

# KAREN PALCHO

## *The Goddess Revisited*

January 10 - February 22, 2009

The Cohen Gallery, GoggleWorks Center for the Arts





Every year, the GoggleWorks invites artists from across the country to submit work for a themed, juried exhibition. An independent juror selects the work for the exhibition and chooses one artist to receive the “Exhibition Award,” giving that artist the opportunity to create work for a solo show at the GoggleWorks the following year.

I am pleased to present *The Goddess Revisited*, a solo exhibition of the work of artist and ceramicist, Karen Palcho, who won the 2008 Exhibition Award. Karen was one of more than eighty artists who submitted work to that year’s exhibition, *Our Natural World*. It was juried by the internationally renowned art critic Dr. Robert Metzger, Director Emeritus of the Reading Public Museum.

*The Goddess Revisited*, at the Cohen Gallery, is a rich and beautiful show that showcases Karen’s extraordinary creativity and unique world view. We are proud to exhibit Karen’s work and look forward to her continuing success.

**Diane Labelle**  
Director of the Cohen Gallery  
Executive Director  
GoggleWorks Center for the Arts



Inspired by the opportunity for this show—and under the influence of dramatic changes in the world and in my life—I revisited the Goddess theme I’ve been working with for 15 years and found that she, and I, had changed. *The Goddess Revisited* reflects this transformation.



Acrylic, 2008, 22” x 30”  
Detail, Ceramic, 2007  
Ceramic, 2008, height 28”





Named for a mythical creature from Australian folklore, the Bunyip series developed when I made drawings, then paintings, of old sculptures and saw new sculptural potential in the painted silhouettes. For me, these pieces live at the mysterious intersection of mythology, figurative art and cartoons.

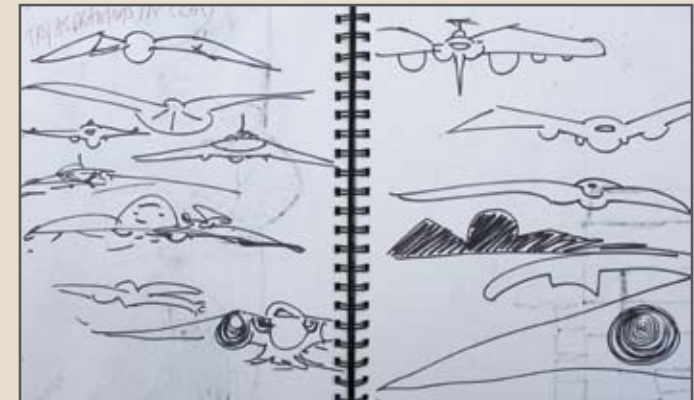
*Ceramics, 2008, height 25" and 26"*  
*Acrylic, 2008, 22" x 30"*





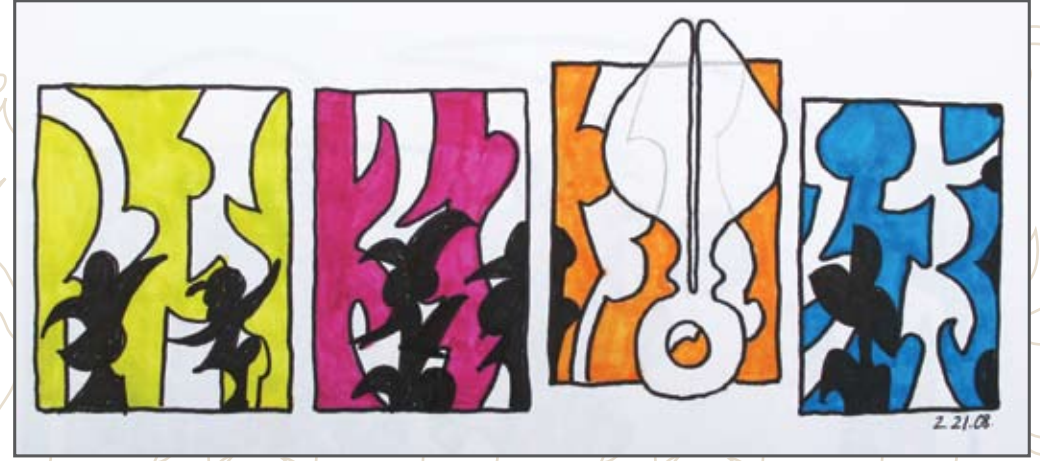
I introduced geometric, mechanical elements to my work when softer forms were no longer sufficient. The battleship and cruciform shapes reflect sorrow and danger, but also unity between the organic and crystalline worlds.

*Ceramics, 2008, height 16" to 18"*



On a 2004 pilgrimage to eastern Slovakia, home to my Palcho ancestors, I was intrigued by the stenciled interiors of the region's famed wooden churches, especially because the family business was screen-printing. I sketched, photographed and used the stencils as the starting point for layered paintings.

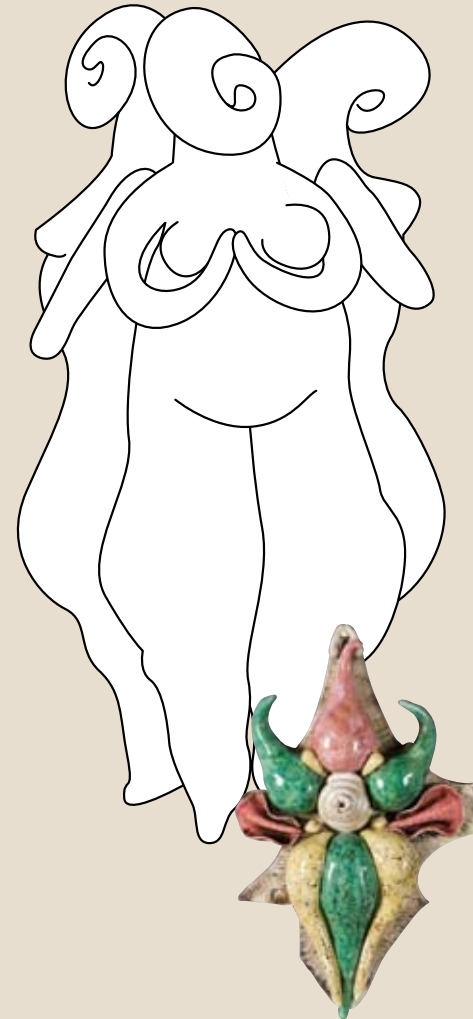
My newest paintings are collages of recycled and freshly painted materials, such as photocopies of previous paintings, acetate from my father's printing business, and handmade, pasted paper.



Acrylic paintings and collage, 2008, 22" x 30"



The original "Triple Goddess" emerged in 1993 when I found myself without a potter's wheel and began making sculpture from drawings of seedpods. Her ancient form and benevolent, joyous spirit have influenced much of my work since then.



Ceramics, 2008, height 16" to 30"



Detail, Acrylic, 2006  
Glass, 1978, height to 24"  
Ceramic, 1998, height to 18"  
Acrylic painting and collage, 2008,  
12" x 16" to 22" x 30"



I seem to have one story to tell. Although it has evolved, and manifests itself in many forms, it is rooted in an image of the vessel that I've been making since childhood.



The transformation of the Goddess in my new work mirrors changes in my own life and self-image. My skincare products business required unaccustomed structure and mastery of highly left-brained activities. Meanwhile, my mother was struggling for her life; I became a warrior--her protector. I spent the dark evenings during her illness watching *Battlestar Galactica* on TV and later, under the nighttime stars, pondering the subtle divide between humans, gods and machines.

*Ceramics, 2008, 12" x 21"; bunyip height 12"*  
*Acrylic collage, 2008, 38" x 26"*



## **THE GODDESS REVISITED:**

Robert P. Metzger, Ph.D

The wide-ranging spectrum of Karen Palcho's art encompasses painting, ceramic sculpture, collage, and drawings, at a time of increasing narrowness and tight specialization. A very physical woman, her delight in her craft characterizes her very identity and strength as an artist. Palcho's dazzlingly protean vision achieves a balance between boldness and subtlety, humor and mystery in awesome equilibrium. Aspects of the organic, inorganic and human achieve a dynamic tranquility informed by mythology, folklore, and pop culture.

The infectious vitality which Palcho exudes as a person is mirrored in the energizing flourish of fluid movement in her work. Her astonishing talent and energetic intelligence have taken her on a passionate artistic journey through many years of outstanding teaching, to the four corners of the earth from Africa to Alaska, and on location searching for her European ancestral roots.

The colorful kaleidoscopic compositions of Palcho's recent paintings resemble the play of light upon a cyclorama. The irregular curvilinear shapes are in a state of explosive metamorphosis: overlapping, interweaving, spinning out from one another, and meandering in simple or complex ways. Swooping rhythms of smooth-edged helix, scroll, crescent, and oval shapes intersect, cluster, or hover above one another as they oscillate between being seen as figure or ground. The dramatic, sometimes loopy forms explore positive-negative or advance-retreat relationships across the flattened picture plane, creating a special illusion and depth with the advance and recession of color.

As the shapes impishly jostle one another, each modifying that adjacent to it, they sometimes set up contradictory and discontinuous relationships along with multiple perspectives. Despite this intriguing tumultuousness, Palcho manages to organize and arrange each vortical component part into a unified, cohesive composition of non-descriptive nature. Because the space is not limited to a single perspective, the forms alternately enlarge and reduce scale, evoking details of landscape features. The elegant, and precise edges of the forms often reference images that derive from the botanical, cosmological, geological, or zoological. Plants, rocks, sky, water are transformed into mystical emblems of topographical surfaces with a sure clarity of designs and a sense of locked-in energy. These improvisatory



*"The irregular curvilinear shapes are in a state of explosive metamorphosis."*

*Acrylic collage, 2008, 11" x 15"*

transformations bring to mind our unending panorama of delights, from abundant flowers and fields to vast scalloped shaped seas, but also often refer to actual clay vessels which Palcho herself made as a potter. Her inexact interpretation of the visual elements allows for free association and tantalizing ambiguity on the part of the viewer. The unending configurations and special densities bespeak a spontaneity and fluidity in the freely flowing forms.

The color scheme employed in these paintings is devoid of harsh tones, reflecting the bright hues of nature with electrically charged visual vibrations. These lively areas of color are often set against distinct contrasting forms of black or white which vary from painting to painting in their function as the underlying ground for the brightly colored forms. As the colors advance and recede, subtle modulations of tone and blending within the sinuous shapes become more apparent. The arched contours, scalloped edges, and sensuous curves become animated, as rolling hoops springing themselves along an opulent course. The unbroken, emphatic color outlines also suggest a rapidly whirling motion of striking ebullience.

The forms and colors of her paintings are enlivened by her self-reflexive technique of collage, which she incorporates into these works by recycling her earlier canvases. In reabsorbing elements of actual earlier paintings or mechanical copies of them, she is following in the great twentieth century collage tradition of Picasso, Braque, Arp, Motherwell, and Marca-Relli. Palcho builds upon the techniques of these masters by incorporating linoleum cuts and Xerox copies of her paintings, as well as cut out forms on acetate which are reshaped and glued to the canvas. Additionally, she enlivens the flat surfaces by dragging tools through wet acrylic to achieve unexpected textures and paints the color forms alternately matte and shiny. All of the collage fragments are given equal weight with the other shapes on the actual painted surface.

Palcho's biomorphic ceramic wall sculptures are loosely based on vegetative forms, but incorporate architectonic geometric shapes as well as elements more akin to insects or animals. The fanciful works resemble details of plants in extreme close-up, such as shooting leaf buds or thistle leaves. Palcho's decision to isolate these symmetrically composed neatly trimmed botanical specimens reinforces the explosive impact of her unique herbaria. Instead of copying her surroundings, she transforms nature by tweaking it in these sculptural reliefs. These lyrical rearrangements of nature exist as the artists' personal icons rather than archetypal



*“Palcho builds upon the techniques of the twentieth century collage masters.”*

*Acrylic collage, 2008, 22" x 30"*

symbols. Palcho recently extended her imagery for the wall relief to depict non-organic shapes such as the cruciform and the warship.

As Palcho progressed with the small wall pieces in low relief, she became increasingly interested in larger sculpture with a broader range of sources in nature. Her freestanding sculptures in the Bunyip series are characterized by a vertical build-up of multiple geometric elements from a narrow base. Each side of the Janus-faced Bunyip are meant to be viewed facing in the opposite directions. The diversity of anatomical parts include sexual organs, eyes, mouths, teeth, nipples, and horns. The ceramic forms are given a distinctive pastel color applied as surface decoration through poured glazing. The color helps to clarify the space by assisting the eye to separate and highlight each contrasting element. The outreaching spiraling elements create dramatic hollowed out passages of exuberant asymmetrical geometry. The complexity of the overall forms, including strategically placed holes to illuminate the interior, serve to amplify the unfurling and unfolding of organic form in space.

The goddess series of free standing sculpture which has been evolving for over ten years has recently been revisited on grander scale. Palcho has been increasingly preoccupied with the reconfiguring of the human body and genetic experimentation. The question of what it means to be human is explored in her inflated mutants hovering between the human and the bestial. The contortions of the human figure through extreme simplification, the elimination of individual distinction, most especially the human face, tendrils instead of arms, ballooning volumes, distended forms, and machine-like contours give these figures a heightened expressivity. Her eugenics involution, suggesting only a few loosely structured interlocking body parts, ironically possess a fullness associated with blossoming and growth. The body-as-puzzle-piece humanoids glide effortlessly and playfully in an eternal future which dissolves past and present.

The baroque appendages with the intriguing horns, hooks, and spirals add a note of humor in a manner recalling the inflated toys of Jeff Koons. Palcho's ceramics, however, evidence a genuine enthusiasm and love of her materials which gives her forms a greater sense of imaginative inventiveness. Eschewing the Duchamp-Warhol-Koons straightjacket which eventually restricted and narrowed them to the production of predictable frivolous readymades and replications, Palcho references pop culture icons



*“Spiraling forms create hollowed out passages of exuberant asymmetrical geometry.”*

*Ceramic, 2008, height 27"*

only as a point of departure for authentic fresh improvisation.

Palcho's vital sketches and drawings reveal the kernel of the artists' personal biomorphism and comprise a requisite compendia of her personal imagery. The undulating, continuous linear networks serve as ideograms with multiple perspectives and inform the genesis of shapes found in her paintings and sculpture. The instinctual graphic details, filtered through things seen or imagined, evidence Palcho's spontaneous thought process which displays splashes of brilliant inspiration.

Deeply perceptive and self-aware, Karen Palcho's art reverberates with rich psychological associations of her inner experience. Her tenacious fidelity to experienced reality filtered through a sumptuous veil of abstraction-in-motion is exceptional for a twenty-first century artist in Obama's America. This central experience of non-stop volition in all of her art corresponds to the alacrity of her mind and spirit. The work is teeming with abstract visual fragments with no particular beginning or end, yet these forms are filled with emotion and expression, and communicate remarkable imaginative truth and haunting power.

**Robert P. Meztger, Ph.D**  
Director Emeritus  
Reading Public Museum



*"Body-as-puzzle-piece humanoids glide playfully in an eternal future."*

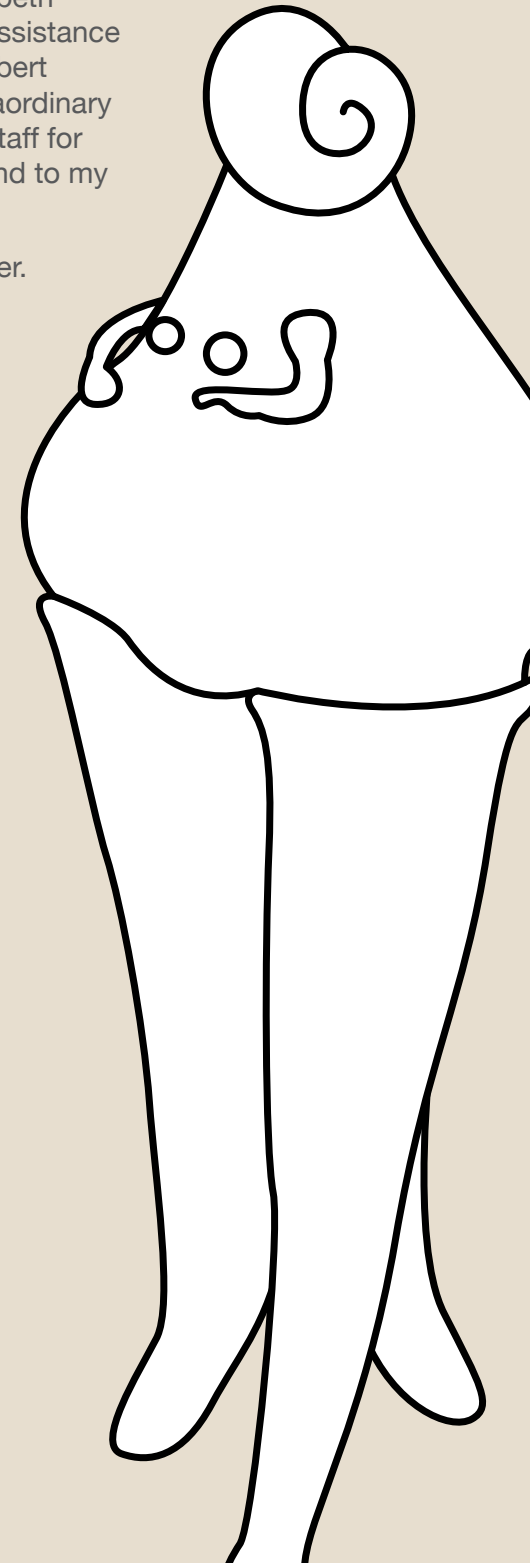
*Ceramic, 2008, height 29"*

This show is dedicated to the life force of my mother, Elizabeth Snyder Palcho. I thank my husband, Terry Griffith, for his assistance in the studio and for his sharp aesthetic insight. I thank Robert Metzger for his interest in my work and for writing the extraordinary essay for this brochure. Thanks also to the GoggleWorks staff for their hard work and enthusiasm in setting up the exhibit, and to my friends and family, for their loving support.

This exhibit is supported in part by a grant from Marlin Miller.

Photography: Kevin Brett, Karen Palcho and Terry Griffith

Catalog Design: Melissa Lobach





Karen Palcho is an artist, traveler, teacher and owner of *Karen's Botanicals* and *Palcho's Pottery* ([www.karensbotanicals.com](http://www.karensbotanicals.com)). Like her art, Karen's businesses are rooted in a fascination with the alchemy of transforming earth-based, raw materials into useful, beautiful things.

An art teacher for twenty-six years, Karen has taught in public and private schools, museums and art centers. She is an adjunct professor of Art Education at Kutztown University and works for the International Baccalaureate Organization. She has studied and taught art in Pennsylvania, Alaska, Luxembourg, The Ivory Coast, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, Slovakia and Israel. She earned a B.S. in Art Education from the Pennsylvania State University in 1982, and an M.Ed. from Kutztown University in 1990. She and her husband, Terry Griffith, live in Berks County, Pennsylvania.