

1994 OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 67

**Wiggins Gallery, Boston
Public Library/Boston
Nan Tull: Retrospective
of Drawings**

Stripes and stalks, irons and tulips, chevrons and ferns—out of these simple shapes, repeated, distorted, refined, and distilled, Nan Tull makes elegant, loosely minimalist drawings. Tull's materials are as basic as her imagery: though she uses graphite, pastel, and occasionally aluminum paint, most of the time Tull draws with compressed charcoal. It is charcoal's velvety dense blackness that gives her drawings their impact. From a distance, what one sees is a pattern of adamant blacks and whites as static and assured as a kind of abstract heraldry. Up close though, clouds of correction and adjustment give each form a pleasing smokiness that hints at motion.

Tull's drawings can be purely geometric or nonobjective, as in the flanged architectural columns of *Irrigate*, or the colliding tectonic plates of *Extensions #20*. Most of the time, however, plant forms are her starting point. In drawings with titles like *Amaryllis*, *Curl*, and *Tulip*, pistils rise framed by walls of petals, and crook-shaped shoots uncurl. The problem with these distilled, abstracted houseplants is that they seem slightly familiar: their handsomeness elicits sympathy, but not surprise, and occasionally Tull seems to be remembering the work of other artists too vividly (some of her linear drawings of leaves

are more or less impersonations of Ellsworth Kelly). In general, one's impression is of a talented artist relaxing, concerning herself more with making a graceful page than with finding a fresh interpretation of natural form.

This is less true of the most recent work in the show, particularly a series called *Tropos* (part of the work for which Tull won a 1994 National Endowment for the Arts/New England Foundation Regional Fellowship in the Visual Arts). These drawings are Tull's most intricate and distinctive: curling dark forms wrap and twist around each other like the arms of octopi, leaving crescents of brightness that form secondary patterns. Off to one side, ruled, red vertical lines, like a musical staff turned on its side, establish a contra-

puntal orderliness. The ruled lines are the only false notes in the series: their presence seems too obviously a decorative device—like the ubiquitous aqueducts of the Salon painters. Otherwise, these drawings are fresh and memorable, as well as elegant. They promise a more concentrated and ambitious program of work, and leave us curious to see what kind of drawings Tull will make next.

—Nico McLan