Ilene Sunshine: out of line

When Paul Klee, the Swiss modernist artist who taught at the Bauhaus, was looking for ways to explain his process and encourage his students to follow their own pathways, he took a whimsical approach. In one of his oft-repeated remarks, he described drawing as the act of "taking a line for a walk." As with all things Klee, the metaphor entailed a leap out of logical consciousness into sentient space. Klee's paintings and drawings might be described as traces of the peregrinations of his line, a seemingly independent creature that accompanied him in mysterious lands where outlandish events occurred and fantastic beings were encountered as a matter of course. The world as represented by Klee was fully three- dimensional. Humor and tragedy, childish simplicity and sophisticated world knowledge were seen as continuums, and all were tools for the artist's larger exploration of the human condition and the spiritual realm. I begin my discussion of Ilene Sunshine's work, and specifically her exhibition at the Kentler International Drawing Space, with Paul Klee because it seems to me that she is another artist for whom art is a series of travels through mysterious, outlandish, and perfectly logical lands, with a line in hand to document her travels.

Sunshine, who is based in New York, is an artist trained in the academic manner, a pedagogical structure that has been at the core of art schools' curricula since at least the seventeenth century. She, however, has traveled far off that course and away from art as representation to art as idea. Deceptively simple and decidedly anti-monumental, her works employ line, space, light, and the cast-offs of nature and human civilization. She draws from and combines two streams of modernist thought. One is the path of acute sentience or responsiveness, of ego-less engagement with the spiritual realms of painting, poetry and music; the other is the off-hand wisdom of Marcel Duchamp (another artist with whom Sunshine shares the ability to travel with urbane finesse in the land of the outlandish). Duchamp's philosophical approach to art, his reliance on the found object, the readymade, and collaborations with chance, provoked a reassessment of the purposes of art in the early decades of the twentieth century that continues to reverberate in the early decades of the twenty-first century. The found object, and the processes of collage, chance, and collaboration with unseen forces (the genius loci of a space, for example) are integral to Sunshine's process. So are risk-taking, the exhilarating free fall of new experience, and an expansive sense of play.

Sunshine's work is driven by experience, and while the materials, the space and the form of her work is continually moving, she circles back again and again to engage questions of life, death, and the transformation of physical form. In recent years, she has been invited to create site projects in a variety of spaces including the Mid-Manhattan branch of the New York Public Library, Wave Hill, in the Bronx, and the Kentler. Each of these installations has been deeply informed by the nature of the particular space and its relationship to the surrounding exterior world. At the library, Sunshine's wall installation, *Genie*, provided a visualization of abstract thought and the mind's processing of information. *Genie*, which referenced the Latin root of the English word *genius*, was more than language, thought, or understanding; in the artist's conception, *Genie* also encompassed human potential. At Wave Hill, the power of the landscape that was visible through the windows of the gallery provoked a painted response; in *A is for alba* the artist traced the contours of leaves taken from the grounds in bands in order to transform one wall into a scrim between interior and exterior space. At the Kentler, Red Hook's patchwork of improvised gardens provided some of the inspiration for the seven drawings found inside. Taking the Kentler's stated purpose to expand the definition of drawing literally, Sunshine worked with clay, graphite, found materials, and the unique and somewhat quirky elements of the room. The steel-plated floor and the various fixtures hanging from ceiling and upper walls were wrenched out of inertia into artistic purpose to become part of the series of drawings that create the exhibition, *out of line*.

In Mind, a wall installation of clipped branches cut from discarded Christmas trees that the artist harvests year after year and plugged into the wall as if into an organically conceived circuit board, hovers at the visual center of the room. In a subtle yet potent way, *In Mind* envisions the map of thoughts that press ever outward in response to

more stimulus, coming together in realization, then dissolving only to reconnect in response to further stimuli. *In Mind* sets out the importance of intellectual rigor; *Never Mind*, its counterpart across the room, suggests the freedom of improvisation and the energy and exhilaration of too many ideas jostling and swirling around, between, and beneath each other. The undercurrent of tension between intellectual control and unrestrained physical expression that these two works set up in the room is carried throughout.

One of the themes that unites this exhibition with the artist's previous work is the intermingling of materials found on the streets of New York (and in this case, Red Hook) with vines, branches, bits of string, rope, plastic bags, and discarded furniture that have had other lives, including previous incarnations in her own sculpture and installations. Her attachment to beautiful junk like colored plastic bags or the discarded mattress that provides the boundary and bodily form of *Florence's Mulberry Tree Speaks French* reflects her own deeply held belief that beauty is multivalent and always within reach. The drawn line that holds this piece together moves from the linear scribbles of the stripped mattress and its cast shadow, to the silhouettes of mulberry leaves (collected from the side yard of the Kentler) traced with graphite dust, to the nearly outlandish, but perfectly apt golden scroll broken off a bed. In *Aerial Fuse*, the view has shifted from the edge of a garden to the patchwork quilt of a cultivated landscape seen from the air. Sited on the only green painted rectangle of the steel-plated floor, *Aerial Fuse* unites floor with ceiling through its looping line of green rope fused to branch and vine and connected to the metal hook that incongruously hangs down into the space of the gallery. Like Klee and Duchamp, Sunshine values the full breadth of experience --the world of made things (geometric, controlled, and measured) and the world of nature (organic, chaotic, and expansive). These two systems are brought into dynamic equilibrium through a careful balance of control and freedom. In her far-reaching exploration of drawing in three-dimensional space, the artist pushes the boundaries of line, of enclosure, and of control. *out of line* takes us to a place of imaginative space where we can sense the freshness of falling water in a formal garden (*From Here to There*) or the heat of an absolutely pink passion that a triangle feels in its soul (*98 Degrees*); and the beauty of a hedge bounding a mulberry tree that may, under the transforming influence of a golden scroll nearby, acquire a French accent. *out of line* is an admonishment, a cheeky rejoinder to regimentation, and an embrace of freedom in the midst of so much carefully constructed and managed time.

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