

The Sewn Drawings of China Marks

By Meredith Bergmann

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In her new sewn work *China Marks* simultaneously critiques and celebrates the derivation of fabric design from Art. Even in yard goods one can find remnants of the heroic 20th century struggle between traditional illusionistic depth and righteous modern flatness. Most fabrics challenge transformation. They are so undeniably what they are, so assertive, that they will never be sewn up into any thing. Marks accepts their challenge. She will see a virulent pattern and recognize with a kind of joy that “these are insane waves.” That was the beginning of *The Sea Fairy*, a serenely composed, carefully integrated nocturne as haunting as one of Redon’s lithographs.

In the marine fabric of *The Sea Fairy*, the “insane waves,” originally painted with a brush on Mylar, were digitally repeated and shadowed so that waves that were once flat shapes now toss themselves at us. Meanwhile, the fabric of the night sky is veiled with brushstrokes and spangled with rows of dots that sit on its surface. These convey both the flattened charm of stars on a ceiling and the deeper glamour of lights glimpsed through fog. The fabrics themselves have complex histories, in which questions of illusion and quiddity were invoked and tinkered with long before the artist began to subvert them.

Sometimes the rhythms of the fabric reinforce the drawn form. In the body of the man in the boat (more selkie than faerie, with his watery walrus mustache), the swoops of the paisleys form the curves of his belly, shoulder and breast, and a flower marks his kneecap. Sometimes, as in his giant crustacean hand, Marks shuffles and pieces fabric to create anatomical rhythms. The hand, with its magenta nail beds, has a flayed quality. On the middle finger she has highlighted a dark brown shadow with zigzag scumbling in a lighter golden thread. The hand breaches the horizon with a gesture too robust for a scene of rescue or succor, as if the man in the boat were calling back a piece of himself.

Marks reacts to each scrap of fabric in unexpected ways. Some images, like the face of the flying creature, she has cut whole from cloth and only subtly altered. Others are used according to the sense she can make of their shapes, like the spikes that make the creature’s flaming crown. Sometimes one can find her making almost-secret jokes, like her use of map-printed fabric for the creature’s rump and tail. The texture formed by the dense place names on the rump gives way to a tail like a kite, braced by latitude and longitude and feathered by what look like the route lines of another kind of ferry.

According to the artist, one drawing can suggest the next. *Whose Woods Are These?* was first and relatively simple: a sewn and pieced figure venturing into a prefabricated landscape in which the illusion of densely tangled forest is only slightly marred by repeated trademark assertions that read “Apparition Excel.” One branch appears to cross in front of the figure, inserting it into the forest and transforming a stereotypical landscape into a hushed and haunted one. For the artist, the most exciting part of the work was the figure’s head, which she felt that she did not so much draw as

construct, the way she had made sculptures in the past. Marks immediately wanted to build another head, but in a higher chromatic key.

Acid Dandy was constructed from flowers and paisleys as if by a stoned Mod Arcimboldo rethinking his allegory of Spring. Marks uses allegory on many levels, referring to private mythologies, current events, art and art theory. Here, across an innocuous sky, she floats a head that illuminates Wolfgang Kaiser's definition of the grotesque as a "potentially ominous fusion of realms." Her Dandy's blue plaid teeth glowing in his paisley mouth read as little windows right through his belligerent head to an intensely blue, intensely witty sky full of "fleecy" daisy clouds that give the background an extraordinary depth.

For her next drawing, Marks wanted more interaction between figure and ground. In *Nature and Man's Fate* she sewed a hokey Adirondack landscape, like those used for sleeping bag linings, on top of a fantastically flowered chintz and the ground came to life. So subtle are some of her grafts that one begins to see faces and gestures in the unaltered parts of the chintz. The eye is drawn into the landscape, to the moose, which sports a major excrescence: a tumor? a seeded bagel? The moose and the flower-headed figure whose lower body is a canoe hijacked from the landscape, remind me of Picasso's sculpture of a baboon and of the collages Max Ernst made from nineteenth-century engravings. The moose-protagonist in his shrinking landscape is being stalked by the canoe-man and a creature with the cream cheese-colored gloves of Mickey Mouse. What allegory is being enacted here?

Marks keeps returning to investigate and celebrate the head. *Drive, He Said* is made from a Hawaiian-shirt style retro fabric celebrating 1950's American tourism with deadpan surrealism. Empty, finned convertibles speed to Florida beaches, which yield to snowy star-spangled Rockies where a filling station somehow always contains a curiously flat Jefferson Memorial trailing turquoise cherry trees. Another car of more recent vintage is spewed- or is that a famous Western rock formation?- from the mouth of the title character, whose massive head, tucked between palms, coheres from what look like plowed fields and the contour lines and swamp plant symbols of geographical maps. But study his intense expression and puffed cheeks and you will find paisleys, leopard spots, painterly stripes and chintz fronds. His inward-looking eye is curtained with lace. The other glints with a pair of bird's feet. An emblematic head of Tourism, he invites us to roam this drawing and see all its sights.

Marks claims to be merely making a process-driven, reactive art: "I never have to imagine anything. I simply have to pay attention to what's happening under my hands." Yet in her audaciously speculative play she deliberately leads us through the familiar domesticity of her fabric- behind the laundry dancing on the line, under the tablecloth, beneath the apron, inside the lingerie. In *Storybook Days*, a Beatrix Potter-style nursery fabric is found to be full of scenes evoking both Hieronymus Bosch and Henry Darger. Her most intensely narrative piece, it is also the most perverse, because she has so playfully subverted so much of the fabric's carefully innocuous storytelling.

China Marks' new work might seem indebted to the 70's Pattern and Decoration movement, currently receiving renewed attention in several shows, and it provides some of the same pleasures that for that movement seemed so transgressive in the reign of Minimalism, invoking the feminine, women's work, vernacular culture and sheer sensual delight in ornamental color and texture. In earlier two-dimensional work, Marks made her own oversized rubber stamps, silk-screens, and offset plates and used them to create a "chunky mix"- a printed ground that vied with the drawn subject matter in exciting ways. However, she was always, irrepressibly, telling stories and her dark, irreverent, haunting narratives vied with her elaborate process. One can see similar impulses in the work of other artists, such as the gorgeousness of Takako Yamaguchi's symbolic landscapes and the fervor of Carole Caroompas' narrative feminist pastiches. But Marks rarely quotes from pop culture. The way she uses fragments of patterned fabric to model form and carve out space recalls her 1986-91 sculptures in which she combined found objects with her own modeled and cast pieces.

Three years ago, when China Marks' drawings told her they had to be sewn, this message had the instantaneous, visceral impact of a miraculous religious conversion or of falling in love. She had no idea how to begin until a friend of a friend mentioned free-motion embroidery. It took another year before she acquired industrial sewing equipment. Like many artists she is both visionary and practical, glad of the handicap the sewing machine gave to what she saw as her too-facile line. Now she outlines, shades, blends and erases with thread. At the sewing machine, she improvises, takes risks and suffers the suspense: "I have no emotional distance. Am I going to pull it off? Each time it's like I'm rescuing the world." Marks believes that if she remains alert and suffuses even the mundane aspects of her extremely labor-intensive, meticulous work with intentionality, the result is that the finished drawing becomes "an eye magnet, or maybe even a soul magnet. It's like stroking an iron bar with a magnet until the bar is magnetized."

In a world too full of cross-purposes to cohere, this artist's work is to make it all come together, seams showing, for confounding moments of sheer delight. Marks says her work is about simultaneity, "the hum and buzz and glitter of the world, the too-muchness of everything." I hope she will make more of it. Too much is never enough.