



Art Review - The Taming of Fantastical Worlds: Drawings by Alice Aycock

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by Esperanza Leon

"Alice Aycock Drawings: Some Stories are Worth Repeating" at the Parrish Art Museum

On view through July 13, 2013

At a young age, my brother and I would listen to our father read aloud from two thick, leather-bound volumes containing the stories of the *Thousand and One Nights*. The delicate, translucent pages, dense with text, were interspersed with fascinating illustrated plates framed within decorative Arab arches, images sure to captivate a child's imagination.

I have never known the sequence of stories from beginning to end, as we would read only our favorites over and over. It was long ago and my memories of the stories are vague, but the experience of hearing these wondrous and amusing adventures from an ancient and exotic world remains indelible.



Rock, Paper, Scissors (India '07) by Alice Aycock, 2010. Watercolor and ink on paper, 95 11/16 x 59 1/2 inches. Miami Art Museum, gift of Jerry Lindzon, FL.

Alice Aycock's exhibition of drawings at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill prompted me to recall this episode of my childhood, as so many of the works on view unexpectedly reflected back to me my lifelong fascination with stories and storytelling.

The exhibition catalogue essay by curator Jonathan Fineberg makes it clear that Aycock's own interest in stories is rooted in her childhood and a love for literature cultivated in her by her father. In describing one of the artist's machine pieces—titled, not coincidentally, *The Thousand and One Nights in the Mansion of Bliss* (1983)—Fineberg compares the Persian heroine Scheherezade to the artist: "Aycock's storytelling and her imaginary taming of the savage forces in her work resonate unmistakably with this tale."

Most of the work on exhibit, carried out primarily in watercolor, graphite, and ink on paper or Mylar, transmits a fantastical world view that is at once childlike and sophisticated in both its content and the rendering.

Rock, Paper, Scissors (2010) bursts forth in undulating ribbons of red and white that serve as a

backdrop for a minutely fenestrated, blue and white tower that thrusts diagonally upward. This impossible architecture sits precariously on a foundation of blades whirling like a top and spitting forth tiny, yellow propeller-like elements that flutter throughout the picture space. None of it makes sense in real time and space. Rather, one is transported to another reality, like that of a disjointed dream with no precise beginning or end.

This disjointedness is one of the features Fineberg discusses in his essay, suggesting that it has diverse and multiple sources and levels of meaning and experience. In order to better understand the drawings, he posits the following main themes: cities, wars, mechanical movements, games, languages, dance movements, and universe schemes. Most often, the drawings, maquettes, and public projects on view involve several, if not all of these ideas.



The Seventh Manoeuvre of War: The Indirect Approach by Alice Aycock, 1984.
Pencil on Mylar, 60 x 55 inches.
Collection of the artist, courtesy Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin.

The Seventh Manoeuvre of War (1984) is a pencil on Mylar rendering, last in a series the artist developed from diagrams of war strategies, that could well represent a simplistic view of an amusement park, including the requisite “Russian mountain” or roller coaster ride. Not only was Aycock’s father an engineer whose company specialized in bridge girders and other large industrial and machine components, she was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, near Hershey Park, which has operated since 1907 as a theme park and opened its first roller coaster ride in 1923. The suspension of time and reality in an amusement park setting is echoed throughout Aycock’s work.

The *War Manoeuvres* include citations from a text titled *Magic and Schizophrenia*. Not knowing their source initially, I was excited and interested by the strangeness of the narrative of “the character N.N.”, thinking the artist invented it. The cited text, along with the key to the plan above it, provides a twist to what otherwise might be perceived as a dry, schematic line drawing.

A close look at the elements in the drawing within the context of Aycock’s work makes it apparent that these might be items found in the kitchen, in cooking utensils. The key’s labels point toward this, for instance, “D. the ice-makers (café au lait),” although in a deliciously incoherent way.

Control and chaos, sense and nonsense, serenity and discomposure are among the numerous oppositions present in this work. *The Wish-Bone Years* (1988) is yet another *capriccio*, or fantastical architectural composition. I was reminded here, as in other instances in this show, of Piranesi’s 18th century *Carceri d’invenzione* that have always transfixed me. Movie theatres and obsolete Las Vegas marquees compose this black ink drawing connoting glory and decadence, both fictional and real. A pair of hands at center holds a “wishbone” that repeats the shape of the decorative façades and suggests their luck or finality.



Proposal for Miami Heat Arena, 1998, 1999
by Alice Aycock. Ink, marker, and charcoal on
pigmented cotton paper, 40 x 60 inches.
Collection of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky, New
York. Photo Credit: Laura Mitchell.

A number of the drawings on view at the Parrish are proposals for public works or derive from public commissions. The striking drawing on red pigmented paper, *Proposal for Miami Heat Arena* (project unbuilt), would seem like just another form of impossible architecture transferred from the artist's imagination to paper, were it not for the fact that many of Aycock's proposals have gone on to be built and installed. Examples are *Ghost Ballet for the East Bank Machineworks* (2007, Nashville, Tennessee), a photograph of which is on view in the same gallery, and *Star Sifter* at JFK Airport's Terminal 1, of which three maquettes and two site photographs are exhibited, as well as a drawing after the piece.

One might certainly feel disoriented in viewing Aycock's drawings as much as in experiencing her public projects and installations, which she has developed and executed from the beginning of her career in the '70s. She has described the sensation as similar to that of being on a theme park ride, "where you can't stand up straight because everything keeps changing." The majority of her work undoubtedly transmits this, whether it is through form, narrative, or a combination of the two.



The Leonardo Swirl by Alice Aycock, 1984.
Galvanized sheet metal, 21 x 12 inches.
Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody.

Whirling shapes—blades, swirls—constantly in flux, abound in the work. *Three-fold Manifestation II* (1987), now installed at Storm King in upstate New York, is a large-scale example, the stepped, swirled, elliptical bowls achieving the artist's goal of moving the viewer to virtually ascend into and upward through the sculpture. If the photograph on view achieves this (as does the maquette), I can imagine what being before the actual piece would incite.

Not all the other sculptural pieces exhibited provide similar sensations of movement and dynamism. The slightly earlier *Leonardo Swirl* (1984) does seize the eye and senses despite its relatively small size. Dense and opaque, made from galvanized steel sheet ribbons tightly wound, curled, and piled atop one another, the piece has whimsy, harmony, and elegance. These openwork or densely packed ribbons appear in several of the works exhibited, both in two and three dimensions, particularly in this third gallery. *Study for a Timescape* (2011) is one of the more recent watercolors where they appear, along with the also recurring wheel blades.

While Aycock had turned to computer graphics in the early '90s in order to elaborate the precise renderings for the public projects, many of her watercolor and ink drawings came out of the grand-scale, engineered works. My journey with Aycock's work began with the Parrish exhibition, *Sand*:

Memory, Meaning, and Metaphor, in which she re-created her *Sand/Fans* piece from 1971, followed by the reinstallation of this same work at the Salomon Contemporary Warehouse in East Hampton, both in 2008. Interestingly, these two occasions gave her the impetus to re-explore “drawing for drawing’s sake,” as Fineberg states in his essay.



Things Pass By in the Night: Murmuration 2
(from the continuing series entitled “*On the Starry Night*”) by Alice Aycock, 2009. Ink, pencil and watercolor on paper, 59 3/4 x 59 3/4 inches. Collection of the Artist; Courtesy of Salomon Contemporary.

Things Pass by in the Night: Murmurations (2009), from the continuing series entitled *On the Starry Night*, are the most sublime of the works on view in this half of the two-part show (the other half, consisting of the earlier work, is on view at the Grey Art Gallery at NYU). The works from the earlier silkscreen *Starry Night* series (1993) hanging in the central hallway are based on images taken from a star-finder map published in *The New York Times* and, according the curator, explore the aforementioned central themes of Aycock’s work.

The fluttery propellers that map out the black picture space in the more recent *Murmurations* might emerge on the lighter side of the opposing forces in Aycock’s work. From afar, they seem organic: butterflies, birds, petals; close-up one distinguishes the machine element. These works are not overtly savage or menacing, as some of the others might more purposely come across. Their apparent lyrical beauty, though, is tempered by the ever-present substrate of science, mathematics, and mechanics. They are supernovas on paper, gathering the strengths of the artist’s preceding work, lingering in brightness, and marking the onslaught of the most powerful work to come.

Similarly, Aycock’s career seems to be exploding and sending shockwaves as never before, and it would appear far from fading away any time soon.

-Esperanza León

BASIC FACTS: “Alice Aycock Drawings: Some Stories are Worth Repeating” is being presented in two venues: The Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill and the Grey Art Gallery at New York University in New York City. Both shows remain on view through July 13.

The Parrish Art Museum is located at 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, NY 11976. parrishart.org. The Grey Art Gallery is located at 100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003. www.nyu.edu/greyart

The exhibition at The Parrish Art Museum was curated by Parrish Art Museum Adjunct Curator Jonathan Fineberg.

On Friday, May 17, Alice Aycock will deliver an illustrated lecture on her work from 1971 to the

present at 6 p.m. in the Lichtenstein Theater of the Parrish Art Museum.

On Friday, June 28, Robert Hobbs, author of *Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects* (M.I.T. Press, 2005) will discuss Aycock's work at 6 p.m.

NOTE: The artwork appearing on the Home Page is *From the Series Entitled 'Study for a Timescape'* by Alice Aycock, 2011. Ink and watercolor on paper, 50 x 72 inches. Collection of the Artist; Courtesy of Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin.

RELATED: ["Alice Aycock's Creative Process – Two Exhibitions of Drawings Offer A Comprehensive Look"](#)

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