



Charles Livingston, *accrete variation V*, 2003, tissue paper, pencil, resin 8 x 20 feet

Philadelphia Introductions: Charles Livingston

by
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Charles Livingston spent a long time working against the beauty of his art; it was a quality that his professors in graduate school criticized. Then he stopped thinking about it, which is good, because beauty inheres to his work. This would not seem obvious from his method, which involves rigorously systematic procedures which the artist sets up. In description these procedures recall Sol Lewitt's working method, which specifies that a particular type of line be repeated across a specified surface. But where Lewitt's work has a consistently geometric quality, Livingston's tends towards the organic.

This organic quality is partially a matter of his materials. Livingston favors drawing on tissue paper, which he layers so that the resulting work is a product of a slow growth and one drawing is seen beneath another, rather like skin. In 2003 he produced *accretion in form* which consists of six 16 x 20 inch panels. Each bears multiple layers of tissue paper on which he has drawn in pencil; the mounted drawings were then covered with a synthetic varnish, which yields a soft glow. Each of the six started with a different mark, which was repeated over and over again, until part of each drawing approached a dense black. Some of the marks are circular, others relatively straight, but they have none of the precision of lines aided by drafting tools. These obviously hand-made lines are distributed irregularly across each sheet; the results are thickets of lines, and forms with slightly hairy borders.

accretion in form initiated an extended period during which Livingston has set up exercises to explore just what a drawn line is. All of these involved lengthy repetition, sometimes increasing sequentially across the length of a piece or in series. His use of repetition derives from several sources. One is the artist's experience with factory assembly-line work. Another is the repetition involved in meditation. It also comes from his interest in feminist art of the 70s and its exploration of the repetition involved in the sort of maintenance work which has traditionally been women's lot. These were a particular focus of Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles; the washing-up is never really finished. Livingston has stated that repetitive action can be considered a sustaining action that contributes to the construction of our realities. In this, repetition is related to natural development and growth, and hence to time.

Livingston has also inserted an element of chance into his methods; this was directly influenced by the ideas of John Cage, and usually takes the form of shapes generated by dropping rubber bands of varying sizes onto paper. He then subjects these fortuitous forms to a series of highly-structured variations. He is currently working on such a sequence which he calls *infinite drawings*, where each drawing begins with tracing paper placed over a previous one. For the original drawing he dropped ordinary rubber bands in a grid format across the surface of a sheet of 18 x 24 inch tissue paper and drew the outlines in black ink; he colored the areas where they overlapped in pink. This produced an irregular pattern with arcs in some of the lines, punctuated with small pink blotches. For the second drawing he drew straight lines connecting the pink nodes of the first drawing. This design was bolder than the first; it looks like a denser form of the connecting lines in Mark Lombardi's work. For drawing number three he used two-inch circles to connect the nodes of the second drawing, which yielded a very dense pattern of overlapping circles across the page. *Drawing four* also used circles, larger ones (five inches) which he centered on each node of the drawing below it, rather than aligning the nodes with the circles' periphery, as in the previous drawing. The series has no obvious conclusion and Livingston already has the sixth iteration on his drawing-board. He is not likely to run out of ideas, so he will have to create a reason for finishing it.

He likes to display many of the drawings back-lit, and has discovered that if he shows them horizontally, on a specially-constructed light-box, he has the option of layering them, to exhibit their interactions. I saw the first two *Infinite Drawings* this way, and the overlap created a very fine pattern of straight and slightly-arc'd lines that resembled cracked egg-shells. In this arrangement Livingston is doing something very similar to a musical theme-and-variations, with the overlapped drawings creating a sort of visual counterpoint. His work also makes me think of a demonstration I saw by Trisha Brown, and her similar method of developing a dance through a set of rules: she associated the alphabet with an imaginary cube surrounding her body, and touched hands, feet, head, or elbows to its corners in sequences determined by language.

The artist has explored his highly iterative method in other forms and media. He has produced several drawings on 150 foot lengths of tissue paper, which he presents as hand-scrolls. He works on two-foot sections and progresses according to an algorithm which he establishes each time. Another work grew in three dimensions: *2200 square feet (accretion variation I)* began with a six-inch square of tissue paper placed on a larger piece of plexiglas, covered with resin, and allowed to dry. He added another piece of six-inch paper, covered it with resin and allowed it to dry. He repeated the procedure 2,199 times. The result is a glowing, soft-edged, honey-colored object, 19 x 14 x 14 inches, which sits on a larger piece of plexiglas over which resin has spread. Somehow the flow of the resin has caused the four corners to collapse, so the work in no way resembles the regular cube one might expect from stacked paper squares. It is mysterious, with slightly translucent drips on all sides, and sits in a pool of resin that varies in color from pale to dark amber, according to its thickness. And it is very beautiful.

Another serial work involves printing: low-tech monoprints. Livingston inks a large ring of rubber, cut from a bicycle tire, and drops it onto a piece of paper. He covers this with a sheet of plywood and uses the weight of his body as a press. For the next print he drops two of the rubber loops, then three for the one after that, then four, and so on. His goal is to create an entirely black print. The title describes the work in abbreviated form: *inking and dropping a circular piece of rubber on paper*.

Returning to that vexed question of the beauty of this work, what is its source? Surely it's a function of Livingston's choice of materials as well as his hand. It isn't merely the quality of his lines or the impact of gravity on a dropped loop of rubber, but in how he places them on the page and their relations to each other; he's as interested in the spaces between them as in the lines themselves. But it is more: in his sensitivity to light and the subtle implications of transparency, seen most obviously in the layered images. And the consistent use of repetition, of countless actions as regular as a heartbeat. He forces his viewers to meditate on the passing of time and the potential of the whole to be more than the sum of its parts.

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