

LARGE REPTILES & LAMENTATION

Ruth Marten's latest obsession

by Dian Parker

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.

What do gushing waters have in common with large ungainly reptiles? Why is that delicate woman nearly drowning in water? Why are all these elegant Parisian men and women wearing reptiles? And why would two distinguished gentlemen dressed for the opera be standing, oblivious, in fountains of water? What about riding an alligator to tea?

Ask Ruth Marten, *artiste extraordinaire*, who has taken 18th century antique engravings of beautifully dressed men and women, and deftly using watercolour and ink, wrapped and escorted these ladies and gentlemen with alligators. Marten is fearless when she adds a fountain of arcing water spewing out of a prim woman's privates, as the lady sits demurely gazing outwards, possibly reflecting on Trollope's latest novel. The woman, wearing a long gown with red slippers peeking demurely out from under her skirt, sits fanning herself as the water spurts upward, out from between her pressed together legs. Is she hot and bothered, or deliciously climaxing?

These absurd, off-kilter images are Ruth Marten's latest collage-illustrations, called "Fountains & Alligators". Using an X-Acto knife as a pen and treating her pen as a knife, Marten creates surrealistic worlds that are elegant, graceful, dynamic, and extreme. Studying a series of her images has a dizzying effect on one's equilibrium. All is not what it seems. "Once you drape an alligator shawl around a lady's shoulders or build some serious plumbing into an evening dress, the game is on," Marten said. "Any and all interpretations are welcome." The irony of her images is most definitely outside the social norm.

While exploring flea markets as well as antique print shops, Marten discovered her latest inspiration in 19th century copper plate engravings which were originally intended as book illustrations. The handmade, laid paper is gorgeous, as is the delicate rendering of men and women in these fashion plates. These beautiful French engravings are from the early 1800's, after the French Revolution. The men sport morning coats, high in the neck, with

No. 1 from the "Fountains and Alligators" series
by Ruth Marten
9"x6"
watercolour and ink on paper
2015
Courtesy of Van der Grinten Galerie, Cologne

(1)





Cornette de Mousseline Brodée. Robe du Matin.

Image above
No. 1614 from the "Fountains
and Alligators" series
by Ruth Marten
7.5"x4.6"; watercolour and collage on
19th century copperplate engraving; 2015
Courtesy of Van der Grinten Galerie, Cologne

Image right
No. 907 from the "Fountains
and Alligators" series
by Ruth Marten
7.6"x8"; watercolour and collage on
19th century copperplate engraving; 2015
Courtesy of Van der Grinten Galerie, Cologne

a waistcoat of printed quilting and often wear stocking pantaloons with Hessian boots. The Parisian women of this period wear long flowing muslin dresses, with the flattering Empire-style, high waistline. By inserting another story into these proper and upright engravings, Marten twists their serene fashion statements into exciting, eccentric situations. A dapper man in riding attire and top hat drapes an alligator around his shoulders. The irony of elegance and ease is positively charming. The alligator even has its paw on the man's perfectly coiffed hair.

After pursuing a typical course of art lessons, competitions and art academies, Marten, a native New Yorker, found herself in 1973 trying to calculate how she could be part of the world and support herself. "At that time, I began my eight-year career as New York's 'Lady Tattooist' during the illegal and wooly origins of what is now a massively popular art form and right of passage," Marten said. "Concurrent with my interest came the Punk movement, Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation—my principal clientele. As an exponent of unconventional designs and a champion of what is now called Neo-Tribalism, I was happy to work with these self-inventive people who were a perfect match with their optimism and passion." A tattoo is marking the skin with indelible pictures by making punctures in the skin and inserting pigments—not unlike what Marten is now doing with these 19th century engravings.

In the early 70's, magazine illustration was exciting and sexy, reflecting the culture. Before the digital age it was the way society communicated the important ideas of the time, offering alternative viewpoints on everything from manners and mores, to life attitudes, dress, sexual expression and politics. Marten said, "I was lucky enough to be welcomed in to *Esquire* magazine for my first effort. Over a 30-year career, I tried my hand at various forms of the art; from book covers to posters, and record covers to fashion drawing." Marten is perhaps best known for the dozen or so covers she made for Peter Mayle's "Year in Provence" books.

1808.

Costume Parisien.

(941)

1808.

Costume Parisien.

(907)



Capote de Cachemire. Redingote de Levantine, Garnie Pluche coupée de Levantine. Collier de Corail. Capote à Bandes de Tulle et Aemphis de l'erkate.

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These are Marten's characters and perhaps even their words, as they arrive for tea on the back of an alligator as if this was the typical mode of transportation in Paris in 1805. Of course and why not?

Since 1977, Marten has been exhibiting drawings, paintings, sculptures and collages in New York, San Francisco, London, Paris and Cologne. For 17 years she focused extensively on hair, from aesthetic, cultural and absurdist perspectives. "I felt it made a good surrogate for figuration," Marten said. "With its universality, this work opened up broad and interesting conversations. Unfortunately it became a kind of gestalt which I calculated was the signal for me to bail."

Since 2006, Marten has been teaching watercolour technique at New York's School of Visual Arts. Currently she is represented by Van der Grinten Galerie in Cologne, and the John Marchant Gallery in London. Van der Grinten Galerie has championed her collage work and published two books: *The Unvarnished Truth* in 2013 and *Fountains & Alligators* in 2016, an exceptional book. The John Marchant Gallery (formerly Isis Gallery) published a collection of her work entitled *Histoire un-Naturelle* in 2008.

Edward Gorey, Lucas Samaris, Paul Klee, Jim Nutt and Hieronymus Bosch have been great influences for Marten. "I have also loved the mostly West Coast artists of the Funk Ceramics movement. I like older art, especially very old art," she said.

Marten's technique is masterful. It is difficult to tell where her ink, watercolour and blade have impregnated the 19th century engraving. "Suffice it to say, there are many X-Acto blades used in the process—a cut having the same worth as a line," she said. The work is not only beautiful but amusing. One can imagine the lady, in one illustration, standing in the alligator suitcase and reading from *The Beaux Stratagem* these lines: "I've had today a dozen billets-doux, from fops and cits and wits and Beau Street beau." All the while the little book she is reading is spurting water. Or is it ribbons? These are Marten's characters and perhaps even their words, as they arrive for tea on the back of an alligator as if this was the typical mode of transportation in Paris in 1805. Of course and why not?

We laugh along with Marten, reveling in the absurd. One top-hatted gent is on the promenade walking his pet alligator on a leash. Yet on closer examination, the man is actually an alligator himself. The details of her illustration in comparison with the original engraving are so similarly rendered, one can't tell which is which. Her colours (and scaly skin) match perfectly with the man's spats, vest and black silk cravats. "In 'Fountains & Alligators', the theme is extended over several dozen plates," Marten said. "Usually I work only on individual themes. The work may change but the rigor and obsessiveness does not. Drawing is the passion behind it all."

This is no pasted and glued collage. This is the work of an illustrator, a watercolourist, a well-studied painter, a draftsman, dreamer, poet, dancer. Her work is beautiful and precise in design and colour, as well as in texture and composition. In one collage/illustration, she paints a lovely scene of a bonneted woman, sketching on a lap desk. Tacked to the wall behind her are displayed her drawings of fountains (Marten's addition). At the lady's feet is an alligator (or is it a crocodile?). The reptile looks to be smiling. Like all Marten's work, this illustration is delightful, entertaining, and full-on whimsically enchanting.

"My work seems to me to be getting more obscure and uncomfortable which, though engendering much teeth gnashing on my part, seems to be the right direction," Ruth Marten said. "I still prefer *The Book* as an ultimate altar."

Ruth Marten lives and works in New York City. She studied at the High School of Art and Design in Manhattan and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. After working in New York's tattoo underground in the 1970s and early 1980s, including tattooing at the 10th Paris Biennale, Marten had a 30 year career illustrating magazines, music and book covers. Since 1989, she has expressed herself "exclusively through drawings, paintings and sculptures". Her work is in the collections of Charles Saatchi, Don Ed Hardy, the De Young Collection and others. She is represented by Van der Grinten Galerie in Cologne, Germany (www.vandergrintengalerie.com) and John Marchant Gallery, London (www.johnmarchantgallery.com).

1807

Costume Parisien.

(821)



• Costume tout-à-fait Négligé.

No. 821 from the "Fountains and Alligators" series by Ruth Marten 7.9"x4.6"; watercolour and collage on 19th century copperplate engraving; 2015. Courtesy of Van der Grinten Galerie, Cologne