

Medusa Redux: Ida Applebroog and the Spaces of Postmodernity

The favored imago of the artist in the nineteenth century was the *flâneur*. Ambling through the spaces of the “spectacular city which was open to a class and gender-specific gaze,”¹ this voyeur and participant in public entertainments—bars, brothels, racetracks—had access to visual experiences and panoramas off-limits to an unchaperoned, respectable woman. There could be no “*flâneuse*.”² Informal interior scenes of domestic life were of course not exclusively spaces for women artists; but codes of propriety organized the limits of most women artists’ mobility within the spaces of modernity, both in daily life and in paint. To venture forth into a wider arena, Rosa Bonheur, for example, had to secure a *permission de travestissement*.³

To *flâner*—through the city, the picture plane, and art history—remains a necessity, even if the spaces of postmodernity may differ from those of modernity, even if revisionist art history, which takes social context and gender into account, is changing the discipline. In significant ways Ida Applebroog should be considered a true successor to Baudelaire’s urban wanderer. And yet her work is often not referenced either to such a heritage or to the works of younger contemporaries who are credited with that heritage, such as David Salle, Eric Fischl, or Robert Longo. Indeed, her work is rarely discussed in relation to

that of other artists she was surely aware of in her developmental years, though one might compare and contrast Applebroog's penchant for grotesque facial masks with the mordant and hallucinatory distortions of figuration by artists from the Hairy Who (Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Ed Paschke, Karl Wirsum et al.), who were dominant in Chicago when Applebroog attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the mid-sixties. Nor do critics note the affinities with West Coast performance or feminist artists (particularly active in the early seventies, when Applebroog lived in Southern California). Yet the poker-faced humor of William Wegman's early videos finds a kindred spirit in the maddeningly understated punchlines of the small books—significantly titled “performances”—that Applebroog mailed to unsuspecting correspondents in the seventies, and Eleanor Antin's elaborate masquerades of feminine performative genius are offered another kind of stage in Applebroog's presentations of women.

Instead, Applebroog's subject matter is generally described in detail and her emotional message editorialized; the indecipherability of a complete narrative is noted but poststructuralist analysis does not follow, even though such discourse is the lingua franca of postmodernist art writing.

The central action in Ida Applebroog's recent paintings takes place in a hostile, ruined, falsely or perilously idyllic outdoor space: a woman and child embrace in a pumpkin field in *Tomorrowland* (1986); a woman strapped into a strange pair of stiltlike shoes appears in the apple orchard of *Emetic Fields* (1989). Yet to describe these spaces as primary in any thematic or dramatic sense would be misleading. Each painting is a large, complex orchestration of big and small canvases, architecturally disposed with a musical sense of counterpoint. In each work, human figures appear in a variety of scales: often a giant looms alongside the central scape occupied by a “life-size” inhabitant, and narrow bands of single, enigmatic images that frame the larger canvases telegraph intimations of domesticity. In *Marginalia* (1991), and other recent works, the installation space becomes a three-dimensional pictorial field, in which paintings of varying size and scale are freestanding, and the viewer becomes but another figure on Applebroog's complex and ever expanding ground.

Formal decisions are not formulaic, despite these recurrent visual elements. Small and large, interior and exterior, oppressed and op-

pressor are not disposed in the same configuration twice. In a disconcerting manner, edges do not meet, walls show through segments, narrative strips do not coincide with the larger canvases or images they abut. The peculiar flow of narratives through these different spaces and scales, and the locking and unlocking of time and space in these disjointed scripts and scapes, serve to disembody the very evident physicality of these architectural paint-things.

In Applebroog's work, as in television, "the global village" tunes in to an unhierarchic toxic waste dump of places, images, and events. Earthquakes and ball games, assassinations, space walks, the "Love Canal" and *The Love Boat*, Donahue in a dress, the inside of a human ovary, serial murder, plastic surgery—you are there, you are they, they are here. Applebroog's basic compositional techniques for the dispositions of these spaces of postmodernity are related to the visual strategies of such artists as David Salle and Eric Fischl. However, for all their multiples canvases, images, and figures, Salle's and Fischl's works retain the conventional position of gazing *into* a chamber (whose occupant is most likely to be a woman). In Applebroog's work, on the other hand, the traditional spaces of femininity—living room, bedroom, kitchen—become the viewfinder of a vast camera obscura. She is a global flâneuse whose paintings play host to an outer world, inhabited by men, women, children, and animals who spill into "woman's world" at great speed and in tumultuous moral equivalence.

It is the tumult of these spaces that animates the architectural elements of her paintings, transmuting archaic post-and-lintel construction into filmic space and montage. Yet Applebroog's call to the visual-narrative techniques of both old high art and recent low art builds on film's capacity to intercut unrelated images and actions. The narrow bands that horizontally or vertically frame most of the larger paintings have often been referred to as "predellalike," linking these works to medieval and early-Renaissance altarpieces. In these, the predellas were the narrative scenes painted on small panels, usually at the bottom or side of the central, larger image. While the main scenes might contain a static and symbolic portrayal of the principal iconography and be painted in a refined, "advanced," highly finished style, in the High Church Latin of visual language, the predellas were painted in the vernacular. They often appear more "primitive," as they tell a story in vivid movement and detail. But in Applebroog's work,

the predella narrative is reduced to simple repeating images that function as cell animation and as frames from a silent movie with titles. *Tomorrowland's* pumpkin field, for example, features a strip of images at its top: a man presses his face to a woman's skirt/crotch, a man presses his face to a woman's skirt/crotch, a man presses his face to a woman's skirt/crotch—the caption is “It smells nice.” Another repeated image on the same narrow band, of two little girls, bears the subtitle “Are you bleeding yet?” Intercut between these animation strips is a slightly bigger single image of a chorus line, and of a guy on a sofa saying “Want Chinese tonight?” Predella or cartoon? Applebroog reaches back to a very old technique and a very low-brow, “infantile” form of storytelling, not to instruct us on the life of a saint, but rather to offer us only ciphers of modern life. These images are previews for a film run through a Super-8 projector while the main screen may be in Cinemascope, and fragments float around like “smart window” television.

As Griselda Pollock points out in *Vision & Difference*, such Brechtian strategies of montage are particularly useful to an artist engaged in cultural critique. Briefly stated, in order for art to get beyond or behind conventions of representation, in order to expose the ideology these conventions serve, artworks should employ “dis-identificatory practices” that disrupt “the dance of ideology,”⁴ and “distanciation” that would “liberate the viewer from the state of being captured by illusions of art which encourages passive identification with fictional worlds.”⁵ This “critique of realism,” as Pollock notes, depends on “the use of montage, disruption of narrative, refusal of identifications with heroes and heroines, the intermingling of modes from high and popular culture, the use of different registers such as the comic, tragic as well as a confection of songs, images, sounds, film and so forth. Complex seeing and complex multilayered texts [are] the project.”⁶

Clearly Applebroog deploys these prescribed strategies as she draws from “high and popular culture” and combines “comic” and “tragic” registers: the presumed hero of her *Tomorrowland* has a potentially noble body but a clown face. A large bodybuilder, this time a woman flexing her biceps in Applebroog's *Rainbow Caverns*, (1987) is juxtaposed with a small image of a girl, a single strand of spaghetti suspended between her fork and mouth, bonding a Michelangelesque tradition of heroic sculptural rendering to cartoonlike figuration and action.

“Dis-identificatory practices,” of course, have constituted significant, even dominant strategies in the art of the past decade, particularly in works that offer important critiques of the position of women in representation. Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1976–80), in which every form of documentation except figural representation is used to expose the writing-out of the mother as the child enters into language, is a frequently cited example of the usefulness of these techniques to dismantle the repressive aspects of representation. But in the 1980s these strategies became standardized; image appropriation and juxtaposition are by now routine visual devices whose very ubiquity seems to have itself become a repressive discourse. At its best, appropriation can be construed as one more space of post-modernity, a fifth dimension of imagery and art-historical recycling, a flâneur’s knowing stroll through an open library of representations whose reconfiguration will expose and critique ideology. Nevertheless, the actual practice of appropriation and juxtaposition can result in work that remains so close to its visual sources and the ideology they represent that it cannot be distinguished from them, or it can result in work that is simply mundane or flat-footed in its literal one-plus-one approach.

If Applebroog shares certain references with her contemporaries—TV, pornography, pre- and post-1945 art—she distinguishes herself by her transformations of much of what she appropriates, and uses appropriation as a catalyst for her own meanings. Willem de Kooning’s *Woman I* (1950–52), becomes an afterimage in Applebroog’s *Two Women III* (1985), a blurred echo hovering over the shoulder of a fat, girdled woman screaming past de Kooning’s *vagina dentata*, in counterpoint to a repeated predella image of male beauty queens whose rather foolish lumpiness suggests the Other’s Other. Goya’s *Saturn Devouring His Children* (1820–23) becomes, in Applebroog’s *Camp Compazine* (1988), an elderly retiree eating a screaming homunculus during his afternoon snooze. From the high drama of mythology, evil is reinstated within the banality of daily life in a senior-citizen community. If one imagines a Mike Bidlo-esque use of the Goya image, would it have the disquieting effect of making you suspect that your grandfather in Miami might eat you up like bridge mix?

As in the work of Leon Golub, the materiality of paint intensifies the disruptive potential of appropriation. Both engage us in an uneasy relationship with figures we might prefer not even to look

at. Painterly surfaces serve as a moral agent for both artists: Applebroog's palette-knifed, thick, but translucent, paint resonates with Golub's painfully scraped surfaces. Both offer us canvases as wounded as the body of Grünewald's Christ. And just as we don't want to identify with Golub's torturers—or their victims—it is hard to identify with Applebroog's "heroes and heroines." Many of her figures wear grotesque masks—or *are* they masks? Those who appear "normal" are even harder to identify with. Think of the nice grandmotherly lady in an armchair with a rifle across her lap in *Chronic Hollow* (1989). Every figure's moral position is up for grabs—an interesting device in work whose overall sense of moral outrage is unquestionable.

Belladonna (1989), a video by Applebroog and her daughter Beth B., in both its content and its very title offers a rich congruence of Applebroog's subversive practices. Its sound track permeated the Ronald Feldman gallery during Applebroog's 1989 New York exhibition: "I'm not a bad person, I'm not a bad person," one could hear a little boy's angelic voice repeating now and then, from the black-curtained room where the video was periodically screened, as one moved from painting to painting, many of which featured children moving in and out of centrality and in and out of moral high ground. The pink-faced baby peeking out of an old man's brown coat in *Idiopathic Center* (1988), for example, may retain a certain innocence relative to the other children and adolescents depicted in the painting—some nearly vanishing behind bars, others weeping—but this baby face is also the living heart of a man turned to stone, or it might be a boil, an eruption from the old man's earlier promise. This might even be Oedipus, but when he was an unknowing infant in the arms of a loving foster parent. In *Lithium Square* (1988) another sleeping baby, cradled in the lap of a figure whose identity and gender are hidden by a veil, becomes sinister: fat and stone colored, he emits smug indifference to the suffering of his guardian Pietà, who is as successfully erased from representation as the mother in Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*. In *Crimson Gardens* (1986) vignettes of children in scary masks and blindfolds confront a chorus line of women in a concentration camp. One of the children is a ringer: he or she also has a shaved head and striped prison clothes. Is this child a Holocaust victim, an adult woman infantilized by her bared skull, or a child's truly creepy Halloween disguise? Is this Sluggo or little Elie Wiesel? Many of the children in *Marginalia* also

possess an uncertain moral valence: a little girl in hair curlers seems distressingly pleased by the (figurative) torture instruments in the construction of femininity—in French it is said that “il faut souffrir pour être belle.” A boy in an iron collar grins toothily. This image from 1991 eerily prefigured an actual news story from 1993 about a little girl abducted by a family friend and chained by her neck in a Long Island dungeon. The child was said to perfectly fit the victim profile for such pedophilic crimes: prepubescent, abused, and adrift, with unknowing complicity, she gravitated toward any phantasmic image of love or kindness.

At the end of *Belladonna*, the credits reveal that all of the script we have heard delivered in brief, intercut monologues by a cast of several men and women and one little boy are statements taken from testimonies of Joseph Mengele’s victims, Joel Steinberg’s trial, and Freud’s 1919 essay “A Child Is Being Beaten.” The line spoken by the angelic child, “I’m not a bad person,” could well have been the self-pitying justification of Joel Steinberg, a child killer. The moral purity of the child speaker is damaged by this possible ventriloquism. All preconceptions and sentimentality we may attach to the idea of childhood are dissolved.

On the other hand, by juxtaposing quotes from stories of actual physical abuse with erotic fantasies of abuse theorized by Freud, Applebroog and Beth B. effectively resist Freud’s denial of the father’s guilt. Despite Applebroog’s adherence to narrative techniques (storyboard, figuration, captions), *Belladonna* indicates her divergence from the traditional Oedipal narrative: something bad really has been done by the father. Like Laura Mulvey, who, in her essay “The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddles of the Sphinx,” questions what “has been systematically ignored in both classical tragedy and later tradition,”⁷ Applebroog explores the obvious mystery, namely, why were Oedipus and his family cursed? Mulvey reveals the prehistory of the myth: the rape, by Oedipus’s father, Laius, of his host’s young son, Chrysippos.

According to this pre-history of the myth, Laius’s aggressive and violent homosexual act is the latent cause of the curse and of Oedipus’s later suffering. Chrysippos’s experience with Laius can act as a displacement on to another young boy from a primal anxiety in son-to-father relations; the repression of this aspect

of the myth then becomes a repression of the father's fantasy in the Oedipal scenario. Marie Balmory explains Freud's message in terms of his need to repress the *Laius*-like qualities of his own father Jacob Freud. She argues that the *Verjaehung* is a consequence of this (personal) repression was the (theoretical) response to the father's fault and Freud's decision to "exonerate" the father of seduction and "incriminate" the child's fantasy of seduction. It's known that Freud adopted the fantasy theory of seduction during the period of mourning over his own father's death.⁹

A child speaks the words of a child killer, a man reads the fantasies of child abuse recorded by Freud: these positions transform Marie Applebroog's rebellion against the repressive aspects of the Freudian Oedipal narrative that dominates Western systems of aesthetic interpretation. This reading of *Belladonna* is consistent with and enriches our understanding of the child-eating old man in *Camp Campagna*, the stone Snuggli-carrier of *Idiopathic Center*, and the enthralled children of *Marginalia*.

Disidentificatory practice and refunctioning of mythic narrative is at its greatest play in Applebroog's depiction of women. It is hard to project any kind of narcissism onto her figures. The title *Belladonna* is ironically apt because there are no traditionally, overtly beautiful women in her work, whereas within dominant representation, old and ugly women are conventionally relegated to the margins of "culturally overdetermined scopophilia."⁹ They are the old crones doing housework through a doorway in the background of a painting by Vermeer, or attending the beautiful young lady in too many paintings of nudes to be specific. As such they are as the fly on the perfect fruit of a *vanitas*, allegorical emblems for the inevitability of decay and death embedded in Woman by patriarchy. When the aged and the ugly do appear as central subjects, it is in genre painting, a second-class citizen within art history. By placing ugly and plain old women (and men and children), with whom no one wishes to identify, at the center of her project, Applebroog in effect genetically alters genre painting, in a sense "elevates" it to the level of history painting. Her painting exists in a continuum with such large-scale history painting as Géricault's *The Raft of the "Medusa"* (1818-19), Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827), and Courbet's *The Artist's Studio* (1855).¹⁰ Just as

contemporary media culture trivializes history, so Applebroog brings the trivial details of a collapsing order to the scale and tragic dimension of history painting. But if the "Grand Tradition" of painting is understood as fundamentally masculinist,¹¹ then Applebroog's place within it is an anomaly and represents a hostile takeover. Perhaps part of what makes this possible is the fact that the artist herself is beyond the "age" of representation. As Kelly notes, "*Being a woman is but a brief moment in one's life!*"¹² In dominant representation, a female human is only a woman between menses and menopause, and thus only woman's youth is pictured. When the woman artist has aged *out of the picture*, she can return to alter it without compunction. It is significant in this regard that the mainstream avant-garde continues to focus on representations of youth by young women artists, if anything privileging a regression to "teenage girl art" in terms of its sources, content, and style. Works by Karen Kilimnik, Pam Butler, Elizabeth Payton, and Jenny Watson fall into this category.

Belladonna also allows us to travel through ideas about female representation toward the possibility of a repositioned gaze. At a time when writing about femininity is focused on a specular economy in which woman is an object of vision, in which male subjectivity depends on Woman's disappearance into representation, *Belladonna* is a significant title on another level. Belladonna (also known as deadly nightshade), a poisonous hallucinogen found in certain plants, induces widely dilated pupils and can cause psychosis in greater dosages. It was used by women in the nineteenth century to make their eyes appear fashionably large and limpid. Applebroog uses belladonna, the poisonous prison of female beauty, to dilate her pupils and sharpen her vision of patriarchy, transforming Woman from a *site* of representation and a *sight* into a *seer*.

It is said that children and animals have often become the victims of belladonna, accidentally poisoned by eating its fruit.¹³ Patriarchy aptly is the worm in the apples that have fallen off a tree at the center of *Emetic Fields*: a woman walks on stilts to avoid touching these tainted fruit, while on the tree, apples are inhabited by images of elderly men, blindfolded men, and a guy with "Mother" embroidered on the back of his jacket. This Eve bows her head—or is it that she's watching her step?

Applebroog's belladonnas are "Medusa and the Sphinx," who, "like

the other ancient monsters, have survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else's story, not their own."¹⁴ In contrast to the Oedipal narrative, which renders women only as enigmatic monsters threatening "to man's vision,"¹⁵ Applebroog hallucinogenically depicts the triumph and the decay of Oedipus, the de-inscriber of women, in her representation of the return of the repressed female, the pre-scient child, and the ancient monster. A bald Medusa now sits for her portrait in an evening gown and an arm cast, while little Oeddy, nearby, eats a watermelon in *Noble Fields* (1987). Medusa's gaze turned men to stone, to that which is not action, that which is representation, to art. Pygmalion's transformations are a miracle, Medusa's a crime. Applebroog's figures, significantly, are often rendered in a stone color. Applebroog becomes both Medusa and Pygmalion; it is her belladonna-widened gaze that turns action into representation.

The monstrous aspect of these major figures in Applebroog's work recalls the theory of female creativity proposed by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their 1979 *Madwoman in the Attic*.¹⁶ Women artists, Gilbert and Gubar argue, have internalized patriarchy's myth about the destructive, monstrous nature of female creativity and power, and are fearful about using a language that incorporates these defamatory images. This double anxiety erupts in their art through monstrous, mad, violent alter egos; Rochester's mad wife in the attic of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre* is the eponymous example. The conflict implicit in the negotiation of these monstrous alter egos is manifest in works by a range of women artists. Diane Arbus's photographs, while they often show a voyeuristic identification with their "freaky" subjects, also suggest a tacit acceptance of mainstream categorizations of what constitutes normalcy and monstrosity. Cindy Sherman's baroque self-representation as a dead pig is another example of this pattern, as are her male and female figures from art history endowed with a fairy-tale profusion of false noses and disfiguring moles. Applebroog, like Sherman, moves away from a limited, binarist acceptance of the monster/woman artist identification by placing monstrousness on so many heads.

Finally, if these paintings use narrative techniques borrowed from altarpieces, one may wonder to whom these particular altarpieces are dedicated. Certainly not to female figures who have been subsumed to patriarchal religion (the Virgin Mary). They do not celebrate bella-



Ida Applebroog, *Noble Fields*, 1987, oil on canvas, 5 panels, 86 × 132 ins.
(Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

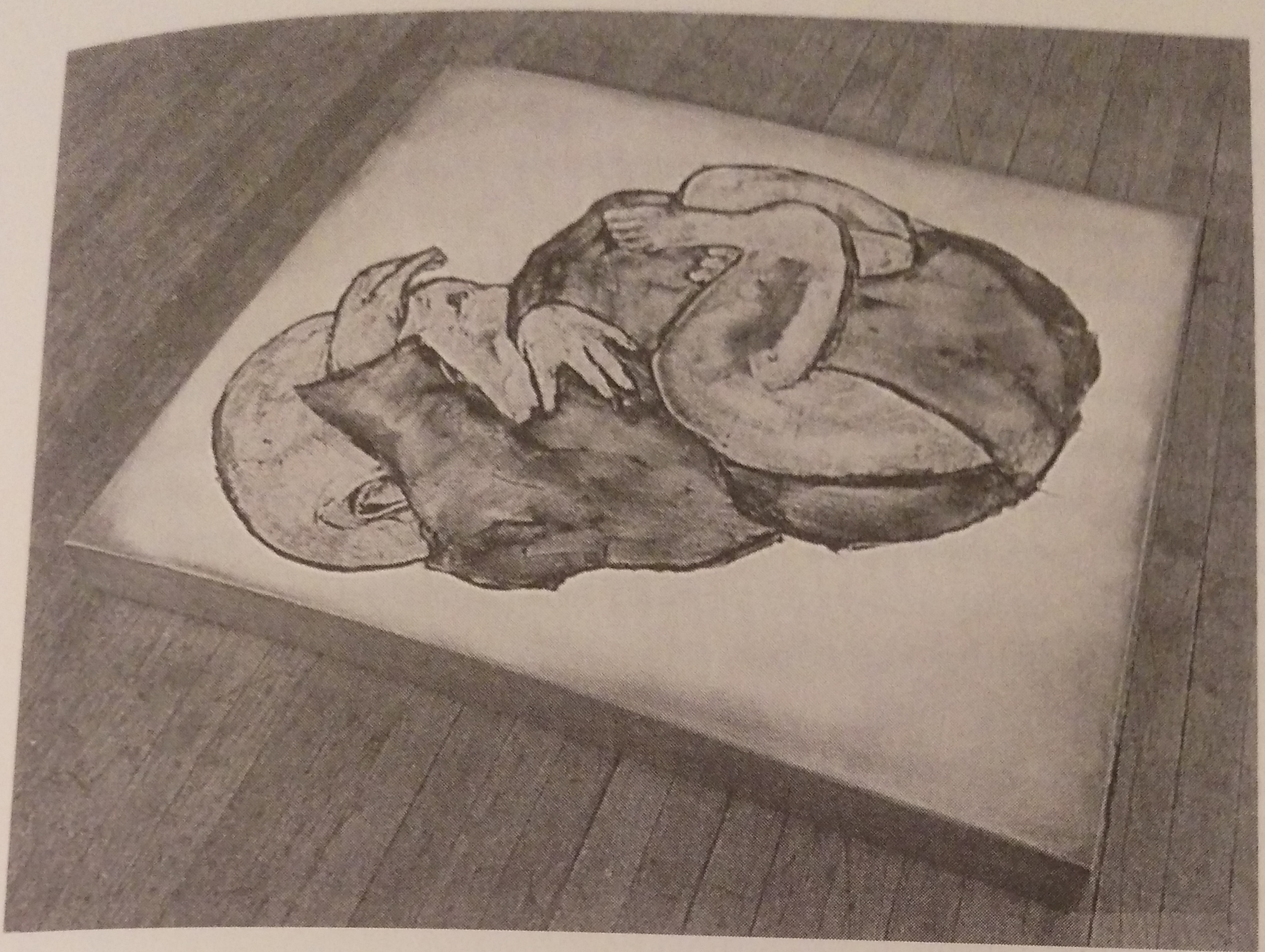
donna, but Donna. They reflect the vision of Galatea, perhaps, but more likely that of Mary Shelley's "monster," or of Cassandra.

In *Emetic Fields* Queen Elizabeth, like all the large-scale figures in Applebroog's paintings, is painted with a gelatinous, translucent brown or gray matter, oil paint extended with gel and troweled on. At times it looks like gleaming sludge. No wonder the queen sports such a still upper lip. Visceral, gleaming paint is as much the key to Applebroog's apparent exclusion from the canon-forming texts of the current feminist avant-garde as is her creation—rather than representation—of female representation, for paint is not the space of choice for postmodern women artists. Applebroog's trust in the materiality of paint to convey a political message, to effect a feminist intervention, brings her up against the profound distrust of figuration and narrative arrived at through the manipulation of slithery pigmented matter on a ground, a distrust held by a school of criticism that in another context I have dubbed "aesthetic terrorism."¹⁷ Modernism and postmodernism have added one last element to the atavistic association of woman/blood/guts/mud/slime/putrefaction/death—that element is paint, a viscous flowing matter capable of dis-

turbing multiformity.¹⁸ The “distanciation” most devoutly wished for by this school of criticism is that from the body, and Applebroog’s paint is particularly grounded in the body. The group of works that she exhibited in New York in 1987 was painted in colors and textures of bodily fluids and excretions: blood red, shit brown, urine yellow. In her 1989 New York exhibition, *Nostrums*, all the titles referred to psychiatric care or physical/psychosomatic management, and Applebroog’s color range expanded to include sappy pinks, mauves, and peach, colors meant to subdue crazy people, which in this case meant, at least temporarily, the viewers.

Applebroog’s use of paint is at once spartan and baroque, non-committal and passionate. In one sense her application of paint is instrumental: nothing is ever more than it needs to be. The predella sections are quite flat, minimal in color and surface. The paint is used functionally, applied as necessary to cover a particular area or create a form (note how the palette knife fashions an orange-draped figure in *Lithium Square*, for example, or how the transparency of the gel medium conveniently renders the black nylons in *Elixir Tabernacle* [1989]). There are no special effects here, but there is effective authority, indeed old-fashioned mastery: the old man eating a child is as sculpturally rendered as the Belvedere Torso that inspired Michelangelo, but constructed with economy rather than showy virtuosity. Applebroog’s gift to painters and to other viewers is precisely in what she achieves beyond the merely instrumental: “unnecessary” moments of visual pleasure within grim pictures. As an example, *Camp Compazine* is a condemnatory exposé of America—with its slumbering child-eater to one side, somber businessmen on the other, and born-again Christians on top—a country and a painting overrun by turkeys whose feathers are built up in waxy, bas-relief slabs of paint. And yet the transition from translucent red to translucent pink in the empty center effects a fluid, almost gentle passage from dark to darker panel, in color, tone, and subject. Such incidences of visual pleasure buy the paintings time to be read over a long period. The layering of paint, and of paintings within paintings, moves the viewer through time in a manner more akin to film than many artworks that far more explicitly and self-consciously remind us that they have appropriated the syntax and formal elements of cinematic language.

Applebroog’s paintings are never easy to describe in a single ex-



Ida Applebroog, *Marginalia (baby)*, 1991, detail from *Marginalia #2*, oil on canvas, 38 × 34 × 3 ins. (Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

planatory sentence. Of the painting *Chronic Hollow*, is it sufficient to say it is a painting of a girl in a dog mask? A girl interrupting a purple landscape with a bench and people tumbling? And what of the predella scenes? But as we stand in front of it, a complex interplay of a thinly applied, pale pinkish brown (dare we call it puce?), slabs of gray gel, nervously applied white, and a “natural” canvas color make up the central scene in which the dog-masked “heroine” interrupts the flow of figures tumbling through a space of uncertain scale. The tumblers’ mobile white-brush-marked outlines strike a delicate balance between virtuosity and functionality, replicating and augmenting their movements through the canvas segments, causing them to move past our gaze like a film run sprocket hole by sprocket hole. At the top of the painting, the starker contrasts of dark crimson, blood red, and white, thinly layered, construct a montage of Applebroog’s gun-toting grandma in an armchair, a couple supporting a woman whose head has vaporized into a delicate white haze.

Applebroog's infusion of trust in painting is perhaps most eloquently displayed in *Marginalia (baby)* (1991), laid on the floor of the gallery: its vulnerability and that of paint are made one.

Contemporary critics have pointed to the work of Sue Williams, expressing amazement that she is "the first painter in recent memory to plunge deep into the taboo-ridden areas of the psyche"¹⁹ and to do so "from within painting,"²⁰ thereby disregarding Applebroog's considerable contributions to the renewal of painting as a locus of feminist discourse. Applebroog's formal influence on Williams should be noted, although Williams remains, perhaps deliberately, much more primitive in her pictorial means. Williams and other artists who romance the abject may unfortunately be popular because female victimization, as graphically expressed through references to pornography, is male oriented, although it may express some women's personal experiences. Applebroog understands the deeper meaning of the 1970s' feminist motto, "The personal is the political": the goal was to release individual women from the bondage of isolation, from self-destructive delusions of unique abnormality, to provide a sense of commonality, to illuminate the existence of a determinative patriarchal system of difference, and to focus anger away from the self toward the culture in order to achieve *voice* and *agency*. Applebroog's work has the scope to encompass personal suffering, identification with many sufferings, including those of monkeys and men, and the levels of ambiguity between victim and victimizer. She has, and offers to the viewer, both no emotional distance and totally ironic authorial distance. She may have infiltrated the "Grand Tradition" of nineteenth-century painting, literally deconstructing its surface, but her work offers a reconfiguration as broad, ambitious, and inclusive as any nineteenth-century narrative oeuvre.

Applebroog's functional, emotionally expressive, and fearless use of paint to reposition ancient female "monsters" at the center of political narrative suggests another space of postmodernity, beyond what is becoming the limited, hackneyed space of poststructuralist theory. It is a space in which narrative has power, but it is a narrative of difference, a different narrative than that of the death of painting or of the ideological prison of late-capitalist commodity culture.

The difficulty in properly contextualizing Applebroog may be the result of her persistent slippage between theoretical positions and

visual strategies: she uses Brechtian practices called for by postmodern feminist writers, but she does so in paint. She calls on ancient and popular narrative techniques, but her paintings do not tell familiar stories. Twentieth-century viewers and readers are accustomed to the Oedipal narrative as it is traditionally explicated. Ida Applebroog resists these readings, refocuses the "destructive" female gaze. No wonder conventional readings can only operate at the level of emotional reaction and political commonplaces. We do not recognize the narrative of the Sphinx or *The Raft of the "Medusa"* as painted by Watson's shark.