

Collection Insights: Drew Shiflett

On Linear Thinking

The drawings and sculptures of Drew Shiflett are sensuous and tactile, yet capable of transcending their own physicality to embrace both pathos and comedic self-consciousness. They are at once melancholic and at the same time whimsical and self-effacing, cousins, perhaps, to Charlie Chaplin's iconic Tramp or the absurdities of Gogo and Didi, the hopeless chumps from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Part sorrow, part satire, Shiflett draws inspiration from diverse sources --Chinese watercolors, literature of the Romance era and the Quilts of Gee's Bend. It is within this spirit of indefatigable discovery that the Islip Art Museum is pleased to examine this work, its roots and synthesis, in our exhibition titled *Collection Insights: Drew Shiflett*.



Scroll Relief, 2003 35 x 54 x 11" paper, cheesecloth, glue, polyester stuffing, styrofoam

Growing up in a theatrical family, it was natural that Drew Shiflett's first artistic ventures would be in the performing arts. But as an adolescent she evidenced an affinity for the visual when, inspired by a Matisse exhibition at the nearby Chicago Art Institute, she feverishly embarked on a series of cut, assembled and glued collages. Her gifts as a visual artist would not again manifest themselves until well into college where she developed her first accomplished series of figurative drawings. Figuration would be the catalyst for the development of her early work, and to the degree that figuration involves sympathy, emotion, flesh and skin, it remains extant in her work. Still, it would be in the throes of the Maryland Institute of Art's MFA program that the inevitable frustrations of graduate school would come to bear on her, driving her to begin ripping up paper and once again assembling it into the layered and woven wall pieces which define the basis of her mature work. To this end she developed a series of wall reliefs in which an intensive process of dense layering and compulsive repetition eventually eclipsed the readable images imbedded within them, transforming the picture plane itself into a swollen, tumorous rectangle. These early works, their pacing slow and laborious, expanded outward from the wall as if afflicted by a type of Postmodernist Elephantism. Architectural, allegorical and convulsively maximal, then and now Shiflett's works have defied easy categorization.

In both her drawings and sculpture, Shiflett's process is one of deliberation, multiplicity and accumulation. Like Homer's Penelope, she creates a continuum of form in which there seems to be no discernible beginning or end but a constant, unrelenting process which ultimately wills itself into stasis. Shiflett's methodology, decidedly low-tech, is very much home grown. After forming a skeletal armature, she painstakingly applies bits of gluey hand cut paper, cheesecloth, and other fibrous goods to the surface. The gradual layering of strips and lines weaves itself into structural form and through this methodical series of gestures the object slowly takes shape. Swelling exponentially from the inside out, these hybrid structures locate identity within the process of their own creation. Fragmentary and itinerant, the narrative thrust of Shiflett's earlier work eventually gave way to a primal language of textural and linear threads - its geometrics reductive and eccentric - which tells the delirious tale of its own making.

In *Scroll Relief*, the artist creates a ritualistic great wall -- personal, labyrinthian, obsessive -- a hive of elemental structure expanding laterally from east to west, reiterating itself in a continuum of soft, ambiguous geometry. This segment of Shiflett's lattice identifies itself, sheepishly, as a part of the greater whole and like a foundling ripped away from its motherland by continental drift it is restless, self-conscious, reluctant. Slightly slouching, drooping, straining against gravity to maintain its nascent, lateral form, thousands of tiny snips of paper are aligned and adjusted, placed and positioned as if hundreds of slaves had labored in its construction. Like a section of royal linen from Thebes, the ritual weaving appears entombed inside its own obsessive past and present. Yet for all its compulsivity, at the same time *Scroll Relief* seems to possess character traits which embody the modesty and diffidence of the reluctant bride, or the humility to be casually hung out to dry like a used bath towel.

Her sculpture muscles into its own existence with sheer willpower and the determination to evolve. A bevy of surplus materials, one more average than the next, is used in the production of these works. White glue, Styrofoam, polyester stuffing, toilet paper. Each of these is methodically, repeatedly applied over and under a

skeletal structure until it is smothered by a mesh skein of web-like interweavings. The most exotic of her materials, the tiny hand-snipped bits of handmade Abaca paper, (made from banana plant fiber), are fitted and fussed into the body of ornamental skin which will become this unfathomably articulated surface. In *Scroll Relief*, the physical form of this sheeting creates a primordial relief, variously sutured, mummified, and just readable as if a Rosetta stone has been glued in place over its tenuous ribs.

The approach to her drawings similarly requires the fixed ideas of meditation and a dilated vision which is seemingly infinite. Often she creates mythical worlds or interior architectures of vast horizontality -- wheat fields, horizon lines, seascapes. Shiflett has talked about the influence the written word has had on her apprehension of structure. She is awed by the sheer deftness required to transport a reader from the beginning to the end of a novel, to convey the deeply transformative power of the written word and of the patience and craftsmanship needed to create an environment which can sustain large ideas. In contrast, Shiflett apportions her focus, leaving behind the greater narrative and honing in on phraseology or vignettes. As if excised from an immense field of vision, the rectangular segments in her drawings are like ghosts which have been spirited away from a larger whole. The artist weaves a delicate grid of fragile, tremulous pencil lines which barely graze the paper surface. Subtle, rhythmic and meditative, the lines coalesce into transparent scrimms of soft organic geometry -- fetishistic, eccentric and diffuse. These elemental structures, founded on ambiguity and the raw transformative power of obsession, are anchored tentatively at the far reaches of the picture plane where they cleave to its outer margins. Here they lay claim to a geography which is parenthetical, a place reserved for note taking and the residues of subject matter. But like slow moving glaciers these intricate fragments have come to restlessly brake at the paper's edge as if gradually sliding through the stories of their own Ice Age.

Within the confines of these linear masses, Shiflett trades on their organic multiplicity and the dense absurdity of their structural fortitude. In *Untitled, #8*, a work acquired by the Islip Art Museum for its permanent collection, she employs the scalloped edges of an arcade, or inverted, Babylonian archways to hint at a deep theatrical space. Striated with columnar shadows, the delicate edges of two halves meet near the center where they share a common border. Their randomized edges are slightly off register, but it is here, at the spine of their sidelong abutment, that they make a fragile peace.

Janet Goleas Curator

The Permanent Collection Collection Insights: Drew Shiflett

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The Permanent Collection of Islip Art Museum

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