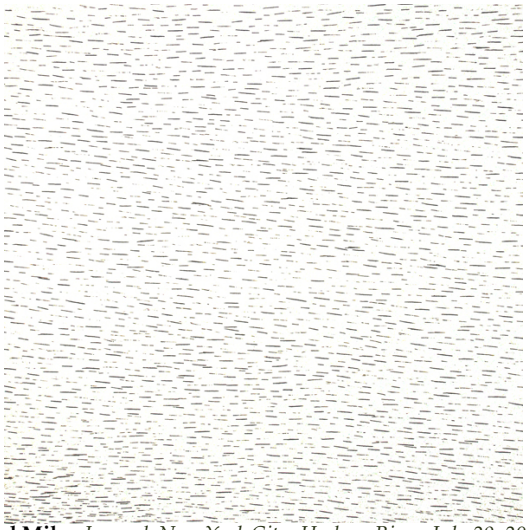
The New York Times
ART REVIEW

Sublime Notions From a Species That Likes to Doodle

By Sylviane Gold
February 18, 2011

"Drawn/Taped/Burned: Abstraction on Paper,"
Katonah Museum of Art, 134 Jay Street, Katonah, New York 10536



Tad Mike, *Inwood, New York City, Hudson River, July 29, 2009* I, 2009, Walnut ink on psper, 10 x 10 inches (25 x 25 cm)

Is there anyone who hasn't enjoyed making an abstract drawing — an elaborate classroom doodle, a Spirograph masterpiece, a tic-tac-toe game? Marking up a blank piece of paper, even in these pixel-fixated times, seems an inherently human activity. But the stunning new exhibition of abstract — or mostly abstract — drawings at the Katonah Museum of Art reveals the elements of the sublime in this sometimes mundane pursuit.The title alone, "Drawn/Taped/Burned: Abstraction on Paper," promises something special. And burning, taping and the usual suspects — ink, pencil, charcoal — are only the begin- ing. The show's artists, who range from megastars like Jasper Johns and Sol LeWitt to relative newcomers like Tristan Perich and Tad Mike, also deploy tea, dust, wax and tar. And their implements run the gamut from lichen to a computer-driven machine invented by Mr. Perich.

The show, compiled from the collection of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky, invites intimate contemplation of the artistic process even as it provides a dizzying ride through a fantastic playground. The show, compiled from the collection of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky, invites intimate contemplation of the artistic process even as it provides a dizzying ride through a fantastic playground.

These 74 works by 66 artists have been deployed for maximum impact by the museum's curator of contemporary art, Ellen Keiter. First she jolts us with the heart-stopping black

of Linda Lynch's 1999 pastel "Dark Ribbon Drawing"; then she ushers us into the vaporous grays of William Anastasi, Edda Renouf and Jill O'Bryan.

Ms. O'Bryan's large-scale graphite piece, "40,000 Breaths Breathed Between June 20, 2000 and March 15, 2005," looks misty only from a distance. When you get closer, you discern the individual touches that recorded the artist's individual breaths over nearly five years.

Another large-format work that compels viewers to move in close and then inch back is Mel Bochner's spectacular "Split Infinity." Dated 1992-93 and executed in charcoal and white pastel, this dynamic mash of floating blocks and colliding grids suggests impossible perspectives that manage to be abstract and surreal at the same time.

Mark di Suvero's untitled ink drawing from 1983 is smaller in size but even more dazzling: its broad black slashes threaded with silver seem to leap off the sheet.

Christine Hiebert gets a similar effect in "Untitled (t.02.3)," her 2002 arrangement of vivid blue painter's tape sliced, stretched and teased into a lively composition resembling a cockaded bird.

Sometimes, manipulating the paper replaces manipulating the image. The earliest work in the show, from 1951, is Esteban Vicente's exquisite little untitled collage of torn bits of earth-toned paper. For "Wrinkled Paper Piece V," from 2006, Joan Witek took a single page, crumpled it, smoothed it out, and let the ensuing topography dictate the patterning in the bands of black she applied.

Bruce Conner also used folds in his paper: the delicate little symmetrical designs he has arrayed in neat columns, like specimens in an exotic insect collection, are derived from inkblots. And Deborah Gottheil Nehmad used a hot stamp to pierce and scorch the paper in the untitled drawing she sent Mr. Kramarsky as a birthday card when he turned 80.

The singed spots add surprisingly luminous bursts of color to Ms. Nehmad's otherwise austere work. But she's hardly alone in making use of its sensuous appeal. Carl Andre juxtaposed areas of radiant red and concentrated black in an untitled 1960 triptych.

Mr. LeWitt's "Three Asymmetrical Pyramids," from 1986, is a watercolor conundrum, a collection of ochre, green and orange triangles that refuse to remain flat but would make no sense in three dimensions. And in "Untitled Drawing (A-92-95)," Stephen Antonakos put colored pencils to dramatic use, covering a five-inch square of vellum with short, intense strokes in reds, blues and greens.

Mr. Antonakos's drawing is so assured and alive that it seems it must be referring to something outside of itself. It isn't. But the word "abstraction" is defined rather loosely in this show. Win Knowlton's blocks of solid browns and striated grays turn out to be close-ups of nine carefully observed cigar butts.

Two of the 20th century's pioneering abstractionists, the dancer and choreographer Trisha Brown and the composer John Cage, became literal when faced with blank paper. Ms. Brown, in "Footwork #5," put a pen between two toes and drew her left foot with her right and her right foot with her left. Mr. Cage soaked a long, narrow piece of paper, quenched a fire with it, traced a rock in black ink at the base and called it "River Rock and Smoke."

Several of the drawings in the exhibition are preparatory sketches of existing or planned artworks. But is a drawing of an abstract sculpture an abstract drawing? In at least one case, the answer is unequivocally yes: Richard Serra's stark, powerful representation of his controversial, disputed and now-destroyed sculpture, "Tilted Arc." But in another case, the drawing itself is the doomed work of art. One of Mr. Perich's drawing machines has been set up on the white wall of the museum's central lobby. Dot by dot, line by line, we watch this mural come closer to completion — and to extinction. It will be painted over once the show ends, another example of abstract art mimicking life after all.