Breaking New Ground in Art History

A Festschrift in Honor of
Alicia Craig Faxon

Margaret A. Hanni, ed.

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Reinventing Silverpoint: An Ancient Technique for the Twenty-First Century

Susan Schwalb

In 1985 the landmark exhibition *The Fine Line: Drawing with Silver in America,* curated by Bruce Weber, opened at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, FL. Drawings by forty American artists of the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries were gathered together, and the show toured to three other venues (Pensacola Museum of Art, Pensacola, FL, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR and Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA). The works were primarily figurative, but there was also a study for an abstract sculpture by John Storrs, along with a few abstract drawings by Michiko Itatani and myself. I would be reluctant to attempt an explanation for the resurgence of interest in an ancient drawing technique at this particular moment in American art history, but there can be no doubt that the Norton show was an essential catalyst. Numerous museum and university gallery shows followed in its wake along with solo and group exhibitions in commercial galleries.' In 1985 I knew of less than twenty-five artists working in metalpoint, but that number has now grown to several hundred including artists from other countries. Even on the social networking site, Facebook, there are currently two "groups" of artists devoted to the medium.

It is said that the use of metalpoint as a writing tool for keeping records can be traced back to ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. By the Middle Ages (476-1450) scribes and illuminators were using it for spacing guides, note-taking, ruling manuscript pages, marginal sketches, and underdrawings, as well as for ornamentation and illustration. It is even possible that Giotto drew in silverpoint. But it

is the Renaissance (1400-1600) that has long been associated with the flowering of drawing as an important art form, and silverpoint reached its zenith with such artists as Da Vinci, Bellini, Botticelli, Durer, and Cranach. It still remained an important tool for record keeping and note-taking, and merchants continued to use it in the fifteenth century. But in the early part of the sixteenth century many artists began to abandon it, as paper, red chalk, and graphite became more available. Still, there were artists who continued with the technique well into the seventeenth century; Rembrandt, for example, made silverpoint landscape drawings, as well as a famous portrait of his wife Saskia in 1633 shortly after they were married- an exquisite work of art with its warm brown tones and fine lines.

The last revival before the twentieth century took place in nineteenth-century England, as the Pre-Raphaelites experimented with silverpoint as part of their general study of Renaissance techniques. Beginning in the 1890s, one could buy a silverpoint kit from Winsor and Newton in England containing a pad of prepared paper and a stylus, but after the First World War, it was discontinued. It is only in the last several years, with the advent of the Internet, that a few website businesses have begun to sell silverpoint materials, and a kit is now available from NaturalPigments.com based in California.[2]

Undoubtedly sparked by British efforts in the medium, American interest dates from the mid-1890s. Thomas Dewing's (1851-1938) exhibitions inspired many artists, particularly those in Boston such as Joseph DeCamp (1858-1923), Philip Leslie Hale (1865-1931), William McGregor Paxton (1869-1941) and Margaret Foster Richardson (1881-1954). In the New York area, artists like Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), John Graham (1881-1961), Joseph Stella (1877-1946), and Paul Cadmus (1902-1999) also worked in silverpoint. There seems to have been something of a network, and artists tended to inspire each other so that August Mosca began to make silverpoint drawings while he was Stella's assistant between 1938 and 1946. But by and large, interest in the medium developed around artists who taught it in a variety of art schools. Among the leaders, one would have to count Paula Gerard who taught Michiko Itatani and Flora Langlois during her years at the Art Institute of Chicago (1962-1975), and the Layton School of Art (Milwaukee, WI, 1945-1962), James S. Watrous who taught John Wilde and numerous others at the University of Wisconsin (1930-1976), and Roger Anliker at Carnegie Mellon University (in the 1960's) and later at Tyler School of Art. In 1957 Watrous published *The Craft of Old-Master Drawings,* an important book that contains detailed technical information. But in the last ten to twenty years I believe it is primarily museum and gallery shows (along with studio visits) that have led to the current flowering of the medium. Artists have been captivated by the luminosity, the extremely fine and precise lines and the almost iridescent surface, so different from a pencil or ink line. As Margaret Mathews-Berenson puts it in a recent essay,

> At a time when art is being redefined by new and rapidly changing digital tools and technology that often deny the man-made mark, silverpoint offers artists a connection with a potent creative tradition. The fine delicate lines inevitably reveal the artist's hand: an affirmation of human presence. ..... A drawing medium made for quiet meditation, silverpoint remains a venerable instrument of intimate communication for artists today and provides welcome distraction from the dizzying pace of our technocentric world for artists and viewers alike.[3]

In brief, silverpoint requires a piece of silver wire usually placed in a simple stylus (a pin vise or mechanical pencil holder); as it is drawn across a prepared surface, a mark is created by tiny particles of metal that are left behind. Usually a grayish color, it tarnishes to a warm brown over time. In the Renaissance, artists fashioned their tools out of thick rods of metal that were often carved with elaborate and ornate designs. To allow for two different kinds of marks, these tools had points at either end, one sharpened to a fine point and the other somewhat blunt and wider. Nowadays, most artists sharpen their tools on a sandstone or sharpening stone or with a piece of sandpaper. Artists have generally preferred sterling silver but almost any metal can be used, including gold, copper, brass, bronze, aluminum, tin, lead, pewter, steel, iron and platinum. Unfortunately, the words "silverpoint" and "metalpoint" are often interchanged, but to avoid confusion, "metalpoint" should refer to drawings that use a variety of metals while "silverpoint" should be reserved for silver.

In the Renaissance, working in metalpoint was a very labor-intensive process. Although he may not be reliable, Cennino d'Andrea Cennini, in *II Libra dell' Arte (The Craftsman's Handbook)*, describes how a ground, made from ground bones (found under the dining room table), combined with animal skin glue, white lead and saliva or oils required at least nine coats before beginning a drawing.[4] Today we have a plentiful supply of commercially prepared gessos and paints; Chinese white watercolor paint, Shiva Casein, polymer or acrylic gesso and even ordinary house paint all work well as grounds and only need a few coats. Golden Artist Colors, Inc. has recently produced a water-based ground especially made for silverpoint, and numerous commercial papers with clay-coated surfaces are also available, most of them printing papers, originally designed for other purposes. But in spite of these conveniences, there are many contemporary artists who continue to prepare their grounds with traditional gesso. Roger Anliker, for example, required his students at Carnegie Mellon University to spend a month sanding the surface between coats in order to make a perfect ground; it is hardly surprising that a limited number of artists in his class continued in the medium. In any case, a minimum of four coats is needed for a traditional ground or an acrylic gesso (the consistency of homogenized milk). Colored grounds can be obtained by adding pigment to gesso or by using paint, but nothing prevents an artist from also experimenting with private techniques, and one thinks of the watercolor drops that Paula Gerard floated onto her wet casein grounds which made abstract patterns that were the basis of her drawings.

The magic of silverpoint and metalpoint drawing lies in the color changes that the initial grayish line undergoes through time. Silver generally turns a warm brown, copper and brass mutate into a yellowish-green. On the other hand, aluminum, gold, platinum and pewter tend to maintain their original color. This tarnishing effect is different on every kind of prepared surface or paper. Since the oxidation is caused by heat and humidity, a winter drawing is different from a summer drawing. In the winter it takes much longer for a line to change color, and identical drawings that make use of identical metals, grounds and papers will have different patinas on the surface if they were made at different times of the year. Although it is customary to focus on the qualities of the metalpoint line, it must not be thought that a drawing is restricted to effects of pure linearity. Dark and light tones can be obtained by slowly building up the lines. And pressing lightly or heavily can also change the darkness of a line though one has to be careful not to break the surface of the ground. On the other hand, Joseph Stella often drew with such vigor on his very free ground that he deliberately broke the surface, thereby creating a forceful effect in some of his bold self-portraits. But he could also be precise and refined, especially when he combined silverpoint with colored pencil in his flower drawings.

Because it is very difficult to erase a metalpoint mark it is generally thought that one must be a master draftsman to use the medium, but in fact, artists have found ways of removing marks by sanding the surface or by the careful manipulation of an eraser. However it is generally not possible to draw over a silverpoint line that has been removed since the ground is damaged and will not accept the metal. But even this damage can become an artistic opportunity. Morgan O'Hara (born 1941), in recent experiments, uses eraser marks to create a circle that intersects with lines that radiate outwards from a central point, leaving a ghostly presence that seems to lurk within the drawing. Joseph Nicoletti (born 1948) has adapted another highly unusual technique; by repeatedly layering very thin coats of gesso on top of a drawing as it progresses, he arrives at an interesting multiple image, and the lines under the gesso never tarnish.

For most of the twentieth century silverpoint art was dominated by figuration. The subject matter consisted primarily of portraits, figures, landscapes and still lives, along with details of plants and flowers. But many of these artists were aware of the problem presented by the shadow of the Renaissance masters. They understood that they needed an extraordinary command of the medium but they also did not wish to be caught emulating the composition and the techniques of a Renaissance drawing.

With Leo Dee (1931-2004) a single object such as a lemon or a part of an envelope is transformed into an exquisite meditative landscape. So refined is his technique that it can be very difficult to discern the mark-making process even with a magnifying glass.

Dennis James Martin (1956-2001) managed to give his 24-karat goldpoint and platinum drawings of reclining nudes a voluptuous and almost pornographic softness. Executed on vellum, these drawings have a blurry quality that resembles an old movie still. Harvey Dinnerstein (born 1928) is certainly one of the most important realists; his work ranges from powerful looking plants to unconventional models (including pregnant women), usually drawn from his community. Several drawings pay special attention to the hair of his models (either facial or head), an unusual focus obviously suggested by the fineness of the silverpoint line.

Marjorie Williams-Smith (born 1953) has restricted her subject matter to flowers, particularly roses. She often draws the flower alone, placed on a pure white ground that has been carefully polished. At times, the exquisite investigation of a part of a flower, as in the work entitled *Close Inspection* (Fig.1), encourages the viewer to marvel at a detail while seemingly caught up in an interior world. The stem appears to disappear into the void, and one begins to sense a strong presence far beyond the intimate scale of the drawing.

Some of the most imaginative image-based works are by artists dealing with surrealist or symbolist themes. One of the masters was John Wilde (1919-2005) who favored a style drenched in fantasy and imagination, sometimes described as "magic realism." The process of transformation fascinated Wilde and his human figures frequently morph into birds and other forms (Fig. 2). In 1982-1984 he made an enormous drawing (38x91in.) entitled *The Great Autobiographical Silverpoint Drawing,* an attempt to recount a part of his life by means of a crowd of symbols and figures, overshadowed by a large tree. Lori Field (born 1955) is another artist who explores personal myths and fantasies. Drawing on a freely painted ground, she is partial to doll-like figures that seem to float in a parallel universe often with animal heads or masks instead of faces. In *Bête Noire,* two figures, one with a cat mask and the other with birds instead of hair, suggest a scene from a strange Victorian drama (Fig. 3). Viewing Field's work is like falling down the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland.*

One of the most unusual developments in contemporary silverpoint drawing has been the emergence of artists who are devoted to abstraction as well as conceptual and minimal art. One of the first to develop abstraction in metalpoint was the Chicago artist Paula Gerard (1907-1991), who studied as a young woman in Italy. She first encountered silverpoint while living in Paris, but it wasn't until she returned to the United States in the 1940s that she began to devote herself almost exclusively to the medium. At first her work was figurative but gradually she began to draw silver and goldpoint lines over her watercolor abstractions. In *Currents,* Gerard uses linear patterns and tone to build up a biomorphic world where one might glimpse waves or sea creatures that inhabit the bottom of the ocean. She is one of the few contemporary artists who also worked with metalpoint on parchment and in one of her best known works, *Vortex,* swirls of tone create a sensual vision not unlike how I imagine riptides or whirlpools (Fig. 4).

Cynthia Lin (born 1964) creates small drawings that seem abstract, but are actually (according to the artist) *trompe l'oeil* portraits of dust and hair. Frequently the drawings are placed flat on a specially designed shelf covered by Plexiglas; they play with the confusion between reality and imagination (Fig. 5). Because of the special circumstances, the silverpoint line in these works is delicate, fine and sometimes barely visible. Marietta Hoferer (born 1974) and Michelle Grabner (born 1962) have both been working almost exclusively on black grounds. Hoferer, known for her minimalist, process-oriented, tape and pencil drawings, only began silverpoint quite recently. As if in a meditative state she draws grids of fine lines on black Plike paper (Fig. 6). The works are often quite large (28x28in.) and even though each line is drawn against a straight edge, the hand of the artist is still evident and slight deviations and accidents are an essential part of the process. In the end these subtle drawings seem like a glittering tapestry of lines of varying widths and tones. In Grabner's black drawings on circular canvases or papers, silverpoint lines radiate from the center to give an illusion of deep space. But in a recent show at Minus Space Gallery in New York, there were more than eighteen works on *rectangular* paper and in this instance, Grabner drew vertical lines from left to right, but since she refused to pause to sharpen the tool, they gradually became slightly wider and less precise in each subsequent drawing.

Several artists have pushed metalpoint off the surface of paper

onto the wall. Linda Hutchins (born 1957), based in Portland, OR, uses her grandmother's silver spoon to make large wall drawings (9' x 12'). She tells the story of her frequent lectures on silverpoint over the years, and how, after hearing herself explain how easy it is to make a mark on wall paint, she decided one day to try it herself. In *Lineal Silver (pool)* (Fig. 7) installed at the Tacoma Art Museum, Hutchins draws with her spoon to create a network of lines that swirl and undulate across the wall. Natalie Loveless (born 1971) uses the medium in context-based performances. In an early work entitled *CoOperation,* 2004, she moved in to the gallery space for five days and communicated with friends and strangers through email. She invited her participants to tell her stories of mourning and memory from which she drew a complex map on the wall, marking their location around the world. For a recent installation at the Kentler International Drawing Space in 2009 she invited friends to determine how she should behave with the wall, whether to throw things at it, kiss it, et cetera. After performing these actions, Loveless then used a stylus to draw lines around each one and to connect them. Surprisingly, the final result was a very subtle image, only visible at very close range. When asked why she preferred silverpoint to graphite, for example, Lovelace mentioned many of the same qualities that appeal to other artists in the medium, the "permanence" of a mark that can't be easily erased, the "resonance" of a "precious meta!," the fact that it tarnishes over time (although she admits that this is the "softest" reason for her preference since she doesn't work densely or on permanent surfaces) and finally, of course, the link to the Italian Renaissance.

One of the most unusual artists currently working in metalpoint is Carol Prusa (born 1956), based in the Miami area. Prusa became interested in silverpoint after a trip to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence in 2002. Self-taught, she works on three-dimensional plastic domes, some as large as sixty inches in diameter that generally hang on the wall. Using silverpoint, silver leaf, acrylic, and fiber optics, she covers her domes with intricate drawings of cosmic shapes, plant-like forms, and designs (Fig. 8). Many recent domes have also included a small video imbedded in the center of the dome. As Bernadette Ryrnes wrote, "One can recognize Prusa's attraction to science in her microcosmic, domed universes. Her silverpoint lines flower

and coil into infinite swirls and eddies on the surface of miniature, spherical planets. Prusa embraces the infinite in the tattooed lacework of her domes.[us]

For more than thirty-five years I have been part of the revival of the technique of silverpoint drawing in America. As I have suggested, most contemporary artists who draw with a metal stylus continue the tradition of Leonardo and Dürer by using the soft, delicate line for figurative imagery. My work, on the other hand, is resolutely abstract, and my handling of the technique has been very varied. In works from the 1970s I tore and burned paper, the smoke provided a free and dramatic contrast to the precise linearity of silverpoint. In works from the 1980s I combined silverpoint with flat expanses of acrylic paint or gold leaf. At times I have used a wide variety of metals to create subtle shifts of tone and color. Finally, in 1996, I began what many think of as my signature works, as I abandoned the stylus altogether in favor of wide metal bands that achieve a shimmering atmosphere reminiscent of the luminous transparency of watercolor as in *Strata* #227 (Fig. 9).

Memories of light have been a recurrent source for recent work, and travels to Arizona and New Mexico suggested some of the colors and shapes in my *Afterimage Series.* Other works responded to the light on the Hudson River as I saw it from my studio on the West Side of Manhattan. More recently, the atmosphere has become subtler; no event (such as a horizon line) is allowed to become the focus. Instead, the eye is invited to wander across the surface, comparing and contrasting. It seemed to me that a sense of the passage of time had become central to these works. I work on both paper and on wood panels; many of these panels are carefully beveled so that the imagery seems to float off the wall. In 2010, while on a residency at Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, I returned to the stylus and began using bronze and copper pads. Margaret Mathews Berenson accurately captured my intention when she wrote that:

> Schwalb resolutely explores new tools and techniques for greater richness of surface and more varied shifts in light and shadow. She recently discovered soft bronze pads akin to Brillo pads that she now employs in such works as *Madrigal* #2 *and* #3 to create luminous horizontal bands of silver

gray, which evoke the whispery mists or atmospheric effects of dawn.[6]

Silverpoint and metalpoint drawing continues to be a medium for quiet, refined, and meditative work, but as my essay has shown, contemporary artists have been radically pushing the boundaries of this time-honored technique. Whether it is combined with other media, used for marking a wall, or for creating large oversized works, silverpoint can no longer be primarily regarded as an ancient technique tied to a conservative sensibility.

End Notes

I want to thank Dorothea Burns for her invaluable advice and my husband, Martin Boykan, for reading and editing the article. My appreciation to all the artists—Carol Prusa, Linda Hutchins, Marietta Hoferer, Cynthia Lin, Lori Field, Marjorie Williams-Smith—and the Arkansas Art Center who graciously agreed to lend their images for the article.

[1] Since *The Fine Line* there have been three other major museum shows of contemporary silverpoint drawing: *Silverpoint Etcetera: Contemporary American Metalpoint Drawings* curated by Charles Schmidt which toured to several museums beginning in 1992, *The Luster of Silver: Contemporary Metalpoint Drawings* curated by Holly Koons McCullough at the Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, GA in 2006 and *The Luster of Silver: Contemporary Metalpoint Drawings* curated by the artists Koo Schadler and Jeannine Cook at the Evansville Museum of Arts, History & Science, Evansville, Indiana in 2009. Cook and Schadler used the original Telfair show as the source for the Evansville show. In addition there have been numerous solo and group shows of metalpoint and silverpoint drawings in commercial galleries plus two recent shows in non-profit venues: *Reinventing Silverpoint; An Ancient Technique for the 21st Century* at the Kentler International Drawing Space, Brooklyn, NY in 2009 curated by Margaret Mathews-Berenson and Susan Schwalb and *Luminous Line: Contemporary Drawing in Metalpoint* curated by Margaret Mathews-Berenson at Scripps College, Claremont, CA in 2010.

[2] "This Silverpoint Drawing Gift Set has everything needed for silverpoint (and metalpoint) drawing. The kit includes 2 mm and 0.9 mm metal holders (styli), two fine silverpoints (99.9% pure silver), two copper points, two nickel-silver points (a total of six metalpoints), a copper wool pad, Golden Silverpoint / Drawing Ground, Maped Epure vinyl eraser and step-by-step instructions" all in a wooden case.
http://www.naturalpigments.com/silverpoint-drawing-gift-set.html

[3] Margaret Mathews Berenson, *Reinventing Silverpoint: An Ancient Technique for the 21st Century* (Brooklyn, NY, brochure for the Kentler International Drawing Space, 2009).

[4] The distinguished scholar and conservator Dorothea Burns notes in email correspondence that all of the Italian Renaissance drawings with prepared drawings that she has seen are covered with a dilute material, obviously applied by brush in one layer.

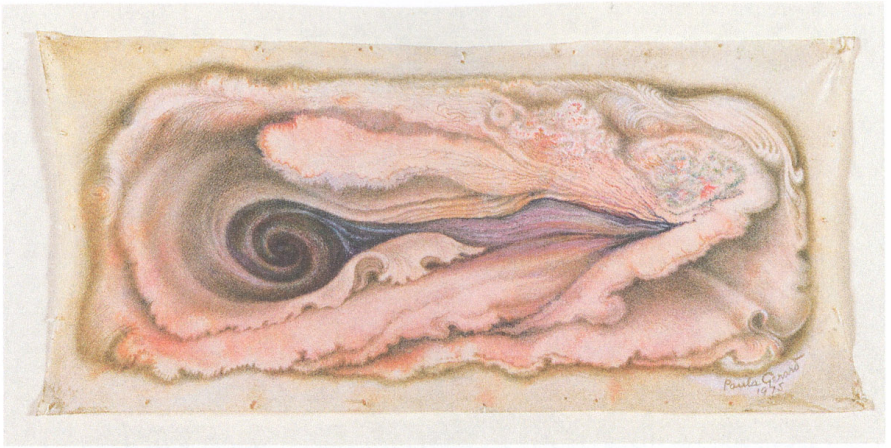
[5] Bernadette Ryrnes, *Silver: Points of Departure* (Nashville, Tennessee, Nashville Arts Magazine, 2011), p. 31.

[6] Margaret Mathews Berenson, *Luminous Line: Contemporary Drawing in Metalpoint*, (Claremont, CA, Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College, 2010), p. 13.

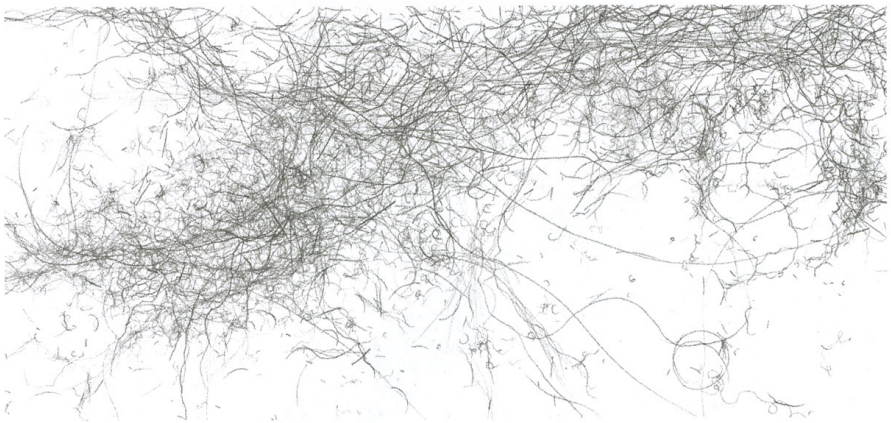
10.1. Marjorie Williams-Smith (American: Washington D.C, 1953), *Close Inspection*, 2002, silverpoint on clay–coated Video Media paper, 10" x 8", collection of Susan Schwalb.

10.2. John Wilde (American: Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1919 - 2006), *Lady-Bird Series #9 (Emily Egret)*, 1982, silverpoint on paper, 8" x 10 1/4", Arkansas Arts Center Foundation Collection, Tabriz Fund purchase, 1983.024.002.

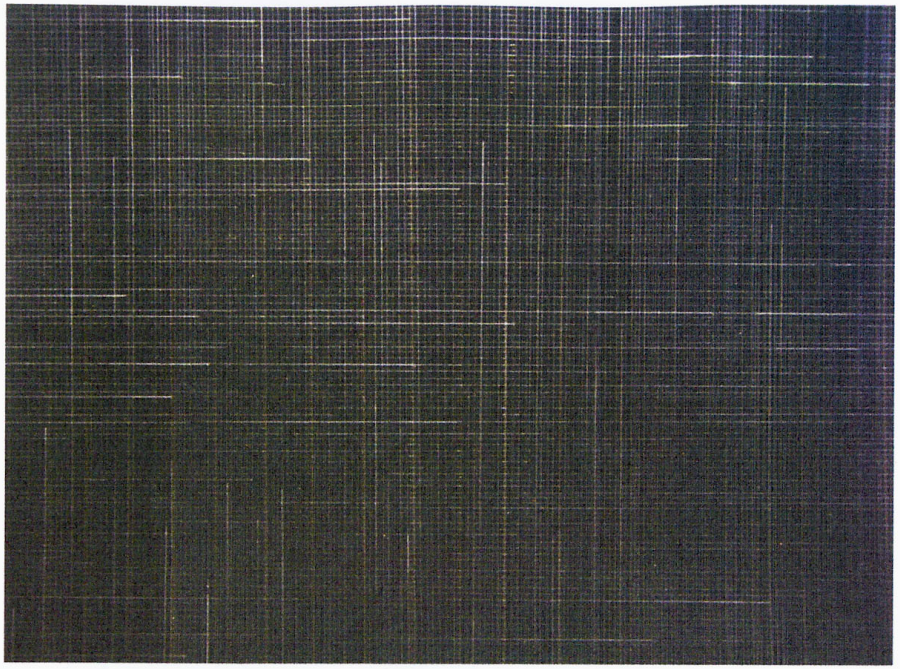
10.3. Lori Field (American: New York, NY, 1955), *Bête Noire*, 2011, silverpoint on panel, 20" x 16", collection of the artist.



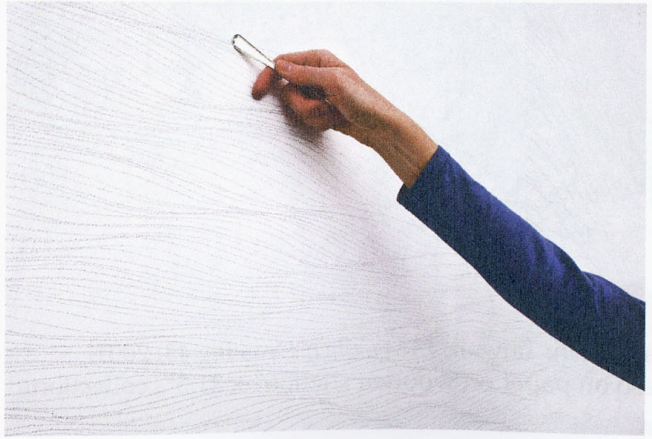
10.4. Paula Gerard (American: Brighton, England, 1907 - 1991), *Vortex*, 1975, silverpoint, goldpoint, watercolor on casein-coated parchment, 4" x 8", Arkansas Arts Center Foundation Collection purchase, 1985.065.



10.5. Cynthia Lin (American: Taiwan, 1964), *Shelf Drawing #3*, 2001 (detail), silver on gesso on paper on wooden shelf, 6" x 21.5", collection of the artist.



10.6. Marietta Hoferer (American: Hausach, Germany, 1962), *March 3, 2011*, 2011 (detail), metalpoint and graphite on black Pilke paper, 14″ x14″, collection of the artist.



10.7. Linda Hutchins (American), Study for *Lineal Silver (Pool)*, silver spoon on wall, 9′ x 12′, collection of the artist.

10.8. Carol Prusa, (American: Chicago, IL, 1956), *Portal (Einstein-Rosen)*, 2011 (detail), silverpoint, graphite, titanium white pigment with acrylic binder on acrylic hemisphere and fiber optics, 50″ x 50″ x 10″. Collection of Berenice Steinbaum, Miami, FL.

10.9. Susan Schwalb (American, New York, NY, 1944), *Strata #227*, 1998, silver/copper/aluminumpoint on clay-coated paper, 9″ x 9″, private collection.