

PAT STEIR: DRAWING OUT OF LINE

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Internationally known painter Pat Steir has a longstanding connection to New England, including her years as a student at Boston University in the late 1960s and her exhibitions in the '80s at Boston's Harcus Gallery. Steir is an eclectic painter, her work ranging over time from self-conscious conceptual engagement with art history to direct investigations of gestural energy. Drawing is the foundation of all her painting, and this scholarly forty-year retrospective of her drawings—with just a few of her paintings included as reference points—is rich yet challenging for the viewer. While Jan Howard, the museum's curator of prints, drawings, and photographs and independent curator Susan Harris have smartly grouped and explained the work, the exhibit will be most fully accessible to those already familiar with Steir's painted oeuvre.

The exhibit tests the viewer from the start, immediately with a jarring juxtaposition. The

exhibit begins with the recreation of Steir's room-sized *Self-Portrait: An Installation*, which first appeared in the New Museum in New York (1987) with its supersized old master-style renderings of facial features. After going through this room, the viewer enters the exhibit's main galleries, and is seduced by a view of one of the few paintings in the show, the darkly voluptuous red-on-red crescendo of the nearly ten-foot-tall *Outer Lhamo Waterfall*, tantalizingly hung at the end of a long gallery. The disconnect between these two pieces raises the question of how Steir got from *Self-Portrait* to *Outer Lhamo Waterfall*, from engagement with European old masters to Asian-inflected breath, gesture, and flow; from academic realism to abstraction; from dryly intellectualized remove to juicy, direct physical engagement.

The first works in the main gallery space are spare, delicate mixed-media drawings from the

When the intimacy of these early drawings does give way to the monumental wave drawings, such as a fifteen-foot-long *Untitled* drawing from 1985, the effect is breathtaking and expansive. Writing as a stand-in for the spoken word—for breath—gives way to breath translated to image through bodily gesture. The effect arises not just from the scale but also from the energy, from the directness of meaning and image becoming utterly congruent. There is no barrier between the "self" making the work and the work itself; the self-consciousness of the conceptual work has been washed away. Yet faint references to writing can be seen in structure, as in the twenty-one-foot-long *After São Paulo*, with rows and columns of chunky repeated horizontal strokes.

After the monumental gestural presence of these drawings and *Outer Lhamo Waterfall*, the exhibit jumps to 2008, where waterfall-related



Left: Pat Steir, *Untitled*, 2008. © Pat Steir. Courtesy of the artist. Above: Pat Steir, *Untitled*, 1985. Gift of Charles B. Benenson (by exchange). © Pat Steir. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY USA. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resources, NY.

'70s. These seminal drawings serve as a sort of Rosetta Stone for the rest of the exhibit, uniting realistic and abstract forms, rendered elements and gestural elements, image, and writing with equal presence on the page. The seeds of her later gestural work are there—small-scale strokes and drips that will later expand exponentially into her full-blown "wave" and "waterfall" work, muscling the words and renderings out in an explosion of scale and repetition. But writing predominates in some of her work of the late '70s, such as the lyrical eight-sheet *I Watch the Day Pass in Shadow and Song*, where mostly text and symbols are structured by a drawn rectangle, the one element repeated on all eight-sheets.

gestural marks are layered with dense free-hand grids, in some cases echoing a faintly ruled grid underlying all. These works feel off-balance, unresolved, and yet it is that unbalance and unresolve that holds the possibility of more painting. Those familiar with Steir's painting may wonder that the most recent paintings she has exhibited to date, which are not included in this exhibit, are instead a return to conceptual work explicitly referencing the work of other artists, this time Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly. We are left to wonder if the possibility we see here will be realized in some future work.

—Mary Bucci McCoy