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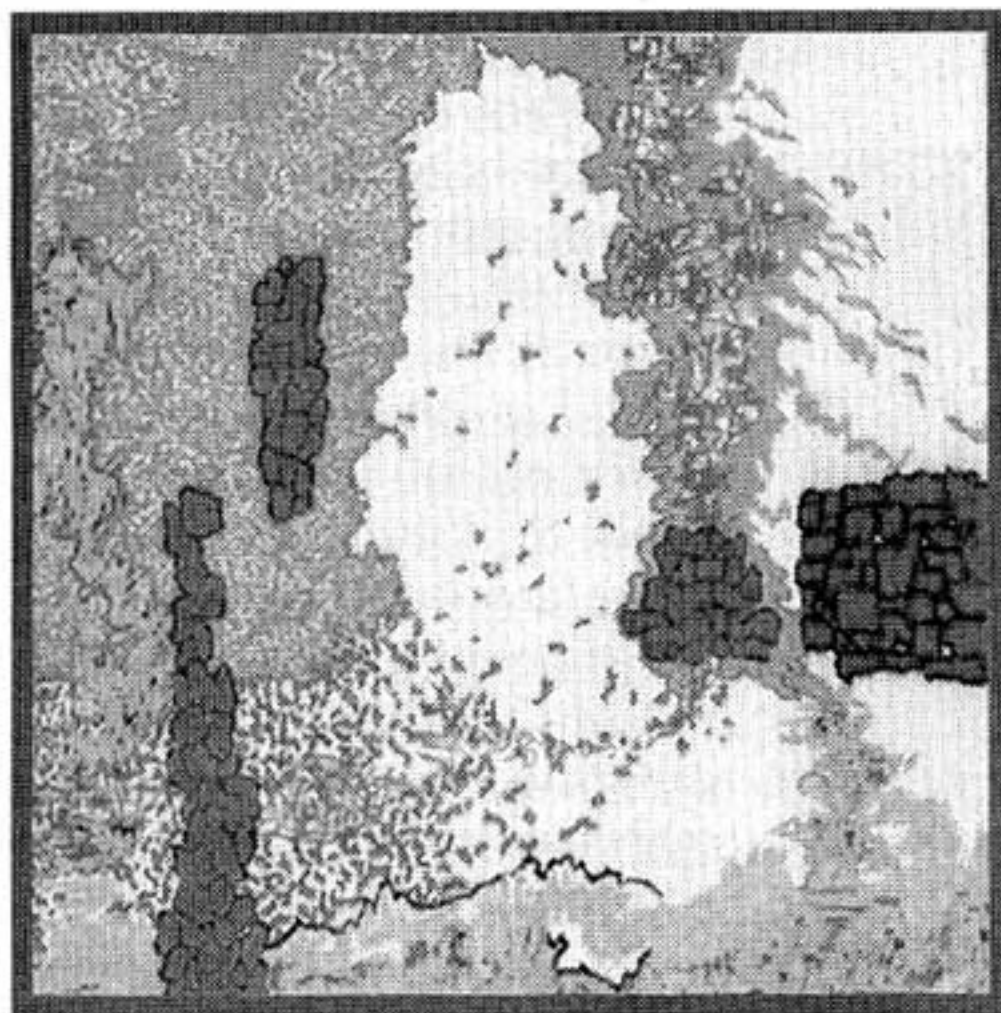
Sid Garrison at Sherry Frumkin Gallery

Sid Garrison has, for the past several years, exhibited nothing but colored-pencil abstractions executed on square sheets of paper. They differ in size by only a few inches (the largest in this exhibition were 28 by 28 inches; the smallest, 23 inches square). And while he may qualify as an emerging artist, he doesn't fit the mold of the newly minted MFA graduate; having never attended art school, he first began showing his work at arts-and-crafts venues in the early 1980s. At a time when artists are free to experiment with all kinds of media, from chlorophyll to construction materials to chocolate syrup, we might be tempted to view his single-minded focus on colored pencils as a deliberate rejection of the flashy and edgy, or even a failure to keep step with his contemporaries. But as his recent exhibition at Sherry Frumkin Gallery makes clear, there are other explanations behind Garrison's apparently narrow practice. For one thing, it's obvious he is extraordinarily enamored of—even obsessed with—the properties of colored pencils, and wants to push them to their limit. For another, just as cutting back a shrub forces maximum energy into the remaining branches, restricting both the shape and medium of his drawings allows Garrison to channel his entire effort into color, technique and composition.

The result is a series of continually inventive drawings that are anything but limited or monotonous. With a bag of

tricks that includes obsessive overlay, burnishing, crosshatching and precise, deliberate smudging, he coaxes from the humble colored pencil a range of effects rivaling those of paint. Fine lines vein the white space in several drawings, giving the appearance of marble. In other drawings, solid areas of color cluster to form prismatic, amorphous shapes that appear softly polished and slightly luminous, like bits of molten plastic. Often, he furs the edges of his forms with tiny pencil strokes, making them appear to bleed into the paper.

Garrison's compositions are unplanned; he begins each drawing with a small mark, then makes another small mark in some distinct relation to the first. Thousands of marks, many layers of pencil and a week or so later, he arrives



Sid Garrison, *August 3, 2005, 2005*, colored pencil on paper, at Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica. (Photo: Ira Schrank.)

at the finished drawing. The works succeed in foregrounding the creative process itself—the countless decisions that result in an artwork. In the past, Garrison has likened his drawings to short stories, an apt description for works that each create, abide by and exhaust their own systems of logic. Looking at them, I was reminded of a quote by the writer Jayne Anne Phillips, who once said, “Think of stories as images strung together, each image narrowing the possibilities for the image to come after, until at the end you are left with only a few choices.” This idea of narrowing, of reducing possible moves until there is nowhere else to go, seems to figure heavily into Garrison's practice.

But of course, no artwork comes into being without some large or small element of accident, and this is something Garrison embraces, as well. Each drawing is titled simply with a month, a day, and a year, which turns out to represent its date of completion—a recognition of art as a temporal process that begins on the whim of the artist, but, as it's created, gains a life of its own and seems to end largely of its own volition. Garrison may set strict limits on medium and paper shape, but as he is very aware, these restrictions only highlight the fact that

his drawings are subject to any number of variables beyond his control.

Furthering this idea of external influence is the fact that Garrison created these particular drawings while listening to a series of Cold War-era, shortwave radio recordings compiled in 2001 by British sound artist Akin Fernandez into a four-disc set called the *Conet Project*. In the recordings, from which the title of Garrison's exhibition *Signal Drift* is derived, unknown people of unknown whereabouts recite random strings of numbers, letters or words in languages ranging from Spanish to Russian, Chinese to Czech. Interspersed among these eerie transmissions are patches of white noise, beeps and, occasionally, snatches of music. For years these “numbers stations” mystified shortwave radio enthusiasts, who suspected they were actually encoded instructions sent by the CIA and other governments' intelligence agencies to a global network of spies. In 1998, the British government confirmed that this was the case.

As he worked, Garrison allowed the recordings to influence his marks, mapping out visual representations of their cryptic contents. Accordingly, in works such as *July 12, 2005* and *July 22, 2005*, methodically smudged lines of colored pencil fill the background, resembling static, while the jagged character of the lines in *August 9, 2005* and *September 10, 2005* might signify the craggy rhythms of, say, German—or the jerky speech pattern of some anonymous broadcaster. Even the changes in Garrison's color palette, which is occasionally monochrome or analogous but more often pops with unadulterated, Crayola-like colors (salmon, aqua, lapis, lime, peach, brick), might correspond to shifting frequencies. In other words, the drawings themselves function as codes, with Garrison the only holder of the key. They also, with their many unexpected combinations of color and shape, their sudden explosions, their meticulous detail, expose the illusory nature of imposed limits in art. Because, of course, just as infinite messages can be composed from permutations of nine numbers, an infinite number of compositions can be created using colored pencils on square sheets of paper.

And yet, visually engrossing as these drawings are, and despite the potential for endless versions of them, a part of us can't help wondering whether Garrison plans to stray from his formula—whether he will eventually introduce other media, or work in a different scale, or use paper of different proportions. How committed is he to working within the confines of a single system? If and when the inclination strikes to explore other avenues, will that urge be followed without a second thought, or suppressed? Beyond a certain point, shutting off avenues for exploration begins to seem like a curious exer-

cise in self-deprivation, which could make the whole project less compelling—or, on the other hand, make it very compelling indeed. This tension between the bounded and boundless, after all, is part of what makes Garrison's current work so intriguing.

—Katherine Satorius

Sid Garrison: Signal Drift closed in February at Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica.

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