

Between Line and Form

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Between Line and Form

CINDY STELMACKOWICH

Between Line and Form at The Ottawa Art Gallery presented a dynamic group of artworks resonating with poetic, spatial and social significance. Curated by Renee Baert, the exhibition was built upon what has become regarded as the renewed interest in drawing apparent in contemporary art.

spanned across the entrance of the main gallery. Startling, due to its size and whiteness, but also because of the spaces of fantasy and make-believe that emerged in black and touches of red ink from the layers of translucent Chinese tissues. Morbidly fantastic, fearful allegories combine and invade Pien's prolific iconography; monsters, amphibians, and the grotesque all appear in varying mutating forms and sizes.

In Chan's *Rainbow Legs* strings of painted toothpicks carefully threaded together to form a pair of trousers gracefully dangle from the gallery wall. As in so many of his delicate constructions, the criss-crossed shadows these toothpicks cast on the wall evoke inner volumes. Fleeting, the thin lines of the rainbow-coloured toothpicks move and dance as visitors pass by. Chan's subtle and marvellous anima-

Sarah Stevenson offered ways for our gaze to enter into these infinite spaces.

Like *Nothing*, Martha Townsend's fifty-two small graphite drawings on white paper, was rich with abstract visual and spatial vocabulary. The organic and seductive shapes produced by her overlapping and almost evenly-shaded grey pencil strokes appear to endlessly fold back onto themselves. The bound-



Ed PIEN, *Between Line and Form*, 2003. Installation view. Photo : David Barbour.

SARAH STEVENSON, *Between Line and Form*, 2003. Installation view. Photo : David Barbour.

The works in the exhibition, inspired by the linear boundaries of drawing and the volumic dimension of sculptural forms, «blur the boundaries between these disciplines.» Framed as being «in-between» drawing and sculpture, they offered the viewer entry into infinite spaces and balances.

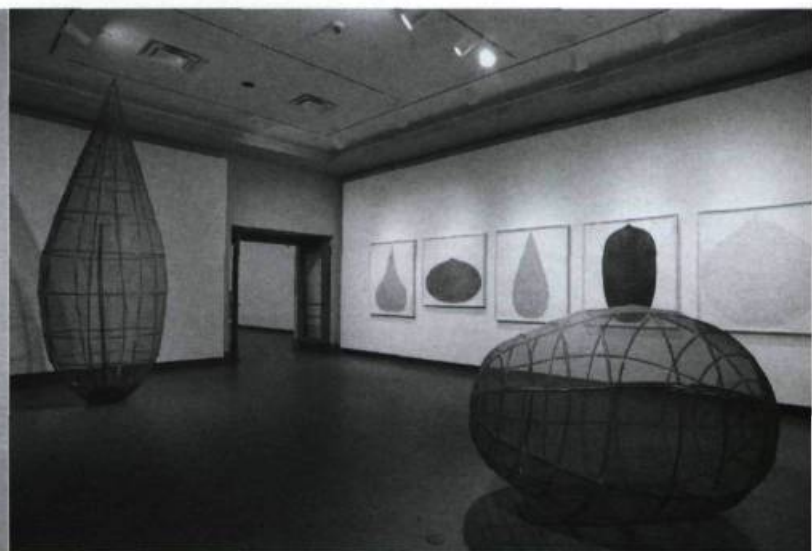
Manifest in the work of four artists (Kai Chan, Ed Pien, Sarah Stevenson, and Martha Townsend) were notions of living, working and creating spaces «in-between.» Innumerable potential narratives and visual points of entry were generated and offered to the viewer for contemplation. In this regard, the exhibition suspended perceptions related not only to representation and to the disciplines of drawing and sculpture, but to social and experiential states of being as well. More broadly, *Between Line and Form* revealed and spatialized the layers of contemporary life experience.

In Ed Pien's work, his highly-regarded animal-human hybrids ghosted through overlapping ink drawings stretched across the gallery walls, as well as across a 33-foot screen-like tissue, *A Mixing of Dreams*. This large layered tissue that hovered above the gallery floor

Let loose, the phantom-like drawings disperse across fragile and trembling tissues.

Buoyed up by pins on the walls and fishing line from the ceiling, Pien's installation reflects the voluminous shadows of the psyche. Like veils of the unconscious, Pien's oversized tissue seemed to float within the dimensions of the exhibition space. Imaginatively, his imagery expanded beyond the material reality of the graphic line and augmented its way with a dream-like consistency through the space traversed by the large tissue.

Numerous constructions by Kai Chan — recent winner of the Saidye Bronfman Award for Excellence in the Fine Crafts — also revealed and exposed the ways that shapes, memory and images implicate each other, making us gradually aware of where representational space and lived space intersect. Incorporating into his work everyday materials often collected from his own kitchen and garden, such as cinnamon sticks, incense sticks, toothpicks and twigs, Chan pushes these materials into new formations, where they suggest new spatialized vocabularies. His work proposes an interlacement of living and creating.



tions build upon a grammar of the body that does not coincide with its material or social permanence.

In another poignant work of Chan's, *What It Is I Came For, I Turn and Turn, Part V*, two bunches of incense sticks installed at eye level punctuate the gallery walls, inviting our gaze to closely inspect the trajectory of these elongated mustard and pink fire sticks with thickly-dipped lines. With their extended reach, the two bushel-like groupings are spaced a couple of feet apart. Installed on the wall, they explode toward the viewer as he enters the intimate gallery, like bursting firecrackers, seeming to extend beyond the sticks' physical limits and into our field of vision.

Between Line and Form proposes several methods of perceiving interstices «in-between,» besides expansive and volumetric forms and spaces. The exhibition explores the manifestation of infinite spaces and possibilities in intensely abstract works. Here, the interactions and intersections of line and form arrive at a point of infinity, having no limits or boundaries in space, extent, or magnitude. The compelling lines and inviting forms in the allusive works by Martha Townsend and

aries or exteriority of the drawings become reversed into interiority. The result is the creation of imaginary yet suggestive spaces whose logic is both its mode and its method. Displayed in two large sets of square grids, a further inter-referential dialogue between the numerous and varying shapes and spaces continued.

Sarah Stevenson's works highlight the artist's developed interest inside shapes and forms. In a series of five monochromatic works on paper and two large ribbed mesh-works, eternal states and balances were presented. Stevenson's chalk pastel and graphite drawings depicting large abstract forms appear suspended amongst the tracing lines used to grid the form's shapes. Some of these drawn lines were left intact and appeared both within the shapes and around the perimeters of the paper. The depths and volumes created by the large buoyed forms quickly disguised the markings on the two-dimensional plane of the paper. Illusionary, infinite spaces remained. The pencil lines, which once served as the architectural supports, remained only as traces or ghosts to the alluring shapes.

Shore/lines: responding to place

DENIS LONGCHAMPS

Stevenson's two sculptural forms, *Flame*, and *Egg*, co-habit with the drawings. One black nylon mesh piece reached from the floor toward the ceiling, the other, rested in a horizontal position on the floor. The strong lines of the forms were shaped by the yards of gridded mesh seamed together along its plastic rod armatures. The transparency of the mesh fabric allowed the gaze invisible entry inside the forms. Insides became outsides, however, as the emptiness of the gallery space was echoed back when attempting to look through the layers. The physical space inside the sculptures was therefore not separate from its outside, but rather appeared as a co-extensive interior in relation to the outside.

A resounding strength of *Between Line and Form* was reflected in the artists' intense encounters with their materials. The way that inside-space works in Stevenson's pieces, reflects her focused engagement with the limits of material and architectural boundaries. Not seeming to connect directly with the strict linearity of the white page or the sculpture's ribs, her imagery and shapes linger above their grids. Martha Townsend's suggestive shapes similarly occupy transitory and emergent spaces, as do Kai Chan's poetic constructions, and Ed Pien's graphic installations with Chinese tissues. Approaching the limits of their chosen materials, these artists replace the crossing lines of those limits and teach us about resistance within contemporary experience. By re-drawing the limits, they give shape to where limits define becomings.

Between Line and Form is a thoughtful and intelligent exploration into the spaces «in-between.» Reverberating between the languages of drawing and sculpture, the artworks shift disciplinary boundaries in order to generate endless spatial and experiential becomings. Revealed in the moments of these poetic unfoldings are a few of the infinite contemporary states of being, acting and living. ←

Between Line and Form

Kai Chan, Ed Pien, Sarah Stevenson
and Martha Townsend
Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa
January 16–March 16, 2003

The concept of *ArtCity* — a city that is encompassed by and devoted to art in a multiplicity of voices, expressions, and forms — is the vision of the MacLaren Art Centre's Director, William Moore. A city with a population of 120 thousand, one hour north of Toronto, and perceived as the gateway to the north, Barrie, Ontario, is the optimal location for this transformation.

The first major initiative under the umbrella of *ArtCity* is the environmental art biennial *Shore/lines*. From May to October 2003, the first edition of *Shore/lines* (plans are already underway for 2005!) not only offers its participants the opportunity to explore the nature theme and its relation to culture and humankind, but also references Barrie's own historical development as part of the city's sesquicentennial celebrations. Barrie embraces one end of Lake Simcoe, known as Kempenfelt Bay, and sits on what was the shore of the ancient Lake Algonquin. Kempenfelt Bay is the starting point of the historic Nine Mile Portage, used long before colonization by the First Nations to reach Georgian Bay, and the Bay also played an important role in the Fur Trade and the war of 1812.

On the basis of such a rich history, *Shore/lines* proposes to examine the real and imagined boundaries between land and water as well as their relations to each other.¹ Following the advice of Montreal-based independent curator and writer John K. Grande, the MacLaren invited sixteen artists from across Canada, the United States, and Europe — six of them working in teams of two — to choose a site within Barrie and create a response to the social and geographical terrain. This summer, fourteen such sites offer an equal number of responses. Some reference the impact of humankind on the environment, while others recreate what they envision to be idyllic, pre-civilization landscapes within the actual contemporary topography; some explore spiritual connections with nature, while others question the concept of his-



tory itself and its position toward the environment. Above all, each response stems from the premise that "nature is the art of which we are part,"² consciously or not, in communion, in colonization, or in rebellion. While most of the material used by the participating artists is found in or around their chosen site, some do include man-made materials to formulate a critical contrast with the bounty of nature. In environmental art, the natural world is both the subject and the object. The ensuing installations are intended to be ephemeral in order to emphasize the changing qualities of the real and imagined boundaries between land and water, the core theme of *Shore/lines*.

Newfoundland artist Will Gill has constructed a structure reminiscent of the lighthouses that have guided boats for centuries on waterways around the world. Erected on Georgian College's property, his installation references these buildings with its tall and slender column covered with the required warning stripes. It has no light, however; instead, it is topped with three radar-like dishes covered with straw. Gill's work combines his personal experience of the rugged Atlantic coastline (in Halifax and St. John's) and Barrie's topographical and agricultural his-

tory. Such lighthouses are still found in the region of Simcoe County bordering Georgian Bay, the earliest of which was built in 1834 on Simcoe Island at Nine Mile Point. In his work, Will Gill strives not only to question, but also to find a healthy balance between progress and nature — if such equilibrium exists at all. To create the wooden lighthouse Gill used dead pine trees removed from the local parkland in Barrie. The final trimming was done with various electric hand tools — a chainsaw, a sander, and a grinder —, leaving marks on the main body, the scars of industrialization on nature. Inspired in part by an oak tree twice as old as Barrie itself, the artist created a protection device usually situated on the physical boundaries of water and land. Traditionally a lighthouse's purpose is to warn of nature's destructive force — to protect people from danger; Gill's lighthouse is intended to do the opposite. His creation can be perceived as a warning sign to protect the old trees, a natural heritage, against industrialization, as well as suggesting a historical link connecting Simcoe County's past, its present, and its future.³

Although incorporating a more spiritual approach, similar links are found in the work of Alfio Bonanno. Founder of Tickon (Tranekaer

ALFIO BONANNO,
Between Land and Water, Shore/lines,
2003. MacLaren Art
Centre. Photo:
Andre Beneteau.