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ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 2002

JOHN MORRIS

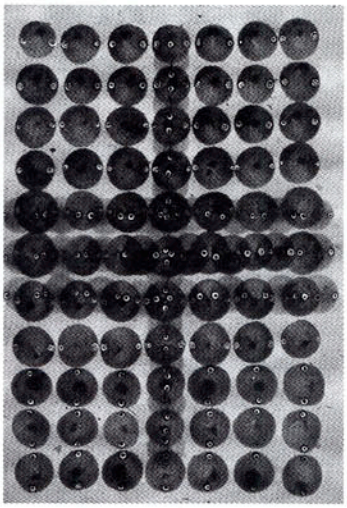
D'AMELIO TERRAS

John Morris practices what critic Alan Weiss calls a "poetics of the ad infinitum," an ecstatic but precise doodling in which handmade marks stand for unrepresentable holism. Morris's drawings are roughly the size of lined binder paper and are often made on just this unassuming support, as if he had been studying Kabbalistic tomes and taking copious notes in hieroglyphics of his own devising. In his recent work, fragile spirals, scrolls, and webs are traced in ink and white or clear acrylic, punctuated by passages of graphite or ballpoint pen and, occasionally, pinkish pencil. This black-and-white-and-red-all-over palette emphasizes the quasi-linguistic nature of the marks, a Babel of urgently decorative shapes that—in the tradition of visionary scribes from Artaud and Michaux to Twombly—simultaneously empty and replenish ideas about writing and ciphering. The drawings are seductively pictorial, spinning out biomorphic minutiae and galactic ellipses. But their underlying interest is in systematization, a capacious motif linking cellular, mathematical, and verbal patterns into one giddy metaphor for order within chaos.

Morris does have a tacit real-world subject, the "creative destruction" theory of Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950)—an émigré Harvard professor famous for exploring paradigm shifts brought about by new and innovative business practices. Legible words and numbers appear in Morris's whorls of abstraction, and perhaps those conversant in Schumpeter's theories would find explicit connections. But probably not. The term "creative destruction," the name of the economist, and the exhibition's title, "Drawings for the Austrian School," are themselves symbols resting on the border where pictures shade toward language. In this, the tale of Schumpeter adds a layer to Morris's personal investigation of proliferation and sublimity. The aura of self-replicating complexity was furthered by the installation, which presented thirty-five drawings pinned to the wall in one gallery and some sixty others framed and propped on a shelf that ran around the perimeter of a second room painted a deep, elegant blue. Displayed like so many manuscripts or codices, the drawings bombarded the viewer with a promise of information that was revoked by hermeticism at the same time.

Art like Morris's suggests a direct, indexical, and therefore euphoric transcription of thought, in which every sign is motivated by some mystical urgency known only to the author, and no detour through conventional grammar dulls the high of radical self-expression. Not surprisingly, comparisons to the "art of the insane" usually crop up in discussion of this kind of work. Morris's graphic world is anything but crazy—he favors exquisitely balanced detail, and his acrylics and pencils bind every squiggle into a milky, silvery matrix. Still, a fidgety perturbation breathes from these inscriptions. Their mythopoetics might go like this: The Fall into knowledge opens a hopeless gap between sign and referent, and out of this gap well the aesthetics of "ad infinitum." A crusade for sense via nonsense is pursued by self-identifying acolytes who, like Artaud with his madness or Michaux with his mescaline, are willing to suffer their penciled prophecies in order to repair cosmic articulation. Each prideful individual inventor of a new symbolic economy must persuade his audience to buy into his altered communication, to read his clairvoyant code. Doing so, we enjoy the beauty of the picture without the sweat of generating it, with looking thus offering passive catharsis for syntax overload, a pleasant day trip to the pandemonium of graphomania.

—*Frances Richard*



John Morris, *Untitled (Drawing for the Austrian School)*, 2001, acrylic on handmade paper, 9 x 6¼".

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ART IN REVIEW

John Morris

'Drawings for the Austrian School'

D'Amelio Terras
525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through tomorrow

It might be a first, a drawing show sparked by the theories of Joseph Schumpeter, the 20th-century Austrian-born economist who held that economic change came about through the replacement — by entrepreneurs with new ideas — of old business models and practices. But these jottings by John Morris — more than 100 intricately layered sheets in which dots, spots, traceries, patterns, webs, grids and other markings of utmost delicacy are made with different implements on variously treated surfaces — give only faint hints of the theories that spawned them.

Some tightly controlled, almost robotically repetitive in their imagery, others more freehand in their doodling, they evoke man-made and natural phenomena, among them patterns from nature, electronic circuitry, virus colonies, active spermatozoa, musical notations. In "A Drawing for F. A. Hayek No. 1," small white balls are strung in casual rows beneath a white stringlike grid on a black ground; "Untitled (Drawing for the Austrian School)" is a roundish pink haze of tiny dots and larger markings that suggests an agar culture seen under a microscope; and "A Drawing for Mancur Olson No. 1" very much resembles a vertebrate skeleton.

Though the drawings look fragile, they seem to be wired into one another in a way that lends cumulative strength. Altogether, they generate a lot of juice.

GRACE GLUECK

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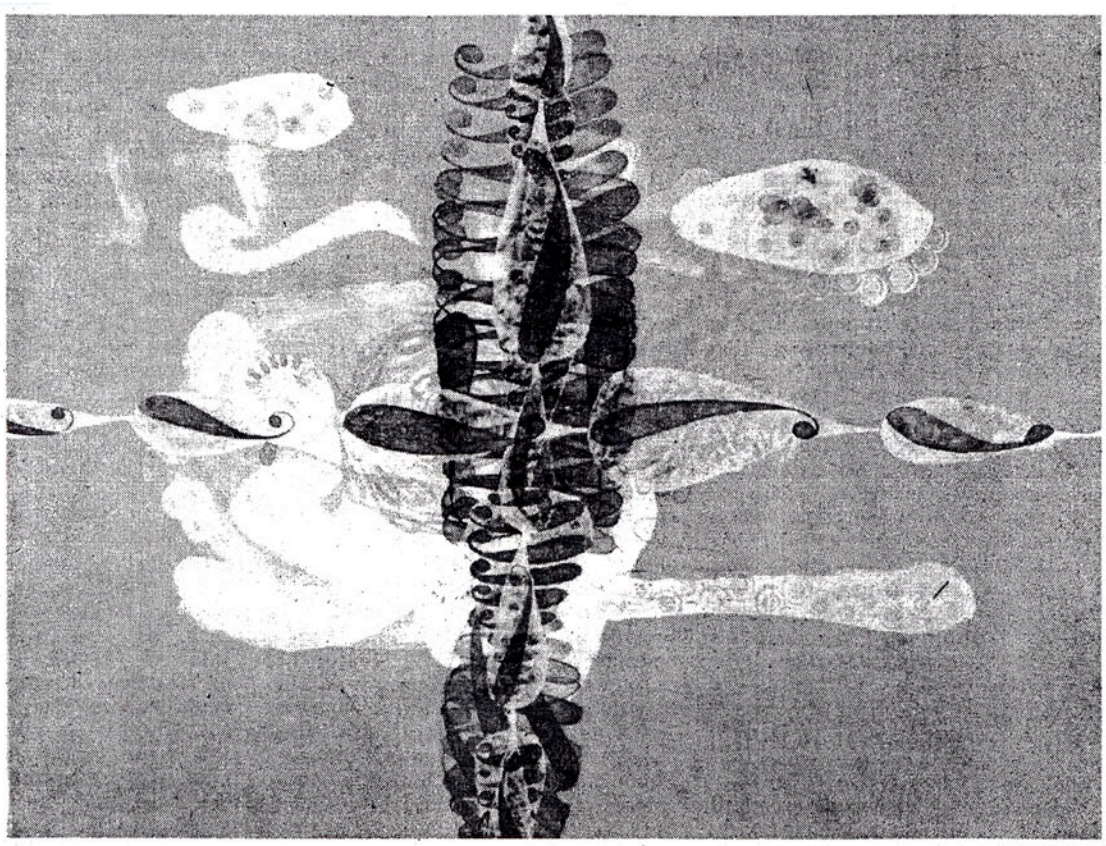
ARTS & LETTERS



D'AMELIO TERRAS

John Morris, 'A Drawing for Mancur Olson #1' (2002).

By TALYA HALKIN

"Drawings for the Austrian School," an exhibition of new works by John Morris, consists of over 100 small compositions on paper. Mr. Morris has created a language of his own, whose vocabulary mutates from one drawing to another like a constantly agitated kaleidoscope.

He uses acrylic, ink, graphite, and ballpoint pen to create intricate, labor-intensive works. In some of them, chains of arabesques, delicately coiled spirals and filigree patterns form dense, intricate patterns. In others, a single element is isolated in space like a piece of coral or a biological cell enlarged under a microscope. Although they have a powerful ornamental quality, they are also, according to the artist himself, strongly organic forms.

For viewers unfamiliar with Mr. Morris's work, it may come as a surprise to learn that he relates these delicate, fragile compositions to the organic models of growth and death developed by the important 20th-century "Austrian School" of economists. "Creative Destruction," the collective name for an entire series of drawings in the exhibition, is dedicated to Joseph Schumpeter. A believer in the idea that political freedom required total economic freedom, Schumpeter coined the term "Creative Destruction" to describe his belief that entrepreneurs with new ideas must destroy existing business models in order to allow for economic growth.

The series is composed of rows of unframed drawings made on torn notebook paper. The paper was first covered with doodles, scribbled notes, and telephone numbers, then a restricted palette of white, gray, and black color, they possess a raw, spontaneous quality.

What makes these drawings smart and intriguing, however, is not their theoretical context. Rather, it is the way their small dimensions and complex patterns concentrate the viewer's gaze, triggering a kind of intense visual fascination through which perception and feeling are altered.