

Boston Globe
January 18, 2002

Drawing Attention “Back to the Drawing Board”

by: Christine Temin

It's a drawing if the artist says so. That's the criterion Bill Arning used in selecting the 149 works in "The 17th Drawing Show," the all over the map exhibition at the Mills Gallery of the BCA. A curator at MIT's List Visual Arts center, Arning was the guest juror for the 2002 edition of an event that over the years has repeatedly defined and redefined "drawing." This year's "drawings" include video, a two part work held together with a zipper, Pop Tarts with political messages and three-dimensional, free-standing pieces that could just as well qualify as sculpture.

Take Mary Sherman's "Midnight Blue," yards and yards of paper covered with blue oil stick, unrolling on the floor in extravagant flourishes. Drawing? Well, it does create a line, while alluding also to the scroll that is the traditional support for calligraphy and graphics.

There's a scroll in the show too -- Douglas Kornfeld's "Portrait of a Crowd," vellum on wooden rollers, the paper filled with the shorthand image identifying men's restrooms repeated in tidy rows. It's a portrait not only of a crowd, but of conformity.

Half the sprawling exhibition is hung "salon Style" -- floor to ceiling, in the 19th-century manner -- and the sheer goofiness of installing 21st-century art in this academic fashion is liberating. You know from the start you're not going to be able to take in everything -- unless you stay a week or so -- so your eye is selective. Its almost guaranteed that you'll find something of interest.

Sometimes Arning is able to create conversations among works. Muscular, slashing, urban architectural forms in drawing by David Lloyd Brown, Eileen Gillespie, and Kristine Cortese harmonize well. Nan Freeman's "Sequined Hat for Bill," a huge commanding image that emphasizes the contrast between black and white, is flanked by two works that provide a deliberate contrast: Jesse Kaminsky's "Dark Energy," a textured black web that look like a monochrome; and Julie Levesque's white-on-white "Dishes in/Dishes/Out."

The "woman's work" theme enters with Magda Fernandez's embroidered "Why," another white-on-white piece, and continues in Rachel Perry Welty's "Yellow Drawing." Welty has chained together the twist ties that close plastic bags, robbing them of their function. "Yellow Drawing" looks like the creation of a housewife gone off the deep end, and its also an example of the many humorous works Arning has included in the show.

Its become almost de rigeur for big contemporary exhibitions to include a viewer-participation piece. The ever impish Jerry beck has supplied one for the "Drawing Show." Beck's "Quickdraw" is a huge wooden hand hanging on the wall, with a box of pencils nearby: You're invited to doodle.