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Juanita McNeely



James Fuentes Press

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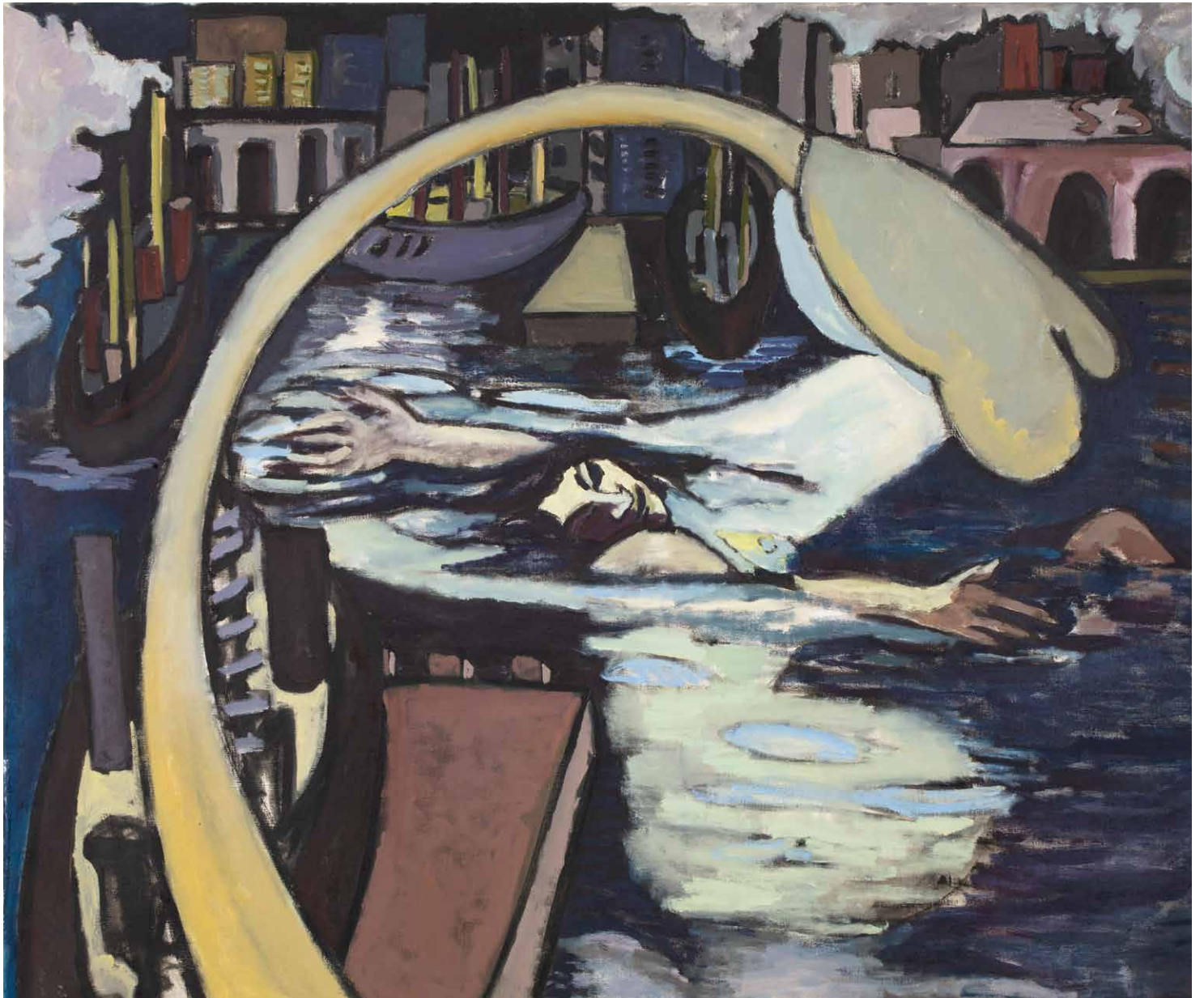
Cover: *Woman in the Plant Shadows*, 1970s.
Oil on canvas, 84½ × 67½ inches

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Plates



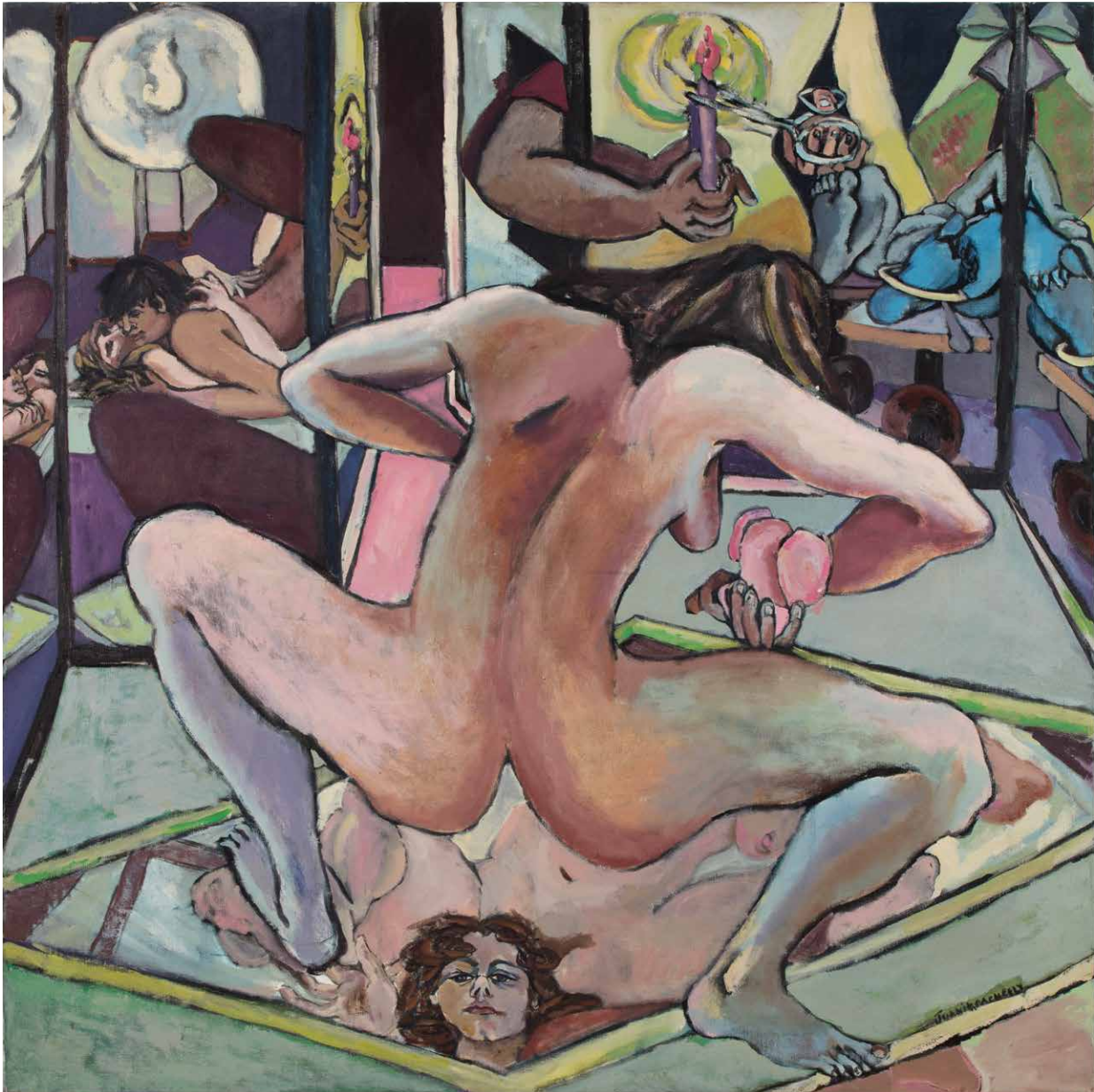


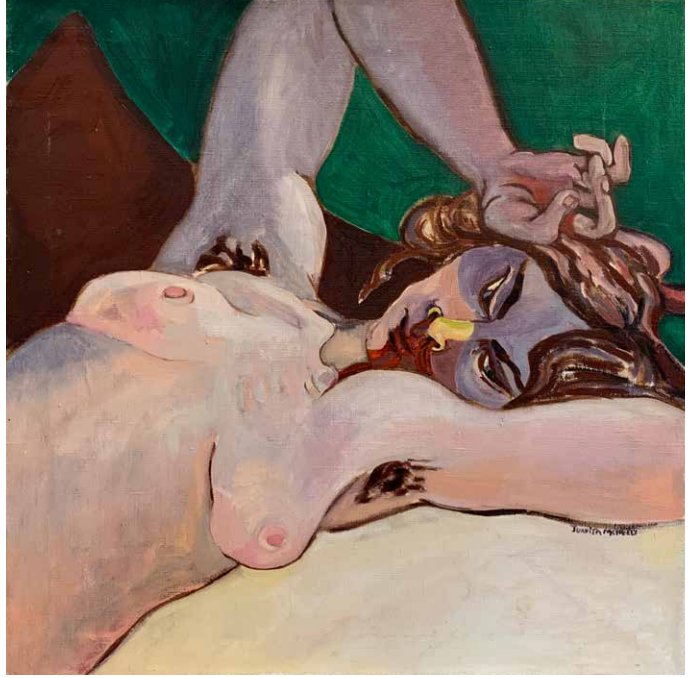






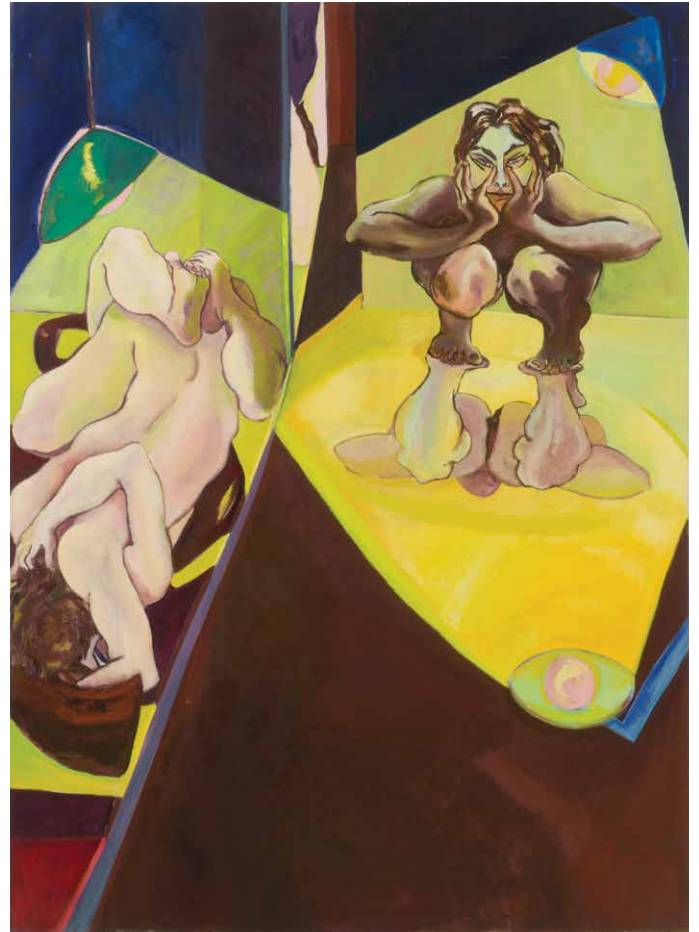










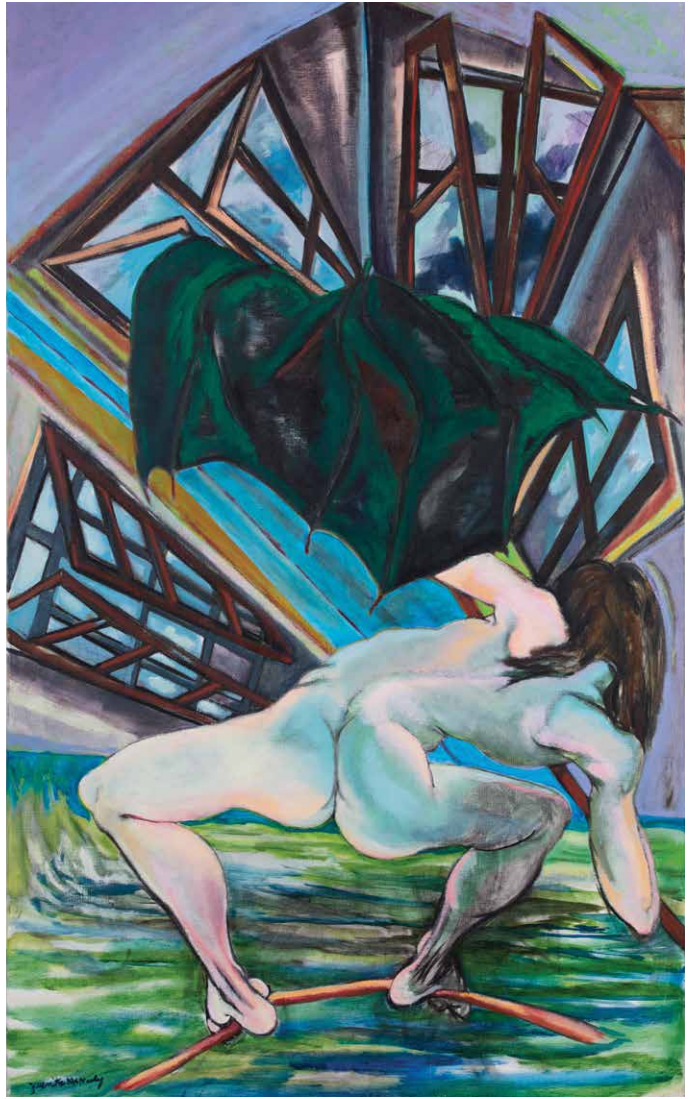
















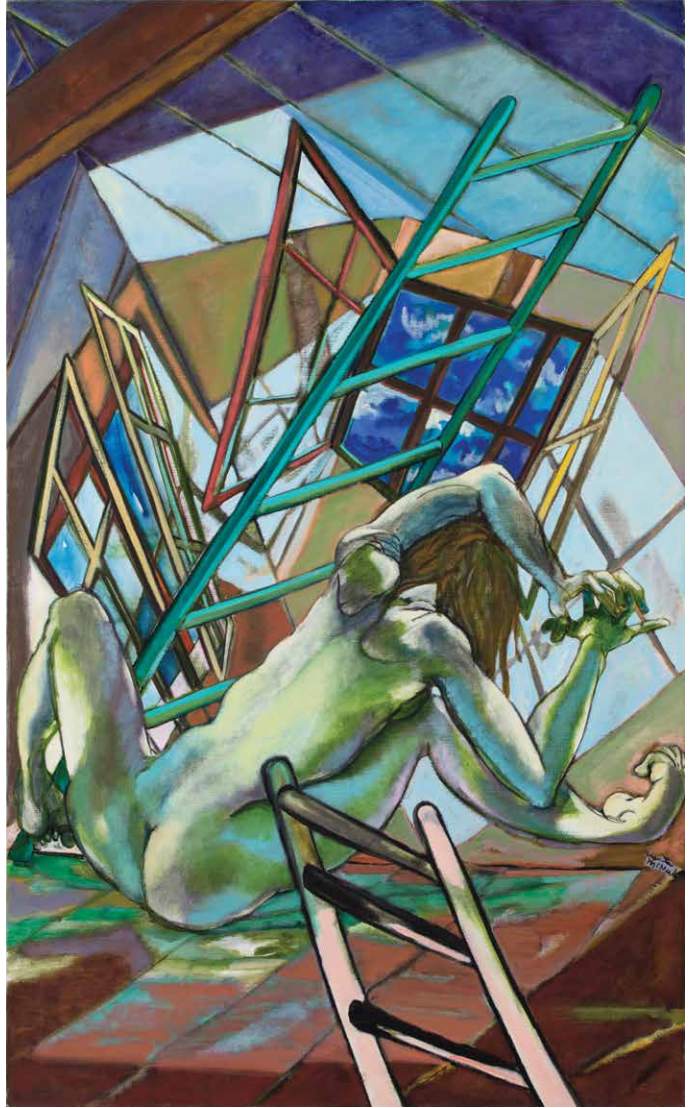




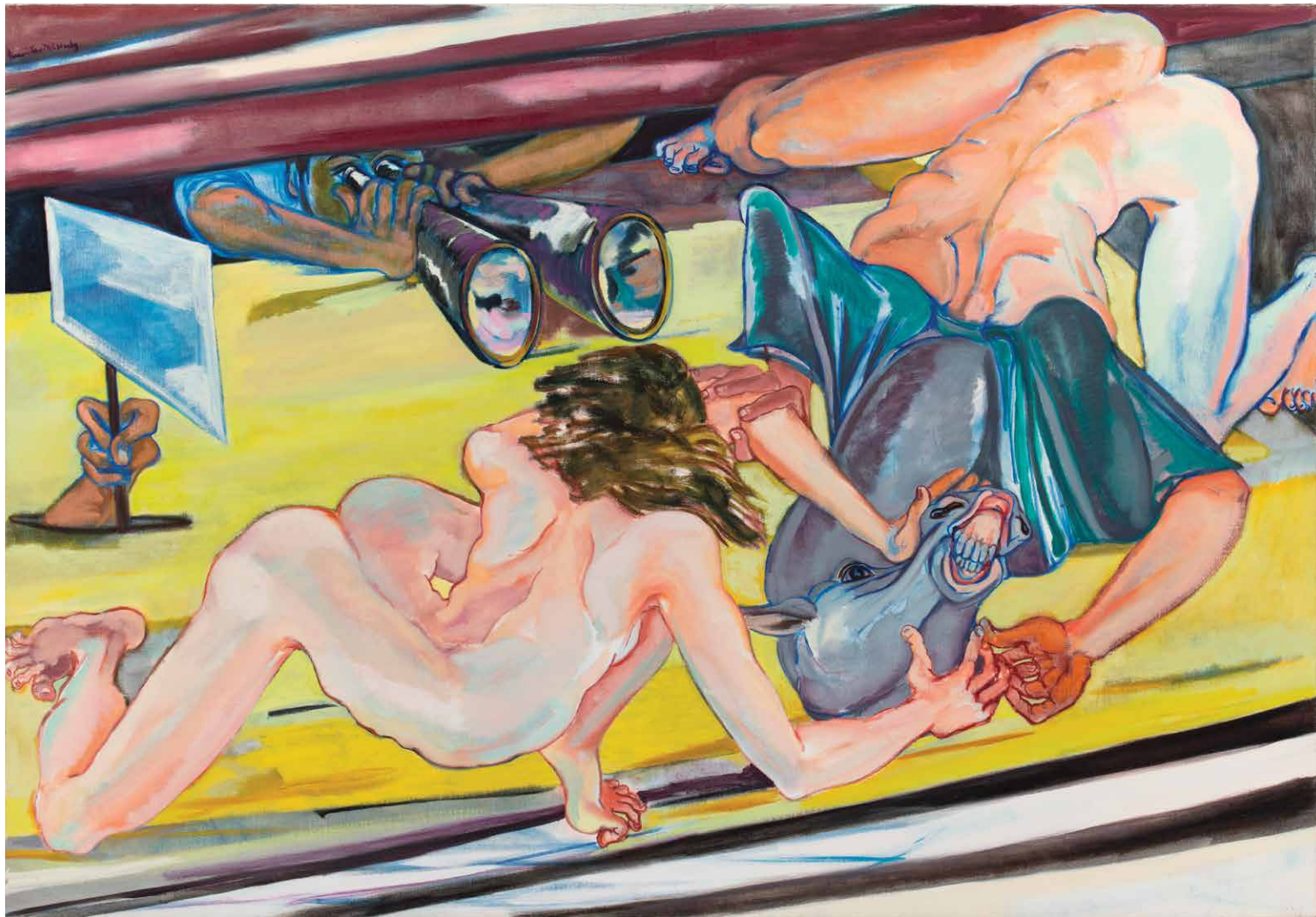




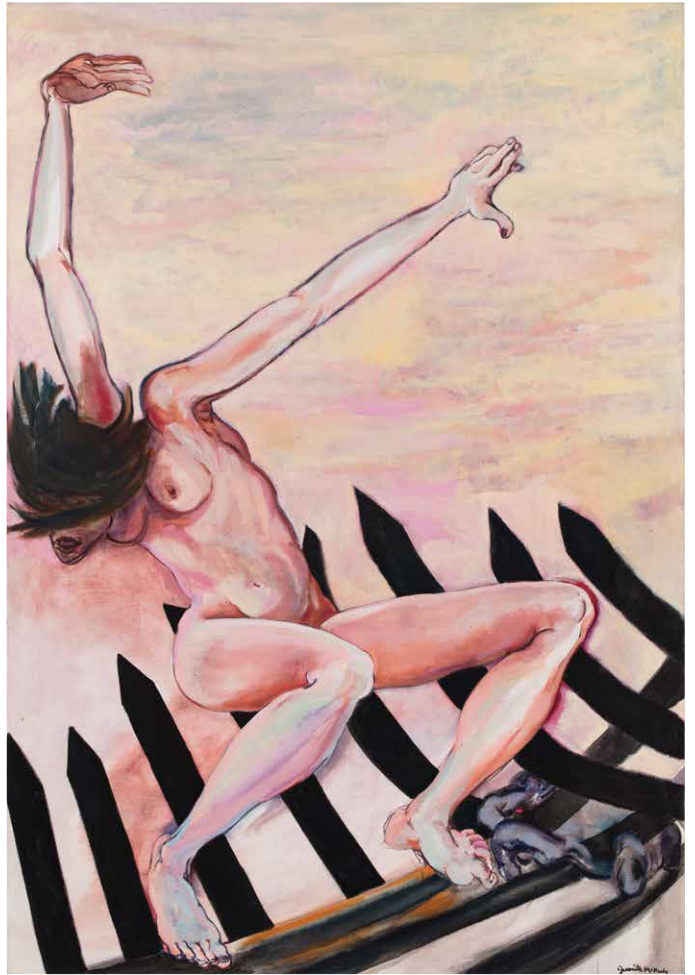


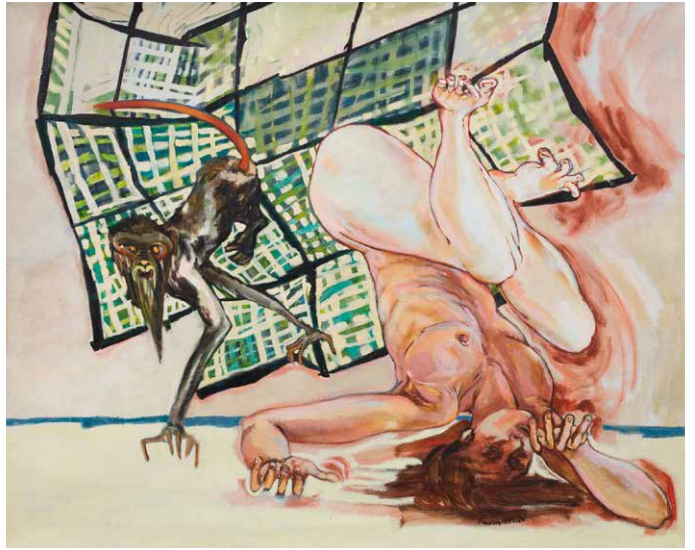


















Towering in Spirit

I have known Juanita since the 1970s, from the time when she was a young artist, beautiful and dynamic. We were both painters deeply involved in the women's movement in the macho art world of New York City back then, struggling to gain a foothold in a mainstream where most women had previously been consigned to the ranks of camp followers. The Feminist push for entrance created a space where many of us could bond, form new friendships and networks, and enter into discussions of our work.

Until recently, figuration had been considered old fashioned and no longer part of the zeitgeist. Juanita's visual vocabulary courageously always included people, place, and animal alter egos expressed in emotionally charged color and motion. She at times used her own likeness caught

Joan Semmel

naked with trembling fingers and toes plummeting through crowded or emptied spaces. Juanita opened up a world to the viewer of an imagination that had traveled through the extremes of feeling and managed to extract from it a dynamic and moving panorama of life and art, ever resistant and amazingly resilient, beautiful, rich, and alive.

Juanita has suffered enormous physical problems over the years, impeding her very mobility. She has, however, determinably continued and has succeeded in producing a body of amazing work: large in scale and towering in spirit. Artists of the past such as Schiele and Bacon, for instance, have often utilized distortion as a way to extend feelings, but Juanita speaks to us in a different voice and one that is very much her own. It is a female voice coping with a body and flesh that is beyond her control. The pain and passion of that struggle permeate her imagery and give her work an authenticity rarely encountered in contemporary art. Her art is a medium that provides her great agency in life, and that grants us the enormous privilege of sharing in it, too.

Juanita's Practice

It starts with something seen, perhaps an eccentric character appearing briefly in passing. Imprinted on Juanita McNeely's formidable visual memory, it could be a recent or past experience, rooted in her own life from the keen experience of her body: self-portraits that are also everywoman. Animals are a frequent motif carrying intense emotion.

With her art primarily rooted in the human body, sketching and thinking about its movement and liveliness on paper follows, experimenting with how she will pose and arrange them. Ultimately

The contents of this essay emerge directly from three conversations with Juanita McNeely held in her Westbeth studio with her friend Sharyn M. Finnegan in May of 2022.

the work comes completely from her imagination. Interestingly, this painter of large works liked to do many thumbnail sketches on small pieces of paper, finding the contrast stimulating between one scale and another. Juanita would use a reducing lens to go over the results, comparing the two. This tool would become even more crucial when her mobility was compromised later on, giving her an immediate distant perspective on works in progress.

When the composition settles somewhat, the canvas, always large, is stretched with the finest linen, gessoed and dried and put up on the wall. She is fond of painting against an aural backdrop of old movies on TV she knows well from theaters in St. Louis, frequented with both parents in her youth. She doesn't have to look at them to know what is going on, but an unneeded part of her mind is distracted, granting her freedom to paint freely.

Juanita approaches the canvas with a rag and turpentine in one hand, and a brush loaded with color in the other, to draw and paint simultaneously, stepping back and forth, her whole body involved in working spontaneously to get movement and vibrancy down on canvas. Checking the lines and quickly wiping away with the turp what does not work, she continually reconfigures these moves with the paint. For this tall woman, the scale is needed precisely because of her physical engagement with the whole canvas. When, at times, she could no longer step back and forward, she rolled

back and forward in her wheel chair. At times she may use a smaller brush to render some of the juicy details she does not want to forget.

When Juanita is satisfied with the composition, selected colors related to her concept of it are picked and her brushes and favorite medium of Poppy Seed Oil come out. That medium has the advantage of slow drying, so she can leave her options open longer. The canvas is already partially, thinly covered with many shades of the original color, which will very likely peek out from the final work in outline as well as giving it an under painting. Juanita made her own detailed color chart coupled with painted chips of colors on cardboard that she experimentally affixes with blue tape to the canvas to see how they might work. Sometimes working with multiple colors at once, she finds herself holding four brushes, one in the gap of each finger, making sure they do not touch. She is also cleaning brushes as she goes along.

When Juanita is finished applying a color to the painting, and before she cleans the brush in the turp, she'll put a slash of the color on a piece of paper to the side: sequentially listing an exact vertical record of what she has used if she wants to go back to it. She will also not hesitate to integrate the white of the canvas into the form, or use the turp to extend the paint on the finished work. All of this care is about keeping the surface thin and the application of color fresh, avoiding what she calls

a “heavy feeling” of too much paint. If Juanita saw a passage that did not have the texture she desired, a controlled flick of a drop of turp and oil would hit the canvas and be tapped away with a paper towel. This is a trick she learned in the print studio in Westbeth, the artist housing in New York that she’s lived in since the 1970s.

Juanita’s color is the seductress for a painting that might be difficult to look at. Her earliest work is her darkest in terms of value and not long after she would burst out as a natural colorist, realizing that it makes the work thrum with life, drawing the viewer in.

You can see the brushwork and yet it is remarkably clean without being hard edged. Loose slashes of related or contrasting colors appear next to each other, then a hard, vertical post or flower stem or architectural element will traverse the painting straight as an arrow. Juanita loves contrast: the small sketch, the giant canvas, dark against light, the expressive against the cold, the loose against the hard.

Clarity is all, and for that, control is necessary. Throughout the painting process she needed distance from the work that was not possible in her immediate space. Just across from the painting on the wall, Juanita had a sleeping loft that she would ascend to comfortably look down from, just as she would start the day, studying the work in progress for a good while.

The desire for the image to pulse with life and, in turn, meaning, was paramount and reality could be abridged in the process. A painter of the figure who never drew or painted from the model is unusual. Juanita started drawing her nude active figures in Junior High. The class was reading Shakespeare and her way of taking notes was to draw the figures as active bodies as she imaged in her mind, with no detail, as in clothing, nor genitalia, about which she knew little. In 1940s St. Louis the suggestion of nudity was a problem and her parents were called. Fortunately, both parents were more broad minded than the ones calling. They supported her—something they never stopped doing.

When she got to Washington University, a required drawing class with models repelled her as their stillness seemed deadly, lacking of life. Asking for a reprieve from this requirement, Juanita’s professors gave her a two month trial to prove she didn’t need the course. Consequently, she never worked from a model or from photographs.

Her portraits come from this extra ability to absorb the visual world. Aware of it, she trained herself continually to observe people and the way they moved in detail. Often her portraits are more like the subjects than any photo might be, despite the figures occasionally seeming to do the physically untenable. Juanita gives unnatural hands and toes more emotional freight than might seem possible.

Printmaking was an important facet of her work that had some impact on her painting as well. There was a print studio in Westbeth but it was in very bad condition. Juanita joined with 40 Westbeth artists who got a large grant to really improve it, and this process became part of her daily life. In the morning and early afternoons she would paint in her studio, well lit with natural light from huge windows facing the Hudson River. When the light dimmed she would head down to the print studio for a few hours. She started with monoprints, akin to painting in a way, and branched out, experimenting from there. She loved the variation she would get from various pulls and working on a different scale was refreshing. These monoprints proved to be a favorite practice.

Around the same time—the mid '70s—she started experimenting with cut paper. It started with the idea of making Christmas cutout dolls for friends, but their flatness was boring, and so she started experimenting with cuts and bends and saw how the light changed them depending on their angle. With larger paper and scissors she started with her leaping women, experimenting with how much she could cut without the piece falling apart, which was impossible to anticipate. Working with this effect of real light was exciting. She showed these experiments to Mary Frank, another habitué of the print shop, who was intrigued and began to work in the medium also.

The third medium that Juanita has worked in was one she started experimenting with in graduate school at Southern Illinois University. Trying out pottery, she had a professor who emphasized perfection in forming the pot—very uninteresting to Juanita. A couple of students were very taken with the results she got from painting onto her misshapen work after the glazed pot's were fired. The difficulty here was that she could see her composition, but putting on the color with glaze is a somewhat color blind process as they appear pale and do not emerge until firing. An exchange was agreed upon; her friends made the pots and she would paint them before firing, altogether more fun.

In time, it was really through experience and with her retentive visual memory that she grasped complete control of the color, and imagery relating to her other work emerged. Juanita now was thinking of the surface of the ceramic just as she thought of the surface of a newly stretched canvas. The difference lay in how the round shapes placed the figures in even greater motion.

One of Juanita's earliest and most important influences was the German Expressionists, many of whom had come to St. Louis to escape the Nazi regimen. Some were teaching at the St. Louis School of Fine Arts at Washington University when she was there, and their rigor became a model for her. One professor, Werner Drewes, who trained in the Bauhaus and studied under Max

Sharyn M. Finnegan

Beckmann, was of particular influence and very supportive of her work. Beckmann had taught at the St. Louis School a decade earlier and the St. Louis Art Museum held the largest collection of his work in the world, right across the street from the school. Juanita frequently went there after class to study his work and was especially interested in his multi-paneled works. Incredible for her, he visited the campus with his family and Juanita got to meet him. His English was not good and his wife, known as Quappi, was his translator. Juanita McNeely is an Expressionist painter, but more rarely, a Woman Expressionist painter, bringing that experience to light for over 60 years in all its facets and as never before.

**A Full Circle:
Hall W. Rockefeller
in conversation with
Juanita McNeely**

Juanita McNeely doesn't live in a hypothetical world. Her images of naked, mostly female figures aren't drawn directly from life, but they are true to the image of Woman that she has in her mind: a synthesis of all the artist has observed of human movement and gesture. This is not to say that her forms are perfect. Anatomically correct, yes, but often exaggerated, lanky, or contorted. Perfection bores her, as she finds nothing in it to work for or against. The flawless simply isn't real and is therefore not worth her time.

It would be easy to read McNeely's grounded attitude as informed by a life of bodily suffering—as she has experienced—but this may also be a result of her upbringing as a Midwesterner, an identity she didn't completely abandon when she left St. Louis as a young adult. A biographical reading of her work, however, distracts from its potent political message, which also unflinchingly depicts a universal human pain.

Though this is on its own is a feminist stance—to bring the reality of women's lives to canvas, to depict bodies in the way they are lived in—painting was not what McNeely's feminist peers of the 1970s were doing. Artists like Hannah Wilke, who lived in the same apartment building, were bringing their bodies into the work, using performance as protest. Others were creating installations and interventions, making political statements with craft materials typically considered

feminine, as Louise Bourgeois did and whom McNeely also knew.

So why make art in a medium inextricable from the male canon of capital A Art History? As McNeely most often paints on an epic scale, across numerous connected canvases, she presents an understanding for how painting can incorporate narrative and movement across time, depicting both the psychological and physical truths of an embodied life. The tradition of painting, McNeely proves, can itself serve a feminist purpose.

When she painted her figures on ceramic pots and vases, she wasn't using a craft medium the way her contemporaries were, either. Instead of throwing her own pots, McNeely would swap with ceramicists she knew, hoping for signs of their hand in the clay, which she would use to inform the placement of her figures. McNeely's embrace of pottery was not a bid to elevate craft to the level of fine art, but rather simply another means for communicating a complicated story.

Using the vessel's continual surface she tells of a multifaceted experience, as a theater in the round can reveal the varied perspectives that a proscenium flattens. By no means decorative art, we may sooner read this narrative in relation to what, say, Carolee Schneemann was doing in her feminist performances of the same time. Even when approaching the form of the circle—which perhaps only Giotto, as the legend goes, could

render perfectly—McNeely keenly found within it signs of human imperfection and complexity. Entering into the long tradition of painting, she transforms it into a dimension of embodied experience.

Content warning: the following interview contains a description of sexual assault.

Hall W. Rockefeller

Tell me about your time as an art student at Washington University in St. Louis.

Juanita McNeely

I mean, I was lucky at the school I went to. We had all these models, the same models. They were all good models and all interesting, but I just got very tired of it. I mean, every day you go to look at the same person. I thought, “Oh, it’s got to be better than this.” And so I went and spoke to the painting professor. I said, “Can I take off from school? Just give me a semester. Let me paint anything I want. And I’ll bring it back to you. And if you think it’s not worth doing, you let me know. Then I’ll just quit.”

Hall W. Rockefeller

Wow.

Juanita McNeely

And he let me do that. I made all these images and ideas and brought them back. I was young but I brought it back. I lined them up and said, “May I

come back and stay as long as you say so? But I still would like to do what I want to do." I was surprised they let me.

Hall W. Rockefeller

That's fantastic.

Juanita McNeely

I loved being there. It was a wonderful place.

Hall W. Rockefeller

You saw a lot of Max Beckmann's work in St. Louis, right?

Juanita McNeely

Oh, I used to sit in the library, and say, "I'm going to beat you, [Beckmann]. I'm going to beat you."

Hall W. Rockefeller

And who taught you ceramic?

Juanita McNeely

The only woman ceramicist there taught us. She prompted, "Well, will you make the perfect pot

today?" Right away, my head went zap. I don't like hearing that. "You just keep working on it until it becomes as perfect as you can make it. Come show me afterwards." I spent the time being bored, doing that. Then finally, I just kind of gracefully dropped it as a mistake. Is there such thing as a perfect pot?

Hall W. Rockefeller

No.

Juanita McNeely

I couldn't believe this. And I didn't want to be the one that did it.

Hall W. Rockefeller

It's like a perfect circle. That doesn't exist either.

Juanita McNeely

I mean, it just doesn't make sense, things being perfect.

Hall W. Rockefeller

That's a fantastic story. I think that really sums up something about your character.

Juanita McNeely

Yes. You get a lot of that. I used to knit sweaters. I purposely left a mistake in it because I liked the idea. I always made mistakes anyhow—and just worked it in as the thing to do.

Hall W. Rockefeller

I'd love to talk more about the pots you did make. Are the figures on the pots coming to you from your imagination?

Juanita McNeely

Yeah. My mind. My mind. Wherever I went I was studying where the person put their foot, what angle their head was. I was always studying the figure. And that's all I was interested in, the figure. And so, you start to record it. Basically, if you look at my paintings, they're broken arms and legs. But they're with intent. I get very upset when I look at a painting that someone did as a figure painting and an arm is broken, but not on purpose. That's irritating to me.

Hall W. Rockefeller

They don't understand the figure. They don't understand anatomy. You said you moved on to ceramics

because you were tired of painting and you wanted something different.

Juanita McNeely

Well, if you're using the figure, it's easy to keep going someplace. That's one reason.

Hall W. Rockefeller

So is there sort of a narrative? Or is it a repetition of a single form around the vessel?

Juanita McNeely

It's a narrative. I start someplace... It's very nice when you work on them, because when you start, you begin to feel like you can feel the incised lines. I realized there was something really wonderful to have a drawing already, and then you just start carving around.

Hall W. Rockefeller

So these lines in the clay, those are your lines? You did that? Or was this texture done by the potter?

Juanita McNeely

The potter.

Hall W. Rockefeller

Okay. And then you responded to it.

Juanita McNeely

Right.

Hall W. Rockefeller

When you talk about the circle of the pot, do you think of it in the same way as your multiple canvases, which tell a narrative?

Juanita McNeely

I'm as interested in what is going to happen next, on the other side. I start off with very planned images, what I call thumbnail sketches. This is basically to clear my mind. I don't like clichés. I mean, when you're making something, it could easily become a cliché. So I try to do all of the ideas and just get rid of them. Then I just close in on it and try to erase, erase, erase, erase. Get down to something simple, so that when I look at it, I see it fresh.

Hall W. Rockefeller

Let's see. There's one pot here with an image of a two people on it....

Juanita McNeely

They're couples. What amazed me, a lot of people just assume... one of the paintings that I see they labeled from the gallery as a couple, a man or woman having sex, making love or whatever you want to call it. And they thought it was rape. I thought to myself, if I was depicting rape... I've almost been raped in a gallery that I used to show in and believe me, you just don't roll over.

Hall W. Rockefeller

So you would've depicted it very differently if that were the case.

Juanita McNeely

[She tells the story of her assault:] I had placed a folding table against the wall, to the back of the gallery. So that if someone came by and asked me, "Did you make this?" I always said, "No, I didn't do it," thinking that would save me some. It didn't. And when I ended up on the floor, I started screaming, "I'm going to kill you." And I meant it.

I just kept saying it over and over, "Do you hear me? You have no right to touch me. I'm going to kill you." And the two of us tangled on the floor with this metal table. And we got turned around in it. When I got loose, I started after him and went

out the open door and he stopped and looked and I just took off down Spring Street.

I was yelling the whole time, "I'm going to kill you. Watch out. I'm going to kill you." When I came back down to the door, I felt sorry. This man looked at me and he said, "Was he trying to steal from you?" I remember saying, "Is that all you think that happens to a woman? They lose some money?"

Hall W. Rockefeller

Oof.

Juanita McNeely

I said, "No, I was trying to kill him." The guy was beside himself. He just left.

Hall W. Rockefeller

I think that's the problem we have, the people in power who are men just can't conceive of the experience of being a woman.

Juanita McNeely

In another gallery, I had lots of bleeding women on the walls. I used to paint that a lot, because it was what I knew and what was real to me. I remember this woman came to the door and she said, "What

are you doing here?" I responded, "What do you mean?" She said, "You have my child right here. And they see all this blood coming out of a woman." I turned around and said, "First of all, you came inside. Second of all, can I ask you what is so awful about a woman bleeding?" I said, "That's how you give birth. That's how you die. That's how you live."

Hall W. Rockefeller

Right.

Juanita McNeely

"Blood," I said, "is quite beautiful if you look at it." And I said, "It's a way of teaching. It's okay. It's okay to have this happen." But, she would have no part. I had a wonderful way of not being quite aware of the work's impact on people. It was a gift to me really, because I just do it.

Another time, this lovely older man came to see my work to review it. I had all these women, blood, everything. He looked, looked, looked and I thought, "Oh brother, here we go." Then he did the sweetest thing. He came over, he said, "Would you mind? I'm so fascinated, but I don't want to hurt your feelings. I need a question answered." And it was a beautiful question: "Do you mind if I ask, why do you have all the blood? Do all women bleed this much?" I told him, "Actually, you're the first person

to ask," I said, "It's just my perception that I want to talk about. Some women may bleed as much as I'm showing, but some may just have a spot, that's it. Not everyone may have that experience." And he said, "Thank you." And I realized afterwards that a lot of men in certain situations, they may not be able [to understand], they may not have seen.

Hall W. Rockefeller

When you think of your art out in the world, separate from you, do you think of it as important that other people are looking at it and learning from it? Or is it something else?

Juanita McNeely

It's just something else. But I would love [learning] to be the response because, if I'm truthful, I had a lot of hemorrhaging when I was younger. And very seriously. So that's my experience, not someone else's experience. I found it almost beautiful to me. I could just freely say what I wanted and it just never occurred to me why someone would be upset. Another time an art critic suddenly comes up and I hear her say, "Who's this artist?" She asked, "Is she crazy? She needs a good shrink." I was dying to say something, but I had to say the right thing. I mean, she was a very well known art critic. I mean, I've had men come right up to Jeremy and to me and

say, "Oh, I really love that position. Is that your position?"

Hall W. Rockefeller

Oh, God.

Juanita McNeely

I said, "No."

Hall W. Rockefeller

Yikes.

Juanita McNeely

He continued, "Do you do that with your..." I thought, oh God, It's a moron that's walked in the office.

Hall W. Rockefeller

That's exactly the right word. Why did you find paint to be the right way of expressing what you wanted to express? Why not another medium?

Juanita McNeely

I had started as an oil painter at school and I kept

doing it. I loved the smell and the mood. I just loved it.

Hall W. Rockefeller

And what did you paint the ceramics with?

Juanita McNeely

Well, that's a good question. They're glazes. The other thing with ceramics is that, in a sense, it's frightening because when you paint it, you dry it, you put it in the kiln, and prepare to find out what it looks like afterward. And it doesn't necessarily look like you'd thought and hoped, but it's fascinating to see.

Hall W. Rockefeller

So you're okay with that? You accept that?

Juanita McNeely

Yeah, it's fun.

Hall W. Rockefeller

It sounds like with both oil paints and glazes, it's a commitment.

Juanita McNeely

For years they were saying, "Painting is dead." Blah, blah, blah.

Hall W. Rockefeller

But you painted anyway.

Juanita McNeely

Yeah. I mean, when I was at Washington the new artists coming out of New York were abstract painters. And I thought, oh no, I want to do the figure.

Hall W. Rockefeller

Looking back at the hegemony of abstract art in the '40s, '50s, and '60s—there was a newness and there was excitement around newness and the way it defied traditions, defied the norms—but then it becomes the dominant thing and you can't do anything else. The thing that began as counterculture becomes the culture.

Juanita McNeely

Or you can just think of everything figured as abstract at the same time. I mean, Joan Semmel,

I remember seeing her have wonderful abstract painting. And then she came back from Spain. When Joan came back, she found an image for herself. But most importantly, she found a reason, a cause, a particular motive for why she was painting what she painted.

Hall W. Rockefeller

And you think that was because of her experience in Europe, in Spain, that she found the body and painted the body?

Juanita McNeely

The old bodies. I mean, certainly Alice Neel did that as well, but her body really wasn't aged, so it's different.

Hall W. Rockefeller

Do you think that your work is motivated, in the way that Joan Semmel was motivated to depict the body, by the contorted body, the body in pain?

Juanita McNeely

Yes, in pain, maybe. But I don't think of it as contortion.

Hall W. Rockefeller

I see.

Juanita McNeely

But yes, of course they are. I just don't think in those terms, in a sense. I get an idea or a feeling of what I want to say, I think for a long time, and I make loose sketches that are far off from the ideal—I never really think about one particular thing that it has to be. But I do paint blood a lot.

Hall W. Rockefeller

I think that you're right in saying that [blood] is there when you're born, it's there when you're alive, and it's there when you die. And if you're painting life and experience, blood is at every juncture.

Juanita McNeely

Yes.

Meeting Juanita

At the end of an 18-hour bus trip in the fall of 1962, I passed a billboard proclaiming that I was now entering Carbondale, the cultural center of the Midwest. Somehow I didn't feel the surge of excitement intended. I had grown up in Greenwich Village and was 23 years old. I'd been told by some faculty members at Boston University that my two years at Southern Illinois would be a chance to be left alone to paint. It turned out to be a great deal more. It was where I met two lifelong friends. One of these is the subject of this book.

A couple weeks later I was sitting under a tree hoping to find something (besides the tree) to connect to when I noticed a tall slender woman walking toward me. We had already met briefly in the studio building and now easily fell into conversation.

By the time we parted I had a sense of possible survival and hope that maybe I had found a friend.

As it turned out there were events that gave some shape to our time spent there. During the second year someone had the sway to lure Roy Lichtenstein and Allan Kaprow away from New York for a few days. Was there some unspeakable activity they were involved in, such as running a dog fighting ring?—both had excellent career prospects, and I doubt that the Illinois department of higher education was overflowing with funds, but appear they did. So it was that they stood in my studio, one at a time, on the same day. I was floundering and not so delusional to think I would be touched with a golden scepter. Lichtenstein was remote. He might as well have been a hologram. Kaprow was friendly and suggested I come to his gallery when I returned to New York. I suspect he was recruiting soldiers for his Happening Army. In retrospect, I think his idea was a way of creating a more communal notion of art. This speculation is an invitation to an already dense discourse, and not the purpose of my contribution here.

The visit included an actual happening. On a chilly day we were deployed along a dried out creek bed after being told a bare bones outline of the actions we should perform (though perform is not the preferred term). Evidence of this non-event can be seen in Jeff Kelly's book *Child's Play*. In one photo Juanita can be seen from the back, perched

in the lower branches of a tree. In another, second from the left in a row of young artists, I can be seen throwing large rocks down onto a jumble of furniture in the creek bed. Perhaps my perspective was altered over time by having participated, but at the time there was only bafflement, in a genial and bemused spirit. That night Lichtenstein and Kaprow were induced to attend a party at our apartment. They were content to watch our revelry—two more observant wall flowers could not be found, though they slipped away before it got “good.” More star power followed with a talk by Anaïs Nin that evinced more bafflement, as did the Maya Deren film that she screened. This is the kind of cultural disjuncture that I have come to seek out, and I had to start somewhere. Another kind of learning took place on our trips to roadhouses and rib shacks. There was funky music and the ribs that remain my standard today—and no bafflement to process.

Many years later Juanita told me that her graduation project, a mural at a university library, was secreted away before anyone could see it.¹ As

1 Entitled *Man's Injustice to Man*, made 1963–64, it was intended for the Morris library at the Southern Illinois University, as reported by the student newspaper at the time and by the artist herself. A series of related sketches for the mural remain, exhibited through jamesfuentes.online in November, 2020.

she described it, it was a response to racial cruelty and ignorance. I'm sure the people who were the intended targets were impressed by her marksmanship. Whether this work still exists is doubtful. Perhaps it has a place in some mythic museum of honored degenerate art.

As news of the Beatles reached us with their early innocent sound, this time was bracketed by the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of JFK. The latter event created a general of disbelief and sadness, while our game of nuclear chicken with Cuba and the USSR seemed to hardly ruffle any feathers in Carbondale. I went to the Student Union in search of some supportive sense of panic and found only a handful of scholars who mostly ignored a TV that reported of a world standing on the abyss. My dismay shifted into something worse, a state of dread beyond my power to describe. Throughout these event-filled years Juanita kept painting. She was there whenever I arrived at the studio and still there when I left. I have a vivid memory of walking home and seeing her ahead of me, looking exhausted. I still hadn't a clue of the physical burdens she dealt with most of her life. Juanita's degree of determination deserves respect. In a similar situation, there are few artists who would endure until they had spoken, like she did.

After graduation, two or three years passed and my contact with Juanita and Mike was mostly by mail. I was a bit surprised that they had married.

The few friends I had in New York were partaking in similar prescriptive behavior, or so I had perceived it at the time. At any rate I assumed my married friends wouldn't be much fun. I had spent the time in a way that was not resumé-worthy. The "Sixties" has enough accumulated resonance to convey an idea of why this was the case. I moved from the West Village to the East Village to limit the distractions and to reclaim a sense of purpose (rents were lower, too). Within a year, Juanita and Mike told me they were moving to New York. They soon found an apartment a couple blocks north of me on 7th Street, between 1st Ave and Ave A. We were neighbors, just without a white picket fence.

One day I got a call from Juanita asking me to come over and see a new painting. It was of Mike sitting on my knee and Juanita peering from the edge of the canvas. I didn't know what to make of it and wasn't able to look at it purely as a painting. I stammered something evasive and soon eased my way out the door. They later moved to West 14th St near the old meatpacking district that is now filled with pricey restaurants, galleries, and the Whitney Museum, which recently bought a major work by Juanita. They then moved several blocks south to Westbeth, a labyrinthine building once owned by the telephone company—now dedicated for occupancy by artists. She still lives there today with her second husband of many years, Jeremy, who is worth knowing about in his own right: a sculptor in metal

Dick Taylor

and owner of a custom iron works business, restorer of the Statue of Liberty as well as artworks found in museum collections. There is also evidence in one of Juanita's paintings that he tap dances, though I haven't been privileged to see a performance.

I have lived in New Haven, Connecticut for the past 45 years. I drew yesterday, today, and with any luck will do so tomorrow. I guess Juanita is the New Yorker now. Juanita and I continued to stay in touch over the years. We still talk on a semi-regular basis, and I have continued to learn more about her past. The incarnations of this strata of her netherworld can be seen lurking in many of her works. Still, in all our interactions, Juanita is wry and serene. It took me a long time to understand that what I was watching was the steady, unbroken evolution of a creation that, while relaying pain in sharp focus, was depicting the abuses and absurdities of simply being alive. Painting with power, intelligence, craft, and clarity: these are the skills of a heroic artist. It's often hard to see the big picture.

Contributors

Sharyn M. Finnegan

Sharyn M. Finnegan is a New York based figurative painter of landscapes and self-portraits. She has attended artist residencies and exhibited over the last 50 years in New York, New Jersey, Vermont, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Texas, Newfoundland, Iceland, Ireland, Britain, Germany, Denmark, and, most recently, Greece. She was also a studio and art history professor at Parsons School of Design, New York for 35 years. Over the years she has curated exhibits and written reviews and monographs on other women artists—her favorite being her monographic text on her good friend Juanita McNeely titled *Juanita McNeely: Art and Life Entwined*, which appeared in the *Woman's Art Journal*, Fall/Winter 2011.

Hall W. Rockefeller

Hall W. Rockefeller is a writer, speaker, and educator specializing in women-identifying artists both past and present. She is the founder of Less Than Half, an online platform that takes a holistic approach to solving the problem of underrepresentation for women artists in art history and the market, as well as the Less Than Half Salon, a virtual, women-focused community offering an alternative to the art world's patriarchal status quo. Her writing has appeared in *BOMB*, *Brooklyn*

Rail, Hyperallergic, and Sculpture Magazine, among others, as well as in numerous exhibition catalogs featuring the work of women artists.

Joan Semmel

Joan Semmel is a feminist painter, writer, and professor born in New York, where she lives and works. She spent 1963–1970 in Spain, and upon her return to New York City in 1970 began to paint in the figurative style for which she is known. During this time she became involved in the feminist movement and was a member of various collectives including the Fight Censorship group, of which Juanita McNeely was also a member. Semmel's work has been exhibited at the The National Portrait Gallery, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Bronx Museum, and Institute of Contemporary Art Boston; and is in the public collections of the Tate Modern, Whitney Museum, Jewish Museum, Brooklyn Museum, and Museum of Fine Art Houston. She has juried for the National Endowment for the Arts, taught at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and is recipient of the Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award and the Anonymous Was A Woman Award.

Dick Taylor

Dick Taylor is an artist living in New Haven Connecticut.

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