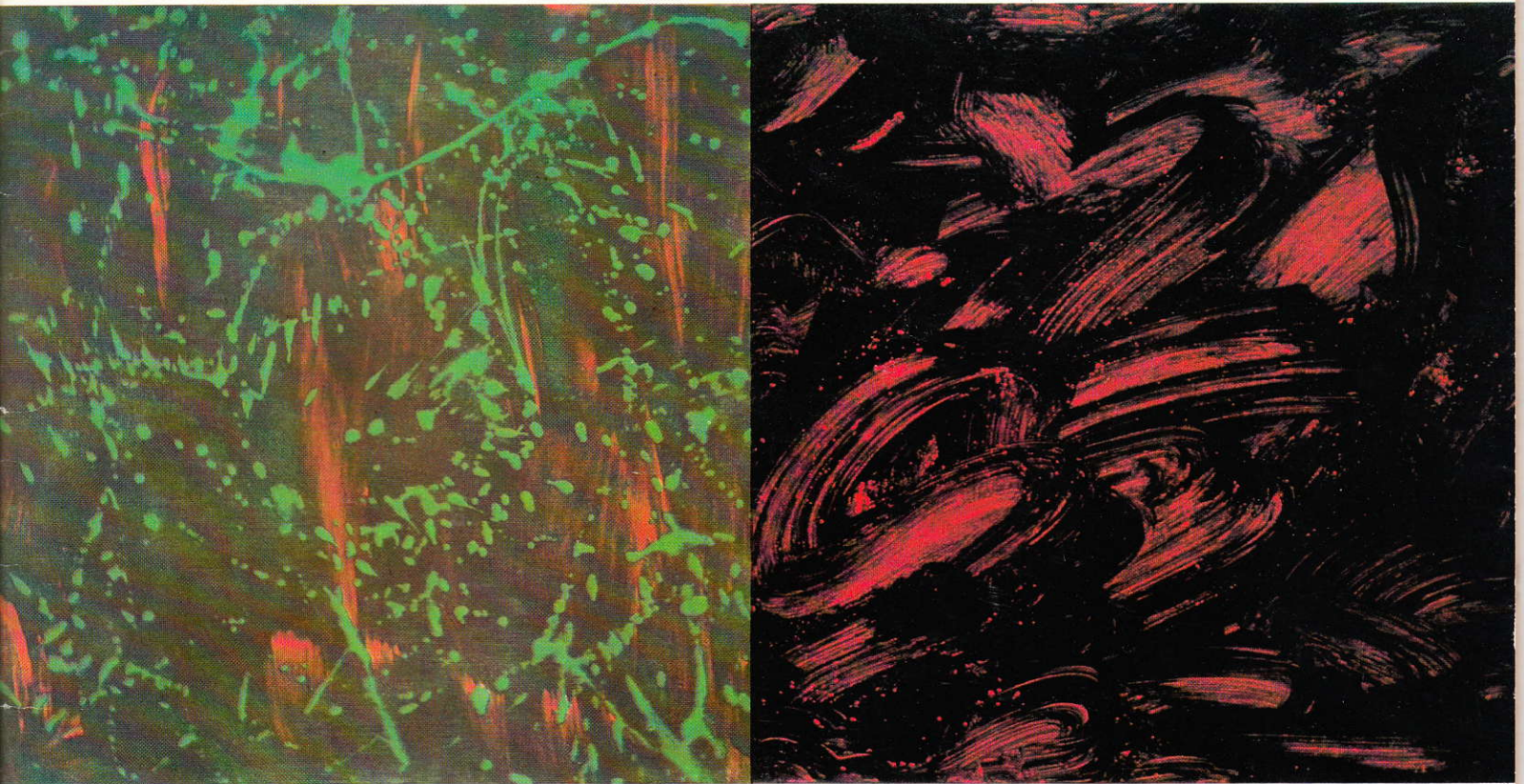
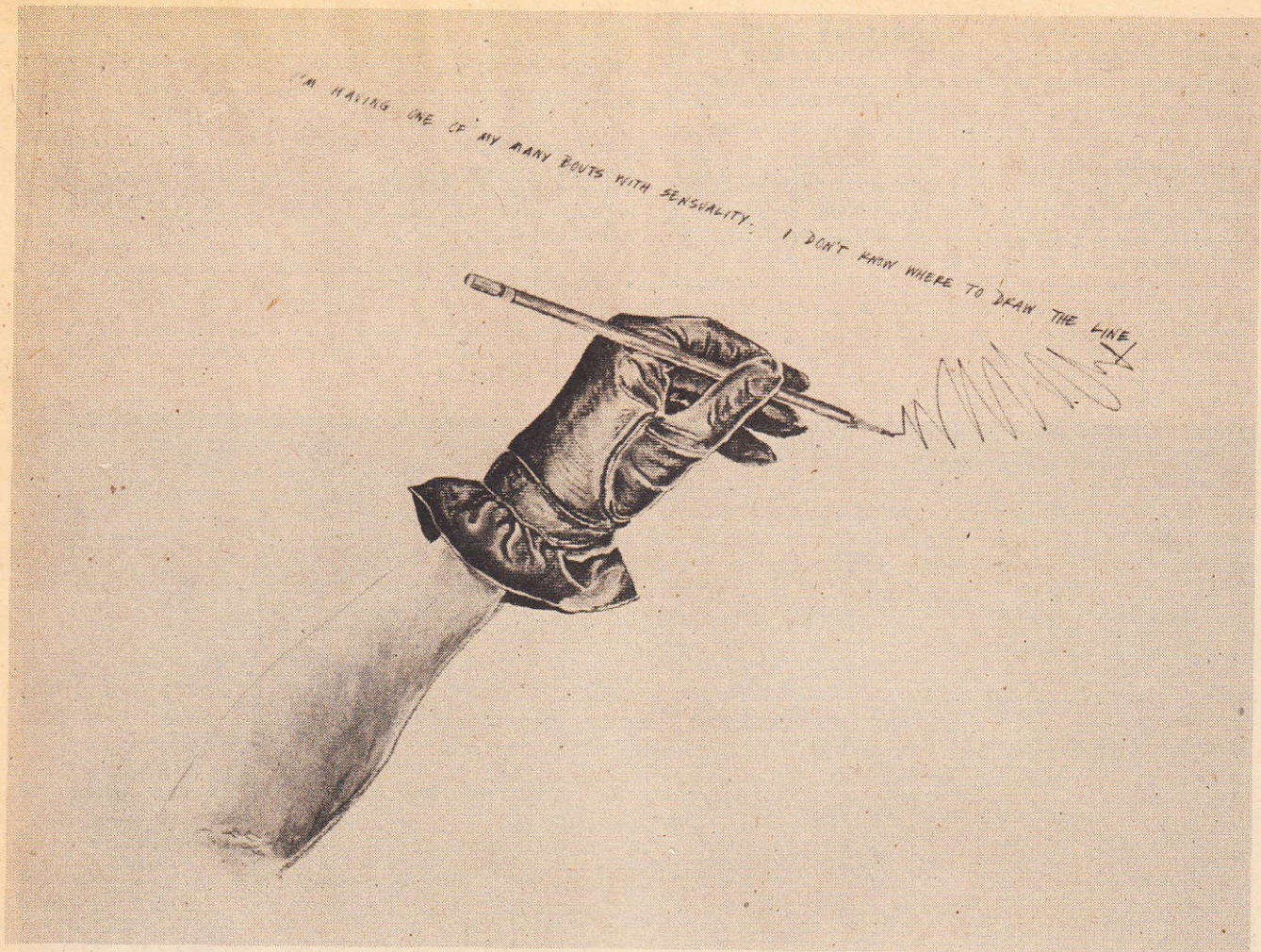


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KATHY HALL, *Sensuality*, 1979, 19" x 25", pastel on paper

Kathy Hall

Melinda Wortz

"In a traditional Catholic background you are so involved in symbol; icon as part of your life — it influences you so subconsciously." With this statement Kathy Hall synthesizes the experiential/philosophic premises of her art. A symbol can function on various levels, from alluding to the experience or concept symbolized to so completely embodying what is signified that the two are inseparable. A search for a contemporary means to fuse signifier and signified in a theological, specifically Roman Catholic sense, is at the heart of Hall's art making.

As an undergraduate at the University of California, Irvine, Hall found relevant direction from Vija Celmins, and produced a series of impressive superrealist paintings. During her graduate study at Claremont, 1974-6, she describes herself as a "young existentialist," avidly reading philosophy. Obsessed with understanding how we perceive reality through language, she read Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein and others. In the paintings executed during these years she produced simple single, two or three image compositions with captions, in the desire to unify visual and verbal abstractions. Her first images toward this end were palm trees — the California icon *sine qua non*, from orange crate labels to David Hockney. A good example of this series is *Image-Idea*, 1975, a graphite drawing depicting three palm trees labeled "image," "image," and "image," with arrows pointing from each to the words "palm tree" positioned above the word "idea." The signifying functions of both visual and verbal thinking are effectively

presented in this work, but the images, the pictured palm trees and the written words "image" and "idea" are very general.

Hall spent the next several years in search of the appropriate symbols for more personal icons which would meaningfully fuse image and idea. Pelican images in a 1977 series done in response to Wittgenstein are more emotionally laden than the palm trees. *Potentiality*, for example, portrays two helpless baby birds huddled together for comfort, while *Actuality* presents a powerful, angular image of a bird in flight. In *Double Negative*, which depicts a dead pelican with the caption, "that which is not that is not," poignantly demonstrates the dichotomy between the dryness of verbal abstractions and the direct impact effected by a visual image of death. In a theological sense the title, *Double Negative* implies the nonnegativity of death, which our culture has come to view as a negation of life, as opposed to a resurrection.

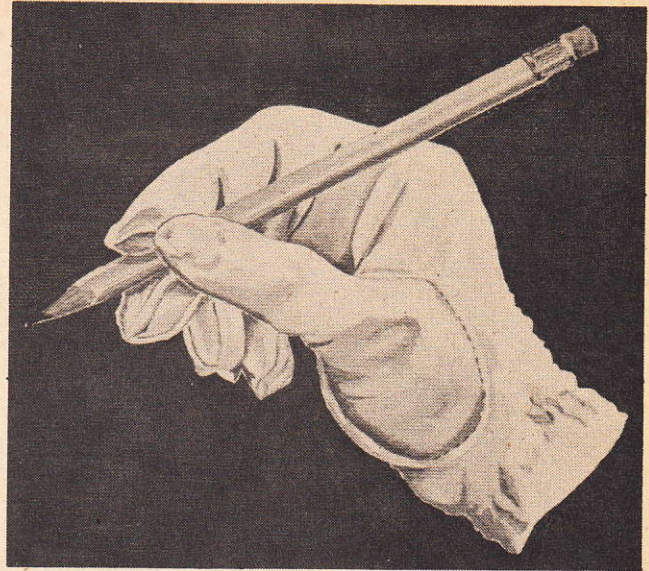
Hall's immediate response to the intellectualization which characterizes the graduate school experience was to produce in 1978 a series of brilliant and sensual, iconic, single image watercolors depicting hibiscus and based on themes of romantic love — *The Flirt*, for example, and *Wilting and Waiting*. It was during this period that she felt stress strongly for the first time in her life, away from the support system of graduate school. One night, while resenting the menial task of doing the dishes, she experienced an intuitive insight through which her resentment was transcended. Among the feelings which comprised this moment was a sense of deep gratitude for her mother's sacrificial role throughout the years, and by

extension to all mothers. The symbol for this transcendent moment, in which the ordinary was transformed into the radiant and holy, became the blue plastic gloves she wore while doing the dishes. The subsequent paintings, from 1979 to the present, incorporate symbolic gloves in the presentation of religious themes.

The earliest paintings of this series were executed in watercolor. *Alas* of 1978 portrays a single hand holding a package of Mexican cigarettes whose brand name is *Alas*; in *Agnostic Act* we see two centered hands in a gesture of prayer. However, as Hall felt that the medium of watercolor was inadequate to render the quality of blue plastic, in 1979 she began a series of pastel drawings, resulting in one of her most fully realized works to that time, *Sensuality*, in which a black-gloved hand holds a blue pencil which has just written the inscription, "I'm having one of my bouts with sensuality. I don't know where to draw the line," and ending with a random scribble. In contrast to most of her previous work, this drawing is less symmetrical and stable in its composition, its angularity sets up formal and emotional tensions that are directly related to the verbal and visual image-content; the metaphoric handwriting on the wall, the equivocal nature of the message, the black-glove evoking the wages of sin, death or the devil.

Another work in this series, *The Self*, presents two diagonally aligned, black-gloved hands, the right one writing "The Self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting.' Barnett Newman. Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself?" An important formal innovation in this series is Hall's depiction of the words in the act of being made, a much more dynamic, living image than the more objective use of captions. Likewise the use of two diagonally positioned images charges the space more actively than the one or three-image, symmetrical compositions of previous work. "In the black glove series," she says, "I was writing from my life, using my own language instead of the language of philosophy."

In her most recent work Hall is using oil paint to create a rich ground of intense color—blue, red and black — on which two white gloves are the dramatis personae. In most works of this series she has eliminated words in the paintings themselves, allowing the richness of the oil color and the symbolic imagery to carry the expression. Perhaps the most striking of these paintings is *Sacrifice*, with its brilliant red ground, the color of

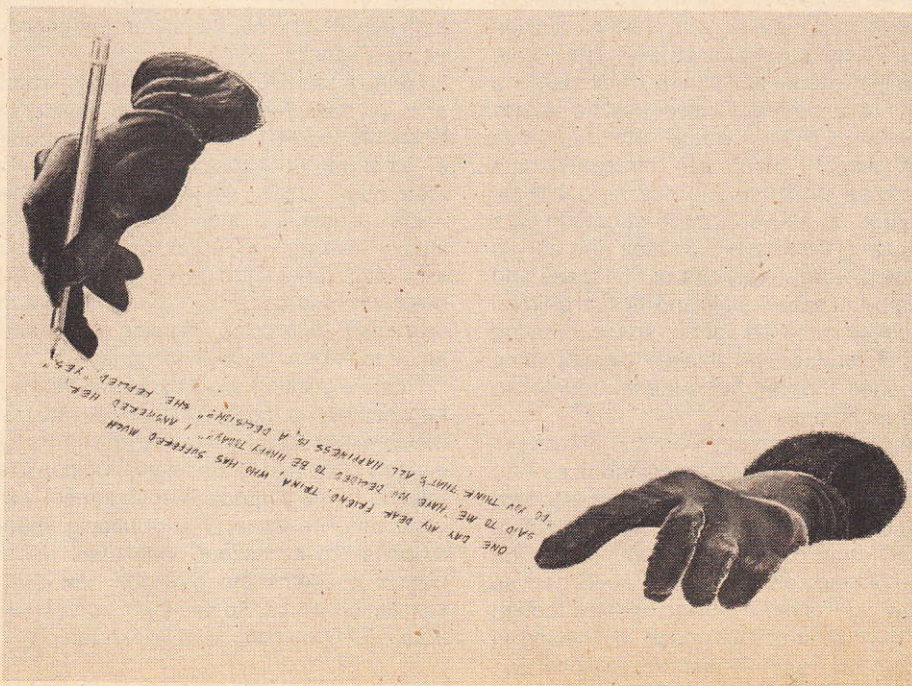


KATHY HALL, *Space is a Metaphor for the Divine*, 1, 1979 (detail), oil on canvas.

passion, both Christ's and ours. The white gloves are in the same horizontal plane, the left making a beckoning gesture (which can also be seen as a Buddhist mudra) and the right hand refusing the "call" by turning its outstretched fingers away from the left. In *Metaphysics of Suffering*, on a black ground, the lower white glove seems to be offering a rose to the hand above it, which remains half-closed; hesitant to accept the double-edged gift of beauty and pain. As much as these disembodied white (purity, the Spirit) gloves function powerfully as symbols, they also have an immediate tangibility because of the high degree of realism Hall achieves, using her own hands for models. As in her earlier work, Hall also presents the white gloves as performances in real space and time, so that they literally become living symbols. ■

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Melinda Wortz, Chairman of the Art Department at the University of California, Irvine and Director of its art gallery, has contributed to *Art News*, *Artweek* and *Art in America*.



KATHY HALL, *Trina*, 1979, 19" x 25", pastel on paper