

Obsessive Compulsions

Intense Mark-Making and a Recurring Theme Characterize John Lees's Art

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

The artist John Lees is one of the most accomplished expressionist painters of his generation. He is also one of the most under-recognized, at least when it comes to inclusion within museum collections and the sort of group exhibitions that help build a reputation. He has the distinction, however, of having exhibited continuously in private galleries since 1989.

ART REVIEW

His latest exhibition, at the Nicole Fiacco Gallery, contains a selection of significant drawings and mixed-media works on paper from 1992 to 2006. Many of them have been reworked over the course of several years, as is Mr. Lees's way — the artist meticulously recording the date of each new addition in pencil on the back or front of the paper. Some of the drawings here are the product of 15 to 20 separate drawing sessions over a period of up to 10 years.

Like his paintings, Mr. Lees's drawings combine direct observations of the natural world and records of feelings and emotions aroused by being in the landscape. In short, they are both representational and abstract at the same time. What exactly impels the artist to try to balance these conflicting formal qualities in a single work remains something of a mystery, but the results, when successful, are marvelously expressive, and even kind of visionary.

Intense, almost obsessive mark-making is the basis of Mr. Lees's drawings, which can be appreciated for their subtle, variegated surface texture as much as the imagery itself. Some of them are heavily built up to a point where they have a kind of sculptural quality, while others are so finely



WATERY IMAGES

"Stream," right (ink, Conté crayon and charcoal on paper), and "Fish" (mixed-media on paper) are among the John Lees works on display at the Nicole Fiacco Gallery in Hudson.

wrought that they remind you of etchings or lithographs. Multiple processes and materials are often combined in a single drawing, including ink, pencil, gouache and charcoal, as well as collage.

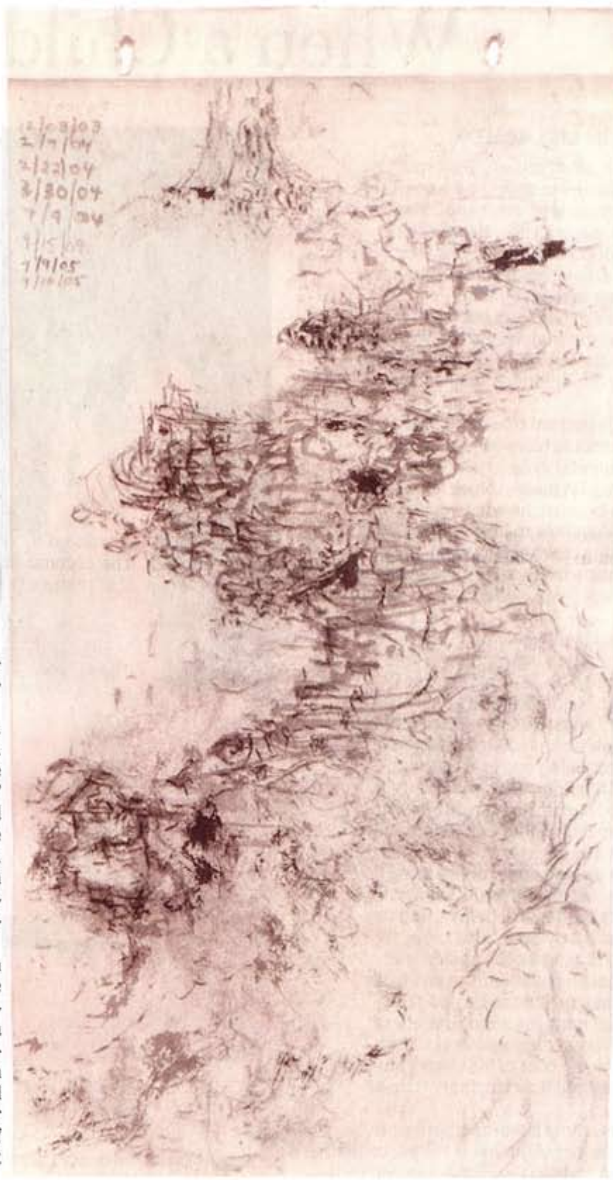
Born in Denville, N.J., Mr. Lees lives and works in Cairo in upstate New York. The environs of the town and the nearby Catskills serve as inspiration, though given the generic titles ("Study for Mountain," "Lilac," "Stream"), identifying the places depicted is difficult. The exception is a series of landscapes inspired by a visit to Italy several years ago, their titles pinpointing specific locations. Mostly, however, the works here are of landscapes with ponds, streams and rivers.

This affinity for water is shown in several variations on a single theme, a meandering mountain stream seen from below. It is always the same stream, though each drawing is slightly different because of the use of alternating colors and materials — ink, crayon and charcoal. The discrepancies could also have something to do with the

fact that the artist often draws from memory. But each is so skillfully done that we immediately recognize the hand of a pro.

In his depiction of other subjects, Mr. Lees's images become more abstract. Among the best of these works here are "Pond (Koko)" (1992) and "Studio Table" (1995), in which the artist scratches and cuts the surface of the paper on which the image is drawn to get a desired texture. Both of these images seem to bristle with energy, reflecting the intensity of the creative moment without sacrificing its connection to the world surrounding the artist.

Sometimes Mr. Lees depicts wildlife. In the very first work we encounter in the show, "Fish," which has no date, the reflective luminosity of the foreground area contracts nicely with the blur and blotchiness at top, creating the impression of a fish moving through the depths of a sun-flecked stream. Perhaps more keenly than other works here, it expresses Mr. Lees's love of nature, whose simple beauty he has made it his modest mission to record.



"John Lees: Selected Drawings 1992-2006," Nicole Fiacco Gallery, 506 Warren Street, Hudson, through May 27. Information: (518) 828-5090 or www.nicolefiaccogallery.com.