

FRIEZE
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Allan McCollum. *Drawings*, 1989-93. Pencil on museum board, each unique. Installation: Centre d' Art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland, 1993.

ALLAN McCOLLUM
DRAWINGS
Centre d'Art Contemporain, Genève
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by **Jeffrey Kastner**

Our expectations of the various objects with which we share our lives are fraught with contradictions. Our cultural system of estimation has come to value the singular, the scarce, the unique above all, yet we still remain essentially fascinated with material profusion, convinced that there's a kind of latent potential that lies in quantity, attached to the notion of safety in numbers. It's a virgin/whore dichotomy for the world of things: though we constantly reiterate our respect for the chaste beauty of the singular, deep down inside we still desire the lusty plenty of the mass-produced.

The complex work of Allan McCollum has played purposefully with this dilemma, and taken similarly productive advantage of our current difficulty in distinguishing novelty or authenticity or even objective worth in a world increasingly dominated by mechanical reproduction and technological surrogates. His trademark installations of large numbers of formally repetitive objects, produced over the last ten years—thousands of little pink widgets or black painted rectangles, or in Geneva, 2,400 small pencil works from the ‘Drawings’ project on which he has been working since 1988—repeatedly call into question notions of the single and the multiple, confronting traditional conceptions of originality, value and the relationship between the two. Layered with contradiction and paradox, his accumulative works deliver a sensual and intellectual charge, even though the analytical roadblocks he builds into them can sometimes make it awfully difficult to locate the power source.

Laid out 50 pieces to each of the 48 tables, the 200 dozen small *Drawings* (executed by McCollum and a battalion of studio assistants) on display at Geneva’s newly reopened Centre d’Art Contemporain represent shapes developed through the repeated combination of around 50 templates designed by the artist. In their indeterminate Rorschachian symmetry, the black and white silhouettes recall all manner of things in the abstract and virtually nothing in specific—the shapes could be vases or minarets, ice-cream cones or crowns, diatoms or door-knockers.

Filling a large room in the Centre’s renovated factory space from wall to wall, with only narrow corridors between the displays, the installation and its constituent parts tease the viewer mercilessly. The damn things are undoubtedly drawings, but they stubbornly refuse to behave like them. With tethers going back to McCollum’s artistic formation during conceptualism’s halcyon days, these simulacra present a kind of koan: a meditative puzzle expressed through an artistic object which seems to increase in complexity the more deeply you analyse it. Although they’re executed in one of the most extemporaneous of all media, the pieces are incredibly calculated. They’re all hand-made, but the ostensible objective of their formal treatment is to sublimate any outright evidence of the hand. Despite being professionally framed and ready to hang, they eschew the walls for the mundane platforms on which they sit like seconds at a frame shop clearance-sale. They are each unique, but are presented in a way which obfuscates their singularity. They all look the same, but only superficially; actually they’re all different, but only minutely.

When viewers finally extricate themselves from this analytical quicksand, what they’re left with in this, like in so many of McCollum’s schemes, are works which purposefully float between conventional definitions—works constructed in

such a way that any discussion of them tends to wipe out on the slippery slope of their particulars, sending it tumbling right into the lap of the big picture they comprise. Throughout the last decade, this big picture of McCollum's has been embodied in a strategy that walks the knife's edge between originality and imitation, that asks questions about the relative merits of hand-craft and mass-production, that constantly probes for vulnerabilities in conventional notions of both the sublime gesture of art and the pedestrian mechanics of the manufactured. That his generative, if familiar, underlying thesis—namely that the concept of the 'original' is only meaningful in relation to the concept of the 'replica,' that the two are not so much mutually exclusive as mutually dependent—rarely seems to devolve into simple tautology is a credit to McCollum's generally careful choices and considered execution.

Though McCollum has continued to add to it over the last five years, the *Drawings* installation on view here really bears more formal and conceptual resemblance to his work from the mid 80's than to his most recent output. His latest casting projects (the 750 dinosaur bones he installed at the 1991 Carnegie International and *The Dog from Pompei* project first exhibited last year in Madrid) show an exciting and promising evolution. They once and for all transcend the threat of conceptual circularity which has always seemed to hang over the artist's work by referencing natural as well as socio-artistic history. They keep the heady concept they explore (the tangled contingencies between representation and absence) firmly grounded by choosing formal vehicles that link up to time and memory, that contain both immediate and lingering resonance. They are natural organisms, familiar to us despite the fact we couldn't possibly have ever really seen them, beings long since gone, which now can be made real to us only through traces which illustrate their ultimate immateriality. While the earlier body of his projects to which the current *Drawings* seem more related can be seen as staying within a more closed system of artistic discourse, like all of the best of McCollum's work, they have the ability to take you on an often disorienting trip into the fissure between producer and produced, across the chasm between things and representations of things—ultimately leaving you on the other side, challenged and confounded but with just enough material to start building the bridge back.