

Rockability: Beth Ames Swartz's *Fault Line, #4*

## Just deserts

JOHN PERREAULT

I LIKE deserts. Some people crave mountain greenery; not I. But there is no use arguing: you cannot come to any agreement when it comes to temperaments so obviously opposed. When I lived for a while in Arizona — actually, I commuted from New York — it was worthwhile to me. I had no trouble putting up with Tucson's automobile culture, because all around was desert.

Is it that those barren wastes are not as barren as supposed? Is it the dry reaches of clear space that turn one inward? Later, when I was surveying Arizona art, a theory began to form: that the best of Arizona art (not the cowboy-art kitsch, or imitation New York art), and maybe, just maybe, the best of Western Art, has something to do with an inwardness that you don't see much in city art. The rocks, the dust, the heat make everyman — or everywoman — a kind of anchorite.

The world may be plagued by desertification, losing a country's worth of tillable land each year (or something like that); we may be headed for the eerie landscape offered by Frank Herbert's sci-fi best-seller, *Dune*; yet the desert holds its "charms." Some charms: solitude, awe, and panic.

Nevertheless, the American desert has provided nourishment for considerable art. One only need think of the inspiration it has afforded the likes of Georgia O'Keeffe or New Mexico's Agnes Martin, whose current exhibition at Pace (32 E. 57th Street, through October 31) is one of her best.

Now, however, to the short list of mystical-desert-women — although she is too personable perhaps to be the guru type — we may be able to add the indomitable, still young, Cabala-obsessed Beth Ames Swartz. Two small exhibitions give us the chance to see her unusual work: "Beth Ames Swartz: Israel Revisited" at the Jewish Museum (1109 Fifth Avenue, through January 3) and her "New Ritual Landscapes" at the Frank

Marino Gallery (489 Broome Street, through October 31).

Originally a New Yorker, Swartz has lived in Arizona since 1959; unlike O'Keeffe and Martin, she didn't move west with an already established reputation. "When I first came from the city," she says in an interview with Ruth Ann Appelhof in the illuminating "Israel Revisited" catalogue, "I felt alienated. Then, gradually, I felt the dignity and continuity of the earth and I needed to translate this visually." This process gradually led her to ritual, the Cabala of Jewish mysticism, and the spiritual investigation, as a woman, of her own roots in Jewish culture.

Swartz is one of the growing number of non-New Yorkers well on their way to establishing a national reputation. "Israel Revisited," after its run at the Jewish Museum, will travel to six other museums around the country, and then to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. ("Packaging," sneered another artist at her Jewish Museum opening. But what's wrong with giving your own art a little push, bringing it out into the world?)

I first became aware of her art through the mails, a now traditional channel for artists who, either by choice or chance, live out in the regions beyond New York, Chicago, L.A. Catalogues, clippings, press releases came with some regularity. It all seemed — dare I say it? — a bit nutty. I mean, really. Rubbing earth into paper, soaking it, gouging it, burning it, burying it. And then all the stuff about ritual.

Yet when I first actually saw the work — when the First Western States Biennial came to Washington D.C.? — there was something to it, something special. It glowed, it had some inner force. That force is not one of strangeness — other artists, including the French neo-Dadaist Yves Klein, have worked with the elements — but one of eerie familiarity.

I still ask myself if it is merely my own love of desert colors, of earthy sites, and of iridescence, or if it is something deeper. I think the latter. Casting aside all mystical or quasi-mystical explanations, it is clear that the desert and the elements, no matter how expressed, are culturally operative symbols. Swartz taps these energies. Her work is rich. Several systems of meaning converge: abstract-expressionist, gesture-process modes of making art (Swartz started as a kind of color-field painter), new regionalism, feminism, and Jewish mysticism. There is also an alchemical, magical layer — an influence of the "secrets" of the Cabala — that leaves one amazed that paper can be transformed into luxurious and seemingly timeless abstractions.

At the Jewish Museum we are forced to confront Swartz's feminism and mysticism head-on, for here are offered the results of a quest. Some women have long felt that the great mystical traditions are not for them; that these, unfairly, are male-dominated ways of knowledge. After all, try naming more than a few women spiritual leaders: Saint Teresa, Joan of Arc (well, only maybe). If any have existed, their history has

been hidden. There are a few female Sufi "saints." But in Judaism? Forget it. If ever there was a patriarchy, Judaism is it.

Not so. The "secret" doctrines of the Cabala come to the rescue, for in these, God has a feminine aspect, and the union of the masculine and the feminine may be what all this travail is about.

Swartz visited 10 sacred sites in Israel, sacred to her because each was connected with a woman in the Bible. The works on display are the results: composed in part of earth found on each site, rubbed into paper, the paper burned and torn according to Swartz's ritualistic process. There are color codes at work and connections to the Cabalistic "Tree of Life" — a diagram not unlike those that depict the bodily energy-centers of yoga. *Bethlehem #1*, for instance, is "about" that place, honors Rachel of the Bible, but is also "about" the fire, earth, and sunlight that contributed to its final form. Some of the pieces more than suggest the forms of Hebrew letters. The Hebrew alphabet, in case you didn't know it, is also a mystical code.

All of this contributes to the impact of the art, but none of it would be worth mentioning if the pieces themselves were not strong in their own right: color, texture, and a certain sculptural quality, even when the papers are held down for our inspection under glass, as they all are in this exhibit.

The selection of more recent work at Frank Marino is more "avant-garde" and paradoxically more accessible. It is hard to argue with the big, unframed wall pieces. This whole set of works — including a model-like accumulation of paper "rocks" — was inspired by a trip down the Colorado River. But most are also suffused with the light of a mystical marriage of landscape and spirit. Swartz, who I believe sees herself as a kind of shaman, is trying to tackle some important themes: history, language, landscape, transformation. Her work is neither trendy nor modest.

Casting aside all mystical explanations, it is clear that the desert, no matter how expressed, is a culturally operative symbol. Beth Ames Swartz taps it