

Russell Crotty at Shoshana Wayne Gallery

Shoshana Wayne Gallery has presented its third solo show for artist Russell Crotty. The exhibition includes two nine-foot tall drawings from the 1990s, and a host of artist books and journals chronicling the artist's absolute devotion to surf culture. I confess, when I first visited the show, I found the work to be somewhat inaccessible, but had the good sense to find an artist friend who has been surfing for fifty years and return with him for another look. As I surmised, it took an experienced surfer to reveal the obsessive and private world in which Crotty is deeply embedded, and it was a

and some mention of what appear to be alter egos Crotty has devised to tell some of his tales.

On second viewing, I left feeling that Crotty is drawing the surf ride that never ends, and that he had beautifully evoked the intensity, richness and spirituality of surf culture. As my friend said to me, "I don't want to romanticize this, but surfing is an experience in which you become a particle on a wave of energy. It is a meditation; it is transcendent, and it is also terrifying in some respects because there is great danger at times. It is something that people like myself, who have been surfing for half a century, can barely explain. It becomes a way of life that bonds together those who have had these feelings." Apparently, for persons deeply devoted to this sub-culture, it is not uncommon to fill notebooks with sketches, private information about where waves are breaking, the depth of water in

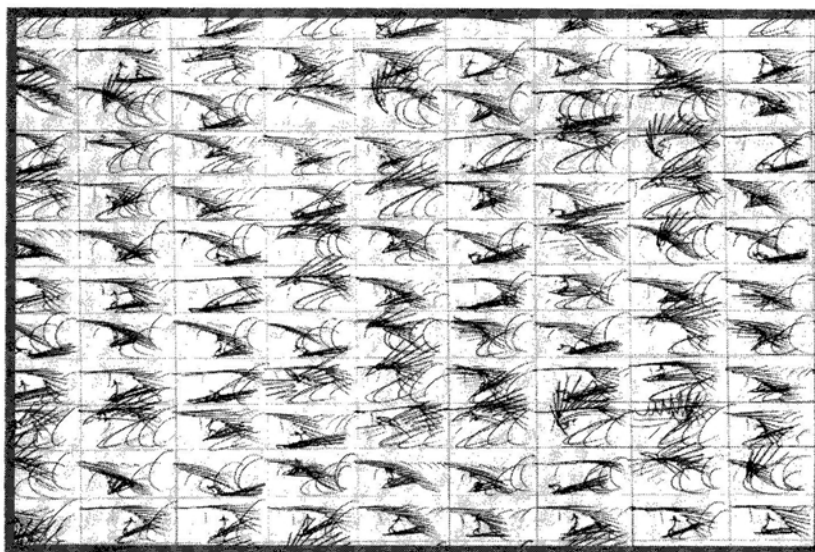
involves brilliant timing, and being at the right spot at the right moment. It requires an understanding and embrace of nature, being a weatherman, a geologist, and above all being physically fit as a life discipline. Like art, the return one gets as a surfer is in direct response to the preparation put into it. Throughout the notations in *Surf Works* Crotty evokes the beauty of the ride, the terror of wiping out, the essential pain and endurance experience and the epiphanies acquired—all this from what at first appear to be sketches of stick figures.

The question becomes, is it necessary to know about surfing to understand and appreciate Crotty's work? Yes and no. On a formal level, one can glean something of substance from the making of this work. But with further research, these drawings truly come alive; the payoff is worth the time spent finding out just what the artist was doing. As a viewer, much less a writer, it was incumbent upon me to take the work further, to show some responsibility in understanding what the artist was up to here, and this becomes part of the true enjoyment of experiencing Crotty's thoroughly engaging *Surf Works*.

—Clayton Campbell

Russell Crotty: Surf Works 1988-2008 closed in February at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica.

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Russell Crotty, detail of *Surf Drawing Blue*, 1990, ink and pencil on paper, 118-1/8" x 240", at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica.

fascinating discovery.

On first viewing then, my experience was purely aesthetic and formal. The two large drawings flanking either end of the gallery are well-made and minimalist in conception, reminiscent in an offhand way of Cy Twombly's quavering lines and pristine application. Each drawing utilizes a grid in which hundreds of tiny vignettes are laid out like film strips. The individual cells are quickly rendered with ballpoint pen and contain notations of stick figures surfing on waves. They appear to invite a conversation about drawing in general, and these two works specifically about minimalist drawing. Without knowledge of surfing, this is where the conversation between artist and viewer might stay. The book and journals are filled with pleasant and seemingly conventional watercolors of beaches and surf scenes, cartographic sketches of waves and surf spots. Writing is scribbled throughout the journals, peppered with a large dose of surf vernacular

various places, the best spots and how to ride. It is a private language, spoken in code known only to those in the closed circuit of advanced surfing. What is clear is that for this group, surfing is a powerful experience and they seek to find a way to integrate it into the rest of their lives; Crotty is able to do this through his art.

The large drawings were made from the point of view of the surfers as the waves are breaking, rather than the from perspective of the viewer. The notations are memories of rides, quite specific in how the waves unfold and break. It is a document of actual experience, and much less focused on the formality of drawing. This motif picks up in more detail in the notebooks. For example, Crotty shows the layouts of a "break" so that a surfer can get back out to catch the waves. In other sections there are elaborate maps of spots where hardcore surfers go. The quest for the right waves is a journey. This exacting approach to surfing