

Ruth Hardinger/Centro de Arte UNICEF

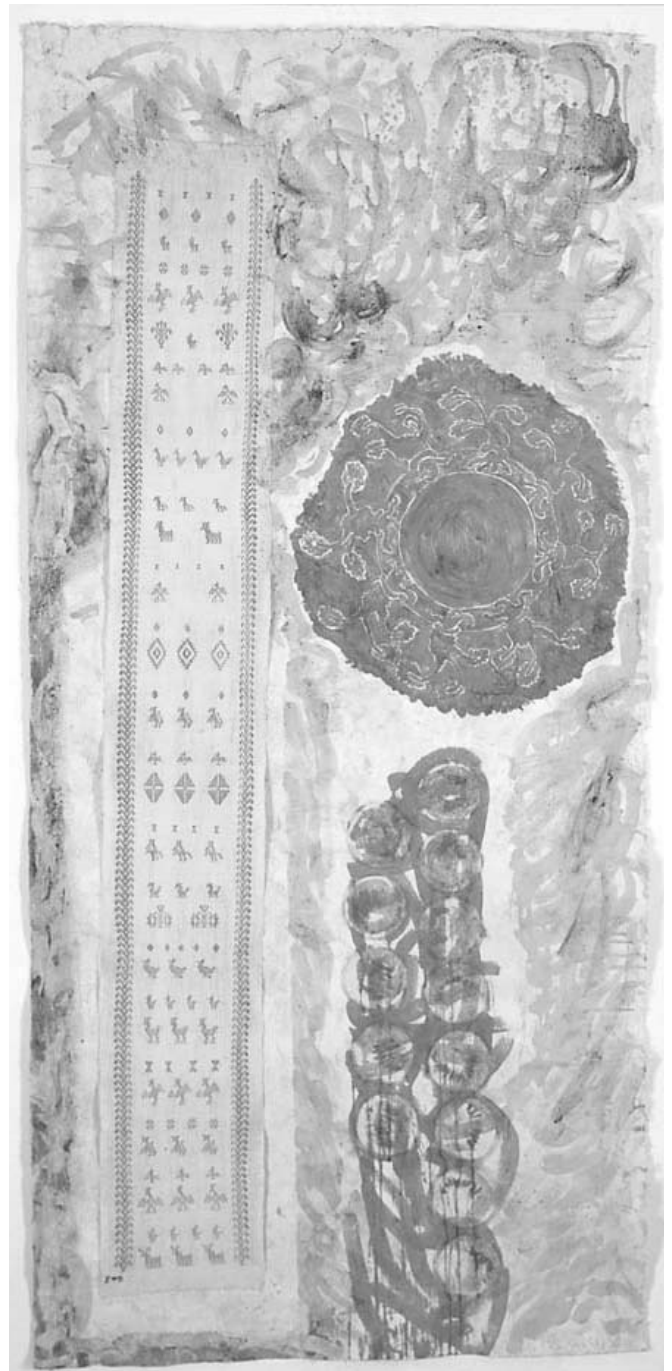
Of Time and the Image

by Richard Vine

Best known for her large-scale sculptures, Ruth Hardinger has also produced a great number of works on paper notable for their graphic freshness and formal variety. The approximately 175 semi-abstract works assembled here—chosen and installed by the artist to cover some 10 years and a half dozen stylistic phases—reveal a love of traditional art and artisan materials, and a preoccupation with both spontaneity and historical appropriation.

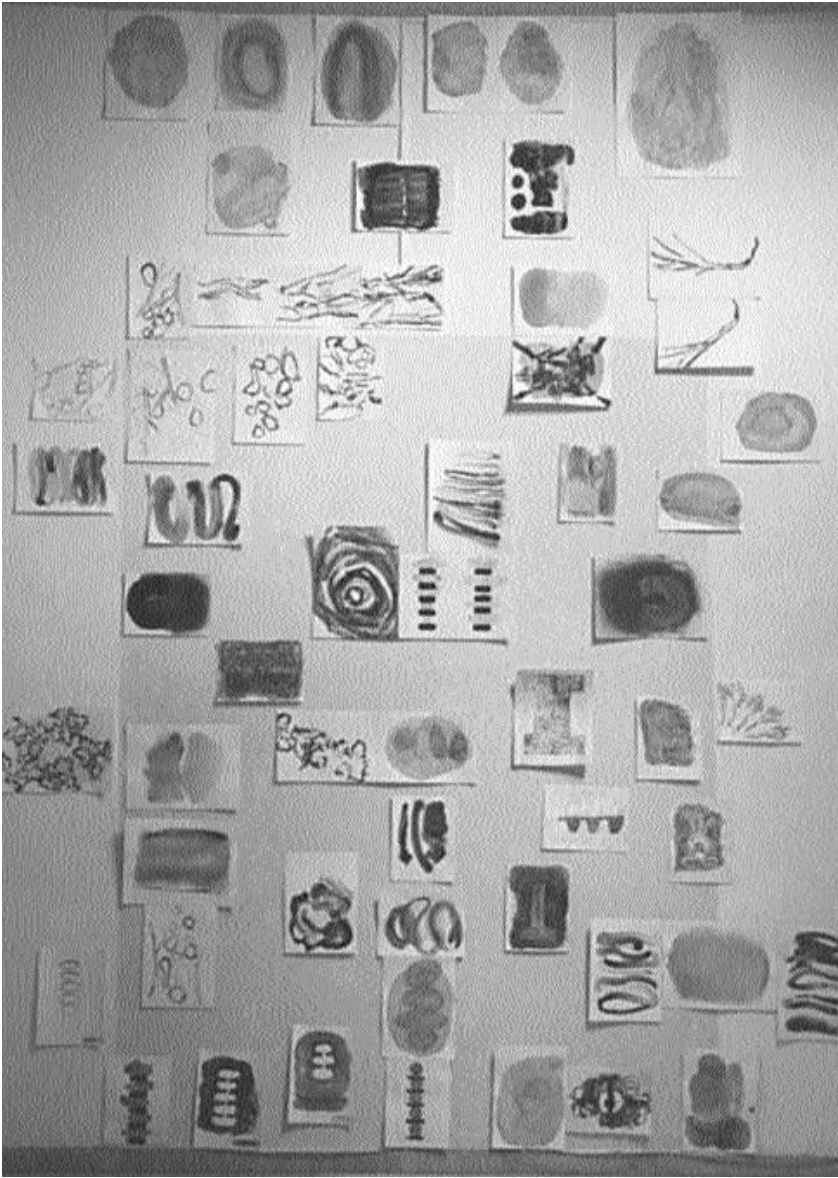
The show's cyclical journey begins with an ink rendering of a small, knobby “trader piece”—an object of the sort that circulated throughout pre-Columbian South America, often ending up hundreds, even thousands of miles from its point of origin. Isolating this token of exchange, which once symbolically knit together disparate places and cultures, Hardinger lets the squat, dark form float alone, a shadow of its former self, on a sheet as blank as forgetfulness. The isolate image thus evokes a current reality: the margin of unknowing that surrounds today's scholarly reconstructions of those storied pre-Conquest civilizations. Hardinger's work is, in part, an attempt to imaginatively bridge that abyss, continuing intuitively into the void, beyond the point where empiricism is forced to leave off.

Though she is influenced by archeology and often visits Latin American sites, particularly near Oaxaca (where she maintains a working relationship with local textile artisans), Hardinger seeks not an historically precise replication of Mesoamerican symbols and their social contexts, but an esthetic continuity expressed through certain primary communicative forms. Many of these are evident in her “Composites” (1991-2001), a group of about 75 images clustered together in one towering, labyrinthine arrangement. Plotted rank-and-file across the wall, the drawings become, in effect, an installation—a single large surface-piece built of smaller, discrete, and never before interconnected works. Branches and leaves, directly stenciled quotes from the natural world of New England, are matched by broad, blocky C-masses that



Drawing of counts, 1992, 72 x 48", beeswax, cochineal and Chontal back-strap loom weaving by E. Vásquez de Sabino on amate paper.

suggest purposefully formed stones, the markers of emergent culture. Elsewhere, thick courtlike I-forms and hovering rings evoke the pre-Columbian ballgame ritual, upon which the continuity of the cosmos once mythically depended. Exaggeratedly undulating “serpent” forms—no doubt primordial in heritage—recall indigenous versions of a snake-shaped creative deity sometimes associated with the later Quetzalcóatl. Spinelike counting stacks bring to mind the r



Composites, 1991-2001, size var: apx. 144 x 96", multiple papers and acrylic on wall, watercolor, graphite, ink and oil crayon.

rudimentary mathematical devices from which complex architectural and cosmological computations astonishingly evolved. In some cases, two or more ganged-together sheets set up a specific permutation of imagery or flow of ideas. In others, the blank wall spaces between the drawings invite viewers to make their own linear links and imaginative connections among components, creating their own constellations of meaning.

Hardinger's thematic concerns distantly echo those of her influential teacher, Theodoros Stamos. In this first-generation Abstract Expressionist she found validation for her interests in mythology, calligraphy, and organic forms, as well as encouragement of her penchant for what she calls "one moment" drawings—sketches done rapidly, under the direct influence of an instantaneous impulse or perception. But her esthetic does

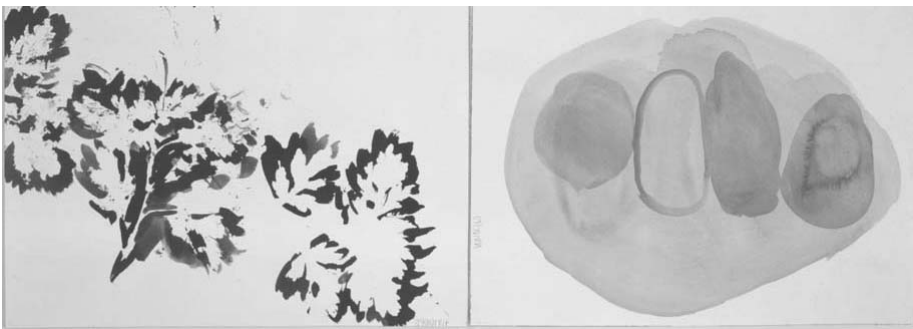
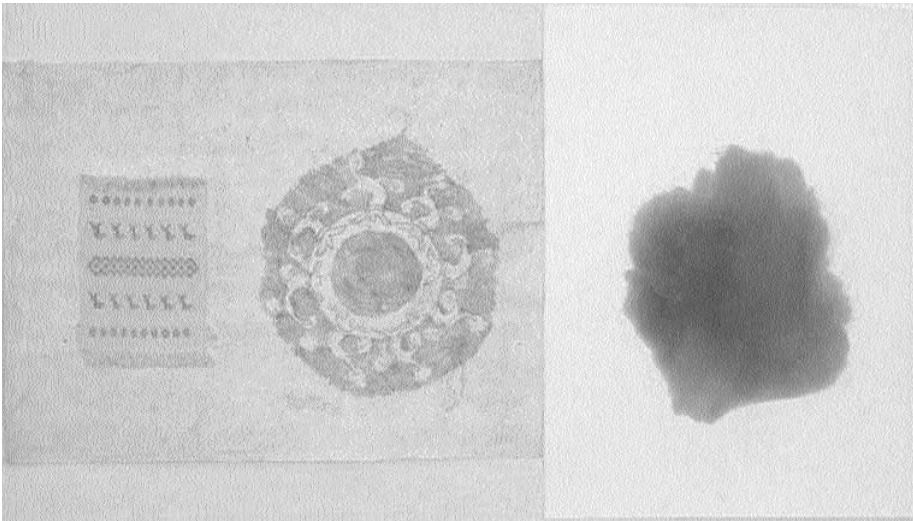
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not have a straight-line history. It is marked by a confluence of many styles—including process art, in which the activity of handling materials becomes the subject of the work. Systematic thought underlies each "free" gesture, yielding an expressionism filtered through a conceptual lens. Hardinger also investigates nonart disciplines like anthropology, and her interest in cultural crossings has been the focus of much of her work in tapestry and sculpture. What makes this particular selection so intriguing is that the works on paper contain specific cultural allusions alongside purely visual and nonreferential abstraction. Contradictions abide.

Installed as a winding "S" curve, "Composite #2" (1997), a group of 20 images executed on a trip to the New York State countryside, consists of plant forms depicted through a kind of stenciling—vegetation laid on paper and brushed over with watercolor to form realistic "impressions of nature." At the other extreme, "Correspondences" (2000), a single column composed of 10 pages of lively ink squiggles, commemorates the artifice of cultural invention: each calligraphic figure, hovering between representation and linguistic symbolization, constituting a sketch after (rather than before) a larger graphite drawing, a kinesthetic exercise in the remembrance of

strokes and forms. Thus a secondary process of visual quotation derives from the primary process of imitating nature—a concise summary of the way abstracted thought proliferates, building upon and extending its own products as a civilized sensibility develops. Another sort of visual quotation is enacted on two walls painted with cream-colored rectangles upon which groups of drawings are mounted. Echoing the sheets of off-white paper used in the graphite works, the rectangles integrate the gallery structure itself into Hardinger's conceptual project, resonating across the interior void as her recuperative works do across space and time.

The underlying dialectic between a world "without form, and void" and one structured by human discourse is concisely portrayed in several mixed-medium works, including "Dibujo de Cuentas/Drawing of Counts" (1992). In a related diptych, a



95-030101RH5, cochineal, pencil and Chontal back-strap loom weaving by E. Vásquez de Sabino on amate and graphite on paper.

090101RH and 051701RH, 2001, 10 x 28 1/2", ink and watercolor on papers.

graphite haze on one side is juxtaposed with, on the other, a rectangle of backstrap-loom weaving and a circular image appropriated from the ancient Mixtec book called the Codex Nuttall. The compositions, bridging two sheets of paper, bind together three epochs, three cultures, and three image-symbols. The rationality of the geometric forms is supplemented by associational content. The circle represents plants and their intertwined roots, a likely signifier for the continuity and reciprocal interdependence of life. The square contains columns of symbols by which the Chontal Indian woman who wove the dress material might orient herself cosmically within her familiar, workaday environment: between rooster and eagle, corn plant and star.

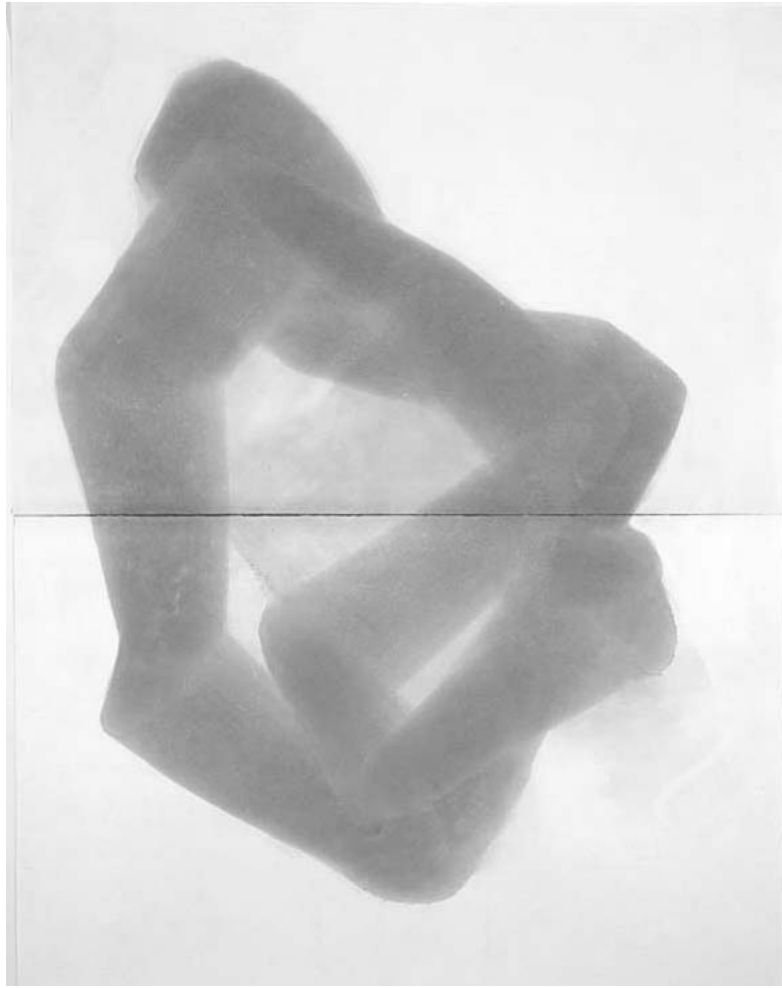
One of the most peculiar and intriguing aspects of this show is an act of formal and historical displacement. Hardinger has done a number of rubbings from pre-Columbian ruins, concentrating primarily on ceremonial or mythic humanoid figures. None of these “persons” appear in the exhibition. But the improvised sponge-and-nylon blotter she used to produce them was also employed to create a batch of calligraphic forms in black ink on brown paper that have the

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air of energetic jottings. A more elegant, postmodernist pastiche could scarcely be imagined. The marks on the pages were originally made just to distribute ink evenly on the blotter so that it could be used to make the rubbings. Hardinger “recognized” these marks, shown in two columns on abutting walls in a corner of the gallery, as art only after they first satisfied their function as ink-testers. The whole process, then, is freighted with the complex source references of a New York artist on the cusp of the third millennium. The unintended compositions deftly unite the pictographic heritage of ancient Zapotec stone carvers-present through their absence, so to speak-with a gestural vigor and a wry, post-Surrealist automatism.

Somewhat atypical in their emphasis on strict angularity, several images created after the September 11, 2001, terrorist disaster at the World Trade Center (just a few blocks from Hardinger’s home and studio) consist largely of toppled columns and broken lines, an echo of lives interrupted and human connections abruptly severed. In stark contrast are a number of bloblike watercolors and large-scale graphite “smoke drawings,” many with the suggestion of intertwining limbs. Everything here is sensuality and envelopment, fluidity and change. Each form seems to embody a cloud of feelings. Rounded, nuanced in tone, inward-turning, the diaphanous apparitions bespeak a rejection of sharp contours and defined volumes, suggesting that distinctness and decisiveness are too often bound up with cold absolutism, the yes-no, right-wrong, us-them mindset that prompts acts of extermination—whether on the plateaus of 316th-century Mexico or in the financial district of downtown Manhattan.

This submerged theme has long been present in Hardinger’s graphic production. A number of works in the show are done predominantly in cochineal, a red dye derived from the crushed bodies of tiny insects that feed on the nopal cactus. Since Aztec belief held that the souls of deceased warriors migrated to the nopal cactus, the artist’s use of this



121600RH, 2000, 54 x 39", graphite on papers.

traditional material constitutes, in effect, an act of drawing with the blood of ancient protectors. Thus are viewers reminded that the arts and crafts, as well as the secure peace that makes them possible, are founded on the strength and sacrifice of guardians, whose lifeblood soaks our culture and our soil—an insight made vivid again for forgetful North Americans by recent traumatic events in New York. The history of art, like that of every other human endeavor, is written in blood.

Defenders may, of course, easily become aggressors, as the complicated development of Mesoamerica makes abundantly clear. One of the complexities of this region is that—due in part to indigenous warfare, followed by Spanish

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imperialism—its city-state civilizations have been outlasted by tribal cultures that continue to this day. Hardinger's soft graphite convolutions, especially when

juxtaposed with the rickety phallic forms of her post-WTC images, suggest a persistence through yielding, a vital flow that is the necessary complement of linear willfulness. Hung far from the erectile "trader piece" but serving as its formal and conceptual mate is a drawing in which orange and red swirls surround a single black void. The vaginal image, at once a portal and a reminder of the biological imperative, evokes (especially when mentally conjoined with the trader piece) a sexual perpetuity—and thus makes the exhibition itself a cyclical emblem of eternity.

It is impossible to contemplate Hardinger's images, with their allusions to once-ceremonial mysteries—birth, sex, cultivation, star-gazing, war, mathematics, worship, and death—and not be struck by one epochal fact. Vanished from them is the reality of the gods. There is beauty here, and sheer joy in formal invention, even a search for community across time. But there is no positive

metaphysical conviction. The forms and gestures convey a palpable relief over escape from outdated religious strictures, yet remain, in the larger sense, destitute. This is a high compliment to the artist's candor, for today we do, in effect, live among cultural tracings recycled from a great age of faith, like tourists in a deconsecrated temple. While some postmodernists might revel in this "freedom," blithely mingling signifiers and cultural markers in an a historical pot-pourri, Hardinger, with her deep regard for older art forms and for physical connection to things elemental, offers a more complex response. Asserting the need for harmony through plurality, she mediates gracefully between the new, the traditional, and the ancient.