



Bonnie Hull *Memory as Myth*

Bonnie Hull was born Bonita June Decker on March 23, 1944, in Evanston, Illinois. Her father, Howard, was serving in the Pacific, and she did not see him until she was eighteen months old. She and her mother, June, lived on their own in an apartment in Chicago. Three brothers would come along later. The war over, the Deckers built a house in Wilmette, a few blocks west of Lake Michigan on Chicago's north shore, and it was there that Bonnie's self-identity as a suburban girl began. What, she would ask herself later, what, artistically speaking, is the iconography for a white suburban girl?

Wilmette is a suburb, it's true, but only a short train ride away from downtown Chicago and the Art Institute on Michigan Avenue at Adams, with its stately lions guarding it. Beginning in junior high school, Bonnie and her friend Carolyn Schneider, dressed as closely as they could manage as beatniks (black tights, skirts, and sweaters), rode the El to the heart of the city to hang out at the museum, look at the art, try to mingle with students at the School of the Art Institute, and then cross the street for milkshakes at the B & G. Today Hull and Schneider remain close artist friends and convene each year for a week's worth of art-making and memory-sharing.

Bonnie took art classes throughout junior high and high school, and at Michigan State University studied drawing and majored in art history, a subject of interest to her to this day, especially modern and contemporary art history. After four years at Michigan State, she worked for a time in the art department at Northwestern University in Evanston near her family home, and there she met Roger Hull. They married in 1969 and moved to Salem in 1970, arriving on a sunny day in June. Hence, coincidentally, her exhibition *Memory as Myth* marks the fiftieth anniversary of their rolling into town pulling their VW bug behind a U-Haul truck, spending their first

night in a motel near the odoriferous Boise Cascade paper mill, and watching *Auntie Mame* on television.

In Salem, Bonnie Hull worked at the Willamette University Library and Salem Public Library, delved into local history and conducted the research that led to the listing of the Court-Chemeketa Residential Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places, established and co-owned the Arbor Café with Lynn Strelow, sat on civic boards and commissions, served on committees for cultural organizations ranging from the Marion County Historical Society to the Lord and Schryver Garden Conservancy. In 2011, she and Sharon Rose curated the exhibition *Lord and Schryver: Shaping Our Cultural Landscape* for the Hallie Ford Museum of Art. She is also the mother of Zachary Hull, born in 1973, and a grandmother.

In addition to all this, and concurrent with it all, Bonnie Hull is an artist. Her first solo show was in 1976 at Willamette, at the invitation of Robert Hess, the sculptor who taught for many years in the Willamette art department. She has had one-person shows at Bush Barn Art Center, at the 12 x 16 Gallery in Portland, and most recently at George Fox University in Newberg, with her summer 2019 exhibition *Little Me*. Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions and is in public and private collections.

Even so, it could still be said that as an artist Hull has flown under the radar. Although well known as a matriarch of the arts in Salem and represented in private collections far afield, she is regarded on the broader regional art scene, more often than not, as her art-historian husband's wife. For Bonnie Hull, making art is in many ways its own reward, so this later-in-life exhibition at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art is an important capstone event in her long engagement with art and art history, with imagination and memory.

—Roger Hull



Bonnie Hull on the roof of the San Francisco Art Institute, January 1972.

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Bonnie Hull, an artist with wide-ranging creative impulses and interests, works in a variety of media in a variety of ways and has done so for more than fifty years. She is a painter in acrylic, gouache, and watercolor. She draws boldly in graphite, ink, and pastel in large-format works, and she sketches constantly in drawing books large and small. She has worked in her own version of encaustic that blends drawn line and poured wax, on one occasion embedding the wax with sweepings from the studio floor. She is a collagist and capricious book-maker (often using black tape or clear mailing tape to stick things down and hold them together). She is a quilter—a hand-quilter, that would be, creating original works experimentally and improvisationally. Hull's work ranges far and wide, recklessly so some might say, but her broad oeuvre, created in the course of five decades, is unified by her unswerving interest in five particular elements: line, pattern, process, image, and narrative.

Fundamental to Bonnie Hull's arsenal of skills is the drawn line. She draws with a formidable certainty to create drawings as such, paintings based on the underpinnings of drawing, and quilts that involve, in effect, drawing with thread. Her drawings can be broad and fluently rendered—with long lines sweeping through a composition—or they can be highly detailed, small-scale descriptions of the petals of a hydrangea.

For Hull, line often leads to pattern, in compositions of outlined shapes on a flat ground, resulting in a decorative effect. Decorative patterning is too easily dismissed as prettified and banal, but in Hull's hands it can become supercharged with optical energy. She is in some ways an independent outlier of the Pattern and Decoration movement that originated in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of Miriam Schapiro and Faith Ringgold, among others, and that persists to this day despite the rise of alternative modes in American



and European art in recent decades. As Hull's show opens in Salem, for example, the exhibition *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art* is just closing at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Hull's interest in decorative pattern is based in part on her love of fabric and its floral, geometric, and sometimes randomly composed designs, as well as the colors they embody, both saturated and dilute. She collects fabric, vintage and modern, and from this stash makes quilts that one can see as collages in cloth. She is not interested in the ready-made patterns sold in quilt shops but in patternings of her own invention.

As for process, taking a heat gun to a waxed drawing to see what the result will be has been one of her strategies. A work in the collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art shows one outcome of this process. Her collage-like piecing and hand-sewing of her quilts, with an overlay of appliqué sometimes added, is process-based—preplanned only to a degree. Her recent huge drawings, created section by section because the paper is so long that it can't be seen all at once except on a very long wall, is by its nature a process of open-ended exploration.

Brown and White, 2007, acrylic, ink, and wax, softened by heat gun, on panel, 12 x 12 in., collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, gift of the artist, 2008.005.



In addition to line, pattern, and process, Hull thinks in terms of image and narrative. In a gallery statement a few years ago she wrote: "Line, image, narrative. These are the basis of all the work I do. If I work on paper, with paint, with fabric and needle, drawing, the things I'm interested in are the same: line, image, narrative. The stories I tell, the image, the lines are ways of interpreting the life I have led and continue to lead."

In this way, decorative patterning is much more than decoration as such; it is the basis of narrative storytelling. Now in her seventies, Bonnie Hull's storytelling can often concern memories from her past, her Midwestern childhood and youth, her Pacific Northwest adulthood.

As for *Memory as Myth*, the title and theme of Hull's exhibition here at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, she has this to say:

Memories become separate things from the actual events of a life, just as artworks find their own resonance once an idea is formed. It is this layering that has come to intrigue me in recent years, years during which memory itself takes on a new importance with the losses of aging.

And the Sun Still Shines, 2019, acrylic on panel, 36 x 36 in., on painted paper ground, courtesy of the artist.



My own life was in transition in 2003–2005 when, to make sense of the evolving narrative, I began to write. In my solo exhibit at George Fox University in 2019 and again in this exhibit, *Memory as Myth*, I have used a poem of my own from that period as the starting point for visual work.

My process involves the collection of images both personal and generic, conversations with family or friends, and time spent digging into an individual memory to retrieve random images . . . colors, sounds, smells, the "feeling" of a moment in time. All of this activity constitutes the "memory" part of the title.

In the studio, the "memories" and the collected images begin to re-form . . . to take on a life of their own. This begins the myth-making . . . the transforming of a mundane memory of childhood swimming or summer camp, of the floor of my grandfather's sunroom, a snowstorm on Ouillette Lane, into something that represents that memory but is not the memory itself. It is this process that has become powerful and electric. To look at a painting, a quilt, a drawing and to understand where it came from but to see a different story emerging . . . this becomes the goal in the making process for me.

Pop's Floor, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in., courtesy of the artist.



The poem in question, its lines the basis of the titles and narrative content of the works presented in the Study Gallery portion of the exhibition, is this:

The Illustrations for My Life Story

Chapter One

The house plant,
the light making stripes
through the Venetian blinds
on the floor of Pop's sunroom.

Snow, snow, snow.

The swimming pool,
the long long hall.

The hot and singing
Wisconsin meadow.

The flames at the window.



The Pool, 2019, acrylic on panel, 30 x 60 in., courtesy of the artist.

Shadow of the House (detail), 2019, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 42 x 228 in., courtesy of the artist.



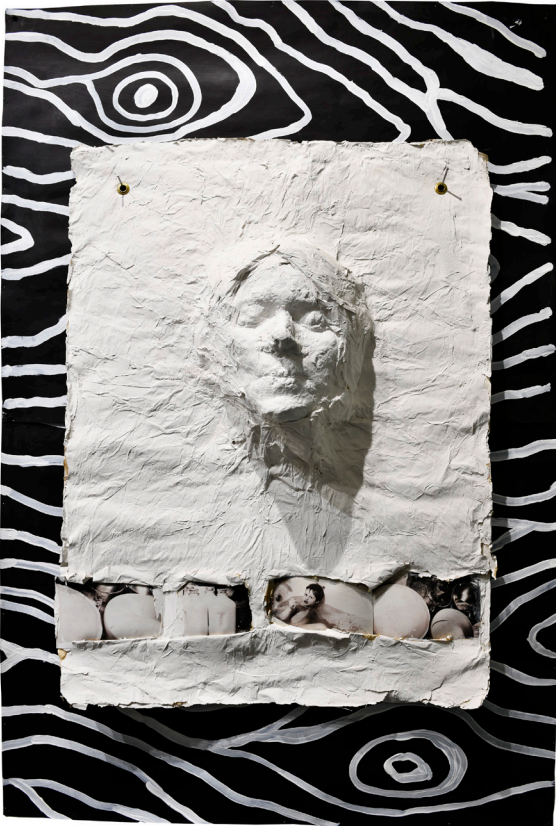
Roger Hull is a Professor Emeritus of Art History at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon.

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Front: *Meadow*, 2019, acrylic on panel, 36 x 36 in., on painted paper ground, courtesy of the artist.

This page, top: *The Long Long Hall*, 2019, acrylic on panel, 24 x 72 in., courtesy of the artist.

Above: *Mask*, 1977, cast paper, gesso, stitchery, and photographs, 23½ x 17½ in., on painted paper ground (2019), courtesy of the artist.

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