

# Growing Up A Painter

## Dona Nelson

Present-day abstract painting is almost totally ruled by painting conventions: grids, stripes, panels, fields of all-over activity, images suspended in the middle of the canvas, etc. Why paint abstractly at all if our paintings are bound by more rigid organizing conventions than the portrait, landscape and still life ever were? A mountain is a complicated form. As Cezanne illustrated, it can inspire paintings endlessly, but after one has seen a few squares, a painting composed of squares, no matter how interesting the surface, color and space, suffers from a kind of familiarity. The *whole* of the painting ceases to compel active looking, and some of the adventure that painting can achieve is inevitably lost.

It seems to me that so-called woman's imagery (symmetrical images, grids, etc.) has more to do with oppression than anything else—keeping us in our places. It has to do with *not* creating.

Likewise, the complacent New York art world does not inspire creation either as it is primarily oriented toward "good" and "bad" which are usually relative to what we've known about before, and even these designations tend to be based on shallow "looks" (painterly, hard-edge, slightly figurative, non-figurative) rather than on any substantial thinking about painting.

It is very difficult, even painful, to examine all aspects of your painting and try to be fully conscious of the origins of everything that is there, to try to create the *whole* thing and make a truly personal art, but only then does one fully realize how adventuresome the attempt to make paintings is.

The inherent genius of paint and canvas is this: out of the simultaneity of thoughts, having no absolute form, constantly impinged upon by the emotions, a hard physical thing arises, different from all those thoughts.

I think abstract painting as a whole has gotten too simple, too far from the way the mind works. There seems to be such an overwhelming need to *organize*, achieve a kind of finality. Agnes Martin said, "This painting I like because you can get in there and rest." The thing that seems most important to me is to escape the organizing conventions that allow us to rest and rob our paintings of the life that is in us.

Painters have attempted to expand abstract painting by introducing design (so-called pattern painting), mathematical illustration (e.g. Robert Mangold), and general wall decoration (Stella's recent reliefs). Painting has lasted so long because of the flexible, expressive nature of its possibilities—color, surface, mark, flat-emanating space. The shift in attention from these concerns to compositional concerns (e.g. Stella's reliefs—a shape here, a shape there, a decorated surface here, a decorated surface there) leads away from the particular things

painting can do, away from painting itself.

Abstract painting, far from being at its end, has just begun, but at its beginning, it was already proclaimed as a kind of all time culmination—a reflection of the goal-oriented, history-oriented, death-oriented, twentieth century obsession with progression, as if all the supposed links between things were more noteworthy than the things.

I understand "reductive" (please excuse the word) painting to be painting that attempts a very specific, resonant single space. The reductive impulse that has been important in abstract painting for the last twenty years has made for some very fine painting: Newman, Stella's black paintings, Marden's and Agnes Martin's etc. This is the painting that I have loved best and thought most about because it is here that I have found a sense of *place*. I have admired and sought the reality that a painting can possess. I don't like the term "abstract" as it implies something second-rate to all the vivid realities of this world. The esthetic of grids and monochromatic planes is a highly artificial one. People who are not knowledgeable about modern painting will often make fun of, for instance, a single monochromatic panel, saying, "Is this what all the fuss is about? It's like the story of the emperor with no clothes." Artists hate this old saw, and yet it is said so often that I have begun to think about it. Human life and human beings are very complicated. It would seem natural that art might be more interesting and more relevant to more people if it in some way reflected this complexity. Although Cezanne is often talked about in relation to modern painting, particularly in relation to Marden, the thing that strikes me most when I look at Cezanne is his incredible complexity. In terms of space alone, he often allowed many different kinds of space within the same painting, many subtle shifts. Cezanne's paintings are both deliberate and tentative, fixed and fluid, reflecting a whole mind rather than a single thought, a mind that could entertain grand themes, contradictions, and incomplete musings.

Recently, I have been looking a lot at Pollock and DeKooning. I like the way Pollock was able to be very detailed and very big at the same time—everything happens at the same moment, in the present, on the surface. DeKooning's life-long attitudes toward art-making seem to me to be exceptionally healthy. He wrote, "Art should *not* have to be a certain way." He also said that the notion of having to will one thing "made him sick."

In my own work, everything is entwined with something else—the near altered by my memory of the far, a dark day, a Manet gray.

New art comes about through an individual imagination simultaneously working upon past painting and the

specifics of a work in progress. So long as a person has seen other paintings, what she does will in some way be affected by what she has seen. If the effect is a rejection of male painting, than it has made its mark upon our paintings as surely as any other way. Mainly, I want to be conscious of *how* I have been affected. I do not mind learning from past painting so long as I am fully conscious of the nature of that knowledge.

Great painters, Manet and Cezanne consistently, others sporadically, are distinguished by a particular kind of inventive ability—the actual paint has yielded to their imaginations, thoughts, feelings. They have created new kinds of space. Painting space is not cartoon flatness or depth perspective, rather it is the thoroughly ambiguous space of a dream, the emotionally and physically inextricable, a flatness equivalent to unfamiliar spaces. In this realization, all great painting is abstract and expressive in the best and most subtle sense of the words.

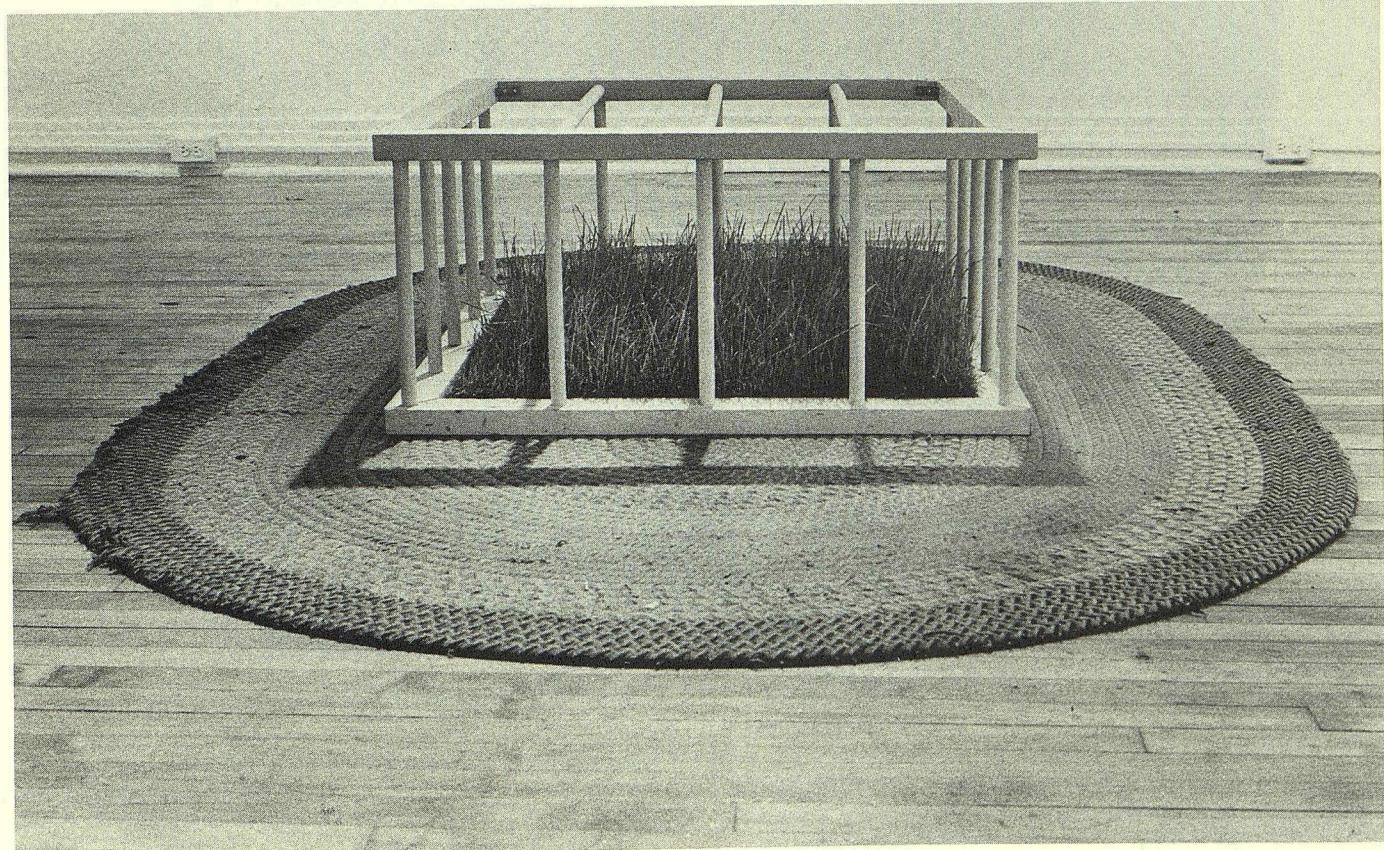
A painting's reality cannot be experienced through descriptions or photographs, and an artist who enjoys high visibility often suffers a kind of backwards invisibility. The art is shown, bought, talked about, written about and seems to become a known factor, with either a good reputation or a bad one, which doesn't need to be looked at anymore (an illusion).

Looking at a painting is not like watching television; it is active rather than passive, a kind of claiming, satisfying just by itself. Anyone can "see"; but no one can see, casual viewer or museum curator, who will not let go of ego, judgments and categories long enough to penetrate a painting and allow it to penetrate them.

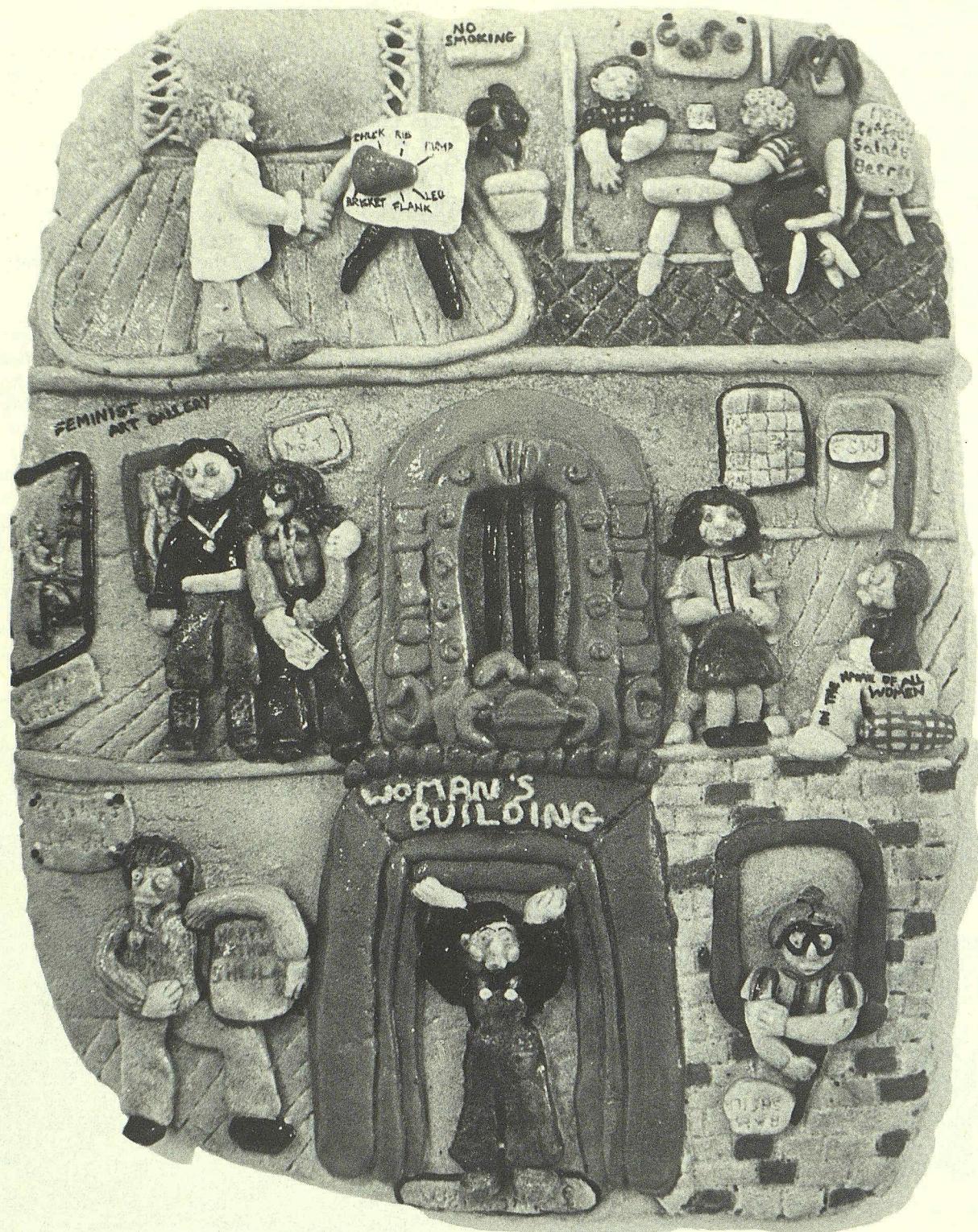
Since painting is limited to an irreproducible thing, it has never been and will never be an art form to be enjoyed by huge numbers of people. In terms of their commercial allocations, paintings are luxury items, but such a designation doesn't say anything about their living nature as art. It just refers to the money swirl that goes on about them.

Painting, like nature, and unlike politics and religion, is not moralistic. In painting as in music, poetry and dance, an individual has the opportunity of getting out from under the economic, sociological, psychological and political descriptions that are constantly foisted upon her from childhood by parents, education, peers, and society in general. In art, the real complexity and specificity of an experienced life can shine through. Far from being a luxury item, either making art or experiencing art should be the prerogative of every person on this earth.

When I was still in school—about ten years ago—someone said to me, in tones of awe and admiration, "Do you know that Stella knows what his painting is going to be like for the next ten years?" I didn't know if this was true, but I do know that even at that time I got a very uneasy feeling. Authority, control, clarity may be useful attributes for a businessman, but it seems to me that they are, more often than not, destructive and limiting to an artist. Anyone that knows me knows that I am as authoritative and verbal as any man, but recently I feel weary of myself like I long ago felt weary of most men. My painting is dark to me. I don't know "where it's going." I hope it takes me someplace where I have never been before.



Kate Millet. *Domestic Scene*. 1976. Mixed media. Rug is 4' x 6'.



Nancy Fried. *The Woman's Building*. n.d. Flour, salt, water, acrylic and watercolors.



Dara Robinson. *Resurrection—Self-Portrait as the Sacred Heart*. n.d.

Louise Fishman is a painter and lives in New York.

Barbara Asch is a painter and an art therapist. She lives in New York City and Bridgehampton.

Harmony Hammond is a painter who lives in New York.

Leora Stewart is a fiber artist who lives and works in New York City.

Sara Whitworth is a painter and writer who lives in Chelsea.

Gloria Klein is a native New Yorker who expresses the chaos, structure and excitement of her life in her paintings. She is currently coordinating "10 Downtown: 10 Years."

Dona Nelson is a painter who lives in New York City.

Ann Wilson, sometimes known as Rose Etta Stone, was last seen drowning in bureaucratic papers. She is currently directing an environmental art theater work, "Butler's Lives of the Saints," a renaissance work involving opera, drama, painting, theater and thirty artists.

Kate Millet is a sculptor and author. Her latest book is *Sita*.

Nancy Fried is a feminist lesbian artist who portrays the intimate everyday lesbian lifestyle in her artwork. She is a member of the Feminist Studio Workshop and the Natalie Barney Lesbian Art Project Collective. She is currently preparing for her second one-woman show at the Los Angeles Woman's Building in the fall.

Dara Robinson is interested, vitally interested, in the culture women are creating, but her greatest thrill is contributing to the creation of a lesbian culture. "I am a militant lesbian feminist activist."