

# Dream Logic

by David Brickman

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*Tanja Softic: Works on Paper* The College of Saint Rose Art Gallery, through Dec. 7

By now it's not a surprise: For many years, under the guidance of director Jeanne Flanagan, the little College of Saint Rose Art Gallery has brought artists of world caliber right into the heart of Albany with little fanfare and, sometimes, insufficient public response. The current solo exhibition of works on paper by Tanja Softic continues this under-the-radar tradition by presenting a solid selection of large-scale pieces in a strong individual style. Softic, of Bosnian Muslim background, was pursuing a graduate degree in the United States when war broke out in her homeland, effectively making her a refugee by the time she finished in 2002. But she seems to have landed on her feet: Now an associate professor at the University of Richmond in Virginia, Softic's work has been shown widely and placed in public collections from New York and Atlanta to China and New Zealand. It's not hard to see why. Working on handmade paper in a mix of media (mainly acrylic and chalk), Softic builds layers of subtle color and texture as a ground for the interplay of carefully rendered, somewhat mystical objects that recur in varying combinations throughout the works shown here. She incorporates elements of abstraction, softly rendered nature and hard-edge realism into a dreamlike stew that is both very comfortable to look at and easily adapted to individual interpretation. While Softic says in a statement that her drawings "read as text, where one element leads to and reveals another," I found myself more inclined toward getting the overall gestalt of each piece, absorbing its mood and feeling rather than reading it literally or sequentially. There is a range of atmospheres in these drawings, mostly toward the slightly stormy, but the more recent pieces are decidedly sunnier, exhibiting an inner glow that suffuses the space around them. Softic has a personal visual vocabulary that includes seedpods, tiny sea creatures, plants and root vegetables; human organs, teeth and bones, as well as those of animals; and man-made objects, real or imagined, many of which appear to have a scientific application, including bowls, flasks, syringes and such. Additional elements are taken from classical architecture, including columns, floorplans and wallpaper patterns. She combines the skill of a medical or botanical illustrator with the soul of a poet to make extremely detailed drawings that are nothing if not evocative. But evocative of what? The inability to pin down exactly what this work is about is, in fact, a large part of what the work is about. Schooled in classical Europe, then living in postmodernist America, Softic appears to be using her art as a laboratory for working out this aesthetic and cultural dichotomy. Again, her statement is

instructive, as she writes, “I aim to reconcile aesthetic ideas and pictorial approaches that are cast as opposites in most of contemporary art theory and criticism.” She then goes on to describe her works as reflecting both “the traditional visual arts of [her] native Bosnia and Herzegovina” and “the experience of living in the fragmented, layered, constantly changing culture.” These contrasts are present in the work, as is the sense of them being more about process than about any clearly intended meaning. In the hands of a lesser-skilled artist, this could be the formula for disaster, but Softic pulls it off. In effect, she has seduced us into her world of dreamlike confusion, using soft color and layered texture and careful crosshatching on a grand scale, taking us to a place where a sweet potato and its root system is comparable to a human heart and its blood vessels, and an unfolding flower has its equivalents in the form of a section of a Moorish column and the symmetrical shape of a woman’s reproductive organs. Softic has put her memories and ruminations on view, but she does not sensationalize or preach. She says, “I look at and feel my personal and cultural history and [yet, it] is in another world.” Looking at her work or reading it or, as I prefer, feeling it, presents an opportunity to explore her touchpoints—in moments of recognition perhaps we will become better acquainted with our own. The gallery has been painted a soft slate blue to set off the unframed drawings, which are worked edge to edge and held to the walls with pushpins stuck through little attached tabs. Considering that the three largest are each about 6 and a half feet by 12 and a half feet, this is an effective means of presentation; the color choice for the background works well—even in the academic arena, no longer are gallery walls expected to be pure white, and I say thank goodness for that.