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"Drawing, not toeing, the line"

"International Paper" at the UCLA Hammer takes delight in sensual pleasures and material substance.

By Christopher Knight, Times Staff Writer

Conceptual art, which downplays the visual quality of objects in order to emphasize artistic ideas, is long established as a mainstream practice. It has transformed the international cultural landscape over the last 30-plus years.

One place the effect can be seen with unusual clarity is in the way artists now casually regard the medium of drawing. At the UCLA Hammer Museum, a sizable and often engaging survey of recent drawings by emerging artists from the United States, Mexico, Europe, Japan and China -- all under the age of 46 -- shows how. Drawing has always served as the most direct evidence of the unfolding processes of artistic thought -- the record of an artist's mind at work -- so drawing is a natural for today's post-Conceptual art world. And if the show, which is cleverly titled "International Paper," did not set out to chronicle that development in all its complexity and nuance, it nonetheless embodies it.

For one thing, most of the artists assembled by Hammer director Ann Philbin and curators James Elaine and Claudine Isé make drawings as their primary mode of expression. Although some work in other mediums (especially painting), 15 of the 22 artists work almost exclusively on paper, according to the show's concise and handsomely designed catalog.

Drawing doesn't function here as a preliminary step on the way to making something else. From the strange, colored-pencil trees and other flora by Hillary Bleecker, where exquisite fantasy seems to harbor a nebulous feeling of irradiated dread, to the silvery expanse of translucent paper used by Sandeep Mukherjee, in which lines and shapes incised with a needle create ethereal, shifting planes of reflected light, drawing is enough.

What Bleecker, Mukherjee and about 10 others also demonstrate is that, in order to make it enough, the visual qualities of the object cannot be slighted. Conceptual art may have been instrumental in changing our ideas about drawing, but how a drawing looks remains paramount.

About half the drawings in this show look pretty terrific, partly because many of the artists exploit the visual, social and political subtleties of showy decoration in their work. (Lari Pittman's art is a critical precedent for many of these.) They represent what might be called the New Paganism -- a delight in sensual pleasures and material substance.

Carolyn Castaño's baroque birds, encrusted with paste gemstones and collaged with ads from glossy magazines, transform the gallery into an eccentric fashion runway. Berlin's Kather-ine Wulff, who works part time as a theatrical hairstylist, revels in costumed artifice. Even Nick Lowe pushes artifice and display way over the top: His huge, dense, colored-pencil drawing of a rave at Stonehenge is like a heavy-metal version of a 19th century fairy painting by British eccentric Richard Dadd.

Lowe's other drawing, the spectacular "The Business of Fancydancing," provides the show's wow! moment. (At 22, he's the youngest artist here.) An 8-foot-tall fusion of an Eastern mandala and a Western Rorschach blot, a cosmological map and a guide to an individual psyche, is cobbled together from elaborately cut and woven strips of multicolored paper. Like a gigantic telephone-pad doodle re-created in three dimensions with excruciating care -- and on a public scale -- the work forms a dazzling locus for the projection of all kinds of tangled audience fantasies.

Cut paper is also the medium for Mexico City's Pablo Vargas-Lugo, whose subject matter seems to slip back and forth between pure abstraction and smoky, cloud-and-light-filled landscapes. In these spidery, visually sophisticated renderings, Matisse's paper cutouts meet the Mexican folkloric tradition of papel picado, in which colored tissue paper is deftly scissored for use as party décor.

Likewise, Tam Van Tran emphasizes his drawings as physical objects. Using strips of crumpled paper punched with holes, joined with thousands of metal staples and smeared with bright green paint laced with chlorophyll, they're incessant visual essays on natural processes of nourishment and decay.

In a very different, hyper-realist way, so is the monumental charcoal rendering of a deep, brooding forest, mounted on four wooden panels, by Japan's Honda Takeshi. The image and its materials -- trees, paper, charcoal and wood -- are all different forms of the same thing.

Also monumental is the intricate linear maze by Cologne's Silke Schatz, which has the look of an enormous architectural projection. The vast, crystalline rooms, intricately detailed corridors and other majestic spaces all seem to have erupted from a modest pattern on the floor -- linoleum as millennial destiny.

The show also includes some computer imagery. There are DVDs by Milan's Alessandro Pessoli and by Yuri Masnyj and the anonymous team that calls itself Lansing-Dreiden, both from New York. All are weakly derivative -- Pessoli's of watercolors by Francesco Clemente, Masnyj's of laptop-style computer games (think electronic Etch-A-Sketch) and Lansing-Dreiden's waifs-in-the-wilderness of fashionable Japanese cartoons (anime).

The recent popularity of animation by South African artist William Kentridge, whose brilliant short films are made from scores of Expressionist charcoal drawings, is one likely impetus for including animation here. But in a show where paper offers the sole common denominator for a hugely diverse array of drawings, television sets and LCD screens just feel out of place. The widespread attraction to drawing's emphatically handmade quality may even partly represent a recoil from the slick remoteness of the ubiquitous screen.

Indeed, drawing's inherently old-fashioned quality can be salutary. Kim McCarty's five watercolors of preadolescent children, each isolated on an otherwise blank page, are composed from thin washes of luxurious color in a most traditional manner. As puddles of transparent paint assume the visual tenor of a bruise, fragility melds with something far harsher. McCarty's poignant subject matter is hardly unique, but her skillful rendering of the collision between childhood beauty and youthful damage echoes with tender vulnerability.

On the other hand, Aaron Morse's strangely suggestive literary illustrations are unthinkable without the morphing capabilities of the computer. Pulling, squeezing and otherwise distorting images that recall tales from America's past, he evokes the narrative pliability of social memory.

Faux naif qualities turn up in the storybook images of Swedish artist Jockum Nordström, mythic tales by San Francisco's Shaun O'Dell and even the serial abstractions of New Yorker Nina Lola Bachhuber. The show is somewhat heavy on this urban folk-style art, which feels repetitive.

One more note: Nearly 40% of the artists in "International Paper" -- and most of the best ones -- work in Los Angeles. The mix is appropriate because of the longstanding abundance of excellent artists here, and notable because of the ratio's difference from the general museum norm.

It's refreshing to see a show that is neither culturally provincial, merely boosting local art for its own sake, nor tacitly focused on institutional careerism, by boosting fashionable new artists from elsewhere to pave an avenue of future curatorial mobility.

"International Paper" demonstrates that the function of a richly cosmopolitan art museum is complex but distinct -- that is, to show what the world of art out there looks like from here.