

STAGE & ARTS

Art: Drawn by four

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts offers a clever show of modern drawings.

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Jack Pavlik's huge bands of welded steel whip back and forth, undulating gracefully as his machines hum and whirl in museum galleries that are rarely disturbed by more than a cough or tour guide's murmur. The sculptor's motorized contraptions are a come-hither enticement at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, where several are on view in "Expanded Drawing," a clever new show organized by the Minnesota Artists' Exhibition Program.

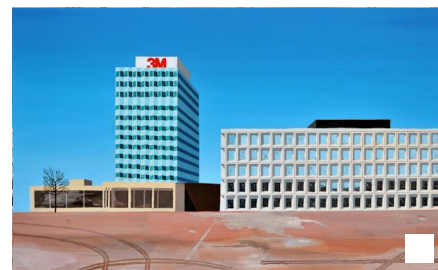
From a distance, the constructions look like abandoned industrial flotsam, part of a robotic assembly line in perpetual motion. Up close, their levers and pistons pump rhythmically, making the flexible steel ribbons dance in air as their shadows flicker across the walls in arabesques of light and darkness. Shadow drawings are as old and familiar as the animal shapes kids make shining a flashlight against their hands and a tent wall, but Pavlik's drawings are way beyond child's play. There is a retro feel to his work reminiscent of the 1960s and '70s, when such experimentation was all the rage, but the sculptures are fresh and lively in this context.

The premise of "Expanded Drawing" -- that drawing is no longer just an "exercise in preparation," but a medium for experimentation and new ideas -- is hardly earthshaking. The four featured artists draw in dramatically different materials, Pavlik with machines, Nicholas Conbere on Mylar, Michelle Johnson on graph paper and Sonja Peterson in silhouettes cut from paper or acrylic.

Conbere's expansive drawings are modernist fantasy landscapes in which roads and stairways, mountains and lakes, cities and villages overlap and flow into one another with dreamlike fluidity. He has even used them as background for a five-minute animated film that plays continuously in the gallery. Johnson's graph-paper drawings are elegant exercises in calligraphy, her entwined letters and curlicues coalescing into ornate designs reminiscent of rug patterns, Moorish tile and baroque ornamentation.

But it is Peterson whose work really sizzles. As intricate as lace and conceptually more complex, her designs are stunning inventions in a virtually forgotten medium associated with folk craft and Victorian spinsters. Up to 9 feet tall and 6 feet wide, they are astonishingly complex scenes, one a vast oval landscape of people, animals, buildings and vehicles woven into a thicket of Spanish moss. Another features a cow in an intricate pasture of flowers, cornstalks, barnyards and a vast spider web. The most fabulous is the witty "Underground Plot of the Royal Pommes Frites," which depicts an 18th-century garden in which Indians and American Revolution-era soldiers skirmish amid potato plants under the watchful eye of scarecrow versions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. It's an eye-teasing technical marvel and plenty of fun.

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