

Mona Marshall

HARRIS GALLERY

HOUSTON

by James R. Timpler

Images From A Lover of the Earth
Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!
Earth of the departed sunsets—earth of the
mountains misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full
moon just tinged with blue!
Earth of the shine and dark mottling the
tide of the river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds bright
and dearer for my sake!
Far-swooping elbow'd earth—rich apple-
blossom'd earth!
Smile, for your lover comes!

The Earth's lover, for Whitman, of course, is the poet. In our case, it's the artist who, like Whitman, in "Song of Myself," celebrates the connectedness of all living creatures to each other, to the Earth, and, indeed, to the cosmos ("For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you"). . .

Ut Poesis pictura. Mona Marshall's show at the Harris Gallery is visual poetry from a lover of the Earth. The title of her show is "The Memory of Rain" (rain is also one of the Earth's lovers). It is about droughts-specifically, droughts that have effected west Texas, but, poetically, droughts that dehydrate the spirit and evaporate the ever-shrinking pools of connectivity.

Marshall's show is divided into three visual themes: The "Memory of Rain" series, seven 42" x 35" mixed media drawings on heavily textured prepared paper; the "Survivors" series, three 15" x 53" white panels, each of which display a horizontal row of five 7" x 6 1/4" scratchboard-type drawings on paper; and the newspaper series, six copies of front pages from the archives of various Texas newspapers, each of which have hanging down the center of a 6" wide parchment banner. Each banner has written on it stories, song lyrics, or folk sayings that reflect on drought conditions.

The perspicacity of Marshall's work confirms that art comes out of a specific cultural context, then it's thrown back into the milieu like seeds into plowed furrows. Art thrives on our responses, drawing feelings and ideas

Mona Marshall

Solace, 1998
Mixed
media on paper, 42" x 35"



from us like roots sucking in nutrients from the soil. Then it gives it all back plus more, as does a mature plant that cleanses the air with pure oxygen and enriches our bodies with its own nutrients. As goes the cycle of life, so goes the cycle of art.

Her images are surrounded by white, mottled areas that remind me of walking on the insufferably hot, sun-bleached caliche of southwest Texas, chasing the cloud shadows that danced over it like a trickster promising rain that never came. Inside the bright, arid, borders, the drawings happen at night, softly, quietly, illuminated by cool moonlight. The skin-tones are subtle distortions of oranges, greens, and yellows. All of the prominent figures are of women. Sometimes, only their hands and feet are shown, as if to speak not just of womanhood, but of the hard work and sacrifice required to live off the earth-with the earth. This thought is echoed in her heavily worked, layered surfaces, rich like a well tilled field. The layered surfaces allude to history, the passage of time; to the four-dimensional complexities of life; to the translucent *unsureness* of just where we are in it; to the memory needed to connect it all. In the iconography of Western art, buckets of water and references to the earth often represent the womb containing the seed of life. Especially in "Memory of Rain: *Solace*," Marshall alludes to that special communion between woman and the earth (meanwhile, on the periphery, Adam has snaked his way up into the tree and is snatching the fruit for himself). *Solace* is the most diverse of the drawings, utilizing the white borders in a manner reminiscent of medieval illuminated manuscripts and incorporating graph-like symbols. A couple of the pieces incorporate writing in the white border areas. Some of it is legible, some of it is layered over like old memories that become more and more difficult to make out through the refracting, distorting glaze of subsequent experiences.

Marshall's newspaper pieces speak the nature of memory; how opaque, like payment, temporal distance becomes without it how life is analogue and cyclical, not digital linear; how tragedies like droughts kick up ripples and waves that shape and reshape the ric of our culture; how we respond with art, song, and story-telling; how we can do little about it except remember and try *futilely* to forecast it (It will Rain Within the / Same Number of Days as / Stars Within the Circle around the Moon).

The "Survivors" drawings, images of *thistley* plants that thrive in drought condition are made by scratching into white encaustic over graphite. They provide a wonderful metaphor for scratching through the baked, cracked earth to plant a seed-or scratching a living under any adverse conditions. These drawings raise questions about an aesthetic survival under adversity.

Marshall's show is about survival. It is ically anti-technology in its austere, hand-he beauty. Through it she suggests that our sui is contingent upon our being able to transe the Cartesian dualities of mind/body, humankind/nature; upon our reestablishing connectivity with all living things and the Earth; upon the flesh of our hands and feet making love to the Earth. Her art sows the s of these ideas and echoes Whitman:

These are really the thoughts of all i
all ages and lands, they are
original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mir
they are nothing, or next to i
If they are not the riddle and the unt
of the riddle they are nothing
If they are not just as close as they i
distant they are nothing.
This is the grass that grows whereve
land is and the water is,
This is the common air that bathes
the globe. 0