

Sam Hunter, *New Directions*, New York: S. Bitter Larkin Gallery, 1990

## NEW DIRECTIONS

Mary Weatherford has for three years been painting simple targets in highly personal but objectively pleasurable color combinations, and she also makes targets overpainted with delicately rendered floral bouquets. To both of these inventions she applies such surprising titles as *Camille*, and *Manon Lescaut*. Perhaps quixotically she perceives her rather rigorous color structures, which often recall the purist targets of Kenneth Noland and Jasper Johns's early constructions, as "diagrams of personal histories." The literary associations of her repeated images support and amplify the formal essence of her art. These abstract constructs, visual and literary, constantly "target" the tragic heroines so often depicted in film, opera and literature as the focus of their submerged content. Weatherford has referred to these themes in an explanatory commentary of her titles as "archetypal histories of good/bad women," and anti-feminist prejudice she wishes to expunge, or at least to confront explicitly in her highly formalized art with its anomalous but suggestive titles.

Ms. Weatherford arrived at her obsessive and rivetting target motif in 1986 at the Whitney Museum of American Art as a fellow in the Independent Study Program. Shortly thereafter she discovered the nineteenth-century nature photography of Karl Blossfeldt, in whose starkly isolated plant and floral imagery the European Surrealists had later taken a lively interest. Modernist form and a viable deconstructive critique for unmasking anti-feminist codes of representation first came together in a moment of epiphany during a viewing of Hitchcock's film, *Vertigo*. She recalls: "In the film Jimmy Stewart and Kim Novack are walking in a forest. This is a woman pretending to be reincarnated, pretending to be another woman. She walks up to one of the trees and says, 'I was born here and I died there.' I felt it was the perfect place in the film, where time and place become one ... I had found a model for a time line. Then I remembered those Natural History museums of my childhood where you see a slab of a tree with the dates marked off on its rings, and there I found a great physical metaphor for the passage of time and how things evolve. Then I began thinking in political terms, how things in the world change little by little: You start here and you end up there, and you're not quite sure how it happened but somehow as a woman you've been cheated of your rights. So my paintings started out being historical time lines, and then I wondered why they couldn't go a step further and become personal histories."

As the target motif evolved, and with it her pictorial experience, Ms. Weatherford's colors grew more sensuously responsive, seductive and symbolically attuned. Their chromatic lushness and her use of a single, centered image draws the viewer's eye to the center of the painting. By utilizing target images, inevitably associated with the masculine art of Johns and Noland, and by working on an increasingly heroic scale defined by their generation, she refers inevitably to an American macho tradition. She also manipulates conventional male/female symbols in a personal manner: the target refers at once to a traditional male preoccupation with shooting, but it also underscores women's role as the target of the male fantasy, that strange and threatening "other" which he must reduce to a relatively powerless status. The target is also formed of concentric circles (a traditionally female sign, as are her repeated use of blood-red colors). An increasing ease and mastery in large scale form recently combine with vibrant color interaction and nuanced surface to subvert even her most didactic intentions, however. Today her art clearly sustains her declared aim to "make political art that can be beautiful."

- Sam Hunter



MARY WEATHERFORD

LA TRAVIATA (VIOLETTA) 1989. Oil on canvas; diptych, each 60 x 60"