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Drawings as 'finished' artwork

[By Steve Bennett](#)- Express-News

There's a tendency to denigrate drawing as a rough draft, to designate it the Art 101 framework for a grander vision, like an oil painting. And in these days of multimedia installations and computer-generated conceptions, who needs to know how to draw?

But, it turns out, pencils remain sharpened.

Exhibitions such as "Texas Draws I" last summer at the Southwest School of Art & Craft are proof positive. And now along comes "Intense Concentration," an aptly named survey of contemporary drawing at the University of Texas at San Antonio Art Gallery through Feb. 14.

"It's about drawing as finished work," says Scott A. Sherer, the UTSA art department faculty member who is gallery manager and curator of the show.

"Intense Concentration," which refers not only to the artist's creative process but the focus required of the viewer, is a testament to the skill and, well, wizardry of six artists from across the country. The drawings here range from El Paso artist Albert Wong's exacting realism to San Antonian Judith Cottrell's exhilarating abstractions.

Trompe l'oeil, French for "trick the eye," is Wong's modus operandi. Five thorny twigs, appearing remarkably three-dimensional, twice horizontally pierce a folded sheet of shaded gray paper embellished with Chinese characters. The initial reaction is to reach out and touch these "objects," only to learn they are contained on a flat white surface stained by watercolors. In another work, with a nod and perhaps a wink to the drawing process, Wong tapes nude studio sketches torn from a spiral pad to a larger paper surface, creating not only the artistic image itself, but the materials to create it. It's all drawn on, down to the "tape." Viewers have no choice but to marvel at the technical virtuosity of the artist, born in China and a member of the University of Texas at El Paso faculty since 1986. All the while, we are encouraged to consider the fundamental elements of the artistic process.

While we're on the subject of visual trickery, let's consider Darice Polo, a widely exhibited artist who teaches at Kent State University in Ohio. Polo's drawings at first glance resemble the old black-and-white family photographs that inspired them. It is, almost literally, like looking through her family photo album. In "Fela's Visit 1952," a spectacled aunt in an old netted hat jostles an infant in his mother's lap; it's an image all of us have in our family gallery. In painstaking detail — down to the ill-focused fuzziness of a treasured old photo — Polo draws her memories in graphite, soliciting from

us a deeper consideration of the passing of time and the prisms and portholes through which we view it. Elegiac and formal, Polo's drawings, notably works from her ongoing "Statue of Liberty Island Project," truly do, in the artist's words, "encompass single snapshots of plaintive memory."

In Eastern cultures, a young woman's long hair is associated with "life force, sexual energy, growth and identity," says Hong Chun Zhang, a young artist from China who teaches at the University of Kansas. Large-scale charcoal on paper drawings from a series she calls "Three Graces" capture light refracting off the long hair — shiny and black — of Hong and her two sisters. It almost looks like carved wood. Hong says she uses hair to exaggerate stereotypes as well as to "move beyond the surface." "Twister" is the tour de force here, however, a supple, dynamic, illusionary drawing that merges Hong's ancient Chinese heritage with her new home in Kansas, land of tornadoes.

Sliding down the scale of photorealism, but no less amazing in execution, are Arlington artist Janet Chaffee's graphite explorations of lace, with its intricate geometry and rigid repetitiveness. Semicircular sunburst patterns emerge from thousands of tiny marks on the page, a process that must be at least as tedious as tatting itself. That one work is called "Safety Net" testifies to the fact that crafts traditionally associated with women — and not just lace-making, but, say, quilting — are the very fiber of the family and should not be lost. "The process," says the Colorado native, "is a conversation between the old and the new."

With Dan Zeller's work, it's impossible to tell if you are looking at something through a microscope or a telescope. It's either molecular or geographic, or both. (Somehow, something in these drawings reminded me of the otherworldly flora and fauna of "Avatar," although I'd be hard-pressed to say why.) The Brooklyn artist, perhaps the best known artist of the group, creates a visual language that, he says, "is borrowed from many places, including but not limited to satellite photography, electron micrographs, topographical maps, anatomical and schematic diagrams." Mind-blowing stuff.

The abstractions of Michigan artist Kris Jones and Judith Cottrell, who earned her master's of fine arts degree in 2006 from the University of Texas at San Antonio, close "Intense Concentration" with fluidity, grace and a reminder that drawing, too, is an evolving art form.

Jones' bubbling brew combines a variety of materials, from coffee to ink. A work such as "Lascoix," which the artist said was inspired by "the scientific and the spiritual," opens up a lot of dichotomies: both beautiful and somewhat repugnant, it seems at once to be highly structured and to infect the page with an irrepressible mold. The work speaks to the tension between an artist's deliberation and ability to control it.

Cottrell calls her big (7 feet by 7 feet) gel ink drawing on latexed wood panel "sweet corn." She probably has a good reason, perhaps because it was too, um, corny to call it "heaven." Or even "ocean." It's an astounding piece, a mass of thousands of individually marked loops and curves and arabesques against a tannish background that beckons you to dive in and somehow live happily ever after. Up close, upon the dawning realization that all these surface marks were made individually, with a pen available at any drugstore, the viewer is justified in entertaining a fleeting question or two concerning the artist's sanity. If anything, Cottrell proves that the art of drawing remains, as Sherer puts it, "a process of discovery."

"Intense Concentration" remains on view through Feb. 14 at the UTSA Art Gallery, Department of Art and Art History, One UTSA Circle. Hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday, 1-4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Free and open to the public. Call 458-4391 for more information.