

Interview: Natasha Bowdoin

by Wendy Vogel



Natasha Bowdoin
Contrariwise (detail)
 2010
 Pencil, gouache and ink on cut paper
 96 x 96 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and CTRL gallery, Houston

Houston-based artist Natasha Bowdoin is concurrently featured in solo exhibitions at Houston's CTRL Gallery (Implausible Tiger, on view through February 19) and at the Visual Arts Center at the University of Texas at Austin (The Daisy Argument, through March 12). Bowdoin sat down with ...mbg at CTRL last week to talk about the two exhibitions, her process and ideas informing the work.

...might be good [...mbg]: You gave an artist's talk here a few weeks ago where you showed images that related to your thinking behind the work. I was interested the relationship you sketched out between older scientific illustrations, classification of the natural world, and fiction. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Natasha Bowdoin [NB]: Sure. I have been interested for a while now in images from a time when scientific understanding of the natural world was still in its early stages, allowing for an openness in recording and comprehending the natural world. There is a duality in these images, specifically natural imagery from the early 19th-century, where on the one hand you have naturalists trying to literally record nature in the most accurate of fashions, and on the other you have a heavy influence and presence of mythology and religion. During this time science and myth almost seemed to be two halves of the same whole. So in these visual documents I end up collecting, there's an interesting relationship between an attempt at recording what's out there, and the indulgence to allow for the mystical and the fantastical, all of which are allowed to exist with equal importance.

In regard to my own work, there's an iconography not just of animals and plants, but also of forces of nature and other natural elements. The animal drawings at CTRL represent my efforts to create my own bestiary. I didn't want to just draw animals from life and leave it there. I wanted them to reflect this human desire to read into the natural world, in a way that nature acts as a mirror that tells one something about what it is to be human. That is why these early 19th century drawings provide a great model for me.

...mbg: Another remarkable element in your work is your use of language. In your cut-paper reliefs you work up to a shape by layering ribbons of handwritten text so that an external, semi-recognizable shape appears. Can you talk about that process, how it begins and how it ends?

NB: The process has to be organic and open-ended. I often start with a text that I'm interested in. In the case of this exhibition (*Implausible Tiger*), I became fixated on Jorge Luis Borges' "Dreamtigers" poem. I start by making drawings of the text, inserting my transcription of the text into different drawn patterns, and then I cut up the drawings. There's no plan for the final image. Usually what happens is that I first have to accrue a pile of raw drawing material. Once I have this material I can then start to investigate how to organize, layer and assemble it.

I think of it like gardening. I have to grow the material that I'm going to use first and then I can harvest it to use in the actual making. Sometimes drawings that are intended to be discrete pictorial images get cut up and integrated into something else. I find that I can't get anywhere compelling if I plan out the process ahead of time. Things have to be allowed to accumulate and fall away in an unpredictable fashion for the work to get interesting.

...mbg: You work with very specific literary references and you often come back to the same texts. For example, in *The Daisy Argument* that is currently on view at the VAC in Austin, you created a site-specific installation of handwritten fronds composed from passages from *Alice in Wonderland*. A lot of the work here in CTRL is based on Borges' poem. Does either Carroll's use of language, or Borges' ideas about the properties of language (I'm thinking about Pierre Menard's appropriation of *Don Quixote* collapsing the distance between the reader and the writer), translate into your compositions? If so, how?

NB: That's a good question. The *Alice in Wonderland* piece has been growing and changing over time. I try my best to keep its form open so that it resists having a final fixed state. In terms of how the text looks, I try to mirror the feeling you get as you read *Alice*. In addition to all of Carroll's playfulness with actual words and their placement on the page, there's also a constant feeling of growing big and shrinking small - mirrored in the character of Alice herself, who never seems to have a fixed form in the Wonderland world. In Carroll's world, words are often freed of the burden of making sense. Even Alice's own body resists limitation. And so I try to use the text in a way that feels as though it's in a constant process of formation and dissolution, shrinking and expanding, in efforts to defy being pinned down by meaning.

With the work related to Borges, I find what attracts me to his writing is the feeling that it has no distinct beginning or end. There is a sense that once you start reading you may never exit this circular loop. In addition to being cyclical, Borges has a labyrinthine way of looking at and writing literature. I try to translate that idea into my own visual process, in many ways making images almost impossible to read. You know that there are words there, but it's really hard to move in a certain direction. The hope is that there's a multiplicity of ways for one piece to be read.

...mbg: Another striking aspect of your work is its labor-intensiveness. The installation at the VAC alone took you weeks to finish. I was wondering if you thought about your process related to artists like Hanne Darboven or Agnes Martin, whose works teeter between neurosis and control. These artists work within systematic parameters, but their work is also very detailed and has a handmade quality. I see something similar in your pieces. Can you speak to that?

NB: I certainly am attracted to and invested in exploring this idea about the elasticity of language, but I also think that transcription of found texts provides an excellent substrate for my process. The text allows me the ability to focus. I do find that if I don't narrow my focus in the beginning, I tend to cast my net too wide and lose track of what I'm after. I like the built-in absurdity of the task of transcribing a poem over and over again. I think in some ways it's similar to Martin, who is using a very simple set of elements, but depending on the very methodical and careful arrangement of those elements, something completely new and expansive is born. I'm definitely attracted to a methodical, meditative approach to making, and also to the idea that through intense labor one can transcend from an originally mundane task into something unpredictable and ripe with potential.

...mbg: Do you see this aspect of your work as related to the sublime?

NB: I'm tentative to say "I'm interested in the sublime," because what artist isn't, in her or his own way? But I think it's great that you see that in the work. In my most recent artist talk, I showed some images of work by Emma Kunz, a kind of painter/healer, who was in a group show *3 x Abstraction: New Methods in Drawing* with Agnes Martin and Hilma af Klint in 2005. The show looked at labor and abstraction in service to reach the sublime. I think my own goals share a kinship with these ideas.

...mbg: I've been thinking a lot about this show at CTRL, *The Daisy Argument* at the VAC and your work in the Core Residency Program show last year. I noticed a real desire to experiment with different formats. Your work in the Core show was more of a mural, and in this exhibition alone there's a combination of cut-paper reliefs in frames, more free-floating compositions composed from ribbons of handwritten text, and two-dimensional drawings. What are the differences between these formats?

NB: I think it's hard with the group format of the Core show, or any group show for that matter, because you only get to put one or two works out there that people view as symbolic of your entire practice. After that experience I really wanted to take the opportunity to show the breadth of my work. In the past I have tried to compartmentalize different parts of my practice. For instance, I've rarely shown the animal drawings alongside the cut-paper work. I knew that their wellspring was the same but I wasn't sure if they would make sense together visually to other people. In the end, I thought the works look disparate to people, then maybe what's exciting about that is it challenges viewers to find the connections between things I believe are very much related.

...mbg: Can you talk more specifically about the wall painting behind *The Daisy Argument* in its most recent incarnation at the VAC?

NB: The wall painting really did come out of the Core show mural piece (*The world below the brine [Whitman and Me]*, 2010). I felt like there was something I wanted to distill from that experience, but not replicate. When I go to install the *Alice* work I bring all the drawing pieces with me and then assemble them intuitively on site. I have amassed close to 50 drawing pieces thus far. I thought in this new incarnation of the piece, why not make a more permanent mark? Of course it's not actually permanent, because it's going to be painted over, but when I got there I felt like I wanted to be more aggressive in my installation than I have been in the past. I thought the wall painting was a nice medium to contrast and mask the lightness and fragility of the paper.

...mbg: There's a relationship to architecture with the painting, but you have a very different experience of the work because it's more colorful, too. Those color choices are different than the ones used in the new works at CTRL. There are more visceral reds, oranges and yellows here, whereas the VAC has more blues and greens...

NB: A lot of the color choice was made on the spot. I was looking at the pieces that I brought with me and was thinking, well, what is the space asking for? The Arcade space has these huge windows so there's a lot of light and nature that catches your eye. In past formations, the piece has always stayed in this pale yellow and gray world. I just felt like I wanted it to be bold all of a sudden. I wanted it to feel less like you were looking at one discrete piece on the wall and more like it was a physical experience of words rushing around you.

A lot of the drawings I brought with me seemed to resemble plant growth, and a lot of people were saying the forms specifically looked like underwater plant life. So some of the blues in that installation came from thinking about how it might look and feel to be under the sea. These installations have always been large in scale, but I in the past I felt like the drawings were ghost-like images, subtle in palette. This last time around it feels much more aggressive in drawing, which I like.

...mbg: Coming back to the idea of the ghost image, I'm wondering if there's a hint of nostalgia in your work about how certain literary works enter our consciousness. I'm thinking about how the appreciation of the paper novel has trailed off. But you've also talked about Native American oral storytelling traditions. Is your work paying homage to the obsolescence of those forms?

NB: I think my work speaks to a different way of reading and experiencing literature that I believe is still alive, but one that requires more of an active pursuit by the reader, especially now that everything is immediately accessible online. But I do think I'm trying to go back to something even older, before the golden age of books. I've had this constant interest in mythology and storytelling and its presence through time. I'm specifically thinking back to the time of the bards and how a story would be something you "carried" with you, changing and adapting to wherever you stopped to tell it. I'm interested in a time where in addition for story to be adaptable, it was also related to movement and sound in a way.

When you read stories from Native American trickster myth cycles, they often begin with the storyteller saying or writing "Here lives my story" or "My story was walking one day." Stories have an animate presence. The story itself is its own character in a strange way. I like that more open-ended, shape-shifting version of how a story can function as opposed to one where its interpretation is more fixed.

...mbg: There is an idea of freeing language from having a classificatory principle into something that is more malleable...

NB: Yeah, malleable is a great word. I saw Salmon Rushdie speak when he came through Houston a few weeks back. He read from his new book *Luka and the Fire of Life*, which is sort of fairytale meant for both children and adults. He was being interviewed afterwards and the interviewer asked, "How do you tell your reader that they're entering into the realm of a fairytale? How do you set the stage for that kind of tale?" Salmon Rushdie starting talking about the words "Once upon a time." He said that in Arabic, their version of "Once upon a time" is "It was so; it was not so." I think that's a really beautiful and powerful way to start a story. No matter how stories are classified, they are always a mix of fiction and nonfiction, as determined through the presence of the author. I like that idea of starting out something with an admittance of contradiction. That's something I would like to emulate in my own work.

Wendy Vogel is Editor of ...might be good.