

Pat Steir: Drawings
Helen Day Art Center, Stowe Vermont
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by Cynthia Close

Gravity, time, and the environment are Pat Steir's handmaidens as she creates iconic paintings hanging in museums around the world. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Tate Gallery (London), and the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), among many others. In 1973, as a young artist, she was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1981. Her alma mater, Pratt Institute, awarded her a doctorate in 1991.

A Coup for the Helen Day

The art critic John Perrault called Steir one of today's most underrated artists. The fact that the Helen Day Art Center in Stowe is hosting a solo exhibition by an artist of this caliber is indeed a coup and a feather in the cap of curator and newly appointed executive director Rachel Moore.

It is not widely known that the New York-based Steir maintains a studio right here in Vermont. It was in this studio where Stowe artist Molly Davies, who is also a friend of Steir's, shot a video of her at work painting. The video accompanies the exhibit and adds a most welcomed dimension to the show allowing us to see the artist in action—pouring, flicking, and dripping paint on the huge canvases most familiar to those who know her work.

Steir's paintings require galleries with ceilings greater than 14 feet, which the Helen Day could not accommodate, so in negotiating what the artist would or could show, it was agreed that smaller works, identified by Steir as "drawings," seemed most appropriate. Perhaps modest by New York standards, this show accomplishes one of the primary mandates of the Helen Day: introducing new audiences to challenging work by a major figure in contemporary art.

Accepting the Unpredictable

In the main gallery, a suite of untitled works on paper done in the last decade is pinned directly to the white walls. Not drawings in the traditional sense, they are actually painterly mixed media works, visually related by a powerful black swath of paint that occupies the center of each piece, as though obliterating something underneath that the artist does not want us to see. These works harkened back to Steir's early conversion from a career as an illustrator making figurative art when she slashed X's through her more recognizable imagery. In explaining this transition, Steir stated, "I wanted to

destroy images as symbols. To make the image a symbol for a symbol. I had to act it out—make the image and cross it out.”

These works on paper are informally pinned to the wall, making them seem vulnerable and simultaneously more accessible to the viewer. We have no frame or glass to keep us at a distance from the artist’s intent, her gesture. Rachel Moore’s decision to leave out those often ubiquitous cue cards on the walls telling us what we should know about how to “read” an artwork also puts the onus on the viewer, encouraging us to look at these drawings on our own terms.

Pat Steir’s work has been most closely aligned with conceptual art, abstract expressionism, and minimalism. On a superficial level, she is sometimes compared to the drip painter Jackson Pollack. Other than the fact that Steir, like Pollack, is very physical in the way she applies paint, allowing for accident and for the paint’s interaction with its environment to create the work, there is little to bring these artists together in the same sentence. There is an implicit aggression in a Pollack that in Steir’s hands turns to meditation.

Steir met John Cage (1912–1992), the pioneering composer and conceptual artist, in 1980. He was an influential early mentor to Steir. It was Cage who introduced her to the concept of “nondoing,” the acceptance of chance and the importance of the unpredictable in painting. It was also in 1980 when she met the pioneering minimalist painter Agnes Martin who became a lifelong friend. Steir visited Martin in New Mexico every year until Martin’s death in 2004.

Watching Steir in Davies’s video deliberately flicking paint from a brush held like a fairy wand, we can see the evidence of Chinese Yi-pin painting traditions of the eighth and ninth centuries. Her slow, meditative observation of the downward flow of poured paint demonstrates the influence of Taoist philosophy on her methods, producing works that embody harmony between man and nature like her well-known and ongoing *Waterfall* series.

As we enter the adjoining East Gallery at Helen Day, we encounter more traditionally presented white-framed work. Rather than projecting their energy outward, the pieces here dating from 2004–2008 are more nuanced, more colorful and have a delicacy that invites us in to examine the forms as they interact with the negative space. The earliest work in the show titled *Drum Series* (1977) is hung by itself near the entrance. Of all the pieces on display, it comes closest to the definition of “drawing” in that the medium is graphite or pencil marks, with lines and symbols on sheets of paper, lined up in twos, inside a single frame. Like finding some long lost hieroglyphics, if we can decode it, perhaps it holds the keys to knowing more about the body of work that followed.

Humor and Hard Work

Born in 1940 (although some sources list 1938) in Newark, New Jersey, this enigmatic artist is known to us through her art, rather than through the cult of personality

surrounding some of her precursors like Pollack or Mark Rothko, both who had dramatic and untimely deaths. In Molly Davies's video, we see Steir in motion, hauling buckets of paint, climbing scaffolding, belying her 76 years. Her sly humor also comes through when she mugs a bit self-consciously for the camera, as art, produced in contemplation like Steirs's, is not usually a spectator sport.

There is also a funny bit shot outside the studio in the streets and hallowed Art Institutions of New York City. We follow Steir through the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MOMA where she comments on some of the work, admiring in particular, the color field paintings of Clifford Still. Then she spies one of her own large works, hanging over the reception and ticket area in MOMA. She asks if she or her friend can take a picture, and it appears as though the staff behind the counter tells her no picture taking allowed. She attempts to explain that she is the artist, but it seems doubtful that they believe her. She smiles and shrugs, and she along with her videographer move on.

Pat Steir is undaunted by the challenges that naturally come as we age. At one point she says, "I love it when [painting] is impossible, when it's hard. Otherwise, why do it? Why do anything?" Luckily the results of her lifelong labor provide the answer.