

5-1-1994

## A view from within: Ruth Dealy's real-life portraits

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### Recommended Citation

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# A view from within

## Ruth Dealy's real-life portraits

by Bill Rodriguez

**S**tanding in the middle of her light-flooded corner studio, Ruth Dealy, was a whole person. Part of her was on the wall, sitting on the edge of a bed in "The Morning After" (1981), done about five years into her discovery of self-portraits as a theme. A bruise of a face, purplish, looked at us stunned.

Part of her stood beaming back at the disturbing image, as proudly as if the paintings was a child who had just won a spelling bee. She liked its painterly surface and images, even though she hadn't included it with the other self-portraits at her current one-person show at the Providence Art Club through May 27. Some of her less aggressive paintings, including the two-section show's title piece, "Sleep In Spite of Thunder," is at AS220 through May 29.

Despite Ruth Dealy's sometimes stormy images, the 46-year-old artist comes across in person as courteous and downright cheerful, busying to get coffee for her visitor. But you would never mistake her for somebody sleepwalking through her days to avoid wincing at life's metaphorical thunder. And though she teaches painting part-time at Rhode Island School of Design, where she got both her BFA and MFA, she's hardly a remote ivory tower academic, despite being raised in Cambridge. Social involvement as well as art animates her life, and she has spent much of the past three years on the fund-raising committee that made the AS220 art center happen.

"I'm a very nice mother. We've been married 27 years and I really like my husband. I really am generous, community-spirited. And I find it really stifling, to be that sensitive," Dealy said, although she values the quality about herself. Her husband, James, is a social worker, and their children are 6 and 12.

"The moment I get in the studio and shut the door, I feel unaccountable morally," she declared. "The moment I shut the door of my studio I feel a sense of exhilarating freedom from morality. Just like a criminal or a crazy person — or an artist. Also the most like myself."

She gestured over her shoulder to the battered face of "The Morning After." "And so that is what happens here. These are angry — anger is almost too light a word for it. They are criminal in intent, in some sense, I think," Dealy paused a moment, chuckled, and added: "She said mildly."

The dutiful mother and wife in modest blue sweater and skirt got some more lipstick onto the styrofoam edge of a steaming cup of Dunkin' Donuts Dark Roast. The violence of the self-portraits and her friendliness are both quite genuine, she pointed

bring the atom bomb into the world. Her Russian Jewish heritage includes 27 generations of rabbis.

"All that plus a Marxist sensibility. My grandfather on the other side was a Wobbler and Samuel Gompers' best friend," she added. "The workers' sensibility is like every woman who ever jumped out of a women's garment union fire is in my head!"

Dealy laughed at that, something she did a lot in the course of an hour, antennas readily up for irony.

Another thing that amuses her — when

She noted how police are usually frustrated by varied descriptions of perpetrators. "No one focuses on the same thing. 'He wearing a green windbreaker with raggedy sleeves' and 'No, no — he had a broad face that was very oval.'"

On this score she has a problem with still life painters, at least the smug ones.

"It's almost like a difference in philosophy politically. Like —" and she assumed an aggressive voice, "— This pear is a pear and I can guarantee it and I'm not worried about the world because I'm a person who knows that a pear is a pear!"

To her mind, she is a "very realistic" depicter of the only landscape she could honestly claim to be viewing — the one whose borders blend the internal with the external. For the title painting of her show she bought irises every few days for two months, though they appear as merely a suggested blur. "It sounds precious but it's not. It's a real process, looking at them until I feel I'm in the right place."

Shapes and semi-defined images emerge from Dealy's canvases like both remembered shapes and present ones merging in and out of time. She speaks of images "partially seen and partially felt." Her greediness about wanting to draw from so much — the unseen and the once seen and the unseeable — has a lot to do with being

thankful for, and sometimes giddy about, the very process of seeing. At age 16 she permanently lost the sight in her right eye, though medication brought sight back to the other.

"I don't think I'm a very reborn anything, you know what I mean? But I do feel, being blind when I was little, a real sense of awe at what I look at. 'Whoa!' I have that experience a lot during the day, like I'm just knocked out visually a lot of the time," she said.

She likes reading Faulkner for that experience, that of coming upon significant moments suddenly.

Of course, every occurrence isn't an epiphany. Themes of contrast also emerge to her consciousness, and then into her canvases: "Freedom and belonging, inside or outside, that kind of stuff."

"Self-portraits are the perfect place to do them. Most of my self-portraits are outsiders, in a funny way," she added. "Outsiders to the normal daily dialogue. I'm really aware of that. And yet I want them to be a very solid part of the physical world — that's why they're so large, too. You can't marginalize them. You can't even put them over your sofa! I think scale has a lot to do with the impact."

In her artist's statement for the show she tells of searching fruitlessly as a painter for a decade before discovering a compelling theme to explore 16 years ago. Then self-portraits with their "cast of thousands" provided bountiful variations, her very own haystack or lily pad series.

That angry images well up is something that — again that irony — makes her smile. And say: "There's got to be some pessimists. Outside I'm an optimist, but as an artist, somebody's got to shake their fist at God." □



**'DUTCH SELF-PORTRAIT':** "The moment I shut the door of my studio I feel a sense of exhilarating freedom from morality. Just like a criminal or a crazy person — or an artist."

out, and only a foolish consistency would exclude one. Life-at-large doesn't do so, after all. Her felt sense of bearing a "huge moral accountability" comes from three sources, any of which would be enough to motivate a roomful of consciences. Her father was WWII nuclear physicist at Los Alamos, helping Oppenheimer and Teller

it's not annoying the hell out of her — is the notion some artists have that they capture reality when they duplicate surfaces.

"Like they'll have somebody and their shoelaces will be just as in focus as the eyes. And you don't look at people like that," she insisted. "And that's called realism and it's bullshit!"

## Dealy's double vision

It's appropriate as well as ingenious for her current exhibition, *Ruth Frisch Dealy: Sleep In Spite of Thunder*, to be showing in galleries across town rather than in adjacent rooms. Viewers could use some decompression time to assimilate all the artist pours at them in both her abstract and her figure works. These paintings thrum with energy even when the subject matter is a stationary person.

The former are being shown at AS220, with one exception. Six abstractions with representational references, including the title canvas, "Sleep In Spite of Thunder" (1994), are typical in style and also emblematic of the other works in the room. At first, any of the serenity promised by the title is overwhelmed by the overall explosiveness of the 5x8' painting's Expressionist style. Whirling black lines entwine at both sides, atop vague shapes emerging from a mainly gray background, as though from dreamscape clouds. But a bold red arm-length appendage gropes up from off-canvas at the bottom center and pulls the eye toward a quiet flower-

like form in yellow and green. Eventually, one might notice a shape in the upper right that suggests a figure turning away.

Most of the others approach pure abstraction; brushstrokes thick with the physicality of paint, unified in style by those swirling black brush strokes that also serve to guide and direct the eye. Some of the titles, such as "Eye" (1994) make references that one can then detect amidst the shapes. For instance, when "Swamp Grass" (1990) is so named, its sea-green background, rock-gray forms and shadow-black areas take on identity, and the patches of yellow and red burst suddenly into bloom.

The single distinct figure on the walls is in "Evicted" (1976). A young woman sits at the center, made formal simply by the large white earrings she wears. Angular shapes emerge from grays and whites of what would be a cityscape if she were on a terrace. Like the title painting, this 18-year-old work juxtaposes calm and chaos quite effectively, though more explicitly than is Dealy's current tendency.

Most of the eight paintings in the Providence Art Club show are more recent, and most are self-portraits. The influence of German Expressionism is also evident here, though there is only one with the Max Beckman-like outlining of shapes with thick, black lines — the three impassive faces of "Witnesses" (1994). That painting obtains much of its power from its simplicity: primary colors dominate the tightly cropped assembly; the men stare off to our right, and fingers are extended toward the mouth at the right — but whether it is the man's raised in shock or that of someone about to silence him remains an evocative ambiguity.

The image of the artist in "Dutch Portrait" (1989) may not mimic Rembrandt in more than the reference to self-portraiture, but it very well may be the definitive work in that tradition that Dealy has produced. It's a work of quiet power and compositional clarity. Black ropes of cascading hair and brisk stabs of color that assemble into a face are in contrast to the expression, passive but intense. The light-white swath in the upper left is balanced by the white collar, lending a pristine mood. If the show were to only consist of one painting, this image of the artist peering out into our world, so keenly observant, might very well suffice. — B.R.