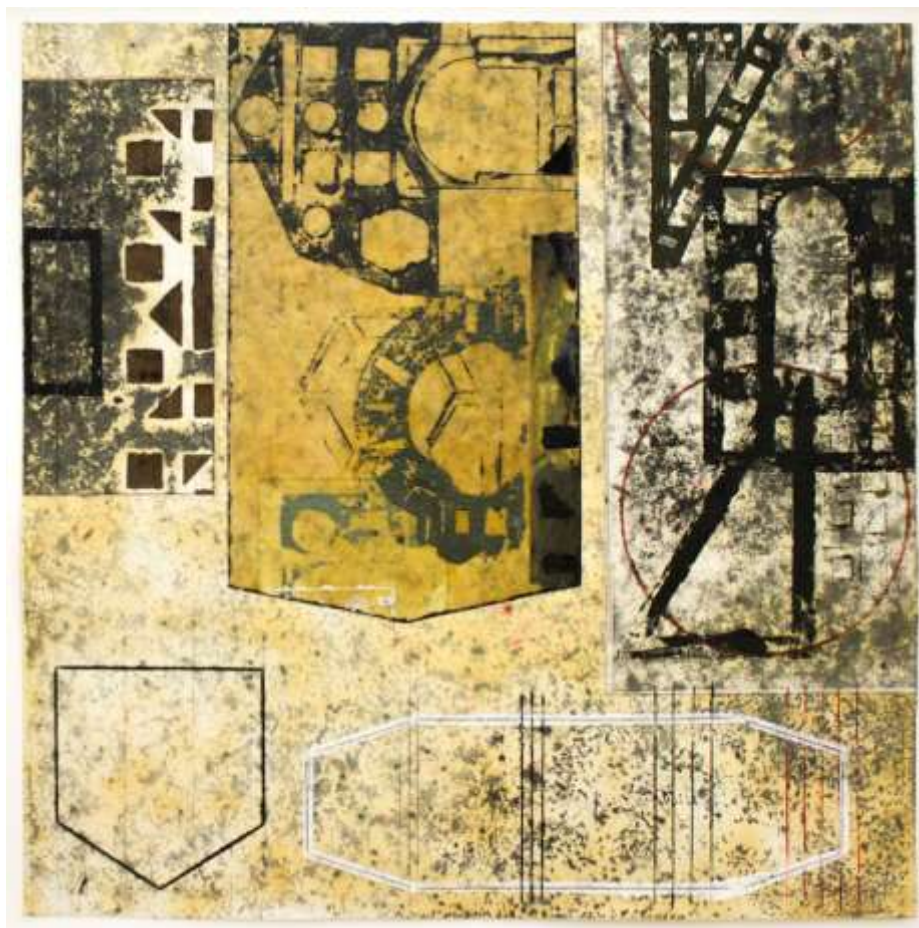


David Rabinowitch:

Périgord Construction of Vision Drawings

by *Marcia E. Vetrocq* February 5, 2019

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David Rabinowitch, *Untitled (Périgord Construction of Vision)*, 2012. Beeswax, crayon, graphite, oil, oil based ink and collage on paper, 26 x 26 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

In the course of fifty years of exhibiting his art, David Rabinowitch has come to be known for his rigorous empiricism, flinty intelligence, and serial investigations into the organizing operations of perception. Where his extensive corpus of drawings is concerned, Rabinowitch distinguishes between drawings that are and are not intended for sculpture, and drawings that do and do not reference “external things” (musical instruments, trees,

shells, sculpture, architecture). With equal firmness, in a 2003 interview with the *Brooklyn Rail*'s Joan Waltemath Rabinowitch outlined what he saw as a cardinal difference between sculpture and architecture. Not disparagingly, he declared the latter to be among the decorative arts for its basis in pattern, which is born of the repetition of modular features required for construction and function. The 19 drawings in his current show manifestly are not intended for sculpture. But far from observing other categorical boundaries, the drawings propose a fluctuating relationship between abstraction and “external things,” and fruitfully complicate any simple distinction between pattern and non-pattern.

Rabinowitch initiated the series in 2008 when he first visited the Périgord region of southwest France and sketched the area's Romanesque ecclesiastical architecture. Work on the *Périgord* drawings proper began shortly thereafter, continued intermittently over the subsequent decade, and is ongoing. The selection here begins with eight drawings from 2012, runs through the next three years, and concludes with one entry dated 2013/2018. The drawings are far from grand in size (the largest are 26 inches square), but they are rich in material and structural complexities. In combinations that vary from drawing to drawing, Rabinowitch used beeswax, wax, crayon, oil, oil-based ink, graphite, collage, colored pencil, and a sheet of gold leaf (cut in the shape of an elementary basilica). Notwithstanding the prevalence of black, the drawings share a warm tonality that arises from a preliminary application of beeswax to many of the creamy sheets and from a seemingly local palette of the brown, ochre, gray, and olive—occasionally freckled together—of Périgord stone. Here and there a grassy green and summery yellow may have arrived from nearby foliage and fields. In one drawing, a sapphire-colored triangle glows within a thicket of black marks like a shard of stained glass.

With the exception of a few forms that resemble pods or wasp nests, the defining elements of the *Périgord* drawings are abstract graphic shapes—solids and outlines, geometry that is regular and not—that Rabinowitch created with hand-cut paper templates, each unique and used just once, like a stencil or stamp. These shapes convene in frontal, nonhierarchical compositions that are often stabilized by a large block of color or a simple shape that touches an edge or occupies a corner. Overlapping and intersecting, the components broker a visual accord between plane geometry and unremitting flatness on the one hand, and the stout walls and massed volumes of Romanesque architecture on the other.

The proliferation in the *Périgord* drawings of differently scaled shapes, many of them irregularly contoured and cut, forecloses modular repetition along with the decorative quality ascribed to architecture by Rabinowitch. Small, exciting observations accrue with time. A certain configuration might suggest a ground plan in one moment and an elevation or section in the next. Two round-topped window-like shapes, one colored pale olive and the other framed by a field of that color, play a game of positive/negative, while each is scored with lines that reference both masonry and grids. Elsewhere a similarly rounded shape is laid over one corner of a hexagon, triggering the perception of a rogue perspectival diagram.



David Rabinowitch, *Untitled (Périgord Construction of Vision)*, 2014. Beeswax, crayon, oil and oil based ink on paper, 17 × 12 1/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

The absorbing, sometimes almost teasing activity within these drawings is unlike anything we're accustomed to seeing from Rabinowitch. Although a previous jolt was delivered by the bright colors and vigorously looping lines of his *Birth of Romanticism* series, exhibited in 2011 at Peter Blum, the genealogical tree of the *Périgord* drawings is actually so dense that it enriches our understanding of much that has been constant in Rabinowitch's art from the outset. The full title of the series is *Périgord Romanesque Construction of Vision*. He first used the phrase "Construction of Vision" in 1969 for an extensive series of spartan drawings comprising fine lines, circles, ellipses, and curves. Sheet by sheet, each successive change in the number, proximity, or relative position of the elements was sufficient to suggest recession or motion in an otherwise featureless field. As for "Romanesque," which conjures heft and bulk, Rabinowitch's earliest invocation came in the form of the *Romanesque Abutments* of 1968, a series of steel floor sculptures in which each work is installed touching a wall, as if to contribute to an architectural structure. The chunky, irregular sculptures echo some of the shapes found in Rabinowitch's *Carved Woodblock Monotypes* of 1962, the first works he made with single-use, hand-cut templates. Descendants of the monotypes' flat, irregular shapes returned in the templates cut for the *Périgord* drawings. Rabinowitch first sketched actual Romanesque architecture in 1970 – 71, in and around Cologne, and from that experience he developed several groups of *Ottonian Construction of Vision* drawings. Also in the 1970s, he worked on the *Metrical (Romanesque) Constructions*, multipart polygonal

floor works whose flat shapes were derived from Romanesque architecture. At approximately four inches thick, the solid planes of those works were counted as “masses” by Rabinowitch.

The above might seem an over-long historical review for an artist who instituted a system of classifying his work by series precisely as a bulwark against the possibility of developing a “style.” But the point here is that progressive campaigns of observation and analysis—not the evolution of a “look” or manner or style—are the basis for the coherence of Rabinowitch’s art. Those interrelated campaigns account for his readiness to tailor an established title and assign it to a new category of work, to articulate subseries within series, and to return to a single drawing after five years when a fresh possibility presents itself. In a 1997 conversation with David Carrier, Rabinowitch described his strategy for sculpture as aggregating parts that build toward a “totality,” a “particular” whose conditions are perceived in time. He was aiming not for a literal wholeness but for “the continuous regeneration of perception with respect to one thing.” That seems an apt way to think about the *Périgord* drawings and also what they tell us about the switchbacks and through lines of Rabinowitch’s long, estimable career.

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