

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Open" competition in 2006, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Open" was juried by Catherine D'Ignazio, (Co-Director, iKatun and Member of The Institute for Infinitely Small Things, Massachusetts); Omar Lopez-Chahoud, (Independent Curator, New York); and Rachel Berwick, (Artist, Connecticut).

"Open" was made possible by grants from the Roberts Foundation, Goldfarb Memorial Trust, Helen M. Saunders Trust, Bank of America, and the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign.

Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary arts organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community. Programs include visual arts and public art projects, music, performance, spoken word, film and video, and creative social events designed to connect people with each other. Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways is an alternative to mainstream museums and commercial culture; its programs are made possible by a diverse and growing audience, and support from a wide range of enlightened funders.

On the cover: Surface Tension III (Fishing), graphite, watercolor, ink on paper, 38" x 50", 2007 (detail).

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

# Fay Ku



Surface Tension X (Big Wave Good-Bye), graphite, watercolor, ink on paper, 38" x 50", 2007.

## Thank Heaven For Little Girls?

By David Cohen

On first sighting, in the opening of the ten-image saga that constitutes "Surface Tension," Fay Ku's fishers seem harmless enough, although the way that knife is being brandished arouses the suspicion that it might not be intended for aquatic prey. But what soon becomes apparent is that, like the innocent-seeming children who kidnap Barbarella in Roger Vadim's 1968 movie of that title, Fay Ku's kids aren't half as cute as they ought to be. In fact, given a chance, they could outdo Goya's militiamen in wanton cruelty. Before their adventures are up we see them eating roe from a fish still quivering with life, shooting prisoners at sea, abetting rape, and gloating over a gruesome lynching or suicide scene.

These powerful drawings are at once dramatic and enigmatic. They are energized by a contradiction in expectation: viewer and artist, like the little girls, are innocents corrupted by experience. They share this conceit with California artist Kim Dingle's partying toddlers, only in Dingle the spectacle of three-year-olds crowding a bar in their diapers is primarily humorous: however much of a gaggle of barely distinct babes they form, and however adult their pursuits, they retain the essential demeanor of their age—psychologically speaking, they are individuals in their own space, however alike they are pictorially. The horror of Ku's little girl thugs is that they not only act in regimen, but they can think and feel collectively, too. Their all-too-adult group

Fay Ku was born in Taipei, Taiwan, and immigrated to the United States shortly before her third birthday. After graduating from Bennington College, in Vermont, with a dual B.A. in Literature and Visual Arts, she moved to New York City where she completed two Masters degrees at the Pratt Institute in Art History and Studio Art. She has exhibited her work in solo exhibitions at Real Art Ways, Metaphor Contemporary Art Gallery in Brooklyn, A.I.R. Gallery in Manhattan and Lumi Art Space in Brooklyn. She has been included in group exhibitions in Shanghai, Philadelphia and New York City. She has had residencies with Artists Alliance Lower East Side Residency program in New York and Weir Farm Art Center in Wilton, Connecticut. She currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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sadism brings to mind the teenage boys of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

Ku—like many contemporary women artists—is a godchild of Henry Darger. But then again, the Chicago janitor's Vivian girls rarely give as good as they get. Battle-hardy as they become in their epic struggle with the Glandelinian overlords, they preserve Christian virtue and military honor. The Ku girls, on the other hand, display stiff indifference, and even occasional glee, in the face of the suffering they witness or inflict.

Ku is able, with incredible deftness, to describe frowns and grimaces without becoming distractedly absorbed in the personality of each player. These aren't masks, however, but real facial features. The clean cut of her graphite line gives the figures a sharpness of definition, but at the same time, faint pentimenti convey specificity, allowing at once literal animation (moving features) and a sense of the animated hand of the artist struggling to pin down emotion.

And yet, how ambiguous those emotions can actually be. Each figure in "Double Team" (the second drawing in the series) could occupy a different emotional extreme. In the foreground vessel of two boats, the girl at the front, who holds the rod, is embraced around the waist by a second and pulled back by her long hair by a third crew member. Each

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**Surface Tension III (Fishing), graphite, watercolor, ink on paper, 38" x 50", 2007.**



face conveys at once collective exhilaration—teamwork in the face of danger—and frenzied competitiveness. The grimaces are against the elements and against each other, at once defiant and vindictive.

Another Dargeresque painter with whom she shares a cartoon or animé aesthetic is Hilary Harkness, whose tableaux of massed, complex battle and massacre scenes are cast with near-identical Barbie-esque combatants. But where Harkness recalls Brueghel in the all-over density of composition in which her protagonists are placed, Ku creates an almost visceral sense of proximity with her figures, isolating them against the accentuated blankness of the surrounding white page. Harkness taps a comic macabre in the lack of differentiation of her figures, their cool remoteness. In Ku there is a more complex push-pull between individual and collective, indeed, a "surface tension" between expressiveness and stylization.

Throughout this aptly formally-named series, there are multilayered tensions all finding their way to the surface. What happens above sea level reflects stirrings below—the big catch out of view, turbulence, inundation. Then there is tension between the figures. Tensions arising from split intentions. And then there is the age-old formal tension between the page as a depictive field and a thing in itself; the tension, in other words, between a desire to convey perspective and a willingness to acknowledge the reality of the picture plane. By drawing isolated incidents on big sheets of paper, and, in all but the concluding page ("Big Wave Good-bye"), resisting the temptation of all-over texture in favor of the minimalist gesture of restraint, Ku explores extremes of detail and emptiness, pitting one against the other.

Her aesthetic oscillates between a fear of empty spaces and a fearless embrace of blankness. While the figures are carved out of space with elegant economy, there is equally (contradictorily) no detail spared, no time limit set on the exquisite conveyance of texture through miniscule line. This comes out in the way, in "Fishing" for instance, she supplies the grain in each differentiated plank of the foreground boat, not to mention the scales on each of the little critters



**Surface Tension IX (Isolated Incident), graphite, watercolor, ink, collage on paper, 38" x 50", 2007.**

spewing out of the sliced open belly of the big catch. In "Double Team," different orders of detail and decoration are microscopically conveyed in the back of the figure furthest from view: the mermaid tattoo on her back, the fishes on her headscarf, the grain on her club.

These kinds of detail identify an object's position in perspective, receding space. Other kinds of draughtsmanship, by contrast, push some detail up against the picture plane, nonetheless following a pictorial logic. In "Crowdpleaser"—one of the most disturbing and at the same time delectable of the set of ten images—the suspended, perhaps hanged figures (whose fate so delights the eponymously delighted crowd of girls each bobbing along in a coffin-like craft) are seen by the viewer in silhouette, through the sails. Ku has devoted loving craft to the moiré effect of these sails, which are separate, cutout bits of paper collaged to the supporting page; the figures, and sections of the poles holding them up, are rendered in a dense fingerprint-like maze texture.

Ku's line is spectacularly dexterous; there is rarely a need to "cheat" by using wash to create shape or texture, or to use color. Pure line, as has been suggested, is sufficient, thanks to her patience and craft, to intimate volume. Instead, when such effects as wash or color are brought into play it is as much to accentuate their superfluity as to satisfy a need.

Watercolor is used, for instance, on the matching camouflage armbands, headwear and bikinis of the girl marines in "Deployment" as they march from their boats, braving the seas. Bright orange denotes the roe a girl voraciously scoops from a fish's belly in "Fishing," signaling the oedipal hunger of a baby consuming babies.

The titles seem to acknowledge the double life of these drawings as essays in form with content. "Deployment" refers to watercolor as much as it does to amphibious landing. Similarly, "Isolated Incident" is a rare, concentrated instance of painterly finesse—rather than a singular color signaling an element or effect, a rich spread of color cordons off an area as luxurious or somehow blessed, in contrast to the humdrum black and white of the rest of the page, invigilated by girl-guards and a girl-gondolier. But how blessed are the inhabitants of the mini-mogul miniature set within the larger Chinese page? The ferocity of their intercourse is situated precariously between extreme passion and rape, making the docility of the guards all the more sinister.

It is left to the last page, "Big Wave Good-bye," to settle the tension of line and tone in the latter's favor—perhaps. The overt reference to Hokusai extends the suitably unharmonious multiculturalism of influences in this series to Japan. Sea and stormy sky are united as a mottled texture of gray wash, although tellingly this is a meticulously and carefully orchestrated sequence of effects. But the serrated lips of the legendary white wave are achieved through line alone once more; the tip of the wave, in other words, is an eye of the storm of calm and order, even as the image beckons a watery grave.

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