

**Dorothy Faison**

b.1955, Schenectady, New York, lives in  
Kailua, O'ahu  
exhibited in *Biennial I*

gallery floor

*The Captain's Lawnbed Courtesy of the Lawnboat  
Historical Society, 2010-2011*

mattress, Synlawn, wood, paper, paint and  
pigments, pillows, bed linens

right

*Aeternum, Servants Sub Pectore Vulnus/ Nursing  
an Everlasting Wound Within the Breast and the  
Lawn Boats Make their Deliveries, 2008*

watercolor, lithocoal, charcoal on paper

## DOROTHY FAISON

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Dorothy Faison wanted to be an artist since she was a young child, an interest recognized and nurtured by her parents. Her father, who worked in advertising, bought her art books. Her mother was interested in art history and took her daughter to museums in New York City. As Faison grew so did this drive to become an artist. At age four her parents divorced, and two years later, her mother having remarried, Faison left with the family to spend the next six years in Central and South America while her stepfather worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

For Faison, being immersed in new cultures with ancient histories would prove to have a lasting impact. Her experience in Bolivia from age nine to twelve was particularly memorable and affecting. She was fascinated by the local Indian cultures, the Aymara and Quechua, which had been less influenced by the Spanish than most in Latin America. She was especially attracted to the rituals of the people, which combined elements of Christian religion, mysticism and magic, as well as to the landscape of the Altiplano, a high, barren and desert-like plateau ringed by mountains.

In 1968 Faison returned with her family to the United States, which seemed to her like a foreign land after such a long absence. In Bolivia she had had no contact with television and media as most children growing up in the United States had, and American culture seemed strange and alienating at first. That same year, Faison accompanied her parents to Hawaii where they decided to settle. Faison enrolled at the Honolulu Academy of Art's Art Center classes for three years, and when her high school had little to offer in terms of an art program, she pursued her artistic interests on her own at home.

After high school, Faison enrolled as an art major with a secondary emphasis on art history and languages at the University of Hawaii-Manoa in the 1970s, with periods away at Sophia University in Tokyo and the Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland. She received a bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of Hawaii in 1977 and went on to earn a master of fine arts degree from Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1979.

While her undergraduate training had provided her with a solid grounding in a wide range of techniques and media, Faison wasn't sure how to transform her abilities into a meaningful vision. In graduate school, she began to focus on issues of natural order and societal dislocations that were precipitated by pregnancy and the birth of the first of her three children. Faison developed an imagery to fit her expressive needs by inventing a narrative that drew from her past experiences. The central element in this narrative was "Rachel", embodied in the form of sheep (the name Rachel is derived from the Hebrew word for ewe or female sheep) and serving as the alter ego of the artist and more broadly as a symbol for all women. To the sheep Faison gradually added other animals, populating magical landscapes with whole herds painted in bright colors and gold, many depicted on wheels like pull-toys. Eventually Faison abandoned this subject matter because she felt people tended to misread it as decorative and charming; she needed to find images which could be deeply personal, drawing on her own history, experiences and emotions, and yet resonate with broader associations addressing universal issues.

From the late 1980s to the present, Faison's work has assumed greater formal range and expressive power. In her paintings and drawings, Faison, sensing the potential for drama in the world around her, in history and in legend,

intermingles real and mythic times, past and present. Her expansive, sparse landscapes similar to that of the desolate Bolivian Altiplano, are sprinkled with dwellings and tents that suggest a primeval and/or nomadic presence. In the borders and peripheries of the works are elements drawn from many sources—depictions of tools and dolls from ancient and primitive cultures, boats, industrial structures, syringes, asparagus, helicopters—whose presence serves, like the chorus in a Greek play, to reference and amplify the narrative unfolded in the central stage of the pictorial space.

Faison uses a variety of motifs which are laden with allusions and meanings. She continues to use animals—usually dogs, cats, raccoons—which represent instinct and being in tune with the natural environment. Beds signify life and death: the place of creation and beginning (sex, love, birth) as the place where life starts, but also of decline and ending as the place where life ends. Similarly, cradles and sarcophagi refer to human inclinations, the former connected to nurturing, the latter to protecting and preserving. Tents with open doorways symbolize the potential of the unknown and yet to be realized. Airplanes serve as a "reality check," the artist says, a link to world events and the present.

Faison's mysterious images draw upon the most private and personal depths of her psyche. Mediated through her sensibility, however, they speak a universal language that encourages us to confront some of the eternal enigmas of human existence and ponder anew their significance and relevance in the contemporary world.