

"THE RED SEA #1, HONORING MIRIAM," earth, fire, sunlight, mixed media on layered paper, 41 by 46½ by 3 inches. Collection of Diane and Gary Tooker, Paradise Valley, Arizona.

Courage and Change

A beautiful new book and a new exhibition trace the flowering of Beth Ames Swartz's indomitable sense of connectedness with nature

By Barbara H. Perlman

Out of the search for a definition of self in the '70s—a search related in part to the newly forged strength of the women's movement, there arose a generation of artists with strong regional ties and even stronger trust in the truth of their own closely-held vision.

East Coast writers, in particular, coined the not wholly satisfactory term Postmodern to describe the widely varying work of recent years, and under this rubric has flowed all manner of expression and experiment.

Among leading artists in the Southwest, Beth Ames Swartz rose to national prominence by stubbornly heed-

ing the promptings of intuition and by obeying the rigorous demands of emotional need. In so doing, she created a new form of art expression, answerable only to herself and accessible to a vast audience in terms of meaning ranging from primitive simplicity to recondite secrecy.

How Swartz's contributions occurred has now been traced in the book "Connecting: The Art of Beth Ames Swartz," written by Mary Carrol Nelson, with an introduction by Harry Rand, curator of 20th century painting and sculpture for the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and published by Northland Press in Flagstaff, Arizona. For the first time, the art and life of this important artist have been fully documented and sump-

tuously illustrated in a well-researched volume that allows the reader to observe with surprising clarity Swartz's indomitable drive to express her love, anger, sweetest dreams, fears, and wide-ranging philosophy through her art.

Courageously, Swartz has opened her life fully to author Nelson, allowing an accurate picture to unfold concerning the struggles and rewards of a woman who is determined to do what sculptor Louise Nevelson declared impossible: that is, be a good wife and mother on one hand and a good artist on the other. In Nevelson's opinion, a woman can't do both well. Swartz believes a woman can—and has spent nearly 25 years giving the sometimes mutually exclusive tasks her best efforts.

"Connecting" also reinforces the theory-into-law that no artist confronts the grandeur of nature in the Southwest without being affected, and in Swartz's case, the impact has been awesome. Visual proof is supplied by the beautiful color reproductions documenting the artist's work and dating from the unassertive, East Coast-rooted watercolors of semi-abstract landscapes in the 1960s to the powerful layered and charred paper construction-paintings of the mid-'70s to present. Also included are photos of three new works, explosively energetic acrylics on canvas exploring emotional and physical balance as a source of personal and social healing.

Another discovery awaiting the reader is that Swartz, to a degree remarkable even for artists and poets, translates her life experiences directly into images. Life for her is a conscious dialogue with art. Life challenges art's processes and commitments; art confronts life's assumptions and complacency. Inevitably, ways of thinking and working are upended, discarded or fused in different ways to create new patterns of awareness. In a word, the process is growth. Life, to Swartz, means growth.

Finally, what the work itself has proved during the past eight years is that from modest beginnings has grown

an artist of consequence—one who has commanded attention on a national level since 1976 with images emerging from Swartz's use of what the ancient Greeks identified as life-sustaining elements—fire, air, earth, water.

In retrospect, Swartz's dramatic paper constructions justifiably can be described, both in breadth of concept and depth of impact, as heroic—a term rarely applied to art produced by a woman, and particularly a woman working in the highly personal, inward-looking Postmodern period.

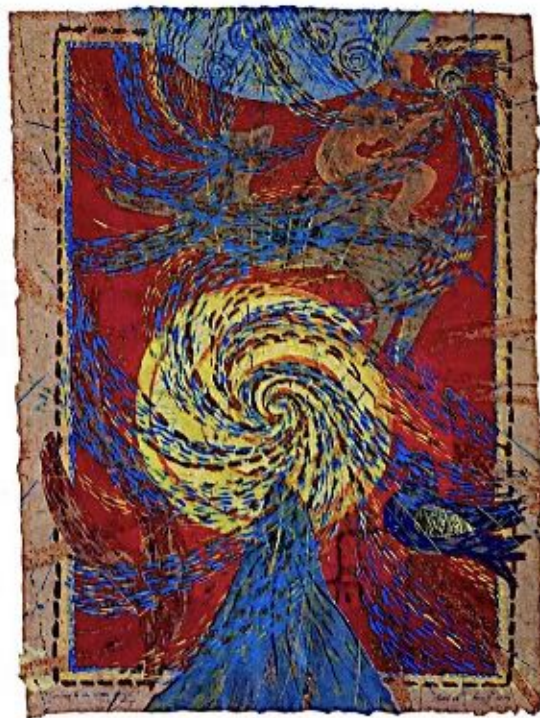
"Connecting" begins by sketching the coming of age of a well-educated, middle-class, highly dependent but inquiring young woman raised in Manhattan by educator-parents and duly programmed for a career in art education. The young woman married at 23, moved to Phoenix with her attorney husband, and began painting "lyrical abstractions" in pleasing colors and of an imaginary nature—arching trees, mirror-ponds of soft blues and violet, and the like. "I began as an observer of nature," Swartz remarked in a recent interview. "The desert was alien to me at first. Nature meant trees and grass in the park when I lived in New York."

A raft trip down the Colorado River in 1970 changed her perception. She studied the forms of rocks and began to identify with massive formations as she "noticed feminine forms within them. I became involved with the land in a new way. We climbed through three billion years of

The serigraph "Journey to the Upper World" accompanies a 100-copy clothbound limited edition of "Connecting: The Art of Beth Ames Swartz," published by Northland Press. This artwork, 30 by 22 inches, involves more than 30 print runs as well as hand-detailing. Feathers embedded in handmade paper provide a delicately patterned background for gold and silver leaf, rainbow hues of microglitter and further paper laminations. Both the serigraph and limited edition of the book are available from Northland Press.



Beth Ames Swartz with "The Red Sea #1" at the Beaumont Art Museum, Beaumont, Texas.



"JOURNEY TO THE UPPER WORLD," serigraph with microglitter on handmade paper, 30 by 22 inches, 1983.



"AURORA BOREALIS #7," acrylic and microglitter on linen canvas, 60 by 60 inches, 1983.

geologic time, went to sleep at sunset and awoke when the sun rose. The color nuances and variations were overwhelming . . . Going into the canyon was a turning point in my life. An archetypal female figure in a landscape setting was an elemental change in my work that showed at last I felt connected to my surroundings. I knew I was home."

She experimented with color fields, pouring paint onto canvas and paper. She struggled to break out of old restraints in a "Meditation Series," studied Zen and was reassured by general systems theories that healthy growth is safely accompanied by disorder of old habits or patterns in order to make way for constructive change. A series involving acrylic paint poured onto watercolor paper explored concepts of water, air, flight, spiritual energy and "earthflow" or earth forms. She worked to synchronize freely moving gesture with spontaneous color flows.

A trip to Israel in 1976 put Swartz in touch with her Judaic heritage. She returned to Arizona ready to investigate the potential of fire as a symbol of prayer (a flame burning at the Memorial to the Holocaust), as a cleanser-cauterizer, as a destroyer and as an art medium.

Swartz moved away from her Zen color field work and began developing a wide variety of images created with fire and by exposure to rain and sun. The upshot of this tumultuously intense period was the landmark exhibit, "Inquiry into Fire," presented in 1978 at Scottsdale Center for the Arts.

Examples of her breakthrough process at that time included fire- and smoke-scribed images on heavy paper that had been scratched and otherwise mutilated. Of outstanding interest were cabala-esque sheets adorned with metallic leaf recalling long-buried manuscript pages. A "Mica Transformation Series" further heralded Swartz's preference for surface richness. Sparkling bits of mica collaged and layered with gold and silver papers were suggestive, as biographer Nelson points out, "of old silk—perhaps a scrap of an ancient robe."

Also portending future directions, the "Torah Scroll Series" incorporated earth taken from the desert, shoveled onto burned paper and bonded with acrylic rhoplex. Swartz developed an intricate but effective ritual involving burning (destruction), samples of earth (interment/death), and re-ordering (rebirth) through additions of layered rice paper, gold and silver foils, microglitter and acrylic paint.

Surfaces soon became Swartz's triumph and trademark—volcanic topographies illuminated by lavish color suggesting the undying energy of a radiant cosmos.

By 1979, Nelson notes, Swartz had risen in stature "from that of a regionally recognized artist to growing national acclaim." She was one of four Arizona artists chosen to participate in the First Western States Biennial Exhibition, which toured the United States until 1980. Newsweek touted her as one of Georgia O'Keeffe's "most accomplished successors." Reviews in Smithsonian magazine



"COLLY'S DREAM #1," fire, earth, sunlight, mixed media on layered paper, 30 by 60 inches. Photos courtesy Northland Press.

and others praised her innovative and beautiful work.

A one-person exhibition at the Frank Marino Gallery in 1979 introduced her new concepts to a receptive New York audience. A major solo exhibition, "Israel Revisited," opened at The Jewish Museum in New York in 1981 and traveled to the Skirball Museum, Los Angeles; the Judah Magnes Museum, Berkeley; the Beaumont Museum of Art, Texas; Albuquerque Museum, New Mexico, and other institutions.

Swartz elaborated her ritual to incorporate earth from various regions and lands. The "Sedona Series," for example, was "a mosaic of fragments against black backgrounds . . . beautiful objects that appear to have been torn from a canyon wall, just at sundown," Nelson writes.

John Perrault wrote in *The Soho News* in 1981: "Several systems of meaning converge: abstract-expressionist, gesture-process modes of making art . . . new regionalism, feminism and Jewish mysticism. There is also an alchemical magical layer—and influences of the 'secrets' of the cabala—that leaves one amazed that paper can be transformed into luxurious and seemingly timeless abstractions."

By 1982, the beautiful series, "Colly's Dream," titled as a tribute to Colly Soleri, late wife of Arizona architect Paolo Soleri, marked the climax and denouement of this phase of Swartz's development.

A threat to her own health brought Swartz up short, and she became engrossed in the study of healing processes. In preparation for "A Moving Point of Balance," a major solo touring exhibition scheduled to open at the Nickle Arts Museum in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, in 1985, she proposed to explore personal and archetypal implications of her visits to numinous sites held sacred by Native Americans in the Southwest. "Now, more than ever," she said in 1983, "I want the paintings to speak about healing and to serve as icons or talismans." Her research included travel to Snowflake, Prophecy Rock and Grand Canyon in Arizona; Oha Caliente and Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.

She continues to fuse spirit and landscape, as critic Perrault noted in 1980. She still commences her work outdoors, throws paint on large canvases and prefers oversize

brushes. "That's when those big shapes start happening," she says. "Then I bring the painting indoors and develop borders composed of archetypal designs. I am constantly stripping away, getting rid of the intellectual baggage. I want to be surprised, not know what's going to happen."

After a visit to Carnac, France, in 1983, and after being present at a healing ritual in Chaco Canyon, Swartz began the "Aurora Borealis Series," large visionary skyscape canvases. In these, Swartz uses microglitter as a substitute for fire to convey the "passionate level of violent energy in the paintings." Mixed with rhoplex and painted in 50 or more tones, the glitter gives what she terms an "other-worldly luminosity, especially at twilight and night."

As Swartz steps swiftly from safe, secure boundaries toward further experiment, she finds courage in the knowledge that "inexplicable or apparently foolhardy paths often open up to us the greatest opportunities for growth."

The new works include monotypes, small acrylic "icons" and 4- to 5-foot canvases depicting swirling sky forms and shapes—stars, mythic animals, stylized human figures, trails of sparkle and color that appear to spin and whirl as Swartz gives visual expression to the belief that "everything is connected to everything else in varying degrees. This is the basis of my work and has also been the basis of my life."

Implicit in her conviction of connectedness is harmony and balance of mind and body. "Maybe what a moving point of balance is in life is realizing that change happens anyway," she says. "If we can direct our own balancing and take responsibility for our growth, we can make choices. Change, then, isn't something that just happens to us."

As Swartz recognizes the need for points of balance in individual lives and society, her art defines the urgency for equilibrium, based on healing rather than destructive powers in nature. ■

**Elaine Horwitch Galleries, Scottsdale, presents
"Beth Ames Swartz, Selected Works: 1970-1984,"
March 8 through 21.**