

Nearly Uniform: Contemporary Silverpoint Drawings

Curated by Chelsea L. Cooksey

Robyn Ellenbogen, Marietta Hoferer, Ron Janowich, Michael Kukla, & Susan Schwalb

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Nearly Uniform: Contemporary Silverpoint Drawings seeks to bring to our attention to the subtlety and beauty of abstract silverpoint drawing through the artwork of five contemporary artists, **Robyn Ellenbogen, Marietta Hoferer, Ron Janowich, Michael Kukla** and **Susan Schwalb**. The method of silverpoint drawing is time-consuming and exacting, limiting the artist in terms of scale and mark making versatility and ability, rendering large-scale, broad gestural mark making—commonly associated with the production of abstract art—impossible. While this methodical and well-planned practice may seem at odds with common notions of abstract art, the drawings in this exhibition beautifully demonstrate the ability to craft luminous abstract drawings from precise grid-like structures and meticulous mark making. While there are several contemporary artists working in silverpoint today, with oeuvres ranging from portraiture, still life drawings, representations of flora and fauna as well as conceptual and site-specific installations, the five artists selected for this exhibition were chosen specifically for their work in abstract silverpoint.

Upon initial application, the lines appear gray, pewter or copper colored. However, as the metal materials are highly sensitive, the colors will metamorphose from oxidization and tarnishing due to changes in air temperature, humidity and the passage of time. It is an unpredictable effect, with the gray of silver taking a warm brown hue, the burnish of copper and brass adopt a greenish and light black tone respectively, while a gold and platinum lines apply and remain leaden in color. Silverpoint drawings—in great contrast to drawings of charcoal or graphite—have a luminous, almost ethereal quality that belies the flat surface. The uniform lines and negative spaces shimmer and glow as the light reflects the precise and exacting lines and swirls drawn into the surface. The vantage and distance in which the drawings are viewed will affect the undulating incandescence of the surface metals. These unpredictable nuances of color, enhanced by light, are perhaps, the most distinct and beautiful aspect of silverpoint drawings. To further this effect, the drawings in this exhibition are presented in a series to encourage an intimate viewing experience, giving the viewer the ability to appreciate the subtle, essential and incandescent difference of each drawing as an individual work and as a whole in a series.

Silverpoint drawing is both precise and challenging and requires a proper base or ground, and a metal stylus or metal material with which to draw. Originally utilized in the early middle ages by scribes for record keeping, it flourished as a drawing medium in the 15th century, with delicate renderings of nature, portraiture, and figuration by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer and Jan Van Eyck. Limitations in the use of the media—namely the timely preparation of the drawing surface and the unforgiving nature of the medium—gave way to artists favoring charcoal, graphite and chalk for the desired ability to draw more easily on multiple surfaces, and the practice fell out of fashion by the 17th century. Silverpoint (as it is most commonly known) was revived by the Pre-Raphaelites in the 19th century and continues as a contemporary medium today.

The five artists in this exhibition work in modern materials with a base of egg tempera, claycoat paper, colored and acrylic gesso, plike paper, and paper on wood instead of the traditional Renaissance base application of rabbit skin glue mixed with saliva and ground bone over coarse rag papers. Though silver and gold are preferred for ease and softness of material—rather than their material value over other metals—these contemporary artists also incorporate the use

of metallic wools, metal scrubbers, spoons, coins and industrial tape, as well as more traditional brass, copper, and pewter. As the metal material is drawn over the textured ground, bits of metal are embedded in the “teeth” of the surface. Silverpoint drawing is quite unforgiving—once a line has been embedded into the surface, it cannot be easily erased or covered over. Contrary to drawing with chalk or pencil, in which lines of varying thickness or darkness are crafted, depending on how the artist bears down on the drawing instrument, silverpoint marks are specific, precise and leave a nearly uniform line.

Robyn Ellenbogen aims to translate feelings of time and memory into her abstract images. Series like *Tondos* and *The Last Wave* demonstrate a use of gesture and line by combining traditional metalpoint drawing with metallic wool and wire on a gesso and plike paper surface. Ellenbogen’s undulating curvilinear lines are presented in contrast to the linear, grid-like patterns of **Susan Schwalb** and **Marietta Hoferer**. Schwalb combines painting and drawing to create the element of structure in her *Polyphony* and *Intermezzo* series. Her use of rich ground color illuminates a precise and thoughtful application of silver, copper and gold metals, fusing and layering color and metal to transform the wooden surface with movement and depth. *Intermezzo* pushes the boundaries of the surface plane by extending the diagonal lines on to the sides of the panel. By contrast, Hoferer’s nearly monochromatic *Mercury* series emphasizes her exploration of a grid-like structure; the absence of color enhances the subtle variability of line application and negative space and highlights the shifting, oxidized variance of color concomitant to metalpoint. Both the *Thailand* and *Untitled* drawings of **Ron Janowich** combine the precisely drawn grid, as utilized in Schwalb and Hoferer’s work, yet his grid is drawn into rounded and curvilinear shapes, juxtaposing geometric angles with curvilinear borders. Janowich also introduces an element of chance into his work, splashing colored encaustic paint in a gestural action over a completed silverpoint drawing. **Michael Kukla**’s works are monochromatic and curvilinear, echoing the shapes of Janowich and the palate of Hoferer. Kukla’s *Aircooled* and *SP* series utilize gouache, gesso and silverpoint to create luminous organic and gestural drawings. Meticulously drawn and shaded images that straddle the line between movement and stillness, the images seem to hover on top of the paper.

This exhibition gives the viewer the ability to appreciate the nuanced and practiced hand of these five artists in their exploration of traditional and contemporary metal materials. Their subtle, delicate and precise application of the nearly uniform line that is essentially impossible to erase, creates a series of luminous, incandescent drawings that celebrate both the beauty and complexity of contemporary abstract silverpoint drawing.



Susan Schwalb *Polyphony XI*, 2015

Chelsea L. Cooksey is an art historian whose specialty is modern and contemporary art; she received her M.A. in Modern and Contemporary Art from Purchase College and B.A. in Art History from the University of Colorado Denver. Her previous positions included Research Assistant to the Director of The Arshile Gorky Foundation working on the catalogue raisonné, assistant to the Program Coordinator of the Art Students League of New York and Assistant for Oral History interviews for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. She is currently the Registrar at Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs.