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Decisive Line Drawings by Dan Howard

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Dan F. Howard. *Abstract Drawing: Two*, 2010. Charcoal; 91.4 x 149.9 cm (36 x 59 in.). Courtesy of the artist.

Decisive Line

Drawings by Dan Howard

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In mathematics, a line is the geometric figure formed by a point moving along a fixed direction, and its major property is that it is one-dimensional.

In art, however, line has much more than a single dimension. Lines are mutable and chameleon-like in character—they can be soft and seductively flowing, agitated and emotionally loud, or passively descriptive. Line also serves as the fundamental element of most drawings. In this exhibition, Dan Howard reveals his continuing fascination with, and mastery of, line. Composed not only of charcoal, graphite, and pen-and-ink drawings, but also of oil

paintings, this array of works showcases the artist's fluency in drawing and represents just a sampling of his production over the past two decades.

Although drawing is often dismissed as preparatory in nature, it is in fact central to most visual enterprises. The revered neoclassical artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres declared, "Drawing is the probity of art. To draw does not simply mean to reproduce contours; drawing does not simply consist of line: drawing is also expression, the inner form, the surface, modeling." To Ingres and to many others

before and since, drawing constituted the bedrock of art. One only need look across the expansive history of art to see the truth of his assertion. Renowned artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, Käthe Kollwitz, and Pablo Picasso produced breathtakingly affecting and impressive paintings, prints, sculptures, and works in other mediums, all of which stemmed from their enviable abilities as draftsmen. And drawing's importance is not limited to the West; consider the centrality of ink drawings to centuries of Asian art.

In *Decisive Line*, the primacy of drawing—and line in particular—is on full display. Most of the works on display here, especially those done in graphite or pen and ink, consist predominately of crosshatched lines. This is consistent with Howard's working methods



Dan F. Howard. *Colorado Postcard, Brighton*, 2010. Oil on canvas; 29.2 x 24.8 cm (11 1/2 x 9 3/4 in.). Courtesy of the artist.

over the course of his career, which got an early start. The artist was born in Iowa City in 1931 and majored in art as an undergraduate at the University of Iowa. After a short stint in the Air Force in the mid-1950s, he returned to the university, where he received his Master of Fine Arts (with a concentration in painting) in 1958. After moving through the ranks at Arkansas State and Kansas State universities, Howard came to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in 1974 as a full professor and chair of the Department of Art, in which capacity he served until 1983. He retired in 1997 but has continued the vigorous practice that he established years earlier.

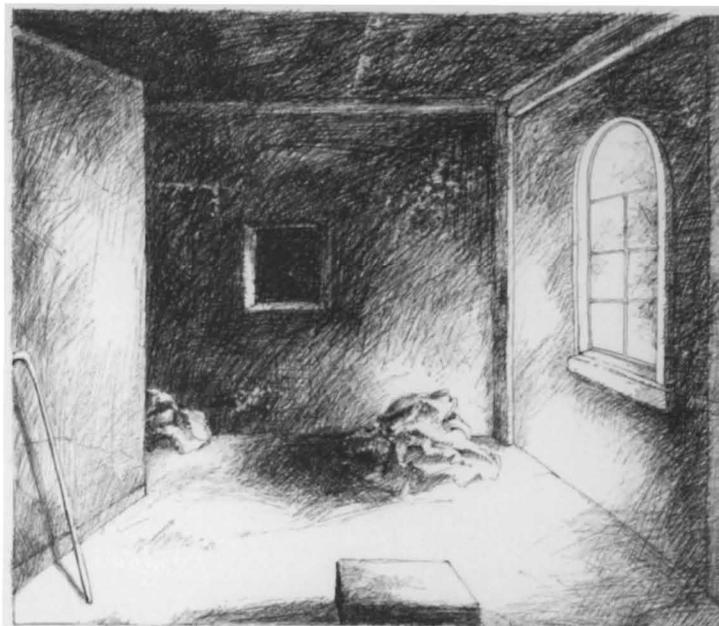
Throughout his career, Howard has often worked in series; this, he believes, allows him to develop an idea in a systematic way. Although the scope of this exhibition makes it difficult to accommodate entire series, works such as *Colorado Postcard Studies*, *Colorado Postcard Study: II*, *Colorado Postcard, Brighton*, and *Colorado Postcard (Biomorphic Variation)* provide a glimpse into the challenges and benefits of working in this way. Looking at these four works, one can see how the artist explored different facets—some formal, some conceptual—of the postcard image. The derivation of these works from often-cheesy mid-century postcards is made evident by the word *Colorado*, which is emblazoned across part of the image. Howard often revels in such tongue-in-cheek (or outright satirical) references. But this series is more than just a nostalgic reference to an endearing travel ritual. The artist made regular summer visits to Aspen, where he took photographs that serve as the basis for these images.

Although his emphasis on line—and assertive, decisive line at that—is very much on display in this

show, Howard is also deeply invested in exploring the presentation of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. For him, the energetic, expansive use of crosshatching helps create a sense of space, and a quick glance at any of his works impresses this upon the viewer. The dark and light areas that result from the placement of these lines create a sense of space. In some images, such as *Secluded Interiors (Of the Mind)*, this space is fairly easy to navigate, while in others, like *Carnevale*, it becomes more difficult. Indeed, the artist seems to enjoy confronting viewers with ambiguities, challenging us to work our way through unclear spaces that sometimes beckon and guide us in and sometimes seems to collapse upon themselves. For example, in *Bondage/Pillow: Reprise*, we are invited into a scene that at first glance reveals itself as a bed with a bound pillow in the background and crumpled blanket in the foreground. Focusing on the latter, however, creates a visual field in which it dissolves into abstract passages of paint.

Working in different mediums is also important to Howard. Each has its own unique qualities, and he ensures that those take center stage. He has always maintained that an artist should be true to the medium and exploit its unique capabilities; for example, a pencil drawing should not look like a photograph. That commitment is evident in this exhibition. Every medium—charcoal, graphite, oil, pen and ink—asserts itself emphatically.

Although painting in oil is ostensibly different from drawing with graphite, the former is still very much informed by the latter; in other words, drawing is truly the “probity of art” and serves as the foundation of other mediums. Even as celebrated a painter



Dan F. Howard. *Secluded Interiors (Of the Mind)*, 1992. Pen and ink on paper; 38.1 x 44.5 cm (15 x 17 1/2 in.). Courtesy of the artist.

as Paul Cézanne acknowledged this fact, noting, “Drawing and color are not separate at all; in so far as you paint, you draw. The more the color harmonizes, the more exact the drawing becomes.” For this reason, it is entirely appropriate that oil paintings be included in this exhibition.

This embrace of many mediums allows Howard to engage with a wide variety of subject matter, as is evident from the titles of his works. Over the years, he has produced series prompted by his fascination with such diverse topics as Caravaggio, comic strips, Egyptology, photos from the Hubble Space Telescope, and Stonehenge. Often, these are the result of personal experiences such as a 1980 trip to Stonehenge or of longstanding interests like that in comic-book and comic-strip art. This engagement is far from superficial, prompting the artist to revisit subjects repeatedly and resulting in titles such as *Bondage/Pillow: Reprise* and *Disasters Revisited: IV*.



Dan F. Howard. *Bondage/Pillow: Reprise*, 2010. Oil on canvas; 154.9 x 147.3 cm (61 X 58 in.). Courtesy of the artist.

Virtually all of Howard's work involves degrees of both representation and abstraction; in some ways, it is amazingly catholic in scope, including a wide range of materials, mediums, sizes, and subjects.

This diversity allows for, and in fact invites, viewers to engage intensively, offering them many ways to be drawn into the works. This engagement proves the impact of Howard's art and is also a yardstick that he uses to measure its success. "I am disappointed," he has said, "when a viewer doesn't want to come back and look again and again and again. I don't want them to 'get it' on the first viewing. It is sort of a dual proposition. There are things I attempt to engender, that I want to portray, but the total equation is dependent on the interaction with the viewer. Without that, the painting is not complete."

This show, ultimately, not only shares Dan Howard's mastery of drawing, but also helps us understand the value of drawing as a way to process the world around us. As the preeminent art historian Kenneth Clark once astutely noted, "It is often said that Leonardo drew so well because he knew about things; it is truer to say that he knew about things because he drew so well." With that in mind, we would all do well to take the lead of artists like Howard and immerse ourselves in the practice of drawing. Perhaps, eventually, we'll arrive at images that are as engaging and captivating as his.

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