. So, again, you can't really quantify, but that's the spirit of what we're looking for.

Q. In 2008, the Brooklyn Arts Council honored you and your husband for your pioneering work and your dedication to supporting fellow artists. Why do you find it necessary to support fellow artists?

A. It's a hard life being an artist. This is a commercial gallery but that doesn't mean that I am just interested in art that I can sell. I'm interested in art that means

something, that means something in our time—again communicating with people. You know, it has a purpose; it has a beauty in life. To me, the representational image is important. You draw a circle with two dots in it, and you show it to an infant, and they'll smile because there is recognition as a face. So when you've had this abstract form, the rarified rectangular form used for painting or drawing, and something is dominant (that is supposed to draw someone's attention) it can be very potent, very powerful. Fellow artists and myself, that is what we're struggling to do. It makes life more wonderful, I think, when there is art in various forms. Sometimes it's fun to just discover it on the street where people wheat-paste their own art. This is not so legal but people do it anyway. To walk into a gallery and to actually be surprised, we hope here that

we can make it worth someone's visit, and we try very seriously to do that. I just think it's important for the arts to live in our society, and artists also.

I don't want to get political, and I think (if I can generalize) we are more about connectivity. I think that's why artists tend to be a little more broad-minded or liberal-minded, a little more progressive, because we're not so much competing, like who's going to get to the goalpost first. So that connection is important and it's important to support your fellow artists. We all keep learning from each other and are inspired by each other.

Q. As an artist, what is your favorite medium to work with and why?

A. Well, I do love paint. I love what the stroke looks like when it gets laid down on a canvas. I also like monoprints; You



S. as Galatea, Mixed media on Canson charcoal paper, 25 x 19 in. (63.5 x 48.26 cm)

paint on a slicker surface and when it gets transferred, you see that stroke. I use Filbert brushes. They're kind of flat and a little bit rounded at the top, and I feel like I can do almost anything with them. So there is a physicality about paint that I love. I'm a natural draftsman. To draw a figure—just the way the light falls on the forms—I could always draw whatever I could see. I learned anatomy in order to teach anatomy for artists. You learn about it, and then you sort of know what's under the surface. There's a magic to that.

Pencils, charcoals, anything you mush around, erase, I just love the whole physicality of it. Right now, I want to do some sculpture. I've done some face sculpture and I like that a lot—getting both hands into something and really pushing it around.

Q. As a private collector, what type of work are you interested in most, and why?

A. Actually my husband and I collected a lot of photography. It's very interesting to know a bit about photography, but we're not really limited to that. It's a little hard for us to continue to collect because we

have a lot of artwork and, even with our own, space is a true consideration. But, every now and then you see something and you just can't resist. And what is that quality that speaks to you? I don't know. I just bought something by an artist at an exhibition and I said, "I want to personally ask you about that piece." And he said, "I would have given it to you." I'm connected with artists and I want to support them whenever I can.

Q. You've also done some installations. What is your favorite?

A. Some of the way the work gets displayed could be called an installation. I think I mentioned a series in Red Hook that was shown in a number of different places and installed differently. It was installed as a grid, and as a walk-around exhibit at eye level. I have ideas for installations showing trees on multiple levels but I haven't had the opportunity to do that yet.

One of the most interesting installations was a series of figures that look like they're falling through space. I showed them in a location, a very big room, with vitrines you

could walk into. It wasn't as though they were underwater, but they looked like they were in their own world.

Q. Who are some of your favorite artists and which one has inspired you most?

A. The whole pantheon of Western art excites me. So, people like Masaccio infused storytelling with emotion. That was a very pivotal part of art history. He inspired Michelangelo. As a kid, I really loved van Gogh for the same qualities of getting emotional through the actual paint.

I love Alice Neel for the emotional character of her painting. Anselm Kiefer for the quality of laying down the paint. Basically, I think I am drawn to more emotional work. I don't think I could just pick one. I love Helen Levitt, the photographer who started going out in the '30s, photographing street life with her handheld camera. Women weren't doing that, so it was quite a bold thing for her to do.

Q. You taught at Parsons School of Design from 1985 to 1994. What important piece of advice would you give art students today?

A. Don't be afraid to mess it up. Be bold, go in there, dig in there. I used to give an assignment to do a bad drawing. The students were like, "How do I get an 'A' in this class if I do a bad drawing? Why is my teacher telling me to do a bad drawing?" You have to dig deep and figure things out. Don't be afraid to try something different. It's hard, especially in a university-type setting, because people want to succeed. They want to perform well, and we're told in childhood, when growing up, what's good and what's bad, so it's hard to shake it up on your own.

That's part of what I do in my own practice. Shake it up by working fast. Shake it up by working with your out-of-control hand. Shake it up by taking on things that you don't know where you're going with it. Let the process lead you someplace interesting.

Q. You have done so much over the years, but is there an artist you would like to collaborate with or a dream project you would like to do?

A. Yes. My dream project is to work with a choreographer and to use the figures

that are painted on this black background as they appear to be falling from space. I'd love to do more of those. I'd like those to be projected into a deep, dark dance performance. I'd like to take off with that. I'd like the performance to inspire more paintings. I'd like to do more paintings like that, like these figures. I think of them as beyond time, in a way. A lot of the paintings, a couple of the more domestic ones, are in a setting you relate to as contemporary. But these are mostly nudes, falling through space. Is that purgatory? Is that heaven? Is that just a dark place with a contemporary figure?

Again, the imagination can take it anywhere, but I feel the movement and the physicality. I think with the right collaboration, it could be really natural.

Q. As an artist, what type of legacy would you like to leave behind?

A. I think it would be that my contribution said something about our times. We are living in times where a lot of old assumptions and prejudices seem to be breaking down. Even though I don't have a political agenda in my body of work, I'm

hoping that that spirit of openheartedness, of acceptance, of the importance of connecting with your fellow man, will come through in some way. It would be like the Eastern philosophies where you're breathing in and we're all connected. We're all breathing in and out the same air—it's a continuum. That really means a lot to me.

I come from a Jewish background and some of the most important work for me has been work that was inspired by Christian art. Right now, my *Stations of the Cross* series—which I was absolutely compelled to do, as a story of suffering and of dignity—is on display at a church and that means so much to me. I'm so humbled and grateful for that opportunity.

Q. You've been featured in *SmartMoney*, *The New York Times*, and *Artworld Digest*. What's next for you?

A. *Breuckelen Magazine*.

Q. Finish this sentence. My life as an artist has been ...

A: Gratifying. **BK**



Installation panorama of the *Dark Figure* series, Tabla Rasa Gallery