

ART REVIEW

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Filling in the blanks

A spellbinding exhibit at the DeCordova Museum showcases artists dedicated to - if not obsessed with - minute detail

By Sebastian Smee, Globe Staff | September 12, 2008

LINCOLN - People think drawing comes out of an impulse to create. They see infants picking up colored pencils, think "Oh, how marvelous!" and hoard the memory as a sentimental defense against their child's future destiny as a wage slave.

But really look and you see that a child's first instinct is not to create, but to deface. Give a child a mark-making implement and a clean blank surface (it could just as well be an expensive tabletop as a cheap sheet of paper) and he or she will proceed to defile it. Children are vandals. The destructive impulse predates the creative one.

The artists in the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park's fantastic new show "Drawn to Detail" are anything but vandals. But there are times when their work, in all its obsessive detail, suggests the same sort of horror vacui, or fear of empty space, that seems to overtake children. In infants, it often comes out as aggression. In the artists here, it can come over as an anxious attempt to keep uncertainty at bay.

The 26 artists in "Drawn to Detail," organized by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, Kate Erin Dempsey and Nina Bozicnik, have spent weeks and months filling blank surfaces with obsessive mark-making. Technically, much of their work is spellbinding. Consider Astrid Bowlby, who, in the biggest of four works on display has filled a 30-by-38 1/2-inch piece of paper with tiny white flowers using nothing but blank ink (the ink, that is, defines the flowers negatively). In the process she conjures a kind of floral sublime: More complexity than the imagination can possibly hold onto without falling back on abstractions.

Even more virtuosic (if not quite as detailed) is the work of Jim Dingilian, who fills clear glass bottles with smoke and then fastidiously erases parts of the carbon residue to create mundane, misty images of cars and vans outside desolate buildings. The results have a three-dimensional, stereoscopic quality because you see through the image on the front side of the bottle to an image on the back. The effect is hallucinatory.

But what makes this show seem so of-the-moment is not so much the level of virtuosity as the level of dedication and, in many cases it would seem, obsession. Confronted by evidence of such extraordinary labors, you can't help feeling that the habit of detail might be symptomatic of something larger going on in art: a deep-seated anxiety about art's purposes, a sense of aesthetic drift, of sailing on the open sea with discipline and vim but without coordinates.

The best response, according to these artists (and they are exemplars of a much wider trend) is to immerse oneself in making marks, to find meaning in process rather than content.

Why, after all, spend so much of one's life filling a large blank surface with flowers? Surely if one's allegiance is to beauty one could settle on something less cliched? And why fill up most of an even larger sheet of paper, as the brilliant Tom Friedman has done, with thousands of small arrows connecting random points? The results - a constellation of tiny vectors recalling far-off galaxies, cities seen from the stratosphere, or a mathematician's

thought-experiments gone mad - are captivating, but patently arbitrary.

And why, like Louise Marshall, go to such extreme lengths to reproduce the look of locks of freshly cut hair by means of hundreds of curling brushstrokes of unbelievable delicacy and exactitude?

Their pretexts may be flimsy, in other words, but these artists - heroically to my mind - have said, "To hell with it! There is value in the doing."

The wager, in most cases, has paid off. Just occasionally, we see work of great technical virtuosity or clever conception but limited artistic appeal. I was wowed, for instance, but not especially affected by Darina Karpov's large and dazzlingly constructed graphite drawing called "Blackout." There was something a little too willed about its effort to impress.

Similarly, I was amused by, but in the end indifferent to, Jane Masters's diptych spelling out the words "OBSESSIVE" AND "COMPULSIVE" by means of tiny holes singed by a wood-burning tool. The floral, doily-like patterns surrounding the words linked these works to the horror vacui detectable elsewhere in the show. But the combination of concept and execution (associations of domestic sterility suppressing habits of self-harm) felt clever and neat, rather than inspired or surprising.

Most of the show's finest things had an improvised quality. As you looked, you were drawn into the process of creation and, consequently, a sense of duration.

The entrancingly delicate work of Jacob El Hanani, for instance, uses the finest of ink lines to create gauzy webs that ripple and stretch across the paper's surface. One work here seemed to riff on the 19th-century critic and polymath John Ruskin's advice in his how-to-draw handbook, "The Elements of Drawing," that one should begin by creating even fields of tone by means of simple cross-hatching. The result, extended by El Hanani across a whole page, transcends the banality of a mere exercise, and comes to feel like something heart-stoppingly fragile and tender. In the care it evokes, it reminded me of the poet Jose Ortega Y Gasset's declaration: "Love is a phenomenon of attention."

Among the most dazzling works were a series of small drawings in color and one massive drawing in black and white by Daniel Zeller. Again, there is no discernible subject, no discernible point to what is depicted. Instead, the works function "rather like a meditation," as Zeller says in the catalog.

But what an entrancingly beautiful meditation! In one smaller colored work, in ink and acrylic, the exquisite combination of saffron yellow, light blue, and olive green brings the freely but fanatically elaborated patterning to life.

The larger work, called "Partial Distribution," is simply gob-smacking. Zeller covers a vast, vertically oriented surface with light, reiterated pencil lines that resemble contour lines on a map. He creates trompe l'oeil depressions in the surface of the drawing by bunching the lines closer together, and the result is that we feel like we are looking at an aerial photograph of no place in particular.

I fell in love, too, with the wonderfully free and inventive work of Marco Maggi, one of whose pieces - a true show-stopper - is the result of scores of incisions made on the skin of nine apples.

"Understanding less is my profession," Maggi is quoted saying in the catalog. "It requires rigorous training." Touché. "When we don't understand," he goes on, "we doubt, and reduce the speed of our decision-making, we become subtle and cautious."

Well, if this is the price of doubt, it's something I suspect we can learn to live with.