

Independent Weekly

VOTE! The Indy's 2010 Best of the Triangle
Arts » Visual Art



Family photos inspired by Lewis Carroll's work Underground art

by Chris Vitello

Down the Rabbit Hole

Nowadays, really seeing images is nearly as difficult as making original ones.

Habituated to computer-generated imagery and video game narratives integrated into HD screens hung in most public places, one must push myriad frames of reference and significance out of the way just to lay eyes and mind on an image as such. If you make this effort of seeing, you'll be rewarded at Tama Hochbaum's *Down the Rabbit Hole*, a show of composite photographs based on Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland story, at Durham's Golden Belt.

Begun for a themed group show at UNC-Chapel Hill's Ackland Museum, Hochbaum's series is now fully realized in about 30 witty and whimsical color prints featuring family members and friends as the characters we've all come to love over the years in the many retellings of Alice's adventures. Her show provides a terrific contrast to the seamless and somewhat sanitized CGI treatment by Tim Burton currently in movie theaters—Hochbaum's Alice lives among us and delivers more of the mystery of general experience than Burton's delightfully creepy thrill ride. Hochbaum combines anywhere from 10 to 35 different pictures into her final images, retaining many of the original shots' linear edges to give a look that lends a Futurist appearance to her backgrounds and endows the characters with the kinetic anxiety that has made their story so memorable.

Hochbaum's relationship with Lewis Carroll's original photographs of Alice Liddell dates back to her earlier career as a painter and to her studies with Robert Pincus-Witten at Queens College. By referencing Carroll's images, Hochbaum reminds us that he was one of the late-19th century's great polymaths. An accomplished photographer of acquaintances and landscapes in the early days of the medium, Carroll also wrote notably on mathematics and logic, created popular word games, including a precursor of Scrabble, and invented oddities such as a tablet on which to record one's dreams in symbols without turning on the light to write.

This loosening of logic in order to gain a wider point of view holds Carroll's writing, creations and exploits together. Hochbaum channels his madcap mind in images like the one that lends the show its title. Objects fly around an endless bookcase that offers glimpses of Auster and Borges books as Alice—played by Hochbaum's daughter Claire—plummets toward Wonderland. At the bottom of the rabbit hole, Alice shrinks and then grows into a giant in front of a receding archway that brings Russian matrushka dolls to mind, intertwining the frantic and fascinating.

Hochbaum's best works use image seams and Photoshop pixilations either to singularize an image with narrative focus or to feature bright, flat figures against tense, congested backgrounds. In "Swimming in Tears," Alice is shown in a dead-man's float in a silvery layer that could be clouds, smoke, water or bedclothes. Her abandonment to the nonsensical underground comes across as both threatening and exciting, as Hochbaum somehow nestles her subject into a turbulent yet even mass of soft tessellations.

It's always interesting to see an artist's interpretation of familiar stories, and this show delivers the same lightness and darkness that keeps us reading Carroll's work well into adulthood. At her best, Hochbaum endows the dramatic moments of the Alice narrative with its often-contradictory emotional tones through compositional techniques that are both kinetic and unifying. It's a difficult task for the artist but not difficult for viewers of all ages to enjoy. My 3-year-old daughter explained why "Caucus Race," in

which Alice watches a dodo and several stuffed birds dance in a ring, was her favorite: "It looks like they're having fun."

Tags: [Tama Hochbaum](#), [Golden Belt](#)

[✉ Email a Friend](#) [🖨 Print](#) [➡ Share](#) [🔖 Save this Story](#) [➕ Add to Custom List](#) [💬 Comments \(1\)](#)

Related Events

Down the Rabbit Hole @ Golden Belt

March 19–April 14

[Comments \(0\)](#)

Related Locations

Golden Belt

[Durham](#)

807 E Main St

★★★★★ [Be the first to review this location!](#)

[Author Archives](#)

Chinese artists respond to Three Gorges Dam

After the flood

by [Chris Vitiello](#)

[More »](#)