

ASHEVILLE MADE



March 1, 2019

It's Not How The Crow Flies — It's How It Lands That's Important

by Tom Kerr



"Life is messed up and weird," acknowledges Margaret Curtis, who makes the most of that in her uniquely recognizable paintings.

Portrait by Amos Moses

The early work of Margaret Curtis appeared in the 1994 Bad Girls exhibit at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art. Since then, she's been widely celebrated for her visceral, provocative, feminist-based oil-on-panel paintings. Curtis taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York for several years, and for the past 10 years has resided in Tryon.

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Your paintings can convey profound, unsettling messages in a lusciously beautiful way.

I like to draw the viewer in before I hit them over the head.

I sense a physicality in how you paint.

I'm not interested in painting with a uniform skin, or as a display of skill. I want a more fractured and built surface, like geological layers. I want the surface to feel like it's alive; a record of time and the artist's movement.



I Wandered the Mesas of My Mother's Bones

Do you paint one at a time, or an entire body of work?

Pretty much one painting at a time, lately. But I have this backlog of ideas, like a traffic jam in my head, and need to get them out faster.

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How do you conceive your images?

The imagery tends to come in three ways. The first, though least frequent, are the images that pop into my head fully formed, usually while I'm driving or first waking up. I see them whole, in their entirety, including color.

The second way is when a sentence or phrase pops into my head. "I Wandered the Mesas of My Mother's Bones" is a good example. I loved the phrase, and spent a long time trying to figure out the best way to give it physical form. I asked friends if anyone had a skeleton I could borrow, and lo and behold, someone did! When I brought the life-sized teaching skeleton home and laid it on my studio floor, it suddenly seemed very vulnerable, almost alive.

The third and most common way is simply processing experience or thought. Some ideas or experiences seem like they'd make an interesting painting.



Trial By Fire -The Body Politic

For example?

“Trial by Water” is a good example. I had been thinking of our current culture of shaming and exclusion, and wanted to reference the Salem witch trials, but in a contemporary context. I realized that the viewer needed to be underwater, in the position of the victim, so that we are studying the abusers and their cruelty. I took an underwater camera into a pool and recorded video of my friends and family jeering and pointing at me.

Some of your paintings recall literary magical realism.

My work is not surreal, although some people call it surrealism. But I can align with magical realism.

Reality is stranger than fiction, right?

Yes. Life is messed up and weird. In the '90s, I was in New Mexico, gardening in the backyard. I felt scratching on my back. A crow had landed on my head and just stood there and stayed there. Then my neighbor came and pointed up. I looked and there was a funnel cloud forming above my head. Nobody believes me when I tell them that story.



I Came Across My Death in a Clearing

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**I do! A tornado formed right above me when I was a child and I was mesmerized.
But there was no mystical crow involved.**

Someone said the crow meant I'm going to die.

**That's if a buzzard lands on your roof. A Cherokee medicine woman told me
crows are always a good omen.**

Oh, good! I knew that crow was looking out for me.



Red

Margaret Curtis: Recent Work runs through Saturday, March 15, at Weizenblatt Gallery at Mars Hill University (79 Cascade St., Mars Hill, mhu.edu/venue/weizenblatt-gallery), with a reception Wednesday, Feb. 27, 6-8pm. Curtis' work will also be in two Asheville Area Arts Council exhibits — Who's Afraid of Red, March 1-29, opening reception Friday, March 1, 6-8pm; and Beyond Knowing, May 10-June 21, opening reception Friday, May 10, 6-8pm — and in Appalachia Now, the inaugural exhibit of the newly renovated Asheville Arts Museum, 2 South Pack Square, scheduled this spring (see ashevilleart.org for updates). She's in a group exhibit at The Satellite Gallery (55 Broadway) running in March with an opening exhibit Friday, March 1, 6-8pm (thesatellitegallery.com). Margaret Curtis is also represented by the Tracey Morgan Gallery (188 Coxe Ave., Asheville, traceymorgangallery.com). She'll donate work to the annual Art Affair fundraiser for OpenDoors of Asheville, happening March 9. For more information, visit margaretcurtisart.com or find her on Instagram (@margarcur).

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