

CREIGHTON MICHAEL
squiggleLINER

CENTER FOR THE ARTS GALLERY, TOWSON UNIVERSITY
January 27, 2007—March 10, 2007

DELAWARE CENTER FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS
May 14, 2008—August 17, 2008

CREIGHTON MICHAEL
squiggleLINEAR

Creighton Michael is both a painter and a sculptor, and he shows examples of each medium in this exhibition. His two-dimensional and three-dimensional works are closely related enterprises, and the viewer comes away feeling rather more energized having seen the two side by side. His work ethic and approach to painting is like that of Paul Cézanne or Giorgio Morandi; he is a painter's painter. He follows a course of study to its very end, giving full respect to the pictorial space and to the parameters of the problem he has placed before himself. The dialogue that he sets up between the painting and sculpture supports this careful and thorough approach to the creative endeavor and all originate out of the artist's interest in drawing. Indeed, it must be understood from the beginning that the conceptual underpinnings of all of Michael's work is the practice of drawing and the movement of line in space, whether that line is painted, drawn, or dimensional.

Michael is an extremely intelligent artist—well-read, knowledgeable about the history of art in general, and particularly well-versed in modern and contemporary art. He teaches at the college level and this too informs his work. His early paintings evolved out of a post-minimalist aesthetic, and the understanding of the power of balanced and careful design continues to inform his compositions. Even when producing the rather ornate *Notation* series, which are based, to some extent, on Chinese ink brush paintings of natural forms, the major underlying movements make reference to the compositional devices of Modern design in the West.

In fact, the complexity of the overlapping and interweaving brushstrokes contrasts in compelling ways with the careful placement of the larger forms. The two black-and-white works in the current exhibition emerge out of both Asian art and Abstract Expressionism, of Franz Kline's gestural mark-making and Frank Stella's reductive black paintings, of the natural world and the imagined world, of the minimal and the "maximal." Their artificial structure speaks of contemporary art, their subjects address nature: flowers, leaves, and billowing tendrils. The *Notation* series follows on a group of works from the 1990s that are influenced by the structure of the natural world, and for the artist they address the contrast between what is seen and what is felt.¹ There are nine paintings in the *Notation* series, and in them Michael develops a mark making vocabulary which forms the basis for many of his later paintings.

Six of the paintings in this exhibition belong to the 2006 series entitled *Field*. They represent a fusion of painting, sculpture, and drawing as the paint lies on the surface of

convex panels that bow out from the wall. So they are sculptural paintings, a kind of postmodern painted relief. They are also more abstract than the *Notation* works, making no obvious reference to objects in nature, and they are brightly colored. However, the same hand that created the earlier series is clearly responsible for these works too. The controlled brushstrokes now form layers of color. It is as if each layer is a screen, something well understood in the information age when artists work in Photoshop or other similar programs using "screens" of imagery, layering one on top of the other, forming complex collages of nearly transparent strata. While these paintings have nothing to do with the computer (they were not made using one) they nonetheless indicate the general knowledge of how computer imagery works. They operate within the climate of the computer age.

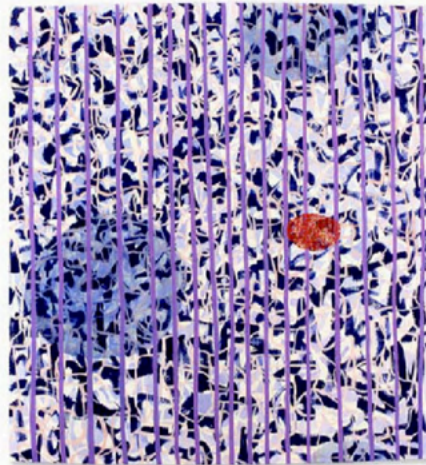
The *Field* paintings also make reference to techniques from the past—to oil glazes, one layer upon the next, with linen as a surface and utilizing the sculptural forms of a medieval altar panel. Michael paints in oils rather than acrylic, and while the imagery and intense colors set him squarely in our time, the understanding of the possibilities of oil paint and the richness it provides when applied with thin layers of glazed color points to such Venetian masters of the Renaissance as Giovanni Bellini. The artist sets up tensions between the organic layers of forms—the various levels of patterns—and between the surface structure and the illusion of space that is created by the compositional organization. Michael himself refers to this



NOTATION 898, 1998, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in.,



FIELD 4106, 2006, oil on linen on convex panel, 36 x 34 x 2.5 in.



FIELD 4406, 2006, oil on linen on convex panel, 36 x 34 x 2.5 in.



FIELD 4206, 2006, oil on linen on convex panel, 36 x 34 x 2.5 in.

effect as an “ocular migraine,” and the inspiration for the series emanates from the particular visual effects of that condition. They also show the artist’s continued exploration of marks, calligraphic strokes which comment upon the close relationship between writing and drawing.²

All of Michael’s works are well crafted and the forms are integral to the craftsmanship. This is often not a characteristic of contemporary painting, but it is one that plays a significant role in all of Michael’s work, most especially the paintings. They are beautifully made works, a compliment rarely employed anymore. There is a growing group of artists who are exploring abstraction and who hold the kind of respect for composition, design, and application of paint that has been eschewed in the recent past. Painting is clearly alive and thriving, even painting that builds upon the technical devices of Modernism and which is fascinated by image and surface.³

In his three-dimensional work, Michael has developed the concept of dimensional drawing. Here, his sculptures appear in two formats, free-standing (in the round) and wall mounted (relief). In them, he is inspired in part by the late reed pen and sepia ink drawings of Vincent van Gogh where the mark is seen simultaneously as an individual unit and as a component of a larger pattern. Michael designates this idea “synchronous viewing,” which he has evolved into a body of three-dimensional works. The artist offers drawing in physical terms, forming two sculpture series, *Grid* and *Squiggle*, examples of which are included in this exhibition. In both series the artist utilizes shadows from the “drawn” wire or rope to enhance the dimensionality of the piece and to give emphasis to the lines’ sense of motion, resulting in a measured pulse that combines the action and process of drawing with the physical and spatial characteristics of sculpture.⁴ Michael sees *Grid* as a hybrid work that combines sculpture and drawing “at an intersection with writing.”⁵ For the artist there is a close relationship between mark making in the plastic arts and in other marking activities such as choreography, musical notation, and calligraphy.

Grid presents exceptionally controlled arrangements where the gestures associated with drawing are organized into units (marks), constructed one component at a time. Michael composes these marks of wire individually by hand using needle-nose pliers. He covers the wire in plastic and rubber and then inserts the sections into predrilled holes in the wall or on the pedestals. They are designed so that they can be installed by someone other than the artist and to incorporate variation. Michael writes, “Responsibility for the creation of the drawing is transferred from the artist to the installer. Each *Grid* has an accompanying schematic locating the precise intersection at which to drill, information on unit production, how the grid is drawn on the wall, and the artist’s signature, which documents the piece.”⁶ While the installer has some input, the initial organization is established by the artist himself.

Michael’s deployment of variation is similar to jazz syncopation where improvisation becomes an organizing principle. The schematic operates as a musical score, but the installer is allowed to choose which “leg” of the individual piece of wire to insert into the wall first. It is inserted at an intersection on the grid where the hole is drilled; the intersection is the point where the vertical and horizontal lines meet. *Grid 3004* was the last *Grid* to use a predetermined numeric pattern. Many of the *Grid* pieces made in late 2004 and after no longer contain “two legs.”⁷ Consequently, the work varies even more at each installation, employing chance in its final disposition. This element of chance contrasts with the rigid grid structure, setting up a tension that invigorates the work and that removes it from the purely conceptual realm.⁸

The free-standing works consist of a sculpture pedestal where the drawing itself, assembled out of wire and rubber tubing, has left the top of the platform, thereby incorporating the stand into the work. This notion of the sculpture pedestal becoming part of the work of art is not new. Constantin Brancusi first established this understanding in the early twentieth century. His approach was to make art of the pedestals too, but he did this by

carving and finishing the two parts (the pedestal and the sculpture) into a developed whole. Michael has turned that notion upside down, instead taking a standardized form for the pedestal and adding dimensional drawing, not to the top where the art “should” sit, but rather wandering down its sides. So, not only is the pedestal created in a different vocabulary, but the work of art expected to rest atop it is no longer situated there.⁹

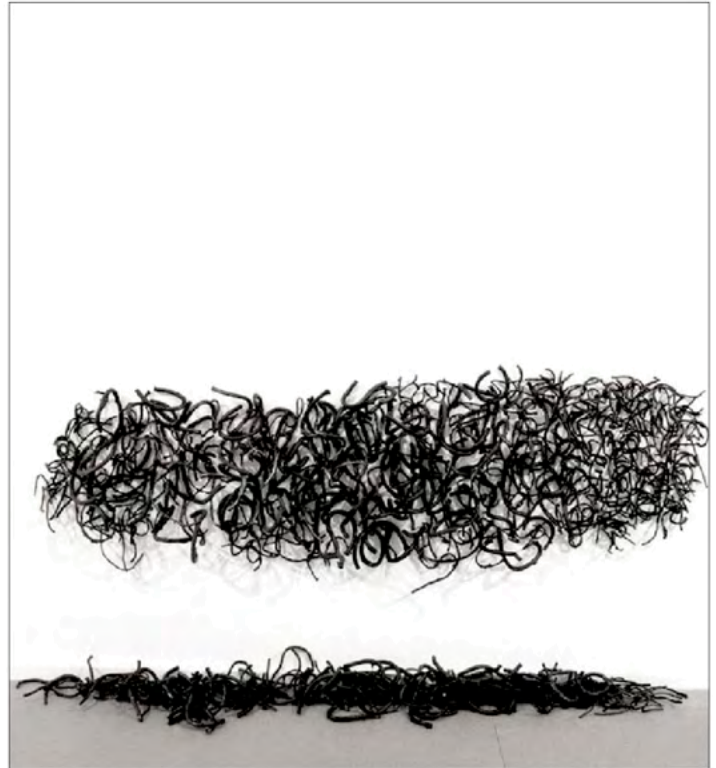
Squiggle, an additional series represented here, demonstrates another approach to sculpture, that of medium to large installation. Each is comprised of graphite and paper, the traditional components of a mark, and of rope. Rope is 100% cotton as is rag paper, the substrate for drawing. The *Squiggles* are drawings that have become dimensional and they are site specific to some extent. While planned generically, they can be extended or truncated to fit a particular space. Some include shelves where the debris from marking (lengths of white or black rope) has fallen like chalk dust into blackboard trays or graphite fragments that rest on the floor, the residue of past activity.

There is also a comic quality to the installations. The notion of rope becoming animated, so to speak, provides the same kind of sophisticated humor found in the pedestal *Grid* series where the sculpture itself activates the planes of the generic pedestal. These works can be appreciated for their sense of design, understanding of materials, and the beauty of their forms, but they can be valued also for their refined wit. Michael himself points out that, “Similar to *Grid*, *Squiggle* mimics the drawing process as it is created one mark at a time. Unlike traditional drawing however, which characteristically records a moment, action or image in time, *Grid* and *Squiggle* assume the transitory nature of installation.”¹⁰ The artist’s understanding of the action as “mimicry” alludes to the refined humor of these works. They represent a double entendre, operating as elegant compositions, conceptual works that demonstrate excellent craftsmanship at the same time that they represent a cleverness of both design and content. They are supremely seductive works.

Michael has managed—quite artfully—to comment upon the history of art, and to make the viewer take notice of the seriousness of purpose of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, and Conceptualism while turning these approaches to his own purposes. Each of Michael’s sculptures refers to the transitory nature of installation and the concrete character of its materials. In all of the artist’s paintings and sculptures there is a sense of the fleeting and of the momentary that acts as a counterpoint to their implied history and which demonstrates the artist’s sensitivity for concept and aesthetic.

J. Susan Isaacs, Ph.D.

Professor of Art History and Curator of the Department of Art Galleries, Towson University
Adjunct Curator, Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts



SQUIGGLElinear B206, 2006, graphite, paper, acrylic and rope,
33 x 84 x 11 in.

NOTES

- ¹ The artist maintains a website which has numerous descriptions of his various series. www.creightonmichael.com
- ² www.creightonmichael.com
- ³ One thinks of such disparate artists as Ross Bleckner, Jonathan Lasker, and Tobi Kahn in regard to contemporary abstraction.
- ⁴ From an unpublished artist’s statement by Creighton Michael.
- ⁵ From an unpublished artist’s statement by Creighton Michael.
- ⁶ From an unpublished artist’s statement by Creighton Michael.
- ⁷ E-mail correspondence with the artist, December, 2006.
- ⁸ Conceptual and Minimalist artists like Sol LeWitt reveled in the notion of repetition and regulation and also designed works that others could install.
- ⁹ Michael states, “By scale and concept these 60 inch high stands, reference both drawing as it is traditionally installed, 60 inch from center to floor, and twentieth-century sculpture, which included the pedestal as a part of the sculpture.” From an unpublished artist’s statement by Creighton Michael.
- ¹⁰ Michael sees both *Grid* and *Squiggle* as installation works. Unpublished artist’s statement by Creighton Michael.

Introductions

CURATOR J. SUSAN ISAACS DESCRIBES CREIGHTON MICHAEL as a painter's painter. He is also an art historian's artist. This is not to say that he is too weighted down by art history to create highly original art works; to the contrary, his works reveal a unique, coherent aesthetic and approach. What makes him an art historian's artist is the way he approaches each of his series as though he is a researcher investigating a problem, the manner in which his works are informed by an intimacy with the entire history of modern art, and his use of, and obvious love for, the language of the historian and critic when he describes his own works.

The visual and the conceptual, the flat and the three-dimensional, the singular present and the collective past all come together in a delightful dance as we watch Creighton Michael's elegant lines twirl across a canvas or drape themselves along a pedestal. Michael feels that, for him, "drawing is primary, not preliminary" and we see evidence of this in the primacy of the linear apparent in both his paintings and sculpture. We are grateful to the artist and to our partnering institution, Towson University, for making this exhibition possible; only by gathering together several series of Michael's works in a variety of media can we truly appreciate the singularity of the artist's vision, his intellectual rigor and constant attention to craftsmanship, and the consistency of his approach.

Maxine Gaiber
Executive Director
Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts

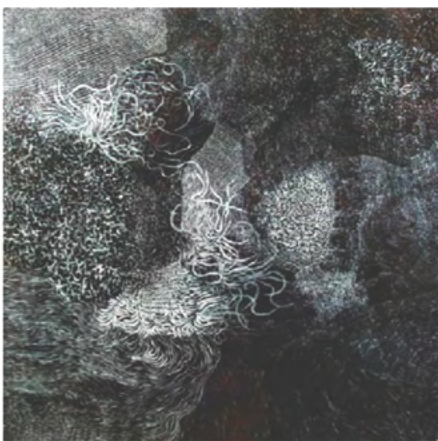
THE CENTER FOR THE ARTS GALLERY at Towson University is privileged to present the work of an outstanding contemporary artist, Creighton Michael.

His installation, *SQUIGGLElinear*, is at the intersection of drawing and sculpture and incorporates the effects of abstract repetitive mark-making evolving into complex and intricate structures. Informed by art history and observation of natural forms, his work exudes energy and vitality.

This exhibition provides a stimulating aesthetic discussion point for our students, and presents a distinct and original artistic perspective to the wider community.

I would like to thank the Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication, Christopher 'Kit' Spicer and the Chair of the Department of Art, Jean Miller, for their commitment to exhibitions of this caliber. I am especially appreciative of the collaboration with the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, without which this endeavor would not have been possible.

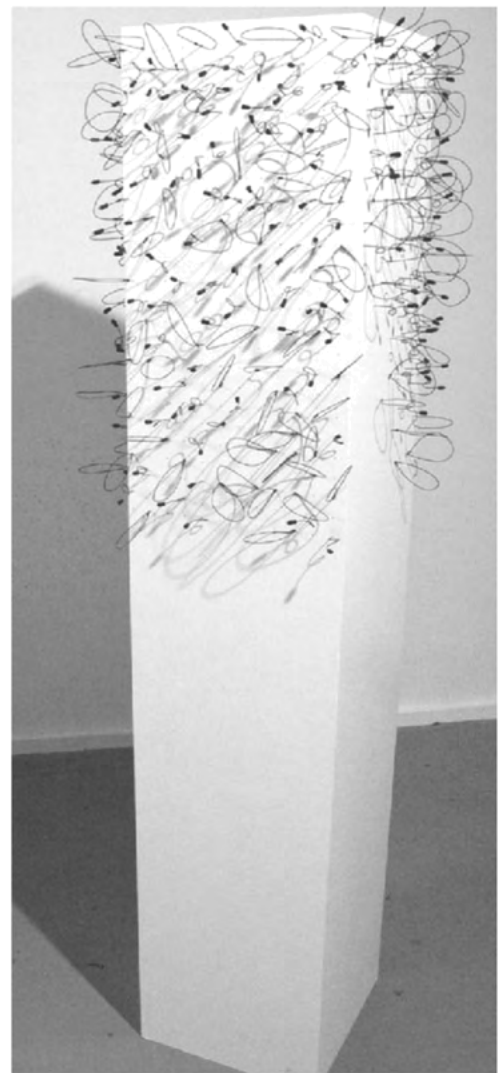
Christopher Bartlett
Professor of Art, Director of Towson University Art Galleries



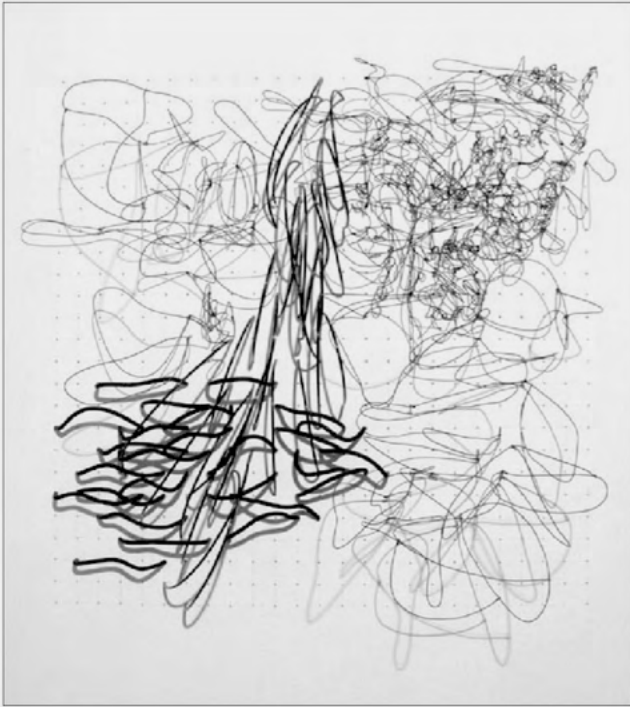
NOTATION 798, 1998, oil on canvas,
60 x 60 in.



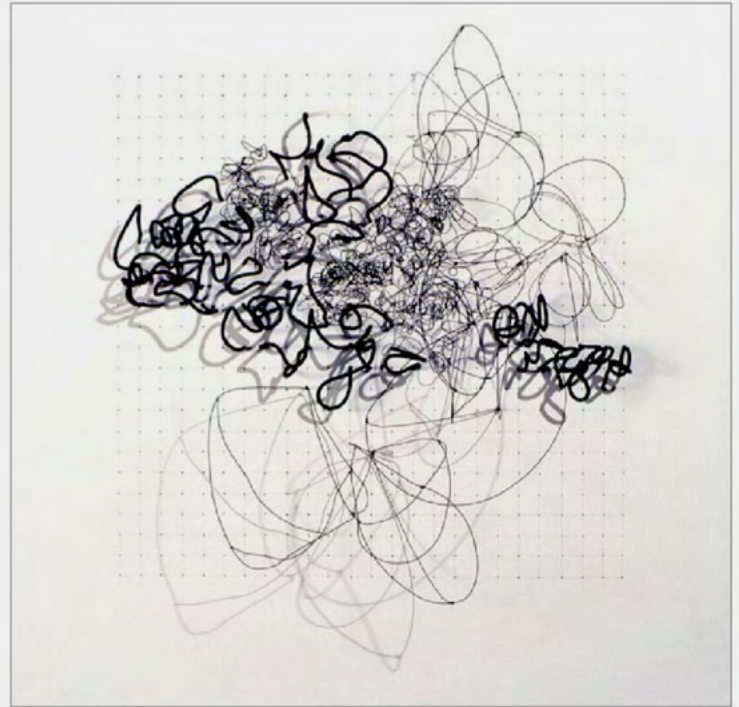
FIELD 4606, 2006, oil on linen on convex
panel, 36 x 34 x 2.5 in.



GRID 4806, 2006, anodized steel wire and rubber
tubing, 24 x 12 x 3.5 inches; plywood stand,
60 x 12 x 12 in.



GRID 3706, 2006, steel wire, rubber and plastic tubing, 24 x 24 x 8.5 in.



GRID 3906, 2006, steel wire and rubber tubing, 24 x 24 x 8.5 in.

CREIGHTON MICHAEL (Mount Kisco, New York) attended the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee (B.F.A. Honors; 1971, Painting), Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee (M.A.; 1976, Art History), and Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri (M.F.A.; 1978, Painting/Multi-Media). He has been awarded a number of fellowships, among them the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship (sculpture), a Pollock Krasner Foundation Grant, the Edward Albee Foundation Fellowship, and the Golden Foundation for the Arts Award (painting). He has shown his work in many exhibitions at museums and galleries across the United States and internationally, and his work is included in numerous public and corporate collections including: American Express, AT&T, The Brooklyn Museum of Art,

The John and Maxine Belger Family Foundation, the David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, the Denver Art Museum, the Neuberger Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art, the Mint Museum of Art, the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, New York University, Pfizer, Inc., Progressive Corporation, Prudential, the R.I.S.D Museum of Art, the University of Richmond Museums, Vanderbilt University, and the Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro. He has been a visiting professor and lecturer at a number of schools including Princeton University, the Rhode Island School of Design, and Virginia Commonwealth University. Currently, he is a visiting Assistant Professor of Art at Hunter College in New York City.



200 South Madison Street
Wilmington, DE 19801
T 302 656 6466
F 302 656 6944
www.thedcca.org



8000 York Road
Towson, MD 21252
T 410 704 2787
www.towson.edu/centerforthearts

Catalogue publication
supported in part by the
Jandon Foundation.

PUBLISHED BY
MANXpress
13 East Langhorne Avenue
Havertown, PA 19083

CATALOGUE DESIGN
Scott Spector