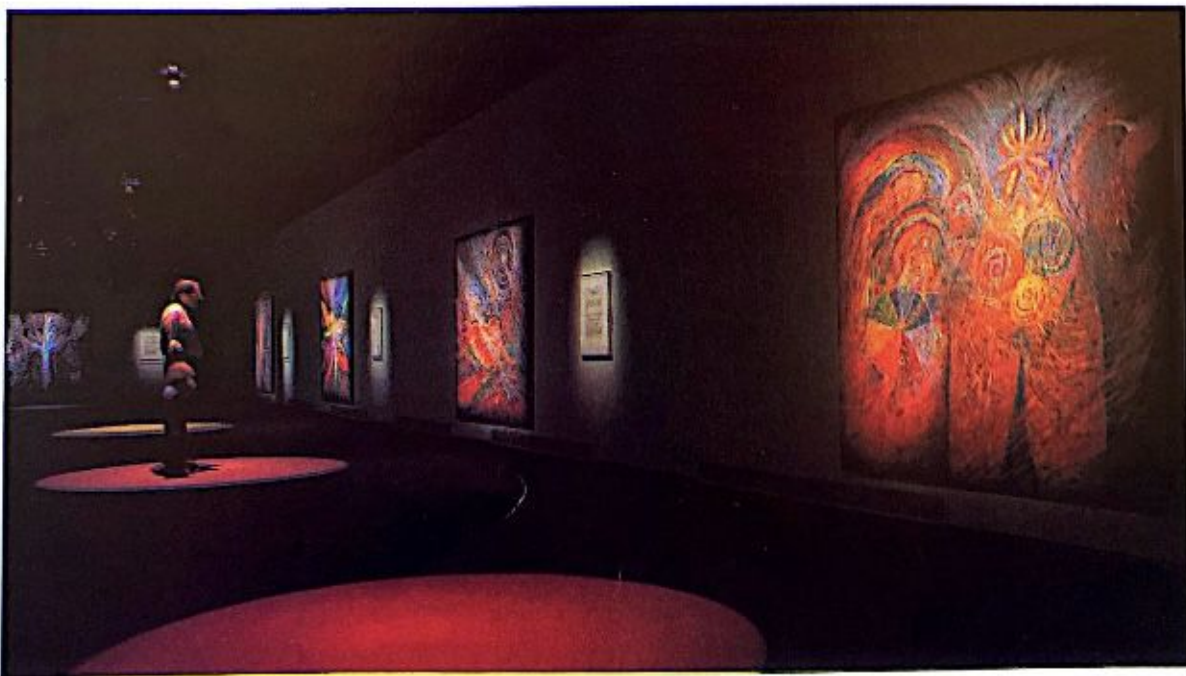


BALANCING ACT

Latest work of Beth Ames Swartz set in quiet, healing environment

The Navajos say “walk in beauty,” blessing the times when inner peace radiates outward, connecting with the order and beauty of nature. The Tao considers life a river. One must flow with the river to be in harmony.

Beth Ames Swartz knows that planting one's feet against the current of life's swiftly flowing river results in disharmony. For 30 years her life and her art have done a tandem dance, spiraling toward new edges and new awareness. Most art lovers know Swartz's fire paintings. A series of events (her mother's heart attack, anger and fear of death) precipitated a moment in Swartz's studio when she grabbed a screwdriver and stabbed and ripped at the paper in front of her. This led to a new way of painting. Destructive acts (burning and tearing paper; shoveling earth onto painting surfaces) are followed by a careful reforming of the broken



Top: “Sixth Chakra,” acrylic gold-leaf, broken glass and glitter on linen, 7’ x 7’.
Left: “Moving Point of Balance” on exhibit at Nickle Art Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.



Beth Ames Swartz poses in her studio with "Seventh Chakra: Crown of the Head," left, and "Fifth Chakra: Throat," right. The works, part of the "A Moving Point of Balance" series, are both 7'x7', of acrylic, gold leaf, micro-glitter and broken glass on linen.

pieces. The new shapes, rich pigments and glued connections of the finished work preserve, then transcend, the painful history of its construction.

In 1982, Beth Ames Swartz, who has lived in the Valley since 1959, moved on from her fire works. Once again a health problem, a benign tumor, led her in search of new forms for this new experience. She moved to heal herself. She visited American Indian ritual sites. While visiting one of the sites near Snowflake, she was caught in a rainstorm. Two horses came and stood beside her, protecting her from the rain. Confronting this experience led to new imagery about inner powers that can be personified by animal spirits. The result of this journey is "A Moving Point of Balance."

"A Moving Point of Balance" is an environmental work that has, as its focal point, seven paintings spotlighted in a darkened room. The viewer makes the transition from outside, secular space to this contemplative room by passing through a crystal quartz light bath and traveling on past a Navajo medicine wheel, the ancient Native American symbol that bridges "the boundary between



"Alchemy I," azurite and quartz crystals on canvas; 5'x5'; Elaine Horwitch Galleries.

contemporary experience and prehistoric consciousness."

The darkness beyond the medicine wheel, in the room where the paintings are, is filled with meditative music. The viewer travels from the medicine wheel through the darkness to each of seven color baths located in front of the seven paintings. The paintings represent East Indian chakras, places in the body that govern equilibrium. Red bathes the viewer looking at the first chakra, "Base of the Spine." The following light colors and paintings are coupled: orange with "Reproduction;" yellow with "Solar Plexis;" green with "Heart;" blue with "Throat;" indigo with the "Third Eye" or "Intuition;" violet with "Crown of the Head."

To exit from the room of the chakras, the viewer passes through a balancing room. Principles of Native American crystal medicine and sophisticated color lighting prepare the viewer for re-emergence into the world of street signs, hot dogs and errands.

"A Moving Point of Balance" is a healing environment, a place away from contemporary noise; a place to attain equilibrium. Within this environment, the healing qualities of colored light, music and the medicine wheel prepare the viewer for a participatory relationship with the paintings.

The way the paintings work is deceptively simple. For example, they are square. When seen from across the room, this square shape serves two purposes: it produces a floating quality, balancing gravity with equal vertical and horizontal lines; and it gives a feeling of isolated completeness to each work.

When standing in the color baths, about four feet away from the seven-foot-square paintings, the viewer finds herself in the center of the work; the square edges are eliminated as shape by becoming unfocused in peripheral vision. At such close range, only one area can be seen at a time. The viewer must move physically (turning the head) or mentally (shifting from direct to peripheral vision) to see the whole.

Jackson Pollock, in the early 1950s, knew this dance-of-the-painter, dance-of-the-viewer dialogue when he did his 8-foot x 17-foot drip paintings. Because of their size, the viewer who cares to see the whole work is forced to follow the web-like drips from one edge to another, literally traveling their path with eye or brain.

In her fire work, Beth Ames Swartz developed a way of painting that carried her into the work, a step beyond the surface tension of Jackson Pollock's painted choreography. In "A Moving Point of Balance," Swartz shares her journey into

the paintings with her viewers. By her use of large scale, central imagery, light-reflective substances (glass, microglitter, luminous paint) tactile surfaces (wrinkled foil beneath brightly colored pigment) and contemplative space, she offers the viewer a pathway into the painting. Because these paintings are about chakras, places of balance within each person, the pathway into the painting becomes a pathway into the viewer. After walking in the paths of these paintings, the viewer feels the skin and muscle of the surfaces, the breath and spirit of the forms, the tightness and release of each body center. The experience of the painting becomes cathartic, producing a soothing release of tension.

The magic of ritual transforms the viewer and the painting. Just as with a Hopi sand painting (the process and experience are as essential as the image), so in "A Moving Point of Balance" the inner experience of the viewer is essential. The centering of the viewer depends on walking with the painting; becoming as if one were the painting.

Beth Ames Swartz intends to create this interdependence between viewer and painting. "We have reached a stage in cultural evolution where the perpetuation of heroes serves dependency. We must develop ways of trusting interdependency among people and their surroundings. This trust of connectedness is a moral choice to heal ourselves and our environment." "A Moving Point of Balance" is a statement about interdependence as an act of healing.

Having created the healing ritual, Beth Ames Swartz moves toward inner synthesis. Her most recent work connects the fire paintings with the flow of the chakras. These new works place the chakra images within a frame, no longer depending on the ceremony for viewing. With their healing stones ground into painted surfaces, their burned paper wedged to and curling up from the canvas, and their fluid paint pools, they have a wholeness and boiling energy which announces new power and new movement for Beth Ames Swartz.

Beth Ames Swartz is represented in Scottsdale by Elaine Horwitch Galleries. "A Moving Point of Balance" will be on tour in Europe and the United States through 1991. On May 17, the Fountainhead Corporate Park in Tempe will sponsor a premier Arizona showing of the artwork to benefit the Arizona Drug Abuse Program. Information about tickets, which cost \$50, can be obtained by calling Marcia Ellis at 921-4000. PMM

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