

Drew Shiflett: Line Readings

During a recent studio visit, Drew Shiflett briefly discussed the work of a few artists who are important to her—the delicate grids of Agnes Martin in particular. She also talked about Alan Shields, who emerged in the 1970s and is best known for post-minimalist work that uses marked and stitched fabric to make hybrids of sculpture and painting. Later, Shiflett mentioned Martín Ramírez, a self-taught artist hospitalized for most of his adult life for schizophrenia, whose often large-scale drawings of a few restricted motifs—fantastic urban scenes; railways; men on horseback—are inscribed within dense networks of parallel hatchings.

It is a striking trio, which traces a terrain that includes both sophisticated and intuitive approaches to regular, linear mark-making; firm adherence to abstraction and dalliance with figurative imagery; and a range of relationships to textiles—especially to weaving—as process and metaphor. In Shiflett’s own recent works, which she calls “constructed drawings” (they might also be called collages, or reliefs), fields of shade and tone, rich with atmosphere and, sometimes, hints of architecture or landscape as well as woven cloth, are built from the painstaking repetition of fine parallel marks. They are drawn variously in ink, sometimes with a Rapidograph pen; watercolor; pencil; and Conté crayon. The chromatic and tonal range is narrow: gray, darker gray, sepia. The drawings’ “construction” involves layers and adjacencies of pasted-together and interwoven sheets and strips of paper, most of it handmade, as well as cheesecloth and paper pulp. Generally, the glue and (if used) the watercolor cause the paper to buckle, which contributes to their subtle three-dimensionality. The growth of each composition is organic; sometimes there are guiding ideas, but usually not. Scale ranges from tiny

to substantial. The handmade-ness is unabashedly evident throughout, although some of the marks seem mechanically—or, magically—small and regular. The demands of the process are, Shiflett explains, “a way of slowing down time for me”; as a result, they are also a register of time for the viewer.

A method for slowing down time is also, nearly inevitably, a form of meditation. Originally a painting student, Shiflett says she started making drawings as a relief (the pun is inevitable) from working on canvas, which seemed unsatisfying. The nature of the work’s composition, its visible additions and subtractions, are as essential as its formal conclusions. Incremental calculations made along the way involve decisions about line and shape, individually and in mutual relationship. Despite her embrace of the intuitive and serendipitous, Shiflett is clear about wanting to “push the mark-making in as rigorous a direction as possible.” But she also admits to the balkiness of the process, to a kind of groping that is also crucial to the outcome. “My ideas are not fixed. They mutate as I go along,” she says of the business of beginning a new drawing, the larger of which can take months to complete, and then adds, “I’m elated when the piece comes to life, and I’m always trying to determine how and when this happens. It’s as if the drawing locks into place at the same time it becomes animated.”

All untitled, Shiflett’s constructed drawings vary considerably in the degree to which they suggest objective imagery. Several, such as *Untitled #59* and *Untitled #60*, have multiple horizontal courses in which colonnades, or windows, or perhaps narrow doorways can be discerned. Sequences of arches occasionally

appear, and are sometimes inverted to become scallops. At times, the patterning is all over, with a scrim of fine marks deepening in some places, becoming lighter and finer elsewhere. In other cases, areas of denser mark-making are blocked off in roughly rectangular configurations against lighter areas, themselves sometimes divided into large-scale grids. One drawing looks something like an architectural plan for a rather eccentric residence, with a tiny central structure connected by long corridors to a pair of matched pavilions. There are examples, such as *Untitled #62*, that are particularly close to textiles—tattersall, seersucker. Often, contrasting areas are pieced together, like patchwork. Several expansive horizontal drawings, much wider than they are high, such as *Untitled #56* and *Untitled #58*, strongly evoke landscapes. *Untitled #55*, a singular tall, narrow and irregular drawing, with protruding crosspieces, suggests a kind of totem.

The constructed drawings followed a series of sculptures in which the vocabulary of parallel hatchings, already central to Shiflett's working language, was further developed. Laid on the floor, or draped over frames that suggest both easels and looms, the sculptures have the volume of heavy drapery, but appear airy, nearly weightless. Here, too, there is a range of referentiality. *Tongues* (2000) has appendages that resemble levers or pedals. *Stretch* (2000) snakes along the floor like a wagon train seen from a distance. *Easel Sculpture #2* (2000) most closely anticipates the constructed drawings that followed, with its wry negotiation (per the title) between sculptural and pictorial form.

In a landmark 1978 essay titled "Grids," Rosalind Krauss described the format as riven by contradiction. On the one hand, "Logically speaking, the grid extends, in all directions, to infinity," she wrote. On the other, "the grid is an introjection of the boundaries of the world into the interior of the work; it is a mapping of the space inside the frame onto itself. It is a mode or repetition, the content of which is the conventional nature of art itself."¹ To the extent that the grid is extroverted, it brings in the whole of visual experience. But it is also purely formal and hermetic. It often resonates at a frequency that can be called (though Krauss hesitates to do so) spiritual. Equally inclusive is Sol LeWitt's account of Conceptualism, written at a time when he was practicing it by deploying regular geometries, including carefully ruled and delicately drawn parallel lines. The first of his 1969 "Sentences on Conceptual Art" reads, "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."² Not altogether dissimilar is Agnes Martin's characteristic invocation, in one breath, of beauty and imperfection: "I hope I have made it clear that the work is about perfection as we are aware of it in our minds but that the paintings are very far from being perfect—completely removed in fact—even as we ourselves are,"³ she said in an undated statement with which a book of her collected writings begins.

This combination of voices, and Martin's in particular, clearly evokes Shiflett's. Using the rudimentary marks of grids, and hinting at—while decisively refraining from—more elaborate material forms, Shiflett commits herself to the experiential receptivity of which Martin speaks so eloquently.

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¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA and London, MIT, 1986, pp. 18-19.

² Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," first published in *O-9*, New York, and *Art-Language*, England, both 1969, reprinted in *Sol LeWitt*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1978, p. 168.

³ Agnes Martin, "Notes," in *Agnes Martin: Writings/Schriften*, Osfildern-Ruit, Haatje Cantz, 1992, p. 15.