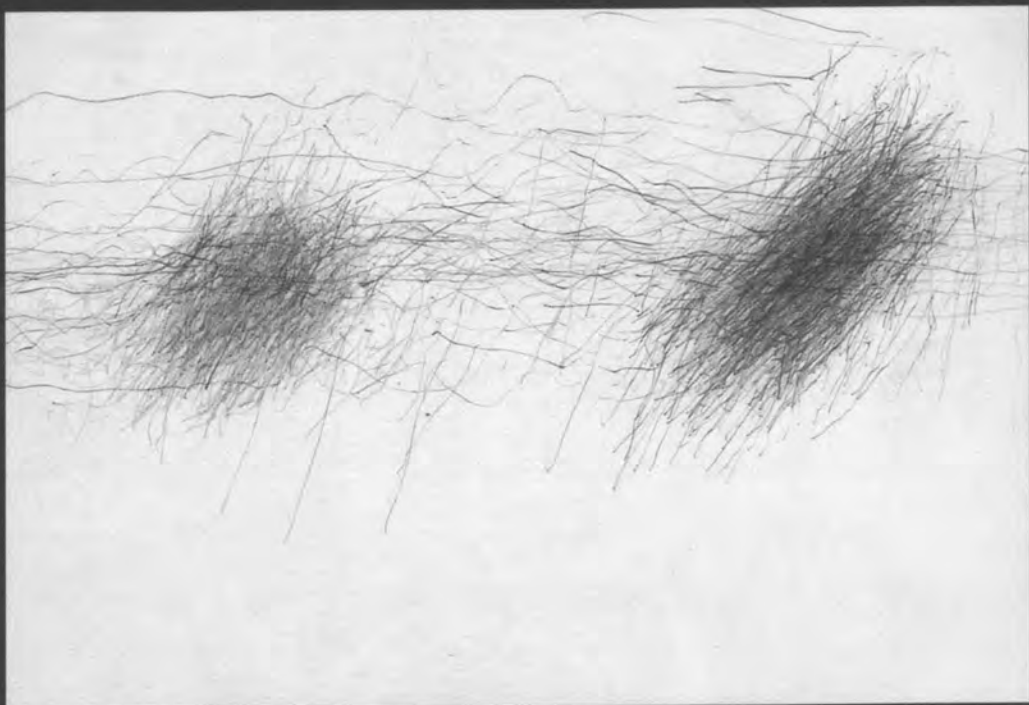




Obsessive Drawing

DELAWARE CENTER FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS

**December 1, 2000
through
February 4, 2001**



Obsessive Drawing is an exhibition about drawing as a primary medium. The exhibition includes 39 abstract and figurative works by 18 artists.

Drawings in this exhibition convey the artists' complete involvement with the materials of drawing. Works range from mural-sized (Santoleri) with surfaces densely covered with charcoal, graphite and erasure marks (Edelstein, Herrick, Levine, Tomasula) or built up with layers of materials (Bokat, Robbins), to those in which the pristine paper claims at least as much space in the drawing as the marked (Kotik, Loudon, Segre). Some artists perform a ritual of controlled repetition to create their abstract drawings that refer to the physicality of the process (Anastasi, Houshiary).

Others represent a literal figure or subject (Hawkesworth, Kentridge, Mabrey, Solow). One is involved with symmetry, drawing worlds on a small scale that read as microcosms and macrocosms (White); and one uses microscopic text to draw (Gissler). Whatever process the artists in Obsessive Drawing utilize to create their work, they all have a relationship to "obsessive" in this exhibition. To discuss the connection in drawing to the psychological states of being that obsession implies, and to go beyond the purely formal descriptions of the work, I invited psychoanalyst and art collector, Merle Molofsky, to engage in a dialogue on the subject of obsession. During the course of our conversation, Merle was shown only a few images of works in the exhibition.

Dede Young
Curator

DY: What does obsessive mean to you?

MM: Obsession is something that consumes us, that we cannot escape. A thought haunts us, and everything else leads us back to the torment and pleasure of our obsession. We brood, we ruminate, we return to the same doubts and scruples, the ifs and onlys, the forbidden, the unbidden. Like a wet dog, we try to shake off what clings to us. But obsession cannot be shaken away.

Obsession signals the presence of conflict and ambivalence. Obsession is a mask to distract us from our obsessions. We do something obsessively because there is something else we are obsessed by, but cannot acknowledge.

Psychoanalysis teaches that we are torn between the demands of desire and the demands of conscience. Conscience insists that we forswear fulfillment of desire. But we cannot.

DY: How does obsessiveness relate to artmaking?

MM: The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (*Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena, Playing and Reality*, Tavistock Publications, London: 1985) describes the symbolic process of a seven year old boy preoccupied with string, who tied furniture together in an attempt to bind the anxiety of separation. This magical act served as bridge between achievement and desire. His string play is a variant of obsessive drawing. As he created a psychic umbilical cord to deny and control emptiness, so too does the artist who confronts emptiness, the pre-gestural space.

We create symmetry to restore emotional balance. If we maintain symmetry, neither instinct nor conscience prevails. The question of symmetry, then, is provocative: what prevails?

DY: This question of symmetry applies especially to the works of Hope White and Thomas Kotik. In very different ways these two artists create a kind of balance in their drawings that "flip" the way I read the space—from near to far, from interior to exterior.

But the question of "what prevails?" is also appropriate in works that are not necessarily symmetrical, but rather where the gestural marks and the paper or ground left unmarked hold the eye equally. I am thinking especially of Sharon Louden's work where the image (or figure) is contained in a relatively small area of a large sheet of mylar. Her drawing may be completed in a matter of moments; her gesture has immediacy and tension.

MM: Zen-inspired Japanese ink drawing captures complex impressions in an unmediated moment. The moment of gesture is as transient as the world. Obsession rubs, rubs out, works over, returns, tries to make truth clearer, or more obscure. Zen says gesture is truth. Obsession says truth is unbearable.

DY: Bruce Robbins' and William Anastasi's drawings also look like spontaneous gesture drawings. Shirazeh Houshiary's work, along with Robbins' and Anastasi's, seem closest to Zen. Robbins' line has the freedom of a child's mark, though he sets up his space to create tension. In his Subway Drawings, Anastasi holds pencils in each hand and lets the movement of the subway he rides define



his gesture for a certain period of time. Houshiary sits on the floor with a sheet of paper and starts her drawing with the pencil in the center of the sheet. She moves her self around the paper making a series of tiny marks—one with each breath. The drawing is complete when the artist is essentially exhausted and has let go her conscious control of her action.

In the realm of "obsession says truth is unbearable" is William Kentridge. His drawing, "Coma," is one of hundreds of drawings used to create his animated video "History of the Main Complaint," which portrays and laments Apartheid in his homeland. Inherent in "Coma" is the unbearable sadness of this harsh reality, and in the video work that animates the drawings, obsession is keenly felt.

But, tell me more about obsession.

MM: D.W. Winnicott ("Dreaming, Fantasizing, and Living", op. cit.) links obsession with the need to fill an inner gap. We face an abyss in the form of a question, do I or do I not exist? If the artist does not fill the space, will emptiness mirror non-existence?

Dread of non-existence becomes manifest in the repetitive mark, cross-hatching, refining, erasing and filling in, overflowing margins. Repetition is obsessive. We return to the scene of the crime. We announce we have a secret. As we seek to obscure, we reveal. Ambivalence demands that the mask must slip.

Line reflects continuity. Broken lines represent an attempt to isolate the unwanted thought, the forbidden act, a way to isolate one's self from others, or from one's self. Line points to the unthinkable as a pause in speech signals an unthinkable wish. Broken lines insist, this does not lead to that. Obsessive line keeps a boundary.

DY: To me line is such a formal, self-assertive part of drawing—a beginning point; a point of departure, an organizing element of composition. Having control of line is something an artist develops and hopes to maintain throughout life. Gary Gissler creates a fine line of words without spaces between them to create an image. One almost needs a magnifying glass to read the text, which, when deciphered, reveals something personal. But I wonder, what does "the mask must slip really mean?"

MM: What do I hide beneath my disguise? What does my masquerade reveal about myself? Take for example the Bruce Robbins and the Erik Levine. In terms of the ambivalent tensions inherent in the horizontal splits, the heavy solid weight pressing down onto the fragile intricacies of line in Bruce Robbins' work, and the opposite in the Levine's work, the solid dark rising upward, supporting, balancing, encroaching on the woven intricacies above. What must be contained? Obviously, whatever is contained can only be imperfectly contained. Containment is suggested, but is impossible. Peter Solow's work uses transparency of space—nothing is fully revealed, but nothing can be fully concealed. Past, memory, always presses through.

DY: So, containment is like a mask. When I look at Bruce Edelstein's figure pressing to edges of the space, I get a sense of anxiety from the composition with the figure up side down. The way she is drawn, with her face looking out at the viewer, evokes memories of difficult life experiences, and also elicits compassion, at least from me.

It becomes apparent that, at first glance, we may not connect to the underlying impulses of the artist making the work. Drawings as large and powerful as Jane Herrick's, or as intensely marked as Ken Mabrey's, Tim Hawkesworth's, or Gary Gissler's assert themselves as "obsessive." Others, like the Tomasula, are subtler. In fact, the Tomasula, Gissler and Loudon seem to border on obsession with fetishism and taboo, which perhaps we can discuss over an exhibition focused on allure.

For now, a final comment about "obsessive?"

MM: The obsessive gesture begs for recognition. See me as I cannot see myself, and forgive me. In return, I will make my mark upon emptiness, and upon you.



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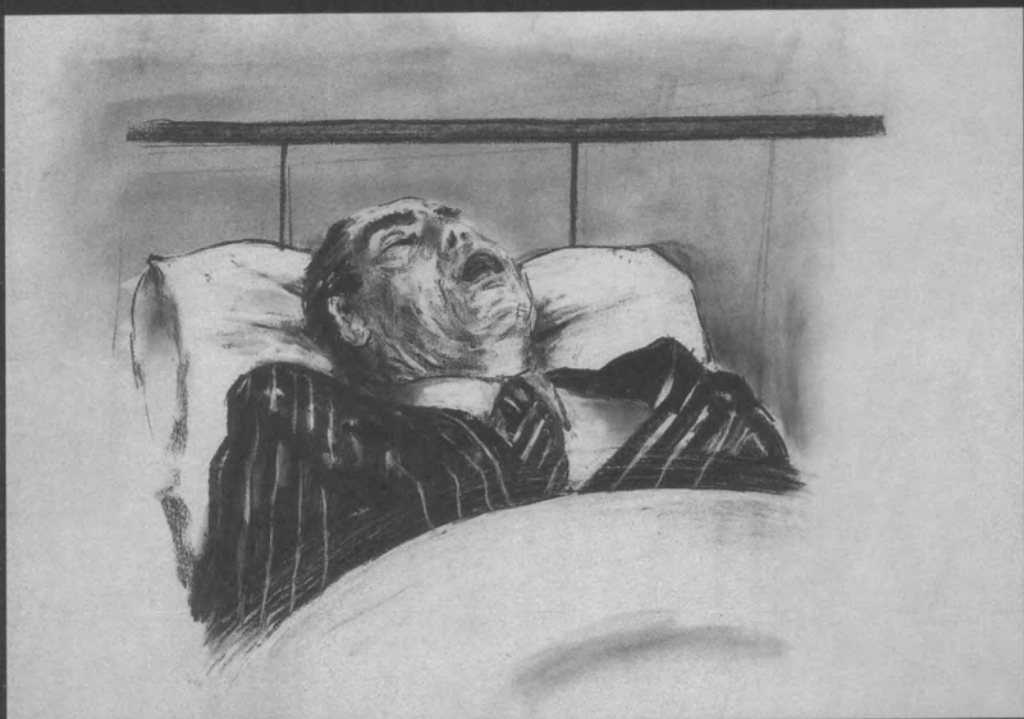
◀ **William Anastasi**
Subway Drawing
1993
Graphite on paper
7.5 x 11.5 in

center

■ **Jane Herrick**
In the Thick of It
(detail)
1998
charcoal on paper
60 x 128 x 5 in.

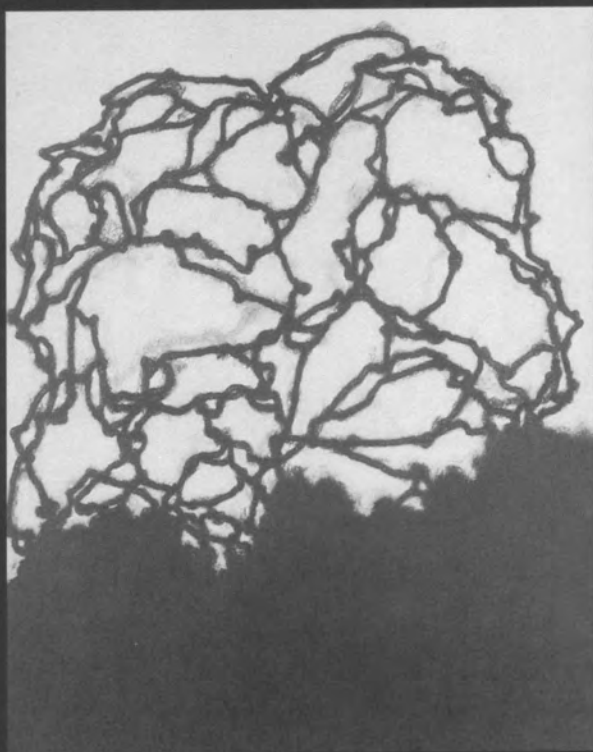
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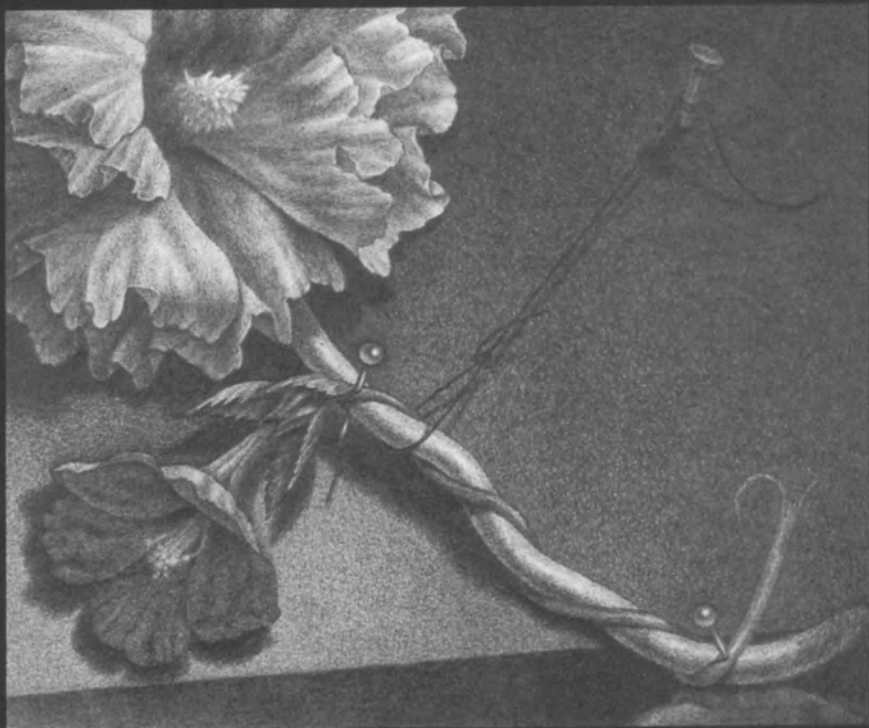
▶ **Bruce Edelstein**
Untitled, 06/96
(detail)
Charcoal on paper
60 x 22.25 in



▲ William Kentridge
Coma
 1999
 Charcoal on paper
 38 x 47 in.

▲ Erik Levine
Morphological Poker
 1996
 Pencil on paper
 50 x 38 in..





▲ Maria Tomasula
Untitled
 1993
 Graphite on paper
 4 x 5 in.

cover image

◀ Hope White
Mandala Series
 ink on paper,
 7 in. diameter

William Anastasi

Julie Bokat

Bruce Edelstein

Gary Gissler

Tim Hawkesworth

Jane Herrick

Shirazeh Houshiary

William Kentridge

Thomas Kotik

Erik Levine

Sharon Loudon

Ken Mabrey

Bruce Robbins

Paul Santoleri

Michelle Segre

Peter Solow

Maria Tomasula

Hope White



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DELAWARE CENTER FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Exhibition Checklist

Gallery Hours:

M, Tu, Th, F	10 am - 6 pm
Wed	10 am - 8 pm
Sat	10 am - 5 pm
Sun	1 pm - 5 pm

William Anastasi
Subway Drawing
1993
Graphite on paper
Lent by Sandra Gering
Gallery

Subway Drawing
1994
Graphite on paper
Lent by Sandra Gering
Gallery

Pencil Drop Drawing
1997
Graphite on paper
Lent by Sandra Gering
Gallery

Julie Bokat
Life Cycle
2000
Charcoal on paper
Lent by the artist

Nascence
2000
Charcoal on paper
Lent by the artist

Synthesis
2000
Charcoal and beeswax
on paper, mounted
Lent by the artist

Continual
2000
Charcoal and beeswax
on paper, mounted
Lent by the artist

Bruce Edelstein
Untitled, 06/96
Charcoal on paper
Private collection,
New York

Gary Gissler
doubt
2000
Pencil on gessoed panel
8 x 8 in.
Courtesy of
123 Watts Gallery

to need a need
1999
Pencil on gessoed panel
Courtesy of Tom McCormick
Gallery

you know I need to know
1999
Pencil on gessoed panel
Courtesy of Tom McCormick
Gallery

disenchanted
1999
Pencil on gessoed panel
Courtesy of 123 Watts
Gallery

do you hear what
2000
Pencil on gessoed panel
Courtesy of 123 Watts
Gallery

Tim Hawkesworth
Talisman
1999
Pencil, wax, pigment and
scorching on paper
Lent by the artist

Jane Herrick
In the Thick of It
1998
Charcoal on paper
Lent by the artist

Shirazeh Houshlyari
Breath
1997
Graphite on black ground
Lent by Anne B. Morgan

William Kentridge
Coma
1999
Charcoal on paper
Lent by Michael
and Ilene Salzman

Thomas Kotik
Untitled
1999
Ink on paper
Lent by Mary Cerutti

Erik Levine
Morphological Poker
1996
Pencil on paper
Lent by the artist

Sharon Loudon
*Tangled Tips: Lines
from Zion*
2000
Ink on mylar
Lent by the artist

Ken Mabrey
Express Check-out
2000
Ink on rag paper
Lent by the artist

Bruce Robbins
Untitled
2000
Graphite on gessoed
sheetrock
Lent by the artist

Untitled
2000
Graphite on gessoed
sheetrock
Lent by the artist

Untitled
2000
Graphite on gessoed
sheetrock
Lent by the artist

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Graphite on gessoed
sheetrock
Lent by the artist

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2000
Graphite on gessoed
sheetrock
Lent by the artist

Untitled
2000
Graphite on gessoed
sheetrock
Lent by the artist

Untitled
2000
Graphite on gessoed
sheetrock
Lent by the artist

Paul Santoleri
To Your Island
1998
Conte on paper
Lent by the artist

Michelle Segre
Foot
1998
Marker on paper
Private collection,
New York

Peter Solow
View from Belvedere
1999
Graphite on paper
Lent by the artist

Maria Tomasula
Untitled
1993
Graphite on paper
Private collection,
New York

Hope White
Mandala Series
1999
Ink on paper
Lent by the artist

Mandala Series
1999
Ink on paper
Lent by the artist

Mandala Series
2000
Ink on paper
Lent by the artist

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Ink on paper
Lent by the artist