

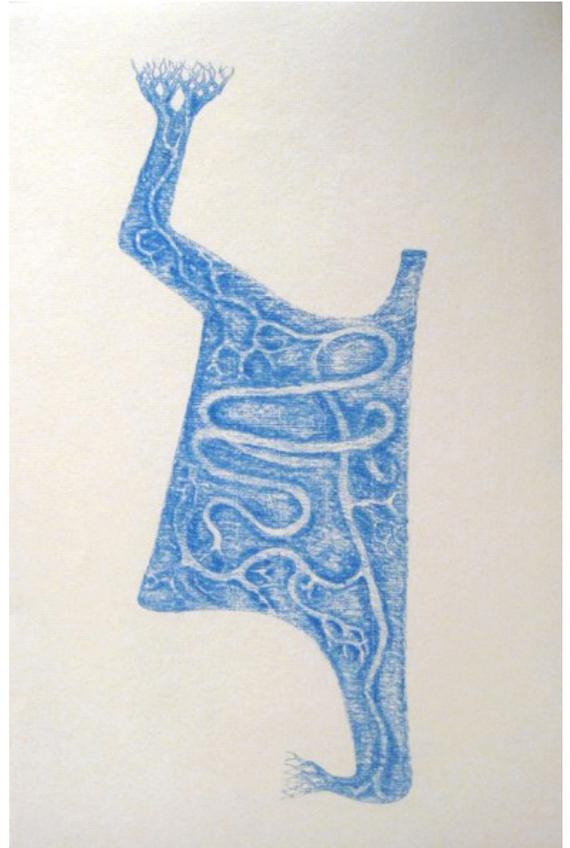
Ideogram and Morphism

THE DRAWINGS OF ROBERT EGERT

Robert Egert grew up riding his bicycle through Bushwick in the 1970s. Twenty years later he was living in Williamsburg and was one of the handful of artists who founded the artists' community there. Williamsburg's early bohemians share an intense bond. They are like family to me. And even if I might not know them well, as friends in the ordinary sense, I know them deeply in connection with our shared philosophical roots.

Williamsburg in the 90s was an oasis of weirdness at a time when art on the whole was very derivative. There was a movement here that advanced synthesis over analysis in art making. The neighborhood became known for hybrid forms and unearthly environments. There was a generative, organic quality to the art that was starkly different from the imagistic literalism of postmodernism. You can see this overall trend in Williamsburg in the work of Roxy Paine, Chris Martin, Amy Sillman, Ken Butler, Rachel Harrison, Ebon Fisher, to name a few. And you can also see in the history of this art scene a fusion between conceptualism and abstract painting.

To be sure, art writers invariably strain to find overarching narratives, and I would not attempt to do this, for example, with the new trends in painting in Bushwick which, in most cases, may be no more connected with old Williamsburg than they are with any number of other historical trends in painting. Still, we can point to some things that happened to New York Art at the turn of the century as the scene began to migrate across the East River. The appearance of certain esoteric and organic motifs in abstract painting in Greenpoint in the 1980s (James Harrison, Peter Acheson, Chris Martin). And the way in which certain conceits of minimalism merged with media art in the "warehouse movement" along the waterfront in the early 90s.



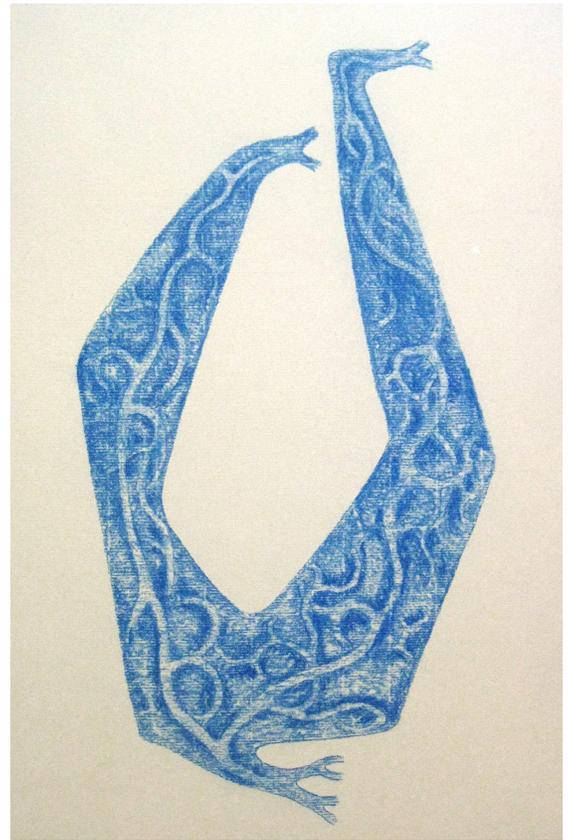
Torasik, conté on printmaking paper, 12" x 23, 2010-2011

A Klein Bottle is a mathematical construction that takes the form of a three-dimensional object. The Klein Bottle has a single continuous surface that coterminously includes both interior and exterior surfaces. Apposite to the basic nature of evolutionary biology, the Klein Bottle is in fact a model for autophagia inclusive of capture, consumption and digestion.



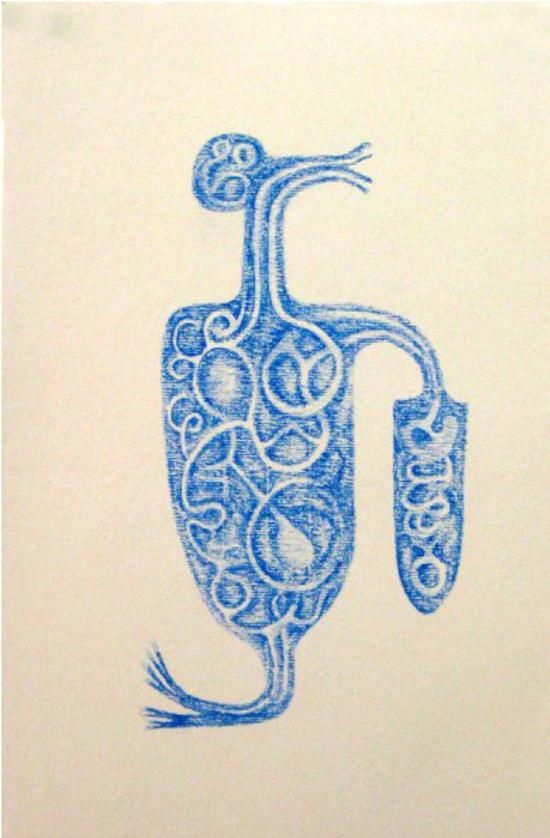
Sigil conté chalk on printmaking paper, 11" x 17", 2012

Gothic, the catch phrase for vulgar novellas, suggests the horrid fibers that link violence and sex barely visible in the obscure viscera of darkness. Gothic spirit exists to preserve the asymmetric structures and uncontrolled animate forces hidden beneath bucolic exteriors. The Gothic not only empowers ecclesiastic architecture but is the counterweight to the rational examination of the body.



Inversion conté chalk on printmaking paper, 11" x 17", 2012

The underworld, a world unknown by any living person, is imagined as an extension of our own world but perversely altered. It exists in a parallel universe—a magical place that obeys the laws of conventional, three dimensional space but yet cannot be accessed save by passing through the transformation of death. Like a mirror to our own world, the underworld is often depicted as an inverted reflection of our living reality. An inverted torch, a window that slides open from the top, a bed that clings to the ceiling.



Pendulum conté chalk on printmaking paper, 11" x 17", 2012

The word pendulum can refer to the swinging part of a clock that acts to maintain and regulate movement. But the origin of the word comes from the latin, pendulus, hanging down. Our own gross (large) organs are concentrated in our chest, thorax, neck and head, and our appendages are largely composed of skeletal, muscular, adipose tissue, nerve, skin, etc. In the future, scientists will likely explore the implantation of sensory organs in our appendages to enhance our sensorial capacity. This will be especially useful in military applications.

Robert Egert's work provides a key to this transition. His work spans the whole of it. Some of his paintings even look like keys, or compact hybrids of organic life and language poised for an unraveling.

Robert began his career in the postmodern East Village and Soho in the 80s. Then he was in the middle of the Brooklyn phenomenon in the 90s. He took a master's degree in Marxist studies at the storied CUNY grad center under Marshall Berman, a right of passage of many thinkers and readers in the neighborhood at that time. And so even though there is a Brooklyn synthetic quality to his organic forms, there is also an analytic quality that comes through from the 80s fascination with history, power, the construction of knowledge (epistemology), and so forth.

The delicate red and blue conté drawings remind me of those mysterious illustrations in the very first encyclopedias, like the one assembled by the brigade of draftsmen who accompanied Napoleon's army to Egypt—specimens from a naïve science.

The conté drawings could also be rubbings from some alien fossil, or powdery carbon copies drawn out of some forgotten photomechanical process. One inspiration that Robert mentions are medical illustrations of vascular systems, where long arteries are truncated for easier viewing.

Somewhere between language and life form, Egert draws these entities as discrete symbols, carefully conjoined with their negative spaces. And then there are intricate details inside the shapes, rendering a deeper layer of anatomy. The drawings are done on a rough and allegedly extinct kind of laid printing paper. The pigment dust lies on the page a delicate powder, much like Odilon Redon's use of charcoal.

They are erudite and pithy, and yet they are not cynical or ironic. Actually, they are affirmative and sincere. They hold out an ephemeral optimism against a disembodied modernity that they nonetheless acknowledge. Simply, the possibility of new aesthetic life against considerable odds. They remind me of the marks that a philosopher might make who has forsaken writing, but whose pictograms still contain the powder of the battlefield.

Ethan Pettit, 2012

