

RUTH MILLER DRAWINGS

*A Retrospective*



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## THE DRAWINGS OF RUTH MILLER

The first work of art that I ever paid money for was a drawing by Ruth Miller. We are friends, but it was not for friendship that I bought it. It was because there was something inside it that I needed. With daily contact, I hoped, I might uncover a sense of what gives the drawing its power and completeness. I wanted it to reveal its secrets. I wanted it to speak.

Over time, the drawing has spoken in a strong clear voice. The tone is not one of argument but of conversation. One recognizes at once that the artist is familiar with all points of view. The entire tradition of drawing is alive in these works. The dialogue is open and frank. It reaches back across time. There is great courage in inviting so many to the table. I look into her drawings and see, in the tactile form, exactly why Giacometti was mad for Giotto. In the use of line that delimits both object and interval in space, I see what Morandi learned from Cézanne. These are drawings that continue.

It is the tactile form, the volume, which takes hold of us first. It is rare. I know of no other artist working today who gets it so fully. There is both the volume of the object and the volume of the space; the two achieve a remarkable balance. We see right through to the center of forms, to their beginning. Accords are created between object and page. There are always relations. Rhythms generated within release into the surrounding space. We are given a specific form, carefully seen, but the line is never too tied to the object. She is a constructor. The whole page is always engaged. As one looks, one recreates, over time, the growth of the form and the search for affinities—as many as possible.



We can join fully in the search because the path is laid bare for us. The language is internalized. Here the rhetoric of drawing does not call attention to itself. It is a bridge, which we cross with ease. There is an admirable self-effacement that allows us to contemplate just the event of the drawing itself. Memory and knowledge structure these drawings as much as what is discovered in nature. One comes to recognize how many of the apparent contradictions, or oppositions, that are inherent in the act of drawing are brought to elegant and harmonious resolution. A tension is kept alive between what is inside of us, and what is out in the world.



*Missouri Oak*, 1999, pencil, 14" x 17"



Another order of balance finds beautiful expression in two subjects of the later drawings. There is parity between them and poetry in their combination. Each subject lives as both a beloved subject in the history of art and as one of vital significance to the artist in the present. One is the head. It calls up for us all



heads of the past. But it is a very specific one, the head of the artist's mother on her sickbed. The second subject is the great Missouri Oak that stands outside her mother's home. We think of Cézanne, as we should.

The drawings are in series; created and considered over time, a succession of days that becomes a succession of years. The subjects might be seen as opposite poles, the contemplation of the tree a balance to that of the mother. We imagine the drawings might alternate, as night follows day. In the heads, a form is captured that evokes the time of a past spent together and the urgent desire, in the present, to savor what remains, the balance of a life. The tree is most often seen as a strong and upright presence, permanent and outside of us. But treatments differ, and the subjects are set at varying distances and seen in different lights. The heads are not so much projected in space as held, sometimes drawn near, solid as crystal, sometimes receding, nearly out of reach.



Likewise the oak, usually secure in its attachment to the earth, can be overcome by movements in the page. The poles can switch, and we feel both the preciousness and precariousness of life. We are reminded that light can both create and dissolve form. The drawings are meditations. They reflect on and ask, what is transient and what endures? How are we formed by what has come before? They carry within them the suggestion that what lasts will rise from what perishes.





The voice these drawings speak in is distinct and personal. The space is not the infinite distance that signals the abyss, nor is the structure one that aspires to the absolute. Each has its element of despair. Here despair has been replaced with desire. The space is a human space. It is within our grasp. The time is our time. These drawings heighten experience through making us aware of the daily rhythms, the time in which we live our lives. It is the essential relation between time and the growth of form that gives this work its lasting power. Form must be given space to exist in, but it must also be given time. This is a gift to us, drawing that captivates and unfolds slowly. It both reveals and affirms. Given time, it forms us.



As an artist, a generation younger than Miller, who aspires to what these drawings achieve, I am grateful for the openness of form that invites us into the heart of the drawing and into the center of the act of drawing itself. It is here that we may gather strength. I am grateful for the formal rigor that never loses sight of the

objective. These are the drawings of a lifetime, and they are an inspiration to continue. Above all, there is the compelling feeling in the work that the artist cannot get enough of the world, as we cannot get enough of what we love. This is, I think, the true subject of the work.

— KIM SLOANE, JULY 2001