

Linda Griggs

I'm Not Sure I Should Be Telling You This

Thirty Years of Narrative Painting and Story Art

1982 - 2012

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

I'm Not Sure I Should Be Telling You This

Thirty Years of Narrative Painting and Story Art

Hampden Gallery University of Massachusetts Amherst Amherst, MA 01003

October 28-November 29, 2012

Curated by Alix Sloan Essay © Jeffrey Cyphers Wright

Sincere thanks to Allen Hansen, Sally Curcio, Alix Sloan, Jeffrey Cyphers Wright, and to the installation crew and staff of Hampden Gallery.



Defying (and Deifying) Time

Linda Griggs and the Vernacular of Authenticity

In "the age of mechanical reproduction," the notion of authenticity becomes paramount in establishing criterion for judging art. Linda Griggs matches objects with hand-lettered stories to create an authentic (and original) vision. Her oeuvre —by turns wry, haunting, wicked and humorous — is unusually cohesive as is evident in this 30-year survey.

Other artists in the "narrative story telling" genre include Raymond Pettibon, Irene Hardwicke and Stephen Hannock, all of whom work in a representational mode and include text. Like these practitioners, Griggs mixes words and images in novel ways, revealing both fear and faith.

Initially informed by her heartland upbringing, Griggs transcribes legacy and place, dignity and despair. Empty shoes act as stand-ins for a departed friend. The label on the inside heel reads "Comfort Soles." Morbidity is countered by winking beauty.

Inverted, melting ice cream cones represent a young woman's breasts in a Depression-era family tale. A Barbie doll in a pink icing dress graces the artist's childhood birthday cake in an uneasy alliance between desire and ideals, remembrance and projection. These still-lifes tap the iconography of the memento mori tradition but are leavened with verbal and visual puns.

Griggs is interested in investigating words as mythmaking and organizing systems. Early on, her titles became longer until finally the words were incorporated into the work.

Drawing on extensive knowledge of art history as well as personal experience, the paintings possess plural vantages.

The most obvious appeal is Griggs's representational skill. Her deft handling of oil paint and attention to detail is manifest throughout.

The evocative vignettes often focus on the final interactions of the material and the immaterial. A roll-on suitcase, a supreme metaphor for transience, visits a Victorian cemetery in a suite of five paintings.

The printed title reads: "When John's friend, Mark, was dying Bill promised to scatter his ashes in London..." Unfortunately, Bill kept forgetting to take the Tiffany-blue luggage containing Mike's remains. The artist re-imagined the forgotten carry-on in an apposite setting, creating a juxtapositional *frisson*.

In a beautifully wrought and poignant homage, Griggs honors Marcia Tucker, a friend and founder of the New Museum. Reflecting on what Tucker might eat in the afterlife, Griggs's husband quipped, "angel food cake." And so, the artist portrayed a store-bought angel food cake, still in its plastic packaging.

Griggs paints with such precision that the emblematic object is given auratic stature. It has become an iconic devotional offering, maintaining some essence of its subject, Marcia Tucker. Surrounded by inky darkness of indeterminate space, the cake appears to rest on an altar. It is spotlighted from above as if on a stage. Seemingly emanating from the cake is a cluster of ghost-like forms rising upward, recalling images of ectoplasm in spirit photographs.

In a remarkable coincidence, the apparitions are realistic renditions of albumen exploding, i.e., what happens to egg whites when you bake angel food cake.

An intrinsic part of Griggs's process is research. In this case, she tracked down an electron microscope photo and even had a correspondence with the photographer.

Mortality is an overarching motif for Griggs. Many paintings depict small heaps of human ash. Echoing those remains, the paintings themselves represent a form of ongoing cremation. They "live on" as capsules of transpired time — time which is being transported to the present and beyond via the authentic magic of Linda Griggs.

—Jeffrey Cyphers Wright



Big Back Yard

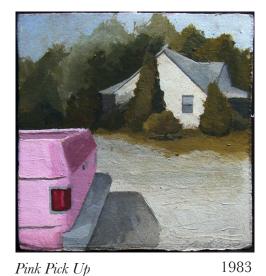


Untitled (Shadow on Pink Wall)

1982



Brownie Pledge 1984



Pink Pick Up



 $\mathit{Funeral}\;\mathit{Food}$





May Queen 1989



Rosebowl

1989



Home Beauty Salon Collection of Bruno and Theresa Bertocci



Hole and Bushes



Dog Humiliation, Humiliated Dog

1991



Self Portrait with Colors





Red Indian 1992-4



Uncle Bill's Epilepsy 1993-4



Nettie 1994



Happy Motoring 1994







He was less than a year old. His sister, Francis, was twelve. She rode on the front seat of the wagon with the coffin in her lap.

Excerpt from *Red Indian* panels, 2 and 6

1992-4



Her son, Bill, had severe epilepsy and violent outbursts that the doctors called epileptic rages or furies. Epilepsy doesn't cause violence. We think he had brain lesions but at least they didn't say he was possessed by demons.

If Bill wanted a job he had to lie about his condition. He made enough money to buy his mother a TV set on credit. Then he would have a seizure and get fired. Some men in a truck would repossess the TV set. Everybody in the neighborhood would see the truck and know what happened.

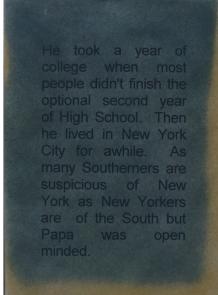
The neighborhood saw the police cars come for Bill. Grandma couldn't afford to call an ambulance when he became violent and needed to be restrained. He would come around, confused and exhausted, in jail. Or they find him wandering, lost like a drunk, on the road and bring him home.



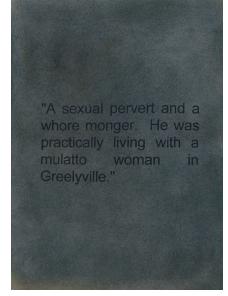
Before she knew what was happening, Bill had his sister by the hair. Grandma got her loose and told her to run. Through the window at the side of the house, she could see Bill get Grandma's little finger in his mouth. Before Papa could get between them Bill nearly tore it off. The police came.

Excerpt from
Uncle Bill's
Epilepsy
Panels 2 and 4
1993-4

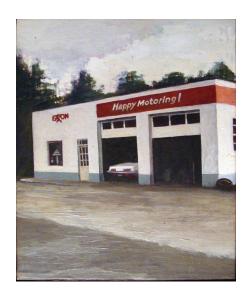


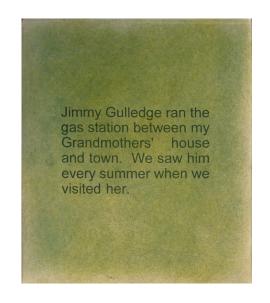






Excerpt from *Nettie* panels 2 and 4







When Granny told me he'd shot himself, I was sick at heart, sick to my stomach. Different things were said. His gas station had to close. He was clinically depressed. His son divorced his wife leaving her to care for their child born with Spina Bifida. I have read that the highest rate of suicide is among older Americans.

Happy Motoring



Pike's Peek



Fruit of the Womb Courtesy of Ann Partlow

My Grandmother grew up on a farm slaughtering and butchering animals so she often described human flesh as meat.

It surprised me when she referred to the twins she miscarried as the little pears.

Later she forgot herself and called them *the giblets*.

They asked Old Man Campbell, "How are you feeling, how's your appetite?" He said, "I'm feeling right poorly. I can't eat nothing. Nothing tastes good." His daughterin-law took that as a slight to her nursing abilities and said, "Now Daddy, you know that's just not true. You ate two fryers for lunch." He snapped his head head around and said, "Well, what's two little chickens to a sick man."



2001 A Lot to a Chicken



Milk, Milk, Lemonade Courtesy of annoymous lender

2001



Scarlett Runner
Courtesy of Rena Kozersky and Tony Robbin

My Great-grandfather William Barton 'Bart' Allen got away with murder. He got a job ganging the line on the railroad tracks in Missouri. Even though he was three-quarters Cherokee he could often pass for White. The men had just gotten their lunch one plate of beans, same as always - when the railroad bull, a big drunken Irishman, came down the line. The bull reached into my Greatgrandfather's plate, grabbed himself a handful of beans, and started eating them out of his fist. Bart Allen said, "If you do it again, I'll kill you." The bull went on down the line. On the way back he did it again. Bart pulled out his gun and killed him. He went home and told his wife, "Pack up the children. Pick everything in the garden. We're leaving." And they ran to Minnesota. It turns out my mom always knew about this and decided to keep it secret but her cousin, Ovanual, spilled the story.

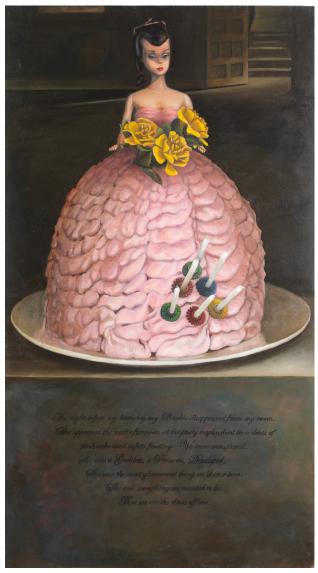
1952

Aunt Faye invited the couple from downstairs to diner. The wife brought a kind of pie Aunt Faye had never tasted before. Aunt Faye complimented the wife and politely asked for the recipe. The wife said it was a private family recipe and that it wasn't given out.

Aunt Faye made pie after pie until she'd duplicated the recipe exactly. Then she invited the wife over again and fed it to her. The wife ate it and didn't say a word.



Eat Crow Courtesy of David Harris



Suddenly Last Birthday

The night before my birthday my Barbie disappeared from my room. She appeared the next afternoon at the party resplendent in a dress of pink cake and taffeta frosting.

We were enraptured. She was a Goddess, a Princess, Developed.

She was the most glamorous thing we'd ever seen. She was everything we wanted to be.

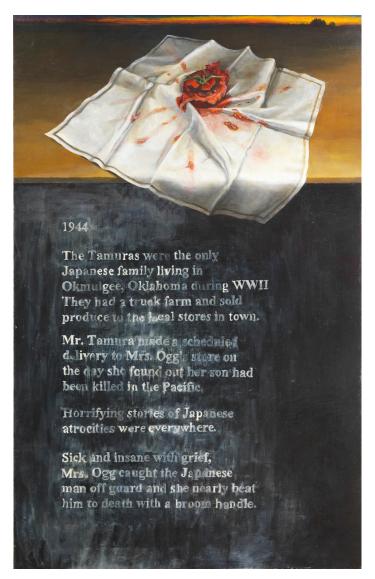
Then we ate the dress off her.

1944

One Japanese family, the the Tamuras, lived in Okmulgee, Oklahoma during WWII. They had a truck farm and sold produce to the local stores in town. They made a scheduled delivery to Mrs. Ogg's store on the day she found out her son had been killed in the Pacific.

Horrifying stories of Japanese attrocities were everywhere.

Sick and insane with grief, Mrs. Ogg caught the Japanese man off guard and she nearly beat him to death with a broom handle.



Untitled (History Lesson)



Sugar Pants 2005

During the Depression, staples came in fabric bags. Folks cut clothes from them.

My Grandmother was married in a soda sack suit.

Her underpants were sugar.

Papa was 25 but she was 15 when they eloped.

When they told her sister, Nettie, what they'd done She said, "Well what'd you get her with -- an ice cream cone?

Come and the Lord shall feed our souls

With more substantial meat

With such as Saints in glory love

With such as angels eat.



2007

Marcia Tucker's Memorial Lesson



Communion Rumination

Cousin Sybil's playmates at Ruby Baptist had gotten caught in the supply closet eating the communion wafers and drinking the grape juice. Forty-five years later she was still aghast as she told Cousin Judy the story.

Unconsecrated host in a supply cabinet is not the body and blood of Christ. The playmates were guilty of theft and perhaps gluttony but... no transubstantiation, no sacrilege.

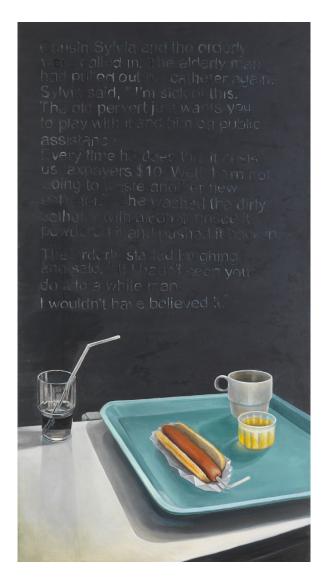
Cousin Judy said, Well, I didn't dare tell her that at Ruby Presbyterian we just let the kids have the leftovers when communion's done.

We don't use any special wafers. We just use Bunny Bread. It's the best anyway, better than Wonder or Sunbeam.

You know, we got this new preacher last year and he wanted something more, you know, formal looking than cut-up squares of Bunny Bread. So he went to the Communion Committee and asked if they could come up with some kind of little loaf for him to bless and break.

So Viola Outen volunteered to make homeade bread and set aside some dough to make a little loaf. Well, after doing that for a year she got sick of it. Viola said, I'll tell you what. That is just too much work for one little loaf of bread. If you need something just to bless and break, I'll give YOU a Pop-tart.

Cousin Sylvia and the orderly were called in. The elderly man had pulled out his catheter again. Sylvia said, "I'm sick of this. The old pervert just wants you to play with it and him on public assistance. Every time he does this it costs us taxpayers \$10. Well, I'm not going to waste another new catheter." She washed the dirty catheter with alcohol, rinsed it, powdered it and pushed it back in. The orderly started laughing and said, "If I hadn't seen you do it to a white man I wouldn't have believed it."



2009



When I was visiting my friend, Babette, I mentioned that I needed a cosmetics case. She said, "Oh, I have one I can give you. It was my mother's." I waited for her to go and get it but the conversation drifted and I didn't want to press. Her mother was expiring in a home for the aged.

When we caught up the following year she told me that her mother's boyfriend, Ernie, had passed away. Ernie had been estranged from his children so Babette had had to take care of the cremation. She was given the ashes. Babette offered to find a nice container and bring them to her mother's room at the nursing home. Her mother didn't want them. She said it was too depressing.

Babette called his children again but they said they didn't care what she did with him. So she kept them.

Then one day a friend of Babette's called to see if they could meet. She was flying to New York for one day to fulfill her Uncle's final request that his remains be scattered in the Hudson River. Babette said, "Oh, can I come too! I've had some ashes in my mother's cosmetics case in the attic for over a year."

Hard Case 2011

After the memorial service they sat under the carport and talked about who had a good death and who had a hard death.

"Now, Drew Threet, he had a good death." They all agreed. He found out he was terminal but he didn't have much pain and he could drive. He visited his family, said his goodbyes and then he died.

Yes," they said, "he was able to get up and go right up until he went."



2011

Rise, My Soul







When John's friend, Mark was dying Bill promised to scatter his ashes in London, Mark's favorite city.

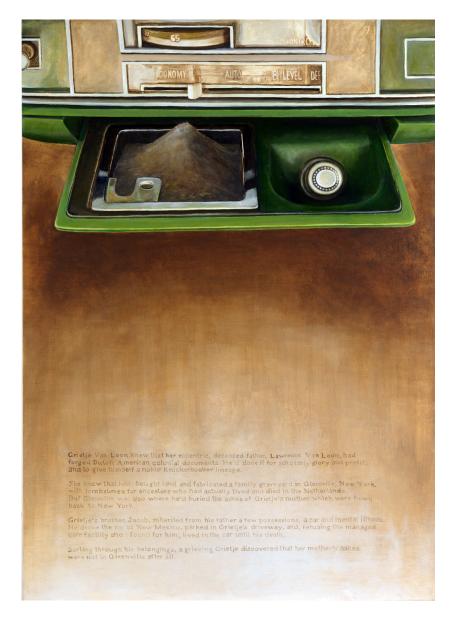
Years later John asked Bill how the scattering had gone. Bill said he hadn't done it yet. "Why not?", John asked. "You go to London several times a year."





"I know", John said. "I just keep forgetting to pack him."

2011



Grietje Van Loon was aware that her eccentric, deceased father, Lawrence VanLoon, had forged Dutch-American colonial documents. He'd done it for scholarly glory and profit, and to give himself a noble Knickerbocker lineage. He'd even filled the family graveyard in Glenville, New York, with tombstones for ancestors actually buried in the Netherlands. But Glenville was also where he'd buried the ashes of Grietje's mother, after her body was flown from Hawaii to New York.

Grietje's brother, Jacob, inherited his father's mental illness, a few possessions, and the family car. He drove the car to New Mexico, parked in Grietje's driveway, and lived in the car until his death. Sorting through his belongings, a grieving Grietje discovered that her mother's ashes were not in Glennville after all.

Not Yet Titled 2011

When Joe found out his Ex had AIDS Joe brought him home to live with him.

With few effective therapies available in the eighties the Ex tried homeopathy.

Attempting to cleanse the body, he was drinking his own urine.

The Ex committed suicide.

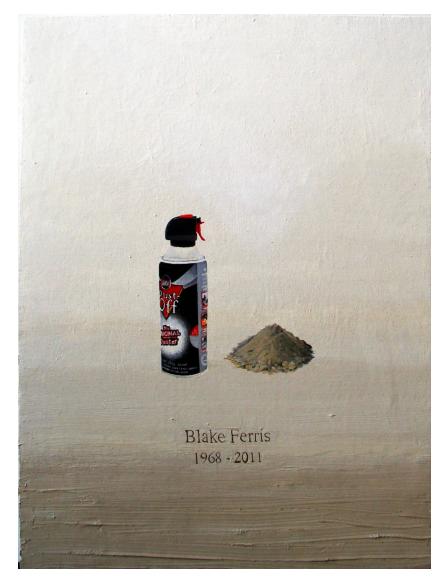
His parents took his body back. They held a private funeral.

Grieving, Joe called us together for a memorial service We met in Prospect Park, Brooklyn.

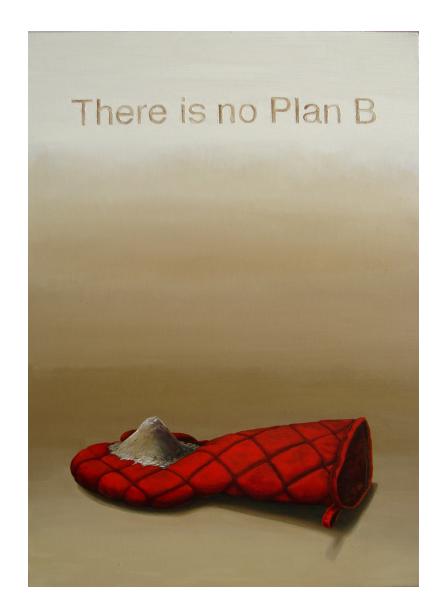
Holding hands we said the Lord's Prayer and stood in a circle around the remaining jar of urine found in the refrigerator.



2012 Hard Case



Like a Hurricane



2012

The Dreamy Crematorium

I'm Not Sure I Should Be Telling You This Checklist

A Lot to a Chicken

2001

oil on canvas over panel

The Big Back Yard

1981

acrylic and colored pencil on paper 18 x 23 3/4

Casper David Friedrich's Campground

1993

encaustic on paper over panel $13 \times 6 \frac{1}{2}$

courtesy of Alix Sloan

Communion Ruminations

2008

oil on canvas over panel 43 x 39

Dog Humiliation/Humilated Dog

1991

oil on oak

framed 9-1/4 ¹/₄ x 12

The Dreamy Crematorium

2012

oil on canvas over panel

48.5 x 34.5"

Eat Crow

2005

oil on canvas over panel

47 x 26 courtesy of David Harris

Fruit of the Womb

2000

oil on canvas over panel 38-1/2 x 34-1/2 courtesy of Ann Partlow

011 01

Funeral Food

1989 oil on panel

6 x 8

The Good Christian

1989

oil on oak 7 1/4 X 5 3/4

Happy Motoring

1992-4

2, oil on panel

 $7-1/2 \times 5$

2, toner and pigment on mounted paper

 $7-1/2 \times 5$

Hard Case

2011

oil on canvas over panel

48 x 44

History Lesson

2006

oil on canvas over panel

46 x 26

Hole and Bushes

1993

oil on oak

2 x 1-1/4, 2 x 2-5/8, 2 x 1-1/4

Home Beauty Salon

1990

oil on panel

7 x 10

courtesy of Bruno & Theresa Bertocci

Hot Dog (aka "One Man's Meat")

2009

oil on canvas over panel

 52×28

Janis with Okra

1988

Prismacolor on paper 7 3/8 X 5 5/8

Like a Hurricane

(Blake Ferris Memorial painting)

2011

oil on canvas over panel

 28×20.5

Marcia Tucker Memorial

Lesson

2007

oil on canvas over panel

31 x 21-1/2 & 10 x 21-1/2

May Queen

1989

egg temepra on panel

Pole: 2 x 3/4

Oueen:2 x 1-5/8

Milk, Milk, Lemonade

2001

oil on canvas over panel

19 x 26

courtesy of an anonymous lender

Nettie

1994

6, oil on panel

5 x 7

6, toner and pigment on mounted paper

 5×7

Not Yet Titled - Van Loon

2011

oil on canvas over panel

 48.5×34

I'm Not Sure I Should Be Telling You This Checklist

Oklahoma Panorama

1990 oil on oak 2 X 9 1/4

Pike's Peek

1999

oil on canvas over panel 18 x 24

Pink Pick Up

1983

acrylic on paper 4 1/4 x 4

Pump House Shadow

1989 oil on oak 4 7/8 x 6 3/14

Red Indian

1992-4
6, oil on panel
5-1/2 x 4 to 6-1/2
6, toner and pigment on mounted paper
5-1/2 x 4 to 6-1/2

Rise, My Soul

2011

oil on canvas over panel 52 x 28

Rosebowl

1989

egg tempra on panel

2 x 23/4

Scarlet Runner

2003

oil on canvas over panel 19 x 26

courtesy of Rena Kozersy & Tony

Robbin

Self Portrait with Colors

1991 oil on oak 12 x 12

Shadow of Trash Day Redux

1991 oil on oak 3 1/2 X 4 1/2

Suddenly Last Birthday

2005

oil on canvas mounted on panel 47 x 26"

Sugar Pants

2004 oil on panel 8 x 10

Sungate Pool

1984

acrylic on masonite 2 3/8 X 4 3/8

Tulsa Int'l Airport

1987 oil on canvas 8 X 11- 1/2 Uncle Bill's Epilepsy

1993-4

5, oil on panel 7-1/4 x 5-1/2 to 7-1/4

5, toner and pigment on mounted paper

7-1/4 x 5-1/2 to 7-1/4

Untitled (Shadow on Pink Wall)

1982

acrylic and colored pencil on paper

17 7/8 x 26 5/8

Urine Mourning (communion cup)

2012

oil on canvas over panel

 48×36

When John's friend, Mark was dying Bill promised to scatter his ashes in London, Mark's favorite city.

Years later John asked Bill how the scattering had gone. Bill said he hadn't done it yet. Why not?", John asked. "You go to London several times a year."

"I know", John said. "I just keep forgetting to pack him."

2011

5, oil on canvas over panel 24 x 18, 26 x 20, 32 x 18

26 x 20, 24 x 18

Photo credits: Theresa Bertocci, pg 7 Brian Buckly, pgs 16, 17 18b, 19 - 27, 30, 31 and 33

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.