

Nancy Boyd

SEPARATE AGENDAS & IN HER DREAMS

Nancy Boyd
BY KAREN HASSELFELT

Artist's Statement (2004)
BY NANCY BOYD



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By Karen Hasselfelt, 2004

Born into a working class family in Hamilton, Ontario, Nancy Boyd began her career as an artist in her early thirties after studying art at the Ontario College of Art & Design and the University of Waterloo. She worked for many years as a graphic designer for regional governments, EXPO '86 and CBC. Since 1988, Boyd has been teaching drawing and painting part-time at Capilano College in North Vancouver, devoting the balance of her time to her studio art practice.

The work of Nancy Boyd is often the storehouse for memories and a record of her life experiences. Boyd's work is founded in her interest in human relationships

Nancy Boyd
Separate Agendas, 1987

oil pastel and graphite drawing
on vellum
(62.5 x 76.3 cm)
SAG 1990.03.01

Photographs by Cameron Heryet

and her desire to find "home." Living in a less than supportive family environment, Boyd had to search elsewhere to find connection, whether internally or externally in relationships with others. The depth of the artist's connection to Agnes was the inspiration for two works in the Surrey Art Gallery's permanent collection - *In Her Dreams* and *Separate Agendas* (1987). Agnes, a beloved wolfhound crossbreed, was an important member of the artist's family for fourteen years before the dog passed away in 2001. These dream-like and intensely emotional drawings explore human and human/animal relationships.

In Her Dreams and *Separate Agendas* are departures from the more formal/classical concerns of Boyd's other work, and reflect the psychological drama that can play out in relationships. By delving deeper into the nature of being human, the artist risks exposing not only her own vulnerability, but also that of the observed and the observer (the viewer). In *Separate Agendas*, the artist describes the scene that unfolds before the viewer: "Each figure looks away from the other, the male unaware of the vulnerability of the dog/female/me as he is intent on his own self-involving action. She too is entirely taken up with



Nancy Boyd *Separate Agendas*, 1987 oil pastel and graphite drawing on vellum (62.5 x 76.3 cm) SAG 1990.03.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

her own unrelated concerns, yet they exist in such proximity to each other."¹

The artist's use of 100% rag vellum in these drawings references animal skins, from which vellum was originally made. This medium is ideally chosen, acting as a metaphor for the sensuousness of human interaction; the artist's deft use of line caresses the vellum's smooth surface. The transparency of this medium both hides and reveals the images, building up intricate layers of image, narrative and meaning. Relationships and their unfolding can be ambiguous, and like the veiling quality of the vellum, this ambiguity plays out in the composition of these images where the picture plane is simultaneously tilted and flattened, leaving the figures to float on this ethereal 'skin,' disturbing and unsettling. The delicacy of these drawings is in sharp contrast to the intensity of the message - the terror, vulnerability, and isolation that are intrinsic to human experience.

Many Inuit and First Nation artists create drawings, sculptures, and masks that embody ideas of transformation. In Boyd's drawing *In Her Dreams*, the dog's head can also be regarded as a mask. Masks allow a person to hide their own identity and feelings, and allow one to assume another identity. In many aboriginal cultures, shamans carry the myths and religious beliefs of their culture and have the power to heal and transform, often wearing masks and clothing made from animal skins to take on the characteristics and powers of these animal spirits. Before the 20th century, traditional Western art represented human figures in their physical likeness, while aboriginal artists distort human proportions and characteristics according to what they symbolize. Such art leads us to experience the frailty and insecurity of the human condition.²

By the 1920s, Surrealists such as Andre Breton, Max Ernst and Frida Kahlo used unlikely juxtapositions, heightened reality and dream imagery to distort the recognizable, understanding the power of distortion and transformation. While Boyd has no direct connection to Surrealism, her work has some correlation to this artistic movement. The temporality of human life comes through in Boyd's floating figures, and is also depicted in the work of the Surrealists, who responded to horrors of World War I by challenging conventional notions of how to depict the human figure and in what context. Literally meaning "beyond the real," Surrealism was a literary and artistic movement launched in France in 1924 that re-examined all existing social, scientific and philosophical values through the liberation of the unconscious. A major publication of the Surrealists was called *Minotaure*, named after the mythical beast that had the head of a bull and a human body.

Automatic writing and exploiting the accidental in art making were important techniques in Surrealist practice. A favourite game of the Surrealists was to construct collective drawings or collages called *cadavre exquis* (exquisite corpse).³ The resulting images would only vaguely resemble the human form and sometimes have animal parts attached to human bodies. Contemporary Canadian artists from the Winnipeg-based Royal Art Lodge collective use similar techniques to construct their collaborative works. Each artist adds to the image created by previous members and then sends it to the next artist until all members have contributed to the final work.

Boyd's work has an affinity with other contemporary artists working with the human figure. Canadian artists such as Betty Goodwin and Leslie Poole also focused their explorations on the human figure and Boyd was profoundly affected by an exhibition of Goodwin's



work that she saw in Vancouver in the 1980's. Many parallels can be drawn between the work of Goodwin and Boyd from this time - the search for meaning in the intricacies of human relationships, the focus on human interaction, and the materials used (especially vellum). Boyd's drawings from the 'Agnes' series are reminiscent of Goodwin's *Swimmers* series (1983) where ethereal images of solitary floating bodies are rendered in graphite, charcoal and oil pastels on vellum. Robert Enright, Canadian art writer and critic, said the work of Betty Goodwin "consistently and movingly traced the body's fragile negotiations between being and not being, between presence and absence, and between hope and despair".⁴ This

description of Goodwin's practice can also give some insight into work produced by Boyd during this time.

Both Boyd and artists such as Leslie Poole have investigated archetypal images and universal dualities such as masculine and feminine in their work. Boyd's drawing *In Her Dreams* depicts Agnes' head attached to a naked female body. This image is extremely powerful and extends the personal into the realm of the universal. Boyd has stated that "Initially, I planned to use Agnes as the more universal female counterpart (to the German Shepherd male dog you see in other pieces in this set)."⁵ Poole's Neo-Baroque series also shows figures that are part human and part animal,



Nancy Boyd *In Her Dreams*, 1987 oil pastel and graphite drawing on vellum (99.5 x 125 cm) SAG 1990.03.02 Gift of the Artist. Photograph by Cameron Heryet

often with a dog's head. In other paintings such as *Sphinx 2* (1990), Poole portrays a naked woman with the head of a lion standing at a sink. These part human, part animal figures are reminiscent of certain archetypal and transformational images from ancient Egyptian and Greek mythology.

In Her Dreams also portrays the vulnerability of animals - specifically Boyd's dog Agnes. In the evolution of dogs living with humans, they have become domesticated and dependent upon us. As psychological archetypes, dogs symbolize devotion, faithfulness and protection. They remind us of our primary, instinctual nature as animals, from survival instincts to sexual drives. Boyd says: "I became so thoroughly engaged in these drawings and in my bonding with Agnes that I began to frequently dream that she and I were the same creature, that we sometimes morphed into each other as a device to escape pain or imminent danger. Problematically, when she was in distress, I would want to *become* her to protect her. And vice versa."⁶

Due to the intense emotions and vulnerability experienced when creating these works, Boyd has chosen not to enter this realm again until very recently, stating that she had not found either the appropriate form or courage to do so.⁷ Since the Agnes series, Boyd's work has become more abstract, more tactile and more concerned with the transcendental. However, as deeply personal feelings and experiences transform into objective perspectives on interactions with others, Boyd contemplates entering this territory again with the benefit of past experience.

1. Artist's Statement, September 2004.
2. Reinhold Hohl, "Tribal Art: The Aesthetic Dimension" in Suzanne Greub, ed., *Expressions of Belief: Masterpieces of African, Oceanic, and Indonesian Art from the Museum voor Volkenkunde, Rotterdam*, New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1988.
3. *Cadavre Exquis* is based on an old parlour game that was played by several people. Each player would write a phrase on a piece of paper, fold the paper to conceal what had been written and then pass it on to the next player for their contribution to form a nonsensical sentence. This game was adapted to drawing and collage, where a section of the human body was assigned to each player to complete the drawing. William S. Rubin *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968, page 83.
4. Robert Enright, "A Bloodstream of Images: An Interview with Betty Goodwin", *Border Crossings*, Vol. 14. No. 4 (Fall 1995), pages 42-53.
5. Artist's Statement, September 2004.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

Footnotes

Artist's Statement (2004)

In Her Dreams (1987)

Separate Agendas (1987)

These drawings are from a set of works on vellum in which I dealt with some very intense emotional and psychological paradigms, particularly those between men and women. The dog in these images was my beloved Agnes, a wolfhound cross breed who graced my life for 14 years until December, 2001. The depth and power of my connection to her was so strong that I had difficulty separating our respective responses to circumstances.

I became so thoroughly engaged in these drawings and in my bonding with Agnes that I began to frequently dream that she and I were the same creature, that we sometimes morphed into each other as a device to escape pain or immanent danger. Problematically, when she was in distress, I would want to become her to protect her. And vice versa. The drawing *In Her Dreams* addresses just this experience.

In *Separate Agendas*, each figure looks away from the other, the male unaware of the vulnerability of the dog/female/me as he is intent on his own self-involving action. She too is entirely taken up with her own unrelated concerns, yet they exist in such proximity to each other.

Initially, I planned to use Agnes as the more universal female counterpart (to the German Shepherd male dog you see in other pieces in this set). I thought I was masking the intensity of my own feelings and perceptions about the struggle between men and women. Ironically, I found that the presence of animal figures amplified the "terror, vulnerability and isolation experienced in moments of unbridled emotion", as Karen Hasselfelt said about this work in

her curator's statement. At the exhibit opening, I saw people leaving the room visibly moved and shaken by the rawness of the drawings.

These drawings were a romantic interlude between more formal/classical inquiries that came before and after. Over the years, I have increasingly built into my processes those important moments of the unexpected surprise that artists thrive on. However, I have not welcomed an equivalent emotionally flooded state into my work as I did in the dog drawings of 1987-88. Since then my work has become more abstract, more tactile and more concerned with the transcendental. I am thrilled to be exploring imagery that investigates the primacy and fecundity of cellular life through a series of encaustic drawings.

I do often think about how I might once again enter the kind of deeply felt territory that occupied me in the dog drawings. I have not yet found either the appropriate form or the courage to do so. Such is the nature of the romantic and the sublime: it is terrifying.



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