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ARTISTS' PRINTS, BOOKS AND MULTIPLES

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IN FOCUS

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States of Play

ARTIST Jenny Wiener's measured, forensic scrutiny of her subjects also involves comedic leaps of the imagination, writes Mike Sims

Pressure gauge, compass or trundle wheel in hand, Jenny Wiener invites her viewer on unexpected detours off well-known paths: down Dorothy's Yellow Brick Road or around Wonderland with Alice. Her concern is always the internal logic of a work though she cannot be sure where her enquiries will take her. 'The question leads the work,' she says, adding that, for things to go right, she has 'to get in the pocket of the drawing, I have to be in the drawing.' So, together, we clamber inside paintings as if they are stage sets. In her 2008 drawing with screenprint, *The Annunciation Analysis*, we spy from the balcony as the little girl in Carlo Crivelli's 15th century *Annunciation*. In *Unstacking Caravaggio Analysis* (2009), we peep down, like a stagchandler from the lighting rig, on Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (1610). What do we learn? That the disciple Cleopas had truly colossal paws...

There are other intriguing perspectives too. The sightline presented by her *Grand Ecart* (*Wide Open*) shoots straight between the legs of the dancer in Seurat's *Le Chahut* (1889-1890). This artful dig at 19th century mores also has the 21st century in its sights; in becoming the painting's pivot, Seurat's Can-Can girl becomes her modern equivalent – the pole dancer.

To track Wiener's subjects around the National Gallery, London, in which many of them hang, is telling. The building embodies choice, each room presenting equally inviting alternatives through myriad doorways. In the Alice pictures, Wiener's

subject is a little girl who somehow pilots her way through a magical, sometimes frightening world. Dorothy has a similar experience in the Land of Oz.

The nearest contemporary model is perhaps the computer game, in which the player's environment can be utterly transformed by a decision to try one way rather than another. Wiener likes playing with her nieces and nephews on their Nintendos or Xboxes and her 2008 drawing with screenprint, *Joining Crivelli*, alludes directly to the computer game experience. Inspired by a tree-lined passageway she spotted in two of the artist's paintings (*Annunciation* and *Madonna of the Swallow*, c. 1490), Wiener decided that Crivelli had happened upon the very 21st century 'game space', the zone in a computer game that connects one time and place with another. 'Players navigate through one door (in this case a 15th century archway) and gain access to another world. For Crivelli, one world is the tranquil space of the annunciation... The other is a world of harassment and the persecution of Saint Sebastian.' The neat compression of this idea is typical of Wiener's work.

Wiener seems in earnest, closely scrutinizing the options artists have exercised in making pictures and analyzing the ways we make them add up to something. But our value systems are often arbitrary and ridiculous, she suggests. Having read somewhere that potholes in London were 'soaring' by 40%, she measured them, recording her findings in a digital banner itemizing 'the hidden and visible languages of measuring London'. The same print contains the legend: 'This drawing is not to scale'. You don't say...

For there is something of the 'straight' man's dissembling in Wiener's work; it is both deadly serious and knockabout. The fact-checking is more often illogical than illuminating. It brings Alice to mind again, marooned on the lunatic fringe where clever talk and plain silliness are very hard to distinguish. Wiener can be almost impenetrably deadpan. She explains how the 'scenario' she developed to measure the Yellow Brick Road was for her husband to video her making her way along London's Oxford Street at



Christmas – a ‘code of difficulty’ that roughly approximated to Dorothy’s halting progress. Such ‘simulations’, scrupulously tabulated in her 2010 digital print, *How Long is the Yellow Brick Road*, project a journey time of some eight days. It’s a good joke. Wiener’s jokes are good: so fastidiously witty that confused laughter seems the only appropriate response.

Born in Anderson, South Carolina, Wiener came to the UK in 1991. Before that she had worked in the head office of a company that ran cinemas across the south-eastern states of America; ‘I love cinema,’ she says, ‘I started out as a candy girl.’ Her job was ‘like a puzzle’: working out which film went where, planning runs, calculating audiences and percentage profits. When she first arrived in the UK, she worked for the financial company, Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, helping clients (in an earlier phase of the internet) to set up websites. ‘People would put these questions: do I need a website? Should I sell shoes? I had to try to work out what they were telling me and what they were trying to do. I had no experience – I’ve always tried to be in the creative world. The guy who hired me told me he was doing so because I thought ‘different.’ But Wiener put her business skills to good use, applying flow charts and ‘executive dashboards’ to art with hilarious effect. Her enthusiasm for both golf and stationery offers other clues to her work: think of the distinctive palette of golf score cards and tees, the daring of marker pens and the uncharted horizon of the flip chart...

Creative Immersion

Certainly Wiener is immersed in the creative world now. Having been shortlisted for the Jerwood Drawing Award in 2005, she graduated from Camberwell College of Arts, London, with a BA (Hons) Drawing, in 2006, and from the Royal College of Art, London, with an MA in Printmaking in 2008. *You are Here*, her first solo show, was held at Bearspace, London, the following year and numerous others followed. This year, in London alone, her work has been seen at the *RA Summer Exhibition*, the *Creekside*

Open 2011 and *Bite* at Mall Galleries. She had a solo exhibition at Printroom at Home, in June, and showed new work at ArtFirst project space in October. Her one-woman *Measuring Margate*, the inaugural *Pushing Print* solo exhibition prize, was held at the town’s Pie Factory gallery this spring. In the USA, she has exhibited at the Print Center, Philadelphia; the Printmaking Center of New Jersey; the International Print Center, New York; and at *Art on Paper 2011*, Annapolis, Maryland. She can count Charles Saatchi and Belmacz among the private collectors of her work.

As an artist, Wiener measures everything and nothing. The effect is pleasantly dizzying. Her 2011 drawing and screenprint ‘*Go Fish*’ (*The Card Players*) offers a view over the shoulders of Cézanne’s glum card-playing trio from the perspective of the bystander at the back. Ah, you notice, ‘*Go Fish*’ is right – they’re playing the well-known children’s game and the player on the right has a fish card. I fished for further elucidation about the game (and its relevance to the image) to find that there’s more than one game called ‘*Go Fish*’: ‘*Goldfish*’, ‘*Fish*’, ‘*Literature*’ and ‘*Quartets*’ suggested Wikipedia. The site added helpfully that the best way to settle conundrums of this kind was ‘disambiguation... the process of resolving the conflicts that arise when a single term is ambiguous’. Any takers? Not Wiener I think, ‘ambiguation’ being half the fun.

Jenny Wiener is showing at the London Art Fair, London N1, from 18-22 Jan and the 6th International Kyoto Hanga 2012, International Print Exhibition Japan/UK at Kyoto City Museum of Art, 31 Jul-12 Aug. Other 2012 exhibitions will be held at the Free Museum of Dallas, SMU Southern Methodist University, Texas, US; Printroom Gallery, London; and *Power of Paper* at the Saatchi Gallery, London

Contact

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Images, left to right

Unraveling Caravaggio Analysis (detail) 2009. Drawing & screenprint, 1,450 x 1,005 mm

Joring Crivelli 2008. Drawing & screenprint, 1,370 x 1,460 mm

Measuring Margate Pier (detail) 2011. Screenprint & drawing, 1,345 x 1,275 mm

Go Fish (*The Card Players*) (detail) 2011. Drawing, digital & screenprint, 490 x 330 mm