

# Drawing exhibit at MECA puts the process on display

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By Bob Keyes Staff Writer

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Kevin Townsend rejects the model where artists isolate themselves in a studio and emerge sometime later with a piece of art that justifies their time away.

Townsend, an artist obsessed with time, prefers working out in the open, for all to see. As part of a new exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, Townsend is making what he calls a 48-hour durational drawing in the front window of the Congress Street gallery. When completed, his drawing, "A Granular Field of Nows," will encompass 48 hours of drawing time and become the showpiece of "Drawing Now," an unconventional abstract drawing exhibition with work from 30 artists representing 11 countries.

## IF YOU GO

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**WHAT:** "Drawing Now"

**WHERE:** Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, 522 Congress St., Portland

**WHEN:** On view through March 22; First Friday opening reception from 5 to 8 p.m. Feb. 1; regular gallery hours, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday; 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursday; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Sunday, except First Fridays when the gallery is open until 8 p.m.

**HOW MUCH:** Free

**INFO:** [meca.edu/about/institute-of-contemporary-art/coming-soon/drawing-now](http://meca.edu/about/institute-of-contemporary-art/coming-soon/drawing-now)

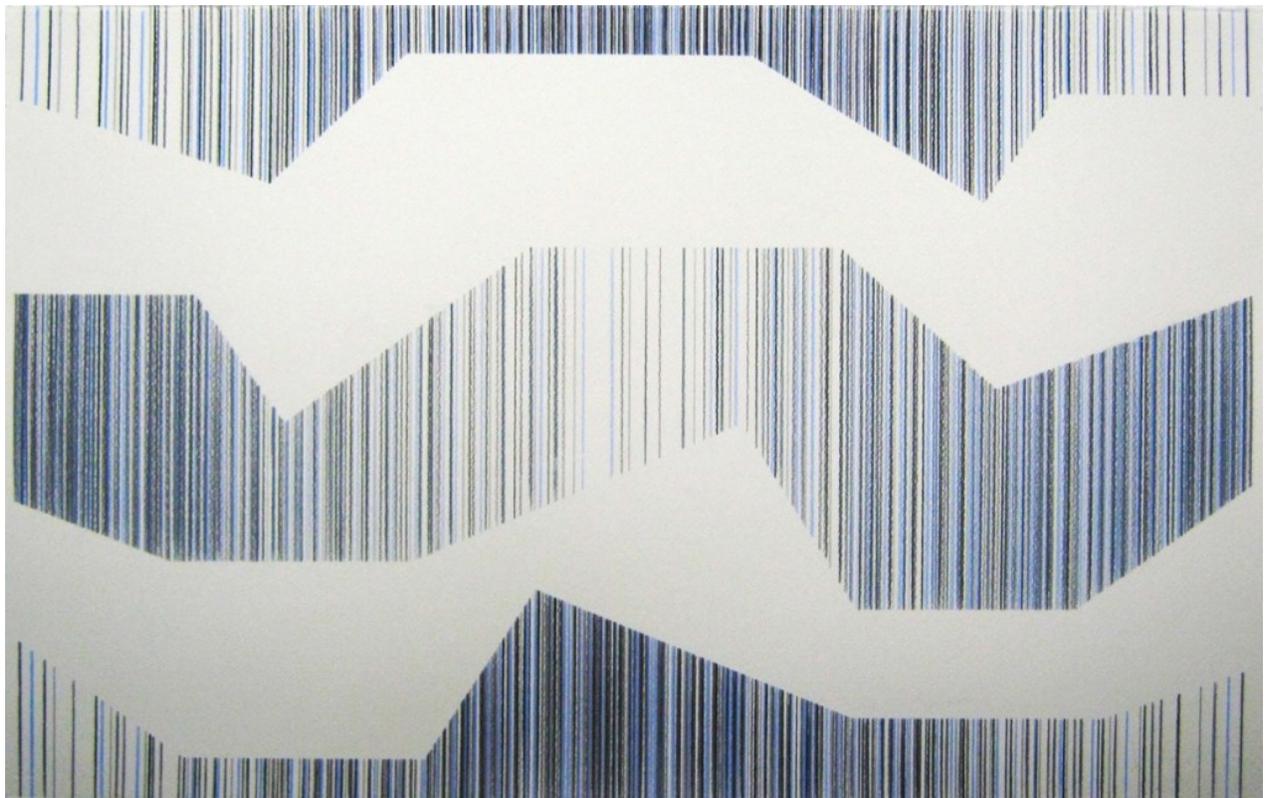
RELATED: American Contemporary Music Ensemble will perform at the ICA at MECA at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 21, presented in partnership with Portland Ovations; \$36, \$33 for seniors, \$18 for students; 207-842-0800 or [porttix.com](http://porttix.com)

It opened last week and is on view through March 22. There's an opening celebration from 5 to 8 p.m. Feb. 1 as part of Portland First Friday Art Walk. Townsend, who teaches at the Kansas City Art Institute and formerly taught at MECA, will complete his drawing in the second part of his artist residency from Jan. 30 to Feb. 2. He started his site-specific drawing last week with the gallery walls painted a dark shade of blue and then marking time by making small white lines, sitting, standing, crouching and scrunched up on the floor as he worked. Each line represents a moment and passage of time.

He dislikes the idea of disappearing into a studio to do his work because such practice is counter to how he lives the rest of his life. "Why do I need to disappear? I don't want to disappear or disconnect," he said. "Process is the most important part, to be in the moment of making. The object is the artifact left behind. I like opening this up, for the viewer to see the passage of time. My hope is there is this shared time that we experience together and this shared experience of the work."

This exhibition pulls back a curtain of mystery on the art of drawing and its role in connecting artists. The ICA at MECA is collaborating with the Drawing Collective, an international group of artists linked mostly on social media, to host this show. It is the first U.S. exhibition of the collective, which has Maine roots. It was founded by Munira Naqui, a Portland-based artist and co-curator of the exhibition, along with Bruce Brown, curator emeritus of the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, now in Rockland. Erin Hutton, director of exhibitions at ICA, organized the exhibition.

The collective formed to connect like-minded artists who are separated by distance, language and culture, said Naqui, who was born in Bangladesh and studied in Russia. She has lived in Maine since 1993.



Barbara Halnan, "Study in Positive: Negative Space," colored pencil.

She began the collective five years ago after talking with artist friends in Paris about their mutual interest in abstract drawing. Its members live in the United States, Canada, France and across Europe, as well as in New Zealand, Australia, Turkey and Vietnam. The collective previously showed members' work in Paris and Sydney, Australia.

Maine is well represented, with three of its 30 members living here. In addition to Naqui, the other Maine artists are Ellen Golden and Clint Fulkerson. Josefina Auslender of Cape Elizabeth is not part of the collective and is showing in "Drawing Now" as a guest. Townsend, who now lives in the midwest but spent several years in Portland, also is showing as a guest of the collective.

In forming the collective, Naqui tested her theory that the practice of drawing connects artists who are otherwise disconnected. The idea was to establish bonds among mutually motivated artists to help them from falling into the kind of studio isolation that Townsend avoids by working in the public domain. "We spend all our time in the studio, mostly in solo practice and mostly by ourselves," she said. "But we all shared the strong need to connect with like-minded artists."

For members of the Drawing Collective, the act of drawing provides an outlet for communicating with each other and the outside world, regardless of language, Naqui said. They correspond through social media, often depending on Google Translate when a visual

image isn't available or doesn't suffice. "But most of our exchanges are visual," she said, "Our language is very visual."

And that's what visitors to "Drawing Now" will see. The work is fluid, dynamic, energetic, rigid, colorful and monochromatic. These are experiments in negative and positive space, with color and form, and an exploration of the intersection of perspective, precision and repetition, made with pencil and with ink on a variety of surfaces. The art is unframed and simply hung.

The work is connected by its vibrancy and by the motivation of its creators, who seek new ways to express their ideas in the abstract and are devoted to exploration and moving the endeavor of drawing forward, Brown said. As such, the work of the Drawing Collective represents a new chapter in the history of abstract drawing, placing Naqui and her colleagues firmly as descendants of Bauhaus, Réalités Nouvelles and other art schools and movements, he said.

There's a multimedia aspect to "Drawing Now," as well. The ICA at MECA will collaborate with Portland Ovations on Feb. 21 to present a performance by the American Contemporary Music Ensemble, a New York-based group with a flexible roster of musicians and instrumentation. They will perform in the gallery, creating music that responds to the artwork, said Portland Ovations executive director Aimee Petrin.

Portland Ovations has collaborated with the ICA on dance and music projects, and was interested in finding another project for a partnership. The ICA had this exhibition in place, including the plans for the Townsend's durational drawing in the front window. That dynamic aspect piqued Petrin's interest.



"The ICA is working at the intersection of visual arts and performing arts, and so many artists I know work in that place – inter-media or mixed media or multimedia, whatever you want to call it," she said. That philosophy aligns with Portland Ovations' interest in providing audiences "with immersive experiences where you feel like you are in the art and not just standing back and watching," she said.

By collaborating, both the ICA and Portland Ovations enhance what they offer their respective audiences, Petrin said, and introduce audiences to new work and perhaps new artistic disciplines. "Done well, collaborations always add up to something greater," she said.

“When people collaborate with a lot of integrity and a lot of interest in making something happen they couldn’t make happen by themselves, there’s a real generative quality at play. That’s what we’re after.”

Townsend is working alone as he makes his drawing, sometimes isolated by headphones – and motivated by music – to help him focus. But he works in full public view, and some people walking by on Congress Street stopped to watch through the window as he worked on his drawing last week.

Others kept on moving.

Townsend appreciates the opportunity to share his work in progress, and looks forward to coming back to Portland to put in the final hours he needs to finish it. “There’s a labor aspect to producing this work,” he said. “With me being in the front window working, people can see the physical labor involved. It allows for a different type of access to the work. I think many of us can relate to the idea of a work day and physical labor.”

His work marks time, one small stroke at a time and all part of something much larger.

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