



We live with it (& why did I not
expect there was so much of it to be
lived with) This somehow is my
topic, beauty joined to suffering
the compound of life.

artist's journal, october 28, 1993

Maggie Poor

April 17 – May 30, 1999

curated by Jo-Ann Conklin

David Winton Bell Gallery
Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island

For Alma and Katharine

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Psyche's Lamp

I never met Maggie Poor, but I would like to have known her. This feeling developed as I studied her often exquisite drawings and sculpture, and read the journals that she kept the last few years of her life, filled with descriptions of childhood memories, accounts of events shared with friends, lovers, and family, and discussions of her fears and her struggle to make sense of her situation.¹ It grew as I talked with her extensive and devoted coterie of friends and her remarkable, loving family. Maggie was diagnosed with a rare form of thyroid cancer in 1986 and died on June 14, 1995. To the great fortune of those of us who never met her, and those who knew her well, she left a significant body of work that offers insight into her personality and world.

Maggie was by all accounts an open, spirited, and determined individual. She was an avid reader, a teller of tales who as a child built "fairy houses" furnished with moss, acorn caps, and bits of bark in the woods behind the family home. She was "not so good at tennis, swimming, croquet and riding bikes," but she danced the flamenco. She wore bright red lipstick and "a leather jacket that belied her gentleness."² She inherited a love of words and nature from her father Stacey, an engineer and naturalist; and

her laughter and love of art and reading from her mother Katharine, a portrait and still-life painter. She had a well-developed sense of humor and an appreciation for the foibles of relationships:

We used to have laughing practice. I can picture us sitting on the bottom stairs in the Lynchburg house, Mom, Dad, and me. They were laughing loudly. Of course I was disdainful because it wasn't like the real situation. What a pill of a kid I could be.

4 She collected *New Yorker* cartoons and quotes from friends, philosophers, and advertisements that she pinned up around her apartment. Born in 1952 in New York City, Maggie moved with her parents and younger brother, Bancroft, to Connecticut, Virginia, and Ohio—to the town of Hudson, where she spent most of her formative years—and finally to Massachusetts. She attended Brown University, graduating with a degree in visual art in 1976, and moved to New York; she continued to create art and supported herself through graphic design and proofreading. She lived with her cancer for many years—traveling, writing, painting, sculpting, pursuing the affairs of her heart, and ruminating on connections, human and otherwise.

Sumer's Crossing, 1984
Oil stick on paper, 23" x 22 1/4"
Collection of Merry Conway



Determined to carry on with her interests, Maggie remained in her five-floor walkup in Manhattan until two weeks before she died, when she moved to her parents' home in Princeton, Massachusetts. Her mother relates a story that seems to tell us a good deal about perseverance. During that final period, Maggie slipped in and out of consciousness. As family members bathed her one morning, thinking she was unaware of her surroundings, they were surprised and moved to hear her ask, "Does anybody know a good joke."



Maggie Poor was selective about sharing her work. When people came for a studio visit she would carefully choose two or three works (usually sculptures) to display. At artists' residencies and communities she was sometimes thought of as secretive. It was therefore with surprise that friends discovered that her studio held hundreds of drawings that had never been exhibited or seen during her lifetime. Poor considered sculpture her primary medium, but she created many more works on paper—it was in her drawings that her ideas took shape, through a process of repetition and reworking that at times seemed based on free association. Elements evolved—a boat into a lantern, a wishbone into the outline of a body, a bean into a head into an internal organ—moving freely from drawing into sculpture and back again.

Over the past four years several exhibitions of Poor's work have been organized, each with a slightly different emphasis. This exhibition at Brown concentrates on her drawings, specifically those created after 1989, and includes only a few related sculptural works. A small number of Poor's finished drawings are straightforward studies for sculpture and there are, in addition, many sketchbooks filled with small, loose renderings of objects and installations. But the drawings exhibited here, and indeed most of her drawings, are fully realized, independent works of art.

Several stages are evident in a chronology of the drawings. Poor's student years focused on self-portraits, interiors, and still lifes, executed in a somewhat expressionist but fairly representational manner. They were heavily

6 painted and rich in tone—deep blues, purples, and browns, often offset by white. By 1984, when she was living in New York, the still lifes had taken on a surreal edge. Individual objects or pairs of objects were depicted in recognizable but peculiar settings. In *Sumer's Crossing* (page 4), a white ladder leads from the sea to a solid white wall. What one might reach from such a vantage point is not explained. The artist urged herself to “think abstract . . . change the space in the work—less specific, less literal—but . . . keep the weight of the forms.” She created a series of stark, bold works: single objects leaning against walls were drawn in black ink and surrounded by black.

In 1988, there was a softening in Poor's drawings. She moved away from the use of stark black and white and dense colors, adopting a subtler palette. She drew objects floating in blank or minimally rendered spaces. A year later Poor completed a pair of large drawings, in each of which are five versions of a single object: in one drawing a cone-shaped armature (page 7), in the other an hourglass form. These large drawings (and a third, also from 1989, documenting three extant sculptural works) perform dual duty, functioning equally well as studies of three-dimensional forms (i.e., sculpture) and as abstract depictions (i.e., drawings). They mark a point of transition.

From this time on, Poor explores a space of her own invention, in which objects come and go from view, subtle outlines of forms are laid over, and portions of objects peek out from under layers of pigment. The surfaces are sensuous and complex—handmade papers in tones of peach, beige, gray, and yellow (and occasionally translucent papers) are layered with pencil, pastel, watercolor, litho crayon, and oil paint. Transfers and collaged elements are sometimes incorporated. These late drawings take on an ephemeral, evocative air. Organic elements float in intricate, nonspecific spaces. Everything is allusion, nothing definite. The viewer is drawn in to examine closely and to discover the hidden and half-hidden elements within.

Poor was concerned about creating works that are too pretty. A sketchbook note reads: “fear of these aspects of my own sensibility: when does it

Untitled, 1989

Oil paint, oil stick, charcoal,
and pencil on paper
39 1/2" x 27 1/2"

Collection of Merry Conway



become melodrama, overheated, torrid? what is too pretty, decorative?" She chose to embrace "all my parts," to use the "frailest, feeblest lines. . . . Remember to make those marks when exhausted. Use this moment."³

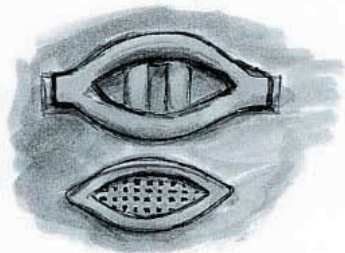
. . . .

By the early nineties, Poor had accumulated a vocabulary of evocative symbolic elements, most of which were derived from nature.

Today my New York apartment is filled with seed pods, bits of fossil, coral fragments brought back from my own or friends' travels. There is a force of purpose in the derivation of these forms . . . that is an inspiration to me. Tenacity, the fierce compulsion to survive, shapes the line of the most delicate sprout.⁴

The symbols evolve, one seeming to lead Poor to the next. For example, a bean sprout becomes sperm or a tadpole, and occasionally looks like a rhizome. A bean pod (shaped like a kidney bean) with a truncated stem takes on aspects of a head with a peculiar long nose, like the trunk of an elephant (Poor referred to this as the "Pinocchio head"). At other times, this latter form looks like a human organ (a heart or uterus, possibly a fetus). As is the case with most of her symbols, they appear in both drawings and sculpture. The bean/head/human organ drawings seem to be the model for the plaster element (human organ) that is included in the sculpture *After Endgame* of 1991.

The derivation of some elements is more complex and less easily deciphered. These forms seem to coalesce from two or three others, as if the



artist was drawn to certain, inevitable motifs. A body-shaped box, or sarcophagus, that appears in numerous drawings created after 1992 seems to be derived from two forms that Poor explored in drawings and sculptures: a wishbone/almond shape (visualize a wishbone in which the bones bend in and meet, or the outline of an almond with a little knob/head at the wide end) and a lotus pod (a large, otherworldly plant, the pod is crescent-moon shaped and open along the inner edge). Poor created numerous line drawings of the wishbone/almond form before translating it into a plaster sculpture entitled *Madragora*. She also made sketches of a shallow vessel that is based on this form (turned on its side and viewed in three-quarter perspective). The lotus pod drawings were created simultaneously or slightly after the works described above. Poor always depicted the lotus pod in three-quarter view; it therefore looks remarkably similar to the shallow vessel. The outline of both of these forms evokes an abstracted figure—a head and shoulders that taper down to the feet. It is a small step from these shapes to a sarcophagus, requiring only that Poor flatten the bottom surface.

Poor also created a “conflict resolution boat,” identified in a sketchbook alongside the note “transpersonal conflict field, spirit battles w/in.” She seemed to have used this motif to explore artistic concerns as well as personal ones, and eventually included it in more than a dozen sculptures, sketches, and finished drawings. Pointed at both ends like a canoe, wide in the middle like a rowboat, the conflict resolution boat first appears around 1983 as a study for a sculptural work. A drawing from 1988 (page 10) includes both a realistic version of the boat in three-quarter view and an abstracted form: a slightly softened outline of the boat viewed as if seen from above. This abstraction became *Sotto Voce*, a series of three small wall sculptures dating from 1989 through 1991. In Poor’s sketchbooks they are sometimes shown vertically, sometimes horizontally, as at left. The vertical orientation suggests

*At dusk we might chase fireflies
in the long field or roll down the hill
in front of the house over and over,
fast, till the world spun when we
sat up in the asters and bellflowers
by the road.*

artist's journal, november 1994



a boat or a vulva, the horizontal orientation a mouth, thus reinforcing the title, which literally means "under (the) voice." A musical term designating a low, soft tone used so as not to be overheard, the title may also refer to the artist's having temporarily lost her voice following her cancer surgeries.

With slight variations of the boat motif, Poor created *Psyche's Lamp* (see sketch below). This is again a shallow vessel, with soft curves. It is pointed at both ends like the boat, but the ends are extended to create small handles and the whole piece fits nicely into two cupped hands. The reference is to the classical Roman story of a love between mortal and immortal, between the beautiful mortal Psyche and Cupid, the god of love. Psyche performed numerous seemingly impossible tasks in order to prove herself worthy of Cupid's love, but was consistently hindered by the jealousy of Venus (Cupid's mother) or her own curiosity. Finally, the pair was united in marriage. The story is an allegory of the search of the soul (Psyche) for union with desire (Cupid), the outcome of which is pleasure (or Voluptas, as their child was named). It is also associated with rebirth, an interpretation based on the fact that the Greek word *psyche* means both "soul" and "butterfly." The butterfly, who passes through a dull existence as a caterpillar and then awakens from metamorphosis to feed on summer





flowers, is associated with the human soul, which is purified by suffering and misfortune and thereby prepared for the enjoyment of true happiness. It seems to me that Psyche (who represents both beauty and suffering) was a resounding symbol for Poor, who wrote: "This somehow is my topic, beauty joined to suffering, the compound of life."

Poor's investigation of beauty encompassed both the physical and spiritual worlds. In 1990 she added a truncated female torso to her vocabulary of symbols. Without arms, legs, or head, it suggests the remnants of an ancient sculpture and corresponds to the artist's questioning of classical and contemporary definitions of physical beauty. In several drawings created in 1992 and 1993, the torso becomes less substantial. In one it is partially obscured behind a cloud of pigment. In others it exists as a barely visible outline. I believe that the torso is symbolic of Poor's philosophical musings on beauty and her personal reactions to her failing body. She never stated this directly in her journals or sketchbooks, but she did mourn the loss of her "lean jawed face . . . slim shoulders, long exquisite neck." Poor included torsos in the last two drawings she made, in June of 1995. In one a plump, bloated body is seen in side view (page 22); in the other we view the body full on, arms flung out to the side, chest forward. This small simple gesture is open, free, somehow joyous, as if the figure is standing enjoying a cool breeze.

*That place held a mixture of magic
and pain leavened always with boredom
when invention ran out.*

artist's journal, november 8, 1994

Words had a place of honor in the Poor household. From childhood Maggie read voraciously. Her library was impressively large and catholic, including books on poetry, history, anthropology, folklore, spirituality, mythology, alchemy, art history and criticism, women's issues, race and prejudice, as well as classic novels, and, later in her life, "survival" stories, particularly Vietnam-related books such as Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth*

of July and Winnie Smith's *American Daughter Goes to War: On the Front Lines with an Army Nurse in Vietnam*. Words and the acquisition of knowledge provided a connection between Maggie and her father. During dinner, they looked up words in the dictionary, "his big unabridged [books] . . . encyclopedia, atlas, etymological history ringing his plate."

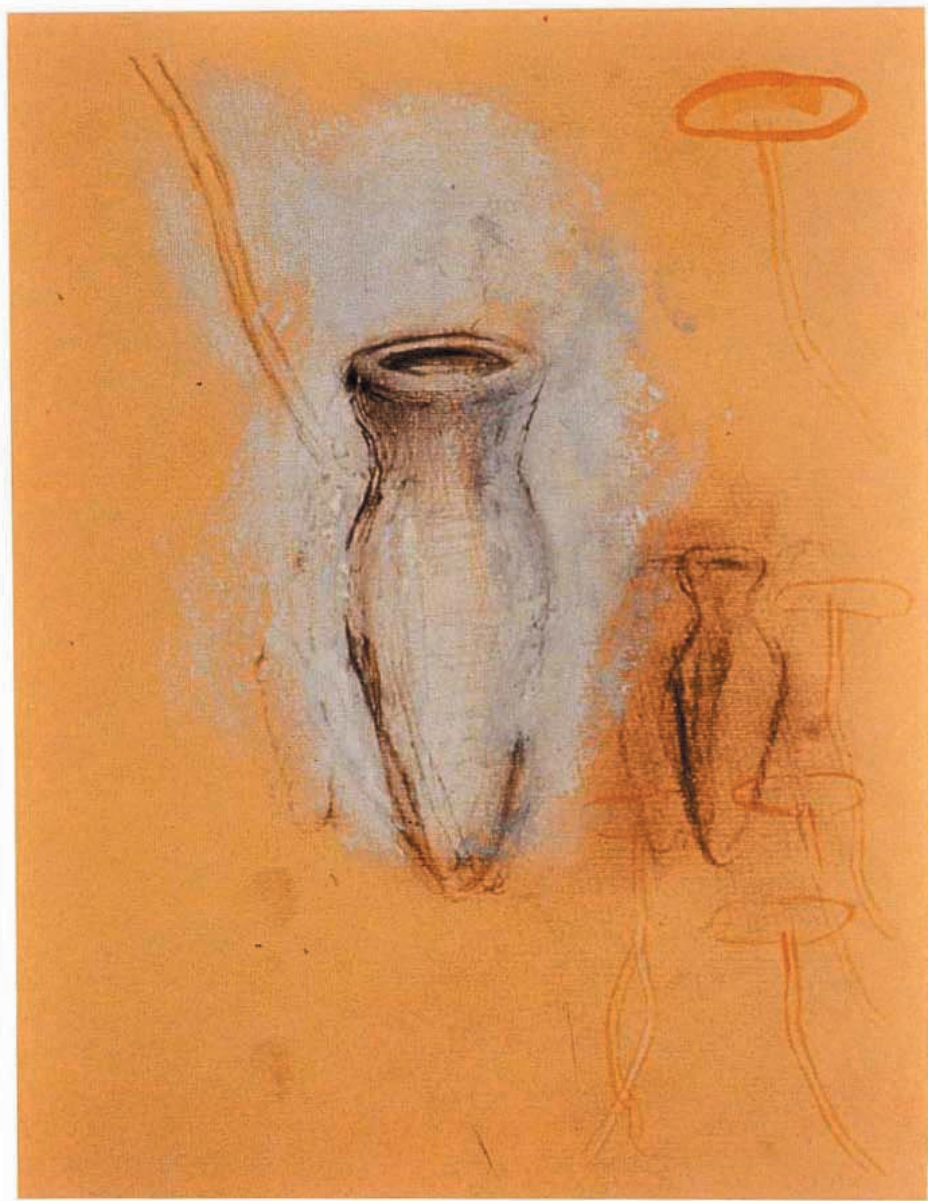
When sculpting became physically challenging, Poor turned her creative energies to writing—she attended a writing workshop during 1994 and continued to draw. She approached writing in much the same way as she had visual art, using similar methods and exploring the same subjects. "Make many, many drawings, then edit, layer onto old ones." Her journals are filled with numerous retellings of stories. As in the drawings, the elements are reworked and recombined. Her subject remains life's beauty and pain, and particularly (as in "Frog Pond," reprinted here) the struggle for connections with friends, family, and nature.

A sketchbook drawing of an unfabricated sculpture (circa 1994) documents Poor's intent to incorporate words into her visual art. The work includes a large, lidded rectangular box containing a spherical form. Plaster tablets lie on the floor around the box, connected to the sphere by cords. Each tablet is inscribed with a word: *malignant, indolent, rare, sensitive, resistant, entrenched*. The string of words is reminiscent of two posters (advertisements for the 21 Club and the Brooklyn Academy of Music New Wave Festival, respectively) that hung on the front door of Poor's apartment. The first contained the words *joy, pain, desire, conflict, lust, laughter*. The second read: *truth, passion, faith, survival*.



Untitled, 1990. Oil stick, charcoal, watercolor, and pencil on paper, 12" x 9 1/2"

Estate of the artist





Poor made plans for and began work on several other box pieces in 1994. Some were small white plaster boxes with inscriptions written on paper—"All of me, why not take all of me," or "You know I'm yours for just the taking, I'll gladly surrender myself to you, Body and soul." These works are romantic in tone and intention. Others are related to medical experiences, both personal and universal. In November of 1993, after returning from a trip to Italy where she visited medical museums, Poor made reference to new works:

I feel there's something coalescing, several pieces under way that speak to each other. They are variations of boxes with leashed vessels, all in early stages . . . I think I have the leash/umbilicus material—a paper cord. . . . The boxes are containing and not containing. . . . this is all very obscure . . . I don't have a sense of their meaning at all. I guess in writing or talking about them I will talk about the history of medicine.

The "medical" boxes are grittier than the "romantic" pieces. Instead of plaster, they are constructed of wood and filled with gravel onto which the vessels are set. According to family and friends, Poor associated these works with lab tests, stainless steel trays, and sterilized equipment; the "leashed vessels" can easily be interpreted as internal organs and arteries. I am, however, far more intrigued by Poor's interest in connections—in arteries and connective tissue, and other ties that bind us physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Poor literally draws these connections in works from 1990 and 1991 that depict a torso and a vessel, or two vessels, joined by what looks in some instances like stiff tubing, in other instances like pliant cord. In still other drawings, appendages attached to isolated objects reach out as if in search of entities with which to relate.

The most explicit manifestation of this theme is seen in a 1992 drawing in which eleven body-shaped boxes are connected to a large yellow mass that floats in the center of the image. Within the mass is the outline of a female torso. That the work symbolizes the cycle of life—the lives born through women and then returned to a collective soul—seems obvious. The indi-

vidual work may suffer for this, seeming too neat and uncharacteristically precise. But the message is a universal one with which all of us deal, sooner or later and with greater and lesser success.

In writing about Maggie Poor, I have tried to provide a glimpse into her personality and those facts of her life that informed her work. Her curiosity led her down many paths, and her medical condition was simply one more. As with everything else it became an integral part of her art, as well as her life. In a quick journal entry she notes "thinking of speaking about art as a form of connecting." In her desire to connect she has succeeded masterfully, by leaving behind a body of visual and literary work that speaks to friends, relatives, and those of us who never had the pleasure of meeting her.

Jo-Ann Conklin

Tenacity, the fierce compulsion to survive, shapes the line of the most delicate sprout.

from an essay written for a solo exhibition at the Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, Massachusetts, 1993

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken from these journals.
- 2 Stephen Westfall, *Maggie Poor*, London: Interim Art, 1996, 5.
- 3 Artist's sketchbook, 7/92 and 11/21/92.
- 4 From an essay written for a solo exhibition at the Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, Massachusetts, 1993.



Frog Pond

By Maggie Poor

20 The frog pond lies in a clearing near what was my grandmother's house. You can reach it by crossing the hayfield behind Aunt Nan's. There's a dark short path with trees arching overhead and acorns that hurt your bare feet. The pond's about 30 by 40 feet, oval, rimmed with a neat stone wall like everything in that landscape. Its bottom is sandy with patches of gunky weeds that used to make us screech when we stepped on them. The bright clearing's surrounded by a part of the woods we kids never got to know, dense and viney and full of poison ivy. I liked the scribbly lines of the bittersweet that's thick there, first green and then orange in fall. I used to muse over its name, but never tried the berries.

All of us cousins learned to swim there, the smallest kids paddling naked in the shallow end near the aunts on duty. When my mother was a child here, her Uncle Harry gave a medal made from a quarter and a ribbon when you'd learned to swim across the deep end.

The pond's full of frogs, frogs slipping green into the water or glinting their gold eyes from the dark ledges of the rocks. Always there's a dog, trotting intently around the pond's rim, trembling and snorting with excitement, leaning over the wall to peer into the crevices for frogs, or plunging and bounding in the water, a useless hunter, under the baleful glare of the frogs. Sometimes one of us kids did catch a frog, held its slippery cool body, studied the delicate webs of its feet, its translucent skin, stared into its cold trapped eyes for a minute, then let it go.

For the first time in many years I'd come with my mother to the Frog Pond. In sneakers and jeans we lay side by side staring deep into the water. The late October sun shone down on our backs. Dream a dream of sun and water, a protected clearing, for just a little while.

First I saw the water striders on the surface. Bracing against the water tension, they moved on splayed legs in rhythm, familiar; but now I was finding new kinds of bugs throughout the water. My sense of scale shifted, became more and more attuned to fineness; spellbound, I could see hocks and joints and hairs on the insects. One was grenade-shaped and sank slowly through lazy-looking diagonal currents, half-suspended. The water had a texture, a grain to it, a sense of planes, of layers of density.

Just as I'd hoped, I could see my mother relax. The weeks just past of crisis and hospitals fell away; there was delight on her face as she looked into the pond.

Shafts of light penetrated the dimness of the water. It looked thick with greeny-brown particles. Drift, sift with me through fluid planes, another kind of space. Light sinks through the murk; we're entranced, aswim in a shaft of autumn light. Curled leaves drop onto the water surface, drift and spin. Winter's coming soon. †

What I love about the winter colors is their doubleness. The briar that snagged me on the path was red-grey, almost iridescent. The tawny oak leaves curled like baskets to show pinky-grey backs. It can make the bony winter landscape glow.

Bug on its back, whirling comically long forelimbs through the water. Caddis flies, spiderlike with messy grass nests they've built to fit themselves, wavering at the edges of floating leaves or against the submerged rocks. Tiny fast-scudding blue-white bugs moving in fits and starts. A white worm fine as a hair, looping and unlooping in a convulsive calligraphy;



the second it straightens out it starts to sink. A stuttering gait on a bug as big as a pinhead.
A stop-and-go tumbling rush for an orange-and-black one.

A tadpole with short arms and little legs swims idly, languidly through the deeper water.
Dark moss lines the rocks and sways in fronds. The bottom's piled with oak leaves now.
Here and there the yellow hull of a bittersweet berry stands out on a black rock ledge.

Bad news had come to us, an operation, a time in hospital. Watching it heal day by day,
the gallant body, my skin mending. Weak, shocked; coming to the country to get better.
At dusk we arrived. The wind moved in the trees, leaves rustled in the quiet—it shook
me so, I sagged against the car.

So tender, like the milky skin throbbing in the frog's pulsing throat, beneath the beautiful
staring gold eyes. Like the frog poised in air, transfixed in the hand of the scrutinizing child.
I look over. My mother's rapt, as I'd hoped, her vigil briefly forgotten. Soon we'll surface
together, walk slowly back to the house. Slowly we're finding a shape to follow, shaping our
way through murky new waters.

Exhibitions

- 1999 David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence
Fletcher/Priest Gallery, Worcester, MA
- 1997 Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA, *In Search of Form: Maggie Poor, Drawings, Sculptures and Installations*
Sculpture Center, New York
- 1996 Interim Art, London
- 1995 Friendspace, New York, *Artists and Friends*
- 1993 The Drawing Center, New York, *The Return of the Cadavre Exquis*
Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA, *The Listening Object*
- 1991 OIA, New York, *CoVariants: Abstract Painting and Sculpture*
- 1988 Rosa Esman Gallery, New York, *Small(scale)*
- 1987 Sculpture Center, New York, *Small Works*
A.I.R. Gallery, New York
22 Wooster Gallery, New York, *Freedom*
- 1984 Kenkeleba House, New York, *Affirmations of Life*
Interim Art, London
- 1978 David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, *After Brown: The Seventies*
- 1976 HERA Gallery, Wakefield, RI, *Etchings by Ten Women*
- Mary Sherman. "Diverse exhibit resonate with love of humanity." *Boston Sunday Herald*, November 16, 51.
- Leon Nigrosh. "Self portraits: Maggie Poor's and Josh Dunbar's lives revealed in their work." *The Worcester Phoenix*, October 10, 18.
- Wesley Gibson. "Maggie Poor, Sculpture Center." *Art Paper*, September, 55.
- 1996 Stephen Westfall. *Maggie Poor*. London: Interim Art.
- Sarah Kent. "Maggie Poor/Interim Art." *Time Out*, June 19–26.
- 1994 "Maggie Poor, '70" *Laurel School Highlights*, Autumn, 14–15.
- 1993 *Art New England*, February/March, 20.
Christine Temin, "Critic's Tip." *Boston Globe*, January 28.
- 1992 Nancy Princenthal. "Artist's Book Beat." *Print Collector's Newsletter*, Nov.–Dec.

Selected Bibliography

- 1999 Frank Magiera. "A mother's tribute to her artist daughter." *Datebook*, supplement to the *Sunday Telegram*, Worcester, MA, March 7–13.
- 1997 Patty Youngblood. "'In Search of Form' Maggie Poor (and friends) at Fitchburg Art Museum." *The Landmark*, Holden, MA, September 25, 28.

COVER: *Untitled*, 1992. Pencil, oil paint, and mixed media on paper, 12 1/2" x 9 1/8". Collection of Marcel Fiévé, New York.

INSIDE BACK COVER: Quotation taken from advertising, distributed by the Manhattan 21 Theatre Club, that hung in Poor's apartment.

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