

## **CURATOR'S STATEMENT**

### **WAYNE HULGIN: Recent Drawings and Paintings**

**October 27, 2008 to January 4, 2009**

Written by  
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(Revised November 16, 2008)

Few artists in the San Diego area create art as nuanced, understated, and elegant as Wayne Hulin. Regionally, the brilliant artist Robin Bright, a master of subtlety and sensitivity in his concepts and use of materials, is one of the few who come to mind as possessing similar gifts. Although Hulin's current exhibition "Recent Drawings and Paintings" at the Taylor/Pacific Beach Branch Library is governed by unusual restraint, spending time with his art reveals delightful and, at times, irreverent and witty, visual and conceptual surprises and contradictions.

Born and raised in Akron, Ohio, Hulin received a BFA from Arizona State University and an MFA from the same institution in 1994. That year he moved to San Diego where he was immediately hired as an art teacher. Over the years, he has taught art-related subjects at several educational institutions, including City College where he currently teaches drawing, painting, and art history. During his undergraduate years, Hulin's art was oriented towards figuration, but that began changing in graduate school when circles, the dominant form in his current art, made their first appearance. For the past few years, Hulin has been preoccupied with repetition and mark-making, with abstract expressionism and minimalism also influencing his art.

A discussion of the history and practice of mark-making in visual art is beyond the scope of this statement because, in the broadest sense, it is an integral component of almost all media and forms of expression. However, many artists like Hulin who specifically identify themselves as mark-makers are consumed by the process. To non-artists, especially, this method of creating art by spending days, weeks, or months obsessively covering paper, canvas, or other materials with endlessly repeated shapes, numbers, writing, pictographs, or other marks, may appear to be eccentric, even bizarre. At the same time, outsiders may be awed by the surgical precision, dedication, and tenacity needed to perform these endeavors.

In terms of the international contemporary art scene, obsessive mark-making is again in the news. Over the past few years, art world fascination with works by post-Mao era Chinese artists has revealed a number of Chinese artists who take mark-making to new extremes. This buzz has been heightened by blazing auction house sales and exposure through recent high profile exhibitions such as "Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection" at the Berkeley Museum of Art and "Half-Life of a Dream: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Logan Collection" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. These newly discovered mark-

makers include Lu Qing, Chen Guangwu, Du Jie, and Liang Yuanwei. Lu Qing, for example, spent 300 days drawing and painting with washes hundreds of thousands of tiny, precisely arranged squares on a 150-foot long roll of silk. The cumulative effect is simultaneously poetic and mind-numbing.

When asked to cite some contemporary mark-marking artists who might have influenced him, Hulgin mentions Mark Tobey (1890-1976) and James Siena (b. 1957), and praises the intricately executed drawings, woodcuts, and engravings of the great German master Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). Also, during his childhood, Hulgin remembers being fascinated by watching his mother create circular doodles for hours while she was on the phone. Hulgin believes that the repetition and circular motifs that are major components of his art today may be attributable to that experience.

Like some of the mark-making Chinese artists, Hulgin's creative process is so intense that it includes entering a trance-like state during which he metamorphoses into an obsessively focused mark-maker capable of performing staggering feats of patience and control. Repetition manifested in intricate patterns and miniscule marks become his visual and technical mantras. One unusual method Hulgin uses to stay focused during these creative periods is by digitally recording televised tennis matches and replaying them over and over again on his television.

A group of nine intimately scaled, untitled graphite drawings on vellum (a translucent plastic film) from the "Circle Drawing Series" (#2, #3, #4, #5, #34, #38, #39, and #40 in the exhibition) reveal the artist's obsessive mark-making at its extreme. Averaging six inches high by five inches wide, each drawing takes hundreds of hours to complete. (Hulgin uses Stabilo graphite pencils whose waxy binder enables the graphite to adhere to the slick, nonporous surface of the vellum.) At first glance, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, and #39 appear to be nothing more than solid, dark gray rectangles whose uniformity, flatness, and austere geometry appear to have sprung from an unabashedly severe and minimalist aesthetic. Following the same format, but with obvious designs or patterns, are #34, #38, and #40. Like several other, much larger drawings in the exhibition, in various ways the imagery of #38 and #40 has a kinship to the fibers or structure of woven textiles, though that relationship is unintentional. A sensuous abstraction of randomly meandering curvilinear lines, #38 suggests a loose tangle of threads, cords, and strings, whereas the proportions and tightly spaced, horizontal rows of #40 could be mistaken for the warp and weft of textiles, a blanket-like weaving, or a reed window shade.

In Hulgin's art, however, nothing is as it seems. Hulgin enjoys toying with the perceptions of the viewer, and, as will be explained later, engages in other irreverent and mischievous activities such as subverting the traditional order of artistic processes. For example, close inspection (a magnifying glass will be helpful) of the aforementioned works reveals that each image is composed of tens of thousands of tiny, hand-drawn circles, some barely larger than a grain of sand. (Circles and cross-hatchings are Hulgin's marks of choice, though not within the same work.) These are drawn without using magnification; only with the assistance of reading glasses and by getting close to the drawing board. Once viewers realize – most often, only after it is pointed out to them, and then, with shock – that the building blocks of the "Circle Drawing Series" are, indeed, circles so minute that they are nearly invisible, the door to understanding Hulgin's artistic vision is unlocked.

Another surprise is that many of the “Circle Drawing Series” images contain intricate and odd organic patterns that do not appear to reference anything in the real world (their resemblance to microscopic views of slices of tissue or colonies of cells or microorganisms is purely coincidental, says the artist), but are strangely pleasing in their rhythm and elaborateness. So densely rendered that they are barely visible, these patterns are made by varying the weight of the lines and the diameters of the circles. “How dark can I get it so no one actually sees what’s going on?” Hulgin asks.

Especially delightful is #38. The seemingly random loopings and intertwinings of this drawing’s curvilinear lines create the illusion of artful spontaneity, but the viewer is jarred into another reality when he or she realizes that this whimsy came at great cost: the artist painstakingly rendered every line with countless miniscule circles. The boldest of these works, #34, is the only a mixed-media drawing in the exhibition. Its primary image is a bold, maze-like pattern brushed on with acrylic ink and superimposed on a gray background. This background, visible through the open spaces of the maze, is composed of nearly invisible graphite circles.

Circles on a larger scale are integral to Hulgin’s heavily impastoed oil paintings and his more ephemeral acrylic ink paintings. In and of themselves, the oil images are curvilinear and relatively benign free-form abstractions reminiscent of cloud patterns or liquids of different densities gently commingling with one another. Their palettes are monochromatic, but unusual enough to be engaging. The magic occurs in the technique.

In these paintings, as in his drawings, Hulgin demonstrates superb control over his media and tools. *Circle Painting Number 1* and *Circle Painting Number 2* were executed using thick oil paint applied to wood panels. The surfaces of the works – dense, textured matrixes of hundreds of precise, circular swirls of paint integrated into the entire image as if it were born of a bubbling cauldron of pigment – add an exciting sculptural and expressive dimension. In the hands of a lesser artist this process could have degenerated into the gimmickry or contrivances associated with the worst decorative art, but Hulgin pulls it off admirably. Some of the ways he does this are by preserving the viscous sensuality of the paint and the subtle accidents and irregularities that occur during the painting process: the unintentional ridges, globs, peaks, and flows of the paint. Because these works are unframed, the viewer is permitted to savor the nubs of paint that extend off the front edges of the panels. Incidentally, Hulgin’s treatment of edges, whether in his drawings or paintings, is a detail on which he lavishes considerable attention and one of the joys of his artistry. Hulgin’s three untitled acrylic ink on paper paintings from the “Circle Painting Series” (#35, #36, and #37 in the exhibition) are delicate and translucent and offer their own rewards.

Paintings from the “Veil Series” comprise the largest component of Hulgin’s exhibition. In general, each is composed of a central vertical element or “leg” flanked by generous expanses of negative space. Because these works are executed by pooling, splattering, dripping, and swirling various “strengths” of washes of black gouache on paper, one’s first reaction is to compare them to Rorschach inkblots, but Hulgin sees them primarily as a form of abstract expressionism. Part of his technique includes sketching out the preliminary painting with clear water. He estimates that for every five small veil paintings he creates, he discards four, weeding

out those that too closely suggest objects or imagery, or appear to be overworked. The kinship of the Veil Paintings to works by Helen Frankenthaler or Paul Jenkins can't be ignored, but as exercises in the evocative power of abstract form, judicious use of negative space, sensitivity to composition, and the beauty of simplicity and restraint (not only in their execution, but in the way they are matted and framed) these works are remarkable.

Perhaps the most spectacular paintings in the "Veil Series" are a set of three large untitled gouache on paper works (#31, #32, and #33 in the exhibition.) Larger, more complex, and undoubtedly more difficult to create than the smaller paintings from the same series, these works are particularly luminous, sensual, and open to interpretation.

The paintings from the "Veil Series" offer insight into some of the ways Hulgin works conceptually, especially, as mentioned earlier in this statement, "in subverting the traditional order of artistic processes." Hulgin is fond of repeating not only marks, but images. For example, the images found in a set of small, gouache, veil paintings (#9, #10, and #11 in the exhibition) are reproduced in a corresponding set of graphite drawings (#12, #13, and #14). Similarly, Hulgin translated a tiny, spontaneous gouache (#30) into an imposing, graphically powerful, and gritty oil painting (#1). And components of the image depicted in one of the most impressive works in the exhibition, a large, untitled, graphite drawing from the "Biomorph Series," were derived from sections of a small gouache. The negative space in this image is so powerful (it is shaped like a giant "X" centered in the middle of the composition) that an argument could be made that the negative space is the image, and the penciled image the negative space.

Two other large untitled drawings (#7 and #26), both from the "Line Drawing Series," merit discussion. These stunning works whose images are, respectively, square and rectangular, are grounded in a minimalist aesthetic, but are vibrant tours de force. The images resemble flat, frayed pieces of cloth whose threads are depicted as dense, randomized layerings of graphite lines. In his treatment of the edges of the "fabric" and his variation in the weight of the lines, Hulgin uses the simplest of elements, straight lines, to create a dazzling filigree.

Hulgin confesses that one of the greatest challenges he faces in creating his art is knowing when to stop, that is, realizing the exact moment when a work is finished; when nothing more can be added without destroying its purity and integrity. In today's world of excess and visual and sensory overload, that attribute is refreshing.

#### Additional Information about the Works Mentioned Above

- # 1. *Veil Painting Number 1* (2008)
- # 2. Untitled drawing [cat. # CDS-002-LIBR] from the Circle Drawing Series (2004)
- # 3. Untitled drawing [cat. # CDS-003-LIBR] from the Circle Drawing Series (2005)
- # 4. Untitled drawing [cat. # CDS-004-LIBR] from the Circle Drawing Series (2004)
- # 5. Untitled drawing [cat. # CDS-005-LIBR] from the Circle Drawing Series (2003)
- # 7. Untitled drawing [cat. # LDS-007-LIBR] from the Line Drawing Series (2007)
- # 8. *Circle Painting Number 2* [cat. # CPS-008-LIBR] (2008)
- # 9. Untitled painting [cat. # VS-009-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)  
(Note: This is the companion piece to #12)
- # 10. Untitled painting [cat. # VS-010-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)  
(Note: This is the companion piece to #13)

- # 11. Untitled painting [cat. # VS-011-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)  
(Note: This is the companion piece to #14)
- # 12. Untitled drawing [cat. # VS-012-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)  
(Note: This is the companion piece to #9)
- # 13. Untitled drawing [cat. # VS-013-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)  
(Note: This is the companion piece to #10)
- # 14. Untitled drawing [cat. # VS-014-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)  
(Note: This is the companion piece to #11)
- # 15. *Circle Painting Number 1* [cat. # CPS-015-LIBR] (2008)
- # 26. Untitled large drawing [cat. # VS-002-LIBR] from the Line Drawing Series (2008)
- # 30. Untitled painting [cat. # VS-030-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)  
(Note: This is the companion piece to #15)
- # 31. Untitled large painting [cat. # VS-031-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)
- # 32. Untitled large painting [cat. # VS-032-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)
- # 33. Untitled large painting [cat. # VS-033-LIBR] from the Veil Series (2008)
- # 34. Untitled drawing [cat. # CDS-030-LIBR] from the Circle Drawing Series (2005)as
- # 35. Untitled painting [cat. # CPS-035-LIBR] from the Circle Painting Series (2008)
- # 36. Untitled painting [cat. # CPS-036-LIBR] from the Circle Painting Series (2008)
- # 37. Untitled painting [cat. # CPS-037-LIBR] from the Circle Painting Series (2008)
- # 38. Untitled drawing [cat. # CDS-038-LIBR] from the Circle Drawing Series (2005)
- # 39. Untitled drawing [cat. # CDS-039-LIBR] from the Circle Drawing Series (2006)
- # 40. Untitled drawing [cat. # CDS-040-LIBR] from the Circle Drawing Series (2008)