



Fig. 1. *Ghost Vases* (1977), oil and wax on canvas, 71 x 63 in. Collection: Angela and Nicholas Curtis, Sydney

A New Paradigm: The Art of Denise Green

BARBARA ZABEL

“Resisting all party lines and drawing on a wide range of sources, Denise Green constructs her own model of multicultural influence, blurring and smudging as many boundaries as she can along the way.”
—Suzi Gablik

Australian-born artist Denise Green has created a substantial body of art over the last several decades, paintings and drawings that both honor and challenge myriad sources while also “blurring and smudging” established boundaries. Critic Suzi Gablik’s prescient observations are as much about Green’s art as they are about her recently published book, *Metonymy in Contemporary Art: A New Paradigm*.^{*} At once autobiographical and analytical, the book charts Green’s personal journey as an artist from the late 1960s to the present. As the reader engages in the process of reading and looking, an engaging narrative emerges. Central to this narrative is Green’s recognition that, rather than encoding a strictly Western mode of thinking, her painting derives from a rich cultural mix of Western and Asian principles. Such a realization led Green to define her art in terms of an alternative paradigm she calls “metonymic thinking,” whereby painting becomes a transformative

process, in her words, “allowing us to express an invisible spirituality.”

Finding such an alternative mode of thinking and working did not come easily for an artist coming to maturity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when she and her art-world peers were deeply enmeshed in the formalism of American critic Clement Greenberg, the Marxism of German writer Walter Benjamin, and subsequently the French post-structuralism of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault. Beginning in the 1980s, however, Green struggled against these Western thinkers, realizing a closer affinity with non-Western modes of thought. Taking her cues from philosophers, linguists, and folklorists ranging from Indian linguist A. K. Ramanujan to psychoanalytic clinician Alan Roland, Green has formulated an alternative paradigm based on a meshing of East and West, which she accomplishes via the unique perspective of a practicing artist. Her wide-ranging philosophical discussions invariably circle back to her own paintings, as well as to works by other artists with whom she shares a global vision—Agnes Martin, Brice Marden, and

Dorothea Rockburne, among others. Philosophical abstractions are thus made concrete, embodied in the physical reality of the paintings themselves. As readers, we also engage in a close reading of the works and begin a journey that is both geographic and spiritual.

Geographically, the journey begins with Green’s departure from her native Australia and her entry into the countercultural turmoil of late-1960s Paris where she attended the *École des Beaux Arts*. In the early 1970s, Green moved to New York, where she became involved in the ferment of semiotic theory; and later in the 1970s she received wide acclaim as a “New Image” painter. Subsequent decades witnessed Green’s emergence on an increasingly international stage as she participated in workshops in India and exhibitions throughout Europe and Australia. This geographic journey was, of course, interwoven with a spiritual one. Green’s thinking was increasingly fueled by alternative visions, especially those of Aboriginal artists of her native land, whom she refers to as “custodians of sacred sites.” Just as Aboriginal artists painted “to bring into being the presence of

* All quotations are taken from Denise Green, *Metonymy in Contemporary Art: A New Paradigm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

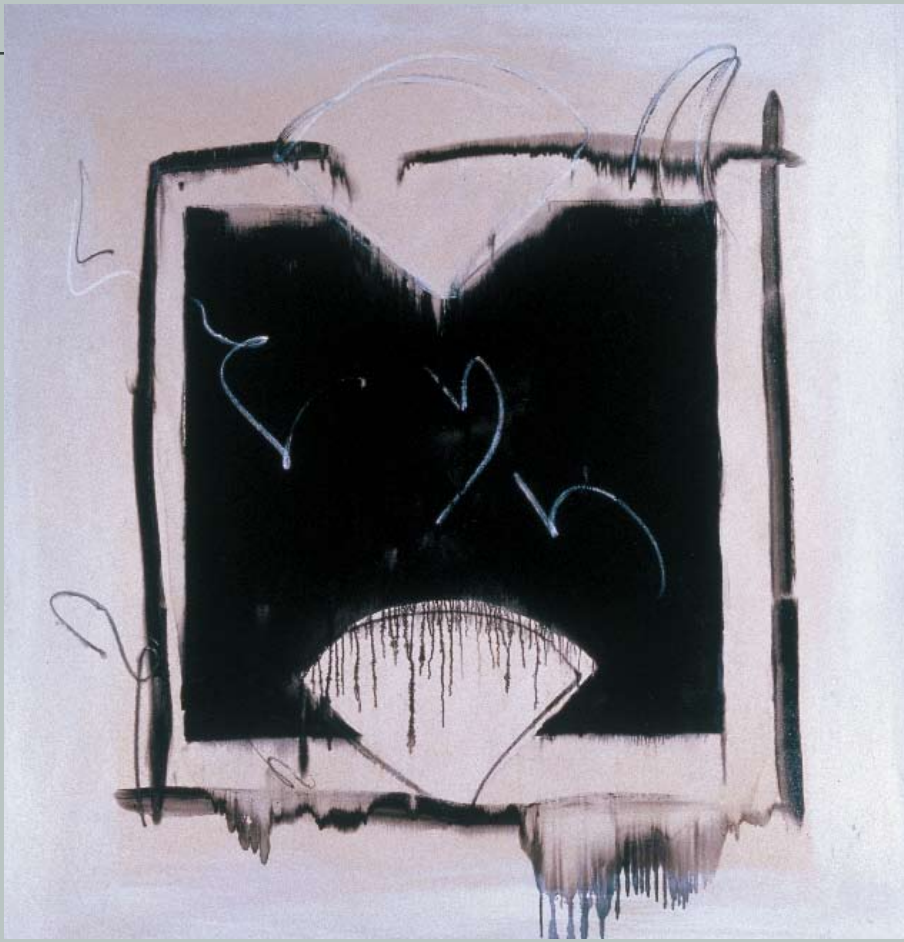
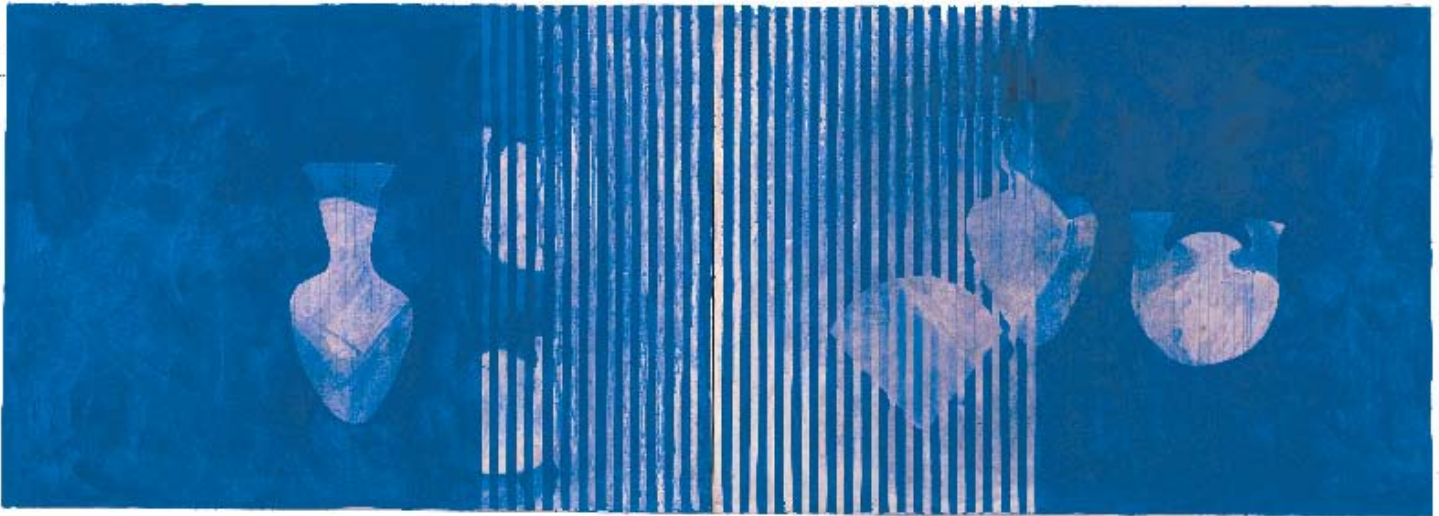


Fig. 2. *Cinderella—What?* (1992), oil on canvas, 72 x 68 in.
Collection: Ian and Christine George, Melbourne



Fig. 4. *The Great Escape* (1987), oil and paint stick on canvas, 68 x 70 in.

Fig. 3. *Blue Re-Witnessing* (2001), acrylic on canvas, diptych, 44 x 124 in.



another realm,” Green paints to establish a dialogue or a “resonance” with traditional cultures.

In *Ghost Vases* of 1977 (fig. 1), for instance, two earthen vases seem to hover over a richly hued ground, evoking archetypal vessels from ancient Etruscan culture as well as the rich *terra rosa* tonality of Pompeii frescos. The work is emblematic of her “New Image” paintings, similar to those shown in the Whitney Museum’s eponymous show of 1978. The surfacing of recognizable imagery in paintings of Green and her peers, including David True, Robert Moskowitz, and Neil Jenney, signified a need among young artists to reassert a connection with physical reality, to evoke a sense of narrative, and to challenge the hegemony of minimalist and conceptual art. What distinguishes Green’s paintings is that, while she grounds her paintings in physical reality, she also reaches back to revive the spiritual resonance of Mark Rothko, an early mentor and teacher. And just as another important influence, Joseph Beuys, adopted materials like fat and felt to establish contact with Nordic and Tartar cultures, Green’s allusive forms in *Ghost Vases* are “invested with personal meaning.” The resonance of her seemingly mundane objects—vases, tables, arches, fans—reaches across centuries to establish a dialogue with ancient cultures.

Green’s paintings typically featured sumptuous use of color, but her penchant for bright color gave way quite suddenly to a radically limited palette of black and white. *Cinderella—What?* of 1992 (fig. 2) is one of the series of works that, as she realized only after painting them, “had been stimulated by feelings of grief for [her] father, who had died years before.” Perhaps the most explicitly autobiographical work to date, this series initiates a conversation between the artist and her father, fulfilling “a need to grieve long after the fact.” The stark

opposition of two white fan shapes separated by a field of black suggests the difficulty of making a connection, of coming to terms with her father’s death. Much like Robert Motherwell’s *Elegy* series—which, though very different in form and context, also depends on stark contrasts of black and white to express mourning—Green’s works become a means of communicating feelings of loss and grief that transcend the specific subject and become universal elegies.

Tragedy entered her studio more immediately—and almost literally—on September 11, 2001. From her studio off Canal Street, just blocks from Ground Zero, Green witnessed the most horrific event of the new century, the cataclysmic collapse of the World Trade Center. The perplexing question facing artists at the time was: In the face of an evil act of such magnitude, what can an artist do? The answer, of course, is nothing—that is, nothing beyond what one knows how to do: make art. For Green, as for many artists at the time, painting became a refuge, offering, in her words, “some kind of protection.” Art became a healing process, a kind of urban poetry signaling distress but also catharsis. As she faced her blank canvas, Green felt compelled to paint vertical stripes, over and over, consciously or unconsciously simulating the façades of the Towers. Green talks about the urgency of this act, as if through art she could somehow fill the void of the massive towers’ absence. But the verticals are not left to stand alone. In one painting from this series, *Blue Re-Witnessing* of 2001 (fig. 3), the artist has superimposed several floating forms on the stripes—fans and vases, which recur throughout her career. These familiar, mundane, and comforting forms remind us of the enduring presence of meaning in the face of such a threat. By engaging in Green’s process of painting and thinking, we begin to comprehend how art can initiate a process of

recovering one's sense of perspective, one's grasp of reality—and ultimately one's perspective.

Although the idea of loss is recurrent in Green's art, wit and humor also infuse her works. Indeed, the artist often sets up a counterpoint between the gravitas of archetypal forms and the spontaneity of calligraphic lines. Such contrapuntal interplay informs *The Great Escape* of 1987 (fig. 4), for instance, which features one of Green's classic fans surrounded by calligraphic markings, which radiate spontaneous energy. The title of the work also comes into play. Could it refer to the artist's escape from Australia? Or from Western thought? Or does *The Great Escape* conjure an image of a motorcycle-riding artist, à la Steve McQueen, escaping from urban realities to seek redemption in the Outback? Perhaps the title suggests all of these. As in all of work, there is an open-endedness that engages the viewer's participation in serious as well as light-hearted discourse.

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As a whole, Green's paintings give us a vivid narrative of an artist's development in terms of global political and cultural trends, a development that mirrors the globalization of the cultural scene in recent years. Major exhibitions of non-Western art in this country and abroad have proliferated. Museums such as the Asia Society, the Museum of Modern Art's P.S.1, and the International Center of

Photography, to name a few in New York, have featured shows of contemporary Chinese, Vietnamese, South Asian, and Australian Aboriginal artists. And urban centers throughout the world, from Shanghai to Istanbul, are now hosting international exhibitions. However, there have been relatively few in-depth examinations of the radical implications of such global developments for Western artists. In her book, Green tackles the multiple ways artists have deviated from Western tradition as a result of global, and particularly Asian, influences. And she has created an art increasingly inflected with Asian elements and Aboriginal modes of thought.

As an art historian of the modern and postmodern period, I am sensitive to the discourse of postcolonialism and the problematic issues engendered by the assimilation of indigenous cultures not one's own. However, unlike colonialist appropriation, Green's embrace of indigenous Aboriginal and South Asian cultures subsumes diverse cultural traditions within a new global vision. Racial discussions have dominated cultural politics in Australia in recent decades, and while these discussions offer much food for thought, it is not Green's aim to interrogate the dynamic relationship between the "civilizing" impulse of colonial powers and Australia's own indigenous cultures. Her paintings do not encode the binary thinking that has been dominant in Western cultures: civilized/primitive, body/mind, self/other, etc. Instead, these paintings represent an attempt on the part of a white Australian to counter that dialectic with a vision whereby such oppositions are seamlessly meshed and contradictions are resolved into a more global whole.

Green's is an expansive reading of cultural transaction and artistic practice. She approaches difficult terrain not so much to problematize issues raised regarding the intermixing of cultures but rather to propose a more optimistic model of artistic creativity—indeed, of life in the twenty-first century. And while she draws insights from a broad spectrum of philosophical thought both Western and Eastern, she always grounds her optimism in painting practice. In her painting and her writing, Green senses a shared optimism among different cultures as well as among contemporary artists and is able to map a path to a better world at a time when such optimism is all too rare.

The "new paradigm" Green proposes, in both her book and in her painting, is the creation of an intelligent artist fully engaged in contemporary issues. Green is able to jettison a strictly chronological, linear, "Western" approach, without sacrificing coherence. By interweaving personal stories and meditations on the works of other artists and the events of the day in *Metonymy in Contemporary Art*, Green crafts a fascinating narrative that has something of the character and spontaneity of her paintings. Denise Green's painting and her prose are intuitive as well as cerebral; both are imbued with a sense of discovery embedded in process. And both forms present us with intuitive, fluid, and very engaging narratives.

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Author of the recent book *Assembling Art: The Machine and the American Avant-Garde*, BARBARA ZABEL is now working on issues of auto/biography in relation to the early wire portraits of Alexander Calder. She is Professor of Modern & Contemporary Art in the Department of Art History & Architectural Studies at Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut.



Fig. 5. *Spire Cross, Square Column Series* (1 of 6 columns) (2006), oil and wax on canvas, 56 x 14 in. Courtesy: Galerie Heike Curtze, Vienna and Berlin

Fig. 6. *Falling, Square Column Series* (1 of 6 columns) (2006), oil and wax on canvas, 70 x 14 in. Courtesy: Galerie Heike Curtze, Vienna and Berlin



An Interview with Denise Green

BARBARA ZABEL

BZ You've recently written a book, *Metonymy in Contemporary Art: A New Paradigm*, an engaging story of your own career in relation to artists with whom you feel a close connection. Could you talk a little about why, as a practicing artist, you took the time to write the book—and why now?

DG My interest in writing the book goes back to 1976 when I made a return trip to Australia and visited Kuringai Chase, a site sacred to the Australian Aborigines. I came away from this experience with the conviction that there is a whole other aesthetic and way of looking at art, and a different meaning to this work, that does not exist within the Western opus. Over the following years I was compelled to explore other Eastern cultures through travel to India, Burma, Japan, and Indonesia. A. K. Ramanujan's writings were also extremely influential. The decision to write the book was based on these experiences as well as a desire to further introduce in the West the metonymic way of thinking and how it applies to contemporary art. The argument that I make in the book could not have been made before this. It is only within the last two decades that an Eastern cognitive framework has been available to Western thought through the writings of Alan Roland and Ramanujan. This different aesthetic and cognitive mode is missing from the critical discourse in contemporary art. My book presents a new paradigm for looking at contemporary art, based on this Eastern way of thinking.

BZ Would you say more about how you got involved in this mode of critical thinking based largely on Asian and Indian art?

DG I had been looking for others with whom I could engage about this aesthetic and thereby further my understanding of it. I didn't see anything in Western critical writing that was close to my experience. I was

introduced to the metonymic mode of thinking in Alan Roland's book *In Search of Self in India and Japan* (1988), where he cites Ramanujan's essay "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?"

BZ How does your painting technique tie into the mode of thinking that you spell out in the book?

DG When an artist creates metonymically, the artwork is a seamless extension of the artist's state of mind. In describing my paintings from an Eastern perspective, I would consider them to be a partial manifestation of myself. The black-and-white works, such as *Cinderella—What?*, which grew out of feelings of loss and absence, do not symbolically represent those emotions—rather, they are a direct portrayal of them. The metonymic process allows me to bring out many different aspects of my inner life, including those disavowed feelings that can only be expressed through paintings that convey this emotional state.

BZ Has the process of telling your story given you a special understanding of your work?

DG I wanted my paintings to be understood not only in formal but also in more personal terms. I usually don't immediately understand the meaning of my work while I am creating it. It is only with the passage of time, sometimes as long as a year, that I come to understand what I am trying to express. My paintings use an abstract vocabulary that draws upon a bank of stored images, both personal and cultural, which tell the story of my life. Understanding my own story and its artistic progress has helped

my work to develop. I gain this understanding through my writing, through telling my story to myself.

BZ I am intrigued with the direction your art has taken since the publication of your book—and especially with the paintings in your current show in Kleve, Germany. I'm thinking particularly of your series *A Rose Is a Rose Is . . .* of 2005. Would you talk about the new paintings and their literary titles?

DG While the title itself comes from Gertrude Stein, of course, my literary inspiration here is not Stein but rather A. K. Ramanujan. Ramanujan refers to South Indian medieval poetry as being structured like a concentric nest, with successive encompassments. This descriptive reference resonated with me and stimulated my use of the repeating rose image. I was also motivated to introduce this motif to memorialize my mother, a gardener, who passed away in 2003. In the "Rose" paintings I was interested in finding a visual equivalent to the concept of ephemerality, but the formal emphasis is not on dark brooding emotion. Instead, it is on the fleetingness of life as conveyed through permutations of monochromatic color in the multiple images of the cut rose. These paintings do not attempt to picture my mother or symbolically represent her death. Instead, the image of the cut rose is a metonym that stands in for her, and the briefness of life.

BZ Would you say a few words about your upcoming exhibitions and lectures?

DG Currently I have two exhibitions in Germany, one at the Galerie

Heike Curtze in Berlin and another at the Galerie Cora Hölzl in Düsseldorf. Both have works from my 2006 retrospective at the Museum Kurhaus Kleve. The *Square Column Series* (figs. 5, 6), an installation of twenty-six panels that I made specifically for my retrospective, is now on view in Berlin. In it I introduce the imagery of a stone. This architectural fragment was given to me in Dresden at the site of the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche, which had been destroyed in World War II. The work also memorializes the World Trade Center, the attack on which I witnessed from the window of my studio. The stone makes reference to collapse, but by arranging the panels into six vertical columns, I am symbolically rebuilding what has been destroyed. On view in Düsseldorf are two triptychs that further the theme in the Square Column Series.

BZ Finally, what books are you currently reading?

DG I am reading *A Pirate of Exquisite Mind: The Life of William Dampier, Explorer, Naturalist, and Buccaneer*, by Diana and Michael Preston, which is a biography of a wonderful seventeenth-century adventurer and pioneer. I am also reading an exhibition catalog from the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, titled *Picasso and Africa*, edited by Laurence Madeline and Marilyn Martin. The exhibition and catalog are a dialogue between Picasso's art and the continent that profoundly influenced it.

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