

# ARTCRITICAL

## FEBRUARY 3, 2008

### ALAN SARET AT THE DRAWING CENTER, RICHARD POUSETTE-DART AT KNOEDLER

by David Cohen



Alan Saret, Sana Whirl Will 1983 colored pencil on paper Courtesy The Drawing Center

Alan Saret was an important figure in the post-minimal art movement of the late 1960s who subsequently dropped out of the art scene. He is best known for mesh sculptures in chicken wire and similar materials that create dense yet airy, amorphous forms, and are often suspended.

Mr. Saret has been coaxed back into view in recent years: James Cohan Gallery, for example, staged a show of privately held early works in 2004. Now the Drawing Center has organized a show of 31 drawings, dating from between 1967 and 2002, and a pair of sculptures.

These drawings, which comprise a majority of his graphic output, belong to a series the artist calls his “gang drawings,” so named because the marks are generated by a fistful of colored pencils wielded as a single drawing implement. The clusters of marks then ensue can bear an obvious formal relationship to his sculptures, but are not to be construed as preparatory for the sculptures, or even necessarily sculptural.

Working this way can give rise to an instructive tension between individual, signifying marks and generalized texture. There is, however, considerable variety on this score from one drawing to the next. “The Great Hair Lock Ensoulment” (1968) presents a sharp, crisp formation of lines in echelon that will bring to mind the postwar School of Paris painter Hans Hartung. “Ensoulment of the Kings of Eart of All Ages” (1970) on the other hand, while also presenting a concentrated mass of line at the center of a large (two by three foot) sheet, opts for various softer kinds of line, some mushy and impressionistic, others spindly and tenderly feeble.

The defining formal characteristic of Mr. Saret’s aesthetic, then, is a dualism of

looseness and definition. This equally relates to his wire sculptures that have literal presence but at the same time defy their own physicality to generate transcendent, suggestive meanings. Mr. Saret's outlook reflects the influences of his formative years. As a counter-cultural artist of the 1960s he was attracted to process art and found, industrial materials as part of anti-aesthetic stance that relegated the hand of the artist. Increasingly, he was also attracted to mysticism, much affected by a period spent in India in the 1970s. This perhaps accounts for the liberating mix of the literal and the transcendental in his drawings.

The use of clusters, in this context, manages at once to deny the expressive agency of the hand and to generate suggestive chance effects. The result is a curious fusion of severity and opulence. These drawings have a rigor and clarity that recalls the process art of the 1970s, yet formally harks back to the lyrical innocence of abstract expressionism, as does their mystical inclinations. The feathery strokes and singing colors of "Prana Spectrum Trace" (1989) might bring Joan Mitchell to some people's minds. The general sense of disembodied gesture that animates many of these at once lyrical and awkward drawings relates directly to Jackson Pollock with little acknowledgement of minimalist denial.

An exhibition of late drawings by first generation Abstract Expressionist Richard Pousette-Dart at Knoedler includes works made at the same time as many of Mr. Saret's, and despite generational differences between these two artists the drawings seem to touch on a similar duality of absence and presence. Physical gesture means the artist's hand is present yet transcended: there is no question that the arcs or circles are handmade, but an unforced, lyrical all-overness creates a cosmic, suprapersonal sense of order and well-being.

"Light Gathers to the Question of No" (1979) is a page filled with quickly scribbled circles — those towards the edge begin to dissipate while a cluster in the middle are more heavily outlined to suggest a circle of circles. These forms can equally be read as receding in space or projecting forward. In several works, a loosely drawn, off-centered circular form provides a focal point causing other kinds of marks to shimmer or vibrate, pulling the eye into an enveloping, consuming field.

These late drawings look remarkably like much younger, contemporary abstract painters. Where "Sphere Credo" (1991) has a matter-of-fact robustness that brings Terry Winters to mind, the graceful deliberations of "The Sadness of a Circle" (1989) with its deconstructed arcs and loops is a dead-ringer for Brice Marden.

Pousette-Dart was possessed of a gorgeous touch, drawing with animated restraint. There is unfussed variety of line within a single piece, such as "Imprison Circle" (1980s), where smaller, thinner marks serve to convey spatial depth. "Sphere Credo" layers circles within a loose diagonal grid with asymmetrical additions of color, in this case green dabs of acrylic. The pencil pentimenti generates depth while the circles drawn with spirited gusto in black ink pop off the page.