

DOTTY ATTIE

Small tense moments of seeing, moments of attention, the posing of situations that do not admit of resolution, the recording of events after the fact—while the fact, the pivotal incident, remains obscure, something to be guessed at, pondered over or savored. No, we don't know what really happened, or even exactly how or when. But in Dotty Attie's world, like in our own, it is assumed that everyone else knows. We see the record of this knowledge on their faces, in the pose of their heads and arms; a record

ism. Yet, at the same time, the work is always about drawing, the magic of the cropped image, the moving close-up that bridges the distance between 'see' and 'feel' in a single Attie sentence. These sentences are seemingly factual notes punctuating the images, but both sentences and images are interdependent. Read separately, they still remain fragments of the same dream. By drawing the images serially, Attie has seemingly detached them forever from their original sources, from Caravaggio and Ingres and Degas. By copying and cropping

murder and/or cannibalism. So Attie's serial pieces are Victorian morality tales in reverse, always implicit in the measured tone of the linking verbal narration. But the beauty and the terror and the magic that suffuse all of the artist's work come from Attie's eye and drawing pencil, the pencil that registers and recaptures the raised hand, the enigmatic eye, the bound body, and the unbound girdle. Attie has copied all these small intimacies that register feeling from passages in paintings that are part of art history. The costumed past, remote and

sheet. The 120 odd images contained in the several work sheets that make up *The Traveling Conjurer* evoke the intensity and mystery of the Ingmar Bergman film *The Seventh Seal*, maybe because they share the film's themes of magic, ritual, and death or perhaps because there is an equal amount of the medieval mystery play in Attie's own traveling troupe of jugglers and magicians. More likely, it is that the imagery itself accounts for the work's somber effect.

Attie's exhibition at the A.I.R. Gallery offers us four separate, singular, and not slightly miraculous pencil works. The magic of drawing—Attie's copying of bits and pieces of art to show the beauty of the gesture of a hand, the shadows on the back of a head, the light on folds of cloth, the textures of life—is caught for us. Looked at from this viewpoint, it makes sense that Attie, the most imaginative of fantasists, started out in the '60s to be a realist painter. Looking back now, she says it was never the paint and she rarely used much color; it was the image in terms of line that fascinated her. Before art school, Ingres was a secret hero. Attie's preference for working small, for making intimate art is by this time well known.

To paraphrase an Attie title (*What Surprised Them Most*), what is most surprising still is the extending sweep of Attie's world as seen in her current show. Aside from the size of the individual drawings, in their overall scope her works become like an army filling the gallery walls, filling 40 and 70 feet of wall space, while their individual size remains a measure of the intimacy they demand of us. We must go up very close indeed and thus become intimate with the passions and perversities of men and women not of our time who are yet too much of ourselves. In each of Attie's sentences of detached observation, we are confronted with unavoidable facts that are also organizing rules, the rules of the life and death games that Attie takes for her subject matter. And then, the images unfold, the story continues, and we are caught in the unremitting sweep of Attie's unique, narrative art. (A.I.R., November 4-27)

Corinne Robins

Dotty Attie, *Carolina and her Father* (working drawing), 1978. Pencil on paper, 12 1/2 x 10". Courtesy A.I.R.



of their knowledge and/or of their experience that has led to knowledge of a forbidden, anti-social nature. The forbidden: something that is private and hidden, that may be witnessed, even enacted as a public rite without losing its mysterious character if all that is revealed are its effects in the faces of participants and/or witnesses. Thus, the public act retains its magic, the private deed its unexplained character. We are meant not to know, left to suspect, imagine, dream.

Attie offers us her parade of images and, in *The Traveling Conjurer*, at last deals with magic, which is one of the things her work has always been about, together now with incest, murder, and cannibal-

ism. Yet, at the same time, the work is always about drawing, the magic of the cropped image, the moving close-up that bridges the distance between 'see' and 'feel' in a single Attie sentence. These sentences are seemingly factual notes punctuating the images, but both sentences and images are interdependent. Read separately, they still remain fragments of the same dream. By drawing the images serially, Attie has seemingly detached them forever from their original sources, from Caravaggio and Ingres and Degas. By copying and cropping

them, she has torn them free of art history and linked them instead to personal experience—first, hers in making, and then ours in the seeing of her serial art works. The stories—*Carolina and Her Father*, *The Traveling Conjurer And His Troupe*, *An Adventure at Sea*—are all histories of a passion or an obsession presented in the guise of an amusement, pleasure, or distraction. But amusement or pleasure in Attie's world always implies risk, and the need for secrecy in the face of the breaking down of some civilized law. We are made to suspect that Attie's people at times indulge in life and death amusements, that in *Below Stairs* the meal's rich taste comes from the spice of

safe, is suddenly revealed as a country of revelations.

Just as there is a physical distance between each of Attie's successive images and a further space surrounding each printed sentence, so there is a rhythm of understanding, of feeling the narrative that Attie builds up by her way of telling and not telling each story. Looking at the working drawing for *Carolina And Her Father*, there is a suggestion of a drama of some kind taking place via the 20 small squares of drawings. But what the story might be, or the chilling intimacy that Attie manages to zero in on in terms of the cool, compressed text that accompanies the image sequences, is barely touched upon in such a work