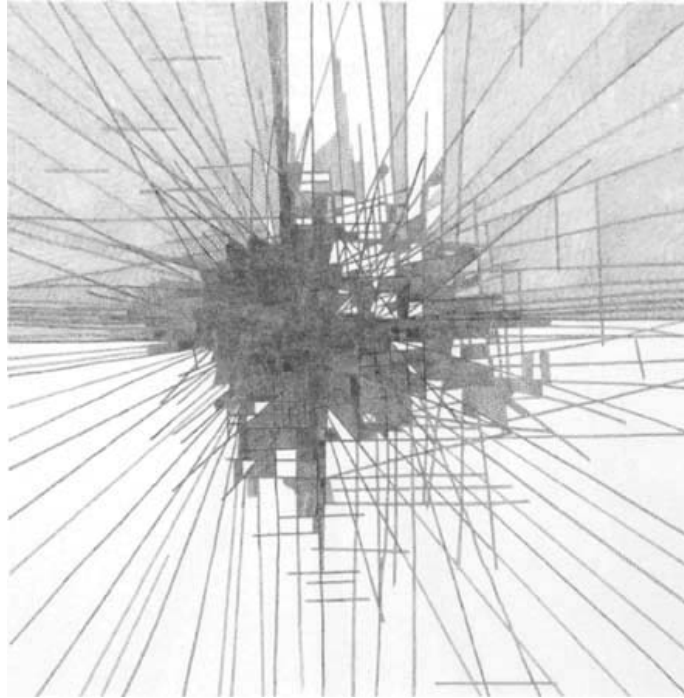


...might be good

Issue #192

The Shoe Fits!

June 15, 2012



Star Line, 2010, 18 x 18 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas

Jacob El Hanani Through June 16 at Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas

by Benjamin Lima

Seeing the ten examples of Jacob El Hanani's *Linear Landscape* series of ink drawings at Holly Johnson Gallery is a special event. El Hanani has worked steadily and consistently for years (with works collected by [MoMA](#) and the [Metropolitan Museum](#) among many others), yet, positioned apart from any particular group and the trends of the moment, his work may be unknown to those who are not specialists in drawings. Although the small scale, detail and repetition of his work resembles that of his colleagues [Marco Maggi](#) or [Astrid Bowlby](#), it also contains a historical dimension in relation to medieval Jewish manuscripts.

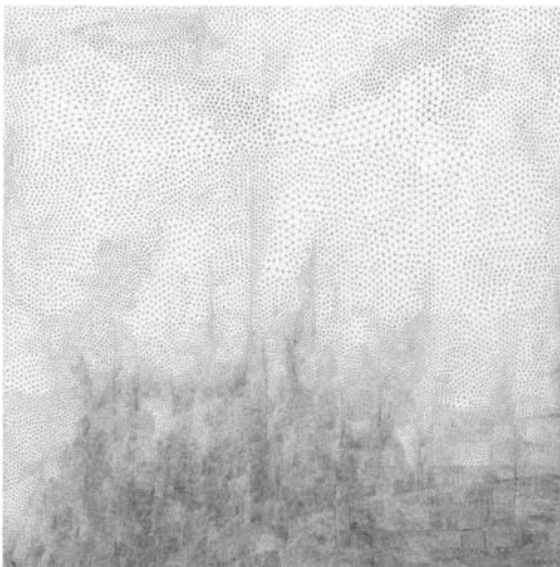
Each of the *Linear Landscapes*, at 18 inches square, practically demands up-close attention to discern even a few of the details. All of the forms are generated by the meticulous repetition of tiny shapes. Sometimes, the unit of repetition is a single mark or hatch; sometimes, it is a letter or series of letters. (The latter technique, known as micrography, in which tiny letterforms become abstract decorations, derives from medieval Jewish manuscripts.) The initial challenge, then, can be to discern whether the

drawing is based on text or not. After that, one might search for specific references to establish a scale of view. Are the landscapes cosmic, microscopic, human-scale or otherwise? Often, this is left ambiguous. In *Leaves* (2011), overlapping diagonals blanket the main field, as darker areas fill in the upper right and lower left corners. In *Triangle Landscape* (2011), gently curving rows of small triangular marks create billowing cloudlike forms across the top two-thirds of the frame, while darker, angular shapes crowd around the bottom.

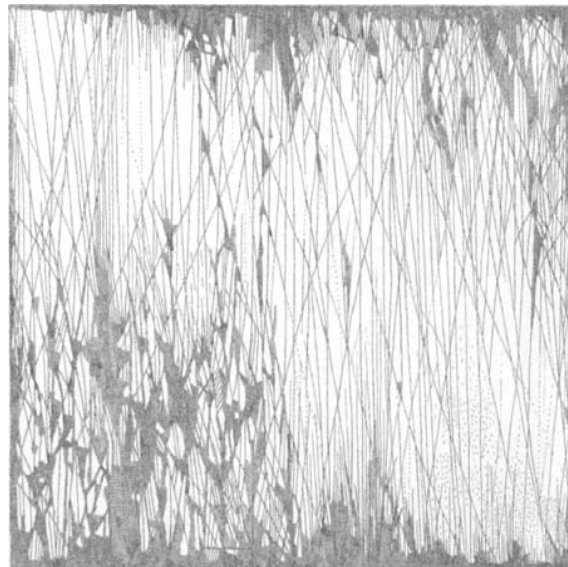
Micrography is an especially historically resonant aspect of El Hanani's practice. According to an [online exhibit at the Jewish Theological Seminary](#), micrography developed in medieval Jewish communities within the broader Islamic world, where it was frequently used for Bibles in codex form. Without oversimplifying the situation, micrography could be seen as characteristic of traditions—such as those of both the Jewish and Muslim communities—that included both a reverence for sacred scripture and certain prohibitions on divine images. El Hanani's work is not explicitly devotional, but his biography does refer to the influence of this cultural context; he was born in Morocco in 1947 and moved to Israel as a child. Later, when he moved to New York, he found affinities with artists such as Sol LeWitt, whose work also incorporated highly repetitive patterns at a small scale. I am not sure, however, whether El Hanani's work bears a closer affinity to one or the other of these models. The sheer individuality of his work makes it difficult to glibly categorize in this way.

If both medieval and contemporary, sacred and secular references are important to El Hanani's work, is it possible to define how they work in combination? One idea is that the state of reverie, induced by contemplating the vast number of tiny repetitions, is shared across the sacred and secular contexts, simply as a result of their scale. If so, this would show that in some cases, formal resemblances can overpower differences of context. However, insofar as each of El Hanani's works creates an absorbing microcosm with its own inherent interest, questions such as these recede into the background.

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Leaves, 2011



Triangle Landscape, 2011