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The New York Times

Gayleen Aiken: 'Cousins, Quarries and a Nickelodeon'

By Ken Johnson - Feb. 14, 2013



"Old Kitchen Sink Troubles" (1984), by the Vermont painter Gayleen Aiken. Luise Ross Gallery, New York

Luise Ross Gallery

511 West 25th Street, Chelsea

Through March 2

The self-taught artist Gayleen Aiken (1934-2005) has been called the Grandma Moses of Vermont. A lifelong resident of Barre, Vt., she began making art as a child. If you consider the nearly 30 drawings and paintings dating from 1955 to 1995 in this lively show, it looks superficially as if her technical skills were arrested at about age 10.

That is deceptive, though, as there is considerable formal complexity in much of her work. One of the people dancing in moonlight outside a big, old house lighted from within and full of revelers is a remarkable feat of depicting light and space, and a touching expression of human community.

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At least part of Aiken's mind evidently remained in a state of childlike openness. Carefully detailed and quirkily annotated pencil and crayon drawings of musical instruments, rural homes in zooming perspective and the inner workings of a granite gravestone company, whose raw material comes from nearby quarries, exude infectious curiosity about the world around her.

There is much commotion in her works. Many are populated by rambunctious children with maniacal toothy smiles. They are identified in handwritten captions as "Raimbilli cousins" from an imaginary extended family. Disasters happen, as in the comical drawing of a person thrusting a plunger into an overflowing kitchen sink, surrounded by cheerful onlookers, but the work has no dark side.

There is something unnerving, however, about some two dozen nearly life-size, full-figure portraits of madly grinning Raimbillis made of cardboard, paint and fabric, all hanging on the wall facing the gallery entrance.