

FOUR ARTISTS: DRAWINGS

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organized by
The New Museum

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INTRODUCTION

Four Artists: Drawings is the third exhibition and the first international exhibition to be organized under the auspices of The New Museum. The New Museum, begun in January, 1977, is a not-for-profit organization formed to exhibit work and disseminate information about art and artists from 1970 on.

We intend to show works of art which have not yet gained public visibility or acceptance and to present them within a critical and scholarly context. The New Museum's first priority is to focus on living artists and the work they make; to this end, we are providing information about lesser-known artists on a national and international level. We will move this month to a new exhibition and office space at 65 Fifth Avenue, formerly the New School Graduate Art Center.

THE NEW MUSEUM

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FOUR ARTISTS: DRAWINGS

"The type of work which is established by planned thought, usually simple, mechanical and sometimes almost radical, such as the work of Sol Lewitt is a definite visualization of American nationalistic intellectualism..."

The above quotation by a Japanese critic, which appeared recently in a Japanese art magazine, typifies the reaction to contemporary American art in Japan. Whether Sol Lewitt or any other artist represents American esthetics is, of course, not an issue here.

The works of the four artists selected for this exhibition were chosen not on the basis of how closely they conform to the criterion expressed above but rather because they are representative of the diverse nature of contemporary art in America.

The works shown in this exhibition, while dealing with different issues, use a common medium--drawing. It is important to understand that drawing in America is a legitimate art form, not merely a vehicle for technical study preliminary to painting. Of the four artists represented here, three are accomplished painters, yet each of the drawings stands on its own merit. One should especially take note of the use of the expanding variety of non-traditional materials used in the drawings.

The drawings we have selected for this exhibition have their own character, which is modified by the environment in which they are seen. We are deeply interested in the interreaction which this exhibition creates vis-a-vis Japan and the Japanese viewers.

We are pleased to be able to bring this work to the attention of the Japanese audience. We are especially thankful to Prof. Yukio Tsuchiya and Mr. Terukata Fujieda, the art critic, who made special efforts to make this exhibition possible.

Michiko Miyamoto

The New Museum

FOUR ARTISTS: DRAWINGS

In America today, drawing no longer takes second place to painting and sculpture. Drawings are no longer seen only as preliminary studies for major works of art; in fact, some artists work only in the drawing mode, considering it a viable medium for the expression of aesthetic and ontological concerns.

Prior to the twentieth century, drawing in the Western World was largely a matter of outline or contour rather than volumetric expression; to qualify as drawing, marks on paper were traditionally considered to occupy less area than the ground on which they were made, so that there was a higher proportion of paper to line. Drawings have always been used as methods of notation, ways of "thinking out loud" visually. They are, in general, fast, inexpensive and more easily discarded than painting or sculpture. Many drawings show a lack of refinement considered undesirable in other media. Conversely, many drawings are pristine, more conventional than painting or sculpture by the same artist because of the nature of the medium. Some drawings permit an intimacy of scale that would not otherwise be possible in larger works. Sometimes, the spontaneous, hand-made gesture indigenous to drawing is incorporated into work in other media, and becomes part of the artist's permanent vocabulary of forms. Thus paintings may utilize graph marks similar to those found on paper, or sculpture may be incised or its surface marked with graphic images.

As a rule, however, all kinds of drawings embody a visual thinking which is more immediate, more flexible, transportable, disposable and personal than other modes and it is through the medium of drawing that many artists are most intuitively able to formulate the basic ideas of their work. Today, there is also a considerable change in the educated viewer's attitude toward drawing. The idea of drawing for its own sake, rather than at the service of other, more permanent or larger works, has become accepted. The beauty of a mark alone, rather than the skill of a mark as an aspect of representation, can be appreciated and understood.

Although the four artists in this exhibition all work within the usual confines of drawing, that is, the making of images or marks on paper, the resulting configurations are vastly different from each other, both in form and in expressive intent. Although all four artists have been working for some time, they

are not yet well known; they represent, at present, a provocative cross-section of avant-garde thinking in New York today.

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Bill Jensen's drawings are not studies for his paintings in the usual sense. He begins by making a drawing of the shape he wants to use, revising it constantly, building the image intuitively and adding layers of charcoal on white paper. When the shape emerges, he begins painting, but if the painting seems to falter, he returns to the drawing. Jensen's images, in both media, are eccentric and vulnerable; they occupy the center of the picture plane as if they had landed there from the natural world, rather than evolving logically from formal, aesthetic concerns. The images suggest natural forms but do not look like them. It is as though, organically, the images had emerged with difficulty and settled on the paper or canvas. The extreme sensuousness of his painting, with its lush color and thickly applied paint, is more difficult to locate in the drawings. The outline of the form has been continuously erased, until the final configuration is "found." The paper has been worked over, the edges of each enigmatic image appearing and disappearing. The dark, smudged quality of charcoal, which does not stay within the confines of the original drawn shape, gives Jensen's forms a further organic quality. The paintings and the drawings generally are both small, although recently Jensen has turned to a slightly larger format. In all instances, they are perceivable in a single glance, relating to the movement of the hand and arm on the paper. Jensen uses unitary forms in his work, so that the eye looks "into" the picture rather than roaming about it. These are not forms to be read, but presences to be apprehended at once.

In sharp contrast to the intuitive method of Jensen's drawings, the forms in Sharon Haskell's work are arrived at logically. Each mark refers to a world within the confines of the paper rather than to any world of forms outside. The drawings are self-referential, made by pressing down a corner or area of the paper upon which a carbon pencil shape has been drawn, onto another area of the paper, which is reached without folding. The shape or part of the shape is rubbed off onto another section of the paper, creating a mirror image of the original. This is not recognizable as such because of its altered position of the paper, or sometimes because

it is also a partial image. Although both Jensen and Haskell use only black and white in their drawings, Jensen's use of charcoal black implies a coloristic use of black, with its gradations of light and extraordinary surface density. Haskell's use of black and white seems neutral and non-coloristic. This is because her forms are schematic and structural rather than intuitive, biomorphic. She builds shapes that lie somewhere between geometric shapes and lyrical ones, are distinctly non-organic, and do not resemble or suggest natural forms. These shapes are logically derived, and usually extend to the corners and edges of the paper itself. Thus, the forms she uses are literal rather than poetic in their origin, although their ultimate effect is one of mystery rather than logic.

Haskell does only drawings; Dennis Kardon, on the other hand, uses drawings as a way of doing what he cannot do in his paintings. He sees his drawings as the genesis of his ideas, an arena in which he can flexibly explore issues which will ultimately be resolved in the paintings. There is, for him, an immediacy about the drawings which differs from the attitudes of both Jensen and Haskell. For Jensen, the forms emerge intuitively but are continuously reworked until the shape emerges; for Haskell, the degree of pre-planning, the logical steps taken, mean that once transferred, no change of shape is possible. A great deal of reworking is involved in the one case, and a great deal of planning in the other. Kardon, however, enjoys the immediacy of the medium and does not revise. His paintings, in contrast, require continuous alteration to achieve their final form. His drawings are structural in intent as well as appearance, and there is a feeling of speed or velocity in the marks. Kardon uses a wide variety of marks--lines, blotches, drips, areas of dark and light--and although there is no color as such in the work, there is a strong suggestion of it because of the infinite kinds of markings and the dragged, brushed quality of the india ink in some places. Kardon feels that the black and white in his mind "stand for" colors, and this contributes to their effect. He uses drawing to create the kind of edges that are intrinsic to his painting, and in this way sees the work as structural rather than compositional. Certainly the balance of forms that was once the hallmark of "good" drawing or painting is no longer an issue; indeed, it is neither necessary or desirable in work being done in recent years. Although composition is irrelevant, Kardon's

drawings nonetheless suggest both interior and exterior spaces at the same time. There is something architectonic about them, perhaps because many of the marks exist within linear boundaries or enclosures. The drawings also suggest arcane maps or topographical views, but what they are or seem to be shifts as the eye shifts across the page, in and out of suggested internal spaces.

Donald Sultan's drawings explore other kinds of topographical relationships. Sultan, originally from Chicago, utilizes images of real things--tables and buildings--in his work, but they are neither literal images nor representational ones. Rather, they are prototypical. It is the architectonic nature of a table or a building that interests Sultan, and he uses it as a point of departure. In his paintings, sculptures and bas-reliefs as well as in his drawings, forms can be viewed from any angle. Often, his signature will appear upside-down, not in error, but as an indication that the work can be looked at from other directions. There is a curious kind of perspective in these drawings, as though a three-dimensional, illusionistic Renaissance drawing had been tilted and flattened, presented from above or below rather than seen head-on, at eye level. Sultan's drawings have a casual, smudged look about them; some of the earlier drawings have random images scattered throughout the rectangle, Sultan's favorite objects or marks. The recent works are less cluttered, the images less randomly arrayed, but they still contain a strong sense of arbitrariness. The artist has deliberately left the space and the images ambiguous, to be read first one way, then another, with maximum flexibility and the maximum participation of the viewer.

Sultan's drawings are urban in feeling, whereas Jensen's and Haskell's are not. While Jensen's images are reminiscent of nature, Haskell leaves open space around her shapes, conveying a clear, poetic sensation of light despite the logic of the placement. Kardon, like Sultan, also has a kind of urban quality in his work, but this is due more to the intense velocity of the marks than to the cavernous volumetric sense of space created by Sultan. Sultan's images are ambiguous, elliptical in meaning, strongly physical; the surface seems constructed and shaped, rather than occupied (as in Jensen's work), incised (as in Kardon's) or delineated (like Haskell's).

Sultan uses dense, unruly, unexpected color, not literally to fill in shapes, but to create an image and destroy it at the same time.

None of the four artists' work can be characterized by any single description. While Kardon uses drawing as a way of working out ideas for painting, Haskell does nothing but drawings. Jensen finds drawing and painting equivalent in value, and uses the two in dialogue with each other; Sultan sees drawing as integral to the body of work in its entirety. More important than their connections is that the work of these artists is no longer, in America, a secondary art. Rather, it demonstrates that drawing now is an opportunity to investigate the most advanced and provocative ideas, and to experiment with unexplored materials, forms and modes of facture.

Marcia Tucker

