

UB exhibition samples new takes on drawing

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"Bellow Black Diamond," an ink-on-paper drawing by George Boorujy, is on view in "Falling Through Space Drawn by the Line" in the UB Art Gallery through Dec. 8.

By Colin Dabkowski

The act of drawing is perhaps the simplest and oldest form of creative expression. To scrawl some line or shape – on a cave wall or a spiral notebook – is step one in the process of becoming an artist. For that reason, it has in the past been treated as a kind of warm-up for the real thing, that “real thing” being painting or sculpture. But thankfully for aspiring artists the world over who are now just beginning to learn their way around a pencil, those old notions about where drawing ranks in the grand scheme of the fine arts have broken down.

The enveloping Sol LeWitt scribble drawing in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, to pick one of countless examples, is all the evidence we need that drawing as a medium has gained a place at the table in our hallowed institutions.

“Falling Through Space Drawn by the Line,” an excellent exhibition in the University at Buffalo Art Gallery curated by Sandra Firmin and Joan Linder, showcases more than a dozen distinct approaches to drawing by contemporary artists. If anything, the range of styles included demonstrates that “drawing,” as a category that signifies anything important, is becoming as meaningless and generic as “new media.”

Visitors to the gallery are greeted with George Boorujy’s gargantuan, photo-realistic ink-on-paper drawing of a buffalo called “Bellow Black Diamond.” It stares you in the face, confrontationally, set against a pure white background devoid of any of the natural surroundings in which you might expect to find such a creature. The effect is jarring and a tad unsettling.

Nearby, a similarly enormous frame holds Marsha Cottrell’s 2012 “Under the Illuminating Hydrogen,” made up of many sheets of mulberry paper manipulated digitally and by hand to produce what looks like a combination of a star-map, a CAD drawing and a long-exposure photograph.

Deborah Zlotzky’s series of gauzy graphite-on-mylar drawings are exercises in improvisation unlike anything I’ve seen before. She has created strange, biomorphic forms by moving graphite powder across sheets of paper by blowing, smudging or painting it. The resulting images, like Megan Greene’s dark drawings at Hallwalls in 2008, are disconcerting in part because they configure human anatomy in unexpected ways.

The Lightwell Gallery hosts the beautiful, brainlike automatic drawings of Tony Orrico, who appeared at the gallery last week to do a drawing

performance that one observer said made him look like a “human spirograph.” Elsewhere, the remarkable ballpoint pen portraits of Toyin Oduola prompt us to think about race in new ways and Charmaine Wheatley’s mad series of scrapbooklike drawings chart a strange journey of discovery. Charles Ritchie’s mysterious light studies of his suburban home are soft and poetic, while Saul Chernick’s series of fantastical drawings based on medieval and Renaissance woodcuts are quite the opposite.

The one big miss in the show is an entire room given over to a dead-end conceptual exercise by Molly Springfield, in which visitors are invited to contribute to her ever-evolving “Marginalia Archive.” Springfield is collecting and archiving people’s notes in the margins in books and other texts in an attempt, she wrote, to ask questions about “the materiality of language and contemporary digital culture.” This might work as an academic research project, but as art, it falls flat on its face.

On the whole, though, “Falling Through Space” is a worthwhile look at how artists are pushing the medium and the definition of drawing to new places.

preview

What: “Falling Through Space Drawn by the Line”

When: Through Dec. 8

Where: University at Buffalo Art Gallery, Center for the Arts, UB North Campus, Amherst

Admission: Free

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