

My Recollections of Making *The Maze*
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April 2019

I first learned about the Scottish ballad writer Helen Adam (1909-1993) from the American poet Denise Levertov (1923-1997). I met Denise while I was an artist-in-residence at Yaddo in 1975. She told me, quite emphatically, that I *had* to meet Helen.

Helen Adam had made a name for herself in San Francisco, where she was an active part of the San Francisco Renaissance, an avant-garde literary movement contemporaneous with the City's Beat Generation in the 1950s and 60s. She was friends with Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan and the wonderful collage artist Jess, who influenced Helen to create collages in the late 1950s. I wrote Helen a letter and she invited me to visit her in New York City, where she had relocated. Though she was nearly 40 years older, we became friends. In 1976 I was offered a residency at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts on Deer Isle, Maine. Sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Copernicus Society, my residency was designed to produce a work of art with a poet whose ideas were compatible to mine. Helen was my only choice. We lived together that summer at Haystack. Every morning, Helen swam nude in the cold Maine waters and collected beautifully round grey stones from her walks along the shore. Under a tight deadline, I confined myself to a makeshift work space in the glass-blowing studio.

Adam's dire Scottish ballad themes parallel many of the ideas I like to explore in my art. We decided to concentrate on her poem "In and Out of the Horn-Beam Maze." I chose a large chalkboard slate, not unlike those found in schools, as my "canvas." I laid out the poem's symbolic journey and then etched the last stanza into the slate. Clues and artifacts throughout the work visualize the poem's narrative. Four children run out for their mid-summer play. At the garden's end, they run into a maze. Only three come out. The poem tells the fate of Flora:

When she reached the center nothing was there.
Nothing! Nothing! Nowhere, nowhere!
Only silence, and radiant air.
She never ran out of the maze.

Flora's fate captivated me. *The Maze* is essentially a *memento mori* to her. Like Flora, we all enter the maze of life not knowing what we will find along the way or when we will be

transformed. I thought it important for Helen and I to include personal remembrances to Flora. Helen's birth sign can be found on a map of Scotland, near her native Glasgow, and mine can be found on a map of Ireland, near my ancestral home Adare. Locks of our hair – Helen's on the bottom left edge and mine on the bottom right edge – connect us to Flora's fate.

In 2018 I got an unexpected email from collector Malcolm Knapp. He told me he was "downsizing" and offered to give *The Maze* back to me. He had purchased it after seeing it in the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian in 1977, where it was exhibited in "The Object as Poet" exhibition. He always thought it was a major piece of my career. I accepted his generous offer, got it back, and saw it needed to be repaired. The threads had broken and become faded. There was some cleaning needed. I took it apart and repaired it, making a few changes. I eliminated a moth that had largely disintegrated. I rationalized that it wasn't the correct moth referred to in the poem! I substituted a different black bird in the upper right. I worked on and off on it for about three months, all the while trying to stay true to its original spirit.

But of course, I am a different artist than when I created this at the age of 29 and Helen was 66. I am 71 now and Helen is gone. Life is different now; some things are better; some things aren't. A new type of conservation clear acrylic glazing has been invented and now covers the work, protecting it and making it easier to view. I look forward to seeing how *The Maze* is received now. Working on it these past few months has given me time to think about my brief but intense summer in Maine collaborating with a friend and true artist whose reputation, I'm pleased to say, is undergoing a "renaissance" in literary circles today.