

Cursive

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Curated by: Thalia Vrachopoulos Ph.D

Tenri Cultural Institute of New York
43A West 13th Street | New York, NY 10011 | 212-645-2800 | www.tenri.org

Cursive refers to script defined by long flowing, connected lines that developed out of picture symbols into formal writing and then to a demotic style, called cursive. Although writing dates back to Sumerian cuneiform the type of cursive stroke that serves as inspiration and integrative element for this show comes from a later development associated with the Hellenistic demotic Egyptian scripts, written in a flowing style, thereby cursive. In China also when Emperor Qin Shi Huang ordered his Prime Minister Li Si to standardize the writing system in an effort to unify regional communication, a running script was developed. Called *caoshu* (grass writing or cursive hand), it is a rapid stroke thus it was used for making quick but rough copies and is sub-divided into two parts: *zhangcao* and *jincao*. For the sake of this essay it is *jincao* with which we are concerned in which the characters are written fast and the strokes run together, are sometimes joined and vary in size within the same piece of writing. Featuring the art of five artists D. Dominick Lombardi, Creighton Michael, David S. Rubin, Hilda Shen and Rebecca Smith this show conveys the essential character of cursive writing not as literal reference, but rather as inspiration and synthesis to the varied artistic expressions and media.

D. Dominick Lombardi's *Post Apocalyptic Tattoo* installation depicts a series of physically distorted characters informed by the "low art" of tattoo that because they appear as genetic hybrids also refer to recent experimentation in genetic engineering. As the artist describes them these "apocalypse survivors, build their self-assured attitudes on the fact that everyone's physical deficiencies are obvious- so no one feels weak, unequal or ashamed." Whether Lombardi's figures are conveyed as drawings, paintings or sculpture they rely heavily on line whose power lies in its running flow and fluid curve. Lombardi's mutant forms seem to roll into themselves like brain convolutions combining into creatures whose appearance ranges from somewhat recognizable humans to flat script designs. As post-apocalyptic survivors in their evolutionary process they've needed to speciate in order to survive their polluted environment to become new forms that in their multi-variance and strength serve as compelling tributes to humanity.

Creighton Michael's dimensional drawing developed out of "episodes of marking activity varying both in duration and intensity that examines in physical terms the process and structure of drawing." In their three-dimensionality his constructed drawings combine shapes composed of hand worked wire, rope, glue, plastic or rubber into drawing entities. While discrete units they are simultaneously viewed as collective harmonies that rhythmically wend and weave their way through cursive paths. Michael's series entitled *Squiggle* as a subgroup of the *Dimensional Drawing* category made of rope that has been coated with paper pulp and graphite mix to result in cursive squiggles that can be read as calligraphic strokes or drawing lines. Although more than ephemeral lines in a drawing due to their concrete construction, these linear shapes transition into a time related installation genre. They appear to be in the process of breaking away from their matrix to casually fall and collect on the gallery floor. Consequently, they are not read as fixed signs but rather they're taken to be in constant flux. They are also multi-dimensional not only in their sculpturality but also because of the shadows they project on the white walls that formulate another dimension altogether. Appearing like manifestations of the indefinable these delicate lines fit well into Ouspensky's notion of parallel dimensional existences.

David S. Rubin's curving, branching, flowing drawing line owes its genesis to the automatist practices of 20th Century Surrealism as well as to 19th Century spiritualist practices. The resulting shapes appear as chandelier forms or blood corpuscles or even planetary orbs that at points ebb and recede, or expand and increase, bunching up and dispersing. He conveys the connectivity of all things through images of colorful circular linear shapes that appear to

interweave and wend their way through a cosmic journey. Rubin's work can be read in terms of string theory, which is multidimensional containing twisting orbifolds exploded from a Euclidean perspective of three-dimensional space. Starting as points merging with other points to formulate lines these can merge into a plane expanding the coordinated reference. However, rather than describing nature's oneness in terms of geometric considerations, Rubin prefers to situate himself in the less definable interstices between his circular shapes. Consequently, as he describes this state, he loves "being right on the cusp, at that fine point between dualities— where a push one way or the other would be too finite."

Hilda Shen's site-specific installation pieces employ the imagery of fingerprints imprinted on shapes that reference Chinese scholar rocks related to the practice of landscape painting, calligraphy as well as meditation. This body of work continues her earlier practice seen in her *China2000* show of creating pieces about the continuity and overlap between human and geologic history depicted in multiple perspectives and media. Although ciphers of identity fingerprints are also round, curving, circular forms that relate to cursive strokes not only in their continuous thrust but also in their free-flowing characteristics. Shen's reference to scholar rocks is also multivalent for not only are they minerals but they attain their form from atmospheric conditions such as repetitive water flow patterns, thereby are also imprints of nature while also relating to the cursive script and calligraphy. A rock and its accompanying spirit (ch'i) in Chinese history are seen as the underlying scaffold of the heavenly and earthly planes and are referred to as the "roots of the clouds." Depending on the amount and quality of its spirit a rock or a person can possess more or less energy. According to Chinese art theory, rocks and people should contain the essence of the Tao therefore those without energy are dead and lifeless and cannot be painted. For a rock's form to be discernible thereby depictable, it must be spiritually imbued like P'an Ku's the primordial entity's head, which was transmuted into rock. As Lu Cha'i proposed, the main consideration in depicting them is that "each brushstroke must move and turn with abrupt stops sinuous as a dragon."¹

Rebecca Smith's lyrical, colorful forms are created for specific spaces whose dynamic results from the artist's relationship to the environment during specific conditions. In her recent colored tape drawing installation entitled *Shorthand Feminine*, 2005 Smith examines the components of shorthand script not only for the purpose of comprehending it and exposing its ramifications on power and gender relations within the workplace, but she's also studying it in terms of its formal value. Whether Pittman or Gregg, shorthand is an opaque language inaccessible to most people yet women were expected to master its forms for the purpose of conveying male communications. In this series she renders texts written in Gregg shorthand using pastel colors, thereby creating a space configured with chromatic language. Overlain on the field of writing are several forms built from accumulated layers of tape bands of different colors and increasingly greater lengths that form a "hieroglyph" of her own invention that denotes a joyous, striding female figure. On a visual level it is pleasing to look at, yet when viewed close-up the Arabic-looking strokes that appear to be grounded in a pictorial aesthetic, confound traditional readings and result in script-like strokes. Smith engages with the intricacies of language and works with text that while sharing some similarity with shorthand clearly engages with alternative readings that are not fixed but rather redefine the nature of language in their multivalent significance.

- Thalia Vrachopoulos Ph.D

¹ Mai-Mai Sze, *The Way of Chinese Painting: its Ideas and Techniques*, (Random House, New York , 1956) p. 192

D. Dominick Lombardi



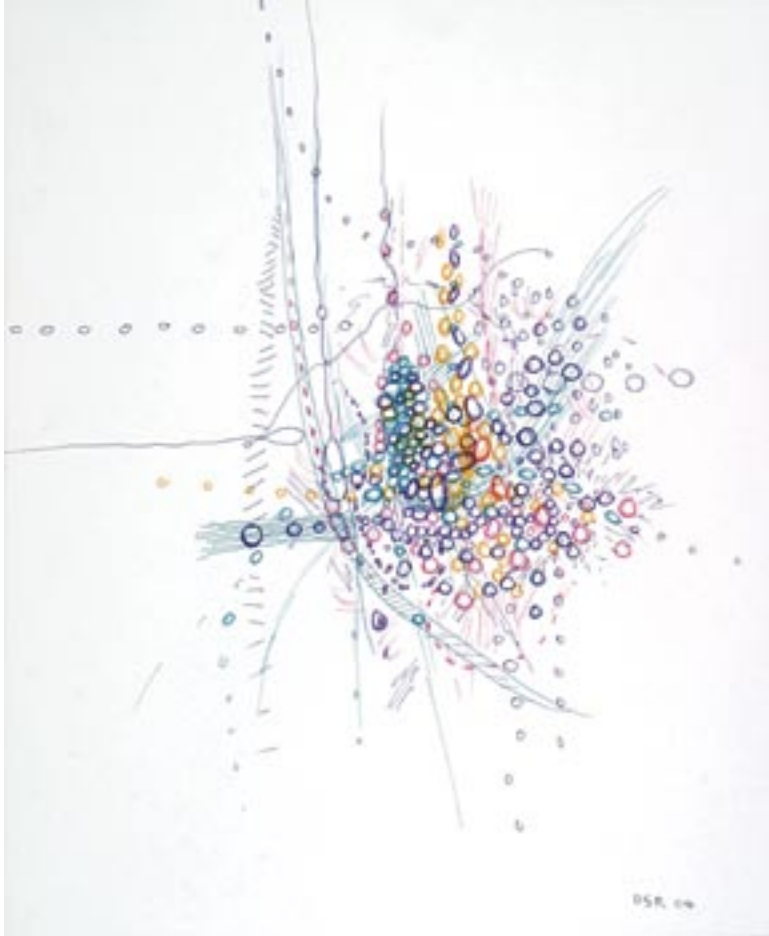
Head #485, Mixed Media, 2004, 15.5 x 13.5 x 6"
Head #1030, Head #1034, Head #1029, India Ink on Paper, 2004, 14 x 14"

Creighton Michael



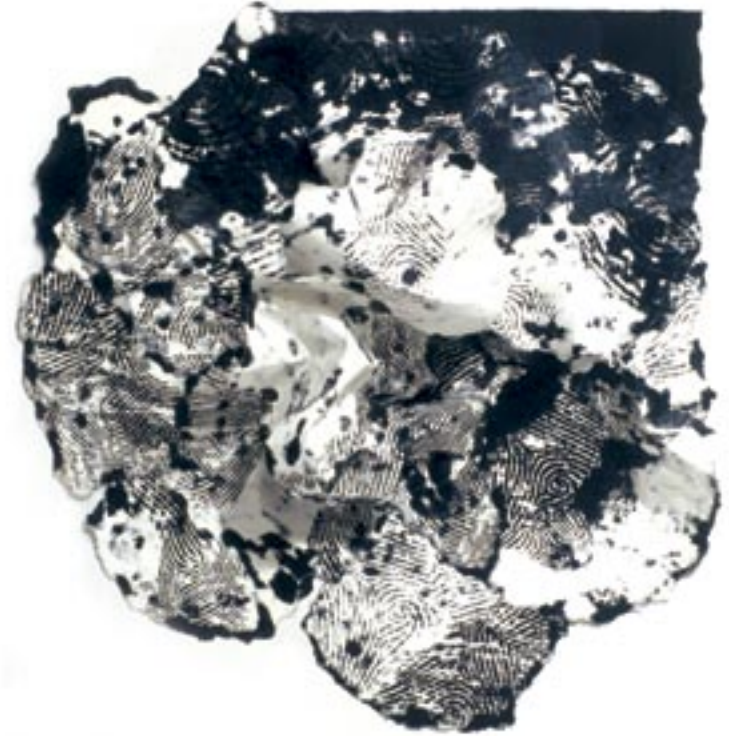
SQUIGGLE, Paper, Graphite & Cotton Rope, 2005, Dimensions Vary

David S. Rubin



Epiphany, Roller Pens on Paper, 2004, 17 x 14" photo © Mike Smith

Hilda Shen



Geode, Ink & Wax on Paper, 2004, 22 x 23 x 5"

Rebecca Smith



Elizabeth Bay Tangle (detail), Color Tape Drawing Installation, 2003, 8'10" x 15'5"



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