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The Wild and Precious Life
of Sister Thérèse Higgins



Just Paint

THE ART AND LIFE OF CAROL HUNT

by Rachel Morton

You can't turn a corner in Carol Hunt's spacious Southampton home without coming upon a wall full of breathtaking prints or paintings by Robert Motherwell, James Brooks, Willem de Kooning, Louise Nevelson, and other icons of the abstract expressionist movement, which flourished here on the east end of Long Island in the forties and fifties.



Hunt (Carol Jewell '65) counts some of these greats among her friends and neighbors, and many have inspired her own work, which also occupies a great deal of wall space—not only in her own house but also in the collections of Guild Hall Museum, Parrish Art Museum, General Electric, Pepsico, Republic National Bank, Morgan Guarantee, and numerous other public and private collections.

Her canvases are bold. Some are colorful, others austere, but all have a power, an aggressive conviction and confidence. Hunt is mild mannered, self-effacing with an easy laugh and a relaxed manner. Without a paintbrush in her hand, she seems almost out of place in the context of these large, bold, explosive canvases. But the art bears witness to the dynamism and ambition of this determined woman.

Helen Harrison, director of the Pollock-Krasner House and former *New York Times* art critic, has curated several shows that have included Hunt's work. She describes Hunt's paintings as "spontaneous but built on a very firm structure, so even though it looks very loose and free, it is very coherent."

Abstract expressionists like to work big, and Hunt is no exception. Her studio has a 16-foot ceiling to accommodate her large canvases and 12-foot woven wall hangings. And it also has distinct and spacious work areas for drawing, printmaking (she has an etching press), weaving (she uses a Saori Japanese loom), and computer graphics—all art forms in which Hunt regularly works. But it's the big paintings that dominate the room, and for which Hunt is so well known.

When Hunt paints she likes to listen to classical music—Stravinsky, Bartok, Asian music. She likens each brushstroke and each color to a different instrument. “That’s why I like the large canvas versus the small; it’s the full symphony versus the chord.”

“I used to be very macho,” says Hunt. “I’d take a 25-foot canvas and just tear into it. I felt I had to do a big painting or I wasn’t working.”

A recently completed oil painting hangs on one wall of her large, skylit studio. Called *Between the Grapes and the Wine*, it is about six feet square and is fairly exploding with color and energy. It is multilayered. Hunt explains that she first covered the canvas with neon orange, then applied the “structure”—bold black strokes that she refers to as “dancers or trees.” And then she began applying, with an enormously wide brush, more colors and shapes. The broad strokes not only create energy and shape, but the colors mix a little, edges aren’t sharp but mix with other colors in a process called *sfumato*. The neon orange reappears through lines scraped through the surface.

In the past, Hunt would have used a ladder to get to the top of this large canvas. But times have changed. Illness has limited her ability to climb big ladders and clamber up and all around a giant canvas. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1972, and recently it and other illnesses have begun taking their toll on her physically. “The last eight years have been pretty bad,” she admits. “I’ve been using a scooter since 1988, but I could still get

around. I could walk, but the scooter helped me preserve my energy. Now I must use it all the time.”

So she’s adapted. Hunt now paints seated in a trim little motorized scooter. Her painting hangs above a “trough”—a narrow shaft that has been cut into the floor. She can lower the canvas by means of pulleys and ropes, down below floor level, so she can paint the tops of this and other large canvases without having to climb, or even stand.

“For years the MS didn’t bother me,” she says. “It’s kind of a gradual thing, so I’ve learned to acclimate. I don’t even think of it anymore, to tell you the truth. That’s the way I am, and I just keep doing what I can do. No sense looking back.”

But today she is looking back, to one of the turning points in her life and her career—to the day that she interviewed for her first job out of college. In a way, IBM can be credited for the art career of Carol Hunt. That and rampant sexism.

Hunt says that some people find it incongruous that she was, first and foremost, a mathematician. She majored in math at Regis and was encouraged to pursue math as a career. Hunt says she always figured she’d go straight into IBM after graduation, work as a systems analyst, have six kids, and live happily ever after. She’d retire at 40 and then paint.

She had taken a computer course at IBM during her four years at Regis and had gotten hands-on experience with the newly emergent computer



Wave, an etching by Carroll Dunham, is one of many works of art in Hunt’s home.



April Morning, watercolor and ink on paper, 62" x 44", 2010.



Detail from *The Night of the Green Moon*, woven wall hanging, wool with cotton and acrylic, 2009, 12' x 2'.

“I like the large canvas versus the small—it’s the full symphony versus the chord.”

technology. So she was an excellent candidate for the systems analyst job, but when she got to the final interview, the president of IBM told her, “You are our best candidate, but now that I’ve seen you, I see that you’re too marriageable. I’m giving the job to the fellow from MIT.”

Hunt laughs at this story, admitting that it hadn’t bothered her at the time. This kind of discrimination was common in the sixties and even counted as flattery, especially for Hunt, who thought of herself at that time as “a geek” and something of a wallflower.

The IBM president was right in one way. Carol Jewell did get married soon thereafter, to Jay Hunt, her high school boyfriend from their hometown of Norwood. In this 43-year marriage, Carol and Jay share, among many other things, a passionate love of art. Jay took Carol to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts for the first time to see Monet’s *Haystacks*. “Look at this!” he exclaimed.

“I was overwhelmed,” she says.

Though Hunt had always had artistic leanings, she had no exposure to art as a young girl. “I didn’t know what an artist was growing up. Didn’t know you could be an artist.”

She got her first set of paints in sixth grade and was encouraged by her teacher, Sister Marie DeSales Dineen, CSJ (who later joined the faculty at Fontbonne and then the art department at Regis).

Though she majored in math, Hunt continued to paint at Regis and was taken under the wing of Sister Louisella Walters, CSJ, head of the art department.

“I was a math major, but I also loved art. I was torn between the two. Sister Louisella said stay in the math department because you’ll be able to eat when you graduate. Just keep painting and bring your paintings to me. She gave me space in the studio to work when I had free time.”

After the IBM fiasco, Carol taught math, and she continued teaching throughout Jay’s years in medical school. When they moved to Philadelphia for



Jay's residency, Carol began experiencing MS symptoms and was diagnosed with the disease.

"It was a bad year," she says. "Jay looked so sad; he kept bringing me flowers. But I felt fine and was determined to defy it. Though I lost some vision, instead of backing out I said, 'I'm going for it.' I enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts."

She took a figure drawing class and began working with fabric, turning nudes into pillows. They were an instant success. Soon she had a "thriving little business" supplying pillows and wall hangings to galleries and the art museum store. But she still yearned to paint, and when Jay's medical career took them to California, she took the opportunity to begin painting in earnest.

Ironically, it was when her model took off for a commune on the coast of Oregon that Hunt had her next creative surge. "I was left with the crumpled striped sheet she was sitting on," she says. Around the same time Hunt saw an exhibition of the Japanese art of package wrapping—*furoshike*. "They had a box wrapped in striped fabric, and when I looked at it, I saw canvas. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, that is a painting.'

"I went home and took that leftover sheet and tied it up. Let it flow into loose folds. The contours were all very organic. I wasn't painting the object, but the movement. The fabric was my model."

Her work became progressively more abstract, and she began experimenting with lithography, drawing in some lines, then erasing them, "and all

of a sudden it freed up the stripes and they started flying off in their own direction. More like rhythms."

Since their son was beginning school at the time, Hunt was able to set up a home studio and really focus on her painting. They moved to Southampton in 1977, and as her husband began his medical practice there, her painting career took off. Her work began to be shown in galleries and museums in the Hamptons and in New York City, and she spent a year as a guest artist in the print department at Stony Brook.

She admits that she's had to accept that her condition has limited her career in some ways. "I've only got one good arm and one good leg," she says, laughing. "It's almost a comedy of errors sometimes—trying to reach up, trying to prevent the walker from going into the trough.

"I've had to put things on the back burner," she adds. "I've had to lower my expectations. But after all these years, I'm still painting. I've got a nice life. I'm really lucky."

She has also experimented with a number of different media, most notably film animation through computer graphics. Especially during times when her MS has rendered the physical demands of painting difficult, she has turned to the computer. Here, her math skills and her early computer experience at Regis and IBM have made making art on the computer a natural and rewarding endeavor.

In the past decade or so, Hunt has made 17 animations that have been screened in venues like



Between the Grapes and the Wine, oil on canvas, 68" x 78", 2010

the Pollock-Krasner House and Guild Hall Museum in East Hampton and at Stony Brook. She got the biggest kick out of seeing her work at the computer graphics convention “Siggraph” in Los Angeles. She describes walking into the convention hall and seeing her art projected on a giant screen right over the IBM table. In fact, she laughs, “It was kind of obscuring their logo! That was a treat.” Her videos are much like her abstract expressionist paintings, but in motion. They look like art in the process of happening.

But lately she’s gone back to painting. She feels the computer is “too sterile”—she likes the hands-

on, personal touch of painting. She loves the brushstrokes, she loves the smell of oil paint.

These days, Hunt has the added pleasure of a grandchild who is a frequent visitor and enthusiastic painter. Her son, who like his father became a doctor, lives nearby, and a visit from 6-year-old J.B. is the highlight of many days.

“I like the Chinese philosophy,” she says. “Just go out and absorb nature. Remember what you saw, what you felt. And paint.” **R**

Hunt’s work can be seen at Spanierman Gallery in New York City, or online at www.spanierman.com/hunt,-carol/album