

Michael Abatemarco | For The New Mexican

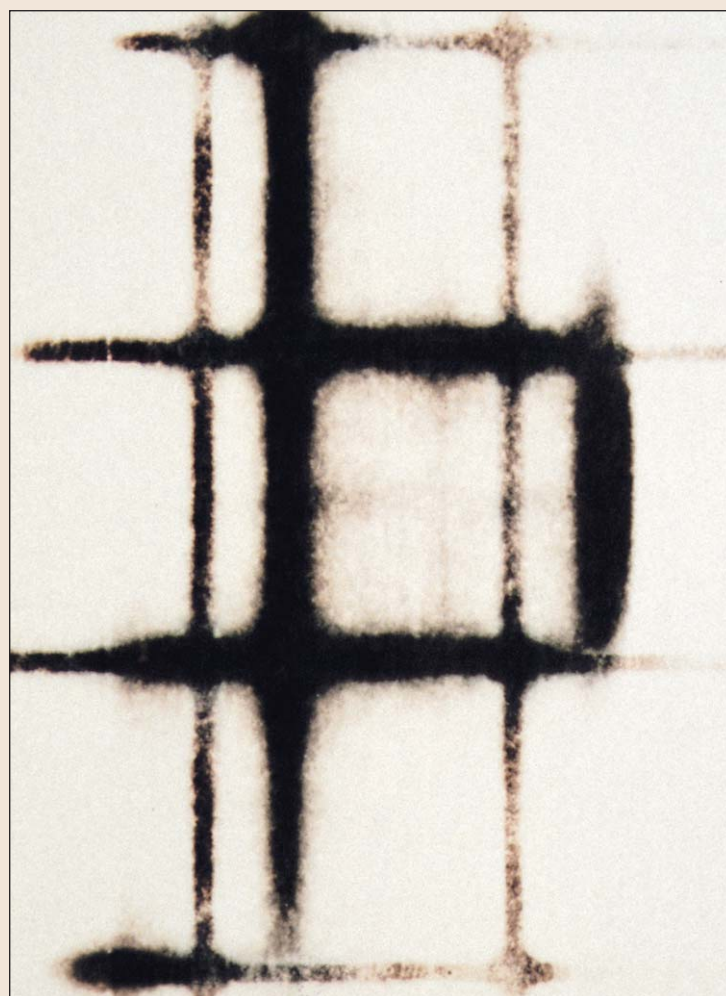
This just in from the invisible place



Jay Tracy: *For the Lost Bees #5*, detail, 2008, mixed media on plywood, 48 x 36 inches

Above, *Untitled #2306*, 2005, thermogenic drawing on vintage fax paper, 5.25 x 3.75 inches

All images courtesy Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art



In an unusual process that has an affinity with photography, Jay Tracy creates abstractions that represent what he calls “nonretinal realities.” Like someone taking snapshots of things the eyes cannot perceive, he treats us to a view of places within us. If we could take pictures directly from the mind’s eye and show them to others, they might resemble Tracy’s thermogenic (or heat-derived) drawings, which seem to have been born in the brief instant between seeing an object and comprehending what we see. Some of his untitled images look like silhouettes or shadows of physical objects. One such work depicts what appears to be a shadow from a latticed fence, but it is not. The mind seeks to impose a kind of order on Tracy’s drawings based on familiar things.

“The drawings are a report back from this invisible place,” Tracy said in a recent telephone interview. His thermogenic drawings are on view at Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art, along with new work by Seth Anderson. “Jay uses heat the same way a photographer uses light — to create an ambience through color and simplicity of form,” said John Addison, the gallery’s director. Tracy discovered through experimentation that heat applied to vintage fax paper created a chemical reaction that altered the surface of the paper. Using a variety of methods, the artist found that he could bring out subtle gradations of tone and create patterns.

Tracy began using the process in the early 1990s, when he became dissatisfied with the limitations of painting. He was looking for a way of creative expression that was more immediate — “not built up like a painting,” he said, “but more instantaneous.” He began making photograms using a technique described in a journal entry on his Web site: “Ordinary found objects, selected for their actual and potential light-transmitting properties, were used as three-dimensional negatives.”

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An interest in the chemical reactions to light led Tracy to create a series of heliogenic (light-derived) images. In another journal entry, he writes "I created these heliogenic works using a proprietary variant of the iron-silver salt photoemulsion chemistry traditionally associated with the Van Dyke brown print." The heliogenic prints required a great deal of processing, however, because they were tray-developed like photographs. The chemical reaction to the light was also very slow.

Tracy worked with heliogenic images for about 10 years, until he became curious about heat and how that might affect the surfaces of various types of paper. When he began experimenting with thermogenics, he had difficulty finding heat-sensitive paper that would yield the results he was after. Research led him to a limited cache of 40-year-old facsimile paper in England that had the right texture and color and produced the right type of stable reaction. The process of creating images by marking this paper was immediate.

Jay uses heat the same way a photographer uses light — to create an ambience through color and simplicity of form.

— John Addison, gallery director

"These marks (literally superficial burns) are like fingerprints," Tracy states on his Web site. "They manifest general typologies, but their specific features cannot fully characterize their author or reveal the circumstances of their making." One might say the same of dreams. Tracy's drawings come from a similar place. "I'm treading in that space that is familiar and not familiar, visible and invisible," he said.

In capturing suggestive shapes with an irreproducible technique, Tracy creates works that are one of a kind. Unlike editioned prints that use more traditional techniques such as lithography, no single image can be duplicated using the thermogenic process. "They are more like monoprints," Addison explained. Adding to their distinctiveness is the fact that, once Tracy had used up his cache of vintage facsimile paper, he had to move on to something else. He doubts he could track down any more of the fax paper; a prospect that, in retrospect, makes finding it in the first place seem fortuitous.

New work in the May exhibit includes mixed-media pieces along with the thermogenic drawings. Tracy described the new work as "highly improvisational" and involving painting and chemicals such as industrial coatings and bactericides.

Seldom are chemical interactions dealt with so consciously in an artist's work, although they are critical in the success of many kinds of media, from emulsion-based films to painting. Usually, a work of art is about the final image and not the process used to arrive at the final image. In Tracy's work, there is less distance between process and outcome. "I'm interested in how chemical properties contribute to the reality of the piece, how they enter into the narrative," he said. "They have a life of their own: a secret life." ◀

details

- ▼ Jay Tracy: *Fugitive Form: Thermogenic Drawings & Mixed Media Paintings*, opening with Seth Anderson: *Line Paintings*
- ▼ Opening reception 5-7 p.m. Friday, May 9; exhibits through June 7
- ▼ Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art, 439 Camino del Monte Sol, 992-0711