

THE PORTLAND PHOENIX

Small Scale Yields Big Impact

Little Drawings Deliver Deeper Truths

by Britta Konau, April 18, 2013



"CITADEL RUIN," Charcoal on Mylar, 3.75x4 inches, 2010, by Dozier Bell.

Medieval towns, towers and turrets, flocks of birds and blazing fires could easily be the subjects of fairytales or kitsch. Not so in the hands of Dozier Bell, who has plunged deeply into her imagination and masterfully realized what she found there in visual terms.

"Dozier Bell: Mind's Eye" at the Bates College Museum of Art assembles 16 charcoal drawings on Mylar executed between 2007 and 2012. The works are diminutive, some not even three inches tall. This scale does what miniatures generally do at first glance: disarm viewers' fears (how could such a small thing feel overpowering?), and instill a sense of preciousness. But make no mistake about it: the impact of Bell's little black-and-white images is powerful. For starters, awe is not an inappropriate term for the feeling generated by her drawing skills. Through extremely nuanced handling of her medium, Bell not only describes her subjects on a miniscule scale, but also suggests the textures and even temperatures of elemental forces, including water, clouds, and haze. "Smoking," an image of fire and smoke emanating from choppy waters, is rendered in an almost photographic monochrome realism. The source of the conflagration remains unexplained and similar mysteries envelope most of Bell's imagery. Is the horizontal stretch of light caused by fire? Is it merely the lights of a city? Or the rising sun? The dark, cloudy night skies instill a yearning for light, clarity, and certainty that Bell's drawings do not offer.

One has to admire Bell's daring for using conventionally sentimental and romantic subjects. She knows, however, how to insert emotional distance by employing a monochrome palette, small scale, and resultant lack of detail, shrouding the imagery in mystery and timelessness. It is actually difficult to write about Bell's work as it so much depends on intuition for its conception and interpretation, like a true descendant of 19th-century Romantics. The dark silhouettes of castles and towers become basic expressions of hostility and fear, but also act as markers of the past prevailing into the present. The few drawings that portray nature untouched by humans are often dominated by ominous flocks of birds, suspended in mid-air. Time and movement are stilled. The only source of animation is light.

The source of that light is unambiguously revealed as the sun breaking through a cloud cover in "Roofline," reviving notions of the divine force as redemptive light. Similarly, the cross hairs, which were so pervasive in much of Bell's earlier work, surface again in "Navigation 5" as an emblem of the search of the clouded sky for a presence, for meaning.

Maybe the best way to describe Bell's drawings is in theatrical terms, as stage sets for battles between light and darkness. While this may sound corny, it is not. Much seems at stake here and Bell is too smart to present any one overt reading. We may substitute all sorts of interpretations for those two opposites, reason and intellect versus irrational fear and faith for instance. No easy either/or is offered by Bell's scenes, but an uneasy and complex coexistence of forces; elemental forces beyond our reckoning and control that the world, and us in it, remains subject to. The very making of the drawings embodies conflicting tendencies as the emotional exuberance of the subjects is contrasted with the utmost restraint and control of execution.

The solemnity of Bell's images seems to belong to another era and another mindset than the contemporary hyper-stimulated one. But they are also intensely complex and too skeptical not to belong to our present. Bell's profound artistic vision and integrity transforms these little things into propositions of great magnitude.

"Dozier Bell: Mind's Eye" through May 25, 2013 |
at the Bates College Museum of Art, Olin Arts
Center, 75 Russell Street, Lewiston | 207.
786.6158 | bates.edu/museum