



GRAPHITE

**INDIANAPOLIS
MUSEUM
OF ART**

IMA

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MARA HOBBERMAN AND DAN SHAW-TOWN

Conducted via e-mail

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MARA HOBERMAN: One interesting aspect of presenting your work in the context of the *Graphite* show at the IMA is that it enables us to look closely at the material you use, unfettered by constrictions of traditional media descriptions. In other words, we can talk about your practice and materials without getting caught up in whether a specific work should be classified as a “drawing” or a “sculpture” or an “installation” per se. I think this will prove to be an effective—and liberating—way in which to approach your work, and I am looking forward to talking with you about how, why,

and to what effects you use graphite.

To begin, a very basic question: Which specific qualities of graphite appeal to you and why?

DAN SHAW-TOWN: What I like most about graphite, in the way I use it, is its ability to transform the surface or object to which you’re applying or transferring it. By giving things a thin metallic coat, it acts as a disguise in some way. I never use fixative on my graphite works, because for the fixative to function I would have to apply so much that it would completely change the

appearance of the work’s surface. Therefore, in my case, I’m interested in the way graphite remains in a state of constant flux—it doesn’t dry or harden. Whenever my pieces are moved and installed, everyone involved ends up covered in the stuff . . . I like that.

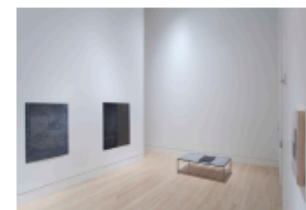
HOBERMAN: What have you learned about graphite as a material, having worked with it in various ways and over a period of time?

SHAW-TOWN: It gets everywhere! My old studio looked like a coal mine when I moved out. Also,

the way I use graphite involves a lot of physicality. Because the material is so hard—it is a mineral, in fact—it takes real stamina to apply it to such excess. In my current studio I have a separate room dedicated specifically to the graphite work.

HOBERMAN: Some of your works possess an alluring haptic quality [fig. 1]. They appear soft, lustrous, weighty, and

FIGURE 1



worn. It almost seems as if the heavily applied graphite transforms the paper itself into a new and unique material—something between buttery leather and metallic cloth. The effect is particularly interesting because raw graphite does not itself possess any of the above qualities that make one want to cloak one’s self in the material. Is there an aspect of alchemy in your use of graphite? Do you feel as though you are changing the material properties of the substances you work on?

SHAW-TOWN: Absolutely, alchemy and entropy are at

the heart of the graphite works. I actually think of the paper as being a primary material in that body of work—as much, if not more so, than the graphite I apply. The paper is being transformed; the graphite is a tool. In the pieces you reference, the graphite saturates the paper, allowing me to handle it in such a way that it ends up looking like metallic cloth (as you describe). This involves hours of kneading and ironing. That kind of handling simply wouldn't be possible without the initial graphite coating. It goes back to this notion of disguise, and the paper

losing its paper-ness and becoming something else entirely.

HOBERMAN: How do you achieve the range in tonality and texture in works such as *Untitled* (2011) [fig. 2]? Is this pure graphite-on-graphite, or is

FIGURE 2



there another element contributing to the lighter or darker areas?

SHAW-TOWN: The paper has been kneaded and ironed flat again following the initial graphite coating. And then a range of layers and different qualities of white spray paint have been used. I've experimented with lots of spray paint brands, as well as having my own compressor, but to achieve that light, dusty finish you can't beat the no-frills, low-quality spray can stuff.

HOBERMAN: Could you say more about how entropy factors into your

practice and the final works? Is it a matter of not using any kind of fixative—which means that there really is no “final” or “fixed” state to these works? Would you agree that your graphite works could be described, at least to a certain extent, as ephemeral (since the graphite is always coming off or at risk of smudging against something or someone)?

SHAW-TOWN: It starts even earlier than the stage when one would usually apply fixative. In most cases it begins with the blank sheet of paper. By covering the paper in

graphite, I feel I'm erasing what's already there as much as I am adding something new. The paper itself is a beautiful object, and I often feel like I'm disrespecting how it should be properly used when I make these works.

I do think of my works as ephemeral, and find myself battling with the assumed fragility and the generally conservative attitude that surround works on paper. This has led me to display pieces on the floor or low steel tables. I'll often turn up to install a show at a gallery with a group of works and no preconception of which

pieces will end up on the floor or the wall. I like to allow room for experimentation and improvisation in the gallery space—an environment that I find difficult to energize.

Having to deal with real (practical) situations often results in the most interesting work. When I had my first show back in London after having moved to New York, I had to transport the graphite work in my hand luggage. That was the first time I ever folded the graphite sheets [fig. 3]. It was only when I got there that I decided to leave them folded in the

exhibition.

FIGURE 3



HOBBERMAN: When I think of graphite, two typical uses immediately come to mind: quick sketches done with compressed graphite sticks, and on the other end of the stylistic spectrum, very carefully drawn pencil lines—as in architectural renderings or schematic drawings. In both of these cases graphite is used sparingly

and finely to create lines, shapes, or shading. What led you to experiment with using massive amounts of this material and in such a way that the mark of the graphite completely dominates the surfaces upon which you work?

SHAW-TOWN: When I moved to New York four years ago, I had a tiny studio and was struggling a bit because I'd just finished my MFA at Goldsmiths in London specializing in sculpture, and I just had no space to continue that practice. So I began making drawings of my previous body of work from photos [fig. 4].

FIGURE 4



The results were strange, as it was almost like doing preliminary sketches after the work was made. (I never did any preliminary sketching before . . . ever.) I started to view the drawings as portraits of sculptures, but the problem was I wasn't that good at drawing and would often scribble over things I wasn't happy with. This eventually led to my completely covering over

the original drawings with graphite. The earliest works all have drawings under the graphite-covered surface. And from there it was the straightforward process of engulfing sheets of white paper that held my attention. To cover a 50 x 38-inch sheet of paper takes about four eight-hour days, going at it constantly. It's a very labor-intensive and consuming activity. It's more like polishing or sanding than it is drawing.

The other most common material I use in conjunction with graphite is spray paint. I love it for its efficiency and speed. One work in the Indianapolis

show [fig. 5] has been covered in graphite on one side (which took a couple of grueling, long days), and the other side, which I coated in spray paint, was done in seconds. I'm very interested in artworks being a document of time and process, but that doesn't mean the process

FIGURE 5



has to be long and laborious.

HOBERMAN: I like the idea that there are ghosted images under the heavy layers of graphite and that you built a new body of work directly on top of previous attempts. Do the under-drawings remain visible at all in the final work?

SHAW-TOWN: The original drawings were made with a much harder form of graphite, such as 2H, but I use the softer 6B when covering large areas. So upon close inspection you can see the indented lines that the 2H pencil left in the

paper. I've considered producing new works on paper that has already been printed on in some way, but I think too much emphasis would fall on what I was covering over. I also want to give a nod to Rauschenberg at some point and cover over someone else's drawing—a very different sort of erasure from his de Kooning piece. **1**

HOBERMAN: It's interesting that you mention Rauschenberg because I find a certain affinity between some of your graphite works and drawings by Jasper Johns. Like you, Johns has used

thickly applied graphite; at times it is so heavily applied that his iconic imagery—flag, map, target, the alphabet—is all but obscured by the layers of dark and iridescent graphite. In particular, I am thinking of *Alphabets* (1957) [fig. 6], one of Johns's early alphabet drawings, which

FIGURE 6



incorporates pencil and collage, in comparison with your work *Untitled* (2011) [fig. 2]. The reference to the underlying grid and the illegibility of the image are points of comparison, but I also find the handling of the graphite to be similar. Is Johns someone whose work—graphite drawings or otherwise—interests you?

SHAW-TOWN: I think about and look at images of Johns's "cross-hatch" works on a daily basis. They are so simple and so good. To me those works are about covering the surface. He starts with a blank support and devises

FIGURE 2



a system to work his way from one corner to the other. I've tried to copy one before and it's terrifically difficult to imitate.

HOBERMAN: Something I find particularly interesting about your practice is that, on the one hand, your use

of graphite is very straightforward and deliberate, but in another sense, you let the environment (or, as you say, practical situations) dictate the works' presentation and final appearance. The tension between the strong sense of authorship and a certain resignation of control seems to me to be an important aspect of your work. There is another piece [fig. 7] that I would like to bring up here because I think it is part of the "entropic" vein of your work. To create this work, you use a piece of high-density foam board basically as a blank slate

FIGURE 7



that picks up graphite dust as well as other debris and stains from your studio. The concept reminds me a bit of Yves Klein's *Cosmogonies* from the early 1960s. For this series Klein let dust, dirt, wind, rain, and other natural forces create images on canvas. In your case, however, the traces left on the surface relate to your studio practice, even if the materials are indirectly

applied. Could you describe this piece and how you came to it?

SHAW-TOWN: Sometimes I feel my own hand gets in the way of the work—the decisions about what mark to put where, how many marks, how few, and so forth. I find myself not necessarily wanting to make those choices directly visible on whatever the chosen support or surface. The piece involving high-density foam board—a material I chose for the way it attracts dust and grips onto it—is a way for me to make a work that is created by a situation that I'm only partially in

control of, but where the parameters are clearly defined. I'd like to think this work speaks about "potential" as much as anything else.

Mara Hoberman is a freelance curator, art writer, and editor based in Brooklyn and Paris.