

Melting Clocks and Sweet Sweat

PAINTINGS, POETRY, PROCESS AND POLITICS

BY JESSICA DAMEN

With a long confident stride, two tall beautiful women on each arm and his signature mustache, curved into perfect symmetry, there was no question that the famous Salvador Dali was only a few feet from me. Their brisk pace was directed toward *The Persistence of Memory*. I had just finished admiring Dali's painting as part of The Museum of Modern Art's (MOMA) expansive, 1968 survey exhibition, "Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage."

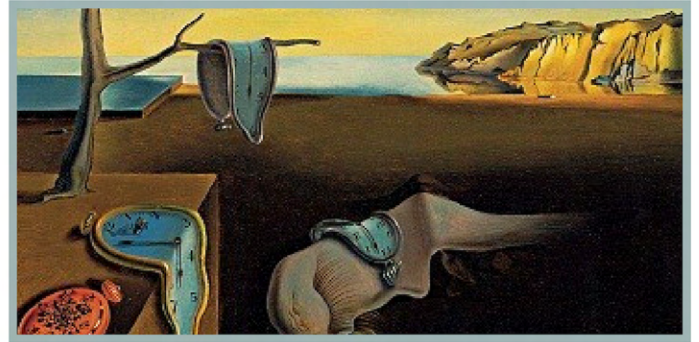
The crawling ants inside the orange clock mesmerized me, as did the melting clocks and the weird creature that reminded me of a dead slug. I was sixteen years old, a junior student attending the public high school Francis Lewis in Queens, New York. I went to MOMA to fulfill an art assignment. MOMA's exhibition was my first exposure to Surrealism. It was an "aesthetic" experience unlike any I had previously known.

I have always been a dreamer, lost in the massed produced art prints found in my grandparents' home. During those pre-air-conditioned summer days, I had hours of daydreaming time. Winslow Homer's *Snap The Whip* delighted me during lonely times alongside another reproduction: a courtly scene showing finely dressed silk clad ladies and gentlemen engaged in card games and conversations. I could move from being a barefoot boy to a pampered lady in one afternoon; feel the exhilaration and breathlessness of running barefoot in a field or absorb the sumptuous elegance of a genteel teatime.



Winslow Homer. *Snap the Whip*. 1872. 22" x 36". Oil on Canvas.

I loved composing stories that transported me to another time and place. But Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* was different. Whereas my grandparents' prints encouraged escapism through approachable scenes, Dali's work was a super-realistic distortion of familiar objects encased in an empty, unfamiliar landscape of .



The Persistence of Memory. Salvador Dalí. (Spanish, 1904-1989). *The Persistence of Memory*. 1931. Oil on canvas, 9 1/2 x 13" (24.1 x 33 cm). © Salvador Dalí, Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph taken in 2004.

beauty and dread. *The Persistence of Memory* is sensuous. The ants were rendered so real I squirmed with distaste. Yet the painting fulfilled another dimension necessary for art-viewing that, heretofore, I was unaware of: *intellectual engagement*. Those melting clocks perversely rendered the opposite of time flying. Instead, time was rendered like melting cheese and depicted as a sickening melting slog. This was a liberating metaphor that high school students understood well.

Ellen Dissanayake's book, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, posits that art making is a biological imperative intrinsic to *Homo sapiens'* evolution:

"...Aesthetic is not something added to us—learned or acquired like speaking a second language... but...is the way we are, *Homo aestheticus*, stained through and through. (Moreover) humans were evolved to require, 'beauty' and 'meaning.'"

Transporting my art viewers from pleasant daydreaming to, "oh well, what could that mean," is a combined movement which I aspire to in my own work. I want art to be a sensuous experience, with vivid colors, textures, storytelling and psychological tension all mixed with a good dollop of intellectual engagement.

Enjoy these stories. They tell of how I became the artist I am today. ✧

P O E T R Y

How hearing a poem opened my eyes.

During the summer of 2001, Maj Ragain and I were both “fellows in residence” at the Fine Arts Work Center (FAWC) in Provincetown, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. We were both eager to embrace this undistracted time for painting, writing and readings. One muggy night in the common room, Maj read aloud “The Summer We Longed For Comes”, his celebratory and loving words for his wife, LuAnn. Three years later, Maj recounted my first reaction to this reading in the introduction to our 2004 joint exhibition catalog, *Vision to Verse - Verse to Vision*:

“It was Maj’s calm, clear voice that made... Lu come to life [for me]... it was an awakening.”

Maj said that I “conscripted” LuAnn to my studio. I guess I was rather insistent. I still recall her easy, jaunting walk when she entered my stuffy studio. There was light streaming in from the open double doors. I saw a strong woman who took little time to

**“The Summer We Longed For Comes”
by Maj Ragain**

It is 95 degrees in the cottage kitchen
July, not a breath of air.
My wife complains
“Sweat is coming out
of me everywhere.”
Her shoes are full of sweat
I can hear it in her step.
I have always listened for news
Of whatever is passing by:
a comet’s dust, a tattered season,
a grease monkey’s jabber,
the signal of her callused heel:
I smell the musk of a drunken priestess.
She plays upon the windchime
my noisy bones make.
I say this as plain as I can.
Sweat is the tears of cold stars.
Sweat finds the pearled engine of the mollusk.
Sweat is the magic marker on the ghostly chalkboard.
Sweat is a newborn child in the halogen family.
Sweat is the ink of saints.
Sweat is a holy bead
At the back of my wife’s knee.



Sweet Sweat. 2001. 35" x 24". Oil on Canvas.

strike a pose. The canvas blank, I sketched with my soft vine charcoal her triangular form projecting it outward and beyond the picture plane. Her legs were un-self-consciously spread. Her piercing gaze in the painting directed the viewer beyond to an unseen space. Because Lu so comfortably occupied my studio, *Sweet Sweat* could not contain her within the canvas. I allowed the pearls of oily paint to drip like sweat.

Later, when Maj and I decided to collaborate, I described to him the process for *Sweet Sweat*:

“The paint is fat, loose and dripping like a grease monkey jabber. I can’t paint jabber but I can paint grease. The mollusk image emerges like a pearl, a halogen light. The sweep of (her) dress is the comet’s tail. The top of her head is cropped to call attention to her prominent black eyes. There is not an element in the painting that doesn’t refer to her.” ✧

PAINTING AND PROCESS

During my first year of graduate work, I found validation for my emotive art from an unlikely artist. At the time, I was insecure about my chosen subject, and trying to do justice to the grief-ridden story of my late sister, Cynthia. I could hear the director Grace Hartigan's booming laughter and the rhythmic clomp of her cane-assisted walk as she approached my studio with visiting artist John Waters, the self-described "Pope of Trash." The two huge personalities listened as I nervously spoke about my paintings. They directed their attention to my small canvas *Cynthia's Stance*. Grace spoke first. She was critical of the floppy, silly diaper and my use of white was especially bad. She must have said something negative about the mood or "gestalt" of the painting because at some point John Waters chimed in: "In fact, Grace, I see something very different here. I see a child who is proud of her accomplishment. She is wearing braces but she is upright. There is a spirit of triumph."

I felt relief and some validation. The famous (and sometimes infamous) John Waters saw the insight and intention of my image. Cynthia was the sister I never knew. She died just before I was born. I wished to honor the perfect baby girl ruined by a willfully botched delivery. The diagnosis, "cerebral hypoxia," masks the violence inflicted on my mother as she lay helpless while a nurse held her baby's head back until



Cynthia's Stance. 1999. 32" x 24". Oil on canvas.

the obstetrician arrived. After all, according to that hospital's policy in 1950, only obstetricians delivered newborns.

I recalled my mother and sister's many long drives from northern New Jersey to Johns Hopkins Hospital to learn therapeutic practices for a child with Cerebral Palsy. Our entire family was involved. My oldest sister, a mere four year old, tried to be the "big sister" but holding a spastic infant was very hard.



Spastic Holding. 30" x 22". Ink, watercolor on paper.

My father made Cindy a special seat so that she could sit up. Then, at long last, she stood up. Her muscles finally stretched and strengthened enough to support braces. Cindy's triumphant moment was captured in a small snapshot.

Four decades later, after my parents died and their home was being cleared out, I found that triumphant photograph inside a yellowed envelope. I recognized my mother's beautiful script; her name neatly written in pencil at the top, "Cynthia."

Cynthia's Stance honors her memory and triumph. Cindy is centered and upright surrounded by a dark red-brown background. Deep space reveals a pained child and a crooked chair. After all, stretches were painful and her world skewed. Found under the shelf table that stabilizes her are running, imaginary playmates she never knew. Here for posterity is a singular moment of joy and triumph when Cindy, two years old, turned her eyes toward us saying, "Look at me mommy. Look at me sister. Remember me." ✧

This past July my youngest daughter Joanna gave birth to a healthy baby boy. The hospital's labor and delivery nurse, a doula, her obstetrician and her husband, Josh, were all in attendance with her in the birthing room. She was never left completely alone. She wasn't forcefully restrained or denied ambulation. Nor was she moved from her bed to a sterile delivery room during the last stage of labor. Shortly after Logan's birth her doula gave her even more support with nursing and other postpartum needs.



Joanna and many of today's women are the beneficiaries of a concerted effort by the women's liberation movement of the 1960's and 70's that stated, in no uncertain terms, a woman's body is her own; birthing is not a pathology in most cases given proper support and prenatal care; women deserve education about the birthing process to take control over how they will birth; women need the support of a partner and to never be left alone to labor; and never should a birth be interfered with merely because an obstetrician is not available.

The determined efforts of feminist nurses, midwives and other change agents are supported by research demonstrating the maternal/infant benefits of a supportive birthing environment. Because of this, Joanna's birthing experience was the complete opposite of the horrific one inflicted upon my mother and Cynthia.

Joanna is a take-charge, professional woman from an affluent family. In addition to her innate confidence she has had the multiple benefits of exceptional medical care. If only all women, of all classes and colors could have the support and medical expertise that was afforded to my

daughter. But maternal/child health care in the United States is stratified. Although the common causes of maternal death from sepsis and hemorrhage have been drastically reduced since the beginning of the twentieth century, maternal deaths are disproportionately higher for women of color than white women (almost twice as high). **Except for pilot programs or nonprofit support, the cost for a doula is prohibitive for women on Medicaid and, to date, only six states currently reimburse Medicaid recipients for doula services. An additional 6 states plan to get Medicaid approval to implement doula coverage and 5 more states are considering it—but what about the other 33 states?**



Record of Baby's Days. Ongoing installation.
Inspired by the title of Cynthia's baby book.

Cynthia's Stance was originally part of a much larger installation called, *A Record of Baby's Days*. Closely studying them, empathizing with and feeling my family's many conflicted emotions was akin to a three-year grief quest. In hindsight, I was recognizing and validating the grief that my mother and father so valiantly tried to mask. At an artist talk of *A Record of Baby's Days*, a participant related that her family also shrouded the death of a sibling, although the pall of grief covered them heavily.

Isn't it long past time to complacently accept that black and brown people carry the burden of unnecessary infant and maternal deaths? Isn't it time to recognize the long-term debilitating effects of grief inflicted on marginalized populations? As I've learned from my quest with *Cynthia's Stance*, the casket closes, but grief lives on. ✧