

KATHERINE B. CRUM
THE ART OF NANCY GENN

The present exhibition offers a small sampling of works by Nancy Genn created over the past few years. In just fifteen objects a rich variety of materials and techniques appear, some of them quite exacting and exotic. Because they are complex, much of this text is devoted to the description of Genn's working methods. What is most striking about her work, however, is not her technical proficiency, but the way her media serve a consistent and personal vision.

Regardless of the antiquity of her media, they are used solely for modernist purposes, for refining and shaping the artists experience of her world, and by extension, ours.

After more than a decade of work with handmade paper Genn began to explore the interplay of markings and paper in a rich array of collage works that continues to the present day. A fine example of this series is *Marmaris*

#86, made in 2001. First the surface of commercially made paper was painted with a thin layer of gouache. Then the three gray areas were run through a monotype press, uniting them with a thin veil of color. The printing plate was wiped before printing, so that the marks of the rag and brush would create a pattern. The effect is much more subtle, the color layer thinner and more transparent, than it would be if the color layer were painted directly on the surface. The darker brown and black areas were added next. Then the entire piece was dampened on both sides before attaching the collage elements of gampi with methyl cellulose. (This moistening is to prevent shrinking and wrinkling.) The pieces of gampi are small, fittingly, as they are precious. This traditional Japanese paper is made from the fibers of the gampi plant, which

is almost impossible to cultivate and thus must be harvested from wild plants.

It is prized for its transparency and its characteristic pearlescent sheen. In a further refinement, the gampi was lithographed with a tracing from a topographical map salvaged from a landscape architect's wastebasket. The ink is a subtle reddish-gray.

The topographical map in *Marmaris* #93 has no specific reference to the piece. But almost all of Genn's works refer in some way to a sense of place. In human experience, time passes in a specific location, so that places bear the evidence of a witnessing presence. Titles are chosen to evoke her experience of the place in some way, not to depict it literally. Often, it is color that suggests the place. *Marmaris* #90 has the colors of ancient city walls, reflecting the Roman influence when she was a "Visiting Artist" at the American Academy in Rome.

Genn has also traveled widely, most recently to the Near and Middle East.

These places have made an especially strong impression upon her because of their antiquity and because the marks of so many human activities have survived. Thus, one series

of collages is named Marmaris, after an ancient seaport on the southwest coast of Turkey. Another series is named for Taizz, the ancient capital of Yemen. The varied and fragmentary elements of the collages are meticulously constructed and yet, ironically, the finished objects appear to record the passage of time. In Genn's collage works there are many seeming accidents and breaks, surfaces that seem to have been abraded or washed, beautifully stained or, weathered. Bits of writing, maps or other markings denoting a place or a human presence appear as illegible fragments. In a similar way ancient Greek monuments seem more beautiful to us in bone-white ruins than they would in their originally multi-colored state. Ultimately Genn's works are emblematic of a human lifespan consumed, yet leaving traces that are valuable to contemplate even when they cannot be deciphered.

KATHERINE B. CRUM. PH.D.

*Lewis B. and Dorothy Collman Chief Curator
Art and Education
The Parrish Art Museum
Southampton, New York*