



Inside Out No. 3

2008, graphite on gessoed panel, 32 x 52. Collection Museum London; London, Ontario.

“Artists have only their perceptions,” says Ontario-based draftsman Kelly Wallace. “Every subject matter has already been covered. It is the way that we do what we do that makes it unique to us. ‘How’ is far more significant than ‘what.’”

The “what” of Wallace’s work is straightforward: representational drawings made with graphite marks. The “how” is quite another matter. When it comes to his artistic process, Wallace is a strange blend of mad scientist and connoisseur. He spent six years alone refining his chosen drawing surface—paper on gessoed panels. (Even just finding the right adhesive took years—he eventually settled on a pH-neutral, heat-activated adhesive often used by the British Museum for conservation projects.) But for Wallace, the investment of time and money to experiment and make modifications with his materials made absolute sense, because the surface on which he makes his strokes represents all the potential of the drawing itself.

“What happens on the surface is my gig,” he says, and that gig is straight-up freehand rendering. No scaling, measuring, or projecting on the surface before he gets started. This means the artist always faces the very real possibility of failure—he may not leave enough room to finish the drawing, or he might not frame it on the paper quite as he had hoped. But if mistakes are made, Wallace owns them and keeps them, rarely going back to redo passages. “The drawer, in my mind, has done a disservice by hiding the parts he didn’t get right,” Wallace says. “I don’t use an eraser. I understand that in a graphite drawing an eraser can be as integral as the pencil, but it damages the surface, and drawing is very forward to me. I try not to go back.”

By the Line

Canadian artist **Kelly Wallace** depicts chaotic wreckage and debris in his graphite drawings created almost entirely with short, straight lines.

BY COURTNEY JORDAN

Although he doesn't use an eraser, Wallace does use his share of other tools. To prevent smudging, as he draws he rests his hand on a T-Square affixed to kitchen-drawer rollers that slides horizontally so that he never actually touches the surface with his hand. He'll also pin a string to his easel and pull it across the drawing when he wants to create a horizon or guide line. But beyond that, it's all drawing action. "I let the drawing come," he says. "If there's more graphite in an area, it's because I was more interested in that area, not because it 'needed' to be darker. It is a point of importance, and I don't edit myself."

Wallace is ambidextrous, which has proven useful, as he estimates that he spends around 3,000 hours a year drawing—more than eight hours a day. The artist rotates his surface 90 degrees ev-



ABOVE
One Canadian No. 2
2009, graphite and colored pencil on gessoed paper and aluminum, 8 x 11. Private collection.

RIGHT
Detail from *One Canadian No. 2*, in progress.

For a Canadian who is half-American, the title of *One Canadian* is a bit tongue-in-cheek, but that irreverence isn't out of place considering the performance aspect of these drawings. Creating counterfeit-quality renderings of American currency—torn in half, crumpled, ripped in pieces, and neatly shredded—allows Wallace to test his skills and show what he is able to do to the almighty dollar with freehand line.

ery day, and it's all pencil strokes from there. He works from top to bottom, left to right. His marks are unusual in that they all go the same way: There is no shading, smudging, crosshatching, or outlines to be found. Wallace's drawings are composed entirely of straight vertically drawn lines.

"I think of all my work from the last couple of years on a per line basis," Wallace says. "Per centimeter, I can make 15 straight lines without them touching each other—grayscale the paper, essentially. In between each of those lines are tiny little dashes." All those little dashes add up, as Wallace can make as many as 2,000 to 3,000 strokes per square inch. So much repetitive pressure makes the surface of Wallace's drawings hard and polished, almost like black-and-white enamel.

Monitoring and tallying his mark making in such a manner (the artist keeps a daily log of his output and even prices his work by the hour) is one way the artist problematizes the concept of line: How do you make the perfect amount of line in a drawing? Can artists calculate what they need in terms of line to get the effect they

want? Working this way also re-contextualizes the very idea of mark making. The same essential gesture of line that was used artistically by Renoir or Matisse has also been mechanized in industrial settings all over the world to make various kinds of striations and marks, and Wallace's drawings confront the viewer with

this duality. He keeps his line isolated and produces it in an almost mechanical manner, yet his drawings are still made by hand, the same way Renoir's were.

"I was trying to figure out how to suck all the life and gesture out of the line, make it mechanical, but still make it beautiful and still represent the perception of space," says Wallace. Another payoff of the artist's method is the visu-



Sticks n Stones No. 3
2008, graphite, 3 x 4. Courtesy Serpahn Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

al cadence Wallace can create and control with his lines. "With no outline, the image would float in a white void," he says. "It seems to have an atmospheric property to it. So I started to space my lines deliberately, really close together in details and priority of focus, farther apart for out-of-focus areas. I could essentially speed and slow down the viewer's eye."

Wallace's drawings embrace contradiction: the conceptual and the representational, tight realism and total abstraction can coexist in any one image. Wrecked buildings, destroyed houses, and piles of abstracted debris and rubble fill works such as *Sticks n Stones* and *Inside Out*. The scenes are totally fictitious, although the drawings were inspired by a newspaper photograph of war-torn Sarajevo. But

in drawings such as the *Capital Salvage* triptych and *Split*, there is a far more abstracted quality to the work. Forms—wall beams, tree branches—seem identifiable but shift into formless shapes and gradations that are somewhat disorienting to view. To a certain extent this is due to the abstract, unstructured shapes depicted. But it is also almost as if the drawings are vibrating or shimmering—an optical ef-



Capital Salvage (triptych)
2009–2010, graphite, 72 x 45 each.
Courtesy Bill Lowe Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kelly Wallace lives and works in Ontario, Canada. He received his B.F.A. at the University of Guelph, in Ontario, in 1993. Since then he has received an award grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, as well as grants from the Ontario Arts Council. He has participated in group shows in Canada and the United States and held solo exhibitions at the MacLaren Art Centre in Barre, Ontario and the Museum London in London, Ontario. He is represented by Seraphin Gallery, in Philadelphia, Bill Lowe Gallery, in Atlanta, and Michael Gibson Gallery in London, Ontario.

fect brought on by the fact that the eye, with no clearly defined edges to focus on, is constantly refocusing as it sweeps across the drawing.

With his “line alone” approach, Wallace says he could have picked any subject matter to explore, but he chose the topic of destruction because he sees both control and beauty in it. “There is order in that chaos,” the artist says. “I’ve designed the destruction—it couldn’t really exist, architecturally speaking. It is constructed destruction—perfected drawings of imperfection. There’s beauty in the destruction, too, even if it is terminal, precarious, something that is uncertain.”

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In the same way, Wallace views the state of fine-art drawing as terminal. “Drawing is the mistress of all artists. It is the grandparent of fine art. If you are 70 years old, you know what drawing is about. But if you are 20 or 30? You don’t see the technical importance. It’s a dying art.” But Wallace is not content to light the pyre and mourn, perhaps because an artistic way of life is not easily shed. “Art is one of those things you don’t really pick,” he says. “It’s natural selection. It picks you.” ❖



OPPOSITE PAGE AND ABOVE
Details from *Capital Salvage*.

OWNING *the* GALLERY PROCESS

Several years ago, Wallace began looking for opportunities to more widely show his art by searching the internet for galleries worldwide that showed work that caught his eye. “I researched for two years,” he says, “looking for compelling, strong drawings and where they were.”

Eventually, Wallace came up with a “Top 20” list of galleries and decided to make a play for their attention in what he admits was a gamble. “I sent each gallery’s director an email with only one sentence in it: ‘I draw more than you can possibly comprehend,’” he says. The only other item in the email was a link to a website that had images of Wallace’s work but no other information. By the end of the week, Wallace had heard from all of the galleries he had contacted.

Since then, Wallace has made arrangements and negotiated with several of those institutions. But despite these inroads, the artist is unwilling to just hand over his work to galleries, no questions asked. “Drawings don’t happen quickly,” he says. “With the exception of some curators, most don’t really know how my work is made or what it is about. If I let them have the drawings, they can sell them, but that’s three or four years of work.”

Giving up works that represent such a major time investment has made Wallace reassess how his inventory is created and motivated him to take a stronger stance on how he moves forward with gallery representation. He monitors where his works go, says no when he has to, and is able to, in his words, “tailor what I want to fit within the context my drawings are hanging in.”