

Goddesses Unite

The Making of a Mural

BY JUDY SPRINGER

My drawings tend to deal with either dualism or lesbianism. Both tendencies emerged from a series on the Queen of Hearts. The Queen of Hearts card provided me with a format for the duality drawings: two figures — which are really the same, one opposite the other — which together make up a whole image. I play around with duality but the underlying interest is in the human as a dualistic and hierarchical being. Dualism, or opposing elements in a continuum, becomes a problem when it is seen as the only way to relate objects/subjects. The problem is compounded when one of those opposed elements takes on authority, energy and visibility. This is what splits the whole and is implicit in patriarchy. In my drawings I reassert the whole by presenting both sides of the opposition — connected by the boundary line — either side of which is right-side up.

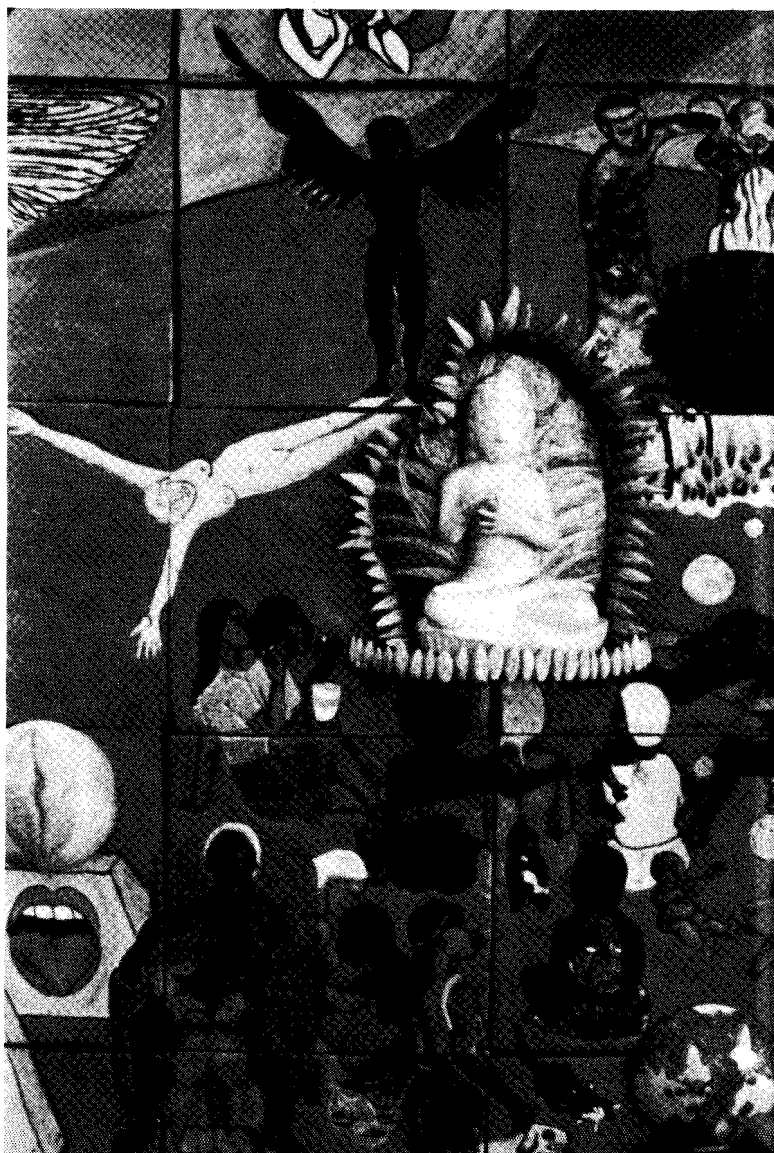
I became interested in duality while investigating the shadow, the unconscious, the Other, the repressed and denied as it related to the sphere of woman in patriarchy. It is what I thought about for nine months as I worked on an

5' X 10' ceramic mural, *Goddesses Unite*. This project began with the desire to portray women out-of-doors. I had made a ceramic mural in 1978 showing women's activities thematically connected by placing them inside a house. Afterwards I realized how typical it was to portray women indoors and how hidden and separated our lives and work are. So I wanted women together on the landscape and immediately wanted the Earth herself to be part of it.

I used books and magazines to find ideas and images. While my reference materials consisted mostly of picture books — art, mythology, science — they also included such image-producing books as Barbara Walker's *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*.

The project remained at a low level of planning for months as I continued with other work until one day the centre, which energized the piece, came: Oral History. I portrayed orally related activities and representations focused on listening to the silent Prajnaparamita — a Mahayana Buddhist Goddess — signing "unite."

(This led to the title *Goddesses Unite*, which came to me during the glazing phase.)



Then I found a place to take the final piece — the Manitoba Advisory Council on the Status of Women and the Women's Directorate's shared board room in Winnipeg — and got a grant from the Manitoba Arts Council for materials. I was on welfare at the time so could afford the time to do it and was already using my home for a studio. I tacked some brown wrapping paper to my wall and drew a cartoon to size. It was transferred to clay through the medium of tracing paper. Once on clay that had been rolled out, I incised, cut out sections, added more clay, carved and textured the clay. I used mostly porcelain to make individual pieces to glue onto the surface or later into the recessed areas. I glazed and oxidation-fired the 200 six-inch tiles and many additions at either medium- or high-fire temperatures.

As I gathered my materials, the number of images and possibilities grew and I began editing based on my desire to reveal women; getting below and beyond and around definitions imposed on us by patriarchy. I was particularly influenced by imagery arising from French feminist theories of Woman as the Unconscious, the Other. The underground fit easily into this concept: repository of death, the Earth's dynamic forces, the buried, women's lost and distorted past. I transformed some figures when I saw where my interests lay, e.g., a rather benign Cretan princess changed into a Medusa (with a Kali necklace) because I see her as a projection of the repression of female strength and sexuality. Likewise it gave theoretical validation for a proliferation of lesbian images, since homosexuality is definitely suppressed. I made up stories to fit other figures into the scheme of things. For instance, the mural shows an angel falling from the sky into the ocean. In the picture source (detail from the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*), it is falling into fire. I decided it was an intellectual idea falling into the sea where it may be transformed emotionally by that unconscious symbol.

Goddesses Unite is a joyful piece. There are no images of men oppressing women, no images of women trying to change themselves to fit into or find their place, or arguing about their place in patriarchal society. Instead, they experience a liberation by taking on the role and revealing the Other, the What Is Left Out, the Erased From History, the Taboo and Unknown through representations such as the shadow, menstrual blood, Amazons, the love of women for women and the crone.

I could see this in my own life, for making the mural was a healing process. It is one thing to creatively use the idea of Woman identified with the rejected, the repressed; it is another to actually

feel this identification, which I had been doing after years of being out as a lesbian in Brandon, Manitoba and experiencing the results. For example, I had often felt that if only I were nicer, friendlier, tried harder, I would fit in. Did I have the wrong attitude or what? Then a friend had the courage to tell me that — yes — she did cross the street when she saw me coming, avoided me because she was going through a divorce and didn't want people to think she might become a lesbian. The initial devastation turned into relief when I realized I hadn't been imagining rejection and moreover, that there was nothing I could do about it. I accepted finally that I am a small-town dyke — a shadow — and one of my social functions is to be a screen onto which people project their fears and feelings about homosexuality.

That acceptance became affirmation as I recognized the force of revelation and the need to investigate the process of rejection and denial in the operation of hierarchical duality — what exactly is being rejected and denied and by whom. This is operating in my work now as I return to my main sources and work on a series called *The Lesbian Queen*. The card-like Queen side represents what I and other lesbians create and define for ourselves: the positive lesbian image. This is important because the Queen makes us visible in a society that tries to keep us below the boundary of social acceptance, as women who can have a place only if we hide what we are. With our images, words and culture we make a space and we take it. But, if we think we are only our individual, personal or even group identity, we are forgetting the Other side of the picture. That Other side shows the lesbian's social role and in the role we are a threat. The Other side of the drawings portrays us as such beings as Blatant Sexual Creatures, Separatist Punk Dykes, Witches, Castrators of Men, Medusas and Lovers of the Female. Our Queen side, what we assert for ourselves, is invisible to society. Our Other side is what we reclaim for ourselves but which we may reject by identifying our whole self with our ego. It is important that we not forget our Other side, for if we do, we will think we're safe and want to join, to give our allegiance to a society that divides people, that creates

and enforces the boundaries between us through oppressing one side of the division: lesbians/straights, women/men, black/white, poor/rich.... In my drawings I search for ways to remember the entire image, make visible the whole and claim all myself/ourselves.



Goddesses Unite, Judy Springer, 1986, detail of 5' x 10' mural