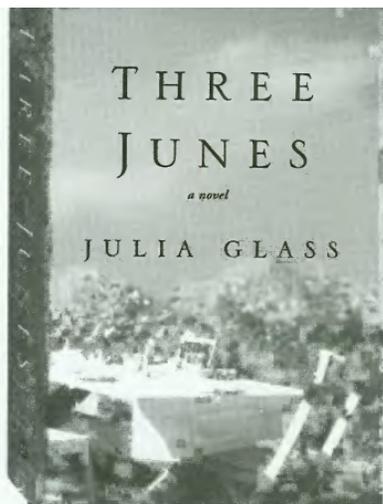




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THE ART WORLD

THE DRAWING BOARD

New directions for the oldest medium.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The dryly titled "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions," a show at the Museum of Modern Art, in Queens, is a trailblazing event for an art world that has sorely needed one. Laura Hoptman, the curator of the exhibition, which runs until January 6th, has sorted out a quiet but potent development of the last decade by focussing on an international array of twenty-six young but established artists of many tendencies. Her selections vary in quality, but even some of the weaker elements testify that artists are beginning to reconceive their vocation around the humble disciplines of pencil, pen, or brush on paper. She tacitly rejects the flabby creed of academic avant-gardism, which defines "art" as anything that an art institution chooses to exhibit, thus rendering the term so nebulous that judging it, other than as entertainment or politics, is a fool's errand. Although "Drawing Now" may be eclectic to a fault and indulgent of wacky formats—pointlessly large ones, in some cases—it affirms that a search is on for renewed standards of mastery, validity, and eloquence in a medium that has been the bedrock of visual art since the draftsmen of Lascaux.

What does it mean to make drawings in an age of myriad image technologies? My two favorite artists in the show, John Currin and Elizabeth Peyton, answer that it's a personal enterprise, played out on a public stage for an audience that isn't limited to the living. Currin's fantasies of winsome, sexy sylphs and his satiric faux portraits of haplessly neurotic contemporary men and women provide startling encounters with art history. A virtuoso, Currin competitively evokes both Old Masters such as Cranach and Watteau and their debased legacies in popular illustration. It's easy to characterize his work as perverse and decadent, but what else, on the current scene, affords pleasures so savory and overflowing? Peyton likewise risks categorical

contempt by making art for pleasure's sake, with ostensibly languid but breathtakingly assured drawings in colored pencil and runny watercolor of ultra-pretty, pouty friends. Honest adoration is her bulwark, which proves as tough as stone. Her memorials to youthful romantic longing are fresh and timeless.

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rin's wit and Peyton's passion, the Scottish artist generates a brittle melancholy that points up the sharper authenticity of his New York mates. Something similar happens repeatedly, if not so dramatically, throughout the show, as a viewer's powers of discrimination are called into play. Nothing could be further from the festivalist pluralism of so many contemporary group exhibitions (Documenta, the Whitney Biennial) that pat the darling tousled heads of all artists equally.

The last heyday of drawing was during the early nineteen-seventies, when the post-minimalist buzzword was "process." The likes of Sol LeWitt and Bruce Nauman manifested thought in action with conceptual projects and what looked like glorified napkin sketches by engineers. They tipped drawing away from the sensuousness of painting, toward the rationality of design and architecture. Several of Hoptman's proposi-



Neo Rauch's "Weiche" (1999): Harsh, proletarian utopias depicted with a chafing wit.

tions, such as "Architectural Drafting" and "Visionary Architecture," signal the belated arrival of a countermovement in which professional-looking draftsmanship is infused with sheer aestheticism and the bizarre. The London artist Paul Noble bids to be the M. C. Escher of our day in obsessively detailed visions of nightmare cities, whose forms may double as block-lettered messages. Matthew Ritchie, a fabulist of science with an ardent following, depicts the creation and evolution of life in large, bravura diagrams executed on plastic in pencil and colored ink. They quickly exhaust my patience for cogitation. But Ritchie is on to something: the intimate kinship of drawing and thinking, spun out to epic extremes. A younger, more elastic brain than mine may be a requisite for enjoying him.

The show's most rewarding groups, after "Fashion and Likeness," are "Vernacular Illustration" and "Ornament." Here the artists embrace two of the most pejorative terms in modern criticism: illustration and decoration. Embellishment of heartfelt stories and cultivation of sophisticated beauty have been disparaged in serious art for so long that their revival jolts. Among the most compelling of the works in this vein are Kara Walker's narratives about slave ships and plantation life, Kai Althoff's darkling watercolors of lonely individuals and lonelier couples, and Laura Owens's quizzically tentative botanical designs, which seem oddly nonplussed by their own loveliness. In each case, talent and intelligence gain traction from a forthright, demanding task. A devotion to drawing overcomes the post-modern cringe at meaning and sincerity. Gordian knots of self-consciousness are cut.

Two standout artists—Neo Rauch, of Germany, and Switzerland's Ugo Rondinone—are unclassifiable. Rauch, who lives in Leipzig, is forty-two years old. His large oils on paper, which suggest a kind of socialist-realist science fiction, explore a harsh utopia of taciturn proletarian giants and the odd besuited centaur. They are firmly contoured and monumentally composed in a rugged hand, with an astringent palette of black, yellow, a startling red-orange, and off-kilter pastels. "Warner" (1999) depicts uniformed men gathering at a picnic table

set with vases, under gawkily stylized trees. The men are equipped with bulky devices that might be vacuum cleaners, chemical sprayers, or flamethrowers (one appears to be on fire). I have no idea what the picture is about—Rauch is new to New York, and we are only starting to understand him—but it's riveting. Like Currin, Rauch anchors retrogressive subjects and styles in the present tense of a quirky temperament. Both artists exercise a chafing, rather unfriendly wit and suggest a double sense of the verb "to draw": to limn and to pull forth. They don't merely appropriate memories of history and other art but bring them to fractious life.

Rondinone is a one-man movement; call it "Ugoismo." This thirty-nine-year-old Swiss polymath—in addition to drawing, he works in video and sound installations, sculpture, abstract painting, and photography—has quietly become a doyen of cosmopolitan taste and style in New York, where he now lives. To appreciate Rondinone's appeal, imagine "Eurotrash" as a term of the highest praise. The show at MOMA features two huge, beautiful, wallpaperish forest landscapes in white ink on black, which suggest negative offprints of eighteenth-century rococo designs. Hoptman, in the catalogue, tells us that they were scaled up by hand from plein-air sketches that Rondinone regularly makes while hiking in Switzerland. This way of seeing—saturated with culture even amid raw nature—delivers a philosophical kick. It rebuts cynical theories of style as a social imposition and proposes that artifice may be as natural to human beings as leaves are to trees. Ugoismo equals innocence, excruciatingly refined.

Some parts of the show, notably a section entitled "Comics and Animation," which features images of sexy girls as fighter planes by the ubiquitous Takashi Murakami, fail in an instructive way. Comics and Japanese anime are thriving popular arts, which impose a second-handedness on fine art that exploits them. (Why not just go to the real thing?) Artists who succeed today redeem orphaned modes of expression, undercutting the glossy impersonality and ennui of so much current culture, both high and low. Is the new drawing a refuge of the individual imagination—or the skirmish line of an impending counterattack? ♦

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Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998 and is the magazine's art critic.

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