



L. Natasha Bowdoin, *Hang onto your ego*, 2010; gouache and ink on paper; 8 x 10 inches; courtesy the artist and CTRL gallery, Houston

R. *Implausible Tiger*, 2010; pencil, gouache, and ink on cut paper; 60 x 84 inches; courtesy the artist and CTRL gallery, Houston

HOUSTON

Natasha Bowdoin CTRL

Natasha Bowdoin's recent exhibition *Implausible Tiger* at CTRL gallery displays a remarkable balance of depth and delicacy in cut-paper works of organic shapes and literary-inspired animals. Bowdoin uses Jorge Luis Borges' "Dreamtigers," a short prose work from a volume of the same name, as a source for nearly half of the seventeen large works in the exhibition. In "Dreamtigers" Borges tells how his childhood love for tigers lies latent in his subconscious throughout his adult life until, in moments when he is nearly asleep but in control of his dreams, he "bring[s] forth tigers." The piece ends with a deliberation on his failure to adequately render tigers within this dreamscape: "Oh, incompetence! My dreams never seem to engender the creature I so hunger for. The tiger does appear, but it is all dried up, or it's flimsy-looking, or it has impure vagaries of shape of an unacceptable size, or it's altogether too ephemeral..."

Inspired by the imaginative challenge of representation set forth in "Dreamtigers," Bowdoin's *Implausible Tiger* is a 5-x-7-foot tour de force of pencil, gouache and ink on cut paper. The twisting, amorphous depiction appears to be pulling itself apart into as many as six individual tigers. In the Borgesian spirit of the labyrinthine, Bowdoin creates jagged stripes across the shape by layering cut paper: first, a white layer on top to define the image's shape, then another winding white layer with handwritten text (perhaps Borges) underneath, followed by a layer of yellow painted paper—all mounted to create several inches of depth above a black-and-white painted base. The intricacy of the work is mesmerizing.

Impossible Tiger, made from the same materials and identically scaled, looks less like an abstracted portrayal of actual tigers and more like something from a biochemistry textbook—perhaps the view of a cross-sectioned

organ or a cell under a microscope. Bowdoin's masterful cutting creates networks so precise and patterned that their branching recalls the self-similar mathematics of fractals. Although only a couple inches thick, the layers of reds, oranges, blues and blacks seem impossibly deep.

While these large cutouts exhibit Bowdoin's engagement with patterning, rhythm and a dreamlike fluidity, the exhibition also includes an installation of forty small gouache-and-ink works depicting animals. Bowdoin's interest in bridging the written word with visual representation connects these drawings thematically to her larger work. The installation begins with a drawing of bananas that forms the text "This Banana Wood" (an anagram for "Natasha Bowdoin") and follows with skillfully articulated renderings of the creatures that dwell there. Several of the drawings have short lines of text or song lyrics underneath; for example, a fox stands above the Pixies' line "Hang on to your ego."

Ultimately, Bowdoin's artistic preoccupations seem very much aligned with those of her literary muse; like Borges, the artist finds unique and imaginative ways to represent abstract ideas. Her work calls into question reality's shifting point of reference—in the same way that Borges' tiger appears with "impure vagaries of shape"—and creates pictorial space for viewers to let their imaginations sprawl. Part illuminated manuscripts woven with cryptic text, part sculptural boxes, Bowdoin's exhibition is a menagerie of abstracted linguistic and optical delights.

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