

Inkmarks: Thoughts on a Drawing Project

I am writing this essay as an amateur in drawing and an outsider to art studies. It's meant simply as a companion to the portfolio I risked putting up on this website alongside my research and writing work.

A Brush from Max

After I retired to a studio apartment in the middle of Manhattan in 2016, I had to reshape my life, after losing my wife and retiring from Wesleyan – 45 years of a creative and fulfilling life dissolved. Shedding all my possessions and archives, I became a model of the new downsizing mentality. The idea of finding a hobby fell into place while talking to my friend Max Gimblett, an artist who had delved deeply into Zen brushwork (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cw7BWbs8ANs> for that side of his multifaceted work). Max reached into a drawer crammed with lovely Chinese brushes and handed me a fat one, telling me to just go ahead and draw, and I started an odyssey on paper.

Back to the Drawing Board

Though I felt like a drawing virgin, I had an earlier brush, so to speak, with putting pigment on paper. When I was ten, we lived in Vienna in 1953-4. On a Fulbright, my father taught in the school I was thrown into. Knowing no German, I drew maps for the first couple of months, with tracing paper and crayons. The art class was required, and there I did some surprising work, despite the teacher's rather rigid guidelines. I have no idea of why I thought to draw the Empire State Building in winter. I had only just discovered New York on the way to Europe. I guess it stuck in my mind amidst the foreign streets of early postwar Vienna, with their bombed-out ruins and Soviet troops. It's curious that a ten-year-old found the patience for such painstaking detail, including the sign for "Joe's."



The rocket ship is also an Americanism, though in the pre-NASA days, I would have seen one only in comic books or "Flash Gordon" serials at the Saturday movies.



More conventionally, I drew a Matissean still-life and a curious rendering of a temple overlooking a multicolored hillside. These drawings sprang from vivid childhood visuality in a special time-space moment.





Back in Detroit, I took an “art class,” live models and all, that proved I had zero ability to re-create reality on paper. My next flirtation with drawing came with the surging American interest in the Japanese aesthetic. Alongside the Kahlil Gibran and Omar Khayyam editions I saw the attractive books published by Tuttle and thought it would be cool to grind an inkstone and put brush to paper. I think I even bought a set, which I never used. As a freshman at Michigan, I discovered Japanese studies and even did a summer internship for Prof. Yamagiwa. That phase passed as I went on an odyssey that took me through the 1960s at Manhattan School of Music, back to Ann Arbor, and into ethnomusicology and marriage, with a backdrop of research in Afghanistan. There, I shifted my visual sense to compose hundreds of documentary slides you can see on this website, alongside a critique of the downside of Afghanistan’s photogenic charm (“Hayden’s Histories,” under the Writings tab). For the next half-century, I never thought of drawing until another artist friend, Jacqueline Gourevitch, suggested pencil sketching as a retirement hobby. That didn’t take, but then Max reached into his brush drawer and something clicked.

Sketchy Thoughts

In what follows, I won't quote from works on psychology of perception or art history and criticism, though I will cite a few artists' remarks. It's just my thinking about drawing.

Titles

There are none. Much as I admire Klee, a major influence on my early visual life, and enjoy wordplay, I don't like shutting down viewers' imagination when they take in an image.

Medium

Almost all the art stores in New York City--like the fine Central Art Supply Max sent me to--have closed, so paper selection is more limited than when I started. Unless you're a pro, it's hard to invest in pricey papers online.

I tend to overload papers and sketch pads, so many of the images here are wrinkled. This also means they don't photograph optimally. I chose not to hire a specialist to sweeten them. I've done only a minor bit of adjustment on iPhoto.

I started as an inkbrush-only person but slowly filtered in a little Conté crayon, pencil, and charcoal just to broaden my imagination.

Paper itself is absorbing, literally and mentally. Motherwell has some quotable things to say about this medium, starting with "I infinitely prefer paper to any other medium...ink on rice paper is music," which appeals to my sensibility.

His thoughts on how paper handles ink confirm my experience, as in the way ink bleeds through the fabric once you put it down. Some of his drawings "would spread so much...they would totally surprise me. I would watch them like baking bread as they browned and changed...[they] self-increased at least fifty percent." Motherwell goes so far as to say "the subject matter *is* paper...I hadn't the remotest idea of what was going to happen...each one was...the object revealing itself to me."

This leads me to think about the impulse of drawing itself.

Impulse

Without reading about how artists begin their work, I simply made an inky gesture and then thought about what it implied. Maybe it sat well enough by itself. But often, the first move seemed to call for a second. Making an addition creates complication—you think about balance or complement. So impulse yields to control. How I arrived at this aesthetic I cannot say. But this working method was common among the artists who flourished in my early years or just before. I'm a twentieth-century person, with roots in the nineteenth century and a cosmopolitan upbringing.

Here's the very influential Paul Klee in 1920:

"...place the first active deed (line). After a short time, halt, get your breath... Look back and see how far we have already come (counter-movement)."

To quote perhaps his most famous phrase, it's about "taking a line for a walk."

There's a connection to "automatism," which the Surrealists promoted, linking Klee and someone like Jackson Pollock: "the automatic process was the idea of beginning a painting without having a plan, so the image could develop out of the experience...both artists [Klee and Pollock] strove to synthesize spontaneity and control."

More poetically, here's Motherwell, remembering something Picasso said: "If you use gestures, you instinctively make forms rhyme." That's a poetic-musical metaphor I can live with.

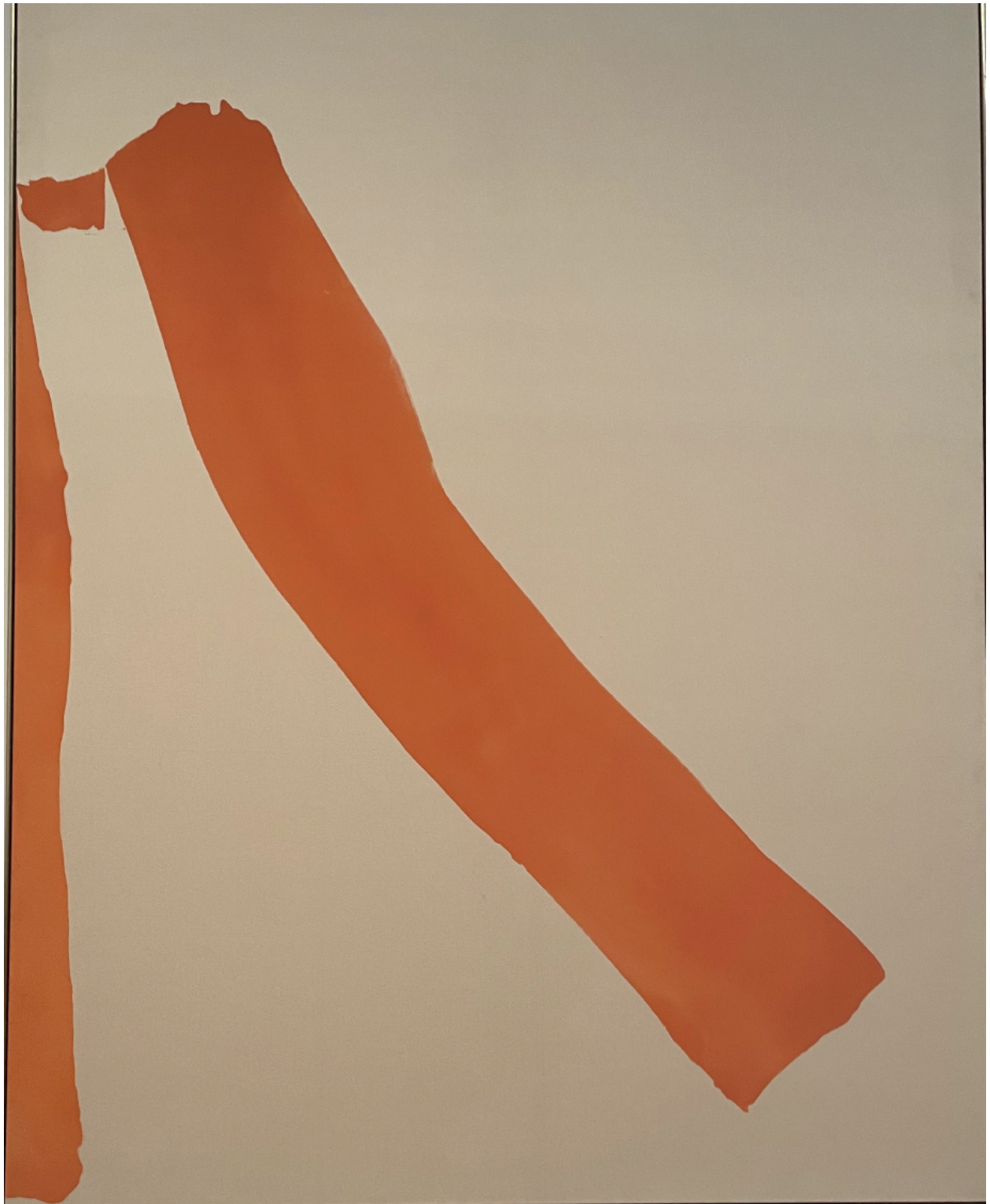
So you always find yourself in a lineage, even if the Zeitgeist I felt comfortable in was old-fashioned by 2016.

Influence

I'm a trained musicologist and a dabbler in art history, fields dominated by searching for "influence" in careers and artworks. I tried to start from a clean slate in drawing, so to speak, but a lifetime of looking leaves its traces. My parents took me to the wonderful Detroit Institute of the Arts as soon as I could walk, I think, and my lifelong travels have always included museum visits.

So I'm not surprised if I see a parallel between one of my drawings and something at MoMA or the Met. An orange Helen Frankenthaler suddenly looked familiar recently, next to a series of mine that looks like variations on yellow

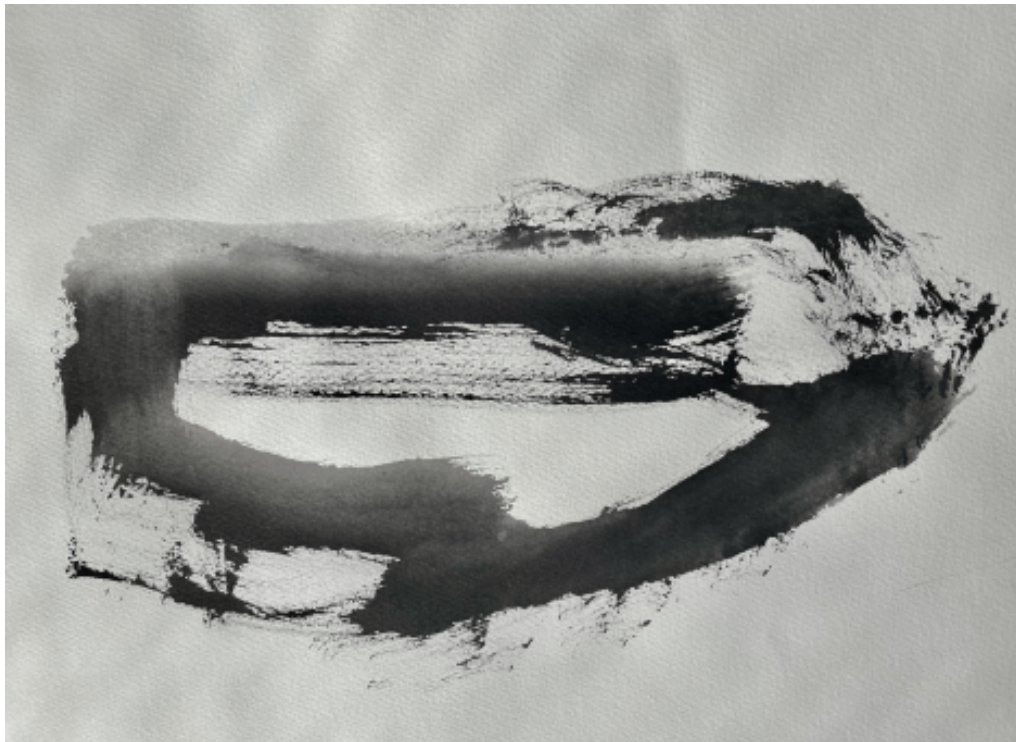
motif. I'm usually in the world of the art of my time --1940s-50s--without trying to imitate.





But then there's the Zen side that Max embodies (see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cw7BWbs8ANs> for his approach), so resonant with my teenage attraction for the brush. Stephen Addiss's classic *Art of Zen* is a recent revelation, explaining some of my impulses:





...and you might notice a Zen sensibility lurking in other images here. The *enso* circle that I've watched Max embody effortlessly has left its imprint, but I don't "think Zen" when drawing.

Motif

Motherwell says: "When you've done something a lot, it gets built into your arm and wrist and just comes out—in the way you might use a certain phrase habitually, though in wholly different contexts." And: "I also have almost pre-history associations with these images." He certainly did dig into some subterranean source of repeated motifs, but so did many of his period- Morandi and Albers to the extreme, Jasper Johns and others in Motherwell's circle.

I don't work on their plane, but I notice that no matter how fresh an impulsive gesture may seem, it often ends up familiar. Here's a short tour of motifs.

Pairing

This echoes Motherwell/Picasso on rhyming in drawing. The pairs usually align but can take many different forms.



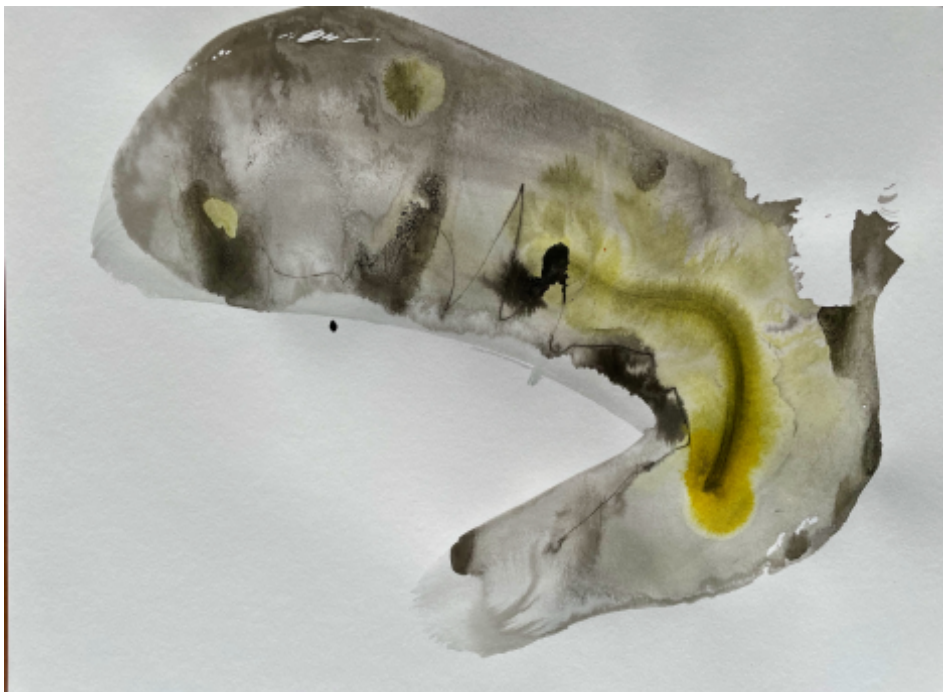


Zoomorphic

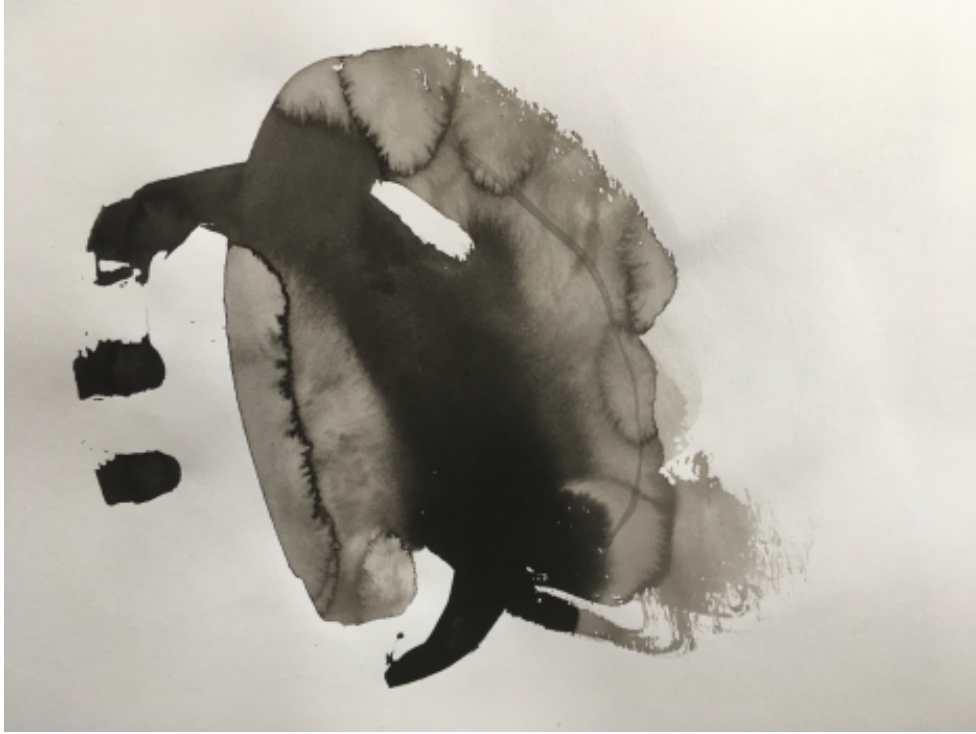
I never intend to draw animalesque images, but perception being what it is, I later see creatures that have emerged, like this catfish-frog.



Or a possible whale who emerged from the ink-bleeding technique I keep returning to:



Or some sort of stray dragon:



Finally, is this- unwittingly- a bird or bat against the moon? Totally unintended.



I guess there's no escaping these identifications once seen, no more planned than this mass of water vapor over Riverside Park was meant to form the animal that is unavoidably there to any human eye that has seen a bird in flight. So much for the objective-abstract boundary.



Arc

An opening gesture often describes an arc, but it's also a follow-up I might take to unify a composition. Arcs differ greatly from drawing to drawing.



Composites

Some of my habitual motifs bump up against each other in combinations- here the straight line, the arc/circle, and the bled-through shape that looks like a protozoa (cf. the "whale" above for another of these). There's a hint of calligraphy, another motif.



The single vertical

This stroke is so resonant, from Zen to the Aleph of Arabic calligraphy that I'm not surprised when I turn to it in a simplifying mood.



My photos of straight lines suggest how motifs appear to the eye everywhere. Back at Riverside Park, the seagull joins what looks like an ink drawing to the natural world. The above-and-below-waterline visuality only complicates the matter. I guess it's not surprising I'm drawn to take photos like these...



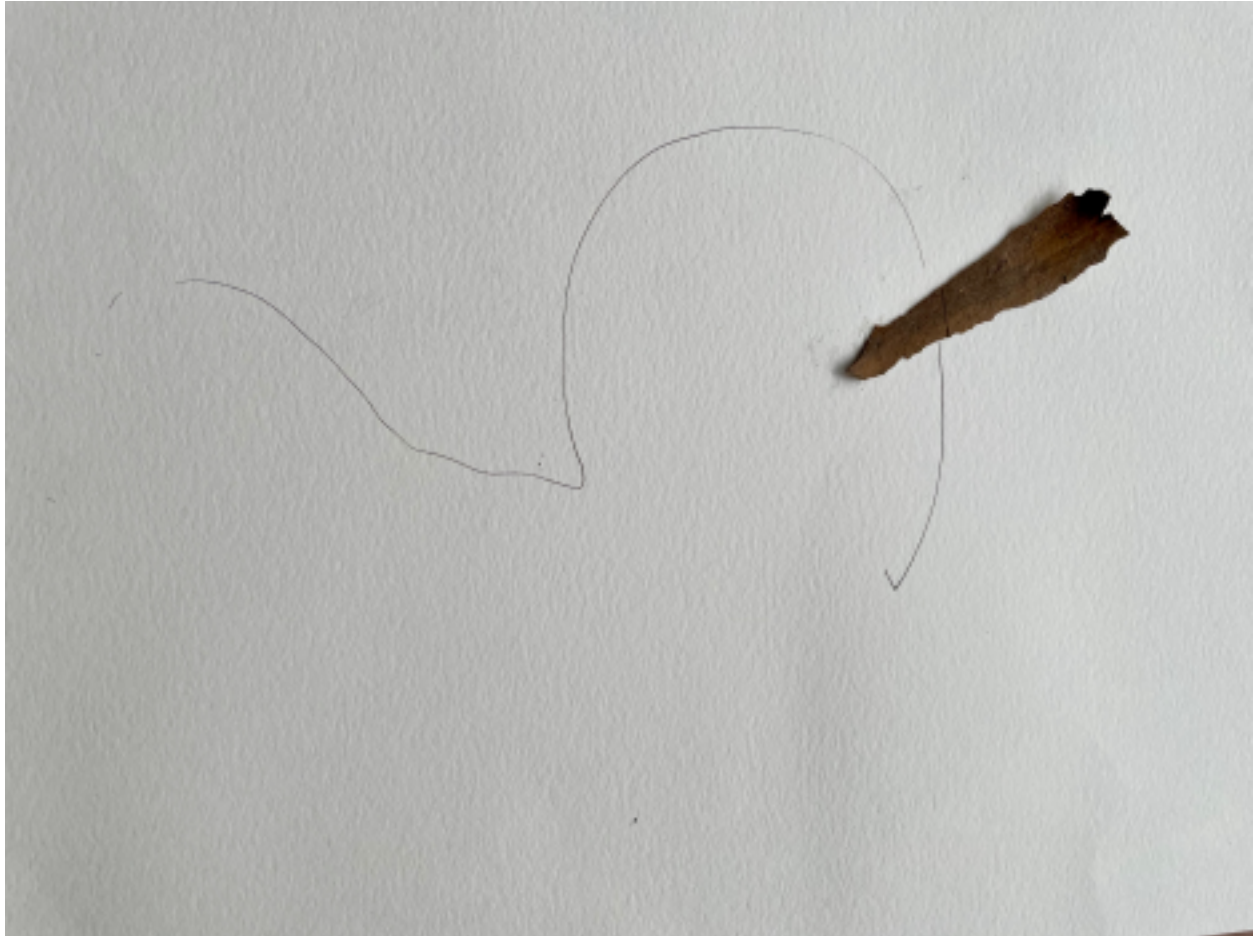
At the same location, without the bird, the line between photography and ink drawing blurs even further.

Well-schooled in modernist abstract photography by my friend Andy Szegedy-Maszak, I notice such compositions constantly on my walks in Manhattan – another portfolio to put up someday.



New Directions?

Spotting sycamore bark led me to try my first collage. Hard to tell where my drawing mind might go in my late years.



Envoi

This seems like about enough self-analysis. I find my visual sensibility has been greatly expanded and stretched through this recent hobby, extending from museum galleries and art books to the dens daily clustering of images in Manhattan.

I'll try to avoid this caveat from Motherwell:

"No Japanese brushes, no Japanese ink. Was already using ink and Japanese paper, so no calligraphy either. No fake Oriental work for me."

And I'll never have Max's forest of ink bottles or a dedicated workspace beyond the dining table in my small studio, but that's just fine. I'm trying to not take this hobby too seriously and hope this essay hasn't been self-important.



In closing, I'd like to thank my parents for exposure to art and to the art historian Ernst Scheyer (my high school friend Gini's dad), who offered me insights into modernism. I greatly valued my long interaction with the artwork of my late friend David Schorr and talks with the late Puffin D'Oench, curator extraordinaire. Viewing art shows with Jacqueline Gourevitch has been one of the highlights of the New York life.

Sources for quotes

Fabienne Eggelhofer and Elsa Smithgall, *Ten Americans: After Paul Klee*. Munich, London and NY: Prestel, 2017.

David Rosand, ed. *Robert Motherwell on Paper*. New York: Harry Abrams, 1997