

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Gagosian
May 23, 2016



BOUNDARY CROSSINGS *Sculptural—Pictorial*

Left: Mark Grotjahn, *Untitled (Deco Pink and Lemon Yellow Butterfly 45.95)*, 2016, color pencil on paper, 55 × 42 inches (139.7 × 106.7 cm) © Mark Grotjahn. Photo by Douglas M. Parker Studio

Right: Mark Grotjahn, *Untitled (TO BE TITLED Mask M32.b)*, 2015–16, painted bronze, 59 3/8 × 24 1/2 × 37 1/2 inches (150.8 × 62.2 × 95.3 cm) © Mark Grotjahn. Photo by Douglas M. Parker Studio

BY JOHN ELDERFIELD

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The exhibition "Plane.Site," currently on view at Gagosian Gallery San Francisco, is comprised of drawings and other works on paper made in two dimensions, and sculptures and assemblages made in three dimensions by more than a dozen modern and contemporary artists. The exhibition was selected by Sam Orlofsky with the aim of showing how each of these artists has in different ways crossed the divide from two- to three-dimensional composition, or vice versa. This essay, by John Elderfield, has two parts: the first describes some of the principles that have influenced such boundary crossings; the second addresses a number of the works in the exhibition. Below is an excerpt from part one.

Any project conceived for the purpose of juxtaposing two- and three-dimensional works of art needs to acknowledge the long history of comparing them. As far back as Renaissance Italy, theoretical discussions of art used the term *paragone* (comparison) largely to consider the relative possibilities available to painting and sculpture.¹ The most frequent comparison made in such discussions was between the Central Italian and the Venetian schools of painting, the former valued for its linear design, the latter for its color. And it was broadly understood—especially, and predictably, by advocates of the Central Italian school—that drawing was the very basis not only of pictorial art but of sculpture as well.

This exhibition was not conceived to explore the viability of that claim for the priority of drawing in the art of sculpture, although it does imply the inescapability of the connection between the two, as any such survey will. Rather, the exhibition is concerned with how, and to what effect, a range of modern and contemporary artists have negotiated the transition from drawing to sculpture, and from sculpture to drawing—the terms “drawing” and “sculpture” being broadly defined here, as is evident from the works shown. Nonetheless, a useful way of beginning to address this

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subject is to look briefly at what is, or was, commonly understood by the term "sculptor's (or 'sculptural') drawing."

The critic and curator Philip Rawson, an eloquent guide to the means and methods of drawing over the ages, points out that until the Italian Quattrocento, no European sculptor was supposed to be able to draw.² In the medieval period, only those sculptors who also worked in two dimensions drew habitually; any other sculptor who needed, say, to show a client a proposed design hired a draftsman to make one. And when sculptors began to make drawings (for their own use or to guide assistants), they tended to do so without thinking of the format of the paper as a frame to which the image should relate. Instead, the image was generally treated as an independent motif, composed of mutually related units and placed anywhere on the sheet. In this approach, the space of the paper outside the image was not incorporated into the design but functioned like the open, empty space around actual sculptures. Rawson's example is a sheet of drawings by Michelangelo.

In contrast, Rawson observes, painters' drawings have tended to treat the usually rectangular format of the paper as a frame to which the image content relates. And in this approach, the disposition of the drawn marks also relates those areas of the paper not occupied by the image to the framing rectangle. Hence, a page of a sketchbook by Paul Cézanne may at first seem to comprise a random scatter of studies, each organized out of mutually related elements. Just sufficient elements, however—by no means all—also relate to the edges of the page to create a good-enough bond for themselves and their ambient space within the format-asframe. What is more—and this is true of the Michelangelo sheet as well—the composition gives the impression of being instinctive rather than planned: the two layouts reflect the ingrained habits of their artists' different practices.

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This antithesis between sculptors' drawings, with images in open space, and painters' drawings, with images relating to the format-as-frame, is of course a general rule to which there are numerous exceptions. Still, it does broadly distinguish most sculptors' and painters' drawings dating from the Renaissance to modern art—and, highly relevant to the present project, it influences the kind of sculpture made by painters.

Most common in the work of the painter/sculptors of the early modern period, for example Edgar Degas and Henri Matisse, was vigorously modeled sculpture that explored volume, contour, mass, and positive and negative shape in the articulation of bodily forms, the better to understand them for rendering in paint. In making such works, these artists created sculptures each of which presents itself as a sequence of independent, self-contained visual motifs—a succession of framed pictures—as opposed to an object to be gradually revealed as the eye circulates around it. Matisse's *La Serpentine* of 1909, for example, a smallish, painting-size bronze, sets the figure within a format comprising two sides of a rectangular frame; in this respect it may be said to reflect the painter's pictorial interests.

Caution is needed, though, in extending Rawson's two methods of drawing to actual sculptures. In many cases, including the work of most of these painter/sculptors, it would be wrong to assume that the pictorial interests that lead to the use of the paper format as a frame are incompatible with sculptural ones that treat the motif as independent. In fact, the situation here is the same in reverse as the one presented by Cézanne's sketchbook page. Matisse's *La Serpentine* may set the figure within a kind of virtual frame, and the shaping of the body may transmit a complementary linear impulse, but the linearity is the product of shaped, mutually related volumes with real heft, of which a just sufficient number—but by no means all—do not relate to the frame. They therefore create a good-enough sense of independent invention in open space. As a

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result, we are asked to confront at the same time what a later sculptor, William Tucker, has called "the grasped and the seen."³

In the same year that Matisse made *La Serpentine*, Pablo Picasso pondered the contrast of the sculptural and the pictorial while working on his *Woman's Head (Fernande)*. "I thought that the curves you see on the surface should continue in the interior," he said. "I had the idea of doing them in wire," but he didn't do so because "it was too intellectual, too much like painting"⁴—in other words, too pictorial and insufficiently sculptural. Nonetheless, some twenty years later, in 1928, Picasso made a series of line drawings in ink that led to iron-wire maquettes, for a monument to the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, that were blatantly pictorial, being organized in a three-dimensional frame format.

It was with reference to these and similar sculptures that in 1931 Picasso's friend the sculptor Julio González applied the phrase "drawing in space," which was coined in 1929 by critics to describe Calder's wire sculpture.⁵ The phrase became established in the lexicon of sculptural methodology to imply the kind of spontaneous invention associated with doodling on paper. "I think best in wire," Calder reputedly said.⁶ Drawing-in-space sculpture is of course not drawing on paper, and therefore, its pictorial birth notwithstanding, it has often flourished in the form of mutually related units in free space without any reference to a format-as-frame, as many of Calder's own works show; but Calder's works also demonstrate that the absence of any reference to framing will not necessarily cancel pictorial connotations. By suspending sculptures in space, Calder eliminated even the rudimentary framing reference provided by a ground plane, but only to show that a sculpture that you can look through, as well as at and around, necessarily invokes the seen as well as, and often more than, the grasped. To tamp down the pictorial required form with substance that visibly responded to the pull of gravity or that otherwise engaged its ambient physical space—required sculpture to be plainly sited.

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Relatively recent disputes between opponents and defenders of the pictorial resemble those in the Renaissance *paragone* debates. The pictorial was at one time thought to be entirely undesirable, and before that extremely desirable. The later categorical judgment responded to the earlier: the emphasis on “objecthood” in Minimalist art, which put sculpture thought pictorial into disrepute, was a reaction to Clement Greenberg’s claim that the best modernist sculpture appeals not to the grasped but only to the seen, only to “eyesight alone.” Greenberg argued that “sculpture has turned out to be almost as exclusively visual in its essence as painting itself . . . modernist sensibility, though it rejects sculptural painting of any kind, allows sculpture to be as pictorial as it pleases.”⁷ The pictorial in sculpture needs a wider acknowledgment—like Michael Baxandall’s, which suggests that “it is worth thinking of the sculptor’s strange project in another way—of the sculptor having to achieve in three dimensions many of the pictorial things a picture has to do in only two dimensions.”

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