

1-1-1990

# Psychic Transformation: One Woman's Journey

Nancy Macko  
*Scripps College*

---

## Recommended Citation

Macko, Nancy. "Psychic transformation: one woman's journey." *Psychological Perspectives* 23 (1990): 86-95.

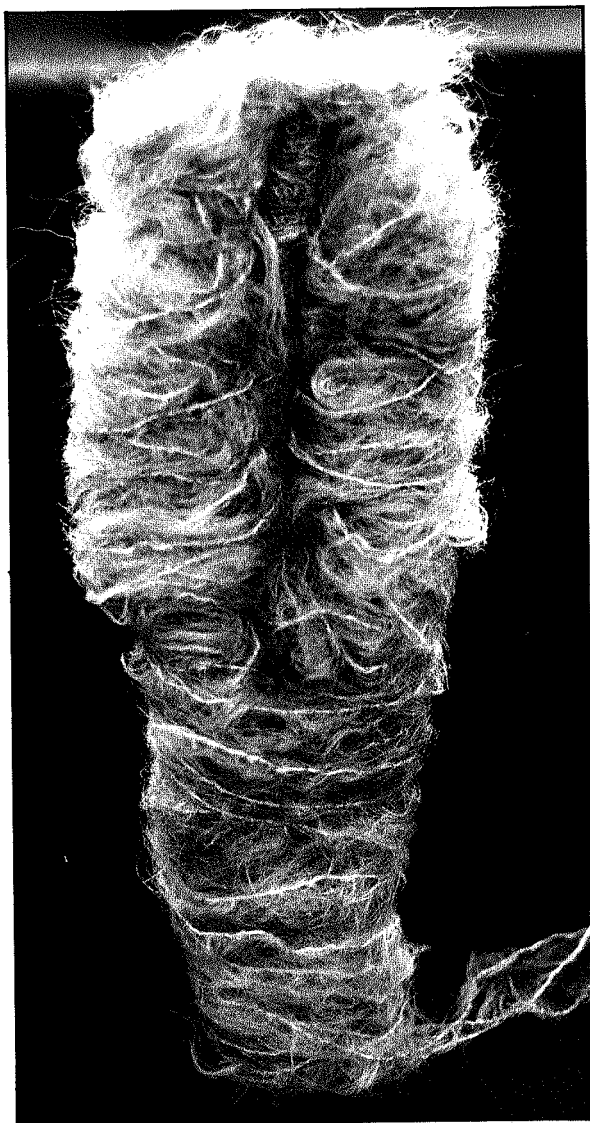
This Article - postprint is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

A · R · T

NANCY MACKO

# PSYCHIC TRANSFORMATION

*One Woman's Journey*



*"Innana"*  
*Mohair wrapped*  
*around sticks,*  
*1984*

PHOTOS: JAN BLAIR

I believe I am connected to the earth, to Nature and landscape through my body and soul, and these connections are the sources of my female energy. I honor my beliefs by creating visual metaphors for experiences that lack the words they need to “speak them to hear”; instead, I am trying to “show them to see.” In so doing, I hope to contribute to the community of women and feminists that is struggling to affect a change that will radically alter the way we think, the way we feel, and the way we comprehend our reality. *Tactile qualities, visual landscape, inner landscape, natural cycles, nature’s expressions of power and energy, and my body’s movement feed into the manifestation of my intangible, nonverbal knowings while painting.*



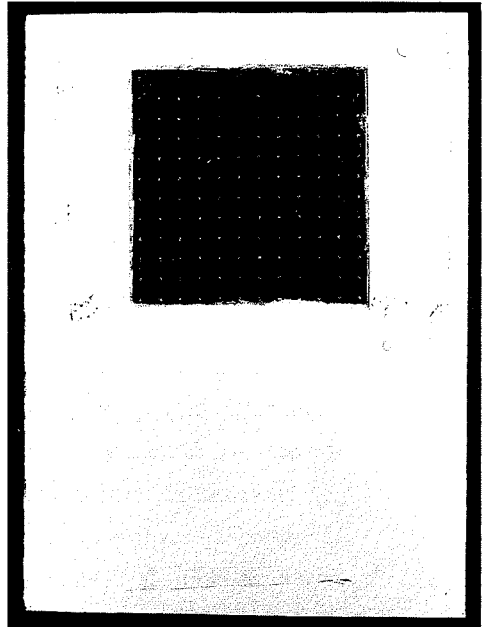
I want to acknowledge and affirm these connections in developing my spirituality and energy. Inner dreams and active imagination have enabled me to gain an awareness of some of the deeper layers of my unconscious. As a result, I recently created and taught a course entitled, “Understanding Woman’s Psychic Transformation through Contemporary Art and Literature,” in which we looked at expressions of transformation that were analogous to the birth, life, death, re-birth cycle Jung developed in his concept of the individuation process. *Together, these inner and outer awareneses create, image, and bring together into a new form parts that seemed unrelated, unconnected, unresolved.*

When my grandmother died in 1979, I was forced to confront and express my feelings more directly than at any other time in my adult life. It was during this crisis that I began to create works which came directly from the center of my feelings. Suddenly, there were no rules; to me, the death of my grandmother was an unforgivable event, and I no longer respected the "rules." I experienced a new freedom to express myself without restraint. This shift in my perception of permission, censorship and limits showed me how my intuition functioned and its connection to my artwork. I began to trust my feelings more and more. For me, this event clearly marked the awakening of a deeper awareness of my intuitive self.

*"Suddenly,  
there were no rules;  
to me the death  
of my grandmother  
was an unforgivable  
event, and I  
no longer respected  
the rules."*

---

*"22 by 30  
+ Square #18,"  
Acrylic and collage  
on paper with  
embossment,  
1980*



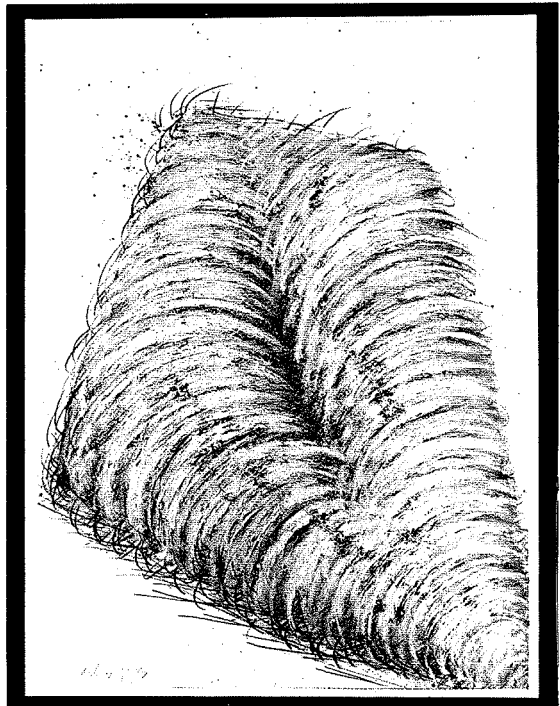
By exploring hand-rubbed dry pigments of pinks and black, I was able to express my pain and rage over the loss of my grandmother. I made collages using the roll ends from old wallpaper I found in her house and then added paper from my mother's house. I painted on the wallpaper—adding my mark, my comment. I abstracted the original motif of dry-pigments and wallpaper while continuing to work with a centrally located square because it seemed to function as a grounding device. It was a place to locate myself and my feelings in an otherwise unknown environment.

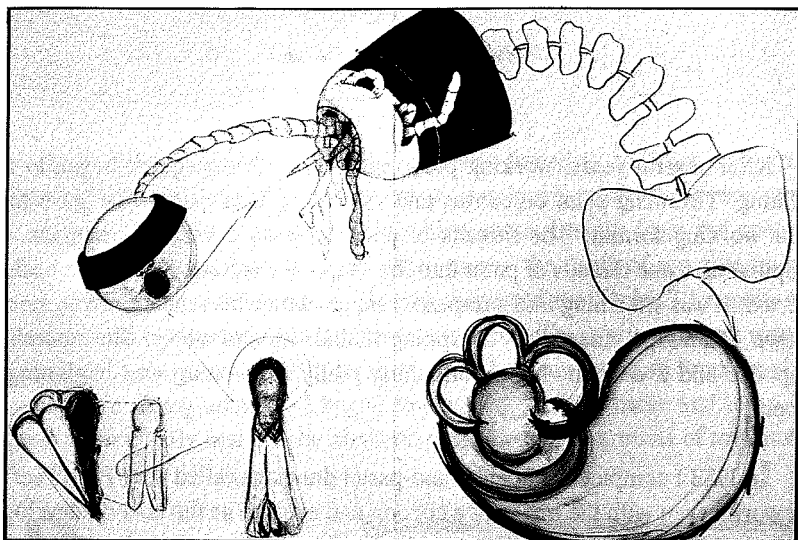
After several years, working predominantly with the square began to feel confining. Throwing paint on canvas and splattering it on paper now gave me a looser working format. The threads of paint took on a woven dimension. By manipulating these threads of paint into the shape of a square, the square became distorted: It was stretching into a trapezoid shape, which became a cocoon. I made my own goddess, "Innana," by wrapping mohair around sticks. She resembled a papoose and a cocoon. Now, something really fascinating was beginning to happen.

In 1983 I completed 25 pencil-and-pastel drawings called the "Pupa" series. This work began with the image of a cocoon and evolved as the cocoon developed bones, shed its shell, and became a wishbone. The wishbone spread until it almost snapped, but instead it became a fishtail. The fish grew and dove deep under the surface of the water. The water opened up and exposed its power and energy. When it became calm, it took its place in the larger landscape below the horizon line. The landscape opened up to show me its leaves, ovals, flowers, petals, tree trunks, stripes, blossoms, seeds, multiple horizon lines, multiple realities, metaphysical metaphors, my psychic journey, myself as a woman and as a reflection of nature.

Through painting and drawing, I have given birth to a psychic child. She plays in my unconscious, raising its contents up to the light of consciousness; she creates visual metaphors of an alive and ever-expanding spiritual self devoted to the process of individuation through transformation and rebirth. Though this birth occurred while I was working through my grandmother's death, I have also experienced this process in working with dreams.

"Pupa #7"  
Pastel and pencil  
on paper,  
1983





*"Mystery Rites of the Moon Goddess"*

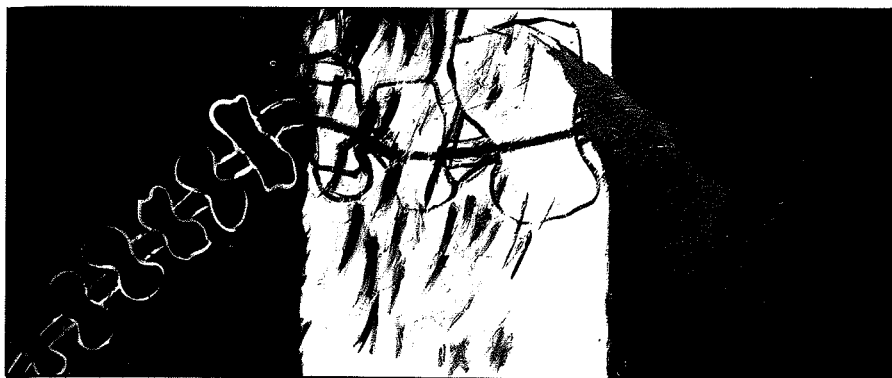
Pencil on paper, 1983

During the summer of 1983, I read M. Esther Harding's book, *Woman's Mysteries: Ancient and Modern*. At the same time, I dreamt a very powerful and what felt to be a very significant dream. In a drawing entitled, "Mystery Rites of the Moon Goddess," I attempted to reveal aspects of the dream: *An archaeologist showed me a small fetish doll that looked like a clothespin. As I turned it over, I saw that it was part of a large white plaster crystal—one of its sections could come loose or be replaced. A closer look focused on the head of the doll, which swelled up into a howling, blindfolded baby's face.*

I took all day to create the drawing, and I only knew what to draw up to that point. From the images released in my unconscious, together with the process of active imagination, I completed the second half of the drawing—the right-hand side—by giving the head a spine and pelvis and creating a folded, fetal-like form at the bottom of the page.

It took me years to recognize that this dream and the drawing that followed were a precursor of my own rebirth. The frozen, uptight, Madonna girl who goes blindfolded through a chewed-up process to come out united was attempting to stay awake and aware through the experience of psychic change.

Significantly, the images came from the dream. I placed them on paper. Then my life unfolded, because my dreams revealed what was going to happen. My painting and drawing tell me what is going to happen long before the event occurs on the physical plane. I can't always see it, because it is a metaphor. But when I look back, I often grasp it as an "ah-ha" experience. The integration of my thoughts and feelings that followed from this dream resulted in a new sense of wholeness and awareness.



"Wish"

Acrylic on canvas, 1984

*"My paintings and drawings  
tell me what is going to happen  
long before the event occurs  
on the physical plane."*

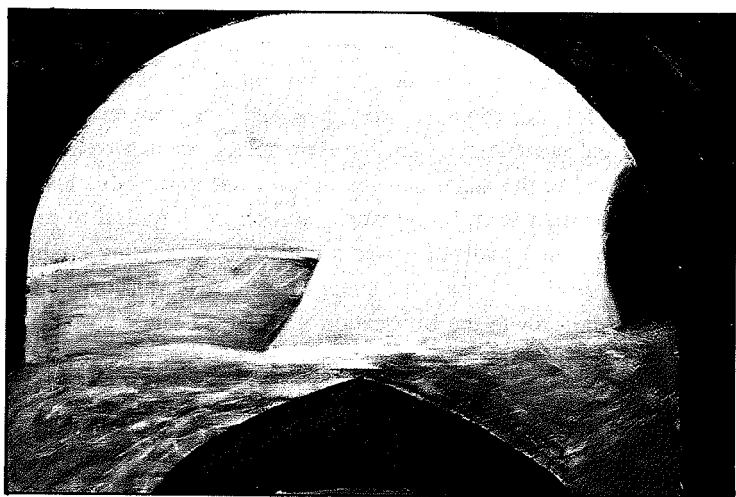
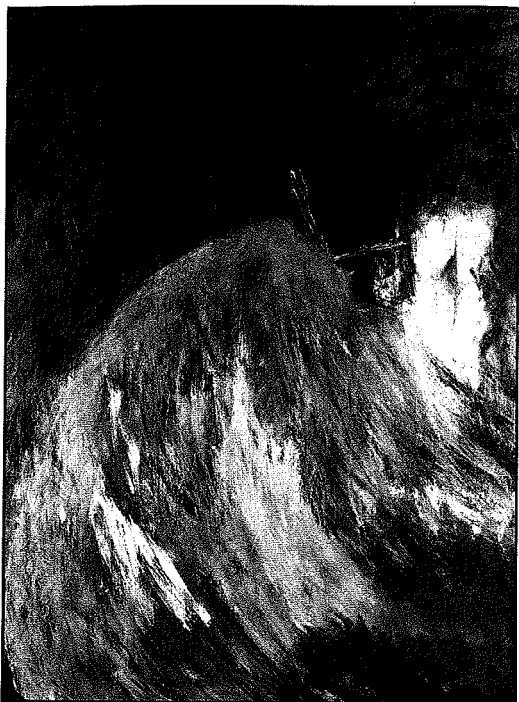
---

I repeated the backbone motif from the drawing in a painting entitled, *Wish*, which, with the help of a large, green, bifurcated flying form and a big pink wishbone, initiated a psychic descent. My initial descent was spurned by the loss of a lover. Questions about sexuality, fate, and luck were entangled in a confusion of feelings and awarenesses. I attributed my reluctance to surrender to the inevitable changes ahead to the anger and resistance I felt toward this loss. Initially, I felt that the bifurcated form in my work represented a refusal to give up one thing for another; then I realized it was a means of surpassing dualities. Seeing the wishbone spread until it almost snapped, seeing it transform into a fishtail, experiencing the growth the bifurcation implied—I knew I would be changed by this experience.

Works on paper from this period (1984–85)—entitled *Adam's Rib*, *Tunnel of Love*, *Secret Love*, and *Jinxed*—reflected my disappointment with my situation. I expressed my sorrow in pieces titled *Reliquary*, *The Mihrab (Prayer Rug)*, and *On the Brink*. Symbols of bad luck and fate surfaced as the wishbone, horseshoe, boomerang and the Greek omega symbol of ending. I've heard that contemplating one's own skeleton is symbolic of re-entering the womb. The fetus-like creature in *On the Brink* faces the doorway to a dark tunnel, possibly leading to a similar re-entry. In *The Mihrab* a significant half of the upper image dropped off to lay below the podlike form, and it remains there as the rest of the being flies off in *Wish on the Wing*. This marks a surrender to the below, as the paddle or arm becomes a fish leading me to deeper levels within myself.

*"Shaman with  
Three Faces"*  
Acrylic and pencil  
on paper,  
1985

*"Ship Ahoy"*  
Acrylic on paper,  
1986



*Anchored* in my inner reality to the unconscious and with the guidance of a *Shaman with Three Faces*, I *Disarmed* and watched myself separate into three selves: death, spirit, and sexuality. The dolphin, straddling both worlds and chuckling somewhat, led me to a lower domain. The fish then became the vehicle for my deepest, most turbulent emotions, and a series of paintings followed that took place deep below the surface of the conscious realm. I began my ascent in *Surfacing* and emerged in a boat from the cave or belly of the fish in *Ship Ahoy*.



Through the transformative process, I am now drawn to nature for the metaphor and inspiration in my work. I feel an inner calm when I am experiencing the beauty of nature. The landscape is a source of meditation for me, a spiritual experience. It quiets my thoughts and enables me to intimately experience what is around me. The landscape connects me with the creative part of myself, enabling me to synthesize my experience and reflect upon its significance.

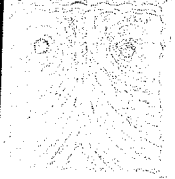
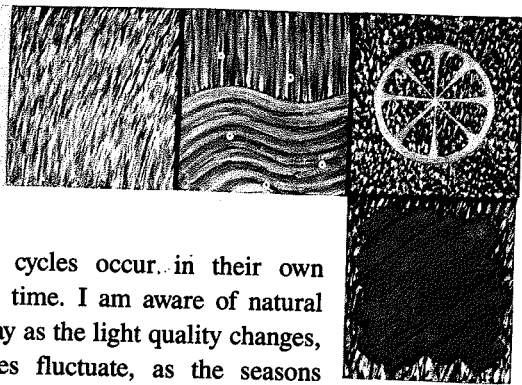
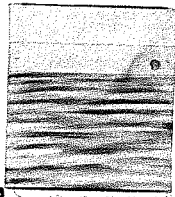
Using acrylic paints or varying viscosities (from thin washes to thick impasto) in conjunction with whipped-acrylic gels (pumice, extra heavy gloss, extra heavy matte), thinner gloss, matte mediums, and sometimes broken pieces of wood, I build surfaces of varying densities on large stretched canvases that give the illusion of light and space. In this way, I create paintings that are metaphors of landscape, the cycles of nature, and multiple levels of consciousness.



*"Hummingbird"*  
Acrylic on canvas  
with dried rose,  
1989

One aspect of nature which really intrigues me is the idea of "boundaries." Solid, physical boundaries appear to maintain distinctions and differences among the many elements of the physical world. In my work I often represent such boundaries with solid lines or stripes. Metaphysical boundaries seem to act more as transitions between different levels of thought and awarenesses. I often express the phenomenon of experiencing multiple levels of awareness simultaneously by creating more than one horizon in a painting or print. Personal boundaries feel like lines of distinction within myself, helping me to differentiate my feelings; in relation to another person, these boundaries facilitate the experience of limits, edges, risks and intimacy.

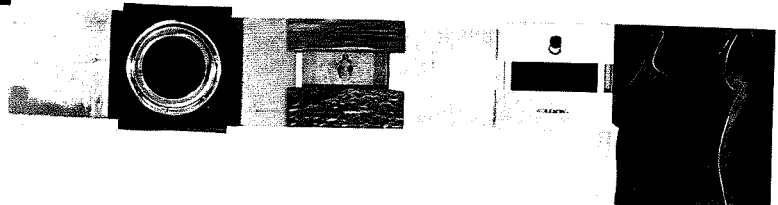
*"Femme Seas"*  
 Acrylic and wood  
 on canvas,  
 1989

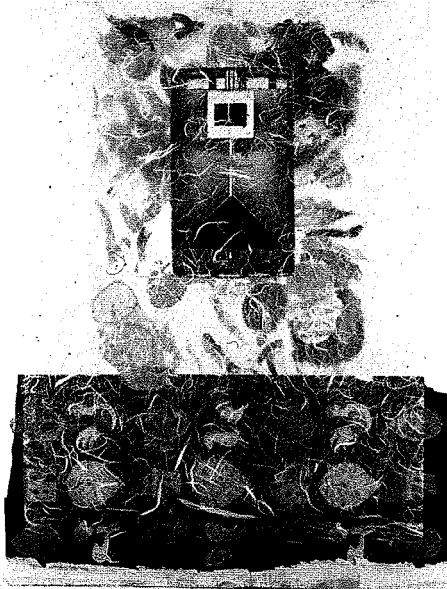


Natural cycles occur in their own time—organic time. I am aware of natural cycles every day as the light quality changes, as temperatures fluctuate, as the seasons gently shift. I perceive these cycles around me, I feel them within me, and, therefore, I also participate in them. In fact, natural cycles seem to be non-hierarchical and non-dualistic as well as always changing or always re-presenting themselves in a new form. They also seem to be creative in their intelligence or their consciousness.

In the spring of 1989 I was visited by several strong images of completed paintings in my dreams. On a residency in Virginia in October of the same year, I used the opportunity of that private solace to realize these paintings. The first came to be called *Femme Seas* and is clearly a commentary on the monthly blood cycle of a woman. It is a multiple-panel piece in which each panel refers to a different aspect of the cycle and is placed in conjunction to those aspects which precede and follow it. Another piece, *Cycle: Femme*, refers to a larger time-frame and seems to relate many of the transformations a female undergoes during her lifetime—baby, girl, adolescent, woman, goddess—with aspects of the landscape and Nature.

*"Cycle: Femme"*  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 and mixed media,  
 1989





*"Lark Eggs"*  
Mixed media and  
collage on paper,  
1989

During the same time period I developed a series of collages, the *Lark Series* inspired by a dear friend of mine—a woman who had been my mentor for over 10 years—who had been diagnosed with cancer. This was the first time I had *consciously* attempted to direct my artmaking toward a healing effort. Meditation, contemplation, and thoughts of endearment drew me closer to my friend and enabled me to express my deepest feelings for her. This time, though the work was still creating a sense of centeredness and balance, I was not trying to comprehend and accept loss as I had when my grandmother died. Instead, I was discovering a voice to celebrate and support life and to understand the complexities of life's experiences.

By recognizing events in the context of their cyclical patterns, I began to create ways to honor wholeness rather than fragmentation and compartmentalization. I acknowledged equality rather than hierarchy and realized that simultaneity occurred in every moment. I envisioned a balance between our minds and our bodies; our thoughts and our feelings; our hearts and our souls; ourselves and our environment. Together. Cooperatively. Mutually.

---

*Nancy Macko is an assistant professor of art at Scripps College and the Claremont Graduate School in Claremont, California, where she teaches drawing, printmaking, and computer graphics. She has been exhibiting prints, paintings and works on paper since 1977, both nationally and internationally. A one-person exhibition of her prints was held at Ashiyagawa Gallery in Ashiya, Japan, in November of 1989.*