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Rozsika Parker and *Margaret Priest*
'"Still out of breath in Arizona" and other pictures'

By 1975 works by Margaret Priest will have been seen in most parts of the country. One June 4 - 22 an exhibition of her drawings opens at the Garage gallery in Earlham Street, Covent Garden. From August 10 - 21 her work will be on exhibition at the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, and three of her drawings will be included in the touring show; 'An Element of Landscape' - works purchased by the Arts Council. She talked to Rosie Parker about herself and the motivation behind her work.

M. I never feel that my work is successful; there is always something more to grasp; something more to dredge up. You see, on one level my work is about physical, formal workings of structure but it's also about spaces, places and times because I want to discover how much that absorbs me and makes me react is based on my background, and to convey visually these things that hover in the back of my brain.
R. Can you tell me a bit about your background?
M. Yes, I was an only child and my parents were relatively quite old when I was born, and consequently so protective and packed with fears where I was concerned that I was never allowed to do anything that might hurt me. There was a taboo on touching electrical things, crossing roads etc. But they let me play with what I wanted to, and gave me a tool set, which was quite enlightened.
R. So they were happy that you went to art school?
M. Oh no. They were both working class people. They'd both worked and studied to become clerical workers from being manual workers, and they expected me to take the next step and to become what they considered a professional person - they wanted me to be a teacher, a solicitor, a doctor; and because I managed to get O Levels and A Levels there was nothing in my way. They were shattered that I wanted to go to art school.
R. I'm surprised that you had the courage and confidence to persist.
M. It's not courage, it's effrontry - there is a terrific effontry in deciding to become an artist. You decide that society is going to be rewarded for giving you a grant to study, and I see the fact that I can now teach part-time in art schools such as St. Martin's as a continuation of the grant.
R. Were you encouraged at school to go on to art college?
M. No, because the area I lived in - Dagenham - was a cultural wilderness. I went to the only grammar school in the area. And once you'd proved yourself to be clever, everybody expected you to go to university. I just had this terrible thing that I'd got to escape, I didn't know from what, but just to where I'd be valued, and I didn't feel I was valued there.
R. Not even by your contemporaries?
M. No, you see I developed late, was skinny, weedy and asthmatic; it was fifteen years ago and the height of the sweater girl. I became desperately physically insecure.
R. Do you suppose that you made up for your physical insecurity by establishing a sort of physical perfection on paper?
M. It's very easy to draw those kind of conclusions. It's an interesting parallel, my insecurity and my security of craft, but it's probably superficial, covering up layers and layers of other motivations. Still I was very physically insecure and the fact that I broke my nose five times didn't help. However, my attitude towards my physical appearance was modified within a year of going to art school. Some people actually said, 'May I draw you, you've got such an interesting face.' Whereas before they were always saying, 'Christ, look at that nose.' Maybe I knew all along that that was one area where I could function with the least amount of pain. But it was difficult to go to art school, knowing that you could go to university, and knowing that that was a way of changing your financial circumstances. I wanted classy things.
R. When you went to art school and began to accept your physical hangups, did you have a corresponding increase in overall confidence?
M. Not really because I had no cultural background. I had no idea at all what was going on in painting at that time, and in addition I hadn't done art at school. Most of the people who went to art school in a working class area were not the people who wanted to go, but the people who were good at art and weren't good enough at anything else. So many of the people at college had been doing art at school since they were eleven, while I had done nothing. I was terrified, and unable to do what I thought was required, I just used to do neat things which were at least not dirty. I was immediately type-cast as a graphic designer/illustrator.
R. Do you think that the same kind of equation would have been made if you had been a man?
M. No, and my appearance was against me at the time. I looked fashionable, wore all the right clothing, and that marked me down as superficial. A concern with appearance is imagined to preclude a woman from the depth of intensity and drive required of a painter. It wasn't until I'd left Walthamstow after a year of pre-diploma studies and had spent one whole term as a graphic designer that I actually realised that my motivation wasn't towards graphic design at all. I reapplied for a painting course, and burst into this kind of manly painting exercise; wearing jeans all the time and working on huge chunks of hardboard - throwing myself into it.
R. It's striking the extent to which your actions were effected by the prejudices surrounding women's appearance. Your experiences sound like the reversal of what Betty Friedan calls the 'frilly blouse syndrome' when women who do supposedly manly work feel compelled to adopt some ultra feminine item of clothing.
Today you are doing small, exact pictures. Why did you abandon large scale painting?
M. Well, I enjoyed it, and it was very valuable. Things like that always sound pretentious, but it was very valuable; it was an experience and it was physically very stimulating. But I was making pastiches; it was coming off the surface of what other women artists were doing who were emulating men, and that's one thing I don't want to do - I want to make a woman's art that's of a woman and not of a woman mutated in order to make it in a man's world.
R. Your position is directly opposed to that of so many women art students who say that the stereotype of the woman as a small scale delicate worker is so entrenched that they are actually discouraged from painting on large canvases.
M. On the contrary I was consistantly encouraged to paint large. It was as if anything small scale was associated with the female stereotype and couldn't be the vehicle for anything universally meaningful. Anyone working on a small scale drew the comment, 'Oh, knitting again!' For a long time I was determined to do nothing that was considered typical of a woman. But I eventually realised that my strength lies in the end of my fingers. I don't have a relaxed body. I feel that the kind of person who eats a lot and yet remains thin can't do big relaxed paintings.
R. Are you saying that biology is destiny?
M. No, but for me fighting against experiencing myself as the sort of woman I am was very destructive. I turned against everything that's part of our conditioning - I didn't want to consider having children or getting married.
R. Did you begin to realise that you could work in a way which might be seen as conforming to the female stereotype because

Parker, Roszika; Priest, Margaret. "'Still out of breath in Arizona' and other pictures." *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985*. Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock. London: Pandora Press (Routlege & Kegan Paul Ltd.), 1987: pp. 152-154.