

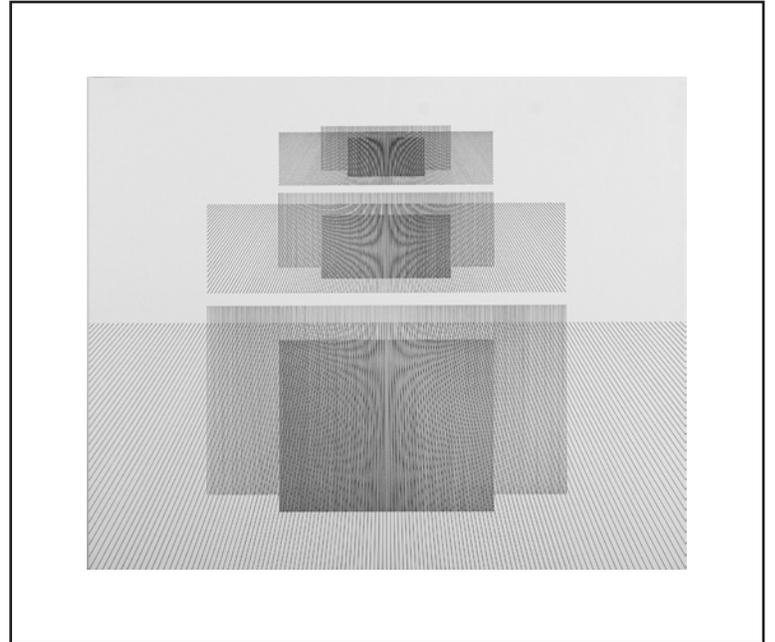
Brian Fisher  
ODYSSEY #3

**Brian Fisher and Odyssey #3: a Drawing at the Surrey Art Gallery**

**BRIAN GRISON**

**Artist's Statement (2001)**

**BRIAN FISHER**



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at the Surrey Art Gallery***

**Brian Grison**

No matter how much art is studied, its illusive meanings multiply and remain mysterious. Each viewer's interpretation of a work of art is unique and constantly shifting — like life itself. If viewers ask the artist for answers the questions will only increase. The artist's explanation is only another interpretation and as much a kind of guesswork as the viewer's. While usually deeper, the artist's interpretation is not always the most accurate. And, because they are only human, their opinions are naturally biased.

Brian Fisher  
*Odyssey #3*, 1990

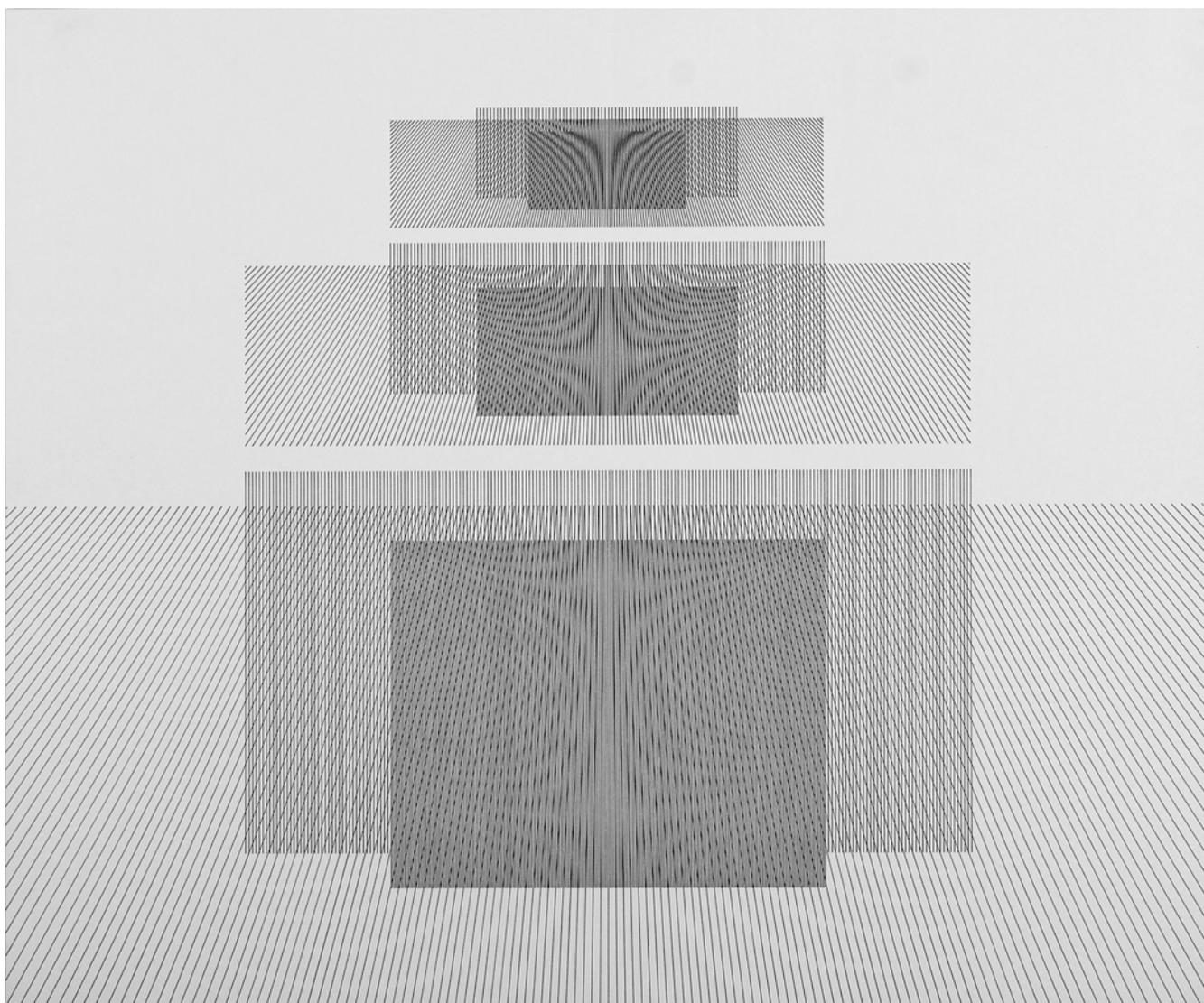
ink on illustration board  
(57.6 x 69.3 cm)  
SAG 1989.03.01  
Gift of Joan Lowndes

Photograph by Cameron Heryet

However this seemingly strange condition does not preclude the value of studying art. It is by asking questions that one learns, not by finding a final answer. Imagine a world in which every work of art had only one easily pinpointed meaning. Most art would be boring, and little of it would require more than one look. Fortunately, like human beings, artworks are infinitely variable in their meanings and they constantly surprise both the artist and the viewer with new facets.

With these guidelines in mind what can be learned about *Odyssey #3* and Canadian artist Brian Fisher who made this pen and ink drawing in 1969? What compelled him to draw this rather mystical looking abstract image? Why is Brian Fisher and this particular work of art worthy of our attention?

There are several ways to approach these questions. One can analyze the drawing from a formal and technical perspective, and this might tell the viewer



Brian Fisher, *Odyssey #3*, 1969, ink on illustration board, (57.6 x 69.3cm) SAG 1989.03.01  
Gift of Joan Lowdnes. Photograph by Cameron Heryet

something about the artist's philosophy, aesthetic interests and studio practice. One can glean interesting hints from meanings within the title. One can study the artist's life and education in the hope of discovering the psychological roots and interests that lead to this drawing. One can study the social and art communities, or the 'spirit of the times' that surrounded his developing years. Just as art always takes the viewer elsewhere, research will lead the viewer to new ideas and questions. This is one of the purposes of art for both the artist and the viewer.

There are a number of sources, exhibition catalogues, articles, reviews and surveys of Canadian art from which one can learn about Brian Fisher.<sup>1</sup> He was born in London, England in 1939 while his parents were visiting his father's family. One year later his family returned to Regina, Saskatchewan. Fisher studied at the University of Regina where he studied under Roy Kiyooka, Arthur McKay, Kenneth Lockheed and Ronald Bloore. After two further years of study in Italy he settled in Vancouver in 1963 at the Vancouver School of Art.<sup>2</sup> During the 1960s, his art evolved from biomorphic to mandala-like line drawings to the delicate mechanical pen and ink images that, like *Odyssey #3*, brought him acclaim across Canada.

The materials and tools to create *Odyssey #3* were simple: wooden T-squares with a raised clear plastic edges, set squares, protractors, rulers with 1 and 2mm intervals, technical pens, illustration boards, drawing boards, and ordinary tables.<sup>3</sup> These tools suggest Brian Fisher's concern for precision and craftsmanship, and that he enjoyed challenging his considerable skills.<sup>4</sup> However, in apparent contradiction of this seemingly strict and mechanical control, his working practice required that he "empty his mind of thought, [and allow] his imagination to wonder freely, without constraint,"<sup>5</sup> while

concentration on the rhythmic stroke of the point of the pen.<sup>6</sup> To experience *Odyssey #3*, the viewer needs to indulge in a similarly focused daydreaming state, while being "absorbed into the limitless space"<sup>7</sup> of the drawing.

Many of the articles about Brian Fisher there is the suggest that work such as *Odyssey #3* reflects his experience of the prairie landscape of south Saskatchewan.<sup>8</sup> This speculation suggests a possible line of search for meaning in the drawing. The prairie was an exciting place for the young Brian Fisher. He roamed the countryside, the "limitless plains planted to wheat"<sup>9</sup> and, like any prairie kid, he trapped gophers, and fished and swam in creeks.<sup>10</sup> He loved this shimmering "fantastic space filled with uncounted golden stocks waving in the breeze"<sup>11</sup> The radiating lines of *Odyssey #3* that converge on a point above the drawing could suggest both the rays of the bright prairie sun or the "shimmering atmosphere of the prairie sky"<sup>12</sup> and, possibly, the horizon hidden from the small boy by the waving wheat.

The search for meaning in *Odyssey #3* could travel in another direction. Brian Fisher's drawings have been compared to the work of other artists, among them Roy Kiyooka, Kazuo Nakamura, Ronald Bloore, the Americans Sol LeWitt, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Irwin, and the Europeans Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley. Studying these artists might reveal certain common characteristics that could be applied to *Odyssey #3*. However, these similarities would be overwhelmed by the differences among these artists. To situate Brian Fisher among them would probably be limiting and misleading. On the other hand, by studying the uniqueness of each of these artists, one might take a small step toward discovering some aspect of the roots of *Odyssey #3*. For example, both Ronald Bloore and Roy Kiyooka are associated with the

prairie landscape, eastern mysticism, and a style that is austere, meditative, and intellectually challenging. Perhaps, the search for Brian Fisher's aesthetic roots would require a close study of his teachers influence, remembering, of course, that any good artist will outgrow influences.

If the study of art does not lead to irreducible truths, then why bother? Learning about art leads one to one's own life, and that is important. The viewer will recognize that their own interpretations are like the meaning of his or her own life, as endless and variable as the art they enjoy. The evolving and ever-expanding relationship the viewer establishes with a drawing is its meaning. The more that he or she knows about the work of art, the artist and that artist's world, the deeper their relationship will become. Conversely, the more the viewer knows about their own self, the more they will be able to understand, love, and enjoy the meanings and values that they bring to art as well as to their own life. Searching for new meanings is a lifelong odyssey, and this word in the title of Brian Fisher's drawing is therefore significant.

No matter what path the viewer chooses to learn about the significance of a particular work of art, its meaning will expand in all directions to encompass the world. This is another way of saying that the world is represented in each work of art.<sup>13</sup> Through the "relaxed concentration" that Brian Fisher's working process induced, *Odyssey #3* encompassed and expanded his own inner-world, the outer-world of art, and its history and the other-world of the viewer. Even now, over thirty years later, the drawing still invites the viewer to embark on the same meditative odyssey of unlimited discovery that the drawing represents. But *Odyssey #3* is also a gentle warning that the long and circular path to self-discovery is

arduous and, as in Homer's *Odyssey*, there can be challenging insights along the way.

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Notes:

1. For example, in the archives of the Surrey Art Gallery, which owns *Odyssey #3*, there is a thick file of articles about Brian Fisher and his art.
2. Personal communication with the artist.
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. Review in Brian Fisher file, Archives, Surrey Art Gallery.
6. Personal communication with the artist.
7. Review in Brian Fisher file, archives, Surrey Art Gallery.
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. Personal communication with the artist.
11. Review in Brian Fisher file, archives, Surrey Art Gallery.
12. Personal communication with the artist.
13. Godfrey, Tony. *Drawing Today; Draughtsmen in the Eighties*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1990. p. 12.

### *Artist's Statement*

**Brian Fisher, 2001**

My intention during this period (1965-70 approx.) was to define mass and space as much as possible through the use of line, not line as circumscription but as a directional component in building the mass: the symmetrical termination of each line defined the divisions between mass and space, with a minimum of explicit boundary. The moiré patterns resulting from these overlaid line systems were a serendipitous surprise, revealing, as they did, unanticipated curvatures which animated the mathematical rigidity of the "formal" approach to art. Paradox.

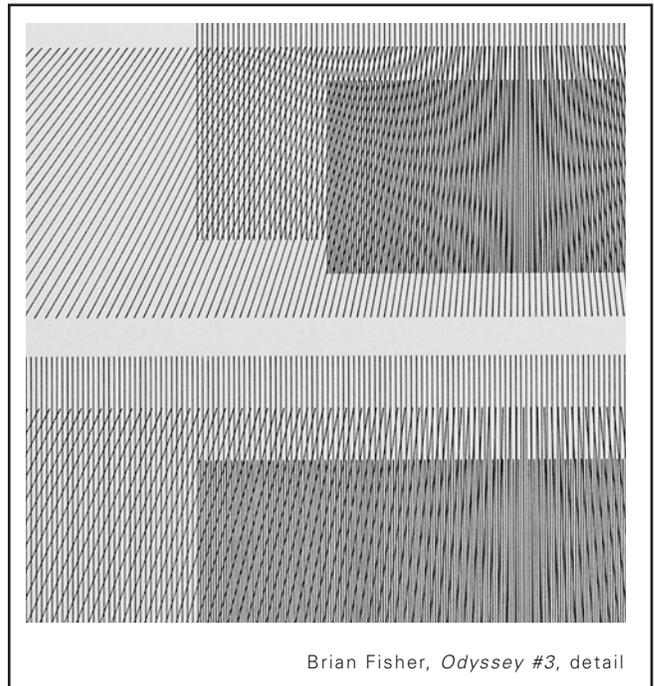
In a broader context, these images reflected my desire to somehow illustrate the holistic nature of the universe, as I perceived it then.

Since that time, my form has undergone many changes but I still cling to that original notion. Through my life-long interest in cosmology, specifically Quantum Theory, I am coming to believe that it is perception itself which shapes reality. What better arena in which to prove this speculation, (if proof is possible), than painting?

Without a methodology, there are no means with which to build.

Without an ideal, there is no foundation.

Without an aesthetic, there is no grace.



Brian Fisher, *Odyssey #3*, detail

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surrey  
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13750 88 Avenue  
 Surrey, BC V3W 3L1  
 Phone: 604-501-5566  
 artgallery@surrey.ca  
 www.surrey.ca/artgallery



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