

Words infused with soul

this winter a friend recounted visiting Doris Cross in the hospital where she was recovering from a stroke suffered last November in Paris. After many previous visits to see Doris in intensive care, my friend was surprised to find her walking the hall entrained with rolling stanchions of dripping fluids. When asked how she was, Doris smiled—unable to speak—and formed the word “perfect” with both lips and gesture.

by MaLin Wilson



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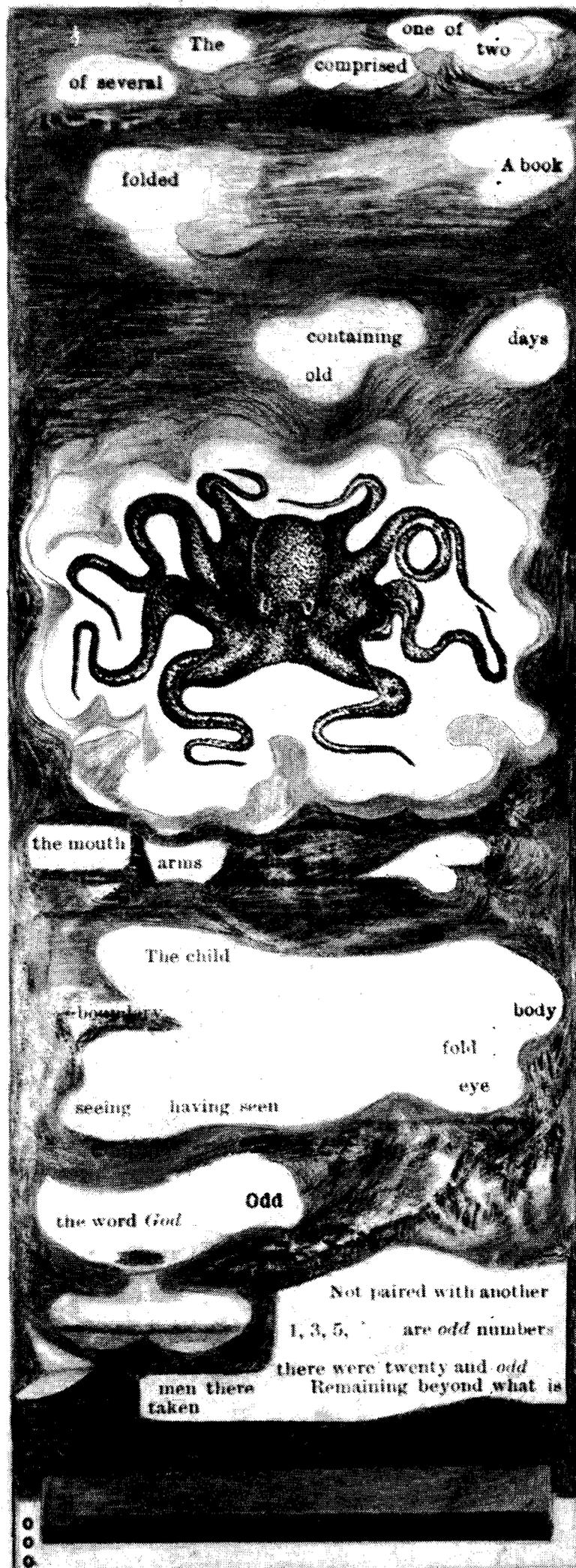
More than any other artist that I have met during my forty-five years, Doris Cross “perfectly” inhabits her art and the moment. It is impossible to have a casual conversation with Doris Cross: she charges every meeting with meaning and significance. Since moving to Santa Fe in 1973, she has served as a hovering “culture carrier” with her intelligence, wit, and intensity. The continued presence of such a complex and remarkable person here has always seemed both an anomaly and a solace. Certainly Doris Cross’ residency in Santa Fe has validated this town for many a creative person who found a home here, yet was demoralized by the proliferation of mediocrity—especially the ever-increasing tsunami waves of market-oriented dumb art.

I first encountered Doris Cross’ work in February 1974, at the long-gone-but-not-to-be-forgotten Hill’s Gallery. Hill’s was exhibiting her *Found Word* works—images made by subtractive-addition to the text of a 1913 *Webster’s Secondary School Dictionary*. Doris’ altered dictionary columns are the most widely exhibited, published, and well-known facet of her work. They are a unique and extraordinary corpus in the history of art. Her “found words” are in the European tradition of Appolinaire, yet stand apart by their visual sophistication, and they distinguish themselves from recent post-modern photo-text works by their physical sensuality.

Doris described her initial plunge into the dictionary column in the mid-1960’s in her Lower East Side New York studio: “For no reason that I know, I saw the pages differently—certain words came out and they worked together, to my mind. I grabbed a pen and almost violently eliminated what I didn’t want...I was a little frightened.” Shortly thereafter she fell into a three-week frenzy with the columns: “During that time visions would come to me...I thought I was having a schizophrenic experience.”

In 1987 I curated an exhibition of Cross’ columns at the Jonson Gallery at UNM. After this experience of prolonged looking, I recommend viewing her columns *en masse*. Together they have the feel of a live organism. What is so compelling about the columns is not that they synergetically combine work and image to address our most overriding senses—sight and hearing, but the columns ground philosophical incision into visceral intelligence. I think of the columns as information from a truly integrated sensibility—soiled words in the best sense, i.e. words of the soil or infused with soul. They are messages of pleasure and passion, a rarely glimpsed sensuality versus today’s more common display of anxiety placed in the genitals. The orderly listing of the words in the architectural form of a column are physically assaulted and caressed. They are excavated, masked, gouged, enlarged. The result is poetry, humor, and coherence suffused with sharp intelligence. Much of our Western heritage has been a separation of our pure minds from our dirty bodies. Cross’ work gives us a whiff of what a true reunion of mind and body might be like.

I do not mean to indicate that individual columns are not



strong enough to stand alone. They can. But access to lots of columns gives the viewer an opportunity to relax in this foreign terrain where what is initially odd is recognized as logical, even prescient.

In addition to the columns exhibition at UNM, Cross inspired Richard Hooker and myself to organize a community *Madonna* exhibition in 1983. In a 1981 *ARTLines* interview, Doris mused about a Madonna exhibition in Santa Fe because "This is Madonna Country historically, more so than Cowboys and Indians." As we worked on the exhibition I found that she had painted and drawn the Madonna repeatedly during the 1940's in New York City, the period when she was a mother of young children. The exhibition of 150 artists in Santa Fe included one of Doris' early paintings and two contemporary works including a banner with a quote from Homer's *Iliad*: "The Madonna speaks, 'O thou whose glory fills the ethereal throne and all ye deathless powers, protect my son...'"

Her work always pushes communication to a much more poetic and expansive flow of information, and her Octopus series, based on the column ODDS, is an example of one of her most fascinating explorations:

The biggest association I have over a period of doing fifteen to eighteen works of one column—ODDS—had to do with a search, unknown. That is why I did so many of them.

The first involvement had to do with the number "8=OCTO", and with the transformation of the octopus image. The octopus is simply an image of a creature with eight arms. (The month of primitive Roman year, which began in March, is October.)

ODD=the word God. I think God...is...an...octopus. The number eight is infinity. My fascination with the column ODDS and the octopus started ten years ago. One column I did with an octopus head looked like a Madonna. (I will never sell that.)

Mother Earth...birth... = infinity.

The simple fact that birth is infinite.

The octopus is the polypi of Homer and Aristotle.

There are many octopi surrounding the cliffs of Greece. In the OCTOPUS series I was in search of eternity—of the infinite.

—DORIS CROSS, 1986

Although Doris has exhibited nationally and internationally, and has been praised in such magazines as *ARTFORUM* (for her *Columns* book, Trike Press, 1982), and been sought out by poets and intellectuals, she has remained an underground figure in relation to her talent. Everyone can supply reasons for this—she's an older woman after all, she cares little for fashion, she works in unpredictable spurts, she's tough and not easily trifled with, she's more concerned with art, god, and the Madonna than she is the dollar. When asked to exhibit she may come up with a completely unexpected work—like her sculpture that weighs a boulder—"For Buckminster Fuller." And, she's a truly passionate and sexy human being with extraordinary vitality, even after the major stroke she suffered in Paris last fall. And then, add to all of this her undeniable humor.

Since her arrival in Santa Fe, Doris Cross has perfectly fulfilled her unofficial and consequently firm position of honor. In reviewing my files, she's never received one negative review, yet she has remained an underground figure. Fortunately, the Museum of San Antonio in Texas is organizing the first Doris Cross Retrospective with a full catalog to open in Spring 1993. Finally, there will be an exhibition of her work that will help answer some of my questions: How extensive is the influence of surrealism and

cubism on her work? What work won her awards at the Brooklyn Museum? What about her involvement with the American Abstract Artists?

When I first moved here in 1973, a famous resident writer, unrecognized in Santa Fe, said this city honored its own only after years of major kudos from elsewhere. I want to know why it is Texas that is organizing the Doris Cross Retrospective. Even though our own Museum of Fine Arts has acquired one of her important lead dictionary sculptures, they have never given her a solo exhibition. The work of Doris Cross can be seen this month at the Shidoni Gallery. The show opens on July 31st with a reception from 5-8 pm, and runs through August 24th.

END

Malin Wilson is an independent curator, writer, and educator. She's lived in Santa Fe since 1973, and she gathers mushrooms.

