

Gerritzen branches out with *trachea* and the hero

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Artist and teacher Helen Gerritzen has been something of an enigma to me for some time. I often see her breezing past in the narrow hallways of the University Power Plant (where we both teach) looking lost in thought.

Sometimes, as I turned the corner, she would be there on her hands and knees putting up large, unwieldy student drawings; her hands smudged

with charcoal and face intensely absorbed in the task. But her other worldly appearance was not the puzzle—nearly all of us art teachers have the habit of looking transported.

It was the work she was putting up that always arrested me. The drawings coming out of her classes were unfailingly dazzling. It seemed as if Gerritzen could teach every student to “speak” with every stroke of his/her hand and to imbue the ordinary subjects (paper cones, chairs, obscure corners of architecture) with a strange new power of expression. Yet, despite having admired dozens, if not hundreds of her students’ works, I had seen little of her own art. So it was with avid curiosity that I received an invitation to her show entitled *trachea and the hero, and other such stories...*

I didn’t even wait for the show to open, but called Gerritzen immediately and met her in the university printmaking studio where her prints were still lying, literally fresh off the press. These were massive, over-life-sized images composed of two panels: A pair of antlers and an upside down branch seemingly floated above two white expanses of paper—something like planets lost amidst nothingness.

What struck me immediately about these objects is that they evoked something of the mystery inherent in her students’ drawings—as if Gerritzen could recognize and point out to others something in ordinary objects that most of us failed to see.

PREVIEW TO OCT 7
TRACHEA AND THE HERO, AND OTHER SUCH STORIES...

HELEN GERRITZEN
SNAP GALLERY (10308 - 97 STREET)
OPENING RECEPTION SEP 7 (7 - 9 PM)

AS IT TURNED OUT, this first impression was not off the mark. Gerritzen, I learned, is a collector. Not a collector of stamps, antiques or anything else that we usually deem as collectible. She finds objects that are meaningful only to her.

For instance, she is the proud owner of a pair of circular door ornaments that once adorned a turn of the century entranceway and ones she says look like breasts. She has a pair of old wall brackets, sieves, candle moulds, baking cones, to just name a few of the curiosities.

She keeps these objects for months, sometimes years, and in moments of inspiration uses them to create her drawings or prints. Sometimes she familiarizes herself with these objects from the inside out by casting the cavities in gelatin. (A habit that, she says, occasionally startles her husband, who innocently reaches into the fridge and instead of cheese finds strange casts of gelatin.)

Once each one of these treasured objects finds its way into Gerritzen’s prints it undergoes a transformation. For instance, the large branch that we were just gazing at in her current

print is one she noticed just lying along the tree-lined street where she lives.

“That’s it,” Gerritzen says of the find. “I knew I needed it for my work.” She dragged it home—large and cumbersome as it was—and painted it a pristine white. Now, transformed and reversed, it became reminiscent of the human trachea—like the one that Gerritzen once drew in the anatomy lab at the university hospital.

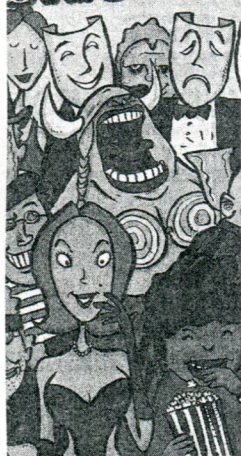
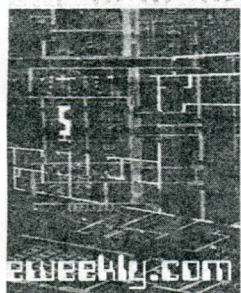
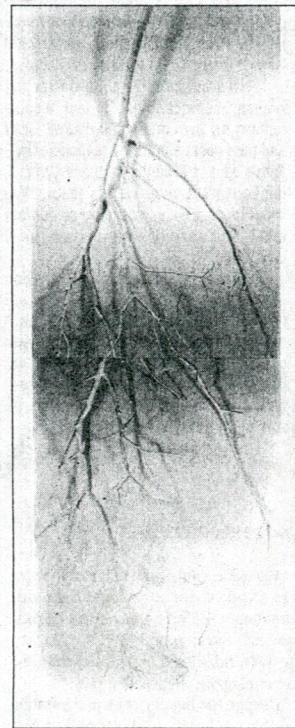
But as full of symbolism and allegory as this simple branch became, it is further enriched by a pair of antlers on the other half of the diptych. These two remarkably similar forked objects, reaching in opposite directions, now took on connotations of yin and yang, male and female, two forms of power, or as Gerritzen explains, of the myth of Daphne and Apollo.

Daphne, in an effort to avoid being raped, turned into a tree. It is through the tree-like trachea that she must have taken her final breath.

“The last breath she takes as a human,” muses Gerritzen poetically.

As we stood talking over these prints, I began to understand a little more about the Gerritzen enigma. As a teacher and as an artist, Gerritzen inspires poetic thought. Like the ancient storytellers, she takes the ordinary stuff around us and transforms it into a living myth.

“I love them; I love the stories [myths, symbols, allegories],” Gerritzen confirms. “I want to relate them to the here and now.” ▀



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