

## INFINITY THEATER: INNOCENCE, EXPERIENCE, AND THE ART OF CAROL DOYLE

Have you noticed that a bit of sky, seen through a vent, or from between two chimneys, two rocks, or through an arcade, etc., gives a more profound idea of infinity than a great panorama seen from the top of a mountain?

Charles Baudelaire, *Letter to Armand Fraisse*, 18 February, 1860

If we accept Baudelaire's observation, then Carol Doyle's small format etchings should be all the more ideally suited to exploring the idea of infinity. But the artist's own vision defines the proscenium and lends scale to her apprehension of an infinite world more profoundly than any compositional framing device: the trick to framing the infinite is not so much seeing it through a small format window as it is focusing on imagery which suggests a context beyond the frame.



*Tap*, 2 $\frac{5}{8}$   $\times$  3 $\frac{7}{8}$ " hardground with pen-resist aquatint.

Doyle speaks freely about her iconography, almost as though these insights couldn't possibly lessen an essential mystery. And they don't. Answers to questions never satisfy, but lead instead to larger questions. Like the child, we counter every explanation with, *but why?*

And even as adults we never fully graduate from innocence to experience; rather, we flicker back and forth between the two, and it would be difficult to even conceive of one except from our perspective in the other. From the moment we enter the world, we're no more capable of complete innocence than we are ever capable of being entirely experienced.

The concept of *Infinity Theater* evolved innocently enough. It began when Doyle unconsciously picked up a figure-eight painting gesture, but only after she'd repeated it several times and turned it on its side did she recognize it for the symbol of infinity. She had already adopted it as a logo for her Infinity Theater proscenium paintings when she stumbled upon this passage from a 1940 entry in Max Beckmann's *Diaries*: "If one interprets all of this—the war, all life for that matter—as just a scene from the Theatre of Infinity, it's a lot easier to bear." Experiencing through the words of another artist—one who spoke from another time and place—a phrase that had innocently coalesced in her own art, Doyle was finally able to consciously recognize a theme to encompass this new body of work: that innocence and experience are not so much circumstances of being as they are lenses through which we can shift our perspective.

In *What I Don't Know*, Doyle distinguishes innocence from its less endearing relation, ignorance. A gallery crammed with artifacts sets the scene for Doyle's self-confessed cultural innocence in this print. We might expect an artist to be more skilled than the rest of us at deciphering meaning in art, but what more accurately distinguishes the artist is compulsion, not knowledge. Ironically, what the artist doesn't know *best* is art—her own art in particular. But that scarcely makes her ignorant. Ignorance might imply a denial of or indifference to experience, while innocence is open, even vulnerable, to it. Doyle's *not knowing* is what makes her art a source of curiosity both for herself and the viewer, and while curiosity may be born of innocence, it unavoidably propels us into experience, knowledge, and those inevitable choices between good and evil. The title, *Pure Science*, for example, refers to scientific exploration with no particular goal. It's a term Carol picked up from her engineer-husband, and she immediately sensed from it reverberations with her own experience as an artist. This print depicts an adolescent-looking scientist toying with mysteries just to see what will happen—out of *curiosity*—and with no thought to consequences. The floral explosion of his experiment may be lethal or merely amusing; his amoral curiosity, not unlike the artist's, seeks only its own satisfaction. But common sense demands: *Shouldn't we stop him?* After all, how can we possibly trust

someone so caught up in his own unreality toying with such potential enormities? In one of my lunchtime conversations with Carol during the project, we touched on the related subject of censorship. This was just after Alice Walker's *Am I Blue?* had been removed from the California Learning Assessment System test because of its alleged "anti-meat eating" agenda, and I recall bemoaning how, in a world filled with clear and present toxicity, social critics would exhaust themselves over anything as thoroughly non-toxic as art or literature. But then Carol reminded me that if we accept art as a powerful medium, we must also accept its potential toxicity. Once a toxic image poisons your psyche, it can be as persistent as lead, and its cumulative toxicity may eventually deaden the soul. Still, there's no absolute measure for aesthetic toxicity: my canary may sing all the stronger from precisely what kills yours.

If we can't agree on what's toxic in art, we can at least say with certainty that nicotine is toxic, and at a time when the cigarette practically symbolizes social blasphemy, cigarettes figure prominently in Doyle's iconography, as distraction, prop, badge of identity and belonging, and as a talisman allowing the smoker to live in self-generated intensity, doomed to eventually consume himself, yet somehow magically protected from that knowledge by the very object which hastens the consumption. Smoking is breath, certainly a corruption of the yogic *prana*, but nonetheless a means to slow and focus the body and mind. It's not unalloyed evil—ask any smoker. And when we learn that something as innocent as theater popcorn can pose a lethal health threat, it's time to re-examine the meaning of toxicity. But Doyle isn't proposing to further an anti- or pro-smoking agenda; for her, the smoker-as-social-outcast occupies the same position artists have traditionally sought: a position which affords an *outsider* perspective on culturally sanctioned reality.

Like cigarettes, devils are common as dirt in Doyle's compositions, but they aren't Christianity's potent symbols of evil. Rather they are the slyly admired artisans of folklore and popular culture: the makers of quality fireworks, the alchemists who add that secret ingredient to *Orange Julius* (powdered devil piss, as urban legend would have it), and the architects of such natural wonders as Devil's Postpile, Golfcourse, Tower, Kitchen, Racetrack, etc. Their creations of material beauty and weirdness inspire our wonder but lack that dimension of spirit which distinguishes life from matter. Artifice, artifacts—*art*—can never rival life, so devils serve as fitting patron saints to the artist, and Doyle inevitably returns the bifocal lens of innocence and experience back onto herself as artist. *The Ventriloquist*



*The Ventriloquist*, 2 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 3 $\frac{7}{8}$ " hard- and softground etching.

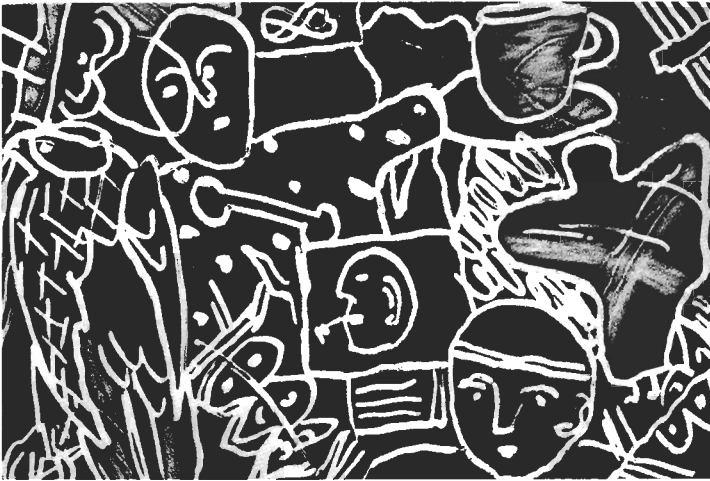
shows a performer (who bears an uncanny resemblance to Marcel Duchamp, but in whom Doyle insists she unconsciously portrays, if anyone, her father) accompanied by his dummy, both looking disreputable with matching cigarettes dangling off their lips. Just as the artist might be an innocent medium for her muse, so the dummy—a quintessential innocent—takes its inspiration (quite literally a *breathing in*) from the ventriloquist. Or perhaps it's the ventriloquist whom Doyle sees as her surrogate: the experienced old hand, an inveterate *trickster*, performing his illusions before the unlikely audience of a crucible and a cooked turkey. In alchemy, the crucible provides a sacred space where elements are precisely combined and transformed, defining art in the purest, most exalted terms. The cooked bird represents a more mundane transformation, not incidentally reminding us how the innocent often wind up as someone else's dinner. A canny performer or a confidence man will refer to his audience/victims as pigeons or turkeys, and Doyle incorporates these less exalted attributes of con art into her composite portrait of the artist for the simple reason that we ignore them at our own peril. Can we, for example, support the trust we place in a work of contemporary art by our simply *liking* it? Are we swayed that it wins favorable critical attention? How many artists have enjoyed the unqualified praise of their time only to be justifiably forgotten by history? Even when neither our own nor others' approval is forthcoming, art can be decades, if not centuries, ahead of its audience, so neither we nor the professional critic can be expected to recognize its worth contempo-

raneously. Artists frequently even question their own inspiration: how often does the 3:00AM epiphany evaporate, or at the very least congeal into ordinariness, with the light of day? However many lessons we may apply from our experience, at some level we always approach art as innocents.

In *Birdcatcher*, *caging a bird* undoubtedly also stands as a metaphor for artmaking. In distilling and isolating elements of art, how can the artist avoid deadening or even killing what she captures? And as if that weren't distasteful enough, Doyle portrays her artist-surrogate in such a brutish guise—a half-beast whose partial humanity is further undercut by another cigarette dangling from yet another tough, uncaring mouth—that we can't help but fear the henhouse is being ruled by a fox. Then again, who better than a fox to know how to protect his charges from predation? And if *Birdcatcher* portrays power and sovereignty in a suspect light, *King O' Nuttin'* pokes holes in its sanctity. The print's title recalls a scene from *The Honeymooners* where Ralph berates Alice to establish his household sovereignty: *'I'm the King, Alice, and you're nuttin.' Got it? King. Nuttin.' Do you know what that means, Alice? [Alice responds dryly:] Yeah. You're the King o' Nuttin.'* Like Ralph, the artist is undisputed sovereign of a realm that remains (unless, in the artist's case, blessed by the attentions of commerce) supremely unimportant to most of the world; yet if the artist approaches her work as an innocent, power—even over her own work—can only be an unwanted distraction.

We expect those exercising sovereignty—whether over a henhouse or a nation—to be the most unlikely hybrids: experienced in the ways of power, yet innocent of any conflicting self-interest. In other words, we expect them to be angels. Along with devils, Doyle's world is populated by angels, and if devils represent physical/material expressions, angels represent spiritual ones—spiritual, yet still worldly: their power lies not so much in affecting the world as in keeping the world from affecting us. Feeling safe, for example, is not something we ordinarily think of as power, but it unquestionably is power of enormous importance not only to our physical lives, but to our spiritual lives as well (after all, feeling *safe* is only an etymological hair's breadth from feeling *saved*). Unfortunately, the innocence of such a feeling is often hopelessly compromised by the means taken to secure it, but the feeling itself is nonetheless innocent, and Doyle conceives of this power in terms of the *guardian angel*. In *Jimmy Brown's Guardian Angel*, she creates a compositional jigsaw puzzle that acknowledges the apparently random, fragmentary nature of

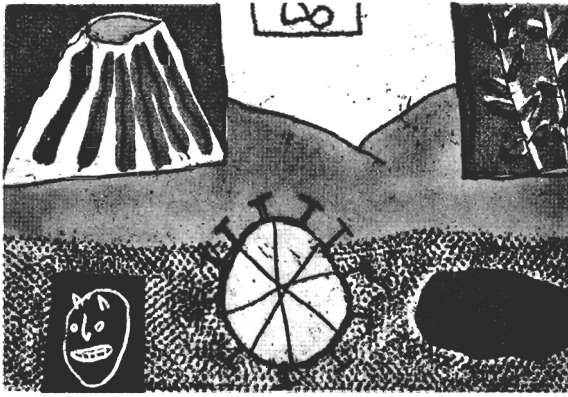
experience while reveling in the miracle that all the pieces nonetheless fit. On a more personal level, *Peter as an Angel* portrays one of Doyle's painting students in the guise of a punk-angel. His *otherness* is emphasized not only by a halo and wings, but also by a green face, spiky hair, and what Doyle explains is a "receiver" implanted in his chest, much like the tiny speakers she discovered in the talking dolls of her childhood. Perhaps this last detail speaks to the enigma of communication/communion and to that mysterious boundary between what is expressed and what is perceived, whether between student and teacher, mortal and divine, or between a child and her doll. In addition to being intermediaries, angels are also popularly seen as reservoirs of personal and ancestral knowledge. In this sense, they are prototypical teachers, and by imagining one of her students



*Jimmy Brown's Guardian Angel, 2 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 3 $\frac{7}{8}$ " pen-resist aquatint.*

in the guise of an angelic teacher, Doyle subverts the conventional wisdom which values only a teacher's contribution of experience to the learning process without also valuing the contribution of a student's innocence. We either learn from history/experience, or doom ourselves to repeat it; but from the insights born of innocence, we revise the world.

*Wish You Were Here* might serve as a postcard souvenir for what appears to be a low-intensity adventure, and seeing it so makes this print an apt summary for *Infinity Theater*. In it, *Karmic Wheel*, Doyle's own tongue-in-cheek invention, chases a mirage across the



*Wish You Were Here*, 2 $\frac{5}{8}$   $\times$  3 $\frac{7}{8}$ " color hardground and aquatint.

sands beneath mineral-green deposits masquerading as grassy hills, with insets highlighting the local attractions: an unimpressive, grayish example of native flora, a dormant cinder cone, and the ubiquitous devil. Searching for a source, following the promise of nourishment, innocently falling into harm's way, or perhaps just rolling along because that's its nature, *Karmic Wheel* is surely another portrait of the artist. *Wish you were here?* Is Doyle's desire for our company the artist's wish to share wonders from her vision quest, or is she just tired and lonely? It could be either or both. Or it could be something else completely.

David Kelso, Director  
*made in California*

*Infinity Theater*, 1995, a suite of fourteen color and black/white intaglio prints by Carol Doyle, is published by *made in California* in an edition of thirty impressions printed on 9 $\frac{7}{8}$   $\times$  11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " Arches white paper. Complete suites come in Arches tan portfolios with cover and title sheet linocuts by the artist. Single titles are also available. For further information, please contact the publisher.



*Peter as an Angel, 3<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 2<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" color hard- and softground with aquatint.*