

BROOKLYN RAIL

James Siena

ON VIEW Miles McEnery Gallery December 14, 2023–February 3, 2024

By Alfred Mac Adam | January 2024

Call it a new wrinkle—the surfaces of James Siena’s recent works on paper bob and weave all over the place, often resembling a rattlesnake’s shed skin. And yet, despite the novel look of the twenty pieces now on view at Miles McEnery, the Siena of old is still palpably present: the obsessive drawing, the *horror vacui*, the meticulous delineation of every shape.

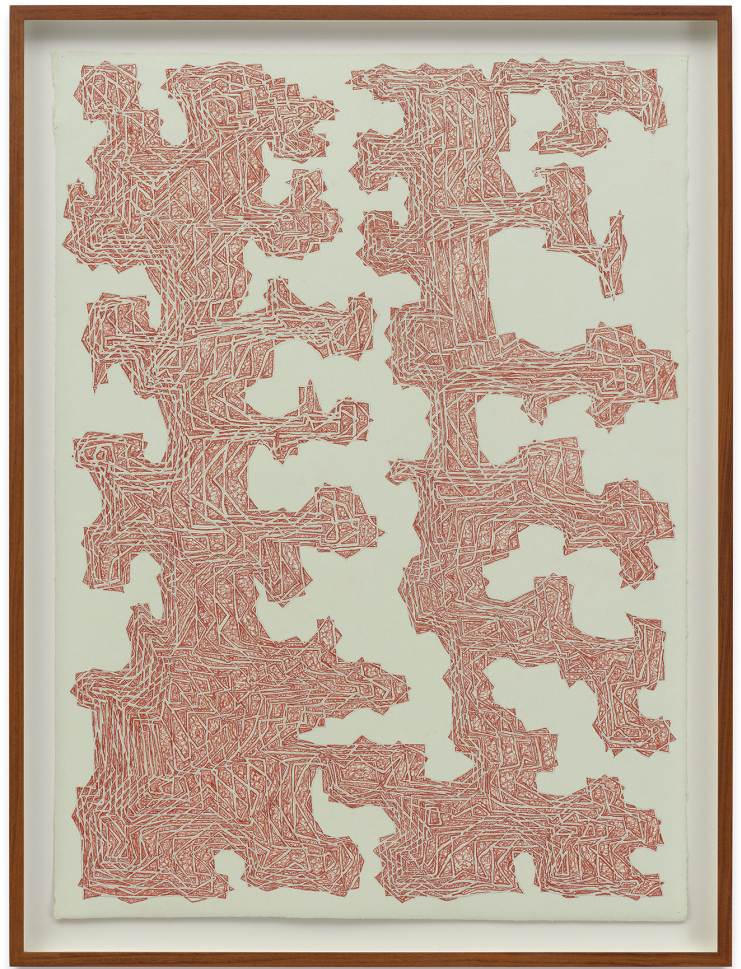
Within the unity of his style, however, there is diversity. Each piece here is a nuanced commentary on Siena’s total body of work, bringing questions of spontaneity versus self-awareness to the fore. Siena, we know, begins a given work with a plan in mind, but what is the source of that plan? In the 1920s, the Surrealists linked artistic production closely to psychic automatism. This would allow the subconscious to express itself, bringing the greatest possible authenticity to artistic expression. The second wave of Surrealism, which took place here in New York in the 1930s and ’40s, backed away from total automatism and moved toward a two-step process: the subconscious would be allowed to speak, but the intervention of consciousness in the process brought a greater degree of order to the sometimes chaotic products of the unconscious. Siena’s work in its totality reflects this dialectical relationship between unleashed instinct and conscious will.

We may imagine Siena’s creative process in this way: from somewhere in the preconscious depths of his mind come instructions or configurations, whether in color or not we cannot say. His conscious mind, directing his hand, acts on those directives, manipulating them, arranging them on a surface. There is an obsessive quality to his procedure: in Siena’s earlier work we see this primarily in how thoroughly he would cover the given surface. In his new drawings, there is open space, interstices where the blank surface is allowed to participate in the production.



James Siena, *Atonicity*, 2023. Charcoal on paper, 22 1/2 x 31 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

Atonicity (2023) opens the show. This charcoal-on-paper composition looks like a typical Siena: the entire 22-by-31-inch surface is covered. But we immediately see that there is an optical effect at work here, independent of the whole sheet. A cruciform gestalt divides the sheet into four sections, but this structuring motif only appears at a distance. As we move closer, the cross fades into the surface. The creation of such an optical effect can only be successful if premeditation is allowed into the creation of the work. The title of the drawing, *Atonicity*, has, in this regard, several ramifications. First, it refers to an affliction: an atonic person loses muscular strength, any ability to stand erect. The cruciform element then comes into play as a kind of support structure, a corrective to formlessness. But the word is also the title of a 2023 musical composition, by the digital group Blaster Clockers, that reaches no crescendo. This correspondence thus highlights Siena's awareness of the interplay between the flow of fancy and the imposition of order on that flow by the conscious imagination.



James Siena, *417714*, 2019. Graphite and crayon on paper, 31 x 22 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

More enigmatically titled, the graphite and crayon on paper *417714* (2019) also shows us Siena's interplay of automatism and self-awareness.

Parallel configurations, themselves made up of myriad intersecting shapes, appear on a field. They recall crystals growing in a beaker or coral growing in the sea, vaguely plant-like but not biomorphic. The same pattern reappears in other works, notably in *TLIL4TH7* (2019), dramatizing the interaction between shape and surface, as if Siena wanted to let his shapes live in a world of their own. The presence of the background as an active element contributes a figure-ground mode of composition that recalls Siena's forays into sculpture.

Set apart in a small room at the center of the gallery are four 2023 watercolors—there is no medium in which Siena has not worked. Modest in size, these pieces show Siena as a consummate colorist. Three of these are in rose, red-orange, and blue-green, respectively, and harken back to Siena's earlier compulsive works in that they completely dominate the surface, no breathing room allowed. The fourth, *Ensciages* (2023), certainly one of the gems of the show, is a bravura performance. On a medium sized, 25-by-19-inch sheet, Siena crams together his dense motifs and an optical break at the center, as if some insane oscilloscope were beating out patterns to interfere with the uniformity of Siena's initial program. The tawny background gives a special richness to the work, once more reminding us of how Siena's painstaking drawing technique is given life by his exquisite attention to color.



James Siena, *TLIL4TH7*, 2019. Graphite and charcoal on paper, 31 x 22 3/4 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

In this exhibition, we are shown again and again the fact that Siena's change of skin is a renewal, and a reaffirmation of his key role in our artistic lives.