JANIS PROVISOR

Born in 1946, Brooklyn, NY
Lives and works in New York, NY and Litchfield, CT

Janis Provisor studied at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, and at the San Francisco Art Institute, where she earned a B.F.A. (1969) and an M.F.A. (1971).

Her work has been exhibited at numerous public institutions, including the San Francisco Art Institute, CA; the New Museum, New York, NY; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; the Brooklyn Museum, NY; Aspen Art Museum, CO; the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.; the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, CA; New Orleans Museum of Art, LA; Crown Point Press, San Francisco, CA; Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, TW; Tucson Museum of Art, AZ, and many others.

Her work is included in several public museum collections, such as the Brooklyn Museum, NY; Buffalo AKG Museum, NY; the Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY; Mumok, Vienna, AT; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; the RISD Museum, Providence, RI; Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, CA; San Diego Museum of Art, CA; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA; Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA; Tucson Art Museum, AZ; Phoenix Art Museum, AZ; and Yale Art Gallery, New Haven, CT. Provisor divides her time between New York City and Litchfield, CT.

What the Butler Saw
October 23, 2025

What the Butler Saw

A Conversation with Artist Janis Provisor, "You Know What I Mean," Magenta Plains

James Scarborough

Where language fails, pigment speaks: Janis Provisor's investigations at the edge of legibility

Janis Provisor's latest exhibition demands attention through its directness and refusal to be easily categorized. Working where abstraction meets figuration, Provisor creates paintings that feel like psychological excavations in watercolor's most fluid states. Eyes emerge and recede, faces half-materialize across surfaces already dense with scribbled thoughts, some legible, most buried beneath layers of pooling, crackling pigment.

Her technical audacity strikes immediately. Provisor achieves opacity and translucency within single compositions, letting liquid watercolor behave according to its own logic while keeping rigorous control over color. Hot pinks collide with acid yellows against stark white or blood red. Geometric structures dissolve into looping marks. What seems spontaneous proves deliberate on closer look.

Her works on paper are autonomous investigations rather than preliminary sketches, isolating color concerns with precision. Yet across both media, Provisor's fundamental concern remains constant: making the body's interior experience visible through paint's material properties. These are not confessional works but records of consciousness engaging with form, color, and the medium's stubborn physicality.

At 79, having navigated the New York art world since 1978, taken a nine-year detour into Chinese carpet-making, and sustained her practice for decades, Provisor works with the confidence of someone who trusts her instincts completely.

Below follows an email conversation with Janis Provisor.

JS: Your exhibition title, "You Know What I Mean," suggests an unspoken understanding between artist and viewer. Yet your paintings work in deliberately ambiguous territory – figures emerge and dissolve, text gets buried, forms remain liminal. What exactly do you expect viewers to "know," and how much meaning are you comfortable leaving unresolved?

JP: I expect viewers to know what they don't know. And know that I don't work in a linear series with variations on a theme. Hopefully they will get that there is a thread in my work that explicates a subject or feeling without a full narrative.

JS: You begin paintings by scribbling stream-of-consciousness thoughts across the canvas, which then become partially or completely obscured. This seems a confrontation with language's inadequacy. Should viewers recover these buried texts, or does concealing them serve a different purpose in constructing psychological space?

JP: I doubt that viewers could ever extricate these texts but perhaps the remnants are a tease...if I could articulate in words what my paintings mean/say, I doubt I would paint. But the automatic writing that I put down on the surface serves as a gateway to clear out my feelings, and get to work. While they're often quite personal in the moment, even I don' often remember what I "said" But the occasional scratchings or even words that are visible serve are a reminder of the armature I use to build a painting.

Party Girl, 74" x 62", 2025, watercolor, water-soluble oil

Give Me Hope, 74"x32", 2025, watercolor, flashe, pencil, crayon, marker, pen

JS: The press materials say you achieve "almost every alchemical possibility in paint": opacity, translucency, fluidity, powderiness. This technical range seems essential to investigating interior experience. How did your nine years in China, running Fort Street Studio and working with hand-knotted silk carpets, affect your understanding of material transformation and control?

JP: Actually, I would say there is no correlation between the two other than to say I came back to painting full time with a greater confidence in what I do. Remember, I participated in painting most of the designs and never stopped making art during our China adventure.

Beam Me Away Scottie, 74" x 62", 2025, watercolor, water soluble oil, pen, chalk, pencil

Mars Bars, 74" x 62", 2025, flashe, watercolor, water-soluble oil, pencil, crayon, marker

JS: Your colors often feel confrontational: pinks against acid yellows, dense blacks interrupting airy whites. There's nothing cautious about these choices. How do you decide which color collisions serve a painting's emotional structure, and when does color become structural rather than expressive?

JP: As I've looked back on my body of work I' ve come to realize that I've used a "hot" palate from the beginning, even in my graduate student days in graduate school at San Francisco Art Institute. Color is also subject matter, as is balance and value...in my case I would find it hard to separate my color choices between structural vs psychological. I think in this matter I work on instinct ...or something simple, like let's see what I can do with Red.

JS: You've described your works on paper as autonomous compositions rather than preparatory sketches, using them to isolate specific formal and color concerns. How does the shift in scale and surface between paper and canvas change your relationship to control, and what discoveries on paper migrate back into your larger paintings?

JP: If I set up to work on paper, it's a more intimate relationship for me. I'm closer to the piece, almost like desk work. With my paintings I employ my entire body so the physical act of working is very different. I like that difference...the small brush vs the large, the arm vs the hand. Some moments turn up in the works on paper that occasionally push me to explore them further in a painting. Can't be more clear than that...but it does sometimes happen. Nothing is planned and drawn out.

Mulch, 74" x 62", 2025, watercolor, spray paint, pencil, crayon pen, water-soluble oil paint

Thinking Thomas, 74" x 62", 2025, watercolor, flashe, pencil, marker

JS: Having exhibited alongside Mary Heilman and Judy Pfaff at Holly Solomon Gallery in the late 1970s and early 1980s, you witnessed the debates about pattern and decoration, feminist reclamations of craft, and abstraction's expressive possibilities. How do you see this work in relation to those conversations, particularly as you return to New York audiences after decades of evolution?

This is a question difficult to answer. I think that I, along with a good share of the artists showing with Holly Solomon, evolved as individuals, not as part of a group. It's too easy and reductive to put us in groups, and of course there were affinities, but I was involved in charting my own course. I worked with Holly until 1990, and my work changed along the way. As I look at early work of mine I can clearly see a thread throughout even though some of the "look" and process has changed. We grow and move throughout the years; at least we hope to do so! Still challenging myself, struggling to get to the point, still working!

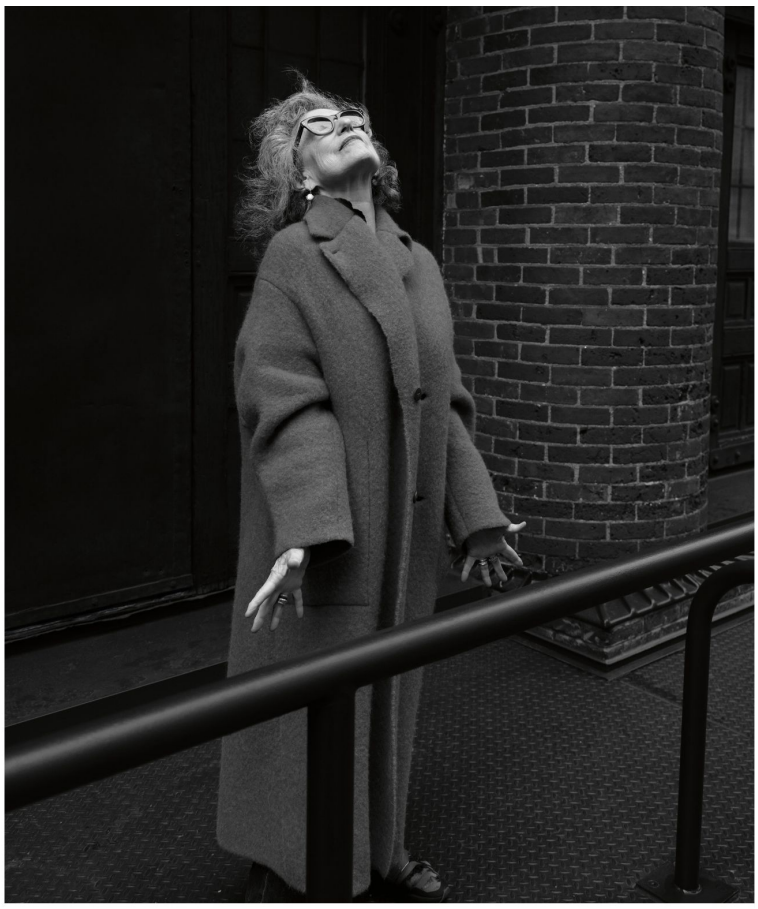
The exhibition runs November 6th to December 20th, 2025. The exhibition is free to visit. Magenta Plains is located at 149 Canal Street, New York, NY 10002. For more information, click here.

The Grand Tourist
May 26, 2025

the Grand Tourist

This Artist Turned to Design, Only to Return to the Canvas

May 26, 2025
By RICKY LEE



Artist Janis Provisor. Photo: The Grand Tourist

Janis Provisor had a successful art career before she and her husband took a risky detour into the world of luxury design. Now, decades later, she's picked up the brush again to be an abstract painter. As we discover, she has a lot left to say.

Janis Provisor had a successful art career before she and her husband took a risky detour into the world of luxury design. Now, decades later, she's returned to her more introspective roots as an abstract painter. Janis Provisor's long career as a critically acclaimed, multifaceted artist has taken many serendipitous and fortuitous twists—not to mention international turns—over the years. The painter, now in her 70s, was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Cincinnati. Inspired by the work of artist Richard Diebenkorn, she moved to California at an early age in 1968 to attend the San Francisco Art Institute (at the time known as the California School of Fine Arts).

Later, after relocating to New York, she worked with the tastemaking gallerist Holly Solomon and was one of six artists asked to participate in the second group exhibition series at the fledgling New Museum. From there, she collaborated with Kathan Brown's Crown Point Press etching studio, taking an early trip to Asia to make prints. This began her love affair with China, where, in the 1990s, she moved and founded with her husband Fort Street Studio, the still-in-demand luxe, hand-knotted silk carpet brand that has become a darling of the art and design communities. She eventually stepped away from the business in 2021, after stints in Hangzhou, Hong Kong, Italy, and France, to focus on her art full-time once again. Provisor's works are included in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Brooklyn Museum; the Yale University Art Gallery; the National Gallery of Art and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.; and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, among many others nationally and internationally. In her current practice, she makes vivid paintings that are seemingly autobiographical, exploring themes of abstraction and precariousness. These psychological works incorporate text and writing directly onto the canvas, sometimes obscuring or leaving in a stream of consciousness with words or phrases visible. She's also experimenting with painting on large-format printed iPhone photographs, using them as a starting point for some of her new work. "The body of work that I do has a thread," Provisor says. "But I don't feel that I do the same painting repeatedly. I'm not interested in that. I don't work in an obvious series where there's slight permutations from one to the next. Sometimes yes, but I have a hard time doing that."

After a standout presentation of works on paper, and a showing at the Independent Art Fair last spring, Provisor was invited this winter by the directors of the artist-run Canada gallery to mount "Living on Hart," her first solo show in Manhattan since 1991, as well as a show at Madrid's Fahrenheit gallery that opened in February. "I am interested in a painting imparting some kind of psychological quality but still being abstracted, maybe beautiful, maybe ominous," Provisor says. "I like the idea of it looking fresh."

Your solo show of new paintings and works on paper recently opened at Canada gallery in New York's Tribeca, but before we discuss it, let's talk about your artistic journey.

If you want to start very early, I was born in Brooklyn, and my mother was from Cincinnati, and she didn't feel comfortable with my father's family, who were more intellectual. She encouraged my father to move to Cincinnati, and she felt that he could make a better living as a lawyer there after the war because a lot of his friends were in the same field. So I grew up in Cincinnati. I think because my attachment to New York was so strong, my father would send me, and not my brothers who were younger, back to New York because he had assimilated in Cincinnati by that time, but he sent me sort of from the fourth grade on, by myself, to stay with my relatives. I spent a lot of time in New York growing up. My aunts and uncles took me to museums; they were a large part of my life and a huge influence. But when I decided to get out, I wanted to go someplace where there was no influence. I guess I finally left there when I was about 21 or 22. I'd never been west of the Mississippi. I went and finished up school at San Francisco Art Institute, and I think that's the first time I started really feeling like I was an artist.

And that was during the 1970s?

It was 1968, an amazing time to be in San Francisco. I feel very lucky. I had a studio on Haight Street. The Art Institute was a wild, interesting place, and one of the main reasons I went there in the beginning was because of a Richard Diebenkorn painting in the Cincinnati Art Museum. I used to go and sit in the museum under the painting and think of how to get out; I was really enamored with his work. I wanted to go to the Art Institute because Diebenkorn had been there. That was the impetus. And being in San Francisco at that time was amazing, and I was there off and on for a long time. I went away to teach at different places; I taught at California State University, Humboldt State. I taught at the University of Texas at Austin, and I kept going back to the Bay Area. I had tenure-track jobs—which I was lucky to have—but I wasn't interested in being a full-time teacher. Once I started making enough money from my art, I quit and gave up those jobs.

How did your relationship with the legendary art dealer Holly Solomon come about?

I went on a trip to New York to take my work around. The art world was much smaller. And through somebody, I met Holly. Well, it was sort of interesting, there was a guy named Mitchell Kahan, who saw my work somewhere, and he was then the director of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Alabama and then the North Carolina Museum of Art. He was interested in my work. He was an interesting guy. He ended up being the director of the Akron Art Museum for 20 years. He knew somebody at Holly's, and he told him, "You really need to see her work." So I got an appointment. In those days, you could get appointments. It's very different now, you know, and in a way the art world was so much smaller. Well, not in a way, it was so much smaller, so I met this person. Horace Solomon, Holly's husband, saw my work while I was talking to the director, Neil Printz. He said, "Can you leave these paintings here? Holly's out of town, but she'll be back in a couple days." I said I could leave them for a day or so, and when I got back I walked in the gallery and Holly said, "Oh, you, I want to see you," and that was the first step. Then she came out to San Francisco, I think for a Mary Heilmann show at a gallery called Daniel Weinberg Gallery. She wanted to make a studio visit, but I was living up north then, and I knew she had no sense of how far away that was. So she asked me to bring a few paintings to her hotel. She was quite wacky and fascinating. She was like an idiot savant: brilliant and dramatic, and impossible; everything and every other adjective you can give her. But she took paintings off the wall of the hotel and put my paintings up that I had brought, and I had support from several of the curators at the Berkeley Art Museum. Mark Rosenthal, David Ross, and Michael Auping were sort of a triumvirate there, and later she called and offered me a show and asked me to join the gallery. I had my first show at Holly's when I was still living in California.

And you were one of the first artists to have a show at the New Museum?

At the same time during the trip when I met Holly, I met Marcia Tucker, who was at the New Museum, and she asked me to be in the second show of the New Museum, which was called "Outside New York." I think the first one was called "Inside New York."

This was a group show of various artists. I also heard an interview where you mentioned that while you were still in San Francisco, you also met a woman who ran a print company called Crown Point Press, which led to some fortuitous outcomes.
Oh yeah, Crown Point Press. Do you know it? Crown Point Press is probably one of the most major print publishers and published many, many artists that you know from across the board, from Richard Diebenkorn to current artists like Laura Owens, I mean, on and on.

Kathan Brown, who was the owner, was really quite a visionary. Once she took a bunch of conceptual artists and people to an island called Tenerife to do work. The main place is in San Francisco, and that's an etching studio. But she had invited artists to do different things, and at one point she was taking artists to Japan to make prints, artists like Alex Katz and Francesco Clemente and a lot of different people, but then it became too expensive to work in Japan. That was the time when the yen was very high. Then she decided to take some artists to China. And she invited me. She said, "Do you want to make prints in China?" I said yes. It was the first time I really worked with her, and it was a magical experience because my husband, Brad Davis, who is also a painter and who was part of the Pattern and Decoration movement—we met at Holly's. We were with people before. He'd been involved in literati Chinese painting, and we got together over that. I was looking at Chinese literati painting when I was changing my work, and he said, "You're not going without me." And Kathan said that's fine. There were about five of us. And what was so magical about it was that it was like being a child again. Suddenly, we were in a new environment, which was very exciting. We were like kids, who could just get up and run and do things. And it was great. But it was also at the time of Tiananmen Square. And so, it was sort of a revolutionary time to be in China. The country was starting to be wide open. People were excited, people were marching. It just was by coincidence that we were there then. And that was an amazing moment in my life. I went on to make prints in San Francisco with Kathan afterward.

That was 1989. How long was that trip?
Three weeks. We went to Hangzhou. We climbed mountains, which was sort of amazing. I mean, we had experiences that were just incredible, incredible across the board. And we were in Shanghai. I have seen Shanghai change from being, I won't say primitive, but slow, difficult, very Communist party to now. I mean, there's been a full circle. China's not in a good place as far as I'm concerned now. But for us, it was terribly exciting at the time. And then, when the art market in the early 90s was faltering, nothing like 2008, but it was tough then, we decided to take a year off and took our kid out of school to go to China and Hong Kong, and then we stayed for nine years. It was bizarre.

"Living on Hart," Provisor's fall exhibition at Canada gallery in New York, including "Hammertown" (2024, left) and "Livid" (2024). Photo: Courtesy Canada gallery

When you got to China, you were working with your husband in a studio, and he had the idea to design a carpet for your New York loft, and that's how you started Fort Street Studio, the hand-knotted silk carpet company. How and why did you get into rug design?

It was just the strangest thing and sort of serendipitous. I can just tell you this: We were renting a tiny flat, cold-water kitchen, everything for $4,000 a month. This was in 1994. And our loft was being sublet for $3,000 a month, and that was 3,000 square feet. So it was just insane. But China: Brad came home one day after being out and about, and he said, "I met a retired silk-weaving carpet company director. You want to make a carpet for the loft in New York? Would be fun to do, let's collaborate." And I said, "Yeah, why not?" We set up a studio in our bedroom, and we were living with naked light bulbs hanging down. There was ice in the toilet in the morning because it was south of the Yangtze River.

It was hilarious. And it's hard for me when I look back to realize that I went through all that. It was exciting and difficult, but we somehow found a big piece of plywood. We brought it home on some kind of wheelie thing ourselves, took it upstairs, put it over two desks, and one side was his studio and one side was mine. And we just made a deal to paint things that weren't our own artwork but try to think of something that would work for a rug on the floor. And we tried to do things that were painterly with watercolor, and they'd never done that before. Nobody had, because there wasn't software then, and it was too difficult to weave. So Brad figured out all this software stuff without ever being on a computer. After the first year when we were there, we were in Hangzhou about eight months and four months in Hong Kong before. Then Brad asked if I wanted to stay another year and just try and get this working.

The company grew into a huge success with showrooms and high-end clients across the globe. And in 2021, Rizzoli published *A Tale of Warp and Weft: Fort Street Studio,* describing it as "a fascinating look at the transformation of a watercolor painting to a beautiful silk carpet." Why a book?

It's a monograph about the founding and development of Fort Street Studio, highlighting our innovations in carpet design, including how we were the first in industry to develop watercolor style with non-repeat in a hand-knotted carpet. It was a more artistic and personal book. Except for a few essays, we wrote most of it, telling our story. We showed installations, reproductions of the actual watercolors, and talked about ourselves as artists. It was also about our adventure in China. We told Rizzoli that we absolutely did not want to do a product book. It felt like the book was our swan song in that world! We were visiting design, but living in art.

What is it about fashion and design in general and couture in particular that attracts you? You've done projects with Hermès creative director Pierre-Alexis Dumas, you've designed jewelry, a home in Aspen that was featured in *Architectural Digest*....

I've always been interested in fashion for ideas and shapes. I think that if you just go around certain stores and troll, you can get a lot of ideas, because designers of a certain ilk can be extremely creative. I might not wear any of that stuff, but I look at Comme des Garçons and say, "Are you kidding? This is amazing!" There is a painting in the show in Canada that was inspired by Haider Ackermann. He did a couture look for Jean Paul Gaultier Haute Couture, a purple dress that I think Tilda Swinton wore in some magazine. But the dress was so.... It didn't look like a dress. It just looked like an animal or some kind of shape. And I just ripped it out. And the purple painting in the show at Canada gallery sort of came from that dress. I find shapes and I look at things that spur me on to other kinds of ideas. I consider myself primarily an abstract artist. I believe in abstraction to create psychological tone and mood and discovery. And I would say that in a certain way, I'm a navel gazer. I'm always dealing with looking inside, too, missing a lot of things out in front of me.

Your show at Canada is called "Living on Hart." Is there any particular significance to that title?

Hart Drive. I was trying to think of the title of the show, and I liked the play of it, like heart, like hard drive. And so that's why "Living on Hart." I thought about it because I have had pieces of art that I've titled *Living on Laight,* because our place in New York is on Laight Street. I like the play of that, living on late. And I've had things called *Good Night, Hong Kong,* living in Hong Kong, that kind of thing. So that's where the title started.

How would you describe your paintings in "Living on Hart?" Are they autobiographical?

They are autobiographical to a certain point. As I get older, I'm thinking about wanting to pare down, wanting to get rid of excess, if I can. I feel like I'm interested in things that are precarious, on a precipice, feeling like you're falling, but you don't fall. And I'm interested in that liminal ledge between mostly abstraction and occasionally a figurative element. What I noticed in the last year or so, something that was quite interesting, is that I don't look back that much. I mean, of course, we all do to a certain degree, but a few of my paintings from the 1980s came up at an auction somewhere, and I looked at one of the smaller paintings of mine in the auction for a long time. And what I recognized is how many similarities there are to what I'm doing now. The approach is different. The use of materials is different. They're much looser, very direct now. Yet there are images floating on grounds that are abstract or lean towards some recognizable something, whether it be a cross, whether it be another form. And I've used eyes off and on forever.

And how do you work? What's your process of working? Or do you not discuss what your process is?

I do a little bit. My process, how I start, and usually starting is always hard for me, is that I never or almost never work on paper and canvas stretchers at the same time. That's hard for me. I go through a long period of paper, but I don't use the paper to make paintings necessarily, that's not how it works for me. I don't sketch, I don't plan. I think of color a lot. When I first started painting, again, I had studios everywhere. I couldn't work on canvases because we were in Italy, we were in Hong Kong, we had studios everywhere, but we worked on paper because it is just too cumbersome to schlep around paintings. As a matter of fact—you'll laugh—but I literally have art supplies in several different places, still in their basements or where we rented some place. I mean, it's insane. We were sure we would go back, but we didn't. But we worked in Italy for several summers before we came up here to Connecticut and moved back to New York full-time. And then, when I had a studio, we had studios in Industry City, and that's when I started painting on canvas again.

Do you prefer any certain color palettes in your work?
Yeah, I noticed that throughout my history, I've worked with a kind of hot color, a kind of fluorescent pink, acidy green. I mean, it just keeps coming back. And I noticed just recently, when I was cleaning up my studios, that I had fluorescent pigments from the time I was a student in San Francisco. Still.

One gets the sense when viewing these works that the paintings are gazing back, observing us and inviting psychological engagement. Is that intentional?
I think that's true. I don't plan it. I don't think about it in those terms, but I think about it as a focal point of looking in, looking out, engaging. You look at it and you see that maybe you see into the painting and it's sort of ephemeral. I don't want to nail it down, but I do think that the eye is sort of like your third eye. It's the center that looks in that comes out. It's your spiritual eye. And so, I'm interested in all of that. nd as a side note, I've been thinking about eyes a lot lately because my husband has glaucoma, and it's bad. And in one eye, very bad. And so, you start thinking about your sight and what you look at. We joke that he could write books, or he could do this, or he could do that. But it's like trying to understand what sight is. What is sight? It's not just looking at the tree in your yard. For all those reasons, I think eyes happen in my work. But I am interested in a painting imparting some kind of psychological quality, but still being abstract and maybe beautiful, maybe ominous and maybe quick. I like that idea of looking fresh. That it was just done.

"Romance" (2024); watercolor, watersoluble oil, marker, pencil, and crayon on linen, installed at Canada gallery. Photo: Courtesy Canada gallery

What's next on your agenda?
I'd like to backtrack a little. You asked me about my process and about it being autobiographical. Something that's often been very important to me is text. I started using text in my work, and I remember exactly when I started using it. It was when my dad died, 1991. I started writing "Dad" and things like that. And then with these paintings, when I start, I might mix up some colors. I don't sketch, but I sort of write all over the paintings. I scribble all kinds of things. For instance, when October 7th happened in Israel, and I'm Jewish, I wrote a lot about that, how I felt. Now, I'm writing, I would say, more about how heartbroken I am, and the genocide, and how conflicted I feel. I write all that stuff. Sometimes I just write like, "Oh, I feel so exhausted. I need hormones. Get me through the day." I write with all kinds of markers, pencils, pens. I have a bunch in my hand, and I just randomly write all over. And with some of the paintings there is just white in the background. The white, I get sort of triple-primed linen, and you could see the writing, but sometimes the paintings are upside down, so you can't necessarily read it. I don't necessarily want you to read it. I can't even remember what I've written half the time, because it was truly responding to something in the moment, what I'm feeling or thinking about. And that becomes the impetus.

And then I start painting. And I paint over the words that I've written, completely over. It's like I don't even see them. But I have one here that they didn't choose for the show, which is one of my favorites. You could see writing because there's a whole white area. Sometimes, I scribble. I've been scribbling a little on the black. I have one painting that's in chalk. But you could see some things. I had mustaches in a lot of paintings, but not in the ones in the show. It's about the idea of power for me, I guess. Not that I want to be a man, but it's a man's world kind of thing. And it's still a man's world. Just look at who we have in our government now.

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Janis Provisor Recent Paintings at Canada

Janis Provisor: Living on Hart installation view CanadaGallery showing ***Hammertown*** *(left) and* ***Livid*** *(right), both 2024*

Janis Provisor: ***Living on Hart***

Canada

61 Lispenard Street, New York

By EDWARD WAISNIS January 3, 2025

Janis Provisor had her first shows at Holly Solomon Gallery, that quirky temple of decoration that I previously wrote of in a review of the recent revival exhibition of work by Provisor stablemate Kim MacConnel. Her work garnered attention for a pioneering use of material, namely modeling paste, that afforded her the ability to project her compositions into bas-relief constructions that earned comparison to Elizabeth Murray's own nascent experimentation. The sculpted and carved surfaces also seemed to be in an unforced dialogue with the high-contrast (pre-plate) paintings of Julian Schnabel that, in hindsight, exposed a

misogynist/feminist dichotomy.

In the decades that followed, Provisor moved toward lyricism, relying on glazes, and extending the injection of innovation by incorporating the bling of metallic leaf to her canvases. Contrasting panels appeared in a spirit, it seemed, to what both Sean Scully and Pat Steir were engaged in. Stripped of the artifice, Provisor has surrendered to the direct and the unprocessed, having traversed late modernism and its requirement of assigning style to arrive in the twenty-first century with its floundering wide-embrace.

Where Picasso sought to recapture innocence, and therefore purity (of form, of intent, of reaction), in the creative spark found in being new to the world - this mood of discovery is alive in Provisor's work. The initial effect reading as a confident child's refrigerator-worth pieces, or, given Provisor's often go-to of working against a dark ground, an adolescent prodigy's rendition of black light posters.

I would classify Provisor's work as New York paintings, with odes to Amy Sillman (especially the works on paper) and Rita Ackermann (in appreciation of where obscuring serves image making) and even, bringing in stirrings from the U.K., Tracy Emin (treasuring looseness), the most pertinent comparison is to German painting of the 1980s, specifically that of the members of the Neue Wilde, particularly that of Walter Dahn. Provisor, free from Teutonic angst, cooler in nature and less reliant on the slapdash, nevertheless is likeminded in her surrender to the id and a healthy tapping of the louche.

Provisor often begins with the laying down of stream of consciousness phrases and letter structures with crayon and pencil that are then transmuted to broadsides by the coats of paint applied in a spirit of automatism that is aided by the use of water-based mediums (including water-soluble oils); fluidity rules the day.

Mask, 2020, made at the height of the pandemic communicates as a blatant signifier of the tragedy as it unfolded. A swath of black, occupying the lower half of the canvas, represents the titular accessory one brandished against the virus. An 'x'– the universal cartoon signifier of demise–supplicates the pupil in one of the rudimentarily rendered eyes scrawled above the fascial cloak, with a looping line casually filling in for a nose. The whimsy is pressed upon by foreboding of memory and the caution of warning.

Janis Provisor, ***Mask****, 2020, watercolor, gouache and water-soluble oil on linen, 60 x 50 inches*

Janis Provisor, ***Come Come****, 2024, black gesso, watercolor, water-soluble oil, crayon, pencil and pen on linen, 74 x 62 inches*

Come Come, 2024, with blaring sweeping passages of orange and pink against a black field that coalesce around a blue form that has settled into a volume reminiscent of a cone or, given the placement the two perfect circles that expose the black ground that can be construed as eyeholes, a hood, resurrecting Guston's Klan hoods. Or, conversely, is the entire affair an elbow in the ribs with a slight of a comical sort?

With recent talk of U.A.Ps and drones invading, could *Livid*, 2024, be winking at a yearned for alien encounter by reading the central orange figure as said creature, while another side of the equation querying as to whether celestial or test tube in origin.

Janis Provisor, ***Livid****, 2024, black gesso, watercolor, water-soluble oil, chalk, pencil and pen on linen, 74 x 62 inches*

Striptease, 2024, once again sporting a black ground, dazzles with the bombast of a night in an edgy neighborhood vibe. The horizontal line of blocky forms reading as a distant stand of building harbored beneath a roiling sky of red clouds; my fabulation is spurred by the title of the work. On the other hand, from a formalist perspective, it is a brazen piece of painting concerned with light.

Janis Provisor, ***Striptease****, 2024, black gesso and watercolor on linen, 74 x 62 inches*

Romance, 2024, a square canvas, hung in a huddle with works on paper and emanated great presence from the niche it was installed in. The eminence of a distraught head mummified in a fluid, bubbly, miasma of a radiating purple puddle surrounded by (or emerging from) a burled wood enclosure–cave, burrow, lair, transport? The contrast between the two elements, with uninflected white separating them, is strikingly discordant and exceedingly memorable.

Home, 2020, One of a trio of works on paper offers a hulking black rectangular form punctuated by three square openings that one, based upon the title, takes as windows, against a field of fluid swipes of green tan and white.

Janis Provisor, ***Home****, 2020, watercolor, gouache, pencil and crayon on paper, 23.5 x 19.5 x 2 inches*

Janis Provisor, ***Mister****, 2020, gouache, pencil and crayon on paper, 23 x 19.5 x 2 inches*

Mister, 2020, in keeping with the masculine title, creeps into the domain of an eagle emblem–think Albanian flag–but may simply be the subliminal result of the Rorschach inspired technique used by Provisor brining about visualization of a crest. In any case, it conveys a regal quality. *Lulu*, 2020 goes from ooze to crepuscular, the alchemy leading one to consider the options of plant-life versus intestinal.

*Janis Provisor, **Lulu**, 2020, watercolor, gouache, pencil and crayon on paper, 23.5 x 19.5 x 2 inches*

Aligning with my deeply held belief that the new year provides the satisfaction–for better or worse–of deliverance firmly (finally) into the twenty-first century and all the prospects that lie ahead. I feel confident in expressing that Provisor's practice offers one facet of where painting is going in this new era.

Exhibition dates: November 22, 2024–January 11, 2025

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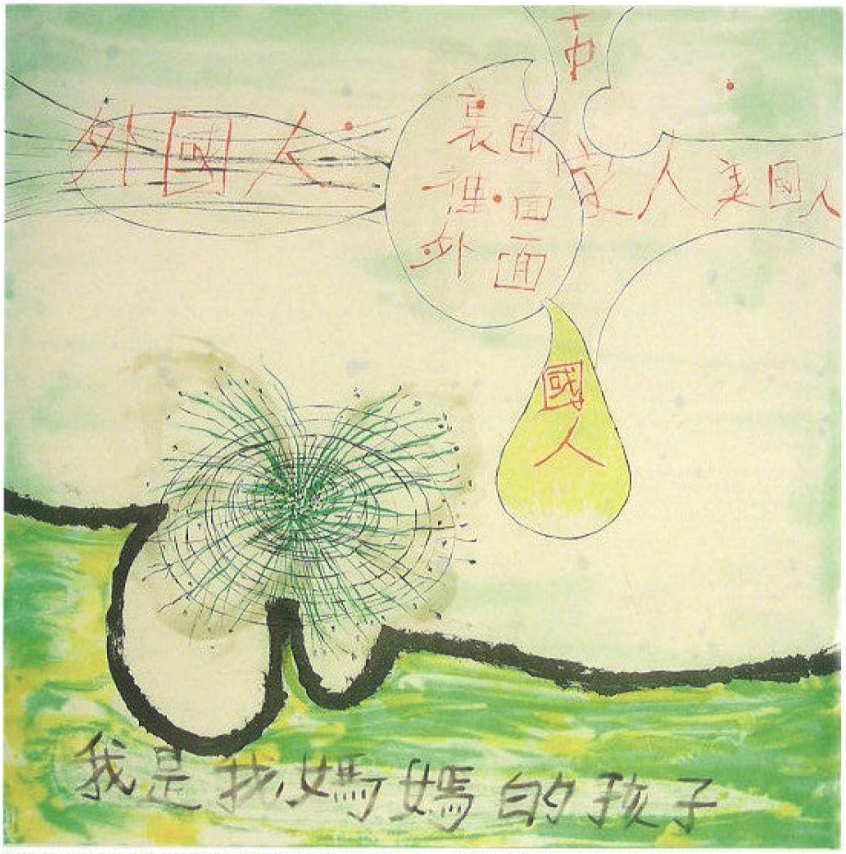
Overview



Janis Provisor, *Foreigner*, 2004. Color spit bite, soap ground and sugar lift aquatints on *Gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 42 x 40-1/2"; image size: 35-1/2 x 35-1/2". Edition 10. Printed by Emily York.

Janis Provisor

"I've been something of vagabond in my adult life, and this has affected how I think and what I do/make in my art. Living in China and being a witness to a culture moving and changing so quickly has led me to incorporate cultural events, along with personal ones, into my work, with abstraction as the device."

–Janis Provisor, 2004

Janis Provisor, with her husband Brad Davis and son Alec, is back in New York, after nine years living in China. Two of her new etchings, *Foreigner* and *Family Values*, incorporate Chinese characters in her own handwriting. Anyone who knows the language will see that she, as a foreigner, writes awkwardly, but will be able to read the message. The rest of us see the Chinese characters as decorative elements in animated works of art that respond brightly to the changing, shrinking, nature of the world in our time.

Three of the four prints presented here incorporate butterflies, symbols of transformation, fastened loosely to the paper, not printed directly on it. Provisor has said that she works "not in an ironic or cynical way but with complete sincerity and emotional connection." She uses Chinese characters "to convey my simulta-

Janis Provisor, *Family Values*, 2004. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with hard ground etching and printed collage elements on *Gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 26-1/4 x 39-1/2"; image size: 17-3/4 x 31-1/2 ". Edition 20. Printed by Emily York.

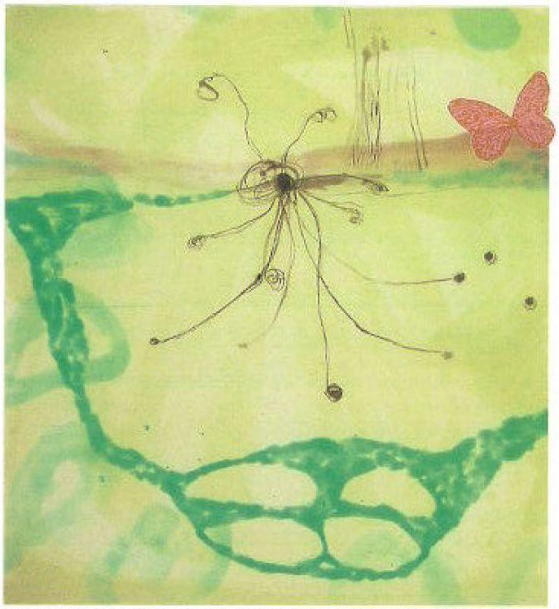
neous feelings of rootedness and of not belonging anywhere."

Provisor was born in 1946 in Brooklyn. She grew up in Cincinnati going to museums with her mother and excelling in art classes. To please her father, who was a lawyer, she enrolled in pre-law at the University of Michigan, but at the moment of committing to the program broke out in hives. She took this as a sign that she should study art instead, and went into the School of Architecture and Design at U. Michigan. After further study at the College of Art, University of Cincinnati, she went to the San Francisco Art Institute where she gained both a B.F.A. and (in 1971) an M.F.A. In 1978 she was included in a show of six artists at the New Museum called "Outside New York." This led to an invitation to join New York's prestigious Holly Solomon Gallery.

Janis Provisor, *Fly*, 2004. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with printed collage elements on *Gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 29-3/4 x 26-3/4"; image size: 21-3/4 x 19-3/4". Edition 20. Printed by Emily York.

The Holly Solomon Gallery was the focal point of the art movement called Pattern and Decoration, which flourished in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and included Robert Kushner, Joyce Kozloff, Valerie Jaudon, and Brad Davis, among others. The movement reacted against the austerity of minimal art and was largely inspired by Islamic, Indian, Native American and other non-Western art traditions. Provisor, though more involved with nature than some of the artists involved, was sympathetic to their approach. As a writer in *ArtSpace* said in 1990, "Provisor's is a romantic vision, but it is not dewey-eyed. ...It is both decorative and psychologically resonant, evoking in painterly terms the harsh beauty of nature viewed up close, and the quiet terror such intimacy inspires."

After she moved from San Francisco to New York in 1981, Provisor spent a great deal of time in museums, searching for ways to energize her work, and there she discovered the eighteenth century Chinese painter Bada Shanren. "He was painting elements from nature that seemed almost incidental to what I viewed as the abstract force," she says. "His composition on the page somehow electrified me." Later, in *Orientations* magazine, Arnold Chang, a historian of Chinese art, wrote: "In the whole history of Chinese painting, only Bada Shanren's work comes close to being charged



Janis Provisor, *Flower Power*, 2004. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with drypoint and printed collage elements on *Gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 29-3/4 x 26-3/4"; image size: 21-3/4 x 19-3/4". Edition 15. Printed by Emily York.

with the psychological tension evident in Provisor's painting. Like Bada, her work is direct, intuitive, and spontaneous, full of private symbols and secret meanings."

Provisor shared her growing enthusiasm for Chinese painting with Brad Davis, a serious scholar of the culture, and the couple later married. Davis accompanied her in 1989 on her first trip to China, where I took her to work in the Crown Point Press woodblock program in Hangzhou and Shanghai. "Everyone is so engaged; everything is so real," Provisor said at the time. I remember that we were in a small boat on the West Lake in Hangzhou when she remarked dreamily, "I'm going to try to come back here with Brad and Alec (a toddler at the time) to live for a while." I laughed. That was 1989. We saw demonstrations everywhere in support of the "democracy" students occupying Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and the day after we left China the students were gunned down by government forces. For three or four years people feared even to speak to foreigners.

But things changed in China, and in 1993 Provisor and Davis made the big decision to move there with their (then) six-year-old son. They went back to Hangzhou, where they spent nearly a year, then moved to Hong Kong where their life in China stretched to nine years. They returned to New York in 2002 with substantial gains. Alec speaks and writes Chinese fluently, and Davis and Provisor are the proprietors of a celebrated and flourishing business producing silk carpets under the name Fort Street Studio.

Hangzhou is a center of the Chinese silk industry, and soon after they arrived there Davis had the idea that they should design a silk carpet for their home and have it made. This, wrote Steven Henry Madoff in a long article in the *New York Times Magazine* Design Supplement in 2003, "was a little like saying, 'Well, I'm in Texas, so I may as well drill an oil well.'" The project took years and involved rescuing a bankrupt rug factory, but now Davis and Provisor design, produce, and sell carpets described by Madoff as "silvery in the light, beige like suede or the resonant blue of night skies, with drifting brushstrokes or soft squares like tiles worn by age and weather." There is a list of celebrity purchasers: Madonna, Elton John, Tom Clancy. Madoff concludes his article by commenting that Provisor and Davis "have joined the long history of artists crossing into craft, from William Morris to the Bauhaus and beyond."

Beyond that, Provisor continues to pursue her paintings and prints. "The design work," she says, "is more public than the painting and printmaking, which comes from a more personal place, one of expression of who I am at any given time." It is important to remember that Provisor came to design by way of being a painter. Walter Gropius, who wrote the Bauhaus manifesto, was an architect, and said "the final goal of all artistic activity is architecture." And William Morris (1834-1896) was first and foremost a designer, though he did some painting. Morris believed that there should be no distinction between decorative and fine arts, and he worried that "men in struggling towards the complete attainment of all the luxuries of life could deprive their whole race of the beauty of life." He recommended that people be vigilant in keeping ugly things out of their homes, and in that Provisor is in complete agreement with him.

In making the carpets, Provisor says, "Neither Brad nor I were interested in just designing for the marketplace (though indeed we had to learn about that to survive). What we wanted was to create something new, a new vocabulary in rug making. We didn't look for the expedient way to get something made, but came to it from a

Janis Provisor in the Crown Point studio, 2004.

more organic direction, more like making art. But we don't think of it as making art. It's something different, but related to art."

Provisor says that she has learned to work in a variety of ways. "Is it all fascinating and worthwhile?" she asks, and answers with a resounding yes. To the next question, "Is it all art?" she answers no, but adds that living in China and working on the carpets has freed her from being very concerned about the differences. She finds her painting more relaxed. The experience, she says, "has made me lighter (though just as demanding) and opened my eyes to a larger world."

–Kathan Brown

Janis Provisor and Brad Davis, wild silk hand knotted carpet, F032-A, SQ-Teal.

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Janis Provisor: Four New Color Etchings
Pat Steir: Mixed Marks, seven new color etchings

April 28 - May 28, 2005

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William T. Wiley: New Work, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, 2012 R Street NW, through May.

William T. Wiley is the recipient of the 2005 Lifetime Acheivement Award from the Southern Graphics Council.

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The New York Times Magazine
April 13, 2003

The New York Times Magazine

Dream Weavers

By Steven Henry Madoff

April 13, 2003

When the artists Janis Provisor and Brad Davis went to China to make woodblock prints, they had no idea that within a few years the floor would be their canvas and they would be painting in silk.

''It was May 1989,'' Provisor begins. ''We'd gone to Hangzhou. It was the time of the Tiananmen demonstrations and -- ''

Davis cuts in almost unconsciously, as couples do after nearly 20 years of marriage: ''And it was like the 60's, this feeling of possibility, of things opening up, of potential. It was infectious.''

Then Provisor cuts back in: ''We just ran out onto the street in the rain as soon as we got there, and both of us, within the first hours of being there, had this overwhelming feeling that we would go back there and live. We both just knew it.''

The artists came to the second act in their careers -- founding the Fort Street Studio carpet company in 1996 -- as many creative people do: through the luck of their talent and by the chance of events. Their instincts would turn out to be true, but life intervened. There was a young child to raise, art to make, homes in Colorado and New York to care for and taxes to pay. Still, China hung like a childhood moon, big as imagination. They had long admired Chinese art, debating its meanings, painting under its influence and falling in love in the process.

Then their chance came. It was 1993, the economy was crashing, and the two looked at each other, thinking: China. Why not? If this was the prospect of guilty pleasure, it was also the impulse that artists have to leap into voids, to take risks in their work and see what happens. They went back to Hangzhou, their 6-year-old son, Alec, and a nanny in tow. Back to cold weather, to a tiny apartment with two only rooms that they could use and a single light bulb to paint by and to the weird little bit of destiny that was evidently sleeping in the hallway, waiting.

''It was just whimsy,'' Davis says. ''I'd had an interest in carpets ever since graduate school, and I thought, Here we are in Hangzhou, a center of the silk industry, and if there was any place we could make a silk carpet for our place, this was it.'' Which, it turned out, was a little like saying, ''Well, I'm in Texas, so I may as well drill an oil well.'' And Davis wanted to drill a kind of well that no one had invented yet.

He couldn't have guessed what would follow down the road. Their carpets would be silvery in the light, beige like suede or the resonant blue of night skies, with drifting brushstrokes or soft squares like tiles worn by age and weather. Members of the press took note. Shows came in Hong Kong, Paris, London, New York, Los Angeles. Madonna, who can afford $15,000 rugs, ordered two. The Hollywood producer Joel Silver, Elton John and Tom Clancy all bought them. One cropped up in Mel Gibson's movie ''What Women Want,'' another in a Robbie Williams video. But the road was neither straight nor smooth.

The saga of the silk carpet has many characters. It sweeps over great swaths of China, from the north, where wild Dandong silk (more durable than the cultivated kind) is harvested, to a bankrupt rug factory near Hangzhou that the artists heroically revived, to Hong Kong, where they ended up settling, remarkably, for eight and a half years.

''We didn't want to just sit around,'' Provisor recalls, talking in the 5,000-square-foot loft the couple now rents near the Holland Tunnel in Manhattan. ''We wanted to work because that's what we do wherever we are.'' Her features are angular and elegant, while her speech is rapid, with the slightest edge of metal. The loft is filled with artifacts of their adventure abroad and pieces they've designed from traditional models: lanterns; a huge antique wedding bed; a mottled mustard-yellow table with classically bowed legs. There are heaps of half-finished jewelry in chalcedonies, quartz, opals, freshwater pearls, rubies and gold that Provisor began making in China and that she plans to use in a sibling business.

''We wanted to make all kinds of things,'' Davis continues. ''Furniture, lamps, fabrics, dishes.'' He gets up, a modest tidiness about him, thin, with cropped white hair, and brings out pieces of bone china festooned with an abstract pattern in platinum. ''We made about 15,000 of these in four different patterns, because we just had the idea. But the price was too expensive, and the market wasn't there. But the carpet -- the carpet we just kept working on.'' Then Provisor says, ''It was like a rubber band that we stretched and stretched and couldn't let go.''

Their idea was to make carpets based on watercolors -- painterly abstractions without the repeating patterns of most rugs or the usual hard-edged lines. They found a woman who had run a carpet factory, and they showed her 40 images. She covered her eyes. No, too difficult, she said. No, can't be done. Months passed. This was 1994. Davis knew a man in Hong Kong who could write software, and he flew to see him. They thought it would take three months to draft a design program. Seven months crawled by before the program was done: a way to blow up each colored knot of thread in a weaver's map. (There are more than one and a half million knots in a 9-by-12-foot rug.)

The software worked, but achieving the subtle gradations, the change of hues, called steps, was like learning a new language, and the colors were from no palette the dyers had used before. After the first grating mess of purples, turquoise and gray, Davis had to sit at the factory with a Bunsen burner to make the dye lots himself. Two years passed with experiment, training and revisions, getting the look and the ''hand'' of the rug as soft as an otter's pelt, with four weavers working three months on each carpet. By Year 3, the well was drilled.

''I remember the first order coming back, seven patterns, three each,'' he says. ''They came in May '96, and I was so happy that I literally danced on them. I thought: Wow. We can do this.'' They had found a way to release the dense imagery and the charged colors of their canvases into something literally more grounded -- rich to the eye, sinking into comfort, the way Matisse famously wrote, ''What I dream of is an art of balance . . . a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair.''

Pierre-Alexis Dumas, a creative director for Hermès in Paris, says: "I think what makes their rugs so classic is that they have a huge respect for tradition, which you feel in the quality of the craft. And then they move beyond that to make something no one had thought of or thought possible. It comes from painting, but it isn't painting, because of the importance of touch. You're meant to touch it. You can't resist touching it, being on it, living in it, so to speak. The one I have is like a flying carpet because it carries so many memories. We've taken it from Hong Kong to London to Paris, everywhere we've lived. My child learned to walk on that carpet. It is my Proustian madeleine."

Provisor and Davis have their own memories. At the end of the saga, they left China. Their son is fluent in Mandarin. They've built a showroom in New York, their next act -- in the long history of artists crossing into craft, from William Morris to the Bauhaus and beyond -- now open on Broadway. "We took a left turn by accident and kept on going," Provisor says. It took them a long way round, but it looks as if they must be home.

Artforum
February 1990

CROWN POINT PRESS

JANIS PROVISOR

"What I came to realize about my work... is that my spiritual and psychological relationship with nature is key. I keep coming back to nature, not landscape, but nature."

View

Interview by Constance Lewallen at Crown Point Press, San Francisco, California.

Interview with Janis Provisor, February, 1990.

You've been using metal leaf for fifteen years. What attracted you to that material?

The lure, the seductiveness of religious articles and the light in Sienese painting had a certain kind of aura to me that I wanted to infuse my work with. I was struck more by the trappings, the physical quality of these sources, than by religious or spiritual aspects. Yet, that was interesting to me as well.

Your paintings always have had an a element of spirituality, maybe more so in earlier work than now.

That's true, but I think that's coming full circle. I have always had a longing or desire to find a spiritual center, and as a child was attracted to the ritual in religion. I suppose the ritualistic aspect served as a gateway, allowing me to pass through on my search for that illusive spot of greater meaning. And that was a large part of why I got involved in art, too, because I felt it had a kind of meaning for me that was mysterious and that I had no other way of expressing.

Let's talk about when you were living in Texas in the mid-seventies. How did that affect your work?

It was at that time I became involved with nature. There is a place called the Texas Hill Country, outside of Austin, which has a lunar quality. I spent a lot of time there. What I came to realize about my work, and I still think it is true today, is that my spiritual and psychological relationship with nature is key. I keep coming back to nature, not landscape, but nature.

Not landscape, because landscape denotes something naturalistic?

Right, and hierarchical — sky, trees — it's very specific. To me nature implies a much larger, much grander experience, both positive and negative, forceful and passionate, and that seems to be the key. Since my work keeps coming back to that, I've tried to live in places surrounded by landscape, although I am not an outdoors sort of person. It's almost as if I view nature through a window, like looking at television. Nature is outside, and I try to pull it inside.

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When did you leave Texas?

In 1978, when I came back to San Francisco.

You received your B.A. and your M.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute?

Yes. I went to school other places first but finished there.

And then you got a job teaching at the University of Texas in Austin?

First I taught at Cal State Humboldt in Arcata, California. It was the first time I lived in the country, and it was dreadful. It rained a lot, and it was difficult for me in every way. I lived there for two years; it seemed like a very long time. I came down to San Francisco as much as possible and moved back to the city for a while before moving to Texas for two years.

When you returned, you began showing at the Hansen Fuller Gallery, where you showed a painting called "Sweetwater."

Named after a town in Texas.

You were already using very thick and textural paint.

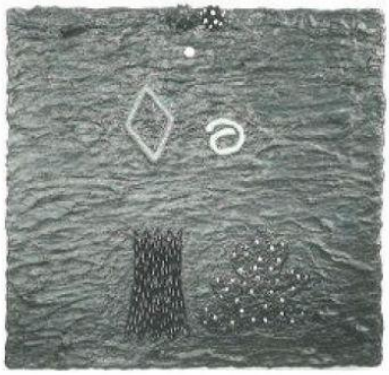
I started doing that in Texas. At the time my paintings were very small, 22 x 23", and the size was very important. I remember it was my head size, as if I had put a frame around my head. Later I used my body as a measurement.

You were painting in acrylic and oil and using symbolic motifs — a spiral, a diamond — along with real objects embedded in the paint and sometimes extending beyond the frame — curious little things. Some of them reminded me of forms you see in paintings by Paul Klee.

Someone else said that, though he was never an influence. But when I saw a Klee show a few years ago at the Modern in New York, I myself was struck with certain similarities.

It was just coincidental?

Yes, but he did influence me in one small respect a few years later. Because I had been using crosses in my work a lot, my father asked why I never used a Jewish star. I answered that crosses not only symbolize Christianity, but represent history, among other meanings. A Jewish star is so much more specific. I was passing Jaap Rietman's bookstore one day and noticed a Klee painting on the cover of a book. It had a Star of David in it. That inspired me to do several paintings with a six-pointed star.



Sweetwater, 1978, oil and acrylic on canvas, 22 x 23"

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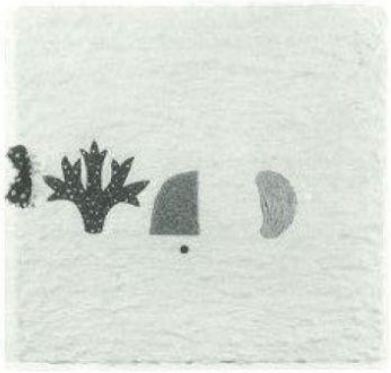


Jasper, 1979, oil and acrylic on canvas, 22 x 23"

Jesters, 1980, oil and acrylic on canvas, 22 x 23"

Did you see the Robert Moskowitz show at MoMA? There is a painting with a swastika on it. The museum found it necessary to include the explanation that the swastika is an ancient symbol derived from a Sanskrit word. It means something like well-being.

It had a very positive meaning.

And because the Germans adopted the symbol, it became synonymous with absolute evil. Moskowitz used it because he resented the fact that the Nazis had perverted the symbol, and he wanted to reinstate it so it could be used again.

Well, using the cross is easy, but using the Jewish star...I did get a lot of criticism. I included a large yellow painting with a Star of David in a show. A lot of people were quite offended, including some German collectors.

As an artist, you can't think about things like that.

No, you can only work from your own self.

You did a painting in 1979 called "Jasper." It seems as if you were still using thick paint but also modeling clay, so the surfaces were becoming even thicker.

Thicker and thicker, and the process became more like sculpture. I sort of ventured down a road that led me to become a sculptor, which is not something I wanted to be at all. But at the time I was building up the surfaces before I put the paint on.

The colors at this point were really artificial — acid greens and bright pinks.

When I moved back to San Francisco from Texas, I spent a lot of time in the Mission District. I became very interested in the low-riders and in the idea of "peacocking."

What does that mean?

People dressing up in their finest, very colorful clothes, strutting and showing off; the male not the female, like in the animal kingdom. I found it fascinating. The neon colors in my paintings came from that, and the titles of the paintings from that period came from low-rider gangs. I felt like I was dealing with a kind of urban nature. A lot of images came out of that — the dancing figures, girls in bell-bottom pants. It was also about my coming of age in the sixties, and the styles of the time.

But you were still using abstract symbols, like crosses, as well as stylized naturalistic references such as trees and plants.

Yes, I mixed them together.

Did the idea of religious ritual play a part?

It was certainly not conscious. I don't think of my paintings as being specifically about ritual, they're really just about a feeling.

You weren't in the New Image *show at the Whitney in the late seventies, but at the time you were making paintings that people associated with that group — paintings with isolated images. The so-called New Image painters, like Moskowitz and David True, were working in an area somewhere between Minimalism and representation. I guess you were put into that bag because there was a certain similarity with what you were doing, but were you aware of the trend?*

No, but as a matter of fact around that time I saw Richard Marshall, who organized that show, and he told me he was putting together such a show but had decided to go with images that were more representational than mine. He said there was also a group of artists who were working with more abstract images or mixing the symbols like I was doing. That was the first I heard of the idea.

Seeing your work, however, probably reinforced his idea that something was in the air. You did a painting called "Brownsville" at about that time. It is impasto and contains personal symbology, as well as universal images. The personal symbols weren't meant to be interpreted, were they?

No, but perhaps felt. It's evident that the symbols had meaning.

Each viewer has his or her own way of responding.

Once you let go of a painting, it isn't yours anymore. Everyone has an individual interpretation.

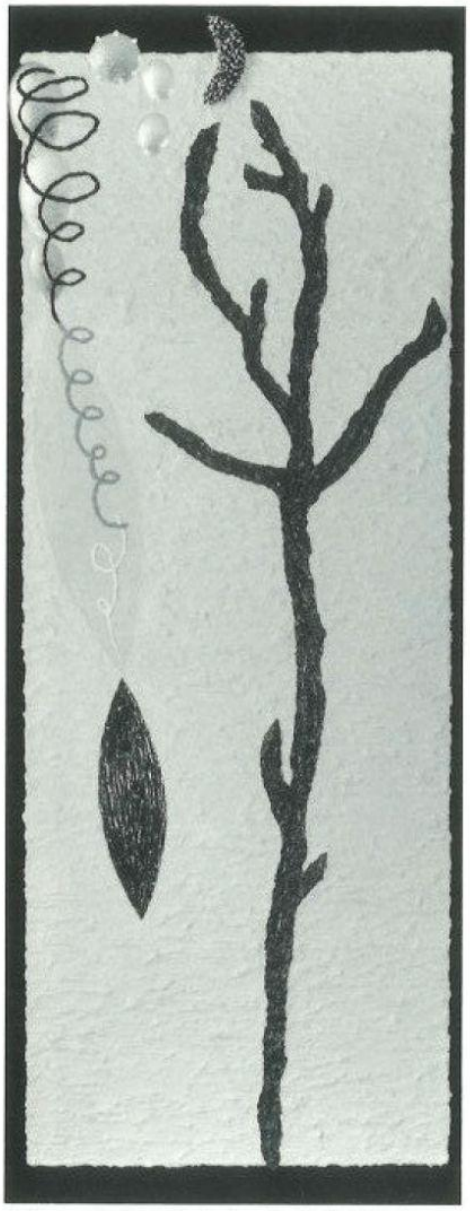
Do you object to that?

No, but sometimes it is troubling when people are consistently specific about an interpretation. But in the end you have to be beyond that, you have to let go. There are things that you are expressing in a painting that cannot be verbalized. When someone else tries to put it in words, it doesn't work.

In 1980 you were in San Francisco, and you were still using hot color, thick paint, but the paintings were becoming large. For example, "Confessing a Feeling" is 87" high. In it you used metal leaf and also had objects projecting from the frame, falling forms on the left.

I remember there is a red linear form, like a vein or tree traveling from top to bottom. And the ground is an acidic green.

Your new prints contain those same colors, but in a softer version. Also, the falling motif occurs again and again in your work as in the new four-part painting "Another Trophy," and in almost all the woodblock prints.



Confessing a Feeling, 1980, oil and acrylic, 87 1/2 x 33 1/2"

The question of color is peculiar. Although I'd like to believe I have no conscious favorites, I recognize that certain colors continually reappear in my work. As far as the falling motif, I admit that my paintings generally have a vertical-horizontal axis. It's a natural predilection of mine and any variance is definitely going against the grain.

You also did a group of night paintings around this time.

I am interested in qualities of light — day and night — I mean, what happens in a psychological way. I don't plan these things, they happen intuitively. I start from my unconscious. An image will come out of my unconscious which I then lasso, or embrace, and use. And I continue to use it until I find that it whithers away. Where I don't feel as if I have a very good visual memory, I am out there looking a lot, internalizing.

You mean you can't draw well from memory?

No, that's why my rocks look like potatoes (laughter), and that's fine. I find I don't have a visual memory for other art either. I remember feelings, though, and that helps me with my work, so I can let go. I am willing to try things now, to trust myself.

You did a painting in 1981 called "For Paul." You were still using bright, artificial colors and thick paint in that work, and perhaps that's one reason Richard Armstrong in Artforum *compares your work to that of Joe Zucker and John Torreano. He talks about your "cloisonne" method that related to how Joe applied cotton balls to create a surface and Torreano embedded glass objects in his paintings. Armstrong was putting your work in the context of Decorative painting.*

It was really a problem. I'm trying to be careful now, in terms of galleries, because when you are showing in a particular venue that has a strong identity, you are automatically thought of in that way whether you belong or not. I do not feel my work is decorative. It's not about decoration and never has been, but people look at gold leaf, or embedded objects, and jump to the wrong conclusion. Materials do not come before the ideas.

Well, in "For Paul," you are still involved in figures.

And large trees. It was both landscape-related and figurative.

The figures became bigger and bigger until in a painting like "Moon River," which was in your Matrix show at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, the figure is the dominant motif.

And that was about as physical, as sculptural, as large and heavy as my paintings ever got. In retrospect, it was work that had lost meaning for me.

The figures have a different character also. They're not emblematic girls and boys. These are first of all more naturalistic but also disturbing and strange. "After Midnight," and other paintings from the time — "Russian Hill," "Visitacion Valley" — had an edge, a kind of nightmarish quality.

Another Trophy, 1989, oil and metal leaf on canvas, four panels, 52 x 160" overall

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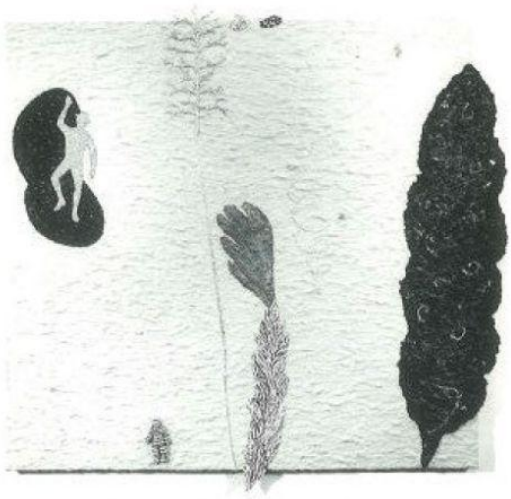

For Paul, 1980, acrylic and oil on canvas, 72 1/2 x 73 1/2"

Moon River, 1981, oil on canvas mounted on plywood, 92 x 72"

They were the dark side. I think my own life was like that. I allow myself to come through my work quite easily. I think I was struggling to find my way out of what I was doing.

The backgrounds were opening up. Rather than being monochromatic, they contained several colors applied in choppy strokes.

That was the beginning of my trying to get myself back into painting. The work had become so contained, so built before I ever started painting, I had felt that I was no longer painting, no longer discovering. Not that painting is the path to discovery, but because everything was formed before I started painting, it became a job and not particularly interesting.

It became mechanical?

Yes, and I finally had to make a clean break.

It's soon after the Matrix show that you moved again, this time to New York.

Yes, I moved to New York for six or seven months, came back to San Francisco for a few months, and then I moved back to New York. I tend to be a wanderer.

I know you wanted to be in New York very much at that time but, as it turned out, you didn't stay very long.

I was there for three or four years. New York has been a funny place for me. I was born there, I spent a lot of time in New York while I was growing up. We lived in Cincinnati, but my father's side of the family all lived in New York. My father hadn't yet quite assimilated into Cincinnati (I was the first born), so from the third or fourth grade on, he started sending me, not my brothers, to New York for all my vacations. All my cousins were my age and were what I considered intellectuals. They took me to museums, they cared about art, and so I had a very different life in New York and I idealized New York. I went to San Francisco for only two reasons. One, because I felt that if I went to New York I might suffocate in the bosom of my family and the other reason was because of Richard Diebenkorn.

Explain that.

There was a painting of his in the Cincinnati Art Museum that I used to look at all the time. I don't know the title of it, but there was a figure on the bottom, just a bust of a figure, and, I seem to remember, it was in a car. There was a light landscape on top in greens, beiges, pinks, and the rest of the painting was very dark green. I was very interested in that kind of painting and Diebenkorn at the time, and I knew that he had spent time at the San Francisco Art Institute. I had gone to school in Michigan and then came back to Cincinnati. I appplied to a lot of places, UCLA, Berkeley, which I got into, but I decided on San Francisco, although I had never been West of the Mississippi. It was great. I have very fond memories of the school.

Did your move to New York help you get past this personal psychodrama period of the early eighties?

It was a transitional period during which I was trying to sort out all kind of influences I felt — all the moves. I started recognizing that I was becoming more interested in nature again and that's what needed to become part of my work. I felt that my work had become too outside of myself and was less meaningful to me. I was looking at a lot of books on Chinese painting. I had been interested in Chinatown and kitchy stuff for a long time, but I really hadn't looked at the art very much up until that time. But I found something about it that appealed to me. Brad Davis, who knew a great deal about Chinese art, came over to my studio to see my paintings of what I thought of as Chinese mountains, and he said "Those are not Chinese mountains." I said, "Oh yes they are."

I thought you became interested in Chinese painting through Brad.

Everybody thinks that. It was one of those synergistic things that just happened. Brad had a growing collection of Chinese painting and I learned a lot more through him, but we look at and think about Chinese painting very differently.

And your work is very different.

I discovered seventeenth-century Chinese artists who dealt with the ground and space in such a remarkably modern way, a way that made so much sense for me in my work. It freed me to be able to use images that collided together and then opened up, that looked like they related but didn't relate at all, that had the same degree of physical importance although in reality their scale or physical or psychological importance would be totally different. But for me it was like opening up a box, it was a window that I was able to slide through.

So you got back to nature through paintings of nature, not nature itself.

Absolutely. I began a love affair with Chinese painting.

At about this time, you did a painting called "Silver Mountain." Was that influenced by Chinese painting?

Probably...yes, but not by any specific painting. No doubt I was also aware of the mountains of Colorado. The painting was made after I spent a summer there.

Why did you move to Colorado?

Brad had a son from a former marriage who used to come to New York every summer, and because he was of an age when he didn't want to come to New York, we decided we would go to Colorado and rent a house for the summer.

But eventually you ended up staying in Colorado.

Silver Mountain, 1983, oil and acrylic on canvas, 78 x 120"

We spent the summer and worked well there, both of us. The country was overwhelming to me. It was the first time I liked living in the country. I am basically an urban person who grew up in the suburbs who loves to go to the country. So I have this state of conflict all the time. But Colorado was beautiful, dry, sunny all the time. The landscape was truly inspirational, but not in a way that was picture-perfect. I liked the strange rocks, weird ranchers, the sensation of nature taking over. We bought some land the last two weeks and we were thinking that we would build a place for the summer. Out there you have to build with such strong materials because of the winter, that we thought we might as well build something we could live in during the winter, too. Once we decided that, we thought we would try living there. We came back to New York for a year, stayed the whole season and moved the following August, but kept our place in New York for the next few years.

Well, as you were painting in Colorado, people started saying your paintings evoked the West.

To be identified as a such-and-such artist is so dangerous. To be thought of as a Colorado artist was insane to me. In fact I lived near Aspen, and knew nothing about the rest of Colorado. It was a jumping-off point to come to New York and to go to California. At no time did I relate to Colorado. I was completely unaware of the history. I stayed in my studio and worked and read a lot, and went to the movies, just like I would anywhere else. Once you live outside of New York, people identify you with the region. All of a sudden, Michael Brenson in the *Times* and other writers referred to me as a Colorado artist.

I don't think it stuck, though.

No, I don't think so.

Well, getting back to 1986 and '87 in Colorado, you were making large single-panel paintings. Paintings like "Red Rock" and "Black Moon" are very abstract, though they evoke nature, as all your work does. They are mostly vertical and tend to be dark.

They're darker than what I'm doing now. Slightly less leaf is showing, although at that time there was more leaf than in previous works. There were many years during which I leafed the whole canvas first and then painted all over it, so that you might only see an inch or so of leaf. I was beginning to open up the surface, so in "Red Rock" there is a sense of light coming through a cave-like rock.

But these paintings have a lyrical, loose quality.

They're heavy, but things are open as well. I started to use the leaf as a ground because I could put paint on and remove it almost like a chalkboard. I wanted the work to have an immediacy and I tried to go for that immediacy. I could scrub off the paint and bring it back without building the painting up and up and up so that every layer stayed there.

I see.

I wanted the freshness to be predominant, although the paintings were heavy and there was much more use of black.

There are a lot of bright whites, but otherwise they are very dark. What made you start to create the paintings in panels?

The first one was "Three Stages of Night," three individual panels, each 34 x 38". And then I did one drawing, "Untitled 1986," which is five panels joined together. What made me do those was something very matter of fact. I was asked to do a commission proposal, a long, horizontal piece. I had extra squares of paper, because I was cutting off the ends to make the paper the right size. I started looking at these fragments and started putting them together, and I very quickly did a painting on panels of paper. Serendipity.

It gave you an opportunity to use different kinds of space, different perspectives.

Different elements of nature, sliding together, but each in its own separate world. I was excited and I did many multi-panel works on paper for a while, but not on canvas, yet, because I still had some things I wanted to deal with on the single-panel paintings. But for the show I am having in May, 1990, at Dorothy Goldeen in Los Angeles, almost all the works are in panels, but done in a very different way. I plan to have single small panels that act as periods and commas, that will be sort of tones for the space — a much more conceptual idea.

Say that again.

I may have a single canvas that might be just sky or light, framed by itself, and might be just tone, or might be just gold leaf.

Like a pause.

I don't usually preconceive a show. I tend to paint and not think about the eventual installation, so this is unusual for me. The panels have opened up a way of working, but I don't feel that I want to do it exclusively.

Well, you didn't in the Chinese woodblock prints, either. "Scattered Petals" and "Red Wood" are multi-paneled but "Long Fall" works very beautifully as a single image. It relates to one of the panels of "Another Trophy." The painting is not as open and light as the prints.

But, for instance, if we look at "Scattered Petals," the second panel relates in the feeling and the way it's made to the first panel in "Another Trophy." The first panel in the painting has a pulsating star quality that is also found in the print. And in both the painting and the print there is a panel with scattered red forms that could be petals, that could be fresh flowers falling and covering your face. They are very light so you're not really being smothered but you're feeling a layer of something soft falling in front of your face. And when I talk about nature, it's those feelings, those senses, that interest me as well. That feeling of wind across your face. I thought about that a lot in the

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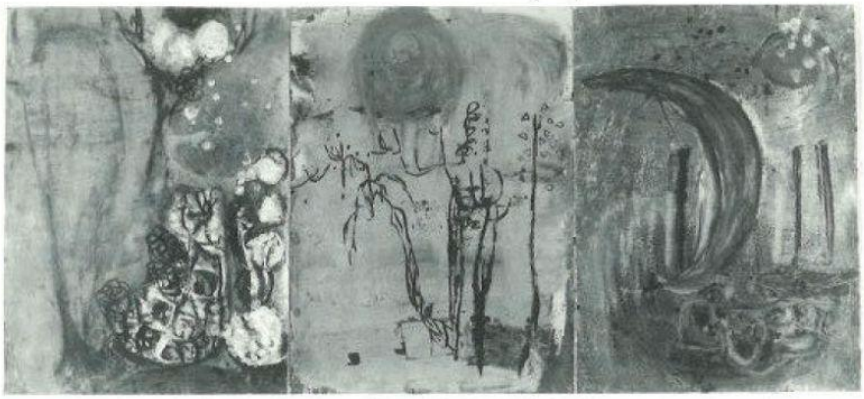

Postponement, 1987, watercolor and acrylic on paper, three panels, 20 1/4 x 45" overall

Scattered Petals, 1989, color woodblock print on silk,
paper size: 23 5/16 x 31 1/4"; image size: 7 3/8 x 22 1/4", edition 35

prints. But in regard to how Chinese woodblock prints influenced my paintings, the paintings that followed are more open, more elegant. Although I never think of myself as an elegant artist, I sort of like that.

They are simpler and more lyrical. But the Chinese woodblocks were not your first experience in printmaking. I read about some lithographs you made in 1985 in New York, co-published by Diane Vilani and Maurice Sanchez.

The prints have to do with rocks, flowers, trees. They're very dark because they are printed on black paper.

But you used gold.

Brushed gold.

Was that a good experience?

Yes, it was my first experience in printing, but I have a difficult time with lithography.

Because it's flat?

Yes, though I did a lithograph later with Bud Shark where I escaped that flatness by using leaf which gives it a physical quality. But I was intrigued with the directness of working on silk for the woodcuts in China, for instance, which have been very influential to my new work.

In what way?

First I was struck by how I had to prepare for those prints — it was so direct and so economical. Because I had to prepare maquettes with watercolor on silk, there was little room for error. And Kathan [Brown] said not to use metal leaf, though I did a little, but very little.

And the forms had to be somewhat separated.

Right, because the Chinese process does not lend itself to close registration. At first that was inhibiting, because I was changing the way I was working, plus working on unsized silk, where you put one stroke down and the whole thing crinkles and you have to get up and get some spray starch and iron it flat, because if you put the next stroke on, it puddles in the crinkles that you've made from the previous stroke. So this was difficult. But in the end I started chopping and cutting pieces — they became sort of puzzles.

Like a collage?

Well, I didn't really collage the pieces. Also Kathan said they should be small because she wasn't sure how large a page the printers could handle. So where I might have thought about doing a large single image, I couldn't. So because of all these strictures, it

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Excavation, 1989, oil and metal leaf on canvas, two panels, 62 x 112" overall

made me think about the work and approach it in a different way. It was a struggle, but from that struggle came simplicity that I liked. Though the preparatory process was very difficult, the outcome is that my work has a more tranquil quality, a gentler quality, that I find somewhat surprising.

About the color...you had been using very hot color. And in New York, before moving to Colorado, you made dark paintings. By the time you moved to Colorado you had completely abandoned that artificial color.

The candy colors.

And the metallic color?

The leaf still comes through but there was a lot of glazing and staining on top, so that the actual leaf was submerged. As a result a different kind of light comes through, so that the paintings are not as flat as if they had just a leaf ground.

And there is a sense of weathered walls, of peeling.

Which I've actually thought a lot about.

But in a way, the paintings are less colorful.

The colors are more subdued, softer.

Well they're not primaries.

They're more nature-related. I think a lot of these paintings have a lot to do with the quality of light that comes at dusk when colors are not as clear.

Is the two-panel painting we are looking at, "Excavation," named for de Kooning's painting of the same name?

de Kooning is one of my favorite painters and as I was painting this I felt like I was excavating a rock and the painting was primarily in black and white and I said, "ah ha" (laughter). I was not unaware of the reference.

"Excavation" is composed of two medium-sized panels.

It's about 60" high and 10' across.

Are the two panels meant to abut?

No, there is supposed to be a slight space between the panels.

Usually, the panels that compose your paintings do abut. What made you decide to leave a space in this one?

Well, although I think they work together, I really wanted them to be read together and as two separate pictures. So that you really felt the distance.

Well, the panels are very different.

And yet when you have to confront them together, then you see that they work together in a disjunctive way, and the right panel becomes just a part of the left panel.

A detail?

Almost like a detail. The right is sort of gaseous, phantasmagoric, humid, and drippy with bits of concrete. Water sluices down the center and there seems to be some kind of growth on the right-hand side of the left panel.

In the context of your work, this panel is less naturalistic, more abstract than the right panel. Do you agree?

I do and I don't because in some ways I really hate the word abstract, unless we're careful to say that we don't mean nonobjective.

To me abstract is not nonobjective. Abstract connotes abstracted from something.

Then, I agree that this is more abstract. And I think in the work the separations are becoming apparent and that I'm mixing the two together. I felt I did that in those very early thick paintings, so in a way I'm coming full circle. Although they look very different, the symbology is totally different, but I am doing some of the same kinds of things with some forms that relate closer to something you might recognize while others are really personal. They could derive from organs or ulcers...

Organic things...

That are very particular to me.

Anybody would be able to tell that these stem from nature.

But that's it.

The prints are obviously nature-related. Although not every panel is explicit as to its source, but in the context of the whole, they are more recognizable as plants, water...than in "Excavation."

I agree with that.

There are clusters of forms that are obviously organic but they could be interior or exterior.

And very cool at the same time. There's a sensuality about them that's cool, yet sort of...humid. I don't know how to describe it, but it has a kind of feel of the air on your body, slightly sweaty, yet also very cool and removed.

That's because of the leaf.

And it has a kind of seductive quality but yet keeps you away.

But not seductive in a pretty sense.

No, they're not pretty. Also the paintings are about painting. Painting is paint as well; it's not just about the image.

What about the larger single-panel "Nocturne" painting with a gold ground? It has many layers. Most of the painting is done on the surface of the gold. Then it's been worked and glazed on top and then wiped out.

It has a kind of table at the bottom. It's also about an enclosure, a hovering form on top and also a pulsating sky. It's a nocturnal painting. It's not dark like the formerly dark paintings, where there was a different sort of psychology and a thicker, darker paint quality. This has a quality of night and maybe something that's ominous but is implied, not direct.

And there are also these fruit-like or rock-like forms on what could be a table. And there is also a web of lines, something I see a lot in your paintings and in the prints as well.

A thicket...that could be rock-like, tree-like, everything together entwined...

Things seem to float around. The space is very ambiguous.

I think that's true, although there is a kind of horizon.

But some of the paintings don't have horizons at all. In fact, most don't.

Although it's floaty everywhere else. But it does have that anchor, which I think allows the other things to float — you're not sure about the space.

Does the spatial treatment have anything to do with Chinese art?

Yes and no. I can say two things about Chinese paintings that interest me. A Chinese painting scholar would laugh and say this is ridiculous, but I take things in an associative way. I consider myself a "bird and flower" painter, in Chinese painting terminology. There are two kinds of Chinese paintings that deal with nature (I'm not talking about the figurative work). One is the "literati" school, scholarly, academic landscape painting, and the other is the "bird and flower" school, landscape as still-life. And I consider myself in the latter group. How space is portrayed suggested to me a way to float things. The second thing that amazed me about the space in a Chinese painting, the layered

space, is that it allowed you to enter the paintings at any point you wanted. The space tipped and changed and moved all over so you were there no matter where you looked. And so those two ideas about space, or how I interpreted them, allowed me to rethink how I wanted to use the space in my paintings. I have many friends who are involved in Chinese painting or who are Chinese and look at these and laugh at the idea that they have anything to do with Chinese painting. They can see maybe a glimmer and they love that I am interested in Chinese painting, but the paintings don't look Chinese at all. Unfortunately, because I've mentioned I'm interested in Chinese painting, people write about the Oriental quality in my work. If I had never said I was interested in Chinese painting...

No one would pick it up...but that's always how it's been with you.

I know (laughter).

These are devices that get you started painting, but that's it.

I need those kind things when I start my journey, I suppose...

And you take from them what they mean to you, your personal needs as an artist...

And it's not appropriation...

Appropriation! Not at all! Well, "Jasmine," which is another new painting about the same size, is a much hotter painting with copper leaf, pink and orange paint, and a boat-like form at the bottom.

It works the same way the table form does in "Nocturne," as an enclosure that holds up the stage and pushes you back up into the center of the painting.

How do you title your paintings?

I have a difficult time titling paintings. Sometimes I think about a title beforehand.

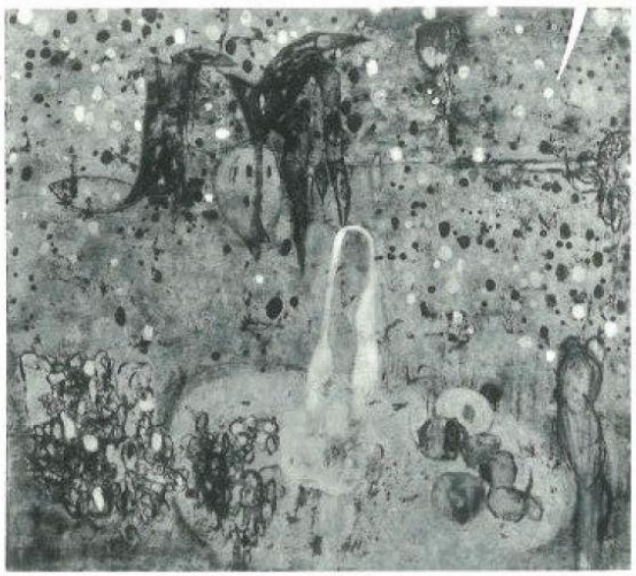
Why do you title them, then?

I title them for identification, because people encourage me to.

But you could title them something like "Orange and Copper."

I could, and sometimes I do that but sometimes things really appear to me afterwards. And this felt to me like night-blooming jasmine, it had what I thought might be some Indian quality, East Indian quality, a kind of sensuality that was interesting. Jasmine...it had a fragrance, a perfume to it.

It does...but it's a very loose relationship.



Nocturne, 1989-90, oil and metal leaf on canvas, 72 x 80"

Jasmine, 1989-90, oil and metal leaf on canvas, 72 x 80"

I mean the painting is the thing, the object, the image, what you're looking at, and the rest of it is stuff that falls away. You have to be careful, if you attach too much extraneous information to a painting, then you lose the sense of it.

Well, "Jasmine" is more sensuous, as you said. It has to do with the color, I suppose. In the right panel of "Nocturne," the green keeps you away.

Well, it's much more gassy, it's like a swamp.

And "Jasmine" has more of a decorative...

It's much more sexy, almost...

When you start a painting, do you know what you are going to paint?

Well, I have a sense. I repeat my images, I have a stack of flip cards, snapshots of my own work that I flip through...

To get your mind going...

Yes. I'll say to myself, "Oh, yeah, that's an interesting idea, I didn't really pursue that enough," or, "I'm not really interested in that." The very first thing that I do, and I do this in a very random fashion, is put a color of gesso on the canvas. In this particular case, it was black. It could be white or it could be a tint of a color.

Arbitrarily?

I use a lot of black, but also white or sometimes color. Then, I leaf up some copper — I'm more interested in copper and aluminum right now, less in gold. Then I decide how much glue (sizing) to put on, and that decision is also fairly arbitrary. If I cover it all over evenly, when I put the leaf on there will be nothing that will show from underneath.

But if you don't cover it evenly, you see gaps, and you see black come through, or whatever is underneath.

It's almost as if it's a hand-rubbing underneath. I like to do the leafing myself, although I've had people help me do it, because it seems to be a dreamy time to me, when ideas come. I can do it very quickly, and because I'm not consciously trying to think about it, I let thoughts and ideas filter through. When the leaf is dried on, I take a wallpaper brush and I scrub off the tailings, where the squares are, and that's where the undercoat, the gesso, comes through. Then I sit back and look at the canvas, and flip through the snapshots, and I see things appear through the leaf which I use in combination with my ideas.

Do you draw on the canvas?

I do a very loose, very loose charcoal drawing, two or three lines. On "Jasmine," I did a vertical line which might be a waterfall, and a few criss-crosses, branch-like, tree forms. That was it, that's all I put on, and then I started painting directly. I don't know how some of the things that happen, happen. It has to do with what I was talking about earlier, about letting something come from your unconscious and then lassoing it, catching it, holding on to it. Then the painting evolves from working.

And you have always approached your work that way. Not specifically, of course, in terms of how you just described the layers, etc., but in general.

That's true, except the difference between these paintings and the paintings I did ten years ago is that then all the images were embedded into the paint, so that I was really confined to my idea from the beginning. I couldn't change it very easily. The color or the way I applied the paint could change, but here the whole form can change. The leaf becomes like a chalkboard, I can just rinse it off. So I could have something there and if it's not working in the painting, I can erase it, so it becomes like drawing. The paintings really have the quality of drawing.

They're very direct.

It also came out of the prints, because I was very interested in the immediacy and the openness, the simplicity of the prints and that kind of quietude, and so I think that the paintings progressed from that point. And also that kind of watercolory...

Transparent...

Which I am using more and more.

In your works on paper, too?

I haven't done as many works on paper recently, I've been working mostly on canvas.

About China, you made your prints in Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Duo Yun Xuan in Shanghai. And in Shanghai you did...

The single image, "Long Fall." And I started to do some work in Hangzhou, but we didn't publish anything from Hangzhou. The two other prints are from Suzhou.

Duo Yun Xuan is a workshop.

It's a historical workshop. They do reproductions of ancient Chinese paintings, and they do a remarkable job.

They also do work for the government — posters, etc.

And particularly in Suzhou, which was also a shop, but smaller and a different kind, they deal more with folk art. They do posters to commemorate birthdays, holidays, New

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Long Fall, 1989, color woodblock print on silk,
paper size: 32 1/2 x 21 7/8"; image size: 19 1/2 x 13 7/8",
edition 75

Red Wood, 1989, color woodblock print on silk,
paper size: 22 x 30 5/8"; image size: 7 13/16 x 19 7/8", edition 35

Year's Day. Some are quite old and have been done for years, and we actually purchased a couple of books of old Ming prints that they had done in that shop and that they later reproduced. They are characterized by bright colors, less nuance.

Not as refined?

But they did a very refined job for me.

So they have the skill.

Yes, but what they seem to be producing in their shop was of a different nature, so I think we were quite surprised that they could do what we had given them.

You sent the work ahead, and when you arrived, there was a proof to look at. Then, for example, on "Long Fall," how long did you spend in the shop working with the printers?

For "Long Fall," we worked two days, but not two complete days. They did a remarkable job of reproducing my watercolor, but there were some things that were not quite right.

Was it color?

It was color and value; not color so much as value.

But it wasn't shape.

No, the shape was unbelievable. And they had added things. They were able to do something with the kind of printing that I felt enhanced the piece, that made it more beautiful than the watercolor. The tonality in certain areas, for instance, the *rondelle* on the right has a kind of tonality in the print that is harsher than the watercolor and that I liked better. I thought that was an interesting aspect of the process. It's truly a collaboration. The person who printed my print was a woman. A man cut the blocks. Cutting the blocks seems overwhelming to me, I can't imagine having to do something like that; it's so complex...and the printing as well. In the beginning, I felt that I had to be very tender or cautious.

Not to insult them?

Yes, to be very careful about how I directed them. And in each place it was slightly different. In this case, the black needed to be changed. The blacks were very flat and even all across the print, and that was different from the watercolor. It was very important that it be right, because there was a lot of black. I felt I had to be very sensitive to the woman and it was very clear to me that I couldn't sit down and paint it to show her. It was obvious to me that she wanted to do it. She sat down in front of me. I was on the other side of the table, and about ten people were standing around. Professor Yang was our interpreter, and I would point here and say, "A little darker, okay, stop." We'd go back and forth like that.

Was it difficult?

You know how you psych yourself up to do a task and feel a rush of adrenalin. Sometimes when everyone was going sightseeing, I wished I could join them rather than going to the shop to work, but then I would come back high, because the experience was unlike any that I'd ever had. I never had worked like this before, really trying to explain myself and trying to understand someone else. It was not like at Crown Point Press where you can make a mistake and come back the next day and change it. Even when you are working on a painting, and you are totally depressed because it isn't going well, there is always tomorrow. But in China, it had to work, and it had to work at that moment.

Because you would have no other chance.

So the sense of relief afterwards was terrific. The printer was great. It was so gratifying

to get this proof back and see that she did get it; she understood the changes, as subtle as they were. And I think what we — Pat Steir, Bob Bechtle, artists who did the China project before me — all felt was that everyone we worked with in all the shops was actually very happy to change the work if you explained the sense or the bones of the piece. What they wanted to know was, "What is this painting about?" Not literally, but the spirit. "What is it saying so I can interpret what you want." Essentially, they want to know what the armature is, the skeleton. And I liked that. They weren't insulted once you explained that to them. They'd say, "Oh, yes, okay so you want this, you want that."

So they were sensitive.

They were. And I happen to know some Chinese painters.

And they loved that...that must have helped enormously.

When I walked in the room and noticed some paintings and said, "That's by Qi Baishi," their eyes widened.

And in Suzhou?

Suzhou was a different experience. We were there a shorter amount of time, because in the beginning we really didn't expect to do the print there. Kathan had left several small panels there on her previous trip — she left work at different shops to see what each one would do. In Suzhou, Kathan just wanted to test the quality of their work, so she said, "Pick out any panel and we'll see what you can do." When we came we found that they had made twenty proofs of one panel.

Oh, how funny!

It was really funny. It was the far right panel of the three-panel print, "Red Wood." It was probably the most difficult, because it was the most layered with dots. Also, there was an area of bright white, which one shop had said they couldn't do at all.

Maybe they picked the most difficult on purpose.

Maybe they did, that's what we wondered. They were able to reproduce the quality of white that was in the painting. And there was also lots of black, and the panel was layered with dots. Not all the proofs were alike, but we were able to point to which parts of ones we liked. At that moment, Kathan decided that we should have them do the other two panels. They had the other pieces, but there were no proofs. So this was a gamble.

You mean they did the others on their own?

Yes, they had done the one so well, we felt we could explain from the drawings what we wanted on the others. When they sent the proofs, there was really only one that I wanted to change. It was a big change and hard to get across, but we did.

By mail?

By mail, by communication. I don't think that would have worked if they hadn't met me and we hadn't talked about it first in person. I changed the second panel of "Scattered Petals." And I didn't have the watercolor to refer to, because they had kept it. I looked at it and it looked too dark, very dark red, and I knew that wasn't quite right because it dominated too much. At first I tried to repaint it, but we were afraid if I repainted it that they would think that we meant they should recut certain blocks. So what we decided to do was just make notes on the proof they had sent us, "Make this a little warmer, cool down this area, keep this area the same." We also sent swatches of color.

And it worked.

They did it. I was really delighted with the outcome. The Suzhou prints have a kind of vibrancy which is different from the sparkliness of those from Duo Yun Xuan. I like both results. The shop in Suzhou is a very different kind of shop from Duo Yun Xuan. It is a lively, more folksy place, whereas Duo Yun Xuan is one of the premier places. It was fascinating to see all these different ways of working. The shops are all different, and they compete with each other. They bring out different aspects of your work. I loved that.

And what about just being in China?

China was truly the trip of my life. I've traveled a lot; I've been to Europe many times, I've been to Hong Kong.

This was not your first trip to the Orient.

It was my third trip, but neither Brad nor I had ever been to China. I feel I will always be grateful to Kathan for the opportunity to go to China. It is as if she presented me with this bouquet. I felt so charmed by eveything, and the people were so nice to us, and that was fantastic.

Did you get a chance to travel?

We made a side trip to climb one of the five sacred mountains, which is called Huang Shan, that many of the Chinese painters have painted. When you see in Chinese painting fog running through the trees, sticking to each leaf, you think it's all imagined, but in fact it is realistic. We drove from Hangzhou to a town called Shexian in an area that was very strong intellectually in the seventeenth-century for painting and scholarship. The best ink is still made in that town. We stayed there for a day, went to the ink factory and the ink stone factory. Because we weren't in a large group, we could talk to people, ask how things were done. They served us tea, and we bought inks. Instead of the tourist kind of inks, I was able to get real vermillion sticks. The next morning we went off to the mountain. We were supposed to take the tram up, spend the night, and walk down, but it was pouring. The next day the fog lifted just long enough to allow us to see the mountain and walk around. Our driver felt sorry for us because of the weather, so on the way back to the town, he offered to take us someplace. He happened to say, "I don't know if you have heard of an artist named Huang Bin Hong. This town is his ancestral home." He happened to be a twentieth-century artist who died in 1955 who both Brad and I are very interested in and collect. The town was tiny. The whole town came out — they probably never saw Westerners. They showed us pictures of their kids, I whipped out a picture of Alec. We went into the painter's house — I don't think anyone in our group had been in a home like this — an old house that still preserved real living space. The townspeople are not allowed in the house ordinarily, so they all trooped in with us, everyone came in. We saw how the house was put together, where the gardens were, where the courtyards were, so it was fascinating, not just because it was this artist's house, but because we could see a typical provincial household of the time. Although I've looked at a lot of Chinese painting, I didn't know if I was attracted only to the painting and whether I would like the country, but I loved it. My feelings were so heightened throughout the trip, I could barely sleep.

You were there in May, 1989 during the student uprising. How aware were you of the political situation?

We followed it very closely. It was almost like being in America in the sixties.

Were you afraid?

No, not for a moment. First of all, we weren't in Beijing.

Where the action was.

Well, there was action everywhere.

Shanghai, too?

And Hangzhou — marches in Hangzhou all the time. Wall posters were up everywhere, people talking about it. We had an experience in a friendship store (where only foreigners are allowed to shop) in a hotel where we had stopped to have a cup of coffee. We were browsing while a march was going by in the street. And all the clerks, primarily young women, rushed into the offices. They were shouting and were obviously in agreement with the marchers; it was very exciting and moving. We followed them into the offices where we were not allowed to be, and one of the young girls turned around to me and said, "You know, we want to be free, too." Tears came to my eyes.

Cover: Janis Provisor with Cai Yan and Professor Yang Yung Hua, Hangzhou, China
All photographs of paintings courtesy Fuller-Gross Gallery, San Francisco,
except photo of *Postponement*, courtesy Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica.

Artforum
May 1985

ARTFORUM

Holly
Solomon
Gallery

ART FORUM, APRIL 1985

Janis Provisor, *Let It Be*, 1984, oil and metal leaf on canvas, 90 × 60".

New York

JANIS PROVISOR, Holly Solomon Gallery; RICHARD STANKIEWICZ, Zabriskie Gallery:

JANIS PROVISOR

The main inspiration for Janis Provisor's recent paintings and works on paper is her fascination with the rocky terrain of Colorado, where she recently settled. In several examples massive structures reminiscent of monumental calcified cliffs appear, while other shapes bring to mind boulders and flora typical of the Southwest. Working in large scale, in oil and metal leaf, Provisor sounds an intriguing iconic note in these landscapes; big enough physically to seem to invite entry, they nevertheless signal viewers to keep their distance. For while the rich, densely textured surfaces serve as a sensual come-on, the curiously flattened perspective and the top-heaviness of the vertical compositions push the images toward abstraction, removing and distancing them from the viewer.

In *Let It Be*, 1984, stony forms colored a brilliant gray seem to emerge from the depths of dark shadows. The tactile treatment of the forms heightens their expressive impact, and the gestural rendering of contours underscores their fantastic quality. Color is used lyrically to bring out a dramatic, confrontational element. The heaven-blue strip of sky surrounding the top of the dominant gray formation, and the work's title, invite contemplation of the painting's possible metaphorical implications. Is Genesis the subject of *Let It Be*? Does the imagery represent the dawn of creation? Perhaps, perhaps not—Provisor leaves the interpretation up to the viewer. It seems she prefers to celebrate rather than to reveal the cosmic mysteries lurking in these landscapes.

BY RONNIE COHEN

New York 10019 Telephone: 757-7777 Area

The New York Times
December 1984

The New York Times

Art:

By MICHAEL BRENSON

Janis Provisor (Holly Solomon Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue): Although Janis Provisor's new works are still filled with personal symbols and tied to her background in New Image and Pattern Painting, they are generally larger, less explicitly personal and more compositionally involved than before. They are also decisively marked by her experience of Chinatown in San Francisco and by the landscapes of Texas and of Colorado, where she now lives.

While the textures and shapes of these paintings suggest fabrics and ornament, they have the feel of a world that is both enchanted and deathly. The show's signature form is a vine that falls like jewelry, but also floats and hovers. The rocks in "Let It Be" also seem ghostly and human. In several paintings, there are phantomlike heads. In "Land of Mine," forms suggest states of female disarray.

The paintings themselves seem to float. In "China Paris," landscape forms in the shape of a map of Paris seem to glide across an Asian field like a cloud. Attracted to the Orient and determined to avoid anything suggesting traditional composition, Provisor seems to have turned to Oriental painting as a compositional guide. The problem is that she does not yet have the feeling for the total surface that the best Oriental painters have always had, in part, as a result of their calligraphic training. Once her paintings become tighter, I think she will have carried Pattern Painting into a realm that it was largely intended to avoid. (Through Dec. 22.)

Arts Magazine
September 1982

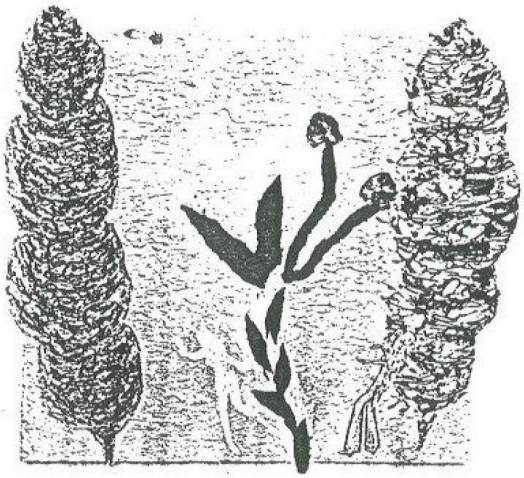
ARTSMAGAZINE

JANIS PROVISOR

The coiled emotion in Janis Provisor's thickly painted new figurative pieces unwinds into the tranquil equilibrium of the opposing triangles of Solomon's Seal (Star of David). Provisor plays out her personal psychodramas on the canvas without losing sight of the socio-political and religious status quo around her. Self-portraits of anxiety and self-discovery in insolent but fabulous colors; lush multi-layered paint surfaces that are visually stunning in the richness of their textures and emotionally gratifying in the depth of their content. Nuclear landscapes are implied in the convex gold-leaf egg shapes; concave pans that recall radar detectors mirror these complementary shapes. The viewer is challenged amidst the barrage of signs and implications. Intimate, personal, but also politically upfront and relevant in their encompassing attentiveness, Provisor's work is engaging and captivating on many levels. (Holly Solomon, *April 14-May 5*)

Artforum
May 1982

ARTFORUM



Janis Provisor, *Roselawn*, 1980, oil, acrylic and modeling paste on canvas, 62½ x 73".

JANIS PROVISOR, Holly Solomon Gallery:

JANIS PROVISOR's new paintings are both the largest and the most iconographically complicated she has made. One of two formats, either a 5½- by 6-foot horizontal or 7- by 2½-foot vertical canvas, and a monochromatic ground are common to all eight. Her palette is stridently up-to-date. It's lush, acrid, neon- and fluorescent-derived, assuredly chemical, completely "artificial": pink, turquoise, bright yellow, purple, red. She also uses lots of white and black. The surfaces of the paintings are equally as distinguished. Uniformly built up from edge to edge with modelling paste and gesso, they present a fluid topography of roughly parallel vertical marks—a thoughtful frosting.

The images—in this case vegetation, figures and various abstract shapes—are appended to bare canvas and built up concurrently with the field. Nonetheless, figure and ground are strictly separated, by contrasting colors and by different applications of paste. The physical treatment of each image complements its meaning. The very literal, all-over surface of the paintings equalizes (and therefore negates) any potential significance of the brush or knife marks, neatly side-stepping one of the morasses of the new Expressionism. And in building each part of the surface without reference to a grid, Provisor moves into a drawing style heretofore the sole province of John Torreano and Joe Zucker. (Each has his own duchy.)

Certain objects, typically rounded shapes that protrude from their frontal planes and their edges, are more obviously "attached" to the paintings than others. These "real things" determine the paintings' space, which is uncommonly tactile, fluid, and to my eyes spherical rather than planar. And this is where Provisor's work diverges from that of Elizabeth Murray and Louisa Chase, two painters to whom I expect she is most frequently compared.

All three employ an implicitly *cloisonné*-like method: every form is rendered with inviolable perimeters, and there are no modulations within each color's boundaries. Provisor's and Chase's color is more temperamental, more rowdy, than Murray's, but both are indebted to her vibrant, high-contrast work of the past eight years. Murray's style came from an intuitive understanding of the expressive possibilities in Al Held's elegant and forcefully idiosyncratic constructs. They take shape in her hands in a range of colors and with a touch that recalls, however unconsciously, Hans Hofmann. Chase runs the same style through a more overtly psychological interpretation to a kind of postdisco pictographic conclusion; the results are handsome but suspect in their topicality. Provisor's work seems more synthetic: if her paintings are analogues, they are about something more than self and identity location.

As the titles of the paintings imply, Provisor is painting landscapes. In each one the coloration of the ground and its physical activity form a mise-en-scène.

The players—miniskirted and bell-bottomed modniks and an occasional, tiny, paint-encrusted Michelin man—share the set with oversized plant forms and an array of less literal shapes that punctuate the schema as protozoa, bubbles, wordless speech balloons, tornadoes of thought or feeling.

Of course, this work is vigorously decorative. It exploits many of the rights only recently restored to the orthodoxy of painting, most fundamentally that of abstract and representational images being allowed to be parts of the same puzzle. More saliently, the work proposes an evolution beyond the painfully elementary, Minimalist-based, figure/ground compositions of what is known vernacularly as New Image painting.

—RICHARD ARMSTRONG

Images & Issues
Spring 1982

JANIS PROVISOR AT UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Berkeley

The figures in Janis Provisor's paintings emit a just-hatched quality similar to that of the emerging pod people in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The figures lack faces, sometimes appearing as flat cutouts snipped from a patterned page.

In *Moon River*, 1981, one of two large canvases and three smaller works on paper included in this exhibition, the genderless figure kneels and holds aloft a large pink bow, which might also be a large pink butterfly. We see no river or moon, and so we are left to assume that the painting refers to an imagined state not confined within the boundaries of the canvas. Provisor allows exotic flower forms to extend beyond the limits of the stretchers, a device that effectively intensifies the surreal qualities of the scene. By increasing our awareness of the canvas, Provisor ensures that we will constantly be reminded that we are looking at a painting. Three-dimensional fluted molds, borrowed from the kitchen and heavily painted, adorn the tips of the largest flower form. An escaping tendril anchors the kneeling figure in an otherwise free-floating background. Even with its unformed features, the figure—lime green and white in contrast to the black, brown, and purple surrounding—is a symbol of hope amid the murk.

Janis Provisor, *Moon River*, 1981. Oil on canvas on plywood, 92 x 72". Courtesy Hansen Fuller-Goldeen Gallery.

Three smaller works, *Visitation Valley*, *Russian Hill*, and *The Mission [District]*, bear the names of San Francisco neighborhoods. They have similar motifs. Solid-color (pink or white) figures, one per picture, step through or are buffeted through, horizonless environments fraught with plant forms. The paint is always thick, and sometimes the color is fragmented into oversized, impressionist brushstrokes.

Provisor uses pop titles for her large canvases, although no apparent connection between titles and images is offered. Perhaps she feels one title is as good as the next, and thus we should not read too much into them. However, when we see a heavily impastoed gold spiderweb, a figure with pink, egglike growths all over its humanlike form, and a tiny white silhouetted female floating off into the forcefully brushed silver infinity (in *After Midnight*), it is impossible *not* to relate the images to a nighttime fantasy.

Is Provisor's painting surreal? Perhaps. She works with large, flat figures and a strong sense of pattern, obvious relatives of current New Image and pattern painting styles. But where do these images come from? If we seek art-historical antecedents, they resemble the visionary, God-and-creation forms of William Blake. The backgrounds, metallic and doomed to darkness, are the primordial ooze or a physical metaphor for the mess we have made of the world today. The figures and the plant forms are a new order, seriously mutated—very sci-fi. Provisor can be seen as working at cross-purposes. She uses rich colors, built-up paint surfaces, gleaming metals. As do other New Image painters, she also uses visual metaphors. The result refers to the fullness of life, the depth of experience, and so on. Right? Wrong. The quasi-pop sensibility, the flatness, and the superficiality win out, and in the midst of plenty, Provisor gives us a shallowness that refers not to the paintings themselves but to some of our lives. —**Mary Stofflet**

images & issues

The Oakland Tribune
January 1982

The Oakland Tribune

'Matrix' artists' layering full of visual mysteries

By Charles Shere
Tribune Art Critic

Janis Provisor's paintings, currently exhibited as part of the ongoing "Matrix" series of installations at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, are strong, rich, deep work.

They are major examples of a kind of painting which developed in the last few years in a curious historical repetition. As the Bay Area Figurative movement returned to recognizable subject matter in the 1950s, reacting against Abstract Expressionism, so these "New Imagists" reacted against the minimal developments of color-field painting.

Much of their impact was blunted by a side issue — the kind of imagery chosen. In New York and various other places that often tended toward decorative patterning, that style gained another name — "P and D" painting, for pattern and decoration.

But the major work has been done by artists like Provisor, many of them from this area. Provisor herself grew up in Ohio and lives in New York, but studied at the San Francisco Art Institute.

What the best of these painters have in common is an urge to use painting to confront deeper issues. They aren't afraid of incorporating drama and mystery in their work, to be enigmatically narrative, to be bold.

They often work the surface with deep layers of impasto, using Rhoplex or other kinds of modeling material, metallic pigments, and objects fastened to the surface as well as oil or acrylic.

And they are more often than not women. The reasons for that are open to speculation, and so are the implications, but the fact may not be

GALLERY ROUNDUP

irrelevant to the often profound, humanistic implications of their work.

Provisor shows two large paintings here, nearly eight feet high by six wide, and a trio of smaller paintings on paper. All of them are ambiguous — disturbing at first, perhaps, as the gallery handout suggests, in their vaguely menacing aspects (especially the small ones, which are named for areas of San Francisco and show small figures in apparently threatening urban environments).

Yet they are also curiously resigned, natural, correct. The large figures in "After Midnight" and "Moon River" are really neither threatened nor threatening, but have apparently assumed their proper place in their fields. If there are suggestions of attachment, even of oppression, there is also the suggestion of an internal power, the capability to withstand and prevail.

Provisor's richly luminous surfaces, even when they are nearly coal-black, often highlighted by a burnished metallic glow, convey that visual impression of deep inner strength. The dream-like imagery — including giant plant forms, spider webs and magical human presences — suggest the power of subconsciously, perhaps collectively subconsciously glimpsed truths.

The work is not narrative. There can be no single story in them. No "interpretation" will reveal their artistic meaning. They are bigger and deeper than that.

The new reinstallation of paintings in the University Art Museum's permanent collection, downstairs in Gallery B, continues the theme with a splendid sequence on two adjacent walls.

Provisor's "Royal Images," Jess' "Mrs. Sara Winchester," Alexander Maldonado's "Wax Museum," Hassel Smith's "More About 9," Roy d Forest's "Alias Sam Dodsworth" and the nearby "Journey No. 3" by Joan Brown and "Origin" by Jay de Feo carry on a nonverbal dialogue with one another — and with the Provisors upstairs.

Part of this is a simple matter of technique. Her heavy layers of impasto reflect a concern similar to de Feo's an Jess'.

All three artists probe the mysteries of their own painting in this heavy layering — the visual mysteries, and those concerning the origin of painting, of the visual concept, and of the control and guidance leading the final image out of the materials.

International Herald Tribune
October 1981

INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune

A Bit of SoHo in Amsterdam

by Rona Dobson

AMSTERDAM — Going out on a limb, an Amsterdam gallery has arranged a show of young artists' work from New York by linking up with the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York's SoHo art area. Enterprise, initiative and naturally high hopes of success are all part of the venture, but so is the element of risk.

New York foments with art activity and is open to all comers, with a public keen to sample new experiences. The Netherlands is in a much more conservative phase, at least where American art is concerned; people here prefer lithos, prints and drawings by known names to original works by a new generation of unknowns. The Dutch tend to look toward the new German art generation in particular and to admire the density of painting and somber colors of the recent figurative swing there, stemming probably from a touch of youthful nostalgia for the old-style German expressionism.

Yet the work of these young Americans at the American Graffiti Gallery, 20 Berenstraat, Amsterdam, until Oct. 21 is fresh and new and indicates a change in mood. One of the three, Michael Mogavero, paints very much in the restless, busily patterned expressionist idiom, although he is more disciplined and composed into a painterly whole than most of the dissonant canvases shown as New German Art in a recent large exhibition in Brussels. Mogavero, who has strong expressionist affinities within his clear, descriptive, figurative style, takes up where some of the 1940s American artists left off.

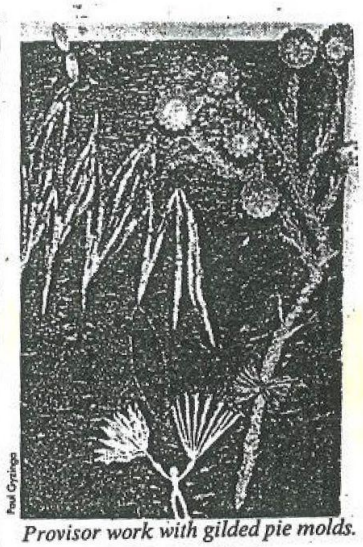
In each painting, a frieze of figures or a single figure — dressed in casual outfits with their casually theatrical effect — dominates a background of distant apartment blocks, city streets, trees, mansions, a glimpse of highway, all against a restless weave of clashing pattern that creates tension and provokes curiosity.

Most of the gallery's spectators might have stepped straight out of Mogavero's canvases; most wore the same carefully offhand colorful mix of garb, scarlet boots and grubby sneakers, tunics and T-shirts, jeans and capes, most formed the same shifting clusters in much the same poses as their counterparts on the walls. Yet most were Dutch, the city was Amsterdam, not New York. Few seemed to notice that Mogavero, without leaving the United States, has caught and conveyed a universal phenomenon, a sharp moment of actuality.

Janis Provisor, another of the three artists from New York, is also involved with her own time, putting an unaggressive accent on feminism in her paint-on-paper compositions. These show small female figures running or just released from wide-spun webs strung like menacing suns in a gaudy sky. Her colors recall textile imprints that aim to catch the eye, deliberately assertive and brash and splashed with sparkle.

In the largest work of the show, Provisor clamps scallop-sided pie molds to her painted scene, gilding the humble cooking utensils to garish gold. Falling out of the painting is a tiny, pink-striped clay figure hanging on the sprays of painted greenery by fingertips. Her art apes a nursery school picture book, discards subtlety of color or form, scores a point without ponderous pretension.

Jared Bark's work is cooler and more strictly controlled, his sense of composition strong. He offers a feeling of space and light, with small gray plunging figures, like paper silhouettes spilled from a book, strewn across a color field of pale pink in one work; inserted panes of glass, shivered into neat raylike striations, combine with more silhouette figures in others.


Paul Grubpp

Provisor work with gilded pie molds.

One eccentric and imaginative work by Bark shows a burning log cabin in one corner, smoke flaring from behind it into a tall tree shape, watched from the other side by a larger-than-life head crowned by a flame-shaped coxcomb of hair. Probably a European public will find Bark's work, with its surreal overtones, more reassuringly familiar than Mogavero's observant paintings of people and sketchy cityscapes or Provisor's gaudy thrust, but all three deserve to be studied with interest as signals from across the Atlantic. ■

Janis Provisor, First Impressions, 1980. *Oil, acrylic, rhoplex, and modeling paste on canvas, 23¾ x 23⅛ ". Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery.*

JANIS PROVISOR

Two years ago, Janis Provisor exhibited paintings which are fundamental to an understanding of her present work. The paintings were, more specifically, objects in a strictly sculptural sense: painted reliefs which had an intense numenistic quality that exuded mystery. The work fulfilled the artist's intentions at that time to make paintings that were like icons or objects of some religious ceremony, or ritual, or event which was affecting but not necessarily understood.

This concern with ritualistic presence allowed the artist to set up situations or to create events in which handmade objects or emblems were placed on canvases that had a square format and surfaces built-up by paint into highly textured grounds or fields. The sense of ritual was furthered by the deliberate placement of objects almost ceremoniously on the textured grounds. The sense of mystery was made pervasive by the nature of the objects which seemed to be the discrete particulars of a private vocabulary derived from archetypal forms or images; circles and concentric circles, spirals and crosses were combined with a large leaf-like form, architectural and biomorphic or anatomical forms, and a variety of dots and mounds which served to punctuate the groupings and sequential orderings of elements, or to accent dimensional things.

Beyond the mystery and ritual, a more important problem seems to reside at the core of the new work, a problem that finds little explanation by simply stating that the artist's work is personal. The problem for Janis Provisor is how to objectify the self, its emotional life and inner response to an external world. How is she to make this process not merely visible, but concretely material and tangibly real? In part, the solution still resides in her desire to make paintings that are objects: paintings that present actual handmade figures on textured grounds within the concrete and specific conditions of sculptural relief.

If Provisor understates painting's inherent illusionism in favor of sculptural objecthood, it must be added that she trades it for an emblematic use of objects which converts a thing into a signifier of another thing, and which withdraws the sculptural object from real space and places it within a metaphorical context.

This is not done at the expense of the power of paint to operate in the sensual arena as an expressive medium, however. Provisor employs oil paint, acrylics, and acrylic medium as material to convey the metaphoric content of her images in a frankly physical and sensuous manner. Color is strong, assertive, ranging from somber, nocturnal blacks and blues to ice-cream pastels; from zany carnival colors, hot pinks and yellows, to muted earth colors of ochers and browns.

In the current show, the painting *Thee Illusions* seems to celebrate this process of metaphoric conversion: the objects placed upon an encrusted black field maintain their emblematic identity as a kind of ornament put on or placed in the surface; or they function as signifiers of other things (for example, one shape can be read as leaf or as tree). The painting contains shapes that will appear in other paintings: an egg shape, an oval, a figure-eight. These shapes are made to function in many ways. They are both ambiguous and multi-referential, such that the egg shape of *Thee Illusions* can be nailed down in a painting called *First Impressions* and in part of a larger work, *Low Creatures*, as a lake or pool; however, that same shape in *Hawaiian Gardens* and in other work takes on a more hermetic and less accessible aspect.

Color is also made to function in ways that are either referential or ambiguous. In the paintings *Lakeland Lovers* and *First Impressions*, the blue can be read as either sky or water. The color can be said to be associative. In *Midnight*, it is not clear if the title refers to the dominant shape in the painting's center; the use of color here is ambiguous.

This power of converting objects into metaphors or signifiers has importance only in how it relates to the overall concern of the artist to extend the self and to objectify the self in the work. The handmade quality of the emblematic forms are indeed an extension of the self.

The process of making the forms entails a variety of methods of handling: rolling, pulling, and twirling the pigment until the objects are shaped into their characteristic forms as ovals, leaves, concentric circles, etc. This process also underscores their making as extensions of the performing self: dance in the movements used to make the emblems, and ritual in the highly deliberated placing of them on the canvas.

The paintings are powerful objects that convey the artist's sense of place as the conjunction of people, feelings, and things lifted out of the continuum and transformed into emblems that embody Provisor's experience of the world. This expands on the mystical and hermetic content of earlier work to accommodate the more specific subject of the self's response to place—its interaction with the people of a place in pictures like the *Dukes of Frisco*; the things and creatures of a place as in *Lakeland Lovers*, *Low Creatures*, and *First Impressions*. In *First Impressions*, however, the elements are compressed in such a manner that they nearly obliterate the field, yet assert themselves as the very concrete particulars of place: a snail, a pool, a branch, weed, or twig.

Provisor, in her second exhibit in New York and first one-person show, has given us paintings that are important in their manner of addressing the psychological necessity of presenting the self and its response to the world, a problem that is one of the few easily identifiable concerns of Post-Modernist art. She restores our power to believe in art's capacity to change the appearance of the way we perceive the self and the world. Janis Provisor's new paintings transfigure the commonplace. (Holly Solomon, *April 12-May 3*)

art
January 1980

art

Linear sculptures displayed at Nelson, Pence galleries

By DEL McCOLM
Arts editor

Ralph Ellison's book, "Invisible Man" published in 1952, describes a room containing electric light bulbs glowing in rows from ceiling to floor in what could be one of the first installation pieces. The creator's motive was revenge on the electric company, not self-expression or a desire to change perceptions of the world, but the idea of light and linear sculptures evidently has appealed to artists for awhile.

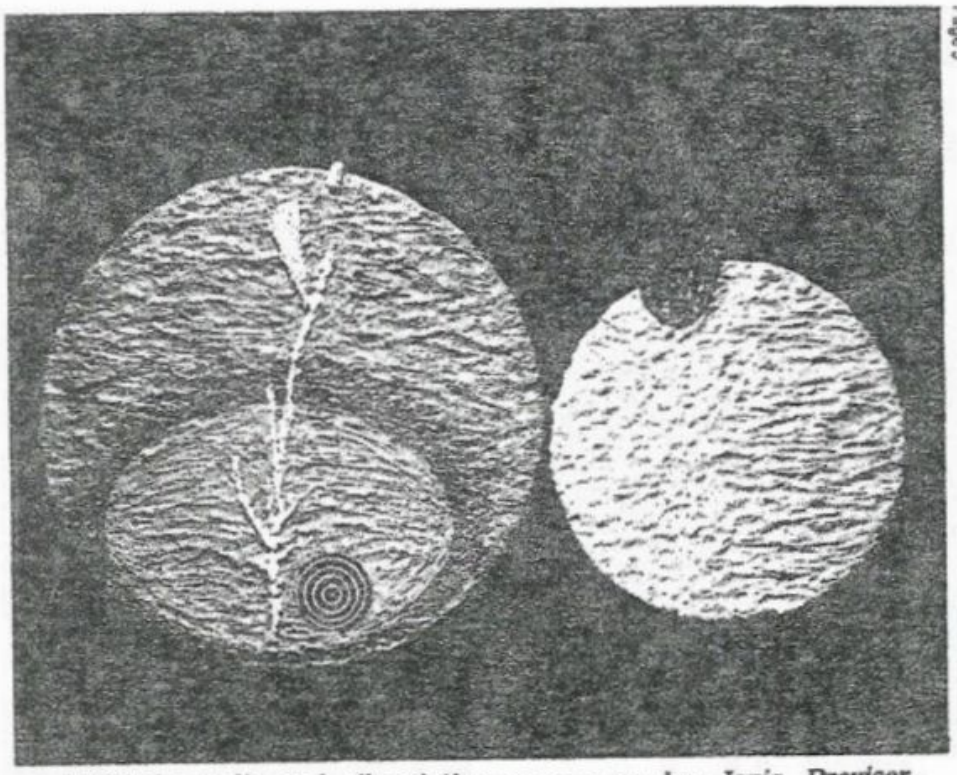
Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto constructed linear sculptures of walls of light cords with light bulbs in 1967 titled "Picture of Electric Wires," and he'll repeat the performance at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in a show opening Feb. 29.

Davis has two linear sculpture shows now, one at the Pence Gallery by Ronda Stavig, a vertical cat's-cradle in color filling half the gallery, and the other by Kathy Goodell at the UC Davis Nelson Gallery in the Art Building.

Goodell sculpts in wire. One of her sculptures includes sixteen parallel lines from the high gallery ceiling which form a massive but almost invisible rectangle and carry two large wings set at right angles. So close they nearly brush each other, the lower wing is almost at floor level. Made of wires and small, clear glass beads, they sway slightly, separately like a Calder mobile, as you walk past. Shadows mark their swaying, subtly extending the sculpture's territory. Although the untitled piece possesses monumental bulk, the effect is airy, light, fragile, ethereal, an imaginative use of volume without weight.

Goodell achieves poetic results with the most unlikely materials, wires, glass beads, a magnifying glass. The 32 year old San Francisco artist received undergraduate and master of art's degrees from San Francisco Art Institute in 1972 and has won three grants: the National Endowment Individual Artist' grant in 1979 and the Fulbright-Hays to Romania and California Commission for the Arts grants in 1976. She has taught at California State University, San Francisco, the SFAI, Santa Rosa Junior College and California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland.

Janis Provisor's symbolic, thickly textured paintings with a strong design element and astringent colors work very well with the subtle Goodell sculptures. Strong personal images of her "urban landscapes" include an oval pond, dead leafless tree and rose, which have evolved



Untitled acrylic and oil painting on canvas by Janis Provisor, Nelson Gallery, UCD Art Building through Feb. 5

from being a few of many ingredients to being the only elements in her more interesting, most recent work.

The pond itself is set within a circle which becomes the shape of the latest of the series. This circular format is repeated in smaller size nudging the pond in her personal symbolism, which she calls "icons." Edges are invaded by a rose and a caterpillar in a Roy Deforest touch and the frame is the room in which it is displayed in one of the most effective installations ever seen in Davis. The spotlight focused on the painting sets up color vibrations as you enter the edge of the light pool on the floor in the windowless closet-sized inner gallery, painted a heavy deep blue which seems to absorb all air.

Provisor, who received a Ford Foundation grant in 1978, has had significant shows at the Holly Soloman Gallery n New York in 1979, the Nan Lurie Gallery in Chicago, and the Hansen Fuller Gallery in San Francisco.

Gallery hours are noon to 5 p.m. weekdays, 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday. The exhibition is open through Feb. 5.

Stavig's installation piece at the Pence is a whimsical cage into which the viewer can walk—carefully.

Colors shimmer as you walk along hundreds of colored yarn lengths strung from ceiling. It's humorous, clever and it works, with hues changing. It's not a polished piece; the lines are attached crudely to the ceiling, but the idea is provocative.

Plastic pick up sticks bristle across these lines, breaking their linear regularity, a theme she also uses in her small, vivid watercolor paintings.

Her subject is landscapes, each reduced to generalized images drawn from memory, she says. Other characteristics are heightened color and the same linear regularity whether her subject is trees or furrows in farmlands.

Stavig won first prize in drawing at the October Artfest in 1979 with an intense expressionist self-portrait. This exhibition, with the color installation piece and landscapes, does not really indicate the full scope of her work. She received her undergraduate degree from UC Davis in 1978 and has had her work included in the Northern California Arts and Crafts Show.

Davis Enterprise—Weekend

Artforum
November 1980

Art in America

Janis Provisor: *Old Times*, 1980, oil and acrylic on canvas, 82¾ by 31¾ inches; at Hansen Fuller Goldeen. (Review on p. 144.)

SAN FRANCISCO

Janis Provisor at Hansen Fuller Goldeen

Janis Provisor's dramatic new paintings reassert the primacy of paint. In her hands, paint becomes Play-Dough; she moves beyond impasto, skeining and tollhouse-dotting to elaborate her surfaces with the dexterity of a ceramicist building a flashy, fetishistic assemblage. In the mid-'70s Provisor interwove strips of canvas, joining those artists then experimenting with the layered look. Now she begins with an intense, choppy, monochrome sea of oil paint onto which she appliqués an apparently arbitrary collection of referential images often made of papier mâché, sometimes supported by screening or formed in molds. Provisor's images generally function, however, simply as pretexts for the display of paint. In *Old Times*, a thick purple ground threatens to engulf everything—an anorectic seaweed tree that resembles a fissure, two giant fronds that refuse to remain within the frame, a trio of metallic blobs attached to one corner, a handful of cancerous green vegepods sprouting thorny encrustations, a lone white nodule, a black clove-studded crescent, and, finally, a silhouetted black figure, dancing, running or perhaps reacting with terror.

Despite their naïve iconography, these paintings have tremendous presence. Yet they do not breathe the way Clement Greenberg thought paintings should; their density precludes atmosphere. They are also drastically centripetal—black holes which absorb matter and energy. Closed off to the world, agoraphobic in the extreme, Provisor's work remains open to all the resources made available by paint itself. She is encyclopedic in her ambition to use anything—any palette, any texture, any technique, any mix of materials—that serves her purpose. She follows van Gogh (and Wayne Thiebaud) in stoking up the ground at points of focus, Hofmann in contrasting broad planes against involuted local maelstroms, Miró and Pollock in working with her canvas on the floor.

Long preoccupied with ex-voto, fetishistic emblems, Provisor now uses the human figure—"Something I never thought I'd do again and haven't since undergraduate days." But it is the incongruity of Provisor's silhouetted figures that makes them appropriate to her cut-and-paste approach to the surface. They appear to have been thrust into an alien environment as lurid and inhospitable as that of '50s Japanese sci-fi—the irradiated blobs continue to grow; the foliage still festers.

In their estrangement, Provisor's figures read as surrogates for the artist. She is, in fact, so alienated from nature that her reference point seems to be Caspar David Friedrich, the city-dweller stranded on a rock, gazing off into the hazy distance. Yet her figures also seem to long for some kind of attachment. In a dazzling canvas that was not completed in time for the exhibition, the presence of *two* figures implies the possibility of a relationship, of a narrative beyond mere terror or frenzy.

—*Howard Junker*

Art Week
November 1979

Art Week

Six Counterformalists

Santa Barbara / **Mindy Lorenz**

Bay Area/Contemporary Strengths, a multimedia exhibit organized by Phyllis Plous at the Art Museum of the University of California, includes the work of six Bay Area artists who, in Plous' view, have become figures of strength within their media and leaders in the general shift of formal values during the 1970s. Wide-ranging sensibilities are visible in installations and video by Howard Fried and Paul Kos, photographs by Ellen Brooks and Jim Pomeroy, paintings by Janis Provisor and sculpture by Dorothy Reid.

Sculpture has undergone radical redefinition during the 1970s, and Reid's work participates in such concerns with simple materials, obsessive process, fragile yet tenacious structure and sculptural/architectural metaphors for shelter or containment. *Reflection,* 1979, a long, suspended sculpture consisting of twenty-five pairs of iron chains and thin wooden dowels wrapped with layers of white fabric, suggests many kinds of organic and inorganic skeletal structures. Like an ephemeral abstraction of the inverted columns and ribs of a cloister, this piece disorients our normal perception of architectonic structure and space, yet remains consistent with some aspects of linear perspective. Three other pieces by Reid are made of papier mache, chalk and pencil, placed on or against the wall.

Provisor's thickly textured oil and acrylic paintings on canvas also deal with obsessive process, layered materials, ritual and personal symbolism. Drawing from her experience of the physical and psychic environment of the Texas hill country, Provisor creates emblematic images intuitively yet meticulously, placing them on thickly painted color fields that wrap around the edges of the canvas. Her process combines aspects of painting, sculpture and collage, with some painted shapes projecting in high relief. Sumptuous texture, glowing color, opalescent translucency and crisp edges characterize the paintings, which suggest mystical and primitive associations with nature.

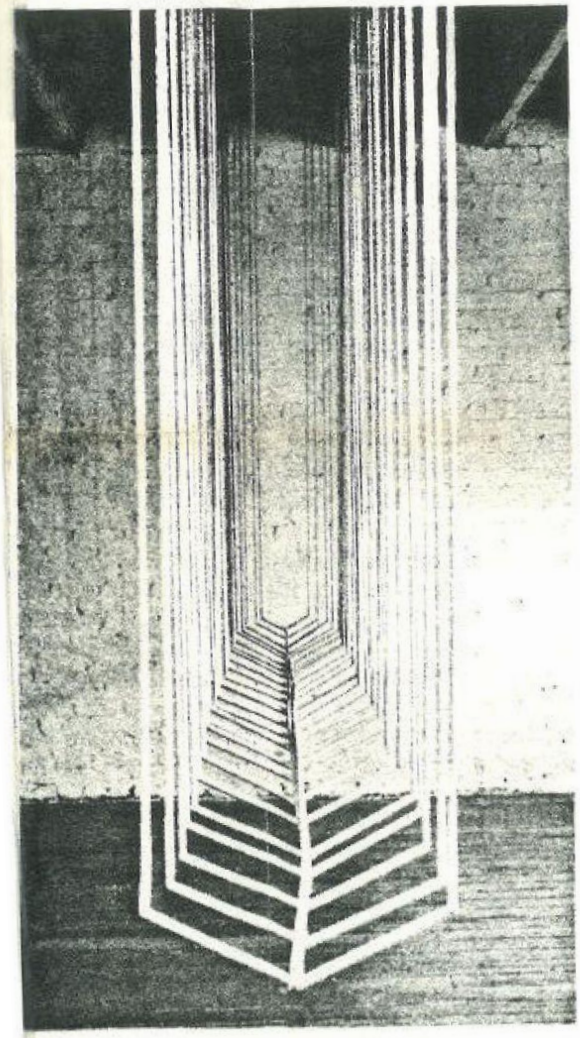
Memory images and narrative content are central to Brooks' eight untitled photographic tableaux fabricated from objects previously collected and specifically made for the setups. The works view from above the private rooms of participants engaged in highly charged dramas. Small, manipulable, adult

Continued on next page

Six Counterformalists, continued

nude dolls, complete with genitalia and shoes, are the protagonists amid props carefully selected for maximum implication and mystery. Brooks' work has the power to elicit in the viewer strong personal, often sexual fantasies which augment and make explicit aspects of the artist's ambiguous information.

Pomeroy uses a different approach in his stereoscopic fabrications with Cibachrome prints from a series called *Making the World Safe for Geometry*, 1978. Designed to provide the illusion of three-dimensions, these images combine dramatic settings, like Stonehenge or an astronaut on the moon, with minimalist sculptural elements. When viewed stereoptically, they have overwhelming spatial impact and offer funny and imaginative new perceptions of familiar sights. As visual art criticism, whose playfulness parodies fundamental premises of modernism, these "altered postcards" update Duchamp's concept of "Readymade-Aided" and provoke reassessment of the idea, materialism, documentation and accessibility of art.



DOROTHY REID: REFLECTION, *1979, fabric, wood and chain, 12'x 16"x 16', at UC Santa Barbara.*

Where we are observers of Pomeroy's imaginary sculptural installations, we become participants in Kos' installation, *Evolution: Notes for the Invasion-mar mar march*, first presented in 1972. Working with the spatiotemporal implications of video, Kos creates controlled environments in which the viewer gathers data and draws conclusions, not only about the piece, but about general problems of processing multimedia information into meaningful communication. The installation consists of a thirty-foot long room, dimly lit with red light, containing regularly spaced 2x4s on the floor and a small video monitor and other objects on an altarlike table at the far end. Upon entering, one hears typing sounds beating a monotonous marching rhythm and is induced to move forward, stepping high over the boards, to find out more information. Gradually the pieces of the puzzle come together as the visual material at the far end explains the audio and kinesthetic data.

Fried is also concerned with the way in which information becomes communication, using sculptural installation, video and film, either separately or together. However, where Kos' work allows the viewer to reach conclusions, Fried's pieces are provokingly indefinite. The classic psychological approach-avoidance system provides underlying structure and meaning to both pieces in this show: *Fireman's Conflict-Resolution* 1972, 1978, 1979, a sculptural installation of steel, wood, paint and text; and a videotape, *Vito's Reef*, 1978. This superb video (effectively installed by Paul Prince) combines control of the best inherent features of the medium with remarkably well-developed personal content. In both the installation and the video, visual imagery works with verbal expression to present Freed's basic premise, attacking it from all sides. Contradiction, opposition, irresolution and arbitrariness are expressed through surprising metaphors involving physical action such as sports or sex. Potential violence, frenzied frustration or disaster looms in both pieces, but so do humor and love.

Considering the number of Bay Area artists providing leadership in various directions, the show might have made its point more impressively by including more artists. On the other hand, it could have focused on installation-video-performance work, since the Bay Area is internationally noted for this genre. Regardless of the question of more or less, the exhibition offers a valuable opportunity to see the work of six artists on the cutting edge of important directions for the 1980s. □

Art Week
1978

Austin American-Statesman

Janis Provisor

at New Orleans Museum of Art

(New Orleans, Louisiana)

A sophisticated vocabulary of symbols embedded in a thickly encrusted surface of paint is the substance of Janis Provisor's exhibit at the New Orleans Museum of Art. Both strangely feminine and powerful, Provisor's symbols make allusions to ritual objects in an arrangement that conveys obsession.

She describes her work as "diagrams of a neo-ritualistic presence . . . related to the trappings and 'language' of ritual and/or logical sequence in both a decorative and structural sense, rather than any precise notion of content."

Provisor exhibits in three basic modes: large unstretched canvases stiffened with layers of acrylic and Rhoplex, 84" x 86"; small stretched paintings, 22" x 23"; and works on paper in gouache and acrylic, 29" x 41". By utilizing the same basic shapes in the same size, but altering the scale and the surface treatment within each of the categories, the paintings have quite different effects within a consistent approach.

In choosing nearly square formats for the large and small paintings on canvas, and accentuating the center as well as the edge, the ritualistic aspect dominates. There is power in the tension created by the unconventional placement and choice of shapes, and in the texture and off-beat use of color.

The arrangement and strong treatment of the shapes defy a strictly decorative appearance such a style might suggest, and causes them to operate like symbols of a distinct visual language.

In the large paintings, a wide border is frequently used on three or four edges, with a surface treatment varying from raised, brilliantly-colored squiggles to only subtle color change from that of the center. There is no use of a grid in evidence, but the positioning of symbols implies an intuitively-felt geometrical substructure.

The works on paper are larger than the small paintings on canvas and of a more obviously rectangular format. Provisor responds to both this surface and proportion choice by using a matte gouache for the basic ground cover and arranging shapes in a more complex way.

Her recent exhibits include: the Watson/deNagy Gallery, Houston; David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto; Protetch-McIntosh Gallery, Washington, D.C. The New Orleans one-person exhibition is the result of a recommendation of the 1977 Artists Biennial juror, Jack Boulton, Associate Director of the American Federation of Arts' International Exhibitions Committee in Washington, D.C., who selected four artists from the 1256 who submitted work. (March 10-April 9).

—*Mary McIntyre*

Mary McIntyre is art critic for the *American Statesman*, Austin, Texas.

Janis Provisor
Amberly, 1977
Oil and acrylic on canvas
22" x 23"
Courtesy Watson-deNagy Gallery