

Art in America
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Robert Therrien at Gagosian, New York

The devil is in the details, Robert Therrien seemed to intone in palimpsestlike drawings of gleeful satanic figures disporting on two small sheets of fusty wallpaper figured with a pattern of field flowers no longer in fashion. None much larger than a fingernail, each devil was assigned a color--red, silver, a sort of golden ocher, brown--and set to prancing within the floral field, in at least one instance straddling a flower. The devils raised identical pitchforks in salute to the viewer from within a cluttered pictorial space.

The optical density of iconic elements in the new drawings, all untitled, included in this discursive exhibition--snowman, cloud, halo, chapel spire, coffin, cartoonlike duck bills--suggested the tactile, saturated quality of silkscreen or inkjet printing. But his materials are more complex than that, consisting of various combinations of Japan color, graphite, pencil, ink, tempera and enamel on smooth buff paper marked by pushpin holes at the corners, presented in simple, well-crafted ivory-colored frames. With a regularity attributable to Therrien's use of templates, the forms share a richness and density and, often, a halation at each figure's thin edge. The halo in one ink and graphite work was rendered by a simple line, while in another it was implied by an edge as deep as the rim of a coin, radiant in its own pale glow.

Drawings were sequenced in the gallery according to an internal, formal logic; they spoke to one another like semaphores. In three similar drawings, Therrien deploys descending rows of dots and then keystones. In each, the lower right corner of a grid ends with a head in profile, like the period at the end of a sentence, or possibly representing the source of these icons--a talking head.

In the gallery's center, a tear-shaped, tin-plated brass object measuring about a foot from base to tip, rested at eye level on the corner of an outsized, white enameled table made of wood. Eschewing a perfect finish, Therrien allows the teardrop's surface to reveal the marks of casting and polishing, which impart a sense of substantial heaviness to the object. The enamel finish of the oddly crafted table also reveals the touch of a painter's hand. So did the components of the remaining sculpture--the elephantine flaps of two wood panels butted into the wall at different angles, carpentered to fit but not to touch. Conceived as a Dutch door to nowhere, the work scissored out into the space it was intended to define, as though moving through a looking glass.