SYNTHESIS OF THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL
IN THE WORKS OF MAY STEVENS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Jan Abbott, B.F.A.
Denton, Texas
May 1998

This thesis is an investigation of the way in which the painter May Stevens (b. 1924) synthesizes her personal experiences and political philosophy to form complex and enduring works of art. Primary data was accumulated through an extended interview with May Stevens and by examining her works on exhibit in New York and Boston. An analysis of selected works from her "Big Daddy" and "Ordinary/Extraordinary" series revealed how her personal feelings about her own family became entwined with larger political issues. As an important member of the feminist art movement that evolved during the 1970s, she celebrated this new kinship among women in paintings that also explored the contradictions in their lives. In more recent work she has explored complex social issues such as teenage prostitution, sexism, and child abuse in a variety of artistic styles and media. This study investigates how May Stevens continues to portray issues of international significance in works that consistently engage the viewer on a personal, almost visceral level.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1967 was a time of increasing turmoil for the United States both internationally and at home. The coming year would bring massive protests over Vietnam, the May Revolt in France, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, student revolts at Columbia, violence at the Chicago Democratic Convention, and the assassinations of both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy.

It was in 1967 that May Stevens (b.1924) painted what came to be called the precursor of her “Big Daddy” series (Fig. 1). Titled Prime Time, this rather innocuous image of an overweight bald man in his undershirt bore little resemblance to the powerful bullet-headed “Daddies” to come. The man, in fact, was May Stevens’ father. Painted from a recent photograph, she found it painful to see what her father had become.

Although she loved her father and admired his self-reliance, she found his politics repulsive:

My father’s politics were aligned with those of management. He joined the company union and talked against commies, Jews, niggers, etc. He had his own scale of racial acceptability, with the English, Scots, and Germans at the top. He approved of Hitler’s policies towards Jews; he said that Jews were niggers with their skin turned inside out.¹

Prime Time shows her father standing with arms crossed in front of a glaringly blank television screen. Stevens eventually saw this image as a symbol of American complicity in the war in Southeast Asia, with the television representing our numbness to the nightly news reports of bombings and death counts.²

This was not the first time that a concern for political issues had surfaced in Stevens' work. In 1951 she did a painting called The Martinsville Seven, which referred to the politicized trial of seven black men in Virginia. This primarily abstract work was favorably received, but she was criticized for its title. Any reference to politics was considered taboo for the serious artist during the 1950s when Abstract Expressionism was the accepted and exalted style. However, such criticism did not dampen her commitment to confront injustice. She became deeply involved in the civil rights movement and participated in demonstrations and marches on Washington, D.C. In the early 1960s, Stevens returned to a more realistic style in a series called “Freedom Riders” dealing with the daily bus burnings in Alabama. In 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote the preface to a catalogue for an exhibition of this series.³

During the late sixties Stevens became active in the artists’ movement to protest the war in Vietnam. In 1966 she and her husband Rudolph Baranik, along with a group of artists including Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, and Denise Levertov, organized a group

² Ibid.

called Artists and Writers Protest. They staged demonstrations and organized numerous exhibitions to communicate their objections.

May Stevens also expressed her anger through “Big Daddy.” By 1968 he had become an absurd, funny and tragic, yet menacing expression of authoritarianism, super-patriotism, and racism. He sometimes wore a military helmet and even had “paper doll outfits” that transformed him into a policeman, a soldier, an executioner, or a butcher (Fig. 4). He was now completely nude with a phallic, bullet-shaped, bomb-shaped head and a panting bulldog seated on his lap. Both he and his canine attribute grinned in a smug and self-righteous manner, embodying American imperialism and hegemony.

However, it was only after the stimulus of the contemporary women’s movement in the early seventies that Stevens realized the anti-patriarchal aspect of the “Big Daddies.” She had thought of them as anti-establishment, but realized that the meanings were synonymous. She described thinking about all the buildings and libraries across the country, all planned and constructed by men. “And all the books in all those libraries, with the philosophies and the theories, the poems and the paintings, the religions and the sciences, all written, all designed by men.”

She continued to recast “Big Daddy” from 1967 until 1976, and through these works one can chart the course of May Stevens’ personal rebellion against the values of

\[4\] Ibid., 115
her father and “Big Daddy.” Not only did she work through her bitter feelings about her father’s oppressive attitudes, but thanks to feminism she became aware of the crippling effects of such attitudes on her mother, Alice Stevens.

Although a bright child, Alice Stevens had been forced to quit school in order to help support her family. She went to work as a mother’s helper for wealthy families, while her brother was allowed to continue in school. After marriage she found some joy in motherhood, but was never adept at cooking, sewing, or keeping house. Over the years she became increasingly disoriented and gradually lost the ability to speak. Diagnosed years later with schizophrenia, Alice Stevens spent her last three decades in mental institutions and nursing homes. By delving into the complexities of patriarchy and sexism, Stevens realized that her mother’s aborted life was not simply the result of living with her father; it was also the result of living in a society that forced her into roles with fewer and fewer chances to thrive (or even to survive).

A few years later she would begin a series based on her mother’s life, but in 1974 she felt more comfortable painting her family of friends and artists. While not abandoning the “Big Daddy” theme, she began a series of three paintings that overtly expressed her developing feminist consciousness and her deeply felt connection to other women. In the last painting of this series, *Mysteries and Politics* (1978), Stevens portrayed herself along with artists and intellectuals—all women, all friends (Fig. 15). Along with artists such as Betsy Damon, Pat Steir, and Mary Beth Edelson are feminist art historians Patricia Hills and Carol Duncan. Also included is anthropologist Elizabeth Weatherford whose research
focused on women's issues. In addition to these contemporary friends, Stevens included her mother, Alice Stevens, dressed in white and holding the infant May Stevens. And looming behind the women on the right is the disembodied head of Rosa Luxemburg, the socialist revolutionary of the early twentieth century. For Stevens, this diverse gathering represents "the development of a political ideology rooted in spiritual kinship among women."  

The images of her mother and Luxemburg came from a collage Stevens had published a year earlier in the feminist journal *Heresies* (Fig. 18). For this collage she used photographs, poetry, and excerpts from Luxemburg's letters to contrast the ordinary and tragic life of her mother, Alice, with the extraordinary and tragic life of Rosa, who was brutally murdered and thrown into a Berlin canal in 1919. Stevens returned to this theme after painting *Mysteries and Politics* and began what was to become the "Ordinary/Extraordinary" series; an enterprise that would engage her creative energy for the next fourteen years (1977-1991).

By contrasting the life of this "ordinary" housewife with the imposing figure of Rosa Luxemburg, Stevens created a powerful juxtaposition, one that is sometimes jarring for the viewer. Speaking of her mother, May Stevens said, "I think there are some people

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who don’t want to look at this woman. They don’t think she should be in art; in fact, they
don’t think she should be anywhere.”

Rosa Luxemburg, on the other hand, was an internationally known figure whose
voice lives on in her theoretical papers as well as her remarkable letters. May Stevens was
inspired by these writings, especially by Luxemburg’s devotion to working-class interests
and her concern for the fullest development of the human spirit.

As Stevens continued the “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series, she explored various
media and painting styles. She used photographs, text, and photocopied images in
complex collages and paintings to illuminate disturbing connections between these two
women who influenced her life. She alternated between larger than life-size paintings
featuring Alice and equally large paintings with Rosa; she even portrayed imaginary
meetings and conversations between the housewife and the revolutionary.

May Stevens’ decade-long immersion in the “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series still
resonates in her more current work, where she continues to explore relationships among
women. In a series of works developed from a painting called Sea of Words (1991) Rosa
and Alice have been replaced by a mystical cast of women rowers (Fig. 35). In these
paintings the water’s surface is covered by vast tangles of text with quotes by feminist

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6 May Stevens, quoted in Melissa Dabakis, “Re-imagining Women’s History,” in
Rosa Alice May Stevens Ordinary Extraordinary, ed. Melissa Dabakis and Janis Bell
writers and theorists. These works are more about feelings than specific narratives; they show abstracted worlds where possibilities are infinite.

Stevens has also addressed more specific issues in the lives of contemporary women. *Women's History: Live Girls* (1992) exposes the world of young Detroit prostitutes, while a 1996 work called *Tic Tac Toe* addresses her concern about child abuse, both at the local and international level. Although entirely different in media and style, these works also confront issues of feminism, class, and patriarchy.

In summary, May Stevens has consistently incorporated her personal experience as a feminist and a political activist into her art. Her work is not overtly polemical, but rather a careful and fierce analysis of the forces that shape women’s lives. Much of her career parallels that of the contemporary women’s movement and is charged with the emotion and power born of acute awareness. Her artistic style, her media, and her methods of investigation have shifted dramatically throughout her career, but her intense commitment to her art and to a better world has never wavered.

*Statement of the Problem*

This thesis analyzes selected works by May Stevens over the course of her career and investigates how she consistently synthesizes her personal experiences and political philosophy to form complex and enduring works of art.
Methodology

Primary data for this study was accumulated by communicating directly with May Stevens and by viewing her artwork in New York and Boston. Stevens was interviewed on June 1, 1996, at the Mary Ryan Gallery in New York City, where she discussed all aspects of her one-woman show which was in progress at the gallery. On view were several paintings from the “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series as well as more recent paintings, prints, and works on paper. She provided valuable insights into her working methods and graciously answered all questions concerning the relationship between her personal convictions and her artwork. In February 1997 individual works by Stevens were viewed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and again at the Mary Ryan Gallery in New York. A second interview scheduled for February 1997 was canceled due to illness, but May Stevens responded to a mailed list of questions with a lengthy letter to the author dated 16 April 1997. She also sent a copy of her hand-written notes for a lecture given at The University of New Mexico about her “Sea of Words” exhibit there in April 1996. Other valuable sources of primary data were the numerous published articles and poems written by May Stevens, as well as a 1994 book called in words, which she co-authored with her husband Rudolph Baranik.

Secondary sources consulted included published interviews with the artist, exhibition catalogs, periodical articles, and texts on political and feminist art. The
accumulation of secondary data was aided by access to the artist's file at the Mary Ryan Gallery in New York.

Review of Literature

Although no monographs exist on the complete works of May Stevens, portions of her oeuvre have been written about extensively. However, prior to this study, no attempt had been undertaken to tie together all phases of her career.

Prior to 1974, Stevens' work was sporadically mentioned in art journals, including short reviews in ARTnews, Arts Magazine, and Artforum. By late 1974 the impetus of the women's movement and recognition of the patriarchal and sexist aspects of her "Big Daddy" series brought her to the attention of Feminist Art Journal. The Winter 1974-75 issue published a lengthy interview with Stevens that dealt with aspects of the "Big Daddy" series. This interview was valuable in determining the exact origins of the works, as well as providing insights into her aesthetic considerations.

In her 1976 book From the Center, Lucy Lippard wrote a three-page essay on the "Big Daddy" series that eloquently described the richness of its ironies and ambiguities but did not discuss individual paintings. A 1977 review by Donald Kuspit analyzed the personal, political, and theatrical elements that contribute to the impact of the "Big Daddy" works.

May Stevens' essay, "My Work and My Working-Class Father," was included in a 1977 book called Working It Out: 23 Women Writers, Artists, Scientists, and Scholars Talk about Their Lives and Work, edited by Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels. This
essay was extremely informative about Stevens’ formative years and how her father became the inspiration for “Big Daddy.”

After 1980, the series was often mentioned in articles dealing with activist art; however, most writings focused on the new “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series. Only three years into this lengthy series, Moira Roth wrote an extended article in *Artforum* called “Visions and Revisions, Rosa Luxemburg and the Artist’s Mother.” Roth focused on the effectiveness of Stevens’ work as feminist art, specifically how she combines and balances the political and spiritual elements of women’s lives.

A premature summation of the series came in a March 1984 exhibition catalogue (The series continued until 1991). Called *Ordinary/Extraordinary: A Summation*, it offered the contrasting views of Lucy Lippard and Donald Kuspit. Lippard noted that Stevens was one of the very few artists willing to deal with class as a subject, including the middle-class nature of the women’s movement. Kuspit, however, saw the series as more personal than political, with a bleakness related to Stevens’ personal losses.

A 1989 article in *Art in America* called “Two Lives: Ordinary Extraordinary,” by Carol Jacobsen, gave an update on the continuing series. But the lengthiest analysis of Stevens’ career was published in the 1995 book *Redefining American History Painting*, edited by Patricia M. Burnham and Lucretia H. Geise. In her essay “Painting History as Lived Feminist Experience” Patricia Hills situated “Ordinary/Extraordinary” within the genre of history painting. Hills focused on Stevens’ work as a record of her personal experiences as a feminist artist, a documentation of the new community of women artists,
and an exploration of connections to women of the past. Although she briefly discussed several phases of Stevens' career, the "Big Daddy" series as well as the most recent work were not part of her analysis.

An interpretation of the "Sea of Words" series was provided by Moira Roth in her essay "May Stevens: Women, Words and Water." This essay was part of the catalogue for the Sea of Words exhibition held in 1993 at the University of Colorado. Since 1993 there has been a handful of reviews in journals and newspapers, but most valuable to my research on Stevens' recent work was the interview and correspondence with the artist. One of the great benefits of writing about a contemporary feminist such as May Stevens is the generous support such artists offer each other, as well as feminist art historians.
CHAPTER 2

EARLY WORK AND THE "BIG DADDY" SERIES

I began to paint my own family background. I painted out of love for those lower-middle-class Americans I came from and out of a great anger for what had happened to them and what they were letting happen, making happen, in the South and in Vietnam.¹

May Stevens. 1977

In 1967, when May Stevens examined a recent photograph of her father and began to paint *Prime Time*, she felt that she had come “home.”² Weary of the anti-Americanism espoused by her European-born husband and friends, she decided that it was time to accept her own heritage and paint what was true and honest about it.

During the next eight years, as she developed her “Big Daddy” series, she would delve deeply into childhood memories and buried anger. These would be combined with the many facets of her rage against the Vietnam war, bringing layers of meaning to the iconic Big Daddy. This chapter will investigate the origins of May Stevens’ commitment to social change, her earliest “political” paintings, and the complex personal and political implications of her “Big Daddy” series.


Both of her parents, as well as the working-class neighborhood of her childhood, deeply affected what she did and did not want out of life. Reared in Quincy, Massachusetts, ten miles south of Boston, Stevens went to school with Scots, some Anglo-Saxons and Nordics, but no African-Americans. The largest minority in town were the Italians, who were also the only Catholics. Stevens’ mother had been Catholic before she married, a fact that her father, Ralph Stevens, continued to hold against her. He despised Catholicism and its sanction of poverty and sacrifice.³

Ralph Stevens, in fact, despised many groups. He described the depth of his many prejudices often and emphatically within his own household. As Stevens says, “At home my father talked against Jews, blacks, Italians and Catholics in general. He had his own internal chart:

- English
- Scots
- Scandinavians
- Germans
- Irish
- French
- Italians
- Jews/Syrians
- Blacks.

He never said these things publicly, nor did he act on them—to my knowledge. But he

said them over and over." His hate was in the air that his family breathed, consistently, from one day to another.

May Stevens abhorred these racist attitudes, yet she liked her father. She walked with him to his job at the shipyard, laughing, talking and teasing. He seemed to enjoy her brazenness and said that she "had a face like that of a kid being sassy to a cop." Despite his hateful prejudices, he also reflected the Yankee characteristics of common sense, responsibility and frugality. Her neighbors, too, offered many examples of these positive qualities. Most provided well for their families and owned their own homes, but none worked in business or in the professions.

Her mother, Alice Stevens, never had a chance according to Stevens in a letter to the author. She was forced to quit elementary school when her father died and never developed any talents or social graces. She was not a good housekeeper, she did not cook well, and she did not know how to dress or talk. Her husband came to hate her, "so as not to pity her," and avoided her whenever he could. Alice Stevens loved her two children without question, but both May and her brother were embarrassed by their mother's awkwardness; neither brought friends home to visit. When her son died at

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4 Ibid.
6 May Stevens, letter to the author, 16 April 1997.
sixteen and her daughter left home, Alice Stevens became completely disoriented and was committed to a state mental hospital.⁷

Later, Stevens came to see that it was not just her father who had crippled her mother, but larger forces of oppression:

Poverty (class) ground her down from the beginning (when it took a bright child out of school to make her a mother’s helper to the rich folk on the hill) and used male dominance to do it (her brother was kept in school) and religion to sanctify the arrangement and squelch her own desire. She was taught to be good. She was a good student. She was always good—until she painted the kitchen red in the middle of the night and screamed at the passing cars.⁸

Stevens was determined that such forces would not limit her own future, but she also had empathy for her parents and a great need to understand. She said years later, “My mother’s situation fed my feminism, my father’s life fed my political impulses. In both cases I saw injustice and needed to understand why and how and what to do.”⁹

A strong work ethic was instilled in her by her father and her Scottish neighbors, but she wanted her life to be riskier, more open. She rejected the more practical idea of college, choosing art school instead. She felt that Massachusetts College of Art would save her from the stiflingly narrow world of her parents. She also feared that traditional college would inevitably lead to a teaching career and old-maid status, which was a profoundly dreaded fate for young women of Stevens’ generation.

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⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁸ Ibid., 112.

⁹ Stevens, letter, 2.
Determined to expand her world and her opportunities, she attended Massachusetts College of Art from 1942 to 1946.

After art school she moved to New York City where she worked at a shop during the day and attended the Art Students League at night. There she met Rudolf Baranik, who would become her partner for the next fifty years. He was a Lithuanian and a Jew and his family had been murdered in Eastern Europe. He had fought with the Americans in Europe and was now seriously studying art. Anti-racist and a socialist, he was someone whom Stevens felt could teach her what she needed to know. They married in June and soon left for Paris to study art and live on the GI bill.

With the birth of their son a year later, they moved to the suburbs of Paris, where Stevens painted and took care of their child. Most of her work during this period was intensely personal, with her son often the subject. However, she did do one political painting. It was a semi-abstract work inspired by the political trial of seven black men accused of rape in Virginia. Many felt that the men had been railroaded, and an international protest resulted. She exhibited this painting in 1951, along with other works, at the cooperative Gallerie Huit on the Left Bank. The reviews of her work were favorable, with one notable exception. The critic of the Paris edition of the New York Herald Tribune singled out her political painting and claimed that it was a fine painting.

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defaced by its title: *The Martinsville Seven.*\(^{11}\) He, like many in the art world during the 1950s, felt that politics had no place in art. It was the McCarthy era politically and the Greenberg era of art criticism. Political content was considered taboo for the serious artist. For May Stevens, however, this criticism only increased her determination to depict what she personally felt was important. She was adamant that no one tell her what to paint!\(^{12}\)

Three years later, back in New York, her life and her art revolved around her son. With her fear of teaching behind her, she quickly obtained her teaching certificate and began teaching high school art. Again living in the suburbs, tied to her job and her son, Stevens became emotionally involved in the civil rights struggle in the South. Accounts of bus burnings and of civil rights workers being beaten were reported daily on television and in the newspapers. Stevens followed these and read everything she could find on the events taking place. What emerged from her studio was a series called “Freedom Riders” (1964), consisting of fifteen paintings, two prints and several drawings. With newspaper photographs as her source, the paintings were mostly black and white, and they were full of pain. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote an


introduction for the show and the AFL-CIO circulated the exhibit to its New York and Washington headquarters.

Most assumed the artist of the series was black, and some, upon realizing that she was not, criticized her presumptuousness. Stevens herself admitted that as a Northern white her tendency was to romanticize these distant struggles. One critic complained that the images were not violent enough, while others simply repeated the refrain that art and politics do not mix. Stevens answered that she felt compelled to paint about this vital social issue and only hoped that she might move others as she had been moved. Had she not been tied to her home and family, she might have traveled to the South, and the paintings might have been more "authentic." But Stevens noted that those in the midst of the struggle had little time to paint.  

She was not just a passive observer. Stevens participated in each of the marches on Washington and heard the "I Have a Dream" speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She went to see Malcolm X's body, laid out in Harlem, where she did drawings and etchings of his head. The personal aspect to this work was her father's racism. "Strangely, my racist father taught me to hate racism just as his oppression of my silent, sick, lapsed Catholic mother taught me that oppressions come in clusters." Later, all of these issues would become prominent in her "Big Daddy" series.

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13 Stevens, "Looking Backward," 23.

14 Ibid.
In 1962, along with such artists as Rudolf Baranik, Nancy Spero and Leon Golub, she helped form a group called Artists and Writers Protest. Their concerns ranged from nuclear testing to racism, but much of their work focused on the military escalations in Vietnam. As anti-war sentiment grew, they published open letters in the New York Times, and in January of 1967, sponsored “Angry Arts Week.” This cultural protest was the largest since the 1940s and included over 600 artists working in dance, music, film, art, poetry and photography. For visual artists the most impressive element was The Collage of Indignation at New York University’s Loeb Student Center. Organized by Dore Ashton and Max Kozloff, this 10’ X 120’ panel was a collaboration of 150 artists and was painted over a five day period. Contributors included Richard Serra, Nancy Spero, Mark di Suvero, James Rosenquist, and, of course, May Stevens and Rudolf Baranik.¹⁵

The critic Lucy Lippard stressed the significance of this collaboration, which she claimed brought art into the real world. In 1967 art was usually confined to its own self-involved arena, primarily concerned with its own properties. Pop and Minimalism were the sanctioned styles, along with abstraction and some kinetic work. Conceptualism was just beginning its critique of almost everything except politics.

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Older artists still carried the taboo against social content wrought from McCarthyism, and younger artists simply thought such content was boring.  

The peace movement became an integral part of May Stevens' life. She participated in the Peace Tower created by The Artists Protest Committee in Los Angeles, and in New York she was heavily involved with the Art Workers Coalition (which coordinated with and eventually absorbed the Artists and Writers Protest group). The work was consuming but gratifying. "My social life and my political life were the same," she noted.  

Stevens lived in Queens during this period near a housing development for United Nations employees. Each night she and her husband would discuss politics with people from all parts of the world. The anti-Americanism of the group became overwhelming to Stevens. "I, too, had high moral sensibilities and despised neo-colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, racism, anti-Semitism, etc., etc., but as each such evening wore on I began to feel more and more depressed."  

She decided to accept herself as an American and paint what she knew and loved. Turning to her own family background, she began by examining two recent photographs—one of her father, one of her mother. Stevens described them as "terrible

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16 Ibid., 17.

17 Tarlow, 7.

18 Stevens, "My Work " 112.
to see, revealing of what life had done to these people I loved, and of what they had done to each other. The photograph of my mother was too terrible for me to deal with. I started to paint my father.\(^\text{19}\)

The result was *Prime Time* (1967), a relatively sympathetic portrait of her father with a television screen as a backdrop (Fig. 1). He is bald, overweight and wearing a sleeveless undershirt. Pushed forward in the picture plane, he stares boldly and somewhat smugly out at the spectator. However, the blank screen behind him and to his right also claims attention. The screen almost merges with the man’s head and may represent a substitute for his individual intellect. To Stevens the television is a subtle reminder of the war in Southeast Asia and the passivity of Americans who ate dinner as they watched soldiers carrying body bags. Vietnam was the first war force-fed to us on the evening news, ironically making it even more unreal, as it was sandwiched between Westerns and sitcoms. Stevens’ symbolism, however, is softened by the painterly brushstrokes that add warmth to the scene\(^\text{20}\).

As she carried her ideas farther, this father figure changed. The first painting called *Big Daddy* (1968) shows the man nude except for a fatigue cap and a bulldog seated on his lap. He has an exaggerated head that is repeated in an image projecting ominously from a television set. In the second *Big Daddy* (1968) the fatigue cap is

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\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Lippard, *A Different War*, 10.
replaced by a helmet, and the television has become a map of Vietnam (Fig. 2). The anti-militarism hinted at previously has now become an overt theme. No longer just a portrait, Big Daddy carries Stevens’ deepest feelings about Vietnam, but also “anguish for her family and how their lives had become entwined with every form of American oppression.”

With her iconography established, Stevens continued to portray Big Daddy in a multitude of settings and roles for the next eight years. He may wear a cowboy hat, a gray flannel suit, or a policeman’s uniform. He is sometimes draped in the stars and stripes but often is unselfconsciously naked. But always his expression is the same—complacent, passive, and with total incomprehension—as he watches the world he has helped create. Stevens said he represented to her “an authoritarian and closed attitude towards the world. It was a middle American attitude toward culture, toward politics, toward black people and toward Jews. He was a person who had stopped thinking when he was twenty and hadn’t opened his mind to anything since.” The multitude of implied issues can be looked at by analyzing selected works from the series.

In *Pax Americana* (1973) Big Daddy is seated wearing a cloak of stars and stripes, with perfect clouds floating behind him (Fig. 3). His see-through helmet reveals

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a phallic-shaped head that rises straight from his shoulders. His features are carefully
detailed with his lips pressed firmly together. There is just the hint of a grin. The
convoluted lines of his face are echoed in the folded wrinkles of his bulldog, who sits
securely in his lap. Big Daddy’s over-sized right hand emerges from his cloak revealing
heavy rings on his thick curled fingers. His dog, too, is accessorized with a heavy
studded collar and impressive thick claws that rest upon the American flag.

*Pax Americana* demonstrates a dramatic change in style since the original
portrait, *Prime Time*. Stevens switched from oil to acrylics during this period and here
used much stronger colors and flatter, more clarified forms. The background is painted
in a cobalt blue that accentuates the paleness of the figures. The flag’s colors are only
subtly modulated, and it is the changing shapes of the stars and stripes themselves that
lend weight to Big Daddy. Stevens explained that she wanted “a brashness, a kind of
American, straight, head-on, even commercial approach.”23 There is a cool detachment
to these images similar to that used by Warhol and other Pop artists of the 1960s, but
Stevens subverts the Pop style by infusing her work with social and political content.
When asked about the influence of Pop art, Stevens commented, “I don’t care where the
source is and what the medium is. I use anything that can do what I want.”24

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.
Here the message is about the dangers of flag waving, of super-patriotism. Stevens suggests the danger of a society that fails to question what its government is doing. The complacency that Big Daddy portrays speaks of the acquiescence of middle-class Americans and specifically of the great denial about what our military was doing to the civilians in Vietnam. As Susan Sontag said, Americans “really do not believe that other countries, other ways of life, exist, in the way that they and theirs do.” For example, it was only because of the grass roots anti-war movement that questions were finally asked, and the ugly truth about the war was revealed. The public was shocked to learn of the Mylai massacre, the secret missions and the lies that were fed to us by Lyndon Johnson and his military leaders.

Stevens showed Big Daddy with the many roles that he can play in a 1970 painting called *Big Daddy Paper Doll* (Fig. 4). Done in acrylic on canvas, measuring 6 1/2' X 14', this huge work features a virtual line up of five larger than life-size menacing figures. In the center, a white naked Big Daddy smiles happily with his bulldog on his lap. On each side his image is repeated twice, but his body has dematerialized and only his attire remains—fixed in identical seated positions. These are the costumes of authority (or paper doll outfits) that Big Daddy may wear. On the left is the black hood and cloak of the executioner, which doubles as a symbol for the white hooded Ku Klux Klansman. Next, a decorated soldier’s uniform and a flag suit for his

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dog refer again to abuses in Vietnam. To the right of Big Daddy is a policeman’s uniform complete with a riot helmet and “P.D.” initialed tank top for the dog. And on the far right is the white aproned outfit of a butcher, made sinister with bright splatters of blood.

Arranged symmetrically with the same deep blue background, the repetition of forms causes a patterned, decorative effect. The face of Big Daddy is penciled in and then carefully, almost lovingly, painted. There exists a sharp contrast between the beauty of the composition and the ugliness of the content. In a review of 1977, critic Donald Kuspit said:

With the Big Daddy Paper Doll, 1971, Stevens made it unmistakably clear that she meant Big Daddy to function as abstract form as well as social and personal content, a visual convention and meaning—cliché as well as passionate shape and portentous idea—rhetoric as well as reality. Big Daddy is at once an ideological image of America’s indifferent use of power and a personally charged form with theatrical potential, a potential which can be turned against it—used to mock its ideological meaning. There is something both mechanical and obsessive in Stevens’ use of this image—something routine which she yet manages to scrape the last ounce of resonance from.26

There is irony, too, when she takes the little girls’ pastime of paperdolls and applies it to the big boy games of power. The innocence of childhood and the brutality of adulthood are contrasted. Big Daddy himself looks innocent and vulnerable in his centralized nakedness. He seems about to say, “Hey, its not my fault—someone dresses me for these roles. I am just sitting here!”

26 Donald Kuspit, “May Stevens at Lerner Heller,” Art in America 65 (March 1977): 118.
As her fascination with Big Daddy continued, Stevens doubled him, tripled him and sometimes even had him trade places with his canine attribute. In *Metamorphosis* (1973), three monumental Daddies sit before the familiar drifting clouds (Fig.5). A closer look, however, reveals that in the figure on the right the heads of Big Daddy and the bulldog have been transposed. Stevens depicts this transformation in sequence from left to right. Naked, with his dog seated where his genitals should be, the Daddy on the left seems to vibrate as the metamorphosis begins. The changes are partially complete in the center figures, where Stevens again employs a double image of the head to suggest movement or transformation. On the right, the reversal is complete and it is remarkable how natural Big Daddy appears with a bulldog face and how contented he seems with his bulldog body.

At work here is a comment on the bestiality of humankind, and May Stevens discussed this connotation. She said, “The human and the beast is a very ancient, deeply felt, racial memory. It’s the ambiguity that human beings feel about their bodies, the mind-body dichotomy.” She compares them to the metamorphosis from human to animal in some of Francis Bacon’s paintings, which she finds quite beautiful but also terrifying (Fig. 6). In all the Big Daddy works the canine is a symbol of the lower nature of its owner, but in *Metamorphosis* Stevens emphasizes how easily the

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28 Ibid.
transformation from human to beast occurs. Big Daddy is completely oblivious to his own permutation. Further analogies between the man and the beast have been noted by others. Artist Leon Golub finds the bulldog comparable to the giantism of male genitals in Japanese erotic art, and critic Lawrence Alloway finds "a cluster of male references, some openly political and satirical, others derived from covert associations with sexual functions."29

In two more works from 1973, Stevens simplified her imagery even more, and the bulldog is no longer present. Power (36" X 83") and Head (6' X 6') are distinctly different in style, although their message is almost the same. In Power Big Daddy is doubled in a diptych format with mirror images on each side of a dotted white line (Fig. 7). His neck and head have been stylized to a mere protuberance—a thumb, or more likely a penis—that rises abruptly from his rounded shoulders. Distinguishing features have been almost eliminated, and his ears (which are always small) have all but disappeared. Big Daddy, after all, does not need to listen—his attitude is fixed and his satisfaction is obvious. One Daddy looks to the right, the other to the left, each with his paralyzing gaze of complacency. Again the imagery is phallic even in the negative space between the two heads. When feminist friends commented on this repetition of phallic forms, Stevens recognized them as such but claimed that they evolved unconsciously. She said:

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I think the negative form is always present to an artist and it is very important to the whole work. I think very abstractly when I execute my works and the underlying relationships of essential forces, the vibrating of color and the pushing and pulling of forms, are absolutely crucial to me. I don’t like to sound mystical or anything but I really do believe that there is something that happens, some mysterious emanation that occurs when everything is working together. That’s what makes art to me regardless of the burden of these works in regard to social meaning.\textsuperscript{36}

Herself a proclaimed and involved feminist by 1973, Stevens realized that these anti-establishment paintings were also anti-patriarchal. As she examined relationships in both the private and the public spheres, she found that misuse of authority was rooted in patriarchal systems of power. The original Big Daddy (her father) was her first experience of such power gone awry. His contempt for the poor and his complete disregard and neglect of his sick wife eventually strained his relationship with his daughter.

In \textit{Head} (1973), the brilliant cobalt blue background has disappeared and the entire canvas is filled with pale pastels of pink, blue and lavender (Fig. 8). It is a huge close-up of Big Daddy’s fleshy face, and it is funny yet freaky; beautiful yet hideous. The oil paint is ethereal, soft and cloud-like. Stevens described it as elusive, hard to pin down, “but pervasive, all-encompassing. It smiles and sucks you in.”\textsuperscript{31} Here Big Daddy’s face surrounds the spectator, offering no chance for escape, and he has a smile that is no cause for comfort. Like patriarchy, he is everywhere. Like patriarchy,

\textsuperscript{30} Nemser, 4.

\textsuperscript{31} Stevens, “My Work,” 115.
wickedness is hidden by seductive assurances and validated by a self-righteous and monumental presence.

Although Big Daddy grew out of May Stevens’ personal imagery, comparisons can be made to similar hierarchic figures of the past. Stevens observed, “Recently I discovered Ingres’s portrait of Louis-Francois Bertin which is a fine example of a Big Daddy figure. I just love the way he sits there in his solidity, his mass, his authority, and his unimpeachable rightness” (Fig. 9). Others agree. Manet called Ingres’ portrait “the Buddha of the bourgeoisie.” The two figures are handled quite differently, but critic Lawrence Alloway noted that “the slope up from the huge hips to the commanding head is comparable.” Other royal, as well as state, portraits are brought to mind, even contemporary portraits of presidents with the stars and stripes conspicuously displayed behind them.

Alloway also relates some absurd aspects of Big Daddy to Dutch genre paintings. For instance, in Big Daddy Paper Doll, Big Daddy’s white flabby body looks out of place next to the smartly tailored outfits beside him. This can be compared

32 Nemser, 4.


34 Alloway, 4.
to Dutch paintings where doctors are sometimes dressed in out-of-date styles so as to ridicule their "pomposity."  

One is also reminded of corporate offices, where portraits of the top executives line the walls, leading chronologically to the current man in charge. Man after man after man, they all seem to be big daddies, with similar suits and haircuts, and similar serious expressions. Small town courtrooms exhibit the same type of processional series, with portraits of their successive judges (all men) in matching historical frames.

Big Daddy was not the only expression of anger against the war to arise from an artist's unconscious. The Vietnam war brought out an abundance of "submerged and subversive imagery," especially by women. 36 Nancy Spero's "Bombs and Helicopters" series in 1966, like Stevens' Big Daddy series, evolved before the contemporary women's movement. The series included monstrous insect-like helicopters scooping up bodies, penises spraying destruction indiscriminately, and monsters shitting bombs (Fig. 10). Spero says of her imagery, "I couldn't think of another way of showing the obscenity of the bomb, except through this expression of sexual obscenity and as horrified as people were at this work, reality was always much worse." 37 Her spontaneous use of the male body to depict monstrous extremes came from

35 Ibid.

36 Lippard, *A Different War*, 42.

37 Ibid.
unconscious realizations about male power. (Just as May Stevens unconsciously transformed her own father into a beast.) Spero thought of the series as her own private expression of rage and never even exhibited them until after the Vietnam war had ended. Only later did a feminist analysis explore the more universal connections between sex and the military, gender expectations, and the "male power of the bomb."³⁸

Another example of submerged imagery released by the war was in the ceramic work of Michele Oka Doner. In 1967 she made ceramic "dolls" and masks with faces distorted by tattoos and various mutilations (Fig. 11). When some of her activist students identified these as napalm victims, Doner was surprised but pleased with their interpretation. That had not been her conscious intent for these works, but it did reflect her sympathies. Doner’s content soon became more overtly political and, in 1981, she created a unique war memorial for the city of Franklin, Michigan.

Men also did powerful work addressing Vietnam. Rudolf Baranik, Stevens’ husband, worked on a Vietnam "Elegies" series from 1966 to 1974. Lucy Lippard described these works as "unique among art about Vietnam for their conversion of anger into a monumental poetic melancholy."³⁹ Leon Golub did his own "Napalm" series in 1969 and a "Vietnam" series in 1972 (Fig. 12). He used life-size brutal figures and torn canvases to convey aggression and slaughter. The effect is a direct experience;

³⁸ Ibid.
³⁹ Ibid., 51.
the presence of war is felt intensely. According to Lippard, "This is a man's picture of war as possible, rather than a woman's picture of war as unspeakable, fantastic." 40

However, it took women such as Spero and Stevens to depict the role of patriarchy in world aggressions. As Stevens said, "Certainly the Big Daddy is a subject that reflects a macho attitude which has dominated our culture for a long time and the men were too much a part of it to attack it honestly." 41 Working outside the cultural mainstream, women were more willing to tackle certain themes that men often ignored.

In terms of political art, some called the "Big Daddy" series propaganda, while other labeled them political cartoons. If so, Stevens joins the respectable tradition of Goya, Daumier, and George Grosz as a social commentator. Like these artists, Stevens finds social relevance and aesthetic concerns not incompatible. The Big Daddy works may look cartoonish at first glance, but as one critic explained, "to understand the works they must be observed closely. The underpainting of many works, the meticulousness and subtlety in the changes of texture, can be seen only on careful examination." 42 It is this subtlety that allowed Stevens to make such outrageous statements using Big Daddy. He is ugly, but not too ugly. He is exaggerated, but not too

40 Ibid., 46.

41 Nemser, 7.

exaggerated. In fact, it is his very ordinariness that forms his appeal; there are people like this everywhere.

Social commentary, however, had lost favor in the art world of the 1960s and 70s. While most reviewers found redeeming elements in the works, some would temper their praise with such remarks as: “If they suffer from blatant social comment, they more than make up for it with fine, expressive painting.”43 Another critic commented, “I wonder if we need more stereotypes or confirmations of what we already know. The work finally participates too much in what it purports to rebuke.”44

Regarding the Vietnam war, the protest art produced during this time was just one part of the overall movement against the war. That the mass movement was effective in bringing attention and pressure on President Johnson and the military cannot be denied. However, the particular effectiveness of art as a means of protest was and still is widely debated.

May Stevens herself has never had expectations of specific results from her visual art. Her paintings simply define a state of affairs. They imply that it is up to the viewer to choose the terms of action. In the example of Big Daddy, it is his


overwhelming bulk and smugness that confront the viewer as a barrier to the future.\textsuperscript{45}

As an activist committed to social change, Stevens realizes that there are more effective means for change than art. “I think the medium for social change is words and action and not art. I don’t expect my art, which could be considered political in orientation, to change the world. If my art can confirm or affirm a certain world view, fine, but it’s not out to change anybody’s mind.”\textsuperscript{46} Stevens did recognize that sending a painting out into the world is a political act. All art, she writes, “Can be placed somewhere along a political spectrum, supporting one set of class interests or another, actively or passively, at the very least supporting existing conditions by ignoring other possibilities, silence giving consent.”\textsuperscript{47}

As socially concerned art became more common during the late 1970s, criticism of its efforts also increased. Some felt that art should be directly politically effective or it had no value. Painters like Stevens, whose work was shown in galleries and museums, were criticized as ineffectual due to their limited audience. Only street art, videos, and film met such critics’ requirement that art reach the masses. However, Stevens has always contended that there is room for all kinds of artists and strongly

\textsuperscript{45} Wallach, 151.

\textsuperscript{46} Nemser, 5.

\textsuperscript{47} May Stevens, “Taking Art to the Revolution,” \textit{Heresies} 9-3 (1979): 40.
defends her choice of themes and presentation. To choose another method would mean
turning her back on that which only she can do. She is convinced that

if the ideological input in art is administered in some doctrinaire or dutiful way, it
doesn’t work. This input, that seems to be organic, is only valid and powerful when
it is first internalized. If it is not profound, deep in your nature, you’re going to get
something superficial. It has to be close to you, very important to you. I do have a
social responsibility. But it always means what I define it as. I have only to follow
what I can do and am. That’s the source. It is not anything prescribed from the
outside.  

Stevens feels that the criticism of political art derives from the fact that much of it is not
created in this careful manner. She says, “It’s full of corny imagery and old hat ideas.”
She describes how feelings must be “strong, worked out, integrated and internalized in
the work.”

It is this sense of internalization that makes her work convincing. Big Daddy is
not merely the product of her imagination—his appearance and his character have been
worked on and worked through for many years. From an early age May Stevens
questioned the injustices she saw around her, and gradually these concerns began to
emerge in her work, culminating in a fusion of the personal and the political in the “Big
Daddy” series. Beginning with her own ambiguous feelings toward her father, she
gradually came to see how attitudes like his affected society. As her understanding

48 May Stevens, quoted in “Masses and Meetings,” by Lucy Lippard in May
University Art Gallery, 1984), n.p.

49 Nemser, 5.
increased, she made more connections between what happened within her own family and what was happening in society. She learned that feminist writers were also questioning the validity of dualisms like public/private and recognizing their relationship to that most essential dichotomy, power/powerlessness. As Virginia Woolf said, "The public and the private worlds are inseparably connected: . . . the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and the servilities of the other."  

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FEMINIST AWARENESS AND LEAVING BIG DADDY

I don’t think that any woman artist who is alive now, who is intelligent and responsive to the world in which she lives, is untouched by the activity, the thought, and the excitement that’s been going on in the women’s movement over the past years. Whether she’s conscious of it, whether she admits it, or not. We are all touched by it. It’s part of the way we think and speak today. It’s the reason, or a large part of the reason, that we think and speak in such numbers and with such power.¹

May Stevens, 1981

The Vietnam War brought gender-related anxieties to both sexes. For many women, the first realization of their own oppression came from their experiences within the anti-war and civil rights movements. In the Art Workers Coalition, where men and women united against the United States’ involvement in Vietnam, the men made most of the intellectual decisions and the “girls” made most of the coffee.² Women artists rebelled in 1969 by forming Women Artists in Revolution (W.A.R.) and, in 1970, the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee. W.A.R. pressured New York museums and commercial galleries to show the work of women artists, while the Ad Hoc Committee specifically


² Kay Larson, “For the First Time Women Are Leading Not Following,” 79 ARTnews (October 1980): 64.
targeted the Whitney Museum of American Art’s annual show for equal representation of women artists. On the West Coast, artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro confronted university sexism in 1971 by forming The Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts. In 1972 the Women’s Caucus for Art (W.C.A.) was formed within the College Art Association. This group became independent in 1975 after pressure from the C.A.A board of directors, who did not want the legal responsibility for the W.C.A.’s actions. They were able to expand their activities while maintaining a “familial and adversarial” relationship with the C.A.A.,pressuring their parent organization to become more open and democratic and less of an “old boys network.”

Looking back on this pivotal period, many women recall a historical moment when the message of feminism first connected and began to change their lives. Art historian Linda Nochlin described it as “a conversion experience which, for many women of my age and position, was rather like the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus: a conviction that before I had been blind; now I had seen the light.” It was a subsequent article written by Nochlin that triggered May Stevens’ commitment to the goals of

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feminism. As she said, "Reading Linda Nochlin’s 'Why have there been no Great Women Artists?' made me aware of the enormity of the gap. I set about reading, doing research. And I realized the specifics of my always held/known awareness of the inequality between men and women." The article to which she refers was published in *ARTnews* in 1971. It has been called a sociohistorical analysis that demonstrated convincingly that women's sex roles have kept them from the training, travel and studio experience needed for success. Nochlin further showed that the work of women artists has been grossly undervalued and even written out of official art history records. This was critical information for women artists, but the article also provided evidence, for the first time, that it was the structures of a male-dominated society that had kept women from functioning at their fullest creative capacity. Activated by outrage and excitement, women artists began to meet and act collectively for themselves.

May Stevens played an active part in this new feminist art movement. In 1971 she was a founding member of the first cooperative gallery in Soho, called Artists in Residence (A.I.R.). Cooperatives such as this emerged all across the country providing exhibit space, lectures, performances, workshops, consciousness-raising sessions and slide registries. Consciousness-raising, a technique adopted from Marxism, was

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5 May Stevens, letter to the author, 16 April 1997.

particularly effective in helping women connect personal experiences to the social structures that framed their lives. Josephine Donovan explains that this technique “leads to an awareness of membership in a politically oppressed group: for Marx it was the proletariat; for feminists it is women.” Stevens and other politically active women artists began to analyze their own situation and formulate new definitions. In their understanding, the term “political” became broadly defined to mean the awareness of the structures of power and of the societal norms that had imposed specific and common experiences on women and that had kept women subordinate to men. To be a feminist came to mean not just questioning patriarchal authority but engaging in social change. And as these women changed their world, they also made a new history--one that featured women in the center and not at the margins.

As a participant in this new history, May Stevens felt compelled to depict it in her art. Between 1974 and 1978 she documented the emergence of this newly awakened feminist consciousness in three huge paintings: Artist’s Studio (After Courbet) (1974), Soho Women Artists (1977-78), and Mysteries and Politics (1978) (Figs.13, 14, 15). All of these works place women at the center, as subjects rather than objects, participating in their own history.

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In 1972, when Stevens began *Artist's Studio (After Courbet)*, she was still in the midst of her “Big Daddy” series. This series and the Big Daddy motif had been richly rewarding for Stevens, and she was finding it difficult to let go of them. She found that the two years she spent working on *Artist's Studio*, while using Big Daddy in other works, provided the transition that she needed. Using Courbet’s 1854-55 painting as a model, Stevens painted a group portrait of herself as the artist, surrounded by friends and supporters (Fig. 13).

She had admired Courbet’s painting at the Louvre and was particularly drawn to him because of his politics. His depiction of the grinding misery of ordinary workers in *The Stonebreakers* shocked contemporaries at the Paris Salon of 1850-51 (Fig. 16). Courbet’s friend and compatriot, the socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, called *The Stonebreakers* “a heartbreaking indictment of capitalism.” At the same Salon, the starkly realistic *Burial at Ornans* also focused on a working-class theme. Courbet “was a socialist and a real fighter,” according to Stevens, who also calls the figures in her painting fighters--fighters “for the kind of art they believe in.”

Courbet represented the social and political world of 1855 Paris in his major work, *Interior of my Studio, a Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of My Life as an

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*Artist* (Fig. 17). In the center he placed himself at work on a landscape; looking on is a model and small boy. To the right are his supporters, including the poet Baudelaire and the critic Champfleury. On the left there is a group of “genre” types, such as a beggar, a priest, and a hunter. Although known for including common people in his works, these particular figures, according to recent scholarship, represent contemporary political figures. Knowledgeable Parisians would have recognized the sources of these symbolic “types.”

Like Courbet, Stevens placed herself and one of her paintings in the center of her canvas. Appropriately, the painting depicts Big Daddy in *Metamorphosis* (1973) (Fig. 5). Just as Big Daddy changes within this work, Stevens changed the direction of her art while working on *Artist’s Studio*. In this composition she turns away from Big Daddy and looks toward her three painter friends on the left—Arnold Belkin, Felicity Rainie, and Sylvia Sleigh. Behind Stevens, where Courbet placed the nude model, is Stevens’ husband Rudolf Baranik. According to Stevens his supportive position “represents a certain truth in our relationship.”

Also standing on the right are critic Joachim Neugroschel and Nancy Spero; seated are Leon Golub and critic Lawrence Alloway. Like Courbet’s group on the right, these friends and supporters are easily recognizable.

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11 Hills, 315.

12 Nemser, 6.
In style there are some similarities to the Big Daddy works. She uses the same flat ultramarine blue for the background; and people predominate, with no details of the studio included. The figures look almost like cut-outs, with each silhouette clearly outlined. As in the “Big Daddy” series, there is an emphasis on patterning, particularly in the clothing. Flat areas alternate with subtle modeling, a contrast that Stevens likes to play with in her work. Although primarily painted in a naturalistic manner, she used color imaginatively to suggest the individual personalities. As Stevens said, “One of my concepts in the painting was that the skin tones of the nine individuals would act as color. For example, I wanted Sylvia to be all gold, Felicity Rainie to have a warm golden skin tone, Lawrence a pinkish hue and Nancy a pale, almost greenish yellow and all those flesh tones had to be adjusted to the blue background.”

Curator Ronald Kuchta commented on the complexity of these color relationships, saying that with this painting Stevens makes it clear that she

is first of all a painter, concerned with questions of both form and content. Her paintings ultimately make no separation between the two. This is their strength—their form has value, richness, because it develops out of the artist’s wide range of personal concerns; while these concerns become effective as content because they are made visible by Stevens’ mastery of her formal options.

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13 Ibid.

She also captured each of her subjects in a characteristic pose, a task made less
difficult because she knew them so well. For instance, Arnold Belkin seems about to strut
forward, while Sylvia Sleigh plays "the grand lady."\(^{15}\) They have been somewhat stylized,
but Stevens tried not to diminish their complexity. All were deeply interested in the
political aspects of art as well as deeply committed to painting. One reviewer stated that
this work "represents the artist's having found a spiritual home away from her Middle
American home."\(^{16}\) Patricia Hills, however, saw this as more than a personal celebration.
By bringing these individuals together, she said that "Stevens sought to commemorate a
moment in history when politics and art interpenetrated."\(^{17}\)

Just as Courbet described his painting as an allegory summing up seven years of
his life, May Stevens saw *Artist's Studio (After Courbet)* as an allegory summing up her
life during the Big Daddy period. Since she exhibited Big Daddy from 1968 until 1975,
hers studio painting also represents a seven year span. Beginning with *Artist's Studio
(After Courbet)* Stevens' content gradually shifted from a feminist critique of male power
to an assertion of a new position for a woman as an artist.

As Stevens became more involved in the feminist art movement, her enthusiasm
for women artists became increasingly evident in her work. Inspired by Linda Nochlin's

\(^{15}\) Nemser, 6.

\(^{16}\) Gerrit Henry, "May Stevens," *ARTnews* 74 (May 1975): 97.

\(^{17}\) Hills, 316.
article to seek out women artists from the past, she discovered the work of Artemisia Gentileschi. This 17th-century Roman painter was well known during her lifetime, but was overlooked by art historians until recent years. Stevens eventually did several paintings and a lithograph with Gentileschi as the subject. One 9-by-5-foot canvas depicts a monumental, idealized Artemisia with a backdrop of gold-lettered text describing her life. In 1977 this painting became part of Sister Chapel, a traveling exhibition consisting of eleven panels honoring prominent women of the past and present.

Stevens’ friendships with contemporary women artists became more focused in 1976 when she joined a collective of twenty women to publish *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. As one of six editors for the first issue, Stevens volunteered her Soho loft as their first office. She also contributed essays, poems, and artwork over the years. For the first issue in January 1977, Stevens created a two-page montage of black and white images (Fig. 18). On the left side was *Tribute to Rosa Luxemburg*. Using photographs and text from Luxemburg’s letters, she highlighted the life of the German socialist revolutionary of the early twentieth century. On the right was *Two Women*, which juxtaposed images from Luxemburg’s life with images from the life of Alice Stevens, May Stevens’ mother. This original montage would eventually lead to the “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series, which would engage her for the next fifteen years (1976-91).

However, during this period of 1977-78 Stevens was not yet ready to deal with the emotions stirred by reflection on her mother’s life. She chose rather to depict her new
family of women artists and critics from whom she drew so much support and strength. As she said at the time, "I find more energy among women artists and women art students than in any other segment of the art world."\textsuperscript{18}

The first painting to feature her close circle of artist friends was \textit{Soho Women Artists} (1977-78). In this seven by twelve-foot canvas, Stevens depicts her artistic life as well as the community life of her neighborhood (Fig. 14). From the left are Signora Dapolito (seated), who sells bread on Prince Street, two local men, and Stevens herself. Next are Harmony Hammond and Marty Pottenger, both members of the \textit{Heresies} collective, and Louise Bourgeois wearing her breast-covered sculpture. To the right of Bourgeois are Miriam Schapiro, Lucy Lippard, and Sarah Charlesworth, who is seated on a bicycle. Seated on the floor are Joyce Kozloff and her son Nicholas. In the background are three earlier paintings: \textit{Benny Andrews, the Artist, and Big Daddy Paper Doll} (1976); \textit{Artimesia Gentileschi} (1977); and \textit{Big Daddy Draped} (1971). Positioned like backdrops to a stage, these paintings show the path of Stevens' artistic career, with the most prominent Daddy image exiting to the right.

While planning \textit{Soho Women Artists}, Stevens borrowed photographs of her subjects and even sent out a photographer to bring back snapshots. However, her format for the composition changed as she worked on the painting. As Stevens described the process,

\textsuperscript{18} Nemser, 7.
I start with a concept, but after the initial moves I have to stand back and figure out what the canvas wants to do, where it’s going. If the painting is going to live, there must be an organic growth in its making. It’s a little like the novelist who creates characters and then has to let them live their own lives. For me everything is in question until the very end.¹⁹

As always, Stevens seeks a balance between the formal qualities of the painting and the content, sometimes turning to art history for examples. While working on Soho Women Artists she looked at reproductions of the Arezzo frescoes by Piero della Francesca—Discovery of the Wood of the True Cross from “The Legend of the True Cross” fresco cycle (1454-58), with what she calls “the beautiful still figures of the Queen and her attendants, the flow of their garments, the line of their heads and the curve of their necks”²⁰ (Fig. 19).

Like history painters, Stevens assembled these figures for the power of their association. Lovingly painted, they are serene and meditative, a state enhanced again by a deep luminous blue that surrounds and bonds the figures. One critic called the figures “Greek-like” with “faces as strong and inward-turning as the white gaze of the Venus de Milo.”²¹ The blue here is more modulated than in the “Big Daddy” series, and the linearity of the figures contrasts sharply with this ground. The lavender and pinks may draw associations with feminine qualities, but ironically they came about from mixing the

¹⁹ Stevens in Lives and Works, 218.

²⁰ Ibid., 219.

²¹ “May Stevens,” ARTnews 78 (January 1979): 151.
red, white, and blues used in the Big Daddy works.\textsuperscript{22} Each figure is outlined, and each has her or his own color scheme, seemingly independent of light or atmosphere. The result seems more like a series of unique individuals rather than an actual gathering. According to one reviewer, this handling “forces the viewer to ask why these particular figures occupy the same composition.”\textsuperscript{23}

May Stevens, like Courbet, is not hesitant to comment on her work. The women were chosen for \textit{Soho Women Artists}, she says, to show the variety of the feminist art movement. For instance, Marty Pottenger represents performance art, a powerful element of feminist art in the 1970s. Harmony Hammond is an example of the politically active mother, dedicated to the \textit{Heresies} collective, while raising a daughter on her own. California artist Miriam Schapiro was known for introducing decorative as well as craft elements into fine art, so Stevens depicts her in a frog-patterned blouse and ornate coat to reflect these artistic interests.

Critic Lucy Lippard, a major voice for feminist artists in the 1970s, stands behind Schapiro. Explaining this placement, Stevens described Lippard as “so active, so quick, but also quite modest. She does not like to be celebrated or displayed. She is not a cult-of-personality person. Her politics are close to mine—committed and New England.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Stevens in \textit{Lives and Works}, 221.


\textsuperscript{24} Stevens quoted in Hills, 321.
At the center of the gathering is the imposing figure of Louise Bourgeois. Her coat of ponderous breasts represents both physical and psychological power, recalling a prepatriarchal period of culture when images and myths depicted strong and revered female figures. Seated below on the floor next to her small son is Joyce Kozloff, another artist who embraced pattern and decoration in her work. Their pose is similar to that in a 1970 photograph taken of Kozloff and her then infant son at an artists’ protest action in front of Picasso’s *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art. Thus, their pose alludes to political activism which was part of the appeal for Stevens. Another politically active artist, Sarah Charlesworth, sits on her bicycle. As a conceptual artist she worked with Joseph Kosuth and later became involved with Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, a group formed by Stevens and Baranik after the demise of the Art Workers’ Coalition in 1971.

Stevens has referred to *Soho Women Artists* as a contemporary history painting. In so doing she gives credence to the historical significance of women artists working collectively as a community. They are comforted by knowledge of their own artistic heritage, here represented by Artemisia Gentileschi, but also aware of the oppressive forces still surrounding them (Big Daddy lurks nearby). Depicting this alternative community was important, according to Patricia Hills, because

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25 Ibid., 321.

26 Ibid., 310.
the feminist project of the 1970s was not to replace men in the social and professional hierarchies or to create a feminist isolationism. Rather, feminists wanted to understand the social, political, and economic power structures that benefited white men in America and to create more viable systems and progressive attitudes about class, race, and gender.27

It is significant that Stevens does not take center stage in this painting and that the artists are shown interacting with the life of the neighborhood. Like certain Big Daddy images, this painting can be seen as a comment against the idea of the hero, specifically the artist-hero. Feminist scholars were challenging the traditional canon of “great masters” and the “myth of the Great Artist...unique, godlike--bearing within his person since birth a mysterious essence.”28 As Linda Nochlin emphatically noted in “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” “A dispassionate, impersonal, sociologically- and institutionally-oriented approach would reveal the entire romantic, elitist, individual- glorifying and monograph-producing substructure upon which the profession of art history is based, and which has only recently been called into question by a group of younger dissidents within it.”29 Soho Women Artists shows a model of creativity completely at odds with the modernist legacy of the individual genius at work on his painting.

27 Ibid., 320.

28 Nochlin, 7.

29 Ibid., 6.
Immediately following Soho Women Artists, in 1978, Stevens painted Mysteries and Politics (Fig. 15). The twelve-foot-long canvas was originally conceived as a series of six-foot-tall figures that would fully inhabit the space. Using variations of color, gesture, and technique, Stevens planned to evoke the irrational, the mysterious, on the left side of the painting and gradually move toward a depiction of the logical, more rational, on the right. The final painting has a much more complex composition, but she explains that figures often go in and out of these paintings as it develops. In the end it is different in color, composition, and even in its dramatis personae than the original conception. The whole meaning of the painting shifts with these changes. As I work I'm looking for the right mix, for the flow between the various elements, the resonance I need. I clarify the meaning of the painting for myself as I work.\(^\text{30}\)

In its final form Mysteries and Politics is a semicircle of artists and intellectuals, women and babies, family and friends. Images from the past mesh with depictions of contemporary artists, united in their dreams for the future. Josephine Withers called the group a "sacra conversazione of thirteen women."\(^\text{31}\) More evenly spaced than in Soho Women Artists, these women seem to contemplate an empty space in the foreground—or perhaps even beyond, as they invite the viewer into their realm. As originally planned, the mystical element does arise from the left, in the crouching figure of performance artist Betsy Damon. Dressed in her costume for The 7,000 Year Old Woman piece, she

\(^{30}\) Stevens in Lives and Works, 219.

embodies the many-breasted Artemis of Ephesus and the feminist interest in prepatriarchal Goddess images. Above Damon is Pat Steir, who represented for Stevens "the poetic mysteries of magic and women’s association with witchcraft."\textsuperscript{32} Floating behind and above Steir is the dynamic nude torso of Mary Beth Edelson, an image taken from a postcard announcing one of her performance events. Inspired by the Bird-headed Snake Goddess from Egypt and figurines of the Snake Goddess found in Minoan culture, Edelson used her own body to create rituals for the spiritual empowerment of women. This vertical band of Damon, Steir and Edelson collectively represents sexuality—from initiation to old age.\textsuperscript{33}

Next to Steir is the ghostly standing image of Alice Stevens as a young mother, who holds in her arms her infant daughter, May. Like an old photograph, but infused with light, she looks down toward a seated Poppy Johnson. An anti-war and museum protester, Johnson is serene and Madonna-like as she cradles her twin babies—one on each arm. To the right of Johnson stand art historians Carol Duncan, a contributor to \textit{Heresies}, and Patricia Hills, an activist writer who is visibly pregnant with her third child. May depicts herself looking back toward Hills, her presence almost unnoticeable. Thus the entire left side of the canvas is interwoven with themes of sexuality, body consciousness, intuitiveness and mother-child relationships.

\textsuperscript{32} Hills, 322.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
To the right of Stevens looms the disembodied head of Rosa Luxemburg, who oversees the rational side of the composition. Sculptor Suzanne Harris squats next to the seated Joan Snyder, who is dressed in work clothes. Snyder's farm provided a retreat for members of the Heresies collective, and to Stevens she symbolized "earthiness." Standing behind Snyder is artist Amy Sillman, also a member of the collective and a former student of Stevens. Beside her, at the far right, is anthropologist Elizabeth Weatherford, whose feminism inspired her to turn her research toward women's issues. Later she would study and make films documenting Native American history. All of the figures are self-contained and peaceful, but they seem to communicate softly, magically across a space strewn with petals.

Significantly, the adult Stevens in the painting turns toward the center of the canvas, where the political and the spiritual meet. By 1978, feminist theory and practice had evolved into these two major categories with numerous divisions within each. The political side ranged from liberal feminists who were focused on passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and protection of abortion rights, to socialist feminists who were inspired by Marxist theory to seek more radical changes in social structures and institutions. On the spiritual side were those who were creating their own religion based on their belief in the Great Goddess and others who shared a more general belief in the

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34 Ibid.
intense emotional bonds between women that can create a spiritual community.\(^{35}\) May Stevens felt that it was crucial for women artists to validate each other and realize that a commitment to political ideologies does not preclude a spiritual kinship among women. Although personally committed to work that embodies her political beliefs, she commented that “that is one form of art and does not negate the continuing need for art of meditation and transcendence.”\(^{36}\) As a measure of the efficacy of Stevens’ work, Lucy Lippard said that for many years she introduced her lecture on women artists with a slide of *Mysteries and Politics.*\(^{37}\)

Although symbolically depicting and integrating the “spiritual” and “political” sides of the women’s art movement, other themes pulsate throughout the composition. Working closely with the *Heresies* collective, Stevens was inspired to depict some of the complexity of women’s lives—the pull of family, politics, and career. She describes how several friends were at stages in their lives when they had to decide whether or not to have children. As she says, “They had to decide if they could psychically afford to give


\(^{36}\) May Stevens, “Radical Change or a Piece of the Pie,” 1 no.7 *Women Artists Newsletter* (December 1975): 6.

up the idea of ever having children; it was a difficult period for women who believe in
and fight for the liberation of women, for their own selfhood."³⁸

Stevens was also profoundly influenced by Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, which she read just before starting *Mysteries and Politics*. Published in 1976, this book is considered a key work in the literature of spiritual feminism.³⁹ Rich analyzed how the institution of motherhood (not the experience of motherhood) has "alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them. It has withheld over one-half the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between 'private' and 'public' life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities."⁴⁰ In *Mysteries and Politics* Stevens reintegrates the private and public spheres of women's lives. So, too, she reunites the experience of motherhood and pregnancy with the spiritual and political sides of life. Stevens said of the book, "Much of the emotion that went into the painting was stirred and released by her words."⁴¹

Another stated purpose for the painting was to portray consciousness as it is experienced—on many levels. As Stevens put it: "I would like to have a sense of different


³⁹ Roth, 40.


levels of consciousness, and of things seeping through, disappearing. That phenomenon is so real to me, and so overwhelming, that I'd like to put that in art." In *Mysteries and Politics* she emphasizes the connections between the present and the past, the living and the dead, the born and the unborn. The painting also reflects Stevens' sense of reality as "always in flux and always changing." This attitude was inspired by the women's movement and the sense that real social change is possible; however, Stevens also suggests the difficulties and the risks—both Alice and Rosa met tragic ends. Thus, there is not one single message to *Mysteries and Politics*. It is hopeful but also reflective—aware of the joy but also the sadness. Lucy Lippard commented, "This is what is so moving about a great deal of art by women--its refusal to deny any part for the whole."

This desire to integrate the fragments of lives led many women artists to use collage as a medium. Collage was also a way to introduce memories and dreams of the past into present consciousness. Although painted, the images of Stevens' mother and Rosa Luxemburg appear "collaged" into *Mysteries and Politics*. Both were taken from the *Two Women* work created for the first issue of *Heresies*, but their juxtaposition here presents each in young adulthood. These ghosts from the past represent the opposing pull

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43 Ibid.

of family life versus that of the intellectual life. These were forces that Stevens and all these women felt. For Stevens in particular, Luxemburg may have represented what Adrienne Rich called a “counter-mother.” Rich described how many women “have split themselves—between two mothers: one, usually the biological one, who represents the culture of domesticity, of male-centeredness, of conventional expectations, and another, perhaps a woman artist or teacher, who becomes the countervailing figure.” In other words, although she loved her mother, May Stevens must have felt instinctively drawn to the more active and intellectual life of Rosa Luxemburg.

Stevens has called Mysteries and Politics “an image of a way station in the development of the second wave of feminism.” She alludes to a scholarly but controversial article for Art Bulletin in 1987 written by Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews. In this article the authors made a distinction between a first and second wave of the feminist art movement. The first wave celebrated the lives and accomplishments of women—past and present—especially women artists. They said that the “first decade of feminist art thus was buoyed not only by anger, but by a new sense of community, the attempts to develop a new art to express a new sensibility, and an

45 Rich, 247.

46 Stevens in Hills, 322.
optimistic faith in the ability of art to promote and even engender a feminist consciousness.\textsuperscript{47}

This first wave stressed the similarities of women and included such artists as Miriam Schapiro, Sylvia Sleigh, and Judy Chicago, whose \textit{Dinner Party} commemorated thirty-nine women with individually designed place settings. In works like \textit{Dinner Party} traditional women’s crafts, such as embroidery and needlepoint, were elevated to the status of “high” art, while feminist theorists analyzed craft as a shaper of women’s sensibilities. Also on a theoretical level, some feminists investigated the possibility of an essential feminine aesthetic that emphasized centralized imagery (as opposed to the phallic imagery of male artists). This became a controversial issue which was especially difficult to analyze considering the overwhelming social constructions involving gender. Although Stevens rejected the idea of an “essential” feminine aesthetic, her paintings of \textit{Artemisia Gentileschi}, as well as \textit{Artist’s Studio (After Courbet)} and \textit{Soho Women Artists}, clearly positioned her work within this so-called first wave.

The second wave of feminist art, as described by Gouma-Peterson and Mathews, began more formal critiques of traditional art history methodologies and examined the ideologies that were responsible for racism, sexism as well as class and age discrimination.\textsuperscript{48} In \textit{Mysteries and Politics} May Stevens created a vision of this new more


\textsuperscript{48} Hills, 323.
complex focus in the women's art movement. This work embraces the various elements of the movement without giving emphasis to one over the other. As a depiction of a community of women artists, it is a document of a historical moment. Stevens injected issues of class into the discussion by including the image of a working-class mother (Alice Stevens) and juxtaposing it with the image of a upper-class revolutionary leader (Rosa Luxemburg). Their contrast begins a theme that Stevens will develop fully in the years to come.

In conclusion, just as one can trace the progression of May Stevens' anger in the works of the "Big Daddy" series, one can trace her developing consciousness as a feminist artist in *Artist's Studio (After Courbet)*, *Soho Women Artists*, and *Mysteries and Politics*. Some would say that her style grew more refined with each painting, culminating in the complex and beautiful *Mysteries and Politics*. But style, per se, was not Stevens' foremost concern. Like other political artists, she works with an overall strategy and never depends on a signature style. Stevens often said she used whatever would get her ideas across, but she does admit that she allowed herself more variety, more "mystery" in *Mysteries and Politics*. These three paintings show Stevens' interests at specific points in time; they should not be judged as an integrated series.

Stevens' work was part of a wide range of feminist art in the 1970s. In fact, the plurality of styles is perhaps the most distinguishing factor of feminist art during this decade. Early feminist art was created outside the official art world domain where "serious" art meant a depersonalized, anti-psychological, formal mentality. As women
bridged the gaps between their personal and public lives, they also brought the personal back into art. Artist Nicholas Africano said that “women made subject matter legitimate again.”\textsuperscript{49} Having done so, they also legitimated it for men. Lucy Lippard credits feminist art with introducing “plurality” into the art scene. Feminist art, she argued in 1980, offers a “socially concerned alternative” to the male-oriented “art about art” now in favor.\textsuperscript{50} May Stevens was equally impressed with the liberating effect of feminist art, and ironically credits the fact that galleries would not accept women’s art. As early as 1974 she said,

The women’s movement has changed the whole art world. The new openness and acceptance of a multiplicity of styles is because women, who have not been so controlled and not been so conformist about adjusting to gallery requirements, have been making all kinds of work which is now surfacing. Their art has made it possible for men to do all kinds of different art too and for it to be looked at and accepted. That tight Greenbergian narrowness is pretty much over.\textsuperscript{51}

In the three paintings discussed in this chapter, Stevens was able, not only to celebrate this exciting kinship of women and political artists, but also to explore the contradictions that women face as artists, mothers, and activists. One cannot underestimate the impact of feminism upon May Stevens. It was the powerful nature of her friendships within the \textit{Heresies} collective that gave her the courage to face what had happened, was happening, to her own mother. The next chapter will examine the resulting series based on the lives of her mother and Rosa Luxemburg.

\textsuperscript{49} Larson, 68.

\textsuperscript{50} Lippard in Larson, 63.

\textsuperscript{51} Nemser, 7.
CHAPTER 4

THE “ORDINARY/EXTRAORDINARY” SERIES

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is mis-named as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language--this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable.¹

Adrienne Rich, 1979

As outlined in the previous chapter, May Stevens’ themes and the visual forms she used to express them changed with her involvement in the women’s movement. Her work with the members of the Heresies collective brought her in contact with a plethora of different viewpoints and approaches to feminist art. She and other feminist artists began to see a shift in their approach. The emphatic declarations against certain aspects of society became less strident and were often replaced by a more complex visual discourse.²

For May Stevens this began when, with the courage gained through the women’s movement, she decided to examine that “too terrible to see” photograph of her mother from 1967. While working with the Heresies collective in 1976, she began to sort through


the painful emotions that the photograph roused. As she analyzed the circumstances of her mother’s life, she realized that they were not unique. It was not just her father who had ground her down but a social system that valued boys more than girls and shut women off in the isolation of household drudgery.

It was also during the mid 1970s that a friend introduced her to the writings of Rosa Luxemburg. She began to read everything she could find on the German revolutionary. As an activist artist she was intrigued by Rosa’s writings on socialism, but she was equally fascinated by her intimate letters that reveal the private person. Despite the vast differences in their circumstances, she began to see parallels in the lives of the housewife, Alice, and the revolutionary, Rosa. This chapter will investigate the origins of May Stevens’ interest in Rosa Luxemburg, her anxieties regarding her own mother, Alice Stevens, and the complicated personal and political themes woven into her Ordinary/Extraordinary series, which contrasts the lives of these two women.

Alice Stevens (1895-1985) came from an Irish Catholic family in South Boston. She was a bright child, but her education was thwarted by poverty. In 1976, May Stevens publicly described her mother:

My mother had to leave grade school because her father died and her labor and pitiful salary were needed at home. She went to work for the mill owners on the hill

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1 The frequency of references to Rosa Luxemburg and Alice Stevens, as well as possible confusion between Alice and May Stevens, necessitates this mode of reference. Critics discussing the series often adopt this shorthand.
as a mother's helper. My mother was a very good student in elementary school, loved reading and mathematics, but she never got another chance to learn.4

Alice had few options and married a hardworking but cold man. She lived for twenty years in a four room house on a working-class street, where she raised two children but slowly retreated from the world. She was never adept at domestic skills, nor did she develop any social graces. In fact, she gradually lost the ability to speak. In 1964, Alice was placed in a nursing home in Framingham, Massachusetts. Stevens explained,

They put her away in a place for people who can’t speak, or speak in tongues. After many years she stopped being angry. Then she was calm, distracted, utterly amiable. But her foot moved constantly, involuntarily. And she had gained the ability to speak, but lost a life to speak of.5

Rosa’s story is also about a woman’s voice. She spoke eloquently and forcefully, but she was eventually silenced by those who did not want to hear. Born in 1871 to a well-off family in Zamosc, Poland, she was educated at the University of Zurich where she studied philosophy and law. After emigrating to Germany, she joined the Social Democratic Party. From that time until her assassination in January of 1919, she was one of the foremost intellectual and political leaders in the Marxist world. She debated with every major Marxist theoretician of the age, including Lenin. With Karl Liebknecht she

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founded the Spartacus League, from which emerged the German Communist Party, and she was imprisoned several times for her radical politics. She worked diligently for socialism with the hope that it would create an ideal democratic world. Assassinated at the age of 47, her skull was smashed with a rifle butt and her body thrown into the Landwehr Canal in Berlin.

Two lives—so different. Why did May Stevens choose these particular women to combine and compare in her art for over a decade? The idea originated with her work on *Heresies* in 1977. As discussed in Chapter 3, for the first issue she did a double-page spread that focused on the life of her mother and Rosa Luxemburg (Fig. 18). Stevens explained that the idea was “to make something that would suit this publication, which we conceived of as being socialist-feminist...it was to combine art and politics, and I came up with the idea of working with the thinking, the life, the work of Rosa Luxemburg and to combine this with the story of the life of my own mother.”

Stevens was also troubled by the perceived bourgeois nature of the women’s movement. She was aware of the split within the movement between women of different classes. As she explained to the author in June of 1996, working-class women saw the feminist movement as dominated by media stars and as having little to do with their daily lives raising children. This was upsetting for Stevens, who came from a working-class family and knew what feminism offered for all classes of women. By combining the life

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of Alice Stevens, coming from one end of the social class spectrum, with that of Rosa Luxemburg, from the other end, she hoped to embrace all women in between those two extremes.\footnote{May Stevens, interview by author, 1 June 1996., Mary Ryan Gallery, New York.}

Stevens’ work within the women’s movement had shown her the importance of linking the personal to the political and the possibilities for change that this suggested. The sense of hopefulness that this offered made delving into her mother’s life more bearable. Feminist historians insisted that without also linking the personal to the historical, collective action or even individual action is impossible:

Without knowledge of historical roots, our view of daily life remains at the level of individual reaction to what strikes us as intolerable. Our analyses tend to document our feelings of subjection rather than the underlying conditions of the subjection of all women. Through historical studies of women, as changing diversified participants in social development, we can begin to answer the question, on what basis do women share an historical existence.\footnote{Ann D.Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nancy Schrom Dye. “The Problem of Women’s History,” in Liberating Women’s History, ed. Berenice A Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 84-85.}

Stevens was concerned with the underlying conditions that determined her mother’s life, and she discovered that it was just such conditions that Luxemburg fought to change.

Conceptually, “Ordinary/Extraordinary” is a unified analysis of two lives, but it is also a series of individual portraits done in a variety of media. Sometimes the two women are depicted in the same work, but often they are treated separately—coming together only at exhibitions. There is considerable variety in the size, form, and handling of each work.
The series is composed of paintings in oil and acrylic, collages, photomurals and text, photomontages, and an artist’s book. Photographs are primary sources and images are repeated from one work to another. Some works are meticulously arranged and carefully painted, while others are more expressionistic with drips and splashes of paint. Carol Jacobsen writes that these are “expressing by visual analogy Luxemburg’s belief in spontaneity as a driving force for change.” The disjunctions found within and among the works are intentional; ideas are clarified but not resolved. The pictorial surface is often complicated, and, according to Jacobsen, the viewer must “coax significance (and pleasure) out of a series of juxtapositions deliberately left unharmonized, without commentary, since the artist is looking particularly for forms of expression that will let in certain kinds of everyday experience, and parallel the shifting levels of consciousness through which we perceive them.”

After the Heresies layout, the next combination of Rosa and Alice was in the large painting Mysteries and Politics (1978), which was discussed in Chapter 3 (Fig. 15). Here the two figures take on even more symbolic meanings. Surrounded by the contemporary members of the women’s artist movement of the 1970s, Rosa and Alice add a sense of history to the depiction. Alice is part of the personal history of the artist, while Rosa’s life is a documented part of political history. Their placement within this context shows the

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10 Ibid., 29.
continuity of women’s struggle against oppressive forces—both individually and as part of larger groups.

After the Heresies layout, Stevens expanded the Rosa/Alice comparison in collages, where she again combined text with photocopied images. In 1980 she received a grant to publish her artist’s book Ordinary Extraordinary, where she readapted many of her collages to a page-size format (Fig. 20). This process naturally required changes and sometimes even new images. She found that this format allowed her to experiment with various combinations of elements from each of the two women’s lives. The viewer is also the reader and participates in what Stevens called “a journey of one thing leading into another with the pacing controlled by the material on each page.”

Words from Rosa’s letters give dimensionality to the faded historical photographs and reveal the private Rosa—a woman who often yearned for the simple pleasures of love and family. She infused her political goals with an acknowledgment of the personal side of life.

As she wrote from her prison cell in Wronke on 28 December 1916:

> See to it that you remain a human being. To be human is the main thing, and that means to be strong and clear and of good cheer in spite and because of everything. To be human means throwing one’s life on the scales of destiny, if need be, to be joyful for every fine day and every beautiful cloud—oh, I can’t write you any recipes how to be human, I only know how to be human.

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It was in such writings that Stevens exposed the human side of Rosa and thus exploded the mythic Rosa Luxemburg.

In 1981 Stevens did the first large-scale painting (78" X 142") of the series. *Everybody Knows Me* translates into paint the three images of Alice from the lower half of the 1977 *Heresies* collage (Fig. 21). In the tripartite arrangement there is a progression through the life of her mother. On the left is the formal grouping of the young Alice with her siblings. It is placed highest on the canvas and suggests the greatest distance in space and time. Next is the image of Alice as a young mother, but it is the final section on the right that dominates the painting. Here the elderly seated Alice occupies the entire frame and is pushed forward into direct dialogue with the viewer. This overweight balding old woman is someone we might look away from on the street, but here she commands our attention and we cannot look away. The monumental size of the work recalls the tradition of history painting developed by Gustave Courbet, where the ordinary person becomes worthy of artistic portrayal. One immediately questions why this woman is portrayed in this way.

Painted from a photocopy of the original collage, the work retains some details, while others fade. Stevens uses these processed images as metaphors for the fragmentary nature of memory and also as a way to show distance in time. When asked about her use...

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of xerography, Stevens replied, “I like the look of it. I like the degraded photograph very much. I find excitement in the forms that come through. You never know what the machine is going to do. You can treat this medium almost like an abstract expressionist. You just start up and see what happens.”

Thus the appeal is both for the formal qualities as well as the connotations. The work is flatly painted with a silvery surface that one writer says “deliberately conveys a psychological distance.”

The title comes from Alice herself. May Stevens wrote of her mother, “Once she said, 80 years old, living in a nursing home, eating the food, waiting for change, forgetting more each day, sliding toward a slimmer consciousness, slipping softly away: ‘everybody knows me.’” Alice probably meant this literally. In a nursing home the residents are constantly hearing their names called by the staff and by the regular visitors, so for a person like Alice, it would seem that everyone does knows her. But it is also true in the larger sense that everyone does know of someone like her—an aged former housewife sitting day after day in a nursing home. “Alice is at once the unique individual and every aged working-class woman, just as Courbet’s peasant grandfather becomes the

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focus of ritual and ceremony in his *Burial At Ornans*. In *Everybody Knows Me*, the central figure showing Alice as a wife and mother is the link between the hopefulness of childhood on the left and the resigned old woman on the right. Stevens suggests that it is the roles and confines of domesticity that often lead to unrealized dreams, especially for working-class women.

In 1981 Stevens' only child, Steven Baranik, died tragically at the age of thirty-three. There inevitably followed a long period of grief for Stevens and her husband. Only looking back, years later, did Stevens realize how her sorrow was reflected in her work. Reese Williams, a close friend of Stevens, calls this grief "a third presence" in the paintings that followed. Hardly a criticism, he sees this period of mourning as a highly creative time. "When an individual (or a community) allows the grief-horror-fear-anger to stream through his or her being, a change takes place on every level—spiritual, mental, emotional, cellular—and a powerful regenerative force is released in response to the death."

The paintings to which he referred are *Demonstration* (1982), *Voices* (1983), and *Procession* (1983) (Figs. 22, 23, 24).

The first depicts a 1967 demonstration in Berlin commemorating the anniversaries of Luxemburg’s and Karl Liebknecht’s deaths. Even 48 years after their deaths, these two

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remained potent symbols of the peace, antinuclear, and socialist movements. This panoramic view of crowded masses and street marchers is divided by an erect banner. On each side, marchers carry huge portraits of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. Stevens emphasizes Luxemburg’s image by pushing it forward with highlighting, while Liebknecht’s image is partially obscured by shadow. Although painted in the same grisaille tones of Everybody Knows Me, the surface is more painterly, and the overhead view provides a greater sense of spatial depth. The lively brushstrokes are charged with emotion, but Stevens’ obvious photo/Xerox source distances the viewer from the scene. We see the larger-than-life image of Luxemburg as history has recorded her, a faded but powerful icon for change. Stevens described Demonstration in March 1984:

   The consciousness in the painting is Rosa’s. Karl is impassive, a pictured face. Rosa’s look is alive, it charges the scene. She looks beyond the picture edge and plane. The painful dryness in this painting, that persists in spite of the loosening of the handling, has to do with a great feeling of impoverishment, loss, the taking away, absence.19

Only years later would Stevens acknowledge that these feelings of loss and absence directly related to her own grief over the loss of her son. Again it was private emotions that gave power to her painting, but in this and subsequent works Stevens never wavered

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from her goal of portraying Luxemburg. Her own defiance of death drove her to find and express that part of Rosa (and her son) that lives on.

The next painting, *Voices* (1983), is also a street scene (Fig. 23). In 1919 a symbolic funeral procession carried the coffins of Luxemburg and Liebknecht through Berlin. (Luxemburg’s was empty; her body was not recovered from the canal until four months later.) In Stevens’ depiction of this scene the coffins have been whitened and highlighted, making them the focal points of the painting. Almost abstract figures in black, white and subtle gray march along the bottom of the canvas, anchoring the composition. Welling up from the coffins are some of Rosa’s last words, “Tomorrow the revolution will rear its head once again, and ... will proclaim, with trumpets blazing: I was, I am, I will be! Ich Bin, Ich war, Ich werde sein!” The words echo all across the top of the canvas in endless layers of flickering blues, golds, greens, and purples. They emerge from a silvery background that seems to pulsate with the emotion of the message. Stevens said of *Voices,*

Over Rosa and Karl’s coffins, over and over again these words pile up, turn and fall and rise. They are like sounds. They make a vaulted space or a series of vaultings for the sound to resonate in, connoting and denoting. The signifier becomes the signified. In these three paintings Rosa has gotten smaller and finally disappeared. Her meaning has become absorbed into the painting, into the context and the resonance of her life. She is her afterimage.\(^{21}\)


In *Procession* (1983), the last of the trilogy, the street marchers have returned with an even greater sense of movement and agitation (Fig. 24). They carry posters in which Rosa’s image seems to glow with her intelligence, and it is her piercing gaze that propels them forward. There are harsh contrasts that flicker almost like a strobe light, with browns and bronzes emerging from the monochrome surface. Above the marchers Rosa’s words are barely discernible, obscured in the shadows. Stevens injects the scene with her own memories of political activism, as well as her enthusiasm for Rosa’s ideals. As she said, “All the peace marches and demonstrations I ever went to are in these crowds. Above the heads, their heads in pinks and purples, handwriting, words, Rosa’s words, --all but gone.”22 These three paintings can be seen as a triumph over grief—the personal grief of the artist for her son and the public grief for lost ideals, lost dreams. The works are disturbing; yet they are inspiring.

In each of these three works, Stevens’ painting style is intrinsically connected to the work’s content. Each picture builds on the formal considerations of the one before. As Patricia Hills describes it,

She constantly adds new ideas and insights to her paintings without rejecting out of hand the older ideas. She does not think in terms of a clash of opposites, but, instead, lets the old ideas absorb the new and the new supersede the old until she arrives at a fresh synthesis. This supersession of one idea over another--replacement without destruction--was a principle of her dialectic outlook on life, her politics, and the way she understood both history and the workings of consciousness.”23

22 Ibid., 328.

23 Hills, 328.
For Stevens, this outlook makes the collage or montage aesthetic particularly appealing and effective. She is able to transfer images from one context to another and thereby change or add to their meaning. By arranging such items as old photographs, newspaper clippings or letter fragments, she creates disjunctions that correspond to how we remember. There is no formal synthesis, as in Cubist collages, for these combinations often create tension. There is not the absurdity of Surrealist collages, for the elements do relate to each other, although sometimes uncomfortably. The images are not completely unified, because that is not how human memory works as we recall the events of the past.

Like Stevens, many feminist artists found collage particularly effective for evoking memories, as well as bringing the personal side of life into art. Most notably, California artist Miriam Schapiro expanded her abstract art to include new materials and symbols in works she dubbed “femmages.” To these she would often add personal items such as handkerchiefs, embroidery, patchwork and even aprons (Fig. 25). African-American artist Betye Saar used wooden boxes to hold her arrangements of faded photographs and mementos from her childhood--bits of lace, old gloves, tarnished silver spoons. These had nostalgic titles like Gone are the Days (1970) and Grandma’s Garden (1972).

Stevens again uses collage to represent faded memories in a large painting featuring Alice called Go Gentle (1982-83) (Fig. 26). The left half of the painting has two images from Alice’s earlier years. On the far left is an atmospheric, soft-focus standing figure of Alice in a billowy dress and hat. Next is the formal grouping with her siblings
seen in *Everybody Knows Me*, only more indistinct, as if copied and recopied. Painted in flat monochrome, both images recede into the background, but near the center, two contemporary Alices erupt from the canvas. With wildly gesticulating arms, they show extreme agitation. For the first time Alice is fully modeled with an almost embarrassing corporeality. Her massive knees jut out to the viewer and the veins in her arms bulge as her hands claw the air. Writer and friend Reese Williams claims that this work shows the "regenerative power" that Stevens recouped as she worked through her grief in *Voices* and *Procession*. Here she is "giving the regenerative energy to her mother, who at that time is in a hospital and nearing the end of her life."24 He suggests that Stevens is easing her mother (and perhaps herself) toward the idea of death. A final image of Alice on the far right, barely perceptible as she sinks softly from the picture frame, reinforces this interpretation. It is as if she has finally had her say, although not in words, and can finally “go gently.”

The artist has broken the silence, by letting Alice break out in all her fury at what her life has become. Here again she is a distinct individual, but also every aged woman who looks back in anguish at a life of emptiness. One can see this as a portrait of one woman’s unfortunate life, or one can question: How many women have wasted away like this? How many lives have gone unmarked throughout the centuries and at what cost to our society, our culture, our humanity? Virginia Woolf wondered what happened to

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24 Williams, 48.
Shakespeare's "wonderfully gifted sister?" Like her, we also wonder—how many artists, how many writers, how many scientists are lost to the world forever—only because they were born female in a world that had no place for their genius. Stevens has made sure that her own mother's life, despite its disappointments, has not gone unmarked.

Stevens brings Rosa back to life and introduces her to Alice in *Forming the Fifth International* (1985) (Fig. 27). In this imaginary dialogue between the two women, Alice is presented frontally with the same corporeality as in *Go Gentle*, but here her anger is gone as she looks intently toward her companion. The detailed precision of her face, hands and torso contrasts with the crudely painted massiveness of her knees and calves that again jut out into the viewer's space. She is painted in soft flesh tones that blend into pearly whites and beiges. Rosa is shown seated on a park bench looking out toward the viewer, an image that Stevens has used before in various collages and paintings. With her long skirt and long sleeved blouse, the focus is on her head, her intellect, and there is the same serious gaze found in all of her images. Lightly painted in silvery monochrome, Rosa is more a vision than an actual presence. Handled in this manner, she retains her mystery as a historical figure, one that can never be fully known. The two are enveloped in lushly painted deep green foliage, although the setting is only suggested—there is no evidence that this is an actual place. This is obviously an uneasy meeting, and the viewer immediately questions what could these disparate women possibly be discussing. They

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are from different cultures, different generations, and different social classes. Stevens explains,

Alice and Rosa talking together as equals represent the value of each human life, the complementarity of intellect and instinct, the symbolic joining of body and mind, form to content. The still-great distance (in color, in time) between them admits no easy solution but holds out, tenuously, promise and necessity. A sad humor, illogic, and vague hope play her with utopian intensity.\[26\]

With the title, *Forming the Fifth International*, Stevens injects political content into the painting.\[27\] Placing Rosa in conversation with this working-class woman was congruent with Rosa’s own socialist convictions. Unlike Lenin, she had great faith in the wisdom of the working class, and, in fact, felt that the party should be led by the masses.\[28\] She opposed the elite party structure and feared the results of Lenin’s authoritarianism. She believed that “socialism had to be made from the inside out—that the ideals and values of the new society rested in the hearts of leaders and masses alike. This was the ‘spiritual transformation’ that she argued with Lenin.”\[29\]


\[27\] The term “International” refers to a succession of international organizations. The First International was founded by Karl Marx in the 1860s but was dissolved in 1876. It was succeeded by three later Internationals, all dedicated to the spread of Socialism worldwide. Luxemburg was a leader in the Second International, which was founded in 1889. The “Fifth International” referred to by Stevens is imaginary.

\[28\] Dabakis, 14.

\[29\] Ibid., 19.
By presenting Rosa with this all too tangible "ordinary" woman, Stevens seeks to humanize her, to show her as accessible to all classes of women. By putting Alice next to Rosa she breathes new life into one largely forgotten. There is a sense of Alice's potential--if only she had the words to express what has happened.

A more personal interpretation is that Stevens is bringing together her two mothers: Alice, her biological mother and Rosa, her alternative or ideal mother. Many women find such an alternative, according to Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. As discussed in Chapter 3, Rich says that these women have in fact "split themselves," an act that may "allow the young woman to fantasize alternately living as one or the other 'mother,'...but it can also lead to a life in which she never consciously resolves the choices." In the handing of the "Ordinary/Extraordinary" series, Stevens challenges this idea that one must choose one over the other. "The intention was to erode, break apart, and confound the divisive and polarized notion that the one woman's life was special, exemplary, extraordinary, and the other was banal, forgettable and ordinary." This rejection of dualism is at the heart of feminist theory and is explained by Rich as "the positive-negative polarities between which most of our intellectual training has taken place. And, rejecting them, we reaffirm the existence of all those who have through the centuries been negatively defined: not

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31 Withers, 489.
only women, the 'untouchable,' the 'unmanly,' the 'nonwhite,' the 'illiterate': the 'invisible.'" Alice has been one of these invisible women, one seldom if ever depicted in art. Stevens breaks her long silence by making her a suitable subject for art and her life subject to discussion and perhaps redress. As they discuss the Fifth International, Stevens implies that this time women's voices must be heard.

In 1988 Stevens returned to the tragedy of Rosa's death in an installation called *One Plus or Minus One* for the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and later for Orchard Gallery in Derry, Northern Ireland (Figs. 28, 29, 30). The installations consisted of three texts and two huge photomurals (11' X 17' each) depicting scenes inspired by documentary photographs. There are a sea of faces in both murals—all men except for one lone woman in each. The first, *Rosa Luxemburg Attends the Second International*, features two tiers of bearded, dark-suited men (Fig. 29). Placed centrally and with a slightly enlarged scale, Rosa stands out in this crowd of masculinity. The male faces float in a sea of black, but Rosa's white blouse radiates light throughout the area above and behind her. This is the 1904 Congress on World Socialism held in Amsterdam, where socialist groups from around the world sent their leading representatives. Stevens has manipulated the scene to highlight the singularity of Rosa's achievement in this patriarchal world of international socialism. The viewer is drawn toward Rosa despite the overpowering presence of the male leaders. Patriarchy as an all encompassing presence is

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32 Rich, 64.
the theme of this and the accompanying mural. As Melissa Dabakis notes, "The domination of the male voice and of men's history are the real subjects here. Experience and effect become one."33 One is reminded of the famous 1951 photograph of the Abstract Expressionists, called the *Irascibles*. In it, one token female (Hedda Sterne) stands out in another all male group (Fig. 31). But Rosa is no token female—her drive and her formidable intellect have earned her a leading position in this assembly.

In the accompanying mural, *Eden Hotel*, another lone woman, a waitress, is surrounded by male patrons (Fig. 30). These are the German soldiers who killed Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and they are celebrating at a tavern the day after the murders. The five men in the foreground who leer out at the viewer are identifiable. The mustached man toward the center is Otto Runge, the actual murderer of Luxemburg. The anonymous soldiers in the background also stare outward, with ominous skeletal features reminiscent of those in Edvard Munch's *Golgotha* (1900) (Fig. 32).34 After reading the accompanying text, one can experience how Rosa saw these faces as the rifle butt crashed into her skull.35

Stevens' manipulations are more obvious here; one can see where she has cut and rearranged the composition. The image of the waitress is small, but its central location,

33 Dabakis, 28.

34 Ibid.

35 Jacobsen, 185.
amidst a swarm of soldiers, makes it the focal point of the mural. In contrast to the first
mural, this woman is unknown--anonymous and of the working-class. Yet, she too is
surrounded by and trapped within the same patriarchal system. Ever the activist, Stevens
makes the theme contemporary with her text on a nearby wall:

One more or less. Rosa Luxemburg flared across the European dark like a meteor, an
aberration. Her murder restores the usual dark. The waitress brings her tray. The

Both black and white murals have a “charred” effect not unlike woodcuts,
especially those of the German Expressionists. Like Stevens, German artist Kathe
Kollwitz (1867-1945) found the sharp contrasts of black and white especially effective
for expressing emotion. She, too, was a politically committed artist, and her approach to
her work was similar to that of Stevens’. In a 1920 journal entry, Kollwitz explained, “I
have as an artist the right to extract from everything its content of feeling, to let it take
effect on me and to express this outwardly.”37 Her print commemorating the death of
Rosa Luxemburg’s friend and co-revolutionary, Karl Liebknecht, remains a poignant
example (Fig. 33). But Stevens’ murals were impermanent. Since they were painted on
paper that was then plastered directly on the wall, they had to be scraped off at the end of

36 May Stevens, excerpt from One Plus or Minus One, installation at the New
Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City, February 19-April 3, 1988; as reproduced
in Rosa Alice May Stevens Ordinary Extraordinary, ed. Melissa Dabakis and Janis Bell

37 Kathe Kollwitz, quoted in Shulamith Behr, Women Expressionists
each installation. Stevens had faith in their expressive power—ultimately she entrusted
them to the viewer’s mind.

After Alice Stevens died in 1985, May Stevens continued the “Ordinary/
Extraordinary” series for six more years, but gradually her mother began to depart from
her work. An example of these later works is the 1989 painting *Green Field* (Fig. 34). A
lone silhouette stands in the upper left quadrant of an endless, verdant field. The figure is
thinly painted in a chalky white that fades into the green behind it. The handling of the
rest of the canvas is painterly. Lively brushstrokes extend in all directions, but drips along
the lower edge make the surface flatter and more ambiguous. The dense green could be
foliage, but it could be a meadow, or even an aerial view of trees and bushes. Stevens
explains that the figure is Alice—she has donned her hat and picked up her cane, as if
ready to depart.38 No longer seated and waiting, she has taken to her feet and seems
lighter, less massive. Just a few quick steps and the field will be empty.

With May Stevens’ comments, this work has meaning for the viewer, but without
her explanation, it is rather a mystery. With the non-specific title, one is not sure who this
woman represents. Alice is unfamiliar here—we are not used to seeing her active. The hat
and cane may have significance for the artist, but they give no clues to her identity for the
viewer. Of course, all of this uneasiness and uncertainty may have been intentional. As

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38 Stevens, interview by author.
Stevens said, "I don’t want a false resolution, in my work or in my theory. I would rather have it not fit than force it, or cut off something, or deny something I believe in."\(^{39}\)

The complexity of this series is evidenced in the varied approaches that critics have taken in their writings about it. The works have been interpreted in such simple terms as "celebrations of women’s lives" or, more subtly, in a postmodern approach that focuses on the artist’s "creation of a new narrative."\(^{40}\) Clearly such writers bring to the work their own interests, their own priorities and their own familiarity with the subjects as well as the artist and the artist’s intentions.

Josephine Withers emphasizes the cyclic nature of motherhood and the ways that May Stevens forges new bonds between herself, her mother, and Rosa. Stevens does this by recovering the unknown Alice and Rosa, and by reclaiming the mother who had embarrassed her as an adolescent. One reason the photograph of Alice had been "too terrible" do deal with was because Stevens recognized herself in her mother. By restoring Alice to life and giving her a voice, she was able to reclaim what she had previously shunned in her mother.\(^{41}\) By reinvesting Alice with her own identity, Stevens was able to

\(^{39}\) May Stevens, quoted in Withers, 490.

\(^{40}\) Elizabeth Jessie Garber, "Feminist Polyphony: A Conceptual Understanding of Feminist Art Criticism in the 1980s" (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1989), 127.

\(^{41}\) Withers, 492.
express her love for this woman, not only in her art, but in poems that she wrote during this period:

Hold up you head on its hawkcords  
Hood with you eyes the dark you see  
Scratch your nose a little  
Tuck in your mouth over the drowsy gullet  
Suck in the places your skin falls to dream  
under the jutting bone.  
There is great beauty.  

May Stevens, “You Can Go”

Another approach to the series was taken by Patricia Hills, who describes Stevens’ work as a new type of history painting. This new type of history painting places women centrally and presents the personal, the private life as well as the traditional public version of famous leaders “making history.” This idea relates directly to Adrienne Rich’s words at the opening of this chapter: “Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images...will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable.” Stevens has broken the conspiracy of silence by giving a voice to the institutionalized Alice, by not ignoring her, as society and even family members often do. By humanizing the “historical” Rosa she makes her more accessible to women, and her goals seem more attainable. Hills says of

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43 Rich, On Lies, 199.
Stevens' series, "Hers is an unofficial history, cast with specific women, who also serve as types, and who have grown into tropes for voice and silence."  

Although undoubtedly Stevens became intimately involved with this series on a psychological level and used her art in her own healing processes, few would argue that that is all the work is about. Stevens herself sees her work as largely political; however, critic Donald Kuspit sees "it as personal, with the political an overlay of optimism on a profound personal pessimism." He sees Stevens as an individual who is working through her personal life and her paintings as "irreparable bleak pictures." Kuspit is not unsympathetic to feminism, but he fails to explore how Stevens' work relates to issues of women's oppression or women's culture. Although Kuspit generally praises Stevens' art, a few years later he laments that "she in effect presents femaleness as exhaustive of humanness." But Stevens replies, "Cannot humanness be achieved through femaleness and through dealing with female values?" And of her work she says, "The better it is, 

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44 Hills, 310.


46 Garber, 135.

when it gets to places I want it to go--then it speaks about profound issues. These don’t belong to anybody.48

Most writers see the series as a continuation of Stevens’ mode of personalizing her activist/political art. Carol Jacobsen says that her work is “always infused with socialist politics and the socialist theory of permanent revolution.”49 Lucy Lippard sees the work as an analysis of class issues whereby Stevens redeems the lives of Rosa and Alice. She speaks of Stevens’ “internalized” ideology that makes the work more subtle than some political art but also more authentic.50

Patricia Mathews takes a postmodern approach in her analysis of the series in her essay “A Dialogue of Silence: May Stevens’ Ordinary. Extraordinary.” Her focus is on Stevens’ creation of a new narrative outside the patriarchal system. She describes Stevens’ techniques and use of media (especially collage) as characteristic of postmodernism. The disunited elements in the work, she says, are products of “discontinuous narrative content: two different women living in different historical contexts and the incongruous structures of each of the lives) as well as signifiers of


49 Jacobsen, 154.

society’s fragmentation.”

Using the terminology of postmodernism, Mathews’ essay describes social conditions through the “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series and how these conditions have constructed women’s relative social positions.

In conclusion, May Stevens’ “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series is a complex weaving of personal and political ideas that defies a single interpretation. As Melissa Dabakis says, “It works on many levels.” Both Rosa and Alice connect with the viewer on a personal level, but powerful feminist and socialist messages are also there for those who contemplate the larger picture. May Stevens helps us understand the political meaning of their lives, and their pain, but she provides no easy answers. As she says, “The works I do continue to speak to issues of art and society and give up nothing to either but exist in the heat of those contradictions. I don’t want to shred the white paper. I want to make it burn.”


52 Dabakis, 30.

CHAPTER 5

RECENT WORK

I want a painting that rips the dark expanse so we can see the still undone, the white unwritten on, the possible.”

May Stevens, 1996

After her death in 1985, Alice Stevens gradually faded from May Stevens’ work. Rosa Luxemburg persisted a little longer in several paintings that focused on water—specifically the Landwehr Canal, which held Luxemburg’s body for five months. Such work reflects Stevens’ long fascination with water and its associations. This interest reaches back to Stevens’ childhood, when she spent hours walking by a tidal inlet near her home. Another painting that features water is Elaboration of Absence (1991). It is based on a photograph from a book about Luxemburg, but it does not depict her directly. Since 1991, May Stevens has moved away from Alice Stevens and Rosa Luxemburg to explore new themes, but the issues brought forward in her “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series continue to inform her new work.


Elaboration of Absence, the last painting with references to Rosa Luxemburg, can be considered a transitional work. It consists of two canvases—one placed on the floor directly below another one on the wall. Above is a scene of women prisoners circling a walled exercise area, with a guard watching nearby. The time period and the place refer to Luxemburg's four year imprisonment for her opposition to World War I. In the canvas below, ovals of shining whirlpools echo the circle of the prisoners and also recall the Landwehr Canal. Stevens says of the work, "To me there is a magic in the circle of their being together, something enforced by their collective isolation." At the base of the painting on the wall is a formal text inscribed in capital letters:

TO NARRATE MEANS TO SPEAK HERE AND NOW WITH AN AUTHORITY THAT DERIVES FROM HAVING BEEN (LITERALLY OR METAPHORICALLY) THERE AND THEN . . . NOT ONE NARRATIVE AMONG MANY, BUT THE MATRIX OF ALL POSSIBLE NARRATIVE . . ELSEWHERE . . THE ELABORATION OF ABSENCE . . .

This text comes from Carlo Ginzburg's Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath (1991). When Stevens discovered this book, she was mesmerized by Ginzburg's feminist understandings. His words continue to surface in her work. As she explains:

He possesses an amazing ability to sense what happened when the witches crossed over to the other side through drugs, dreams or incantations. The whole point of his book is to understand what they did and what they really knew. I felt I was enlarging my context by reading this. I wasn't just staying with my own time and reading

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feminist theory but instead was reaching back into a distant past, contacting other kinds of beings.\(^5\)

An expert on the marginalized or forgotten elements of history, Ginzburg traces 2000 years of Eurasian folklore, ranging from the medieval European witch trials to rituals in ancient Greece and Asia. In his conclusion, he argues that all of these myths are held together by a common theme, that of "going into the beyond, returning from the beyond."\(^6\) Ginzburg’s complex, controversial research provides a rich source for evidence of alternative belief systems and appeals to May Stevens on many levels.\(^7\)

With *Sea of Words* (1991) Stevens moves completely away from her Luxemburg sources while retaining the themes of women, words, and water (Figs. 35, 36). In this huge (7’ X 11’) painting, four slight, but luminous women row tiny skiffs across an immense ocean of words. With their oars almost touching, they band together, but there is no sense of hurry or exertion. Their placement, however, is curious. The two boats placed higher seem to be farther away, but they are larger than the two lower boats, which confounds any logical reading of their relative positions.

The rowers are ghostly presences, with little to identify them as women. This was intentional, according to Stevens. "That is because I want them to represent people, just as the male figure has been made to stand for humankind. Here women represent the

\(^5\) Stevens, in Roth, n.p.

\(^6\) Ginzburg, 307.

\(^7\) Roth, n.p.
concept of 'human beings' or the concept 'man.'

She has also commented that after "drowning Rosa" she wanted to do a woman on top of the water.

The words, too, are difficult to decipher. Written in silver, white, gray, ocher and gold, they undulate across the surface. Overlapping and fading into one another, they are almost legible, but not quite. Their power comes from the emotion with which they were painted. Stevens said, "When I wrote them I knew where they came from. I wrote them with all the emotions I feel when reading words that strike me like the proverbial lightning bolt with their truthfulness, their usefulness.

She used words drawn from feminist writers like Virginia Woolf and Julia Kristeva. First are passionate excerpts about women's oppression from Woolf's "A Room of One's Own." Next are lines from Julia Kristeva's "About Chinese Women" that describe an ancient Chinese sex manual which suggested that the man and the woman concentrate on the woman's sexual pleasure to provide the best experience for both. Finally, she went back to Woolf and "A Writer's Diary" for lines that echo her own feelings about being an artist and a woman.

Stevens has always loved language. She reads constantly and writes both essays and poems. She enjoys the process of hand-lettering and finds works like Sea of Words to be meditative, soothing, and never tedious. She has used text in her art for years, but

8 Stevens, "Sea of Words" notes.

9 Stevens, in Roth, n.p.

10 Ibid.
never before on this scale. “Using language for me is like another tool, another color. I
don’t use a lot of color so language has become one of my main colors. The tension
between legibility and illegibility of the words is always interesting to me.”  

*Sea of Words* became the impetus for another series by Stevens, and in 1993 an
exhibition by the same name was organized at the University of Colorado. For this
installation, Stevens chose to clarify the text of *Sea of Words* by reading the words, ever
so softly, onto a continuously playing tape. “I often think about something I call the ‘hum
of being’--moments when nothing is going on, yet you can still hear the sound of your
own body, pulse, blood and breathing. I want this tape to sound very low in order to
evoke that sort of sensation for its listeners.”  

Shown at this same exhibition was *Women’s History: Live Girls* (1992). In this
painting the setting jumps to 1990 and the streets of Detroit, where young prostitutes
stride into the night (Fig. 37). Stevens depicts three larger-than-life-size adolescent girls
as they boldly parade down a city street. Pushed into the foreground, their bodies are
nearly nude and youthfully seductive. Above them neon lights flash “live girls” and
“dancing” against a wall of graffiti. The atmosphere of the street is eerie with what could
be fog descending, but the girls are outlined in light, and glow with their own aura.
Alongside them, stretching across the entire thirteen foot canvas, is a huge gray

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11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.
automobile. It could be a potential client or perhaps an unmarked police car, but either way, its overwhelming presence signifies the patriarchal powers that control these young hookers.¹³

Stevens links this contemporary scene to the past by including twelve small shrouded female figures, scattered across the lower part of the painting. These are women prisoners from the early part of the century; images derived from the same German book that showed prisoners circling the walled exercise area. These silent, unseen figures seem to circle and envelop the younger women in a secret and mutual alliance.

The inspiration for *Women’s History: Live Girls* came from the work of Carol Jacobsen, an artist friend of Stevens. In 1990 Jacobsen interviewed young Detroit prostitutes and made two video tapes about them entitled *Night Voices* and *Who’s Going to Take My Word?* For a Colorado exhibition, Stevens gave the women their voices by including their words on tape. They explained the conditions of their lives, their fears, their battles with authorities, and their frustration with not being heard or trusted. As they described walking the same streets each night, Stevens was reminded of the German prisoners. “Women walking in circles confined by walls that keep them going in the same deepening grooves. Over and over. Then and now. But the painted circle lights up from within; these young bodies burn as they pass. Women’s history is being re-imagined.”¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ May Stevens, quoted in *This Is My Body; This is My Blood*, ed. Susan E. Jihad and May Stevens (Amherst, Herter Art Gallery, 1992). n.p.
Painting these youthful bodies was a welcome change for Stevens, especially after so much concentration on aging and death in the last part of the “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series. It is also likely that she was inspired by younger women artists, who in the 1990s have returned to the subject of women’s bodies. For example, Stevens acknowledges the strong impact of Kiki Smith’s work and increasingly seems to direct her work toward women younger than herself.

Surprisingly, Women’s History: Live Girls was created specifically for an exhibition that accompanied an international conference, “Marxism in the New World Order: Crises and Possibilities.” Stevens has always been responsive to Marxist ideology and as a feminist theorist she contributed to this conference. She describes her feelings about socialism: “Social justice is not possible without economic justice. I love the (unrealized) ideals: from each according to her/his ability; to each according to his/her need. To me the interconnection of all creatures is the key. We are part of each other.”15

With this bold and sensuous painting she challenged Marxist intellectuals to rethink the old class and work critiques of prostitution (which insisted that material conditions led to its development) and to incorporate feminist social theories (which focus on sexuality or gender as the basis for ideological constructs leading to prostitution).16

15 Stevens, letter to the author, 16 April 1997.

In a 1996 work, *Tic Tac Toe*, Stevens again turns to a social issue. This time it is child abuse in its many forms (Figs. 38a, b, c, d, e, f). *Tic Tac Toe* is a series of 32 small works on paper, 8" X 5" each, consisting primarily of Xeroxed images with burned holes and edges, pieces of hair, and bits of collaged paper. Reading left to right, the first several images depict Alissa, a New York City child, whose murder was widely reported in 1995. Although protected and cared for by her father, she was returned to her mentally ill mother after his death. Apparently her mother disapproved of the unusual folklore that Alissa learned from her Puerto Rican father, and she attempted to exorcise these ideas from her child. Sexually abused with a hairbrush, the girl was eventually bludgeoned to death by her mother. Stevens presents the innocent image of Alissa along with the newspaper clipping describing her shocking death (Fig. 38a). In another, she shows the child’s mother, looking almost like a child herself, with a graphic representation of her own abuse collaged within her head (Fig. 38b). In yet another, Stevens has attached small globs of hair to paper that has holes burned into it and burned edges (Fig. 38c). Stevens explains that the hair makes the child from the newspaper seem real, human—with a body and vulnerable to pain.¹⁷

Stevens recognizes the international scope of the problem in the next few images, which depict Brazilian children (Fig. 38d). These are gangs of homeless youngsters whom business owners find disruptive and, apparently, less than human. Local authorities

¹⁷ May Stevens, interview by author, 1 June 1996, Mary Ryan Gallery, New York City.
pay bounty hunters to find and shoot down these children—as if they were animals!\textsuperscript{18}

Stevens shows the young boys fleeing the hunters, with holes ripped in the paper, like the bullets that rip through their flesh.

Such specific images of horror alternate with generic depictions of children at play. These kids are black, white, urban and suburban, but none seem safe. The scattered cigarette burned holes suggest the random violence that is an every day fact for many children. In one work, two tiny fragments from the want ads symbolize fragmented lives or perhaps lost dreams (Fig. 38e). Stevens described the last work in the series as the most difficult to do. Here she actually burned out the faces of two girls and a boy in an image that shows them striding forward, hand in hand (Fig. 38f).

Child abuse is a difficult issue to discuss, much less depict, but Stevens handles the subject with the kind of delicacy and poignancy that it warrants. She gives voice to the powerless, not unlike she did for her own mother and again for the young prostitutes. She insists that they not be forgotten. When describing the series, Stevens often quotes a poem by Pablo Neruda, "The blood of the children in the streets is like . . . the blood of the children in the streets."\textsuperscript{19} In Tic Tac Toe, Stevens inspires the viewer to ask, "How dare we accept this as the status quo? How dare we not be incensed and rallied into action?"

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Pablo Neruda, quoted by Stevens, in interview by author.
A more contemplative work is *Her Boats* (1996) from the "Sea of Words" series (Fig. 39). High on this 7' X 12' canvas Stevens depicts another female rower. This one bends forward, head to one side, intently pushing across a shimmering gold surface. On each side are two shapes that could be boats, and below is a dark ominous area than seems to stretch into the abyss of the ocean or perhaps the depths of unexplored caverns. There is a lightness, a sense of joy to the luminous rower, who traverses waves of fragmented text. Again there are lines from Virginia Woolf and Julia Kristeva, but to these Stevens has added words about the oppression of the "outsider" from Carlo Ginzberg, Edward Said, and others. The rower glides across the words, but her lightness is tempered by the dark area below, painted in shades of charcoal, umber, and black. A long curve delineates the dark and light sections of the painting and each part alternately commands attention. Standing in front of *Her Boats* shortly after its completion, Stevens explained that the contrast emphasizes how the dark and the painful aspects of life are just as constant as the golden and the light moments. Both are important and always present. Stevens challenges the viewer to interpret this unreal space—to see the possibilities in spite of the darkness. One reviewer described Stevens' painting as "a form of magic designed to act as a mediator between the strange world and us: a way of

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29 Stevens, interview by author.
seizing power by giving form to both terrors and desires. Her technique exposes reality but also extends the idea of the real to something as yet not seen.\textsuperscript{21}

Stevens continues to do works with the “Sea of Words” theme, alternating paintings with lithographs done at the Tamarind Institute. Since 1991, she has merged voices from the past with those of the present in these contemplative works where political sentiments are present but more understated than previously. However, she seems to balance these meditative works with more direct expressions of her social concern in works like \textit{Women’s History: Live Girls} and \textit{Tic Tac Toe}. As she has done for the last 40 years, she works without concern for popularity or current stylistic fads, adapting her style to her message, and never giving up on the positive potential of words and images. It is her sense of connection to others (both past and present) and her belief in the possibility for change that guides her work. In describing the content of her recent work she said,

Social meaning is understood differently. I want the meaning to be deeper, broader, more inclusive, less judgmental, more about feeling than information or incidents (like a specific example). Which does not mean going above or beyond a specific injustice, just seeing it more deeply. I don’t want to leave behind the things I’ve learned, only to contextualize them differently.

Difference is not hierarchy.\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{22} Stevens, letter to the author, 16 April 1997.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

It should be evident from this investigation, that it is impossible to consider the work of May Stevens without discussing her political beliefs. It is also impossible to analyze her work without seeing the connections to her personal life. As a woman artist who came of age in the socially conservative 1950s, she never anticipated that society would compensate her for doing what she loved. Since making art and making a living were separate aspects of her life, at no time did she consider tailoring her art toward gallery or public tastes. Criticized early in her career for a politically inspired painting, she became even more determined to paint what she personally felt was important. For over forty years she has consistently synthesized her personal experiences and political philosophy in complex and enduring works of art.

Her work has always been both personal and political, although sometimes more one than the other. At first, personal subjects, especially images of her son, alternated with works inspired by current events. She depicted the plight of others—the Freedom Riders in the South and the civilians in Vietnam. However, in 1968, when she returned to her own working-class roots and began to paint her father, a true synthesis of the personal and the political emerged. As the "Big Daddy" series developed, her father was gradually transformed into a complex symbol of imperialism, patriarchy, militarism and narrow-
mindedness. Stevens agonized over the attitudes of her father and her working-class neighbors and became deeply involved in the anti-war movement.

When feminism brought a new awareness of her identity as a woman artist, she boldly painted herself in the place of Courbet. She recognized the significance of women artists working collectively for the first time, and she documented this historical moment in *Mysteries and Politics* (1978). In this complex work, which symbolically unites the spiritual and political sides of the women's art movement, there are underlying themes about motherhood, consciousness, history and fragmentation. Stevens was a founding member of the collective that organized *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* and has contributed both essays and art since 1977. She was an active participant in the New York segment of the feminist art movement and helped to change the face of the art world in the 1970s. Energized by her community of women friends and artists, Stevens integrated feminist issues and theory into her life and her work.

By embracing her own mother and combining her with Rosa Luxemburg in the “Ordinary/Extraordinary” series, Stevens was able to examine even more complex issues relating to sex roles, mother-daughter bonds, and the pervasive effects of patriarchy. She was one of the few artists dealing with issues of class as she contrasted this working-class housewife and a renowned revolutionary. Overwhelming grief over the death of her son lent pathos to Stevens’ depictions of Rosa’s death and of her mother’s lost life. The series underscored the horrible waste of relegating women to stifling roles but also the power of
political ideas to endure as the past inspires the future. There are no false resolutions, but the works inspire the kinds of questions and debate necessary for change.

Stevens continued her dialogue with the past when she linked political prisoners from the early part of the century with young Detroit streetwalkers from the 1990s. With a backdrop of misused patriarchy, she gave voice to these adolescent girls trapped in prostitution. Stevens knew the pain of losing a child, and she used subtlety and respect in her work concerning abuse of adolescents and children.

In the “Sea of Words” series, which continues today, Stevens paints women who have risen above the effects of misogyny. These women sail across the waves, buoyed by the collective support of their feminist foremothers and a few unusual and perceptive men. These tiny, but capable, rowers represent a future of possibilities, as the viewer hears the artist read the politically charged words that brought them together.

May Stevens’ passionate interest in the fate of humanity is reflected in all aspects of her life. Her writing, her teaching, her public lectures—all reveal her as an individual who cares deeply—about art, about politics and about the human condition. How inspiring this is amidst the cynicism and careerism of the 1980s and 1990s.

The breadth of Stevens’ career exemplifies how one can create art that is a living vital cultural force without relinquishing aesthetic appeal. Just as she synthesizes the personal and political elements, she also balances the form with the content so that her work is compelling in both respects. She is able to portray issues of international significance while engaging the viewer on a personal, almost visceral level. By constantly
inviting the viewer’s participation, she creates a sense of mutual exploration of the subject matter. With her unflinching honesty she creates haunting images that linger uneasily on the mind. It took courage to excavate her own working-class heritage, but the results are singularly distinctive--this is the art that only she could do. Because Stevens’ personal ideology has been weighed and internalized, her political content never seems shallow. It necessarily reflects the layers of complexity around all social issues.

Of course, May Stevens is not alone in her quest to make art that arouses the consciousness of the viewer. “Art of conscious” (as Donald Kuspit called it) has become more acceptable in recent years, and there are many artists dealing with political realities. May Stevens’ method of synthesizing the personal with the political, in her life as well as her work, makes her a valuable model for such artists. It is because her ideology is a lived one that she continues to create powerful art and to inspire an entire new generation of activist artists.
Fig. 1. May Stevens, *Prime Time*, 1967
Fig. 2. May Stevens, *Big Daddy*, 1968
Fig. 3. May Stevens, *Pax Americana*, 1973
Fig. 4. May Stevens, *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, 1970
Fig. 7. May Stevens, *Power*, 1973
Fig. 8. May Stevens, *Head*, 1973
Fig. 9. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *M. Louis-Francois Bertin*, 1832
Fig. 10. Nancy Spero, *Male Bomb (War Series)*, 1966
Fig. 11. Michele Oka Doner, *Death Masks*, 1967
Fig. 12. Leon Golub, *Vietnam II*, 1973
Fig. 13. May Stevens, *Artist's Studio (After Courbet)*, 1974
Fig. 14. May Stevens, *Soho Women Artists*, 1977-78
Fig. 15. May Stevens, *Mysteries and Politics*, 1978
Fig. 16. Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers*, 1849
Fig. 17. Gustave Courbet, *Interior of my Studio, a Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of My Life as an Artist*, 1854-55
Fig. 18. May Stevens, double-page spread. *Heresies*, issue 1, 1977
Fig. 19. Piero della Francesca, *Discovery of the True Cross and Meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, c. 1454-58
Fig. 20. May Stevens, *Ordinary/Extraordinary* (artist’s book), 1980 detail
Fig. 21. May Stevens, *Everybody Knows Me*, 1981
Fig. 22. May Stevens, *Demonstration*, 1982
Fig. 23. May Stevens, *Voices*, 1983
Fig. 24. May Stevens, *Procession*, 1983
Fig. 25. Miriam Schapiro, *Wonderland*, 1983
Fig. 26. May Stevens, *Go Gentle*, 1982-83
Fig. 27. May Stevens, *Forming the Fifth International*, 1985
Fig. 28. May Stevens, *One Plus or Minus One* (installation view), 1988
Fig. 29. May Stevens, *Rosa Luxemburg Attends the Second International*, 1988
Fig. 30. May Stevens, *Eden Hotel*, 1988
Fig. 31. Nina Leen, *Irascibles*, in *Life* magazine, January 1951
Fig. 32. Edvard Munch, *Golgotha*, 1900
Fig. 33. Kathe Kollwitz, *Memorial Sheet for Karl Liebknecht*, 1920
Fig. 34. May Stevens. *Green Field*, 1989
Fig. 36. May Stevens, *Sea of Words*, 1991 detail
Fig. 37. May Stevens, Women's History: Live Girls, 1992
Figs. 38a,b,c,d,e,f. May Stevens, *Tic Tac Toe*, 1996
Fig. 39. May Stevens, *Her Boots*, 1996
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