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Drawing a line at the Neuberger

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Line is the subject of the new Sharon Louden exhibit at Purchase College's Neuberger Museum of Art. But the show's real theme is where we draw the line when we look at art.

How and what do we see when we watch many lines come together and pull apart on multiple screens, as they do in Louden's animated works?

Do we concentrate on one thing, or do we try to take it in all at once? Do we look for patterns in a piece that is passing us by even as we're watching it, or do we create our own narrative where none exists?

Louden's drawings, paintings, prints, sculptures and animations, do not make for the easiest art. But those who let their minds loose to play in "Sharon Louden: Character," at the Neuberger through June 18, will be rewarded by the experience.

What's terrific about Louden is that she invites you to free-associate. "Hugs" (2005) consists of colored-pencil and watercolor lines on nine black squares of Key Colour paper, arranged into a larger square. The drawings conjure images of pouncing spiders, tendrils wafting across the face, grasses blowing in the wind. The animated "Hugs" (2006), by contrast, suggests starbursts, broken blood vessels and twigs.

The free associations multiply — and become harder to track — when Louden turns her animations into three-ring circuses as she does in "The Dance: Acts 1 Through 5" (2006).

Here lines bent like pipe cleaners play across three monitors — reaching out like tentacles, piling up like football players, spooning around one another. The action seems to move left to right, then right to left and then stops in the middle. Or not. The eye is not to be entirely trusted.

You'll have an easier time with Louden's cascading sculptures of monofilament lines held together by cage clips and glue. These installations — called "Yellow Tails" (2004) and "Motley Tails" (2005) — resemble falls of hair, feather boas, shimmering curtains, things that are sensuous and exotic.

Sometimes Louden helps the associations along with a descriptive title. "Swingers," a 1997 watercolor on paper, features a peach-colored hangman's noose that has swung itself over to kiss the loop of another noose. The second noose, in deeper orange and placed upside down, curves like a drooping flower. The images of tightening knots canoodling, as well as the title, also intimate the games adults play.

Louden understands that when they're correctly placed, a few lines is all you need. In "The Lingerin'" (2003-04), a watercolor, acrylic and gel painting on panel, a clump of blue-and-white lines hangs toward the right side of a white canvas like a burst of fireworks in a Fourth of July sky or a snowflake frozen on a window pane. These lines make up the face you cannot forget, the love you refuse to lose, the feelings you just can't let go. And you stand there in awe of a work that can express so much with so little.

Louden's is not the only artwork on view at the Neuberger to tantalize the mind. Dennis Oppenheim has filled the museum's cavernous Theater Gallery with "The Assembly Line (with By-Products from a Mechanical Trance)" (through May 19), an installation from his "Factory Series." It's comprised of large industrial fans, ducts, spinning turbines, chimneys, a steel arch, chutes, ventilators and gauzy, inflatable vessels that look like big, white Chinese lanterns.

While the fans are supposed to push air through the ducts to the turbines, chimneys and vessels, only part of the apparatus appears to be in motion. No doubt that's the point. The title and subtitle suggest a dysfunctional assembly line, which may be the perfect metaphor for our post-industrial age.

But "The Assembly Line" may also be a metaphor for the way the brain works, with certain parts plugged in and others unconnected. In this regard, the work recalls Charles Hampden-Turner's ingenious 1981 book, "Maps of the Mind: Charts and concepts of the mind and its labyrinths," which uses 60 imaginary drawings of the brain to visualize the world's great thinkers. This peculiar "Assembly Line" would be quite at home there.

Balancing Loudon's drawn lines and Oppenheim's "Assembly Line" is "Facing Abstraction: Refiguring the Body in the Twentieth Century" (through July 16), which considers the ways in which artists increasingly abstracted the body in an age of anxiety and apocalypse.

Among the standouts is Alexander Archipenko's "Untitled (Standing Torso)," a 1914 marble that illustrates the sensuality of the female nude. As with Loudon, Archipenko makes sparseness sing.
