

Ann M. Coff



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ANN McCOY: ALCHEMICAL MYTHS

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ART GALLERY, FINE ARTS CENTER
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

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The exhibition is guest curated by Howardena Pindell, Associate Professor, Art Department, S.U.N.Y. Stony Brook, and member of the Stony Brook Art Gallery Advisory Committee, to whom special thanks are deserved for her professional expertise in developing the exhibition and for contributing the catalogue essay.

Brooke and Caroline Alexander and Joe Fawbush of the Brooke Alexander, Inc., New York, and Suzanne Delahanty, Director, Neuberger Museum, S.U.N.Y. Purchase, are gratefully acknowledged for their assistance and generous loans to the exhibition.

Lynne Silkman
Acting Director

Photo Credits: Eric Pollitzer, Eeva-Inkeri

Cover: *THE NIGHT SEA, 1978*

Frontispiece: *CUTTLEFISH: DE SECRETIS NATURAE, 1978*

ANN McCOY: ALCHEMICAL MYTHS

Ten years ago, while organizing an exhibition of California printmaking, I met Ann McCoy. Her studio was in Venice, California and she was working on a fourteen foot high drawing of a waterfall. A decade later I made another visit to her studio, now located in New York, appropriately near the Museum of Natural History. I found her beginning a large "mural" project on the history of The Florida Everglades and The Stag ritual of the now extinct Timucua Indians.

Photo images and squarish straw baskets of colored pencils assembled by hue were distributed around the studio. She talked to me about Carl Jung, archetypal dreams and the world of the limitless unconscious.

"As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional 'unconscious identity' with natural phenomena . . . This enormous loss is compensated for by the symbols of our dreams. They bring up our original nature -- its instincts and peculiar thinking."

"To the scientific mind, such phenomena as symbolic ideas are a nuisance because they cannot be formulated in a way that is satisfactory to intellect and logic."²

Wherever Ann McCoy's explorations have led her, inward into the interstices of her unconscious or outward into the phenomenological world, she has brought forth through sheer force of will and meticulously patient research and observation, a series of "epic" works based on themes of transcendence and spiritual awakening. In the exhibition are included portions of several series including *The Night Sea*, *Mud Men*, and *The Underworld*.

A committed daily involvement to a Jungian perception of the world, linked with a love for archaeology, alchemical studies, philosophy and comparative religion have produced a unique vision of the universe of the human psyche. The dynamic pulls of "duality," an expression of the struggle for the integration of the "light" and "shadow" side of the personality, are reflected in a dense tapestry of flickering images which shift across cultural and time barriers.

She speaks of her childhood in Boulder, Colorado and Santa Fe, New Mexico, as filled with the joy of discovering other cultures and the awe of the far distant past revealed in North American archaeological discoveries. The pleasure of encountering different ways of viewing the world grew out of her observance of Native American rituals such as ceremonies conducted by the Taos Pueblo Indians. She was also intrigued by geology and the earth's deep time strata recorded in layers.

She refers to her mother as a "Latin scholar," and "sportswoman" who would take her and her brother on walks where they were taught to recognize and memorize the characteristics of local flora and fauna. Her father, an inventor, worked with rare earths including "some of the last elements on the chart like Beryllium."

"Growing up in a scientific community was rather interesting, I think, and having a father who was an inventor was also interesting. It was like growing up in a household where a foreign language was spoken. I never had any idea what was going on because all the conversations were about science . . . It sort of helped me to live in my imagination more just because I couldn't relate to anything that was happening around me."³

Gradually the tedium of sifting potsherds moved her away from archaeology to sculpture. However, an attempt to focus solely on art bored her, causing her to split her energies between all of her interests, philosophy, classics and art. As a sculptor she worked with wedges of cast resin exploring images of icebergs and mountains. During this period of her life illness and exhaustion led her into Jungian analysis, which transformed her work from the use of a sculptural three dimensional medium to the use of the large format drawing. As a result of Jungian analysis, she explored her dream life and archetypal dream imagery which became the focal point around which all of her life revolved. Mountain, iceberg and glacier images melted into waterfalls and "heated up" leading to *The Red Sea* as well as a deep involvement with the writings of Prague's 18th century court alchemist Michael Maier.

The Red Sea was executed in Berlin in 1977, while she was living in the former bunker studio of Nazi sculptor Arnold Braker in the Grünwald Forest. Located near her studio was the former Aryan Race Institute where during Hitler's reign, people were "requisitioned" and murdered, their bodies boiled in lye to retrieve their skeletons for anatomical measurements. The palpable residue of the horrors of World War II and the grim pall of mid-winter darkness in Berlin led her to what she refers to as an "extreme state of introversion."

After returning to New York, she explored themes of the descent into the lower regions, death, decay, regeneration and transcendence. *The Night Sea*, *Mud Men* and *The Underworld* series reflect the profound influence of her year in Berlin.

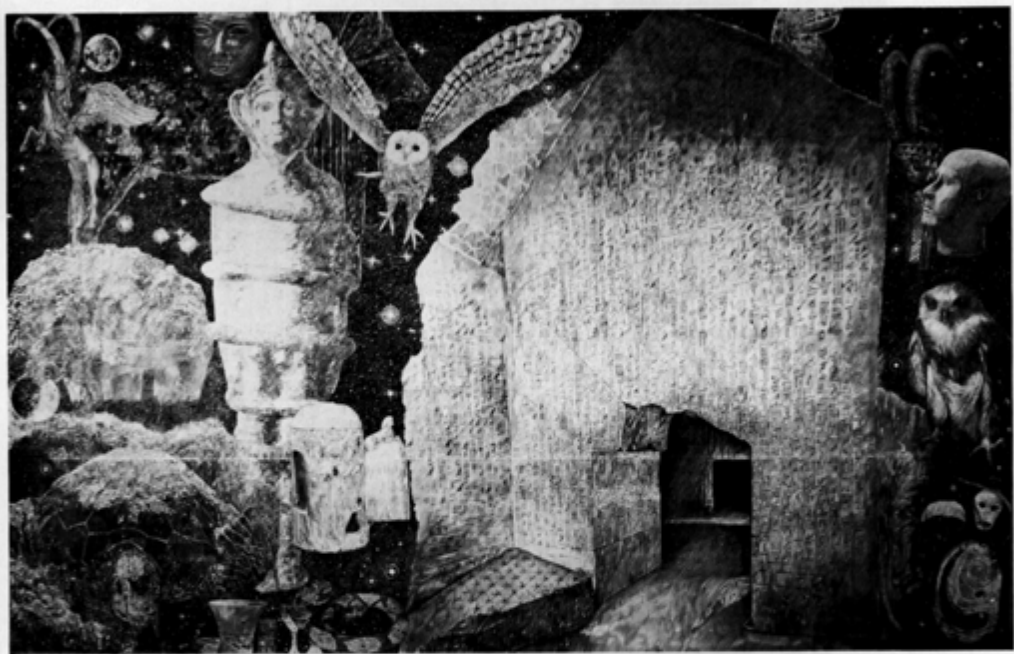
"Our times have demonstrated what it means for the gates of the underworld to be opened. Things whose enormity nobody could have imagined in the 'idyllic' harmlessness of the first decade of our century have happened and have turned our world upside down."⁴

Using the dream world as the keystone for each work, McCoy seeks her symbolic images through direct experience as well as research. Whereas most contemporary artists prefer the safer, more cosmetic "journey" at home through the pages of *National Geographic*, McCoy, like 19th century American painter Frederich Edwin Church (1826-1900), the "Darwin of landscape painting," ventures to the furthest frontiers in search of primary source material. Night scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia enabled her to observe underwater life for her images in *The Night Sea* series. In 1980 she visited Egypt's major monuments for source material for *The Underworld* series.

Not only would night scuba diving be considered too perilous for most to attempt, for some, the journey into the unconscious would be experienced as equally, if not more so, frightening.

Mythical references, archaeological artifacts as well as animals of special archetypal significance sift through her images. The tortoise appears representing an early form of mandala because of the maze pattern on its shell; salamanders appear as a link to the alchemical belief that the salamander is the only animal that cannot be destroyed by fire. Planets, circle mandalas, and alchemical symbols emerge including in *The Red Sea*, a geometric image of intertwined snakes, symbolizing "tension between the opposites." In the other series, clusters of four spheres appear representing the four alchemical elements, "solid, liquid, gas, flame."

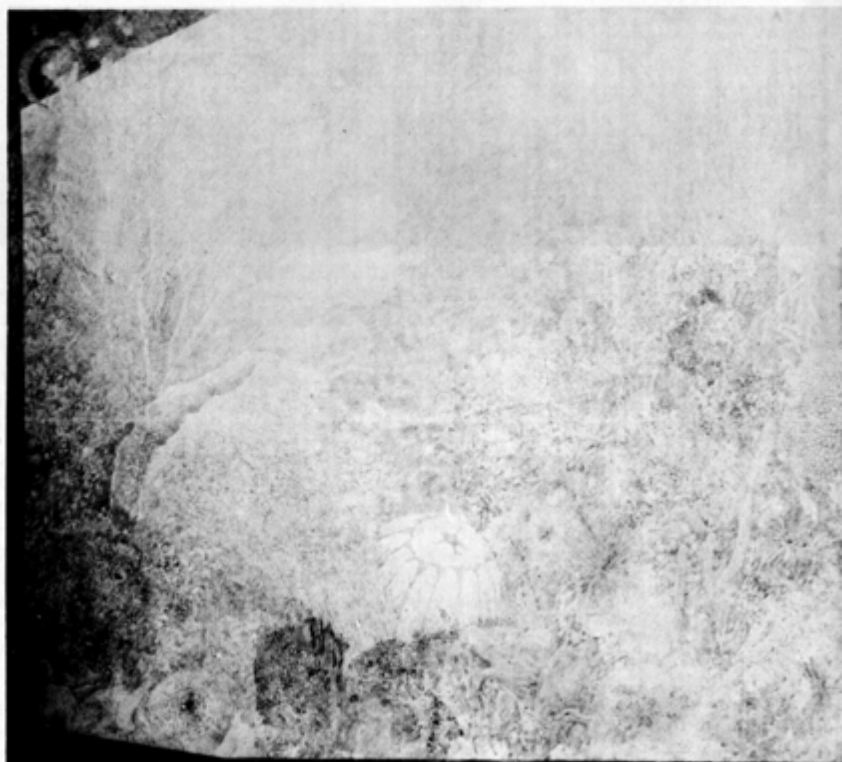
Images swell and hover appearing to linger behind the picture plane or seemingly drift slightly above it like a projected flickering film image on a translucent screen or a transmitted video image.



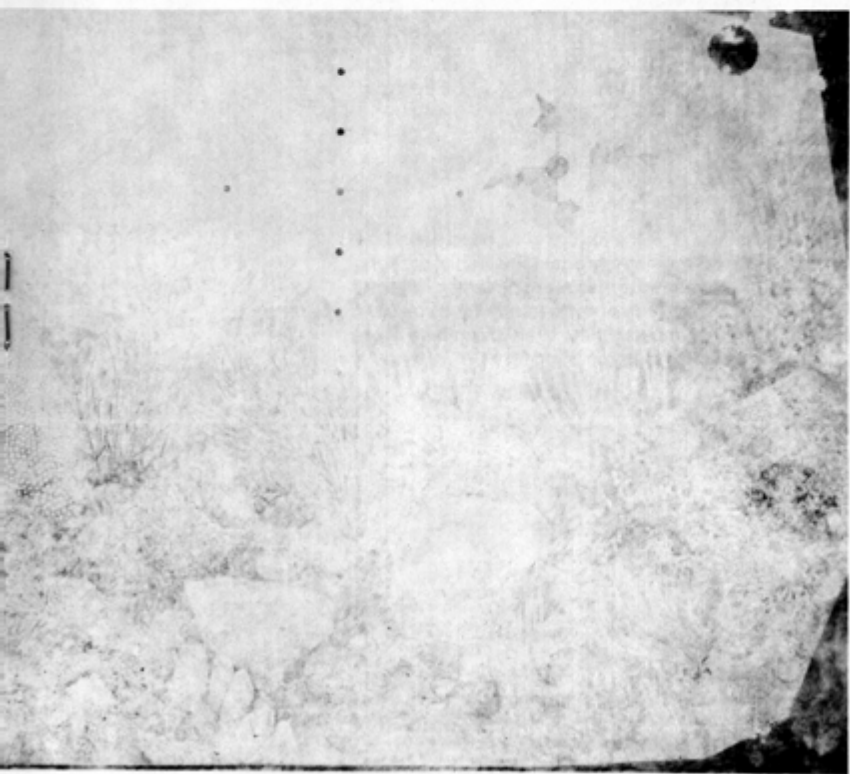
PYRAMID FOR MARTIN HURSON, 1981



SEA SERPENTS: *TRACTULUS ARISTOLIS*, 1978



THE RED SEA, 1977



The mysterious quality of her dream life meshed with her waking life seems to create a sense of time-space akin to the Australian aborigine preception of dream time in its endless flow of past, present and future into the "Eternal Now."

Each drawing surface is prepared meticulously with a Chinese ink tinted gesso ground, whether it is an irregular sheet of handmade Japanese paper as in the *Mud Men* series or exposed Swiss photographic paper mounted on canvas as in *The Red Sea*. Working from her own photographs on images she has borrowed, she reconstructs each segment distilling each element from multiple images, somewhat like a fresco painter working across the picture plane segment by segment. (Although she occasionally has worked with projected slides, she prefers the immediacy of direct drawing, layer by layer.)

She covers her surface with a network of often diagonal, short strokes of color pencil, creating a shimmering surface tension which melts into stratum of images with a "frottage" - like (a rubbing technique), visual effect. Her unique stroke unifies the surface not only as a result of the character of her seismographic line, but because of the "silences" left by the empty spaces between clusters of lines. These "silences" appear to set up a galaxy of points of light as if the whole image were projected on a map of the heavens. Most of her work has drawn borders which appear to relate to an early experience of seeing Jules Verne's "Twenty Thousand Leagues Beneath the Sea." In it she recalls an image which she refers to as a "porthole in the unconscious."

McCoy's work represents a 20th century link to the 19th century landscape tradition as exemplified by the Luminists and the Hudson River School. Her vision embraces the "outer" landscape as well as the "inner" terrain embraced by the breadth of her knowledge of the universe an extension of the 19th century intimacy with many bends in the river. Stratified images, inner translucent light emerging as images sift up through the matrix of the paper, combine to make a haunting image which implants itself upon the consciousness of the viewer, perhaps to linger and trigger other older memories of the archetypal, the "eternal."

"The further we delve into the origins of a collective image, ... the more we uncover a seemingly unending web of archetypal patterns that, before modern times, were never the object of conscious reflection ... The fact is that in former times men did not reflect upon their symbols; they lived them and were unconsciously animated by their meaning."⁵

HOWARDENA PINDELL

NOTES:

¹C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*. New York, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1964, p. 85

²*Ibid.*, p.80

³Ann McCoy provided me with tapes from 2 lectures which she gave on her life and work. One lecture "Art, Dream, Alchemy" was given at The Neuberger Museum, S.U.N.Y., Purchase, New York, July 21, 1982. The other lecture was given at C.G. Jung Society of New York, January 18, 1980.

⁴C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, p. 85

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 69



NEKYIA. 1980



THE NIGHT SEA JOURNEY, 1979

SELECTED ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- Brooke Alexander, Inc., New York, 1981
- Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago, 1979
- Chandler Coventry Gallery, Paddington, Australia, 1978
- Wallraf-Richartz Museum/Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, 1977
- Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, 1976
- Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1975
- Fourcade-Droll, Inc., New York, 1974

SELECTED AWARDS AND GRANTS

- National Endowment for the Arts, 1978
- Berliner Kunstlerprogramm, D.A.A.D., 1977
- American Association of University Women, 1976

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College
- Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
- Denver Art Museum, Denver
- Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles
- Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Museum of Fine Art, Houston
- National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Entries are listed chronologically. Measurements are given in inches, height preceding width. All works are on loan courtesy of Brooke Alexander, Inc., New York, except where noted.

THE RED SEA, 1977

Colored pencil on paper with acrylic ground, mounted on canvas
107½ x 239

From: *THE NIGHT SEA SERIES*

THE NIGHT SEA, 1978

Hand colored lithograph on 2 sheets
65¼ x 34½ (each sheet)
Edition of 30

SEA SERPENTS: TRACTULUS ARISTOLIS, 1978

Hand colored lithograph on 3 sheets
29¾ x 41¾ (each sheet)
Edition of 30

CUTTLEFISH: DE SECRETIS NATURAE, 1978

Hand colored lithograph on 4 sheets
41¾ x 29¾ (each sheet)
Edition of 35

THE NIGHT SEA JOURNEY, 1979

Colored pencil on paper with acrylic ground, mounted on canvas
108 x 165½

From: *MUD MEN SERIES*

UNTERWELT II, 1980

Colored pencil on paper with acrylic ground
78½ x 42

(CAVE OF HOWTH) UATH BIENNE E'TAIR, 1980

Colored pencil on paper with acrylic ground
78½ x 42

From: *THE UNDERWORLD SERIES*

NEKYIA, 1980

Colored pencil on paper with acrylic ground, mounted on canvas
107½ x 171
Courtesy of The Neuberger Museum, S.U.N.Y. Purchase, New York

PYRAMID FOR MARTIN HURSON, 1981

Colored pencil on paper with acrylic ground, mounted on canvas
107 x 129

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK



THE FINE ARTS CENTER

art gallery

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART GALLERY

- 1975** FACULTY EXHIBITION
- 1976** MICHELLE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
SALVATORE ROMANO
- 1977** MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
HERBERT BAYER (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
- 1978** LEON GOLUB
WOMEN ARTISTS FROM NEW YORK
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL
- 1979** SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONFIST
HOWARDENA PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN
- 1980** BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTO PIENE
STONY BROOK 11, THE STUDIO FACULTY
- 1981** ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER
LEON POLK SMITH
- 1982** FOUR SCULPTORS
CECILE ABISH
JACK YOUNGERMAN
ALAN SHIELDS
THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL

