

## Southern California

### 'Major Drawings' at Carl Berg Gallery

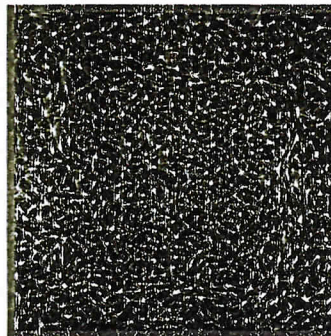
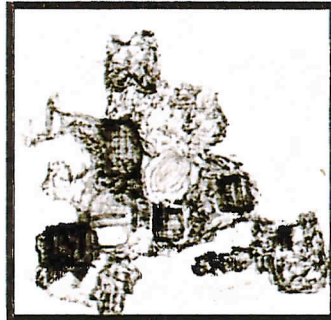
**A**lmost perforce, drawing surveys now feature work not made on paper or with traditional drawing materials. In fact, it's actually a relief to find such a survey whose meta-drawings all display methods or at least reasoning that directly addresses draftsmanly line, gesture and substance. And it's reassuring that the expanded-format works included in *Major Drawings*—and its, er, drawing drawings no less—are so assured and engaging.

Bringing gallery artists together with artists not represented (at least yet) by Carl Berg, *Major Drawings* wanted simply to reaffirm the fact that drawing is no longer considered a second-tier practice, least of all by artists themselves. This, too, would seem to be a point proven decades ago by Robert Rauschenberg and an army of post-minimalists. But with other troops currently afoot—platoons of cartoon-influenced figure-drawers converging on us from points as far afield as Japan, Canada and the Bay Area—perhaps it was time to champion younger draftspeople who think big, work bold and successfully revive (whether they know it or not) some very fruitful directions first proposed a generation ago.

None in *Major Drawings* thought bigger and worked bolder than Gelah Penn. The Brooklyn-based artist filled Berg's ample display window with an explosion of hair, fur, wires, tendrils and many other manners of lines described physically in three-dimensional space. Again, Penn's strategies are not new, harking back as they do to fuzzy, hairy, stick-thingly installations of the 1970s and 1980s (by such as David Hammons, Nancy Graves and Ellen van Fleet), but in her energy, exuberance, distinctive approach and evident conviction she makes them her own. Similarly, James Buss takes up where Vija Celmins (among others) leaves off, covering small areas of large sheets with concentrated graphite marking in order to describe itchy textures and ambiguous terrains. John Geary, working a lot larger in charcoal, picks up on Celmins's hyperrealistic aspect, applying it to an image (a simian of some sort—perhaps a baby gorilla)—chewing on a branch) that is almost unsettlingly banal.

Steve Schmidt's two works effectively cover large areas with obsessive pencil doodlings. Paul Klee wrote of "tak-

ing a line for a walk," and Schmidt allows his graphitic contemplation to take him for quite a stroll, wandering all over the place, back on itself many times, until the paper is choked with a dense, mysterious filigree. Timothy Nolan effects a more regular weblike structure by lacing kinky white lines all over a colored surface, in a pattern more regular than Schmidt's but still fluid and slyly erratic. By contrast, Tony de los Reyes goes for an almost painterly image, applying bister to paper in a wavelike formation inside of which dark colors begin—just begin—to congeal into recognizable forms.



The only quality shared by these works—and those of Neha Choksi, Chelsea Dean and Margaret Griffith—besides their physical breadth is their visual delicacy. Indeed, if you permitted yourself a gustatory synesthesia, *Major Drawings* became a visit to a patisserie, a collection of baking, icing and spun sugar wrought by three-star pastry chefs. We're not making nutritional metaphors here, but sensual ones: These artworks seduced the eye and melted on its tongue. Rather than glaze the mind, these assured and virtuosic works gave it a rush.

—Peter Frank

*Major Drawings* closed March 11 at Carl Berg Gallery, Los Angeles.

Peter Frank is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

### Manfred Menz and Lothar Schmitz at AndrewShire Gallery

**T**he natural world is something of a romantic fascination in the scope of contemporary discourse.

Industrialism, technology and even artists have either removed us from nature or reduced it to a quasi-amusement park that is visited on special occasions or seen while passing through. In poststructuralist circles, questions surrounding the reality of nature's existence as a genuine entity have been debated for decades. Jacques Derrida famously argued that nature and culture are inseparable as one always mediates an understanding of the other. And Jean Baudrillard cites the simulacrum, in the form of "symbolic order," as mankind's ultimate deviation from an existence more in tune with nature's harmony. Baudrillard finally arrived at the conclusion that man's relationship with the natural world is so mediated that any understanding of it is through a simulated experience, something he referred to as the *hyperreal*. The work of Manfred

Menz and Lothar Schmitz, while visually and conceptually independent, share a common concern for the lack of genuine experience in manufactured human ecologies.

Although the exhibition functions as a two-man show, both artists titled their respective bodies of work separately. Menz offered eleven photographs from his *Invisible Project* series. These images are relatively subtle in their critique of man's relationship with—or disconnection from—nature. Simply put, Menz's photographs are altered depictions of famous architectural landmarks from which the highly recognizable structures such as the Golden Gate Bridge or Notre Dame Cathedral have been disappeared by way of digital manipulation. What remains are the manicured gar-



Lothar Schmitz, *Inside Out*, 2005, artificial turf, foam core, 60" x 45" x 30", at AndrewShire Gallery, Los Angeles.

dens, rows of trees, and topiaries that adorn these monumental edifices. The buildings have been replaced with the stark white of the photo paper, which creates an interesting reversal of positive and negative space in that the landmarks, as seen conventionally, would normally read as positive and the surrounding flora would generally tend toward the negative. Menz pushes the overlooked to the foreground forcing the viewer to contemplate the reality of nature, or lack thereof, at the hand of man. The removal of what we know to be fabricated reveals that what we expect to natural is indeed artificial. In *Louvre* (2003), the bricks before the Paris museum have been removed emphasizing errant patches of grass that trace their pattern. Menz presents landscape not so much as an exercise in aesthetics but as instead as an active philosophical player in constructing social reality.

Less subtle than Menz, Schmitz's three sculptural installations from his *Protosphere* series respond to the taming of nature and the irony of how doing so has created a situation in which we must