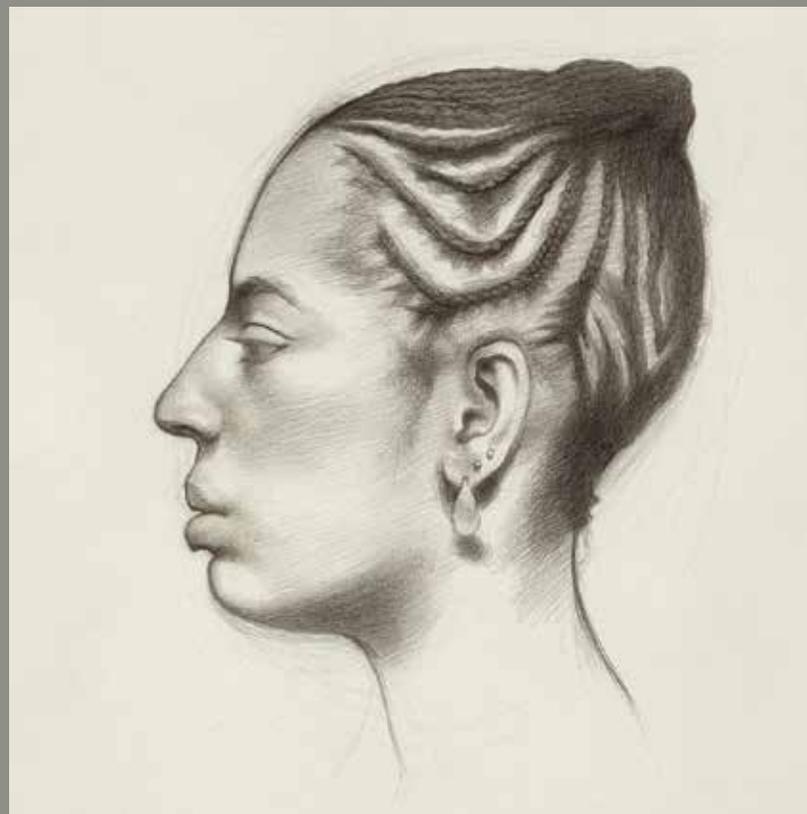


PRECIOUS METAL

A recent exhibition underscored the beauty and versatility of silverpoint as a medium for discerning draftsmen.

BY JERRY N. WEISS



RIGHT
Vespers
By Marjorie William Smith, 2012, silverpoint on black gesso, 11¼ x 8¾.
All artwork this article courtesy National Arts Club, New York, New York.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Mercedes
by Harvey Dinnerstein, 1976, silverpoint on clay-coated surface, 20½ x 20½. Private collection.
Although this silverpoint precedes an identical oil painting of the subject, Dinnerstein's drawing stands as an independent and complete work.



More than 200 years ago, before the mass production of graphite pencils, artists relied on other drawing media to lend substance to observation and fantasy. Velvet washes of ink and the granular marks of chalk are venerable methods in the artist's studio, but for permanence, nothing has rivaled metalpoint—drawings made with a sharpened metal stick on a prepared surface. Of several metals that can be used, silver is most often preferred, its light gray tones darkening and turning warmer over time with exposure to air.

Silverpoint was popular during the medieval and Renaissance eras—some of Leonardo's finest drawings, for example, were made in silverpoint—and it has continued to be used, though sparingly, ever since. Its eclipse was hastened by the production of more convenient materials, and perhaps Caravaggio and the advent of chiaroscuro in Western art played a part, too, as silverpoint discourages the dramatic effects of a full value spectrum. It is instead a medium suited to suggestiveness and understatement.

Among dry media, silverpoint is unsurpassed in its durability. Graphite, charcoal, and chalk are easily erased. Silverpoint neither smudges nor fades. When applied to a gesso or clay-coated surface it is as close to an eternal drawing vehicle as can be found. There is little room for hesitation or error—once a line is drawn with silverpoint it cannot be easily undone. Given its rigorous nature and subtle effects, silverpoint deters casual treatment and remains a favorite medium for serious draftsmen.

Silverpoint enjoys a range of expressive possibilities, but it is above all unique for its precision and delicacy. Sherry Camhy, an accomplished draftsman and the author of this magazine's "Material World" column, became intrigued with the medium some 20 years ago. (See page TK for an article by Camhy about how to get started drawing in silverpoint.) She was first struck by the medium's beauty during a visit to Harvey Dinnerstein's studio, where she saw his drawing *Mercedes*. "Although I love color and use oil paint and pastel in addition to silverpoint and graphite, there is something about the purity and quiet of tonal work that captivates me," Camhy says. She has taken an interest in promoting the work of contemporary silverpoint artists and recently curated "The Silverpoint Exhibition" this past December at the National Arts Club, in New York City.

Camhy explains that her aim with the exhibition was "to find work being done in both old techniques and new ones so that there would be a wide range of diverse examples of what is going on in the world of silverpoint today." That diversity can be seen in the images shown here, with their varied approaches to line, tone, and atmosphere, as well as their assorted interpretations of the figure and still life and even the inclusion of sculptural elements in some pieces.

RIGHT
Model Resting
by Burton Silverman,
1949, silverpoint on
clay-coated board,
14 x 11.

OPPOSITE PAGE
**Reclining Female
Figure With Hair
in Face**

by Steven Assael,
2010, silverpoint
and crayon on
paper, 18 x 12½.



Dinnerstein's *Mercedes* is, like many of the drawings in the show, a modern-day work with traditional resonance. A coolly intense study of a woman in profile, *Mercedes* has an iconic elegance once reserved for those who were wealthy enough to commission a likeness—this is a contemporary woman who could pass as ancient Egyptian royalty. Details delineating the model's features and finely braided hair are cleanly etched with the metal stylus. The softly modeled forms of the forehead and jawline reconcile naturalism with a personal sense of refinement. A cohesive element in the drawing is the lyrical line, which forms a contour that firmly encloses the subject without sacrificing form or ceding the impression that the portrait is suffused with light. The silverpoint's cursive linear rhythms are as aesthetically satisfying as they are descriptive.

An early work by Burton Silverman, *Model Resting*, already displays the artist's interest in the psychological aspects of a portrait. The drawing is a study in economy, the voluptuous shapes of the figure indicated with a few arabesque lines. The nude is of secondary importance, as the greatest attention to form is reserved for the model's head, where deeply impressed lines describe the edges of eyes and lips. Yet the most interesting implications reside in the hands. The tapering fingers that support the sitter's head are modeled with classical serenity, while those of the other hand are drawn summarily, curled in discomfort or youthful restlessness that belies the figure's otherwise bleary expression.

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More provocative is the depiction of a nude offered by Steven Assael in *Reclining Female Figure With Hair in Face*. In contrast to the drawings of Dinnerstein and Silverman, *Female Reclining* is constructed of subtle layers of silverpoint to suggest three-dimensional volume. Rather than focusing on the decorative linear qualities of the medium, Assael here chooses to apply silverpoint to textural ends, creating forms that are tactile. The image is unsettling, for Assael's brilliant academic technique is used to upset conventional iconography. The delicacy of handling and emphasis on the pelvis that add to the figure's erotic charge are mitigated by the rigid pose, as well as by a cascade of carefully rendered hair that masks much of the model's face, forming a faux beard that subverts traditional expectations of feminine beauty.



IN THE DRAWINGS OF EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN AND JULIETTE ARISTIDES, THE FIGURES ALL BUT DISSOLVE INTO THE AIR THAT SURROUNDS THEM.



Atmospheric handling is taken even further in the works of Ephraim Rubenstein and Juliette Aristides, whose figures all but dissolve into the air that surrounds them. In Rubenstein's *Maddie Asleep*, a child's form develops with the utmost gentleness before receding into the pure white of the paper. All the elements of the drawing are unified by hatched lines laid closely together at an angle that is natural for a right-handed draftsman. In *Natalia Sleeping*, Aristides essays a similar subject, but she begins with a toned paper that allows her silverpoint to be supplemented with white highlights. Here, too, the theme of sleep has encouraged a nearly dreamlike subtlety, and differences in value appear to have been breathed onto the paper. Both drawings represent a most appealing aspect of silverpoint, its capacity for allusiveness.

Another fine example of the nuances offered by silverpoint is *Self*, by Dan Thompson. As light of touch and atmospheric as Aristides and Rubenstein's drawings, *Self* depicts not the lassitude of sleep but a state of intense observation. Different also is the artist's handling of line, with multidirectional hatchings skittering over the surface of the portrait to form a textural network. Instead of delineating his portrait with a clear outline, Thompson allows the image to take shape through hundreds of flickering strokes of the stylus that create a mood of nervous animation. Yet for all its sense of movement, the drawing is convincingly volumetric and displays the artist's mastery of anatomy.

"In *Washed Ashore*," Wendy Shalen combines drawing with found objects. She writes about the work's origin:



ABOVE

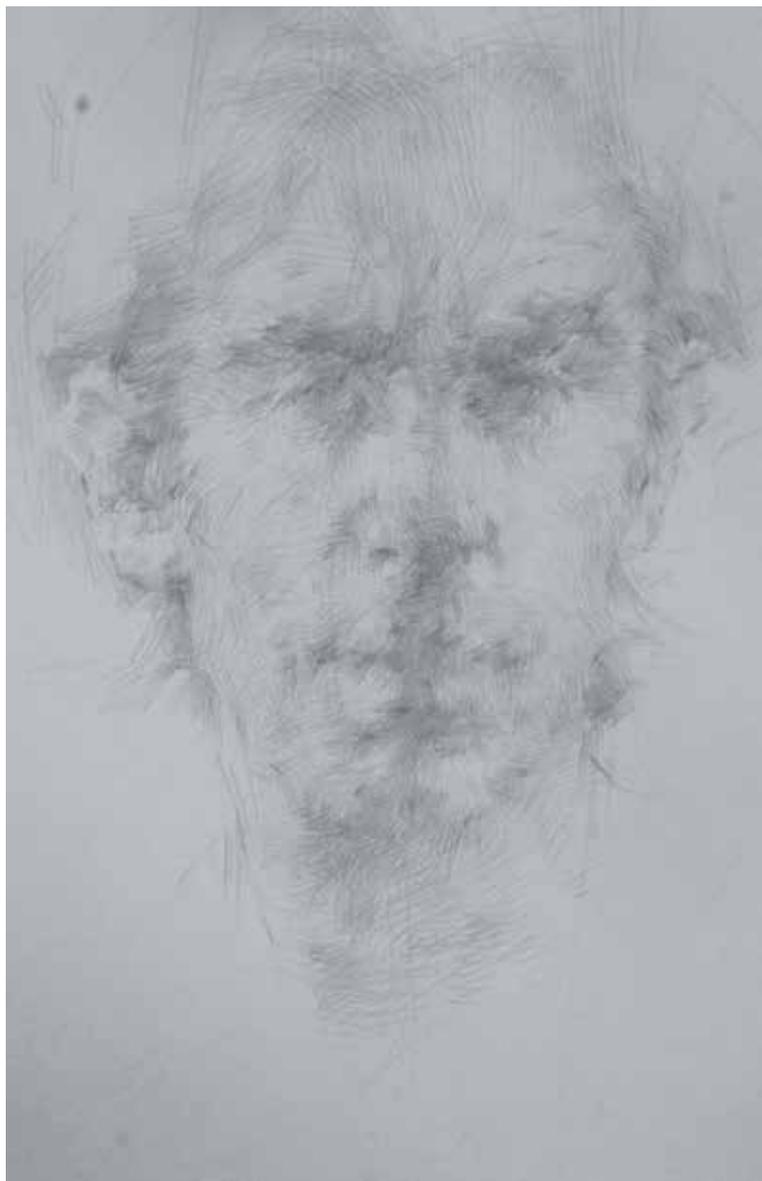
Maddie Asleep

by Ephraim Rubenstein, 1990, silverpoint on prepared paper, 16 x 21. Rubenstein says that he spends "a lot of time (and some experimentation) initially finding the right materials for the subject at hand, as I try for the greatest consonance between the subject and the expressive qualities of the medium. I think of silverpoint as being very quiet, in that it doesn't make darks of any real consequence, and you have to approach it and huddle closely around to really see it. This seemed more than appropriate in the case of a sleeping child. It is as if even the drawing is being careful not to wake the child."

OPPOSITE PAGE

Natalia Sleeping

by Juliette Aristides, 2005, silverpoint on toned paper heightened with white, 9 x 13.



**LEFT
Self**

by Dan Thompson, 2013, silverpoint, 17 x 11.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE
Washed Ashore**

by Wendy Shalen, 2008, silverpoint on prepared paper, nylon fishing line, and skull, 25 x 32.

Silverpoint was once practiced on a small scale, but today some artists use a larger format. Shalen writes that works such as this “convey the impression that nature is watching us as we destroy our environment (and ultimately ourselves) with garbage, pollution, and a selfish disregard for our actions.”

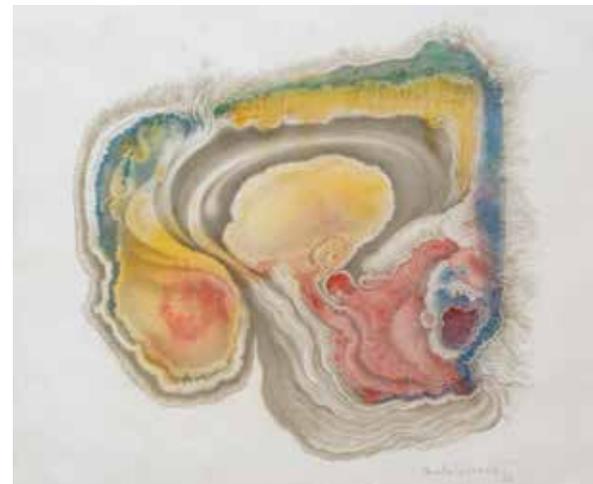
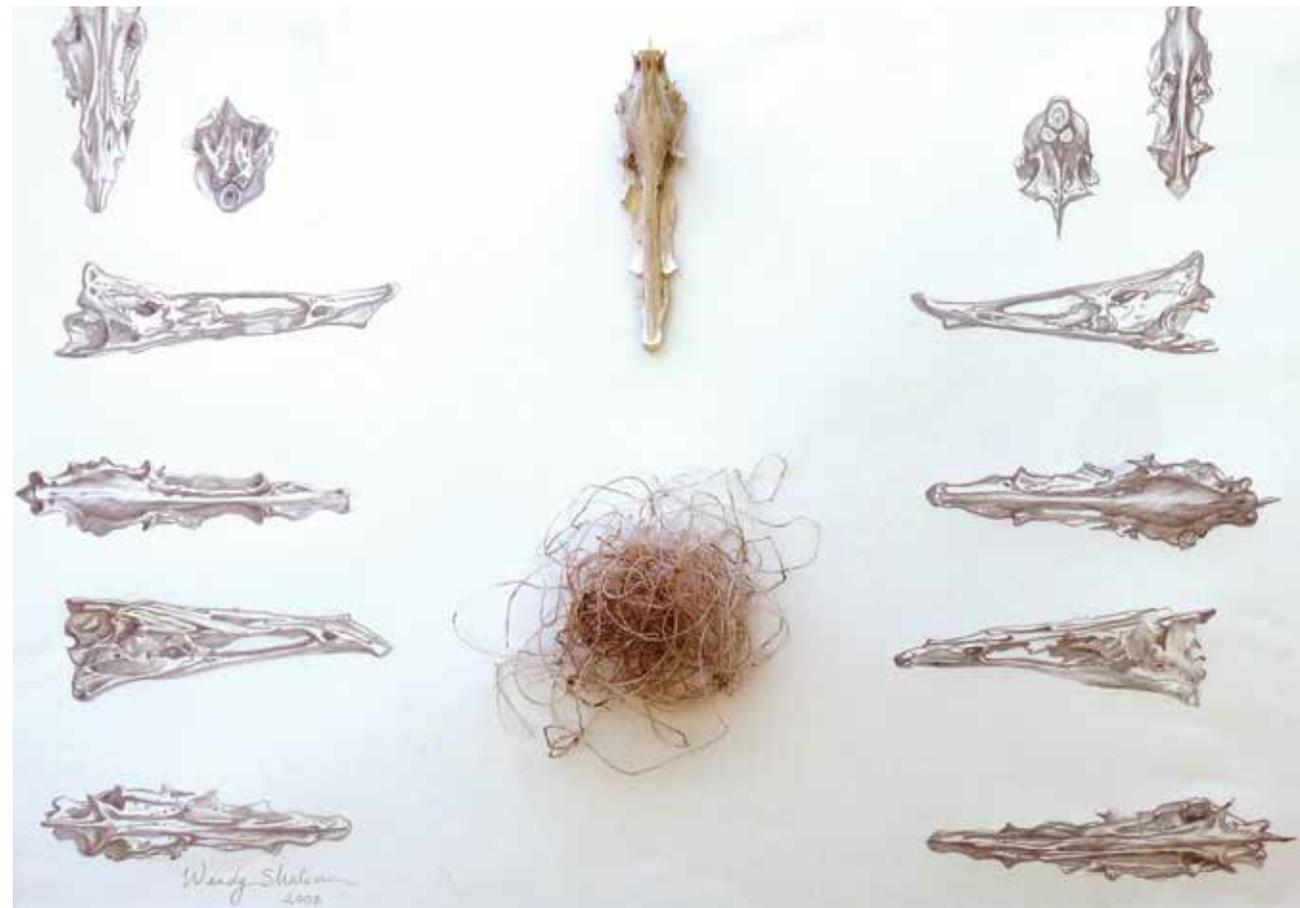
of Dinnerstein’s *Mercedes*. Both artists position their subject at the page’s center, encouraging the viewer to appreciate the beauty of the subject’s self-contained shape. Mazzullo’s portrait is not of a person but of a sphere around which paper has been twisted. The resulting crinkles are marvelously intricate, yet the overall form is based on a familiar premise. The base is a ball, the top a floral spray. Mazzullo is referencing the familiar silhouette of a bouquet supported in a vase and reimagining the subject in a contemporary way. For the tonal restraint of a drawing like *Upwrap* to work, the draftsman must have a thorough understanding of light and solid form. In

“While walking along a Florida beach, I came upon a skull of a bird or fish lying next to a nylon fishing line, and I immediately was struck by the damage done by careless fishermen.” The work incorporates these found objects and surrounds them with a dozen meticulously observed drawings of the skull, each seen from a different angle. Shalen’s concerns are given voice through her skilled draftsmanship. What at first glance may be construed as a study of animal anatomy becomes, with the inclusion of tangled wire, a poignant ecological statement.

In many ways Tom Mazzullo’s *Upwrap* is reminiscent

Upwrap it’s possible to admire both the artist’s control of line and the tension and movement that can be explored in a still life.

Silverpoint demands an exacting command of line and a willingness to forego the illusionistic force of strong light and shadow in favor of effects that are both more calligraphic and more luminous. “The Silverpoint Exhibition” shows the extraordinary results that can occur when draftsmen work within these conventions to expand the expressive potential of this medium, the beauty of which never fades. ❖



**ABOVE
Currents**

By Paula Gerard, 1980, silverpoint over watercolor and casein, 10 x 12.

**RIGHT
Upwrap**

by Tom Mazzullo, 2009, silverpoint on prepared paper, 12 x 9.

Mazzullo is the rare artist whose primary medium is silverpoint. Of his series of drawings showing objects shrouded in paper, Mazzullo has written, “I find these challenging and fun to draw, and conceptually interesting as well, as I am trying to create beauty out of trash.”



ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT “THE SILVERPOINT EXHIBITION” OR THE NATIONAL ARTS CLUB, VISIT WWW.NATIONALARTSCLUB.ORG.