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LINDA STARK *runaway love*

by Meg Linton

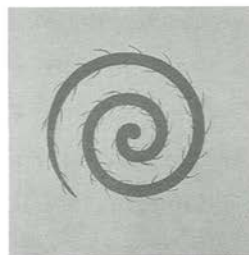
*The point is, the poets are more
attracted by the possible meanings of
a painting than by the evident means
used to make either painting or
meaning. The picture as object yields
to the subject for interpretation.¹*

Linda Stark is a painter with vision and purpose, who makes abstract paintings containing images from her everyday world to communicate the inherent themes of consciousness: love, death, and desire. Blatantly ignoring art world dictates of "fashionable" or "unfashionable," Stark creates deeply spiritual and symbolic paintings with profound references to both the physical and metaphysical realm. Stark's work is part of a long artistic history as evidenced by the 1986 survey exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*,² organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, an exhibition which had a profound impact on the artists of her generation working in Los Angeles.

Shortly after finishing graduate school in 1985 at the University of California at Irvine, Stark established a studio in Costa Mesa, California and took a job as the Chief of Security at the Newport Harbor Art Museum from 1985-87.³ In keeping the museum secure, she was allowed extended periods of time to look at the art in the galleries and see what withstood the "guard" test of time. Meaning, she would see what artwork would continually hold her interest for the two or three months it was on display. This experience taught her a great deal about time, resonance, and the act of looking. It also spawned a breakthrough in her work that would take her a year to realize.

While she was working at the museum, several important exhibitions were held: *Flemish Expressions: Representational Painting in the 20th Century*; *The Interpretive Link: Abstract Surrealism into Abstract Expressionism*; *Chris Burden*; *John McCracken* and various shows from the permanent collection. At some point she came across a tiny anonymous painting. This minute work generated a visceral experience which caused her to shift from making large ten by six-foot, smooth-textured Georgia O'Keeffe inspired atmospheric paintings to ten by ten-inch flat abstractions with a single graphic image. The survey begins here, in 1988, when the artist finds her own path—a circuitous route of inherently personal images demonstrating the epic conflicts of the human condition.

It begins with the spiral: an image of great potency in nature, mythology, and art. The spiral is a shell on a snail's back, the swirling gases of a distant galaxy, or a fast moving vortex washing down the drain. This archetypal shape is a constant presence in Stark's work, representing the infinite, universal energy and the karmic cycle of life. Stark's interest in the spiral is based upon her observations of nature and her studies of eastern religions and philosophies. Over the years, Stark has developed her spiral into various forms of concentric circles and rotations with multiple references to the body, natural forces and levels of enlightenment.



Spiral Pathway (1988) is a small, quirky, square mandala-like painting where a thorny red spiral floats in a blue field. The opposing colors cause an optical vibration and create a visual intensity. The thorns (or pesky hairs) sprouting from the bloody brick road indicate a less than smooth ride for this little Dorothy. The cycle of life is beautiful but bumpy, no matter what side of the rainbow. The push and pull of opposites or bitter sweetness is a continuing thread. In Stark's hands these elements are simultaneously empowering and defeatist, humorous and serious, joyful and sorrowful.

In *Kundalini* (1991) she directly refers to the serpent energy of Hindu philosophy using the vertical canvas as a figurative element—a torso. A luminous spiral rises from the base of the canvas to a large suspended orb made by pooling the paint and giving it an orange peel texture. (This stippling technique she later develops into a thick skin-like surface for her "flesh" paintings). Depicting the rising cosmic energy of consciousness from the root "chakra" or base of the spine to the crown chakra or skull, Kundalini manifests the physical route of energy through the human body. It is Stark's attempt to visualize an invisible-physical phenomenon—much like depicting "thought-forms" of Annie

Besant and CW Leadbeater in their book of the same name.⁴

Out of these spiral paintings arise several images that morph into concentric circles. However, unlike those of Jasper Johns or Timothy Nolan, Stark's circles are of the body and vacillate between being breasts and eyeballs. In particular, *Untitled (Double Spiral)* (1991), presents a crossover of imagery where the thorny path of two co-joined spirals stare at us as we stare at the sprouting cleavage. In *Todos Los Días* (1988), two disembodied breasts with large round nipples intersected with rings of blood red tears are splayed across the smooth surface of the canvas. This painting, along with *The Execution of Saint Agatha* (1988), mark the artist's motivation to create an idealized or hyper-realized uber-Woman—simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. Throughout history Saint Agatha has been depicted holding her breasts on a silver platter—the resulting torture of refusing the advances of Quintian, a wealthy nobleman of Sicily. Her captor did not demand her head (like Salome with John the Baptiste), instead, he wanted her source of life, nourishment and strength; all he got were two mounds of flesh.⁵

Stark's feminine badges of honor evolve (or in this case are reduced) over time from representing the whole breast to focusing on the expressive nipple. *Abstract* (1993) is a bold, sensual and erotic painting depicting two aroused life-sized nipples formed completely out of oil paint. Again, the small canvas acts as a torso and the nipples are a pair of alert eyes staring boldly into the face of the viewer. The male gaze is finally subjected to the female gaze. The surface is flesh-colored but lacks the skin-like, stippled surface of later works like *Flower Nipples* (1997) or *Third Quadrant* (1997). The nipple paintings are not simply an emblem that equals "Woman." The nipple paintings validate female sensuality, excitability and desire.

Along with expressing erotic passion, Stark weaves into her images the

themes of lost love, heartache, and suffering. In *Todos Los Días* (1988), three rings of bloody tears encircle the breasts and radiate from the heart center. Stark calls these tears her "fountain of sorrow." The "fountain" also appears as waterfalls of color streaming off the edges of the canvas from weeping eyes or from bleeding breasts as in *Untitled (Two Fountains)* (1991). Rivers of tears flood from a pair of solid black eyes and overflow a turbulent murky blue field in *Untitled (Crying Eyes)* (1991). The eyes peer out of a sorrowful mask like an ancient *penitente* in the *Semana Santa* processions in Sevilla. The hooded and masked figures march with their burdens once a year at Easter to repent for their sins and pray for forgiveness, hope, and strength. Stark's roman catholic/kitsch-like fountains of sorrow give us pleasure along with a little pain—reminding us suffering is part of living.

Stark's ability to create a strong and complicated visual language is a result of attentively looking at the world around her. Like the sacred paintings of the Australian Aborigines or Native North Americans, her inspiration is gleaned from her everyday experiences and her immediate environment. The "fountains of sorrow" are generated from living in downtown Los Angeles and seeing the Latin religious imagery in the neighborhood. When Stark worked at a law office in the late eighties, she stared at two things everyday: the herringbone floor which inspired her first weave paintings; and a Vija Celmins' ocean drawing which inspired her peaked ocean paintings, *Part* (1992) and *Be the Rainbow* (1994). She uses her own body as source material as it bruises, scars, and ages. She is a keen observer of her physical, emotional, and intellectual environment and is able to produce complex, yet readable, symbols expressing the ying/yang of human consciousness.

When Stark moved from downtown Los Angeles to the Silverlake/Atwater area in the mid 1990s, she discovered a new foe, friend and obsession, the Black Widow Spider. Her studio and house were severely neglected by the previous tenant and nature had taken over the

backyard and parts of the house. It was/is a haven for these nocturnal eight-legged femme fatales. Stark (who remains both terrified and fascinated by these creatures), has created a personalized mythology or arche-typology using the classic red hourglass and the ephemeral lethal web of the black widow.

Other artists like Vija Celmins and Louise Bourgeois have explored this imagery in their work, because the spider is a potent symbol of creativity, destruction and pride—evidenced by the story of Arachne told by the Roman poet Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*.⁵ It is a perfect image for Stark to adopt as it plays into the dualistic nature of her work. The red hourglass functions as a symbol of time—marking our mortality as it is branded on a black bulbous belly of a female spider—who (like the praying mantis) may decide to forgo the post-coital cigarette and kill her mate.

When Stark describes seeing the black widows as she walks to and from her studio at night, she notes that you cannot see the spider itself, only the hovering red hourglass bobbing in the dark. The widow uses her weakness, the exposed abdomen, as her strength—her bedazzled belly lures insects into her web. Stark sets the red, bold graphic hourglass in a black stippled field. At first she painted the hourglass life-size; then it began to grow as she connected with its wealth of meaning. Stark's deadly hourglass ultimately transforms into the woman in the red dress—powerful, seductive, and fertile; female as creator and destroyer, created and destroyed.

Stark mixes religious and pop culture references in sacred and profane ways without disrespect. She uses an intuitive and analytical process in developing her symbology to convey inspiration and meaning to her audience; much like stained glass windows of Medieval times when the public could not read but could associate a symbol with an event, person or action. One of her many temp jobs was working at IBM where

she learned about the marketing/status concept of "branding," and how this trickled down into the corporate culture, group dynamic and the individual. She was intrigued by the hierarchical symbology of monograms on the male executive uniform and how these emblems were used to create identity. Stark took this concept as emotional branding and translated it into a series of flesh paintings with an image or word "branded" into the painted, skin-like surface—*Third Quadrant* (1997), *Signature* (1998), and *Jesus!* (1999). Stark captures the detail of the brand in the flesh, she even creates a halo effect around the image as if it is a healing scab on the human body. *Jesus!* (1999), is a conflicted painting because the word is both an acknowledgement of a religious belief but also an expletive. Is it a prayer or blasphemy?

From her cadre of diverse images, Stark also uses bankrupt images like the "flower power" daisy of the mid-twentieth century to speak to those lost ideals of *Make Love Not War*. The rainbow has been adopted by gay pride, but Stark, in the peaked ocean painting *Be the Rainbow* (1994), uses it to express a desire to keep the ideals of the Hippy Generation (before it went awry) current and familiar. *Silver That Girl* (1998) is a tribute to Marlo Thomas and to the aging feminists who battled on the front lines to change Woman's situation in America. Stark reinvests these familiar but cliché images with fresh perspective.



Stark's work is extreme and this is only a brief introduction to her vast repertoire. Her elaborate technique and loaded images require a free association to delve into the deeper meanings and to find a personal connection. She communicates in a non-verbal way through her intense graphics, color, oil paint, and surface textures to provoke interpretation. Each aesthetic choice has meaning(s) and is carefully strategized to convey an expression of her human experience and to trigger

a thoughtful reaction of our own experience in this world. As Georgia O'Keefe said (and this is also true for Linda Stark): "I found I could say things with colors and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way—things that I had no words for."⁶

1. McClatchy, J.D., Editor. "Introduction," from *Poets on Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth-Century Poets*. California: University of California Press. 1988, p. XV.

2. Tuchman, Maurice. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. New York: Abbeville Press and Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986.

3. Newport Harbor Art Museum is now called The Orange County Museum of Art

4. Besant, Annie and CW Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*. Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1925, 1969, 1975.

5. "Arachne." Loggia. 17 June 2002. <<http://www.ogiia.com/myth/arachne.html>>. "According to Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, Arachne lived in the country of Lydia (which had a legendary reputation for producing some of the most splendid textiles in the ancient world), where she matured into one of the finest weavers ever known. Arachne was in fact so adept at weaving that she grew arrogant, and claimed her ability rivaled that of the goddess Athena. Athena, as the patron deity of weavers and quite an accomplished weaver herself, immediately took notice of Arachne, and traveled to Lydia in order to confront the boastful woman. There the goddess assumed the guise of an old peasant, and gently warned Arachne not to compare her talents to those of an immortal; Arachne merely dismissed this reproach, and so Athena was compelled to accept the mortal woman's challenge. They would each compete by creating a tapestry. Athena wove her tapestry with images that foretold the fate of humans who compared themselves with deities, while Arachne's weaving told of the loves of the gods. Such was Arachne's skill that her work equaled that of the goddess, and Athena, overwhelmed by anger, struck the hapless woman repeatedly. Terrified, Arachne hung herself, but Athena transformed the woman into a spider who quickly scurried off. Thus, this tale explains the spider's ability to weave its web."

6. Eldredge, Charles C., "Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley," from *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. New York: Abbeville Press and Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986, p. 118. (Endnote 25, p.129: Georgia O'Keefe, *Georgia O'Keefe*, New York: Viking Press, 1976.)