

Nelson Flack

b.1948, Burlington, Iowa, lives in Lahaina, Maui
exhibited in *Biennial IV*

left to right

Untitled #4 2008, 2008

India ink on cotton paper

A Drawing for an Engraving, a Mango, 2010

graphite and India Ink on cotton paper

These drawings come from my ongoing portfolios concerned with perception and engraving. *Untitled No.4 2008*, is a drawing study for making etchings and aquatint engravings. This portfolio of inkings are made directly, without preconception, reconsideration, or editing. Once the India ink is marked on the paper, the result is final and the inkings often proceed in a concentric pattern worked from all sides. These drawings find their source from the French engraver and painter Claude Mellan, 1598-1688.

A Drawing for an Engraving, a Mango investigates the expressive dialogue between drawing, engraving, and factual observations of the physical world. These drawings of mangoes began in Lahaina, Maui in 1989 and required local sourced fruit, natural light, and direct recording similarly used by Paul Cezanne and Giorgio Morandi. These drawings

explore the subject of the mango within specific moments of light, and life cycle of the form. The recent drawings of mangoes follow this subject as optical form from ripening,

NELSON FLACK

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Lives in Lahaina on Maui*

Nelson Flack's abilities and promise in public grade school art classes in Dayton, Ohio, where he grew up, earned him at age twelve a scholarship to attend Saturday classes at the local art museum, the Dayton Art Institute. Flack recalls being impressed by the works in the Institute's collection and many of the temporary exhibitions he saw as part of his weekend visits over the two-year period he studied at the museum. An uncle, who was knowledgeable about art and collected Pennsylvania folk objects, and Flack's stepmother, who presented him with a book on Surrealism for his eleventh birthday and filled their home with contemporary works borrowed from the loan collection of the Dayton Art Institute, helped further his appreciation for looking at art and an understanding of its importance in everyday life.

Flack continued art studies when he went off to high school at Blair Academy in Blairstown, New Jersey. In ninth grade he was singled out for an exhibition of his paintings at the school, and when he graduated in 1966, he received an award for his artistic accomplishments. While at Blair, Flack would often venture on his own to New York City and spend many hours in the museums and galleries. Although Flack was an aspiring painter, his father's desire that he enroll at the U. S. Naval Academy and pursue a military career led to a compromise plan for his future. In the fall of 1966 Flack entered the University of Pennsylvania as a business major in the Wharton School. He soon moved to the School of Art and Architecture as an architecture major and

started taking drawing classes. By his sophomore year, however, he had transferred to the art program and was spending most of his time painting. Flack often visited exhibitions at the University's Institute of Contemporary Art, and the experience of seeing the works of Brice Marden and Jules Olitski particularly impressed on him the possibilities for scale, structure, color and feeling in painting.

Flack graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1971 and later that year moved to New York City. While he supported himself through employment at several galleries and picture framers over the next few years and participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program (1973-74), Flack devoted his own time to drawing and painting, exploring the material qualities of pigment and pictorial light in large abstract canvases. The early 1970s were a time of transition and change in the visual arts in New York. The preeminence of abstract expressionism and color field painting had waned, the direction and viability of painting were in question, and minimal, conceptual and process art were capturing the attention of curators and critics. In this atmosphere of creative uncertainty and flux, Flack was increasingly dissatisfied with the possibilities painting presented him and he stopped in 1974. Gradually, however, Flack found that drawing still offered him a way to move

forward artistically, and he has concentrated on this medium over the last twenty-five years. "I found drawing more expressive," Flack has noted, "a more truthful notation of my experience. Painting became less expressive; I could not find my imagination in color and pigment. Painting was getting in my way, so I followed the voice and course of drawing."

Losing the lease on his New York loft and feeling the need to get away from life in a large city, Flack moved to Moloka'i in 1977, in part because it would enable him to more easily visit his mother, who had returned to live in her native Australia. Flack later settled on Maui and found that the sense of isolation provided a nurturing environment for pursuing individual work and discovering his own way as an artist. Over the next several years he worked in several art galleries in Lahaina and from 1985 to 1989 for a decorative arts dealer in Sydney, Australia. When he returned to Maui in 1989 he operated his own gallery until 1994. In the art he made during this time, Flack tried different graphic materials and techniques and explored a range of formal and conceptual concerns. The works included a series of large triptychs executed in black crayon and graphite on tablet-like supports of laminated sheets of paper. Flack sanded the heavily gessoed surfaces revealing parts of the ground and giving the works an internal luminosity. Flack also experimented with laminations of various unconventional materials as grounds for drawings (wool blankets impregnated with

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FLACK (continued)

glue and mounted with paper on wood panels; plaster and concrete laminations with steel reinforcement in preparation for drawing and fresco). Increasingly, however, Flack wanted to get back to a more traditional approach to drawing in response to direct observation of the visual world. In the mid 1980s he began two series of drawings which continued simultaneously to the mid 1990s. For one series Flack used his cat as the subject and for the other a mango. He moved back and forth between the two series; each offered a different kind of experience which helped balance his expressive needs. His approach to drawing the cat was perceptual, based on continual observation; as the cat moved he kept redrawing the image, changing the structure of the drawing and achieving a fluid and spontaneous appearance. In contrast, the mango drawings are contemplative and static. In these works he kept a tight rein on subject matter, offering only the most essential elements of figurative description: form, light, shadow. He chose the mango because of its commonness, its simplicity, and because it allowed him to capture a quick, illusionistic likeness melding medium and material, graphite and paper. Flack explored a range of approaches in the series, from descriptive to schematic, and a variety of techniques, from tightly controlled line to loose, raking strokes to stippling, examining the visual duality that as an image becomes more or less descriptive it correspondingly loses or gains expressive, emotional content.

In the summer of 1995 Flack began the series of drawings featured in this exhibi-

tion. Flack views these works as investigations into the characteristics and possibilities of engraving, the mechanical copperplate printing technique which he has been intrigued to explore. The drawings were inspired in part by viewing the works of Garnett Puett which Flack saw in the presentation of *The Contemporary Museum Biennial Exhibition of Hawai'i Artists* at the Hui No'eau Visual Arts Center on Maui. Puett, a sculptor and beekeeper, collaborates with honeybees to produce his work, allowing them to alter and augment his sculptures with their honeycomb structures. Observing the incremental, uniform way in which the bees constructed their formations showed Flack a way for approaching the marking of a sheet of paper, using a single linear element repeated and expanded systematically, to develop a vocabulary for engraving.

The drawings which have resulted from this experience represent Flack's sustained inquiry into a process of dividing the sheet of paper into black and white shapes from which form, pattern, and light are created. Using steel-tipped pens and india ink, Flack begins from a random point near the center of the sheet, making marks two or three millimeters in length which radiate concentrically outward, gradually framing a network of small triangular areas of the untouched paper. Flack's process is deliberate and arduous as he painstakingly builds his drawings, completing a half an inch in an hour and often taking months to finish a work. The intimacy and rhythm of the manner in which Flack engages the

sheet—moving the hand back and forth between ink source and paper, the repetitive application of pressure from the wrist and fingers to determine the strength and character of the marks—becomes a kind of meditative ritual tied to Surrealism's concept of automatism, the attempt to relinquish artistic control by eliminating cognitive thought and accessing the subconscious. Just as the process of mark making dictates the form of his drawings, accident also plays a part, and Flack incorporates the random drops and splashes of ink which occasionally fall onto the sheet from the pen. Each of these unexpected elements becomes the hub for a new concentric nexus and must be integrated into the whole, often substantially altering the structure of the drawing.

Although Flack makes his drawings without conscious iconography, subjects or content, they elicit strong connections to our experiences and the natural world. The complex linear trajectories which intertwine and fill the sheet congeal momentarily to create an illusion of volumetric contour suggesting the topography of landscapes. In a similar way, the compressed energy and wavering, organic irregularities of the spaces enclosed by Flack's markings evoke microscopic cellular structures. The measured rhythms of spiraling concentric forms seduce the eye like the quiet, reserved presence of a Zen rock garden. The pulse of light which arises from the subtle contrasts of dark lines and white spaces shimmers across the paper like sunlight on the surface of ocean water.