

Graphic Impressions

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Cover Image

Rochelle Toner
Stack, 2008


INTERNATIONAL

Rochelle Toner: Layers of Mark and Meaning

by Judith Tannenbaum

Photography provided by Print Center

Tying a Knot in a Cherry Stem an exhibition of work by Rochelle Toner, is cause for celebration. It is an opportunity to immerse oneself in her watercolor drawings, collages and prints from the past decade and to discover their links to early etchings dating back more than 40 years. *Tying a Knot* also reveals connections between Toner's works on paper and a marvelous array of natural and man-made "stuff" that she has assembled.

An artist of remarkable vision and dedication, Toner creates images infused with sensuality and humor, based on her observations of natural form. Her Northern Liberties (Philadelphia) row house is filled with unexpected things. In her third-floor studio, clusters of objects range from dried seedpods and branches to seashells and fossils. Downstairs, a miscellany of collections includes penny quilts designed and stitched by her lowan grandmother. These keep company with groupings of useful items, including rusted sheep shears, rug beaters, tea strainers and "travelers" — tools for measuring wagon wheels — as well as nested ceramic bowls, masks and miniature Day of the Dead shrines from Mexico. Her collections reflect the pleasure Toner takes in tangible everyday objects, both antique and contemporary. There are clear links between their aesthetic qualities and images that she creates with her own hands and mind's eye.

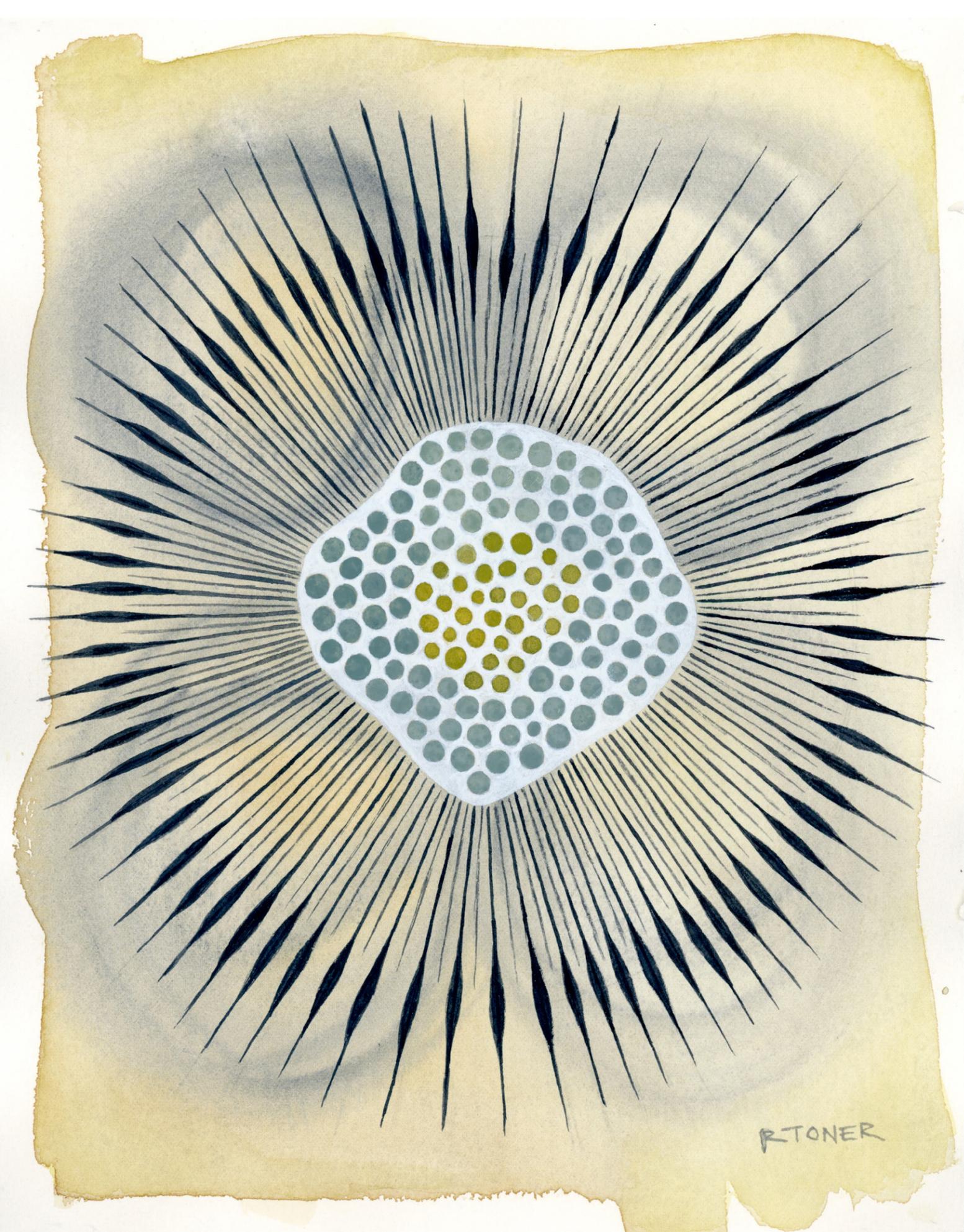
In the exhibition, two large, mysterious black and white etchings from the early 1970s display a more narrative bent than more recent works on paper. The rich tonal variations and complex imagery of the two etchings were the result of months of work. In *Contents Under Pressure*,

created in 1972 just before Toner moved to Philadelphia to teach at Tyler School of Art, Temple University, a cooking pot filled with mountainous forms sits surrounded by spikes in a confined space. Above the pot, strange, impaled, meat-like elements hang from the ceiling. On either side of the composition, taut wires with ominous turnbuckles appear to hold floor and ceiling together. Below the spikes, another space is populated with imagined fruits and vegetable matter. Variations on these recur in recent prints and watercolors. Ideas about women's domestic roles pervade this disquieting architectural setting, while the implied violence of the image contrasts with feminine stereotypes of nurturing and fecundity.

"useful items, including rusted sheep shears, rug beaters, tea strainers and 'travelers'..."



Rochelle Toner, *Contents Under Pressure*, intaglio on murillo paper, 37.5"x27.5" 1972
Edition 12 of 25



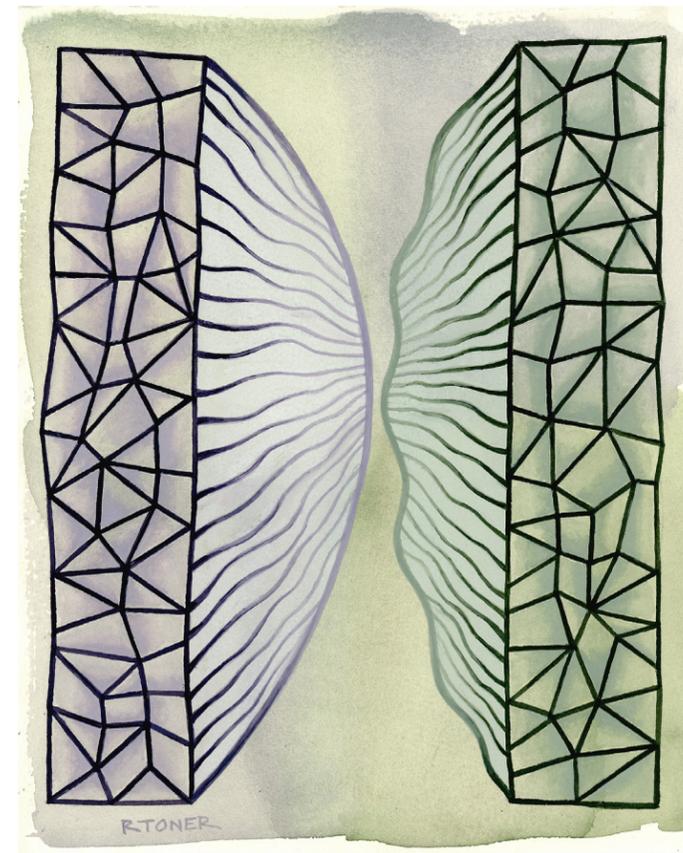
(left) Rochelle Toner, *Fan*, watercolor drawings on arches cover paper, 19 3/4"x16 3/4" 2007

(above) Rochelle Toner, #13, magazine clippings on Arches cover paper, 20"x17" 2017
From the series "Playing With Dolls"



(above) Rochelle Toner, *Tease*, watercolor drawings on arches cover paper, 19 3/4" x 16 3/4" 2010

(right) Rochelle Toner, *Domit*, watercolor drawings on arches cover paper, 19 3/4" x 16 3/4" 2014



Toner's consciousness was indeed stimulated by the feminist revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, as she absorbed its themes and theories to understand better her own drives and desires, both personal and professional. She avoids literal meaning in her work but acknowledges that as a gay woman she was thinking about feminism, sexuality and gender politics in her early work, and that female forms continue to have metaphorical significance for her.¹ She enjoys being strong and able to fix things, traits associated with masculinity; she also cherishes the softness of the womanly, female body.

A strain can be seen in Toner's improvisational method and the resulting biomorphic images. She often starts her watercolor drawings with doodles that she enlarges and plays with — shifting colors, shapes and lines, as she allows one thing to lead to another. Hints of Jean Arp, Louise Bourgeois, Alexander Calder, Paul Klee, Joan Miró and Georgia O'Keeffe appear, but Toner's preference for symmetry (as demonstrated by compositions featuring a central, circular configuration) and bold contours makes the works distinctly her own.

When Toner became dean at Tyler in 1989, her demanding administrative schedule did not allow time to make prints on a regular basis. Necessity being the mother of invention, she found a way to maintain an active studio practice by shifting from printmaking to drawing and concentrating on watercolors, which are less labor intensive and more portable. She continued to contribute to invitational print portfolios, sometimes including imagery derived from her watercolor

drawings in the prints. The wide-ranging palette of Toner's watercolors — subtle washes of color as well as more saturated hues — distinguishes them from her prints and contributes a new vitality and playfulness to her work.

Radiating strokes of color, sometimes resembling feathers or the cilia of cellular forms, express greater immediacy and movement in contrast to the richly toned and textural but monochromatic etchings.

Always intrigued by collage, Toner first tried making them in 2015. After concentrating on watercolors for about 10 years, she wanted to mix things up and try something new. She had made sculpture at several points in her life — first assemblages in boxes, later weighty cast bronze biomorphic forms that resemble components of her semi-abstract etchings. Collage brings two- and three-dimensional modes together — maintaining the flatness of the paper but emphasizing the volumetric nature of cutout shapes and forms. Featuring bold contoured shapes, some of her compositions are loosely geometric, resembling rectilinear frames (for example, *Green Box*, 2015), whereas others suggest eccentric creatures with multiple limbs (*Black Ovals*, 2016). Toner's sources for variegated color, texture and pattern are pages from art and fashion magazines. She has developed an extensive filing system for this material — categorizing and saving pages by color, texture or subject matter — so she can find just the right element for a particular piece.

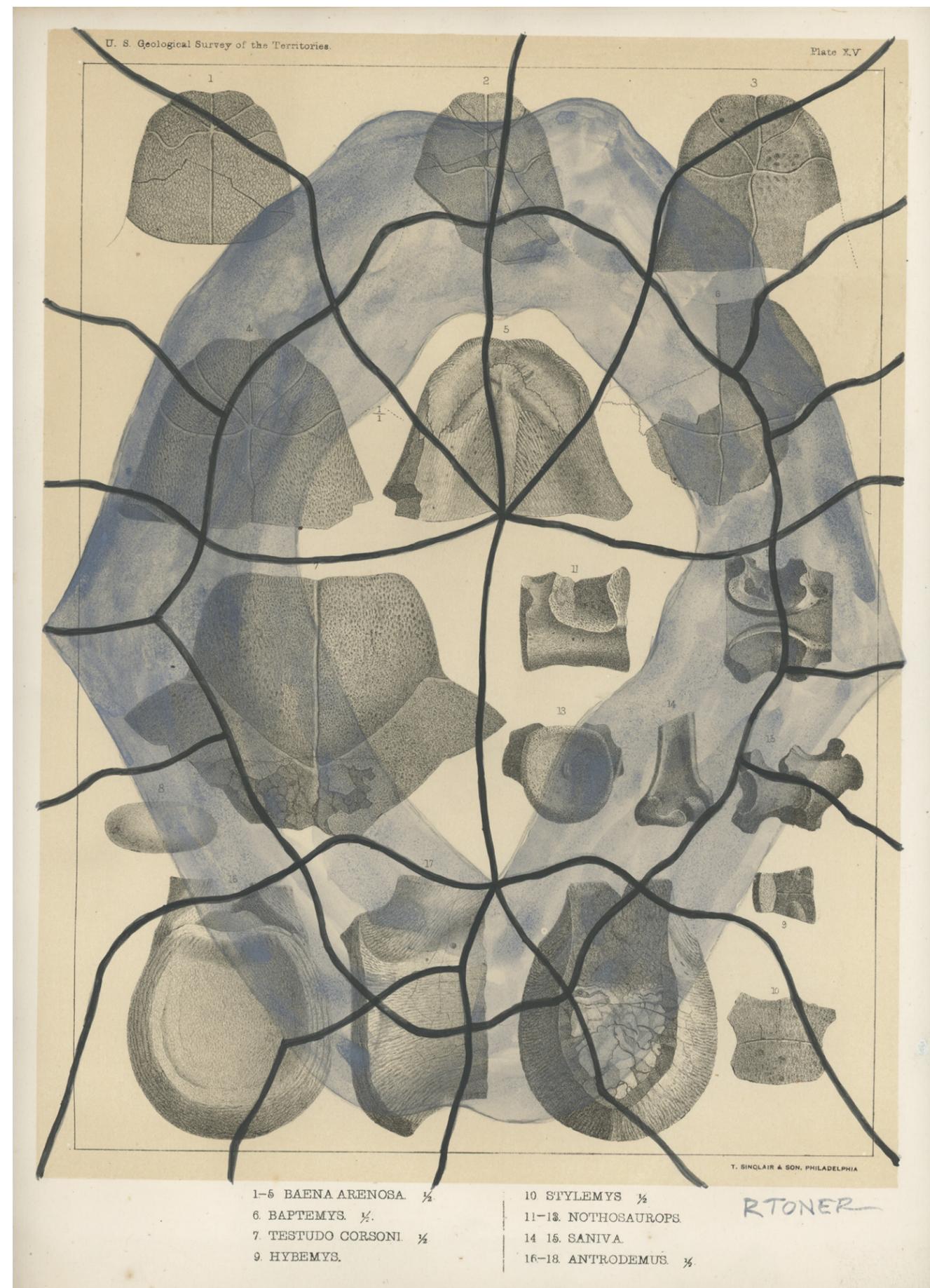
Toner's first group of collages are more abstract than her current series, which she calls *Playing with Dolls* — suggesting toys and paper cutouts from childhood. But the word "doll" can also be slang for a physically attractive individual and implies intimacy, whether desired or unsolicited. Legs and shoes appear in most of these compositions. Often, multiple sets of legs

go in different directions. Diagonal elements add movement, and top and bottom may be reversed. Some of the long-legged figures are clearly feminine but gender becomes ambiguous as Toner plays with feminine and masculine stereotypes. For example, we cannot be sure if we are looking at men's shoes, or are they the feet and legs of a woman dressed in men's clothing? In some of these new collages, Toner puts several different body parts together to form the complete image. Surrealist underpinnings of this work range from the life-size dolls by Hans Bellmer, which have been criticized for objectifying and manipulating the female body, to the androgynous self-portrait photographs by Claude Cahun that deal with lesbian and transgender identities.

Another new series of collages is based on antique lithographic book pages that a friend, Robert Flynt, gave to Toner about twelve years ago, because they reminded him of her work. The lithographs, natural science illustrations from the *U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories*, published in 1873 by Thomas Sinclair & Son, a well-known lithographer in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, include bones and skeletons of all kinds of animals (from the extinct mastodon to

“...we cannot be sure if we are looking at men's shoes, or are they the feet and legs of a woman dressed in men's clothing?”

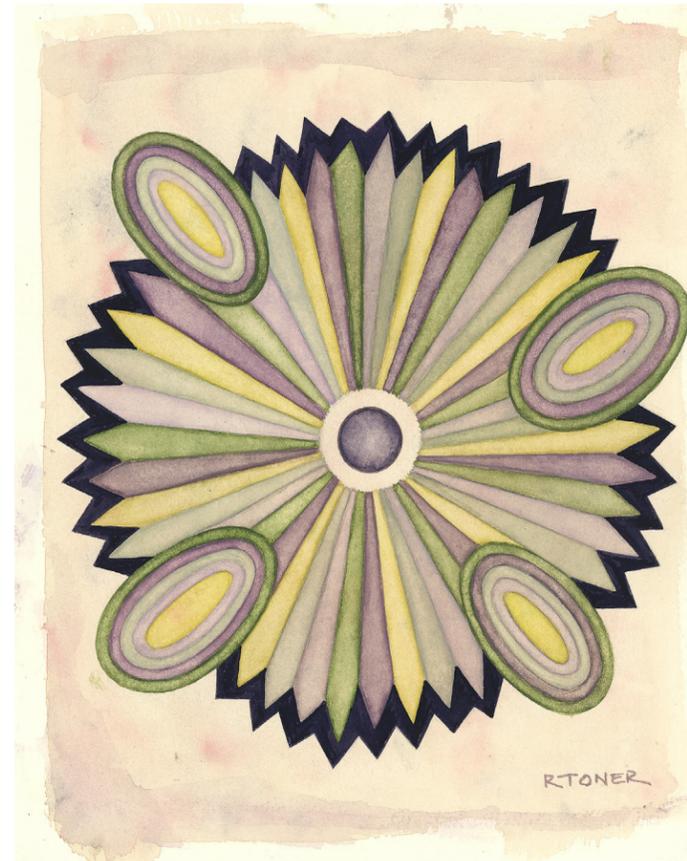
Rochelle Toner, *Plate XV*, watercolor on antique book pages from *U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories*, Philadelphia: Thomas Sinclair & Son, 1873, 20"x17" 2018



common fish) as well as geological formations. They remained untouched until recently, when Toner figured out how to add something of her own without obliterating the originals. Her ongoing series combines three layers of imagery: the printed illustration overlaid with transparent shapes she has drawn in bluish-gray watercolor topped with open patterns of dark gray lines, some resembling elements in her watercolor drawings. Toner uses Payne's Gray for both the washes and the linear configurations although the results are different. ²

It seems equally valid to "read" these collages from the ground up or from the top layer down. When I looked at the new geological collages, first I saw Toner's dark gray top drawing. Then I looked again and saw the watercolor shapes on top of the original illustrations. The dark lines are images in their own right but they also create openings or peepholes through which one sees the layers below. For example, I paid more attention to the lithographic image of a fish skeleton after seeing Toner's abstract pattern. She created her double-layer drawings in response to characteristics she observed in the illustrations, her lines sometimes echoing the original images, sometimes counteracting them.

The geological series exemplifies Toner's ability to balance form and content, representation and abstraction, movement and equilibrium, tension and stillness, the traditional and the new. Biomorphic forms suggesting eggs, webs, leaves and various human elements such as uvulas and breasts have recurred in Toner's art throughout the decades, but she does not repeat herself. Instead, she continues to find new ways to refresh and reinvent the work. From the black and white prints of the 1970s to the latest collage drawings, abstract patterns, marks and strokes merge, coexist and morph into figurative elements. Her observations of botanical forms and human physiology give way to subconscious associations that pulse with movement and metaphor.



*Rochelle Toner
Picket
Watercolor drawing on arches cover paper
19 3/4" x 16 3/4" 2007*



Rochelle Toner, Black Ovals, magazine clippings on arches cover paper, 20" x 17" 2018

Toner has been strikingly productive over the past decade. Her dedication to her work and her pleasure in creating it show no signs of letting up. In fact, shifting to collage has opened up fertile new territory for her. It is not too big a leap to compare her current exploration of collage to Matisse's concentration on cut-paper collage, a technique he took up after the age of seventy when surgery limited his ability to paint. Matisse had expected to die but lived another fourteen years, and the late, large cutouts stand as one of his greatest achievements. Toner may have less recognition and celebrity than Matisse, but her contribution is nonetheless significant. She will continue to thrive as an artist and the work she produces in her later years seems likely to be revelatory. •

¹ Artist statement, July 2018, and author's conversation with the artist during a studio visit, July 27, 2018.

² Twelve of these collage drawings are presented in a book titled *Collage Drawings 1873 - 2018*, published in 2018 by Temple Contemporary (directed by Robert Blackson) coinciding with The Print Center exhibition.

Judith Tannenbaum is a contemporary art curator. From 1986 to 2000, she served as curator, associate director, and interim director at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), University of Pennsylvania. From 2000 to 2013, she was the Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). She is currently artistic director of Whitman at 200: Art and Democracy.

Rochelle Toner: Tying a Knot in a Cherry Stem September 14 – November 10, 2018

(right) Rochelle Toner, Blue Gold, magazine clippings on arches cover 20" x 17" 2016



R. TONER