The Drawing Center's

# DRAWING PAPERS
## Abstract Tendencies
*33*

## Playing at Abstraction

SUSETTE MIN

The instinct to play is a central element in the understanding of culture, everyday life, and contemporary art. Johan Huizinga pointedly comments in *Homo Ludens*, "Heedlessly, barely conscious of what we are doing, we play with lines and planes, curves and masses, and from this abstracted doodling emerge fantastic arabesques, strange animal or human forms." The artists in "Abstract Tendencies" intrinsically share this inclination to arrange assortments of lines, shapes, colors, and designs within a challenging game of what-ifs, testing the limits of artistic integrity and practice. In their individual ways, many of the artists at once create their own rules and challenge these rules through daring and inventive strategies that unsettle or tweak, in one way or another, the established order of abstraction, technology, and drawing.

Huizinga notes that "Play can be, and very frequently is, of the utmost seriousness." Executed with a quirky and gentle sense of humor, the work of Ann Pibal, Nils Gjerdevik, and Peter Dudek is serious business. Visually pleasing and familiar, Pibal's Mylar paintings of repeated color lines are irresistible. Upon closer inspection, her swatch-book series of tasty-colored vertical stripes and horizontal bands cutting across the picture plane seem somewhat "off." Rows of lines and parallelograms deviate from the edge of the Mylar at unexpected moments, confounding the viewer's compulsion to logically order and sequence patterns. Her "disappointing" paintings humorously unsettle art-historical assumptions about abstraction and color in relation to kitsch and the decorative.

In contrast to Pibal's tidy works, Gjerdevik's wall drawings of randomly placed surrealistic-looking blobs, spirals, squiggly lines, and other organic shapes somehow seem at once primordial and anecdotal. His art calls forth a kind of anarchy, a rebellion against all types of formalism. Yet his saturation of disparate styles, muted colors, and converging perspectives is the result of a programmatic strategy of negation that actually strains to stay within the traditional tenets of abstraction. For Gjerdevik, the foundation and ultimate goal of his conceptual practice is to create "a perfectly open work...[that] make[s] use of various artistic vocabularies without constructing a new authority."

Technology creates order out of chaos. Writing in the late thirties, Huizinga was worried that absolutes, ultimatums, and the development of new technologies would obstruct play, threaten its existence, forebode the end of real and true civilization. The artists in "Abstract Tendencies," however, suggest the possibility of a slightly different approach, indicating that industrial production, digital media, and new technologies intervene and transform what play and contemporary art is and does. These artists seem to share Huizinga's suspicion of technology, implying through their work a disquieting ambivalence towards its deformation of experience and its relationship to drawing. But whereas the early abstract artists embraced technology, and later American abstractionists reacted to it, many of the "Abstract Tendencies" artists come to terms with technology, primarily through the use of geometric forms. William Duty, Suzanne Song, and Karl Jensen use the computer, for instance, but only as a means of returning to the basic materials of drawing—paper, pencil, and ink. For example, Duty's drawing appears at first glance to be a far cry from the sort of digital imagery normally produced by Photoshop, and yet the intense graphic rendering of his subject matter is indeed computer-generated. The nature-like objects in his work, which appear to be faithful renderings of silhouettes, blazing, apparitional fires, or rows of Italian cypress trees in a gallery-like setting, are, at some level, simply not real; they were conceived in his mind. At the same time, by means of traditional draftsmanship---an anachronistic mode of documentation—he makes his fictions credible. The obsessive graphic rendering of Duty's imaginary subject matter generated by a computer undoes the translation and dematerializing process of digital media, establishing a dialectic between the real and the reordered real. His drawings become an absurd form of control over nature and technology.

Suzanne Song's *Plastic D (dimension)* presents a tongue-in-cheek trompe l'oeil reconstruction of a lapidary, or engineer's, template—a drafting tool bearing circles and rectangles to make "layflat" 2-D drawings for 3-D construction. The use of computer-based software technology by engineers and designers has transformed the once materially-based plastic or metal template into a virtual tool promising not only accuracy and efficiency but also endless simulations of alternative 3-D designs and unbounded visions. Song's synthetic pink and milky transparent templates at once protrude from and float on the wall, holding in tension the divisions between new and old technologies, art and artifice, illusion and reality.

Initially, Karl Jensen's constructed paper inlays conjure illusions of a fourth dimension—the playing field of a video game, perhaps. Close up, the colored papers, which fit together like a puzzle, Scotch-taped with precise demarcations, reveal an impressive convergence of views. Through the mixing of isometric perspectives with the traditional strategy of foreshortening, and with deft and precise use of an Exacto knife, Jensen creates a cyber-reality from the point of view of what he describes as "a satellite, or the end of an electron microscope." Technological advances paradoxically take away the ability to discern distances and perspectives, creating futuristic landscapes that are vast, empty, and lastly, in the words of Jensen, "deprived of humanity."

Abstraction persists. For Jensen, Song, and Duty, abstraction is a way to engage and come to terms with the threat to humanity posed by the encroachment of technology. In contrast, employing simple means and geometric forms, Joachim Bandau, Caroline Van Damme, and Kathleen McShane engage in a kind of abstract play that is far from some of abstraction's other modes—neither an escape from a technological dystopia nor a consolation for a lost utopian ideal. Rather, their spatial play blurs distinctions between appearance and reality, between what is perceived and what is known.

At first glance, Joachim Bandau's black squares seem mechanically produced. *Untitled* appears, from afar, to be a pile of photographic negatives or layers of tinted glass. Upon closer inspection, the layers reveal themselves as uninterrupted strokes of watercolor made by a thick and extra-wide Japanese brush. The large-scale black rectangular void created by his layers suggests an entry into another world, a window, an absence. From another perspective, the gradations of gray and black that frame this rectangular square not only provide a sensuous depth, but also transform his drawing into a proto-sculpture. Diverging from Frank Stella's "what you see is what you see," Bandau's shadows thrive on and defy the formal strictures of two-dimensional art.

Caroline Van Damme's ruler-like works made of anodized aluminum paper interrogate the "picture" plane, blurring the distinctions between background and foreground, art object and wall, and abstraction and representation. Similarly, Kathleen McShane's cut-out drawings made of paper and pencil question the surface of a drawing on paper. Drawing is her material source, in which her works serve as studies or reviews of the medium's most basic and expressive properties. Abstracting elements from the repertoire of drawing—a partial line from a cloud or a thought bubble in a cartoon, for example—McShane's *Diagonal* is a cut-out form repeated over and over again, resulting in a snowflake-like membrane. The holes or "punctures" that she makes not only reveal the institutional space and supports of The Drawing Center, but also complicate the logic that meaning is only generated within an artwork itself.

Playing is an activity, embedded in material processes, resulting in consequences no matter how great or small. Confronted with a limited amount of time and space, shapes and colors, the Selections artists all, in their own ways, open up alternative realities by trusting their intuitions and tendencies—ultimately by letting go and just playing the game.
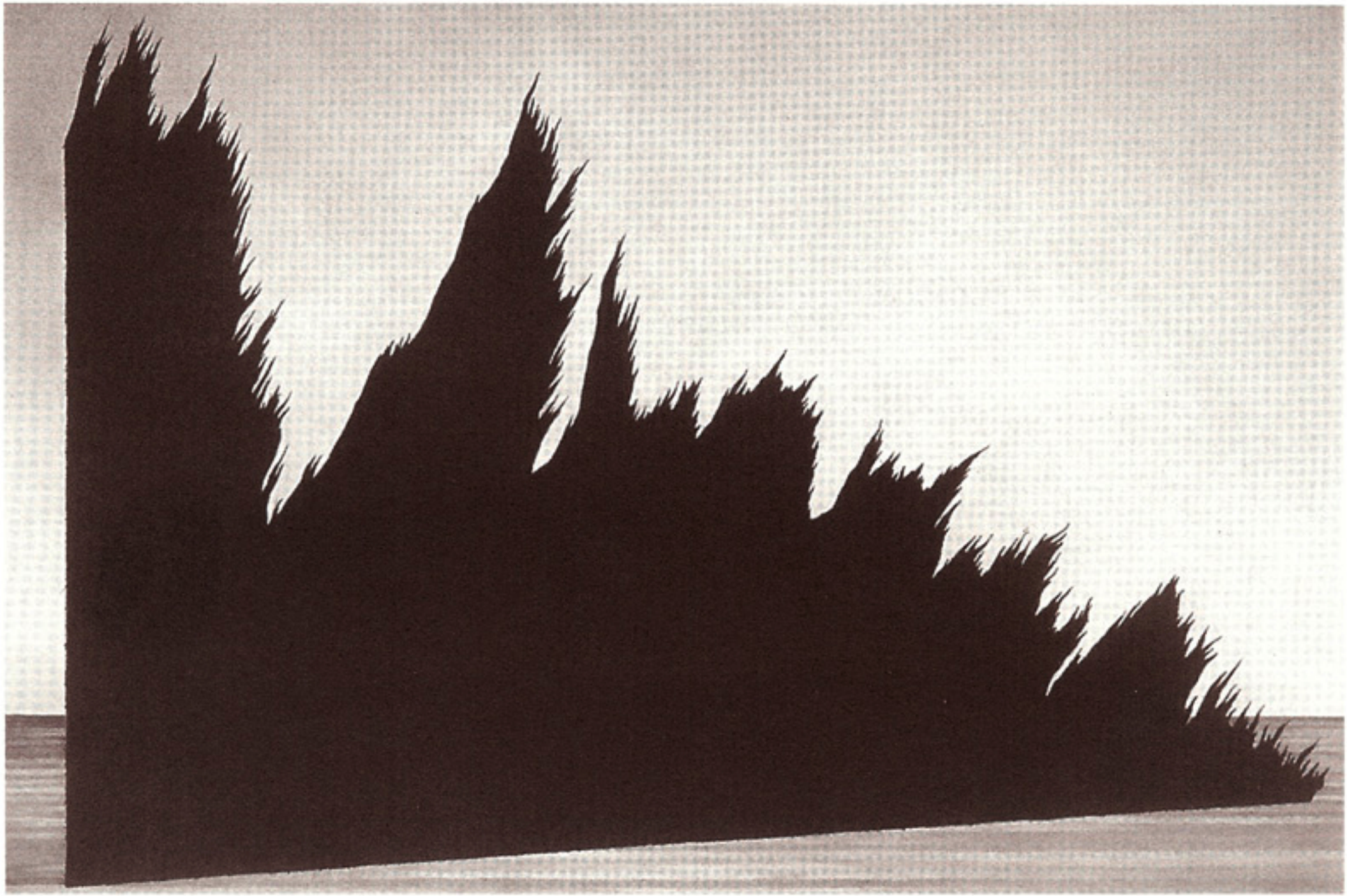
WILLIAM DUTY, *Partition, 2002, graphite on paper, 8 x 12 in.*

# WILLIAM DUTY

In making these drawings, I start with a simple theme or visual idea. It is usually something that intrigues me in its simplicity of form but has a veiled or perhaps forgotten metaphorical appeal, such as the stylized contour of fire or the shape of sails. I then try to think of how that idea might be presented in a fictional presentation space, as well as how to create that space and populate it with objects, arrangements, projections, or other visual phenomena based on the working theme. These ideas then develop into a variety of constructions, and the theme or the space often changes, leading to new themes and spaces or to dead-ends. Generally, I stop when I feel I have created something that alters or expands my associations with the original subject matter. Usually this is something that I hadn't intended.

Making the drawings themselves feels somewhat like carrying out long exercises intended to "solve problems in drawing." I both loathe and enjoy this part of the process—it demands persistence but leads, sometimes, to an unexpected feeling of hypnosis, not unlike that encountered when performing repetitive exercises on a musical instrument. Most of the drawings do concentrate on one or another of the medium's conventionally didactic themes—line, contour, perspective, shading, and so forth. But these are byproducts of an image designed in advance: They are the formalized summaries of various freehand solutions to the drawing process. They are like gestures snapped into a diagram, though no diagram is visible.

The purpose, in my mind, is to create solutions of a sort—"proofs," as it were, in some field with which I am unfamiliar, the text of which is compelling to the eye and seems to follow some winding logical path but the purpose of which remains ultimately unclear. The feeling that something is being ascertained that at first looks mysterious, but which, when understood, is just as likely to turn out to be absurd as profound. The feeling is closest to looking at a mathematical proof for the existence of God that is equally convincing in proving the existence of aliens.

BORN 1970, IN ANCON, PANAMA; LIVES AND WORKS IN QUEENS, NY.

*Partition*, 2002
Graphite on paper
8 x 12 in.