



Beth Ames Swartz

Beth Ames Swartz The Fire and the Rose

Beth Ames Swartz The Word in Paint

Notwithstanding the known impact of theosophy upon the early, pioneering abstract work of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich, the spiritual in art is still more or less taboo. Could we also be reminded that both Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* and the murals of the *Rothko Chapel* were created without irony? What prevents most critics from digging deeper into the spiritual content of Joseph Beuys' work or even Yves Klein's? Nowadays if art and poetry have a religion it is certainly Buddhism, beginning with Zen in the Fifties and now almost universally of the Tibetan kinds. Yet spirituality, because it is too often confused with the evils of organized religion; because it breaks apart formalist cant and a rigid, received view of art history; because it is perceived of as personal, subjective, and certainly unquantifiable; and, above all, because it is deeply embarrassing — is censored. Spiritual art proclaims that art must be more than a product or an investment strategy.

Beth Ames Swartz, whose work of over more than forty years was sampled at the Phoenix Art Museum and then traveled to the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University in 2002 is a spirituality-in-art stalwart.

We could, I suppose, just look at Swartz's work as just paint and a myriad of materials on flat surfaces — somehow no longer flat, no longer mute — but that would miss the point. A painter friend surprised me when I said I was writing about Swartz: "Oh, yes, she gets great textures." My feeling is that the "textures" are not about beauty or tour-de-force but come from the pressure to express the normally inexpressible and communicate the incommunicable. As glittery or as radiant as her paintings are, they are from somewhere else; at their best they are scary and alien. Even the recent paintings, which are outwardly more contemplative and less convulsive, because of the partially and the mostly indecipherable texts in both the "Visible Reminders" paintings and the new "The Fire and the Rose" series, are as original as anything Swartz has done. The paintings seem to come, not from Abstract Expressionism, but from an unknown civilization. They are not easy art and they are a glory to behold.

The larger paintings in the new series use words from T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," the last section of his Four Quartets. Swartz's choices are perfect. The text used in *But heard, half heard, in the stillness* begins with the words: "With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling." Or, to take another example, *Love is the unfamiliar Name*, uses a section that begins: "Who then devised the torment? Love,/ Love is the unfamiliar name..." Eliot, of course, was once the most influential of the 20th century modernist poets writing in English. If one knows his poems, it is impossible to fully strip even fragments of their incorrigible irony. Swartz innocently — and successfully — trims the text to its spiritual bones. Rather than illustrate the poem, she uses the words themselves to impart a kind of mournful transcendence, a kind of Church of England Vedanta.

The Phoenix Museum retrospective in 2002 — a trial-run, I think, for the larger survey that is clearly required — and the Hudson Hills monograph published in association with it were both titled *Reminders of Invisible Light*, which is a clue to the mystical content and effect. In the book, curator David S. Rubin's essay called "Ritual and Transformation" is a factual and level-headed survey of Swartz's development from early Color Field watercolors, through the burned, torn and buried paper works often based on the Kabbalah, culminating in her *Israel Revisited*

Series in which process/rituals she had developed were performed at sites in Israel associated with women in the Old Testament (shown at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1981); through her *A Moving Point of Balance* healing installation of paintings inspired by the chakras or traditional tantric energy centers; through her "Eleventh Hour" sets of paintings; up to her "Shen Qi" paintings of the late '90s and several points in between.

Arlene Raven's poetic, personal essay balances Rubin's more measured descriptions. What is missing is an overview of the spiritual in art, how Swartz fits in, and some sense of her bravery in the face of the art world's fear of the cosmic and the healing, transformative functions of art.

I have followed Swartz's work and commented upon it since the First Western States Biennial in 1979. I contributed an essay to the small catalogue for *A Moving Point of Balance* and as Director/Curator of the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor in Staten Island, booked it in 1989 for the historic 1831 Main Hall. It wasn't easy; all the windows had to be covered. Viewers were bathed in colored light as they stood before each chakra painting; soothing sound was also a component; an Indian medicine wheel provided the introduction and a kind of stabilizing de-briefing environment ended the choreographed sequence of viewing, which had culminated in the Crown Chakra. If I remember correctly there was even at one point a let's-hold-hands-in-a-circle ceremony which participants adored but which embarrassed me. But it all worked. It was amazing. People wept; the comment book was full of ecstatic testimonials. I should have known. Swartz did exit surveys at the San Diego and Aspen venues and found that 98% of the viewers "of all age groups from broad socio-economic and geographic backgrounds felt relaxed, uplifted, and spiritually moved by their experience."

In some sense the taboo against the spiritual in art is the same as the taboo against art therapy. Even craft apparently now needs to be divorced from art therapy. Art is not supposed to have a use. Show me the art that has no use and I will show you the art that is a monopoly board-piece. In an effort to protect art from political interference, our predecessors also protected it from the heavens and in the process, alas, turned it over to the art heathens.

In terms of Swartz's art we are entering difficult territory, one that art history strategies and modes of criticism are of little or no use. Like beauty, the spiritual cannot be quantified. The spiritual in art is also radically nonformalist: we are no longer talking about art about art or forms about form. Even beauty — perhaps beauty in particular — is in service of spiritual ends. Or, as some might have it, beauty itself is a symptom of the spiritual (although I myself am not certain of this).

Spiritual art is like political art in several ways: Spiritual art that causes spiritual states is on a higher plane than art that just illustrates the same, just as political art that causes political action has to be considered more important than political illustration. How to differentiate these two modes in both types of art is extremely problematic.

But political art and spiritual art are different in two important ways: Beauty is not a political tool, unless one thinks of hairless, stern-jawed Aryan youth as beautiful. I think not. Or unless one thinks of oppressive architecture from Egypt to Rome to Washington as beautiful. Although I am no doubt in the minority, I don't.

Although the very effort might increase commitment, intensify solidarity, and even clarify beliefs and positions, political art is not in any major way about making the artist more political. Whereas spiritual art often comes about as a process that transforms the artist.

There is no question that addressing the spiritual in art brings us into difficult territory. New distinctions must be made; new vocabularies called into play. There is, for instance, the art that has a spiritual effect on the maker, the art that effects the viewer, and the art that effects both. What do we mean by a spiritual effect? What do we do with Shaker drawings or mediumistic art in general? Are memory or meditation aids also to be considered? Can the artist be merely a conduit and produce spiritual art without himself or herself being particularly “spiritual”? In other words, as certain major religions claim, is it really the office and not the officiator?

It is probably obvious that images of the Buddha and diagrams such as the “tree” of the Kabbalah can communicate spiritual content or even have spiritual effect, but what of totally abstract forms? Were Mondrian and Kandinsky right after all? Is a spiritual artwork necessarily easily identifiable as such?

In the meantime, Swartz’s work keeps these issues alive.

The Beat Generation has been safely put away, the hippies are all stockbrokers or fathers and mothers of same, at least until recently. And although thousands will come to hear the Dalai Lama and countless artists and musicians donate their works or perform for free to aid the Tibetan cause, there seems to be no interest in analyzing what this is all about. Is it because of the misguided notion that to have freedom of religion one must keep one’s spirituality totally private? We don’t want to step on anybody’s toes and, rightfully, don’t want to impose our beliefs on others. The world once again is being torn about by rigid religionists.

Beth Swartz’s art says that religion may be one of the problems but the spiritual is the solution.

Also, there may be the mistaken idea that the spiritual in art was an ‘80s thing rather than perennial. Suzie Gablik had her say, but not her way. Even I wrote positive things about Alex Grey and a few other artists who were engaged in creating art with a spiritual purpose. Maurice Tuchman at the L.A. County Museum presented a huge exhibition that outlined an historical overview.

Swartz’s art proves that the spiritual in art won’t go away. We need not go into the possibly demonic mediumistic art that the surrealists were enamored of and the spiritualists included in Art Brut. We need not discuss the automatism that the Action Painters lifted from the surrealist. Although it is action painting and then earth art that are Swartz’s first inspirations, there is something more important:

Swartz’s art embodies the yoga of art, experienced by any artist when you are truly inspired. Something can happen when you make art; something can happen when you look at art. That “something” cannot be explained away by referring to a mysterious “aesthetic response.” The mystery is deeper.

— John Perreault, 2003



Visible Reminders:
In my end is my beginning 2001-2002
acrylic on canvas
48" x 72"



Visible Reminders:
There is a time 2002
acrylic on canvas
48" x 72"



Visible Reminders:
Refraction #1 2002
acrylic on canvas
30" x 30"

Visible Reminders:
Refraction #3 2002
acrylic on canvas
30" x 30"

Visible Reminders:
Refraction #2 2002
acrylic on canvas
30" x 30"



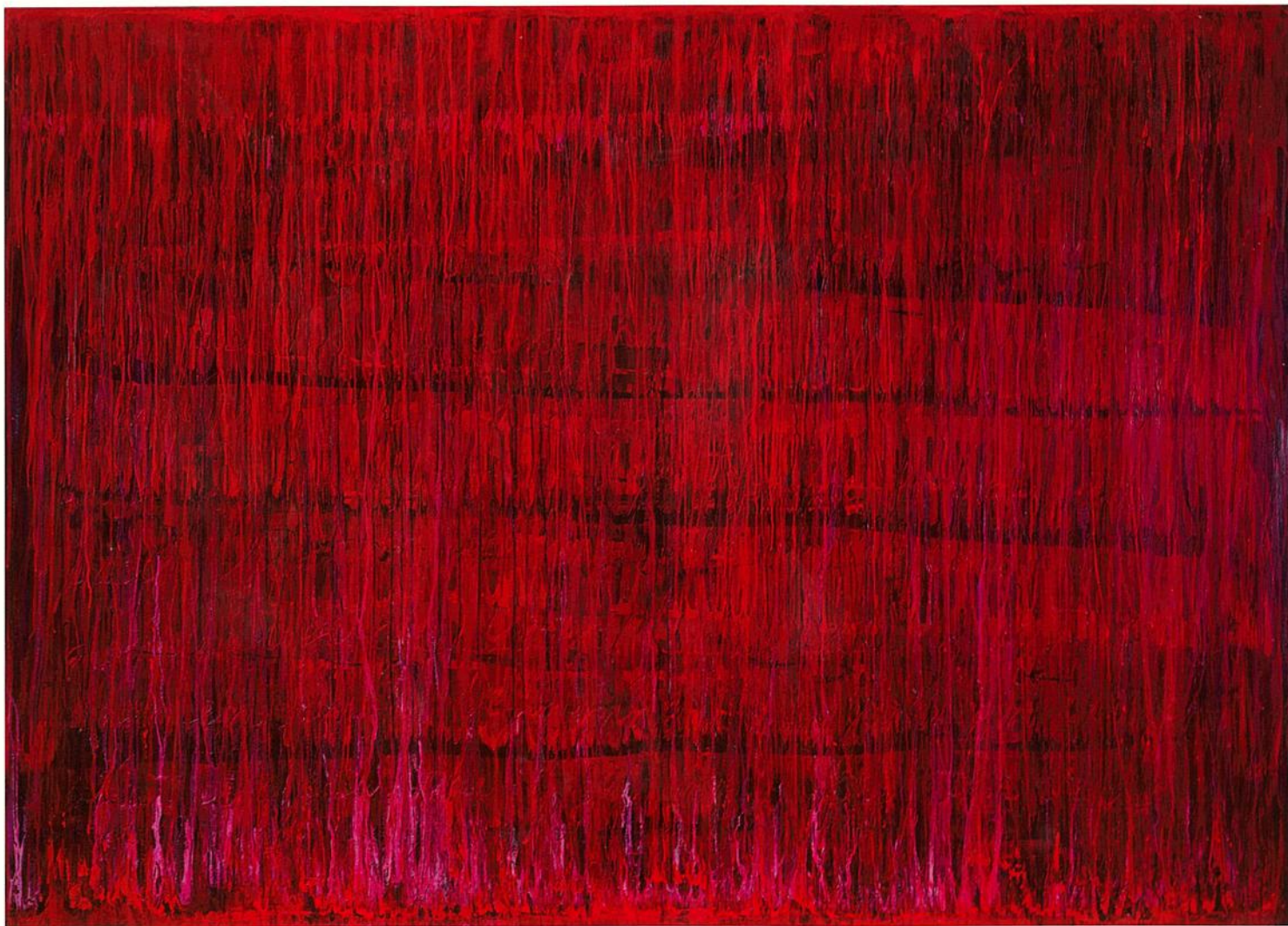
The Fire and the Rose:
But heard, half-heard in the stillness 2003
acrylic on canvas
54" x 66"



The Fire and the Rose:
Love is the unfamiliar Name 2003
acrylic on canvas
48" x 72"



The Fire and the Rose:
To be redeemed from fire by fire 2003
acrylic on canvas
48" x 72"



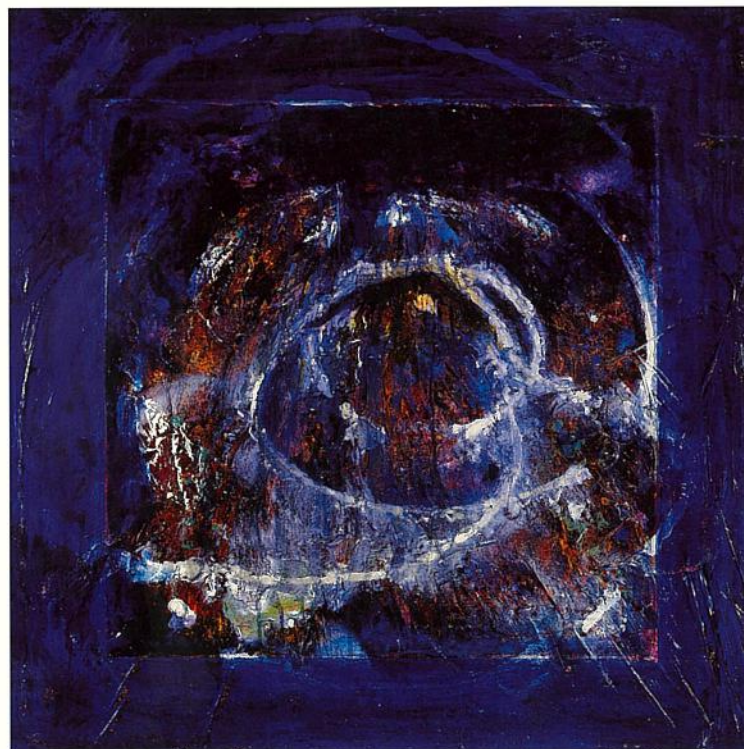
The Fire and the Rose:
And to make an end is to make a beginning 2003
acrylic on canvas
60" x 84"



The Fire and the Rose:
And the fire and the rose are one 2003
acrylic on canvas
48" x 60"



The Fire and the Rose:
Now the hedgerow is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom of snow 2003
acrylic and holographic film on canvas
30" x 30"



The Fire and the Rose:
Between two waves of the sea 2003
acrylic and holographic film on canvas
30" x 30"



The Fire and the Rose:
This is the spring time but not in time's covenant 2003
acrylic and holographic film on canvas
30" x 30"



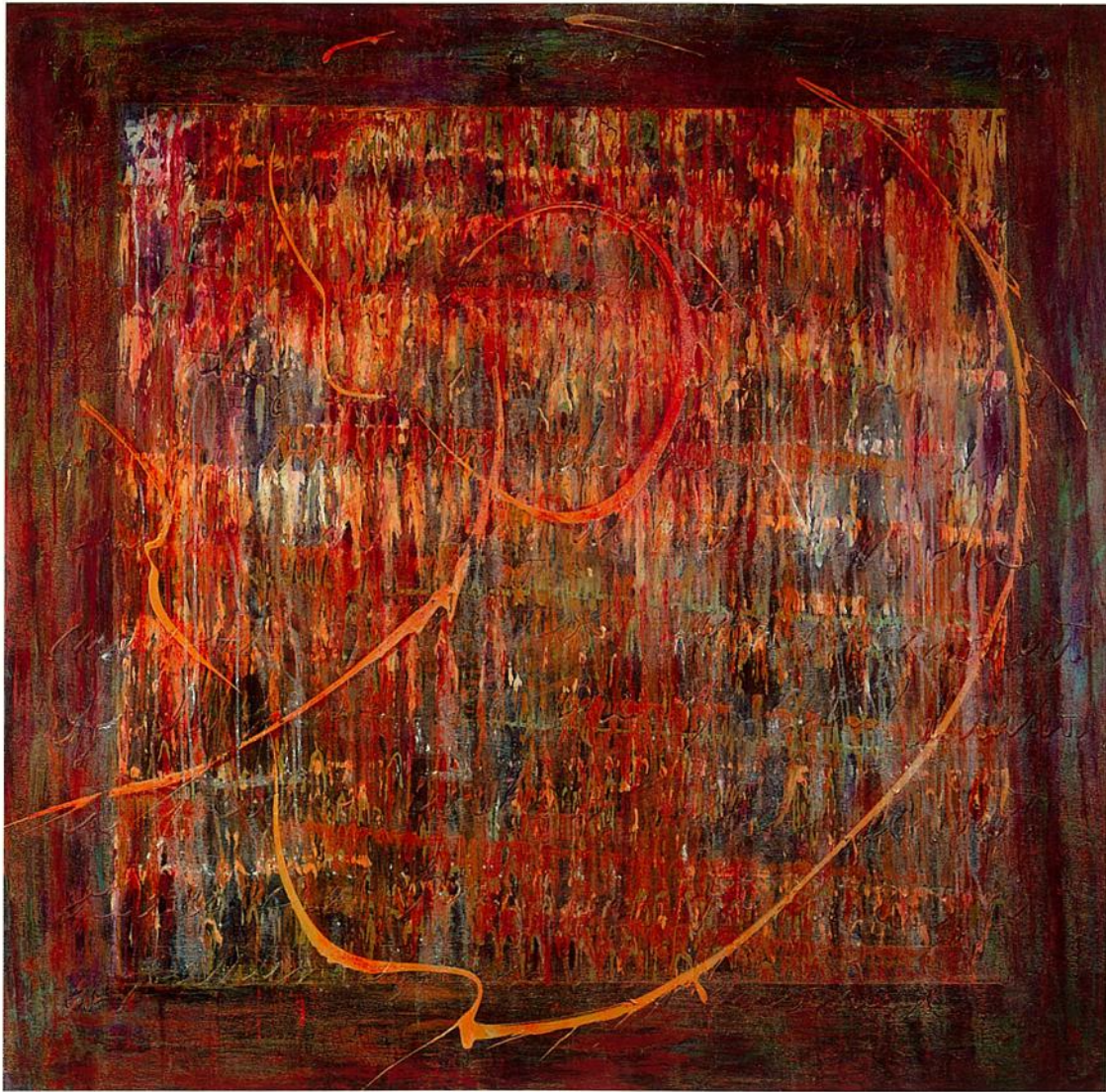
The Fire and the Rose:
When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire 2003
acrylic on canvas
30" x 30"



The Fire and the Rose:
The dove descending breaks the air 2003
acrylic on canvas
60" x 48"



The Fire and the Rose:
The voice of the hidden waterfall 2003
acrylic on canvas
60" x 48"



The Fire and the Rose:
The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree are of equal duration 2003
acrylic on canvas
60" x 60"



The Fire and the Rose:
Being between two lives 2003
acrylic on canvas
60" x 60"



The Fire and the Rose:
The parched eviscerate soil gapes at the vanity of toil 2003
acrylic on canvas
48" x 60"



The Fire and the Rose:
The brief sun flames the ice in windless cold that is the heart's heat 2003
acrylic on canvas
48" x 60"

Selected Biography of Beth Ames Swartz

Selected One-Person Art Exhibitions

- 2004 Aspen International Art, *The Fire and the Rose*, July 16-August 6, 2004, Aspen, CO
- 2004 Vanier Galleries Inc., *The Fire and the Rose*, February 5-28, 2004, Scottsdale, AZ
- 2003 Sylvia Plotkin Judaica Museum, *Visible Reminders*, January 12-March 15, 2003, Phoenix, AZ
- 2002 Chiaroscuro Gallery, *Beth Ames Swartz*, July 5-31, 2002, Santa Fe, NM
- 2002 Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, *Reminders of Invisible Light: Beth Ames Swartz 1960-2001*, June 5-30, 2002, Ithaca, NY
- 2002 Phoenix Art Museum, *Reminders of Invisible Light: Beth Ames Swartz 1960-2001*, February 9-May 14, 2002, Phoenix, AZ
- 2002 Vanier Fine Art Ltd., *Visible Reminders*, February 7-March 2, 2002, Scottsdale, AZ
- 2000 Vanier Fine Art Ltd., *States of Change*, January 12-February 9, 2000, Scottsdale, AZ
- 1998 Donahue/Sosinski Gallery, *Shen Qi Series*, April 9-May 9, 1998, New York, NY
- 1998 Joy Tash Gallery, *Shen Qi Series*, January 8-31, 1998, Scottsdale, AZ
- 1995 Joy Tash Gallery, *The Lotus as Metaphor*, January 19-February 14, 1995, Scottsdale, AZ
- 1994 E.M. Donahue Gallery, *A Story for the Eleventh Hour*, February 10-March 19, 1994, New York, NY
- 1990-85 The Nickle Arts Museum and ten other museums, *A Moving Point of Balance* (traveling museum exhibition), Calgary, Canada

- 1990, '89, '88, '86, '84, '82, '80, '79 Elaine Horwitch Galleries, Scottsdale, AZ
- 1985 ACA Galleries, *Beth Ames Swartz: Selected Works 1975-1985*, May 4-25, 1985, New York, NY
- 1983-81 The Jewish Museum & eight other museums, *Israel Revisited* (traveling museum exhibition), New York, NY
- 1978 Scottsdale Center for the Arts, *Inquiry Into Fire*, February 1-28, 1978, Scottsdale, AZ
- 1977 Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, *Ten Take Ten* (a 10-year retrospective), July 9-August 28, 1977, Colorado Springs, CO

Selected Group Art Exhibitions

- 2002 ACA Galleries, *Summer Show*, July 15-August 15, 2002, New York, NY
- 2002 Pentimenti Gallery, *Four Person Exhibition*, September 15-October 6, 2002, Philadelphia, PA
- 1994 DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park & one other museum, *Body And Soul: Contemporary Art and Healing* (traveling museum exhibition), Cordova, MA
- 1982-80 Sierra Nevada Museum of Art & ten other museums, *Artists in the American Desert* (traveling museum exhibition), Reno, NV
- 1979 Denver Art Museum & three other museums, *The First Western States Biennial Exhibition* (traveling museum exhibition), Denver, CO

Selected Bibliography

- Villani, John. "National Reviews: Beth Ames Swartz," *ARTnews*, 101, no. 51 (May 2002): 75-6.
- Perreault, John. "Beth Ames Swartz to the Rescue," *NY Arts*, 7, no. 4 (April 2002): 22-3.
- Raven, Arlene and Rubin, David. *Reminders of Invisible Light: The Art of Beth Ames Swartz*, New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2002
- Baigell, Matthew. "Art and Spirit: Kabbalah and Jewish-American Artists," *Tikkun* 14, no. 4, (July/August 1999): 59-61.
- Seidel, Miriam. "Beth Ames Swartz at E.M. Donahue," *Art in America*, 82, no. 11 (November 1994): 131.
- Douglas, Olivia W. "Beth Ames Swartz: E.M. Donahue," *ARTnews*, 93, no. 5 (May 1994): 161.
- Raven, Arlene. "Beth Ames Swartz: 'A Story for the Eleventh Hour,'" *The Village Voice*, February 23-March 1, 1994, p. 88.
- Rothschild, John D. and Sichel, Berta. *A Story for the Eleventh Hour* (Exhibition Catalog). New York: E.M. Donahue Gallery, 1994.
- Gablik, Suzi. *The Reenchantment of Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991, pp. 155-157.
- Marks, Claude, editor. *World Artists, 1980-1990*. New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1991, pp. 378-382.
- Perreault, John. *Beth Ames Swartz 1982-1988* (Exhibition Catalog for "A Moving Point of Balance" traveling museum exhibition). Scottsdale, AZ: Beth Ames Swartz, 1988.
- Nelson, Mary Carroll. *Connecting: The Art of Beth Ames Swartz*. Flagstaff: Northland Press, Ltd., 1984.
- Rand, Harry (Introduction). *Israel Revisited: Beth Ames Swartz* (Exhibition Catalog). Phoenix: Beth Ames Swartz, 1981.

Selected Public Collections

- Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY
Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
The Jewish Museum, New York, NY
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
Scottsdale Center for the Arts/Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, AZ
Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA

Selected Honors, Grants, and Other Awards

- 2003 Veteran Feminists of America, Medal of Honor, New York, NY
- 2001 Governor's Arts Award, Phoenix, AZ
- 2000 Artist in Residence, Anderson Ranch, Snowmass Village, CO
- 1994 Founder, *Culture Care*, an international, non-profit organization sponsoring *The Sacred Souls Project*, to identify, support and honor individuals who demonstrate positive human societal values, Phoenix, AZ
- 1994 Awarded *Flow Fund* grant by Rockefeller Family Fund for discretionary philanthropic use for non-personal benefit, New York, NY

Little Gidding¹

Philosophically, Swartz bases her new series *The Fire and the Rose* upon "Little Gidding," the final poem in T.S. Eliot's, *Four Quartets*. Some sense of the poem may be gained by looking at beginning and ending portions.

I (partial)

*Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic.
When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,
In windless cold that is the heart's heat,
Reflecting in a watery mirror
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.
And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,
Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal fire
In the dark time of the year. Between melting and freezing
The soul's sap quivers. There is no earth smell
Or smell of living thing. This is the spring time
But not in time's covenant. Now the hedgerow
Is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom
Of snow, a bloom more sudden
Than that of summer, neither budding nor fading,
Not in the scheme of generation.
Where is the summer, the unimaginable
Zero summer?*

V (partial)

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always--
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.*

¹Eliot, T. S. *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, Harcourt, Brace and Company: New York, 1952, "Four Quartets: Little Gidding," pp.138-145.



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