In Our Cinematic Lives, 2008, color etching and aquatint with chine collé, 15 x 18 inches
Inescapably, we fall into reverie. We idly daydream, mindfully or otherwise, meandering along pathways of memory and desire. Some warn that while musing, we “waste” time, become too “lost” in thought, lapse into illusory notions, or risk descending into melancholy. Others caution that because the word reverie derives from both the French, to daydream, and the Middle French, to hallucinate, it embodies the potential not only for revelation but self-delusion. Yet artists notoriously cultivate reverie and become especially alert to the way such journeys allow us to savor pleasant sensations, explore anxieties, and make transformative discoveries. In recent decades, advances in brain imaging and neuropsychology have reshaped debates—among artists as well as scientists—about the formation of memory and identity. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman has pointed out the astonishing degree to which we react automatically and overestimate our capacity for rational decision-making. In Thinking Fast and Slow he argues convincingly that we alternate between contrasting modes of thought—both of which are fallible. He proposes that we visualize our brain function as “an uneasy interaction between two fictitious characters:” fast-reacting automatic and emotional System 1 and slow, effortful, attentive, and evaluative System 2 (“the person who we think we are”). Acknowledging

One might wonder whether there really is a consciousness of dreams. A dream can be so strange that it seems that another subject has come to dream within us. . . . To convince ourselves that they are really ours, we must reinhabit these dreams. Afterwards, we make up accounts of them, stories from another time, adventures from another world.

—Gaston Bachelard, ¹ La Poétique de la Rêverie

“Odd as it may seem, I am my remembering self, and the experiencing self, who does my living, is like a stranger to me.”

—Daniel Kahneman, ² Thinking Fast and Slow

Serena Perrone: The Art of Reverie and Other Necessary Fictions

By Andrea Packard, List Gallery Director

If nothing else you have saved a life today. A life other than your own, that is. Danger has a way of cutting through melancholy, the real fear blinding you to the fear dimly imagined. If you could only always just have escaped death, you would never be sad again.
Later that day, with greater levity, he writes:

Since the eruption nine years ago, Oyama has been venting vast quantities of sulfur dioxide gas, a tall white plume that—if you had landed in daylight—you would have seen from miles away. Now it is hard to miss, indeed it is practically in your face. And, right on cue, the wind changes, bearing the column of sulfurous death straight down toward you. This seems like an opportune moment to reconsider your plans for the morning.

The volcano’s immense power and unpredictability not only provide the subject matter for Arnold’s poetry and a metaphor for his internal tumult, but a necessary distraction from eruptions of restlessness, sadness, and longing. Notably, he contrasts the ordinary minutia of daily life with the immeasurable vastness of the sublime. Similarly, but from safer vantage points, Perrone contrasts the far off and mythic with the closely observed details and textures of places that we associate more with the “real” and the “known.”

After learning about Arnold’s disappearance, Perrone read his blog and poetry collection Made Flesh. As she writes:

I was captivated by its relevance to my own work—primarily, his thoughts on home and distance, the foreign and familiar, and that longing that seemed ever-present in his work. He seemed to me someone who was also not only concerned with the image of the volcano, but with engaging with his subject matter from both extreme distance and proximity, in varying intervals.

Sharing Arnold’s need to experience and mediate unknowable forces in nature and to reconcile them with the recognizable details of daily life, Perrone began work on A Volcano Pilgrim in Exchange for Fire (2010), a series of 20 mixed media prints corresponding to Arnold’s final blog posts from Japan.

Perrone grew up in St. Louis Missouri, lived in five different homes before college, and spent many summers with her father near the active volcano of Mt. Etna in Sicily after her parents’ separation. Because of these and many subsequent moves and travels, Perrone has been especially attuned to experiences of cultural duality, contrasting concepts of home, and a fascination with geological upheaval, both literal and figurative. Craig Arnold’s pilgrimages provided ritualistic communion with the sublime. Perrone’s printmaking process allows for a safer but similarly obsessive ritual, one that connects her with larger historical and geological forces. As she writes:

The act of printmaking also is an excavation. I am forever removing material—carving wood and pulling fine tendrils of copper out of a plate. It is a slow and meticulous, repetitive process, like removing layers of dirt and stone surrounding an ancient palace floor, a dinosaur bone, or a mummified corpse. Material is constantly and carefully removed to reveal the scene preserved within.

A Volcano Pilgrim in Exchange for Fire is housed in a handmade portfolio box that invites a private sequential viewing of each of the 20 prints in a manner that is similar to the experience of reading a lengthy narrative. One views each 11-by-15-inch composition individually and gradually integrates aspects of the portfolio in memory. Placed edge to edge to form a long panorama, the artwork has been publically exhibited on a 26-foot-long curved wall.

A Volcano Pilgrim in Exchange for Fire (detail from the portfolio, installation view, p. 5, additional details pp. 14–15), 2010
that bridges one or more corners of a room. Spanning an architectural crevasse of sorts, the curved wall emphasizes our departure from conventional spatial relationships. The concave arc draws us in and echoes the undulating curves of the panorama—an imaginary continuum of active volcanoes that are actually located on different continents. Although the 26-foot-long span has a sculptural presence, the 11-inch height of the panorama still requires us to approach and experience it intimately. We must move from far to near as well as laterally back and forth in order to try to understand the work in its entirety. Thus, A Volcano Pilgrim in Exchange for Fire invites a walking meditation that allows one to become more aware of changing pathways, both external and internal, and corresponding changes in attitudes of inquiry, detachment, perception, wonder, and reflection. Whether viewed on the wall or in the portfolio format, the enormity of the work reveals the limits of observation and memory.

A Volcano Pilgrim in Exchange for Fire also engages us by integrating different media. Perrone prints the 20 images of volcanoes with dark blue indigo ink and then overlays them with colorful areas of gouache monotype using a Takach etching press. In addition, using silkscreens and white ink, Perrone arranges selections culled from Arnold’s blog so that the writing seems to erupt from the volcanoes as clouds of text. Thus repositioning words as images, she invites us into a realm that includes language but moves beyond it.

In Perrone’s Maintaining a Safe Distance and Living to Tell (2012), a companion piece to A Volcano Pilgrim, she acknowledges her more cautious nature while emphasizing her authority as tale-teller. Fully displayed in the List Gallery on a 26-foot-long curved wall, the summits portrayed in A Volcano Pilgrim reappear in tones of cool indigo, but she removes the text fragments, portrays the mountains in paler tones, and re-contextualizes the volcanoes in terms of her own life journeys. In contrast to this ethereal panorama, Perrone fills the foreground of each panel with warmer and bolder images: orange-red colored photo-lithographs chronologically depicting a series of places where Perrone has lived or spent significant time over the years. Additionally, she portrays several structures that have special meaning for the artist. This personal and domestic imagery stands in counterpoint to the mythic realms that remain beyond comprehension.

On close inspection, these familiar domestic settings, like the mythic ones, convey a surprising degree of fragility and incompleteness. In one printed sheet, the courtyard pathways in front of a building resemble magma chambers. In another composition, we look down a street in which the buildings appear to be as fragile as theatrical façades. Perrone depicts the dwellings with boldly saturated color, but as monochrome color separations they appear to be part of a process rather than a comprehensive image. Perrone’s

Maintaining a Safe Distance and Living to Tell (detail from the portfolio), 2012 (see pp. 16–17)
contrasting and fragmentary modes of representation prompt us to wonder to what extent the familiar world is just as fictive as the realm of the sublime.

Perrone’s ambitious series *In the Realm of Reverie* (2006–2008), which is composed of seven four-foot-high by six-foot-wide woodcut prints on Mylar, also blends autobiography, mythmaking, and a yearning for both the familiar and the exotic. In each print, Perrone dramatizes figures, architectural features, and foliage in the foreground and middle ground with the emotionally expressive, graphically edgy, and richly textured language of woodcut printing. In contrast to the dark metallic golds and umbers of the woodcut ink, she portrays distant vistas in the soft, luminous, and ethereal tones of silverpoint and goldpoint drawing. At first, the drawings appear to provide the language of memory or visionary projection. Yet compared to the softly sophisticated realism of the distant vistas, the imagery defined by the woodcut print is even more inventive, theatrical, and surreal. Framing motifs such as the Baroque finials and floating spheres in the corners of *Spanning the Nebrodi: The View of Here from There* (2008, p. 12) playfully cushion our stay in what might otherwise be a disturbing or unsettling scene. The two mediums comment on each other, questioning the other’s primacy, reality, and completeness. As a result, we see each print not as a single unalterable memory or experience but a composite vision that is subject to continual scrutiny and revision.

In this series of works, Perrone further explores the interplay of differing modes of thought as she imagines an archetypal journey from childhood into the adult world. Perrone’s central protagonist, a child who wears the same halter-top dress and ponytails throughout the series of prints, appears as a solitary figure in *The Origin of Self-Sacrifice* (2006, p. 11) and *Into the Waking World* (2008, p. 13). In both works, she appears lonely and displaced amid elaborate architectural structures and cultivated lands. Wide-eyed and alternately curious, vigilant, melancholic, and yearning, the girl recalls the alternating adventurousness and vulnerability of heroines such as Little Red Riding Hood and Alice in Wonderland. Unlike Alice, who journeys underground, more into the realm of dreams than reverie, Perrone’s heroine typically looks outward and upward, seeking cross-cultural understanding of what it means to be human. Embodying both maturity and the proverbial innocence of youth, she often looks toward us, reminding us of the human capacity for interaction as well as wonder.

In *Phantom Vessels and the Bastions of Memory* (p. 7), the same girl stands on a balcony overlooking a harbor. She raises a toy boat as if commemorating the many sailing vessels we see crisscrossing the harbor far below. Using the soft and ethereal tones of silverpoint, Perrone draws over a dozen vessels representing different historical periods, cultures, and geographies. Such visions contrast with the comparative immediacy, clarity, and drama of the greenish brown and gold balcony, undulating tree canopy, and dark cloud patterns. One might first imagine that the language of silverpoint drawing represents memory, or a series of memories, and that the medium of woodcut portrays the bastion of memory—the “place” where memories are produced. Yet like memory, the balcony is surprisingly fragmentary and precarious. The narrow and torqued flooring appears insufficient to support the figures, and the slender almost Mannerist scroll edge of the balcony merges with the flattened rendering of the surrounding grass and foliage. On closer inspection, we see that the space could easily crumble or imaginatively reconfigure.

The symmetrical composition of *Phantom Vessels* centers on the gesture of the heroine raising a toy boat in the air. On the side of the boat, Perrone inscribes the word *Meshuggah*—Yiddish for one who is crazy, foolish, or violates taboo. In contrast to the girl’s calm and almost regal pose, this moniker wryly comments on the potentially wayward, unpredictable, and even disastrous outcomes of human journeys, be they inter-cultural or internal ones. At the same time, the heroine’s gesture of raising her own vessel—as if recognizing the *Meshugghas* of the adult world—recalls Picasso’s iconic etching, *Minotaurromachy* (1935), in which a girl holding a raised candle confronts a minotaur amid scenes of violence and monstrosity. Notably, Picasso includes a tiny sailboat on the distant horizon of his print—a faint but memorable symbol of alternate realities beyond the immediate scene of chaos. Echoing the allegorical nature of such gestures and symbols, which recur in so many other art historical precedents, Perrone imbues her protagonist—and perhaps her own memories—with mythic resonance. No matter how specific or personal such images appear at first, we come to realize that we are contemplating a space where individual and communal memories intersect.

In *Phantom Vessels*, the girl with the boat is one of six children arranged on the balcony and the surrounding trees in a large circle that frames the distant seascape. Their poses and interactions embody distinct modes of action, perception, and cognition. The girl appears to consider the distinct histories or cultures represented by the ghostly vessels. In turn, she is observed from a tree branch by her identical twin or alter-ego whose self-observance demonstrates a form of meta-consciousness. Perrone also portrays three identical boys wearing a dark shirt who enact a chronological sequence of distinct actions and cognitive states: one boy shows purposeful intention as he starts to climb a tree beyond the balcony. The second boy appears absorbed in the present as he plays in the tree canopy with a
paper airplane. The third version of the boy gazes at the boats while folding his arms and leaning back against a finial on the balcony, as if engaging in both external perception and retrospection. A sixth figure, a girl with a long braid who looks toward us from the lower left corner of the picture, reminds us of our own gaze. Individually, each child seems to demonstrate a distinct mode of experience, from the ritualistic, task-oriented, or playful to the reflective and speculative or discerning and self-aware. Collectively, they represent some of the cycling modes of consciousness that alternately shape human experience.

Another print in the series In the Realm of Reverie, The Origin of Self-Sacrifice (2006, p. 11), demonstrates creative strategies that enrich many of Perrone’s works. The oddness and specificity of the scene—a distinctively featured little girl sitting in a mangrove swamp and holding a lit candle—convey the authenticity of an event that has been intensely felt and minutely observed. Behind the girl, the ante-bellum architecture of Sibley Hall, a dormitory at Lindenwood University where the artist’s mother briefly lived, further imbues the scene with temporal and geographic accuracy. However, in this work, like so many of Perrone’s pictures, the aura of specificity contrasts with ample evidence of the artist’s fanciful inventions: the improbability of the lone child holding a lit candle while sitting in a swamp; the fact that the child looks directly at us with a slightly perturbed expression; and the flat decorative quality of the woodcut printing in contrast to the ethereal character of the distant landscape. Such incongruities interrupt the illusion that we are witnessing the scene objectively or gaining access to the “origin” alluded to in the title. Moreover, Perrone’s protagonist is not idealized, but portrayed with heavy-set features and dark eyebrows that break with the conventions we associate with pastoral scenes. Thus, Perrone’s heroines do not appear as passive objects to be voyeuristically enjoyed, but as self-possessed beings. The child in The Origin of Self-Sacrifice looks at us like a stage actor about to speak directly to the audience. Her attitude disrupts the suspension of disbelief, but in doing so, Perrone conveys the potential for alternate forms of intimacy and interconnection.

Like such complex and often paradoxical images of childhood, Perrone’s recurring images of houses and buildings allow us to both enter into and study states of reverie. Works such as Fictive Home- lands (2009, p. 18) and Spanning the Nebrodi: The View of Here from There (2008, p. 12) explore the notion of home as inescapably alluring and elusive. These works immediately bring to mind the writings of Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), whose The Poetics of Reverie and The Poetics of Space have influenced numerous contemporary artists. As Bachelard writes:

The great function of poetry is to give us back the situations of our dreams. The house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams. Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting-place for daydreaming. …Our habits of a particular daydream were acquired there. …There exists for each one of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past.
If Bachelard were alive, I imagine that he would appreciate the way Perrone’s prints both express a nostalgia for lost spaces—the wellsprings of our imaginative being—and encourage deliberative reflection; he would also admire Perrone’s insistence on spicing the beauty of her images with an edgy and idiosyncratic specificity that prevents them from becoming saccharin or picturesque. As he cautions:

Over-picturesqueness in a house can conceal its intimacy. This is also true in life. But it is truer still in daydreams. For the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams, the houses that are rich in unalterable oneirism, do not readily lend themselves to description. … All we communicate to others is an orientation toward what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively.  

For Perrone as well as for Bachelard, the “reality” of each image is not connected to its verisimilitude—its likeness to actual places—but its orientation toward engaging the poetics of space, memory, and identity. Although it is tempting to explore the rich trove of personal stories that have informed Perrone’s prints, her art continually reminds us that the search for essential sources inevitably proceeds through a series of fictive and culturally laden filters. Critiquing notions of unitary meaning, Perrone celebrates the inventiveness of the mind as it continually constructs new frames of reference, alternately suspending disbelief and reasserting deliberative analysis. Probing not actual places but successive ideations of childhood, home, and travel, Perrone provides us with gateways for both reverie and mindful elasticity.

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All images appear Courtesy Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, Rhode Island.
A Day in November: Impending Loss (II), 2005–06, woodcut with silverpoint and goldpoint drawing, 48 x 72 inches
Tristessa: Reappearance of the Vanished Filicudi (iii), 2006, woodcut with silverpoint and goldpoint drawing, 48 x 72 inches
The Origin of Self-Sacrifice (IV), 2006–07, woodcut with silverpoint and goldpoint drawing, 48 x 72 inches
Spanning the Nebrodie: The View of Here from There (VII), 2008, woodcut with silverpoint and goldpoint drawing, 48 x 72 inches
Into the Waking World (VIII), 2008, woodcut with silverpoint and goldpoint drawing, 48 x 72 inches
Prints from *A Volcano Pilgrim in Exchange for Fire*, 2010, drypoint, gouache, monotype, silkscreen, and letterpress in linen box, suite of 20 prints, 11 x 15 inches each
Prints from Maintaining a Safe Distance and Living to Tell, 2012, photolithography and silkscreen with colophon in linen box, suite of 20 prints, 11 x 15 inches each
Fictive Homelands, 2009, all images in this series are woodcut and silverpoint on Mylar, 9 ¾ x 12 inches.

From upper left: Point of Departure, Solitude Sounds like Tumbling Stones in the Water at Dusk, Escape from the End of the World, Blessing the Hunters of Fish, Slaying the Shadow of Nemesis, The Auditory Evidence of the World of Animals, In Desperate Search of the World of Plants
Adventures in Echolocation: Somnambulist, 2010, drypoint with chine collé, 16 x 20 inches
Serena Perrone  b. 1979, St. Louis, Missouri

**Education**

2006  MFA Printmaking, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI
2006  Collegiate Teaching Certificate, Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, Brown University, Providence, RI
2004  University of Georgia Studies Abroad Program, Cortona, Italy
2003  BFA Painting, BA Art History, BA French, summa cum laude, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL

**Selected Solo Exhibitions**

2013  Serena Perrone: Reverie, curator: Andrea Packard, List Gallery, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA
2012  Serena Perrone: Maintaining A Safe Distance and Living to Tell, curator: Kelly Schindler, Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, MO
2011  Serena Perrone: Volcanoes and Voyages, Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI
   A Volcano Pilgrim in Exchange for Fire, University of Wyoming Museum of Art, Laramie, WY
2010  Settlements, Ningyo Editions, Boston, MA
   Serena Perrone: By Land By Sea, Center For Emerging Visual Artists Alumni Exhibition, Philadelphia, PA
2009  Serena Perrone: 2009 Solo Series, curator: Sue Spaid, Abington Art Center, Philadelphia, PA
2008  Serena Perrone: In the Realm of Reverie, RISD/Sol Koffler Gallery, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence

**Selected Group Exhibitions, Portfolios, & Collaborations**

2013  Winter (traveling exhibition), Art League Houston, Houston, TX
   Paper Space, curator: Ron Rumford, Community Art Center, Wallingford, PA
   Editions/Artists’ Book Fair, with Cade Tompkins Projects, Altman Building, New York, NY
   IPCNY New Prints 2013/Winter, Jurors: Kelly Driscoll, Ruth Lingen, Chris Santa Maria, Lothar Osterburg, Allison Rudnick, and Harriet Warm, International Print Center New York, NY
2012  IPCNY New Prints 2011/2012 Benefit Exhibition, International Print Center, New York, NY
   Fresh Impressions, curators: Raphael Damast, Shelley Langdale, and Liz Spungen, Projects Gallery, presented in conjunction with the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s exhibition Full Spectrum: Prints from the Brandywine Workshop, Philadelphia, PA
   All About Etching, Neptune Fine Art, Washington, D.C.
   On Loan, curator: Nora Salzman, Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Philadelphia, PA
   IPCNY New Prints 2012/Summer, juror: Shahzia Sikander, International Print Center New York, NY
   Ctrl+P, curators: Julie Chae and Kristina Bilionick, Arlington Arts Center, Arlington, VA
   Structuring Nature: Randall Exon, Andrew Moore, Ben Peterson, Ori Hofshi, Serena Perrone, curator: Andrea Packard, Walton Arts Center, Fayetteville, AR
   Haunting Narratives: Detours from Philadelphia Realism, curator: Matthew Palczynski, Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA
   In the Background, exchange portfolio for Navigating Currents, curator: Yoonmi Nam, Southern Graphics Council Conference, New Orleans, LA
   State of the State, Gallery 102, Crane Arts, Philadelphia, PA
   Volcano/Kaboom! Hiro Sakaguchi, Alina Josan, and Serena Perrone, Rosemont College, Philadelphia, PA
   Printmaking Convergence Presents IPCNY: New Prints 2011/Autumn, Visual Arts Center, University of Texas at Austin
2011  
First Proof, Second State, exchange portfolio and exhibition, Second State Press, Philadelphia, PA  
Editions/Artists’ Book Fair, with Cade Tompkins Projects, Former Dia/Former X Initiative, New York NY  
AS220 4th Anniversary Print Exchange, AS220, Providence, RI  
Trade, 39th Street Gallery (exhibition and exchange portfolio), Washington, D.C.  
NEXT 2011, Chicago, with Cade Tompkins Projects  
Parallel Play: A Kinship, Fort Point Artist Community, Boston, MA  
Printed in Providence, Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI  
Exit Strategy, Serena Perrone and Marty Weishaar, The Creative Alliance at the Patterson, Baltimore, MD  

2010  
Editions/Artists’ Book Fair, with Cade Tompkins Projects, Former Dia/Former X Initiative, New York NY  
Category: Printmaking, juror: Debora Wood, Woman Made Gallery, Chicago, IL  
Biennial Fair for Contemporary Prints and New Editions, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD  
One Theme/Thirty Prints (Philagrafika 2010), Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA  
Selections from C.R. Ettinger Studio, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Philadelphia, PA  
Printable: Printmaking without Limits, Seraphin Gallery, Philadelphia, PA  

Selected Public Collections  
Amity Art Foundation, Woodbridge, CT  
Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH  
Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI  
The Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA  
The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA  
Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence, RI  
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL  
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA  
Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA  
University of Wyoming Museum of Art, Laramie, WY  
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT  

Inside Front Cover  
Blessing the Hunters of Fish, 2009, woodcut and silverpoint on Mylar, 9 ¼ x 12 inches  
Cover  
Phantom Vessels and the Bastion of Memory (V), 2007, woodcut with silverpoint and goldpoint drawing, 48 x 72 inches  
Back cover  
Maintaining a Safe Distance and Living to Tell (detail from portfolio of 20 prints), 2012, photolithography and silkscreen, 11 x 15 inches  

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