

From The First Act: An Archaeological Adventure from
J. and Armand Tour the World, 1980



It has often been suggested that Dotty Attie publish her sequential narratives in book form, but the artist has steadfastly refused, aware that excessive familiarity with the "facts" of her tales would diminish their suggestive power. Indeed, much of the attraction of Attie's work resides in the ephemeral nature of the experience and in the complex after-image that it leaves. It is often amazingly difficult, after the fact, to separate what we have been shown from what we imagine to have taken place.

Dotty Attie's delicately tinted pencil drawings--telling fragments copied from old master paintings and arranged serially to imply new meanings--create an air of whispered fantasy. The cropped images provide momentary focus on gestures, expressions, and "peculiar devices" which are coupled with a simply told story line to suggest a realm of dark secrets and forbidden knowledge. Her disciplined, Ingres-like drawing style and laconic narration make the inferred mystery all the more intriguing. The effect is at once delightful and discomfoting.

The works in MATRIX are excerpted from a larger work, J. and Armand Tour the World (1980). In the prologue to this piece we learn that J. and Armand (friends of Pierre and Lady Holland, protagonists of an earlier Attie saga) "lived quietly in a remote part of the country" where Armand was known for his impersonations of historic figures--"famous courtesans were his specialty." Then one day they decided to tour the world. What follows is a three-act "drama" recounting the major adventures of their journey.

In the first act, exhibited here, the two young gentlemen while touring in the Near East witness the disinterment of "the clay tablets of Babylon." Though they decline to take part, they willingly counsel those scholars who, in the interest of science, re-enact the

bizarre rites suggested by the ancient pictographs.

In the second act, J. and Armand are the guests of honor at a garden party hosted by Lady Margaret Randolph on the grounds of her large tea plantation in Ceylon, when suddenly Lord Swift and his Indian bride begin to perform certain ritual acts ("not sacred, indeed most secular") involving "people and animals in unusual, sometimes hazardous combinations." In the excitement, "Lady Margaret's absence went unnoted."

In the final act, J. and Armand meet the Reverend and Mrs. Dudley, "noted missionaries and spiritual advisors to a formerly savage tribe" on the Ivory Coast. They are privileged to observe first-hand a moonlit tribal ritual in which the disrobed wife of the young reverend plays a most important part.

While the general story line is clear, the artist never tells us exactly what has happened. The specifics must be supplied by the viewer who is guided (sometimes confounded) by a series of ambivalent partial images. Like the archaeologists who seek to reconstruct lost Mesopotamian customs from cryptic representations, we find ourselves delving into subconscious storehouses to invent happenings that might fit the fragmentary evidence of Attie's evocative drawings. In the process we learn more about our own repressed fears and fantasies than we do about J. and Armand.

The images glimpsed through insistent, staccato-shaded frames call to mind Degas' "keyhole" paintings--voyeuristic works depicting women at their baths, observed from a tightly constricted viewpoint. Indeed, constraint and voyeuristic titillation both have a part in the generation of our imaginative faculties here. The earnest moralizing tone inherent in Attie's choice of the rarefied world of late 18th/early 19th century British aristo-

crazy as the setting for her tales is reinforced by the elegant probity of the Ingresque line, so beautifully fluent in its rendering of texture and shadow. "My work exists between the primitive impulse and discipline, lawlessness and control," Attie has said. It is the close association of the polite and the taboo, of repression and release, that lies at the heart of Attie's magic.

In this her most recent work, Attie has broken with the rigidly horizontal one-after-another format that has characterized her sequences of the past five or six years, introducing at the beginning of each "act" a large composite picture which serves to set the stage for the ensuing drama. As a prelude to the first act, for example, we find George Stubbs' Horse Being Attacked by a Lion which, while not specifically related to the Archaeological Adventure that follows, nevertheless suggests a mood of violence and bestial passion. In an ironic reversal of her usual process, 48 small drawing "pieces" combine to form a complete, reconstructed image. Yet each fragment retains its own individual frame, implying the potential for transfer to another narrative context. Meaning is only relative.

Attie's drawings are culled from her extensive collection of art books (two recently acquired goldmines are a book called Animals in Art and another of artists' self-portraits). They are essentially "found" images, discovered by scouring the reproductions with a small frame, then copied with astounding fidelity. Often she isolates scenes that occur in the marginal or background areas of famous paintings--those areas which generally are overlooked in our concentration on the centrally emphasized image and which, according to Attie, give us psychological insight into the artist.

While the use of reproductions

would tend to impose a uniform scale, the jumps from foreground to background produce a variety of close-ups and long shots reminiscent of cinematic composition. Film-like, too, is the progressive unfolding of the story in real time and, evoking the silent picture, the use of terse captions to accompany extensive action. When we know of Attie's habit of working to the accompaniment of TV soap operas, yet another source for the snatches of dialog and moments of attention comes to mind.

Encouraged as a child by her father who took her to art classes in Philadelphia and bought her books on Ingres, Attie early developed a talent for drawing. At the Philadelphia College of Art in the late 1950s she bucked the dominant tide of abstract expressionism by painting realistic canvases from photographs. In 1960 she received a fellowship to study sculpture at the Brooklyn Museum Art School and moved to New York where she has lived ever since. While her work received some critical attention in the 1960s, it was not until 1973, shortly after joining A.I.R., the women's cooperative gallery in SoHo, that Attie felt free to return to the drawing that had been her early passion. In the supportive environment of those pioneering years at A.I.R., Attie found the strength to merge the personal and the public, to work in tune with her native instincts. "Everything I do," she has said, "is taken from sources that didn't originate from me and yet everything I do emanates from my whole life."

Judith C. Rohrer
Guest Curator
Manchester Center, Vermont

Works in MATRIX:

The works in MATRIX are excerpted from a larger work, J. and Armand Tour the World, 1980, which comprises a total of 360 drawings.

The First Act: An Archaeological Adventure, 1980, an arrangement of 84 drawings, graphite and colored pencil: 36 drawings, 4 3/8" x 4 3/8"; 28 drawings, 2 7/8" x 2 7/8"; 20 drawings, 2 7/8" x 3 1/2".

The Magic Lantern Show, 1980, an arrangement of 31 drawings, graphite and colored pencil, each 4 3/8" x 4 3/8".

Selected one-woman exhibitions:

A.I.R. Gallery, NYC '72, '74, '76, '78, '80; Stockton State College, Pomona, NJ '74; O.K. Harris Gallery, NYC '77; University of Massachusetts, Amherst '77; University of Iowa, Iowa City '77; Manhattanville College, Purchase, NY '77; University of Rhode Island, Kingston '78; Houston Contemporary Arts Museum '79; Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS '79; Douglass College, New Brunswick, NJ '80; Wright State University, Dayton, OH '80; Museum Art School, Portland, OR '80; Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, OR '80.

Selected group exhibitions:

Moore College of Art, Philadelphia Artists' Books '73; Fleischer Art Memorial, Philadelphia Focus: In Her Own Image '74; Prince Street Gallery, NYC Self Portraits '75; Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS Artists Look at Art '78; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston Narration '78; Houston Contemporary Arts Museum American Narrative/Story Art '78; Philadelphia College of Art Words and Images '79; Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague Feministische Kunst '79; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC Directions '79; Venice Biennale, Drawings: The

Pluralist Decade '80; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia Drawings: The Pluralist Decade II '80.

Selected bibliography about Attie:

Gruen, John. "Dotty Attie," SoHo Weekly News (November 28, '74), p. 12.

Bell, Jane. "Drawing Now," Arts Magazine, vol. 50, no. 6 (June '76), p. 6.

Kultermann, Udo. "Vermeer: Versions Modernes," Connaissance des Arts, no. 302 (April '77), p. 94+.

Robins, Corinne. "Dotty Attie: Narrative as Ordered Nightmare," Arts Magazine, vol. 51, no. 3 (November '76), p. 81+.

Orenstein, Gloria. "Dotty Attie: 13 Ways of Looking at a Portrait," Womanart, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall '76), p. 4+.

Baracks, Barbara. "Dotty Attie," Artforum, vol. 15, no. 6 (February '77), p. 66+.

Bourdon, David. "Dotty Attie at A.I.R.," Art in America, vol. 65, no. 4 (March/April '77), p. 110+.

Robins, Corinne. "Dotty Attie," Arts Magazine, vol. 53, no. 3 (November '78), p. 16.

Tennant, Donna. "Dotty Attie," The Houston Chronicle (November 11, '79), p. 22.

PLEASE NOTE: Dotty Attie will deliver a MATRIX Evening Lecture on Thursday, January 15, 1981 at 7:30 p.m.