

KATHLEEN JARDINE

Art for a New Millennium

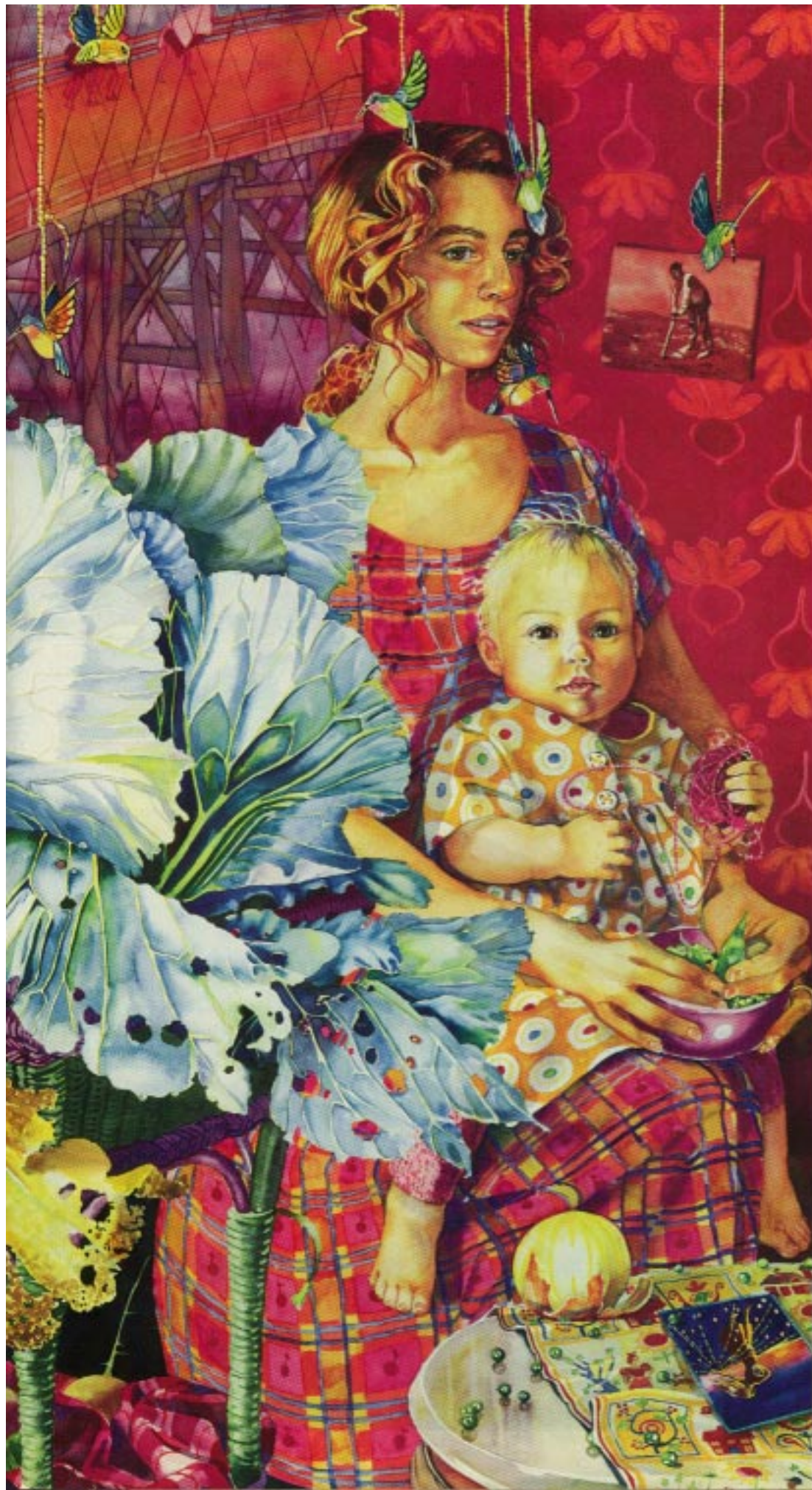
BY CAROLYN SCHWARTZ

W

hat is the right way to live? How do we help redirect a culture that has run amok? How do we elevate the institution of home and family to something of the highest political import? Those are some of the questions that Kathleen Jardine addresses in her richly detailed paintings.

Jardine has been concerned with the subject of "cultural drift" for a long time. The 42-year-old North Carolina artist feels that as a society we ignore values that moor us to a meaningful existence. "Almost since the advent of writing, people have worried about the substitution of the material for the spiritual," she says. Jardine's personal life reflects her commitment to beauty and simplicity. She and her husband and son live simply, in a passive-solar vernacular farmhouse they designed and built themselves. They share their rural environment with a collection of barnyard and domestic animals and also raise much of their own food.





Barbizon Millennium,
1995, watercolor, 40 x 40.
Collection the artist.



Calling her work "narrative, autobiographical, confessional, and cathartic," Jardine says her full-time career as a painter began with the birth of her son in 1980 and her desire to raise him at home. "Most women artists have found it difficult to work with a child in the studio," says Jardine. "But for me, Will's birth acted as a spiritual epiphany. Suddenly I had this God-given subject. I couldn't keep my eyes off him."

Raising Will in her studio, Jardine became her son's biographer. The artist captured his life in watercolor. She entitled an early watercolor of him *I Painted While You Cried, Sweetheart*. Viewers liked and bought the small gestural watercolors of her child. "Every sale meant I could stay home with him, raise him myself. I didn't want him in day care," she says. "I was a product of day care in the 1950's. For me, the experience was straight out of a Dickens novel."

Interest in Jardine's work began to escalate in the early 1980's, when the painter began winning prizes in national competitions. Soon friends began to appear alongside Will in her oversize, intricately detailed psychological interiors. "In a sense, they became proxy self-portraits," she says.

Born into poverty and raised in a maelstrom of multiple marriages, moves, and violence, the artist as a child lived in a private frenzy of creativity. She drew on almost anything she could find—paper bags, walls, and the fly leaves of books. "There wasn't any other paper," she explains.

Her introduction to art history came from a cherished set of encyclopedias. "I literally memorized the section on Western art," she says. Finally, at the age of 22, she had a chance to visit the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. There she searched for her favorite painting. "It was Vermeer's *Girl With the Red Hat*," she says. "I stood



there in the National Gallery with tears streaming down my cheeks. Vermeer really reignited my childhood compulsion to draw eight to ten hours a day. He also caused me to ask myself, How do I make something timeless in a novelty-infatuated culture?"

Today, Jardine lives the simple life, tending to her family and gardens, but there is nothing simple about her artistic vision. The painter uses many of the elements of baroque painting, such as symbolic and allegorical references. She also emphasizes spatial accuracy and chiaroscuro in her works. Despite the



Photo: Carolyn Schwartz

Above: Prozac and Sock Cats, 1991, watercolor, 40 x 30. Collection Fran and Wayne Irvin.

Opposite page: Beautiful Caroline and Dear Vincent, 1992, watercolor, 40 x 30. Collection the artist.



Left:
Will With Cowpeas,
1994, watercolor,
40 x 40. Collection
the artist.

Opposite page: *Will
With the Creation*,
1992, watercolor,
60 x 40. Collection
the artist.

baroque quality of her work, Jardine considers herself a 20th-century realist who portrays her subjects from a distinctly feminine viewpoint. Her figures are exquisitely modeled. Female figures are often surrounded by suggestions of fragility and/or fertility: eggs, vessels, pregnant or postpartum dogs, and lush vegetation. Flowers and vegetables come from the painter's own garden, an artistic utopia in its own right.

Nor is there anything simple about the way Jardine approaches the technical complexities of her work. She works from life, eschewing photographs and projected slides.

"Photographic reality is mediated reality. I paint what I can experience directly," she says. Her

paintings can take as long as two months to complete.

Critics call Jardine's work "intimate" and "sensually beautiful." "Beauty can refer to what is ancient and timeless or to artifice and manipulation," she says. "Either way, it works to keep the viewers looking so they will start to think and feel."

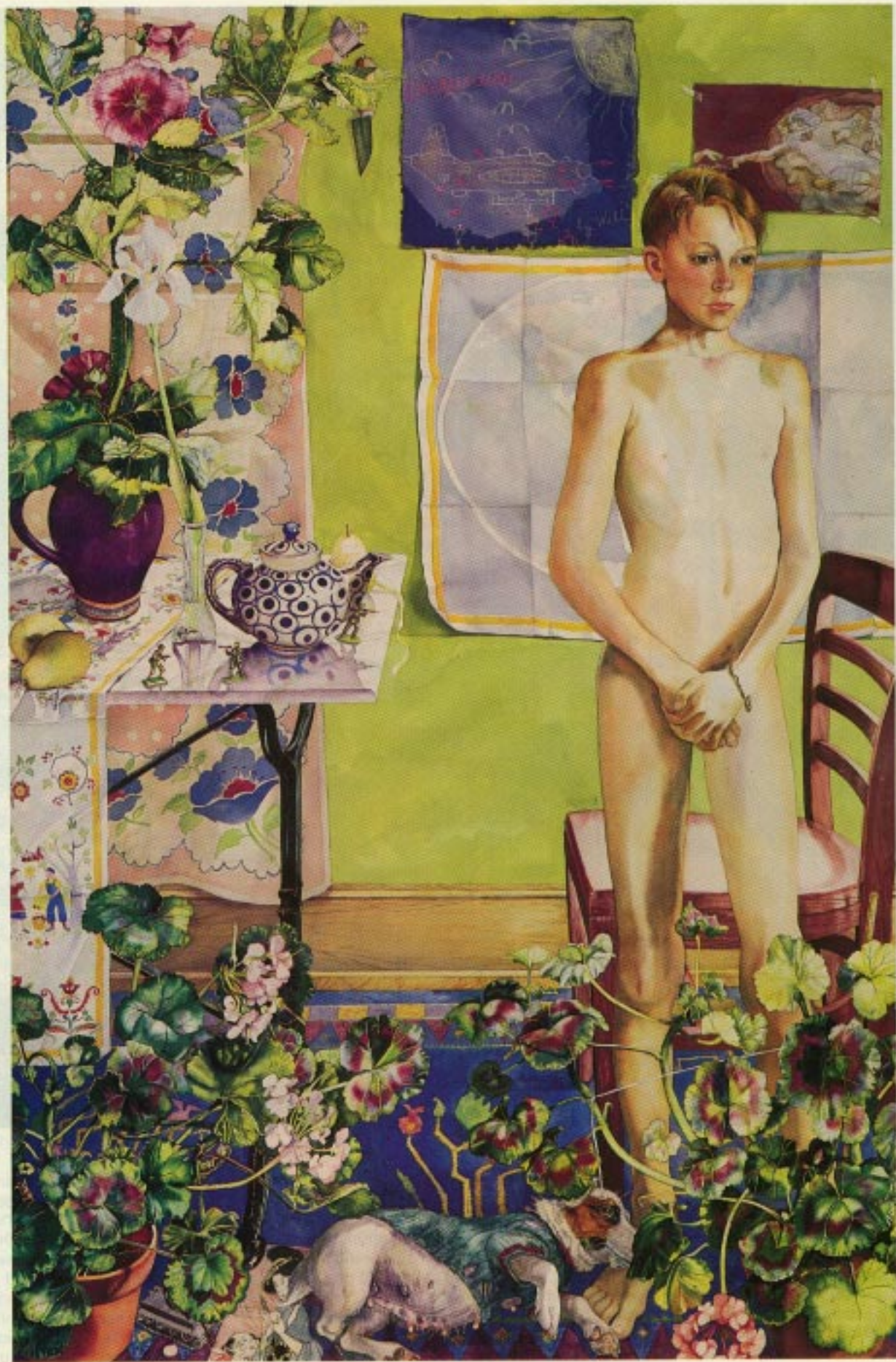
Her works are psychologically complex. In *Will With the Creation*, for example, her pre-adolescent son stands nude, a vulnerable Adam at the threshold of an allegorical Garden of Eden. Behind the boy hangs a Michelangelo print; the finger of God points to the boy, imploring him to emerge from the chaos as a thinking man. The painter has included a compositional prop—a map of the world—to guide him. Symbolic ref-

erences to violence, sexuality, and fertility hint that the boy may be led astray, however. Therein lies the tension. Can the boy overcome the perils that our consumer culture will cast in his path? The viewer can't help but react to the juxtaposition of hallucinatory color and powerful representational imagery.

In another painting, *Prozac and Sock Cats*, Jardine reproaches a culture in which so many of us withstand an unprecedented bombardment of change and stress. Jardine places her beautiful subject amidst a clutter of overgrown foliage. A print on the wall shows a Japanese woman weeping. Little sock cats tumble through the painting. Do they perhaps echo our free-fall in a culture that

offers us no safety net?

Jardine did not always emphasize perspective and light and darkness in her paintings. In her early works, the artist used spatial flattening, having been influenced by Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints. "I had been exposed to *ukiyo-e* and I used those idioms, camouflaging my inability to draw better. Then I began using a simplified string grid to help me determine perspective," she says. "I started making studies that established depth of field, spatial accuracy, and chiaroscuro—that's when my watercolor and oil paintings began to look more baroque. I've had to force myself to take a more cerebral approach to spatial reality instead of allowing myself to wallow in a purely associative





process." Today, after Jardine has made a study of her subject, she transfers her design onto the largest and heaviest Arches or Lana-quarelle paper available.

Jardine feels that much of the satisfaction she derives from completing a painting or commissioned portrait

comes from working directly with her subject. She uses the Hindu word *darsan* (to see and be seen) to describe the phenomenon. "There's this intensely personal heat that is generated when you confront your subject face-to-face. I can't work without it," she says. Her subjects

come from all milieus: gay couples, a dying philanthropist with her children, an animal rights activist. She won't begin a commissioned portrait unless she feels a certain rapport with the person.

Among her contemporary art influences, she cites

Gregory Gillespie, Janet Fish, and William Beckman. She says she is also "incredibly indebted" to such historical mentors as Vermeer, Titian, Brueghel, and Velázquez. Writers who have been equally influential in the development of her work include Ivan Illich,

Wendell Berry, Scott and Helen Nearing, Alvin Toffler, John McPhee, and Witold Rybczynski, as well as a wide spectrum of 19th-century novelists, essayists, and philosophers.

Jardine recently completed a series of works called "Millennium Prayer" (six works from that series are shown in this article). "We need to examine our culture—what we give to our children, what we take with us into the new millennium," she says. "What is the right way to live? All of us need to address that question, whether we do so in the political arena, the artistic community, or at home in our own gardens." She is now working on a new series of works entitled "Sacred and Profane Love."

A native Californian, Kathleen Jardine received a B.S. degree from the University of Oklahoma and an M.F.A. from the University of North Carolina. Since 1981, her work has been shown in over seventy national and international exhibitions, competitions, and invitations. She has received awards from the curators of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and the Tate Gallery in London. Her paintings are included in many corporate and private collections. She is a charter member of the Watercolor U.S.A. Honor Society and a signature member of the National Watercolor Society. She lives with her family in the woods outside Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Jardine's work is currently on view at the Kenneth Winslow Gallery in New York City; the show closes January 27, 1996. The artist will teach a class entitled "Drawing on the Baroque" at the Arrowmont School in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, July 8-12. ■



Above: *Tanks and Dollies in the Beau Monde*, 1989, watercolor, 60 x 40. Collection Drs. Rebecca and Jim Wheeler.

Opposite page: *Sacred and Profane Love*, 1995, watercolor, 51 x 48. Collection the artist.