MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Suellen Rocca Turns an Inward Eye

Rocca's drawings evidence an interior gaze and the working out of psychological states.

Nicole Rudick

Suellen Rocca, "Don't" (1981), graphite and colored pencil on paper, 14 x 11 inches (all images courtesy Matthew Marks gallery © Suellen Rocca)

Rudick, Nicole. "Suellen Rocca Turns an Inward Eye." *Hyperallergic*, October 13, 2018.

In the 1960s, Suellen Rocca was a member of the Hairy Who, a group of six artists who attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the first part of the decade and exhibited together from 1966 to 1969. Though they worked independently, their art is collectively rowdy, celebratory, and vital. Their aesthetic is all-encompassing — their sources range from comics to Mesopotamian art. Rocca's work, in particular, relies in large doses on images from jewelry catalogues and kindergarten workbooks, and of household goods. The groups' teachers at SAIC, notably Whitney Halstead and Ray Yoshida, promoted a nonhierarchical view of world art and culture and made ample use in their instruction of the natural-history collections in Chicago's Field Museum. Rocca's drawings, paintings, and objects from that period use abstracted, intimate forms to create a personal iconography — often in hieroglyphs of repeating elements — that elicits a sense of pleasure in romance, female sexuality, and domestic life. By 1968, Rocca was married with two young children; she balanced motherhood with work in her studio. "It was wonderful," she recalls. "It was a happy time."

But in 1975, she and her husband divorced, and Rocca stopped making art during the 1970s. When she returned to artmaking in 1981 (also returning to Chicago from the Bay Area), her work was decidedly different. Anxiety, threat, and psychic distress became the subjects of ferocious drawings, with titles such as "It's a Secret" (1981), "Scary Travel" (1981), and "Don't" (1981). Rocca maintained some visual themes from her ' 60s work, including figures, cars, hands, and bags, but her formerly joyful iconographies become syntactically dark, with the addition of knives, poison, and flame-like forms. By the end of the decade, however, her drawings took a curious turn. Rather than try to regain

Suellen Rocca, "It's a Secret" (1981), graphite on paper, 11 x 14 inches

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the playful symphony of forms that characterizes her work from the ’60s, Rocca pursued and honed a new area of exploration, her interior life.

In *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929), Rainer Maria Rilke writes, “We have no reason to mistrust our world, for it is not against us. Has it terrors, they are our terrors; has it abysses, those abysses belong to us; are dangers at hand, we must try to love them. And if only we arrange our life according to that principle which counsels us that we must always hold to the difficult, then that which now still seems to us the most alien will become what we most trust and find most faithful.” This passage from *Letters* appears in Ray Yoshida’s handwritten notes from around 1960, the year that Rocca began at SAIC and attended his first-year drawing class. Yoshida famously encouraged an instinctual approach to art — based on the idea that inspiration could come from anywhere — and preached unfettered possibility. In an oral-history interview in 2015, Rocca recalls, “Ray was interested in [students] finding their voice: ‘What is it you want to say? Forget about any of the other stuff.’” Rilke’s advice — to embrace fears and hardships as our own — filters through Yoshida’s emphasis on personal expression to animate Rocca’s artmaking, from her return to art in 1981 through her present work. Rather than sidestep her emotional suffering, she took a full accounting of it, and it transformed her art.

This evolution of her drawing practice is illustrated in a current survey at Matthew Marks Gallery of 30 works on paper made between 1981 and 2017. The seven drawings dating from 1981 and 1982 express a high level of anxiety. It is work that Rocca describes as “cathartic” and a “visual exorcism.” She recalls that it was “good to be making work again” and is quick to point out that she considers all of her art to be autobiographical. “It reflects where I am in my life,” she says, “what I’m thinking.” In “It’s a Secret,” a large figure shown from the shoulders up dominates the drawing; in place of the head are wild, upright, bulbous stalks of hair, like the stout columns of pillar coral. An opening at the figure’s neck reveals a second, smaller figure: a woman weeping into a handkerchief. On her left are drawings of an injured hand, and below her is the phrase, rendered in dashed lines, resembling embroidery stitches, *Im not supposed to do that*.

“It’s a Secret” reads like an inversion of the 1967 painting “Foot Smells.” In this earlier work, a golden-blond hairdo frames a woman’s face, which is inscribed with many of Rocca’s then-signature elements: palm trees, dancing couples, legs, and other cartoonishly rendered forms. The face looks outward, reflecting the world around it. It is a keen illustration of the way Rocca gathered visual material, which could also be read as a note on identity — these are the images that caught her attention, that interested her, that informed her art. “It’s a Secret” is likewise a measure of self, but one that opens inward, onto the psychic landscape.

“Don’t” (1981) shows a road cobbled with oblong stones that carry images of brick walls, eyes, and the words “don’t” and “be good.” The cobbled pattern of the road resembles platelets, as if Rocca’s anxieties are so internalized as to be biological. The road also bears figures with arms and legs splayed, like Xs, hinting at both vulnerability and negation. This form recurs in a much later drawing, “Teta” (2012). The latter’s title refers to the name of Rocca’s grandson’s teddy bear, and the show’s catalogue describes the game of hide-and-seek she would play with her grandson and Teta. The drawing is gridded, showing the bear, always in a spread-eagle position, concealed in various

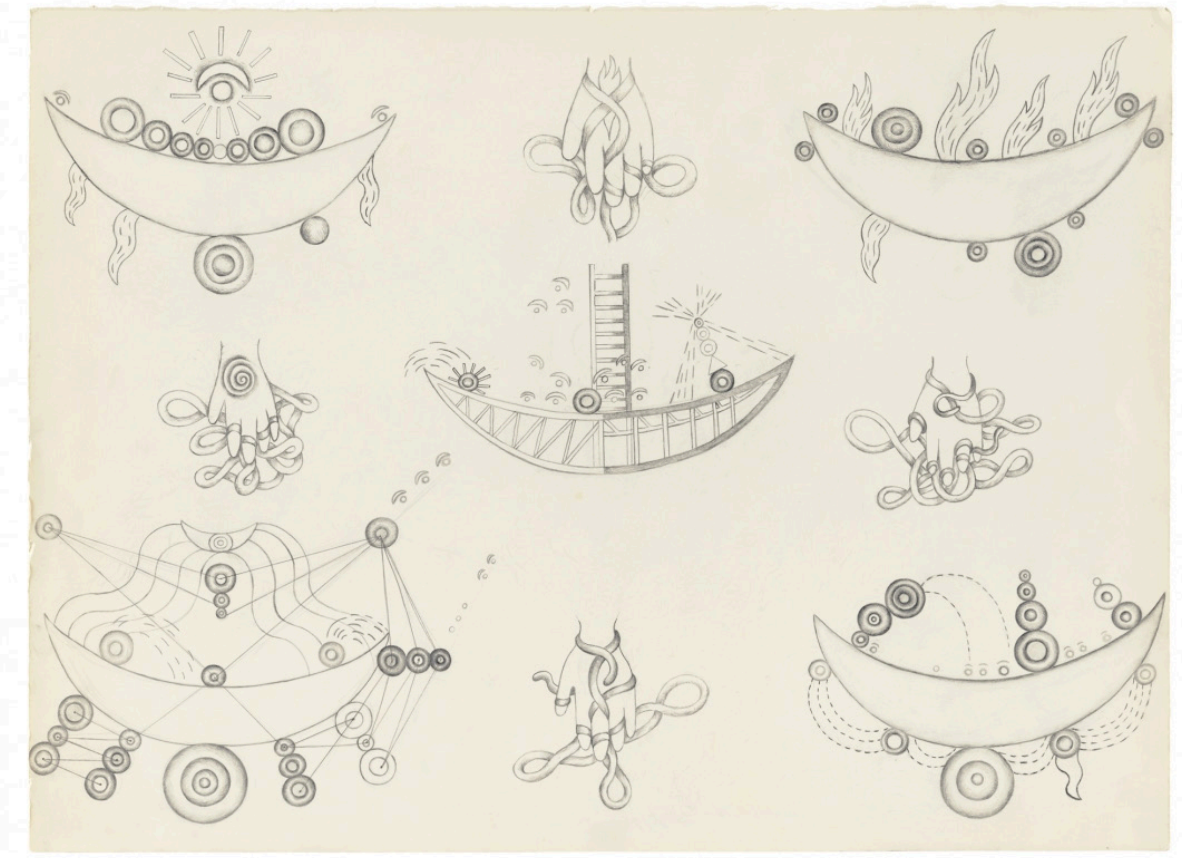
Suellen Rocca, "Neatest Garbage" (1982), graphite and colored pencil on paper, 29 x 23 inches

hiding places. Often, he seems to be disappearing: he is rendered in dashed lines, for instance, or as a faint shadow behind an overwhelming pattern. In two squares of the grid and in a row of smaller squares that line the bottom of the drawing, Teta's form is reduced to an X with a head atop it or inverted, with the head below. In this abridged state, Teta is a cousin to the simplified icons in Rocca's 1960s drawings — brisk renderings of peeled bananas, crossed legs, and palm trees. What's more, she frequently placed a row of playful forms across the bottom of her drawings and paintings in the ' 60s. But in "Teta," it's tempting to read a soft but stern warning in the 15 penciled bear-Xs in quick succession along the bottom edge.

In two drawings from 1982 — "Neatest Garbage" and "Tale of the Two Legged Bunny" — Rocca reimagines the purses and handbags that featured in much of her art from the late ' 60s, including the sculptures "Purse Curse" (1968) and "Mm…" (ca. 1968). In these earlier works, the notion of, for example, a hand reaching into a pink purse adorned with a kissing couple carries a definite erotic charge. But these pleasure purses transform in the 1980s into containers of threat. In "Tale of the

Two Legged Bunny," a hand reaches into a bag containing sharp objects, angry dogs, and guns. The intricate pattern on the hand includes two images of couples kissing around the word "kisses," a reminder of the celebratory romance of the early work, now engulfed in dangers. In "Neatest Garbage," the bag is punctured with holes and its secrets and sinister contents flow out in small streams. The vibrant zig-zags that delineate the bag and various areas of the paper — rendered in blue, brown, red, yellow, and peach — buzz discordantly and warn of peril. They are echoed in the jagged graphite lines, like tiny hackles, of the sharp-toothed dogs that stand guard in the foreground.

A drawing from 1982 not included in this show is the self-portrait "Let Her Be." It depicts a figure from the shoulders up, facing the viewer, and rendered through intersecting and curving bundles of striated bands. The head is studded with 17 eyes, and the titular phrase is written in cursive from shoulder to shoulder. The body is ringed by flame- or leaf-like forms, which are echoed by a widening shadow and hints of color. Above the figure, a body of water spans the width of the paper, its waves, like fire, walling off a castle in the far distance. "Let Her Be" was one of more than 100 works in the 2015-2016 group exhibition *Surrealism: The Conjured Life* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. The show drew from the museum's collection and reflected the city's storied history with Surrealist art (some of the museum's founding members were also avid collectors). The inclusion of Rocca's drawing is significant, as it situates this post-1981 work within a lineage of art that mines unconscious and psychic states through the evocation of dream imagery, and it reflects on an important shift that occurred in her work in 1989.



Suellen Rocca, "Ancestor Signs" (1999-2012), graphite on paper, 22 1/4 x 30 inches

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In the late 1980s, Rocca had a "powerful" dream in which she saw a trio of pelicans in as many boats. In 1989, she produced a suite of three drawings inspired by that vision: "Astronavigate," "Three Birds and Three Boats Over Again," and "Family Passage." These drawings are airy and measured in comparison with those produced earlier in the decade; they are cosmic and meditative. In "Astronavigate," neat rows of geometric shapes, spirals, and concentric designs cut diagonally across the field of paper; above and below, two birds ride crescent-moon-shaped boats across the page. The composition of "Three Birds" is more abstract. The birds are simplified and float within nets of circles interconnected by thin lines, like constellations. Three boats hover above the bird forms, gliding through the emptiness of the paper. The zig-zag lines from "Neatest Garbage" return in "Family Passage," but now they appear as soft, geometric rays guiding boats, as on a celestial river. The anxieties from early in the decade are transformed in these three drawings through notions of transition and passage. It is as though Rocca's dream imagery showed her a way forward — a way, as Rilke put it, to transform the alien in us to "what we most trust."

Rocca develops this new language throughout the 1990s, expressing states of being through the repetition of boats, ladders, and organic forms, while still populating her work with external imagery. In "Rehearsal of Descending and Ascending the Ladder" (1990), the delicate outline of a figure in the bough of a tree was inspired by an Indian miniature of a prince in a tree, and the fish that become part of her lexicon in the late '90s — and which help illustrate a sense of loss, of "not being able to hold onto things," she says, "and things flowing away" — stem from a dream she had while studying the work of German Expressionist Max Beckmann. (At the time, Rocca was working on a master's degree in art history and writing a paper on the symbolism of fish in Beckmann's art.) In the early 1990s, she introduced long, vining ropes into her drawings that spiral and coil and knot. In "Rope Tree and Ladder IV" (1991), the twining rope grows out of a figure's head and arm, and wraps, Rapunzel–like, around the branches and trunk of a tree. By 1997, in "Fish Dream Two," that same rope becomes the outline of a body. Looking back to the '60s, it's evident that this snaking line was always part of her work: as a descriptor of bodies (in "Dream Girl," 1968, for instance) and as ornament ("Sleepy-Head with Handbag," 1968, is rife with it, especially in the maze-like squiggles at bottom). By the end of '90s, the rope itself largely disappears, as the torsos that come to populate her drawings adopt its meandering, fluid qualities for their shape.

But first, the boats and ropes, as well as the abstract symbology from the trio of 1989 drawings, recur in "Ancestor Signs," begun in 1999 and completed in 2012. Rocca combines these various elements in nine discrete, syntactically complex images and sets them in a grid, a structure reminiscent of 1960s drawings such as "Game Page with Poodle" (ca. 1968) and "Unscramble" (ca. 1966–67). The pictorial system of that early work comes full circle in her drawings from the past few years. A suite of three from 2017 — "Page A," "Page B," and "Page C" — revives a sense of the grid and of a hieroglyphic syntax. The imagery in these drawings is inspired by Rocca's discovery, in 2016, of dollhouse furniture she saved from the 1950s; a miniature chair, bed, table, birdcage, and piano now reside around her drawing table. The chair rests on her windowsill, and, she says, "because my studio is on the second floor, I can look out, across the way, and see a chair the same size." Of this interest in matters of perspective, she notes that "things we know we take for granted." In a curious way, the collapsing of difference and distance between the small the large, the near and far, mirrors the collapsed space between her interior world and the surface of the paper — a process

of examination Rocca is not willing to take for granted. Likewise, she says of her recent interest in drawing and painting clouds, "I see them all the time, but [now] I've been *looking* at them."

Rocca's close interior gaze and her working out of inner states on paper rhyme with Louise Bourgeois's long self-examination through her art. Bourgeois, too, found solace and inspiration in putting her unconscious on the page. She describes the negative memories that make their way into her "Insomnia Drawings" as "problems to be solved." The inexpressible, it seems, is only so when it remains unexpressed. Or, as Rilke muses later in Yoshida's transcribed passage, "Perhaps everything terrifying is at bottom the helplessness that seeks out help."

Suellen Rocca: Drawings *continues at Matthew Marks (526 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 27th.*

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