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Crossing the Line: 'A Year in Drawing'

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ANY ARTIST ENGAGED IN GRAPHIC EXPRESSION MUST CONTEND WITH THE CREATIVE DISSONANCE between the controlling hand and the unruly line. "A Year in Drawing," now on view at Galerie Lelong, gives us a generous sampling of recent works on paper by 16 Contemporary artists. It is fascinating to view and compare their diverging approaches to the conundrums of drawing; while some artists willingly share creative authority with the line, others insist on absolute control. And with what is surely a knowing wink, one artist bypasses the difficulties entirely and offers a "drawing" all but untouched by the hand or the pen.



Michael Bodycomb / Photo Credit: Michael Bodycomb 2008

Emilio Perez, 'soul seek' (2008).

The exhibition opens on a note of restraint with a contribution from the Postminimalist artist Kate Shepherd. Six isosceles triangles of equal measurement are affixed to the gallery wall. Each triangle is made up of seven smaller triangles, also of equal size, but of different primary and complementary colors reminiscent of the smooth planar surfaces of Ms. Shepherd's paintings. The alignment of the smaller triangles creates a delicate line that zigzags through the composition. The analytical nature of Ms. Shepherd's geometry brings to mind the fundamental value of the triangle as a drawing tool, both in the fabrication of architecture and in the human figure.

In contrast to Ms. Shepherd's angular precision, the charcoal drawings of Jim Hodges and Ursula von Rydingsvard revel in the medium's messy, tactile responsiveness. Mr. Hodges, a sculptor known primarily for his large-scale installations, demonstrates his superb compositional skills in two abstract landscapes from his series "through an opened gate" (2007). Mr. Hodges draws from an abundant supply of markings ranging from long, fluid strokes to small biomorphic squiggles. The artist's free, yet judicious dispersion of these marks suggests an expansive view of the natural world and creates a drawing that thrums with rhythmic energy. Smudges made with Mr. Hodges's saliva underscore the artist's participation in the line's creative dance. Like Mr. Hodges, Ms. von Rydingsvard is interested in the haptic nature of drawing. Known for her use of chain saws and chisels to carve the cedar sculpture in her series "Clothes to Dry" (2007), Ms. von Rydingsvard subjects her quavering lines of charcoal to the dramatic assault of the artist's fingertips, which pull the line apart and antagonize its forward momentum.

Other artists, however, prefer to exert control over graphic momentum in subtler ways. In his large-scale paintings, Emilio Perez cuts through layers of latex and acrylic paint with an X-Acto knife, giving the curvilinear lines of his paintings an incisive precision. With pen in hand, Mr. Perez is no less stringent. In his three drawings, the fluid and firm calligraphic lines of ink wind their way over a delicate base of muted brown, pink, and gray washes. The centripetal momentum of the swirling cluster

of lines suggests the spontaneous converging of a cosmic form. Conceptual artist Iran do Espírito Santo's pursuit of pristine surfaces and patterns produces, in his drawing activity, meticulously rendered marks that all but yield complete authority to the artist. "CRTN RAISONNÉ 6" (2008) features the artist's graphic motif of nine rectangles arranged in rows of three, each rectangle made up of countless thinly drawn, straight lines of permanent marker. The subtle gradations of blacks and grays created by the varying degrees of pressure in the application of the marker give the lines an extraordinary ciliated fineness. The perfectionism is both beautiful and slightly disturbing to contemplate.

Several works incorporate photographs, stamps, or even debris from outside sources. Jane Hammond's lyrical "All Souls (Tisaluni)" (2007) features more than a dozen species of butterfly, digitally printed and then "pinned" to the artist's large handmade map. Catherine Lee unites shards of Japanese glazed raku to painted watercolor forms on postcard-size pieces of paper. Pioneering Indian Contemporary artist Nalini Malani offers the most traditional, but most compelling use of this technique. Like many of the artists included in the exhibition, Ms. Malani pursues many media, including video and installation. But she began her artistic career as a painter, depicting literary and mythological figures taken from Western and Eastern sources as means both to explore female archetypes and to address the fractured nature of her homeland. The three drawings seen in Lelong are related to Ms. Malani's recent return to her painting and drawing practices. Combining blots of watercolor, ink-transfer drawings, and stenciled lettering, she creates an intriguing dreamlike space where figures and thoughts float and converge. Ms. Malani draws over the blots of watercolor, transforming them into comical figures with solemn faces and knobby knees. The drawings are playful and inventive, clearly riffing off the amorphous shapes created by the watercolors as well as the artist's concerns with female demonization. In "Witches' kitchen (Faust) II," text from the Goethe poem is imposed over Ms. Malani's graphic brew of strange and wonderful imagery.

Finally, continuing his exploration of the snowball as a motif and a container of thoughts and feelings, environmental sculptor Andy Goldsworthy all but relinquishes his creative authority to his "found" object. Last winter, Mr. Goldsworthy placed a snowball, packed with grungy New York snow, onto a large sheet of white paper. As the snow melted, the dirty water created marbled marks on the paper, leaving a grayish circular stain of grit and mud at its center. The resulting "Chelsea Snowball" (2007) is a worthy and whimsical extension of the artist's concerns with the ephemeral and a clever gesture that all but pre-empts the artist's role in the drawing process.