

MARGARET HUNTER

VITAL PATTERNS

ART FIRST

CONTEMPORARY ART

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Art First 9 Cork Street London W1X 1PD

Margaret Hunter's Vital Patterns

Georg Baselitz, her mentor and inspiration, called her Frau Hunter. She describes herself as Afro-Hebridean. Who is this schizophrenic-sounding hybrid?

Margaret Hunter was born on the west coast of Scotland and, except for two childhood years in Nigeria, lived there until 1985 when she moved to Berlin for postgraduate study with Baselitz; since then, although she divides her time between Scotland and Germany, her life and work are centred on Berlin. It is a life divided into two worlds, with two balances, lived - but not lost - in translation.

Although she had attended part-time local art classes, she was 33 and the mother of two children before she went to Glasgow School of Art, after the break-up of her first marriage. It was a difficult but exhilarating time. In her last year, the tutors organised a trip to Amsterdam where, at the Stedelijk Museum, she saw an exhibition of paintings by Baselitz (which, ironically, had originated at the Whitechapel Gallery in London) which made her see in a new way: it opened her eyes. She became obsessed with the idea of studying with him, and, without money or a word of German, and with the reclusive Baselitz secluded in his castle near Hanover and not speaking English, embarked on the seemingly insuperable

task of winning some sort of scholarship or bursary to the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, where Baselitz was visiting professor.

She arrived alone in September 1985 and, although energetic and extrovert, volatile and voluble in her own language and milieu, found herself isolated in a divided city. She found Baselitz affable but formal; unlike Glasgow School of Art, where students and tutors were on easy terms, the Hochschule mirrored German Society with all its hierarchies, ceremony and ritual. At their first meeting, they talked about her work through an interpreter. He felt she was working her way painstakingly, step by step, through German Expressionism, that she should come up to date, that she should immerse herself in drawing to clarify her ideas. In doing so at a time when she could not express herself through language, all the trapped emotions, feelings and ideas emerged in symbols which entered her work in free expressionist drawings, quite different from anything she had done in Scotland, and which have disappeared as she has become more fluent; the intensive drawing continues to this day, the working out of ideas in fast, fluid, expressive bursts.

What was it that so attracted her to Baselitz? What was the influence she travelled so far to experience? In Amsterdam she responded to the passion and directness of his work; in Berlin she found that the artist who painted figures upside down turned the world upside down for her, taught her to look at things differently: the advice he gave her was, she feels, absolutely right; and, paradoxically, although she had come there expressly to succumb to his influence, perhaps her inability to speak the language was in itself a good thing -

he could not dominate her in the way that might have been possible had they been able to communicate in the same language.

After a year of study with Baselitz, she found it was no longer enough simply to look at his work and turned to his sources and inspiration, to the African and Oceanic art in the Berlin Museum of Ethnology. There were the inventiveness, the passion without pathos or sentimentality, the directness without narrative which had so excited her in Baselitz. But it was not until her second cathartic exhibition experience, when she saw the gigantic Africa - The Art of a Continent, imported to Berlin from the Royal Academy in 1996, that she was again bowled over, made the connection and realised that her obsessive need to study with Baselitz was her unconscious need to get back to the African art she had experienced so long before in west Africa at the age of eleven, when her father was posted to Nigeria. It was her epiphany.

In Africa they lived in the bush, with endless camel trains passing in front of their house, having come across the Sahara to make their way to the town of Katsina, North of Kano, 25 miles away. Memories of tribal identity markings on the faces and necks of women surfaced in paintings and in the wood sculptures she began carving in 1992 and in the markings which appear and reappear in her work; what interests her is the idea of identity, of people being tattooed, having their identity stamped upon them. And, of course, her sculpting in wood, was a natural progression from the paintings on wood just as the German Expressionists painted on wood.

Her first sculptures, inspired by images in the Museum of Ethnology were small ceramic sculptures whose scale she found unsatisfactory. Since she lacked the technical knowledge (and patience) to make larger ceramic pieces, and since she was already painting on wood - scratching and hacking - carving in wood was a natural development. The first wood sculptures were a series of four pieces, the earliest of which, *The Receiver*, is a sort of fetish or totem figure, inspired by African themes and ideas, his arms and legs pierced with small bronze cones left over from the lost wax of bronze-making technique. From this came the idea of making a small head from which a huge cone emerges, an arcane reference to the 17th century Nuremberg *Trichter* or funnel, which could either be seen to be funnelling knowledge into the head or as a dunce's cap.

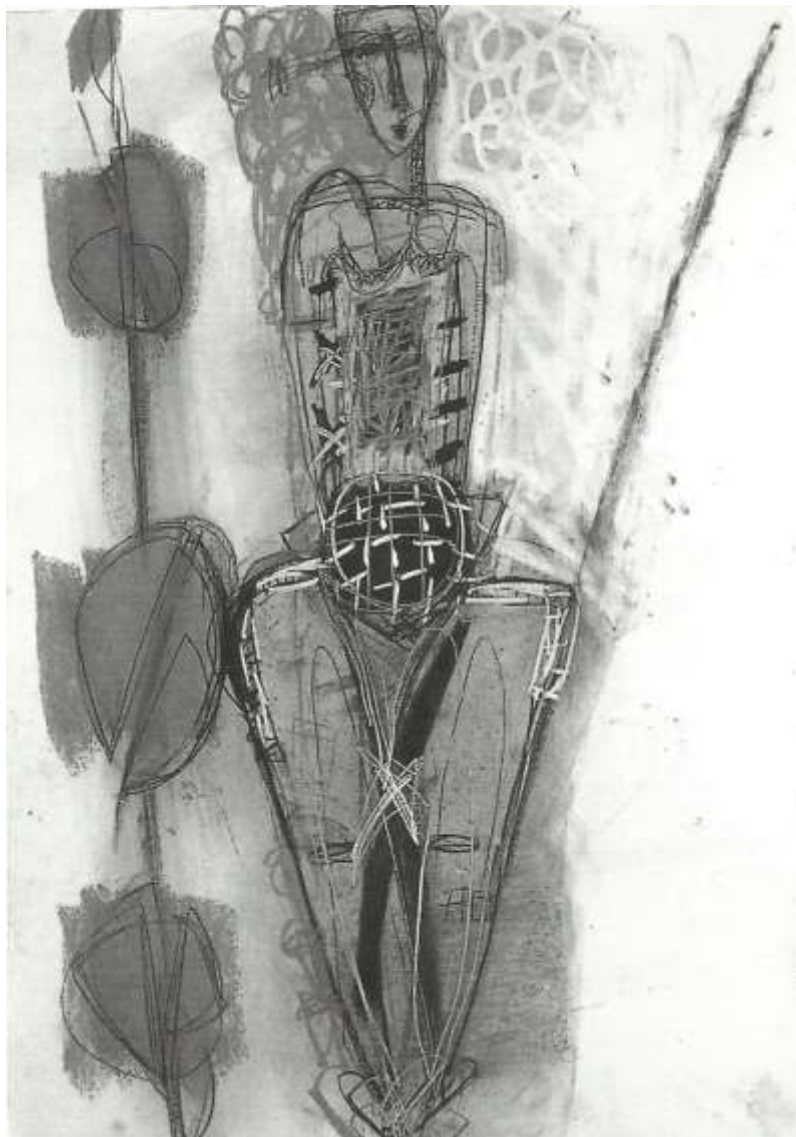
Parallel with Hunter's recognition of her African inspiration is the recurrent theme of separation, division and union. whose origin lies in the reunification of Germany. The next sculpture in the series is a figure of a *Leaning Woman* with a copper wedge inserted into the stomach making the figure bend sideways, symbolising the need for change: if the figure refused to bend and accommodate change it would break. Paintings of the time echo the theme. When the divisive Wall came down in 1989, a part was left standing, an eloquent memorial painted by artists from all over the world, tribute and testament to the theme of Wall/unification/East and West, symbolising the new Berlin and new Germany. Hunter's painting, *Joint Venture*, depicts two heads lying side by side, strange bedfellows, symbolising the two Germanys bending, accommodating, assimilating.

The titles of Hunter's exhibitions have reflected her personal journey: Berlin - Scotland - Transfer (1988); Changing Places (1992); Scratching the Surface (1994); Signs of Life (1996); and now Vital Patterns. Titles of paintings and sculptures in the present exhibition clearly reflect the recurrent themes, the leitmotifs, in her life and work: *Integration, Imagining, Inner Listening, Self Reflection, Part of the Pattern, Something Going On, Der Sprung (Leap)*. The wood, steel and copper wire sculpture, *Blue Figure - The Keeper*, harks back to *The Binding* of 1994; *Holding One's Own* to *Holding Together* (1994), *Points of Contact* to *Carrying the Arrow* (1994). Drawing, painting and sculpture are always developments of the same idea, flowing from one medium to the other in dynamic, osmotic progression (beautifully exemplified by two works from a previous exhibition, *Zig-Zag Figure*, a wood, bronze and steel sculpture of 1994, which, a year later, became the painting *Zig-Zag Concert*).

These vibrant works, begun during a residency in Finland, continue and reflect the exploration of a lively mind steeped in two cultures (in *Finnish Window*, for example, which is painted in cool colours, a characteristic elongated figure stares -wistfully? balefully? contemplatively? timelessly? from behind the bars). They reflect the successful marriage of cold northern European spirit, temper and light with African primitiveness, heat and colour. Margaret Hunter has come a long way on her unlikely voyage of exploration, and the journey is by no means over; in her case, both journey and arrival matter.

Susan Loppert

March 1998



Zitadelle series

1998, pastel on paper, 83 x 59 cm, Private Collection



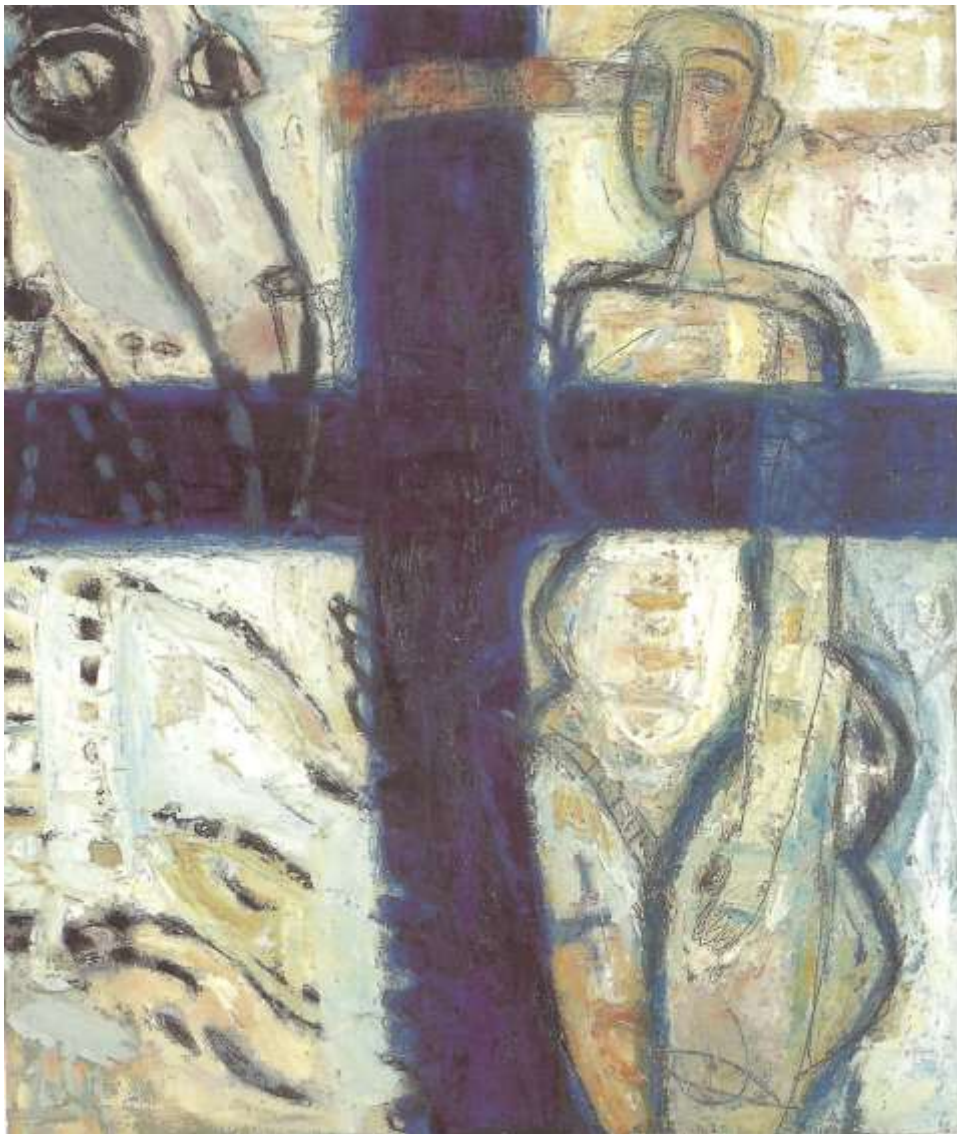
Inner Listening

1997, oil on wood, 100 x 85 cm, Private Collection



Finlandia I

1997, acrylic on paper, 205 x 132 cm, Private Collection



Finnish Window

1997, oil on wood, 100 x 85 cm, Private Collection



Integration

1997, oil on wood, 120 x 95 cm, Private Collection



Something Going On

1998, oil on wood, 120 x 95 cm, Private Collection



Blue Figure

1998, wood, copper and steel, 110 x 63 x 35 cm, Private Collection

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

www.margaret-hunter.com