

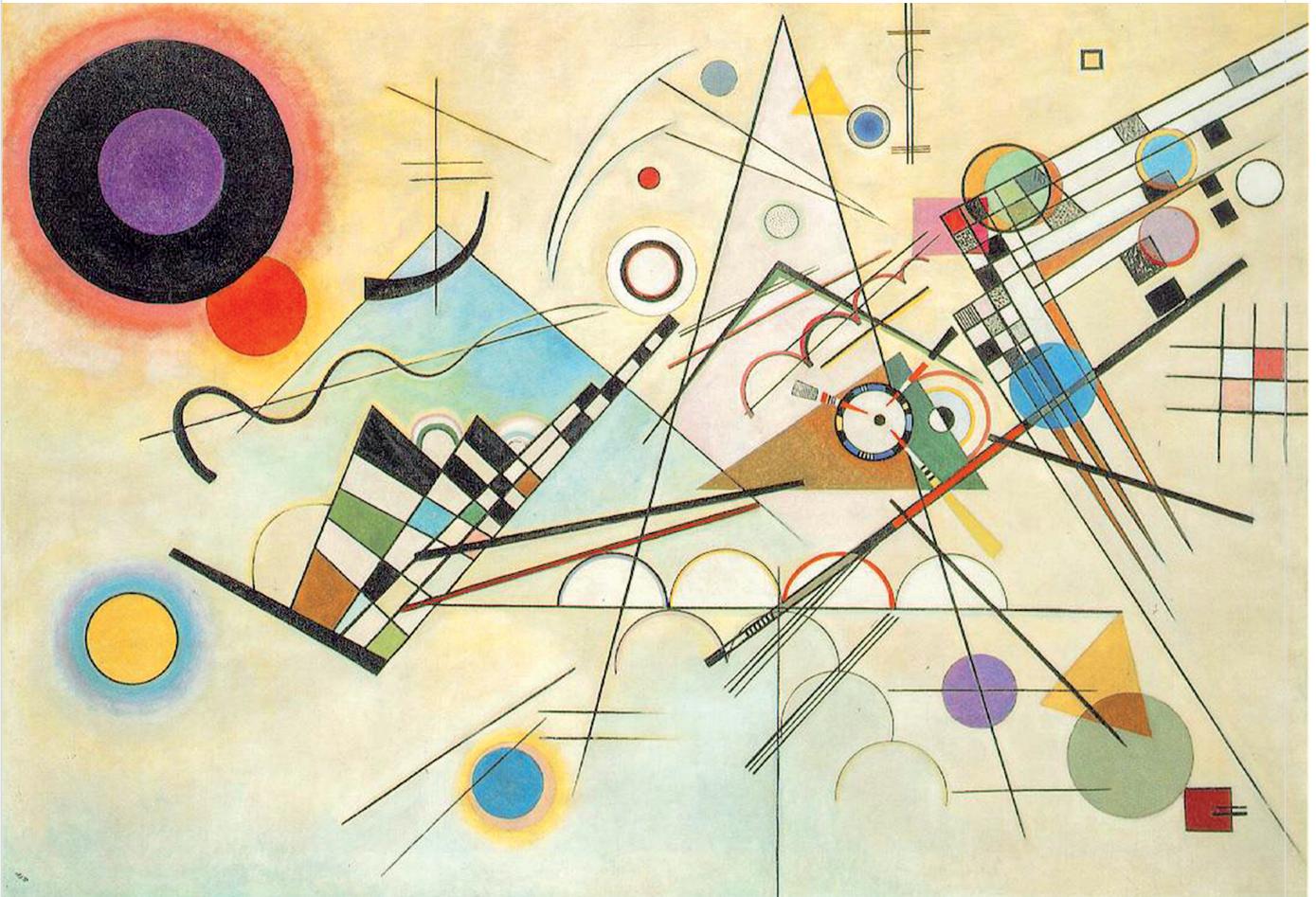
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From Georgia Peach to Art Historian

Reflections on a Jewish Southern Childhood

by **Gail Levin**



I had started teaching while finishing my dissertation on Kandinsky, one of my mother's favorite modernist painters, to whose work she introduced me aesthetically without ever using his name. Composition VIII, Wassily Kandinsky, 1923, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Attraction to the visual arts led me to defy my parents. My mother taught me to paint, but could not imagine me succeeding in a field where she had not. My father envisioned no future for a daughter apart from mother and wife, in keeping with both the prejudices of southern society in his generation and the middle-class aspirations of poor immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe. Neither southern nor Jewish culture celebrated women artists during the 1950s and early 1960s, when I was growing up. Nor did any female artists figure in the major college textbooks used across America in 1965 when I entered college.

Whatever talent for the visual arts was born in me, it was overshadowed by my determination to earn a living, although I stayed close to my inclinations by working as an art historian, a curator, a biographer, and a professor. Yet, again and again, my passion for making art would make itself felt. I rarely made public my results, however, and even when I pursued a conceptual art project—finding and photographing the sites that the American realist Edward Hopper painted, resulting in a book and related exhibitions—my work was often categorized as scholarship, not art. From the start of this conceptual art project, I credited as a predecessor the artist Erle Loran (1905–1999), who had sought out and photographed places painted by Paul Cézanne. In turn, my project on Hopper has inspired numerous imitators.¹

In 2014, I took stock of my ambivalent interaction with the art world in a series of ironic and satirical collages, *On Not Becoming an Artist*, which enjoyed its inaugural show at the National Association of Women Artists in New York. Since then, elsewhere I have shown these and other collages with satirical thrust, reinforcing the identity as a visual artist that began not in formal studies but at home when my mother first taught me to paint.

My father's goal as a first-generation American was to assimilate into American culture. He was born in Atlanta in 1912 as one of five children, the second son of immigrant parents who had fled oppression in Poland and Latvia. His Eastern European Jewish culture shared with the culture of the Deep South a restrictive view of women's roles. In Jewish custom, women could work in family businesses, which were usually run by the men. Women could also work as teachers before marrying and having children. The lingering emphasis on Jewish women's traditional roles in the home and family during the 1950s and 1960s made investment in their higher education seem frivolous. My father, though not my mother, wanted me to graduate from college, but he later told me that he thought that a woman earning a PhD would simply be a waste of time and resources. By contrast, education seemed "more necessary for the Jewish male," who was expected to earn the family's living.²

Despite having only a high school education, my father was an avid reader. He owned few books, so we made frequent trips to the library during my childhood.

After his death in 1984, my mother offered me his books, mostly sets of encyclopedias and bound years of *Reader's Digest*. There also were two works he could not have found in the public library: Alfred C. Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County*.³ The Wilson was tattered, its faded green binding decorated long ago by my own pencil scribbles. Inside the back cover, I found my earliest surviving self-portrait.

Not long ago, I looked back at that self-portrait, a crayon drawing that I made as a small child: a girl with green eyes, probably the closest I could come to my hazel, on either side of a yellow ball of a nose. The girl's head is topped by straight brown hair, the kind my mother often tried to curl with permanent waves until she had to stop because my scalp turned blue. The girl sports a large red grin, a green top, and a pink skirt. Pink crayon defines her body, head, and limbs. She has neither hands nor feet, yet sticks her arms out straight. From the left hangs a small red purse with a black handle. For me, the survival of this piece is poignant, since almost all of my early work was discarded by my mother. This drawing returns as a talisman, a testament to the creative instincts I nursed from a young age.

After discovering my portrait, I looked more closely at the title and date: *Memoirs of Hecate County*, 1946, just two years before my birth. It was not a work of literary criticism, I learned to my surprise, but rather Wilson's second work of fiction—five short stories and a novella: well-reviewed upon publication but soon notorious. One story “The Princess with the Golden Hair” provoked scandal with explicit scenes of sex.⁴ The narrator's past sexual relationships and concurrent love affairs with two women, as well as his friendships in Manhattan and in suburban Hecate County, suggest that American society is dysfunctional.

In July 1946, four months after publication, the Society for the Suppression of Vice sued the publisher, Doubleday, under the New York State Penal Code, accusing it of disseminating obscenity. That November, the court in New York ruled against Doubleday, a decision upheld in two appeals. Nearly 60,000 people bought *Memoirs of Hecate County* before the case arrived at the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948, where the decision was upheld after Justice Felix Frankfurter disqualified himself because he had talked to the author about the book. The remaining judges split 4-4, thus leaving in effect the ban by the New York Court of Appeals, and suppressing the book since its publisher was based in New York. In addition to being my birth year, 1948 marked the first publication of Kinsey's book.

It was strange to find my childhood drawing tucked into lurid tales on these shelves—the 1947 finding that the book was obscene and unprotected by the First Amendment and the ensuing publicity over the subsequent appeals must have drawn my father. I was struck by the irony that he—a man who preached puritanical values—took the trouble to acquire and read a book famous for its obscenity. Yet the eroticism, when I read “The Princess with the Golden Hair,” did not intrigue me as much as the many references to art: Goya, Cézanne, Matisse,



I wonder if my mother was attracted to the fact that Morisot was a woman. Later, despite having endured gender discrimination in her own family, which favored its two sons over its two daughters, she denounced feminists and denied any identification with women's causes. In the Dining Room, Berthe Morisot, ca. 1875, courtesy of the Yorck Project and Wikimedia Commons.

and the Americans James McNeill Whistler and William Merritt Chase, as well as art critics from Clive Bell to James Huneker. In an even more remarkable parallel to my story, Wilson wrote about a curator working at a museum in New York, even mentioning the Whitney Museum, where thirty years later I would be a curator for nearly a decade. For my father, though, reading Wilson's version of the art world must have colored his reaction when I told him, while still in college, that I wanted to become an artist. My father liked literature and history, but had no familiarity with the world of visual art. He came to associate artists with outsiders, bohemians, and riffraff. He would never have wanted his child to make a career in such a questionable context. He tolerated my mother's painting because it seemed like a hobby that she pursued in the home, which she helped to decorate with her canvases.

My mother shared my father's reservations about the art world of New York. Before I was old enough to go to school, I watched her work in a makeshift studio in the attic of our first house in northeast Atlanta. She painted on canvas at an easel and held a wooden palette. What I saw take shape was a picture of a woman standing in a domestic space between a cupboard on one side and a table and chair on the other. Light entered from a window behind the table. My mother later had

this canvas framed and she hung it in our home. We moved from the house with the attic when I was about seven years old. In my mind, the imaginary setting in the painting merged with the space of our attic, which became a fading memory.

Less than a year after the initial move, we left our temporary quarters in a cramped apartment and settled on Margaret Mitchell Drive in a newly constructed house in northwest Atlanta, which became the home where I would live until I left for college. In the middle of third grade, I entered Margaret Mitchell Elementary School, in a new building just across the street from our home, where more and more red brick buildings were displacing the pine woods and blackberry patches that thrived on the red clay.

Soon my mother enrolled me in children's classes on Saturday mornings in the basement of the High Museum of Art, then located in the High family's former mansion on Peachtree Street. I attended school with my next-door neighbor Nancy. I recall that I had a sense of competence in the painting exercises that we did in black India ink and wash. Though I liked these classes, I got to go for only a year or so, perhaps because Nancy did not want to continue and my mother alone would have had to drive me there and back. Nonetheless, this brief experience of excelling in art left a lasting impression.

So did two portraits on permanent display in the auditorium at Margaret Mitchell School. They did not feature any of the usual local heroes. Instead, both represented women linked to *Gone with the Wind*: one the book's author, Atlanta-born Mitchell, the other Vivien Leigh in the role of Scarlett O'Hara, dressed in a blue velvet gown from the 1939 film. The two women became role models for me, a young girl without anyone beyond my teachers to suggest what women could aspire to achieve.⁵ Had I known then that the artist who painted Scarlett's portrait—Helen Carlton—was a woman, she might have been a role model too. At the time, the paintings suggested Mitchell's profession as an author and her character Scarlett's strong will.

A few years ago, I was happy to read that feminist film critic Molly Haskell, another woman of southern origins, also saw this side of Scarlett:

The feminist angle, and the movie's profoundly mixed message, came home to me in 1972, when I took part in a panel—one of the first—on the roles of women in film. Gloria Steinem, editor of the newly launched *Ms.* magazine, brought up *Gone with the Wind*, deploring the spectacle of Scarlett being squeezed into her corset to a seventeen-inch waist, that perfect illustration of female bondage, Southern style. I sprang to defend her as a fierce, courageous heroine, going her own way, a survivor, and so on.⁶

None of these images—neither my mother's paintings nor any scenes from *Gone with the Wind*—seemed significant at the time, but they linger in my visual memory. Later, when I began to study art history, I would realize that the pictures

my mother called *her* paintings were mainly copies of works by famous artists. In fact, she had taken out of a book the woman standing in the attic that I imagined I had seen her paint. She worked from a reproduction so small that what should have been a little dog on the lower right corner became merely a white spot. The image was *In the Dining Room*, by French Impressionist Berthe Morisot.

Now I have become curious about what she saw in Morisot's image, which she could have known only in reproduction. By 1953, when I was five years old, the National Gallery of Art published a brochure, *French Paintings from the Chester Dale Collection*, which reproduced this painting. My mother may have obtained the brochure from the public library, for there were no art books or art magazines in our home. I wonder if my mother was attracted to the fact that Morisot was a woman. Later, despite having endured gender discrimination in her own family, which favored its two sons over its two daughters, she denounced feminists and denied any identification with women's causes. My mother's relationships to her gender and her art were conflicted but understandable, given the restrictive attitudes of her Jewish parents and husband, and her southern community's narrow set of expectations for women. She would not have shared my intuition of the portraits of Vivien Leigh and Margaret Mitchell as alternative models of a more determined and creative southern womanhood.

Growing up in a house full of pictures by unidentified famous artists meant that I absorbed their visual worlds without any awareness of context. Unconsciously, I developed a rich repertoire of images important in the history of modern art. In contrast, some of my colleagues in the museum world experienced art not merely as a visual universe, but also as a mark of social privilege and prestige, since they had parents or other relatives who were major art collectors. In both their case and mine, early and easy access to art could well foster future study and employment—but when the works were just copies, they did not convey lessons of class, social guile, and tact.

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My mother's focus on figuration did not last. A few years later, she turned to abstract art, carefully painting organic and geometric shapes that recalled no particular place. These turned out to have been copies of works by artists such as Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky and Spanish artist Joan Miró. Both artists eventually ended up living in Paris, painting modernist pictures that appealed to my mother. I wonder if my mother, like some of my undergraduate students today, thought that Joan Miró was a woman.

She clearly was drawn to tightly configured, abstract shapes, which were neatly rendered and easier to copy. She did not copy any of Kandinsky's earlier improvisations, with their loose brushwork and flowing shapes, looking instead to his later works. Sometimes she changed the color schemes, probably because she had



My extensive work on Edward Hopper at the Whitney, making sense of his widow's bequest of his artistic estate, made me want to understand the role of parental approval and encouragement. Photo of Gail Levin with Edward Hopper's self-portrait in 1989 at Musée Cantini, Marseilles, France.

to work from black and white reproductions. Yet she reproduced the lines and forms so that they were identical to the originals and easily recognizable. Once I started to take courses in art history and modern art, her sources became obvious. To my knowledge, nobody else realized or cared that her paintings were copies.

I wonder today how my mother came to favor vanguard abstract art while living in Georgia in the early 1950s. This was not long after the confused Michigan Congressman George Dondero argued in 1949 that abstract modern art had been used against the Czarist government when “Trotsky’s friend, Kandinsky” aimed to destroy “by aping the criminal and insane” and by “the creation of brainstorm.”⁷ Dondero echoed the fears and claims against abstract art made in 1930s Germany by the Nazis, who labeled such artworks “degenerate” and then outlawed

them. Abstraction challenged traditional ways of seeing the world. Its unfamiliar conventions and ambiguity made it seem very disturbing and uncontrollable to some, whether on the political left or the right. According to Dondero, whose inane accusations made it into the *Congressional Record* and the popular press, Kandinsky represented “depravity, decadence, and destruction” and was infiltrating America’s cultural centers. In fact, Kandinsky reached right into Georgia, all the way to my mother on Margaret Mitchell Drive.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, some Americans believed that modern art was part of a Communist conspiracy. “Is Modern Art Communistic?” asked Alfred H. Barr in a 1952 article that defended freedom of expression at the time of the Red Scare.⁸ I would have expected my parents to be among those concerned about the threat. I recall that they did not defend or believe in the innocence of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who were convicted and executed in 1953 for conspiracy to commit espionage for the Soviets during wartime. My parents’ attitude differed from the Jewish parents of some of my contemporaries growing up in the North, who insisted that the Rosenbergs were innocent. Instead, from my parents, I heard, “They shamed our people.” When I reflect on this history, I am surprised at my mother’s enthusiasm for the falsely accused Kandinsky and for Miró, whose mural *The Reaper* made a strong anti-fascist statement at the Spanish Republican Pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition. Southern Jews tended to be less radical in their politics than Jews in cities like New York or Chicago. I attribute this in part to the chilling impact of the Ku Klux Klan and the 1915 lynching in Marietta, Georgia, of a Jewish man, Leo Frank, who had been questionably convicted of murder.⁹

My mother’s unlikely embrace of modern art fascinated me. At my request, after I graduated from college, she gave me her copy after Morisot. A few years later, we met in Washington, DC, to attend the wedding of one of her cousins from Mississippi. When she made her usual Saturday morning trip to the beauty parlor, I entertained my father by taking him to the National Gallery, which he had never seen. When we entered the room with Morisot’s *In the Dining Room*, I approached the picture without comment. Its scale was larger than my mother’s copy, which my father had not seen for several years, now that it was hanging in my New York apartment. He stood motionless before the painting, then uttered in amazement, “What is your mother’s painting doing here?” In all likelihood, finding her composition in the National Gallery gave my mother more luster in my father’s eyes.

That my mother had dropped out of high school I only learned from her younger brother after her death. My parents never revealed that she had been a dropout—a rebellious teenager—who worked as a secretary and attended classes at the Atlanta School of Art on Saturdays. She did tell me that she had won prizes for her life drawings in art school, but that her Russian immigrant father became angry that she was drawing male nudes on Shabbat. He called it a *shondab*, Yiddish for something shameful, and made her quit.

Perhaps my mother taught me to paint at such a young age so that she could have the time and peace of mind to do her own painting. I was about eight years old and my younger brother just five when she began in earnest. We each had real wooden easels and used bolo bouncers—those wooden paddles that have a ball attached with a long rubber band—as palettes that we covered with daubs of paint. We painted still-life compositions, observing and trying to capture light and shadow. We also did experiments with abstract art, closing our eyes and drawing in charcoal on the canvas. Then we would open our eyes and fill in the shapes with colors. In retrospect, it resembled an experiment in surrealist automatic painting, influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud. Trying to go beyond the control of the conscious mind or rationality, “automatism” plays a role in surrealist techniques such as spontaneous or automatic writing, drawing, and painting. As a result of my mother’s introduction of concepts she probably learned in art school, I have enjoyed both abstraction and representation ever since.

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As a student at Atlanta’s Northside High School, I was told that art was not a course that students going on to college should elect. Thus forbidden from pursuing art classes, I found other ways to practice making art, such as decorating the school’s bulletin boards and painting murals at summer camp in North Carolina. My mother’s painting lessons had left such an impression on me that, after not taking art classes in high school, I elected to study both studio art and art history in college—to the horror of my parents, who insisted that I study something that would earn me a living after college. They were determined that I not become a burden on them. Since I was female, they pushed the idea of my becoming an elementary school teacher, which my aunt had been before she married.

By the time I returned from spending the last semester of my junior year abroad in Paris at the Sorbonne, I was determined to follow a career in the visual arts. When I told my parents that I planned to become a painter, they threatened to disown me and claimed they would no longer pay for my college tuition. Either it was too late for them to cancel the payments or they were merely bluffing. They had the dean of Simmons College in Boston summon me to her office to defend my choice of major. She ordered me to begin student teaching for a week, which preceded the start of my own college classes, agreeing that if I did not like it I could drop out and change my major. Student teaching at an elementary school that first week required me to catalog the classroom library and to monitor that the students marched in straight lines as they changed classrooms. I had no intention of staying that course.

Yet, that was the moment when both teachers of art and magazine critics were pronouncing painting dead. Not for the first time: photography’s invention by Louis Daguerre moved the painter Paul Delaroche to pronounce painting dead as



“My parents and I could never have imagined my being drawn to write biographies of artists—Edward Hopper, Judy Chicago, and Lee Krasner—as I sought to understand how they found the courage to pursue artistic careers. Had their parents, as mine did, forbidden them to become artists? Portrait of American artist Lee Krasner (1908–1984) as she poses in front of one of her paintings, New York, New York, 1950s. Photo by Fred W. McDarrab. Courtesy of Getty Images.”

early as 1839. With the rise of conceptual art, video art, and installation art in the 1960s, painting’s demise again seemed imminent, as art critic Douglas Crimp reflected: “Painting’s terminal condition finally seemed impossible to ignore. The symptoms were everywhere.”¹⁰ In the spring term of my freshman year, the cover of *Time* magazine had demanded, “Is God Dead?”¹¹ What did I know? I feared to pursue painting if it, too, was about to go.

When I decided to study art history in graduate school, my parents announced that I would become a “Bohemian,” that I would end up on the sidewalk, and that they would not help me. My plans to pursue a degree in art history spurred my great-uncle Louis to warn my grandparents, “Don’t let her get a PhD. She’ll be too smart for any man. No one will marry her.” It seems cruel and strange that my mother taught me to paint and sent me to art classes as a child only to reject my wish to pursue a career in art. Once I had defied my parents’ strictures by be-



coming an art historian, I felt compelled to show them that they were wrong. To do that, I could not fail.

Once I was on that trajectory, I determined to complete a PhD. I could not give up. Having earned my doctorate, I became a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where I spent eight years before deciding to return to college teaching. I had started teaching while finishing my dissertation on Kandinsky, one of my mother's favorite modernist painters, to whose work she introduced me aesthetically without ever using his name. My extensive work on Edward Hopper at the Whitney, making sense of his widow's bequest of his artistic estate, made me want to understand the role of parental approval and encouragement. One of my discoveries was that Hopper's mother saved much of the art he made as a child. This revelation motivated me to write his biography, which in turn led to others.

My interest in artists' lives, especially in their formative years, reflects my own experience growing up as an aspiring artist in a Jewish family in the American Deep South. My own biography is a story of contradictions: a father who held me to standards of modesty that his own books disregarded, a mother who taught me to paint and then forbade me to become an artist, an elementary school that celebrated southern women who wrote and painted, and a high school that nonetheless discouraged college-bound students from taking courses in art.

My experiences surely do not reflect the Atlanta of today, which is much more diverse and cosmopolitan than it was during the 1950s and early 1960s. But this is what it was like then to grow up in a family of first-generation American Jews in the Deep South. My parents' outlook was fearful and provincial, but it was not atypical for their time and place. Their own experiences had included the years of the Great Depression, economic struggle, and discrimination from both non-Jews and the earlier migration of established, better-educated German Jews. That my parents wanted something more secure for their children cannot be faulted, even as their horizons were very limited.

My mother used to remark that she longed to see the world. She did eventually manage to travel to Europe, and even to Japan and Australia, but her own dreams as a young woman had been squelched by her family. Despite the way she tried to impede my education and career choice, she left a desire to travel and a love of all things visual, from houseplants and the garden to antiques, design, and works of art.

From my father, I got an ethical core as well as the will to persist, to make good on my efforts, to keep my word. Whether it was the thick volumes I saw him read from cover to cover or just his admonishment, "Can't never could," he left me with the desire to succeed. How much of this was a product of our Jewish culture I cannot say, but he demonstrated the ability to adapt to the South, to deal with people of backgrounds very different from his own.

At some point in my arts career, I began to understand that most of my peers

had not faced the limited horizons that I had. Growing up Jewish in Georgia, I never imagined that I would go on to earn the first doctorate in art history awarded by the new program at Rutgers, land a position as a curator at a major museum in New York City, or become a distinguished professor at the City University of New York. Neither did my parents. Nor could we have imagined my being drawn to write biographies of artists—Edward Hopper, Judy Chicago, and Lee Krasner—as I sought to understand how they found the courage to pursue artistic careers. Had their parents, as mine did, forbidden them to become artists? The very improbability of my journey resonates with those of my students who wish to pursue career paths that their families discourage. My hope is that writing about how I found my way might help others who still search.

NOTES

1. Gail Levin, *Hopper's Places* (New York: Knopf, 1985). An exception to my work being regarded as scholarly rather than artistic came from critic Vivien Raynor: "*Hopper's Places* [is] a show that is as much about its guest curator, Gail Levin, as about its subject . . . Miss Levin has been building a small reputation as a photographer, and it is partly in this capacity that she now contemplates her subject . . ." Vivian Raynor, "Art: The Unusual, the Instructive and The Mysterious at Rutgers," *New York Times*, October 20, 1985, 11; Erle Loran, *Cézanne's Composition: Analysis of His Form with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1943); Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 3 volumes and a CD became a source book for other photographers seeking Hopper's sites.

2. Moshe Hartman and Harriet Hartman, *Gender Equality and American Jews* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 29.

3. Alfred C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948).

4. For an early review, see Ralph Bates, "Mr. Wilson's Visit in Suburbia; A Visit to Suburbia," *New York Times*, March 31, 1946, ProQuest. See also Harrison Smith, review of *Ladders to Fire*, by Anais Nin, *Saturday Review of Literature* 29 (November 1946): 13, EBSCO.

5. Although I must have recognized the racist stereotypes in this story of the Old South, what I identified with were issues of gender roles and their defiance. It did not come out until the 1990s that Margaret Mitchell, before her untimely death in 1949, anonymously donated significant sums to Morehouse College in Atlanta to educate young African American men. See Orlando Montoya, "Mitchell's Racial Legacy is Two-Sided," Georgia Public Broadcasting, National Public Radio, accessed June 22, 2011, <http://www.gpb.org/news/2011/06/22/mitchells-racial-legacy-is-two-sided>.

6. Molly Haskell, *Frankly, My Dear: Gone With the Wind Revisited* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 20.

7. 81 Cong. Rec. 11584 (1949). See Jane de Hart Matthews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," *American Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (October 1976): 762–787.

8. Alfred H. Barr Jr., "Is Modern Art Communistic?," *New York Times*, December 14, 1952.

9. See Gail Levin, "Jewish Children Singing Dixie: The Toll of the Confederate Monuments as seen by a Jew, a Native Southerner, and an Art Historian," *Jewish Historical Studies* 49, (2017), 1–11.

10. Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 75.

11. "Is God Dead?" *Time Magazine*, April 8, 1966, cover story.