

**Visions of Order in an Anxious Universe:
Obsessive Drawing at the American Folk Art Museum**
by Rob Shuster

September 30th, 2005 4:58 PM

Blankness makes us uneasy. Confronted with silence or an empty sheet of paper, we feel the urge to fill it. For a few, this is a defining compulsion, known in frightening Latin as *horror vacui* and usually associated with messy drawings by the mentally ill, most famously the work of art brut exemplars Adolf W. Mader, Gill, and Edmund Monsiel.

In this small exhibit of that compulsion, W et al. make an obligatory appearance, but refreshingly, curator Brooke Anderson's selections concentrate on five relative unknowns, all of whom draw visions of order to cope with various anxieties. Martin Thompson, a homeless man believed to be autistic, employs strict logic. From a formula, he inks a flawless geometric pattern on graph paper using a single color, then re-creates the work in its negative to make a diptych. The result can be mesmerizing, as if you're glimpsing an object through separate blizzards. Charles Benefiel, also confining himself to a grid, has produced a kind of mystic's scroll. To subdue his obsessive-compulsive disorder, he writes line after line of Morse code—like symbols for an invented monosyllabic language, which he reportedly speaks as he works. The trance state may have guided 83-year-old Eugene Andolsek too; he claims to have sometimes simply "woken up" to his colorful, complex patterns that possess the symmetry and woven texture of tapestry.

In contrast, Hiroyuki Doi's black-and-white drawings suggest forms still evolving. Grief stricken after his brother's death, he decided to watch the autopsy and later found himself obsessed with the circle. Hundreds of them, differently sized and tightly packed, accumulate into elegant gaseous shapes, eerily shaded. Likewise, massed objects or creatures creep along the pathways of Chris Hipkiss's bizarre fields and cities, rendered in foreboding dark pencil.

Such shows can't avoid that whiff of exploitation, but this one feels more like a privileged view of private therapies. The art triumphs.