

**On Randy Twaddle's New Drawings at Holly Johnson Gallery**

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Photo courtesy of Holly Johnson Gallery

Not once, not twice, but too often have been told by my Dallasite friends that Houston is just ugly. They are not talking about its skyline — a mirage when approached from the highways — but of the sprawling neighborhoods with no zoning restrictions. At Holly Johnson Gallery, a new exhibition of a group of drawings, by Randy Twaddle, who lived in Dallas in the 1980's and has since moved to live in this charm-challenged Texas city, focuses on the unconventional beauty of distribution lines there.

*"I love to drive down Houston streets — especially at dawn or dusk — when the light magically turns these silhouetted utilitarian wires and cables into calligraphic drawings or something akin to alternative music scores. I'm constantly awed by their unintentional beauty and lyricism,"* says the artist.

Twaddle's choice of medium is also unconventional — black ink and coffee. I am not sure they would look agreeable under the scrutiny of any paper conservator; at the minimum, it is a lesser sin compared to what have been added to pictures shown at the Brooklyn Museum in the past: Yogurt (in Hernan Bas) or elephant dung (in Chris Ofili).

The black ink lines are sharp and controlled. At distance, they look rather organic and simulated. In close proximity, the pictures betray that Twaddle has drawn border lines first before he filled in black ink. To say they are calligraphic is to over-emphasize the gestural grandness and to ignore their firm root in realism: tangled or stretched across the murky background, they retain instantly recognizable as the way we see them when heading up — there is nothing between those power lines and the sky. That makes them mesmerizing to observe.



Photo courtesy of Holly Johnson Gallery

Yet it is the coffee ground that transforms these images into a lyrical statement of urban decay. If utility wires are the melody lines, the coffee ground is their counterpoint of the harmony. They may be seen as representational, echoing shadows of wires, but they grow and sprawl in their own way. Twaddle let washes of coffee forming their diaphanous shapes and boundaries, by chance. They ease the eyes from knots of wires, and in turn, engender images with an romantic rhetoric. To some extent, they remind me of Helen Frankenthaler's paintings in which turpentine-thinned paint in watery washes was poured onto raw canvas. Yet while Frankenthaler utilized the technique to liberate colors, Twaddle plays down the brown wash to reach a great degree of expressive freedom in our sub-consciousness.

Utility wires are disappearing in urban centers. They were cursed to cause untidiness of street scenes in China. Often, they are the last thing to go in a gentrified neighborhood, but once they are gone, gone with them is the care-free low-key ambiance of those hoods. In variant shades, Randy Twaddle's coffee stained utility wires drawing recall minds of urban dwellers, at repose.

The show is open through March 16 at [Holly Johnson Gallery](#), located at 1411 Dragon Street in Dallas.