

The Sussman Staying Visible Collection © 2022 Jan Rindfleisch

The **Sussman Staying Visible (SSV) Collection** of **Agnes Pelton** paintings and archival material was started by donations from **Irving and Cornelia Sussman** to the **Foothill–De Anza Community College District** through the work and advocacy of **Jan Rindfleisch** and her colleagues in the Staying Visible project. Rindfleisch was the longtime (1979–2011) executive director of the Euphrat Museum of Art (EMA). The Euphrat project *Staying Visible: The Importance of Archives* began with the 1981 eponymous exhibition and book, and encompassed an extraordinary collaboration with **San Jose State University**, major cultural institutions, students, scholars, artists, and community members. The enthusiasm generated by the Staying Visible project ultimately led to the donation of Pelton's paintings and archival materials to the district. These archival materials, which were then donated to the **Smithsonian Institution**, have formed a major basis for all-important subsequent research on Pelton. One of the paintings was included in the 2019–2021 national Pelton traveling retrospective exhibition and book produced by the **Phoenix Art Museum**.¹

The SSV Collection at the EMA in Cupertino draws national attention to the South Bay Area and San Francisco Peninsula role in the legacy of modernist visionary artist Agnes Pelton (1881–1961) and how her life and artwork gained long overdue significant attention. This appreciation grew in large part through her association with local individuals and institutions, and through their history of pioneering diverse art programming on multiple fronts, serving as major cultural players in and beyond the Bay Area.

Collection's Importance

Pelton's art and life have been compared with the widely known painter **Georgia O'Keeffe** and other modernist luminaries.² Pelton's rising star in the art world has made her the subject of major scholarly publications, exhibitions, essays, and even a fictional novel.³ The SSV Collection contains her last work, *Light Center*, which she was working on when she died. The collection also includes a symbolic portrait of the Sussmans, *You Both Make the Desert Flower*, and other significant paintings. The Sussmans, a creative team, were confidants of Pelton and understood her spiritual dimension. The couple salvaged the important paintings in this collection and treasured them despite the blinders of the narrowly focused art world. The Sussmans recognized the works' larger social and historical significance and carefully sought a unique home for this collection which would build on her legacy. Their action was not taken lightly. They had

¹ Vicario, Gilbert. *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist*. Phoenix, AZ, Phoenix Art Museum; Munich, Hirmer Verlag GmbH, 2019. Accompanied traveling exhibition: **Phoenix Art Museum**, 2019; **New Mexico Museum of Art**, Santa Fe, NM, 2019–2020; **Whitney Museum of American Art**, New York, NY 2020; **Palm Springs Art Museum**, Palm Springs, CA, 2020.

² Moss, Karen. *Illumination: The Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin and Florence Miller Pierce*. Newport Beach, CA, Orange County Museum of Art, 2009.

³ Coates, Mari. *The Pelton Papers, A Novel*. She Writes Press, 2020.

seen disregard for Pelton's art and legacy at a major art museum in Southern California in the 1970s. Her artwork was only to be recovered later, her painting *Orbits* preserved by a curator and an archivist at **Oakland Museum of California**. The SSV Collection's importance embraces content, context, and process—interactions, innovation, audacity, and the changing times—Pelton's and those who championed her work.

Recent exhibition wall text for the traveling exhibition *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* and the Staying Visible archival project:

Pelton's slow re-emergence within the margins of American art began through critical and academic re-evaluations of her place in art history. In the 1980s, archival efforts aimed at establishing a baseline of primary research materials began to take shape. The Agnes Pelton papers at the Smithsonian Institution were assembled by Cornelia and Irving Sussman for a biography of Agnes Pelton. They were donated to the Archives by [Euphrat] gallery director Jan Rindfleisch on behalf of the Sussmans, in 1984. The majority of her works were cataloged in a publication for an exhibition curated by the art historian **Margaret Stainer** in 1989, her first solo exhibition since 1955.⁴

Stainer is important. Hidden in the above paragraph's quick summary is a ton of dedicated unpaid research, programming, and publications, starting around 1980, accomplished despite difficult organizational and personal circumstances associated with challenging existing ideology. Art historical writings often acknowledge first "national recognition." In terms of a building, that's like ignoring the planning, foundation, structure, first floor. Without that basic, unrecognized research, documentation, programming—and dedicated commitment—there would be no "national recognition."

Specifics of this effort can be found in Rindfleisch, Jan. "Awakenings: An Untold Backstory of the Agnes Pelton Renaissance." *California Desert Art*, 2019. An overview of the artwork in the SSV Collection along with earlier research are provided in Rindfleisch, Jan. "Making the Desert Flower: An Alternative Look at Rarely Seen Agnes Pelton Paintings." *California Desert Art*, 2019. The latter essay also highlights other dedicated contributors to the Pelton legacy: **Ann Japenga, Nyna Dolby, Erika Doss and Michael Zakian**.

Rindfleisch writes:

Pelton's value today is interdisciplinary. The innovative painter met challenges from art-world, academic, cultural, political, and economic systems. Her story and her art reach far beyond the art world and hold riches for interdisciplinary research along with personal contemplation. The grassroots research, reporting, and organizational work of Japenga and Dolby [and later, Stainer], enhanced by scholars Doss and Zakian, and the work of countless others, are part of a

⁴ Stainer, Margaret. *Agnes Pelton*. Fremont, CA, Ohlone College Art Gallery, 1989. 39 pp. Exhibition publication.

continuum of people who ferret out lost history, acknowledge others, and put puzzle pieces together to tell the story.⁵

Significantly at the time Pelton was active, women and people with different ideas and backgrounds were mostly hidden in the art world, mere tokens in exhibitions and publications. The field was overwhelmingly white male; women had low visibility.⁶ *Staying Visible* was part of a multi-pronged action to raise multiple voices and prepare a more hospitable environment for women and diversity in the arts, whether that involved making art, writing, documenting, curating exhibitions, or taking leadership roles in the arts community in order to truly keep visible.

***Staying Visible's* Bay Area leadership**

San José State University

SJSU alumni, current graduate candidates, and faculty were early, key collaborators that Rindfleisch (M.F.A., 1979) drew into the *Staying Visible* project. Starting as an M.F.A. candidate, unflappable **Margaret Stainer** assumed an early and critical star role. She took on major research, documentation, and writing, and had the tenacity to stick with building the Pelton legacy over the years. She wrote the major essay on Agnes Pelton in the Euphrat book *Staying Visible*. Stainer later became the director of the Louie Art Gallery at **Ohlone College** in Fremont, CA where she continued her research on and advocacy for Pelton while also working on related exhibitions and publications. She led ongoing and seminal research.

SJSU M.A. candidate **Lucy Cain Sargeant**, having the vision and know-how that made the *Staying Visible* project's lofty goals a reality, served as associate curator for the project. She directed the book format and worked the team through the entire publication project, from editing to the laborious placing of waxed strips of type onto boards for printing (the then-existing technology). Sargeant also researched and wrote an essay for *Staying Visible* that formed a generational context for Pelton's out-of-the-mainstream vision. It included Sargeant's interview with **Joyce Treiman** (1922–1991), a dedicated narrative painter with self-portraits hidden in her paintings, who bucked the art-world trend of minimalism. Sargeant, an experienced illustrator at *Sunset* in Menlo Park, went on to become a SJSU faculty member and teach representational (figure) drawing to a generation of students entering an art world steeped in abstraction.

Multitalented **Katherine Huffaker** (M.A. 1973) wrote an essay for *Staying Visible* about painter/quiltmaker **Therese May** (M.A. 1974). The two artists were longtime art

⁵ Rindfleisch, Jan. "Making the Desert Flower: An Alternative Look at Rarely Seen Agnes Pelton Paintings." *California Desert Art*, 2019.

⁶ Dickinson, Eleanor and Roberta Loach. "Does Sex Discrimination Exist in the Visual Arts?" *Visual Dialog*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1975–76. The U.S. box scores at the time for numbers of men (M) and women (F): group invitationals—M 1324, F 699; one-person shows—M 1421, F 38; Oakland Museum collection—M 413, F 119. Females made up 75 percent of students in U.S. art schools in 1971. Other statistics Dickinson and Loach researched and reported compared degrees, faculty, reviews, acquisitions, and gallery representation. Dickinson kept annual statistics well into the new millennium.

collaborators and called attention to art quilts which were largely ignored by the art world at the time. Like Stainer and Rindfleisch, they also helped develop **WORKS Gallery** in San José that played a hugely influential role in stimulating and recognizing the creative local power that started in the late 1970s. WORKS Gallery is a venue that remains a solid, lively, participatory, and challenging fixture of the South Bay art scene today.

SJSU faculty member, probing art historian **Judith Bettelheim** engaged with her former students in research and questioning the system. She wrote a *Staying Visible* essay in which she took on women and “hobby art” and the importance of a wide scope of art historical documentation.

De Anza College

Indefatigable videographers **Deanna (DeDe) Bartels**, a past instructor in the art department and **California History Center**, and her colleague **Betty Estersohn** helped write an article for *Staying Visible*, documenting the life of artist/actress **Marjorie Eaton** (1901–1986). Eaton’s own experiences, starting in New York in the late 1920s and later in Taos, shed light on the choices and challenges of women in the art world of Pelton’s time and their searches elsewhere for community and inspiration. Eaton would ultimately form an unusual arts colony in the hills of Palo Alto with a multiracial, international bent, with salon events attended by cultural and high-tech leaders. Videographer **Susan Kirk** created a 2021 Taos exhibition and video documentation of Eaton’s life.⁷ Eaton’s home incorporated **Juana Briones’** adobe from the former Rancho de la Purísima Concepción. This incredible history, along with a wall of the original adobe, is maintained by the **Palo Alto Historical Society**.

At the Euphrat, intrepid **Kim Bielejec Sanzo**, assistant to the director, researched and wrote about **Beatrice Wood** (1893–1998). Another contemporary of Pelton, Wood was a well-connected art-world figure who also sought inspiration, a certain freedom, and community in the desert. Additionally, Sanzo oversaw diverse aspects and details of the exhibition and publication. She made the expansive project advance when the Euphrat had scant funds, recruiting people dedicated to telling lost stories. **Carol Holzgrape**, with an English literature background, jumped into research and wrote about artist **Consuelo Cloos**, who lived in Marjorie Eaton’s arts colony in Palo Alto.

Concurrent De Anza collaborative events sponsored by and held in the Euphrat added system-challenging context. A few examples: The Intercultural Studies department sponsored a slide show by muralist **Patricia Rodriguez**, who was also featured in *Staying Visible*, and in 1982, it presented two lecture/demonstrations on Pomo basketry and spiritual life by Pomo medicine woman **Mabel McKay**. Two instructors in language arts, **George Barlow** and **Ulysses Pichon**, started an extensive poetry reading series in 1980, with multiple readings each year. Poets included Barlow in June 1981, **Quincy Troupe** in May 1982, and anti-apartheid activist **Dennis Brutus** in June 1983.

⁷ Kirk, Susan. *Marjorie Eaton: A Life in Pictures*. Taos, NM, **Taos Art Museum**, April 7, 2019–March 1, 2020. On June 8, 2019, curator Susan Kirk gave a talk on Marjorie Eaton; video is available.

Community

An early Euphrat board member, Cupertino City Council member/mayor **Barbara Rogers** was an early supporter of *Staying Visible* when there was very little apparent support for broad-based arts in the general community. It took Rogers three attempts to succeed in initiating the **Cupertino Fine Arts Commission**. In 1984 a grant was awarded to the Euphrat exhibition/book *FACES*. The first Euphrat Board was in place in 1982 and included FHDA trustee **Dr. Gerald Besson**, De Anza President **Dr. Robert DeHart**, Vice-President **Dr. Barbara Reid**, and the first community members. By 1990 the board included FHDA trustee **Dr. Raymond Bacchetti** from **Stanford University**; vice presidents of **Apple Computer**, **Hewlett Packard**, and **Tandem Computers**; along with elementary and high school district board members, **Cupertino Unified School District** trustee **Joan Barram** serving as board president, and Stanford activists **Cecelia Preciado** and **José Antonio Burciaga**, all striving to support a struggling arts community and long-neglected arts education at all levels, ultimately, with **Ruth Tunstall Grant**, starting the Arts & Schools Program. The longest serving member was **Judy Goddess**, first as director of the nonprofit Center for Self-Reliant Education.

National and Regional Context: Individuals and Institutions

Paul Karlstrom, West Coast area director of the **Archives of American Art**, **Smithsonian Institution**, wrote the foreword for *Staying Visible*. He addressed the critical role of archives and how many serious artists feel “locked out” of an art establishment network. He assured the support for the project and participation of the Smithsonian, where critically important Pelton and other archives were donated in the 1980s.

Staying Visible original research grew from a Rindfleisch visit and conversations regarding the **Archives of California Art** at the **Oakland Museum**. Chief Curator for Art **George Neubert** recognized Pelton’s importance, purchased Pelton’s *Orbits* from a thrift store for a song, brought it into the museum’s collection, and boldly placed it on display. Museologist **Michael Bell**, then registrar/cataloguer for the museum’s art department, called attention to the importance of the art and its story, the value in keeping art and artist visible.

Additional *Staying Visible* Bay Area artists presented more nonconformist context for Pelton: eccentric, short-lived Santa Rosa painter **E.F. Evans**; co-founder of Mujeres Muralistas **Patricia Rodriguez**; the now-renowned installation artist **Mildred Howard**, who once visited the Eaton arts colony in Palo Alto; and celebrator of prosaic Latinx life, narrative painter **Carmen Lomas Garza**.

Others contributing commentaries in the book *Staying Visible* included **Wanda Corn**, associate professor of art history, **Stanford University**; **Marie Pinedo**, education and resource director, **Galeria de la Raza**; **Charles Shere**, critic, **Oakland Tribune**; **Mary Stoufflet**, art journalist; **Tom Albright**, critic, **San Francisco Chronicle**; author **Karen Petersen**; **Jan Butterfield**, associated editor of *Images and Issues* and lecturer at **San Francisco Art Institute**. Additional institutions, such as the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**, participated by lending or providing information.

Collection Acquisition and Original Goals

The Sussmans maintained contact and sought out Rindfleisch after the *Staying Visible* exhibition. They were impressed by Euphrat exhibitions/publications such as *Art, Religion, and Spirituality* (1982; included Buddhist home altars from the Poston internment camp and the history of the Duc-Vien (Full of Virtues) Pagoda opened in San José in 1980); *Men and Children* (1980); and *Contemporary Surrealism: Classical, Visionary, and Social* (1984, dedicated to Pelton). They were drawn to the Euphrat's interdisciplinary reach, its forum approach, the college/community partnership, and the demonstrated respect and advocacy for women and diverse ideas. Their decision process in donating the collection and encouraging others to donate reflected a desire to move past a single academic discipline to a dialog and collaboration between disciplines, including programs for the physically limited, women's studies, social and physical sciences, and religious studies. None of these approaches were commonplace in the art world or academia at the time.

In communications and correspondence, Cornelia Sussman understood our struggles and provided encouragement to our Staying Visible group as we challenged the status quo of the art and academic world, [along with the indifference of Silicon Valley, with areas carpeted by engineers and techies,] just as she and Irving must have done with Pelton and others in Cathedral City—what Pelton might call “Making the Desert Flower.”

Our group embraced Sussman's vision for a future with excellent visibility, strong scholarship, and expanded contextual understanding for Pelton and her work. The combination of the early 1980s seminal interdisciplinary, intercultural Euphrat exhibitions and publications, the shared vision for Pelton and her art, and the community involvement and community board motivated the Sussmans and others to entrust Pelton artwork to our fledgling Euphrat collection [which ultimately became the responsibility of the Foothill De Anza Community College District Trustees]. As Staying Visible proponents, we recognize and honor all their gifts of art, their understanding, and their encouragement.⁸

The **Staying Visible Group** (SVG), a loosely knit coalition that includes many members who contributed to the original early 1980s efforts, acts individually and in subgroups; to find solutions, venues, and networks to promote other important people and ideas that have gone ignored. The group has a continuing interest in the SSV Collection. It is our concern that the Sussmans' energy and goals be taken into consideration, that the story of the SSV Collection be told, that Pelton's artwork—whether kept, donated, or sold—and her legacy enjoy the context, visibility, and security they deserve, and that any potential funds derived from her work be employed for the same goals.

Other publications and research:

⁸ Rindfleisch, Jan. “Making the Desert Flower: An Alternative Look at Rarely Seen Agnes Pelton Paintings.” *California Desert Art*, 2019.

Zakian, Michael. *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature*. Seattle, WA, University of Washington Press, 1995. Published in association with exhibition at Palm Springs Desert Museum, Palm Springs, CA.