

Imagination and Distant Memories in the
2014 Pacific States Biennial National Print Exhibition at the
University of Hawai'i at Hilo Campus Center Gallery

By Jean Ippolito

Just as the images in the 2014 Pacific States Biennial National Print Exhibition stir our imaginations, it is from the imagination of the artists that the images have sprung. The connecting thread that brings the images together in this year's show is imagination. We, as viewers, can only imagine what lies beyond the door in DeAnn Prosia's *Entrance to the City*, or the door of David Furst's *Afterglow*, or the open gate in Kristin Powers Nowlin's *Carry Me Back to Old Virginia*. A majority of the artwork in this show stems from the artists' imagination in order to provoke the thoughts of a viewer into story telling narratives.

Entrance to the City is an etching by DeAnn Prosia, who imagines what it is like for viewers to block out surrounding elements only to focus on what is of interest. There is an incredible amount of detail in this etching, but the main focus is a set of doors, an entrance – no, an exit from a mall, train station, civic center or airport – a large exterior space with people walking rapidly back and forth and cars passing behind them seen through the glass. We can imagine an escape from one crowded interior to a busy exterior, as we end one journey to begin another. In Christina Altfeld's etching entitled *No Equality*, one can only imagine what is behind the door as two shrouded figures progress toward it. These stately, but ghostly, images stand before the patterned entrance as a seated elderly gentleman peers over his shoulder from the side. Unlike the other doors in this diverse show of prints, this one remains closed. One can only imagine what lies behind the ornate façade.

Some of the artwork in this exhibition evokes mysterious environments, as though looking through a portal to another world. The artist, Barbara Duval in the etching *Untitled 03*, imagines the placement of human figures in smoky environments, like a well-choreographed dance. It is the hazy environment and the vague visages that leave the storytelling to the viewer's imagination. Karinna Gomez in *Forest Substation*, a mezzotint print, imagines the mundane – “communication towers, weather instrumentation, substations, and power plants” as “surreal interpretations, and ones of both isolation and interconnectedness . . .” Highlighted in darkness, the mundane substation seems to want to tell a story, making it an object that most would turn away from; one that, in this case, appears to have an air of importance.

In many cases, animal characters take part in the narratives. Jonathan Cartedge imagines a world in which traditional animals of prey rediscover their surroundings through “conceptual puzzles that describe the inner workings of their environment . . .” Rabbits (yes, rabbits) use the tools of biologists in the scientific laboratory to explore the natural world around them. In Jonathan's etching, entitled *Bird Netting*, these not so docile rabbits, wearing trousers, are

wrestling birds, banding the legs, observing, and taking notes on clipboards, all beneath the fine lines of netting. Does the victim become the prey in this role reversal? No, at the edge of the net, an anthropomorphic rabbit releases the bird toward freedom. In Robert Bern's linoleum print, *Stuck with It*, there is no happy ending. It is a seriously imaginative illustration of the fear and torture that physical illness brings to frail bodies. Human figures with grotesque animal heads appear to be injecting limp bodies with gargantuan hypodermic needles. This is a kind of nightmarish imagination. In the work of Justin Diggle, birds are the imaginative metaphor for surveillance. In *Mobile Inverse Surveillance House System I*, the bird flies through the air with spy equipment housed on its back. The artist wants to remind us that, like the birds, surveillance equipment is hovering above us everywhere we go. There is a house with many windows, a satellite dish extended from a metal arm, and a periscopic chimney on the bird's back. A close up look at the detailed texture of the bird reveals that it is, itself, a mechanical device. The only really organic looking part is a human-like ear attached to one wing.

Some of the imagined narratives in these prints are humorous or playful. Jennifer Junker imagines humor in everyday idioms as shown in *Cakewalk*, a screen print. She calls these "word puns," with "everyday life as an inspiration . . ." A four-tiered cake is on a lead, tagging behind its master. There is just enough visual information in this screen print to give the viewer a chuckle. The youth that is walking the cake is only partially shown at the right, and the cake appears to be bouncing along the ground on the far left of the 11.5 X 29" inch horizontal format. Interestingly enough, it is the rope lead that is the central focal point of this composition, all on a whimsically framed cerulean blue background.

Florence Alfano McEwin, in *Mi Casita*, processes the objects of girlhood play, like paper dolls, and magazine cutouts. She refers to this as the "purity of play." *Mi Casita* is playtime, a young girl jumping rope, boy running, dog leaping, and a dollhouse. The latter object is a dollhouse only by association. It could be a diagram of a real house. The figures appear to be floating, jumping, and launching themselves into the air from the roof of the house. Cut away views within the dollhouse show a living room, dining room, bathroom and bedroom with a single bed, but it is empty. Everyone is outside playing. All of the items in this print look as though they were photocopied from newspaper or magazines, maybe even advertisements, but the juxtapositions give the impression of a child's imaginary playtime, with no more concerns than those of home and play.

Another playful piece with a "mischievous and cynical spin" can be found in the work of Johanna Winters and Don Krumpos. The collaborative spontaneity and improvisation of these two artists results in the intaglio print entitled *How the Sequestration Ruined Danny's Summer Vacation*. This is an image of whimsical characters that can provoke different story telling in the mind of each viewer. An alligator hot air balloon holds up a bathtub basket with two passengers inside. One holds a lantern to lead the way. It is the plump character on the ground that holds a rope to steer the balloon, while he is anchored to the ground by a ball

and chain. The ball at the end of the chain has a character all its own as it waves two flags in the air. The alligator balloon may be buoyant, but not happy. He bares a scowl on his face and a crown on his head, but his snout is tied shut with a ribbon. He is not going to tell the story. That is left up to each viewer to narrate within the creative depths of his or her own psyche.

In Yuji Hiratsuka's intaglio print *Permian Utopia*, the characters are like actors "who narrate a story in a play" leaving the plot points up to the viewer's imagination. The stage setting for the characters is a fantasy undersea world or garden of earthly delights. The artist creates whimsical mismatches of satirical figures as metaphors for emotions. Using bright colors and rich textures, the juxtapositions are puzzling, but the artist insists, "They are all happy people." In *Hollow Tips*, a woodcut print, Ricardo Ruiz juxtaposes simple primitive shapes and primary colors with modern designs in a "dialogue with contemporary society and its relationship to primitive cultures." Visually, there are similarities between the feathered costumes of Native American dancers and the abstracted faces of African masks, with the shapes and colors of traffic lights and neon signs in a metropolis of cosmopolitan rhythms.

In many of the prints in this show, artists begin with existing imagery and, through imagination, abstract it to create fantastic characters by anthropomorphizing animals, or animalizing the heads of human figures. On the other hand, the *Punkin Voodoo* woodcut of David Graves is an abstract maze of lines, circles and colors. The artist explains in his statement that he begins with the anthropologist's diagram for family and societal organizations to evolve abstract quilt-like structures.

Another work that evokes the world of the anthropologist's fieldwork is Keegan Adams's *Ritual*. In Keegan's lithograph, a line of feathers across the bottom of the print is the foundation for a ritual of ghostly torsos that rise from the feather tips in smoky puffs. Some torsos are visible, but the faces are vague, and only imagined from the surfaces of splotches of water wash. Much of the surface of Keegan's print is abstract. Vague drumbeats and rhythms can be imagined from the repeated drops of ink on a wet surface. Wind and weather elements may also be of the viewer's imagination triggered by the striated surface of the print.

Another etching in this show that is rich in multicultural imagery is *Sign Me* by Mario Kiran. In this print, there are rich, cosmopolitan mixtures of "cross-cultural relationships between East Indian and Western influences . . ." It is truly a whimsical mixture of ornate tattoos and dancing hands. Each hand is a graceful *mudra* covered with psychedelic pop designs.

Imagination is a concept to behold in these prints for the 2014 Pacific States Biennial National Print Exhibition. Some of the works draw on imaginary scenarios and some on fictitious characters. Yet, there are some that require each of us to examine our surrounding reality with enough imagination to get past assumptions or stereotypes. Such is the case with *Luther 49 crop*, a block print, which is one of a series called *Invisible People* by the artist Neil Shigley.

The artist explains that his “subjects are homeless people living on the streets near my studio . . .” presented to show the “incredible character that life on the streets has given these individuals . . .” Neil gives us the opportunity to imagine a narrative for the individual that is the close up face in this print.

As a testament of how important the workings of the human mind are to creativity in this artwork, two of the artists participating in the Pacific States Biennial National Print Exhibition are professional practicing psychologists. Of those two, Jennifer Smith claims that, “Years as a multicultural-psychologist have sharpened my capacity to see the extraordinary in everyday life.” She begins with ink drawings by hand, scans them into the computer and abstracts them by “shifting color, texture, composition or scale.” Her digitally manipulated figures dance like flames and flicker like the synapses in our neuro-networked brains.

Juliette Becker, a practicing psychotherapist, focuses on the beauty she sees in everyday life. Other artists practice their own kind of self-therapy through art. Yenphi “Mimi” Le, in *The Roundup*, a relief print, imagines heroic situations in which to resolve her childhood fears. Like a book illustration, the print tells a story, in which the female protagonist calmly takes the offense against a massive rattlesnake and cobra with nothing more than ropes and lassos. There is enough imagination in this storytelling to build confidence in any weak-kneed audience member.

Although purely abstract images are rare in this biennial show, there are instances in which abstraction is a stronger vehicle to provoke the imagination. Margaret Gallegos imagines the “feminine . . . at the macro and micro levels . . .” Her entry entitled, *Of Blood and the Moon . . . and Nesting*, reveals the “magnetism and fecundity” in the “forces of nature.” There is an honesty and sincerity in Gallegos’ images of the feminine that you won’t find in the delicate beauty of a naturalistic representation.

Finally, the serene figural landscape, *So Much Doubt to Lose* by Tracy Templeton, allows us to imagine traversing over the hills of our own human emotions. Silver folds of fluid fabric prick our imaginings of early black and white landscape photography. The hand caressing the top of the mountain directs our thoughts as the vision of the human form beneath the drapery reminds us of our own feelings in times of doubt.

Our invited juror, Willie Cole, a very imaginative artist in his own right, selected from the entries the works that were most provocative and “innovative, in technique as well as story telling.” The artworks in this year’s Pacific States Biennial are certainly capable of creating stories in the minds of the viewers. The images created by the artists are just the beginning of the story; but perceptive viewers will build their own climax and conclusion, so that each one walks away with a story that is unique and personal.

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