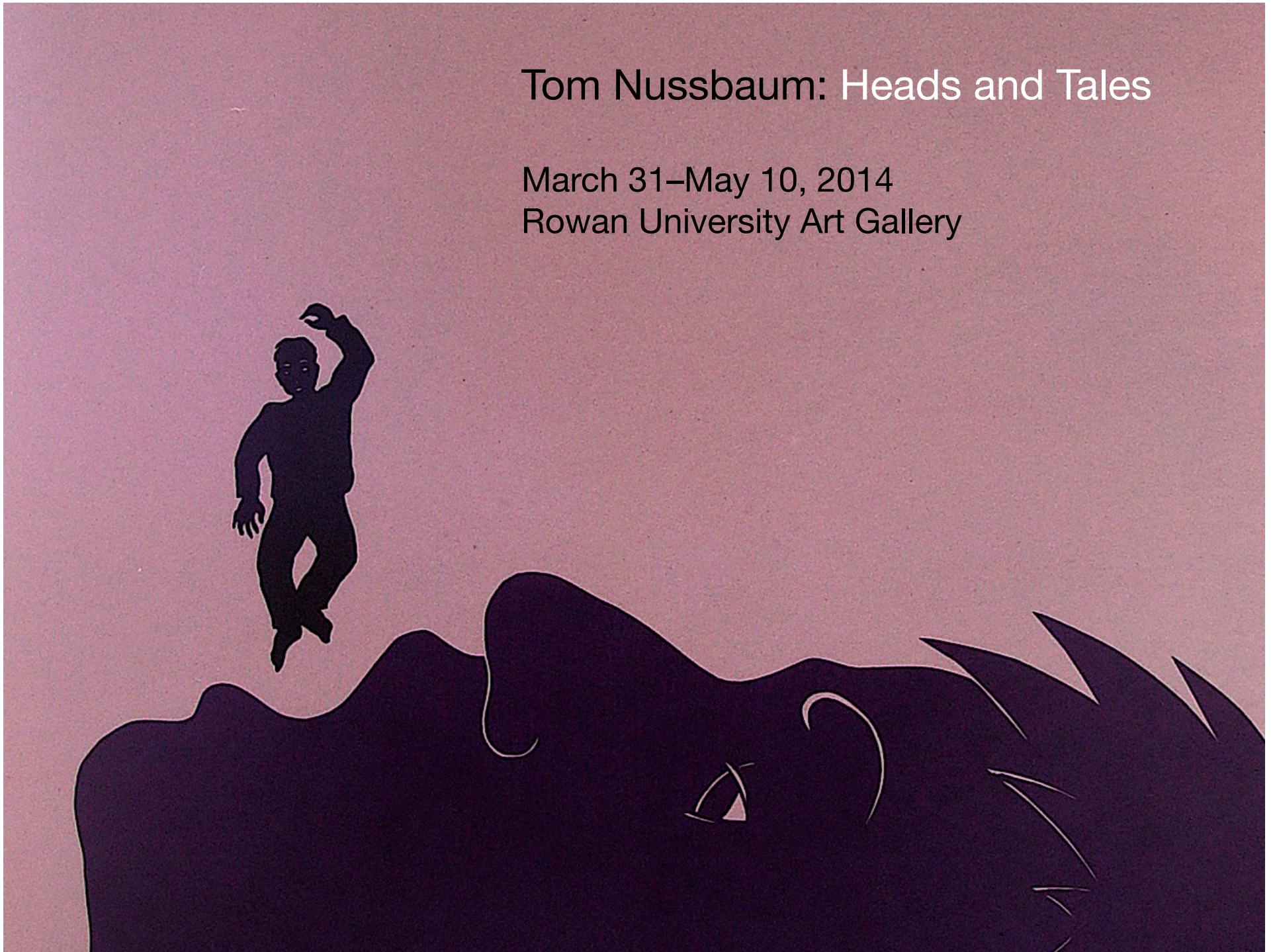
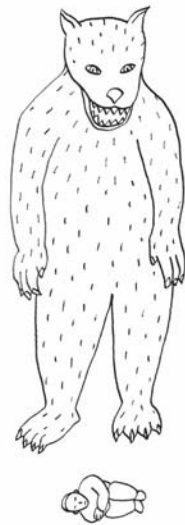
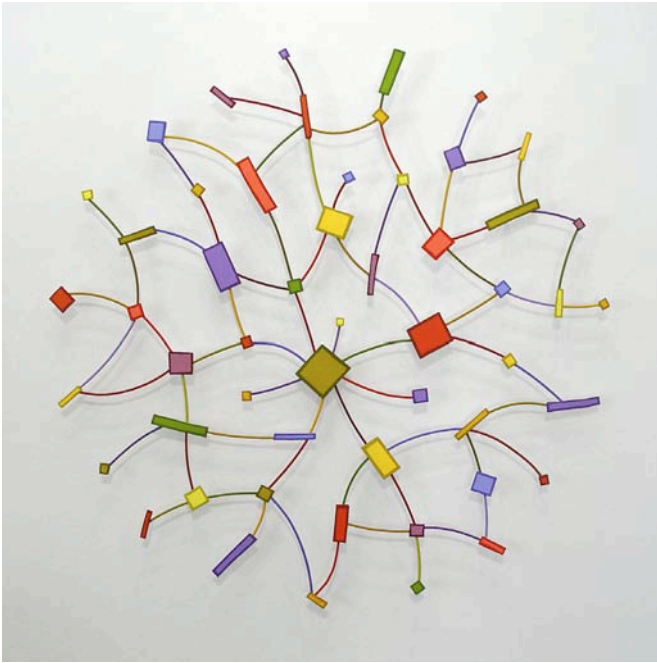


Tom Nussbaum: Heads and Tales

March 31–May 10, 2014

Rowan University Art Gallery





Top: *One Hundred*, 2014, acrylic on welded steel. *Bring Them Out*, 2006, cut paper. Bottom: *Alphabet Mountain*, 2006, cut paper. *Dream*, 2000, ink on paper. *New One Hundred*, 2014, acrylic on paper and steel.

Tom Nussbaum's Heads, Tales, and Abstraction

From cheerful ocular pleasures to unfathomable narratives, Tom Nussbaum's impeccably crafted and vibrantly colorful art conveys a wide range of responses. His profuse production has over the last thirty-five years spanned from intimate objects to monumental public art installations and has alternated between airy linear abstract constructions and figurative, anecdotal sculptures and drawings.

Born in Philadelphia in 1953, Nussbaum was raised and educated in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His father was a professor and a writer of textbooks on electrical engineering and physics. His mother, a nursery school teacher, had emigrated in her mid-twenties from England to the US after meeting his father, who was stationed with the US Air Force there. Having taken studio classes in ceramics at the University of Minnesota, Nussbaum first worked as a production potter and a carpenter, framing and remodeling houses. He continued in his twenties to pursue his artistic aspirations as he explored ceramic vessel forms that evolved into linear basket-like structures. In 1980 Nussbaum moved from Minneapolis to New York City and soon began working as a studio assistant to the painter and film animator Suzan Pitt and the formerly married artists Mimi Gross and Red

Grooms. Gross was the daughter of the mid-20th century American figurative sculptor Chaim Gross (1904–91), who, with his wife Renee, formed a renowned collection of the art of their contemporaries and African carvings and cast gold weights (now preserved as the Renee & Chaim Gross Foundation's house-museum in New York City). The colorful and rich imagination of Suzan Pitt and representational, figurative, and narrative heritage and impulses in the work of Chaim Gross, Mimi Gross, and Red Grooms, along with Nussbaum's fascination with complex construction and folk art traditions, provided a basis for his art. His creative predilections were also manifested in and motivated by the extensive collection of toy cars, game boards, folk art from around the world, textiles, other Americana, and mid-century decorative art and furniture, acquired with his wife, the artist and teacher Rolla Herman, that fill the Montclair, New Jersey house they moved to with their daughter and son in 1993 and the former farm near Cooperstown, New York they have owned since 2011.

Nussbaum's first mature artworks were ceramic sculptures that referenced baskets and architecture. These pieces led to an extensive series of delicate painted wood open framework sculptures with striking affinities to his recent col-

orful abstract sculptures. Nussbaum added sheet metal to his wood structures and then employed just metal to fashion larger figure and house motif objects that look like freshly made folk art. His technical facility and ability to scale up his ideas led in 1987 to the first of his public sculpture commissions, which have continued to the present. Over the last twenty-five years Nussbaum has become the veritable public sculptor laureate of New Jersey, having completed over fifteen projects for state parks, hospitals, schools, and train stations, as well as commissions for corporations and private collectors.

Nussbaum remains best known as an artist for his series of small figurative and animal statuettes, begun in 1992 and pursued in depth from 1997 to 2008. Saturated hues coat Nussbaum's little people and creatures. With the notable precedents of sculptors Alexander Calder, David Smith, George Sugarman, and Sol LeWitt, Nussbaum is among the small cadre of modern sculptors who use color forthrightly. Painted figurative sculpture dates to the early Greeks, though all that usually remains now on Greco-Roman statues are bare traces of pigment. To create his figurines Nussbaum moved from metal back to clay and then to plaster and a resin medium, casting a few pieces in bronze,

as he sought a material that was more expressive and could be more readily manipulated.

Nussbaum has never considered that there is a meaningful distinction between the fine and folk art traditions and artistry. His many diminutive figures and animal sculptures mine a multi-millennial, worldwide wealth of floridly colored, painted, and glazed figurines. Nussbaum's small figures and animals are the ample yet compact, stalwart and somber offspring of Mayan figurines, Chinese Tang period burial statuettes, English Staffordshire figures, Northwest Native American woodcarvings, painted wood cigar store Indian figures, and American chalkware, no less than Honoré Daumier and Picasso ceramics and his sculptures of the early 1950s like *Baboon and Young* and *She-Goat*. Nussbaum has created a brigade of miniature birds, beasts, and human beings that is distinctly his own. His figurines' small scale increases their accessibility and poignancy as they address identity, solitude, fear, and anxiety. While deeply personal, these works are more archetypal than autobiographical, more generic than specific. Detail and generalization are intriguingly mixed. Nussbaum's subjects transcend race, class, and other immediate categorizations. He has a special fascination with the mixture of fondness and fright that exists between humans and animals. His visual narratives conceal more than they disclose. Moral and psychological dilemmas and demons seem to have been externalized and hover over many of these figurines. Nussbaum's figures make impossibilities look like everyday events. They assert that life is inexplicable, and that passivity and uncertainty prevail over action and resolution. His

mostly male figurines abound with confounding scale disjunctions, odd skin colors, and dream-like vignettes. Confronting unsettling circumstances, fears, and fates, they become endearing talismans of grace and calm. As with his abstract work, Nussbaum's use of color in his figurative sculpture is more instinctually and emotionally based than naturalistic. Nussbaum has described his figurative works as motivated by "a process of self-discovery... a personal mining of images... [that] usually first appear in drawings."

Nussbaum's drawings are as swift, terse, and colorless as his sculptures are labor-intensive, nuanced, and color-saturated. His works on paper are the source of his figurative sculptures, yet they revel in off-hand lightness while his figurative sculptures exude weight and solidity. Nussbaum uses his drawing to inscribe and codify the flood of images from which his sculptures are built. Nussbaum's drawings are not sketches or studies. They display the meticulous execution and refinement of his sculpture pared down as stringently as possible. While some are made preliminary to his sculpture, others are drawn after the fact. In his paper silhouette cut-outs Nussbaum lets color play the same central role it does in his sculpture, just as his all-white, cut paper cards and commemorative objects turn paper into sculptures, but his drawings, while luxuriating in slightness, render mass from outlines, pushing how much can be divulged with so little.

Nussbaum's new abstract sculptures radiate non-objectivity, luminous color, and almost sybaritic delight. Though aglow with color, they formally connect with the act and appearance of his

drawing as much as his previous sculptures. They seem like the buoyant offspring of Calder mobiles, Antonio Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, pinwheels, George Nelson's clock designs, Ferris wheels and the Watts Towers in Los Angeles. They remind us that like so many artists of his generation Nussbaum seeks to move beyond Minimalist motifs but still likes Minimalism's bold geometries and systems. While they break decisively with the figurative focus of his art, the new series' standing forms reflect his abiding interest in architecture and the structural frameworks of buildings and towers, mixed with manikin-like references to the human body. Nussbaum has taken his imagery and forms to their atomic state. He connects his new abstracted formal vocabulary to the cohesion found in the diversity of fabrics used in quilt designs and his admiration of the patterns and designs of weavings and textiles from around the world. For Nussbaum, these new sculptures might best be appreciated as his handmade response and homage to the World Wide Web and evocation of the vast networks of earthbound and cloud communications that envelop contemporary existence.

Given Nussbaum's productivity and the impossibility of including his public art, this survey is inevitably partial, yet it makes abundantly clear how engaging, diverse, and encompassing Nussbaum's exploration of heads, tales and abstraction has been.

—Patterson Sims, *New York City Independent Art Curator, Writer, and Consultant*

About the Artist

Nussbaum's work has been exhibited at numerous galleries and museums, including the Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York and Chicago, the Delahunty and Barry Whistler galleries in Dallas, the Robischon Gallery in Denver, the Metaphor Gallery in Brooklyn, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Laforet Museum, Tokyo, the Nicolayson Art Museum Casper, WY, the Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ, the Hunterdon Museum of Art, Clinton, NJ, the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, The Contemporary Austin (Laguna Gloria Art Museum), Austin, Texas, and the Wright Museum of Art, Beloit, Wisconsin.

Nussbaum has commissioned works for the Hasbro Toy Company, the MTA Metro North Railroad, New Jersey Transit, the New York City Public Schools, the Princeton Public Library, the Wildwoods Convention Center, the College of New Jersey, the Mayo Clinic, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Charlotte Bloomberg Children's Center, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital, the Montclair Art Museum, and the Albert E. Hinds Memorial Plaza.

Nussbaum is also known for design objects produced by his two companies, the Acme Robot Company and Atomic Iron Works. Children's Universe/Rizzoli published his activity book, *My World is Not Flat*.

Nussbaum has been awarded two New Jersey State Individual Artist Fellowships and has been a three-time MacDowell Colony Fellow.

Curatorial Statement

Tom Nussbaum: Heads and Tales is an exhibition of selected studio work from the last sixteen years, representing the progression in Nussbaum's practice, which moves between the representational and the abstract.

His process of self-discovery and mining of images that have personal and psychological meaning are motivations for the leitmotifs devel-

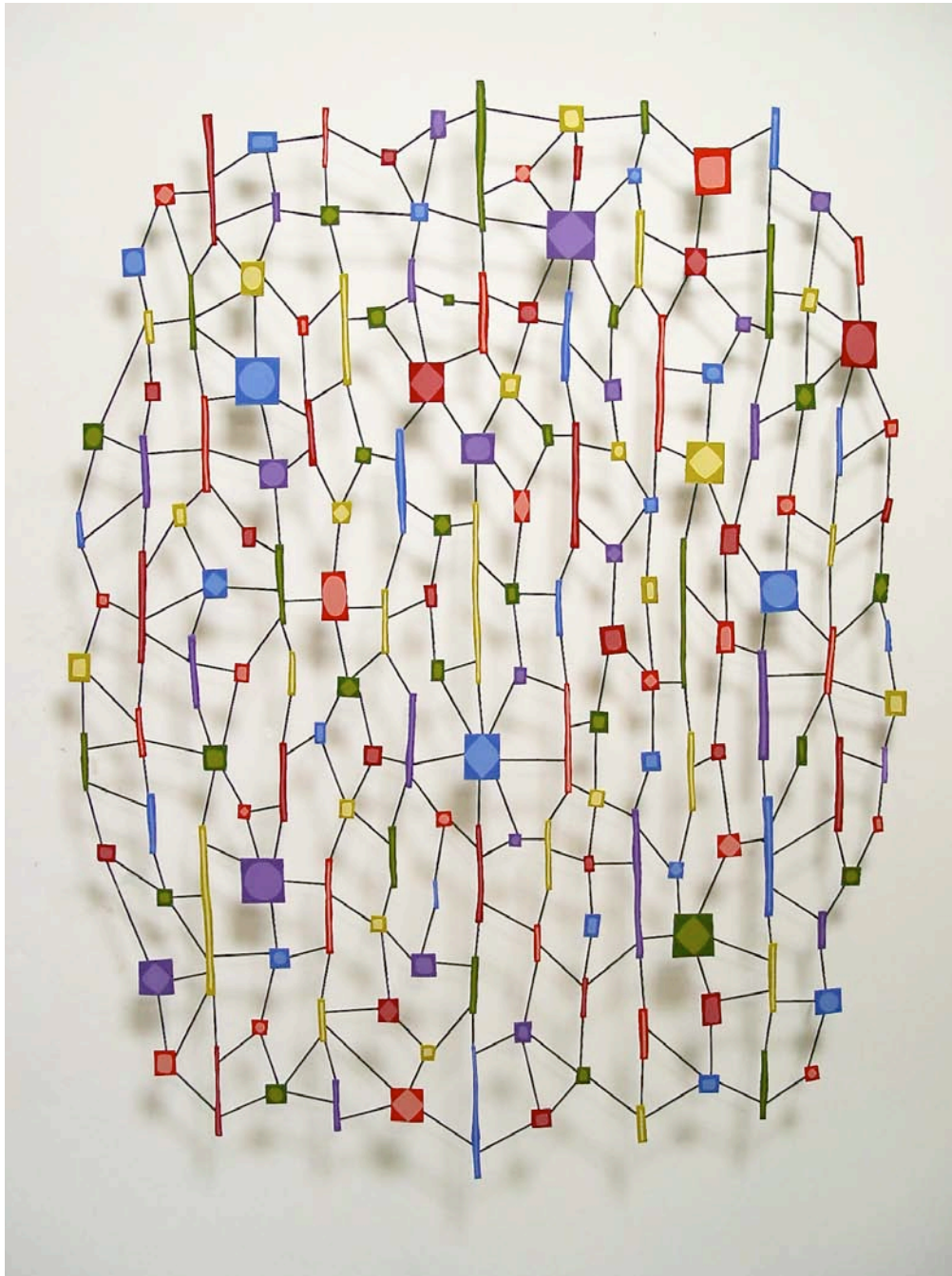
oped in his drawings and found in his animations, and in his cut paper and sculpture works.

Nussbaum's distinctive color palette, and his explorations of form, structure, and pattern unified his work as it progressed from the figurative to the abstract. In a variety of work that is seemingly disparate in style, Nussbaum locates common attributes to embody a narrative framework.

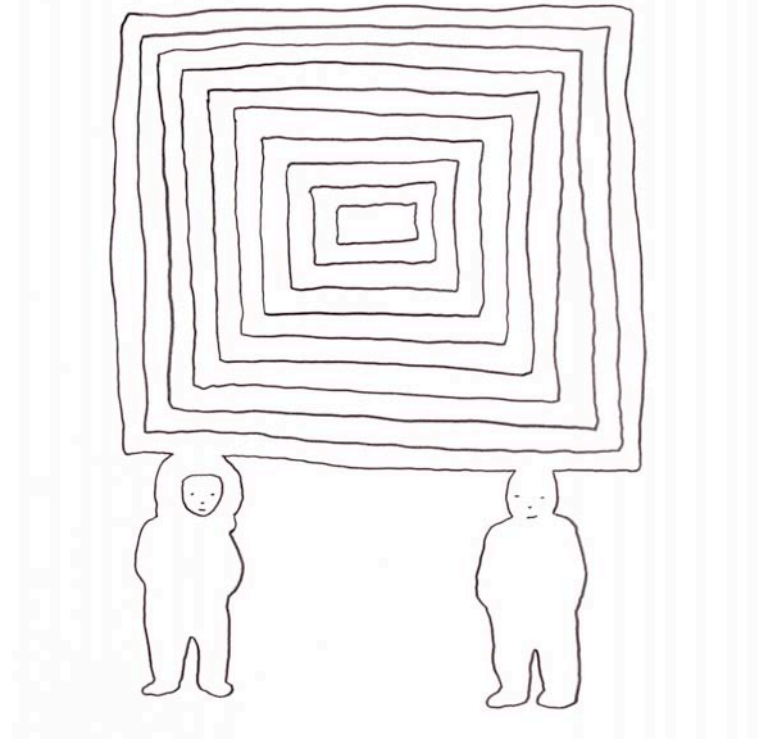
—Mary Salvante, Curator



Bottlehead, 2008, acrylic on aqua resin. *Woman II*, 2012, acrylic on plaster and welded steel.



Tootsie Pop, 2013, acrylic on welded steel. *Connection*, 2005, graphite on paper. Front cover: *Jack*, 2006, cut paper.



Acknowledgments

We thank Tom Nussbaum for his support and contributions in making this show possible. We are delighted with the insightful essay provided by Patterson Sims and thank him for introducing us to Tom's work. Thanks to Tom Kloskey for the editing and design of this brochure. *Tom Nussbaum: Heads and Tales* would not have been possible without, in part, funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.



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