

Bees, Stars, AND BEYOND

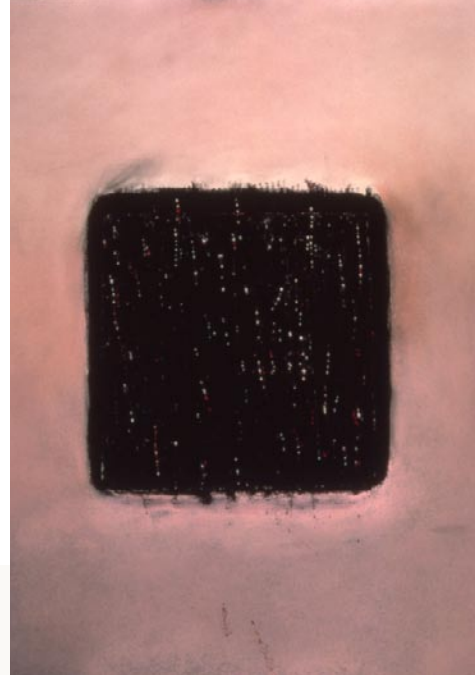
MARY DAVIS MACNAUGHTON

FOR twenty years Nancy Macko has ruminated on the mystery of nature, at levels seen and unseen, small and large. In the realm of the small, she has pictured beehives and the molecular structure of glucose; in the domain of the large, she has envisioned constellations and the stars that inhabit them. Throughout her work, hives and constellations are metaphors for the connective structure of nature. She is also drawn to human systems that link the world through technology, especially the computer, which she uses to generate and layer imagery. For Macko, other worlds of connection are math, which describes the universe's underlying numerical patterns through symbols, and myth, which imagines human origins and behavior through fables. She is especially interested in myths that describe matriarchal cultures. Populating her work are bee priestesses of Eleusis and Delphi and such ancient nature goddesses as Demeter and Hymen, whose rituals of the harvest and the wedding feast focused on fertility and spirituality. Ultimately Macko's art links past and present, archaic bee priestesses and contemporary feminism, to present a vision of the future in which the human quest for domination is replaced by a search for harmony. This transformative vision has shaped her life as an artist.

Macko makes art about underlying structures in the world by combining multiple media, in particular painting, printmaking, and digital art. She has blended these artistic processes through computer-generated imagery, which she has developed since 1988, when she began teaching printmaking and computer graphics at Scripps College. Now head of the Digital Art Program at Scripps, Macko continues to create works that blend traditional printmaking and computer-generated imagery in what can be described as digital collage. Recently this hybrid approach has led her to move into Web-based and time-based digital media.

The Honeycomb Wall, 1993–94
(detail)
Cat. no. 1





Connective images and collage techniques are present even in Macko's early work. For example, in her MFA exhibition at the University of California, Berkeley, Macko exhibited such works on paper as *22 x 30 + □, #4* (1980), whose centered grid of nipples from embossing pegboard anticipate the circular reinforcements that would later float through her paintings and prints from 2000–2006. In *22 x 30 + □, #17* (1980), she introduced the motif of flowered wallpaper, an allusion to her grandmother, who had this pattern on her walls and who was a nurturing presence throughout Macko's childhood. This wallpaper reappears many times in later work, at different scales and degrees of visibility.

Macko first brought her blended practices of digital imagery and printmaking together to make a major statement in *The Waggle Dance: Lessons From the Hive* (1993). This work, which presents digital images behind silk-screened Plexiglas, announces her characteristic method of composing in layers. In three panels—a rectangle flanked by two hexagons—she imprinted one of nature's most beautiful connective systems, the hive. The outer panels of this tripartite piece echo the honeycomb cell, while the lacewood frames suggest amber honey. Inside the panels, Macko used a digital paint program to layer images with multiple degrees of transparency. In juxtaposing painterly and graphic marks, she seamlessly combined painting and printmaking methods with digital techniques. Suspended above the soft-edged images of bees and hives within these frames are sharp, linear diagrams, silk-screened on the Plexiglas, taken from a geometry lesson on how to inscribe a hexagon in a circle. Here Macko alluded to the history of the hexagon, which extends back to Pythagoras. She also made visual links among the hexagon, the hive, and ancient goddesses who worshiped the bee.

The apiary world appears again in a more ambitious work called *Dance of the Melissae* (1994).¹ In this large installation, Macko linked the honeybee society to art, science, technology, and ancient cultures. The multipart work consists of both two- and three-dimensional components. Some are freestanding assemblage sculptures featuring the paraphernalia of bee culture, while the Large Votives are wall-mounted lead-wrapped wood panels that evoke ancient offerings. In this work we

LEFT:
22 × 30 + □, #17, 1980
Mixed media on paper
30 × 22 in.

RIGHT:
22 × 30 + □, #4, 1980
Embossment, dry pigment,
and pastel on paper
30 × 22 in.