

FORT GANSEVOORT

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Gayleen Aiken: *Interiors*

By Lyle Rexer

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Gayleen Aiken, “Cousins Gawleen” and “Butter Cup” dancing slowly by the nickelodeon playing, 1966. Colored pencil, ballpoint pen, and crayon on paper. 9 x 12 inches. Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

She seemed delightfully eccentric, the white-haired lady with her nervous laugh, the musical instruments she played in a manic frenzy, and the stories she repeated. You may have wished for a grandmother like her, unless you happened to look inside her handbag only to find the shrunken head, the fetish, the monkey’s paw. Gayleen Aiken was not anybody’s granny. And she was not the second coming of Grandma Moses, the folk artist. Gayleen Aiken created an art that flirted constantly with darkness, even as it summoned everything in its power to keep that darkness at bay.

Superficially, she was the heir to Grandma Moses. A Vermont native, Aiken mastered a luminous color palette, often composed from colored pencils, that could evoke the seasonal landscape with vivid freshness. Her imaginary family of cousins, the Raimbillis, and their friends celebrated the freedom of childhood and the pleasure of community in a cartoon fashion reminiscent of so much rural folk art from the previous two centuries. Which is as far as most viewers have gotten with her work, as evidenced by Aiken’s sporadic representation in the art world. Fort Gansevoort is the latest of a small group of contemporary dealers (and artists) who have selectively enfranchised this outsider work and encouraged us to look beyond, or perhaps deeper, into the pretty pictures.

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The selection curated by artist Laurie Simmons is heavy on the doings of the Raimbilli cousins as they cavort in and around the “old heirloom country house,” as Aiken described it and illustrated it inside and out, over and over again, in drawings dating from 1940 to 2003. This is not surprising considering Simmons’s interest in the accoutrements of childhood, especially dolls, and the interior spaces of dollhouses (as she has fabricated them in tiny tableaux) that can shape or reflect children’s consciousness. Aiken’s children dance to the music of nickelodeons and player pianos, pull pranks, and generally enjoy themselves. She also intersperses paintings that more directly narrate events of her life, as in *I/Gayleen Aiken signed one of our published Books For Visitors And my school friends...* (1998), when she goes to a signing event for a book about her artistic work. But the more carefully one looks through Simmons’s selection, the more shadowed these visions become.

In the first place, there are quite a few images that depict things not exactly going according to plan. The character Nonit Talli turns up to cause trouble on a number of occasions, the house has its problems, the player piano acts up, and the Raimbillis won’t behave like well-mannered guests. Of course, this is not exactly Bruegel’s *The Triumph of Death* (ca. 1562), or even *Children’s Games* (1560). But other elements also intrude. The first is Aiken’s deep fascination with music and moonlight. Half the pictures involve musical instruments, especially the player piano, which almost magically appears in many rooms of the house. In paintings not in the show, it even appears on the lawn. Several pictures are simply visual catalogues of instruments. The moon is a sanctifier of music’s power, a source of Dionysian release that Aiken refers to in many of her best works. The power of night and music is evoked most vividly in *Cousin Gawleen, Johnio, Gawliver...* (1994), a scene lit only by an outsize clock that glows green as the children dance. Aiken frequently repeated her imagery because her imaginative world was an archetypal one, in which the same stories, the same perceptions of a fundamental collision of order and disorder keep recurring.

There is a magnetic attraction to chaos in these pictures, but also a profound, even desperate longing for order and continuity. Like a fingerprint, Aiken marks out the right-hand corner of almost every drawing or painting for a tiny narrative cartoon panel. These pictures-within-the picture constitute a litany of her identity and the description of a childhood that, although fraught with trauma, was also the thing she most wanted to hold onto. The words in the tiny panels are like a mantra, recited over and over to ward off anxiety and pain, and the “old heirloom house,” so often rendered, beginning when Aiken was not more than five years old, is a talismanic sign. It is the point around which her entire universe revolves—even as it harbors the potential for fear and disorder.

I once visited Aiken in Vermont with the artist Don Sunseri, who “discovered” her work. We went to the old heirloom house, and I watched her walk its perimeter, touch its siding and talk to it. In an animistic, mythological world, things and places don’t just need to be recalled, they need to be negotiated with, placated, and even worshipped. The alternative, which is always close at hand, is too terrible to be faced directly.