



*The Arborist*, ink on paper (23 x 29 in.), 2003. Courtesy the artist.

# After the Woods

Ernesto Caivano's drawings and sculptures provide access to a world of his own making

by Brett Littman

**E**rnesto Caivano, a thirty-one-year-old Spanish-born artist now based in New York, is making waves and gaining attention for his drawings from "After the Woods," an ongoing project that was recently on view at the Whitney Biennial and is currently on view at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center. Working from an intensely personal mythology—a made-up world with recurring characters—the series spins a web of multilayered meaning and narrative intrigue.

Caivano is approaching "After the Woods" more like a filmmaker than an illustrator. Although he is working from a story outline that he created, the details of that story—and the drawings that stem from them—are being developed out of sequence, as though they were "shot" on location. The story describes the journey and reunion—occurring in the future—of a couple who

have been separated for one thousand years. Each of the two main characters has special attributes and interests. The man, who becomes a knight, has the ability to speed the evolutionary growth of plants, and the woman, who becomes a space ship, advances aviation and space technology. Other fantastical characters include birds called "philapores" that carry encrypted messages between the man and woman in an effort to help them reunite. For the viewer, looking at the drawings is not a linear experience, but rather one that is similar to reading the chapters of Julio Cortázar's masterpiece *Hopscotch* in the alternative chapter order that the author provides in the novel's opening colophon (which requires the reader to jump back and forth among different parts of the book, rather than sticking to the order in which they were printed). New story lines are created by

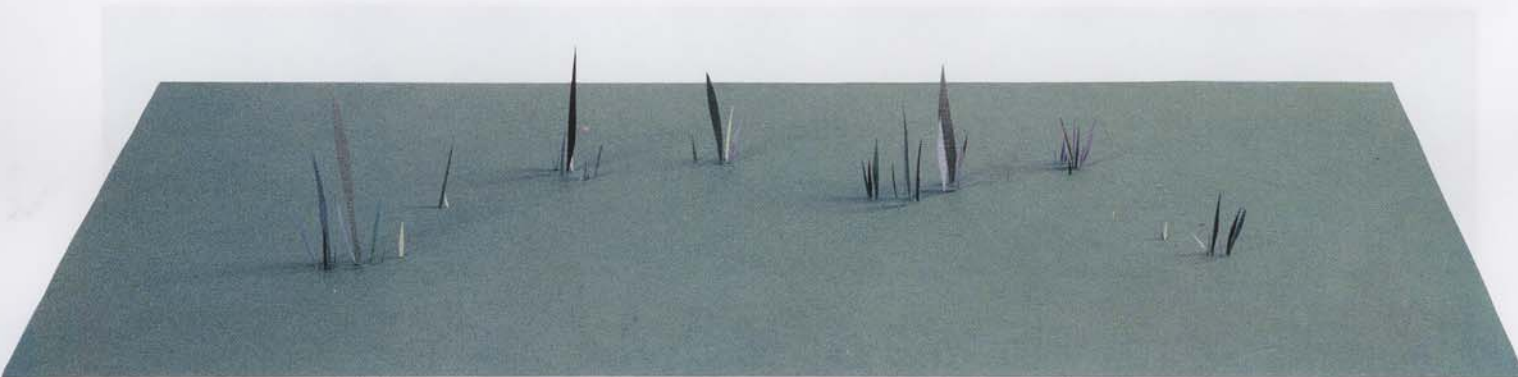


the viewer's imagination; images repeat and morph into new forms, and the thread of story is determined by the subjective way in which we each see and process the images.

At first glance, Caivano's seven-foot scroll drawings, such as *Love of Philapores*, *Traps*, *Screens and Offerings*, and *Last Escape*, look like fifteenth-century Chinese or Japanese landscape drawings. There is an almost Asian mastery of line, detail, and empty space. Upon closer inspection, one sees forms that are based on a wide variety of sources, from John James Audubon's drawings of birds to low-polygon-count modeling used in video games and even Stealth bomber technology. Caivano skillfully encodes his fictitious, drawn environments with folklore, science, popular culture, environmental issues, and fairy tales, creating a multivalent horizon of associations and reference points. He also symbolically hints at issues of communication and miscommunication in the modern world (evoking his own upbringing in a multilingual household) through the undecipherable messages

vance, as they often appear as details within the drawings and as integral tropes in the narrative. As discrete units, the small drawings also act as tangents that might change the story line at any time as new geometric and natural forms accumulate.

Caivano's paper sculptures allow the viewer to experience the world of "After the Woods" in multiple dimensions. He builds these sculptures using the low-tech approach of drawing on card stock and then cutting the forms out by hand. The individual pieces are then assembled with glue. There is a contemplative and serene atmosphere to the sculptures that reflects the painstaking handcraft that goes into their creation. In addition, the sculptures have a playful feeling that evokes the dioramas that one makes in elementary school. One of the more interesting aspects of sculpture such as *The Blades of Grass* is the flat nature of the representation of the stalks, again reflecting Caivano's interest in video-game technology and the way it presents two-dimensional images in a three dimensional environ-



*Blade of Grass*, colored cardstock (13 x 19 x 2 in.), 2003. Courtesy the artist.

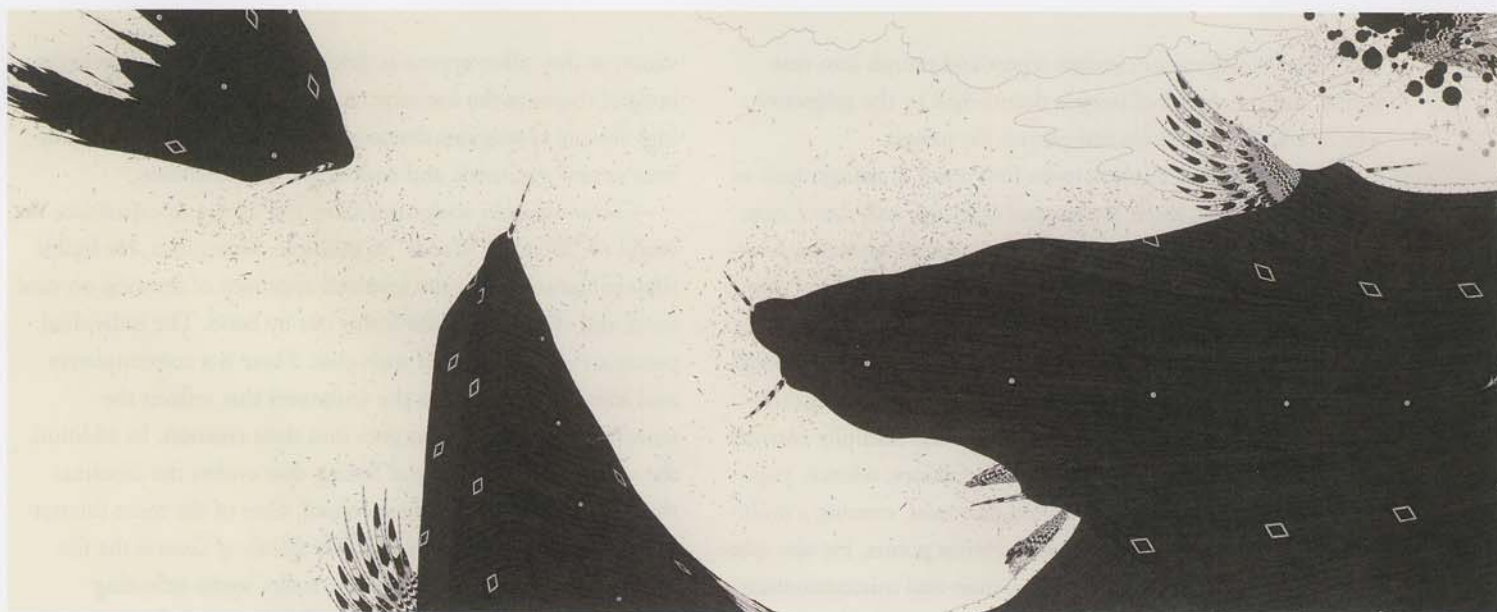
that are carried on the birds' feathers and passed between the two main characters.

To fully understand Caivano's "After the Woods" project, however, one should also take note of his small drawings and his paper-cutout sculptures. *Embracing a Block of Wood*, *Forming Land Structures*, *Once upon a Time a Levitating Piece of Grass*, and *Stealth Structures* are all detailed sketches of the microcosm and ecosystem that make up the landscape in which "After the Woods" unfolds. The process of looking at these drawings is reminiscent of Charles and Ray Eames's film *Powers of Ten*, in which the viewer first sees a couple lying on the grass and is then transported high above the same spot (by powers of ten) to a galaxy-eye view, and then back to the couple on the grass. Caivano's studies of blades of grass and tree stumps are of particular rele-

ment. There is a moment when one walks around the sculpture and views it from the side when the whole piece disappears from view. This optical illusion plays with the idea of filling space with the invisible or non-visible.

In Caivano's last exhibition at 31 Grand Inc. in 2003, he started to work with larger-scale paper sculptures that look more like set designs for a fantasy landscape. The large paper tree stumps and oversize blades of grass successfully transport his mythology into the physical world that we inhabit. □

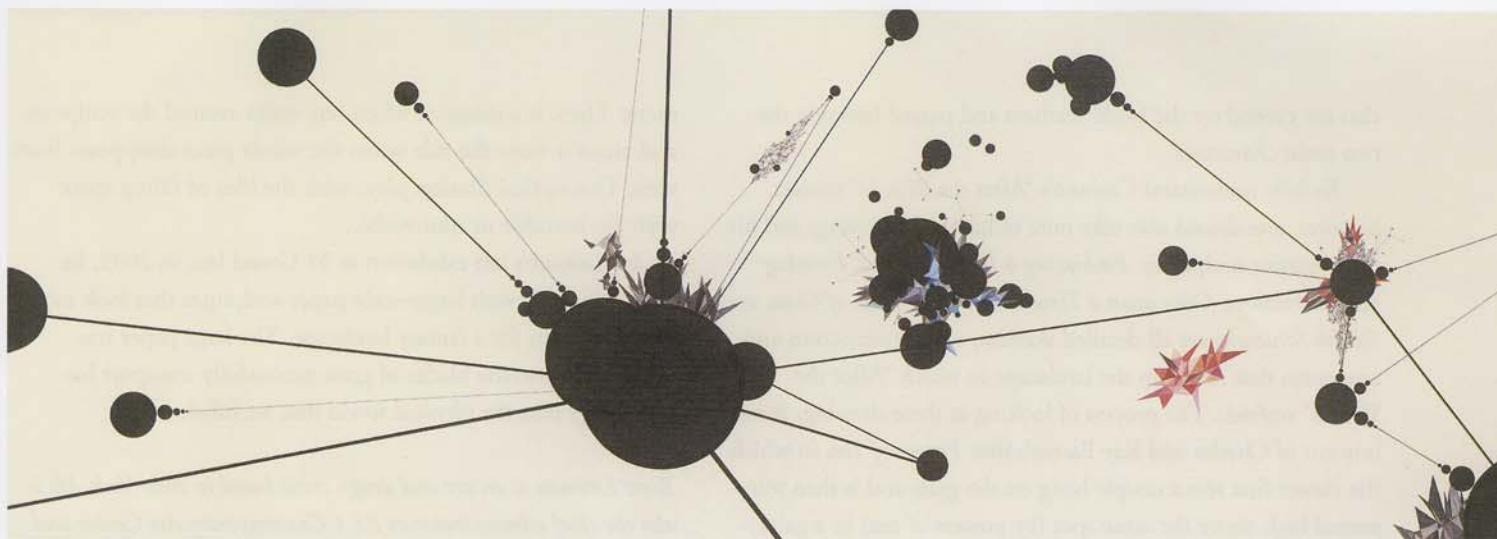
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*Losing It*, ink on paper (18 3/8 x 90 3/8 in.), 2004. All images courtesy Grimm/Rosenfeld Gallery, Munich, and Guild and Greyshkul Gallery, New York.



*Nocturnal Transmissions*, ink on paper (18 3/8 x 90 3/8 in.), 2004.



*Code and Skin Fractals*, ink and watercolor on paper (16 3/8 x 91 3/8 in.), 2004.





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