



***Flooded* and Other Intimate Terrains by Cherith Lundin**

by Wayne L. Roosa

We think of floods as disasters. And they often are. But Webster's definitions involve more ambiguity than that. As a verb, *flood* can mean *to fill with an abundance or an excess*. As *excess*, "to flood" is *to cover, submerge, inundate*, but as *abundance* it is *to fill or flow in an outpouring*. A nicely charged ambiguity runs through the words used to define *flood*. If *excess* is destructive, then surely *abundance* is life giving. So if a landscape is flooded, has it been ravaged or ravished? It depends.

In keeping with that, if an artist makes a seventy-foot wide drawing titled *Flooded*; a drawing that submerges two entire walls, overflowing the usual banks of "drawing," inundating the gallery space; and if the *trompe l'oeil* quality of the drawing is convincing to the point that the walls dissolve into a vast plane of water seeming to sweep our bodies towards a distant horizon, inexorably converging into the corner of the room; a corner that now—through the illusion of perspective—becomes a promontory dangerously extending into the void where we will be washed over the edge; if all of this, will we not think disaster?

But this drawing involves more ambiguity than that. For even as one's first sensation sees a landscape of water rushing us towards a precipice, a second look sees that it is also a vast bed, the ruffled bedclothes rippling in waves of cloth away from us, perhaps after a night's sleep or love making or dreaming. Some of the folds subliminally imply a figure, or more accurately, the absence of a figure that has left the bed. Suddenly the viewer slips between seeing this as an expansive exterior space and a private interior one, between something remote and extensive and something intimate and intensive. A nice dislocation occurs. We shift from being afloat in a flooded landscape like someone in a canoe to being adrift in a vast bedscape like someone waking out of a dream. We are pulled into the convergence of these opposites—just as we are pulled towards the corner of the gallery space—with a certain alarm and pleasure, wondering exactly where we are. Wondering what

happened here last night? Was it excess or abundance? Was it disaster or life giving?
Ravaging or ravishing?

Two things keep us in suspension between these opposites. One is Cherith Lundin's manner of drawing. The other is the ambiguity of her actual subject matter. In terms of the first, this enormous pencil drawing is highly rational in its objective observation of folds and details. Space is constructed with a clear system of perspective. There is no gestural emotion in the line quality. Evidence of the artist's hand is subdued in favor of a descriptive drawing such that the pencil leaves tiny white flecks as it passes over the tooth of the wall paint's stipple, implying both the impressionistic flicker of light on water's surface and the weave of cotton bed sheets in the morning light. The almost academic precision of her drawing style makes us interested in the formal problems of representing three-dimensional shapes in light and dark. This objectivity would rescue us from the highly emotional subject matter associated with *what* is drawn. For in terms of subject, Lundin touches on two of the most provocative traditions—the sublime landscape and the eros of the reclining human figure—but without quite committing to either.

Who can blame her? This late in art's history and this jaded in culture's self-conscious self-irony, both subjects—so earnest in their histories, so profitable in their markets—are almost untouchable for the serious artist. (Never mind that we still yearn to travel in wild untrammelled landscapes and to love authentically in the intimacy of our beds.) The quality of Lundin's drawing seems to me perfectly suited to the fraught condition of these themes explored here as much by what is not drawn as by what is. Indeed, it is the abstract formal beauty of the drawing that allows us to approach this submerged landscape *qua* morning bed somewhat unawares.

But still, for all this cool neutrality, Lundin does actually place us exactly *in* the bed and the flood. And the strange slippage of scale does disorient us. Frederick Church's great painting of Niagara Falls roaring into a precipice at our feet while rushing into deep space on the horizon; Ingres's classical nudes reclining before us with vacant stares—these painted with such precise observation and formal order that the restraint only serves to intensify the emotions thus suppressed—come to mind. The fear of being swept away, the warm intimacy of being in the bed, these are held in check by the cool neutrality of the academic rendering. Terror and Eros are mediated by neutrality and facticity. A neutrality and facticity that one enjoys examining at great length.

These tensions are played out in a very different way in Lundin's *Atlas* drawings. In these she reverses the relationship of scale to the viewer's body. Although the installation of

all the *Atlas* drawings covers a whole wall, each drawing is quite small and private. The viewer must draw close and lean in to inspect these beautifully precise renderings. And as we lean forward Lundin once again places us in the bed. We find ourselves almost literally nosing about in the covers. Here the rumpled bedding is far more suggestive of human figures. Once again Lundin mediates the almost shocking engagement with something so intimate by way of her drawing style. For on the formal level, these are near-classical renderings of drapery. Ever since Phidias mastered the use of “wet drapery” to reveal and conceal the figure, artists have employed the rich metaphoric possibilities of cloth vis-à-vis the human body. Here the drawing’s almost academic detachment of observation in gray and white serves as just enough restraint now that our noses are literally six inches away from the morning’s vacated sheets and implied partner. The beautifully rendered soft light (exactly between a studio spot used to demonstrate contrast for still life studies and the dawn’s more emotive caress) floods over these full, three-dimensional volumes of bedding. A strong sense of figurative “presence” is evoked as these bedclothes-cum-bodies toss and turn against the empty white spaces surrounding them. Some sprawl openly across the foreground, while others curl up in the fetal position and float near the center of the paper’s open white space.

Each *Atlas* drawing is highly engaging in its own terms. But this is, in fact, a series such that all the drawings form a longer “narrative” of sorts. This series of drawings refers to a month of mornings. Each morning Lundin made a photographic note of the state of the bedclothes after she and her husband had risen. That photograph became the basis for the day’s drawing. As everyone knows, the word “atlas” refers to a portfolio of maps. An *Atlas* may contain maps of a variety of terrains, or it may contain maps showing the changing geography of the same terrain over periods of time. Lundin’s *Atlas* series is more like the latter. It “maps” changes in the terrain of the bed over one month’s time. The shifting state of the bedclothes implies the geography of life’s private and shifting terrain. Exhibited together in a grid on the wall, the whole *Atlas* project is a kind of visual log of this intimate space and the corresponding morning states of being; all achieved so elegantly through the formal problem of rendering a bed’s drapery.

In some wonderfully obscure way, all of this alludes to the life-giving abundance and excess implied in Webster’s other definition of *flood*, which is not so much a disaster as it is, *an overflowing of water onto land that is normally dry*.