

# Overview

## Janis Provisor Mothers and Sons

In the last week of May, 1989—ten years ago—I stood with Janis Provisor, her husband Brad Davis, and two Chinese-speaking friends part way up the famous Yellow Mountain so often depicted in Chinese paintings. It was raining. Above us a bare rock pinnacle with a gnarled pine growing from its side held a perfect halo of

light-filled cloud around its tip.

Below us we could see a little band of people winding up a village street with placards supporting the students who were occupying Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Unprepared for rain, we had bought at a roadside stand plastic ponchos decorated with large pink polka dots. We clutched them close to our bodies as we surveyed steep stairs carved into the rock and disappearing into clouds.



Janis Provisor and Brad Davis on the Yellow Mountain, 1989.

A villager, unfazed by our strange pink-spotted selves, stopped to see if we'd like to hire his car. After intense negotiations, we climbed in, and on the way up the mountain Davis asked if we could detour to the nearby birthplace of a famous 19th century painter.

Keys were produced, a door opened into a stone house, the largest in that village. About twenty people crowded inside after us. Children climbed over balcony handrails and framed themselves inside beautiful round doorways. A toddler full of curiosity stared at us, and Provisor asked our friend to translate so she could speak to his mother: "I have a boy at home just your son's age," she said, "And on this trip, I miss my son so much. I hope to bring him back to China someday."

In Hangzhou, at work on a woodcut for Crown Point's China Project, Provisor revisited the thought. "Everyone is so engaged; everything is so real," she said. "I'd like Alec to experience this country."

Later, in a boat on the West Lake she made a decision. "I'm going to try to come back here with the family and live for a while," she said. I thought it was a far-fetched idea and laughed.



Janis Provisor, *Mothers and Sons*, 1999. Color soap ground and spit bite aquatints with soft ground etching, drypoint and direct gravure on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 50 x 41 1/2"; image size: 39 1/2 x 32". Edition 25. Printed by Case Hudson.



The day after we left China, the students were gunned down in Tiananmen Square, and for three or four years people feared even to speak with foreigners.

Then things changed again. The "To Get Rich is Glorious" campaign began, and getting rich seemed to require foreign connections. Provisor and Davis arranged temporary teaching jobs at Hangzhou University.

While living in Hangzhou they set up a business designing luxurious silk carpets that are produced there and eventually sold in the United States. They have kept the business thriving, and at the same time have continued their lives as painters.

When Provisor, her husband, and their son Alec moved to China, Alec was almost six. Now he is eleven,

and they are living in Hong Kong. But soon they will be back in New York.

"It's time for Alec to learn what it is to be an American," Provisor says. "China will always be a tremendous influence in his life. And I hope he'll always remember how to read, write, and speak Chinese."

The prints you see in this newsletter are about the feeling of Provisor's life in China, what she calls "this portion of my journey through life." They are also about the exuberant, delicate, fluctuating relationship of a mother and her son. Three of the prints have as backgrounds Alec's Chinese writing. Provisor asked him to write a phrase he once called out casually to her, across their apartment: "I love you, woman!"

"He's very secure, very independent,



Janis Provisor, *Mandarin Love Note*, 1999. Color hard ground etching with spit bite aquatint, drypoint, and direct gravure on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 31 1/4 x 30 1/2; image size: 19 1/4 x 19 1/4. Edition 35. Printed by Case Hudson.

and that makes him free," Provisor says about her son. "I called one of the prints *Romance*, and I was thinking, what is this notion of romance with a child—you're mine, but you're not. And I'm happy about that, but sad. Everything goes by so fast." And that's where the butterfly comes in.

After Provisor's father died, she began dreaming of butterflies, and she realized why they are in many cultures symbols of the brevity and beauty of life.

"To see a butterfly light on a leaf is a moment arrested, a moment of beauty that flutters like a breath, like holding your breath for a moment," she says, and then she adds, "I don't think of this kind of thing when I'm working. I'm a formalist artist. My work isn't artfully designed to illustrate something. It's abstract, it's concerned with form, with color and balance. But it's also full of emotion, and that probably comes from whatever is preoccupying me at the time."

Provisor was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1946. She grew up in Cincinnati and studied at the San Francisco Art Institute.

She moved to New York in 1981, and began showing at the Holly Solomon Gallery. She was making textured paintings in which she built



Janis Provisor, *Flutter*, 1999. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 44 1/4 x 41 1/4; image size: 32 1/4 x 32 1/4. Edition 25. Printed by Case Hudson.



up the canvas with modeling paste, then painted over it. "I began to feel I was no longer painting, no longer discovering," she says.

Trying to find a way out of the predicament, she spent a lot of time in museums, and noticed the work of a Chinese eighteenth century painter named Bada Shanren. "He was painting elements from nature but that seemed almost incidental to what I viewed as the abstract force. His composition on the page somehow electrified me," she remembers. "I don't look at his work very often at the moment, but I feel like I swallowed whole what I needed."

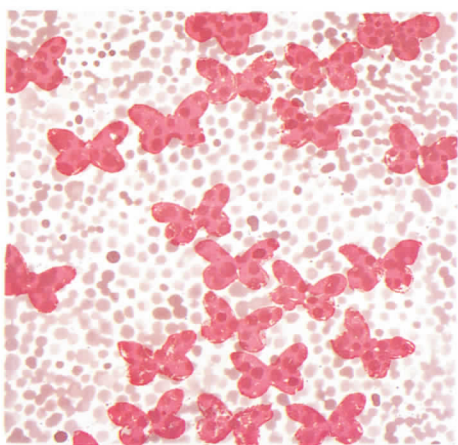
In an article in *Orientations* magazine, Arnold Chang, who is a historian of Chinese art, remarks that critics sometimes say Provisor's work is influenced by Chinese painting, but this misses the point both of her work and that of the Chinese.

"She has invited Chinese painting to enter *her* world, on *her* terms," he says. "In the whole history of Chinese painting, only Bada Shanren's work comes close to being charged with the psychological tension evident in Provisor's painting. Like Bada, her work is direct, intuitive, and spontaneous, full of private symbols and secret meanings."

Through her titles and her conversations with me, Provisor has shared some of the private meanings in this



Janis Provisor, *Romance*, 1999. Color spit bite and soap ground aquatints with drypoint. Paper size: 47 1/4 x 40 1/2"; image size: 36 1/2 x 30 1/4". Edition 25. Printed by Case Hudson.



Janis Provisor, *Breathless*, 1999. Color sugar lift aquatint with spit bite aquatint on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 31 1/4 x 30 1/2"; image size: 19 1/4 x 19 1/8". Edition 35. Printed by Case Hudson.

group of prints, and I think those meanings give extra dimension to the work. But that kind of meaning is not something we need to know in order to access the art and use it for ourselves.

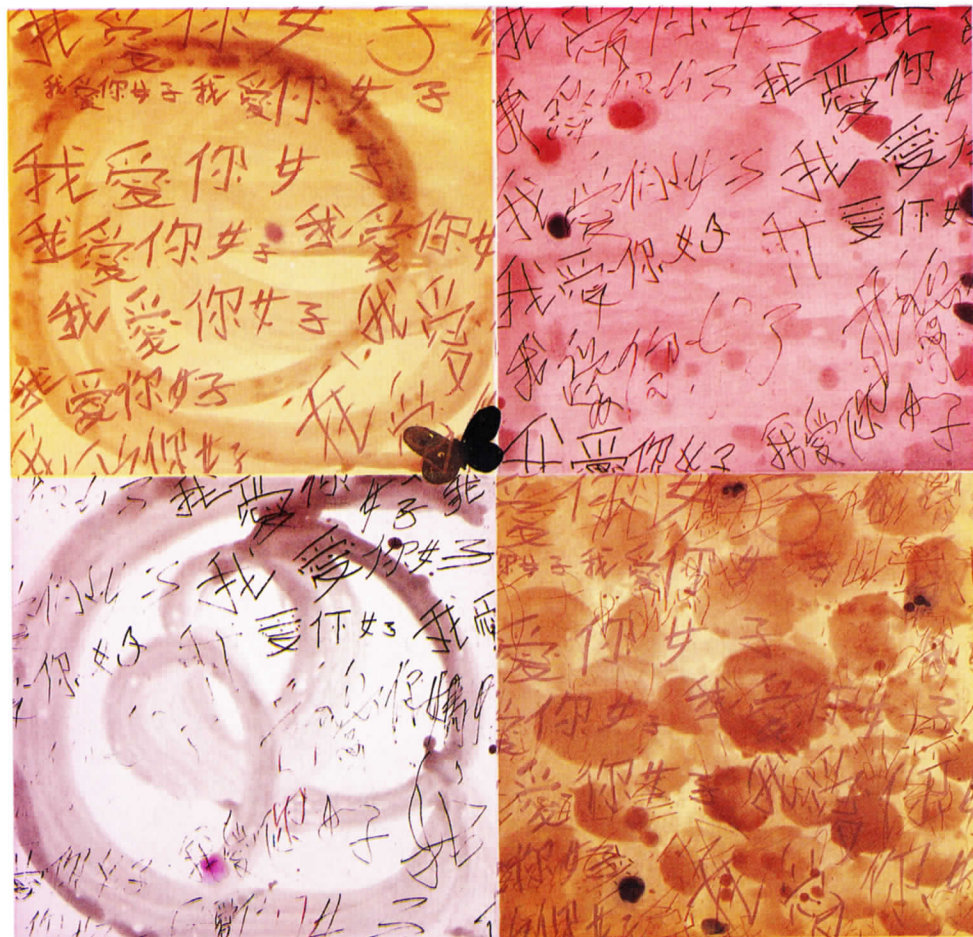
What we've been talking about here is the way an artist gets going, how she thinks and what matters to her as she begins to work. Provisor says her work is about connection, abstraction, and emotion. Those qualities, I think, are clearly there.

— Kathan Brown



Janis Provisor in the Crown Point studio, 1999.





Janis Provisor, *I Love You Woman*, 1999. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with aquatint and direct gravure. Paper size: 44 1/2 x 41 1/2; image size: 32 1/2 x 32 1/2. Edition 25. Printed by Case Hudson.

**Join Us for Breakfast** on **Friday, October 1, 9:30-11 a.m.** In conjunction with the San Francisco International Art Exhibition, Crown Point Press will be a stop on a self-guided walking tour through the City's gallery districts. Organized by The San Francisco Art Dealers Association, and sponsored by The Bakers of Paris and Just Desserts. Call 415-626-7498 for detailed information and a site map.

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## Notes

### San Francisco

#### In the Crown Point Gallery:

**Janis Provisor: Etchings and Woodcuts 1989-1999**

September 16 through November 4.  
Reception for the artist 6-8 p.m. Thursday, September 16.

#### At the San Francisco International Art Exhibition:

September 30 through October 4, Fort Mason Center. Crown Point will be showing new prints by Janis Provisor and advance proofs of *Why Draw a Landscape?* a portfolio of prints by eleven artists and a new book by Kathan Brown.

#### At the Gallery Paule Anglim:

New paintings by Anne Appleby, September 30 through October 30.

#### At the California Palace of the Legion of Honor:

*41 Etchings Drypoints* the portfolio of prints by Richard Diebenkorn published by Crown Point Press in 1965. September 25 through January 23, 2000. Kathan Brown will give a public lecture about the exhibition at 10 a.m. on September 23.

### New York

#### At Karen McCready Fine Art:

October 14, 6-9 p.m., a book signing for Kathan Brown and opening of the first exhibition of *Why Draw a Landscape?* prints by Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Jane Freilicher, Pat Steir, Ed Ruscha, Robert Bechtle, Tom Marioni, David Nash, Bryan Hunt, April Gornik, Joan Nelson, and Anne Appleby accompanied by a hardcover book. Kathan Brown will give a brief talk at 7 p.m. 425 West 13th Street, New York, NY (212) 243-0439.

Design: Brent A. Jones  
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