

Beyond the Windows: A Conversation with Jeannie Motherwell

By Peter Alson
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Jeannie Motherwell and I both spent our childhood summers in Provincetown, and knew each other slightly, yet didn't become good friends until much more recently. I'm not sure exactly why that's so, but we were both shy as children, and beyond that shared a certain unmetabolized weight of artistic expectation that might have made a friendship uncomfortable.

In Jeannie's work, which combines painting with photographs, appropriated images and text, there is play between shadow and light, water and boats, doorways and windows, that sometimes shows a glimpse of what might be Provincetown harbor, but more often is an obscure, sunlight-suffused window into a world that we can't quite see. Almost always, the work feels hopeful, as if there were something beyond those windows, as if perhaps there is a person inside hiding who is now ready to come out.

PETER ALSON: You and I both have father figures who were and are huge presences in the literary and art worlds, for you it was your dad, Robert Motherwell, and for me it's my uncle, Norman Mailer. You became a painter; I became a writer.

JEANNIE MOTHERWELL: Imagine that!

PA: Are we crazy? Or just masochistic?

JM: I don't worry about that anymore. It's too late now. But the fact is I tried to give up painting for many years. Many years. I think wanting to become a painter was a natural impulse, growing up with and being around my father and stepmother Helen [Frankenthaler; married from 1958-1970]. They were my role models. But I also think when I was younger I worried too much about making it in the art world, because they had already done so. I just don't anymore. I feel like I have to paint now whether I'm successful or not. What about you?

PA: I think it's pretty similar. I started writing because I didn't know any better. I was 17 and I was suddenly seized by the urge to write a story.

JM: That's the age I started painting!

PA: I think inwardly I'd always fought against becoming a writer in the way you resist any family business, but, as you say, there's a strong gravity exerted by having someone close to you who is successful and famous and obviously enjoying what they do.

JM: I really fell in love with painting when I was in college, and finally understood why Dad and Helen loved it so. I remember writing Dad letters all the time from college about the feeling. He was encouraging but also told me that it was a lousy business. Still, he thought I had the talent and the "bug."

PA: So he was supportive?

JM: Very supportive. But to have him come into your studio was a little unnerving. He'd walk in and say, "That's very good. Don't touch it!" Or, "That's very good. It just gets past tacky."

PA: That must have been somewhat difficult.

JM: Well, I learned some things from those kind of criticisms but it also started me looking at my own work with his eye too much. On the other hand, it enabled me to understand his work really well. I can usually identify his best work before someone else, because I understood him and his process so well. But I think that's where I wasn't so sure about my own identity. I think that's probably why I quit painting.

PA: You did? I stopped writing for a while.

JM: For the same reason?

PA: I think so—if identity means knowing why you're doing something. I know when I came back to writing after about

a year, it felt like I was making a choice, which gave me a different feeling about what I was doing. How long did you stop painting?

JM: Fourteen years.

PA: Wow, 14 years! That's an incredibly long time. That's not just a break.

JM: I was thinking I'd absolutely never do it again. I was married, had a child, and we were living a different kind of life. I thought, "Oh, this is much better." And it wasn't that I didn't have the time to paint, I just felt I was learning more watching my child develop.

PA: What changed?

JM: It's funny, I had taken my husband's name when we got married, but you can't ever really get rid of your name, so when I got divorced I took my name back because I thought, This is ridiculous. This is who I am.

PA: And you started painting again?

JM: No. Not right away. But one day a friend of mine asked me when I was going to start painting again, and I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Why don't you just have some fun?" And so I tried to. I started making cards and sending them to people, and it just sort of expanded from there. I began putting things on canvas, and the next thing I knew I was painting.

I don't think I knew you could have fun when you painted. I grew up thinking one couldn't say anything unless it was profound. Dad and Helen were already famous. That was the only way I knew them. I didn't see them starting out or struggling or what they went through to get there. I just thought you already had to know what you were doing. So it wasn't fun. It was really, really hard, and I was wrapped up in trying to find my own identity. But now I find it so much fun—because I'm inspired and I feel like I know who I am.

PA: Your use of the form of collage is interesting to me, as a fellow child of divorce, because in collage you're putting disparate fragments together and trying to make sense of them, making a whole out of broken pieces.

JM: I think that's very true. Not only that, but growing up in a house like Dad's or Helen's or Renate's [Renate Ponsold, Motherwell's fourth wife, of 19 years, whose photographs are featured in this issue] was like walking through museums all the time. Everything was an *object d'art*, placed in a certain way, and you spent all your time looking around, and if you grow up in that you can't help but constantly notice how things go together. Also, Dad used to do things like wake up and decide to rearrange the paintings in the room, so all of a sudden everything looked different, and it had the same effect as collage. I think that's what drew me to it. The control of pushing things around, and the added surprise of what you get when you do that. So when you picked up on the idea of the different parts of your life being put together, that's really what it's about for me.

PA: In writing the only time things truly are alive for me is when I'm making discoveries and connections, when I'm being surprised, so when you use the word "surprise" it has resonance for me. Also the idea of making connections. When I think of collage I think of making connections between images that might not logically go together, it's more of an instinctive thing. In the text that you use in some of your collages—unattributed text, I might add...

JM: Plagiarism [laughs], total plagiarism.

PA: ...the word "connection" keeps coming up and it jumps out at me. Was that something you were thinking about when you picked out those pieces of text?

JM: They actually come from a poem a friend of mine wrote about 25 years ago, and he happened to send it to me, and I started cutting it up, and then asked him if he would mind.

PA: Who is this?

JM: An artist and writer friend of mine named Jim Banks. I call him "Word Man." The poem really seemed to fit in my pictures, so I took it and went with it.

PA: In the piece *Eyes Look Take a Look*, you use a photograph of your daughter Rebecca's eyes on top of a woman's torso by Titian.

JM: All the things my daughter's going through growing up—the love, passion, innocence, pain—and what I experience myself as a woman, have parallels as well as separations, so there are connections but they're different. It's about the play between the two, the contrasts, that I was working with.

PA: Do you still look at things through your dad's eyes, either after you've painted something or during the process?

JM: Well, I guess at this point I don't have to worry about what he would think anymore. I'm happy with what I'm painting, and whether someone else likes it or not, I know that the work is me and in that sense real and true. I know Dad would believe in that. Would I be able to say this if he were still alive? I don't know. But I think if you are being honest and you are being true, that's really all you can do. For some of us it just takes a little longer to get there than for others.

Peter Alson is the author of the memoir Confessions of an Ivy League Bookie, reviewed in Provincetown Arts '96. His writing has appeared in a wide range of national magazines, including Esquire and Playboy