

Drawing the Line: Wiggly, Squiggly, and Otherwise
by Ilene Dube

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Often, people wanting to disavow themselves of artistic ability say "I can't draw a straight line," as if drawing an unwavering line had anything to do with art. In fact it is in the squiggles where it starts to get interesting.

For the past two weeks, the Paul Robeson Center for the Arts has had a wiggly, squiggly, meandering three-dimensional line winding its way up the front column of the Michael Graves-designed building, bringing attention to the bronze bust of Paul Robeson.

Made of pipe cleaners and re-appropriated plastic products by Caroline Lathan-Stiefel, it is a site-specific work that welcomes visitors to "Drawing Beyond: An Exhibition of Contemporary Drawing," curated by Princeton artist Marsha Levin-Rojer. On view through Friday, April 13, the exhibit includes the work of nine contemporary artists who challenge the viewer to reconsider what drawing means today.

The idea has been incubating with Levin-Rojer since she saw "On Line: Drawing Through the 20th Century" at MOMA two autumns ago. That exhibit looked at how artists have drawn lines on walls, earth, ceramics, film, and computer screens with such tools as sticks, scrapers, and pixels, and argued for an expanded definition of drawing that moves off the page and into space and time.

"I started to think, what are the criteria that define drawing," says Levin-Rojer, taking a hanging break in the Robeson Center's second-floor lounge. She thinks back to a long-ago talk at the Princeton University Art Museum on 19th-century watercolor studies for paintings. "I considered them paintings," says Levin-Rojer, wrapped in a swirly blue felted scarf by Piroska Toth, yet another drawn piece. "For a long time, drawings were preliminary for large scale painting. Now drawing has its own validity and is no longer a means to an end."

With the idea that drawing commands a presence of its own and has dissolved boundaries between media, Levin-Rojer spent three months researching monographs, catalogues, and online shows, including the Drawing Center, an online registry for emerging artists. The artists she found for "Drawing Beyond" have exhibited at MoMA, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Fogg Art Museum, the Gwangju Biennale in Korea, and the Brooklyn Museum.

"I was drawn to people working across boundaries, who were pushing the limits of linearity and mark making. What are the qualities that make them drawings?" she ponders aloud.

Levin-Rojer, who earned a bachelor's degree in math at Temple University and returned to school at the age of 50 to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, has been drawing since her childhood in Merion, Pennsylvania.

In the mid-1980s she studied the figure with Bucks County painter Jacques Fabert “in order to feel more comfortable with abstraction,” she says. She also enjoys working on grid constructions to explore color.

About seven years ago, she began moving drawings off the page, creating shadow drawings from sculpted wire.

A former Montgomery Center for the Arts (MCA) artist-in-residence and chair of the MCA exhibitions committee, Levin-Rojer is a member of both Princeton Artists Alliance and Movis, a consortium of Princeton-area artists. One rule for this show was “no friends,” although Movis colleague Maggie Johnson gets a special thank you in the exhibit catalogue. So the slate of artists for “Drawing Beyond” includes names Princeton-area art lovers may not be familiar with.

Eve Aschheim, a senior lecturer in visual arts at the Lewis Center for the Arts, is an abstract artist who paints and draws. The boundary she crosses is in her choice of medium, Mylar, a drafting film. She works on both sides of the semi-transparent medium, using ink, graphite, and gesso. Taking this even further, she puts her drawings on photographic paper, projecting light, to create photograms. These become negative images of the works on Mylar, with their calligraphic lines, layerings, and pentimenti (the reappearance of an underlying image that had been covered).

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Theresa Chong, of Englewood Heights, also works on two sides of her substrate, in this case rice paper. She begins with a pixelated computer drawing and transfers it to rice paper with gouache and graphite, creating tiny hand-drawn squares, developed on both sides of the rice paper. An accomplished cellist, Chong sometimes renders these as a digital video drawing set to music. In “Drawing Beyond,” she has a four-and-a-half minute video dedicated to John Cage that is silent except for the sound of pixels popping.

Sara Schneckloth creates dramatic large-scale drawings using white china marker on black photo backdrop paper. “One can feel the involvement of the entire body in their construction, much like Pollock’s pourings,” says Levin-Rojer. At 96-by-107 inches, “Confluence,” with carefully feathered swirling lines, suggests both microscopic life and the cosmos, and the similarities between the two. In another work, Schneckloth draws with cutout paper.

At the center of the gallery is an interactive drawing table by Schneckloth. Like a small billiard table, it has a charcoal drawing covering the surface protected with plastic, and the viewer can play with ball bearings on top. (Note: Schneckloth also has an exhibit at Princeton High School’s Numina Gallery, with an opening reception Friday, March 16, from 6 to 8 p.m., and a closing reception Wednesday, March 28, at 7 p.m. Schneckloth will give a drawing workshop there, also on March 28, from 3 to 5 p.m.)

Sun K. Kwak is known for site-specific drawings made with masking tape. (Interestingly, Levin-Rojer also draws with masking tape.) Here we see a photograph of one of her large masking tape installations, and she will give a film presentation on the project on Thursday, March 15.

South African artist William Kentridge has achieved international acclaim for his charcoal drawings, animations, video installations, performance pieces, and operas. Here he has two works in photogravure, one of which is viewed through a stereoscope. “Scribe 1” depicts a seated man, surrounded by his seated shadow, looking at the seated woman next to him who in fact is a drawing on the same plane against which his shadow is projected. In the other, “Larder,” a sculptural model of an indeterminate animal is covered with drawing, and there is a paper dragon-like object floating above it, also covered with drawing. It’s a drawing about drawing.

Standing in the gallery, viewers may realize that all the work, except that of Lathan-Stiefel, is black and white, which takes them back to the original idea of drawing as something that is done with black ink on white paper, or the reverse. Caroline Burton's silver ink and acrylic works are dynamic statements in white on black, concentrating on the pattern of line in netting or fiber.

"Burton revisits the grid, a popular standard of 20th-century Modernism, and transforms it into elaborate renderings of cage-like structures that she has created out of rabbit fencing," says Levin-Rojer. Sometimes Burton "draws" on fabric with a sewing machine.

Anchoring the show is work by Maurice Galimidi, charcoal on paper that is more traditional, more familiar. Working from a live model, or a memory of a live model, his lines follow the intriguing form of the human figure as he sees it.

Life drawing has its roots in the Renaissance, Levin-Rojer reminds us. "Galimidi invests his figures with an energy and spirit that seem to beg for more space," she says. "The figure is not always given its due."

Galimidi, a Ewing resident who runs Allegra Printing in Lawrence, is a regular at the Arts Council's life drawing workshop held Monday nights. He has won awards at Phillips Mill in New Hope and in the Mercer County Artists Show. "If I don't come to the workshop, I feel dissatisfied and empty," says the Brooklyn native who earned a bachelor's degree in studio art from SUNY Oneonta in 1976.

He has been working from live models for as long as he can remember. Before the Arts Council it was at Artworks in Trenton, and before that at the Art Students League in New York. Sometimes he works in pastel, but, he says, "I don't do as much color as I used to. I do work large — I can't do small — and I do work standing up. It's a creative act, working back and forth from paper to eye, and it's action filled."

When working in his studio, without the model, he says, "I lose details and get into more form. I start looking at composition, weight, counterbalance, and movement. If you're not working from a model as a point of reference, you'll never get to abstraction. For me, there has to be some point of reference, something the viewer can touch, a tangible feel. The live figure, for me, breathes life into everything."

Commenting on the black-and-whiteness of the show, he says "artists show emotion through color. Drawings that lack color reveal an artist's soul. Without color you're reduced to formal line, form, and texture."

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"By dissolving the boundaries between different mediums or moving into 3-dimensional space or confounding our expectations of scale, these artists prompt us to ask "what exactly is it that defines a drawing?" Is it the linearity, the mark, the gesture? The materials, the exploration, the intent? "Drawing Beyond" will raise these questions and defer to the viewer for answers."