

C H A R A C T E R

S H A R O N

L O U D E N

S H A R O N L O U D E N
C H A R A C T E R

Neuberger Museum of Art
Purchase College
State University of New York

January 29 – June 18, 2006

Curated by Dede Young

Sharon Louden: Character is made possible with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency.

Exhibition support is also generously provided by Ruth and Jeffrey Libin; Joanne and Jeffrey Klein; Toby Devan Lewis; Sherry and Joel Mallin Family Foundation; Helen Stambler Neuberger and Jim Neuberger; Michael Straus; and, Jacqueline Adler Walker and Arthur Walker.

Additional exhibition support is provided by Helaine Friedman; Douglas Maxwell; the Westchester Arts Council, with funds from Westchester County government; and the Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art.

PURCHASE
COLLEGE
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

© 2006 Neuberger Museum of Art
Purchase College
State University of New York
735 Anderson Hill Road
Purchase, New York 10577-1400
www.neuberger.org

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from the Neuberger Museum of Art.

cover: *Motley Tails*, 2005
Monofilament line, cage clips and glue
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Numark Gallery,
Washington, D.C.

Employing the simplest linear forms—drawn and painted, materialized in sculptural installations and animated in videos—Sharon Louden invites viewers into a world of dynamic gesture and subtly playful allusion. “*Character*,” the title of the exhibition documented in this publication, refers to the artist’s intention to endow her lines, now exploded into the third and fourth dimensions, with recognizably human traits—emotion, personality and even a sort of rudimentary social life. Louden’s is a unique, thoughtful, and richly suggestive exploration of the modernist trope, “the expressive line.” The Neuberger Museum of Art has a long history of supporting accomplished, early mid-career artists with first surveys, and we are pleased to extend this tradition by presenting *Sharon Louden: Character*.

Thanks for organization of the exhibition, its elegant installation and publication go to Dede Young, the Neuberger Museum of Art Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. I would like to thank Lilly Wei for her insightful essay. For their contributions, I would like to acknowledge the members of the Neuberger professional staff, the Board of Directors of the Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art, as well as our docents and volunteers for their work behind the scenes in support of the Museum’s public programs.

On behalf of Purchase College, the staff and Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art, I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Jeffrey Libin, whose leadership made our fundraising efforts a great success, and to all those who provided generous support for the exhibition including Ruth and Jeffrey Libin; Joanne and Jeffrey Klein; Toby Devan Lewis; Sherry and Joel Mallin Family Foundation; Helen Stambler Neuberger and Jim Neuberger; Michael Straus; Jacqueline Adler Walker and Arthur Walker; Helaine Friedman; Douglas Maxwell; the Westchester Arts Council; New York State Council on the Arts; and the Friends of the Neuberger Museum of Art.

Thom Collins, *Director*

Sharon Loudon is an artist who revels in the hands-on and labor-intensive, fueled by a high-octane work ethic that is also a kind of devotional exercise and meditative ritual. She has an instinctive regard for the physicality of mediums such as drawing, painting and printmaking as well as a deep-seated need to touch her creations again and again. She also has a penchant for utilitarian industrial materials such as fishing line, cotton dental rolls, latex, rubber tubing and television antenna wire, which she transforms into creations that are alluring and enigmatic. Because movement has always been so critical to Loudon's aesthetic, animation also intrigues her, enough so that she finally completed her first ventures in that medium—*Hugs, Heavy, Them, Footprints, The Dance: Acts 1 through 5*—this past year. These new time-based projects, plus two-dimensional paintings, drawings and prints and three-dimensional sculpture and installations comprise *Character*, an exhibition that traces the artist's development from 1997 to the present through a remarkable series of works.

Loudon had studied landscape and figurative painting while at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago but it was in graduate school at Yale that she began to make abstract drawings. Although still based on the body and its postures, they were more or less a sequence of sketchy, expressive lines, vestiges of their source, arranged in a reductive composition. These exercises signaled a point of departure for her as drawing became her preferred mode of expression. No matter what materials are involved, her work begins with drawing.

Animation, in the meantime, has interested Loudon for years, but it was the dynamic aspects of animation that fascinated her, not the medium itself, as seductive as it was. It was simply the means to an end, another vehicle—

like all the mediums she uses—to translate her drawings into yet a different language. While she has issues with animation's lack of actual physical presence—of tangibility and tactility—she is delighted by the realization of the movement that has always been implicit in her work. The flickered, splattered marks of her paintings and drawings, although seemingly spontaneous, are considered and very carefully placed and usually clustered in some odd, off-centered position on the blankness of the surface, suggesting gestures that are about to coalesce or disintegrate, a temporarily arrested configuration in an ongoing, shifting and ephemeral enterprise, like a cinematic still. The luminescent paintings that she conceived in the late 1990s went a step further and did fluctuate in their wattage, brightening and dimming, depending on the light conditions. One gangly incandescent line became Loudon's "glow line," a figure that appears and reappears like a stock character in many of her works, supported by a cast of recurring *dramatis personae*, all abstract strokes with their own angles, curves, tangles and lengths, their own skittered gaits and personality traits. In retrospect, animation seems an inevitable medium for Loudon's art and functions as an agent in much the way wind and weather interacts with her outdoor installations, activating them.

Loudon's syntax ultimately consists of only two kinds of lines: the straight and the twisted. She then re-mixes and alters them into strokes and squiggles that are long and short, fat and lean, smooth and frizzled—like a bad hair day—their rhythms varying, syncopated, serving them up in watercolors, graphite, chalk, ink, acrylics and phosphorescent acrylics, pumped up with gel medium sometimes for more body when they are on paper, Mylar or panel. Loudon wants her lines to be anthropomorphic, to have personalities. And they do. Her abstract "small fry," as Henry James once designated his fictive beings, are merry pranksters, comical,

slapstick cartoon marks that collide, knock each other over, push each other out of the way, escape out the frame, appear again, fold themselves into an image, unravel and release. Loudon's sensibility is ludic although laced with elegance and in the animations, she often choreographs her gestures so that they stumble and fall, like children playing a game, awkward acrobats tumbling over each other. *Footprints*, 4 minutes and shown here as a 7-ft. square wall projection, resembles the pattern of silhouetted feet placed on the floor in order to teach ballroom dancing. Another is called *The Dance: Acts 1 through 5*, a three-channel projection on three suspended walls. Built on contradiction and counterpoint, her methodology is to construct an image and then deconstruct or destroy it, a contraction and release comparable to the two-step of a heartbeat. Often autobiographical, her marks are coded memorabilia that can refer to the shapes of objects that are meaningful to her, that she takes comfort in and pleasure from. They are also extrapolated from poses people assume that have amused her, that have attitude or suggest a dramatic or droll situation. For instance, she says that one short, curved line is derived from the outline of a blanket over a body but the viewer need not know that; the origin is not part of the content, which is both formal and expressive, the narrative conveyed through the action of the figures, not their histories. Emphasizing the active life, many of her titles describe an action, their words often both noun and verb: *Hugs, Merge, Flaps, Swingers, Attenders*. Dimensionality is also a significant aspect of animation. The medium permits a shift between flatness and space, surface and depth of field as marks appear and disappear in much the way dance and music function, as sequences of events in time and space, with "beginnings, middles and ends... exits and entrances," as curator Dede Young puts it, seesawing between the two and three-dimensional.

Loudon's work is also unembarrassed by beauty, however idiosyncratic, best exemplified in her indoor and outdoor installations which, dependent upon architecture and space, change with each new site. They are often assembled out of translucent fibers, sometimes tipped with attachments like small mirrors and are yet another form of drawing. Planted in fields, suspended from trees, they are thrust into the landscape and intermittent motion, antecedents to her current projections.

For *Character*, she has reprised *Yellow Tails* (2004) and *Motley Tails* (2005), made of hundreds of miles of milky white and candy-colored mono-filament wires bundled, clipped together and suspended. Recently shown at the Numark Gallery in Washington, D.C., *Motley Tails*—electric green, artificial coral, sunshine yellow, aquatic blue—closely resembles either fake hair pieces or, as noted by several critics, the coarse, flowing tails of My Little Ponies, a popular children's toy. Loudon, however, transcends the mass-produced kitsch of the material, turning the ensemble—which occupies 900 sq. ft. in this version—into a garden in luxuriant bloom, a glittered, star-dusted fairy land, a time-out zone of suspended realities and first pleasures, her own take on string theory. Its affect, as in all of her work, is achieved through the countless repetition of units that are commensurate with the scale of the human body and the gesture of the hand, a body language linked to her body and gestures. It is a notational impulse that parallels her mark-making in dialogue with the space that these notations or units occupy. Through the power of accumulation, Loudon's permeable and luminous installations attain a monumentality that is constructed from the anti-monumental. It might be said that all her work—with its playful urgency, its absurdist and nostalgic theatricality, its wry, unconventional glamour—is dedicated to the miracle of the small and the transcendence of the cumulative.

Lilly Wei

Interviewer: Dede Young, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Neuberger Museum of Art

Dede Young:

You stretch the tradition of drawing, or pure drawing, by expanding upon traditional drawing tools, and you make 3-dimensional work. Why do you consider your work, especially the sculptural work and the new animation to be 'within drawing'?

Sharon Louden:

All my work is within drawing because of my extensive use of and dedication to the line as a source and backbone to my visual vocabulary. It is the line that defines the characters that translate the feelings, meanings, tensions and personalities that I look for within them. The efficiency, versatility, flexibility and infinite possibilities of the use of the line are ample material to describe my language. Through drawing, line occurs and explains so much.

DY: Your marks clearly fall within the tradition of abstraction, a program that has progressed through your experimentation with many different and unusual materials. What generates your ongoing investigation of form, and what are you trying to achieve with your material choices?

SL: What generates my continual investigation is a search to give character to my forms with which I have a dialogue. Drawing is the tool I use to explore character in my forms. I owe it to my anthropomorphic "creatures" to give them

different characteristics, and by using different materials within drawing, I get close to defining them further.

DY: There is a calligraphic character to your marks. What is the process of making a work? Do you begin with automatic marks?

SL: I would not call the marks "automatic," quite the contrary. I first observe a whole sheet of paper as infinite space defined only by the boundaries of the edges of the surface. After selecting a placement for these marks, I build them with intention, one by one, making a form naturally, but always sensitive of the tension I feel when one mark is placed next to another. If I do not feel a sense of movement or tension by how it is drawn and where it is placed, I discard the drawing entirely. I edit tremendously by throwing out while in the moment, as well as over time.

DY: Your animation seems to come out of the history of abstraction in film, particularly the 'Beat Era' movement in the 1950s, with artists including Hy Hirsh, John and James Whitney, and later, the 1970s 'visual music' animation artists pushed the medium forward. In what ways is your animation connected to this history, and what potential for change in your work does animation bring forth?

SL: In the process of making these animations, I made a concerted effort not to refer too much to the history of film and animation. While those films are historically important, I really focused on this animation as drawing, and less on the history of animation and film per say.

Therefore, I leaned on artists and creative spirits, inside and outside the art world who gave me "freedom" and a certain "innocence," which gave me carte blanche and confidence to move

in this direction. Work I have viewed numerous times over my lifetime include Gustave Courbet, Philip Guston and Shel Silverstein, as well as many performances of modern dance and classical ballet, including companies such as Eliot Feld, Momix, Jody Oberfelder, Thierry Malandain, and too many more to note here. I revisited morning programs shown on television that I grew up with that reminded me of the feeling of joy I remembered then, which I wanted to capture within the medium of animation in my own way.

I was driven to have the work remain elegant, beautiful, formal, and yet, have a spirit, innocence and sense of humor indicative of what I feel when I experience these mediums. I felt that this work had to be about drawing and my visual vocabulary, and I reached for those sources and subjects that generate the lines with which I work. I stayed true to that.

In my works on paper and sculpture, I honor such artists as Eva Hesse, Robert Ryman, Louise Bourgeois, Barnett Newman, and others who have given me strength and freedom to work in the ways I do. They provide a place for me to resist against, however, I have to forge through to continue to develop my own vocabulary. It is always a balance of keeping work of others I love in mind, while proceeding to encourage growth of my work.

The animation is truly a project where I felt free on an island on my own, for the most part. I liked the idea of looking to different artists who were not necessarily a part of the art world, but a part of the mainstream, to give me inspiration with this work specifically, which makes it truly contemporary.

DY: With the animation, you are working with a technician. How collaborative is this relationship? Is it similar to the experience of working in a print shop with a master printer?

SL: It is not collaborative. Yes, working with an animator is very much like working with a master printer and/or a fabricator. It is most like working with a foundry—like when I made an edition of my rubber Agents out of bronze. I worked with the technicians at the foundry to figure out the best way to achieve a certain look in my Agents, to cast them into bronze. Their skills carried out the idea. In working with Brian Clyne, who was with me for the last half of the animation project, we sat down next to one another, and I described the feeling, gesture, movement that I wanted to achieve, and sometimes actually physically showed the gesture to him, while also relaying what I wanted to accomplish in the story of the animation. All of the gestures you see in the animation are of my own hand; they are scanned into the computer and manipulated through the animation process, with his technical expertise making that happen.

DY: I have always seen the metaphor in your work as "symbolic interior life force"—a sort of gut-wrenched expression of various tensional states of being. Now, you are loosening up your lexicon with more whimsical marks that add up to a more specific narrative. I am picturing Mickey Mouse cartoons without Mickey, for example. Is the animation a purposeful segue into lightheartedness—an antidote to seriousness? Had you otherwise taken drawing as far as you could?

SL: I am thrilled that you would see my work as a "gut-wrenched expression of various tensional states of being." I agree with that statement very much. I strive to achieve a certain tension in the work that is still very much there in the animation, if not more.

paper for a drawing: just as I see a space before making an installation. For example, in the three-channel animation called The Dance, I wanted the forms to feel as though they are flying through air and that the presentation was more object-like, closer to sculpture and installation. The Hugs, Heavy, and Them pieces were all designed to be viewed in a more intimate format; Footprints, in an ideally larger format, can be viewed in a monitor as well.

DY: In this exhibition, the viewer experiences works from phosphorescent prints in a darkened room, which appear to leap into space in start-and-stop moments, to strict minimalist drawings in which small marks occupy relatively small areas of pristine, smooth white paper, Mylar and canvas, to obsessively lush sculpture, to light-filled animation. Where do you think this journey in your work is leading?

SL: I think the journey is taking me closer to the body in some way, possibly toward performance. I increasingly want the viewer and myself to be physically inside my installations. Also, seeing my drawings animated has expanded my sense of space and increases the notion of dance. I don't know exactly what that means—what form future work will take—however, I know the work will continue to be of drawing and about drawing.

One of my missions in my work is to add character to my forms, within the line, and find that tension you describe with the space. I am doing so by using animation to create and add movement to the work, and within this medium, humor—something that I believe has been hinted at and alluded to in the drawings before, but now is purposely evident.

I actually think the work is not "Mickey Mouse without Mickey" at all. That to me feels empty. The work is full, with elements of sexuality, humor, beauty and lots of color, which is new for me. The flavor may well be light-hearted; however, it is still serious. I find humor and beauty to be complex, with different layers of meaning.

I have yet to take my drawings and work as far as I can. Even within the process of the animation, I continually made works on paper at the same time. I have the rest of my life to explore drawing, my primary medium to which I am fully committed. I have a long way to go, and working with the animation is just another step in the development of my visual vocabulary.

DY: What is the purpose, beyond being experimental, in using three different formats to present the animation?

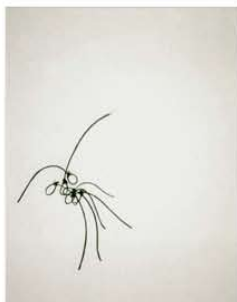
SL: Each of the animation's contents requires different formats. When I started making the animations, I imagined the 'space' for them, just as I select the size and format of a piece of



MOTLEY TAILS, 2003. MONOFILAMENT LINE, CAGE CLIPS AND GLUE



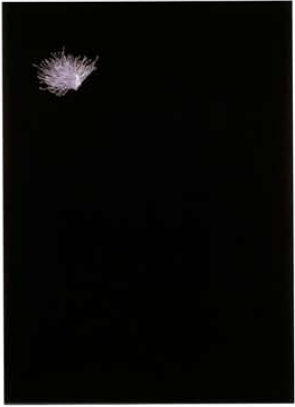
YELLOW TAILS, 2004, MONOFILAMENT LINE, CAGE CLIPS AND GLUE



SWINGERS, 1997, CHALK ON PAPER



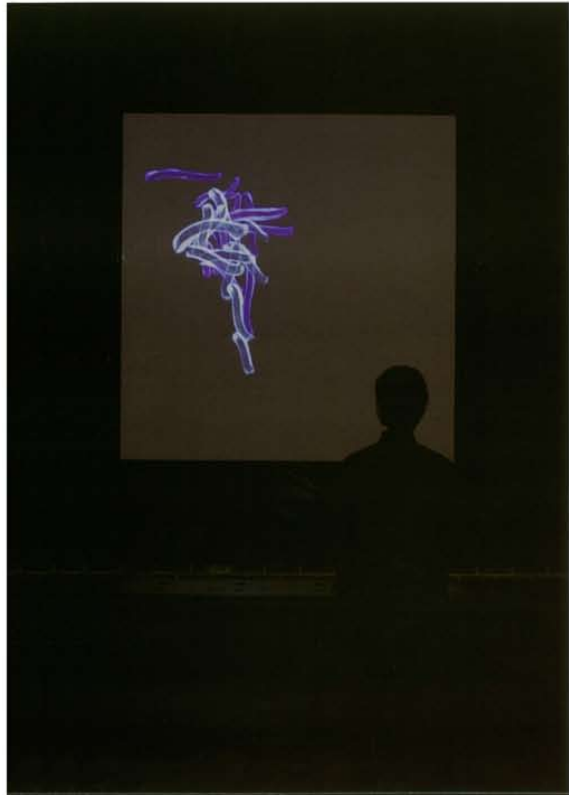
PONYTAILS, 1997, GRAPHITE AND GEL MEDIUM ON MYLAR



TANGLED TIPS (LINES FROM ZION), 2000. INK ON NYLON

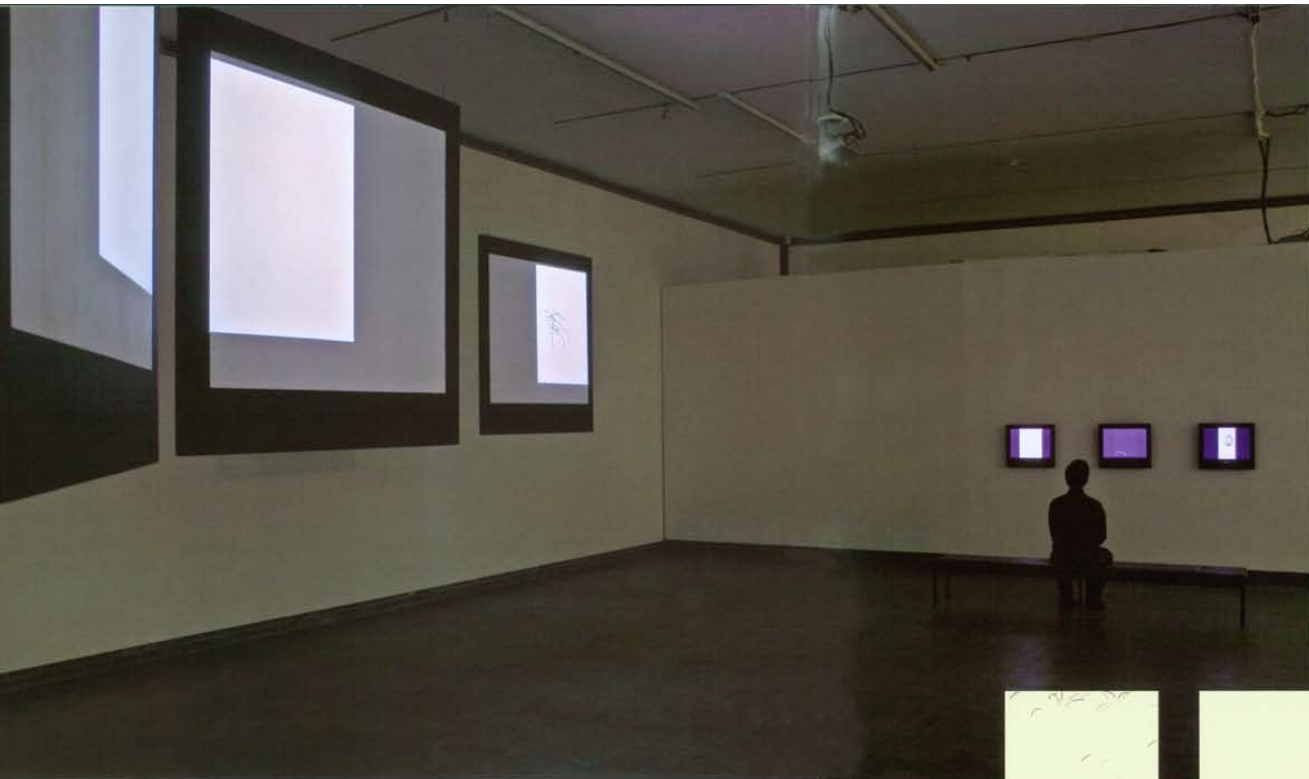


FLAPS, 1998. WATERCOLOR AND GEL MEDIUM ON GRIDDED NYLON



FOOTPRINTS, 2006. ANIMATION





HUGS, 2006. ANIMATION



HEAVY, 2006. ANIMATION