

VISUAL ARTS

GETTING THE LEAD OUT

Pencil work front and center in "Graphite Visions" at the Schick Art Gallery

By William Jaeger

A pencil? Isn't that the definition of simplicity itself, the barest of bare bones? What kind of art is made with the lowly pencil?

That's what "Graphite Vision" tries to answer. With their art students in mind, the Schick Gallery often has shows based around a single material or medium. These shows always clarify — and sometimes astound — for all of us. Their ceramics show last fall certainly did that.

But graphite? Charcoal might give more possibilities. Both of these colorless (black and gray) materials break apart onto the surface, scuffing it, revealing their color or tone by overcoming surface resistance. (By contrast, paint and ink work by adhering or pouring onto a surface.) Unlike charcoal, graphite is prosaic, and part of our everyday drudge, like learning your alphabet in school (if they still teach that).

In the arts, the pencil is used most of all for studies, sketches that find their denouement in some other medium. And there are drawings in this show that seem to be about preliminary observation, and many are not especially singular for either their content or their undoubted skill.

But just a short aesthetic distance away from this are Robert Bauer's five small landscapes. These are like conjured memories, simple trees and walkways half-erased. If they were only about depiction, they'd be insufficient. It's their retraction from facts that makes them about the persistence of vision.

Depiction takes a different turn in a pair of 8-foot-tall rigorous drawings of interior rooms in an apartment, circa 1970. If there is something awkward about the rectangular space, the light-drenched billowing curtains, the overly detailed record covers, or even the mundane, nostalgic scenes themselves, that might be exactly what draws us in.

Awkwardness is definitely what gets refined and codified in the folk-art inspired drawings by Hipkiss, a pair of so-called "outsider" artists who are too savvy and well represented to be genuinely naive. Their style distorts and elongates perspective, gives inordinate detail to unexpected and often repeating subjects, and plays with the notion of the bizarre as normal, as if we should expect endless ex-

aggerations around us. These are brilliant and wacky drawings, showing a world of carnival agriculture with industrial side effects.

Alongside two rather prosaic studies by Catherine Murphy, a third, "Studio Wall," is more illusory, commenting on drawing itself. First, a pale, textured wall surface

is realistically rendered. Over this, a large butterfly outline is drawn in a few strong strokes. But consider: Is this a view of a butterfly drawn on a wall, or of a butterfly drawn on the paper where a wall has been represented?

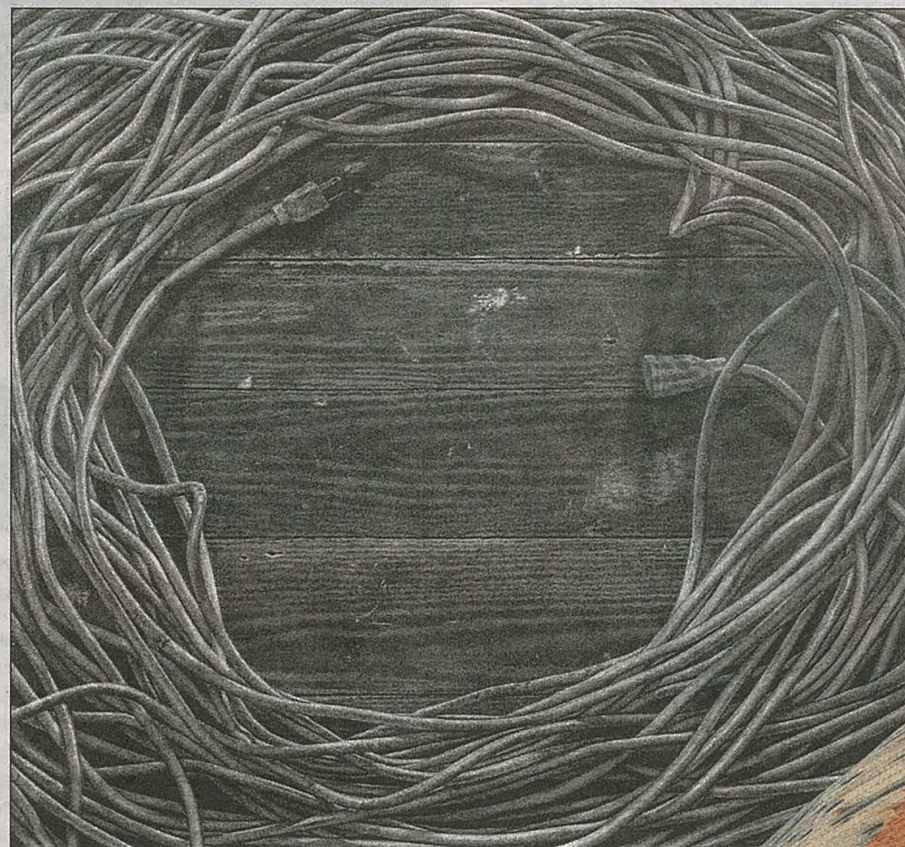
For purely exquisite draftsmanship, M'onma's three highly detailed and

complicated layers of human and animal forms become a dense mat of patterns, the overlapping textures with hints of subject in counterplay. In a similarly tactile and gorgeous way, Seana Reilly's two large book works are open to pages where graphite rises up from the bottom like roiled, inky waters.

There are abstract works that summon up old formal ideas with mere graphite, and there are two corrugated cardboard works that have been heavily coated with graphite so the sheen and the broken surface make them almost sculptural, as if made of pure carbon. True sculpture makes an appearance with Jessica Drenk's forms made of countless pencils glued together and then cut and shaped anew, revealing the interior solidity of the wooden pencils with their graphite rods firmly in place.

We get to the extremes of rendering, and a giddy zenith of the pencil as an instrument for making art, in a pair of detailed, almost minimalist pieces by Anne Lindberg. The drawn line, in this case using a straight edge and repeated by the hundreds in perfect vertical strips, is both the start and end of this show. As simple as the idea is, the lines vary slightly in length and density (and some colored pencil is snuck in as well), so the result builds into a pair of large works quite optically mesmerizing.

► *William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.*



CATHERINE MURPHY'S "STUDIO FLOOR"

If you go

"Graphite Vision"

■ **Where:** Schick Art Gallery, Skidmore College, 815 N. Broadway, Saratoga Springs

■ **When:** Through April 23

■ **Hours:** 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Friday, Saturday and noon-4 p.m. Sunday

■ **Admission:** Free

■ **Info:** 580-5049; www.skidmore.edu/schick



JESSICA DRENK'S "IMPLEMENT 54"