Eleanor Spiess-Ferris
The Magpie Chronicles

Robert T. Wright
Community Gallery of Art
College of Lake County
Eleanor Spiess-Ferris  
By Garrett Holg

“Symbolism is a slippery subject. Any one symbol may have hundreds of interpretations. ...Herein lies some of the true fascination of symbols. No matter how arbitrary their associations, they always seem meaningful. The longer any given symbol is contemplated, the more meaningful it becomes.”  
-Barbara G. Walker  
*The Women’s Dictionary of Symbols & Sacred Objects*

Chicago-based artist Eleanor Spiess-Ferris well-knows the slipperiness of symbols. As a painter and a storyteller she speaks through her art with curious and profoundly resonant images. *Nothing*, from the most apparently mundane to the most inexplicable, appears on her canvases without a purpose.

Like the Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire who believed art is capable of inducing thoughts and perceptions that exist free from physical reality, she uses her art to transcend the tangible world and reveal what lies beyond. Hers is an art of ideas. It is one that suggests states of mind more than it faithfully defines nature - one that embraces the boundlessness of reflection more than the certainty of understanding.

During her 30-year career as a painter, Spiess-Ferris has drawn inspiration for her work from the Spanish Penitentes, Catholic retablos, Indian Kachinas and Native American fetishes of her Spanish-New Mexican heritage. Her paintings frequently incorporate symbols identified with feminist spirituality and goddess worship, as well as Classical learning and Christian belief. Seamlessly blending personal memory with a visionary’s gift for the fantastic, she can justly claim kinship to such artists as Hieronymus Bosch, Gustave Moreau and Paul Delvaux.
Fox, 2001
Oil on canvas
24” x 24”
From such disparate influences and interests, the artist has fashioned a private and wondrously poetic myth that is, at once, beautiful and grotesque, comic and tragic, real and unreal, telling and yet, delectably enigmatic. The sixteen extraordinary oil and gouache paintings and four conte crayon drawings assembled for this exhibition continue her personal narrative. Pondering issues regarding gender, the human condition, death, spirituality and the environment, they are imbued with one of the most unique voices in contemporary art.

In Spiess-Ferris’ world we routinely confront the seemingly incomprehensible and the unexpected. Here, a woman wades through water with the heads and necks of swans impaled on her fingertips; there another woman kneels in a large cup grasping giant lilies that cry milky tears; elsewhere a lovely head sits atop a broken hollow torso.

Such horrific scenes may shock, or at least give pause, but to stop here would do the works injustice. These are symbolic narratives, densely encoded with suggestion and meaning. Each image carries many, varied and often contradictory connotations, which the artist readily welcomes into the reading of her paintings.

A fox, for instance, even one worn as a wrap around the shoulders of a stylish woman, as in Fox (2001), might symbolize cunning, trickery, malice or feigned flattery. Or, it might represent adaptability, subtlety and discretion - all are recognized as attributes of the fox. Likewise, the image of the extended tongue that appears in the gouaches Floater (2005) and Taming of the Monsters (2005) is an age-old male/female sexual symbol. A sign of insult in some countries, it is a friendly greeting in others. Such ambiguity is not only encouraged by the artist, she insists on it.

Perhaps the most powerfully charged and prevalent image in Spiess-Ferris’ iconography is water (the first element), the primordial fluid from which all life originates, the cosmic womb of creation myths. It is the symbol of baptism, purification and regeneration. Yet, it is also capable of dissolving matter and drowning all living beings. In these works water appears as drops of rain, a rushing river, a tranquil pool (historically a gathering site for goddess worship) and, something more mysterious, as in the show’s most provocatively layered work, Islands (2004).
*Islands*, 2002
Oil on canvas
56” x 72”
The setting for this large and impressive canvas is significant, for it takes place in darkness, a place of transformation, and deep water, which often signifies the afterlife. In it, a crowd of people is submerged in water up to their chins. Indeed, looking like islands, some wear floral wreaths around their apparently disembodied heads (a theme the artist shares with 19th century Symbolist painters). One woman wears a tall conical-shaped birdhouse as a hat. Another steadies a glowing lamp on her head. Another’s head balances an erect white lily on a tufted cushion.

The longer one reflects on this painting the more complex the connective links between the images become. Peoples’ heads, for instance, appear separate from their bodies, which are obscured below the water’s surface in a metaphoric severing of their spiritual and physical selves. Looking like life-preservers, the floral wreaths are simultaneously expressions of celebration and mourning. The woman wearing the birdhouse-hat may be as much a captor, as a protector of the birds inside, which might depict messengers or human souls. And the lily, raised in adoration like a sacred relic or a royal scepter, is illuminated by the lamp (symbolizing enlightenment, perhaps, or the moon, the source of all souls). The flower of the Madonna and the goddess, it radiates purity, majesty, devotion, faith, wisdom and resurrection.

Such readings only begin to peel away the layers of this painting. Perhaps we are witnessing a procession of ritual celebrants, an exodus of flood victims, or souls of the dead seeking rebirth. Every viewer will, in some way, relate differently to the painting. As in each of her works, the artist is purposely elusive concerning her intent. Instead, she lets the multifaceted associations connected with each image work on us, allowing shades of implication to accumulate and build within a painting and in the process evolve a sense of meaning.

A gifted storyteller, Spiess-Ferris is an equally accomplished painter. She is every bit as skilled at depicting meticulously detailed flowers, birds and fanciful costumes, as she is at freely painting expressive abstract backgrounds suggesting clouds and water. Frequently subverting the illusionistic depth characteristic of traditional Renaissance space, she constructs spatial relationships that can be as complicated as her symbolism. In her work things are seldom seen from a single point of view.
**Cooling Pond, 2005**
Oil on canvas
56” x 72”
Taming the Monsters, 2005
Gouache on paper
20” x 20”
In *Island 2* (2005), a woman’s bodiless head nests like an egg (the primeval Great Mother?, the protector?) in a floating wreath of lilies, while birds roost in the leafless branches that comprise her bizarre arboreal headdress. Here, sky and water recede naturalistically into the distance, but the head and wreath tilt forward occupying a different spatial plane. Beneath them, further corrupting the illusion of depth, a patch of bright blue paint has been applied without attempting to blend it believably into the surrounding water. In *Cooling Pond* (2005), which, for the most part, also obeys optical perspective, sea serpents are depicted frontally in the foreground, like two dimensional heraldic emblems.

The most unsettling spatial effect, however, occurs in *Tightrope* (2002), which features a unicyclist on a high-wire. It is already a disturbing image because the cyclist has no body inside its be-ribboned tunic and a balance pole has been substituted for arms. Our uneasiness increases with the realization that what is at first perceived as a background of deep space is really a flat, shallow, wall-like surface to which the high-wire is nailed in a winking nod to the trompe l’œil deceptions of such artists as Harnett and Peto.

Symbolism has been called “the most guarded of languages because it can always be denied.” Spiess-Ferris denies none of it. She unconditionally invites the various ideas her paintings provoke in others, believing what a painting means to her, as the storyteller, isn’t as important as what it means to us, as the interpreters. Disquieting, enigmatic or insightful, Spiess-Ferris’ paintings persist in truly fascinating the viewer.

Garrett Holg writes for *Artnews* magazine and is the former art critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times.*
Tightrope, 2005
Oil on canvas
30” x 20”
Eleanor Spiess-Ferris

BORN Las Vegas, New Mexico
RESIDES Chicago, IL

EDUCATION
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
   BFA, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

SELECTED HONORS
2001 Artist-in-Residence, Anchor Graphics, Chicago, IL
2000 Illinois Arts Council Artists Fellowship Grant
1991 Arts Midwest Fellowship Grant
1991 Community Arts Assistance Program Grant, Dept. of Cultural Affairs, Chicago

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2006 New Works, Aron Packer Gallery, Chicago, IL
2002 Ferris Wheel, Evanston Arts Center, Evanston, IL
2002 Regeneration, Zaks gallery, Chicago, IL
1999 New Works, Zaks gallery, Chicago, IL
1996 The Goddess Series, Shircliff Gallery of Art, Vincennes University, Vincennes, IN
1994 Works on Paper, Zaks gallery, Chicago, IL
1992 Eleanor Spiess-Ferris: An Artist’s Journey
   Charles Wustum Museum of Fine Art, Racine, WI
   University of Wisconsin at Green Bay, Green Bay, WI

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2005 The Art of the Bookplate, Printworks Gallery
2005 State of the Art 2005 National Biennial Watercolor Invitational, Parkland College, Champaign, IL.
   Traveled to The Art Center, Highland Park, IL
2003 Not Just a Pretty Face, Hyde Park Art center, Chicago, IL
2002 Ferris: A Family of Artists, Evanston Art center, Evanston, IL
2000 Faculty Exhibition 2000, Evanston Art center, Evanston, IL

SELECTED COLLECTIONS
College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, IL
Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL
Portland Museum of Fine Art, Portland, OR
University Museum, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL
Wustum Museum of Fine Art, Racine, WI
Gathering Swan, 2002
Oil on canvas
24: x 24”
**Eleanor Spiess-Ferris: The Magpie Chronicles**

**Exhibition Checklist**

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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Cooling Pond</em>, 2005</td>
<td></td>
<td>Oil on canvas</td>
<td>56” x 72”</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Rain</em>, 2000</td>
<td></td>
<td>Oil on canvas</td>
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<td><em>Island 2</em>, 2005</td>
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<td>Oil on canvas</td>
<td>52” x 42”</td>
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<td><em>Late Fall – Acceptance of Winter</em>, 2005</td>
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<td>Gouache on paper</td>
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<td><em>Tightrope</em>, 2005</td>
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<td><em>Thoughts</em>, 2006</td>
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<td><em>Lilies</em>, 2001</td>
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<td><em>Oasis</em>, 2006</td>
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<td><em>Fox</em>, 2001</td>
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<td><em>Jamie</em>, 2005</td>
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<td><em>Dora</em>, 2003</td>
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<td><em>Ruby</em>, 2003</td>
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<td><em>The Protector</em>, 2001</td>
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<td><em>Sara</em>, 2002</td>
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All works are courtesy of Aron Packer Gallery, Chicago, IL

The title of this exhibition, *The Magpie Chronicles*, was taken from a short story written by Emile Ferris, the artist’s daughter.
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The Magpie Chronicles
March 3 – April 9, 2006

Gallery Hours:
Mon-Thu 8:00 am-9:00 pm
Fri/Sat 9:00 am-4:30 pm
Sun 1:00-5:00 pm
Spring Break: March 27-April 2
Mon-Fri: 8:00 am-4:30 pm
Closed Apr 1-2 (Sat/Sun)

Gallery Information: 847-543-2240
E-mail: sjones@clcillinois.edu
http://yyz.clcillinois.edu/artgallery

Cover art: Eleanor Spiess-Ferris, Island 2, 2005, Oil on canvas, 52” x 42”

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