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## Counting Vessels

M. Siri Amrit Kroesen  
*Portland State University*

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The abstract and thesis of M. Siri Amrit Kroesen for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Painting presented May 22, 1996, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

COMMITTEE APPROVALS:

[REDACTED]  
Susan Harlañ, Chair

[REDACTED]  
Elizabeth Mead

[REDACTED]  
Michihiro Kosuge

[REDACTED]  
Richard Wattenberg,  
Representative of the Office of  
Graduate Studies

[REDACTED]  
Eleanor H. Erskine

MASTERS PROGRAM APPROVAL:

[REDACTED]  
Mary Constans

\*\*\*\*\*

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## ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of M. Siri Amrit Kroesen for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Painting presented May 22, 1996.

Title: Counting Vessels.

The discussion and illustration of how paintings function as thresholds is examined in the thesis report and the thesis exhibition, Threshold implies the passage of how an artist approaches the processes of seeing. The painting is the entry point, a place of connection of artist and viewer, a record of human experience transforming individual, interdependent and universal knowledge.

Issues of the human body's relationship to vessels, and the metaphor that is integrated in relationship of space and proximity is explored. The significance of symbols and signs and the interplay of historical and personal imagery are examined through the precepts of Feminist Theory. The historical influences are paleolithic and are cross referenced from Japan to India. Other direct influences of the fertility form of the pelvic

region of the female frame represents the abstracted appearance, signifying the human body's ability to possess and regenerate its essence.

The work and its discussion of this symbol reflect specifically the use of the vessel form synthesizing the anatomical reference of uterus, the regenerative region of the female body. The uterus as symbol is to imply a conscious internal (and external) perception that is relative to ideas of human containment. The paintings are concerned with utility bottles transforming a sense of transition metaphorically from earth to air, opaque to transparent. The object of painting as a threshold for visceral knowledge and an opportunity for the knowledge is explored through the proximity of objects. Usage of materials creates a personal dialogue. Merging specific experiences into visual documents, the content and the symbols create parallels of the vessel to the body as forms that hold. The realization that the distance of objects establishing their relationship, and the philosophical importance of the vessels and the body's void are symbolically represented in both the written word and the painted image.

COUNTING VESSELS

by  
M. SIRI AMRIT KROESEN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Art: Painting

Portland State University  
1996

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## THESIS

“The symbolic does not simply point to a meaning , but rather allows that meaning to present itself.<sup>1</sup>

--H. G. Gadamer

The observation of the interplay of allegory and symbol within systems of beliefs, has been an integral part of my work. The study of feminist criticism stimulated in me the desire to express work drawn from personal experience. Personal experience becomes allegory supported by the repetitive uses of figure as symbol.

The Greek word "symbolon" from which the word symbol is derived, refers to a broken piece, one half of which signifies the existence of the other. The manifest symbol represents its visually unmanifest meaning. The paintings are tablets of an ontological examination of the proximity of matter to spirit. The female body in my work as subject, and the integration of the vessel as object, speaks of the process of the body's mingling in substances outside itself. The vessel becomes a metaphor for the body and yet still interacts in the duality of what is inner and what is outer. The female body (the symbol) has become a representation of theology (a religion that existed approximately 35,000 years ago -

based upon the discovery of paleolithic forms) representing the belief that the female body contains creative neurological abilities that set her apart from the male in expression of function not just form. The emergence of feminist history and its reinterpretation of events opens a whole realm of images and objects that can function from the proximity of the female body. Whether it be the figure in totality or in fragment the work strives to function as a sign for regeneration, incorporating into the work a record of consciousness and discernment.

Rebecca Solnit in writing about Anne Hamilton's work touches on the physiology of the female body and the correlation to the sociological interpretation of the female. "The pregnable borders of the female are what make her threatening to the ideas of self-containment, control, accountability in her things merge and from her things emerge."<sup>2</sup>

The use of a historical image ideally implies a past, the history of the mark in the painting then acts as a metaphor of the actual historical re-emergence of submerged images and beliefs. The feminine archetypes that were buried by Christianity, resurfacing in the 70's producing the idea of essentialism. The constructs of essentialism entail the aspects of the female experience as elemental, irrepressible and available even when subtracted by



society. They are intrinsic. In recognition of this I approached the process of painting as a commitment to translate my experience to a visual medium. Communicating from my own feminine existence I am consciously aware of contributing to the pool of images created from and about the feminine form.

My process of painting images, concealing then scrapping down to a previous surface, parallels archeology in which images are created, submerged and rediscovered. The use of historical images ideally implies a past. The marks history then acts also a metaphor of the actual historical reemergence of the submerged images and beliefs. The surface that is removed acts as an additional layer much like collective memories that are contained in the earth. The deductive becomes the additive.

First year work consisted of exploration of surface qualities that would support the image by combining the use of materials that would physically and metaphorically relate to the actual history of the image. The use of linen, canvas, wood, paper, stencils, hand made gessos, dry pigments, layering of materials, submerging images in bee's wax, all burned and scraped back created a fascination with destroyed and defaced images.

This led to the overall conception that the painting itself is a vessel, a record of time, a repository of my visual memory. My

sensibilities then led me to investigate the confinements of the painting, the edge, the shape, the confession of itself as an object.

Again Rebecca Solnit comments on the phenomenology of the object, "Every object serves as evidence.; the feather of a bird, the bird of birds, bird of the open air, a loaf of bread should speak of reapers, mills and wheat fields, so that one injects the world by labor and landscape not by bread alone"<sup>3</sup>.

If the vessel is that which contains a liquid to the limitations of its container, paintings can function similarly. By the juxtaposition of metaphors ornamenting the body as the sign, the image expands to the edges of the canvas.

I began to fragment the figure specifically as an opportunity to focus in on the torso region in which other forms rotate, combining issues of space as the vestibule or passageway. The dichotomy of the vessel as a container of substance, contrasting the vestibule as a container of passage.

The aim to recreate a feeling of the sublime existing in the female body and the study of feminism supported me in the investigation of how to translate my birthing experience into a visual object. Working on the first series at Portland State University, I was dealing with a child attached to a apnea monitor, recording her breaths and heartbeats. I was at the time working

with a paleolithic goddess fertility form. The combination of the use of the fertility goddess and my experience as a mother of a premature child created a dichotomy. The act of defacement and application of paint expressed my rage and torment. The handling contributing to content.

“Crossings” (Fig.1) is a painting of a figure surrounded in a field of blood red, the atmospheric space is twirling around the paleolithic image of an armless, legless creature. Her head and face are unidentified. Floating next to her is an image of an egg, a lone green egg that was rediscovered in the surface. The egg signifies the separation of the form from its source and the disempowerment that I felt as a mother. The egg is vulnerable, yet still sustains its autonomy within the form. This painting was a transitional piece because the utilitarian use of a borrowed historical image was problematic. It was interrupting my goal of representing my personal experience, it seemed that the universality of the image had diluted my quest for personal imagery. I felt a need to dive deeper into images that specifically came from my subconsciousness. I realized the further I dissected the image formally the greater was the actualization of a personal image.

“To the primordial mysteries of the feminine belongs also the making of vessels-used for gathering-transporting. These instruments of preservation are important for another aspect of feminine domination that is of critical importance for the development of culture. Female domination is symbolized in the center, the hearth which is the original alter. In Rome the basic matriarchal element was most conspicuously preserved in the cult of Vesta”<sup>4</sup>

-Erich Neuwman, “The Great Mother”

These paintings contain versions of vessels. The words vessel and vestibule all stem from the Latin word Vesta. “Vesta” is the Roman goddess of the hearth and of the fire. These sources are important to me politically, as they are an effort to reidentify history as invention. Although these paintings mostly are concerned with formal issues, they are firmly rooted in personal experiences, my bridge into post modernism. The sources are non European, creating a cross section of cultural experience. This series is influenced by Japanese pottery specifically of the Jomon period. The “V” shaped pots characteristic of this period were made for the basic necessities of life: water, fire and food. The pots are anatomically referential to the pelvic area and in addition seem to

have a relationship to the paleolithic goddess form as if you were to cut her at the waist. The pelvic region is forced forward, splitting open. It is the Jamon pot merged into atmospheric space, together and then broken open as if a gas or sound is released, relating to the anatomical opening of the mothers pelvis during birthing.

“Pelvic Pot” (Fig. 2) is the Jamon stylized figure containing an anatomical spinning pelvis. Both vessels are split open so their contents are exposed. The bursting has been from within, creating sub-vessels contributing to the process that separation only creates new distinct wholes. They owe their form to that which they came from but function independently. The hip bones rotate around a black hole, the vastness of any vessel. Centralized in the painting is the form of the pelvis, the skeleton, symbolically both an anatomical memory and the portal of sublime experience. The white paint on top of the burnt defaced surface represents death. The pelvis and the vessel are outlined, moving the eye around, falling in contrast to the dark columns that allow this pot to take form. The record of the touch, the embrace, are statements that maintain themselves in reverence to the sacredness of object making. They are markings that focus on the relationship of transparency and confinement of duality and communion.

“Elemental Death”(Fig.3) portrays the interior space of

containment. That which both houses death and birth, for both experiences allow the body to be a vessel. One that carries the body form in and the other that lets the spirit form out. The painting is split in two, allowing the appearance of both the light and the void. The top of the work is the skeleton vibrating in the center, expanding out to both the left and to the right as if shedding itself. Containing in an archway, the vestibule, which is the passage that is leading, incorporates the physicality of the viewer. The white film that covers the bottom to middle of the work is illuminates previous marks. Large black gravestone shapes are energetically added to the piece. Writing utilized as mark making is evident at the lower left. Acting as earth, a structure. Some marks are intentional. Others hover and can only be retrieved after time. My desire for the work to maintain the evidence of the makers hand is present through the physical handling of the paint. As in other works presented, the piece revolves around the process of reworking the surface so that the finished product has a feeling of an abrupt ending.

“The mother tongue, spoken or written expects an answer, It is conversation , a word the root of which means turning together. The mother tongue is language not as mere communication, but as relation,

relationship,. It connects... its power is not in dividing  
but in binding.”<sup>5</sup>

-Jane Tompkins

“Retrieving”(Fig.4) uses the image of a hand in what Indian culture or dance is referred to as a “mudra”. The hand is perched so the thumb, which represents the energy of the ego, pressing the index finger represents aspects of knowledge offering the experience of the expansion of the ego through higher thinking. The hand is entering the painting at the upper left, fragmented to draw attention to the suggestion of the figure in it’s totality. The hand is reaching toward three small floating vessels placed behind one larger more predominate one. There is a heart or organ shape supporting both the architectural space and it’s occupants. The smoky gray haze floats in front of the passageways that are dark and ambiguous. The interest of proximity and the relation of objects to the flesh is implemented. The mingling of the body with that which is outside ourselves. The substance of what the vessel contains is the question that I became interactive with. The vessel now seemed to pertain to the mundane, the secular, the everyday. The vessel here changes to the bottle. It now becomes free standing, more clearly a thing that holds something invisible. The bottle becomes a container of a substance outside the body.

This piece began a dialogue that was concerned with greater social meaning. Could the bottles represent themselves as containers of (by-products) of the anatomical, things such as breath and thought which are unseen.

“Solitaire”(Fig. 5) is about a bottle that is composed of the initial surface, the record of the first handling, suspended in a black void space. The generic bottle image is a visual reaction to free the work of it's historical reference, the blatant goddess image. The bottle seems to function within a field of larger association, for the bottle can hold anything from enlightenment to coca cola.

In “Solitaire” the isolation and simplicity pushed further the idea of the painting as physical illusion, and it could be as simple as the illusion of a nondescript bottle. The bottle functions in relation to the ideas of a broken piece, the symbol of object that represents an absence of the body. The position of the bottle to the yellow edge relates the figure to the confinement of the paintings edge. The flash of the image, is revealing the aesthetic of the thing.

The painting “E-Coli“(Fig 6) suspends a dead hand in a black atmospheric space. The outline of a larger bottle, almost now completely transparent, is positioned over most of the surface. Smaller bottles emanating a sepia light, float around the hand, the target point in the composition. E-Coli is scratched on the painting



referring to the alchemical idea that bottles or vessels can hold transforming substances that can change the order of life. The same hand is used again. The mudra in the East Indian Dance “Bharata Natayam”, (is a gesture) that identifies placement in time and space. It represents the exact moment, at the exact place at the exact time. The black space that signifies the void suggests architectural dimension. The surface is convoluted as with previous paintings wax, tar and collage exist as the final surface. One hue, much like the skin that has rotted, is merged back into the board. Uniquely, the color is the accumulation of all the materials creating a physical depth to carve notions.

The use of stencils began with this painting. The hand images are taken from dance manuals. The drawings were xeroxed and enlarged, transferred to tracing paper and shellaced to the surface. The painting has received several coats and compositions. Finally the tracing paper is removed down to the initial gessoed surface. The coldness of the gesso contrasting with the darkness of the tar creates a richness and dimension to the tension of flesh to substance.

The “Paper Pieces” (Fig. 7) continuing with the stenciled hands, and the positioning of the suspended bottles led to the exploration of the relationship the bottles have with themselves within the

work of these five paper pieces. A feeling of inertia, the undeniable relationship that the hand has to the bottles spin within the confines of the piece. These pieces were done quickly and in succession. They all are treated with a limited palette of earth tones and dark silhouettes . I have played with the handling of how the bottles are treated, as if the bottle becomes a hole in the surface. The bottles are repeated again referring to functions of the body that are repetitive, like breathing, the beating or contractions of the organs. The accumulations of these organs containing fluids and how they operate together. The spatial treatment of these paper pieces is again atmospheric but yet still implying some inner room, a confined inner space. The collage element of the hands that were also transferred to the paper have meaning but I hope they still represent function that autonomizes them.

“Countings”(Fig 8) and “Choices”(Fig.9) have now taken further the concept of the vessel as bottle. They are all floating in unison. They have a certain conformity that the stenciled image also contributes to. They are now referring also to what is not filling them, their empty transparency is what seems to fill. Heidegger states, “The jug’s void determines all the handling in the process of making the vessel. The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material but in the void that it holds. And yet is the jug empty?”<sup>6</sup>

I began to list the feelings and deposits of fear that these bottles would hold, earthquakes, E- coli, aids, empty thoughts. This investigation about what would fill this empty bottle, continued back to measuring the functions of the body. Again the movements of inhalation, exhalation, releasing of liquids, blinking, all acts of repetition, mostly involuntary, yet all the acts of the body repeated in a rhythm. The repetition also reveals metaphor; the bottle that holds, the painting that holds, the frame that holds, the viewer that holds. The painting offers the bottles a place both to be held and to suspend, like the body holds and releases.

In "Choices" the impact of touch is represented by the stamping of the hand. Considerations of the scale of this hand is evident. The child hand , the perplexity of the touch of a child into the substance of the bottle's moods. Again a feeling of movement in unison, a spinning , an aliveness. The atmospheric space here becomes even more architectural, repeated, ghostly arches emerging out of the surface offer a sense of placement that a dream would offer. The stencil of the gate post is used in both paintings, luring the viewer into the feeling of marking the passage, again the sign between the inner and outer space. One has neither left nor arrived. Larger more encompassing fields of arched black shroud the movement between the hands and the bottle. Heidegger

discusses that what appropriates a 'thing' is the distance of the object from us, the nearness is what 'thingifies'. The relationship to the flesh and the thing is explored in "Choices". What is emerging and what is decaying? What is seen and not? What is perpetuating the movement, the hand or the bottle?

"the potter does not shape the jug he only shapes the clay. No. He shapes the void. From start to finish the potter takes hold of the impalpable void and brings it forth as the container in the shape of a containing vessel. The jug's void determines all the handling in the process."<sup>7</sup>

-Heidegger

The vessel's relationship to the void, and the dichotomy of the container and the contained, allowed the interplay of symbolic flesh to its environment and to what the environment holds. This created a visual example of proximity. Depicting the space between flesh and object, flesh and surroundings, flesh and bone. The painting establishes the distance between objects. The proximity of objects establishes their relationship to each other. Works declare the holding of appearances. The paintings in relation to each other furthers the condition of holding. In unison the paintings offer a continuum, a record, creating evidence of time. The allegory is fused with personal myth through the repetition of images.



Fig. 1 "Crossings"



Fig. 2 "Pelvic Pot"



Fig. 3 "Elemental Death"



Fig. 4 "Retrieving"



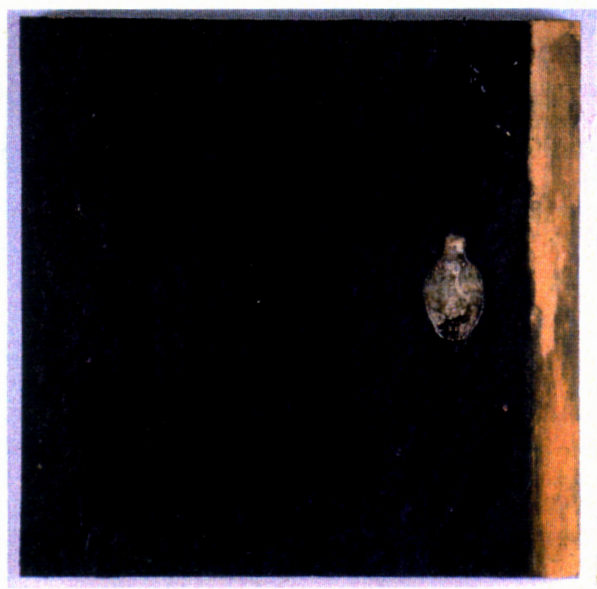


Fig. 5 "Solitaire"



Fig. 6 "E-Coli"



Fig. 7 "Paper Pieces"



Fig. 8 "Countings"

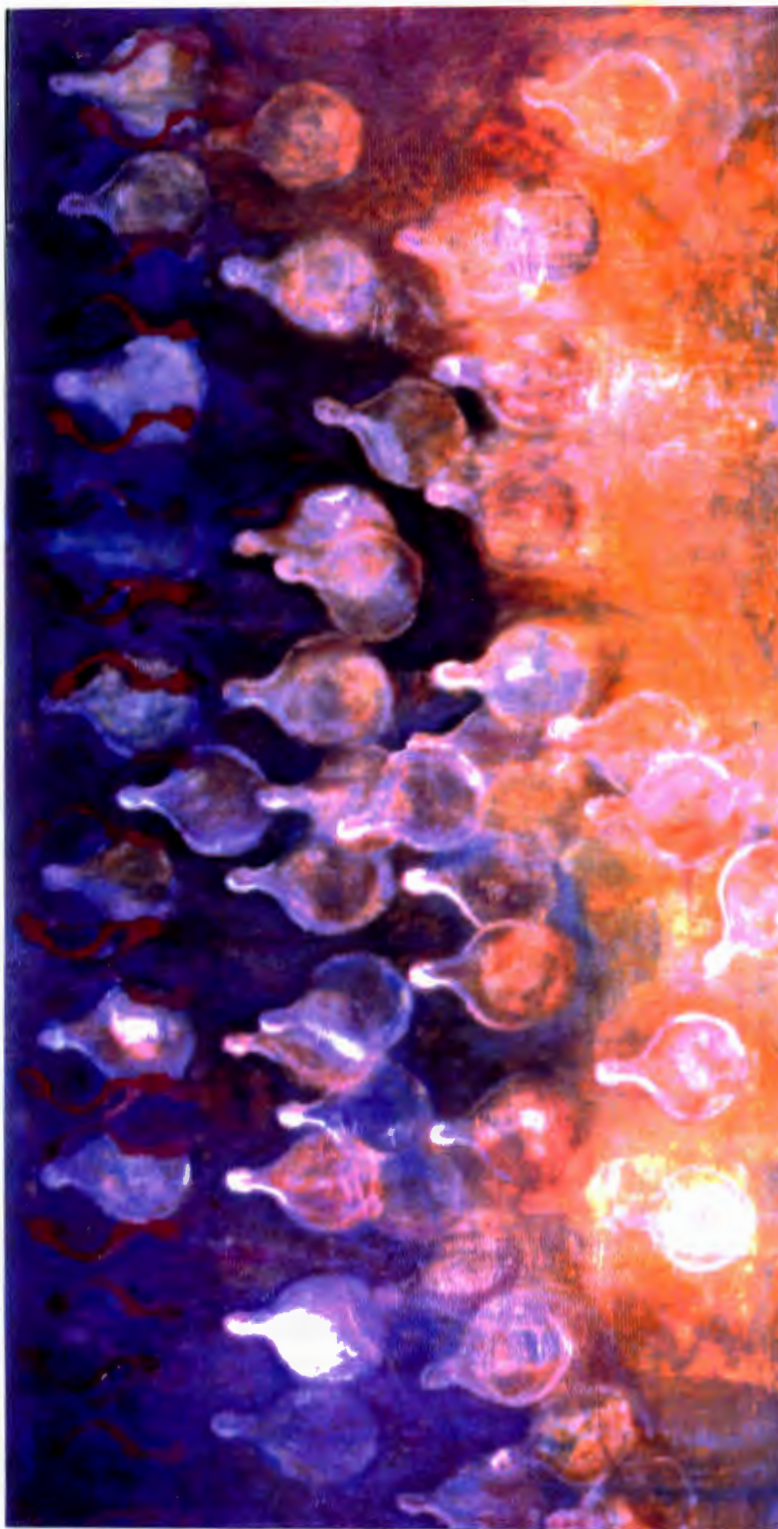


Fig. 9 "Choices"

## ENDNOTES

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