

a loaded brush

nancy brett: recent paintings



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Organized by Kathleen Monaghan,
Director, The Hyde Collection

Guest essayist Barry Schwabsky,
Writer, Art Critic, New York City

Exhibition schedule:

Cranbrook Art Museum
May 30 - August 23, 1998
Cranbrook Academy of Art
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

The Hyde Collection
July 31 - September 25, 1999
Glens Falls, New York

Frontispiece: *Captive*, 1998

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acknowledgments:

One of the very great pleasures of working with contemporary art is the relationship with living artists. Visiting the artist's studio, being allowed into that very private world of someone who faces the daily struggle of creativity, is indeed a privilege. Curators come to know a number of things about the work and the artist when they have the advantage of watching the process unfold. Nancy Brett made the experience of organizing this exhibition one of very great pleasure for me. Her intelligence, sensitivity, inexhaustible willingness, and generosity are deeply appreciated.

I am indebted to the artist for her assistance and also to the lenders, additionally, I am thankful to a dedicated staff who so graciously carried the burden of the countless details of organizing an exhibition: Susan Weber designed the catalogue; Robin Blakney-Carlson managed the traveling schedule; Jane Thompson edited text, and Kitty Ramsey handled the coordinating details.



Brett's studio.

...the act of imagination is bound up with memory. You know they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding: it is remembering. Remembering where it all used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was ... It is emotional memory ... what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding."

Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory"

I am mesmerized by the power of art. Art commands my attention and teaches me something every day. I am equally captivated by human experience, how it differs from reality and how the complexities of life render us all, in some way, helpless. It follows then that painting about emotion and character, painting that serves as a mnemonic device for a past now lost from memory, engages me more often and with more "staying power" than most other art forms. For this reason I am drawn to the work of Nancy Brett where I find the intensity and tension that reside in personal, social history operating in the paintings. These are emotions that most often exist only on the boundary of our consciousness. Our balance is easily lost. Despite that, the artist risks all as she dares us to lift the veil at the threshold of remembrance.

Nancy Brett is preoccupied with the ephemera of daily life. Her paintings are filled with symbols of the feminine: bright red nails, pretty dresses, bobby sox, pony tails, and fluff. Only on the periphery do we sometimes find a male figure lurking. The artist seduces the viewer with bright color and bold design. Like a banquet for the eye, Brett gives us good-humored polka dots, gallant plaids, and bold splashes. A critic might say she celebrates the banal in the realm of the domestic. Look again, this time more closely.

The artist invites us into the illusory world of childhood memory, the place where experience, relationships, and identity are transfigured into the *grown-up*. The pictures are poignant incantations of experience. Family structure, playground politics, and gender identification are without an arbitrator in these enigmatic settings. The sanctuary of home and protection becomes suspect, the pain of loss, unmediated.

Brett provokes the viewer. She exposes a world where ignorance, silence and complicity govern behavior. What will become of the faceless little girl who exposes her panties and hides her face? Or the boy-child-desperado who targets the evening news — or, is it he going for the one reading the news? Are adults the victims of their own imaginings? To what omnipotent force, experienced or perceived, do we give over our authority? Do we willfully use our capacity for self-determination, or relinquish it for the sake of approbation? On whose account do we forge the reminiscence of pain into an unguent of desire? Using the startlingly familiar terrain of childhood, Brett presents us with fictive repetitive chronicles. She gives substance to ubiquitous life-experience through her painting. Simultaneously, she asks the viewer to reconstruct their shrouded reality.

Kathleen Monaghan
Director, The Hyde Collection

the secrets we share with painting:

Nancy Brett is an abstract painter of highly charged representational imagery. "I hope you write a really formalist essay," she said (laughing) as I was leaving her studio, and of course I will. But a properly formal interpretation of a painting is not, in my view, the kind that can't talk about, say, a pair of red shoes, but only something like "a shoe-shaped reddish patch just below the center of the canvas." It's not a reductive reading, an exercise in leaving-out, but a way of binding an expansive understanding of the work to the primal fact that it is, precisely, a work of art, an artificial creation and not an immediate reality, so that the whole range of feelings that find expression in the painting is threaded in and out of the feelings about art that are at its origin.

The reason I can presume to offer such an interpretation of Nancy Brett's paintings is that I think I know something about her feelings toward art. I know because the paintings tell me. Their ability to do so, to tell so much insinuatingly, with an obliquity and a directness I can hardly tell apart, gives me to understand what good paintings are. The goodness of a good painting is not so much an autonomous reality — although I want to say that it is really something in the painting and not my own projection into it, a by-product of my perceptual and interpretive energy — as something I recognize, as a capacity to evoke recognition. The strange thing is that what I recognize in the painting can only be something I recognize in myself.

What is it that I recognize here? I never wore those red shoes or those blue ones, that yellow or pink dress, that pony tail being done or undone. There are stories somewhere in these paintings, but they're not my stories — for all I know they're not Brett's either — and they're ones in which the same things seem to happen in different ways. The gesture that is "gathering" in this painting (*Pony Tail*) may be "cutting" in that one (*Pony Tail with Scissors*). There may be a memory back there somewhere, but in revising itself, reconstructing itself, memory assumes the limits and prerogatives of fiction, gives up the claim to be "mine" and takes on the responsibility to be "ours." (Idea for a science-fiction story à la Philip K. Dick: what if a drug were capable of giving me someone else's memories?) It's no accident that if you walk up to the painting called *Captive* and spread your arms the way the girl in the painting has, your arms — if you're an adult, and neither small as a jockey nor tall as a basketball player — will encompass just about the width of the canvas. Try it on. What is this being caught up in a dress (a piece of colored fabric) or painting (a piece of fabric with colors on it)? Is pleasurable, scary, reassuring, confusing? Are you surprised to learn that it's a kind of unseeing, both for the one who makes the painting and for the one involved in the more passive pleasure of



Pony Tail (with scissors), 1998



The Perfect Chair, 1997/98



Hokey Pokey, 1996



Red Bedroom, 1998



Inside the Yellow Dress, 1997



Spirit Feet, 1998



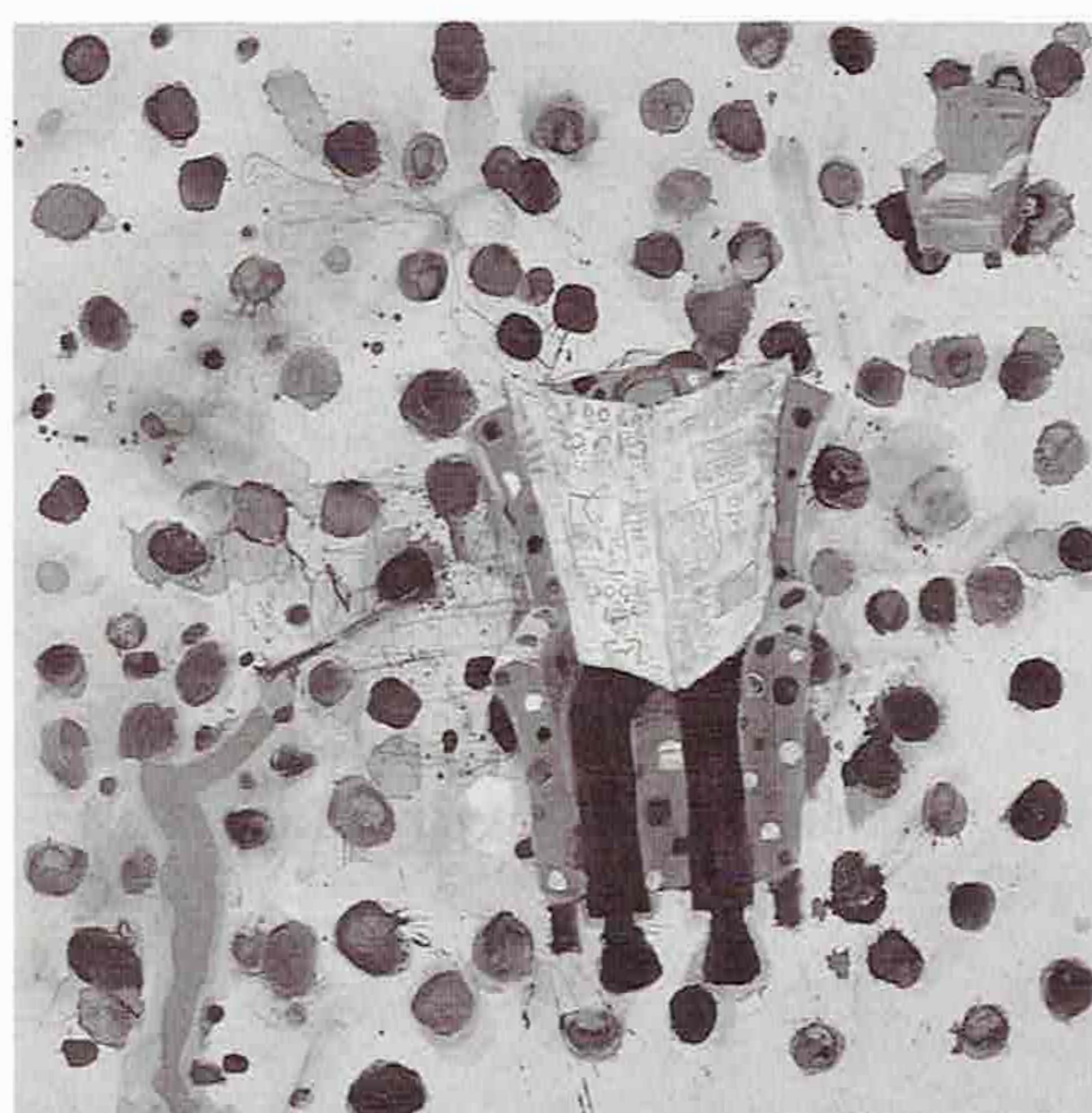
Pony Tail, 1995

receiving it, a way of letting something come around and over the eyes? Since you can be inside it and outside it at the same time, it offers something to perception that is somehow in between seeing and touching, or both at once, the beguiling way the girl's body, in the painting, appears through the traces it leaves on or through the dress that lightly falls upon it. The dress may be coming off or on, painting is indifferent to such narrative vectors, but rightly so in this case, since dressing and undressing are nearly the same from the point of view of the understanding that it is the passage of the garment across the body that transmutes it into a sign, though one through which, as we see here, the body always continues to transpire.

Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny — the dictum may not hold in biology, after all, but it describes Brett's paintings. The path that each one takes is the same one her career as a whole has taken: first abstraction, then landscape, then figuration. Each painting grows, not out of an image, but out of a sequence of abstract marks. Sometimes these are still visible, to some degree, in the finished painting: the stripes of *The Perfect Chair*, the cursive squiggles in *Pony Tail (with scissors)*, the polka-dot blobs in *Hero* — motifs that would seem out of place in the work of contemporary abstractionists like Mary Heilman or Jacqueline Humphries. Often they are buried within the skin of the painting, perhaps detectable as a sort of textural irregularity — look carefully for the big X imbedded in the surface of *Study (Our Little Secret)*, X marks the spot. The marks create a sense of place, of weather, of mood; only then is that place populated.

Much is hidden within these paintings, but the fact that something is hidden — secreted — is never concealed. *Our Little Secret* could have been the title of any of them, or all. The important thing is understanding that you, reader, you, viewer, whoever you are, have been comprehended in that first person plural possessive. Shown the painting that actually bears the title, I warned the artist not to print it on her show's announcement. "It could get you in a lot of trouble these days." Actually the people who like to go around censoring artworks may not be far wrong. They can communicate feelings that leave us troubled, irresolute. The secrets we share with painting are just anybody's: anonymous memories, equivocal identifications.

Barry Schwabsky



Hero, 1997

nancy brett:

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EDUCATION

- M.F.A. Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI
B.F.A. Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 The Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, NY
1998 Cranbrook Art Museum, Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI
1997 The Painting Center, Project Room, New York, NY
1996 Courthouse Gallery, The Lake George Arts Project, Lake George, NY
1993 Victoria Munroe Fine Art, New York, NY
1991 Victoria Munroe Gallery, New York, NY
1989 Victoria Munroe Gallery, New York, NY
1988 L'Ecole Gallery, New York, NY
1987 Hillwood Art Museum, C.W. Post, Long Island University, NY
1982 Harm Bouckaert Gallery, New York, NY
1980 Ericson Gallery, New York, NY
1976 Gallery Seven, Detroit, MI

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1997 *HAIR-DO*, curated by Nancy Brett, The Work Space, NY
Current Undercurrent; Working in Brooklyn, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY; Gasworks Gallery, London England; Cornerhouse Gallery, Manchester, England; Weatherspoon Art Gallery, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
The Figure Reconsidered, The Gallery at Hastings-on-Hudson, Municipal Building, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY
1996 *Small Prints*, Traveling Exhibition, University of West England, Bristol, England; Parsons School of Design, NY
Pet Paintings, Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston, MA
Swag and Puddle, The Work Space, NY
Faculty Exhibition, The Parson School of Design Gallery, NY
1995 *The Nature of Landscape*, The Gallery at

- Hastings-on-Hudson, Municipal Building, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY
new york STATEments, The Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, NY; Art in General, NY
Pleasant Pebble, The Work Space, NY
1994 *Image in Paint*, Inaugural Exhibition, K&E Gallery, New York, NY
Landscape: Seen and Remembered, sponsored by Organization of Independent Artists, Police Building, New York, NY
Landscape Not Landscape, Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton, FL
Artists of the Mohawk Hudson Region, University Art Museum, State University of New York at Albany, NY
Rainbow: Prints from Bob Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop, Exhibition traveling in Africa through 1997
1993 *Summer Salon*, Victoria Munroe Fine Art, New York, NY
1992 *Distant Visions: Contemporary Landscape Painting*, Epstein Museum, Birmingham, MI
New and Notable Acquisitions, Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, MI
Summer Salon, Victoria Munroe Gallery, New York, NY
Landscapes, Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, NY
1991 *The Painters*, Victoria Munroe Gallery, New York, NY
Celebrating Nature, Champion International Corporation Collection Exhibition
1990 *Notions of Place: Paintings and Drawings*, Victoria Munroe Gallery, New York, NY
1989 *Lines of Vision: Drawings by Contemporary Women*, Blum Helman Warehouse; Hillwood Art Museum, C.W. Post, Long Island University
Summer Exhibition, Michael Walls Gallery, New York, NY
Landscape: A Travelogue Painted from Memory, Imagination and Reality, Ruth Siegel Gallery, NY
1988 *Landscape Anthology*, Grace Borgencihl Gallery, New York, NY

- 1986 *Letters*, Institute for Art and Urban Resources at The Clocktower, New York, NY
- 1985 *Chain Reaction*, 55 Mercer Street Gallery, New York, NY
- 1984 *WSU/NYC*, Wayne State University Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1983 *Women Artists*, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
Painting from the Mind's Eye, Hillwood Art Museum, C.W. Post, L.I.U.
Work 4 the Revolution, Harm Bouckaert Gallery, New York, NY
- 1982 *Cranbrook, USA*, Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI
- 1981 *Painting Up Front*, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
- 1980 Susan Caldwell, Inc., New York, NY
Painting as Precept, Ericson Gallery, New York, NY
U.S. Art 1980, Ericson Gallery, New York, NY
- 1979 Susan Caldwell, Inc., New York, NY
 Touchstone Gallery, New York, NY
- 1978 Museum of Modern Art, Corporate Placement, New York, NY
- 1974 *Michigan Focus*, Detroit Institute of Arts and Grand Rapids Museum of Art
- 1972 Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY
 Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI

AWARDS

- 1998 New York Foundation for the Arts, Fellowship in Painting
- 1996 Barbara Deming Memorial Fund
- 1991 National Endowment for the Arts, Visual Artist Fellowship
- 1983-88 Artist Fellowship and Residency at Yaddo

SELECTED PUBLIC & CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University
 Cranbrook Art Museum
 Power Institute of Fine Arts, Sydney, Australia
 Princess Cruise Lines

General Electric
 Champion International
 J.P. Morgan, Morgan Guaranty Trust Company
 Amerada Hess Corporation
 Manhattan Savings Bank
 Milbank, Tweed, Hadley, and McCloy
 Prudential Insurance
 Best Products
 IBM
 Marsh and McLennan Companies, Inc.
 Kidder, Peabody, Inc.
 Morgan Stanley

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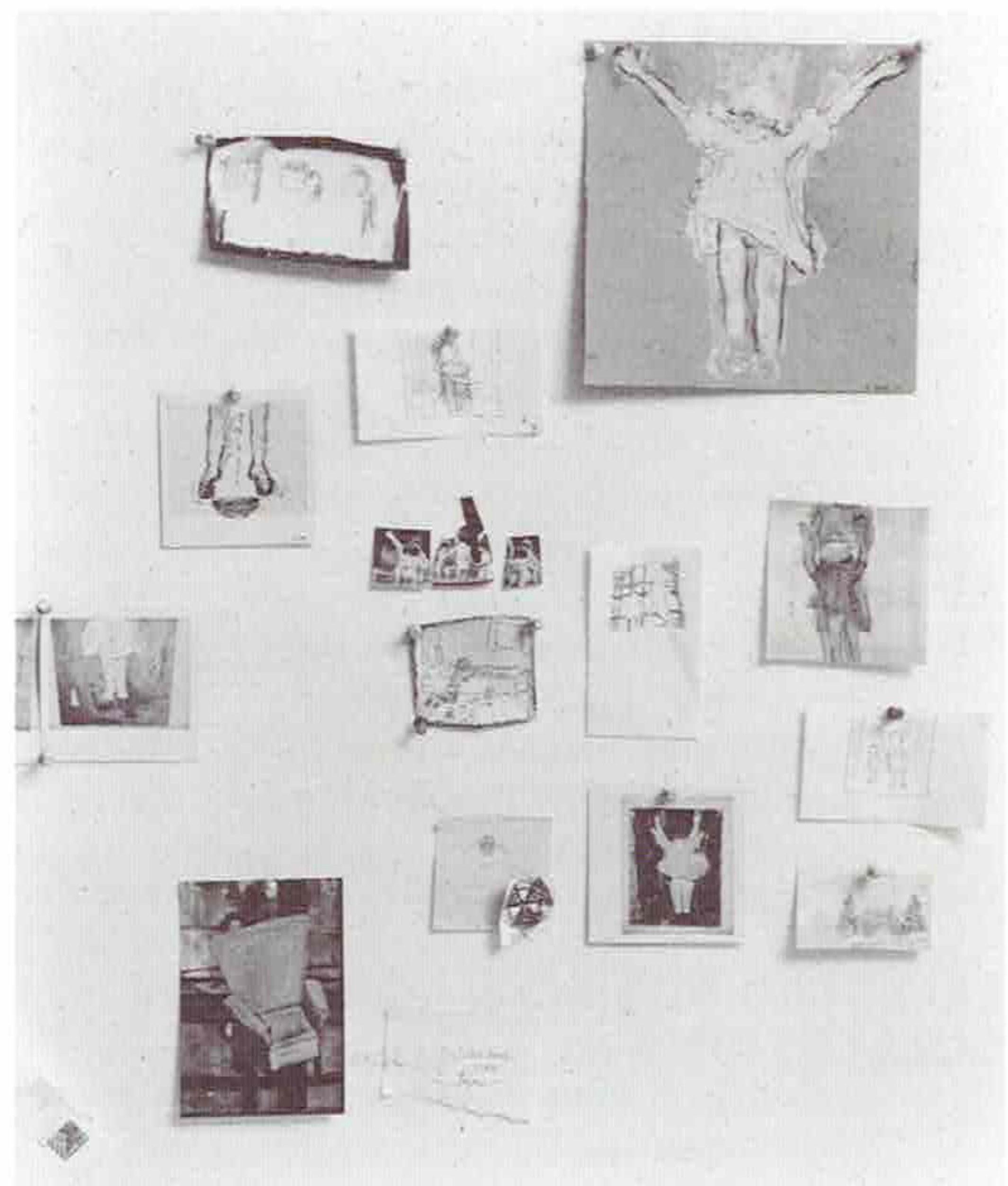
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- Scott, Sue. "Nancy Brett" *ARTnews*, May, 1993.
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- Van Wagner, Judy. "Nancy Brett and Something 'Other'", *Kindred Spirits* Catalog Essay, Long Island University, 1987
- Westfall, Stephen. "Nancy Brett," *ARTS*, September, 1983.

TEACHING

- 1995- Parsons School of Design, New York, NY
- 1995 Yale School of Art, Visiting Artist
- 1995 State University of New York, Purchase, Visiting Artist in Painting, Winter Semester
- 1997,'94 The School of Visual Arts, New York, NY, Lecture
- 1997,'93 Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY Visiting Artist
- 1993 Bennington College, Bennington, VT, Visiting Artist
- 1993 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Lecture
- 1993,'89 Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY, Visiting Artist
- 1993,'84 University of Delaware, Newark, Visiting Artist
- 1986 University of Illinois, Champagne, IL Visiting Artist
- 1986 Ohio State University, Columbus, OH Visiting Lecturer

- 1985 C.W. Post, Long Island University, Greenvale, NY, Visiting Artist
- 1985 Southampton College, Long Island University, Southampton, NY, Visiting Artist
- 1981 Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, Visiting Artist
- 1976-77 Jersey City State College, Jersey City, NJ
- 1972-73 Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

The artist wishes to dedicate the work in this exhibition to the memory of her mother Fanchon Eidelman; and to thank Barry Schwabsky, Peter Brett, Vicki Brett-Gach, Deborah Waxenberg and Roger Rubin for their support.



A wall in Brett's studio.

cklist:

ensions are in inches; height precedes width.

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Bathers, 1996/97**
Oil on canvas, 36 x 36
Collection of the artist

Bedroom, 1995/98
Oil on linen, 35 x 42
Collection of the artist

Hero, 1997
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30
Collection of the artist

A Little Hokey Pokey, 1998
Oil on canvas, 18 x 20
Collection of the artist

Hokey Pokey, 1996**
Oil, gouache, ink on canvas, 73 x 70
Collection of the artist

Pony Tail II, 1996
Oil on canvas, 18 x 20
Collection of the artist

My Brother's Hand, 1996/97
Oil, gouache, ink on canvas, 70 x 73
Collection of the artist

Pony Tail, 1995
Oil on canvas, 73 x 70
Collection of Barbara Lipski

Red Bedroom, 1997
Oil on canvas, 22 x 22
Collection of Bob Berlind and Mary Lucier

10. *Inside the Yellow Dress*, 1997
Oil and gouache on canvas, 50 x 40
Collection of Shelley and David Kruth

11. *Blue Feet*, 1998
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48
Collection of the artist

12. *Captive*, 1998**
Oil on canvas, 72 x 72
Collection of the artist

13. *Our Little Secret*, 1998
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30
Collection of the artist

14. *Pony Tail (with scissors)*, 1998
Oil, gouache, ink on canvas, 12 x 12
Collection of the artist

15. *The Perfect Chair*, 1997/98
Oil, gouache, ink on canvas, 60 x 66
Collection of the artist

16. *Spirit Feet*, 1998
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30
Collection of the artist

17. *Study (Our Little Secret)*, 1998
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12
Collection of the artist

** shown exclusively at Cranbrook Art Museum