

# Changing Lives and Making Policy: The Houston Women's Caucus for Art 1978–1988

by Mary Ross Taylor

The Houston Women's Caucus for Art (HWCA) celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2003. The Caucus was founded when Houston, already one of the largest cities in the United States, began to develop a large and institutionalized art community. It was an opportune moment for art activists, and from 1978 through 1988 the HWCA participated in local and national activities with extraordinary effectiveness. Its efforts were unmatched by any other Houston artists' group or by the Caucus itself after the first ten years.

The Caucus was most active politically prior to opening the Firehouse Gallery on lower Westheimer in 1983. When The Museum of Fine Arts presented "Fresh Paint: The Houston School" in 1985, it marked the end of a period of visible struggle by Houston artists for local respect.<sup>1</sup> During the same year, the Caucus published its last major catalogue in conjunction with a big multi-site exhibition.<sup>2</sup> The drive for equal opportunity that motivated the Caucus in its early years lost its force as Houston artists attained respectability and, with it, more exposure and opportunity for recognition. By 1988, the Caucus, hosting the national Women's Caucus for Art conference, persuaded forty museums and galleries to open their doors to exhibitions of local women artists. By the conclusion of the conference, political action had disappeared from the Caucus agenda.<sup>3</sup>

Political activism was never the only mission of the Caucus. Providing a supportive network of fellow artists was the first and most enduring function of the group. With no office, no paid staff, and certainly no financial angel, the Houston Women's Caucus for Art quickly accomplished a remarkable variety of programs.

The group introduced Houston artists to each other, a networking function still valued by members. Through service on national boards the organization connected local artists with the national feminist art community. These connections brought critics and artists as speakers from New York and elsewhere and facilitated sending Houston exhibitions to other cities in conjunction with conferences.<sup>4</sup> In addition, a number of regional and national art conferences occurred in Houston. The Caucus used these meetings to showcase work by Houston women. Not only did visiting experts see the exhibitions, but the local audience saw them as part of prestigious programs.

The energy to undertake an ambitious multi-faceted mission came out of the International Women's Year Conference held in Houston in 1977. On January 10, 1978, women gathered in artist Pat St. John Danko's Montrose home to start a chapter of the Women's Caucus for Art. They had heard about the national organization at the IWY Conference.<sup>5</sup> The national Women's Caucus

for Art "emerged from the College Art Association in 1972 in protest of male domination of that organization [of art historians and artists teaching at the post-secondary level] and of the arts in general."<sup>6</sup> Local chapters began forming in the late 1970s and Houston women artists readily identified with the national cause.

"A bunch of us separately went down to IWY and they had an art section where we discussed the old question, 'Are there any good women artists?' That was the question that rocked the art world then. It's terrible it could have been asked. All of us were affected. We questioned ourselves and each other. The men had social places to gather, bars and other places they comfortably hung out, but the women had nothing; we were in our garages and our homes," Lynn Randolph recalls. Toby Topek remembers, "There were all these women in the room [at IWY] discussing what women could do—it was so exciting! My life began that day."<sup>7</sup>

In 1978, mainstream United States feminism was a political movement with an agenda of demands for reforming the treatment of women by legal and cultural institutions. Prior to the IWY Conference, Houston had hosted the first national conference of the National Women's Political Caucus and a national conference of the National Organization for Women. The artists who made up the HWCA acted in the spirit of the times, conducting their first meeting on the basis of a list of "Suggested Procedures" gleaned from advice by national WCA president Judith Brodsky, an art historian. Power was vested in an Executive Board of officers and two advisory committees of members and community representatives. Respect for individual viewpoints and concern about preventing the use of volunteer roles for personal promotion were and still are top priorities.<sup>8</sup>

The chapter regularly revisited their political standards in the early years. When founding president Roberta Graham Harris handed incoming president Jan Beauboeuf five handwritten pages of advice, the values she passed on were a direct development from the procedures that had guided the organizing meeting.<sup>9</sup> Three years later a membership survey described the organization's functions as "(1) a support group, (2) an educational and professional resource, (3) a collective, 'political' force and (4) a community service and non-profit organization." The political origins of the Caucus were evident, however, in the introduction to the survey:

...we feel the women's art movement, like all movements begun from the fires of injustice, is a frail and vulnerable, loosely formulated 'course of action' intent on bring [sic] about a general change in attitude and behavior; and as such, depends heavily on principled, committed individuals who must be flexible but uncompromising

in their primary dedication to the particular social changes they are advocating. In view of this we feel it is essential at this point to seek and assess the attitudes, motivations, expectations and disappointments of the Caucus members.<sup>10</sup>

Later surveys assessed the interests and priorities of the members, but the tone of the surveys shifted, emphasizing services members desired rather than political concerns.<sup>11</sup>

The political impulse behind the Caucus arose in a national context, but the specific positions the group took were very much the product of their local context. In the 1960s the Houston artist community was small and institutions were minimally engaged with local contemporary art. As the 1970s began, only three women artists were regularly visible: Gertrude Barnstone, sculptor Roberta F. Harris, and Dorothy Hood. All joined the Caucus at its founding.<sup>12</sup>

In the mid-1970s, James Surls, George Krause, Gael Stack, John Alexander, Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom joined the University of Houston art faculty.<sup>13</sup> Bloom joined the Caucus in its first year.<sup>14</sup> Sculptor Hannah Stewart joined the art department at University of St. Thomas and became a Caucus member. James Harithas, who became director of the Contemporary Art Museum in 1974, featured local artists, including women, for the first time.<sup>15</sup> In 1979, sculptor James Surls launched the influential artist-run exhibition space Lawndale Annex at the University of Houston.<sup>16</sup>

By the late 1970s the handful of Houston artists who taught and showed work in the late 1960s and early 1970s found themselves immersed in a "second wave" of artists who arrived or became visible in Houston. Among the "second wave" were numerous women.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the two daily newspapers employed four art critics with feminist sympathies in the 1970s: Ann Holmes, Charlotte Moser, and Moser's successor Donna Tennant at the *Houston Chronicle* and, at *The Houston Post*, Mimi Crossley.

The new Caucus promptly challenged two established institutions: the local PBS television station and the Chamber of Commerce. The action against PBS reflected the feeling that Houston was a city whose artists got no respect. It was the first of a series of causes that involved the politics of art but transcended gender. Male artists supported the Caucus in those advocacy actions, which increased the chapter's visibility and influence.

On February 7, 1978, four weeks after their first meeting, the Caucus decided to boycott the annual benefit art auction held by Channel 8, the PBS station at the University of Houston.<sup>18</sup> Charity donations of artists' work were no longer tax-deductible at market value, so HWCA members said, "When dentists donate root canals, we'll donate art!" The boycott was to be a surprise, but a chapter member involved in the benefit disclosed the plan. The chapter fiercely reprimanded the whistle-blower and rebuffed the auction committee's offer to institute a minimum bid. Fifty artists refused to give work. The power of acting as a coalition surprised chapter members.<sup>19</sup>

Emboldened, HWCA confronted the Houston Chamber of Commerce about the upcoming Main Street festival (precursor to the Houston International Festival). This time the controversy originated in terms of gender, but the Caucus demanded competi-

itive access for all. In an amiable letter, chapter president Roberta Graham Harris told Chamber of Commerce officials that Main Street visual arts chairman Michael Metyko rebuffed a proposal from the chapter to exhibit art because "The Women's Caucus has had enough publicity this year" and Main Street "is not a hype women's issue."<sup>20</sup> The Caucus was dissatisfied with their exchange of letters and copied the correspondence in May to Mayor Jim McConn. Soon the Mayor's Cultural Liaison, Molly Parkerson, accepted Gertrude Barnstone's invitation to meet with Caucus members at Lynn Randolph's home.<sup>21</sup>

The Caucus was working out of members' living rooms, but its representatives were all business. They presented Parkerson "suggested guidelines" that began "Open to all...regardless of race, sex, or creed" and proposed "highly respected members of the art community...as advisors to those who select the members of the Judging Committee." Parkerson, who went on to serve on the HWCA Community Advisory Board, endorsed the guidelines to the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>22</sup> In 1979, Festival organizers appointed an experienced artist and Caucus member, Alice Lok Cahana, to head the Visual Arts section.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the gender bias that set off the Festival confrontation, the values the Caucus advocated were both inclusive and mainstream. The chapter fought for open competitive opportunity regardless of race, creed or gender.<sup>24</sup> Equally characteristic was the appeal to recognized art experts to judge their work. The Caucus sought acceptance by an art establishment that had always snubbed women. Since Houston artists generally felt snubbed by the local museums, it was natural for the Caucus and male artists to join forces in demanding a greater role in Houston art institutions.

To that end, the Caucus was visibly present in October 1978 at a gathering of over fifty artists at the Contemporary Arts Museum. Artists protested their exclusion from museum governance, arguing that the museum was so important to them that it should not operate without their input. The outcome of the meeting was a twelve-member artists' advisory committee of the museum. Affirming the credibility of the Caucus, four of the twelve (chosen by the artists themselves) were chapter leaders: Gertrude Barnstone, Jan Beauboeuf, Roberta F. Harris and Lynn Randolph.<sup>25</sup>

Political action was swift, but organizing lectures and exhibitions took longer. The Caucus really established itself in 1979. The April membership roster lists sixty members; in May, the HWCA Board decided to apply for formal nonprofit tax-deductible status.<sup>26</sup> For the first time the Caucus put on exhibitions. These were in mainstream public places—although not at art institutions. Houston Public Library downtown was the site of the first HWCA exhibition, "18 x 24," in January 1979. The Caucus also put on "Four Men / Four Women," a juried exhibition at the Alley Theater in late January during the play *Artichoke*.<sup>27</sup> In February, a free public slide lecture by noted New York feminist art critic Lucy Lippard proved the value of bringing in experts. Lippard secured slides from some HWCA artists for future lectures.<sup>28</sup> In summer 1979, a Caucus program introduced the New York Feminist Art Institute in SoHo, with slides of Institute founders' work and "survival kits" of tips for women visiting New York City alone.<sup>29</sup>

Painter Lynn Randolph became president for 1979–1980. Randolph originated important programs and wielded a wide personal acquaintanceship on behalf of the group. By summer 1979, the Caucus was achieving one goal: inclusion in Houston art exhibition opportunities. After debating with Randolph about the type of exhibition he needed to launch Lawndale as an inclusive and attractive space, James Surls included Caucus members in the invitation to all Houston artists to participate in Lawndale's inaugural exhibition, "Miniatures," held August 31–September 29. Shortly afterward, the Caucus sponsored a reception at Randolph's home for eighty-year-old Louisiana sculptor Clyde Connell, whose first solo exhibition in Houston was at Lawndale from September 28–November 23, 1979.<sup>30</sup> These were the first of many Lawndale-Caucus collaborations.

Meanwhile, the art community and Houston's large feminist community were learning that the University of Houston–Clear Lake would present nationally recognized California feminist artist Judy Chicago's huge sculpture, "The Dinner Party," in 1980.<sup>31</sup> The Caucus was to install a large members' show in the Bayou Building at University of Houston–Clear Lake in March, 1980. It was not a museum, but it was a venue where important Houston artists had been shown, and the Chicago exhibition would attract statewide visitors and critical debate. In June 1979, planning started for the "Our Show" exhibition and an accompanying catalog.

Another collaborative venture was the first Caucus fundraiser, the Black and Orange Ball. It was held on October 26, 1979 at Jeff McKissack's "Orange Show," which was not yet open to the public. McKissack attended and, for the first time, saw a crowd of people enjoying his creation.<sup>32</sup> The Caucus was forming alliances with well-known and not-so-well-known art entities. All of them were new and putting down roots in the city.

Chapter documentation scarcely mentions the significance of

the collaborative nature of program activity for members, but early participants are clear about the impact on their lives. Chapter members implemented exhibitions, lectures, panels and receptions, met guest lecturers, and talked to new acquaintances. In doing this, they practiced a variety of skills at operating in the larger community. Some say that practice was the most valuable and lasting benefit of their Caucus membership.<sup>33</sup>

If 1979 was a year of making itself known locally, 1980 shifted the Caucus focus to the regional and national stages. Even before the members' exhibit in conjunction with "The Dinner Party" (which generated an enormous amount of publicity in Houston about women and art), the Caucus was preparing for a regional meeting of the College Art Association—the group from which the national WCA had emerged. The Mid-America College Art Association (MACAA) met in Houston in October 1980.

As part of the Conference, HWCA presented two exhibitions. Arizona artist Muriel Magenta (who later was National WCA President) juried "Heartland" at the Jung Center. Toby Topek of the HWCA organized an outdoor sculpture exhibition, "12 On Site," which opened the night of October 23 on a vacant lot at 4300 Montrose.<sup>34</sup> Caucus members Roberta F. Harris, Candace Knapp, and Toby Topek were conference panelists; Gertrude Barnstone, sculptor and HWCA president for 1980–1981, Suzanne Bloom, Linda Graetz, Lynn Randolph and Jana Vander Lee all moderated MACAA panels.<sup>35</sup> Randolph's presidency began with an emphasis on local personal ties, but concluded with a burst of nationally visible activity. Caucus membership increased steadily: sixty in 1979, eighty in 1980, rising to 101 in February 1981.<sup>36</sup>

The Caucus took bigger steps in every area during 1981. The ambitious "Houston / Austin: the Exchange" exhibitions opened in January. The credibility of Caucus exhibitions was sustained by the practice of submitting possible works to outside professionals



*The Caucus joined several community organizations in renovating the old firehouse at 1413 Westheimer. It became the Firehouse Gallery for the Caucus shows, beginning in 1983. Photograph by Debra Rueb.*

who made the selections. For “The Exchange,” Annette Carlozzi, curator at Laguna Gloria Art Museum in Austin, chose the Austin show. Marti Mayo, curator at the Contemporary Art Museum, selected Houston art. Both exhibitions were shown at St. Edwards University in Austin (sponsored by Women & Their Work) and at the University of St. Thomas art department gallery in Houston.<sup>37</sup> In November 1981, the Caucus co-sponsored a major exhibition with catalogue at Lawndale of national and local artists curated by Charmaine Locke, “The Image of the House in Contemporary Art.”<sup>38</sup> New York artist Jackie Apple was presented in May at Rice Media Center.

Previous political actions were overshadowed by the impact of the next Caucus project, a challenge to the Museum of Fine Arts launched with a two-and-one-half page single-spaced “Open letter to the Board of Trustees.” The letter objected to the appointment of New York critic Barbara Rose as Curator of Exhibitions and Collections and to the covert sale of works by the museum to fund purchases of art from Ms. Rose’s husband, pop songwriter Jerry Leiber.<sup>39</sup> In the end, the Caucus action led to the resignation of the director William Agee, the demotion of Rose, and public changes in traditional Trustee procedures. Agee was replaced by Peter Marzio, who still directs the Museum of Fine Arts; HWCA created the opportunity for Marzio to come here.

Almost 100 women and men signed the Caucus letter and the organization bought newspaper ads to reproduce it. Copies sent to local journalists provoked a series of investigative articles by Mimi Crossley at *The Houston Post*, substantiating the HWCA criticisms.<sup>40</sup> Several museum staff members were leaving, so it appeared that the Museum would be in the hands of two devotees of a narrow specialty. Grace Glueck wrote a column on the subject in *The New York Times*, in which Director William Agee and critic Rose were dismissive of the Caucus complaints.<sup>41</sup> Glueck wrote, “Asked about the sale of the works, Miss Rose said: ‘They are not my paintings; they belong to Jerry. I didn’t know he had sold them to the museum—although he donated one—because I was in Europe, doing research, and I had nothing to do with the sale.’”

*This photo of Caucus members on the steps of the Firehouse was used as an invitation to a member show in the early 1980s. (l-r, back row) unidentified, Toby Topek, unidentified, Lin Swanner, Katherine Norris, unidentified, Cynthia Batmanis, Sandy Seltzer Bryant, JoAnne Brigham, Lynn Randolph, Leslie Lopez, Pam Pool, unidentified, unidentified; (l-r, sitting on steps) Heidi Stansfield-Nelson, Fran Kalmakov, Sharon Stewart, unidentified, Janet Hasinger. Photograph by Debra Rueb.*



Glueck quoted Agee as saying, “Miss Rose’s hiring and the purchase of the paintings are coincidental.”<sup>42</sup>

As the controversy unfolded, thanks to Crossley’s digging, it became clear that Agee was quietly selling a number of works—some given by prominent families and many by artists whose importance seemed to have increased, not diminished. The sales were to finance the purchase of art for which others did not share the director’s passion. The deal involving Rose’s husband seemed to give her, by questionable means, even more compensation than her sweeping title, non-resident status, and travel expense account. The combination did not look good. Museum trustee Caroline Law conferred with Caucus representatives Suzanne Bloom and Lynn Randolph on April 15; they found her sympathetic.<sup>43</sup> The Trustees gave Agee a vote of confidence, but they also formulated their first policy concerning deaccession and broke tradition by making the names of their Board’s acquisitions committee public. The following February Agee resigned.<sup>44</sup> The Caucus had changed the face of the Museum of Fine Arts.

Photography/video artist Suzanne Bloom, who had drafted most of the MFA controversy correspondence, became chapter president for 1981–1982. However, the event that distinguished that year had nothing to do with political action. It involved the ultimately successful negotiations by which the Caucus leased a gallery space of its own. The Caucus had wanted a gathering place, resource center, and exhibition space, a “room of one’s own,” virtually from the inception of the group.<sup>45</sup> As far back as 1979, City Council member Lance Lalor spoke with Lynn Randolph and then wrote to the Caucus about the availability of an old fire station as a possible gallery site.<sup>46</sup>

The Birkett Foundation had purchased the station, former firehouse #16 at 1413 Westheimer, for preservation. A master lease was given to the civic group Neartown Association. In September 1981, Neartown began discussing the possibility of leasing space to HWCA.<sup>47</sup> The original fire truck bay of the 1923 building would serve as a gallery.<sup>48</sup> Though it was much smaller than the exhibitions the Caucus had been organizing, the space

was inexpensive and would be always available and under their control. The Caucus agreed to share the building with three other community groups: Park People, Bayou Preservation Association, and the Citizen's Environmental Coalition.<sup>49</sup>

In the summer of 1982, with sculptor Toby Topek as president for 1982–1983, the chapter raised funds for and pitched in on the renovation of the Firehouse. A detailed prospectus for HWCA Committee responsibilities was drafted and revised to delegate authority deep into the membership in anticipation of growing volunteer responsibilities in connection with the new gallery.<sup>50</sup>

Launching the Firehouse Gallery meant that, in addition to putting art in community venues, the Caucus had to attract the community to their own space. Though inexpensive, the gallery would require attendants. Despite the challenges, it seemed a logical undertaking. Alternative (artist-run) spaces multiplied in Houston as the Firehouse was getting underway. These included Studio One (1980), Houston Center for Photography (1982), Diverse Works (1982), Center for Art and Performance (1982), Midtown Art Center (1982), and Square One (1983).<sup>51</sup> The Cultural Arts Council of Houston, which was formed in the mid-1970s to support the arts with hotel and motel tax revenues, began funding Artist-in-Residence programs in 1979. Those helped, along with federal government grants, to staff artist-run exhibition sites.<sup>52</sup>

The Caucus sustained its national network by exhibitions and public lectures while work on the Firehouse Gallery began. In the spring of 1982, HWCA presented a series of well-attended talks at Lawndale "addressing the artist's role and responsibility in society, the function of the art object, the question of spiritual content in art and the responsibility of society to the artistic voice." James Harithas, former CAM director, spoke on March 12; London-based critic Suzi Gablik spoke on April 9; and founding Menil Collection director Walter Hopps spoke in May.<sup>53</sup>

A juried exhibition organized in November 1982 was shown at the Philadelphia Art Alliance during the national CAA and WCA conference in February 1983.<sup>54</sup> The jurors, Marge Goldwater of the Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art and Becky Reese, curator of Huntington Gallery at UT–Austin, took part in a Caucus panel discussion in Houston in November 1982. In December 1982 a reception promoting membership featured a talk by national president Muriel Magenta.

Exhibitions and lectures began at the Firehouse well before the official dedication. In March 1983 there was "Latin America: Women as Artists and Artisans," accompanied by a slide talk on "Latin America: Women, Art and Social Change" by "Third World" artist Betty LaDuke from Oregon. New York artist Nancy Spero exhibited and spoke at the Firehouse in April. Thomas McEvelley, professor at Rice University, talked on "The Problems Facing the Artist in the Current Situation" that month, and Diana Block, director of the nonprofit DW [Dallas Women's] gallery spoke in May.<sup>55</sup> Caucus members showed their own work at Lawndale in 1983; thirty-nine participated in the exhibition.<sup>56</sup> Members also held a show October 10–28 at O'Kane Gallery of University of Houston–Downtown.<sup>57</sup> The Firehouse was perfect for bringing small exhibitions of feminist work from elsewhere. It

was too small for Caucus shows but those gained credibility by appearing on the schedule of established Houston venues.

Painter Sandi Seltzer Bryant, who became chapter president for 1983–1984, was the seventh president but the first president to have joined after the initial year.<sup>58</sup> The transition in chapter leadership to a new generation was accompanied by the formal opening of the Firehouse Gallery on September 11, 1983. Mayor Kathy Whitmire cut the ribbon at 2:00 p.m. The gallery featured a members' show of small work in boxes, "A Room of One's Own."<sup>59</sup> In December the Firehouse hosted "Traces," an exhibition organized by Caucus members using "anonymous, accidental, coincidental works of art," things they found while driving around the city.<sup>60</sup>

The Caucus continued to thrive on challenges. In addition to a schedule of varied exhibitions and talks at the Firehouse, members organized large shows of local art at other venues in 1984 and 1985. Exhibitions Chair Dan Allison arranged for a members' exhibit to go to Los Angeles in February, 1985 in conjunction with the national CAA and WCA conference.<sup>61</sup>

"Artists at Work," a monthly series in 1984, continued the emphasis on introducing feminist artists to Houston by presenting five women artists: two from Houston, one from Philadelphia, one from San Francisco, and one from Illinois. In May 1984, "Artists at Work: The Future," was by children, in conjunction with other exhibitions by children in Houston that month.<sup>62</sup> Ambitious local exhibitions were annual affairs. A show by eighty Houston artists, forty-two of them men, was curated by painter Linn Swanner and installed on three levels of Two Houston Center downtown from March 9–March 24.<sup>63</sup>

Although occasional shows mixed established and emerging Houston artists, the Caucus offered exhibitions in places where many Houstonians saw them, or at multiple sites that increased the audience. The 1984 show at Two Houston Center was accompanied by a forty-six page illustrated catalog; a "preview party" celebrating its publication took place at Moody Gallery on Friday, June 15, 1984.<sup>64</sup> Betty Moody, a popular and well-regarded gallery owner specializing in Texas artists, was on the HWCA Community Advisory Board.<sup>65</sup>

Swanner became the next chapter president, and a gallery coordinator, Paula Dugan, was paid to handle exhibitions and write grants in 1984–1985. She was successful at this new Caucus job, but as the season progressed the Caucus won and spent more grant money than the group could match dollar for dollar. The shortfall was in the budgeted goal of \$10,000 individual contributions, which occurred despite a membership directory of 126 names. By February 1985, the \$60 monthly cost of the newsletter was a worrisome burden.

The new generation of leaders questioned the wisdom of continuing as part of a national feminist organization. Swanner floated the idea of a name change, reporting that prospective corporate donors wanted to help art groups, not political organizations. The members debated whether to leave the national organization. Half the dues were remitted to the national office, which was also the only arm of the organization eligible to compete for National Endowment for the Arts grants, which were imagined to be a panacea by many arts groups in the mid-1980s.

The busy schedule of Firehouse exhibitions and activities in 1984–1985 gave no hint of the questions being raised about the Caucus's identity. Fall 1984 began with a solo exhibition by Louisiana sculptor Clyde Connell. The next solo exhibition was by José Valdez, a brickmaker whose clay work addressed his experiences as an immigrant worker on the Texas-Mexico border.<sup>66</sup> Group shows presented books made by Texas artists, a juried show of sculpture by chapter members, new feminist video ("Revising Romance"), and a curated show of prints that was an event of the Southern Graphics Conference at Rice University.<sup>67</sup>

The biggest project of the year was "Self Images," an invitational show curated by artists James Surls, Derek Boshier, Rachel Hecker and Toby Topek. It filled the Firehouse and Midtown Art Center from April 5 to May 11. The Houston Coalition for the Visual Arts promoted "Self Images" as part of a seven-site "assemblage" of artist-organized exhibition during the annual meeting of the National Association of Artists' Organizations in Houston.<sup>68</sup> The energy level of the Houston art community had never been higher.

The thirty-six page illustrated catalogue for "Self Images" was handsome, but the bill came as the season ended with a budget shortfall. Paying for the catalogue took the organization over two years. To the Caucus, which had operated with a balanced budget ranging from \$1000 to \$20,000 since 1979, a \$7000 bill was monumental.<sup>69</sup> The exhibition schedule went forward at the Firehouse for the 1985–1986 season without a paid staff member. More significantly, the chapter's cash crunch terminated the tradition of bringing exhibitions from around the nation to Houston.

Mary Jane Connolly took over as chapter president, and the gallery opened its Fall 1985 season with "Men of the Caucus" and two solo exhibitions by Houston-area women artists. The annual curated show open to all Houston artists was held in May 1986 at Stages, a small theater.<sup>70</sup> A new challenge became public in May of 1986: Houston would host the 1988 national conference of the College Art Association and the Women's Caucus for Art. The national art community wanted to see Houston's new and internationally celebrated Menil Collection.

When Pam Johnson agreed to be president for 1986–1987, she faced the threat of a lawsuit to collect the remaining \$2600 owed on the 1985 catalogue, a dwindling roll of about fifty members, and a looming national conference.<sup>71</sup> Former presidents Lynn Randolph and Sandi Seltzer Bryant took charge of the conference and recruited Barbara Michels, a novelist and professional grantwriter who had served on the HWCA Community Advisory Board. Michels secured almost \$30,000 in government funding to cover travel expenses, honoraria, and related materials for a quickly outlined series of panel discussions involving art historians and artists from all over the U.S. (one came from England).<sup>72</sup>

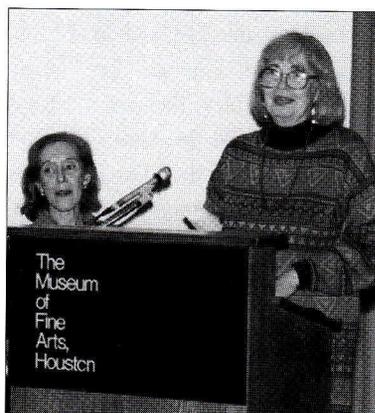
Seltzer Bryant orchestrated complex hospitality and transportation plans. At a chapter meeting on July 28, 1987, Randolph suggested approaching galleries to show art by women. Margaret Smithers-Crump and Lydia Bodnar-Balahuttrak launched a computer-based Caucus campaign of letters and visits resulting in commitments from forty museums and galleries to present exhibitions by women during the conference.<sup>73</sup> The chapter organized one of the few books on Texas women artists, *No Bluebonnets, No Yellow*

*Roses: Essays on Texas Women in the Arts*, in conjunction with the Conference.<sup>74</sup> A six-page tabloid newsletter from the chapter in February 1988 itemized the unprecedented array of exhibitions and introduced conference participants.<sup>75</sup>

While the conference committee was developing a masterful event, the chapter confronted reduced circumstances. Johnson created a restructuring plan for the Executive Board to discuss on July 2, 1986. First on the list was building membership by delivering services members valued. From that project would come revenues to pay off debts if the gallery operated at low cost or, through user fees, as a profit center. Her checklist of ethical issues emphasized prohibiting artists from judging their own work for shows or trading professional favors, a continuation of the Caucus history of concern about the misuse of authority in a feminist organization. Power would rest, as before, with the whole board; meetings would no longer be devoted to chapter business, but would offer members value for their dues in the form of programs.<sup>76</sup>

Treasurer Sara S. Squires talked the printer into accepting scheduled payments. The Board agreed to a hardship budget, but not without the loss of some disappointed members. Exhibitions, once routinely costing \$1000 or more, were held to around \$100 each. Speakers and panels returned as a monthly feature, but for the first time almost everyone presented was local, and the focus was to be on "personal and practical matters." Garage sales and small fundraising events were calendared and the emphasis on grantwriting was replaced by marketing.<sup>77</sup> A *pro bono* public relations consultant signed on in January 1987 through Business Volunteers for Arts to assist with membership development.<sup>78</sup> By May 1987, Squires reported no outstanding bills. To maintain the important tradition of subjecting members' work to outside evaluation, curator and art historian Robert Hobbs, who briefly worked at CAM, was engaged to jury the members' show for the 1988 national conference even though his travel might be an expense.<sup>79</sup>

By December 1987, shortly before the 1988 national conference in Houston, the chapter had 167 paid members, the most ever.<sup>80</sup> Johnson had handed over a solvent organization to the 1987–1988 president, Terry Grigsby Rogers, a C.P.A. who had served on the Community Advisory Board. The national conference was a great success, with a wealth of well-publicized related events open to the public. In March, Fotofest 1988 followed the national CAA / WCA conference and the Caucus sponsored a show of African American women photographers curated by



Houston artist Dorothy Hood (at lectern) receives a Lifetime Achievement Award from national WCA President Muriel Magenta at the 1988 WCA Conference in Houston. Photograph by Debra Rueb.

future MacArthur Fellow Deborah Willis.<sup>81</sup>

Monthly programs resumed with a modest level of out-of-town speakers. Solomon Grimberg from Dallas lectured on Frida Kahlo, and Dallas Museum of Art curator Sue Graze made studio visits.<sup>82</sup> But the success of the conference did not translate into local benefits for the host chapter, although the members who worked to bring it about gained new professional recognition.

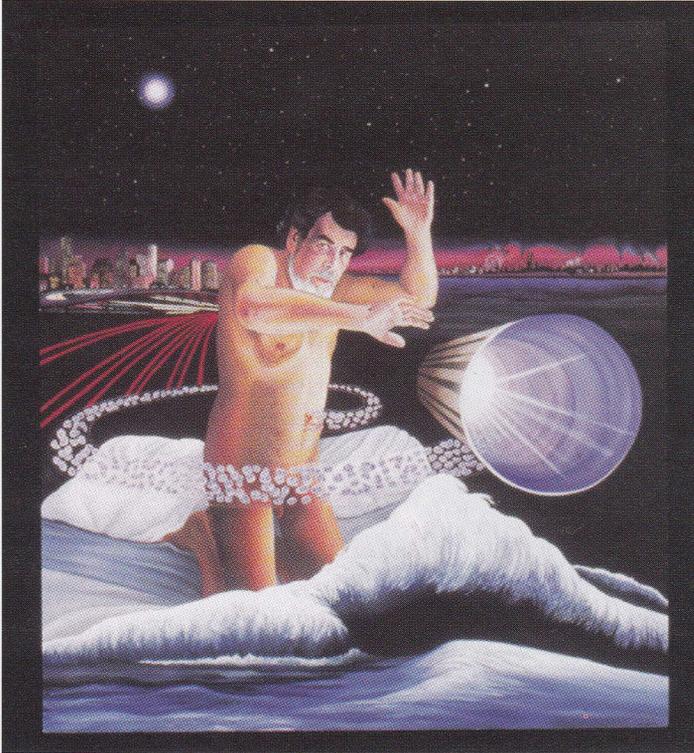
Houston's art community had changed markedly in a decade. The original political agenda of the HWCA had, in many respects, been achieved; the number of exhibitions related to the national conference seemed to confirm that the city was open to work by women artists. The Caucus had shifted from pressing a public policy agenda to serving members. The gallery ceased to bring in new work from outside Texas and never regained the vigor it had during the mid-1980s. The profile of the organization diminished as women artists became, thanks to the Houston Women's Caucus for Art, no longer a novelty in Houston. But despite the much greater visibility of art by women now, a primary purpose of the Caucus—supporting individual artists by organizing a network of friendly peers—continues unchanged.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Barbara Rose and Susie Kalil, "Preface," *Fresh Paint: The Houston School* (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1985).
- 2 "Self Images," April 5–May 11, Firehouse Gallery and Midtown Art Center, exhibition history files, Houston Women's Caucus for Art 1978–1997, Women's Archive and Research Center, Special Collections and Archives, University of Houston Libraries (hereinafter cited as HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A).
- 3 *HWCA newsletter* (February 1988); "HWCA Restructure 1986–87," three handwritten pages, July 2, 1986, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 4 Founding president Roberta Graham Harris was Regional Vice President of the Coalition of Women's Art Organizations in 1979; chapter president Gertrude Barnstone was CWAO president in 1982–83; chapter president Lynn Randolph was Regional Vice President of the WCA in 1983–84 and chapter president Sandi Seltzer Bryant was WCA conference consulting chair in 1991–92. *HWCA newsletter* 1, no. 11 (1978); *HWCA newsletter* (February 1983); Chapter history highlights with statements from past presidents, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 5 Toby Topek, personal calendar 1978; "Background of the Houston Women's Caucus for Art," Leigh Fought, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 6 Tre Roberts, "Women's Caucus for Art National Conference," *Art Papers* 12, no. 3 (May/June 1988): 39.
- 7 Lynn Randolph (HWCA President 1979–1980), interview by author, Wimberley, TX, June 10, 2001; Toby Topek (HWCA President 1982–1983), telephone interview by author, February 25, 2002.
- 8 "Suggested Procedures for First Meeting of the Houston Chapter of Women's Caucus for Art," including handwritten notes, January 10, 1978, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A. At that meeting Roberta Graham Harris, a painter, was chosen President; Martha Terrill Miller was made Secretary; Katy Nail, Treasurer; Jana Vander Lee, Program Chair; and Pat St. John Danko, Newsletter Editor.
- 9 Notes from Roberta G. Harris to Jan Beauboeuf, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 10 "Towards a Statement of Purpose," from the Executive Board to the Caucus Members, February 1981, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 11 Member questionnaire, *HWCA newsletter* (April–May 1985), HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 12 "Earl Staley, Interview by MaryRoss Taylor," *ArtLies* 24 (Fall 1999): 47; "Dorothy Hood, Interview by Susie Kalil," *ArtLies* 24 (Fall 1999): 42; membership rosters, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A. The sculptor Roberta F. Harris is not the painter Roberta Graham Harris, who served as President of HWCA.

- 13 Rose and Kalil, *Fresh Paint*, 40.
- 14 *Houston Chronicle*, March 1, 1982, 2, section 6. She later described it as "vital for me during that early period." "Manual (Hill/Bloom), Interview by David Jacobs," *ArtLies* 24 (Fall 1999): 86.
- 15 "Lynn Randolph, Interview by Emily Todd," *ArtLies* 24 (Fall 1999): 83.
- 16 Liz Ward and Rachel Ranta, "Houston Art Community Timeline," *Lawndale Live! Exhibition Catalogue* (Houston: Lawndale Art & Performance Center, 1993), 50.
- 17 Don Shaw, interview by author, Pine Bluff, AR, December 26, 2001.
- 18 HWCA meeting February 7, 1978, described in Bonnie Britt, "Women's Caucus for Art: voice for the artist," *Houston Chronicle*, March 1, 1982, 2, section 6.
- 19 Randolph, interview by author; Bonnie Britt, "Women's Caucus for Art: voice for the artist," *Houston Chronicle*, March 1, 1982, 2, section 6.
- 20 Letter from Roberta Graham Harris to Charles T. Lansden, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 21 Letters to the Mayor (May 1978) and to Molly M. Parkerson (June 1978), HWCA letterhead, letter to Board of Directors, Cultural Arts Council of Houston, September 30, 1981, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 22 Letter from Office of the Mayor, Molly M. Parkerson, Cultural Liaison, to Charles Lansden, Director, Community Betterment Division, Houston Chamber of Commerce, June 9, 1978, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A. Subsequently another Mayoral staff member, JoAnne Adams, served several terms as a Community Advisor. See HWCA letterhead, letter to Board of Directors, Cultural Arts Council of Houston, September 30, 1981, letterhead dated 1982–83, typed list of HWCA board dated 1983–84, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 23 Minutes of HWCA meeting, June 26, 1979, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 24 The Caucus repeatedly urged the Cultural Arts Council of Houston to permit the public to nominate candidates for its Board of Directors and to prohibit non-competitive funding of the Houston Festival. See minutes of HWCA meeting June 26, 1979 and letter from HWCA to CACH, September 1982, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 25 *HWCA newsletter* 1, no. 10 (1978), HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 26 Women's Caucus for Art Telephone List, April 11, 1979, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A; Agenda, HWCA meeting, May 13, 1979, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 27 Houston Chapter Women's Caucus for Art Projects, three pages covering 1979–1981, page 1, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A. A juried exhibition is one in which an art professional selects from submitted entries. Juried exhibitions carry somewhat more prestige on an artist's resume.
- 28 *Ibid.*; Randolph, interview by author.
- 29 *HWCA newsletter* (July 1979), HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 30 *Lawndale Live!*, 61.
- 31 Presenting "The Dinner Party" was a community-based art action itself, originated by The Bookstore, which I had started in 1973. Scores of women and some men worked to raise funds for the exhibition and for a long list of related art activities showcasing Houston artists, mostly women, in many media.
- 32 Houston Chapter Women's Caucus for Art Projects, three pages covering 1979–1981, page 1, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 33 Martha Terrill Miller, telephone interview by author, December 14, 2001; Lynn Randolph, telephone interview by author, December 10, 2001.
- 34 "12 On Site" artists were Viveka Barnett, Gertrude Barnstone, Marilyn Biles, Cecile Burns, Linda Graetz, Marlene Matalon, Heidi Stanfield, Viki Stewart, Tacey Tajan, Martha Terrill Miller, Toby Topek and Tralene Vassilopoulos. *HWCA newsletter* (September 1980), HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Membership rosters, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 37 Exhibition invitations, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.

- 38 "Image of the House" information, exhibition files, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 39 "An open letter to the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston from the Executive Board of the Women's Caucus for Art," March 26, 1981, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 40 Mimi Crossley, "Curator's husband recently sold paintings to MFA," *The Houston Post*, March 27, 1981, 12E; "MFA curator to remain in N.Y.," *The Houston Post*, March 20, 1981, 12E; "Art caucus sends letter of protest to MFA," *The Houston Post*, April 3, 1981, 6E; "MFA director allowed 2 private sales to art collector," *The Houston Post*, April 9, 1981, 4E; "MFA Director lists 18 more paintings for de-accession," *The Houston Post*, April 15, 1981, 23C; "Matisse work returning: Museum of Fine Arts to pull painting off the market," *The Houston Post*, April 21, 1981, 8B; "MFA deal for Picasso work stalled," *The Houston Post*, April 24, 1981, 14E; "When museums buy and sell: the public's right to know," *The Houston Post*, May 19, 1981, 7B; "Museum trustees approve plan to auction several works," *The Houston Post*, July 3, 1981, 6E; "MFA releases names on acquisitions committee," *The Houston Post*, November 17, 1981, 4C; Ann Holmes, "Rose's appointment draws caucus protests," *Houston Chronicle*, April 2, 1981; "Museum to host four old master art exhibitions," *Houston Chronicle*, April 6, 1981, 4, section 3; "Change at the MFA: Is the museum losing some friends as well as some paintings?" *Houston Chronicle*, April 20, 1981; "Museum board gives Agee confidence vote," *Houston Chronicle*, May 14, 1981, 15, section 3; "MFA's controversial deaccessioning plan under attack—again," *Houston Chronicle*, June 25, 1981, 4, section 4. Holmes also wrote about the Caucus role in the controversy in *Art News* during 1991, in a story headed "Houston: A Restless Watching," HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 41 Glueck, "Art People: The Talk of Houston," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1981.
- 42 Op.cit.
- 43 Letter to Mrs. Theodore N. Law, April 20, 1981, personal archive, Lynn Randolph, Houston.
- 44 Mimi Crossley, "Agee resigns post as MFA director to look to future," *The Houston Post*; Ann Holmes, "Warren may be named MFA interim director," *Houston Chronicle*, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 45 Minutes of HWCA meeting, June 26, 1979, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 46 Agenda of HWCA meeting, April 8, 1979, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 47 *HWCA newsletter*, April 1982, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 48 Sower, "Old firehouse ready for new assignment," *Houston Chronicle*, September 9, 1983, 4, section 5, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 49 Leslie Sower, "Neighbors," *Houston Chronicle*, June 11, 1982, 4, section 5, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 50 "Committee Structure," "Guidelines—Committees," and "Committees—Houston Chapter WCA," HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 51 *Lawndale Live!*, 50-51.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 54 Call for entries, exhibition invitation card and poster, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 55 Invitation cards, publicity materials, chapter history highlights, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 56 Rose and Kalil, *Fresh Paint*, 197; exhibition files, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 57 Exhibition invitation card, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 58 Chapter history highlights with statements from past presidents, produced by HWCA, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 59 Invitation card and memorabilia, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 60 Call for entries, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 61 Chapter history highlights with statements from past presidents, produced by HWCA, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 62 "1984 HWCA Presentation Series—the Artist at Work," related postcard announcements, press releases, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 63 Marge Crumbaker, *The Houston Post*, March 8, 1984, 4B; "Galleries" listings, *Houston Chronicle*, March 8, 1984; checklist of works exhibited and contract with Two Houston Center, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 64 Invitation card, exhibition files, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 65 Chapter history highlights with statements from past presidents, produced by HWCA, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 66 Connell, September 20–October 27, 1984; Valdez, December 6, 1984–January 15, 1985, exhibition files, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 67 "Book Works," November 2–December 2, 1984; sculpture, "Private Rites," January 22–February 23, 1995; video, February 14, 21, 28 and March 7, 1985; prints, March 1–March 30, 1985, invitation cards, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 68 Carol Everingham, *The Houston Post*; exhibition poster, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 69 Houston Women's Caucus for Art Statement of Receipts and Disbursements, Year Ended June 30, 1980 (Unaudited); Yearly Financial Report, July 8, 1980 to July 14, 1981, Linda Colthart, Treasurer; Houston Women's Caucus for Art, Statement of Receipts and Disbursements, Fiscal Years ending June 30, 1984, 1983 & 1982; Currently Received Grants & Donations, Currently Owed Amounts Yet Unpaid (as of 5/9/86); Houston Women's Caucus for Art Budget Review 1987–88, 1988–89, 1989–90, Projected 1990–91, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 70 Exhibition history files, chapter history highlights with statements from past presidents, produced by HWCA, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 71 Minutes of meeting July 2, 1986; Chapter history highlights with statements from past presidents, produced by HWCA, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 72 Randolph, interview by author; files of 1988 WCA Conference, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A; notes and correspondence in personal archive, Lynn Randolph, Houston; Houston Women's Caucus for Art Budget Review 1987–88 through 1990–91, prepared in 1989–90, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 73 Exhibition file, 1988 WCA Conference materials, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A; and personal archive, correspondence and memoranda, Lynn Randolph, Houston.
- 74 Sylvia Moore, ed., *No Bluebonnets, No Yellow Roses: Essays on Texas Women in the Arts* (New York: Midmarch Press, 1988). This compilation includes essays by Emily F. Cutrer, Sandra Levy, Robert Hobbs, Elizabeth McBride, Donna Tennant, Joy Poe, Glenn M. Park and Anita Valencia, Kristin Staroba and Susie Kalil. The publication was suggested by Cynthia Navaretti of the National WCA.
- 75 *HWCA newsletter*, February 1988, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 76 "HWCA Re-structure 1986–87," three handwritten pages, July 2, 1986, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 77 Minutes of HWCA meeting, July 2, 1986, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 78 Letter from volunteer consultant dated January 21, 1987, "Dear Group: HWCA and BVA meeting," HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 79 Minutes of HWCA meeting, May 19, 1987, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 80 Minutes of HWCA meeting, December 15, 1987, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 81 Minutes of HWCA meeting, July 28, 1987; Chapter history highlights with statements from past presidents, produced by HWCA, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.
- 82 Chapter history highlights with statements from past presidents, produced by HWCA, HWCA Collection, UH-SC&A.

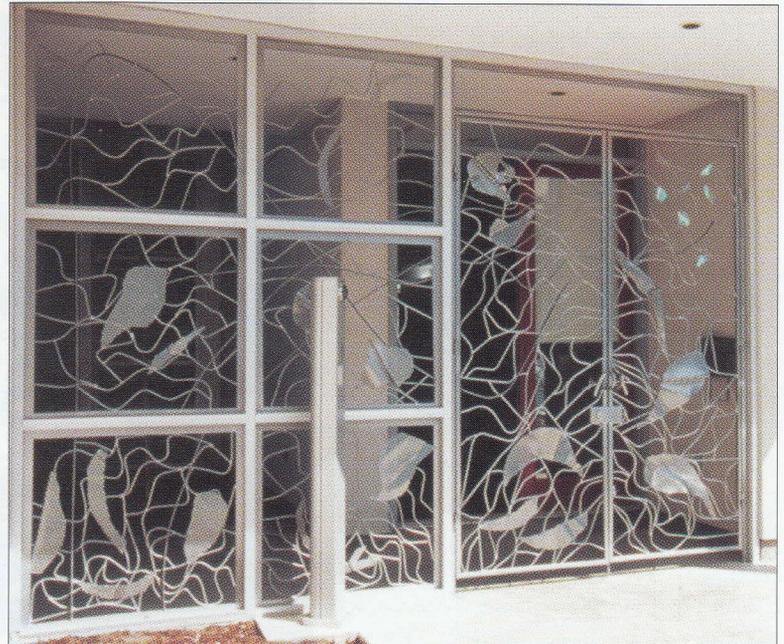


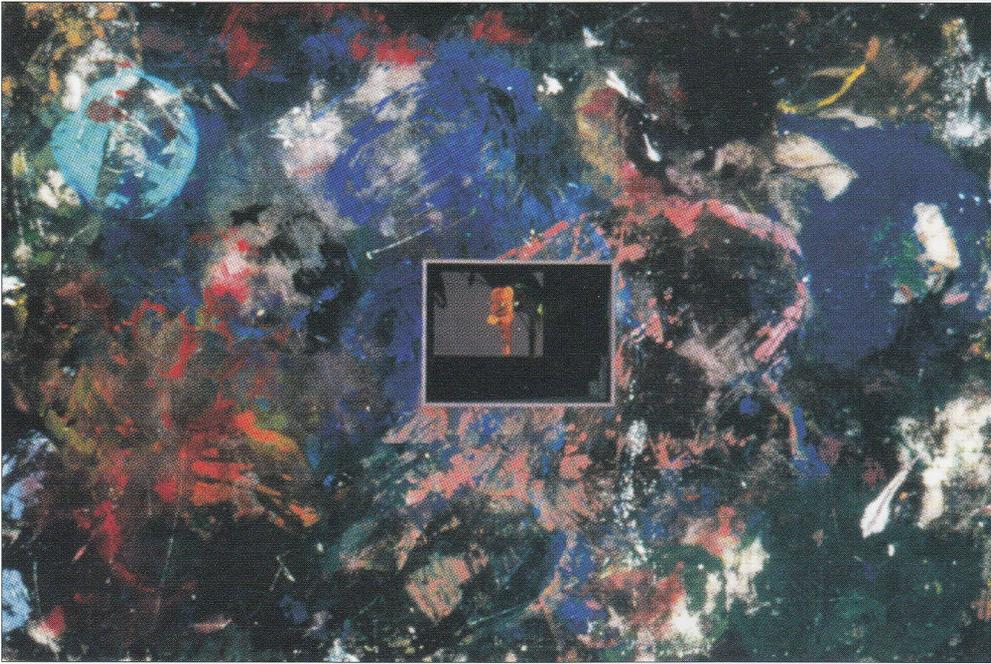
*Lynn Randolph, HWCA president 1979–80.*  
**The Magician**, 2001. Oil on canvas. 56" x 51".

Photograph by: Paul Hester

*Gertrude Barnstone, HWCA president 1980–81.*  
**Entry-house**, 2002–03. Powder-coated steel, dichroic glass.  
9' x 12' x 2". Architect: Cameron Armstrong.

Photograph by: Beryl Striewski. Courtesy Goldesberry Gallery.



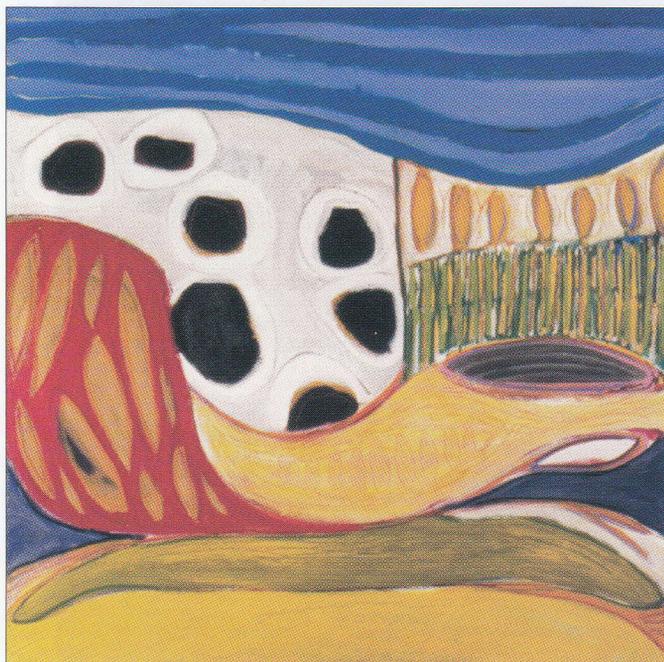


*MANUAL (Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom),  
Suzanne Bloom, HWCA president 1981–82.*  
**Wildflower (jewelweed), 2002.**  
*Lambda photographic print, edition: 1/3.  
42 3/4" x 68 1/4".*

Courtesy Moody Gallery.

*Toby Topek, HWCA president 1982–83.*  
*Cotswold 2000 Downtown Streetscape Project,  
Phase I, Texas Avenue, 2000. Marble mosaic in  
sidewalk, one of eleven. 10' diameter.*

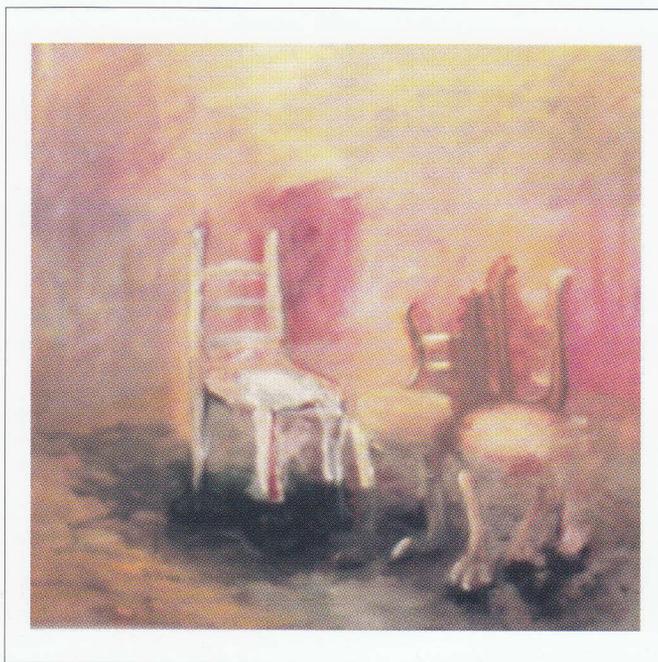


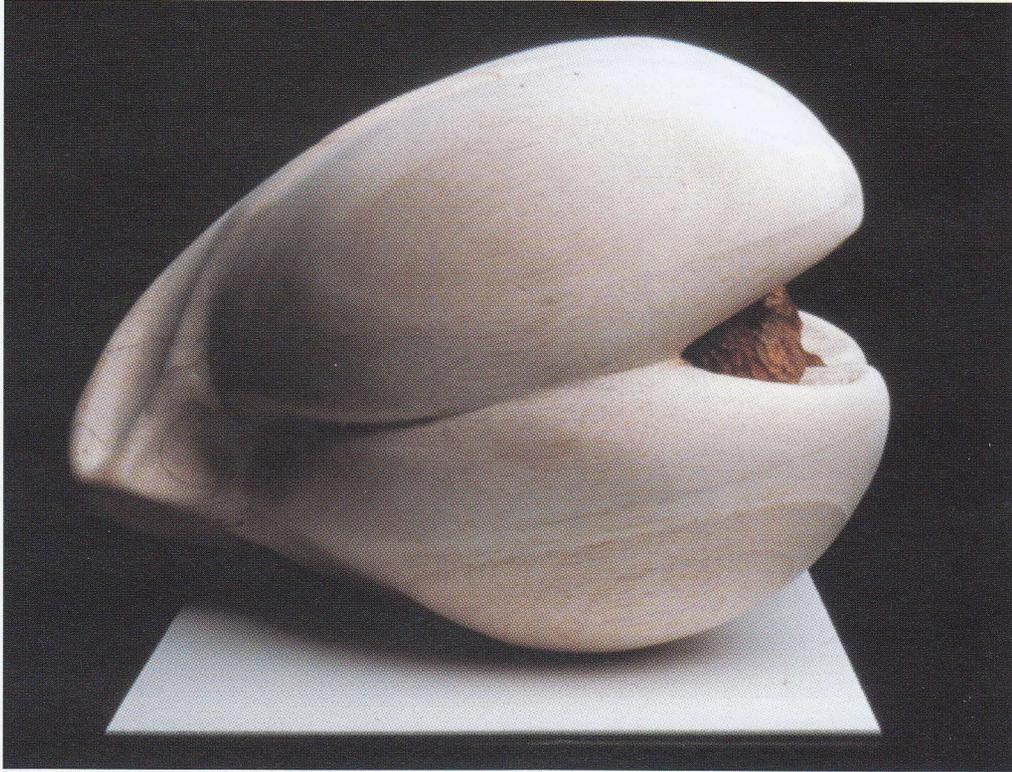


*Sandi Seltzer Bryant, HWCA president 1983–84.*  
**Untitled** 2001, acrylic on canvas. 48" x 48".

Courtesy McMurtrey Gallery

*Lin Swanner, HWCA president 1984–85.*  
**Mother and Sisters**, 2001.  
Acrylic on canvas, 78" x 84".





*Pam Johnson, HWCA president 1986–87. A Propagating Sturno-clavicular Swell, 2002. Balsa wood with stained "seeds". 10" x 15" x 8".*

Photograph by: George Hixson