

Rock Art and Ethics, a Personal Response

By Janet Lever

"When we enter the landscape to learn something, we are obligated, I think, to pay attention rather than constantly pose questions. To approach the land as we would a person, by opening an intelligent conversation, and to stay in one place, to make of that one long observation, a fully dilated experience." These words of wisdom are from Barry Lopez.

A little over 20 years ago, I came to Colorado for graduate school in fine art. In the anthropology museum I found a refuge. Endless shelves holding a collection of some of the finest prehistoric pottery in North America. My own work at that time explored installations of clay pieces in the landscape. A week later an unexpected archaeological site! Wanting to know more of the cultural context from which the museum pots came, I started to visit canyons and mesas of the Colorado Plateau. These journeys expanded my vision from the ground to the surrounding canyon walls, to structures in hidden alcoves, and finally to the petroglyphs and pictographs on the nearby rock surfaces.

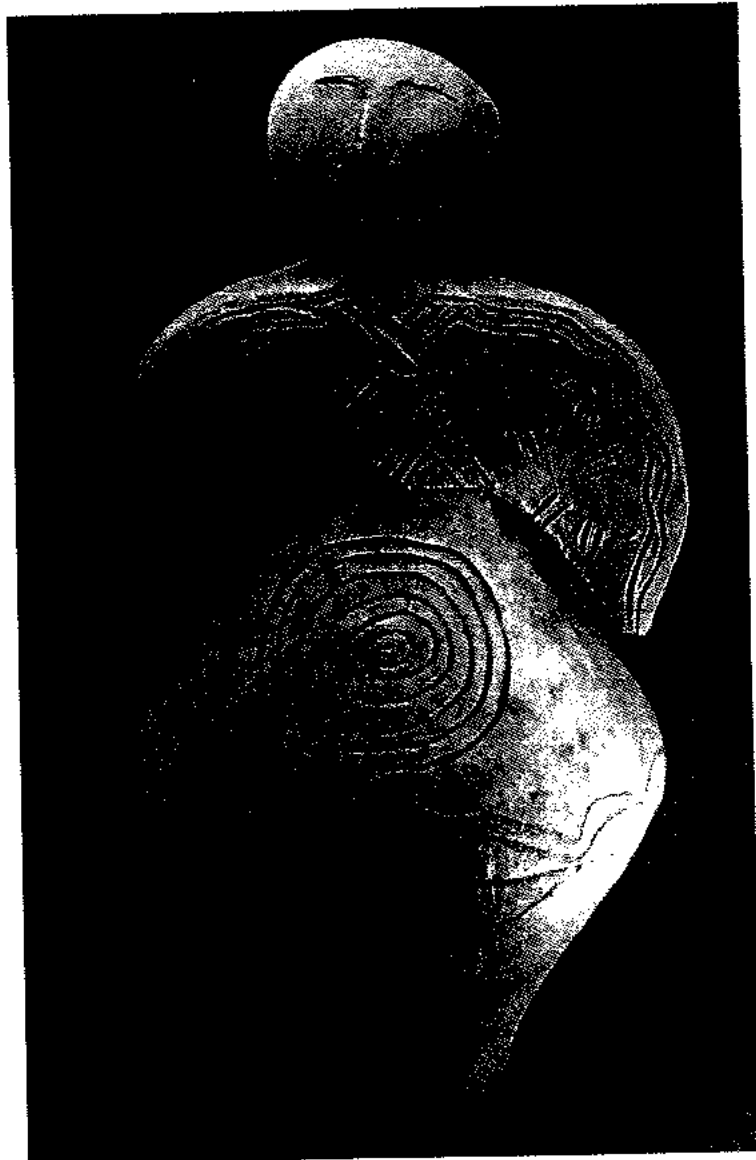
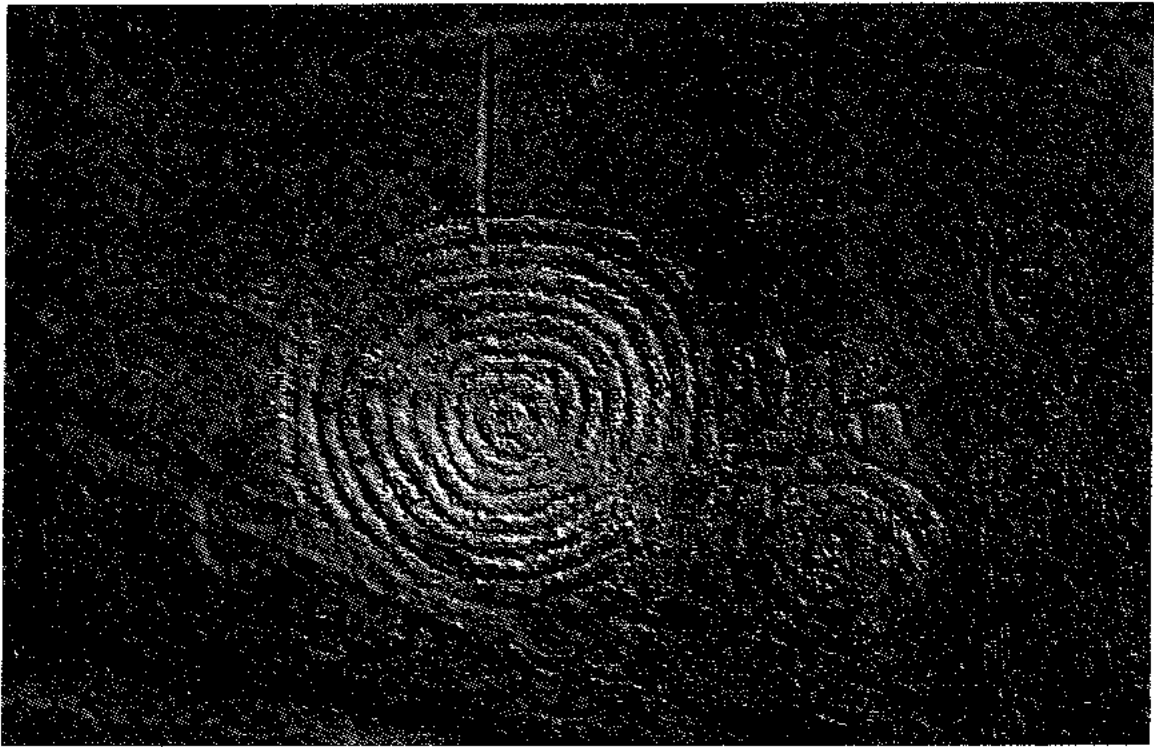


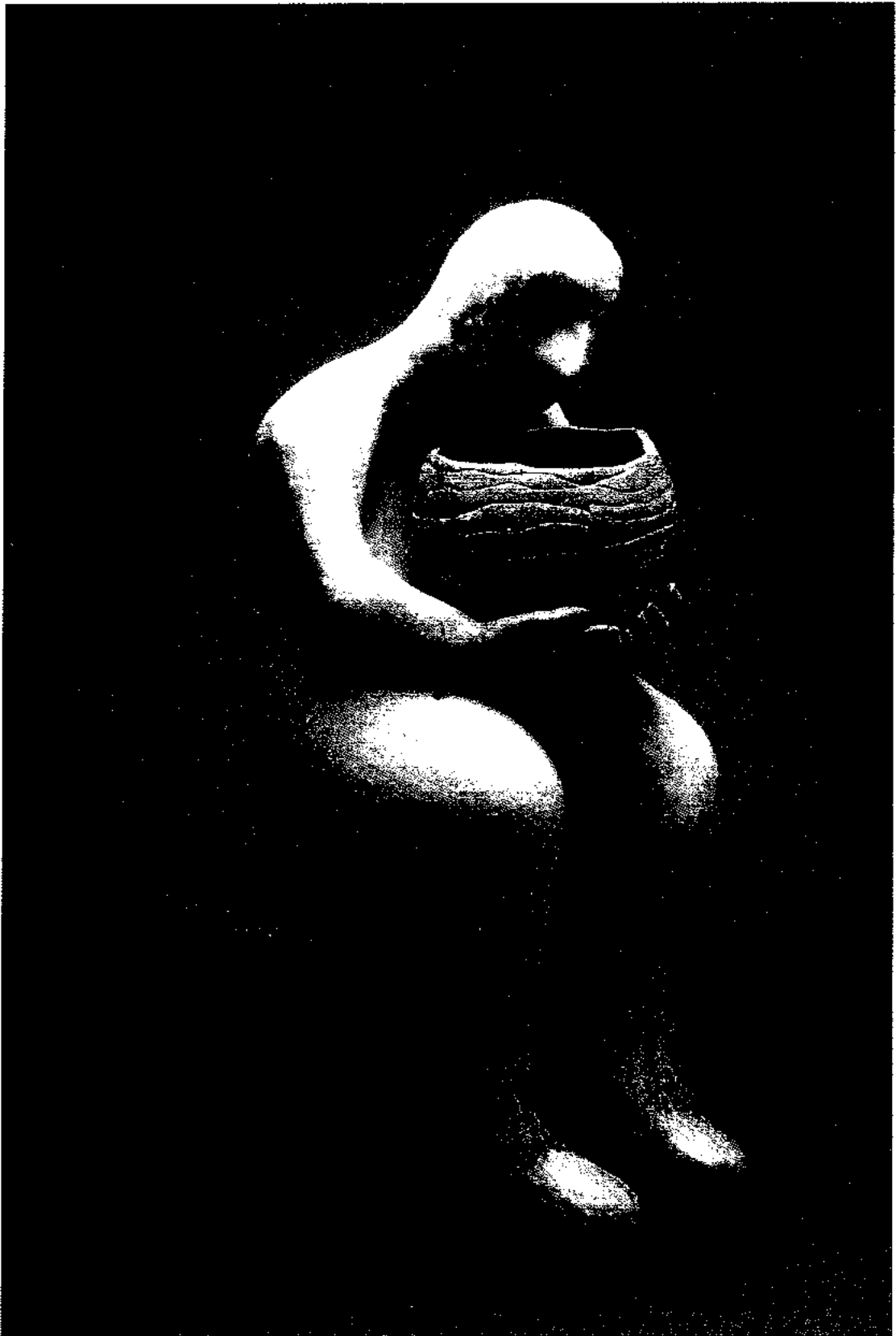
Lucy Lippard has written in her book *Overlay*, "There is a mysterious romantic element to wondering about the past. However critically one goes about it. The ancient sites and images are talismans, aids to memory, outlets for the imaginations that can't be regulated, owned, or manipulated like so much contemporary art, because so little is ever or will be known about them."

Here is a brief introduction to how I approach a rock art site. From a map, I get oriented in the landscape. I focus on a particular landform and accompanying drainages. I look out for other cultural marks, such as Moqui steps. I investigate patinated surfaces and follow directional pointers in the landscape. I come in close and wait for the light to reveal the drawings, glyphs, or paint. Part of my conversation with these sites now includes an offering (in the form of a prayer) to quiet the mind. Turning slowly 360 degrees, I consider the whole landscape. A photographic scan is the first record. To understand more deeply, a careful sketch or tracing is made. Intellect and intuition can extend these into field notes and then poetry, prose, interpretation. Discussion with others at the site and around the campfire deepens one's understanding.

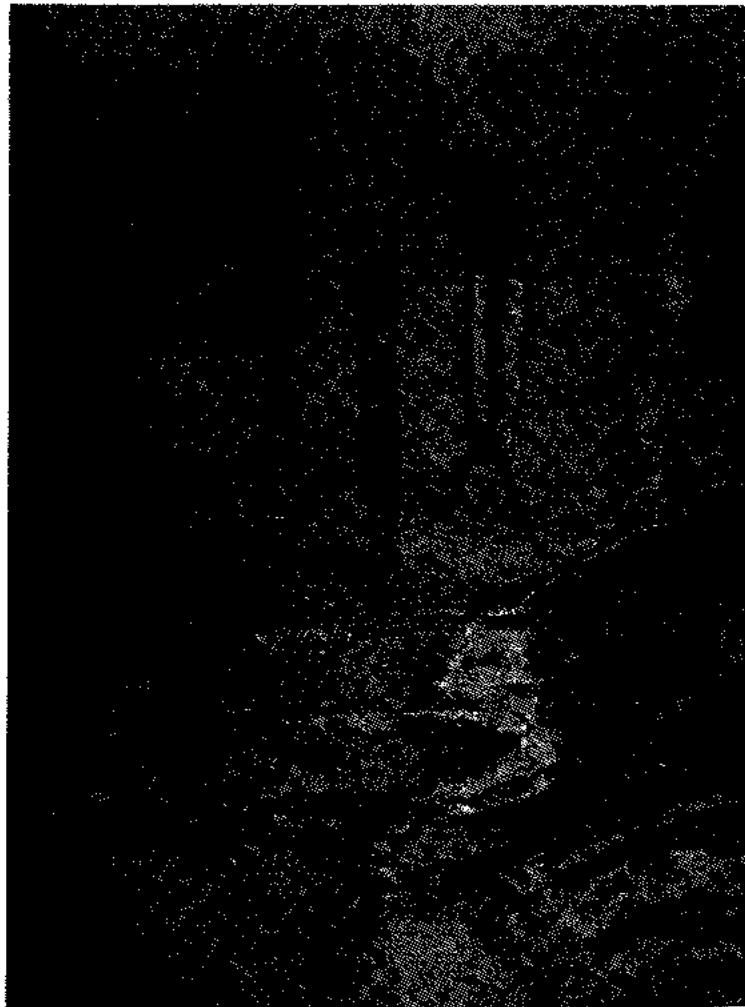
An artist can bring home the whole experience... sites and insights... and translate these into new forms: in my case, into clay. It is possible to transform two-dimensional images drawn or painted on stone into three-dimensional pieces. My intent is not to recreate, but to respond with delight to the details witnessed at the source. Let's look at some of these sources and some of the finished work.







Observation means paying attention to details. I look at and think about the art-making process. Someone once said, "God is in the details." By looking carefully at the details of each rock art site and considering the art-making process, I think we can deepen our understanding of the paintings and engravings. The element of line: painted, incised, finger-daubed, as in an archaic Barrier Canyon figure. The element of color: ground from hematite, ochre, kaolin, and applied with yucca brushes. The element of form: indelible and powerful in this archaic figure. The element of composition: where figures are balanced and elegant, contained by the recessed rock surface. This interaction with the rock surface itself is important to note. At Little Wild Horse Canyon, are the openings in the undulating sandstone and the green pigmented rock part of the panel?



Jean Berger writes in *The Sense of Sight*, "All the languages of art have been developed as an attempt to transform the instantaneous into the permanent. Art supposes that beauty is not an exception - is not in despite of - but is the basis for order..... Art is an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally..... the transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer."

From Thor Conway's *Painted Dreams*: "By its very nature rock art is paradox and ambiguity. Instead of settling for inaccurate and incomplete descriptions, we should learn to embrace these enigmatic images as personalizations of nature. In the Native American environmental perspective, self merges quickly into the surrounding world. Three environments are often depicted in rock walls: the personal, often directed through vision questing or the shaman's journey. The community, where rock art is part of an established site. And ultimately, the intertwined landscapes of the natural world."

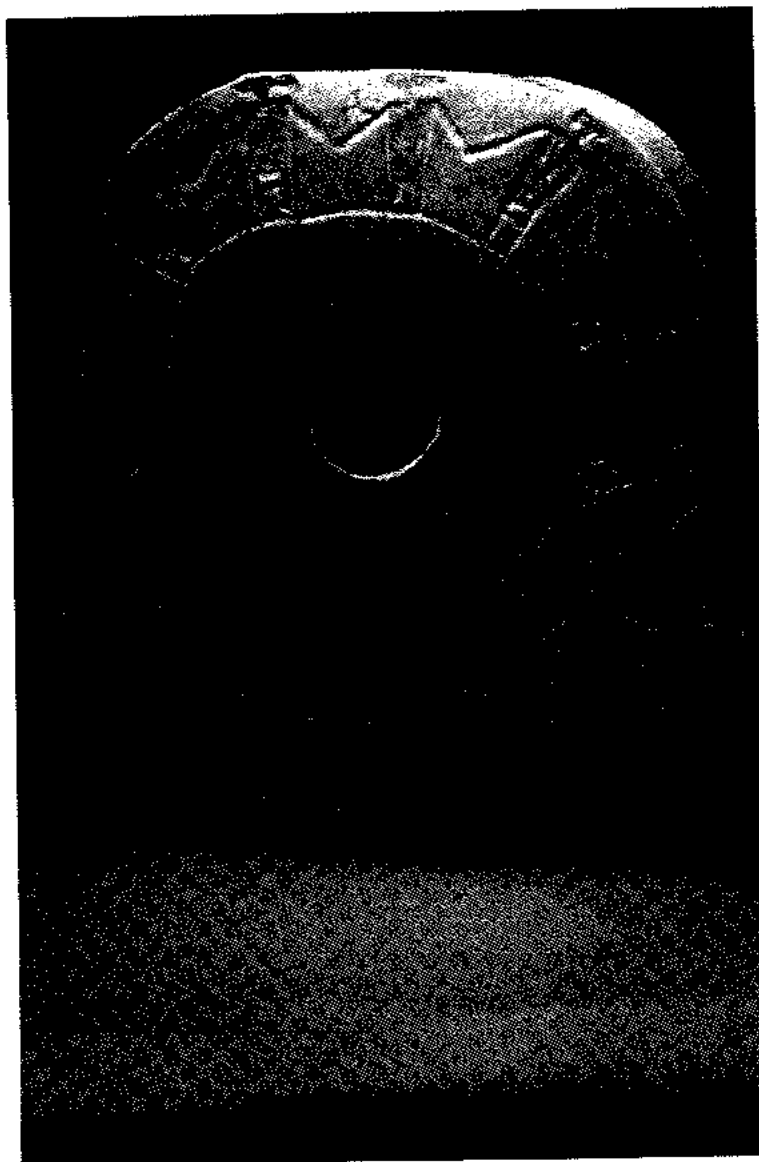
As 20th Century viewers, as anthropologists, we need to make a record. Thus we survey and collect inventories of photographs, make maps and scale drawings and fill out forms. Let's consider this from an ethical perspective. These activities are not about ownership, but about dynamic participation. So often in the past these recordings have been inadequate; as destructive as chalking, latex molds and vandalism is misinformation. Accuracy in perception follows through to excellence in publication. Any practice that devalues, commercializes, or cheapens the meaning of these rock art images needs to be questioned. When other artists were asked about what they wished to communicate with their work, they responded generously. Margaret Berrier, a jeweler, wrote: "My silverglyphs are based on actual images made by ancient peoples. Looking for petroglyphs and pictographs is an adventure. I'm inspired by these magical images. I feel like the ancient artists are trying to communicate with us. I try to make each piece a spiritual creation as well as an artistic one." Rick Bury, a photographer, wrote: "I want to relay a sense of the sacred. The sacredness comes in part from the ephemerality of native art. The artists have vanished, the images are fading away, another version of creation is slipping away.

My own vision is not about absolute truths, just perceptions. I wish to transmit not only an image, but also the structure of delight. This process does not occur in the library, but rather on the journey, in the landscape. I see how surfaces were prepared - pigments ground, lines pecked, color blown. Cracks and edges become entrances for figures on a panel.



After years of looking, one recognizes themes, motifs, resonances. These myriad images become a fuge, not just random notes. I would like to share a passage from Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Senses*. In the chapter on vision she writes: "The visual image is a kind of trip wire for the emotions. When we see an object, the whole peninsula of our senses wakes up to appraise the new sight. Few symbols have ever meant as much to us, regardless of our religion, politics, age or gender, as rings. We give rings to symbolize infinite love and the close harmony of two souls.... Rings halo what is sacred.... Rings suggest eternity, agelessness, perfection. We bring the world into focus with the globes of our eyes, worlds within worlds."

This talk was meant to be a discussion of rock art and ethics. These days, I feel not only the challenge of being an artist, but also the call of stewardship in relation to a fragile environment. I still look at the prehistoric pottery, but it needs to be held more dearly. So do these images on stone. My personal ethic must honor a lineage from the past so that the next generation can experience these mysteries and more.



REFERENCES CITED

- Ackerman, Diane 1991 *A Natural History of the Senses*
- Berger, Jean 1980 *The Sense of Sight*
- Conway, Thor 1994 *Painted Dreams, North American Rock Art*, North World Press, Inc.,
Minocqua, Wisconsin.
- Lippard, Lucy 1983 *Overlay, Contemporary Art, and the Art of Prehistory*
- Lopez, Barry 1990 *The Rediscovery of North America*

