

Rikki Ducornet



Desirous

Rikki Ducornet



Desirous

Pierre Menard Gallery
Cambridge, MA
2007



Published by:
Pierre Menard Gallery
10 Arrow St.
Cambridge, MA 02138
www.pierremenardgallery.com

© 2007 Pierre Menard Gallery
All rights reserved
All images © Rikki Ducornet
All text © the author

“The Deep Zoo” appears in *Conjunctions 38: Rejoicing Revoicing*.
“Afterword: Waking to Eden” from *The Jade Cabinet*, Dalkey Archive Press, 1994.
Phosphor in Dreamland, Dalkey Archive Press, 1995.

Printed and bound by Next Generation Printing
Canton, MA, USA
First edition

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner
without written permission from the publisher, except in the context of reviews.

Edited by: **John Wronoski**
Designed by: **Erica Mena**

Cover image: *A Key for Enkidu*, 22x30”, 2007
gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper

This book has been set in a combination of Warnock and Amythest typefaces.



CONTENTS

<i>Desirous</i>	1
by Brian Evenson	
<i>The Eroticism of Botany</i>	4
by M.E. Warlick	
Plates	11
<i>The Deep Zoo</i>	27
by Rikki Ducornet	
<i>Afterword: Waking to Eden</i>	35
by Rikki Ducornet	
from <i>Phosphor in Dreamland</i>	37
by Rikki Ducornet	
Curriculum Vitae	38

RIKKI DUCORNET AND THE EROTICISM OF BOTANY

M.E. Warlick, Ph.D.

The recent paintings and drawings of Rikki Ducornet spring from the traditions of botanical illustration. Like the hand-colored woodcuts and full-page engravings that embellish the pages of medieval herbals and Renaissance botanical portfolios, her images contain multiple forms that suggest the stages of metamorphosis in a developing plant—from seed to sprout to bud to flower to pod. Generally organized within a grid, these forms float on a neutral field, cut and freed from the warm earthy humus that nurtured their growth. They are reminiscent of the history of botanical illustrations in ways that will be explored below. Ducornet's lush plants and flowers have an animated self-awareness. They are erotic exhibitionists, positioned to reveal their secret sexual parts and to spill their seeds in exuberant abandon. Occasionally, they transform into shapes and creatures that cross and merge the boundaries of the mineral, vegetable and animal realms. The mysteries of life, love and transformation are revealed here, seductively posed for the scrutiny of the sensitive observer.

For medievalists and well into the early modern period, plants were valued for their medicinal powers. In herbal manuscripts and early printed books, plants were described and grouped according to the diseases that they cured, giving suggestions for the ideal conditions to gather them and offering recipes for their preparation. The illustrations in these books are simplified, with only the essential outlines of leaves, flowers and stems.¹ An illustration for an onion would have a bulb and thin broad leaves. A rose would show its thorns and serrated leaves. Violets would gather in a clump. Sometimes the same illustration would be repeated for different flowers. These woodcuts served more as visual cues or reference points for the doctors and pharmacists who could actually read the texts. Wise women knew these plants by heart, having gathered them in the footsteps of their mothers, before sharing their secrets with the men who were taking over their ancient profession of healing.

One of the most profusely illustrated of the medieval health handbooks was the late fourteenth-century *Tacuinum Sanitatis*². Rooted in the Galenic medicine of antiquity and permeated with medieval folklore, this handbook indicates the degree of the plants' relative heat and coolness, their dryness and moisture. Opposites cure, so plants that are cool and moist can quench fevers. Hot and dry plants evaporate cold runny noses and elevate the spirits. These illustrations are more elaborate than the herbal woodcuts. Plants grow within the context of gardens and fields. In these images, peasants and aristocrats gather plants and prepare them in their homes and cottage storefronts. Plants are connected to seasons of the year, and many are helpful for psychological ailments, used in the treatment of sexual apathy, depression and melancholy.

Numerous "Books of Secrets" developed in medieval manuscripts and early printed texts well into the eighteenth-century.³ Galenic oppositions continued in importance as did the theory of signatures. Plants shaped like anatomical forms of the human body could be turned into medicines

useful for that part of the body. For example, a plant with five leaves shaped like a hand could be used to treat ailments of the hand. Plants with heart-shaped flowers could be prepared as medications for the heart or to enhance romance. Flowers that resembled scorpions contained antidotes for poisons. Drawing on the foundations of plant alchemy, these texts advanced philosophical theories, describing plants as parts of an integrated system of nature in which correspondences could be traced between the mineral, vegetable, and animal realms. Practical recipes were offered as well, for infusions, teas, tonics, poultices, emetics, creams, soaps and sachets.

Ducornet's images share some of the directness of early botanical woodcuts, in their frontality, emphasis on contours, and lack of roots. In *Desirous* 2, an array of flowers and pods seem unrelated by shape, but they are connected and contrasted by hot and cool colors. Sunny ochres and fleshy pinks vie with lunar blues and greys to suggest their varying warmth and coolness. Yet unlike the illustrations in early herbals, all of her plants are strident individualists, whose shapes and apparent methods of growth are rarely repeated. In this same painting, an animated chorus line of flowers spans the lower register like comic fan dancers, emerging from vaginal and womb-like buds. In the center, there is a rotund cone or enclosed bud, bursting at the seams with the coming of spring. Next to the bud, a saucy flower extends its stamen in search of a pollinating insect and to the right a blue pod has just broken open to exhale a dusky grey offshoot. A flower in full bloom above transforms into a bird with a phallic head. At the top right, there is a cross-section of a seed, encasing four flames of embryonic growth. By placing a variety of buds, flowers and stems within the same painting, Ducornet also evokes the later traditions of the lavish hand-colored engravings of exotic species which resulted from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century voyages of discovery.

With the dawn of the Scientific Revolution, artists illustrated botanicals with a greater dependence on close observation. Full page plates in the famous herbals of Otto Brunfels (1488-1534) and Leonhard Fuchs (1501-1566) represented idealized plants, complete with their root systems. Their engraved illustrations elaborated on plant life cycles by including in the folio plates details of every stage of a plant's life, from buds to fruits to pods and seeds. Ducornet's assortments of plants are freer, less narrative and more inventive. Many of her stems are cut, liberated from their roots and removed from their moorings, as if sliced by a botanist's scalpel. Have they been gathered for a bouquet or for pressing into a scrapbook, or simply cropped by the artist's eye, to focus on their sexual parts and secret, most intimate cavities?

The exoticism of Ducornet's plants recall the illustrations of many botanists who accompanied the voyages of discovery and returned to Europe on ships laden with tropical plants and animals, dried to a crisp or pickled in brandy. Sketches of the plants made on site were transformed into full-page hand-colored engravings, collected as avidly as the plants themselves. The wider world proved a treasure trove for rich European collectors who greedily filled their curiosity cabinets with stuffed animals, shells, and precious stones. Plants were more difficult to preserve, although dried specimens could be labeled and sorted into portfolios. While seeds could be transported with more success, nurtured to maturity back home in humid conservatories, the illustrations of plants were an essential means of collecting and studying plant diversity.

Many artists turned their talents to botanical illustration. In 1575, at the end of a long career spent as a cartographer and illustrator of natural history texts, Joris Hoefnagel (1542-1601) illuminated a manuscript, the *Mira calligraphiae monumenta*, for the Hapsburg Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612) in Prague. It is filled with insects, shells, and botanical details of domestic flowers and newly imported exotics like tomatoes and lilies that mimic the calligraphic strokes of its scribe, Georg Bocskay (d. 1575).⁴ Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717), daughter of the famous alchemical engraver, Matthäus Merian (1593-1650), was a celebrated botanical artist in her own right.⁵ She was one of the first to record the various stages of insect metamorphosis and plant development, and she often paired insects with the specific fruits and flowers that attracted them. In 1699, accompanied by her youngest daughter, she traveled to the Dutch colony of Surinam on the northern coast of South America. Upon her return to Holland, she published her research and drawings in the *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*, 1705, containing hand-colored full page plates based on several hundred drawings on vellum made during her travels. From the sixteenth- to the eighteenth-centuries, European still life painting flourished, with fruits and flowers gathered and drawn at the peak of perfection, then combined into complex compositions by artists who defied the seasons so that tulips, roses, periwinkles and lilies could all bloom miraculously at the same moment. In these paintings, insects often carry moral messages of the fleeting aspects of human life, as they transform from caterpillars to butterflies to suggest the transcendence of the soul.

In the eighteenth century, the Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus (1707-78) developed a method for describing the differences in plants based on sexual difference.⁶ He was not the first to use sexual terms to describe plant parts, but his system for defining plant orders and species was based primarily on the observation and quantification of male stamens and female pistils. He saw the calyx as a nuptial bed, a site for heterosexual encounters between “husbands” and “wives,” labeling their parts without a hint of embarrassment:

The calyx then is the marriage bed, the corolla the curtains, the filaments the spermatic vessels, the antherae the testicles, the dust the male sperm, the stigma the extremity of the female organ, the style the vagina, the germen the ovary, the pericarpium the ovary impregnated, the seeds the ovula or eggs.⁷

Steeped in the gender politics of his day, Linnaeus assumed the male stamens to be the active members, giving them priority over the passive female pistils who waited receptively for the fertilizing pollen. As flowers typically contain more stamens than pistils, it is hardly surprising that Linnaeus’s male stamens were hardly ever monogamous. Linnaeus’s lavish use of sexual metaphors shocked many of his colleagues, and some even accused him of pornography.

Rationalist French botanists attacked Linnaeus’s theories of plant reproduction, perhaps miffed at the popularity of their English rival. In his defense, Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), grandfather of Charles, wrote a long narrative poem, “The Loves of Plants,” published in 1789.⁸ Admired by William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and detested by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), the poem, narrated by a “Botanical Muse,” describes eighty-three of Linnaeus’s plants in rhymes laden with domestic and mythological references to sex, love and marriage. Darwin went further than

Linnaeus in stressing the proportions, length and arrangements of the plant organs, and he put the female pistils in charge. Male parts are referred to as husbands, knights, beaux and swains, while the female parts are queens, priestesses, African beauties, haughty maids, nymphs, and shepherdesses. Only when the proportions of stamens to pistils reaches a ratio of five males to one female, do the ladies acquire the titles of harlots and seductresses. Darwin creates a pastoral utopia in which there are no sexual victims, little jealousy, no prostitution, vice, death or disease, and only one clandestine child. His poem is still deeply embedded in the prevailing cultural ideas of sexuality and gender, reflecting the late eighteenth-century view that female sexuality was “normal” and healthy.

Linnaeus’s system continued to inspire many followers in England, especially the devoted botanist Joseph Banks (1743-1820), who as a young man sailed on the Endeavor with Captain James Cook to Tahiti in 1768.⁹ Their main purpose was astronomical, to study the transit of Venus across the Sun. Choosing Tahiti as the site to observe the movements of this planet named for the goddess of love seemed most appropriate. In the previous year, Captain Samuel Wallis (1728-95) sailing on the *Dolphin* had “discovered” the island. Following initial skirmishes, the women of Tahiti found out how easily their sexual favors could inspire British Naval to lay down their arms. A French ship docked soon after, with similar results. Tales of the Tahiti women’s free and open sexuality filtered back to Europe and flamed the desires of their imperialist explorers. Upon his arrival, Banks enthusiastically availed himself of the sexual availability of the Tahitian maidens. Purea, a high ranking woman, arranged to have his clothes stolen during one hot and steamy encounter on shore, and Banks had to return to the ship draped only in a Tahitian cape. When Banks returned to England, this event and other tales of his sexual exploits provoked humorous poems and caricatures that mercilessly eroded his reputation in society. Nevertheless, his scientific contributions to botany were recognized and in 1778 he became President of the Royal Society, where he reigned for the next forty-two years. In the wake of Linnaeus, Banks and other European botanical explorers, exotic plants and human sexuality became inexorably fused. Europeans were amazed by their brilliant colors, unexpected shapes, profusion of flowers and the succulent juiciness of their fruits. Throughout Europe, gardens expanded in exotic directions. At the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and at Kew Gardens in London, tropical plants were displayed and celebrated as a record of territorial conquests.

Many of Ducornet’s paintings suggest the sexual seduction and lush fertility of tropical vegetation. *Desirous 4* is dominated by two large flowers below, and three sections of branches above. All these plants contain secret openings, elliptical cavities that tempt the eye to enter. On the two branches at the upper right, burls or knots have taken on the shapes of flowers with many petals. At the far right, an insect decked in perfect camouflage mimics an upright extension of the branch with seed pods. *Desirous 3* is an exuberant image, with a large flower above and two showy leaf clusters below. All of these plants are in vibrant health, with new leaves and petals opening to the sun. Spilling from the top flower are digit-like polyps, mostly paired, with a few frolicking babies bouncing into the air. The fertility of this plant is reminiscent of the famous *Adonis*, a flower discovered on Tahiti, which contained a hundred male stamens and a hundred female pistils within a single blossom.¹⁰

In the Romantic period, the French artist J. J. Grandville (1803-1847) dressed and coiffed coquettish young ladies with flowers, leaves and roots in his series entitled *Les fleurs animées* (*The Animated Flowers*), 1846-47. In one engraving, a rose lady recoils in horror as a monstrous pair of sharp metal clippers threatens to detach her from her cozy garden plot. In another plate, a pretty young nurse outfitted in the leaves and roots of the marsh mallow plant (*guimauve*), offers a bowl of her healing potion to a sick frog lying in a hospital bed. Concurrently in England, Linnaeus's lurid language had been purged of sexual metaphors to accommodate the prim expectations of Victorian audiences, even while Alice feasted on her magic mushrooms.

By the end of the nineteenth century, such droll and fanciful illustrations had given way to empirical science, as microscopes and photography became the principle tools of botanical illustration. Photography captured the specifics of plant anatomy, losing the universal aspects of earlier means of reproduction. Karl Blossfeldt's (1865-1932) detached and often symmetrical close-up photographs of plants retain the curvilinear eroticism of Art Nouveau vegetation tamed by the streamlined forms of modernism. His pods, leaves, stems and tendrils carry a sexual charge in spite of their linear simplicity. In the 1930s, Georgia O'Keefe protested the comparison of her large flower paintings to sexualized human anatomy, but her critics and fans remained seduced by the soft dark cavities of her overlapping petals pierced by arching stamens.

Ducornet suggests a scientific approach in *Desirous I*, in which a slice of cells anchors the center of the image, evoking origins and shifting the viewer's focus down to the scrutiny of the microscope. Yet, immediately science gives way to the fertile imagination. The eye and the mind shift in recognition, as forms evade a clear identification. Maybe instead it is a collection of smooth pebbles that have been trapped in a tidal pool. To the right, blades of articulated circles and dots emerge from a small tuft of grass, a nod to Dürer's famous *Great Piece of Turf*, 1503, one of the first paintings to observe and record closely the details of the natural world. These extensions could also be sea polyps, anchored deep upon the ocean floor. Suddenly, the circular pod becomes an eye of a swimming fish seen in profile, sporting a profusion of antennae and motorized back fins. To the left, one of the polyps has matured, with eyes or breasts swaying on a phallic stem. Seeds, pods and a womb-like herbarium float above. Below is the cross-section of the calyx of an exotic flower, with seven blue buds and seven red berries compressing the seasonal cycles of fertilization and maturity. The petals of this flower are winged and formed of a serpent's skin, suggesting eternal renewal.

With such images of metamorphosis, Ducornet reveals her affinities with surrealism. The surrealists were drawn to wilder places and untamed nature, such as subterranean caves studded with crystals, coral reefs of the South Pacific, and the tropics. They imagined the convulsive beauty of an abandoned steam locomotive forever stilled and encased in verdant jungle vegetation. Max Ernst created a series of frottage drawings which he transformed into prints and published as a series entitled, *Histoire Naturelle*, 1925. He created these frottages by rubbing graphite and charcoal on paper over rough surfaces. Then, a spark of recognition or inspiration would invoke a natural form—birds, insects, leaves, floating eyes—which he would then delineate and complete with additional drawing. These drawings, and many of his paintings, reveal his admiration for the illustrations of

natural history.¹¹ Brassai (1899-1984) photographed a sprouting potato as an example of the “magic-circumstantial,” in which an everyday plant seen out of context evokes the inexpressible mystery of a magical object that cannot be identified or defined. The surrealists envisioned the natural history of the imagination.

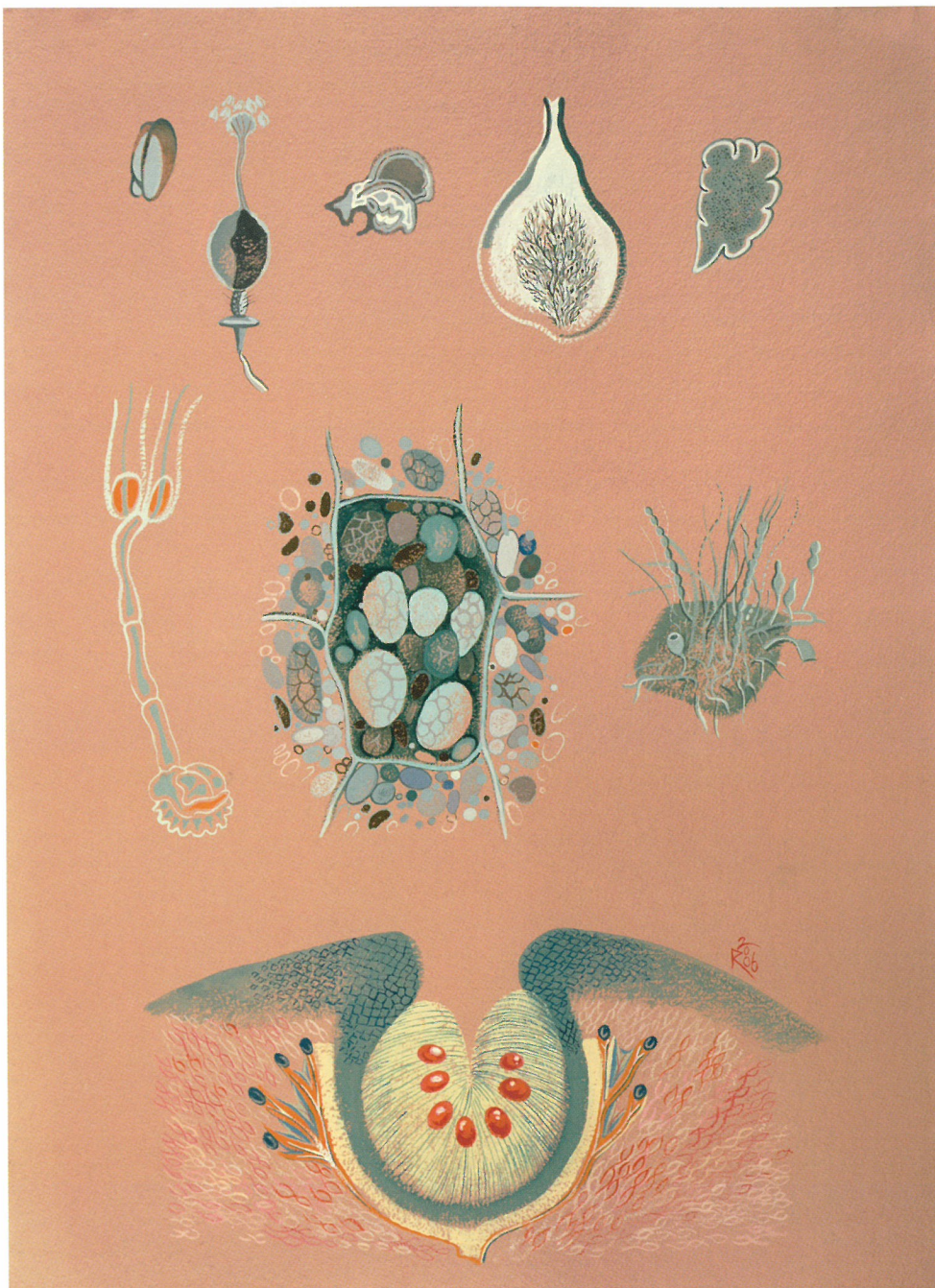
In Ducornet’s plants there are glimpses of anthropomorphic features, if not the suggestion of an entire body, as in her drawings of Mandrakes.¹² In *Desirous 5* the multiplicity of forms have coalesced. Flowers and buds spill from a gnarled base that hides eyes, vulvas, and more secret cavities. Balanced on a stem above, a circular seed pod reveals hidden treasures, small seeds in a juicy pulp, like the pomegranate eaten by Persephone that caused her annual migration from the fertile Earth above to the depths of Hades. At the top of this creature, a mature seed pod lies prone and receptive, as if resting a moment before taking flight as a bird. As in this image, many of Ducornet’s plants appear to be hermaphrodites, with ambiguous or even mutating sexual identity.

Today, we often forget the symbiotic relationship that exists between the respiratory cycles of plants and all living creatures, as plants during photosynthesis transform the carbon dioxide of our expirations back into oxygen. We are less aware of the diversity of plants that surround us. The novice botanist turns the pages of a modern flora field guide to identify the yellow ones or the purples ones, without discovering a plant’s medicinal powers, its mythological legend, or its life cycle. Few people maintain kitchen gardens, but prefer homes with low maintenance yards. Our fruit comes packaged in plastic wrap, radiated and genetically altered to preserve its shelf life rather than its flavor. We are far removed from living at the center of the cosmic diagrams of Robert Fludd (1574-1637), who placed the earth enclosed within a concentric circular system leading to the planets, stars and the heavenly spheres beyond. In Fludd’s engravings, the mineral, vegetable and animal realms all play an important role as the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm. Ducornet’s drawings remind us of the magic once apparent in the natural world and of our place within it.

More could be said about the relationship between Ducornet’s art and her writing, the evocation of visual imagery within her novels, and the inclusion of illustrations within her texts. Viewed on their own, Ducornet’s drawings can inspire the viewer to a new awareness of the plant world and to our relationship to plants within the broader continuum of natural creation. The suggested life cycles of these plants, so full of joy, passion and fecundity can inspire a deeper understanding of our own quests for pleasure and delight as well as our yearning to engage in the more transcendent processes of physical, mental and spiritual metamorphosis.

NOTES

- ¹ Gill Saunders, *Picturing Plants: An Analytical History of Botanical Illustration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 17-40.
- ² Luisa Cogliati Arano, *The Medieval Health Handbook* (New York: George Braziller, 1976). Illustrated manuscript versions are now housed in Liège, Paris, Vienna, Rome and Rouen.
- ³ William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
- ⁴ The Getty Museum now owns this manuscript, Ms 20. Lee Hendrix and Thea Vignau-Wilberg, *Mira calligraphiae monumenta* (Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1992). 1-54.
- ⁵ Ducornet acknowledges her admiration for Maria Sibylla Merian's work in "Optical Pleasure," *The Monstrous and the Marvelous* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1999), 54. This collection of essays shares the inspiration she has gained from visits to natural history museums and to other authors and artists inspired by natural history collections.
- ⁶ Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 11-39.
- ⁷ Linnaeus, *The Elements of Botany*, trans. Hugh Rose, cited by Janet Browne, "Botany for Gentlemen: Erasmus Darwin and the 'Loves of the Plants,'" *Isis* 80.4 (December 1989), 600.
- ⁸ Browne, 592-621.
- ⁹ Patricia Fara, *Sex, Botany and Empire: The Story of Carl Linnaeus and Joseph Banks* (Cambridge, England: Icon Books, 2004), 1-18.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 117-118.
- ¹¹ Elizabeth Legge, "Zeuxis's Grapes, Novalis's Fossils, Freud's Flowers: Max Ernst's *Natural History*, *Art History*, 16 (March 1993): 147-172.
- ¹² M. E. Warlick, "Rikki Ducornet: An Alchemy of Dreams and Desire," *Cauda Pavonis* ns. 20.2 (Fall, 2001): 24-34.



Desirous 1

2006, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Desirous 2

2006, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Desirous 3

2006, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Desirous 4

2006, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Desirous 5
2006, 22x30"

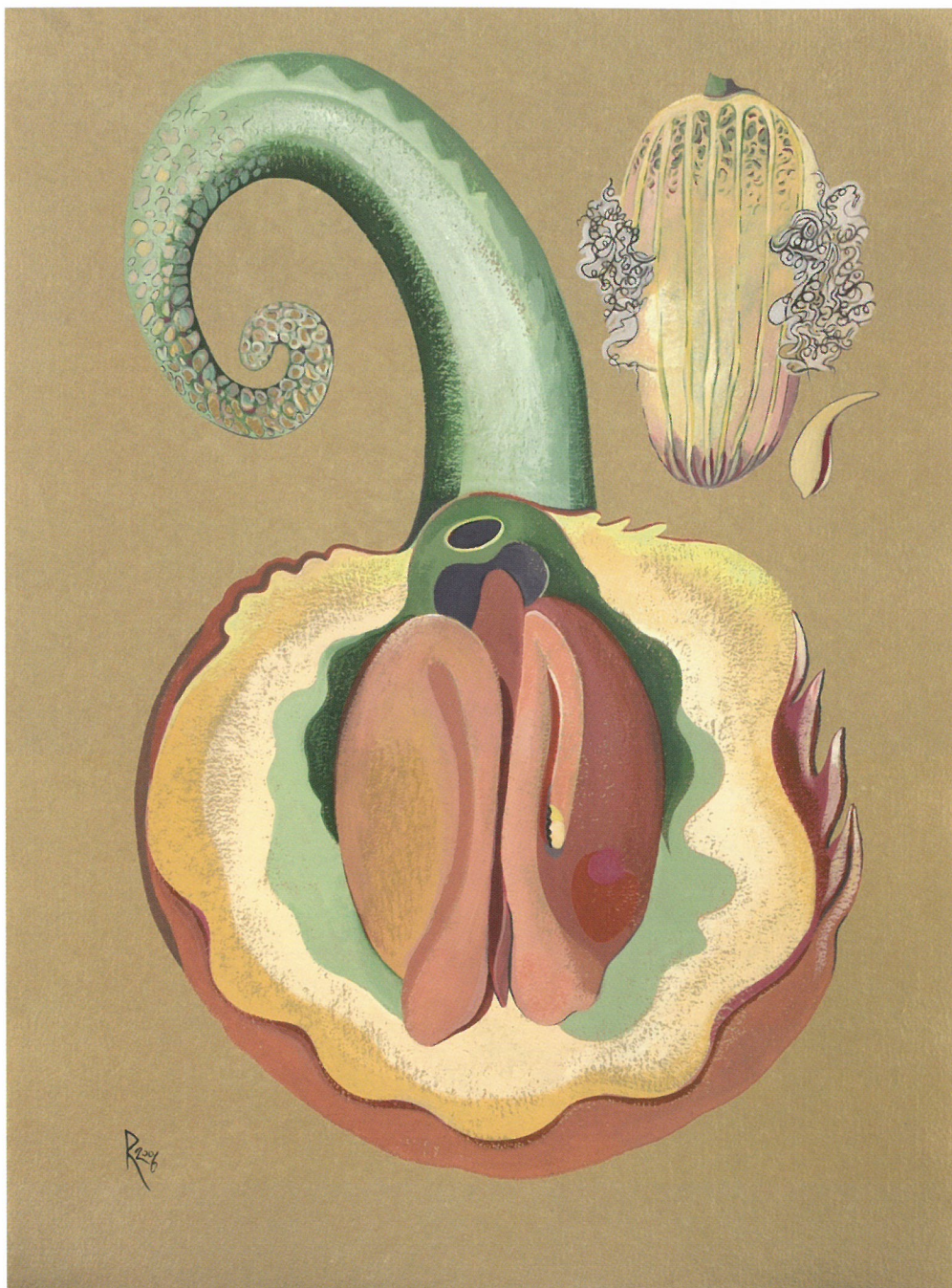
gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Desirous 6

2006, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Desirous 7

2006, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Desirous 8

2006, 22x30"

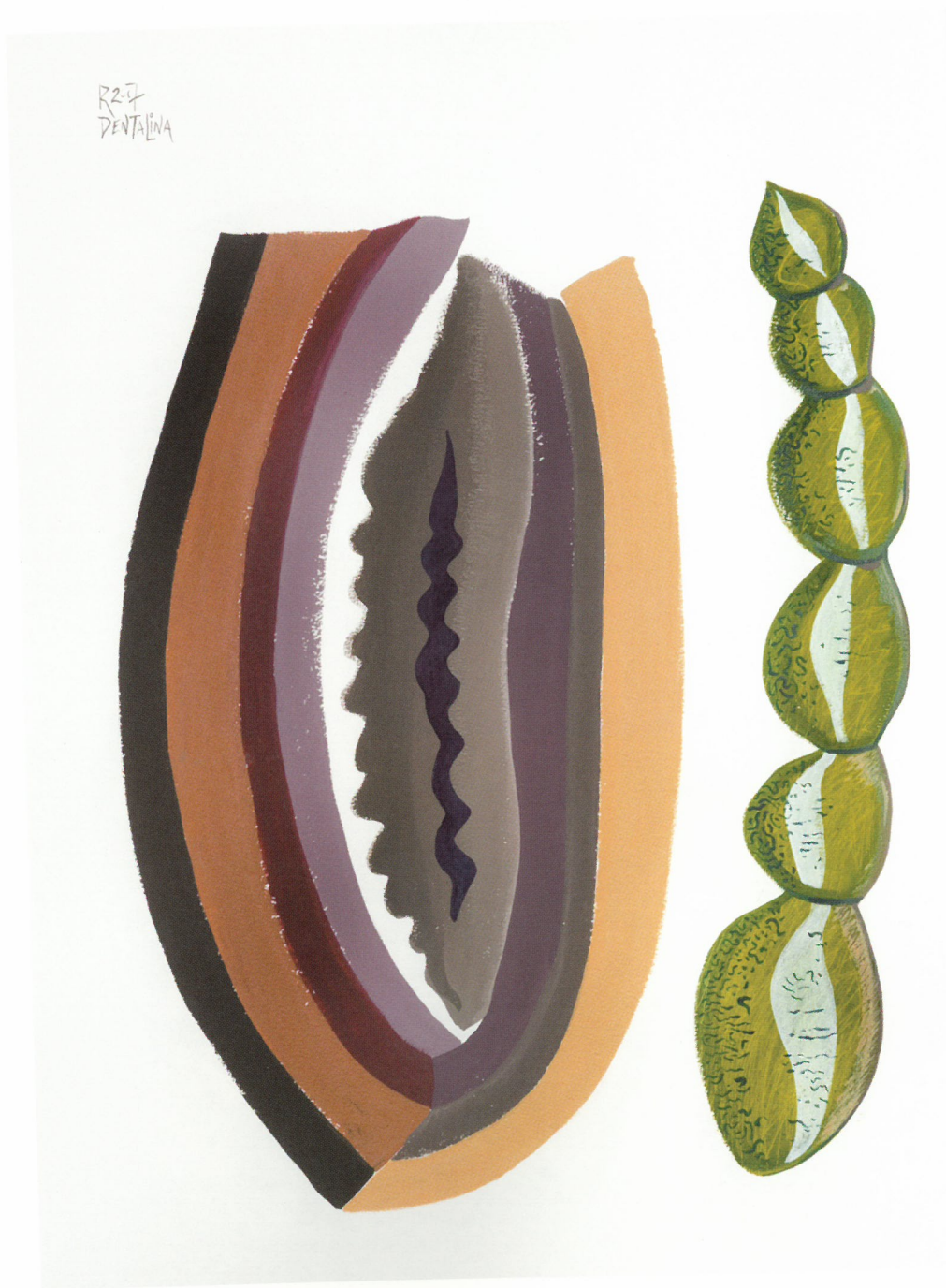
gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



The Mountain Gnaws Away at the Sun and Then

2007, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Dentalina

2007, 22x30"

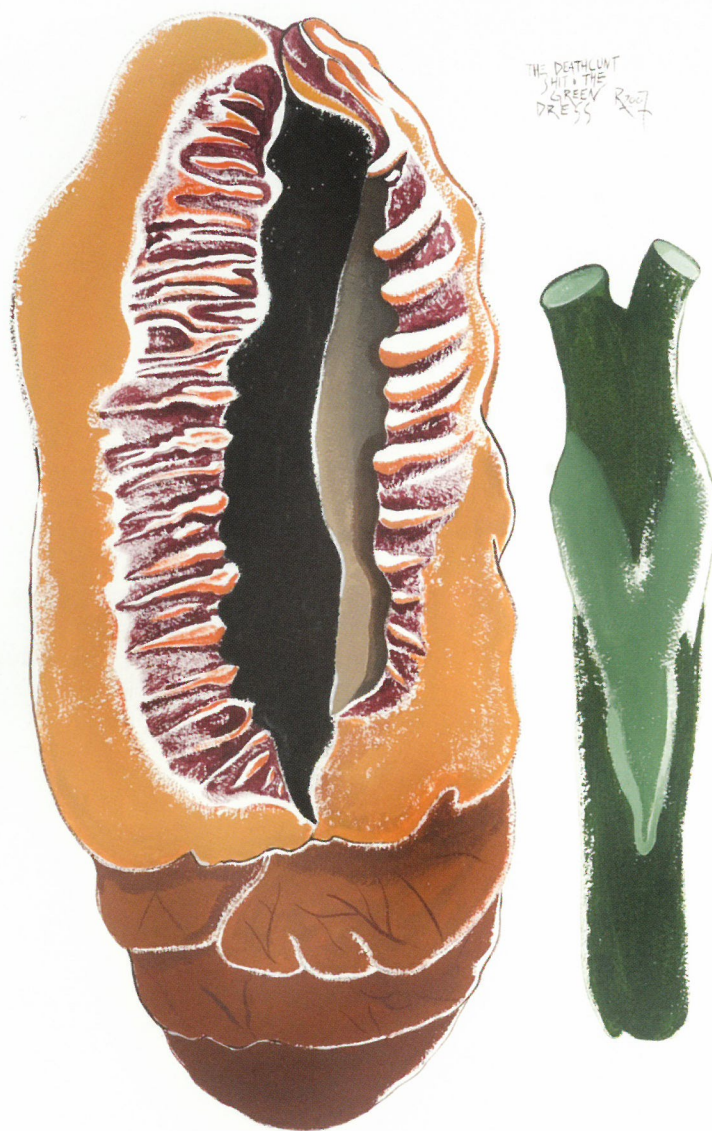
gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Pearl Buttons

2007, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



The Death Cunt, Shit and the Green Dress

2007, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Paradise

2007, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Paper Doll

2007, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Paper Doll

2007, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper



Paper Doll

2007, 22x30"

gouache, acrylic and watercolor on Arches heavy water color paper