



Beth Ames Swartz

*Tender
Alchemy*

HIRMER

Julianne Swartz

Alchemical Alignment of Tenderness

Lauren R. O'Connell

There is a magic to our tenderness,” Beth Ames Swartz once reflected, describing the transformative nature of the relationship with her daughter, the artist Julianne Swartz.¹ The word “magic” is not incidental here, for tenderness, in the alchemical sense, operates as a catalyst. Tenderness transmutes fracture into form, isolation into communion, and matter into meaning. The dialectic between Beth and Julianne, two artists whose lives are intimately intertwined yet whose practices remain strikingly distinct, unfolds as an alchemical dialogue of ritual, intuition, and intellect. While their materials diverge—Beth favoring saturation, density, and symbolic layering, and Julianne preferring ephemerality, restraint, and embodied presence—their work shares a devotion to art as a site of transformation and healing.

Beth Ames Swartz was born in Manhattan in 1936, the youngest of three children. From an early age, she displayed a heightened sensitivity that set her apart from her siblings, as she later reflected in *Odd One Out* (1965) (fig. 1). This sensibility would later infuse her life and art with visionary depth. She discovered in art a sense of belonging and agency, finding in materials a language that would enable her to explore forces larger than herself. Yet the mid-twentieth-century art world was hardly welcoming to women who sought independence as artists. Patriarchal norms held sway, and women were often dismissed, sidelined, or framed in relation to men rather than recognized for their own pursuits. Still, Beth persisted, carving her own path by pursuing art as a necessity.

Her full-time career as an artist began in 1964, five years after moving to Arizona, when she left teaching to follow her calling. She sought inspiration and growth through travel and in artist collectives, but a 1970 trip down the Colorado River crystallized her artistic vision, linking self, spirit, and land in works such as *Opening Her New Wings at Dusk* (1971) (p. 31). From that point forward, her practice became increasingly experimental, guided by the conviction that art could serve as

fig. 1 Beth Ames Swartz, *Odd One Out*, 1965. Pastel on rice paper; 17¼ × 12 inches.

a means of both personal inquiry and spiritual transformation. This revelation led to her earliest series, where her past and present converged into acts of catharsis and revelation.

In her *Disordering* series, Beth tore, punctured, and ruptured the paper's surface, producing works charged with an urgency to release repressed emotion and open new forms. This exploration expanded into several series, where she embraced fire as both destructive and purifying. She developed a ritual process: unrolling large sheets of paper on the ground, mutilating them with tools, setting them aflame, and then layering them with paint, gold leaf, and earth before repeating the process (fig. 2). The resulting works possessed a hardened yet malleable quality, shaped into volumetric forms that suggested both resistance and transformation. *Smoke drawings*—abstract works painted with soot from candle flames—preceded these fiery experiments, their ephemeral stains a meditation on combustion as both erasure and mark-making. Already, one senses in these works an alchemical sensibility, in which destructive force might result in illumination.

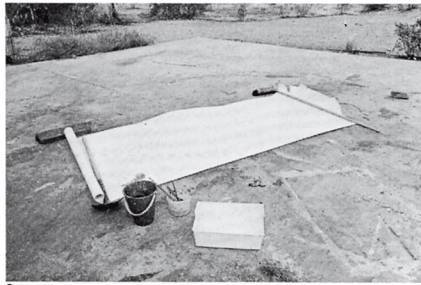
In 1978, encouraged by art historian and critic Barbara Rose who had seen her *Inquiry into Fire* catalogue, Beth rented a studio in New York City for three weeks. She invited art dealers and critics to visit, and the initiative propelled her fire work into the New York art scene, resulting



1



4



2



5



3



5

PROCESS (ritual)

"The ritual I have developed for this exhibition is akin to the natural biological cycle of life/death/rebirth. I act out this cycle during the ordering/dis-ordering/reordering process."

1. Emptying mind (ordering)
2. White paper rolled out (ordering)
3. a) Mutilation with screw-driver (disordering)
b) Fire and Ice Process: ice randomly thrown on paper before mutilation (disordering)
4. Fire-burning of mutilations (disordering)
5. Mixed-media applied (reordering)
6. Earth, rain, sunlight, tearing, fire, collaged paper, mixed-media added as needed (reordering)

Pictured on preceding page.

"My art is my way of seeking a 'fusion of opposites', a 'gesture of balance'; integrating mind/body/spirit to connect with my own as well as nature's evolution."

BETH AMES SWARTZ
Paradise Valley, Arizona

fig. 2 Beth Ames Swartz's ritual process.

in two gallery shows,² a feature article in *The Soho News*,³ and a solo exhibition at the Jewish Museum,⁴ among others. Despite the acclaim, Beth eventually turned toward new pathways and processes of spiritual inquiry. Choosing sacrifice over market recognition, she expanded her practice into uncharted terrain, devoting herself to the study and interpretation of a wide range of wisdom systems. Each line of inquiry received several years of focused attention, during which she developed new rituals and processes. To date, she has completed this cycle numerous times, resulting in over twenty-two distinct series.

As her practice evolved, Beth turned to frameworks of spirituality and metaphysics, linking her own survival to the wider cosmos. Her recent series, *Quantum Light* (2023–present) (pp. 67–69), draws upon her lifelong fascination with the stars. As a child, she believed that people became stars when they died, their souls shining above. Later, influenced by Plato's *Timaeus* and by quantum physics, she envisioned art as a parallel to the uncertain, dynamic processes of reality itself, shaped by observation, shifting in meaning through each encounter. In these luminous works, science and spirituality converge. The search for the immaterial future, for what happens when the soul leaves its earthly container, becomes visualized in Beth's radiant forms. Here again, the ethos is one of alchemy, transmuting speculation into visual resonance, aligning ancient philosophy with contemporary physics.

While Beth's trajectory reached toward the metaphysical and infinite, Julianne's path followed sensory experience and material transmutation. Born in Phoenix in 1967, Julianne grew up within the atmosphere of her mother's artistic and spiritual life, surrounded by rituals, meditation, and esoteric research. Yet having seen the financial and emotional challenges her mother faced as an artist, she initially resisted following this path. Nevertheless, she turned to art as a way of processing her own life experiences. At twenty-six, she held her first solo exhibition in New York, presenting text-based works that drew from philosophy



fig. 3 Julianne Swartz, *Co-Portrait (Gideon, Andy, Nico, Ethan)*, 2014. Digital C-print; 22¾ × 16 inches.

and poetry. These early works already revealed her instinct to translate inner states into external form. It was not until she participated in the art residency program at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1999 that she fully committed to art, embracing a practice that, like her mother's, became a way of life.

Julianne's works often center on intimacy and fragile bonds. Her series *Co-Portraits* reimagines the family portrait as a dynamic interplay of interaction, touch, and gesture. To take the portraits, families interacted together outdoors, passing a mirror back and forth, creating compositions in which bodies merge through reflection. The results, as seen in *Co-Portrait (Gideon, Andy, Nico, Ethan)* (2014) (fig. 3), symbolize the tenderness of kinship and the porous boundaries between self and other. Without digital manipulation, the works rely on presence and chance, evoking the values of touch, security, and groundedness. The mirror here functions as both tool and metaphor, reflecting the intimacy of familiarity between bodies.

Her installation *Sine Body* (2017) (pp. 86–89) extends this sensibility into the realm of sound. Constructed from glass and unglazed porcelain, the work uses acoustic reflection to generate powerful drone sounds through a feedback process that reads the air mass within each vessel, finding a resonant sine tone specific to that object. Installed as a constellation of multiple objects, the tones from each vessel layer to produce shifting compositions of harmony and dissonance, through chance and interaction. When activated through live performance, *Sine Body* enacts a ritual of locating resonance, inviting the body of the viewer to vibrate in sympathy with the vessels (fig. 4). The installation embodies sensuality by privileging materiality, sound, and experience. It is as if the vessels themselves breathe, their tones marking the present moment in all its fragility.

Throughout her practice, Julianne remained subtly shaped by the atmosphere of her mother's influence. Through a form of osmosis, she absorbed Beth's principles of artistic inquiry as survival, ritual, and a means of transformation. Beth meditated and studied mystical texts, offering a living model of integration. Just as importantly, Beth modeled generosity. In the 1990s, she co-founded the Artist Breakfast Club, nurturing community among local artists. To Julianne, this exemplified how art could move from the private into the communal, from the personal into the collective. Their relationship as mother and daughter was thus marked by mutual support as well as difference.

Comparisons to Ana Mendieta underscore their shared investment in ritual, body, and nature. Susan Aberth notes the affinity between Beth and Mendieta in their ritualized processes, though their spiritual sources differ.⁵ Nancy Princenthal similarly connects Julianne's *Carriers* (pp. 111–113) to Mendieta's *Siluetas*, highlighting their mutual emphasis on the body's provisionality.⁶ Such alignments situate their lineage

within a broader feminist tradition of ritualistic art, while affirming their individuality. Beth's work builds permanence through layering, and Julianne's through resonance and ephemerality. Beth seeks future transcendence, while Julianne dwells in the present, privileging sensual and grounded experience.

The differences between their practices are as instructive as their affinities. Beth's art is maximalist, saturated, and layered with meaning and color, striving toward symbolic depth. Julianne's work is minimal, ephemeral, and fragile in its neutrality. One accumulates density; the other cultivates restraint. Yet both share a willingness to surrender control to process, allowing intuition and material to guide them. Both of their studios are sites of revelation rather than mastery, where art becomes an agent of discovery. This shared ethos underscores the alignment of their practices, even across generational and stylistic divides.

Perhaps astrology can provide a useful frame for these differences and affinities. Beth's Aquarian orientation is future-looking, cerebral, and visionary, seeking to transcend material limitations and imagine

fig. 4 Julianne Swartz performing *Sine Body* at the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU, Richmond, VA, 2019.



continuities beyond death. Her *Quantum Light* series exemplifies this—art as cosmic inquiry, as speculation about the soul and the universe, aligning with her lifelong sense of being a star among stars. Julianne’s Taurean sensibility is grounded, sensual, and corporeal, exemplified in works like *Co-Portraits* and *Sine Body*, which privilege presence, materiality, felt vibration, and resonance. Together they form a synthesis of Aquarius and Taurus, a dialogue between transcendence and embodiment, future and present, and intellect and sensuality. Threaded throughout their practices, these archetypes illuminate how their differences translate as complementary rather than oppositional.

The alchemical alignment of Beth Ames Swartz and Julianne Swartz reflects a lineage of resilience and tenderness, in which art serves as both container and catalyst for transformation. Beth transmutes rupture into ritual, fire into illumination, isolation into community. Julianne transforms intimacy into form, ephemeral forces into presence, fragility into strength. Their works diverge in form yet converge in ethos, offering art as a site of revelation, a process of becoming, and a gesture of tenderness toward self and other. Together, they embody an artistic succession, aligned not through sameness but through complementarity, offering us an image of art as alchemical tenderness—an endless cycle of healing, creation, and renewal.

1 Beth Ames Swartz, in conversation with the author and Julianne Swartz via Zoom, July 24, 2025.	4 The exhibition <i>Beth Ames Swartz: Israel Revisited</i> opened in 1981 at the Jewish Museum in New York.
2 Beth Ames Swartz met with Frank Marino, who subsequently gave her two solo shows at his New York gallery in 1979 and 1981.	5 Susan L. Aberth, “Visionary Pathways, A Life in Transformation”, p. 14.
3 The influential New York art critic John Perreault wrote a feature article on Beth Ames Swartz in <i>The Soho News</i> after seeing her 1981 exhibitions at Frank Marino Gallery and the Jewish Museum. Perreault continued to write about Swartz’s art as both a critic and curator. John Perreault, “Just Deserts,” <i>The Soho News</i> , October 13, 1981.	6 Nancy Princenthal, “Harnessing Sound, Harvesting Light”, p. 75.

Tender Alchemy brings together the transformative works of mother-daughter artists Beth Ames Swartz and Julianne Swartz. Though their methods differ, both explore healing, perception, and unseen forces through a shared creative alchemy. Their cross-generational dialogue unfolds across pages, offering a quiet yet powerful meditation on art's capacity to transmute matter and emotion.

With contributions by Lauren R. O'Connell,
Susan L. Aberth, and Nancy Princenthal.

