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Alston Conley

“There is at the back of every artist’s mind something like a pattern or a type of architecture. The original quality in any [woman] of imagination is imagery. It is a thing like the landscape of [her] dreams; the sort of world [she] would like to make or in which [she] would wish to wander; the strange flora and fauna of [her] own secret planet; the sort of thing [she] likes to think about.”¹

—G. K. Chesterton

Examined in this exhibition is Sarah Westlake’s mature work from the last eighteen years. During this period, 1984 to 2002, she alternated between drawings and sculptures. Formal ideas shifted from two-dimensional works to three-dimensional works and back again. The *Fantasy Garden* series, a case in point, was inspired initially by visits to the Generalife gardens of the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain. Westlake developed a series of drawings depicting structured geometric spaces and curvilinear lines that include an array of natural forms. The geometric shapes can be read as a series of largely abstracted architectural spaces—as rooms, doorways, arches, and windows. Adjacent diagonal forms and fluid natural lines offset rectilinear geometry. In *Fantasy Garden #26* (1984, no. 1), a series of vertical rectangles subdivides the long horizontal drawing. Each rectangle is described with a variety of gray tones and graphic marks; gestural and controlled additive layers and erasures build a language of contrasts. The spatial reading is flat, like a Japanese print, an influence since her student

days at Cranbrook Academy of Art. Within this organized geometry, however, are trees, plants, windows, and doorways—rectilinear and arching.

A similar geometry structures *Paul’s Palace, Fantasy Garden #30* (no. 2), a lithograph from 1984. Here, also, the controlled graphic marks are juxtaposed to quiet, empty expanses and looser gestural, organic marks. This lithograph inspired the sculpture *Paul’s Palace, Fantasy Garden #31* (no. 3), a collaboration with cabinetmaker Harry Jones from Martha’s Vineyard, where Westlake also had a studio. The sculpture reads as a semi-transparent folding screen and also as a construction of gestures captured in wood, plaster, and paint within a geometric space. The folding screen serves no traditional function; it neither blocks a section of a room, nor provides a series of painted decorative surfaces that subdivide space. It is the view; its structure is both functional and aesthetic, and is both partially opaque and transparent.

Westlake synthesizes three main influences: the structural elements found in the minimal reductive work of Agnes Martin, the sensuously decorative, as seen in the work of Henri Matisse, and the flat space of Japanese prints and painted screens. It is in Japanese culture, in which humans are perceived as part of nature (in contrast to the biblical story granting man dominion over nature, which evolved, within Western culture, into the truism of man versus nature) that Westlake finds her inspiration for integrating natural forms into man-made architectural structures. Two drawings, *Fantasy Garden #41* (1985, no. 4) and



Fig. 1 Sarah Westlake. Paper sculpture from studio, ca. 1994.

Fantasy Garden: Cat Tails (ca. 1987, no. 5), exemplify this fusion. In the former, the diagonal and horizontal linearity establish the space and contain the loosely drawn organic and floral forms. This piece is reductive, tonal, without color, and controlled, even in the gestural passages. The composition's strength lies within the intelligent, rigorous minimalism that is inherent in its formal complexity and tonal subtlety. By contrast, *Fantasy Garden: Cat Tails* has rich color combined with tonal areas and the floral forms; here, the structural components of the composition are indistinguishable from the decorative.

The folding screens, from the years that follow, alternate emphasis on the structure and on the decorative function. Her screens and drawings influence each other in both ways. The functional quality of a screen as room-divider disappears from *Pungo River Grass*, *Fantasy Garden #51* (1987, no. 6). The painted planar wood forms are reduced geometry merged with organic form. These are interspersed among linear steel elements, resulting in a rhythmic composition that captures the movement of marsh grass. The geometric planar forms are reminiscent of

screen panels that have dissolved and left traces of their former structure. From one view, the tall planar shapes are covered with richly colored curving areas that echo the steel linear arches. As one views the other side, the forms appear as dark silhouettes, emphasizing the structure of the piece. The linear, curving, metal rods recall the grass motif seen on sixteenth-century Japanese screens, such as "Pampas grasses,"² or the butterfly flower (*Gaura Lindeimeri*) that grew in Westlake's Vineyard garden, and whose tiny white blossoms grow at the top of a tall stem. The tall, thin-stemmed butterfly flower sways with the breeze and echoes the arch of the spouting water in the artist's garden fountain. The spray in the Generalife garden's fountains might have been an inspiration for her garden, as well as for the linear elements of the *Pungo River Grass* sculpture.

In her drawings from the early 1990s, Westlake continues to depict various juxtapositions of compositional elements found within her sculptures. The differentiation between linear and planar, vertical, horizontal and diagonal, geometric and organic, warm and cool colors and the individual mark and the larger color field structures and balances each of these drawings. The complexity of the shifting elements holds the viewer in "aesthetic arrest."³ Like a haiku, a traditional Japanese short poem with a rhythmic division of syllables that are thought to more nearly capture reality if they contain no center, Westlake's drawings evoke an impression of nature within a defined structure. Each drawing of this series is named after a natural phenomenon: *Light Wind*, *Plankton*, *Inner Stream*, *Celestial Air*, and *Salmon Run*, (nos. 8–12), suggesting a natural moment as an interior reflection.

The untitled series of sculptures that follow in the mid-1990s again evolves from earlier drawings. In Westlake's studio there is a small paper sculpture made from a drawing (fig.1). The paper is folded over on itself, curling the flat planes into three-dimensional forms. Working with a plaster material applied to a shaped metal screen, Westlake built

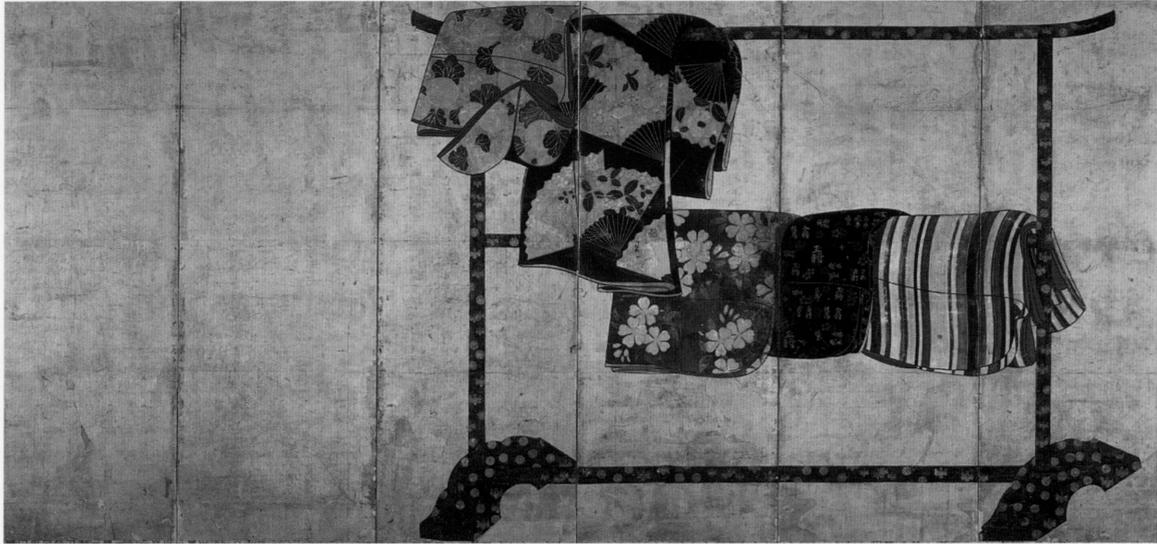


Fig. 2 Artist Unknown, *Whose Sleeves?*, Japanese Edo period, Genna (1615–1624) or Kan'ei (1624–1644) era Japan Six-panel folding screen; ink and color on gold-leafed paper, 167.7 x 321 cm. KJM2-Ukiyo-5, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: Gift by special Contribution 08.169. Photograph ©2004 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

forms that curve inward and then reopen. These forms are both painted and inscribed. The scraffito-like drawn marks reveal the white plaster underneath the paint, not unlike the European tradition of decorative scraffito plaster walls. Small, twisting, organic forms simultaneously hide and reveal the sculpture's interiors, an appropriate metaphor for the emotionally expressive objects and their reflection of the artist's creative process, alternately revealing and concealing their maker's interior life.

These works, like *Untitled #9* (1995, no. 18) that has a womb-like opening, have a strong relationship to the human body. In a grant application from 1968, Westlake connected dance to drawing: "Exposure to dance principles has increased [my] knowledge of the body's potential for abstract form and movement, and through it I have gained the confidence to leap over much of the intermediate ground between a literal use of anatomy and non-literal translation of the human image into abstract ideas." The untitled sculptures of

the mid-1990s appear imbued with these abstracted ideas of the human form.

The 1994 *Untitled* drawing (no. 19) relates to the sculptures of the same year; ideas seem to flow back and forth between media. It has the vertical orientation of *Untitled #3* (1994, no. 15) and the inwardly turning planes in the form of two inverted cones folding in on themselves that resemble *Untitled #7* (1995, no. 16), yet, it is *Untitled #11* (1996, no. 20) that the 1994 drawing seems to precede and most resemble. The sculpture's inwardly folded planes, pinched open at both the top and right side, appear like a figure bowing, a dance under a cloth. The *Untitled* drawing resembles an abstracted biomorphic head with a slender neck-like form under a shawl.

The six drawings from 2002 that reinvestigate the geometry of architectural spaces were made soon after a visit to Japan. Much like Japanese prints, which appear flat, lacking the "Western" light and shadow strategies that create the illusion of depth, Westlake's

drawings rely on diagonal lines and forms to imply spatial depth. In such works, the bottom of the picture exists as foreground while the diagonals draw the viewer's eye across and up the composition to the suggested background, and yet the shapes are flat. The geometric shapes are colored with paint and textured with incised drawing marks. Many of the elements are collaged onto the already complexly textured planar surface. Three of the drawings, *Breeze*, *Dragon Limb*, and *Whose Sleeves?* (2002, nos. 21, 22, and 23), have black linear structures from which hang patterned forms that appear to be cloths or garments. The title *Whose Sleeves?* suggests a connection to the Japanese Edo period screens of the same name. "'Tagasode,' meaning 'whose sleeves?'—was frequently the title used for Japanese paintings that hint at the presence of a woman, but refrain from actually portraying her. This, it was felt, is more evocative than a literal representation."⁴ In Japanese "Tagasode" genre painting, richly patterned and decorated kimonos hang from clothes racks. Occasionally these prized garments are joined by other personal possessions, such as an amulet or a musical instrument. These images float on a gold ground, intimating the beauty of the unseen owner, as in *Whose Sleeves?*, a screen in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (fig. 2).

Flecks of gold leaf in Westlake's planar surfaces further recall the large gold-leaf grounds in these Japanese screens. The title *Breeze* both suggests the cause of the tilting cloths and connects the viewer to nature. Like the "Tagasode" screen paintings, Westlake's drawing "reflects the ideal of Zen artists—to express the true life of something, the essence, rather than merely to display what is seen."⁵ Her artworks are visual haiku, with rhythmic divisions of forms that function like syllables. And like haiku, they record the poet's, or the artist's, impression of a moment from daily life. Painstakingly constructed, yet delicate, Westlake's pictures have the immediacy and freshness of haiku, a moment in nature—a breeze blowing the garment that has been hung out to dry. Among

Westlake's favorite haiku was the following poem by Basho's companion, Sora:

What a cool, summer breeze!
Here, I make myself at home,
Rest, and take my ease.⁶

It is the concept underlying the "Tagasode" paintings, of a beautiful woman suggested but unseen, that most embodies Westlake's work. Her creative presence is implied in each of the artworks, and it was her choice, like the Zen artists, not to settle for the representation of just the visible.

Westlake was one of a handful of women artists of her generation from the Boston area who had an accomplished professional career. She moved between media with complexity and variation, graphically recording her creative thought process. These works from the last eighteen years of her career show a searching, personal visual language that was strongly felt, yet steeped in restraint. They were exhibited, but perhaps not seen and appreciated widely enough. I, for one, would have been poorer without having viewed and known these works and the creative life they represent.

NOTES

- 1 Gender altered quote, qtd. in *Visual Notes: for Architects and Designers* by Norman Crowe and Paul Laseau (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. 1984). G. K. Chesterton, forward, W. H. Auden: *A Certain World* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970).
- 2 *Pampas grasses*, 16th century, six panel folding screens; ink, color, and gold on paper, the Cleveland Museum of Art. *From Turning Point: Oribe and the Arts of Sixteenth-Century Japan*. Edited by Miyeko Murase (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 2003) 220-221.
- 3 Joseph Campbell. Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Lecture, referencing James Joyce's discussion of aesthetic vision within the novel *Portrait of The Artist as A Young Man* (1916).
- 4 "Aspen No. 10," Section 10 (New York: Aspen Communication, 1971). Qtd. from Miyeko Murase. *Bybu: Japanese Screens from New York Collections* (The Asia Society, Inc, 1971). 94.
- 5 "Aspen No. 10," Section 10 (New York: Aspen Communication, 1971).
- 6 Sora, *A Haiku Journey, Basho's Narrow Road to a Far Provence*, trans. Dorothy Britton (Kodalisha International Ltd., 1974) 60.