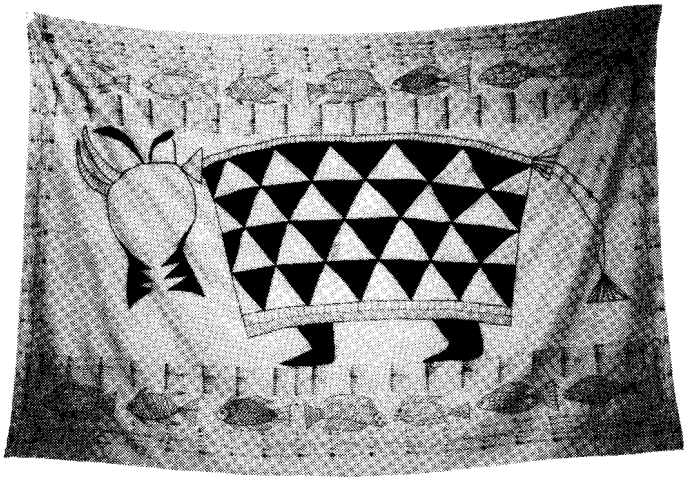
Con - ver - sa - tion

WINSOM

This is an excerpt from a dialogue with Janice Andreae that took place before Winsom's trip to West Africa in the summer of 1989.

Janice: What is your current project?
Winsom: I'm working on a new series called *The Black Cloth Series.* It is completely different from anything I have done.
Janice: In what way?
Winsom: I am exploring the colour make-up of black dyes where I break up the black colour to see its components. Then I do pictorial stuff — right now I'm doing Old Anancy folktales. Anancy is a folk hero from West Africa. He's a spider, who can change his form to a human one. Parents usually tell the tales of Anancy to their children as moral stories, like fables. There's always a trickster in every story. Thousands of these tales have been passed down in Jamaica from West Africa.



So, I'm interpreting these folk tales. For instance, one that I'm working on right now is about how knowledge came to the people. Anancy collected all the knowledge and would not share it with anyone. He stored it on his back. The children and everyone else knows he has it and they keep asking him to share it. One day, Anancy wants to get away from a child who is trying to get the knowledge from him. He climbs a tree and the big sack he carries, the big round section in the spider, gets knocked against the tree and cracks. All the knowledge he has stored there floods down to the ground and is scattered all over the earth. That's how knowledge came to the earth.
Janice: A lot of the work we do in feminist studies has to do with gendered knowledge, knowledge disseminated by men, excluded from women.
Winsom: I never thought about knowledge in that way. I always have thought that women had all the knowledge to begin with and that is why this man Anancy had to steal the knowledge for his calabash. The men stole it and now we're getting it back.
Janice: I don't think that white middle-class women ever feel that they have had the *knowledge* all along. I think that we feel that we have been denied it, that it has been kept from us. It's something women, especially feminists have had to find and define in their own terms. It's not something they've had and then lost.
Winsom: Maybe the reason for that is because we've always been the leaders in our culture. At least for blacks, I know women are the leaders. We've always kept things going.
Janice: You are the only Black woman artist/activist living in Kingston. That must be a difficult situation.
Winsom: Sometimes, I think of moving to Toronto just because of that. Especially because I'm the only textile artist in Kingston, too. There are weavers, but no surface dyers. It's not like I can even mix in with other surface dyers and talk with them. However, I try to bring in a lot of other black artists to Kingston, even if only for a weekend so that I can spend a few hours with them talking about what's going on politically.
Janice: Women are quite receptive to your imagery of women.
Winsom: Yes, I see that women need to have more things about themselves around. Art is one of the traditions where every time a woman's form is present she either holds a flower or a child. I believe that women do everything. Therefore, I wanted to put out more images of women working. I have just finished a piece on paper which shows women who are all sugar cane cutters, cutting cane, working. Women playing games, women doing everything.
Janice: Your women are always active, too.
Winsom: Yes, they're active and they're often in groups because we belong together as a group. I mean we've been all to each other. I couldn't live by myself, but I think males could. They need people in man/woman relationships, while I think women need contact with each other (woman/woman relationships), to feed off each other, to support each other. I think that is one of the reasons I portray active women. By watching women in groups when I go to meetings and demonstrations, I see how the women are supporting each other. There's strength there. When you see a group of women you really feel strong.
Janice: Have you received support from grant giving agencies?
Winsom: Only just recently for a tour I am going to make to West Africa to study dyeing techniques and to work in the dye pits, traditionally a man's territory. Because I work in textile, I am considered a crafts person by all of the grant giving agencies, *not* an artist. I create one of a kind. I conceive and design each work. No two are alike. Yet, I'm a crafts person. This trip will enable me to study the heritage of the art of dyeing and its tradition as an art form. I will also exchange information and techniques that have been lost to Africa, which I know from Jamaica. These techniques originally came from Ghana but are no longer used there.

On her return from West Africa, Winsom sent the following poem:

I walked through a narrow mud-walled passage.
The buildings were crumbling and seemed
ready to fall down on me. The smells were
strange and overpowering. At each of the
numerous corners, my neck craned forward,
waiting for that first glimpse of a
traditional African dye pit.

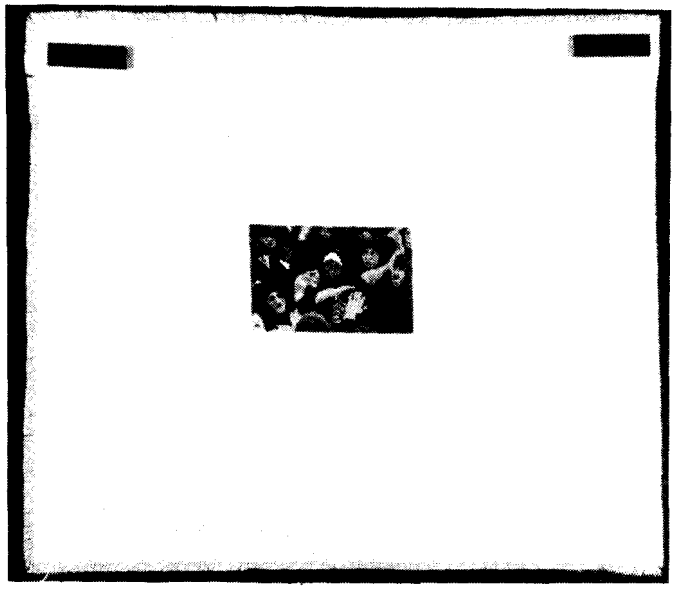
Frag - ments

COLETTE WHITEN

Colette Whiten was involved in drafting the Ontario College of Art's new Equity 2000 Plan, an affirmative action policy aimed at increasing the number of women on faculty. This fragment is excerpted from a dialogue with Janice Andreae that took place before the plan was passed last fall.

Janice: Colette, do you use feminist material as a source for your work?
Colette: No.
Janice: Do you think of yourself as a feminist?
Colette: Absolutely. I don't use feminist material as a source because I think that there is often a problem with feminist work — that the politics somehow get in the way of the perception of the work. I have to try to explain this better. What I mean is that whoever is doing it is operating from a position of common knowledge or something that is already understood — I think it's essential that you're clarifying something for yourself through the process of making a work instead of trying to enlighten other people.
Janice: You probably would say that your work has a feminist outlook because you are a feminist so that your work comes out of your experience of the world. You teach a lot of women students at OCA. Does teaching give you something that informs your work?
Colette: Yes. I think sometimes it gives and sometimes it takes away because you often use your own experience, whether you use your own ideas in order to motivate yourself or your students to work. I don't think it's entirely one-sided...it keeps the adrenaline going and you just keep making things. In that way you sense that you have a certain credibility. The questions students ask keep you alert and scared! But this year I have been preoccupied with the status of women at the school, with the faculty association and the position of women on the faculty. It is just appalling.
Janice: What is your position there?
Colette: Last year, I was a full-time faculty member for the first time. I have been teaching at the school for 15 years and last year I applied for some extra teaching positions, which made me a full-time faculty member. I'm on probation if you like, meaning that they could take my full-time position way from me, but I'm sort of determined that I'm going to keep it. Whereas, some of the people who are just starting there would have a hard time. I just made a point of getting more involved; for example, I'm on the Hiring Committee and the Foundation Program. I haven't made a tremendous difference but at least I feel that I have had some effect. Currently, 14 percent of the full-time faculty are women. It is the position of the male faculty that "we hire women." You know, "we hire women," *we* do, *we*.

They do, but they keep them always in either summer or evening school, in what are called contractually limited positions so women have no security and they are not part of the decision-making process.
Janice: Women who hold full-time faculty positions often get stretched to their limits in terms of meetings and committee work, especially since there is a strong desire now for women to be represented on all levels of the academic bureaucratic structure.
Colette: And the ratio of students to women faculty is 60 to one. The ratio of male students to male faculty is around 9 to one. You not only have all the female students who want to talk to you, and it is important, but you also have male students who want to talk to you because they want an alternate point of view. So we are just stretched beyond belief. It is also emotionally stressful. I am amazed that so many women students do not recognize the fact that there is not representation of women on faculty as a problem. Many women students don't see it as a problem.
Janice: Why?
Colette: They just don't think that it's important because they would prefer to think that the world does not operate that way, on a gender bias. And I also think that when you are young and pretty, then everything seems to be possible.
Janice: Do you think it's very hard for women students to identify themselves with women faculty members because the workload is so hard?
Colette: They don't want to deal with the problems. They want to recognize the success. You know that there are some strong women on our faculty at the present time.
Janice: It sounds as if they have to be.
Colette: The students look at them and they say that's possible now. I think it's great that there are some women who they can look up to and say I can achieve that or that's possible for me to do. That's a step in the right direction. But you know, if they hear you bitching about the number of women on faculty or about job security, then they think you're just being unreasonable. They're not ready to deal with that kind of situation at all.



UN urged to investigate Iraqi gas attacks, 1988-89,
cross-stitch embroidery thread, cotton cloth, steel and magnets

Courtesy: Carmen Lamanna Gallery

HELEN LUCAS

This is an extract of an interview conducted by Meg Luxton and Shelagh Wilkinson.

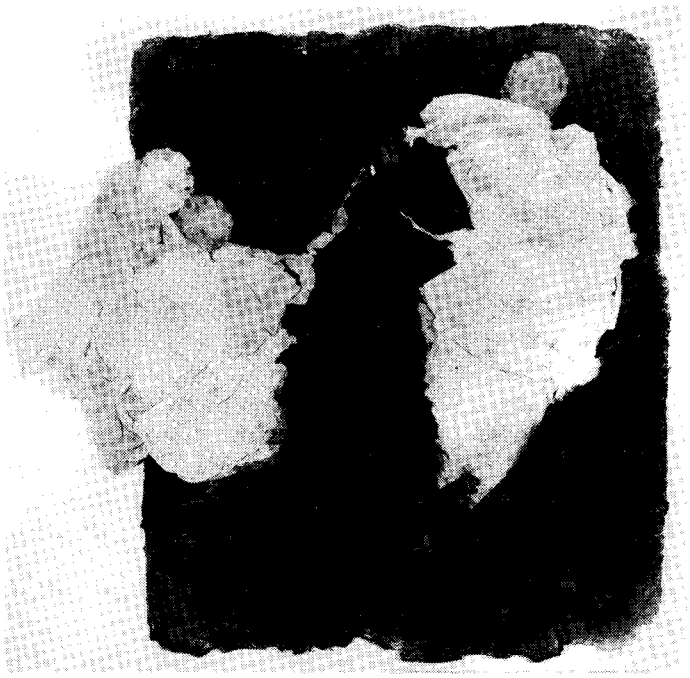
Shelagh: Helen, were you feeling the rumblings of the Women's Movement around the early 1970s in Toronto?
Helen: No, 1975 was for me a gift— International Women's Year. I worked alone. I had left the Greek community and I didn't really know where to go. I wasn't part of the art community then because I felt inferior; I'm basically an introvert. I'm really alright with people now, but I was terrified then. I was very shy and I had small children, so I worked alone and I worked at home. I didn't see many people. I had no women friends, except for Malka, my gutsy Israeli friend. She helped me to develop my awareness because she had been through the same thing. She had been a wonderful folk singer and her marriage collapsed because she wanted to sing. I was going through all of this on my own when I was asked to be involved with the Festival of Women in the Arts. I had been reading books on awareness, on how to be strong.
Shelagh: Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique?*
Helen: Yes, and *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer. I was asked to be on the steering committee for the festival. In fact, that's how I met Germaine Greer. We invited her to come. I met a lot of gutsy women. For the first time, I found women who had the same ambitions, the same agonies, and we could love each other. I think now that if I had a choice between one man — which was what I was told was the ultimate all those years and what I searched for — and my friends, it would not be a decision. I could not exist without my women friends. The response from another woman fulfills me, there is a total connection between our beings, our agonies, and our joys.
Meg: Your art must have undergone some changes then?
Helen: Yes. I did some drawings that were used for publicity for the festival. I made two totem poles, which were shown at the exhibit that was part of the festival. They were two big 4' X 8' charcoal drawings on white masonite — huge drawings. One portrayed a totem pole of women helping each other up — the one on top is ready to take off. The other one depicted how men get to the "top" — each one is pushing the other one down.
Meg: How easy was it then for you to survive on your art?
Helen: I began teaching at Sheridan College where I met Shelagh, who was the head of the Women's Centre there. After my divorce proceedings, I moved into the top floor of a house on Avenue Road and got a warehouse studio on Bedford Street. More than half my salary was going to rent. My mother said to me, "Well, maybe you should have stayed married." For the first time in my life, I started to cry on the telephone.
Meg: When you went from Sheridan into your studio around 1979-80, is that when you started painting?
Helen: That was my last half year at Sheridan. I stopped teaching and began the flower paintings. Just straight flowers, joyous paintings. There was more response to them than all of the black and white figure drawings. The paintings started selling. I had no gallery. Because I was in downtown Toronto, it worked. I was selling enough to sustain myself.
Shelagh: And you used to open your house as a gallery and we would fill it.
Helen: In 1975, International Women's Year, my dear friend Fiona McCall suggested that I have an open house, first with my black and white drawings.
Shelagh: It brought a lot of people.
Helen: Then I started, once a year, having an open studio. I think I had about three. I would do smaller drawings for that and frame them — and have paintings. I had a good audience. Joan Chalmers walked in one day and bought a big five-foot square painting. I was just dumbfounded. Nice things began to happen and, over the years, it has really improved.

Helen Lucas in her studio

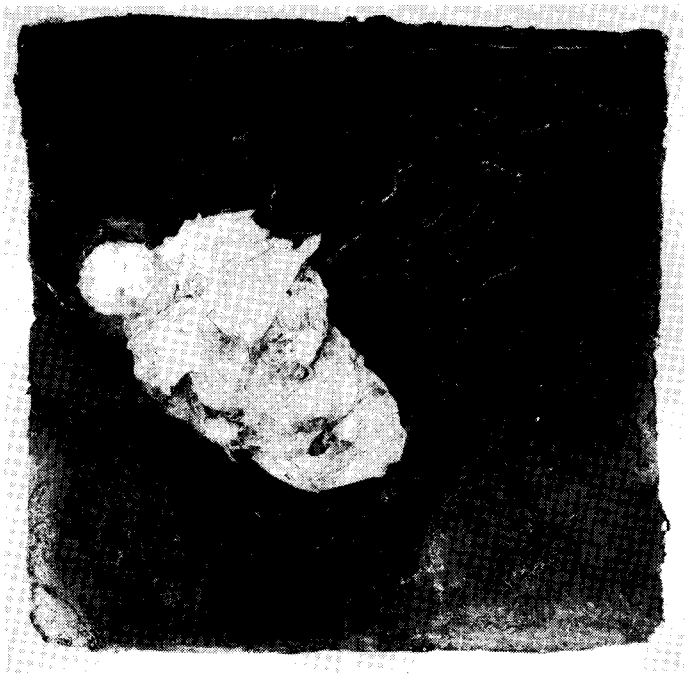
BETTY WHITE

Toronto artist Betty White talked to Fran Beer about a sequence of paintings inspired by the death of her mother and reflecting the process of coming to terms with that loss.

Alone. The death was a sudden tearing apart of her from me. This piece reflects the first overwhelming sense of aloneness. Not isolation. Not abandonment, because she is always with me, in me. This aloneness was passive, but very painful. I don't think I will ever be the same. If the mother is the closest connection to the universe, then that one primal cord is cut. When that spirit is lost, nothing takes its place — neither friends nor husband. Children are the next step, you must pass on the best of what you have been given, but life is never the same. The new bond with children does not replace the old one.



Metamorphosis. This piece links the images of death and life; it is a baby in a coffin, a mummy, a chrysalis. Her death has forced a maturing in me, so they are bound together — creativity and death. Whatever I am going through emotionally comes out in spite of myself, there is no rational filtering. I have always let it come out but since her death I have come to understand this process. The integration of materials, the positioning and balancing, all come from a free flow of emotion; they are not planned consciously, they happen. This is how she was with me. She did not impose herself on me, or try to make me feel one way or another. She did not have that freedom herself but she passed it on to me. She let it happen — it's a kind of legacy. There is emergence in this piece, but not separation from death. Life means growth and change, and for these you must have both joy and pain.



Separation. This piece came a few months after she died, though it is a general description of separation from many things. I tore myself away psychologically from a lot of things in the need to find strength again. My mother's existence had enabled me to nourish; the loss of that spirit left me devastated. I had to pull away from others and from her. But in this piece there is a fusion between us, too; it is me pulling away, and her being separated from her loved ones.

Photos: Ouellette Associates