

Some artists are called to express the majesty of a landscape, the wistfulness of a smile or the subtle perfection of a flower. Others are moved to look deeper, probing beyond the visual surface of the everyday world to express the psychological, social, political, economic or religious forces that move in the shadowland just beyond sight. These artists rely largely on symbols and context to communicate their thoughts and feelings, in the process producing content-laden works that are both evocative and innately personal. In this article, three award-winning artists—Susan Webb Tregay, Alex Powers and Barbara Rachko—explain how they transform their thoughts and feelings into art, providing insightful road maps that can help you chart your own course into an exciting, powerful realm of self-expression.

Creating a Legacy

Susan Webb Tregay

Susan Webb Tregay's thought-provoking, mixed-media works grow out of a family history deeply entrenched in the struggles

of the feminist movement—and her desire to pass that legacy on to her own daughter. "My grandmother was a Suffragette, a first-generation feminist who fought for women's right to vote," she says. "She raised and educated my mother to expect equal rights, but that was not to be. As a parent in the '50s,

a woman was confined to the house. A quarter of a century later, my experience was identical. I was educated and taught school. But after I had my family, I found that no one would hire a woman with children. That's part of what led me to become an artist. So I wanted to show my daughter that the feminist movement isn't a finished product and she shouldn't take it for granted."

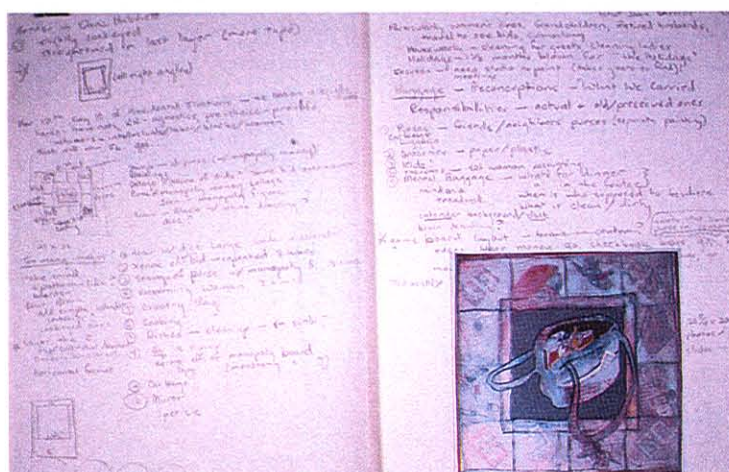
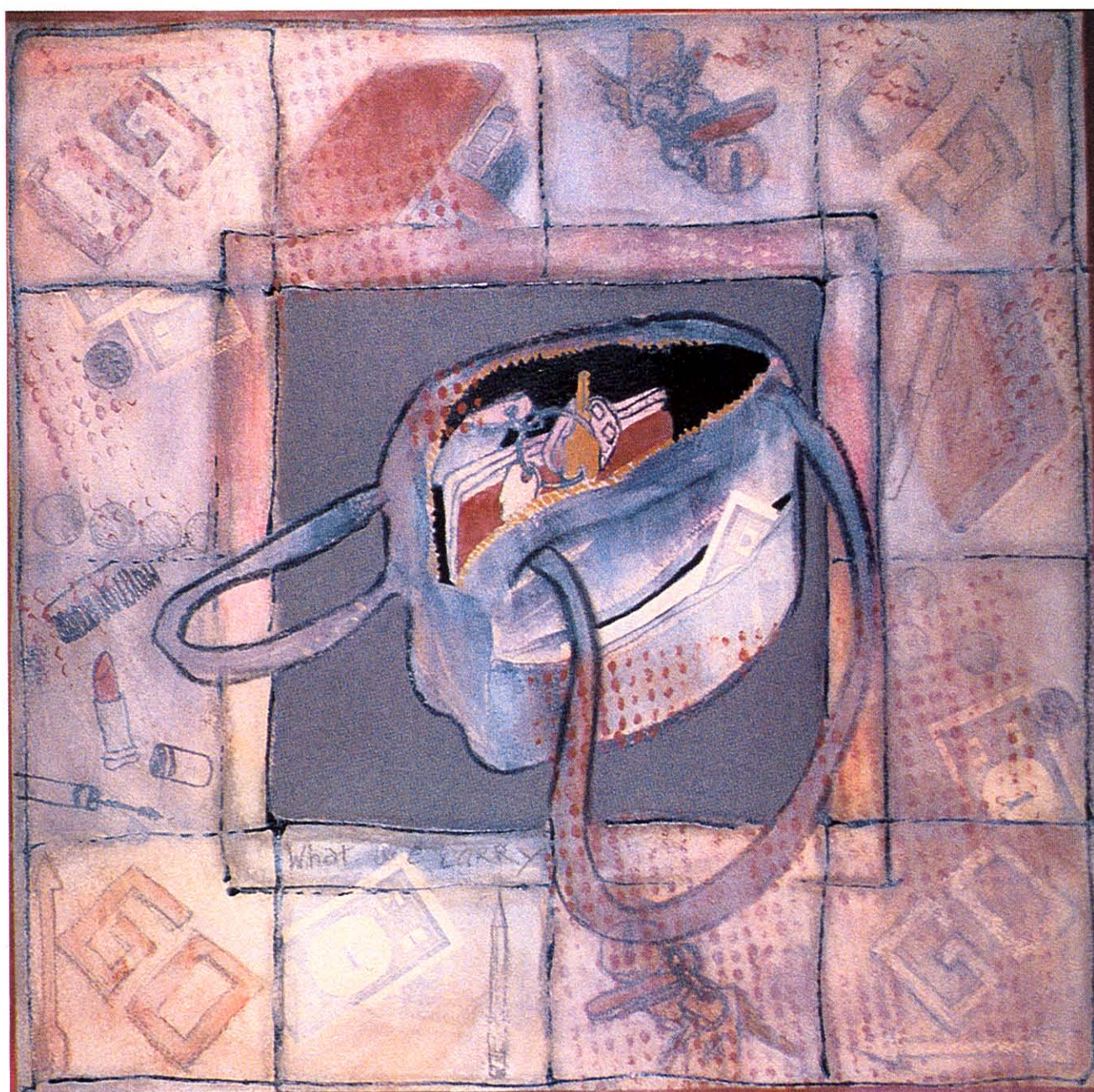
The New York artist uses common, everyday objects such as tables, chairs or an unraveled sweater as metaphors for larger issues. The genesis of her painting *What We Carry* (at right) offers an

instructive glimpse into how Tregay makes the leap from the conceptual to the concrete. "I'd been struggling with the idea of the burdens that women carry when a friend came in my backdoor weighted down with a 10-lb. purse. I asked her to dump it on my kitchen table, and she graciously complied.

Paint What's Important

*Move beyond the literal
to turn your thoughts, ideas
and emotions into art.*

BY GREG SCHABER



A Weighty Statement • In *What We Carry* (mixed media, 20¾x20¾) Tregay used a friend's purse to express the burdens that women bear. The page from her notebook/sketchbook (at left) gives more insight into Tregay's thought processes in developing the piece.



A Movement in Time • The spinning table in *Turning the Tables* (mixed media, 18x29) represents the cyclic motion of the feminist movement as it moves, frame by frame, through time. Below: Susan Webb Tregay.



I then photographed the purse and its contents," says Tregay. "She's a real estate agent, so I chose to make the background look like a Monopoly board. Because my friend is always on the go, I changed the corners of the board to read 'Go, Go, Go, Go.'"

Typically, Tregay's paintings grow out of brainstorming sessions in which she creates lists of related ideas, imagery and metaphors, and records them in her sketchbook, as you can see on the bottom of page 43. She uses one idea per painting, so a list of related ideas may form the basis of a series. Tregay uses whatever media a given piece demands—watercolor, acrylic, pastel, watercolor crayons, pencil, wax, gold leaf, oil and collage all see use from time to time. She applies her ideas and techniques in layers, adding or removing elements as necessary, and allowing the piece to grow and develop naturally as new possibilities present themselves.

Although she's serious about her message, Tregay isn't adamant that everyone interpret her work the way she intends. A little mystery, she says, is a good thing. "If they can get something out of my work that applies to their life, that's even better than understanding where I came from when I painted it," she says.

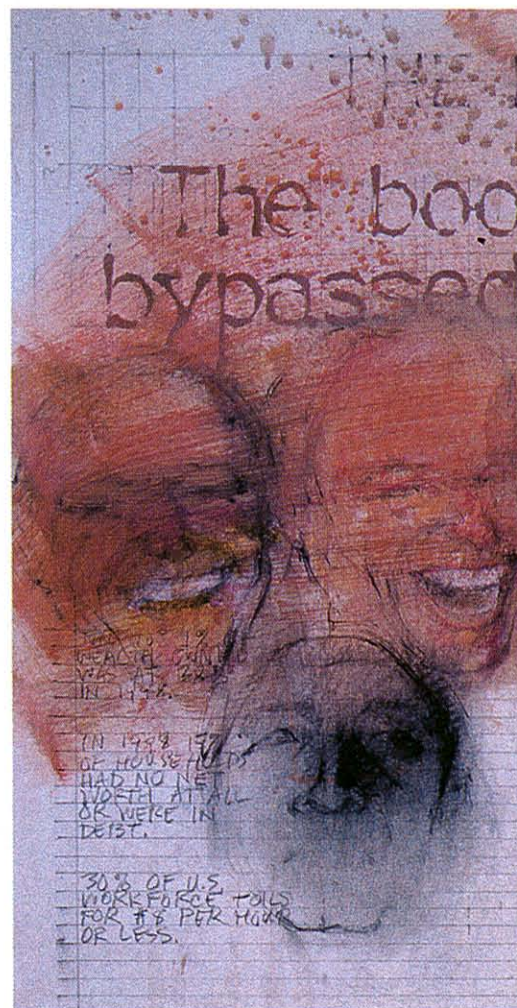
Storming the Gates

Alex Powers

Much of Alex Powers' stark imagery deals with the weighty topics of economic inequality, human origins and religion. "One of the things dearest to my heart is the greatness of capitalism," says the South Carolina artist. "But there's a problem: The rich have all the money. One-half of 1 percent of the population of the United States owns

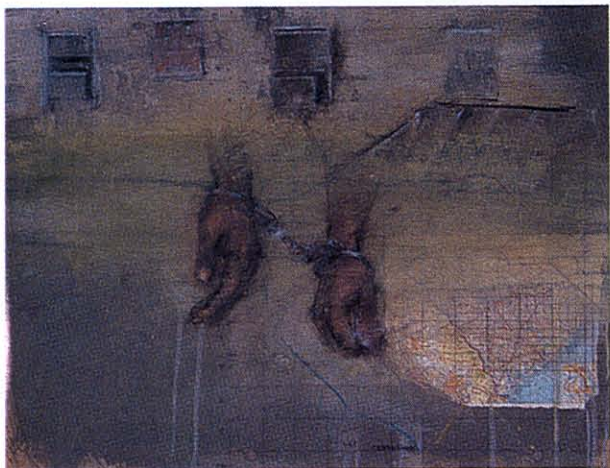
40 percent of the wealth. It's not right. I mean, there are 15 million children in the United States who go to bed hungry every night. Thirty percent of the work force in the United States works for \$8 an hour or less. I don't care to have a lot of money. But these are serious problems."

Given his political interests, perhaps it's not surprising that Powers is an avid reader, and that much of his inspiration comes from what he's read. Quotes or statistics often provide the spark that sets a new artwork in motion. As an example, Powers points to *Bypassed* (below), a painting that sprang from a print-media quote: "The Boom of the '90s

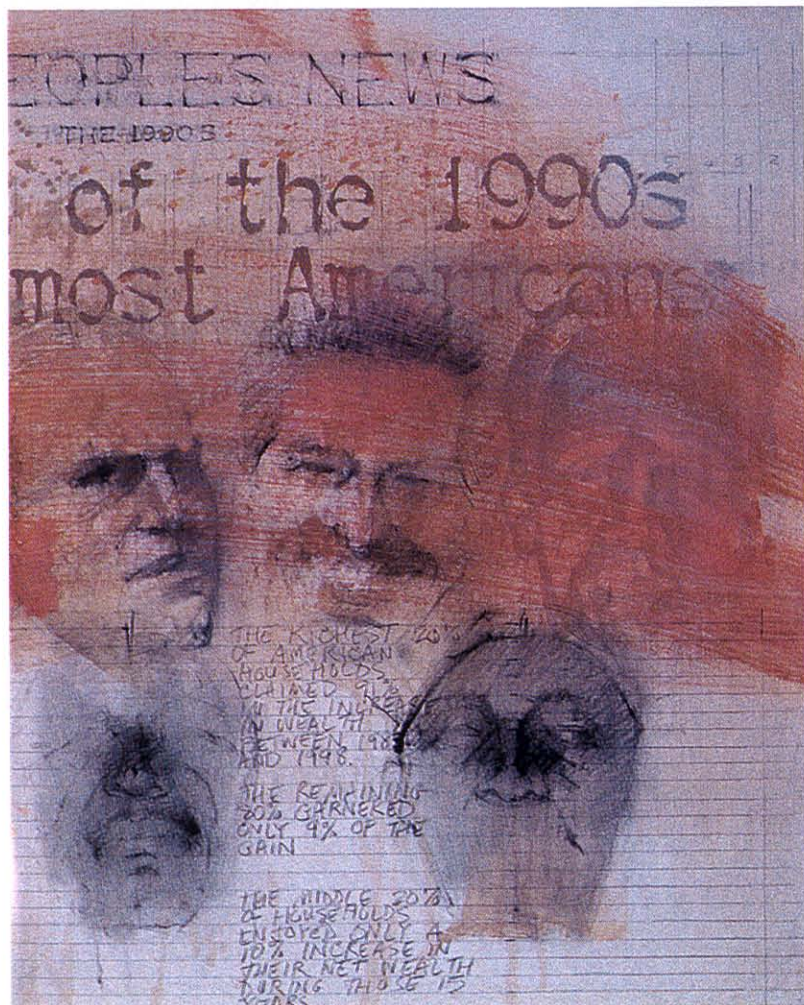


“Trust what your heart feels and your mind thinks.”

—Alex Powers



A Map to Expression • Powers began *1 in 9* (at left; mixed media, 30x40) without any idea of what to paint. He went into the studio with a map and newspaper photo of a black man riding a bike through a depressed urban area. The images reminded him of something he'd read—“One in nine African-American men between the ages of 21 and 35 was in jail in 1998.” He borrowed the air conditioners from the newspaper photo, collaged the map and remembered the hands from a scene in a movie. Below, at right: Alex Powers.



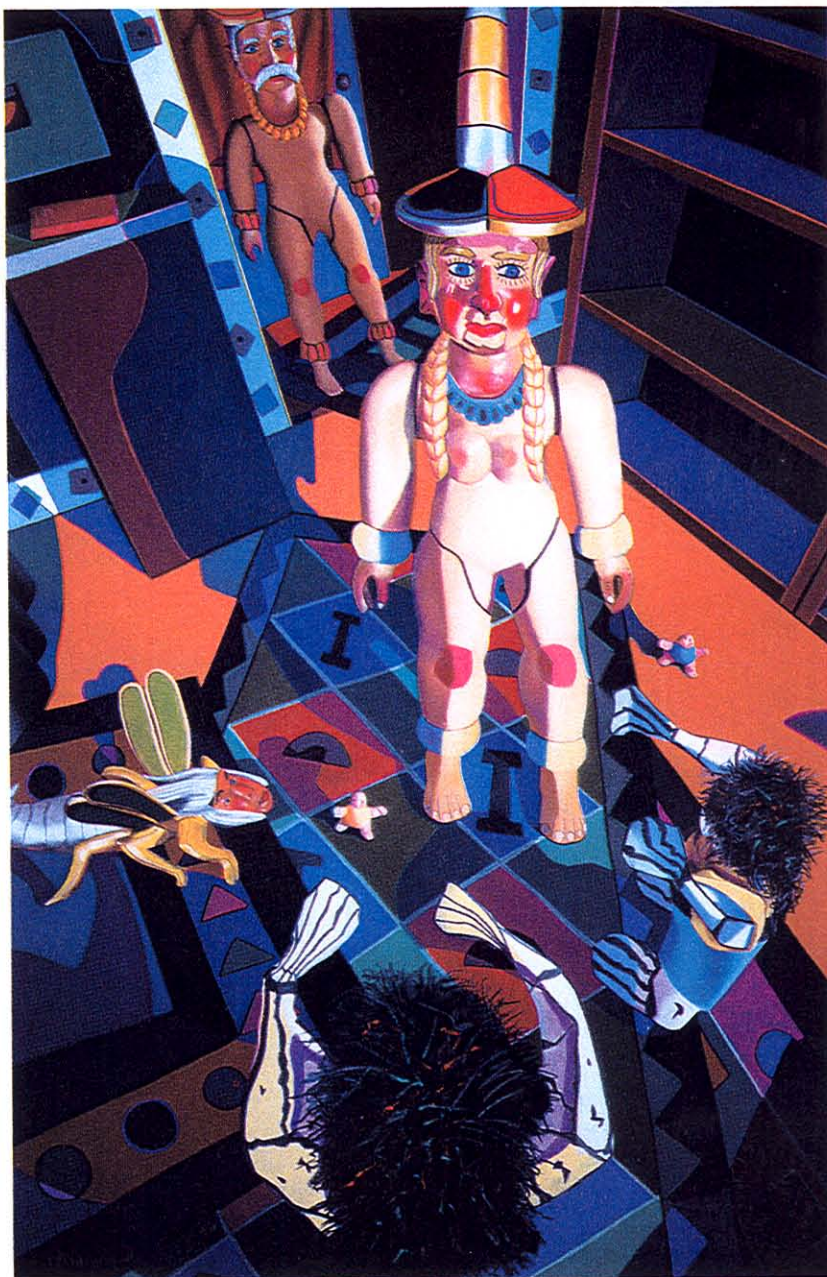
The Faces of Economics • Powers gets much of his inspiration from reading. For example, *Bypassed* (mixed media, 30x40) grew out of a quote—“The Boom of the ‘90s Bypassed Most Americans.” Powers used this in a newspaper format and juxtaposed affluent-looking faces with those of the poor.

Bypassed Most Americans.” “The media publicizes the Clinton years as being great economic times,” Powers says. “And they were, but they were great only for the rich. Actually the poor and middle income people saw no gains from ’87 up through the ’90s. So I wrote that quote near the top of the painting, and above that I wrote ‘The People’s News,’ trying to make the format like a newspaper. I added some writing in columns. Then I did five heads of smiling, rich people positioned above three heads of poor people who aren’t smiling.”

Powers’ visual statements evolve as he works, and he uses whatever media will get his point across—gouache, compressed charcoal, pastel, collage. “Usually the content comes first, and then I have to find the source material and the form/design,” he says. There are times, though, when he goes to the studio armed only with a few found images that he thinks are appealing, then works backward to discover a unifying theme.

Creating this type of art demands that you trust “what your heart feels and your

A Step Forward • In *Answering the Call* (pastel, 58x38) Rachko’s central figure steps from the shadowy background into the bright light to face fears of all sizes. To increase the sense of the drama of this emotionally powerful moment, Rachko contrasted areas of brightly lit color with dark, foreboding shadows.



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mind thinks," says Powers. "It takes a little nerve. But that's the whole reason for doing this. We're all eccentric in our personalities, and it seems odd that we wouldn't do paintings that let those personalities come out."

Dealing With Conflict

Barbara Rachko

While Tregay and Powers build their work around larger societal issues, New York pastelist Barbara Rachko focuses her long-running Domestic Threats series on interpersonal conflicts and personal fears. "The idea is that you should confront these things and grow from them rather than avoid them," she says. "In most of my pieces there are confrontations between a central figure—or maybe a central figure and an ally—and a group of smaller, threatening figures. A lot of it has to do with what's going on in my life. All kinds of things seep into your work."

To play out these confrontations in her art, Rachko has assembled a colorful stable of Mexican folk-art figures. "They're really surrogates for people," she says. "They take different roles in different paintings. I'm like

a stage director working with them. But instead of telling them how to act, I'm posing them and lighting them."

An example of how this troupe of surrogates perform can be seen in *Answering the Call* (at left). "That was inspired by a time in my art career when I had to decide whether to move from Virginia to New York," she explains. "My late husband, Bryan, and I weren't married yet, and I was getting drawn to New York by the galleries. I wanted to go, but Bryan was afraid it would ruin our relationship. So I did this piece, which was about answering the call of my dream and going to New York. The woman is in the center, and the man is in the back in another room kind of looking on. In front of the woman are all these creatures, which symbolize her facing personal demons or fears."

Rachko spends lots of time setting up, arranging, rearranging, planning and lighting her subjects. Still, after the work is complete, she often finds unforeseen meanings entwined with her original intent. "Initially you think you're doing something for one reason, and you probably are doing it for that reason," she says. "But then later you see all these other things that you can read into what you were doing." §

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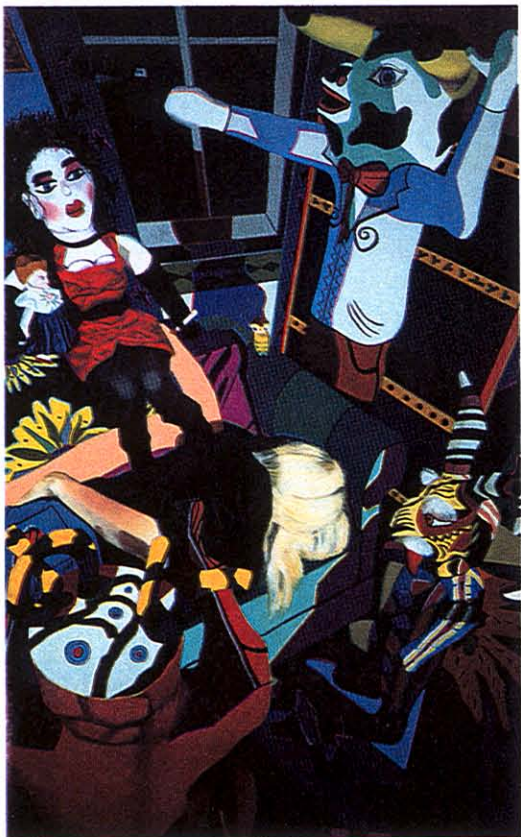


Photo by Bryan Jack.

A Restless Image • Rachko dealt with the worries and fears that make for sleepless nights in *No Cure for Insomnia* (pastel, 58x38). The piece is framed so that the cast of troubles seems to crowd in on and loom over the figure on the couch. Above: Barbara Rachko.