



*Maud Gatewood: Re-Visions*. Greensboro: Weatherspoon Art Gallery, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro [Distributed by University of Washington Press], 1994; pp. 11-12+37.

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## maud gatewood: re-visions by robert hobbs

During the past four decades well-meaning critics have categorized Maud Gatewood's art as "southern," with the unfortunate result of masking her highly critical approach and ignoring the dialogue that she has maintained with both modernist and postmodernist art.

Many writers have assumed some regional quintessence that can be verbally articulated and represented in art. For example, Blue Greenberg of the *Durham Morning Herald* writes, "The southern sense of nature permeates [Gatewood's] work. Its essence is the sun, heavy shade, stillness and small-town feeling."<sup>1</sup> In *Art Papers* Susan Knowles views Gatewood's work as "the distilled essence of the South."<sup>2</sup> And in an essay for the *New York Times*, Ronald Blythe terms her paintings of Caswell County "part of the landscape of every North Carolinian mind."<sup>3</sup> Even when cogently reasoned, this assumption of an essential southern quality errs in its broad generalizations because there is not one South but many. No longer voting a Dixiecrat ticket, people in the southeastern section of the United States are both conservative and liberal, rural and urban, WASP and multicultural. Since World War II, the American South has changed dramatically. From a relatively poor and provincial section of the country, plagued by bigotry and racial violence, it has become home to widely varied, even international business and industry. It is part of what is euphemistically known as the Sun Belt, a designation that provides a progressive image and at the same time disengages the South from its former Bible Belt identification.

An informed observer of this changing region over the past four decades, Maud Gatewood has taken full advantage of her marginalized status—as southerner, woman, and deeply sophisticated individual living in one of the poorest counties in North Carolina—to develop an art intended to revise prevailing opinions and disrupt the polarities of an urban-vanguard versus a

regional-parochial culture. Part of the difficulty in categorizing the direction of her art is indicated by the unwieldy label suggested by Elizabeth Baker, editor of *Art in America*, who called her "a stylizing sophisticated-primitive realist."<sup>4</sup>

Gatewood's "re-visions" are wry critiques of these polarities. Rather than regarding the South as an essence, Gatewood finds ways of transforming regional subjects by subjecting them to some of the same distancing devices of both modernist and postmodernist art. But she does not fall into the trap of regarding any new art as an orthodoxy; instead, she subjects it to a regionalist critique, thus taking an independent approach to both mainstream and regional attitudes.

Gatewood has noted the changing identity of the Southeast, occasioned by urbanization, industrialization, and the great migration into the Sun Belt. Because change is a crucial component of the new South's identity, Gatewood paintings often play with ambiguities that allow both the artist and her public the options of interpreting their outcome. "I think you learn that life isn't always straightforward," the artist has stated. "I think it's in the nature of the species to be a little evasive and covered. Ambiguity might be the heart of life as well as art."<sup>5</sup> One of her goals is to create works of art poised on the threshold of distinctly different realities, including urban and rural sensibilities and abstraction and realism: "Creating a good painting is like walking a tightrope. You've got to make the thing work, but almost not work, to get that teetering sensation."<sup>6</sup>

Although couched primarily in formalist terms, this "teetering sensation" relates also to her subject matter. Gatewood prefers to keep her subject matter as open as possible by concentrating on formal problems and relying on the unconscious mind together with deeply held values to give these shapes meaning:

What I'm trying to paint is relationships, formal relationships: light and color and forms. There might be messages, but I think a lot of times painters know less about what their painting says than anybody else.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than depending on the rhetoric and power of public manifestos as many avant-garde groups did in the first part of the twentieth century, Gatewood trusts her work to communicate its contents and finds that suggestion is ultimately more persuasive than bombast. "I believe whispers carry farther than shouts," the artist has stated. "With a shout, it's boom, splash and it's gone. A whisper just drifts on and on."

Because the regional interpretation is firmly ingrained in discussions of Gatewood's art, it is important to understand its limits at the outset of this study by examining the two essays that have contributed most to the idea that her southern character is based on an immersion in nature. Written by the eminent New York critic Donald Kuspit, these essays contain passages that often have been repeated in reviews of Gatewood's paintings. In the first, written in 1977 and entitled "Mythical Regionalism and Critical Realism," Kuspit provides an incisive analysis of regionalism as a construct that people frequently have preferred to regard as reality. He considers this myth to be idealistic and also troubling because it simplifies the nature of reality by providing a "'True Romance' or soap opera" gloss over the complications of modern technology and abstraction. According to Kuspit, even when artists subscribing to this mythical regionalism have embraced modern art, they have tended to freeze it into a timeless realm and have refrained from entering the dynamic sphere giving rise to modern art, thus transforming it into a static world that can be manipulated to accord with the regionalist quest for simplicity and reliability.<sup>8</sup>

In his 1983 essay for the exhibition catalogue *Painting in the South: 1564-1980*, Kuspit conjectures that "the Southern sense of nature...[is] an unconscious presence...that conditioned the sensibility of the serious Southern modernists as much as modernist practice."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to say that "what one refers to when one refers to oneself as Southern is a highly emotional awareness of nature as a dominant force in life...."<sup>10</sup> When he comes to the subject of Maud Gatewood's art, he connects her depiction of tunnels in the early 1970s with a "sense of interiority [that] is psychic as well; it correlates with the sense of nature as indwelling as well as dwelling in nature." Coming perilously close to reducing Gatewood's choice of subject matter to the traditional gender-specific psychological account of woman = interiority, he concludes that this interiority "articulates the Southern condition of being saturated with nature from the beginning. Nature in this sense is not simply a paradise of plenty but the rhythm determining the inner life's unfolding—a moral force, not simply a platitudinous presence."<sup>11</sup> If one were to take Kuspit's reasoning to its natural conclusion, one would regard all paintings of tunnels as manifesting a sense of interiority and conclude that subject matter always takes precedence over style, rendering the latter an unessential mode of communication. A major problem with Kuspit's interpretation is that it leaves room neither for irony nor for the disparity between subject matter and style that is essential to many works of art and specifically to Maud Gatewood's paintings.

In the earlier essay Kuspit likewise turns to highly debatable speculation when he proposes that artists should wish to avoid the twin pitfalls of "the prejudiced glance implied by the media look" and "an underpinning of formalist abstraction designed to structure it according to a predetermined look of 'good art'" by

## endnotes

1. Blue Greenberg, "A Southern Treatment for Modernists' Styles," *Durham Morning Herald* 22 July 1983: 12D.
2. Susan W. Knowles, "Southern Realism," *Art Papers* 9 (July-Aug. 1985): 56.
3. Ronald Blythe, "Roaming Back Roads in North Carolina: In Caswell County, Climate and Scenery Induce a Welcome Languor," *New York Times* 21 Sept. 1986: xx15.
4. Elizabeth C. Baker, "Southern Exposure," *Art in America* 64 (July-Aug. 1976): 49.
5. Charles Wheeler, "My Painting Is My Statement," *Bulletin* [University of North Carolina at Greensboro] 74 (Mar. 1985): 3.
6. Wheeler 3.
7. Wheeler 3.
8. Donald B. Kuspit, "Mythical Regionalism and Critical Realism," *Contemporary Art/Southeast* 1 (Apr.-May 1977): 10-11.
9. Donald B. Kuspit, "The Post-War Period, 1950 to 1980: A Critic's View," *Painting in the South: 1564-1980* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1983) 145.
10. Kuspit, "The Post-War Period" 150.
11. Kuspit, "The Post-War Period" 158.
12. Kuspit, "Mythical Regionalism" 11.
13. Kuspit, "Mythical Regionalism" 11.
14. Kuspit, "Mythical Regionalism" 10.
15. This concept is indebted to Jessie Poesch's insightful introduction to *The Art of the Old South: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and the Products of Craftsmen 1560-1860* (New York: Harrison House, 1983) ix. Poesch writes: "The South is growing more and more like the rest of America, and many things thought to be peculiarly Southern—intricate race relations, jazz and country music, even Coca-Cola—have, for better or worse, been assimilated into the broader culture of America. Historians, sociologists, and literary critics . . . have acknowledged that, given all the differences, the South has always been a part of the United States. Paradoxically, the very definition of the South as separate has depended upon its being a part of the whole."
16. K. Porter Aichele, "An Interview with Maud Gatewood," *Maud Gatewood: In Celebration of UNC's Centennial* (Greensboro, N.C.: Weatherspoon Art Gallery, 1992) not paginated.
17. Maud Florance Gatewood, "Painting: Theory, Choice, Practice," Master's thesis, The Ohio State University, 1955.
18. Gatewood 17.
19. Gatewood 15.
20. Gatewood 17.
21. Maud Gatewood, personal interview, 4 Dec. 1993.
22. André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1953) 312.
23. Harriet Doar, "Artist's Works Reflect an Order of Self," *Charlotte Observer* 5 Mar. 1972: 24A.
24. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 17ff.
25. Jameson 25.
26. Gatewood 12.
27. Gatewood, personal interview, 3 Dec. 1993.
28. Dee Walston, "With Maud Gatewood, Back Home in Yanceyville," *Herald-Sun* [Durham, N.C.] 18 Apr. 1993: E6.
29. Bill Chaze, "A Picture Is a Picture Is a Picture to UNC Art Teacher: 'I've Got Almost Nothing to Say,'" *Charlotte News* 20 Mar. 1968: 14B.
30. Chaze 14B.
31. Blue Greenberg, "New Personal Touch Shows in Gatewood Exhibit," *Durham Morning Herald* 22 May 1987: 11D.
32. Harriet Doar, "Artist's Brush Brings Out the Big and Little of Human Life," *Charlotte Observer* 11 Sept. 1966: F1.
33. Doar, "Artist's Works" 24A.
34. Maud Gatewood, personal interview, 3 Dec. 1993.
35. Doar, "Artist's Brush" F1.
36. Jane Roehrs, "'Most People Shun Modern Art,'" *Charlotte News* 10 Sept. 1966: 16C.
37. Doar, "Artist's Brush" F1.
38. Gatewood has related that she took the plywood pattern for this first cutout to the Mint Museum and used the saber saw belonging to Herbert Cohen, who was head of installation design for the museum. The connection with the Mint strongly suggests that the first cutout was made either during or shortly after Gatewood's large exhibition that was on view from September 11 through October 5. Having the opportunity to assess her recent work in this exhibition may have been a contributing factor in Gatewood's search for a totally new direction. Personal interview, 3 Dec. 1993.
39. Helen Thrush, "Art: Alumni Artists Invitational," *Alumni News* [University of North Carolina at Greensboro] 55 (April 1967): 20.
40. Gatewood, personal interview, 8 Aug. 1993.
41. Gatewood, personal interview, 3 Dec. 1993.
42. Steven Litt, "Maud Gatewood, Southern Exposer: Startling to Savage to Serene—Artist's Images Exhibit Critical Eye," *News and Observer* [Raleigh, N.C.] 16 Aug. 1987: C2.
43. Gatewood, personal interview, 2 Dec. 1993.
44. Gatewood, personal interview, 2 Aug. 1993.
45. Harriet Doar, "McNeal Gallery Opens Maud Gatewood Exhibit," *Charlotte Observer* 29 Dec. 1974: 5B.
46. Gatewood, personal interview, 2 Aug. 1993.
47. Gatewood, personal interview, 2 Aug. 1993.
48. Huston Paschal, *Maud Gatewood: Figure Painting* (Atlanta: Heath Gallery; Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1983) 5.
49. Gatewood, personal interview, 2 Aug. 1993.
50. Gatewood, personal interview, Dec. 1993.
51. Gatewood, personal interview, Dec. 1993.
52. Aichele n.p.
53. Greenberg, "New Personal Touch" 11D.
54. Litt C2.
55. Aichele n.p.
56. Gatewood, personal interview, 2 Dec. 1993.
57. "Louisiana's Blow-Dried Grand Wizard," *Newsweek* 113 (23 Jan. 1989) 27.
58. Gatewood, personal interview, 2 Dec. 1993.
59. Gatewood, personal interview, 2 Dec. 1993.
60. Barkley, Meredith, "Artist Paints Because She Must," *News and Record* [Raleigh] 21 Apr. 1993: 2.
61. Gatewood, fellowship application, 1991, artist's papers.