

SUSAN UNTERBERG: WATER DREAMS



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A FISH

BY EUGENIA PARRY

**"O LORD...HAVE PITY UPON
THESE WATERS WITHIN ME,
WHICH ARE DYING OF THIRST!"
PAUL CLAUDEL¹**

Her eyes are green, like her father's. The color, a point of contact between generations, is sacred in her self-contemplation. She has photographed for years, pondering men and women relating to their children: mysteries of failure and outrage; agonizing confusions of parenthood. "She's perfect...she cooks, she cleans, she doesn't give me any problems, she's great," says one son. She is sated with these "close ties,"² by gene pools deformed by misunderstanding.

Examining the material world, she photographs common objects in interiors, cutting mats to divide the images so that things in the same room won't belong together. Like estranged family members, they may as well be on different continents.

She visits a landscape in upstate New York and discovers a lake. She's hopeful standing on the shore. "The lake...stops us near its bank. It says to our will: you shall go no further; you should go back to looking at distant things, at the beyond. While you were wandering, something here was already looking on. The lake is a large tranquil eye. The lake takes all of light and makes a world out of it."³

Her lake is complete. She doesn't need to describe it. Nor is it a narcissist's mirror. Blue and yellow light, reeds, leaves, and branches form webs she cannot disentangle. She photographs the place as a feeling, enlarging her negatives beyond photographic good sense, preferring the pictures upside down. Without narrative or drama, the sky, clouds, and trees blur in primary hues. Ice, melting in springtime, is a fabric of evolving memory. She discovers in water "not a substance that is drunk," but "a substance which drinks."⁴

Fish, silhouetted against the translucent layerings, are intent on their journey. She feels a kinship with these silent, fluctuating creatures. Photographing, she joins their inverted aerial world. "Art needs to learn from reflections, and music from echoes. By imitating that we invent."⁵ In de-objectifying objects, she invents and discovers how she feels.

The lake, a gaze, becomes home for her mind. "Unexplored pool of liquid light which God put in the depths of our being,"⁶ it swells inside and outside of herself. She finds endless time, an invitation to die. Not to end her life, but to forsake old habits of observation: fathers and sons; mothers and daughters; mothers and sons; household objects that don't connect. Part of her falls asleep, throws off what she understood of ordinary problems, of disjuncture, guilt, ignorance, imprisonment, melancholy. "No one ever recovers from having dreamed next to dormant water."⁷

"I'm a fish," she told me.

"Pisces?"

"Cancer. That's close enough!"

Water is refuge, the lake a reservoir of knowledge. Not the kind she had as wife, parent, or keeper of objects. She shoots cruciforms of dead branches—talismans that protect and summon magic. She thought she understood marriage, but in the limpid eye where sky is subterranean, joinings defy separation.

Nothing in photography's history could have prepared her for this. There is the object, and one photographs it. But "the *imaginary* does not find its deep, nutritive roots in *images*; first it needs a closer, more enveloping and material *presence*. Imaginary reality is evoked before being described."⁸ She portrays apples, leaves, reeds, enveloped by this "*presence*," as if under water. Plants become nurturing breasts or a phallus. The abundant earth overflows. Its lens of water, pure and untainted, is greater than that of her camera.

Perhaps the psychology of gestures in her portraits was a necessary preparation for these deeper involvements. Risking the unknown, she abandons human terms. Entering the inverted heavens of the lake, she becomes another kind of artist.

continued on back panel. . .

The pictures in the present exhibition, deriving from discoveries out of doors, signal a profound change from the early work that problematized families and make possible, her recent studies of captive, white horses. She compares these animals to the mythical unicorn closed in a garden, a version of her former self, she says. The horses run free, held in a ring. She shoots them running, rolling over. The postures feel as unearthly as a meeting with a god. Infused with green light, the animals struggle and disappear into their own physical power.

Approaching the horses, she held her camera close to their heads to isolate the eyes, which are not unlike the dark pools where fish hide. Each horse's eye conveys something different of intelligence, impatience, calm, rage. Swimming in some of the eyes is a tiny human form with a camera. It feels right. The artist is a fish. She lives there.

Notes

1. *Cinq grandes odes*, Paris, 1913, p. 65, quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams, An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, translated by Edith R. Farrell, Dallas, The Pegasus Foundation, The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1983, p. 54.
2. From an installation of video and still photographs, quoted by Marcia Tucker in *Susan Unterberg, Close Ties*, exhibition brochure, New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 6 May—7 August, 1994, pp. unnn.
3. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 28.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
6. Paul Claudel, *L'Oiseau noir dans le soleil levant*, 15th ed., Paris, 1929, p. 229, quoted in Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 31.
7. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 90.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Front panel image: *Goldfish*
Back panel image: *Fish*
All prints are 30" x 40" C-prints, 1995
Photography: D. James Dee
Brochure Design: Eileen Boxer/Boxer Design
Printing: The Stinehour Press

Susan Unterberg is a native New Yorker. Her shows and installations have included *Mothers and Daughters*, *Fathers and Sons*, and *Mother and Sons*. She has had solo exhibitions at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Sarah Lawrence College Library, the Lawrence Miller Gallery and most recently at Yancey Richardson Gallery. Her work has been exhibited in group shows at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Wesleyan University Center for the Arts (Middletown, Connecticut), The Chrysler Museum (Norfolk, Virginia), The Hyde Collection (Glens Falls, New York) among other places. Her photographs have been reproduced or reviewed in

Harper's, *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *The New York Observer* and elsewhere. She has lectured widely and her photographs are in public and private collections nationwide. She is the recipient of fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Polaroid Corporation. She has been a fellow at Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony. She holds a Bachelor's degree from Sarah Lawrence College and a Master's in photography from New York University. About her landscape photographs she has written "My pictures do not depict a place people will recognize. They are about the landscape of the soul."