

ART REVIEW

Working Words Into Images, Artists Become Storytellers

By GRACE GLUECK

At storytelling, writers and speakers can't claim a monopoly. Artists do it, too, although their methods are odder, and they often dig into the work of writers for material. (But then, writers mine the work of other writers.) And there's a bonus: their work can take off in visual flights of fancy.

From its continuing Viewing Program, in which in-house curators choose for exhibition the work of artists unrepresented by New York galleries, the Drawing Center has come up with 14 "talespinners," whose imagery flirts with narrative. Some actually manipulate words and even books; others play with fairy tales and folklore; still others base figments on literary characters; and a few address social, political and otherworldly topics. In short, the narrative category here is — well, porous. Still, it exposes some intriguing talents.

One of them is a Canadian artist,

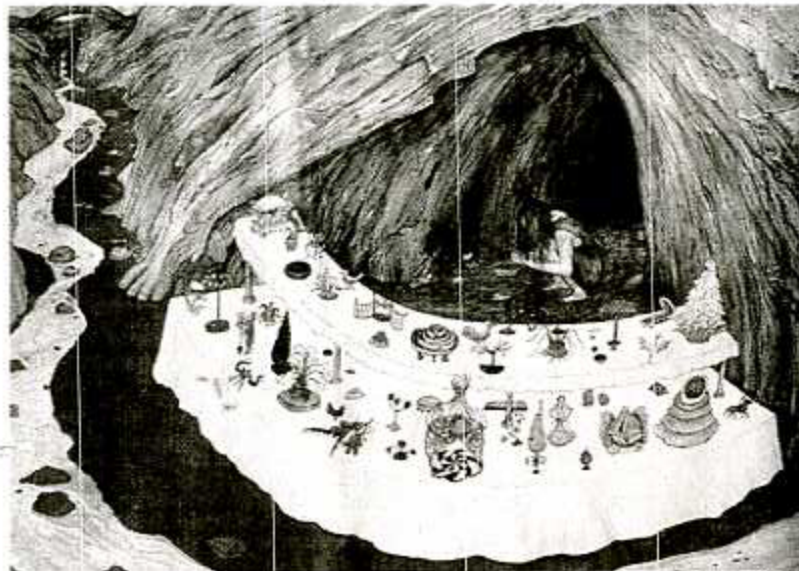
"*Talespinning: Selections Fall 2004*" is at the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, SoHo, (212) 219-2166, through Oct. 23.

Nancy Jackson, whose fairy-tale landscapes in gouache suggest territories seemingly untrodden by human foot, evoking the crisply expressive terrains of northern European Renaissance artists like Albrecht Altdorfer.

While suggesting the unseen presence of ogres, dragon slayers, hobbits and mythical heroes, they also give delicate worm's-eye views of wilderness flora and fauna. In short, while visionary, they are also of the earth.

Among offerings with political and societal implications, the miniature ink-and-pencil drawings of Ricardo Lanzarini, a Uruguayan, are a stand-out. Filling tiny books of cigarette rolling paper, they comment on the vicissitudes of (his) daily life in a time of global uncertainties and displacements. He maneuvers — with the precision and élan of the 17th-century French miniaturist engraver Jacques Callot — a flock of odd-ball people and situations: workers, protesters, exhorters, despairers, disgruntled crowds, partially dressed in medieval-looking garb.

Often his characters wear what appear to be banners, weapons or parasols, actually made of shavings from the pencils he uses to draw them. And — carefully teased out —



"Causeway, Part I" by Nancy Jackson, part of "Talespinning."

they spill from the tiny cigarette books into the exhibition case, even climbing on the gallery walls. Despite their size, they have a swarming mob energy.

Another approach to political commentary is made by Arny Wilson, whose series of pencil and watercolor drawings, "A Glimpse of What Life in a Free Country Can Be Like," takes its title from remarks made in 2003 by President Bush on the war with Iraq. In cartoony panels reminiscent of those by the outsider artist Henry Darger that depict innocent-looking girls at devious games, she puts quotations from right-wing and left-wing sources into cartoon blurbs

mouthed by sweet young things in a pastoral setting.

But her sympathies are not so easily discerned: thoughts from both sources are melded into a stream of patter that covers multiple viewpoints. Her intent is to show that political language is not simple to construe and that "complex similarities exist in supposedly diametrically opposed lines of reasoning."

Some of the artists' engage texts and books quite directly. Alice Attie takes quotes from Faulkner, Joyce and others, working their literal words into abstract images. From Franz Kafka's "Burrow," for example, she has produced an incredibly

complex calligraphic maze of threadly lines and shaded areas, entirely composed of the author's words. More concerned with the book as object is a Japanese artist, Noriko Ambe, who cuts dynamically contoured topographies deeply into the pages of atlases and newspapers, making them into sculptural entities that somehow relate what she calls her own "emotional geography" to that of the earth.

Art as a form of obsession is also apparent in the work of Eung Ho Park, whose enormous drawing in ballpoint ink appears at first glance to be a gray silhouette of a jug. (He sees it as a head.) Examined closer up, it's a network of thousands of minuscule roots, meditatively drawn by the artist. He was prompted by thoughts of gnarled, exposed ginseng roots he had seen in his native Korea and of a baobab tree in Brooklyn that evoked his own human vulnerability, and also suggested the system of roots that unites human life from generation to generation.

Obsession, too, seems to motivate the work of Catharyne Ward, an English artist who draws tangled, convoluted masses of hair, the kind a pre-Raphaelite artist would revel in. Braids, curls, waves and knots of the stuff surge across her scratchboard surfaces, occasionally interrupted by small symbols like a heart or a cross. Hair, of course, fetishistically figures in myths and fairy tales. (In fact, these drawings somehow suggest a primordial tale like "Lord of the Rings.") So what better place for them than in a narrative show?

Newspapers are a potent source of

From playing with fairy tales to manipulating atlases.

reworkable imagery for Geoff Grogan, whose giant, complex collage formed from scraps of newspaper, "The Kicker," suggests a slam-bang action episode from a comic book or sci-fi film.

In a bit of a stretch, the show includes two artists who produce handmade signs. Alejandro Diaz, a Conceptual artist, reproduces snippets of language by hand on crude pieces of cardboard that echo the ambitions and imperatives of everyday life, like "Looking for Nice Upper-East Side Lady With Clean Elegant Apartment. Must Have Cable." He is the strategist, too, behind a luxuriant mass of auburn hair that lies on the floor next to a sign, "Back in 5 min."

Tucker Nichols's work also uses handmade signs to record the vernacular: clichés like "The Way Things Used to Be," fragments of overheard conversation like "Let Me Tell You a Secret" and other mundanities, like "Tell Me More." If you like cute, it's here, too.

"Talespinning" is an uneven show but, as is usual at the Drawing Center, one in which discoveries are likely. The center's willingness to take risks with its choices is one strong reason why it remains a rewarding place to visit.