

Judith Ann Scott was born in Cincinnati, Ohio on May 1, 1943. Following the birth of her sister Joyce, Judith emerged moments later, unexpected, from the same womb. Tremendous pressure was brought to bear on the parents of severely retarded children to “put them away.” Judith was fortunate, and relatively unique, in being permitted to spend the first seven and a half years of her life at home with her parents, her brothers and, most important, sharing her existence with the person to whom she was closest, her fraternal twin. The tragedy was at least postponed. On that courageous decision rests Judith’s extraordinary psychological strength, her resilience and richness of personality.

metamorphosis

THE FIBER ART OF JUDITH SCOTT

by JOHN M. MACGREGOR (excerpts)

RESCUE: THE BEGINNING OF A NEW LIFE

For thirty-six years Judith Scott’s life was shaped by the institutional settings in which she lived. Many permanent aspects of her character reflect this irreversible experience. Genetically influenced by Down syndrome, she is also the product of a still more limiting and disturbing condition, the syndrome resulting from prolonged exposure to the empty and manipulative existence characteristic of life in custodial institutions. Had things continued as planned, she would have died an inmate, anonymous and forgotten. Instead, Judith returned to the world as precipitously as she had left it. This unanticipated miracle was accomplished by her twin!

Joyce Scott had already lived a full and eventful life. She had three daughters of her own. Her busy life in California had, however, included so little contact with her sister that she was no longer certain that Judith was still alive. Now, as an unanticipated outcome of a six day



retreat focused on conscious living and dying, a sudden shift of consciousness awakened a surprising recognition in her. “At some point it became absolutely crystal clear that Judy should be with me and not far away. Before I had never felt empowered in relation to her at all. Something had changed. I realized with clarity that I could become Judy’s guardian and bring her out here (to California). I didn’t have one second of doubt.”

Transforming this sudden realization into reality involved a great deal of time and effort, and incredible determination. Since Judith had been made a ward of the state of Ohio extensive negotiations were necessary before the state would legally recognize Joyce’s right to assume responsibility for her sister’s care. Judith herself, of course, played no part in these deliberations. On November 26, 1986, she was simply placed on a plane and “shipped,” unaccompanied, to San Francisco. The experience for Judith would have been very frightening, since she had never flown before and did not know where she was going. Joyce remembers how, “She

JUDITH SCOTT, Photo by Leon Borenstein

arrived looking lost and terrified. There were dark rings under her eyes. She fell into my arms and sobbed. I am not sure she knew who I was. She was just glad to have someone there to look after her.”

It is profoundly difficult to enter into the psychological reality of an adult woman who has always been isolated from her environment both because of her inability to hear and the limitations which Down syndrome necessarily involves. While Judith’s mental experience undoubtedly differs from any hypothetical norm, it is not so much a question of lack as it is of difference. The mental states which we must attempt to grasp are not less complex than those of any other artist. Our task is made more difficult, however, because Judith cannot use words to communicate. She can tell us nothing of her constantly changing mental experience—she cannot share her inner world, her thoughts, her feelings, her fantasies, her needs. Only her joy, her pain, her rage, are occasionally made dramatically evident.

A fundamental factor inspiring and giving shape to Judith’s need to create, to reach out beyond herself, is the fact that she is a twin. Her sister Joyce is intellectually above average, a sensitive and loving participant in Judith’s new life since she emerged from the institution. Joyce is our major source of information and insight concerning Judith’s early life. As children the girls were inseparable, merged in that “participation mystique” known only to twins. More than is the case with other artists, Judith Scott’s work raises compelling questions concerning the impact on the image-making process of childhood experiences of closeness and loss. To what extent is she still preoccupied with restoring a lost paradise?

WATCHING JUDITH AT WORK

Judith works constantly, but there are moments when, unpredictably, she goes off on “shopping expeditions.” She checks various nooks and crannies, even private offices, all over the studio, acquiring magazines, various objects, bits of rejected material, or more yarn. She is almost invisible on these hunting forays, very secretive as she conceals things in her purse or bags. Her creative process involves theft. Things disappear. Spools of yarn, thread, string, disappear. Wood, cardboard, metal objects,

disappear. The people around her have adapted. This is not easy when your purse or wallet, the magazine you were reading, or your car keys, are involved. At Creative Growth Art Center theft as a creative principle has been accepted, with the disappearance of thousands of dollars worth of yarn, cord, and string, now budgeted for. Needless to say, Judith’s work could never have unfolded in a huge custodial institution.

As with a pearl, at the heart of each of Judith’s objects some sort of hidden thing functions as a central core, serving as the basis for her concern with covering over and concealing. There is a hidden inside, and layers and layers beyond. It is possible that this concern with secret internal objects, even those which are hard and mechanical, derives from fantasies about the unknown inside of the human body and its mysterious functions.

Something begins to grow—slowly, meticulously, thoughtfully, day by day, month after month. Watching Judith working, witnessing the deliberate repeated gestures of her hands summoning an object into being, observing the slow evolution of a “thing,” is not less fascinating, or essential, than recording the step by step development of a spider’s web or a moth’s cocoon. The resultant forms, while unplanned, can have no other origin than as expressive derivatives of Judith’s psyche. Less easily resolved is the issue of who or what is at the center of the soft containers; and what processes, if any, are envisioned as occurring within. The recent works are large. Some could easily contain Judith’s body. All of them “contain” Judith’s mind.

DISCOVERY OF THE COCOON

Recently, I came across a relevant passage in the Journals of André Gide:

“ . . . I know (or at least I have been told) that that substance the silkworm discharges while making his cocoon would poison him if he kept it in him. He purges himself of it. To save himself he empties himself. None the less the cocoon, which he is obliged to form under threat of death and which he would be unable either to imagine or to fashion otherwise, protects the metamorphosis of the caterpillar; and the caterpillar cannot become a butterfly unless emptied of that silky poison.”

Gide is not known as an authority on entomology, so I can't vouch for the accuracy of his science, but poets and artists have a way of arriving at truth by unusual routes—including pure intuition. The cocoon is a tough and solidly constructed object which encases and protects the body within it, even echoing the form of that body to some extent. To approach the inner world of the cocoon is to contemplate miraculous possibilities of change or transformation. One senses that there must be something living inside—but what?

Judith Scott's very first three-dimensional forms, the bound reed constructions, were identified by her as "Baba" and rocked in her arms.

While no doubt reflective of her experience of dolls, in childhood and later, it is probable that what she sought in these symbolic forms was not a doll but a living baby. Had Judith herself not given these constructions a name and function, it is highly unlikely that we would ever have identified these first forms as symbolic or substitute babies. Nevertheless, what was, and is, evident is that their essential nature consists of a central core surrounded by a series of external wrappings. This is significant in that almost all of Judith's subsequent objects, whatever their shape, were to make use of the same formula—an inner "thing" concealed within a sequence of soft fiber membranes. Both the idea of concealment (a secret), and the function of care and protection (a baby), find expression in all of her work.

As the objects Judith was making became ever larger in size, losing their simple doll-like shape, the association with babies seems less and less obvious, though the

A variety of small immature creatures, caterpillars, silk worms, and a few rare forms of butterfly larva, enter a cocoon. In actuality, they spin it around themselves. The material they use emerges from their body, commonly from the head, but is used to make a separate object—the cocoon. While the chief substance of most cocoons is silk, the larva often incorporates other substances, including soil, sand grains, plant materials, and hair or waste from its own body. Some cocoons ultimately contain very little silk at all!

essential formula, container and contained, is never abandoned. Indeed, the secret within is enhanced as the hidden content grows ever more obscure and deeply buried. The wrapping process inevitably implies that something is within; the outer layers never appearing as the "thing" in itself, but always as external, enclosing forms. Judith's compulsive work focuses exclusively on the elaboration of this multi-layered container. It is not impossible that she forgets what is within, so that it becomes, over time, a secret even to her. What is absolutely essential is simply that something be hidden within. Because of the organic appearance of the external form it is natural to assume that something living is inside. On some level Judith knows the mundane truth of what lies concealed within the cocoon, yet in another part of her mind she may choose not to know, awaiting instead a miraculous transformation. All of her work seems to involve an ongoing preparation for an event that has not yet occurred. In this sense, the objects are nothing, the

process is all. No one would confuse the wrappings for the gift.

The art of Judith Scott, despite the complicating factor of her deafness and total lack of language, forced me to reconsider my tentative assumptions concerning the limitations of creativity in mental retardation. Because of the intensity of the forces compelling her to give birth to three-dimensional form, and the bizarre nature of the abstract forms that emerged, she stood out among all the artists active at Creative Growth as a true Outsider Artist.

Princeton trained art historian John M. MacGregor, Ph.D., has devoted his teaching and research career to interdisciplinary studies in psychiatry/psychoanalysis and art. His post-doctoral training included study at the School of Psychiatry of the Menniger Foundation, Topeka, the C.G. Jung Institute, Zurich, the Tavistock Clinic, London, and with the late Anna Freud at the Hampstead Clinic, London. Since 1985 he has devoted himself to research and writing in psychiatric art, and in the related fields of l'Art Brut/Outsider Art.