




CATHIE BLECK

❖ BECOMING ❖

Human





M A R I A N N E B E R A R D I



BEAUTY



Matters



CATHIE BLECK IS ONE OF THE GREAT LIVING MASTERS OF THE CLAY-BOARD MEDIUM.



*She discovered it nearly 30 years ago, and since then has relished the way
she can scrape sharp tools against the ink washes she applies to its surface, exposing the bright white
kaolin clay beneath. Drawing against this whitest and most durable of all the earth's clays—
the same remarkable material from which fine Sèvres, Meissen and Chinese porcelain
is made—is like sculpting a relief or making an engraving.*

BEAUTIFUL TRAPS :: DETAIL

It is two and three-dimensional at once, and is emphatically not the medium of choice for the unsure draftsman, for it reveals far more than it conceals.

With this tactile medium Cathie Bleck has refined an inimitable black-and-white style featuring voluptuous images of plant, animal and human life teeming with energy, but struggling to maintain a harmonious balance with one another. This marvelous metaphor of peeling aside a thin veil of inky darkness to expose the luminous forms within is perfectly married to Cathie Bleck's lifelong artistic subject—the light and dark sides of natural forces. She sees beauty in both zones and recognized early on that there cannot be anything more perfect than allowing her light and dark subjects to emerge from a bed of clay, just as they do in nature itself: an owl with terrifying eyes gleaming through the needles of a pine forest, sweet blackberries clinging to shiny rapier-sharp brambles, damp monster ferns unfurling their prehistoric fronds like prehensile claws, or a frog startling a little girl's midnight walk by plopping like a clap of thunder into a strange black pool.

Cathie Bleck grew up in a big family of nine children on a 20-acre evergreen and fruit farm in Illinois. Her childhood was a complete immersion in nature, where she came to know its harder truths along with its sweet fructose ones. As she readily admits, "As a child I fell in love with the darkness," acknowledging that a sunny, idyllic existence also contains a shadowy foil that is a joy

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AQUA REGIA I :: RIGHT DETAIL





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to explore. There is something in the human hardwiring that is excited about being terrified. In art historical terms, Cathie Bleck evolved fully into an artist of the sublime—recording beauty in the both the benign and the terrible—and as such she's in excellent company with figures she deeply admires including J.M.W. Turner, Salvator Rosa and Frederic Church. Like the great masters of black-and-white art before her, namely her heroes Lynd Ward, Thomas Hart Benton, Wanda Gag, and Rockwell Kent, Cathie Bleck creates drama and mystery, and unforgettable imagery, through high contrast. Her uncanny ability to think in opposites, to render the positive negative and vice versa, has found expression in media all around us. Her designs have made their way onto the pages of *Business Week*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Time* magazine, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Esquire*, *The New York Times*, Warner Bros. Records, Random House, Simon & Schuster, Sony Records, NIH, Farrar Straus and Giroux, U.S. postage stamps, and the 2007 U.S. State Department's Earth Day Poster, among many others.

The artist's latest body of work, *Becoming Human*, is a spectacularly ambitious achievement. While all the images possess the hallmarks of her style—her passion for storytelling, the deeply sensual nature imagery, and forceful designs built from light-dark rhythms—there's a vast amount in them that's entirely new. In fact, the artist has made sweeping technical, compositional, and iconographic leaps, pushing the boundaries of anything her medium has achieved before. The result of changing so many artistic variables at once isn't simply an incredible intellectual feat—a visual feast.

The artist is the first to concede that she pushed the technical and pictorial boundaries of her art sharply into the realm of intrepid experimentation out of thematic necessity. As a mother of three talented children, whom she's nearly finished raising to young adulthood, as naturalist attuned to assaults on our environment, and to the disastrous war in Iraq, the artist is now asking: "What does being human really mean? What gives rise to all the contradictory elements that make us human? Why can we be so compassionate on one hand and brutally combative on the other? Why does a soldier, in an ultimate act of selflessness, fall upon a grenade to save his comrades?"

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TRESPASSER :: DETAIL

Why does another massacre an entire village? Is it possible for human beings to exist without conflict? Is conflict a requisite of the human condition? And even more weirdly, do we need conflict to be creative? How are we really all that different from animals, which often have nearly identical impulses? And how does the recognition and pursuit of beauty figure into this? Perhaps it is the need to find beauty, in its myriad contradictory manifestations, and make it a part of one's life that is the most important "human" characteristic of all.

"Ideas for my art come from relationships," the artist explains. "I'm interested in the tension that exists in resolving complex problems, observing both sides, what is right and wrong, good and evil, diligence vs. giving up, seduction vs. restraint. This translates into perspective, being high up in a tree, for example, and looking down on a problem that lies ahead or already exists. The solution can sometimes be found though it is often disguised by chaos. I am often more concerned about asking a viewer questions in my work than offering a solution. That's why it takes so much time to view my work. One has to sit with a piece for a long time in order to understand the stories."

Over the past year-and-a-half during which she produced *Becoming Human*, Cathie Bleck used new tools to address these complex subjects. To begin with, she no longer restricted her palette to black and white but used color, to underscore the fact that being human is being more than

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INHERITANCE :: RIGHT DETAIL





BEAUTY MATTERS

black and white. Like a the chef of a five-star restaurant, she'd developed secret recipes for mixing various pigments with her usual medium of liquid kaolin clay to achieve gentle colors that have a natural rather than synthetic appearance. She's also chosen to compose sometimes in diptychs and triptychs, a new format that suggests flip sides of an ethical or moral equation, or a necessary extension of it.

Perhaps most noticeably of all, she has increased the scale of her imagery dramatically. Formerly working almost as a miniaturist, she is now painting and drawing on panels that are four, five, and even six feet in height or length. The larger supports enable her to create environments and figures closer to the human scale, so that a viewer has an easier time relating to them. In this way, she is encouraging her viewers to become more engaged as "empathetic voyeurs."

The increase in scale brought with it an opportunity for the artist to start manipulating the surfaces of these large simulated natural environments, to suggest the texture of bark, moss, feathers, even swirling pools of water in a more painterly fashion. Cathie Bleck explains, "I can sometimes create a type of clay that's almost like putty, which I then apply to the surface and manipulate in various ways. This technique enables me to create areas of raised relief that bind with the panel and when they dry are just as durable. You can see this in the yellow birds in *Renaissance*. The putty dried very beautifully, creating some air holes that added texture. I often get unexpected results which inject surprise into my surfaces. In this body of work I have intentionally allowed myself not to override the accidents but to work with them and the shapes they suggest. It's been a breakthrough of sorts."

Lest a human viewer forget that the world is populated by entire kingdoms of plants and animals, Cathie Bleck has begun composing her imagery from unusual and unexpected vantage points suggestive of an animal's point of view rather than a human's. In *A Choice*, (page 19) for example, a stunning leopard perches up high in a tree to survey the landscape below him. Nestled beneath this

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ASCENT

magnificent creature, whose dappled coat is one of the finest passages in this entire body of work, is quite literally a sleeping beauty. Here the artist asks whether the large cat, whose thoughtful expression is every bit as human as it is leopard, is appraising the woman's beauty out of sheer pleasure, or whether the pleasure is linked instead to a selfish desire to devour her. Depending upon his motivation, beauty will be destroyed or survive.

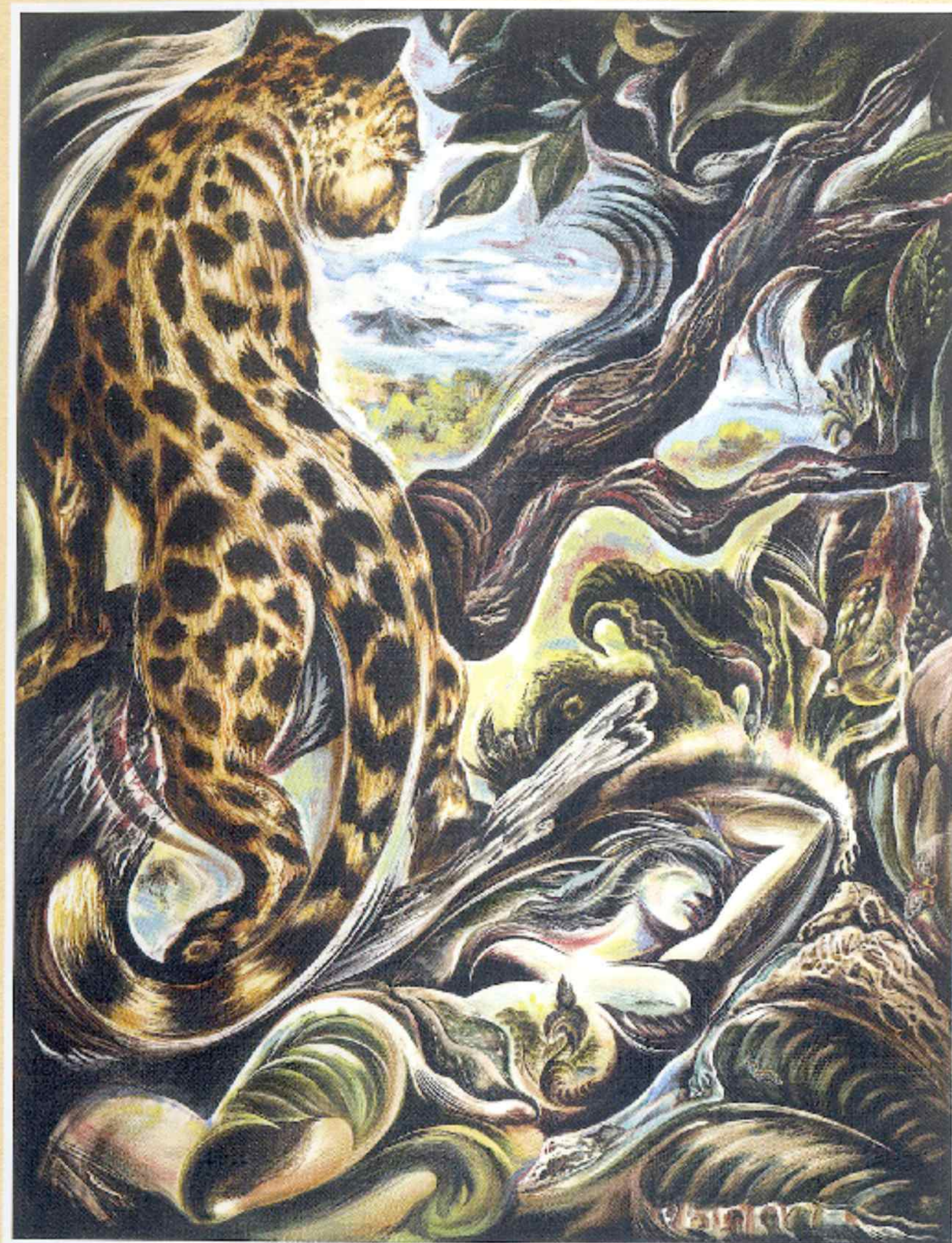
In *Becoming Human*, animals have become, to an unprecedented degree in Cathie Bleck's work, practically surrogate humans. To some extent, she now uses humans and animals interchangeably as her protagonists. "Animals are never really animals," she explains. "They have a human quality, and are one step away from being human. I am fascinated by animal behavior, their unusual partnerships, the beauty of their body lines and patterns of their coats. In my painting entitled *Two Worlds*, it's not hard to see someone you know or maybe even something in yourself—the sloth chooses the easier path, taking whatever falls into his lap, rather than striving to better his condition.

In nearly every regard, the most daring work in *Becoming Human* is *Ascent*. (Page 16) At first glance the composition seems to be completely abstract, a glowing vortex with few contextual clues. What reads as a bright oval opening is surrounded by a dense golden web of organic matter. The work is one of the most painterly in Bleck's oeuvre, for she's drawn, painted, and sculpted

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TRESPASSER :: DETAIL



A CHOICE



from liquid kaolin clay the stems and roots that make up this web of organic stuff that defies immediate identification. In places, the artist heightened the affect of light striking this organic tunnel by applying glints of gold leaf here and there.

The spatial relationships in this image are intentionally disorienting and the vantage point deliberately ambiguous. Is that light from the sky streaming through the center of the web? Are we deep inside a cave looking out, or are we inside a deep hole looking up? Or is this a reflection of the sky in a deep pool of water, in which case it would mean that we are at the top of a vertical shaft looking down? And what are we standing on? What is this web made of?

In this extraordinary painting, Cathie Bleck has confounded our expectations not only by choosing an ambiguous vantage point, but selecting one we quite possibly have never assumed before. She is asking us to look at something from the world as though we might be something other than a human being. This could be a view from another consciousness entirely, perhaps an animal, perhaps some form of intelligent plant life?

Closer looking reveals clues that *Ascent* is drawn from the point of view of a fish or another sea creature looking up towards the surface of the water from many feet below. Along the central left margin we see the underside of a duck, paddling away with its webbed feet. Just above it, an eye

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TWO WORLDS :: RIGHT





BEAUTY MATTERS

of a squid emerges from a dense bed of kelp. Near the distant sunlit surface is a school of fish. Cathie Bleck is a scuba diver, who conceived the idea for this work after diving with her husband on their first trip to Egypt this winter. Her source of inspiration is recorded, teasingly in the upper right corner, as a tiny, upside-down string of pyramids, which also doubles as a stem of thorns. In this important work, Bleck is eloquently arguing with the notion that humankind is somehow superior to the rest of the world. She insists we realize that in order to view this beautiful spectacle of nature, which a sea creature is accorded every day, we humans have first have to learn how to swim, and then learn how to swim with heavy wetsuits and an arsenal of cumbersome breathing equipment strapped to us. But, we do it, she reminds us, because our imagination asks us to, and because beauty truly matters to every single one of us.

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MARIANNE BERARDI, PH.D., IS AN HISTORIAN OF DUTCH AND AMERICAN ART BASED IN CLEVELAND, OH. A SPECIALIST IN 17TH- AND 18TH-CENTURY FLOWER PAINTING, SHE IS PREPARING A FULL-LENGTH BIOGRAPHY AND CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ OF THE WORK OF THE DUTCH ARTIST RACHEL RUTSCH (1664-1750). MARIANNE IS A FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE ALBRECHT-KEMPER MUSEUM OF ART IN ST. JOSEPH, MO, AND THE CLEVELAND ARTISTS FOUNDATION, AND CURRENTLY SERVES AS A SENIOR FINE ARTS EXPERT TO HERITAGE AUCTION GALLERIES.



RENAISSANCE :: LEFT + WHEN WE BECAME HUMAN :: ABOVE



// BECOMING HUMAN //

THE BUTLER INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN ART :: YOUNGSTOWN :: OHIO

WHEN WE BECAME HUMAN : 16" x 13" : 2006 : INKS/KAOLIN CLAY ON SCRATCHBOARD

HEAVEN AND HELL : 9" x 18" : 2003 : INKS AND SCRATCHBOARD

A CHOICE : 60" x 48" x 2" : 2008 : INKS, KAOLIN CLAY AND 22K GOLD LEAF ON CLAY-BOARD

AQUA REGIA I : 20" x 16" x 2" : 2008 : INKS, KAOLIN CLAY AND 22K GOLD LEAF ON CLAY-BOARD

AQUA REGIA II : 20" x 16" x 2" : 2008 : INKS, KAOLIN CLAY AND 22K GOLD LEAF ON CLAY-BOARD

ASCENT : 60" x 30" x 1" : 2008 : INKS, KAOLIN CLAY AND 22K GOLD LEAF ON CLAY-BOARD

BEAUTIFUL TRAPS : STUDY : 60" x 30" : 2008 : INKS AND KAOLIN CLAY ON PAPER

BEAUTIFUL TRAPS : 30" x 60" x 1" : 2008 : INKS AND KAOLIN CLAY ON CLAY-BOARD

BEAUTY I : 16" x 20" x 2" : 2008 : INKS, KAOLIN CLAY AND 22K GOLD LEAF ON CLAY-BOARD

TWO WORLDS : 60" x 48" x 2" : 2008 : INKS, KAOLIN CLAY AND 22K GOLD LEAF ON CLAY-BOARD

CARING FOR THE PHOENIX TWO : 8" x 8" x 2" : 2008 : INKS, KAOLIN CLAY AND 22K GOLD LEAF ON CLAY-BOARD

FLOWER OF THE ROOT :: ABOVE



// BECOMING HUMAN //

THE BUTLER INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN ART :: YOUNGSTOWN :: OHIO

RENAISSANCE : 60" x 30" x 1" : 2007 : INKS AND KAOLIN CLAY ON CLAY-BOARD

THE BIRTH OF MOTHER NATURE'S SON : 60" x 30" x 1" : 2006 : INKS AND KAOLIN CLAY ON CLAY-BOARD

UNCOILED PLEASURES : 6" x 6" x 2" : 2008 : INKS AND KAOLIN CLAY ON CLAY-BOARD

FLOWER OF THE ROOT : 24" x 36" x 2" : 2007 : INKS AND KAOLIN CLAY ON CLAY-BOARD

WILLOW STUDY : 23" x 15" : 2006 : PASTELS ON PAPER

WILLOW : 24" x 36" x 2" : 2008 : INKS, KAOLIN CLAY ON CLAY-BOARD

TRESPASSER : 11" x 9.5" : 2008 : INK AND KAOLIN CLAY ON SCRATCHBOARD

FOREST PASSAGE TWO : 16" x 20" x 2" : INKS AND KAOLIN CLAY ON CLAY-BOARD

INHERITANCE : 42" x 18.5" : 2008 : INKS, KAOLIN CLAY, 22K GOLD LEAF AND FLOWERS ON PAPER

THE REST TWO : 60" x 30" x 1" : 2008 : INKS AND KAOLIN CLAY ON CLAY-BOARD

RAPTURED LANDSCAPE : RELIEF PRINT : 8.5" x 9.75" : 2008

BEAUTIFUL TRAPS STUDY :: TOP LEFT + INHERITANCE :: TOP RIGHT