

## Collage and Matrixiality: Sacred Precincts, Bounded Chaos

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There are places in this world that are neither here nor there, neither up nor down, neither real nor imaginary. These are the in-between places, difficult to find and even more challenging to sustain. Yet they are the most fruitful places of all. For in these liminal narrows a kind of life takes place that is out of the ordinary, creative and once in a while genuinely magical. (Moore 34) [Thomas Moore]

The problem is not just how to deconstruct this structure. Rather, another process of meaning. . . is needed to unveil, out of what looks like "unregulated permeability". . . a borderspace. . . a filter; the matrix. (Lichtenberg Ettinger par. 3) [Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger]

My journey wends towards a language of nature-based visual art (Fig. 1). Material plenitude—rendered through overlaid textures; glowing, gilt surfaces; variegated encrustations and cavities (Fig. 2); glistening webs and trails; and paradisiacal natural references—is its itinerary. Collage and assemblage are its vehicles. At any moment it exists on the threshold of a vista and a passageway (Fig. 3)—a transitional state of focus and dissolve—and ambivalence is indeed indexical to its unfolding. As this journey and this process art have evolved from single collages and assemblages to altars (Fig. 4) and site-specific installations over the past half-decade, I have found that collage, as work and text, leads to other vistas and passageways. Combined with meditations on nature, on deity and deities, on artifacts of spirit in the history of art, and on the wellsprings of creativity, these readings have secured a fertile, yet fragile territory (Fig. 5) for exploration and meditation. Passing through this complex terrain, mapping and re-mapping it in a continual search for understanding and identity, impresses or perhaps just uncovers a heretofore hidden pilgrimage trail (Fig. 6). These markers and equivalents link collage with spirituality, complexly woven with matrixiality, in fertile and fruitful permutations.

### Collage

Collage is the art of building up relief constructions from papers, fabrics, and other surfaces (Fig. 7) so that a "picture" appears, both anchored to and hovering above its planar backing; assemblage is the activity of extending that process and its repertoire of materials, including "found" and "ready-made" objects, fully into the third dimension (Fig. 8). Collage and assemblage may be considered celebratory in privileging process, play, practice and, most importantly, the final moments of piecing together rather than the initial steps of cutting apart. In his book *Free Play*, musician Stephen Nachmanovich defines play as "*lila*," "the taproot (Fig. 9) from which original art springs; . . . the raw stuff that the artist channels and organizes with all [her] learning and technique. . . . the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own pure joy" (42-43). This play-space is not so much space as context, not so much bounded field as energy field (Fig. 10), not so much studio as experimental laboratory. Collage is both physical evidence and means for tapping into the greater domain of recuperative and restorative energies. It covers and recovers, protects and enshrines, memorializes and sustains.

Beginning with Picasso's and Braque's Synthetic Cubist "breakthroughs" (Fig. 11), and extending through the major movements of twentieth-century art, from Dada (Fig. 12) and Surrealism (Fig. 13) to the activist arts of the 1960s (Fig. 14), and thence to the "Pattern and Decoration" movement of the 1970s (Fig. 15), collage and assemblage have become yoked to both mainstream and vernacular arts, in particular, art by women. Feminist art critic and historian Lucy Lippard reports that "[a]ll over the world, women privileged and/or desperate and/or daring enough to consider creation outside traditional limits are finding an outlet for these drives in an art. . . that there is some excuse for making, an art that costs little (Fig. 16) or nothing and performs an ostensibly useful function in the bargain." What are these vernacular arts? "Handwork," Lippard avers: everything and anything from quilting to embroidery (Fig. 17) to "freedom of expression

within [and building up from] a framework" (Lippard, "Something" 102). The building up of some *thing* by means of *material* attached to a backing or frame, whether that be a piece of wood, a photograph, a latch-hook rug canvas (Fig. 18), the grid of the loom, a box from the attic (Fig. 19), or any other kind of generating grid, can all be included in the holistic, inclusive, and celebratory domain of twentieth-century collage.

Moving beyond the celebratory, turn-of-the-twenty-first-century feminist and postmodernist theory provides well-sharpened tools to re-till and re-fertilize the fields of collage. Feminist theory allows us to visualize collaging as endemic to the playful, yet subversive strategies of feminist masquerade—defusing, differentiating, fragmenting, rupturing, de-constructing, and finally, demythologizing the "sacred cows" of the past—not the least of which are the Western and modernist notions of the self-sufficient spectator/subject, the self-defined (primarily male) artist, and the studio-manipulated (primarily female) object (Fig. 20). Along with postmodernist terms such as "pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness," not to mention "ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the deconstructed, decentered. . . subject" (Klages par. 12), we now read of "deconstructive," "destabilizing" strategies that expose modernist art (Fig. 21) and gender in art as "socially constructed and unstable, signifying differently across, class, cultures and centuries" (Barnett 80; Rozsika Parker, qtd. in Barnett 80).

### Collage; Bounded Chaos; Sacred Precincts

I make shrines, sanctuaries, sacred precincts (Fig. 22), paradise gardens (Fig. 23), and bits of encapsulated chaos (Fig. 24). To me they are all interrelated and synonymous—stages, as I have noted, in an ongoing journey. My work is firmly grounded in Western traditions, not only those associated with vernacular home-studios, but also their commodification in embroidery, needlepoint, and Scandinavian-styled rug and wall-hanging kits, popularized in the paint-by-number decades of the fifties through the seventies and subsequently brought into the field of visual culture. These pictures and pillows were built up in combinatory crewel embroidery stitchery and needlepoint. Of late these have evolved into much less of a functional or sure thing—in fact, into a serious play of accumulation that follows no image or color scheme, no numbers, and no bounding lines (Fig. 25). My recent processes—accumulating, gathering, and glueing stones (Fig. 26), pebbles and polished minerals, both found and purchased; baskets and tubs of shells (Fig. 27), left over from a generous vacation Bible school donation; miscellaneous "art craft" supplies such as potpourri mixes, dried flowers, prepared dried branches, tiles, beads, and ribbons; the "supplies" in my pantry including dried lasagna noodles (Fig. 28), soup and coffee beans, nuts in their shells, whole nutmeg and cinnamon sticks, sand-colored powdered ginger, white-powdered Cream of Tartar, crystalline white Margarita salt, and red Hawaiian salt; and, finally, various jewelry drawers (Fig. 29) sequestering unworn, discarded, forgotten, and even special earrings, bracelets, and rings—work to retain open textures and unfinished closures. In so doing they work to subvert the commodified domesticity I claimed as a kit-maker in my teens, reclaimed as a single entrepreneur in my twenties, lived out in full bore as a mother and PTA leader in my forties, then exfoliated, moving back into art as an emergent-empty nester at fifty. Bursting (Fig. 30) with materials that are never fully composed—in fact, always on the verge of decomposition—they both celebrate and subvert material plenitude.

In describing the free play of collage—the play that disassembles in order to reassemble, even to degrees of excess, Stephen Nachmanovich recognizes pitfalls. "I see that absolutely everything in nature arises from the power of free play sloshing (Fig. 31) against the power of limits," he states (33). Working fully within this embodied "gap," the collagist redefines limits as possibilities, practicing therein her instrument, sharpening her tools, sharpening her textural and textual skills as fabricator. The materials she has at hand, in the garden, pantry, sewing/mending box, and "junk" jewelry drawer, prove to be profoundly malleable and transforming (Fig. 32). Remaking these things into symbols and fragments of larger wholes, yet refusing to finish them as wholes, she becomes a shaman or, more accurately, a "*bricoleuse*." Nachmanovich explains that

a *bricoleur* is a kind of jack-of-all trades or handyman who can fix anything. The *bricoleur* is an artist of limits. . . . Dreams and myths work in the same way; in dream-time we take whatever happened that day, bits and pieces of material and events, and transform them into the deep symbolism of our own personal mythology (33, 86) (Fig. 33).

But this is only the beginning. The *bricoleuse* creates more than a collage; she makes a nest, a home and a *temenos* for the very symbols and fragments, the very part-images and the materials that have been transformed and are envisioned as still transforming. Attended and tended by bits of nature, culture, and clutter, as well as the Spirit and spirits she has encountered and visualized in making this domestic mix into her art, these bounded or framed units, with overlaid layers, become her personal precincts (Fig. 34). The precinct or sanctuary is both physical and metaphorical—a physical space energized by work, reflection, meditation, just being, and further art making; and a metaphorical springboard for work, on a variety of levels.

I compare the sacred precinct to the nest (Fig. 35) in Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological "poetics of space." Like Bachelard's nest, my precinct is a "sign of *return* mark[ing] an infinite number of daydreams. . . reach[ing] back across the years. . . through the dream." Unlike Bachelard's nests, my precincts and sanctuaries do not "combat all absence" (103). Rather, they sequester it. For Bachelard's mother bird, "Everything is a matter of inner pressure, physically dominant intimacy. The nest is a swelling fruit, pressing against its limits" (101). For me, the precinct or sanctuary is not so much full presence, but a brief hiatus, what feminist art theorist Griselda Pollock calls "partial means," "complex harnessing," and "negotiated conflict" ("Politics" 19). This is because other references build up and burgeon out—subterranean and suboceanic caves (Fig. 36), mountaintop shrines (Fig. 37), and rock-cut altars (Fig. 38)—all somewhat wild and uncompartmented, and all opening a gap to the experience of absence and the transgression of limits. By this I mean the *absenting* of domestic *routine* in the very remaking of it, so that the *presence* of hunting-and-gathering (Fig. 39) and other rituals may press in, push to, and push beyond the presumed limits of the space, thence to work its way up into high pitched nerve endings—figured in the work as tortuous branches and spindly twiglets winding around and around one another without end (Fig. 40). They are subtly subversive paradises of the wild.

#### Collage, Sacred Precincts, Bounded Chaos, and Spirituality

I like to think of my collage-making as goddesslike and gardenlike—eruptive, interleaved, overlaid, and branching out in many directions. The assemblages of my *Shrines and Sanctuaries* series are both excavated from the abysses of the world and projected, by means of visions, dreams and titles (*Creation Chamber, under Grace*, Fig. 41), into the cosmic ranges of heaven. Predicated on the one hand on a return to and resurrection in God, the shrines are bathed on the other hand in at least a diluted solution of the demonic—the earthly and subearthly sexualities of the goddess. Assemblages to the Hawaiian fire goddess Pele (Fig. 42), made during my last visit to Kauai, where as a resident I had envisioned and connected with these powers, materialize the stuff of the unholy abyss (the tonguelike emanations from the volcano, Pele's home) and the holy heaven (the limpid blue of sky), with the pagan nested into the Christian in a delectable borderspace of deferred meaning (Figs. 31-35).

Paradise gardens (Fig. 43), the overall theme of my landscape collages and drawings, are not always sequentially textured plots. Represented in literature, legend and in art, they witness to the power of an alternative vision. Let us call it "the perilous garden." These emplotments run riot with flowers climbing (Fig. 44) over other flowers, ivy creeping over the interstices, and weeds encroaching over all. In the medieval Mary Garden (Fig. 45), cultivated in Romanesque monastic cloisters and pictured in Gothic cathedral rose windows and Late Gothic illuminated manuscripts (Fig. 46), rule is established only to be transgressed. The Mary Garden is literally a horror vacui with no space unclustered (Fig. 47), no plot merely micro-tilled, no space untouched by flowers and herbs that are overflowing and drenched in disguised symbolism. Deeply embedded is the medieval worshiper's meditation (Fig. 48), overlaying the enclosed Mary/paradise garden onto the garden of the world.

Likewise overlaid with images and references are other paradise gardens. Writing on "The Garden Where the Task Is Found," an ancient alchemical manuscript, Rudolf Bernoulli comments (Fig. 49), "What confusion, what disorder, what a hopeless tangle! Weeds everywhere, the paths scarcely discernible beneath the rank verdure! It is almost impossible to distinguish the plan according to which the garden was laid out" (48). This is only the tip of the taproot. Paradise sites reference not so much the well-managed garden God granted to Adam and Eve but an amorphous, "intermediate realm" (Fig. 50). "Wild, careless, and wanton" plants "grow and multiply at a prodigious rate," and are "dynamic and relentless in [their] capacity to produce images and emotions" (Smoley 46) (Fig. 51).

In my current work, I usually begin (Fig. 52) with a landscape, collaging my own photographs (4 x 6-inch machine prints) side to side (Fig. 53), for a sequential abutment, or side to side reversed (Fig. 54), for a mirror abutment. Collaborating with my husband who scans, enlarges and duplicates his digital photos of Hawaiian plants and flowers (Fig. 55) for re-use in my work, I add his to my own, along with associated memories, impressions, dream visions, and imagination. Then, I overlay all of that with material, color, texture, and the multiple allusions (Fig. 56) that they all bring to one another during the assemblage process. The "original" picture very quickly becomes subsumed in an agglomeration of pictures (Fig. 41). The postmodernist in me elevates it to the scholarly term "hyperreality." I feel equally, if not more comfortable calling it "stuff" (Fig. 57).

I see an Ohio forest drenched and dewy from spring rains (Fig. 58). I re-envision it as a royal grove, then reconstruct it as such with overlaid, reflective objects). I see an ancient Hawaiian volcanic plain and re-envision it still erupting, on fire (Fig. 59). I build it up with Hawaiian plant residues (Fig. 43). I look at my husband's photograph of birds reflected and mirrored as they stand in Hawaiian taro fields; I re-envision the photograph as a procession mural in an ancient Minoan or Mycenaean ritual chamber, and make a sanctuary entitled *The Queen's Megaron* (Fig. 60). I see Western Kentucky karst topography, sandstone landforms overlaying subterranean limestone caves, and refigure it with baskets (Fig. 61) and dried plant cuttings. *Karst Topography Crossings* (Fig. 62) appellates living beings, inhaling, exhaling, and collapsing into miniature caves, each replete with hidden mysteries. And the allusions go on as the raw and cultural materials accumulate. From time to time they are temporarily blocked as the stuff twists (Fig. 63), coagulates, and ponds.

And Finally, Matrixiality

Artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger has found a way to theorize this deeply emplotted will to excess that returns it to sensual, mythic, eruptive multi-dimensionality. She writes:

An artwork attaches, suspends or creates desire. An object mysteriously embodies a space in this whole. A drive awakes where an art object joins forces with interior objects. . . inviting the viewer to follow it into an unknown, invisible space. . . interlaced by the artist; inviting the viewer to abandon defenses and to weave into the work its own invisible threads—its affect, phantasy, engagement, knowledge (pars. 10, 11).

This is "matrixial borderspace" (Fig. 64). It has no fixed visual correlative. Yet, the matrix is so utterly material that it can fully be felt. It is pure possibility; it is pure "stuff." It allows us to be excessive and make art until the making and baking are at a pitch of intensity and at a peak (Fig. 65) of ambient heat. It propels us into the devilish and the divine, without asking us to resolve which deity or deities identify our stand. "The matrixial gaze thrills us while fragmenting, multiplying, scattering and joining grains together, it turns us into what we may call wit(h)nesses: *participatory* witnesses to traumatic events of an-other at the price of fragilizing and fragmenting us" (Lichtenberg Ettinger pars. 10, 11) (Fig. 66). In the matrix there is no prospect of mastery, but that lack opens the door to other prospects. Making art in the matrix, Lichtenberg Ettinger goes on to say, allows the artist not only to go beyond the visible, but to burst the

boundaries of space and time in a dimension of “unregulated permeability” where “encounter[s] between present (Fig. 67) and archaic” are not only possible but probable (Judith Butler, qtd. par. 3; par. 8). “Through this process the limits, borderlines and thresholds conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation of new ones” (Pollock, *Differencing* 212).

In my work, borderspaces appear first as fertile zones or furrows (Fig. 68)—defined matrices of creation. I discern them, clear a space for them, “plant” and “water” them. But then I allow them to “matrixialize”: I allow the living matter within them to erupt, to stream up (Fig. 69) and out of their boundaries and to weave borderspaces throughout—over, under, and within—the pictorial field. I highlight or gild them. I burrow (Fig. 70) into them. In this state, dualities cease; unities are also banished; nature and the artist merge (Fig. 71) and diverge; processes of accumulation and overlay accelerate. Creation roars. Passion reigns. I cease to exist. I exist fully and unconditionally.

I began this essay with the analogy of a journey and a pilgrimage trail (Fig. 72). I end it with a throbbing matrix. If artmaking is to survive in a world where dualities are still very much with us and where ambivalence, excessiveness, and multiple identities in ourselves and in others are scorched by cut-and-dry moralities, platitudes, and simplicities, it needs to feed on matrixiality and all of the multifarious links that go along with it. Dynamically embodied not only in collage, there is a matrix in all spiritual art, where processes of making, meditating and finding unlock doors to the unmediated real. These visual dialogues can trace the topography of a landscape as ancient as Eden, as amorphous as Venus, and as familiar as our backyard gardens (Fig. 73). Open the gates; let the wellsprings flow.