

Monday, March 9, 2009

Pulling the Plug

Penny Rockwell's work is, well, electric

By Melissa Stern

The work of Penny Rockwell, currently showing at Pavel Zoubok Gallery, is harrowing, intimate, sad and beautiful. She has documented with painful honesty the progression of a psychotic break that she suffered in the early 1990s, one fueled by paranoid delusions that electrical plugs were evil animated beings that were after her. After 10 years of therapy—and medication—she has attempted to recreate and communicate the absolute terror of this experience.



"Untitled (Plugs), 2000-03" by Penny Rockwell

The exhibition is divided into three parts: The first, entitled "Evidence," is a dense wall full of realistic and sinister drawings of industrial equipment, lamps and tools—all with prominent and menacing plugs. They are a studied and desperate attempt prove that the world is full of danger.

The second part is in a different drawing style and represents a small dark woman (or women) being chased and engulfed by plugs that are stylized with long fanglike prongs. The plugs are wildly animated. Snaking through rooms and up stairs, relentlessly pursuing the small cartoon women.

Some of the drawings depict an insanely detailed household; furniture and the ever-present plugs swirl into one and domesticity runs amok. The thing that saves this work from being just therapeutic is that the drawings are incredibly beautiful.

In black and white with a few strategic hits of color, they are skillfully composed and drawn. This is what makes this work transcend that of other "outsider" artists, who too often make work that needs a strong back-story in order to click. Often I feel drawn into the world of an outsider artist with a twinge of guilt—Rockwell's work, however, gives me no such pains. The story of her descent into this mad world is both sad and interesting, and reading her narrative adds another valuable layer of understanding to the show, but it isn't necessary. The work stands on its own as contemporary drawing, full stop.

The third section of the exhibition documents the artists' stay in Bellevue. A dense cacophony of figures crowds into the drawing entitled "Untitled (Plugs)" Up, down, naked, eating, screaming, yawning—the full gamut of human behavior is crowded into this one dense drawing. Another depicts a snaking line of every variety of naked female waiting to bathe in one big, old-fashioned bathtub while a uniformed nurse screams for order.

Throughout all of the work, there is a powerful underlying sense of formal design and layout, bringing order to the madness of these drawings. There is structure beneath the work, perhaps the same structure that enabled Penny Rockwell to eventually find her way home.

>Penny Rockwell: Plugs

Through Mar. 14, Pavel Zoubok Gallery 533 W. 23rd St. (betw. 10th & 11th Aves.), 212-675-7490.