

Navigating the Ambiguous

BY MARTHA ROUNDS

Nina Wishnok invites the viewers of her works to enter a realm where ambiguity, mystery and imagination come together. Consider her multi-media series *trace people*. She places outlines of generic male figures on backdrops of irregular color. One frame shows the outline of a slightly stooped man with a raincoat, cap and cane; dozens of smaller figures appear in front of and beside him against a background of washed-out grays. Another frame shows three men in different poses, sitting or walking; the figures touch each other but do not interact in any way. The figures are set against irregular bands of orange, tan and brown. Both works are small (10" x 10") so they invite the viewer to come close and ask questions. Who are the men?

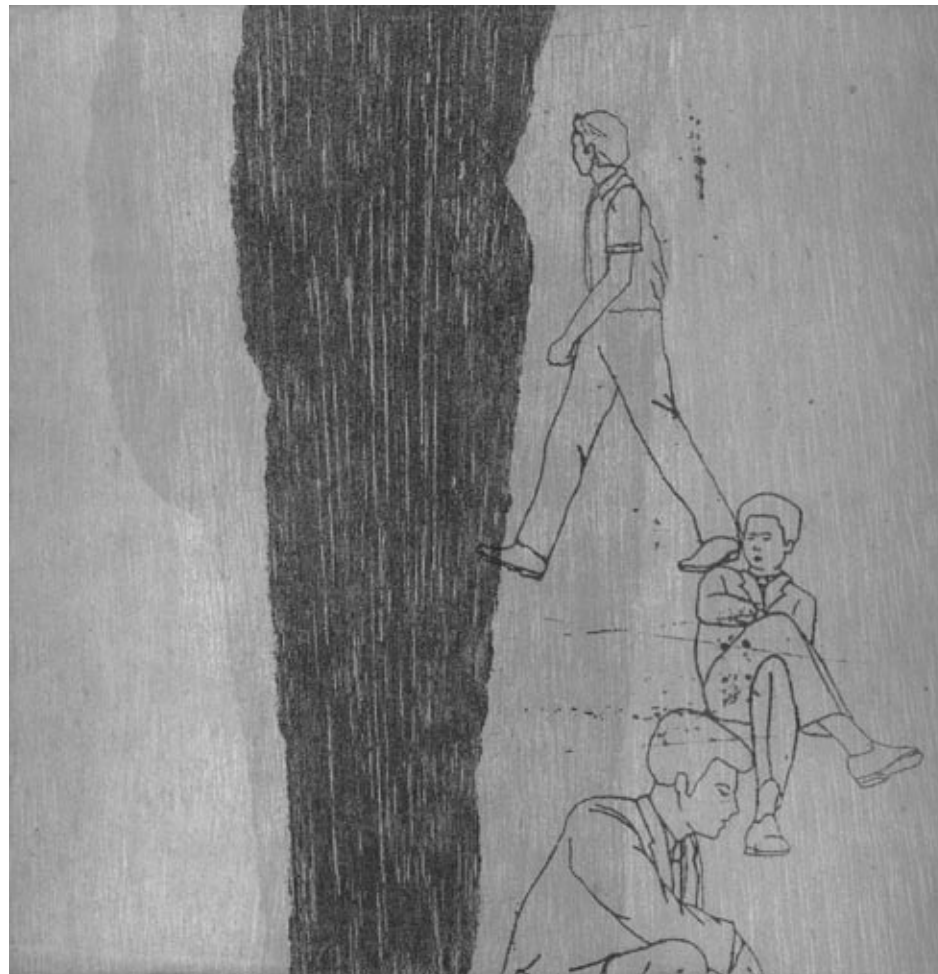
How and why are they connected? Or perhaps they are on man, and a depiction of his thoughts? Or is it a depiction of his past, or future, or both?

Almost all Wishnok's work incorporates a woodblock print as one of its elements, partly because it combines well with other techniques, says Wishnok, and partly because it is pleasurable and meditative to carve. "I like the organic quality of woodblock and how it combines with mechanical processes." She prints on rice paper, "because the paper is strong and takes color beautifully."

She often combines woodcut with a lithography material called Pronto Plates, flexible polyester plates originally developed for commercial use that work beautifully for her because they inject an element of spontaneity into every piece.

"Built into the material is a level of happy accident," Wishnok says, "You tend to get some unpredictable results. Instead of a plain Xerox-style representation, you get an extra layer of mystery because things muck up or don't print evenly."

Her undergraduate studies in art history at New York University set the stage for her exploration of the concrete and the abstract, the visual and the conceptual. "The teaching there was all-encompassing," she says. "You'd take an architecture class but it was also about politics and sociology and history." After completing her studies at NYU in 1989, she earned a degree in graphic design at Massachusetts College of Art in 1995. For the past five years, she has continued her studies at the DeCordova Museum School and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where she studied with Catherine Kernan, co-founder of Somerville's Mixit Studios. Under Kernan's tutelage, she fell in love with printmaking. "It suits the way I work, because I'm not very methodical," she explains. "It's flexible. It's a matrix for doing whatever I want, and I can incorporate so many



things into it." With the boundless flexibility that printmaking and other techniques afford her, Wishnok has the freedom to explore the complexity of human thought and experience.

In *dictionary series*, Wishnok combines copies of nineteenth century dictionary pages with seemingly unrelated images and swirls of energetic color. A page headed with words like "cautionary" and "cautious" appears beside an outline of a human with artificial wings with various dimensions carefully measured. Nearby sits a pale butterfly. The juxtaposed images and text invite question after question: Is the winged man the legendary Icarus, who fell into the sea after heedlessly disregarding his father's warning? How do the winged man and the

butterfly relate? What is the cautionary thought here, if there is one?

Wishnok grounds the viewer in the objective authority of the dictionary, but uses associated images that make the viewer's thoughts and imagination take flight. "The Victorian, almost stodgy language and imagery on the dictionary pages inspired me to combine them with organic shapes and other, similar imagery culled from old catalogues, advertisements, patent applications, etcetera," she says.

In Wishnok's view, humans constantly move back and forth between the literal and the abstract. We move from literal interactions with other people and the world to intellectual or emotional processing and reactions. The two sources – literal and abstract – inform each other. Visually, she tries to depict the fluid boundary between the two.

"I examine the relationship between inner and outer life, and finding a balance within those two seeming extremes," asserts Wishnok. "I'm interested in how we navigate and reconcile dichotomies such as emotion and intellect, chaos and control, inner and outer life."

For Wishnok, from the unexpected springs "the space between planning and accident." She relishes the mental challenges that emerge for her and others when she places visual details in a new context or combines colors in unexpected ways. "It's exciting to me," she says. "I'd rather not know where something's going to end up."

Visit Nina Wishnok's website, www.ninawishnok.com to see more of her work. Her work may also be viewed at the Massachusetts College of Art 40th Anniversary Alumni Exhibit June 1-21, and at the Danforth Museum's Members' Juried Exhibit, June 16-July 30. Coming up in January 2007 will be Mixit Print Studio's group show at the Arsenal Arts Center in Watertown.