

Helen C. Frederick
The View is Daunting

FEBRUARY 11 TO MARCH 4, 2002
LAMAR DODD SCHOOL OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
ATHENS, GEORGIA

Helen C. Frederick
THE VIEW IS DAUNTING
 Interview With Milena Kalinovska

“Put all the images of language in a place of safety and make use of them, for they are in the desert and it’s in the desert we must go and look for them.”

The last manuscript notes that Jean Genet left at the top of his final proofs of Prisoner of Love

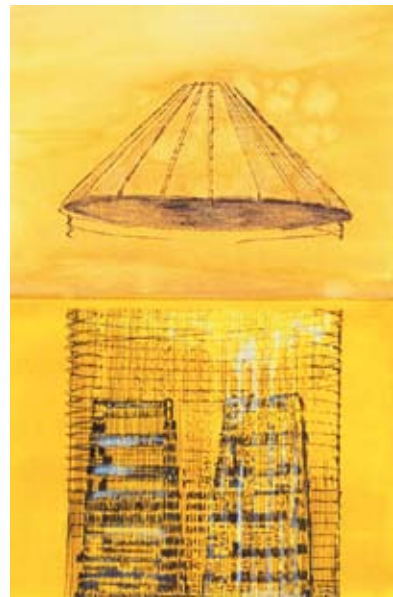
MK: I feel that all you consider in your work and life is a residual process, and that defining process in your case, is a necessary ritual. Therefore, the driving force behind this conversation I see as process as ritual. I see this both in terms of your work as well as that of your living.

HF: Revealing certain conditions is a main concern in *The View is Daunting*, where works have been explored from what I find imbedded in living experience. In various ways the history of my life is acknowledged in materials that I find are capable of expanding the nature of my existence. These materials, in turn, are dedicated to how I’ve learned from them. So, the idea of process as ritual makes sense.

MK: Your best thinking seems to come when you are engaged with travel to different geographies and have time to let these locations get “under your skin” and into your mind. You have spent some time for example working in Acadia Island, Maine and Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. Your most extreme working experience seems to have taken place in the Solar House in Taos, New Mexico, 1993. It was here that you were physically most challenged by the extreme changes in temperature and also mentally you had to deal with the sense of “limitless time.”

HF: If I don’t remove myself from my usual environment, it’s more difficult for me to sense that pause where a process reveals itself. Without settling in another location, or becoming newly aware in a challenging way of that pause, you may miss that opportunity forever. It’s the unexpected associations that I look for when I go to these other places. The actual things that can make a difference are really very simple.

MK: Tell me more specifically about the Solar House and what led you to it.



Detail, *After the Dream of Constantine*, 22” x 30”, watercolor, carborundum print and gum transfer, 1993.

HF: What grew out of the Solar House experience in 1993, that you refer to, is the *Masse Ici* work included in this exhibition. The Solar House experience occurred in such a different climate and environment than I’m accustomed to. I shy away from intense cold. In this solar-heated house, intense heat collected and I was so hot during the day, and then at night the air was very cold.

These extremes allowed me, in my discomfort, to think about the extension of materials I use. I had brought along 4’ x 8’ sized sheets of papers that I’d already made—one to work on each day. I didn’t think I’d have to deal with any sense of expansion or contraction. I thought I had already eliminated that concern in making the paper itself and controlling its specifications. In the solar house environment, however, it was so intense that the papers, with the humidity of the day, greatly expanded. At night, it was so cold that the paper contracted significantly. I thought: this is a possibility; how do I use this? I wetted the papers and threw them on the hot stone in the day. Then at night, they shrank to the stone. So whatever I had drawn as a delicate wash



Abracadabra gates, video monitors, and flax panels, *Appearance(dis)appearance*, installation, 1995.

the month before the bomb exploded, I wasn’t worried, it didn’t seem to be of any concern as long as the boys would come home, as long as our boys would come home and be safe.” So it was that patriotic experience and “I was fine,” and everything was falling down around them. And I thought: this is remarkable; this is the patriotism that I don’t feel, that they feel and will continue to feel. Whereas, I’m the one questioning: why did we do it? How Oppenheimer can barely be portrayed in any photograph without showing us tremendous pain – I carry the anguish, also since I lost a brother in an explosion caused by the military, and how atomic war affected the environment forever is my dilemma. It wasn’t their dilemma. I know that what drives the work is the fact that what Genet writes rings true “...the hour in which—and it’s a space rather than a time—every being becomes his own shadow, and thus something other than himself. The hour of metamorphosis, when people half hope, half fear that a dog will become a wolf. The hour that comes down to us from as far back as the early Middle Ages, when country people believed that transformation might happen at any moment” I am driven with this idea of surrender to that metamorphosis...so that is what the work is all about.

MK: Again, in terms of the memory, because of this, the memory has a major role in your work, and indeed, it must be the memory that you have carried since the time you could remember.

HF: ...that there was another world to draw on that wasn’t the real world. I think that all artists have that at some point; you’re not sure how to get it confirmed, or when it’s appropriate to discuss. [Laughter] But I think we all are drawing our own conviction. We create a space where the ground rules are unknown. I shared a room with my grand-mother for part of my formative years, and the only way I could find myself was to sit alone and think about how I would like the world to be and what it would look like. And I realized, later, that I was drawing in my mind, the images inside me that didn’t coincide with the exterior. And that was the clue, I guess, that I had to be an artist, because I wanted to redraw the world...I had to reconfirm it.

MK: You have also observed—and this is coming back to your thinking again, about what makes you inspired in terms of your work—that you do not see much conflict between nature and technology. And isn’t it a puzzling comment in relationship to, for example, an atomic bomb and the way we live?

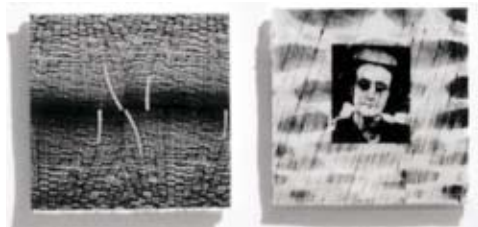
HF: Especially now. Well, I’m an optimist, and I believe that technology will always turn us in the



represents each year in your life and work. Could you tell me how this work developed and how much time you gave to the work?

HF: I think a lot of art is made around blind corners, and at that time, I needed to examine what I could remember in my life that recognized why I had made images, and also examine a sense of my generation's history. It was a process of dealing with the persistence of memory: what remains just beyond our grasp; the internal musings about external conditions. The cause for the investigation of fifty images started with the atom bomb, since I'm a child of that period, being born in 1945, and I was preparing this exhibition at a time when we were approaching 1995.

I decided to interview my parents—I couldn't interview my grandparents, but others who were alive that were that generation older than my parents—and find out what they thought about the period of 1945 and earlier and why was I so anxious about it and why weren't they? And these interviews built up a suspension, a kind of anxiety. So I eventually traveled to New Mexico, and went to Almagordo, and I went to



Two panels of 49 silkscreen prints, Appearance(dis)appearance, 1995.

the white dunes, where the bomb testing affected the landscape, and I went to Roswell, where I really felt physically threatened. I was experiencing something—a trauma or resonance—that I had to really look at. When I came back East, I started looking at all my journals, and decided to record the period of my birth and a year before, when my parents were conceiving me, to the year after when I would have turned fifty. I made use of two gates with the words "Abracadabra" constructed in their metal form. Abracadabra means, in certain cultures, "hurl your thunderbolt until

death." One gate was very tortured and burnt, and the other was very new. Most people came to the show, and did not see what I intended, which was this burnt gate was past history, and the straight, clean Abracadabra gate represented the future. These viewers said that crystal, clean reading is the old, and we're headed in a damaged direction, and that translation was very meaningful to me.

MK: What are the immediately readable images in the book that accompanied the wall pieces? I can see the atom bomb exploding in this picture. Where did you get it from?

HF: The atom bomb looks like a cap or a war helmet, and I've used that idea of the war helmet in my work in monotypes for a lot of things. Some of the other images are people I knew like John Lennon, they're images of language that explore the use of type. The book piece was made in 1994 as part of an installation, but the years are not represented chronologically at all. There's Sanskrit from my interest in India and Indian philosophy. There's the foot itself, the moving ped, or the instrument of our marking on the land. And then there's some earlier history that is just questioning, or doubt, or textual experience of where I grew up, since we lived in a small town near the railway. So they're very eclectic, but somehow, when I start putting them upon the wall, I tried not to alter them to make them visually pleasing. Like others of my time, I'm highly affected by Warhol, and the whole idea of building a wall with modular elements to create time by reading left to right, etc. is a familiar method. The same wall images were bound in a book because of the need to hand-turn history. The book to me is really a time-based element that's essential to understanding the history of the work.

MK: What came out of the interview that you did with your parents?

HF: There was just a depth of emotion that was surprising because I think that generation doesn't reveal their feelings. And as much as I prodded, it was still, "No, we were fine, I was carrying you



The View is Daunting, 23.5" x 19.5", lithograph, 2002.

or as a charcoal mark distorted itself, to my surprise, the next day. This led me to a way of creating new systems of responding and looking at the work.

MK: So, truly, the paper was almost like your own skin—

HF: It was.

MK: I am particularly struck by your shaped awareness of yourself, nature and technological elements (your body, temperature, house). I think that these three elements form a theme dealing with your identity and a broader meaning it has for all of us through your entire work.

HF: Yes probably, as an extension of my sensory experience, which is also true of the Masse Ici, 1997. In this case I was tempted to consider myself inside these storage and drying houses, beautiful silos and structures I saw and photographed, in Pennsylvania. And if I placed myself inside a silo with the grain drying around me, I would be standing in place of the ladders the farmers put in the silos. My perception would be to withdraw and to look out to the countryside, but with my back to the viewer. I don't really want the viewer to be aware of my emotions. They're seeing the

backside of me while I am viewing the landscape. The readability of language is also what I'm concerned about here, since you can only see Masse Ici from my viewing side. If you read the letters backwards, you can still translate them, but the meaning is different. And that little bit of irony came out of these experiences of being in a different environment where I had this time to pause, as I said, to withdraw, and to make these considerations. The human scale is not privileged for understanding nature...and may even be disadvantaged. I wanted to create a position of identity where only the isolated figure in the silo knows its condition. I don't think I would get to that understanding unless I was thrown into a situation that was demonstratively exaggerated. I would not ordinarily have confronted this relationship to nature.

MK: Your use of fragmented language and the way emotions are hidden behind it brings me to experimentation practiced since the 60's. You obviously have a significant affiliation with that period.

HF: I definitely do, and even before that, an interest in Duchamp because I grew up in Pennsylvania near the Philadelphia Museum, and many weekends I would go and look at Duchamp's works in that collection. His great glass totally fascinated me, and I read about Duchamp before I entered RISD. His writing and thinking infused important cognitive perceptions for me. Particularly how long he thought about an artwork, and the irony and the parody found in Duchamp's work fascinated me. His ability to redefine the experience of art, and possibly choosing to oppose his own artwork. For me, that is the essential quality of what art is about. If it can call up the unfamiliar in a familiar way, disassociate information in this information-bearing age I'm interested in it.

MK: Marcel Duchamp made everybody think anew when looking at his work. A critic said about his photographic practice that what Duchamp could not realize through a work of art as object, he expressed through a transformation of the artist himself. Like Duchamp, you actively use your own identity this time in the object itself.

HF: When I look at the entire collection of ways I've put together language and image, it comes back



to visual and concrete poetry. I'm never satisfied intellectually unless there's some layer of meaning that probably is going to have the word delivered visually with it, or some layer of meaning that comes from extracting an element that could be a word.

MK: Where do you find the words you employ?

HF: One of my friends was Davi Det Hompson (1939-1996) who was a Fluxus artist in Richmond, Virginia, and early on, he set his name in type, "David E. Thompson", but moved two letters over and became "Davi Det Hompson". He kept that name, and throughout his life concentrated on word/image concepts and created another sense of language. I think because I mainly work on paper, there's a sensitivity to books and to printed language that I study and apply. When I was in Prague, for example, I immediately went to the libraries to view manuscripts. I also enjoy the function of the book as a container, and its ability to censor what's in it until you open it. It's like the structure of the body opening up. So books have always been this other level for me of containment, as an object. Even as a young child I am told, I was looking at books, not just to learn by, but also I had to have them with me at night. They were objects. I believed in them as a reality. They didn't only transport me; they were a true physical reality for me.

MK: The books that you yourself have created are not necessarily the books that one would read. One experiences your books by handling and exploring them. Their shape is unusual for a regular book, and the words are impregnated with meanings added to them through contemplative images that a viewer is invited to complete.

HF: The demands to finalize that decision for completion are intriguing. The Scieran book of 1999 was formed from walking experiences in Greece, for example, but possibly that wasn't why I made the book at all. Something was drawing me back to the great Indian epic of the Mahabharata. I asked a scholar, while I was in Greece, is there any reference in classical Greek literature to the fig tree? He could not find one, so when I came back from the island of Skopelos (where we were experimenting with fig plant material for hand papermaking), I realized that I would portray the bhodi tree; as the meaningful image to be paired with the walking experiences in Greece.

While in Greece, I really began to understand the intersection of art and nature as evoked by repeated images. Mixing these cultural experiences and references intrigues me. Scieran adapted text from the Mahabharata, for example. At the most unexpected times, language will have great meaning.

Considering the title of this show, The View is Daunting, one would think that would refer to what's happened in the past six months. I've had that title going in my mind for years. Now, I have enough information that I can use those words with appropriate pentameter, and as a type of



Scieran, 8.5" x 11.25", artist book, 1999-2000.

panoramic survey, to describe that nature itself is a form of mind. To me, the whole purpose for doing the work is to satisfy my need to make the commentary and hope that the viewer senses the need also to make the commentary. There will be a multiplicity of narratives. Whether the viewer fathoms the same commentary is almost irrelevant.

MK: Could you give some specific example of how you select your words?

HF: Well, by means of the use of recall that I mentioned to you. Flying on a very small plane in 1996, I felt extremely uncomfortable and looked out to see in French and English—Masse Ici, Ground Here—on the wing of the plane. So I put that away in my image bank, and then when I was again traveling and saw a detail in an olive tree grove, I considered the sense of the parts of

the whole, the small and the large, the remainder of all this dried material on the ground and I somehow pulled up that memory of the wing of the plane and the title came forward for the piece. Another thing that I really dwell on in other cultures is: how does the land provide an economic base of support? As I am being provided for as the traveler on this ground, what does it provide for the immediate culture? So these olive trees were dormant, and I wondered: how does the population possibly make enough money from this small island to keep this grove going? I had read about what the grove meant in Greek classical literature, and what the grove



Detail, Suspension installation with Shorn, artist book, 2000.

means in contemporary times is really similar - it's a sacred place where people go, yes, to gather the fruits, but also it's an enclosed space, and it has this sound - the wind blows and there is a magical sound which transports you. Driving down from Mount Parnassus to the sea, there's just miles of these olive groves, and it's breathtaking; and then you get to the sea that you know feeds back to the grove, back to the mountain. So this is always on my mind when I'm in a locale. I am clearing the story: the history of the culture, how it spreads its economy, how it affects me as the visitor, as a type of pilgrim. And I feel responsible to deal with that pilgrimage wherever I come back into the work. It's not outdoor plein air painting that I'll ever do; it's not nature itself personified. It's building up information about these layers of culture, economy and spirituality that somehow relate in images. There is an inter-

esting book by Louwrien Wijers, who interviewed Joseph Bueys and the Dalai Lama, called Writing As Sculpture, about the greater possibilities of working with the environment. I value the perceptions of why I've been in a particular environment; the altered experience of time; the altered experience of space. And I never know why I'm going to be there. But I trust that I will find out, and that will be the next layer that I can explain to myself, and I can put it into the work. That's the process.

MK: You are interested in understanding how nature, its geography, imprints itself on memory, and really ultimately on cultural history.

HF: Exactly. The Scieran book is a perfect example of that. The word "Scieran" comes from a small book about the beach. I bought this on the way to Greece, to learn something about Greek beach life. And the book turned out to be an investigation of the beach in terms of the history of civilization, when there were spas on certain beaches, when it was a paradise, when it was a sanctuary. And I was very appreciative to this book, before I arrived to the Greek islands to understand what each island offered wasn't the point; it was really physically why people go to that edge of the water and the word "Scieran" (old English) means shorn and how the shore is cut off, or broken off because of what happens in nature. The eruptions that create the edge, that selvage of human experience, was the perfect thing I'd been looking for all this time. But who would think, in a tourist book about the beach, it would become clear to me? It was my entry level into really looking at the walking, and the tearing away of layers that happens to me while I am walking. I can become very emotionally vulnerable when I'm in these experiences. It's slightly frightening, it's like I feel I could be a whirlpool and perhaps disappear; that's how deeply these experiences affect me.

MK: I felt that very strongly when I was trying to understand the work that came out of the Solar House experience. It became clear that these experiences affect you deeply. In Appearance(dis) appearance of 1995, the autobiographical group of prints of about fifty, which



direction so that we can learn about ourselves. I think now, so much that we have given away on the Web is available for anyone to use, and our fears are confirmed that if we aren't ourselves prepared to protect Earth first—human technology's second compared to the Earth—that the natural sciences, including our own lives, could be destroyed by those who choose to do it. The notion that we can defend ourselves with technology is not true. So, the imagery will have to mirror, in some way, the belief that technology will feed back to us values and means for preservation.

There are those, for example, in the simpler sense, that feel books will disappear because of electronic media. That's never going to happen. Technology is passing on to the next phase. We will always need to print out on paper and hold that object, even though I think we're all about the electronic moving image in this age. But, as has been pointed out to me, the conceptual gray-not-seen of celluloid has its grandparent in the white-not-perceived of paper; the moving image moves back to celluloid, that is, the gray of film. And I had thought this whole show would be about just that, the fact that paper is the basis which has carried the information load as long as there has been an information load to carry, and that part of the load now is the examination of the electronic environment in which the new carriers are developed. Then I realized *The View is Daunting* is a more important subject. So those things feed into it, that I use paper and I use language, and I take electronic images, and that all harkens back to film.

Really, the moving image is the more important part of the work. And that we have to move through the realm of the subconscious to arrive at the work. I seem to move through, as you have indicated, process and ritual to get there. By using the book and video projections, my work can apply informative and time-based sequential entities. So the moving image is really what we're dealing with now, technologically. Whatever cloning or genetics, or great advances we make, we come back to the struggle between inner and outer life. (...and what do we know about wolves and dogs these days?) So I believe that technology always swings back to our convictions and our need to believe that nature and human technology have to work together, and they're the same; otherwise, we're destroying ourselves.

Milena Kalinovska was Exhibitions Director of Riverside Studios in London, England; Adjunct Curator at the New Museum in New York, and the Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Her latest project and exhibition, *Beyond Preconceptions: The Sixties Experiment*, is traveling internationally. She was born in Prague and now lives in Washington, DC.

Cover: Detail, *The View is Daunting*, artist book, 15" x 13", digital offset, 2002.

