



Barbara Sosson

Sensuous Shapes & Mimicry

February 1 – 25, 2023



Gross McCleaf Gallery

127 South 16th Street

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102

www.grossmccleaf.com • 215 665 8138

Sensuous Shapes & Mimicry

This series began in 2016 with a body of totally nonobjective works containing sensuous shapes with no realist imagery. During the pandemic I began working on images that I photographed on several visits to the Bronx Botanical Gardens in New York. Although they were representational paintings, the last six works slowly migrated back toward the abstract. Included in this exhibition are three of those more abstract botanical paintings depicting how the ponds at dusk become a network of black abstract shapes.

Last year, with the push and encouragement of my friend, artist and gallery owner, Rebecca Segall, I decided to return to my abstract works, into which I have recently added graphic bird imagery. I am interested in the way birds' patterns mimic their environments, creating the beautiful and extreme designs of their plumage. I read that bird's skin cells contain codes that create these designs which mimic their environments and helps to protect them from their predators.

My early classical training at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts keeps my hand and eyes focused and enables me to include multiple techniques in my work. I find this union of imagery and related abstract shapes to be a workable subject that feeds my painterly hand, as well as my sense of design and my love of the natural world. I have painted in oils for over fifty years and have recently added a limited use of mirror markers and glitter to illuminate my birds' glamour and their florescent dressings.

Throughout this long painting career, I have worked in multiple series that are usually numerous years-long and evolve to and from the real and the ideal.

Barbara Sosson
February 2023



Above: Barbara Sosson in her studio, photograph by Susan Beard
Cover: *Guinea Fowl*, detail (see page 17)
Back cover: Rebecca Segall with Sosson in her studio, photograph by Susan Beard.

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Acknowledgments

There are many people who, in an artist's life, play an important part in the making of a gallery exhibition. I thank my friend, artist, and the Gross McCleaf Gallery owner, Rebecca Segall who spends her daily life in support of a large stable of artists, pulling out the best in their creative lives to show in her top-notch center city Philadelphia gallery. She greatly helped with this latest transition to grow my uninhibited art, and to paint full speed ahead with a growing passion.

Her wonderful staff, Morgan Hobbs, Assistant Director and artist, Emma Rose Cook, Registrar, and Sharon Ewing, former owner and supporter, all worked in tangent to create and promote this professional exhibition. I appreciate the creative tasks these friends do for their artists in their every working day.

And then there is my number one supporter, Professor Mary Ellen Didier, who put up with my jabber in our daily compromise to get this show completed. It is a wonder we survived launching both a Fellowship Annual and this Personal Exhibition within the same time frame! She is my best friend, a manager, with an educated mind who gives her undying support backed by love.

There are numerous others that play a part in this venture, Antonia de Pace and Madison Duddy of *Style Magazine* who listened to me talk for hours; and Clint Jukkala, *PAFA Executive Dean of the College of Fine Arts* who initiated this union.

Miriam Seidel for her writing of my catalogue text and our Q & A dialogue. Tom Monteleone of Paradigm color graphics who has been supportive and behind every publication I have printed over the many years.

Mostafa Darwish, my dear friend, a terrific artist and our Fellowship Virtual Gallery web master, who agreed to create an amazing site, linked to this show, that will run concurrently during the month of February and will then be added to our archive of Fellowship Virtual Exhibitions that we launch throughout the year that features Academy alumni. [www.fellowshipgallery.org]

So, on with the show that I waited for through a long pandemic that features three stages of my creative experimentation and allows me to share my life-long love of art making. ■



Knotted, 2016-22, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

BARBARA SOSSON: CROSSING BORDERS

Over a long career, Barbara Sosson has shifted confidently back and forth over the border between representational and abstract painting. The work in this latest exhibition, *Sensuous Shapes and Mimicry*, shows an easy mixing and merging between the two. The animating theme in these new paintings—the almost magical ability of birds' plumage to blend with their environments—allows for a brilliant play of texture, color, and line.

Sosson has exhibited widely since her first solo show, at Sandi Webster's Wallnuts Gallery in 1978 with abstract paintings of space, six feet across. Her work is in many institutional collections, including The State Museum in Harrisburg, Bryn Mawr College, The Fellowship of PAFA, the Woodmere Art Museum, and in corporate collections including Aramark, Fidelity Bank, Capitol One, and Amber Road in Shanghai, China.

A graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts [PAFA], Sosson currently leads the storied Fellowship of PAFA, as their *President*. The Fellowship is an independent nonprofit organization run by Academy alumni who are practicing artists. Alongside her continuous painting career, she owned and operated SossonDesign, a fine art graphic design firm that served museums, galleries, and artists for over fifty years.

Miriam Seidel

January 2023



Chills, 2022, oil on canvas with white glitter, 48 x 48 inches

The following is a recent dialogue between Miriam Seidel [MS] and Barbara Sosson [BS]

MS: Were you making art steadily through the years when you were a busy graphic designer, or were there times when you had to set it aside?

BS: I never ever stopped painting. I always had a separate professional studio. Back then, I painted on the weekend. Many nights I worked until 4 a.m. during the week, so I could do that. Right now, it's the opposite. I paint five days a week and I do design work on the weekend. And I always showed—In the past I had two solo shows at Gross McCleaf—one in 1982 and one in 1983. Estelle Gross, the original owner, invited me to show my *Central Divide Series*, a two-year series of large Sennelier pastels framed in custom Plexi boxes.

MS: So this show is a kind of homecoming for you. Let's talk about your newest series that appears in this show. How did you find your way to the motif of birds?

BS: I read an article about how the cells in the birds' skin create the patterns that form their plumage designs. I thought that was amazing; the idea that they are mimicking their environment for camouflage, to help them survive.

MS: So did the glitter in the series come about because of the iridescence of their feathers?

BS: Yes. I started using more glitter in specific areas—I think of it as spot glitter. I'm also using oil and mirror markers that allow me drawn cleaner graphic lines as opposed to a brush line.

MS: What strikes me the most about these new paintings is that you're bringing everything in, in terms of technique. You've got every kind of mark you can make. You've got hard opaque color, you've got drips, you've got these frothy gestural areas. You seem to be having a lot of fun.

BS: Not exactly fun—but I like to think of certain creative passages as pleasurable activities. These release dopamine which creates my positive outlook on life and I like being happy. I even tried to put real feathers onto the canvas but the gluing didn't quite work out. There's also this reoccurring moon-shape that I like for an environmental background or stage set.

MS: Yes, you've got a lot of big shapes in play around the birds.

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In Heat, 2023, oil on canvas with spot glitter & mirror marker, 72 x 60 inches

BS: Well, I'm a person who likes working big. I'm an arm, not a wrist painter.

MS: There's also a sort of hard-soft thing going on here.

BS: I love that hard-soft contrast. I think it came from my knowledge of hard-edged painting. As a designer, I designed many catalogs for artists like Edna Andrade, of the *Hard Edged* school who worked with graphic hard shapes. However, I also was exposed to the expressionistic drippers too!!

MS: Let's talk more about another duality that runs through your work: your movement between abstract and representational work.

BS: I do go back and forth, but not overnight—over a period of a few years I migrate between non-objective and realist schools, even using underpainting, which I love to do. Like in my *Garden Bouquet* series of 2011 to 2015, and the more recent *Botanical Garden* series of 2019 to 2022. I used underpainting in both of those series.

MS: You must have learned how to do underpainting at PAFA [The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts], where they taught traditional painting techniques.

BS: Yes, I started painting very traditionally. I attended the Academy summer classes in my 11th and 12th years of high school. When I got my Cresson [the Cresson Traveling Scholarship, a student award at PAFA] in 1966, I had been painting life-sized nudes that looked like Ben Kamihira's work [long-time PAFA teacher]. The Cresson allowed me to travel. I spent four full months roaming around Europe, at age 21, going every day to a museum. And I fell in love with the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, both the modern structure of it and the art. And something clicked all of a sudden. When I came back to my fourth year at PAFA, I said to myself, I'm going to go abstract. One of my teachers, Walter Stuempfig, warned me, "You're wasting your talent." Other instructors were encouraging, like Hobson Pitman. Jimmy Lueders steered me to the work of various contemporary artists because he understood what I was starting to do.

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Butt of Course, 2022, oil on canvas with spot green glitter, 40 x 46 inches

MS: Just before the pandemic, you were experimenting with pure abstraction, using techniques that you've returned to in the bird paintings. Then, for two-and-a-half years, during COVID, you shifted back to a more representational approach with your *Botanical Garden* series.

BS: Yes, that's pretty accurate. I went up to the New York Botanical Gardens a few times, and I took shots of things I thought would make interesting paintings. I then put them into my computer and rearranged their compositions. Then I vectorized those composite images in Adobe Illustrator. I had them printed them out, life size, and those prints became the "models" I worked from by eye. But even in those paintings, certain elements like the treatment of shadows on the water at dusk became more and more abstract in the final works.

MS: I'd like to ask you if there's any connection between your many years of graphic design work and your painting?

BS: Yes, but not in the way you'd think. What did I do for my entire career? I looked at art. I was designing many catalogs for PAFA, for the Woodmere Museum, the

Delaware Art Museum, the Union League, ICA, galleries and hundreds of artists and one on collections at Columbia University. I didn't do a lot of logos, but I do like typography, however, I haven't used it in my paintings.

MS: So, during your entire design career day-job, you were looking at art.

BS: Yes, I looked at art every day. And closely—I had to color-correct it, working at first from 4 by 5 inch color transparencies that I scanned into files for print and later with camera jpegs. I was looking at how color relationships worked, and how other artists' compositions worked.

MS: And in graphic design, there's constant visual decision making.

BS: Yes, just like in painting. Artists are daily decision makers! ■



Something to Hold Onto, 2022, oil on canvas with rubber lizards, 48 x 48 inches

Barbara Sosson

Education:

1963–67 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), Philadelphia, PA
1965 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME
1969 –71 The Philadelphia College of Art, PA (now named the University of the Arts), B.F.A. Degree

Collections:

Represented in private and public collections including:
Aramark Corporation, Philadelphia; Capitol One Corporate Offices in Delaware; Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA; Fellowship of PAFA, Philadelphia; Fidelity Bank, Philadelphia; Insurance Company of North America, a CIGNA Corporation, Houston, TX; Schnader, Harrison, Segal & Lewis, Philadelphia; The State Museum in Harrisburg, PA; WIP Radio Station, Philadelphia; Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia; and the Amber Road Corporation, Shanghai, China.

Commissions:

2016 Awarded commission to paint two Donkeys for the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia (Iowa & Texas)
2013–14 Corporate competition awarded \$25,000 to paint five canvases on the subject of the Tea Route, each 30" square for the Amber Road Corporation's Shanghai, China Office. Juried by the PAFA Faculty & Amber Road Corporation

Awards & Scholarships:

2015, '12, '08, '07, '06, '05, '02, '01, '00, 1988 National Competition Awards for the design of fine art publications as owner of Sosson Design (1972 – 2016)
1968 Mary Butler Memorial Award, Painting, PAFA, Annual Exhibition by invitation
The W.I.P. Radio Purchase Prize, Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia
1967 The Thouron Prize and The Gimbel Prize, PAFA, Philadelphia
1966 The William Emlen Cresson Memorial Scholarship for Travel Abroad and The Marion Higgins Prize, PAFA, Philadelphia
1965 Scholarship to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME
The Charles Toppan Prize for Drawing, PAFA, Philadelphia
1963–67 Four-year, full paid, Board of Education Scholarship to PAFA for painting

Service & Memberships:

2019-23 President of the Fellowship of PAFA
2017-19 Vice President of Communications of the Fellowship of PAFA
2017-22 Serving as an elected member of the PAFA Alumni Council

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Right: *Guinea Fowl*, 2023, oil on canvas with spot glitter & mirror marker, 48 x 36 inches



Service & Memberships continued:

2015-16 Vice President of Communications, Da Vinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia
Current member of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Barnes Foundation; Museum of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

Curated Exhibitions:

2020 Organized *Virtual Gallery for the Fellowship of PAFA* (three month shows with guest curators)
2020 Organized *FAME [Fellowship Annual Members Exhibition]*, Hot-Bed Gallery, Juror, Rebecca O'Leary
2019 Organized *FAME*, Hot-Bed Gallery, selected Juror, James Oliver
2016 "*SIX*" *An Exhibition of Large Scale Works* at the Da Vinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia
2015 "*3*" *An Exhibition of Three PAFA Alumni* at the Da Vinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia

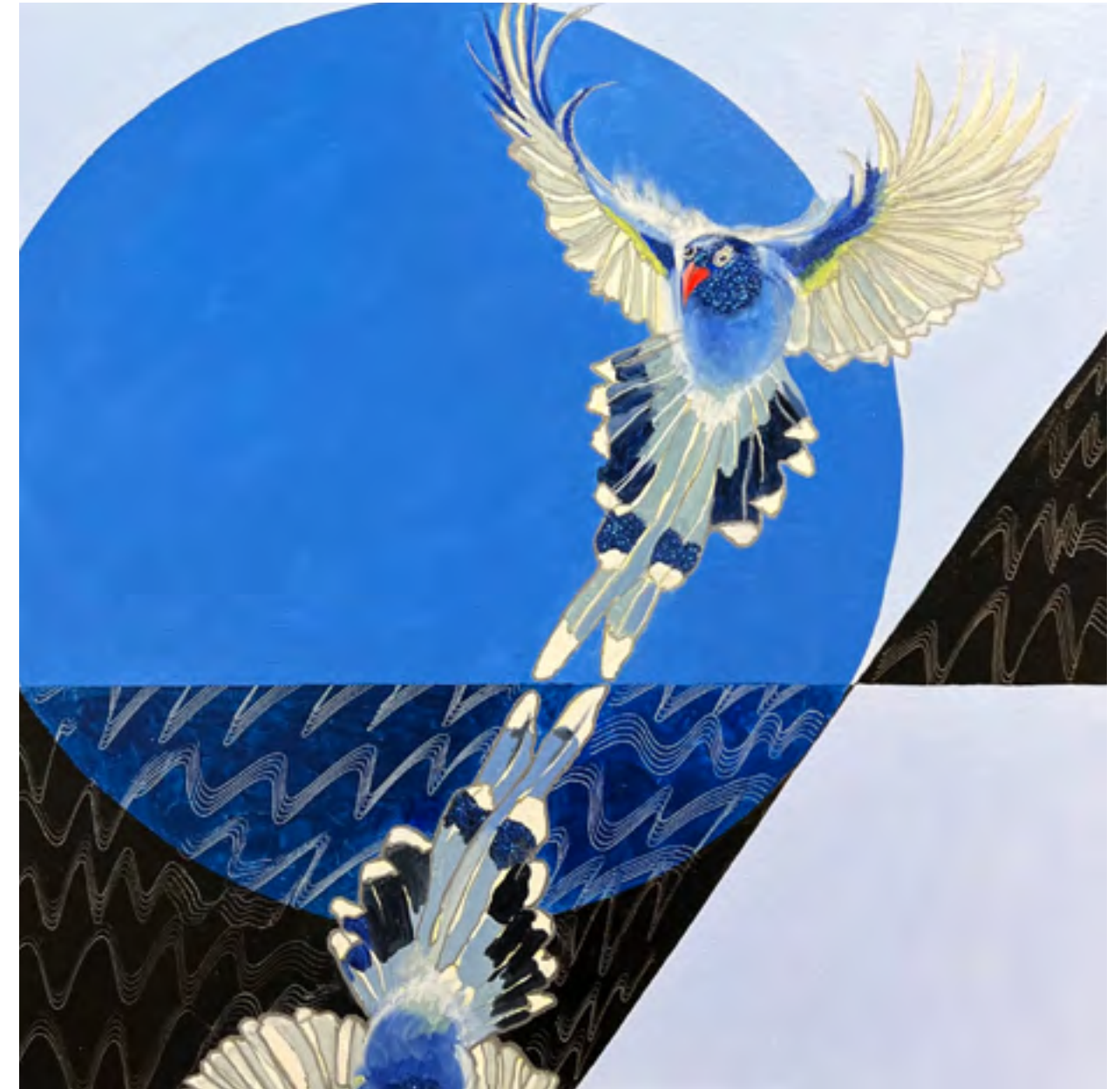
Selected Exhibitions:

2023 *Sensuous Shapes & Mimicry*, Gross McCleaf Gallery, Philadelphia
2018 *Garden Bouquet Revisited*, Hot-Bed Gallery, Philadelphia, Juror, James Oliver
Rail Park Benefit, 990 Spring Garden, Philadelphia, curated by Bridgette Mayer
2016 "*SIX*" *An Exhibition of Large Scale Works* at the Da Vinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia
2015 "*3*" *An Exhibition of Three PAFA Alum* at the Da Vinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia
2006 *Paintings of the Countryside of France*, The Cosmopolitan Club, Philadelphia
1982, '83 *Central Divide Series I & II*, Gross McCleaf Gallery, Philadelphia
1978 *Recent Paintings and Drawings*, The Wallnuts Gallery (later named Sande Webster Gallery), Philadelphia
1973, '72, '69 *Ballinger Architects*, Philadelphia
1971 *Abstract Paintings*, Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia
1969 *The Mill Gallery Exhibition*, Carversville, PA

Invitational Group Exhibitions:

2021 *Bouquet*, Gross McCleaf Gallery, Philadelphia
2020 *Dance of Shapes: FMC Tower*, Philadelphia
2016 *SIX An Exhibition of Large Scale Works*, Da Vinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia
2015 *3 An Exhibition by 3 PAFA Alum*, Da Vinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia
Benefit for Project Home, Jed Williams Gallery, Philadelphia
2016, '14, '12, '10 *Dear Fleisher*, 4 x 6 inches of Art, Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia
Small Worlds, The Plastic Club, Philadelphia
2015, '14, '12 *Art Unleashed*, Uarts, Philadelphia
2007 *WWCC 30th Anniversary Show*, Philadelphia, organized by Thomas Duffy
2005 *65th Annual Members' Exhibition*, Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia
Group Exhibition, Workerman Gallery, Manayunk, PA
2004, '05 *Post Open Studio Tours*, Philadelphia
2003 *Pennsylvania Academy-Alumni Works on Paper Invitational*, the Free Library of Philadelphia, organized by the Women's Board of PAFA
The Unbroken Circle, A Tribute to Quita Brodhead, Wayne Art Center, Wayne, PA, organized by Bill Scott

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Magpie & Blue Moon, 2023, oil on canvas with spot glitter & mirror marker, 30 x 30 inches

Invitational Group Exhibitions continued:

- 2001 *Passionate Palettes*, Selections from the Permanent Collection, Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, organized by Michael Schantz, *Director*
- 1997 *Left Brain/Right Brain*, Artforms Gallery, Manayunk, PA
Artists Helping Artists, former McIlhenny Mansion, Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, organized by The Women's Committee and the PAFA Fellowship
- 1977 *Brick by Brick Exhibition*, PAFA, Cherry Street Gallery, Philadelphia
- 1997–85 *Annual Open Studio Tours*, 915 Spring Garden Studios, Philadelphia
- 1996 *Invitational Drawing Exhibition*, Smith College, Northampton, MA, organized by Martha Armstrong
- 1992 *6 Plus*, Catherine Starr Gallery, Philadelphia
- 1989 *Hobson Pittman, The Teacher*, The Woodmere Art Museum, Chestnut Hill, PA
- 1985 *Greater Harrisburg Arts Festival '85*, The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg
- 1984 *Hobson Pittman: Painter (Students of Pittman)*, Peale House Galleries of PAFA, Philadelphia
- 1983 *Landscape*, Gross McCleaf Gallery, Philadelphia
Landscape, Cheltenham Art Centre, PA
- 1982 *Three Rivers Salutes Three States*, Three Rivers Arts Festival, Pittsburgh, PA
10 Studios/20 Artists, Muse Foundation Invitational, Philadelphia
- 1981 *New Generation Artists*, Gross McCleaf Gallery, Philadelphia
- 1981–67 Invited to the *Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts' Annual Fellowship Exhibitions*, Furness Building Galleries, Philadelphia (1974 exhibition at Museum of the Philadelphia Civic Center)
- 1980 *Color and Watercolor*, Gross McCleaf Gallery, Philadelphia
- 1975 Chester County Art Association, Chester, PA
- 1969 Crest College, Allentown, PA
- 1968 *Young Philadelphians*, The Kenmore Galleries, Philadelphia, Guest Curator: Hobson Pittman
- 1967 *Angry Arts*, The Ethical Society of Philadelphia

Juried Group Exhibitions:

- 2022 *125th Fellowship Annual of PAFA*, Anne Bryan Gallery, PAFA, Philadelphia, Juror: Audrey Flack
- 2021 *124th Fellowship Annual of PAFA*, Gross McCleaf Gallery, Philadelphia, Juror: Rebecca Segall
- 2021 *SUMMERHOUSE*, HOT•BED Gallery, Philadelphia, Juror: Bryan Hoffman
H2O, Mid-Atlantic 3rd Annual Regional Show, Virginia Beach, VA, Juror: Vanessa Thaxton-Ward
- 2020 *123rd Fellowship Annual of PAFA*, HOT•BED Gallery, Philadelphia, Juror: Rebecca O'Leary
- 2019 *122nd Annual Exhibition of PAFA [FAME]*, HOT•BED Gallery, Philadelphia, Juror: James Oliver
- 2000 *103rd Alumni Exhibition of PAFA*, Philadelphia, Juror: Randall Exon
- 1993 *96th Annual Juried Exhibition of PAFA*, Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, Jurors: Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason
- 1989 *48th Annual Awards Painting Exhibition*, Cheltenham Art Centre, PA, Juror: Lisa Phillips, Curator, Whitney Museum of American Art, NY

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Silver Pheasant, 2023, oil on canvas with spot glitter & mirror marker, 30 x 30 inches

Juried Group Exhibitions continued:

- 1989 *92nd Annual Fellowship Exhibition of PAFA*, The American College Gregg Conference Center, Bryn Mawr, PA, Juror: Frank Hyder
- 1988 *91st Annual Fellowship Exhibition of PAFA*, Port of History Museum, Philadelphia, Juror: Rafael Ferrer
- 1987 *The Philadelphia Eye*, Pace University, Fingesten Gallery, New York City, Juror: Peter Fingesten
- 1984 *Cheltenham Art Centre Annual Exhibition*, PA
- 1982 *18th Juried Exhibition*, Allentown Art Museum, PA
Philadelphia Art Dealers Select, The Philadelphia Art Alliance
- 1981 *Beaver College Drawing Annual*, Glenside, PA (later named Arcadia University)
- 1980 *The Philadelphia Art Alliance 1st Bi-Annual Juried Members' Show*; traveled to Glassboro State College, Westby Art Gallery, NJ
- 1978 *Paperworks Exhibition*, Cheltenham Art Centre, PA, Juror: Martha Zelt
- 1977 *Rutgers National Drawing '77*, Camden, NJ, Jurors: Ilya Bolotowsky, Lee Bontecou, and Marcia Tucker
- 1975 *Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Juried Fellowship* at Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, Painting Jurors: Lois Eaton Dollin, Robert Barfield, and Paul Keene
- 1968 *Abstract*, The Philadelphia Art Alliance ■



Cubist Parrot Finches, 2023, oil on canvas with sot glitter & mirror marker, 30 x 30 inches

Three Botanical Garden Paintings



Mystical Pond, 2021, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Twilight Reflections, 2021, oil on canvas with glitter varnish, 24 x 24 inches



Grass Reflections, 2022, oil on canvas with mirror marker, 30 x 30 inches

