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Obscured Lines: Contemporary Drawing In Los Angeles

By Phung Huynh, Assistant Professor of Art Fri, Feb 24, 2012



Drawing is a natural and immediate form of human expression, driven by the impulse to doodle, write, or sketch. In contemporary art practices, drawing is more of a metaphoric and sometimes hyperbolic connection between looking and thinking. This approach allows artists to question the real, tangible world and to communicate ideas and experiences in more inventive ways. Artists are afforded the versatility of drawing as an art form that can be an accurate description of real life experience or a transcription of memory; it can be social critique or playful meandering of line; it can be representational, abstract, gestural or expressionistic. The exhibition seeks to locate contemporary drawing in Los Angeles and features the works of nine artists. Some of the artists are native Angelenos, and some are émigré Angelenos, shaping an eclectic yet informed perspective on drawing practices today. The works on display blur the symbolic line that attempts to rigidly define drawing. Looking beyond traditional “works on paper,” these artists demonstrate the process of drawing as experimentation and exploration in a context that is directly or loosely connected to metropolitan culture in Southern California.

One of the byproducts of urbanization and inhabiting such a large, sprawling city as Los Angeles is the attempt to understand the human condition. In Joe Biel’s delicate renderings of “charged human situations,” Biel portrays the human condition as enigmatic, bizarre and contradictory. Fragments of figural stone sculptures appear fleshy, or an open picture book with real objects tumble from its leaves, are all drawn scenarios that reference the contradictions of human experience. In Sergio Teran’s life-size charcoal drawings, he examines the human condition through portraiture, unveiling individual people. Teran is known for his portraits of people close to him who mime a symbolic activity or gesture. Some of these portraits include figures wearing Mexican wrestling masks. The mask can give the person superhuman strength and the guise to be a spiritual being. Yet without the mask, the person is left ordinary. Like Biel and Teran, Alexandra Wiesenfeld’s work is representational and figurative with subject matter that is not literal, but is psychologically probing. Her mixed media drawings are layers of images which include people, animals and foliage that occupy a mysterious azure landscape. Wiesenfeld’s drawing process echoes how she thinks our minds work in complex layers of thoughts, feelings and projections.

Another significant theme that occurs in the drawing exhibition is the tenuous relationship between people and nature. In Jennifer Celio’s work, she engages the viewer with hyper detailed graphite drawings of dense forests with dappling light interspersed between branches and leaves. Upon closer observation, the drawings reveal cellphone towers disguised as trees and an airplane flying overhead. Celio addresses environmental degradation that is directly linked to human occupation and urban sprawl that is prevalent in Los Angeles. A similar concern poetically emerges in Elizabeth Saveri’s pieces. Her subject matter is often of trees, leaves, and trash, objects she describes as “features in [her] urban environment that are everywhere, but rarely seen or noticed.” The remnants of nature (dead leaves) and the residue of human activity (trash) are intermingled in the same space. Saveri’s drawings operate as an allegorical reminder that the passage of time and decay do not distinguish between what is natural or what is manmade. Although **Kiel Johnson**’s works do not incorporate images of nature, the absence of nature underscores the machine-like elements of his drawings. Johnson’s art reflects an interest in the investigation of how things are built and work. He takes apart everyday, utilitarian objects such as shopping carts and bleachers and reconstructs them into visually fascinating forms void function. Johnson creates compact cityscapes that are filled with industrial structures, but where no living creature can inhabit. Thick layers of roads and buildings overlap to create an irregularly shaped globe, too busy for anyone to live on. The irony of man-made objects that become useless is punctuated by his black and white compositions drawn on a raw wooden surface.



The featured artists in the exhibition push the boundaries of drawing beyond traditional flat works. Some specifically choose to experiment with abstraction, installation, and more conceptual practices, which challenge the conventional picturesque ideas about drawing. In Margaret Griffith's large-scale works, she skillfully handles pigmented ink on paper to divide space into dissecting planes and geometric forms. The forms collectively warp and twist, suggesting the interior or exterior of architectural structures. These structures are not specific buildings or places but collapse back into a more intuitive, abstract visual experience. Griffith's more recent projects are paper installations inspired by domestic gates in her neighborhood. She replicates these gates by cutting out their negative spaces on heavyweight white paper and allows the "paper gates" to pile on top of each other, which ultimately transform into an abstract sculpture. Tim Nolan is an artist who also questions how drawing is traditionally made and perceived. Nolan's "drawings" are mylar tape strategically affixed to walls. His process is challenging through his choice of abstract imagery and his decision to make drawings as installations. His work comes across as precise geometric patterns, but there is a gradual understanding that his wall pieces shift the perception of two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. The illusionary space and planes created by the tape juxtapose the true plane that is the wall itself, keeping in flux what is real and what is drawn.

A critical aspect of contemporary drawing is to fully explore its potential conceptually. Interested in investigating the ideas that motivate art-making, Hataya Tubtim's work addresses art as an experience rather than an object. Tubtim is aware of the viewer's role in the interpretation of the art, and her audience's gestures become part of her piece. Tubtim's work in the exhibition is meant to operate as a line "mural drawing," and the viewers are given vinyl stickers to place on the drawing. A mural is typically meant to be public and commands participation of an audience. For Tubtim, drawing is about mark-making, but the marks are made by both artist and viewer. In contemplating her methods, Tubtim articulates that: "In participatory practice, compromise is vital when relying on the audience or other artists for the full realization of an image. Compromise is not construed as failure, but the reality of a social moment." For many artists, that "social moment" is essential, the exchange between the artwork, vis-à-vis the artist, and the viewer which ultimately brings life to the art object. The exhibition is a modest survey of the exciting trends that are occurring in contemporary drawing. For the artist, it is not simply about making marks or empty gestures. Drawing is core to the physical manifestation of an idea, feeling or experience.