

*Drawings (plus an interview with the artist
by Jennifer A. Gately)*

Wes Mills

Note: This interview appeared in the publication accompanying Wes Mills' 2007 exhibition at the Portland (Oregon) Art Museum. It is reprinted here by permission of Wes Mills, Jennifer A. Gately, and the Portland Art Museum. We are grateful to Wes Mills, Ms. Gately and Ingrid Berger of PAM, and G. B. Carson for their invaluable assistance.

Existing in a place between the palpable and the ephemeral, Wes Mills' deeply personal, abstract graphite and ink drawings emanate an intuitive sense of the universal. His daily drawing practice, like a practice in meditation, is continually inventive and reflects a lifelong quest for authenticity.

The following dialogue offers insight into the artist's current thoughts and practice and is the result of numerous conversations between the curator and the artist in the months leading up to the exhibition.

Jennifer Gately: It is important to recognize that for each subtle and idiosyncratic drawing in this small survey there are generally twenty to thirty related works. Is there anything else we should keep in mind as we discuss your work?



Courtesy Portland Art Museum.

Wes Mills: Yes, this thought of authenticity is important to me. As I work, I often ask myself: What is a true, authentic thought? Does something become authentic or is it born authentic? I feel this may be the common thread that runs through both my drawings and me as a person.

JG: One of the earliest drawings here was created in 1995, during a time of transition from work that was highly self-referential to work that investigates pure abstraction.

WM: In the early '90s my work dealt with stories and memories from my past and frequently included text. At that time I liked the idea that a drawing could be read, literally. Often the text was just the word green, written over and over. This drawing is probably one of the last from that period. The use of text originated from my childhood school days. Occasionally I would get into a bit of trouble, so in turn I was made to stay indoors during recess periods. The teacher would have me rewrite words that I had misspelled over and over on the chalkboard, and there was a certain point when I'd get lost in this sea of words. This repetition, which I returned to in these early drawings, became a kind of safe haven for me.

JG: At that time, after abandoning art for nearly ten years, you began to work with great deliberation, and your choice of materials shifted as well.

WM: There was a point in my life when I felt I needed some sort of grounding or focus. In some ways, my drawing practice might have evolved into this, but it was also a deliberate choice. There would be one

place in my life where I wouldn't permit myself to get distracted. I began to make drawings using the simplest of materials, mainly a graphite pencil and white powdered pigment. I felt that if I truly were to get somewhere, to a deeper or more meaningful place, perhaps it would come from this alone. It wouldn't be about introducing a new material. I feel the same way about ideas too. A lot of artists come to their work with ideas. For me, it's the other way around. If one thinks about it, the idea itself would be like another material, another distraction. I'm not interested in my drawings being too intentional. However, it's important to me that drawing relates to my everyday life.

JG: You work these materials heavily into the surface of a very specific color of paper.

WM: Many of these drawings have been touched quite a bit in their making, and not just with the tip of a pencil. I have almost always made drawings on this off-white paper, almost a sandalwood color. After years of making drawings on this tone of paper, I discovered some [Islamic] writings that spoke about an ancient color system called the Haft Rang system. Briefly, in order for the true qualities of black and white to reveal themselves, these two colors need to rest on a neutral ground—a sandalwood color similar to my paper. I had



Wes Mills, No Title, 1995, graphite, powdered pigment, colored pencil on paper, 6.25 x 7 inches. © 1995 Wes Mills. Courtesy Portland Art Museum.

seen this relationship of black and white in connection to a neutral ground years ago, but even more so, in my life, I was drawn to the possibility of being able to better see a thing for what it is if it could exist on a neutral ground. So I was surprised when I crossed paths with this early belief. I felt these writings spoke directly about my drawings. I am often taken by the thought of Universal Truths and how they intertwine through everybody. In a lot of ways, they connect us as individuals, and perhaps for me drawing is that link.

JG: Yet, the ground of the drawing *Haft Rang* (1997) at first appears to be gray. . . .

WM: Yes, I carefully drew a very even field and then erased through to this neutral ground color. I really like what is not drawn, what has been removed. I like the thought of this neutral ground or this place, and when you keep taking things away or adding things, eventually you end up at yourself.



*Wes Mills, **Haft
Rang**, 1997,
graphite on paper,
2 x 2 inches. ©
1997 Wes Mills.
Courtesy Portland
Art Museum.*

JG: With this notion of the ground upon which your drawings exist in mind, you created a group of drawings called *Five Ingredients of a Cow* (1999) that alludes to your interest in Buddhist philosophy.

WM: There is a tendency, when you're continually making work over time, for a preciousness to come into it, which I think affects the ground or the level on which the drawing initially exists. When polishing a stone, there is a certain point at which you no longer see the stone and instead you see your own reflection. I try to be conscious of where this ground exists in my drawing and in my life. I feel the Tibetan culture understands this. They have a practice of desecrating the earth before they create their sand drawings. They literally wash and coat the ground with five ingredients of a cow—the dung, the piss, the snot. . . . When I learned this years ago, it made me think about this notion of the ground and how one builds or exists on it. Where does the ground exist, and can one actually lower it?

JG: There are a few traditional references to spatial depth in your work. The Duchamp drawings from that same year have a subtle horizontal line that seems particularly intentional and helps to orient the drawing.



Wes Mills, **Memory Line**, 1999, graphite, powdered pigment on paper, 6 x 6 inches. © 1999 Wes Mills. Courtesy Portland Art Museum.

WM: Generally, I feel my drawings aren't directly related to other artists' work. However, those drawings relate to a small Marcel Duchamp etching I own. It's actually a restrike, most likely printed years after he



Wes Mills,
No Title,
from the series
Shore Line,
*2001, graph-
ite, powdered
pigment, ink,
tape, paint on
paper, 8 x 8
inches. © 2001*
Wes Mills.
Courtesy
Portland Art
Museum.

passed away. I find that it isn't so much the original drawing that feels like Duchamp, but the intentional marks that were made to destroy the plate after the initial edition was printed. I made this assemblage of diagonal marks similar to the lines in the etching, as a backdrop. They became interesting in themselves—the way they started playing with each other—but then I added a very deliberate horizontal line and I liked what happened, what it does with my eye and the way I read the drawing and how I enter into it. This Duchamp in particular is a funny drawing. When I was hanging it for a show, I looked at it and to my surprise the horizontal line was missing [laughter]. So I took it out of the frame and used a penny to make the line. All of a sudden the experience of the drawing unfolded into its initial thought.

JG: I'm particularly drawn to one type of line that reappears in your work, which seems to be heading



Wes Mills, Duchamp, 1999, graphite, powdered pigment on paper, 7.25 x 7.5 inches. © 1999 Wes Mills. Courtesy Portland Art Museum.

in one direction then suddenly turns in another. You mentioned that this relates to your ideas about memory and the way one travels from one thought to another, from point a to point b.

WM: I like how one's thoughts can change direction. If I were to see a thought in the form of a line, what would it look like? I made a group of works titled *Memory Line* (1999) in which I would draw a form and then redraw it on the same page. What interests me is the mental line that is created in the making of a drawing. It doesn't matter what the form is. I like this thought of memory and forgetting . . . to remember something isn't always a straight line. In order to remind yourself of something, do you ever go back to the place you were at when you originally had the thought?

JG: All the time [laughter]. . . .

WM: *Memory Line* was made with this in mind.

JG: Though your work is abstract, it often finds its inspiration in nature.

WM: One time, I was sitting on the bank of the Bitterroot River near my home, watching sticks and leaves float by. I was thinking about the flow of the river

and the linear space it covered. In my mind I could see the world in this linear way, but at the same time I could hear the water lapping up against the bank, back and forth, to and from me. The lapping shoreline was only taking up a foot or so of space, yet I could see the history of this line going up the side of the bank and valley. The drawings that followed were more about this type of space and the possibility it encompassed. Around this time, I felt that my orientation toward my work—the way I looked at drawing and the world—was changing. I began making drawings that didn't have linear lines but rather little specks that simply follow the natural progression of my hand.

Earlier I talked about the ground on which a drawing exists. At first, this ground in the *Shore Line* (2001) drawings felt somewhat transparent and it was difficult to understand where the drawing existed on the page. Many of them have a central, hard-edge vertical line that I initially drew to help give the drawing something to relate to. But I found that this drawn line lacked some sense of truth. I found that when I cut through the paper surface with a razor blade, all of a sudden the drawing existed near this new physical edge. I like the fact that this physical edge exists inside the drawing. It plays into my thoughts on what is inside and what is outside the drawing, almost like bringing the edge of the paper inside, the outside in.

JG: You're continually inventive, even with such limited materials. You've talked about altering the ground you work on, and, in fact, you've even gone so far as to alter the shape of the paper using templates you store in various boxes, which you take with you when you travel.

WM: There is a tendency to take the abstract rectangle for granted in relationship to art and architecture. These drawings are a response to that. First I was ripping the paper and cutting it into different shapes; it seemed like it was another dimension in the drawing and it was distracting. Then I began to make these more organic forms that really brought everything back. I made these Plexiglas templates that I rip the paper around. The first few drawings seemed odd, but then I started to make a

group that related to the forms; I started to accept the form and now I really like them.

JG: Much of the palpable energy in your drawings stems from the space in between—between dark and light, between divergent lines, between forms.

WM: I think the space in between things really defines so much of what a thing is about. The paintings of [Italian Metaphysical painter] Giorgio Morandi are a good example. The spaces between the forms he painted really define where they are, what they are. Just as in a conversation . . . so often what is not said says more than what is said.