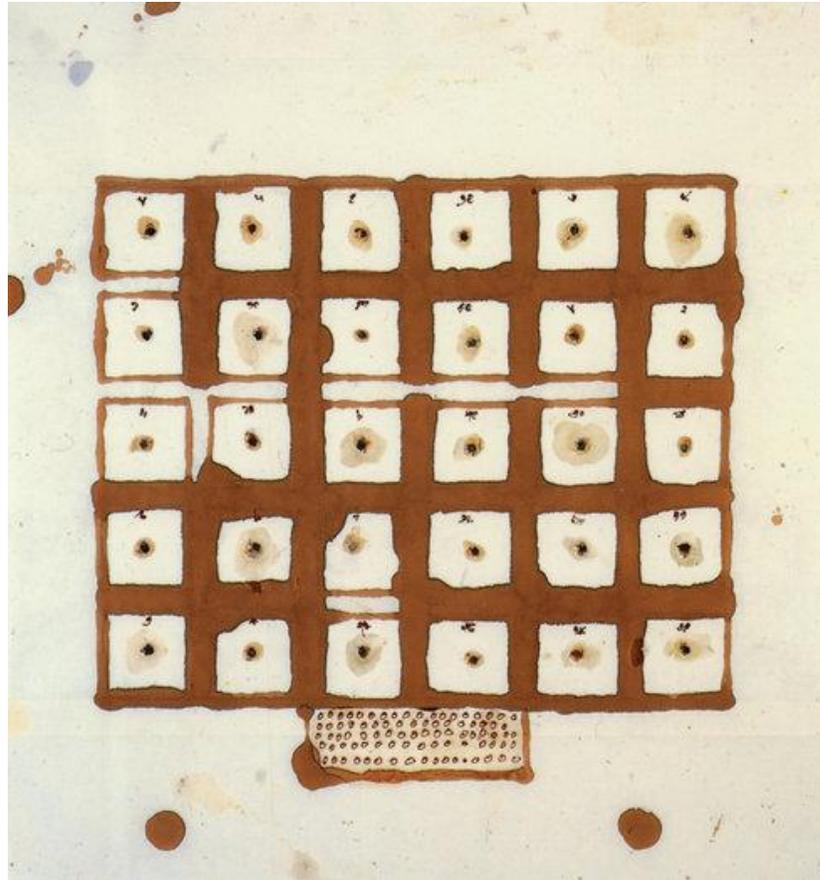


Review: Santa Barbara Museum of Art makes room for Stuart and Aycock

Art review: Retrospectives of New York-based artists Michelle Stuart and Alice Aycock meet auspiciously at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.



Michelle Stuart's seed calendar series of drawings treats time as an organic construct.
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By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic

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SANTA BARBARA — Michelle Stuart and Alice Aycock are very different artists. Stuart is a kind of cartographer, mapping not just the land but our intimate experience of it. Aycock is more literary, transforming familiar themes like the intrusion of technology into nature and society's spiritual discontents into sculptures that are sometimes participatory.

However, the juxtaposition of two sizable, retrospective exhibitions of their drawings at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art is fortuitous. Both New York-based artists emerged in the 1970s, both were (and still are) focused on human intervention in the actual landscape, and both have exploited drawing's fundamental capacity as a luxuriant medium for imaginative thought.

"Drawn from Nature," a traveling show organized at the University of Nottingham, England, assembles 59 works by Stuart — drawings, photographs, objects and a video — made since 1969. That was the year humankind landed on the moon, an epic event characterized for most observers down on the ground as a leap of imagination tied to a radically altered relationship to Earth.

PHOTOS: Best art moments of 2013

That the event was on Stuart's mind is obvious from "Moon," a graphite drawing of the lunar surface made from landing photographs. At 29 1/2 inches per side, the drawing is square. That betrays privilege to neither the landscape nor human orientation, which a horizontal or vertical format would imply.

Instead, the square format emphasizes the materiality of the sheet of paper. The sheet is its own "field," where marks of the hand are registered.

Stuart's exquisitely pale, pockmarked image is as much like a picture of a sponge as it is like the moon's cratered surface. The exploratory human limits of the sky above and the ocean below collapse into the tactility of a pencil drawing.

Nearby, a slightly later drawing titled "Sand" inserts time into Stuart's developing equation. Drawing has long been compared to writing, partly because of the common materials and partly because both are solitary activities. In this work Stuart used her pencil to write the title word in neat rows of cursive script, perhaps 30 times across and repeated on more than 80 lines down.

The page is also liberally sprinkled with pencil dots, seemingly at random, like a handful of punctuation marks strewn across the surface. Many words are smudged from upper right to lower left, an angle that matches the handwriting. Like sands through the hourglass or a tide line perpetually erased at the shore, it underscores drawing as a continuous process of making and unmaking.

CRITICS' PICKS: What to watch, where to go, what to eat

In the wake of the rise of Conceptual art, drawings gained traction as a prominent medium for artists in the 1970s. A drawing intimately links art to mind, and Stuart's work is slow, gentle and contemplative.

Her most widely known works are a group of free-hanging paper scrolls mounted on muslin, often pinned to the wall at the top and unfurled on the floor at your feet. That configuration literally grounds perception. Two large scrolls in the exhibition, both made in different landscapes in upstate New York, are densely covered in graphite. Stuart made them with a heavy-duty version of frottage, the old Surrealist technique of rubbing graphite over thin paper laid down on a textured surface. Her paper is not thin; it was laid directly on the rock-strewn ground, and she sometimes smashed dirt itself into the paper.

Forget releasing the subconscious, which Surrealist artists wanted from frottage. Stuart's scrolls instead remind me of industrial-strength grave rubbings, recording Earth's mortality. A 1975 video shows a monumental related example: The paper scroll ran several hundred feet down a gorge, where an ancient tributary of Niagara Falls once ran.

Perhaps the most consistently beautiful drawings are a series of modest "seed calendars" from 1992-95. A sheet of rice paper, as delicate and translucent as fragile skin, is subdivided into various grid formations. One or more seeds — ash, maple, columbine, etc. — are deposited within each square.

ART: Can you guess the high price?

The artist has organized the grid, modern symbol of rational thought. But it's the moist seeds that do the internal drawing, oozing and staining the sheet. Her calendars mark organic time, as if having grown from that early rendering of "Sand."

Alice Aycock's drawings likewise ground themselves, but more the way an architect builds within a given landscape. The show, organized by the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y., includes nearly 100 drawings, photographs and models, plus one sculpture. "Some Stories are Worth Repeating" is divided into two sections.

One part, including large drawings made since 1984, is at the museum. Aycock's early work, surveying 1971 through 1983, is at the Art, Design and Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara.

The early drawings tend to be rather straightforward, like architectural drafting documents for environmental outdoor sculptures. Their simplicity can be deceiving. Aycock sometimes fabricates a literary narrative as the plan develops: The spatial layout of one 1978 drawing of a building grew from a made-up story of a young girl living on the outskirts of Cairo and her interactions with others.

The strongest work here is "The Miraculating Machine in the Garden," which takes the famous 19th century American emblem of the industrial dynamo intruding on pristine nature and turns it into a phantasmagorical gizmo of coils, antennas and pipes. A drawing, a table-top model and a 30-foot-wide finished sculpture at Rutgers University, shown in a photograph, explodes myths of natural, cultural and even spiritual order.

GRAPHIC: Highest-earning art executives

For drawing, that explosion becomes even more compelling in the show's second half. The earlier connection to the structural demands of drafting gives way to sheer, unadulterated, often gorgeous fantasy, sometimes inspired by non-Western mythology.

Nearly 8 feet wide, "The Celestial City Game" looks like a flying carpet crossed with a mosque's floor-plan. With a dozen snakes slithering across the checkerboard floor, a kid's chutes-and-ladders game board is tossed in for good measure.

Rendered in vivid red, gold and blue, the tilted perspective of the square pattern, like a flattened building, visually torques in space. The result is a kind of crosscultural mandala — the cosmos as a landing pad for imaginative perception.

In "Rock, Paper, Scissors (India '07)," a nearly 8-foot-tall drawing in watercolor and ink, a temple lifts off like a rocket ship. Aycock tilted the stepped, intricately faceted tower, its rococo latticework adapted from a crown-like harem palace in 18th century Jaipur. Standing before it is akin to looking up at the launch and getting slightly delirious, wonder mixed with wooziness.

The tower is animated by an elaborate swirl of rippling crimson ribbon. Its silvery base is a giant, whirling turbine. Hundreds of little pinwheels flutter across the surface like migrating butterflies or birds crossed with lacerating blades — simultaneously delicate and ferocious.

Rock, paper, scissors is a hand-game — itself appropriate for a drawing. In the imposing image, winning and losing is as much a matter of chance as skill.

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'Michelle Stuart: Drawn from Nature'

Where: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St.

When: Through May 4

Contact: (805) 963-4364, <http://www.sbma.net>

Where: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St. and AD&A Museum, UC Santa Barbara

When: SBMA through April 20, AD&A Museum through April 19

Contact: SBMA at (805) 963-4364, <http://www.sbma.net>; AD&A Museum (805) 893-2951, <http://www.museum.ucsb.edu>

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-stuart-aycock-review-20140306,0,240248.story>