

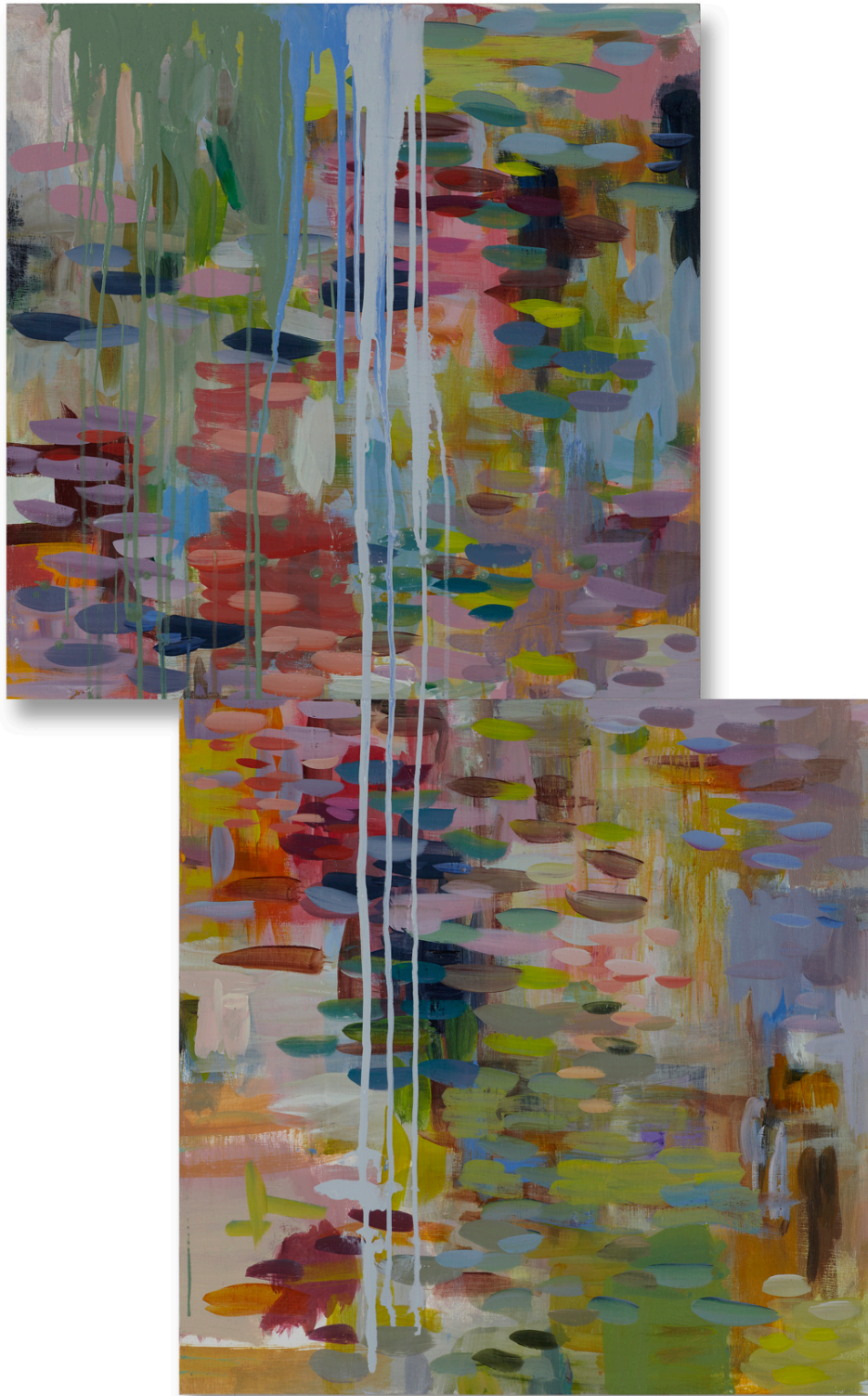
GINNY SYKES *SELECTED WORKS 2003-2015*

*With contributed essays by
Buzz Spector, Lanny Silverman, Jacqueline Witkowski,
and Joanna Gardener-Huggett*



Tempest #2, acrylic collage on paper, 41" x 29", 2015

"...the experience of body, mind, and spirit in nature has entered my abstractions, collapsing the space between my lived, remembered, and perceptual experience and the abstracted performance of my responses...it is an essence rather than depiction of nature I am interested in..." *Ginny Sykes, 2015*

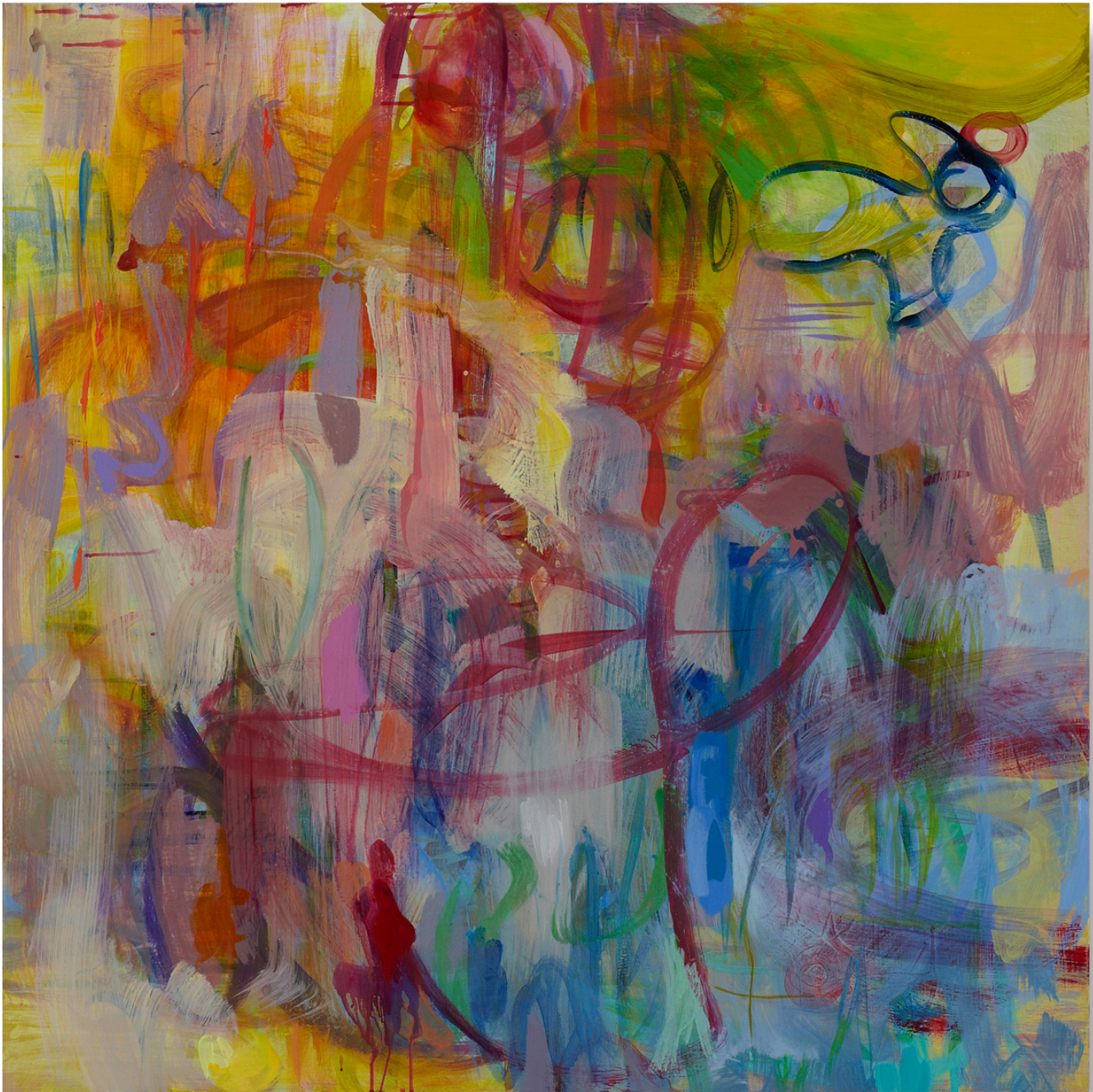


Rebalancing, 47" x 29.5", acrylic on wood panel, 2014

Essay by Buzz Spector, *Professor of Art, Washington University, St Louis, MO; recipient of the College Art Association's Distinguished Teaching of Art Award 2013*

Space is when you find it. That's not a typo in my first sentence. Ginny Sykes has been lots of places as artist and traveler, accumulating many "whens," therefore, in times spent in New Zealand, Europe, the Caribbean, as well as the more mundane Midwest. Each locale has added to Sykes's history of spatial encounters wherein she

has, existentially at least, carried away with her something of those spaces. Bachelard meditates thusly on the matter: "je suis l'espace où je suis" (I am the space where I am), by which he praises the mind's incorporated spaces in which our inner lives dwell. I read sensations of place in Sykes's paintings, but they are not offered here in a spirit of documentation. Rather, these bright and buoyantly aerated fields are activated by gestures freed from inscription. They offer a common pulse of sensory liquidity which, in drawing us in, reveals itself to be the transmogrification of space into visceral experience. We find . . . ourselves, after all, in such seeing.



Loosely Followed Script #3, 48"x 48", acrylic on wood panel, 2014

Essay by Lanny Silverman, (*Chief Curator of Exhibitions, The Chicago Cultural Center, 1990 to 2011*) discusses *SURFACE* (excerpt)

Sykes' work utilizes a wide variety of media and approaches, a facility for abstraction, formal composition, and, foremost, a passion for pushing the viewer to look at what is before them. Sykes' most powerful works create a dialectic tension between chaos and order, abstraction and representation, and at times between temporal immediacy and fading memories. Drawings whose intense sense of motion hints at a bodily presence become a kind of Sufi dance of energy. Ambiguous figure/ground relationships often push gestural abstraction towards representation and imagery, which is sometimes bolstered by collaged real world artifacts. Memory and the associational poetry of image are never far behind in these abstractions. Occasionally the artist utilizes symbolic archetypes as focused imagery that hints at spiritual content, whether it be a graceful dance of opposites, a mask-like persona, or blob-like forms that seem like psychic entities. At times Sykes will transform background details or marginalia of her previous work into the starring attraction of a newer work. In addition, her layering of meaning and memory, as well as her varied approach to balancing illusion making with the flat "is-ness" of mark-making and gestural painting all keep the viewer involved with the very process of looking.



Black and White Cellulars, 015, Charcoal on Paper, 44.5" x 60", 2008



The Blue Guitar and a Caged Bird Tossed into the Night Air, oil on linen, 60" x 58", 2003

Essay by Jacqueline Witkowski, MA, Ph.d. Candidate, University of British Columbia, BA, DePaul University, Chicago IL

Ginny Sykes invites her viewers to delve deeper. In each of the works presented, the various forms—ambiguously hidden or distinctly exposed—offer a visual quest to appreciate their development since 1993. While some forms float through and appear in multiple arrangements, others appear only momentarily or shift in variation, thus requiring a new visual approach. The gestural and abstracted marks change and allow for importance to transpire through various means, proving how each work is indeed a singular entity. Yet when presented together, they share and pass along the shapes and colors that imbue the canvases, papers, and woodcuts.

Appearing with enthusiasm, the colors invigorate and inspire the amorphous forms with a kind of sensuousness that asks for more than a passive glance. The use of red punctuating both subtly and with vigor is felt throughout the compositions, whether the color infuses the wood stain of *Portrait with Bone and Glove* or provides a guide to the configuration of *Table Vase Eye*.

Sykes's pointedly applied mediums only highlight the depth of the canvas and further the attention toward the textures of scraped paint and crosshatched pencil. She offers a noticeably tactile element in the works, and in turn, encourages didactic interactions. Though the forms may be ambiguous, the unstable shifts only add to the investigation of what else can be seen.

Continuum: Selected Works 1993-2003 provides more than just the sleight of the artist's hand over the course of twenty years. The works stem from variations of larger projects that speak to leitmotifs of femininity, gender and creativity. Just as the forms pass through the collective whole, so too do these ideas, and proffer more meaning into the array of work.



Corpo Minerale, charcoal, pastel, relief print, transfer print, pencil, paint on paper, 41.75" x 29.5", 2008

Ritual, Refuge, and Intervention: Ginny Sykes's "Divided Beauty"
Essay by Joanna Gardener-Huggett, Associate Professor and Department
Chair, History of Art and Architecture, DePaul University, Chicago IL

Ginny Sykes's exhibition "Divided Beauty" is the culmination of work that began in 2004 while the artist was a resident at The Ragdale Foundation. As one enters the gallery, there is an immediate engagement with Sykes's stirring gestures and organic forms that float, multiply, and clash within and against the boundaries of her abstract black, white, and silver prints and drawings. One also observes single works interspersed with diptychs, triptychs, and totem-like images with intermittent punctuations of terracotta and mustard yellow that force the viewer to move at a slower pace. While continuing to proceed through the space, the spectator begins to digest the archetypal forms that draw on the history of Sykes's art and connects with the wider dialogue she initiates regarding women's practice of abstraction and feminism's conflicted discourse with modernism.

Sykes's artwork is greatly enriched by long periods of time spent in Italy, and dominating this body of new work is an abstracted shape based on the "Mourning Madonna" common to Italo-Byzantine paintings popular in the 13th and 14th centuries. As an icon, the "Mourning Madonna" generally depicted Christ's mother witnessing his crucifixion with hands clasped and bowed head, which is referenced in the arched bodily form that Sykes adopts. On one level this subject is common to the history of women artists and certainly to Sykes's own experience as a mother as seen in an earlier charcoal drawing *Release*, 1987 (page 5), where a woman's long arms grasp the body of an infant ready to embark on her own journey. The mother's guiding movements in the water at once reveals her wish to retain this intimate bond with her child, but also grant her daughter's wish to swim on her own. However, in these recent drawings and prints Sykes moves beyond a gender-specific reading in a number of ways. First, as an abstracted shape it betrays the need for designation as male or female. Further, the bowed body often rendered in black alludes to mourning, but by demanding reflection at a critical juncture in one's life, it also points to the implications of the past for the future. As the figural forms drift, hover, commune, and reproduce as evidenced in *The Alchemy of Silver*, *Face Off*, *Float 4/#1*, and *Triangular Shield #1*, the anxiety of waiting, loss, and memory are evoked—but so are possibilities for transcending those boundaries.

In addition to the tradition of Madonna images, Sykes also draws from the models of Christian diptychs and triptychs for several new works in this exhibition. This tradition's connection to ceremony and ritual has always played a critical role in Sykes's art—for example, in the installation *Altar of Re-Entry*, 1992 (page 7). The now familiar "Mourning Madonna" is found on the left wing sheltered by entwined white strands. Faintly painted Ionic columns frame the central panel, which features a winged cypress tree acting as a substitute for the human figure. Scrolls on either side of its base mimic the Ionic capitals above, and simultaneously reference women's ovaries. An infinity

symbol can be found in the upper right-hand panel and on the lower left and right wings hang gold painted television sets with their screens removed and bursting with branches. A stone circle housing additional twigs, which suggest an impending ritual burning, complements the installation. Although much smaller in scale, the new drawings Shield #1 and Shield #2 create a similar space as the viewer's eye is drawn to the center where Sykes's archetypal forms are conjoined. Rendered in pastel, charcoal, and pencil, they mirror and repeat across the triptych, enticing the eye further with anxious and angular markings. Because the terracotta is concentrated in the center of Shield #2, the reverberations of pale blue pastel in the distance increases a sense of immediacy and power that parallels the ritual act of meditation that is a fundamental component of Sykes's oeuvre.

The repeated pairing of forms throughout the exhibition is not coincidental, and is one of a number of references to Classical archetypes that remain essential to Sykes's body of work. This, Red Twins, and Yah!, for example, address polarities in terms of gender, generation, and state of mind, but also refer to archetypal figures like Artemis who was the twin of Apollo and responsible for assisting her mother Leto with his delivery. She is not only symbolized by the twin forms, but also by Sykes's use of pencil which creates a shimmering silver surface, for instance in This and Face Off. Considered an alchemical medium, silver is frequently linked with the lunar cycle just as Artemis is referred to as the goddess of the moon.



Winter Solstice, pencil on paper, 9" x 12", 2005

Further, Jean Shinoda Bolen argues that Artemis is an important emblem for the “crone-age” woman who is freed from ties of family and is afforded an autonomy that permits exploration, but also potential for activism and a commitment to mentoring those who follow in her footsteps.

Therefore, a connection can be made between Artemis’s history and Sykes’s generational shift from young mother and emerging artist in *Release*, to the new drawings and prints where she is contemplating a new phase of life and professional activity. Again silver is instrumental in these works as it symbolizes the possibility for both physical and personal reflection, as well as being associated with an identity that is centered on creative expression.

Pandora also figures prominently, directly named in *Ode to Pandora* and suggested in *Vases, Redux*. Typically, Pandora is cast as a symbol of destruction and death for opening the box given to her by Zeus, thus releasing all the terrors of the globe. However, feminist re-evaluations note that Pandora’s box was actually a pithos (a large storage jar) or honey-vase that brought blessings to the world. The stacked circular forms found in the left hand border of *Release* and the web-like network in the small color drawing *Winter Solstice, 2005* (page 8) return in Sykes’s new works, especially *Triplets*, as the discs and threads of lines intermingle with varying biomorphic shapes that surround Pandora’s symbolic urn like a force field. By invoking these archetypes, however, Sykes does not intend her images to universalize female experience. On the contrary, because these narratives are conveyed through complex multi-layered abstract gestures and markings, it is the formal experience that is the viewer’s guide and permits multiple points of entry and histories to be engaged.

Another compelling feminist subtext to the works in Sykes’s exhibition is the dialogue between modernism and feminism. *Figure (Homage to Magritte)*, and *Untitled Triptych (Homage to Ellsworth Kelly)*, both name critically acclaimed male artists of the twentieth century. However, the homage must not be taken literally as an indicator of pure formal influence or admiration. Instead, Sykes offers a counterpoint to their own experiments with polyptychs that present a feminist perspective often not acknowledged in the canon of art history. *Figure (Homage to Magritte)*, for instance, responds to Magritte’s *L’Évidence Éternelle* (1930), which consists of a series of small paintings vertically aligned to suggest a complete female body. Like many Surrealists’ works, however, woman becomes a vessel that is fragmented and not an active subject. While Sykes adopts Magritte’s format, the figure resists gender specificity and also evokes complex states of identity. By pairing her “Mourning Madonna” figures in various positions of opposition, intimacy, and solitude, Sykes ultimately undermines Magritte’s fetishizing of the female body. Further, Sykes’s *Untitled Triptych (Homage to Ellsworth Kelly)* challenges Kelly’s clean, crisp and high-keyed color field paintings that are often described in terms of beauty and universal appeal and epitomize the modernist painting that feminist theory has exposed as inherently patriarchal.

Sykes stages an intervention into this scene by appropriating Kelly's stylized triangular and shield-like forms, but the bulbous shapes are compressed within each panel. While strongly outlined in charcoal, each form appears to be enclosed in an intricate webbing that interjects an individual presence and agency that modernism tends to eliminate, especially for the female voice.

Although feminist art history often dismisses women's engagement with abstraction because of its unavoidable association with the heroic white male artist, Helen Molesworth notes that it actually affords a site of refuge from brutal gendering which women such as Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, and Joan Mitchell long understood. The exhibition "Divided Beauty" is an eloquent demonstration of how non-objective imagery permits multifaceted readings and feminist interjections, powerfully illuminating Sykes's contribution to this field of production. The "Mourning Madonnas" found throughout simultaneously evoke balance, conflict, desire, harmony, and isolation; all qualities that are experienced by the woman artist who dares to challenge a history of erasure.

¹ Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Older Women, Archetypes in Women Over Fifty* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 135.

¹ Helen Molesworth, "Painting with Ambivalence," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007), 430.

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