

Now in Residence: Walls of Luscious Austerity

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW | SOL LEWITT

By Holland Cotterdec



Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art will remain up for 25 years. Erik Jacobs for The New York Times

NORTH ADAMS, Mass. — The Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt, who died last year, was our Fra Angelico. And the three-story 19th-century mill here, housing a survey of his panoramic wall drawings, is our Museo di San Marco: a building full of art conceived by one artist, executed by many hands, devoted to big ideas. So it will be for the next quarter century, which is how long “Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective” is scheduled to run.

The setting is close to perfect. The space, with its generous windows, is large and flexible enough to accommodate more than a hundred of the ink-painting murals LeWitt designed between 1969 and 2007. On the campus of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, set amid stony hills in a working-class New England town, the site suits the stringently sensuous, anyone-can-make-it spirit of his art.

The show’s timing is as ideal as it is regrettable. It is a pity that LeWitt, who conceived this project in collaboration with the Yale University Art Gallery and worked closely with Mass MoCA and the Williams College Museum of Art on its realization, couldn’t have seen the results, which look organic and embracing in a way that his 2000 traveling museum survey did not. He often said that beauty was not the point of his art, but the Mass MoCA installation is pretty gorgeous.

And no art, we suddenly see, is better suited to meet hard economic times. Most of the materials used in the wall drawings are five-and-dime simple: pencils, colored ink, crayons, brushes, paper. You could tote them around in

a shopping bag, ready to tackle the first empty wall you found.

Not that these drawings are street art. They aren’t populist in that way; they were meant for the great indoors. But neither do they depend on elite settings — museums or galleries — to make sense. They are abstract, not arcane. Their visual effects can be complex, but their language is plain: lines, colors, clean surfaces, the basics of grade-school art class. No wonder they feel welcoming; they take us back to the past before they take us somewhere else.

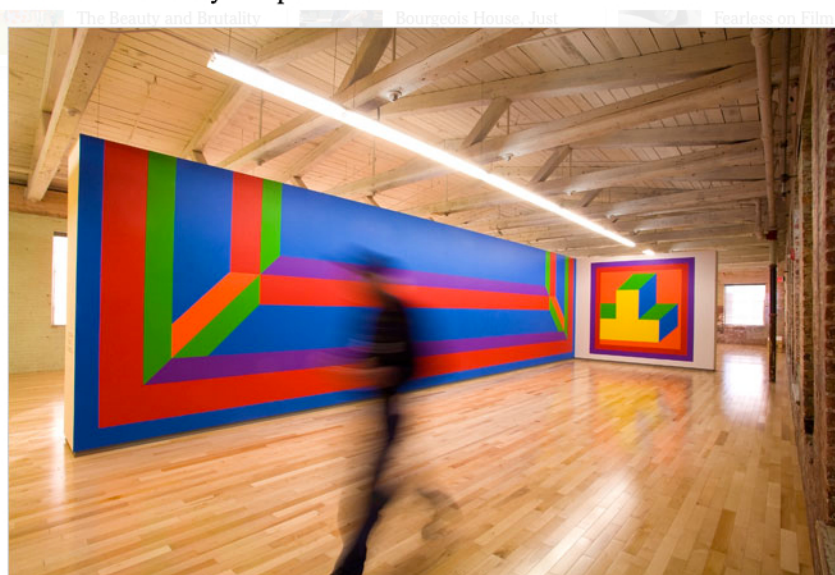
Within those essential elements there’s diversity. The lines come straight and curved; vertical, diagonal, horizontal. They resolve into geometric shapes (cubes, grids, bulls’-eyes); they splinter and fight; they gather in doodly squiggles like metal shavings to a magnet. In many cases they simply stream on, parallel and continuous, from floor to ceiling and wall edge to wall edge, like some crazy, destinationless Bruckner scherzo that expresses high joy by running in place.

Most of the surfaces are matte and dry like frescos, though in one piece, first done in Germany in 1999, vertical bands of saturated colors are interrupted by a glossy black splat of thick acrylic. And within matte surfaces visual textures subtly vary depending on whether color has been drawn, brushed, washed or dabbed on.

The color range is dramatic. Early drawings from the 1970s are diagrammatic patterns of blue or black lines on white ground connecting corners of walls with door jambs and the odd fire-alarm unit. They might look mathematical or scientific, expressions of an American mania for measuring and

surveying, if their logic wasn't so batty. As it is, they turn the very idea of calculation into a game. They connect dots, but to no purpose. They turn space into a walk-in cat's cradle.

By the 1980s, though, color had replaced or equaled line as a primary element. And the entire chromatic spectrum was brought into play. Sometimes hues were tamped down, but just as often they were high-keyed and brash, giving certain drawings — I'm thinking of a composition of snaking orange and green bands — the retinal hilarity of Op Art.



Sol LeWitt wall drawings at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. The drawings were executed by supervised groups of art students. Erik Jacobs for The New York Times

Lusciousness and austerity alternated over 40 years, but through all the blossomings and thinnings, this art remains, at a fundamental level, ordinary, modest, graspable, doable. It also stays resolutely impersonal, never sticking for long with any single graphic style, never showcasing a distinctive touch, never carrying a signature.

Although LeWitt came up with the initial designs, his relationship to the work was otherwise hands-off. He wrote instructions for how the work should be done — firm but easy-to-follow recipes with occasional sweeten-to-taste allowances — but hired other artists to do it. Some he trained, with the expectation that they would train others, who would in turn train still others, stretching on through generations.

To help assure smooth continuity, he devised art that didn't require virtuosic talent, just straightforward artisan skills and patient attention. If a drawing was done correctly that was enough.

But the fact that LeWitt asked teams to do the work was significant. On a strictly practical level, this meant each piece could be expeditiously recreated. At the same time the collaborative model offered an alternative to a star-obsessed

market. And, like a kind of mini private-sector version of the Works Progress Administration, it gave artists paying jobs doing what they liked to do.

Finally, he understood, as every teacher does, that doing preset tasks could stimulate creativity. Many of his drawings were done by supervised groups of art students — those at Mass MoCA included — in a learning-on-the-job tradition very similar to Renaissance workshop practice. A master artist provides the overarching concept; senior artists oversee production; apprentices do the grunt work and in the process discover and develop ideas of their own.

LeWitt's work is, famously, about ideas before all else. He was one of the first artists to formally define — in a 1967 Artforum article — Conceptual Art. And he was among the first to make work that fit the definition: work that played down the unique art object, with its associations of individual genius, exchange value and physical permanence, in favor of utopian proposals, collective visions, objects that existed first and last as ideas. ("The wall drawing is a permanent installation, until destroyed," LeWitt wrote in 1970.)

A small show called "The ABCDs of Sol LeWitt" at the Williams College Museum of Art, near Mass MoCA, zeroes in on that watershed 1960s moment with an archival display of his manuscripts and drawings, including a draft of the Artforum article with the words that put LeWitt's career on the map:

"When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand, and execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art." The wall drawings are prime examples of this definition in action.

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Historically speaking, a visit to Mass MoCA should come after a look at the Williams College show, which has been organized by Lisa Corrin, the museum's director, and Erica DiBenedetto, an art history student. (LeWitt would have appreciated the leveling.) But there is something to be said for seeing the wall drawings first: for just walking straight into the grand apparatus of concept and color, and letting it sing and shout and whisper around you.

After all, do you need to know the theological ideas behind the virgins and angels painted on the walls of San Marco by Fra Angelico and his anonymous assistants in order to be entranced? No. You will eventually want to know about those ideas of salvation and eternity, just as you will want to learn about the ideas — collaboration, generosity, the embrace of ephemerality — that underpin LeWitt's art and make it, now more than ever, exemplary.

The ideas in Fra Angelico's frescos are demanding and unworldly. The ideas in LeWitt's drawings — in the monumental, abstract annunciations and visitations and sacred conversations at Mass MoCA — are exhilarating and of this moment on earth. So are we talking about Conceptual Art or spiritual art? I'd say both.

"Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective" will remain on view for 25 years at Mass MoCA, North Adams, Mass., (413) 662-2111, massmoca.org. "The ABCDs of Sol LeWitt" continues through May 17 at Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Mass., (413) 597-2429, wcma.org.

