

# Flax finds revelation through repetition

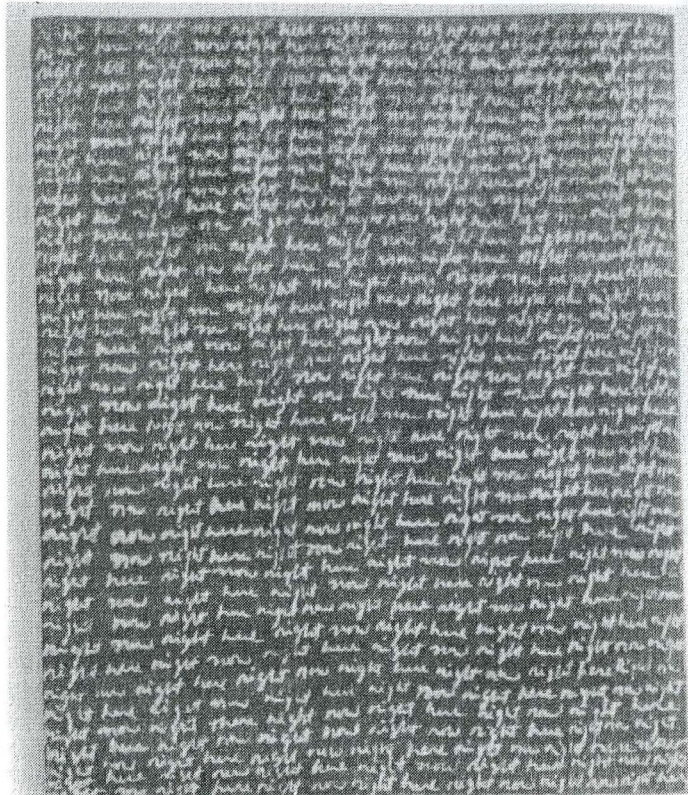
By Jennifer Hagar

I am sitting on the floor of the Albert Merola Gallery on a raw June morning that feels like fall looking at Donna Flax's most recent work — paintings made of words. Some are stories which just fill the space, the size of a child's school slate. Some are just a single word or phrase repeated over and over. And the most recent work is rows of numbers which have the same meditative quality as the word paintings.

(Flax's show, "Just Notice," opens at 8 p.m. Friday at Merola, 424 Commercial St. and runs through July 13.)

I am immediately pulled into the intimacy of the narrative — small cursive white writing on a black background — of the first painting I pick up, "Whore Stories: Deanna." Beyond the spell of story, the effect is visual and auditory. It's as if you, the viewer, are being let into a confidence, spoken sotto voce in a dim corner of an anonymous room. Some words are barely audible, some more urgent. These are insider stories from a world far out of the mainstream. The tone of the storytelling voice is that of a person trying to snatch small comforts in a dangerous and hard world. In the story a large ex-con named John keeps getting up to play Chopin on a baby grand piano just as the passion heats up with his date. These are people who can't sit with themselves.

The white writing against a black background creates a strobe effect. Discreet words come in and out of focus, or, like the black-and-white keys on a piano, hit major and minor



*Flax's word paintings evoke hidden emotions.*

keys. Visually, the voice is tentative, mysterious. Flax wrote with a fine brush on a background of "significant paint" while it was still wet. Stand back and the story is just a pattern, but beautiful in that. There is a tension between emergence and submergence of meaning created by paint and light. In one painting especially, "Right Here, Right Now" painted in deep blues and greens, it's as if the words are fishes longing to return to the depths. In all the paintings there is the sense that these words are just signs that gesture towards meaning, that the big story is beyond words.

"I do them totally stream of consciousness," says Flax of the stories. "I didn't edit them or change them. I just wrote whatever fit in the page. What I liked about them was that they became almost abstract."

Like Flax's earlier works, the ex-votos of two years ago and before that the paintings with tiny figures in a landscape with big skies, this recent work conveys a visual poetry of loneliness and longing for spiritual consolation.

Flax has been interested in words and images since she came into contact with ex-votos on a trip to Mexico five years ago. Ex votos are sto-



*Photo Sue Harrison*

*Donna Flax has taken her former ex votos work to a new stage that emphasizes the use of letters and numbers.*

ries and images "where the punchline is divine intervention," she elaborates. The ex-voto paintings, modeled on the format of the Mexican homages to saints, are dominated by an image with writing on the lower portion working out a personal dilemma or emotional issue. One currently on view at the Schoolhouse Center shows a moonlit road winding into a stark desert mountain range. A spray of red flowers floats in the sky. Below in the writing the artist grapples with a friend's death. "... I closed my eyes and kept think-

ing that tomorrow I would come visit you and sit in the garden like we did that last time ..."

Flax's most recent work extends beyond the personal to embrace universal dilemmas of spiritual quest and salvation. "In the past I've been interested in painting on a more emotional level. The emotion is still there but there's more of a spiritual context that's obvious to me."

A lot of the work was influenced by books on Buddhism and Jewish mysticism Flax read the last time

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**Flax** continued from previous page she was in Mexico and the common threads between the two of compassion, acceptance, loving kindness and mindfulness became preoccupations for her. This reading came to her as solace during a spiritual crisis, "a time of doubting and seeking."

"Whore Stories: Peggy" contains the poignant observation, "It was just not her time for salvation." This is the story of an "ice princess" ("not a prostitute but a beautiful woman who happened to get paid a lot of money to make people feel special") who meets a horrible lonely death. The question lingers, for the viewer and the artist: Why? Why them? Why not me?

Out of this question Why? came a painting of the word "why" against a background of sky and clouds. The white writing is ethereal and gets lost at times against a greenish background that resembles a sky before a summer storm. It's as if the word, "why" is being whispered against the sky, and it felt that way as she was painting it, says Flax. "I became interested in just words and their mystical symbolism. As I painted I said the word over and over until I reached an altered state, like chanting." The word paintings grew out of a conscious effort to cultivate positive words instead of being drawn into the obsessive compulsion of negative thinking. "I became aware of the 'sky-like nature of my mind'," says Flax, referring to the Buddhist concept of allowing thoughts to pass through consciousness without judgment or attachment as if the thoughts are clouds passing across the sun.

The stories, and the art, beyond being about pain and addiction, are about people "searching for salvation," according to Flax. "People like to think, 'that can never happen to me,' but the truth is it's fairly arbitrary."

These stories pay homage to lives that are beyond the pale but not that far from us. Flax says, "The

works are about mindfulness ... When you see some person on the street you think, oh just some person on the street, you don't want to know them or notice what their life is about." The stories request us to notice. Flax feels that the shadowy lives brought to the surface challenge the viewer's compassion and abilities to be present. "Do you have the patience to stand still long enough to read the stories; can you sit with the emotions they call forth?"

A year ago Flax was sitting in a doctor's office when she picked up a Smithsonian and immediately became absorbed in a long article about Pi. "Pi is a miraculous infinite number that is totally random and transcendental," says Flax. She had already been introduced to the concept of Ein Sof through her readings of Jewish mystical texts "involved with symbols and numbers in trying to establish a direct route to the divine," and one of the first word paintings she did was of this phrase.

Ein Sof, first described by the 12th century Kabbalist, Isaac the Blind, is a concept "of infinity beyond any spiritual concept that we know," says Flax. Like Pi, it "is a description of an infinite state or infinite energy." She found a site on the Internet that lists 100,000 digits of Pi, and started to paint them. ("You divide 22 by 7 and just keep going — all these numbers happen after the decimal point.") She likes the way they look. The number paintings are evocative of a cryptic

language, opaque but oddly idiosyncratic. "You think numbers are so impersonal but then you see your old phone number or the street number where you lived long ago." These number paintings entitled, "Pi: Random and Transcendental," are another way for Flax to create her own spiritual language, and they also resonate with her quest for salvation and meaning. The dilemma is that as soon as you try to define the infinite it becomes finite and disappears. "There is something about Pi — as far as anyone knows, it never ends," she says. "It drives people crazy. Maybe it never works out. Maybe it just keeps going." In trying to explore this "relationship with the Unknowable," Flax meditates on the nature of relationship itself. In the play between language and the sensuous surface of the painting the work evokes our human limitations coming to the border of the big unknowable universe. "It's like when someone dies," says Flax. "Our brains can't accommodate the information ... you'll never see that person again. How can that be?"

In this period of time of spiritual crisis and quest, Flax came upon practices and literature that resonated with her deepest instincts but the refrain that came up always for her was, "But these are not my words." With this new work Flax has made her own routes to the divine, her own spiritual poetry. "Something I was looking for, I seem to have found."

# Flax finds inner & outer paths of inspiration

By Sue Harrison

BANNER STAFF

For Donna Flax, inspiration can come from many places. It can come from a mist-enshrouded Mexican hillside or from a simple listing of children's names, children who have died in the Middle East wars. From both within and without she finds ways to say what she needs to say.

A show of her paintings will open at the Albert Merola Gallery, 424 Commercial St., Provincetown, with a reception at 8 p.m. on Friday. The show will hang through July 15.

Flax first came to Provincetown in 1982 after studying social work and design at Cornell and art at Mass. College of Art. She was first a printmaker and then painter and she has run a silkscreening business, D. Flax, since 1987. Her paintings, she says, often take a long time to come together. She does a great deal of research on whatever her subject matter is before she ever picks up a brush. For instance, she says, if she is painting the constellation Leo, she will read books about constellations and stars and about their placement in the sky.

Some paintings come from direct experience like "The World Between the Worlds," a dream-like landscape in oil on plaster. She was driving down a Mexican mountainside and mist "Farmers were disappearing in the sugar cane fields with their burros and their white hats. I felt my mood being altered. Wanted to go into the mist. It was as if

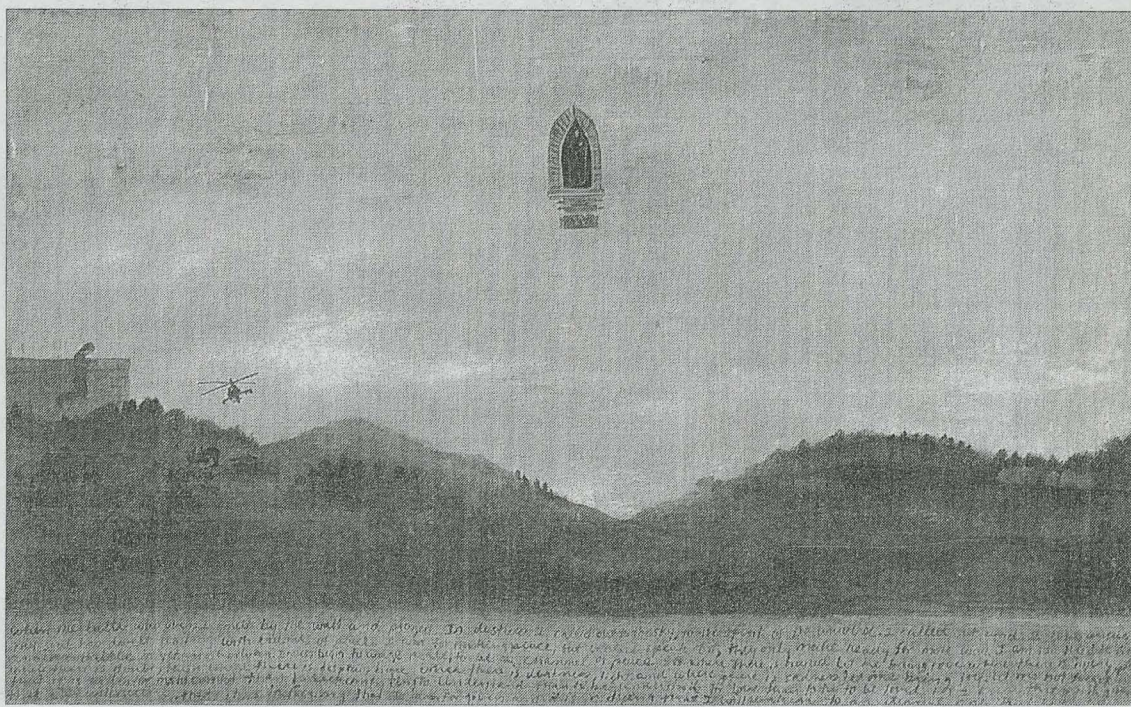
there was some mystical place on the other side, like one step into the mist and I would be transported into another time."

As she drove through the mist, feeling that otherworldly sense, she looked in her rearview mirror at the two teenagers in her back seat and felt a different sort of being transported away. Seeing them in their youth, considering her midpoint in life, she says, made her wistful and sad. "I wanted to disappear into a different kind of fog and find some missing thing, my youth, what I thought I would be," she says.

They continued down to a park by the river, but it was cold and they turned around and drove back to the village they were staying in. "Turns out the journey all happened in the car, in my head," she says.

For this show, which is partly about peace, she was searching online and Psalm 120 came up which speaks of dwelling too long with people who are enemies of peace and who do not want peace to come. She started to think about ex-votos — Mexican paintings done on metal to commemorate miracles asked and answered. When someone wants help, they pray to a Saint or to Jesus, to Mary or the Guadeloupe. If their prayer is answered they must have an ex-votos painted which will tell the story of their travail and deliverance. If they don't, misfortune will follow like water rolls down — as she saw, soldiers were praying on a battlefield for victory. What if, she wondered, the soldiers prayed for peace? That led to the show's theme painting, "My Soul Has Dwelt Too Long With Enemies of Peace."

"It is about a miracle I wish would happen," she says. "In it a



"My Soul Has Dwelt Too Long With Enemies of Peace," oil on plaster on panel by Flax.

soldier stops to pray after a terrible battle and awakens to the possibility of becoming a warrior of peace rather than a soldier of violence and destruction," she says.

In the painting, Guadeloupe hovers in the sky while a military helicopter swoops in over the battle lines. On the bottom of the painting is Psalm 120 and some other thoughts by Flax.

"It's hard to write about peace without the 'Kumbaya' factor," she says. "We increasingly live in a country which is controlled by people who are enemies of peace. My fantasy is asks for help in finding a way to change. You can't just say war is over, come home. You can't just stop a war but if the consciousness [of the soldiers] could change, it might be different.

Two paintings in the show are in response to the memory of

"the soldiers who have died in Iraq and the children who have died in the Middle East since the year 2000," she says. "They both incorporate the freehand writing of the lists of names I have used before. ... The one about the Middle East also asks the question, 'Would you weep for this child if you knew?' It was a hard piece to paint. While reading the names and ages of all these children and the terrible ways they died, I knew some of them were beloved heroes or martyrs in the hearts of their people and yet were so despised

by the people who killed them. I have a lot of heartbreak over the situation in Israel. I feel the pain of both sides and, as a result, I have no choice but to grieve equally for these children, regardless of their race or religion."

She wanted her paintings to combat the sense of despair the wars brought up in her.

"I can't stop the war from this little town but I can paint pictures about peace and hope that people will think and talk about ways to live at peace with themselves and others." □