

Andrew Tavarelli: The nature of culture

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THE NATURE OF CULTURE

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Alexey von Schlippe Gallery of Art

University of Connecticut

Avery Point

April 18th – May 30th, 2015

Andrew Tavarelli

Before he became an artist, Andrew Tavarelli, trekker, wanderer, writer, and visual artist, considered a career as an anthropologist. In his first survey show, “The Nature of Culture,” Tavarelli confronts us with paintings and hybrid prints that appropriate, deconstruct and recontextualize images of geishas, heraldic ornaments, and early 20th century industrial landscapes. Here nature seeps into world cultures through the idealized abstraction of Art Deco, the signifiers of transcendence in Japanese ukiyo-e prints, and the metonymic images of power and courage found in European heraldry. The vivid collisions of symbols, signs, color, and pattern in Tavarelli’s work are meditations on painting, which elegantly communicate his deep love of nature and his fascination with its cultural transformations.

Tavarelli’s paintings have important connections to the formal strategies of the short-lived, mid-seventies, Pattern and Decoration movement. The antagonistic, but ironic connection between Greenbergian “over-allness,” as seen in Pollack’s drip paintings, and Minimalism’s insistence on a non-hierarchical order of “one thing after another,” set in motion the move toward the decorative and the beginnings of the P and D movement. Flatness, repetition, and pattern were the jargon of new painting. Painters who defined the movement such as Joyce Kosloff and Robert Kushner made connections to craft and non-Western traditions through the inclusion of ornamental ceramic tile, silkscreened wall hangings, costume design, stitching, and embroidery. In the same time period, shifting from geometric abstraction to hybrid paintings of brightly patterned fans, Tavarelli developed a language of his own.



Ando's Fan, 1978, pastel on paper, 22x4in.

The visual language of signs and symbols speaks to us in voices that codify and convey culturally specific meaning. The temporal and cultural elisions in Tavarèlli's current work move us through time and space to other cultures with the speed of today's social media. While his earlier fan paintings join the ornamental accouterment of the fan and the high art of formal abstraction, current paintings such as *Babe in the Woods* (p.10) and *Birdman* (p.9) speak to us in a multitude of voices. They are the voices of otherness and difference, of East and West. Mikhail Bakhtin, 20th century Russian linguist and philosopher, in writing about what he perceived to be "multiple speaking subjects" in Dostoevsky's work, uses the term "polyphony," which he borrowed from music to describe a "carnivalesque arena of diversity".¹ In Tavarèlli's prints and paintings we see a similar array of cultural signs that engage us with their own respective validity and narrative weight.



Lost Archer Swamp, 1982, oil on canvas, 4x8.5in.

The multiple voices in Tavarèlli's work conjure up the voices of today: of artists from around the world, of people crossing borders, of cultural globalization, and of different peoples who share common experiences. Those that view globalization as a threat see an entropic process without controls that will turn the hierarchy of global economic and political power on its head. A more positive view can be found in David Joselit's recent essay, "On Aggregators," which reflects Bakhtin's idea of multiple voices as expressed through polyphonic form. In his essay, Joselit quotes an excerpt from a conversation between Franz Thalmair and the anonymous collective named Slavs and Tartars; "The collision of different registers, different voices, different worlds, and different logics previously considered to be antithetical, incommensurate, or simply unable to exist in the same page, sentence, is crucial to our practice."² Similarly, in Thomas Hirschhorn's 2005 project, "Musée Précaire Albinet," he reasserts the idea of art as art, not as political or cultural critique, but as powerful only through action in its own right. The public sphere of social interaction requires that conflict and difference are neither explicable nor reconcilable, but simply are. In his use of seemingly irreconcilable images from Western and non-Western cultures, Tavarèlli's practice appears to reflect both the cacophony of Joselit and Hirschhorn and the polyphony of Bakhtin.

Proceeding from his personal archive of images to the canvas as if viewed through a kaleidoscope, Tavarèlli's images repeat, tile, and layer. His paintings juxtapose Western imagery, sometimes historic, sometimes nostalgic, with iconic images of temples, geishas, and mountainous landscapes. In other paintings, memory, desire, and longing suffuse pictures of exotic other-worldliness. Rather

than hold us in a dreamy state of the beyond, Tavarèlli keeps us in the present through his contradictory twist of the blatant and seemingly arbitrary clash of images. Following the strategies of collage in the work of Max Ernst, or Robert Rauschenberg's Rebus painting, or Brecht for that matter, Tavarèlli confronts us with work composed of brash and playful non-sequiturs, hybrid and morphing imagery that holds us in its thrall.

The pleasure one experiences while looking at Tavarèlli's work is charged with the seemingly conflicting desire to find hidden meaning in the mosaic of clashing subjects while remaining transfixed by the allure of their formal beauty. Abstract compositional arrangements in his prints and paintings confound us every bit as much as the compositional arrangements of his imagery. The coincidence of sign and abstract shape rendered as pattern and flatness simultaneously fill and empty space. His work plays with our understanding of what we see and what we know. In *Double Falls* (p.18), Tavarèlli teases us with detail that suggests the illusion of open space. Upon closer examination the open space suddenly becomes the mountain from which the water cascades. The sheer beauty and visual sleight-of-hand Tavarèlli's paintings embody is compelling. It is an important location of meaning in his work. His paintings and prints are about looking, and *then* seeing; they are "exercises in slow perception."³

As we take in his work, we train our eyes to slow down and become selective. Only when we pull back, reset, and dive back in, does the logic of Tavarèlli's dislocations and fragmented imagery become clear and turn into palaces of pleasurable play. We begin to discover a structure that renders a narrative where little things, of the same order, or not, coalesce. In *Raptor Falls* (p.8), cascading waterfalls divide to form shimmering rivulets. The falls part to reveal a rocky mountain that has been split and doubled to form a Rorschach-like image. Its spectral form suggests a spine and pelvis surrounded by billowing mist. To the right are images of lantern flowers and poppies entangled with tendrils of yellow and gold. They flow like the falling water, but they are airier, more windblown. To the left a raptor circles from behind, its wing extended but curved, as if with a sharp eye protecting the unfolding scene. Each piece of this complex painting insists on being noticed—the center of attention. But in a trick of pareidolia (seeing images in clouds) the fleeting picture of a woman emerges from a mythical sea; water cascades from her hair and floral sunshine blows from behind. *Raptor Falls* provokes thoughts about the shifting nature of perception. Through his improbable placement of images, Tavarèlli reminds us that context can radically reshape meaning and test our understanding of what we see.

Many of his paintings reject such resolution or even its possibility. They remain stubbornly

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics"

2. David Joselit, October 146, fall 2013, p. 15

3. Ken Baker, "Some Exercises in Slow Perception," Art Forum 1977

fractured, more collage-like. In *Double Falls* (p.18), a gasping, tongue-wagging heraldic lion, partially visible among ribbon-like banners, hangs ensnared, its claws extended as if in a death throes. The twists and turns of the unfurling ribbons that end in *fleurs de lis* mimic the lion's tongue, ecstatic gasp, and flowing fur, further complicating the image. Vertical stripes of light and dark blue form the background for the hapless lion. Stenciled images of butterflies and birds decorate the orange panels on either side of the painting. The panels appear to be drawn back like theater curtains framing a stage. Arabesques, ornamental decoration, and complementary colors flatten the space and reinforce the theater interpretation; the title, *Double Falls*, tells another story. The vertical stripes we see read as falling water fed by streams from above the lion's head. The curtains turn to cliffs. The lion, dark gray and shadowy like a Balinese puppet, is crowned by a Rorschach doubling that is reminiscent of *Raptor Falls*. The scene is whole. He is the main event. Tavarrelli has confessed to an anxiety about attending theater that all but keeps him away. *Double Falls*, with its precipitous cliffs, rushing waterfall, and spectacle of the heraldic lion dangling center stage, suggests an uncanny image of Tavarrelli's creative process, an image in which theater substitutes for gallery and the heraldic lion, the anxiously exposed artist.

Water appears in all but three of the paintings in the show. In scanning *Mantling Falls* (p.15), a waterfall plunges from a rocky precipice on the left; it is one of four vertical zones of color and pattern. A floating ornamental frieze momentarily distracts our eye; this is the mantling that gives the painting its title. Its alternating blue and orange depict stylized leaf and water forms that partially hide the falls. The form is of heraldic origin, perhaps a harbinger of things to come. Fluttering leaves fall with the movement of the water. A tree branch clinging to a rocky cliff is silhouetted against a full moon that sits atop the second vertical of misty gray space. Another section of rocky cliff virtually divides the canvas in half; it abuts a glowing ground of salmon pink with a lyrical repeat pattern of sinewy tendrils that connects white, green, and pink water lilies. In Eastern philosophy, the waterfall symbolizes the passage of time. Its downward movement stands in contrast to the vertical stability of a mountain. Paradoxically, a waterfall is constant, but continually changing. *Mantling Falls* is a sublime painting in which falling leaves and the moon allude to natural cycles. The scene captures a transcendent moment of stillness in which the symbols of passing time are held in suspension.

While Tavarrelli's paintings assert themselves with intellectual and visual punch, his prints feel different. Their imagery is complex, as with the paintings, but layered. The means of production and digital imagery are more subtly persuasive in which transparency, gradual color shifts, and

smooth elisions of shape and space give them a magisterial grandeur. In the absence of the facture of brush applied to canvas, the support disappears. Our gaze fixes on the space beyond. *Snow Ladies* (p.20) is a stunning example of the transcendent beauty Tavarrelli achieves with his prints. Three women in costume stand at the center of a wintery Japanese landscape. Subtle mauves and grays bathe the scene in a starry evening light. The entire tableau is studded with surrogate stars in the repeated form of a floating bejeweled earring. The central figure gazes with sweet concern toward the woman on her left, whose head is bowed. We gaze upon a scene of quiet intimacy, a visitation. The snow covered trees and landscape illuminate the scene of hushed stillness. With *Snow Ladies*, Tavarrelli has deftly positioned us as voyeurs in a moment of guiltless pleasure.

The watercolors, all completed in 2014, respond to excerpts from Tavarrelli's second novel, *False Stars*; set in Bali, it was completed in 2006. The watercolors more closely resemble the "thumbnail" sketches that he paints in his journals when travelling. Like his return to where he has been, the watercolors reimagine and record the places described in his novel. In watercolor *no. 6* (p.28) a spirit creature, in this case a Balinese shadow puppet character, walks with a snake, its serpentine body describing a meandering trail that unfolds behind the creature. The corresponding passage in *False Stars* reads, "The stream of mourners wound like a snake through the village to the cremation grounds. There was a long unbroken white cloth attached to the coffin and a line of women held it above their heads as they walked along." Watercolor *no. 42* (p.36) depicts a rotund figure with uplifted hands, his body tinted blue and face rimmed with a trace of a beard; he has a beseeching expression. Again from his novel, "He holds a mask before his face. The man's body reminds me of a healthy round Buddha. He sits cross-legged amidst a sea of crinkled newspaper and scribbles of pink packing cord." Tavarrelli's light, but deft touch, like the quick sketches in his journals, brings a sense of immediacy to these paintings in which, through the indexical marks of his hand, we feel his presence.

Peripatetic at heart, Tavarrelli asks us to travel with him. The journey leads us through diverse terrain, both real and imagined, cultural and natural. He invites us to celebrate this diversity as well as the curiosity that it gives rise to. In the mix of modalities, and the contrast of distinctive images that populate his work, one can hear the harmonics of the voices that comprise the beauty of polyphony.

Fritz Buehner
Boston 2015

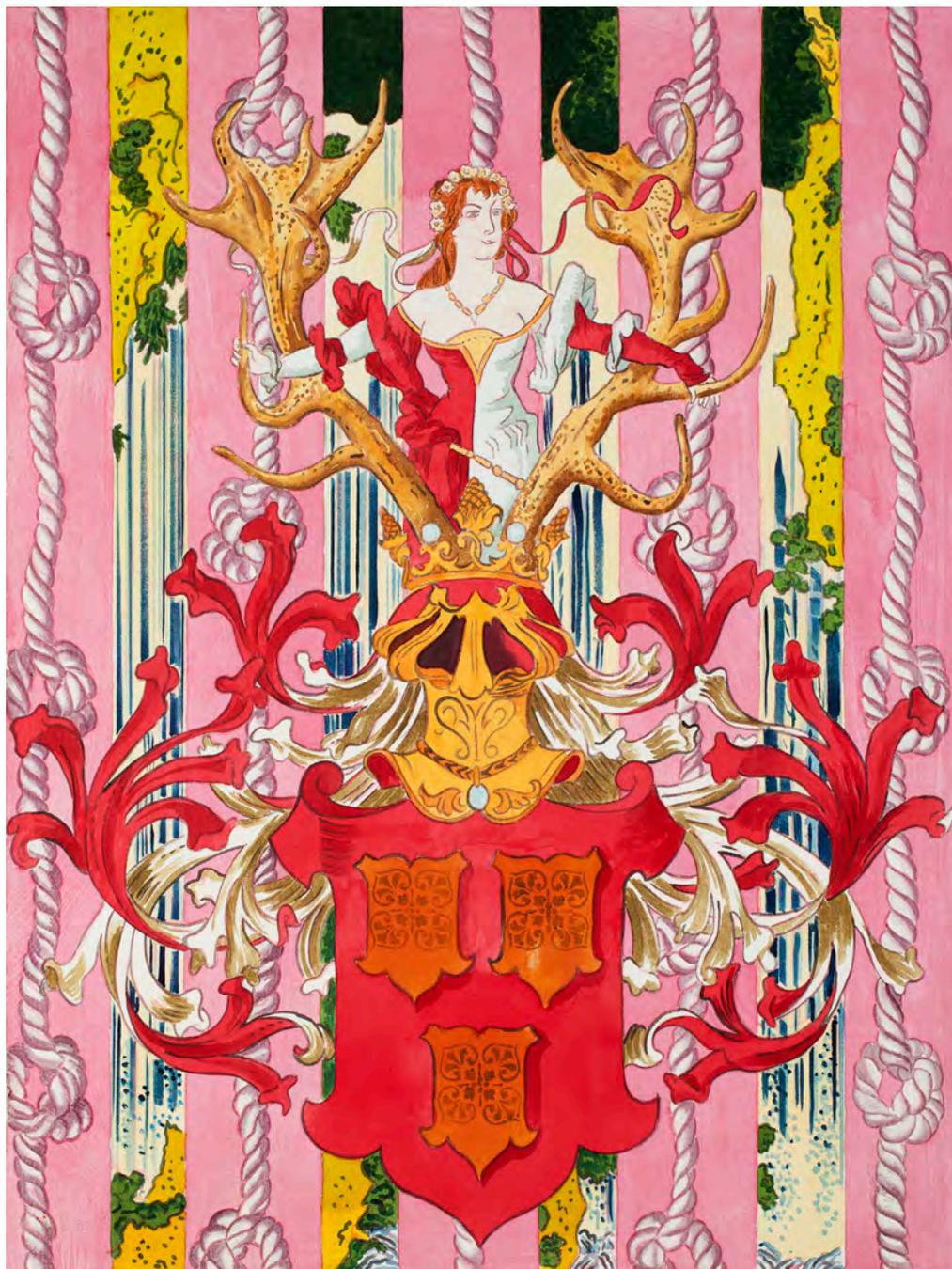
Paintings:
The Nature of Culture



Raptor Falls, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 45x60in.



Birdman, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 40x30in.



Babe in the Woods, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 40x30in.



Aviary, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 42x60in.



Metropolis Falls, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 45x64in.



Heavy Weather, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 44x60in.



A Scholarly Life, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 40x30in.



Mantling Falls, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 40x30in.



One Eyed Falls, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 60x42in.

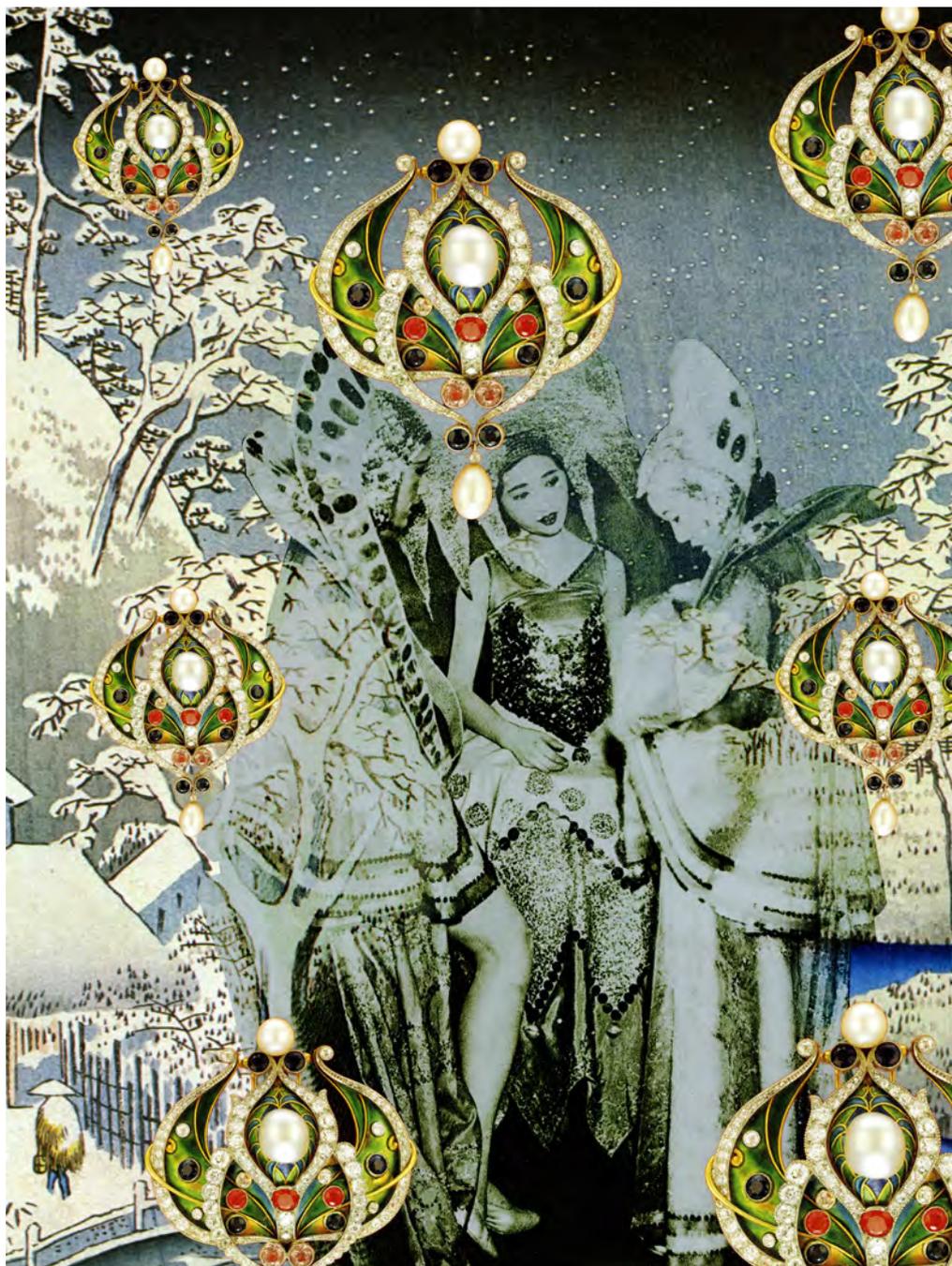


Perch, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 40x30in.

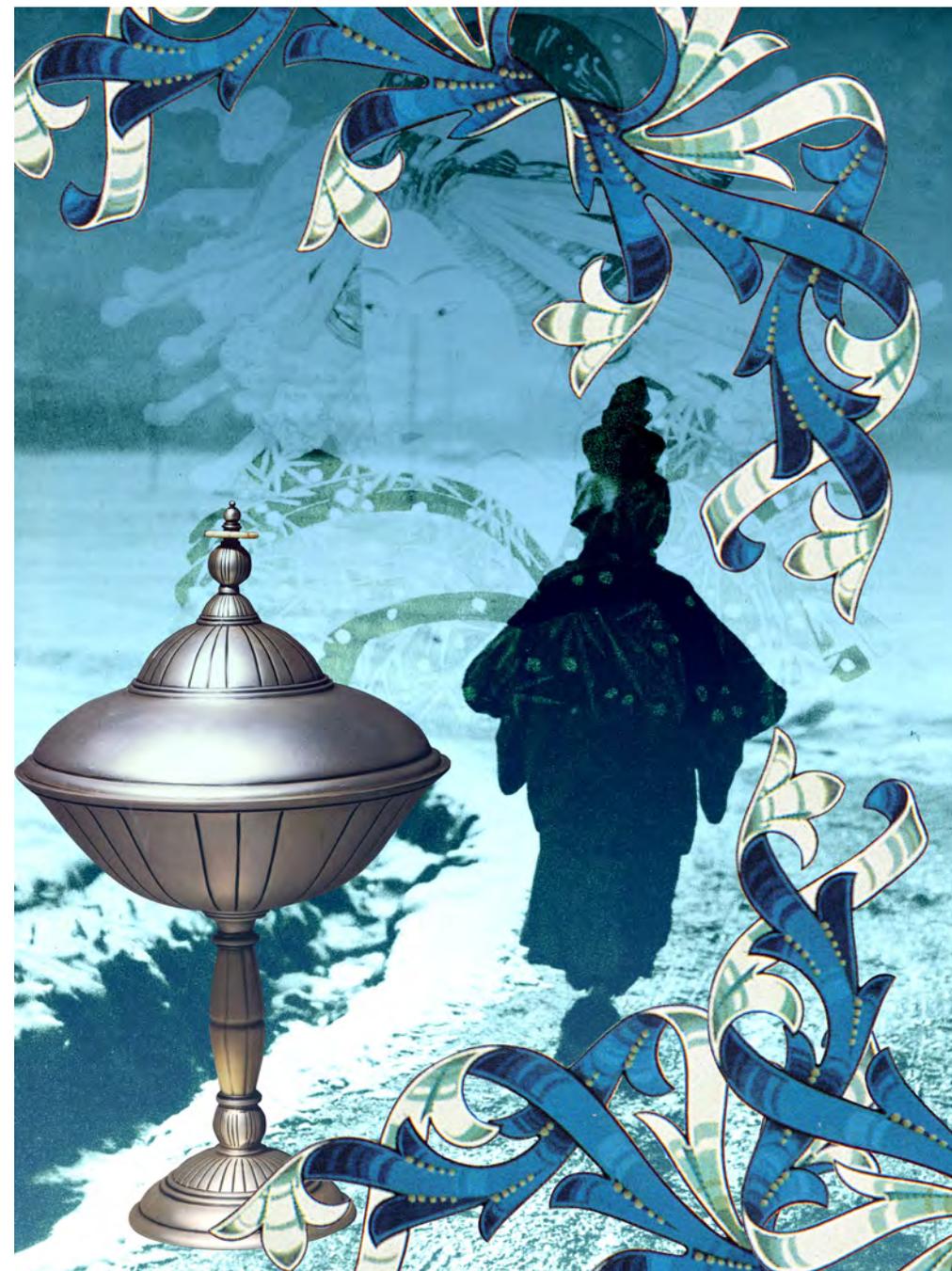


Double Falls, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 40x30in.

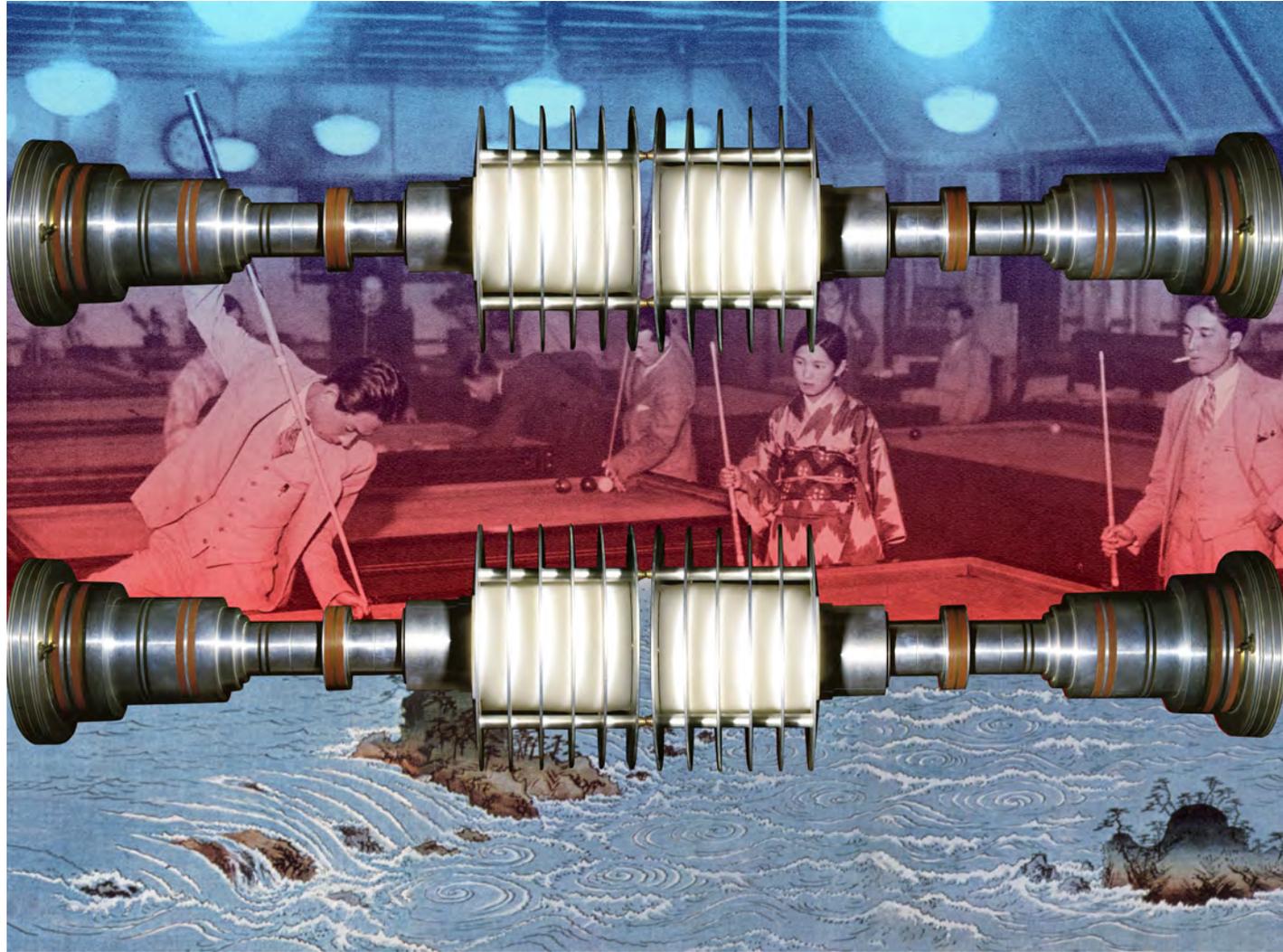
Prints: New Old Worlds



Snow Ladies, 2012, pigment ink on paper, 48x36in.



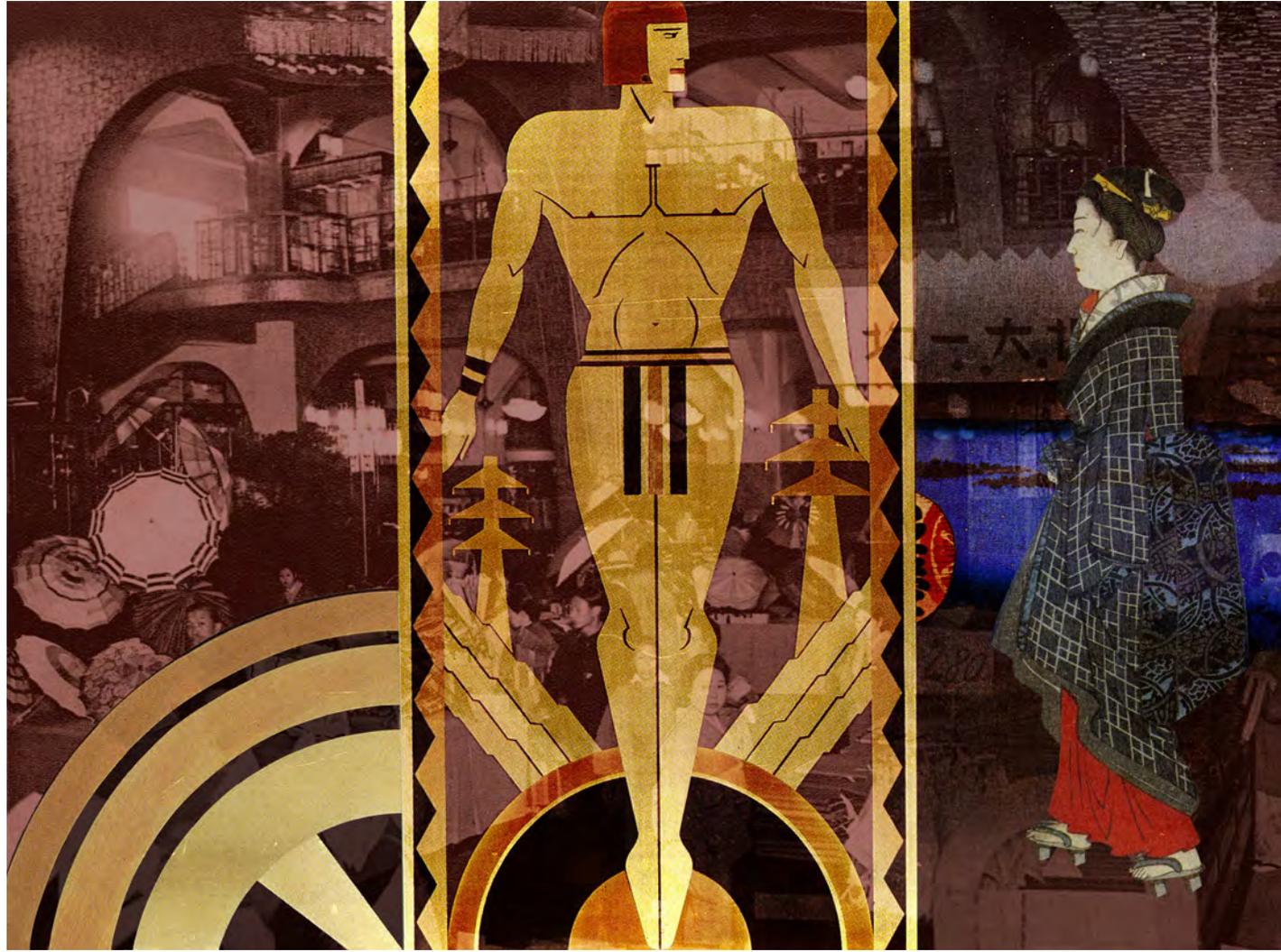
Solo, 2012, pigment ink on paper, 48x36in.



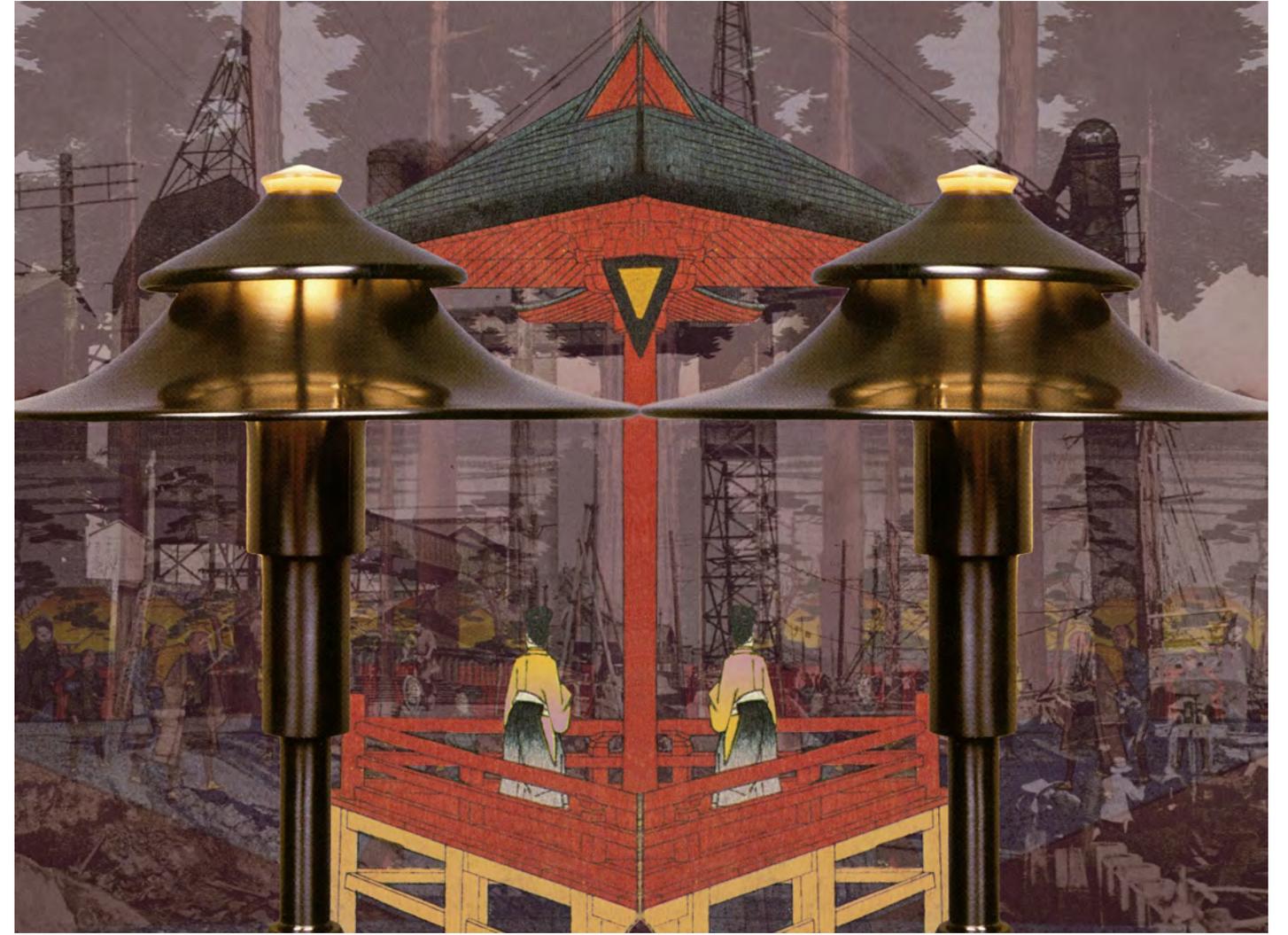
Pool Hall, 2012, pigment ink on paper, 36x48in.



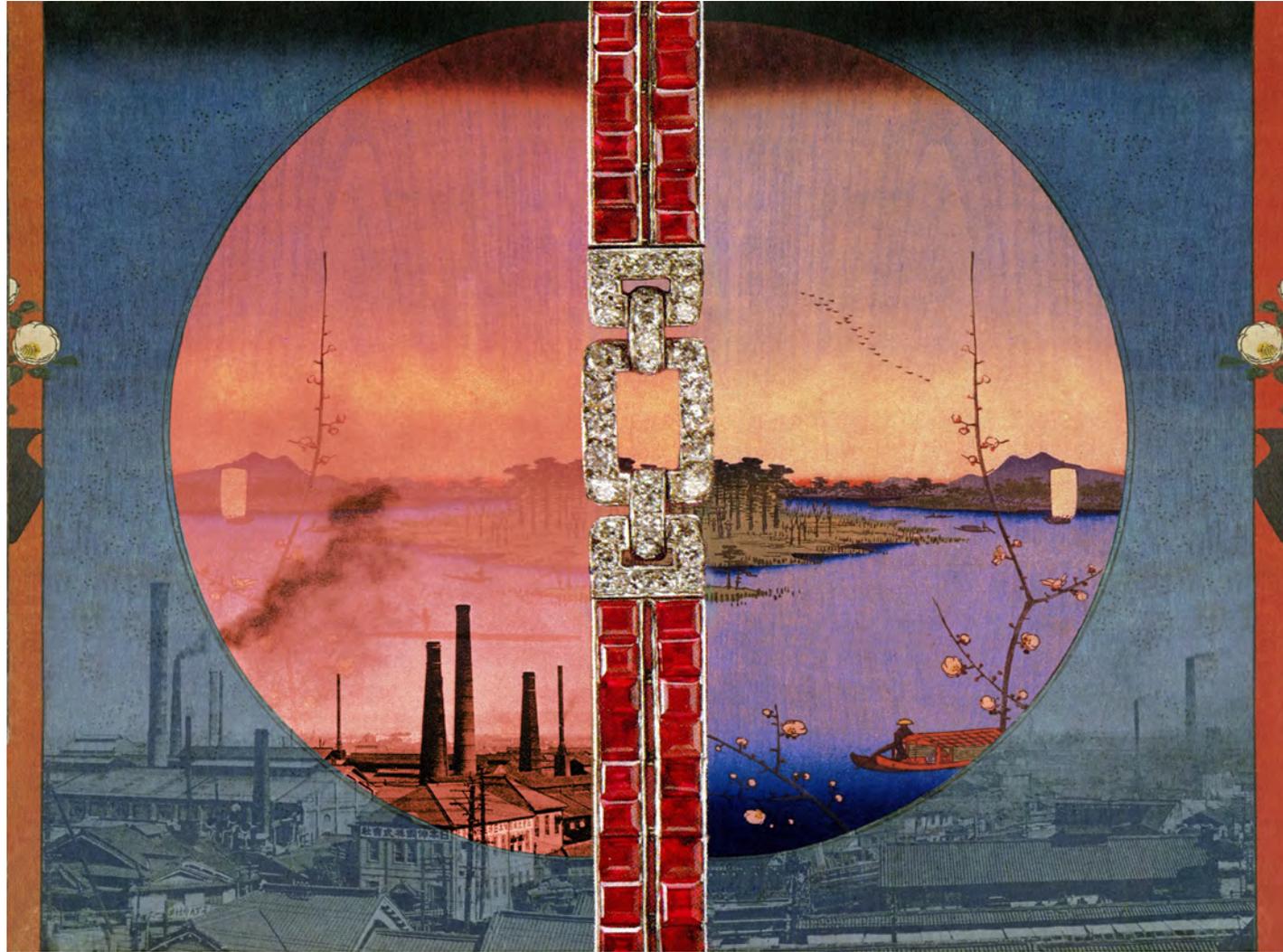
Dancers in the Light, 2012, pigment ink on paper, 36x48in.



Arches, 2012, pigment ink on paper, 36x48in.



Smoke, 2012, pigment ink on paper, 36x48in.



View from the Bridge, 2012, pigment ink on paper, 36x48in.

Watercolors: False Stars

2014, watercolor on paper, 30x22in.



6, *The stream of mourners wound like a snake through the village to the cremation grounds. There was a long, unbroken white cloth attached to the coffin...*



11, *I couldn't describe the gown if my life depended on it...Until this day, I imagine myself in the sex-bomb dress I fancied.*



17, I caught a glimpse of the pratimas as they were carried aloft in shallow baskets draped with batik.



22, Fate is a funny thing. Sometimes one person's bad luck opens up a world of opportunity for someone else.



27, Still, I've never looked at that stick the same way again. It's the identical piece of wood, but it doesn't vibrate the way it used to.



41, It's a miracle of physics how ten days can take up so much space in the human heart. Hastily affixed stick-up notes...



36, We watched the smoke peel off the cinnamon colored rings. The box had a picture of two deer on it; a buck, with an enormous rack of antlers, stood guard over a reclining doe.



42, He holds a mask before his face. The man's body reminds me of a healthy round Buddha. He sits cross-legged amidst a sea of crinkled newspaper and scribbles of pink packing cord.



43, The lollipop-shaped object was wrapped in yellow newspaper...a bundle of human bones was tied to the handle.



44, I took the mask...I wanted to look through its eyes: maybe I could get a glimpse of what death looked like without getting too near.

The artist wishes to thank:

The Office of the Dean College of Arts and Sciences at Boston College for their generous contribution to the catalogue and exhibition.

Julia Pavone, director of Alexey von Schlippe Gallery of Art, for the opportunity and her continued support of the work.

Sheila Gallagher, for her comments and suggestions

Catalogue Design: Mai Hoang

Text Editor: Santi Dewa Ayu

Essay “The Nature of Culture”: Fritz Buehner

Photographic Credits: Clements Photography and Design