A LIFE IN ART (1)

Judith Margolis

Even as a very young child, I knew how to draw. One day in fourth grade, when I was nine, the teacher told us to draw pictures of ourselves the way we would look “grown up.” Most of the children filled their pages with childishly rendered cowboys, pilots, ballerinas, and mommies. But I was developing early, and not only artistically. I already needed a bra, and I thought “grown up” meant being like the full-figured women I saw on TV. Imagining one of those sophisticated secretaries, I drew myself wearing high-heeled shoes, a starched white blouse, and a tight sheath skirt.

I knew how to make geometric objects look “real” by using shading. The breasts on my grown-up self, I decided, would be so three-dimensional, they’d cast a shadow. I was immensely pleased with how “real” the drawing looked and was so absorbed that I didn’t notice the excited attention of the other children as they pointed at my drawing.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I remember the dreamy feeling of surfacing from my imaginary drawing world as the teacher, coming to see what the other children were giggling about, said, “Judy, maybe you’d better come with me.” She picked up the drawing, and I followed her down the corridor to the principal’s office. She placed the drawing on the principal’s desk and said, “Look at this.” Until that moment, I didn’t know that something was wrong. I thought she was sharing with the principal her pride in the superb realism of my drawing. This would have been unprecedented but plausible.

When the principal said, “I think we’ll put this away until your mother comes to get it,” it started to dawn on me that drawing the BREASTS was a BAD mistake. A parallel subterranean knowledge confirmed that there was something shameful about my own developing female body.
Thus I learned something that would continue to both nourish and disturb me for all of my life as an artist. I realized that I understand about things by drawing them. And I found out that drawing what is “real” to me might make other people uncomfortable and even angry.

As a grown-up artist, I came to be a regular visitor to an old-age home, where I would go to draw the residents. Many of them spent their days strapped into wheel chairs, diapered, bibbed, and drooling, or calling out in high-pitched, keening cries, disoriented and agitated. “This is also how a life might turn out,” I thought.

Elinor’s room smelled of urine, and her eyes were cloudy with cataracts, but she liked me to sit with her while she told me the one story she remembered. As I drew her, I heard that story over and over again.

In the telling, she is a young girl of six or seven, her voice thin and high, like a child. Her father is the captain of a barge on the Erie Canal, and she and her younger sister, kept home from school, are allowed to play on the deck of her father’s riverboat. It is spring, and they wear dresses with sailor collars, ribbons in their hair, and straw hats with brightly colored straw flowers. They call to the sailors on passing barges and wave to the children who run along the banks of the canal. Elinor is very proud that her father is a captain, She is proud to be the older sister. She remembers and tells every detail about her dress and her hat and especially how much fun it was to stay home from school and run in the breeze on the deck of the barge.

One day, I asked Elinor if she would like to draw a picture of her father’s boat. With great concentration, she gripped the pencil and drew the boat and the figures of herself and her sister. I drew her as she drew, noting with my own pen the deep wrinkles in her face, her knobby arthritic fingers. All the while, she told me again, as she did on each of my visits, about that delightful, free, safe, and happy time, all that was left of her life’s story.

During the time I knew Elinor, I was a radically busy mother of three, working at a full-time job while attempting to remain committed to the practice of art.
“Elinor Drawing II”
drawing on paper, 8.5" × 11"

“Elinor Drawing I”
drawing on paper, 8.5" × 11"
“Sleeping Beauty”
drawing on paper, 18" × 24" (collection, Noa Massari)
It was my custom to keep a sketchpad handy, so as to try throughout the day to wring the truth from even the most mundane things I might see—a sink full of dishes, the baby playing, the view from a window.

My daughter, Noa, who was eleven, long-legged and blossoming, loved to wear a certain silk kimono of mine. One evening, I sketched her as she dozed on my bed and was moved by her latent womanly grace, suggesting the character of Sleeping Beauty. Influenced by Carl Jung’s teachings, I decided to retell that fairy tale, using drawings of myself and my family to project onto the story, making it at the same time personal and universal.

I started my story with the wedding of the King and Queen. At traditional Jewish weddings, a juggler (tummler in Yiddish) was employed to entertain and cheer the bride. Here, in “The Bride and the Juggler,” I am both the apprehensive bride, ambivalent about the upcoming nuptials, and the juggler,
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“King and Queen”
pastel on paper, 38" × 40"

limber and free, though shockingly exposed. The Bride/Queen recoils from her anxiety about the many things that must be juggled and from the overwhelming choices that face a modern woman marrying.

In “King and Queen,” the honeymoon is decidedly over. The troubled King refuses to reveal himself, and the Queen is up all night. So much to do! The industrious striving of housework has gone wildly out of control, resulting in this leaping woman with flopping breasts and straining muscles, burdened by her admirable energy, getting things done despite the tyrannical fashion of her high-heeled shoes.

In his sleep, the King hides both his face and his genitals, as if instinctively protecting himself from the powerful, unconscious, lunar energy of his wife.
“The Frog Queen”
drawing on paper, 18" × 24"
In fairy tales and myths, the Queen’s barrenness gives way to a birth only after consultation with an “otherworldly” creature—a witch or wizard, if warm-blooded, or a cold-blooded snake or frog. Jungian analysis of fairy tales makes much of confrontations with wild beasts. Facing up to the forces of nature—the unexpected, the odd, the strange, the unusual—teaches us how to integrate the dark aspect of the psyche, usually for some reward. For example, kissed frogs turn to princes or gold.

I chose frogs, arranged in a magic circle. The foliage surrounding “The Frog Queen” provides protection and acknowledges the “wildish” world of nature. Ironically, the models for this drawing were domesticated house plants and my own domesticated self. I was living in a cramped apartment with children, husband, and pets all demanding attention, while I longed for adventure and mysterious transformative experience in the grand outdoors.

In another drawing called “The Frog Lover,” not shown here, the Queen is shown “consorting” with a frog in an encounter that suggests an ambivalently benign pornography. She is nude and caresses herself with one hand while the small mirror she holds up to her face reflects a frog. The auto-eroticism, typically reserved in board-room paintings for the pleasure of a presumably male viewer, is enacted here by an independent female, directing her own fate for her own motives and benefit. Our Queen not only has a rich inner life, she also ends up pregnant. And so “The Frog Queen” and “The Frog Lover,” like Ruth Weisberg’s “Waterborne” and “Sacred and Profane” (see companion article), join the work by women who note their own bodies in order to record or invent the truth of woman’s experience from inside.

Though widely known collectively, the twelve Fairy Godmothers are not generally known as individual personalities. Here the Good/Godmothers are gathered around the festive table, now a disarray of crumbs, crumpled napkins, spilled wine, and leftovers. They lean against each other, the younger and the older ones, visiting and enjoying the occasion. They are dressed up. My twelve fairy godmothers have definite, recognizable personalities; there’s the one who diets (she doesn’t eat her cheese cake), the one who wears trousers (a sophisticated free-thinker), the old one who looks away, a bit disoriented. My own “hippie” sandals and bare toes reference a life style that, in fact, placed me outside the warm circle of my family, but in this drawing I am included in things, seated near my loving grandmother, Molly, who died when I was two. As I drew, I slipped her drawn arm through mine, getting closer. The eerie feeling of being in her presence was unexpected.
As I drew the women, using photographs of my great-grandmothers, grandmothers, and aunts, I recognized certain truths about myself and my family—how they seem to wear their flesh more comfortably than my generation did. I wanted to show their affection for each other, the way they touched easily. These two drawings of the Godmothers are always received with stunned, delighted laughter. The unexpectedly recognizable Jewish faces create a radical Judaizing of the whole story, and the widening of possibilities for all stories to be seen through a haimish (homey) Jewish lens.
After her solitary wandering through the castle, Sleeping Beauty ends up asleep and waiting for a hundred years. High in a tower, she is surrounded by a protective thicket of thorny roses, which the prince has to penetrate. I have fashioned for our brave youth a civilized wallpaper version of the dense thicket, representing the woman’s realm—the “boudoir”—her hidden female place of the sleeping world. The roses, undeniably vaginal, protect her even as they keep her hidden and alone.

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Autobiography is a strange hybrid, joining truth with “story” in an artistic context that allows, even expects, some fiction to enliven understanding.

I was too young and untutored to know what was happening in that fourth-grade drawing class. But despite the wounding to my burgeoning maturity, I continued to envision my “real” self.
"The Tower"
drawing on paper, 18" × 24" (collection, Linda Myers)
The “aha!” I felt on doing the first Sleeping Beauty drawing was one of those pivotal moments embedded in everyday life, and I am still absorbed with its consequences.

Drawing my dead grandmothers and enabling the aged Elinor to draw her own cherished memory confirmed to me that autobiographical art animates the dead and allows an astonishing kind of time travel.

For women especially, autobiography can be a direct route into a life of art practice. From the trials of girlhood turning to womanhood to the burden of incapacity that awaits the elderly, every twist and turn of the journey is useful material to be reckoned with. By remaining true to a particular way of being, a way of listening, a way of seeing, you can do art that instructs you about life’s complexities, along with dinner, laundry and round-the-clock child care. Our own lives are the stories we tell ourselves—the tale that unfolds as we each become the person we are meant to be.