

# CHEIM & READ

## Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

### Adam Fuss Teaches Morality

by kimberly chou 09/10/10

It's a history that's likely unknown to those who grew up with it as Chutes and Ladders: The game Snakes and Ladders began as a Jain morality-teaching tool in 16th Century India. Snakes and ladders on the checkered board represented the bad and good deeds of life, respectively. On older versions of the game board, to finish one must land on the last square, where a ladder leads up to Nirvana—sometimes depicted as the smiling face of God.



Photographer Adam Fuss draws on this esoteric background for his new show at Cheim & Reid, "Home and the World," open now through Oct. 23. For Fuss, Snakes and Ladders represents a geography of human life. "The board is a simultaneous representation of landscape and chronology, in a global and in an individualized sense," Fuss said. "When you play the game that's your landscape: where you were born, where

you cross, where you moved across, where you die, perhaps even in terms of multiple lives."

In his gelatin silver print photographs and large-scale daguerreotypes, Fuss explores the places one calls home and the rest of the world during a lifetime. His photographs show snakes in spectral black and white on a one-to-one scale. Taking off from the physical board game, he photographed live snakes on a grid made of newspapers and on drawings of square and diamond grids. In other photographs, they twist around a vertical staff (the "Caduceus" series) and traverse sidewise, like script ("Alphabet"). Daguerreotypes channel a church altar and entryway through more secular objects: a mattress, upon which rests a loose knot of snakes; a vagina in such close-up as to show its architecture.

"Home and the World" continues more than 20 years of snakes in Fuss's work. Prior to his investigation of Snakes and Ladders in the past ten years, prompted, he said, by interest in the work of symbolist Carl Schuster, Fuss saw snakes as animals with a purely positive connotation. For him, they are representative of a great energy and life force. Fuss has previously depicted snakes swimming, for example and for this show, the "Caduceus" series was inspired by the story behind the medical symbol. (In the myths of Hermes and Tiresias, the blind seer Tiresias separated two copulating snakes with his staff and was turned into a woman. Seven years later, he did the same thing and was turned back into a man. Tiresias passed on the staff to Hermes—the latter a figure also associated with alchemy, another transformative process.) Greek myth also surfaces in his *Medusa* photograph of snakes inside a wedding dress. Instead of the part of the story

frequently referenced in visual art—the Gorgon getting her head chopped off by hero Perseus—Fuss calls on what happens shortly after. From the beheading, Pegasus and the giant Chrysaor spring from the blood—two positive figures emerging from the negative.

When Fuss began working on what would become this show, he first experimented with snakes on a grid. In the grid series where each square is made out of sheets of newspaper, the newspaper performs the role of time-keeper and calendar, much like the Snakes and Ladders board does. "We wet the newspaper because I wanted both sides [visible]," Fuss explained. "I didn't want the literal newspaper. I wanted the information to be like a soup-trying to describe the landscape but without specific trees and plants and rocks. It's just the idea of the landscape, just the idea of the news."

Turned 45 degrees as a set of diamond shapes, the grid takes on another representation of home. The diamond pattern seen in the photograms, and also in the mattress stitching in one daguerreotype, recalls the style of windows popular in the part of England where Fuss grew up.

Although Fuss works in formats first used in earliest days of photography, his approach breaks tradition in a few ways. In developing photos, one generally wants the negative laid flat and tight so the resulting image will be as sharp as possible. For "Home and the World," Fuss forced the paper to roll and buckle, producing areas that are out of focus. The idea is to convey what a two-dimensional game board can not: just as the ladders are not flat on the ground but angled or vertical, the snakes, Fuss said, are coming up from underground and down again.

"Home and the World" references Western spiritual ideas and symbols as well. The daguerreotype of snakes on a mattress evolved from the original idea of photographing a simple altar, arranged with candles and cross,



in a church near Fuss's childhood home. Looking to capture the architecture of a vagina, Fuss was inspired by a William Blake sketch of a chapel between a woman's legs and the man-made door at the entrance of the Caves of Lascaux.

"In a way I'm trying to describe the architecture of the entrance, but not referencing a sensual experience," Fuss said. "Also, I'm doing photography [with the daguerreotype format] in the same way a 19th Century photographer shot the architecture of gothic cathedrals."

Fuss's images are many times larger than traditional daguerreotypes. (The snakes on the mattress daguerreotype measures 27 ¾ by 42 inches and the vagina 28 by 24 inches.) There's a challenge to the artist in producing in this format on such scale, and it also changes how it can be presented and, ultimately, how the viewer can interact with it.

"A daguerreotype historically is about hand-size. It's actually something you can move around," Fuss said. "When you scale it up it becomes more of a picture than a hand held object."