

*Dialogue*  
by Tessa Barr



**Heart Drain (abdomen)**

things have this way  
have this way to coming through,  
coming through,  
my fingers out into the world. but I have no  
name for it.

**The Rule-maker:**

"Come on girl make it up."  
"Artist statement please."  
"Pin it up on the wall girl."  
"Open studio, people will walk by, they will come  
in to it from that sheet on the wall.  
You must be true.  
Stay up all night and try to fit it all on one small  
sheet.  
Oh And  
Please no poetry."

**Tessa:**

"When I draw it comes  
comes right through.  
like a wave of water.

I take my candle and pigment deep into the  
cave.

I could make it up for you, which will have its  
own sense of honesty  
but

When I move it it comes.

No choice it comes.

Close my eyes.

Move.

Open my eyes.

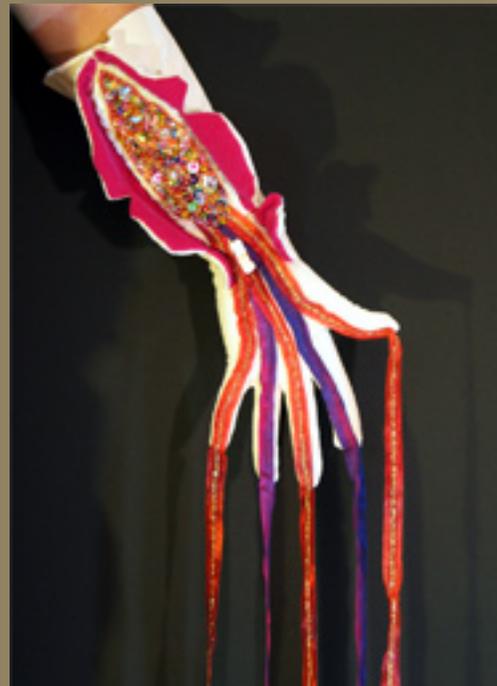
There it is again.

Inescapable.

All around me wants to come (needs to come).

It is blocking the way.

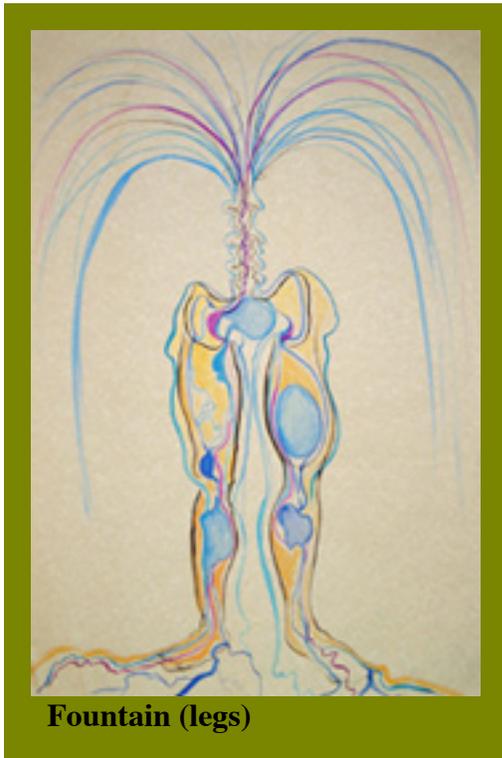
Way out of the cave. Back into the world."



**Out into the World  
(abdomen & hands)**

I move, move, move it to get through till something else takes its place. It is impossible to be still something always moving in something always coming out. The drawing is the document to that moment that is also forever changing. In being witnessed it comes into another incarnation. What was a roll of fat becomes a ribbon rolling out of frame.

Once I wanted to paint everything. I had no name for it. It just came out and through dreams sleeping or awake.



**Fountain (legs)**

### **The Oppressor:**

"You take a concept, add material, and blend very carefully. Please watch where and how and who you step. All materials must be acid free. If luck and brains conceive you parent an elusive an golden piece of finished artwork. Explanation follows."

### **Tessa:**

"This is what I was taught. I struggled to release into my natural art-making. I struggled to stifle what my gut wanted to create because I could not name it. I 'closed it down' and held fast to my self inflicted rules. I confined my spirit and pushed so hard to understand my creations. I could not sit back and interact with my work. It did not speak to me. I tried to strangle it loose. Instead everything went silent and I continued to make and make and make. I followed through no matter what else called to me. I held tight held on to any fleeting thought like gold, like

it would be my own keystone.

I developed and dropped.

Straddled the drawing bench. Bent awkwardly over a loom for hours at a time. Mixed paint. Carded wool. Extruded clay I had mixed from powder. Stitched thousands of sequins onto a costume. Waved a metal plate, submerged in acid, with a feather. Built and stretched large and cumbersome canvases. I continually did and made and developed. My art and drive to create hung over me. Never satisfied. Bigger than me. As my repertoire grew my understanding shrank. I tried to develop a relationship and create some boundaries. I lay on my back to keep afloat."

I remember mixing paint. Mixing it up until it was just soupy enough and that perfect color too. If I could've danced that color that texture then. Then I could've written that damn artist's statement.

When I move,  
I can see it.  
I can see something.  
Something comes and makes sense.

Imagine to flashing back  
(That soupy paint could always speak)  
It has always had a name  
but to get inside you had to let it speak through  
you  
what comes even when pushing is right  
it is all right  
what speaks to me  
what might speak to you  
everything has its own language  
but there is only one all at the same time  
What will come and what will fall away?



**Feathers into Stone (spine)**

**Tessa:**

"I can speak to you all now I can speak to the girl up late painting all night years ago. Did you know that color you mixed last night could always speak? That it could dance? Stare long enough at a blank canvas or ball of clay it will tell you what to make of it. And Please break the rules (self imposed or otherwise). And Please paint everything."

***Tessa's Comments on Her Story***

I have always known I was an artist and that I make art from my gut. It has mostly come easy to me. I can disappear into a drawing or painting for a whole day. Growing up academics were difficult and I got through school with no skin left on my teeth. I struggled with the idea of having a creative life because it seemed like a big challenge and even bigger gamble. I spent several years trying to "catch up" and get to where I thought I was supposed to be going. Finally I began painting and decided I wanted to paint everything! Everything around me was fuel—the world wanted to be painted, experience wanted to be painted. It was beautiful. I was once again in my element and ended up in art school. There I felt held back and stunted. I began to question everything I did naturally. I felt I had lost what I had so once loved. I had difficulty quieting my

mind from what I had learned. I wanted to unlearn. I spent the next 5 years shifting through and recycling what was of value. Slowly things took shape. I found myself in a creative job teaching art. I still struggled and sifted trying to get back to my gut with my own creativity.

A year ago I found Tamalpa (or maybe it found me) and jumped feet first, straight into the level 1 training program. At Tamalpa I gained a new resource for art-making . . . MOVEMENT. I began to move, images came and I wanted to draw everything. I felt free to let many things I struggled with sit to the side. With time and practice I have begun to step away and become aware of what I have been doing and how I have been holding myself back. I now have a new understanding of my creative process. I feel like I can make art almost about anything. I can make art about what I move or write and my art can inspire me to move . . . I can make art about someone else's movement, and move in response to another person's art. After one year at Tamalpa I feel I am more inspired than ever and that the possibilities are unlimited.

***On Witnessing the Aesthetic Process***  
**by Daria Halprin**

Tessa is just completing her 2005–2006 L1 weekend training, and part of the completion process is a culminating “self portrait ritual presentation.” One of the opening lines in her ritual presentation was “I am an artist in recovery.” Her statement of her serious life theme was delivered with such a sense of gritty humor, and her dance enactment—movement being a new form of process, discovery and creation for Tessa—had the quality of very serious play, a serious playing with her themes, her emotions, and the images in her life-sized self portrait that hung on the wall behind her. Tessa was moving her images and her life story. And we, her witnesses, were moved by her. “To be moved” is an interesting phrase; it suggests that feeling and imagination are somehow connected to an experience of being in motion. Having always painted, for Tessa being in motion with emotion and imagination is a totally new process: letting her painting move, provoke, open and inspire, illuminates the “everything” (as she calls it) in her life story.

For me as a teacher, watching Tessa’s final piece was framed by my experience of witnessing her process throughout the past year. Her final presentation, or act of “recovering,” is made so much more authentic and potent by my active remembering. The arts accompany us as we remember so that to re-member is to re-join parts and pieces in a new form, with new meaning and with artfulness. I am excited by the ways in which Tessa has immersed herself in this embodied expressive-arts process of reclamation. Could we call it a healing? And are we brave enough to let that remain a verb rather than a noun—brave enough not to call it fixed or claim that the gritty, underbelly, shadow stuff can be made to go away and then I, it, you will be o.k.? Can we stay in-flux, constantly moving, becoming, with layer upon layer encountered and treasured?

Tessa’s aesthetic response to her training experience speaks to this process of reclamation

and re-membering—the reclaiming of herself as an artist who feels she could “paint everything in the world” and does begin to paint “everything in her life.” In doing so, the “everything in her life” is imbued with the potency of poetic inspiration, metaphor and creative spirit as much as it is with the psychologizing process. Or we might say, one feeds the other, provokes and inspires the other—a life-art bridging.

The history of Tessa’s struggle with art and academia is given a richness in retrospect, the artist’s retrospective, which renders it a beautiful and archetypal story of redemption. What do I and what do you want to recover from, what do I/you/we want to redeem, we might ask. What struggle do you want to dance, paint, evoke, provoke, or celebrate in poetry?

Tessa made a very interesting comment in her training group as we reflected together on the experience of performing and witnessing. In the same vein as “I could paint everything in the world,” she said that while her own piece was certainly very meaningful to her, just as meaningful was the way in which her feelings and imagination were provoked in watching the performances of her peers. She said, “I have the feeling of wanting to dance and paint and write about the themes I saw in each of your presentations; your family history takes me to mine; your theme of holding and being held—I want to explore that for myself; your moving and spoken foot poem—I want to explore what poems are living in my feet; your life and death dance—I want to explore what is mine.” Tessa’s statement that “I could paint everything in the world” leads us to “I could dance everything in the world” or “I could write poetry about everything in my life—or your dance, painting, poem—I could explore that and discover how it lives in me.”

The art opens me, the art opens me to you, the art opens us to the world and opens the world to us.