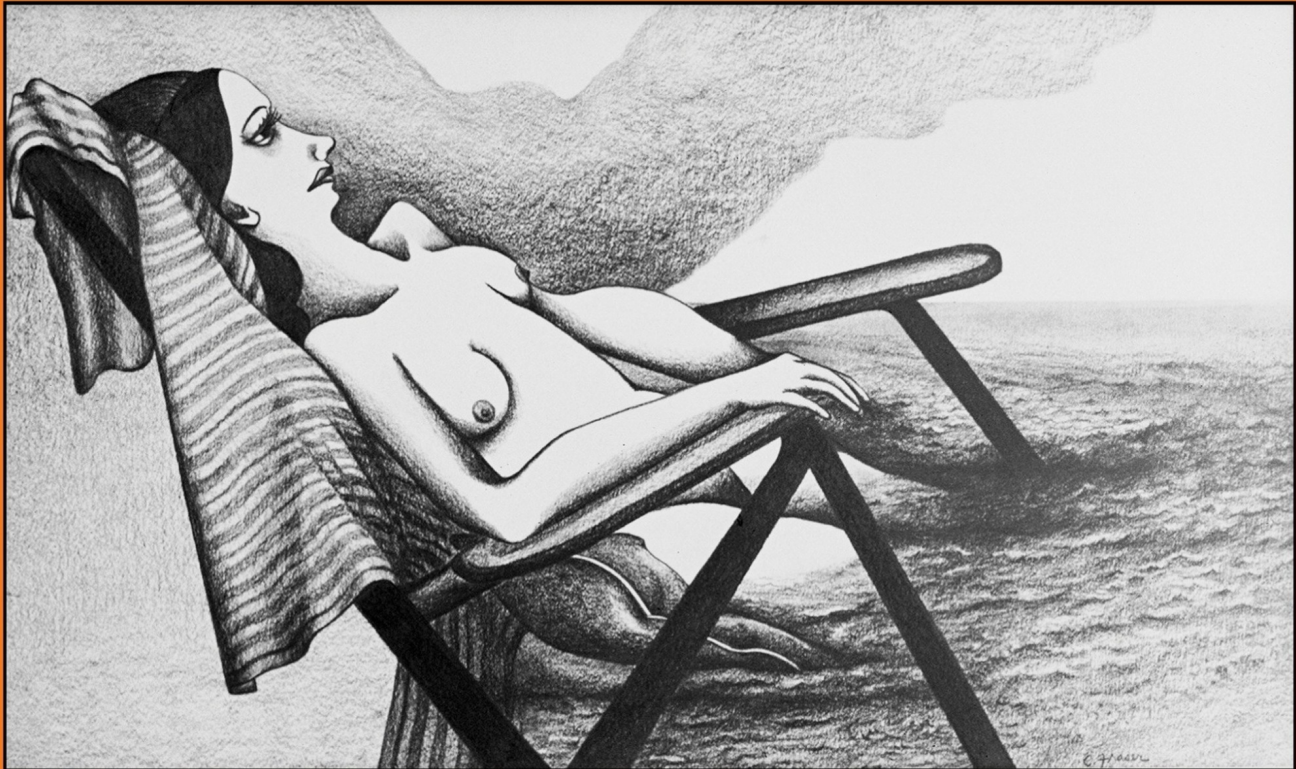


# focusing: drawings by carol hoorn fraser



edited by john fraser and barbara bickle

# Focusing

Drawings by  
CAROL HOORN FRASER

Edited by  
John Fraser and Barbara Bickle

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Requests should be addressed to [fraserj@eastlink.ca](mailto:fraserj@eastlink.ca).  
Most of the works are included in [www.jottings.ca/carol/site.html](http://www.jottings.ca/carol/site.html)

A number are in Ian G. Lumsden, ed. Drawings by Carol Fraser 1948 – 1986  
(Beaverbrook Art Gallery, 1986)

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Cover image: Complacency, 1976, pencil.

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*Focusing* is for Carol Lind Geary

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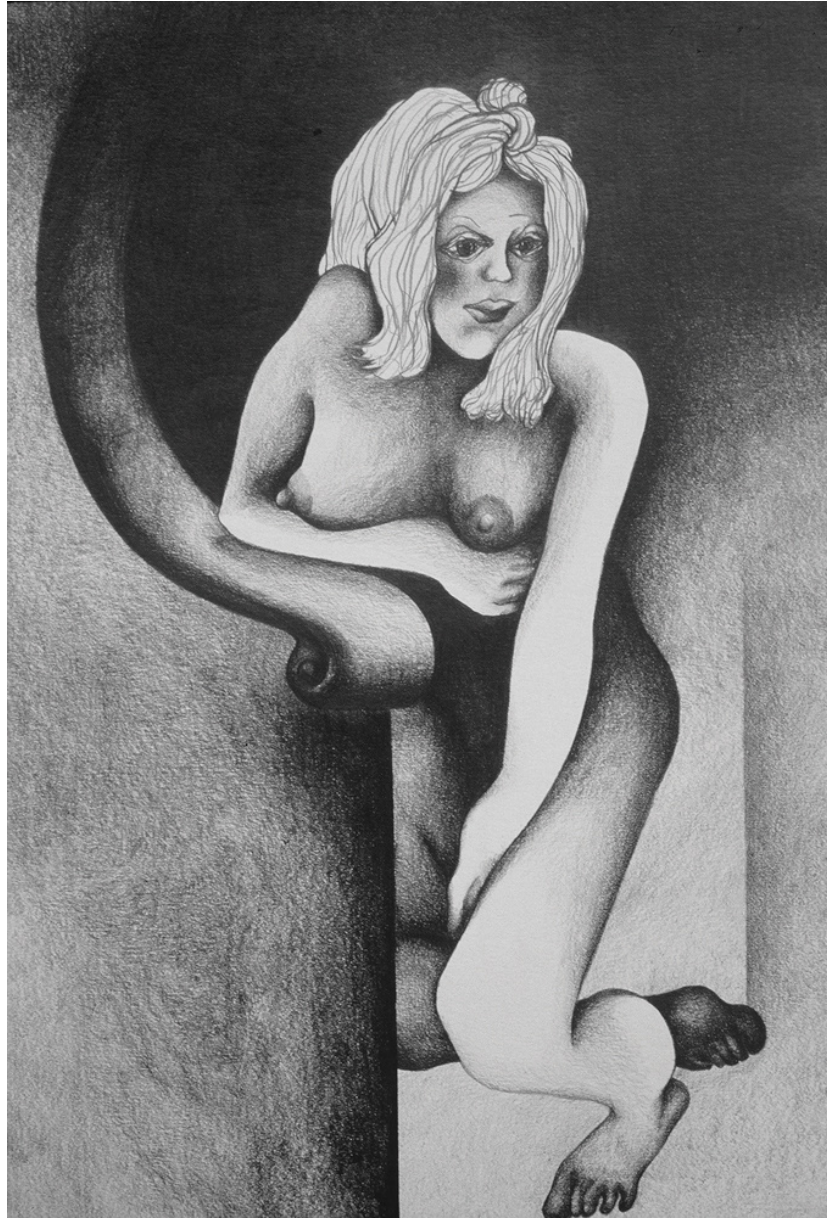
*Posthumous titles are in square brackets.*

Photograph of Carol Hoorn Fraser

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Biographical

**I**

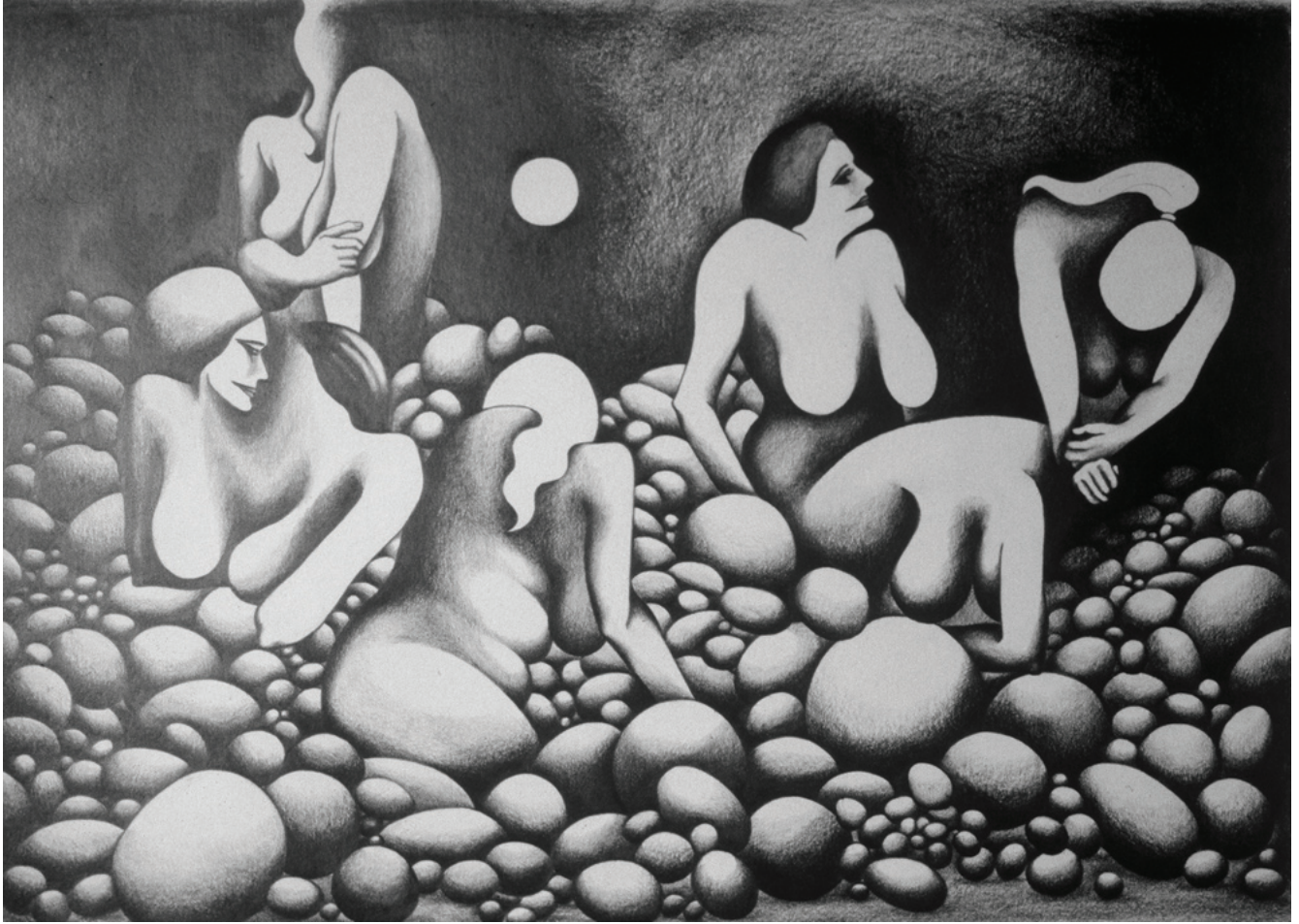


Jeannie #3  
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pencil



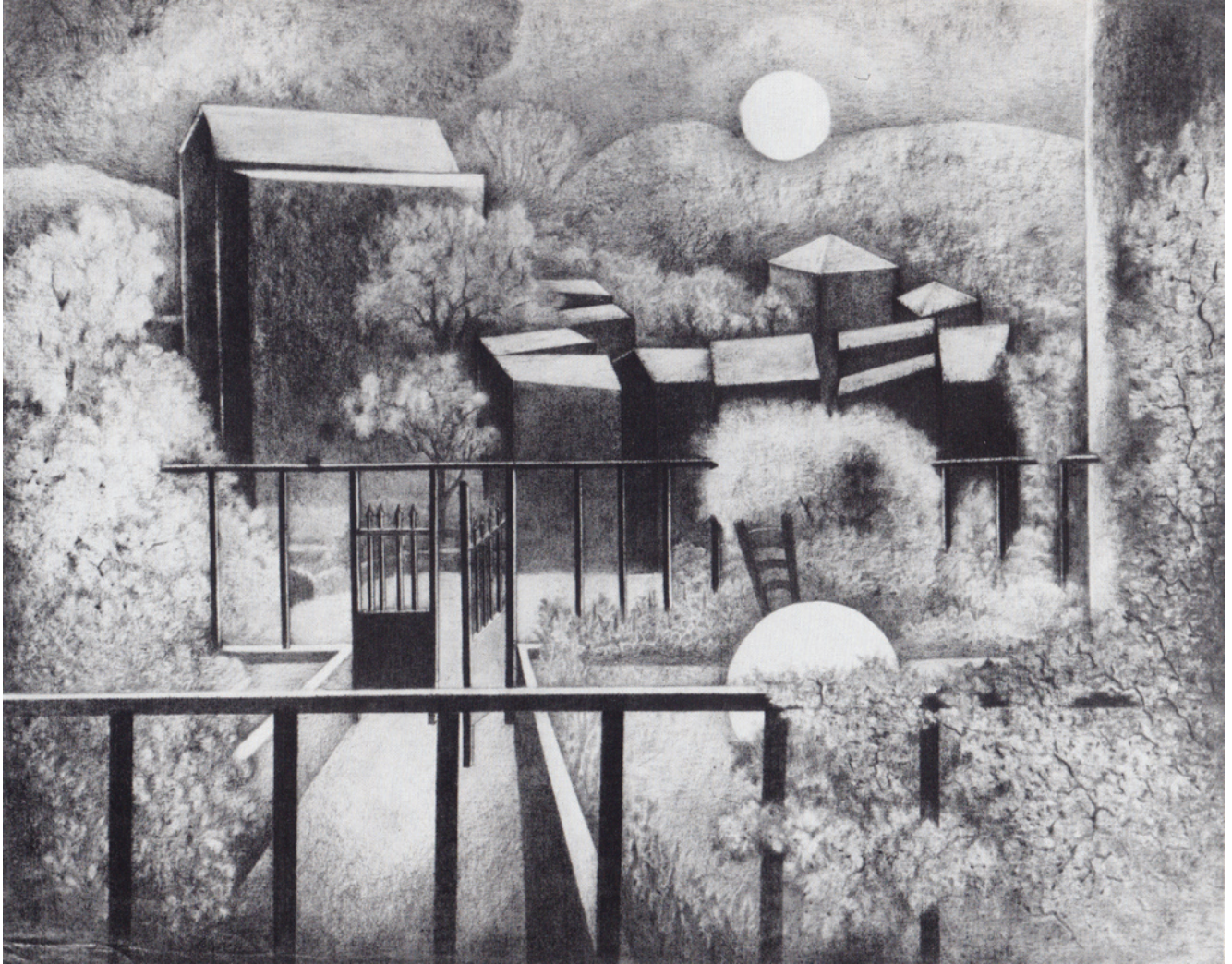
Seated Nude  
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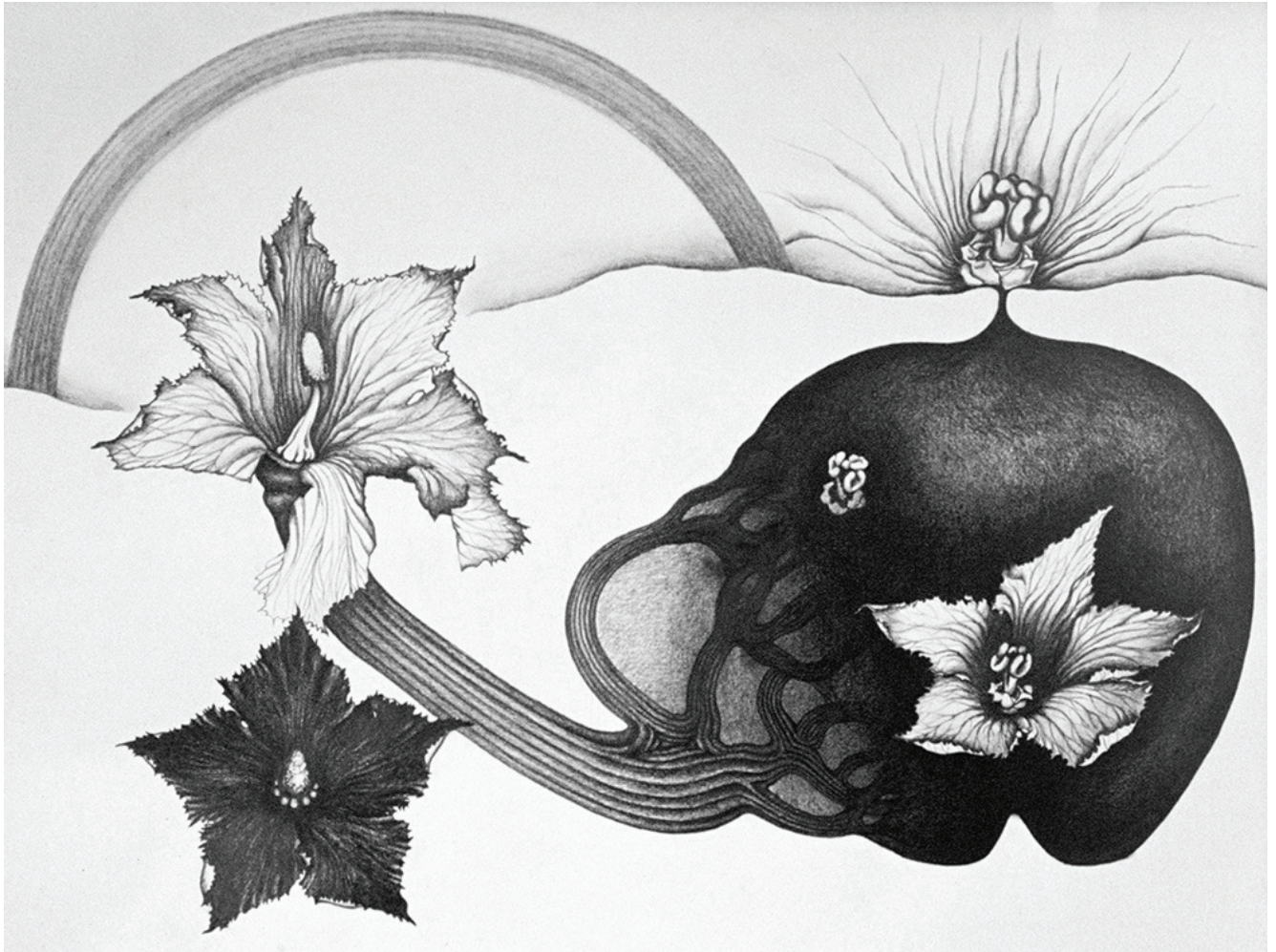


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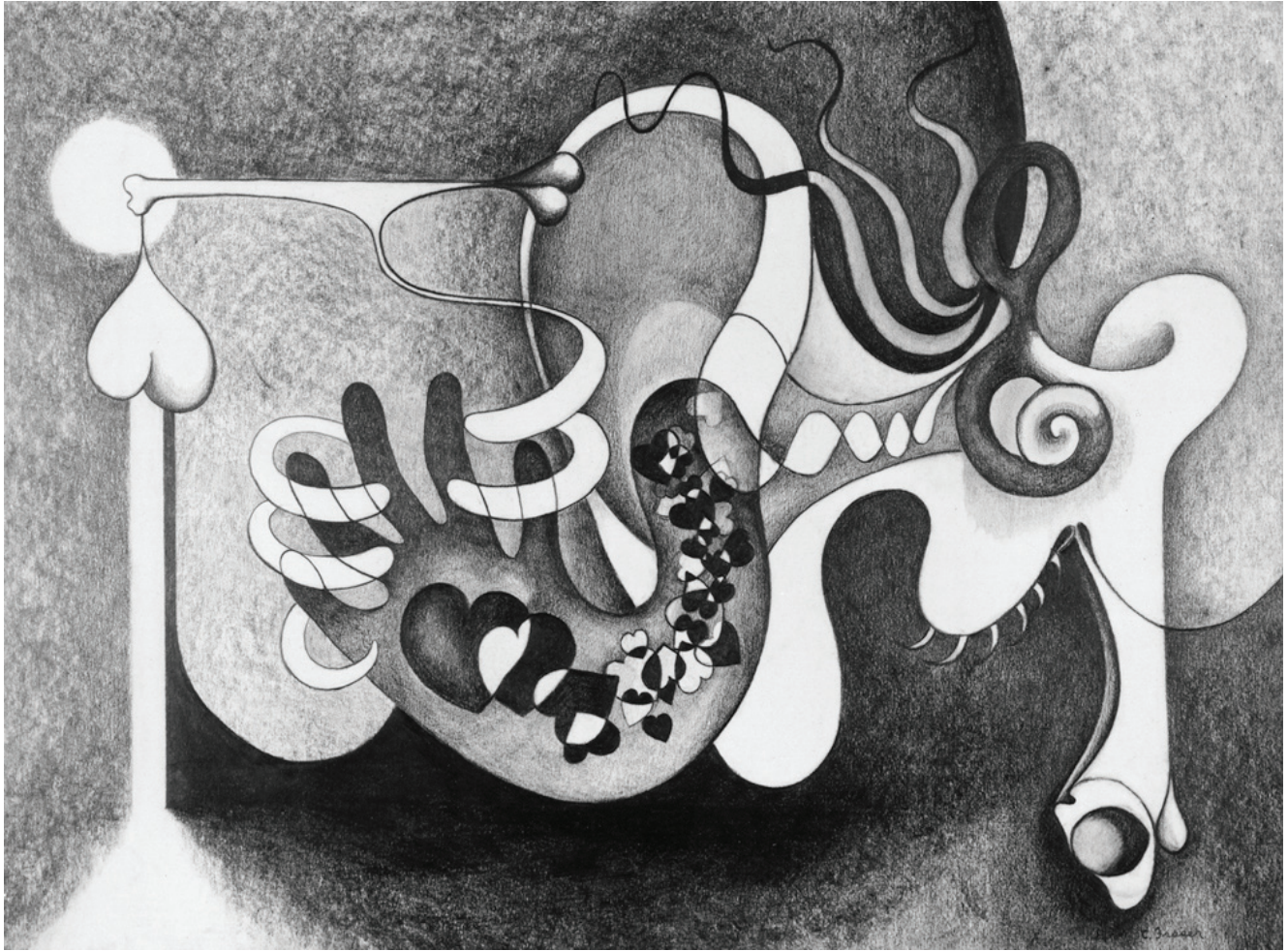


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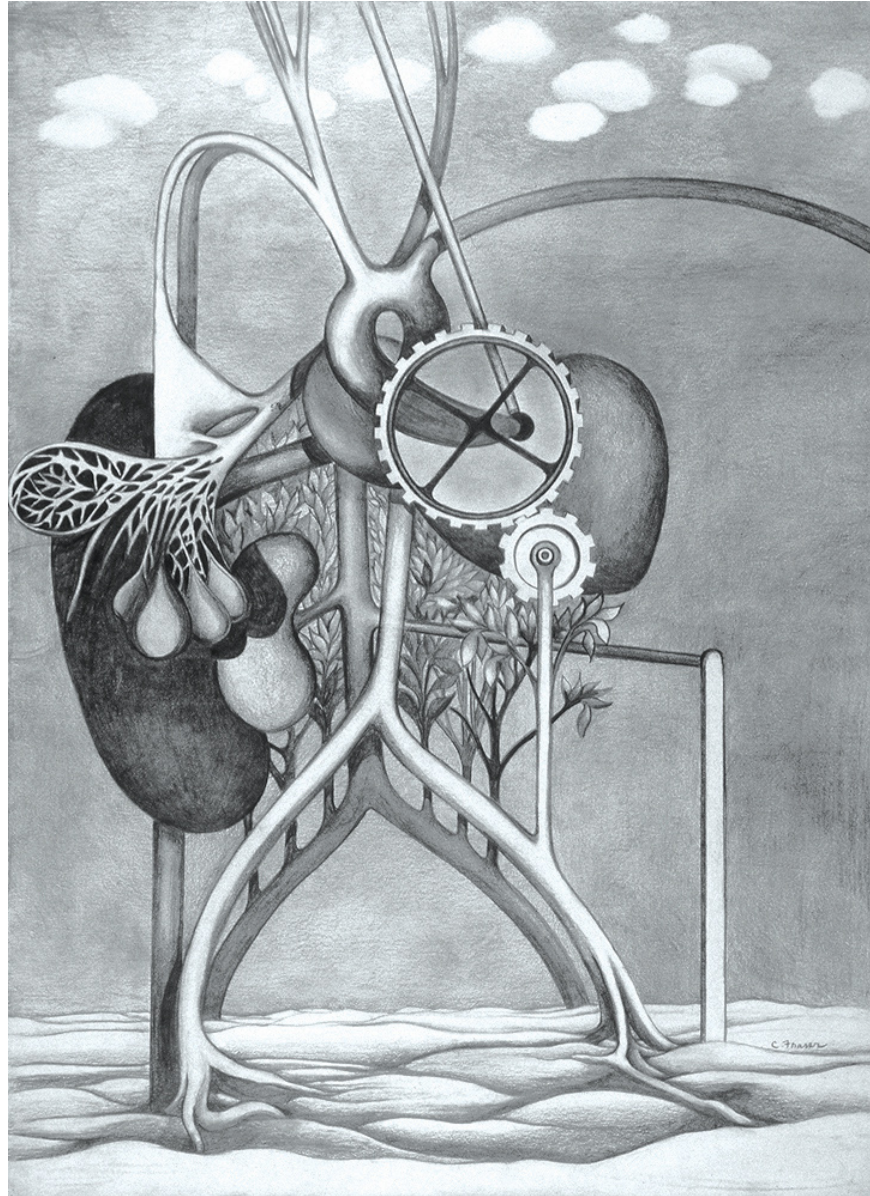


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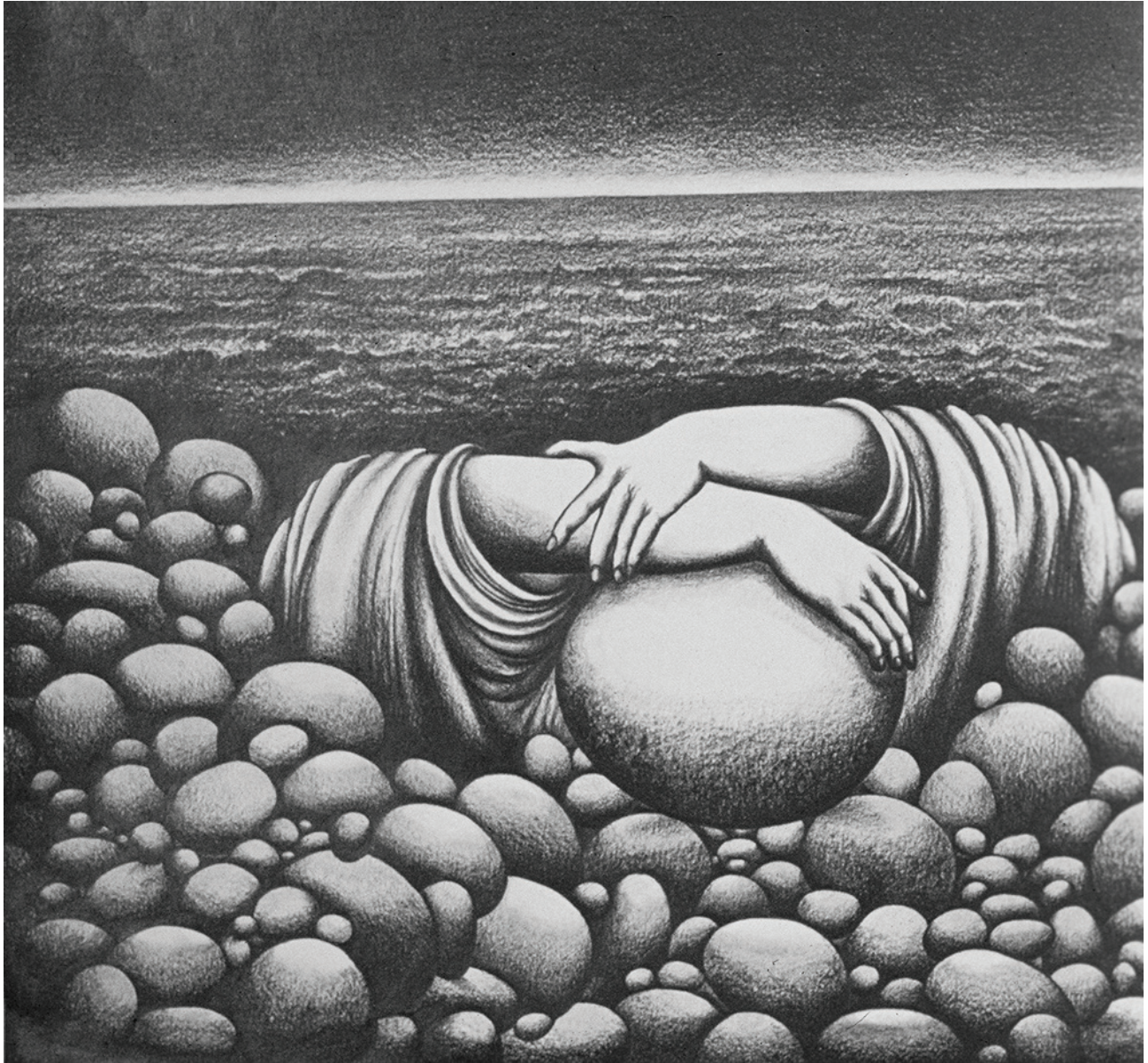
Nature Girl  
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pencil



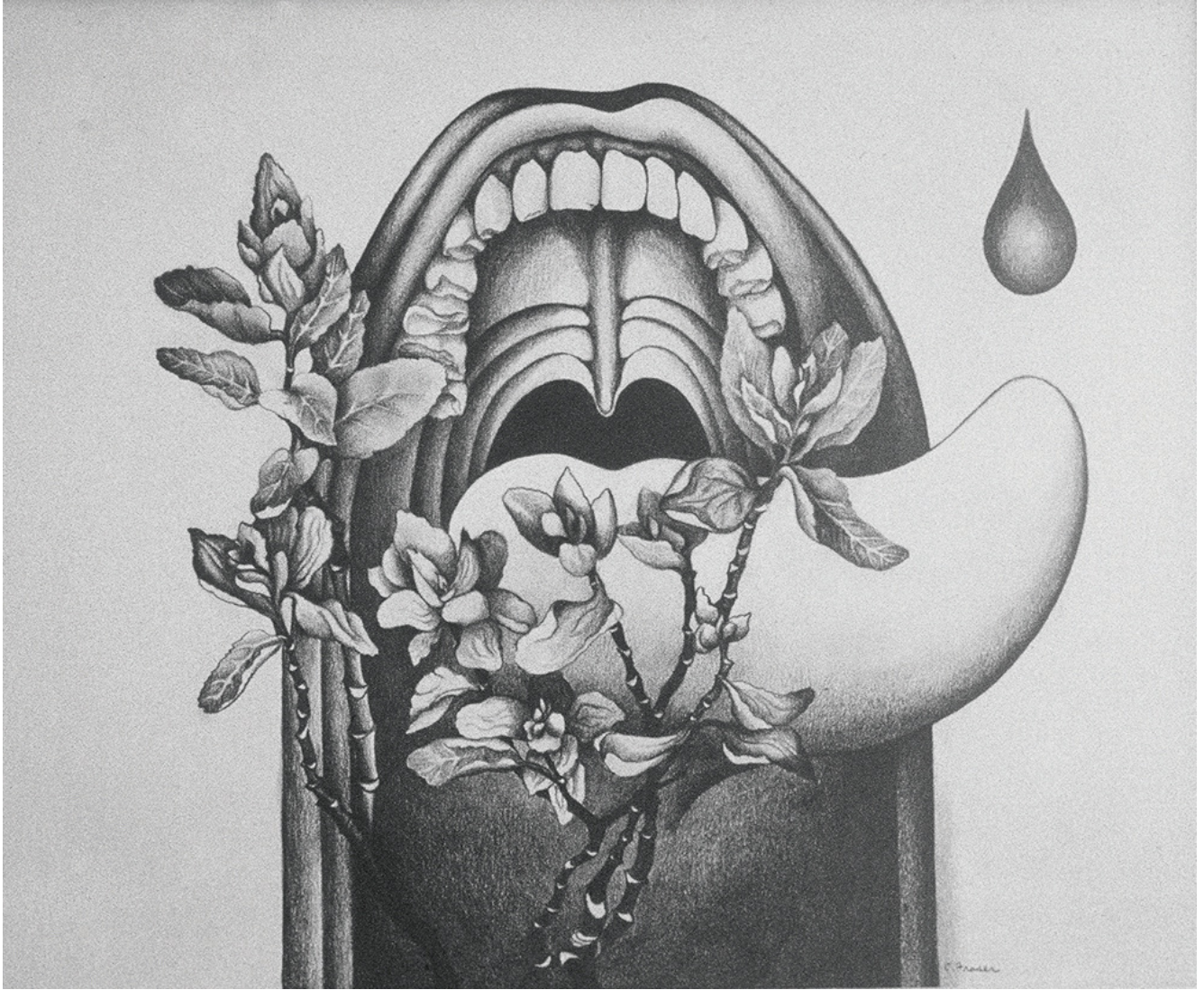
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[Final Soliloquy]  
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pencil



Carol Hoorn Fraser  
Photo: JF

## Focusing: Afterword

### I

Carol Hoorn Fraser cared deeply about drawing. She loved looking at drawings, Van Gogh's and Rembrandt's especially. And made a lot of them herself.

When she taught drawing to architecture students, she had them draw a straight-back chair, then draw how it would look from behind, then draw how it would look from behind upside down. Drawing was a way of feeling the three-dimensionality of things. Modeling is easier with pencils than with brushes.

She was mordantly funny about clever-dumb redefinings of drawing. Reviewing a trendy show, she wrote:

Suppose that I go into a restaurant and order a piece of chocolate cake and the waitress brings me a piece of apple pie with a fancy explanation of how apple pie really is chocolate cake and the manager just happens to know a pastry cook who makes the best apple pie in town and how I must eat apple pie as if it were really chocolate cake? Even if this is the best apple pie in the whole of North America, assuming I had my heart set on a piece of chocolate cake, I'm not going to be very favourably disposed toward that pie. I would probably dislike it—as well as the waitress, the pastry cook, the manager and the restaurant.

Of course the main victim in this little episode is that delicious and innocent piece of pie that was made to impersonate chocolate cake. Because in this situation no

amount of rationalizing could persuade me to appreciate it for itself.

She went on to talk civilly about the individual works on their own merits, calling them “strong well-realized statements”—the six-inch gouges in plywood, the wolf in silhouette flame-cut from a 4” steel sheet, etc.

Curating a show herself in the same series, she commissioned large action drawings of athletes in motion and a set, also large, of naked men who posed doing frontally the kinds of things that they normally did clothed—working on a car engine, taking photos, and so forth. I imagine she had a face of bland surprise ready should there be any objection.

That was in 1979.

## II

Sophomores and peasants,  
Poets and their critics,  
Are the same in bed.  
(W.H. Auden, winding up a poetic meditation.)

I suspect that for Fraser drawing figured for a good while as a part of the Other Kingdom where artists of all shapes, and sizes, and colours, and belief systems, and food preferences, across thousands of years, way back to the French caves, were co-creators with only the simplest of means— charcoal, quill pens, pencils...

You had to pay your dues by performing there, in the primary task of capturing a shared reality. You had to be able to convey in a few strokes the three-dimensionality, the musculature of a posing model, a child’s totter, a cat’s leap, a can-can dancer, a breaking wave (there’s one here), the fleeting expressions on a face.

Or work fast-fast even when the subject—a flower, a tree, a landscape—was stationary, as if its visual essence would vanish unless captured by those expressive quick curves and dots and dashes and slashes at the moment of your looking.

She had a number of goes at surf on rocks.

In Provence she sometimes used sticks and weeds.

### III

1967 was her major break-out year. If Scott Fitzgerald had died before *Gatsby*, or Plath before the *Ariel* poems, or Goya before the French invaded Spain, our sense of their oeuvres would be very different.

Up until 1967, Fraser had been essentially a realist, rendering in a variety of ways the seen, the visible tangible world. After that, she got inside the body and explored its interconnectedness with its environment. I'm speaking principally of the oils, her medium of preference, from which she was barred for a while by allergies.

Previously, drawing for her had been a documenting of places and an exploring of the figure, naked and clothed, with a variety of techniques. Afterwards, done much less, it would become an intensely personal and transformative idiom, in which each setting-out into the unprecedented was a daring commitment, an action in its own way.

### IV

The drawings here come very largely from the later years and were chosen for visual energy, individuality, and craftsmanship, without regard to

content. Some groupings suggested themselves after a while, but without any “story.”

Apart from the waves and rocks, done late, they aren't calligraphic. Nor need they be in order to pass the audition. Enough original decision-making has gone into them and enough fine points of execution where an error could have wrecked a performance, like false notes during a piano recital.

Zen is partly a readying of the self so that action occurs, it does so swiftly and decisively—fist-strike, brush stroke, sword strike, flower placement. But there can be slower-paced readyings, and then a steady committed execution.

Look at the tips of those squash blossoms, or the roof-top rooster, added last, or the fingers of the girl in her beach chair, or the faces of the beach women, or the suspended drop of honey, or the inked hand-bird. She was working without a net. She thought you ought to get it right the first time. But she had struggled a lot during her earlier and less original Expressionist years.

In his 1913 report of an aeroplane meet, Kafka noted the paradox that a perfectly executed flight by the great Blériot excited spectators less than a more uncertain one by someone else where you shared in each swoop and rise.

Her ease here is deceptive.

## V

The musculature in these drawings is so muscular. You couldn't copy the positions of those bodies from photos. She herself, I'm sure, could visualize a chair upside down from behind. And a body too, if needs be. She would have become a medical illustrator, she told an interviewer, if she could have afforded the training. She knew the body like she knew flowers.

There are dramatic concentrations and intensifications. A kneeling nude on a stony beach, initially (in a drawing not included) a single crouching figure with breasts rounded like stones and face invisible, becomes six highly individuated and mysterious figures, as if in some archaic nighttime rite.

Provençal olive trees and dry-stone walls crowd and jostle together. Mexico, old and new, is compacted into that textured back yard with the invented smooth hotel or apartment building in the background.

In bolder metamorphoses, a mouth is no longer a taken-for-granted aperture below the nose. Intensifying the spatial feeling you have when the dentist's inside it, it becomes a reared up archaic cavern entry with dangerous sharp edges and emerging muscle, no longer just "your" mouth, as it might be a hair-do.

Anger becomes the fury of every male-silenced woman in the fascinating vertical drawing that changes instantly from receptive to surging Fury when you turn it on its side. As she herself would surely have intended.

## VI

Though the drawings aren't strictly speaking a series, they belong with sets of images like Goya's *Los Disparates* or Max Ernst's brilliant collages, where you can't guess what you'll find as you turn the page. It was a point of honour in her not to repeat herself, except in the watercolours.

The drawings don't fit together into literary narratives, either here or in the body of her work. But then, our own interior lives aren't organized in tidy sequences— "Ah yes, that was my irony year." Attitudes come and go and interweave.

But yes, she spent two summers in Provence, and she had migraines and yes, there were bitter pills to swallow for an independent spirit like herself in male-dominated art politics in the Seventies. And the Mexican yard with the chickens was next to the flat-roofed house that we rented in Ajijic, pronounced Ah-hee-heek, on Lake Chapala, in her last year.

“The Geology of Fear” wasn’t just playful.

## VII

Some may find the sharp-edged intensity of “Bitter Pill” disturbing. And that dangerous mouth, an independent *thing* now, is ambiguous. How is it *feeling* about its encounter with sweetness? And is beauty so strong that a rose can flay you? Things aren’t allowed to be comfortably what they normally are. Nudes should be soft, hearing merely auditory, bodily tubes tucked discretely away inside. There are challenges here.

But whereas Dada, and neoDada, and the AcaDada of the Acadadamy were essentially in your stupid bourgeois face, Surrealism was an invitation to the bold to go along bravely into problematic zones of expanding discovery.

Frida Kahlo rejected the attempt of André Breton to conscript her into the Surrealist team, and Fraser, who had Kahlo on a wall-calendar in her sunroom when she died, wasn’t into Surrealist doctrine.

But she loved Magritte, and Ernst’s jungles and collages, and Rousseau, and the movies of Buñuel. And was better than some of the women Surrealists when it came to a sustained level of invention.

Her art was always invitational, not elitest-exclusionary. And insofar as what she saw was surreal, it was a surreality that was an intensification of aspects of the real.



## VIII

These drawings are as exuberant collectively as some of the icons of Abstract Expressionism. They open up imaginative possibilities and display skills worth acquiring in order to render individual visions. It took her years of disciplined realworld rendering to move beyond realism and become wholly herself. But quality is always in part a function of difficulty overcome, in art as in sports.

As Tom Hanks says of baseball in *A League of Their Own*, “It’s supposed to be hard. If it wasn’t hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great.”

Carol Hoorn Fraser made some great unique works of art, in a league of her own.

John Fraser  
2015

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## Biographical

**Carol Hoorn Fraser**, (1930 – 1991), RCA, grew up in Superior, Wisconsin, and obtained an MFA at the University of Minnesota, where she studied under art historian Lorenz Eitner, aesthetician John Hospers, and poet Allen Tate, among others, wrote her thesis on “The Human Image in Contemporary Painting,” and took top awards in major shows at the Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. In 1961 she moved with her husband John to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she lived until her death, with stays in Provence and Mexico. Her works are in the Walker Art Center, the Smithsonian Institute, the National Gallery of Canada, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, and other public galleries.

**John Fraser**, (1928 – ), PhD, FRSC, grew up in North London and has degrees from Oxford (Balliol) and the University of Minnesota, with a minor in Philosophy. For thirty years he taught English at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. His three print books were published by Cambridge University Press. His large website, *jottings.ca*, includes a book-length presentation of Carol’s life and works and the anthology *A New Book of Verse*, and he is the author of several eBooks.

**Barbara Bickle**, (1947 – ), BFA, was born in Toronto, Ontario, where she attended the Central Technical School of Art. In 1980 she moved to Halifax to study art history, drawing and painting at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. A postgraduate diploma in computer graphics and interactive multimedia at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, led to careers in fine art and web design. She has produced a booklet of her life as an artist: *The Book of Jobs – how an artist survived in Canada*.