At the end of the Breast Cancer Journal Hollis Sigler describes her approach to painting: “In executing these pieces, it is important to me to be as spontaneous as possible. Being spontaneous gives me a sense of a child’s joy in drawing, a joy unspoiled by a critical eye. The works are done, therefore, without any preliminary drawings. In most cases, I start with my diary, writing to myself, creating a dialogue with myself about the events of my life. This gives me a handle to the concept for a drawing.

When I begin to draw, I make decisions as I go. I am often asked whether it is the words or the images that come to me first. Because I am working spontaneously, there is no set answer. Sometimes words come first and sometimes it is an image. I do not make any corrections to the drawings. There are drawings that do not work and they are rejected. I try to do the whole drawing in one sitting. I do this in order to keep in the moment, because if I wait, my sense of the situation changes. This can affect everything from color choice to my emotional connection to the work.

In terms of the paintings, they do take longer: however, I still try to do the initial drawing on the canvas in one sitting. The painting then develops over time on top of the drawing. But I do not change the initial drawing the painting is derived from.”

Give the students newsprint paper to brainstorm ideas for autobiographical paintings. Encourage them to try out different ideas just as Sigler did as she wrote and sketched in her own diary. Ask them if they remember a party or a picnic, a visitor, a trip, an incident at school that is still vivid in their mind. Ask them to set the stage just as Sigler did and give us hints about how they felt by the objects they chose and how they place them.

Remind students that Sigler used a vocabulary of objects to tell her stories. Clothes and chairs became stand-ins for people. A television became a voice invading a room with both good and bad news. A vanity table became a reminder of mothers and grandmothers or a metaphor for the transitory nature of life itself, much like the “vanitas” paintings of the 17th century.

Ask students to choose one idea to develop as a painting. Tell them to look again at the way Hollis Sigler organizes her compositions and to notice some of the visual devices she uses in the foreground to frame her paintings, such as trees, curtains, or a row of objects. She also uses a clearly defined middle-ground where furniture and clothes reside and a back-ground that is usually the back wall of a room or the sky.

Ask students to look at Sigler’s composition and draw what happens next. Who are the guests, does a space ship land, do fireworks explode in the sky?

For additional ideas, read Ann Perry Parker’s lesson plan at www.mmoca.org/mmocacollects. Go to the lesson plans in the For Teachers section of the website.

Hollis Sigler used both words and images in her paintings, which she often described as “visual poems.” Show students examples of Japanese, Indian, and Persian art where text and image are organized on a page. Provide examples of contemporary poems in which words alone can become an image. Examples are Forsythia by Mary Ellen Solt and D-re-A-mi-N-gl-Y or Grasshopper by e.e.cummings. (Activities for Creating Pictures and Poetry, Janis Bunchman and Stephanie Bissell Briggs, Davis Publications, Inc., 1994.)

Work with children to create their own visual poems. Other forms to study are Japanese haiku and “Fibs,” based on the first five or six numbers in the Fibonacci series (goatcreek.blogspot.com)

Hollis Sigler’s grandmother and mother both died of breast cancer. She knew that certain types of cancer seem to have a genetic link. She also knew that cases of breast cancer are increasing and that environmental pollution has been linked to that increase.

As Sigler’s cancer advanced she included more and more factual information about the disease in her paintings. She draws us in with her art and then asks us to consider the kind of world we are creating. Our comfortable life rests on technology that
The Art: What’s Going on Here?

Hollis Sigler is a story teller. In this painting she has set the stage and positioned the props. We know where we are. We know the time of day and the time of year. We see a table with two glasses, cake plates and two chairs. A third chair faces away from us. We see a row of glowing lanterns strung across the yard, as well as an open screen door.

Like any good teller Hollis Sigler piques our curiosity with tantalizing details. But this is a story we must finish ourselves. We do not know who has hung the lanterns or brought out the table and chairs. We do not know why this party was or organized or who was invited. It looks like a celebration with wine and cake, but can we be sure?

The actors are missing, leaving us suspended in time. Has someone just gone back inside the house leaving the door open? Did the telephone ring? Is the guest at the front door? We cannot know if something has already happened or is about to happen. We stand outside the yard, fenced off by spiky plants and trees. We are observers seeing only a part of the drama. When we turn away, we are unable to shake our questions and sense of unease.

Hollis Sigler uses a stage-like composition to tell her story. In the foreground two large trees and a row of plants frame the action and keep us at a distance. In the middle ground the table is set and waiting. A single lawn chair is turned toward the moon. The side of the house and a fence define the space of the yard. In the background the moon is already above the horizon, still yellow but getting smaller as it climbs the sky. We are startled to see the planet Saturn peak into view from behind a tree.

Strong contrasts of value and color, like the composition, enhance the story. The moon looks far away but hovers over the table like a spotlight. Its yellow glow rings the table while the lanterns cast an amber glow that is reflected on door, fence, and trees. The rest of the scene is in darkness. Just as the painting shifts from white at the center to black at the edges, the color shifts from warm yellow and reds to cool greens and very dark blues.

The Artist: Biographical Notes

Hollis Sigler was born in 1948, a member of the Baby Boom generation whose parents came of age during the Depression and World War II. When she was growing up in the 1950’s, America was booming. President Eisenhower warned of the danger of a “military-industrial complex” (Farewell Address to the Nation, January 17, 1961), the Cold War and nuclear bombs were on everyone’s mind, and new highways and suburbs were beginning to spread across the landscape.

Sigler received a Masters of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1973. As a young artist she experimented with Abstract Expressionism and Photo-realism. Then, in 1976 her art changed drastically.

She said, “Not knowing what to do with intense feelings of victimization [as a woman artist and as a lesbian], I put down my paintbrush and began drawing without restraint, like a child….Drawing was my salvation. It completed me.” (Hollis Sigler’s Breast Cancer Journal, with essays by Susan M. Love and James Yood, Hudson Hills Press, New York, 1999.)

In an interview years later, Hollis Sigler remembers drawing for hours at her grandmother’s art table. There was no television in the house, but lots of paper and crayons, and she was free to do whatever she liked. It was that sense of unbounded creativity, she says, that she was trying to recapture as an adult. (Video excerpt from What Does the Lady Do with Her Rage?, reproduced with permission on www.mmoca.org/mmocacollects)

Her new paintings were done in a style that looked untrained and almost childlike, with richly applied paint in short descriptive brush strokes. The subject matter reflected her life, her relationships, and her anxieties, without being specific.

She continues in the Breast Cancer Journal, “Although I wanted emotions in my art, I was determined to be silent about their cause….I wanted the viewers to have a dialogue with the art, to be able to put themselves in the picture….The works should touch us in our shared emotional space.”

As the art critic James Yood comments, “Sigler depicts places momentarily abandoned by human figures but still seething and reverberating with the emotional temperature of their presence…In work after work she explores what it means to love, to enjoy small pleasures, to consider both the wonder and the ambiguities of human relationships, and to inventory the thousand tender wounds of intimacy.” (James Yood, Breast Cancer Journal, page 14)

In 1985, at the age of thirty-seven, Hollis Sigler was diagnosed with breast cancer. After intensive therapy the cancer was in remission. You Worry About Its Success was painted during this period when Sigler still felt she might win her battle with cancer.

Then in 1992 the cancer reappeared and metastasized in her bones. ‘This time instead of remaining silent about her ordeal she began the work that would become the Breast Cancer Journal.’

The first paintings she made explored her reactions to what was happening in her body. Paintings like The Illusion War To Think She Had Any Control Over Her Life and Trying To Maintain An Air Of Normalcy used the same faux naif style and vocabulary of images she had developed since 1976. But the meaning was now explicit. Until her death in 2001, Sigler concentrated on making paintings that used both images and words to describe a disease that has isolated women with silence and dread.

Sigler saw these paintings as personal catharsis. Over time that would change. She began to include more and more text on the frame around her paintings, quoting scientific journals and statistics on the spread of cancer. Her art became a way to inform other people about a disease that claims many more lives in the United States than AIDS.