

LIFE'S VOYAGE



ETCHINGS BY ZEVI BLUM

ZEVI BLUM



ART HISTORY HAS NOT BEEN KIND TO SATIRISTS. WHERE SOME, LIKE Hogarth or Daumier, have been granted the status of “masters,” the attribution has been grudging at best. The exalted status of, artists like Brueghel or Goya, on the other hand, seems to have been established largely outside the satiric content of their work. Several obvious facts may account for this. Satire by its nature tends to be topical. It is difficult to ascribe it an enduring value, and satire becomes inaccessible as the historical referents are forgotten. We still enjoy the fantastic characters which inhabit Hieronymus Bosch’s paintings, but the satiric import of these works is all but lost on the modern viewer. Effective satire must also maintain a fragile emotional distance from its subject. If this distance is lost, the genre easily degenerates into pathos, on the one hand, or caricature, on the other. Besieged as we are by images of the bizarre and the unnatural and lacking any discernible standards of taste or decorum, we must wonder if satire as an artistic genre is even possible today.

Clearly Zevi Blum believes it is. Blum’s compositions present us a delightful panoply of characters. Fat prelates plot, warriors posture, and lavishly dressed courtiers and coquettes preen. Their attire ranges from the armour of the medieval knight to the latest fashions at the court of the Sun King. They belong to no age and to every age. They are both fanciful anachronisms and universals in the *comédie humaine*.

The theme which seems to pervade all of Blum’s works is that of human inventiveness gone awry. It is at once marvelous in its variety and aimless in its intention. In the *Saints in Grotto* etchings, scores of official looking clerics seem involved in building and administering elaborate machines to “fish” for saints, who seem oddly content to inhabit secure caves under the ground. The works poke fun at a commonplace of art through the ages and, of course, invert the usual topology of heaven and earth. But the primary focus is on the elaborate and pointless engines of man’s invention. They seem to signify artifice without purpose, energy without direction. The futility of human effort here is given point by the fact that most of the image is crammed into the top quarter of the pictorial space, making the figures look much like ants in a child’s ant farm.

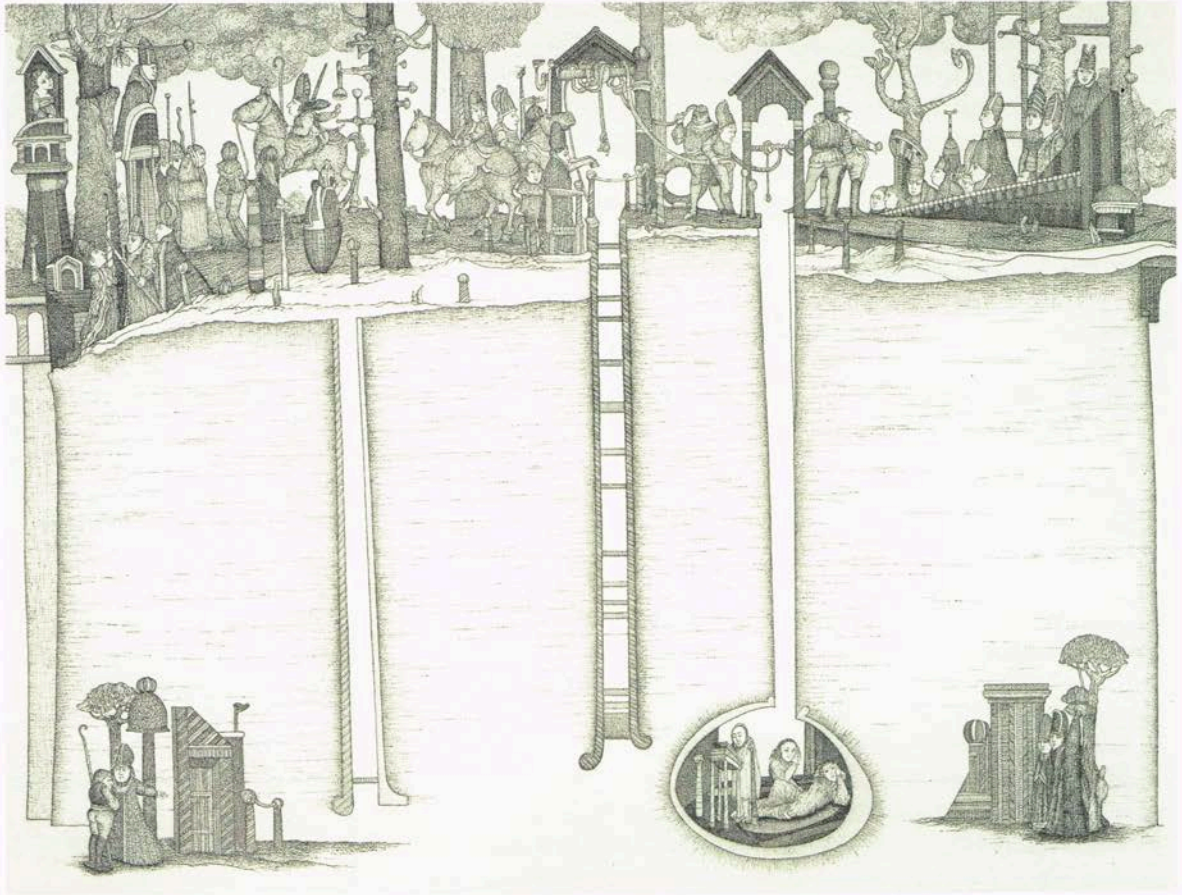
Another etching finds its literal context in the medieval crusades to recapture the Holy Lands—surely one of mankind's more inglorious undertakings—and its figurative context in the Ship of Fools. But the intent seems similar to that of *Saints in Grotto*. In *Disembarkation* we find boatloads of figures in armour or clerical attire making their way to a small and seemingly insignificant promontory at the bottom of the picture. Here again, the world order has been turned upside down. The elaborate boats are actually inverted domes of cathedrals and state-houses—symbols of man's highest social and intellectual achievements. And here again the figures have concocted fabulous vehicles to surmount natural obstacles, against which they seem small and insignificant.

But in his elaborate devices to dig, float, or fly, man's ingenuity seems strangely at one with the natural forces it struggles to overcome. Blum's landscapes are inhabited by large forms which sprout from the earth to assume human, and often explicitly sexual, shapes, while humans and the products of their inventiveness become plant-like in a continuous metamorphosis of line. This interchangeability of human and natural shapes underlines an irony which flickers beneath the surface of nearly all Blum's works: though man's fabulous inventions aim finally at forestalling oblivion, his engines of immortality assume curiously mutable forms. The dance in which Blum's players leap and pirouette is ultimately a dance of death.

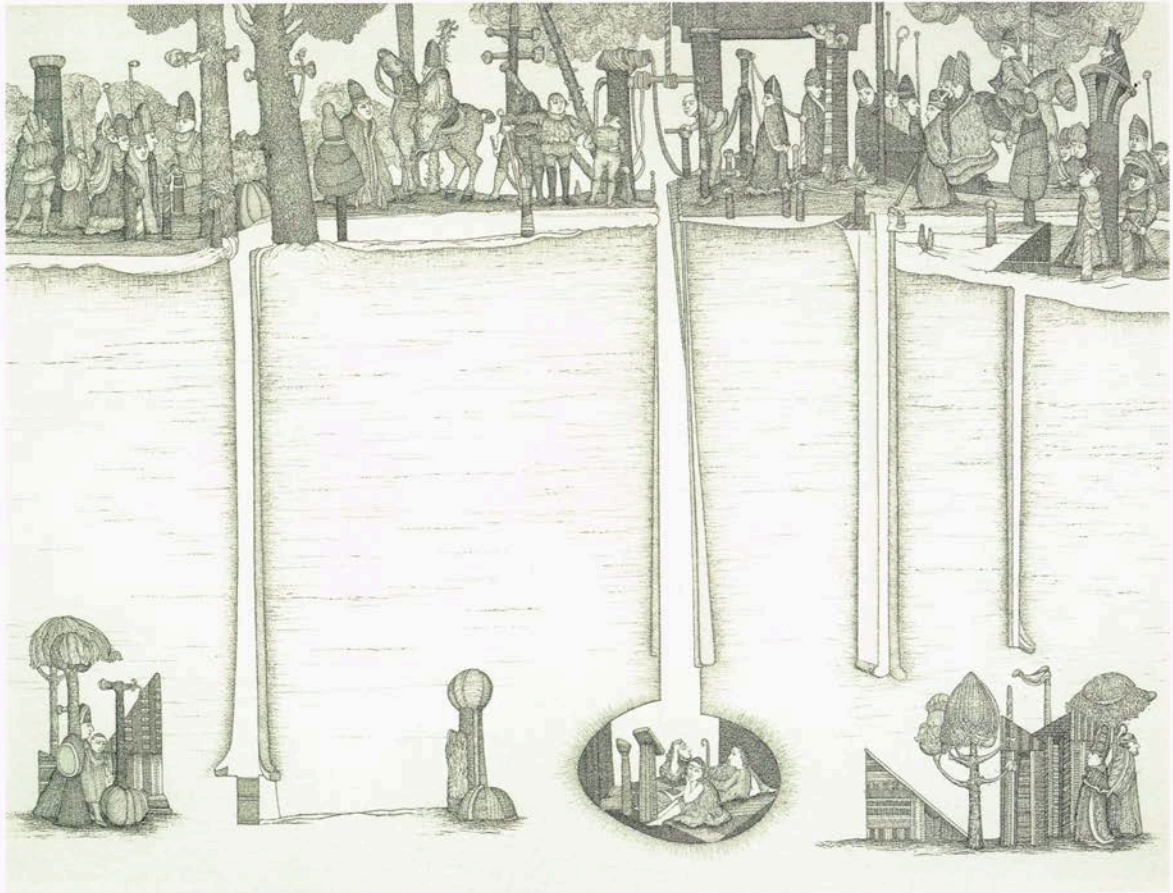
Blum's creations are filled with allusions to war, superstition, and sexual violence. In *German Unicorns with German Virgins...*, for example, the virgins are decked out as whores, and the unicorn, traditional symbol of purity in western art, has become a fearsome warhorse with a horn reminiscent of the helmet worn by the Kaiser's forces during the First World War. Yet, Blum never indulges the darker themes, as the disturbing satires of Dix and Grosz had done. His works aim not so much at exposing man's hypocrisy or exploring his depravity as they revel in man's magnificent, if pointless, creativity, a creativity in the exercise of which he seems to regain something of his lost innocence. An image central to all of Blum's art is his small, haunting figure of Hephaestus, the artificer deity whose misshapen form belies his wondrous creativity.

It is artifice itself which turns the point of Blum's satiric thrusts. Though his characters express the timelessness of human folly, they never become more than stylizations of the artist's rhythmic, cursive line. They exist finally as the highest tribute to a fanciful imagination. Blum well understands that satire is most effective when we see in it a measure of ourselves.

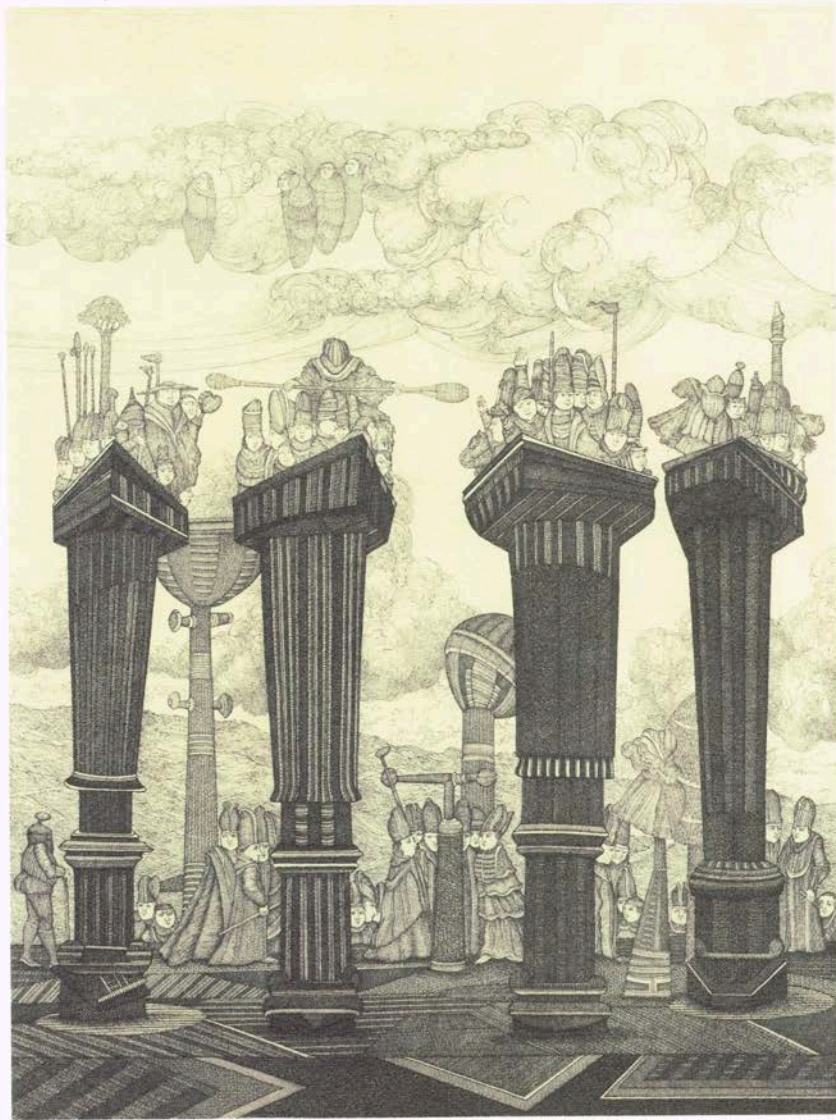
James Hall
Oxford Gallery, Rochester, New York



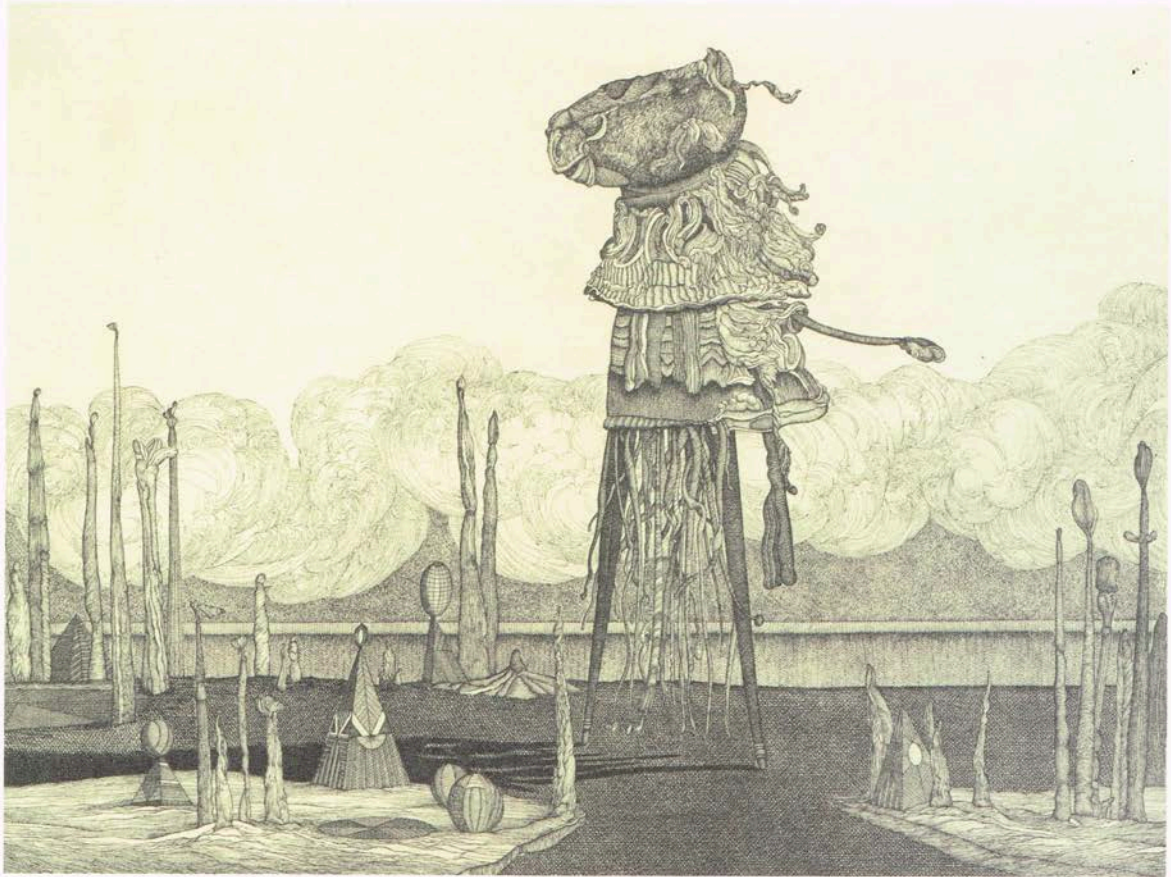
Saints in Grottos #1 1998 18" x 24"



Saints in Grottos #2 1998 18" x 24"



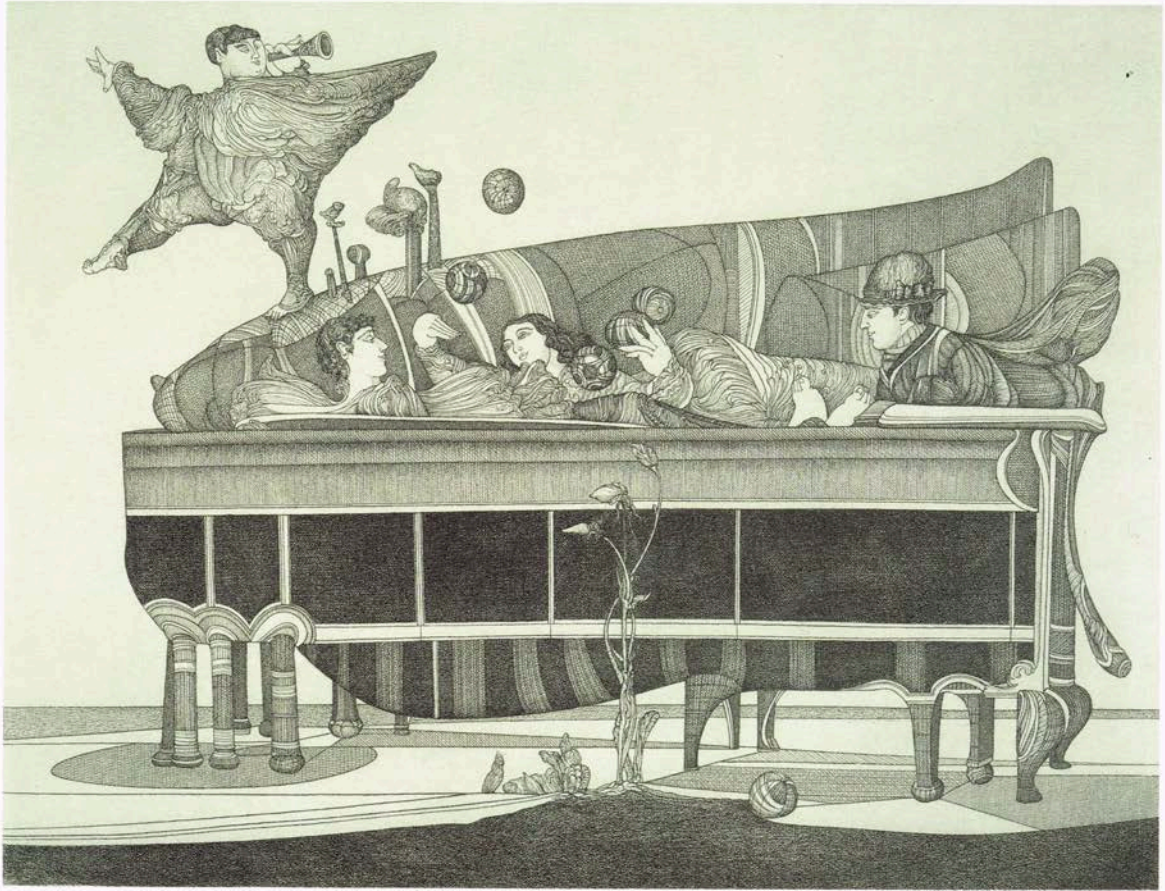
Renaissance Crowd with Pulpits 1999 25" x 19"



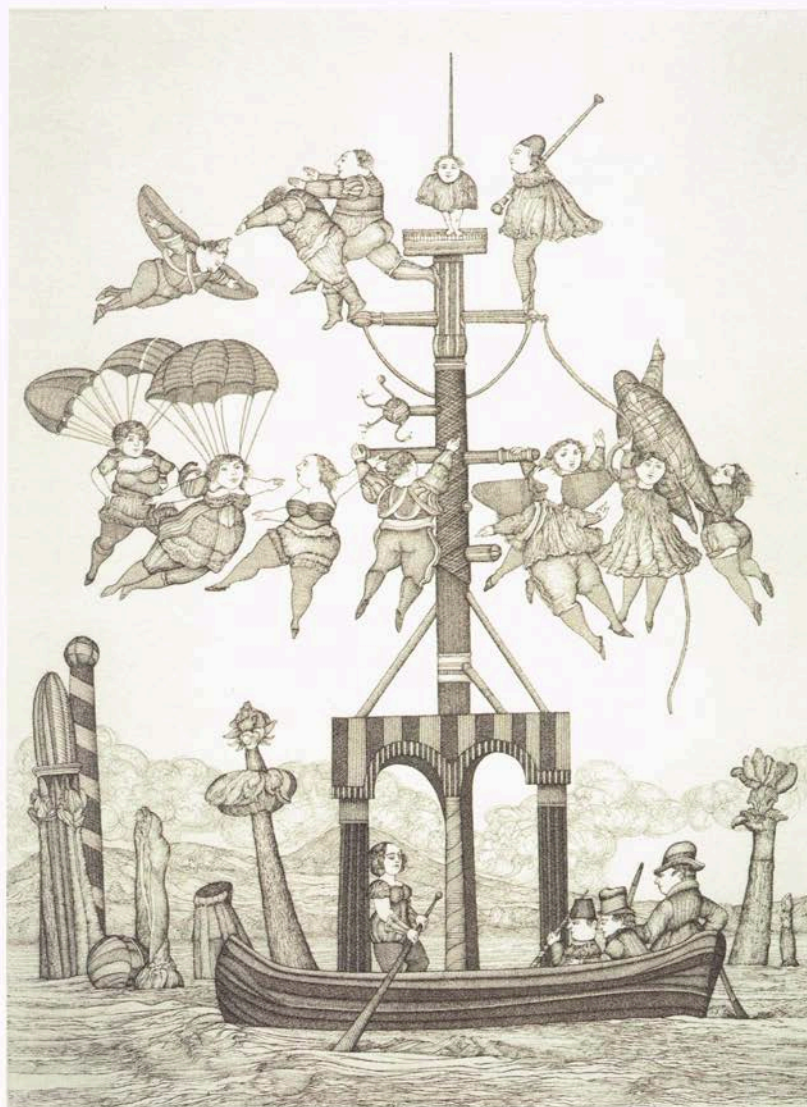
Stilt Walker 1997 18" x 24"



Fathers & Sons 1978 24" x 18"



Hot Tub of Life 1990 18" x 24"



Crewing Upstate 1987 24" x 18"



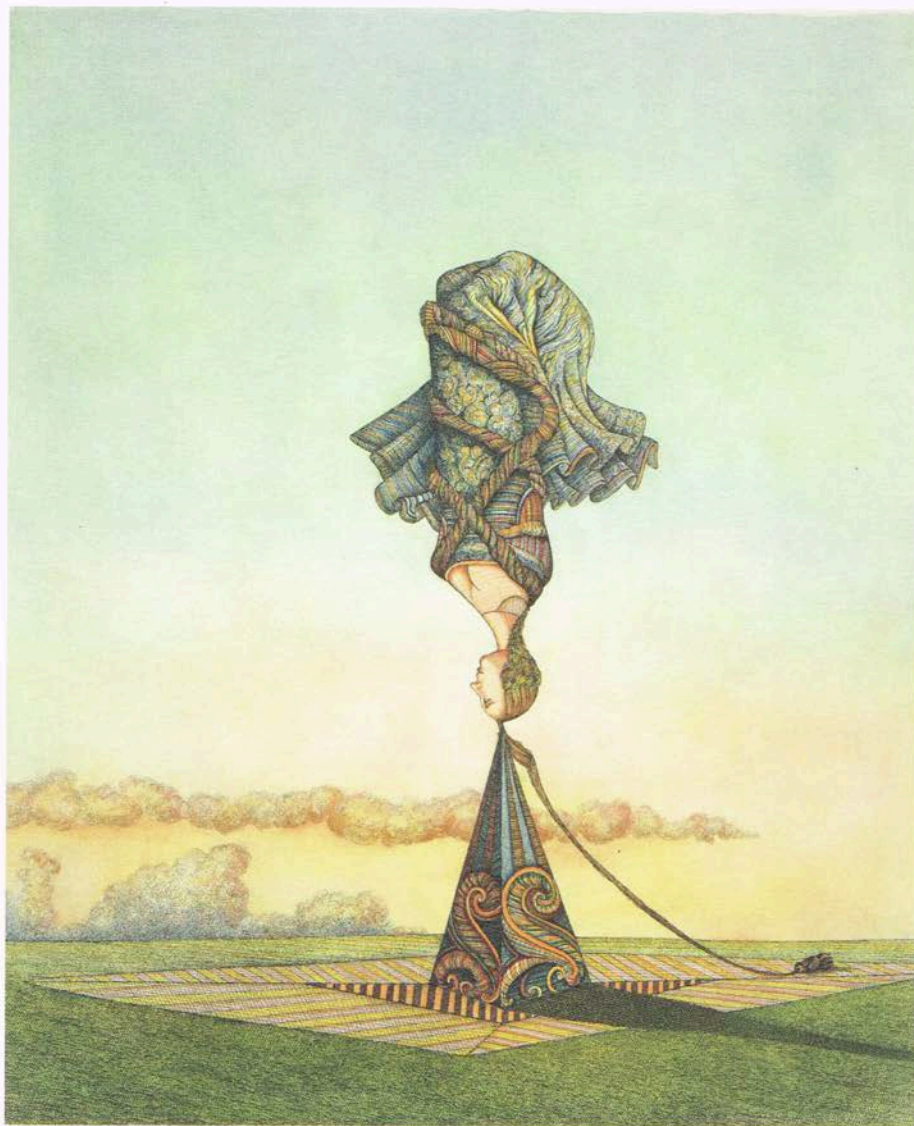
German Unicorn with German Virgins & Other Germans 1998 18" x 24"



Trick 1989 17" x 14 1/2"



Stunt 1989 17" x 14 1/2"



Feat 1989 17" x 14 1/2"



Three for the Tightrope 1999 24" x 18"



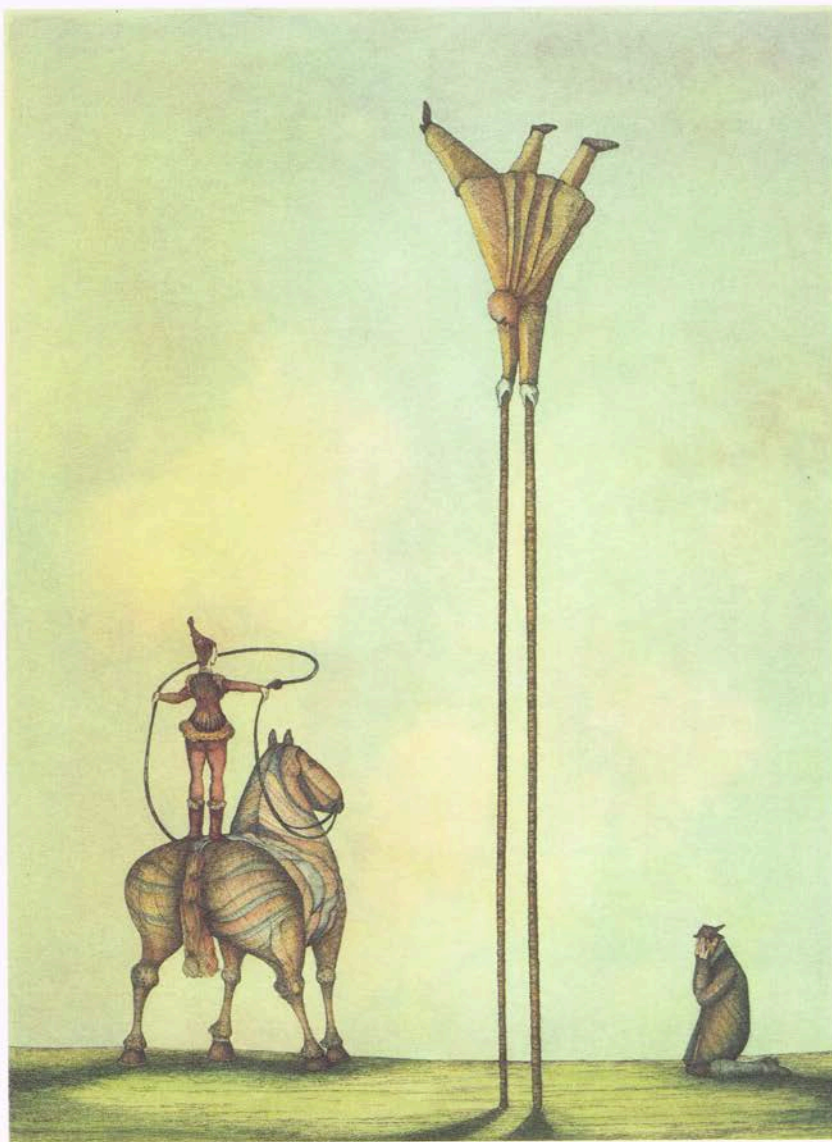
Protocols & Easements 1984 18" x 42"



Disembarkation 1999 24" x 18"



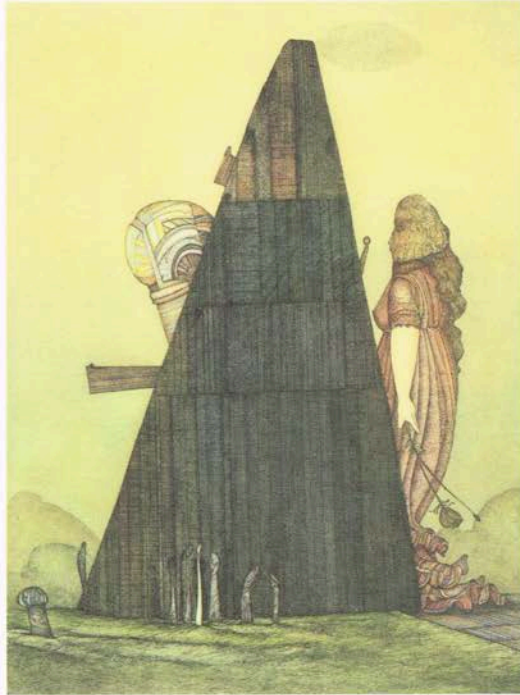
Pre-School #1 1977 18" x 24"



Performance Art 1980 24" x 18"



History Lesson 1985 18" x 24"



Open Air Confessional 1982 24" x 18"

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