

Paradox, Precision, and Passion

Passing on the Spirit: Helen Hardin, 1943-1984. Commemorative Retrospective Exhibition Organized by The Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Summer, 1994.

Reviewed by Kate T. Donohue

Paradox, precision, and passion are woven into the canvas and etching plates of the artist, Helen Hardin. Her work contains the paradox of both the modern geometric world and the ancient spiritual universe of her Southwest Pueblo American heritage. With her angles, circles, squares, and lines, she becomes an architect of the soul, but Hardin always painted from her passion. Rather than telling a story of the image, as do many traditional artists, she painted from the felt-sense of the image.

Hardin, who died in 1984, felt her work was spiritual, not in the structured, religious sense, but in the "sense of being alive and human, a sense of an affirmation of the spirit." ("American Indian Artists." Video of Helen Hardin, Public Broadcasting System, 1976) Hardin dove into her paintings, and her art invites the audience to immerse itself in her psyche, Native American tradition, and visual metaphor, to discover its own themes, both personal and universal.

Hardin's work still invites you to plunge in: the latest invitation was a commemorative retrospective, organized by Santa Fe's Institute of American Indian Arts Museum during the summer of 1994, *Passing on the Spirit: Helen Hardin, 1943-1984*. Hardin's body of work culminates in her remarkable *Woman Series*~ a transformative trinity of feminine Kachinas created three years before Hardin's death. As we shall see, this series recaptures themes that thread through this artist's entire individuation as a creative personality.

PARADOX

Helen Hardin was born into a paradoxical world. Her parents descended from two very distinct cultures: her mother from the Pueblo Tewa Native American, and her father from the Anglo American. These two young adults were ambitious and aspiring when they met. Herbert Hardin hoped to study law, and Pablita Velarde was already a Tewa painter when they married in Albuquerque in 1941. Pablita's life was also one of limitation and pain. The paradox of her creativity and ambition was a conflicted legacy she passed on to her daughter. It was to have a profound influence on Hardin's creativity.

Pablita was raised in the unfamiliar and hostile environment of St. Catherine's Indian School, where she was forced to abandon her Tewa language and culture. Pablita's father, Herman Velarde, remarried after the death of his wife, and virtually abandoned his children. Later, Pablita found her life's work in painting, but even this led to a further rupture with her Tewa tradition: women did not paint in her Pueblo. They made pots, but never decorated the walls of the kiva: painting was an exclusive right of the male. Yet Pablita pursued her art, alongside the duties of motherhood. Attending to both roles, she found a constant struggle, which expressed itself in her alcoholism, and eventually, divorce from her husband Herbert, when Hardin was thirteen years old. Pablita Velarde's continued struggle as a painter bore fruit, however, and she gained acclaim, particularly for her mural at Bandelier State Park in New Mexico.

Growing up, Helen Hardin experienced her mother's dual nature: the loving, sober, nurturer Pablita; the other the unpredictable, intoxicated, and abusive Pablita. This duality seemed to shape Helen's sense of family itself. In 1950, at the age of seven, Hardin painted a portrait that showed the two distinct sides of her family experience. On one side stand two Herberts; her happy looking brother, and closer to the center, her father. On the other side, facing the father, is her Native American mother, followed by a sad little girl with down-cast eyes, who has a doll hanging from her hand. Childhood was clearly a mixture of two very different parents, and a contradictory duality within the mother. These early contradictions would contribute to the emotional paradox of her entire life.

Raised for her first six years at the Santa Clara Pueblo, Helen Hardin's early, highly imigistic language was Tewa, which uses fifteen delineated states of being, the English

language has only its three tenses of past, present, and future). Hardin also had two names, Helen and her Tewa name, Tsa-sah-wee-eh, which means Little Standing spice. Throughout her creative career, Hardin signed her works as Tsa-sah-wee-eh, and the work itself draws on the imagery and language of this expansive Tewa universe rather than the more limited, masculine English.

A spiritual duality existed for her as well. Alongside the Tewa icons in her home, Pablita raised her daughters Helen, and her son, Herbert, as Roman Catholics. However, Hardin never painted Christian images; Tewa alone was the source of the spiritual inspiration for her work. Tsa-sah-wee-eh felt closely connected to the universality, logic, and the natural and mystical elements of the Tewa spiritual life. She especially enjoyed the humanness of the Tewa Kachinas. Although Tewa deities and icons inspired Tsa-sah-wee-eh's creativity, Hardin herself was considered a "half-breed," and was never fully accepted by her elders and tribe. The paradox of the tribe's personal rejection, contrasted with Hardin's connection to Tewa spirituality, was further dramatized by the Elders' response to her work. They censured her artistic interpretations of Tewa spiritual themes. Although abstract, the Elders felt that Hardin's paintings revealed tribal secrets.

Hardin's struggle for her own identity as a woman and an artist involved an interplay of pain and occasional blessings. Her first long-term relationship, was with Pat Terrazas, an extremely abusive and life-threatening man, but it produced her daughter, Margarete Bagshaw-Tindel. Unlike Hardin, Margarete was allowed to dance in the celebrations at her Pueblo, a very important step to taking one's place within the tribe. Margarete today is a practicing artist, and the mother of two children, Helen and Forrest.

In 1968, Helen Hardin's father became a significant player in her struggle for individuation from her mother. Earlier, the feeling that she had lost him through her parent's divorce had become more pronounced when he re-married, a re-creation of her mother's childhood pain. But as Hardin's relationship with her mother intensified, she felt her mother was abusive and competitive. Sensing this dilemma, her father made an effort to become a guide in her life. Now living in Colombia, Herbert invited his daughter and granddaughter to live with him, and it was he who orchestrated her first one-woman show in Bogotá in 1968. His support helped her separate from both abusive relationships in her life, Pablita, her mother, and Pat, her lover. As a consequence, however, Hardin's first individual success was not in her homeland, but in South America, far from her mother's fame as a traditional Native American artist.

With this first taste of her own personal and artistic identity and success, Hardin returned to New Mexico, and her work began to take off. In 1970, the New Mexican magazine featured Hardin on its cover: "Tsa-sah-wee-eh Does Her Own Thing:" The evidence of her individuation was at hand. Her work became a bridge toward healing the paradoxes of her life, those warring, rejecting opposites. Helen Hardin's art was a poignant example of Jung's transcendent function at work; this bridge to the world also helped her create a new image of herself.

Hardin's journey toward individuation was tumultuous. In November, 1972, she collapsed and was hospitalized briefly for ' depression. During the months of individual therapy that followed, she began to see the pieces of her life that had closed in on her: the scars of her childhood, an abusive relationship, the strain of single motherhood, and her constant internal pressure and work schedule. Weeks after her hospitalization, Hardin met Cradoc Bagshaw, a free-lance photographer, whom she married in 1973. Within a creative family that accepted her, Hardin really belonged. Cradoc gave her the "security she craved" (Personal interviews Cradoc Bagshaw, August, 1994), and her art flourished. It became more complex and layered, and now bore her artistic signature. The security of her new-found home allowed her to plunge into her internal terrain and begin to depict her passion with precision. Her belief in the transformative power of art as a bridge to her potential self became the guiding principal in her life.

PRECISION

An astonishing precision governed Hardin's life and work. She was the "prophetess of the compass, a sage of the ruler and a high priestess of the protractor." (Jay Scott, *Changing Woman*. Flagstaff, AZ Northland Publishing Co., 1989, p. 40) Hardin's exactness helped her

compensate for her wounding and became the portal to her Tewa spirituality.

Quite in contrast to her unpredictable, abusive, early years, her creative work as an adult was very controlled and detailed. She could work for thirteen hours a day in her studio, and she would not settle for less than a perfect line. If one did not suit her, she would wipe away layers of her work. Etching on copper plates, Hardin had chosen an unforgiving medium, which allowed for no mistakes. Her drive for perfection was unyielding, but it went beyond anything that we could formulate as animus-driven, and into an unexpected aspect of the feminine self.

Similar to many people who are raised in unpredictable homes, in which abuse and hostility vie and toy with love and comfort, Hardin developed a compensatory perfectionism out of her striving to balance and heal the initial injury. Within her art, she would control and master her world, thus overcoming the criticism, rejection, and insecurity of her past. This compensatory drive also reflected her internal strength as a fighter. She would be a *warrior woman* and her art would rule with a perfect aesthetic integrity. Possibly, seeing herself as the warrior woman was her way of fighting for the love and favor not only of her mother Pablita, but of the Tewa world, and, finally, what she seeks out in her *Women Series*, the universal mother in herself.

The transcendent function does in art what it cannot do in life. Hardin had failed geometry in high school. In her struggle to gain more class time for her art while in high school, she found her way into the boys' drafting class. Always peeking out of the corner of her eye at what the boys were doing with their instruments, she began unconsciously to incorporate geometry into her work. She would return to geometry later on, with her studies in anthropology at the University of New Mexico. (Kristina Marie Ryder, "In Search of Creative Women: Helen Hardin, Santa Clara Pueblo Artist." (University of San Diego, Master's Thesis, 1986).

It was through her love for anthropological roots and origins that Hardin discovered her ancestral links to geometry. The Hohokam, Mogollan, and Anasazi people were her tribal forbears, and her doorway to her collective unconscious. As well, she particularly embraced the Mimbres geometric traditions in design. When preparing for a major work, she would first paint a small Mimbres-inspired piece that she called her "Mimbres potboilers." Her embrace of her ancestors' use of geometry allowed her to access the precision she desired, achieving it with her loved "gadgets," her drafting tools. The recovery of native inspiration also opened her to a change in direction, as she began to explore lights space, and color in her work. She developed a masterly balance of composition, line, form, mass, space, color, and time. This drive for perfection and integrity in her work was Hardin's way of creating order, an ultimate harmony of elements out of choosy best illustrated in her *Women Series*.

Precision also governed Hardin's approach to preparing for her work. Margarete remembers watching her mother's preparation ritual. "Helen would walk into her studio, turn on her 100 watt light bulbs above the drawing table, then turn on the TV, for her soaps or music." Hardin would then attend to her hands, which were extremely important to her. Methodically, like a Zen monk, "she would roll up her sleeves, and smooth lotion on her hands for at least twenty minutes. She would then proceed to stir each individual egg carton container of paint twenty times. She would sip some of her coffee or tea, and then she would begin to work." Margarete called her mother's preparation ritual "a spiritual awakening." (Interviews with Margarete Bagshaw-Tindall, August 19 and September 10, 1994) The ritual allowed her to communicate and begin to dance with her Tewa spirits, the dance that was denied her by the Elders. It also allowed her to experience being close to the gods or spirits. In this numinous state (Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of The Holy*. New York, Oxford Press, 1917), Hardin encountered the god/spirit in its full power. Inspired by both dread and devotion, she danced with her Tewa spirits throughout her subsequent creative activity. Ultimately, making art became like a meditation practice, which permitted her spirits to create prayers of almost perfect resolution, her paintings.

PASSION

Yet Hardin also painted from her own passion, in the manner of a contemporary postmodern artist. Her feelings for an image, song, mask, or myth directed her brush or etching tool (Lou Ann Farris-Culley, "Allegory and Metaphor in the Art of Helen Hardin," *Helicon* Nine, 1981), even as her passion directed her personal life and public career. She was a

forceful spokeswoman for Native American art, a sometimes iconoclastic community member, an absorbing friend, loving mother, and, by her husband's account, a fascinating and compelling partner and wife.

One's passion in life can be directed simultaneously by feelings of belonging and of abandonment. Hardin's deep attachment to her Native American legacy stemmed in part from the rejection she experienced from this very community. By the tribes, both mother and daughter were censured and isolated because of their work as painters. Moreover, Hardin, as a "half breed," was never allowed to take her place in a Pueblo dance, even after her art had demonstrated her understanding of her Pueblo roots, and this was a very deep loss. She was never fully embraced by the Pueblo.

Though Hardin felt rejected by both her mother and by her beloved Tewa culture, her source of inspiration remained to the end the imagery of the Native American cultures. Hardin created each Kachina from her emotional response to them, and her work captures the sense of these deities caught between heaven and earth, which is what Kachinas represent. Her deep, intuitive understanding of the spiritual matters of the Kachinas created yet another rupture between Hardin and her Pueblo Elders, however. The Elders of the Santa Clara Pueblo criticized her for exposing sacred aspects of the Kachinas to non-Tewa people. Local legend has it that the Elders actually said she would die young for violating this taboo. When Hardin did die at the age of forty-one, Pablita was devastated, convinced that the prophecy was fulfilled.

In Tewa culture, the matrilineal cords are very strong. Hardin's link to the Tewa was primarily through her mother, and both women had broken cords to the Pueblo culture, particularly to the "motherline." (Naomi Ruth Lowinsky, *Motherline*. Los Angeles, Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1992) This is the legacy passed on from grandmother, mother, daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter. Hardin's motherland, in the Tewa culture, was the "wounded feminine," a heritage of suffering, devaluation, and even self-destruction.

For instance, Pablita's mother, Marianita, died at a very young age, leaving Pablita virtually abandoned. Her Pueblo, as we have seen, went on to censure her for daring to paint. Pablita handed down this wounded heritage to her daughter. Being rejected for her representations of the spiritual caused a legacy of emotional pain and disconnection from her history and roots. Hardin strove to heal this wounded motherland through her creative work, and her art became a bridge across the chasms in the motherline, a means to transcend the pain, connect with her culture to universal themes of mother, and to realize herself as universal woman.

THE WOMAN SERIES

Helen Hardin's triumphant bridging of the gap in the motherline is best represented by her most ambitious and significant works, called *The Woman Series*. Created in the three years before her death from breast cancer (1981-1983), Tsa-sahwee-eh's Women are the accumulation of all the knowledge and skill that she derived from her life work. Particularly Asia her etched "Feminine Trinity," her sure hand begins to resolve the paradoxes of her life by truly acknowledging the universal and the collective in her images and art, to map the true identity of her self. Two incidents inspired this series: Hardin's changing personal life, and her reaction to the treatment of women in the work of male Native American artists. "Their women were large and lifeless, large blobs. Sort of doing nothing except being idle, fat, and wallowing in the daylight. But women do more than this, and I wanted to show thinking women. And my women are not just Indian women, they're universal women. So *Changing Woman* appeals to all women because they should change. They should go through many changes throughout their lives. This is what I personally feel." (Personal Document of Inee Yang Slaughter, transcription of Helen Hardin interview in New Jersey, 1984)

Hardin saw her women as sensitive, emotional, *and* intellectual. Her focus was on the face, not the body or the "boobs," (as Hardin would refer to breasts). Her women were truly strong, androgynous women, able to unite the masculine and feminine; the emotional and the cerebral. Jung postulated that one of the ultimate achievements of one's individuation process was to hold the masculine and feminine in conscious balance. Hardin achieves just this with her *Woman Series*. With this trinity of Madonnas, in striking contrast to the masculine trinity of Christian culture, she created her own spiritual deities. Nor, despite the abstraction, is the

body left out. Her *Women* are both holy and human. Through these works, Hardin imagines herself as the ageless Kachina and the changing young woman artist. The series represents the pinnacle of her personal and spiritual journey.

Changing Woman, (1980-1981), which Hardin considered her most important piece, is a face divided in half. On one side, there is a profile which may represent her lifelong struggle with personal relationship. Here she looks into herself and confronts her shadow: the pain and inner conflicts that were locked away and unaddressed. (She permits herself to confront another Tewa taboo by publicly addressing her shame and struggle. In Tewa tradition, problems are never addressed publicly, especially to another culture.) The frontal gaze is her confrontation with her external Tewa and Anglo worlds: her resolution of belonging to neither. Her face is held in a circle. Hardin strongly identified with the universal cycle represented by the circle. Perhaps it enabled her to hold and resolve both her internal and external conflicts. The turquoise circular beads, a sign of good health and luck, bless her struggle.

Changing Woman seems to be a portrait of herself as an ageless Kachina. The Hopi and the Navajo traditions talk about the *warrior woman*, which is represented here in the treatment of *Changing Woman's* hair. The myth of the warrior woman is about a young woman who is fixing her hair, and has completed only one side in a bun. Suddenly the village is attacked. Because all the men happen to be away at another war, the young woman runs out to defend her village, leaving the other half of her hair undone. (Personal interview, Cheryl Ingram, August, 1994) Helen is the warrior woman who is ready to fight and struggle and resolve her inner battles. In this piece, she is able to face her past, and proceed into an unknown future, while always acknowledging the universal cycle of the change of seasons, seen in the earth-tones used in the piece.



Changing Woman

Medicine Woman

Listening Woman

Medicine Woman (1982), completed before Hardin was diagnosed with breast cancer, is replete with healing imagery. Perhaps her close, delicate link with her personal and collective unconscious informed her of the need for healing medicine. This etching is the only one of the series with plumes, which in some Native American cultures signify a healing spirit. Margarete recalled that while painting *Medicine Women* her mother had a "sinking sensation" and knew emotionally that she needed "medicine" to go on. (Personal interview, Margerete Bagshaw-Tindall, September, 1994) In the etching, *Medicine Woman* is cross-eyed, and knows she must look beyond what is within" and "know" it. This woman's face is also two-sided; *Medicine Woman* portrays the ceremonial healer able to hold the broken circle of both her anguish and her healing, and to face herself.

Cradoc Bagshaw, Hardin's husband, remembers how important this series was to her. He understood that what she was engaged in depicting was a metamorphosis actually taking place

as she created the work. In her intense discussions, she communicated the meaning of her creations to him. When she started *Listening Woman* in 1983, Cradoc knew she had returned from a distant part of her journey, and that issue had her feet on the ground again." (Personal interview, Cradoc Bagshaw, September, 1994) This painting is the third of the trinity, a symbol of creation, perhaps birthing a new image of herself. *Listening Woman* is "who I am becoming now." She looks "straight forward. She is very bold, very strong. She is the strongest of the three so far. She listens. She looks right directly at you. She is solid and self-sufficient and able to absorb the sorrow of the universe. She is Kachina/Madonna/Artist who can embrace constant changes, the timelessness of grief, and the virtue of endurance." Margarete states that her mother found in *Listening Woman* an "objective self" who was willing to listen to her soulful needs. "She needed to be objective and make decisions about her life. Helen needed to get selfish and draw on her objective self and let go of the anger and bias." (Interview with Margarete Bagshaw-Tindall, August 1994). *Listening Woman* portrays compassion as the ability to relinquish the anger, pain, and resentment, and move beyond them. Perhaps this capacity to forgive emerges only from the "objective self."

Helen's achievement was to create a feminine spirit that she could pass on to numerous young artists and admirers, who, like me, continue to discover her work. "The artist appeals to that part of our being . . . which is a gift and not an acquisition and, therefore, more permanently enduring." (Joseph Conrad, in Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, New York, Vintage Press, 1979, p. 1) Cheryl Ingram director of Helen Hardin's estate gallery, said that her most powerful experience of Hardin's work was through the eyes of a young Navajo male artist, who came to the gallery during the original installation of Hardin's works. He quietly looked at each piece, and seemed to be meditating in front of each one before moving on to another. Before leaving, he turned to Cheryl with tear- eyes, and said, "She is my hero." (Personal interview, Cheryl Ingram and Inee Slaughter, August 21, 1994)

Hardin's spiritual vision is a particularly poignant inheritance for her own daughter, Margarete, who has also become a practicing artist, continuing the motherline in this regard.

Hardin seemed to know that she had made a new angle into many people's souls and lives. "I think the reason I don't fear death is because I know that I'll always be here through my paintings . . . it's the reward of living and the reward I have to those that survive me. It is the only thing I can give that is really me." ("American Indian Artists," 1976) With her angles, curves, circles, squares, and lines, she has managed to pass on the "spirit" of her aliveness, creativity, and spirituality.

The Helen Hardin Estate Gallery is at the Silver Sun Gallery, in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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