

ARTS | CONNECTICUT AND WESTCHESTER

Drawing Evolves, Testing Its Boundaries

A Review of 'Extreme Drawing,' at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum



Courtesy of Amelie Chabannes and Stephan Stoyanov Gallery

"Double Portrait, Marina, Ulay, a Fourth Hand and the Impermanence #1" by Amelie Chabannes, 2011.

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Published: April 5, 2013

Drawing Evolves, Testing Its Boundaries

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

While drawing once served an auxiliary function — that is, as studies for paintings, sculpture and architecture — over the last century it became a stand-alone medium. And like other art media in this age of cultural and technological flux and innovation, its definition is often pushed to the limits. You can sense this just from the title of “Extreme Drawing” at the [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#) in Ridgefield, Conn.

“Extreme Drawing” is not a single exhibition. Instead, it follows the Aldrich’s recently adopted format of semester-long programming linked by a theme. In this case, six exhibitions installed throughout the museum look at drawing from a variety of perspectives and suggest that visitors think about it as a more abstract or conceptual category.

A discrete exhibition-within-the-exhibition, “Ballpoint Pen Drawing Since 1950,” features work by nearly a dozen artists created with the humble ballpoint pen, which was designed as a mass-produced replacement for the fountain pen. Here you have ballpoint masters like [Il Lee](#), whose abstract “BL-120” (2011) uses the pen’s minute hatching capabilities, as well as the shininess of its ink, to full effect; or [Bill Adams](#), whose neo-Surrealist drawings center on furry Cyclops-cube-forms. The show also includes an artist associated with Surrealism itself: [Alberto Giacometti](#), who started drawing with ballpoint pens in the early 1950s, and is represented by his “Portrait of Diego” done on the cover of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, a French literary journal, in about 1963.

Another semi-traditional approach to drawing can be seen in the work of [Robert Longo](#), whose photorealistic graphite images are often included in the so-called [Pictures](#) group, the first generation of artists to appropriate mass-media images without significantly altering them. Mr. Longo’s “The Capitol Project” encompasses a room-size installation of “Capitol” (2013), seven large graphite panels that together depict the United States Capitol. His installation also includes 81 smaller “studies,” which look much like black-and-white photographs and are arranged like a gridded archive on the walls just inside the museum’s entrance. These range from the uncanny (drawings of human skulls or a “Study for Freud’s Desk and Chair,” 2000) to the bombastic (“Study for French Bomb Test XL,” 2004).

Drawing becomes more sculptural — if one can claim such a thing — in the work of [Amelie Chabannes](#) and [Jane South](#). Ms. Chabannes continues the archival impulse alluded to by Mr. Longo, with images culled from the Internet and inscribed in shaky outlines, along with carved-out “excavations” in the wall, and accompanied by a somewhat convoluted narrative about “fusional relationships,” a concept borrowed from psychology and described in a gallery handout as “the opposite of the primacy of individual identity.” Ms. South’s simpler, more impressive installation is a sculpture suspended from the ceiling made with hand-painted paper, wood, cable and particle board, that resembles the technical elements of a theater stage.

“Creative Growth: Dan Miller and Judith Scott” focuses on just two artists, both associated with the [Creative Growth Art Center](#) in Oakland, Calif., which serves developmentally and physically disabled adults. Following a strong trend in the art world to display work by “outsider” artists, Ms. Scott’s large, amorphous balls made primarily from found textiles and Mr. Miller’s abstract doodle-grids combine the historic expressiveness of drawing and modernist abstraction with a covert art world critique. As if reversing the accusations made against modern art, that it could be made by anyone, the gallery handout quotes a review from an art magazine lauding the Oakland center for being like an art school, “except without the self-doubt, posing, competition and careerism.” (One way of underscoring this, however, might have been to exhibit the work of several Creative Growth artists, rather than just two.)

Finally, Los Angeles-based [Harry Dodge](#)’s “Meaty Beaty Big and Bouncy” installation pushes the concept of drawing into murkier regions. Videos based on storytelling — retelling a dream or vision or blocking out the action for an imagined film — link linear narrative, tall tales and “yarns” with the drawn line. What is most distinctive about the installation, however, is how it feels more like a palimpsest of contemporary Los Angeles art — [Paul McCarthy](#), [Mike Kelley](#), [Bruce Nauman](#), [Ed Ruscha](#) and [Raymond Pettibon](#) — than a meditation on drawing, per se.

Similarly, “Extreme Drawing” feels less cohesive than earlier themes at the Aldrich like “portraiture” and “collaboration.” Part of the issue is that contemporary art — like modern art before it — is often engaged in breaking away from traditional categories and dispensing with media altogether. And yet this might have been an opportunity for exploring how traditional practices persist in different forms, like the drawing programs on smartphones or, in urban spaces, through graffiti. Connecting disparate works by a single theme, while a fairly basic curatorial approach, isn’t the worst idea. It’s just that in “Extreme Drawing,” it feels like draftsmanship itself in its earlier days: a provisional study rather than a fully realized project.

“Extreme Drawing” is at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through Aug. 25 (except “Harry Dodge: Meaty Beaty Big and Bouncy,” which closes May 26). Information: (203) 438-4519 or [aldrichart.org](#).