

# '90's drawing: beyond pushing pencils

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WORCESTER — The meaning of drawing used to be clear: Artists applied pencil, charcoal or pen to paper, creating images that represent objects in the world, usually in preparation for painting or sculpture.

## Art Review

But in the last two decades that definition has been blown apart. That drawing has expanded to include numerous new media and purposes is delightfully apparent in "Drawn in the '90s," a first-rate exhibition of some 80 contemporary works by an international group of artists, on view at the Worcester Art Museum.

Tradition has not been entirely abandoned; many works here employ the usual media and supports. But there are also drawings on everything from mylar to rubber sheeting. Curtis Anderson, for example, applies rubber cement and ink to old maps; Martin Kippenberger limns homely Greek muses with ballpoint pens on hotel stationery. Collage elements and pain', from gouache to watercolor, also appear; in fact one of the surprising pleasures of the show is its many brilliantly colored works, a trend epitomized by Richmond Burton's "Color Threshold 2." Here a spectrum of hues is fronted by a plain brown box, suggesting the genie of color has escaped into the drawing milieu.

On the more high-tech end there are drawings made with a laser or photocopier; there are even two motorized drawing machines, busily spewing out works on paper.

A traveling exhibition organized by Independent Curators Incorporated, "Drawn in the '90s," which premiered at the Katonah Museum of Art in '92, picks up the trend identified in Janet Kardon's seminal 1980

Venice Biennale exhibition, "Drawing, the Pluralist Decade." But while the Conceptualist works featured in that show reflected the dematerialized art of the '70s, the '80s saw a return to the art object's physicality. Painting and sculpture once again took center stage, and the notions of craft and expression, and the evidence of the artist's hand became ascendant. Drawing too reflected this object-oriented approach, which is everywhere evident in this show, where drawing is presented as a finished art in its own right. The notion of preparatory sketches is absent, as is the idea that drawing replicates nature, as a photograph might. Instead, material and expressive qualities are paramount.

Don't go to Worcester expecting works by the likes of Julian Schnabel, David Salle or even Kiki Smith; one of the charms of "Drawn in the '90s" is its absence of '80s art stars. One notable exception is Mimmo Paladino, but his knockout "Jessye Norman III," with its poetic synthesis of figure and fauna in a landscape of the imagination, executed in both black and white and brilliant color, fits right into this show's spirit of subjective vision.

Still, it takes a bit of hubris to call an exhibition "Drawn in the '90s" when we are barely into the decade, and when most of the works included are dated 1990. That ante is raised by this particular decade, which not only marks the end of the century but also the end of the millennium. Yet the ice of this show's premise is less thin than one might imagine; it accurately reflects the pluralism that has characterized the art world in the post-modern decades, and which gives every indication of continuing.

As Sean Rainbird points out in a essay in the show's catalog (which reproduces a work by every artist, although unfortunately not in color) the influence of the German artist Joseph Beuys is everywhere apparent. Beuys' concept of *braunkreuz*, or material taking form, is evident in such works as the Japanese artist Matsutani's "Hon (Book)," in which a portion of an old French book is bound by rope and obliterated by graphite and vinyl. A more pared down version of this idea is manifested in Dove Bradshaw's lone wall mounted branch covered in blood red pigment, where object, line and color are literally made one.

Beuys' interest in nature and nurture, cycles of birth and death, and the body has permeated this generation's consciousness, as evidenced in such diverse images as Carroll Dunham's hairy pink forms, or Rosemarie Trockel's delicately erotic linear tracings, made by photocopying the artist's hair. Nature's organicism is evoked in Terry Winters' charcoal image of a mushroom-shaped object, which seems to vibrate in space. On the other hand, John Newman's mixed-media shell form represents a more analytical, if brightly colored, approach to nature.

A wall devoted to the extraordinarily delicate, utterly edgeless overall surfaces of Stefan Gritsch, Jacob El Hanani and Andrea Way bears the mark of Beuys' obsession with meaning and meaninglessness, imagery and text. These works also emerge from Pollock's drip paintings, but they are distinguished by an elegant touch and an oceanic sense of infinity.

The fertile abstract expressionist legacy is also mined in Melissa Meyer's dense, black and white labyrinth, and Jim Lutes' bristling, energetically layered mixed-media maze. Philip Taaffe's pencil drawing of abstract figurative graphite forms alternating with the negative space of the white paper looks to the surrealist periods of such sculptors as Giacometti and David Smith.

Thus the art of the past is venerated — but it also takes a ribbing. The motorized drawing machines inevitably imply that technology is rendering artists obsolete; John Kessler's robotic version, which sports a pair of rubber boots, might be seen as an oblique dig at Beuys' trademark garb of felt hat and boots. In a similar vein Nicolas Rule's totemic text on the genealogy of thoroughbreds ("Baby League was got by Bubbling Over ... Rhythm was got by Mr. Prospector"), which ends in a bloody trickle, satirizes the traditional view of Western art as a sort of self-perpetuating horse race of white male geniuses.

But in general, political themes, from feminism to gay rights to ecology, are noticeably absent. That's not to say that the tenor of the times here is copacetic — an underlying dread is best conveyed by Christopher Wool's huge, stark rendition of the word "fear."

Still, romance is also in the air, albeit in a very '90s mode, epitomized by Giuseppe Gallo's poignant "L'amore e' un limone." With its two red silhouetted female figures shyly facing each other across a chasm of space breached by a cut lemon, the work offers a crowning Beuysian touch, a sort of nod to that artist's famous sculpture of a lemon and a lightbulb, with its symbolic parable of transferred energy. But the image also suggests that the future's changing modes of art and affection will, nonetheless, retain their traditionally bittersweet edge.