



Great Rivers Biennial 2008

Michelle Oosterbaan: *Living Room*

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CONTEMPORARYARTMUSEUMSTLOUIS



Drop off Dark Star, Amber Babes & Bedrock (detail), 2008, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 51 x 120 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Michelle Oosterbaan: *Living Room*

In Oosterbaan's drawings and installations, both myth and memory play important roles. Blending imagined narratives with personal history, she explores both the formal and psychological relationships between line, color, and architectural space. For the *Great Rivers Biennial 2008*, Oosterbaan creates a site-specific installation, *Living Room*, constructed from a series of silhouettes and large-scale works on paper. Together these works—from linear mappings of time to finely rendered animal forms to topographical "dust drawings" on the floor—form a contained environment, an "ecology" of images, in which Oosterbaan explores definitions of place, passage, and personal journey. Here Oosterbaan and Assistant Curator Laura Fried discuss the element of time and storytelling in her work, and her recent interest in sixteenth century tapestries.

Laura Fried: We have often spoken about the relationship of time and the timeline to your new work. On the one hand, you often integrate the "timeline" graphic—color bands that act not only as the literal representation of time passing but also as formal interstitial spaces between these concentrated "events" on the page. On the other hand, perhaps this project *Living Room* takes as its most fundamental subject and structure of the linear narrative, the timeline. How do you respond to this question of time in these drawings and the extent to which chronological systems inform this work?

Michelle Oosterbaan: Each drawing relates to time in a spatial construct. I consider the page to be a contained space in which an event unfolds. I add images, whether geometric or organic, and assess how the presence of each new form will affect or alter the immediate environment—how it will change the ecology, if you will, and message of the work. Sometimes these events happen simultaneously, stacked on top of or alongside one another, becoming another way to mark a record of time passing. This process is filled with gaps of quiet concentration, stillness and reflection of where I am in the world I am creating, noting each step. I often consider how spaces are constructed in Egyptian steles or medieval, Byzantine, and Indian miniatures paintings. Japanese wood block prints (Hokusai and Hiroshige especially) intrigue me quite a lot. More broadly, I am attracted to the idea of the timeline because it orders something which seems so amorphous and intangible. I see time as a series of interconnected relationships, which reveal cause and effect, tangents and detours and main roads. In these drawings, I am interested in both micro and macro divisions of space and time. I start with individual incidents and events but realize that the whole system is continuous, linked, where small and large events are equally significant to the passage and transition of time.

LF: Following that, I wonder if you might reflect on the particular relationship between the practice of drawing and time. Certainly, you strike a balance in these drawings between expanses of empty space and suspended concentrations of color and hyper-fine detail, which suggests a labor-intensive process. Moreover, I imagine that you work towards a particular process of "reading" for your viewer, who follows your constructed narrative across the space. Could you speak to your relationship to line, on the one hand, and of the viewer's encounter, on the other, to the subject of time?

MO: I make these detailed drawings to investigate critical moments that define one's life. In this way, memory becomes concrete. I am interested in anchoring moments within transitions—architects call it "wayfinding"—which reveal both order and chaos within a larger context. Details require time to absorb; they slow down the process of looking, and they bring the viewer close. I use contour line with attention to edge in a sometimes spare, minimal fashion and other times in dense layers. I like watching the growth of lines, paying attention to how marks and flecks relate, echo, vary, and build upon each other...and how they can behave as abstractions and fuse into a picture at once. Employing different stylistic approaches in drafting encourages an open ended interpretation of plot and place and form. I want to be sure the viewer slows down and looks for as long as it takes to encounter, digest, and interpret images into a story of his or her own. Gaps between images allow the viewer to process the story at various degrees of speed and depth. The symbols' fluctuating patterns set up zones of space akin to the phases of memory—like an image flitting in and out of conscious focus. With multiple perspectives and shifts in scale, each drawing becomes a theater of space navigating a place where the mundane journey merges with the mythic narrative.

LF: On a recent visit to your studio, you brought out these incredible images of 16th century Renaissance tapestry, and we discussed the surprising simplicity of their formal structure and color foundations. There is indeed a connection between this historical embroidered medium and your recent drawn work—the continuous narrative structure, the commitment to color, the object-without-frame—but you drew my attention to the notion of the epic, which seems to hold special interest for you here. Could you elaborate on your recent fascination with these images?

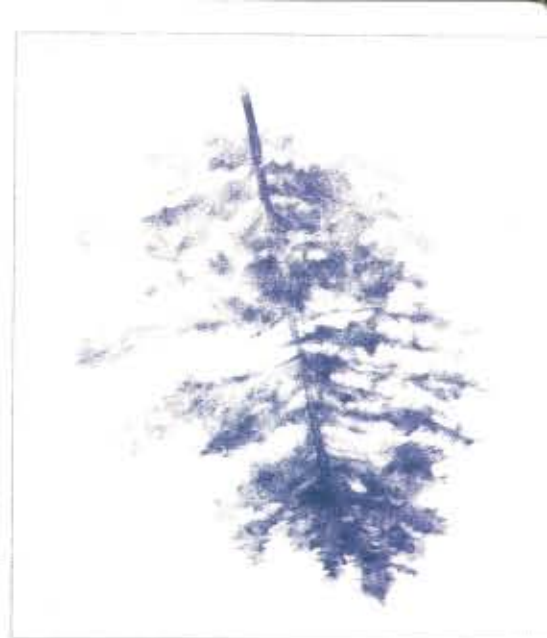
MO: The tapestries are from Belgium by Bernard van Orley at the Met and Louvre. You mean the scene called *Killing Wild Boars*—it represents December. I like the weird arrangements and collections of unlikely partners in the story. There are such beautifully rendered and exquisite color combinations, stunning detail and refinement in the expression of figures and animals and vegetation. There is a rich description of every part of the story...the landscape, the time of year, time of day, costume, and expression on faces. The abundance of information...so much is happening in practically every square inch of these tapestries. It's both inspiring and, in the true sense of the word, awesome.

LF: The *Living Room* drawings are ripe with familiar forms: from the suspended contours of fire and water to the fine-lined exotic cats and canines that populate the installation. You maintain that each of the figures and forms acts as a metaphor for a moment in your own history. Here you have created a network of icons, or symbols, that together construct what is ultimately is a very personal narrative. I wonder if the serial forms (the wild dogs across the window) further insist upon this kind of iconographic system you construct. I am hoping you could elaborate a bit on the personal iconography you create and how such a system, and those individual signs, are manifest formally?

MO: As I draw, images collect and accumulate. The evolution is both intuitive and improvisational. As if keeping a diary, I create and follow events in my everyday life on these pages. They begin almost as streams of consciousness, yielding very focused layers of a particular event that unfold. Drawings for me usually start as a kind of question, some of which are very simply, "How did I get here?" (like the David Byrne song). Others are life changing. I include single images that document and pinpoint particular visions, which together become a network that achieves a form of truth.

My process is about balancing the "air" of the space with visual weight of an image not only to tell a story, but to develop simultaneous senses of sparseness and intensity, of aggression and harmony. They appear dream-like, yet the images are scripted from daily life. Seeing these images and figures side-by-side and in repetition underscores this point.

I am searching for primary images to represent, or symbolize, moments and places. I realize they are recognizable, yet not necessarily tied to the same meanings, associations, and the same world from which I construct them...I invite the viewer to put his or her imprint on the isolated images—to apply multiple interpretations of work—an act that maintains a sense of mystery and curiosity and in the end increases the layers of the story's potential.



Constellation (detail), 2008, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 51 1/2 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Middle, 2008, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 50 1/2 x 89 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Cutout, 2006-2007, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 78 1/2 x 51 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Michelle Oosterbaan (b. 1967, Boston, Massachusetts)

Michelle Oosterbaan has exhibited work at The Drawing Center, New York, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Morris Gallery, Philadelphia, Abington Arts Center, Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, The Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware, and Fleisher Art Memorial in Philadelphia. She has been awarded residencies at the MacDowell Colony, as a John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Fellow, Peterborough, New Hampshire; Cité des Arts International, Paris; Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York; and at The Gil Society (Giffelagio), Akureuri, Iceland. A graduate of Washington University St. Louis, Oosterbaan received her Master of Fine Arts in Painting from Indiana University and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Washington University's School of Art.

Artist Acknowledgments

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The *Great Rivers Biennial* is an artist awards program designed to strengthen the local arts community in St. Louis by supporting and celebrating local emerging talent. Three artists, selected by distinguished curators from around the country and individually awarded a \$20,000 grant from the Gateway Foundation, have each created new work on the occasion of the 2008 exhibition at the Contemporary. The goal of this innovative awards program is to provide these artists professional support, as well as to raise the visibility of their work in the Midwestern and national arts community. This year's panel of jurors included Cheryl Brutvan, Curator of Contemporary Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Lillian Tone, Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, Director and Chief Curator, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, Colorado.

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cover image: *Drop off Dark Star, Amber Bobes & Bedrock* (detail), 2008, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 51 x 120 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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