



Frances Hynes

THE WANDERERS

1994 – 2001

FRANCES HYNES:
THE WANDERERS, 1994–2001

September 14, 2021 – December 11, 2021

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This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Frances Hynes: The Wanderers, 1994–2001*, organized by the Dr. M.T. Geoffrey Yeh Art Gallery at St. John's University, Queens, New York.

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Published by
Dr. M.T. Geoffrey Yeh Art Gallery
Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall
St. John's University
8000 Utopia Parkway
Queens, New York 11439

Contributors: Owen Duffy and Frances Hynes
Photography: Phil Hinge, Arcis Tiburcio Zane, and Kevin Noble (Figures 9 and 22)
Copyediting: Arts Editing Services: Tyler Considine and Liz Janoff
Design: Brian James and Winnie Lam

ISBN: 978-1-7371954-1-2

Cover: Detail of *Landscape (with Cattle, Lake & Tree)*, 1995. Oil on unstretched cotton canvas, 77 × 98 inches.

Page 49: Detail of photograph by Frances Hynes of *Skellig Bheag*, County Kerry, Ireland, undated.

Inside Back Cover: Detail of *Greetings from an Island*, 1995. Watercolor and gouache on C. M. Fabriano paper, 22 × 30 inches.

FRANCES HYNES: LEAVING AND WANDERING

‘They just kept turning up
And were thought of as foreign’
One-eyed and benign
They lie about his house,
Quernstones out of a bog.

— Seamus Heaney, “Belderg”¹

I’ve never seen the quernstones of the Belderg bogs nor the Skelligs slicing the sky with their jagged peaks. I’ve never set foot in the Burren’s karsts nor taken a ferry to the Aran Islands nor visited any corner of the Emerald Isle. Like so many others, my family—my ancestors—left Ireland generations ago. And so, for now, Ireland exists in my mind as a green dream, a bucolic place filled with stone walls and cottages, lonely ruins, and rolling farmland. Seamus Heaney’s ode to the bogs of Belderg, a poetic tribute to those marshes of peat filled with Neolithic remains, underscores the oldness of Ireland, its history and myth. And that past, once buried deep underneath soil and sod, often surfaces like a quernstone, an innocuous but weighty thing to be stumbled upon. Heaney’s poetry provides an evocative foundation for deciphering Frances Hynes’s dreamlike paintings in her exhibition *The Wanderers, 1994 – 2001*, works that seem to acknowledge the endlessness of the past, ever present yet ethereal.

In 1995, Hynes accepted a visiting faculty position at Burren College of Art in County Clare, Ireland. Born and raised in Queens, Hynes had visited Ireland before, but the experience of living in her family’s ancestral homeland for half a year and the chance to wander through Celtic lands and stumble upon Heaney’s quernstones herself deeply impacted her painting, resulting in a career-shifting body of work. Known as the *Irish Paintings*, this series, brought together for *The Wanderers, 1994-2001*, draws upon the richness of Celtic life: from early Christian archaeological remains to otherworldly landmasses and local lore. In doing so, Hynes’s series continues to weave elegiac tales about wandering, memory, and migration, a quarter-century after its creation.

Since embarking on the artist’s journey in the 1960s, Hynes has remained active in New York’s painting scene and achieved notable accolades, including a 1980 show at the Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S.1 (now MoMA PS1) and forty more solo exhibitions over the course of as many years. “One can see Hynes’ paintings as both universal and personal,” wrote art critic John Yau in 1983; they are “concerned with timelessness and time.”² Writing in *Art in America*, the poet Gerrit Henry also noted her art’s ability to synthesize contradictions: her work “is poetic in the best sense of the word—she is a painter of the everyday fantastic.”³ Hynes has often mentioned that she’s stayed on “the outskirts” of the art world, connected to it but never conforming to its rules. But by

the 1990s, Hynes felt she reached a personal impasse with her more pared-down, minimal kind of painting, which, in her words, was “a style that was confining.”⁴ Her appointment at Burren College and the subsequent months in Ireland proved formative. “I wanted to draw more from the world,” Hynes explains, “and create paintings that included ideas and images that affected me each day.”⁵

The *Wanderer* encapsulates this critical period in Hynes’s development as an artist and is central to the exhibition. The painting exemplifies her contrapuntal movement between the past and present and engagement with the time-before. Ambiguous humanoids, long and lanky, trudge across an icy forest as if in search of something more. “When I created this painting,” Hynes recalls, “I was thinking about layers of time and the span of time, ancient time. I often think of the vast age of the Earth, of the universe, and of the history of humankind on planet Earth.”⁶ The figures glide like spirits across the surface, in the middle of a migration or a wandering. Hynes draws with the brush, building the composition through the figures. In the background, snow-capped peaks rise around a forest of attenuated, leafless trees. Contours of cattle and horses, domesticated creatures that humans have enlisted for service and companionship, move along with the restless travelers. If one were to remove the silhouettes of living beings and landscapes, then a vibrant abstract painting would remain, one marked with swaths of gestural, brushy pigment that haunt

like afterimages. *The Wanderer* beseeches art historical comparison to the 19,000-year-old parietal paintings of Lascaux, France. In this vast network of caves, our prehistoric ancestors painted some six thousand effigies of stags, ibexes, bears, and other animals as well as the occasional representation of a human being. Hynes recasts the fading silhouettes of some of these first paintings, some of the very first images, in her work. The gestures of hands, made from a few simple strokes of her brush, and the nomadic narratives of *The Wanderer* hearken back to what earlier humans created in an attempt to make sense of their world. To locate her own experiences of travel in 1995, metaphorically represented through this painting, Hynes reaches far back into the past. Moreover, Hynes painted this work on lawn, a light and transparent fabric so thin it appears almost like paper, which could be readily folded and transported with ease during her own travels.

Hynes beckons viewers to wander with her. During her time at Burren College, Hynes traveled the country, encountering Ireland’s archaeological sites, histories, and landscapes. She describes Ireland as “a mystical place” and remembers, in particular, being deeply affected by the drama of places like the Skellig Islands, off the country’s southwest coast.⁷ On a subsequent trip to Ireland in 1996, when Hynes was a visiting artist at the International Artists’ Retreat Center, The Cill Rialaig Project (now Cill Rialaig Arts Centre) in Ballinskelligs, County Kerry, she had her first impactful encounter

with the islands. “From my cottage there were wonderful views of the Skelligs, high craggy islands in the sea off Kerry,” Hynes recalls.⁸ “One day I visited Skellig Michael, and on the way, the boat passed the smaller Skellig Islands, splinters of stone jutting up from the seas.”⁹ At the top of Skellig Michael, one can find the ruins of an early Christian settlement, a lonesome retreat for ascetic monks dating to the sixth century. These dramatic seascapes appear in two of Hynes’s paintings: *Skellig (with shawl)* and *Ochre Skellig*. Each offers a different perspective on this timeless geological formation. In *Skellig (with shawl)*, Skellig Michael rises from the water like a vast, ominous peak, and expressive, energetic greens and blacks set the island against a tempestuous sky. To the right, cutting across the horizon, crimson and olive chevrons float above the sea, a representation of a kind of shawl knitted by women in the Aran Islands.

Paired with *Ochre Skellig*, the two paintings read as inverses of one another through their complementary color palettes, landscape and portrait formats, and elevated and sea-level perspectives. Together, the paintings emphasize the possibility of seeing an object from completely oppositional points of view. But they both emphasize the experience of looking vis-à-vis a series of framing devices: lines crop, scale, and frame the composition and provide a scaffolding to structure the image. “Random marks, incident, and activity on the horizon,” explains the artist, “contribute to a sense of deep space

and suggest to the viewer distant images and moving water in the foreground.”¹⁰

While many of Hynes’s works engage with the here and now and the active experience of embodied looking, senses of mystery, faith, and enchantment emanate from *The Curing Well*, a large, imposing painting on unstretched canvas. Concerning the curiosity of belief, five hunched-over figures in the painting progressively rise up after drinking a curing well’s holy water. Ireland’s many curing wells, fed by underground springs, purportedly heal the maladies of the faithful, and are often associated with a saint who can treat a peculiar ailment, from toothaches to sore limbs. Hynes liked to stop at the holy well of Gleninagh, which was near Ballyvaughan, the home of Burren College. She fondly remembers visiting the well of “St. Brigid in Liscannor, one of the oldest wells in Ireland, on her feast day, February 1, which denotes the first day of spring in Ireland. Nearby is the site of ancient Irish Lughnasadh celebrations, marking the beginning of the harvest season.”¹¹ Despite their origins in pre-Christian traditions, holy wells, according to historian Gary R. Varner, “continue to exist and offer humans sources for comfort and healing as well as a link through the dim past to another realm of existence.”¹² Indeed, Hynes’s paintings locate those liminal places and times that cut through the past and present. In *The Curing Well*, against a mountainous landscape, dotted with spindly trees and dashes of snow, pinks and blues push and pull, activating the busy picture

plane. Seen through the chalky gray flesh of Hynes's silhouetted figures, these fields of color lend the painting a sense of the surreal. The unstretched canvas, conducive to Hynes's peripatetics, gently furls against the wall, becoming itself a kind of skin. Thick sweeps of energetic pigment record a luminous index of human activity. Unsupported, the painting responds to its environment, textured and alive.

Migration resonates as a theme throughout *The Wanderers, 1994 – 2001*. Specifically, paintings like *The Leaving* remind us that migration is not a new phenomenon in the United States. In the nineteenth century, Ireland saw an exodus of its people to the rest of the world. The year Hynes made this painting was the 150th anniversary of the beginning of The Great Hunger, a seven-year period of famine and disease largely caused by blighted potato crops. To commemorate this tragic and historic event, which resulted in many Irish emigrants seeking a new life, Hynes wanted to make a painting about “immigration, not only of the Irish people to America, but about all those leaving and wandering, searching for home, often with sorrow for what is left behind.”

The energetic blackening out of the background—as if she is quite literally erasing the painted past—mirrors the experience of leaving behind the life one knows. Hynes's figures, ever mysterious, move to the right of the painting. A dog and a family, thin and meek, look outward beyond the canvas, as bursts of color seep through the painting's background at

its edges. An oversized leg dominates the bottom right corner, calf extended in motion, as the individual bounds off the picture plane, a recurring reference in Hynes's work to Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies of beings in motion. A lone figure, seated, appears to contemplate the void. *The Leaving* captures two sources of pain: the mournful loss of one's homeland and the strangeness of a new, foreign, and potentially unwelcoming land.

While Hynes's paintings capture the unsettledness of Heaney's poems, and their reverence for old lands and histories, her sense of wonder can be likened to one of her neighbors: Joseph Cornell, who lived a few miles down the street from the Yeh Art Gallery on Utopia Parkway. While the two artists never met, Cornell's enchanting boxes and collages invite viewers on a journey of the mind; dioramas of curiosity to fill the wandering subconscious. Like Hynes's work, Cornell's boxes and collages rely on framing and refer to optical devices, calling attention to the act of observation. Both artists position viewers as witnesses-from-a-distance, allowing us to peer into another world or time. And as viewers, it is our privilege to experience the realms their works conjure. How fortunate we are then that Hynes transmits the world of her paintings so evocatively into our own.

Owen Duffy

NOTES

¹ Seamus Heaney, “Belderg,” in *Seamus Heaney: Poems, 1965-1975*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981), 168. Shaped like a donut, a quernstone is a Neolithic device used for grinding wheat, among other materials.

² John Yau, “Frances Hynes,” *Arts Magazine*, October 1983, 3.

³ Gerrit Henry, “Frances Hynes at June Kelly,” *Art in America*, November 1999, 146.

⁴ Frances Hynes, interview with the author, July 13, 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Frances Hynes, email to the author, August 13, 2021.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gary R. Varner, *Sacred Wells: A Study in the History, Meaning, and Mythology of Holy Wells & Waters* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009), 12.

¹³ Frances Hynes, email to the author, August 13, 2021.



WORKS



Figure 1: *Landscape (with Cattle, Lake and Tree)*, 1995. Oil on unstretched cotton canvas, 77 x 98 inches.



Figure 2: *Ochre Skellig*, 1995–96. Oil on unstretched cotton canvas, mounted on canvas-covered Masonite, 21 1/4 x 29 1/2 inches.

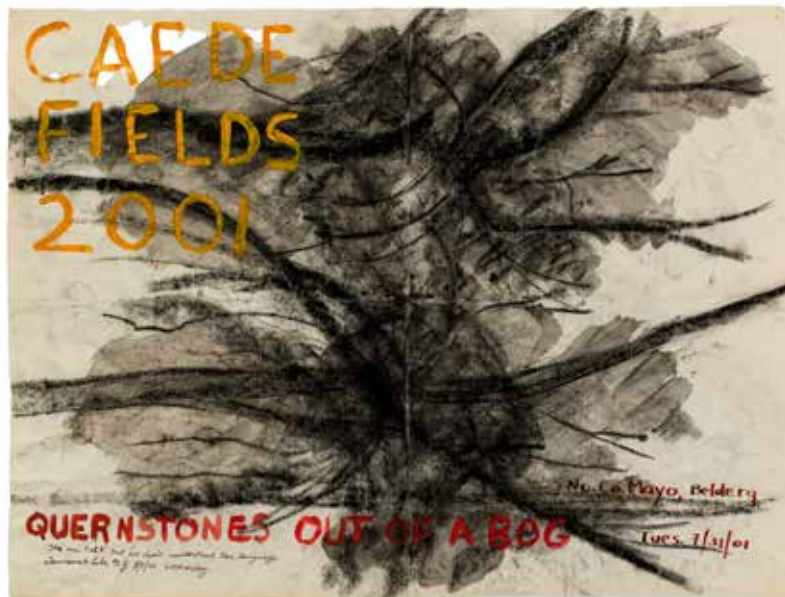


Figure 3: *Caide Fields*, 2001. Charcoal, sepia ink and gouache on Strathmore USA, 100% cotton charcoal paper, 19 x 25 inches.

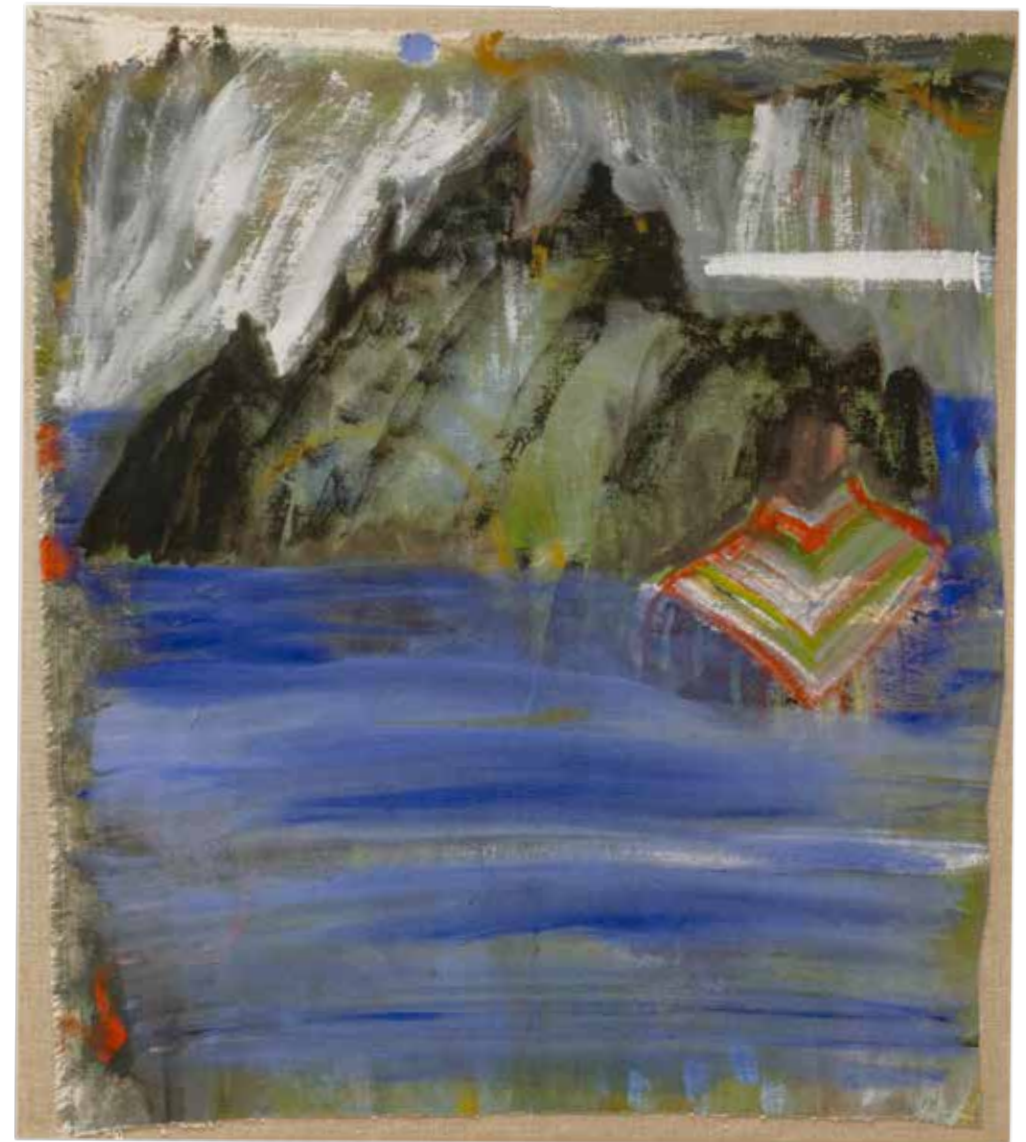


Figure 4: *Skellig (with shawl)*, 1997. Oil on unstretched canvas, mounted on linen, 23 x 20 inches.



Figure 5: *The Music of Boa Island, Playing with Three Hands*, 1995. Mixed media, 28 x 29 ³/₄ inches.



Figure 6: *Dappled Creatures/ Golden Grove*, 1998. Oil on unstretched cotton canvas, mounted, 45 ¹/₂ x 52 inches.



Figure 7: *The Curing Well*, 1996.
Oil and acrylic on unstretched
canvas, 65 x 104 inches.





Figure 8: *Greetings from an Island*,
1995. Watercolor and gouache on C. M.
Fabriano paper, 22 × 30 inches.



Figure 9: *The Leaving*, 1995. Oil on linen, 46 x 44 inches. Collection of Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Hamden, Connecticut.

"The Leaving is about immigration, not only of the Irish people to America, but about all of us leaving and wandering, searching for home, often with sorrow for what we leave behind."

— Frances Hynes



Figure 10: *Red Cross Rider*, 1996. Watercolor and gouache on C. M. Fabriano paper, 22 x 30 inches.



Figure 11: *Moving On*, 1995-96. Oil on linen, 22 x 28 inches.



Figure 12: *The Wanderer*, 1996. Oil on unstretched, folded cotton lawn, 57 x 75 inches.

"When I created this painting, I was thinking of layers of time, the vast span of time and ancient time."

— Frances Hynes



Figure 13: *The Wanderers*, 1996.
Acrylic on Saunders/Waterford
paper, 22 ¹/₄ × 29 ³/₄ inches.



Small text label on the wall, likely providing information about the artwork.





Figure 14: *Camel Walk*, 1994.
Watercolor and gouache on Arches,
France paper, 22 1/4 x 30 inches.



Figure 16: *Horse and Rider*, ca.
1990s. Watercolor and acrylic on
CM Fabriano paper, cut and reas-
sembled, with monoprint fragment,
19 x 25 inches.



Figure 15: *Riddle of the Hybrid*,
1997. Oil on unstretched folded
denim, mounted, 41 x 60 inches.



Figure 17: *Above the Earth and
Under the Earth*, ca. 1990s.
Gouache on Saunders/Waterford
paper, folded, 20 x 30 inches.



Figure 18: *Hunters in the Snow*, no date.
Oil on cotton lawn, 26 × 55 1/4 inches.

“This was a much larger painting that I kept cropping and cutting into smaller and smaller pieces. Now I wonder what it looked like ‘whole’ and wish I had saved the cut away fragments.”

— Frances Hynes



Figure 19: *Embryonic Series: Edge of the Woods*, no date. Oil on cotton canvas sized with rabbit-skin glue, 20 x 30 inches.



Figure 20: *Embryonic Deer and Rising Figures*, ca. 1990s. Oil on folded cotton lawn, 54 x 56 inches.

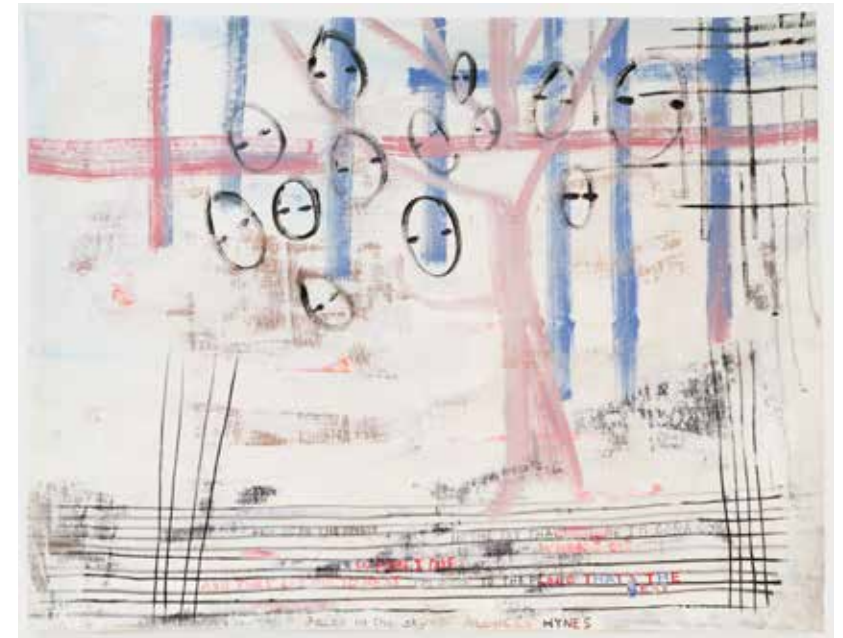


Figure 21: *Spirits in the Sky*, no date. Oil on unstretched canvas, 41 x 51 inches.

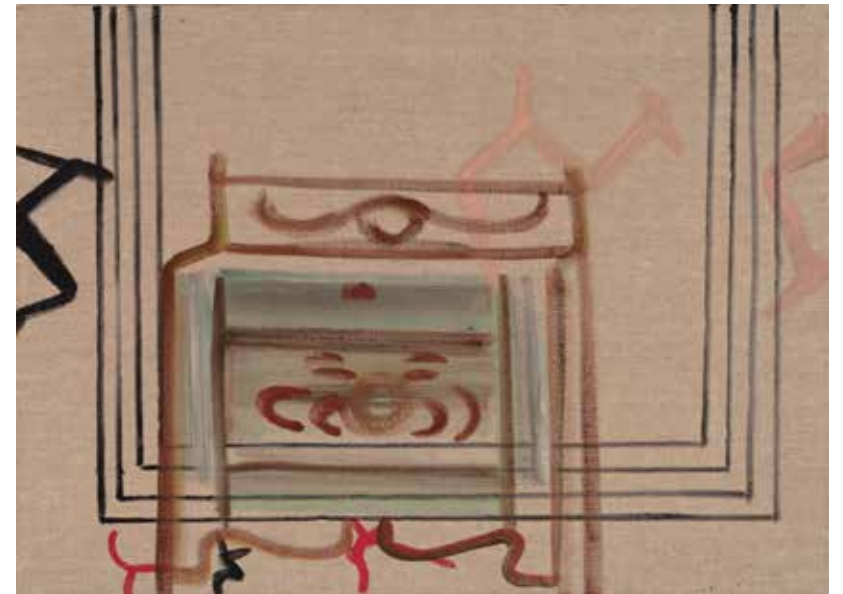


Figure 22: *Embryonic Series: Desk, Reclining Figure and Animals*, ca. 1990s. Oil on linen with rabbit-skin glue, 20 x 30 inches.



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All works courtesy the artist unless otherwise noted.

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Figure 20: *Embryonic Deer and Rising Figures*, ca. 1990s. Oil on folded cotton lawn, 54 × 56 inches.

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Figure 22: *Embryonic Series: Desk, Reclining Figure and Animals*, ca. 1990s. Oil on linen, sized with rabbit-skin glue, 20 × 30 inches.

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Frances Hynes has a lengthy exhibition history beginning with the 1974 New Talent Festival, sponsored by eighteen New York galleries to provide venues for unknown artists. Poindexter Gallery participated in the festival and introduced her paintings. A solo exhibition at Poindexter Gallery followed. She has since had more than forty solo exhibitions. These include a solo exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S.1 (now MoMA PS1), in Long Island City, New York and nine solo shows at Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York. Other museum exhibitions include the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York; New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut; Springfield Museum of Art, Ohio; Wright Museum of Art, Beloit, Wisconsin; Jacksonville Museum of Contemporary Art, Florida; and a ten-year survey at Ogunquit Museum of American Art, Maine.

Frances Hynes had six solo exhibitions at June Kelly Gallery, New York, between 1991 and 2017. *All Kinds of Weather*, a one-person show of watercolors, was presented at Phyllis Stigliano Gallery, Brooklyn, in cooperation with June Kelly Gallery in 2010. In 2015, Phyllis Stigliano Art Projects presented *Frances Hynes: animal works, paintings from the early 1980s* at Robert Kobayashi's gallery, Moe's Meat Market. Hynes also shows at Elizabeth Moss Gallery, Falmouth, Maine. Dan Kany reviewed in the Portland Press Herald Hynes's 2018 exhibition *Marking Time: Of Land and Of Sea* at Elizabeth Moss Gallery.

Her work has been featured in three invitationals at the National Academy of Design, New York, and two at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York. Her work travels internationally through the Art in Embassies Program, based in Washington, D.C.

Her painting is represented in numerous museum collections including: Albany Institute of History and Art, New York; Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, Maine; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine; Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York; Ireland's Great Hunger Museum, Hamden, Connecticut; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.; New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut; Newark Museum, New Jersey; Portland Museum of Art, Maine; Queens Museum of Art, New York; Springfield Museum of Art, Ohio; Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia; and the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Hynes is the recipient of awards for her painting from both the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Academy of Design. She lives in Queens, New York, and was a founding member of Independent Studios I, a group of artists that maintained a cooperative workspace in Long Island City from 1978 to 2016. Frances Hynes received a Master of Arts from New York University and a Bachelor of Arts from St. John's University. At New York University, she performed in *Outskirts*, a happening choreographed by Robert Rauschenberg.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This exhibition and publication would not be possible without the support of many individuals from St. John's University and the wider community. In no particular order, special thanks go to Elizabeth DeLuna, Catherine Lahood, Ryan Flores, Eileen O'Connor, Fr. Brian Shanley, Gina Florio, Aaris Sherin, Susan Damiani and The McCallen Society, Mat Gasparek, Christopher K. Ho, Alyse Hennig, Susan Rosenberg, André McKenzie, Brian James, Edrex Fontanilla, Belenna Lauto, Jamilee Lacy, Laura Burton, Winnie Lam, Nerissa Palad-Palermo, Matthew Wilson, Monique Jernigan, Elizabeth Ponce de Leon, Denise Vencak-Toner, Tyler Considine, Liz Janoff, Yasmin Mazloom, Paul Fabozzi, Diane Blascovich, Nicole Miskiewicz, St. John's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Moss Galleries, Falmouth and Portland, Maine, Phyllis Stigliano Art Projects, an anonymous donor, Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University, in Hamden, Connecticut, and the Rev. Al Shands, among many others.





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