

# THREADS OF LIGHT:

Cloth Paintings by Ali



Ali

PUCKER GALLERY • BOSTON

## Thoughts from a Collector...

I bought one of the first works Ali brought to the Pucker Gallery. My romantic remembrance of how it went is that, one morning, unannounced, a serious young woman walked in off Newbury Street with her works rolled up under one arm. People looked at her and her work and were charmed, but told her to come back after lunch, whereupon she picked up her things and disappeared. I heard it was a great relief when she returned still clutching her work.

I showed up a few days later and bought, for Judy, my wife, *Acrobat on a Blue Rope*. I asked what the artist was like. I was curious about this person whose work stirred me and harassed me delightfully by making it so difficult to choose which picture to buy. Everybody described Ali differently but said the same thing – that she was lovely, mysterious, shy and determined, and that her presence was exotic. She wore boots, a longish skirt, a dramatic blouse and a marvelous heavy necklace. When I took our piece home, I told Judy its author sounded like a gypsy princess.

Later we met Ali, and over time have seen her often. I always check what she is wearing, especially her jewelry, which sometimes I can hear, just barely, from across the room.

Ali is like her work and vice-versa. And she has no idea how good she is or how interesting. She is authenticity personified and original in ways you can't be on purpose. Her work is disarming and elegant at a level that can only be achieved when elements of the primitive, the innocent and the personal are present.

Our original Ali piece is as fresh, surprising, and satisfying today as on the day we hung it. There is already in the early work of great artists, a purity and force that won't go away. Everything I loved about Ali's earlier work is still there, but even richer now, more magical. Her growth has been of the most trustworthy kind, steady and organic, utterly unselfconscious and natural. Her work speaks to us with increasing subtlety, power and ingenuity.

Recently, Ali has created some very large works. They are magnificent, but what delights me most about them is that they are as intimate as her smaller pictures. They insist on close attention, and personal scrutiny.

Ali is a person I am always thinking about, wondering how she is and what she is working on. I can hardly wait to see what she does next.

— *B.A. King*  
Southborough, Massachusetts  
January 2007



**AC282** *Grand Canyon IX*  
67 x 37"



**AC267** *Fragments I*  
15 5/8 x 13 5/8"



**AC271** *Nicky Juggling*  
15 3/4 x 13 3/4"

# THREADS OF LIGHT: *Painting with Cloth*

In *Lighting Strikes Twice* (AC265) a thin, bright horizon created by one strand of white thread and lightning created by a few running stitches are the quintessence of Ali's imaginative use of fiber as pigment. But it is her skillful use of found cloth of varying weight and texture, dyed with graduated colors or woven with printed patterns that reveals her ability to think about and to manipulate such material in the way other painters use conventional pigment. She has translated the painter's vocabulary for applying pigment, texture, brush strokes, blending and shading of color and modeling of light into a new language of cloth.

Frequently Ali employs motion in a manner that is dramatic enough to create palpable tension within the environment of a picture. The approaching thunder storm that darkens the bleak landscape of *Lighting Strikes Twice* (AC265), and has pulled a sheer dress into its vortex, has overtones of terror, even violence. In contrast to her use of motion, energy and tension as thresholds into her paintings, Ali also frequently employs stillness and silence to establish a dominant mood. In some paintings this combination serves to quiet or neutralizes the mood of a picture. In other cases this combination suggests a narrative, although always unfinished.

After her use of cloth as pigment, throughout her career the use of light, and the lack of it, has been Ali's second most distinctive innovation. But the two are inextricable. Over time and continued experiments with layering sheer textiles to model shapes and create shadows and graduations of light and bold dappled interior patterns of light, Ali has evolved her own formulas for the more conventional chiaroscuro techniques deeply embedded in Western painting since the Italian Renaissance. Ali employs and manipulates light unlike the effusive washes of light that saturate the canvasses of Monet and other impressionists, but rather more like the manner in which Rembrandt employed "obscure light" to clarify details and to enhance the darkness of his canvasses. With Ali, too, her choice of varying qualities and sources of light defines her use of shadow and of darkness as comparable devices for modeling forms in her paintings.

Beyond Ali's use of light to 'color' an image, or suggest meaning, mood, or tone, her most engaging use of light is for its expressive liminal function, serving as a threshold between the physical world in which the viewer stands and the inner world of the painting. Frequently this is the result of an enticing manipulation of light sources. It is through her manipulation of light from various sources, often within the same painting, that Ali provides access into a painting. Not only does this eccentricity catch our attention, but it can tease logic and challenge our perception, making us look at the picture longer, or for a second and third time, thereby allowing us the leisure to be captured within the world of that image.

Ali is an ardent traveler and increasingly these experiences provide the impetus for her cloth paintings. While location provided the backdrop for her past Mexican and Venetian paintings, her most recent paintings are essentially about the backdrop—Colorado's Grand Canyon, that great chasm in the Colorado Plateau carved out by the Colorado river over millennia, where Ali trekked and boated in 2005. The two dominant features of the Canyon that have inspired this group of Ali's cloth paintings to date are the unique light and the dramatic surfaces of the steep walls of



AC269 *Fragments II*  
15 3/4 x 13 5/8"



**AC266** *Fragments III*  
15 1/8 x 13 5/8"

*with the imagery. However, with the new Grand Canyon pieces, for example, I am using the fabrics in the opposite way, showing the rough edges and using the wrinkles and the raw edges of the fabric to cast small shadows and to give an illusion of rocks."*

—Alison Cann-Clift

In these paintings the natural qualities of variously textured cloth ripple to the surface of the Canyon walls, rocks and water, and extend out to the untrimmed and unmatted edges of the paintings. When studied at close range, these graduations of color in the Canyon walls are seen to be a myriad of small cut pieces of overlaid cloth secured solely by large, prominent stitches that enhance and, at times, agitate the surface. However, far from agitating *Red Canyon Wall* (AC276), this same complex technique of dense overlaying produces one of Ali's most beautiful and tranquil compositions. The rhythmic flow of the graduated light illuminates the quiet surface of a pool of iridescent cloth and rests on a single figure who stands between the light and a darkened cavern, and whose small size implies something of the vastness of this single location within the Canyon.

Ali's use of synthetic iridescent and metallic cloth has been fully exploited in the deep watery surface of the pool in *Grand Canyon VI* (AC279) in which she makes effective use of the interplay between the iridescence of different colored sheer layers and the inherent reflective sheen of these textiles. While, the vertical format of *Grand Canyon IX* (AC282), has allowed Ali not only to fully describe the lengthy cascade of light down the rugged Canyon walls, but also its life-giving powers deep below the surface of the earth. In addition to the large format, the power of this painting comes from Ali's ability to recreate what she has seen and experienced, and to imbed her immediate sense of the Canyon's rugged beauty. This painting is Ali's self-conscious use of cloth in its most daring and mature form.

—William Thrasher  
Wellesley, Massachusetts  
December 2007

This text is selected from an essay that will appear in a forthcoming catalogue published by the Fuller Craft Museum in cooperation with Pucker Gallery to accompany the retrospective exhibition *Ali's Light: The Cloth Paintings, 1976-2006*. The exhibition will be at the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts from June 30, 2007 to October 21, 2007. For more information please visit [www.fullercraft.org](http://www.fullercraft.org).

the Canyon where it is possible to study, in detail, three of the four known eras of geological time.

In the Grand Canyon light falls into the interior from heights ranging from 4,000 to 6,000 feet, bouncing downward from surface to surface, or cascading and trickling down the numerous narrow waterfalls that form pools in the basin. Occasionally the Canyon walls split open onto narrow slices of the bright Colorado sky, giving a more accurate sense of the immense scale of the Canyon. One of Ali's smaller paintings of the Canyon, *Grand Canyon VIII* (AC281) illustrates how the red-brown colors of the Canyon walls filter and color the ambient light as it comes to rest outside a dark cavern. In terms of technique, this is the closest thing to a cloth sketch that Ali has completed.

As if to rise to the challenge of conveying the almost imponderable size of the Grand Canyon, Ali has conceived most of these paintings on a very large scale. And with this most recent group of paintings she has taken on another major challenge in her use of cloth as pigment. In direct contrast to her earlier success at disguising cloth, she now seems to celebrate it.

*"Because I think of cloth as paint, earlier I did not want the texture or the wrinkles of the cloth to interfere*



**AC274** *Grand Canyon III*  
60 x 33 1/2"



**AC272** *Grand Canyon I*  
25 1/2 x 31 1/4"



**AC273** *Grand Canyon II*  
25 x 31 1/2"





**AC277** *Grand Canyon IV*  
44 x 48"



**AC264** *Sharp Edges*  
32 x 26 5/8"



**AC283** *Grand Canyon X*  
38 x 48"



**AC263** *Dissolved*  
25 3/4 x 25 7/8"



**AC280** *Grand Canyon VII*  
45 x 45"



**AC268** *Out of the Blue*  
31 1/2 x 35"



**AC279** *Grand Canyon VI*  
37 x 44 1/2"



**AC270** *Paper Moon*  
33 1/2 x 25"





**AC278** *Grand Canyon V*  
40 x 43"

# ALI (Alison Cann-Clift)

## Biography

### EDUCATION

- 1967-1972 School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
1968-1971 Tufts University (B.F.A.)  
1979 Artists Foundation Fellowship

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 *Ali's Light: Cloth Paintings 1967-2007*, Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, MA  
2007 *Threads of Light*, Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA  
2005 *Layers and Fabrications*, Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA  
2001 *Texture of Still Life*, Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA  
1998 *Monuments*, Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA  
1998 *Day of the Dead II*, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA  
1995 *Nature Morte—Naturaleza Muerta*, Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA  
1993 *Ofrendas—Offerings*, Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA  
1991 *Performance Spaces*, Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA  
1988 *Circus, Sand and Sea*, Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA  
1986 *Beyond the Center Ring*, Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA  
1984 *Monotypes*, Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA  
1982 Traveling exhibition: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada  
Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA  
1981 *Views and Viewpoints: Landscapes of the 20th Century*, Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA  
1980 Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA  
1978 *Ali's Circus*, Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA  
1977 Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2006 *Fine Choices: Memories and Dreams*, Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA  
2005 *Fine Choices 2005*, Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA  
2000 *Fine Choices: Memories Now*, Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA  
2000 *Dream Worlds: Neo-Surrealism in the Millennium*, Attleboro Museum, Attleboro, MA  
1991 *President's Choice Exhibition*, South Shore Artists' Association, Cohasset, MA  
1991 *The Mind's Eye*, The Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA  
1985 Boston Arts Festival Invitational, Boston, MA  
1984 Miami International Print Biennial, Coral Gables, FL  
1981-82 *Center Ring: The Artist (Two Centuries of Circus Art)*, Traveling Exhibition: Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI  
Ohio Art Museum, Columbus, OH  
New York State Museum, Albany, NY  
Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC  
1981 *25th Annual Print Exhibition*, Hunterdon Art Center, Clinton, NJ  
1981 *12th National Art Exhibit*, Second Crossing Gallery, Valley City, ND  
1981 *Audubon Artists 39th Annual Exhibition*, National Arts Club, New York, NY  
1979 *Art of the State*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA  
Provincetown Art Association, Provincetown, MA  
1977 *Six Artists*, Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA  
1977 *Centennial Exhibition*, Museum School, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

## PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia, Canada  
Boston Public Library, Boston, MA  
Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, NH  
DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park,  
Lincoln, MA  
Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA  
Fogg Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA  
Johnson Art Gallery, Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA  
Neka Museum, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia  
New Britain Museum of American Art,  
New Britain, CT  
Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA  
Schick Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY

Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv, Israel  
The Art Gallery, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College,  
Wellesley, MA  
William Rockhill Nelson Museum, Kansas City, MO  
Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA

## PUBLICATIONS

*Ali: Still Life, Paintings of the Last Decade*,  
Pucker Art Publications, Boston, 2001.  
Including an essay by Alicia Craig Faxon.

*Ali: Beyond the Big Top, Cloth Paintings and Graphic Works*,  
Pucker Art Publications, Boston & David R. Godine Co.,  
Boston, 1988. Including an essay by Allan J. Palmer.



**AC265** *Lightening Strikes Twice*  
31 x 33"

# THREADS OF LIGHT: Cloth Paintings by Ali



## DATES:

28 April to 3 June 2007

## OPENING RECEPTION:

28 April 2007, 3:00 to 6:00 PM

The public is invited to attend.

The artist will be present.

**AC276** *Red Wall Canyon*

43 1/2 x 55"

## FRONT COVER:

**AC281** *Grand Canyon VIII*

28 x 25"

## CREDITS

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## GALLERY HOURS:

Monday through Saturday 10:00 AM to 5:30 PM

Sundays 1:00 to 5:00 PM

This catalogue and other catalogues  
featuring Gallery artists can be viewed  
at [www.puckergallery.com](http://www.puckergallery.com).

Member of the Boston Art Dealers Association.

One hour free validated parking is available  
in the lot on the corner of Newbury and  
Dartmouth Streets.

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