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AROUND THE GALLERIES, March 10, 2006

Leah Ollman, Special to the Times

Drawings at Carl Berg showcase versatility and vitality.



Tony de los Reyes, *Trinidad*, 2006, Bister on paper, 44 x 44 inches

The definition of drawing, expanded

A delicious bit of market-driven irony has boosted drawing, the oldest visual art form, into the limelight as the hottest new trend. The more attention drawing gets, the more new adherents it seems to attract. Never mind that some of them are working in paint and sculptural materials; if a work is in a drawings show, it must be a drawing. Cross-fertilization and discovery matter more than exclusionary definitions anyway.

The "Major Drawings" show at Carl Berg showcases nine artists who work large, either in the spirit of drawing, with directness and immediacy, or the old-fashioned way, with pencil and paper. Versatility and vitality largely run high.

James Buss draws innocuous roadside scenes with exquisite finesse and sets them, like snapshots in oversized mats, within huge panels that telescope our focus deep into the details. **Chelsea Dean** is also a technical wizard, building up images of plants from loops of hair-thin lines. Engaging drawings by **Margaret Griffith** and **Timothy Nolan** play with pattern and deviation, repetition and improvisation.

Of lesser interest are watercolors of burst balloons by **Neha Choksi**, which barely transcend the level of sophomore exercise. **Steve Schmidt's** manic, skittering line (made by attaching his pencils to power tools) has more energy than purpose, and **John Geary's** charcoal drawing of a young chimp is accomplished but dull. **Gelah Penn** has spun a frivolous stream-of-consciousness doodle in the space of the gallery's front window using colored plastic thread that's been strung, knotted and whipped into frizzy tumbleweeds.

The most stirring piece in the show is **Tony de los Reyes'** "Trinidad," painted in bister, a pigment made from soot. The drawing consists of a single gesture, a large, swift comma the color of dried blood. The pigment has pooled in several areas and dried to a glossy dark crust, but in between, where the paint is translucent, De los Reyes has conjured faint images of ships, perhaps in battle. The history of conquest wafts through, within the pure potency and fury of the physical mark.

Carl Berg Gallery, 6018 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 931-6060