

# ARTFORUM

## MARCH 2008

### ALAN SARET: THE DRAWING CENTER

by Jeffrey Kastner

The art world loves lost-and-found stories, tales of marginalized mavericks whose good work is later rehabilitated by enterprising curators on the prowl for underappreciated achievements. The recent exhibition of Alan Saret's "Gang Drawings," 1967–2003—the first solo show by the pioneering SoHo "anti-form" artist in over seventeen years, featuring works on paper made between 1967 and 2003 with "ganged" handfuls of colored pencils—only dipped into a single precinct of a much broader career, but nevertheless did a service by reintroducing one intriguing insider-turned-outsider.

In the late 1960s, Saret was a rising star, making his name producing gorgeously indeterminate volumetric assemblages of wire. Designed variously to crouch on the floor, cling to the wall, or dangle from the ceiling, these works operate between control and chance, springing here and sagging there with improbably animate flair. By the age of twenty-four, he had earned a solo show and an appearance in a group show at Klaus Kertess's Bykert Gallery, spots in the Whitney Annual and Leo Castelli's landmark "9 in a Warehouse" exhibition (curated by Saret's Hunter College MFA professor, Robert Morris), and a Guggenheim Fellowship. But for all his success, Saret also seems to have had a wicked iconoclastic streak—he supposedly withdrew from the 1969 Whitney show "Anti-Illusion: Procedures and Materials," for example, to protest its title—not to mention an attraction to spirituality that put him at odds with the material-driven secularism that, at least superficially, dominated the artistic times. In 1971, his personal questing led him on a three-year journey through India, and though he returned to his home and work, the process of his withdrawal from the mainstream art world only accelerated thereafter.

The recent show featured twenty-nine of Saret's drawings, alongside a pair of sculptures from the 1980s. Art historian and Artforum contributor Johanna Burton notes in an accompanying essay that the drawings originally emerged from the artist's attempts to sketch his own three-dimensional pieces, and they do evince the same process-sensitive methods and fascination with the relationship between line and volume that inform the wire works. Evoking a brand of gestural automatism associated more with the pre-Minimalist 1950s than with his own distinctly post-Minimalist moment, Saret's passages of complex Technicolor scribbling—made by dragging fistfuls of colored pencils across the surface of large, here almost always horizontally oriented sheets of paper—have an at times almost bodily presence, like balls of energy or apparitional traces, while maintaining a compositional delicacy and spontaneous gestural vitality suggestive of Twombly or Pollock. The earliest works—with titles like *Circle Nodes-Four Bars, Three Circles Ruled & Free Sweep, or Sweep, Arch and Running Nodes*, the last conferred on an invigoratingly jittery horizontal composition whose galloping arcs and hatchings bring Muybridge to mind—would seem to be in line with the era's prevailing deadpan modes of conceptual address. (A sense of didactic sobriety is abetted by the graph paper on which the first pieces are executed; Saret had a day job in the drafting office of New York's Port Authority.)

Yet the artist's spiritual leanings were already finding their way into the works. Over the following years, the pieces maintain their compositional restraint and purity of line even as the

ideas behind them—not to mention the language Saret chooses to express these ideas in their increasingly trippy titles—seem to grow more expansive and existential. Peppered with references to imaginary Indian-sounding locations, roughly half the titles also include the word ensoulment. A theological term for the endowing of a being with a soul, it's a curious word to see in the context of contemporary art—curious enough, perhaps, to suggest the philosophical grounds for Saret's estrangement from the mainstream—but also one that even in the tightly focused context of the show seems apt coming from an artist so obviously committed to establishing an operational interface between the things he makes and the way he feels.