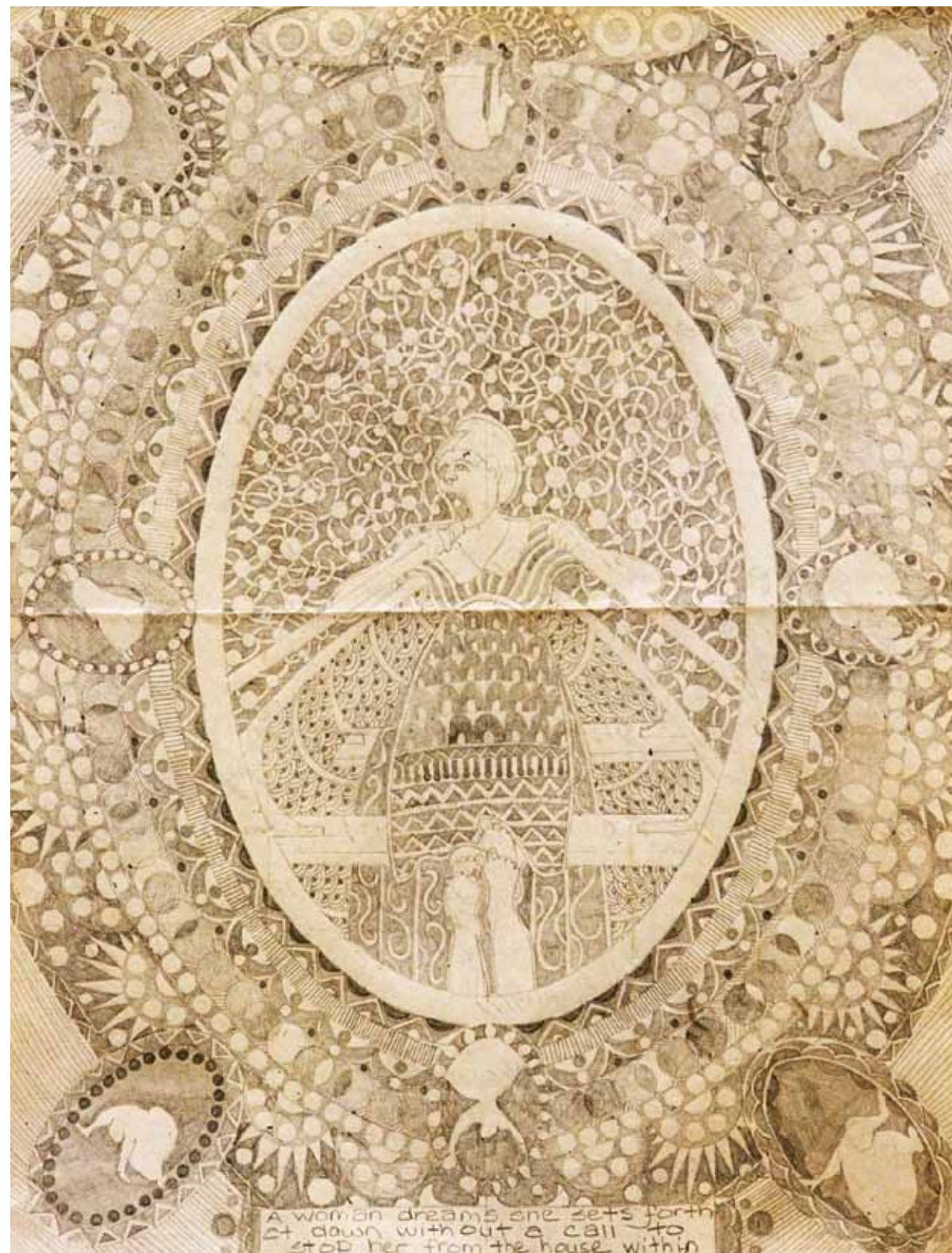


# *Filling In the White Space*

Dense patterns and pen strokes distinguish  
Roz Leibowitz's peculiar drawings,  
allowing the artist to explore subtly  
subversive narratives hidden  
in not-so-plain sight.

BY COURTNEY JORDAN



**A Woman Dreams**

2001, graphite on vintage paper, 11 x 8¼.  
Private collection.

# “A painter chooses color. I choose pattern,”

says Roz Leibowitz, a New York City-based draftsman whose drawings are filled with intricate serpentine lines and nearly impenetrable layers of border and pattern. “I’m not a formalist, creating art based on composition or color.” Instead, as an artist with masters’ degrees in library science and literacy, Leibowitz more readily identifies with the act of writing in her work. “Most of the time when I’m drawing, I think in terms of narrative,” she says. “My brain goes to stories. To me the drawings are like poems. The patterns are like handwriting.”

Leibowitz’s drawings are predominant focused on women and their societal roles. This leitmotif is complemented by the fact that the patterns in her drawings call to mind the intricate designs often found in quilts, lace, crochet, and knitting. All have historically been designated as women’s work, and they have personal significance for the artist, as well. “My mother loved lace, textiles, engraved

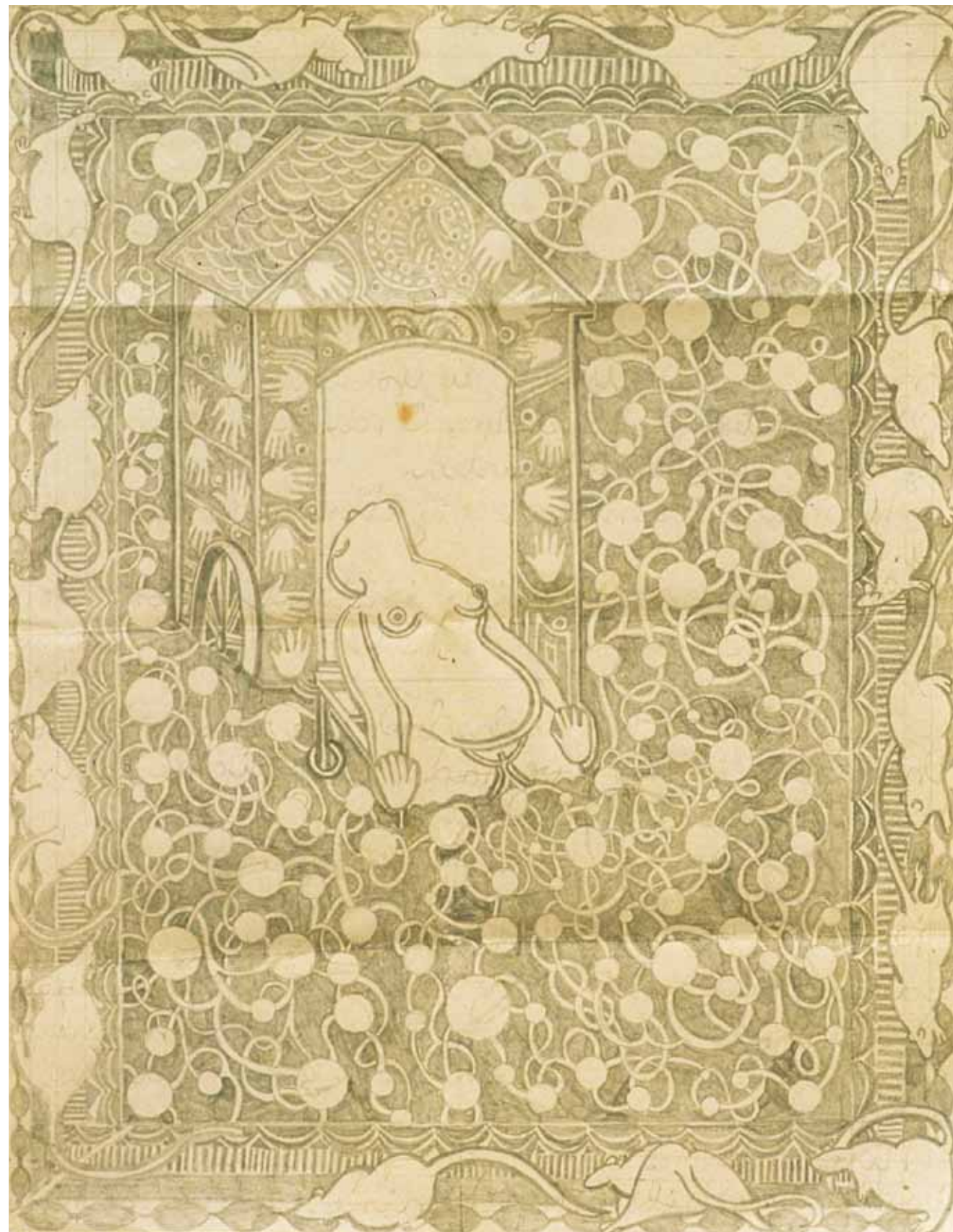
and cut glass—so anything heavily worked appeals and is meditative to me,” she says.

The artist’s crowded and layered marks also allow her to harbor hidden worlds. This sense of masking or disguising objects and narratives starts with the artist’s chosen surfaces. Leibowitz rarely uses new paper. Instead she works on vintage papers that often have marks on them, such as ledger paper with old tally columns; pages from centuries-old catalogs; legal papers; and historic deeds of sale. The almost animate sensibility of these surfaces appeals to the artist. “It’s a primitive notion, but sometimes drawing over the papers with patterns, as in *The Glass Beads*, plays on the Romantic sensibility of hidden worlds and that the idea there are things *in* inanimate things,” she says. “So to me it is not ‘just paper.’ I’ll take something that was printed or written on in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and move it forward in its existence. It feels as if you are connecting to the past.”



OPPOSITE PAGE  
**The Glass Beads**  
 2010, ink and gouache on vintage book pages, 14 x 18½.  
 Private collection.

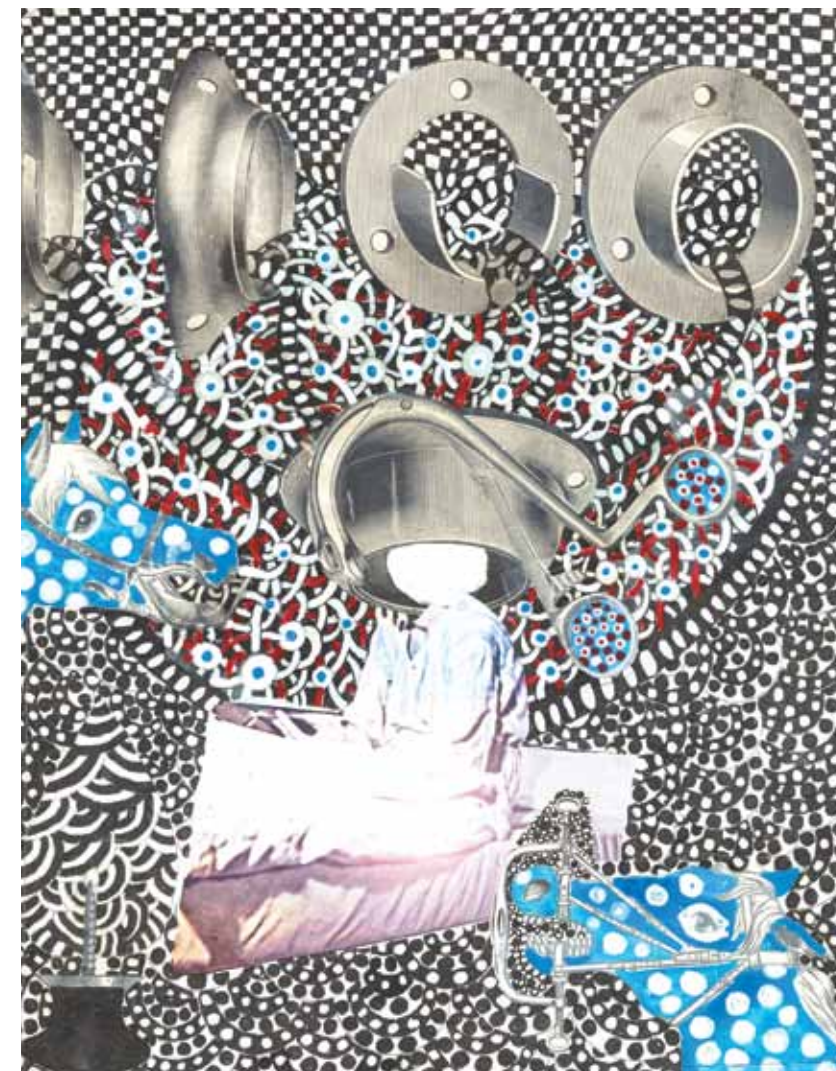
ABOVE  
**My Milk Teeth**  
 2001, graphite and ink on vintage paper, 14 x 8.  
 Private collection.



Leibowitz prefers an extremely thin surface, such as onion skin paper, and she knows when she's found a paper that will work for her just by touching it. "It has to have the kind of texture that I like—not brittle, with a smooth coating that can take ink well—and an image that I can take from and work with," she says. "I'm known to go into book fairs and open the books and feel the pages."

Such particularity goes for the artist's pens as well. "I'm not too thrilled about the archival quality of markers, and I cannot stand brushes," she says. "Also, my hand shakes, so all my materials have to have a hard point." The implement that best meets Leibowitz's needs is a technical pen called a rapidograph, historically employed by engineers and architects for technical drawings. "They hardly make them anymore, but with a rapidograph, you get a consistent line no matter what, and they work very smoothly," says Leibowitz. "That is what I like about them—you get a very even flow and cannot manipulate the pen stroke." The tradeoff for this consistency of line is that the inks available for a rapidograph do not come in a wide range of colors. Although a few of her drawings incorporate color, for the most part their power and dynamism are realized through line and pattern.

The artist starts by tracing figures and objects for her compositional layouts. "I trace almost everything in the drawings, like the old animators who would work with several layers of tracing," says Leibowitz. "I could do it freehand, but the idea of tracing is one that I love—seeing through the paper and the motion of the line. For me it is all about line



OPPOSITE PAGE  
**The Bathing Party**  
 2001, graphite on vintage paper, 11 x 8½.  
 Collection the artist.

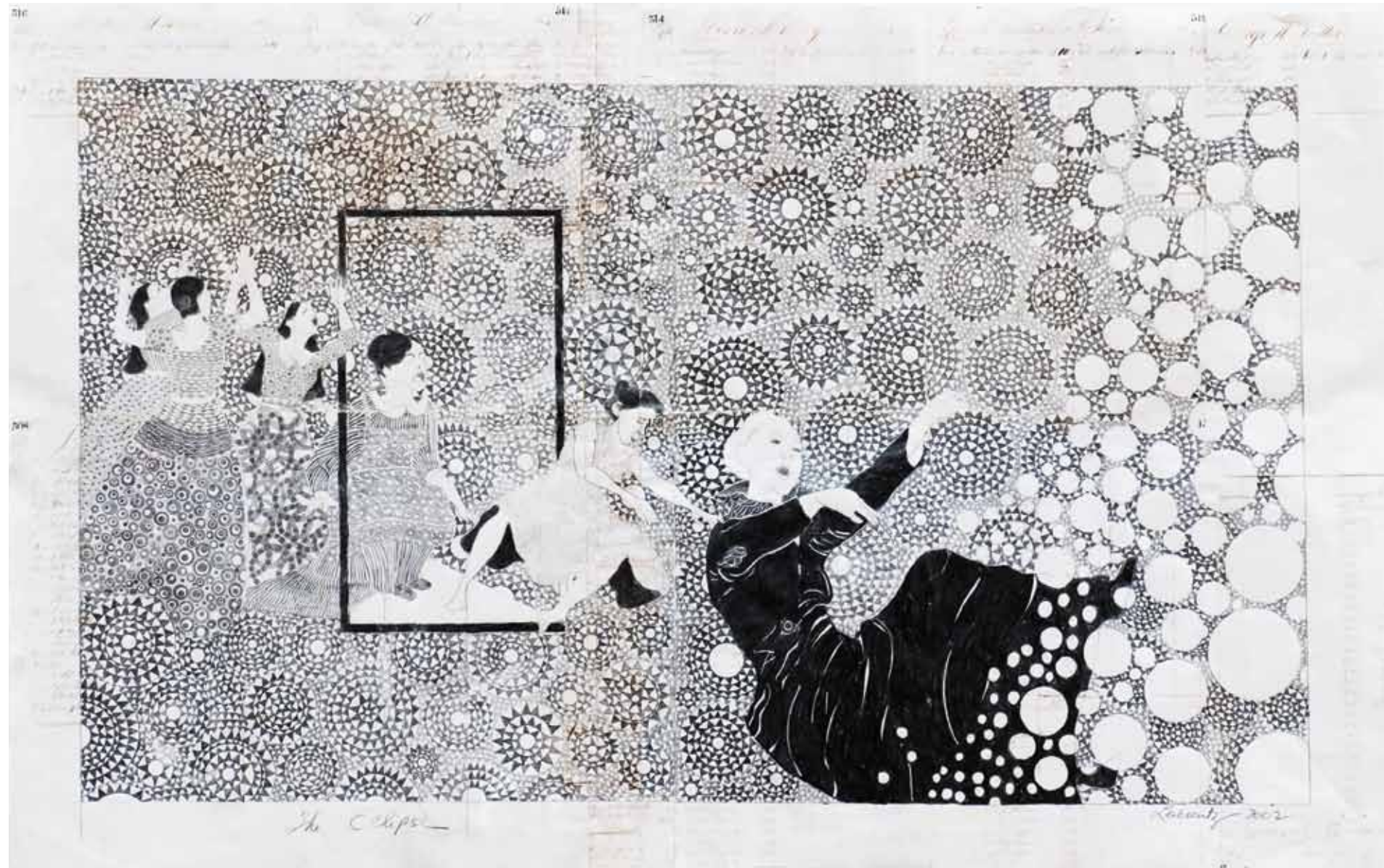
ABOVE  
**The Blue Light**  
 2009, ink and collage on board, 9 x 7.  
 Private collection.

drawing. Shading is fine, and I did it for many years, but now everything should be said in the pattern and the manipulation of the paper."

The heavy patterning in her drawings is, among other things, a solution for the artist's challenges with negative space. "Empty space—I can't work well with it," she says. "My unsuccessful works tend to go wrong when I have to deal with white space. So I fill it in." Indeed, Leibowitz lays siege to the page, packing it with marks and line. The patterns and borders that she creates—with ovals, curving lines,

checkerboards, floral motifs, bracelets of intertwined circles and loops, and bull's-eyes—are so familiar to her that she can literally work on them lying down. And she does. "You could say I am an artist who works in bed," Leibowitz says. "I lean the page against a book or hard surface and just draw. I can watch television—listening and filling in the patterns at the same time."

Leibowitz also fills the white space of her drawings with collage elements and sometimes pierces the paper with needlepoint pinpricks, a crafting tradition that goes back to



the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. “Every young lady from the Victorian era would have done theorem paintings using stencils or paper piercings,” she says. “For me it’s simply a way of handling negative space.” In *The Dreambook*, the figures are almost entirely collaged, from the pieces of powder-blue paper that form their arms and faces to the segments of typed paper that are arranged to give pattern and form to the figures’ dresses.

The artist finds the process of creating her complex layers of pattern or collage simultaneously constraining and freeing. “The work is controlled

and concentrated,” she says. “But my mind is free. I look through the work and there is a world inside that opens up.” This desire to open or engage with one’s inner world is in keeping with Leibowitz’s interest in Victorian-era Romanticism, with its preoccupation with intuition, emotion, the irrational, and the transformative power of imagination. “Reality is expansive, and there are always multiple views of things,” the artist says. “I’m a child of the 1960s—a work of art should be a doorway to other realities. If it doesn’t have that, it is closed off. You have to allow for

the spirits—you are calling for them when you make art.”

For Leibowitz, then, art can be a visual gateway for deep thought, insight, and self-reflection. In this sense, her work is tied to that of outsider artists such as Martín Ramírez and Adolph Wölflí—two artists who also favored compact line. For Leibowitz, the fact that outsider art is—to her way of thinking—generated by something other than a desire to make art is one of the most appealing things about it. “It was generated by these artists’ obsession to get their message across,” she says. “It didn’t

Bride Island series, which explores the place of women in Victorian society. In this piece, Leibowitz turns what is nowadays a banal experience—having one’s teeth inspected by a dentist—into something a bit more extreme. A voluptuous female figure dressed in a voluminous red-dotted dress sits with her head tilted upward. Her hands are pressed to her body in a pose that’s both suggestive and prayerlike. Most dramatic are her lips, which are being pulled away from her teeth by four long, thin prongs.

The dentistry aspect of the drawing is strange and threatening, in part because the dentist is nowhere to be seen. “It was the idea of the innocent woman having a violent,

invasive experience like this,” says Leibowitz. The figure is surrounded by a pattern of circles enclosing starburst or flower shapes. Hardly qualifying as a background, the patterns are lovely and delicate but give no sense of spatiality to the drawing. In fact, they inhibit visual egress, as everything in the drawing is forced to the foreground of the picture plane. The compression of layers resonates with the figure’s likely mindset of feeling trapped or ensnared.

The idea of escape or access to other worlds is broached in several of Leibowitz’s works. In *A woman dreams*, the figure actively alters her situation as she rows a boat into a patterned sea, although her destination is unclear and there’s no horizon



OPPOSITE PAGE  
**The Fall Eclipse**  
2002, graphite on vintage ledger paper, 38 x 24. Collection the artist.

LEFT  
**The Dreambook**  
2007, graphite and collage with paper piercing, 17 x 12½. Private collection.

matter if the drawing was perfect. What mattered was what they tried to say to the world. The art was a means to an end. The message was what they wanted to shine through.”

Leibowitz desires the meanings of her works to shine through as well, despite how she camouflages them. “My work is the dense type of work that fills the page,” she says. “You have to look at it very closely, and I prefer the viewer goes up close.” When they do, viewers find drawings of women caught in peculiar moments set in the past. *My Milk Teeth* is a drawing from Leibowitz’s

**RIGHT**  
**October**  
2006, graphite on  
vintage sketch-  
book page,  
15 x 10. Collection  
the artist.



**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**The Demorest Ecstasy**  
2009, ink on four  
catalog pages,  
28 x 20. Collection  
the artist.

line to guide her. In both of these drawings, the figures are subsumed and somewhat dominated by the patterning that surrounds them, as if the swirling intricate designs are indications of women's powerlessness.

In *The Fall Eclipse*, the way out is more literal—a doorway is indicated by a rectangular outline through which several female figures tumble. Their mouths are open, but whether they are crying out from hopefulness or from fright remains unclear. In *The Bathing Party*, sexual or sensual oblivion seems to be figure's mode of escape. The hand motif that decorates the wheeled bathhouse imparts a sense of physicality to the scene, reinforcing perhaps that the figure finds her abandon quite pleasurable.

In *Shadowland*, a series from 2006 to 2008, the woman's world grows and moves forward into the

20<sup>th</sup> century, with a sense of the wider world creeping in. Figures are presented in duos or groups, often embracing or in close proximity, perhaps as a sign of solidarity or singleness of purpose. Collage elements—of newsprint pages, cutout birds, and even vintage drawings of feet—are layered within the drawn patterns. In *October*, Leibowitz explores shadow as line, giving the sense of an inverted world, where light and dark are switched. "I was going darker—things were not as good as they should have been," she says, in reference to the removed-looking figures that occupy these drawings.

The artist's latest series, *Ecstasies*, is mostly about figures coming out of a malaise into a happier time. The patterns in the drawings run riot in seeming reaction, a celebra-

tion of this psychological thawing of the figures. In *The Demorest Ecstasy*, an era illustration of dress designs—a Victorian woman's "eternal army," quips Leibowitz—is entangled in an elaborate looping pattern that echoes the decoration of the dresses featured in the original illustration.

*The Blue Light* presents no fewer than six patterns, each seeming to swirl and undulate with frenetic energy. The checkerboard pattern folds in on itself. The white oval pattern set in black swirls in and out of the collaged spouts, and the blue ponies are speckled with white dots, indicating that the occasion of the titled blue light is not a sedate one but something a bit more exciting, although the specifics remain unclear.

Leibowitz's art is very much a handmade endeavor—just like the women's work the artist so admires. "It is all the same impulse," Leibowitz says. "All my work has to do with memory, the past, narrative, and bringing it forward. By bringing the drawing stories into our world, they are set on a new path, someone views them, and it becomes a web of worlds." ❖

### About the Artist

Roz Leibowitz is a self-taught artist and photographer. Born and raised in New York City, Leibowitz continues to live and work in her hometown. For more information, visit [www.rozleibowitz.com](http://www.rozleibowitz.com) or [www.searspeyton.com](http://www.searspeyton.com), or contact Sears-Peyton Gallery, in New York City, at [info@searspeyton.com](mailto:info@searspeyton.com).

