

Rediscovering Drawing, the Forgotten Art

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

Drawing is one of the foundations of art. It is probably even fair to say that there would be no art without it. It is also a universal language, speaking to us across time and space. But today many artists no longer know how to draw. Nor do they really need to, for cameras and computers do all the work for them.

Though drawing may be in retreat, it has not disappeared. A small but growing number of young artists have rediscovered the medium, as anyone can see by walking the Chelsea gallery district in Manhattan. They are attracted to its expressive potential, but also to the fact that you don't need costly materials or a studio in which to work. All you need is imagination.

Among those young artists returning to drawing is Joan Linder, the subject of a small but engaging exhibition at the Anthony Giordano Gallery at Dowling College. About 20 of her most recent works of various sizes have been shoehorned into the gallery, which, though a single room atop a ceramics studio, is spacious and light-filled and generally a pleasant place to look at art.

Born in 1970, Ms. Linder divides her time between New York City and Buffalo, where she teaches at the University of Buffalo. But first and foremost she is an artist, using a quill pen, bottles of ink and sheets of paper to make drawings of contemporary life: buildings, landscapes, banal mass-produced household objects, her local bar and even images of the war in Iraq. She also draws erotic nudes.

Ms. Linder's drawings are more than just literal transcriptions of what she sees. They often have a depth or psychological weight and frequently seem to dwell on issues of sexual politics, objectification and power. At the same time, many of her drawings are beautiful. They involve imagination, dedication of purpose and tremendous skill, with the imagery elegantly set down.

The current show has few erotic works — a disappointment, I confess, given that they are often funny; the artist depicts naked men with the same voyeurism traditionally used to sexualize and objectify the female body, resulting in images that are more humorous than strictly erotic. In their place, however, are several of her latest series of bound self-portraits, which consist of large pen drawings of the artist naked and bound in layers of thick rope.

These self-portraits move away from raunchy humor to take Ms. Linder's art into a darker, more dangerous place. She is flirting with violence and misogyny here as she

explores dynamics of gender and power. Perhaps realizing this, she has begun to produce images in which the body has been omitted or erased, so that all you see are the ropes.

The effect of the rope drawings without the bodies is hallucinatory, for the bonds keep the viewer thinking that they see a body when in fact there is actually nothing there. Suddenly the images shift from being sexual and possibly violent to being humorous and quirky. With the female body taken away, the objectification is denied and the imagery loses its sexual charge.

Other works showing here are more conventional studies in human form, including closely observed drawings of hands, feet, internal organs and skeletal parts, like the sacrum and scapula. Ms. Linder's attention to anatomy is reminiscent of the celebrated anatomical drawings of Andreas Vesalius, the 16th-century physician and author.

The final series of images depicts modernist architecture, mostly square or rectangular structures with uniform rows of windows. Formally they are the exact opposite of the figurative drawings, for the style is sloppy and the details sketchy. A building labeled the Forum Hotel is so awkwardly shown that it looks as if it might be about to collapse at any minute.

Time haunts this fragile structure, which is drawn in blue ink. It looks like an apparition of a building, with the wavy rows of windows snaking their way down the facade. One's reaction is incredulity, for no building looks like this. I was fascinated by it, along with the other buildings in the drawings here, which look as if they are made of stacks of sugar cubes. They are a tour de force.

"Of Bodies and Buildings: Drawings by Joan Linder," Anthony Giordano Gallery at Dowling College, Idle Hour Boulevard, Oakdale, through Dec. 9; (631) 244-3016 or www.dowling.edu.