

Meditations on the Space In-Between

Julia M. Becker's *Flowweb*

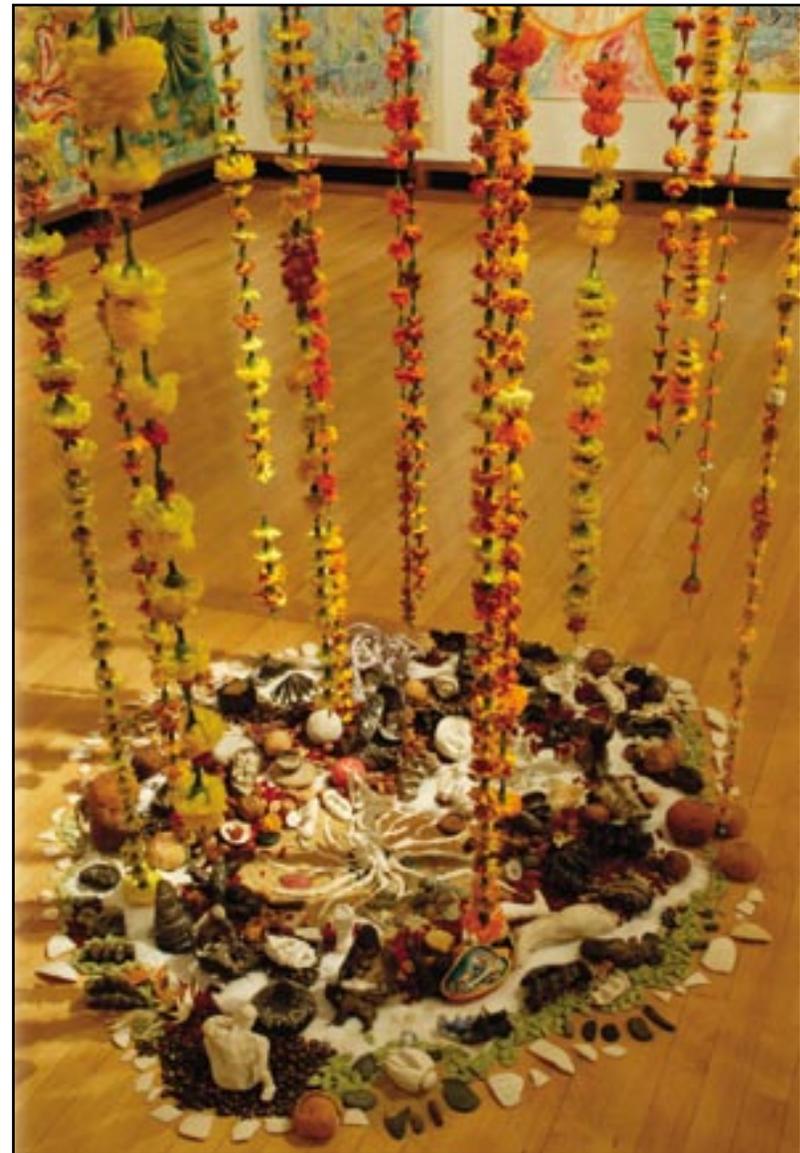
Jessica Hunter Larsen

Photography: McMillan Studios, Daniel Biehl & Julia M. Becker

Note: This essay first appeared in the catalog accompanying Julia Becker's solo exhibition, *Flowweb*, mounted by the Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Great Falls, Montana, in 2005. It is reprinted here by kind permission of the author and the Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art. Our thanks to the artist and to Lynn Spriggs, Paris Gibson Square's former director, for their invaluable assistance.

"The process and work are not linear for me. It is cyclical, radiant, layered, woven, linked, merged. It is all happening at once, rich and vital."

There are moments in our lives that are electric, charged with possibilities. The breathless instant between the fading of the symphony's last note and the thunder of applause; the split second on the beach when you aren't sure if the water swirling around your ankles is pushing you toward shore or tugging you out to sea; that deliciously anxious moment between wondering if he will kiss you and knowing that he will—these are the moments when all sure bets are off and everything is possible. These moments form the space in-between, where magic and science dance. In between



Julia M. Becker, Flower Chandelier (detail) with floor sculptures, 2005, © 2005 Julia M. Becker.



Julia M. Becker, Darfur, 2005, acrylic on panel, 16 x 20 inches, © 2005 Julia M. Becker.

creation and destruction, sleep and wakefulness, ebb and flow—this is the place where art lives. This is the place Julia M. Becker calls home.

“Breaking down, tearing through, obliterating, removing, cutting through, revealing and concealing, wiping off, wiping on . . . the process of destruction is equal to the process of creation.”

In Hindu cosmology, creation and destruction are faces of the same god. God is everywhere, in everything, and transforms continuously. As every gardener knows, this cycle of birth and

death constitutes the essential process of life—all must die to be reborn. Transformation is a constant for Julia M. Becker as well. She creates a drawing, only to paint over it. Cutting the painting into stencils, she makes a hand-rubbed print. Layering the print with dressmaking patterns, maps, or EEG readings, she transforms the print into a collage. By suspending multiple collages from the ceiling, she gives them a new life as a hanging tent. Metamorphosis plays out in Julia’s *video paintings* as well. Ephemeral images—created of light and transmitted through light—flow freely from one to the next, in a continual celebration of the impermanence of this life. Julia admits that she is often more invested in the process than the product. Creating, contemplating, re-creating—all are part of the same whole, as natural as breathing. In this evolutionary artistic process, meaning is inextricably tied to making.

“In the effort to move away from our inherent materialistic tendencies my working process involves tearing down the methods/techniques/processes that can obsess us and take us away from drawing deeper, past surface.”

The continual evolution that characterizes Julia’s creative life flies in the face of what we think of as “making art.” Isn’t the end result of an artistic endeavor a precious object, one to be revered, protected, marketed, possessed? In our relentless consumer culture, where we judge our social status by our ability to acquire the right material objects (anything but Manolo Blahnik shoes simply won’t do), Julia’s pursuit of art as a catalyst for transformation, rather than a commodity, becomes a perplexing, if not downright radical,



Installation view: Julia M. Becker, Flowweb: Hand Prints, Paintings & Sculpture, Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Great Falls, Montana, 2005. All works © 2005 Julia M. Becker.

proposition. How can we assess something's value if it won't sit still long enough to be weighed and measured, classified and appraised?

"Sometimes the work is a meditation, a prayer, a discovery, a practice. It is letting go, trusting, allowing intuitive knowing to do its work. Sometimes the images come quickly and solidly. Other times it is vaguer and requires more play, more layering, more time, more evolution.

Sometimes I need to get lost in the work so I can find my way . . . I don't analyze my work, or process it intellectually. I trust my heart and hand—they know what to do. Sometimes I go at the working process in a way that may appear a little reckless to get past any formal pretense that may inhibit a deeper truth from emerging in the work. I mix colors that feel right . . . I accept 'mistakes'—they become part of the work."

And yet, while process and performance are undeniably part of the whole, Julia's artwork is rooted in substance. In fact, the sheer joy she takes in her materials is palpable and contagious. We as viewers revel along with her in the delicate weave of a handmade paper, the



Installation view: Julia M. Becker, Nonstop India, Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Great Falls, Montana, 2005. All works © 2005 Julia M. Becker.

sensuous curve of a found tree-branch, the solid comfort of a lump of clay. So how do we account for art that simultaneously celebrates the essential qualities of its materials, while continually evolving away from materialism? To appreciate Julia's work, we must step outside the world of fixed and immutable things to become part of the metamorphosis. For a moment, we must live in the space in-between the material and the idea.

"The work is informed by a personal connection to what I understand of Hinduism from my experience in India. God is everywhere, everyone is god, god is always transforming. Life is but a fleeting moment. Anything can happen. Your experience is unique and valuable and



Julia M. Becker, Three Transformative Deities: Hone, Flow, and Surge, 2004, painting & print on paper, 43.25 x 58 inches, © 2004 Julia M. Becker.

universal. Death is always present. Life is a gift and a duty."

When Julia's artworks do pause long enough in their evolutionary journey for us to admire them, they are magnificent. After so many incarnations, these wise old souls have stories to tell. This is sacred art for a vehemently secular age, and as such, it demands our active involvement. Images weave together to form visual narratives of personal and spiritual quests that compel us to embark on journeys of our own. We don't merely look at the images Julia creates—we inhabit them. Many religions embrace the notion of metempsychosis, the migration of consciousness or the soul from one state of being to another. Julia's artworks encourage a kind of



Julia M. Becker, No Other Way (Archway), 2004, painting, print, collage, & seeds on paper, 38.5 x 27 inches, © 2004 Julia M. Becker.

visual metempsychosis; by inhabiting a sequence of images we, too, participate in the transformative process. Identity becomes fluid as the boundaries that separate animate from inanimate dissolve. Swaying dancers plant tree-roots, swimmers become one with the waves, and girls grow wings. Everything is evolving all the time and we are along for the ride.

“The hand-sculptures are created out of lumps of clay that fit in my hand. I’ll start and finish with the same amount of clay—nothing is added, nothing is removed. I make these without looking, often with my eyes closed. Or sometimes I’ll make them during a meeting, under the table.”

She may be on to something. The constant transformation that characterizes Julia’s art may, in fact, describe the world better than a fixed, precious object ever could. Quantum physics tells us that, at an atomic level, all objects are in a constant state of flux. In fact, the act of looking at something changes the way it behaves. Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle states that the presence of the experimenter changes the experiment. For example, since light affects the behavior of electrons, they behave in a fundamentally different manner under experimental conditions than they do when left alone. Julia knows this intuitively: she often will create drawings or make clay sculptures with her eyes closed. There is a moment, in between looking and not looking, when the world may be fundamentally different than you know.

“The ‘other’ imagery, the awareness of what I’ll call energetic imagery, is what my work is about. We know more than we know. There is more than we see. If we let go of our assumptions, our judgments, and allow



(above) Julia M. Becker, *Gratitude*, 2004, ink on paper, 9 x 12 inches, © 2004 Julia M. Becker.

(left image): Julia M. Becker, *Bedouin Woman: Carrier of Spirit and Earth*, 2004–2005, acrylic on Tableau paper, 125 x 39 inches, © 2004 Julia M. Becker.

(right image): Julia M. Becker, *Bedouin Woman: Fire and Gauze*, 2004–2005, acrylic on Tableau paper, 108 x 27 inches, © 2004 Julia M. Becker.



Julia M. Becker, *Big Smile* (radiance of being, mapping the journey), 2004, painting, print, collage, & seeds on paper, 86 x 58 inches, © 2004 Julia M. Becker.

other ways of knowing (intuition, imagination) to take root, there is a shift.”

While engaging larger universal ideas of spiritual evolution and growth, Julia’s artwork is also deeply personal. Every facet of her life permeates every aspect of her art. Her experiences as an artist, an observer, a citizen, a traveler, a musician, a teacher, an athlete, a partner, and a mother are woven throughout her art. At its core, Julia’s work is about intimacy—with oneself, with others, with spirit, with humanity. So it is not surprising to find her working on the floor, squatting directly over the paper, creating an intimacy with the work that only immediate, physical contact can provide.

“Sometimes I paint with both arms, moving like a dance over large paper on the floor. Other times it is a quiet meditative miniature-painting mode, like Persian paintings. Some of the small paintings have been an attempt to bring the immediacy and spontaneity of my sketchbook paintings and drawings onto the wood panels.”

Challenging, forgiving, deeply humane, rooted, and ephemeral, Julia M. Becker’s artwork may be the perfect antidote for a world that seems hopelessly entangled in materialism. In celebrating the moments in between the flow and ebb of our daily lives, Julia’s artwork helps us forge connections to other people and connect to something greater than ourselves.

“Just this morning I was thinking how the work is about intimacy, with place, each other, with the universe; about practicing it, and passing it on...I ask myself, ‘why do I do this?’ It is my prayer for the world.”

This exhibit is dedicated to my father
Flavian T. Becker
1929–1983
Whose heart sang through music,
And whose love will always sing through me.

And especially, my soul mates,
Daniel and Eula.



Julia Becker has been making images for as long as she can remember. Her daily life and immediate environment, including travel and living experience throughout the world, inspire and inform her work. In 2002 she traveled to South India on a project exploring sacred sites. After her return, Jessica Hunter Larsen, Curator at Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, invited her to share her India experience in an exhibit of her current work. Julia spent a couple of years working on the multi-media works that became the installation of *Flowebb* and *Nonstop India* (video installation). During that time other influences continued to make their way into the work, including current social/political/environmental issues and events as well as physiological and medical imagery and feelings as an outcome of her daughter's ongoing medical issues. There is also always the inspiration and influence of music, as related to body, memory, presence, and connection. Julia spent twenty-one days installing the elaborate installation, which involved building a flower chandelier (with flowers grown in her garden and donated and harvested from other gardens in the area) and layering and sewing translucent paintings and hand-prints on the walls. During the course of the installation, there were collaborative performances in the exhibit space, filming, and readings.