

Sharon Loudon
TAKING TURNS

This catalogue has been published in conjunction with the exhibition *Sharon Louden: Taking Turns* organized by the Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama.

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This catalogue documents a new body of work by Sharon Loudon commissioned by the Birmingham Museum of Art and inspired by the particularities of the Museum's galleries and gardens. Loudon conceptually "ran through" the Museum conceiving the works in their completed state prior to their creation and installation. Curator Ron Platt, in his essay for this publication references Paul Klee's evocative statement, "a drawing is a line that goes for a walk," which provides a perfect entry point for us to explore Sharon Loudon's *Taking Turns*. The highly participatory nature of walking should inspire our looking, making it an active process of engagement for the viewer with the works of art. Approaching the works in this way can free the lines from specific constraints of material and open the possibilities for thinking about the gesture and the movement more than the media. Movement through these shapes also inspires our thinking about line and how it informs our understanding, not only about bodily movement, but ways of seeing. Actively moving through space with the line as guide and inspiration allows us to better understand the possibilities of drawing and the very nature of line and movement through space.

The Birmingham Museum of Art has a history of inviting artists to create site-specific works for our space, both short term and long term. This list includes Jessica Diamond, Tara Donovan, Patrick Dougherty, Stephen Hendee, Sol Lewitt, Paul Morrison and Lawrence Weiner. It is an honor and a pleasure to add Sharon Loudon to this distinguished list. We are extremely grateful for Sharon Loudon's enthusiasm and dedication to this project and for the generous support of our funders, the Toby D. Lewis Philanthropic Fund, Mr. and Mrs. Werner Kramarsky, an anonymous gift in honor of Vinson Valega, and EBSCO Industries, Inc.

As with any exhibition, many members of the staff are instrumental in its successful execution. Particularly crucial to this installation were Denny Frank, Rashid Qandil, Priscilla Tapio, and Daniel White. We are also grateful to Birmingham-based artist, Amy Pleasant, who worked with Sharon Loudon and the preparation department on the installation. James Williams designed the handsome catalogue. Finally, I wish to acknowledge Curator Ron Platt who conceived this dynamic project and was devoted to its successful development and execution; his attention and interpretation enlarges our understanding of the artist's work.

FOREWORD & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Gail Andrews

The R. Hugh Daniel Director
Birmingham Museum of Art

I WALK THE LINE

Ron Platt

The Hugh Kaul Curator
of Modern and
Contemporary Art

Throughout Sharon Louden's focused yet diverse body of drawings, paintings, video and sculptural installations, the line is a common denominator. In a 2007 interview with curator Dede Young, the New York-based artist affirmed a "...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."¹

Drawing has traditionally been utilized at the service of other media, most notably painting and sculpture. But for decades now numerous artists have found it essential and primary to their practice. Drawing can be quick, intuitive, improvisatory, intimate, and direct and a superlative carrier of ideas. By following ideas and intuition instead of the prescribed rules of a particular discipline, Louden has followed the drawn line through various media and modes of expression. "The mediums are there to work for me," she says. "Because the mediums are secondary I can move back and forth between them."²

Taking Turns, Louden's newly-commissioned work for the Birmingham Museum of Art, comprises three complimentary and interrelated bodies of work: a suite of 14 small paintings and a video projection presented in the same ground floor gallery, and an installation of fiber-optic sculptural "drawings" in the treetops of the Museum's Sculpture Garden.

Louden conceived of and determined placement of the works that constitute *Taking Turns* on a 2007

visit to Birmingham—well before she created them in material form—thought and process before object. That the complete work inhabits two places at once invites a viewer's active participation, engaging them physically to navigate the museum as they look at and look for the work. Paul Klee, a great master of line, characterized a drawing as a line that goes for a walk.³ For this project, Loudén literalizes Klee's comment, as her line moves through paintings, video and outdoor sculptural installation.

Louden's diverse inspirations include the awkward and tender cartoons of Shel Silverstein; Agnes Martin's serene grids; Eva Hesse, whose lines abandoned the page, canvas, and wall to drip from the ceiling; and Richard Tuttle, who Loudén credits with giving her "permission to play."⁴ Loudén's emphasis on the body and its movement through space also makes the 1960s non-narrative "new dance" choreography and performances of Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown notable precursors.

Louden entered Yale's graduate MFA program a figurative painter, immersed in her material's physicality and sensuousness as inspired by David Park and other Bay Area painters. She gradually began breaking her figures down into line, a process she credits with enabling her to pursue abstraction but see the line as figuration.

Louden fuses the imposed precision and clarity of geometry with the sensual and exploratory gesture. At the core of her visual vocabulary is a signature

gestural mark—a single stroke—that she describes as her "essence." As Loudén's practice evolved over time she began to see some of her marks as characters: maybe because of how she placed a mark on the paper, or the motion with which she drew it, or she may have been inspired by her observation of an individual's stance or motion. The uniqueness and character of her marks emerge through Loudén's attempt to "work with the marks as if I'm becoming aware of them for the first time. This enables me to maintain an innocence, freshness, and clarity of comprehension."⁵

Bringing together three distinct bodies of work within one exhibition creates complex layers as one considers the multiple perspectives and perceptions at play, and the overlapping approaches where each mode informs and modifies characteristics of the other. And yet, all of the work in *Taking Turns* evolved out of one simple shape—a rectangle. In the paintings the rectangles take form from one-line gestures that link into four-sided shapes. Because of their transparent centers some of the marks themselves read as rectangles. This process becomes animate in the video, where rectangles become sheets of paper or imaginary portals. The rectangular structures in the garden are three-dimensional, and were they not suspended high in the trees, could be entered.

Within the museum, one's first encounter with *Taking Turns* is the group of paintings Loudén created for the exhibition. Fastidiously prepared and pared

to essentials, these new paintings on panel are both modest and intense. Notwithstanding their simplicity, they require and reward close looking. Initially, coats of primer and gesso were applied to the surface of each wooden panel. The monochrome painted grounds of each individual painting—calm tints of buff, white, gray, pink or yellow—have been reapplied and sanded until sleek and glowing. While the paintings are visually interrelated, they are not sequentially ordered. When viewed together, however, their subtle variations in hue attune our eyes to the many perceptual nuances at play between them.

Louden mixes her paint with gel medium to make it transparent and elastic. Earlier this year Loudon remarked that while the paintings were not yet finished, they had, “all been touched,” a reference that reinforces her intimate interaction with them.⁶ The paint’s elasticity makes it possible for Loudon to stretch the compound as she applies it to the panel’s surface, and one can just feel the patient and gentle tugs of her brush. Many of Loudon’s marks are fingertip width, furthering the sense of an individual’s touch. Loudon’s sense of play comes through in numerous ways, from her sly insertion of glitter or phosphorescence into the body of the paint, to a gangly mark or awkward sequence.

The compositions of Loudon’s paintings are spare and open. Against their serene monochrome grounds her marks and shapes fairly pulse with energy. We perceive them as discrete units in contact with one

another and, while the paintings’ square format negates a sense of landscape, they nonetheless evoke a space charged with life’s force. Because Loudon’s marks appear to embody lifelike characteristics they can be considered as entities within and not elements of a larger composition. As characters, they can convincingly move from setting to setting and adopt different guises.

Sharing a gallery with the paintings is a 3:15 minute silent animated video that projects onto a darkened back wall. The video is presented as a 7 x 8 foot horizontal rectangle that provides an open and expansive field, compared to the tight 13-inch square format of the paintings. Loudon has dematerialized her paintings and reintroduced their formal elements—defining a space, determining colors, building up images and finding ways to connect them—into a time-based, digital language. The video’s imagery is a combination of digital effects and scans of Loudon’s actual drawn marks, introducing the artist’s touch into a virtual medium. Loudon cites the video as, “the driving force for all of the work in the exhibition. It is the only element with a specific order and that order sets up the structure for the other work as well.”

Louden regards her 2006 installation *Blue Willow* as a precedent for the current work.⁷ With its fusion of drawing, kinetic sculpture and indeterminate sense of depth, *Blue Willow* moved her further into video animation as a way to explore movement and

perspective. Louden says, “With *Blue Willow* I could feel myself being transported into it—I felt like I was inside one of my drawings.”⁸

While film and video are prevalent contemporary artforms, Louden’s work in this arena stands apart.⁹ Coming as it does out of her drawing practice, Louden’s work in video has more in common with the late Jeremy Blake, whose digital animations from the late ‘90s through 2007 reference both abstract painting and narrative, yet elude resolution.

While Louden is unconcerned with technology per se, she is keen to explore and exploit the capabilities of time-based media and digital manipulation. She recognized immediately the need for expert guidance and assistance to achieve her goals and, from the outset, she has worked with animator Brian Clyne, whose role in the process she likens to that of a master printmaker, or a foundry fabricator.

Louden asked Clyne to create virtual approximations of wind, light, and gravity. These artificial conditions, the movement of the animation, and the already animate characteristics of Louden’s marks, underscore a suggestion of narrative.

While *The Bridge* video is presented within the exhibition as an endless loop, its starting point is the image of a simplified landscape—an expansive blue sky, and a horizon line suffused with the glow of a pink sunrise. Sheets of paper appear in the foreground as if blown by the wind and get pulled into the composition, immediately establishing a sense of

depth at odds with the paintings’ emphatic flatness, and light-handedly suggesting that the adjacent paintings are being pulled off the walls and into this virtual environment.

For the video Louden compiled a “digital library” that holds examples of her entire vocabulary of gestures—opaque, transparent, textured, colored. They float languidly into the composition’s frame, now controlled not by the artist’s hand but by their environment. Freed from the surface of the paintings and seemingly aloft on the wind, they take on the characteristics of paper confetti. Some of the marks link to form rectangular apertures, which Louden characterizes as portals or windows through which the viewer passes as he or she traverses virtual space.

At this point Louden introduces a non-stationary, internal point-of-view that she refers to as a camera. This moving perspective within the animation intensifies our perceptions of time, speed, movement, and changes in conditions, and provides a visual sense of how Louden conceived the entire project as moving from one place to another.

A blur of white suddenly fills the screen and comes into focus, and the middle ground is activated by a group of loose, empty, mostly black squares and rectangles that seem suspended across the middle of the composition. They share an uncanny physical resemblance to the installation of sculptural drawings outside in the trees. A small rectangle appears at the top left corner of the composition and moves to the

center, and as it slowly grows to fill the screen, reveals itself as the animation's initial empty landscape.

The third element of *Taking Turns* is an installation of three-dimensional "gestures" crafted out of lengths of LED cable that Louden has positioned and suspended in the trees of the Museum's Sculpture Garden. The ten individual units range from three to twenty-seven feet in size. Typically used for signage and other commercial applications, Louden chose the material—LED Neon Flex—for its flexibility and light intensity. Within the outdoor installation Louden's gestural marks assume three-dimensionality; the virtual landscape of the animation transforms into the real world. Views of the garden are accessible from multiple vantage points both within the museum and outside. Walking around the garden and beneath the treetops, viewers now assume the role and perspective of the "camera" that moved through the video. Formally, the entire space has become a composition and a sculpture: the tree's trunks and limbs act as both structural supports and compositional elements.

Sharon Louden makes art slowly, deliberately, at a tempo attuned to the rhythms of the body and at odds with the accelerated pace of contemporary society. Her practice of more than twenty years has been sustained by her intense interest in exploring these core ideas and principles through a range of

media and for all they are worth. Yet, her practice and work continue to move along an ever advancing arc.

Louden's art is anchored in a formal and conceptual framework, but it is when she turns over the process to intuition that she achieves what she seeks most: making the intensity she feels when conceiving and creating the work palpable to the viewer. This project evolved from what Louden describes as a childlike desire to run uninhibitedly through the halls of the museum, and to translate this physical rush to the viewer. Art can provide for such flights of imagination and physical intensity. *Taking Turns* makes clear Louden's desire to make art an act of participation, pleasure and discovery.

1 Dede Young, "Expanded Boundaries: Interview with Sharon Louden," in *Sharon Louden: Character* (Purchase: Neuberger Museum of Art), p. 5.

2 Sharon Louden, conversation with the author, July 2008.

3 Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, (New York: George Wittenborn Inc., 1964), p. 105.

4 Louden, telephone conversation with the author, August 2008.

5 Louden, conversation with the author, July 2008.

6 Louden, conversation with the author, August 2008.

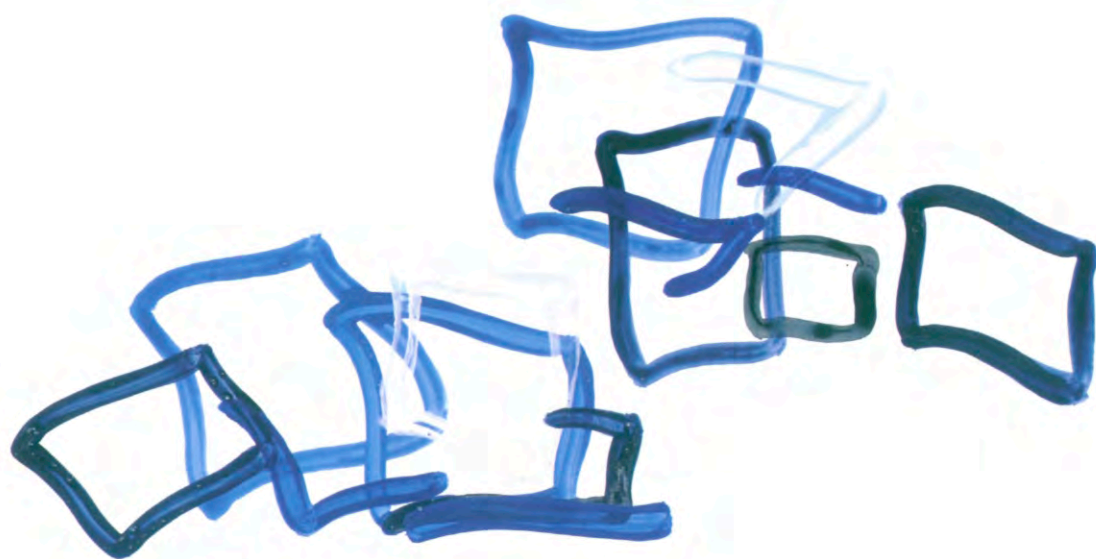
7 *Blue Willow* was Louden's contribution to the exhibition, *Light x Eight: The Hanukkah Project*, at The Jewish Museum in New York, NY (November 25, 2006–February 04, 2007).

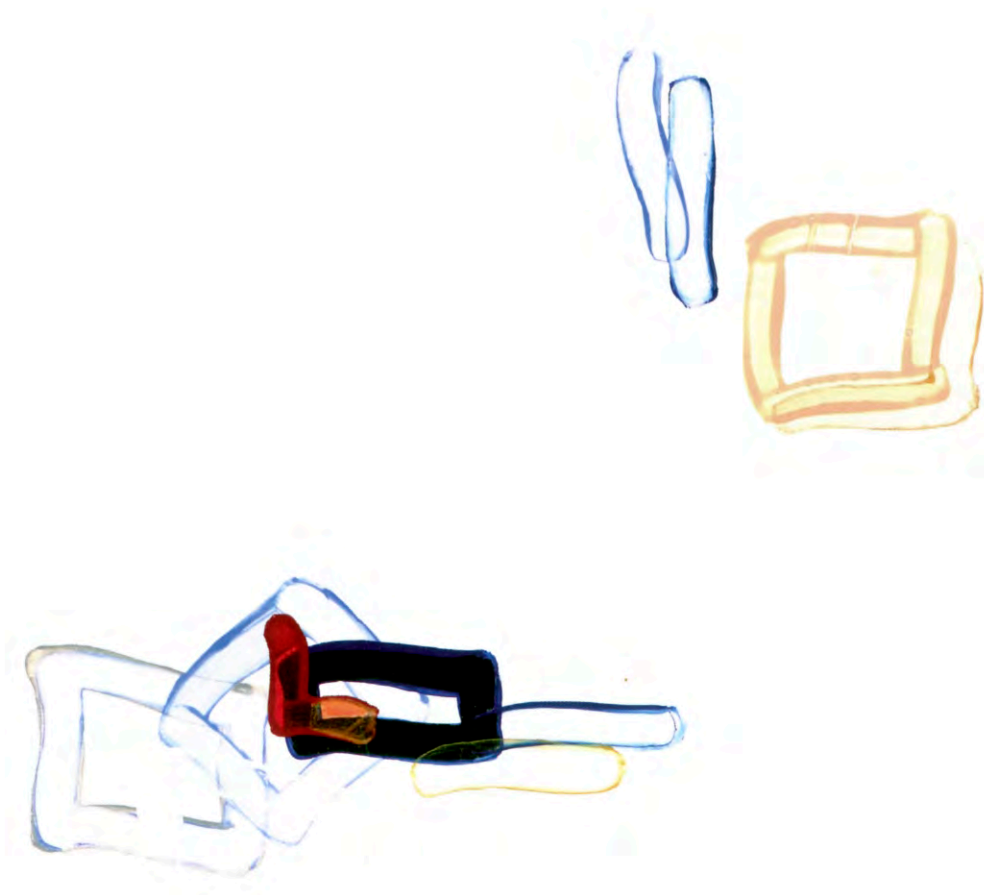
8 Louden, telephone conversation with the author, May 2008.

9 Louden is intrigued with the work of early- and mid-twentieth century abstract filmmakers such as Malcolm LeGrice, Walter Ruttmann, Oskar Fischinger, and Stan Brakhage, though she feels little affinity with their emphasis on film and its fundamental properties.

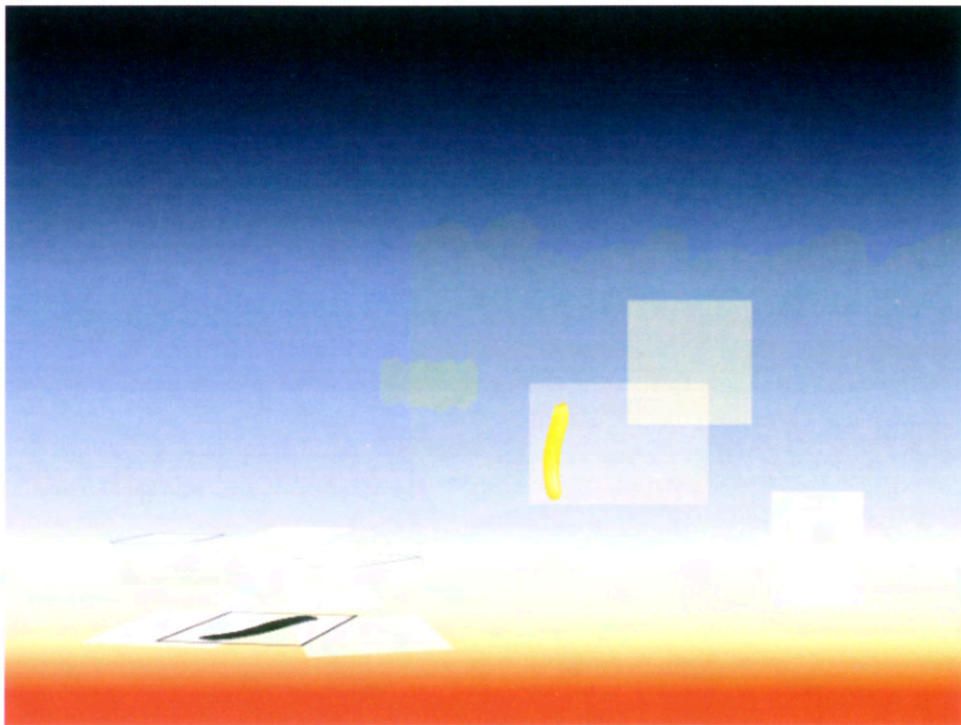
The Bridge

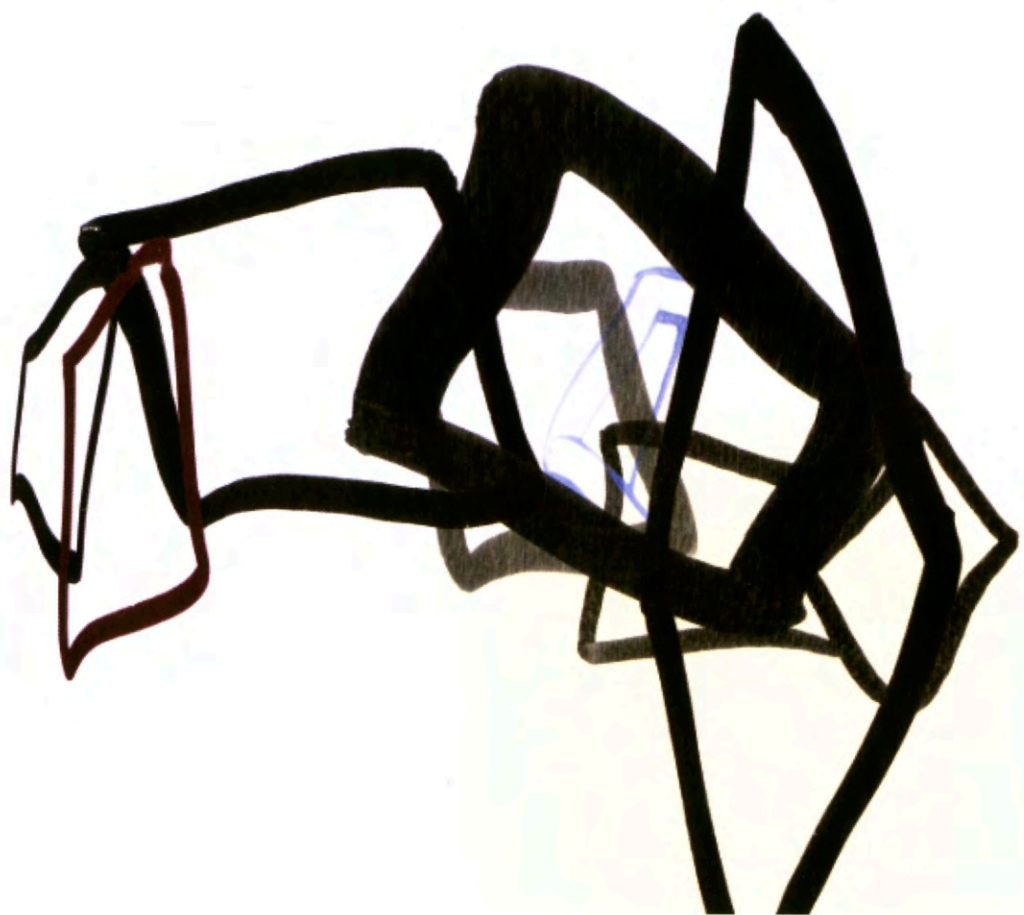
14 Paintings
13 in x 13 in
watercolor and acrylic
on wood panels
2008





Stills from
The Bridge
3:15 Digital Animation
DVD
2008







The Bridge

Site-specific installation

LED cable

10 units, dimensions variable

2008



