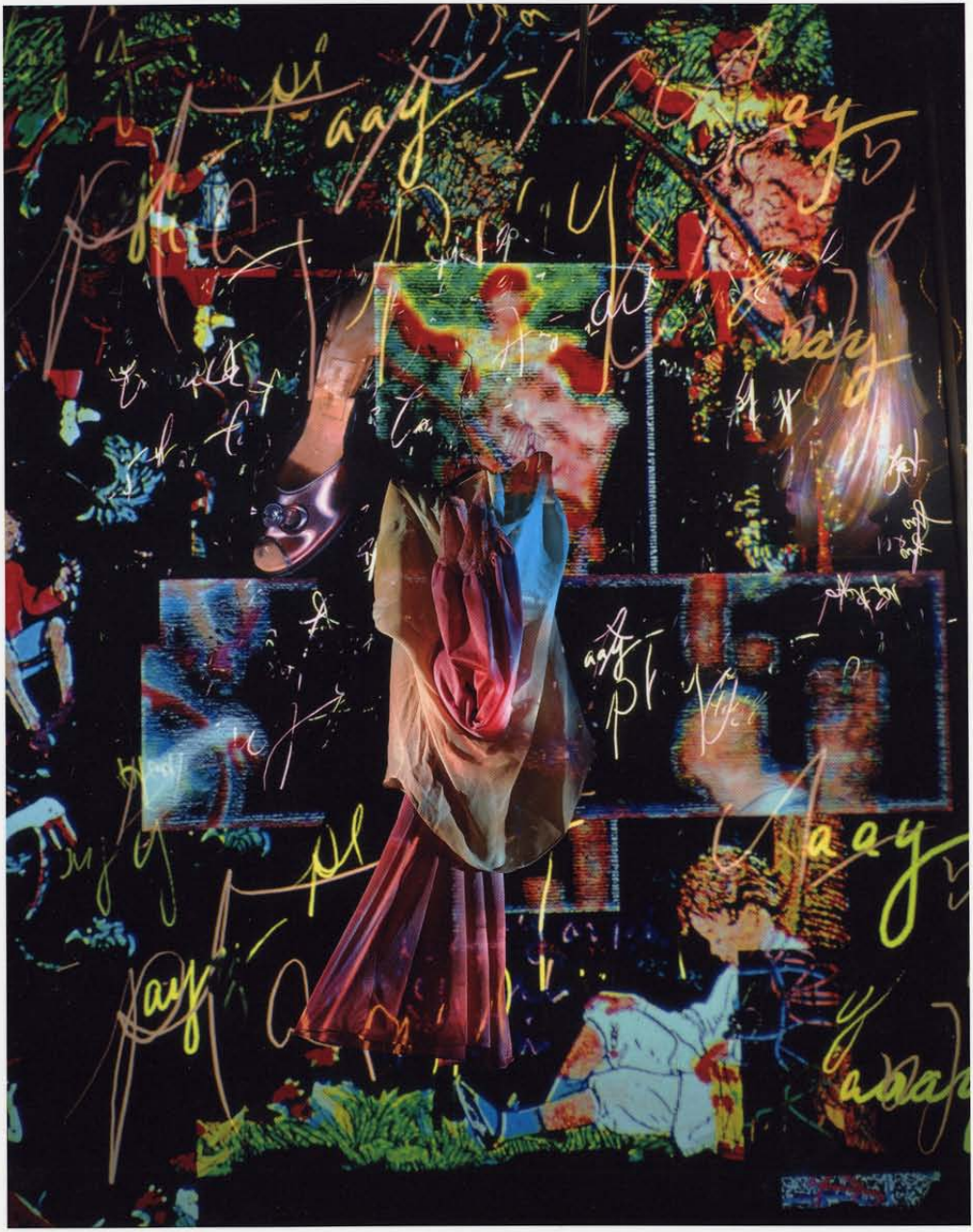

A Conversation with Jane Calvin

Photographer Jane Calvin earned her BA in art history from Bryn Mawr College, and in the 1960s and '70s she worked as an independent art dealer. By the late 1970s she had decided to continue her education at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago, where she earned her MFA. Since that time, her work has been widely exhibited nationally and internationally, most recently at 798 Photo Gallery in Beijing, China, a country in which she has traveled extensively over the past two years. She exhibited her work at the University of Tampa's Scarfone Hartley Galleries in 2003. Our telephone conversation with her took place in spring 2005, shortly before Calvin left for the opening of her China show.

Mathews: Since *Tampa Review* is a literary magazine, a good way to begin this conversation might be to ask you about the literary aspects of your visual art. I wonder if you are aware of narratives or stories as you work on a piece. Do you see yourself in any way as a poet or fiction writer while you're working?

Jane Calvin.

Calvin: It's a really interesting question. And my connection to literature is a strong one. I'd *like* to be a poet or a fiction writer—because it takes up so much less working space! [*Laughter.*] But I do work visually. Narratives in my photos *are visual*; they're constructed through associations with objects, images, and text fragments that I assemble to make pictures. Also, I like the physicality of actually *making* things, of working in a real space. But that said, I get tremendous inspiration from reading. I have always been an avid reader, beginning in the many hours of my childhood spent in the local public library. Sometimes there are stories in my head when I'm working on a piece. Some photos are like poems—made of visual imagery, in an associative way.

As a small aside, when I started to construct these kinds of images, in the 1980s, I would sometimes be listening to stories being read on the radio by Studs Terkel. He's a great radio personality in Chicago, and a writer. A story would sometimes filter into the piece I was making. I specifically remember Flannery O'Connor tales that he read, which were amazing to me.

Mathews: Oh, yes. She was a wonderful writer—and almost a neighbor, in Georgia.

Calvin: That's right. So there's a big connection to literature for me, if that answers your question.

Mathews: Well, it does. And for me the literary connections also hearken back a little. Your pieces clearly are cutting-edge, contemporary work—sometimes mistaken for digital compositions—but they also remind me of art photography from the Victorian or Pre-Raphaelite period. I'm thinking of Julia Margaret Cameron or Lewis Carroll in England, for example. Cameron often chose to depict literary subjects, and both of them arranged or posed their photographs for dramatic or narrative effects. Are you conscious of affirming or extending the work of those wonderful, early photographers?

Calvin: I *am* conscious of that tradition. I don't think about that in terms of my work, but it's a really fascinating idea. I like to arrange my photographs, instead of "finding" them. As I've said in an artist's statement, "I make photographs, I don't take them. I'm a maker of meaning, not an observer of it." People forget that photographers have always been arranging and posing their subjects. During the Civil War, for example, the photographers even moved bodies around, just to improve the composition. I think people like Julia Margaret Cameron and Lewis Carroll often had a story or an idea that they wanted to portray in a portrait. And so, yes, they arranged

and posed their subjects to *make* "a picture." I think even people like Henri Cartier-Bresson in the twentieth century would wait for the picture to *arrange itself.*

Mathews: Yes.

Calvin: People think Cartier-Bresson just took his pictures, but he didn't. He waited until everything arranged itself the way he wanted it before he tripped the shutter. This process still goes. It's always been a part of photography.

Golub: Jane, to continue the discussion about arranging images, I'm fascinated by the way you develop and play with spatial ambiguity in your photographs. You've remarked that your interest is in creating ambiguous space, yet ironically you often create visual barriers, like hanging dresses, that deny this ambiguity by restricting the viewer's access into the interior. Are you intentionally asserting a psychological dynamic by blocking the viewer's entrance, or are these strictly formal decisions?

Calvin: Wow, you guys ask very stimulating and provocative questions. [*Laughter.*] I hadn't thought about it as blocking the viewer's entrance into the space. It's interesting, though, because you can also think of the dress, or clothing, as blocking entrance to the body. So I think it works that way on a metaphorical level. It probably was never a formal decision—more of a psychological dynamic, I would say.

Mathews: That may have come into play with Victorian photography as well—exploring and transcending realism. In their photographic space, at its extreme, they produced wonderful collections of *real* photographs of fairies, for example. But they were marvelous posed photographs allowing the camera to lead us from realism into fantasy, into a space that we couldn't ordinarily see—making the *metaphors* real. I'm wondering if that's part of what you're trying to do, trying to get us to see spaces that we don't often perceive or think about.

Calvin: One of the traditions in photography is the idea or assumption—from the nineteenth century on—that the photograph represents reality. These days that idea seems quite flawed. My photographs engage ideas of artificiality and constructedness and evoke a play between veracity and the invented within their fragmented and layered space.

Mathews: Do you lead people into that space as a way of getting them to see this one better? How do your photographic spaces relate to the real world?

Calvin: My aim is to see this world in unfamiliar ways—or to help the viewer to see it that way—because I want the photographs to evoke *ideas* about our world. The ideas in the photographs are ideas that I get from reading or listening to the news or just thinking, and then trying to make images that reflect those ideas. I try to communicate my thoughts about issues indirectly, because I don't like dogmatic work, and I like to stimulate people, so they'll enjoy their own reactions and responses. The work doesn't answer questions about the world; I hope it raises them.

Golub: I've noticed that one of the areas you raise questions about relates to images and roles of women. You launched your career as a photographer in the early 1980s. But interestingly, your chronology matches the rise of the feminist art movement with Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago. (And, incidentally, Schapiro exhibited here at the Scarfone Hartley Galleries in 2004 and was the subject of a *Tampa Review* interview, the last issue, with work also featured on the cover.) Your visual narratives obviously touch various women's issues. But would you share how the feminist art movement influenced you, consciously or unconsciously, as a developing female artist?

Calvin: That's interesting—that my career parallels the rise of the feminist movement. So I was *of the time.* [*Laughter.*] I remember reading *The Feminine Mystique.* I read it late, but it certainly touched chords in my life. And when I was in school at the Art Institute, I think it was in the air. I read Linda Nochlin [an influential art historian] and others who were writing—or rewriting—art history. Some of the influence was unconscious. I think it had to be *unconscious* to work itself out as art.

Golub: That's been the source of a great deal of twentieth century art.

Calvin: Yeah. Because it's powerful. And I could put those powerful impulses into the art. That's a good place for them! [*Laughter.*]

Golub: Jane, as an art critic, I find that your work brings to mind many other contemporary artists as well, some of them similarly tapping the unconscious. At times, your use of text, for example, suggests Brice Marden's calligraphic strokes or Cy Twombly's random markings. Sim-

ilarly, your seductive hanging dresses combined with text hint, albeit distantly, of Lesley Dill, or in their monumentality, of Beverly Semmes. I'm curious about those contemporary artists, especially females, who are conscious or unconscious touchstones.

Calvin: Again, it's an intriguing question. The artists that you brought up are really interesting to me. Brice Marden's work, for example—I had never thought of it in relationship to my own, but I saw a body of his work that was based on Chinese calligraphy. It was before I had gone to China, so I wasn't interested in it for *that* reason; I was just very drawn to it. I think what I like is that the writing looks like *writing*, but it also looks like *painting*. I guess that's the real definition of calligraphy. I think that's really very appealing to me.

Cy Twombly's work I've always loved. When I first started trying to use text I became aware of just how difficult it is to integrate text into a visual image. It took me a long time to do that, and *he* does it so beautifully. I love the way his markings and words just flow through—float through—the paintings. They're integrated, and it's beautiful. So he's been an influence. I love the monumentality of Beverly Semmes's dresses. And I saw a large body of Lesley Dill's work at a Chicago show recently. Seeing it all together had an impact on me.

Jane Calvin in Distortion Mirror. Photo by Robert Gurbo, 2005.

Mathews: Your work also reminds me in some ways of one of our innovative Florida photographers, Jerry Uelsmann. He has explored what he refers to as "post-visualization." He manipulates photographic images in the darkroom, combining multiple sources into a final print. The resulting almost surreal images have some similarities to your work, but many striking differences (including the fact that he works almost entirely in black and white)—but although the combining of incongruous elements in the final print seems similar, your process of visualization seems to be almost opposite. Can you comment on your process of visualization in your photographs.

Calvin: I'm certainly familiar with Jerry Uelsmann's work. I remember looking at it when I first began photography. We all went into the darkroom and tried to *do* those things, squabbling over the enlargers. [*Laughter.*] I wasn't really good at that. But a black and white darkroom is a very exciting place to be, to manipulate the print under a safe light, and magical things happen . . . I don't know if I'm explaining it correctly . . .

Mathews: Adrienne is nodding her head. I wish you could see her. Smiling and nodding her head.

Calvin: Yes. But color printing is a different process, because there's no safe light—and you can't see anything. It's very mechanical, and I don't play there. Some people do, but very, very few. And, so, for me, the most exciting and interesting part of the process, since now I work in color, is in the studio. That's where my exploration of ideas takes place. I work very slowly, and, as I set up the pictures. Well, I say I *set up* a picture—I assemble objects and projections, images and texts. And I continually change things. I change what I have up; I move things around. I change the lighting. I change the camera angle and sometimes the position of the camera. And, throughout the whole process, which could take a week or a month or longer, I continually proof with Polaroid film. I do something initially and then I make a Polaroid, and I sit and stare at it for a very long time. And then I go back into the studio and make some changes and make another Polaroid—then sit and stare at that. I think mostly what I do is sit and stare at these things on the wall until I get the image the way I want it, and then I make one negative. And that's it. It's all on one negative. It looks like a lot of images, because I use projections.

Mathews: Well, in a sense you are using projectors and actual objects the way Uelsmann uses enlargers.

Calvin: That's right. But it's a different process because it involves three dimensions. That's also why I don't do it on a computer. The actual space is really important for the picture, I think.

Golub: Jane, you talked earlier about physicality—and how you love the physicality of objects—and you've commented previously about your attraction to the sculptural qualities of real objects. On occasion you've exhibited your phenomenal installations, but have you ever created sculpture?

Calvin: Well, no. That's another thing I wish I could do. [*Laughter*] Some of the things I do are *almost* sculpture, but they're sculpture for the camera to record. The reason is, I'm very bad at the *engineering* of sculpture. I have bought things, found things that I want to put together and make into a sculpture, but I can't hold them together and make them actually permanent. They fall apart. [*Laughter.*] I used to make Halloween costumes for my kids. They lasted for the three hours they were in school, and then they fell apart. Well, that's the problem with the sculpture. I really would love to be able to do it, but I don't think it's one of my skills.

Mathews: Can you tell us a little about the incredible, rich, vibrant, and subtle colors you achieve in your prints?

Calvin: I'm very good with lighting, and that's a big part of the color for me. The other technical aspects of my color are the film and the paper. I use the most saturated, high-contrast film and paper that I can get. Also, when I make the slides for my projections, I look for certain kinds of colors that I know will work well in the photos. But color seems to be innate for me. For a long time I did black and white photography, and I loved it—that was good discipline—but when I started doing color, it felt very natural. I think my use of color strengthens the ideas in my pictures. And I think black also helps to make the colors stronger.

Golub: Duchamp is another artist you've mentioned. I am interested in your response to his sculpture and what you observed as the transformation of actual objects into symbolic ones. Certainly he enjoyed a revival—especially in terms of conceptualism—during the period when you were a developing artist. When you describe your process of constructing installations in your pre-photography stage, the notion of "chance" seems to play a large part. Is Duchamp a touchstone for some of these processes you have mentioned?

Calvin: Yes, I think he and John Cage with their ideas of chance and randomness have played a big part in the construction of my pictures. I have all these images and slides in carousels, and I don't organize them in any linear way. I like when they just suddenly come up, and something *works*. I control some of it—but not how the slides come up or when. I think that stimulates art—makes it more open.

Golub: You've recently restated your broad direction as an artist, and I'm going to quote you. You said, "The images can be seen as my commentary on the political and social roles projected onto a society whose desires, manipulated by language and image, conflict with concerns of gender, sexuality, race and female identity." I'm assuming that images of a rag doll contrasted with sexually charged aggressive females plays into your overall schema. But would you clarify what you mean by the "conflict"? Are you referring to societal proscriptions?

Calvin: Yes. I am referring to them. Referring to society imposing constructed images, constructed roles of women, men, boys, girls, whites, blacks, etceteras. Since I'm a female, I'm more connected to images of female identity in this society. But my hope is that the ideas extend outward, to encompass more. I'm trying to bring up or expose the ways in which language and image have proscribed the roles and images of ourselves, to ourselves. That's why I use found text fragments, and found objects, because these things exist already in our society—I didn't make them—and so they refer back to the culture and the society in which they were made.

Golub: Are you ever concerned that by using female images, supercharged with sexuality, you might in some way, paradoxically, *amplify* societal proscriptions?

Calvin: Well, I think that was a problem a number of years ago. There was a time when it was not politically correct for women to use that kind of female imagery. I think that time has passed. I *hope* it's passed; because it's another proscription about what to do and what not to do, what to be able to look at and not to be able to look at. We shouldn't be threatened by these images. We should be able to see the satire, or to be able to see the pulp images I use in the context of their time. In this post-feminist era, images of female sexuality can be used as commentary on the roles projected onto both women and men in our society. They can expose the manipulation of images.