

Labyrinth II

Labyrinthine Ways

ERIK DESMAZIÈRES' PRINTS EVOKE DÜRER, PIRANESI AND HIS OWN FANTASTIC, DISTURBING VISION. BY MATTHEW ROSE

IN HIS SHORT STORY *The Library of Babel*, Jorge Luis Borges eloquently and despairingly expressed the impossibility of organizing human knowledge. He imagined the universe as an intricate, disordered collection of books residing in a structure "composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries," a labyrinth of fantastic scale and daunting perspective. And the tomes that line Borges' shelves are as oblique in meaning as the library that houses them.

French artist Erik Desmazières, who recently produced a series of prints to illustrate *The Library of Babel*, has made this Borgesian sense of disorientation one of the principal subjects of his growing body of Old Master-style etchings. "I specialize in places that disappear," says the lanky 60-year-old, sitting in his Paris studio, backlit by an enormous window that frames Sacré Coeur, the vast, white basilica atop Montmartre.

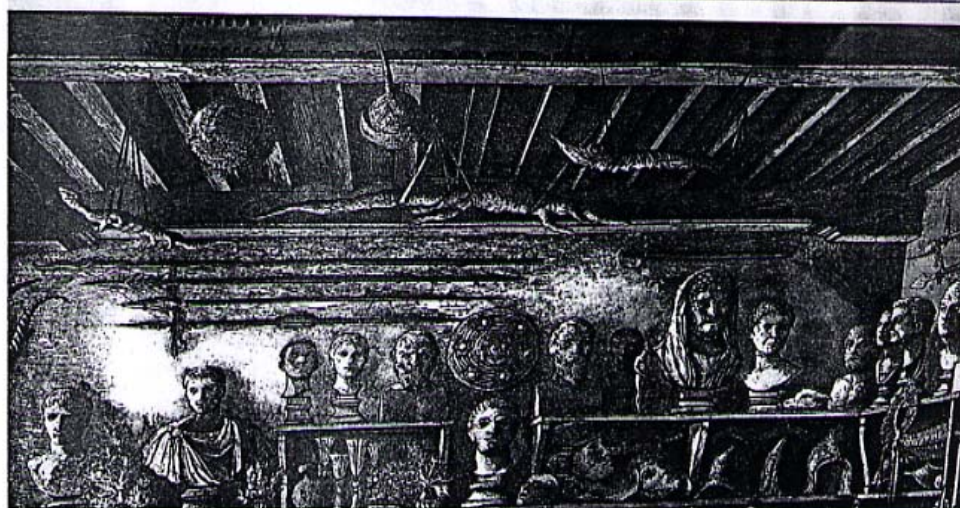
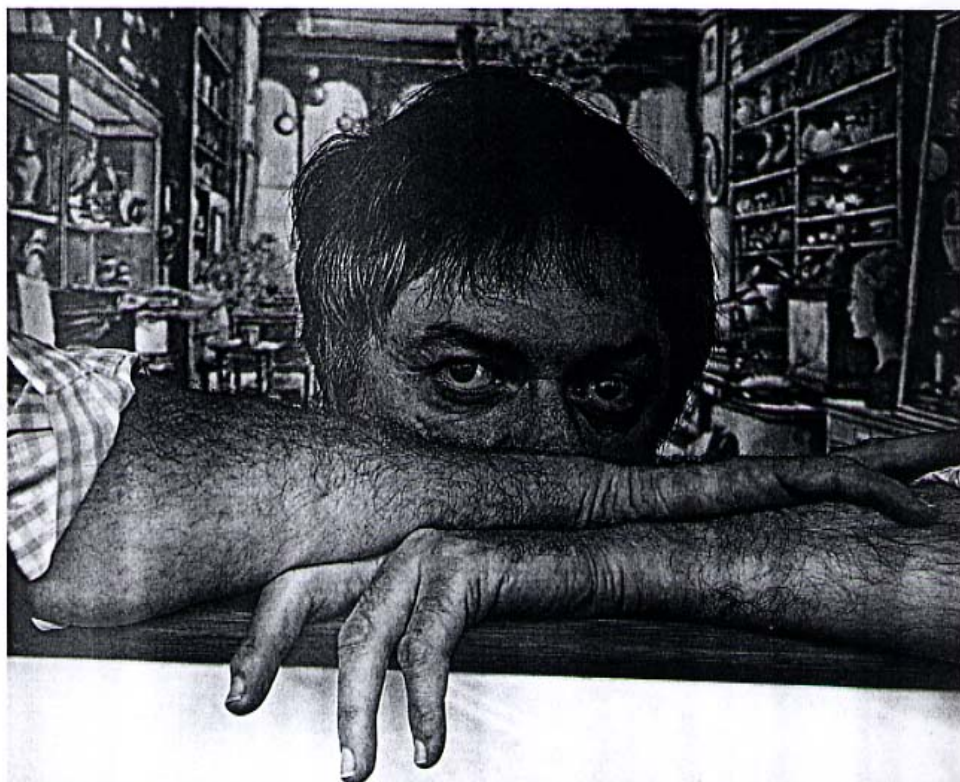
Desmazières arrived on the scene in 1972 when New York print dealer Andrew Fitch (now of the Fitch-Febvre Gallery in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.) dropped in on him and glimpsed the beginnings of a formidable talent. He was impressed by drawings

such as *The Fire* and *The Ramparts*, large-scale constructions of architecturally impossible cities. By coincidence, Fitch had just come from a visit with M.C. Escher, the Dutch fantasist whose own mathematically perplexing works were then reaching immense popularity. "I

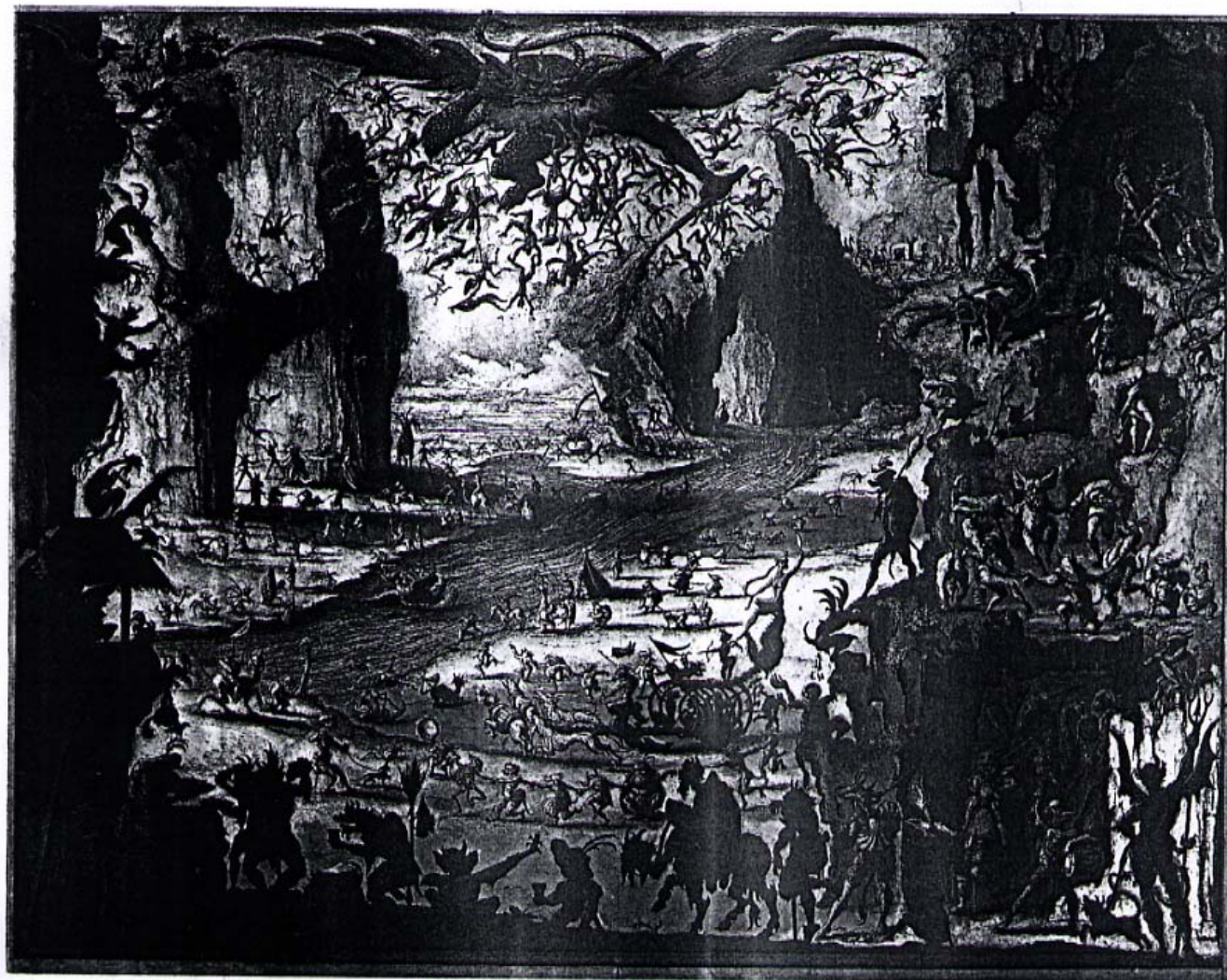
From left:
Labyrinth II, 2003,
etching and aquatint;
the artist leans
against his 2007
etching, *Rembrandts*
Kunstcaemer.

showed Andrew one other drawing, *L'Ecroulement*," Desmazières recalls. "He said, 'If ever you produce a print of that, let me know.'" Desmazières went to work, producing several etchings over the following 12 months, and he and Fitch began a relationship that has spanned more than three decades.

The son of a diplomat, Desmazières was born in Rabat, Morocco, in 1948. As a boy he dreamed up vast imaginary cities, but when his family moved to Paris in 1962, he felt destined to follow in his father's footsteps. He repressed his architectural impulses and put



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La Tentation de Saint Antoine,
1993, etching and aquatint.

his talent on hold for 10 years until he completed a political science degree at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris. It was only then that he took an evening art course, then a printmaking course, and began to gain a sense of his path. Solitary and deliberate, Desmazières adopted a style that recalled the imaginary prisons of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the meticulous architecture of Jacques Callot and the symbolic narratives of Albrecht Dürer.

Desmazières' fascination with the styles of bygone days took root when, as a teenager, he discovered Dürer, Piranesi and Canaletto through reproductions in books. "I learned by copying," he says. "By age 15 I realized I had ancestors—the Old Mas-

ters—particularly Piranesi, whose imaginary architectures became very important for me. I feel close to these artists, their drawings and etchings, their way of seeing the world. Clearly, my work is more influenced by Dürer than Duchamp, and working in an Old Master style is a way to continue a powerful and personal aesthetic."

That aesthetic is built on a structure of exaggerated perspective and unusual angles, which recur throughout Desmazières' work. *The Fire* (1973) tosses the viewer into the ruins of a stone city. In *The Ramparts*, we look skyward from the entrance of this city into a fully realized space. In *The Wheels* (1974) the viewer teeters above the scene, staring into a grid-like



abyss of stone wheels hanging from ropes off a matrix of stone beams. The artist propels us into a dizzying universe that is real and fantastic, historical and fictional.

In a series of etchings he made for a 52-page limited edition (210 copies) of *The Library of Babel* (Les Amis du Livre Con-

temporain, 1997), Desmazières has given visible form to the Borgesian view of the powerlessness of human consciousness to grasp infinity. His vast spaces are crammed with furiously concentrating researchers, assisted by slave-like human dollies with stacks of books tied around their bodies as they ferry them across a narrow bridge on their hands and knees. Six years later, the artist returned to the subject in a print titled *Labyrinthe II* (2003). Here a young bibliophile laden with books gestures toward a coded door, commanding it to open. A polyhedral plinth (which Desmazières calls a "philosopher's stone") stands guard, a direct quote from Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514).

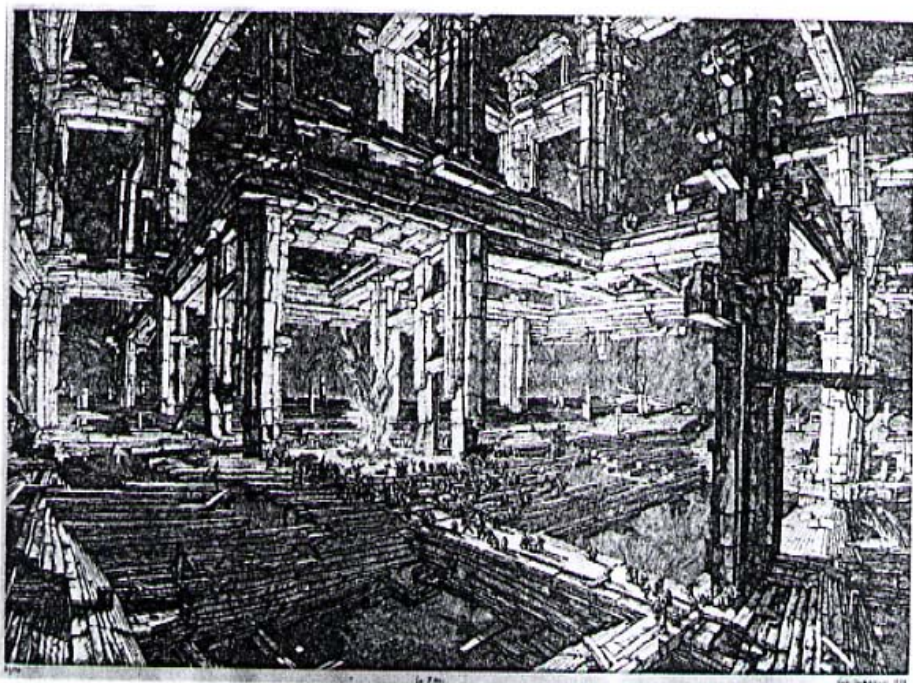
While Desmazières is adept at creating imaginary worlds, he has also depicted actual scenes with convincing solidity. His series of prints of Paris' covered pedestrian walkways provide a tour of the contemporary city. *La Salle Labrouste* (2001) depicts in authentic detail the immense 19th-century reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale with real-life knowledge workers laboring away. "In the middle of working on *La Salle Labrouste*, I was lost in the perspec-

tive of the vaulted ceiling and the walls lined with books," he recalls. "I had to rush at the time, as they were going to close the room for restoration." Those drawings and the prints were exhibited in a major exhibition of the artist's works at the Musée Carnavalet from October 2006 to February 2007.

In his studio, Desmazières is slowly adding depth to his most recent work, *Le Magasin de Robert Capia*, a delightfully messy gallery of curiosities, books and puppets. He wipes the copper plate with varnish so that newly etched lines will appear bright and visible, and uses a large magnifying glass to realize the level of precise, intricate detail he requires. Before the edition is finalized, he makes several "state proofs." Desmazières explains that the etching process, which he calls "an obsession," mimics the accumulation of knowledge. His devotion to process extends to honoring his printer, René Tazé, in a dozen works that meticulously illustrate Tazé's techniques, presses and atelier.

While new projects are constantly coursing through Desmazières' studio, their realization can take months. "One day I'd like to draw Grand Central Station in New York," he says while calmly worrying over a work in progress. Picking up a graving tool, he nicks out a few details from the copper plate. "I can't tell people when a print will be finished." Then, he changes his mind, and says, echoing Borges, "A subject is never finished." **A**

From top: Desmazières requires such a precise level of detail that he often employs a magnifying glass when etching a copper plate; *The Fire*, 1973, etching.



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