

Artist connects with patterns of ornate cutout paper drawings

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DAN TRANBERG This 2005 piece, titled "Congregation," is among the highlights of the show "Mark Fox: Drawings," on view at Shaheen Modern and Contemporary Art in Cleveland through the end of the month. It is made from hundreds of intricately cut drawings, which are attached to each other, creating a lacelike form that hangs several inches in front of a gallery wall.

ART MATTERS

The architect Mies van der Rohe is famous for perpetuating the idea that less is more. On the other end of the spectrum is New York-based artist Mark Fox, whose densely packed drawings gain their strength from vast accumulations of shapes -- the more, the better.

Individually, many of the doodles and casually rendered diagrams that make up Fox's elaborate works on paper aren't especially interesting. But when hundreds of them are connected together in weblike matrices, the results are fascinating.

The solo exhibition "Mark Fox: Drawings," on view at Shaheen Modern and Contemporary Art through Wednesday, Aug. 31, highlights two distinctly different types of work by Fox. One involves intricately cutting out small drawings and attaching them to each other to create large yet delicate lacelike forms that either hang from the ceiling or are suspended several inches in front of a wall.

The shadows cast by these works are almost as interesting as the works themselves. Those hung close to a wall are especially exciting, as they create the optical effect of blurred backgrounds behind crisply defined shapes.

A second body of work by Fox is more conventional, done on single rectangular sheets of paper, but it's still all about amassing shapes that form intricately patterned surfaces. Several of them are extremely subtle; their repeating shapes are only visible upon close viewing.

Featuring 14 recent works, the show presents just enough to arouse interest in Fox, who is originally from Cincinnati and moved to New York in 2003.

Now in his early 40s, Fox is enjoying great success as an emerging artist. About a third of the works at Shaheen have already sold, and he developed something of a cultlike following in Cincinnati before he left -- a local alternative weekly referred to him in 2001 as "the greatest living artist in Cincinnati."

In addition to the kinds of works on view at Shaheen, Fox has done performance-based work, some involving handmade puppets. He also co-founded an avant-garde theater troupe in Cincinnati called Saw Theater.

But, according to gallery director Brett Shaheen, drawing remains at the core of all of Fox's activities. "He's the kind of person that constantly doodles in sketchbooks," Shaheen said.

Such obsessive behavior is exactly what makes Fox's work so compelling. The largest of his cut-paper pieces is made from 1,400 individual drawings, Shaheen said. The complexity of the process of cutting out and connecting that many bits of paper is staggering to think about.

From a distance, both types of work that Fox makes feel consistent with the complexity of

modern life. It is as if he's embracing all of the chaos that surrounds us, making it oddly cohesive.

Just as artists and architects from the mid-20th century fixated on the idea of reducing and simplifying shapes to form pure symbols of modernity, Fox takes on the endless complexity of contemporary life as a new kind of model.

Somehow, it feels just right.

Shaheen Modern and Contemporary Art is at 740 W. Superior Ave., Cleveland. Call 216-830-8888.

Tranberg is an artist and writer living in Cleveland. Art Matters is a column that runs weekly in Friday! covering the area art scene. To be considered for publication, items about shows or openings must be received three weeks in advance. Mail to Plain Dealer Art Critic, 1801 Superior Ave., Cleveland, OH 44114. Fax 216-999-6269. To reach Dan Tranberg: trandan@core.com

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