

MANON CLEARY
OBSESSIVE OBSERVER:
A NEW PERSPECTIVE
THROUGH HER
PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIES

ESSAYS BY STEPHEN MAY
AND F. STEVEN KIJEK

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MANON CLEARY



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Conceptualized and Produced by
F. Steven Kijek

Guest Curator:
Jack Rasmussen

PREFACE

The Arts Club of Washington is honored to be the venue for the important exhibition ***Manon Cleary, Obsessive Observer: A New Perspective Through Her Photographic Studies***. Manon Cleary (1942 – 2011) was a member of the Arts Club of Washington and an important figure in the Washington, D.C. arts community. In addition to being a great artist, Cleary was also a teacher, curator, writer, activist, and collector. The exhibition of her works in oil, graphite, gouache, and photography allows the viewer to see the extent and expanse of her creative spirit and process.

F. Steven Kijek, Cleary's husband, conceived and produced the exhibition focusing on her use of photography, an area previously unexplored in Cleary's prior exhibitions. The Arts Club appreciates the opportunity to join with Kijek in presenting this important aspect of Cleary's creative process to the public in this exhibition. We also appreciate the assistance of Dr. Jack Rasmussen, Director and Curator of the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts

Center, in his role as guest curator of the exhibition. His knowledge of Cleary and her work in the context of Washington artists further allows Cleary's art to be considered from different perspectives.

We would like to thank the members of the Arts Club, and especially the members of the Exhibition Committee, for their support of ***Manon Cleary, Obsessive Observer: A New Perspective Through Her Photographic Studies***. This ground-breaking exhibition supports The Arts Club's mission statement that our purpose is the promotion of visual, literary, and musical arts through public education, study and participation.

Finally, we want to acknowledge the contributions of Nichola Hays, Arts Club of Washington Gallery Manager, for her effort in coordinating this complex exhibition, securing loans from multiple lenders, managing the installation of the works, and assisting F. Steven Kijek in arranging for the various public programs being held at the Arts Club in conjunction with the exhibition.

June Hajjar
President
Arts Club of Washington

Patricia Quealy Moore
Chair, Exhibition Committee
Arts Club of Washington

INTRODUCTION BY GUEST CURATOR IF DUCCIO LIVED IN ADAMS MORGAN AND HAD A CAMERA

Manon Cleary used her exquisite technique to depict a different universe. Perhaps not quite the spiritual universe Duccio di Buoninsegna revealed in his 13th century altarpieces, but a sensual one that was similarly beyond our reach. Her academic training and use of photography may have steered her away from the hierarchical and perspectival distortions Duccio employed for spiritual impact, but Cleary was in no sense a photo-realist. She was a conjurer; tempting us with a world just outside our bourgeois lives, a world of flesh and bones, longing, and loss.

Viewers could conceivably be troubled by comparisons between Cleary and Duccio. After all, Duccio was one of the greatest masters of religious painting and an innovator who helped usher in the Renaissance. Cleary was not a religious painter—she was a true bohemian, rebellious to any form of authority in the buttoned-down city of Washington. But Cleary's unconventional lifestyle and unorthodox beliefs had more in common with Duccio than one might think. Duccio "...failed to appear for military duty; and

on various occasions he was fined for nonpayment of debts, for creating a public disturbance, and even for what appears to have been the suspicion of practicing magic."ⁱ

By comparison with Duccio, Cleary was a solid citizen, though there is no question that she, too, practiced magic. Watching her on the floor, working by the light of her slide projector, one could only gape at the genius that allowed her to transform what she felt into flesh and blood... a kind of reverse transubstantiation. She was just what we needed in this city of pours, chevrons, and stripes. We recognized our nature in Cleary's work—the darker side we tried to forget.

Just as Duccio led painting away from the hermetic rigidity of medieval icons to the greater naturalism of the Renaissance, Cleary was also an innovator who helped us leave behind the formalism of the Washington Color School in favor of a greater humanism in our art. Her paintings point us towards the path

of our own potential Renaissance in Washington. When Cleary passed away in 2011, she was just beginning to be recognized nationally for the master she was. If her latest paintings were not yet being carried through the streets of Washington by adoring and reverent throngs as were Duccio's through the streets of Sienna, she just needed a bit more time than she had. We are starting to catch up to Cleary and her role in the rebirth of painting.

I am grateful to the Arts Club of Washington for taking one more step in the process of recognizing fully, at last, what Manon Cleary's art means for us. Cleary left us a better picture of ourselves. Maybe not our "better" selves, but she made us whole in the same way Duccio's achievements led to Caravaggio realistically rendering our sensual and emotional nature. We are imperfectly human and, like Cleary, we long for what we cannot have.

ⁱ Ernest T. DeWald, *Italian Painting 1200–1600* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).

Jack Rasmussen
Director and Curator,
American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center



MANON CLEARY'S ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

BY STEPHEN MAY

The human figure has been an enduring presence throughout art history, persisting even when the prevailing mood was hostile toward artists who chose to depict figures in representational terms. This was especially true during the middle and into the late 20th century, when Abstract Expressionism was all the rage in America, and art critics vigorously promoted non-objective art, while condemning representational work as reactionary.

By the 1960s, some intrepid artists were exploring new possibilities for creative, realist expression. They sought ways, as representational painter Philip Pearlstein put it, "to figure out how to be a realist, but not in the old terms."

Artists like Pearlstein carried the torch for realism from the 1960s on, regaining acceptability for the idea that one could work directly from observation, relying largely on time-honored practices and modes of perception learned from study of Western art. There was no single defining characteristic under the umbrella of realism, although efforts were made to assign artists to such categories as classical realism, social realism, photo-realism, and magic realism.

Manon Cleary

Manon Cleary (1942-2011) was one of a kind. Beautiful, intense, ambitious, gener-

ous, well-trained, knowledgeable, and supremely talented, she produced a body of art that is different, challenging, and of enduring aesthetic quality. Her restless, inquiring mind and adventurous spirit constantly drove her to seek new fields to conquer that stretched her artistic skills and imagination. Her crowning achievement was to harness the qualities of photography in the cause of subtle, nuanced oil and graphite nudes.

HER RESTLESS, INQUIRING MIND AND ADVENTUROUS SPIRIT CONSTANTLY DROVE HER TO SEEK NEW FIELDS TO CONQUER THAT STRETCHED HER ARTISTIC SKILLS AND IMAGINATION. HER CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT WAS TO HARNESS THE QUALITIES OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE CAUSE OF SUBTLE, NUANCED OIL AND GRAPHITE NUDES.

Cleary, who started out while Abstract Expressionism was still riding high, built her art on traditional approaches, while also finding new sources of inspiration and innovation in using photographs to depict the figure, portraits, and self-portraits. Few were aware that Cleary was a skilled photographer and master of darkroom processes, who made images integral to her paintings and drawings.

Particularly in her late work she played on the nuanced qualities of light and movement, imbuing her nude self-portraits with grace and dignity in fascinating composi-

tions. Her compelling self-portraits, both in oil paintings and graphite drawings, benefited from numerous photographs and are intriguing ventures into imaginative techniques carried out with consummate skill.

Cleary was often described as a photo-realist, but she resisted that categorization, saying that although she worked from photographs, "I think my imagery is more personal than traditional photo-

realism." She also stated that she had "no feel" for abstraction.

Born an identical twin in St. Louis, MO, Cleary decided early on to become an artist. As she told Washington photographer Paul Feinberg in a series of interviews, "I believe I was meant to make art; to me, it's like having a hobby and a job that are one and the same... The whole process of creating a painting is extremely pleasurable for me. I feel arrogantly special because not many people can do what I can do."

While earning her bachelor's degree at Washington University in 1964, Cleary

2. *Self Portrait*, 1978, graphite on paper. 29 x 23 inches. Estate of Manon Cleary.



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CLEARY SHOULD BE BEST KNOWN FOR HER STARK, METICULOUSLY ACCURATE OIL PAINTINGS AND SOFT, EXQUISITELY RENDERED BLACK AND WHITE GRAPHITE DRAWINGS, PRIMARILY OF HERSELF IN VARIED POSES. THESE IMAGES, INVOLVING THE TRANSFORMATION OF PHOTOGRAPHS, ARE ALL ABOUT LIGHT, SPECIFICALLY THE MANIPULATION OF LIGHT TO EXPLORE ITS DIFFERENT SUBTLETIES AND EFFECTS—DIRECT AND REFLECTED—ON THE HUMAN BODY.



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3. Manon Cleary with her twin sister, Shirley, 1949. Photo © Eilene Maret.
4. *Idol*, 1969, acrylic on canvas. 50 x 45 inches. Courtesy of F. Steven Kijek. An example of Cleary's "Pop" series.
5. *Juicer*, 1969, acrylic on canvas. 36 x 36 inches. Private collection.
6. Manon Cleary in Venice, Italy, 1968.
7. *Headlights*, 1970, acrylic on canvas. Collection for the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Another example of Cleary's post graduate work.
8. *Unicorn Rate #1*, 1995, oil on canvas. 48 x 60 inches. Private collection. This work illustrates how Manon used light from well-defined sources, generally located above and outside the painting, to bring life and drama to this painting.

received academic training in drawing and painting. She earned a master's degree from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in 1968, and spent a year in Rome where she observed the work of the Old Masters. This training provided her with the tools to become a successful professional artist, bolstered by a deep understanding of art history. Rome, she later recalled, was "the first time that I started to think about making art that had something to do with me as opposed to just a continuation of classroom assignments."

Cleary settled in Washington in 1970, beginning over three decades of teaching art at what is now the University of the District of Columbia. She became a well-

known personality around town, made her idiosyncratically decorated residence/studio in the Beverly Court building in Adams Morgan a gathering place for lively friends and acquaintances, and was a generous mentor to countless younger artists. Her death at age 69 was mourned in the Washington art world and around the country.

Manon Cleary, Obsessive Observer. A New Perspective through her Photographic Studies offers an opportunity to see some of her most innovative work, while providing insights into her motivations and techniques. It suggests why her multi-faceted oeuvre has been variously described as obsessive, disturbing, eccentric, iconic, breath-taking, and lyrical. This display also

documents why, during her lifetime, she was generally recognized as the Washington area's best figurative painter.

Early on, Cleary experimented with Pop Art (Fig. 4, 5, and 7, page 8) and depictions of exotic flowers, none of which she found satisfying. A superb draftsman, Cleary was transfixed by the effects of light on the human body. Gradually she created images drawn from personal experiences and based on photographs. Often using her own body as subject matter, she acknowledged that "all of my work is about self." She was also fearless, creating empathetic portraits of white rats and unsparring studies of male nudes.

Cleary should be best known for her stark, meticulously accurate oil paintings and soft, exquisitely rendered black and white graphite drawings, primarily of herself in varied poses. These images, involving the transformation of photographs, are all about light, specifically the manipulation of light to explore its different subtleties and effects—direct and reflected—on the human body. In evolving this light-focused style that Lenore Miller, director of the Luther Brady Gallery at George Washington University calls "Painterly Realism," Cleary reflected several disparate influences. Cleary's friend, art critic Jean Lawlor Cohen, who curated *Manon Cleary: A Retrospective* at the old Edison Place

Gallery in 2006, observed in her exhibition catalogue essay that "Certainly the label 'magic realism' honors her sleight-of-hand, her making art out of something (a photo) that is itself an illusion."

Caravaggio

Cleary's decision to become a figurative artist emphasizing the effects of light was inspired by her exposure in Rome to the work of Michelangelo Merisi—known as Caravaggio (1571-1610). The tempestuous Italian painter positioned models in dark environments, selectively illuminating them with external light sources. Some scholars suggest that Caravaggio trans-

posed figures onto canvas by utilizing an early camera obscura. Cleary, of course, had actual cameras at her disposal.

What intrigued Cleary was how Caravaggio used light from well-defined sources, generally located above and outside the painting. His scenes of dark interiors are strikingly illuminated by single or multiple shafts of light that strike various surfaces, creating dramatic contrasts between light and shade.

Caravaggio masterworks that resonate with Cleary's art include *Narcissus* (circa 1598), in which the title figure is illuminated by swatches of light and shade that dramatically pivot on the lad's fully lit knee, and *St. John the Baptist* (1601-1602), portraying a full-body profile of a curly-haired youth, posed in a manner akin to Cleary's self-portraits, with strategic beams of light reflecting off portions of his body. Caravaggio's unique genius

lives on not only in his magnificent paintings, but in the art of admirers like Cleary.

Photography

Cleary found that photographs of nudes were a particularly useful way to record and store information and an efficient means of studying the effects of light and shadow on the human body.

According to her husband, F. Steven Kijek, "She would put the timer on the camera,



9. Contact prints from photographic study for *Nude*, 1994 shown below.
10. *Nude*, 1994, graphite on rag paper. 23 x 29 inches. Estate of Manon Cleary.



10.

go get in position, and then the camera would take a picture...[B]y working in her darkroom or sending specific instructions if sent out for processing, she was able to capture different exposures of the same position from the same photograph." The different exposures "allowed her to see the darkness, contrast, and light more clearly."

Discussing her working techniques, Cleary said that her graphites and oils were "not necessarily...[in] fidelity to my photo sources. I would like the viewer to notice the unique interpretation—the 'me'—that I bring to my work, as well as the overlooked beauty and color I bring to an image."

Gerhard Richter

Few artists have used photography as Cleary did. A notable exception is the influential contemporary German artist Gerhard Richter (b. 1932). Some of his most interesting art is based on photos, often taken by himself, or newspaper and magazine iconography, which he melds into large-format, grey-scale paintings. Like Cleary, Richter does not simply enlarge and copy photographs as large-scale paintings; rather, he changes them in the process of reusing them, frequently blurring the focus of pictures, infusing them with a new aura.

In his work from the 1960s, Richter smudged paintings of clippings and snap-

shots by feathering the paint or smearing it while still wet and relied on grisaille—shades of grey—to add to the ambiguity of the images. Whether transforming a magazine clipping of a fashionable woman striding down a flight of steps, or transposing a photo of family members enjoying themselves in a speeding motor boat, translating a shot of his father holding his dog, he created hazy, exquisitely refined grisaille paintings.

While Richter worked in oils and Cleary in graphite, their results are similarly striking and compelling. Kijek recalls Cleary's excited sense of kinship with Richter while viewing a Richter retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in 2003.

Oil and Graphite

The manner in which Cleary used a series of photos for guidance on light and shadow in an oil painting are demonstrated in the images leading up to *Mystery Series #2* (Fig. 13, page 12). Close inspection of each photo reveals the subtle changes in the impact of the light, which Cleary sorted out for the desired look in the final canvas. In the painting, light floods the profile of her body on the left and captures highlights in her cascading hair. The standing figure is brightly illuminated on her backside, and shadowed on her left

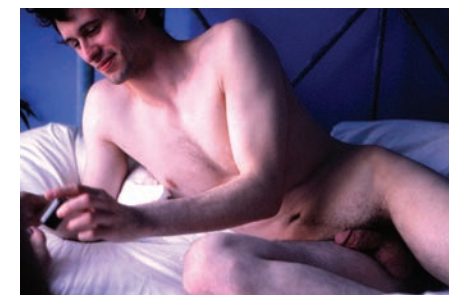
side. A shaft of light brightens the animal skull. It is an aesthetically pleasing composition that harks back to Caravaggio.

Cleary believed "everyone has a period of peak physical beauty, a time when they discover and feel satisfied with their exterior beauty....I took enough photos in my 30s that I could do nude and self-portraits long after my body sagged. My self-portraits look the way I saw myself in the mirror—minus all my imperfections. A reviewer in *Art in America* said my self-portraits were a "triumph in narcissism!"—perfect!"

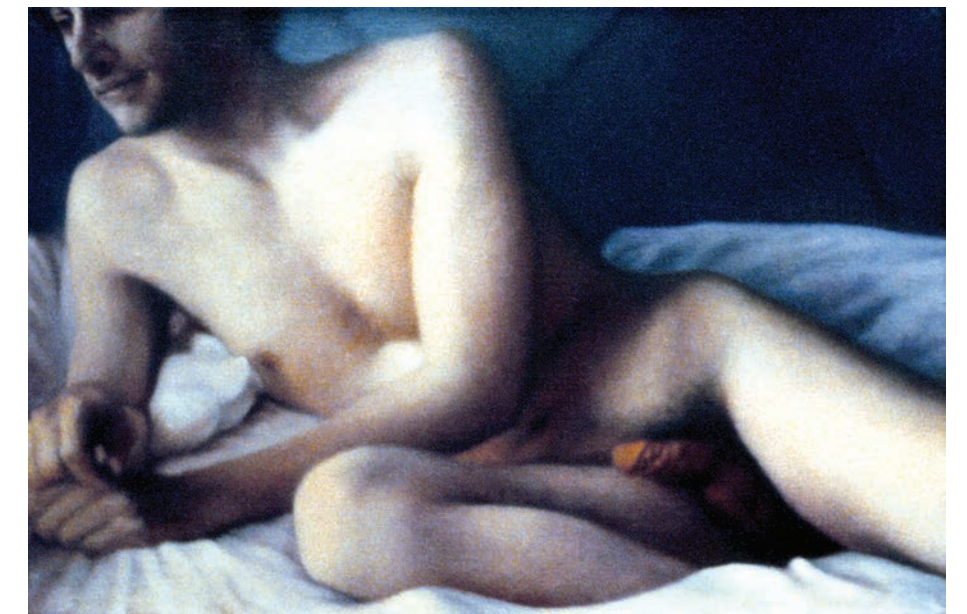
Her technical finesse with oil paint and with graphite is demonstrated by comparing a 1994 oil and acrylic, *Jim* (Fig. 12, page 11), and a 1994 graphite on rag paper, *Nude* (Fig. 10, page 10). While the poses are somewhat different, the artist has made spectacular use of chiaroscuro effects—strongly contrasting tones of light and shade—with dramatic lights and darks developed in continuously blended, modulated gradations ranging from white to black.

Mastering Graphite

With much effort, Cleary mastered graphite drawings of form, perspective, foreshortening, and light of the human figure. "It was difficult," she told Feinberg,



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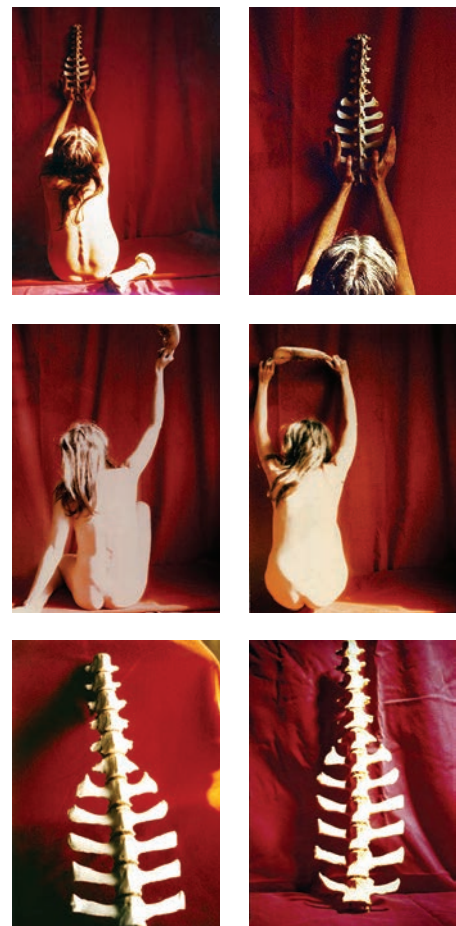
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11. Using natural light source from a window in his bedroom, Cleary captured various poses as compositional study for *Jim*, 1994.

12. *Jim*, 1994, oil on canvas. 8 x 12 inches. Estate of Manon Cleary.



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13. *Mystery Series #2*, 1988, oil on canvas 60 x 48. Courtesy of Steve Krensky. Photo © F. Steven Kijek.

14. In many of Cleary's photographic studies, she uses a self-timer to capture various compositions.

CLEARY BELIEVED “EVERYONE HAS A PERIOD OF PEAK PHYSICAL BEAUTY, A TIME WHEN THEY DISCOVER AND FEEL SATISFIED WITH THEIR EXTERIOR BEAUTY ... MY SELF-PORTRAITS LOOK THE WAY I SAW MYSELF IN THE MIRROR—MINUS ALL MY IMPERFECTIONS. A REVIEWER IN ART IN AMERICA SAID MY SELF-PORTRAITS WERE A ‘TRIUMPH IN NARCISSISM!’—PERFECT!”

“to make up the technique as I had no precedent. It was necessary to teach myself how to use the medium and to figure out what papers and erasers would work best. I also had to learn how much I could abuse the surface without destroying it.”

“Since she painted in the style of the Old Masters with glazing and using many, many thin layers of pigment on a canvas,” says Kijek, “she almost duplicated that technique using graphite.” Cleary utilized powdered graphite on paper for her drawings. Paper, however, can only accept a certain amount of graphite before it is no longer absorbed and starts collecting on its surface. Her solution was to use a fixative that created an additional adhesive

layer on top of the paper—the graphite adhered to the fixative, creating another layer on the paper. She would repeat this process, building layer upon layer of graphite on one sheet of paper that would normally only be able to receive a limited amount of graphite. A mineral whose crystalline formation is tabular and reflects light, graphite was well-suited to Cleary's purposes.

The multi-layered end result gave depth, sparkle, and luminosity to her drawings. As Cleary put it, “There's a glow to graphite that you just don't get from charcoal; that you don't get from anything else like it.”

“The graphite drawings literally look like



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platinum print or silver print photographs, because of the play of reflected light,” says Kijek. Under glass, which drastically distorts reflections of the image, however, Cleary's graphites lose much of their sparkle.

While retaining some debt to Caravaggio's chiaroscuro in paintings, here Cleary leaned more toward sfumato—the soft gradation of light tones into dark ones, eliminating sharply defined contours. Perhaps she had in mind Leonardo da Vinci's comment about light and shade that they should blend imperceptibly “without lines or borders, in the manner of smoke.”

The darkened photos that preceded a 1978 *Self Portrait* (page 9), while helpful in rendering the pronounced shadings of the final graphite image, are far different from the pose depicted in the drawing.

That pose offered the opportunity not only to record the spectacular lighting from the left of her bent leg, and the contrasting darkness defining the separation of her leg from the rest of her body, but also to show details of her ankle and toes and the splayed fingers of her right hand. This work is in the permanent collection at The Art Institute of Chicago (Fig. 47, page 36).

Series

Cleary often referred to her need to avoid inertia in her art by constantly taking on new challenges. Explaining why she created so many series on different themes in her mature career, Cleary said that “stagnation is very detrimental to an artist's work. Working is no longer a pleasure when you have to make art that looks like your art. The movement from one image

to another is what makes art interesting to me. I'll reach a point where I'll just become exhausted and say, ‘Okay, that's it,’ and then I'll take up something else.”

While there is some overlap among Cleary's graphite series, in each she sought out new challenges, searching for artistic progression by extending the reach of her techniques and refining her final compositions. Increasingly, her graphite drawings became more subtle and carefully focused in a manner that would make da Vinci smile.

The culminating works of Cleary's career focused on a series of sensitive graphite portrayals in which she modified the extreme contrasts of light and dark in favor of following the classical technique of sfumato. This softened the transi-

15. *Self Portrait with Randy*, 1977, graphite on paper. 39 x 27 inches. Estate of Manon Cleary.

tion from darkest shadow to brightest highlights, and created gradations of light tones into darker ones, with smooth contours, letting smoky light define curves.

For *Nude*, a 1994 graphite (Fig. 10, page 10), Cleary assumed a dreamy, sensuous pose leaning back against a satin pillow. The straightforward graphite is drawn from the same photograph but offers subtle changes in the effects of light: it is considerably brighter on her body than in the photos, her left breast is less prominent, and the sheen of the pillow is heightened.

In her *Male Nude* graphite (Fig. 17, page 15), Cleary brightened the light from photographs to emphasize the muscular torso, and obscured the head in a haze that suggests movement.

In *Self Portrait #6* (Fig. 23, page 18), from her *Movement Series*, one photograph reveals a window as the source of light, while her supple body creates a sense of movement. The resulting drawing obscures the light, which falls on her carefully positioned body in a way that patches of darkness and light enhance its compositional appeal.

In a 1984 *Movement Series #7* graphite (Fig. 25, page 19), her body assumes a quite different pose from the photographs, which were created from a higher perspective, with her head cropped out, except for her long tresses, and more pronounced light and dark effects. The graphite version does incorporate the dark band across her right leg, which also appears in one of the photos, and the subtle shading on her right bicep.

Cleary estimated that she spent three days on "darkroom work," developing and printing film, "with variations in photo papers, filters and exposure time, producing approximately 10-15 different 'images' per negative for each potential drawing ... Each drawing, which resembled no single photo source, took between 60-100 hours to complete."

A good example of that process is Steve's *Manon* (Fig. 19, page 16), in which she photographed herself from above, curled up on a quilt, and then used the images for the finished, softly stroked, evocative drawing. One difference is that the quilt is delicately lit and precisely rendered in the graphite drawing, whereas it shows little definition in the photographs. The pose and execution put one in mind of equally smooth, carefully lit *Odalisques* in the 1810s–1830s by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, which are so precise that they look like photographs.

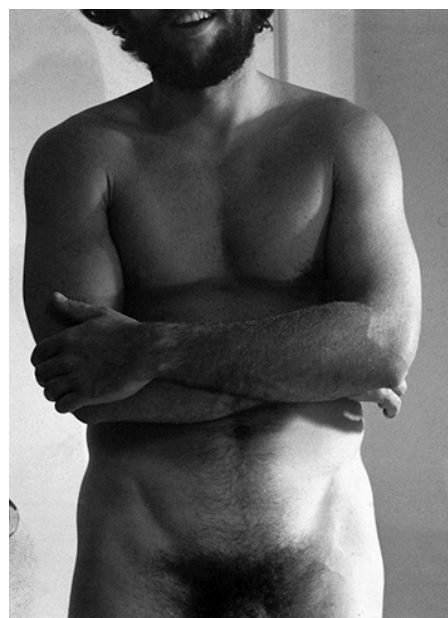
A standout from this period is Cleary's graphite of her curled up body on a striped rug, *Movement Series #7* (Fig. 41, page 32). The careful shading of the body, with highlights here and there, suggests a bronze statue, while the blurring of the head suggests movement.

Cleary's *Mysteries Series* was inspired in part by the great frieze, awash in red, in the Villa of Mysteries (50 B.C.) at Pompeii, and in part by bleached animal bones she collected in Wyoming.

For an oil painting, *Mysteries Series #4* (Fig. 27, page 21), photographs document Cleary's body with her brightly lit back while cupping an animal vertebra in her hands. The ritualistic position was likened by Jean Lawlor Cohen to a "eucharistic pose." Of note is the narrow shaft of light on Cleary's left arm in both the photo and the painting. Illuminated bones stand out against the red floor drape. Critics hailed this picture as the standout in a 1989 exhibition at Washington's Osuna Gallery.

Mysteries Series #3 (Fig. 29, page 23) is unusual because it depicts a three-quarter's view of the resolute artist's face, albeit shadowed, looking toward the viewer, while *Mysteries Series #3a* (Fig. 30, page 24) features a mysterious, cloaked person, who seems intent on striking the crouched artist.

In many ways the pinnacle of Cleary's career was meeting the challenges posed by



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THE CULMINATING WORKS OF CLEARY'S CAREER FOCUSED ON A SERIES OF SENSITIVE GRAPHITE PORTRAYALS IN WHICH SHE MODIFIED THE EXTREME CONTRASTS OF LIGHT AND DARK IN FAVOR OF FOLLOWING THE CLASSICAL TECHNIQUE OF SFUMATO.

16. Photographic studies for *Gene II*, 1974.



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17. *Gene II*, 1974, graphite on paper. 36 x 29 inches. Estate of Manon Cleary.



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18. Once Cleary decided on a composition, she made multiple exposures of an image so that she can clearly observe the subtles of light and shadow.

19. Steve's Manon, 1988, graphite on paper. 21 x 27. Estate of Manon Cleary.

20. This is first artwork that lead her to two decades of work on the *Movement Series*.

21. Randy, 1978, graphite on paper. Private collection.



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26. In her *Mystery Series*, Cleary staged various poses and compositions to create a narrative for the series.

27. *Mystery Series #4*, 1987, oil on canvas. 60 x 40 inches. Estate of Manon Cleary.



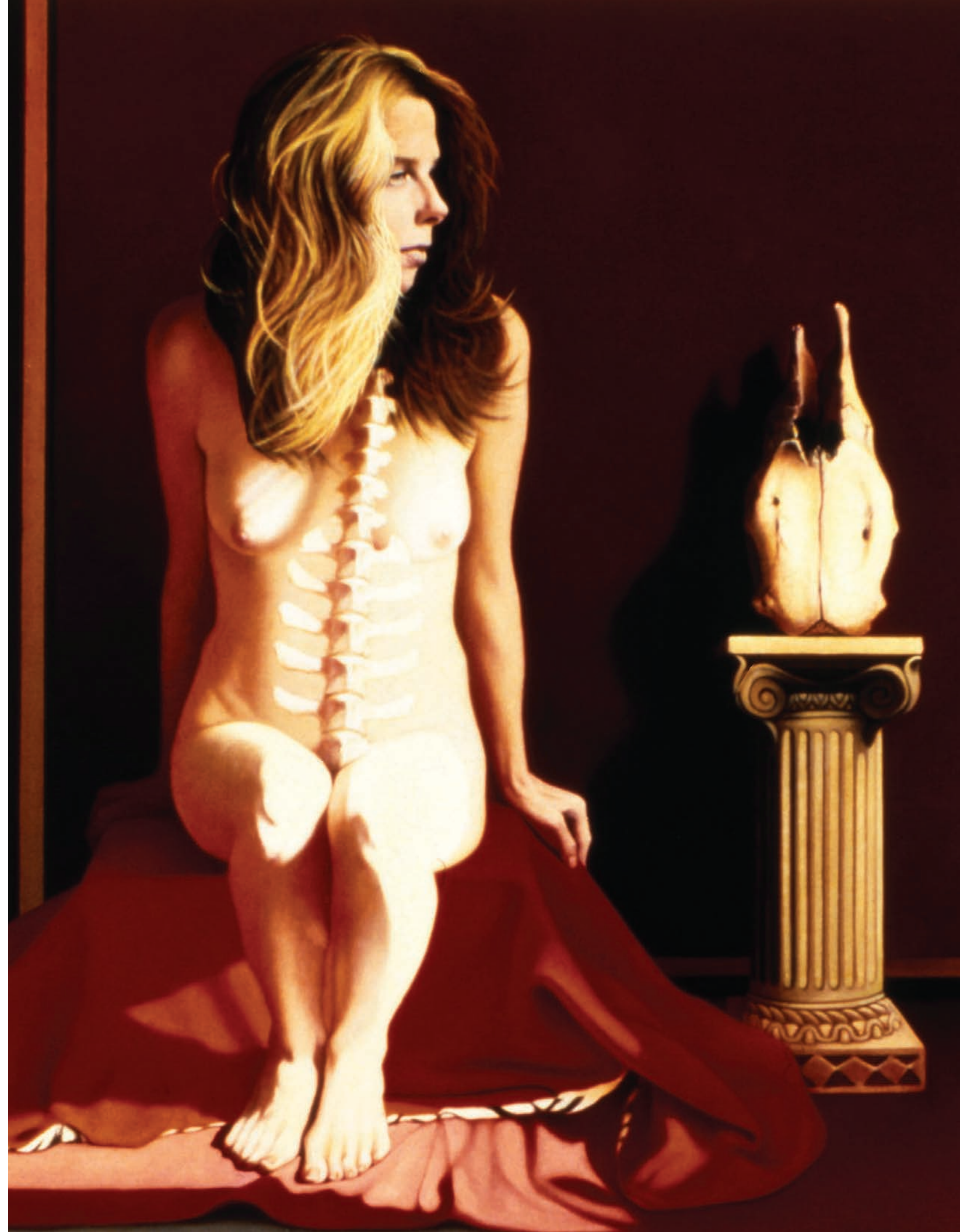
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28. Photographic study for *Mystery Series*.
29. *Mystery Series #5*, 1987, oil on canvas.
50 x 41 inches. Courtesy of Steve Krensky.



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30. *Mystery Series #3a*, 1988, oil on canvas. 50 x 41 inches. Estate of Manon Cleary.



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31. *Mystery Series #8*, 1988, oil on canvas. 60 x 48 inches. Private collection.



32. *Man in Plastic Bag #6*, 1995, graphite powder and pencil on paper. 25½ x 20 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of F. Steven Kijek. Photo © Smithsonian American Art Museum.



33. *Man in Plastic Bag #5*, 1995, graphite powder and pencil on paper. 25½ x 20 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of F. Steven Kijek. Photo © Smithsonian American Art Museum.



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a series depicting *Men in Plastic Bags*, (Figs. 32 and 33, pages 26 and 27) which involved especially complex effects of light on the plastic bags and on the male figure within. The examples in the exhibition document the technical virtuosity with which the artist captured the abstracted effect of light on the clear plastic and the distortion of the human figure within. As Cohen put it, "light catches on the surfaces of synthetic material and human skin to create a Rorschach of sorts."

Two of these haunting images are in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Joann Moser, the museum's Deputy Chief Curator, who chose the works, commented that "Manon Cleary had a distinctive vision and the extraordinary skills to realize it. Her graphite drawings of wrapped figures suggest people who struggle with secrets that restrict and suffocate them." Other Cleary works are owned by the Brooklyn Museum, Corcoran Gallery of Art, and National Museum of Women in the Arts, among others.

Equally fascinating and challenging are a series of graphite images of a man encased in a black, opaque rubber mask. Here, in addition to the challenge of rendering the effects of light on the silhouette,

Cleary recorded nuanced reflections from the hard, dark headgear worn by Kijek. These were created at a time that the artist, dependent on an oxygen machine to breathe, felt she was losing her own identity. (Fig. 35, page 28; Fig. 46, page 35)

Creating to the End

Plagued by chronic lung disease (COPD) acquired from decades of work with toxic fixtures, paint solvents, and graphite powder, Cleary wasted away to 86 pounds with 18 percent lung capacity. Undaunted, she continued creating work, notably two poignant series entitled *Thinner* (Fig. 49, page 38), unsparing photos of her emaciated body, and *Breathless* (Fig. 50, page 39), graphites focusing on her contorted face while gasping for air, reminiscent of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.

With admirable fortitude, Cleary continued to create important art to the end of her life. Asked what would happen if she couldn't paint or draw, Cleary responded, "It's an obsession—I do go crazy when I can't work ... It's my salvation, my constant; it's always been there, and it's always going to be there to fall back on, to hide in, or whatever I need it for. It's always been there as my ego. I think of

IT'S AN OBSESSION—I DO GO CRAZY WHEN I CAN'T WORK ... IT'S MY SALVATION, MY CONSTANT; IT'S ALWAYS BEEN THERE, AND IT'S ALWAYS GOING TO BE THERE TO FALL BACK ON, TO HIDE IN, OR WHATEVER I NEED IT FOR. IT'S ALWAYS BEEN THERE AS MY EGO. I THINK OF MYSELF AS AN ARTIST AND THEN AS A WOMAN—IN THAT ORDER.

MANON CLEARY

myself as an artist and then as a woman—in that order."

Christopher Addison of Addison/Ripley Fine Art in Washington, who was her dealer at the end, recalls admiringly that Cleary "was fearless, questing, generous and, despite everything, optimistic. She proved that while life is finite, there is no limit to the human spirit."

Toward the end of her life Cleary expressed concern about the fate of her work: "My art is my legacy, my children. I'm creating a history for myself the same way someone else would carry their genes forth. I care where my paintings go and how they do in the world, every one of them."

Clearly, she need not have worried. The abiding strength, aesthetic quality, and timelessness of Manon Cleary's unusual, photography-based, realistically-depicted human figures auger well for the enduring importance of her art.

Stephen May is a Washington-based art historian, writer and lecturer. He regrets that he never met Manon Cleary, but appreciates getting to know her through her work. He is grateful to her husband, F. Steven Kijek, for his contributions to this essay. Kijek is an indefatigable source of information and insight about his wife and her work.

35. *Steve in Rubber Mask* (unfinished), 2001, graphite on paper. 28 x 21 inches. Estate of Manon Cleary.
36. This photograph illustrates how Cleary uses her photographic studies to create her artwork.



37.



38.



39.

MANON CLEARY, OBSESSIVE OBSERVER: A NEW PERSPECTIVE THROUGH HER PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIES

BY F. STEVEN KIJEK

I remember Manon saying she began using photography as reference in 1968 when she created her paintings and drawings while she studied in Rome at Tyler Abroad. Her early graphite drawings were pretty much confined to replicating the photo source with different exposures. However, in her self-portraiture, Manon was not only developing her technical virtuosity, but also a progressively complex series of compositions.

The positioning of her contortions in self-portraiture developed into abstractions by the manipulation of several light sources. So by the mid-1970s, even though she was in the early stages of using photography, she had developed extremely complex figurative compositions, primarily using herself as the subject. She referred to these works as "static" (Figs. 37-39, page 30). In *Self Portrait*, 1978 (Fig. 47, page 36), we see a very sophisticated juxtaposition of light that creates an abstraction of the human figure. It is the very complex lighting that makes the abstraction.

I don't really know if Manon was aware of the complexities; I think this was her innate ability to understand light in its relationship to composition and the years of relentless

curiosity and dedication to her art. This virtuosity of technique, composition and use of light, came to a pinnacle before she took photography classes at the Corcoran School with Joe Cameron in 1978. At that time, Manon was on yet another quest to challenge herself artistically.

In a proposal to the University of the District of Columbia 1983-1984 Faculty Senate Research Program, Manon had suggested drawings that were "... to vary from previous works in the same material, in that they were to deal with the self as subject in motion, and as such, were to create a more abstracted and possibly warmer image. I sought to bring more of a feeling of flux, passage of time, and movement to my work, which previously dealt with more static images. Through these pieces, I had hoped to draw attention more to the underlying abstract design qualities of my work, beyond the simple technical virtuosity which had been, in the past, their draw for both public appreciation, commercial success, and critical note."

This new series was called *Self Portraits: Time, Movement and Light (A Series of Graphite Drawings)* (Figs. 23 and 25, pages 18-19; Figs. 40-43, pages 32-33). Manon's

description of her photographic methodology reads as if it were from a professional photographer. She explains: "Shot photos of self using a low ASA film (Kodak Plus X Pan ASA 125), at a very slow shutter speed (15), in a darkened room with only late afternoon sunlight as a light source. A timer was used to allow for time to set the F stop, focus the camera, and get into the pose, before beginning to move as the shutter closed ... Developed and printed film, with variations in photo papers, filters, and exposure times, producing approximately 10-15 different 'images' per negative for each potential drawing."

It's impressive to see the process by which she transformed an initial concept utilizing different light structures and compositions, taking a variety of photographs, and pulling different aspects of the figure from each to create a single composition. It's almost as if she created a theme and then a variation on that theme.

Now having a wider range of possibilities produced from more advanced uses of the camera, Manon was able to manifest a new creative vision by juxtaposing a composition from a variety of different photographic elements. And she was success-

IT'S IMPRESSIVE TO SEE THE PROCESS BY WHICH SHE TRANSFORMED AN INITIAL CONCEPT UTILIZING DIFFERENT LIGHT STRUCTURES AND COMPOSITIONS, TAKING A VARIETY OF PHOTOGRAPHS, AND PULLING DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF THE FIGURE FROM EACH TO CREATE A SINGLE COMPOSITION. IT'S ALMOST AS IF SHE CREATED A THEME AND THEN A VARIATION ON THAT THEME.

37. *Self Portrait*, 1980, graphite on paper. Private collection.

38. *Nude*, 1978, graphite and pencil on paper. 29 x 23 inches. Private collection.

39. *Nude*, 1981, graphite on paper. 29 x 23 inches. Private collection.



40.



42.



41.



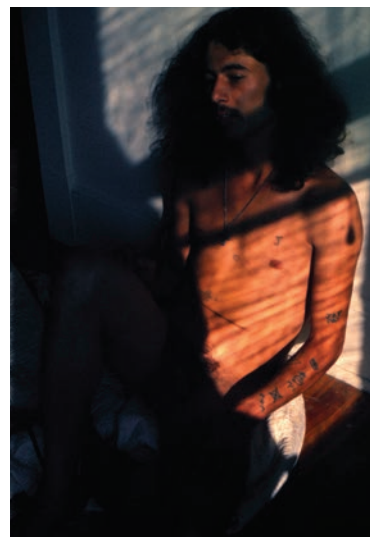
43.

41. *Movement Series #7*, 1984, graphite on paper. 23 x 29. Private collection.
38. *Movement Series #22*, 1994, graphite on paper. 23 x 29. Private collection.

42. *Movement Series #4*, 1984, graphite on paper. 23 x 29. Private collection.
43. *Movement Series #15*, 1994, graphite on paper. 23 x 29. Private collection.



44.



45.

ful: "As work progressed and confidence developed, the images became more abstracted. Abstraction of forms successfully freed me from reliance on photo images, with results being photographically convincing, but not photographically accurate. A lot more of the creative 'me' entered this body of work than in previous work." This genre, later known as her *Movement Series*, would continue intermittently for several decades.

In between these periods of the *Movement Series*, Manon continued to paint and draw, employing the same varied supplemental photographic studies, but now she was using the photographic studies to initially explore a variety of poses to complete the painting's compositions.

To achieve the concept for the painting of *Randy* (Fig. 44, page 34), Manon had an afternoon photo shoot with him and randomly shot photos until she found what she was looking for: a youthful hustler, sitting on her living room floor against a wall, bathed in the setting sunlight through which the Venetian blinds striped his naked body with light and shadow. It's a master work.

The same process of searching for positions and creating composition was used for the *Mystery Series* (Fig. 13, page 12; Fig. 27, page 21; Fig. 29, page 23; Figs. 30-31, pages 24-25). Hundreds of photos were taken until Manon had found the exact forms of her body to complete the paintings' compositions.

It wasn't until the early 1990s that she radically shifted direction altogether with the creation of *Men In Plastic Bags* (Fig. 1, page 3; Figs. 32-33, pages 26-27). The concept was confirmed: she would put her male models in large clear plastic bags and photograph them in different poses. Each graphite drawing was executed from a single photograph.

Artistically, this was a sharp change of direction moving from her earlier abstractions of the human figure. These are also different from what she had conveyed in the *Movement Series*. This abstraction of light, didn't use the contortions of her body for its structure, but instead it incorporates a translucency and the reflective qualities

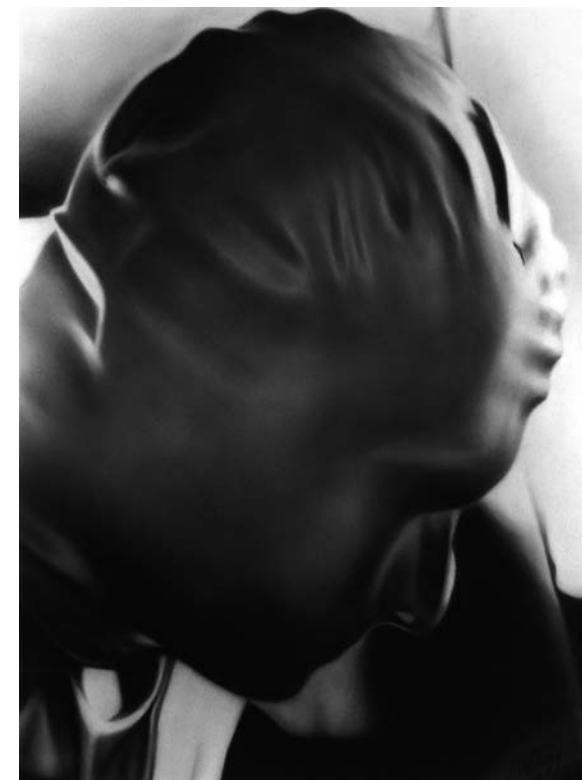
of the plastic to create the abstraction of light on the figure. Replacing the smooth gliding of light and darkness on her previous graphites, in the *Men In Plastic Bags* series, Manon fractured and attenuated the light and darkness on the figures' surface with the aid of the plastic covering. Again she had challenged herself and her technical abilities, and she succeeded.

Even during Manon's periods of extreme illness she had the will to create. In 1998, with a doctor's misdiagnosis of an eating disorder, and collapsing at 86 pounds with 18 percent lung capacity, Manon still created.

With her twin sister, Shirley Cleary-Cooper as photographer, Manon created *Thinner*: a series of six photographs illustrating her significantly emaciated physical state and her fading sense of self, all with the use of light (Fig. 49, page 38). In 2000, still unable to use the solvents, terpenoids, and fixatives necessary in creating her art, Manon courageously and cleverly produced the *Breathless Series* (Fig. 50, page 39). This series gives the viewer a frighteningly intimate invitation into her existence as she struggled to breathe with such drastically low lung capacity.

Again, light is playing a major role in the composition: it is static scintillation as if the minute scratches of light are the oxygen that she's desperately trying to consume. The image's darkness contains and immobilizes her to the point that her facial proximity draws us into the extreme experience of struggling for air. What technique Manon used to create the *Breathless Series*, I don't know, but once I was talking to her about it, she said, "It's very complicated, Steve. It's not like I just pressed my face against a photocopier and pressed the button."

When we met, Manon was intrigued by my rubber fetish and immediately wanted to do a photo shoot of me in a full rubber suit. She was captivated by how with the rubber acted like a second skin on the body—not white but black. Not softly reflecting light, but sharply reflecting the light. This type of darkness was a complete opposite from what she had drawn for decades.



46.

After a three-year absence from drawing due to her failing health, Manon found new inspiration and was drawing again. As was her technique for her art—pulling the light out of the darkness—she took multiple photographs of me in rubber to see how light curved on the rubber in one photograph, versus ripples of darkness and light in another.

Unfortunately Manon was only able to complete one drawing in the Rubber Series, as the materials she used were taking a toll on her lungs. A second drawing remains unfinished.

I consider myself very fortunate to have been married to Manon. She was a great artist and I absorbed so much from observing her in the studio and in life. She shared with me many great gifts—the greatest being the life of an artist. It is with these gifts that I bring you this first-time exhibition: **Manon Cleary, Obsessive Observer: A New Perspective Through Her Photographic Studies.**

46. *Steve in Rubber Mask*, 2001, graphite on paper. Estate of Manon Cleary.



47.



48.

47. *Self-portrait*, 1978, graphite with smudging and erasing on ivory wove paper. 19 x 25 inches. The Jalane and Richard Davidson Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago.

48. Photographic study for *Self-portrait*, 1978.



49.



50.

49. Manon Cleary and Shirley Cleary-Cooper, *Thinner #1-6*, 1999, digital prints on paper. Estate of Manon Cleary.

50. Selected prints from the *Breathless Series*, 2000, digital prints on photo paper. Estate of Manon Cleary.

MANON CLEARY BIOGRAPHY

1942-2011

EDUCATION

- 1964 B.F.A., Washington University, St. Louis, MO
- 1968 M.F.A., Tyler School of Art, Temple University, (Painting with a minor in printmaking) Philadelphia, PA (First year of study: Tyler in Rome, Italy)

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 39th Street Gallery, Brentwood, MD, *Creating a Legacy: Paintings and Drawings by Manon Cleary*; curated by John Paradiso and F.Steven Kijek.
- 2009 Addison/Ripley Fine Art, Washington, DC, *Manon Cleary: New Pastels*.
- 2007 DCAC, District of Columbia Arts Center, Washington, DC, *Herb's Choice: Manon Cleary: Skyscapes*; curated by Lea-Ann Bigelow.
- 2006 WAM at Emerson Gallery, Washington, DC, *Manon Cleary: A Thirty-six Year Retrospective*; curated by Jean Lawlor Cohen.
- 2005 Waddle Gallery, Northern Virginia Community College, Loudon Campus, Sterling, VA, *Manon Cleary: Drawings*.
- 2000 PASS, Washington, DC, *Self Portraits: Breathless*.
- 1999 Addison/Ripley Gallery, Washington, DC, *Exotic Bloom Series*.
- 1998 Abraham Lubelski Gallery, New York, NY, *Manon Cleary and the Villa Of Mysteries*; curated by Lee Klein.
- 1997 Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD, *The Body in Question*; curated by Lee Fleming.
- 1996 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, *Art Sites 96*.
- 1994 Addison/Ripley Gallery, Washington, DC, *Movement Series*.
- 1991 J. Rosenthal Gallery, Chicago, IL, *Mystery Series*.
- 1989 Osuna Gallery, *Mystery Series*, Washington, DC.
- 1987 Tyler Gallery, State University of New York at Oswego, NY, *Manon Cleary*.
University of the District of Columbia, *Pastel Sky Scapes*, Washington, DC.
- 1985 Gulbenkian Foundation: Centro de Arte Moderna, Lisbon, Portugal, *Ten Year Retrospective*.
- 1984 FIAC, Grand Palais, Paris, France.
- 1982 Iolas/Jackson Gallery, New York, NY.
- 1981 FIAC, Grand Palais, Paris, France.
- 1979 A.J. Wood Gallery, Philadelphia, PA.
- 1972 Franz Bader Gallery, Washington, DC.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 American University Museum, Washington, DC, *Washington Art Matters: 1940's-1980's*; curated by Sidney Lawrence, Elizabeth Tebow and Jean Lawlor Cohen.
- 2012 American University Museum, Washington, DC, *The Constant Artist*; curated by Jack Rasmussen and Paul Feinberg.
- 2010 American University Museum, Washington, DC, *Catalyst: 35 Years of the Washington Project For The Arts*; curated by JW Mahoney.
- 2008 Kalamazoo Institute of Art Museum, MI, *The Figure Revealed: Contemporary American Figure Painting and Drawings*; curated by Deneise Lisiecke.
John A. Wilson Building City Art Collection, Washington, DC, *Heart of DC: Building The Collection*; curated by Sondra Arkin.
WAM at Pepco's Emerson Gallery, Washington, DC, *Herb White: A Taste For Art*; curated By Sarah Tanguy
Bayley Museum, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, *Masquerade*.
- 2005-07 Through Exhibits USA and The Mid Atlantic Art Alliance, Traveling to: Masur Museum, Monroe, CA; Wayne Stark University Center Galleries, College Station, TX; Perspective Gallery, Blacksburg, VA; Museum of Texas Tec University, Lubbock, TX; California State University Dominguez Hill, Carson, CA; *By Any Means: Works From The National Drawing Invitatationals*; curated By Donald Perry.
- 2006 Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC, *A Mint Menagerie: Critters From The Collection*.
- 2005 Warehouse Gallery Through WPA/Corcoran, Washington, DC, *Seven*; curated By F. Lennox Campello.
- 2002 Arts Club of Washington, *Summer Member's Exhibition*, Washington, DC.
- 2001 City of Baltimore, MD, *Fish Out of Water*; collaboration with F. Steven Kijek.
National Museum of Women in The Arts, Washington, DC, *Gardener's Delight*.
- 1999-00 The Art institute of Chicago, IL, *Contemporary American Realist Drawings*.

OTHER SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS VENUES

- Alternative Museum, New York, NY
- American Cultural Center, Bucharest, Hungary
- American House, Berlin, Germany
- Århus Kunst Museum, Århus, Denmark
- Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AK

- Asbæk Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark
- Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, FL
- Boise State University, Boise, ID
- Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY
- Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, San Diego, CA
- Galerie Asbæk, Copenhagen, Denmark
- George Mason University, Fairfax, VA
- George Washington University, Washington, DC
- Georgetown University, Washington, DC
- Herning Højskole, Herning, Denmark
- Holter Museum, Helena, MT
- Holtzman Gallery, Towson University, MD
- Huntsville Museum, Huntsville, AL
- Institute of Contemporary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- Instituto de Cultura Hispanica, Madrid, Spain
- Jane Haslem Gallery, Washington, DC
- Kasteev State Art Museum, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- Malmö Kunsthall, Malmö, Sweden
- Metropolitan Museum and Art Center, Miami, FL
- Most Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- Museum Nacional de Soares Dos Reis, Oporto, Portugal
- Museum of Contemporary Art, Finland
- The National Academy of Design, New York, NY
- National Museum of Fine Arts, Valetta, Malta
- National Society of Fine Arts, Lisbon, Portugal
- Oklahoma Museum of Art, Oklahoma City, OK
- Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA
- Pyramid Gallery, Washington, DC
- Rosenberg Gallery, Goucher College, Towson, MD
- Squires Gallery, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA
- The State Art Museum, Karaganda, Kazakhstan
- Taft Museum, Cincinnati, OH
- Terra Museum of American Art, Evanston, IL
- Toledo Museum of Art, OH
- Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia
- Washington Project For The Arts, Washington, DC
- Pratt Graphic Center, New York City, NY
- The Fort Worth Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX
- Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA
- Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

ARTIST IN RESIDENCIES

- 1997 Bridge Association, Tien Shan Mountains, Kazakhstan.
- 1996 Bridge Association, Tau Turgeon Valley, Kazakhstan.
- 1984 Ucross Foundation, Ucross, WY
- 1980 Herning Højskole, Herning, Denmark

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Nathan Goldstein, *100 American and European Drawings: A Portfolio*, Prentice-Hall, 1982.
- Frank Goodyear, Jr., *Contemporary American Realism Since 1960*, Boston (New York Graphic Society), 1980 (pp. 79 and 193).
- Mary Sayre Haverstock, *An American Bestiary*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979 (pp. 224 and 225).

CATALOGS

- Ruth E. Fine, Ray Hernandez-Duran, and Mark Pascale, *Contemporary American Realist Drawings: The Jalane and Richard Davidson Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago*, Hudson Hills, 1999.
- Art Sites 96 through Washington Review Magazine*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1996.
- Karen W. Valdes and Paul Cummings, *Divergent Styles: Contemporary American Drawing*, University Gallery, University of Florida, 1990.
- Mary Jane Pagan, *Approaching the Figure: Part I*, Georgetown University, 1989.
- Jock Reynolds, *Recollections: Washington Artists at W.P.A.*, 1975-88, Washington Project for the Arts, 1988.
- Jose Sommer Ribeiro and Lee Fleming, *Pintura e Desehno de Manon Cleary*, Centro de Arte Moderna, Gulbenkian Foundation, 1985.
- Paul Cummings, *Twentieth-Century American Drawings: The Figure in Context*, by International Exhibitions Foundation, 1984.
- Frank Goodyear, *Perspective on Contemporary American Realism: Works of Art on Paper from the Collection of Jalane and Richard Davidson*, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1982.
- Edward J. Nygren, *The Human Form: Contemporary American Figure Drawing in the*

- Academic Tradition*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1980.
- Nina Felshin, *Metarealities*, Washington Project for the Arts, 1980.

- Clair List, *Images of the 70's: 9 Washington Artists*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1980.
- Julia Boyd, *A New Bestiary: Animal Imagery in Contemporary Art*, The Institute of Contemporary Art of the Virginia Museum, 1980.

- John Perreault, *Selected 20th Century American Nudes*, Harold Reed Gallery, 1978.
- Jane Livingston and Charlotte Christensen, *Ung Kunst Fra USA*, Århus Kunst Museum, ICA, 1976.

- Manon Cleary: The Body in Question*, Maryland Art Place, 1997.

- Leslie Landsman, Patricia Venturino, and James Durham, *Fish Out of Water: Baltimore's Fin-Tastic Voyage*, Orange Frazer Press, 2001.

SELECTED PUBLIC AND CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

- American Embassy, Lima, Peru
- Bayley Museum, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA
- Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY
- Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, IL
- City of Kirkwood, Kirkwood, MO
- Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
- Dimock Gallery, George Washington University, Washington, DC
- Hickory Museum, Hickory, NC
- Kasteev State Art Museum, Almay, Kazakhstan
- Marietta Cobb Museum, Marietta, GA
- Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, Rochester, NY
- Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC
- National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC
- Norman Eppink Gallery, Emporia State University, Emporia, KS
- Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ
- The Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY
- Ponce Museum, Ponce, Puerto Rico
- Rutgers' University, Camden, NJ
- Southwestern Bell Corporation, Texas
- State Fine Arts Museum of Alma-Ata, Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan
- Stevens Corporation, Little Rock, AK
- The University of the District of Columbia, Washington, DC
- Ucross Foundation, Ucross, WY
- Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City, UT

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