

Meticulous meditations on the abstract

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent, 1/3/2003

"Drawing Now: Eight Propositions," the Museum of Modern Art's show up through this weekend in Queens, suggests that in recent years the most provocative work in drawing has been illustrative, hinged on figures and driven by narrative. "The Fall Line," at OSP Gallery in the South End, examines abstraction in drawing today. The show features 33 works by 11 artists with international reputations. Save for a few, their hallmark is their obsessive mark making.

OSP stands for Open Studios Press, which publishes the periodical *New American Paintings* - regional surveys of contemporary art, chosen by a jury. Until now, publisher Steven Zevitas has used his office gallery to exhibit work featured in the book. "The Fall Line" - and, one hopes, exhibitions to follow - give Zevitas a turn in the curator's seat.

The MoMA show is not amiss for excluding abstraction in "Drawing Now." It includes work by Kara Walker and John Currin, who make uneasy, dense narratives that refer to popular culture; such themes have dominated much of the art world in the last decade. "The Fall Line," furthermore, clearly traces its roots to abstract artists of the past 40 or 50 years, such as Brice Marden and Sol LeWitt.

That's not to say the artists in this show are stale. Some of the artists, such as Theresa Chong and Jacob El Hanani, make work that embodies the rawness conveyed by contemporary narrative artists - it just comes across in their obsessive technique rather than in pictures. El Hanani's "Nof 99" is an exquisitely meticulous inked network of minuscule cells. They form bodies, which then create fault lines and shadows, making a moire effect that hints at depth and picture.

Chong uses gouache to build veils of gray, laced with fine grids and feathery veins of white. She develops a surface both dark and delicate. It's hard to believe that the human hand has the finesse - or the human mind the patience - to make works like these.

Bronlyn Jones's drawings are spare and diagrammatic. All her small pieces, marked by tracings and erasures, unfold within a grid, playing out a drama of containment and a battle for - and against - perfection. An untitled work features a gray rectangle with one slightly convex side defying the whisker-thin lines of the box that holds it.

Sharon Loudon paints with thick calligraphic strokes that dominate their paper ground. In her white-on-white pieces, like "Merge (upper left, down)," the tension lies between the thick, almost sculptural quality of the paint and the flat, thin paper beneath. Here a white tangle of paint topples from one corner, nearly vanishing against the page as it thins into streaks at the bottom.

In pure tininess of gesture, Wes Mills's drawings have the same compulsive edge as El Hanani's, but they have much more breathing room. He bands "Watching Children Play" on top and bottom with ivory silk; in between, two nearly invisible graphite lines drop. One is marked with the merest blots of pink at either end. Tiny arcs as fine as eyelashes flutter about. The sheer delicacy of the work is breathtaking.

James Siena draws in colored pencil on small sheets, cleverly turning the concrete into meditative abstractions. "Two Combs" has a green comb facing a blue one, their teeth interlocking to make a colorful ladder. Like El Hanani, Siena builds up from small units; so does John Morris, who makes organic patterns out of repeated cells. One from his series "Untitled (Drawing for the Austrian School)" starts with a ground of horizontal lines dotted with white teardrops; it looks almost like fabric. Then he draws spiraling forms, like mutating Slinkies, over the surface. There's a palpable menace brought on just by the repetition of shapes and gestures.

Mark Sheinkman's gestures are larger and less sneaky, but they, too, feel like an organism growing out of control. Sheinkman makes complex snarls of barbed, fraying black lines over a page drawn over and erased with similar loops and tangles, creating a disappearing but somehow never-ending nest of it - like a family dysfunction running through generations.

Eve Aschheim draws on duralene, a foggy but transparent medium more durable than tracing paper. She creates patterns against perspective lines that travel back to a point. "Shell" has concentric ovals in white against the black lines, with other gestures and smudges that pulsate between surface and depth. It's like walking down a long stone hallway when you're dizzy and feverish.

Color comes up in work by only two artists. Suzan Frecon's untitled watercolors on burnished old Indian paper recall the thick labyrinths of Marden's drawings and paintings. Frecon's dark lines recede into the coppery paper to create brooding, meditative works.

Laurie Reid's watercolors make simple patterns on large sheets of paper: "Vivid (Blue)" unfurls from ceiling to floor, open and inviting, crisscrossed with wavering lines of watery blue blots, some concentrated and strung close as pearls, and others fat, pale, and sparse. It's a festive piece, like a handful of Mardi Gras beads.

Reid's drawings are the only ones in the show not fueled by an anxious energy. Despite this, these works are rich and inviting and offer the kind of distilled viewing experience that only drawings, in their clarity and simplicity, can.

THE FALL LINE: INTUITION AND NECESSITY IN CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACT DRAWING

At: OSP Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave., through Jan. 25. 617-778-5265.

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