

Primordial Lands



By Lynn Cline ■ The New Mexican

Boston-area painter Sloat Shaw almost dropped out of her first art class because she vehemently believed she couldn't draw.

Her teacher at the Brookline Art Center, however, saw a gift that Shaw couldn't yet recognize and persuaded her student to stick it out.

Shaw had decided to pursue a doctorate in anthropology after the birth of her second child when the urge to draw struck her out of the blue.

"I was going to get my doctorate, and I was researching what my dissertation topic would be at the Art Institute of Boston. I had gone to take a course about the point where art, language, literature and philosophy meet," Shaw said during a phone interview from her home in Brookline, Mass.

"The course was given by an anthropologist at Radcliffe, and when I walked into the Art Institute for class, I would always pass by easels, and there was this enormous pull for me."

Shaw honored that tug. Trading her research tools for paintbrushes, she enrolled in Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts and threw herself into painting. As an undergraduate at Columbia University, she had studied with Margaret Mead and Claude Levi-Strauss; now Shaw pursued a classical course of study, drawing hundreds of figures, copying old masters and practicing trompe l'oeil.

Painting portraits, she began to glean a sense of what lay beneath the human surface, penetrating the profound mysteries making up the physical image of a person.

Shaw eventually developed a startling and strangely beautiful approach to painting,



Left, 'After the Flood: Day 30,' 1999, linocut, watercolor, chine collé, 10 x 11 inches.
Above, 'After the Flood: Day 16,' 1997, hand-colored and stitched lithograph, 12 x 9 inches.

DETAILS

- ▼ Sloat Shaw
Paintings, drawings & prints
- ▼ Opening reception 5-7:30 p.m. today, May 10.
Exhibit through June 13
- ▼ Chalk Farm Gallery, 330 Old Santa Fe Trail
- ▼ 983-7125

evoking archetypal memories of sacred journeys through primordial landscapes.

After the Flood, a solo exhibit of her paintings, drawings and prints, opens with a reception from 5 to 7:30 p.m. today, May 10, at the new location of Chalk Farm Gallery. (The artist will not be present.)

Shaw's oil paintings contain as many as 30 layers of glazes, lending an ephemeral quality to the work. She often slashes the painted canvas, then loosely sews across the cut so that the canvas threads remain revealed.

"I am a shape-shifter who works in paint," she said. "I shift the way people view reality. I awaken the interior memories about the earth and expose buried mystical longings. I work with the myths of the Western world to uncover the psychic roots of our culture."

Intriguingly, Shaw does not paint the human figure on her canvases. Instead, a small company of sticks represent the human figures as they travel through misty fjords and earthen caves and across uninhabited worlds shaped by flood and fire.

"I always have three sticks," Shaw said. "Usually I put myself as one of the three sticks, and sometimes my two kids or different people are represented by the other sticks. When you stand in front of one of the paintings, you (and the piece) are working together so that the light that's in the painting comes out, and you become one of the sticks. That allows the viewer to move into the painting."

Shaw became drawn to sticks after traveling 2,000 miles through England and Scotland and visiting stone circles like Callanish and Avebury, ancient Celtic formations based on sacred geometry. She also learned about archaeological ruins of preserved giant sticks resembling ancient fortresses that exist in the area today.

Returning to her home, she began to paint outside, focusing on landscapes that captured her imagination.

"I went to Quincy, and there were these sticks in the water and old bridge supports. My idea had been that I would draw this beautiful marshland, and behind it was a massive industrial complex — and I would draw the difference between nature and the complex," she said.

"But after I'd been there, the pictures started to take on their own life. I was really interested in those sticks in the water and birds on top of posts — the light as it hit the water. I was really interested in the way the land would change each day — because I'd go in all kinds of weather — when it was really cold and windy and drizzly."

But when Shaw enrolled in the museum's school, she had to shift from working outside to inside a studio.

"I didn't know what to do," she said. "I had all of these photographs from Quincy, so I started to build these little stone and clay models, miniature landscapes on slate bases with remnants of human presence in sticks and old bridge supports. I became much more interested in the models and not in the photographs. I started to tie little strings around the stones and move them around in different configurations: tall and thin, round and small. I drew them in gigantic sizes on the page."

From there the paintings took on a life of their own as Shaw shifted her focus from the models to the landscapes emerging on canvas with layers of paint.

Paintings such as *After the Flood: Crossing Over With Jed*, an acrylic and charcoal on canvas, are infused with a soft light, juxtaposing a thin, tall grouping of sticks with a massive landscape rent in two by a cavernous gorge. In *After the Flood: Day 21*, an oil with stitching, the sticks seem to be journeying along a mountain path beneath a sky churning with clouds.

Some people are moved to tears the first time they experience one of Shaw's paintings. Perhaps it's because they remember a deep, forgotten link to the land.

"We are bathed in light, flooded with water, swirled by the wind," Shaw said. "As modern beings we forget our relation to the elements until the electricity goes, the phone is dead, the planes are grounded. Paint is a way for me to express both the seen and the unseen. It bridges the path between our world that we acknowledge and the hidden world that we just glimpse in our dreams. I paint the force of the earth." ◀