andrea sulzer

after nature

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine
introduction and acknowledgments

*Andrea Sulzer: After Nature* brings together a selection of this multi-faceted artist’s dizzyingly complex prints and drawings. The exhibition is the seventh in a summer series inaugurated in 1999 (interrupted for the three summers during which the Bowdoin College Museum of Art was undergoing renovation) that seeks out unusual responses to the landscape.

The subtitle *After Nature* was selected deliberately to acknowledge both the formative role of the land in Sulzer’s work, her increasing remove from it, and the dark undertones that suggest a post-natural condition. It was chosen even before I learned of Sulzer’s passionate appreciation of W. G. Sebald’s book of the same name. Sebald, grounded in the destruction and upheavals of the twentieth century, is noted for his darkly poetic, deeply personal treks through a tortured landscape, where experience, imagination, and memory collude. Both the writer and the artist pile up vertiginous details in their respective responses to the strange and terrible beauty of both nature and human history.

I am so grateful to Andrea Sulzer for making her art and for her energetic cooperation in helping to pull together the details of the exhibition, including providing such a thoughtful and lucid artist’s statement that most of my responsibility as an essayist was preempted. I also appreciate the willingness of the lenders to share their collections, and acknowledge the Elizabeth B. G. Hamlin Fund and the Stevens L. Frost Endowment Fund, whose far-sighted generosity continues to make so many of the Museum’s programs possible.

**KATY KLINE  DIRECTOR**
I draw because it's the most immediate, transparent, unrehearsed, and flexible way I know of to make thought and sensation visible. When I begin making marks, they might become a riff on a vast array of visual and other experiences: a news event, a line from a book or a song, a pattern in nature, or a long-ago memory that surfaces through the act of drawing itself. An expanse of large paper provides the time and space I need to accumulate a history with an emerging work. My mark-making—a weaving of the past into the present—is not so much a way to record time but a way to be in time. A mark makes a moment visible and then, like a note, it becomes absorbed into the larger atmosphere of the piece.

Drawing, for me, is an unfiltered response to daily living. I don't erase— not as a matter of principle, but because it is a non-issue, like the impossibility of trying to re-live a moment. I may work over parts of the drawing later on to address more formal concerns such as balance and movement, but the concept of a mistake doesn't enter my mind. Drawing is a place where I look for freedom and am receptive to that instant of grace when the moment becomes so expansive that I lose myself and breathe with the drawing.

*Strongylocentrotus droebachiensis* (sea urchin), 2002 illustration in *Life Between the Tides* not in exhibition
The single greatest influence on my recent work is the writing of W. G. Sebald, particularly the prose poem *After Nature*. The manner in which he evokes the workings of memory, both personal and historical, is what I aspire to do visually. I am interested in the way memory fractures, distorts, and collapses time, and, in particular, how modern memory is overwhelmed by fragments that are impossible to ground in personal experience.

*After Nature*, in turn, led me to Albrecht Altdorfer’s violent, beautiful, sixteenth-century painting *The Battle of Alexander*, which fueled in me a succession of questions about our relationship to the land and how the land functions as an archive of memory.

*spillway* (2006) is the largest and most intricate of my recent drawings, a vast imagined landscape made up of a proliferation of mostly tiny marks of ink on paper. Fragments of historical and contemporary images, primarily of battles and soldiers, are nearly lost in a flood of detail, as if the drawing itself could absorb the blows of violence. Like maps and aerial imagery, the viewpoint of *spillway* is from above, and areas of great detail inhabit the page alongside areas of emptiness. The space is unsettling, vertiginous; images shift, dissolve, and reorganize themselves like the fluid and unstable nature of memory. I want my drawings to feel like portals into new yet strangely familiar worlds.

*spillway* feels like a culmination but it is also a beginning. It is the first drawing of a three-to-four year project—an oversized atlas comprising twenty-four new drawings that will have the opposite function of conventional maps. Instead of helping you find your way, these pages will help you get lost.

ANDREA SULZER
All my work is small marks in a large area. (Andrea Sulzer)

...parasitical shapes intertwine, and, growing into and out of one another surge as a demonic swarm...


Although Sebald was discussing the sixteenth-century painter Grünewald, he might well have been describing the work of Andrea Sulzer, in which a dizzying profusion of individual marks construct strangely accumulating, teeming forms. Sulzer’s works on paper are consistently grounded in a feeling for landscape’s rich powers of suggestion, but they only very rarely reference the specifics.

Starting from early works that exquisitely rendered observed details of the natural world, to more recent evocations of huge, mysterious vistas, she lays on her varied and vivid marks obsessively. The scale and point of view of these works is often hard to determine; one expanse can suggest a close-up scrutiny of an infinitely microbial world and, at the same time, a bird’s-eye view of the details of an immense vastness.

The amount of visual incident in Sulzer’s drawings and prints requires, and repays, slow and deliberate looking. The viewer is drawn in for the sheer pleasure of savoring myriad endlessly inventive and different marks—pods, cracks, spikes, needles, hairs, spongy blisters. Viewer expectations can suddenly be upended when, within an abstract field expanse, one stumbles upon the apparition of a human figure.
Sulzer's somewhat unconventional educational background is reflected in a highly individual and nuanced approach that draws upon interests in language, history, literature, and the natural world. Few other young artists have earned degrees in French, English as a foreign language, and forestry sciences, as well as fine arts.

She has illustrated several books on marine and conservation biology; these elegant natural history drawings predict her later independent art in their combination of a sober accuracy of information and an exquisite delicacy of touch and detail. Already visible is the rich variety of marks—stippling and hatching—that she will continue to exploit in her subsequent work.

The earliest pieces in this exhibition were done from direct observation. Drypoints of a nest or of the abject corpse of a bird demonstrate a masterful exploitation of the scratched line to convey the fragile fragility of the woven twigs or the pathos of flattened feathers. Though Sulzer faithfully renders the factual details, her bold organization of forms on the open sheet, daringly isolating a small subject off-center on a large, empty field, forecasts later compositional risks and extravagances.

wrack (1999) also was done from direct observation. The title describes a particular variety of seaweed common along the Maine coastline. The dense tangle fills every inch of the slightly irregular paper, creating an all-over urgency that will characterize much of the work that follows. A constant in Sulzer's work will be an unremitting accumulation of small parts, a generous profusion of details and an accretion of gestures whose obsessive crowding often hints at dark undercurrents. It is telling that the term wrack is also used to describe debris from a maritime disaster, the disorderly residue of misfortune.

In 2002 Sulzer began what would become a series of more than seventy graphite drawings that arose not from the observation of an external subject but rather from investigating the private recesses of memory and imagination. These hedge drawings are small and, done daily, became a kind of diary of the artist's inner life. Once again she has built intricate, dense tangles, lines laid down rapidly that pulsate with barely contained vitality. One feels locked within these spaces, whose scale is ambiguous. Are they immense and overpowering or intimate and benign? Plant forms seem both reas-
Pull-out centerfold reveals poster of spillway

spillway (details) photos Luc Demers
garden, 2001  photo Dennis Griggs
suringly familiar and strangely threatening, underscoring the nature of a hedge as both barrier and protection.

The artist’s childhood memories of playing and hiding in hedges in Germany produced the darkly dappled garden, which exploits the bold contrasts of rich blacks and the white of untouched paper. A vague claustrophobia is offset by the suggestion of an escape path at the right and by the jolting interruption of an actual seam that unapologetically joins two sheets of paper.

Beginning with the hedge and garden drawings, there are often striking similarities between Sulzer’s marks and those of van Gogh’s late drawings from Arles. A detail seen in isolation is difficult to assign to either artist; both rely on a variety of small urgent strokes that roil with furious energy, acting at some remove from nature while affirming its churning pulse and rhythms.

Upon Sulzer’s return in 2004 from two years of study in Scotland, a radical element entered her work. An ambitious drawing, point me in the direction home, at fifteen feet too tall to be installed in this exhibition, introduced imagery directly referencing war and history. Sulzer had been reading Sebald’s After Nature and was also powerfully struck by a reproduction of The Battle of Alexander at Issus (1529), a painting by the German artist Albrecht Altdorfer, who is often considered the father of independent landscape painting. From a dramatic overhead perspective, Altdorfer depicts thousands of minute figures embroiled in battle. Their tangled lances and standards create a scene of overall tumult and conflict that is echoed in the churning turmoil of the heavens. Soon Sulzer’s own drawings would quietly interject dramatic tidbits of twentieth-century military imagery taken from photographs of World War II, and even an occasional image of herself, thus enacting her own understanding of the land as a potent carrier of human experience and memory.

A spillway is a device used to control the release of flows from a dam. Sulzer’s monumental work of the same name appears to capture an immense landscape of pockmarked forms at their last moment of containment before they erupt off the page. Drama is supplied by the sheer size of the work, an apparently overhead point of view, and a disorienting absence of balance. Despite an initial impression of random chaos, slow and careful looking provides a
wrack, 1999  photo Luc Demers
way in. Within the exuberant variety of abstract whorls and hatching, the viewer is taken aback to discern an occasional recumbent form, splayed book, or group of armed men (paradoxically seen both from above and below). The sharp lines of their bayonets multiply frighteningly; in other areas of the drawing clusters of sharp pointed lines suggest dark and hidden forms and forces. Having found one figure, one starts to read them everywhere. spill-way's own history, encompassing an unimaginable number of inked marks and moments, stands in for the innumerable actions of human beings in and on the larger landscape of human history and memory.

Like an explorer, Sulzer continues to chart new territories, driven by her restless investigative impulses. It is not surprising, given her ongoing interest in marks made upon the land, that she has made some works loosely describable as “maps.” Though adhering to a map format, they provide no actual topographical indications, but their scarred, layered surfaces nonetheless suggest an impossibly fragile, ancient document, itself eroded, bearing hints of past history and loss.

Her most recent woodblocks involve the radical introduction of rich layers of color. There are hints of her telltale overhead view and rings of small figures piling up. Although these objects look very different from her drawings, they nonetheless participate in the artist's ongoing commitment to slow accumulation and measured accretion. The “sprouting perpetuation and proliferation” (After Nature, p. 27) to which Sebald drew attention in Grünewald could equally well describe Sulzer's approach.

Sulzer's drawings involve a dramatic tension among forms and forces; the viewer is swept up in the uncertainty about whether the active fields of marks are coalescing toward resolution or disintegrating into chaos. Her work marks time by the making of marks, and in the process creates an archived archaeology of her own (and the viewer's) moments.

KATY KLINE
biographical statement

I was born and raised on Long Island, New York, where my parents immigrated in the late 1950s. A child of the suburbs (when I was born our family lived in Levittown), I spent most of my childhood summers in Germany. Our family divided its time between Karlsruhe, the city of my parents’ origin, and a family vineyard in the Palatinate region where the extended family would gather. This vineyard, a place where the kids ran free all day, often returns to me in daydreams and when I’m drawing. I think my early experience of two lands, two languages, two families (the nuclear, the extended), in sum, two ways of being, had a defining influence on me.

I made things from an early age, but I am a late bloomer. At age 37, as my hunger to make images began to eclipse everything else, I left my job as a laboratory instructor at Bowdoin College and moved my work into a studio in Fort Andross in Brunswick. Up until that time, it was as if I had been living a life that wasn’t quite mine.
Education
2002–2004  Glasgow School of Art: Master of Fine Arts
1989–1991  University of Maine, Orono: Master of Science (Forest Biology)
1984–1985  Columbia University, Teachers College: Master of Arts
1982–1984  New York University: Bachelor of Arts (French)
1979–1981  Smith College (Fine Arts major, transferred to NYU in 1982)

Solo/Two-Person Exhibitions
2007  Works on paper, ICON Contemporary Art, Brunswick, Maine (with Duncan Hewitt)
       spillway, McCoy Gallery, Merrimack College, North Andover, Massachusetts
2006  Free Hand, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, Maine
       Serving Time, Maine State House, Augusta, Maine
2005  Worlds Apart: Drawings, ICON Contemporary Art, Brunswick, Maine
2002  Prints and Drawings, ICON Contemporary Art, Brunswick, Maine
2000  Recent Drawings, ICON Contemporary Art, Brunswick, Maine (with Ann Minich)
       From the Thicket, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, Maine

Group Exhibitions
2008  Gangbusters, Plane Space, New York, New York
       An Other World, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, Maine
       Grayscale, Plane Space, New York, New York
2006  Skowhegan at 60, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, Maine
       Maine Print Project, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, Maine
       ArtFutures Scotland, Millenium Hotel, Glasgow, Scotland
2005  From Here to There, Sowaka Gallery, Kyoto, Japan
       BraveArt, Atrium Gallery, London, England
       M.F.A. Degree Show, Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland
2003  Contemporary Drawing, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, and X’ian Academy of Art, X’ian, China
       Contemporary Prints from the Bruce Brown Collection, Colby College, Waterville, Maine

Awards/Residencies
2007  Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant
2006  Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation Grant Commission
2003  Horace W. Goldsmith Scholarship: Glasgow School of Art
2001  Bingham Fellowship: Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture
2000, 1999  Ucross Foundation Residency
           Vermont Studio Center Residency

Work Experience
2007–present  Non-resident studio instructor, Maine College of Art, Portland, Maine
2006–present  Freelance drawing instructor
1991–2003  Freelance illustrator
1993–1997  Freelance field ecologist
1993 (summer)  The Nature Conservancy, field ecologist, Brunswick, Maine
1992–1993 and University of Maine, Orono, Maine: instructor
1987–1991  (English as a Second Language)

Selected Published Illustrations


Other
2007  Accepted in The Drawing Center’s Slide Registry and Viewing Program, New York, New York
2007  Maine Percent for Art Commission: Medomak Valley Middle School
works in the exhibition

*illustrated

*nest 1, 1999
drypoint on paper
20 x 23 3/4 inches
Courtesy of Mark Wethli

*hedge 1, 2002
graphite on newsprint
12 x 9 inches
Courtesy of Dorothea Sulzer

*wrack, 1999
ink on paper
20 x 24 inches
Courtesy of Riley Brewster

*hedge 3, 2002
graphite on newsprint
12 x 9 inches
Courtesy of Pia Young

fallen, 2001
drypoint on paper
20 3/4 x 23 1/2 inches
Collection of the artist

*hedge 6, 2002
graphite on newsprint
12 x 9 inches
Courtesy of Dorothea Sulzer

* garden, 2001
ink on paper
47 1/2 x 46 inches
Collection of the artist

*hedge 8, 2002
graphite on newsprint
12 x 9 inches
Courtesy of Pia Young

Edenkoben, 2001
ink on paper
47 1/2 x 46
Collection of the artist

* above and beyond, 2005
ink on paper
43 x 45 inches
Courtesy of Jane Brox

at sea, 2005
conté crayon on paper
12 x 9 inches
Courtesy of Roy Kozupsky

*spillway, 2006
ink on paper
101 x 101 inches
Collection of the artist

what's left, 2006
color woodcut on mulberry paper
27 x 48 inches
Collection of the artist

heap, 2008
woodcut
16 x 16 inches
Collection of the artist

ring around, 2008
woodcut
16 x 16 inches
Collection of the artist

This brochure accompanies an exhibition of the same name at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art from June 17 through August 27, 2008.

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On the cover. spillway, 2006 (detail)
photo: Luc Demers

Opposite: nest 1, 1999
photo: Dennis Griggs