

**SUE HETTMANSPERGER**



***ITERATIONS: PAINTING AND COLLAGE***

Sue Hettmansperger  
*Iterations: Painting and Collage*

November 7 – December 15, 2019

LIST GALLERY  
Swarthmore College

## Sue Hettmansperger's *Elegies for the Anthropocene*

— Andrea Packard, List Gallery Director

Several years ago, upon first entering Sue Hettmansperger's light-filled studio in Iowa City, I became mesmerized by *Iterations*, her ongoing series of interrelated paintings and collages. Her saturated colors and complex compositions stood out against the white walls like chord variations in a compelling yet unfamiliar key. Looking closely, I discerned the varied sources of inspiration that have fascinated her for nearly 50 years: southwestern deserts, human anatomy, botanical forms, topology and mapping, mechanical templates, plastic packaging, Photo-shopped images, and the by-products of industrial technology. Studying such diverse imagery through the lenses of drawing, printmaking, painting, and collage, she has developed a vast and idiosyncratic vocabulary of forms, textures, and gestures. Hybrid elements interweave and float near the center of each picture, like debris captured by a river current or ocean gyre. Although her compositions do not document specific places or events, they remind me of Emmet Gowin's aerial photographs of nuclear test sites and other landscapes that have been utterly transformed by human intervention. Like Gowin, Hettmansperger uses intimate scale, nuanced tonality, and harmonious rhythms to create images that are at once beautiful and existentially haunting. Each picture offers an elegy

in response to our lost connection to nature. Collectively, her works argue for an environmentally conscious perspective.

Born in Akron, Ohio, in 1948, Hettmansperger moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, when she was nine years old, and she spent her formative years surrounded by the winding arroyos and striated canyons of the Southwest. Although she was initially interested in journalism, exposure to artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg led her to see art as a way to challenge conventional thinking. While earning both a B.F.A. and an M.A. from the University of New Mexico, she developed her creative practice while also pursuing wide-ranging interests in biology, physics, mapping systems, and ecology. Her interest in iterative processes developed later, sparked by Fritjof Capra's description of chaos theory and nonlinear systems in his book, *The Web of Life* (1996).

Hettmansperger's fascination with iterative processes can also be traced to her training as a printmaker. As an undergraduate, she studied lithography with the innovative artist, Garo Antreasian, who co-founded Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles. Because composing on lithographic stones and etching plates

requires one to print provisional drafts, or "states," each of which requires revision, Hettmansperger grew adept at elaborating her ideas through numerous discrete steps. Her post-graduate work as a curator at Tamarind Institute, and later at Tyler Graphics in New York City, strengthened her affinity for recursive processes. She was also influenced by leading artists such as Jasper Johns, Vija Celmins, and Ed Ruscha, who worked iteratively and explored the poetic resonance of disjunctive contrasts, chance effects, or technological processes.

In 1977, when Hettmansperger began teaching at the University of Iowa, she joined an institution with a long tradition of fostering idiosyncratic, socially engaged, and unconventional thinkers. The Department of Art and Art History had been shaped by faculty as diverse as the noted Regionalist painter, Grant Wood, and the globally oriented Art Historian, H.W. Jansen. Elizabeth Catlett, who was the first African American woman to earn an M.F.A. from the university, graduated in 1940 and went on to earn acclaim for her socially progressive prints and sculptures. Miriam Schapiro, one of the founders of the feminist art movement, received an M.F.A. in 1949. Another feminist innovator, Ana Mendieta, graduated in 1977. Like many of the notable artists who taught at the university before her, including Mauricio Lasansky, Philip Guston, Byron Burford, and David Hockney, Hettmansperger pursued a deeply personal approach.

Hettmansperger has been recognized for elaborating the traditions established by early 20th century American Modernists such as Marsden Hartley, Raymond Johnson, Arthur Dove, and Georgia O'Keefe. Using a limited palette, abstracted forms, flattened spaces, and inventive gestures, she creates transcendental and emblematic representations of nature. However, it could also be said that Hettmansperger's somber and quasi-existential tonalities align closely with the psychologically charged still lifes of Italian artist Giorgio Morandi, whose tremulously painted tableaux of bottles and jars can be seen as metaphors for the interconnection and ephemerality of all living systems. Innumerable artists come to mind when viewing a Hettmansperger composition, not because of the appearance or style of their pictures, but because of their ability to convey personal emotions and metaphysical ideas at the same time.



*Collage #6, 2015*  
11 x 12 inches, mixed media on paper



For example, viewing *Iterations* in person, I thought of musical compositions by Philip Glass and John Adams, whose nuanced variations, urgent rhythms, and surprising contrasts awaken us to the unexpected, and challenge our habits of thinking. Such musical associations or influences should not be surprising, given that Hettmansperger has lived with the composer Lawrence Fritts for many years. Their two video collaborations, *Mappaemundi* (2008) and *Natural Language* (2008) portray the human relationship to the natural world as a cyclical feedback loop and an ecology of interrelationships.

Like her experimental video collaborations, Hettmansperger's paintings reflect an approach that is disciplined and restrained, but not formulaic. She most often begins with small-scale experiments in collage and the resulting compositions form the basis for her oil paintings. For example, in an untitled work made in 2018 (page 4), she combines fragments of oak leaves with similar shapes cut from discarded plastic. She interweaves these materials with printed images of similar patterns made by cracked terrain. Comparing this collage with its painted counterpart (page 13), we see Hettmansperger's ideas evolve through translations of scale, media, and color.

Whereas the shallow relief and striking textures of diverse materials make her collages edgy and jarring, Hettmansperger softens and unifies her paintings through dominant and emotionally

resonant color chords. Most often, she chooses deep aquamarine blues, which evoke the fluidity and expansiveness of oceans, or earthy reds, which suggest blood-infused anatomy or iron-rich landscapes. Using traditional techniques such as chiaroscuro and glazing with transparent and semi-opaque layers of paint, she suffuses disparate objects with a smoky atmosphere. The resulting tone is somber, even ominous, yet also gently contemplative.

Contemplation is, in part, the subject of Hettmansperger's most complex compositions such as her untitled polyptych (page 9). Her grid of four similarly sized canvases suggests a picture window. However, rather than depicting an expansive vista, she compresses space by using overlapping forms and aerial viewpoints, and by eliminating horizon lines and other narrative details. As a result, each work simultaneously reads as a still life, a landscape, and ideational space. Together, they suggest successive states of mind. These ambitious polyptychs challenge the idea of viewing the world from a single viewpoint and invite viewers to think in a nonlinear and holistic manner.

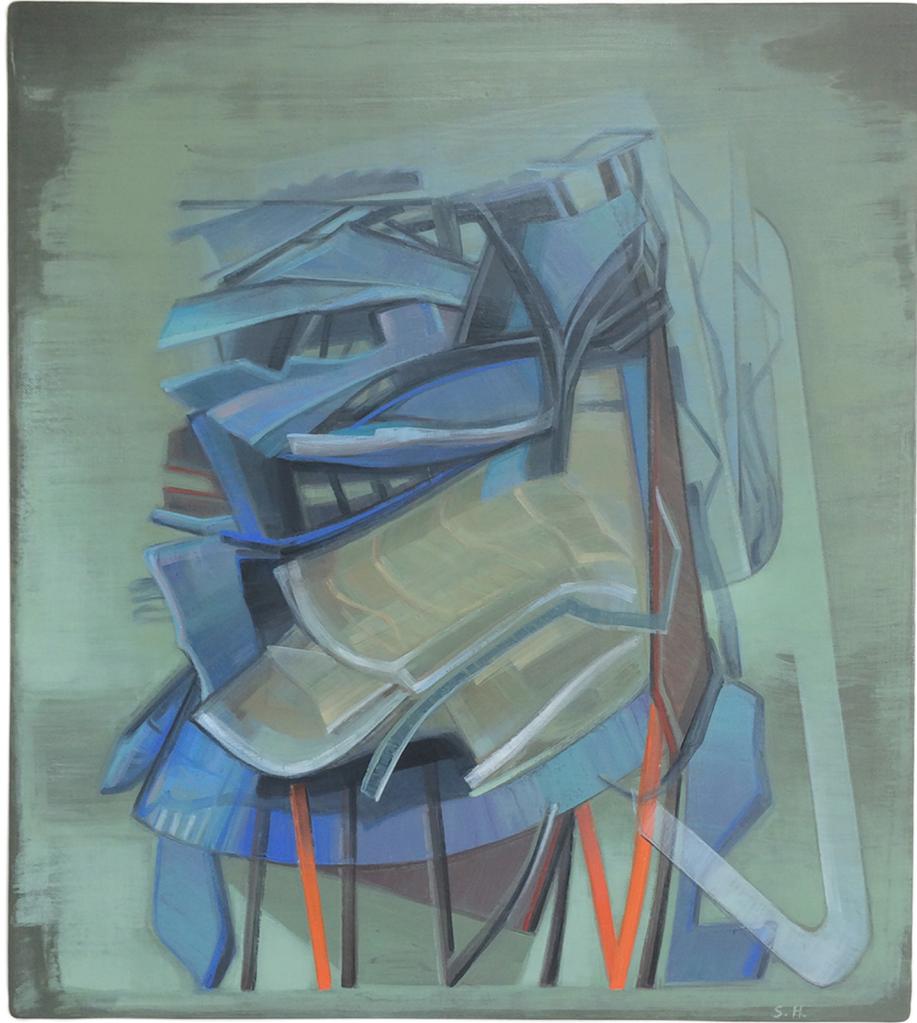
Hettmansperger's art reflects the need to contemplate what it means to be human during a time of accelerating change and crisis. As synthetic materials pollute our food supply and rising sea levels reshape the continents, she asks us to consider what corresponding changes might take place in the terrain of imagination.

Opposite: *Collage #12*, 2018  
11 x 12 inches, mixed media on paper

*Iterations*



*Polyptych #1, 2018-2019*  
56 x 59 inches, oil on linen



*Painting #4, 2019*  
27 x 30 inches, oil on linen



*Polyptych #2, 2015-2018*  
56 x 59 inches, oil on linen



*Painting #7, 2004*  
24 x 27 inches, oil on linen  
photo by Charlene Trawick



*Polyptych #3, 2015-2017*  
56 x 59 inches, oil on linen



*Painting #6, 2010-2011*  
27 x 30 inches, oil on linen  
photo by Charlene Trawick



*Painting #5, 2014-2015*  
27 x 27 inches, oil on linen  
photo by Charlene Trawick



*Collage #9, 2018*  
11 x 12 inches, mixed media on paper



*Collage #15, 2019*  
11 x 12 inches, mixed media on paper



Collage #11, 2011  
11 x 12 inches, mixed media on paper



Collage #2, 2019  
11 x 12 inches, mixed media on paper

## Biography

Sue Hettmansperger was born in 1948 in Akron, Ohio, and moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, when she was nine years old. She attended the Yale University Summer School of Art in 1971. She earned a B.F.A. in 1972 and an M.A. in 1974 from the University of New Mexico, where she focused on lithography and drawing. She is Professor Emerita at the University of Iowa, where she taught studio art from 1977 to 2018.

Since 1988, Hettmansperger has presented eight one-person exhibitions at A.I.R. Gallery, the first women's co-op gallery in New York City. Her work has also been included in group exhibitions at the Museum of the Art Institute of Chicago (2012), the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art (2012 & 2006), the Figge Museum of Art (2010), Bowling Green State University (2005), Northern Arizona University (2005), Grinnell College (2003); University of Texas, San Antonio (2002); Des Moines Art Center (1996); Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago (1992); and Evanston Art Center (1986). Her work appeared in the publication *New American Paintings Midwest* in 2005 and 2010.

In 2008, Hettmansperger received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in Painting. Her other awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1983), the University of

Iowa Faculty Scholar Award (1997-99), an Iowa Arts Council Major Grant (2009), and five University of Iowa Arts and Humanities Initiative Grants (2001, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2013). She has also been awarded residency fellowships by the MacDowell Colony (1977), Roswell Museum Artist in Residence Program (1975 and 1990), the Ucross Foundation (1992), and the Corporation of Yaddo (2012).

Her work is represented in distinguished institutional collections, including the Museum of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Des Moines Art Center, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the University of Iowa Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Kemper Art Museum. Her public artworks include commissions from the University of Iowa Biomedical Discovery Building; Kirkwood College, Iowa; and the Cedar Rapids Convention Center, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

The artist's website:  
[www.suehettmansperger.com](http://www.suehettmansperger.com)



Collage #7, 2015  
11 x 12 inches, mixed media on paper



## Acknowledgements

The Department of Art and Art History, Swarthmore College, is pleased to honor Sue Hettmansperger as the 2019 Marjorie Heilman Visiting Artist and Lecturer.

This catalog was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Sue Hettmansperger / Iterations: Painting and Collage*, which was presented by the List Gallery, Swarthmore College, November 7 – December 15, 2019.

Sue Hettmansperger would like to thank Andrea Packard for her curatorial guidance and insightful essay; Tess Wei for the catalog design; Richard Sjolund for many of the photographs in this catalog; and The Department of Art and Art History, Swarthmore College, for making her exhibition possible. She is also grateful for her ongoing relationship with the University of Iowa, and her inspiring partner, Lawrence Fritts.

All works reproduced in this catalog appear courtesy of Sue Hettmansperger.

Funding for the exhibition and this accompanying catalog was provided by the Marjorie Heilman Visiting Artist Fund. Additional support was provided by the Department of Art and Art History, Swarthmore College.

Catalog © 2019 List Gallery, Swarthmore College

Published in the United States by:  
List Gallery, Swarthmore College  
500 College Avenue  
Swarthmore, PA 19081

<https://www.swarthmore.edu/list-gallery>

Editor: Andrea Packard  
Design: Tess Wei  
Photos: Richard Sjolund (unless otherwise noted).  
ISBN: 978-0-9993904-0-5

**Cover image:**  
*Collage #2* (detail), 2019, 11 x 12 inches, mixed media on paper  
**Back Cover:**  
*Painting #9* (detail), 2014–2015, 27 x 27 inches, oil on linen  
**Opposite:**  
*Collage #5*, 2019, 11 x 12 inches, mixed media on paper



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