

## Rishma

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My introduction to Rishma was through her writing, not published work but rather a distinctive strong loopy signature on the mailing list at a café where my work was hung two decades ago.

Asking at the café on her next visit she discovered I was there, introduced herself, and we had a brief exchange. Some months later she appeared at a crowded opening of an exhibition of my work and came up to say hello. I surprised us both when I recognized her and remembered her name, that signature.

She asked if I was interested in collaborating on a project, responding to a new collection of poems. We arranged a time and she came out to see me in my tiny loft apartment. I remember being a little intimidated by this beautiful, intelligent and intense woman but she was charming and loved the cozy book filled space. Perusing the piles on the coffee table she declared that I was reading all the same things she was. Self taught, I had always grieved the absence of connection to the academic world. Rishma pronounced me an “independent scholar” and I felt a kind of entry to that world.

Responding to “The Body of my Garden” collection proved extraordinarily challenging. In the arc of my own work in the studio, I had begun dropping narrative from my paintings, exploring the power of ambiguity, space and emptiness. Rishma’s thick sheaf of poems, annotated in her now familiar hand, was narrative rich, laden with imagery, painterly. I tried to shoehorn her work into my own with awkward, distressing results. How to avoid illustrating, to go deeper and make an authentic response? I read and reread the poems and kept working away while our exhibition deadline loomed.

As a guilty distraction, I started to play with a small piece just for myself. Image transfer, a tree line, crows flying. I added a tiny bird skeleton and began a second one: a nest, one egg and the words *Baby Boy*. Four pieces in all

and then a long fence line. In a rush of recognition, I realized I was painting “Copper Moon,” Rishma’s poem about the death of Matthew Shepard, told from the point of view of his mother. I saw immediately how the process had been working, how Rishma’s words had found a home in me. The dam burst, the paintings flooded out, entirely mine, entirely inspired by her words. True collaboration.

Throughout, we grappled with ego and trust, finding the places where the work rose up to become more than either of us. Rishma had to contend with me using fragments of her work, overriding line breaks, obscuring and revealing passages. I had to contend with Rishma wanting to work directly on canvasses bearing my signature. I remember asking Rish - “Would you want me to write a poem for your book?” In the end, she wrote into the paintings, her expressive script the mark that bridged the two media.

My portrait of her [on the front cover of this issue], head flung back, throat exposed, was our invitation piece. Later, her poem, “Esperanza” was, in first draft, for me. We witnessed each other, our love and mutual regard and our struggles.

Our collaboration began and continued in various ways for over fourteen years. Rishma, my beloved friend, deepened and broadened my life. She cared about women and art, lived surrounded by books, white flowers, black silk. She was brave, beautiful, and extraordinary.