

Object: Drawing

Ray Cronin

Number 54, Winter 2000–2001

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9487ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

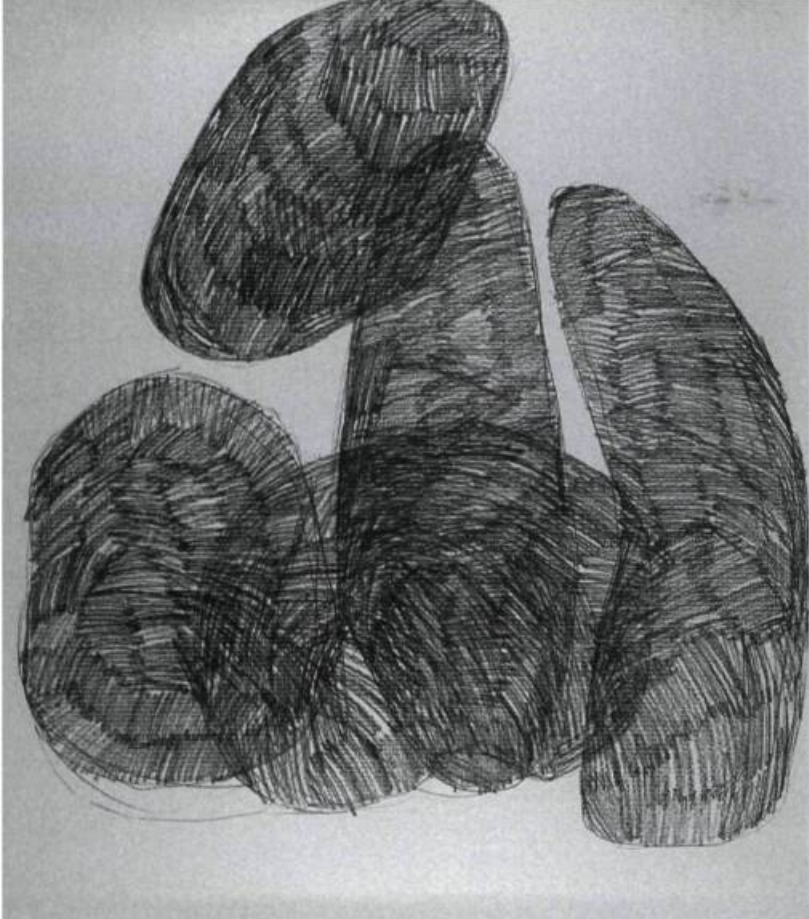
0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Cronin, R. (2000). Object: Drawing. *Espace Sculpture*, (54), 41–43.



Object: DRAWING

RAY CRONIN

Space is a material for sculpture as it is for few other art forms. The manipulation of space and the direct competition of objects and the viewer for room belong to sculpture and architecture, and sometimes to performance art. Familiar to sculptors, this is not the paradigm of the relationship between viewer and artwork that we have inherited from history. We've been saddled with that dichotomy between image and object, a dichotomy deeply rooted in Western art history, in the very way we see the world: objects are of the world, images are of the mind. "Because of its occupation of the real space of the body and of society, sculpture became a term that could designate anything real," wrote American art historian Thomas McEvilley. As the art of reality, sculpture has become the predominant art of the postmodern, McEvilley claims, because it is actual in an age marked by "radical doubt."

Vanessa Paschakarnis, *Untitled*, 1996. Graphite on paper. 118 x 140 cm. Photo : courtesy of the artist.

Vanessa Paschakarnis, *Five Shadows*, 1996. Plaster, graphite, wax. Various dimensions. Photo : courtesy of the artist.

Anything artists make is actual, of course. The making of all art is about an idea being expressed through materials and process. Perceiving that art is another matter. Western habit is to view two-dimensional work as existing in a sort of «virtual» space. There is no sense of illusion in sculpture, no "window" through which the viewer sees an alternate reality. Instead, that alternate reality is right in your face, stubbornly sitting in the middle of the gallery. Even sculpture that looks like something else is undeniably, palpably "real" in a way that we simply will not allow a photograph, painting or drawing to be. But then, if McEvilley is right (and I think he is) that any art can, in certain circumstances, become sculpture, where does that leave a form such as drawing?

Three events converged to suggest the subject of drawing to me. First, Montreal artist Susie Major gave a lecture and workshop at the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design in Fredericton. Her workshop was on drawing and her lecture dealt with her own drawing practice. Trained as a sculptor, Major has always used drawing

in an intensely physical way. Her drawings are sculptural, in that they address issues of form, space and materials. We overlapped at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design for a few semesters, and her drawings were part of sculpture studio-group discussions. It didn't seem odd fourteen years ago, and it still doesn't.

The second noteworthy event was the opening, also in Fredericton, of a new show by Halifax-based sculptor Vanessa Paschakarnis. Her exhibition, *Sculptures and Drawings* at Gallery Connexion, continued her exploration of specific forms, here in drawings and in large plaster sculptures. Her work is based on natural elements (a sand dollar, a crab shell, a pebble), but they are so abstracted from their source as to take on a being of their own. Paschakarnis, another graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, has shown extensively in the Maritimes since emigrating here from Germany in 1997. Drawing has long been a key component of her practice. It is hard, and probably pointless, to differentiate the drawings from the sculpture in her work. All of her work incorporates mark making,

for instance; all of her work is about material presence and possibility.

Finally, *Process* opened in Saint John. *Process*, an exhibition of works-in-progress by Saint John sculptor Jason Fitzpatrick (another NSCAD alumnus), was almost entirely an exhibition of drawings. These simple works were the result of intense labour. Rectangular fields of graphite, they were either uniformly covered or covered and then erased. The erased images are each the result of nine passes — cover, erase, cover, erase, nine times. A process demanding on both the materials and the artist — the paper tended to wear out and the artist's muscles to seize up. These drawings were finished works, but they pointed in directions that Fitzpatrick intends to go. Not studies or models *per se*, the works in *Process* point to the architectural scale works Fitzpatrick intends to pursue. On the wall outside his studio is his only extant architectural drawing, to date anyway — a floor to ceiling drawing with the scale of an exposed beam.

In the work of Fitzpatrick, Major and Paschakarnis, the line between drawing and sculpture is blurry — if not erased outright. These are things first and images second, if at all.

In Fitzpatrick's recent sculpture, *Conduit 3: Volume*, a canvas trough filled with black ink hung quietly in the gallery with the weightiness of a soaked sponge and all the potential energy of a coiled spring. It scribed a liquid line in space, and it wasn't hard to imagine it as the source of all the lines in the world. The canvas was saturated with wax, but it still leaked, creating a pattern of drips on the floor and the appearance of black sweat all over the trough itself. *Conduit 3: Volume* took over its space, routing the viewer around it to navigate its shores. For all of its aggressive simplicity, the work carried poetic and symbolic resonance, at once ship and sea, potential and actuality.

Was this a drawing? Yes, a drawing conceived in three dimensions, and thus a sculpture as well. In a related work Fitzpatrick soaked a coil of rope in printers ink for several weeks. The resulting coil is profoundly black, its presence altered in a way that no surface coating could ever do. Fitzpatrick is interested in the idea of sculpture as «the residue of labour» and his works on paper, rectangular swaths of graphite, ink, blood or other materials, achieve the luster created by repetitive work.

Susie Major, in her work *Wall to Floor Throw*, dipped a ball in what she describes as "inky syrup," a drawing medium created to be sticky. She bounced a ball from wall to floor repeatedly to draw a sculpture out of the wall, the floor, the ball and her own



labour. A drawing, *Pebbles*, was made by covering a sheet of graph paper with gravel found on the side of the road, carefully tracing the outline of each rock where it lay on the paper. Major did a series of these works, of grass, twigs and other material collected outside, a series of records on graph paper, time captured in the traces of her collections.

In an untitled drawing from 1996, Paschakarnis lay large stones on a roll of paper and traced the outlines, using the pencil to push the stones around on the paper, tracing and retracing the wandering path of the rock across the sheet. In a related sculpture she made large plaster versions of pebbles, which she then drew on, covering every inch of their surface in a sleek layer of graphite. Not as pigment, though, but as line. The sheer labour of such a project was never hidden, but served as part of the content of the works. "The residue of labour," indeed.

Her recent exhibition in Fredericton featured excerpts from a series of drawings that Paschakarnis calls *Shields for a Human*. The four large works included in this show were clustered at one end of the room, conveying the sense that the viewer was somehow interloping upon a private conversation. As with her sculptures, her drawings are non-objective, rooted in source material from the natural world, but eschewing representation as a strategy.

Major's drawings are perhaps the most sculptural, as she uses the actual working of the paper as her content. Folding, crumpling, burning and rusting are all used to create drawings. Her process is akin to that of installation, with a component of collecting and gathering, and of performance as well. In *Lines*, a piece from 1994, she coated branches in carbon by holding them over candles and displayed the blackened sticks in a common yellow bucket. In *Heat Study*, she used the branches from *Lines* that had burned to make her own charcoal. She made the drawings while the branches were still hot enough to burn the paper. In other drawings she burned through the paper, testing how far she could go without losing the whole sheet to flames.

Major's drawings have less in common with Rembrandt than with process-based sculpture, post-minimal objects that use paper as their core material. Take *Crumble*, created when one of her folded drawings gave up the ghost and disintegrated under the strain. The sculpture is a small heap of crumbled paper; a small piece more about obsessive work than it was about any finished object. Major consistently pushes the limits of what drawing can do. In *Brownosing*, from 1998, she dipped her nose in chocolate fudge frosting to make a grid pattern on the wall, one line a day for a week outside the academic and art history offices at NSCAD, a performance poking fun at the academic

Jason Fitzpatrick, 200
Feet Litre, 2000.
Rope, ink. 15.2 x 20.3
cm. Photo: courtesy
of the artist.



Susie Major, *Ballroom*, 1998. Silver paint, garbage bags, tape. Ball size: 4 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Jason Fitzpatrick, *Conduit 3: Volume*, 1999. Canvas, wax, ink, wire. 25.4 x 25.4 x 579.12 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

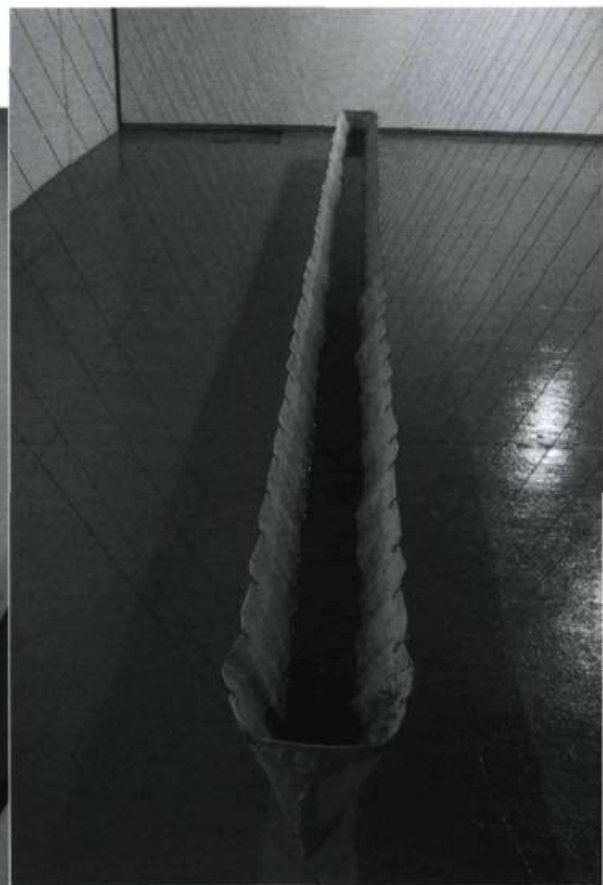
games played at any university. "The idea was about sucking up," she said, "brown-nosing literally." She has also used spitballs, make-up and myrrh. "Art is the one place where a person can make their own territory," she says.

Paschakarnis, too, makes little distinction between the act of drawing and the process of making sculpture. An early work, *Shadow of a Tree*, from 1993, started with an observation. Paschakarnis took a photo of the shadow of a tree under which she was sitting. Months later she used the photograph to create a work from marble chips, using the white gravel to stand in for the shadow on a gallery floor. As Paschakarnis has written, "With my work I want to share my experience. Yet I am not interested in illustrating it or informing others about it." Drawing is a *language* that these sculptors use to get at the things they want to say. Paschakarnis' statement could apply to all three artists: "My investigations take place in the language of drawing — as a concept — and in the language of sculpture — as a real thing."

In *Ballroom* of 1998, Major pushed the idea of drawing as a "real thing" to an extreme. She taped black garbage bags over the floor of a white painted room,

creating a contrasting space in which to create a drawing. Dipping a ball in silver paint, she played racquetball until she had achieved the effect she was looking for. A site-specific performance, an intervention, a sculpture or a drawing: whatever you call *Ballroom*, it is physical, and it is that physicality that Major sought. "My relationship to drawing is more the physical relationship to sculpture," she said, "than the imagistic relationship to painting."

These artists are very practical in their approach to drawing; they are all interested in the act of drawing, and in getting that physicality across to the viewer. They get there through sculptural means, not through images or symbols, nor by any desire toward expression. Major pushes paper to its limits and beyond, doing without it as often as not. "Paper only goes so far in terms of wear and tear," she says simply. For Fitzpatrick drawing is at base a reductive art, and a minimal one. "I've always been trying to get rid of myself in my work," he says. Paschakarnis thinks of it as trying to get across an experience — "I want to put work out that initiates experience as a thing that one has to engage with." We are not meant to merely look at these drawings, but rather to expe-



rience them as physical presences, as the residue of labour, as, basically, sculpture. "It's about the material of the world being revealed in a particular way," Major said. "With stone carving I felt that I was just moving dust," she continued. "Drawing was a way of moving dust without the hassle."

L'auteur signale la dichotomie qui existe dans la société occidentale entre l'image et l'objet : la première référant à l'esprit, le second au monde réel. Parce qu'elle s'inscrit véritablement dans la réalité, par son côté palpable, la sculpture serait devenue la forme d'art prédominante en cette ère postmoderne marquée par le « doute absolu ». Qu'en est-il dès lors d'un médium comme le dessin ?

Relatant les expositions récentes de trois artistes, Susie Major, Vanessa Paschakarnis et Jason Fitzpatrick, l'auteur note que dans leur travail la frontière s'estompe entre sculpture et dessin. Ces artistes abordent le dessin d'une façon très concrète, très matérielle. Dès lors, leurs œuvres ne sont pas conçues pour être simplement regardées par le spectateur mais pour que celui-ci les expérimente réellement, les aborde comme des présences physiques, à la limite comme des... sculptures.