

Dallas, Texas

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Devin Borden Gallery

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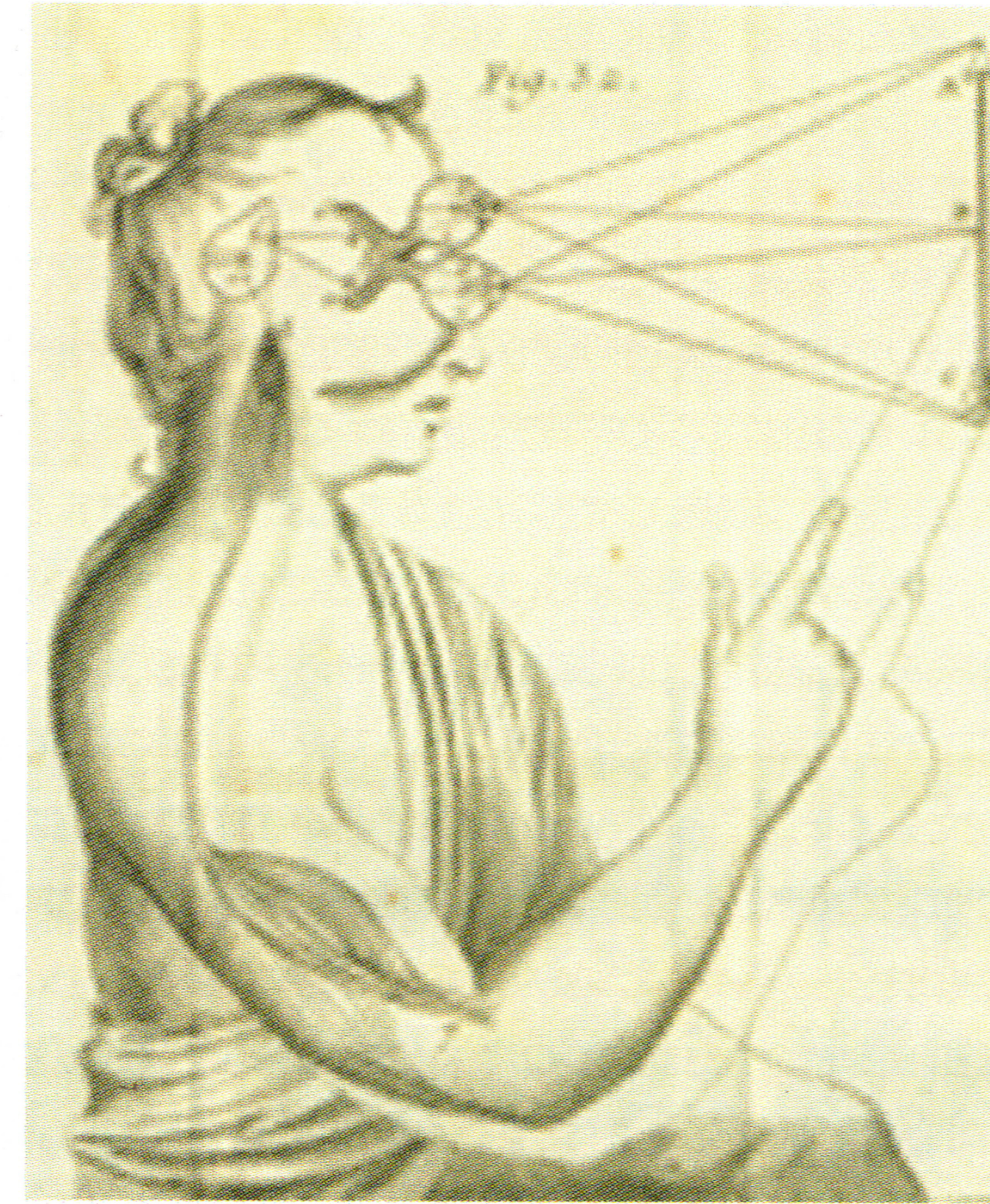
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Detail from René Descartes' (1596-1650) drawing in "meditations métaphysiques" explaining the function of the pineal gland.

As a visual artist who has written about art as long as I have made it, I am pleased to finally be able to contribute an essay to an exhibition in which I am also participating. The roster of artists in "On Drawing: Line" provides productive grist for my mill. Not only is each artist a skilled devotee of this most supple, transparent, and direct medium, but their art exemplifies a growing divergence in contemporary approaches to this timeless form. I locate this divergence in what is described as the mind-body problem, an age-old argument about the nature of the world and how humans perceive and understand their existence in it. Drawing's

function was transformed by the invention of photography, which revolutionizing our ability to document the physical world and changed the way we thought about image-making. An eye-to-hand process involving pencil on paper became a mechanical process where a camera served as both retina and scribe, with the operator as composer-editor. But drawing has remained an essential medium. Many contemporary artists still view drawing's purpose as referential and descriptive, but lines made by a pencil can now represent internal as well as external perspectives. For the artists in this show drawing now serves

as a means of formulating an idea or expressing a feeling by writing with images.

The insistently, almost obsessively abstract drawings of Anna Bogatin, Theresa Chong, Jacob El Hanani, Nicole Phungrasamee Fein, and Lauren Seiden use repetition to assemble intricate matrixes of repeated lines to stimulate one of humanity's oldest skills: our ability to decipher structure or infer meaning from patterns. In this sense their devotion to constructing individual a coherent whole from a multitude of individual marks illustrates the assertion of the mystic poet Thomas Merton that "the perfection of each created thing is not merely its conformity to an abstract type but in its own individual identity with itself."

Anna Bogatin's intimately scaled stacks of finely textured lines form collectives with the weight, heft, and personality of dimensional objects. In her Lyrical series she arranges columns of horizontal black or blue lines to create the sensation of architectural structure while withholding identity markers that could define the function of her mysterious forms.

The meticulous improvisations Theresa Chong fashions from pencil and gouache are studies in complexity. A work like BGV No. 19 0:46" overlays two translucent sheets of rice paper to double visual intimacy while intimating spatial depth. The rhythms that activate Chong's compositions suggest an atomistic view of the world, where individual elements, whether notes in music, bees in a hive, or molecules in the air, cohere to form a meaningful whole.

Arthur Danto described Jacob El Hanani's fantastically detailed drawings as evoking "peace and patience, as if time had no bearing on their

world." In Triangle Landscape El Hanani upsets our expectation that spectacle must be grandly scaled. Adapting calligraphic micrography techniques, he assembles a tonal tableaux composed of minute interlocking triangles, a luminous, self-contained universe, complex but also completely non-referential.

Nicole Phungrasamee Fein's works on paper privilege the sanctity of the brushstroke. Her multiple strokes of watercolor result in complex, luminous color studies that can be read at a glance, like vivid gestalts. However, closer inspection reveals that the artist's painstaking process of alignment produces line as the meeting place of two colors.

Lauren Seiden's allover approach to graphite on paper evokes parallels to Ad Reinhardt black-on-black paintings; in that both artists derive innumerable distinctions from one color or tone. Viewed head-on, Seiden's Other Spaces series read as austere minimal monoliths; seen from other vantage points they reveal multitudes of distinctive marks arranged in banded layers or geometric patterns.

Earth artist Robert Smithson observed that "Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void." As someone preoccupied with both words and voids, I relate strongly to Smithson's conflation of mental constructs with the structures of the natural world, and I see it as a key to understanding the work of Todd Camplin, Jillian Conrad, Sharon Engelstein, Richard Nix, and Mark Sheinkman. They approach drawing not as a means to illusion, but allusion, using abstraction as a means

of diagramming the world around them.

Todd Camplin "starts with text, because words have always mystified me." Employing drawing as a process of apprehension through transformation, his art suggests form as a way of understanding content. The overlays of richly textured color, pattern, and shape in ...me you... dream assay the essential character and flavor of words much as Kandinsky used form and color to visualize his sense perceptions of music.

Jillian Conrad views the physical world as "a language formed by layers of time, choice, and chance." In her Sites and Settlements series Conrad applies her sculptor's sensibility to drawing, gluing graphite sticks of differing diameters and lengths to sheets of paper. The interlocking coordinates and schematic networks they create suggest both natural and human organizational systems, from archeological dig plots to geologic fracture maps or convoluted text diagrams.

A sculptor whose work depicts "natural organisms that have somehow been altered by the curious forces of industry and culture," Sharon Engelstein's drawings use pen-plotter machines to imagine, detail, and refine her sculptural ideas. Engelstein uses plotter vector graphics to complicate and even refute sculptural solidity; in Young Ghost she refashions a spook's drapery into complex fractured geometric coordinates that simultaneously intimate weightlessness and volume.

My ongoing Floral Prototypes series combines atmospheric grounds, hardedge geometries, and freehand gestures to hybridize natural forms and man-made structures. Western Cowboy Roper takes a geometric approach, constructing flower petals from circles that expand outward like ripples in a pond;

the radial grid of Variegated Harlequin fuses organic floral geometries with the rhythms of a chandelier that illuminates one of Lincoln Center's performance halls.

Rules set boundaries to be obeyed or violated, and they produce a creative tension in Richard Nix's newest drawings. Mozart K, 545, drawn in ink marker color, translates musical tones into colors arranged to visualize this sonata's structure. Nix's brilliantly colored geometric patterns retain the process of their manufacture; corrections, erasures, and preliminary sketching manifest drawing's ability to spark imaginations despite (or perhaps because) of its inability to achieve perfection.

Compared to most artists, Mark Sheinkman works backwards. First he coats the surface of his paper with liquid graphite, and then begins to create imagery through a process of subtraction. His primary tool is an eraser, and his chosen subject is not form but movement. Sheinkman's energetic gestures, arranged in sinuous waves in Carlisle, or suggesting the bustling circular swirl of a dust devil in Broad, emerge from his paper's dark grounds like details revealed in a sudden flash of light across a dark night.

Leonardo DaVinci, who was no slouch as a draftsman, observed that "Line has in itself neither matter nor substance, and may rather be called an imaginary idea rather than a real object." The Greek mathematician Euclid said something similar when he summarized line as "a breadthless length." Both capture the creative tension inherent to drawing: what you see is not so much on the paper as in your mind.

—Christopher French

NICOLE PHUNGGRASAMEE FEIN

Nicole Phungrasamee Fein creates intimately-scaled works on paper. Fein lays down strokes of color in multiple layers resulting in paintings of complex, luminous color in a process more akin to weaving than traditional watercolor painting. Such an intense and painstaking process produces work of astonishing tranquility that has been compared to the Minimalist masters including Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt.

Born in Evanston, Illinois in 1974, Nicole Fein attended Tufts University (BA), the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (BFA), and Mills College, Oakland (MFA). She exhibits nationwide including Devin Borden Gallery in Houston and Gallery Joe in Philadelphia. Her drawings have been collected by numerous public collections including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Menil Collection, The Fogg Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Blanton Museum of Art and The University of Richmond Museums (Virginia). She lives and works in San Francisco, California.

Nicole Phungrasamee Fein

1080512, 2012

Watercolor on paper

14 x 14 inches

