

J A C O B   E L   H A N A N I



The art of the line



## The art of the line

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*Robert G. Edelman*

The intricate and intimate works on paper of Jacob El Hanani are, on several levels, optical notations of a personal and cultural history, executed with a precision that is both mystifying and phenomenal. Having known the artist and his work for many years, I have often been impressed, at times surprised by the range of invention within the self-limitations of his practice. Specifically, his use of a fine-point pen and India ink on paper to inscribe, without magnification and using elemental forms such as circles, triangles, squares conjoined with line, meticulously rendered drawings with a confluence of tiny marks. No matter how many times I have viewed his work in the studio, I am amazed anew with his discipline and command of even the minutest detail of a composition. I have to admit that the subtlety of his drawings is such that I am never quite sure which ones are of a recent vintage. In fact, I have occasionally stared at a work in his studio and asked the artist "have I seen this one before?" to which the artist would

respond "many times...but maybe it wasn't finished yet"

The opportunity to view, or rather experience, a thematic variety of El Hanani's work in this exhibition clearly illustrates that there is, within each drawing, a complexity of repeated markings that are the foundation of the exploratory process that goes into making each and every one of them. His practice is often compared, in reviews of his past exhibitions, to the thousand-year old practice of micrography, the Middle-Eastern tradition of using Hebrew text to create miniscule images within a complex graphic design or pattern. However, the artist is quick to point out that his employment of Hebrew lettering makes up about 10 percent of his graphic work. Nevertheless, a connection to this historic method of drawing is an integral element within his work, in all its uniquely executed, conceptual variations.

Born in Casablanca, with its blend of Jewish, Islamic cultures and the French protectorate in Morocco, raised in Israel, studying at the Avni art school in Tel Aviv and then the École de Beaux Art in Paris, El Hanani's early life was imbued with a rich heritage that has profoundly influenced his imagery and working methodology. In Paris, El Hanani met the South American artists Raphael Soto, Carlos

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**Aleph-Beth**  
(detail)





**Aleph-Beth, 2010**

Ink on paper, 23.5 x 17.5 inches

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Cruz Diaz and Julio Le Parc, among others, which ultimately led to his show at Denise Rene Gallery in Paris in 1975, and two years later at Denise Rene in New York. Some of the early sources of inspiration for his work ranged from Persian miniatures, Islamic

manuscripts, Durer etchings, the delicate precision of Japanese art, the microscopic text of the tefillin and mezuzah in Israel, Islamic manuscripts, as well as the traditional Italian design concept of "tutto fatto a mano", everything made by hand. Also inspired by modern



art, El Hanani sites the graphic “universal” field artwork of Henri Michaux, Mark Tobey and Paul Klee as early influences on his work. Once the artist had relocated to New York City, the conceptual clarity of Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt, whose work exemplified the “all-over” approach to graphic or painted space, was a significant inspiration, and reinforced his decision to eliminate any suggestion of figural imagery from his own artwork.

El Hanani’s meticulous approach to the act of drawing has emerged from the necessity for the patience and perseverance required in making work that clearly manifests its labor-intensive fabrication. The magic of El Hanani’s graphic explorations is that, despite the pre-conceived choice of a particular mark or shape, the drawings take on a life of their own as they, literally, materialize. It’s not surprising that the artist takes a break every ten minutes, not just to assess the results of his most recent markings, but also to rest his eyes and contemplate the work in progress. The opportunity to observe his working process, often accompanied by an entertaining conversation, might include watching the artist as he rotates a sheet of paper on his worktable, deciding where his next linear foray will occur. It would be tempting to compare this activity to the moment of, for example, Cezanne staring, in between brushstrokes, at the Mont Sainte-Victoire, or Pollock having a cigarette in between drips, but in a way it is similar in its results: the time needed to contemplate what and where, as in a chess match, the artist’s next move will take place. As much as the final drawing might suggest a pre-conceived composition, El Hanani’s working process,

and the ultimate finished work, defy any such narrow or limiting analyses.

The drawings in this exhibition are iconic examples of El Hanani’s various series, including the cross-hatching, basketry, gauze, fabric, writing and alphabet compositions. He does not hesitate to share with me the realization that, after forty years of working on these and other series in his New York studio, taking into account his awareness of the legacy of Arte Povera, Minimalism, Post-Minimalism and “a lack of means”, all together have contributed to his long-standing commitment to the discipline of ink on paper. Yet even with the strict self-limitation, it is impressive to observe how much El Hanani has explored the modest space and tightly controlled physicality of his chosen métier. As El Hanani has explained to me, with a broad stroke of his arm, that his process is not about a sweeping gesture, but about the motion of the tips of his fingers.

Of the works included in this exhibition, one of the earliest is *Parallel Lines*, 2001, which, with some magnification, displays a layered series of white lines that intersect and overlap to resemble both multi-layered highways and densely woven fabric. The challenge of accurately analyzing the actual process involved for the artist, even with a magnifying glass, would ultimately be pure conjecture. The black lines beneath the white weave form a ground layer, but appear to have been added later, to emphasize or highlight the complex linear mesh. The exactitude necessary to execute such a drawing is in itself a confirmation of El Hanani’s mastery of his medium. On several levels, the drawing



defies the limitations of a composition that is executed from a pre-conceived plan, such as a Sol LeWitt wall drawing. For the artist, a structural plan emerges within the process, even with the ingredients being pre-determined.

Gauze, from 2007, is a rhythmic, spatially energizing composition of what resembles a close-up of gauze fabric, the warp and weft threads blowing in the wind. Probably one of El Hanani's most illusionistic tropes, the gauze drawings suggest a link to the work of Vija Celmins, particularly her spider webs, as they seem to float in space and defy gravity. Once again, the artist's delicate line work is precise, while also suggesting a very spontaneous approach to the ultimate composition. According to Wikipedia, the history of silk weaving may be traced to 13th century Gaza, and this historic craft has influenced El Hanani's use of this traditional pattern.

The micrographic work Alef-Beth, 2010, from the eponymous lettering series, is a steady, rhythmic diagonal composition of a repeated series of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The alphabet lines descend diagonally from left to right, as if marching or dancing across the paper. The precision of the spacing and exacting scale of the marks is mind-boggling, considering the lack of either a straight edge, hand support or magnification.

One of the more minimalist works here, The Hebrew Barbed Wire, 2012, is a series of horizontal, fluid pen lines that could be perceived as a layering of superimposed landscapes, perhaps a mountain range, desert or a turbulent ocean, all seen from a distance. As the lines move down the paper, they become more dense, and calmer, the rhythmic

lines suggesting transition and transparency. However, as one gets closer and observes the sharp edges and points of the barbed wire, a sense of peril and danger permeates the image. Suddenly this meditative space becomes a more threatening, visually disruptive and confining experience. The choice of imagery is likely a reference to the El Hanani's own experience of serving in the Israeli army at a critical time in the country's history.

Also included are two multi-layered drawings from El Hanani's basketry series, inspired by his admiration for the traditional craft, particularly Japanese and Moroccan, of woven basket design and fabrication. Each of the drawings has its own schema, or method of execution. The large, horizontal Basket 2014 is so layered and asymmetric that, at first viewing, it seems a bit chaotic. However, as the eye moves across the composition, one can see the longer five-line strips, seemingly in motion, that energize and bind the hundreds, or thousands, of drawing units into a multi-tiered weaving. In Five Line Basket (2012), the majority of five stroke units are floating in space, freed from the finished mesh around the edges of the drawing. In this way, El Hanani invites the viewer to see how these drawings evolve and come to life. The artist is challenging us to traverse what looks at a distance like a detailed map of a city, to experience the evolution of his work in progress. We are invited to enter the space, travel within it, and realize we can never know it completely, no matter how hard we try.