

# THE ART OF JESSICA PARK

Dream-like transformations by a visionary artist from New England

TONY GENGARELLY



Jessica Park's unique perspective has combined with a remarkable array of artistry to transform the ordinary reality she records so well into a world of visionary excitement. Working from her home in Williamstown, Massachusetts, where she has lived for most of her life, Jessica creates transfigured architectural monuments: skyscrapers, bridges, Victorian mansions, historic landmark buildings, even ordinary houses. The artist often focuses on rooftops, overhanging eaves and cornices; the top portions of skyscrapers and bridges to accommodate an upward vantage point, while she substitutes her own visionary elements for existing backgrounds. Known for her rainbow-palette of colors, intricately arranged and harmoniously balanced, Jessica complements the grids of decorative hues that highlight her principle subjects with naturalistic effects that include, most importantly, remarkable skies. These are filled with astronomical phenomena which she researches and includes in a variety of presentations. Her playful imagination generates a cosmic balance where multicoloured images lift off the paper into a separate reality. Jessica often uses an inversion of light and dark – nighttime skies over day-lit buildings/bridges – in the accomplishment of this gesture.

Park was born into a household of professional educators and writers. Her mother, Clara Claiborne

Park, who taught English literature at Williams College, wrote two memoirs about her exceptional daughter – *The Siege* (1967) and *Exiting Nirvana* (2001). David Park, her father, was a professor of Physics at Williams College and authored several books, many of which placed the discipline within a more philosophical context. Jessica's autism – at first a mystery which threatened to overwhelm her family – has become an important part of who she is as an artist and accomplished person. Rather than succumbing to the news that Jessica was on the spectrum, the Parks rallied and successfully brought her back into the world as an important, contributing member of society. Following the recent deaths of her parents, Park's three older siblings now watch over their artist sister who is living responsibly alone in the family residence.

Along with insightful love from her parents, siblings and the community of friends and patrons that surround the Park family, the artistic sensibility,

above: *The House in Chapin Court*, 1987, acrylic on paper, no measurements, collection of Anita Sokolsky and Stephen Tiffit

opposite: *The Queen Anne Victorian House in Portland, Oregon*, 2002, acrylic on paper, 24 x 18 ins. / 61 x 45.7 cm, collection of Marcia Johnston Wood



nk 6/30/02

726

170



left:  
*George Washington  
 Bridge #1, with  
 Underwater Lightning  
 and Colored Rays*, 1998,  
 acrylic on paper, 24 x  
 15.5 ins. / 61 x 39.4 cm,  
 Collection of Martha  
 Millard

opposite:  
*The Flatiron Building #1,  
 with the Double Suns*,  
 1996, acrylic on paper,  
 24 x 18 ins. / 61 x 45.7 cm,  
 collection of Anthony  
 Zisa

that now defines much of who she is, was also a guide that led Park out of the wilderness of her own mind. From the age of three Jessica showed interest in visual representation. It was then that her mother Clara, out of desperation to communicate with Jessica, began to draw with her. First, they drew lines together and then Clara introduced circles, triangles and squares, which Jessica eventually repeated. She had excellent eye-hand coordination and her powers of recall were quite extraordinary.

Once Jessica's interest had been aroused, she began to open up with a few words to identify what was being drawn. Clara drew familiar objects, then stick figures, which led to labelling parts of the body. Thus began the "long, slow" journey into oral, then written language. When Jessica was able to attend school, first in England at the age of four, she expanded her interest in drawing, initially painting lines of colour with some variation in hue. However, at age seven Jessica accomplished a series of images

with the same stick figures using different colours to represent the four seasons.

Jessica had begun to use her art as a kind of linguistic shorthand to record aspects of her life such as encounters with thunder storms and cast shadows that either challenged or delighted her. Using pencil and loosely applied crayon, she generated a series of pictures related to such themes. Staped together they became "books"; used by Clara to initiate conversations with her daughter. These early visual narratives demonstrated a lively imagination and an ability to express her emotions through art. Jessica still lived in a world of private obsessions and fears, but she had found a way through artistic representation to record reactions to the world around her.

The acquisition of linguistic and social skills along with significant leaps in Jessica's artistry accelerated in high school. Upon graduation at the age of 21, she had learned how to read and write and, more importantly for her art career, how to draw and use the acrylic





8/10/02  
Joseph Park

opposite:

*The Silverstein House and the Stoned Lion*, 1992,  
acrylic on paper, 20 x 14 ins. / 50.8 x 35.6 cm,  
collection of Deborah Silverstein

colour medium that she still employs for her painting. Part of this gained expertise came from art classes, but more importantly from interested friends, classmates Anna and Diana Saldo, and camp counselor Valerie Pinsky, who extended art training beyond the classroom. Jessica Park's prodigious talent had begun to emerge.

Determined to fill the huge gap that people with autism face after formal schooling ends, Clara introduced Jessica and her art to a variety of professional gatherings. By 1980–81, Jessica was using her newly-acquired drawing skills and colour applications to create abstract, two-dimensional renderings of household items such as space heaters and electric blanket controls, revealing a fascination with mechanical gadgetry that continues to this day. At a meeting of the Autism Society of America, Clara displayed one of Jessica's pieces to the audience she was addressing. A man jumped up and offered to buy the picture and an art career was born. Jessica continued to paint and sell pictures of mechanical objects, but soon branched out into architecture and the skies above it as she continued to expand and develop her art.

A professor at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in neighbouring North Adams, I met Jessica Park in 2004. She was a much-recognised, professional artist in mid-career who had already completed a number of seminal paintings. Jessica and her art became a focus of my Museum Studies classes over the next ten years. As we studied, displayed and published her work, I began to comprehend the magic of her art.

Jessica is an artist who is engaged with her craft on an almost daily basis. She is mostly self-taught in the evolution of her art, expanding the intricacy of her paintings when inspiring subjects unlock her creative artistry. The painting begins with a carefully articulated drawing of the principle subject. Drawn on site or from a photographic reproduction (sometimes a combination of the two), these renderings, signed by the artist, stand on their own as works of art. Next, the drawing is often enlarged, and with the use of a ruler and the aid of a light box, its lines are disengaged from the original drawing and straightened. This step also involves removing many of the details from the picture. What remains is a ridged structure ready to receive the artist's palette. Then Jessica lays in her colours one at a time and with meticulous precision accomplishes a brilliant array of hues and tonal gradations. The latter are achieved with segmented progressions that accentuate the volume and depth of a bridge or a building. The artist finally reintroduces the details using colour to highlight them. What results

is a brilliantly rendered transformation of the subject.

When the composition is securely accomplished – her “rage for order” thus sublimated into a coloured abstraction – the artist begins her imaginative play with the background and introduces a variety of special features. These usually embrace an astronomical dimension but include as well some elements of particular interest to the artist. These “enthusiasms”, as Jessica affectionately calls them, range from broken drainpipes to loose shingles; from mythical animals to pyrotechnical displays; from “horizontal rainbows” to prismatic articulations. On several occasions Jessica has repeated a subject – once 15 times, with a set of French doors opening to a porch. This perseverative inclination, however, becomes the exploration of a theme, as Jessica uses different colour combinations and varied background elements for each rendition. Clearly, Jessica has converted what is called a disability into an ability in the creation of her art.

The artist has a commanding use of foreshortening and can articulate perspective depth reasonably well. Her perspective, though, is perceptual and can at times be confusing to the viewer's eye. Also, the proportion of objects in her pictures is not always accurate, but Jessica is not disturbed by such anomalies. Her mind has a clearly mapped image of the picture she wants, and a mistake (called a “painto”) with the placement of a colour or location of an object is more of a concern. Over the past ten years the artist has ventured more into the world of fantasy. Her realistic scenes have thus experienced even more of a transformation with the injection of particular “enthusiasms” such as the bright lights of Las Vegas that appear in Park's rendition of Times Square on New Year's Eve. Jessica has quite a creative mix of applications which contribute substantially to the completion of her art.

Park continues to exhibit her work to national and international audiences. Her paintings are in hundreds of private collections and in the growing repository of grassroots art at the Bennington Museum in Bennington, Vermont. The Jessica Park Project, an educational initiative at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, continues to study, display and publish her art, most recently in 2014 with a major retrospective at the Brattleboro (Vermont) Museum and Art Center. Her accomplished body of work has led art critics and educators like Pamala Rogers, Director of the New York Studio/Gallery Pure Vision Arts that represents Park, to pose this question: “Are the paintings of Ms. Park significant because they are created by a person with a disability or in spite of it?” And to answer it, not surprisingly: “They are just extraordinary contemporary art.”

Tony Gengarelly, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Art History and Museum Studies, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, and Director of the Jessica Park Project at MCLA.