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# Cogito Vertigo Sum

## Danforth Gallery's "Drawing the New Millennium"

By Chris Thompson

*"Drawing the New Millennium: The Challenge of Media and Idea to the Nature of Drawing" is at the Danforth Gallery through November 16. Call (207) 775-6245.*



**"DEED AMERICANA #30,"**: Douglas Navarra, gouache and pencil.

A fierce and ageless girl in a Snow White dress grips the wrist of a human-rabbit hybrid creature. She scolds the velveteen freak with the disturbing intensity peculiar to the kinds of infractions found in fairy tales, where crimes against nature can commingle with crimes against narrative in the most haunting ways. Giving psychoanalysts the wettest of dreams, even Sarah Goldstein's title for this work ("Reprimand #6") combines the emotional and the clinical into a bedtime story gone haywire.

This spirit of open-ended experimentation with the processes of drawing, and with the question of what exactly constitutes drawing today, is one of two major themes that the show "Drawing the New Millennium" seeks to bring into convergence. The other is the idea of staging a show of drawing by emerging artists from New York to Newfoundland. To this end, Maine Artists' Space hired two curators to work in collaboration: Elizabeth Finch, curator for the Drawing Center in New York, and John Murchie, Independent Curator of the Maritimes. They met this past August at the Danforth Gallery and chewed over hundreds of artists' submissions from here and there throughout the North Atlantic.

Interestingly, the show's final cut does not include any of our neighbors to the north.

Perhaps in order to do justice to the desire for a cohesive body of work that explores "the challenge of media and idea to the nature of drawing," the hope of having an artist from every state or province had to take a backseat. There may, however, be a more interesting response than disappointment to the absence of total geographical inclusivity. If the show's aim is to ask the philosophical question of how drawing itself is changing in response both to "new media" and "new ideas," then its larger question concerns the relationship between concept and its conception. With respect to the missing Canadians, this question could be: is a good idea that never takes physical form any less relevant than one that does?

It may be that because nobody really knows what constitutes drawing, it is uniquely poised to address such heady questions. At the cusp of the intuitive and the analytical, even the most academic artistic practices treat drawing as the activity where the conceptual and perceptual flow into one another, where artists can take themselves out for a test drive.

This promiscuity works in strange partnership with the long-standing quasi-Protestant idea that drawing is the honest toil that is the necessary investment for any artistic product worth its salt. Teachers of all media will insist that their pupils draw and draw again; one of art history's Old Master disciplinarians, perhaps Poussin, said: "Drawing is the probity of art."

Works like Steve Locke's "Notes for Paintings" is a provocative example of work that slips between these two tendencies, the strict and the sexy, that constitute drawing's identity. The piece consists of dozens of quick sketches — pen and ink, polaroids, computer printout — tacked to the wall in a way that resembles both an art-school critique and a stalker's hidden den. Their charged, surreptitious feel owes in equal parts to the subject matter (clothed and naked men) and to the quickness with which the images were sketched, photographed, or downloaded.

In one, a naked muscleman divides his downward glance between his own semi-erect penis and his barbell on the otherwise featureless floor, as though a hidden relationship between the two were about to present itself. Surrounding this image are other fragments: men in business suits engaged in conversation, men in church engaged in the celebration of the Eucharist, men in the shower engaged in some other activities. Locke writes: "I want to expose the things hidden by the architecture of suits: the prohibition of contact, the unwritten codes of desire, and the isolation of contemporary life."

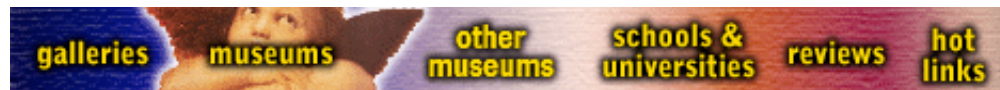
The work of all of the artists in the show is unified by a concern with the ability of drawing to probe and to scramble the relationship between reality and its representation. While much of the show employs relatively low-tech materials, the collaborative work of Green/Hoffman/Piribeck really picks up the "new media" ball and wanders with it. They use Global Positioning Satellite technology to make drawings recording their explorations of Portland's Back Cove, employing

cutting-edge media in the most old-fashioned play.

At the opposite end of the technical spectrum, Sarah Bapst's "Despite" presents five panels recording her methodical efforts to translate a Sanskrit phrase into English. Here drawing becomes the process of making visible her detours through dictionaries in a number of languages, following a whirlpool path through layers of cultural exchange, making the work feel more like vivisection than scholarship. She records her notes on entries relating to philology and Indian philosophy in a drive for knowledge that she seems to acknowledge to be confounded from the start. One mentions "vidya," meaning knowledge, another "maya," meaning illusion; at the end of the fifth panel we are no closer to resolving the tension between them.

Nor, at the end of this show, are we any closer to resolving the question of the "nature" of drawing; instead, drawing is presented as a tool for translating between coexisting realities — visual and verbal, emotional and intellectual, actual and imaginary — a process of translation in which it is impossible not to get lost, in which drawing never draws a final conclusion.

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