

Drawing is another kind of language

Recent American Drawings
from a New York Private
Collection



SHARON LOUDEN

Born 1964, Philadelphia; lives and works in New York City

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Tight, 1993

ink and graphite on Mylar
8 x 11 in. (20.3 x 27.9 cm)

Sharon Loudén's work transgresses boundaries and moves between opposites. Her Mylar grounds host linear configurations of ink, graphite, or acrylic, which blend two- and three-dimensionality, abstraction and representation, and vertical and horizontal modes of viewing. In this ink-and-graphite drawing, Loudén compresses pictorial modes commonly held to be mutually exclusive and viewing experiences usually encountered separately.

Two superimposed snarls of lines gather in the upper section of the sheet, with parts reaching down to the bottom. Because of their thickness and darker, matte tone, the streams of ink dominate the picture, almost obscuring the more delicate tangle of graphite lines. When seen from angles at which light hits and dissolves the shiny graphite, the black streams press against and unite with the flat surface as if absorbed into a dry sponge. From other angles, however, especially when the graphite tangle comes into view, the flat pattern seems to inflate into a spatial structure in which two

bulks of lines twist and turn. The uneven saturation of the broad ink streams is particularly effective, transforming their planar expanses into voluptuously modeled, longitudinal bodies. The image, then, switches back and forth between flat pattern and spatial convolution, expressing one of the artist's central concerns. As Loudén has said, "I am interested in the power and use of the singular line, and lines tangled together, having three-dimensionality within a two-dimensional space; lines coming off or away from the frame of the page, lines going back and forth from being flat two-dimensional forms to three-dimensional internal, sculptural illusions."¹

At times, these sculptural illusions stimulate our imagination enough to transform abstraction into representation, to turn ink and graphite into a dancing couple. Referring to pairs of organic or even anthropomorphic forms like the one in *Tight*, Loudén speaks of intestinal forms, of "observing bodies in motion: in sexual positions, the crossing of legs in different positions, and glimpses of curious attitudes of posture."²

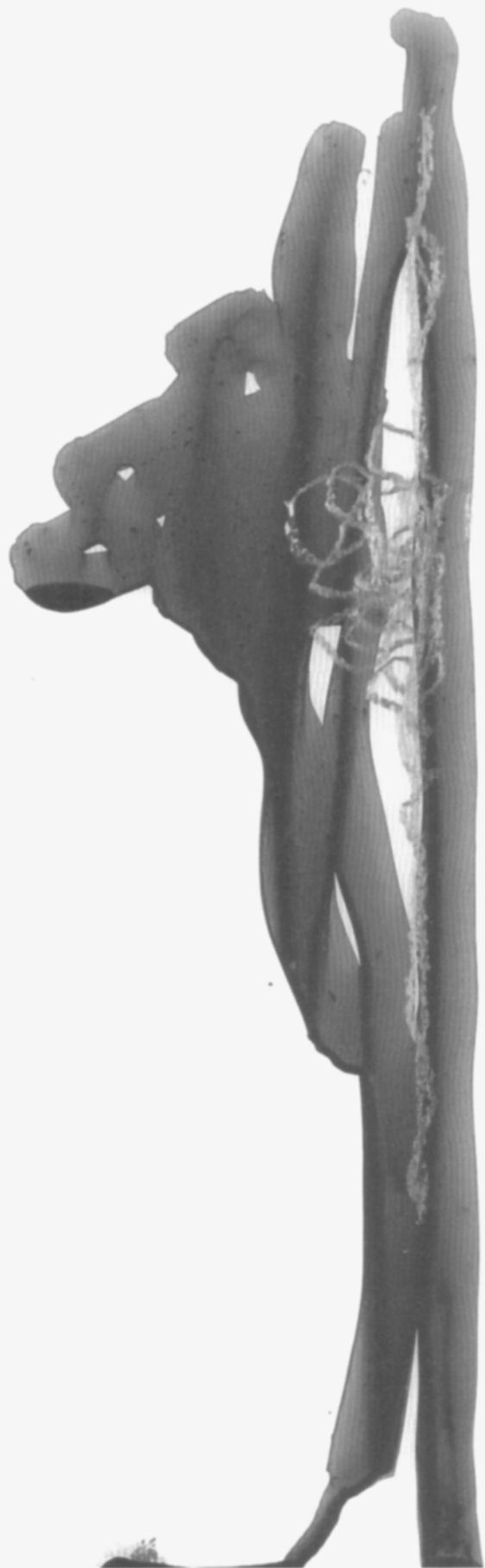
Of greatest interest, however, is the way in which this drawing melds not just spatial representation and flat abstraction,

but also different modes of viewing. The ink streams invoke a vertical orientation: their liquid flow follows the laws of gravity; puddles of ink accumulate in certain places like the heavy drop at the point farthest from the source, frozen on the verge of running; excess ink from the broad streams gathers at the bottom along the edge of the sheet. By contrast, the graphite tangle addresses us horizontally, as it sits on the Mylar seemingly unaffected by gravity. Especially upon closer inspection, its intricate texture and uneven contour give the impression of built-up powder. To behold *Tight* is thus to enter into a state of unrest, of constant switching between vertical and horizontal orientations.

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1 Sharon Loudén, quoted in Karen Sardisco, *Markings: A Drawing Invitational*, exhibition brochure, Mercer Gallery, Monroe Community College (Rochester, New York, 1995), 11.

2 *Ibid.*, 11.



Drawing for "Agents," 1996

ink and graphite on double-sided Mylar
11 x 17 in. (27.9 x 43.2 cm)

In her recent drawings, Sharon Loudon has continued to work with contrasts, as this 1996 example from the series *Drawings for "Agents"* makes clear. Here, as in *Tight*, Loudon presents a visual game for the viewer, who must reconcile the opposites captured on the page. If in *Tight* the difference between the shiny, coiled graphite line and the runny ink sets up the primary contrast of the drawing, here the contrast is between the shape of the two marks.

Near the center of a vertical expanse of Mylar, Loudon has painted a looped, fist-like shape and a circle. The eye is drawn first to the "fist," in which a series of brushstrokes curve away from and then back toward a central point. A thick pool of ink caps the end of each stroke, where Loudon's hand stopped to lift the brush from the page. The form retains an active,

physical sense of her hand's swift movements. At the same time, the loops of her marks, as they double over themselves, create the impression of a rounded, three-dimensional object. One horizontal stroke at the bottom creates a base on which the other marks appear to rest. We read a solid, static object, yet our awareness of the artist's gestures, our imagination of the movements of her hand, simultaneously confounds this view.

The circular form further complicates the spatial illusion. Composed of multiple, superimposed rings, it appears to have been painted in one long stroke. Loudon's gesture – a slow, repetitive circling – seems to bind the circle to the plane of the sheet, reinforcing its flatness. The two forms jostle in our eye with their alternate dimensionalities.

Yet it is the formal distinction between the two shapes that sets up the primary contrast – and humor – of the drawing. Even more than in *Tight*, abstraction here moves into representation, as the forms take on

personalities and enact an imagined drama. Suggestive of male and female, these "creatures," Loudon has said in an artist's statement, "become alive as individual, humorous entities unto themselves." Here she makes the space between the two forms the focus of the drama, a push-pull tease between them.

The sculptures to which this drawing relates, the so-called "agents" of the title, are composed of small black foam-rubber tubes that Loudon bunches into configurations and pins to the wall in clusters. For her earliest sculptures, made in the winter of 1996, she twisted larger rubber tubes into tangled forms and hung them from the ceiling in groups. The current "agents," while similar in their snarled shapes to the earlier pieces, differ in size (they are much smaller) and presentation. Installed on the wall, they tease the boundary with painting, much as the forms in her drawings evoke sculpture.

JULIE VICINUS

