

This is a t

By Sue Knight

"Only children can hear the song of the male house mouse," writes Annie Dillard in "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek."

"Only children keep their eyes open. The only thing they have got is sense; they have highly developed 'input systems' admitting all data indiscriminately. (My friend) has collected thousands of arrowheads and spearheads; he says that if you really want to find arrowheads, you must walk with a child — a child will pick up everything. All my adult life I have wished to see the cemented case of a caddisfly larva. It took . . . the young daughter of friends . . . to find one on the pebbled bottom of a shallow stream on whose bank we sat side by side. "What's this?" she asked. That, I wanted to say as I recognized the prize she held, is a memento mori for people who read too much."

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It is this childlike wonder of discovery that envelops people in the presence of Elkins Park artists Ursula Sternberg.

Her house is filled with shiny circles and fun shapes and baubles and billowy bright things.

Beneath a toy clown which rides, a bicycle from foyer to living room on a suspended tightrope, she curls up on the floor and begins to talk about her art.

"Give me a surface, and I'll paint it," she says, exuding eccentricity with a very distinct style. Her latest discovery is window shades which she paints to order. And then there are the painted clothes, shoes, belts, folding screens, salvaged toys and "Chaise 1" and "Chaise 2" scattered about.

Like her surfaces, her focus is constantly evolving. It could attribute to a roving eye which, liking what it sees, records it on the handiest material available.

"I don't, she says, "make a distinction between art with a capital "A", and art with a small 'a'."

She's never had a formal training, but began studying privately in studios while she was growing up in Brussels, Belgium. She has always, and she emphasizes the always, worked with live models: it is moving things and changing things that fascinate her.

She returns to the room with a collection of "visual diaries:" of Paris, of Venice, of the Reading Terminal Mart, built from the sketchbooks which she

rip through one artists mind

carries with her wherever she goes so she can always "entertain herself."

Usually, she records the main ideas, in sketches and text, and waits until later to add detail and color.

There are barroom scenes and bag ladies, Venetian mists and haunting landscapes, revealing the aura she felt at the time. This way, she is never bored, she says it's surprising she even considers the possibility.

From among 104 entries, hers was recently awarded first prize in the 33rd annual National Society of Painters in Casein and Acrylic competition. "Between Two Worlds" depicts, she explains, two distinct worlds and a line of somber figures under umbrellas making its way into the latter.

The figures come from one world of bloom and color, and pass into a dreary scene, a distant world without sun. It expresses Sternberg's concern with harsh treatment and lack of appreciation of the world. The crowd is faceless, and she says she doesn't know.

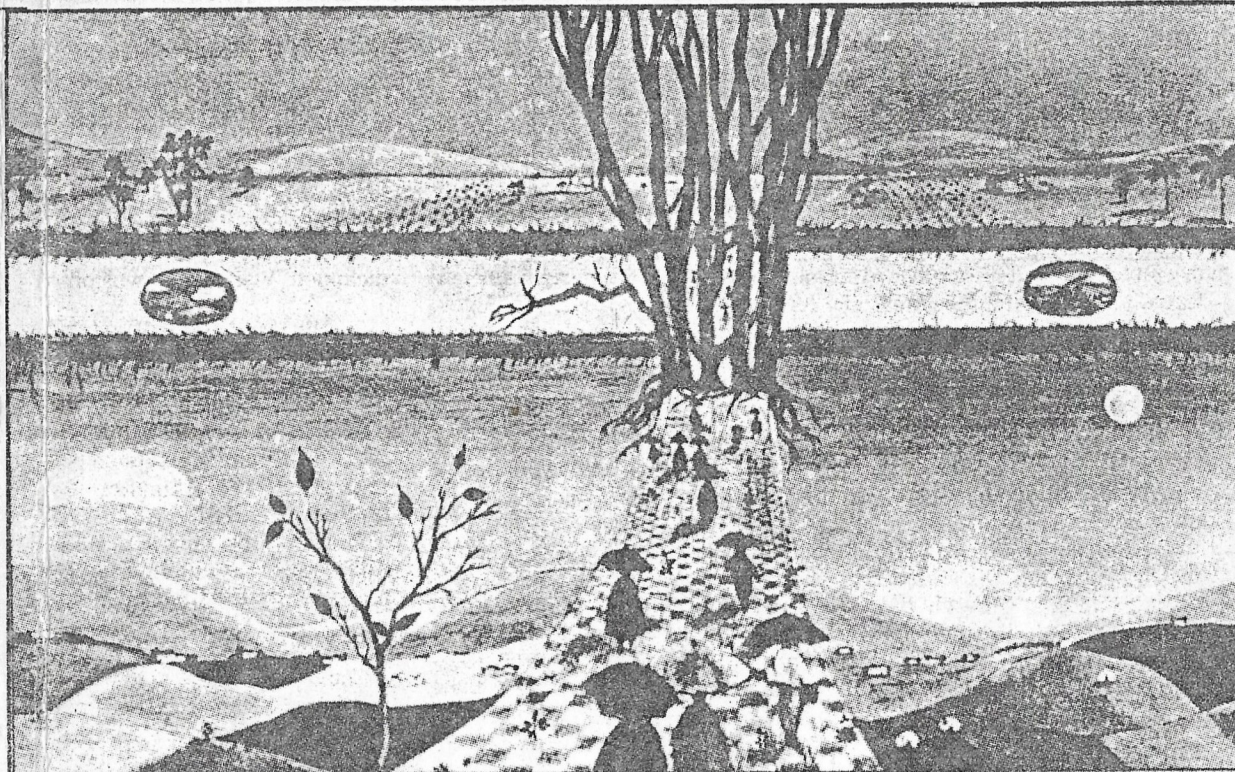
But then, with a hint of humor, she confides that the inspiration for those umbrellas was her Brussels studio from which she looked down onto a bevy of black umbrellas. She merges the serious with the innocent: although "Between Two Worlds" is a fatalistic voyage, it is also a voyage of discovery, and this Sternberg really wants to reveal.

She is affiliated with the Suzanne Gross and Langman galleries of Philadelphia, as well as galleries in Dusseldorf, Cologne, Brussels and Rochester. Her studio was among those open to the public as part of the recent Philadelphia Art Week celebration. She has also had her work published in the London Times, Sunday Observer, music journals and program covers.

Many titled Europeans collect her work as well as private collectors in major American cities. Her favorite forum is Europe; at present, she has a show in Dusseldorf.

Besides going to exhibits, traveling abroad, and "running around a lot," she also visits schools as an artist-in-residence.

At Friends' Central in Philadelphia, she asked the students to translate a visual experience into drawing



"Between Two Worlds," an oil on canvas by Ursula Sternberg.

and/or writing in the form of "pictorial journals" like her own. The assignment mirrors her eagerness to absorb and then interpret what she experiences using different senses.

She happens to mention that she draws, occasionally, with her left hand because the right is prejudiced after so many years. It's another example of how she likes to examine and engage her world.

"Newts," continues Dillard, "are the most common of salamanders. Their skin is a lighted green, like water in a sunlit pond, and rows of very bright red dots line their banks. They have gills as larvae; as they grow they turn a luminescent red, lose their gills, and walk out of the water to spend a few years padding around in damp places on the forest floor. Their feet look like fingered baby hands, and they walk in the same leg patterns as all four-footed

creatures — dogs, mules, and, for that matter, lesser pandas. When they mature fully, they turn green again and stream to the water in droves. A newt can scent its way home from as far as eight miles away. They are altogether excellent creatures, if somewhat moist, but no one pays the least attention to them, except children."

And then Ursula fondly surveys her odd collection of painted toy trains and doll houses and fabric collages. Someone else's throw-aways, to her they are potential prizes.

She says it is the accomplishment in the doing, the discovering, the working through that makes professional aggravation worthwhile.

When questioned, she confesses it's just a matter of taking the time to really look.