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Numbers, nature, science and more: UMass exhibit showcases two approaches to abstract art

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You might not know it from just a quick glance at his drawings, paintings and other work, but the abstract artist Terry Winters finds much inspiration in the natural world and sciences.

A new exhibit at the University Museum of Contemporary Art (UMCA) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst is taking a unique look at the veteran New York artist (born in 1949), who first came to prominence in the 1980s. “Terry Winters: Facts and Fictions” offers an expansive collection of his drawings — finished ones as well as early drafts from his notebooks that have rarely been shown.

Though known more for his paintings, Winters’ drawings make for an engaging show, with interpretation left open to the viewer. In work that can include graphite, ink, gouache, charcoal and occasionally oil or acrylic paint, the drawings offer a range of organic shapes, from abstracted images of plants, flowers or even insects to tangled lines and intersecting grids.

If there can be said to be a consistent theme to Winters’ work, which has been shown in many major museums, including New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, it’s one of morphing and expanding forms, where images from the natural and scientific worlds encounter those from the technical and architectural fields.

Amanda Herman, education curator at UMCA, ventures another idea. During a recent tour of the exhibit, she pointed to “i,” a 1987 work of gouache on paper; the clusters of red-pink balls here might suggest 3D atomic models. “Or it could be something you look at under a microscope,” she said.

As exhibit notes put it, Winters has spent his career investigating “the patterns and schemata that undergird physical and intellectual life,” producing “obstensibly abstract” art that, even if it doesn’t “depict recognizable objects or scenes ... remains grounded in the real world.”

“Terry Winters: Facts and Fictions” is the first overview of Winters’ drawings exhibited in the United States. Showcasing material from 1980 up to more recent years, the exhibit first opened a year ago at The Drawing Center in New York City. UMCA Director Loretta Yarlow is a long-time fan of Winters’ work; she saw the show at The Drawing Center and asked the exhibit’s curator, Claire Gilman, about bringing it to the Valley.



In an email, Yarlow said as much as she admires Winters’ use of color in his paintings, “I love the way the reduced palette of his drawings, to black and white, allows us to concentrate on intricate structure and construction and to see how, from one drawing to the next, they undergo constant change and permutation.”

The larger drawings at the UMCA show are presented roughly chronologically. In the main gallery, Winters’ preliminary drawings, in pencil, ink, charcoal or some combination of those materials, are arranged in display cases in the center of the room. As Herman notes, these smaller works can offer a road map to some of the larger drawings, revealing Winters’ experimentation with different forms and ideas.

“You get to see what his process was, how some ideas were developed further and others weren’t,” she said.

For instance, two smaller drawings from the early 2000s are clearly related to two larger ones from 2009, “7-Fold Sequence, One” and “7-Fold Sequence, Two,” which depict clusters of dark, interlocking, rough ovals that are bisected by lines and cracks. These shapes can suggest any number of “real life” objects: cracked eggshells, animal footprints, curled strips of black paper, seashell fragments.

And “Untitled,” a 2011 work of graphite and gouache on paper, is filled with a wild range of shapes and images: spiked ovals (sea urchins? the shell of a horse chestnut?), ellipses of varying sizes, circles and loops. There’s a sense of movement and energy in which many of the objects seem to be gravitating toward the drawing’s center, where a large, dark circle — with a hole in its middle, like a portal (to other worlds?) — is positioned.

Yarlow, who curated a Winters show in New York City when she worked there, says she’s long wanted to bring his work to UMass “knowing how it would resonate and speak to so many people here — artists, art historians, architects, poets, musicians, mathematicians, scientist .”

Pointilism for the 21st century

Whereas Terry Winters is known for his loose pen and brush strokes, and building his work intuitively, Xylor Jane crafts paintings that are as carefully constructed as blueprints.

At UMCA, a smaller exhibit that complements the Terry Winters show features several paintings by Jane, of Greenfield, built on tiny, textured dots that when viewed from different ranges reveal numbers, different mathematical concepts and surprising patterns of color.

The works that are part of “Xylor Jane: Counterclockwise” cover a roughly 12-year period, from the early/mid 2000s to more recent years. Herman points to “Magic Square for Finding Lost People,” a 2014 oil on panel painting, as a particularly good example of the artist’s technique, themes and color scheme; the latter uses just the seven colors of the rainbow.

Up close the viewer simply sees thousands of tiny dots that create a pebbled surface without any recognizable pattern; it seems more akin to some kind of coded matrix or digital grid. Step back, though, and interlocking squares and triangles of different colors emerge, as do nine larger squares, each of which contains a number between 1 and 9. Adding the numbers in any direction — horizontally, vertically or diagonally — leaves a total of 15.

Some of Jane’s other paintings are built around prime numbers; another one, “Magic Square for Earthlings,” is studded with varying patterns of triangles and other sharp, geometric shapes that conjure a Navajo blanket, among other things. The numbers within the larger squares are much harder to distinguish here, hidden as they are by competing patterns and images.

“[Jane] is really interested in the power of numbers,” said Herman. “And the level of detail she brings to her paintings is incredible.” She notes, for example, that Jane uses a magnifying glass to create her gridwork of tiny, painted dots.

In a review of one of her shows in 2017, The Los Angeles Times put it like this: “Jane has made paintings that invite you to do two things at once: look at them and through them, relishing the tactility of their surfaces and peering into spaces that seem to reach far beyond what is possible.”

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Terry Winters: Facts and Fictions” and “Xylor Jane: Counterclockwise” are on exhibit at the University Museum of Contemporary Art through April 28. For more information, including on upcoming events at the exhibits, visit umass.edu/umca.