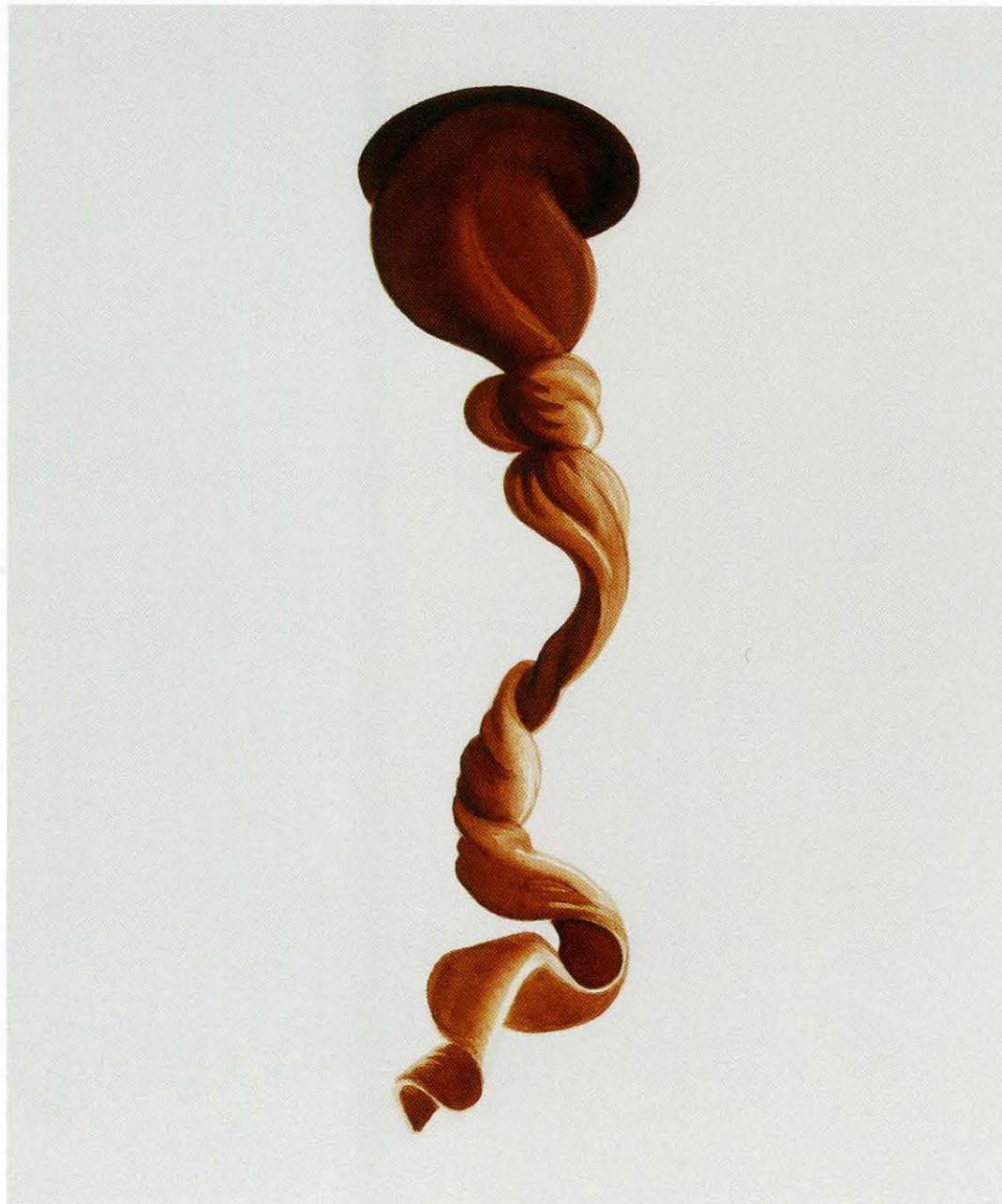


GLADYS BEL

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blindsight



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

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FEBRUARY 21 - MARCH 28, 1998

AUSTIN, TEXAS

## Gladys Bel

Gladys Bel's drawings appear like messages from another world—perhaps the world of the subconscious mind—so compelling and strange are their images. Having initially studied poetry and ceramics, the artist creates work informed by both earlier pursuits. Her mature works—exquisite drawings seen alone or in groups—retain references to the lyrical, metaphoric, and syntactical structures of poetry, and also to the sensual, often biomorphic qualities of clay.

Bel's early work in ceramic heightened her keen sensitivity to the corporeal aspects of clay, a sensitivity still evident in her sepia drawings, their very color a reminder of clay. In ceramic works that alluded obliquely to the abstracted body, Bel once explored the metaphoric properties of the medium—its formal similarities to, for instance, flesh. Her works in clay eventually moved beyond these formal "rhymes" with the body, to sculptures informed by a cooler, more intellectual order. These modular groupings relied on a systemic order and analytic precision, interrupted only by the accidents inherent to the medium (e.g. breakage in the kiln). The serial, structural nature of these later clayworks, coupled with the sensual and metaphorical qualities of their predecessors, continue to inform Bel's more recent works—her inspired and long-running oeuvre of drawings.

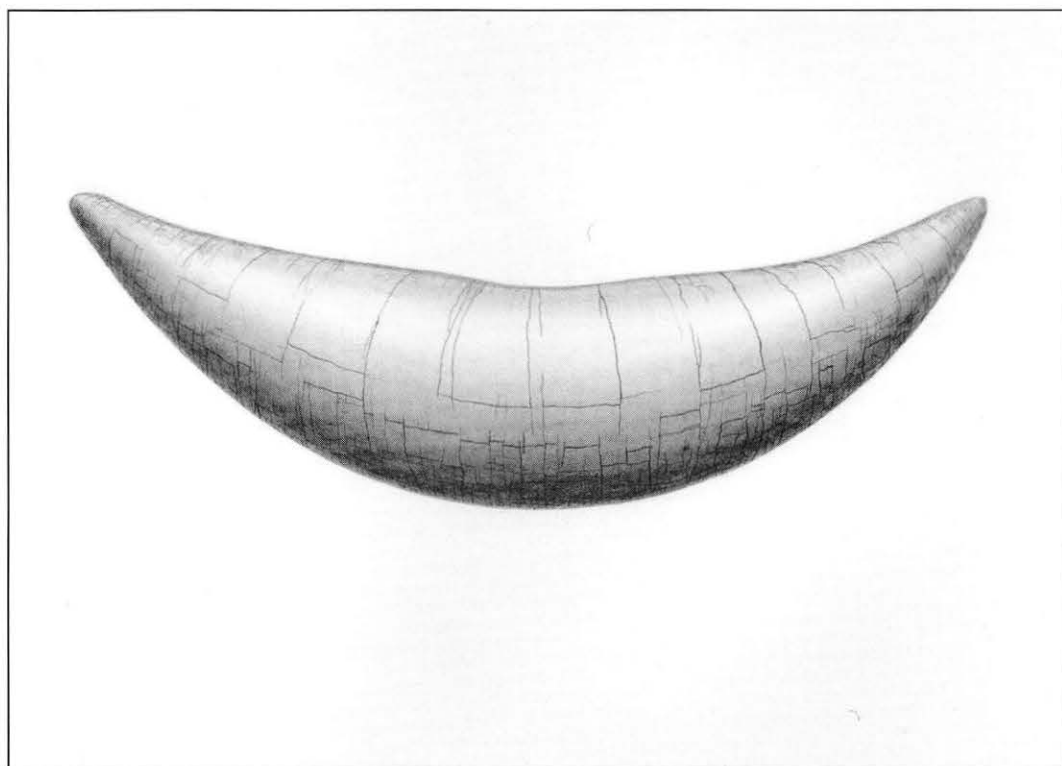
Initially, Bel employed drawings simply as preparatory studies for ceramic

sculptures. Soon it became evident, however, that the drawings themselves—irrespective of any resulting sculptural object—could function effectively on their own. In fact, Bel astutely discerned that the drawings could be and do more than mere sculptures. They exceeded what was possible in clay—in scale, complexity, and facture. Bel then began to focus almost exclusively on making drawings, many of these still hinting at the three-dimensional clayworks they might have become—molded, articulated volumes.

The artist's drawings even today rely upon aspects of the early drawings. The images are isolated on blank, uninflected fields, floating in the center of the sheet. Thus, a logical decision for the early "schematic drawings" has become a compositional and

aesthetic choice in later works. The drawings fall generally into two categories: highly modeled, illusionistic renderings in sepia or charcoal; and flat, silhouetted shapes, often rendered in black. The Greenbergian logic of Bel's two modes is clear: while in the service of a three-dimensional medium (ceramic), the drawings came to be rendered with convincing illusionism; when they are to be seen as drawings, they proudly and overtly evidence their own flatness.

The images themselves vary tremendously in terms of origin and result. Bel is an image-scavenger. She sifts through all manner of media seeking an evocative shape, something that startles her, retains her interest, or calls to mind a memory. Old-master paintings, magazines, antique books, billboards and flea market treasures



"Old Thoughts" Charcoal on paper, 38" X 50" 1992

provide fodder for Bel's voluminous sketchbooks. In these notebooks, Bel then refines, extracts, distorts, conflates, and abbreviates shapes that have captured her attention, seeking always to produce the purest, most efficient sign. She intends that these forms carry weight and meaning, even if these are not immediately readable or specific. Many have for the artist a sort of Proustian recollective power—whether conscious or subconscious. They are intended to trigger associations and memories. By the time Bel has put these images through their many transformations, she has usually rendered the original source all but unrecognizable.

Once having refined a form to its essence—a sort of “phoneme” of meaning in her enigmatic visual language—Bel chooses one of her favored means of presentation for the finished drawing. One manner is the rapidly executed black silhouette, each presented on a small sheet, pinned in grid formation directly to the wall. A large grouping of these suggests multiple possible readings—numerous interconnections and relationships between and among the individual images. One encounters a veritable encyclopedia of these units of meaning strung together, and one cannot avoid the impulse to find implied narratives. As the eye travels from left to right, top to bottom, evocative connections leap forward from the juxtapositions. This syntax of forms is the unedited Bel—a peek into the workings of her eye and mind.

Occasionally, the shapes in even these flattest of drawings rhyme formally with the body, its parts and its tensions (in a manner reminiscent of her earlier ceramic works). One finds an uncomfortable sexual ambiguity in a few of the images—a swollenness here, a penetrated orifice there. Occasionally, Bel will satisfy herself to draw a highly recognizable figure (or animal or object), provided its comportment or attitude is evocative enough. These figurative drawings function like proper nouns in the context of Bel's syntax of images. They stand out for their readability, but they do not diminish the power of those less-(consciously)-recognizable images surrounding them.

Her next step is often to refine further, to cull a few of the most evocative shapes and to render them in illusionistic, finely-tuned drawings. In this, Bel's other favored manner, the virtuoso drawing harkens back to her earliest schematic renderings. Having forced the images through various levels of refinement and adjustment, however, Bel here creates drawings of three-dimensional forms that could never be (least of all in ceramic). However convincing the illusionism, these drawings are occasionally “marred” by an intentional ink drip or spill, reminding us that they exist only in the realm of drawing. They are replacements for the physical world, efficient signs for some pre-lingual memory. Often a single work among these will contain the thoughts and images of many earlier

works, synthesized into an even more complex, eccentric whole.

These drawings, whether small sepia inks or large charcoals, stand alone. They are Bel's icons, meaning-laden signs in a mysterious language barely glimpsed. Or perhaps they are traces of a fleeting world that we have been able only to intuit heretofore. Marcel Duchamp imagined objects in the fourth dimension that, passing through our world, might leave behind three-dimensional traces or “shadows.” In Gladys Bel's work, a viewer might imagine eccentric, otherworldly 3-D objects passing through two-dimensional fields, leaving behind their own strange and enigmatic “shadows.” Bel seems to have achieved ready access to this other world, and to have acquired a clear grasp of its objects. She has learned a good bit about its language, perhaps even its poetry. And, with her estimable work, she has been good enough to share with us her findings—in stimulating, extraordinarily evocative drawings.

*Don Bacigalupi, Ph.D.  
Director and Chief Curator  
Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum  
of the University of Houston  
Winter 1998*



# GLADYS BEL

## EDUCATION

- 1980 MFA, Cranbrook Academy of Art,  
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan  
1970-71 Graduate program in English, SMU,  
Dallas, Texas  
1969 BS, Art & English Education,  
Louisiana State University, Baton  
Rouge, Louisiana

## FELLOWSHIPS

- 1995 Fellow, Virginia Center for the  
Creative Arts, Sweet Briar, Virginia  
1992 Fellow, MacDowell Colony,  
Peterborough, New Hampshire  
1991 Visiting Artist, YADDO, Saratoga  
Springs, New York  
1990 Visiting Artist, YADDO, Saratoga  
Springs, New York  
1989 Fellow, MacDowell Colony,  
Peterborough, New Hampshire  
1988 Visiting Artist, Watershed Center  
for the Ceramic Arts, North  
Edgecomb, Maine  
1980 Visiting Artist, New York State College  
of Ceramics, Alfred, New York

## TEACHING

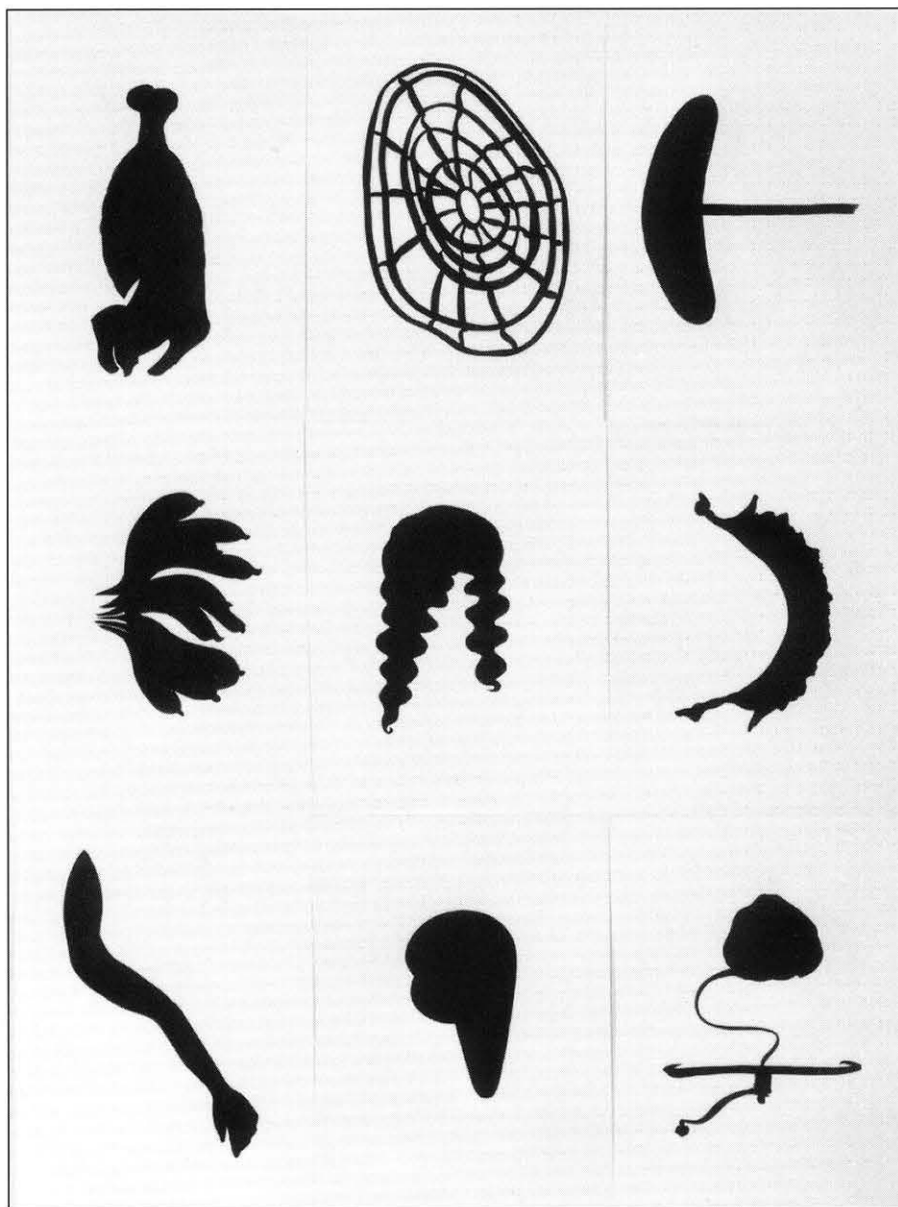
- 1986-98 Houston Community College System,  
Houston, Texas  
1981-84 School of the Museum of Fine Arts,  
Boston, Massachusetts  
1982-83 Mount Ida College, Newton, Massachusetts

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 *blindsight*, Women & Their Work  
Gallery, Austin, Texas  
1996 *Gladys Bel: new drawings*, Sally  
Sprout Gallery, Houston, Texas

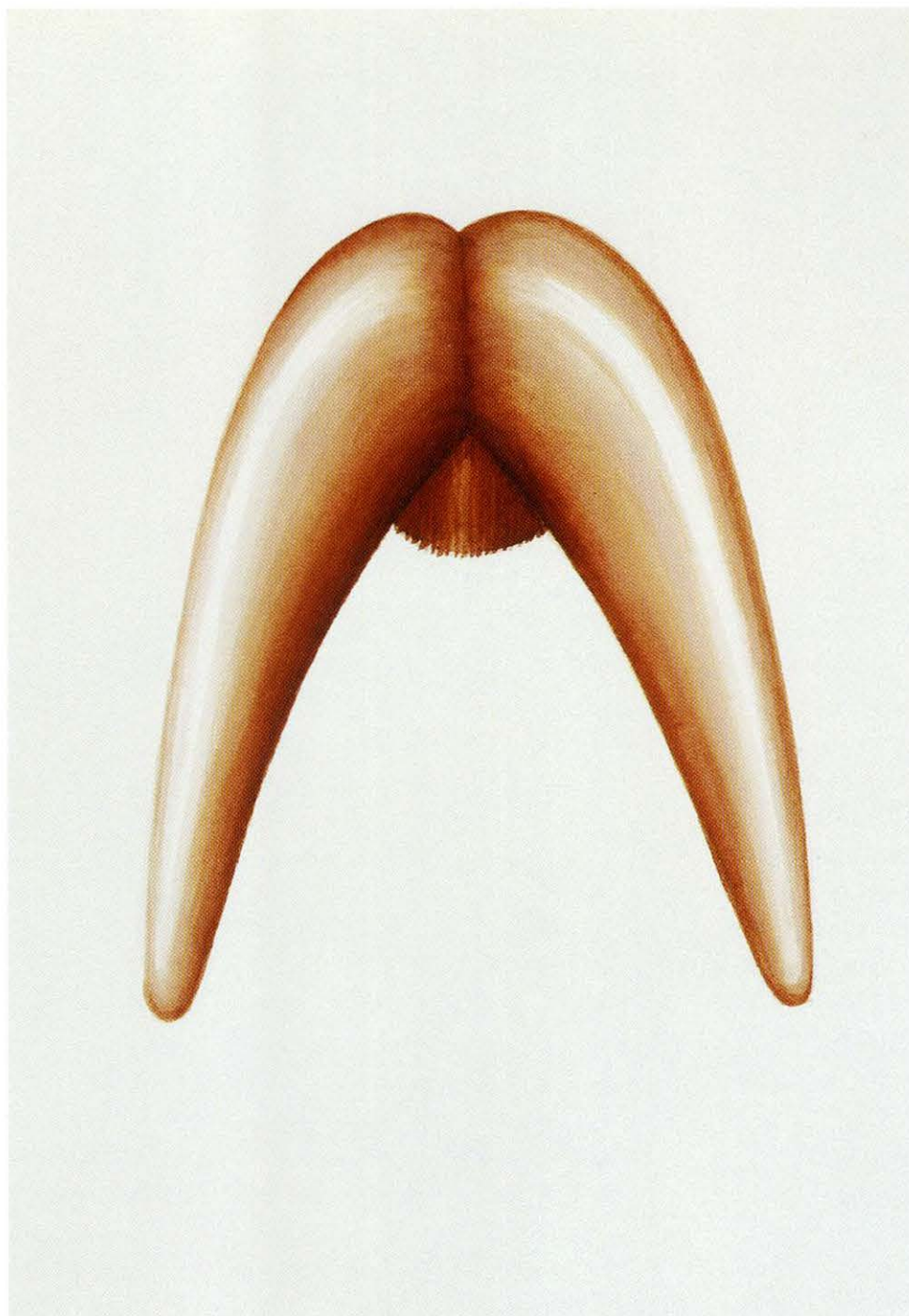
## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1997 *Selected Drawings & Works On Paper*,  
Kingston Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts  
*The Big Show*, Lawndale Art &  
Performance Center, Houston, Texas  
*Houston Area College Faculty Art  
Exhibit*, University of Houston,  
Clear Lake, Texas  
1996 *The Big Show*, Lawndale Art &  
Performance Center, Houston, Texas  
*Texas Art Celebration '96*, 1600  
Smith Gallery, Houston, Texas,  
Juror's Honorable Mention Award,  
Juror: Jock Reynolds, Director,  
Addison Gallery of American Art,  
*1996 Houston Area Exhibition*,  
Blaffer Gallery, University of  
Houston, Houston, Texas  
1995 *Drawing From Strength*, Transco  
Tower Gallery, Houston, Texas  
1993 *On Paper: Gladys Bel, Dick  
Davison, Sharon Willcuts*, Sally  
Sprout Gallery, Houston, Texas  
1992 *Texas Art Celebration '92*, 1600  
Smith Gallery, Houston, Texas,  
Juror's Honorable Mention Award,  
Juror: Allison de Lima Green,  
Curator/MFA, Houston, Texas  
*The Big Show*, Lawndale Art &  
Performance Center, Houston, Texas  
1984 *The Cranbrook Connection*, REF



Sampling from the "Silhouette Series" India ink on paper, nine drawings, each 12" X 9" 1995-1998

- |      |   |      |   |
|------|---|------|---|
|      | Studios, Houston, Texas   |      | <i>Skeet Shoot</i> , Boston College Gallery,<br>Boston, Massachusetts   |
|      | <i>Assuming Less, Understanding More</i> ,<br>INNOVA, Houston, Texas. Juror's Award   | 1983 | <i>Surface Dialogue</i> , Southern<br>Massachusetts University Gallery,<br>North Dartmouth, Massachusetts     |
| 1991 | <i>Visual Arts Alliance Exhibition</i> , East<br>Gallery, Transco Tower, Houston, Texas   |      | <i>Innovation/Craft '82</i> , Rhode Island<br>College, Providence, Rhode Island                               |
| 1990 | <i>Texas Art Celebration '90</i> , 1600<br>Smith Gallery, Houston, Texas  | 1982 | <i>Faculty Show</i> , School of the<br>Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,<br>Massachusetts                          |
| 1989 | <i>Faculty Show</i> , HCCS Galleries,<br>Houston, Texas   | 1981 | <i>A CAID Event</i> , Contemporary Arts<br>Institute/Detroit and Detroit Artists<br>Market, Detroit, Michigan |
| 1988 | <i>East End Show</i> , Lawndale Art &<br>Performance Center, Houston, Texas.<br>Juror's Special Recognition, Juror:<br>Richard Marshall, Whitney Museum<br>of Art, New York, New York |      | <i>Earthenware USA</i> , Hand & Spirit<br>Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona  |
|      | <i>Small Works</i> , Firehouse Gallery,<br>Houston, Texas   |      | <i>Michigan Ceramics '81</i> , Detroit<br>Artists Market, Detroit, Michigan                                   |
|      | <i>Rejected: A Salon de Refuses</i> ,<br>Diverse Works, Houston, Texas  |      | <i>Sculpture</i> , Detroit Focus Gallery,<br>Detroit, Michigan  |
| 1987 | <i>Clay Annual</i> , HCCS Gallery One,<br>Houston, Texas  | 1980 | <i>Cranbrook Museum Summer Show</i> ,<br>Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield<br>Hills, Michigan                  |
| 1984 | <i>Ceramics and Mixed Media</i> ,<br>Lopoukhine Gallery, Boston Massachusetts   |      |   |

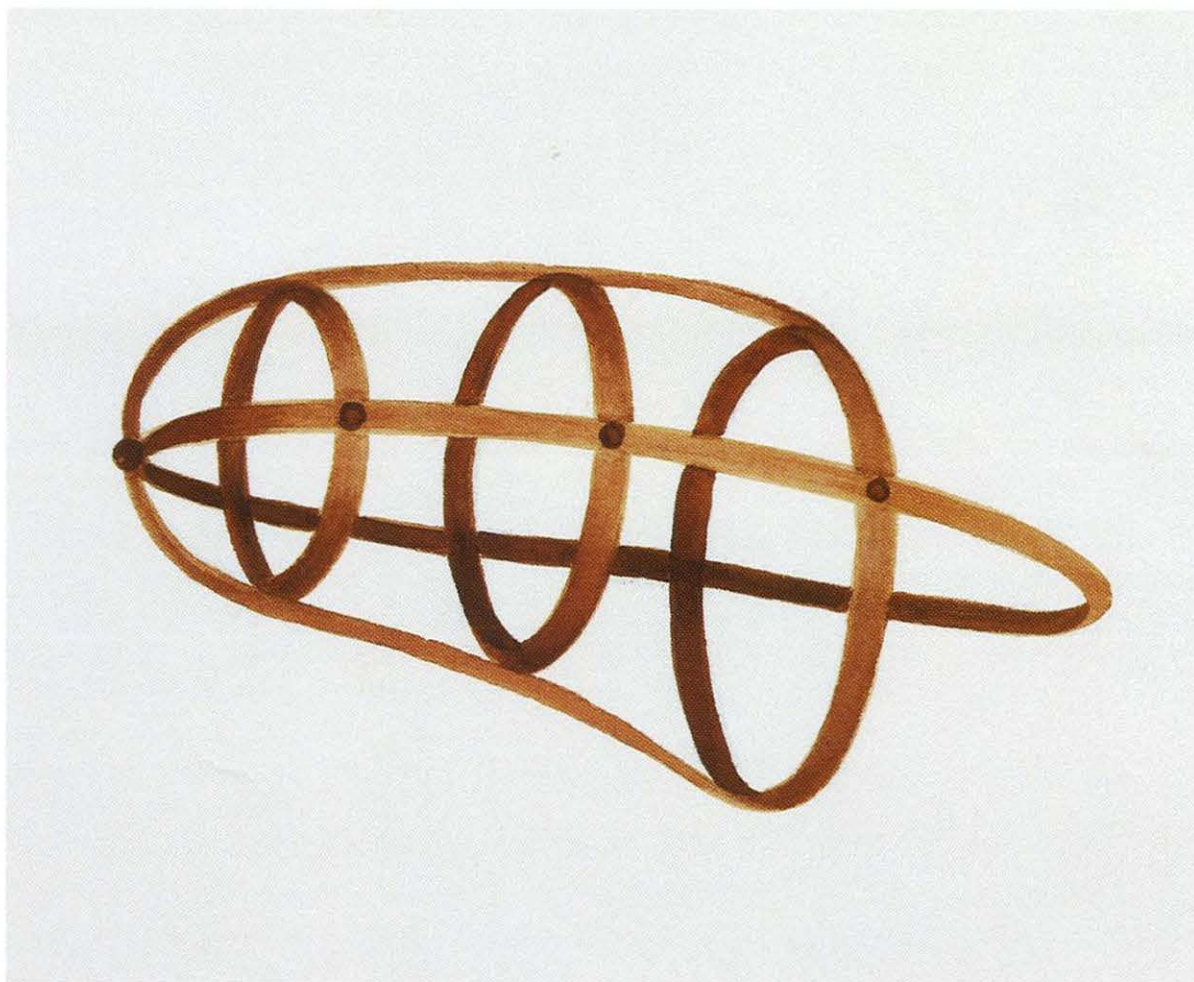


*This Panel: "Of Cabbages and Kings", Sepia ink on paper, 9" x 7", 1997*

*Cover Panel: "Prophesy", Sepia ink on paper, 9" x 7", 1997*

*Back Panel: "Soliloquy" Sepia ink on paper, 9" X 7", 1997*





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Now celebrating its 20th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1495 artists in 168 visual art exhibitions, 81 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 116 workshops, in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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