

The Armand & Eleanor Castellani Collection



The Armand & Eleanor Castellani Collection Art for the Public Eye

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CASTELLANI FAMILY DONORS

With great appreciation, the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University would like to acknowledge and thank Armand and Eleanor Castellani, their children, and respective family members for their support and generous donations of art.

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Roger Brown

(American, 1941–1997)

Lot's Wife, 1981

Oil on canvas

72¼ × 48¼ inches

(detail opposite)

[Gift of the Children of Armand and Eleanor Castellani, 1999](#)



While Roger Brown's work is closely associated with the Chicago Imagists, his various Christian-themed paintings are best illuminated when considered in the context of his Bible Belt upbringing. A series of paintings from the mid-1970s that recast scenes from the life of Christ as allegories of contemporary American politics (*Assassination Crucifix*, 1975; *The Entry of Christ into Chicago in 1976*, 1976) gave way in the 1980s to scenes from the Old Testament, including *Lot's Wife*, 1981, and *Adam and Eve (Expulsion from the Garden)*, 1982.

Lot's Wife presents the familiar, fire-and-brimstone cautionary tale from Genesis in the context of the theatrical pantomime developed in some of Brown's earliest paintings. The title figure stands in flat, front-and-center symmetry, backlit by the ground-zero conflagration of Sodom and Gomorrah in a distant valley. She is framed by Brown's ubiquitous, sumac-like foliage,¹ which, along with the stylized landscape and clouds, lends a hieratic quality to the picture. The near-perfect symmetry of the composition is broken only by the figure's head—turned to the left in silhouette, captured at the moment when she succumbs to voyeuristic temptation, looks back, and turns into a pillar of salt. It is only here that we notice Brown's tongue-in-cheek detail: the figure's rigid, armless torso resembles a classic diner saltshaker, complete with a subtle series of white dots at the neckline, equal parts salt crystals and pearls.

Brown's rendition of *Lot's Wife* owes as much to his omnivorous interest in Americana as it does to ancient Hebrew texts. The figure's sculptural coiffure,

pearl necklace, and long, heavy skirt cast her as a 1940s Hollywood starlet or a wedding cake topper.² Vivien Leigh's Scarlett O'Hara comes to mind, silhouetted against the fiery horizon in *Gone with the Wind*. But in a more ominously autobiographical reading of the picture, Lot's wife may stand in for Brown himself, rooted in his Southern milieu, but looking over his shoulder at the volatile "Sodom" of New York in the 1980s.³ Painted just a few years before the founding of ACT UP and Brown's own decade of dealing with AIDS (ca. 1987–97), the work speaks to his lifelong alienation from the New York art scene and, as a gay man, from the mainstream American culture that so fascinated him. Through this lens, the cautionary tale of Lot's wife is the perfect metaphor for the tension Brown must have felt between his fundamentalist upbringing and its condemnation of the lifestyle that ultimately took his life.

Eric Jackson-Forsberg

- ¹ Common in many parts of the United States and particularly evident on roadsides, sumac is as important a decorative element in Brown's mature paintings as acanthus leaves were to ancient Greek and Roman architecture.
- ² This figure reappears as the angel in *Adam and Eve (Expulsion from the Garden)*.
- ³ Brown first visited New York in 1960 for two weeks as a high school graduation gift.



Matta

(Chilean, 1911–2002)

Interrupteur de la mémoire (*The Switch of Memory*), 1966

Oil on canvas

79½ × 137 inches

(detail opposite)

[Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Armand J. Castellani, 1986](#)

Matta's *Interrupteur de la mémoire* (*The Switch of Memory*) is an important artifact from one of the artist's most ambitious, visionary works: *L'Honni aveuglant* (*The Dazzling Outcast*), an immersive installation of five canvases originally mounted at the Iolas Gallery in 1966.¹ Like many of his Surrealist contemporaries, Matta strove to represent multiple dimensions in a single, two-dimensional image—three spatial dimensions, a fourth temporal dimension, and an infinite, “inner” dimensions of the mind. He worked for decades to instill his work with this panoply of perception, culminating in his concept of the “open cube.” He explained, “I have tried to act as if I were located at the center of the cube and the canvas; rather than being a window in front of me, it was one of the six sides of the cube.”² Earlier works, such as *A Grave Situation*, 1946, and *The Unthinkable*, 1957, provided hints. But with *L'Honni aveuglant*, he modeled his open cube using multiple canvases, a concept that owes something to the enveloping format of cyclorama painting, and to the *fin de siècle* idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), which was conveyed to Matta through his work in Le Corbusier's studio in the 1930s.

In the expansive, personal cosmology of *L'Honni aveuglant*, *Interrupteur de la mémoire* represents the past, and here the title comes into focus: memory as the switch that activates our concept of past experience.³ In keeping with memory's role in reconstructing the past, however, the painting offers a fragmented and bewildering record. Totemic, biomechanical figures struggle to assume discernible form, vying with the

chaotic architecture of their environment in Matta's signature synthesis of the surreal and the abstract.

At the very center of the painting is the remnant of a machine, a distant echo of the carousel-like apparatus of Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*.⁴ But the axis of this defunct engine has spun the composition apart in an explosion of centrifugal force. At the same time, Matta implies a sense of rhythmic, diagonal movement—from upper left to lower right—as well as a constant sense of materialization in and out of the acidic green miasma of the background. Interspersed throughout are the white-hot wires that punctuate much of Matta's work. In many paintings, these lines serve as diagrammatic connectors between disparate forms. Here, however, the connections are broken, and some “wires” are coiled like filaments within vacuum tube–like forms. Despite their bold delineation, these lines flail through space in a dissonant rendition of the vexing disconnect attendant to remembering the past. Whatever its context, Matta's “switch” is a frenetic but faulty activator of the power of memory.

Eric Jackson-Forsberg

¹ Although the installation was re-created by the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in 2011 without *Interrupteur de la mémoire*, it is documented as one of the panels of the 1966 group through photographs and the exhibition invitation. In the 2011 re-creation, the work *Les Grandes expectatives* (*Great Expectations*), representing the future, stands in for its counterpart. In both installations, the role of the sixth canvas remains unclear; the most likely explanation is that Matta had to compromise his original concept of the open cube by omitting one canvas so that viewers could enter the installation.

² Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, online guide to the 2011 exhibition *El Cubo Abierto* (*The Open Cube*). Available at www.museothyssen.org/microsites/exposiciones/2011/matta/museo2_en.html.

³ The title has been translated occasionally as “Interruption of Memory,” but *interrupteur* as “switch” is more accurate and appropriate, given Matta's many mechanical and electrical allusions.

⁴ Duchamp became a major influence on Matta when the two expatriate artists met in New York during World War II; Matta first saw *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*) at Katherine Dreier's home.



Do We Really Have ESP?

The CAM Collection as Educational Resource

Eric Jackson-Forsberg

In an experience replete with memorable moments, one anecdote stands out from my time coordinating education programming for the Castellani Art Museum. In the summer of 1999, newly hired as the CAM's education coordinator, I accompanied collaborators from Lewiston-Porter High School to the annual Empire State Partnership (ESP) conference at Sarah Lawrence College. The campus was studded with temporary "ESP Conference" way-finding signs, and I suppose it was bound to happen: one day, a curious couple driving past the campus pulled up to our encampment and innocently asked, "Do you guys really have ESP?"

Humorous as the incident was, I have often reflected on it since as an incidental bit of synchronicity concerning the nature and goals of the Empire State Partnership initiative. The fact that the initiative shared an acronym with the phenomenon was coincidental, but they did have something in common: the suggestion that perception—and by extension knowledge—can transcend the senses. Extra-Sensory Perception is often characterized as "mind reading" and, to be clear, neither I nor my colleagues possessed that ability. But the Empire State Partnership initiative, which paired individual arts organizations with individual schools for in-depth curricular intervention, encouraged something similar: learning "in and through the arts," which by definition was not limited to one discipline, curricular definition, or means of perception.

Various factors in the CAM's mission, collection, and role in its community paved the way for a program like ESP. First, the CAM is the only collecting art museum in

Niagara County, making it a key cultural resource for the region. Second, it is the prime cultural resource for Niagara University, which was founded on Vincentian principles of service to the community. Third—and most conducive to the establishment of ESP—the CAM can be characterized as a "teaching collection" from its inception. Inspired by their conviction in the value of education and their desire to give back to the community where their business began, founding patrons Armand and Eleanor Castellani established the new museum and gifted their collection as a vital educational resource. The spirit of an accessible collection they kindled, together with the CAM's regional and institutional context, set the stage for a museum ready to embrace experimental educational outreach.

By the mid 1990s, the CAM already had an impressive track record of educational programs related to its collection and exhibitions, and to its outstanding Folk Arts program. But, like many institutions at that time, its impact on local students was still relegated largely to "enrichment." Students would visit the museum on a field trip once a year, but, like some strange dream, the experience would fade in the return to the routine of the classroom. In 1996, the New York State Board of Regents adopted new learning standards that formalized goals for K-12 school achievement. Initially, many saw these new standards as hostile to art education in schools, as they focused primarily on bolstering math and ELA (English Language Arts) performance. It seemed that even the model of occasional enrichment outside the classroom was threatened. But that same





FIGURE 6
Jedd Garett
(American, born 1955)
Curtain of Protection, 1980
Acrylic on canvas
73 × 57 inches
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Armand J. Castellani, 1989

*Round, curved, shapely body,
posing for the onlookers.
Hiding the inner thoughts and feelings,
to make the outside look better.
Head turned to hide the eyes,
because the eyes would tell the real emotion.
The flames of emotion releasing to tell the person to just let go.
But the wall that has been built will not let it happen.¹*

year, the New York State Council on the Arts allocated funds for a series of ESP pilot partnerships, with the goal of linking the state's vast arts and cultural resources to efforts to implement the new standards. This constituted a major, state-level vote of confidence in the power of the arts to support higher student achievement in various subjects—including, but not limited to, the arts.

Primed to enter an ESP partnership thanks to its mission-driven history of innovative educational programming, the CAM sought a school partner that was equally intrepid. The Lewiston-Porter School district was a natural choice, because the CAM had hosted the district's annual art show for several years, and it had ambitious art and ELA departments led by teachers willing to pursue experimental means to address the new learning standards. The CAM also had a model for the pilot project it would pursue with Lewiston-Porter: Writing on the Wall. This model for engaging students in critical thinking and writing exercises based in visual analysis of artwork emerged from the CAM's exhibition program. Inspired by the experimental interactive efforts of Marcia Tucker at the New Museum in New York, CAM director Sandra H. Olsen and curator Elizabeth Licata began experimenting with ways to encourage audience feedback and participation. For the 1991 exhibition *Tainted Prospects*, the CAM staff invited visitors to write reactions to the exhibition on index

cards and post them in the gallery, forming a low-tech, "crowdsourced" response to the show. This concept became Writing on the Wall, a centerpiece of Licata's Issues in Contemporary Art class for Niagara University. It seemed the perfect project for the new partnership with Lewiston-Porter students, as it inherently tied visual and textual literacy, and offered a look into a contemporary curator's process of research, multidisciplinary interpretation, and facilitation of dialogue between collections, artists, and audiences.

The version of Writing on the Wall employed in the ESP partnership gave each student a structured way to act as a guest curator: selecting a work from the collection, researching the artist and the work, and writing an interpretive wall text for a group-curated exhibition. Subsequent rounds of the project included creative written responses such as poetry along with the expository texts (above). Later, the project challenged art students to create visual art of their own in response to work chosen from the CAM's collection, and to write an accompanying statement, adding layers to the cross-disciplinary dialogue. The goal was not to produce a cohort of professional artists and curators, but rather to facilitate the maturation of students' critical thinking and writing skills—development that would serve them well in their work back in the classroom fulfilling the state standards in ELA, social studies, the arts, and other subjects.

Writing on the Wall's positive impact on students stems from its combination of Visual Thinking Strategies and a constructivist learning approach employed by both teachers and museum personnel. In concert with the multimedia resources provided—including in-class presentations by and interviews with artists represented in the collection and materials from the museum's collection files—students were encouraged to construct their own understandings of the artwork, bringing their unique backgrounds and experiences to bear. Lewiston-Porter English teacher Patrick Heyden attested that artists' in-class visits were particularly effective in demonstrating the conceptual dimensions of artwork for English students and in illustrating the dual importance of process and product in artmaking for art students. Heyden observed that the visiting artists "invariably focused on the theme that [they] do not create work simply to make visual enhancements to the world, just as authors write for a purpose, often social or political." Writing on the Wall invited students to position artwork within their own social and political frames of reference, fostering their sense of agency to analyze and construct meaning from other kinds of primary cultural resources as well.

In a way, Writing on the Wall is a counterpart to the work of artist Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival, a group of at-risk students in New York)—examples of which are in the CAM's collection (see pages 100 and 124). Rollins addressed the formidable challenge of making canonical literature accessible to the students by allowing them to draw and paint directly on pages from the classic books in their curriculum, producing graphically layered work through a tactile process of bringing literature "down to earth." With Writing on the Wall, the image/text interface was different, but equally effective at removing barriers to student engagement with cultural production. Work offered for the project by the ESP team included a wide range of media, styles, and subjects—from the graffiti-inspired expressions of Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Jimmy Olsen*, 1981 (page 28) to the frenetic, pop assemblage of Judy Pfaff's *Wasco*, 1986 (pages 90–91) and the surreal abstraction of Matta's *Interrupteur de la mémoire (The Switch of Memory)*, 1966 (page 69). Students produced remarkable writing and artwork based on these collection highlights, finding ways in to history with works like Arnold Mesches's *Art in Public Places I*, 1983 (page 72), as well as invitations to broader interpretive license with

ambiguously provocative works like Biff Henrich's photograph *Untitled*, 1984. Each student was afforded an opportunity to "adopt" an artwork, explore its backstory through the museum's files, and, ultimately, to develop his or her own critical voice through a writing exercise with an authentic, culturally rich purpose.

Encouraged by the success of Writing on the Wall, the CAM/Lewiston-Porter ESP partnership expanded horizontally to include social studies and music, and vertically to encompass grades 9 through 11. Guided by the overarching themes of "Rights and Responsibilities" and "Power and the Abuse of Power," three more projects emerged: the Mock Trial of Abigail Williams, which linked theater, history, and ELA in a creative exploration of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*; historic re-enactors—Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Harriet Tubman—who added a new dimension to the school's social studies curriculum; and Investigating the Holocaust, which linked art, literature, and history, including a field trip to the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. The museum's collection and special exhibitions were incorporated even in these projects. A series of abstract paintings from the collection made a powerful, atmospheric backdrop for the Mock Trial of Abigail Williams, and Terry Katz Kasimov's collages in *The Federman Series*—inspired by Ray Federman's Holocaust work *The Voice in the Closet*—were a natural for the ESP Investigating the Holocaust unit.

The CAM/Lewiston-Porter ESP partnership saw multiple benefits for both institutions. For the school, the project was linked to improved student performance on standardized tests in ELA; expanded course offerings, staff, and media resources in the art department; and a wealth of inspiring student success stories. For the museum, the project marked greater fulfillment of its community-focused educational mission, as well as expansion of that mission to make it a more multidisciplinary arts organization. While it did not impart the awesome power of clairvoyance, ESP did constitute an extraordinary museum-community partnership marked by elevated student achievement, innovative support for state education standards, increased community engagement with the collection, and enhanced programmatic capacity for both school and museum.

¹ This poem was written by Jennifer Marschke, a Lewiston-Porter student, in response to Jedd Garett's painting *Curtain of Protection*, 1980 (figure 6).