

JULIE ADLER by Jacki Apple

One of the functions of art is to open up space in our perceptions that allows us to see the world in a different way. In a world bombarded daily by millions of mediated images, that is a very challenging task. Sometimes it requires stepping back from the present moment and meditating on the tension between our subjective interior life and a more vast external state of existence. This is the dialectic that pervades much of Julie Adler's work. She is an artist who has a way of getting under the skin of things in her explorations of both psychological and physical spaces that express the struggle against confinement and the loneliness of abandonment. Her images are both autobiographical and philosophical. They are permeated with a deep and often poignant sadness in their reflections on the human condition and the effect we have had on other life forms that we share our habitat with. Adler's is not an existential view but rather one informed by her Buddhist practice and dharma teachings along with her own personal explorations and concerns. The inner and outer architecture of oppression and suffering is countered by a striving towards enlightenment.

While Adler's previous paintings and drawings focused primarily on the human figure, often using her own body as the vehicle for expression of these conflicting forces, in the newest works-in-progress she introduces other life forms as narrators. Her early paintings were expressionist images of mummies, trapped souls crying out from inside their bindings. The latest works again reference the passage from life to death with images suggesting fossil-like remnants, octopi tentacles, shed reptile skins, subtle mutations. A ropelike braided object as tail, tentacle, umbilical cord, and even Rapunzel's hair is a recurring theme. If we as a species are our own worst enemy, perpetrators of our own suffering, these creatures are, as consequence, our victims. In that sense, her images are a call to consciousness.

As an artist-in-residence at Campbell Hall, a painter who is also an accomplished vocalist and writer, Adler had the opportunity to work with previously unexplored media, opening up her imagery to both the limitations and possibilities of various printmaking techniques. Thus her works-in-progress have the raw sense of the immediacy of her trial and error experimental process.

The strongest pieces left me with the sense of our own folly as a species, the environmental degradation that is the result, and the impending consequences. In a combination of acrylic and linocut on canvas, the remains of an exoskeleton (or is it an inner skeleton?) whose species is elusive lies across the fiery landscape of "In Land", seemingly suspended in purgatory between life and death. In the companion canvas "1% contained" a single hand grasps the edge of a shoreline of flotsam and destruction, suggesting but not describing the aftermath of a tsunami. In a very different etching/aquatint, "The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready", the image of a howling lone donkey evokes a sole survivor on a bleak landscape of loss. A pair of monoprints, "Urge and urge and urge" #1 and 2, each contains three lumpy ovoid masses in graduating sizes, one set against a sky of fire, the other of ash.

My favorite work, and one with much future potential, is a sculptural installation called "Ball Bearings". A stack of used volleyballs, their surfaces reprinted with their own linear patterns in vivid colors, sit on a table. Their tops have been cut off and they are stuffed with a soft

crushed up fleshy beige colored fabric. They lay there like prematurely cracked open eggs. Long braided cords trail out from them across the floor. These strange pods conjure up thoughts of never hatched abandoned sea turtles, or tortoises, of poisoned water and land, endangered species. At the same time, they also suggest alien life forms that we cannot identify. This ambiguity gives them both a poetic sense of absence and a disturbing presence. They are at once sad, beautiful, and foreboding.

At the other end of the scale, Adler approached the old technology of etching and aquatint with an historical bent. Here the subject matter of repression and constraint coupled with escape and flight takes on the look of scary stories in old books, of dark Nordic fairy tales and nightmares, but with the contemporary twist of relativity. When is your prison your shelter? When is your freedom your prison?

Julie Adler's engagement with process and her penchant for probing the problems and paradoxes of the underworld and the cosmic simultaneously leave me looking forward to where she will take her latest subject matter next, and what kinds of images and questions will emerge. If her work makes you a little bit uncomfortable, so much the better.

Jacki Apple
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