

Joan Linder's 'Of Bodies and Buildings' at Dowling

BY ARIELLA BUDICK | ariella.budick@newsday.com
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On a windblown day in Brooklyn, Joan Linder nestles in her cold basement studio while her bundled baby alternately coos and frets in her arms. Pinned to a November-gray wall is a spectacular and meticulous life-sized drawing of a toilet. Elsewhere are other products of Linder's bold and patient hand and slightly morbid imagination: comic-book-style sketches of a bunny's pornographic adventures; a couple of dissected body parts. Despite the subject matter and the temperature, the studio feels electrified by the energy of her work.

Linder, whose show "Of Bodies and Buildings" is up through Dec. 9 at the Anthony Giordano Gallery at Dowling College in Oakdale, takes a snake's attitude toward art, shedding each successive medium and subject in order to grow and change. At 37, she has accumulated an ambitious catalog of accomplishments: a respectable Manhattan gallery, a tenure-track job at the University at Buffalo, a newborn. She's taken the time along the way to find a narrow topic and then probe its intricacies before moving on.

In a relatively brief career, she has drawn each piece of furniture in her apartment to scale, studied the grotesque, oddly beautiful forms of human organs, and captured the fraught climate of family gatherings. A constant is her ability to inject subtle vitality into ropes, plants, trees, buildings.

Intimate objects

Her objects are "characters in a narration without a storyline. She provides you an intimacy with objects that you wouldn't expect to be intimate with," says Karen Levitov, a curator at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan, who has written about Linder's work.

Turning the tables on generations of male artists who offered up the anatomies of women as fruits for delectation, Linder painted a series of "Men" who don't seem aware that they're hardly wearing any clothes. Corporate executives literally throw their weight around at the office, opening a file drawer or searching for a contact lens while bulbous bellies overhang their briefs and wobble over their stick-like legs.

"Nobody wants to look at this work," Linder admits. "People don't want to see naked men."

The drawings were a response to Linder's contemporaries Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin, who merge the classic nude with the Playboy kind. "I thought, 'Screw that. I'm going to do these pictures of fat men and what power really looks like.'"

She's interested in the absence of power, too, especially in bodies bound and immobilized, or stretched out on the dissecting table. This line of inquiry was sparked in 2004, when she saw a Japanese bondage film and, later, the horrific images from Abu Ghraib.

First she thought, "I will tie up men – that's the next phase of my man project." But soon the images morphed into meditations on the erotics of helplessness. She tied up friends and had them tie her – then removed the bodies altogether and left only the bonds of rope on the page. These are among her most successful efforts: "They were more interesting, more abstract. They played a kind of unconscious game of hide and seek."

Despite the haunted nature of their origins, the body-free bondage pictures at the Anthony Giordano Gallery appear delicately abstract and elegant. You might feel an undercurrent of aggression in the tensile quality of the ropes, in how convoluted areas congregate in some corners of the paper and go slack in others, but the knotty political nature of the images comes across almost subliminally.

"All of her work can be appreciated on a superficial aesthetic level. It can be admired for the time, energy and skill she puts into it," says Heather Bhandari, curator at the Mixed Greens Gallery in Chelsea, which represents Linder. "But you can take it to a deeper level.... There are political undertones to most of what she does."

So an intricate drawing of the shelves in her parents' basement, groaning with hoarded cans of food and spilling forth toilet paper and cleaning products, becomes more than simply a catalog of consumption. It's what Linder calls "a survivalist bulwark."

The word survival has special resonance for Linder, whose father and paternal grandparents made it through the Holocaust. Her pictures of that family branch carry the burden of those memories. For these scenes, she uses a mostly monochrome palette – "like a film noir," she says. "Whatever's in color is the nightmare perspective."

In one image, a wizened grandmother stares blankly out of an armchair, watched over by a circle of menacing plants and lamps. A man sits inches away, but he might as well be on another continent. Only the woman's avocado green sweater disturbs the black-and-whiteness of the scene – a patch that highlights her solitude. Linder explains that

her subject's isolation was not merely metaphorical; Alzheimer's had begun to eat away at the old lady's mind.

In another of these gothic family images, Linder paints herself sitting off to the side, sipping a glass of red wine, while, in the background, smiling relatives cluster around the stove, ladling soup into bowls.

"There's this tension between the intimacy of the family home and the alienation, where she is both part of what's happening and yet she's isolated herself from it," says Levitov of the Jewish Museum. "You can almost smell the matzo ball soup. You're there, across the table, and yet you're wondering, 'What's going on?'"

Estranged specimens

Linder brings that compelling friction between distance and engagement to all of her work, even to some of the most recent drawings she made of cadavers in a university lab. The partially dissected corpses, splayed out, opened up, faces hidden or grotesquely exposed, are at once people and things, intimate reflections of our own flesh, yet utterly strange specimens.

"I was thinking about this war and how we don't see death at all. All this war and death, and we don't see it. I was thinking it would be interesting to be in the presence of a dead body."

The blemish that isn't

Joan Linder's intricate process, the way she works simply with pen and ink on paper, means that she can't disguise her mistakes. Whether her nib slips, she messes up the pattern, or a bottle of ink sloshes, leaving a big blotch, the errors she makes become integral, revealing the workings of her very individual hand. At one point, a huge spill appeared on the life-sized drawing of a couch she had been laboring on for months: "I was devastated," she recalls, "but then it was OK. I wanted to do work that was a one-shot deal." It's even possible that the contrast between the sloppy spontaneity of the blemishes and the obsessive precision of her line is what makes Linder's pictures so alive.

WHERE&WHEN: "Of Bodies and Buildings: Drawings by Joan Linder." Through Dec. 9 at the Anthony Giordano Gallery, Dowling College, Idle Hour Boulevard, Oakdale. For exhibition hours and admission prices, call 631-244-3016 or visit dowling.edu.

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