

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Rebecca Rutstein: Abyss

"No man is an island," so the saying goes. Among the epiphanies revealed in Rebecca Rutstein's art is the realization that no island is an island, either—it is a mountain, only partially obscured by water. Rutstein leads us beneath the surface. We see that, far from isolated, islands are landmarks in submerged landscapes as vast, varied, and beautiful as anything on terra firma, the world of our walking, waking lives. But like dreams and distant planets, much of the sea-bed remains a mystery. Though part of this thoroughly traversed, studied, and exploited Earth, "the deep" remains a frontier—remote and uncharted.

While oceanic depths inspire awe and wonder in Rutstein, her work is "about" more than sea or land. It is an evolving meditation on life and love; geology, biology, and psychology; nature and nurture; past, present, and future; the terrestrial and extraterrestrial; documentation and dreaming. But the revelatory shift in perspective, the elegant challenge to preconceived perception that renders an island a mountain (and back again), is central to Rutstein's vision.

Rutstein is fascinated by plate tectonics, the study of how the Earth's crust folds, slides, collides, and erupts along fault lines. In this movement of the Earth's surfaces she finds metaphors for human relationships—layered and complex individuals coming together and pulling apart, alliances shifting, connections lying dormant or growing volatile. Rutstein's paintings remind us that we humans—layers of epidermis punctuated by orifices and scars, skin stretched across bone, swollen by muscle, softened by fat, concealing constellations of organs and galaxies of veins, driven by the mercurial mysteries of intellect and psychology, temporary repositories for the mechanics of life and agents in existence—are not so unlike our complicated world, with its substrata supporting an unstable crust, molten core, protuberant mountains, creases of valleys, recesses of ocean, exploding volcanoes, fissuring faults, networks of rivers, interdependent ecosystems, and cycles of creation and destruction, all driven by forces of nature so majestic and ineffable that we've spent millennia variously forming, propounding, arguing, reforming, and rejecting ideas of a creating and guiding God.

Tectonics are both message and medium for Rutstein. Pushing personal and artistic boundaries, she asks "How many disparate elements can cohabitate on a canvas?" Her paintings answer that question. Expansive and enveloping, they are built of overlapping and conjoined motifs. Wholly abstract passages co-exist with fully realized mountain ranges and cliffs (Rutstein titled this show *Abyss*). Mesh forms suggest the undulating grids of a topographer's relief-map, computer scans of the human body, and fishing nets. Twisting, ropey shapes evoke seaweed, lava flows, arteries, intestines, and umbilical cords. Lozenge-shaped clouds above are echoed in sinuous shadows

BRIDGETTE **MAYER** GALLERY

below. Clusters of familiar decorative flourishes are redolent of the dizzying density of Victoriana, psychedelia, and much contemporary graphic design. Signs of human habitation and exploration—geodesic domes, futuristic pods, tents, airplanes, a submarine—stealthily stake-out territory. In Rutstein’s paintings we are grounded, underwater, aloft. We are out of body and beneath our own skin. In them, it is yesterday, today, and tomorrow; here, there, and everywhere; always and all at once.

Rutstein’s passion for things geological—that is, her love for and engagement with the world around her—combined with rampant talent and drive to investigate and invent, have been rewarded with residencies in the Limestone Mountains of the Canadian Rockies and Na’alehu (The Big Island), Hawaii. Her previous shows reflected these extended immersions in and study of two of the Earth’s most spectacular environs. This show gestated much closer to home—in a basement studio *in* Rutstein’s home. An artist with a demonstrated urge to wonder and wander, Rutstein worked at home and underground throughout her recent pregnancy (during which she produced a masterpiece named Oliver). Her physical self somewhat limited in mobility and constrained by circumstances, removed from direct observation of the natural vistas that inspire her, Rutstein’s imagination—her inner world—blossomed. The *Abyss* Rutstein confronted was the depth of her own creativity. She pondered, explored, documented, and collected. She brought newfound treasures and wonders to the surface. They are all around you.

—Matt Singer, 2007

Curator, Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art, Writer, Philadelphia Museum of Art