

■  
 Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison have made *The Lagoon Cycle* a compendium of possibilities, verbal and visual. There are dialogues between two imaginary characters, the Witness and the Lagoonmaker, and monologues by each of them in turn. There are hand-colored photographs of a mangrove tree and a buffalo wallow, as well as drawings of tanks designed for research into the behavior of a crab from Sri Lanka—or, as the island country used to be known, Ceylon. *The Lagoon Cycle* includes an inventory of the island's other names, a disquisition on the symbolism of Sri Lanka's flag, and an immense rendering of the flag itself. Deep into the Cycle, satellite photographs of the southwestern United States lead to a visionary map, a prophecy in cartographer's form, of the new coastlines that would appear if polar ice should begin to melt. There is more, of course—an abundance not only of images but of different kinds of imagery.

One meets the Witness and the Lagoonmaker in the introductory panel of the Cycle. That is the first of numberless occasions for wondering to what degree the Witness is Helen Mayer Harrison and the Lagoonmaker is Newton Harrison. Those are the parts they play when they perform the Cycle, and yet, as the work moves on from the First Lagoon, it questions the possibility of individuals' being as separate as those two characters appear to be at the outset. Throughout *The Lagoon Cycle*, themes, images, and visions turn and return in patterns that mitigate against isolation.

From the start the Lagoonmaker and the Witness treat large questions of creation and self-creation, will, and belief and action with a confidence that usually occurs at the end of a cycle of experience, not at the start. As the Witness implies in the first lines of the text, the Harrisons themselves were not so confident when they set out to learn about the Sri Lankan crab. Confounding its beginning with its end, *The Lagoon Cycle* presents us with a spectacle whose sequence doesn't match the order of the events it recalls. Rather, it plays with

that sequence, and with the very notion of temporal order. Out of that play comes the image of a future open to revision now, in the present.

Presenting time as a play of echoes, the Cycle leads the imagination into a world where recurrence points up resemblance and resemblance comes alive as metaphor. Of course, the meanings of *The Lagoon Cycle* reveal themselves full force only as one moves in order from the First Lagoon to the Seventh. But the Harrisons undermine the effects of that straight-line approach with a buildup of metaphoric reverberation. In panel 1 of the First Lagoon the Lagoonmaker makes a comparison, not a lagoon. He equates a crab to a work of art; that is, he sees that creature as "hardy" enough to "live under museum conditions." Only then does he think of creating a museum-lagoon—the conditions of the creature's new environment. From that metaphor, which posits a certain animal as a kind of art-material, comes everything: the trip to Sri Lanka, the vision of that country's shift from a traditional to a modern economy, the first sighting of the crab in its mangrove habitat, the subsequent experiments with an artificial lagoon, the aggrandizement of that artifice in a scheme to build an immense aquatic farm on the shores of the Salton Sea in southern California.

Halfway through the Cycle the imagination feels itself drawn back to origins, the lush Sri Lankan detail of the First Lagoon, and onward to an as yet unimaginable resolution of tensions that have arisen between nature and culture, self and world, art and science, Witness and Lagoonmaker. Drawn in two directions at once, the imagination feels itself jolted out of a rut, the expectation of narrative progress along familiar lines. The metaphors I'd like to trace all carry the work to points of displacement, moments when a cycle slips out of its usual path. Since there is no question of tracing all the patterns of *The Lagoon Cycle*, I'll have to jump from point to point, following certain of the artists' metaphors as they develop and widen the Cycle's reach.

**T**he *Lagoon Cycle* leads us with compelling speed deep into the Harrisons' interest—one is soon ready to say obsession—with the Sri Lankan crab. As the image of a mangrove cluster (First Lagoon, panel 6) gives way to the diagrams of artificial habitats (Second Lagoon), there is comment on the displacements caused by British colonial rule in Sri Lanka; on the survival, despite colonialism, of traditional social and agricultural systems; and on tourists who replay in a farcical mode the roles of departed imperial authorities, disrupting the economy—the very food chain—of the island and encouraging bad manners in the children.

The Witness's report from the hotel in Colombo (First Lagoon, panel 4) arranges fragments of memory to suggest an order of life whose elements have been displaced, dispersed, reduced to fragments—cultural bits and pieces scattered like the ruins of ancient architecture. The Lagoonmaker recounts his own sense of displacement, a state whose emblem is a word misapprehended (“truth” for “tooth”). Wandering between “the temple on the rock and the village nearby,” the Witness hears “an intellectual” talk, as intellectuals do, in abstractions as he comments on the breakdown of “a coherent, mutually supportive system”—namely, the network of irrigation tanks and canals that supported the island's agriculture, and thus its human culture, for centuries.

Further on, the abstract quality of such language will look like a particularly Western trait or problem that appears in other parts of the world as the product of colonial displacement. Here the Sri Lankan's jargon is only one notable detail on the way to our immersion in the atmosphere of his world. Among all the other things it does, *The Lagoon Cycle* offers some of the attractions of a vivid memoir of travel. Soon a more practical man, a water department official, tells the Witness in much simpler language how the old system worked, fitting in to the shape of the land, and a guide tells her how social life was organized around the perennial task of repairing the system—a task no longer well performed. Then the Witness hears an ancient story that bathes the irrigation system in a mythic light.

Having shown an entire people working together to keep the irrigation system in order, panel 4 of the First Lagoon points to a crucial generalization: “A culture is a cooperative adventure . . . by which people define themselves collectively.” But the Witness doesn't want to drift off into the realm of expertise, where sweeping images become the abstractions of the specialist's jargon. She moves on from that vision of

culture as a “cooperative adventure” to observe that people do not really take a part in that venture until they “niche themselves individually.” That phrase takes us back to the description of the crab and its adaptation to the complex environmental niche it has found in “the lagoons at Trincomalee and Negombo” (First Lagoon, panel 1). Thus the motions of the Cycle link cultural developments to the patterns that flow through natural environments. And the image of the environmental niche persists.

Arguing for the feasibility of the tanks he designed for the Sri Lankan crabs, the Lagoonmaker must face the Witness's objection that those artificial habitats cannot hook up with larger cycles. They are isolated. Seen as images, not simply as useful devices, the tanks refer “to alienation, to violation, to breaking the integrity of a real system.” The Lagoonmaker replies that like evolving creatures, he and the Witness must “adapt ourselves to supply what the crab needs; then we become part of the experiment; . . . we niche ourselves in” (Second Lagoon, panel 1). The Lagoonmaker and the Witness reject suggestions and criticisms from an exceedingly methodical scientist and from a Marxist because their offerings are too rigid: they imply a niche too narrow to permit evolution, which the two leading characters of the Cycle call play and, implicitly, equate with art (Third Lagoon, panel 6; Fourth Lagoon, panel 4). The Seventh Lagoon integrates the image of a niche (one might say, “niches” it) into an environment on a global scale.

Throughout the First and Second Lagoons themes of displacement and adaptation evolve in counterpoint to the Harrisons' visual images, which shift in style from realistic to schematic, and in content from natural to artificial, with the crab's form as an emblematic constant. Yet we know from the discourse of the Witness and the Lagoonmaker that the crab's behavior is not stable. It modulates, for better or for worse, to the degree that artifice is not perfect (the Lagoonmaker's replications of a natural state are only approximate). Sri Lanka changes too, despite the persistence of ancient emblems on its flag—the red and yellow presence that presides over the beginning of *The Lagoon Cycle*.

Everything is in flux, as few have failed to notice since the time of Heraclitus. The question is how to envision change; then, what to do with one's vision. Modernity begins with the belief, first articulated by eighteenth-century philosophers and revolutionaries, that cyclical change can be converted into progress, a straight-ahead advance to the perfection of

humanity and the world. The Harrisons' Cycle responds to the failures of all our visions of perfectibility.

Like animal forms and the shapes of institutions, meanings also change. The flow of the Harrisons' imagery suggests that all those changes occur in cycles that can—or ought to—be linked. Without that linkage, life finds itself in niches too narrow, too static, and, finally, unlivable—deadly. It would be impressive if the Harrisons simply made such points. But they do more than that. Following their cycles of metaphor from word to picture and back, from social observation to scientific experiment to metaphor, one sees them positioning art itself as the medium through which we might answer the questions raised by the inevitability of change.

Instead of tracing the play of displacement and adaptation (or “niching oneself in”), I might have traced the Cycle's tensions between reportage (noting what is) and experiment (making it new)—alternatives that cross and recross one another as each Lagoon appears, entangling the paths of science and technology with those of cultural innovation and, eventually, art. I might have followed the Cycle's images of belief and action, and the way those two possibilities become metaphors for one another. And there are other paths through *The Lagoon Cycle*, all of them leading to the vista overlooking the Seventh Lagoon.

That Lagoon is the spectacle of the world after hubris and the physical expression of that spiritual error—namely, fire—have shifted the balance of earth and water. Overreaching, our Promethean technology has caused polar ice to melt. The coastlines of our continents are receding. The question is how to find and preserve livable niches in the new environment. “Life in the lagoons is tough, and very rich. . . . It must improvise its existence . . . with the materials at hand” (Third Lagoon, panel 5). The Witness and the Lagoonmaker have learned to improvise. As they create the Lagoons through which they travel, they accept the “discourse” of lagoon life as a metaphorical guide. Or at least they struggle toward that acceptance. If our culture undertakes the same struggle and accepts the same guide, perhaps we'll find ways to adapt even to ecological disaster. Our adaptation may even be, in the Harrisons' word, “graceful.”

With remarkable tact the Harrisons remind us that the West's advance into modernity has not been “graceful.” Just the opposite. At the source of that gracelessness is the modern world's most notable invention, the Western individual, with all his complaints about oppression at the hands of modern science and technology, the marketplace, and the administrative structures those developments inspire. Silenced by the benefits of material progress, such complaining is often unconscious. The changes that bring the modern individual into existence appear to isolate him in a state where a full degree of consciousness is nearly unbearable. Only in extreme forms does the modern self voice its grievances—two highly visible instances are the painter and the poet.

At the start of the modern period there were those who worried that the effects of science and technology might be spiritually deadening and physically destructive. The “dark Satanic Mills” from the preface to William Blake's *Milton* (1804–08) stand near the beginning of an immense cycle of protest. Fears of unconsidered progress became routine, routine became cliché, and in the 1960s clichéd laments about the vicissitudes of selfhood rose to new levels of insistence. In their frustration and desperation the visionaries of the sixties pushed their antitechnological rhetoric of peace, love, and environmental concern to the point of claiming that if we would all just be nice enough, evolution would take a magic leap. Suddenly, impelled by nothing but our impatience, there would appear an individual freed of all the hostility, all the predilection for harm, that characterizes the individual in the competitive, mechanized West. But no such individual appeared, and our most recent spate of visionary rhetoric suffered the disrepute of prophecy disproved.

The Harrisons are visionaries too, and much of their imagery recalls the optimism of the 1960s. Yet their art dispenses with the fanciful motif essential to that earlier period's displays of prophetic enthusiasm: the magically perfect self, born, no one could say how, from the workings of a make-believe evolution—cultural or biological or neither. Ecstatic prophecy, sixties-style, didn't deem it necessary to be intelligible about such matters. By contrast, the Harrisons refuse to base their hopes on the sudden appearance of a self on a new model. They accept Western individuality in its familiar, often alienated, form; in fact, they present themselves as an extreme case of alienated selfhood: the artist estranged from ordinary life by a vision of its mechanized—now electromechanized—oppressions. That is the point of insisting that the Harrisons are artists, fully and intentionally, not merely because their

work happens to appear in art museums. As artists, they ground their vision of a more “graceful” future in an acceptance of, not a flight from, the Western self who has suffered so much at the hands of modernity and, out of that suffering, wreaked so much damage.

■  
One agent of the modern individual’s hubris is the “creative imagination,” the faculty that Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Biographis Literaria* (1817) imputes to authentic poets. As Coleridge told it, the creative imagination is the source of all that is grand, all that is sublimely significant, in the world. Grieving, as he often did, over the failure of his own creative genius, Coleridge looked for such genius elsewhere, seeing it most often in the works of William Wordsworth. Others saw that transcendent quality in Shelley’s odes or Delacroix’s oriental fantasies or in the work of any number of romantics.

Neither the theory nor the practice of romanticism makes it clear what the creative imagination claims for itself. The changes in style that characterize the art and poetry we call romantic are easy to chart, but that procedure is superficial. It says nothing about meaning. Was romantic creativity a matter of recollecting a spirituality lost to a secularized world or did it generate a new spirit, a new vision, new meanings? Did the creative imagination have the power to bring about palpable change? None of the romantics answered those questions directly, nor were their implied positions stable. As their confidence ebbed and flowed, the most ambitious artists and writers of modernity’s first decades claimed less, then more, then less again for their creative faculties. At its most aggressive, the modern imagination turned arrogant and identified its powers with those of heroic, even divine, figures. With his massive recasting of Scripture (*America, Europe, Milton, Jerusalem*), William Blake struck the pose of a latter-day prophet on the biblical model; and George Gordon, Lord Byron, flirted endlessly with a self-image in the guise of Milton’s Lucifer (see, for example, *Lara*, 1814).

Romanticism blurred the distinctions between a variety of personages, real and fictive: Lucifer, an angel so dazzling his pride is almost excusable; the brilliantly narcissistic artist or poet who appeared at the outset of the modern era, of whom Byron was perhaps the most thoroughly self-centered; Napoleon, the soldier of obscure origins and such extraordinary success that the aristocratic Chateaubriand described him as “the man whose genius I admire and whose

despotism I abhor” (*Memoires d’outre-tombe*, 1849–50). Refusing to sort out that milling cast of prideful, overreaching characters, the early modern sensibility encouraged a confusion between creativity as a source of art and creativity as a force at large in the world.

Redrawing the map of Europe, fabricating dynasties out of whole cloth, overseeing the constitutions devised for his invented realms, Napoleon looked like an artist to some of his contemporaries. In essay 14 of *The Friend* (1818), Coleridge’s image of Napoleon—“the mad Realizer of mad Dreams”—gives that historical figure a cousinly resemblance to the protagonist of any one of several poems by Edgar Allan Poe (say, “A Dream within a Dream”), or to Poe himself. Thomas Carlyle’s tract *On Heroes* (1841) describes Napoleon’s fall from the heights of imperial arrogance as the fate due an artist whose style has turned pretentious and empty: Napoleon “strove to connect himself with Austrian Dynasties, Popedoms, with the old false Feudalities. . . . *Self* and false ambitions had now become his god. . . . What a paltry patchwork of theatrical paper-mantles, tinsel and mummery, had this man wrapped his own great reality in, thinking to make it more real thereby!” Carlyle’s italics in that passage point up the belief to which our culture still clings: any “great reality,” military or aesthetic or whatever, must originate in selfhood. Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it in *Nature* (1836), thought “reduces all things, until the world becomes at last only a realized will—the double of the man.”

André Breton and his surrealist shock troops revived the privileges of romantic creativity with the original—one might say, Napoleonic—enthusiasm. And in our time Frank Stella said he wanted to establish a “totalitarianism of quality.” That statement, recorded in the Museum of Modern Art’s *Frank Stella* catalog of 1970, expresses a familiar desire: to give art absolute control of experience. But Stella is careful, as are most avant-gardists, to concern himself exclusively with the experience of his own work. Rather than claim aesthetic sway over the entire world, Stella claims to dominate only the narrow realm of the pictorial problems he has chosen to address. Avant-garde painters and poets cling to romantic privileges in miniaturized, specialized forms. The scale of the artist’s ambition changes. Nonetheless its absolutism has persisted unchanged for two centuries.

The symbolist (in other words, late, late romantic) Remy de Gourmont offered this summary in *Le livre des masques*: “The world and all that is external to the ego, exists only

according to the idea of it which he [the ego] forms for himself. . . . It is what Schopenhauer popularized in the very clear and simple formula: The world is my representation.” Formula, indeed. In opposing its own world to that of ordinary reality, the modern self—artist or not—often employs a creative method as mechanistic as any in the world he tries to flee.

As the avant-garde specialized more and more, it employed the jargon of romanticism less and less. Talk of the creative imagination departed from the neighborhood of high aesthetic ambition to spread throughout the culture. Overuse made the phrase banal. By insisting on the word *creative*, the Harrisons recall its helpfulness in early arguments for the authority of the self. They cycle present usage into our memory of the past. But that is only the first step. Their larger intention is to reinvest the word *creative* with active, organic meaning. Thus they extend their claim to creativity from themselves to everyone, absolutely everyone: the Witness says that as people “niche themselves” into their environments, they “improvise their existence as best they can, *very creatively*” (First Lagoon, panel 3; italics mine). To try to revitalize the word *creative* and, at the same time, rehabilitate it, point it in a new direction, is a complex proceeding. The creative imagination can too easily serve as a charismatic leader’s argument for his own, Napoleonic, legitimacy. Or “creativity” stays in aesthetic regions, authorizing the arrogance of preciosity and hermetic withdrawal. Another alternative: the artist’s hermetic stance turns Napoleonic.

Traveling from the Fourth to the Fifth Lagoon, we see the Lagoonmaker remaking himself on the romantic-modernist model of the artist. Sensing a momentum in the metaphor that transposed Sri Lankan lagoons to Californian tanks, he imagines an extravagant future for the image: the Salton Sea of California’s Colorado Desert is to be the site of vast food-producing ponds. But the Salton Sea is too polluted, says the Witness. The Lagoonmaker agrees, revising—and aggrandizing—his plan until it threatens to spread the pollution of that inland sea to the Gulf of California and thence to the Pacific Ocean. Though blinkered by his enthusiasm, he does preserve some skepticism, some distance from his own dubious impulses. At times it looks as though the Lagoonmaker’s scheme is a satire on the most ambitious of the earthworkers—Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer especially. But by the time we get to panel 3 of the Fifth Lagoon, the Lagoonmaker seems to be trying to outdo the earthworkers at their own game.

As his overweening “creativity” carries him away to a state of art-hubris, the Lagoonmaker’s aquatic-farming scheme becomes difficult to distinguish from the disruptive projects of the scientists and technologists whose expertise so oppresses the sort of person who often becomes an artist. The Lagoonmaker’s plan for the Salton Sea is very like the one that disrupted the Sri Lankan ecology by substituting tractors, rigidly specialized devices, for the environmentally versatile water buffalo. Neglecting the Witness’s comments on that disaster (First Lagoon, panel 4), the Lagoonmaker has begun to behave like an expert.

■  
The larger patterns of *The Lagoon Cycle* turn always toward the possibility of reconciling self and world, so the Lagoonmaker is talked out of his obsession. That isn’t easy to do. The proposed farms are impressive, and he is tempted—like so many before him, some of them artists and others not—to overlook consequences in the rush of pride. The Witness does manage to get him to “pay attention to changes of state” (Sixth Lagoon, panel 2), and the threat to the Cycle’s unity passes. Without that episode, the Harrisons’ narrative would float off into utopian mists. They want their vision of a reconciled self and world to be a strong image of the future, not an escapist fantasy, so the individuality that is brought into tune with larger forces must be true individuality: the vexed and overreaching persona each of us knows in the most immediate possible way.

A sense of his own creative power draws the Lagoonmaker into his megalomaniacal plan for the landscape of southern California. That same power leads him out of prideful isolation. Having built his scheme from metaphors, he is able, eventually, to see a metaphorical reflection of himself in the Witness. She symbolizes, among other things, his self-consciousness. He recognizes himself as double—or, better, manifold—not enclosed in the unity of an absolutist self. That recognition brings him back to the Witness’s vision of culture as “a cooperative venture,” not an opportunity for an imperial imagination to exert itself. And it returns him to the unities of the Cycle. The episode questions, then redeems, the process of displacement, which the Lagoonmaker’s plan exploited in such a freewheeling manner. After all, the metaphorical vision that saves him employs displacements of another kind—as the word’s root (*metapherein*, “to transfer”) suggests.

hazardous practice of claiming the world as its own invention. We are, after all, formed by our culture. When we try to will ourselves free of the tendency toward imperial imaginings, we only display our peculiarly Western willfulness. *The Lagoon Cycle* suggests that even the most disruptive, hubristic of spirits can “niche itself into” the “discourse” of a healthy environment. Thus the first text of the Seventh Lagoon suggests that even our technology, whose creations are often so destructive, can display an empathy with the world its Promethean impulses have so often tried to dominate.

That text points to a finale in the form of a new beginning. With a crisis just past, the Witness and the Lagoonmaker begin a new conversation, which soon turns to the subject of conversation itself. An image emerges: “the business of the universe” as “an odd kind of dialogue,” an interchange—the monologue of the imagination wielding its creativity like a weapon. That image leads to a further image of “a discourse between earth and rock taking place mainly at the water’s edge”—the volcanic activity that extends along the coastlines of the Pacific basin. The Lagoonmaker sees that “Ring of Fire” as the edge of “an ocean of fire beneath an ocean of water.” Mountains of the earth look to him like foam on the ocean of fire, a metaphor that requires the imagination to compress millions of geologic years into less than a second. The image induces water to take the place of rock in the “discourse” the world engages in on a geophysical scale; so fire, including the combustions and explosions of technology, is potentially reconciled with water, its seeming opposite.

The conversation now shifts to a biocultural scale, and the Pacific Ocean reappears in the image of an estuarial lagoon. On that scale the imagination moves with dispatch to a comparison between estuarial refugia well maintained by traditional practices and the same locations depleted by the substitution of tractors for water buffalo. There is a further contrast between monologue (a single impulse supplying itself with all the consensus it seems to require) and dialogue (which corrects the self-absorbed forgetting, the indifference to consequences, that monologue promotes). Monologue’s symbol is, of course, the gasoline-powered tractor, a device so specialized it is inevitably more disruptive than effective. The water buffalo sustains the Sri Lankan environment, natural and cultural, by entering into a dialogue with it. Agricultural policy in Sri Lanka still promotes tractors for their short-term

The Seventh Lagoon points to a side effect of the technology emblemized by the tractor: the greenhouse effect that threatens to warm the glaciers. Thoughtlessly unleashed since the beginning of civilization, fire causes ice to melt and oceans to rise. Only as humanity retreats to higher elevations can our Promethean impulses be reconciled with our environment. The reconciliation takes place in the course of a continual improvisation, a withdrawal from a disaster that turns, with the flow of metaphor, into its opposite: a “new beginning.” Endlessly recreating our existences, we niche ourselves into the cycles of an environment created by our own hubris. In the final text of the Seventh Lagoon we find the land itself “drawing and redrawing” its new coastlines.

Until now the modern self has claimed such gestures of self-definition as its exclusive prerogative, preludes to the moment of projecting its imaginative energies outward and thereby claiming authority over nature—symbolically, if not in fact. The Harrisons, who see the creative imagination at work in every culture, not only our own, suggest that it be treated as a natural resource—not as the patented trait of the Western individual. Rejoined to our world by the “new beginning” of the Seventh Lagoon, we find it easy—even natural—to attribute our own creative impulses to nature, and to do that in a spirit very different from that of the Byronic-Napoleonic self, who aspires to absolute domination. Acknowledging that selves of that sort, our sort, are the only ones we have, the Cycle leads them into discourse with other selves, entities, forces.

The dialogue of the Witness and the Lagoonmaker offers a metaphor for existence in all its forms, so that it becomes possible to imagine consciousness on the scale of biocultural or geophysical time. With that possibility comes another: our lives, on their small scale, joined up with, cycled into, those larger ones. That is the future the Harrisons present. Their vision is all the more convincing because it provides a place for the source of *The Lagoon Cycle*: the creative imagination. To be creative. That is a troubling ideal, often unrealized and just as often realized badly. An ideal we would like not only to claim but to reclaim, to redeem. *The Lagoon Cycle* suggests a way, any number of ways, we might begin to do that.