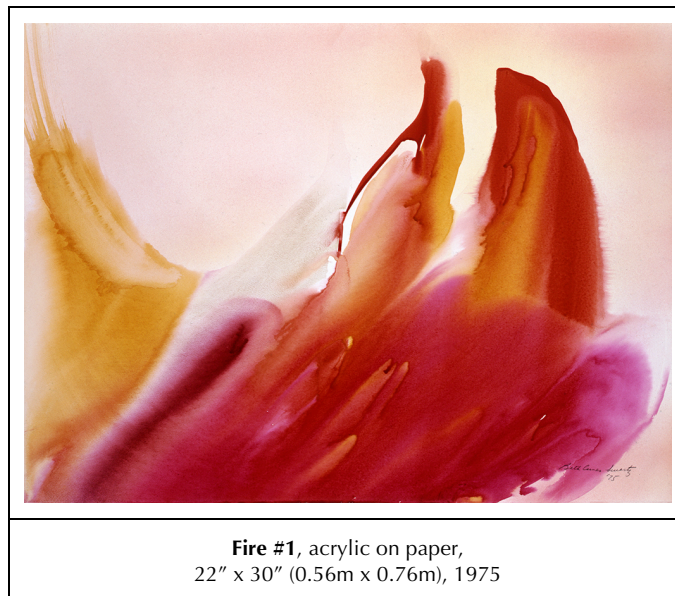


About: **Inquiry into Fire 1976-77**

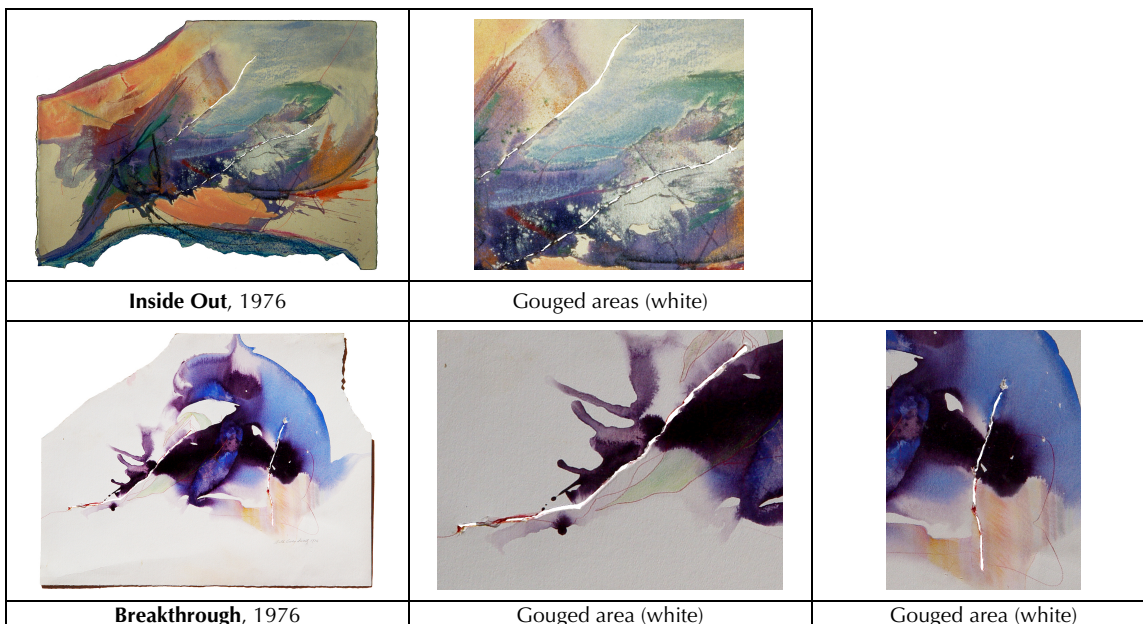
My mother's 1975 illness and its psychological impact upon me not only precipitated my 1975 *I Love Mommy* series but generated a profound and lasting impact upon my art.

In 1976, I returned to my plan to explore fire, thereby beginning the fifth and final series visualizing individual elements of classical Greek thought (having already explored water, air, prana, and earth). Before my mother's sickness, I made one foray depicting fire in an "abstractly representational" manner.



My plans for a *Fire* series changed radically by the time I completed *I Love Mommy*. First and foremost, I got in touch with the anger and childhood pain I felt resulting from my mother's often inappropriate behavior, especially from one incident when she found me masturbating at three years of age and responded by placing iodine on my vagina; the burning feeling I experienced probably established a metaphorical connection in my mind between that the burning sensation I experienced and fire's burning affect.

Growing-up, I always behaved as a “good little girl.” No longer! Now, I released repressed anger and pain tearing the paper substrate into an irregular shape and then thrusting a screwdriver into the paper, gouging holes. In essence, I now was acting out “real world” action that I painted symbolically in my 1973 *Projected Power* series.



The destructive aspect of this new creative process emboldened me, liberated me. It helped me get in touch with my own fear of death. Working with fire and thinking about its disordering aspects helped me recognize and alleviate (somewhat) my fear of death. At this time, I began a long friendship with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross after attending her symposium on “Death and Dying”; she helped me rationalize that growth that can result from pain and suffering, while her case studies even provide hope of life after death.

Another preoccupation in my thinking by this time was my interest in flow, in continuity. Alan Watts was one of the prime inspirations behind the flow depictions of my 1971 *Meditation* series; Watts said,


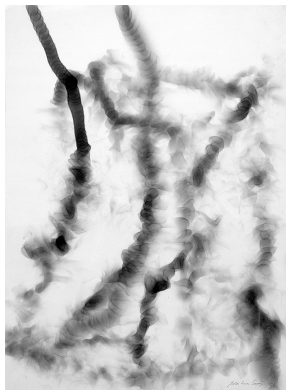
“The more a thing tends to be permanent, the more it tends to be lifeless.”

Confucius, standing by a river, said,

“It goes on like this, never ceasing day or night!” or, as some have translated, “Time flows away like the water in the river.”

I rebelled against the concept a life-death duality, proposing instead an endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The Chinese analog to the classical Greek system of five elements views them as forces transforming one into the other. My *Umi*, *Air*, *Prana* and *Earthflow* works all tried to visualize flow. By the end of my *Earthflow* series, the images started to break-up, becoming more non-continuous, a sure sign to me that artistically it was time to move on. I decided to capture the flow of fire.

Initially, I produced smoke drawings, works on paper painted using smoke, i.e., soot, resulting from incomplete combustion of a candle flame. These magical and mysterious abstract works captured the beauty of the dark side while lighting my way toward further embracing fire as a medium.

	
<p>Smoke Drawing #1 ID #380 Smoke on paper 30" x 22" (0.76m x 0.56m) 1976</p>	<p>Smoke Drawing #2 ID #656 Smoke on paper 30" x 22" (0.76m x 0.56m) 1976</p>

The Hindu God Shiva is known as The Destroyer. Shiva destroys the universe at the end of each cycle, which then allows for a new Creation. I thought, "Why not incorporate the burning and purifying process of fire into my method?"

Thus, my next explorations used fire to burn the paper medium in addition to painting with smoke. In my mind, I was creating on a three-dimensional plane in the sense that I considered both the front and back of the paper substrate to be part of the work of art.



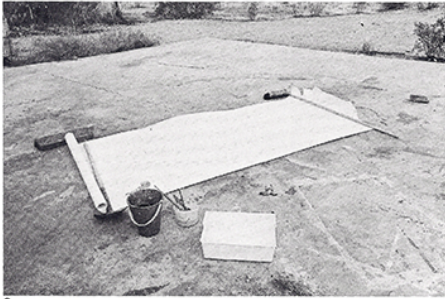
During this 1976-77 period, I developed a process-ritual that began on site where I would first concentrate on emptying my mind and praying. Next, I would unroll onto the earth large pieces of white paper that I somewhat randomly mutilated with a screwdriver or other tool; then, I set the paper ablaze. (In my *Fire and Ice* works, I threw ice onto the paper before beginning the defacement but I discontinued this part of the process on my pilgrimages to remote sites.) After firing, I began adding things onto the paper such as earth, acrylic paint, and gold leaf. Finally, I would cycle through the process-ritual again overlaying the paper with new sheets attached to one another with Ropex; the resulting artwork when finished possessed a stiff, resistant but malleable nature that allowed me to give the large pieces a non-static, volumetric shape when hung.



1



4



2



5



3



5

PROCESS (ritual)

"The ritual I have developed for this exhibition is akin to the natural biological cycle of life/death/rebirth. I act out this cycle during the ordering/dis-ordering/reordering process."

1. Emptying mind (ordering)
2. White paper rolled out (ordering)
3. a) Mutilation with screwdriver (disordering)
b) Fire and Ice Process: ice randomly thrown on paper before mutilation (disordering)
4. Fire-burning of mutilations (disordering)
5. Mixed-media applied (reordering)
6. Earth, rain, sunlight, tearing, fire, collaged paper, mixed-media added as needed (reordering)

Pictured on preceding page.

"My art is my way of seeking a 'fusion of opposites', a 'gesture of balance'; integrating mind/body/spirit to connect with my own as well as nature's evolution."

BETH AMES SWARTZ
Paradise Valley, Arizona

My preoccupation with fire would last another eight years and, in fact, a lifetime.