Susan Te Kahurangi King

ANDREW EDLIN GALLERY

Susan Te Kahurangi King's rich, strange drawings at Andrew Edlin Gallery fell into two groups: works from the 1970s and those from the '80s. The works in the earlier group are kinetic: They evoke waves that surge and loom and fall from one side of a sheet to another, and that seem to have taken up—and then been taken over by—a mass of cartoon-like objects and shapes in their paths: spoonbills, Mickey Mouse hands, a pinwheel of legs, a curvy calf, and a foot in a Mary Jane–style shoe. Difficult, at times, to discern, these items appear and reappear in fields of soft pencil marks that sometimes fade to a light graphite or watercolor wash, occasionally interrupted by rougher swatches of colored crayon or ink.

At the age of four, the New Zealand–born King gradually stopped speaking, and her parents encouraged her to draw. The recent exhibition coincided with an exhibition of the artist's work at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, organized by Tina Kukielski, which included output from the beginning of King's life to the present, before and after a nearly twenty-year period when, in addition to not speaking, she stopped drawing, too. An exhibition at Andrew Edlin Gallery two years ago featured some of the artist's early work. (That show was organized by curator Chris Byrne, who co-organized the recent exhibition with gallerist Robin Heald.) In those pieces, the cartoon figures were larger, more discrete and identifiable. They had often been on the receiving end of some terrible brutality: severed, torn apart, fragmented into multiple perspectives, the usual stuff of cartoon violence made newly and intensely visceral in King's sly renderings.

The drawings in the recent show, albeit still dark, contained a more muted sense of mayhem. In one (the works were all untitled and undated), a cresting shape was created and filled by planks that climbed the curve of the undulation as if they were self-replicating stairs or piano keys playing their own arpeggio, like something out of *Fantasia*. Underneath, at left, a group of leggy, blue-skinned creatures, some in pink bathing suits, some bare-breasted, crowded forward over a pile of unattached legs and hands, while long-snouted, blank-eyed Kilroy-like heads peered voyeuristically over the rising planks to watch.

Susan Te Kahurangi King, *Untitled*, ca. 1975–79, graphite, colored pencil, and crayon on paper, 17 × 11½".

In the later drawings, those from the '80s, the shapes covered most of the sheet, echoing the allover patterning of Maori art, which King's father studied intensively. These works were executed almost completely in graphite, with very spare incidents of inked color, and though typically abstract they were alive or dynamic in a way that brought to mind a certain kind of dark children's book illustration—that of Tomi Ungerer, for example, with his menacing landscapes of rocks with eyes—with the mood transmuted into something like lurking twilight.

It is not uncommon for artists to use popular illustration to convey a combination of menace and innocence: Think Sue Williams's comic-book takes on action painting, for example, or Rivane Neuenschwander's blank Color Field cartoon panels with solitary speech

bubbles floating above. King's personal history—and later diagnosis of autism—may also tempt us to read her compositions as a product of her psychology, to interpret her works as tumultuous inner landscapes or as insuppressible visual shouts of things unsaid or unrecognized. In the end, such armchair analysis is unnecessary: The drawings have a very particular urgency, pulling us in with their power to amaze and confuse, and keeping us there with their distinct atmosphere of apprehensiveness and dread.

—Emily Hall