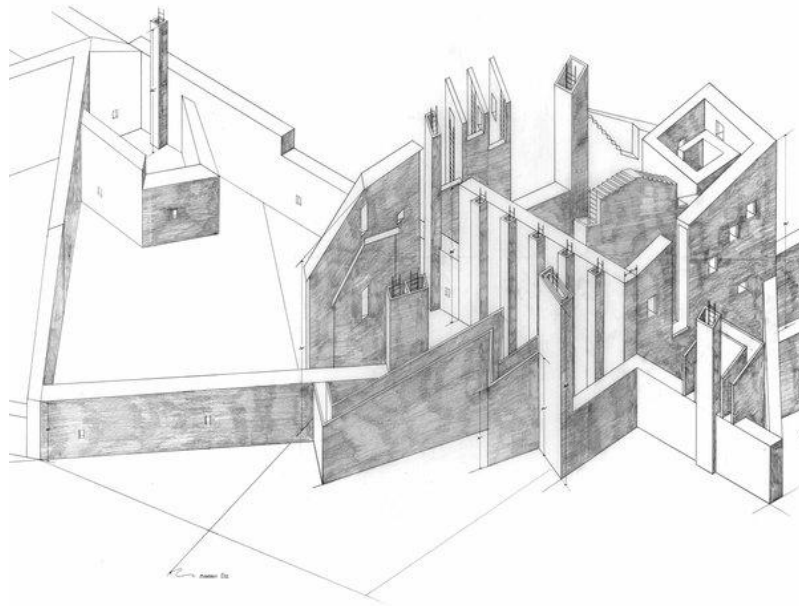


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Building Extravagant Fantasies With Contraptions and Tunnels

‘Alice Aycock Drawings’ at Grey Art Gallery and Parrish Art Museum

By KAREN ROSENBERG



The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Alice Aycock's "City of the Walls: A Narrow City, a Thin City ..." (1978).

A Minimalist turned unabashed fantasist, the sculptor Alice Aycock is one of the more visionary figures to have emerged from the New York art scene of the 1970s. She would not seem out of place among the obsessive cosmographers of “[The Encyclopedic Palace](#),” at this summer’s Venice Biennale.

Her imagination is especially active on paper, as seen in “[Alice Aycock Drawings: Some Stories Are Worth Repeating](#),” an intriguing and occasionally befuddling exhibition, split between the Grey Art Gallery at New York University and the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y.

Ms. Aycock, 66, likes to call her work “nonfunctional architecture,” and her drawings often take the form of blueprints or diagrams. You won’t see much of her hand in this survey; her approach to drawing is very different from that of say, [Dan Flavin](#) or [Robert Smithson](#), two sculptor peers whose works on paper are much more relaxed. “I didn’t want to draw by sketching impressionistically; I didn’t trust that,” she has said.



Private Collection, Richmond, Virginia

Alice Aycock Drawings A detail of “The New & Favorite Game of the Universe and the Golden Goose Egg” (1987).

It makes sense that she was an early adopter of computer graphics programs, as the later works at the Parrish reveal; they can look a bit cartoonish, however, especially the “Sum Over Histories” series of Gehry-esque loops and swirls superimposed on scans of maps and charts.

Both halves of the show (organized by Jonathan Fineberg, an art historian and adjunct curator at the Parrish) wisely include some photographs and sculptural maquettes. And visitors can see more of Ms. Aycock’s three-dimensional work with a trip to the Andrew Haswell Green Park in Manhattan, where her roller coaster of a sculpture, “[East River Roundabout](#),” has been installed since 1995, or to Terminal 1 at Kennedy International Airport, home to 1998’s “Star Sifter.”

It’s best to begin at the Grey, where early-1970s installations like “Sand/Fans” are amply documented. This ephemeral piece, almost a mini-Earthwork, consisted of a pile of sand that was gradually flattened by air currents from four industrial fans. Here, too, is a drawing of a low building with seven tons of earth heaped on its roof, inspired partly by Smithson’s “Partially Buried Woodshed.” It could be reached only by crawling, and those who entered faced the possibility of being buried alive.

Ms. Aycock’s wells and tunnels of the mid-1970s induced a similar claustrophobia, while associating themselves with all sorts of underground networks: burial sites in ancient Mycenae, cliff dwellings in the Southwest, even the vault of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

“The Beginnings of a Complex ...,” her 1977 contribution to Documenta, was envisioned as a series of subterranean tunnels, but its floodprone site necessitated a change of plans. It became an aboveground set of flattened, billboardlike structures that could be negotiated with ladders and platforms. It also had a text component, a rambling narrative laden with cinematic and philosophical references that stands in counterpoint to Ms. Aycock’s simple, precise drawings of the project.

“Complex” appears to have unleashed Ms. Aycock’s literary ambitions; writing is even more central to the plans that follow, like the medievaesque “City of the Walls,” of 1978, or the self-descriptive “Shanty Town Inhabited by Two Lunatics” (both accompanied by bizarre, free-associative film treatments).

It doesn’t seem to matter whether these structures could be realized; in the mind and on the page, they link architecture indelibly to specific characters and experiences. Although clearly informed by postmodern architecture, literature and theory, they anticipate some darkly fanciful strains of more recent art (like the warrenlike installations made by the duo of Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe).

The latest works at the Grey, from the mid-1980s, look [more mechanical](#) than architectural. They could be seen as homages to Duchamp, or to tinkerer-healers like Wilhelm Reich and Emery Blagdon; “The Miraculating Machine in the Garden,” for instance, combines antennas, conveyor belts, bells and cyclotron pipes for the purpose of “sending vibrations.” It looks rather quaint, but that seems to be the point; in his catalog essay, Mr. Fineberg calls it a “romantic scientific apparatus, like something from an old Frankenstein movie.”

At the Parrish, the machines give way to games: elaborate, multicolored drawings based on tantric diagrams, ancient illuminated manuscripts and 19th-century British game boards, among other sources. They include a “Navajo Whirling Rainbow Game,” with spiraling pathways, and the “Celestial City Game,” with snakes and ladders.

Here, as in many of Ms. Aycock’s sculptural proposals, logical systems — a major legacy of 1970s art — are rendered null and void by an unchecked eclecticism. You sense that the artist is the only player who knows the rules; often, you suspect that she is making them up as she goes along.

“Alice Aycock Drawings: Some Stories Are Worth Repeating” runs through July 13 at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Manhattan; (212) 998-6780, nyu.edu/greyart; and at the Parrish Art Museum, 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, N.Y.; (631) 283-2118, parrishart.org.