

Tough



Pretty Tough: Contemporary Storytelling

Ambreen Butt, Kate Clark, Orly Cogan, Amy Cutler, Kyung Jeon,
Catarina Leitão, Rosana Palazyan, Liliana Porter, and Stacey Steers

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

Pretty Tough: Contemporary Storytelling



Ambreen Butt, *The Great Hunt*, from the series *Dirty Pretty (1)*, 2008
Courtesy Anna Kustera, New York

Pretty Tough: Contemporary Storytelling presents the work of nine internationally and culturally diverse women, who although formally distinct, all reclaim storytelling and vintage techniques as strategies to address contemporary discourses on warfare, the environment, and female struggles. The artists focus on narrative representation and figuration. Their fairytale-like depictions are in reality reflections of underlying conflicts, played out through refined, delicate, and meticulous work that is highly labor intensive.

Pakistani-born, Boston-based Ambreen Butt studied the Indian and Persian tradition of miniature painting in her native country before coming to the U.S. Her work combines Eastern traditions and Western techniques. The combination reflects her personal dislocation and informs the content of the work. Butt's fantastic narratives are based on real struggles that often portray social and political unrest. In her drawings depicted on a contemporary material, Mylar—a strong polyester film first developed in the 1950s—she also inserts contemporary images of Muslim women protesting warfare, using needlework, a traditional craft, to draw their images. The needlework is also used to tie together the different types of narratives, styles, and eras (ancient and contemporary), as well as physically attaching a series of overlying drawings that reveal layers of situations, points of view, even memories. The surprising use of contemporary Mylar for a miniature drawing seems to parallel the—to some—surprising image of empowered Muslim women engaged in their country's public life. Both technique and content are updated by Butt's quest to speak her own truth.

Orly Cogan, *Dumbo* (detail), 2004
Courtesy of the artist



The New York-based artist Orly Cogan, who was born in Israel, works with vintage textiles—table linens, dresser scarves, bed sheets, and children’s quilts—that have often been already embroidered in a more modest era. Through her own hand stitching and embroidery, she updates their contents to incorporate the unladylike reality and wit of contemporary women—their struggles and the stereotypes they have created for themselves, which must now be overcome. These struggles are in all probability very different from those of the earlier generation of women who originally embroidered the textiles she uses. The updates include, for example, concerns with fertility, feminism and power plays in relationships, sexuality, food and drug addictions, all of which challenge childhood fairytales embedded with prince/princess stereotypes. Ultimately, Cogan’s quest is to define the role of women in current society, all the while honoring the labors of the past. She does this seamlessly with humor and irony, updating role models by infusing fantasy and whimsy with a dose of domestic reality.

Amy Cutler's delicate yet sharp drawings, layering gouache on opaque watercolor on paper, are surrealistic in tone, presenting self-absorbed, silent, diligent, and sometimes exhausted women dealing with bizarre circumstances. The drawings in this exhibition range from a warfare scene where women soldiers are having issues with their horses to a family portrait with a multifaceted matriarch, an exotic market that sells dying elephants, and two mothers who have lost their identities and have fused with their progeny. The characters created by Cutler, who was born in Poughkeepsie, New York, flaunt extraordinary attire that is sometimes traditional or ceremonial, infusing the scenes with timeless qualities. The apparel also enhances specific attitudes and personality traits that in some cases contribute to the impracticality of literally addressing a critical situation. The heavy patterns are, for Cutler, a way of connecting to nature, and their cross-cultural aspect, present also in the objects, furniture, and architecture, is a reconsideration—for better or for worse—of our global society. By the same token, Cutler presents environments that are isolated, reflecting not only the inner isolation of the women, but also expressing an environmental decay manifested in her depiction of animals in clear states of despair. Ultimately, Cutler beautifully depicts the absurdity and contradictions of family ties and female relationships, social mores, warfare, and concern for the environment.



Amy Cutler, *Multiplicity*, 2007
Collection of the artist
Courtesy LESLIE TONKONOW ARTWORK + PROJECTS, New York

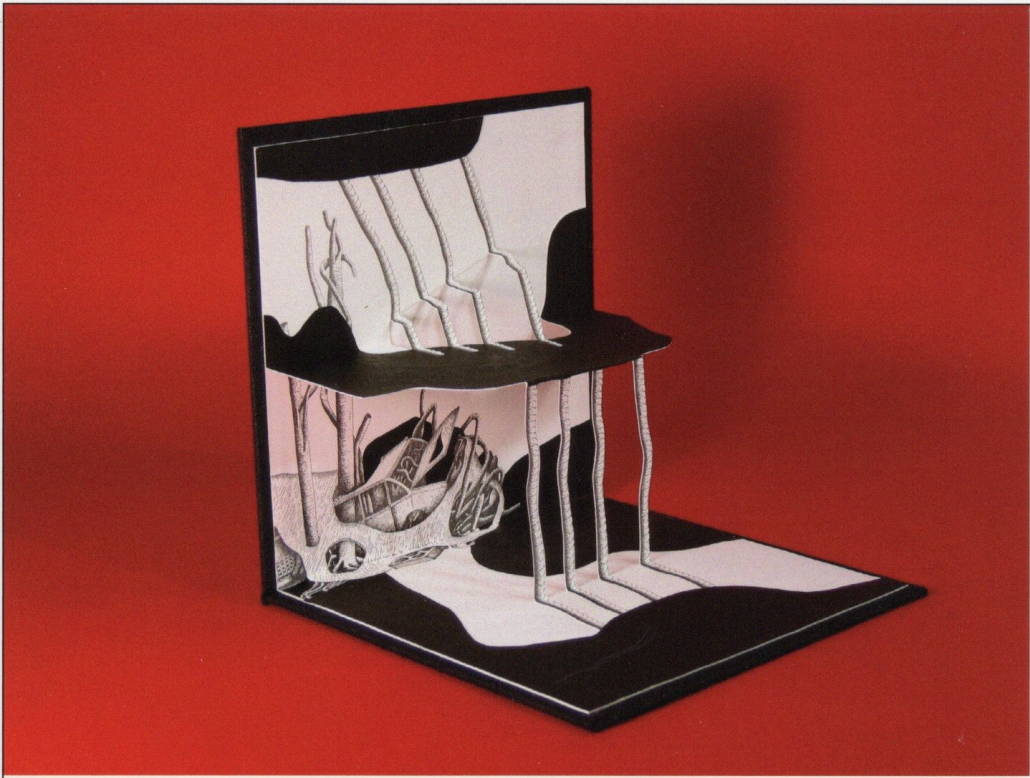
Kyung Jeon's soft, delicate, and tender pencil, watercolor, and gouache drawings present chapters of stories that pertain to one single overarching narrative, loosely based on her personal experiences. Each watercolor is a chapter of one of the stories. The works in this exhibition are part of a forsaken and tragic love story of thirteen chapters. In chapter six, the female character—dressed in red, a color that for Jeon represents a bad omen—is blinded by sorrow, falls over a cliff and is threatened by a Hokusai-like wave,¹ only to be saved by fairies that represent goodness. In chapter seven, she feels at a loss in a labyrinth, where a monster dressed in yellow represents death and birth simultaneously.² And in chapter nine the male character dressed in green undergoes terrible misadventures envisioned by the female. Each scene is carefully rendered on traditional Korean rice paper provided to the New Jersey-born artist by her grandfather. The artist has concocted a unique way to attach the rice paper to the canvas, updating the traditional material for her use in contemporary artworks. In the process it acquires a unique texture, tears, and wrinkles that become part of her fine and careful language, through which she tells her stories of loneliness, despair, and struggling relationships.

1 Katsushika Hokusai was a Japanese artist of the Edo period. He is best known for his woodblock print of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, 1820s, which depicts a tremendous wave that has since been of inspiration to many artists.

2 From *Kyung Jeon: Interview with the artist*, Tina Kim Gallery, September – October, 2008.



Kyung Jeon, *Chapter 11: Rest, and a vision.*, 2008
Courtesy Tina Kim Gallery, New York



Catarina Leitão, *Uplift* (booklet 3 of 7 booklets), 2008
Courtesy of the artist

The New York City-based Portuguese artist Catarina Leitão's intensely traced ink drawings depict characters dressed with protective gear who wrestle indecipherable organic shapes that range from natural-looking creeper plants to animated oil spills. It is not clear, though, if the uncanny elements are taking over or if the characters are taming the mysterious vines and spills. What is clear is that the illusion of a victimized nature is gone.³ For the artist, the drawings address the ambivalence between "what is nature" and "what is a mutation."⁴ Have we created a nature that is toxic and that in its polluted version will reach us all? Are these drawings about humans trying to protect nature from the aggressions of civilization or are we trying to protect ourselves from a deviant nature? Leitão's small-scale pop-up books with the same theme further articulate and animate the dilemma.

³ In *Catarina Leitão, Natureza Domesticada/Tamed Nature*, catalogue of exhibition at Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, 2002.

⁴ Conversation with the artist, September 26, 2008.



Rosana Palazyan, *Untitled (the handkerchief series)* [Sin título (serie los pañuelos)] (detail), 1996
Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros

Rosana Palazyan creates socially committed artwork in her native Brazil. Of Armenian descent, her family survived the Ottoman conflict and was exiled in Greece. At the beginning of her career, her first embroidered works formed Armenian crosses (*Khachkar*), which have curative and sacred aspects besides symbolizing the permanence of faith.⁵ For Palazyan, embroidery is a kind of drawing that is open to possibilities. She believes embroidery transforms mourning into a restorative strategy and gives more density of meaning to the portrayed narrative.⁶ The artist lives in Rio de Janeiro, where her brother was killed by a stray bullet. For *Untitled*, 1996, she collected the embroidered handkerchiefs of the women in her family and then added her own stitching in order to tell the story of this loss in the format of a detailed fairytale. From this piece on, Palazyan has used such delicacy through a diversity of media and materials to express her social convictions as well as to engage the spectator in a more intimate relationship with the issues she brings to the fore.

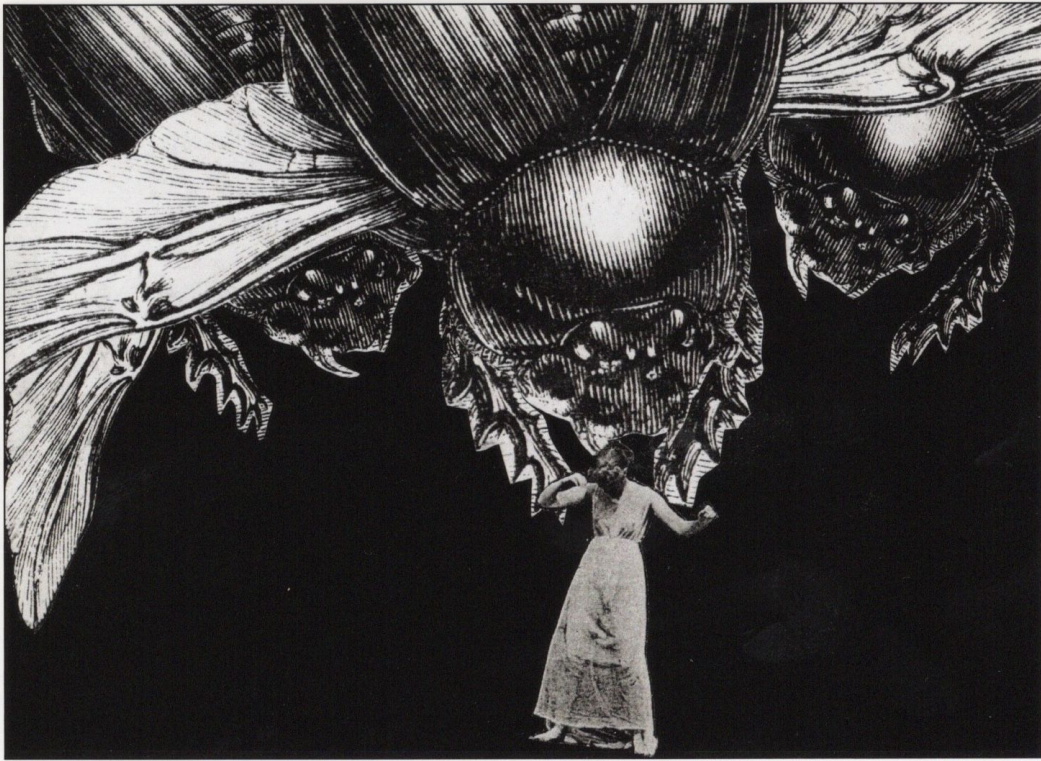
⁵ Paulo Herkenhoff in *Rosana Palazyan, O Lugar do Sonho*, catalogue for the exhibition at Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Sao Paulo, 2004, p. 90.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Argentinean-born, New York-based Liliana Porter's neutral canvases are activated by tiny toy figurines. The artist plays with wry humor as the toys interact. Her narratives at first appear to have a cute, tender, and intimate feeling to them, yet on closer inspection they transform into troubling situations. The works in this exhibition present characters trapped in some sort of disastrous spill of paint. Yet some figures, mainly female, are concentrating on the task of cleaning up. Porter's work not only addresses issues of loss, but also of learning and renewal. Few works that deal with overwhelming situations also address the potential for healing and the optimism for reconstruction with the keen clarity that Porter presents.

Liliana Porter, *Untitled with black and white paint*, 2008
Courtesy of the artist and Hosfelt Gallery, New York and San Francisco





Stacey Steers, *Night Flight* (film still from *Phantom Canyon*), 2006
 Courtesy ClampArt, New York

Stacey Steers's video *Phantom Canyon* is a surreal reenactment of a real-life event where a woman is trapped in a relationship and environment she wishes to escape. The video was made using cutouts of Edward Muybridge's renowned 1870s motion photographs. Muybridge tried to rationally understand the limits of our own perception through technology and controlled motion stills. Paradoxically, Steers inserts reanimated versions of Muybridge's images into highly emotional, non-rational narrative spaces. Through 4,000 meticulous handmade collages, Steers, a resident of Boulder, Colorado, presents a journey through life's struggles, as well as the memories and emotions they evoke.

All the artists in this exhibition use traditional or vintage techniques that are essential to the success of their concepts. By engaging traditional modes of expression, their work holds a vast universal appeal while addressing less agreeable issues that are of great relevance in today's society. This highly stylized and crafted work—*pretty*—offers profound assessments of our contemporary world—*tough*. And relying on storytelling and updated techniques is a subversive strategy that permeates the public sphere more efficiently than any confrontational discourse.

I would like to thank the artists for their feedback and contributions to this essay.

Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, curator

Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions in h x w x d in inches unless otherwise noted

Ambreen Butt

The Great Hunt, from the series *Dirty Pretty* (1), 2008
 Water-based pigments, white gouache, text, thread, gold leaf on layers of Mylar and tea-stained paper
 45 x 30

The Great Hunt, from the series *Dirty Pretty* (2) & (3), 2008
 Water-based pigments, white gouache, text, thread, gold leaf on layers of Mylar and tea-stained paper
 Diptych: 45 x 30 each

Untitled, from the series *Dirty Pretty* (1), 2008

Water based pigments, white gouache, text, thread, gold leaf on layers of Mylar and tea stained paper
 28 x 20

Courtesy Anna Kustera, New York

Kate Clark

Lit from Within, 2009
 Gazelle hide, foam, clay, thread, pins, rubber eyes
 68 x 66 x 66

Matriarch, 2009
 Zebra hide, foam, clay, thread, pins, rubber eyes
 29 x 19 x 27

Untitled (Baby Bison), 2009

Bison hide, foam, clay, thread, pins, rubber eyes
54 x 30 x 42

Courtesy Claire Oliver Gallery, New York

Orly Cogan

Dumbo, 2004

Hand-stitched embroidery, paint, on vintage baby quilt
47 x 30

Wonder of You, 2006

Hand stitched embroidery, paint, on vintage table linen
35 x 34

East of Eden, 2008

Hand-stitched embroidery, paint, on vintage linen
24 x 80

Before the Fall, 2009

Hand stitched embroidery, appliqué, paint, on printed
linen
40 x 54

Courtesy of the artist

Amy Cutler

Equine Pell Mell, 2002

Gouache on paper
41 1/4 x 59 15/16
Collection of Jonathan and Betsy Stapleton

Progeny, 2003

Gouache on paper
13 7/8 x 11
Collection of Dianne Wallace, New York

Export, 2007

Gouache on paper
30 1/8 x 23
Collection of Heather and Tony Podesta

Multiplicity, 2007

Gouache on paper
17 3/4 x 11 inches
Collection of the artist

Courtesy LESLIE TONKONOW ARTWORK + PROJECTS,
New York

Kyung Jeon

*Chapter 6: Blinded by clouds of sorrow the girl falls over
cliff's edge.*, 2008

Gouache, watercolor, graphite on rice paper on canvas
43 3/4 x 34 3/4

*Chapter 7: Lost in false passages the girl's fears are for
naught; this monster's lesson is gentle.*, 2008

Gouache, watercolor, graphite on rice paper on canvas
43 3/4 x 69 3/4

Chapter 11: Rest, and a vision., 2008

Gouache, watercolor, graphite on rice paper on canvas
43 3/4 x 34 3/4

Courtesy Tina Kim Gallery, New York

Catarina Leitão

Thicket # 14, 2007

Ink on paper
16 x 12

Thicket # 15, 2007

Ink on paper
16 x 12

Thicket # 16, 2007

Ink on paper
16 x 12

Thicket # 18, 2007

Ink on paper
16 x 12

Thicket # 19, 2007

Ink on paper
16 x 12

Thicket # 20, 2007

Ink on paper
16 x 12

Courtesy of the artist and Number 35, New York

Uplift, 2008

Seven booklets, letterpress-printed from polymer plates,
hand-painted with sumi ink
7 x 7 each
Edition #5 of 5
Courtesy of the artist

Rosana Palazyan

*Untitled (the handkerchief series) [Sin titulo (serie los
pañuelos)]*, 1996

Embroidered handkerchiefs, eight pieces
15 9/16 x 69 5/16
Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros

Liliana Porter

Untitled with black paint, 2008

Mixed media and assemblage on canvas
34 x 40

Untitled with black and white paint, 2008

Mixed media and assemblage on canvas
46 x 72

Untitled with glass ship, 2008

Mixed media and assemblage on canvas
25 x 80 x 3

Courtesy of the artist and Hosfelt Gallery, New York and
San Francisco

Stacey Steers

Phantom Canyon, 2006

35 mm transferred to DVD
Black and white, stereo sound; 10:00 minutes
Courtesy ClampArt, New York