

THE TACTILE POWER OF ELLEN SYLVARNES '83

"Islands conjure ideas about isolation, detachment, lost paradises," muses artist Ellen Sylvarnes. "The solitude of the artist also comes to mind." She also knows that thoughts are as fluid as the water that surrounds any island. "The artist isn't alone," Ellen quickly adds, "they're alone when they come up with ideas, but they're also out there interacting in the world."

And so islands become the ultimate metaphor for the creative process, for just as islands are not isolated bits of land, but rather hills keeping their heads above water, so our works—even those created in the deepest isolation—are linked one to another within the fluid depths of the unconscious.

Ellen came to COA for its approach—small classes, broad connections, meaningful content. "Art, the environment, human ecology, were all formulating in my mind at the time," she says. She worked with three now-retired arts faculty members: JoAnne Carpenter, Ernie McMullen, and Roc Caivano, then spent a few intense years at the famed Art Students League in New York City.

Context remains essential to Ellen, beginning with the very materials with which she works. Only rarely will she purchase a tube of paint. Rather, she creates her pigments from centuries-old techniques, crushing marble into powder, combining it with wax or resin derived from beetles; choosing Italian gessoes by their locale—for the hue varies according to the minerals within the region's clay; painting with the dust of gold or silver; or painting on silk woven by former prostitutes in Cambodia. With these substances—"pummeled, poured, mixed, and boiled over a flame," according to Berlin's Emerson Gallery—Ellen "explores everything from the power structures that silently govern our lives to the radiance of desire that emboldens us to a greater reality." Ellen had two solo shows at the Emerson. She has also had solo shows in Rome and Slovenia, and group exhibitions in New York City, New Jersey, Canada, England, and Scotland.

Recently, installations have captivated Ellen—works that one needs to stand within to experience. Through sound, light, small, icon-like sculptures, drawings on transparent Mylar that change as the sun tracks across the sky, the pieces interact with each other and with the space in which they are seen.

Whether painting with resin on panels or filling vials with various chemicals; whether setting bronze orbs in front of the New York Stock Exchange or tossing prints of her own body into the sea, there's a physicality to Ellen's work, and with that, a tension which she sometimes speaks of as a battle between concept and material. "Things happen; you destroy, and create, and destroy." From this struggle comes a tactile power—one that is salted within the depths of our oceanic selves.—Donna Gold

Right: Vessel Series, mixed media, 6 x 8 inches







Left: Emerging Night, mixed media on panel, 76 x 54 inches

Above: Division, shellac, resin, and mixed media on panel, 96 x 84 inches