

# ART PAPERS

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## LEADED RICHMOND

Curator N. Elizabeth Schlatter developed *Leaded: The Materiality and Metamorphosis of Graphite* from rather simple concepts [Harnett Museum of Art, University of Richmond; August 23—September 30, 2007]. Featuring work by a diverse group of international artists, the show is premised on the fact that graphite is a material that speaks to both artists and non-artists alike. As such, *Leaded* begins and ends with graphite. Many of the artists in the exhibition share her views on the universality of the medium: graphite and its mass-produced vehicle, the pencil, are ubiquitous, unprivileged, and already understood. Following this logic, *Leaded* is conceptually straightforward yet artistically complex and challenging. It is articulated around three general themes: Graphite as Content, Graphite as Transformative Agent, and Graphite as Sculpture. Of course, many of the works easily engage two or more categories.

Though Schlatter certainly recognizes that many artists primarily use graphite to draw, *Leaded* is not a survey of contemporary works on paper. It is first and foremost a show about material. While it is certainly interesting to ponder the results of any extreme investigation of material, the most successful works in the show extend materiality beyond experimental manipulation into signifying experience and meaning in the world.

Gloria Ortiz-Hernandez' works are, in fact, drawings. As such, they provide a fairly easy entry into the exhibition. *Sum II*, 2004, and *Sequitur III*, 2004, arrangements of gradated circles and squares on pristine sheets of paper, initially seem like exercises in the simple control of the pencil. Yet simplicity, as we know, is hardly ever simple. These drawings transcend both hue and monochromy to become meditative studies of shape and space, which evoke landscape, light, and air.

Hernandez' drawings set a bar for delicacy, which the show foregrounds as a property of graphite. Delicacy evolves into elusiveness in the work of Mark Sheinkman and Christopher Cook. Sheinkman's graphite-on-canvas works allude to ethereal puffs of smoke; Cook's blend of graphite, oil, resin, and solvent produces a surface that, similarly dense and layered, is established through larger gestures. Cook, Sheinkman, and Hernandez share a colorless world, which propels their paintings into explorations of form.

Even when graphite is layered heavily, as in the work of Stephen Sollins or in James Busby's *Number Thirty-Seven*, 2003, the silvery surface allows us to perceive the ground as something other than mere blackness. Sollins' camping supply catalogue pages are so densely hatched that they crinkle, leaving the images of tents and sleeping bags in supernatural darkness—a terrifying sea of shimmering desolation. Similarly, Busby's *Number Thirty-Seven* is an abysmal construction that propels us onto a pond of graphite, whose silvery surface captures our reflection and expands indefinitely.



Works by Creighton Michael and Sarah Lovitt explore graphite's three-dimensional potential. Their sculptures enlist graphite's metallic sheen to convey an illusory solidity. Michael coats small bundles of rope with graphite until they resemble fragments of scrap steel-wire. Their arrangement on the wall and floor suggests a dense bramble patch. Sarah Lovitt's *Chain*, 2003-2007, functions somewhat similarly, while contrasting perceptions of solidity with fragility more intentionally. Here, Lovitt enlists plays of texture and mass to create illusion and poetry. With its gray scale of graphite powder, the wax chain hovers between ghostly form and the solidity of steel. Molly Springfield's obsessively rendered drawings of photocopies are also quite elusive. By presenting a copy of a copy of an object, she puts forth the problem of originality. A question arises, underpinning this investigation: "why would anyone go to the trouble?" *The Real Object*, 2006, a drawing of a photocopied art history text, unmercifully begs us to follow Springfield down the rabbit hole. While her sensuous rendering of the photocopied page is masterful, the subject matter leaves us cool.

The work in *Leaded* is both mesmerizing in its beauty and challenging in its content. Often, artists who strip their means down to absolute essentials—paper, pencil, and maybe an eraser—derive the most from exploration. So do exhibitions.

—Andy Kozlowski