

MARGARET HUNTER

ELEMENTAL TRACES



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ART FIRST CONTEMPORARY ART

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Throughout the past decade of claim and counterclaim for the latest, most sensational types of art, Margaret Hunter has stayed where she always was, painting and making sculptures about the human condition. As John Berger has observed "when one studies an artist's work as a whole, one usually finds that he or she has an underlying, constant theme, a kind of hidden but continuous subject. The continuous subject reflects the bias of the artist's imagination; it reveals that area of experience to which his or her temperament forces him or her to return again and again, and from which he or she creates certain standards of interest with which to judge ordinary disparate subjects as they present themselves to him or her".' Margaret Hunter's continuous subject resides in the connection between the internal world of her own experience, of living across geographical and cultural boundaries, and the external conditions presented by the social, historical and political realities of contemporary Europe.

Much has happened since her arrival in Berlin in 1985 to study with Georg Baselitz and her subsequent decision to remain in the then divided city. Hunter's area of experience as a Scottish artist has been significantly changed by living and working in Berlin and by her long exposure to the constant state of flux which the city has undergone and continues to under-go. With the collapse of the Wall in 1989 Berlin has become the epitome of change, with a new



infrastructure, new architecture, and increasing movements of people into and within the city. She has witnessed two totally different and opposing systems being suddenly and crudely brought together - since 1994 her studio has been in the Eastern part of Berlin, in the Panzerhalle which was previously used to repair army tanks situated on a former GDR military barracks - and she has observed at first hand the misunderstandings between the peoples of the two Germanys with their different viewpoints and values. Hunter's preoccupation with ideas of re-invention and regeneration and her exploration of both internal and external forces, reflects the transitions which have followed in the wake of German re-unification. Her search for personal identity and her own experience as an 'outsider' have led to the creation of a body of painting and sculpture which is manifestly her own and owes nothing at all to the changing fashions of the art world.

Margaret Hunter's new work relates to both Berlin and beyond. In this case 'beyond' means the extremes of both Northern (Finland) and Southern (Mallorca) Europe, where she spent periods working in 1997 and 1998. What she has to say about the almost imperceptible influence of place on her work is well worth noting.



"In the town of Nykarleby where I stayed in Finland, I never heard a dog bark or a child laughing/crying. It was Autumn and each morning there was a grey mist which hung down like a curtain, hiding the houses on the opposite side of the river. One morning, I got up an hour earlier than usual and the sky was lit up as if by fireworks, with dramatic reds and oranges. It was magnificent. I went back to bed and when I rose not long afterwards, the grey mist had descended again. In Finland, I had the feeling things were happening, but always when I wasn't looking."

"Santanyi in Mallorca - what can I say, in so many ways the opposite to Finland: colours magnificent; warm; comfortable; extrovert, expressive, friendly people; the light, the sea, the landscape. There is no stop and start, therefore the obvious influences of Germany, Finland and Santanyi are more to do with colour and the appearance of forms associated (for me) with these places which are reinventions from my store of symbols."

"At the end of the day there are just the paintings and sculptures for the public - the stories are mine. Finland and Santanyi are tied together in the work through me, the translator."



Although the direct experiences of Finland and Mallorca have been assimilated to become part of Hunter's continuous subject, it is apparent that as a result of working in those extremes of location her repertoire of forms and symbols has been subtly altered and remade and her work invested with new meanings. Her paintings, and in particular her colour, seem to have taken on an added richness and intensity while her main symbol, the female body, appears now to carry extra insights and allusions. It is clear that Hunter's creative imagination has been stimulated by her travels, unleashing new levels of creative energy and enhancing the expressive and emotional power of her work.

Bunch of Person, Path, and Leaves, form a group of paintings directly inspired by the landscape and colours of Mallorca. *Bunch of Person* was begun in the studio at Santanyi where the surrounding landscape provided the source for *Path*. In *Leaves* the sphere-like leaf forms of the giant cacti re-appear as vital patterns within a dramatic compositional structure. The imagery of *Distant Intimations, Another Conversation, and Two Heads and a Message*, continues to exploit the triangle form with the attached history and meaning of the Nuremberg Trichter (funnel) which has become the most potent of symbols for Hunter. Interestingly she is convinced of a connection between the Nuremberg Trichter and



John Duns Scotus (c.1265-1308) the medieval Scottish philosopher who is buried in Cologne. The Duncce's Cap and its inverted form, the Trichter, both have scholastic associations and at the time of the Nuremberg Trichter there was a revival of interest in Duns Scotus across Europe when his followers were known as 'Dunsmen'.

Hunter's use of this symbol also reflects her experience of working with artists from the East and hearing their stories of life under communism. The idea of knowledge (or propaganda) being poured in seemed all too obvious, but it also made her more aware of the kinds of aggressive, manipulative marketing that goes on in the West. What appeals to Hunter above all, is the richness and variety of the interpretations connected with such symbolism.

Hunter's great subject is the female human figure. She presents the figure as a collection of parts, signs, and fragments, which in turn constitute an ongoing series of images, conceived as either paintings or sculptures. Ideas originate and accumulate in the form of small drawings which then become the basis for larger drawings, paintings, or sculptures. Her paintings are strongly pigmented,



making use of over-painting and layering techniques, with surfaces heavily scratched and scored, in order to expose previous markings and tracings. Her sculptures, carved from wood but often incorporating metal parts, resemble the paintings through the use of highly textured surfaces and incised lines which usually relate to identity (as stamped upon them). This aspect of 'surface' lies at the heart of Hunter's work as does her identification with 'primitive' forms and with African art. Some years ago, a student at Glasgow School of Art told Hunter that she had visited an exhibition of African sculptures which gleamed with 'human grease' - the sweat from hands laid on the sculptures over years and years for the purposes of magic or religion. This description of sculpture as an object invested with human histories and magical properties stuck in Hunter's mind. She has stated that this is the kind of importance of 'presence' she desires for her own sculptures.

The central themes of Hunter's work, language and meaning, signs and signals, understanding and misunderstanding are reflected in paintings such as *Echo*, *Mutual Context* and *Dreamings*. On a personal level these themes relate to her existence in a country where for most of the time she does not communicate to others in her mother tongue. There is also of course the further external



context of misunderstandings between the peoples of the two former parts of Germany. Hunter's great achievement has been to make work which speaks so eloquently and sympathetically about such issues.

By making paintings, sculptures and drawings about the clash of desires and needs which have to be accommodated and negotiated within our-selves, in our bodies and in our minds, Hunter proposes that through conflict and diversity there might also arise the possibility for change and progress, on both a personal level and on the larger and wider levels of the social and political. All of the work which forms the exhibition *Elemental Traces* deals with the relationship between the individual human psyche and external reality and is imbued with the spirit of renewal and hope for the future. Once again Margaret Hunter, with her Giacometti-like persistence, has shown us that in her hands the power and vitality of painting and of sculpture remains capable of transforming our lives.

Alexander Moffat

Chair of the School of Fine Art
Glasgow School of Art

Notes

1. John Berger, *The Look of Things*, Pelican Books, 1972
2. From letters to Alexander Moffat from the artist, 1999-2000



Echo, 1999/2000, oil on wood, 122 x 99 cm



Distant Intimacy, 1999/2000, oil on wood, 120 x 95 cm



Another Conversation, 1999/2000, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 cm, Private Collection



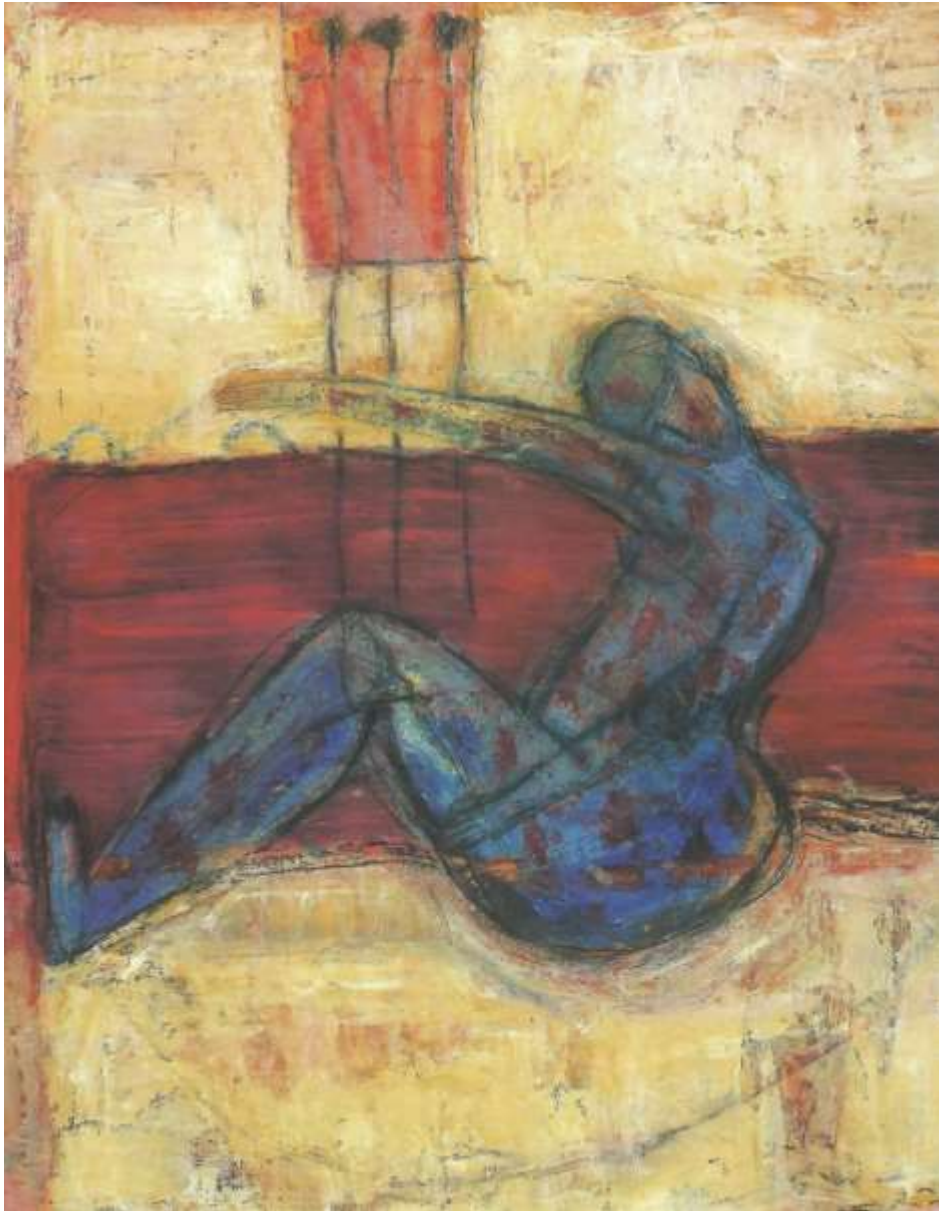
Dreamings, 1999/2000, oil on canvas, 105 x 85 cm



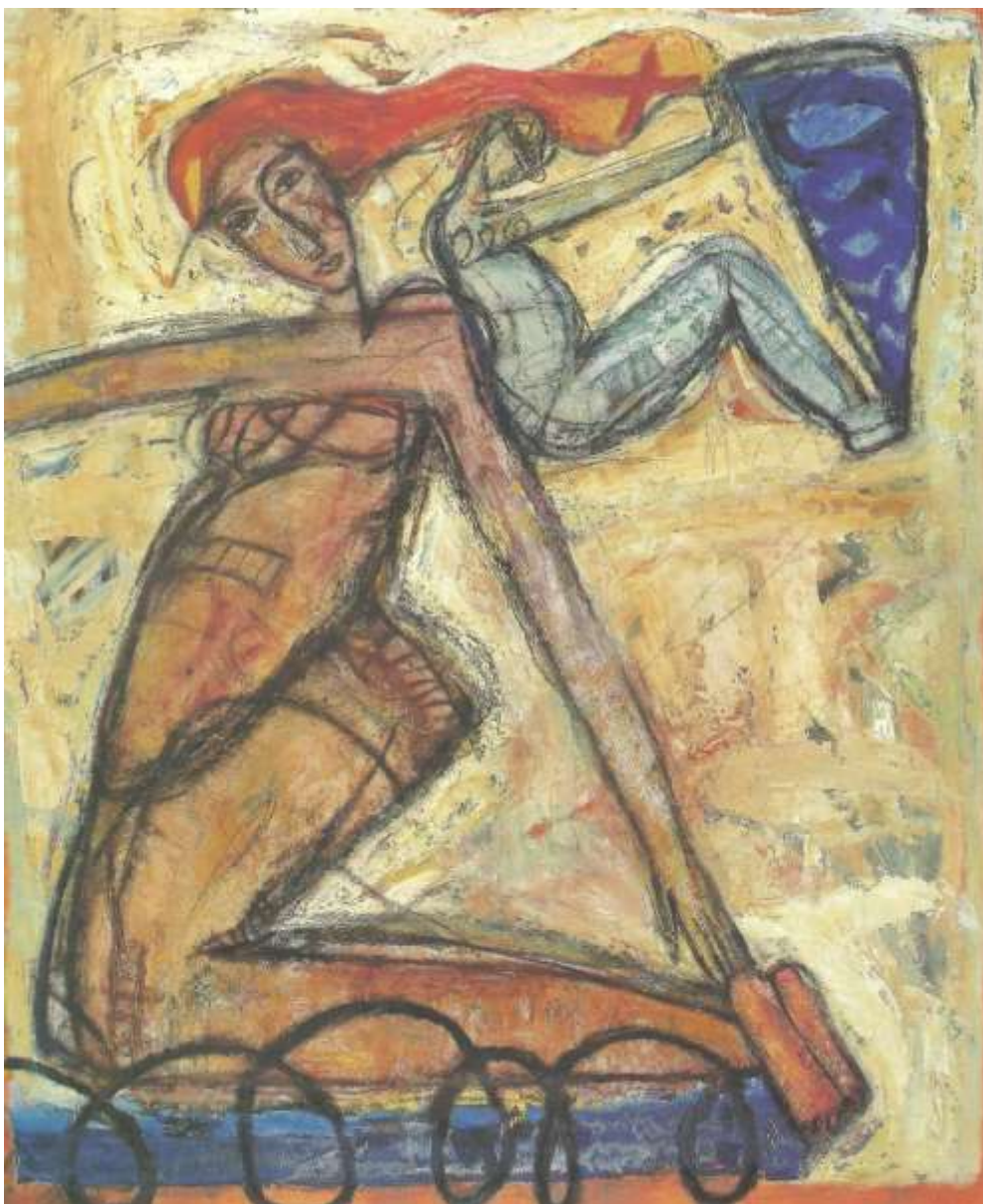
Leaves, 1999/2000, oil on wood, 119 x 100 cm



Mutual Context, 1999/2000, oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm



Flow, 1999/2000, oil on canvas, 115 x 90 cm



Moving On, 1999/2000, oil on wood, 115 x 95 cm



Path, 1999, oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm



Bunch of Person, 1999/2000, oil on wood, 142 x 105 cm

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Strule Steele

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Sven Hoffmann

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For definitive information or images, please consult Margaret Hunter through her website:

www.margaret-hunter.com