

The image features a dark, monochromatic background with a complex, organic texture. The texture consists of numerous small, rounded, overlapping shapes that resemble biological cells or a dense forest canopy, creating a sense of depth and movement. In the center of the image, there is a circular area with a smoother, lighter gray texture. Overlaid on this central area is the text "Drawn to Detail" in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

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Director of Curatorial Affairs

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Koch Curatorial Fellow, 2007-2008

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The impulse to draw is with us from an early age, from our first messy scribbles as young children, finger-painting, drawing with chalk on sidewalks, and scratching our names or words in the sand at the beach. The desire to use our hands and often an accompanying tool to make a mark stays with us throughout life. We draw to plan, to dream, and to document. We are not just marking our territory, but recording our very existence.

Drawings as works of art have always been appealing because of the medium's immediacy. In painting and sculpture an artist can often rework an area, but if changes or erasures are made to a drawing, the revisions are usually visible, evidence of the artist's presence. In other words, by looking at a drawing we can tell how it was made. That is why, in part, we treasure drawings by the Great Masters. Through these artists' gestures we have a direct connection to their thought processes. As artist **Astrid Bowlby** says, "I see drawing as a physical analogy to thought that can be reconsidered by being rearranged and added to."¹ Like a note left for someone, the unmediated gesture invites the viewer to imagine how the work was made, thus connecting "viewer to art to artist."²

But what accounts for the impulse to create the exceptionally detailed compositions we have selected for this exhibition, which can include obsessive mark-making, repetition, patterning and all-over intricate design, laborious process, and *horror vacui* (fear of empty space)? These artists add detail, work with a detailed visual vocabulary, or even detail the passage of time by listing and recording the particulars of events. They can render an abstraction or a recognizable image, sometimes so small that the viewer needs a magnifying glass to decipher it. Critics have labeled this predisposition towards the microscopic "Microwave" or "HyperProcess," an aesthetic which has appeared in several gallery exhibitions over the last decade.³ In "Microwave" the artists may "deliberately reduce their movements and expressive media... [and] bring drawing to an extreme [to] create works of precision."⁴ While the gesture remains important, these artists "sublimate it in repetitive action, tightly controlled material, or a logical system of organization."⁵

In today's fast-paced, digital world, we rarely have time for detail. We seldom stop to smell the roses, never mind notice every individual petal. Attention deficit disorders prevail, while advertisers feed on our need to multitask and to find timesaving shortcuts wherever we can. The artists in this exhibition are drawn to detail in part as a reaction to today's hectic lifestyle and technological advancements and also because of their desire to make sense of the changing world around them. As Barbara A. MacAdam notes about the type of artwork labeled "Microwave," technology "has been an inevitable factor: some react against it, fetishizing the handmade; others celebrate, mimic or compete with it."⁶ One example is the artist **Daniel Zeller**, who describes his intensely detailed drawings as offering "a refuge from the media blitz." He observes that "people look to this kind of work as the only place they can have control. Artists find everything around them is controlling them. For me, this is a free place."⁷ For **Zeller**, "... the drawings become an act of digestion and regurgitation; reconfiguration driven by informational overload."⁸ Control is also crucial to **Jacob El Hanani**, who spends countless hours on each artwork as a deliberate "reaction against the idea being more important than the execution."⁹ These endurance drawings, which can take months to complete, emphasize the hand-made while eclipsing the concept of a drawing as an immediate translation of a thought. **El Hanani's** marks are methodical and systematic. He explains that "there are two forces in the world: the aspiration to go further, to the moon, to build high, go fast, and a parallel movement

of going to the infinitely small, breaking the atom, modifying cells. It was a personal challenge to bring drawing to the extreme and see how far my eyes and fingers could go."¹⁰

Slowing down time is also an impetus for **Marco Maggi**, who explains: "Understanding less is my profession. It requires rigorous training. When we don't understand, we doubt, and reduce the speed of our decision-making, we become subtle and cautious. When accompanied by faith and its certainties, we become capable of making radical and dangerous decisions. In art and cars, speed is tragic."¹¹ **Maggi's** infinitesimal marks and incisions on aluminum and clayboard demonstrate his belief that the "insignificant is very significant," and that "details are perfect doors to slow down and check perception."¹² **Zeller's** mesmerizing, graphite and color drawings challenge our normative perceptions by combining images of the human body with satellite and aerial views of the landscape. Similarly, **Cynthia Lin** reflects on "the fragmentary, overloaded, and ever-shifting nature of modern visual experience."¹³ First scanning friends' body parts into a computer, she then magnifies the result and draws from the scanned image. As **Lin** describes, "enigmatically cropped, these microcosmic structures evoke macrocosmic connections. Lips and river canyons share a topographical logic. The heightened tactility of a harshly lit chin evokes the moon."¹⁴ **Lin's** drawings "critique the modern habit of quick recognition and speedy dismissal," and they oblige us to re-visit our hurried viewing habits.¹⁵ **Louise Marshall's** minutely detailed drawings also require close-looking. Her renderings of hair are so realistic that the viewer may mistake them for actual strands. We are attracted to the extreme verisimilitude in **Marshall's** images but may be simultaneously repelled because of their bodily intimacy.

Perhaps this attention to detail is not as incongruous in today's world as it may at first appear. The overabundance of digital information and images has made us all familiar with pixels—the smallest parts that make up an image on our TV and computer screens. Because of this, we may be more receptive to understanding the small details that make up a whole. We are accustomed to being able to zoom in and out, to see the entirety or the individual parts. Many of the works in *Drawn to Detail* are meant to be seen from both close up and far away. **Darina Karpov's** and **Andrea Sulzer's** large works on paper provide two very different viewing experiences. From afar, the works coalesce into a swirl of what appears to be an abstract image, but up close, we see recognizable fragments from sources as diverse as history, literature, film, and consumer culture. Frustrating our desire to make sense of the images, **Karpov** "is interested in an unreliable or fugitive narrative,"¹⁶ while **Sulzer** notes that "instead of helping you find your way," her drawings "...help you get lost."¹⁷ **Julie Mehretu's** individual marks, which derive from sources as wide-ranging as architectural and city plans, weather maps, airport diagrams, computer games, tattoos, and graffiti, also disappear into "the larger context of the whole," as the viewer moves back.¹⁸

Mehretu's layered, frenetic drawings with their references to maps, diagrams, and plans exemplify a trend in contemporary art to look to architecture and planning as a way of making order out of chaos, or conversely, sometimes breaking out of the order to suggest chaos. Responding to what he calls a "post-human type of city life," **Tadashi Moriyama's** small, densely-packed gouache and ink drawings contain anonymous, high-rise buildings spinning out of control, futuristic city plans, ruins, and complex neural and technological networks of our global society.¹⁹ Like many of the artists in the exhibition, **Moriyama** combines the contemporary with the historical, also looking to Indian and Islamic miniatures for inspiration. **Martha Lewis** utilizes building and garden plans, religious mandalas, navigational charts, and patent designs to reference the past and to talk about the future. By combining fragments from many different sources **Lewis** thwarts our efforts to make logical sense of her complex, colorful compositions.

While the artists discussed above find much of their material in the built environment and man-made systems, others discover their inspiration in the natural world. **Laura Kim's** drawings teeter between decorative abstractions and lyrical evocations of nature. She describes her method as a stream of consciousness which brings out the dream-like qualities she wishes to suggest for the viewer.²⁰ Based loosely on real landscapes, **David Omar White's** science fiction-like fantasy worlds, with their repetitive series of organic patterns, offer an alternative reality. The work of both of these artists confirms a resurgence of interest in romanticism, seen in the awareness of the transcendent, the subconscious, and the emotions. What better media to address these feelings than drawing—the media considered closest to thought?

The combination of botanical imagery with detailed decorative motifs links several of the artists in the exhibition. **Mary O'Malley** and **Kako Ueda** are attracted to the minutiae and repetition found in ornamental artwork, like hand-worked needlecraft, traditional paper cut techniques, and Victorian imagery. Rather than viewing craft media and processes as oppositional to fine art, these artists embrace the decorative, partly in response to our overly technical and increasingly sterile world. **Jane Masters** co-opts the traditional format of the doily or cross-stitched sampler, and **Carol Prusa** creates a cosmos of twinkling, three-dimensional hemispheres covered with interlocking patterns using silverpoint, acrylic, and fiber optic lights. **Bowlby** is also drawn to botanical forms and renders them through an accumulation of obsessive marks that fill the page with density and intricacy.

Another way to respond to the hurried tempo of daily life is to give visual form to time. **Martin Wilner**, for instance, documents his commute to and from work by incorporating snippets of conversations and events he witnesses on the New York City subway. Titled the *Journal of Evidence Weekly*, this project is a type of ritual that serves as a record of **Wilner's** daily experience. Each installment of the *Journal* is ten feet long, and therefore, to "read" the work the viewer must move through space, mimicking the passage of time rendered in the drawings. Similarly, viewers must experience **Jessica Deane Rosner's** *Diary Project* sequentially. *The Diary Project* is a series of seventy-two drawings, each completed on top of and partially obscuring a photocopied page from **Rosner's** journal. Lost in 1986 and returned to her fourteen years later, the journal documents a particular time in the artist's life. In today's hyper-fast world, time seems to pass rapidly and without pause for reflection, but both **Wilner** and **Rosner** create works of art that archive time.

Just as the text in **Rosner's** *Diary Project* is used more for its physical qualities on the page than for its literal meaning, language is used as both the subject and shape of other drawings in the exhibition. The process of writing a name or phrase over and over again, writing all the words to a particular text, or even creating an invented language enables the artist to appropriate and transform language into concrete form. **El Hanani** uses his signature as a repeated motif, filling the page with microscopic letters like threads in a tapestry. **Alice Attie** rewrites the entire text of Dante's *Inferno*, re-imagining the text as a mountainous landscape of flames. **Masters** uses text to provide an element of humor, stating front and center the obsessiveness of her technique by including the words "obsessive" and "compulsive" at the middle of the pictorial field. **Rachel Perry Welty** takes the language of the blind, Braille, and transforms it into a visual vocabulary, "...creating [her] own patterns with rhythms and tensions reminiscent of nature....making visible the unseen."²¹

The structure of language provides just one framework for artists to work within or react against. **Welty** and **Tom Friedman** use a strategy descended from conceptual art—that of creating a set of rules that determine the outcome of the work. Perhaps the best known practitioner of this process is Sol LeWitt, whose wall drawings are executed by a team of assistants who follow a detailed set of directions. Although **Welty** and **Friedman** produce their own work, they often establish rules to follow. **Friedman**, for example, crumples up a piece of paper and then draws lines on all the resulting creases. **Welty** fills a page with dots and then numbers every mark. They both create order out of chaos and chaos out of order.

As drawing's popularity as a medium has grown, its defining characteristics have expanded and the tools and techniques that artists use have evolved.²² In addition to graphite, charcoal, and pen and ink, they work with materials such as string, tape, and smoke, and practices adopted from the world of craft. **Ueda** updates the historical technique of paper cutting, employing an Exacto knife as her tool. She cuts a negative line in paper, making delicate organic compositions that incorporate insects and other references to the natural world. **Jim Dingilian** fills glass bottles with smoke and then erases to form, as if by magic, photorealistic images of mysterious narratives. **Maggi** cuts intricate designs into McIntosh apples, **Masters** uses a crafters' wood-burning tool to singe holes into paper, and **Welty** generates marks with a custom-made Braille punch. **Ricardo Lanzarini** uses an unconventional surface—JOB cigarette paper books—for his tiny, whimsical sketches. He discovered that he could benefit from the "accident of translucency" of the thin paper and delights in being "...able to rescue [the JOB book] from its fate...The market predestined it to be a disposable object to become ashes, the museum will make it a cult object."²³ **Julia von Eichel** and **Dave Eppley** not only utilize unusual

drawing materials, but work in three dimensions. **Von Eichel** connects the ceiling and floor with delicate lines of string, pieces of tape, and irregular shapes of cut and painted mylar, limiting her palette to focus on positive and negative forms. **Eppley** uses brightly colored, industrial vinyl tape for his complex geometric, linear installations that spread on floors and creep up walls in site-specific installations that respond to the architecture of the space.

The extreme detail found throughout the works in this exhibition suggests that much of it is a result of careful planning. Yet many of these drawings in fact develop organically, each line a response to the last. Slowly building an image out of tiny dots, lines, cuts, and repetitive marks can become a form of meditation for some artists. Several even observe that they are not sure how exactly the piece happened when it is completed. **Zeller** remarks that his process is "really like a meditation. I like to think I'm working on the same drawing over and over again."²⁴ The results of these artists' labors can also be entrancing for the viewer. We are attracted to these images because they require close scrutiny. When the drawing fills our vision we get lost in the enveloping detail, finding that the miniscule can be as overwhelming as the colossal. Viewing this type of work is intense as we try to decipher hidden text, follow every intricate line, and imagine the process of creation. This experience makes us rethink how we relate to the world. We have come to rely on the speed of communication and excess of information of the digital world. Many of us are connected at all times, talking or texting on our cell phones, using hand held personal digital assistants (PDAs), traveling with our laptops, downloading music and movies, and surfing the Internet. In the process we may be too busy to pay attention to details. The artists in this exhibition take the time to examine detail, both in reaction to and as a way of controlling digital overload and fragmentation. It is reassuring to know that there are those who do stop and examine things with care, who value the direct mark of the hand, and who find a meditative calm in slowing down. If we take the time to look closely at these artworks, we will find that the more we look, the more we see.

1 Artist's Statement, 2008.

2 Benjamin Genocchio, "Opening a Window on the Creative Mind," exh. review, *New York Times*, January 27, 2008, accessed online, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/27/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/27artswe.html?scp=1&sq=%22opening+a+window+on+the+creative+mind%22&st=nyt>, May 28, 2008.

3 Josée Bienvenu Gallery was one of the first to highlight this genre and coined the word "Microwave." (Barbara A. MacAdam, "The Microwave," exh. review, *Artnews* April 2001, p. 130). For discussion of the term "HyperProcess" see Ginger Gregg Duggan and Judith Hoos Fox, *Over + Over: Passion for Process*, exh. cat. (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 2005), p. 13.

4 Josée Bienvenu Gallery, press release for the exhibition *Microwave*, 2002, accessed online, http://joseebienvenugallery.com/press_microwave02.html, June 2, 2008.

5 Duggan and Fox, p. 13.

6 MacAdam, p. 131.

7 Daniel Zeller, quoted in MacAdam, p. 133.

8 Zeller, quoted in Pierogi press release for the exhibition *Geomorphical Fluxitosis*, 2008, accessed online, <http://www.pierogi2000.com/flatfile/zellerd08EX.html>, May 28, 2008.

9 Jacob El Hanani, quoted in MacAdam, p. 132.

10 Artist's statement, accessed online, <http://www.hosfeltgallery.com/HTML/artists/JacobElHanani.htm>, December 21, 2007.

11 Marco Maggi, quoted in Josée Bienvenu press release for the exhibition *by disappointment only*, 2007-2008, accessed online, <http://chelseaartgalleries.com/Josée+Bienvenu+Gallery/by+disappointment+only.html>, May 28, 2008.

12 E-mail correspondence with the artist, May 2, 2008.

13 Artist's statement, undated, accessed online, <http://www.cynthialinartist.com/pages.php?content=statement.php>, January 21, 2008.

14 Artist's statement, 2005, accessed online, <http://www.cynthialinartist.com/pages.php?content=statement.php&navGalID=Statement>, June 2, 2008.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Darina Karpov, quoted in Pierogi's on-line press release for the exhibition *Infinitely Small Disasters*, 2008, accessed online, <http://www.pierogi2000.com/flatfile/karpovd08exhib.html>, June 2, 2008.

17 Artist's statement, in *Selections, Spring 2008, The Drawing Center's Drawing Papers 75*, exh. cat. (New York: The Drawing Center, 2008), p. 22.

18 Julie Mehretu, quoted in interview with David Binkley, Chief Curator and Kinsey Katchka, Research Specialist on March 28, 2003, in *Ethiopian Passages: Dialogues in the Diaspora* online exh. documentation (Washington D.C.: National Museum of African Art, 2003) accessed online, <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/passages/mehretu-conversation.html>, June 2, 2008.

19 Interview with the curators, March 2008.

20 Interview with the curators, September 2007.

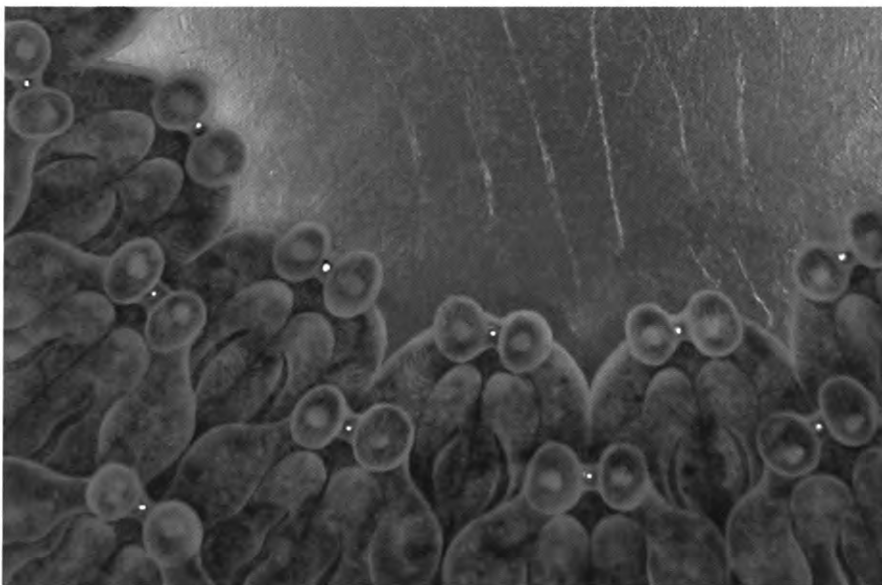
21 E-mail correspondence with the artist, May 14, 2008.

22 Drawing, in its most conventional sense, is "the rendering of shapes and forms on a surface, chiefly by means of lines." (<http://www.artlex.com/>, accessed June 2, 2008).

23 E-mail correspondence with the artist, May 23, 2008.

24 Zeller, quoted in MacAdam, p. 131.

Carol Prusa



Babel

(full and detail)

2007

silverpoint, graphite, titanium white

with acrylic binder on acrylic

hemisphere, and fiber optics

24 x 24 x 12 inches

Courtesy of the Artist

and Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Miami, FL