

ART IN REVIEW - APRIL 4, 2013

## Judith Braun: ‘May I Draw’

Courtesy of the artist and Joe Sheftel Gallery

Roberta Smith



Works displayed as part of Judith Braun’s “May I Draw” exhibition, in black on white or in white on black, at Joe Sheftel.

*Joe Sheftel 24A Orchard Street, Lower East Side Through April 21*

It makes sense that [Judith Braun](#), a veteran artist in her 60s, once made paintings of angels; this is because it is hard to believe that the exquisite drawings in her current exhibition were made by human hands. They have a kind of perfection and innocence that seems untouched and that certainly has nothing to do with machines. That would seem to leave angels or some other supernatural force.

Another explanation may lie with the self-generating energy of many of Ms. Braun’s forms, which are made with graphite on sheets of Dura-Lar, a clear, smooth plastic, in black on white or, even more miraculously, white on black. The majority of her motifs seem to have grown from elegant freehand doodles, whose calligraphic loops and S-curves have multiplied and then doubled into mirroring symmetries. They are abstract but — and this is part of their innocence — they often evoke the bygone delicacy of expert penmanship.

Sometimes her configurations suggest natural forms like butterfly wings, spider webs or jellyfish. In other cases she favors a geometry of floating shapes and encroaching lines in which the slightest suggestion of wood grain thoroughly confuses the sense of solid and void (or orifice and object) while creating an ever-so-subtle erotic frisson.

The most elaborate drawing here is a phrase arranged in a double-mirroring design (both horizontal and vertical) so that it resembles a beautiful, you might even say heavenly, gate bathed in light. The phrase? A mantra of Ms. Braun’s conjuring: “Oh May I Draw as Jane Writes.” As intended, the first Jane that springs to mind is Austen, who wrote with sublime precision and lightness in a time when penmanship mattered.

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