

# You Can See It

## of Diana Dean

working to record the scene. In the "Seeker," on the front and back covers of this issue, she plays two major characters, one on the left of the diptych and one on the right.

I see Dean's work falling into two groups, the images painted before the "White Witch" and the images painted after it. I believe that the differences between these two groups of paintings is that in pre-"White Witch" work, Dean is not the director of her own life; she is not the decision-maker. In post-"White Witch" work, Dean is alive and vibrant and very much directing her own performance, her own life. I feel that Dean began to paint in bold colours when she recognized that she was, for better or worse, mistress of her own destiny.

### Before the White Witch

"The Walk," 1984 (54 x 54") (Figure 2), shows a family out for a walk. Children are scrambling over rocks on the side of the walkway, while a man and a woman (Dean herself) are walking arm in arm. The man appears proud of his family and pleased with himself. He is oblivious to the expression of unhappiness and discontent on the woman's face. The colours of this painting are subdued and muted, as were the colours in all of Dean's work at this time.

Also, in 1985, two paintings, both entitled "Woman pushing A Rock up the Hill" were painted. Both were large paintings (over 16 sq. ft.) and the woman in each painting was Dean herself. One of these works (Figure 3) shows a woman (Dean) struggling to push an enormous boulder up a grade, while another woman looks on with horror. This woman appears to me to symbolize the universal, unhelpful "friends and relations" who will one not to succeed, and who chastize, scold, belittle, and blame those who try to change their status quo—a sort of Greek chorus. With her hands to her face, the observer appears to have no apparent intention of offering assistance. The colours of the painting are monochromatic and seem subdued, in contrast to her later work. The figures seem flat and two dimensional, as do the figures in other works of this time.

These paintings reflect changes that had taken place in



Figure 2. Diana Dean, "The Walk," 54" x 54", Oil on Canvas, 1984.

Dean's life. She moved from Ottawa to Vancouver with her husband and four sons. A year later, her husband left Vancouver for a job in England. Dean became a single parent who had no family support in Canada. She purchased a small building lot on Salt Spring Island and built a small house for herself and her young sons. While construction of the house took place from May to October, Dean and her children lived in a large tent, which acted as bedroom, kitchen, and artist's studio. Dean continued painting during this period.

In 1989, "Picnic Near Agnes" (60 x 66") (Figure 4), was painted, portraying four adults picnicking. The colours are brighter than in her previous work, but still muted, with a deep blue sky and blue dress on one woman (Dean herself) lying contentedly on the ground.

In 1991, Dean continued the picnic theme with "The Coming Storm" (60 x 66") (Figure 5). This is a family scene with someone diving into the water, a man protec-



Fig. 3, Diana Dean, "Women Pushing Rock Up the Hill," 66 " x 58.75", Oil on Canvas, 1984.

tively holding a young child in his arms, while two women sit on the ground. The colours used are similar to "Picnic Near Agnes." Yet, ominously, the sky is filling with storm clouds. The above paintings reflect Dean's life story prior to painting "White Witch."

#### After the White Witch

In the early 1990s, Dean spent several days alone, on a small uninhabited island off the coast of Salt Spring. She used this isolation to meditate and to grieve a dying relationship. After some time alone, Dean began to see "visions." Upon leaving the island (which she later discovered had once been a traditional burial ground for aboriginal people), Dean was re-energized. The intensity of her painting increased, and the visions became very dominant in her work.

"Lamentations," 1994 (72 x 60") (Figure 6), an extremely large painting, was created about this time. It shows a bright blue coffin in the foreground, with women lamenting and keening as they lay a child to rest. The coffin sits on sand and the sand is blood red. In the background is a Gauguin-style Christ figure struggling to

rise up from the ground. The figure is entwined with snakes. In an interview, Dean talked about "Lamentations" and explained that the child represented her soul or spirit, and that it was necessary to care for it. To me, "White Witch" and "Lamentations" represent the leaving behind or the burial of past concepts, and the rebirth or successful navigation of a major passage in Dean's life.

After this time, Dean's work pulsed with colours, bright vibrant yellows, vivid blues, pinks, turquoises, and scarlet reds. Many of the figures in her work filled out and became three-dimensional, became people of substance. This has been particularly true of her self-portraits. I feel that she began to see herself as complete and whole.

Dean's paintings also began to change significantly in other ways. Skies began to fill with moons, symbols, characters, and angels. Rooms and spaces became filled with people, some fully developed, some partially developed. The intensity of Dean's painting heightened with her sense of freedom to be an artist and to make her own statements on canvas.

Although Dean has always painted on a large scale, her scale increased. Two very key paintings from this time are "The Alchemist" and one of a three part series called the "Supper." Each painting is dis-

cussed below.

"The Alchemist," (1993) (Figure 7), is a painting on an enormous scale. It is painted in the form of a stained glass window, domed at the top. The painting is ten feet tall and eight feet wide, constructed in four pieces. In the painting, the ceiling has a large bell on which several bodies are displaying acrobatic skills. Each body is connected to a colored ribbon. On the floor, a woman (Dean) stands on point spinning on a turntable. She is being spun by a male alchemist on the left of the picture. The alchemist controls the woman by means of spools of threads he is creating. In the background, an artist standing at an easel is recording the scene on canvas. The artist is, again, a self-portrait of Dean. Two thoughts have occurred to me about this scene. First, the spinning woman probably represents Dean's past life. Second, and more importantly, Dean can depict this past openly and without pathos or self-pity. As the artist, Dean is able to frankly acknowledge that she had been an attractive woman who played the traditional role well.

"Supper III," 1993 (70.75 x 69.25") (Figure 8), marks another passage in Dean's life. It is in stark contrast to "Woman Pushing a Rock up the Hill." The painting

shows four generations sitting at a dinner table. A lovely young mother sits in the centre, a child on her lap. On the left of the picture is an attractive woman in mid-life, with presence and substance (Dean herself). To the right, an older woman sits, her face bathed in sunlight, looking very complete and very comfortable with herself and with the others. Technically, the women appear more three-dimensionally complete than in earlier works. In the background, a window looks out on the sea. The sky over the sea is filled with imagery from Dean's visions, such as a joker, a pair of wheels, a number five and several moons. I believe that Dean had begun to come to terms with being herself, and with her relationship to her mother in this picture. Indeed, Dean has somehow depicted the essence of a possible good relationship between different generations of women. There appears to be a connectedness and a comfort level between everyone. Dean no longer sees herself alone, but belonging as a full person. However, although the colours in this painting are wonderful, there is still a darkness underlying the colours.

"Self-Portrait—The Artist," 1994 (42 x 54") (Figure 9), proclaimed to all who saw it that Dean was an artist. It is a self-portrait that shows her waist height. Wearing a red smock and purple sweater, Dean is standing before an open door, mixing paints with a palette knife. Her hands are artists' hands, strong and sure, her face is serious looking at the viewer. Energy and purpose flow from her. Looking at it, I know that Dean knows who she is and what she is; she is a painter. In the background, through the open door, the landscape is open and light, and two angels float in the sky. To me, the openness of the landscape points to further passages of growth and maturity in Dean's life journey.

"The Eye of the Needle," 1997 (48 x 48") (Figure 10), represents a major passage in the life of Dean, and in the lives of all women. The picture depicts a nude woman (Dean) standing on a gristmill stone, which lies like a lily pad on the surface of a pond. Also standing on the stone is a large statueque woman (perhaps a high priestess) with an enormous needle resting on her shoulder, as if it were a sword. This priestess is holding out a pair of brilliant red shoes to the nude woman. The nude's age appears to be late 40s or early 50s. I see this painting as documenting the passage through menopause, a passage that can be as difficult as passing successfully

through the eye of a needle, and with the gristmill grinding exceedingly finely. The red shoes are the prize for successfully navigating one's life to this point.

Banquet III, 1998 (83.5 x 54.5") (Figure 11), was painted as one of ten parts of a Banquet Series done between 1993 and 1999. The painting shows four young men sitting at a dinner table, and written on the tablecloth are the words "My Four Sons." These men are Dean's four sons. The picture has a lightness of colour that is new to Dean. When I asked her about it, she said it came from her delight and pride in having all four sons successfully launched into the world—all on different paths. But part of the lightness and joy in the painting was recognition that with the last of her children away from home, she was free to paint without interruption, any time. Dean stated that she loved her children as much as she ever had, but now she came first. It was her turn. The departure of her children from home was again another major passage in Dean's life.

"Seven Stages of Women," 1999 (48 x 84") (Figure 1), appears to be a painting in which Dean plays most, if not all, the leading roles. The scene is one of several women of different ages at a social function. To the right of the picture, a teenage girl appears to be flirting with a man, as she begins her sexual and social development to adulthood. Behind her is a seductive woman (Dean) in a stunning coral dress, with a man in a tuxedo beside her.



Fig. 4. Diana Dean, "Picnic Near Agnes," 60 "x 66", Oil on Canvas, 1988.

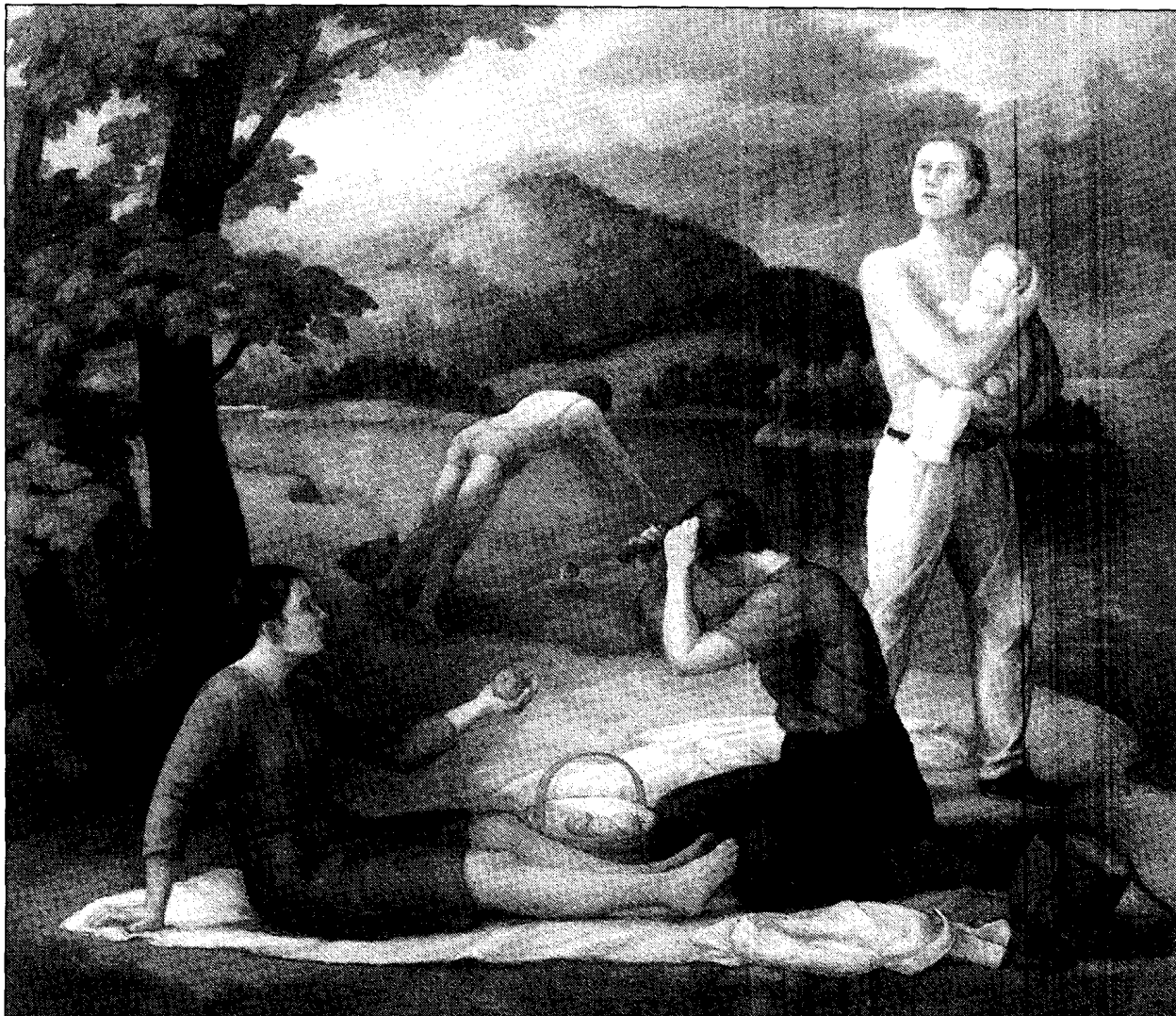


Fig. 5. Diana Dean, "The Coming Storm," 60 " x 66", Oil on Canvas, 1991.

This woman appears at the height of her sexual powers. In the foreground, is a woman in a brilliant turquoise dress. This woman (Dean again), has presence, but she is not young. To her left is a young girl holding a baby. In the background, between the woman in turquoise and the woman in coral, is an old lady, sitting and looking distinctly detached from the scene. I feel that this figure is not connected to the others in the picture and wonder if it is because Dean has still to deal with her passage from middle to old age. While this figure appears as undeveloped and disconnected, I am sure that when Dean gets into old age, she will take centre stage in her own work.

I have found Dean's paintings to be joyous, reflecting her great passion for life. Continuously over the years, I have wondered at the ability of an artist to structure and delineate, on canvas, ideas and perceptions of life passages that have only nebulously floated across my mind. Seeing these paintings has assisted me in my own attempts to articulate and understand the passages and transformations in my own life. Dean's spirit is indomitable. Even pushing a boulder up a hill she does not portray herself as

a victim. I am still uncertain of how to define a feminist perspective, but after looking at Dean's work, I know it exists and that I too am a feminist.

*F. Anne Redpath, a retired management consultant, is the first woman graduate of the School of Administrative Studies at York University (now the Schulich School of Business) and the only female in the School while she was a student. She graduated when it was still legal for prospective employers to turn down a woman's job application for no reason other than that she was a woman. Prior to retiring, she had her own management consulting practice for 20 years. Art is one of Anne's passions.*

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Fig. 6. Diana Dean, "Lamentations," 66" x 90", Oil on Canvas, 1994. Photo: Tom Moore.



Fig. 8. Diana Dean, "Supper III," 70.75" x 69.25", Oil on Canvas, 1994. Photo: Tom Moore.





Fig. 7. Diana Dean, "The Alchemist," (in four parts), 119" x 91.5", Oil on Canvas, 1993. Photo: Tom Moore.



Fig. 9. Diana Dean, "Self-Portrait – The Artist," 66" x 42", Oil on Canvas, 1994. Photo: Tom Moore.



Fig. 10. Diana Dean, "The Eye of the Needle," 60" x 60", Oil on Canvas, 1997. Photo: Tom Moore.





Fig. 11. Diana Dean, "Banquet III," 83.5" x 54.5", Oil on Canvas, 1998. Photo: Tom Moore.



Fig. 12. Diana Dean, "The Seven Ages of Women," 48" x 72", Oil on Canvas, 1999. Photo: Tom Moore.