

S I G R I D B U R T O N

SIGRID BURTON: NEW PAINTINGS

“Sigrid Burton: A Personal Odyssey”

Catalogue Essay by William C. Agee

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Curator, Rockefeller Arts Center Gallery

Michael C. Rockefeller Arts Center Gallery
State University of New York, College at Fredonia
February 16 through March 16, 2001

For Betye Monell Burton



Preceding page: *Abondanza (for Max)*, 40 x 60 inches, 1993-2000, oil on canvas

FOREWARD

In her recent paintings Sigrid Burton travels to many worlds, both near and far. Designed by the architectural firm I.M. Pei and Partners and built in 1969, the Michael C. Rockefeller Arts Center is a major cultural center for western New York and northwestern Pennsylvania. Housing a 1,200-seat concert hall, two theatres and two art galleries, the Rockefeller Arts Center serves as a showcase for the students and faculty in Fredonia's arts programs and as a venue for national and international touring artists. More than 200 events are presented each year by the center and some 23 academic departments, student organizations, and community groups.

In fulfilling its commitment to bring nationally recognized artists to its broad community, the Rockefeller Arts Center Gallery is pleased to present the paintings of Sigrid Burton. The students of Art Forum, as participants in a curatorial program, selected Burton's work for exhibition this year. Support for the exhibition is provided by friends of the Rockefeller Arts Center and the Student Association through the Arts Forum. The exhibition was organized by Katherine T. Carter & Associates. We look forward to sharing her work with the community of the New York State University in Fredonia.

Cynnie Gaasch

Curator, Rockefeller Arts Center Gallery

SIGRID BURTON: A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

In her recent paintings Sigrid Burton travels to many worlds, both near and distant, as she has during her life. The domains she explores may seem to be disparate and disconnected, but they alternately meet, intersect, fuse, and then disappear, like apparitions, in liquid pools of mist and color. Her pictorial odyssey refers simultaneously to both a higher order, a timeless cosmic vastness, as well as to a private, interior world, abounding in personal histories and memories. These paintings have a new quietude, an ease and serenity about them that bespeaks a calm assurance in her direction. Their aura will hide their genesis, that in fact they were born of a crisis of confidence.

We first see color, especially the deep, rich alizarin, her signature hue, for her art is rooted in the lyrical abstraction and color field painting of the 1960s. There are important differences, however, that set her work apart. Her paintings are not poured or stained, but are now built up slowly and carefully, in oil paint, over time, and often over older paintings, giving the work a patina of age, and a craftsmanship that suggests old master practice. This gives the surface an expansive feeling, a virtually limitless space, as of the universe, as if we were traversing toward distant nebulae through a pictorial Hubble telescope. We are caught up in her color, and it becomes the atmosphere within which we move. Soon enough, however, we are brought back to earth by passages of drawing in which we encounter familiar if unidentified elements. Further investigation reveals the drawing to depict references to the immediate world of her studio, to

the quotidian facts of her life, as well as to the sweep of art history and world culture. Here, lyrical abstraction meets with the realm of personal identity, the dominant issue of art in the 1990s. How she has arrived at this juncture is the story of her life as an artist.

Burton was born and raised in Pasadena, California during the 1950s and 1960s when the Los Angeles art scene was just coming of age. Her parents were enthusiastic patrons of the arts who fostered a vital and creative environment in which she happily participated from an early age. She took art classes in school and at the lively Pasadena Art Museum where she saw a succession of important loan exhibitions and collections of California and New York art which well grounded her in modern art. In addition, she was exposed to diverse cultures at the nearby Huntington Library, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Southwest Museum. She knew and learned from a diverse group of artists living and working in the area that included Allan Kaprow, Barbara Smith, and Jirayer Zorthian. She knew local collections, including the colour field paintings assembled by Robert Rowan, long a Pasadena resident. Of particular importance for her were a floral painting by Morris Louis and a concentric circle painting by Ken Noland on long term loan to her parents from the Rowan collection. From an early age she travelled extensively in Europe and the United States, whetting her curiosity for a wide variety of world culture that ever since has kept her open to the multiple possibilities of art and art history. It was no surprise that she gravitated to the study of art, first at the University of California at Berkeley, then, needing to broaden her horizons beyond California, at Bennington College. There

she studied with Pat Adams, from whom she first learned technical aspects of colour, as well as Phillip Wofford, Carol Haerer, Richard Haas, and Sidney Tillim. The deep imprint of colour field painting and lyric abstraction, notably the work of Helen Frankenthaler, Ken Noland, and Jules Olitski, who had all taught there, as well as Morris Louis, had long been established at Bennington and made its mark on Burton.

After college, in 1973, she apprenticed, first with Frankenthaler, and then with Olitski and began her career as a serious painter, working with broad swaths of color indebted to color field painting. From the start her painting has been aligned with the great tradition of modern color painting that can be traced to Titian (long a favorite artist) and Venetian *colore*. It includes impressionism, post-impressionism, Matisse, Bonnard, and Rothko, as well as the color field painters whom she already knew well. However, she had come to color field painting late, after its parameters had been established, and while it was a fruitful point of departure for her, she could not fully embrace it. There were several qualities she had grown to dislike by the late 1970s – the plastic feel and limited textural and chromatic qualities of acrylic paints, and the over reliance on what she felt were its too-easy effects, deriving from the use of additives, gels and squeegees. She loved color and its sensuous, physical impact, but she had to look at it critically, to discover just how she could put her



Kashgar, 40 x 30 inches, 1999, oil on canvas

personal stamp on it. She did not like its purity, its unrelenting abstractness, and what she felt was its remoteness from the tangible, known reality of life, its inability to record everyday experience. She wanted an art that could convey something more personal and that could be invested with a known content, without giving up the lyricism and structure of color.

To achieve this, Burton did nothing less than rethink and transform her entire working method. In 1979, she switched from acrylics to oil paints which, over time, have opened a rich world of traditions, techniques and effects, from glazing to impasto to underpainting, which she has continued to explore to this day. From working on the floor, using broad swaths of colour poured, pulled, or spread which created accidental splashes and pours, she moved to working upright, on the wall, on prepared canvas on stretchers and using only brushes, thus gaining greater control, precision and exactitude over her art. She also began to draw more rigorously and from life, a process that enabled her to fuse colour, which she has always treasured, with a record of her memories distilled from her life and from her far ranging journeys. Through drawing, she could reach the core of her consciousness, her most intimate, interior world of experience as it has filtered through her world travels.

The sharp cultural intersections and contrasts effected by her journeys have kept her art open. She has been alert to record her impressions and memories, and they have infused her art at every turn. In the mid-1980s, for example, a visit to Monet's gardens at Giverny was the impulse behind the proliferation of flamboyant botanic

configurations, although her memory of the Louis floral painting at her home was also surely present. She has been a keen student of western art, and her recent paintings make abundant reference to this history, but she has spent considerable time in Asia as well, which is also clearly evident in her recent work. These references reveal themselves slowly, giving her art a sense of duration, a sense of a long journey through space, time, and memory.

Burton has been eager to explore the world, to embrace and experience it all. It is small wonder that life eventually caught up with her. In the late 1980s, she had unexpectedly lost her father; she had been deeply affected by the devastation among her friends caused by AIDS; and her view of the world had been profoundly altered by a trip to India in 1991. She had begun to question the extent to which painting could embody and express the totality of experience. Finally, after returning in 1995 from an extended stay in India, the clash of cultures and the radical changes in her life overwhelmed her and brought on a severe crisis of confidence in herself and in her art. It was a difficult time that caused her once more to rethink her art and what it meant for her. She faced the impasse, and worked through it, in large measure by attending graduate school at Columbia University in South Asian studies, in order to process and assimilate the overabundance of aesthetic and intellectual information she had received in India.

She has done this admirably, and as a result, she has emerged as a better, more confident painter. She is now a more mature artist, and her work has a new assurance, a greater depth and richness. In her

recent paintings she shows that she has achieved a fine balance, both in her art and in her self, between the worlds of east and west, long a dream of many modern artists, often those from California. The result is now a nuanced, poetic kind of painting rich in multi-layered references, notations, allusions, and memories that appear, disperse, and then reappear easily and surely in and through her surfaces, as if we ourselves were moving between worlds, cultures, and centuries.

After the overwhelming experience of India, Burton had to restart herself, to reaffirm her belief in the power of painting to convey authentic, personal experience. She did this by embracing a basic fact of her life: that she was, first and foremost, a professional artist working everyday, surrounded by the people and things she loves. She began again by looking, not to exotic lands, but to the immediate world of her studio, the space around her and the things that occupied it. She got to it, once more, by again drawing, the most direct form of art making, the quickest way to access her basic impulses as an artist. She drew whatever was at hand, around her, just then, sometimes her two cats, her constant companions in her studio. By 1997, she had begun to work her way back into her art.

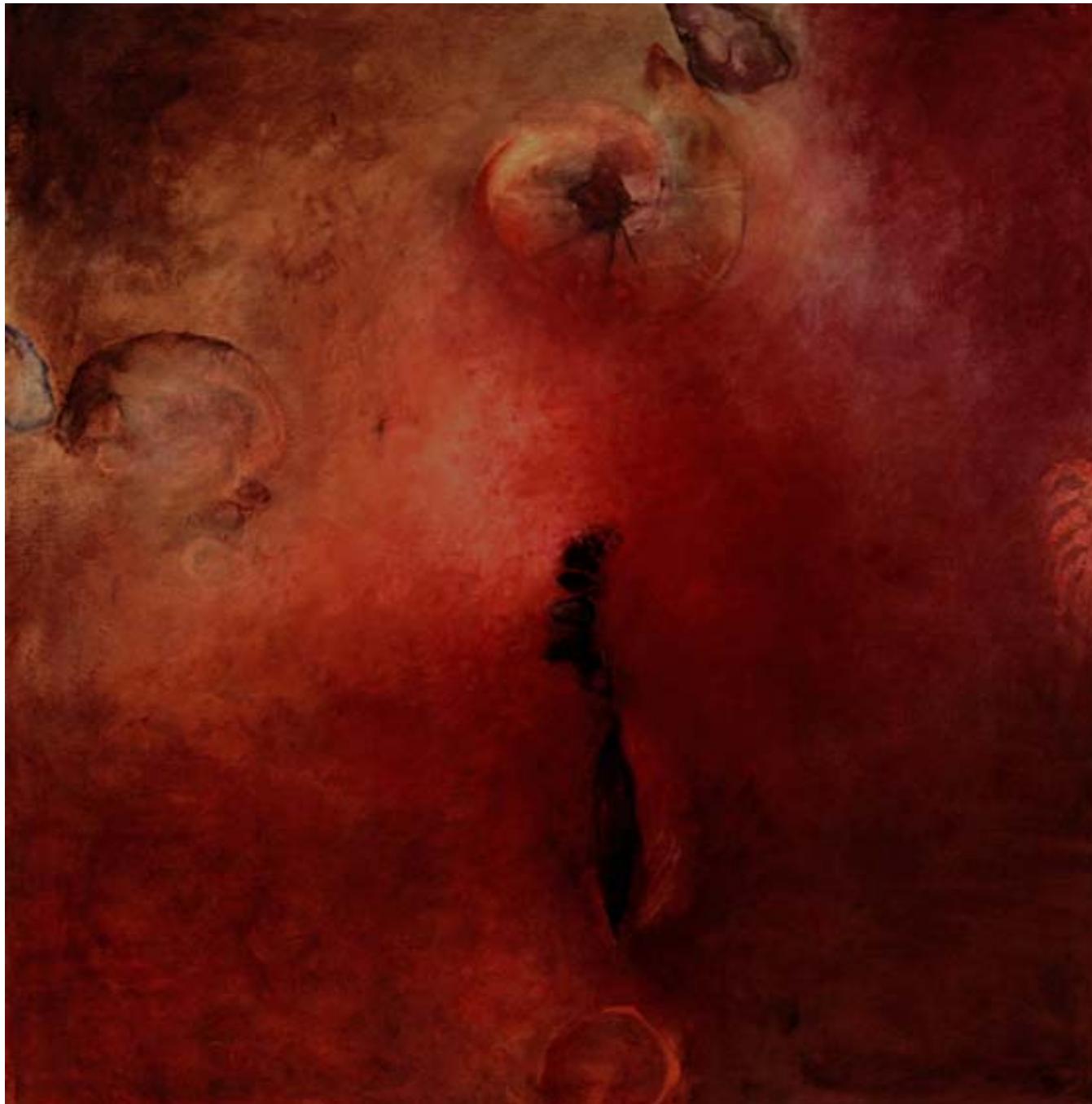
From there, she could then look at the simple beauty of the natural world, and her art has launched into a vast realm of natural forms that include the botanical, the anatomical, and marine life. She has drawn and painted from nature and from photographs, and her recent paintings include references to the shapes of plants, pods, flowers, shells, teeth. She is fascinated by Leonardo's anatomical drawings and in her recent paintings we find multiple references to

skulls, bone, and the workings of the body. Her references are intentional but are deliberately kept ambiguous. She loves the specificity of natural forms, finding in them a wealth of line and shape that cannot be invented. She is intrigued by the shapes of nature, the interrelationship of botanical and anatomical forms, for instance, the abstract complexity of the inner ear and its canals, or how lateral cross sections of the brain look like bisected fruit.

She has discovered that in the ordinary there is the extraordinary. This has enabled her to see her art and the world in a new light, as a single unity, one in which diverse cultures can exist simultaneously, as one, a basic tenet of Indian thought that has deeply affected her. Other aspects of Indian tantric thought are also evident in her new work: we see traces of the real, physical body existing simultaneously with the subtle body, a parallel etheric or spiritual self; we find the micro and the macro constantly juxtaposed; and we find forms and shapes existing at once in the process of both creation and dissolution. We are led to understand that qualities can seem at variance with each other, but in fact such opposites are fundamentally of one essence. Thus precise drawing mixes with her hazy, atmospheric colour, for the world, like life itself, is as fugitive and evanescent as mist and clouds.

Miss Otis Regrets, 60 x 70 inches, 1990-2000, oil on canvas





The parallel universes of Asian thought and western art exist at every turn in Burton's recent paintings. In *Miss Otis Regrets*, for example, the rich alizarins evoke, at once, Titian, Matisse, Rothko, all artists who have been important for Burton, as well as the intense colours of India, as in the pervasive *kum kum*, the vermilion powder which women use to decorate themselves. Her merging of colour and drawing recalls Matisse's fusion of these two traditional pictorial opposites in such key paintings as *The Red Studio*, 1911 and *View of Notre Dame*, 1914 (both Museum of Modern Art, New York). The atmospheric colour suggests, at the same time, the mists over the Ganges, J.M.W. Turner, Monet's *Nymphéas*, the pastels of Odilon Redon, the light of California, and the veiled colour washes of earlier California artists such as Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890- 1973) and Sam Francis (1923-1994).

We feel as if we are both in a cosmic space, reaching to unknown nebulae via the space age travel of the Jet Propulsion Lab in her native Pasadena, and in the space of her studio, for the title refers to her cat, named Miss Otis, whose tail we glimpse at top and at right. The private studio world recalls the worlds of J.S. Chardin and Pierre

Bonnard, two artists that have deeply affected her. We may also feel we are underwater, a reference suggested by the shape of a shell. In *After JSC*, so titled for Chardin, we see at center vestiges of a hanging duck in a still life by the French master. Also apparent are ghostly suggestions of a skull, a *momento mori* to lost friends, and a shell, or fruit, as found in still lifes by van Gogh and Caravaggio, reproductions of which hang on her studio wall. In these beautifully painted works, past and present, east and west, the seen and unseen, the real and the imagined, old and current art meet. We watch with wonder and surprise as the familiar appears in unexpected contexts, and as we engage these contemplative paintings, it is as if Burton has invited us to join her on her lifelong odyssey. Vast worlds pass before us, now joined in one global unity, brought home to us and rendered with deep feeling, in the singular, poetic language of painting.

William C. Agee
Professor of Art History, Hunter College
November, 2000

After JSC, 49 x 46 inches, 2000, oil on canvas

For Bonnie Cashin (In Memorium), 46 x 68 inches, 2000, oil on canvas



Blue in Green, 40 x 40 inches, 2000, oil on canvas



Senor C's Sueño, 60 x 60 inches, 1999-2000, oil on canvas



Dooks, 40 x 30 inches, 2000, oil on canvas



Queen of Hearts (for Berniece Harbers Runyan), 50 x 50 inches, 2000, oil on canvas



Tajik, 40 x 50 inches, 1999, oil on canvas



Fourth Song, 40 x 30 inches, 1999, oil on canvas



Shy Slence, 48 x 72 inches, 2000, oil on canvas



Kyrgis, 48 x 60 inches, 1999, oil on canvas



RESUME

- 1951 Born Pasadena, California
1973 B.A., Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont 1969-1971 at University of California, Berkeley and Los Angeles
2001 M.A. candidate, Columbia University, New York, New York (South Asian Studies)

Fellowships and Honors

- 1994 Recipient of 1994-1995 Indo-American Senior Research Fellowship,
Fulbright Scholar Program for Faculty and Professionals
to study the meaning and use of colour in traditional Indian art forms
1985 Residency Fellowship, Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio Study Center, Bellagio, Italy
1977 Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award for a young artist of distinction who
has not yet received due recognition.
American Academy & Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, New York

One Person Exhibitions

- 2004 Waterworks Visual Arts Center, Salisbury, North Carolina
2003 FLATFILEcontemporary, Chicago, Illinois
2003 Baum Gallery of Fine Art, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas
2001 Rockefeller Arts Center, State University of New York, Fredonia, New York
McArthur Gallery, Tampa, Florida
1998 State Street Gallery, Sarasota, Florida
1993 Jean Albano Gallery, Chicago
1990 Patricia Hamilton Gallery, Santa Monica, California
Hokin Kaufman Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
1988 Patricia Hamilton 112 Greene Street Gallery, New York, New York
Eve Mannes Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia
1987 Ivory Kimpton Gallery, San Francisco, California
Hokin Kaufman Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
1986 Patricia Hamilton 112 Greene Street Gallery, New York, New York
1984 Ivory Kimpton Gallery, San Francisco, California
Martha White Gallery, Louisville, Kentucky
1983 DBR Gallery, Cleveland, Ohio
Grayson Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
1982 Martha White Gallery, Louisville, Kentucky
1980 Salander O'Reilly Gallery, New York, New York
1978 College of Creative Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, California
1976 Artists Space, New York, New York

Group Exhibitions

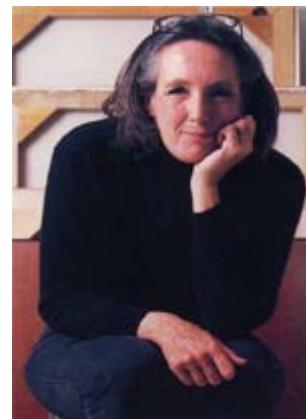
- 2002 "Six Painters", Kreuger Gallery, Pasadena, California
2000 "Hunter Gallery Selects", Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, New York, New York
"New Paintings by Sigrid Burton, Sharon Rosenfeld & Jennifer Young"
Hofstra Museum, Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York
1997 "Gold and Silver" Jean Albano Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
1995 "Perspectives on India", Krasdale Corporation Art Gallery, New York, New York
"Paper Works", Hurlbutt Gallery, Greenwich, Connecticut
1990 "Works on Paper", Hokin Kaufman Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
1988 "Downtown Perspectives", Adelphi University, Manhattan Center, New York, NY
"Recent Acquisitions", John & Mable Ringling Museum, Sarasota, Florida
1987 "Christmas Show", Hokin Kaufman Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
1986 "Pasadena Collects: Art of Our Time", Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California (catalogue)
1984 "Gallery Selections", Janus Gallery, Los Angeles, California
"Hundreds of Drawings", Artists Space, New York, New York
DBR Gallery, Cleveland, Ohio
1983 "The Nancy Yewell Collection", Baxter Art Gallery, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California
Martha White Gallery, Louisville, Kentucky
Ivory Kimpton Gallery, San Francisco, California
1982 Martha White Gallery, Louisville, Kentucky
Inaugural Exhibition, Grayson Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
Gallery Ninety-Nine, Bay Harbor Islands, Florida
1980 Martha White Gallery, Louisville, Kentucky
1979 William O'Reilly Gallery, New York, New York
1977 Candidates for Academy Awards and Honors", American Academy & Institute of Arts & Letters
"Recipients of Academy Honors", American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, New York

Selected Public Collections

Bucknell University, Lewisberg, Pennsylvania
Metropolitan Museum Of Art, New York, New York
John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida
Palm Springs Desert Museum, Palm Springs, California
Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon
Auberge Du Soleil, Napa, California
Baker, Knapp and Tubbs, Chicago, Illinois
Bank of the South, Atlanta, Georgia
B.F. Goodrich, Akron, Ohio
Brown Forman Distilleries, Louisville, Kentucky
C & H Sugar, Crockett, California
Citicorp, New York, New York and Los Angeles, California
Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Cleveland, Ohio
Coca Cola Corporation, Atlanta, Georgia
Digital Equipment, San Francisco, California
First City Capital, New York, New York
First Union Bank, Corporate Headquarters, North Carolina
Freddie Mac, McLean, Virginia
Georgetown Plaza (commission), New York, New York
Glick Organization, Promenade Bldg. (commission), New York, New York
Jim Beam Corp., Chicago, Illinois
Loew's Theater Corporation, New York, New York
Mercantile Bank, Sacramento, California
Merck & Co., Inc., Global Headquarters, Whitehouse Station, New Jersey
NYNEX, White Plains, New York
Northern Telecom, Nashville, Tennessee
Pepsi Co., Chicago, Illinois
Polygram Corporation, Los Angeles, California
Prudential Bache, New York, New York
Prudential Insurance, Newark, New Jersey
Rockefeller Foundation, New York, New York
Simpson Timber Company, Seattle, Washington
Sierra Federal Savings Bank, Beverly Hills, California
Steelcase Inc., Grand Rapids, Michigan
Westridge School, Pasadena, California

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Peter Frank, brochure essay, 1999
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The Louisville Courier Journal, February 21, 1982
Morrissey, Irene, *Vingt Cinq Ans*, November, 1981



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