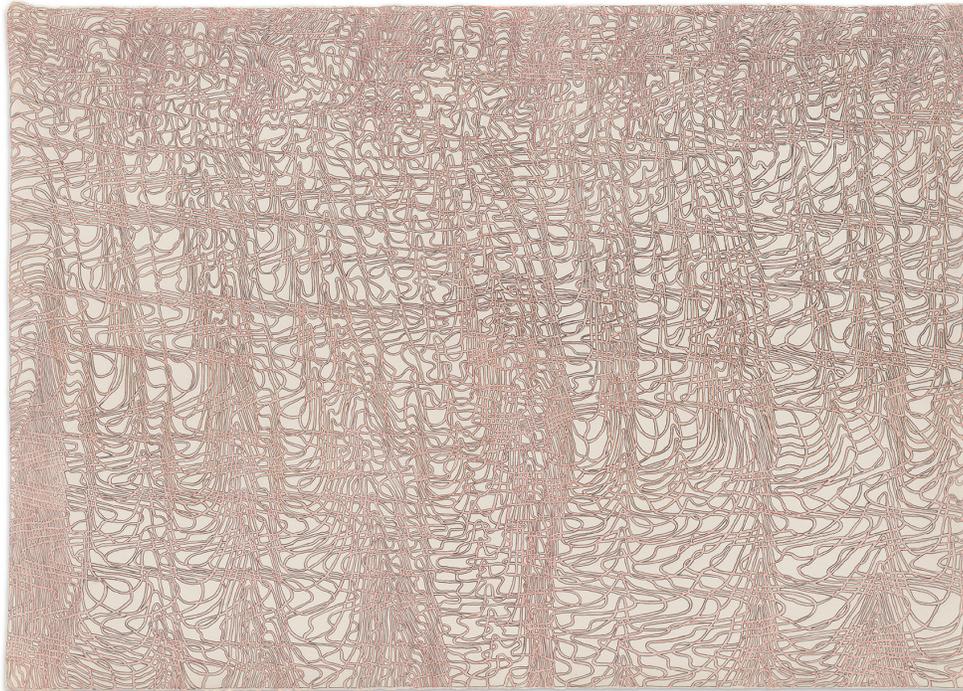


HYPERALLERGIC

The Slow Joy of James Siena's Intricate Compositions

The deepest pleasure of Siena's drawings was giving up the search for what generated them and getting lost in the intricacies of the composition.

By John Yau | 21 January 2024



James Siena, "Spoolstrata" (2023), graphite on paper, paper dimensions: 22 3/8 x 31 1/16 inches

I was surprised how soon James Siena had his second exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery, following his first in late 2022. When I learned that the exhibition was devoted to Siena's drawings, I surmised that it was either a survey or a look at a little-documented period in the artist's career. I was wrong.

All of the show's 31 drawings (made between 2022 and 2023) are procedural compositions in which the artist responds to the first line or band he makes in pencil, usually echoing it. However, Siena doesn't stop there, as he once did. He goes back into the work and with another material does something to the negative spaces or the interior of the bands and shapes, resulting in dry lines and a liquid interior. None of the works are variations. He uses two or more materials in each, including graphite, charcoal, crayon, gouache, ink, and watercolor. The color of the paper becomes part of the composition in these visually dense works that I kept disassembling, as I tried to discern how the drawing was made.

I was reminded of Henri Michaux's drawings documenting his use of mescaline in *Miserable Miracle* (1956). Michaux said of his experience: "In mescaline one finds an independent consciousness with its own world of images. One learns what it is both to have and not have a will." Siena's complex iterations spread across the entire sheet of paper. This, along with his use of color, distinguishes them from Michaux's drawings.

For me, the deepest pleasure of the drawings was giving up the search for what generated them and getting lost in the intricacies of the composition, as my attention moved between the bands and the figure-ground relationship, and I noticed how the use of color emphasized the difference between the lines. I felt the joy of seeing if you could take something multifaceted apart and put it back together again. I couldn't. There is so much going on in each drawing that it became difficult (in a good way) to ponder individual works without pausing for a long time before losing myself in the next one. Each of Siena's drawings demands slow and close attention.

In an interview with Noelle Bodick (*Artspace*, February 25, 2014), Siena cited the late work of Sol LeWitt as an influence, "where his grids appear to sag under the weight of gravity." The slipping and shifting lines and color variation animate the drawings, creating the sense that they are moving and in a state of change. The drawings are not symmetrical and there are no patterns in which a design is repeatedly replicated. There is only constant change and difference. While the drawings might bring to mind a reflection seen in moving water — an image on the brink of reformulation — that association quickly passes. The territory in which Siena works is bordered by the wildness of Jackson Pollock and the rule-bound control of LeWitt.

For instance, Siena might start a drawing according to a set of rules, but he can change or alter them as he goes along. This refusal to settle into a groove is why I keep returning to his work. He recognizes that consciousness is multilayered and does not try to simplify what he does. In fact, he does the opposite. His drawings have grown increasingly complicated and, in that regard, go against the grain. If one legacy of abstraction is the desire to pare away and simplify, Siena has gone in the opposite direction while working solely with lines and the spaces between.

With this exhibition, Siena has opened up a new avenue of discovery for himself. Working after the breakthroughs of late LeWitt, Michaux, and Jackson Pollock, for whom seeing was never simple, his drawings remind us that there is always more to see than the mind can comprehend. To do that while infusing the work with a feeling of rapture that is simultaneously visual and intellectual is a major achievement.

James Siena continues at Miles McEnery Gallery (515 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 3. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.



James Siena, "Sessilae" (2023),
Ink, graphite, and colored pencil on paper,
paper dimensions: 31 x 23 inches