

## Rozsika Parker and Margaret Priest “Still out of breath in Arizona” and other pictures’

*By 1975 works by Margaret Priest will have been seen in most parts of the country. One June 4 - 22 an exhibition of her drawings opens at the Garage gallery in Earlham Street, Covent Garden. From August 10 - 21 her work will be on exhibition at the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, and three of her drawings will be included in the touring show; 'An Element of Landscape' - works purchased by the Arts Council. She talked to Rosie Parker about herself and the motivation behind her work.*

M. I never feel that my work is successful; there is always something more to grasp; something more to dredge up. You see, on one level my work is about physical, formal workings of structure but it's also about spaces, places and times because I want to discover how much that absorbs me and makes me react is based on my background, and to convey visually these things that hover in the back of my brain.

R. Can you tell me a bit about your background?

M. Yes, I was an only child and my parents were relatively quite old when I was born, and consequently so protective and packed with fears where I was concerned that I was never allowed to do anything that might hurt me. There was a taboo on touching electrical things, crossing roads etc. But they let me play with what I wanted to, and gave me a tool set, which was quite enlightened.

R. So they were happy that you went to art school?

M. Oh no. They were both working class people. They'd both worked and studied to become clerical workers from being manual workers, and they expected me to take the next step and to become what they considered a professional person - they wanted me to be a teacher, a solicitor, a doctor; and because I managed to get O Levels and A Levels there was nothing in my way. They were shattered that I wanted to go to art school.

R. I'm surprised that you had the courage and confidence to persist.

M. It's not courage, it's effrontery - there is a terrific effrontery in deciding to become an artist. You decide that society is going to be rewarded for giving you a grant to study, and I see the fact that I can now teach part-time in art schools such as St. Martin's as a continuation of the grant.

R. Were you encouraged at school to go on to art college?

M. No, because the area I lived in - Dagenham - was a cultural wilderness. I went to the only grammar school in the area. And once you'd proved yourself to be clever, everybody expected you to go to university. I just had this terrible thing that I'd got to escape, I didn't know from what, but just to where I'd be valued, and I didn't feel I was valued there.

R. Not even by your contemporaries?

M. No, you see I developed late, was skinny,

weedy and asthmatic; it was fifteen years ago and the height of the sweater girl. I became desperately physically insecure.

R. Do you suppose that you made up for your physical insecurity by establishing a sort of physical perfection on paper?

M. It's very easy to draw those kind of conclusions. It's an interesting parallel, my insecurity and my security of craft, but it's probably superficial, covering up layers and layers of other motivations. Still I was very physically insecure and the fact that I broke my nose five times didn't help. However, my attitude towards my physical appearance was modified within a year of going to art school. Some people actually said, 'May I draw you, you've got such an interesting face.' Whereas before they were always saying, 'Christ, look at that nose.' Maybe I knew all along that that was one area where I could function with the least amount of pain. But it was difficult to go to art school, knowing that you could go to university, and knowing that that was a way of changing your financial circumstances. I wanted classy things.

R. When you went to art school and began to accept your physical hangups, did you have a corresponding increase in overall confidence?

M. Not really because I had no cultural background. I had no idea at all what was going on in painting at that time, and in addition I hadn't done art at school. Most of the people who went to art school in a working class area were not the people who wanted to go, but the people who were good at art and weren't good enough at anything else. So many of the people at college had been doing art at school since they were eleven, while I had done nothing. I was terrified, and unable to do what I thought was required, I just used to do neat things which were at least not dirty. I was immediately type-cast as a graphic designer/illustrator.

R. Do you think that the same kind of equation would have been made if you had been a man?

M. No, and my appearance was against me at the time. I looked fashionable, wore all the right clothing, and that marked me down as superficial. A concern with appearance is imagined to preclude a woman from the depth of intensity and drive required of a painter. It wasn't until I'd left Walthamstow after a year of pre-diploma studies and had spent one whole term as a graphic designer that I actually

realised that my motivation wasn't towards graphic design at all. I reapplied for a painting course, and burst into this kind of manly painting exercise; wearing jeans all the time and working on huge chunks of hardboard - throwing myself into it.

R. It's striking the extent to which your actions were effected by the prejudices surrounding women's appearance. Your experiences sound like the reversal of what Betty Friedan calls the 'frilly blouse syndrome' when women who do supposedly manly work feel compelled to adopt some ultra feminine item of clothing.

Today you are doing small, exact pictures.

Why did you abandon large scale painting?

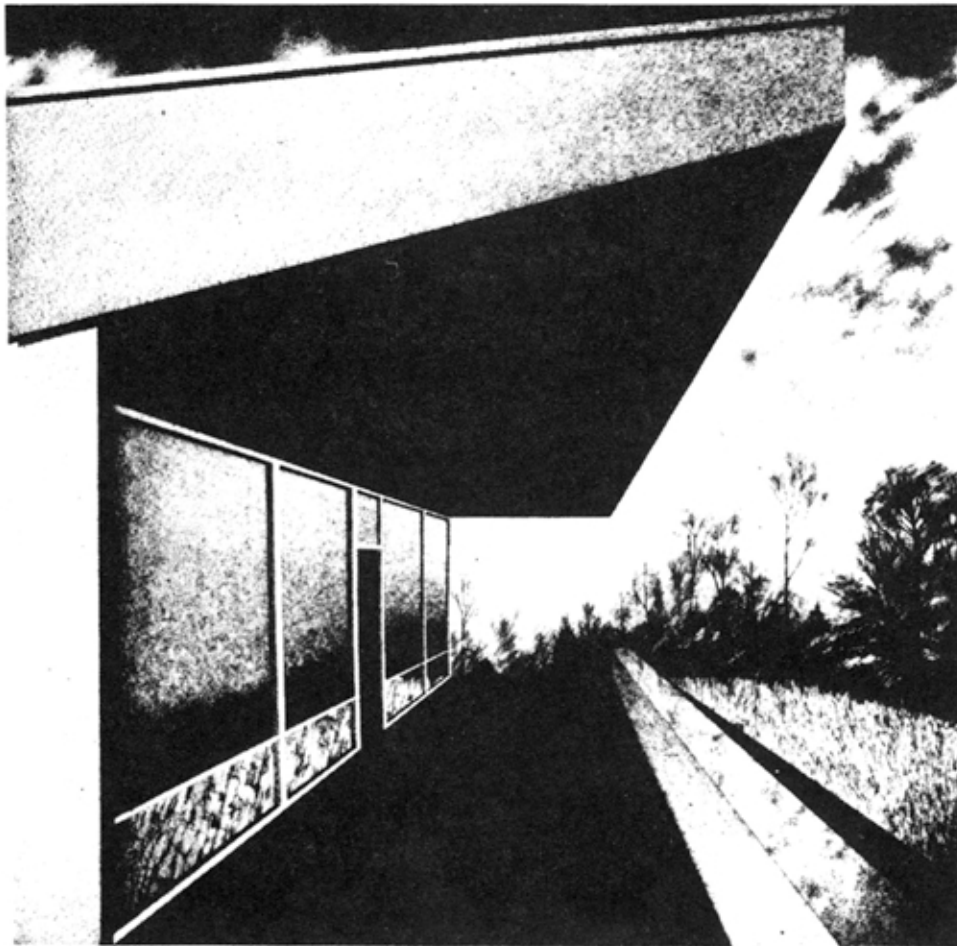
M. Well, I enjoyed it, and it was very valuable. Things like that always sound pretentious, but it was very valuable; it was an experience and it was physically very stimulating. But I was making pastiches; it was coming off the surface of what other women artists were doing who were emulating men, and that's one thing I don't want to do - I want to make a woman's art that's of a woman and not of a woman mutated in order to make it in a man's world. R. Your position is directly opposed to that of so many women art students who say that the stereotype of the woman as a small scale delicate worker is so entrenched that they are actually discouraged from painting on large canvases.

M. On the contrary I was consistently encouraged to paint large. It was as if anything small scale was associated with the female stereotype and couldn't be the vehicle for anything universally meaningful. Anyone working on a small scale drew the comment, 'Oh, knitting again!' For a long time I was determined to do nothing that was considered typical of a woman. But I eventually realised that my strength lies in the end of my fingers. I don't have a relaxed body. I feel that the kind of person who eats a lot and yet remains thin can't do big relaxed paintings.

R. Are you saying that biology is destiny?

M. No, but for me fighting against experiencing myself as the sort of woman I am was very destructive. I turned against everything that's part of our conditioning - I didn't want to consider having children or getting married.

R. Did you begin to realise that you could work in a way which might be seen as conforming to the female stereotype because



Housebite 1971 pencil on Whatman's handmade paper 20.7 cm x 20.7 cm

you felt able to do it in your own terms?

M. Yes, for example I eventually got married, and it's given me incredible freedom because I did it on my own terms. But I still play games, like very rarely wearing a wedding ring. I'm not sure whether it's a game, I mean how can you forget your wedding ring?

R. What do you suppose it symbolises?

M. I'm very happily married - I think everyday how lucky I am, I talk about my husband all the time which is a drag for everyone else but... I think losing my ring is not an attack on my own marriage but a defence against the labels society sticks on you with marriage. When I got married my parents thought, 'Ah she's in our camp after all.' My husband is a painter.

R. Does that create competition between you?

M. Obviously there's competition - how can there not be? You even compete over who has done the washing up. We talk about it though. I'd lived with someone else for five years and suffered all the pain of competition that remained largely unrecognised.

R. You mean that once you are conscious of competition you can deal with it? Do you think it spurs you on to work?

M. No. I don't think consciousness can be the solution but it can be a beginning; an area in which to negotiate, I certainly don't think competition with my husband or anyone else spurs me on to work. The greatest spur is having finished a piece - I immediately want to start another.

R. How do you react to working alone today?

M. When I was at the Royal College of Art I worked alone a lot because I suffered from something of a sense of isolation having changed departments. That made me think that I worked well alone but working alone in an institute is quite different from working on one's own at home. If work goes badly in my studio I find that I just end up sitting in the kitchen drinking mammoth cups of coffee and eating biscuits. My insecurities come back and I start to worry about housework; if I'm at home I don't feel comfortable when I'm just sitting and thinking because I still have the

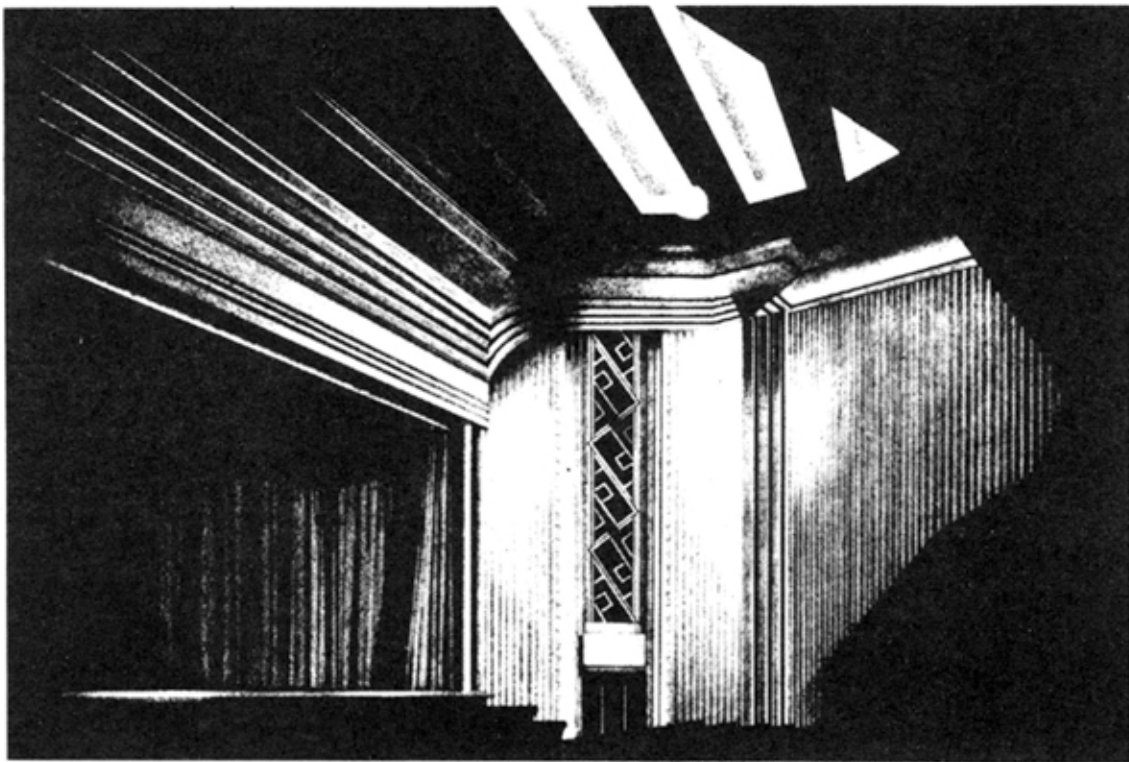
remnants of childhood guilt - thinking is dreaming - dreaming is lazy. Going out to teach and being with people definitely stimulates me - just looking at people.

R. Yet the places you draw are deserted.

M. I don't find it easy to be friendly. I find it difficult to rush up smiling and say hello. I like people who are friendly to me but I can't reach out to people, and my work is the same. My work demands that people come to them, they demand effort on behalf of the viewer. But they are avoidable - they melt into printed matter.

R. They are so mechanically perfect that they resemble photos.

M. Yes, there is a superficial resemblance; it's intentional. I'm trying in pencil to get closer to the more immediate stamp of authority which the media has. Most of the information we receive comes second hand from books, T.V. etc. Years ago I was working in the Science Museum and a boy came up to me, looked at my drawing and said, 'Did you do that or was it done?' My attitude is contradictory because or



*Auditorium 1972 pencil on Whatman's handmade paper 17.2 cm x 20.7 cm*

one hand I'm hiding in media manifestation, and on the other, despite all I know of current style, I'm absorbed in using the craft aspect as a vehicle for emotion. During the ten years that I've been involved in painting there have been constant changes in approach, and having a craft has given me an anchorage and the freedom of having a direction. It's a narrow precise language. Some would call it crystallised, others would say ossified, and I think it would be fair to see in it both those extremes. Some men have even said that it's frigid. Nobody would have used the term if I hadn't been a woman. Perhaps women are expected to convey a kind of warmth or earthiness of emotions. In fact a great many of

the pictures are of places I feel strong emotions towards. They are the equivalents of places I've dreamed about since I was a child. And I feel I'm a part of the places when I draw them. While I drew this one, "Auditorium", I felt that I had been there on some terrible October afternoon in an empty theatre with a cleaner sweeping up dog ends. And this one, "Still out of breath in Arizona" relates to the asthma I've had since I was a child. It has sometimes got to the point when I have to take cortisone. Then I take myself much too seriously and I'm a real drag. That's my other speciality; a goodline in dramatic acts. Anyway, as a child I was always told that unless my asthma improved I'd be packed off to one of those council run

institutions in Switzerland, and as an adult I'm always hearing that all American asthmatics always live in Arizona. I imagined arriving in Arizona and still being out of breath - what could be worse. □

*Margaret's drawings can be seen in 'Elements O Landscape' at:*

*Blackburn September 21 - October 20*

*Newcastle November 30 - January 4*

*Plymouth February 15 - March 16*

*Dorchester March 26 - April 20*

*The show will be touring until November '75 and the above dates are subject to conformation.*