Brian Grimson: Black and White Drawings
October 4 – November 16, 2019

Detail of Untitled (Black and White #1)

Carroll and Sons is pleased to present five recent drawings by Brian Grimson. All five works are in black permanent marker on white paper. The roughly rectangular marks appear to be in softly undulating grids up close but from a distance they coalesce into the image of a stand of trees.

Brian Grimson on the drawings in correspondence with Carroll and Sons:

**BG:** My brother, a programmer, and I have been having ongoing conversations about the nature of life and things. On one occasion I asked him whether he thought machines would ever be like humans. He responded by saying that the more terrifyingly relevant question was whether humans would become like machines. What would that be like, I wondered, to have our lives so scripted and automated? What is the cost of living in the shadows of things that can perform all the tasks we struggle to do every day and do them perfectly and unquestioningly? We create these machines capable of doing, seemingly without moral quandary, all the things that remind us of our humanity. Who are we in comparison?

**CaS:** Thanks for sending the text of the conversation between you and your brother. It gets to a lot of the questions that have been coming up when I’ve shared the drawings. The often-asked
question is whether the works are drawings or prints, made by hand or by some mechanized process. It becomes clear that they are made by hand once viewers look closer, but the image, the trees are only clear when they view the work from a distance. I’m assuming that you start with photographs of the woods in Lexington. How do you go from the photograph to the large drawing?

**BG:** I think I understand what you’re asking. Or maybe I’m still just struggling to talk about a thing that I spend a lot of time thinking about so that I don’t have to talk about it.

It’s a slow meditative process, where I consider density, direction, and length of mark to create a sense of an image. It’s very much a process of looking closely and then standing far away from things, and balancing the two. It’s drawing, not the literal act of drawing a mark, but the drawing out of form from space. There are a lot of techniques employed throughout art history to create form and I wanted to invent one that used a language referential to that history and to the contemporary digital world.

**CaS:** To be more direct in my question, are you working from photographs? Photographs that you have taken? Does a computer play any part in your process?

**BG:** I am working from photos taken usually on my phone while on walks in the woods. All the pixelation and the decision making in terms of marks is basically me trying to think like a machine might. I once tried to copy the pixilation that the computer created and I found that infinitely boring do decided to try and make my own system.

**CaS:** So the drawings are built, one mark at a time. The act of making the mark is done close to the page but in order to see if the image is coming together you have to keep stepping back. In my space, which is 11’ wide from wall to wall, you almost have to have your back to one wall for the image to be clear on the opposite wall. The drawing process must require a lot of physical movement. I assume that the resolution of the photos on your iPhone isn’t that great. Do you print them out to work from? If so, how large are the prints?
BG: I am definitely very active in my studio often pacing back and forth from different distances to get a sense of how the image resolves. I tend to not care about the resolution of the original image, as it’s really just a form of visual note-taking. I guess I’d say I like to compose my paintings with the help of nature and my phone. Once it’s stored I just use it as a way to connect back to that moment when I was in the woods. In some cases I actually prefer that the image be low resolution so that I have to stretch my imagination and rely on more physical feedback than visual in recalling the original organic moment that inspired me to take a picture.

CaS: Do I understand then that you’re looking at your phone while you’re making the drawing? Going from a 2.5 x 4” screen to a 38 x 54” drawing? That’s a lot to do in your head as you’re simultaneously going from a color image to a black and white image and breaking down the image into a series of square marks. Actually the marks are far from square.

BG: It’s a combination of print outs (11x16 or so image) and looking at a computer screen but it’s definitely mostly a translation in my head, otherwise I would not find it at all interesting. And I would say that the marks are square related; or, at the very least, rectilinearish.

I feel like you’re asking a lot about process, which is clearly important to viewers and it’s important to me too. I would say that the initial planning is very top-down, meaning I develop a grander sense of what something should be by doing sketches and looking at photos, but the act of making is very bottom-up and detail oriented. My working process is very much one step at a time with periodically taking a step back to evaluate. The interplay between these two ways of thinking is very important to me in my work, in large part because this conflict is something that I struggle with in my own life. Sometimes it’s hard to see the big picture when you’re focused on the details, and sometimes when you are too concerned about the sum and you miss a lot of important parts.

CaS: I am curious about the process, but I’m also curious about your choice of imagery. Can you talk a bit about the decision to focus on trees?
**BG:** The imagery is easier to explain because it’s more primal than intellectual. We are all primates. Our history, if we go back far enough, is the forest. I think there’s something innate about how we feel about the scenery. There is something about the blank stare into the natural abyss that I think all of us feel at a very basic level. I also think forests are very liminal spaces that sit just outside the edge of civilization, and they are the places into which we project the fantastical. Many great fairy tales occur in the forest, and I think it’s because it’s a place where our imaginations aren’t confined by the monotony and mechanical nature of ordinary life. In the case of these drawings, many of the scenes are very important to me personally because as a young troubled youth I spent a lot of time escaping into these specific woods.

**CaS:** The drawings have a very primal impact – they visually vibrate. Viewers to the work make reference to artists like Bridget Riley, and movements like Op art and psychedelia. That is what viewers are bringing to the work. Can you say a little about whether you are looking at or thinking about other artists or art movements in the making of the drawings?

**BG:** Bridget Riley is a huge figure in my artistic development. I actually had a chance to hear her speak about a museum show while I was attending SAIC. She talked a lot about how she was interested in her early career with landscape and her initial style was very post-impressionistic. She mentioned specifically being inspired by light and shadows on the cliffs of Dover. For me, Op-art is an important reference to make because it’s an inquiry into the nature of seeing and this is an important part of my own work. The fact that she was inspired by landscape is no surprise. Another artist that very much followed a similar path and had an impact on my work was Mondrian, who also worked initially in landscape and then progressed into abstraction. That isn’t to say that I think abstraction is an inherent endpoint to exploring landscape, but rather that the interplay between form and abstraction in nature remains an interesting conflict in art and something that I try to explore.

**CaS:** How does your choice of media, in this case permanent marker, factor into the process? Do you start with the materials or end up there in the search for the image?
BG: My choice of media has always been a humorous issue for me. I think of markers as being an inferior medium, which makes it perfect to use in fine art. I enjoy the immediacy of the mark and I both love and absolutely dread the fact that when working with a permanent medium that dries immediately I have to live with the likelihood that what I do will be imperfect and I’ll probably hate it. For me, it’s a tongue in cheek way to talk about anxiety stemming from permanency and ‘making a mark’ on art history.

The idea for my approach came to me when I was making collages using checkered pattern tape. The visual effect was stunning so I wanted to explore it further. I eventually realized with the encouragement of a teacher that I could make painted versions of the images, but it didn’t make sense to me to try and painstakingly copy the collages, so I came up with using the marker as my unit. I was thinking a lot about a set of minimalist artists including Lee Ufan, Neale Teroni, Yayoi Kusama and Agnes Martin and how they reduced their processes down into a set of rule based actions (some more rigid in design than others.) Unfortunately, this is somewhat of a developmental dead end in terms of progress historically, so I wanted to use their approach as a starting point and go in a different direction, back towards landscape. Landscape has always been important to me because it’s how I first became interested in art. My grandmother, who incidentally grew up not far from Agnes Martin in the Canadian prairies, was a talented painter who borrowed a lot from the Group of Seven. Her paintings hang in my apartment still and remain a big reason why I make art and why I’ve always been drawn to landscape.

CaS: Your choice of titles for the works, Untitled (Black and White) and a number relate to that minimalist heritage. When it comes to a title for the show, what do you suggest?

BG: Black and White Drawings is fine with me.
Installation view of Brian Grimson: Black and White Drawings
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Untitled (Black and White #1), 2018
Permanent marker on paper
38 x 50”
Untitled (Black and White #2), 2018
Permanent marker on paper
38 x 50"
Untitled (Black and White #3), 2017
Permanent marker on paper
38 x 50”
Untitled (Black and White #4), 2017
Permanent marker on paper
38 x 50"
Untitled (Black and White #5), 2017
Permanent marker on paper
38 x 50”
Untitled (Black and White #6), 2017
Permanent marker on paper
25 x 38″
Untitled (Black and White #7), 2017
Permanent marker on paper
38 x 50"
Untitled (Black and White #8), 2017
Permanent marker on paper
38 x 50"