





# Picture Perfect

*Artist Gathie Falk replants her roots in a new old house.*

When I was a kid, I once lived in a house where you could sit in the kitchen and look right outside through the screen door. In a storm you could see the rain pelting down and the rhubarb just waving in the breeze."

Gathie Falk has always liked the idea of living in proximity to the earth—being able to take one step from doorway to garden. But after she left Manitoba for the coast in the 1940s, she found herself in Vancouver perched in houses designed high enough to straddle basements. Last year, in mid-life, the self-described "people artist" (others have called her a "homey eccentric") found her flatlander roots in a house she designed and built in East Vancouver.

Her new home, painted the delicious yellow of butter from the south of France, sits only inches above the ground. It is a wonderful welcoming two-storey box filled with sunlight, much-loved objects, music and, frequently, visiting friends.

Like the everyday objects Falk celebrates in her sculpture and paintings, the house does what it is supposed to do and looks good in the process. The fact that it hugs the ground has something to do with the artist's desire to save a well-established cherry tree in the backyard.

"Bob said no other house or yard has ever been built to accommodate the bottom of a cherry tree," says Falk, delighted. Bob Falk is her nephew, and his firm, F&N Contracting, built the house. According to Falk, Bob shook his head when he tore down the old house, rat-infested basement and all, and filled in and evened out the sloping 49.5-foot x 122-foot lot to create a level base for his aunt's 35-foot x 39-foot house and companion studio—all without disturbing the tree.

In Gathie Falk's past there was always a garden. The first cherry trees were in Hochfeld, a Mennonite village in southern Manitoba, where she lived as a preschooler. Her first formal geometric flower beds were those planned and planted by her hardworking single mother in Winnipeg. "Naturally all this stuff finds its way into my work in one way or another," she said in the Vancouver Art Gallery catalog for her retrospective in 1985. Now it has found its way into her own garden.

A wide lot that would allow her house to present a "friendly" broadside to passersby and a continuous *Continued on page 52.*

By Kerry McPhedran



Portrait of the painter with dog: "This is the house for when I'm old."

*The whole of the second floor has been turned into  
a light-filled storage space and gallery, in which Falk  
paints and gazes at the North Shore mountains.*



*The layout of the ground floor, where the living space is concentrated, is centered around the blue-gray piano and other much-loved furniture.*





line between garden and the ground-level floor were only two of Falk's key requirements for her house.

"Because this is going to be the house for later on when I'm old, all the living space has to be on the main floor." This meant that the entire second floor could be devoted to one splendid light-wrapped storage and gallery space overlooking the North Shore mountains. Falk paints watercolors here, and watches fireworks. "At night, it's fabulous," she says, noting that she recently slept here amid the mountains, sculptures and paintings while a friend convalesced in the first-floor bedroom.

The rectangular first floor has two main sections. The bedroom, bathroom and utility room with their own connecting hallways can be shut off from the second, larger section, where the white-walled living room, dining room, kitchen and office are open to one another.

Wall space was a must for the prolific artist whose huge paintings are often presented as a series. "I had a lovely 1928 house in Kitsilano, but the walls were all broken up with tiny windows. I had to set my paintings against windows and then there was no light."

She relishes wall space, but she also loves natural light. Her house has tall, floor-to-ceiling French doors and paned windows that wrap around the corners of rooms, leaving the nine-foot-high white walls free for a giant piece of *Night Sky*. This "pulsating darkness" was collectively inspired by Vancouver nights, Saint-Exupery's *Wind, Sand & Stars* and the "extraordinary blue" and the gold stars of the Arena Chapel in Padua.

Curiously, this new house does not seem new. Falk explains: "Build me an old house," I said to Bob." They discovered that the trick to creating the sense of scale and solidity of an older house, is to be *generous*. Generous in the size of window sills and surrounds, generous in the nine-foot-high ceilings and custom French doors. What is basically a box form has grace as a result. "People say they can't afford it, but I think they spend too much money on things like tile roofs and brick fronts. Who needs it? Instead, they should spend it on the moldings," says Falk.

"The words 'generous' and 'simple' were used very often," she says. "Especially 'simple'." Consider the stucco exterior. "The stucco man came along and said, 'Here are some stucco patterns you can choose. This is California Spanish, this is so-and-so and so-on.' I said, 'What's this patch up here?' He said, 'That's nothing.' I said, 'That's what I want!'"

*Generous and simple were the watchwords in designing the house. As a result, the box-like form has that feeling of solidity usually found in older homes.*

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## PICTURE PERFECT

And that is precisely what she got. Her wholehearted commitment to the project has paid off. By drawing out the geometric flower beds on the dirt and having the workers pour the aggregate courtyard around them, the flowers she loves so much bloom where she wants them to. Because she measured the distance between the kitchen counters and the island, there are no half steps to be taken by this "quick" cook. By mixing the paint for the light switches herself, she insured they would disappear against the green kitchen wall tiles. "I was on the road every day looking for stuff. It's the only way. You don't let anyone else do it."

Falk organized the ground level floorplan around her pale blue-gray piano and other well-loved pieces of furniture. As a result, everything fits. By making the opening to the second floor an extra three steps up from ground level, she can now move large paintings in and out. (In Kitsilano, she could not get her paintings out of the house until she built a large door onto the fire escape.) She felt that the professionally painted yellow window frames and doors really should have been white like the walls, and repainted them with the help of a friend. This means she no longer frowns slightly each time she looks at them.

More importantly, because she committed her time and energy to nothing but the house for four months and visited the site every day, Falk was there to recognize serendipity when she saw it. And an artist who creates *150 Hanging Cabbages* and performs *The Red Angel*, perched, red wings and red dress atop a red bureau, is a woman ready to recognize serendipity. When she saw the concrete brick chimney before the stucco went on, for example, she called a halt. "The tradesman did such a good job, I couldn't see any point in covering it with stucco." And when she first sketched the housefront, she drew in a peaked porch. But "when I saw the house without the porch, I said 'It's grand. It looks so good, so strong. It doesn't want a porch.'" If she had not been there, a porch would be.

She and Bob worked well together, discussing ideas as the house grew. "He made suggestions, I made the final decision."

Not that everything was easy. What holds the main floor together visually, and what kept Gathie Falk from coming unglued during the year and a half she spent building the house, is the floor, a splendid gray and white surface to do a palazzo proud. It is custom-made from maple squares, each the size of a record album and finished with the non-slip gleam of a high school gym.

"For the years that I was planning the house, the floor was a major item to me. So whenever I had a problem or I had to wait for something to happen and was beginning to get annoyed, I would think of the floor. I would *bask*, thinking of this beautiful gray and white floor. It kept me going."

The floor, like her garden and even the ordinary things such as eggs and teacups that occupy space in her private world, is loved and respected. These sentiments even extend to the six-inch beefy nail she insisted hold up the middle of a curtain rod because "I think that nail is good design. It's a great, functional thing." The triumph is that in spite of her collections of "things," the detail and color, there is no feeling of clutter. Everything belongs.

As the child of Russian immigrant parents during the Depression, Falk remembers "total poverty," but "there were always things. My mother took old things and made new things." Her mother covered cartons with wallpaper to make her a dresser, and Gathie braided the binder twine from which her mother made shoes.

Many "things," from Heinz Klassen's *Five Star Chicken*, resplendent above the Mennonite hymnals on the piano, to the graceful aluminum chandelier from artists Elizabeth Klassen and Tom Graff, are gifts from friends. The elegant frieze that rides the upper edges of the house was made with help from Klassen, as were the green and black painted canvas area rugs. In the front yard, two gray cement bricks labeled "Bob" and "Garry" are embedded at the base of cherry trees planted by Bob and his partner, Garry

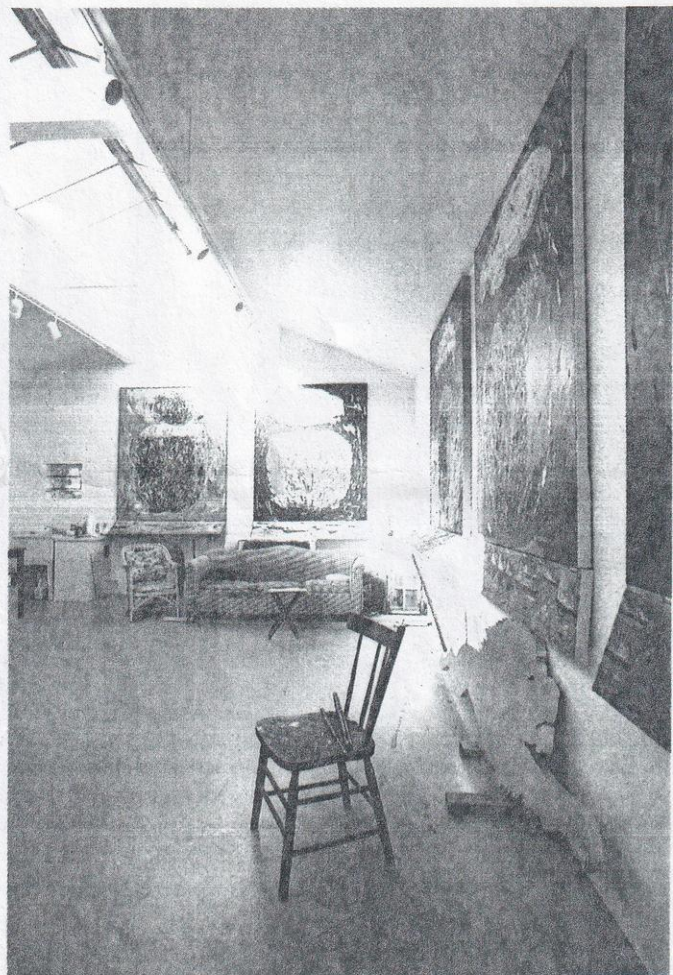
Nikolychuk. The names of nieces Susan and Carol are written in silver on the gateposts they gave Falk. "Elizabeth" commemorates a special plant. A confident cement frog, a gift from a new neighbor, bids welcome from the sidewalk. "I thought it would be stolen, but my neighbor says people here don't steal. And they don't."

Gathie Falk is "here" in this neighborhood because good friends live nearby. "I wanted to be within walking distance of Elizabeth and Tom." Happily the chosen location coincided with her budget.

The house itself has not yet been an inspiration for Falk's work, but only because her work in progress, the *Hedge and Cloud* series, was planned years ago in the Kitsilano house. "I have such a backlog of ideas. But eventually, yes, I suppose the house will be an inspiration."

In the meantime, she is learning the rhythm of her house. She has favorite places for different times of day, different lights. She loves to have breakfast in the spot where sunlight spills into her slender bedroom. The warm studio is a white and gray world of its own, where light filters through a skylight running the length of the roof peak. Back in the house, sometimes Lady, a toy poodle "cut like a dog," joins Falk for afternoon tea in the airy upstairs gallery. Before dinner, from the living room couch, she and her guests can watch both the sunset and the fireplace. After dinner, there is a shift to the office couch for watching TV in the winter, or outside to work in the garden among the young Lombardy poplars, tomatoes, raspberries and peaches in the summer.

Four grape vines are beginning to climb over the 12-foot-high arbor designed to shade alfresco tables on the south side of the house. The rhubarb patch is within sight of the back door. Gathie Falk is home. □



The need to have a lot of wall space was a prime consideration in designing the house.

# National Gallery honours Falk with show

By MICHAEL SCOTT

A major retrospective exhibition of work by Vancouver artist Gathie Falk will open Thursday at the National Gallery of Canada, in Ottawa, reinforcing Falk's reputation as one of the country's most influential artists.

"It's a great honour for Gathie to be recognized in this way, no doubt," said Andy Sylvester, the director of Equinox Gallery, Falk's longtime Vancouver dealer.

"The appeal of her work is enormous, and I think that comes from her persistent innovation, across many years."

The exhibition honouring Falk originated at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the spring of 2000, in collaboration with the National Gallery, and has subsequently toured to Oshawa, Halifax, Regina and now Ottawa.

Like some other Canadian women artists of her generation, among them Mary Pratt and Aganetha Dyck, Falk makes her art from the dross of daily life: the breakfast clutter, the laundry pile, the scullery sink. Falk is a true transcendentalist, presenting the most common of materials — a kitchen chair, say, or a pyramid of apples — as a stage for spiritual

immanence. Falk's work, which will be on view at the National Gallery in Ottawa until May 5, is best known for its gentle depictions of the objects of domestic life: apples, oranges, roses, kitchen chairs, tables, shoes, family pets, potted trees, lightbulbs, garments on hangers, sofas, simple frocks, ribbons, cabbages, tulips, blue skies and birthday cakes.

"She has laid unshakable claim to the realm of the everyday," says critic Robin Laurence in her catalogue essay on the artist.

There is a paradox of opposites in Falk's work that elevates it far beyond the tidy confines of polite parlour art. Among those pairings, as Laurence points out, are life and death, light and shadow, surface and substance, loveliness and ugliness, celebration and lamentation.

"It's extremely important that this West Coast person is being admired by people in eastern Canada," said Kathleen Bartels, the director of the Vancouver Art Gallery, who will attend the public opening of the exhibition. "Her work is something the whole country can be proud of."



Gathie Falk and one of her paintings exploring the essence of everyday objects.

Sun Visual Art Critic  
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# Galleries glow

By ANN ROSENBERG

**T**his is the season when lights sparkle on trees, fires dance in hearths and the holiday spirit hits hard. At the galleries you can enjoy the shows or treat yourself or someone you love.

Two exhibitions by internationally renowned artists should definitely be on your visit list.

At the Patrick Doheny Gallery (1181 West First, to Dec. 31) is Seattle artist Dale Chihuly's first Vancouver solo show. As Doheny says, "If beauty is truth, truth beauty, that's all one knows or needs to know to appreciate the fire that burns in Chihuly's soul."

As you enter the gallery, the radiance flowing from his colorful glass objects hits you like a sonic boom. The first time I saw a Chihuly piece — Blue Persian Set with Warm Red Lip Wraps — I actually gasped in reaction to it. You'll be stunned by the materials in this exhibition.

The show contains exquisite examples from several continuing series (baskets, soft cylinders, seaforms, Persians, Venetians and putti). Many objects reflect the artist's profound understanding of the Pacific Ocean — the flux of its tides, the riches it spills on the shore.

Be forewarned. These high-ticket items are for those with large pocketbooks and steady hands.

At the Canadian Crafts Museum (639 Hornby) we might as well have been transported back to 18th-century Versailles. We see still lifes composed of fur-

niture, tapestries and clothes.

The orchestrator of these visual feasts is London-based artist Kaffe Fassett — the man who put artful sweater-making and art-book design back on the world map. Sadly, the items in Kaffe Fassett's world tour exhibition are not for sale, but his books, tapestry and sweater-making kits are — and the museum shop features sweaters created to Fassett's specifications.

Upstairs, original wearables by three winners and seven runners-up in the Great Vancouver sweater design competition show what talented knitters can do. This exhibit, designed to complement Fassett's, runs until Jan. 31.

The recently renamed Douglas Udell Gallery (1558 West Sixth, to Dec. 12) has an exhibition of sculpture by Regina's Joe Fafard.

When you enter, you're faced down by a sculpture of a bull that looks like a drawing come to life. This ferocious creature is one of several in the show constructed from a bronze cagework that provides the lines and graphic details of a life-sized animal.

That Fafard is paying homage to Picasso's lively drawings of animals is clear, especially in Rita — a cow that, when observed from a certain angle, resembles one of the Spanish master's Don Quixote illustrations.

Those who love Fafard's more traditional bronzes will also find satisfaction here. The small sequence of figures of a cow giving birth is accurate and tender.

From the moment you enter 12 Midnite's Gunland show at Smash Gallery (160 West Cordova, to Dec. 23) you're in for a good time.



STEVE BOSCH

12 MIDNITE, son Harley and couple of gunslingers at Smash

You can write your own graffiti on a wall provided by 12 Midnite, the proprietor of Smash who was once a graffiti artist. And the legs-akimbo gunslinger that's this artist's signature (still found on walls and pavement around town) is also a major motif in this ambitious one-person show of large installations, neon-enlivened canvases and music.

And yes, folks, everything here is for sale — the big pop art works, where figures from Walt Disney and Dr. Zeuss grapple with political and economic themes, the newly produced music cassette and the T-shirts.

And so are the twisted bits of neon and other low-ticket items in Smash's delightful shop.

Other galleries to shop for art? No end to them — with original artwork at figures to suit most budgets. There will be low-ticket items even at galleries you wouldn't expect. In Diane Farris's Christmas sale, for example, prices start at \$50.

If you want to support an important artist-run centre and have something interesting to show for it, go to the Grunt Gallery today or Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m., or at the same time Dec. 12 and 13. Between 80 and 100 artists — including Ken Gerberick, Bill Rennie, Gerry Pethick and Stan Lake — contributed art for this

sale to support Grunt's program of exhibitions and performance.

Splendid new limited-edition prints by Gathie Falk and Gre Murdock will be premiered in New Editions, at the Equinox Gallery (2321 Granville, to Dec. 31). The show also includes Jim Dine's hand-tinted woodblock bathrobes and Roy Lichtenstein's huge rendition of the Oval Room. Again, an opportunity to buy expensive works by Canadian and international artists of note.

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# THE HEAD THAT'S THERE IN THE THING

## A Conversation with Gathie Falk

In an artist's statement for a 1987 exhibition called *Soft Chairs* at the 49th Parallel in New York, Gathie Falk neatly summarized 25 years of art-making through what she called her "Cinderella Complex." She described it as a process that involved "honouring the ordinary, mundane and crass things in everyone's life and consequently changing them into the extraordinary, the revered." The transformations she has effected have been without parallel in Canadian art: she has taken quotidian objects and taken-for-granted spaces and raised them to a level where we are forced to reconsider not only their relationship to us but even their essential nature. Falk's is a perplexing and delightful body of work in which you can take pleasure in never quite knowing where you are or how you should react. But it's also a world which insinuates more troubling colourations. I suppose you could describe her art as a quirky, well-lighted place.

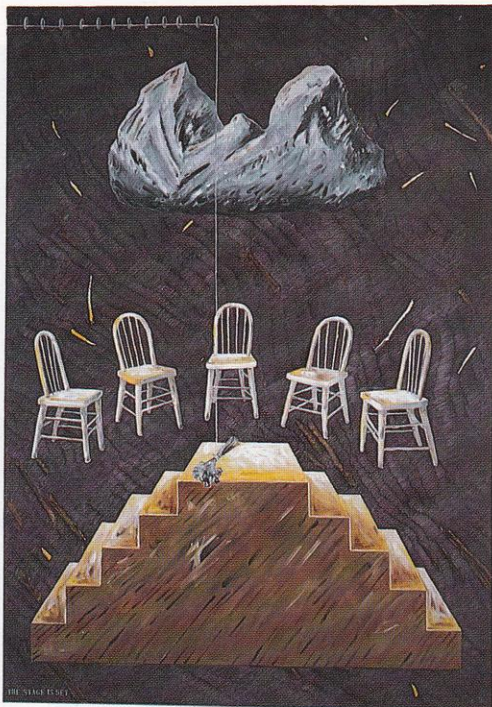
She has looked up at the sky (*Night Sky* series), down to her feet (*Cement Sidewalks*) and out to the ocean (*Pieces of Water*), all of which perspectives have realized bodies of work which are able to concentrate—sometimes in a single painting—commonplace observation, a tinge of surrealism and a high level of painterliness. She can make cement seem like blushing skin (*Cement with Grass #1*, 1982); she can orchestrate vaulted nocturnal sky-scapes of remarkable beauty; or she can compose all-over paintings (*Pieces of Water* series) which just acknowledge Monet's *Waterlilies* before they quickly go off on their own personal direction. And always, the individual, unusual touch; in her sidewalk series the way an abstract shadow falls across a section of concrete makes it seem as if de Chirico were a sidewalk mason.

Certainly she has always been her own painter, even from her first exhibition at the Canvas Shack in Vancouver in 1965. Her chair paintings are so wonderfully eccentric they could only be personal—huge, cushiony chairs holding everything from fish to flowers, from black dresses to strings of Christmas lights. More recently in the *Hedge and Cloud* paintings, the

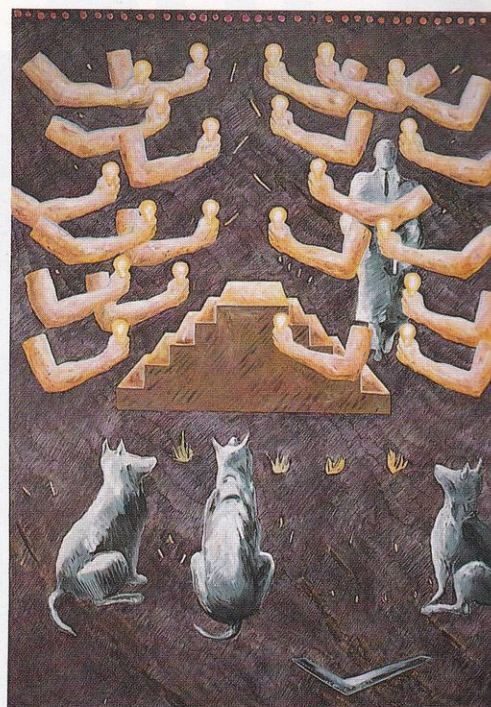
Introduction by Robert Enright



*Clean Cuts #1*, 1993, oil on canvas, 24 3/4" x 24 3/4". Photograph courtesy Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.



*Development of the Plot III,*  
Panel 1 of 9, 1992,  
oil on canvas, 90" x 63".



*Development of the Plot III,*  
Panel 5 of 9, 1992,  
oil on canvas, 90" x 63".

natural phenomena which give the series its name float and vibrate uneasily above ships that have been painted on a ledge. In her series *Venice Sinks with Post Cards from Marco Polo*, Falk has painted a virtuoso body of work that has about it a touch of elegy, as well as fierce clarity unequalled in her work to date.

Falk is arguably the most versatile artist in the country and has made significant contributions in a wide range of media—from painting to ceramics, from installation to performance. Her early performance pieces in Vancouver with Tom Graff were pioneering works; her clay sculptures of everything from fruit to men's shoes are in Canada's major public collections, and her installations, like *My Dog's Bones* (1985) and *Herd of Horses* (1974–75), deserve their reputation as classics. If there's a more various and imaginative artist in Canada than Gathie Falk, I'd be surprised.

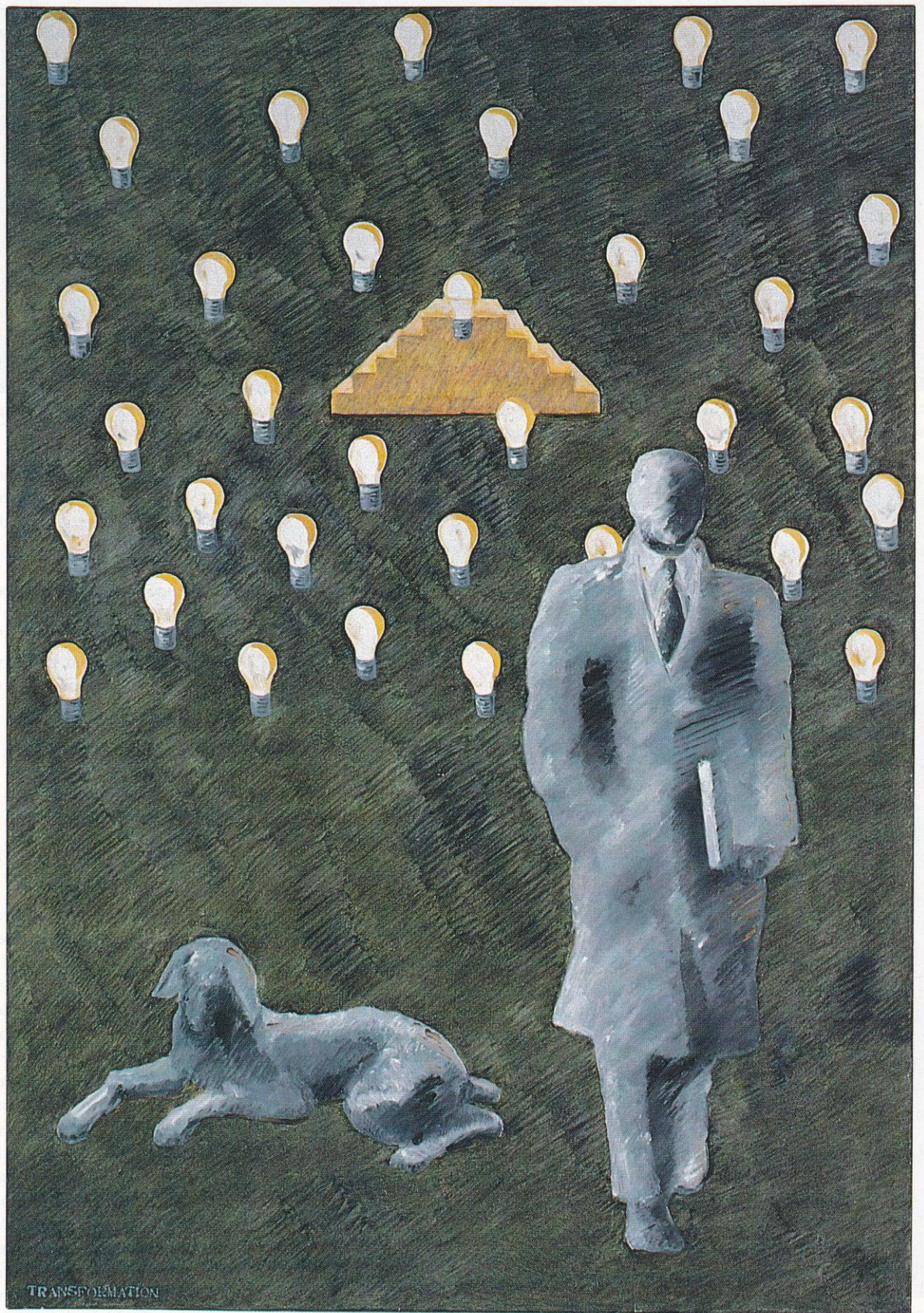
Falk has a non-hierarchical view of art forms and practice. Making art for her has always been a question of discovering which medium best realizes the idea and what kind of art can best incorporate the objects on which she's focussed her attention. She has painted cabbages and has used them as sculptural objects suspended from the ceiling. For an 11-year period beginning in 1966, she did no painting except to colour the ceramic pieces she was producing; she has made paintings with three-dimensional ledges and twig supports. Much of the time, and I intend this as a recognition of her apparently limitless ingenuity, she has been an artist in search of a medium. Her imagination seems to conceive of things through a kind of formal synaesthesia. "Sculptural objects like bushes and trees and hedges," she has remarked, "have a powerful effect on me," and she describes the flat surface of a painting in a way that makes clear her objectified conception of it: "The chair and its shadow," she observes, "working together like one great hinged object."

Falk likes art when it records the point of contact between two or more elements, when one thing enters into the space

of another and in the process changes our view of both things. Often in her work something placed on or growing up from the ground will meet something hanging down from the ceiling—Christmas trees and dog bones, a dresser and cabbages, cabbages and ribbons, rose trees and light bulbs, disembodied arms clutching light bulbs in a disquieting space also populated by dogs, kitchen chairs and mysterious walking men. But despite the sometimes unsettling relationships the work suggests between objects, Falk's world is ultimately one of calming connections—the blue shadows cast from white kitchen chairs lined up in neat rows and festooned with hand-picked flowers are a network of sustained linkages as elaborate in its intricate architecture as a Piranesi. But it's free of his labyrinthine claustrophobia. The artist talks about things "floating around in her image bank," a characteristically Falkian way of describing the imagination. What's clear is that the float is not a free fall; it's a buoyant world where things are encouraged to bump into one another, to nudge things into new orientations, to slip into one another's orbit. So we shouldn't be surprised that one of Gathie Falk's most recent bodies of work is a series of globes. She has pulled the earth out of the galaxy and made it just another element in her own personal, moving and fascinating cosmology.

The following interview was recorded in late February of this year.

**GATHIE FALK:** I always drew with crayons and from the age of five I definitely painted with water-colours. But it was like most children do, nothing spectacular at all. I just liked to do it very much, so much so that when I was about ten or eleven I saw an ad in the paper offering correspondence lessons in art, I discussed the possibility with my family. They thought it was a great idea but they didn't have whatever small amount it was that it cost.



*Development of the Plot III,  
Panel 8 of 9, 1992,  
oil on canvas, 90" x 63".*

*BORDER CROSSINGS: So nothing came of your art interests at the time?*

GF: No, nothing came of it. Teachers tended to push me by putting my work on the bottom of the blackboard, along the railing where the erasers were. They would stick it up there and say, look what you've been doing instead of studying, which was both a compliment and an embarrassment.

Then when I was about 13 I was chosen as one of the first students from our school to be sent to the Winnipeg Art Gallery for Saturday morning classes. They were held in the Civic Centre. It was full of very dark paintings and part of it was a museum with stuffed animals in great glass cases. I remember there were odd rooms and we all sat on pillows on the floor. I went for several years but there wasn't always money for the bus fare. By that time I was into realism, as teenagers usually are. Anything that wasn't real and wasn't realistically portrayed wasn't right. I would be drawing something like a dead soldier with somebody hovering over him or I would have drawn women in evening clothes.

BC: *The connection between those two subjects isn't immediately obvious to me.*

GF: Well, this was war time and my brothers were in the army and I was a bit of a renegade. You see, I had read a great deal about Hitler in magazines, especially one article in an *Esquire* magazine in the '30s. I was convinced that Hitler was who he was, although the people around me didn't believe that. They thought Germans were good and Hitler was good. I had arguments with my friends about that.

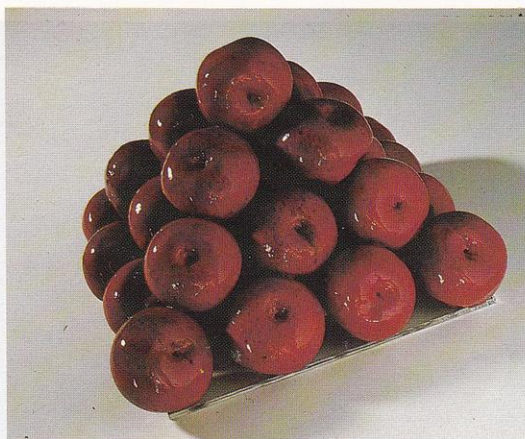
BC: *What were you doing reading an Esquire magazine at that age?*

GF: It was the only magazine in the house. I read absolutely everything that came my way. I loved the funny papers and I went through all the romances in the books and the magazines. Then I would read the cartoons, and finally I would get to the essays and read those.

BC: *Were you an eccentric child?*

GF: I suppose I must have been that way. I never walked anywhere without an open book in front of me. I would have to look up from my book when I crossed the street.

BC: *This wasn't a self-conscious identity that you put on like a suit of clothes? This was your real, inquisitive self?*



*30 Red Apples, 1969, ceramic and glaze, 1' x 1' x 9".*

GF: Yes. Reading really was the most wonderful thing in the world to me. More enjoyable than art, for sure. There was a great deal of art but with reading there were whole worlds to experience.

BC: *Why didn't you want to become a writer, then?*

GF: I did. I just couldn't figure out the plots.

BC: *So you actually tried to write stories?*

GF: I didn't write much but I did start six stories. Several teachers

suggested to me in high school that I should write, but I always said that I didn't know what to write about.

BC: *You certainly knew what to think about when it came to art. I remember reading that you saw a Gauguin painting with a red dog in it and because you knew dogs weren't red you rather summarily decided to write off art for a while.*

GF: The odd time at school we had what were called art appreciation lessons. I remember this picture with the red dog. In my mind I thought, this is nonsense. And I also didn't like the flatness of the paint. I was very old-fashioned in my views. I still did my drawings at home but it made me not go to Saturday class anymore. By that time I was into pastels.

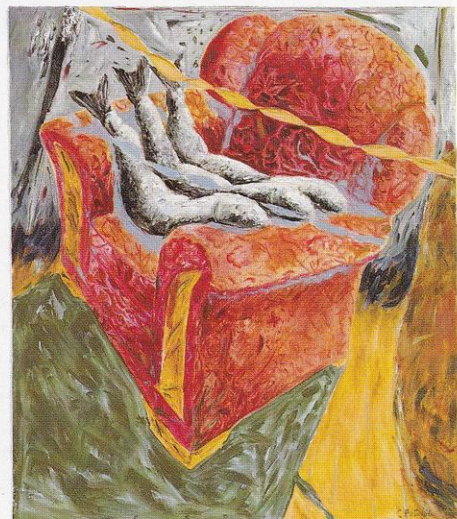
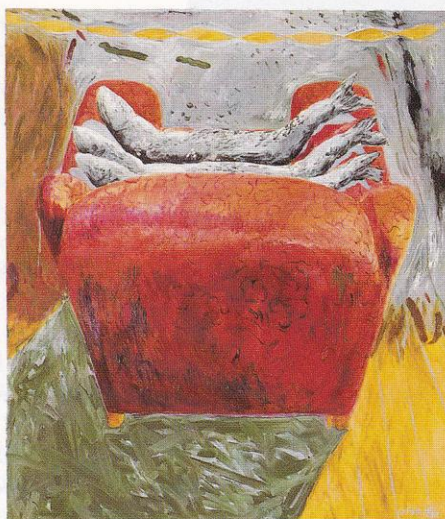
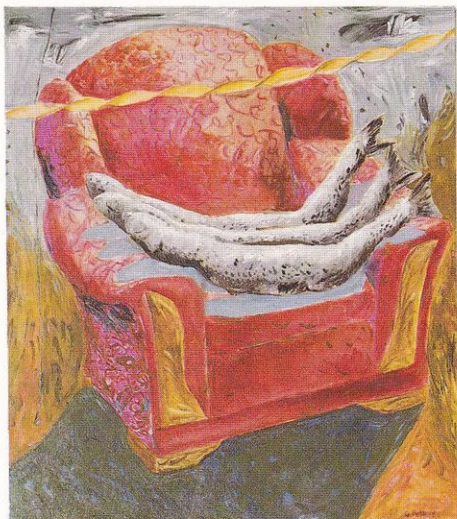
BC: *So you were fairly headstrong?*

GF: Very. I usually did what I wanted to do.

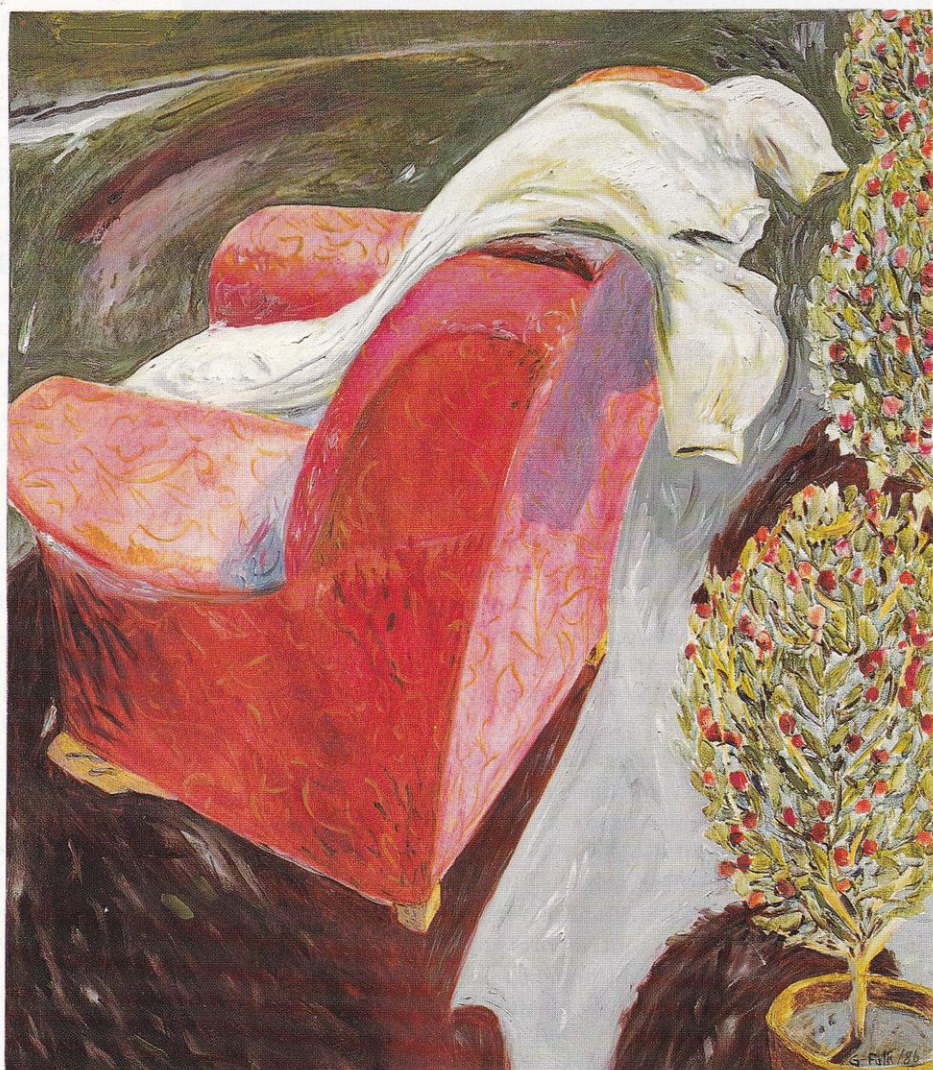
BC: *Would that independence have come out of the circumstances of your childhood?*

GF: I think probably a good deal of it would have been because there was no father's hand to stay me, and I was often put into the position of being the mother. My brothers were away a good deal of the time. My oldest brother, Jack, had gone to the west coast and my younger brother was away working in various places. If we were out of wood, for instance, I would go down and ask for it. And I would have a note from "my mother" written by me. I was put in that position over and over again. So in some ways I had to be very adult, and I probably found that I could do things. My father died when I was eight months old and I have no memory of him. All the other children had fathers. And fathers were everywhere. In the books everybody had fathers. And my mother always used to say, "You're just like your father," not necessarily meaning it as a

*There's a  
time for being  
a child and  
being unsure  
and then  
there's a time  
when you're  
certain that  
what you're  
doing is good.*



*Soft Chair with Fish, "Soft Chair Series," 1987, oil on canvas, each panel 5' x 4'.*



*Soft Chair with White Dress,  
"Soft Chair Series," 1987,  
oil on canvas, 5' x 4'.*

compliment. So I felt very close to mine and missed him dreadfully. Dreadfully.

BC: *Was your mother quite a strong woman as well?*

GF: Yes. She generally did what she wanted to. But can you imagine coming to Canada and not speaking a word of English, and no one in your surroundings speaking a word of it, either? My mother spoke only German. We children learned English as soon as we got to school and had no trouble with it at all. But my mother and all the parents generally didn't speak English. She had lived a life of pride in Russia with her husband and his achievements. He had been an excellent businessman and a fine musician. He played the violin, sang and had choirs. He apparently drew people to him and so it was very hard for my mother because in some senses she had no status in Canadian society. A widow had no status anywhere at that time. It was a heavy life. My mother married again and we weren't allowed to talk about it, but everyone knew and we knew they were talking about it. You see, she didn't live with her husband and that was the terrible secret that we had to keep. She wasn't even divorced, she just left her husband and that was a very wicked thing to do. She refused to go back, although she was strongly urged by the government agencies and also by the church. But she wouldn't do it.

BC: *Were you aware as a child that things were difficult?*

GF: Oh yes. But not everything was difficult. My mother made lovely toys for us and she made very good food. She also made beautiful clothes. She was very proud in the appearance of things and I always wore clothes as nice as anyone's. I was always pretty fancy.

BC: *You've said that one of your first memories was of carrying a blue box and placing it near a whitewashed stove. You also talk about red watermelons. I get a strong sense you were aware of living in a colourful prairie world, a world that most people wouldn't think of as having that kind of intensity.*

GF: I suppose so. I have very good memories of colours. The yellow straw that went into the stove; the red cherries I picked off the trees.

BC: *Then in the early '60s you see Gauguin again and this time he becomes a provocation to get you into art, rather than have you abandon it?*

GF: Isn't that amazing? It was such a leap. I was a great art-gallery-goer all the time and there just wasn't very much contemporary or modern work around. But suddenly I had this wonderful recognition about the quality of Gauguin's work.

BC: *So what happened in the period between the rejection of the red dog and the complete embrace of Gauguin? What allowed the leap?*

GF: Not a great deal where art was concerned, because I was terrifically busy those years. I started earning my own living at 16 and taking music and singing lessons. I took school by correspondence in the evening and worked all day in a factory. And there were church functions. There was no art around that I remember, except for what I saw on my excursions to the Vancouver Art Gallery. I would go whenever I had a free afternoon. But I don't remember anything that would have triggered this leap. I remember the old Eaton's building in Vancouver. It had a room way back somewhere which I discovered. It was always empty but it had bookshelves lined with books and old-fashioned couches all over the place. I would get out these art books and look at them. In Eaton's, can you imagine? It's like something from a dream.

BC: *By 1962 you were in night school? I gather there wasn't a whole bunch of time to give to considerations of art.*

GF: No, never. There would be holidays. If we went to the park on Sunday afternoons I would sometimes take drawing materials. Making art was a great urge from the inside, but there wasn't any time to do it. Music was a great urge for me too, but it seemed easier to get access to it. Of course, I also did art. I remember wanting to show it to someone who could give me a critique, so I took it to Eaton's.

BC: *Eaton's played a fairly large role in your early aesthetic experience?*

GF: Very. I took it to the art department and discussed it with the man behind the counter. He accused me of having painted a photograph, which was not only very embarrassing, but very degrading. I had to leave with my tail between my legs. Another time I was bent on talking to somebody from the art school. It happened to be in the summer and there was no one there, except for a secretary. I said I wanted to talk to an art teacher and she gave me an address way off in an area of Vancouver I had never been to. Even though I tried all afternoon, I never found it. So I had some determination.

BC: *When did you decide that music was less important and that you wanted to make art?*

GF: I discovered I could never be a performer because I got too nervous. I think that may have had a good deal to do with it.

BC: *Were you a good musician?*

GF: I played and sang with emotion. I'm quite musical but I didn't ever get very far in technique. So there you have it. The fact that I could do the whole thing myself also had something to do with my turning from music to art. It suited my temperament perfectly.

BC: *What was the nature of the work that you started to do?*

*I have  
never been  
a retiring,  
delicate flower.  
I wanted  
fiercely to be  
a performer  
and to be out  
there singing  
and dancing.*

GF: Well, there were the inevitable still lifes and things like that. A good deal of the painting was based on realism.

BC: Some of your early work was also fairly expressionistic in tone.

GF: Yes. I think that I am inherently an expressionist. I'm more of a European expressionist—Russian or Swedish.

BC: Do you mean that temperamentally you're predisposed towards the work, less through art history than by way of sensibility? How aware were you of art history?

GF: I was at the university taking art history in the '50s, you know. I was a student for such a long time. I was never sure that my work was good enough but then in 1962 there was a little turning point. I could just tell. There's a time for being a child and being unsure and then there's a time when you're certain that what you're doing is good.

BC: You taught for a long time and then decided in 1965 to stop. What made you to do that?

GF: Two years earlier one of the teachers had come into the staff room and said, "Guess what I'm going to do? I'm going to take out my teacher's pension fund and I'm going to go to Europe." And being, this light bulb went on. But I had just bought a house and a new car. So it took two years and then I took out my pension fund and went to Europe for the summer. I had my first exhibition in 1969 at the Canvas Shack of all the work I had done in the previous years and I never looked back.

BC: What was the work like in that first show?

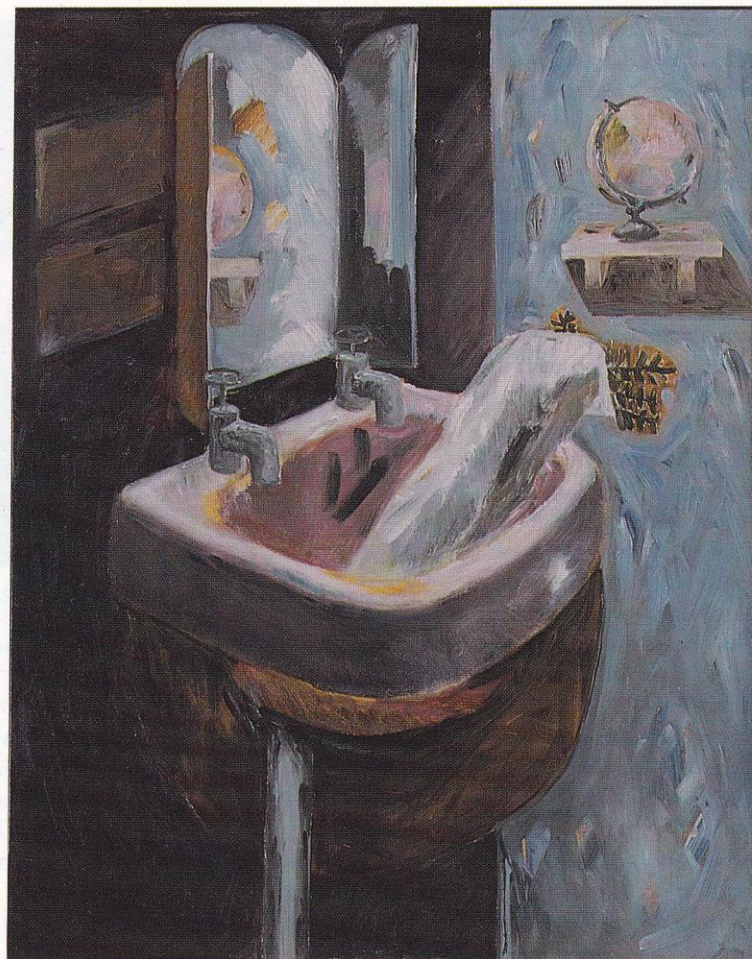
GF: It was thick, juicy painting. One painting had a small round table with two figures with very dead faces sitting at it. I didn't like to make faces. I liked to abstract them—to make them strong and not just flat—which was very difficult to do. I worked very hard at those faces. In the same painting there's this great hovering waitress with rather mad green eyes. To me she was a servant and a mother as well as a person who had power. She had a rather poignant smile. So all that emotion came out. Now, I didn't actually intend it that way. Things happen and I recognize them. If they're wrong I'll change them. But if I recognize it as something that I want, then I'll leave it the way it is.

BC: The painting you're talking about looks like it comes out of a tradition running from Kirchner to Nolde. Certainly it seems to come out of European painting.

GF: I was a great admirer of Nolde and I like Kirchner and all those guys. I knew about those painters at that time, but I don't think I was copying them. I did my own paintings.

BC: You've mentioned religion a couple of times. Was your painting informed by your experience as a Christian?

GF: Oh yes. I had other paintings which probably aren't around any



*Venice Sinks with Postcards from Marco Polo #11, 1990, oil on canvas, 5' x 4'6".*

more that were about my religion. But I always found that they were misinterpreted. They were taken for erotic paintings. It was positively the opposite of what I wanted. I figured this wasn't the way to do things because the message wasn't coming across, so I decided not to paint religious paintings or to put any messages in them.

BC: In *Crucifixion* I there are female torsos drifting around the upper regions of the painting. Do you think that's the basis of an erotic reading?

GF: Well, it is very pink.

BC: I realize you were a practising Christian but what was the personal compulsion that would have made the crucifixion a subject matter you would have wanted to paint in 1966?

GF: At that time I didn't have visual ideas. If I had a visual idea I couldn't delve into it and do it from various angles. Therefore, I tended to do the things that were around me, and sometimes things that were accepted as being worthy topics. The crucifixion was worthy. There's another one you might find intriguing in which almost the whole painting is a Christmas tree with little crucifixion ornaments on it.

BC: Your description makes it sound as if it would be consistent with much of the work you've done since. Did you have any sense that these works were already beginning to anticipate the kind of painter you would become? Or do you see them as being more developmental and less centred now?

GF: The ones that are left are paintings in their own right and I find them as telling as ever. I don't paint that way now because I think I'm always experimenting. When people say *experimental art* they mean you have to use different materials. I find that's not right because every time I have a new subject I'm experimenting with a new way of expressing it. The paint may be thinner or thicker, it may be thin and thick; I may be scraping or banging or wiping the paint, but there's always some experimenting going on.

BC: I think you're generally regarded as one of the most innovative artists of your generation in Canada. You have been able to shift radically throughout your career. You've made ceramic art and you've done performance and you've never locked yourself into a single thing. It's interesting to hear you say that even within the genre of painting you perceive a fair amount of flexibility. What is it in your character that's allowed you to shift so easily?

GF: Simply the desire to. There's the thing in the head that's there, the shapes of things that have to be made, and then you look for ways of making them. Sometimes you have to turn to wood or clay to do it.

BC: The idea generates its own form?

GF: Absolutely. Every time, every idea.

BC: Is that how art comes to you? As an idea and not as an image?

GF: The idea is an image but it's not a total image. It's just that at the beginning it's usually a little germ which you recognize as a good germ. It's got potential and you work on it until it achieves a dimension you can use. Then you still have to find ways of doing it.

BC: What was your attraction to ceramics?

GF: That was rather basic. It had nothing to do with my mind. It's just that I had more or less done all the drawing and painting courses at the university and there was nothing left to take. Also I had seen some very nice pottery



*Red Angel*, first performed at the Vancouver Art Gallery, 1972. Photograph Chick Rice, 1983.

downtown and didn't know how to make it. To my great delight and everlasting gratitude it happened that Glenn Lewis—who had just come back from St. Ives in England—was teaching ceramics. He had taken all his training with Bernard Leach and he had also worked with John Reeves for some years. He was enthusiastic. I took three years with him.

BC: So it was an attractive personality more than

a higher calling to work with clay that engaged you?

GF: I just wanted to make some pots. I had no idea all my ideas would change into three dimensions. It seems the ambition of everyone who goes into a pottery course is to make pots for Christmas to give to their friends. But this was greatly frowned upon by Glenn Lewis. The first efforts were thrown away. You had to be very serious about pottery in our class.

BC: But you made such whimsical pottery.

GF: Well, I made perfectly good ordinary pottery, then I made pot pottery and then I made some sculptures. And by the second year my painting ideas were changing into sculptural ideas. So for many years I made sculpture and painted it.

BC: You actually pulled the image off the canvas and made three-dimensional objects? Was that a difficult transition to make?

GF: There was no difficulty at all. It happened in my head without any volition on my part.

BC: You give the impression of being at the whim of the medium or the idea. Do you sense that you're almost a medium for the medium?

GF: At that time, perhaps. I'd get too many ideas and I'd have to cull and hone them. And then there was performance art which meant conceptualizing sound and ideas that I had never seen or heard before into an artwork.

BC: But you seemed to take to the form like a duck to water during those *Intermedia workshops* given by Deborah Hay in 1968.

GF: Yes.

BC: Were you just a performance artist waiting to find a context in which you could make your work? What was it that allowed you to adapt so effortlessly and so successfully to performance art?

GF: After I recognized what it was that Deborah was about, I could simply work it out in my brain. I could see mentally what would happen if I did this and what would be wrong if I did that.

BC: *The big shift obviously from painting to performance is that the latter is based in time and not in space.*

GF: Yes, but there is a space too. There is a much larger space and you've got to make things happen in it in all these different ways.

BC: *Didn't you have any reservations at all about leaving painting and ceramic work behind?*

GF: Well, I didn't. I left painting but I didn't leave sculpture. Also from 1966 to 1977 I did no painting at all except on my sculptures. People who loved my older paintings would say to me, "Aren't you ever going to paint again?" And I would say, "Yes I will, I just don't know when." So there was always a sense that I could do it later.

BC: *Let me ask you about the context in which you were working as a performance artist. Was the atmosphere in Vancouver perfectly conducive for you to run risks in what was, by and large, a new art form?*

GF: Yes. Intermedia helped immensely because there were bodies who were willing to do what you asked them to do in order to be in a concert at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

BC: *And were they shameless or crazy enough that they would do whatever strange things that were asked of them?*

GF: Most of them were rather delighted. But you couldn't always depend on them to be on time for rehearsals. It finally caused me so much grief that I gave it up. But at the beginning there were always more than enough bodies and there were some dance companies who were willing to participate because they enjoyed it so much. There were artists who didn't really want to do their own work and so they had to be in other people's work. If you were in the art community you were there.

BC: *I've been looking at the documentation of some of your performances, like Red Angel, which was done in 1972. It has a very strong pictorial quality about it, with a very pure sense of colour and very formal organization. I wonder if you brought lessons from painting to performance.*

GF: Oh, absolutely. It was just another way of making a wonderful painting. It was a chance to make something very beautiful and something very mundane at the same time.

BC: *So tell me what happened in Red Angel.*

GF: There's a tableau at the beginning: a woman in a white satin dress, all laced down the front, with great big angel's wings, sits in silhouette on a red buffet with a mirrored back. In front of her are five grey tables and on each

grey table there is a red turntable. On each turntable there's a dark red apple and a parrot sitting on top of the apple. And when the piece begins, the first parrot starts going round and round and singing, "Row, row, row your boat," and the second one starts singing, "Row, row, row your boat"; and the third, fourth and fifth do the same, and then I was the sixth parrot singing, "Row, row, row your boat" on the buffet. We had all faced in the same direction to start with and when we were finished I was still facing in the original direction, but the parrots were all facing in different directions. Then I stop, slowly stand up in my angel's wings, put my hands to the back of my neck and unbutton the top button and take off this white satin dress. Below it is a grey satin dress with short sleeves, and I step out of it, put it over my arm and stand there with the angel wings on. Then you hear a thundering and a rumbling and someone wheels in an old-fashioned washing machine. She has soap and a stool. She comes over to me and takes my white satin dress, goes over to the washing machine, throws soap in and starts the washer. It goes round and round and round. Then she wrings it out and takes the dress away with the soap and the stool. I stand there the whole time with the angel wings and I get back in the same position as I was in before, barefooted. And the first parrot starts singing, "Row, row, row your boat," the second one does the same, and so on until they've all sung.

BC: *Where did the initial idea come from?*

GF: Well, I found this antique white satin dress at a sale and something had to be done with it. I have always had a parrot in my life. I got a plastic parrot when I was about four or five and it went through my life until my 30s. Then I started collecting several other plastic parrots from stores. Eventually, I made red apples and then I put a red apple on top of a turntable and put the parrot on top. But that was years before I made this piece. Then I turned on the turntable and it went round and round. So this image was there—all the elements just had to be combined. The grey dress I got from a friend, Tom Graff. He had bought it for performance art and he lent it to me. The buffet I had used in 1968 in my living-room environment at the Douglas Gallery. I had painted it a candy apple red. So it was in the house ready to be used for the next living-room environment.

BC: *So in a sense you collaged this performance piece together from ideas and objects that had existed earlier in time?*

GF: Everything is always done that way. All art is made that way.

BC: *You never forced it, though. These things always coalesced in their own time for you?*

GF: Well, yes. How can it be in any other time?

BC: *What was it about Tom Graff—who became a performance collaborator with you—that was so appealing?*

***Every time I  
have a new  
subject I'm  
experimenting  
with a new  
way of  
expressing it.***

GF: Well, he was very enthusiastic and had great talent. He was interested in making backdrops or sculpture to be used in a performance. I had been using what was around me and he was interested in making something to use, which was actually like making a sculpture. He made the clouds and I made the turntables. He had more of a theatre background, whereas I had more of a visual art background. He also had a very good singing voice and that brought in the dimension of music.

BC: Did you get to like the theatrical side of it more? Was there a point where you began to like the fact that you were a performer?

GF: I have never really been a retiring, delicate flower. I wanted fiercely to be a performer and to be out there singing and dancing. But I was always overcome by my nerves. There was always a heavy load because you were totally responsible. This was like having written a play and then playing the parts, making the costumes, doing the stage and all the rest of it. There was too much work, I must say. But I did like the applause and there was a good bit of applause. But not always. There were places where the applause was pretty thin. You could be very boring if you weren't careful and I might have been boring.

BC: Winnipeg was fairly responsive, wasn't it?

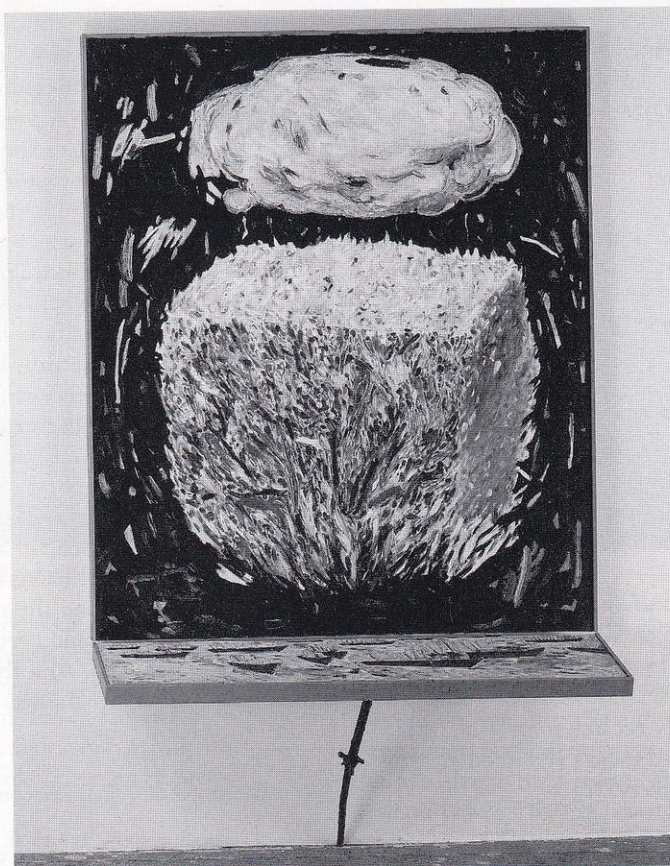
GF: Yes, they were very responsive, although I have to admit that afterwards there were questions like, "Why didn't you just sing it? You're such a good singer, why ruin it?"

BC: In a four-year period ending around 1972 you did 15 performance pieces. Then for the next five years, you performed them throughout Canada. Was that a strange displacement for you? You made no new pieces and yet life continued on.

GF: I suppose I refused to make any more because it was such difficult work. If I got any new ideas I would just knock them on the head. I would consciously say to myself, "You're not resolving that."

BC: What made you stop performing, then, after five years?

GF: There was lots of other work. Those were brief times in between when I did the performances. Most of the time I would do one or two pieces. Only occasionally—as in Ottawa in 1977—did I do a



*There Are Fifteen Ships in English Bay, "Hedge and Cloud Series," 1989, oil and mixed media, 84" x 60".*

whole range of performances. It was for an exhibition of seven Canadian women artists and I was one of them. I was asked to do two performances in connection with the exhibition, one during the afternoon and one in the evening. Besides several of my friends, I was given the whole staff to pick from.

BC: It never became easy for you, I gather?

GF: Every time you did it you had to train new people. It couldn't possibly be easy and you had to look after every niggling little thing. You know, you had to have three hair pins. Of course my friends helped. I can't possibly say that I did all this by myself, but I had to make sure that it was being done. I was responsible that everyone did everything at the right time.

BC: For someone who decided early on that she loved the solitariness of painting, you chose an art form in which you were

highly dependent upon other people. Is there some kind of masochist hiding in you which makes you want to do things that will cause you anxiety?

GF: Well, we did it until I recognized it was not the life for me. Actually, when it came to my retrospective in 1985, Tom said, "You really should put these performances on video tape and use them for the show." I knew that would be an enormous job. That's what it ended up being but we did it. We couldn't document all of them because some didn't work as videos. We just couldn't pin down the essentials, even though we tried.

BC: Are you proud now of those 15 pieces you did over that four-year period?

GF: Yes, definitely.

BC: Do you recognize that you were a pioneer in doing that work?

GF: I've been told so many times.

BC: But you didn't have a conscious sense of being in the vanguard at the time?

GF: No, I didn't because it had been done in New York. I knew it hadn't been done in Vancouver but I didn't know if it existed in Toronto and other places in Canada.

BC: *I think more than any other artist you have been able to take everyday ideas and objects, and transform them into something unusual and important.*

GF: I recognized that only after I did it. But that wasn't what I was recognizing when the image was in the frame. I wasn't aware that I was making something special out of something ordinary. What I recognized was that here was something that would be very, very good if I made it. I realized it would be wonderful made the way I thought about it in my mind. Later I was aware that a whole lot of ordinary stuff had been made special.

BC: *In Winnipeg Aganetha Dyck is another artist who has systematically retrieved unimportant things. Hers has partially been the response of a feminist in a world that is male and hierarchical. Was there any political agenda that was creeping into your art-making at the time?*

GF: No. Apart from the crucifixion paintings, I always thought only about the art.

BC: *It's interesting that for someone who didn't have subject matter, you were able finally to find your subject in the simple things around you. It seems obvious now in looking back, but at the time it may not have been that obvious.*

GF: Well, it's the same thing as doing performance art. You see, you take a bunch of numbers, you add a song that you've always known and that everybody will recognize, then you add a dress or two and you build and build and build until these things work together. That has always been the way I've worked. It's just like being a musician or a composer. He gets a little tiny idea—five notes maybe—and works with that. He makes it larger; he repeats it; he turns it upside down; he adds this and that and so on. Maybe it's because of my training and background. I actually took harmony and counterpoint and all that stuff. Maybe it's helped me to organize my artwork.

BC: *I think about the piece called Pieces of Water, for instance, which could be derived from Monet. I look at a suspended hedge in the middle of a painting and think of Magritte; I look at the chair with fish and maple leaves and think of van Gogh. Was art history also informing you along the way?*

GF: I was very aware of Magritte. I actually think of him as a performance artist in a way. He does a little train coming out of a fireplace. There could be a time element in that.

BC: *I guess the trompe l'oeil quality makes them seem three-dimensional, as well?*

GF: Yes. Now about Monet. People used to say my paintings looked like Monet and I would be quite appalled because up to that point I had only seen the earlier paintings with ladies and gentlemen on sidewalks, with their parasols and all the fuss and feathers. I really didn't want to be that kind of painter. And it wasn't even until after I painted *Pieces of Water* that I saw the water-lilies. So it couldn't be so. But when I saw them and knew what people were

talking about, then I was very pleased. Some of those late paintings were just wonderful.

BC: *Pleased because you wanted to be that kind of painter?*

GF: That's the kind of painter I am.

BC: *So while your paintings might have nodded briefly in the direction of art history, they really came out of your own experience, then?*

GF: I think so, yes. The water was right here two blocks away. I would walk down the street and it would be at the bottom of the street.

BC: *And on the way to the water there was the sidewalk?*

GF: Yes, that's right. All those things.

BC: *For someone who didn't have ideas, you seem endlessly capable of generating them.*

GF: Well, that's the strange thing. When I started painting and writing stories there was a dearth of ideas. Now that I'm older I have only to be sick and lie on my couch for an afternoon and there are two or three ideas. I have to leave most of them by the wayside because there are too many of them.

BC: *It's like you're an inventive Lady Macbeth crying, "Out, damned idea"?*

GF: Yes, sometimes. A lot of times I simply jot them down and then I may use them later and I may not.

BC: *When you do a piece like Hanging Cabbages, what is it that compels you to make an installation and then also realize it in a different medium? Have you been able to determine why the ideas are so flexible? You say the idea generates the form, and yet you have done the same subject matter in a number of different forms.*

GF: There are always so many ways of doing things and I'm very intrigued by that. Even doing something in a different scale is very intriguing to me. Or doing it in a different colour. I had made cabbages earlier but somebody gave me a postcard of a painting done a very long time ago and it had a cabbage and an apple hanging in a window frame, and a piece of melon lying on the windowsill. It made a lovely composition by a Spanish painter whose name I can't think of at the moment. It was up on a rail in my house in the dining room for years. Although I had made cabbages that lay around, the hanging cabbage eventually got to me. That's when I had to make this room. I thought about this great cloud of cabbages hanging from the ceiling. I wanted something in the middle of the room to tie it all down to the floor, and the only thing I could think of was a car. I thought and thought about it and I wasn't satisfied. So there was this continuing dialogue in my head, till eventually I came up with sand. The beach sand must have made me think of it: sand all over the floor, and then an ornate dresser that resembled the cabbages; tying the cabbages to the floor with a long mirror, and the dresser painted as green as were the cabbages. ♦