

# Retreat From the Wild Shores of Abstraction

By ROBERTA SMITH

**D**RAWING NOW: EIGHT PROPOSITIONS" at the Museum of Modern Art, Queens, is sometimes, but not consistently, an outstanding exhibition whose shortcomings are almost as interesting as its triumphs. This automatically means it is above average among big surveys of contemporary art in major New York museums, and makes it required viewing for anyone remotely interested in the art of the moment.

Including generous samplings of work by an international roster of 26 young artists, it is the most ambitious and riskiest show of relatively fresh art organized at the Modern in about 15 years. It presents a broad, densely informative, even opulent view of drawing at the threshold of the 21st century, highlighting the role of the medium's past in its present, its rich plurality of techniques and

A resurrection of discredited styles and neglected techniques.

its modest yet insinuating possibilities, both physical and illusory.

The exhibition was organized by Laura Hoptman, who until last spring was assistant curator in the department of drawing at the Modern and has since become curator of contemporary art at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Ms. Hoptman's premise is that while drawing explored the wilder shores of art for much of the 20th century, especially after 1970, it has now returned to more familiar territory.

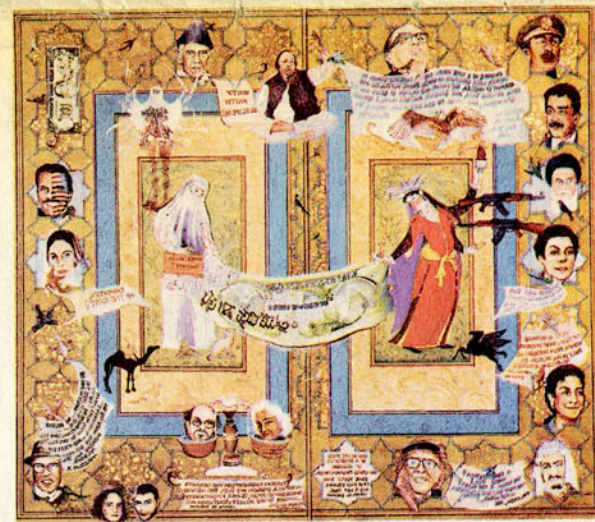
Beginning in the 1990's, she contends, younger artists started easing drawing back from the precarious perches it had ascended

in the preceding two or three decades. They began to place a new emphasis on skillfully rendered representational images, and to reconsider a variety of traditional drawing methods — architectural drafting, commercial art, cartooning, folk art, fashion illustration and street art.

The resurrection of discredited styles and neglected techniques mitigated the derogatory connotations of words like academic and illustrative. Artists from non-Western cultures, entering the art world in greater numbers, added their own traditions to the mix, and something of a drawing renaissance began to take shape.

The show's well-written catalog reiterates this argument to the accompaniment of reproductions of works by Leonardo, Ledoux, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Moritz von Schwind and the underground cartoonist R. Crumb. Ms. Hoptman's dichotomy is more than a little simplistic, and I suspect that the changes she is talking about really started in

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"The Resurgence of Islam," a 1999 watercolor by Shahzia Sikander, is on view at the Modern in Queens.

Museum of Modern Art

# Retreat From the Wild Shores Of Process and Abstraction



Thomas Griesel/Museum of Modern Art

One of "Five Nocturnes" (1996) by Russell Crotty, from "Drawing Now."

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the 1980's. Nonetheless, mainstream drawing has come a long way since the 1970's, when it was regularly pushed to extremes of scale, self-reference and reduction by artists like Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra, Dorothea Rockburne, Robert Morris and Alighiero e Boetti.

With reference to Mr. Serra's work in particular, Ms. Hoptman sums up her argument by suggesting that while drawing then was a verb — a record of the process of its own making — drawing now is a noun, a recognizable image fully conscious of its own history and complexly engaged with the world around it.

On first run-through, the show is especially exhilarating, alive with a sense of trans-cultural savvy, free-ranging imagination and hands-on expertise. Abstraction is in short supply; figuration takes many forms. Everything from early American quilt patterns to Japanese anime is in play. There are drawings in ink, pencil, colored pencil, watercolor, various combinations of these and several kinds of collage.

The artists are grouped according to Ms. Hoptman's eight propositions: prominently labeled categories that include "Science and Art, Nature and Artifice," "Ornament," "Visionary Architecture," "Fashion and Likeness" and "Comics and Animation." This structure creates a balance of coherence and diversity that few big shows achieve. There seems to be something new and different around each corner, but it's all connected by threads of ideas.

The installation alternates clusters of smaller framed works with large-scale feats of drawing that are especially successful. At the entrance, the Cuban collective Los Carpinteros make their most convincing New York appearance with "Cárcel (Prison)," a huge wall drawing of big, drumlike structures with row upon row of

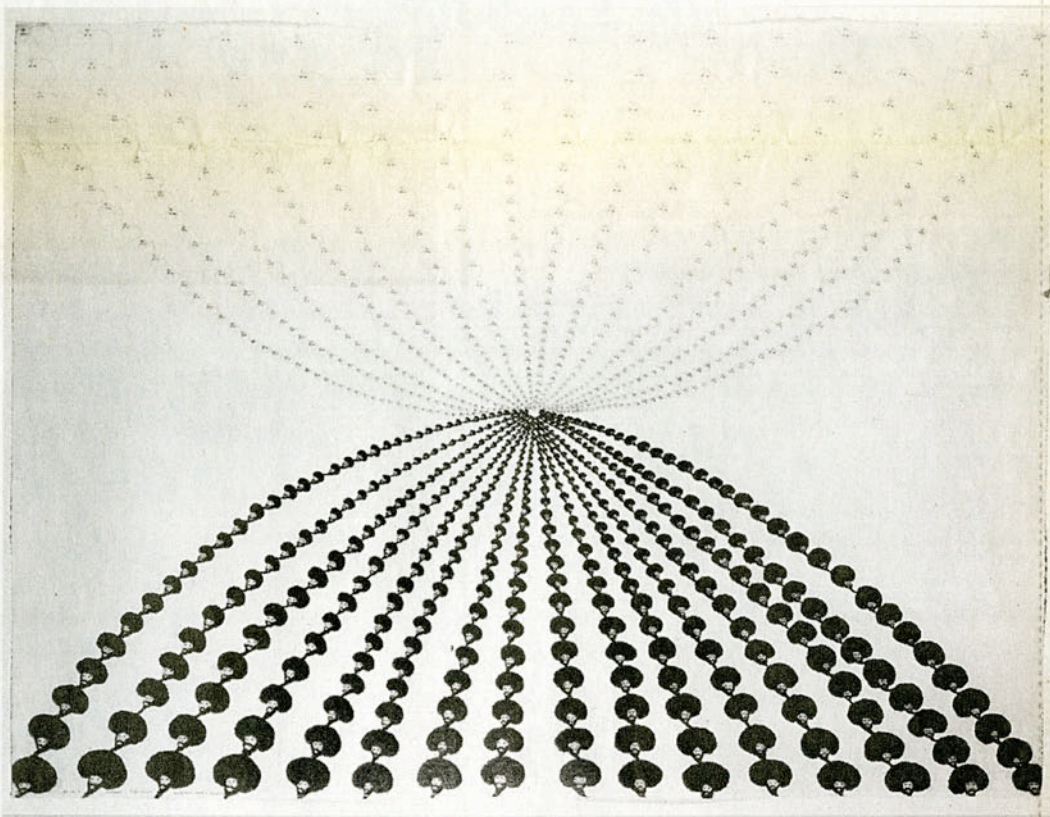
drawers (each with its own real wood knob). It suggests Shaker architecture run amok, as well as Foucault's panoptical prison turned inside out.

In the "Science and Art" section, Ugo Rondinone's enormous reprise of 18th-century landscape ink studies have a spooky, artificial modernity, as if illuminated by black light. Russell Crotty's notebook ballpoint drawing of a nocturnal garden silhouetted against a glowing night sky combines dwarfing giantness with childlike directness. But his wall-size homage to surfing, which unfolds in thousands of postage-stamp stick drawings, seems like a LeWitt gone soft.

In the second category, "Ornament," the Scottish artist Richard Wright seems almost to sum up the way drawing has changed by punctuating a field of red dashes that is reminiscent of 1970's abstraction with a pair of glamorously made-up eyes that all but drip pop-culture allure. Farther along, Toba Khedoori's vast depictions of architectural details deliver their eerie sense of dislocation and emptiness.

At the end of the exhibition comes Barry McGee's dense massing of numerous renditions of his signature sad-sack character interspersed with graffiti, found objects and photographs of street graffiti and skate-boarders. If closely examined, the added material documents the down-and-out life so powerfully that the drawings start to look a little thin. The work's rough edges find a perfect complement in Yoshitomo Nara's refined, sweetly poetic revisions of Japanese popular culture, usually in the form of wide-eyed yet slightly malevolent cartoon youngsters, who appear on random scraps of paper taped to the wall and disrupt reproductions of ukiyo-e prints.

The single most extraordinary work here is "Mall," an intensively worked 13-by-10-foot double sheet by the 30-year-old British artist Paul Noble, who appears in the "Visionary Architecture" category. Centering on a mythic structure that is part mall, part cathedral, part palace, part mosque, this work teems with images, textures and encoded messages. Its towering masonry is cobbled together from blocklike letters and bricks depicting tiny, finely wrought scenes



Museum of Modern Art

"Albinos and Bros With Fros" (1999) by Chris Ofili, from the exhibition "Drawing Now" at the Museum of Modern Art, Queens.

involving bloblike creatures and much gruesome hilarity. The drawing, which could be pored over for hours, reflects a dystopic, anarchic, yet fastidious vision that seems descended directly from Bosch.

The more intimately scaled works represent a similar range of known and unknown names. Chris Ofili's drawings, among the best I've ever seen by him, are so taut that they almost seem punched in tin. They depict abstract patterns and African kings and queens, using tiny percolating images: minuscule Afro-covered heads, both black and albino.

The young German artist Kai Althoff reveals another side of his complex sensibility with mysterious watercolors that combine Rothko-like tones and Grimm Brothers figures and shapes that suggest woodblock prints. Franz Ackermann's imaginary urban views and maps, saturated in color and compressed in size, both idealize and demoralize the modern city.

Other high points include Neo Rauch's sardonic reprise of Socialist Realism; Shahzia Sikander's meticulously personalized, subtly politicized revisions of Indian painting styles; the naughty, quiltlike collages of Jockum Nordstrom; and the similarly Americana-inspired, if more innocent, collages and watercolors of Laura Owens.

But as you look more closely at this exhibition, several flaws emerge, primary among them a lack of solid, interesting drawing, used here as a gerund. Despite the

## ONLINE: AUDIO SLIDE SHOW

Roberta Smith discusses works from "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions" at the Museum of Modern Art in Queens: [nytimes.com/arts](http://nytimes.com/arts).

helpful category structure, more than a few of the artists seem to be simply illustrating, rather than embodying, Ms. Hoptman's eight propositions.

One problem is a certain jitteriness of the hand, an element of faking or fudging older styles. This quality often creeps into the historicizing efforts of John Currin, who affects many different styles but is still best when closest to the present. It is also apparent in the works here by other well-known, if not overexposed artists like Elizabeth Peyton, Kara Walker and Matthew Ritchie, whose best drawing occurs outside of their drawings — in finished works, whether paintings or installation pieces. (While deft, Mr. Ritchie's studies for his discursive genesis myths seem washed out, as if they need to be either more emphatic or smaller.) Mark Manders's line drawings, which have the hermeticism of Joseph Beuys without the delicacy, look better when functioning as a footnote to his sculpture, as in his current show at the Greene Naftali Gallery in Chelsea.

Another problem, the direct opposite of jitteriness, is skill for skill's sake, which

plagues, in various ways, the work of Takashi Murakami, David Thorpe, Jennifer Pastor, Graham Little, Kevin Appel and Julie Mehretu, an artist whose drawing, again, is better on canvas. These artists, who may not be represented by their best efforts, create blank zones in the show, walls that seem almost empty relative to what is going on around them.

While Ms. Hoptman's choices suggest too much attention to her ideas and structuring principles, the show's excess of fashionable artists also reflects a dependence on New York and Europe's hottest galleries. This means that the show may sharpen your appreciation of the current state of drawing by making you clarify what it overlooks. At the top of my list would be the talented German artist Erwin Pfrang, but also James Siena, Laylah Ali, Mark Lombardi, Lily van der Stokker, Anne Chu, Alexander Ross and Steve DiBenedetto (who has a knockout show of color-pencil drawings at Derek Eller in Chelsea right now).

But Ms. Hoptman has provided a lot to think, talk and argue about, and this is commendable. In its generous size, and even in its unevenness, "Drawing Now" revives the format and the spirit of the "Americans" exhibitions that Dorothy C. Miller organized at the Modern in the 1950's and 60's. It would be great if "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions" turned out to be the first of many such revivals.

"Drawing Now: Eight Propositions" remains at the Museum of Modern Art, Queens, 33rd Street at Queens Boulevard, Long Island City, (212) 708-9400, through Jan. 6.