

## Structured Riffs of a Self-propelled Draftsman:

### Introducing JJ Cromer's Untitled Structures

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**As a restlessly inventive, relentlessly self-challenging draftsman,** JJ Cromer has few peers in contemporary art. Since he started drawing in 1998 - at age 30, with no art training - he has developed a rigorous practice yielding a substantial, ever-expanding body of work. His art continues to evolve in new ways that often surprise even him. Although his approach is intuitive, he has developed a sharply disciplined approach, fueled largely by his own enthusiasm and informed in part by his longtime interest in books and literature. (He earned a master's degree in creative writing and trained as a librarian.)

Cromer's "Untitled Structures" series is a striking case in point. It consists of 52 ink and color-pencil drawings with occasional collage elements. In each case the surface is vintage Chinese calligraphy paper, translucent and of pale brown hue, with uniformly printed green grids and borders. The drawings are of two intimate sizes - 4.5-by-7.5 inches and 8.25-by-6.75 inches, with slight variations. The palette is limited in comparison with the chromatically exuberant drawings Cromer more often makes. (1)

In restricting the number to 52 he wanted to suggest the number of weeks in a year. He numbered each drawing, and he presents them in their original sequence, which he sees as a kind of narrative. When it comes to following the story, however, viewers are left to their own devices.

Most of the first few drawings and several others in the series bring to mind graphs and charts, although they lack any statistical or informational function. They read instead as playfully precise exercises in geometric abstraction, reminiscent of Pattern and Decoration art. They also allude to architecture, and the patterns created in children's finger-strings games. Organic and figurative references begin to emerge in the second and third drawings, whose delicately shaded, marginal forms suggest braided hair or knotted ropes. The first dramatic development is the appearance of the quasi-figural form in drawing number 10, like some monumental being from another dimension, with six pendulous, segmented breasts sprouting multiple tiny antennae. Related forms - including several reminiscent of bodily cavities and internal organs - dominate about one-fourth of these drawings. Other drawings suggest hieroglyphics, penmanship exercises, landscapes, circus tents, signal flags and electronic circuitry. Cromer has said that the black imagery in some drawings indicates the introduction of unpredictable, mutagenic factors. Several drawings incorporate passages he cut from earlier drawings, often attached to the backs of these drawings and showing through the translucent paper as shadowy, phantom forms, more faintly visible than those drawn on the front sides.

Notwithstanding the sequential numbers and calendar-year association, Cromer's narrative seems to unfold in non-linear

form, oscillating unpredictably back and forth from geometric/architectural/mechanical structures to more organic forms.

The majority of the latter conjure up other-dimensional entities with fleshy and/or skeletal, insect-like bodies, but Cromer's idiosyncratically structured story concludes with its most overtly humanoid figure. This double-armed, one-headed, lopsidedly built biped, looking as if it's wrapped head-to-toe in its own entrails, sits on what appear to be the teeth and lower jaw of a huge mouth. Cromer employed his reverse-side collage technique to create the pale red and yellow halo around this mummy-like figure's head.

Cromer reserves specific comment on the meanings of these drawings or his intentions regarding them, but he is clear on what this final drawing represents - none other than death itself, its eyeless head backlit by a glowing solar disc. (2)

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#### Notes:

1. See, for example, Cromer's drawings reproduced in Cara Z. Campbell, "Visual Vocabularies of JJ Cromer," *Raw Vision* #70, Fall 2010, pp. 22-27

2. In e-mail correspondence of September 2016 Cromer characterizes his vision of the narrative trajectory as "moving ultimately to the sun, and death (I believe) sitting upright."