

Artweek

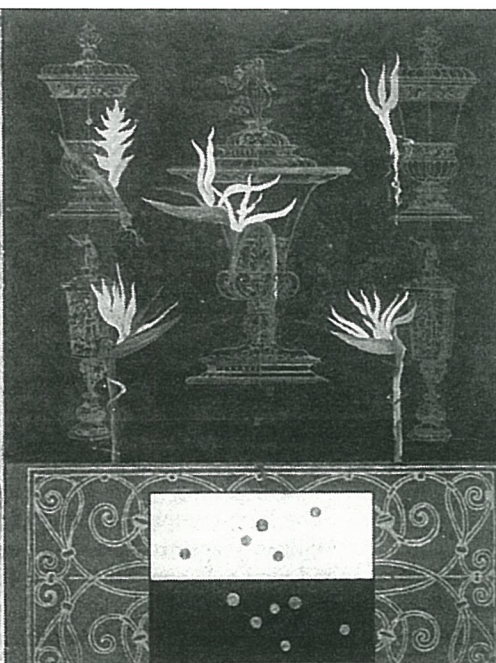
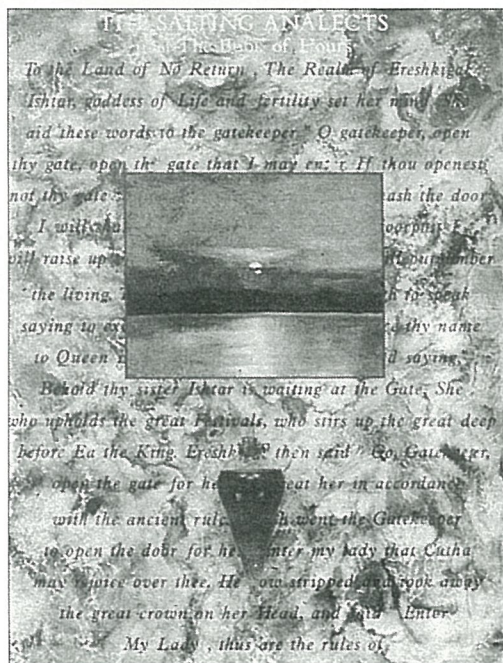


■ Richard Diebenkorn ■ Sunshine & Noir ■ Carl Cheng ■ Ellen Ziegler

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Dennis Evans, *The Salting Analects*, encaustic and mixed media on canvas, 48" x 72", from *The Book of Hours*, at Erickson & Elins Gallery, San Francisco. page 16

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As I was hanging about with friends at a recent gallery opening, the conversation turned to survival tactics. A round of moaning about "day" jobs led to tales of freelance employment which led directly to stories of pillaging the earthquake kit for dinner. "After all," said a sculptor I shall refer to as Ed, "how often do you get to eat Spam?" We all laughed, but as I drove home I kept thinking about all the things my earthquake kit has done for me.

At the age of thirteen, I was attracted to the life of an artist in part because I pictured it—sadly, in error—as a life without housework. It was not a completely fabulous assumption; how many stories do you know that celebrate Picasso's prowess with a broom? It was, however, an idea that failed to take into account some essential differences between Picasso and me. As I grew and found other role models, I also performed practically scientific tests to determine the minimum levels of dish washing, floor waxing, bill filing and earthquake kit renewal necessary to sustain life.

My enthusiasm for this last chore was given a major shake by the Loma Prieta temblor of 1989. As I was still struggling with remedial vacuum cleaning, I had rather sluffed off higher levels of household maintenance such as obtaining emergency supplies. But, as I huddled under a desk in North Beach listening to crashing plate glass and sirens, a positive lust for a neat package with flashlights, batteries, blankets and radios—not to mention healthful snacks and bottled water—arose within my breast. And, unlike most of the resolute promises I make to myself to do better, this one stuck.

The subject, of course, came to the immediate attention of many people and my college alumnus magazine printed an authoritative list of the supplies needed for a first-class kit. Bottled water I presumed would be necessary but garbage bags? For sanitation, it said. Oh. And a tent and a camp stove and bottles of propane and more ... much too much stuff to fit into my tiny budget all at once. I resolved to come home from the grocery store with one "earthquake" item per week, and hope that Pluto kept napping until I accumulated a respectable reserve.

And so I undertook the study of indestructible foods. Although at first I invested in dried milk and food bars, I foresaw a dilemma. If one engaged in responsible rotation of earthquake kit goods, ensuring that they didn't cross the line between indestructible and petrified, one was going to have to eat the stuff some day. It was hard to picture the day that would be improved by a big glass of reconstituted milk and an aging nutrition bar. I began polling friends on the contents of their earthquake kits, and so my study accidentally turned towards attitudes towards risk management.

"You can't prepare for everything," said Mark, whose kit consisted of a flashlight. His remark came just as I had begun to wonder about making up kits for my car and my studio and my office in addition to the one I had at home and the one I gave my boyfriend for Christmas.

"I figure my car will be wherever I am," said Paul, who had a neat cardboard box wrapped in tape and labeled "earthquake" in the trunk of his car. I wondered if I also needed an earthquake kit for my bicycle.

"You have to have tools with you," said Stewart. In 1989, he found himself trying to dig a woman out of a collapsed building with his fingers. I transferred the Swiss army knife to my purse.

"Honey, we have an old tent you can have," said my

father, who proceeded to order a brand-new, high-tech tent from Eddie Bauer and have it delivered to my door.

"Are you sure you can carry all that?" said my mother. Festooned with all the camping gear I had acquired I was going to have trouble standing, much less running for cover.

No general consensus appeared on the appropriate degree of preparedness; I had now spent more time creating my earthquake kit than I had devoted to finding my apartment. I was going to have to make my own decision about when to stop. This was reminding me of something—like maybe my entire life.

"You can't prepare for everything" is the cousin of "Anything could happen," the mantra of every artist who's still on the down side of dominating the world art market. Initiate a random conversation with an artist about his/her career, and most likely you'll strike hope, even if you have to drill through a little modesty to get there.

"I figure my car will be wherever I am," is the earthquake kit equivalent of "If I just do good work, the work will speak for itself," which sounds valiant, except that anyone can see that if what the world really responds to what artwork says, a lot of artwork is saying "bury me."

"You have to have tools with you," reminds me of a "business for artists" book. Tools are good, résumés are good, the Swiss army knife will help in a few earthquake situations but it's probably not going to save my life and the résumé may get one in a door or two but it's not going to create lasting interest in a body of work.

My father's offer of a tent reminded me that, whatever the costs of risking an artist's career, loved ones offer a shelter; my mother's down-to-earth assessment became a metaphor for another question, "Can I carry this? Should I give up my studio and start putting the money into an IRA? Do I want to spend my life energy making art that may go straight into storage? Do I want to spend the money to send out another round of slides?"

These are questions, that, like the threat of an earthquake, are not going to go away. I've had earthquake nightmares where the city is burning and I'm running, running, trying to find my cat; a scene I've never experienced in waking life. But my artist's nightmare appeared in broad daylight: walking past an empty lot one day, I saw a perfectly respectable abstract painting propped up against a tree. It seemed to have been part of a load of trash that someone dumped. Perhaps the dumper couldn't quite bring themselves to toss it on the ground, perhaps a curious passer-by turned it over and, unwilling to take it home, honored it by placing it where it could be seen. I passed the lot occasionally for weeks, and for weeks the painting survived in the shade of that tree, a flash of blue in the dirt. Eventually, there was a rain, the painting fell face over in the mud, then one day I walked by and saw only the tracks of bulldozers.

If that was the future of my work, would I still care to make it? Somehow that's the wrong question; as I can see when I try out the parallel: "If I were to die in an earthquake, would I want to live now?" You just keep going, and if it reduces your present anxiety to lay in a few emergency supplies, great. But when laying in the supplies becomes a source of anxiety in itself, when worry cancels the joy of the moment, it's time to relax. At the end of one's time, I suppose the best one could hope for is a life that parallels the earthquake kit of my friend Jessica: "I had a can of soup," she said, "but I ate it."

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