

Book Review

'Women, Trauma and Visual Expression'

Amy Stacey Curtis,

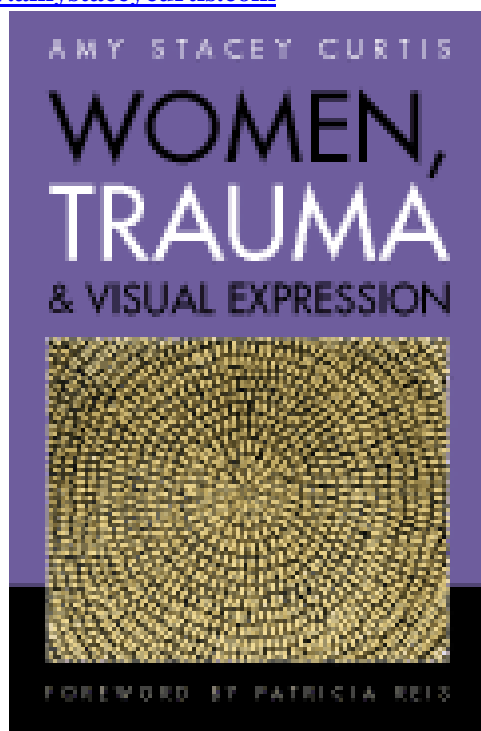
Foreword by Patricia Reis

256 pages; Women's Studies/ Psychology/ Art;

ISBN: 0-9763567-0-8; LCCN: 2004099442

Contact: ascdzine@maine.rr.com;

www.amystaceycurtis.com



Reviewed by Sue Mullane

I recall viewing an art display several years ago which depicted work from people healing from traumatic experiences and being moved by the graphic and at times explicit imagery. What was more pronounced by the work, however, was the collective expression of the resilient nature of the human spirit and its capacity to overcome adversity.

Amy Stacey Curtis reflects on similar themes. 'Women, Trauma and Visual Expression' compares the lives and work of nine women artists: Artemisia Gentileschi, Kaethe Kollwitz, Frida Kahlo, Eva Hesse, and five contemporaries from Chicago, Washington State, San Francisco, New Jersey and herself from Maine. Following detailed examination of each of the lives and art work of these women Curtis offers discourse on some of the major themes of the experience of trauma, as evident in her subjects: trauma isolates, and the positive experience of group can work towards re-establishing a sense of belonging; trauma manifests a feeling of chaos which demands re-creating some sense of control and order; trauma brings about a loss of predictability and sense of self; and the survival of

trauma can contribute to extraordinary persistence, resourcefulness, and organisation of character.

Issues raised by Curtis are at times deeply personal as well as reflective of the broader collective of women who as artists share common work processes, imagery and connection to audience in their progression toward restoration of whole-life. She explores concepts to do with personal, collective and cultural trauma and suggests that society has an expectation of a quick recovery from personal trauma with subsequent 'deep contempt' demonstrated toward those who refer to themselves as "victims" or "survivors". Also, that the art world in general is intolerant of art conveying personal trauma (perceived to be self-serving and emotional) when compared to art conveying collective trauma, which Curtis describes is often viewed as 'timely' and 'courageous'. This distinction is made more so when the artist is a woman, who for Curtis is not taken as seriously as men artists.

Analysis of trauma themes is presented with reference to noted authors in the field of trauma (Judith Herman; Bessel van der Kolk; Ellen Bass and Laura Davis et al) and can inform all women who have experienced trauma, including those who do not see themselves as artists. Many of the issues raised are worthy of reflection within the context of contemporary Australian life-art, which may well serve to meet the expectation of Curtis that through her book awareness may be raised and understanding strengthened about the stigma of trauma.

Sue Mullane, DMT, M. Ed., worked in the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA), Victoria, incorporating creative arts and dance therapy for women survivors and has also conducted research into the lived experience of women in a group dance therapy program. (for details see Quarterly Vol.3, no.3. p. 25.)