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P R O J E C T S

DRAWN/TAPED/BURNED Abstraction on Paper

An Interview about Drawing, Katonah Museum of Art: Drawn / Taped / Burned: Abstraction on Paper Jan. 23rd to May 1st 2011

By Diana Knoblauch

Diana Knoblauch: *Can you tell me about the artistic process of these two drawings?*

Tad Mike: Each work needs to be about a place. In New York City I work in Inwood Hill Park, a beautiful forest really. The works in this exhibition were created while I was an artist-in-residence at the Robert M. MacNamara Foundation on Westport Island, Maine. It was a perfect landscape to create work with wonderful people working there on your behalf. Everything was considered with incredible care which allowed you to seriously concentrate on your work. I went jogging one day in a nature preserve and four miles into this pristine woods found a rocky ledge covered in a beautiful carpet of moss that felt like the right place to work. The daily walk there very much became part of the process. Ideas for drawings began to form during the walk and by the time I arrived I felt ready to work having also collected tools for drawing on the way.

Natural materials are what you use for both tools and medium, can you comment on what you used in these two works?

Every place I choose to work has specific vegetation alive or dead. Sometimes it is common as grass or sometimes exotic as wild fennel like in Tuscany. Regardless, it is the relationship that develops between me and the tool that becomes significant as the tools change constantly. The absorption of more and more of the Walnut Ink sometimes makes the tool more flexible and other times makes it decelerate into something without any structure.

In Maine I used Hemlock and lichen as the primary instruments to create the drawings in this exhibition.

The needles of the Hemlock tree almost became like a scoring device for music manuscript paper. In the drawings made with lichen I was more interested in creating a work that felt like both music and a specific garden I love in Kyoto. I was not trying



Tad Mike

to represent this garden but instead remind myself how it felt. Actually, it is only now I fully realize the influence of the garden at Shoden-ji.

It is obviously a non-representational work, were you attempting to create a certain mood or feeling?

Yes, that of chamber music. I am interested in work that is quietly intense, but with a feeling of counterpoint, restrained, but emotionally complete.

Do you know prior to entering nature what materials you are planning to use, etc. or is it more spontaneous?

It crosses my mind what I may find in a certain landscape, but inevitably my preconceived ideas are replaced by what I discover once outside. Sometimes the wind dictates how I work and with what. A delicate drawing that took three hours to make can be destroyed if the wind reverses unexpectedly so that is also a variable you accept.

What is your artistic background or education?

I studied composition at Mannes School of Music before going to Cooper Union in the School of Art. It was an excellent school for developing one's craft. When I think back, I had intelligent professors who had much to offer philosophically as well. The art historian Dore Ashton, although a writer spoke to students like an artist. She knows how art is constructed technically speaking and how an artist benefits from delving into the written word as a source of inspiration and ideas. I am still exploring the works of certain writers that she offered to me as a student at Cooper.

Do you also work in other more traditional mediums?

I consider Walnut ink a traditional material although I use a more stable interpretation of traditional Walnut ink that is light-fast and PH neutral. I think of Rembrandt's ink works and their virtuosity from such spare yet complete gestures and admire also very much seventeenth century Japanese sumi-e painting. Van Gogh's drawings resonate with me far more than his oil paintings. A dash of ink is quite a different matter than when it is constructed of pigment and Linseed oil.

The choice of paper greatly dictates certain elements of a work especially when working in watercolor where the color of the paper can mean the difference between a work having light or falling flat.

Currently I am working in solutions of watercolor. I have begun making my own watercolors from raw pigments which has given me a much greater understanding of the medium. I think the work benefits from understanding the materials.

Do you bring the Walnut ink with you before departing outside or do you seek it en route to your location? I was under the impression that you went out into nature with paper only.

The Walnut ink I make from the shells of Walnuts that have been charred and dried. In this way I can control the concentration. With some work such as the works in the

Katonah Museum exhibition I wanted a light subtle shade of brown against the cream colored paper. In other works such as the stone drawings, using a stone as the drawing tool, I make a concentration that is almost black in its intensity. Most recently there are works where I allow the water to rehydrate the Walnut ink on the paper so there is a physical presence to the ink. Those works are created alla prima in contrast to some of the line drawings which take hours to complete.

I understand your use of the Hemlock and lichen, but am not sure I can visualize the total process.

The tools vary greatly from landscape to landscape but in the end what I discover outside is often used very much like a traditional brush. Sometimes I will simply pluck something from the ground and at other times I will carefully fold and weave strands of a weed into a hand-tool that creates a certain quality of mark-making. I find this a very natural and intuitive way of working. It is another element within the relationship to drawing that for me provides more pleasure.

What is the yellow tone around the composition and brushwork?

That is actually a separate sheet of paper. It is a light weight cream colored paper mounted on a heavier French paper using a Chinese technique called Chine-collé. The drawing is adhered to the larger sheet with a tissue of glue. This is a technique I prefer to use in etching because the thin sheet holds more detail from the copper plate. I wanted to use this technique with these drawings for the subtle effects of transparency or actually translucency and light it creates. I also like this kind of formal presentation of a drawing that was made outside in conditions that are not always suitable for drawing. In a way the presentation is a foil to the actual drawing.

By choosing to use natural materials are you also making a comment on nature/environment and its relationship to people or is it just your preferred medium?

I like to think the comment is implicit in the work. By sharing the touch of something from the natural world that is specific to a specific landscape at a specific moment in time there is a reflection of that landscape that is created. I feel there is a loss, a loss of perception, a loss of empathy, a loss of appreciation for the natural world which in turn means there is a loss of intuition and understanding. Intuition is instinctual. I find the natural world in its intricacies and gestures large and small largely underappreciated in the west. Walking on a bed of pine straw in a forest is a poetic. I don't mean this in a necessarily romantic way. Even in the most ascetic observations, there are elements of the natural world that carry with them an implied aesthetic that also has a function.

Discovering that moss, lichen and a blade of grass all have a voice was a perfect means of establishing a dialogue between me and me-outside. The artifacts of the natural world carry their language by way of their fingerprints. In some respects these drawings are no more than fingerprints of a landscape.