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ART REVIEW

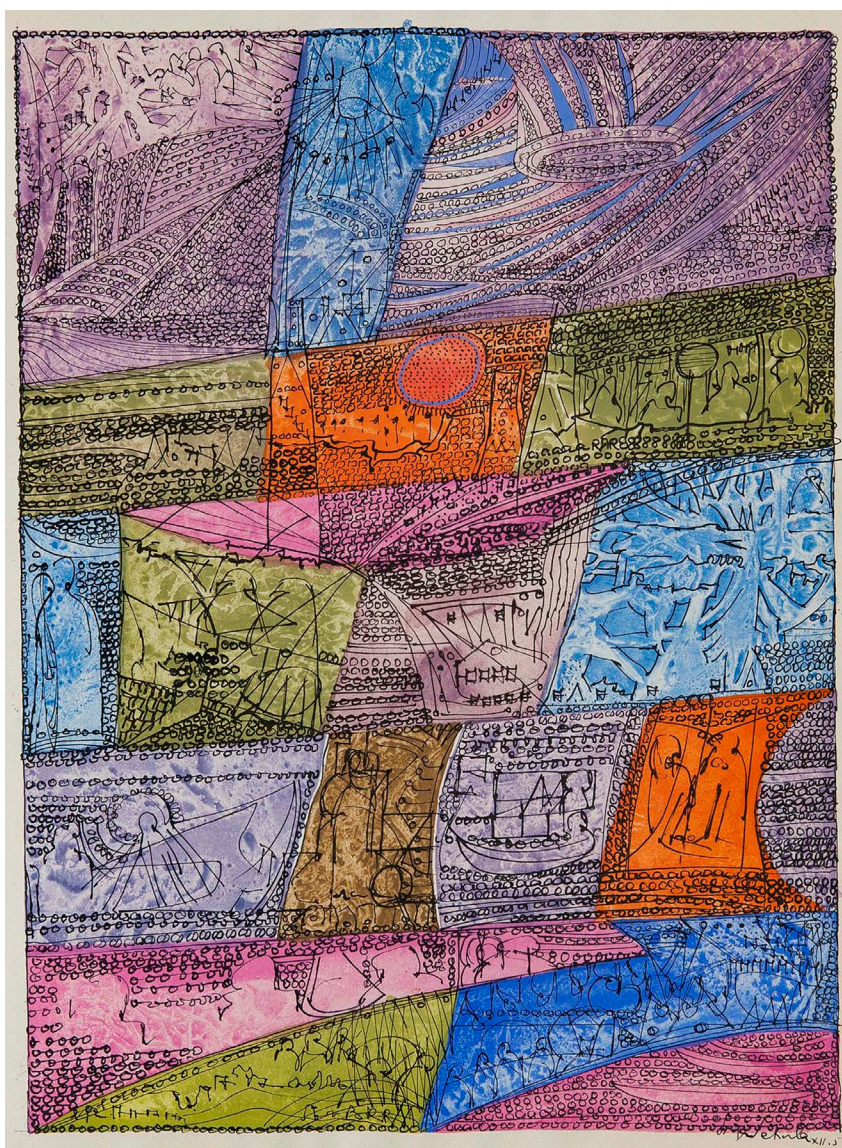
Degree Zero: Drawing at Midcentury' Review: Sketching a Path Into a New Era

An exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art shows how artists used the most elemental of creative practices—drawing—to reinvent their world.

By Eric Gibson Dec. 5, 2020, New York

Because drawing is more modest in scale and intimate in its mode of address than many of the other forms of contemporary art being shown today, it is easy to overlook or take for granted. Kudos to the Museum of Modern Art, then, for thrusting it into the conversation with “Degree Zero: Drawing at Midcentury.” The show covers the years 1948-61, when in the aftermath of World War II artists felt art itself had to be reinvented from the ground up and chose that most fundamental of processes, drawing, for the task. At every turn “Degree Zero” upends our expectations to tell us something new about what was going on at that time.

The approximately 80 works here were all drawn from MoMA’s collection by Associate Curator Samantha Friedman, the show’s organizer, and have been installed with sufficient space between them to permit safe viewing at close quarters. They were made by artists from



Sonja Sekula, *The Voyage*, 1956, ink and watercolor on paper, 12.5 x 9.5 inches

Latin America, Asia and Africa in addition to Europe and North America, until recently the museum's almost exclusive focus. So along with MoMA pantheon members like Henri Matisse and Jackson Pollock, we encounter the likes of Jean Dubuffet, Willys de Castro, Otto Piene and Yayoi Kusama, as well as names likely to be as new to the general public as they were to me. This broad-gauge approach is nothing less than revelatory, forcing us to think differently about certain exalted reputations as a result.

The show's theme is poignantly captured in an untitled charcoal and chalk drawing by the French abstractionist Hans Hartung from 1960. It consists of closely abutting dark, black vertical marks of almost uniform length. On the one hand it reads as a kind of existentialist manifesto, "I draw, therefore I am." Yet at the same time, the individual parts seem to be in the process of resolving themselves into an image—art coming into being before our eyes.

Among the unforgettable discoveries is **Sonja Sekula (1918-1963)**, who divided her time between the U.S. and her native Switzerland, where, the label tells us, she underwent treatment for mental illness. "The Voyage" (1956) is a jewel-like, ink-and-watercolor work organized into a loose grid. Each of its panels is a different color and obsessively filled with a dense web of lines and minuscule circles within which the only recognizable image is that of a ship. It is a mesmerizing, vertiginous record of the journey through a charged interior landscape that demands—and rewards—prolonged, close scrutiny. A pity, then, that it's hung almost too high to be seen properly.

But the artist whose work is most likely to linger in the mind is that of Joong Seop Lee (1916-1956). A refugee during the Korean War who was continually on the move, he "drew" with a sharp-pointed object on the foil from cigarette packages, adding paint to the incisions. "People Reading the Newspaper (Number 84)" (1950-52), one of three such works here, is a semi-abstract image that is as much about the lively, all-over dialog between dark lines and colored shapes as it is a group portrait. Adding to the work's impact is the contrast between its intense pictorial energy and diminutive size—about that of an iPhone screen.

Next to such works, forged in the fire of adversity by individuals for whom art-making was nothing less than a lifeline, the efforts of the high priests of the New York School can seem slight, even trifling. Jasper Johns's shadowy image of an American flag looks wanly ho-hum, while the blizzard of lines making up Cy Twombly's three untitled works comes across as so much pseudo-Abstract Expressionist posturing. Ellsworth Kelly's "Study for La Combe II" (1950), a network of diagonal black lines on a white ground derived from the play of shadows he saw on a stoop, has the feel of a clever design-school project and little more.

The only such figure who emerges unscathed is first-generation Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline. In his collage-drawing "Untitled II" (1952), thick black lines lunge across a now-yellowed page torn from a Brooklyn phone book ("Annleu Louis...Ann&Emily Bridal Shoppe...Ann Leone Silkscreen Studio...Annable Oliver S"). The thick marks are urgent and authentic, playing off both the page's flatness and rectangular shape, as well as the underlying pattern of type.

Aside from the venerable Matisse and Alberto Giacometti, the other artists who shine here are the Latin Americans. Their work is a live wire newly threaded through MoMA's permanent collection displays and exhibitions thanks to an enhanced commitment to this region in recent

PETER BLUM GALLERY

years. It enlarges the language of geometric abstraction pioneered by Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian in the early 20th century, not only with a new formal inventiveness and rigor—their imagery is much more architectonic—but also, God bless them, humor. You often encounter witty interplays between figure and ground, two dimensions and three, as in the Brazilian Hércules Barsotti's "Drawing No. 1 (Desenho No.1)" (1958) where one moment its horizontal black spines appear flat on the sheet and in the next to be ballooning out at you like a relief sculpture.

Plan on an unhurried visit to "Degree Zero." You're going to want to spend a lot of time with these drawings—and maybe even come back.

—*Mr. Gibson is the Journal's Arts in Review editor.*