

art ●●●

## Good on Paper

by **Jerry Saltz**

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Taking drawing from a verb to a noun: a detail of Barry McGee's installation for "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions" (photo: Robin Holland)

### **Drawing Now: Eight Propositions**

Museum of Modern Art  
33rd Street at Queens Boulevard  
Long Island City  
Through January 6

**A** good half of "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions" stands as a rebuttal to those who say contemporary art is in the dumps. It is proof that large-scale surveys don't have to be bland, preachy, or prim. In spite of some mediocre stretches, a vexing lack of color, an underlying dryness, overcrowding, and almost no abstraction (you make your own list of missing artists), the show treats its subject in a speculative, nicely nervy way. It's fun to look at, doesn't take itself too seriously, and has enough lively moments to keep things popping. "Drawing Now" is

built around a refreshingly polemical but not altogether provable idea. Its curator, Laura Hoptman (who last spring left her position as an assistant curator in MOMA's drawing department and is currently organizing the 2004 Carnegie International), believes that over the course of the past 20 years, drawing has taken one giant step . . . backward. It is now closer to what it was in the 19th century than what it was in the 1970s. That is, drawing is no longer driven by modernist ideas of progress, formal innovation, or revolutionary inquiry. We've gone from drawing as a "verb," as Richard Serra called it in 1977—referring to art that is primarily about process, materials, surfaces, or tools—to drawing that is essentially a noun, a finished, stand-alone product. In short, drawing is more like it was before Picasso and Braque invented collage in 1912.

Hoptman means this as good thing, although artists like Serra, Brice Marden, Mary Heilmann, and Sigmar Polke would probably reject this and think their drawings are objects meant to be savored, too. Also, a number of the artists in this show are quite process oriented. Whatever. "Drawing Now" divides 26 artists into eight pithy, purposely open categories that provide structure and will likely have many contemporary artists thinking, "Hey, I could have been in this, too."

Sections include "Visionary Architecture," "Science and Art, Nature and Artifice," "Ornament," "Cosmogonies," "Fashion and Likeness," and

"Vernacular Illustration." There's no honorary Kusama-dot category, even though there are a slew of post-Kusama dot-meisters out there. It would have been nice if the show had included a dark horse like the late Mark Lombardi, a first-class conspiracy theorist who charted governmental misdoings; the great underground comic artist Robert Crumb or his late brother Charles, who produced maniacal notebooks; or Melvin Way, the extravagantly talented schizophrenic whose alchemical sketches are electric. The list could go on. But at close to 300 works, "Drawing Now" is already big enough.

Hoptman's catalog essay ends with five very up—maybe radical—words, resonant with Beatles-like ebullience. She writes, "Drawing is all you need." This doesn't mean that painting, sculpture, or other mediums are passé, only that drawing is more than enough on its own. By now, everyone probably agrees with this. History, however, isn't necessarily on their side. Museum drawing departments have existed for years, but I don't remember ever hearing an artist describe himself or herself as "a drawer." Few careers have happened solely on paper. Brilliant outsiders like Henry Darger, Martin Ramirez, Adolf Wolfli, and Bill Traylor come to mind, as do graphic masters like Piranesi, Escher, Crumb, and Raymond Pettibon (who also paints walls). Paul Klee and William Blake were great on paper, but both made paintings.

"Drawing Now" includes four artists who work *only* on paper. There are two Brits: David Thorpe, who fastidiously collages colored paper into decorous landscapes that are interesting only up close or in parts (as is much of the work here), and Paul Noble, whose finely rendered delineations of some sinister dystopia are among the more eye-catching pieces on hand. Then there are the two MacArthur winners: Toba Khedoori, whose sensual renditions of architectural fragments on enormous sheets of wax-slathered paper haven't developed much since the mid '90s, but still have an almost metaphysical bearing, and Kara Walker, who not only does all sorts of freakish things to paper and is one of the better artists around, but is the closest this country has come to producing a sensibility similar to Goya's. Although her 21 small watercolors, collectively titled "Negress Notes," are guileful, they are occasionally drab. It's too bad one of her go-for-the-throat silhouette installations wasn't included.

Still, with artists like these last three it would be hard for a show to go wrong, and "Drawing Now" doesn't, exactly. Also good are Kai Althoff, Shahzia Sikander, Ugo Rondinone, Jockum Nordstrom, and Chris Ofili, whose drawings of little faces have real voodoo. Ditto Laura Owens, who approaches every drawing as an occasion to rethink drawing; Neo Rauch, whose works on paper aren't that different from his paintings but are so good it doesn't matter; Barry McGee's turbocharged wall of drawings; Franz Ackermann's 34 studies of a walk through Pittsburgh (with provocative titles like *Cinema Beirut* and *Former Trade Center*); John Currin, not because his drawings are so good but because they're so weird; and Elizabeth Peyton, whose drawings aren't as juicy as her paintings but are still captivating. (Besides, it's good to see Peyton in a survey like this, as she's been passed over by nearly all the big biennials.) In the maybe category I'd put Thorpe, Mark Manders, and Russell Crotty, who at 46 is the oldest artist here, and whose large book makes him look better than usual.

"Drawing Now" stumbles in a number of places, however. Firstly, while many of the artists in it are good, not all of them make good drawings. Jennifer Pastor is a canny sculptress, but her drawings aren't anything.

Similarly, Julie Mehretu's 10 small drawings lack the tactile, decorative energy of her paintings. Matthew Ritchie is one of my favorite artists, but these seven mid-scale works don't hold the eye. As fanciful as he can be large-scale, Takashi Murakami's nine small "Studies" are almost invisible. His fascinating gallery-mate, Yoshitomo Nara, fares only a little better. And Richard Wright's starlet-eyed wall drawing fizzles. Another problem is the choice of artists: Graham Little and Kevin Appel aren't interesting enough to be in a survey like this. The same is true of the Cuban collaborative Los Carpinteros, although their wall installation is fun in a "festivalist" way.

Additionally, "Drawing Now" defines the second word in its title too narrowly. "Now" should mean all contemporary art, not just art made by artists in their thirties or artists who show in "cool" galleries. This may be traceable to the institution. In the last decade MOMA has excelled at collecting contemporary art and it's done a number of fine "Project" shows, but it hasn't mounted enough big, messy surveys of new art not drawn from the collection. In 1976, it staged the first excellent "Drawing Now" show, which captured the shift toward process-oriented work and included artists like Serra, Bochner, and Marden. There should have been another one recording the changes that happened around drawing in the mid '80s and another in the early '90s. That way all the weight wouldn't have fallen on Hoptman.

"Drawing Now" is unabashedly about artists who emerged in the 1990s and what they did with drawing. Which is great—they deserve it. This exhibition has been in the planning for five years, and is a little overdue. As it is, for better or for worse, it shows that this generation has combined fantasy and imagination with mannerism, romanticism, academicism, surrealism, conceptualism, architectural drawing, cartooning, mapmaking, illustration, and various crafts. They may not have come up with an overarching, comprehensible style, but it's not about that; they have created a multiplicity of stylistic openings and done more than take drawing a step backward—they've actually gone forward as well.