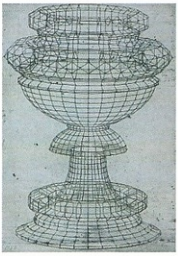
Julia Couzens and Julia Haft-Candell: ALL IN THE LINES

The works of Julia Couzens and Julia Haft-Candell draw one into a consideration of the relationship between line and form that is as familiar in the history of art as it is in our common experience of the natural and industrialized worlds.

In early nineteenth-century France, debate waged within the academy between the Poussinistes and Rubenistes (factions named for their idols Poussin and Rubens, but in fact most represented respectively by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix). The factions argued as to whether it was line or color that held more sway in the definition of form in a two-dimensional painting, with the Poussinistes insisting on line's capacity for specific articulation—for delineation—and the Rubenistes insisting on the capacity of color to flesh out palpable form. The debate was an echo of the opposition, posed by Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* between the sixteenth-century schools of Tuscany and Venice, and the associated concepts of *disegno* and *colore*. Though he predated these schools, the Florentine artist Paolo Uccello, whose preoccupation with linear perspective was celebrated by Vasari as some kind of insomniac obsession, produced works that epitomized the potential for using line alone in a two-dimensional drawing to articulate the complex volume of a three-dimensional form. Uccello's *Perspective Study of a Chalice* (circa. 1450) prefigures the "wireframe" digital renderings of objects seemingly wrapped form-fitting grids that now are commonplace in both industrial applications and popular culture. One need look no further than the common historical characterizations of Poussin (reasoned classicist) and Rubens (Baroque sensualist), or of Ingres (neoclassicist, self proclaimed "*conservator* of good doctrine") and Delacroix (bold romantic), or of the Tuscan and Venetian schools, to see how their oppositions have been analogous to, and not unconnected to, old separations between concepts of mind and body, word and flesh, intellectual and sensual. Drawing and line would seem to win some preferred status in such oppositions, a position of almost pious superiority, and yet they also seem to become obliged toward some sense of propriety and reason while color and expression get to have all the fun.



Uccello, *Perspective Study of a Chalice* (circa. 1450)

As one moves toward the modernist epoch, however, line becomes not only the tool of reasoned delineation in illusionistic representation, but just as likely the conduit of emotion, the mark of expression, the vehicle of color, the stripe of abstraction. Line may be ordered and precise, or may be evocative and raw. And as one moves from two-dimensional representation, no matter how illusionistic or non-objective, and into the three dimensions of sculptural form, line becomes literal and present and structural. Line becomes form—solidified drawing in space—in work by artists as varied as Alexander Rodchenko, Laszlo Maholy-Nagy, José de Rivera, Mary Viera, Fred Sandback, and Nancy Graves. It becomes the familiar concept of "linear form" explored in 3D design courses at art schools, and in design manuals such as the classic mid-century text *The*

Design Continuum by Stewart Kranz and Robert Fisher. And as we move from the realm of art and architecture into categories of crafts, handicrafts, and utilitarian objects, line becomes form in objects ranging from baskets and nets to doilies and wire-mesh fencing. In the Industrial and Post-Industrial ages, line as form, or linear form, becomes familiar in structures as familiar as train trestles, oil derricks, suspension bridges, the Eiffel Tower, and in the unsheathed skeletal framing of buildings.

It is at the intersection of such now familiar structural and infrastructural and constructions, and their kin to be found in crafts, decorative arts, and utilitarian objects, as well as in modern and postmodern sculpture, that the works of both Julia Couzens and Julia Haft-Candell take shape. Each artist's practice is intensely involved in the conversion of line into form, but very much unlike the more purity-seeking tendencies of both classicists who saw line as the tool of reasoned order, and many a modernist who saw line as a path to some kind of geometrically abstract perfection, both Couzens and Haft-Candell seem to see line as the tool of expressive character, and it is a character that can be idiosyncratic, humorous, vulnerable, soulful, and even unapologetically flawed. This may be said as much of their drawings and works on paper as it may be said of their sculptures, as the two-dimensional works of each artist, which might appear at first to be simply two-dimensional linear abstractions, seem more accurately understood as representations—sometimes more illusionistic, sometimes more diagrammatic—of three-dimensional linear forms—drawings on paper of drawings in space, lines of graphite or ink representing lines of string or wood or clay.

Seemingly imprecise in some ways, and clearly driven by intuition, the works of Couzens and Haft-Candell are nonetheless determined and deliberate. For all their informality, they possess a certain formal clarity, and a knowingness about what they are, what they aren't, what they resemble, and what they suggest. They take line beyond a consideration of what it can delineate and describe, and into a consideration of what it can be and what it can evoke. This is the strength of both artists' practices—their willingness to see line materialized and employed toward ends beyond some kind of delineating purity, and instead as something complexly and promiscuously impure—something to muck around with, something interesting in itself as much as in what it might articulate.

The works of Couzens and Haft-Candell undoubtedly deal heavily in structure, and reference structure. In them one sees the lines of conduits and struts and trusses and networks, and they seem to suggest an affiliation with, and perhaps even an aspiration towards real architecture and infrastructure, and in as much they seem to find artistic kinship in the clean geometry of Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, or in the diagrammatic abstractions of the painter Peter Halley, whose compositions are as precise and cool as an organizational flowchart. And in what one might call their modest engineering and structural successes, they find kin among the towers that hold aloft high-voltage wires or the trusses that tie together the International Space Station. But the works of both artists are cobbled together and imprecise, with what structural integrity they attain seeming less the product of careful planning and calculation of proportional relationships and material properties than of trial-and-error experience and on-the-fly empiricism. Their materials are mismatched, their unions, grafts, and connections inconsistent and varying between barely sufficient and overwrought. They stem more from the mindset of the bricoleur than that of the structural engineer, more from that of the gestural expressionist than that of the constructivist or the hardedge abstractionist. For all the odd engineering that does indeed go into them, Couzens' and Haft-Candell's works would

Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International* (circa. 1919)

be more at home among the Art Brut inspired work of Jean Dubuffet or the cultivatedly clumsy and sophisticatedly goofy formalism of Franz West.

There is a certain combination of grace and ragtagness that defines the practice of both artists. The assorted yarns, twines, and strings that conspire to form a kind of tangled skin or web across the Couzens' forms, and that are analogous to what might be cables or ropes in more structurally demanding engineering feats, are here frayed and of inconsistent sizes and strengths, and on the occasion when Couzens incorporates more sturdy strands into her wrapping and weavings—say a bit of climbing or packing rope—these are always joined with lesser strings and yarns, making weakest-link scenarios a hallmark of the work. Interlaced and woven together with bits of cast-off fabric, knitting, and crocheting, they never congeal, and don't even try to conceal that they are in essence three-dimensional patchworks—mendings upon mendings. Meanwhile, the rigid elements of Haft-Candell's works, comprising assorted types of clay formed into rough coils and fired, joined with metal rods and sticks, are so spindly and often bowed and bent as to suggest the chassis of a skyscraper come down with a case of rickets. The unions of these rigid elements often are of a soft-tissue nature, covered in sutured fabric, and the ceramic components are plagued with breaks that the artist has repaired. These repairs are frequently decorated in a manner that calls to mind both the Japanese kintsugi or "golden joinery" tradition (employed as well by the contemporary British ceramic artist Andrew Lord) of honoring the repair by converting it into an aesthetic feature rather than attempting to camouflage it, and the popular pastime of doodling on the casts of friends with recently set broken bones. In these works, line less delineates than simulates bodily conditions. Line fleshes out; line becomes flesh.

It is in their capacity to call to mind space stations and skyscrapers, networks and feats of infrastructure, as well as to evoke a sense of scavenged subsistence and bodily vulnerability that the works of Couzens and Haft-Candell achieve their poignance. One becomes aware that these works—which pull off what they do in large part by simply holding together once assembled, by standing up and continuing to defy gravity, by maintaining necessary balance and tension, by staying connected, by not falling apart—share the same base aspirations as skyscrapers and space stations. At base, they are aspirational works, and are born of an aspirational mindset. But they also suggest a different kind of aspiration, and perhaps one that is less about engineering triumph than about survival, existence, and living—the aspiration to get out of bed, to live another day, to keep a body together even as it ages and breaks, to prop it up when needed, to stand. Looking at them, one can find oneself feeling weak in the knees; one can find the aches from that old injury coming back, one can sense that part of one's body that broke and got repaired somewhere along the way, but doesn't work quite like it used to. And yet for all that sense of frailty and vulnerability, they also have a vibrance, and a stirring pathos, and they manage more often to make one smile over the possibility that a bunch of yarn or clay or sticks—a bunch of cheap materials—with a lot of flaws and funny looks, goofy manners and odd quirks, clear fragility, obvious wear and tear, and surprising determination, might turn out to be something someone can relate to with gravitas, wonder, humor, and romance.

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