

the arts

Arts Review

A work that takes Lewis Carroll's text undersea and lets us drown in words

BY ROBERT FAIRES, FRI., FEB. 4, 2011

'Natasha Bowdoin: The Daisy Argument'

The Arcade, UT Visual Arts Center, 23rd & Trinity

www.utvac.org

Through March 12



"The time has come," the Walrus said, "To talk of many things: Of shoes – and ships – and sealing-wax – Of cabbages – and kings – And why the sea is boiling hot – And whether pigs have wings."

These subjects, famously broached by the betusked sea mammal to a curiously weepy and, as it turns out, remorselessly hungry carpenter in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, resurface in *The Daisy Argument*, though not as topics to be heard. Rather, Natasha Bowdoin intends them to be *seen* – along with other lines from the poem and other parts of the book. The Houston-based artist makes Carroll's text an integral part of her installation, setting it in a very literal way on the long, wavy fronds that sprawl across the walls of the Arcade gallery in the University of Texas' Visual Arts Center and even on the walls themselves. Step up to the thickets of larger-than-life, anemonelike plants that Bowdoin has so carefully cut from paper and layered onto the walls – khaki on top of salmon on top of white on top of goldenrod on top of sapphire – and you'll see tattooed into each thick leaf a faintly rendered sequence of words transcribed from one of the books recording Alice's visits to Wonderland. And in the gray and mustard and midnight-blue backgrounds that the artist has painted on the walls beneath these underwater plants are still more, carved out in white relief. Because of the way they're printed – some words rise vertically on the leaves, some are printed upside down – and the overlay of plant on plant, not all the lines are legible. But providing a fully readable version of Carroll's text doesn't appear to be the point. Bowdoin seems much more interested in language itself, in the pliability and density of it – qualities we see exploited over and over in Alice's journeys.

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least – at least I mean what I say – that's the same thing, you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "You might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!'"

"You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like!'"

"You might just as well say," added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, "that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe!'"

In Wonderland, we grasp just how elastic and fluid language can be, and when its meanings curl and shift, in such rapid piling of idea on idea, how easy it is to get lost in it. Bowdoin gives us a delightful visualization of that, one that also suggests language's organic nature and, in those marvelously undulating fronds, its sensuousness. Language can be seductive, as the poor young oysters learn when they're persuaded by the Walrus to join him for "a pleasant walk, a pleasant talk along the briny beach." Eventually, they come to regret it.

If you recall, only the eldest oyster refuses the invitation for this stroll and thus escapes becoming a midnight snack for the double-dealing walrus and carpenter. Standing in the VAC Arcade, surrounded by Bowdoin's gigantic plants, whose dozens of arms seem almost to be swaying, moved by some invisible current, we might well be beneath the waves, comfortably ensconced in that very sea bed. With the wisest of the oysters, we are safe from the dangers of manipulated language and yet able to luxuriate – one might even say drown – in the sheer beauty and lushness of words, words, words.