



MAUREEN McQUILLAN: DRAWINGS

The artist leans over her work table, an improbably tangible string of ink dangling between her hands. The drawn line belongs in two dimensions; this intrusion into real space is preternatural, absurd. The ink descends slowly, stretching tighter and straighter above a square of paper glazed by viscous chemicals. It settles against the heavy slow resin and is caught. The colloidal surface tension parts imperceptibly, receives the ink line and closes. The ink does not diffuse into the slick. It lies, entombed, millimeters away from another trapped and suspended line. Another line descends, sinks, floats. And another, and another.

The page eventually fills. The artist raises the sheet and tips it. She bows it gently, rounding the edges of the sheet into small horizons. The ink lines ease through the heavy space above the paper slowly, in unison; mirroring and separating. Never quite still, always apart, never mixing, never merging, converging and diverging in glacially slow tidal floods and ebbings. The page tilts further and the spaces between the lines diminish to unimaginable thinness. The lines radiate, dilate, curl and spoon around each other luxuriantly, sensually, exquisitely. A sheet of marks so discreet and sharply edged no human could anticipate them.

The marks are mute. Pure movement dictated by the deep chaotic order of fluid dynamics, gravity and topology. The artist's moves are dance-like, trance-like; the drawings an intuitive and muscular confluence of chance and calculation.

Eventually the drawings leave the studio and make their way into the world. Separated from the artist, they are hung on walls and scrutinized for meaning. We cannot believe that the vertiginous, intricate interplay of lines is not information; analyzable data. We are reminded of information analogs, schematics, graphs. We see organic and geographic topologies; brain scans; interstellar space; electron scans of unicellular organisms.

We believe so powerfully now in the overriding power of the explanations that accompany images that we have lost our capacity to simply see and to refrain from speaking of what we have seen. We can no longer even begin to look without the mediating intervention of words. Overwhelmed by implicit and doubled meanings, we refuse to accept the manifest content transmitted to our brains by the sensory networks that evaluate touch, sight and sound.

Our imputation of symbolic content to Maureen McQuillan's work is no misreading, for the tension in her drawings between narration and pure abstraction is not an accidental byproduct of her working process. She has invited us to project meaning onto images which we recognize as profoundly silent.

McQuillan is not interested in irony, nor is she interested in paradox for its own sake. She understands that this "mistaken" perception of meaning is at the heart of our cognitive and perceptual understanding of the world. We see ships in clouds, and Jesus' face in tortillas. Humans decipher the universe by mapping meaning onto unmeaning. Sometimes we are right, sometimes we are merely inspired. We can predict the location and intensity of hurricanes; and we can believe that a vomiting turtle created the constellations.

That is, we could believe in cosmic turtles, but we rarely do anymore. We no longer trust the evidence before our eyes. We relish our ability to discern the hidden meanings of things, to recognize and interpret the world around us as an endless series of decipherable codings. Subtext has become our scripture, and we wallow in our secular pantheism. Our texts are everywhere. But not here, where the mysteries yield no solutions, only endless and enigmatic complications to be savored, not resolved. McQuillan does not offer us answers, merely the lovely suggestion that we teach ourselves to see innocently again.

—MATT FREEDMAN

UNTITLED, 1999 Printer's ink and resin on paper 38-1/2" x 37"