

Other lines, other wonders

Craft artists show intent, whimsy in their drawings



Jewelry makers

Steve Ford and David Forlano live miles apart and yet collaborate on such pieces as “Untitled (FF100211G).” (Fuller Craft Museum)

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Globe Correspondent / August 22, 2010

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BROCKTON — A good artist’s aesthetic is as unique as a thumbprint. That’s most striking when you can track an artist migrating across media, and especially when the media go from 3-D to 2-D, as is the case in “Different Lines: Drawings by Craft Artists,” a compact and fascinating exhibit at the Fuller Craft Museum.

The show, curated by printmaker Joan Hausrath, features drawings by some renowned artists, including glass artist Dale Chihuly, studio furniture maker Judy Kensley McKie, and jewelry makers Steve Ford and David Forlano.

Drawing and crafts share a certain sympathy. Both have, in the past, been derided as less valuable — the ugly stepsisters of fine arts such as painting and sculpture. In the case of drawing, that's partly because artists have always used sketching as an early step in the creative process. They make plans and work out problems on paper. Drawing didn't used to be perceived as an end in itself.

But process drawings can also be looked at with a keen eye (who doesn't savor a Rembrandt sketch?). And sometimes, of course, artists draw simply for the love of it. "Different Lines" features both preparatory sketches, and drawings that are creative projects in their own right.

Norma Minkowitz falls into the latter category. Minkowitz is best known for her crocheted figurative sculptures. Working with yarn, she is, in effect, building her sculptures out of a continuous, interlaced line. Her exquisitely rendered, mystical pen-and-ink drawings are dense with lines — tree bark, rippling water, foliage, all as much defined by the texture of lines crisscrossing over them as by their contours. "Lovely Bones" is a lush garden of anatomical references such as spines and eyes, veined and mottled and often hard to distinguish from plant life.

Chihuly's drawings, in contrast, are quick, expressive meditations in charcoal, watercolor, and pencil. Chihuly draws improvisationally, without intention, and his sketches can lead to glass projects. His two "Soft Baskets" drawings from the late 1970s and early 1980s each feature drifting circles. In the earlier piece, those circles look like jellyfish, sketched loosely with charcoal and washed with green watercolor rings. In the second, he drew waffling circles, then took a fistful of watercolor pencils and dashed rainbows of parallel lines over them, suggesting an iridescent sparkle.

Spontaneity is paramount in Chihuly's drawings. It's clear that even when his pencil first hits the paper, anything might happen; it's a complete surrender to imagination. McKie also begins her process with simple drawings, but her sketches reveal a plan already working itself out. The several pieces she has on view in "Different Lines" demonstrate her iconographic portrayal of animals — simply rendered, sleek, and totemic.

McKie's ink drawing "Bear Looking Out" is solidly symmetrical and flat, a designed bear, with head at the center flanked by shoulders and then haunches. Three-toed claws delicately hold the burly beast up. Its face is white with black, but a careful pattern of lines and dots evokes his thick coat. I imagine McKie incising that pattern into the wood of what might be a broad bench or a low table.

It would have been a great treat if curator Hausrath had paired drawings with a piece by each artist, so viewers could compare. Instead, we have helpful wall texts with only tiny photographs depicting Chihuly's glass, McKie's furniture, and so on.

Ford and Forlano's drawings have the colorful rhythm and pizzazz of their metal and polymer clay jewelry. Ford, who lives hundreds of miles from Forlano, starts the process for each of these untitled drawings with a warm-toned, striated grid, which he sends to his partner to play with. Forlano draws and collages biomorphic shapes over the grid — I saw ladles and mushrooms and twisting vines, surrounding a blocky construction laid over the top half of a red-orange gingerbread man. Ford's radiating lines activate the space, and Forlano's rounded, twisty forms inhabit it.

Ceramic sculptor Sergei Isupov's charcoal drawings feature doleful characters similar to those he sculpts. Isupov's straightforward, almost cartoonish style disguises his exquisitely delicate technique. "During the 19th Century" and "During the 20th Century" are two large-scale close-ups of couples clinching, although the images are more melancholy than romantic: The men gaze at the women, but the women's eyes wander.

Baskets, sculptural boxes, and encaustic paintings have recently led artist Lissa Hunter back to a passion for drawing. Her works here focus on birds. "Flight," depicting in charcoal what might be a murder of crows passing overhead, treads nimbly along the edge between positive and negative space: Wings, beaks, and tails merge into one another against the white sky, creating an ominous pattern overhead. It's a rush of movement and form, threatening to seep together into one great shadow.

There are several treats in "Different Lines," including cabinet and shrine maker Roy Superior's fluid, assured pen-and-ink sketches of ancient architecture in Italy, and glass artist Dan Dailey's precisely plotted renderings of his whimsical vessels-to-be. Who knew whimsy took such careful planning? The best part about the exhibit, though, is the sense that in delving into these artists' drawing portfolios, we're being let in on a secret, a new way to see their work. Their visions don't change, but we get to see them in a new light.

