

**Interview conducted on the occasion of the exhibition *Grace Hartigan: Painting From Popular Culture, Three Decades*, curated by Jonathan VanDyke for the Susquehanna Art Museum, Harrisburg, PA, spring 2000. Excerpted from the exhibition catalogue.**

### ***Painting From Popular Culture: A Discussion With Grace Hartigan***

*Hartigan met with the Susquehanna Art Museum's Executive Director, Jonathan VanDyke, over lunch in Baltimore, February 12, 2000.*

**Jonathan VanDyke:** You are often viewed in terms of your associations with abstract expressionism. Yet this show demonstrates that your use of imagery and metaphor, and focus upon content, has been long-standing.

**Grace Hartigan:** The people who have a real stake in abstract expressionism act as though I never did any figurative work in the '50's. But hopefully the museum people and historians will continue to be interested in the ranges and the different periods of an artist. It is a lot easier on the feeble intellect if you are a one-shot, one-look artist. The subject material I've picked since the '50's, is imagery that either comes from popular culture or from the art of the past. You can break down all the succeeding decades. And the formal basis for all of my work, continually, has been abstract expressionism.

**JV:** Your appropriation of popular culture in painting preceded the aesthetic of the Pop artists. Do you get connected to them?

**GH:** When Paul Schimmel curated the show *Hand-Painted Pop* for [the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art], he said that Larry Rivers and I were the mother and father of pop art. But Larry was more Pop than I, because he's more deadpan. I always have had more of an emotional investment.

**JV:** And not a satirical edge?

**GH:** That's right. I do not remove myself as much. I get into the middle of the image. I have painted Marilyn Monroe at different times, and I show an emotional element with her, not just a deadpan repetition, like in Andy Warhol's work, which showed a big façade. My work gets into the woman herself.

**JV:** Would you say that you are both reflecting and celebrating culture at the same time?

**GH:** What I really long for is something to worship. I think it was very neat to have had a choice of gods and goddesses. If you were in love, you'd pray to Venus, and if you felt angry, you'd pray to Zeus. You had a lot of range. We don't have that now, so we set up all of these popular culture idols, and we invest them with qualities of love and hostility and so forth. We find these different qualities in movie stars and actors and actresses. Expanded, popular culture reflects what our society wants -- what we want to look like, what we want to wear, and what our rituals are. When I paint a bridal shop, it's a clue into my own culture. And when I get tired of all of

those images, I look forward to working from the great masters, because I feel that I have been joined to this tradition. Hopefully I can add something to it, and I can always get something from it. Working with a great artist every day of your life is a very elegant association. It takes about a month. Soon I will be working with Delacroix. You really get into the artists' heads. I talk to them. I say things: "Oh, you devil, you! That was a good one! Oh, I don't agree with this part. You kind of messed this up. What happened to that leg!"

**JV:** Do you feel that those masters were drawing from their own popular culture? Even if gods and goddesses *appear*, do you find elements in which they are drawing from the world around them?

**GH:** I always said that all of the Madonnas were the artists' girlfriends or their wives, and that Jesus was one of their kids. You draw from the visual material around you. Soon I am going to be painting images from Algiers and Morocco. I have a whole book of photographs from the beginning of photography, images of the dancing girls and the harem and so forth. The photographers worked with women they knew as friends, or prostitutes who were set up in their studios. They weren't casually found in the streets. Delacroix didn't really go into a harem. He had friends, couples that had daughters, and they just hung around and he painted them. It's all a set-up. I always work from visual material, whether it is popular culture or art of the past. When I paint from the art of the past I use reproductions, and when I work from popular culture I use source material such as coloring books, paper doll books, and still images.

**JV:** I'm intrigued by how you've invested pop culture imagery with so many layers of meaning.

**GH:** As in the example of Warhol's *Marilyn* versus mine, I want to depict a real woman, and not what she turned herself into for the public. I see a woman that has the terrible conflict of loving the admiration and the symbol that she became, and suffering from it, too. That ambiguity goes with the territory. Frank O'Hara, the poet, told me a story that he had been at a cocktail party on a rainy evening. He saw this woman come in with a raincoat on and a babushka. He didn't notice anything about her in particular. She went into the bathroom and locked the door. People were pounding on the door, trying to get in. A half an hour later, out came Marlene Dietrich. That is, she had turned herself into Marlene Dietrich. The packaging always interests me. When I work with paper doll books, there is the original woman upon which the image is based, and then the doll that you cut out and pin paper clothes on.

**JV:** So you're interested in the roles we play?

**GH:** Yes. I was married four times and never had a white wedding, but I am fascinated with how much it means – and how little the groom means. You can see that interest in the painting *Wedding Fashions*. In the paper doll book of wedding fashions, every page is devoted to women: the bride, the bride's maids, the maid of honor, and all their clothes. The poor groom had his underwear and one outfit. He didn't have a real life. It's like the castrated Ken with the Barbie doll.

**JV:** Earlier you mentioned the emotional resonance in your work. Among many of the younger artists I work with who are interpreting abstraction and Pop art, I do find an emotional

resonance and a use of personal metaphor. It's an interesting contrast to conceptual works in which emotion is avoided.

**GH:** Abstract expressionism *is* abstract art with emotional content. Bill De Kooning once said "Content is a big little thing." And this content is almost impossible to talk about it. I think it has to do with the mark-making identification of how I work with my whole being, not just with my wrist. You know it when you see it. A real emotion comes through in an authentic way, but I would be darned if I could prove it. When you talk about [emotion], you get dangerously close to expressionism, and I hate expressionism. I think it is self-indulgent, a lot of messy brushstrokes. I think that Ingres' work is filled with emotion, and the tension of the edge, yet Delacroix was supposed to be more emotional than Ingres. Emotion is very, very complex.

**JV:** You have had a stellar career as a teacher. How are your students today handling abstraction?

**GH:** I have been reviewing slides for incoming students in my graduate program, and I find that the best talents today are image-makers. Abstraction seems to have run its course in the last century. The students are going into deep space, which has been forbidden for a hundred years. They have new worlds to tackle, and it is fulfilling to see. If I was a young artist, and I had something that was forbidden from me for a hundred years, I'd make it mine. It is very interesting – I provided my students with a calendar of medieval woman, and in February there are two women with a chess board. The chess board is up to the surface the way Matisse would do it. I thought, that was 1300 and it took the whole Renaissance to put the chess board down, it took all of the last century to bring it up again, and now we are trying to put it down again.

**JV:** How did you come about teaching?

**GH:** It was not something I searched out, but happened by chance. I only graduated from high school. When I moved to Baltimore and married Winston Price in 1960, I left a very active life of creators and the world of art in New York. I felt very isolated and lonely. I was in touch with Eugene Leake, the president of the Maryland Institute, who asked me to have a show there, but I didn't have anything available. I asked if there was anything I could do for him that wouldn't interfere with my painting. He said he had a few graduate students, and would I want to talk to them. Out of that grew the Hoffberger School of Painting. It turned out to be a talent that I didn't know I had. I wouldn't be able to teach anyone how to do anything, but I am very good at pointing out the uniqueness in individual students.

**JV:** Can you speak a little bit about your mark, about your brush stroke?

**GH:** I don't think I am as good at that. That's de Kooning's characteristic. If anything is characteristic of my work, it is drawing through painting. I kid and say, "I have genius, but I have no talent." *[laughing]* I had to work on the talent and I had to find the drawing. I started by working as a draftsman in north New Jersey, and I studied with a teacher that used Nicolaidis' *The Natural Way to Draw*. My drawing emerged from that approach. And then of course I fell in love with Matisse. I've said, "A line is like a lasso, you throw it and capture the space." The

other thing I am complimented on is color. Drawing is something I had to acquire, but my talent with color is something I earned naturally. I don't even have to think about it. Like a skater showing off with high jumps, I like showing myself the range of color I can have. I can do a whole blue painting and I know where to put the orange without even thinking about it. I am criticized for my drawing and painting and praised for my color. A lot of people think you're not supposed to draw in a painting. I am very fortunate to have not been educated because I don't know about the rules. So, with my poor students, I say, "Who told you you're not supposed to do that? You can do whatever you want, if you can get away with it."

**JV:** If I were to compare you with an artist like Joan Mitchell, her work has a greater emphasis on the pure paint stroke and its expression of color. Whereas in your work, your line interacts with blocks of color and defines space.

**GH:** It is very challenging to paint open areas in which there aren't any strokes showing. It is a challenge to create big, open areas where the color has volume, but is flat at the same time. Matisse was brilliant at it. Motherwell is flat as a pancake – never any volume. I use different methods -- sometimes it's turning the edge, sometimes it's using drawing, and sometimes it is a matter of subtle modulation of what seems to be a flat color. Joan told me that I could never make up my mind, because I went from abstraction to image-making. In our century, Matisse was the greatest colorist, and Picasso was the greatest image-maker. I think the greatest painter of our century in terms of the brush stroke was de Kooning. The last time I visited Bill [de Kooning], I told that to [his wife] Elaine, and she glowed as if I had complimented her. She said, "Grace, I couldn't agree with you more."

**JV:** You mentioned Motherwell. I often think of him as being the intellectual, philosophical voice for abstract expressionism. And in talking with you during the past few months, I've recognized the philosophical centeredness underlying your approach.

**GH:** I juggle formal concepts – be it all-over painting, or whether one image is surfacing over another – and I balance these with issues of identity. I ask of the painting, "Are you going to be a paper doll, or a real woman? Are you the actor or the man? Are you the mask or the face?" With my recent series [of Geisha paintings], I told my assistant, Rex, that I was so anxious, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't catch my breath. For the last of the paintings, I wanted to make the Geisha real women. I didn't want the mask, I didn't want the façade of the actress or the dancer. I wanted the woman sitting around, maybe working on the music a little bit in her gorgeous robes, but the real woman. I got on the ladder with three different kinds of paint. I was forming them with three brushes in my hands, bringing these women into existence. I became obsessed. It was only a piece of cloth and some damn paint, but I thought I was making real women. And I got one of them, and I said, "There, hang on, I'll give you a friend!" *[laughing]* I did it all in one day. It is indescribable to create like that. I deal with the mask and the way we present ourselves to the world. Whatever we do, we are always masked in some way.

**JV:** So the painting expresses one more layer of masking?

**GH:** One of the most difficult things of all is not to have the painting be a depiction of the event but the event itself, as it is happening right there. That is the difference between great art and mediocre art. Most art looks like it is talking about something that happened some other place. The greatness of Rembrandt is that the figures are making themselves up right before your eyes. I have never been interested in doing dimensional things because I think artists, painters, are magicians. That's the con job we do on the world, we convince the world that this is real.

**JV:** You have been connected to writers. You can say that writers go through a similar process.

**GH:** The poets, yes. Frank O' Hara's poems are happening right in front of you. Once he was giving a talk at Wagner College in Staten Island, and there was another poet, an academic poet, who wrote for the occasion, and Frank said, "Oh, I never write for an occasion." Frank would be sitting around the Cedar [Tavern], talking, and he would scribble off a poem, it was so alive. He didn't need a special room. He would go out to lunch, and write a poem. I think Frank O' Hara was, more than anyone else, an influence on Pop artists, and on Larry [Rivers] and me.

**JV:** Is there is an affinity between the immediacy of his poems and the immediacy of your paintings?

**GH:** I would think so. Anything that enters my vision, I feel free to just put it in.

**JV:** When we were talking on the phone about Frank O' Hara, we discussed how people want to believe a myth, but that the truth is never as dramatic.

**GH:** Truthfully, the simplification of Frank as a promiscuous queen is such a disservice to him that I can hardly bear it. The myth I find most infuriating is the one of Jackson Pollock as brawling, woman-hating, drunk and macho. The man was tender, suffering -- an inarticulate, shy genius, but people don't want to hear that about Jackson. The taking up of Frank as a gay sexual icon does a great disservice to the intricacy of his poems. It is a disservice to the man he was. He loved women deeply, and he loved straight men deeply. He was an incredible companion. His generosity of spirit permitted so many people to be close to him and to need him, his eye, his mind, his friendship. He regarded every painting I did as an event in his life, a cause for celebration. You couldn't wait to have Frank see the painting. It was a party, it was incredible.

**JV:** Have you been a victim of myth making?

**GH:** I don't really know how I am regarded by the world because I have not had that much written about me. In my monograph, Rob Mattison treated the personal, sensitive material in a wonderful way. I think I am much more intricate and subtle than I am given credit for, but that's my business. So I'll let you know when more is written -- I'm not ready to have the movie made. I don't think Frank knew how he would be regarded, because all this came out after he died. VanGogh didn't cut his whole ear off, he just took a little nick out of it, for heaven's sakes!

**JV:** Certainly you have done many paintings utilizing popular culture imagery. How do you view this group of twelve that we have placed together?

**GH:** What I think should be interesting for people is to see how I have treated popular culture, over three decades, in such a wide variety of styles. I have used a number of points of view, as seen through dots all across the canvas – Seurat gone insane – as seen through transparent veils, beaded curtains of color where you can peak through and see images beyond that. I think that it will be fascinating for people to read the images as they stand in front of the paintings, discovering that there is a doll behind the doll in *Toyland*. Then there is the psychology of Marilyn, the psychology of Valentino – paintings that have to do with the people themselves.

**JV:** I know *Weekend in Hawaii* is one of your favorites.

**GH:** It came from a travel poster. There is a con job with these posters. I'll never forget getting off the plane the first time I was in the tropics. I was bitten by fleas in the airport. I was a mass of itches. The palm trees are pictured as green, but they're not -- they are shredded by storms and they have brown leaves on them. They are suffering beings. And you are *hot* as hell the whole time you're there. When I was in the Virgin Islands, I had to be under mosquito netting all the time because all these creatures were waiting to attack me. That's the irony in the painting, lying in a hammock, playing a ukulele -- everyone is in a wonderful bathing suit. This was my joke to myself. The poster gets you there, and then you do nothing but sweat. And the color is very daring, as well as how it is built up. The tropical color, POW, it knocks you back!

**JV:** Your paintings could be read in terms of a life story. How do you feel about that?

**GH:** It irritates me when a person looks at *Weekend in Hawaii* and says, "You must have been in a good mood when you did that." I could have been suffering down to my fingertips. It was the painting that was carrying me. My personal feelings have nothing to do with the painting at all. When Monet was watching his wife dying, he felt so guilty because he was watching the color changes on her face. If he had painted her dying, he would have painted the color, not his feelings. If I had to rely on my own personal feelings to get into a painting, I would never paint. Painting is a tremendous discipline. My first show was in 1951. What I do is get up, have cafe au lait and toast, do two crossword puzzles and go to the studio. I paint day after day after day.

**JV:** In works such as the *Mut Hut*, you utilize veils of drips. These paintings have been described as symbols of weeping.

**GH:** That idea has been presented by people close to me, because I was going through my husband's terminal illness at the time. I am willing to allow that possibility, but I wasn't conscious of it then. What I was conscious of was that after doing the paintings in the '70's, that were so rigid and so placed, I wanted to open up. I wanted more of the freedom of paint that I had in earlier times with abstract expressionism. I wanted the paint to have a life of its own, not as I willed it to. It is very thrilling to watch the painting come alive in front of your eyes, moving on its own. All through my husband's illness – well, you never recover from that – but I was fascinated by paint having a life of its own. Watercolor is amazing because it moves on its

own. As you watch it dry, you watch this thing living without you. I tried to do a lot of that in oil. It was wonderful with the pointillist paintings. You just let the paint splat. Then you continue, and begin to talk to the paint: "Hey, Blue, would you like to be on top?"

**JV:** I read *Mut Hut* as having a deep emotional resonance. Yet the painting at its basis is about a dog shop. Do these paintings imply that in images of common things, you can discover deeper meanings?

**GH:** One hopes. Creation is using what you know to access what you don't know. Even you don't know what you are creating, because there is a power beyond the conscious power. When Professor Mattison began writing the book on me, I constantly had to free him to interpret. I had painted Saint George but I hadn't given him the spear to kill the dragon. Out of it [Mattison] created this whole interpretation about the dilemma of the powers of modern man. It is a wonderful idea, but it wasn't in my mind. It's not that I didn't want to empower Saint George, I just did not want a spear in that space! I wasn't conscious of this possibility, but I think it's great. A young woman called me from Texas to ask me what a painting meant. I said, "I haven't a clue." I told her, "I did it so long ago, I tell you what, you can look at it and make something up." Invent what you will. What I don't want people to do is what the docents did with children in front of *Billboard*, which belongs to the Minneapolis Museum of Art. They gave them a handful of jellybeans and told them they could eat a jellybean if they found its color in my painting! But if anyone wants to take *Toyland* and make metaphors about the unconscious selection of those objects, it might enlighten me about what the unconscious does. There is a unifying theme, but when so many images exist, when there are disparities, people can read many things. I want them to be free to do that.

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