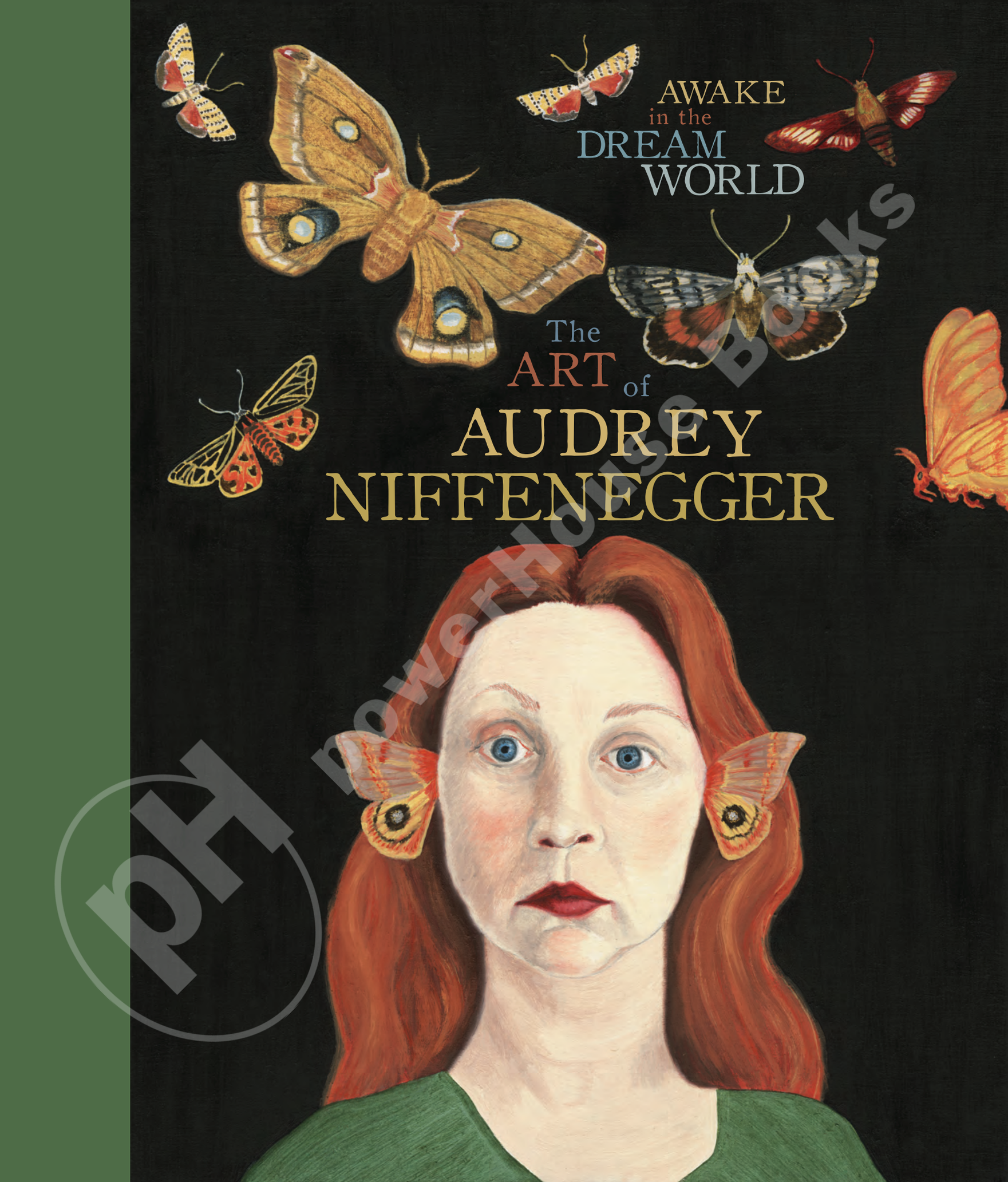

AWAKE IN THE DREAM WORLD:
THE ART OF AUDREY NIFFENEGGER

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AWAKE in the DREAM WORLD

The ART of AUDREY NIFFENEGGER

Essays by KRYSTYNA WASSERMAN,
MARK PASCALE,
AND AUDREY NIFFENEGGER

NATIONAL MUSEUM of WOMEN in the ARTS

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Awake in the Dream World
The Art of Audrey Niffenegger

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WOMEN IN THE ARTS
WASHINGTON, D.C.
JUNE 21–NOVEMBER 10, 2013

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COVER: *Moths of the New World*, 2005 (see page 79)
BACK COVER: Details from *Moths of the New World*, 2005 (see page 79)
FRONTISPIECE: *Nest* (detail), 2000 (see page 73)
PAGES 34–35: *Mistaken identity.* (detail), from *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, 1985–98 (see page 50)
PAGES 70–71: *Lady with Monkey* (detail), 2005 (see page 82)
PAGES 86–87: *Lovers' Embrace* (detail), from portfolio *Vanitas*, 1989 (see page 90)

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TABLE of CONTENTS

Acknowledgments:
Susan Fisher Sterling **6**
Audrey Niffenegger **8**

Krystyna Wasserman *Swept Away by Magic: The Art of Audrey Niffenegger* **10**
Mark Pascale *Audrey Niffenegger: A Primer* **20**
Audrey Niffenegger *Awake in the Dream World* **28**

ADVENTURES IN BOOKLAND **34**
STATES OF MIND **70**
IN DREAMLAND **86**

Exhibition Checklist **106**
Chronology **116**

Mark Pascale

AUDREY NIFFENEGGER: A PRIMER

An educator's primary duty is to coax a person out of raw, immature material. People educate themselves if provided the opportunity to do so. At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where Audrey and I began our personhood in 1981, the idea of education was basically defined by existentialism.[1] There were no grades, and little if any structure. I was her professor, instructing a beginning lithography class, and although I cannot remember the first time I met Audrey, or our first conversation, I do remember the impression she made on me. She was born more or less fully formed. What to do with her?

Years later, I asked her high school mentor, William Wimmer, if he agreed that Audrey bounced out of the womb an adult. He replied, "Audrey was never a child."[2] Apparently, she struck Mr. Wimmer very much the same way that she did me. She was always eager—to work, to try anything, to listen and share stories. She was and is the kind of person who reads a lot—certainly more, and more broadly than me—but she never rubbed it in. Instead, if there were no chance to discuss a particular text, in her very adult way, she would find a topic of mutual interest.

In the early 1980s, SAIC was less like a college than anything I had experienced. There was a nearly complete lack of convention—in social circles, fashion, or the curriculum. It was fairly typical to have a first- or second-semester freshman with little or no drawing experience taking a beginning lithography class—a medium that fundamentally requires drawing skills. Nothing prepared me for this, and nothing prepared me for the rather indifferent attitude that students often adopted toward "requirements." Audrey stepped into one of my early classes at SAIC,[3] and I saw in her a depth beyond what her work indicated in that class. She liked drawing with line—she was already quite adept at etching—and, as etching folks often do, she quickly developed an anathema to the lithography process, not least because of the relative difficulty of making a drawing with as sharply defined a line as one created through line etching.[4] Yet, she found sufficient interest in playing with the technique that she repeated the class twice more at the advanced level.[5]

Indeed, Audrey, along with several of her high-school peers, repeatedly took classes with me at SAIC during the early 1980s.[6] As a group, they were high-spirited, intensely funny, and intelligent, and they always pushed the boundaries of what I thought acceptable as a print. When I go back through my teaching portfolio, I am struck by how many prints by this group of students I still use as examples. They are all different, but similar in the extent to which they willfully undermined my attempts to make them conform to my expectations. This, of course, is a time-honored methodology in college-level teaching: to provide instruction with a cause and effect, purposefully inviting disagreement and contrary results so that students expand beyond their own expectations.

Aubrey **Vincent** Beardsley, ***Virgilius the Sorcerer***, c. 1893
Pen and brush and black ink, over traces of graphite, on ivory wove paper, laid down on board
9 1/8 x 5 5/8 in.
Gift of Robert Allerton, 1925.928, The Art Institute of Chicago

CREDIT:
Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago

Thinking about what remains in my holdings of Audrey's early work, I am struck by the consistently depressing or dark subject matter. That, often coupled with an impish sense of humor, seemed to define this period in her life.[7] I could relate; as an undergraduate, I commuted from home, just as Audrey did. There is a special social pressure for college commuters, compared to their apartment- or campus-dwelling peers, who are fairly free from parental scrutiny. It's quite a bit more difficult to establish independence when you know that you'll be sleeping in your childhood bed, and taking meals with your family at the very moment when you are trying to detach and become self-sufficient. Looking inward, finding places of fantasy life, and other methods of ratcheting oneself out of the preceding eighteen years of life are fairly common ground. Audrey's fantasy life was enriched by her reading as well as her discovery of artists such as Aubrey Beardsley and Egon Schiele. In Beardsley she discovered an artist who drew in a familiar but more sophisticated way than she did, and who also was dedicated to text. Combining words and pictures was an early motif within Audrey's work—in fact, I can hardly think of a lithograph she made without a text of some kind. Thinking of her visual novels, illustrated with etchings, illuminates the significance of her early discovery of Beardsley, as well as of Victorian mores. William Wimmer even characterized her early work as featuring floating women garbed in flowing frocks, not unlike the rather elaborate costume worn by Virgilius in the Beardsley drawing at the Art Institute which Audrey would have seen as a student (opposite).

Among Audrey's other early influences were drawings by Egon Schiele and Horst Janssen. Like Beardsley, Schiele probably has shocked many teenage artists first stumbling upon his work (he certainly shocked me out of my Ingres-worship). His sad biography and short life, coupled with the eroticism and acute vision he expressed, are still stunning discoveries for anyone who happens upon or seeks out his work. In addition, Schiele's line and color were so expressive, and his repetitive format likewise is appealing to younger artists accustomed to drawing in sketchbooks. The Art Institute of Chicago has only two sheets of Schiele's mature drawings, both double-sided and typical of his method. Each depicts at least one self-portrait—which, given her penchant for revealing self-portraiture, would have been of great interest to Niffenegger—with completely different characteristics. In one Schiele, we see the artist's head alone with a sleepy or sickly gaze, held up by his long, thin hand and partially rendered with oil paint (page 24). The second, the verso of a major composition, is a more typical, vaguely erotic self-portrait of the artist's emaciated nude body embracing a nude model; both figures' genitals are bare and generalized. Both drawings are executed with a powerful contour gesture—one rather gloomy and the other desperate and urgent. What makes these discoveries so vital to Niffenegger is that both Beardsley and Schiele made images either as illuminations for other texts or made images fraught with innuendo that was picaresque or simply literary. Both conditions continue to inform her visual and literary work.

Audrey Niffenegger, *Aubrey Beardsley Ex Libris*, 2005
Ink on paper
6 1/8 x 6 in.
Collection of Audrey Niffenegger, Chicago, Illinois

In Janssen, Audrey discovered one very important lesson. When she saw the Art Institute's exhibition *Horst Janssen: Drawings & Etchings*,[8] she witnessed, perhaps for the first time, an overview of work by a contemporary artist whose major contribution and corpus of work was on paper. The exhibition featured a large, long wall of colorful self-portraits. One showed the artist with a bespectacled, tortured face seen from below, eyes and mouth a bruised red-purple, announcing his initials "H" and "J," which float past and above his head. It is a desperate image, urgently

revealing the artist's psyche and willingly showing his vulnerability (opposite). Janssen drew the work in 1982, the same year it was acquired by the museum. All of these factors must have impressed the young Audrey Niffenegger, particularly the realizations that it was possible to be recognized by a major museum during one's lifetime and to have a recognized career based primarily on works on paper. Janssen was an excellent printmaker as well, and the majority of his intaglio prints seen in the exhibition were direct, using the hand-drawing processes of drypoint and etching deliberately and minimally, so that the images were not augmented by printmaking tricks.[9]

Egon Schiele, *Self-Portrait*, 1913; Graphite, with touches of oil, on wove paper
12 1/2 x 18 1/4 in.
Restricted gift of Mr. and Mrs. William O. Hunt and Prints and Drawings Purchase Account, 1966.186R; The Art Institute of Chicago

CREDIT:
Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago

During her career, Niffenegger has made a significant number of self-portraits. It is a time-honored motif, dating to at least the Greek myth of the hunter Narcissus, who died after seeing his reflection, committing suicide because he was unable to live with the knowledge of his own beauty. All of the artists whose work Audrey studied at the Art Institute made self-portraits; indeed, the museum focuses on artists' self-portrait drawings. Another significant example of the motif, Jean Siméon Chardin's pastel *Self-Portrait with a Visor* (1776; page 26) entered the collection and was exhibited during Audrey's student years.[10] The image of the painter, aged, feminized by the scarf that ties his visor to his head, must surely have been interesting to her. The passing of time has long been a theme in her work, as have been the qualities of persona and physiognomy. One can see this in her books, as well as her treatments of herself (several of which are included in this exhibition), not to mention her first published novel, *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

There were other exhibitions during Audrey's student years that may have influenced her, or given her permission to continue working in the style she established early on. In 1982, the Art Institute mounted *Incunabula of Etching*, which included many fine examples of the medium in its earliest iteration. Among the works were examples by Dürer, whose early attempts at etching were rudimentary compared to his elegant engravings. Also, in 1984, *Bindings from Ryerson and Burnham Libraries* was available in the library's vitrines in the reading room. Among the special collections within the library is the Mary Reynolds Collection, which contains works that have influenced many generations of SAIC students. Reynolds was an intimate of Marcel Duchamp, and close with all of the major Surrealist artists in Paris. She was a bookbinder who created special, one-of-a-kind bindings for certain artist's books—one included the skins of two toads.[11] Audrey certainly learned how to bind her own books as a student, but one has to consider the powerful conceptual influence on the young artist by the whimsicality of a woman like Mary Reynolds.

Finally, what has always stayed with me as one of Audrey's many influences and something she introduced me to is the great serial comic strip by Lynda Barry, "Ernie Pook's Comeek," that appeared in the *Chicago Reader*, a weekly newspaper.[12] I still recall how, on Thursdays, students and faculty alike waited for the weekly *Reader* delivery in the lobby of SAIC's Columbus Drive building. Audrey probably went straight for "Ernie Pook"—she had an appetite for it, as de Kooning and other artists did for George Herriman's "Krazy Kat." What Barry's strip lacked in daily-comics slapstick and gags, it delivered in spades in the realm of adolescent interior life. The main characters of "Ernie Pook" were Marlys and Arna (great names for a young artist with deep literary interests and imagination), whose experience of life was filled with acute pathos and psychology. A young adult like Audrey could easily relate to their daily tribulations and observations of everything from the banal to the fabulous. Now truly adult in years, she has published her own volume of comics. It is a serialized graphic novel in the manner of "Ernie Pook's Comeek," *The Night Bookmobile*, which she began publishing in 2008 in *The Guardian*, and subsequently published in book form in 2010.

Horst Janssen, ***Therapeutic Mask***, from *Paranoia Series*, 1982
Pastel and graphite on cream wove paper (pieced at bottom)
14 7/8 x 10 1/4 in.
Restricted gift of Dr. Eugene A. Solow, 1982.1488; The Art Institute of Chicago

CREDIT:
Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago

During the years that Audrey has exhibited her work, I have observed her vacillate between her lyrical, linear style of making figures and her sincere exploration of carefully observed drawings and paintings, rendered in an Old Master style. What I often sensed was missing from these is her terrific ability to articulate a story in a pithy visual manner, but one that combined her storytelling ability with her evolving graphic and painterly interests. In her earlier books, such as *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, she certainly exhibits a concise graphic vocabulary—good enough for a trade edition to be produced based on what is an extraordinarily deluxe, hand-bound *livre d'artiste*. The book's illustrations follow a stylistic pattern that Audrey

Jean Siméon Chardin, ***Self-Portrait with a Visor***, c. 1776
Pastel on blue laid paper, mounted on canvas
18 x 14 3/4 in.
Clarence Buckingham Collection and the Harold Joachim Memorial Fund, 1984.61; The Art Institute of Chicago

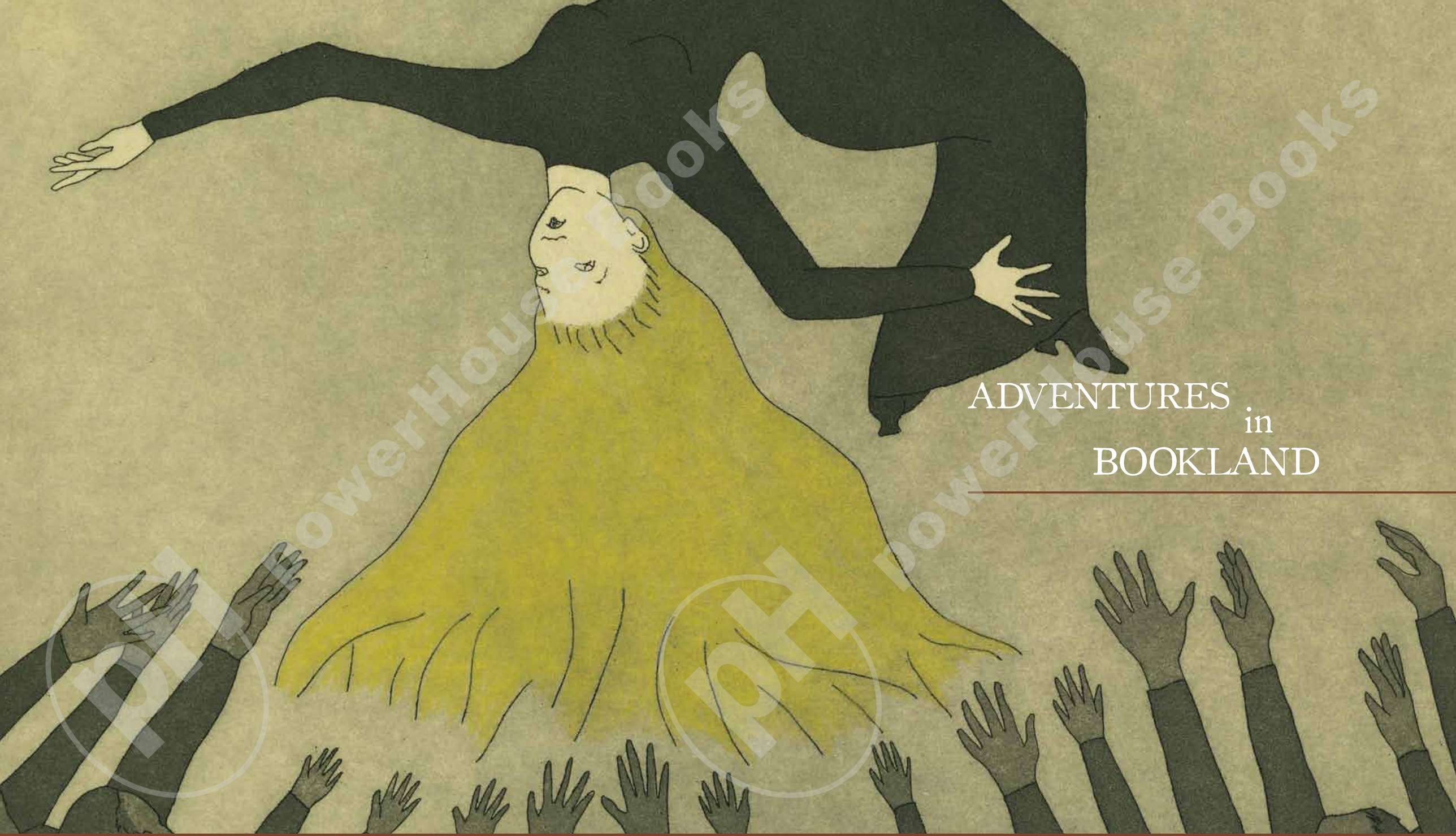
CREDIT:
Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago

instigated very early on—a fluid, unembellished line to describe figures, in concert with generally flat planes of aquatint tone. The images have a quotidian quality that remains to this day in her etched work, even in her most recent publication, *Raven Girl*.

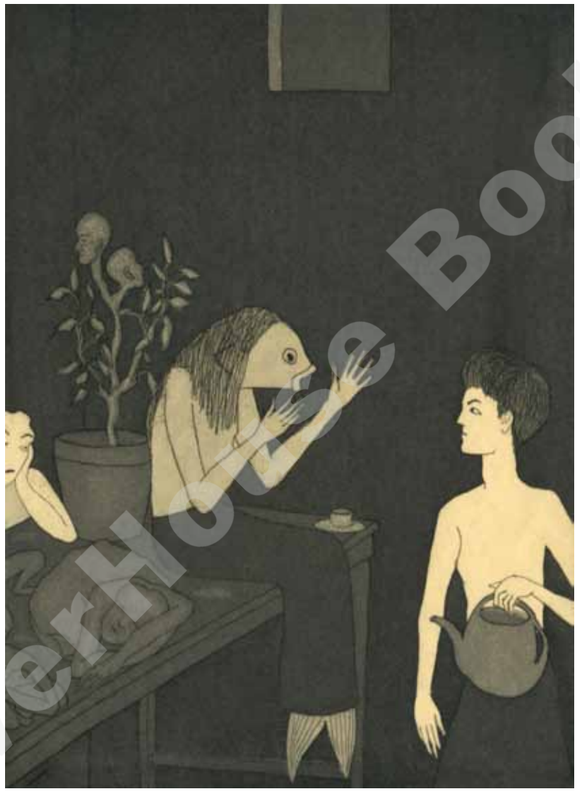
When she exhibited the drawings for *The Night Bookmobile* (not in this exhibition) a few years ago, a forceful change in her visual syntax struck me. She had illustration sufficient for reproduction, but enough of her usual manner remained to remind me that it was Audrey. There was color, but the color was less self-conscious than her painting palette. In short, I felt that she had established a relaxed style, joyful, sophisticated, and full of the love and wonder she has for the world of books and knowledge, expressed in a graphic form. I have ruminated about this for a few years without broaching it with her—Why would she care what I think, now that she has far surpassed me in the field? It leaves me happy and satisfied to have had a chance to express these thoughts publicly, in a book celebrating her rich career. I am so fortunate to know Audrey and always have felt blessed that for a few years we shared our growth in close proximity.

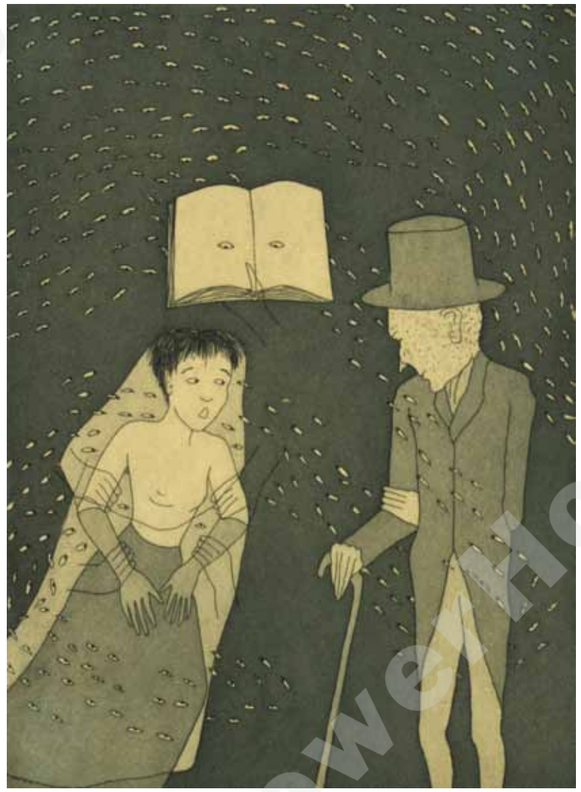
NOTES:

1. I mean that "beginning personhood" refers to attaining independence. For me, the experience at SAIC freed me from the bonds of academia as I experienced them in state universities. It was not so much a lowering of my standards as establishing new priorities. For Audrey, it was more literal—leaving behind requirements and establishing her own course and choices.
2. Phone conversation, August 10, 2012.
3. She enrolled in Beginning Lithography during the spring 1982 semester. It was the second semester at SAIC for both of us.
4. I am reminded of something Jasper Johns, a master of lithography once said about his initial attempts at etching: "Within a short unit of an etching line there are fantastic things happening in the black ink, and none of those things are what one had in mind." Johns, too, went on to master the combined etching processes.
5. Niffenegger enrolled in advanced classes with me in the fall 1982 and spring 1983 semesters. For her experience with etching, see the "Chronology" (page 114) in this book.
6. Among them were David Kelly, Allen Levinson, Tina Onderdonk, and Margret (Peggy) Wade—all students of William Wimmer at Evanston Township High School.
7. Among the prints that I still have is one that she made with an etching needle, scratched into a black tusche ground to produce a white line on black. The image is a somewhat comical drawing of a car driven by a hooded figure along a lonely road at night. It's a bit like a *New Yorker* cartoon.
8. Exhibition at The Art Institute of Chicago, November 17–December 30, 1984.
9. These were referred to as "frivolous effects" by my professors.
10. In addition to being a self-portrait, the work is a pastel drawing—another graphic medium that was once considered a form of painting, and another specialty of the Art Institute's collection. The Chardin, one of five pastel self-portraits, is a pendant to another pastel portrait he made of his wife, and they were exhibited together in the Salon of 1775. The Art Institute acquired the portrait of Madame Chardin in 1962, and waited patiently for the companion pastel to become available. They were first exhibited together in the Art Institute's galleries in the spring of 1984, during Audrey's student years at SAIC.
11. The binding by Reynolds was created for an earlier publication, Jean-Pierre Brisset, *La Science de Dieu ou La Création de l'homme* (Paris: Chamuel Editeur, 1900). For more on Reynolds and the holdings at the Art Institute, see *Surrealism and Its Affinities: The Mary Reynolds Collection, A Bibliography Compiled by Hugh Edwards* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1973), 84; and "Mary Reynolds and the Spirit of Surrealism," *The Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996).
12. Barry started publishing "Ernie Pook's Comeek" in the *Chicago Reader* in 1979, which encouraged her to move to Chicago, where she lived for many years. Her presence in Chicago, as well as her career in publishing, was surely inspirational to Audrey.



ADVENTURES in BOOKLAND



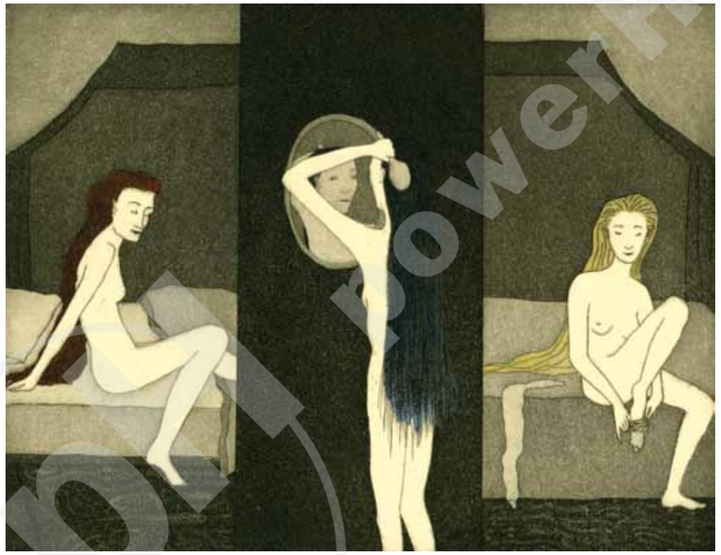


LEFT:
Introduction, from *The Adventuress*

RIGHT:
Her companions were the other Creatures the alchemist had created.,
from *The Adventuress*

LEFT:
The wedding, from *The Adventuress*

RIGHT:
Revelry, from *The Adventuress*



TOP:
Frontispiece from *The Three Incestuous Sisters*

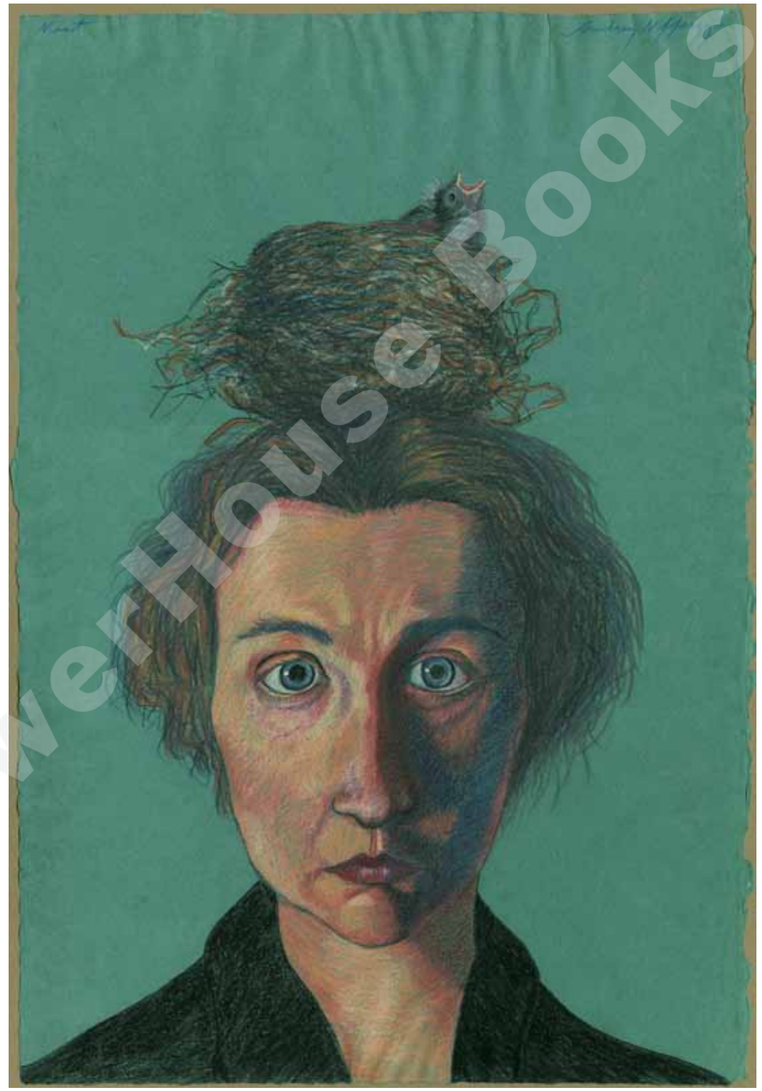
BOTTOM:
Bettine, the youngest, had blond hair and was considered the prettiest sister. Ophile, the eldest, had blue hair and was often thought to be the smartest sister. And Clothilde, who had red hair, was in the middle, and was the most talented sister., from *The Three Incestuous Sisters*

TOP:
Bad luck: Clothilde., from *The Three Incestuous Sisters*

BOTTOM:
A few days later; Clothilde practices levitation at breakfast., from *The Three Incestuous Sisters*

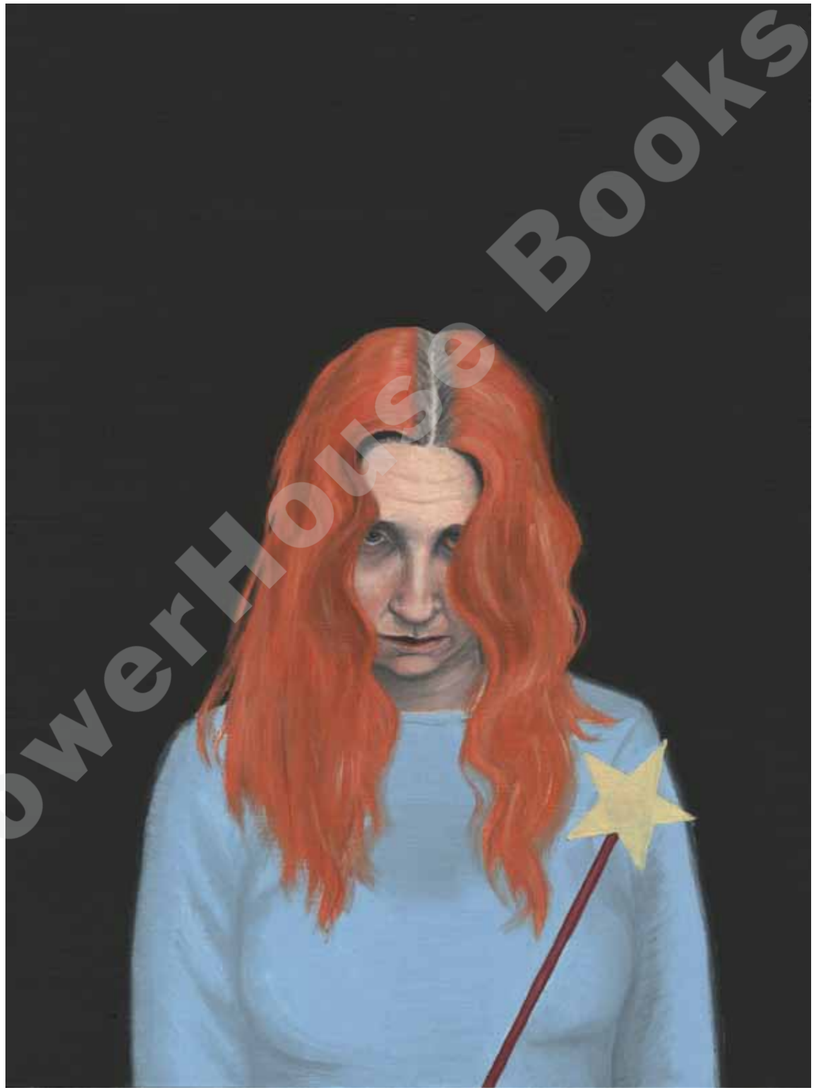
STATES of MIND

Nest, 1985
Aquatint on Fusuma Grey paper
18 x 12 in.
Edition 4/12
Collection of Audrey Niffenegger, Chicago, Illinois

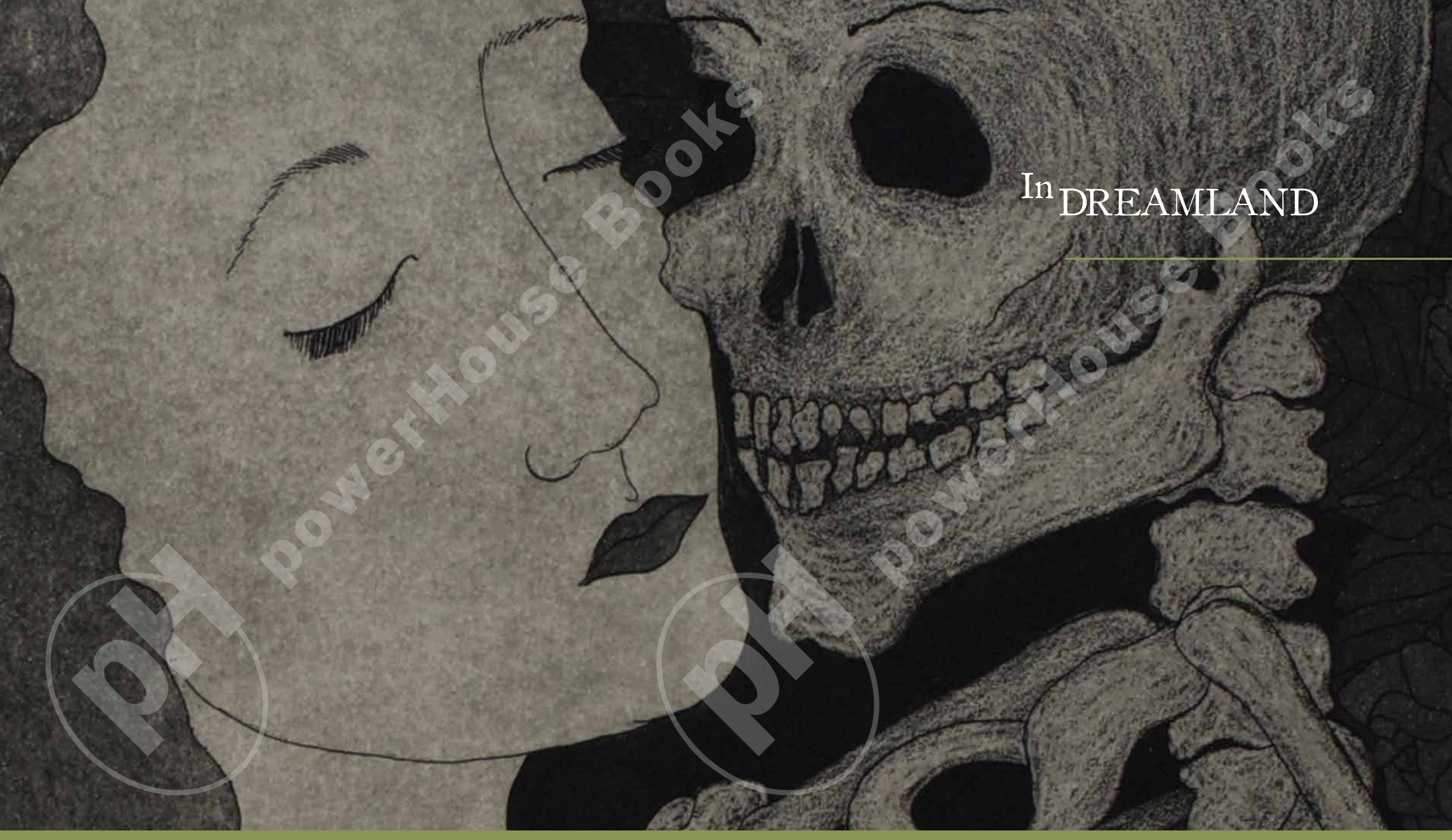


Nest, 2000
Colored pencil and charcoal on paper
17 7/8 x 12 1/4 in.
Collection of Mary Jean Thomson, Riverwoods, Illinois

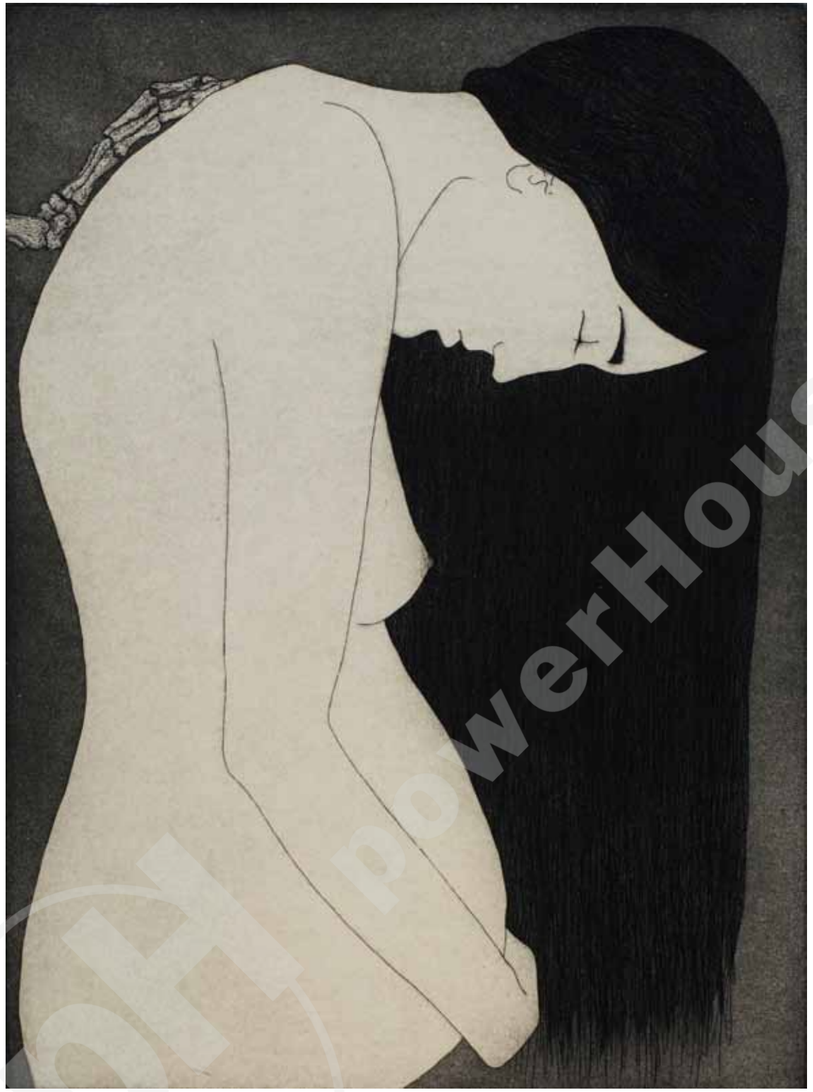
Self-Portrait in Black Hat, 2003
Ink, gouache, and colored pencil on found paper
9 7/8 x 6 3/4 in.
Collection of Mary Jean Thomson, Riverwoods, Illinois



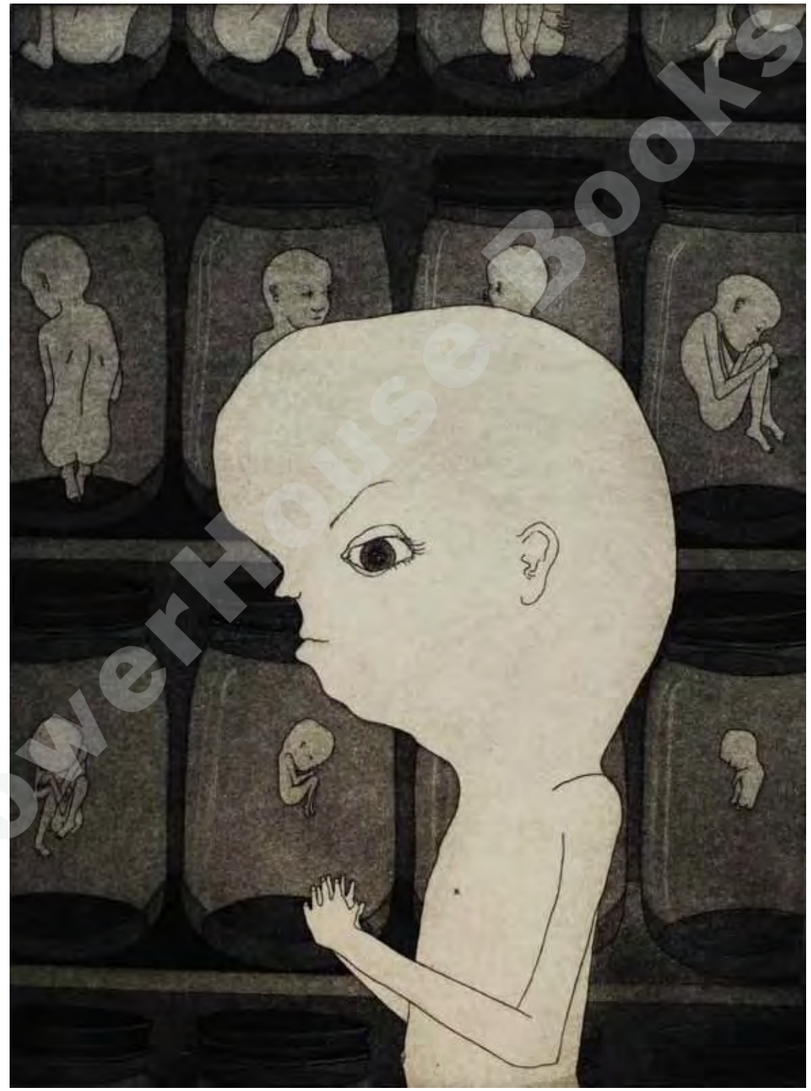
Bad Fairy, 2005
Oil on wooden panel
12 x 8 3/4 in.
Collection of Larry and Laura Gerber, Highland Park, Illinois



In DREAMLAND

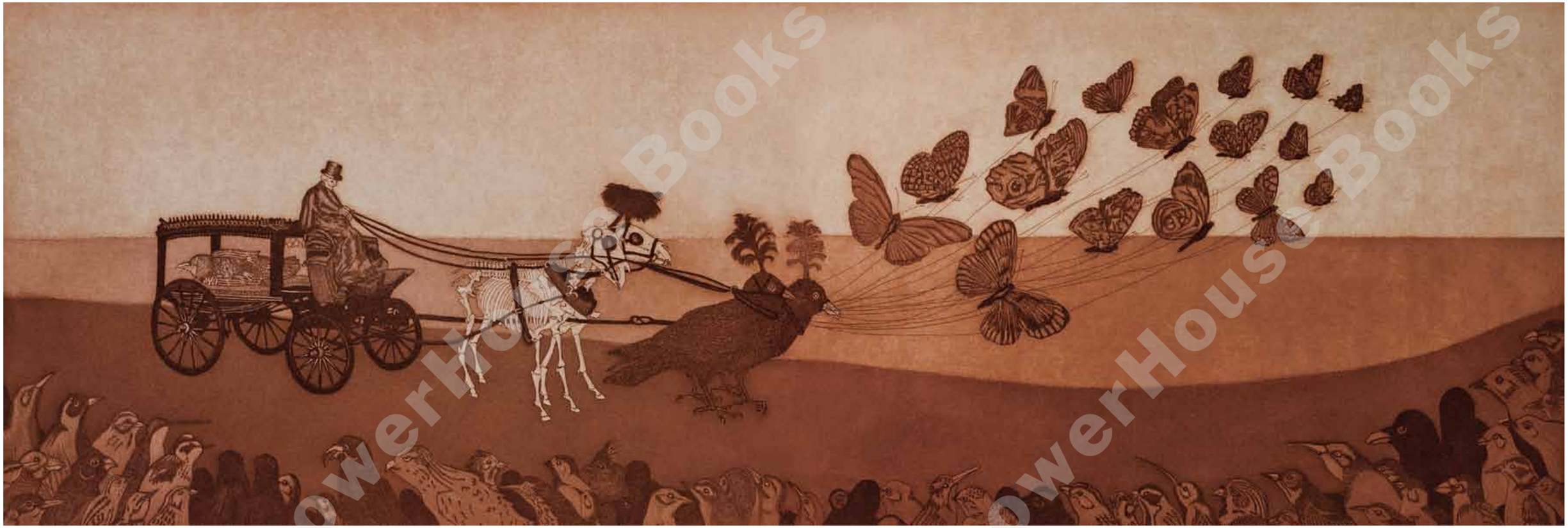


Death Comforts the Mother, from portfolio *Vanitas*, 1989
Poem "Before the Birth of One of her Children," by Anne Bradstreet
Etching with aquatint on Stonehenge Natural paper
30 x 22 1/4 in.
Edition 1/20
Collection of Audrey Niffenegger, Chicago, Illinois



The Embryos, from portfolio *Vanitas*, 1989
Poem "A Cradle Song," by Thomas Dekker
Etching with aquatint on Stonehenge Natural paper
30 x 22 1/2 in.
Edition 1/20
Collection of Audrey Niffenegger, Chicago, Illinois

IN DREAMLAND



The Starling's Funeral, 2008
Aquatint on Sakamoto paper
12 x 35 1/2 in.
Edition of 15; artist's proof
Collection of Audrey Niffenegger, Chicago, Illinois

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