

Shelley Hull



To Know So Much, 1985

Shelley Hull

October 16 through November 22, 1987

University Galleries
Illinois State University
Normal, IL 61761

Acknowledgements

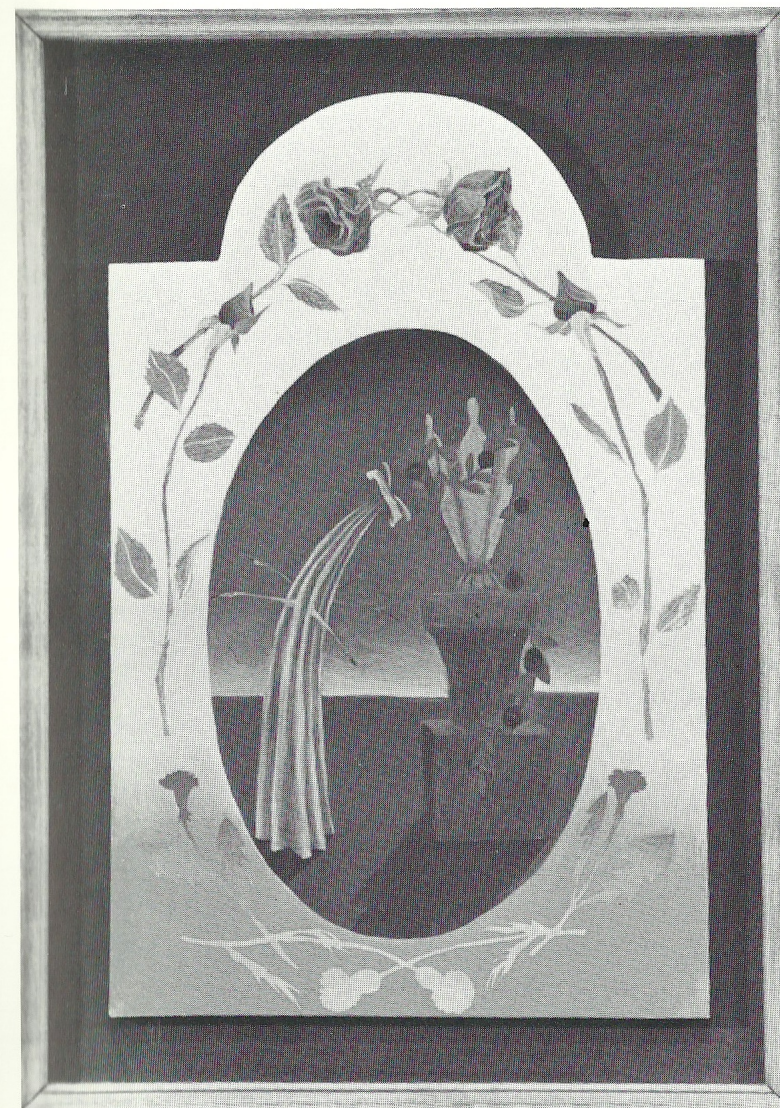
The vibrancy and spiritual intensity of Shelley Hull's works has been inspiring to many during the course of this exhibition. The catalogue and exhibit were made possible through the assistance and generosity of many people. I would first of all like to thank Laurie Dahlberg, for writing an insightful catalogue essay. Thanks are also due to Barbara Hinde, gallery intern, who assiduously transcribed a taped interview with the artist; to my assistants: Lisa Bergant, Mary Statzer, Chris Romang, Teresa Downey and Laura Anderson, who helped in all phases of the exhibition's preparation and installation; to Jeanne Blines, who kept it all secure; to Rhondal McKinney, for scheduling the exhibition; to Mac and Mary Hull and Bonnie Parr for their generous loans of artwork, and finally to Shelley Hull, for making such a fine body of work available to us all.

Barry Blinderman, Director
University Galleries
November, 1987

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Shelley Hull

In some strange way we devalue things as soon as we give utterance to them. We believe we have dived to the uttermost depths of the abyss, and yet when we return to the surface the drop of water on our pallid fingertips no longer resembles the sea from which it came. We think we have discovered a hoard of wonderful treasure-trove, yet when we emerge again into the light of day we see that all we have brought back with us are false stones and chips of glass. But for all this the treasure goes on glimmering in the darkness, unchanged.

— Count Maurice Maeterlink

Shelley Hull seeks to "give utterance" by making art. Her paintings, shrine-like, housed in shallow enclosures and small cabinets, are a private initiation into the ambiguous territory of the artist's spiritual exposition. Hull's veiled and varied iconography spreads before us like a banquet of unknown comestibles where saturated, symbolic color portends the flavor of each piece. Her art speaks of dualities — the eternal connections and conflicts between male and female, intellect and senses, the immutable and temporal, God and humanity. But above all, it speaks of exile.

The notion of exile has several interpretations in Hull's paintings: the historical exile and Diaspora of the Jews from their homeland, the separation from loved ones by death, the loss of golden periods of life with the passage of time and finally, the dispossession of our very innocence throughout the course of life. Though each piece retains its esoteric nature, the body of work is altogether consistent in its expression of the emotions fostered by the forced separation from the things we most love.

Drawing from a rich supply of sources for her iconographic content and formats, Hull integrates such diverse elements as 14th century Siense altars, American religious folk art, and Hispanic-American Christian icon paintings into her own lexicon. These and other elements appear frequently in Hull's paintings, yet she acknowledges that a recurrent inspiration lies in the mythologies of the Kabbalah, a medieval Jewish theosophy based on a mystical interpretation of the Torah. For Hull, the Kabbalistic metaphors are a wellspring of imagery which she uses to explore her own feelings about the nature of life. The creation of the art becomes a cumulative experience from which the artist distills a degree of personal understanding of the universal questions which haunt humankind.



The Other, Bitter Side, 1986

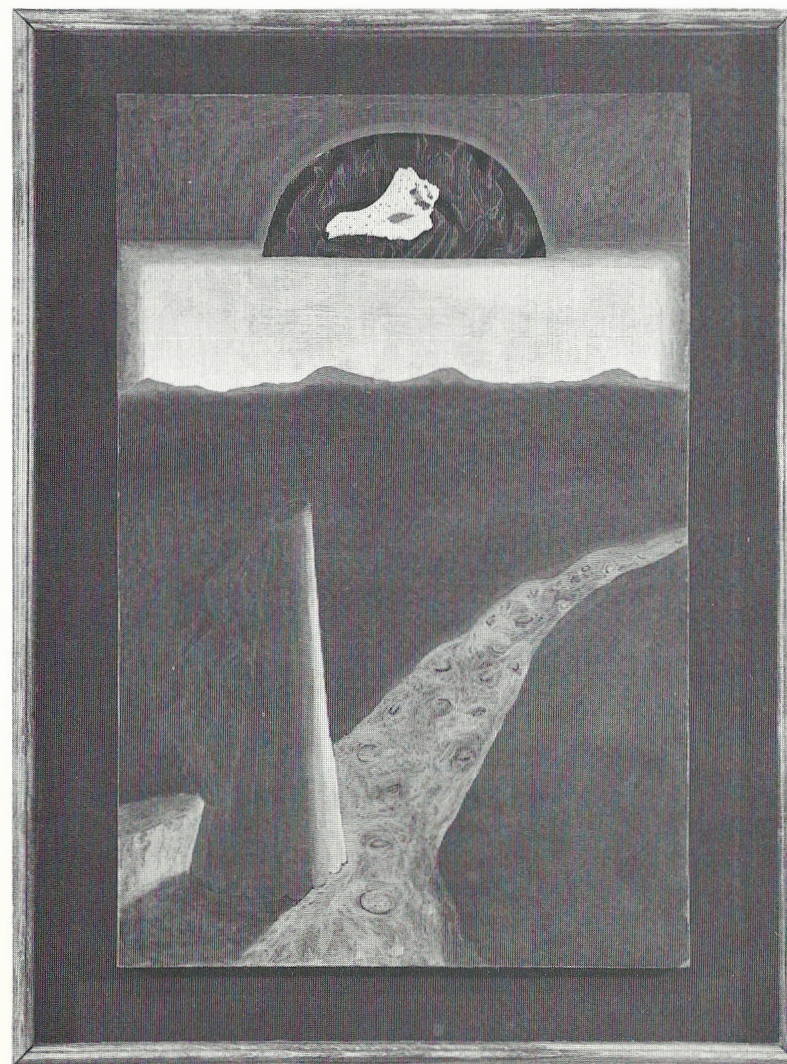
My use of these mystical notions is personal. For Kabbalists, the primary concern is man's relationship to God and explaining God's inner workings. For me, these myths transcend their theological context and describe psychological events.

The dreamlike topography of Hull's paintings does indeed evoke imaginings of the terrain of the subconscious, spurring associations with some of the surrealists who covered similar ground. In works such as *Sacred to the Memory Of*, her use of architectural elements in solitary gardens, casting the long shadows of dusk, is keenly reminiscent of de Chirico. In a gesture that marks the weariness of eternity, a spectre leans against the headstone of perhaps its former mate, unable to make the transition to the spiritual plane, bound in death, as in life, to the physical realm.

Similarly, Hull's creation of strange, anomalous beings as in *Lekh Lekha*, and the tusk-like forms of *To Know So Much*, who wait silently at the outpost of the heavens, are suggestive of Yves Tanguy's surrealist landscapes. These characters clearly exist outside of the conventional frames of time and place, yet somehow we sense that they are ruled by the same forces as we. While we are initially attracted to these works by their vibrant colors and materials as rich as satin and gold leaf, the imagery succeeds in quietly drawing us into the artist's confidence, to share secrets spoken in tongues.

Though the surrealist influences in Hull's work are initially evident, perhaps a greater connection exists between Hull's art and the 19th century Symbolists, who used esoteric imagery to infuse their works with a sphere of meaning not apparent in a straightforward reading of the symbols. In Hull's paintings, we may recognize the meaning of certain abstractions and traditional iconography here or there, but the work is not intended to convey its meaning through a mathematical equation of symbols. Though the viewer may not be familiar with the specific characters, one nonetheless gains a subjective understanding of the work, gathered from the special combination of colors, forms and subconscious associations. Thus, the work itself becomes more than a sum total of its parts.

I am very interested in a presentational art form. My works are not like windows. It's more of a presentation, an event. I want to tell a personal story, without being blatant. I experiment with how much I have to reveal to keep the viewer engaged.



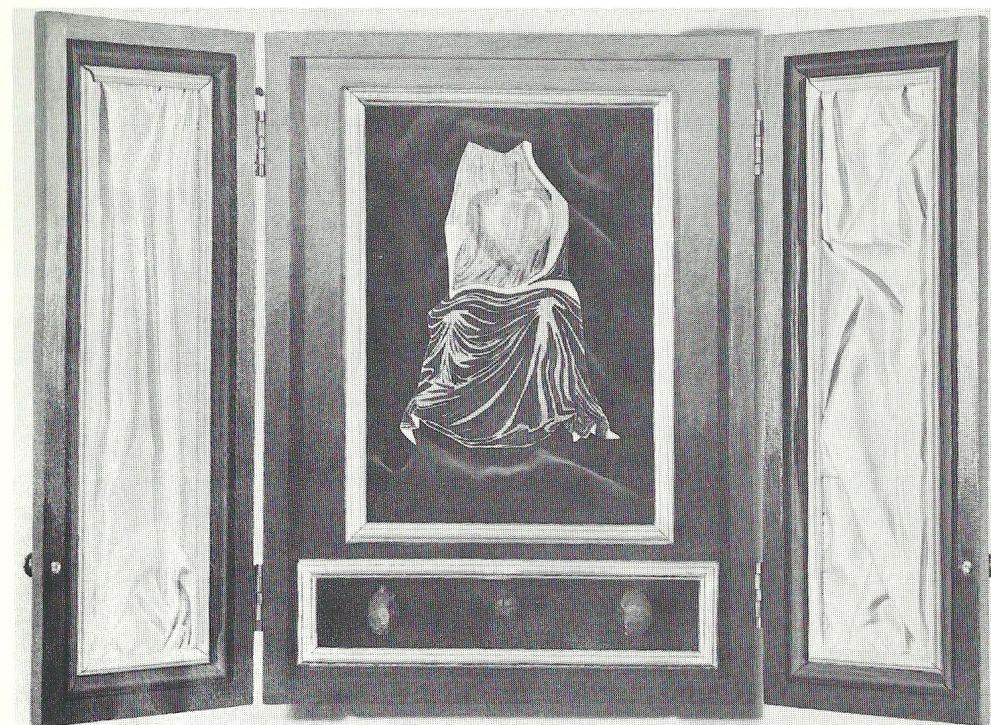
Lekh Lekha, 1986

The intimate scale of the paintings, the delicacy of the painted illusion and the dimensionality of the boxes demand our close inspection, encouraging the strong relationship between the viewer and the work which Hull seeks to build. Perhaps a concern for the "devaluation" of which Maeterlink speaks has led the artist to explore the highly presentational format of the "reliquary" as an environment for found objects. Hull recognizes a preciousness in certain objects which have been so unfortunate as to have outlived their intended use. Sensing their unique place in her own mythologies, Hull's reliquaries transform these "false stones and bits of glass" into cherished objects of symbolic value.

In *Esperanza*, as in all of the folding reliquaries, the opening of the cabinet doors is keyed to produce a sudden transformation in the piece. As the subdued color of the exterior gives way to a brilliant flash of yellow satin, the viewer is immediately faced with the iconic image of a female torso, placed in a niche, floating against a background of dark velvet. The painted draperies of the figure once again contrast with the actual velvets and satins, matching illusion with reality. Fitted with an oversized, fragile, glass heart, the figure could represent the embodiment of compassion, synthesized from centuries of Earth Mother archetypes. Hull places three ordinary nuts in a narrow niche beneath the icon, perhaps as a metaphor for the hearts of mortals — suitably armored on the outside, hiding the delicate fruit within.

Shelley Hull succeeds in creating art without the taint of the modern world. There is an uncommon sensitivity in the slight archaic quality of the images and a sincerity in her effort to give expression to the most elusive questions of mind and spirit. Free of the familiar cast of cynicism, cleverness, coolness and self-importance which is fostered by our cultural diet of too much of everything, her paintings quietly exert a strong will to make us *wonder*.

— Laurie Dahlberg



Biography

Shelley Hull

(b. 1955, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; lives in Rock Island, Illinois)

EDUCATION

- 1979 MFA, Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, MD
1977 BA, Yale University, New Haven, CT

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 *Image/Identity: Self-Portraits by Maryland Artists*, exhibited at various locations throughout Maryland
Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD
- 1986 *Artscape*, Baltimore, MD
Group Exhibition, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD
- 1985 *Shelter '85*, Zenith Art Gallery, Washington, DC
Three Rivers Arts Festival, Pittsburgh, PA
Illuminations, Dramatis Personae, New York, NY
Pandora's Box, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
Tenth Anniversary Show, Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, MD
- 1984 *On View*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
Group Exhibition, Nexus Foundation for Today's Art, Philadelphia, PA
Evocations: Essential and Irrational, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD
- 1983 *Mindscapes*, a travelling exhibition, sponsored by the Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
- 1982 *Artscape*, Baltimore, MD
Group Exhibition, School 33 Art Center, Baltimore, MD
Dimensions '82, Frostburg State College, Frostburg, MD
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AWARDS

- 1985 Honorable Mention, Three Rivers Art Festival, Pittsburgh, PA
1984 National Endowment for the Arts Painting Fellowship
1982 Maryland State Arts Council, Work in Progress Grant

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Sarah Clarke Hollander, Harry Rand and David Tannous, "Shelter '85," catalogue for exhibition, Washington, DC
Marcia Tucker, "On View," catalogue for exhibition, New York, NY
Tom Lachman, "Three Cities Exchange Art Sans Regionalism," *New Art Examiner*, November 1984
Tom Lachman, "Cultural Exchange," *New American*, September 23, 1984
John Dorsey, "Show's Plan Fails, but Art Succeeds," *Baltimore Sun*, September 14, 1984
Olivia Georgia, "Evocations: Essential and Irrational," catalogue for exhibition, Baltimore, MD
Linda De Palma, "Mindscapes," catalogue for exhibition, Baltimore, MD
Bernard Chaet, *The Art of Drawing*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston: 1978
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Catalogue of the Exhibition

Tedyuscung, 1987
mixed media
17½ x 12½"

Esperanza, 1987
mixed media
20½ x 15"

Shekhinah, 1987
mixed media
28 x 18"
collection of Mac and Mary Hull

Stele, 1986
oil on hardboard
28½ x 20"

The Insolent Dogs, 1986
oil on hardboard
24½ x 17"

To Know So Much, 1985
oil and gold leaf on hardboard
24½ x 16¾"

*Descent into the Realm of The
Kelippot*, 1985
oil on hardboard
24½ x 17"

Record of the Human Heart,
1986
mixed media
25½ x 15"

Pardes: Levels of Meaning, 1986
mixed media
21½ x 14½"

The Other, Bitter Side, 1986
mixed media
24½ x 13½"

Lekh Lekha, 1986
mixed media
29 x 21"

Keriah, 1987
oil on hardboard
28½ x 20"

Thy Loss We Shall Mourn, 1986
oil on hardboard
27½ x 19"

Lament, 1986
oil on hardboard
27½ x 19"

Sacred to the Memory Of, 1986
oil on hardboard
27½ x 19"

Lady of Sorrows, 1987
mixed media
17¾ x 11½"
collection of Bonnie Parr

By the Rivers of Babylon, 1985
oil and gold leaf on hardboard
with milagro
17½ x 12½"

Howl, 1986
mixed media
31¼ x 21½"

Sacred to Friendship, 1986
oil on hardboard
28 x 19½"

Elegy, 1987
oil on hardboard with quartz
28 x 19½"

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