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LOUISE DESPONT
NICELLE BEAUCHENE

Nicelle Beauchene, a new gallery on the Lower East Side, opened with Louise Despont's "The Plant Life of Saints," the first show for the artist as well. Over the past couple of years, Despont's stop-motion animations have screened in festivals across the U.S., but here her drawings and sculptures outnumbered the films. Despont credits a number of sources and theories, from tantric drawings to telepathy, but it is Emma Kunz (1892-1963), a Swiss healer, researcher, and later, an artist, to whom Despont owes the most. Like Kunz's, Despont's drawings feature precise geometric patterns, though Kunz's, seen mainly as an articulation of her spirituality and research, are less freeform and have a brighter palette. Despont sticks mostly to muted colors.

The gallery's narrow space, a few steps below street level, was filled with 11 ink-and-graphite drawings (all 2006 or 2007, most around 12 by 15 inches, though some as wide as 23 inches) and three assemblage sculptures. Despite the flea-market esthetic- the drawings are all on antique ledger pages and the sculptures incorporate splintered blocks of wood and old tools- the installation was not haphazard; everything seemed to have found its proper place.

The titles of the sculptures—*Relics from a Shipwrecked Desk (No. 1, 2 and 3)*, all 2008—gave the show a memorial air. Each one suggests a story via a few carefully chosen items from someone else's past, gently placed on top of two or three blocks of wood. In *No. 3*, a coil of braided hair sits atop a stump next to a gnarled branch, the whole thing resting against a rusty hand truck. *No. 2* includes a magnifying glass that enlarges a handwritten note and a black-and-white photo of waves.

The drawings, each spread across two side-by-side ledger pages attached as if they were still bound in a book, are less narrative. Some contain irregular stains and inkblots that look like flayed animal skins (*Plant Fugue No. 2*), others resemble diagrams of solar systems (*A Game of Nearness and Distance*), while a few, drawn with only graphite, approximate Native American rug patterns (*Composition for Helen Keller, No. 1*). A couple of the drawings include headers that indicate the ledgers' original uses, whether to record animal births, fire insurance accounts or business expenses.

In an easy-to-miss cavelike room in the back were *Experiments in Moving Drawings, Parts I & II* (2007), two 16mm films run sequentially and made from many of the drawings up front. Initially, the drawings don't seem to easily lend themselves to animation. But seeing them expand and contract in the film, accompanied by found sounds that are by turns clunky and delicate, we can tell how they (like the sculptures) are built up from layers of shapes, patterns, symbols and histories that Despont collects from mysterious, and occasionally mournful, sources.

--Leigh Anne Miller

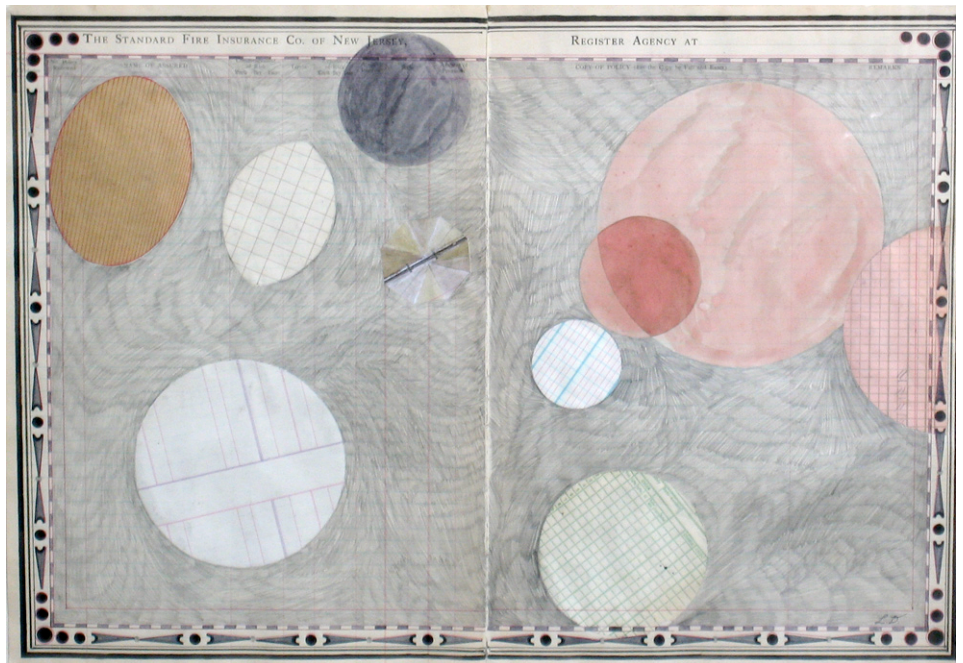


IMAGE: LOUISE DESPONT; A GAME OF NEARNESS AND DISTANCE, 2007, INK AND GRAPHITE ON ANTIQUE LEDGER BOOK PAGES, 15 1/2 X 22 1/4 INCHES; AT NICELLE BEAUCHENE