

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Butterflies by a Graphite- Stained Hand

By **DAVID GROSZ** | October 26, 2006

Los Angeles-based artist Mark Grotjahn's new abstract works at the Whitney Museum, eight large-scale colored-pencil drawings from a series of 12, use a similar pattern to produce a variety of effects and impressions. The basic design is something like two open hand fans placed back to back, so that an array of bands radiates outward from two closely placed central points. At their most brilliant, the drawings evoke celestial explosions, a pinwheel of shooting beams of light. But there is also a lot of monotone gray and black, and several designs look like glazed wooden surfaces, while others that alternate stripes of black and uncolored creamy paper evoke zebra skin.

Mr. Grotjahn (b. 1968) calls his patterns "butterflies," yet they are neither small nor flighty. The average size of the drawings is about 64 inches by 48 inches, and each is the product of considerable labor. Dark outlines show the deliberate plotting that begins each piece. From there, the artist works meticulously, filling in the stripes from the edges inward. When one considers the labor necessary to generate his dense, opaque surfaces — the thickness will cause viewers to initially mistake the drawings for paintings or pastels — his arduous process, carried out with tiny pencil tips, comes into focus.

This play of levity and weight is but one of the tensions that make these works so interesting. Also significant is the question of flatness and depth. With their multiple vanishing points (usually two, sometimes four), the drawings can seem like abstract distillations of multipoint perspective, which since the Renaissance has been a primary strategy for creating an impression of three-dimensional depth. But even as the works encourage a sense of recessed space, they simultaneously undermine it. Framing elements along the side edges, seemingly inadvertent black scratch marks, and fingerprint stains call attention to the paper's flat surface, while also disrupting the image's pictorial illusionism with evidence that it was created by a fallible, graphite-stained hand.

If the limited abstract vocabulary of the "butterfly" series is not quite the fully articulated language of the great abstract artists, it does allow Mr. Grotjahn to generate a wide range of expressive possibilities. "Untitled (Black and Cream Butterfly)" (2006) and "Untitled (Black and Cream Butterfly Negative Middle)" (2006) share the same forms and palettes, yet the two could not feel more different. The thin stripes of the former are jazzy and hip; their staccato rhythm vibrates before the eye. The thicker wedges of the latter describe a frictional standoff between ebony and ivory, tense but static.

2021 S WABASH AVE
CHICAGO IL 60616
+1 (312) 226 2223

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Despite the rigid geometry of the stripe pattern, in some of these works organic forms emerge. A few even begin to look like actual butterflies. "Untitled (Red, Orange, Brown and Black Butterfly)" (2005) has a Monarch-like palette and the errant pencil marks on its surface resemble the naturally occurring nicks and scratches on the delicate membrane of a wing. Similarly, the dappled surface and subtle variations of color in "Untitled Cool Grey 90% Butterfly" (2006) recall the filmy texture of monotone moth skin.

In the brightly colored "Untitled (Multi-Red 4 Wings White Background)" (2006), one of two works to break free from the butterfly pattern, there are two pairs of adjacent vanishing points. The vivid, opaque colors have a crayonlike plasticity, and the impression is of a color wheel or clown costume. Tapering as it moves down the page, the design exposes lean upright triangles of white paper along both edges of the drawing.

Perhaps the most dramatic work in the show is "Untitled (French Grey 10–90% Butterfly)" (2006). Here the several tones of gray create a graduated pattern of light and darkness. Fourteen milky stripes pierce the darker surroundings like spotlights in the night. These beams shoot to the paper edge, but their illumination has little breadth and proves no match for the denser in-between patches of nighttime gray.
Until January 7 (945 Madison Ave. at 75th Street, 212-570-3633).

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