



Linearity in Contemporary Art

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The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, ... The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist's mind, ... Leave out this line and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again.

William Blake, Exhibition and Catalogue of 1809

It is an age-old point of dispute, an unending line of argumentation. For as long as we have charted our contending passions for accuracy, we have debated over this standing opposition: between precision of mind and expressivity, between a notion that is exact in its outlines and a permeating suffusion of awareness, between the point of focus and the mental environment that encompasses all apprehension between the precise thought and the state of mind.

William Blake, who was an engraver as well as a poet, found the concern over intellectual disposition pertained directly to art. For Blake, to express anything at all and not fall into chaos again, art required the precision of the line and specifically not the vagueness of the even tint; in short, the color field. Even more than it was an issue of English Romanticism, the discretion that ranges between the exacting thought and the encompassing field lies at the heart of the discretions of modern art. The dispute over disposition was directly engaged perhaps nowhere so clearly as when T. S. Eliot attempted to disabuse the French poet Paul Valéry of his admiration for the state, or state of mind as the goal of a work of art, and recommended that ideas were necessary to art, writing that a state, in itself, is nothing whatever. But the disagreement over the goal has continued and is implicit in the differences between a variety of the species of modern and contemporary art, and perhaps even between the

generic tendencies of Modern and Postmodern art.

The discrepancy of artistic inclination is, in the end, a discrepancy of character there is no debating it. And as an irreconcilable discrepancy of personality, this is one of the few disputes that actually matters. So it is of particular interest that there have been a number of fascinating exhibitions recently in New York that have explored and sided with the reliance on the line.

Perhaps the most distinctive exhibition was Sharon Louden's Swells & Extensions, which appeared at Dec/Glasgow. In her previous works, Louden employed the line as an isolated gesture and an almost independently living presence whose seemingly intrinsic nature is the heart of the work. Here, she transposed to sculpture that same sense of the line as an individuated, almost self-motivated entity. Louden disposed on the floor and hung from the ceiling thousands of filaments painted to be luminescent. The light in the gallery room slowly rose and fell, descending periodically to a dark in which the filaments quietly shown with collected sheen together, they foamed into a cataract and ocean of incensed and glowing lines, each one with its own character of poise and implied movement, each with its own individual, and precise, nature.

Large and Small Drawings by Christine Hiebert, which was on display at Wynn Kramarsky, was nearly a dissertation on the continuing vitality and potency of the individual line. In 19 charcoal drawings, done in large and small scale, Hiebert committed her lines with an intuitive progress each one she laid down led her to the next and the lines themselves executed their intrinsic nature. They set the clear authorial mark, as if each were a strangely written, calligraphic intention, and yet they also seemed to congeal into modes of visual art. Although thoroughly abstract, the large works took on the unmistakable aspect of an alien landscape; the small-scale works appeared somehow figure/ground, as if visual art were possessed of a character of its own and trended naturally into traditional forms.

Redrawing the Line, which appeared at Art in General and was curated by Monica Amor, took a more deliberately exploratory tack. Nine artists produced 18 works that estimated a broad variety of new applications of the line. There was a quality of pure, undirected experiment in this, and a touch of the non-committal, but that is in the nature of the experimental: to see what happens and then judge the worth. In some instances, there was the hypnotic look of mere, purposeless anomaly, such as Arturo Herrera's Say Seven, 2000 a heavy hanging mass of cut-out wool felt made to appear a careening overlay of ink lines that had lifted off the paper and entered the physical world. In other cases, there were touches of a delicate beauty, as in Pae White's Hobo Woods/Tears of Vietnam, 1998 a set of drizzling vertical lines of thread on which were suspended leaves of dyed paper, looking like glistening chromatic tears falling in rain.

Together, these exhibitions were momentary lessons, cross-sections in time, regarding the approach that artists are taking to one of the fundamental elements in their arsenal of means. And the lesson to be drawn from these moments is that the issue of the worth and function of the line is of perennial moment. It is ever a ripe issue, charged with the disputes and the urges to exploration of the time. The line is, as much as it is anything else, a receptacle of the issues that artists wish to load into it, and there can be no crisis of linearity, for in art, we are ever in a state of crisis. Matters of perpetual dispute will be perpetually in dispute, and that is to say that there is no crisis concerning them. Dispute is the norm, and the source of the drive to proceed.

Which is to say that the line that art follows in time is a curved one. There is no progress, in art or in anything else. We revisit our core disputes, we employ them to make new discoveries, and then we revisit them again. The issues of dispute eternally recur, and that is the mark, or perhaps the ever-developing line, of the continuing vitality of art. □