

Night Journey: An Installation by Susan kae Grant

5501 Columbia Art Center, Dallas, Texas, April 1 – May 13, 2000

Some think that in dreams we consolidate our memories and process thoughts and experiences, but this dream world remains elusive to our conscious mind, almost immediately slipping from memory. As an artist, Susan kae Grant was captivated with the visual experience of the dream state and with the interconnections between dreams and memory and frequently incorporated dreams into her artwork. In February 1993, she began a seven-year long investigation into that unconscious world that we all inhabit by intertwining scientific inquiry with her innate artistic sensibilities. In *Night Journey*, the resulting installation, Grant shares with the viewer her interpretation of the ephemeral experience of wandering through a surreal landscape of the psyche.

Under the supervision of Dr. John Hermann, a psychologist at the UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas who had been conducting his own research into the visual nature of dreams, Grant slept successive nights in a specialized sleep research facility. Electrodes connected to various points on her body recorded brain waves, muscle activity, eye movements, heartbeat, and respiration. With all these distractions, Grant initially resisted falling into rapid eye movement sleep where vivid dreams occur. After nights of REM deprivation, she eventually entered this stage of sleep with great frequency, enabling research technicians to awaken her.

Scientists have found that when awakened abruptly from REM sleep, individuals are able to recall dreams in vivid detail. As video and audio equipment recorded, research technicians repetitively woke Grant from REM sleep and asked her to describe the images she had seen in her mind's eye. Their questions were designed to evoke visual clues that would then trigger deeper recall. When the procedure concluded, Grant took the scientific records of her experience and reconstructed the written chronology of her dreams with the assistance of transcriptions of the taped interviews.

When she considered the dilemma of translating the written chronicle into visual form, Grant resisted a natural tendency to illustrate her dreams in narrative form, preferring instead to portray them as a series of fleeting images that merge from one to another. Alluding to the virtual nature of dreams, Grant avoided the specificity of straight photography and instead constructed images totally from shadows projected by models and studio props. Shadowy leaves and branches throughout the images contribute to the effect of being in a dream landscape.

In the installation, images printed on translucent 4' by 8' chiffon panels hang from the ceiling, inviting viewers to virtually enter Grant's dreamworld. The ethereal figures gesture into the air or reach towards objects, some identifiable and some mysterious—a bird, a mirror, or a "genie" lamp. In several of the images, two figures—one male and one female—interact with each other, sometimes with a sense of conflict. As the figures' actions and the objects seem to hold some symbolic meaning, they encourage speculation, yet resist traditional psychological interpretation. Instead, the overall impression is experiential, of being in the dream, where images change too quickly and fade from memory.

Barbara McCandless, Curator of Photographs
Amon Carter Museum

