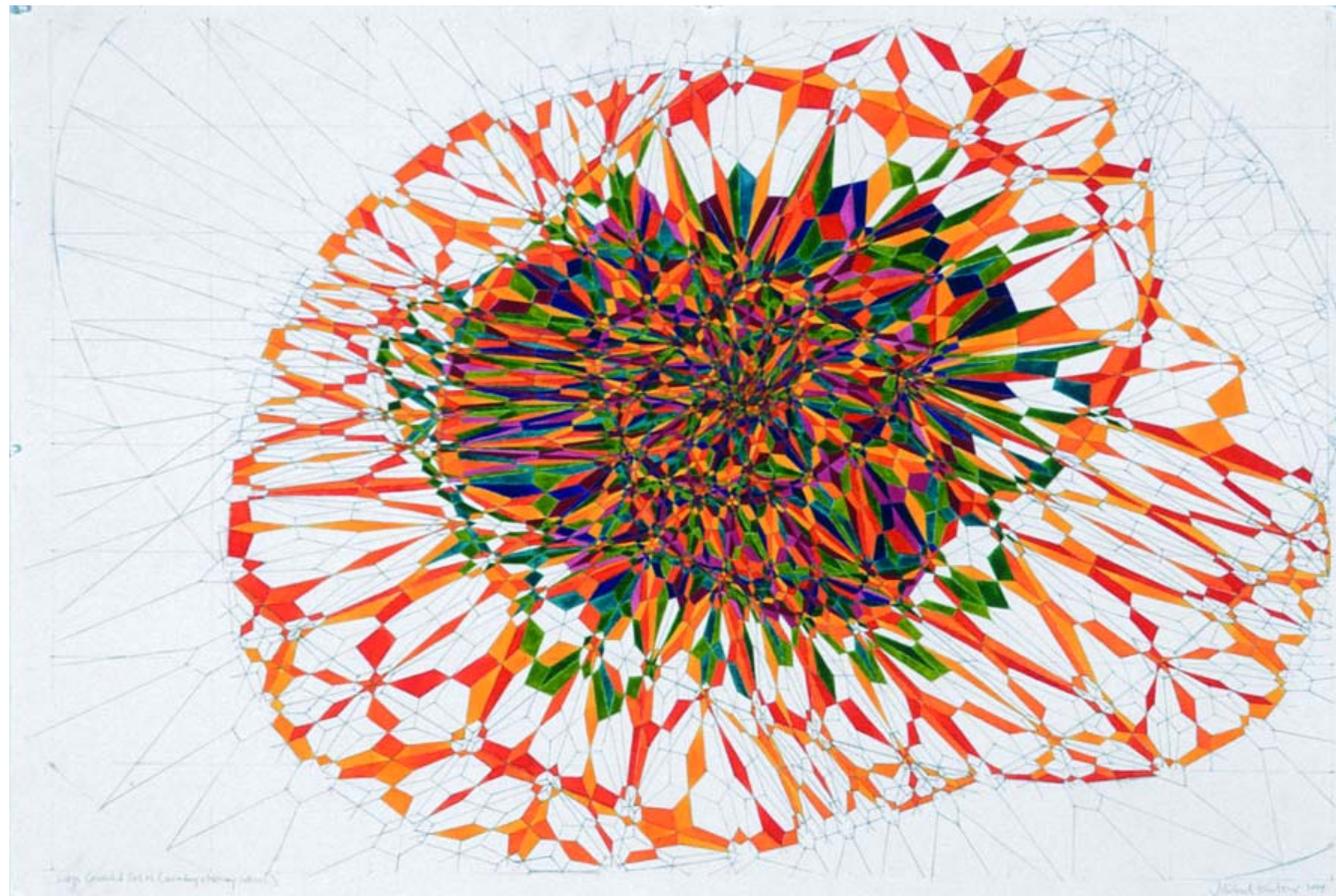


A two-part exhibition presented concurrently at the
Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College
and
The Art Gym
Marylhurst University

October 29 to December 10, 2006
Portland, Oregon

Michael Knutson *Paintings and Drawings, 1981-2006*



Large Convoluted Coil 1
2004
30 x 44 inches
Collection of Linda and Michael Toohy

On the front cover:
Warpt Ovals Wheel (detail)
1999
22 x 30 inches



Geometry Askew: The Drawings of Michael Knutson

The visual effect of a Michael Knutson drawing conjures a multitude of fantastic impressions: a cosmic galaxy, a psychedelic spider's web, a geometric hybrid of carnival paintings that children make on a spinning turntable. With all their spatial complexity, the watercolor wash drawings in this exhibition are born of a simple visual premise. They are best viewed first at a distance, to appreciate the full impact of Knutson's design; then at close range, to grasp the measured calibration of his drawing practice.

Knutson begins each drawing with pencil in hand, developing a basic grid of graphite on paper. Somewhere near the center, he draws a simple spiral—but a spiral that might be lopsided or ovoid, or might overlap itself as it winds outward. Sometimes the artist overlaps two or even three spirals that originate at different points on the page and cross each other like the ripples of stones thrown into a pond. The spiral serves as an armature for the next step, a process of triangulation. Starting at the spiral's center, Knutson bridges its arcs with six radiating lines, creating six irregular triangles. He repeats this process until the spiral is locked into a hexagonal pattern of triangles. Next, he draws small, hexagonal “nodes” around the convergence points of the six triangles, truncating and changing them into irregular hexagons. Finally, he subdivides each hexagon into interlocked cubes, a pattern of diamond shapes known to quilters as “tumbling blocks.” Triangulation is a discipline better known in surveying, navigation, astrometry, and stereopsis. In Knutson's hands, it is an almost Zenlike practice to create a sense of order in what will become a seemingly chaotic drawing. At the center of the drawing, the geometric shapes are most dense and contracted; as he spins out from the core, the shapes expand, stopping only where the spiral flows off the page.

This intricate line drawing, made without a straight-edge, forms the basis for exploring the endless possibilities of illusion from a basic, cubic grid. Although the underlying spirals, triangulations, and color patterns are different in each of the drawings preceding the *Large Convoluted Coil* series, they all have a similar underlying cubic pattern. In the *Large Convoluted Coils* series (2004–05), however, the underlying drawing is identical. The artist has harnessed the benefits of contemporary mechanical reproduction for these works, scanning the original 30-by-44-inch graphite drawing into the computer, a process that is simultaneously low- and high-tech. Because the drawing is so large, Knutson must scan it in eight parts, rejoining the lines in Photoshop. The digitized drawing is then printed at full size onto Rives BFK, an acid-free cotton paper. This process alters the color of the line drawing somewhat, turning the graphite line silver-green, an ironic echo of Old Master silverpoint drawings. It takes Knutson six or seven days to make the original drawing, scan it, and digitally adjust it before he is ready to apply watercolor.

Knutson's large-format oil and acrylic paintings remind us that he is nothing if not a colorist. The colors in his paintings are usually intense and assertive. His drawings, however, reveal his more subtle handling of hue, as he chooses colors—or a color—to pick out shapes and passages in the lacy honeycomb of his drawn matrix. Each drawing presents an opportunity to experiment with variations on the color wheel, with illusions of transparency, or with gradations of saturation of a single color. In *Warpt Coil* (1999), for example, Knutson limited his palette to red, yellow, blue, black, and the white of the paper. Following the crossing-staircases pattern of the cubic grid, each color alternates with black and white every third step. The color staircases also extend diagonally

Michael Knutson with
Large Convoluted Coil series

“Knutson can surprise even himself with the finished watercolor; it is impossible, of course, to visualize exactly how the patterns will emerge and shift before the colors create cadence.”

in three directions. In another drawing, *Warpt Ovals Wheel* (1999), the artist limited himself to the six hues of the color wheel (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet), plus black and the white of the paper. Or, in his monochromatic watercolor drawings, Knutson rigorously applied layers of paint to achieve—in the case of *Study for Wobble Star Coil* (2003)—91 steps of saturation. Each darkening of the blue pigment represents another application of the same watercolor as the base—one can see the tick marks in the upper left corner of the sheet, where Knutson kept track of the number of shadings.

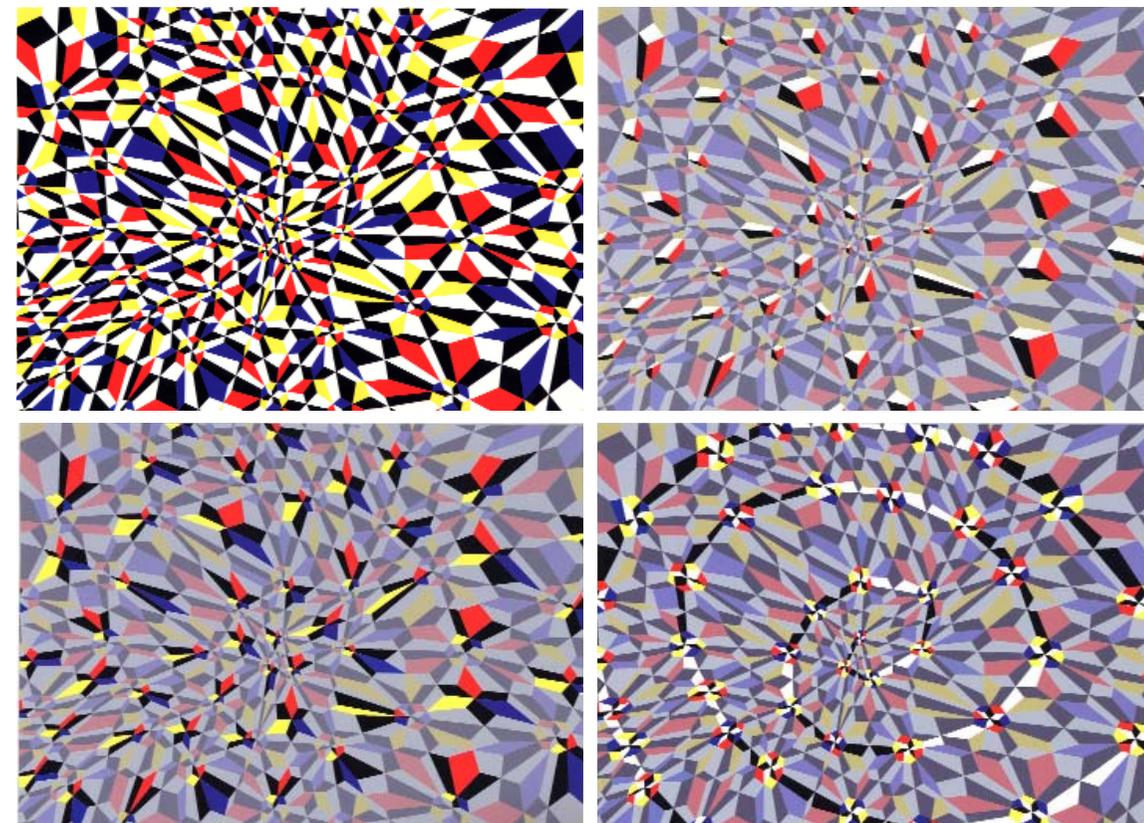
The color patterns of the watercolors from 2004 and 2005 are even more complex. *Large Convoluted Coil 1* (2004) and *Large Convoluted Coil 2* (2004) contain intricate sequences of colors, highly concentrated in minute slivers of shapes at the drawing's core. In *Large Convoluted Coil 1*, the nine secondary and tertiary colors are laid out in hexagonal lattices, like nine overlapping chain-link fences. *Large Convoluted Coil 2* contains 15 colors—the 12 primary, secondary, and tertiary colors and black, white, and gray—in hexagonal lattices.

Knutson can surprise even himself with the finished watercolor; it is impossible, of course, to visualize exactly how the patterns will emerge and shift before the colors create cadence. Around the time that Knutson executed *Warpt Coil*, he began to notice other ways to “read” across the painting than the color step sequences he had been intent on. Alternative color patterns and puzzling shifts of the field competed for his attention. To better understand each of these variant readings, Knutson scanned a slide of *Warpt Coil* into Photoshop and, by muting some colors and not others, isolated patterns of spirals, triangles, stars, ribbons, cubes, clusters, and lattices in a series of digital images (see illustration opposite). This was his first

use of the computer as a tool to see his drawings anew. Five years later, for the *Large Convoluted Coil* series, Knutson employed digital technology as a time-saving device, reproducing a complex drawing to explore various color pattern possibilities.

Certainly the first reading of Knutson's drawings would suggest Optical Art. This mathematically themed variation of Abstraction, which found its apogee in the 1960s, is most closely associated with Victor Vasarely, Bridget Riley, Richard Anuszkiewicz, and a few others. Knutson's drawings bear the repetition of simple geometric forms and colors that create the vibrating effects, moirés, and foreground/background confusion associated with Op Art. But cool tricks of visual perception are not paramount in Knutson's work.

Rather, Knutson cites Joan Miró's celebrated *Constellation Series* (1939–41) as a historic reference that resonates with his own drawing practice. While exiled in France, the Spanish painter made 24 obsessively meticulous drawings triggered by the Spanish Civil War and World War II. All of the drawings feature Miró's familiar motifs—circles, squares, triangles, spirals, and other geometric figures—held in tension within a free-floating web of line. Piet Mondrian (especially the *Pier and Ocean* drawings and paintings, circa 1915, and his late painting *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, 1944), Wassily Kandinsky, and Alfred Jensen are also artists whose works have influenced Knutson. The artist credits Leonardo da Vinci's water movement studies and deluge drawings (circa 1508–18) and the early Christian mosaics in Ravenna as other historical works that inform his imagery. He has even commented, only half jokingly, that his own drawings lie somewhere between Dr. Seuss (the topsy-turvy architecture of Whoville in *Horton Hears a Who!*) and the intricate knots of the carpet pages of Celtic manuscript illumination.

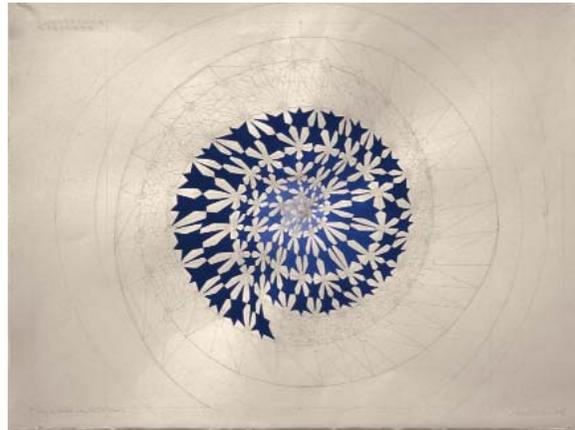


Clockwise from upper left: *Warpt Coil*, 1999, 22 x 30 inches, plus three versions of *Warpt Coil* manipulated in Photoshop to highlight various patterns: cubes, a spiral, and stars.

Knutson is a graduate of Yale University School of Art (M.F.A. 1975), where the influence of Josef Albers' color theory was a pervasive presence. (Knutson assisted in the color theory class Albers started at Yale, and received his M.F.A. just a year before Albers' death.) Even today, Knutson's tendency toward simple color combinations recalls Albers' work. Also teaching at Yale during Knutson's time there was Abstract Expressionist Al Held, whose early black and white linear paintings—huge drawings of stripped-down geometric volumes that created kinetic illusions—piqued Knutson's interest. Crediting Held as his most direct influence, Knutson continues to strive for the spatial cohesiveness and dynamism of Held's work.

Intending his own illusions to be a bit slippery,

Knutson counters an ingrained need for stability by equally and purposefully seeking the disarming quality of his pitched grids. One of the most impressive aspects of Knutson's work is that he creates an enormously energetic image while simultaneously holding the viewer's gaze to the subtle intricacy of the drawing surface. From a slight distance, these drawings appear almost alive, pulsating and flowing with movement. This is due, in part, to the absence of dominant horizontal or vertical lines—the work is always slightly ungrounded and therefore eccentric. Sometimes Knutson interweaves colors, as in *Large Convoluted Coil 5* (2004), where a band of yellow crosses paths with a band of red. This creates the dizzying sensation that the paper has actually buckled or warped. But as one examines the surface of the



Study for Wobble Star Coil
2003
22 x 30 inches
Collection of Merridawn Duckler
and Bryan Baisinger

drawing, the indicia of hand-applied pigment become evident. Especially as Knutson lays one watercolor wash over another, the pigment slightly pulls to the outside edges of each cell of color, a trace of the aqueous medium as it is absorbed by and resists the tooth of the paper. In other works, the geometric shapes of color maintain the slightest thread of negative white space where two colors abut, alerting the viewer to the hand-application of these pigments. (Imagine, for a moment, how different Knutson's drawings would look if he applied his colors digitally in Photoshop.)

Knutson's most recent drawings have a resolutely unfinished quality about them. The watercolor application is much more intensely defined at the center, and much more sparingly at the edges, giving the resulting color shape a certain odd placement on the page. Knutson calls this the "narrative of process," indicating that the viewer can anticipate and participate in how these drawings are designed and constructed. In the end, the viewer might imagine these drawings to be blueprints for some confounding structure, or a map of a mysterious space.

Knutson's drawings that are digitized and then hand-colored exist within the interface of technology and the most traditional methods of art making. In this, Knutson is aligned with only a few other contemporary artists who tap into the possibilities of technology while remaining resolutely committed to

making images by hand. Paintings by Jeffrey Simmons and Tim Bavington, Anne Appleby's color study prints, Julie Mehretu's drawings and paintings, and Tobias Putrih's drawings and sculptures share an interest in exactitude and crispness of execution, but insist on the maker's mark in the finished work. Or perhaps Knutson has just as much in common with traditional and contemporary quilt makers, other artists who divine color and shape combinations out of infinite possibilities.

It is important to note that Knutson's drawings share common concerns with his knock-your-socks-off monumental paintings. The drawings are not, however, studies for the larger works. They may serve as tests for spatial and color sequences the artist might like to apply to his massive canvases, but they are not studies in any traditional sense. Instead, Knutson combines traditional drawing, technological reproduction, and watercolor wash painting to consider new combinations of colors and shapes, challenges that are formal and fundamental considerations for any artist. In these concise drawings, he gives us patterns that are paradoxically otherworldly and comfortably familiar.

Linda Tesner, Director
Ronna and Eric Hoffman
Gallery of Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College

Works in the Exhibition at the Hoffman Gallery

All works are courtesy of the artist and Blackfish Gallery, Portland, and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, unless otherwise noted.

Drawings

All drawings are watercolor on paper.

Large Convoluted Coil 6
2005
30 x 44 inches

Large Convoluted Coil 1
2004
30 x 44 inches
Collection of
Linda and Michael Toohey

Large Convoluted Coil 2
2004
30 x 44 inches
Collection of
Alice and George McCain

Large Convoluted Coil 3
2004
30 x 44 inches

Large Convoluted Coil 4
2004
30 x 44 inches

Large Convoluted Coil 5
2004
30 x 44 inches

Perpendicular Crossing Coils I
2004
22 x 30 inches

Perpendicular Crossing Coils III
2004
22 x 30 inches
Collection of
Marte Lamb and Michael Parsons

Study for Sprung Coil
2004
22 x 30 inches
Collection of
Lucinda Parker and Stephen McCarthy

Study for Bipolar Coiled Field
2003
22 x 30 inches
Collection of
Judy Cooke and Robert Hanson

Study for Convoluted Coil II
2003
22 x 30 inches
Collection of Dorie and Larry Vollum

Study for Convoluted Coil III
2003
22 x 30 inches
Collection of Jane and Spencer Beebe

Study for Crossing Oval Coils II
2003
22 x 30 inches

Study for Crossing Oval Coils III
2003
22 x 30 inches

Study for Tripolar Coiled Field
2003
22 x 30 inches

Study for Wobble Star Coil
2003
22 x 30 inches
Collection of Merridawn Duckler
and Bryan Baisinger

Warpt Coil
1999
22 x 30 inches

Warpt Ovals Wheel
1999
22 x 30 inches

Paintings

Bipolar Coils II
2006
Oil on canvas
72 x 144 inches

Crossing Oval Coils VI
2006
Oil on canvas
84 x 84 inches

Bipolar Coils
2004
Oil on canvas
96 x 72 inches

Crossing Oval Coils II
2004
Oil on canvas
78 x 108 inches
Collection of the State of Oregon,
State Data Center, Salem

Tripolar Coils
2004
Oil on canvas
67 x 60 inches

Crossing Oval Coils I
2003
Oil on canvas
60 x 60 inches

Warpt Coil
2003
Oil on canvas
62 x 64 inches

Black/White Wobble Coil
2002
Oil on canvas
63.5 x 63.5 inches
Collection of Robert R. Dozono

Black/White Tetra Coil
2000
Oil on canvas
78 x 120 inches

Wheel IV
1999
Oil on canvas
36 x 36 inches
Private Collection

Wheel V
1999
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches
Collection of
Marte Lamb and Michael Parsons

Wheel II
1998
Oil on canvas
36 x 36 inches

Moonstalker
1995
Acrylic on canvas
66 x 114 inches

Current
1990
Acrylic and sand on canvas
96 x 120 inches

Apollo and Marsyas
1984
Acrylic on canvas
118 x 68 inches

Fall of Phaeton
1984
Acrylic on canvas
116 x 78 inches
Collection of Robert R. Dozono

Hold Tight
1983
Acrylic on canvas
66 x 66 inches

Odysseus and Calypso
1983
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 120 inches

Runner
1983
Acrylic on canvas
96 x 66 inches

Your Feet's Too Big
1983
Acrylic on canvas
66 x 66 inches

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Michael Knutson, *Paintings and Drawings, 1981-2006* was organized by Terri Hopkins, director and curator of The Art Gym at Marylhurst University, and Stephanie Snyder, director and curator of the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College. The drawings were selected by Linda Tesner, director and curator of the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery at Lewis & Clark College.

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Recycled paper