

## James Nelson at McKenzie

Intimacy of scale and delicacy of touch distinguish the graphite drawings of James Nelson and prompt the viewer to walk right up to them. The 29 recently on view in this artist's Manhattan debut are untitled, all but seven from 2004, and they range in size from a few inches square to roughly 3 by 2 feet. In one of these larger pieces, the surface of the paper is rendered as an irregular network of minuscule, transparent segments, like those in the wings of some insects. Their undulating overlap hints at receding hills and dizzying gorges. This work was paired with a dense, dusky drawing wherein abutting shards resembling cracked ceramic glaze are separated by glowing fissures.

Nelson's mark-making is bound up with the structure and surface of the Japanese and Chinese papers he uses, as if he were deciphering their coded inner workings. All feature a proliferation of tiny contiguous shapes. Incremental in approach, painstaking in process, the drawings coax a range of associations from the touch of the pencil. The most complex of the large pieces incorporates frottage, seen as areas of a tiny dot-grid blotching the surface. These patterned patches mesh with hatch-marked passages and lumpy and jagged shapes suggesting a topographical map. The irregular edge of a slightly darker region advancing up and into the composition from the lower right is a subtle but dis-

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**James Nelson: Untitled, 2004, graphite on Japanese paper, 9 3/4 by 6 1/2 inches; at McKenzie.**



tinct tonal break, establishing a figure/ground relationship unusual in this work. Other drawings fleetingly suggest drifting smoke, foliage seen in mist, torrents of water or the directed scatter of magnetized iron filings.

But this gestalt of the larger massing requires a greater viewing distance than the reflexively close inspection called for by its intricate matrix of components. Nelson thus recasts the central, enlivening paradox of pictorial art: surface manipulation begetting the sweep of space. The sheer, membranelike tissues hang loosely in deep frames, heightening the drama of avowedly illusory ends achieved by abundantly material means.

Graphite hits the retina in allusive ways, and in these drawings, broad tonal variety and the use of both white and buff sheets simulate chroma. Drawing is Nelson's main artistic activity, and though the work is educed from graphical concerns, one wonders what the artist might do with a broader palette. His meditative focus has the high seriousness of a spiritual discipline. And like yoga, Atkins or karate, this work is less effective in small doses. The great many drawings measuring under 4 by 3 inches lack the commitment that gives the bigger sheets their authority. —Stephen Maine

## Lu Shengzhong at Chambers Fine Art

Born in rural Shandong, one of China's coastal provinces, Lu Shengzhong grew up exposed to many folk-art traditions. He studied fine art in Shandong, then earned a master's degree in folk art from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he is a professor of folk art today. In his work, Lu has refined one of China's oldest folk techniques—decorative paper-cutting—for his own purposes. For generations, the Chinese have made richly patterned, lacelike tissue-paper cutouts by hand and used them to accompany gifts or as accoutrements of rituals. With little more than scissors and homemade knives, Lu has made the technique his own.

In this respect, Lu stands distinctly apart from dozens of other Chinese contemporary artists who were quick to embrace or imitate Western styles or approaches—most notably, conceptual, mixed-media installation art—in the late 1980s, when the government's