

The Darkest Dark One Can Imagine

*I believe that the essence of wisdom is found in the darkest and deepest layers. I do not illustrate the layers. I enact them through an extended process of creation.*¹

—Raquel Rabinovich

Raquel Rabinovich's ongoing series of works on paper *Enfolded Darkness* takes time to unfold. The unfolding also takes patience, contemplation, and imagination on the part of the viewer. After a few minutes of staring at the densely layered, deep black background, one's eyes begin to adjust to the dark and the uniform, stenciled words slowly begin to emerge, making themselves visible and eventually legible, and finally revealing their secret, sometimes enigmatic, messages such as, "It is so dark, it is transparent." This series is one of many examples of Rabinovich's lifelong exploration of the dark. She understands the dark, not with its usual dismal or menacing connotations but instead as a metaphor for the beginning of life where awakening and growth begin. The fetus in the womb, seeds in the earth, an egg inside its unbroken shell all linger in the dark in anticipation. Even building foundations that give rise to towering structures are embedded underground, in the dark. Rabinovich defines the dark as "that which is concealed beneath the surface of objects, of words, of thoughts, of the world." She explains that she is "drawn towards the invisible so that I might see towards the unknown so the I might *know*."² This metaphysical desire has fueled her practice of making abstract art for nearly sixty years.

Born in Argentina in 1929, Rabinovich moved to the United States in 1967 and now lives and works in the Hudson Valley. Throughout her extensive career, she has investigated how that which has been concealed emerges into view—how to make the invisible visible. This exhibition features twenty-one mixed-media works on paper that span from 1978 to 2017 including works from *Enfolded Darkness* (1998) and three other series, *Temples of the Blind Windows* (1978–1983), *River Library* (2006–2008), and *Thresholds* (2014–2017). The exhibition title *The Reading Room* refers to the location where the works are installed (an intervention of sorts into the south reading room of Vassar's main library) but also serves as a metaphor for a possible approach to the work. The selections on view each represent an attempt to transcend the routine of every day, inviting viewers to enter into a place of contemplation in which many layers of meaning can be read in, or into, the individual artworks.

Rabinovich has a personal and profound connection to books and libraries that has proved to be a significant influence on her work. During her high school years in the 1940s, she was an idealistic political activist and books provided her with inspiration and a way to connect with

like-minded friends. In her early days as a practicing artist, her friends were artists, poets, and writers and they frequently met to discuss poetry and literature. In 1963, while living in Buenos Aires, she visited the Biblioteca Nacional in search of a poetic Spanish translation of the title of British playwright Christopher Fry's play *The Dark is Light Enough* that she could use for an exhibition she was planning. There she met the renowned Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges who was serving as the library director at the time. She befriended him and the two engaged in many long conversations during the months that she prepared for the exhibition. However, when she invited him to her exhibition he told her could not see the works, explaining that he was blind. She was amazed that she had not noticed his blindness in all their time together. Later, Borges not only offered a translation of the title, *La oscuridad tiene su luz*, but also translated the exhibition catalogue's introductory text. The experience deepened Rabinovich's desire to investigate the threshold of visibility and the metaphorical power of language as a form of artistic expression. Borgesian themes such as darkness, invisibility, dreams, infinity, books, metaphor, and language continue to inform her work today. In a recent interview she said, "Beyond the language of the novel or the poem or the story, there is always an element that is beyond the words, in between the lines, which is not literal. And that world is, for me, a wonderful world. I love that world. I resonate with that world."³

Much of the work on view embodies Rabinovich's fascination with the elusive nature of language. In contrast to the colorful, gestural abstraction she encountered in the New York art world in the 1960s, Rabinovich gravitates toward a more pared down aesthetic, one more aligned with the monochrome works by such artists as Agnes Martin, Brice Marden, and Jasper Johns. While Johns also incorporated recognizable symbols such as letters and numbers into his gray on gray compositions, Rabinovich embraces the illusive, ephemeral, and sometimes paradoxical aspects of symbols. *Temples of the Blind Windows*, for instance, is a series of works based on the Fibonacci sequence, a mathematical formula in which each number is found by adding the two numbers before it [1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, etc.]. The sequence was identified in the twelfth century but knowledge of it dates back to ancient times. The sequence has been found to be ubiquitous in nature: its numbers appear in the reproduction patterns of rabbits and the growth of flower petals, pine cones, and sunflower seeds, among other things. Rabinovich uses a combination of ink wash, charcoal, graphite and rubber stamps on handmade paper chosen specifically for its texture and weight to create a visual interpretation of the formula. Black numbers and grids sketched over a heavily worked, black background hover between opacity and elucidation, calling attention to the artist's process of layering but also the loose grasp many of us have on mathematical concepts and their meaning. This ancient logic of nature is a language that goes beyond human systems.

In 2002, after a visit to India where she collected mud from the Ganges River, Rabinovich began her *River Library* series. Here, she used the mud from rivers around the world as a medium, repeatedly immersing paper in mud to create thick washes that penetrate the surface. The variety of river sediment offers a surprising array of textures from powdery fine dust to granular coarse sand, as well as colors from a deep chocolate brown to a shimmering ochre to soft, neutral gray. Some of the rivers represented here have a personal meaning: the Paraná is in her homeland, Argentina, and the Hudson is in New York, where she created the works. However, her interest in the locations are not only personal. She associates rivers with a global scope, encompassing a broad sweep over time. According to the artist, the layers of mud function as texts that carry latent histories of the rivers and the civilizations that have lived along their banks for millennia. About these histories the artist writes, “These drawings are for me like manuscripts, like pages of unwritten texts of those histories, at once literal and metaphorical.”⁴ Some of the river works are rolled into tight scrolls and glued at the edges so they cannot be opened. Scrolls made from various rivers are piled together on a table or in a vitrine, their surfaces sealed inside and buried underneath one another. Writer Alex Bacon notes that these works “leave open the question of where legibility and meaning resides.”⁵ The allure and potency of Rabinovich’s work lies in such unanswerable questions, mysteries that are fated to go unsolved.

Rabinovich’s works are often defined by their durations. They are created over long periods and they are best experienced over a prolonged period and/or repeated viewings. Different times of day and varying light conditions will activate the play of line, form, and subtle color shifts that emerge and recede from view. By arranging symbols and layering materials on top of one another, Rabinovich intentionally deploys illusive marks, enigmatic symbols, hidden meanings, and private messages. She advises her viewers that “There is a difference between blackness and darkness. A dark place invites one to investigate, to dig in, to know more because it is difficult to see in the dark.”⁶ This exhibition is an invitation, or perhaps a challenge, to the viewers and readers who visit the library in search of knowledge to discover its complexities and absorb its wisdom.

Mary-Kay Lombino

The Emily Hargroves Fisher ’57 and Richard B. Fisher Curator and Assistant Director of Strategic Planning

1. Linda Weintraub and George Quasha, *Raquel Rabinovich: The Dark is the Source of Light*, (Barrytown, NY: Contemporary Artists Collection of Station Hill Arts, 1996), 14.
2. Julia P. Hertzberg, ed. *Raquel Rabinovich: The Anthology of the Riverbeds*, (Buenos Aires: Fundación Alon para las Artes, 2008), 90.
3. "In Conversation: Raquel Rabinovich with Ann McCoy," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 5, 2014.
4. Ibid.
- 5 Alex Bacon, "Raquel Rabinovich's Paradoxes," exhibition brochure for Raquel Rabinovich's solo exhibition *Gateless Gates* at Y Gallery from November 21 - December 23, 2014.
6. *The Brooklyn Rail*.