Siena Recalls Cornell Days in Artist Talk at Johnson

Apr. 20, 2010
Ithaca, New York

Reflecting on the 1970s as a time before technology ruled everyone's lives, James Siena '79 recalled his Cornell years and his development as an artist at an April 16 talk at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art. "I realized on my way up here that I was a freshman 35 years ago -- I thought I was a grownup," said Siena, who is on the faculty of the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Noting that it was the era before the Internet, he remembered playing the computer game "Paranoia" on ARPANET back then. "What does this have to do with me becoming a visual artist?" he said. "I think that what I do is trying to make thought visible -- trying to take apart the visual process in order to make us think about how we think."

Siena was also on campus to receive the 2009-10 Eissner Artist of the Year Award, given to alumni artists of distinction by the Cornell Council for the Arts. The crystal award statuette was presented to Siena after the lecture by Judith Kellock, CCA interim director.

Much of Siena's work involves patterns and structures he terms algorithms. He explained some of those patterns in various slides of his work, including a design that has now been reproduced on a rug made in Kathmandu, Nepal. He said he became interested in visualizing fractals, the Golden Mean and other mathematical concepts when he realized "the edge of anything is infinite."

Siena also said that all the serious disciplines and fields of study he encountered at Cornell intrigued him.
"There was a professor named Asher here," he said. "He believed that the only unit of culture was the individual. That there was no culture. I wanted to one-up him; I was a bit of a smart guy in class. A friend of mine, a poet named Josh Davis, had invented an alter ego named Harold Flood and had written about a hundred poems as this person. So I did a portrait of an imaginary individual."

Siena's talk accompanied the exhibition "James Siena: From the Studio," a personal retrospective of his career which closed April 18 at the Johnson. The show featured 19 pieces from the past 30 years, along with several artworks by his contemporaries (including Joyce Robins, Mark Lombardi and Alfred Jensen) he has traded for, bought or received as gifts; and examples from his collection of antique typewriters and adding machines.
His first-ever exhibition in the 1970s featured two pieces displayed at Moosewood Restaurant in Ithaca, Siena said. There was none of his Cornell work in the recent retrospective; the two earliest pieces on display were from 1977 -- mixed-media works featuring flattened rodents (mole, glue and bronze powder; and mouse and gold leaf), Siena serves on the Johnson Museum and College of Architecture, Art and Planning advisory councils. His lecture was introduced by Andrea Inselmann, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Johnson.
The Art of Geometry: James Siena to Talk About his Work at Johnson Museum

Apr. 14, 2010
Ithaca, New York

Intricate, sometimes brilliantly colored geometrical abstractions, carefully rendered on small metal panels or sheets of paper, are the main attractions in a current show at the Cornell's Johnson Museum. These lovably convoluted flatlands are the work of James Siena, a Cornell graduate (BFA, 1979), and the winner of this year's Eissner Artist of the Year Award. The prize is given annually to "an alumna/us who has achieved national or international success in the arts" - something Siena has achieved over the course of three decades in New York City. "James Siena: From the Studio" will be on display at the Johnson through Sunday, April 18.

Siena's images belong to a genre of artworks (not just visual) incorporating preconceived formal constraints as a primary source of structure and shape. Sol LeWitt, to whom Siena is frequently compared, is a primary point of reference. LeWitt devised formulas for wall drawings to be executed by assistants - e.g., iterations of straight-ruled horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines.

LeWitt is of great historical importance and undoubtedly an influence on the younger artist. Siena's work, however, develops these ideas in a different and arguably richer direction - more aesthetically robust, more sensual and bodily. Plus his math is just more interesting. Though strictly non-figurative (with exceptions, see below), Siena's art might be closer to that of M.C. Escher, whose geometrical schemas are deployed in the service of more accessible image-making.

Siena is also frequently aligned with folk and decorative traditions. However, his art has a self-enclosed quality that seems to place it more directly in the modern art lineage.

The most elaborately formal work here is composed with sign-painter's enamel on aluminum panels, a signature medium. Enter the Faces and Base Three feature elaborate patterns of nested geometric forms. The former contains spiraling rectangular shapes while the latter's rounded forms feel dully static.

ABOUT THE CORNELL COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS
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CCA Interim Director: Judith Kellock jgk6@cornell.edu 607.255.3424
The acridly colored Non-Slice is a strong example of Siena's more organic, freeform side. It can indeed be seen as a cross-section - perhaps of some biological or geological structure.

V-Module is a dizzying maze-vortex in two colors: green and off-white. Hook-like striations converge towards the center of the panel, but the visual core is strangely indeterminate. Module is notably irregular in its manual execution - you can see varying opacities of paint, as well as areas of unpainted metal.

Siena is a rather hit-or-miss colorist. Much of his best work is color restricted, often two-toned. For example, the branching, sponge-like growth of Ballou - black ink on white paper - is not too far removed from the simplicity of Matisse's cutout collages.

Recently, Siena has incorporated his intricate patterning into images of comics-influenced human grotesques. The profiled head of a Cursing Old Man (graphite on paper) is crisply outlined, while his interior forms - suggesting muscles and brain - are rendered in scratchily tonal lines. (The allover abstract graphite drawing Untitled (Fuzzy Line) has similar mark-making - look closely and it's easy to see a face.) In Flatland, Flat Battered Girls, and Four Figures Connected feature disturbingly flattened and distended figures.

Flat Mole and Flat Mouse (both from his student days) are both done on outstretched animal hides covered with metal leaf. The former features tiny drawn hands. Also outliers in Siena's corpus are three small sculptures. Lattices of toothpick fragments have been constructed around grape stems. These minor efforts fit the show's intimate and exploratory theme.

Beyond Siena's own work, a collection of art and artifacts "from the studio" also forms an integral part of the show's concept. The bona-fide artworks are from friends and influences (many bear dedications). Although mostly so-so as art, they do help define a sensibility.

Alan Saret, a mentor of Siena's, has created one of the most impressive images here: Shroni Gorge Air. One of his "gang drawings," it was done with several colored pencils in hand, manipulated with characteristic grace and variety. It contains a sense of sweeping movement akin to the weather. In a similar vein, but less subtle and expressive, is a tiny ink drawing by the abstract surrealist Charles Seliger.

The non-art fares better. Two antique typewriters, aside from being beautiful, are closely linked to Siena's sensibility in at least two ways: in their implicitly anthropomorphic form and in the transparency of their mechanisms. Like them, Siena's work displays its inner workings - actually more so because their resolute flatness leaves nothing occluded.
PRESS RELEASE

Three small photographs, anonymous aerial surveillance images from World War 1, show networks of trenches. Many of these form crenellation-like patterns, particularly Siena-esque.

This is flawed yet fascinating show, a glimpse into the work and sensibility of an intriguing and influential artist.

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Siena will be giving a talk on his work at the museum 4:30 p.m. Friday, April 16. An award ceremony for the Eissner will be held in conjunction with the talk. Visit museum.cornell.edu for more information.
Acclaimed Painter to Receive Cornell Eissner Artist of the Year Award

* WHAT: Painter James Siena to give gallery talk, receive Cornell Eissner Artist of the Year Award

* WHEN: Friday, April 16, 2010, 4:30 p.m.

* WHERE: Floor 2L, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University

Acclaimed painter James Siena will receive the Cornell Eissner Artist of the Year Award Friday, April 16, following a gallery talk at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art on the Cornell University campus. Siena will discuss his professional life as an artist, his time at Cornell as an undergraduate, and his thoughts on the current art world. A reception will follow the award presentation. The event is free and open to the public.

Thirty years after he received his BFA from Cornell, Siena has emerged as one of the art world's internationally-respected leaders whose work is widely respected and critically acclaimed. Siena balances the traditions of 20th and 21st century abstraction with a maverick sensibility to craft salient, if speculative, insights on the contemporary world and the intricate workings of human perception. An exhibition of his works is on display at the Johnson Museum through Sunday, April 18.

Interviews with Mr. Siena can be arranged by contacting Pamela Lafayette, ccpa@cornell.edu or (607) 255-7274.

Photo and additional information available on request.

Contact: Claudia Wheatley
Phone: (607) 255-9451
E-mail: caw43@cornell.edu

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PRESS RELEASE

Released by Cornell Chronicle
By Daniel Aloi

Artist James Siena ’79 to Speak on Campus

Mar. 29, 2010
Ithaca, NY

James Siena ’79 will visit campus April 16 to receive the 2009-10 Eissner Artist of the Year Award from the Cornell Council for the Arts.

Siena will discuss his work at 4:30 p.m. at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, with a reception to follow.

A personal glimpse into Siena's world is on display in "James Siena: From the Studio," at the museum through April 18. The exhibition features paintings and drawings by Siena and his contemporaries as well as sculptural pieces and examples from his extensive collections of antique typewriters and calculating machines.

Siena's paintings focus on complex, colorful linear abstractions, and he works in various media, including lithography, etching, woodcut, drawing and engraving. His work is in many private and public collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art and Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Marion Ettlinger
James Siena Lecture

Ithaca, New York

James Siena (B.F.A. ’79) will give a lecture at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art when he is on campus to receive the 2009–10 Eissner Artist of the Year Award from the Cornell Council for the Arts. His lecture will be followed by a reception.

Siena's work is on display at the museum through April 18. The exhibition, "James Siena: From the Studio," features paintings and drawings by Siena and his contemporaries as well as sculptural pieces and examples from his extensive collections of antique typewriters and calculating machines.

His work is in many private and public collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Museum of Modern Art in New York.

DATE       April 16, 2010
TIME       4:30 p.m.
LOCATION   Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art
PRESS RELEASE

Released by Cornell Daily Sun
By Laura Miller

James Siena: From The Studio

February 10, 2010
Ithaca, New York

From the Studio is a celebration of the interests and work of James Siena ’79, winner of the 2009-2010 Eissner Artist of the Year. An array of odd and colorful contents of Siena’s creative workspace have found their way to the Johnson Museum, a proper homecoming for the Cornell graduate. The exhibit goes beyond showcasing Siena’s own work, including pieces by fellow artists with whom he has crossed paths. It is perhaps such variety that has allowed the collection to evolve into a personal depiction of the artist himself rather than a mere portfolio.

The exhibit harbors a number of Siena’s enamel-on-aluminum and gouache-on-paper paintings, which are chaotic yet extraordinarily symmetrical, resolutely systematic yet organic and abstract. “In Flatland” is just as the name suggests, a neutral combination of peach on yellow that generates a purposeful lack of dimension. Other paintings give undeniable presence and attention to line and color, appearing as the cross sections of marvelous geodes with labyrinthine strata or as the contour plots of nameless, amorphous entities.

Siena imparts a sort of human quality to his abstract figures in pieces like “Four Figures Connected,” a molten mess of stretched and inseparable limbs. The four figures are not only connected, but impossible to discern. There to perhaps expand on the themes of humanity and entanglement - be it helpless or joyous - is Hans Breder’s “Body-Sculpture,” a gelatin silver print of two bodies whose torsos are replaced by a reflection of their piled legs. Siena has both produced and acquired works that draw viewers into illusions of seamlessness and dismantle recognizable forms into curious configurations and colors that demand closer inspection.

The exhibit takes a darkly, eye-catching turn with “Flat Mole” and “Flat Mouse.” Sinewy strokes of gold paint create the sort of patterns that seem to be characteristic of Siena across the unexpected canvas of pressed rodent carcass. The visibility of tiny paws and contorted, barely identifiable features generates the effect of a monochromatic cubist drawing, contributing to the breadth of the collection.

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"Enter the Faces" is an intricate, formulaic arrangement of countless rectangles, based upon carefully contemplated divisions of shapes within shapes within shapes. Like the logic board of some imaginary machine, the composition harbors a math of its own, a profusion of esoteric information. Siena's Williams and Hammond typewriters add a dimension of technological eclecticism to the exhibit, as does his CURTA Calculating Machine. Between his art and the artifacts in his possession there lies a balance between poetic obsolescence and unattainability.

Select works from the studio - those given to Siena by acquaintances - perhaps represent the artist's taste for flattened images and his affinity for the challenge of eliminating the third dimension. Anonymous aerial photographs compress the earth into single planes that can perhaps be compared to microscope slides; buildings and patches of land appear to writhe across the lens like innocuous bacteria. Katie Merz's "Cancer," on the other hand, utilizes the movement, placement, and density of clownish colors and hair-thin pen lines to convey a sense of disguised malignance. A variegated gouache mutant spreads ominously from a single corner of the page.

Visual themes seem to take on a more acute presence when they are reduced to a single, expository plane. Two dimensions allow raw shapes and lines and to be the sole descriptor of objects and tone rather than the depth and shadow you find in three. In spite of their being constructed by different hands and various artistic intentions, many of the pieces in James Siena: From the Studio are mysteriously unified in their treatment of space and their tendency to leave drawing surfaces just as they are - planar, concise - delivering many cross-sections of life that are sometimes hard to decipher, though steadfastly expressive.
Exhibitions at Johnson Museum Feature Work of Alumni Siena and Jury

Jan. 27, 2010
Ithaca, New York

Cornell's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art is currently hosting exhibitions of two AAP art alumni. Sam Jury's Forever Is Never is on display until March 28 while James Siena's From the Studio is up until April 18.

Since graduating from Cornell with an M.F.A. in painting in 1998, Jury has predominantly worked with photography and video. Interested in the gaps and fissures between moving and still images, Jury explores how they mediate between reality and imagination. Forever Is Never is about constructing, deconstructing, and manipulating the photographic image, and Jury creates animated portraits that are no one and everyone all at once. Reminiscent of the composite portraits created by Nancy Burson in the 1980s, Jury suspends the spectator between places and experiences remembered and imagined.

James Siena (B.F.A. '79) is the 2009–10 recipient of the Eissner Artist of the Year Award from the Cornell Council for the Arts. Best known for densely patterned paintings, gouaches, and drawings that are based on self-imposed rules and systems, Siena's work has been shown in over 100 solo and group shows including the 2004 Whitney Biennial. The exhibition not only includes paintings and drawings that Siena has not wanted to part with and works by contemporaries he has traded for and bought, such as Mark Lombardi, Alan Saret, and Charles Seliger. Examples from Siena's collection of antique typewriters and calculating machines provide another glimpse into the way this artist's mind works, while a series of in-progress sculptural pieces consisting of grape stems and hardwood trusses seems to be translations of Siena's concerns into three dimensions.
PRESS RELEASE

Published by Cornell Council for the Arts
Apr., 2010

GALLERY TALK

Type: Music/Arts
Date: Friday, April 16, 2010
Time: 4:30pm - 5:30pm
Location: H.F. Johnson Museum of Art

Description

James Siena, BFA '79, has been named the 2009 – 2010 Cornell University Eissner Artist of the Year Award recipient. Please join the Cornell Council for the Arts for an award presentation and a gallery talk by the artist.

James Siena is one of the most inventive, independent, focused and prolific artists working today. Siena received a BFA from Cornell in 1979, and has emerged as one of the art world's internationally respected leaders whose work is widely regarded and critically acclaimed.

Siena has received prestigious awards and residencies including Artist-in-Residency, Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, NY (2004); Award in Art, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York (2000); Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Competition Award, New York (1999); and Fellowship in Painting, New York Foundation for the Arts, New York (1994).

Confirmed Guests
This event has 11 confirmed guests

Your RSVP
- Attending
- Maybe Attending
- Not Attending

Other Invites
- Maybe Attending (2)

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Released by Cornell Alumni Magazine
By Beth Saulnier

The Rule Breaker

Aug. 28, 2009
Ithaca, New York

James Siena ’79 had his first public art show at a restaurant. But at least it was one of the world’s most famous vegetarian eateries: Moosewood, the venerable fixture of Ithaca’s Dewitt Mall whose eponymous cookbook brought meatless cuisine to the masses. "I got to put up two pieces," the artist recalls, "and I think I got a free dinner."

Siena has come a long way from that undergrad debut. His work is in the collections of such institutions as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the MoMA, Boston’s Museum of Fine Art, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; he participated in the 2004 Whitney Biennial and has had two solo shows at New York’s prestigious PaceWildenstein Gallery. This summer, he got a nod from his alma mater with the 2009 Eissner Artist of the Year Award from the Cornell Council for the Arts; his work will be on display at the Johnson Museum from January to April, and he’ll give a talk on campus on April 16. "One of the things I think about when I work is to slow down modern art to some extent," he says, "to take the immediacy of modern life and make it less of a subject."

Although Siena also makes prints and drawings, he’s best known for his small-scale works on aluminum that, as a New York Times reviewer once noted, "at first resemble funky retro-style patterns for kitchen linoleum or bathroom tile." But in fact, they’re the products of Siena’s own "algorithms," sets of mathematical and geometric rules he devises as a sort of personal challenge and aesthetic exercise. Those restrictions can be brief and straightforward: "Endless line containing black," he explains in the catalog for a 2001 show, describing a piece called Untitled Yellow-Black. "Line made up of acute angles. No lines may cross each other." Or they can be devilishly complex, as in the Battery series:

Irregular ellipses follow the four sides of the picture and cover the entire surface in a spiral chain. Ellipses are located such that they are not situated beside one another, but beside the space between them. Their size diminishes slightly as they reach the center. Irregular spacing causes a "cascade effect," that is, the distortions of one area, because of their determinant value to successive ellipses, cause further distortions, which in turn repeat the distortion, until the center is reached. Once the surface is distributed with

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ellipses, they are lined, within and without, the outer lining taking the form of a net which travels from ellipse to ellipse, forming rectangles with concave sides. . . . All voids are thus filled with successive colors.

"Why do I come up with specific rules?" Siena muses. "I think it's because the picture can kind of make itself—the art would not exist without the idea or rule. It's difficult to say what my goal is, because there's a different goal every time I sit down to make a painting. There's a procedure in motion, and it's the job of that one particular painting to solve that problem. Then when I'm done with that, I go and make another problem. So maybe another way to describe it is that I start a problem and solve it, and the picture is the result of that process."

Siena's work has won over critics, academics, and collectors alike. In nominating him for the Eissner award, Cornell art department chair Patricia Phillips called him "one of the most inventive, independent, focused, and prolific artists working today." In the Times, critic Ken Johnson wrote, "The recipes for spiraling lines, nesting boxes, recursively proliferating lattices, and other sorts of all-over patterns produce something far from soberly rationalistic. Mr. Siena's hand imparts to the images the wobbly linearity of underground comic book art; his decorative impulses give them an elaborately detailed, jewel-like quality.... The combination of systematic complexity, comically eccentric style, and hedonism is mesmerizing and irresistibly delightful."

For his works on aluminum, Siena uses industrial paint—actually, sign painter's enamel. It's the other end of the spectrum from his student days, when he bought pigments in New York and ground his own paints, sometimes adding other elements like eggshells. Then, as now, he worked in a variety of media; he even dabbled in a kind of automotive objet trouvée: "Ithaca has harsh winters that are very hard on cars, and in the Seventies people probably didn't take as good care of their vehicles as they do now," he recalls. "There was a lot of metal in the street that had fallen off cars. And I was picking it up and painting it—these beautiful, lacy, intricately shaped, rusted pieces of metal."

Siena grew up in Washington, D.C., and Palo Alto, California; his father was a lawyer who worked at the Pentagon and later was legal adviser to the president of Stanford. On the Hill, he majored in art and had a varied undergrad experience, from serving as an unofficial roadie for his then-girlfriend's band to working his way up from usher to head house manager at Cornell Cinema. "I remember stealing apples," Siena says with a smile. "We used to ride our bikes to the Cornell Orchard and fill up our backpacks and make huge quantities of applesauce and eat it for the whole fall and freeze it." His academic memories include taking two astronomy courses: one taught by Carl Sagan ("the easiest class I ever took") and another by a professor who had transitioned from male to female over the previous summer. "It was the
toughest class a lot of us had taken,” he recalls. ”Maybe she thought gender reassignment was hard enough—if she could go through that, then we could go through introductory astrophysics and stellar gerontology. I barely passed; it was the most hard-earned D that I ever got.”

After graduation Siena stayed in Ithaca for a couple of years before moving to New York; for years, he supported himself by making museum-quality picture frames. He rented his first studio in 1984, a dirt-floor basement under a hair salon on the Lower East Side—”$100 a month, and worth it too.” With his first wife, he formed a performance art group that made a name for itself in the downtown scene, eventually getting tapped to do some short pieces for HBO and Cinemax. ”It had a time-based element—it could be repeated and rehearsed—but it was not narrative by any means,” he says. ”One guy used to call us ‘dancing poets’ because we would create word clusters and there would be movements either opposing or enhancing the words.” He retired from performance when his son (now twenty) was born; with his own art, his day job making frames, and now parenting, something had to go. ”I spent a lot of time doing child rearing, because we were very broke,” he says. ”But I never resented the fact that I made a living by other means, never felt that it was somehow unfair; that’s the way it is for most artists. It was a good sixteen or seventeen years of doing other things. I was selling a little, but not enough to survive.”

His first solo show in New York came in 1996 at a gallery in Brooklyn, with one in Manhattan the following year. He now has the luxury of focusing exclusively on his art; he and his second wife, French-born artist Katia Santibañez, live on Broome Street on the Lower East Side and each keep studios nearby. They split their time between the city and a 200-year-old house in a tiny village in the Massachusetts Berkshires. ”It felt amazing, like I was being given the longest, best vacation ever, and I’m still on it,” Siena says of being a full-time artist. ”But now I work much harder than ever. Katia’s also very disciplined; we talk during the day about when to have dinner, and sometimes it’s eight or eight-thirty, because we have so much to do. We spend more time in our studios than anywhere else.”

Siena’s most recent solo show, at PaceWildenstein in 2008, featured not only his familiar algorithmic paintings but also some different work—moody, almost malevolent drawings of old men as well as gouaches with sexual themes, such as A Boy Surrounded by His Penis. (As a New York Sun reviewer put it in a rave: ”This rule-fiend seems intent on breaking his own cardinal principles.”) Lately, he’s been working on images of distorted bodies, inspired in part by medieval depictions of devils. ”There are times when it isn’t necessarily fun, and I feel kind of guilty when it isn’t,” he says of the artist’s life. ”It should be fun; I should be overjoyed that this is all I have to do now. It’s the old concept of, ‘be careful what you wish for.’”

Worried man, watching, 2007 graphite and gouache on paper, 35 3/8” x 23 5/8”
PRESS RELEASE

Comments (5)

1976, 1983
written by Michael Sieverts, September 07, 2009

Thanks for this piece.

I've known James since our freshman year, and he was already a full-blown artist – not in what he was making at the moment, necessarily, but in his mindset. He considered himself an artist and as such a citizen of the world, convened in a number of languages, and aware of art from a historical perspective, rocketing into the present.

James made Ithaca a lot more fun for a lot of people.

He was very impressive then, and he's still impressive.

He's been a great and loyal friend, too.

1976
written by Polly Kreisman, September 09, 2009

Ah yes...I remember that Moosewood exhibit well! James, congratulations and please let me know where to email you.

1980 (MFA)
written by Pete Sparber, September 09, 2009

James is one of the handful of folks that I remember vividly. As I recall even back in '70 and '80 he was doing some very interesting, edgy work. It's wonderful to see that it's all coming together. Plus...I swear he looks exactly the same now as he did then!

1976
written by Don Lewis, September 10, 2009

congratulations

1972
written by Mary Barton Nees, September 11, 2009

NICE work shown in this article, want to see more

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