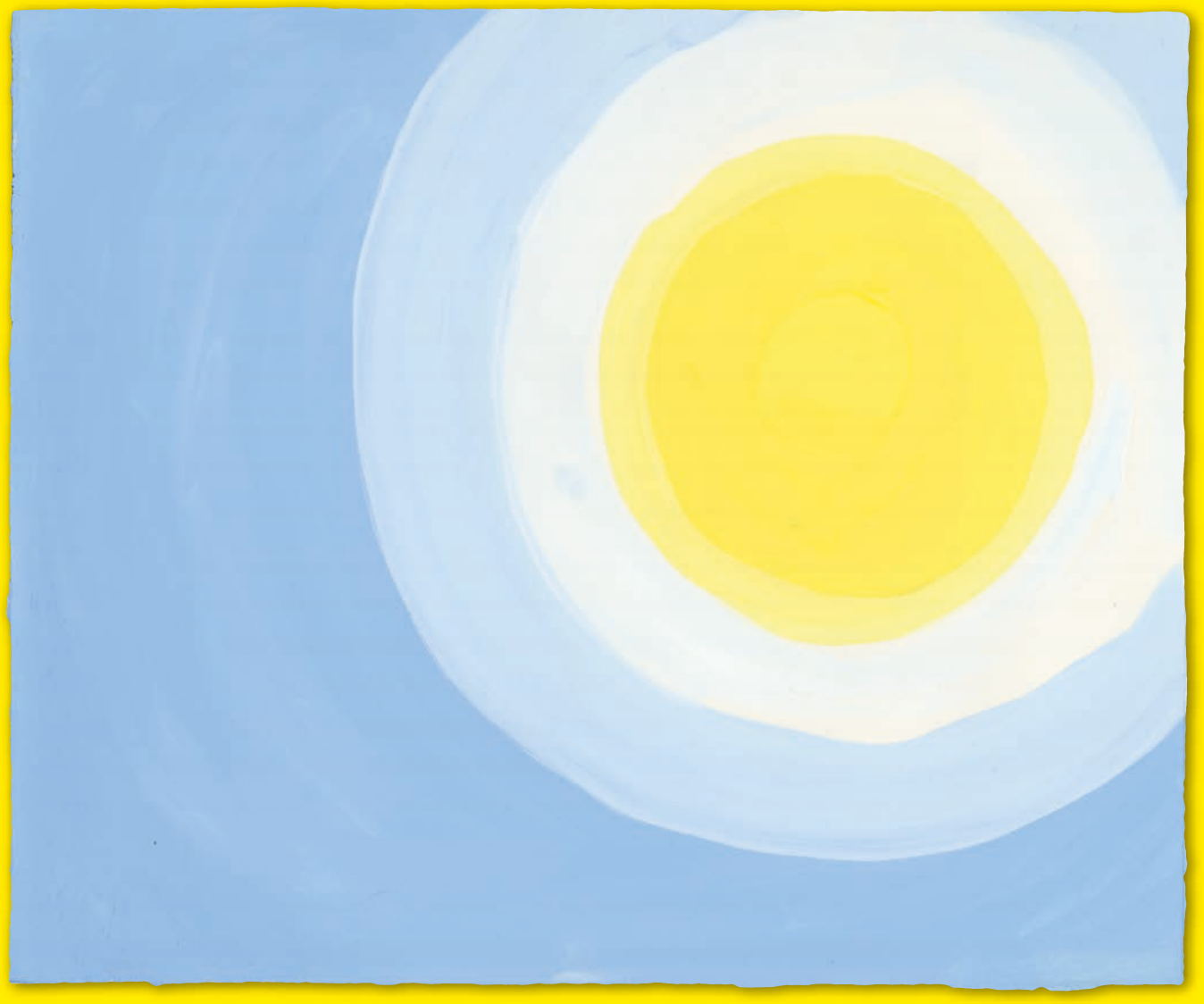
The Sandra Meigs Fonds

The Archives of 1,000 Questions

HELEN MARZOLF

Number 4 in a series of interrelated booklets exploring the Artists' Archives at the University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives



Original drawing for planned Angel Eyes *artist's book, gouache on Arches paper, 1989.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

(text as it will be used on paintings)

I own a pearl necklace.
I like cats, expensive perfume,
and flouncy floral fabrics. I have had a
wide variety of sexual experiences.

SENSITIVITY

I like to sit under a tree
and watch the clouds sail over me.
In the scheme of things on high,
I am but a little fly.

REST

There isn't much I can do about it.
I really don't care anyway.
I just hope no one finds out.

SECRET

The baby has a very high fever.
She just lies there like a sack.
Even when I pick her up,
she doesn't respond.

SICK

It is all below.
Snow covered rooftops,
chimneys puffing with smoke,
white moonlit hills, and trees
glistening with snow lumps.

DREAM

15 total
(4 others missing)

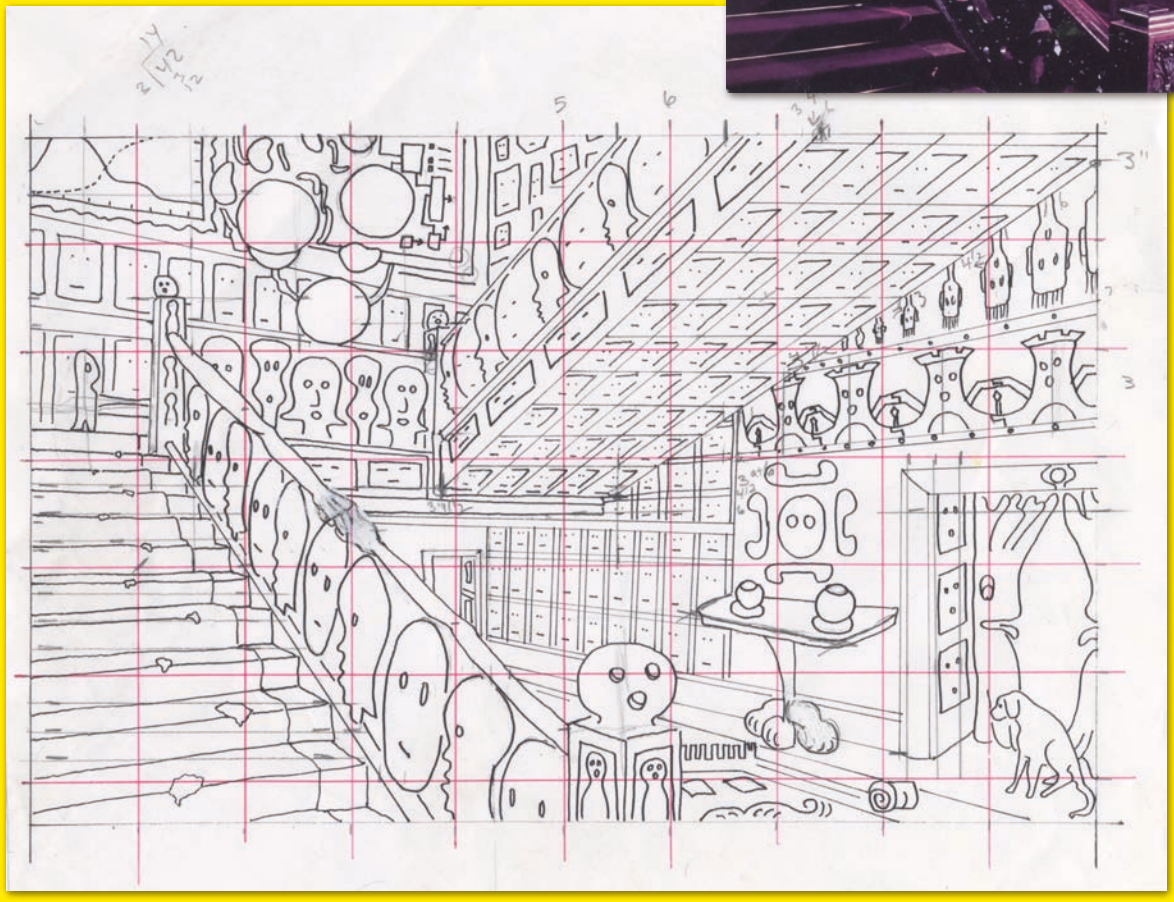
The Archives of 1,000 Questions

ARTIST SANDRA MEIGS BURST ONTO THE CANADIAN ARTS SCENE to immediate critical attention in the 1970s. The late critic John Bentley Mays, who reviewed *The Maelstrom* in 1980, was captivated by Meigs' forceful installation—"it nearly scared me to death," he later admitted. He eventually acquiesced to its experiential demands. In his review, Mays tracked a play-by-play: "You grope for a rational peg … you feel even more separated as you try to gather up the fragments of your life … You are pinched by its weight," concluding with a perceptive note: "At last, however, the piece stops, but without ending; is silenced, but without disclosing anything more than the unspeakability of it." Mays articulated the intensity of Meigs' earliest works, and he also identified a persistent characteristic of her transformative art: that is, it communicates on intellectual, multisensorial, and psychological levels. Her art is "problem-seeking" rather than "problem solving."[1] An aura of mutability permeates the Sandra Meigs fonds in the University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives, where researchers encounter the residual fragments of the generative mix fueling Meigs' art production between 1970 and 2007. The fonds also offers insights to Meigs' teaching practice, her advocacy for artists, and her contributions to professional and academic dialogue. In a larger sense, Meigs' papers sample the preoccupations of Canadian art during this period, the changing approaches to post-secondary arts education, and the vagaries of arts economies.

Although I worked with Meigs in 2013, when we presented *The Basement Panoramas* at Open Space, an artist-run centre in Victoria, BC, I was unfamiliar with her early installations in Halifax, New York, and Montreal. Her first projects were shown in multiple venues: unusual for an emerging artist. Like other artists and curators dispersed across Canada, I knew Meigs' works through reproductions and essays in journals and catalogues. The country's most erudite critics wrote at length, exploring the nuances

1 John Bentley Mays, "The Thinking Person's Artist: Sandra Meigs Follows Tradition of Philosopher/Painter," *National Post* (1 September 2001): E3. See also Mays' earlier review of Meigs' work, "A Harrowing Ride through Sandra Meigs' Maelstrom," *Globe and Mail* (12 April 1980): E11. Meigs' notebooks sample her early dialogue with Mays.

Example of text to be used on paintings in the series Canadian, 1995. [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]



of Meigs' unruly art.[2] Even in reproduction, Meigs' imagery and innovative presentation strategies astonished me with their intensity and beguiling strangeness. The gaps in my understanding of Meigs' production became abundantly clear as I delved into her papers in the University Archives. The fonds revealed the vast reach in Meigs' work, which coalesces as an amalgam of her evolving theoretical investigation, an embrace of vernacularity, a perceptive engagement with the land and landscape, all bound together with the materiality of her practice and the obvious joy she derives from making art. Meigs dynamizes her art by exposing her lived experience with a scary candor. Her powerful feminine voice inhabits the testosterone-inflated big top of art history with a satisfyingly barbed edge.

A Persistent After-Itch

Not surprisingly, the fonds has a lived-in intimacy, a token of the studio maybe. It contains notebooks, lecture notes, and correspondence interspersed with quick drawings, dog-eared exercise books, candy wrappers, foot-printed sketches, phone numbers, calendars, to-do lists, and class evaluation notations. The stream of sketches, often syncopated to text, suggests an urgency to render a fleeting insight or image, often in fluid and fugitive ballpoint pen—reinforcing a sense of immediacy. Meigs' journals are alive with forceful handwritten prose in varying registers: diaristic, narrative, poetic, expository, authoritative, and persuasive. The cumulative effect is one of intention and curiosity, propelled by a feral imagination.

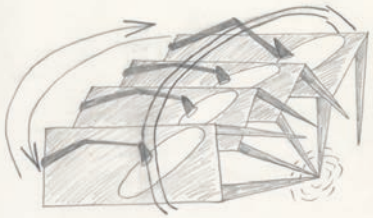
The autobiographical dimension of Meigs' art pulls us into skirmishes of love and sexuality, loneliness, careless social moves, grief, pleasure, confusion, wildness and danger, both real and imagined. Her website explains that Meigs "derives the content of her work from her own personal experiences, and develops these to create visual metaphors related to the psyche."[3] No simplistic, uncompounded confessional reportage here, however. Meigs has a honed ability to conjure imagery both familiar and disquieting, triggering an experiential jolt that lodges a persistent after-itch in the viewer's emotional DNA.

Even in Meigs' first works, she follows the barest whiff of imaginative speculation, elaborating covert intimacies that most of us keep to ourselves. For example, *The Crocodiles* (1976), a proposed artist's book comprised of delicately rendered images crawling with crocodiles, later appeared as a component of the installation *The Pale*

Postcard from the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian National Design Museum of the grand staircase at the Andrew Carnegie Mansion (2001, photograph by Andrew Garn) and, based on this photo, Meigs' sketch for What the Inside Sees, *2007.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

2 In addition to John Bentley Mays, other award-winning critics and curators have written insightfully on Meigs' work, including Lisa Baldissera, Louise Dompierre, Blake Gopnik, Robin Laurence, Sarah Milroy, Philip Monk, Diana Nemiroff, Yolande Racine, Richard Rhodes, Nancy Tousley, Elke Town, and R. M. Vaughan.

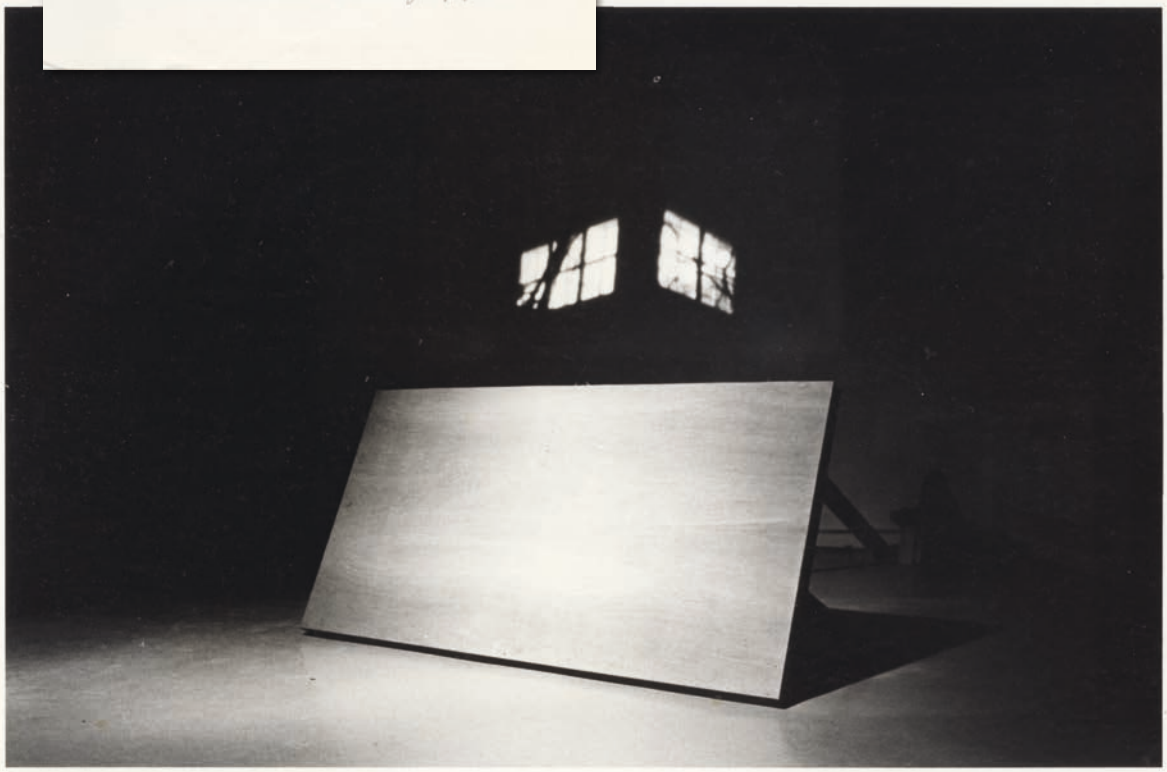
3 "About Sandra Meigs," Sandra Meigs, accessed November 29, 2018, https://www.sandrameigs.com/about.



flipping table with lamp

the table will be propelled with 2 motors, one on each side, and ropes and pulleys.

The table is to be included with the film projection



"The Maelstrom" 1980 A Space Toronto film installation Sandra Meigs photo: L. Fromer

Omnipresent Persistence (1978). One or two of the images of crocodiles are rendered in x-ray vision that reveal, in their reptilian torsos, a reclining figure of a girl dressed in jeans and a shirt. This floating figure, who looks a little like Meigs, emerges occasionally in the fonds. Who is she and what does she signify? In *Purgatorio, A Drinkingbout* (1982), Meigs takes us into the alcohol-infused tragi-comedic rituals of socializing and mating in the seventies. Meigs' congested *Purgatorio* is a melancholic, anonymous place, where her incisive drawings fuse legacies of Dante and country singer Hank Thomson in a series of vignettes from intertwined narratives.

A decade later, Meigs' drafts of the poetic text for *Baby* (1994), intoned by the deadpan voice of a young mother who has accidentally dropped her infant over a precipice, originate in the parental anxiety that has visited sleep-deprived parents of all generations. At that time, Meigs was a new mother, responsible round the clock for her baby daughter. Composer Bob Becker was struck by the country and western cadence of *Baby*. Meigs' text inspired his composition *Cryin' Time*. In his response, he abridged Meigs' words in his composition to "play even more on this ambiguity."[4] Another artist's book, *Suicide Portraits*, is a two-voiced dialogue that becomes increasingly disconnected, page after page, while the repeating images become larger and larger, as if filling a dead air space between the two voices, a no-go zone in this implied relationship. Meigs created *Suicide Portraits* (1996) after the death of her brother, around the same time she was developing *Dummies* (1997).

While Meigs consistently refers to her personal experience in her art, she characterized her work as deconstructive argument in a 1985 panel discussion: "The question is only a personal one for me at this point: was such and such a work successful in its pursuit of deconstructing an activity and way of knowing normally taken for granted?"[5] Meigs' philosophical proclivities surfaced in an earlier 1974 performance series, *The Dogwatch Works*, while she was a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). I became curious about three one-page texts that I discovered in box 1, folder 2 of the fonds: they proposed dog as deity. Initially, I did not know what they were, dog-god treatises or god-dog poems or what? When I identified them as part of *The Dogwatch Works*, I drifted into the library stacks where, in Garry Neill Kennedy's NSCAD chronology, *The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design 1968–1978* (2012), Meigs' recollections clarified the performances—a bit. She recalls the three part performances as:

Above: *Original drawing of the flipping table in* The Maelstrom, *1980.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

Below: The Maelstrom *installation at A Space in Toronto, ON, 1980. Photograph by L. Fromer.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

4 Lyrics for "Cryin' Time," adapted by Bob Becker from Sandra Meigs' *Baby* (1994), box 2, folder 48, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives. Becker changed the word 'baby' to 'you' and dropped or edited a few stanzas.

5 Meigs' lecture notes for the panel discussion "There's No Figuration Like New Figuration: What's New In Critical Illusion?," organized by the bilingual arts journal *PARACHUTE*, Toronto, ON, 1984 (box 1, folder 27, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives). Meigs was one of four panelists together with the critics Douglas Crimp and John Bentley Mays, and art historian René Payant.

To veil a beauty is a cultural reference (Veiled Sultans) - but further elides to what beauty is itself - hidden, or non-existence, a thought only, it cannot be explained (as ugliness can): It is a mixture of parts, or - a perfect oval face/a face equated with some non-organic thing (an oval), or else "as beautiful as Raphael's Madonna (after an art work, like an art work). — And so, when one says "She was so beautiful that she should wear a veil" One is already aware of the meaning or (actually the non-meaning) of the word "beauty."

As — perhaps The Elephant Man is so beautiful that he should wear a veil.

The Elephant Man is so horrid that he has to hide his body behind a cloak and mask, else he be mobbed by the crowd and seized by the police.

The Elephant Man is so beautiful that he has to hide behind a veil. (No more need be said)

— Contract-Narratives

Narrative: merchandise (Question raised by every narrative): What is the narrative "worth"? Here, the narrative is exchanged for a body (a contract of prostitution); elsewhere it can purchase life itself (in The Thousand and One Nights, one story of Scheherazade equals one day of continued life); and elsewhere, in Sade, the narrator systematically alternates, as in a gesture of purchase, an orgy for a dissertation, in other words, for meaning (philosophy is equivalent to sex,

(Ulysses) - Epic: Brechtian awareness

During Dogwatch No. 1, a person continuously occupied a large empty room on the second floor of a building at the Nova Scotia College of Art, to wait for a dog. At no time was the room left unoccupied, or the person inalert. Dog food was placed on the floor to attract a dog, and a window on the first floor was left open so that a dog could have entered the building. [Various texts and objects were taped to the wall.]

During Dogwatch No. 2, I was waiting for a dog in a large, empty room on the second floor of a building at the Nova Scotia College of Art. [Various texts and objects were placed on the wall.]

On the preceding day, I had an ad placed in the local newspaper which read:

> *Public Announcement, DOGS WANTED, all dogs wanted on Saturday, March 30th, 1974 at 1890 Hollis Street, gallery, Halifax 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. BRING YOUR DOG*

At the end of 8 hours, 6 dogs had come.

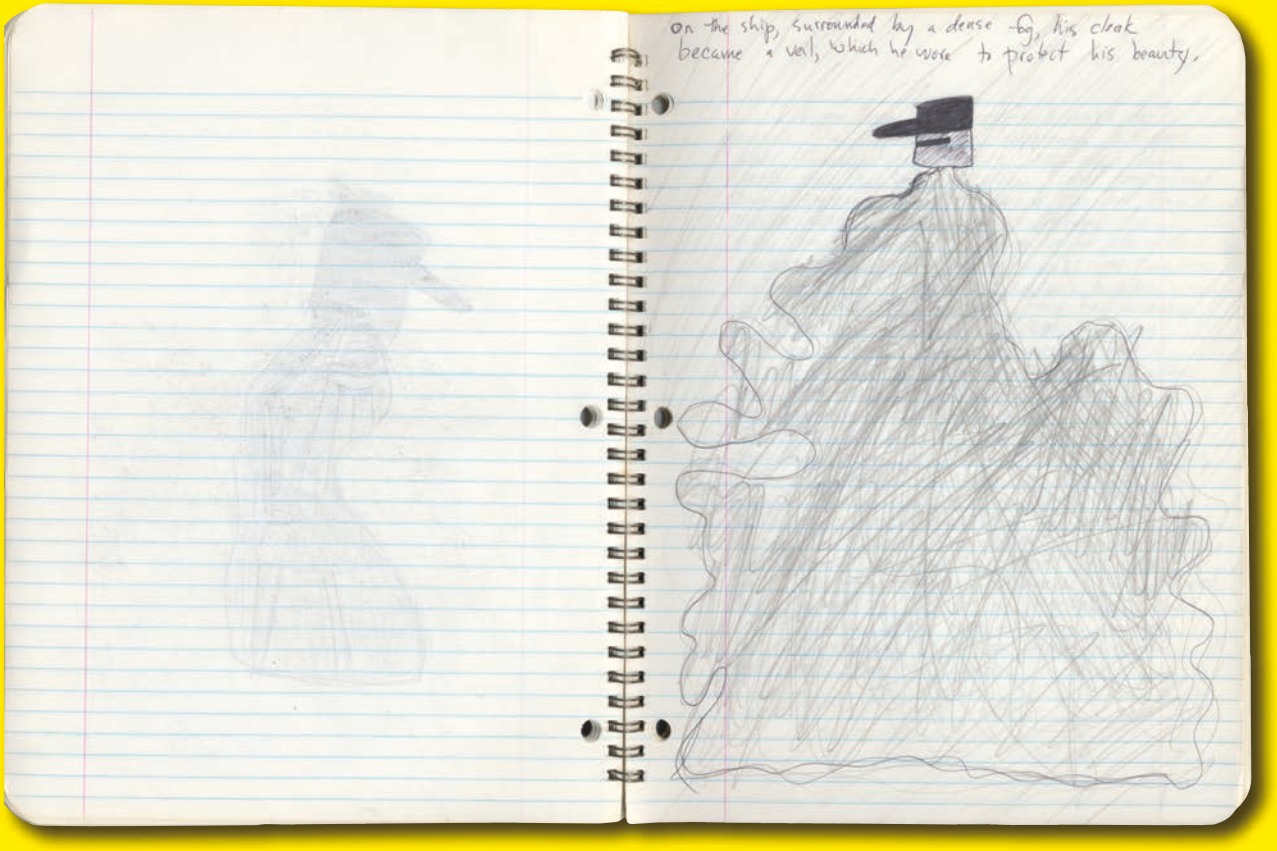
During Dogwatch No. 3, I was in a room continuously waiting for a dog. The room was on the ground level of a building at the Nova Scotia College of Art, with a door which opened directly on a street. To assure that waiting was fulfilled, I tried to prevent a dog from entering by hiring a person to act as a guard outside the door. They stopped all dogs from entering. If a dog did enter, I was to have ended the waiting. [Various texts and objects were placed on the wall.]

At the end of the second day a dog had not come.[6]

Meigs' descriptions of this absurdist set of durational actions posed new questions: were they a gloss on *Waiting for Godot*, or a response to the strangely inevitable waiting games within institutional settings, or were they simply about waiting for a very, very special dog that may or may not be a deity? *The Dogwatch Works*, with its sly humour and a parodic seriousness, is a brilliant example of a facet of NSCAD's ethos

Some of Meigs' handwritten notes about the Elephant Man for the film A Dense Fog, 1976. [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

6 Garry Neill Kennedy, *The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design 1968–1978* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 253, 254, 271. Meigs refers to objects placed on the walls in her recollections. In a telephone interview with me on 30 October 2018, Meigs described the objects as pairs of gloves sewn together at the wrist openings and pairs of socks sewn together at the opening of the sock. Meigs also "prepared The Dogwatch Works in documentary form" for the 1985 exhibition *Four Legs Good: The Dog Show* at the Art Gallery at Harbourfront in Toronto, Ontario. Concordia University shares images of *The Dogwatch Works* online.


On the ship, surrounded by a dense fog, his cloak became a veil, which he wore to protect his beauty.


They carried me upstairs.
I was terribly frightened.
Screaming with fear.

at that time. Meigs was at the college at the height of its influence and notoriety: her experience informed the humorous and rigorous approach that would characterize her work in the years afterward.

Following her Bachelor of Arts degree, Meigs pursued graduate studies in philosophy at Dalhousie University, while maintaining a studio practice and exhibiting.[7] She claims *Artforum*, a critical journal focused on contemporary art, initiated the lateral move to philosophy. While at NSCAD she struggled (as did a sizable percentage of the art community) to decode the dense articles in *Artforum*. A future researcher will analyze how the Dalhousie years influenced Meigs' art. However, Meigs subsequently found herself less stymied by *Artforum*'s convolutions. Her studies in analytic philosophy may have tempered her artist's proposals and statements, always cogent and succinct, yet punctuated with enticing kinks, gaps, or turns that spark curiosity. She later repudiated the analytic philosophy that preoccupied her studies at Dalhousie University. Her notebooks track her transition to the Frankfurt School, beginning with her research into the nature of criticism as an integral aspect of art production.[8] In addition to balancing several media in her installations, Meigs integrates theory into project configuration.

Her notebooks also include analyses of other artists' and writers' works. For example, among her 1976 notes and drawings for *A Dense Fog* (1977-78) and *The Pale Omnipresent Persistence* (1978)—a mix of quotations from and commentary on works by Flaubert, Balzac, tabloid reportage of a Hollywood murder, Baudelaire, de Sade, and Borges—there are extensive notes concerning Joseph Merrick, a.k.a. the Elephant Man.[9] Meigs' interest in the Elephant Man narrative, which predated David Lynch's film (1980), was focused on the costume worn by the outsider protagonist to hide the grotesque effects of neurofibromatosis: "The Elephant Man Story—a man, human soul, recluse, solitude; yet a creation. His cloak was a creation and he was able to *create* events (reaction in the crowd). He *creates* a scene. 'This costume, worn by a bent man hobbling along with a stick, probably the most uncanny that has been designed.' The Elephant Man creates a *scene*."[10] Meigs was fascinated by the ambiguity of Merrick's veiled presence, and her text for her film *A Dense Fog* is a brilliant twist on the Elephant Man

Above: *Drawing and text, part of Meigs' notes for the film A Dense Fog, 1976.*
[Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

Below left: *Pencil drawing, c. 1980-84, with the text: "They carried me upstairs. I was terribly frightened. Screaming with fear."*
[Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

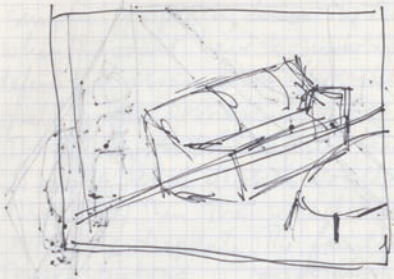
Below right: *Untitled drawing, 1976. When she was seventeen, Meigs drew this image of a constricted architectural interior. It is a tiny, tightly wound drawing. Its inky molecules seem ready to combust.*
[Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

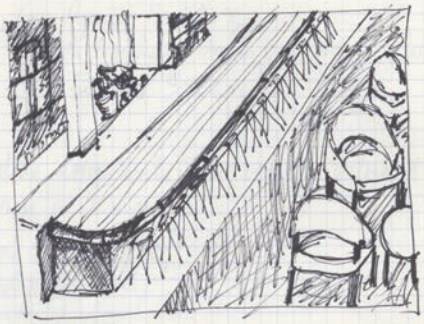
7 Four of Meigs' term papers, as well as her MA thesis, entitled *Universalism and Respect for Persons*, all completed during her time in Dalhousie University's Philosophy Department, are included in her archives. Meigs' thesis examines the nature of respect for persons—not a surprising topic for Meigs given the idiosyncrasy of her emerging art practice (box 1, folders 12, 10, and 13, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives). During the 1970s, Dalhousie's Philosophy Department was highly regarded.

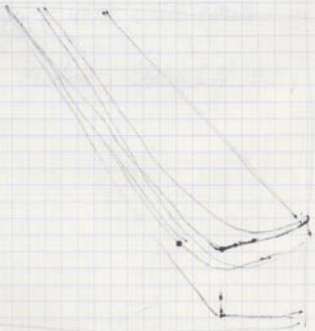
8 Notebooks from Paris, 1976, and Berlin, 1980, box 1, folders 5 and 14, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives.

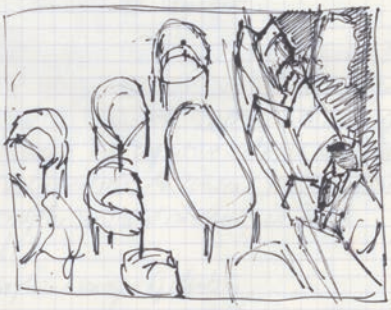
9 Sir Frederick Treves, *The Elephant Man and other Reminiscences* (London: W. H. Allen & Co. Ltd., 1980).

10 Notebook from Paris, 1976, box 1, folder 5, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives.









Applause: Caught in the Act
An Introduction to
Purgatorio: A Drinking Poem

Handkerchief in the Opera
The Bar Picture
I was walking, walking talking
Trap. Trap - You need a cat trap.
Gently lay.
Where he found the handkerchief,
Then told a false story. A mean story.
A deadly story.
It would mean her death.
And he knew it would.
Don't believe a word spoken in vanity.
Cover reality. You're in a fantasy.

And don't even know that you are crazy.
Seek it a better word.
I remembered all those things about my
mother. When I was small.
I knew her then. I don't know her now.
Something went wrong the day she got
rid of my dog.
There are many other things too. And I
keep forgetting that part of it was my fault.
Do I feel guilty for that? Perhaps that's
why I hate her, out of my own guilt.
Movies aren't salvation.
Things can be said in other ways.

narrative. Later, in *The Basement Panoramas* (2013), Meigs' veiled figures, the "ghosts in golden robes," would clatter and spin within the installation, disrupting and soothing the contemplative spaces of her painterly installation.

Meigs' preoccupation with criticality drew on the work of Theodor Adorno, whose ideas on form were of interest to Meigs, and perhaps confirmed her way of choreographing art works as arenas for interpretation. Theorist Gillian Rose parses Adorno's views about the form of the essay: "Adorno says much less about how the essay should examine a work than he does about how it should proceed itself … [his] style as an 'anti-system' … creates conditions under which an object becomes visible anew."[11] Meigs' art is similarly concerned with how scenarios, experiences, and sensory data of contemporary art stimulate insight or spark questions rather than forming an airtight conclusion; like Adorno, her art is intuitively constructed as opposed to architectonically argued—it is an essayistic form.

"A Double Order of Meaning"

Inasmuch as Meigs structures her work theoretically, blurring boundaries between the personal and intellectual, she avidly embraces pop culture as a fecund source of imagery and reference. Comic figures—Popeye, Woody Woodpecker, Tweety Bird clones, and other figures—make cameo appearances. It is tempting to think of her pop-inflected imagery as a device to disarm viewers. But in fact, Meigs understands popular culture as a potent force in cultural ecosystems: "I was brought up on cartoons … and I'm sure they affected my psyche somehow," she says. "So my interest in my art is to expose that machinery, whatever it is, rather than to cut it out."[12] Meigs was among the first generation in North America to view the world through the screen (television, then the personal computer, now phones and devices). Meigs' art traces a historical shift in contemporary art's imagery with strategies that embrace multimedia, abrupt juxtapositions, appropriation, and commercial design and materials. Her notebooks, for example, are a casual inventory of images, designs, and characters she borrowed from packaging, popular science magazines, TV commercials, magazine design, film references, and comic books.

Not all of Meigs' references to pop culture are so literal. Often her work has the "feel" or "look" of popular formats. However compelling they are ultimately found to be, Meigs' paintings have, upon first impression, been variously characterized as vulgar,

Small ballpoint sketches of the installation Purgatorio, A Drinkingbout, *1980.*
[Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

11 Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso Books, 1978, 2014), 19-20. Meigs' papers include references to Rose, an authoritative secondary source.

12 Tousley, "Strange Enchantment," *Canadian Art* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 45.

YYZ

presents

The Room of 1,000 Paintings

(paintings for Popeye)

by

Sandra Meigs

September 2-21, 1986

11-5 Tues.-Sat.

Opening: September 2 8PM

~~11-5 Tues-Sat.~~

YYZ Artists Outlet

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Toronto Ont.

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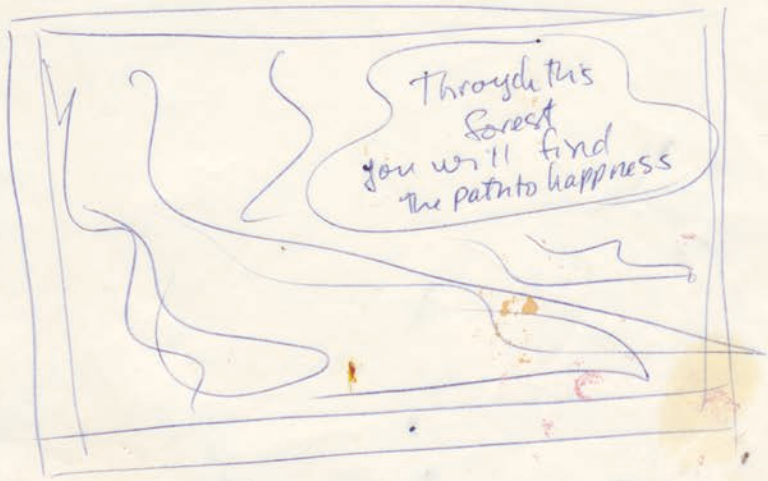


quotidian, or "exquisitely, agonizingly crude and direct."[13] In the catalogue to an exhibition of works by Meigs held at the Power Plant in Toronto in 1990, curator Louise Dompierre, discussing the complexities of *Love Muscle*, unpacks Meigs' ingenious pop culture strategy as

> *one of encroachment, deliberately defying so-called proper cultural and social notions. Operating both on the fringes and within the realm of popular culture, Love Muscle's dialectic draws on the relationship between image and language, narrative and non-narrative form, high art and its vulgarization. Always, whether on a formal level or at the level of its theme, the work implies a double order of meaning: one order interpenetrating the other, binding yet allowing each the possibility of surfacing and being present within the presence of the other.*[14]

In addition, pop culture has often informed Meigs' lighting plots (such as the picture lights above paintings), as well as her framing, labeling, and titling. In the multi-panel *Angel Eyes* (1988), Meigs flanked a self-portrait with a series of multi-species images: a green mosquito, a chick in a plaid tam-o'-shanter, a Persian kitten, a wormy-snaily creature, and a red horse. The horse is a popular visual trope, whether illuminated in tattoos, film posters or, in this case, leaping into the image from an off-stage, imaginary paint-by-numbers kit. Meigs engineered the panels to lean over viewers, lighting *Angel Eyes* with theatrical lights and supporting it on vinyl-covered cushions. The title must have conjured Torontonian Jeff Healey's hit cover of John Hiatt's *Angel Eyes* in the imaginations of visitors, cloaking Meigs' imagery with its eighties sound, further complicating the work. Instead of relying on an integrated monocular vision, *Angel Eyes* afforded its viewers a sweeping imaginative arena.

Meigs' Psychogeographies

Meigs orchestrates multiple tracks in her installations, designing liminal architectures to unseat and disrupt how we see and, ultimately, how we think about what we see, hear, and read. She engineers around parallax, a phenomenon of perceptual fissures and slippery perspectives generated by multiple or destabilized vantage points. The multiple panels of *Angel Eyes*, for example, form a panorama, a format typically associated with landscape, a psychological landscape in this case. Meigs' notebooks

Meigs' drawing for the invitation to A Room of 1,000 Paintings, an installation where a human scale, three-dimensional Popeye presided, 1986. [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

13 Gary Michael Dault, "Chasing Truth through the Looking Glass," *The Globe and Mail* (6 June 1998): C14.

14 Louise Dompierre, "Questioning Visual Art Symptoms and Modes of Representation," in *Sandra Meigs: Pas de Deux* (Toronto: Power Plant, 1990): 11.






reveal a profound connection to land and an assured engagement with the problems of landscape painting.

One of Meigs' psychogeographies, *Purgatorio, A Drinkingbout*, is anchored by a diorama, which was painted by a contracted scene painter. In subsequent works, Meigs decided to take on this painterly task herself. She came to realize the medium was "a potent vehicle for personal expression."[15] Meigs mimicked the museum diorama, a cultural geometry that we accept as a "neutral" backdrop to the diagrammatic tableaux of museology's histories, science, and biology. But one-point perspective is anything but neutral: it is tethered to the acquisitive European gaze, a *horror vacuii*-infused politic that shrink-wrapped the land as potential resource or terrifying wilderness. Meigs builds putatively inert visual forms—such as landscapes—into her works, and then twists them to loosen the façades to reveal underlying political, social, and cultural apparatus.

Meigs is an acute interlocutor of the land, responding to it, receiving from it, tuned to the "thisness" of biomes of variegated textures, botanical and anatomical details of trails and pathways of unseen forces inhabiting the land. Rather than topographical description, her notebooks annotate Meigs' inner life with a land-based reference toward what is living, invisible, or extinct. Her landscapes are places of wordless dreams, histories, terrors, and narratives, micro and macro. In several projects, such as *Baby* (1994), *Canadian* (1995), and *Reckless Days* (1997), Meigs' imagery relies on muscular landscape chunks, rendered with paint moving in big masses reminiscent of lava, or coagulated biomatter, or glaciers, relentlessly fluid.

The Business of Art

Approximately a quarter of the Meigs fonds is concerned with professional activities outside the studio: correspondence with her dealers and museums, teaching materials, advocacy, reports, and notes for public lectures. Throughout her career, Meigs has managed an ambitious practice. Her projects are monumental, complex, and demanding. The fonds attests to her skilled oversight of the business aspects of an active exhibition schedule while attending to market opportunities. Artists' managerial labour is under-recognized and under-accounted. Aside from creative time in the studio, artists prepare exhibition proposals, oversee logistics of installation, promote their work, maintain inventories, and correspond with curators, dealers, collectors, and students. In most arts careers, revenue generation is an ongoing challenge. Meigs supported herself during the early years of her art practice by working other jobs and

Original drawings for planned Angel Eyes *artist's book, gouache on Arches paper, 1989.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

15 Blake Gopnik, "Putting a New Face on Painting" (Toronto: *The Globe and Mail*, 8 September 1999): C10.

running her own upholstery business, Velvet and Vinyl, as well as winning grants, receiving artists' fees for juries and lectures, and earning income from her own sales and occasional commissions. After 1993, Meigs' full-time position as a tenured faculty member at the University of Victoria provided a stable income. But in effect, she carried on with two jobs—as artist and teacher—in addition to managing a household and raising a child. Her lecture notes from "The Measure of Success" could be required reading for every emerging artist.[16]

In her professional correspondence, Meigs is business-like and proactive, communicating directly with curators to organize installations in museums, public galleries, and artist-run centres. She prepared detailed installation plans to ensure her work was presented on *her* terms. In the case of her groundbreaking installation *The Maelstrom* at A Space in Toronto, her notes include a drawing demonstrating the workings of the "flipping table."[17] Later, she went so far as to prepare an installation guide for *The Scab Picker* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, a major museum with a professional installation team.

The majority of artists struggle to find markets for their work. By Canadian standards, Meigs has been successful in this regard. She has worked with dealers since Ydessa Hendeles invited her into her prestigious gallery in 1980. The archives hold correspondence with dealers subsequent to Hendeles: Galerie Chantal Boulanger (Montreal), Trépanier Baer Gallery (Calgary), and a slim selection of early correspondence with her current dealer, Susan Hobbs (Toronto). The Galerie Chantal Boulanger folder is the most comprehensive, detailing the artist-dealer relationship, the diplomatic communication required to negotiate financial arrangement regarding sales, shipping logistics, draft agreements, and inventory arrangements. Meigs was especially attentive to detail and proactive in this relationship (which followed closely on the break with Hendeles, with whom she parted ways in 1985), informing Boulanger early on about her emerging projects, many of which were multidisciplinary installations that required construction, specialized lighting and sound, and other labour and budget-intensive components. Meigs provided ample notice to allow the gallery to assemble resources, materials, and crew.

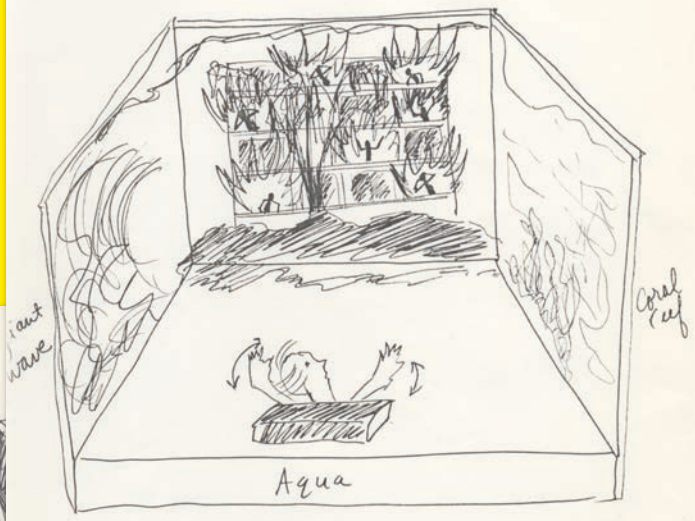
Alternatives to the artist-dealer relationship were few: artists could act as their own agent or market their work through a collective. Meigs became involved with the collectively managed Grace Hopper Gallery, comprised of about a dozen mid-career Toronto artists who banded together to propel a hybrid venture to exhibit and market their work. The group's aspirations and dynamics, its plans and priorities, and its

Gridded photograph of Meigs, used as a model for one of the paintings in the installation Angel Eyes *(1987), and an original drawing based on that photograph for a planned* Angel Eyes *artist's book, gouache on Arches paper, 1989.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

16 Lecture notes for Visual Arts Ontario seminar series "The Measure of Success," November 1984, box 1, folder 27, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives.

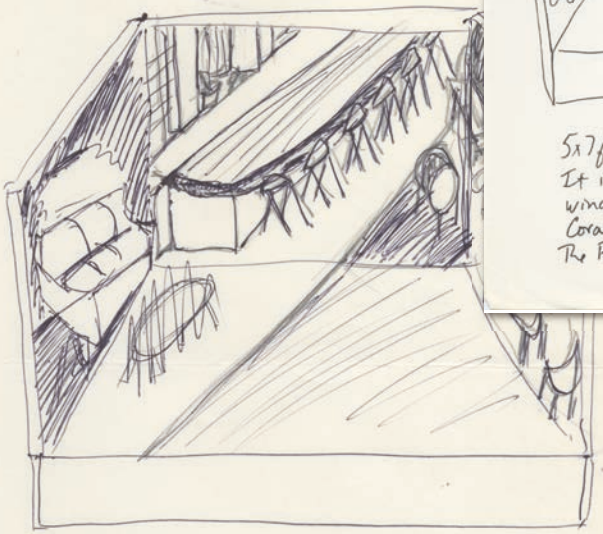
17 Diagram of the "flipping table" in *The Maelstrom*, 1980, box 1, folder 13, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives.

Stage I: Underwater, Apartment House on Fire
With Prompt-Box and Prompter



5x7 ft 3 sided box with set paintings.
It is all underwater. The island is red. People look out from their windows which appear to be on fire. Giant wave to left.
Coral Reef to Right. Water Blue
The Prompt-Box. The Prompter Pops in and out.

Stage II: Bar



struggles are detailed in the minutes of the group's deliberations, drafts of an operating agreement based on Cold City Gallery, reports on the search for affordable space, bank statements, and drafts of the responsibilities of a future employee. The group consisted of artists at the height of their careers, whose studio time was valuable. Achieving lift-off for the Grace Hopper Gallery would have required a huge investment of administration and oversight; maintaining a gallery would not have been feasible for the collective. Ultimately, the Grace Hopper Gallery folded. However, the inaugural exhibition in 1989 was an exhilarating experience, and the entire venture was a sweet visionary idea, and, arguably, a precursor to the "pop-up."

Meigs' Pedagogy

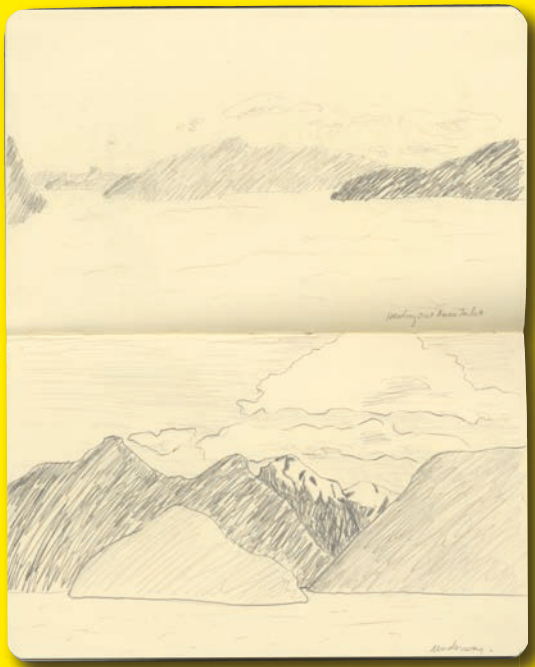
> *"That era of my teaching was the best ever. The classes were really fun and the students were game ... in the earlier years I did a more base project where I had each student bring in the largest random object they could get there and put it in the gallery. So the objects took up the bulk of the floorspace then we had to put all their paintings on the walls around it and critique them. It was a brilliant show!"*[18]

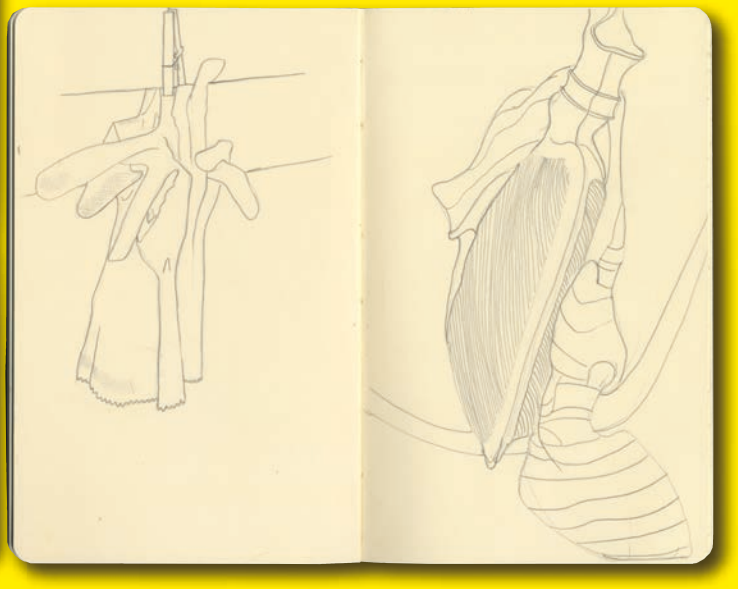
Meigs began her teaching career in the fall of 1979 as a teaching assistant at Dalhousie University, and she continued teaching until 2017, when she retired as full professor at the University of Victoria.[19] The fonds includes selected course proposals and class outlines, undated lecture notes and references, and plans for class projects. Her notebooks also include ideas and references to her teaching. Meigs' lecture notes are compiled by topic and source, according to the preoccupations of her practice, theoretical and media preoccupations, and pedagogy. At the same time, Meigs emphasized craft in her teaching, especially in painting and drawing. She brought her predisposition to multi- and interdisciplinary ventures into her teaching practice. In terms of her teaching preparation, Meigs was ecumenical: her slide lists demonstrate a breadth of references, historical and contemporary, and she inspired students to research diverse areas, including popular culture, film, advertising, posthumanism, and media. Bringing life events into the learning culture was part of Meigs' approach to teaching, too. Her course outlines introduce pragmatic matters: artists' rights and remuneration, copyright, health and safety. When she scheduled the make-up class

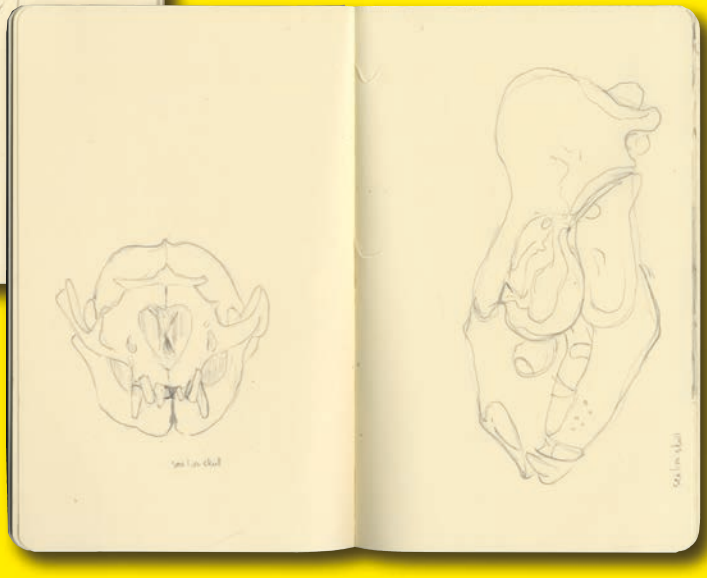
Sketches of the diorama in Purgatorio, A Drinkingbout, *1981.*
[Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

18 Sandra Meigs, email message to author, January 20, 2019.

19 Meigs taught at Dalhousie University (1979-80), York University (1981-84), Ontario College of Art, the University of Toronto (Scarborough), and the University of Victoria (1993-2017). Meigs was Departmental Chair of the Visual Arts Department at the University of Victoria from 1997 to 2002.







following a strike at York University, for example, she screened films *Union Maids* (1976) and *Blue Collar* (1978).[20]

Meigs' fonds constitutes a case study for research in adult education or post-secondary arts education. In her teaching, she was influenced by Adorno's approach to education, and she asked her students to read, analyze, and think deeply in order to emphasize critical dialogue, a crucial skill for artists to effectively articulate and theoretically position their artistic production.

Diverse Re-tellings

Although Meigs spent twenty-five years in Victoria, her art is thinly represented in local public collections: the University of Victoria has two works in its collections, and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria owns *The Newborn* (2001), a series of eleven paintings. The significance of Meigs' fonds for future researchers and artists, historians, and collectors lies in the concentration of documents from her early career. The fonds is a portal to Meigs' thinking: "Those notebooks or journals were really important to me because I found everything so exciting and had no one to tell except the pages."[21] Meigs' self-reflective notebooks were crucial during her early career. For most artists this is a formative and fragile time, and it makes sense that Meigs would place her papers in a university. What make Meigs' archives so compelling is the depth, surprise, and diversity of Meigs' preoccupations as she develops each project.

In a recent interview, Meigs referred to the generative power of one of her paintings: "I worked like crazy for two years but, really, it felt effortless. In this one, I was generating energy. And to me, that's an energy-generating machine."[22] I think Meigs' responsiveness and alacrity as she creates work is at the artistic core of her entire career's work; it permeates the fonds. Meigs is an artist jazzed by life's subtle questions. One of her projects was built in response to her observation: "I am interested in what happens when we 'read' an image without really looking at it."[23] Of course, most of us navigate the world in exactly this way, relying on habit and what we think we know. Meigs' genius lies in messing with this little-travelled scotomatous zone, activating unknowing and confusion as states of fecundity where idea, insight, or synthesis might germinate.

Sketches completed during a trip Meigs took in 2007. They demonstrate how Meigs interpreted her travels with both conventional landscapes (distant view), portraits (thumbnail sketches of others, unidentified), small studies of a sea lion skull, and close-ups of domestic objects such as rubber gloves and a hot water bottle. [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

20 Course materials, c. 1984-85, box 1, folder 36, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives.

21 Sandra Meigs, email message to author, January 20, 2019.

22 Murray White, "Sandra Meigs' journey back to joy," *The Toronto Star* (15 November 2017): n.p.

23 Artist statement, 1995, box 2, folder 1, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives.

Late afternoon, headed out from Hot Springs to Echo Point. The captain and crew put up the sails, trying to catch the wind. The spinnaker was readied. Finally the spinnaker - vivid orange + red stripes - sunburst - billowed out and pulled the ship - nearly 5 knots of speed. The Zodiak was launched with several photo enthusiasts + crew and circled around the ship, snapping her in glorious sail.

Overtired from the activities - I napped till 8. Dinner Roasted Chicken w. cranberries + blueberry sauce. Chocolate torte dessert.

After dinner, singing on deck led by the captain Ian and first mate Steve. All gathered round and many songs were sung. Jen on the salad bowl drumming.

Meigs is usually referred to as a painter, but her approaches to art making are interdisciplinary. From her earliest installations, Meigs' work has involved, to a greater or lesser degree, film and video; writing, literature, and text; music and sound; architecture and spatiality; and performance. Meigs' strategies and working method are effervescent, perambulatory, and surprising, a touchstone for anyone of inter-, trans-, or multidisciplinary preoccupation.

In addition, the fonds contributes to our understanding of the contexts within which Meigs operated: the politics and economies of arts communities and changing approaches to arts education at the post-secondary level—a demanding, complicated, and changeable discipline. As a prominent agent in the national arts community, Meigs was, and is, a leader and innovator who has contributed to and shaped communities both locally and nationally.

In her notes from a 1985 lecture, Meigs discusses the potential changeability and unreliability of narrative: "The value is in their unreliability: those peculiarities which make each telling unique."[24] Her first-person metaphors spark a response in the minds of her viewers, whether an internalized reinvention, speculation, or other imaginative foray. The Sandra Meigs fonds—like her continuing art practice—will generate diverse re-tellings and continue to reshape imaginative terrains and journeys.

From 2005–17, HELEN MARZOLF was the Director of Open Space, an artist-run centre that presents visual art, new music, media arts, literary readings, and interdisciplinary projects. In 2013, Open Space hosted Sandra Meigs' installation *The Basement Panoramas.* Prior to Open Space, Helen was Director/Curator of the Dunlop Art Gallery (1991–2001) in Regina. As a writer, Helen has contributed to publications by the Mendel Art Gallery, the University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon), the Mackenzie Art Gallery (Regina), Open Space (Victoria), and Carleton University (Ottawa).

Sketch and notes completed during a trip that Meigs took to Echo Point in 2007.
[Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

24 Meigs' lecture notes for the panel discussion "Painting and Narrative," University Art Association of Canada, November 1985, box 1, folder 27, Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives.

The Western Gothic

CORRIDOR OF PALEONTOLOGY

dark interior painted earthy + texture of cracked earth

DREAM CORRIDOR

interior painted flesh colored + sand texture stucco dark red

Oh my darling Clementine

DREAM IMAGES:

The Archaic meets The modernage ~~in phantasmagoria~~

Supressed dialogue.

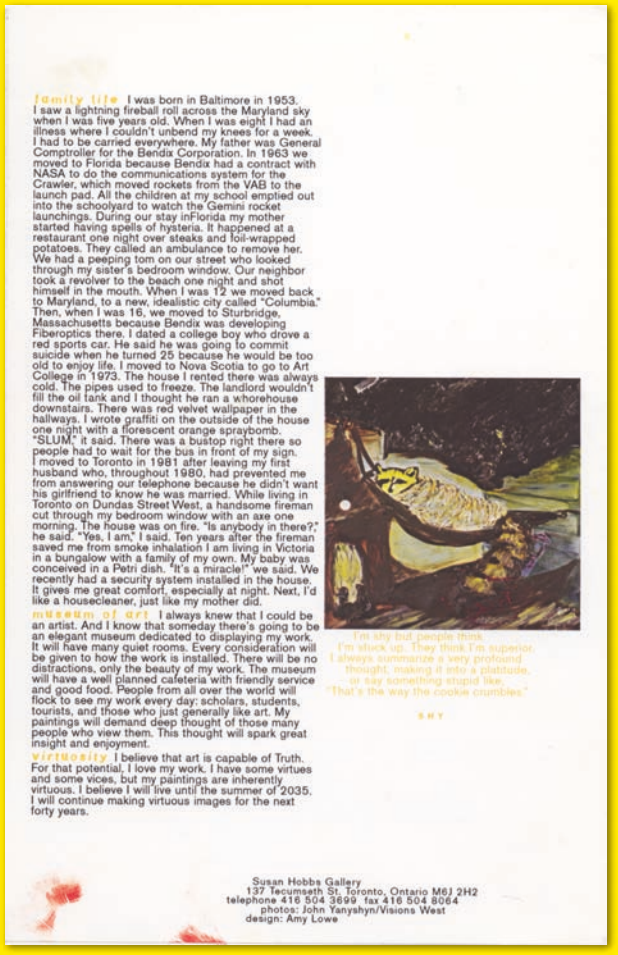
CORRIDOR OF MODERN DREAMS

CORRIDOR OF DREAMS

Facing page: *Sketch of the diorama for Western Gothic, 1984.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

Above: *Postcard announcing Meigs as an independent agent. The back reads, "Sandra Meigs is pleased to announce that she is now the sole representative of her own work." 2006.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

Below: *Meigs' brochure for her upholstery business, Velvet and Vinyl, n.d.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]



This spread: *Brochure for* Canadian, *1995.*
[Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

Overleaf: *Exercise teaching students how to deconstruct a TV advertisement from Meigs' course materials, c. 1984–85.*
[Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

a pearl necklace.
nsive perfume, and
l fabrics. I have had a
sexual experiences.

ENSITIVITY

My art career has started to take off.
They want my work in different
places all over the world. It is
being written about in important
magazines. My dealer calls me
at least twice a week.

CAREER

The baby has a very high fever.
She just lies there like a sack.
Even when I pick her up,
she doesn't respond.

SICK

There isn't much
I can do about it.
I really don't care
anyway. I just hope
no one finds out.

SECRET

It is all below.
Snow covered rooftops,
chimneys puffing with smoke,
white moonlit hills, and trees
glistening with snow lumps.

DREAM

f he finds the dishwasher carton
f empty bottles, he'll know
drinking problem. So I keep
ement door locked. "It's too messy
o go down there," I say.

DRINKING

I have immense hatred for Donna.
It is festering like a boil.
I want justice.
I will never forgive her.

HATE

I'm shy but people think
I'm stuck up. They think I'm superior.
I always summarize a very profound
thought, making it into a platitude,
or say something stupid like,
"That's the way the cookie crumbles."

SHY

I am very happy.
I have the baby I've been
wishing for. Peter and I both
have jobs and enough money
for everything we need.

BABY

I like to sit under a tree
and watch the clouds
sail over me. In the scheme
of things on high,
I am but a little fly.

REST

Wednesdays for lunch,
his apartment after.
, then go to pick up
aby at daycare.
knows.

AFFAIR

The baby says, "I love Santa."
She plays with two pieces of
mandarin orange saying, "I love you,"
one to the other. She makes a bed
for them and covers them each
with a piece of toilet paper.

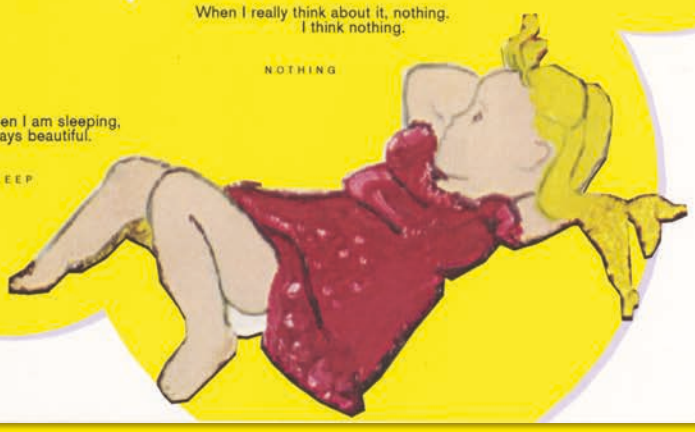
LOVE

When I really think about it, nothing.
I think nothing.

NOTHING

When I am sleeping,
I am always beautiful.

SLEEP



We are in danger.
There are strange obstacles
in the road. We will use cunning
strategies to get us through.
We will be better for it in the end.

ADVENTURE

Assignment

P.I Make a second by second analysis of a 30 sec. Commercial. Using index cards. Draw image in order to note to yourself the implied meaning on both specific and symbolic levels.

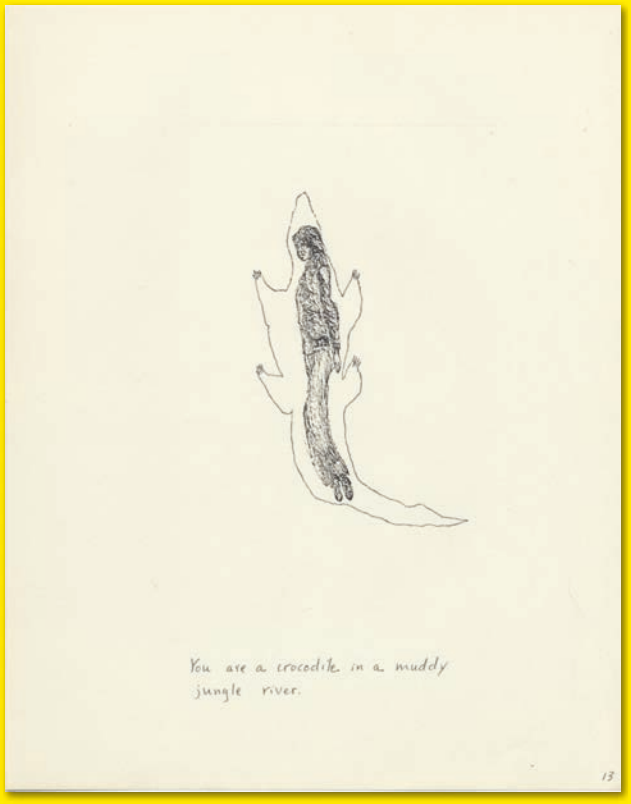
P.II Review your own cards.
Review class as whole.

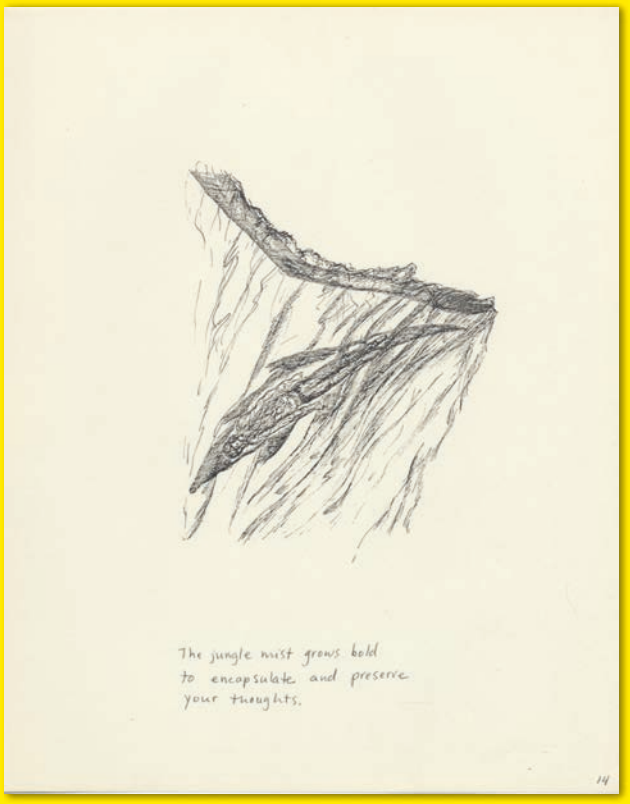
P.III Extract one symbol from the Commercial. Construct your own image which conveys this symbol, and which also conveys the meaning of the symbol in cultural terms.

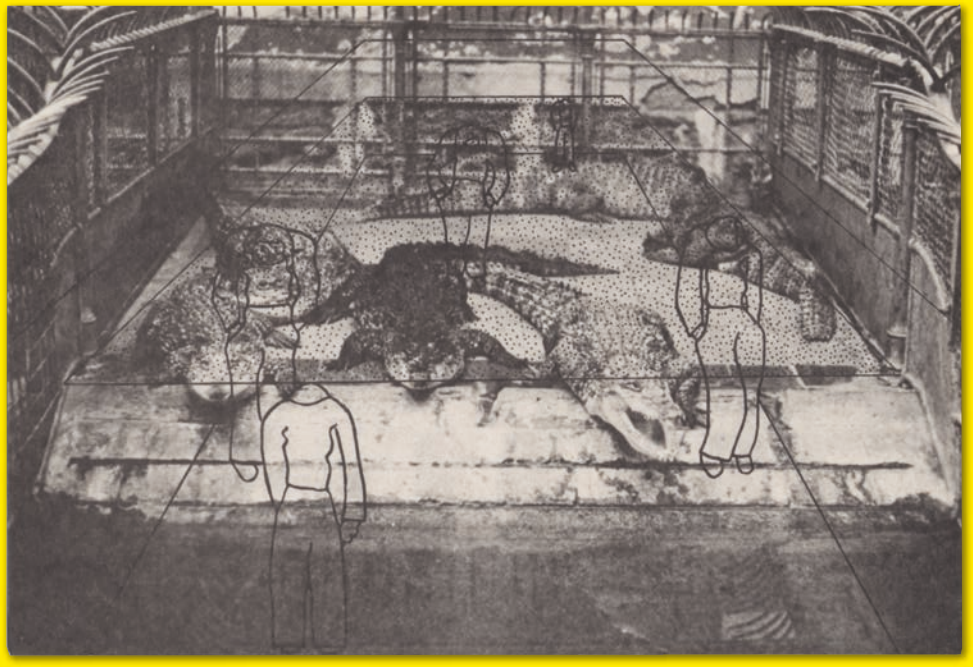
[E.g. A white sheet as cleanliness. Cleanliness as goodness, this goodness as moral goodness, a middle-class concern, doing the right thing for

Society, a family well-organized.]

This can be done in any form at all.
And is due Monday at beginning of
class.







Above: *Dry-point images from the mock-up of the proposed artist's book* The Crocodiles, *1976, which later appeared as a component of the installation* The Pale Omnipresent Persistence *(1978).* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

Below: *Postcard for* The Pale Omnipresent Persistence, *1979.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

Facing page: *Artist statement, 1995.* [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

Journal (Working Title)

Each painting is 20" X 20". The paintings have a heavy build up of Burnt Umber oil colour. The images are constructed with the paint and a clear oil medium called Oleopasto. It has the same consistency as oil paint, but it doesn't have any pigment. The images are mostly interiors and landscapes. Text from a page of a fictional journal is presented with each painting on a small yellow sphere at the bottom of the frame. The sphere floats out from the bottom on a discreet metal armature.

I am interested in what happens when we "read" an image without really looking at it. I am interested in the point of recognition, and the turning back and forth from the recognition to the construct of the image. The journal text also plays with construction and recognition. The writing represents an everyday, trivial experience, but it uses these to construct an understanding of someone. In both the visual and the literary, there are many pieces missing in the illusion.

Now, I'm not sure why I'm using the Burnt Umber colour. I've tried other colours (red, blue, yellow) and they don't work as well. Some of my choice of brown has to do with the idea of feces. (I am the mother of a 2 year old.) That's a very childish idea and I don't know how significant it is. This brown also looks like chocolate. It also looks like mud. It also looks rich and fatty. Something goes on in manipulating the material qualities of the paint and in blending it with the colourless material. It's part of the construct. At times I build up the surface so it has mass and weight. At times I then colour the texture of that surface with tracings of other colours. Sometimes it looks like something, sometimes it doesn't.

It is only March. I have about 4 months to work out the rest of my ideas about the work. I know that in this work I am trying to stay loyal to the individual paintings, rather than trying to consider the work as a whole. That is somehow significant . I think, in the same way, when you keep a journal you are loyal to each page, to the moment, rather then to the book as a finished thing.

Sandra Meigs, March 15, 1995

Sketch for McIntyre Ranch paintin

Gouache sketch for McIntyre Ranch painting, 52" × 84", 2006. [Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]

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Back cover:
Packaging for Popeye candy cigarettes and Easter egg wrappers, which served as inspiration for Meigs' exhibition Room of 1,000 Paintings, *1986.*
[Sandra Meigs fonds, AR138, University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives]