

THE FREEDOM OF SOLITUDE THE ART OF ARON WIESENFELD

By JL Schnabel

In tales of epic quests, heroes or heroines often underwent specific literary steps throughout their perilous journey. These steps outlined the transformation of the hero, the ways in which both his earthly body was worn by the ailments of his quest and how his spirit was tested. The start of the "hero's journey" is marked by the hero's commitment to his quest and the crossing of "the first threshold," into a place that is unknown and foreign. Much like the crossing over from childhood into adulthood, the "hero's journey" often leaves the hero unable to return from where he originated, so drastically altered that there is often no place left for him in his place of origin.

Born in 1972 in Washington D.C., and later relocating to Santa Cruz, California, artist Aron Wiesenfeld spent his childhood creating things:

"I remember starting projects that would sort of spin out of control. I wanted to make a fortress for my G.I. Joe's out of cardboard, which became a seven-level structure with multiple wings, bridges, hidden rooms, etc. I did the same thing with a little fort I built in our back yard; my uncle helped me build it, but I kept tinkering with it every

day after school, and making additions with scrap wood. Eventually it had three stories, a deck, stairs inside and out, and a fireplace. My third-grade class made a special trip to my house to see it. I was very proud of myself that day! I was really excited that a project can take on a life of its own and evolve into something much bigger than what was initially planned, which is still very exciting."

Wiesenfeld has journeyed from this idea of unplanned evolution to his present place, creating breathtakingly honest portraits of solitary, long-limbed youths captured in moments of reverie, whilst in the midst of their own journeys to unknown destinations or unsettling epiphanies. But even before his gallery career began, Wiesenfeld already had a remarkable career drawing heroes and villains for Marvel, DC and Image comics:

"I took a very circuitous path to arrive at what I'm doing now. When I became interested in comics, I think I was at an age when it was important to have an identity at school; so being the one who could draw was my 'thing.' I drew relentlessly, in an obsessive way, I would create assignments for myself, like 'I'm going to draw a woman's head from thirty angles today.'"

This rigorous self-tasking created the opportunity for him to add his own touch to the characters engrained in the psyche of comic culture, and one that gave him a loyal and dedicated following. Obsessed fans hunted for his work in the late 1990s when Wiesenfeld was emerging as a comic book artist. When he struck out of the industry for good in 2004, his absence left his fans wondering where he went, his disappearance mystified them. For Wiesenfeld however, this marked the beginning of his quest to fulfill his own emotional narratives, rather than to continue manipulating the bodies and settings of stories pre-existing within the collective consciousness of the culture:

"I'm very glad I left because painting suits me far

OPPOSITE: "Drain Pipe"

LEFT: "Girl With Dog"
OPPOSITE: "Fish Gatherer"
FOLLOWING: "March", "Runoff"



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better. I feel much more freedom and inspiration, and my work is an expression of my personal thoughts and experiences, not an expression of what Wolverine is doing. Having said that, comics were fantastic for learning the craft of drawing: perspective, anatomy, telling a story, and drawing from imagination. I couldn't do the work I do now if it hadn't been for that."

After his departure from creating comics, Wiesenfeld enrolled in Art Center for Design College in Pasadena where he learned the tools of traditional, old master-style painting and drawing that he would employ in his personal work. He spent the five years after graduation in a solitary working environment, away from the classroom critique setting that had previously been the touchstone of his work. Truly alone in his art making, he used the freedom of this solitude to truly form the ideas and destinations of his work, separated from both the rapid pace of the comic industry, and the regimen of an academic setting.

Having spent years rendering the muscled and predominantly male, adult bodies of comic characters, his personal figures began to morph drastically. In lieu of the exaggerated bodies of supernaturally strong characters, his newly realized "voice" lent itself to the manifestation of slim teenage figures, often female and impossibly elongated. While the unnatural manipulations of the body remained as a subtle hint to his previous works, everything else about his personal work differed drastically. This solitary setting out within the tenuous and cutthroat streams of the art world proved successful as he is currently represented by Arcadia Gallery in NYC:

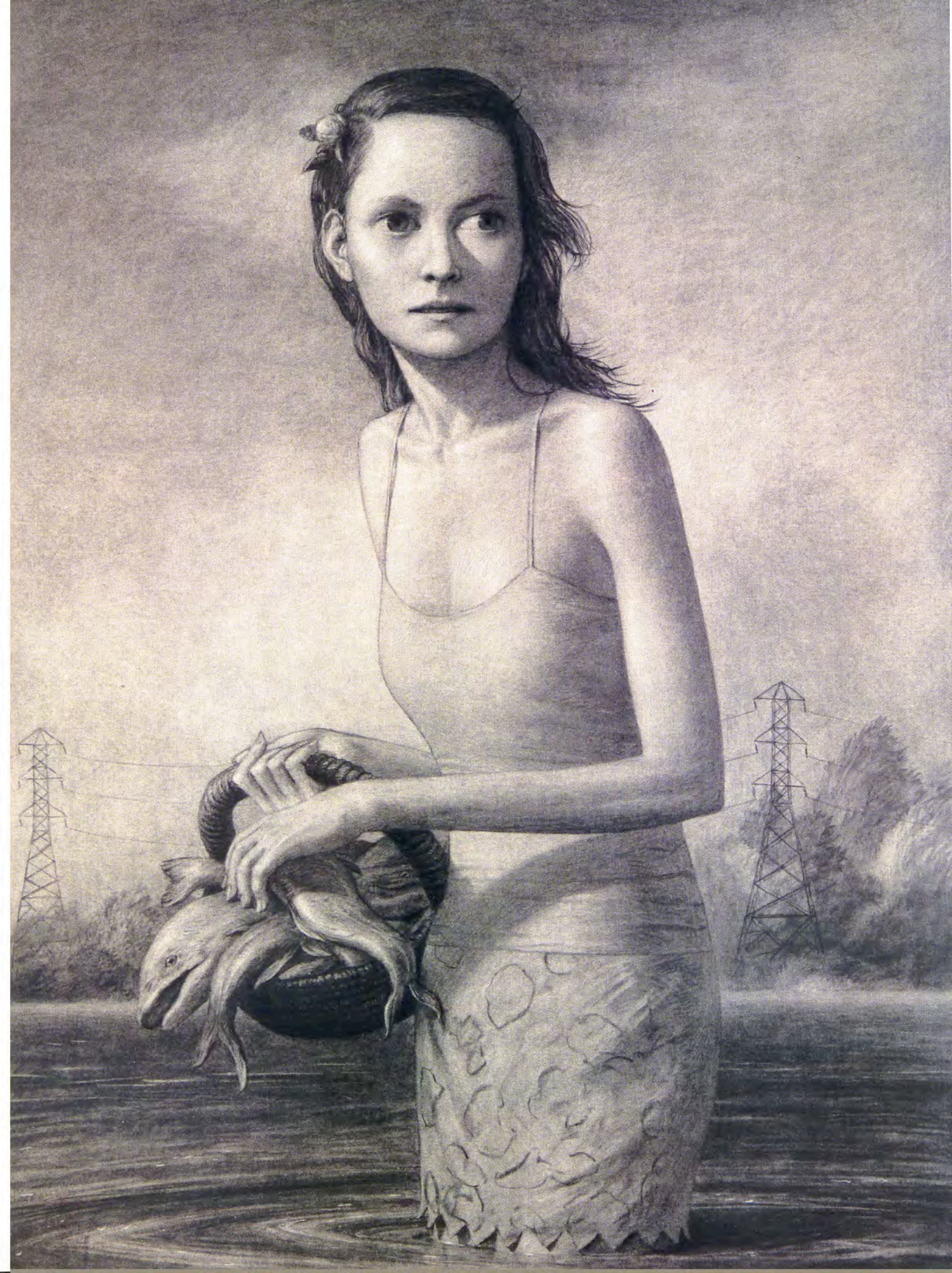
"It's personal feeling, that I need to sequester myself away from external influences to be able to hear my own voice. It has been necessary to do that in order to become an artist and do work that I feel is really mine. My experience has been that other people, even the ones with the best intentions, have their own ideas about what

I should be doing, plus the world is full of ideologies that will push and pull you. I think that's part of where that story in my work comes from, which is about removing oneself from society in order to become a sovereign person."

While using this time to cultivate the figures and aesthetic environments of his work, the idea of solitude bled over into the themes and "story" of the paintings and drawings. It is within these emotive compositions that this solitude is most palpable; the vulnerable, yet determined figures of his work each seem to be caught in the transitional moment of setting out into nature, crossing a threshold, whether they are on a quest, escaping their lives or simply out in search of something yet unseen. These narrative gaps engage the viewer and provoke him to fill in the story:

"There are no narratives in my paintings really, only suggestions of them, which I hope will provoke viewers to do their own story telling. My ideal audience member would be both the protagonist in the story and at the same time its co-creator."

While the paintings provide only a moment within a large, suggested narrative, the elements of action within story are carefully provided. Often the figures appear alone and carrying luggage or other precious objects within natural settings with magnified weather. Figures step over iced streams within frosted forests, wade into stormy seas, push themselves through floods and rest in snow banks. In lieu of spoken words, the settings aptly provide a tone of both struggle and discomfort for the exposed figures. They appear vulnerable and underdressed and yet, in the action of their determination, they also appear paradoxically strong and committed to their journey. There is also a seeking involved, whether this is for a physical object buried beneath leaves or a more psychological query as figures sit at the cusp of storm drains or the edge of the wilted family porch, staring off into nowhere, with only their







physical bodies present in these environments: "I imagine it's a moment of decision when the character is weighing her options. The scene, the action, and the internal dialog are all happening in between definitive places, actions and decisions. I think it gets back to the coming of age idea, that we need to make choices about who we are going to be, but those choices always come with costs, and the foreknowledge of the loss involved can be debilitating. Another way I look at it is like an inevitable march to one's own destruction, or at least a complete loss of what has been, which is a kind of death."

Since we last spoke with Wiesenfeld in 2010, his work and characters have engaged in the repetition of the seemingly unending journey. His characters are still stuck in a transitional limbo, only now some of them seem better equipped to weather the scenarios in which he has placed them. In "Snowbed," a young female's fingers are immersed in snow. Although wrapped in a scarf and clad in a knitted sweater, her gaze suggests that she is either daydreaming or dead, having either succumbed to the elements or no awareness of the cold snow. The tight focus of this painting and several other newer works including "The Crown" is also a departure for Wiesenfeld. The strength of these tight compositions rely on the focus of the facial expressions and postures of his figures while the sweeping beauty of their respective destructive settings becoming secondary. There is a marked sophistication and nuance of their features in these works, illuminating both their youth and the danger of their environments with a quiet, unsettling beauty.

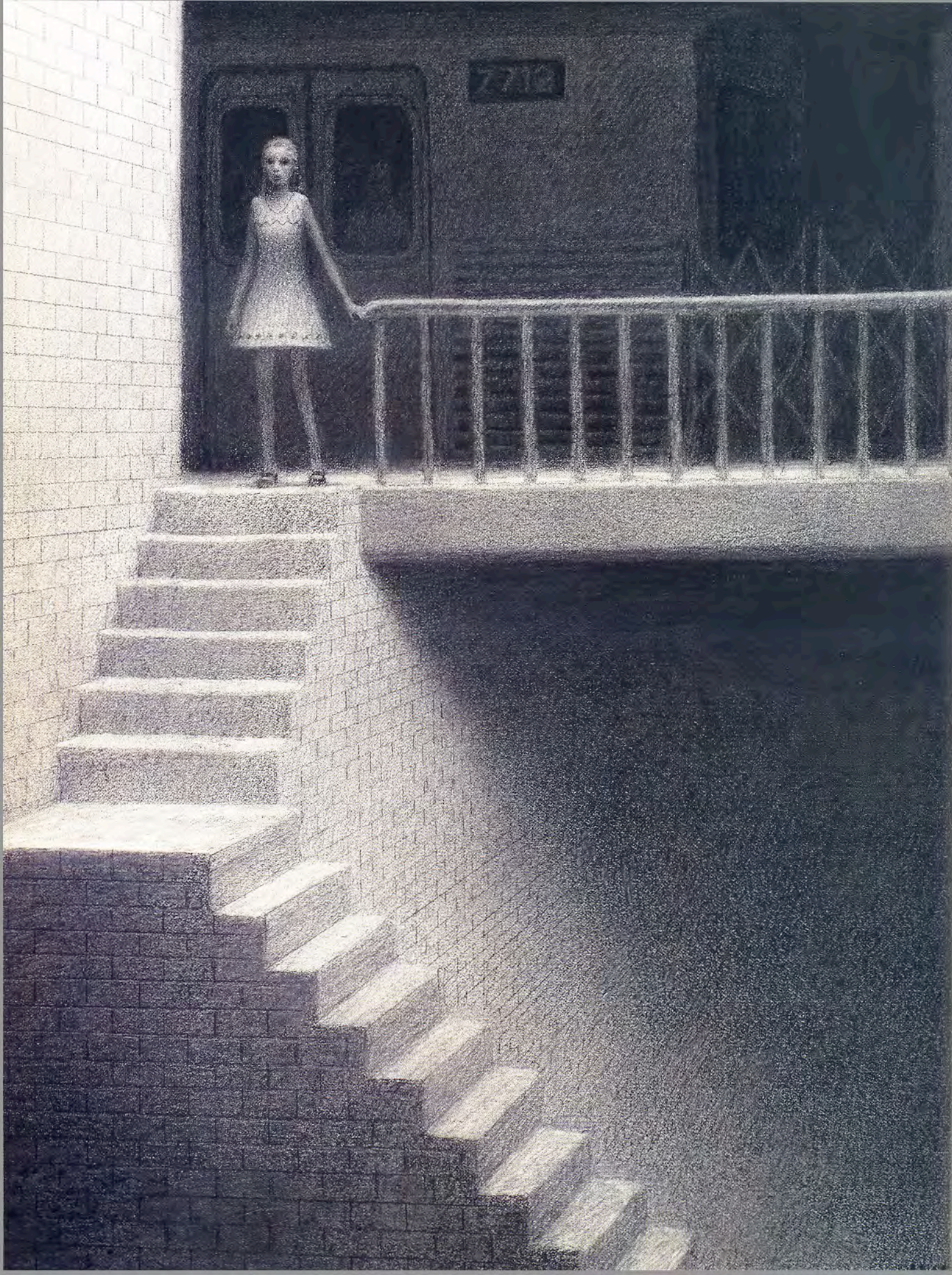
By choosing to represent his "story" with the figures transitioning between early childhood and adulthood, the work vibrates with the unrest of change and echoes the literary device of "the hero's journey." This emotive tension speaks to the metamorphosis of the body as well as the mind. As children we are not only physically vulnerable, but also mentally underdeveloped. We are in constant flux as the outer world pushes expectations on our personalities, a time when our beliefs and dreams are becoming cemented. In this way, the limitlessness of childhood haunts our adult selves:

"I often feel like part of my brain got stuck at age thirteen. It is an age that haunts me. I think that it was the most profound stage in the process of distinguishing myself as a discreet person, with all the fear, shame, hubris, and exhilaration that it involved. It was a time of extreme uncertainty, like falling out of the nest into a world I didn't understand at all, and even less how I would fit into it. That sense of emerging identity comes at the price of loss of the blissful state of childhood. Maybe my paintings are a way of re-enacting that loss, by going back to the scene to try for a different outcome."

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OPPOSITE: "Thomas"
ABOVE: "The Well"
FOLLOWING: "Winter Cabin", "Tunnel", "Thicket"







The prevailing image of childhood, replete with naiveté, innocence and simplicity, is contrasted by the adult tension in the work. The figures appear to have more complex emotional landscapes than their physical ages suggest, and it's in this troublesome anxiety that the work hypnotizes its viewers. The solitary youths seem pressed with the metaphoric turbulence of adulthood as the settings around them swirl with tumult. Acting as dramatic arcs, the settings occasionally appear more fully realized than the lone figures within it, adding to the potency of the emotive intent. These intense, quiet moments of the figures' separation from the unseen and abandoned elements of stability in their lives into the wildness of nature, marks the turbulent freedom of their solitude. It is left up to the viewer to decide if there will be a place waiting for them when they each return from their journeys or if they will choose to remain forever changed and out in the new worlds into which they were each willing to cross over.

ABOVE: "Ruth"
OPPOSITE: "The Crown"

Wiesenfeld's own future remains shaded as he continues on his journey within the fine art world:

"I have ideas for things I want to do, but experience tells me that they are totally subject to change once the work begins. Paintings never end up the way I want them to, they start telling me what to do. It's a process that I have only partial control over, and I wouldn't want it any other way. It's kind of like taking a trip without a map. The best parts are finding things you couldn't imagine were there."

"My experience has been that other people, even the ones with the best intentions, have their own ideas about what I should be doing."

