EXPANDING NARRATIVES OF INTERIORITY

Jessica Dickinson visits Min Kim in her studio. Having just reread Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, they discuss Min's work in progress, sources of creative impulse, narratives, and the influences of their matriarchal lineage. Recorded February 5, 2005

JESSICA: I wanted to start this morning out by sharing this passage I often dwell on from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. It's about a character that returns from a long sea voyage with tales of hardship. While at sea, the character longs for the safety of the shore. But while on land, he can only be suspect of such comfort, longing again for the sea, for in "landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite . . ." Melville speaks about the pull of the sailor to the sea as a metaphor for the struggle to be open in thinking and facing the unknown.

> *Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore.*[1]

MIN: That makes me think of Dr. Richard Kalter,[2] and how he would talk about Socrates taking a stroll on the shore next to a great body of water, conjuring up all these amazing thoughts and philosophies. It's interesting that when *A Room of One's Own* begins, Virginia Woolf is sitting by the water, lost in thought.

JESSICA: Yes, she's sitting on the banks of the river on a college campus, trying to come to a conclusion for the lecture she's going to give on "Women and Fiction." It was 1928 in England. Sitting by the water conjured up in her a striking thought, which gets her very excited. She walks toward the campus greens to explore these ideas, only to be stopped by a man that says women aren't allowed—that it's only for Fellows and Scholars. She loses the idea she has and thinks she might go to the library to look at a famous manuscript for inspiration, but she's told that women may only enter the library if accompanied by a Fellow, or with a letter of introduction. She writes: "That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library."[3]

She's bringing to light the fact that, at that time, a woman wanting to complete a thought or idea was not given the facilities and support to do so. She has the desire, but these barriers prevent the development of her ambitions. The subject of her lecture, which was written for a female audience, is that for women to become great writers and creators, they need a "room of their own" to work in without interruption, which requires the ability to financially support themselves, or to have a benefactor.

The majority of the book consists of Woolf trying to figure out why there were so few women writers of merit, and how this could change. She observes that everything written by men about why women haven't written canonical works takes as a given that women are inferior and do not possess the ability to do so. She agrees that "a woman could never have had Shakespeare's genius"[4] in the time of Shakespeare, because it was virtually impossible for women to gain the life experiences and receive the education that allowed him to develop a writing craft, let alone the respect to even consider it.

MIN: It was very hard for me to engage with the whole story from the beginning, because I think I was stopped by that notion of what restrictions women had at that time—and how to relate that to myself right now. It was hard getting into the first part of the book.

JESSICA: Yes, it's a very specific book in that it's addressing issues in literature, politics, and academics in that period of time in England. But if you get through the whole thing it starts to expand more.

MIN: I am getting to a point in the book where it becomes a lot more interesting for me in the sense that she starts to talk about leaving that past and those restrictions behind and engaging herself and/or the creative person in a more worldly sense. She says to be able to be completely creative you have to leave that behind and engage yourself with the world. And that's something that you and I can relate to at this point in time.

JESSICA: A freedom to be where you are and see where you are; to look at things and to address them and to also

look into yourself . . . and that's what she sees in the future for creative women. I have lots of little stickies in this book . . . on almost every page! I'm trying to understand this book also. It's challenging in 2005 to read something like this, but although she's writing it specifically to women in 1928, she's also writing it to all of time. It's important to remember that less than a hundred years ago, it was hard for women to get an education, and it was only in 1920 in America that they were first allowed to vote. I remember one of my older professors in art school exposing the fact that when he studied art in the early sixties, it was still a serious issue among his male teachers whether women could paint or not, and plenty of them believed women couldn't.

MIN: Maybe she foresaw what would happen in a hundred years, and how women would be involved in diverse professions, but still, some of the issues may be continuing in different forms.

JESSICA: It's well noted that women are sparse in the 'canon.' In some ways, I think in her plowing through these books for answers to questions of women and fiction, she sees that there is a whole experience in life that has hardly been expressed in words or images by women, and that there is so much that will come out once women can fully access what men have had access to for thousands of years. And in many ways, women will harbor new thoughts, visions, motivations, and life to the fields that seem like they're out of ideas.

Since women have not had the opportunity to make art or form ideas to their full extent, perhaps their drive will create freshness and change where it was thought there were no more statements to be made. Perhaps witnessing the nooks, crannies, small tragedies, and margins of life will give insight to the larger life they are going to witness, and bring light to subjects that have been hashed out long ago. Being on the margins of the canon will create new, unheard poetry, for insignificance fosters a certain amount of freedom when searching for a voice.

She feels that all those creative women that were not allowed to bring their story to form will come through "if we work for her"…that "Shakespeare's sister will put on the body she has so often laid down" [5]in suicidal desperation because of her restrictions. So, in her terms, we're creating stories and poetics with all these years of unknown and unexpressed lives behind us and ahead of us, yet we're culminating at this certain point in time and trying to get that piece of work out.

MIN: I like when she relates the notion of fiction to a spiderweb, how it's ever-so-gently attached to real life. And I feel like that's how our work is too. It's narrative. It can be seen as something that is very removed from our daily lives, but I think that if you really looked into it, every part of our daily lives is in our work.

JESSICA: That relationship between creating narratives and experiencing life is a thread throughout this book. When Woolf is nearing the end of her lecture on women and fiction, she says she wishes she could have a concluding statement for her female audience that would be exalting and ennobling:

> *I should implore you to remember your responsibilities, to be higher, more spiritual; I should remind you how much depends upon you, and what an influence you can exert upon the future. But those exhortations can safely, I think, be left to the other sex, who will put them, and indeed have put them, with far greater eloquence that I can compass. When I rummage in my own mind I find no noble sentiments about being companions and equals and influencing the world to higher ends. I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else. Do not dream of influencing other people, I would say, if I knew how to make it sound exalted. Think of things in themselves.*[6]

MIN: As a creative person, it took me a long time to realize that there is so much freedom—that I can do whatever I want to do. There are so many things that I have been influenced and inspired by. When I look into myself there's freedom there. I realized I have so much to give, because I have been taking in so many different things for so long, there's so much in me to give through my work.

JESSICA: It wasn't until after graduate school that I really started to look at things, after reading and thinking and worrying about my place in things, I remember feeling this freedom to really just look at things as they are, and my relationship to them. I tend to think about time and history as this thing that is stirred into a big pot; that the artwork, ideas, literature, and music of the past—ancient or twenty years ago—is still very alive now, stirred into what I see while walking down the street, into everyday interactions.

When I first moved to New York I would go to the Met all the time, and I would go look at everything, every kind of art there—the marginal and the canonical. But I was also looking everywhere for everything, at museums, at shops, looking at trees. We could choose, if we wanted, to only look at things made in the last twenty years, but there

are thousands and thousands of years of space and matter and art and ideas to interact with and to be influenced and inspired by.

MIN: For me to make the type of work I make, the Met is a very important place to me. I love going there to look at the Greek sculptures, the miniature Persian paintings, and the armor. We are striving to make something new, something more interesting, something we have never seen before. And to do that, I think it's important to see and know the incredible things that were created before us.

The first time I got so struck by an artwork was when I was in college. I was at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore. I was passing through some rooms where they exhibited Egyptian art. I had no real interest in Egyptian art at the time. But as I was passing through a room, I saw a head looking at me. It was a bust of King Tut made of granite. His eyeballs weren't there. It was a very simply stylized sculpture and something about that sculpture really changed my life—about ten years ago. What I saw there, I can't even really describe. I felt a strong presence—and it wasn't King Tut. Of course there is a great history that describes King Tut's life, but for me, it was something very different from that. It was the effort, love, and time that the sculptor had put into the art. I remember standing there, almost in tears, hoping that someday I would be able to make works that are very similar to this—art that moves people.

JESSICA: Sometimes I think that it's a presence that connects us to reality. To survive we have to go about our days a little distanced from reality, because it's just a little too intense, yet that intensity is often connected to experiencing beauty. That kind of art, through the care and courage of whoever made it, brings about a physical reality to allow us to have those moments of connecting to reality. Woolf talks about the need for women to go out and experience all levels of reality in order to communicate it through the work they make—not reality as in description, but as in bringing a life to their work.

> *What is meant by "reality"? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of the Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates . . . .So that when I ask you to earn money and have a room of your own, I am asking you to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life, it would appear, whether one can impart it or not.*[7]

Let's look at your work, Min.

MIN: This is what I am working on [FIG. 1]**—I've been working on it for a while. I've had to redo some things. I thought it was going to be contained on one piece of paper, but it's going to grow larger.**

JESSICA: Is it ink?

MIN: It's ink, acrylic, and colored pencil. The water has the colored pencil—I kind of like the effect it makes.

JESSICA: It has a sparkly cool feeling to it. But it also looks like a fire, because all these creatures are gathered around it; you have a bunny, and a tortoise and a . . . ?

MIN: A donkey?

JESSICA: And a . . . ?

MIN: A squirrel cat?

JESSICA: And a . . . ? A you? A girl? And they are settling or bringing up this water?

MIN: They are calming the water down. This piece comes from a dream I had of me being chased by a humongous, colorful vehicle driven by a guy. I was in this big dark vacant space. The vehicle came and for some reason, it came to destroy me. I was so scared. As I was running around to get away from it, I saw a bed of water. It was very shallow and sparkly. I saw all my artwork on it—there were cutouts and drawings floating above the water. I was really scared that the tank-like vehicle would destroy everything I had made. Every time the car passed by us, the water would become angry and lift the artwork, making them fly away. So I stood there with all these animals, and we put our hands out together to calm the water. This piece comes from that dream, but it obviously doesn't have my artwork over water.

JESSICA: It looks like they are working really hard and concentrating.

MIN: Yes, they have to concentrate. It's going to have more intricate vines, and more water underneath it. I've been a little frustrated, because it takes so long to finish these pieces. I have an initial idea for what I want to do, but it changes every time. For instance, after making the water and the figures, I had to redo the water because it was flat. I wanted it to glow. It's been challenging. I have to figure things out every time I start on the cutout wall pieces.

FIGURE 1
we lift our hands to protect the most and the only important to us. (detail)
2005
paper, graphite, gouach, acrylic, color pencil
86 x 86"

JESSICA: Well, it's not worth making if it's not how you want it. But you made it work—that water really glows. Sometimes it's not the labor that takes so long, but the process of invention necessary to create the right feeling.

MIN: Yes, and things are taking a little longer now that I am combining drawings with these cutouts, and the drawing part is becoming more painterly. That's new to me. For instance this cat is a cutout on this scene [FIG. 2], and I want the cat figure to sit on a different piece of paper. But I'm not sure if it really works. I don't want the cutout to be completely flat on the paper, because then I might as well have just drawn it on the paper. I don't want it to look like a collage. I want the paper to do what it does as its own thing. And I want to have this tiny string of lights, but I can't figure out how I should approach it. Maybe it needs to be three-dimensional.

JESSICA: Why do you think you want to make it a cutout installation on a wall, and not collage?

MIN: Collage doesn't work for me because if I wanted to include all these different elements and make an image out of it by gluing it together, then I could just draw and paint it. I think what I'm doing here is a bit different from a collage because it is a composite of different materials that are put together to tell a story. I want the figures and environments to have a life in them. I could seal them all together in a collage, but they need to have more life and air between them.

JESSICA: Well, the cut outs you make are more physical, making them more permanent and present in space. It's more like assembling things, an assemblage.

MIN: I'm interested in making the pieces more physical; I like seeing the paper create shallow dimension; I like seeing the shadows cast by the shapes. I'd like to make sculptures someday. I think this may be in the direction of me making things more three-dimensional.

JESSICA: Also, in terms of your cutouts, by creating something a little bit different from collage, you challenge the viewer to interact with the work more directly. Sometimes when we approach something conventional and known, like a drawing, collage, or painting, we have all these preconceived notions of how to read it and decipher the language. But I think when you do something like this

FIGURE 2
I will always wait for the tiny lights to glow
2005
paper, ink, gouach, graphite
20 x 28"

that is a little off, and that isn't within a boundary, then people look more at what's really there instead of clicking into familiar ways of looking and interpreting.

MIN: Yes, these pieces don't have predetermined edges. They are not rectangular. They are not circular. They have their own edges. The trees, vines, water, or rocks—they become the edges of the pieces. In a sense, I'm making these pieces with a notion of the wall being the ground for everything, and this relates to my drawings. I have been trying to figure this out for a long time—how to make my drawings come off the paper and still have a similar impact.

My drawings have always been made with crisp, white paper. The presence in the drawings is created by a certain relationship between the white negative part of the paper and what is being activated within it. I translate the activity created by the drawn, detailed places in the drawings by making the cutouts and assembling them together on the crisp, white wall. And as the activity of drawing creates the scene within the white of the paper, the activity of assembling the parts on the white wall creates the edges and boundaries of the piece and scene.

JESSICA: I have always thought that your cutouts were made out of this desire to make your drawings or visions more physical or present. To have a home, or a presence in the world, to make what could be considered insignificant have a significance and permanence. When you tried to make oil paintings it didn't work. You have a specific relationship with your drawing materials, and the cutouts are a way for you to use paper, pencils, ink, and water media, and you give them a physical presence and reality by cutting them out and saying, this is real.

They also engage the viewers' space more physically. By having no clear rectangular boundary they actually expand into the viewers' space and invite people in or push people away. Also, I think the flat, white space that surrounds the cutouts relates to your talk of not feeling like you have a home or seeking a place. All your work has this white, vacuous space around it—while a lush home or place is being generated by the bodies in it. The bodies and the figures generate this sense of space, which is most of the time something natural. It's foliage, it's...

MIN: It's nature.

JESSICA: Yes, it's nature. It's something that's generated through the energy of whatever is there. I haven't ever thought that, in the narratives you create, the person entered a place that already existed. I've always perceived that that place grew from the person. That vacuous, white space around it helps create that interpretation.

I've watched the way you work for about ten years, and you start with the characters and the figures, and then you build the space around it within that empty, white space. The cutouts are a more physical building of a place for you. That's why with this piece with the cat sitting within the black space doesn't feel right to you. The space was there, and then you put the cat there—when instead you

need to make the cat, or whatever figures of the narrative, generate that space. It's very rare that I see your pictures without figures or animals in them, and the nature always exists in relation to the figure it surrounds.

MIN: I think you're right. Things are becoming more complex for me in making these cutout pieces. I will always make drawings. They are honest and direct. But I'm really interested in creating a space for the figures that is solid. With this piece I am working on [FIG. 1], the way the girl is drawn is very different from my other work.

JESSICA: She has volume. And the shading is . . .

MIN: . . . a lot more coarse . . . more immediate.

JESSICA: It's not like the others with the thin delicate graphite edge . . .

MIN: . . . and I really like it.

JESSICA: You can really see how they're drawn. It's almost stone-like too—very solid, with so much volume to it.

MIN: I am interested in creating a light source in these pieces. I feel like the last body of work that I made . . . there is a certain flatness to it.

JESSICA: Yes.

MIN: I'd like things to glow now. I like there to be a center of light where things are being illuminated, and I like the figures to have volume and roundness to them. I think that's one way I want to create space with these new pieces. Next to the figures and the animal creatures, there's also the use of flora in the work.

I was in acupuncture the other day, lying on my stomach, with needles in my back and on the back of my hands. I was just lying there, and I could feel movements traveling throughout my body every once in a while. I couldn't stop thinking about the drawings I was making where the things are growing out of the figure—the little branches and the sprouts. At the same time I could totally imagine the flowers growing out of the needles in my body. And it was cool to visualize it. Why are these things growing out of the girls' bodies in my work? It's like a life growing out of her. She has so much life in her and she's creating this home, like you said, for herself, with things inside of her. In the drawings they are represented through this flora of nature.

I can't really deny the fact that my home life has been so unstable for so long. I'm numb to the dynamics and the functions of family matters. Perhaps that's why I make these pieces where the figures are still very passive. They're not really doing anything, they're just standing there observing and watching what's happening—but nevertheless, whatever is going on is created by them. Sometimes that's how I relate to these figures, because that's sort of how I feel too—sort of numb and confused. I'm trying to look and observe things. I'm trying to understand it, but I don't think I really do a lot of times.

JESSICA: Well, at least the bodies in the pieces we're looking at now are . . . whole.

MIN: What do you mean?

JESSICA: For a while your bodies were being torn apart.

MIN: Yes.

JESSICA: Or cutting themselves apart, ripping themselves apart, or being ripped apart by multiple selves.

MIN: Yes.

JESSICA: For a long period of time there was a sense of destruction, self-destruction, death, necessary pain, or things being ripped apart—it was sort of like a self being destroyed.

MIN: Yes. And at that time I think a lot of the figures were attacked by the elements of nature.

JESSICA: Yes, there were also those monsters.

MIN: There were monsters, dragons, and there were carnivorous flowers that were eating people up. But it wasn't necessarily a physically painful process for them.

JESSICA: Because you drew them in such a beautiful way. The way your pencil line drew everything was so eloquent and beautiful that people would go towards it and then get close and notice, "Oh, a limb's missing!"

MIN: Yes, it was like a natural process that was taking place—that nature was consuming and regurgitating these bodies, spitting them back out again to be regenerated even, or to be lost, or to be put in a different place.

JESSICA: It seems like what started happening is that you were drawing, with these thin pencil lines, these

female figures—and other figures too—that were getting involved in, like you said, some sort of natural process of destruction. Then they started regenerating; they started growing sprouts, and they started moving waves. They were standing there and things were growing out of them, or they were lying in it as it was growing through them. Then they were going through the process of the regrowth, with more dimensions starting to form in the pictures. Now, in this picture of what we are looking at, they are solid and round.

MIN: Yes.

JESSICA: So it's as if there is this broad narrative to your work. I think you can definitely read them on their own as independent narratives. But there's a notable difference and relationship between the newer figure, with the coarse solidity to it, and the other ghost-like figures you draw with the thin line, which almost seem like they are in formation—and now the animals are animals and not monsters. With the more recent figures there is some sort of peace, or some sort of faith, that even though the figures are standing there and are numb and waiting for something, that there's a sense of protection . . . and of . . .

MIN: Of equalness.

JESSICA: Yes . . . that the nature and the person are sort of figuring it out.

MIN: Yes. Remember the cutout installation I did five years ago at Bellwether? Remember the scale of the girl and the bear—it was really dramatic.

JESSICA: The bear was very big and the girl much smaller.

MIN: Now, in this drawing, the bear and the girl are the same size. He's holding a knife . . .

JESSICA: But she doesn't care—she's staring straight at him and is very close to him, although he's holding a knife.

MIN: Right.

JESSICA: It is such an interesting narrative, because I think, in a way, it talks of the process of . . . I'm not sure exactly, but I always think of nature as this thing that is outside of us yet within us, it's a way to represent those things that are . . . out of our control.

MIN: Yes.

JESSICA: And no matter what society tries to do to create boundaries—and whatever we try to do to make ourselves a concise being, in clothes and in language—nature, emotion, intuition, chaos, the physical elements, and the chance of the unexpected always sort of breaks through. And I'm not speaking in a Romantic way, but of natural processes. In New York all these ladies can have their hair done, but the wind's still going to blow it all over the place. And there's no way to control that.

And I think *nature* is this pervasive force that's not only external, but also comes from our bodies and our own actions. I think the role of the nature in your work is to provide this sense of place we've been talking about, but also this part of the *self* that is as much of a character as the figures. Because it's generated by the figures, and previously it was surrounding the figures, interacting with them.

MIN: My family immigrated to the U.S. when I was a teenager. All of a sudden, I was faced with so much information, so many fast changes. Coming from an extremely rural area of Korea, it was overwhelming to fit into the American urban lifestyle. One of the only ways I could really relate to the natural way of things, literally and symbolically, was through my dreams. I was changing so fast in order to adapt to the new culture, I related to my dreams . . . as something permanent and reliable.

In my dreams the figures aren't necessarily in nature, they are mostly in New York City, or in my bedroom or my apartment. But I make that connection to where I come from by putting them in natural surroundings. For instance, the dream that inspired this piece [FIG. 1] took place in a really cold building—a very rigid, cold, cement building.

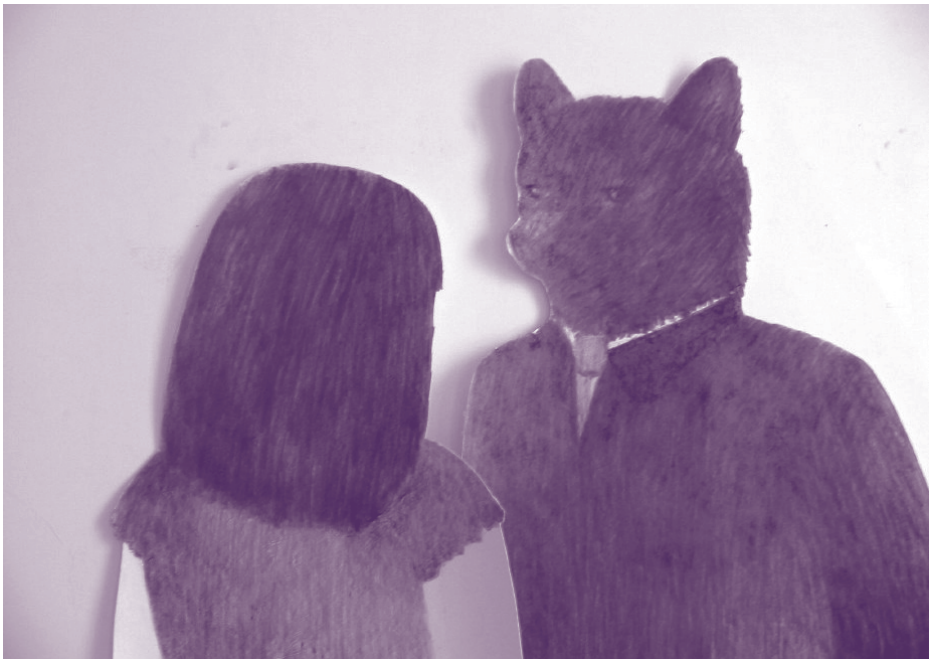
JESSICA: Like a gallery?

MIN: Yes! [LAUGHTER] I thought for a while that it would be more interesting, or maybe it would make more sense, to put them in a sterile setting. I thought about it for a while—where do they really belong? I decided that they don't belong in that cold space.

JESSICA: But I think by making them in that black, black space, you create what that cold cement space might have felt like.

MIN: In the end, it is not an illustration of my dream—it's not about my dreams.

JESSICA: I think that's an important thing to say, and I think that goes back to the craft of fiction. We are visual storytellers—you in a more figurative, storybook way, and



a meeting in the night
2005
graphite, gouach, ink on paper
15 x 22"

I in a more abstract, poetic way—but we are creating stories. Just because you may know that this dream you had was about protecting your artwork from an institution doesn't mean that is the subject of your piece. This is an experience that many people can have, but it won't necessarily be about protecting their artwork, it will be about something else that they are trying to protect, or calm down, etc. You take the inspiration of your dream and make a story out of it, and create a setting. This way people can relate to it, get their own things out of it, and it's not about you anymore. It's how you created a picture.

I talk to my students about this a lot, because, oddly, sometimes the more personal you are, the greater you can communicate. The more specific you are in re-creating the feeling an experience gave you—through trusting your intuition—the more accurate sensations you re-create for the viewer . . .

MIN: . . . through the inspiration . . .

JESSICA: . . . that you're creating a narrative to recreate this certain feeling . . .

MIN: . . . and by doing it that way—by not only illustrating my dreams, but also by creating an inclusive narrative and a pictorial surface, my work can reach out to more people.

JESSICA: Yes . . . great narratives. Take something like *War and Peace* by Tolstoy—and, although it's about something very specific like aristocratic Russia in the 1800s, you can relate so clearly to the characters and their dynamics. It's because of his craft—how he wrote it, and how he chose to create his scenes so the reader can enter them.

MIN: Yes—whatever time or specific scene he's describing, you're able to relate to it from a broader point of view as a human being, even though you did not live in that society.

JESSICA: Have you seen that recent exhibition of Italian painting from the Renaissance at the Met, *From Filippo Lippi to Piero della Francesca: Fra Carnevale and the Making of a Renaissance Master*? The show showcases this artist Fra Carnevale, a student of Lippi's, and how he developed his own style, "mastery," and career in Urbino. I saw the merit of Fra Carnavale and his independent style, which was different from the Florentines'. His paintings were more involved in the details and signs of his time—yet it was like the symbols and meanings and references took over the painting, and it was harder for me to enter them beyond curiosity.

I was much more drawn to Lippi's work, which I had never really thought about or looked at before. I could really rest with them and get something from them. I think it was partly due to his craft, not necessarily technical virtuosity, but a certain reality in the materiality of his paint. Whatever he was communicating to his peers about Gothic gold or sensual naturalism, there was a reality in the surface to relate to *now*. It's

a stamp on a moment to make it permanent beyond Renaissance strategic painting moves, and into a place for any viewer to enter.

MIN: That is exactly how I felt when I saw Botticelli's *Primavera* at the Uffizi. Every time I saw his paintings previously in books I thought they were so decorative and pretty—and only pretty. But when I saw them in real life I had another moment like the one with King Tut. I couldn't even see the whole picture because it was so big—I looked at it for a long time and I was so overwhelmed by it. I went to the corner of the painting and I saw a foot of one of the Graces. I saw her pinky toe, and I was nearly in tears. I thought to myself: there is nothing more beautiful than this little toe, and what surrounds it.

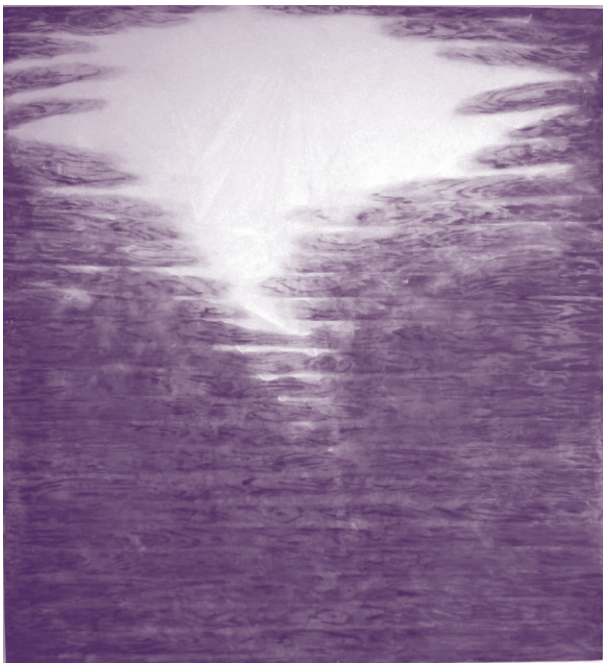
I couldn't really take in the whole thing. I was blown away by it. To make a work of that magnitude, with such intricate hand—I mean, how much time did he put into it? There was *so* much life in that painting. There was so much care, and there was so much of *him* in it. Even though he was just illustrating this myth—it was incredible—and he translated through that piece. That's rare, but it's amazing when it happens.

JESSICA: Yes it's very rare. I was thinking about that this morning. Reading *A Room of One's Own*, while she's going through the library talking about these seminal pieces of literature—but it's not every book by a great author that is amazing—not every book by Virginia Woolf does what *To the Lighthouse* does. We often consider there to be genius in an artist or writer . . . but maybe it's more the artwork itself, and how the artwork contains that. I think that happens with paintings also—that there are these specific pieces that are complete manifestations of something even beyond an artist's vision.

There are artists that probably can create more then one of these pieces, but as Woolf says: "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice."[8] The life that goes into a work is not always something generated solely by the artist, but everything leading up to that point in time, and the artist can work that into their craft, and, with an artwork, create the physical body that can hold that life.

BOTH: . . . sigh . . .

MIN: This is too intense! . . . We are both crushed down into corners of my studio! [LAUGHTER]



Jessica Dickinson, *The Slow Birth*
2004
oil on limestone polymer on wood panel
49 x 46"

JESSICA: That's because there is a lot of pressure! That's what's so interesting about trying to live as an artist, because it's something that can be done when you give yourself the pressure to really create something exactly how you envision it. Woolf writes a lot about it, about trying to capture that thing—this thing that is floating around that you want to bring into life, and how do you do it? It's really difficult, but perhaps through extreme discipline—not necessarily hours and sweat and labor—but with the discipline to really listen to yourself, and extreme faith in yourself and your craft, and sheer perseverance, you can do it; and, as Woolf accentuates, with the financial support to have the time to do so.

MIN: I think it's critical to feel that way in making art.

JESSICA: There is an interesting passage from Woolf that's a pointed display of her view of creativity and women, which I think also relates to our work:

> *Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged*

the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. And one must conclude that it would be a thousand pities if it were hindered or wasted, for it was won by centuries of the most drastic discipline, and there is nothing to take its place.[9]

MIN: I think that's interesting—we're like the crust of the earth that's been settling for a long time, but it's important at this point in time that we really find an individual point of view.

JESSICA: I often think of my great-grandmother Rodemacher, who was a daughter of a German immigrant in southwestern Minnesota. She lived in the small town of Wabasha, and was married to a bank official. She was an intellectual, my German immigrants taught their neighbors how to read. She did decorative painting—I have a plate painted by her that's very important to me.

We have a picture of the house she lived in, and I think of her intellectual and creative self functioning as a hostess in this house, and her creativity going towards painting plates and tending house and sewing. I imagine her very *inside*—embellishing the inside. And there's this train of thought I've been trying to wrap my head around in terms in the way you and I work—our processes and the marks we make and how we cover a surface—it's sort of in this repetitive, interior way.

I guess I'm thinking of a slower, more domestic type of art making, things built up through repetitive steadiness, rather then being bound to ambitions of virtuosity. There's an element of precision to it, but it's somehow not for any kind of technical display. When you and I talk about our interests in Agnes Martin and the drawings of Louise Bourgeois, I think it's this approach to process that links us. Beauty is embodied and compulsive rather than strategic and calculated.

When I think of the story of my matriarchal lineage, I think of the untold stories wrapped up through those hours of sewing, mending, painting plates and borders, cooking, folding clothes, reading books to children, wiping down the kitchen table. With my own work, I've always been into expressing something unconscious or undefined through abstraction, but the bravado and virtuosity of abstract expressionism is too loud for those stories embedded in my physical and cognitive being.

I am interested in how some sort of narrative unfolds through the subtlety of handiwork. I suppose the term for this is "gendered." The feminist Pattern and Decoration movement in the seventies hashed out the issues of the decorative being on the same plane as high art as an expression of history of female domesticity—but I'm interested in the process—the *kind* of time, attention, and energy that went into this work, and how that translates into a painting practice. And often it was about maintaining order and beauty in a household, and tending to an interior space, creating a space.

I think this is similar to how you and I work, slowly and intuitively and with care, where the studio practice is part of daily life maintenance, sitting down to work on our surfaces and maintain their growth. And it seems our work is done when the story has unfolded by working it out of our bodies through small motions, rather then a sweeping statement of bravado, or a precise labor of virtuosity—it's a labor of intuitive necessity rather than strategy. Through the oppression of domestic life, I think there is also agency and power in such labor, as that was the only place for women's creativity to go for so long.

MIN: Yes, I could sit here in one corner to cut the whole piece out, and then get up to arrange it. It's very repetitive, very calming. Of course there is another aspect to making the work, which is the struggle of figure it out. But I think laying down the marks—the process of making the marks for the pieces—it's very domestic-like.

JESSICA: However, it could be an obsessive-compulsive disorder. There are thousands of ways to make work, and I'm not sure if they necessarily gender how we work. I never decided to work this way to make a gendered statement; it was just how I developed the relationship between my materials, my surfaces, and my studio practice. But it's interesting how people are often so curious about it, or confused.

Since I worked as a domestic for a long time, as a nanny, a housekeeper, and a housecleaner, it's an experience I relate my process to—to the repetitive accounts of maintaining a space, and the cycles of change. I'm just starting some new paintings, and it's going to take me two to three months to get through the first stage, because of the slow, repetitive buildup of small actions on the surface. And it's just absolutely necessary for the paintings to work for me to spend that amount of time tending to them. And it's something I enjoy, but it's not mindless; it takes a lot of energy and focus. But I'm not doing it to prove anything, or to say look at everything I've done, for often in the surface that forms, one can't find all the work put into it. It's what generates the work. It's the starting point for it.

MIN: You need to do it to make the work.

JESSICA: It's interesting also to think of what happened to my great-grandmother beyond the plates she painted. After World War I, my great-grandfather's bank had a bank crisis, as was happening at the time. In fear he abandoned the family in the middle of the night, moved to California, was never seen again, and started another family. My great-grandmother had to move to Minneapolis with her three daughters and one son, my grandmother a teenager at the time.

They were absolutely destitute, for they were dependent on the father for support, as was customary at the time—this was around 1920. She had to "take in the wash," washing other people's clothes to support the family, along with eventually taking in boarders and then becoming a schoolteacher. So she insisted that her three daughters get an education and be able to support themselves so they wouldn't have to depend on a man; so they wouldn't get in a situation like she was in.

MIN: I think one of the reasons I don't have a home in some ways now with my Korean family is because my mother wanted me to go out and get my own life. My mother told me the same thing that your great-grandmother told her daughter, when I was eighteen. She had to depend on my father. They didn't have a happy marriage, and she didn't have the means to get out of it. Not all, but a lot of Korean women my age now are dependent on their husbands.

I had a choice to stay at home and attend college, or go away from home, and my mother told me "You need to go out into the world and see everything you need to see and to experience whatever you need to experience to become your own person. You also need to be able to financially support yourself, and then you'll be able to do whatever you want to do. And that's very important." Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* talks about that; the necessity for financial support and the experience to do what you want to do.

JESSICA: My mother had a similar effect in my life, but it had to do with not pursuing a career in art. She was gifted in art, but as she said, "you had two choices—a nurse or a teacher." Considering this, her family wasn't encouraging of her being an art major, and she had to double major in English and take teaching credits. Right after she graduated in 1961 she went to teach in East Africa in a program that predated the Peace Corps to have the adventures she wanted, since they wanted people with English teaching degrees. So she was able to follow her passion for Africa, while art became secondary, although ever present in her life.

I think one reason I might be fascinated with this book, and the subject of how women's creativity is being expressed, is because I come from a fairly old-fashioned family. All through my upbringing, my mother was a housewife taking care of her seven children. She was a teacher before that, and her energy went into taking care of us, cooking for us, etc. But she would stay up late at night after we went to bed and paint in the hallway outside my bedroom. She worked on this one still-life oil painting for about five years, just a little bit at a time, until the canvas fell over someone's head. So she cut it up into little pieces to make small paintings out of it, still persevering.

She just needed to observe her surroundings and make things, and when she recognized I liked making art she would sit me down to work next to her. She gave me a set of oil paint when I was ten, and taught me most of what I know about drawing. She was behind me going to art school and pursuing my career in New York when my father was apprehensive about my focusing solely on art.

The flipside of all this is she always tries to tell me what to do with my paintings, but I tell her to go make her own paintings. Which she is doing now, in her sixties; she's gotten a studio outside of the home, and she takes classes. She always finds a way to get her creative power out somehow; she tries to arrange us, or our bedrooms, or tell us what to do. When she gets to make art, she puts that energy into her art. That's interesting that both our mothers pushed us out into the world that way, to have opportunities they didn't have. I couldn't have done it without her support and encouragement.

I think the most appropriate way to end is with the final sentences of *A Room of One's Own*, where Woolf encourages the power of creative perseverance to create change:

> *For my belief is that if we live another century or so—I am not talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals—and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves; . . . if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. As for her*

coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worthwhile.[10]

FOOTNOTES

[1] *Herman Melville,* ***Moby Dick*** *(1851; reprint, New York: Bantam Classic, 1967), 105*

[2] *Dr. Richard Kalter was the Philosopher-In-Residence at Maryland Institute College of Art, where Min and Jessica met in undergraduate school. He was in residence there for over twenty-five years, until his recent death at age seventy-nine.*

[3] *Virginia Woolf,* ***A Room of One's Own*** *(New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929)*

[4] *Ibid., 50*

[5] *Ibid., 117–118*

[6] *Ibid., 114–115*

[7] *Ibid., 114*

[8] *Ibid., 68–69*

[9] *Ibid., 91*

[10] *Ibid., 117–118*