



THE FEELING SERIES PAINTINGS

by GAINOR ROBERTS

The Story of how these paintings
were created

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THE STORY OF THE FEELING SERIES PAINTINGS

I wish I knew when I got the idea for this series of paintings. I think it was sometime in the mid 70s. It began as a small concept; “I wish I could paint the emotions that I hear people try to express in words”. Joining AA in 1973 renewed my creativity and it was a thrill, upon getting sober, to discover that alcohol and drugs did not completely wipe out my talent. From that little beginning I became obsessed with the idea and it rolled around in my mind for years, surfacing every time I sat in a meeting listening to stories of grief, anger, shame and fear. I didn’t know where to begin such a project. In fact it was not possible at that time, since by then we were living aboard a 31-foot sailboat. The ideas lodged into my brain and took root. Moving ashore, I finally had a studio, the time, and the ideas, but I felt that I lacked some technical abilities and I was creatively blocked. I enrolled in school, attending classes at the National Academy in New York and later at Lyme Academy, in Old Lyme, Connecticut. Still I could not get my mind off the images for these paintings.

But I was still emotionally muddled and the images in my mind had clearly been turned into my feelings, rather than some abstract idea that included everyone’s notion of love, or anger. I needed a method of accessing my own emotions to be able to translate the images to canvas and so three years in psychotherapy ensued and finally the first painting, Anger, emerged during my course in therapy. I chose Anger because I felt, at the time, that if I could paint my anger I would be able to paint all the rest. I didn’t know how difficult some of the others would turn out to be!

The paintings were launched in January of 1994. I presented Anger and Joy at my solo show at the Hoxie Gallery, in Westerly, Rhode Island, later that year. Moving to a new studio presented new challenges and the next four paintings came to life on canvas.

Why it was so important to paint Fear next is unknown to me. It just was. After completing Love, Grief, Jealousy and Loneliness I was on a roll. I felt I could tackle Fear, but I had no idea how to go about painting this image; objects illuminated by a bolt of lightning. I needed a way to backlight a window, but I was not enthusiastic about painting in the dark all night. I tried many ideas. Nothing clicked, and it seemed very difficult. Then, suddenly, another move, to another studio.

I knew Fear would be difficult. It was stuck as an image in my brain and nothing was going to change it. It took quite awhile, in my new studio, to realize that this was the perfect place to paint Fear. It had sliding patio doors, opening onto a dark hallway, and some halogen spot lights mounted outside the window pointing back toward the studio simulated the lightning perfectly. Sheets of blue film on the glass helped create that bluish look of a lightning bolt. I blocked the light from the window, turned off the studio lights and there was my lightning bolt. I ended up painting quite a lot of Fear in the dark after all! The nature of this painting was very overwhelming, and my life was suddenly becoming about as turbulent as the storm in the painting. The painting sat, face to the wall, for more than a year partially finished. The image, as it came to life, was chilling even to me!

As a child my mother thought she was encouraging me in my efforts to create by exclaiming “oh what fun!” when I presented her with one of my drawings or paintings. This irritated me enormously,

as it felt like life and death to me, and was not a whole lot of “fun” as my mother saw it. Eventually, as my mother’s life was nearing an end, I dragged the painting to her bedside, unfinished, and she burst into tears. Yes! She finally got it!

The grand debate over “art imitating life” has flourished for centuries, but in my case my life imitated my art, and the Fear Painting seemed to presage some very wild times, indeed. The metaphorical lightning bolt hit me, and my life changed dramatically, and drastically. Needless to say, when such a thing happens it is necessary to change one’s plans, and so the idea of completing all 12 paintings, finding a suitable venue for a show, and offering them for sale when they were all finished had to change.

It took about three months, in 2001, for us to experience total financial ruin in the stock market melt-down of that year. We had purchased a home in Florida that was to be our winter get-away. Now it was necessary to move to Florida full time, which meant that I had to finish Fear which was still languishing face to the wall in my Westerly, Rhode Island studio. I knew it was folly to think that painting could be completed anywhere else.

For a long time after my move to Florida the Feeling Series paintings lived in a storage unit in the dark, unseen and waiting. I feared they would be there until I died. I could not predict when I could work on the rest of them, or manage such large canvases in my tiny studio. A friend who had collected a lot of my work, wanted to purchase two of them, and it felt right to me that they should be seen and appreciated rather than spend years in the dark of a storage unit. So I sold Joy and Love in the spring of 2002 which generated some much needed cash to live on.

Life was a daily struggle to survive; my husband’s health was failing, and we both had to seek employment to scrape by. The move to Florida meant that I had to reinvent myself as an artist in a new locale and I began slowly to put my art career back together by exhibiting locally as much as I could, joining art groups and teaching painting and drawing. The Feeling Series still raged on in my brain. The next painting was to be Shame. I had those carved masks in my studio in Westerly, and I knew exactly what I wanted to convey in the painting as it was going to follow Fear. In 2004 I put together the still life for Shame in my tiny studio. It dominated one side of the room, while the canvas dominated the other. I worked on it sporadically for the next few years, but I lacked the energy and focus to work on it, and as the painting developed I felt all the years of pent up shame uprising and staring me in the face. It was as if the painting was attacking me. It would sit on my easel for years at a time before I got enough time and energy to put in an afternoon’s work on it. And there was no flow, no creative juices running; it was simply a grind, and all the while seeing my husband’s life ebbing. Those were not good years!

In 2009, after my husband died, I decided to make the living room into a large, airy and bright studio for myself. The Shame still life had to be moved and set up in its new place, creating more problems. Shame was finally finished on August 1, 2010 after nine years of waiting for me.

Many times over those years I made resolutions and pledges to “deal” with these paintings. One

New Year I decided to spend the year deciding if I was going to abandon the series, and leave it at seven (or maybe eight counting Shame). It seemed like an awful thought, I felt that I was abandoning a part of myself, and I would resolve, once again, to try to get to work on the Feeling Series sometime in that year, only to repeat the cycle the next.

The Feeling Series is not an attempt to depict your emotions. They are very autobiographical and many people do not see in them anger, or joy, or grief. These are my images and my feelings, but hopefully they are universal enough to touch some emotions in you; one lady saw serenity in Anger! On closer examination it turned out that she associated pastel colors with her mother and when talking about that subject her voice rose several octaves and I detected quite a lot of “feeling” there as she went on and on about her pastel mother, while raving on and on about how much she liked the painting!

The ideas for these paintings seem to be “delivered” to me from someplace that can only be described as mystical. Once formed, the image seems complete and unchangeable. Sometimes a found object will resonate and spark off the rest of the imagery of the painting, a dream will show me the image, or it comes to me while driving the car, or cleaning the house. Sometimes in a meditation, or simply walking down the street the idea is there, sometimes fragmented and sometimes totally complete. I wanted to paint Jealousy but thinking about it brought on a blank; I could not “see” it. One day while browsing through a Massachusetts antique store the spiral staircase jumped off the table at me, and at that moment I had my painting.

The rest of the Feeling Series are: Awe, Inspiration, Guilt, and Laughter. I know what they look like and now that my life is somewhat back to a normal level of chaos, I no longer feel driven to make pledges to get the series completed. I can not explain how it was “decided” that there had to be twelve paintings; I do think about that from time to time, but I have learned not to question too much. My job is to paint them, and let them go back to where they came from.



48 x 48

oil

\$7500

ANGER

The idea for *Anger* came to me during the course of therapy, when I visualized my anger being confined between my brain and my stomach, in a tube that ran between the two places. Its outlet was my mouth. Kind of like an inverted organ pipe. I saw so much anger around me, in movies, on the news, in stories told by friends. It was clearly a red feeling, and so when I found the glass heads in Pier One I knew I had the basis of the *Anger* painting. I built the acrylic tubes, sealing the ends with plastic rounds, filled them with colored water and set up the still life. The bunch of tulips is a visual pun on “two lips” the mouth where my anger gets ventilated.



48 x 30

oil

Private Collection

JOY

Music, art and nature: the three sources of great joy for me. Joy seems so uncomplicated. Other emotions have layers of other feelings attached to them, but joy is pure, straight and direct. I wanted to make this painting simple. I needed a reminder to “keep it simple” (which, obviously I have a hard time with) and so I tacked on the wall of my studio David Hockney’s beautiful painting of Mount Fuji to remind me that great art is greatest when it is the simplest. Less is more! I have had a love affair with music since my toddler days, and once badgered my parents in getting me a violin. It turned out that my talents lay elsewhere, and my musical abilities made our dog howl until I was “allowed” to stop playing, mercifully saving both the dog and my father’s ears. Later I understood that it was the shape of the instrument that made me desire it. And what other flower to illustrate joy than a bunch of “glads” pointing straight to the sky?



48 x 36

oil

Private Collection

LOVE

This painting is about my own love affair with love. It is about coupling and marriage. The red cloths have “tied the knot”. Close observers will see the “Big Book” under the vase of flowers, a tribute to the fact that I did not know how to love until I got sober, and the love of my life, my soul-mate, was there at my first meeting! Violating all the advice and warnings from sponsors and friends we “went under the table” and nearly paid dearly for this demented activity. Trumpets seem appropriate for describing the fanfare and drama of love. My own wedding ended with Purcell’s *Trumpet Voluntary*. It is about the rainbow, all the colors, intertwined and vibrant, glorious and sunshiny. Sunflowers with their heart shaped leaves, fixed upon the sun as it goes across the sky say love to me. But there is a dark side to love, that under-the-table love, in the dark, in secret, clandestine and obsessive. It’s the Garden of Eden of love and the loss of innocence and the way we are changed forever by our love affairs.



48 x 48

oil

\$8500

LONELINESS

It seems to me that the loneliest people I know come with bright exteriors showing no indication that they are dying of aloneness. Empty boxes, with pretty flowers and angels, decorated with ribbons and lace, seemed to fit the feeling. On close inspection the mirror shows a symbolic figure, a head, mirrored back and forth, the poor soul mirroring its own self *ad infinitum*. How sad for this soul who's life is one of total self, perhaps trapped in the bottle of Four Roses on the table which holds a single orchid blossom. It's a kind of desperate place, swirling and drowning in the green of it, trapped by a barricade of paper boxes. It's so easy to escape the loneliness by simply taking the lids off or moving the boxes aside and letting the light shine in.



42 x 48

oil

\$6700

GRIEF

My grief explodes like firecrackers in my skull, coming upon me again when I think I've got it all finished. There it is again, those "Birds of Paradise" popping out when I least expect it. And I'm once again in the darkness, alone where no one can feel what I feel. I know there is a life outside of my grief, a gauzy loveliness, but I am stuck there until once again it finally passes. Enfolded by my memories, all the "Roses" (the sum total of all the losses and sorrows) of my life become mere shadows upon the walls of my mind and I weep rivers of tears while the melancholy voice of an oboe gives sound to my grief.



48 x 40

oil

\$7000

JEALOUSY

After thinking about jealousy and how to picture it, I decided it was too hard and left it out of the original series. Many years went by. One day I stopped with a friend to browse an antique shop in Massachusetts and the spiral staircase was sitting there on a table. It was instant: there was my jealousy painting! To me, jealousy is a feeling that spirals up or down going nowhere. During my youth the great Spanish modern dancer, José Limon, choreographed and danced the story of Othello, in the "Moor's Pavanne." I saw it performed many times. Jealousy, the stuff of murder and passion, entrapment and insanity created in Shakespeare's tragedy was mirrored in our own time by the spectacular performance of the O. J. Simpson trial. Of course it was no accident that the televised drama coincided exactly with the beginning of my painting *Jealousy* and I was able to paint all day and go home and watch the drama unfolding on TV at night! Here were the stage players, the manipulators, the snared and trapped souls, and always one who thinks they have escaped, only to learn that they are dragging jealousy around like an anchor.



54 x 40

oil on linen

private collection

FEAR

Painting *Fear* brought up so many feelings, fears, and memories it was nearly impossible to work on it. It took several years to complete. I have always been fearful of lightning storms, and the flash causes a kind of atavistic sensation down my spine that feels like fur or feathers being ruffled. As a child I was afraid of a lightning bolt setting our house on fire. My childhood held many terrors, and of course I came to understand that the lightning was a metaphor for the real storm within our household. My great-great aunt was a fine painter and in my bedroom, when I was a child, hung one of her paintings, called "Sands of Time". It was a portrait of a beautiful woman, holding an hourglass. I was told she was dying of TB. No Winnie-the-Poohs on the wall for this child! I would lie awake staring at it wondering if I was going to die of lightning bolts, TB, or snake bites. Eventually I learned there were other things to fear as well: the masked man with a gun, the contents of that Four Roses bottle, the strangers in our midst who are different from me. I learned to fear political systems that are based on injustice and greed where citizens are caged if they believe differently. But mostly it's death that I fear, the heartbeat ending, the life we know changing, the end of eras and ideas and beauty, the rampaging storm that is totally beyond our control, and the sands of the hourglass running out.



48 x 36 oil on linen \$9000

SHAME

The image for this painting came to me when I saw those carved masks in, of all places, T.J. Maxx. I knew I had to have them for *Shame!* It took me a long nine years before I got this painting completed! The image was technically very difficult to paint, and it brought up so many memories and old episodes of the shame in me, it was hard to look at it. I wanted parts of *Shame* to echo part of *Fear* and *Anger*, so I used the same table with open drawers, and similar colors and the swirl of red.

One of my missions is to try to create a beautiful image on the canvas using time honored methods of composition artists have used for centuries and when one of my friends or associates says “isn’t that beautiful!” I know I have succeeded in my mission. But more than that I wanted to capture the chaos, the conflict and confusion that shame brings on, the endless cycle of the shamee becoming the next shamer and the “boxes” that both are trapped within.



48 x 30 oil on linen \$3500

INSPIRATION

Friends have said, "why calla lilies, they look like funeral flowers", and "why black and white? It seems uninspired to me!" My answers are; calla lilies have been depicted in art for centuries, and symbolize various things like light, purity, chastity, sexuality, love, life and death. Seems like a good flower for Inspiration to me! If you look closely you will see that this painting is modeled after the Yin-Yang symbol, which stands for harmony, balance, and opposites. Another good model for Inspiration, but it also feels, to me, either on or off, either I am inspired or I'm not.....nothing in between with inspiration, and it is no accident that the word "inspiration" comes from the root meaning "to breathe" or "inspire" and it often does seem like a matter of life and death, especially when the inspired state of mind is gone and it feels like all the lights have gone out.



48 x 30 oil on linen \$5000

AWE

So many subjects are awesome. I knew that I wanted to incorporate those things that I find awesome in a kind of quiet way. I could have put the Grand Canyon in the background, but it seemed not quite right. Venus and Jupiter played tag across the winter sky several years ago and it literally blew me away as I watched it every night. Stargazer lilies, are the name of some very beautiful oriental hybrid lilies that I grew in my northern garden and they were named because they point their heads toward the sky, like I do. My beautiful carved Chinese altar is a marvel by some unknown craftsman who must have loved what he did because it seems saturated with energy and passion. And finally I can not live without music and when I think of the layers of complexities from building the instrument to making a cohesive sound from an orchestra or writing an opera I am literally awestruck by how amazing music is. Performers, conductors, and composers produce such glorious sounds.



48 x 48 oil on linen \$11,000

GUILT

So much chaos and baggage! I had to quit my job as Curator of the Gallery at Carrollwood Cultural Center to get this done, as I was feeling the pressure of my age, having turned 75 just a month before the painting was finished. I knew I couldn't get this painting done, and maintained that job. It took a year to assemble the still life. Many of the items had been collected years ago, when I saw something for a possible inclusion in *Guilt*. As the still life took on life, other items were added. I have spent many years ferreting out the secrets and guilts that have been with me for my lifetime, and most of them have been detoxified, although as this painting was in progress my guilt over money, and my lack of wise management became to the forefront and I realized that I had to try to do better in that area of my life. I know I am capable of murder, and who hasn't shot off their mouth, or shot themselves in the foot, metaphorically. So many unwise decisions, and so many hurts, both given and received! And I am a privileged white woman in a society that loves violence and shame toward all who are not privileged and white! Yes, I do carry the guilts of my ancestors within me. Alcohol, sex, rage, and religion... a turbulent territory of guilt, resentment, confusion, and regret. It is pretty dark, for sure.