

Hedy Klineman (A'62)

# The Consciousness of Beauty: An Artistic Journey



"Noon," 2006  
36 x 36 inches  
Oil on canvas

A trip to India led  
Hedy Klineman to  
become a body,  
mind and spirit on  
a journey.



**H**edy Klineman (A'62) lives in a tall, narrow building on Fifth Avenue. The little lobby, small elevator and an intimate, darkened foyer, don't in any way prepare you for the warm expanse that is her apartment. When you walk in, it is a shock to the senses: lofty, whitewashed walls are bathed in soft light, elegant plush furniture invites the visitor to lounge by the fireplace and the soft smell of incense fills the air. And then, there are the works of art everywhere. Facing the foyer is a painting that is a wild mix of colors with no discernable figures, the lively blues and reds darting this way and that. A little further in, near the living room, a silk-screened multiple image of the Buddha shimmers in earthen tones. A "Fashion Portrait" is placed over the staircase to an upper floor—a red dress that looks as if it's been casually thrown against a canvas and then fixed on with paint. As I find out later, it's a self-portrait. It would be impossible to pigeonhole all these works into one category, even if they are by one artist. The one thing they do have in common is that they are drenched with color.

Noting the disparate nature of the work on the walls, Klineman says, "The funny thing is, I'm an abstract expressionist—I purposely didn't do realistic stuff—yet I wound up doing portraits!"

Klineman is a perfect match for the living space she has created—elegant, with a sense of fun. Dressed in a color that is best described as eggshell, with a gold belt and pink-rimmed glasses, she has chin-length blond hair and a lot of contagious energy.

Born in Germany, the then three-year old Klineman and her family moved to New York City to escape the imminent World War II. She feels lucky to have come here—many members of her extended family didn't make it through the Holocaust. Klineman, her mother and her younger brother settled in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Her father came after the war, a miracle survivor, and soon after another daughter was born. Her parents worked hard to make ends meet. Klineman sees this as a twist of fate: her family's poverty meant that she had to be sent to an all-day school while she was still very young. By chance, it was an experimental and progressive school, which encouraged the children's creativity.

Destiny is a theme she returns to often—"The fates were very influential in my early life," she explains. "Was I ever fortunate to have the opportunity to go to that nursery school! I think it was the deciding factor in my life." Her path was set when she received a bronze Art Medal in high school, but her luck seemed to run out when she turned 18: she had won a scholarship to the prestigious Brooklyn Museum Art School, but she couldn't take advantage of it, because she was expected to work to help her family. Still, she attended the Fashion Institute of Technology and Pratt Institute at

night, and one of her teachers told her she ought to apply to The Cooper Union. "Through wonderful serendipity and the gods being in the right place"—and, of course, talent—she was accepted. The irony was that had she attended the Brooklyn Museum Art School, she would never have ended up at Cooper Union, where she received extraordinary encouragement. The message, she remembers, was "Get out there. Get more edgy. Go more crazy. Be more adventurous. It was always going beyond, never holding back. And the teachers, the environment, the other students, all inspired that in me. And it never felt competitive—everybody was very much their own person. It's as though there were no wrongs, *everything* was right. What a great environment to live in and to work in and be creative in."

Compared to the calm of the living room, Klineman's studio has a lively messiness. A table near the door is piled with images. On the wall to the left, there are a number of

"Courrèges Mini," ca. 1965  
3 x 4 feet  
Collage of fabric and  
acrylic paint on canvas



her latest works. A portrait of a group sitting down to tea, perhaps, catches my eye. One member stands, wooden, with a mask-like face. Others sit awkwardly as if their joints aren't quite made for the positions they've assumed. There is an almost surreal character to the image, created in part by the fact that all the individuals pictured are African sculptures; once again, there is the interplay of seriousness and humor. These portraits of African sculptures and masks fill the room. Elsewhere, the masks have been superimposed on silk-screened photographs of Klineman's friends. From a series called *Tribal Spirits*, the portraits, she tells me, are about ancestors, about studying from where we come. Family is important to her; it rounds out her experience—she wouldn't be who she is without her husband, Kent, and her two grown children.

A spiritualist, Klineman believes that she's lived in other places during other lives. Her art is a reflection of

her on this level: each group of works offering another piece of her story, all bound together by color, humor and the seriousness of a deep artistic exploration.

Klineman explains it like this: "My work is oriented by decade—not from conscious choice, but from the energies experienced in New York and the world at each decade." New York City was a cultural and artistic mecca and Klineman was both witness and participant—"without my seeking it or knowing it," she muses, "I was always there when things were happening." She counts among her friends people like Andy Warhol and Julian Schnabel. In the 1950s and '60s, she was an abstract expressionist. In the 1970s, she moved on to the variation of abstract expressionism known as color fields, which, unlike the frenetic energy of the work of Jackson Pollack and Willem de Kooning, offered more serene use of swatches of flat, solid color, as seen in the work of artists like Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still.

"Art & Spirit: Reflection," 2000  
72 x 72 inches  
Silkscreen: oil on canvas



In the early 1980s, Klineman was part of New York's downtown scene, where there was an overlap between the art and fashion worlds. Klineman was no stranger to fashion, and for a number of years was the president of shoe designer Charles Jourdan's American division. Her fashion portraits came from this crucible: "I was wanting to express something and I didn't know quite what, but I always liked surface and texture. One day I was at my studio and I had this long beautiful scarf with lots of colors that I had worn that morning. I glued it to a piece of paper and it looked as if it were an undulating scarf in a breeze. And then, I painted over it." After exhibiting these self-portraits, people started asking for her to do their portraits. Klineman would see the gist of a personality in a thing they owned: "The spirit of a person is in their clothes," she says. She would use that item to create the portraits—Warhol's eyeglasses, for example.

In the mid-1980s, New York experienced a seismic change. On the one hand, the art world had ignited and the rest of the world had taken notice. On the other hand, AIDS hit hard during the decade. From that pandemonium, as people retreated into themselves, victims of an age-related trauma, a quietness arose. It was in this atmosphere, in the early 1990s, that Klineman made the turn inwards and started practicing yoga. From this, it was just a small jump to making images of Southeast Asian deities. These paintings, which start off as photographs of the deities, are then silk-screened. They are about reverence, the higher self and transcendence—calm in a turbulent time. A trip to India in 1994 emphasized these values, leading her to become, she says, a body, mind and spirit on a journey.

This brings us back to the current part of the journey, the exploration of ancestors through African sculptures and the new abstract works. The arc of her work, through its many styles, has been an ever-widening consciousness. If she comes back to a style she's tried on before, like abstract expressionism, it's with the lens of broadened awareness—it's a case of never being able to step in the same river twice. In the same way, she brings her stylistic experience to new subject matter. That's why, in her case, once an abstract expressionist, always one.

Over her career, Klineman has had numerous one-person and group exhibitions all over the world. In 2000, she had a major retrospective of her deity works at the Tibet House Museum in New York City entitled "Art and Spirit." Her art is in many private and public collections, including the Hood Museum in New Hampshire and The New England Museum of Contemporary Art in Connecticut. Often written about, she's been profiled on three continents, in *The New York Times*, *The London Times* and *India Today*.

As we wind up, she tells me thoughtfully, "People often say, 'I enjoy your work.' Well, I celebrate life. I'm a positive person. I think it's necessary to have beauty. There's been a



**"Tribal Spirits:  
Portrait of Bill T. Jones," 1999**  
24 x 30 inches  
Silkscreen: oil on canvas

below  
**"Tribal Spirits: Gathering," 1998**  
48 x 36 inches  
Silkscreen: oil on canvas



lot of drama in my early life and life can be messy. Now I have a more conscious understanding of what I have been doing most of my life. What I try to create is beauty with colors and shapes."