

ARTISTS

OF INFLUENCE

HUGH GALLOWAY

V. JANE GORDON

ARTISTS OF INFLUENCE

INTRODUCTION: Kathy Bresnahan

As curator of an Artists of Influence Exhibition a major consideration when choosing participating artists has to be excellence, and its effect on the community. With that firmly in mind I turned to a sense of community, not only a geographical community, but also a community of people with a shared vision and a shared history.

Artists Hugh Galloway and Jane Gordon have both made important contributions to the local art scene. Many members of our arts community will be happy to see these two artists recognized and honoured. There are areas of commonality in their art, in particular their consistent use of the figure and a highly developed sense and utilization of colour. They have in common a deep commitment to their work, and a level of energy and force of personality that is a telling factor in their ability to influence those around them.

Jane and Hugh put tremendous amounts of energy into pursuits that benefit the art community at large, yet both still

manage to create art of their own that is as exciting and influential as they are themselves. Despite this similarity they ultimately have spheres of influence that are quite different and diverse. Hugh has helped a long procession of students, at McMaster University begin to develop a sense of themselves as participating in a continuing and large community of art and artists. Jane's influence has been to stretch and expand that definition of the artistic community. She MAKES things happen in a way that is exciting and eye-opening through "alternative" vehicles for influence. She is a founding member of Bay Area Artists for Women's Art, and founder of the Curatorial Committee at Hamilton Artists Inc.

It was this range and difference in influence that made these two artists seem such an appropriate pairing. Not only can the viewer enjoy the contrasts and dialogue initiated by the juxtapositioning of their work, but, as well, we can celebrate community at its best and in its most inclusive sense.

Kathy Bresnahan, Artist/Curator

ARTIST'S STATEMENT: Hugh Galloway

"Artists flourish like roaches in the cracks of society. Critical consciousness is the most annoying roach of all in a world that likes to think itself seamless."¹

"Every age has a dark side which it prefers to play down, to leave unrecorded and obscure. It wants only its better side to be visible to eternity and it expects art to serve that lie."²

I was brought up between the mountains and the sea where there was popular emotional empathy with the primeval industrial forces, of coal and fire; steel and ship each in a sense metaphors for one another. As my consciousness grew I wanted to find more and more about them, rather than be a passive observer. As time passed steelmaking and shipbuilding died, fishing has become a gaunt shadow and fire in the shape of oil has returned to complete the circle. I have always had enormous respect for the nobility of labour and am dismayed by the cynical manner in which life is sacrificed for financial expediency. There is great difficulty in making metaphor from reality especially in the figurative sense as it appears open to every possible criticism and some aspect of it will surely offend somebody. But therein lies the challenge. I am distressed by the callous economic myopia of western societies which can make bland justifications for youth sleeping in doorways; or in cardboard box cities. The poor are the problem because they are poor. A playwright has drawn inspiration from the curious fact that charity fundraising activities made more for the fashion industry than they did for those they were designed to help.

I have two interests in my picturemaking, critical figure painting and mountain landscape. The mountains stand as a constant reminder of

permanence and immutability relative to human existence. I test one against the other when I am on them. Figurative painting generates a different kind of intellectual battle - of idea shape, colour, organization, in an attempt to produce a work which may refute the challenge of being merely of its time. I hope that the work may be approached, and is accessible at whatever level the viewer wishes to confront it. I am trying to understand a world which daily seems to grow more incomprehensible, where it grows progressively harder to maintain ones sense of identity. However hard the struggle at least the artist has that to sustain him, but it also reinforces the sense of desperate sympathy for that agonized search by a new 'lost generation'.

I find myself pessimistic for the future. Each small landmark of hope does little to slow a seemingly inexorable march to the abyss. I cannot pretend that my work will do anything to arrest that progress but at least I hope the viewer may be able to start from a point totally lacking in ambiguity.

"Abstract art, supposedly originating in interior necessity, is in fact obsessed with the superficial formal aspects of art rather than its visionary potential and world-historical implications. In this it accurately reflects the shallowness of modern materialistic success, an accuracy that does not constitute a redemption. Indeed abstract cunning has created inhuman conditions, monstrous human beings in a monstrous world."³

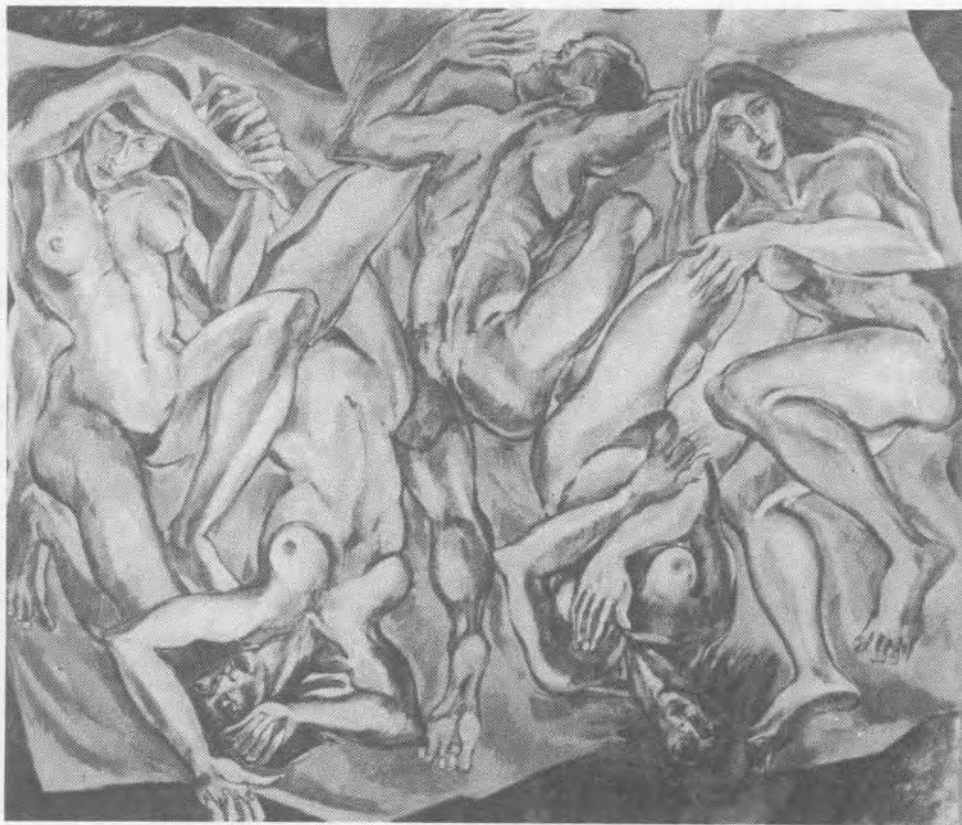
1 The Existential/Activist Painter: The Example of Leon Golub. Donald Kuspit, Rutgers. Preface - quoting Harold Rosenberg.

2 IBID., p. 4.

3 IBID., p. 24.

AN UNEASY ART: Terence Kinsella


THE PAINTINGS OF HUGH GALLOWAY



Lost Generation
1993,
173 x 188
acrylic and oil

"He was a legend for an art whose fluidity of form and ambiguity of content betrayed an anxious but determined attempt to include everything - graceful, incisive draftsmanship as well as muscular liberated painterliness, representation as well as abstraction, tradition as well as innovation, austere analysis along with technical bravado... all the while candidly disclosing the struggle and its inconclusiveness as fundamental to the very content, meaning and

validity of his work. If this made his painting vulnerable to raw, worrisome uncertainty it also guaranteed freshness and deliverance from artifice... and, if it left his dense passionate, motile pictures looking like battlegrounds of nagging alternatives fought to a draw, it also turned them into authentic seismographs of the restless, violent, overcrowded urban world in which they were painted".



The preceding observations are those of Daniel Wheeler writing in Art Since Mid-Century of the great, post-war abstractionist Willem de Kooning. What is startling about these observations is the readiness with which they are able to shed their original context and negotiate a convincing fit with the life and work of Hamilton-area painter Hugh Galloway. Though 'legend' may be too strong a word, Hugh's impact on the younger generation of local artists has been significant. Moreover, this impact has stemmed largely from the 'difficulties' embodied in his approach to picture-making.

Hugh has willed to contemporary painting the unfashionable, formidable and solemn task of symbolizing the shared existential predicament of humankind. His vision is romantic, slightly melancholic, slightly cynical and deadly serious. Equally at odds with current trends is his aim to produce pictures that are well-crafted, naturalistic and morally motivated. Further, hard-core Postmodernists will no doubt balk at his sustained courtship with early Modernist painting conventions. Hugh Galloway seemingly takes pains to build a sense of uneasiness into his pictures. Add to this uneasiness his lack of self-promotion, his resignation to minimal critical success, his stalwart conviction

to pursue his interests for purely personal rewards and an inspirational figure is born - a kind of existential hero who through resolute purpose risks everything, even a tragic end. The artist wryly summarizes his outlook in these words:

* I have always enjoyed the challenge of the organization and painting of complex groups of figures - it's tougher and usually offends almost everyone for one reason or another (poor idea, poor colour, derivative, poorly drawn, out of date, out of style, etc.): it would almost seem that I should contain all the ingredients for massive original success. At least if you decide to be a poet you have the consolation of absolutely no likelihood of any recognition."


For many years Hugh has culled metaphors for the human condition from the fishing villages and mountainous landscape of his native Scotland. Though his images are meant to be read as symbols, they begin with the collection of literal information, a process that usually involves on-site drawing and photo-documentation of hikes in the countryside around Inverness or trips to oil rigs in the North Sea. Hugh then distills the essence of this information, isolates the elements that can be put to metaphoric use and, subsequently, builds a composition around them. The aim of conveying universal truths via the particulars of observable reality is a trademark of his work.

Westminster Bridge
1993,
173 x 231
acrylic and oil



In his recent paintings the artist has looked to the state of the world for avenues into his basic theme. Depicting such contemporary events as the 1988 Piper-Alpha

oil rig disaster, the true story of a suicide attempt on Westminster Bridge in London, and the phenomenon of cardboard box 'cities', Hugh has taken an overtly critical



look at the incongruous values of Western society. His intentions betray the frustration he feels with the current order:

"I am trying to understand the nature of the contemporary, upwardly mobile right-winger who seriously believes in the 'trickle-down-effect'. I think it has trickled down as far as his wallet, no further, and I am disturbed that the majority still believe that the system is working just fine. That's why I like mountains. At least they can be seen as a metaphor for constancy and loyalty, unchanged by human idiocy."

The new work seeks to explore the political dimension of the human condition, and, generally speaking, recommends an approach to living marked by compassion and socialist attitudes.

Arguably, it is in the arena of form and visual presence that Hugh's work is most engaging. Quite apart from its human content, his work is very much about painting as a tradition. His paintings celebrate the legacy of Modernism, technical variation, paint as a drawing material, the idea of the virtuoso performance and the challenge of successfully building layers of complexity into an artwork. To return to Daniel Wheeler's point about de Kooning, Hugh's work is exciting because of its superhuman attempt to do too many things well and at the same time.

Such an approach is incredibly risky - decorous, fully-resolved masterpieces are not the usual result. In Hugh's case a series of oppositions manifest themselves, a series of battles fought between naturalism and abstraction, three-dimensional modelling and two-dimensional flattening, drawing and painting, accurate description and wilful distortion, colour as an indicator of light and colour as an expressive means, the use of paint to describe form and the use of paint to produce surfaces that are attractive in their own right, compositional structure and chaos. Many of Hugh's paintings **do** look like "battlegrounds of nagging alternatives fought to a draw". Still, what is fascinating about them is the fact that their apparent inconclusiveness, rather than detracting from their integrity, **contributes to it**. Here are paintings that embrace challenge and intimate that when they were created something was actually at stake. Here is an artist who dares to be vulnerable, who dares to expose his decision-making process and openly announce his debts to tradition and his struggle for control. Hugh's art is neither easy, hip, harmonious or polite. It is real; personal and sincere and because of this it promises to satisfy.

Hugh Galloway has taught art at McMaster University since 1971 and presently resides in Lynden, Ontario.

THE PARADOX OF THE BODY

"If, in speaking of a woman, it is impossible to say what she is—for to do so would risk abolishing her difference—"

Julia Kristeva, *Stabat Mater* 1

"How difficult they make it for us to become women, when becoming poultry is what that really means!"

Helene Cixous, *Coming to Writing* 2

"I have theorized about the origins of painting" begins the text of the *Life Mound* written by V. Jane Gordon as part of the *Life Work* exhibition.³ Gordon's theorizing about the origins of painting is—like Cixous theorizing about the origins of writing—imagining writing and painting that are specifically woman centred. And yet, it is what happens beyond painting that is both the source and manifestation of Gordon's work. It is the intersection of, the dividing line between, nature and culture in the form of the female body that creates the wall Gordon is trying to work—write—paint—build—her way through.⁴

In her 1972/73 M. A. thesis called "Is There a Subtle Difference Between Selling Art and Selling Potatoes?" she makes the connections between art, nature and the female. "It seems inevitable," she says "that in a society which depends on successful crops for its survival the woman, who also bears fruit in the form of healthy offspring should be linked with the land—the earth mother."⁵ It seems at least as inevitable or significant as poultry or potatoes or women.

Potatoes, poultry, hands, legs, faces. The fragmentation of the body, the female body, and its inseparability from the earth is the central focus of Gordon's painting, her constructions and her earth bound installations. "Women, who in agricultural society were robbed of their wholeness by male defecation of fecundity," she says "find themselves left with no real social role and take refuge in a vicarious existence, lived through their husbands and children."⁶ The processes of reestablishing and reconnecting social

roles while demystifying cultural icons recurs again and again in her work. "I have searched for associations of mounds with belly and breast and the sources of life"⁷ she says, sounding exactly like Kristeva who claims that it is precisely at this point that the heterogeneity of the "speaking subject" and its exposure of the "non-said" explodes with pregnancy and reveals itself as the dividing line between nature and culture.⁸

And yet, it is as a child that the woman remembers. Cixous says, "the primitive face was my mother's With the ferocity of a beast I kept my mother within my sight."⁹ Playfulness and ferocity, mothers and daughters, potatoes and art—ironic and dangerous binary oppositions are essential to Gordon's theories. At the same time, the separation of the female into body parts is for both Cixous and Gordon a significant metaphor; the core of an attempt to regain and refocus on origins and theories of origins. Cixous articulates what applies to Gordon as well, "With one hand, suffering, living, putting your finger on pain, loss. But there is the other hand: the one that writes."¹⁰ The one that paints. The one that creates. The one that influences.

It is significant that the concepts associated with theories of the body include the effects of the presence of the body. Because Jane Gordon's *presence* is the centre of her influence as an artist in this region. As an intensely committed supporter of the professionalization of women artists, a thoughtful mentor, and intellectual founder of the Bay Area Artists for Women's Art her *presence* goes beyond being the accomplished teacher of technical skills.

1. J. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *The Female Body In Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. S. R. Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986) 99

2. Helene Cixous, *Coming To Writing and Other Essays*, ed. D. Jenson intr. by S. R. Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991) 28.

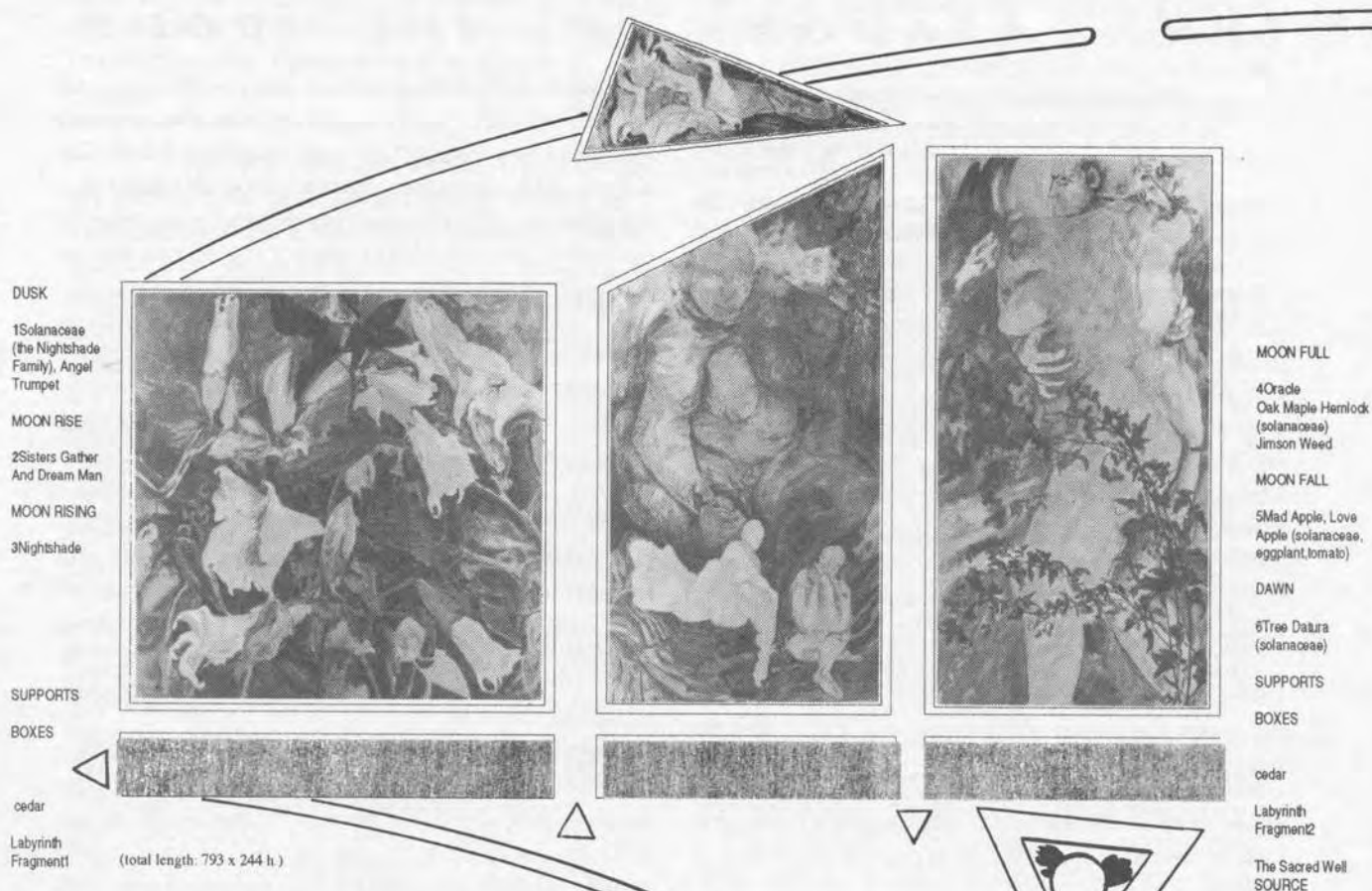
3. V. Jane Gordon, *Life Mound 1* (Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant: Brantford) June 1992

4. Kristeva argues this relationship in "Stabat Mater," 115

5. V. Jane Gordon, "Is There A Subtle Difference Between Selling art And Selling Potatoes?" (Montreal, Concordia Univ, 1973)

6. "Potatoes" 20. 7. Gordon, *Mound*. 8. Kristeva 115. 9. Cixous 3. 10. Cixous 8.

WOMEN AT NIGHT AND THE SACRED WELL



My original proposal for this work states: I hope to achieve a broad synthesis of elements arising in my work over the last ten years: a preoccupation with colour construction, a tension between installation as contextualizing and painting as decontextualizing and visual/ textual mythological construction of a gynocentred immanence.

I decided to begin with the idea of night for this work after painting "Lights In The Sky, Flowers In The Ground" and after a reading of Jovette Marchesault's "Night Cows" at a BAAWA retreat in Sept 1991. As a painter who studied with Guido Molinari and who was mentored by Walter Hickling painting colour at night presented and continues to present special challenges. I had to try and find darkness without sacrificing, intensity of colour, or potential for the construction of a colour form

Statement: V. Jane Gordon



I love to paint, I love the formal problems, the touching and the making- the "thingness" of a painted panel. I am not able, however, to remove the act of painting from its "Cultural" context. Painting is still probably the most privileged of artistic practices, it culturally constructs gender, race and class. This awareness leads me to my preoccupation with contextualization through curating, or in this case through installation. Painting here is embedded in a cultural context provided by installation elements, such as: Solanaceae, (the nightshade family of plants), cedar, the labyrinth, the fore court, the "source" or well, the body, the sacred, and the dark.

I experience myself as spiritually alive. Something as close to the surface of my body as daily life moves on the inside surface of my skin. Through this experience of being I find imagery to explore the feminine divine.

A Vision from the Margins Within

"Not an 'Outsider'-- only an 'Other' that disrupts
Kultur from the margins within..."
Christine Battersby

In this text quoted from *Gender and Genius*, the author completes her observation by stating "—she *seemed* insignificant."¹ Battersby is referring to the German artist Hannah Hoch, a Dadaist, whose art practice existed on the edges of an already marginalized group of male artists. In her book, Battersby argues that unlike Hoch's contemporaries, art historians have had difficulties in recognizing her as a "fully individual artist because she bent the apparently straight lines of (a) patrilineal art-tradition."²

If, in her art, Hannah Hoch bent the lines of a patrilineal art-tradition, then the cultural practice of V. Jane Gordon has left it thoroughly tied up in knots. Always a few steps ahead of her detractors *and* her supporters, Gordon has managed to inject a female subject-based mythos into the pantheon of male 'Oski wee wee' gods whom, it has been reported, reside somewhere on top of Hamilton Mountain. It has also been reported that their offspring (no doubt products of male-god, female-human couplings) hold positions as 'gatekeepers'³ in the art institutions of every major North American city.

Like Hoch, Gordon's cultural practice reveals a strategy of insubordination,⁴ an attack on art. Unlike Hoch, Gordon is very clear about her feminist focus. In each of the various aspects of her practice, she makes room for the matrix of female subjugated voices to emerge from the cracks and crevices of a now crumbling patrilineal art-tradition. Gordon's art-political campaigns, her artist-curatorial projects, her body of writing and her visual production all

use a feminist analysis to disrupt dominant ideologies of art and art-making. Lacking a context for this type of practice, mainstream culture's baffled response to the discourse generated by Gordon has been at times expressed as: "Huh?"

I would like now to turn to the topic of a female subject-based mythos in Gordon's own visual production as the site of her deepest act of insubordination, the site where we might most profoundly consider her as, 'an artist of influence'. In order to do this I will draw upon Carol Christ's discussion of ethics in her upcoming book, *The Power of Eros: A Goddess Theology*.

In this book, religious studies scholar Carol Christ states that "as patriarchal values and ways of living are being challenged today, the authority of patriarchy's Gods is called into question and a new mythos is being created."⁶

In this context, Christ assigns mythos with the meaning of culturally shared symbols and rituals which *foreground* what is considered to be 'real and valuable' (in the sense of what is seen) from a potentially infinite number of 'real and valuable' images within any given culture. According to Christ, a mythos, through 'selected' imagery (symbols and rituals), provides an explanation for and at times creates a powerful interpretation of both individual and community experience. The rituals and symbols of a mythos are important because, as Z. Budapest has written, "that which is not celebrated, that which is not ritualized, goes unnoticed, and in the long run . . . will be devalued."⁷

As Christ relates, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (upon whose definition of religion she relies) has stated that 'ethos' and 'mythos' are interdependent in that a mythos supports

an ethos (a way of life or ethical system expressed in the customs, daily activities, and 'moral sensibility' of a culture).⁸ The role of a mythos in supporting an ethos is to reinforce certain ways of living and acting as appropriate and correct because these ways and acts "put us in touch with what is real and valuable. Conversely, the living of an ethos reinforces the sense that the mythos to which it is connected is true."⁹

Before returning to Gordon's work, I wish to explore the model of culture put forward by Geertz and adapted by Christ more closely. It may seem at first that their model presupposes a cultural system with limited diversity. Arguably in a pluralistic society such as our own, with many 'minorities' demanding a cultural space to bring forward their vision of themselves, the Geertz-Christ monovocal model of culture would not stand up. But it is not a limited diversity which is presupposed by their model. Rather, it is the limited discourse of a single mode of power and knowledge cutting through all social, political, economic, religious and cultural practices and their gendered relations which the model correctly presupposes — it is the dominant discourse of patriarchy which contains and constrains the alternative discourses found in a so-called 'pluralistic' society and defines them as 'Other'.¹⁰ It is this entrenched discourse of literally, 'the father is the law',¹¹ which underpins and validates the Geertz-Christ model of culture and it is to this entrenched discourse that Gordon directs her challenge of insubordination.

By bringing to the surface or by birthing a series of images which consistently construct an alternative mythos, Gordon disrupts the discourse of patriarchy by challenging a fundamental aspect of its power — the right to name. By creating or naming (or in some cases by reclaiming) a new set of symbols and rituals on a *grand* scale, Gordon's potential to influence not only artists but the culture at large, is vast. If

ethos and mythos exist in a kind of interdependent relationship as Geertz suggests, is it not possible to begin to radically alter the one by redefining the other?

Gordon is a feminist and the alternative mythos she has constructed is one which reinforces feminist spirituality — interconnectedness to one another and to the mystery of growth and change. Goddess rituals which connect women to the sacrality of their bodies and to the earth are everywhere evident in her work. Her visual production celebrates embodied and relational life in all of its material particularity. "Women At Night And The Sacred Well" carries on in this tradition.

While Gordon's vision empowers the subjugated voices of women, it is a vision that can be and has been taken up by other voices who also dwell within the margins of patriarchy — those voices which are assigned for now to the status of 'Other', but who can never, permanently, be cast aside as 'insignificant'.

¹ Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) p.144

² Battersby, p.144

³ For a definition of the term see: V. Jane Gordon, *The Flower Show* catalogue, p.9

⁴ This strategy was first suggested as a type of curatorial practice for exhibiting 'women's art' by Nicole Jolicoeur in *Interface*, 1983, p.2

⁵ See Paul Benedetti, 'TOP DRAWER' in *THE SPECTATOR*, Saturday, June 8, 1991, p.C2

⁶ Carol Christ, *The Power of Eros: A Goddess Theology*, (Unpublished manuscript. Available from Dept. of Religious Studies, U. of Ottawa, 177 Waller, Ottawa, Ont, K1N 6N5 c/o Dr. Naomi Goldenberg) p.200

⁷ Z. Budapest as quoted in *The Power of Eros*, p.201

⁸ Christ, p.200

⁹ Christ, p.200

¹⁰ The text you are reading above is written from a point of view within patriarchal culture. It is distant, authoritative, masterful and supposedly gender-neutral. I refer to the artist by her last name in an effort to construct her practice as serious, her actions as 'heroic'. The fact that I am a woman writing this text does nothing to change the point of view since women have been trained to adopt this 'neutral' voice easily.

¹¹ In many cases feminist scholars would describe the dominant discourse as 'androcentric' which means: by the male, for the male, and about the male. In either case women do not end up with any formal power.

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artist/curator Kathy Bresnahan
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- all measurements given in centimeters

NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS :

TERENCE KINSELLA has just completed an M.A. in fine art at the Univ. of Calgary and has an M. A. in philosophy. He is a visual artist with roots in Hamilton.

MARY KECZAN-EBOS is a visual artist and writer who has recently completed an M. A. at the Univ of Toronto and is the current president and co-chair of the Curatorial committee of Hamilton Artists Inc.

JANET TULLOCH is a visual artist, arts writer and graduate student in the department of Religious Studies at the Univ. of Ottawa.

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