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Arts Lead

A Time Of Bones

Pierogi Flat Files Weigh In At Ksu School Of Art Gallery

By Douglas Max Utter

These days drawing is a term that covers a lot of territory.

Van Deusen Auditorium (114)

Kent State University, Kent, Ohio,

Anything that isn't specifically defined as

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something else may well be a drawing, even if it includes printmaking or photographic or digital processes, or paint, or for that matter performance. Because of this looseness it is probably the characteristic art form of our time, which at least in the art world is an era that alternately embraces and eschews every kind of excess, but always dearly loves a pile of marks. You can never be too thin or too rich, or have too many lines. In fact, contemporary art can be so thin, so fine-boned and attenuated, that it's all but transparent, as if it's saying that our culture as a whole has been mixed with a medium or solvent. Perhaps artists are just getting back to basics. Drawing, the intention of making a mark and proclaiming the presence of the hand, is the bone of art, the playing field and first move in an important game that humans play between touch and mind, gesture and perception. This is in some ways a time of bones.

Drawing Invitational for 2007 with Pierogi Flat Files

Wed, Oct 17th - 5:00 pm



Untitled (Airline disaster) By Craig Yu.

Artist and gallery director Joe Amrhein started the Pierogi 2000 Gallery in 1994, serving the burgeoning arts community in the section of Brooklyn known as Williamsburg, just across the river from Manhattan's Lower East Side. It was mainly a gallery among friends, with vodka and pierogis proffered at openings for artists who weren't getting their share of play in the

Manhattan gallery circuit. The signature feature of the place was its flat file collection, where drawings and prints available for public perusal quickly accumulated. By now the files contain the work of some 700 artists and these overflowing file drawers are known all over the world as Pierogi's greatest asset. The white metal cabinets have traveled to galleries in cities worldwide, including London, Vienna, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

One of the more distinguished artists at KSU is an assistant professor named Darice Polo (Free Times, September 6, 2006). Polo is from the Bronx originally and like most of Kent's art faculty makes frequent trips back to the big city. Pierogi was well known to her as one of the best all-round resources for up-to-the-minute graphic experiments, as well as solid work by an immense variety of established artists. From her point of view as a drawing teacher, it's a gold mine for students. Since traveling was what these particular flat files do, Polo was able to schedule a show of works culled from Pierogi as KSU's annual Drawing Invitational for 2007 in the School of Art's gallery, and rented a truck.

For the show itself Polo selected some 30 works by 17 artists, all of whom are based in the eastern United States. Several Ohio and Pennsylvania artists are part of the mix, so the exhibit is something of a survey of characteristic styles and approaches in drawing right now, as practiced between Chicago and New York City. Since drawing of this kind really has national or international points of reference, and is for the most part created by a very peripatetic generation of art makers any of whom might next be found in Seattle or Peru, the geography is more an aspect of relatedness than an attempt at a regional vision. And if you don't especially like the selection on the walls or just want to see more, the flat files are right there in the gallery.

The graphic smorgasbord on display includes a little bit of many types of drawing, from the highly skilled soft-focus realist landscape studies of Bowling Green artist Charles Kanwischer (Free Times, June 21, 2006) and similarly adroit, almost hallucinatory portrait drawings and nudes by Tamie Beldue (of South Vienna, Ohio), to the feminist-oriented narrative cartoons of Chicago artist and former Clevelander Christa Donner. Large, splashy abstractions by Kristopher Jones of Grand Rapids, Michigan begin with swathes of coffee, then are fine-tuned by the addition of a complex circuitry of small lines and circles drawn in ink. Pennsylvania State University's Ann Tarantino's "Breath Portrait (Pink Bubble)" was made by blowing ink through a straw, among other techniques. Looping, swooping gestures encounter delicate passages like eyelashes, or impinge on a stylish grid. She calls these graphic occurrences "almost patterns," suggestive of the infinite detail of things both natural and produced by human beings. Just as process-driven with a slightly revolting sensual twist are works by Pittsburgh's Christopher Craychee, who should win some kind of prize here for the most unusual medium. Using sections of carpet, he burns images into the nap, creating very readable portraits of Karl Marx, Alfred Nobel and a section of Mount Rushmore.

The largest work on view, and also one of the most innovative, is a drawing by a

Pierogi-represented artist that certainly could not fit in a flat file. On a partition wall near the front of the space, Youngstown University instructor Dragana Crniak's jet-black marks seem to float slightly out from the surface, appearing almost to vibrate. Varying in length from mere spots to 3-inch oblong shapes, their three-dimensional appearance is heightened by a slight vertical smearing, which acts as a transitional visual layer. Starting both near the floor and up high on the blank ground, the marks straggle randomly, coagulating as if by accident at eye level on both sides of the wall's jutting corner. They're a little like iron filings magnified, but part of the strength of this work is its indefinite quality, a tension between vagueness and the fact that the black is so firm, so nearly tangible. This is exactly what makes drawing important: The marks we make, from footprints to graffiti to a sketch in a cave at Lascaux or in an art school classroom, are our autobiography, proof of our passage through the world. But also, these traces propose a reality that is capable of surprising us. These are things that are not there, that are ghosts of themselves, to which hints of significance cling like the chemistry of a different, more human reality.

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