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“David Musgrave: Luhring Augustine.”
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David Musgrave

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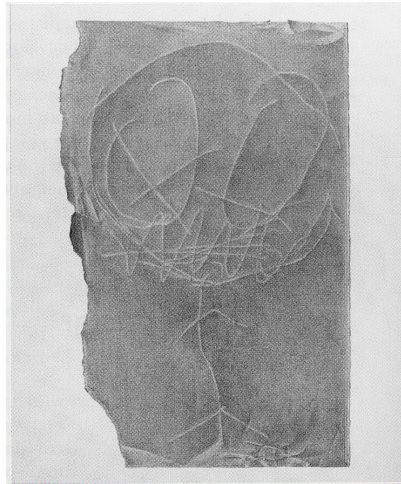
David Musgrave's art, like *Seinfeld*, elevates seemingly banal or arbitrary subjects to unexpected heights. In his New York solo debut, the British artist presented an austere beautiful suite of drawings and objects in which painstakingly flawless technique is brought to bear on motifs that oscillate between the timeless iconic and the neither-here-nor-there. What the exhibition made indisputable was Musgrave's ability to reveal the underlying complexity of outwardly trivial images, and to extract a sensual beauty from materials without resort to “expressive” (or even readily perceptible) inflection. A show about nothing, indeed.

Musgrave's signature image—employed so frequently as to take on the aura of a logo—is that of a crude stick figure with an oversize head. Sexless and faceless (or, at most, having circles or Xs for eyes), it is equal parts telephone doodle and all-purpose avatar, childlike scrawl and primal archetype. For the drawings here, the artist used graphite and paper to simulate other kinds of renderings on surfaces different from those that are physically present; imagine a drawing of a photograph of an etching. The technique at once invests the image with a certain (if still mysterious) import and slows our enquiry after meaning by concentrating attention on the visual. *Plane with scored figure*, 2009, is typical. Not merely representing but convincingly imitating a sheet of cardboard with the figure etched into its surface with a knife, the drawing diverts our gaze away from a singular symbolic significance and around a Möbius strip of technical process.

Grey plane with embossed figure and *Reverse drawing no. 1* and *no. 2* (all 2008), and *Dark plane*, 2009, have similar looks, suggesting compositions that have been embossed, or drawn heavily on a thin sheet of paper's unseen side. That paper's character shifts from drawing to drawing, the effects of creases, crumples, and tears produced with uncanny veracity. The figure changes as well—it shrinks, grows, or multiplies, or is juxtaposed with abstract elements—but ultimately retains both its graphic identity and its conceptual elusiveness. Musgrave observes or imagines the figure's representation with the closest possible attention to detail, but still manages to keep the viewer at a tantalizing distance. Several other drawings represent slight changes of focus; either literally, as in the blurry *Television picture no. 5* and *no. 6*, or figuratively, as in *Rope animal* and *Crochet animal* (all 2008). In the latter pair, two handcrafted beasts, recorded in Musgrave's quasi-mechanical hand, replace the artist's human stand-in, though the function they perform is the same.

Musgrave extended his project from illusory to actual three-dimensional space here in four sculptures. *Film*, 2009, which ran across the floor of the main gallery, consists of a stick figure rendered thirty-five times in what appears to be masking tape but is in fact painted aluminum. Progressing through a sequence of poses that sees the man somersault backward, then roll left to right, the arrangement forms a kind of deconstructed animation, like the pages of a flip book seen as a single image. An elegant trio of wall-mounted objects in the rear gallery rounded things out nicely; *Stick figure (morning)*, 2008, and *Transparent stick figure*, 2009, returned us to the artist's favorite character in, respectively, silver-plated bronze and clear resin. *Opener*, 2007, an enlarged bottle opener, also in resin, sounds like a curveball, until one recognizes that the tool resembles an expressionless head. Seen in isolation it might give little away; here it pops the cap (after the fact) on a surprisingly satisfying brew.

—Michael Wilson



David Musgrave,
Reverse drawing no. 1,
2008, graphite on
paper, 16 1/2 x 13 1/4".