



## REPRESENTATIVE ARTIST

Linda Stein

### INTRIGUED BY THE FACE

I can be a pain to friends who want to go to a show with me. I can't agree to simply get the best seats available because when going to a live performance—whether theatre, opera, dance, or lecture—I must sit up close. In fact, even when everyone says the viewing is better further back (you can see the entire ballet troupe or better take in the stage set), I still prefer first to fifth row orchestra. If I can't see the performers' eyes and facial expressions, I don't feel part of the event; I lose interest and feel detached from the actors.

So it came as no surprise to me when, in the 1970s, I became obsessed with the face in my art. I drew it incessantly, creating paintings, prints, collages, sculptural boxes, anything that could feed my frenzy. Increasingly, my work became more abstract, sketchy, bold, funny. Even sexy. I remember creating an etching based on a serial drawing of faces, in grid formation, that I sketched while my lover was going down on me. I made secret abbreviated initials (e.g., o.s. for the initiation of oral sex; c for climax) under some of the faces as she turned me on. It was an experimental recording of the state of my excitement leading to climax. As a limited-edition-fine-art-print, called *Esoterica*, the etching was exhibited that year in the Yugoslavia International Print Biennial. It even received an award. No one asked what the notations were on the etching, and I didn't offer the information.

Over the years my motif evolved into a facial profile, rather than full face, now including a caveat: I was compelled to focus on the face just below the eyes. I found that I could not draw eyes in those days, however

much I tried. There was an internal pull preventing me from drawing them. Why?

I now believe it was because I was struggling with my sexual identity and wanted not to be *seen*. I was embarrassed, ashamed and in hiding. My life in those days was too confusing, too painful to have eyes on me, even from my own sketches. So I started drawing the face just below the eyes. (You know, we artists think we are in control when we make art. We sometimes feel like gods or masters of the universe, but in reality, though we sit in the driver's seat, we are merely acting as chauffeur. We take orders from some internal power and follow it feverishly.)

I could not help seeing profiles, *sans* eyes, in everything: stones, clouds, shadows, cracks in pavement, water. Hundreds of profile variations seeped out of me in every medium. I grew addicted to a personally generic and androgynous—or non-gendered—profile. If a viewer saw it as male or female, I would be taken aback, for gender had not occurred to me. What did consume me was that my invented profile have a prominent Greek-like nose, soft voluptuous lips and smooth curvilinear chin. Sometimes a neck and sweeping landscaped shoulder were included. With nymphomaniacal urgency, I had to *have* these faces, over and over again, in every possible variation. I had to possess them with pencil and brush, in collage and print. My appetite and passion were limitless.

It has been said that the artist Ingres “painted with his tongue.” For me, the pencil line of the nose slowly making the turn from its vertical descent to horizontal arc has been grippingly sensual. The “u” under the nose for the indentation, the delicate lips, the powerful shoulder created a visceral response in me just this side of orgasm. Importantly, during the creative process, the angles, curves, darks and lights of these profile lines had to be done very carefully, according to my own set of rules; otherwise this charged fascination would not take hold. Eventually, as I followed these rules, my response grew more autonomic and my hand became calligraphic and free. The profile motif took on other associations for the viewer: a page filled with lip notations looked like flying birds; profiles in all directions on canvas appeared to be musical notes.

On and on I worked until a profile *writing* emerged from me. As I developed more of an automatic fluency in my notational script, the teacher in me revived, and I felt that I could instruct anyone so inclined to write this way. I created *A Guide to Profile Writing* with a step-by-step set of instructions for the beginning Profile Writer. I began writing *missives* made up of lips, noses and chins, complete with salutation and return address, and offset with commas, colons, and other punctuation marks; and musical *compositions* with profiles neatly lined up as if they represented the chords of a composer's score; and larger paintings reminiscent of long-lost historical documents written in Hieroglyphics, Sanskrit, or Egyptian.

Never have I known how it is that I enter or leave each series in my art. It is not in the *wanting* that it happens. I always keep working as if the current obsession will go on forever. Trying to stop it is futile. And so, continuing this missive series with no end in sight, I picked up some bent nails and made believe that they were letters of the alphabet against a piece of wood, instead of paper. Gradually, without cognizance, the three-dimensionality of the material began to consume me and I was swept away in a new series of non-facial abstract assemblages. This was followed by a major sculpture series with an anti-war theme (see Stein, *HLFQ* Winter 2000, Vol. 1, No. 4, “The Machete Blade: An Artist's Search for Security and Strength”). Eventually I felt that my *face* days were completely over.

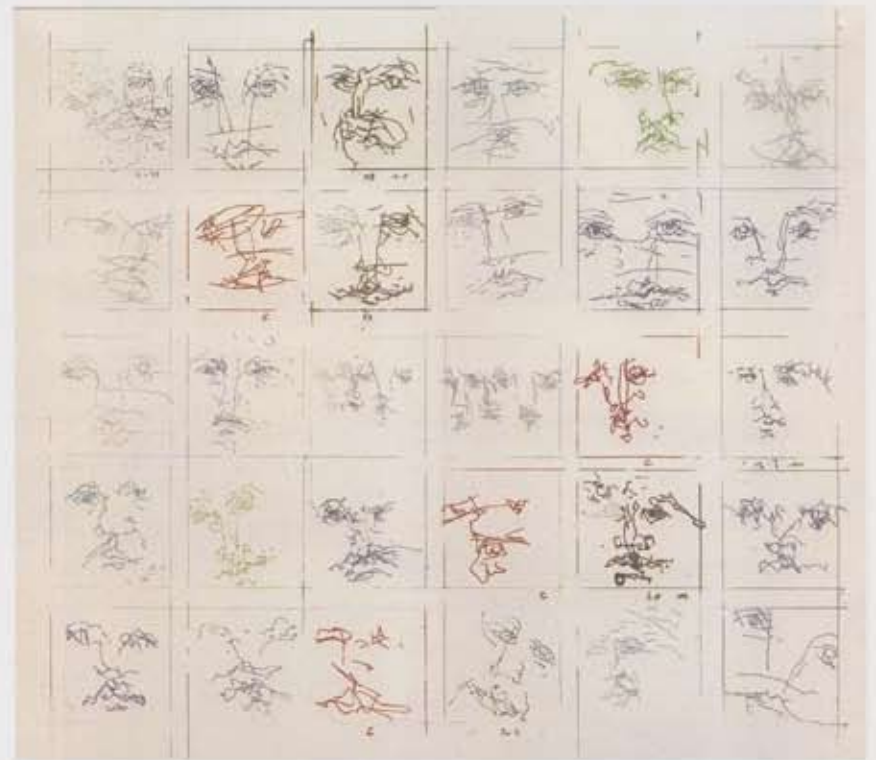
And they were—for the next two decades—as I defined myself as *abstract sculptor*. Then, one day in 2002, I came upon a series of facial profiles of Virginia Woolf that I had done in 1976 and found myself, once again, entranced by the face. Other faces, besides that of Woolf, started to take hold in me, and before I could gauge what was happening, I was hooked again. I started to do commissions of well-known faces and other less-known ones. Some were in grid formation and others had three-dimensionality; some remained as paintings and others became multiples. Unexpectedly, I soon found myself including the eyes! Wanting at this time for the face to be recognizable I now must have felt that eyes were essential.

So here is where you find me: attached again to the face and absorbed with myriad ways to depict it. I call my new series *Mood Portraits* because it

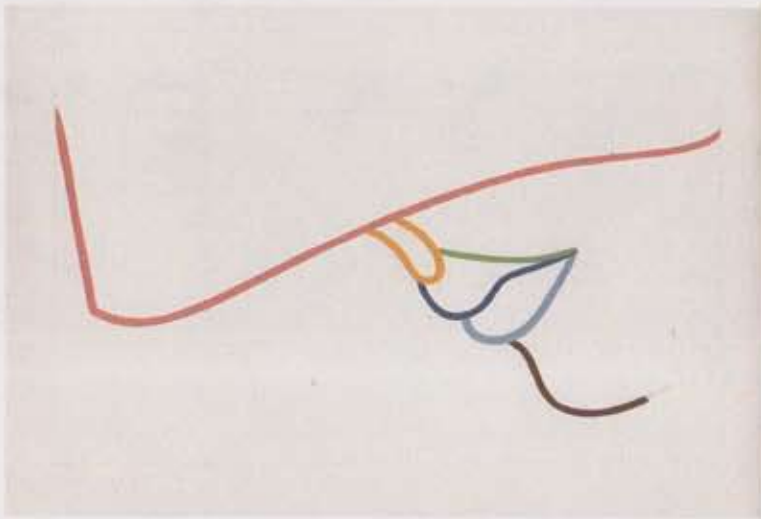
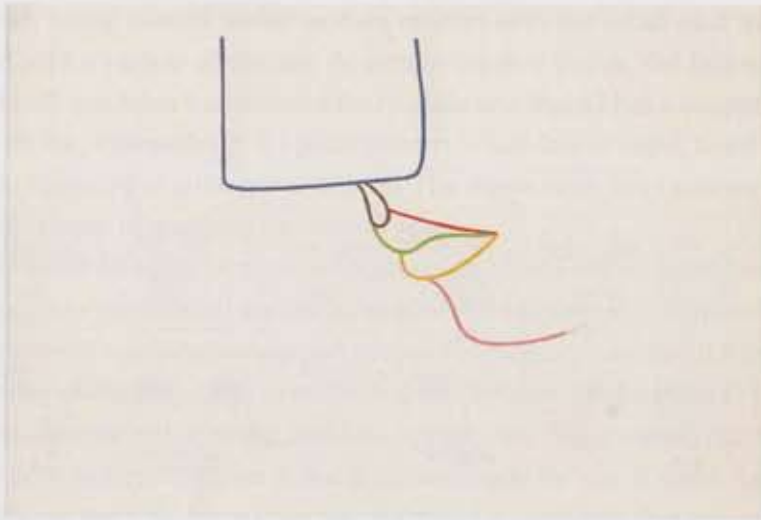
has an ambient element of abstraction which relates to my earlier work. As with my sculpture, I gravitate toward the tactile and include an element of pattern in my current series: texture created with the brush as if it were sewn with a variety of stitches. At certain creative points, the feeling that my brush has been transformed into needle and thread has a soothing effect on me, mesmerizing. If I paint pattern in bed late at night, it will relax me to the point of putting me to sleep. The move away from realism adds another layer of meaning for me as I work.

An active feminist, I enjoy making portraits of well-known women, especially when my finished pieces, as singles or multiples, are commissioned by nonprofit organizations as part of their fundraising activities. It then satisfies my political cravings as well as my artistic ones. As in the past, I prefer doing portraits with a profile or three-quarter view. Transversing that roadway of nose/lips/chin lines is like a homecoming for me. It grabs me and makes me feel safe. Here I can rest and feel the familiarity that comes with repetition. I can enjoy, once again, being intrigued with the face.

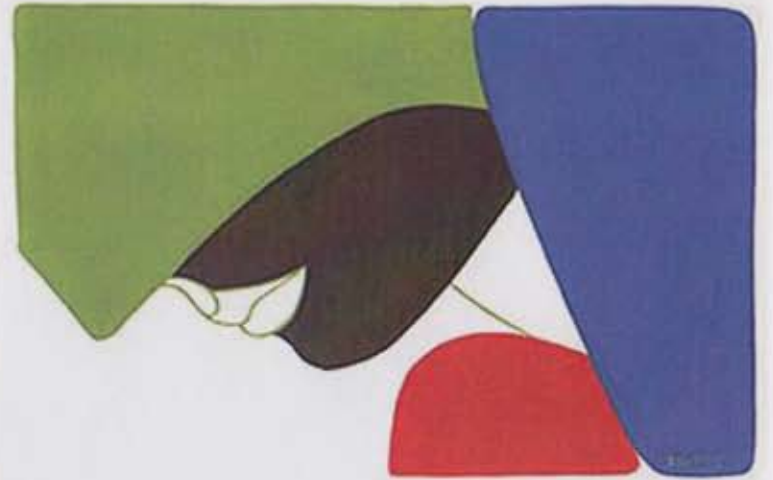
Following are 15 paintings, © 2004 Linda Stein, reproduced here by permission.



*Esoterica 412*



*Profile as If Wire Sculpture*



*Profile Solids 419, 420*



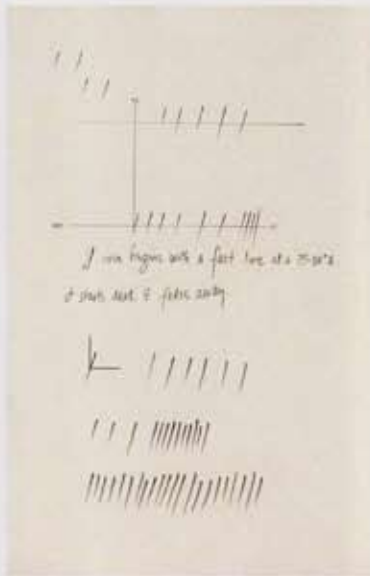
*Profile Strings 416, 417*



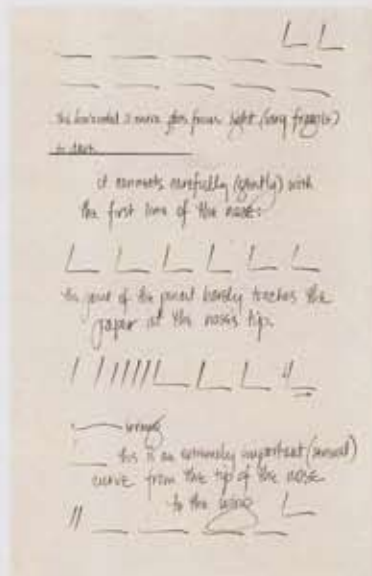
*Profile Landscapes 411, 415*

# A Guide to the Profile Writing of Stein

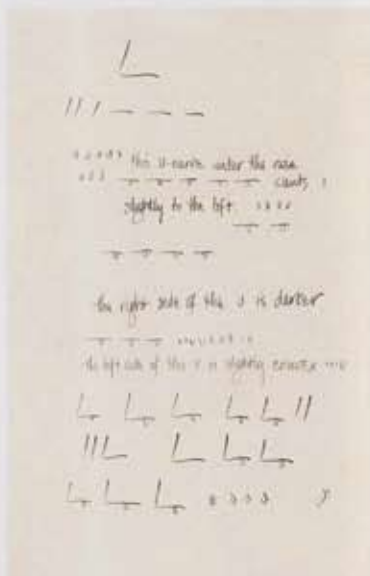
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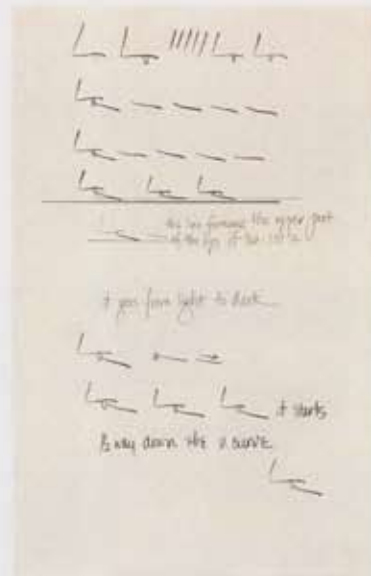
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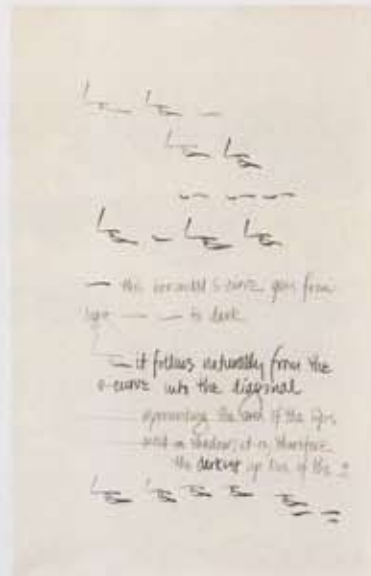
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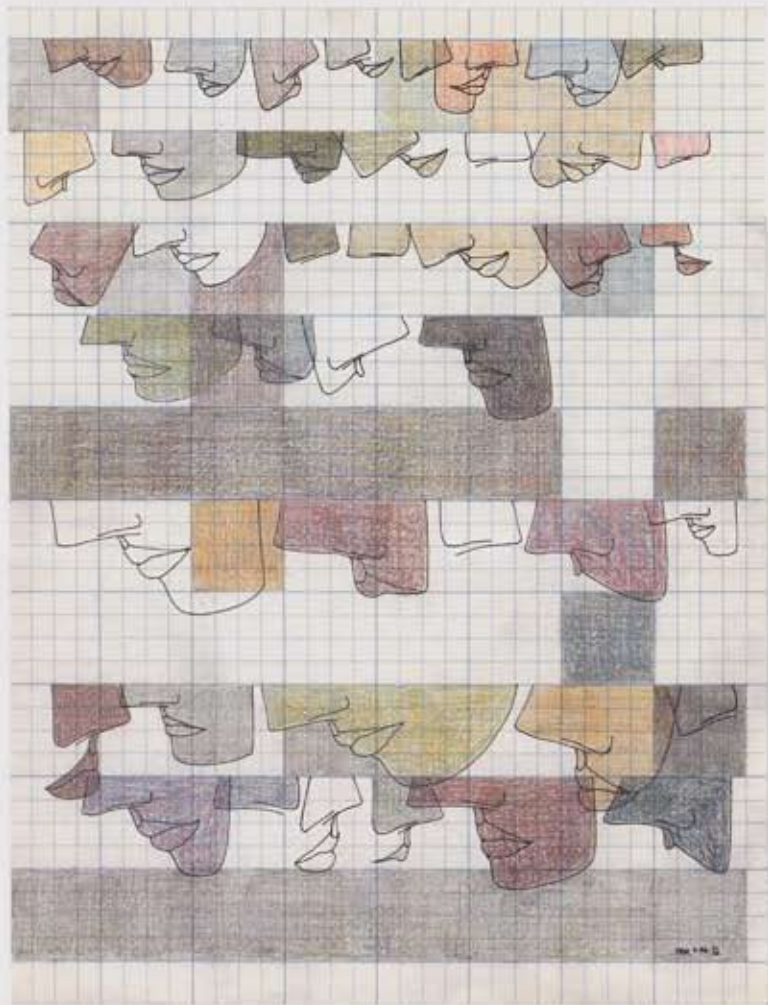
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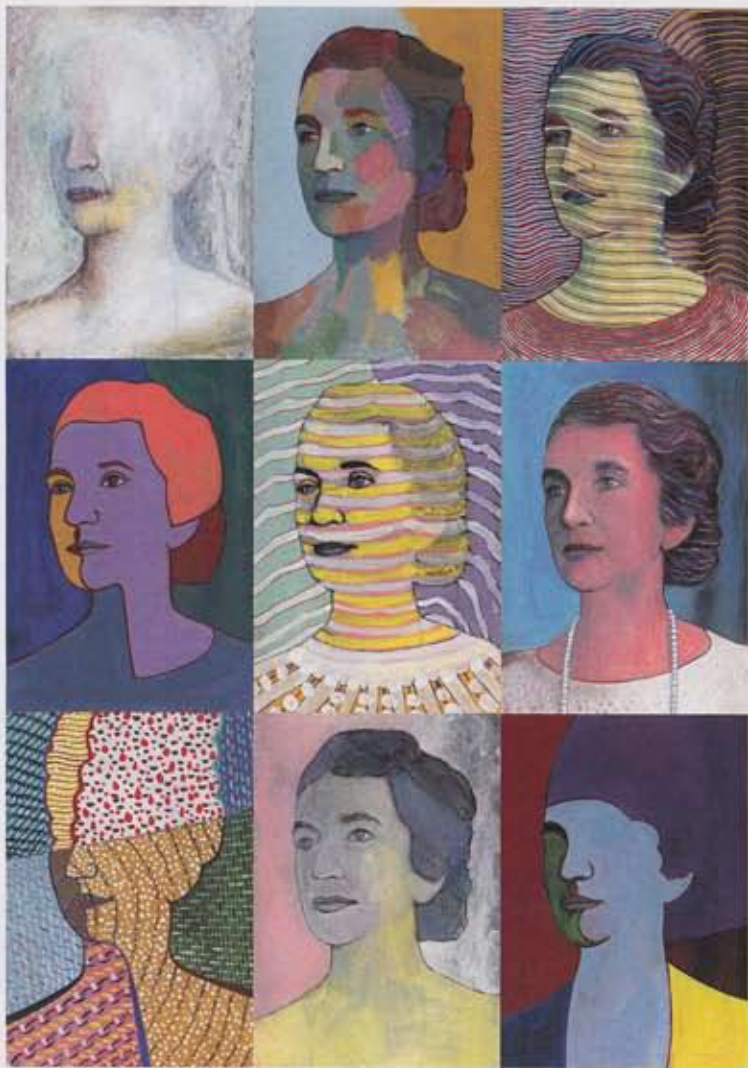
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Profiles Hanging 414



Profile Notations 418



Margaret Sanger 380



Billie Jean King 382

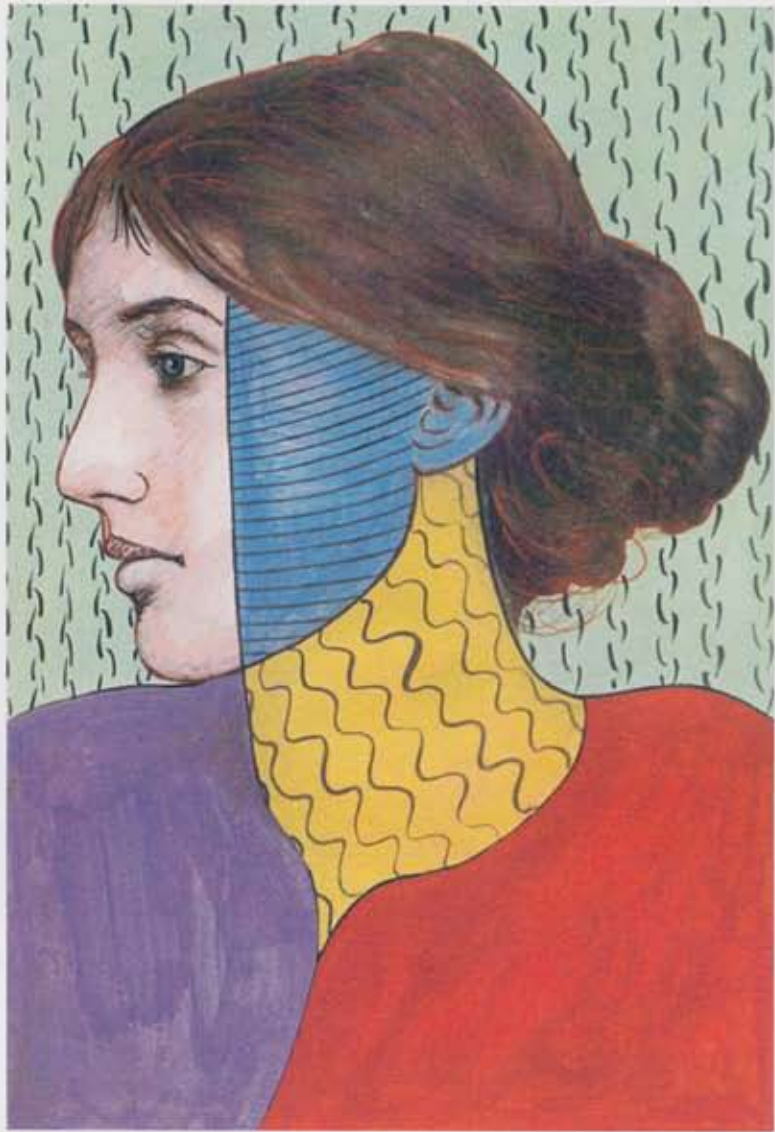




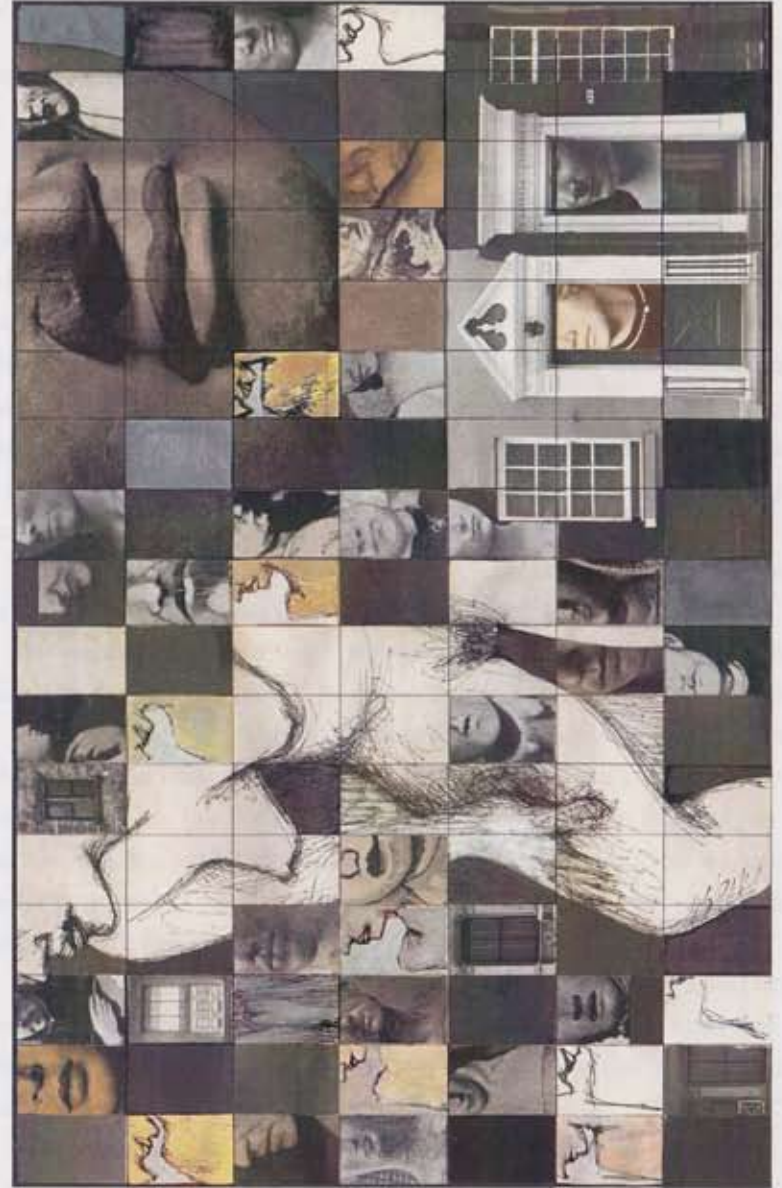
Flo Kennedy 407



Bella Abzug 408



Virginia Woolf 425



Looking Within 392