

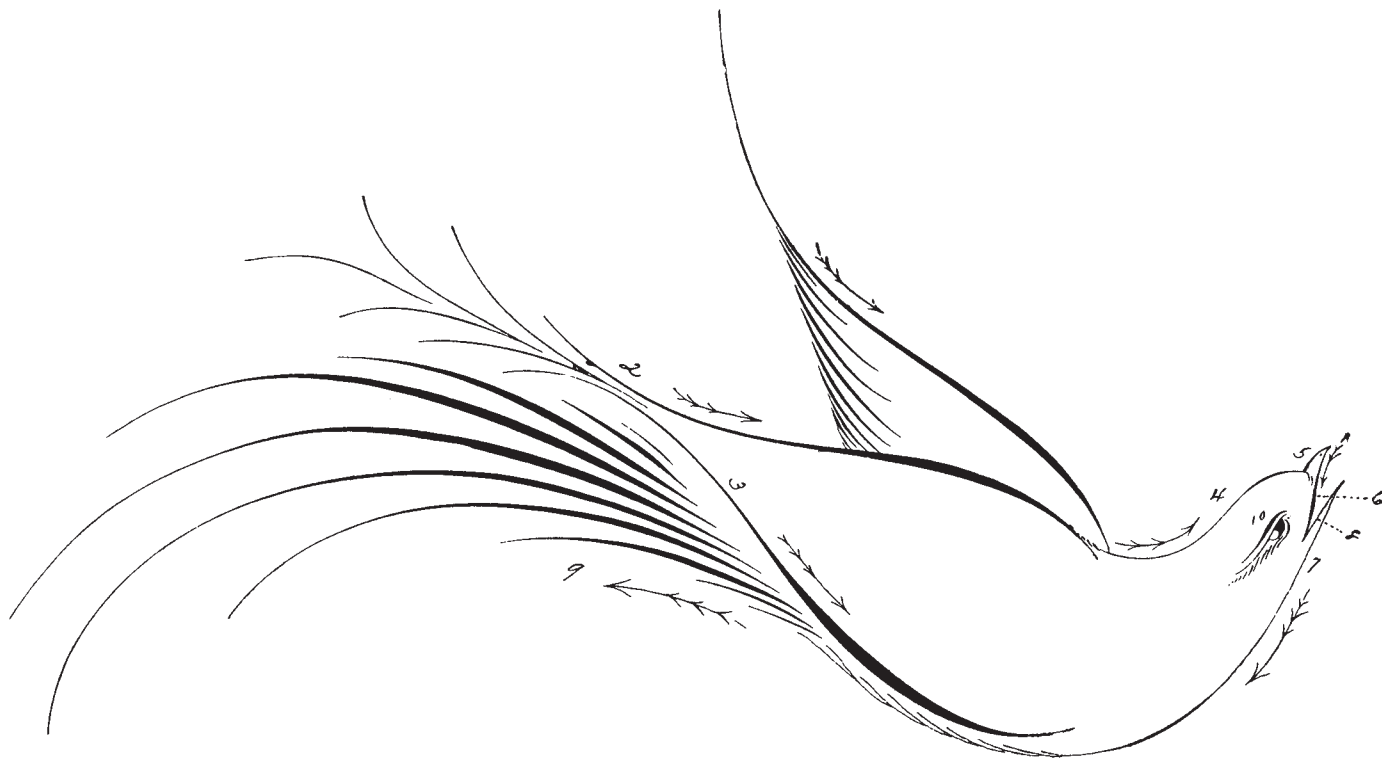


CATHERINE COURTENAYE

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cover:  
detail, *Swan Gone*, 2003

# CATHERINE COURTENAYE



paintings

2002-2004





*Swan Gone*  
45" x 45"  
oil and alkyd on panel  
2003

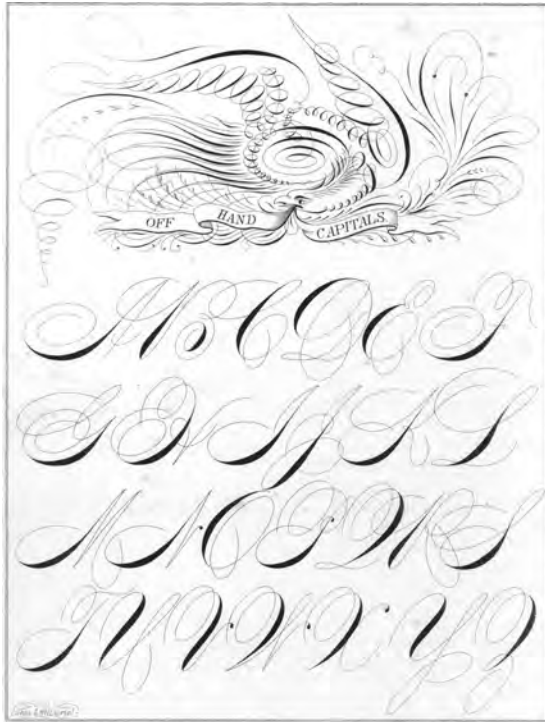




*Dividends and Remainders*  
60" x 60"  
oil and alkyd on panel  
2003







from *Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms:  
A Guide to Correct Writing*, 1878  
Thos. E. Hill  
Publisher: Moses Warren & Co., Chicago

## Abecedariums, Arithmetic, and Abandon: The Paintings of Catherine Courtenaye

Charlene Roth

*Only a learner,  
Quick one or slow one,  
Just a discerner,  
I would teach no one.  
I am earth's native. —  
No rearranging it!  
I be creative,  
Chopping and changing it?*

ROBERT BROWNING  
*PISGAH-SIGHTS* (1876)

*Etiquette is the barrier which society draws  
around itself as a protection against offenses the "law" cannot touch—*

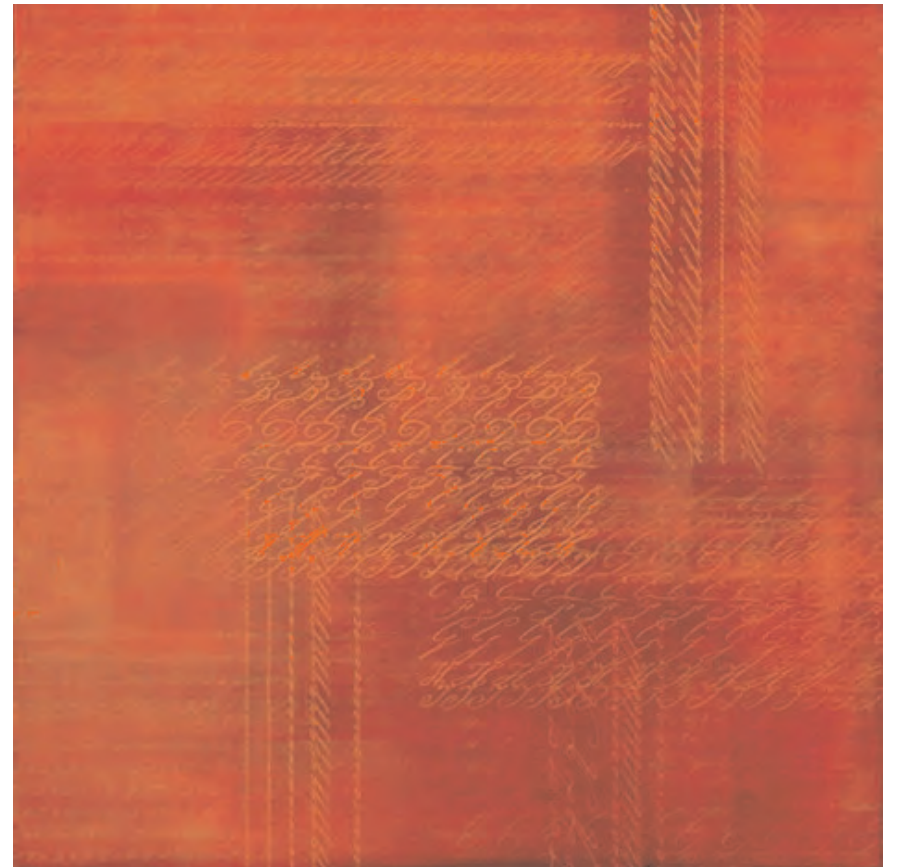
CHARLES WILLIAM DAY  
*HINTS ON ETIQUETTE AND THE USAGES OF SOCIETY WITH A GLANCE AT BAD HABITS* (1834)

The Victorian era laced the stays of its social conventions so tightly that a danger of explosion had to be warded off in some way. One pressure release was achieved by a rather amazing system of small discharges that took the form of flourishes. These petite bursts, excesses, overflows or add-ons to otherwise strictly regimented, labor-intensive activities acted as efficient little escape valves. We eighty forces: high moral purpose and noble sentiment couched in notions of order that negated self-expression, powered a restrictive social machine during the Victorian period. In

America, despite the obvious privations inherent to many 1800's lifestyles like those of settlers and homesteaders, the system inspired many to practice a strict routine of self-improvement aimed to achieve moral high ground.

Masterful penmanship was considered an obligatory social skill in the nineteenth century. Exercises to perfect penmanship were considered to be self-improving and morally uplifting. These, tied to pursuit of the "correct" line stroke, were characterized by relentless repetition. Pursuit of the "correct" line stroke was not just the domain of school children but an obsession practiced across the spectrum of the population. Needless to say, penmanship exercises spawned a repertoire of flourishes. Whimsical loops and impulsive extensions of line developed into the "off-hand flourishes" of flora and fauna that served as release from the tedium of copying. Flourishes extended into other areas of Victorian life and were characterized by intense ornamentation that often amounted to visual overload in art, craft, interior decoration and female fashion.

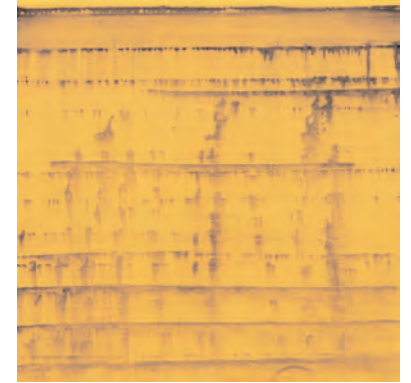
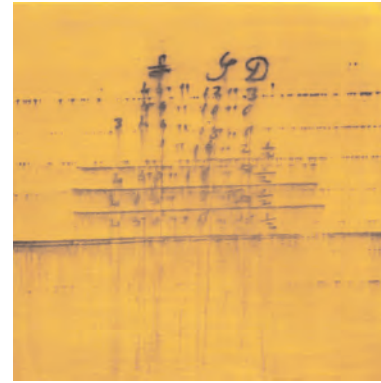
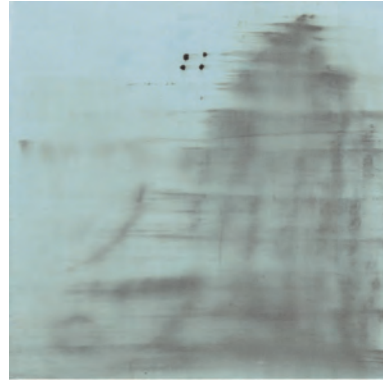
Images drawn from Victorian-American handwriting manuals, as well as penmanship notebooks and arithmetic journals created by young people and adults during the nineteenth century, serve as foundation for Catherine Courtenaye's paintings. The quirky embellishment of flourishes is contextualized, like the individual within the restrictive Victorian social system, in these source materials. They occur appended to the rigid form promoted by teaching texts or handbooks of the period. Simultaneously, literature was displaying its own idiosyncratic blandishments. The poetry of the late nineteenth century is awash in overtly fanciful retellings of myths, fairy and folktales, plus numerous esoteric rants that are all, nonetheless, couched in rigid forms. It is a dichotomy now seen to be symptomatic



*Abecedarium*  
45" x 45"  
oil and alkyd on panel  
2002

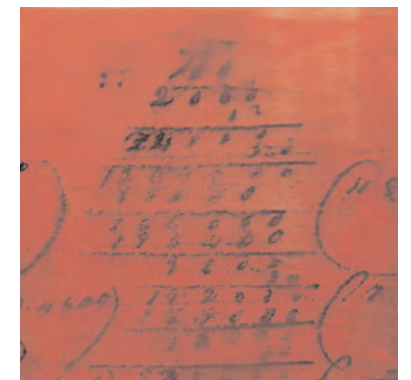


Division #1 through #9  
each 11" x 11"  
oil and alkyd on panel  
2002



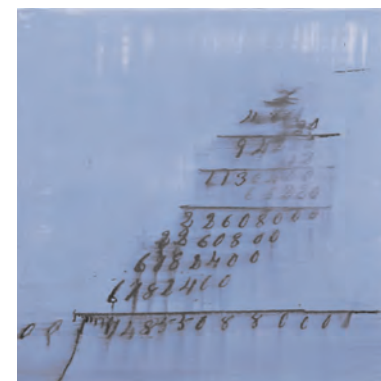
of that time. Courtenaye explores the seeming contradictions of the period, as well as the commonalities between it and ours, with rigor and intuition. Her paintings, oil on panel ranging in size from 11 inches square to 5 feet by 6 feet, serve as insightful hindsight but, more interesting for me, also illuminate, even clarify, a crucial area of contemporary social/cultural discourse. These works question the possibility, but also the status of perfection.

Courtenaye has focused on an elemental and pervasive activity of the Victorian lifestyle to illustrate her subject/s. She has chosen practice, in the form of exercises required for mastery of an exhaustively specific penmanship that characterized the quest for self-improvement, for mastery and perfection pervasive in the nineteenth





century, as her case in point. She reuses marks found in period manuals which featured endless redrawing of specific letters grouped to form the words of particular, correct phrases. The artist presents some exact reproductions of marks she encountered. These are strict duplication to the degree that the strokes are numbered (another regimen of the age) in order of their execution. She escapes the potential dead-end of reiteration, however, with painterly aplomb. Courtenaye affects context and perception by embedding the marks in fields of color. This introduces blur in opposition to the original goal of regimentation and clarity. A window is opened onto examination or critique of the practices, as well as the dictates of the period. In addition, in works such as *Birds of a Feather* (2003), she foregoes the letter form to concentrate on the flourish. The flourish is “an ornate display of the penman’s prowess, used to create animals out of letter form pen strokes,” (source: *Artist Statement*). It also serves as notification of the penholder’s mastery, thus power to break out of the system. It is a veiled show of egoism. The painting exhibits a compulsive re-rendering of marks that form pale, white onto grey, feather images on a





*Birds of a Feather*  
48" x 60"  
oil and alkyd on panel  
2003

opposite:  
*Lexicon*  
60" x 60"  
oil and alkyd on panel  
2003

ground predominated by shades of reddish brown. The feathers are clustered toward the top and center of the panel. They overlap, soften, appear to dissolve into wisps and effectively write one another out of the picture.

A series of paintings titled *Division* is Courtenaye's response to a nineteenth century student arithmetic notebook found in Montana. These works focus on her core interest in futile attempts at bridge building to span or link dichotomies or oppositions. The series is at once playful—the title is a play on words—but they are also gloomy illustrations of the concept of divide. One implication she addresses is the common definition of the mathematic method that is division. It is a means to solve certain kinds of problems. The solution shows the number of groups of one size that make up a larger number. The center image on each panel of the *Division* series is a division problem. Marks to represent the numbers and brackets composing the problem are ranged across the pictorial field with measured strokes, but the symbols become increasingly vague as the series progresses. The numbers break up, dissolve and blur to near erasure beneath an onslaught of paint. *Division #4 (Mustard)* (2002) has lost all resemblance to its source and reads like a melting Braille babble. The painting is at once visually stunning and disturbing. The title alone stands in to lead the viewer to the artist's source material and the title is hardly transparent. The artist is showing us a cruel contradiction. Despite the care with which the numbers are formed, despite a plethora of "correct" strokes and gallant loops, if the numbers become illegible in interpretation, the problem is not solved. The student who spent hours developing ornate penmanship strokes amid the bleakness of a homesteader's existence was not likely to develop noble sentiment or high moral purpose by engaging in this exercise in isolation. Nor was





s/he better equipped to communicate information. Courtenaye's *Division* series, by pointing to the divide, develops into an incisive critique of the problems implicit in written (all) communication attempts.

The abecedarium as a frame or theory book for penmanship exercises of the last half of the nineteenth century is another area Courtenaye exploits toward her critical goal. She draws attention to these elementary principles because they, like the instructional basics of early education subjects in any era (and like the penmanship exercises themselves that mirror the habits of a time) were eventually perceived as useless. They were discarded by succeeding generations as dated techniques, behavior, or modes of thought within the ever-changing field of education but also society at large. In *Abecedarium* (2001), and *Abecedarium III* (2003), Courtenaye presents us with the grid or pattern that constitutes this frame even as she degrades its clarity—its telic properties—with layers of paint. The ascendancy of this particular system is seen to wane even as we move between paintings.

The painting *Swan Gone* (2003) takes the concept a step further. It is a compelling and self-contained address of change as a non-linear movement. Courtenaye renders a hysterical re-drawing of swan wing flourishes mixed with a chant of repetitious rows of practice letters that devolves into squawking strings of strokes lying as inelegant violet and sepia marks to stain the surface of the otherwise muted palette of this painting. The darker side of forced conformity is expressed in the

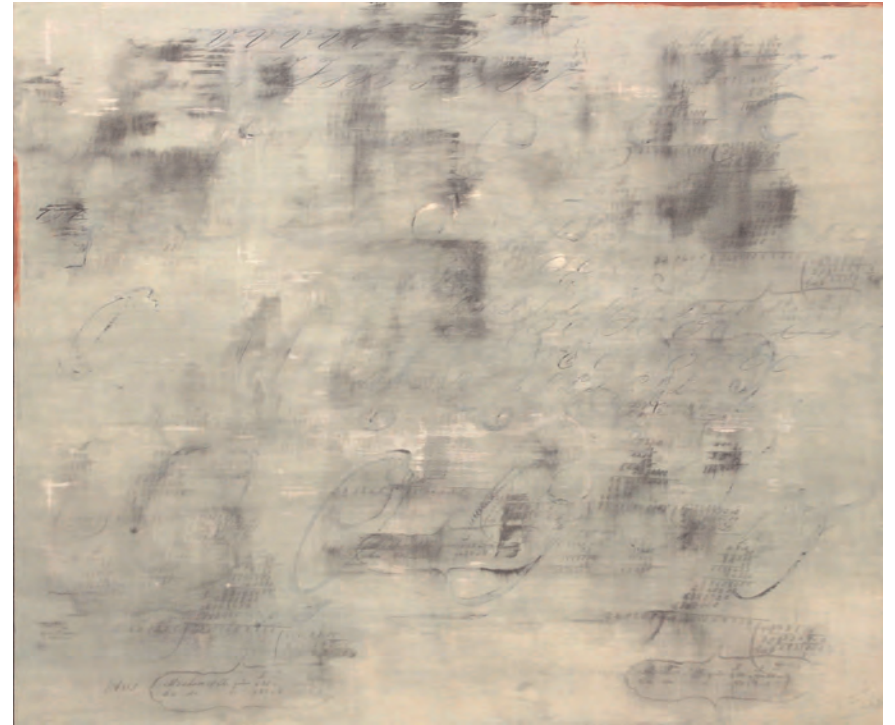


detail, *Blue Ribbon Script*  
2003

fragments of flourishes that weave in and out of the painted ground. Are these the necks of swans as the title suggests, or the fat barrels of snakes? The work is heady and it is sensual even as it fluctuates between frantic and meticulous.

Aspects of the Victorian code of behavior continue to influence interpersonal and intercultural relations today though it is becoming increasingly difficult to support their legitimacy. And this is the crucial issue that Courtenaye addresses with her work. The hierarchal, self-righteous conduct of an omni-potent empire does not translate into viable customs or ethics for the early twenty-first century. This is an age of relativity. *Truth, perfection, mastery* and *right*, along with a plethora of idyllic concepts have passed under an examining glass and are found to be suspect. As her work attests, absolutes lose definition in an age of uncertainty .

CHARLENE ROTH, 2004



*Upstroke, Downstroke*  
60" x 72"  
oil and alkyd on panel  
2004

Charlene Roth is an artist, curator and writer based in Los Angeles.



## BIOGRAPHY

BORN Madrid, Spain, 1957

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

**455 Market Street Lobby Gallery**, "Abecedarium: New Paintings," San Francisco, California, 2003  
**Stremmel Gallery**, Reno, Nevada, 2004  
**Oakland Museum of California** at Latham Square Building, "Sampler," Oakland, California, 2002  
**Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art**, Santa Monica, California, 2000  
**Shaker Museum**, South Union, Kentucky, 2000  
**LIMN**, "Paintings of Shaker Objects," San Francisco, California, 1999  
**Grover/Thurston Gallery**, "The Colors of the Soul: Paintings of Shaker Objects," Seattle, Washington, 1997  
**Andrew Shire Gallery**, Los Angeles, California, 1994  
**Hartnell College**, Salinas, California, 1994  
**DesignWorks**, Berkeley, California, 1993  
**Gallery Paule Anglim**, San Francisco, California, 1992  
**Bank of America World Headquarters**, San Francisco, California, 1990  
**Kouros Gallery**, New York, New York, 1989  
**Iannetti-Lanzone Gallery**, San Francisco, California, 1988

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

**San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Artists Gallery**, 25th Anniversary Exhibition, San Francisco, California, 2003  
**Michelle Bello Fine Art**, "Handpicked," San Francisco, California, 2003  
**Stremmel Gallery**, "30 Years/30 Artists," Reno, Nevada, 2003  
**Kala Art Institute**, "Solos: The Contemporary Monoprint," Berkeley, California, 2002  
**Yellowstone Art Museum**, 34th Annual Art Auction, Billings, Montana, 2002  
**LIMN Gallery**, "Wrap Up," San Francisco, California, 2001  
**Michelle Bello Fine Art**, "Black and White and Read All Over," San Francisco, California, 2001  
**Bedford Gallery, Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts**, "Abstraction: From Raucous to Refined," Walnut Creek, California, 2000  
**Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art**, Gallery Artists Summer Show, Santa Monica, California, 2000  
**Art Museum of Missoula**, Missoula, Montana, Regional Drawing Exhibition, 1999

**Jeffrey Copleff Gallery**, New York, New York, 1999

**Jan Baum Gallery**, "Precious," Los Angeles, California, 1998

**Patricia Sweetow Gallery**, "Pharmacopoeia," San Francisco, California, 1998

**The Jewish Museum**, "L'Chaim: A Kiddush Cup Invitational," San Francisco, California, 1997

**Sherry Frumkin Gallery**, Santa Monica, California, 1996

**San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Rental Gallery**, "Refound," San Francisco, California, 1996

**Richmond Art Center**, "Anonymous Arrangement," Richmond, California, 1995

**Gallery Concord**, "What's in a Word?" Concord, California, 1995

**Schneider Museum of Art**, "Art Faculty Exhibition," Southern Oregon State University, Ashland, 1993

**Vladimir/Emeryville Cultural Exchange**, Vladimir, Russia, 1992

**Asher/Faure Gallery**, Los Angeles, California, 1991

**Elizabeth Leach Gallery**, Portland, Oregon, 1991

"**Art: the Other Industry**," Emeryville, California; John Caldwell, juror, 1990

**Gallery Paule Anglim**, San Francisco, California, 1990

**Galleria San Benigno**, "America, Italia, Spagna," Genoa, Italy, 1989

**The Fourth International LA Art Fair**, Los Angeles, California, 1989

**ProArts Annual**, Oakland, California; Graham Beale, juror, 1988

**San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery**, "Chain Reaction," San Francisco, California, 1988

**Los Medanos College**, "Ten Women Artists of the Bay Area," Pittsburg, California, 1987

**Richmond Art Center**, "Bay Area Drawing," Richmond, California, 1987

**Oakland Museum Collectors' Gallery**, "Small Treasures," Oakland, California, 1987

**ProArts Annual**, Oakland, California; David Ireland, juror, 1987

"**Art: The Other Industry**," Emeryville, California; Sidra Stich, curator, 1987

**University of Iowa Museum of Art**, M.F.A. exhibition, Iowa City, 1984

### AWARDS

**National Endowment for the Arts** Individual Artist Grant, 1989

**Ford Foundation Grants**, 1982, 1983, 1984

*Phi Beta Kappa*, 1979

#### EDUCATION

**University of Iowa**, Iowa City, M.F.A. in painting and drawing, 1984  
**University of Iowa**, Iowa City, M.A. in painting and drawing, 1983  
**Massachusetts College of Art**, Boston, 1980  
**Colby College**, Waterville, Maine, B.A. *magna cum laude* in English, 1979  
**University of Bath**, England, 1977

#### TEACHING

**California College of the Arts**, San Francisco and Oakland, Guest Artist, 1988, 1989, 1990, 2000, 2002  
**Kala Art Institute**, Berkeley, California, Instructor, 2002  
**Loyola Marymount University**, Los Angeles, Guest Artist, 2000  
**California College of the Arts**, San Francisco and Oakland, Panelist, "Drawing as a Major Medium of Expression," 1999  
**Southern Oregon State University**, Ashland, Guest Artist, 1999  
**Southern Oregon State University**, Ashland, Instructor, 1992–93  
**Emeryville Youth Art Program**, Emeryville, California, Instructor, 1985–86  
**Dominican College**, San Rafael, California, Guest Artist, 1985  
**University of Iowa**, Graduate Teaching Assistant in painting, 1982–84

#### RESIDENCIES

**Experimental Workshop**, monotypes, Emeryville, California, 2001  
**Ucross Foundation**, Clearmont, Wyoming, 1991  
**Virginia Center for the Creative Arts**, Sweet Briar, 1985

#### REVIEWS

"Catherine Courtenaye at Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art," Charlene Roth, *Artweek*, January 2001  
"Abstraction: From *Raucous to Refined* at the Bedford Gallery," Juan Rodriguez, *Artweek*, October 2000  
"Driven to Abstraction," Sarah Lavender Smith, *Diablo Magazine*, August 2000  
"The Inner Lives of Things: Catherine Courtenaye's Paintings of Shaker Objects," Bruce Nixon, in conjunction with the Shaker Museum at South Union, Kentucky, January 1999  
"Nostalgic," Rick Deragon, *Monterey County Herald*, November 1994

"Art as a Civic Virtue," Jennifer Crohn, *The East Bay Guardian*, November 1991  
"A Promising Quartet," Kenneth Baker, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 10, 1990  
"Drawn to Richmond," Jim Jordan, *Express*, July 10, 1987  
"Richmond's B.A.D. Show is g-o-o-d," Charles Shere, *Oakland Tribune*, July 7, 1987  
"Drawing Conclusions," Phyllis Bragdon, *Marin Independent Journal*, July 6, 1987  
"Direct Marks and Layers of Mystery," Dan Nadaner, *Artweek*, May 30, 1987

#### SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco  
Bank of America  
Frontier Adjusters of America  
Folger, Levin & Kahn, LLP  
Hyatt Hotels  
Matsushita Investment & Development Co., Osaka, Japan  
Pillsbury Winthrop, LLP  
Silk, Adler & Colvin



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