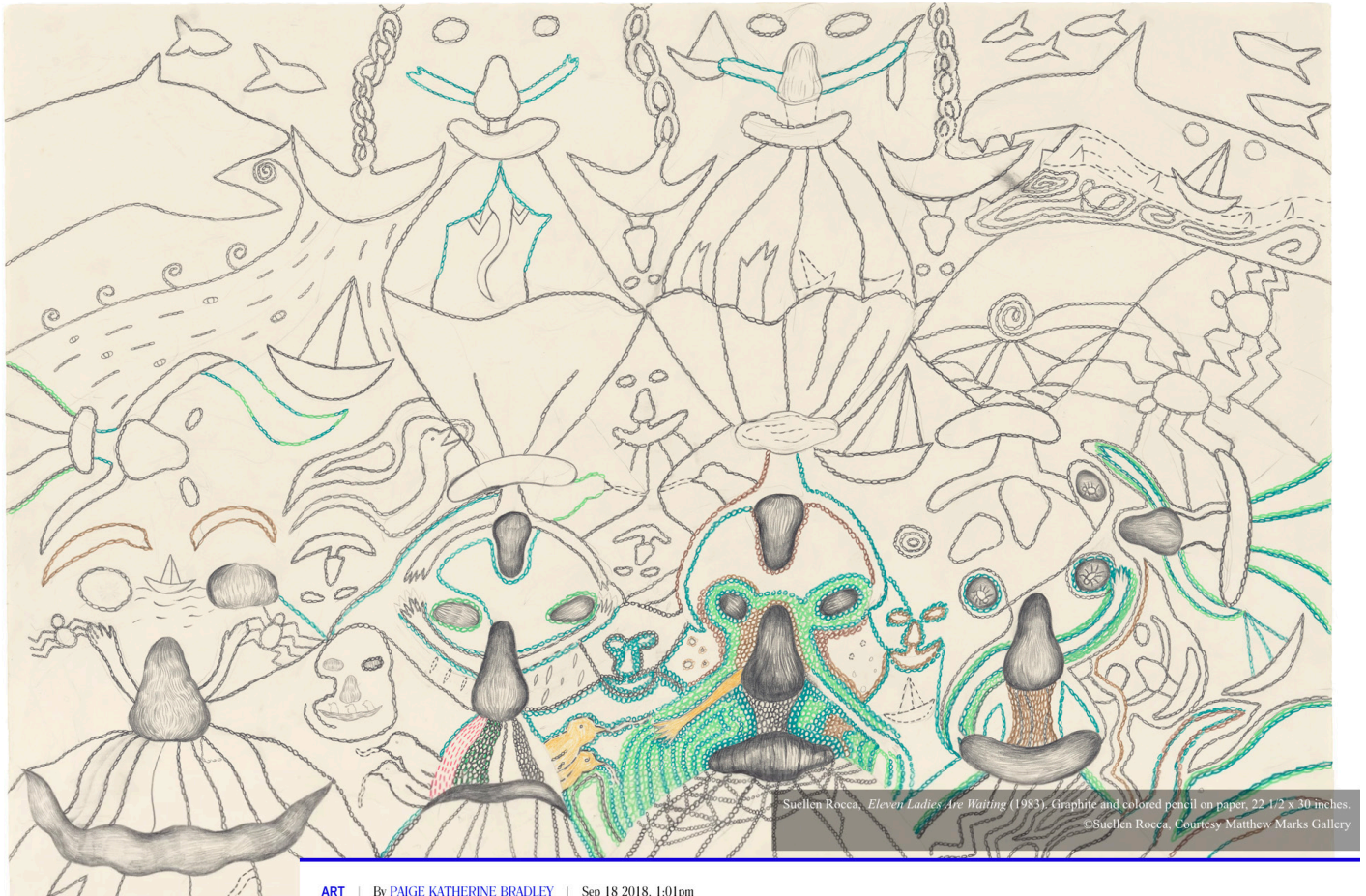


MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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# GARAGE

GARAGE Magazine



Suellen Rocca, *Eleven Ladies Are Waiting* (1983), Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 22 1/2 x 30 inches.  
©Suellen Rocca, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

ART | By PAIGE KATHERINE BRADLEY | Sep 18 2018, 1:01pm

## Suellen Rocca's Graphite Gorgeousness Can Rock Our World

A doyenne of American surrealism speaks on the inspiration of kindergarten course books and drawing from the internal.

Bradley, Paige Katherine. "Suellen Rocca's Graphite Gorgeousness can rock our world." *Garage Magazine*, September 18, 2018.

Suellen Rocca is an artist who first became known for her work with the Chicago Imagists, a.k.a. the Hairy Who, whose collaborative shows during the 1960s have become a touchstone for contemporary artists who freely traverse boundaries between visual mediums, such as comics or design, and academically-trained fine art. This dynamic was explored in a 2015 exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery, *What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present*, which included Rocca's work along with that of her Chicago associates and other freewheeling agents of radical American aesthetics. A new solo show of her latest drawings, as well as a selection from the 1980s, opened at the same gallery last week, so we caught up with her to discuss working in groups versus solo, pop art, and taking cues from the kids.



Suellen Rocca, *Don't* (1981). Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 14 x 11 inches. ©Suellen Rocca, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

GARAGE: In this exhibition are drawings you made from the 1980s until last year. Is this the second solo show you've done in New York now?

Suellen Rocca: Yes.



GARAGE: You've described this work as being "more internal" than the paintings you were doing in the 1960s, some of which were shown here in 2016. And following that idea of working from an intuitive place, these were also made at a time when you were also working solo, rather than in the context of the Hairy Who group as you were doing back in the '60s?

Rocca: The Hairy Who—or Chicago Imagists as we're now called—showed as a group from '66 to '69 with six exhibitions—three were in Chicago at the Hyde Park Art Center, one was at the San Francisco Art Institute, another at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and one in New York at the School of Visual Arts. That one was a drawing show. We didn't show as a group after that.

GARAGE: How did your work change or develop after you stopped showing together and collaborating?

Rocca: I think my work changed, but not so much for that reason. I had moved to northern California in the 1970s with my family and I wasn't making work. I was there from about '72 to '80, and even after I came back to Chicago, until about '81, I took a hiatus from making. The first four drawings in this show were done in 1981, and the work became more expressive of where I was at the time.

GARAGE: Did you feel like you were approaching things in a very different way when you started again? Did you have really different concerns or interests by then?

Rocca: We all go through different transitions in life, and I think it was more related to that.

GARAGE: They're very quiet and subtle, and the softness of the graphite throughout the drawings feels like a real shift from the colorful and graphic paintings you did in the '60s, or the purse sculptures from the same time. The tone of this work is very different.

Rocca: If one were to generalize, I think the imagery in my work from the Hairy Who period was more about external things, things from the culture. I was in my twenties raising children then, and reflecting the popular culture around me by depicting things like diamond rings and working with the purses. The work starting in the early '80s was more about what was going on with me internally.

GARAGE: Does the text in these drawings, as in one of the earliest ones here, *Don't* (1981) and some others, come from thoughts you have while you're drawing, or is the text from another source, like something you'd already written and then use as a source to pull from for the drawings?



Suellen Rocca, *Page A* (2017). Graphite on paper, 22 1/2 x 30 inches. ©Suellen Rocca, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Rocca: I like that question, but the words came as I was doing the work rather than from journals or previous writing. I don't think of the words as being separate, I think of them as images.

GARAGE: You studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and graduated in 1964, after which in 1966 you became part of this Hairy Who group that was taking influence from a broad range of visual culture, not just art history.

Rocca: Well, certainly art history was important to all of us. Going to school at SAIC, you're right in the museum. We were encouraged by teachers like Whitney Halstead to go and look at indigenous art, not just Western art, and to go to the Field Museum of Natural History, which has wonderful collections of Oceanic art. Inspiration came from popular culture, but it also came from many, many other sources of visual culture. Egyptian hieroglyphs are a good reference for me, because of the sort of picture writing that I did. Also, when I was looking for resource material for the book based on my previous show, I discovered a box of my 1950s plastic dollhouse furniture. The objects in a lot of the drawings in this show, such as *Page A* (2017), are based on those pieces of dollhouse furniture.

I was also inspired by the visual idioms of catalogues—my father-in-law was a jeweler, and I was inspired by rows of diamond rings and things like the Sears catalog for its colors, imagery, and the compositions in it. There have been some very good things written about the difference between pop art in New York and what has become known as Imagist work in Chicago, since they happened at the same time.

GARAGE: What do you think the difference was?

Rocca: I'm the curator of an extraordinary collection of Chicago Imagist work at Elmhurst College in Illinois, and the short answer I give on the subject when leading tours is that while New York was cool, Chicago was hot. So, although we were inspired by maybe some of the same sources, in New York the approach was taking that piece of popular culture and putting it into a new context, changing everything by putting it in the gallery. In Chicago, we processed similar material in a very personal way, along with those other influences I mentioned. It was a more idiosyncratic expression. One thing that I think the upcoming Hairy Who exhibition at the Art Institute will establish is that this was not just a Midwest expression of pop art, that it is a style in its own right.

GARAGE: Kindergarten workbooks were mentioned in the description for your last show, of the work in the '60s. Did you teach kindergarten at all, or were you looking at these when your own children were in kindergarten?

Rocca: I have taught young children, but the kindergarten pre-readers from my own childhood were an inspiration before I was teaching kids. I was interested in how these materials had a kind of picture writing, similar to the hieroglyphics. When I was in California during the '70s and I wasn't making my own work, I taught preschool at a private school, on what had originally been a ranch, in a big red barn. I loved the children's drawings and paintings, and that's been an inspiration for me. I love children's perceptions because they really see things. They haven't seen them before, so they really see them. What I tell my older students now is you need to look, because after we think we've seen things we don't look at them anymore.

Suellen Rocca: *Drawings is on view at Matthew Marks Gallery's 526 W 22nd Street location through October 27, 2018.*