

Greatest Generation? Not By a Long Shot, But Interesting Show

*Laramée, Johns and Kelly
Travel, But Good Stuff
Is By Younger Artists*

BY HILTON KRAMER

Given the mini-scandal that erupted last month over Michael Kimmelman's absurd pronouncement in *The New York Times Magazine* that the Minimalists, Conceptualists and Earth Artists who made their debut in the 1960's can now be said to constitute the "Greatest Generation" in the history of American art, it's surprising that so little critical attention has been paid to a traveling exhibition of drawings by many of the same artists. This comprehensive exhibition is called *Drawings of Choice from a New York Collection*, and among the 45 artists represented in the collection are Carl Andre, Walter De Maria, Dan Flavin,

CONTINUED ON 20

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Ellsworth Kelly, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Robert Morris, Dorothea Rockburne, Robert Ryman, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson and Richard Tuttle, as well as a sizable roster of younger, lesser-known artists, some of whose drawings turn out to be decidedly more interesting than many of those by their more celebrated seniors.

As the collector of these drawings has chosen to remain anonymous on this occasion, I shall not identify him here except to say that he's a figure well-known to insiders in the New York art world. In fact, he has already made gifts of several drawings in the collection to the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition, however, was organized at the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in collaboration with the Arkansas Art Center in Little Rock, and its well-designed, fully illustrated catalog—which contains detailed entries on every artist in the show—is distributed by the University of Washington Press in Seattle. The show itself has already been seen in Illinois, Arkansas and the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, Ga. I saw it at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Me., where it remains on view through June 8. Its final destination is the Cincinnati Art Museum, where it will be shown from Aug. 22 to Nov. 16.

It's one of the paradoxes of Minimalism, Conceptualism and Earth Art that while the governing idea tends to be radically reductive, the realization of the completed work generally requires a radical expansion of space. Think of

the multi-building compound established by Donald Judd in Marfa, Tex., or the earthwork projects that Robert Smithson attempted in an abandoned quarry in Emmen, Holland. Mercifully, the drawings related to projects of this kind do not require real-estate adventures—not yet, anyway.

Some of the drawings in the current show are so modest in scale and rudimentary in execution that, until now, they would never have been considered drawings at all. Some, indeed—Donald Judd's *Drawing for Untitled 1973 Structure* (1972) among them—are more accurately described as diagrams than drawings. The mind-set that both informs and sets the limits of what can be

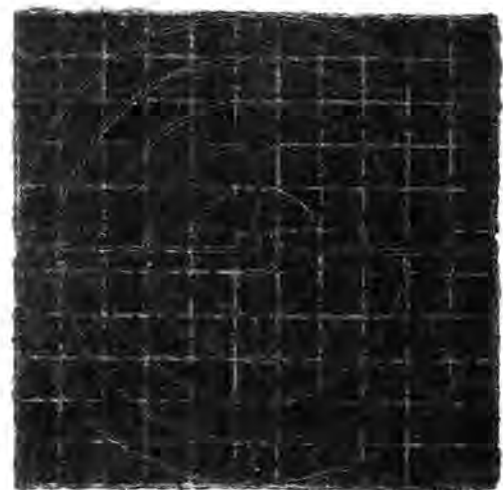
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expected from drawings of this persuasion is clearly stated in Josef Helfenstein's catalog essay, entitled "Concept, Process, Dematerialization: Reflections on the Role of Drawings in Recent Art." Mr. Helfenstein writes: "Artists who were more interested in processes and concepts than in the final project used drawing as an economic and flexible tool to develop and encapsulate ideas quickly on paper—in the form of diagrams, situation sketches or plans reflecting different stages of projects."

Among the surprises to be found in the *Drawings of Choice* exhibition are the many drawings that vibrate this mind-set by deliberately aspiring to something more elegant and more aesthetically engaging. This may or may not reflect a generational shift, but it does seem to be the case that the most appealing drawings tend to be the work of a younger generation.

There's a sumptuous 1999 drawing of a white maze over a black wax grid by Cheryl Goldsleger (b. 1951); a very large 1995 drawing—measuring 106 inches wide—of delicate traceries of charcoal on paper prepared with rabbit-skin glue by Christine Hiebert (b. 1960); a striking, undated drawing in charcoal on an almost-legible map entitled *Major Freeway Interchanges in the Ohio Valley* by Eve Andrée Laramée (b. 1956); and a very sensuous nocturnal drawing, dating from 2000, by Glenn Ligon (b. 1960), who uses a combination of silk screen, coal dust, oil stick and glue on paper to evoke memories of an episode recounted in an essay by James Baldwin. With drawings of this elegant and complex variety, we're a long way from either a Minimalist or Conceptualist aesthetic. Ms. Goldsleger's drawing has closer affinities with the work of Jasper Johns, while Ms. Hiebert's charcoal traceries have certain affinities with Jackson Pollock's all-over abstractions. And nothing could be less Minimalist than the subtle shifts of light and shade in Mr. Ligon's *Untitled (Stranger in the Village/Crowd #1)*.

Not all of the better-known artists



The new and the old: Cheryl Goldsleger's *Untitled*, 1999; and Robert Smithson's *Juggernaut*, 1970.



in the exhibition fare quite as well. Much as I admire the paintings of Agnes Martin, the small examples of her works on paper in this show are thin, to say the least. She clearly needs a large expanse of canvas for her mystical powers as a painter to make themselves felt. Richard Serra doesn't add much to his stature as an artist, either, with the fairly pedestrian drawings in this show. And as for Robert Smithson's drawings of his landscape projects in the early 1970's, they are little more than conventional illustrations. In the end, one leaves this exhibition unpersuaded that Minimalism or Conceptualism ever did succeed in redefining the nature of drawing.

COURTESY CHERYL GOLDSLEGER; PHOTO: PETER SUBICAT

COURTESY OF ROBERT SMITHSON; JAMES CONNOR