

Metaleptic stories

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Monika Zarzeczna at Lesley Heller Workspace

The exploring of the universe was being done with a couple of twigs tied together with string, a stone with a hole in it, an egg, one of Miss Tick's stockings which also had a hole in it, a pin, a piece of paper and a tiny stub of pencil. Unlike wizards, witches learn to make do with a little. The items had been tied and twisted together to make a... device. It moved oddly when she prodded it. One of the sticks seemed to pass right through the egg, for example, and came out the other side without leaving a mark.

The passage above comes from Terry Pratchett's delightful fantasy novel *The wee free men* and is a description of a "shamble" - a device used by witches to explore the universe. It can be made of anything that seems a good idea at the time - provided it also contains something alive, like a beetle or a fresh egg. A shamble, however, is a tricky thing: you can't carry it around, and you have to make it for yourself, right where and when you want to use it. A simple magic detector and amplifier, it is especially useful in times of distress or confusion as it helps you find out what kind of a situation you are in. As Pratchett explains, shambles are not magical, but they are something to be magical through.

Monika Zarzeczna's solo exhibition at Lesley Heller Workspace is full of shambles - as well as Souvenirs, Stool idols, Table sitters and Trophies. Her sculptures are made of twigs, string, paper, cardboard and various bits and pieces that the artist happened to have at hand - and they make the gallery buzz with their latent magic. Some of the objects are delicate assemblages that look like insects on long spindly legs; others are bulky papier-mâché shapes sitting on stools or low tables with the self-possession of drowsy animals. Such comparisons are hard to avoid because the objects have an organic liveliness to them, as well the specificity and psychological complexity of dramatic characters. There is a great deal of natural elegance in Zarzeczna's handling of color and materials, which makes her sculptures look complete and polished to the point of refinement - but this somewhat dangerous quality is offset by the awkwardness of the forms and the precariousness with which they are balanced against each other. Part of the sculptures' irresistible appeal comes from their casual defiance of gravity: what looks like a large piece of rock becomes weightless and insubstantial when perched dangerously on top of a rickety stool, suspended from the flimsiest bit of string or poised in mid air between several thin sticks. Intensely physical and yet illusory, these objects resemble glimpses of a different world, where our notions of physics and probability are not applicable.

In Pratchett's fantasy, the magic of witches consists largely of finding the proper lever to make things work in a desirable way: it comes from common sense, psychology and the habit of working hard to make ends meet - unlike the magic of wizards, which comes from book learning and universities. Naturally, witches are mostly female and wizards are overwhelmingly male.

Magic may or may not be a good analogy to art making, but many women artists have a way of handling things that differs strongly from that of men. And there is a definite feminine touch to Zarzeczna's practice: it relies on contingency and the knack of making do with a little, it has lightness that verges on flimsiness, a sense of fragility and total absence of pretense. Her sculptures belong to the same family line as the works of Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse. Like shambles, they explore the universe and the mind of their creator by amplifying her sharp sense of space and organic existence; and like shambles, they appear to contain something alive - if not a beetle, then perhaps, an imaginary egg.



Monika Zarzeczna, Landscape drawing 2, 2013
wood, string, painted paper, glass lid, 88 x 16 x 96 in.
(image from the gallery's website)