

Art review: Drawings from around the world come together, mostly, at MECA

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By Daniel
Kany

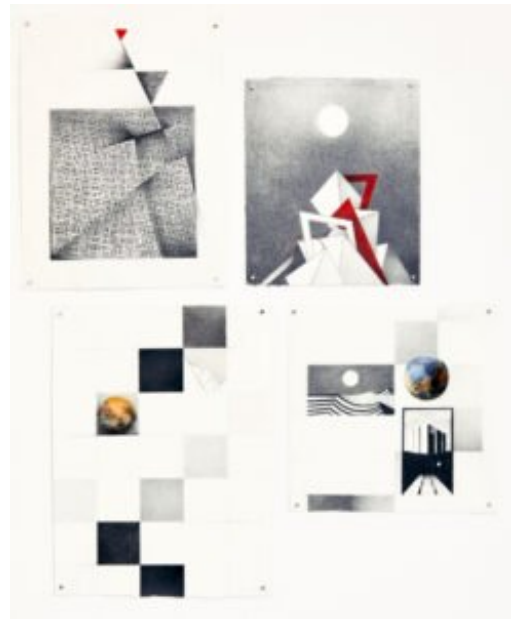
January 27,
2019

“Drawing Now” at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art in Portland features the work of the Drawing Collective, a group of artists from 11 countries founded by Portland artist Munira Naqui, along with a few local guests. This is the Drawing Collective’s first exhibition in the United States following shows in Paris and Sydney. “Drawing Now” was co-curated by Naqui and Bruce Brown.

It is a big show that comes into focus around conceptual abstraction and minimalist drawing. It features only a few flashes of representational drawing, including possibly, the strongest work in the show: Josephina Auslander’s suite of four drawings tucked away in the farthest reaches of the gallery. At first, I thought the placing of her works where they would be the last seen by visitors was a mistake, but enough works connect it bit by bit to create, over time, enough of a context. To be sure, Auslander’s stupendously-rendered images, are largely abstract, but they contain enough pictorial details – the moon, the earth, a horizon line, etc. – to clearly feel like landscapes.

The majority of the work is divided between systems logic and the flat forms of architectural volumes. This latter group might challenge some viewers as to whether it’s drawing or painting. Boundaries certainly matter to many, and confounding boundaries has been one of the driving forces of Modernism. But frankly, I don’t feel strongly about needing to decide if something is a painting or a drawing. My general take is that painting uses the entire surface as part of its visual field and that drawing lets ideas well from a neutral ground. (Think of this as painting uses the entire canvas and a drawing can be a few marks on paper, for example.) That said, in post-war America, painting tends to be more emotive, and drawing – as it always has been – is more dedicated to ideas. Not surprisingly, the Drawing Collective is a bastion of conceptualism.

Most impressive is Kevin Townsend’s (U.S.) “A Granular Field of Nows.” It comprises the foyer gallery of the ICA, much of which has been painted a slate gray. On the dark ground, Townsend has painted tens of thousands of simple figure or tree-like white strokes that create a spatial sense of crowds or forests. Is it drawing? It works for me: marks on a vague ground, and here it’s the marks that create the space, not the ground.



Josefina Auslender, graphite and colored pencil on Aches paper.

ART REVIEW

WHAT: "Drawing Now"

WHERE: Institute of Contemporary Art
at Maine College of Art, 522 Congress
St., Portland

WHEN: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday to
Sunday, until 7 p.m. Thursday, until 8
p.m. for First Friday Art Walk; through
March 22

EXHIBITION OPENING: 5 to 8 p.m.
Friday

INFO: meca.edu/ica



Kevin Townsend, "A Granular Field of Nows," 48-hour durational drawing, signal white acrylic.

Many of the strongest pieces are deeply dedicated to straight-edge lines and forms. Truong Thanh's (Vietnam) reductive line works each have a large black bar on the edge of the paper and a small set of razor-sharp pencil lines folding over each other once or twice. For as spare as they are, they're exhilarating. Thanh's pieces work particularly well next to Liz Davidson's (Canada) luscious, vague and ghostly charcoals. This pair is probably my favorite in the show.

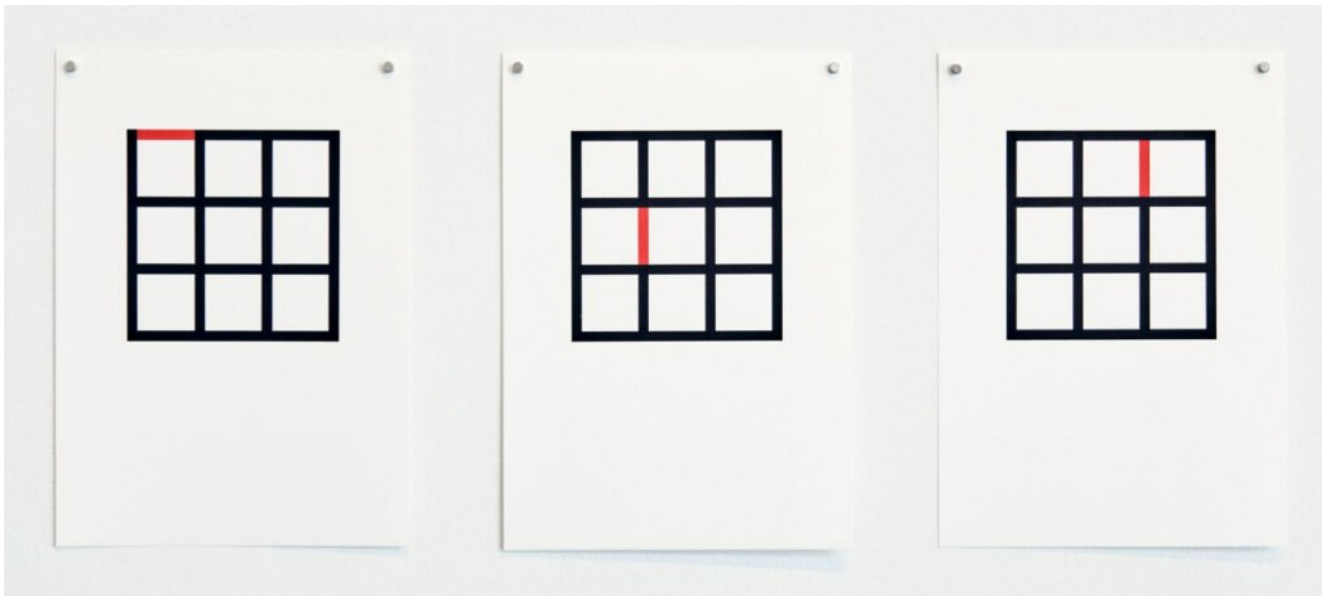
Unfortunately – and while "Drawing Now" is an excellent show, it does have its flaws – Thanh's work is interrupted by the magnets used to hang them directly on the wall. This was clearly a curatorial decision rather than an artistic one since it was used for much of the work. Often, it's an excellent solution, but sometimes it interferes with the work.

Another unfortunate aspect is the trio of works on the other side of Thanh's. Wilma Vissers' (Netherlands) pair of abstract charcoal and gouache forms would probably hold up on their own, but Andre Geertse's (Netherlands) suite of five sheets look like notebook pages torn out of a bored high school student's class notes. They are loud, simplistic and unredeeming to the point of bringing down nearby work. This is also true of Daniel Hill's (USA) four black and white woven paper bits: It literally is the stuff of elementary school and lacks reach to its apparent goal of systems logic. What it does reach, however, are its neighbors: It brings down both Barbara Halnan's (Australia) linear systems and even Naqui's elegant charcoal and wax work. This is surprising: Naqui is not only the founder of the group and a co-curator of show, but her work is consistently among the most sophisticated and elegantly abstract painting in Maine. (She shows at Corey Daniels in Wells.)



Jamel Sghaier, "Compositions 1, 2, 3, 4, 7," acrylic on paper

However, the show is defined less by a couple of fumbled works than by its broad array of works, compelling both conceptually and in terms of craft. One of the sub-modes of “Drawing Now” includes print-like forms of architectural volumes. These are not what many people think of as “drawing,” but, again, is that even a meaningful polemic? Wahida Azhari’s (Germany) pair of blue acrylic paint diptychs are gorgeously simple as well as simply gorgeous. Jamel Sghaier’s (Germany) acrylic forms follow a similar path: handsome architecture ideas presented as simplified print-like graphic forms. Erdem Kucuk-Koroglu’s folding black forms are less architectural than mathematical, but they too exude an extraordinary sense of geometrical precision, though they function with motion rather than space.



Jean-Luc Manguin, “Insertion Rouge” series, marker on paper.

Two particularly strong artists are Jean-Luc Manguin and Christine Boiry of France. Manguin’s work comprises incredibly tight geometrical pieces that either look to optical grids or unfurling systems. Boiry takes the colors of birds and uses lines of those palettes to create simple-seeming and unexpectedly appealing hexagonal forms.

In sum, however, it is the crop of local artists who lead the way. Ellen Golden’s new work is scintillatingly optical: jagged and jazzy. It also marks a huge step forward for her.

We have come to expect this kind of work – smart systems and savvy lines – from Clint Fulkerson, and so indeed his work shines the context of “New Drawing”: webs of precise lines reaching out and connecting everything.

And not only is there much more, but the work that remains unmentioned tends to be on the stronger side. Naqui and Brown have put together an excellent exhibition.

Freelance writer Daniel Kany is an art historian who lives in Cumberland. He can be contacted at:

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