


# ARTnews

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**The Sistine Chapel  
Born Again**

**Women Artists: Losing  
the Battle for Equality?**

**Real and Fake in  
the 'Zagreb Louvre'**





## KATHLEEN LOE

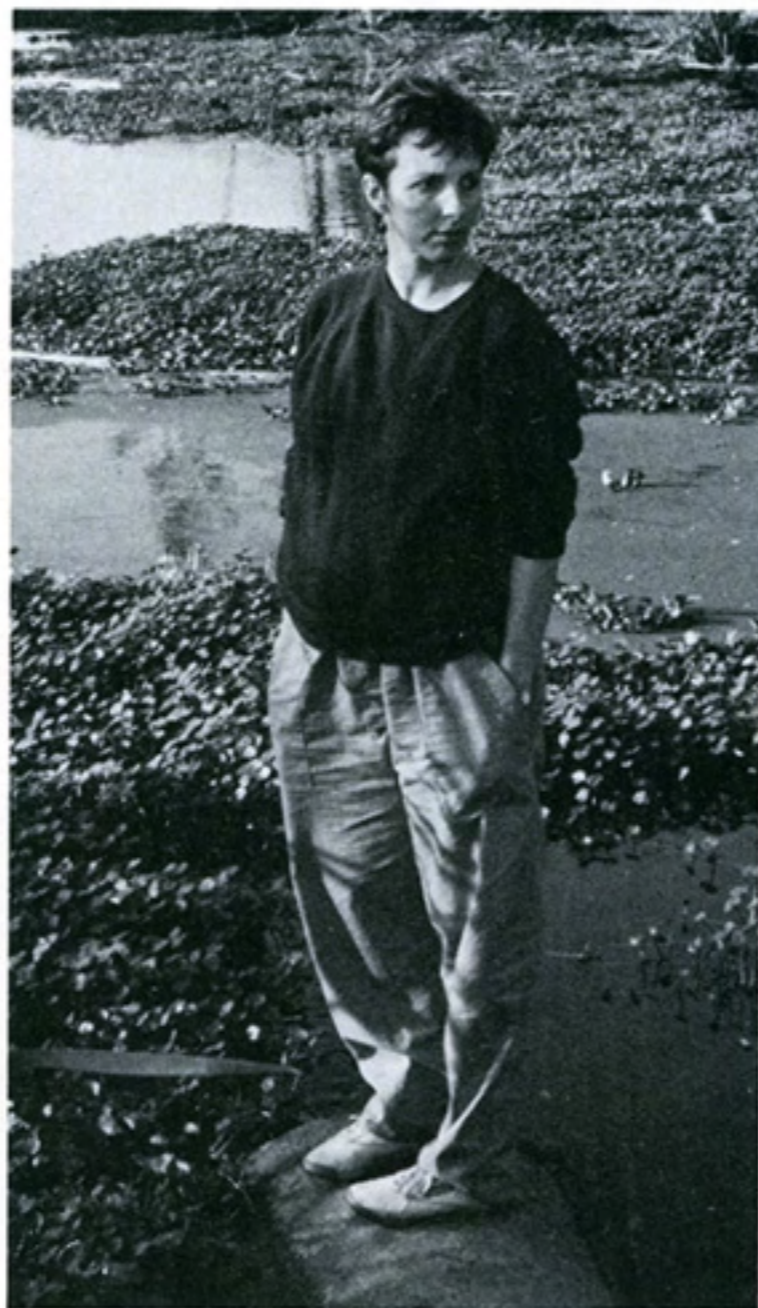
### Spirit, Person, Place

I was there alone  
In a watery drowse.  
—Theodore Roethke

**K**ATHLEEN LOE has frequent recourse to poetry when she's describing the ethos out of which her luminous drawings and paintings emerge—to Cavafy and Rimbaud and Rilke and Roethke and Bly, and to the lyrics of native American Indians. The paintings in no way illustrate the poems (although sometimes she deploys phrases from favorite poems as titles to her works); rather, the poems suggest experiential analogues, they plumb similar depths, evoke a like terrain. "Bly," she notes, "writes somewhere about leaping poetry, the leap *inside* the poem, how in his own work he's been trying to lengthen those leaps. Gradually I too am trying to stretch out the leaps in my painting, so that on occasion they might embody a long, slow leap."

Loe herself is unusually articulate when she's describing the wellsprings of her imagery; indeed, starting out, she'd imagined she might be a writer, a vocation far more in keeping with her Louisiana roots than the painter which she suddenly discovered herself becoming—a vocation for which she could find few models on her home ground. Nevertheless, visual expression took her by storm, took her and held her: in her late teens, walking between literature classes at L.S.U., she happened upon the art studios and got waylaid. "Drawing and painting were the first things in my life where I found I couldn't get around or fake or delude myself," she recalled for me a while back, as we sat in her spare warehouse studio in Long Island City, late afternoon western light and the vast Manhattan skyline streaming in through wide industrial windows. "Either it was true, it rang true, or else it wasn't and it didn't." Loe got a BFA at L.S.U. in 1974. She moved to New York a year later and earned her MFA from Queens College in 1978. After showing for several years in the area, she is having her first New York solo show this month at Fervor Gallery.

Loe was born in southern Louisiana in 1953 but was raised in Jonesboro in the northern part of the state. Her mother was a chemistry teacher, her father a forester; both her parents were Catholics in predominantly Baptist environs. "As Catholics," she recalls, "we tended to be more alone,



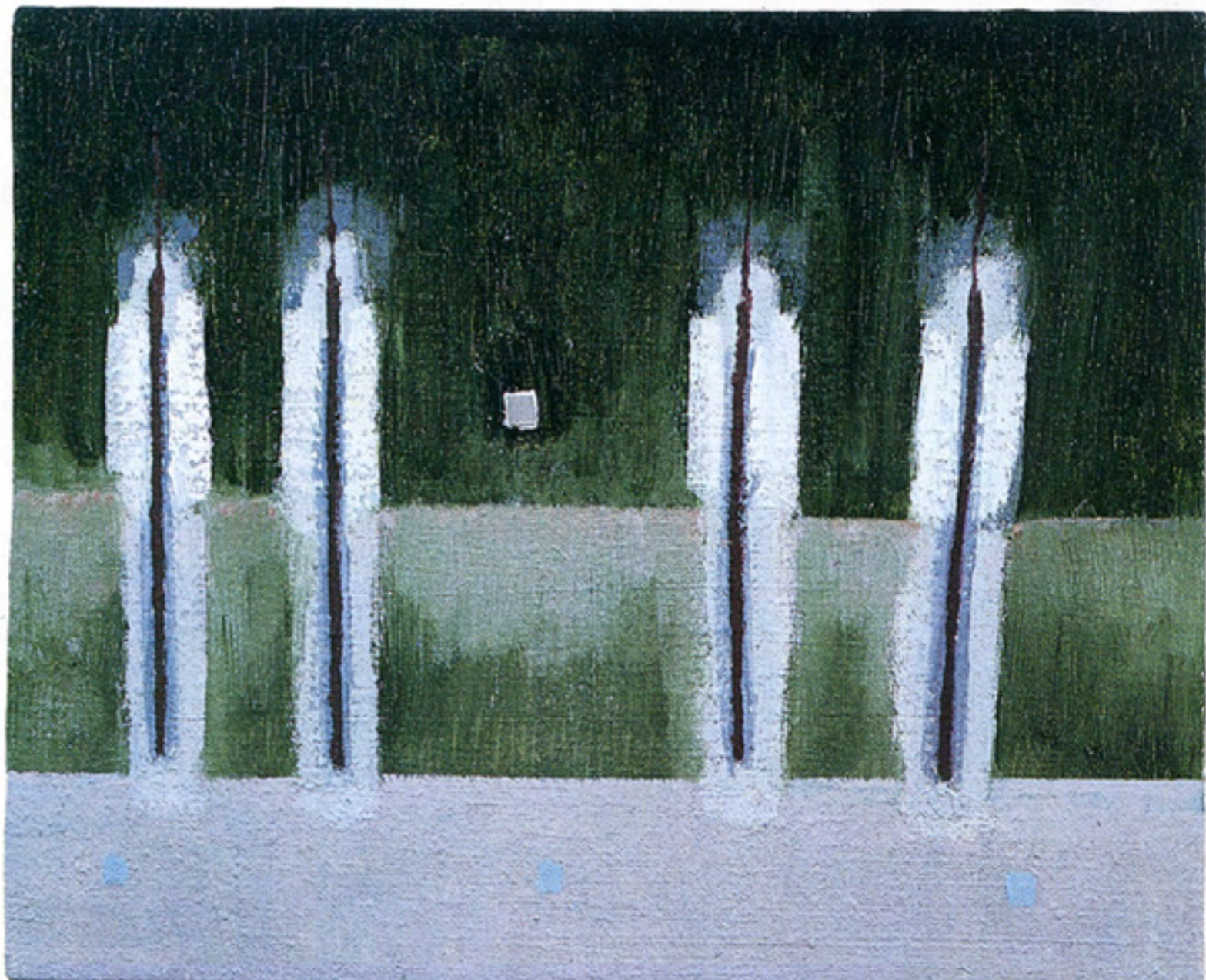
JASON HUNSINGER

less social than our Baptist neighbors. Like a lot of Catholics, I think I became preoccupied with death at an early age, with death and sin, a sense of sin as a dark cloud which you'd inherited inexorably. I tend to be the kind of person who wants to take

something as far as it can go, and in this case, that's pretty far. I suppose I was going to have to be either an artist or a nun." She laughs, cutting the self-seriousness of this last declamation.

Perhaps it was her relative loneliness that sent her out into the countryside surrounding her Jonesboro home, but those landscapes in turn drew her out of the self-centered morbidity of her Catholic childhood. "In southern Louisiana," Loe explains, "landscapes tend to be lush, hazy and soft. But as you move north, it becomes more hilly, pines replace the oaks, the landscape becomes much more vertical. It's a landscape in which you're required to be watchful and attentive. You have to exercise a certain wariness walking around in the woods—you have to know the season, what the animals are up to. It's a watery world down there—there are a lot of ponds and marshes—and I grew up on and in the water, worrying a little about the snakes in the water, developing this combination of comfort and wariness."

Part of Loe's art clearly comes out of those landscapes—or rather the devotion and attention to landscape that they inculcated in her. Several of her recent works evoke those Louisiana forests and water-worlds, but others evoke the high, flat, light-blasted deserts of the American Southwest and still others the bright, craggy, splendid grandeur of the Mediter-

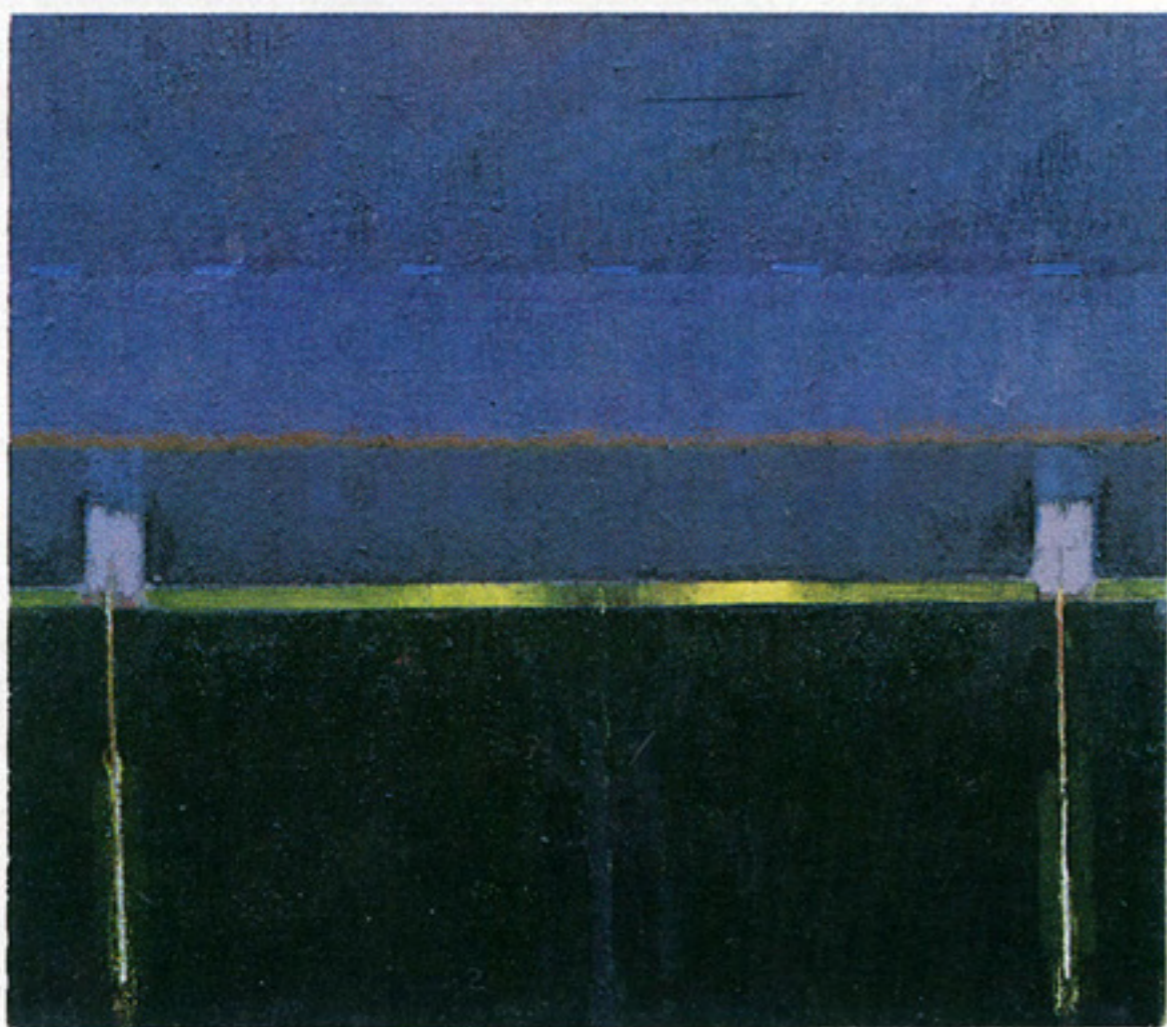


COURTESY FERVOR GALLERY

**Before Malice, 1986, oil and aluminum on canvas, 9 by 11 inches. Loe's abstractions evoke specific places without specifically describing them.**

Lawrence Weschler is a staff writer at The New Yorker.





**Partially Revealed, 1986, oil on canvas, 16 by 18 inches. Part of Loe's art comes out of the landscapes of her native Louisiana.**

ranean seascapes off Crete.

"I'm fascinated," she explains, "by the way people exist in landscapes where place predominates, and by the persistent insistence of those landscapes. In Louisiana, if you don't tend your man-made claims, the landscape will quickly engulf them. The Southwest seems to resist any human tending, stripping you bare before that tightrope of a horizon. In Crete, by contrast, the world seems prodigiously generous, everything a gift—the light, the sea—all that mythology seems not only possible but immediately imminent."

Loe is by no means a simple landscape artist. Her paintings and drawings also address—and here we return to that other aspect of her childhood—the persistence and transformations of faith. "Being an artist," she explains, "can carry with it an immense amount of responsibility—it's a way of at-

tempting to fashion a life based on faith. All the while, through all the world's travails, there's this rushing stream of goodness, of love, of wonder—heaven, perhaps, whatever—and it's as if just a thin membrane separates us from that rushing stream. And it seems to me that art exists to create little momentary tears in that membrane."

Loe's dark childhood forebodings have not been banished, but they have been tamed—they seem to be held in check. "Through the act of painting," she explains, "I try to come to terms with mortality, so that it's totally enmeshed and simultaneous with liveliness. . . ." Her voice fades for a moment, searches, returns. "I try to make happy death paintings." She pronounces "happy" the way Nietzsche might, or Camus.

But the thing that makes Loe such a remarkable artist, it seems to me, is the way

she locates her spiritual aspirations *in the world*—the situatedness, that is, of her epiphanies. With Loe, epiphany is tripartite: it consists of the revelation of the *spiritual* to a specific *person* in a specific *place*. It is incarnational in much the same way as it was for Loe's fellow southern Catholic Flannery O'Connor: evoking the sense of a specific place and only through *that* presence suggesting a transcendence beyond any place.

Loe insists that her paintings aren't epiphanies in themselves. "They aren't themselves those moments," she explains, "but rather reminders that those moments exist and do occur. They're guardians of the memory of such moments and hence guardians of our ability not to be afraid."

Loe's canvases evoke specific places without specifically describing them. They are abstractions, and yet, strangely, meta-abstractions—they seem to modulate into and out of this world. Fence posts, gates, passages, windows hover in and out of view: horizon lines, stark verticals. Indeed, these are rhapsodies of the perpendicular—the perpendicular revealed as man's station in the world. "I'm always playing off the classical grid," Loe admits. "A person stands up against the landscape and that creates a grid right there, a focal point, an interest." The perpendicularity of Loe's vision is precisely that of being-human-in-the-world—which is why, even though they're abstractions, we recognize these places and are present in them, we are alive before them.

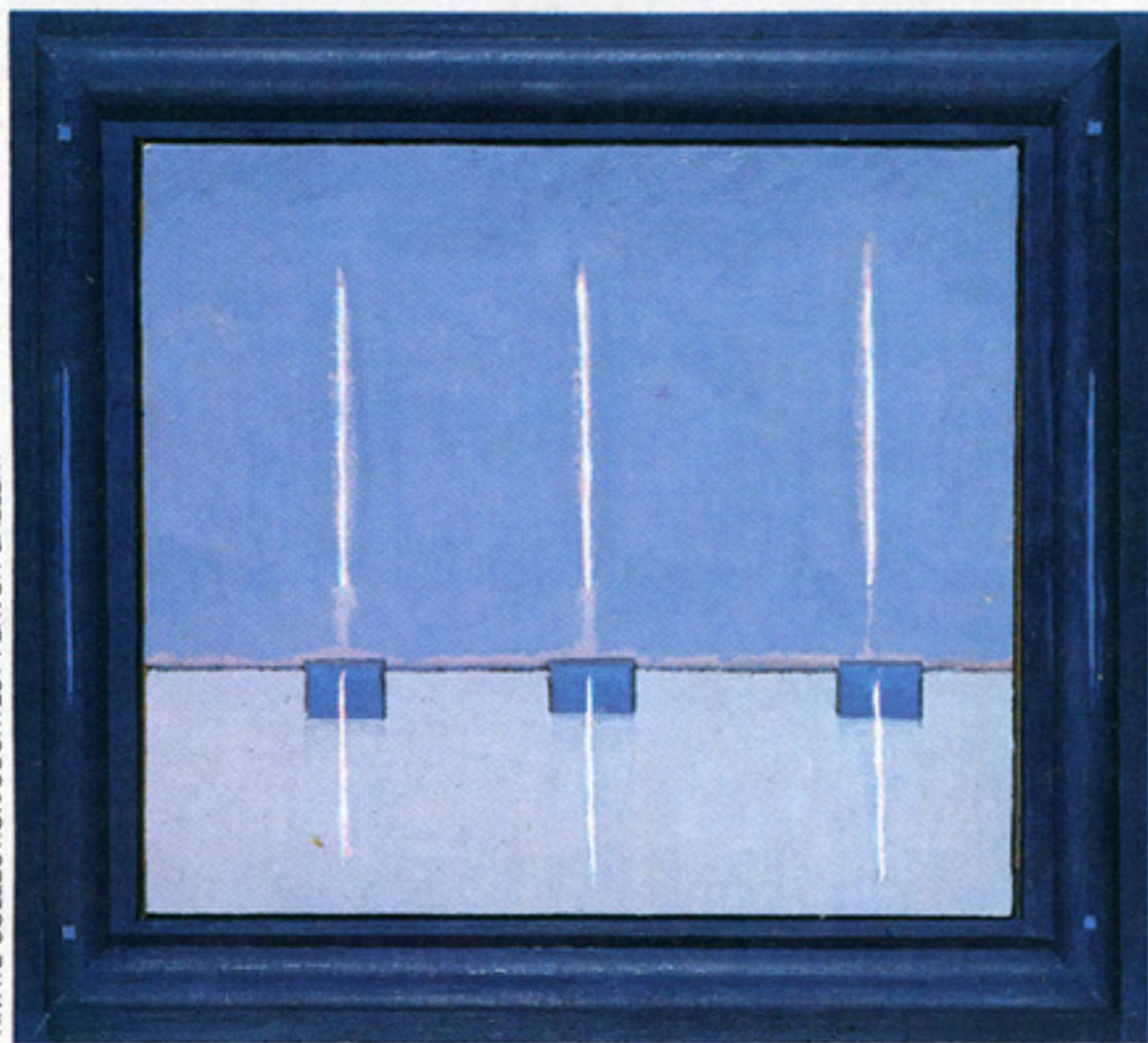
That afternoon we were looking at several of the canvases slotted into their remarkable frames. Loe often places her paintings in elegantly crafted frames in such a way that the square canvases seem to hover in a protected space, as do we looking at them, the simultaneous motifs of weightlessness and gravity thus being reasserted by the frame itself.

Talking about some of her leitmotifs, Loe commented that the verticals often serve as stable elements. "They tend to stay in place, like guardian creatures, while all about them all the rest goes shimmering." Her remark reminded me of some lines by the sublime Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer, in which he describes serving a stint as a draftee on guard duty:

*Task: to be where I am.  
Even when I'm in this solemn and absurd  
role: I am still the place  
where creation does some work on itself.*

Tranströmer's task—and his place—seems to be Loe's as well. (*Postscript: In the meantime, Loe's specific place has shifted. She has moved back to Louisiana and started up a new studio.*)

—Lawrence Weschler



**The artist's square canvases seem to hover in the protected space of their elegantly crafted frames. Here, *Nail of the Sky, 1983, oil on canvas, 16 by 16 inches.***