

Drawing Out

An interview by Ian Berry

The drawn image is a beginning - a first attempt that can be tentative and impulsive. The fragility of paper, the medium's usual support, and the visible tracks of the artist's hand combine to create a privileged space occupied by no other medium. More immediate and less controlled than in painting or sculpture, the artist's marks are fully exposed in drawing. During the 1960s and 1970s, artists began to push these definitions, and for many, including Robert Morris, Dorothea Rockburne, Nancy Spero, and most notably Sol LeWitt, drawing became the medium within which many of their conceptual investigations materialized. Shifts in scale and new techniques also changed the environment for presentation and in turn helped elevate the status of the medium within the institutions of the art world.

Combining both Renaissance techniques and conceptual rigor, Mary Judge has created a large group of systematic drawings that build on this history and move the medium into another space that suggests a third dimension such as installation art or architecture. In doing so, she is thereby joining a generation of artists who continue to redefine boundaries between media. Judge's works begin as drawings that use the transfer technique, *spolvero* (the Italian word for dusting), to create works on paper, canvas, and concrete block. The obsessive surfaces reveal layered traces of her process, which she describes as "about the duality of inner and outerworlds, the self and the other, the visible and the intuited." It is here, in the possibility of something more that Judge combines her personal history and influences into a practice that continues to find new outlets. The following conversation took place over two weeks during February 2001.

Berry You mentioned that you think of yourself as a classicist at heart. Could you discuss the role of measure and proportion in your work?

Judge Proportion is something natural that the body feels: it is part of our survival mechanism. Every cell in the body feels it ... its sensing rightness and harmony that in the end is what beauty really is. I think everyone has this sense of natural proportion, which for an artist can be reinforced through drawing. Through the drawing process, specifically figure drawing, you develop a rhythm, things fall together, links are created, something between the body/eye and model and mind, like everything is connected ... the problem of expressing balance, the force of gravity, potential or arrested movements, and so forth. The nineteenth-century French sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye said that in his animal forms he wanted to express the passion of the beast. That's what the drawing process is like. I felt I was doing that. Also when I was very young, I began to actively draw on my own. Like so many young girls, I was always drawing horses; I was in love with horses. This desire manifested itself in countless drawings; the object of desire was the subject. I also learned from "how to draw" books, the kind where there are organic and geometric shapes that add one to another to make up an image. I think there's a connection with those geometric shapes and proportion.

Another part of understanding measure and proportion, other than direct contact with nature, is exposure to a wide range of "things" greatly made: cathedrals, temples, piazzas. In architectural structures proportion can be seen in a pure way. This exposure enters your body and becomes a part of what comes out. The Gothic cathedral at Cologne is a good example. It seems as if a great force is thrusting it up from underground, that it has emerged directly from the earth. There is a dazzling quality to the texture and repetition of the spires that grabs your attention and won't let it go. It resembles an exotic crystal formation: one can imagine those spires piercing the earth's crust on its journey from the underworld. This duality of expression of the upper and under worlds is a manifestation of the spiritual desires of those who built it. In a way, everything is encapsulated in it all at once: wonder, fear, and hope.

Berry Do you remember any exhibitions or artworks that influenced you early on?

Judge I was drawn to work of Joseph Cornell and William Wiley for their collage aesthetic and also to Pop art and Photo-because of the recognizable imagery. I honestly hated most conceptual work that was going on when I was in school: I didn't understand it, plus here I was drawing and painting from life so it was a big challenge. I saw nothing I could imagine making. Not to say I didn't appreciate certain things, such as a Robert Morris labyrinth at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and Vito Acconci's mirror room at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, or feminist works and experimental film. But these were never things that could be translated into my work. In my travels in Italy I was looking at classic Renaissance and Sieneese paintings and frescoes.

Berry How did these representational images change into the kind of drawings you make today?

Judge It took years for my present work to evolve, including a lot of false starts and searching. I had to shrug off the limitations of my schooling and environment. It wasn't until I made the move to New York that things coalesced. Today I feel that I use every bit of what I learned in those years of drawing from life and have developed an intuitive sense of proportion in my current abstract works. Abstraction to me is drawing out and reducing. My images are figurative, that is, they have a thing-ness, an object-ness, that pure abstract forms don't have. They express a state of being rather than pure non-objectivity.

Berry There is something ancient about your forms and your materials. Earth, dry pigment, concrete, ceramic, and, with the new work, even peat moss. I am also interested in the way one of your prints rusted, and how some of your works weather or are fired. Do the natural materials and ancient sources connect for you?

Judge I would define it as elemental. Perhaps there is some connection to my Celtic roots. Natural materials allow me to concentrate on the process rather than on mixing colors, for example, which would be a distraction. I was elated when I discovered the use of spolvero, because to take a traditional technique and use it in a completely contemporary way is not easy. That wasn't my goal at the outset, but an accident that happened while searching for new means to a generally established end. As in a science experiment without any hypothesis, you follow the trail the clues take you along. It is also informed by my circumstances, traveling and living part of the year in Italy. I think I was predisposed to consider traditional ways of working because of my training and interest in craft, but craft as an end in itself is empty. I concentrate on the idea and the forms that evolve from the process.

Berry Could you describe the system you use to make your spolvero drawings?

Judge I fold a piece of paper in quarters and make a line drawing in pencil, which is perforated by hand with a pushpin or needle. I then open the paper and place it in contact with the surface to be pounced and beat it with a sack of powdered pigment. The pigment moves around a bit between stencil and surface and also catches along creases and elsewhere, thereby creating an image that resembles a print of the entire process while simultaneously allowing a great deal of chance.

Berry Modular elements appear in your work in many places. I am thinking about single works as elements of a larger continuing project and of the more literal modular works such as the block sculptures and multipart drawings.

Judge Modular was a solution I came to out of frustration with painting. I had the idea to change the format in which work was presented as a way to escape the limitations of the medium. The breakthrough came in the ceramic factories of Italy, where I had been experimenting as a diversion from painting. Walking into the bisque room one day, I envisioned a sculpture in black and white, a stack of hanging plates, going up the wall. That's how my use of the modular started. It really was an escape from a tired way of working. I liked how the modular made the work breathe. There was an implied expansion and contraction. As the elements of the modular met, the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. This repetitive format actually dictated drawings on folded paper, which is how that structure entered my work.

Berry The grid permeates all your imagery and installations. Could you talk about the grid that is implicit in this modular system.

Judge A grid is a "senseless" structure, not, for example, like the sense you read into Euclidean geometry. That makes it wonderfully neutral. The grid I use relates to mapping, mechanical reproduction, and tiling, as opposed to technology. In the 1970s the grid was more related to technology and analysis. Also, the grid/wall is like the modular sculptural structure flattened out or unfolded, so it is already similar to the folded-paper component of the drawings. With an image spread out over a grid, a nice shift happens that makes it a little uneven, like old technology that can't maintain consistent production techniques. In this way, small imperfections become elevated.

Berry Are there many permutations of a single work, or does each work have specific dimensions and defined boundaries?

Judge Installation works should adjust to their contexts. Images can be recycled and still be new. I don't feel I do permutations exactly, which suggests sequence or linearity. I start from a point, metaphorically and literally, work out from it and begin from a new point. The point is the same place, that is, empty and full at the same time, with equal potential. I usually work in series and revisit an image or idea until I can't get any more from it. Structure allows for great freedom and problems present themselves to be solved. There is a kind of distance you maintain working this way. It's as if your ego is hovering somewhere over the work but not really poking a finger into the mix. You have to have trust in the process and in what your experience will contribute to it. It allows me to see each work as its own complete experiment, and it either works or it doesn't. Success isn't dependent upon one work.

Berry Recently you have successfully engaged dramatic and varied architectural spaces when installing your work throughout the world. Could you talk about the experience of working on site?

Judge I made my first "installed" works in Italy, where there are many fantastic spaces in which to show them: palazzos, churches, underground vaults. This can be a mixed blessing; certain works don't adapt well, or the context can be too beautiful, but for me it's inspiring. The spaces I have worked in suggested the art I made for them. I fantasize about what I'd like to see there. I also learned to do less and employ a more minimal approach in those instances. With the hotel project, a modern space, I ended up choosing the longest unbroken wall in the entire building, a corridor. I didn't believe one could really make good art in that space, but in the end I was pleased with the piece. For me it relates to the body and the movement of people through the space. It's a work you can walk with, like walking a dog that quietly follows you.