

The Restless Line

Ram Samocha's works take the form of large scale, yet intimate, abstract line drawings. Many of the larger drawings can be viewed as self portraits that capture the artist's maximum physical potential—as realized in pastel, charcoal, pencil, and various other mediums—but without recording recognizable representations of the body itself. For instance, the distance Samocha's arms can span or the reach of his jump are all tested and then recorded in these anthropometric drawings. Subsequently, though the drawings resist the definition of portraiture in the classical sense, they nevertheless record the characteristics of the artist and as such can be viewed as following a tradition of portraiture.

Time is another essential factor to understanding Samocha's workings. Unlike classical drawings, where the preliminary draft marks are erased in the process of completing the drawing, Samocha neither erases nor hides any of what might be considered back drawing. In fact there are no back drawings, only drawing from start to finish. In this way Samocha uses time as a medium incorporated in the work as a whole: the time it takes to produce these repetitive lines, as related to the time it takes the eye of the viewer to trace them back. Through the combination of time and portraiture, the drawings become studies of a subject—the artist—moving through time and the space of the image. Samocha's work is reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), only instead of merely capturing the dynamism of movement, Samocha's work more pronouncedly illustrates the narrative process which created the work—a story of the artist himself. Lines allude to the artist's own workings and the sensibilities which may have caused him to deliver such obsessively compulsive and frantic work.

Samocha stresses that the intensity of Israel, the country he is from, is integral to understanding his work and *The Restless Line*. Even if the viewer has never been to Israel, one can begin to understand the intensity Samocha speaks of through the methods in which he works. Observing Samocha in the midst of his creations—either in live performance or video recordings posted online—or viewing the images on display, one cannot help but to sense an element of dissidence. Wild gestures, strong, repetitious marks, and the conscious choice to bare his chest or nude body to his audience can be interpreted as a protest against conformity.

While the images themselves can be construed as portraiture, the body of the artist is only implied, and not fully revealed, calling into question the absence of Samocha's body in his self portraits. Samocha has demonstrated a willingness to display his body without censorship in certain contexts, so why has he obscured his form in his drawings? As Nancy Spector notes in her 1988 essay, "Subtle Bodies":

The body in absentia—its insistent and vital presence noted only through invisibility—is a profound motif in contemporary art. Recurrent themes of illness, vulnerability or the body in pain no doubt parallel a culture ever more saturated with graphic images of physical suffering. The body—as psychological, sexual and social entity—is an interstitial site where the public and the private spheres cross. It is also where emotional battles triggered by the disintegration of boundaries dividing privacy and publicity are played out.

Though marks made on canvas can relate to any number of creative actions, in Samocha's case they exist as stand-ins for what is essentially without form. His lines articulate the inexpressible emotional wounds of an artist displaced from his home country, struggling to integrate into a new culture. The emphasis on the performing body paired with the absence of the figure in Samocha's finished work accentuates an ethos that may otherwise go unremarked in the public realm.

The strident physicality of Samocha's performance, exclusion of the figure, and deliberate abstraction cause his drawings to elude containment, while proffering opportunities for intimate connection to the work and its creator. The works presented can serve as backdrop to a multiplicity of discussion in which viewers may become active participants through projecting their own thoughts and feelings into each piece. Samocha's remarkable techniques induce a paradoxically corporeal experience while bearing little resemblance to the corporeal form itself.

Robin Selk, 2010