

Blaisdell, Gus, *Constance DeJong: Metal*, University of New Mexico Press, 2003

I saw Constance DeJong's first show of metal paintings and drawings in 1980. I was immediately impressed, found the subsequent work equally distinguished, and was an ardent fan until DeJong went underground in 1997. Then she surfaced again this year with work so remarkably different that I was again struck. What had happened in the years she had not shown? She had transformed her work, even though presently she is again working in metal, and not just in terms of materials. There was a new, deepened center of attention and concentration. What follows is a conversation between the two of us that concentrates on her work out of the public eye from 1997 to the present. We talk a bit about zazen, what DeJong calls sitting practice. This is a practice like yoga that frees the mind for attention and concentration. Like yoga, the sitting practice is religiously neutral. DeJong is not a Buddhist artist and she does not make Buddhist art, whatever that might be. As the reader will see DeJong's awareness of what she does and why she does it is articulate and intense. Attention is a direction of the soul. The interviewer, happily, had little to do but listen, trying for the same attention as the artist displayed.

Gus Blaisdell

Constance DeJong:

What I have noticed about this extended period of art making is that it is like breathing, expanding and contracting. The dark gray steel expanding into colored aluminum and the aluminum contracting back to black. The Copper Drawings expanding into complexity and contracting back to simplicity. The Black Work expanding into high relief and back to extremely low relief The Light Drawings expanding into complexity and relief and contracting into the Rods with simple low relief.

Color continually shifted back and forth between each series, from the dark grey of steel to colored aluminum and then to black aluminum. Black in the sculptures gave way to color in the Sulfur Paintings, The Sulfur Paintings made way for the blackest Reliefs, which denied even a trace of raw (red) copper The Reliefs were followed by the grids, which contained and then relinquished color After the Reliefs came the muted color of the Light Drawings and from the Light Drawings evolved the black and white Rods. From the Rods came the most colorful Nitrate Paintings followed by the somber Four/Three monoliths.

I like the analogy to breathing. For one thing it precludes a hierarchy, a linear pattern, a beginning, a peak, and an ending. It assumes circularity. It suggests that all time and all stages are equivalent.

Gus Blaisdell: The idea of breath, contraction and expansion is very tied into zazen?

It's the cornerstone. At first I was interested in Zen as a field of knowledge and way of seeing. Then it became just meditation practice itself.

And what is that?

It's a practice that brings you into contact with what's real. It's not spiritual and definitely not religious. It's a way to see through your thoughts, which are non-stop fictions, to what is actually occurring.

Like art, it's a form illumination and self-realization. You're always moving forward. It's not creative in the same way art is out it is full of life in the way art is. It's real and substantial in the way art is. But it is more of a deepening into the perfection of the moment, of what already is. You don't need to create anything. So I quit making art for a while.

But you never really quit anything. Like a jazz musician who retires from public performing for a while to reshape his chops, you, as they say, went to the wood shed.

I started drawing, at first, as an extension of zazen. Since I was sitting and staring at nothing for long periods of time I decided to try meditating on an object, and I started with a leaf. After a while I started drawing it. I just started drawing what I saw, what was in front of me, without the intention of trying to make a good drawing. It's like when you are paying such close attention to something that you forget you are separate from that thing. What's great about not doing Art is that then art has a chance. When you try to do something else very earnestly and then the drawing happens... that is interesting.

Do you associate this with the calligraphic tradition from the great Zen ink painters? Dipping mop in ink and lashing out this beautiful drawing and then sitting down again.

My drawing process is slower. That's so perfectly spontaneous. Mine is steadier, more constant. It's like slow motion. It's a sequence in time instead of a burst of spontaneous inspiration

Like the breath drawings of Gloria Graham? Turning the paper ninety degrees until she reached the edge?

Yes, it's a time sequence, a slower speed. But where her vision was within her body I was making relationship with the external world, a specific object. But in a sense it was the same because if you are really with one thing, you are with everything, including yourself and your breath.

Of the drawings we are looking at, the second leaf is the most sensual.

That's because it's restrained. It's quiet, but also charged.

It's sort of swelling towards you, it's opening out.

And the roses. I always draw them when they are closed, before they open up, the light hits the bud, shapes the form. It's just a good form. I would never draw a rose that is opened. When it opens up it's not as interesting-it's too exposed, there's nothing hidden.

It is a singular, particular object that draws you in?

Yes. Every object I draw—each leaf, each pod-has to have a certain structure and sculptural quality. The mass, the line of the stem, the duality of color, subdued but rich, is important. The way the light hits the object has to articulate the mass and warm the color. Then I can make a sculptural drawing.

I drew a leaf every day without worrying too much about the outcome of the drawing. I practiced not thinking and it helped me to not see the leaf but to see the color and the tone and the line. I wasn't concerned with how much like a leaf I

could make the drawing but with how faithfully I could render what I saw and how it felt.

Is the idea that now you have gotten the object back in front of you and it's the real object that was there all the time?

When I was in art school I refused—whenever I could get away with it—to draw from life. I thought it's already there, so why copy it? It's an object that's in front of you. I used to think that if you didn't make it up, it wasn't art. Just copying something was cheating. I didn't consider the transformative aspect of the process.

Now I came at it from a different point of view. Drawing was now a handmaiden of sitting. With drawing, I was investigating my relationship to the perceived world, rather than creating a new world.

In your earliest work, you were concerned with the sculptures as really being drawings and paintings. Now you rediscover that drawing is sculptural. That's fascinating. As you're going through certain dimensions and transforming them within yourself you arrived at opposite conclusions. (When you look at these steel pieces) somebody could say they were sculptures. You say they are paintings and that's that! And now your drawings are sculpture.

It's also important that the materials they are made of express themselves as themselves. Pencil is graphite and pastel is soft, pure pigment, and they must be as dominant as the object rendered. As I make the image on a flat surface, layers of charcoal and pastel build up and then I tilt the drawing board straight up and allow the extraneous chalk to fall. As it does, I press the chalk into the paper to 'catch' the gravitational pull on the material making gravity and the weight of the pigment manifest in the drawing. I want to ground the work in its component parts—what it's made of. In doing so, the drawing process is equal to the drawn object. Drawing is magic: to make marks on a flat surface that transform into a sculptural presence... for a sculptor that is magic. You just do what's in front of you. You copy form, color, and light not paying too much attention to the concept of the form. It's just a gray shape or a dark line. It's color as color and not part of a leaf. Then you step back and recognize that it is a leaf. Magic! That may sound naïve, but I think that's okay in art.

You should always be a beginner in art.

Recently you showed some work that is almost invisible.

Yes, and it happened almost by accident, as a result of letting go of certain studio practices. I've always had a romance with the idea of a painter working directly from or with nature, free of the studio. Sculptors, you know are pretty much tied to their machinery and equipment.

I began to forage outside for material to draw and cast into metal. That provided a way to extend the studio, and got me just plain outdoors.

These sculptures on opposite walls are of grasses, grasses that almost disappear. This is the next thing shown after the nitrate painting.

I brought back a few things from a field that were extremely tiny and fragile. I was collecting objects in nature that I was going to cast in metal, which I did. Little pods, small sculptural objects, little prickly things, stems and things I found on the ground. I cast them but I never ended up doing anything with them because they never got beyond what they were.

Fragile grass, which absolutely could never be cast, surfaced in this bag of stuff that I was collecting. I put it on my table and kept looking at it, knowing that it was something I wasn't going to cast in metal but noticing how the light was hitting it as it sat on my table casting shadows. It reminded me of my metal light drawings. They had a similar geometry and structure, and they were doing what the light drawings were doing, which was creating linear patterns on surfaces. I made a tiny silver holder for the stem and pinned that through sand colored paper. When they were hung on the wall the grasses disappeared. All you could see was the shadow of the grass.

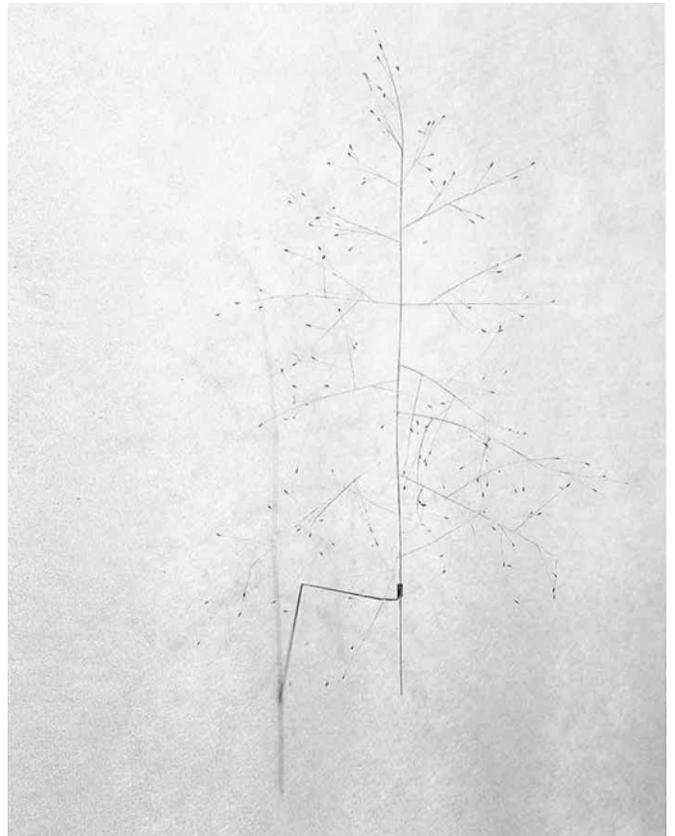
The strange thing is as you approach you think they are floaters inside your own eyes and then you get close and there is shadow and then they are gone.

You think, well it's a tan piece of paper on the wall and maybe there are gnats buzzing around in front of the paper. When you approach it you slowly discover what the work is. Elemental. You are in the work the whole time. People seem surprised and happy when they discover what it is.

They were in an exhibition at the Fine Arts Museum in Santa Fe. The way they were lit at the museum was exactly right. But then there was this out of control air conditioning that was creating a wind, not just a slight breeze. If you put a piece of paper on the floor it would blow away. So I had to nail the papers to the wall instead of letting them float against the wall. The trade-off was that now the pieces were continually quivering in space and the halogen light was quivering and they were actually better in the museum than they were in the studio. They seriously disappeared and they projected this intense shadow at the same time. They had the little geometries of the holder and the tiny buzzing activity of these fuzzy particles like dust or flecks hovering and spinning around this field.

Mites in front of your eyes?

Well, that takes retinal response to a new level. What I like about these is that they appear to exist without the artist's imprint. Which isn't to say that I'm against the artist's signature. Vermeer was intentional; and I love his signature. But it is also wonderful in artwork when the artist isn't in the work. That's what's happening in these. It's just the amazing structure and grace of the natural world.



I once had an aquarium in my studio and in it I had these two beautiful fish that were constantly chasing each other. They were really playful. I built an elaborate underwater world for them with caves and tunnels and lots of plants. Every day I watched them and one day I noticed something that looked like dust in a depression in the gravel. I studied it, trying to figure out what it was. How could there be dust in water? All of a sudden I recognized that it was a dozen tiny fish. I had never witnessed a birth of any kind before. At that moment of recognition I was transfixed, so acutely present that I wasn't there. I disintegrated with happiness. A moment of self-dissolution. That is what I have experienced in sitting and that is what art can do. The grass pieces remind me of that experience.

You recently told me about these four copper pieces on the wall. You said these pieces had to do with the ever-changing flights of birds. And did you mention that you also stopped sitting for a while in order to go out to see the daily flights?

As I came out of the Zendo one morning a flock of birds flew over I heard them before I saw them. They came in very low, right over my head. Then another flock and another I could see them from quite a distance so I had a good view of the continually changing shape of the flock. They were three-dimensional, kinetic forms in space, hurtling towards me with chirping sounds. I began to make little perforated metal pieces, which had a quality of flocks of tiny little birds. Of course they weren't birds. They were holes. And they let light in. They became tiny light objects. They weren't illustrations of what I had experienced with the birds, but they had a sensibility parallel to the birds' flight. The last thing I would do is to title them and give a reference to the birds.

Constructing and reducing, going for the essence and all of a sudden here you are with these delicate copper pieces as a result of going outside and looking at moving things and knowing that you can't capture flights. But nonetheless here is this new form and then it's the piece itself.

It's the piece itself, and it's the light that informs it.

Light for you has always been a stabilizing force.

I discovered light in the copper drawings by scribing lines, which were intended simply to delineate one form from the other or one section within the drawing from another. Then when I held the drawing upright, and saw the shifting light, the lines jumped out. They reflected light or as you said, let the light out. Which is a great way to understand that phenomenon. My work became more about light

once I discovered light in the work. There is this going into the work and at the same time the work coming towards you. That's what I am interested in, that back and forth dialogue with the material itself. That's why I don't conceive work ahead of itself.

These little copper pieces are all about the light pouring down from above.

Light issuing from above informed a lot of the Black Work. But the way it is caught and directed in these works is new.

Here's what amazes me—from these little copper pieces, really small enough to hold in your hand—intimate, private, only seen in the studio—and originally inspired by the flights of birds—these little canopied copper pieces in which light pours from the holes in the canopy above down to the sheet of copper below—from these little pieces about light and flight you have gone on to create a monumental sculptural site with Antoine Predock; hundreds of feet of copper, a monument that rises from bearms of prairie grass and relates intimately to the sky above, and still somehow magically, at least for me, has the intimacy of the little copper drawings. It is staggering. This new work is celestial, cosmological, even ontological! Now that I'm done with my rapture let's talk about this project in some detail.

The structure holds celestial information in two ways. During the day the alcove will filter constantly shifting sunlight through the canopy onto various metal planes. The canopy will be perforated at thousands of points, which will replicate constellation patterns and produce tiny spheres of light that will fall and settle in an indeterminate space. At the same time the reflection of this activity will multiply warping the light from the initial into layered positions. The outer shell of the structure will also be drilled to replicate stellar systems. During the day this will function graphically, charting the night sky with incised lines connecting particular star groups. At night the drilled points will emit light recreating the night sky as it appeared over a century ago from the vantage point of the site itself— $45^{\circ}7' N$, $93^{\circ}38' W$ elevation 848.

The fantasies of location like that exact position suggest that we can map everything; create the celestial as well as the terrestrial sphere. For me, those coordinates are so abstract they hang between the earth and the sky and are invisible. Does that make any sense?

That's beautiful. It leaves the viewer with the infinite.