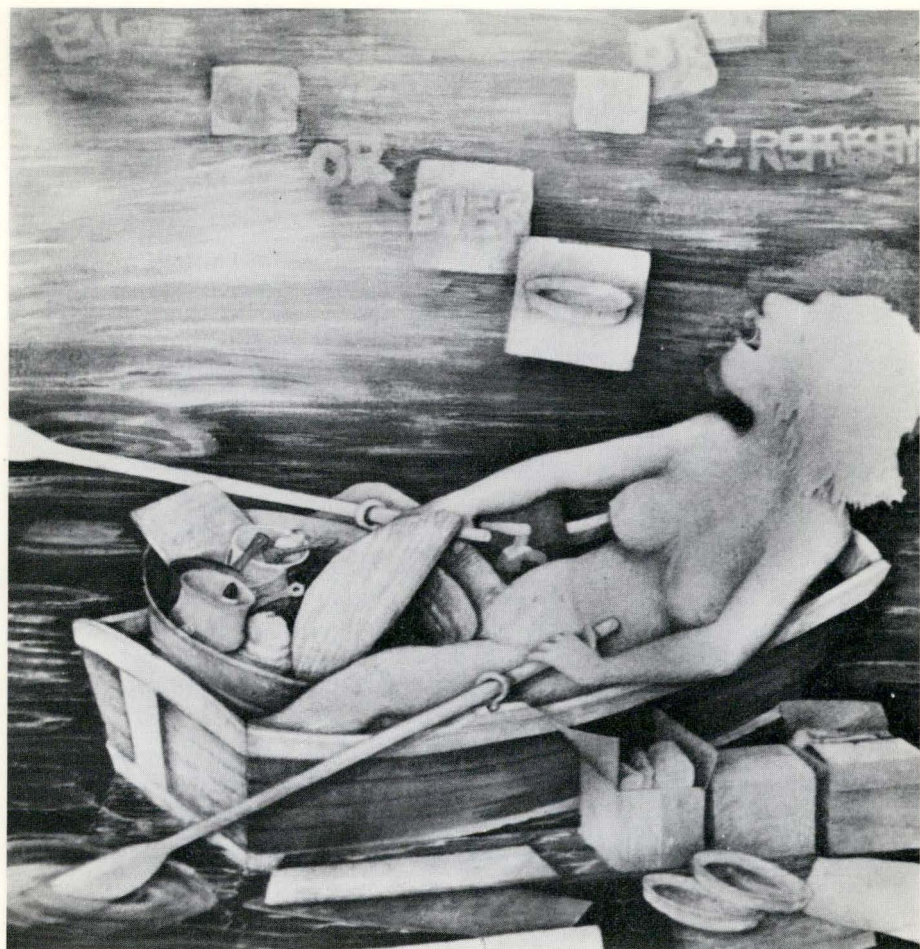


Judy Williams / REFLECTION/EXTENSION

Three years ago, an octagenarian died. She'd lived at Refuge Cove for forty years.¹ Her existence and environment (real and imagined) became the bases for a multi-panelled mural created by her friend and neighbour that reflects/extends the value of Dorothy's being beyond the particular.²

Williams supplemented the information she'd learned from the living person by assembling a further store of facts and fantasies by investigating the remains of a civilization she called "the 'Dorothy' culture."³ To that site the artist rowed again and again to collect fragments of pottery and glass. With an anthropological curiosity and an aesthetic eye, Williams divided blue glass shards into three piles — "dark ultramarine, medium cobalt and blue-violet."⁴ These hues accorded with the jars of Noxzema, Vicks Vaporub and Milk of Magnesia that were still present in the vacant house, alongside Dorothy's kitchen utensils.

In the house, on the beach and in the sheds, Williams also observed evidence of Ed who was the last of Dorothy's three husbands. Given certain clues, she could reconstruct his roles as house-builder, tackle-maker. She could deduce that he, not Dorothy, owned the knife whose blade was sharpened to a sliver. She imagined him as the obsessive driller of holes in everything and as the maker of the boat that gave his widow access to the community and pleasure.⁵ It is Ed that Williams conjures forth in the cover image as the last of a set of husbands, the archetype of the fisherman/fixer. But it is Dorothy who is the muse of the piece. Her artifacts — fragmented or whole; underwater or tangled in grass — are the chief documented facts of a life lived in dozens of the watercolours. Her Eden-like environment alive with flowers; her ocean teeming with fish; her rustic gates; her dead man's lures and tools are recorded in many others. Parts of Dorothy's body are presented as though each was a shard, a piece of an elusive whole: gentle hand on an oar; graceful arm outstretched; willing knees spread. But she is also shown once as a greedy, middle-aged consumer of fruit. She is presented near the conclusion of the 232 panel cycle as a blond, beautiful swimmer floating on her back, her yellow hair electric with the prescience of impending death.⁶



The old woman in her boat reproduced here is a study that pre-dates the mural. It is as close as Williams came to a portrait as she pursued her vision of the import of Dorothy's life. And even here the artist's intention to make something far beyond any obvious statement about a woman's existence is clear. Dorothy is adrift in her boat, adrift in her artifacts, drifting towards death. Her thoughts rise like sheets of paper over her head to disperse in the wind. This preliminary painting previews a major insight and certain visual ideas that are contained in the completed mosaic of images. It betrays no hint of the symbolic format used in the majority of the watercolours nor of the numbering system that contributes immeasurably to the mural's poetry.

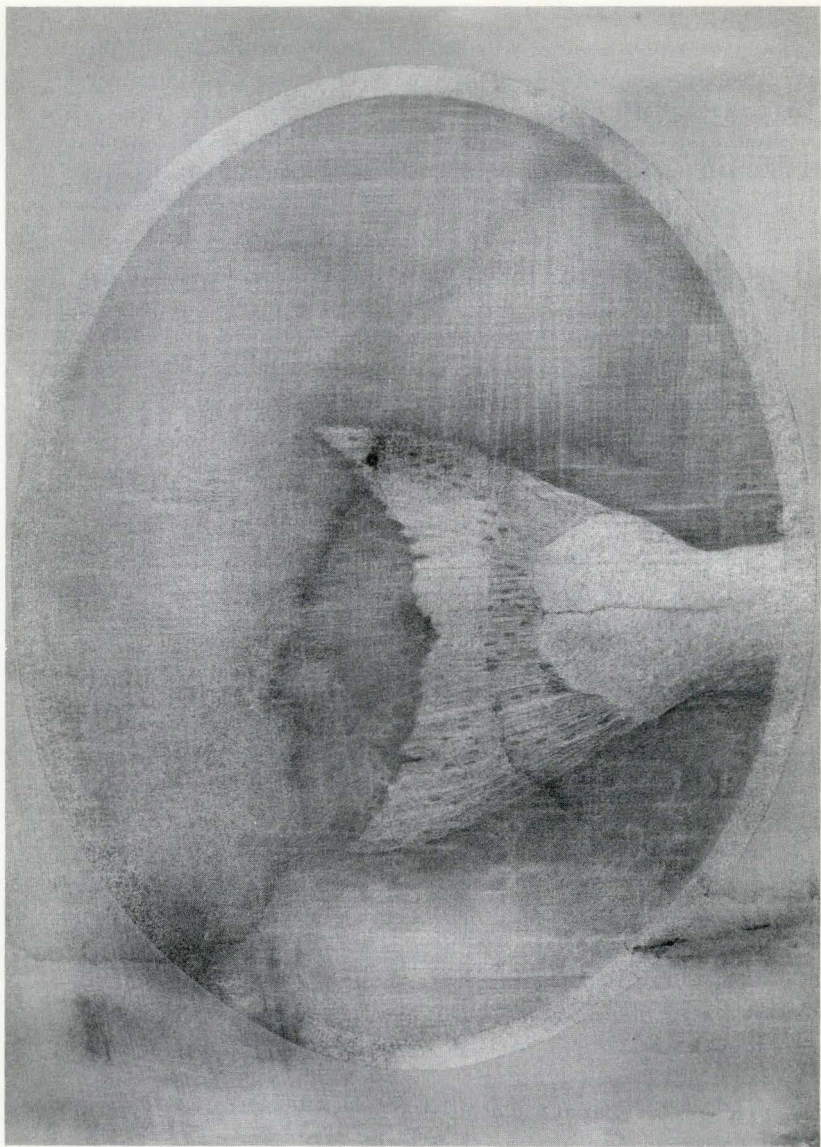


As installed at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, the first of the hundreds of sixteen inches by twenty inches paintings was an image of an ivory-handled, bevelled-glass, oval mirror tipped through a mirrored ellipse.⁷ The elegant mirror crops up time and time again as a clue to Dorothy's possible vanity, an equivalent to the Noxzema jar motif. More importantly, the mirror is established immediately as the material source of the oval shape which frames almost every vignette. The mirror with a rainbow-producing edge is a reflector and suggests the artist's reflections upon the subjects she has recorded. As the reproductions imply, the ovoid is also, through context, the porthole past which fish glide, or it is a window. Or it is the corneal or camera lens to inner or outer vision.⁸

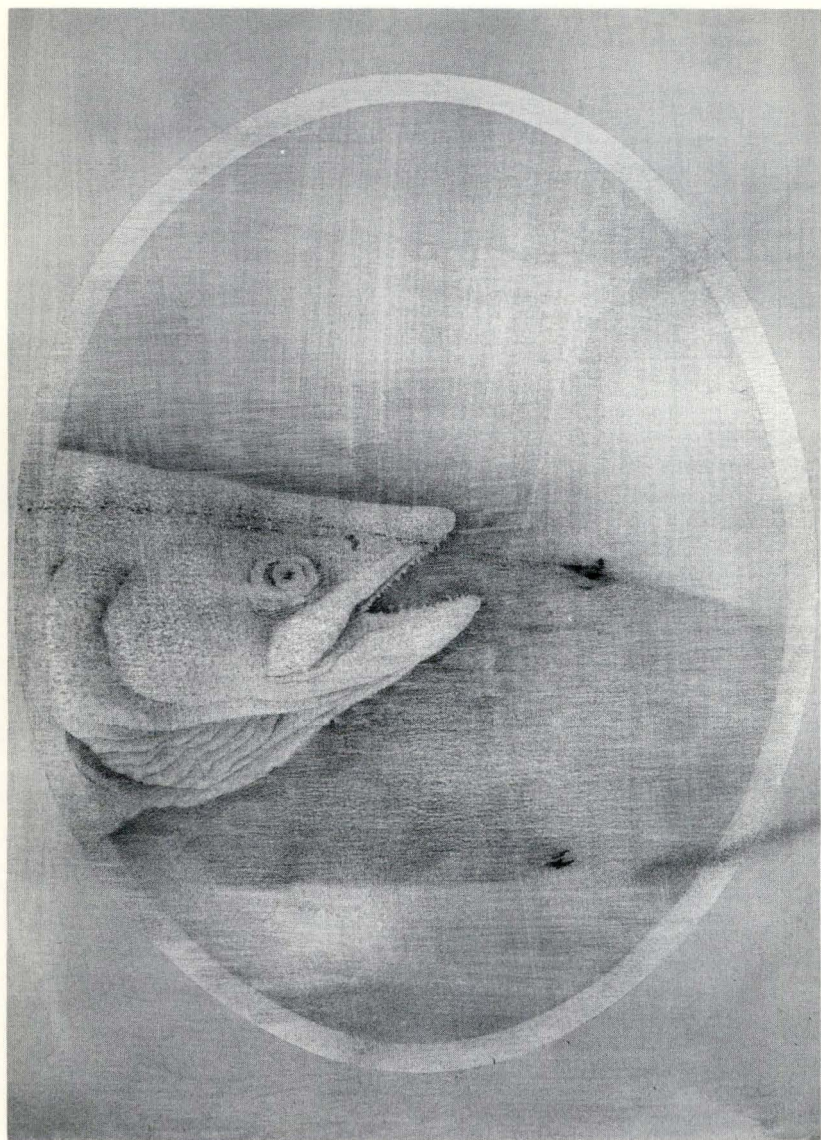
To the left and right of the first image of the mural, two metal number 1s were nailed. Close to them, near an undersea view of a

plaque on which a curve is drawn with mathematical accuracy, one discovered a number 2. The three-part fish painting was number 3.⁹ As preface to the next cluster of images positioned to the right, there was a number 5. The sequence "1, 1, 2, 3, 5 . . ." and the spiralling curve tell the viewer that Williams is employing a number system invented in the seventeenth century by Fibonacci in which the route to the next number is by addition of the two previous numbers. By this means Williams sets up the anticipation of the sequential figures "8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89 . . ." which number the items grouped beside each. Williams chose to use Fibonacci's system because it is exponential, expansive and because it is the basis upon which curves like those in shells can be computed. The difference between step by step reading of single images and cluster effect comprehension of groups is implied through the numbers presented. And just as the mirror, by implication, is the route to *reflection*, the magnifying numbers allude to *extension*. And because Fibonacci's system concerns the curve, it encompasses the ellipse and all other curves suggested in the imagery — the twist of a leaf, the curl of a petal, the circuit of an oar, the spiral of the eddy, the circle of the seasons, the cycle of growth and decay.

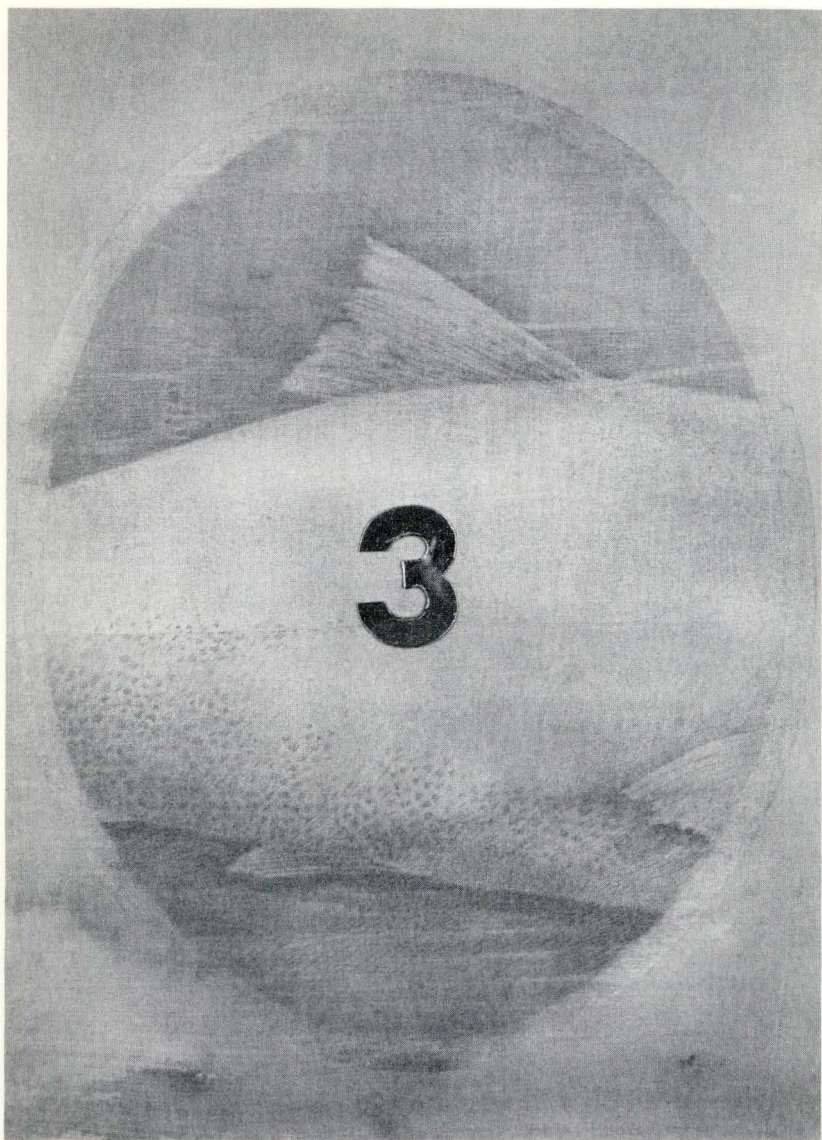
Some other elements that pushed the implication of the mural towards allegory should be explained as they cannot be shown here with clarity.¹⁰ As the viewer moved around the exhibition, he was witness to the accumulating evidence of a life lived; he was made familiar with the tonalities that mark our seasons — grey, grey Winters; green and lilac Springs; golden, blue-skied Summers; russet, orange Falls; the plants, the activities appropriate to them. As he moved he noticed, perhaps, that there was an increase in the number of purely abstract images as he approached the mural's end; an increase, especially, of skies presented on the mirror ellipses. He was aware too, perhaps, that as the mosaic built, the more frequently Williams covered an image with a sheet of translucent plastic, the more frequently she substituted a blank sheet for an image. The factualness that was at the beginning was slowly dematerialized and that transformation completed in section 89 which has as its central image the vision of the swimmer. To her right are over two dozen panels of lucid skies and white plastic sheets. Through one sheet glint the eyes of death. It is as though the swimmer will succumb to an eerie vaporization that will occur in the netherworld between sky and land. All imagery will vanish with her.

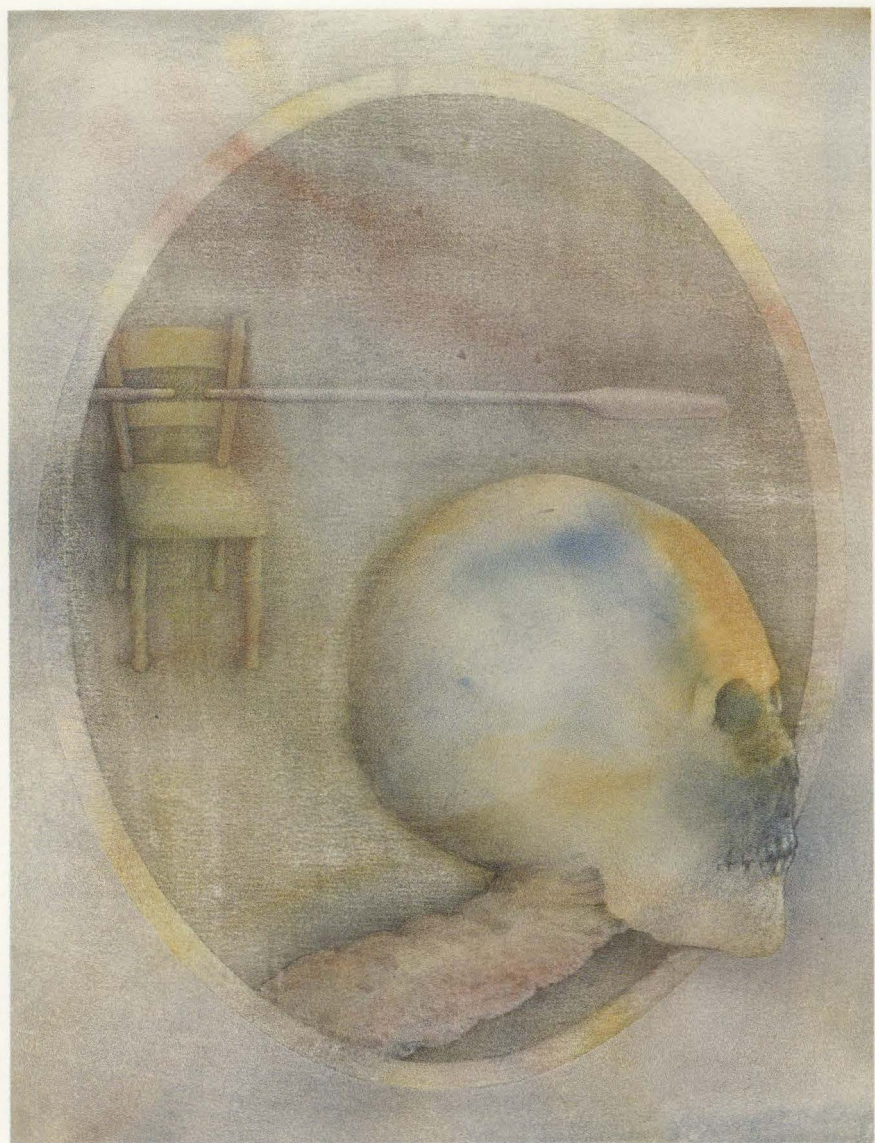


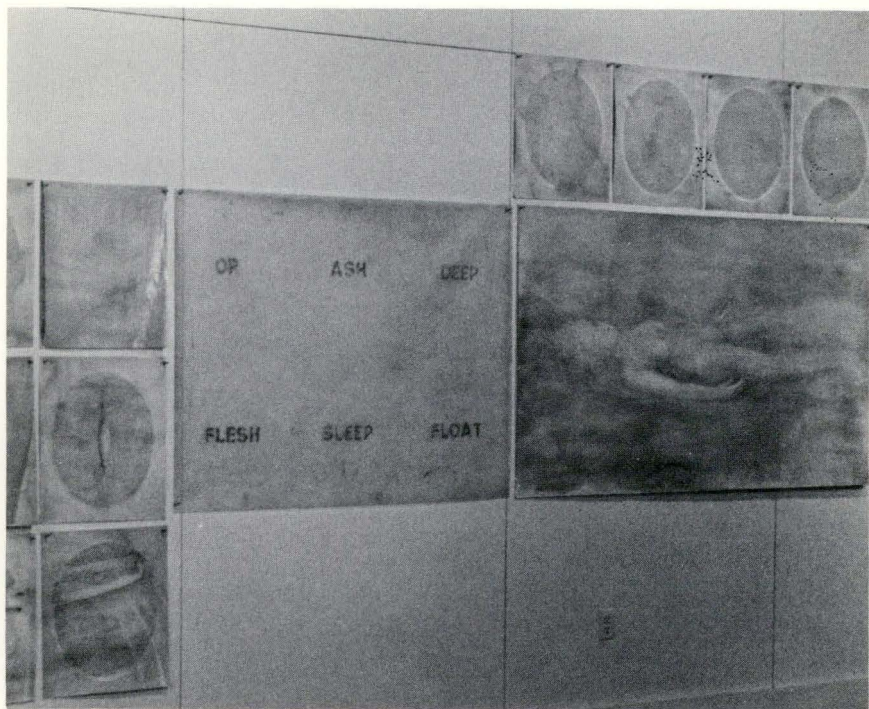
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The plastic sheets curled up from the bottom as though ruffled by the wind of this transfiguration. At the end of a life, as the early study of Dorothy suggested, the *tabula rasa* slowly empties its contents of memory and learning. At the moment of death this mural suggests, it is filled again with purity and light.

In the final passages of REFLECTION/EXTENSION where the imagery began to disappear, it filled with words. In section 89 one discovered the words "DEEP" and "OR" among the preserved fruits and rustic doors. In a large panel to the left of the swimmer was a poem, set out in this fashion:

OR	ASH	DEEP
FLESH	SLEEP	FLOAT.

Scattered among the blank pages and elliptical skies to the swimmer's right the words "FLESH" and "SLEEP," "ASH" and "FLOAT" were scattered like random thoughts, floating there like debris on the sea's surface, like cremated remains.







The words are both literal and symbolic, like the numbers and images of the mural. They pun in a mystic fashion: "OR" — gold or oar; "ASH" — death or grey colour, the end of the swimmer's fiery sensuality; "OR/FLESH" — golden bodies turning in the yellow light; "ASH/SLEEP" — perhaps to dream; "DEEP/FLOAT" — a sinker, death by drowning, or, as likely, new life by dreaming.

In the mural many of the panels are linked together as logically as is the tri-part representation of the fish. In the best sequences, mystery is deepened through odd conjunctions, through omissions of the expected. Single images like the deer who grasps an apple not within her easy reach may serve as a memorable cypher for this exquisitely difficult hymn that celebrates life and death.

— ANN ROSENBERG

NOTES

- ¹ For the past twelve years Williams has lived full- or part-time in Refuge Cove, B.C. This isolated community on West Redonda Island can be reached only by boat or bush plane. Its beautiful vegetation, the submarine life, the myths told by residents, the myths Williams creates in contemplating the land, the persons who reside there — all have been the subjects of her art almost unbrokenly. Two major cycles called *The Search for the True Cedar* and *Sea Door/Reward* are published in *TCR*, Issues Nos. 8/9 & 11.
- ² While Dorothy's site and certain aspects of her nature, her habits are alluded to in the mural, Williams has indicated that Dorothy is actually an amalgam of three female personalities, chief of which is the artist's own.
- ³ For further information about the archaeological process, please consult Ted Lindberg's catalogue to the Charles H. Scott Gallery exhibition of *Reflection/Extension*, staged at the Emily Carr College of Art & Design, April/May, 1984.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Reflection/Extension* has been shown twice: first at the Surrey Art Gallery in Winter 1983/84, then at the Charles H. Scott Gallery. Although the same number of items was included in each manifestation, although certain sequences were identical in both, there were also differences. Williams has more than 232 panels and objects that pertain to the piece and hence she has the option of creating variables each time it is shown.

At the Charles H. Scott Gallery, the rowboat was included as item 232, a piece of sculpture that went well with the gallery's pier-like pillars. In this manifestation the plastic sheets mentioned in the article were included for the first time. The swimmer reproduced here was made as a substitution for an earlier, more benign image.

⁷ The watercolour referred to was not, in fact, the first item in the mosaic, but rather one at the very beginning that was of obvious iconographic significance.

⁸ Those who know Williams' art well could connect the mirror to *La Specola* (Florence) which is an anatomical museum whose name means *double mirror*. The artist has photographed and thought about the significance of the museum's contents which seem to her a beautiful and reverent celebration of the mysteries of the body as understood in the late Renaissance period. She brought to her study of Dorothy's *fragmenti* a similar delicacy and awe.

⁹ This photograph was taken at the Surrey Art Gallery's show of *Reflection/Extension*. At the Charles H. Scott Gallery, the metal 3 was placed to the left of the tri-partite fish.

¹⁰ For a more lengthy description of the mural as installed at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, please see the review in *Vanguard* (Summer 1984), pp. 51-52.

IMAGES

Dorothy in her Boat and the installation at the Charles H. Scott Gallery were photographed by Williams. Robert Keziere photographed Ed's image and that of the fish. The deer and the centrefold vignettes were colour-separated at Cleland-Kent Western Ltd.