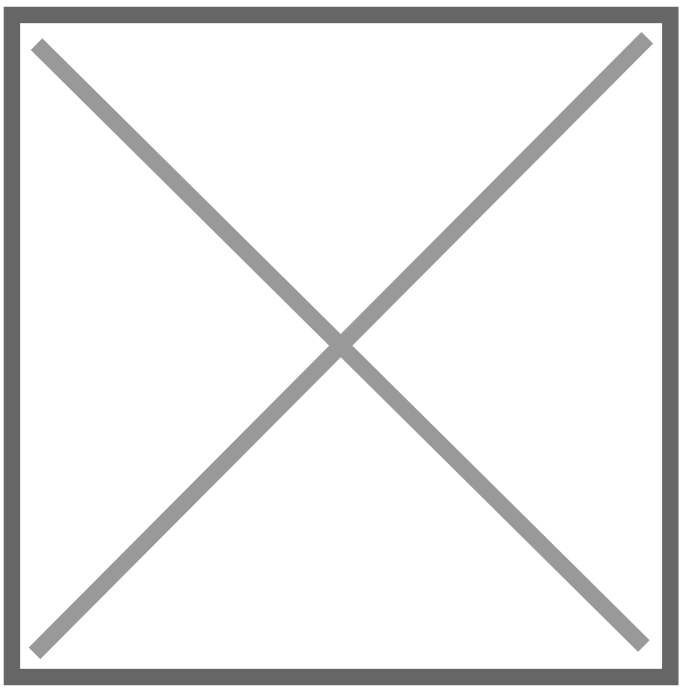
VAN DER GRINTEN GALERIE



Ruth Marten

FOUNTAINS & ALLIGATOR – Artist Statement

22.02.2016–

"DRAWING IS THE PASSION BEHIND IT ALL"

Serendipity has dictated all my choices in the collages I've made since 2006. As I am an absolute dictator in my manual manipulations, I thought it wise to give over to emotion and attraction when first contemplating a new picture. That I often hide my hand within the print's vernacular doesn't concern me as I am disciplined and bullheaded enough to extend the fantasy to the bitter end, thus making it more completely my own.

My first purchase of the print that was the genesis of FOUNTAINS & ALLIGATORS was bought on New York's Upper West Side at a Sunday flea market. This tiny, foxed, delicate print, "497" was etched in 1808 before the advent of lithography and mass publishing. It came from a book entitled "Costume Parisien", one of the earliest fashion magazines, hardcover. I found dozens more in the archives of Argosy Book & Print Shop spanning the years 1808 to the Victorian era

with its grotesque ornamentation and obvious vow to leave no garment unadorned. My people wore Empire style, with its connection to Napoleon and classical Greek lines, exuding an air of sensible modernity. The spareness within the rectangle they inhabited easily allowed for my additions, and the modesty of the poses allowed me to turn them into gushing fountains or force crocodilian cohabitation upon them. Interesting also were the attitudes they took; apparently it was altogether natural at the beginning of the 19th century to strike a pose of lamentation. One can easily imagine the ravages of high childhood mortality and young widowhood through warfare and illness. Those pages were a primer on funereal garb.

*Perhaps these well-to-do Parisians were even waiting for my interventions? It became an opportunity to animate and amplify any notion of an inner life and to provide a bridge to our time where we thrive on layered meanings. All that latency waiting to be exploited! Once you drape an alligator shawl around a lady's shoulders or build some serious plumbing into an evening dress, the game is on. Any and all interpretations are welcome.***<**

I realize upon reflection that mine is a provincial world circumscribed by the streets and history of New York City. I love this town and decry its dissolution into anonymous and soulless architecture. One place that has stubbornly ignored this trend for its entire 90 year history is Argosy Books & Prints on 59th Street. Upon entering, one is overwhelmed by the smell of old paper, rabbit skin glue and time. That was how it was when, as a 17-year-old working after school, I handled the old prints and delivered the framed ones all over the City. I can't recall if I was fired or if I quit, though the latter seems likely as the year was 1966 and I wanted to make history, not file it. Remarkably I've returned to this place, the last of its kind, to hunt the stacks for the bizarre and for the lost.

There seems little doubt that the known past feels safer than the unknowable future. Maybe the armies of artists, illustrators, map makers and social satirists whose vivid renderings illuminate these old pages offer me a comradeship I desire. I also admit to a serious case of Ernst envy (who doesn't?), though I've chosen the 18th century for my material, I'm pressed by their industry and desire to define their known world. These copper plate engravings are beautifully wrought on handmade laid paper and were originally intended as book illustrations. They survived fires, floods, wars and disinterest until 20th century print dealers cut them out and put them into frames for the designer trade or laid them out on tables at flea markets. There they awaited their second or third acts, their content long replaced or refuted by scholarship and technology. That's where I first encountered them and imagined a collaboration.

Nobody really wants these old pictures and I feel no guilt for my alterations. I do see it as a collaboration with artists from the past who strived to illustrate the discoveries and attitudes of their time, an often Herculean task. Sometimes they had to cobble, from hearsay, a furry mammal or translate a ship's artist's sketchbook into sensational first reports of an expedition's discovery of cannibalism! Human sacrifice! Nudity! The engravers met the ship at the dock and like all good reporters, raced to produce images for public delectation. Human curiosity fires the exact same results today.

VAN GRINTEN
DER GALERIE

FOUNTAINS & ALLIGATORS is a bit of a departure from the collage work I've created in that the theme is extended over several dozen plates. Usually I work only on individual themes. Before these collages, I worked 17 years depicting hair from every possible perspective. The work may change but the rigor/obsessiveness does not. Drawing is the passion behind it all. I am most interested in "what" and "how" .

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