

Jeff Davis
Mechanical Drawings
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Jeff Davis has spent three decades on an odyssey, a quest to eradicate the hand from his practice. *Mechanical Drawings* marks the journey's homeward turn, away from pure digital perfection and towards the imperfection of materiality.

Davis, classically trained with an MFA in painting and drawing, spent thirty years grappling with the physical world's messiness versus mathematical perfection. That puts him in good company, aligning Davis with thinkers like Plato, Alan Turing and Vera Molnár, who fantasized about procedures rigorous enough to bypass embodied unreliability.

Davis explains, "For most of my career I have been striving for greater precision in my art. I made every effort to remove the visible evidence of my hand or the materials, considering it an imperfection."

Computation is the heir to this multi-millennial fixation on rigorous procedure. Its allure captivated a dissatisfied Davis, steering him toward digital, generative systems, where he could precisely direct code and chance to produce the perfect lines and forms he knew existed.

After all, classical computation is fundamentally controllable. Its Boolean logic is deterministic, operating on discrete bits with decomposable processes. It serves as portal to the Cartesian worldview's ideals, *perfect* mathematics that can precisely describe those pesky *perfect* circles.

Davis's pursuit of ideal form led him "away from physical practices and toward digital techniques, where I could more closely achieve the ideal version of what I was trying to express."

But, just as developments in AI and quantum reshape the notion of classical computation, something in Davis changed. That change is how to understand *Mechanical Drawings*, the show's oxymoronic title capturing the paradox at the heart of the machine versus the hand, of Jeff Davis's career.

What catalyzed this change after decades? It was, surprisingly, an embodied encounter with the artist's own work. Preparing a mid-career retrospective, Davis hung his early physical work beside his recent digital pieces. The juxtaposition led to realization: Davis's persistent pursuit of the Platonic wasn't necessarily progress, the overcoming of something impure. Rather, it was simply sailing in one particular direction. The great insight was that the artist could go in another, could turn the ship.

Mechanical Drawings is this turn, this coming about, what the artist's reappraisal produced.

The show consists of large-format, pencil-plotted drawings, where the materiality of pencil and paper is celebrated rather than hidden. Besides, you can't *actually* go home again; something has always changed. While still familiar, it's unmistakably different now.

As are Davis's 76x56 cm algorithmically generated pencil drawings, their grids of color built from the hatching of four plotted parent pencils rather than Davis's signature digital gradients. The work explores the optical difference between digital smoothness and blended pencil on paper. A colored pencil does not behave like an unencumbered pixel. It drags, it catches, tips widen as they dull. How much of that does the eye notice? How does the eye respond differently to pencil and paper compared to a screen? What does our eye not predict?

It's these moments where process is revealed, the approximately ten hours of continuous plotter run time required to complete each drawing. It's a peek behind a vulnerably confident curtain, where Davis's zen-like acceptance is made visible. They are the moments where precision is surrendered to the material, where this new work locates itself.

It's work that doesn't feel the need to be exactly perfect; rather, it highlights the subtlety of idiosyncrasy at scale.

Still though, the digital hasn't been forgotten, existing as onchain work on Art Blocks. There it stands as reference and point of departure, as it did for Davis at his retrospective. But now it's inverted. Where typically code produces a digitized output that in turn can be skeuomorphized as a print. Here, the code generates the plotter's instructions as well, blurring clean lines between certificate and instruction, machine and drawing.

For Davis, *Mechanical Drawings* signifies an intentional veer off course, a turn in the general direction of home, but also a new adventure in a long journey.

Text by Peter Baumann

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