

LEADED

THE MATERIALITY AND METAMORPHOSIS OF GRAPHITE

AUGUST 23 TO SEPTEMBER 30, 2007

JOEL AND LILA HARNETT MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND MUSEUMS

Introduction

We use graphite because it has become ubiquitous and seems to be the primary tool of visual culture. We learn with pencils.

— The Art Guys

[from curator's correspondence with the artists]

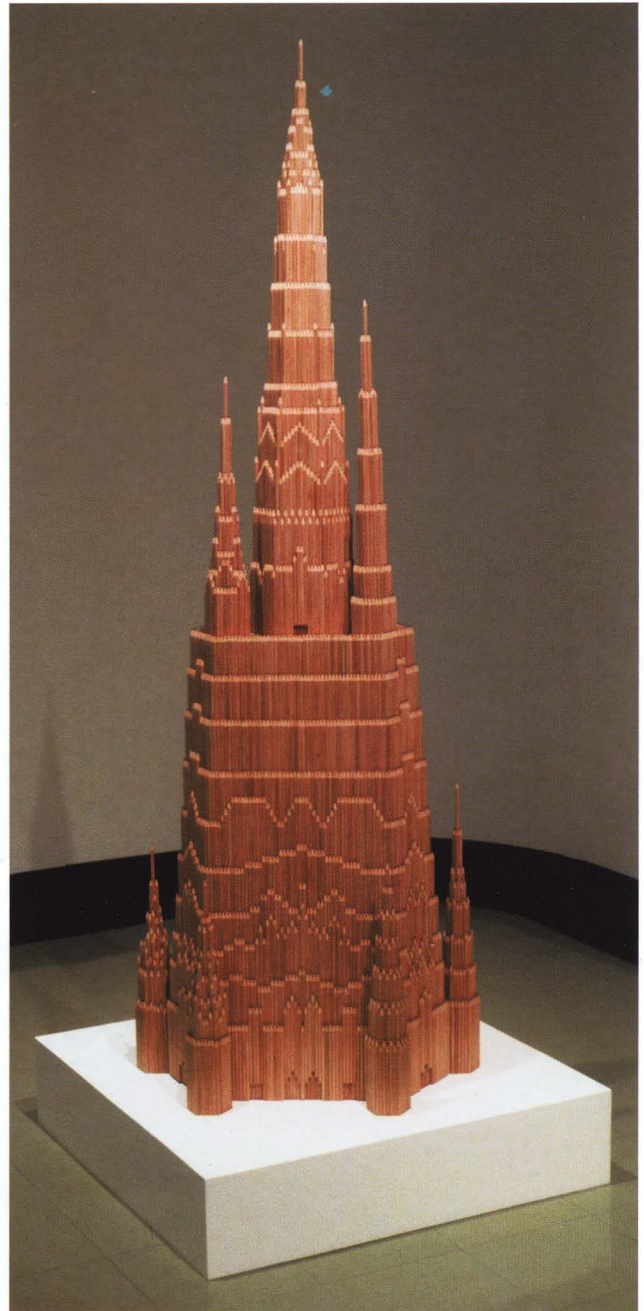
In a sense it is highly appropriate that a university museum organize an exhibition about graphite. After all, the pencil is one of the essential tools in foundation drawing classes. In fact the pencil is perhaps the most familiar of all tools to students taking their first steps at making art, as opposed to charcoal or chalk, or the brush loaded with oil or watercolor. To others, the pencil and the graphite it holds symbolize the essence of the creative act of drawing.

The elemental accessibility of graphite provides entrée into much of the work in this exhibition, which ranges from intriguing experiments with the medium's metallic appearance to more conceptual examinations of written communication and language. Seen in totality, the art in *Leaded* allows us to look at this basic material in a new way, to appreciate its aesthetic versatility that finds resonance in the work of these artists. Here, as the title of the exhibition implies, graphite is seen in its materiality and its potential metamorphosis as a medium of art beyond drawing.

The exhibition was curated by N. Elizabeth Schlatter, Deputy Director and Curator of Exhibitions, University of Richmond Museums, and organized for tour by International Arts and Artists, Washington, DC. At the Joel and Lila Harnett Museum of Art, the exhibition and programs were made possible in part with the generous support of the University's Cultural Affairs Committee.

We would like to thank the lenders to the exhibition as well as the artists and their galleries for their assistance in organizing this exhibition.

RICHARD WALLER
Executive Director
University of Richmond Museums



The Art Guys (Michael Galbreth, American, born 1956, and Jack Massing, American, born 1959), *Bonded Ability #55 (Skyscraper)*, 1999, pencils and glue, 84 x 36 x 36 inches, Courtesy The Art Guys (photograph courtesy AG Worldwide Photo)

Fundamental, Familiar, and Expressive: The Allure of Graphite

Even though you may think they [the galaxy drawings] came from lying under the stars, for me, they came out of loving the blackness of the pencil. It's almost as if I was exploring the blackness of the pencil along with the image that went with it.

— Vija Celmins [interviewed by Chuck Close in *Vija Celmins*, ed. William Bartman. Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1992.]

The seamless union between media and content that contemporary artist Vija Celmins describes is the foundation of all the artwork in *Leaded*. In these two- and three-dimensional works, the artists extrapolate qualities unique to graphite (a silvery richness, an endless range of tonality) or to pencils (a ubiquitous writing and drawing tool, a mass-produced product) to create art that is wholly dependent upon the medium. While some of the artists have retained graphite's traditional function as a means of creating a visual representation of something else, their subject matter is often imaginary, mundane, or even another medium itself (as in Shimon Okshteyn's paintings of brushstrokes). Some artists manipulate and apply graphite in nontraditional ways to transform surfaces and shapes whereas others use the material as units of construction, as in The Art Guys' sculpture of a skyscraper composed of thousands of pencils.

To examine the art in this exhibition, and, in fact, the versatility of the medium and the skill the artists apply, we can group the work into three overlapping themes: graphite as content, graphite as transformative agent, and graphite as sculpture. These groupings are suggested as entry points not endpoints. Each piece in *Leaded* features a unique approach to a medium that initially seems to present artistic constraints but actually enables endless variety. As artist Hsin-Hsi Chen has remarked:

A certain color will give a specific meaning, but the tone of black and white does not limit imagination or space. In this colorless world, we still can see the color and radiant source of life, which penetrate through the layers of graphite.
[from the artist's statement]

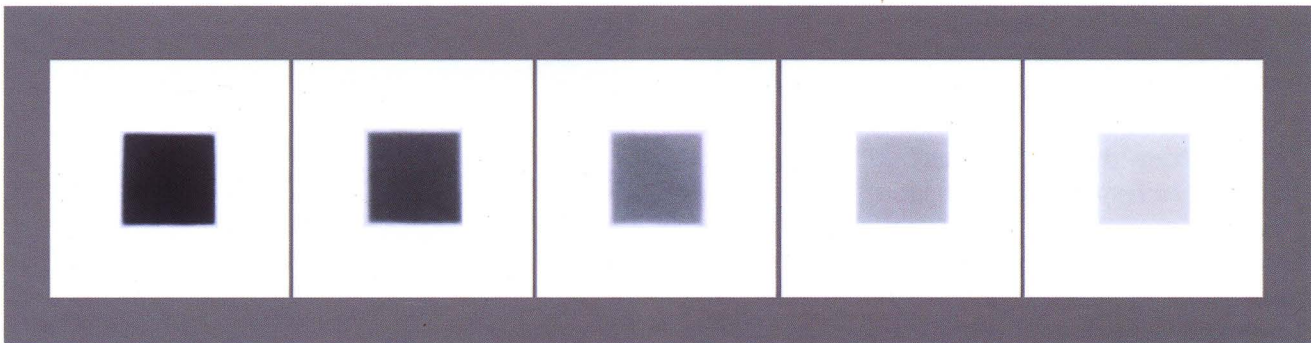
Graphite as Content

Although the pencil appears malleable, it has a mind of its own. It will not be forced beyond its limits and when pushed too far it muddles, peels off, or simply quits making marks. How far to go, how much to ask, are limits that remain elusive and must be tested every time a drawing is made.

— Gloria Ortiz-Hernandez
[from correspondence with the artist]

In all of the art in the exhibition the role of mark-making is subsumed or completely absent, which contrasts with the artist Richard Serra's famous proclamation "Drawing is a verb." Whereas much of modern drawing emphasized the importance of the gesture — of the act of drawing as means of recording the actions and expressions of the artist — the contemporary work in *Leaded* centers on the medium of graphite and/or pencils specifically as the primary means of creating content. Or to state this another way, the artwork in this exhibition could only have been created by using graphite, as opposed to charcoal or even paint, both of which are highly suited to capturing an artist's movements but lack the physical and aesthetic properties of graphite.

This equation between content and graphite can be most easily observed in the two series of drawings, *Sum II* and *Sequitur III*, by **Gloria Ortiz-Hernandez** (Colombian, born 1943). These meticulous images of squares and circles in perfectly graduated tones of gray emerge from the background of the paper through beautifully layered and subtle strokes. Although wholly abstract, they reference the landscape



— the earth, oceans, and sky — by appearing in a state of carefully sequenced flux.

Nature also informs the work of **Meghan Gerety** (American, born 1970), whose silhouettes of trees and branches are dense and opaque yet also highly evocative. Her drawings refer not to specific locations or species but to the concept of "landscape" as well as the memory that a landscape possesses, real or inferred by the viewer.

Both **Christopher Cook** (British, born 1959) and **Hsin-Hsi Chen** (Taiwanese, born 1969) share an interest in the inventive potential of graphite as a way of rendering imaginary spaces. Cook uses a mixture of graphite powder, oil, resin, and solvents that he applies to either coated paper or aluminum panel. With this liquid medium, he invents interiors, landscapes, and even microcosms that are unique in appearance and rich in illusion thanks to his manipulation of the medium and its interaction with the background support. Using pencil on paper that she shapes into three-dimensional objects, Chen makes incredibly precise and vertiginous renderings of imaginary architectural spaces. With a sense of beguiling whimsy, these "settings" disorient the viewer with both actual and illustrated planes and recesses that alternate in a seemingly illogical sequence.

The art of **Molly Springfield** (American, born 1977) and **Shimon Okshteyn** (American, born Ukraine, 1951) is probably the most representational in the exhibition. Yet both artists have employed graphite to draw "un-drawable" things. Springfield examines

Gloria Ortiz-Hernandez (Colombian, born 1943), *Sum II*, 2004, graphite on paper, 17 3/4 x 17 3/4 inches each (total of five), Collection of Michael Straus

issues of originality and reproduction with her almost obsessively rendered drawings of photocopied books and papers that record the very flaws of the photocopy process (banding and smudges) along with the image of the original text. Likewise, Okshteyn's laboriously detailed drawings of painted brushstrokes questions the function of art-making in general and the meaning of "representation."

Mark Sheinkman (American, born 1963) truly succeeds in drawing "nothing" by drawing air. And he manages to convey non-substance with a technique not often credited for creating content — that is, erasure. By first applying layers of graphite and then erasing shapes and lines, he forms his elegant, smoke-like compositions that communicate the movement not of the artist but of some sort of internally generated and temporal force.

Graphite as Transformative Agent

The veneer-like metal coating of graphite on the fragile wax chain is used to illustrate the inherent falsehood in the implication of some unbreakable strength associated with a steel chain. This wax chain, in spite of all its materiality, would be no better functioning as a chain than a drawing of a chain would be, perhaps even less so. And, in the end, what

could a mass of steel chain really contain anyway? But it is through the making of art where one hopes some transformation can take place, and thus something enduring.

– Sarah Lovitt [regarding her work *Chain*, from correspondence with the artist]

The title *Leaded* refers to the inaccurate yet still used term “lead pencil.” Although ancient Greeks and Romans used lead as a mark-making device, the discovery of a pure graphite deposit in England in 1564 heralded the preferred use of the latter material, which is now mixed with clay and other ingredients to form the modern pencil. And the fact that the material is popularly misnamed parallels the transformative and metaphorical abilities of graphite in art.

With *Chain*, **Sarah Lovitt** (American, born 1969) is clearly utilizing the transformative nature of graphite in an obvious manner, particularly in the sections of the wax chain that lack graphite coating. The illusion of solidity is removed thanks solely to the appearance and disappearance of graphite, revealing the magician’s “trick” yet retaining the power of the subject – the chain – which still commands respect despite comprising materials that merely mimic the subject itself.

Similarly, **James Busby** (American, born 1973) manipulates graphite’s metallic appearance in his monolithic paintings on canvas. Combining gesso with graphite, these two seductive materials are layered and polished several times to a state that appears smooth, hard, and pristine, like metal or marble sculpture. The shapes of the artworks with their incised lines and delineated forms appear deliberate yet puzzling, as they resemble commercially made objects in their machine-like perfection.

Stefana McClure (British, North Ireland, born 1959) and **Stephen Sollins** (American, born 1967) focus on the communicative association with graphite as a writing device, through the obliteration of text and imagery in their works on paper. McClure’s drawings capture all of the words in a movie (via



Mark Sheinkman (American, born 1963), *4.19.2007*, 2007, graphite on canvas, 66 x 66 inches, Courtesy the artist and Von Lintel Gallery, New York

subtitles), a dictionary, or a newspaper, written onto a single sheet of graphite paper. Individual letters, words, sentences, conversations – the most elemental tools of language – are replaced with the visual structure of the media. For example, the drawing from the French newspaper *Le Figaro Economie* resembles its source by the recognizable columns of text.

Likewise, Sollins obfuscates text by using layered graphite strokes to cover all but one or two simplistic drawings of camping gear from supply catalogues. Without their accompanying descriptions, prices, and details, the small images of tents and campers become isolated and dwarfed by what appears to be an ocean of darkness, suggested by the metallic sheen of the graphite on the wrinkly surface of the cheap catalog paper. Sollins transforms material meant to be informative and promotional into something that exposes the vulnerability of humanity.

Graphite as Sculpture

*Graphite. It is elemental, Carbon in
its refined form as graphite. One of the three
pure forms*

*of carbon: diamond, graphite, buckyball
(truncated icosahedron).*

*It is biological, we and our remains eventually
go back to this state — duration.*

It is a primary marking and writing material.

*For me to use solid
graphite and to remove the material,
the reciprocal process of leaving
a mark has been resonant for me.*

— Michael Joaquin Grey
[from correspondence with the artist]

The artworks in this last category vary greatly but are combined here because they employ graphite as sculptural material with a conceptual framework or systematic formation that both acknowledges and transcends the materiality of the medium. This grouping is essential in that they define *Leaded* as not being a traditional drawing exhibition but more aptly an exhibition about drawing.

Michael Joaquin Grey (American, born 1961) not only uses graphite as sculptural form, but he reverses the usual association between figure and ground in drawing with his CNC-milled solid graphite disks. The marks on the disks, which measure fifty inches in diameter each, provide a template to capture the movement of his proprioception, movement generated from the energy extending around and through the body. These *Weather Reports* are, in a sense, similar to Sheinkman's erasures as they create content and meaning by the process of a very subtle subtraction of material.

Whereas Grey and Sheinkman create drawings by negative processes, **Creighton Michael** (American, born 1949) provides materiality to what is traditionally two-dimensional — that being the marks made by a pencil to create a drawing. Michael's large sculptures

consist of hundreds or thousands of short segments of cotton rope coated with paper pulp, graphite, and acrylic paste, attached to the wall and on the floor. His *Squiggle* series looks as if a flat drawing has been deconstructed, inflated, and rearranged with a new vitality that is impermanent, lasting only as long as the installation is on view.

In contrast to the engaged and actively visual work of Grey and Michael, **Marco Maggi** (Uruguayan, 1957), with his sculptures involving graphite powder, graphite leads, and Plexiglas, seems focused on the mundane and the machine-made by virtue of his chosen materials. The sterile appearance of his small sculptures belies the intimate relationship forced upon the viewer who must study these works closely in order to identify their content.

Bonded Ability #55 (Skyscraper) presents the combination of utilitarian materials with wit and commentary that is characteristic of **The Art Guys** (Michael Galbreth, American, born 1956, and Jack Massing, American, born 1959). Their seven-foot-tall sculpture made of thousands of sharpened No. 2 pencils and its accompanying drawing refer to the preciousness of architectural plans and models and the hubris of man-made structures. But it also acts as something of a tribute to this common tool that is instantly recognizable, cheap to produce and purchase, and easily destructible (especially their fragile tips and chewable erasers) but also, as demonstrated by the art in this exhibition, infinitely expressive.

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