

Painting Stories, Telling Pictures



Deborah Maverick Kelley at Artists' Gallery

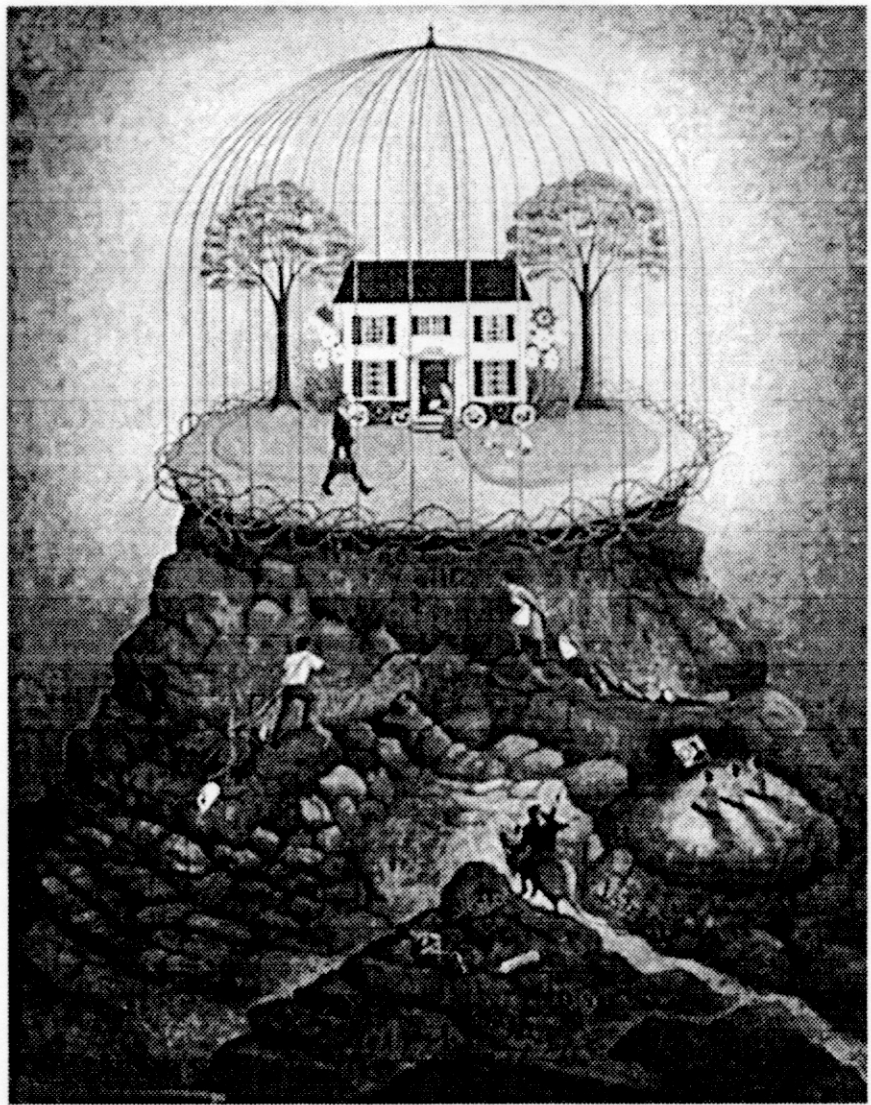
by John Ewing

Once upon a time, a painter friend decided to take up ceramics. We agreed that the change had been foretold, because the artist had been painting light, fanciful designs of cups and teapots for years. It was a logical progression, we thought, but the cups and teapots my friend produced were neither light nor fanciful. Something had been lost. Some charming quality that had made her paintings of ceramic objects so evocative was missing from the objects themselves. Soon, the artist was shifting again. The objects were simplified. They became tiles and containers with flat surfaces. In no time, the whimsical imagery returned, as fresh as ever, and the cups and teapots were back to their proper perspective. Telling a story is the most obvious way to approach the work of San Antonio painter Deborah Maverick Kelley. To call her paintings “stories” links them to a tradition so old and broad it includes medieval illuminated manuscripts and the Sunday funnies. Avoiding the literal and the direct is the common sleight of hand that connects all great storytellers. Through metaphor, allegory and myth, the most compelling tales look at life obliquely, focusing attention in one direction while communicating a lesson or moral from another. Kelley’s stories are neither literal nor direct, and telling them in pictures removes them even further from perceived reality. Yet, those are the classic qualities of a good story. Kelley makes fine use of the traditions that have grown up around the practice of visual storytelling in a recent exhibition at Aviant’s Artists’ Gallery.

One brightly colored series organizes four stories of male/female relationships into visual blocks with stylized borders. This strategy suggests comic strips, vaudeville backdrops, or old-fashioned stereopticons. *Getting Ready* is a triptych of desire, rising from the ordinary to the mythic. In the center is a woman in a comfortable room, preparing herself in a mirror for a night out. To the right are two men fighting in a dark alley, one of them raising a club to the other. The image on the left looks out over a surreal city-scape. Articulated in the starry night above it is a constellation of two soldiers with swords locked in mortal combat. The three images are separated by a curving, green vine and red rose blossoms.

Getting Wistful, *Getting Dinner* and *Getting Somewhere* continue in the same vein, but to varying degrees of stylization and ambiguity. *Getting Dinner* has a kitchen full of busy women on the left and a grouping of idle men on a patio to the right. A diptych separated by a door, this visual organization of the spaces, subjects and activities attaches qualities and connotations to gender. *Getting Wistful* and *Getting Somewhere* are additional triptychs which use a moonlit landscape to either separate or force together men and women. In different stages of betrayal and reconciliation, these narratives are essentially contemporary and middle-class. However, their psychological shadings would be neither apparent nor dramatic without the stylized, block format.

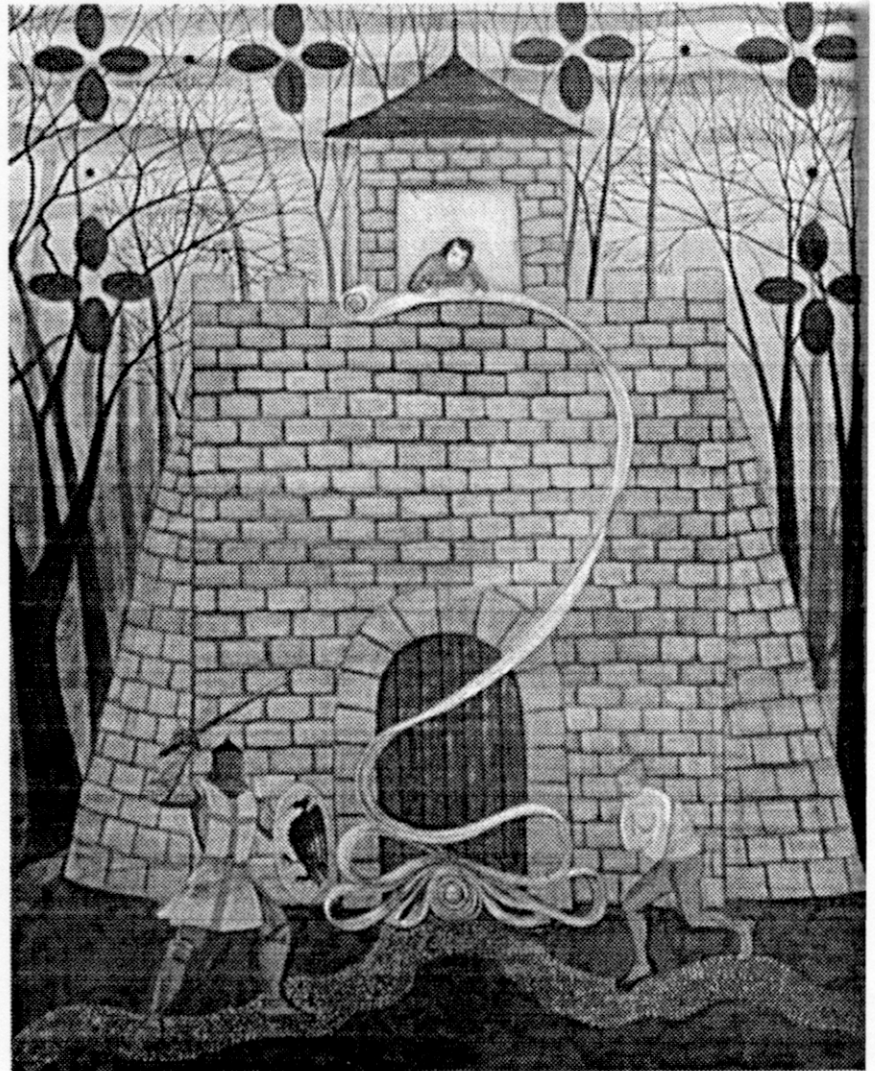
By contrast, a group of acrylic-on-paper works recreates anachronistic models of illustration, injecting touches of a contemporary sensibility. Painted in



an exquisite range of tones, the black and white or sepia and white compositions could be mistaken for Edmund Dulac's *Fairy Book* (sans color) or plates from early editions of Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm. *Life Story* features a Gothic tower with a Rapunzel figure. Instead of hair, this short-cropped contemporary woman is writing on a scroll that billows out from her pen in great swirling arcs. Where it gathers at the base are two male figures in an ambiguous conflict. One is a knight of the Crusades in full armor wielding a shield and sword against a cross-eyed fool in a straitjacket.

My Middle Ages presents the same female character in armor (a Feminist Joan of Arc?), standing on a three-tiered cake and holding an hourglass. Revolving narratives on each tier depict the female knight and a commedia dell'arte harlequin with a contemporary face. In one tier, he offers marriage to the knight, who is poised atop a pedestal. By the end of the images, she's carrying her pedestal and walking out, leaving the sour-faced harlequin behind the door. Another tier shows twin images of the knight. One is slaying a dragon and the other is painting it, with books scattered around her.

Throughout these anachronistic works are stylistic devices which frame and dramatize the narratives. Theatrical drapery and thorny-bramble filigree create a proscenium arch around the central scenes, accentuating the fantastic nature of storytelling. These humorous winks also underscore Kelley's ironic take on contemporary relationships, distancing the viewer from a too-literal reading of the fables.



Apart from the stories themselves, what Deborah Maverick Kelley's work reveals most clearly is how the manipulation of imagery carries narrative as well as sensual information. The repeated presence of books, tapestry rugs, pots of tea, comfortable chairs, flowers, windows and moonlit sky accrue and disperse personal stories as well as delight the eye with colorful detail. Insofar as we believe what we see, Kelley's brand of storytelling might be saying that "show" and "tell" are one in the same.