

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Where Drawing Is What Counts

By HOLLAND COTTER

Published: June 25, 2005

Correction Appended

Hot time, summer in the city. And one of our coolest small nonprofit cultural institutions, the Drawing Center in SoHo, is taking some heat for showing political art. The Drawing Center? Political? Hardly an obvious association to most people familiar with art in New York. Just the opposite would be more like it.

But because the Drawing Center has been chosen to be part of the projected International Freedom Center at ground zero, it has come under some critical scrutiny. The Daily News reported yesterday that the gallery has, since 2001, shown political art critical of the current Bush administration. How much political art? Four pieces, including one on view now, is what The Daily News came up with, out of many dozens, maybe hundreds of works the Drawing Center has exhibited in the last four years.

In fact, the Drawing Center is noted for its rigorous formal, as opposed to ideological, mission. Since its founding in 1977, it has focused on two things: presenting museum-style

shows of traditional drawing, whether in the hands of

[Enlarge This Image](#)



G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

Untitled work by Mark Licari at the Drawing Center in SoHo.

Rembrandt or Agnes Martin or 19th-century Shakers; and expanding, largely through contemporary art, the definition on what "drawing" as a medium is.

Far from being restricted to lines on a sheet of paper, a drawing can take the form of a mural, a sculpture, a book, an installation. It can be made by folding, bending, cutting, sewing, collaging or photographing materials. It can be abstract, figurative, narrative, realistic, fantastical, political or a mix. In the end, the subject at the Drawing Center is always drawing itself: what it has been, what it can be.

Its current group exhibition, "Wall-to-Wall Drawings: Selections Summer 2005," on view through July 30, is a characteristic example of this approach. It's the kind of show the Drawing Center does three or four times a year, selecting emerging or underexposed artists from proposals submitted through an open call. Each show has a loose formal theme, in this case the notion of using the wall as a surface. But variety of invention is the attraction.

Only two of the seven artists in the summer show, both from California, use conventional media. Rosana Castrillo Díaz has drawn the image of a small book directly on the wall in graphite, but so faintly that it's all but invisible, as if it were self-erasing. Mark Licari works in ink, but his image is an eye-popper: a cinematically scaled cartoon of a Rube Goldbergian digestive system, part mechanical and part organic, spewing out showers of insects, a few of which show up on nearby column in the gallery.

An abstract piece by Sun K. Kwak made of strips of black masking tape comes off the the wall even more strikingly, spilling down and rippling across the floor. And Chris Sauter's "Mind and Body" is literally made from the wall itself. The artist has cut out small circles of plaster from it and assembled them into a free-standing sculptural telescope trained on the empty holes.

Avantika Bawa, born in 1973 in India, also juggles ideas of architecture and drawings in an abstract piece made from rectangles of painted cardboard attached to the wall. They suggest labyrinthine barriers receding in space. And enclosure is the subject of Shoshana Dentz's contribution, an image, pieced together on the wall from sheets of painted paper, of a section of a giant wooden fence viewed in dizzying, hard-to-read perspective. Are we above it looking down, below it looking up? For sure we're inside it, and there's no way out.

Finally, Charbel Ackermann's "New Geometry" is also about confusions of perspective, but of the conceptual as well as optical kind. The piece takes the form of a mock-PowerPoint computer presentation, projected on the wall, and its subject is a drawing by someone else that already exists: namely, the Axis of Evil traced by President Bush, linking nations hostile to the United States.

Mr. Ackermann's piece, sly and funny, was, of course, among those cited by The Daily News as a problem. Just as the show as a whole pushes the notion of drawing as a medium to absurd lengths, testing its limits and possibilities, so does Mr. Ackermann push the image of the Axis of Evil to the max, extending, dividing it, passing it through a pseudo-scientific prism of Ptolemaic geometry, orthographic projection and statistical analysis, until it ends up in a crazy tangle. Depending on your perspective, that tangle represents either a political critique, or political reality, or art doing its ambiguous, needling thing, which is exactly what it's supposed to do, wherever it lands.

Correction: Tuesday, July 19:

A Critic's Notebook article on June 25 about the choice of the Drawing Center museum in SoHo for the planned International Freedom Center at ground zero, and a debate on whether the selection is appropriate, referred imprecisely to an article in The Daily News about the museum. While The News's criticism cited only four specific examples of "politically charged" works, it did not say there were only four, and the paper spoke of having found "numerous" examples among dozens of exhibition catalogs examined.