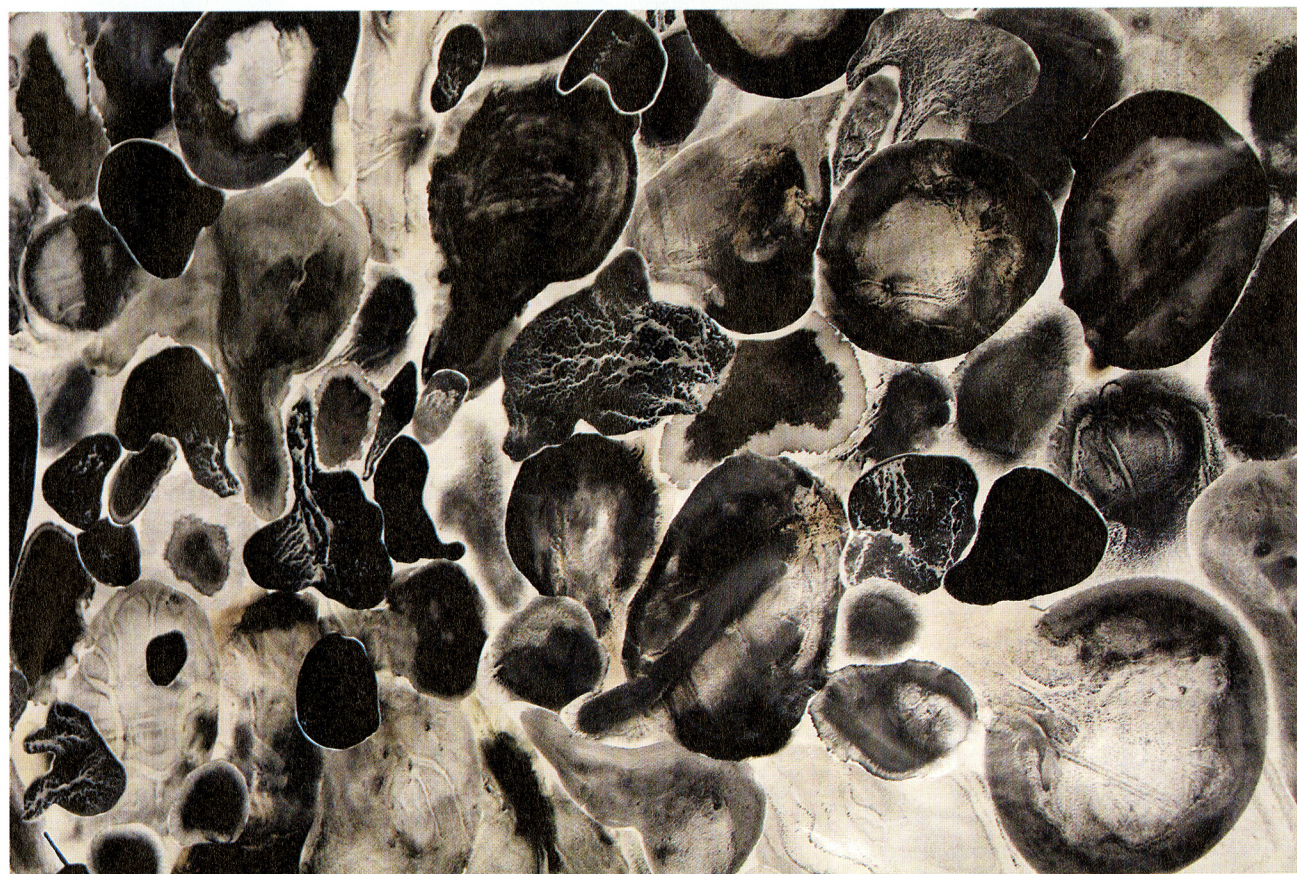


Drawing on Their Imagination

APPROACHING THE MAKING OF WORKS ON PAPER FROM DIFFERENT STARTING POINTS, A GROUP OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS DEMONSTRATES HOW VERSATILE THEIR FAVORITE MEDIUM CAN BE. BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

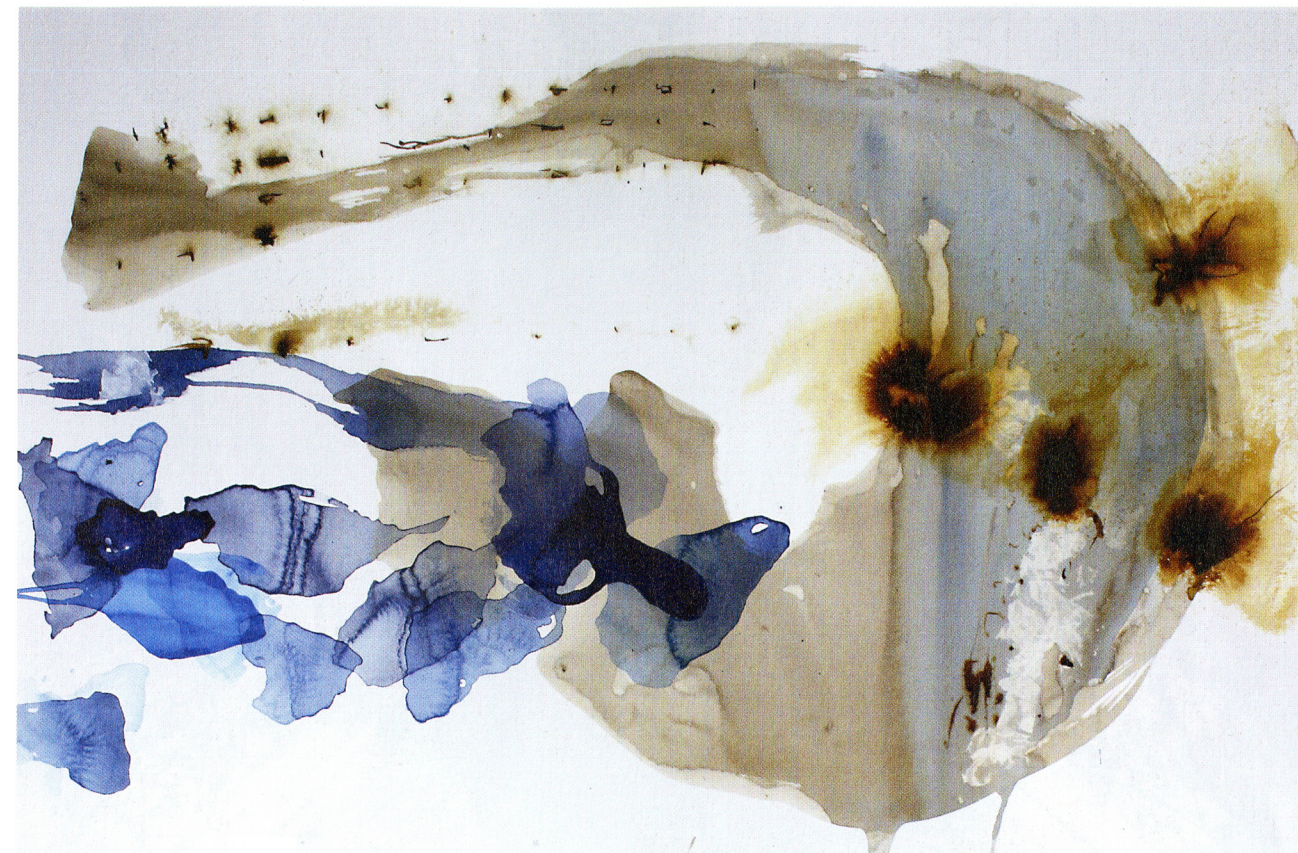


Mark Fox, *Shallow Field Sluggo (Yellow Hue)*, 2013, oil on paper with archival tape, 82.5 x 73 inches.

WHAT DOES IT mean anymore for a work of art to be a drawing? That question has been kicking around for a long time in discussions of modern and contemporary art. Responses to it today are as diverse as the definition of art itself has become. In the catalogue for “Drawing Now,” a 1976 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curator Bernice Rose noted that even in the late 20th century, the art genre known as drawing was still being defined according to certain 17th-century parameters.

However, when that landmark museum show took place, modern and contemporary artists had already transformed drawing into something more than merely a support medium for the more “serious” or enduring endeavors of creating paintings or sculptures. In fact, even in the earliest phases of modern art’s development more than a century ago, the makers of drawings had begun to investigate the nature, purposes, and materials of the medium itself. In the eyes and inventive hands of some artists, drawing long ago had become its own subject.

Some of that spirit of self-investigation and unbridled experimentation pulses through the works of a group of contemporary artists that includes Nancy Blum, William Bradley, Merrilee Challiss, Mark Fox, Pedro Inoue, and Ana Zanic. In terms of their appearance, the techniques and materials that are used to produce them, and the stylistic character and

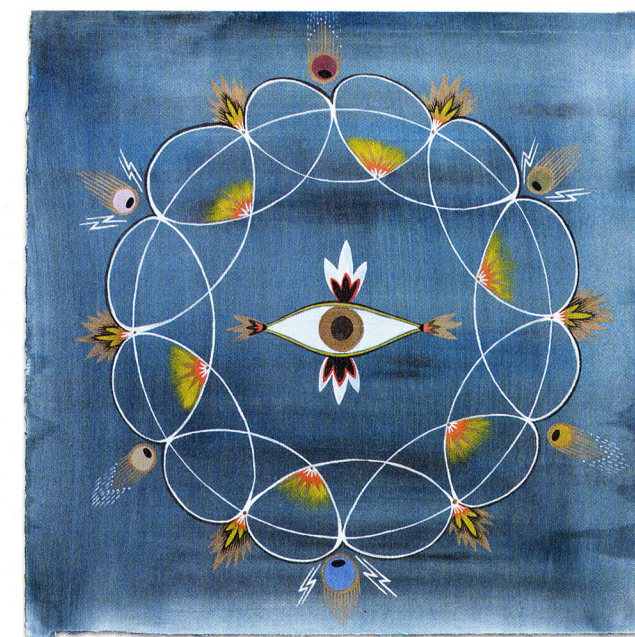


From top: Ana Zanic, *Origin (W-2013-8-3)*, 2013, watercolor and ink on Arches board, 20 x 30 inches; Merrilee Challiss, *Cycle of Birth and Decay*, 2013-14, gouache and ink on paper, 15 x 15 inches.

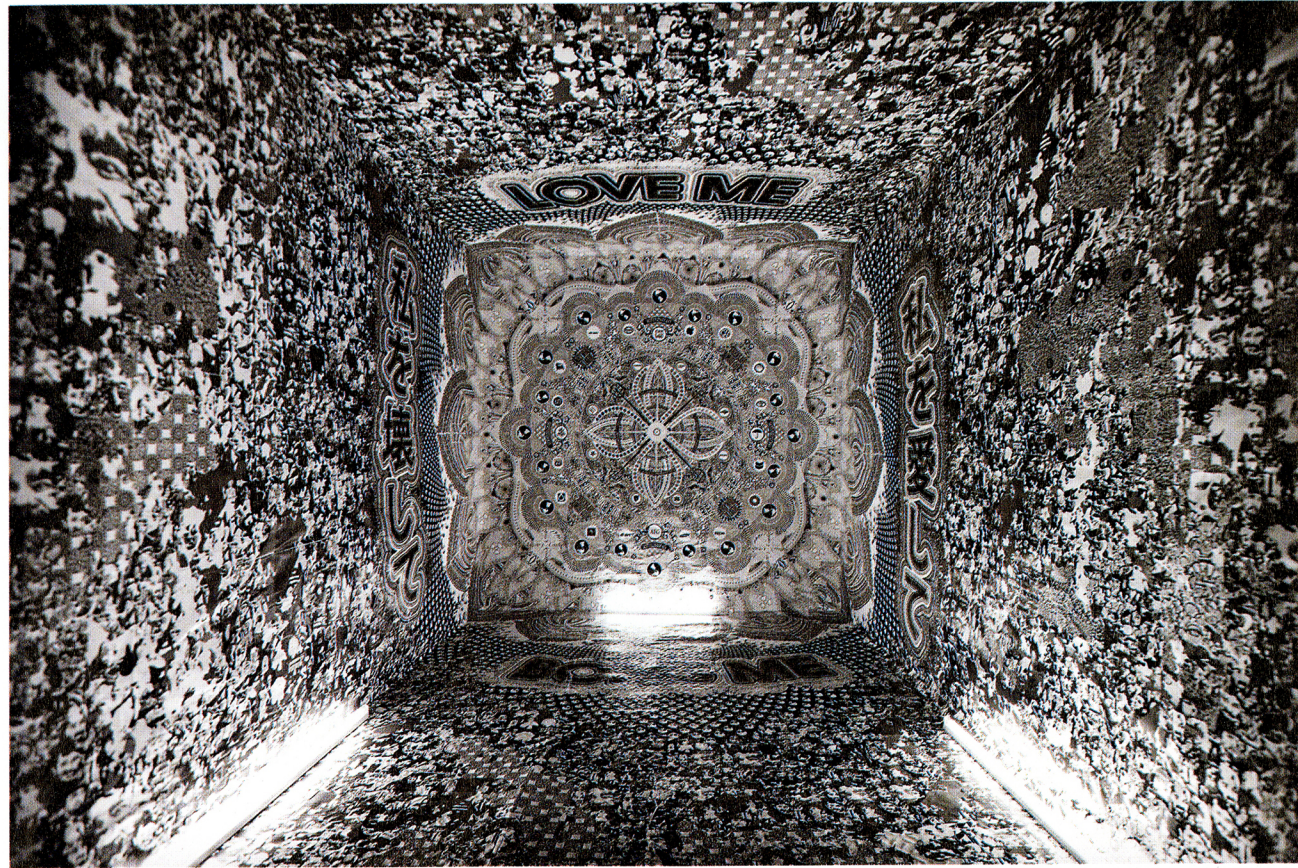
thematic concerns that distinguish them, the works each of these artists creates could not be more different. Still, what they and their makers have in common is a sense of adventure about exploring the limits of what a drawing can be. Draftsmanship in different forms helps shape all of their works, which tend to be made of paper even if they are not always so obviously, familiarly presented on paper.

With an academic background in psychology and women’s studies and experience in the making of ceramic sculptures, the Brooklyn-based artist Nancy Blum’s diverse body of work has included wall-mounted objects, manhole covers and public-art projects in such cities as Minneapolis and Philadelphia. For San Francisco General Hospital, she created art-glass windows measuring some 100 feet long, whose designs depict native, northern-California flowers that have been used for medicinal purposes. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that Blum’s drawings of flowers in exuberant full bloom, made with pencil, colored pencils, ink, and gouache on large sheets of paper, are superbly crafted. They also exude a sense of radiant self-awareness—of their own lushness and fecundity—that can attract a viewer like an alluring aroma.

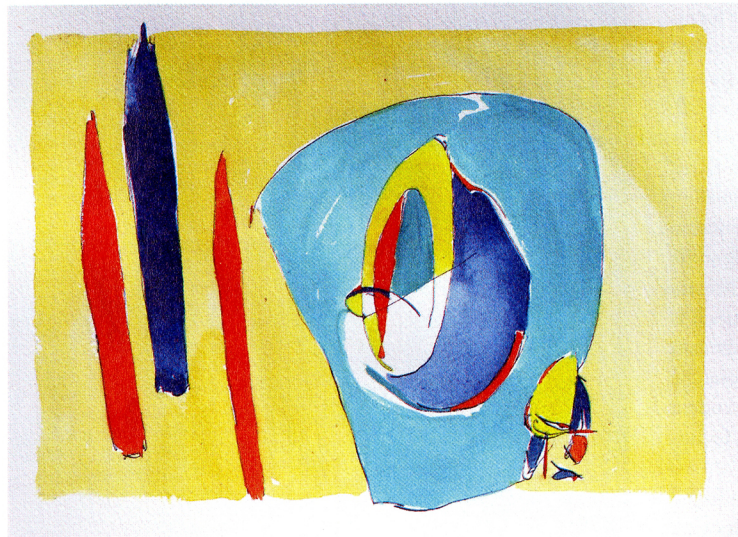
Blum’s image-making process is complex. Some time ago, a friend made her a large version of a Spirograph, the popular, plastic drawing



KATHRYN MARKEL FINE ARTS, NEW YORK; ADAMS AND OLLMAN, PORTLAND, OR



Pedro Inoue, *Love Me, Bomb Me*, printout on paper of digitally created collage, mounted on metal wall, variable dimensions; William Bradley, *Bells and Whistles*, 2014, ink and watercolor on paper.



toy that dates back to the mid-1960s, in which a pen point placed in the hole of a gearwheel that rotates within a circular-template frame creates curved geometric patterns known as hypotrochoids and epitrochoids. Blum uses this tool to emboss large sheets of paper. Then, she says, “I spontaneously draw plum blossoms on the paper with a black brush pen in the style of classical Chinese or Japanese painting. At this point, I draw my main composition of flowers, making reference to 16th- and 17th-century botanical illustrations. I draw them directly onto the paper in pencil, developing the foreground relationships between the various flowers as I go. I outline these flowers in black ink and then build them up with layers of colored pencil to achieve an almost painterly depth.”

Elegant and sumptuous, Blum’s flowers bring to mind the stylized forms of Art Nouveau designs, with their sensuous outlines and contours. Her pictures’ teasing illusion of depth in two-dimensional pictorial space might not be an accident. Blum, who has titled one series of drawings “Wonderland,” says that, like Alice, “There have been moments in my life when I’ve felt that I’ve gone down the rabbit hole.” At such times, she explains, she actually has perceived other dimensions. She adds, “I like my work to reflect the idea that we are not always privy to other



Nancy Blum, *Interwoven*, 2014, ink, colored pencil, gouache and graphite on paper, 49 x 117 inches; Mark Fox, *If To Be Proscenia*, 2012, colored pencil on paper with linen tape and metal pins, 30 x 40 inches.

worlds, but they are there—and richer than we know.”

At first glance, the young British artist William Bradley’s abstract oil-on-canvas tableaux, which in recent years have grown larger in scale as the artist has spent time in some spacious studios that have allowed him to spread out, seem to have been born of the same kind of spontaneous energy that gave classic Abstract Expressionist painting its emotive-explosive oomph. In fact, though, as they subtly allude to one aspect of abstract art-making here or unabashedly quote another of its well-known vocabulary of gestures there, Bradley’s brightly colored images are only unwittingly postmodernist. Still, they *are* a kind of abstract art about abstract art.

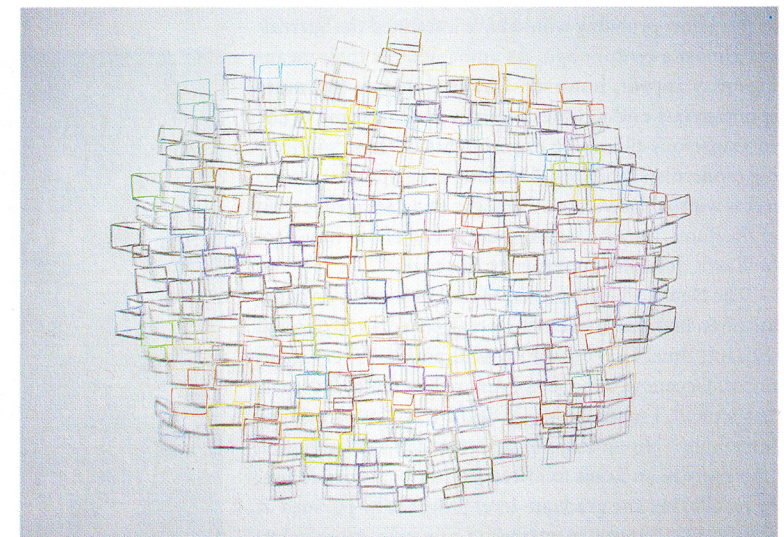
They call attention to the form and making of abstract paintings, but Bradley, who is based in London and in Yorkshire, in northern England, does not put himself or his muses through a pomo theory mill in order to arrive at his vibrant results. Instead, he begins by making abstract pictures with ink and gouache on small sheets of paper. He computer-scans them and then, using image-manipulating software, fine-tunes his scanned images’ colors or lines, not so much in pursuit of better looks or forms but rather as a way of gaining an understanding of the communicative impact his palettes and shapes might have when played large, on canvas.

“I suppose I make it hard on myself,” Bradley says, “but my works on paper are not merely studies for my paintings. They have lives of their own, and some never even evolve into paintings.” Often Bradley bases his irregular forms on those of structures in the real world. He transforms them by the time they reach his art-making surfaces, but their black outlines and sometimes buoyant character within his compositions can trace their roots to

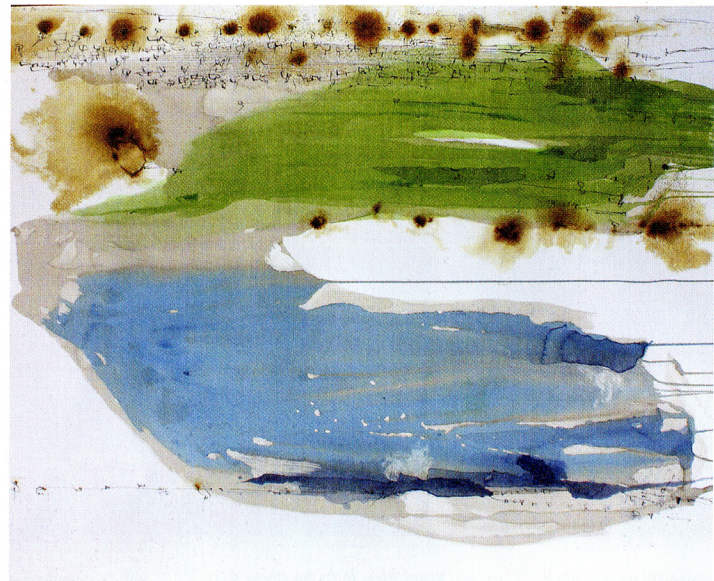
Arshile Gorky’s rhythmic patchworks of color blobs or to the elemental mark-making that so enthralled certain American Surrealist painters in the period just before the eruption of full-bodied Abstract Expressionism.

Based in Birmingham, Ala., Merrilee Challiss has made sculptural objects and installation works; her interests have included Victorian-era crafts, Voodoo and folk art. She says, “I am drawn to the liminal, to things that are in-between, toggling between two states or in a state of transition or becoming.” That sense of something immanent, mixed with an air of mystery and the free-floating psychic energy of dreams are as much a part of Challiss’ art-making kit as the simple materials—ink and gouache on paper—she uses to create her unusual images.

In them, watchful eyes—are they more inquisitive than cau-



THE CONTAINER, TOKYO. PHOTO BY JAMES BINGHAM. COURTESY OF WILLIAM BRADLEY. RICCO/MARESCA, NEW YORK. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ROBERT MILLER GALLERY, NEW YORK.



Ana Zanic, *Trail to Arcadia (W-2013-9-8)*, 2013, watercolor and ink on Arches board, 32 x 40 inches; Pedro Inoue, detail of digitally created collage, *Love Me, Bomb Me*, printout on paper, mounted on metal wall.

edly considered the subject of “why artists do what they do.”

After graduating, back in Ohio, Fox went through a period of making abstract paintings. He founded a small theater company whose original productions mixed different aspects of Eastern and Western puppetry, including Japanese *bunraku* and European marionettes. Later Fox moved to New York, where, he says, “I became interested in the authenticity of the stuff around me.” He began making art out of what most people, never mind most artists, would normally throw away. “I started to collect ink spills on papers in my studio, which I would cut out and eventually shape into three-dimensional sculptural objects.”

Fox collected everyday words and phrases, too, which he drew on paper, carefully cut out, and assembled into wall-mounted drawing-objects. One of his most voluminous drawing-sculpture works, *If to Be Proscenia*, from 2012, is also one of his most ephemeral-feeling creations. Consisting of hundreds of paper rectangles, each one hand-colored, cut out and pinned to a wall, it creates gentle shadows on that background surface whose lines become integral components

of the piece’s “physical” structure—and very subtly bring to mind the interest in shadow puppets and fascination with the drama in the humblest objects or materials that have richly informed Fox’s art.

Based in São Paulo, the Brazilian Pedro Inoue is a graphic designer who serves as the creative director of *Adbusters*, a Canadian magazine that critiques political corruption, corporate greed and capitalism run amuck. As an artist, Inoue brings together his sense of awareness as a political, media, and cultural activist and a clever use of digital image-making techniques to produce works that are both richly satisfying to the eye and intellectually provocative.

In the past, Inoue, who has designed posters and books for a wide range of publishers, museums and other clients, has used his computer to create full-color, complex mandala drawings. Their precisely laid-out patterns consisted of the logos of some of the



tious?—abound, as do trees or feathery or wiry, plant-like forms. About her working method, the artist says, “I begin by layering watercolor or ink onto paper until forms begin to emerge. When they do and they announce their presence to me, I usually switch to gouache and block in areas, and continue layering and building more forms.” She compares this process, which she might repeat several times on the same sheet of paper, to “growing experimental cultures in a petri dish” in a science lab.

Challiss says that through her art she has attempted to develop a vocabulary of visual forms that are “psychically charged.” The results of this effort probably would have interested the Surrealists almost a century ago. As ambiguous as their meanings may appear, however, Challiss’ images feel more spontaneous and a bit less contrived than some of the subconscious-plumbing experiments of those pioneering modernists. She says, “Making art helps me come to terms with and navigate the fraught and damaged terrain of the human psyche, as we near the end of our time here on Earth. It is time to return to the caves.”

The New York-based artist Mark Fox’s works on paper are often unusual, meticulously crafted works of paper at the same time. The product of, as he puts it, “a very traditional, German-Catholic upbringing” in Ohio, Fox says, “As a child, I made drawings and I was always making something.” His undergraduate art studies at Washington University in St. Louis followed a traditional curriculum, he recalls, but the graduate-level program he pursued at Stanford University, in northern California, more point-

best-known global corporations and their brands. Last year, at The Container, a small art space in Tokyo, Inoue presented a stripped-down but no less visually powerful variation of this image-making technique. In a work titled *Love Me, Bomb Me* he used corporate and consumer-brand logos to create a black-and-white wallpaper work that covered the entire interior of the gallery (which is a replica of a half-size, metal shipping container).

Inoue says he used to print out his designs “in a very expensive way,” using full-color output methods and framing his high-quality prints under acrylic, on aluminum sheets. As in his Tokyo project, more recently he has experimented with inexpensive black-and-white printers, producing large designs in pieces, on average-size sheets of paper that must be taped or glued together before being hung up. There is a crudeness about this method that defies the precision that is normally associated with digital technology, but it appeals to Inoue’s aesthetic-political sensibility. The resulting appearance of one of his large-scale creations can be stunning, boldly and inventively expanding our sense of what the physical character and thematic purposes of a work on paper can be.

For nearly two decades, making pictures using watercolor on paper “has been my immense passion,” the artist Ana Zanic says. A graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, Croatia, where she earned a master’s degree in art education and painting, Zanic, who now lives in the suburbs of Chicago, is known for gestural, abstract works made with watercolor. Their broad, calligraphic strokes and sweeping passages of transparent color bring the flowing, liquid nature of her mark-making material vividly to mind, even as they give visible form to uncertain emotional or psychological currents that probably cannot be named. Perhaps if a gasp, a flut-



Nancy Blum, *Stream*, 2014, ink, colored pencil, gouache and graphite on paper, 45 x 36 inches; Merrilee Challiss, *Reverie of Inner Realms*, 2015, gouache on paper, 15 x 15 inches.



ter or one of those split-second moments in which we apprehend, with heightened awareness, the fleeting nature of time could be visualized, it would resemble one of Zanic’s wispy abstractions.

About her method of producing her art, Zanic explains, “My watercolors evolve in layers of washes, intermixed with dynamic lines, scribbles and marks of ink drawing. I start with a watercolor wash. I like to move the paper a lot, hold it flat on the table or floor, then lift it and let the paint drip and flow.” What she refers to as her drawing follows this initial laying-down of preliminary washes. Zanic likes to work on several different pictures at the same time, spreading her sheets of paper out on a table and on the floor. Although she tends to work in relatively small formats, recently she created three large-scale watercolor works for Chicago’s new Loews Hotel.

Of her art, Zanic observes, “I take cues from the spontaneous events that occur during the process. Something will grab my attention; it can be a specific shape or a subtle shade of a wash. I like to draw a parallel between watercolor and life: It is unpredictable, and there is only so much control you can have over the outcome. There is something very positive psychologically in this constant reminder that mistakes will happen.” She adds, wisely, “You can always move on.”

KATHRYN MARKEL FINE ARTS, NEW YORK; THE CONTAINER, TOKYO. PHOTO BY JAMES BINGHAM

RICCO/MARESCA, NEW YORK; ADAMS AND OLLMAN, PORTLAND, OR