

Art in America

November 1998

by Carol Diehl

PRESS RELEASE

Incredibly ambitious, Mary Frank's paintings look as if she's trying to pack into each panel the entire experience of her life--at least the most dramatic, searing, soaring, painful, ecstatic, frightening parts. No boredom here. These are the most cohesive works of Frank's career, vigorous paintings that appear to be roiling with emotion that has been building over decades. While masterfully executed, however, the imagery sometimes seems overwrought, in the way a dream retold never has the same resonance for others as it has for the dreamer. Frank's paintings don't always convey the emotional impact she clearly intends.

Titled *Inscapes*, the paintings are landscapes of the soul, populated with a cast of mythic and personal images that reappear in each painting like characters from a recurring nightmare: owls flying in fiery skies, owl-headed humans, figures in boats navigating turbulent waters, fragmented bodies, gnarled wintry trees. Just as some psychologists say everything in a dream is an aspect of ourselves, all seem to be representations of the artist--especially the lone nude woman whose unclothed state doesn't suggest sexuality as much as exposure and vulnerability.

Dense and intense, the profuse content of these works is reflected in Frank's method--layers that have been scumbled, erased, sanded, mixed with pumice, painted and repainted, sometimes with an overlay of collage. Frank's quick, jagged brushstrokes betray a sense of urgency, as do her colors--for the most part vivid blacks, whites and blazing reds. Even the paintings rendered in watery blue are tumultuous, such as *This is the Remembering* (1996-97); here, a pair of male and female figures grapple and thrash as if caught in a churning tidal wave.

Included in the exhibition were four triptychs. Like altar-pieces, they are covered with hinged door-like panels which viewers are encouraged to open and close. The front panels of *Destinies* (1997), depict an ancient tree against a murky background, which contrasts sharply with the interior, a blazing horizonless panorama dominated by a giant winged owl and birdlike humans flying or falling into watery chaos.

Ultimately, Frank relies on figurative language when her strong painting may be all she needs to tell her story. However there are enough moments of beauty to suggest that we don't have to identify fully with these works to appreciate them for what they are: ardent self-portraits of a complex internal terrain.