

ON·VERGE

alternative art criticism

Posted on November 1, 2013 by CUE
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JOAN WALTEMATH: THE DINWOODIES AT SCHEMA PROJECTS, BROOKLYN September 20 – October 27, 2013



Eight of Joan Waltemath's graphite on mylar drawings are on view at Schema Projects in Bushwick until October 27th. This is the first show of the artist's work in New York in 12 years and it offers a long overdue look at how Waltemath has been radically transforming the possibilities of drawing.

The drawings engage the architecture of the storefront gallery in such singular and delightful ways that the works might have been composed for the space like an occasional poem. Four of the pieces run floor-to-ceiling and are less than a foot wide. They suggest columns or, with *wind's place* and *mind's place*, doorjambs that mirror the entrance to the gallery. Three other works, all approximately the size of the human body, are hung high on the wall and draw the eye up, enlarging the space. The last and smallest work hangs over circuit breaker box, a playful provocation to turn the lights off, which the gallery readily allows. For the drawings are made to be seen in natural light. The unframed drawings are slightly convex — like scrolls or pieces of film — and float in front of the wall.

Joan Waltemath. *Of the West* (2008). Graphite, colored pencil on mylar plot. 81 x 25 inches

The drawings were created by burnishing graphite of different densities into the surface of the mylar. Printed with an irregular grid, the initial impression is one of maps or architectural drawings. Yet each field in this unpredictable array of squares, bands, and rectangles gives back a precise and subtly shifting quantity of reflected light. Other rectilinear figures – often in rapid shifts of scale — are burnished in white, black or bluish pencil and appear to float on these highly reflective grounds. In *Of the West*, for example, a black rectangle seems to be racing down the drawing from the top with an acute sense of arrival.

This body of work was made in response to the Dinwoody petroglyphs, ten thousand year old rock drawings in the canyons of Wyoming. Waltemath grew up in the Great Plains and Indian artifacts are integral to her artistic vision. The petroglyphs, she has suggested elsewhere, are our American Lascaux. Her drawings offer a compelling vision of modern abstraction rooted in Native American spatiality. Shoshone elders say the rock drawings were made to guide vision quests. Waltemath's drawings reward contemplation with visions of vast space that eschew all the strategies and illusions of Western perspectival space.

Looking at *wind's place* and *mind's place*, for example, we could be flying over a sliver of the gridded landscape of the Plains like the wind itself. At other moments, though, we seem to be standing before that immense landscape as it reaches above and below us. And, indeed, at over nine feet high and less than a foot wide, these works cannot be grasped in a single glance but draw the eye up, then down. Rather than evoking the illusions of entry and mastery associated with perspectival space, these works leave us feeling cradled or embraced by something much larger than ourselves. Although purely abstract, there are moments when these works recall Chinese landscape painting, which also employs verticality to place us before an unbounded space. As *the dinwoodies* draw the eye up, again and again, the mind begins to settle. They harmonize body and mind, attuning us to themselves and the space in which we perceive them.

The underlying grid matrix of these drawings is based on harmonic progressions. Waltemath uses a CAD program to project the harmonic progressions around a virtual architectural space as series of increasing intervals, like the intervals between the notes played together to create chords. Yet these intervals are allowed to approach infinity, wrapping and folding the space in these harmonies. The result is a visualization of an infinite amount of harmonic space inside a finite room. If we remember that these harmonic intervals grow larger as they approach infinity, it becomes clear that Waltemath has inverted the logic of Western perspectival space. Rather than the progressively diminishing march of orthogonals towards a vanishing point, these harmonically increasing orthogonals fill the room with space. No window necessary; imagine for a moment you are the vanishing point.

That an algorithm of infinite, harmonic space girds these drawings is perhaps the reason why we seem at times to be looking at a section of a map of the cosmos, an impression that is reinforced by the numbers that ring the drawings and cue the grid lines. The vastness and suddenness of the impression is transporting. And just as suddenly the drawings shimmer and flash. Their highly reflective surfaces pull you back in.

Like auras, borderless colors float on the highly reflective surface of these drawings: reddish pinks, soft blues, green. They form a counterpoint to the precise, rectilinear grounds. Slowly they parse: blue is the ambient outside light streaming in the storefront windows; green the tree, blond the floor. A car drives by streaking the surface with a flash of silver light. And that reddish pink is me, which I discover as I step closer and the color moves. Delicate, curling gently away from the wall, the surface of the drawing sways with you. Another kind of space opens up – before you, behind you, including you. There is something immensely quiet about this space, like that moment between dream and waking. The world paints itself on these drawings.

Up close, the extraordinary labor involved in creating these drawings becomes apparent. Each field of burnished graphite is laid down by hand, line by line, in one of four directions until line becomes surface, shimmering and transmuted. At times, the burnished graphite evokes the surfaces of the rock on which the Dinwoody petroglyphs appear. At others they look like vinyls and would sing if touched.

This summer, the re-installation of Robert Irwin's *Scrim Veil—Black Rectangle – Natural Light* (Whitney Museum of Art, 1977) provoked a collective sigh of relief. Like Irwin's seminal work, these drawings employ natural light, architectural awareness, freedom of movement to increase our perceptual acuity and turn us on to ourselves in the world. Irwin left painting behind. Waltemath came back and transformed it.