Rebecca Rutstein - Precipice

In the paintings for "Precipice", Rebecca Rutstein combines numerous ways of envisioning the world – from topographical wireframe imagery evoking computer models, to Japanese wood blocks, to isometric drawings of the seabed inspired by Marie Tharp's interpretations of sonar readings.

But when one looks across the thickets of grids, into the haunted orange landscape, and toward the towering cliff face that dominates her *Empire of Dirt*, one begins to think that these colliding and overlapping styles camouflage Ms. Rutstein's deeper Romantic inclinations. Writers on Ms. Rutstein's work often address her interest in geology. But this is a little like saying Cezanne was interested in apples. To Cezanne, the still life was a way of probing uncertainty about things and their places in the world; Ms. Rutstein's use of geological, topographic, cartographic, and oceanographic imagery suggests an artist searching for ways of knowing that which is incomprehensibly huge. That such imagery strikes us objective or even coldly scientific only sweetens the deal – like any means of knowing, it awaits displacement by a newer, 'truer' way of understanding, hinting at the vanity of thinking one *knows* anything.

A self-described outdoorsy-type, Rutstein has curtailed her hiking adventures in recent years (as new parents sometimes must) and allowed her imagination to do the wandering. Where it has led is underwater. Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs, H.G. Wells and others imagined alien civilizations under the sea, at the earth's core, and in remote lands. With their colonies of geodesic domes or tiny submarines exploring the depths, there is something more *fi* than *sci-* about Ms. Rutstein's latest work.

Consider a painting like *Finding Gravity.* Under an improbably blue sea, a tiny cluster of domes huddles in the filtered light. Above them, a skein of tumbling grids, like silhouettes of some collapsing architecture, drifts into view. A luminous white grid blankets the ocean floor, which occasionally dissolves into passages of pure paint. Slightly vertical, the picture places the viewer in a curious, floating space, surveying the enormity of the sea. To many art-literate viewers, the picture's deep space and enormous scale call to mind the 19th century painters of the sublime – Beirstadt, Cole, and others – who depicted mankind's tentative settlements in nature's fierce grandeur. But it also calls to mind sci-fi visions of lost or undiscovered worlds.

This summer, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the first Apollo landing. A sense of disappointment greater leaps hadn't followed that initial small step accompanied the celebrations. Rebecca Rutstein's imagined worlds remind viewers that the strangeness of our inner world is perhaps more interesting than one light years away.

-gerard brown