



THERE IS NO CENTER

Susan Te Kahurangi King's disorienting worlds
BY DAN NADEL



ABOVE:
A portrait of King
by Chris Byrne
in colored pencil
on paper, 2015.

LEFT:
Untitled, 1975–80.
Graphite, colored
pencil, and
crayon on paper,
12¼ x 17 in.

The earliest works in Susan Te Kahurangi King's overdue retrospective, opening July 8 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, date from 1958, when the artist was just seven years old. Extraordinarily, her quality of line and formal interests had already matured by that point: In an untitled work from that year, we see Daffy Duck depicted from below and head-on simultaneously, though he's also cropped

to just his midsection and legs. Another drawing from the same period zooms in on a series of cartoon hills and legs mixed with Kandinsky-esque triangles and arches. By 1960, when King was nine, her compositions were complex balancing acts. One contains multiple Donald Ducks, his body shown from various perspectives at the same time, the figures surrounded by a colored landscape rendered in shards and bits. These are masterpieces of 20th-century drawing, and works that remained unseen until less than a decade ago. Tina Kukielski, curator of the ICA Miami show, is rightly positioning King's oeuvre as formally inventive, with a "psychological and emotional weight and darkness," part of a lineage of female synthesizers of abstraction and cartooning that includes Sue Williams, Nicole Eisenman, Amy Sillman, and Joyce Pensato.

OPPOSITE:
Untitled,
ca. 2012–14. Ink
and felt pen on
paper, 12 x 16¼ in.

BELOW:
Untitled, 1960.
Crayon on paper,
13½ x 8¼ in.



King has taken an unusual and circuitous path to the art world. She was born in 1951 in Te Aroha, New Zealand, one of a dozen children. Though her family isn't Maori, her father was a scholar of Maori culture—Te Kahurangi means “the treasured one.” At age four King stopped speaking, and her family moved to the North Shore of Auckland to better facilitate her care. (Undiagnosed in the 1950s, she is now thought to have an autism spectrum disorder.) Her professional breakthrough didn't come until her sister Rachel began posting King's drawings to Facebook in the early 2010s. They were noticed by artist and cartoonist Gary Panter, himself a connoisseur of outlying art. Panter mentioned them to curator and dealer Chris Byrne, who in turn exhibited some of the work at the 2014 Outsider Art Fair and, later that year, at the Andrew Edlin Gallery in New York, where Kukielski spotted it.

At first glance King's drawings are unlikely candidates for the amount of press they've received, let alone a full-blown museum exhibition—we're talking about small, cartoon-based pictures, all made using the same pencil-and-crayon techniques and often in scrappy condition. But compositionally, King's pictures permit various points of entry, providing the viewer a license to interpret freely. We may recognize cartoon characters and humanoids, but the odd secret of icons like Woody Woodpecker, Bugs Bunny, and Daffy Duck is that, embedded as they are in our cultural memory, they read however we want them to—invested with historical meaning or as hollow masks, purely formal agglomerations of shapes.

King's cartoon-based work, the focus of her drawings until the 1970s, is remarkable for its fierce approach to extant imagery. She does not appropriate—she transforms. When she uses recognizable characters, she treats their bodies as things not only to be contorted as she pleases but also viewed from multiple perspectives and through different lenses. She might also focus on minute, otherwise negligible parts of a funny animal comic book drawing—a suburban yard, say, instead of the actual figurative and narrative action—breaking it down to its formal elements: the curve of the knot in the tree; the curlicues of the foliage; the lumpy oval shape of a rock in the yard. All of these are arranged as though there is no gravity, no up or down, just a world of shapes and space. The result is that we appear to see a freeze-frame of a spatial action unfolding in the artist's imagination, bringing to mind Gladys Nilsson's late 1960s depictions of bodies, creatures, and objects cavorting and collapsing into one another.

In the 1970s works, King's cartoon characters move off center stage, and other humanoids begin to populate the drawings—seemingly underwater or at the beach; nude, but with indistinct genitalia; and sometimes wearing cartoonish gloves and shoes. Auckland, of course, is by the sea, so this was not foreign territory, and as Kukielski points out, these drawings coincide with late adolescence, which must have been particularly difficult and fraught for King. In other examples these bodies merge into landscapes and wave formations, sometimes viewed head-on, sometimes in a style akin to a topographical map. One untitled work from around 1978 includes small figures at the base of the page that are dwarfed by heads and eyes escalating in size, the shapes pressing down like an angry sky on any open space within the composition. It's as though in her twenties King zoomed



out on her world. Figures, while still carefully articulated, are sublimated to a flow of marks and shapes. These are all-over compositions, the extreme density of which creates illusions of depth and pattern that confound literal readings, much like the suggestive, carefully composed forms in the recent paintings and drawings of the aforementioned Sue Williams.

King's drawing activity dwindled in the 1980s and then, for unknown reasons, stopped altogether in 1988. She resumed work in 2008. Contemporaneous footage of King drawing shows an artist of incredible confidence, seemingly able to transmit her vision onto paper without the need for sketches or plans. Drawings of the last decade are mostly abstract—bands and loops of bright colors, but still all-over and untethered to ideas of top, bottom, or centrality, as though she is color mapping her previous figurative drawings.

Taken together, as they will be on view at ICA Miami, the drawings are a highly intimate body of work. What King does is a process of world making, in which new characters and terrains are mapped from a number of vantage points. But it's important to remember that this work, like that of her art historical compatriots (Panter, Nilsson, Karl Wirsum, and June Leaf), is close-up art, the kind made while bent over a board or a desk, peering into a realm taking shape on the page. **MP**

Everything is arranged as though there is no gravity, no up or down, just a world of shapes and space.