

A4
Asher

ELISE ASHER



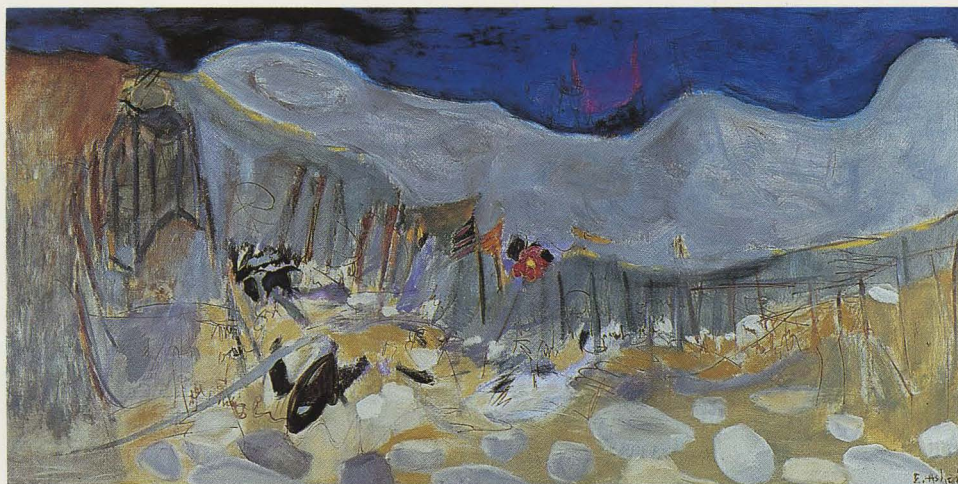
PROFILE OF THE ARTIST BY CHRISTOPHER BUSA

When she first met Stanley Kunitz, in the fall of 1956 in New York City, Elise Asher had just returned from a summer in Provincetown, devastated over the break-up of her nine-year marriage to the artist Nanno de Groot. Kunitz also had been away for the summer, enjoying, while at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, the company of James Brooks and Charlotte Park, Giorgio Cavallon and Linda Lindenberg, and Paul and Peggy Burlin, all of whom, particularly the Brookses and the Cavallons, were close friends of Asher. Knowing how she was freshly grieving, her friends insisted, "You must meet Stanley Kunitz. He's a most wonderful person." Asher, with equal vehemence, said, "No, no, I don't want to meet anyone." But she knew and valued Kunitz's poetry, and meet they finally did at a small dinner at the Burlins which included the Brookses and Cavallons as well. Not too long after that evening, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, their lives were joined together.

She had been publishing poems in many of the best literary journals and so-called little magazines of the period, including *Poetry*, *New Mexico Quarterly*, *Modern Writing*, *Yale Poetry Review*, and *Botteghe Oscure*. Delmore Schwartz, editor at *Partisan Review*, accepted a group of her poems, but they sat in the trunk of his car for a year before they were published. Though most of her poems had been written years earlier, a collection appeared just before she met Kunitz. That volume, *The Meandering Absolute*, opens with a short poem, "Possession":

*Not yours neccessarily when it wanders on your lawn,
Is placed upon your lap, on your plate, in your purse,
Or happens to have flowered from your flesh—*

*O the amber Anything sewn in a cloud,
Canyon, bayou, or fish-ridden sea,
Or then again warm beneath your own quilt,—
Is yours as the wish for it kisses your brain,
As the shine of it swims in your eye.*



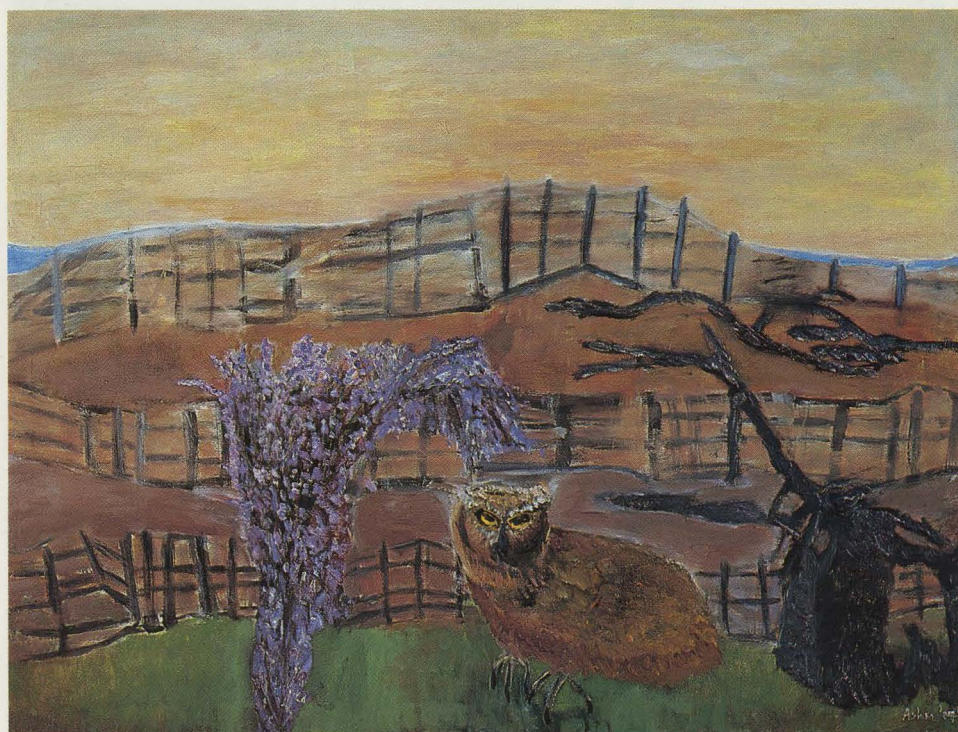
of 35, Elise became one of four small children left in the care of her father, a journalist and intellectual who was "conscientious, even strict, almost a perfectionist, yet quite unconventional, eccentric, politically very liberal—a freethinker, widely read, particularly in poetry." (She now realizes, "How beautifully Stanley and he would have gotten along!") Occasionally some of her father's friends, en route to a scheduled lecture or reading, were overnight guests in the Asher household. One glamorous visitor was Edna St. Vincent Millay, then at the peak of her fame and adored not only by Elise's family but by the entire South Side community of Chicago in the '20s and '30s. Chicago, too, was at a peak of cultural prominence, notably in the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and in efforts at progressive schooling. Asher believes that much of the atmosphere around *Poetry* magazine must certainly have inspired her own beginnings as a poet at a time of her own crushes and yearnings, so full of her own bittersweet unhappiness.

Following her first marriage to a bright, personable, graduate of Harvard Law School, Asher moved to Rochester, New York. Living a comfortable, "boring," suburban life, she was not happy playing tennis at the country club, though she is pleased to remember that she got quite good at the game. Wanting to leave, she instead wrote poetry in hard, intense "binges." Thanks to her unhappiness, she wrote some good poetry, but, she feels, "it was stricter. I couldn't be free. It may even sound a little old-fashioned now."

In the late '40s she moved to New York's Greenwich Village with her small daughter, Babette. Mainly to share with her daughter and to cheer them both up a bit in their new environment, she began using Babette's poster paints to make "schmoo-like figures in imagined environments." Colorful and quite active, these Miro-esque works, done on shirt boards and cheap drawing paper, revealed to her that she was gradually becoming a full-time painter.

During those early days in the Village, her social milieu was largely a literary one. She knew e. e. cummings and W. C. Williams and met Dylan Thomas on his first visit to New York. After readings at the lively YMHA Poetry Center she attended little parties with poets whose work she'd known and admired. She had yet to meet many painters. She was still writing during the late night hours when all was quiet. Toward the end of 1948, however, she met Nanno de Groot through mutual friends from the West Coast.

The following year they travelled to Big Sur for a lengthy sojourn which made an indelible impression on her visual sense. The landscape was breathtaking—"primitive and brutal, pre-Est and completely hidden for nudity, with sulphur baths, smelling of rotten eggs," foam-



TOP:

Elegy for RM

oil on canvas, 1991

MIDDLE:

Under the Burning Lilac

oil on canvas

1988-9

BOTTOM:

Beyond the Rapture and the Dread

oil on canvas, 1989

Like the trail of a snail, Asher's poetry has a meandering line, with semantic loops across her themes of nonsense, innocence, and visionary imagination. In many of her poems, the time-sense is suspended like snow falling in those glass paperweights children play with at Christmas, which, when all the white dust settles, one turns over hypnotically and watches with continuing fascination.

Precisely such objects, experienced while growing up in Chicago, left her with lasting impressions of the feel of magical miniatures. She played with music boxes, created endless paper chains, and made a "very homemade" wax tablet and stylus for her school class in Roman and Greek civilization. She especially cherished one present she received, a sealing-wax set. Like most young children she painted with watercolors, making Christmas cards by taking off from religious images and putting in roosters where the Madonna should be.

After her mother died of cancer at the age

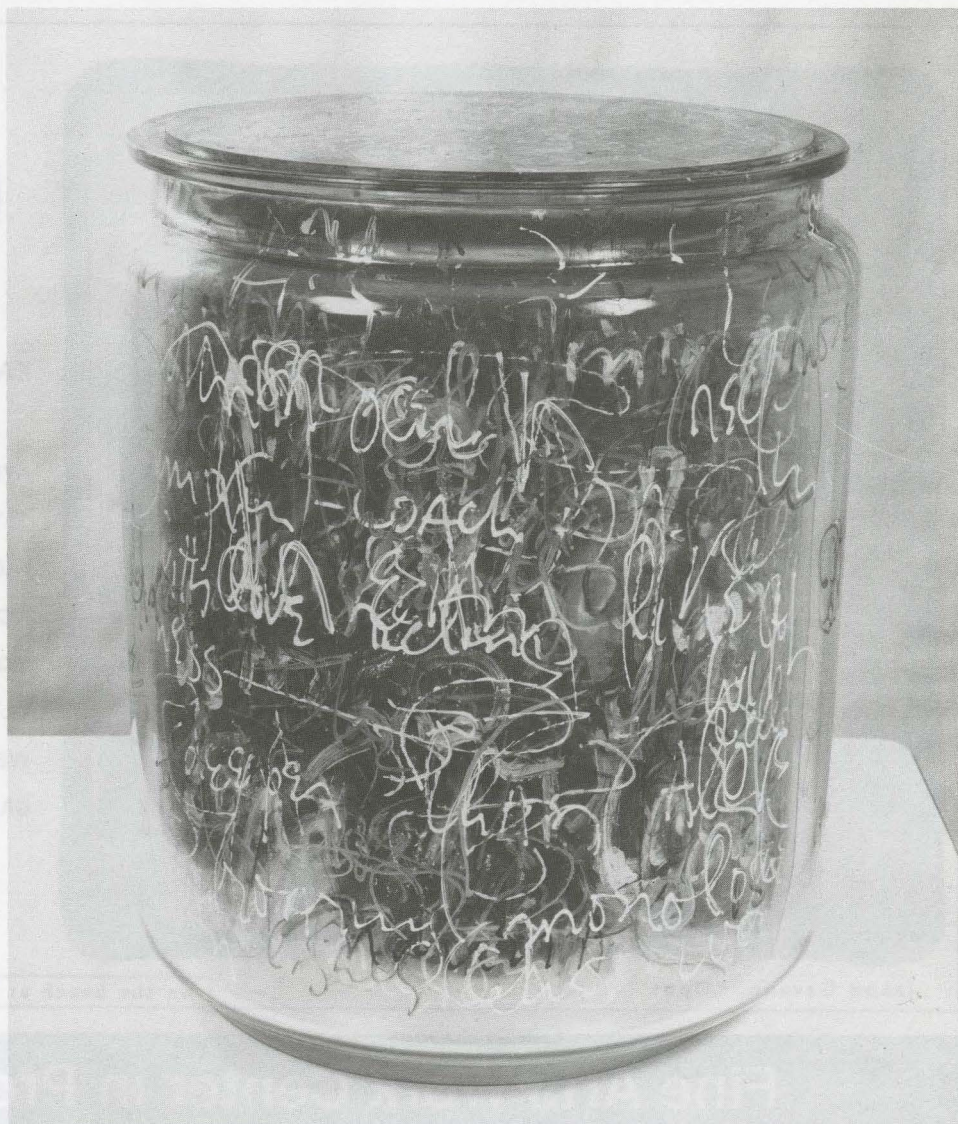
ing in cave-like hollows in the rocky terrain. A mile below, in surf prohibitively dangerous for swimming, she could hear the seals barking.

Only a handful of inhabitants were available for evening visiting. They played Chinese checkers with Henry Miller, who was living on the mountain top with his third wife, and listened to his wild, drunken, and sparkling talk. Most days she and Nanno spent painting and drawing. More obsessively than ever before, excited by the landscape, she pursued her poster-painting, story-telling style. Nanno, a gifted, natural, and independent artist whose landscapes and portraits were conspicuously deft, wore sandals in all climates, whether in Big Sur, New York, or Provincetown. Sometimes Asher felt he seemed like some sort of "beautiful, stork-like bird—a strange mixture of tenderness and a good deal of repressed anger against a Dutch childhood and elderly parents, far too old, he used to say, for a little boy."

Reluctantly they finally left their western paradise and headed east. Back in their Christopher Street apartment, she found herself fully ready for less innocence, gradually launching herself into a style of linear abstraction. These works were much closer to Mark Tobey's "white writing," which she had not yet seen, but which she would come to admire enormously.

After more than two years of working in this manner, she had produced a sizeable body of paintings and had her first one-person show at the Tanager Gallery in 1953, one of the very first artists' co-ops. Situated on Tenth Street, practically on the Bowery, bums could frequently be found sleeping and reeking and sometimes roaming into the gallery, good-natured, unkempt, and cheerfully offering original opinions of what they saw. Also at that time many of the so-called abstract expressionists had small one-room studios in the same building or the adjoining one where they worked and lived illegally. The gallery became one of the hot spots for social contacts and exchange of ideas. The founding members, including herself and Nanno de Groot, Angelo Ippolito, Cajori, Alex Katz, William King, and others, used to jokingly refer to the Tanager as the "Knoedlers of Tenth Street."

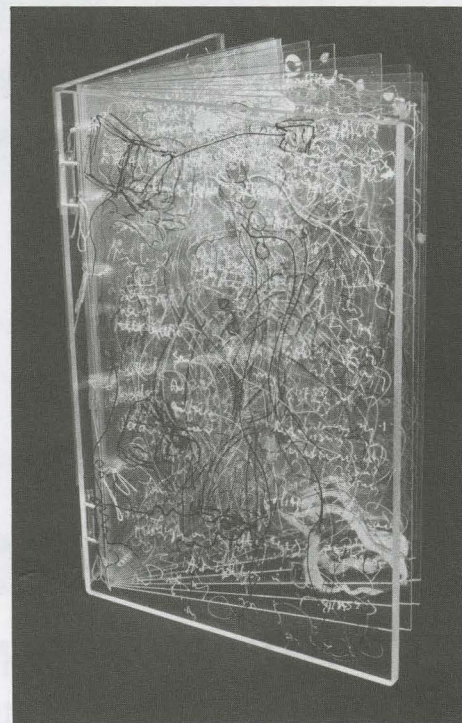
During the '50s and early '60s, Asher showed in a string of annual artist-run exhibitions held at the Stable Gallery. Spending summers in Provincetown, she and de Groot were west-end neighbors of Hans Hofmann. Hofmann was among those of her friends who did not approve of her not being an abstract expressionist. Whenever Hofmann would come to her studio, he would look at her work and say that it was beautiful, but that it was obvious she was in a transitional period. Asher's canvases, consisting of tight weavings of color and



linear configurations, hinting of calligraphy, resembled an "abstract pointilism," she says, "if there is such a style," rather than the athletic push and pull of Hofmann's colored planes. Undaunted, Hofmann was always hopeful she was passing through a phase that would lead to his point of view.

By the early '60s, after making a valentine for Kunitz, Asher began using plexiglass as a painting surface in place of canvas. She had found a large, old-fashioned cookie jar, and, after painting a section of flexible vinyl, wrapped the cylindrical jar. Then, with the force of a revelation, she discarded the vinyl and began painting "in the round," painting the jar itself both inside and outside. In 1964 that piece was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in an exhibition called "Greetings," next to Saul Steinberg's *faux* phonograph records.

Intermittently, between paintings done on canvas, Asher continued to make cylindrical paintings and transparent book structures. These "books" were composed of several acrylic leaves fanning out from a spiral binding, each page vividly inflected with colorful and delightfully illegible writing. The multilayered works, with the total image a composite of thin slices intermingling, were



TOP:
Painted Glass Cylinder, 1964

BELOW:
Standing Plexi Book Structure



Stanley Kunitz, *The Story of my Life*

often compared with see-through objects made by Rauschenberg and Johns in the '60s. But even though Asher received favorable reviews, she ceased to make any more, destroying many pieces and saving only a few. The work, she says without regret, "got more and more beautiful and suddenly it was boring me—that's when I started making Fellini-ish scenes on long, horizontal plexi-panels." Many of these paintings, still enmeshed in cobwebs of calligraphy, depict visionary moments caught in eternal time, images she calls "elsewheres." She made repeated use of clocks, locks, keys, tombs, moors and marshlands, strange birds and other creatures, as well as a variety of billowing figures who always seem to be wearing robes.

Around 1980 she went back to canvas, she says, "for good, happily giving up the jewel-like glitter and cold quality of glass." She felt it no longer suited her psyche. She was drawn to the canvas surface by its warmth, pliability and "give," and because it seemed to her more capable of expressing her visual transformations of lines of text by Blake, Hopkins, Keats, or Yeats. Occasionally, merely for embellishment of the surface, she inserted threads of her own scribbled script.

She is haunted by certain passages or phrases in poems which starkly make her conscious of her own mortality. By way of example, she mentions a short remark by James Joyce which she heard on a television documentary. Joyce, having completed *Finnegans Wake* in weakening

health, was at his lowest ebb about his daughter's mental illness. Half to himself, in a poignant, sing-song voice, he imagined his own death: "Never to see again, nor know, nor miss me." She remembered how she used to ask her father to explain to her, after her mother died, how you can think about not thinking. She wondered how you could know you weren't knowing. "Nor know me!" she whispers harshly. "That's devastating. That scares me."

Her painting from 1985, "The Long Boat," derives its imagery from the Kunitz poem of the same title. A ghostly form floats in the interior of the long boat, a ship of death en route to infinity, gently rocking the dying, faceless figure as if it were an infant in a cradle. The land drifts away. The light fades. The sun is low and orange. The shore birds are death crows. The further landscape is farmland lush with ripe color, awaiting the imminent harvest.



Elise Asher, from *The Long Boat*, 1985

Elise Asher

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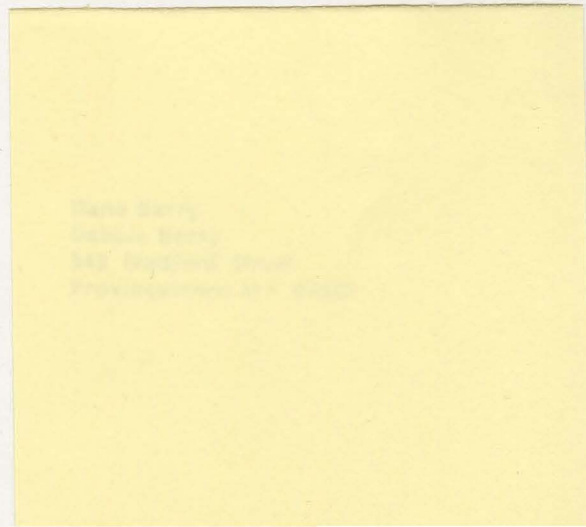
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& others.



"Dawn," Elise Asher (1983)



VF ART ASSOC
A-4, Asher

ELISE ASHER

P A I N T I N G S



THE PROVINCETOWN ART ASSOCIATION AND MUSEUM

ELISE ASHER

P A I N T I N G S

August 14 – September 20, 1992

THE PROVINCETOWN ART ASSOCIATION AND MUSEUM

The Provincetown Art Association and Museum is proud to present this exhibition of the works of Elise Asher.
We are particularly grateful for her enthusiastic cooperation in all aspects of the exhibition.

—Peter Watts, *Chairman*, Exhibition Committee

“I TRY TO TRANSLATE the poetry of existence, its beauty and its terror, into a vocabulary of the visual imagination. This painted transformation seeks a more than usual state of being, the condition of *otherness*.”



Photo of the artist by Hans Namuth

ELISE ASHER'S PAINTINGS ARE Symbolist distillations of invisible worlds of emotion and experience. Whether gentle or violent, Asher creates visual unities that are intense, even ecstatic. Her rare combination of raw power, artful structure and fiery spirituality recalls Van Gogh, and particularly Mirabeau's beautiful words, "drawn perpetually towards the summits where the mysteries of human life reveal themselves."

Poet as well as painter, Asher thinks of her works as emanations of specific poems—by Gerard Manley Hopkins, Keats, or her husband, Stanley Kunitz. Lines or cadences from poems are "jumping-off points, parts of a text that makes music for me and extend the life of the poem."

Asher's colors are ancient ochres, Etruscan terra-cottas, lapis and gold. Her themes are archetypal: aspiration, survival, love, death. With her rich vocabulary of marks and visual metaphors, the painter plays out these themes which affirm a Nature both sophisticated and abundant.

One of her finest paintings, *Beyond The Rapture and The Dread*, inspired by lines from Kunitz' poem the *Abduction*, gains its apocalyptic beauty from a menacing but luxurious expanse of lapis sky. This blue has a most intense area of dramatic radiance where odd fingers of light evoke a hand with an aura or halo of illumination, reaching towards a creature on earth. The astonishing luminosity and saturation of color suggest no other modern artist but rather the brilliant blues of Bellini or Fra Angelico.

In *Enchantment*, from Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, Asher's style of dabs and scratches of paint conjures up a vitalist cosmos both mobile and buoyantly germinating in metamorphosis. Here, a palette of ochres and browns, and a calligraphic evocation of landscape rhythms, again recalls Van Gogh. Asher's graphic force and voluptuous fluctuations of line move the grassy mounds and rocks and make the whole painting vibrate in depth and on the surface. While Asher is no Surrealist, her brushwork, palette and themes convey precisely the Surrealist notion of the "simultaneity of nature"—that seemingly infinite number of life processes seized and dramatized in one moment.

Seductively visual, Asher's work is emphatically metaphysical and invites extended reflection.

—Margaret Sheffield
1991

ASHER'S PAINTINGS
A open into realms we all inhabit; they do not retreat from any emotions we might bring to them. We emerge from the internal configuration of her paintings to wander deep into memory. What we see is her experience transformed into the painterly gesture and the poet's imagery. Her titles invite and suggest experiences or states of mind. There is a joining of self-sufficient "secret" symbols and pictures dependent on and linked to the world. We remain immersed in an atmosphere of garden and sea, arch and eave, bird and sanctuary. Each painting is a story and each story a song resonating in the ear of the spirit, resounding in a chorale of epiphany in life. (Arts Magazine)

—Rose Slivka



Spinning in the Wind

ELISE ASHER, BORN IN CHICAGO, has been living in New York City since 1948 as a visual artist. Prior to that she wrote poetry, culminating in a volume of poems entitled *The Meandering Absolute*. So from the very beginning, her artwork, on whatever surface she has chosen to use, tends to embody the poetic experience—visionary and timeless.



Broken Blossoms

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1991 June Kelly Gallery, New York
- 1988 William Benton Museum, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut
- 1987 Ingber Gallery, New York
- 1986 Cherry Stone Gallery, Wellfleet, Massachusetts
- 1985 Ingber Gallery, New York
- 1983 Ingber Gallery, New York
- *1983 National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.
- *1981 Cherry Stone Gallery, Provincetown, Massachusetts
- *1981 Ingber Gallery, New York
- *1979 Ingber Gallery, New York
- *1976 Washington Woman's Art Center, Washington, D.C.
- *1976 Marsh Gallery, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia
- *1973 Bertha Schaefer Gallery, New York
- *1973 Peter M. David Gallery, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- *1972 Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton, Long Island, New York
- *1971 Tirca Karlis Gallery, Provincetown, Massachusetts
- *1971 The Gotham Book Mart Gallery, New York
- 1966 The Contemporaries, New York
- 1964 Bradford Junior College, (retrospective) Bradford, Massachusetts
- 1963 Mary Harriman Gallery, Boston
- 1963 East Hampton Gallery, New York
- 1958 Grand Central Moderns, New York
- 1953 Tanager Gallery, New York

* These exhibitions consisted of works painted directly on a plexiglass surface rather than on canvas.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- *1990 Barbara Fendrick Gallery, New York
- 1990 Andre Zarre Gallery, New York
- *1990 *The Expanding Figurative Imagination*, Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York
- 1990 Peter M. David Gallery, (structures), Minneapolis, Minnesota
- 1989 Long Point Gallery, Invitational Show, Provincetown, Massachusetts

- 1989 American Academy of Arts and Letters, Candidates for Art Awards, New York
- 1987 *Going Fishing*, Graham Modern, New York
- 1986 Cross Currents, Guild Hall Museum, June 22-July 27, (exchange exhibit with collection from Provincetown Museum)
- 1983, 1984 *Written Imagery Unleashed in the 20th Century*, Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, Hemstead, New York
- 1980 American Academy of Arts and Letters, Award Selected Candidates, New York
- *1979 *Reverse Painting*, Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin
- 1979 Invitational Show, Provincetown Art Association, Provincetown, Massachusetts
- 1978 Tweed Museum, Duluth, Minnesota
- 1978 *Book Forms*, Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, Ohio
- 1978 Two year traveling show, Independent Curators, Inc.
- 1978 *Women Painters and Poets*, New York University, New York
- 1977 Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York
- *1977 Cape Cod as Art Colony, Heritage Museum, Sandwich, Massachusetts
- 1976 *The Object as Poet*, Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1976 *The Art of Poetry*, National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C.
- *1976, 1977 *The Book as Art*, Fendrick Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1973 *Women Chose Women*, New York Cultural Center, New York
- *1973 *The Emerging Real*, Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York
- 1971 *The Line as Form*, Parker Street 470, Boston
- 1971 *A New Consciousness*, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York
- 1970 *The Words as Image*, Jewish Museum, New York
- 1966-1970 *Birds and Beasts*, Graham Gallery, New York
- 1966 Biennial, Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- *1964 *Greetings*, Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 1964 *Arts and Letters*, Howard Wise Gallery, New York
- 1961 *Drawings*, College Art Symposium, Cornell College, Mt. Vernon, Iowa
- 1959 *Lettering*, traveling museum show, Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 1959 *Art USA*, The Colosseum, New York
- 1959 Childe Hassam Purchasing Fund Show, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York
- 1953-1957 *Artists' Annuals*, Stable Gallery, New York

* Various paintings on, or within, plexiglass structures (including standing, transparent books).

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

University of California Art Museum, Berkeley, California
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
Finch College Art Museum, New York
Ciba-Geigy Corporation, Ardsley, New York
First National Bank of Chicago
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina
Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Crocker National Bank, San Francisco
John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin
Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, New York
Tougaloo College, Mississippi
Sheraton Plaza Corporation, Washington, D.C.
New York University Art Collection, New York
Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Provincetown, Massachusetts
National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.
William Benton Museum, Storrs, Connecticut
Poets House, New York



Elegy for R.M.

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Drawings by Elise Asher, Passages, Including "The Long Boat", William
Benton Museum of Art, Storrs, Connecticut,
March 22, 1988 – May 22, 1988



Predator

WORKS IN EXHIBITION

Toward the Void, 1989-90
oil on linen, 30 x 48 inches

Under the Burning Lilac, 1990
oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

Spinning in the Wind, 1990-91
oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches

Enchantment, 1991
oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

Predator, 1991
oil on canvas, 30 x 48 inches

I'm Cold All Over, 1991
oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

Dawnwatch, 1990
oil on canvas, 24 x 48 inches

Elegy for R.M., 1991
oil on linen, 30 x 60 inches

The Windhover, 1989
oil on canvas, 12 x 24 inches

Endlessly Drifting, 1986
oil on canvas, 18 x 36 inches

Beyond the Rapture and the Dread, 1989
oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

On the Cold Hillside, 1989
charcoal on paper, 22 x 28 inches

Broken Blossoms, 1990
oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

Absolved and Free, 1986
oil on linen, 45 x 60 inches

News of Weather, 1983-1988
oil on linen, 30 x 80 inches

Content to Lie Down with the Family Ghosts, 1986
oil on linen, 36 x 72 inches

Like Shining from Shook Foil, 1990
oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches



On the Cold Hillside

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Provincetown Art Association and Museum is grateful to the June Kelly Gallery, New York, for the loan of works for this exhibition; and for permission to reprint in part, the introductory article by Margaret Sheffield which had originally appeared in the brochure for the 1991 Asher exhibition.

Also to Rose Slivka for permission to reprint an excerpt from a review of Asher's works which had originally appeared in "Arts" magazine.

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Catalog designed and produced by Lundquist Design, New York

On the Cover "Toward the Void," oil on linen, 30 x 46 inches, 1989

The Provincetown Art Association and Museum
460 Commercial Street
Provincetown, Massachusetts 02657

Asher's art is visual poetry & metaphor

By Sue Harrison
BANNER STAFF

Elise Asher's paintings have about them a dual quality of innocence, an almost childish straightforwardness mixed with a deep opaque pool of imagery of her own making. A poet and painter, she mixes words and thoughts, dreams and visions, sometimes her own and sometimes those of other poets, using them as leaping off places for paintings. The Fine Arts Work Center has put together a show of her work, curated by Varujan Boghosian, which offers a peek into the myriad halls of her glorious mind. (The show opens with a reception at 6 p.m. Friday and runs through Sept. 6.)

She's 80-something and, though she makes every effort to be gracious, is not that keen on the FAWC show of her paintings. "It's like, I've read the book," she says with a laugh sitting in the windowed alcove of her Commercial Street home which she shares with husband and fellow poet Stanley Kunitz. As she talks about her painting, her life and her poetry, she tends to leave the linear in favor of whatever



Photos Sue Harrison

"Toward the Void" features Asher's recurring themes of time and the moon..

image from her internal collection suits her best. It can make for a slightly confusing conversation initially but the more you know about her work and her life the more it all begins to fall into place.

Left motherless at eight, she and her siblings were raised in relative comfort in Chicago by her hypochondriacal father and a series of maids, cooks and nursemaids. She describes her small tribe: "We were fresh and punished. Nice, well-educated bratty kids." She recalls the two boys and two girls spending nights on the sleeping

porch and traveling by train to New Mexico.

Those two small clues, the train rides, the sleeping porch, are hints of much bigger pieces of her psyche and work.

In an earlier book, "The Visionary Gleam," Asher ties her paintings together with poems or thoughts that inspired them. She begins the book with a passage called "Instead of a Foreword." In it she says, "My search is for a more than usual state of being, the condition of otherness. And from this condition still another

continued on page 39



Photos Sue Harrison

Elise Asher at husband Stanley Kunitz's 95th birthday party recently.

Asher continued from page 37
er 'otherness' may emerge as the visual scenario unfolds; finally to a concrete universe of my own, a mythic land of my own making. ... Through the years, on a track running parallel to my painting, I have been unfolding a prose extravaganza I call, 'The Lavender Train Ride,' really the story of this traveler in time. ... Above all, often visible; my obsessions with keys, clocks, tombstones, moons, water, birdlike creatures, dusks and dawns and color! Color, can it ever match the bizarreness of living."

She talks still of the train rides, of the suspension of rules and normal life and the freedom that creates, the palpable sense of excitement of being outside the normal bounds — an otherness, perhaps.

What also runs through her work is the sense of time running out, of aging, of slipping from the light. In her prose she writes of her father's "slow dying ... gradually reducing itself from a bony precision to a parchment fineness." And she takes on her own aging and inevitable death. She wrote, "Now we are old and wear our alarm clocks on our sleeves and dark sunglasses over our rheumatoid crooking toes



Detail from "Dawn," by Elise Asher.
against the glare of our endless vanity."

Later in the book, when her husband says he believes he is the oldest man alive, she replies, "Yes and what of myself? Grown gnarled and dry as ricepaper; windpipe turned to straw — try to sing a favorite tune and the worn box caws like a crone — and yet, withall, still nursing a backward heart, heart of a schoolgirl which shuns those chemicals that could dignify its erratic thrashings."

Now as the sun pours in the window and spills on the table in front of her, she plays with a bowl of polished stones and says, "I never thought that I would be so old and I don't think there's anything

glorious about it. But I don't want to commit suicide because I would be afraid to." It's tough, she says, having been a terrific tennis player and all the other physical things one takes for granted. Now, she says, she has her happiest times at the card table where she writes. The paintings have long since become too physical for her to handle doing, a form of creative gymnastics she can no longer manage.

As we talk, she returns to her youth.

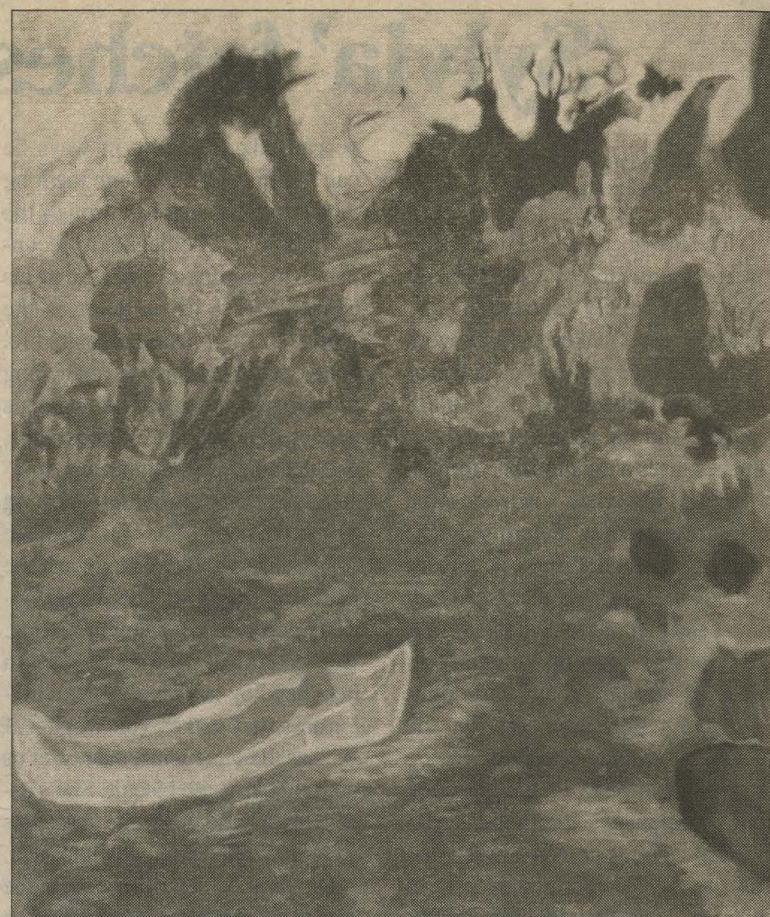
"We all slept on the sleeping porch," she recalls. "There was an owl that used to peek in. I was afraid to say that I was so haunted and scared by it. It was sort of a hoot owl. And I'd run to daddy's room after mother died and I would sleep in the other bed. I was afraid to say it was the owl, I'd just say I had a nightmare. I was so ashamed. Everything was scary then I guess."

That image is strong enough on its own but when coupled with lines from Kunitz's "The Testing-Tree," written many years later, they become an eerie echo of her childhood. He wrote and she included it in her book along with the painting inspired by it:

"In the recurring dream
my mother stands
in her bridal gown
Under the burning lilac ...
...She is wearing an owl's face."

As one listens to Asher and pulls the threads together, the imagery in the paintings takes on a strong narrative quality.

A whole series of her paintings were inspired by Kunitz's "The Long Boat," a poem in which a man's boat breaks free of its mooring and drifts away from his life and his loved ones as he watches in a mixture of awe and relief. In it, the man waves as the dear ones



"When His Boat Snapped Loose" is the beginning of the series of paintings she did based on her husband Stanley Kunitz's poem, "The Long Boat."

disappear into a fog and finally, too tired to take any action, lies down with "the family ghosts" freed from expectation, "buffeted by the storm, endlessly drifting. Peace! Peace! To be rocked by the infinite! As if it didn't matter which way was home. As if he didn't know he loved the earth so much he wanted to stay forever."

Several of the Long Boat paintings are included in the FAWC show.

Boghossian calls her show spectacular. "We are dealing with a rare, poetic imagination without question," he says. "Her point of view is really rare. She has a way of expressing the universal that ends up

being like no one else's. ... When you look at her work, you really can't find the roots. There's no one you see there except Elise Asher."

For her, writing is an activity but one so basic to her existence that it becomes a way of insuring witness to her passage.

"Writing is part of yourself and the reader is part of the audience but it's so basic that it has to do with your breathing," she says. "You're breathing words. It's wonderful because it's instinct. When you think of it, it's marvelous. It keeps you alive. ... Maybe I sound confused. Somebody has to witness what you are doing, otherwise it doesn't exist."

Elise Asher, 92

Poet, painter lived in New York & Provincetown

Elise Asher, 92, a poet and painter who lived in New York and Provincetown, died Sunday, March 7, at her home in Manhattan.

She was the wife of poet Stanley Kunitz.

Ms. Asher was born in Chicago. She was educated at the Art Institute of Chicago, Boston College, Bradford Academy and Simmons School of Social Work. She began writing poetry at an early age and moved to New York in 1947 where she began to also paint seriously. In 1953 she had her first solo painting show at Tanager Gallery in New York and published her first book of poetry, "The Meandering Absolute," in 1955. That book was re-edited, added to and reissued in 2000 under the title "The Night Train." She also published "The Visionary Gleam," a book which joined her writings with her artwork and also incorporated the writings of other poets she admired including that of her husband, the former U.S. Poet Laureate, Stanley Kunitz. Through the years she also published her work in many journals such as the *Partisan Review*.

Her paintings were well received and she was very involved in the women's art movement. Her work was shown in more than two dozen solo shows in New York, Boston, Minneapolis, Richmond, Well-

fleet and Provincetown. Locally, in 1992 the Provincetown Art Association and Museum held a solo show and in 2000 the Fine Arts Work Center (FAWC) held a large retrospective curated by Varujan Boghosian. She also took part in numerous group shows and her work is held in almost 20 public collections including the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.

At the time of her 2000 exhibit at FAWC, Ms. Asher talked to the Banner about her life, the cross country train trips she and her siblings made each year to visit New Mexico, the sleeping porch of her youth that she says was haunted by an owl and one sensed the way she mixed the mythic with the mundane to create her writings and paintings. Her daughter Babette Becker says her mother's work was "inventive and visionary" and added that the paintings were often based on literary references.

"She had three or four major periods of painting and created from a real blending of the two arts," her daughter said. "She was communicating the mystery of human experience."

She is described by her daughter as not being a public person despite having many friends. She was formerly married to painter Nanno de Groot before marrying Kunitz in 1957. She and Kunitz shared a common passion for their arts. In her later years painting became too physical for her and she gave it up, instead writing at a small card table, relying on her poetry to speak to the



Elise Asher

world. She is described as quirky and possessing a wry sense of humor and a penchant for both visual and written puns. Despite her humor, she was intent on writing down the important matters of life. In her Banner interview in 2000, she said, "You're breathing words... When you think of it, it's marvelous. It keeps you alive. ... Somebody has to witness what you are doing, otherwise it doesn't exist."

In addition to her husband and daughter, she is survived by three granddaughters, Lisa, Madeleine and Sherry; three great-grandchildren, Miles Asher, Juniper Elise and Justin Daniel; a step-daughter Gretchen Kunitz and two step-granddaughters, Ariana and Nicole.

A memorial service will be held for friends and family at 1 p.m. on Sunday, March 21, at Poets House, 72 Spring St., New York City.