

*Carry me back to the
wind*

Sheba

SHEBA SHARROW
In Search of Duende

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Memorable art is at once timeless and of its time, a reflection of the universal human condition and the experience of its creator. It encapsulates our shared recollections and speaks to us in a profound way.

With provocative images that challenge our imagination, Sheba Sharrow's many layered paintings are indeed memorable. From deep within her comes a cry that alerts us to the perils of the world beyond.

The paintings, a writer friend once told her, have what the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca called *duende*—"a mysterious power" that is felt but not easily explained, a dark force that is spiritual yet connected to the earth. "Duende," he explained, "comes up from inside, up from the very soles of the feet." For Sharrow, this visceral charge that energizes her own work is "dark but also beautiful."

Art historian Alejandro Anreus described the impact of her work:

[Sheba Sharrow's] extraordinary formal powers—rich sense of color, solid structure and dynamic drawing—pull the viewer in through sheer visual beauty and then a fist descends in the middle of one's stomach once we see her figures walking the tightrope of the human condition.

Intensely worked with fingers, rags, and brushes, Sharrow's surfaces bristle with energy. They attest to her technical facility as well as her abiding devotion to her craft. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1926, Sharrow grew up in Chicago, where she attended children's classes and then later studied full time at the Art Institute of Chicago. During the 1960s, now the mother of two and living in Philadelphia, Sharrow completed the MFA program at the Tyler School of Art, Temple University. In 1970, newly divorced, she accepted a teaching position at Millersville State College in Lancaster, where she remained for the next two decades. "Retirement" has given her the opportunity to devote herself full time to her art.

Sharrow's early paintings were figurative, often studies of her children, but she also experimented with abstraction. But distressed by the Vietnam War and the direction in which this country seemed headed, she changed course and began commenting on the critical issues of the day. Her social conscience, Sharrow claims, was imbibed "with my mother's milk." The figure re-emerged in her work and still dominates even the most abstract of her paintings. "First, I became fascinated with the skull," says Sharrow. "I managed to get hold of one, and it became an obsession. I drew it a thousand times from every angle." This "iconic image," she insists, is "not always morbid." Indeed, smiling skeletons peering out from beneath loaded hats in the Mexican artist Posada's Day of the Dead drawings are pinned to her studio wall. Other strong influences are Goya, Siquieros, and Kollwitz.

Skulls can also be found in more recent works like *Balancing Act III*, from 1996. Here, on either end of his balance stick, they keep a precariously poised tightrope walker in check. Red dashes break the silence of this dreamlike vision in silvery blacks and whites. Gaping onlookers in the lower right balance the composition of this two-panel painting.

Sharrow's anonymous figures, tense and faceless, inhabit large ambiguous spaces. The expressive quality of these painterly fields speaks to the artist's experience as an abstract painter. Male figures predominate. Sharrow says it is her way of "turning the tables" on the history of art, which is peopled mainly by female nudes created by male artists. Her men are hardly stereotypical types, as she points out that they "are more martyrs than initiators."

Much as the artist layers, scrapes, and scratches through the paint to create her surfaces, she adds words, photographs, and symbols to create layers of meaning. Responding to clippings from the news or lines of poetry that capture her attention, she explores their meanings, whether injustice, war, death, desire, suffering, survival, or the strength needed to endure. These fragments of life or art spark her imagination. The artist's palette, which often seems monochromatic, is meant to enhance the graphic quality. Likewise, words inscribed onto the paintings are intended to heighten the visual effect.

Glued onto the lower left of her painting *Suits* (2002) is the newspaper photograph that inspired it: a group of bankers. Sharrow has emphasized their "conspiratorial body language." Her mastery of the figural gesture is evident. Their small heads are featureless, their tie patterns the only suggestion of individuality. Barely painted over and filling the lower third of the canvas are yellowing financial pages, their numbers representing the fortunes these men oversee.

Flag Pole (2004-05), and *G and C* (2005) are two of the artist's responses to the agonies of a nation at war. Suspended figures in both seem held in equilibrium by the expressive force of the painted fields that envelop them. Set against a faded version of the American flag, *Flag Pole* depicts two figures, one executing a gymnastics maneuver and the other drawn from a 1930s-era photo of a slain striker. The flag has no stars, only numbers. "Everything is about numbers," says Sharrow. "What are the costs? How many do we kill? How many do they kill?" *G and C* is a riff on the Spanish filmmaker Luis Bunuel's statement about patriotism, that "God and Country are an unbeatable team: they break all records for oppression and bloodshed." Above the crowd, set against a creamy ground, is a dark figure—arm raised, head bent, no visible means of support. One face gazing up in open-mouthed horror recalls Picasso's *Guernica*; the other figures, more staid and shadowy, look away.

Sharrow loves word plays, and her wry sense of humor cuts through otherwise dark subjects. While *Dog* (2005) was inspired by a news story about the rounding up of feral dogs in Athens before the 2004 Summer Olympics, it also refers to the use of dogs for torture at Abu Ghraib. Sharrow's dogs seem docile, however, and the downcast-looking figure and painted word "DOG," might just as easily conjure up a "dog day." Such layers of meaning imbue every painting.

For Sharrow, "color is a mitigating factor." Too much, she claims, can destroy a work's "punch." While color may not be her driving force, it is still crucial to each work. Brilliant passages, such as the swaths of red and silver in *Attempted Escape* (1992) suggest a crucifixion, and in *Dog*, intense blues and golds suggest the sea and sun of the Mediterranean.

Tasting Rain and especially *General* (both 2004), are striking for the intensity of their color. Both are evocative of war, yet each has a lighter side. Inspired by a photo of Afghan prisoners sitting in the rain, the metaphoric figure in *Tasting Rain* also alludes to childhood memories of tasting rain and snow. Though undertaken as a challenge in response to a comment that she "wasn't a colorist," *General* "assumed a life of its own," morphing into a militaristic presence.

Much of the authority in Sharrow's work stems from her beautifully evocative figures. There are the dark shades in *Love in the Time of Death*, melancholy sitters in *Poems I and II*, or *Sleep's* quiet dreamer, based on a drawing made long ago of her young daughter. Perhaps none is more compelling than the frenzied soul in *Clumsy Dancer*, bobbing out of the frame, throbbing to the beat of the moving passage from Pablo Neruda's 1971 Nobel Prize lecture that forms a horizontal band across the center.

Sheba Sharrow has created a store of memorable paintings. Never facile, formulaic, or decorative, they are provocative works to be reckoned with. Plucked from the world and presented in paint, these images of darkness are surrounded by light and hope. From their sensuous surfaces to their core of meaning, they are indeed imbued with that mysterious power, *duende*.

Margaret Barlow



The General, 2004
acrylic on linen, 16 x 20"



Attempted Escape, 1992
acrylic on linen, 90 x 55"



G and C, 2005
mixed media on arches paper, 30 x 22"



Dog, 2004-05
acrylic on linen, 72 x 60"



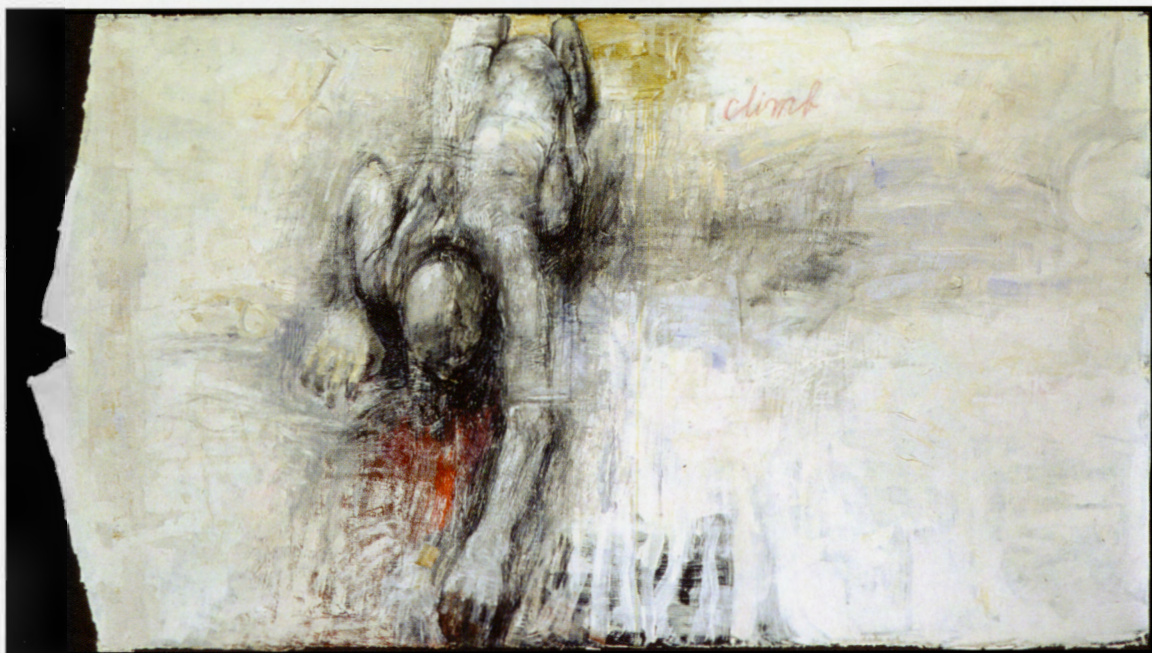
Tasting Rain, 2004
acrylic on arches paper, 15 x 22"



Flag Pole, 2004-05
acrylic on linen, 64 x 98"



Suits, 2002
acrylic on linen, 72 x 84"



Climb, 2002
mixed media on arches paper, 69.5 x 106.25"



Clumsy Dancer, 2001-02
acrylic on linen, 51 x 93"



Balancing Act III (two panels), 1994
mixed media on arches paper, 72 x 103"

SHEBA SHARROW

Education

Art Institute of Chicago, B.F.A.
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts
Temple University, Tyler School of Art, M.F.A.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

Bucknell University, PA
Douglass College, New Brunswick, NJ
George Mason University, Fairfax, VA
Hunterdon Art Center, Clinton, NJ
Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, NJ
Lancaster Museum of Art, PA
Layola University of Chicago, IL
Moravian College, Bethlehem, PA
Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ
Noyes Museum of Art, Oceanville, NJ
Paula Allen Gallery, New York, NY
Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, PA
Rosemont College
Tuichin Center for the Visual Arts, Boone, NC
University of Maryland, Baltimore Campus

Selected Group Exhibitions

Bristol Myers Squibb Gallery, Princeton, NJ
Bucks County College, PA
Cheltenham Art Center, Camden County, NJ
Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA
Fellows of VCCA, Williamsburg, VA
Gary Snyder Fine Arts, New York, NY
Hunterdon Museum of Art, Clinton, NJ
Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, NJ
Selected Group Exhibitions Cont.
Millersville University of PA
NJSCA Fellowship Show, Rutgers University
Rutgers University, Camden, NJ
Snyderman Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
State Museum of New Jersey, Trenton, NJ
Westport Arts Center, Westport, CT
Wilson School, Princeton University, NJ

Public Collections

Armstrong World Industries
Cigna Corporation of America
Citibank of New York
Jersey City Museum
Millersville University of PA
Phillips Art Collection, Franklin and Marshall College
Rite Aid Corporation
Steelcase Corporation
Virginia Center for the Creative Arts

Selected Awards

Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation
Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series
Mishkenot Sha'ananim, Jerusalem
Joan Mitchell Foundation Nominee - 3-time
New Jersey Council on the Arts
Pennsylvania Council on the Arts
Pollack-Krasner Foundation
Virginia Center for the Creative Arts,
Awarded Resident Fellowships – 1979 through 2004



Sleep, 1996
mixed media on arches paper, 30 x 22"



This exhibition was made possible in
part by a grant from the New Jersey
State Council on the Arts,
Department of State

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