

# FOR THE

DEADLINES AT WORK, rush hour traffic, supermarket lines at 6 p.m. — the daily rituals of our contemporary lives rarely evoke the natural world. In her latest exhibition, *Dreams for the Earth*, Arizona artist Beth Ames Swartz paints with disturbing clarity what she sees as the consequences of this alienation of the human spirit from the ancient rhythms of nature. Using xeroxed images from personal photographs, postcards, and magazines such as *Time* and *National Geographic*, Swartz conjures a modern world in which both the human spirit and the landscape are in trouble, where ecological depletion and pollution, nuclear holocaust, and the

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PHOTOGRAPH: JOAN BARKER

extinction of animals coexist with famine and AIDS.

Swartz's choice of materials and scale heighten the viewer's awareness of these tragedies. Through photographs and memorabilia she reminds us that these scenes are actual events. Meanwhile, a reduction in size both objectifies and renders precious such images as our endangered planet, bound by ropes in *Time's* 1989 cover at the heart of "Reconciliation."

But Swartz seems to be commenting on more than the size and condition of our diminished outer landscape. For her, this small, vulnerable sphere is also the inner, tortured, collective soul of the human spirit. Hovering over the bound planet she paints

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the spirit of the earth, the "Mater Dolorosa" (the weeping Mother of God). Just as in a dream it is possible to be killed and also watch the drama, so in Swartz's painting, the Mater Dolorosa weeps for the suffering of her own physical self, here represented by the bound and fettered image of the planet and the vignettes of suffering which encircle the center, emerging and disappearing between layers of paint. The human

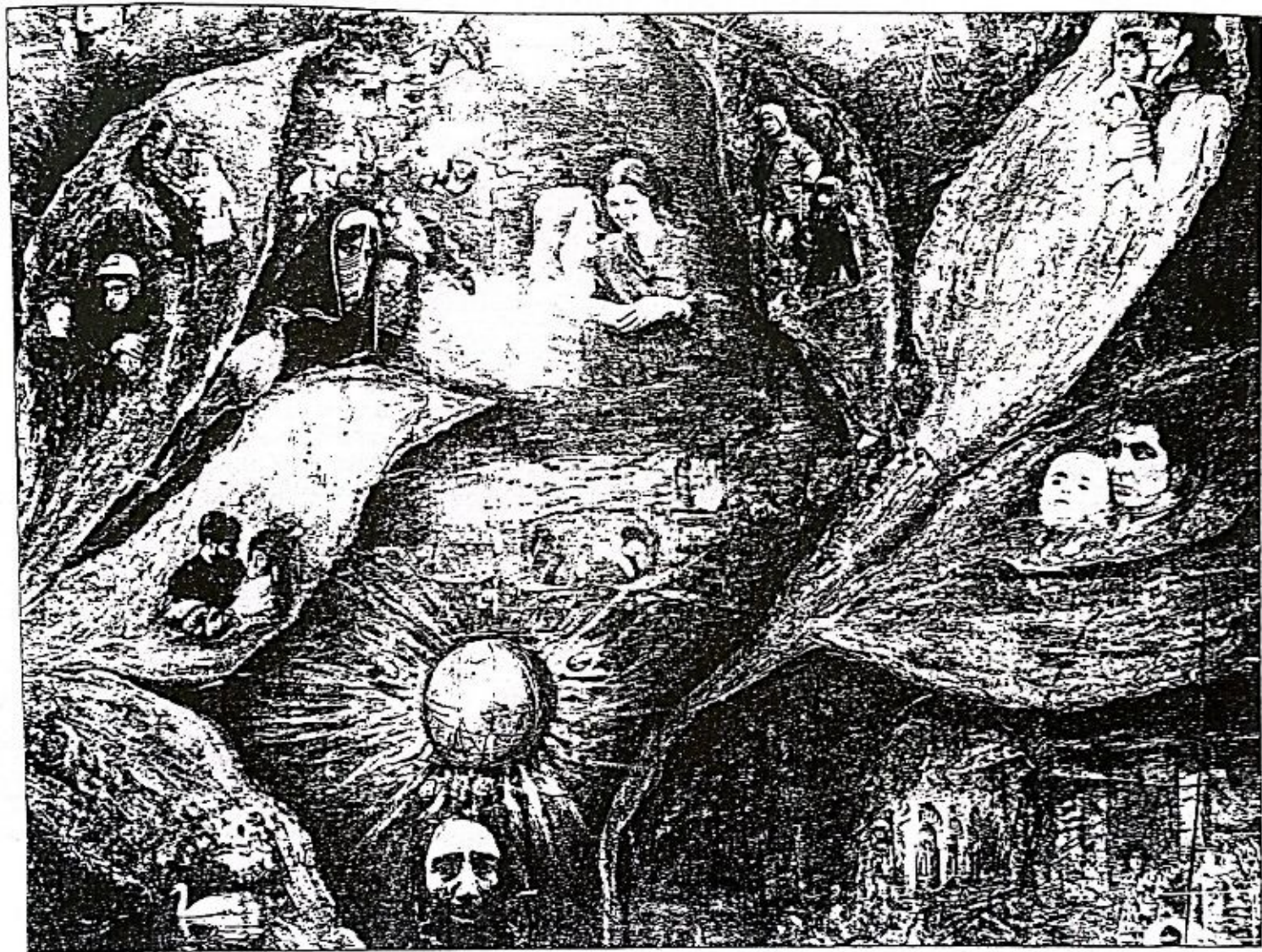
despair and environmental devastation of our modern world seem to be symptoms of the chasm between human beings and the world of nature — a separation which, as the title of this painting indicates, needs reconciliation.

And so, alongside the images of pain and suffering, Swartz has included icons of spiritual faith: Buddhist monks, a sacred mountain, an Indian totem. At the top, in the center of the large canvas, (where in medieval religious iconography the heavenly image of the redeemed soul or the savior would traditionally appear above the clouds), a small plastic antlered deer, dripping brown paint resembling dried blood, stands like a sacrificial lamb over the entire scene.

There is indeed a medieval flavor to the style and design of "Reconciliation." From the bright, pure reds and blues and the gold leaf whose ragged edges suggest a larger covering now worn away with age, to the frontal presentation of stiff saint-like figures, Swartz alludes to a rich, Byzantine tradition of icons and altars. In this tradition, the holy spirit was believed to reside within the image.

That a symbol or image can actually contain a spiritual presence is the premise for *Dreams for the Earth*. In this series, it was Swartz's stated intention that each of the paintings create a sacred union between a painful crisis facing the planet and a healing image. In fact, she prayed before beginning each painting that the juxtaposition of sacred presences (such as Christ or





the Buddha) with what is now happening in the world (for instance, the depletion of the rain forests) might make a difference. After all, Swartz notes, studies of sick patients prayed for by anonymous people often show that the prayed-for patients have gotten better faster than the control group of patients not prayed for, even when the prayed-for patients have been unaware that they were being cared for in this way.

*Dreams for the Earth* are the latest paintings in a series of powerful artworks created by Beth Ames Swartz, but they are not the first time she has invested her work with the ancient belief in the power of sacred images and sacred ritual. In 1976, Swartz traveled

"In the Darkness Shall Be the Light and In the Stillness the Dancing" (detail), mixed media on canvas, 66" x 78". *Opposite page: "Dreams For The Earth #1,"*

mixed media on canvas,

72" x 60".

to ten sacred sites in Israel. She went as a pilgrim to reclaim for herself Hebraic female wisdom, named "the Shekinah" in the ancient mystical Hebrew writings of the Kabbalah. At each site she performed a ritual to bless her visit and the knowledge she took back with her. Symbolically she gathered earth from each place, rubbing it into burned and fragmented paper. *Israel Revisited*, the show which was born of this pilgrimage, became a landmark in art history.

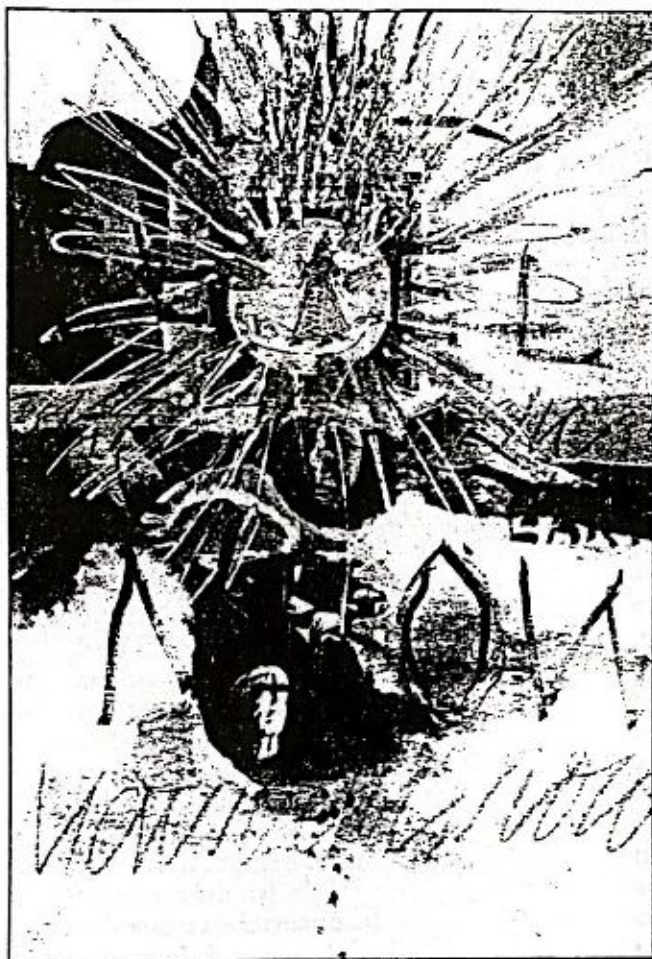
Strangely enough, Swartz's process in creating *Israel Revisited* also resembled the ancient Egyptian myth of Isis. As the story goes, the body of Isis' beloved Osiris was torn apart and scattered throughout the earth by the forces of lust,

power, and the unrelenting heat of the desert. Isis, Goddess of all life in Egypt, searched the earth to find Osiris' members. At each site where she found a part, she performed a sacred ritual. She gathered thirteen of Osiris' fourteen parts (the phallus, lost forever, was recreated by her own power) and, using sacred rituals, resurrected a now immortal Osiris.

The overwhelming response of the public to *Israel Revisited* suggests that even if the parallel with the myth of Isis were not consciously known, Swartz's process of gathering and giving new life to fragments touched by earth and fire had struck her viewers in some deeply personal, yet widely shared and perhaps mythic way. As John Perrault, currently Curator at the American Craft Museum in New York, said of this work: "there was something to it, something special. It glowed. It had some inner force. That force is not one of strangeness... but one of eerie familiarity."

Swartz, though herself unconscious of the archetypal reverberations of her fire process, nevertheless recognized that this new work had touched places deep within her (and within her viewers) which could be felt, but not yet understood. The relationship between outward journey and inward awareness held some powerful wisdom.

In 1982 Beth Ames Swartz became ill, partly from the toxicity of the fire process used in the creation of these works, and partly, she says, from a need to journey within herself. Her search to heal herself and her experiences with Navajo medicine man David Chathlahe Paladin and Hopi Elder Preston Monongye led her to envision *A Moving Point of Balance*, an environmental work which includes as its core seven paintings about the seven



"Feel the Earth Now," mixed media on paper, 39" x 31".

Opposite page: "Are We Selling Out the Earth?," mixed media on paper, 38" x 30".

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*chakras* of the human body. (*Chakras* are energy centers in the human body which are believed to connect body matter with body energy.)

To experience *A Moving Point of Balance*, a viewer becomes a participant. The participant, then, enters a darkened room through a gateway past David Paladin's medicine wheel, a circular pattern of stones whose positions in relation to each other and to the North, East, South and West directions of the universe, symbolize cyclical patterns of movement and behavior. The medicine wheel represents the natural world which is the ground for personal and cultural consciousness.

In the darkened room the viewer steps sequentially into seven colored-light baths to view seven paintings, the *chakras*: Base of the Spine, Reproduction, Solar Plexus, Heart, Throat, The Third Eye, and Crown of the Head. Soft music plays to attune the participant to focus within as he/she views each *chakra* painting.

At the end of the "journey," participants exit through a room whose walls contain an ever-changing white light painting produced by light projected through quartz slides. This is the "Balancing Room" intended to adjust any exaggerated response the participant may have experienced in the room of the *chakras*.

*A Moving Point of Balance*, Swartz says, is a "residue" from her personal quest to heal herself. Part of the quest, which involved working with the *chakra* system to connect body energy to matter, also included inner visualization, a process which gave her an intimate knowledge of the landscape within her own body. Journeying to sacred places of healing both in the American West and in Europe was the second part of Swartz's quest. In creating *A Moving Point of*

Balance, Swartz was recreating the process she had experienced which involved aligning her own inner landscape with a sacred outer landscape and connecting her own body matter with a universal energy system.

Viewer/participants of *A Moving Point of Balance*, then, move through the darkened space in a simulated pilgrimage, stopping to bless and align the inner landscape of their own beings. Standing in front of the *chakra* paintings, whose microglitter, thickly encrusted paint and vaguely internal imagery glow in the spotlights, "pilgrims" have reported diverse responses varying from profound and life-changing epiphanies to a calming, more relaxed enjoyment.

How art has power to touch the human spirit is a mystery. Throughout history viewers have been moved by their experience of art. In ancient times, the power of art to affect the soul (as resident in the universe) was counted on . . . to ensure a successful hunt, to appease a wrathful deity, or to heal a diseased spirit whose body reflected its sickness.

In whatever way art/ritual does have power, one thing is certain. The participant must be receptive. Whether from ritual purification or from a psychological readiness to receive, the viewer must do his/her part in this collaboration. Swartz says that in encountering *A Moving Point of Balance*, the "viewer is called to release his/her preconceived notions about what art is."

Whether or not this is the case, *A Moving Point of Balance* has been both revered and ignored. Swartz created the work to heal her own life and offered it to the world as a vessel for healing others, but because the effectiveness of the work depends upon the receptivity of the viewer, some

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skeptics have been left unmoved.

However, the commercial gallery system, with its power to give or withhold artistic success, has had little influence on the direction of Beth Ames Swartz's art. Her passionate belief in the healing power of art has projected her into the forefront of a broad group of artists whose work intends to transcend rather than reflect culture as defined by art movements. These artists have been referred to as transformational.

Some transformational

artists have traveled so far from the gallery scene that they reject even creating an art product. They prefer to move with their lives, creating art/life. However, for Swartz and others, the process of creating involves forming matter. As Swartz says, "to feed our souls, some of us need to make things." Whether making things or creating art/life, the common denominator for transformational art seems to be loving — and thereby healing — the reviled and rejected parts of our culture and the deep, dark secrets of our souls.

Swartz's next two painting series seemed to be a gathering of the unfinished edges left over from *Israel Revisited* and *A Moving Point of Balance*. In the *Alchemy Series* she was, like Isis, "recreating the phallus . . . by her own power." Swartz herself says that in this series she was personally investigating the male and female, and as in *A Moving Point of Balance*, a visualization of the inner landscape.

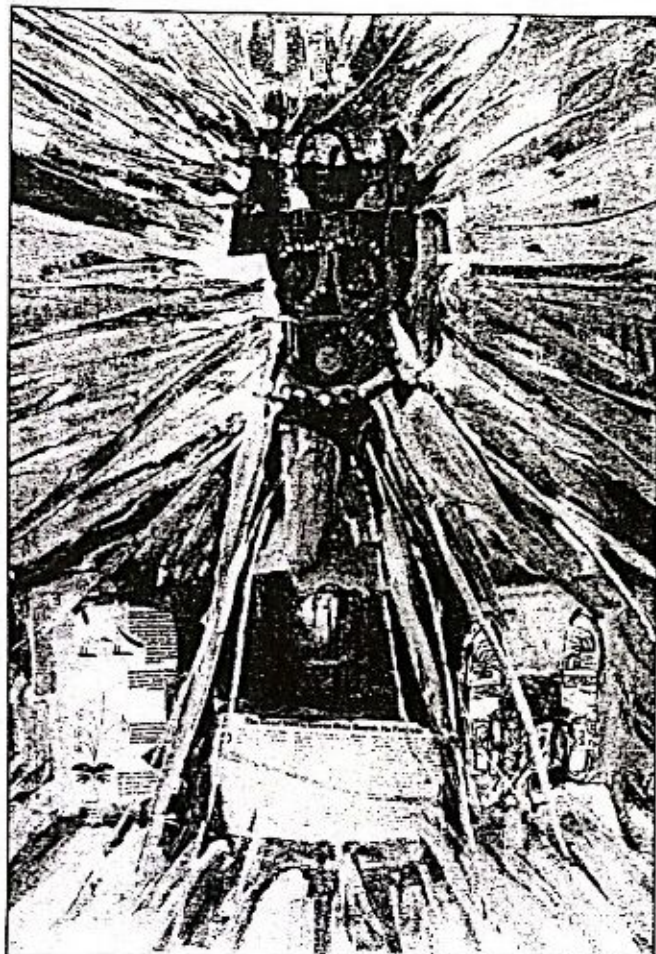
In *Celestial Visitations*, her next series, Swartz's inner beings became angels, carrying messages between the earth and heaven. The deaths of her mother and, very soon after, her father, create the ground or environment for these paintings. An understanding of what was happening to her as well as to her parents as they all confronted the inevitable, inexorable conclusion of the life cycle came to Swartz in the "visitation" of these spiritual messengers. For her,



understanding the experience meant communicating them into matter.

Suffering her parents' deaths, Swartz saw with new eyes the suffering and death of the outer world, whose delicate, interdependent and self-regenerating capacities were being destroyed by greed, insensitivity, and human frailty. With a new empathy, she began to paint that outward reality, confronting "that which is dark and cold and moist, which hides from the light of day and from man's (sic) enlightened thinking, but which holds also the secret of life."

And so Beth Ames Swartz, the Mater Dolorosa of her own dark vision, began to paint *Dreams for the Earth*, drawing upon her deep understanding of the landscape within and the landscape without. John Perrault, writing about the spiritual nature of art in the introduction to another of Swartz's shows, could very well have been reviewing this latest moment in Swartz's own art when he said: "We decide what should be ideal — not



"Costa Rica Guards Its Rain Forests," mixed media on paper, 39" x 31".

## ...THAT ART MIGHT HEAL

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL ART (IFTA) is a non-profit, educational organization whose mission is to present, preserve, document, study and encourage transformative art around the world. The organization defines Transformative Art as any visual or performing art that "expresses or evokes spiritual truths or higher states of consciousness that lead to a greater understanding of oneself, humanity, nature, the cosmos, and their interdependence. Transformative art is intended to affect or heal the body, mind, and spirit of the artist through the creative process and of the receptive viewer/audience through the experience of art itself."

IFTA plans a variety of educational and international advocacy programs. A permanent art center in Sedona, Arizona is part of the IFTA vision. Programs at the center will encompass performance, inter-disciplinary collaborations and historical and contemporary visual arts collections, included in which will be Beth Ames Swartz's multimedia, environmental work, *A Moving Point of Balance*. For information about IFTA, write: International Friends of Transformative Art, P.O. Box 10608, Aspen, Colorado 81612, or call (303) 927-8027, David Floria, Executive Director.

what is real but what should be real — and we take the steps necessary to create these transformations."

In the painting "In the Darkness Shall Be the Light and in the Stillness, the Dancing," she takes the steps necessary to create in viewers of her paintings a high state of consciousness about love, between parent and child, between adults, between a boy and his flute, between sisters and brothers, between grandparent and grandchild. She paints the natural world at peace, a swan swimming on a quiet pond. And always in these dreams for the earth there are transcendent figures, religious and secular, whose spirits glow with love. These figures emerge within and around the deep blue shadows of her canvas.

There are still the images of fear, a shadowy dog slinking across the bottom and the earth still bound, but this time, glowing radiantly beyond its fetters. In this earth image there is hope that once again as in ancient cultures, our environment will embody a larger, transcending spirit, and that opening ourselves to the deep rhythms of that spirit, we will be lifted beyond the narrow self-interest of our own small visions.

But the path is not yet there. The stones on which we will place our feet, one after another in slow, serpentine journey to our inner hearts, the stones which will lead us inexorably toward the sacred mountain, have become broken and buried by an uncaring and preoccupied world.

And so until the stones can be replaced with careful precision, Beth Ames Swartz dreams for us all that an outward, collective journey toward revering and preserving the landscape will lead inevitably to an inner experience of harmony and peace within our souls.