

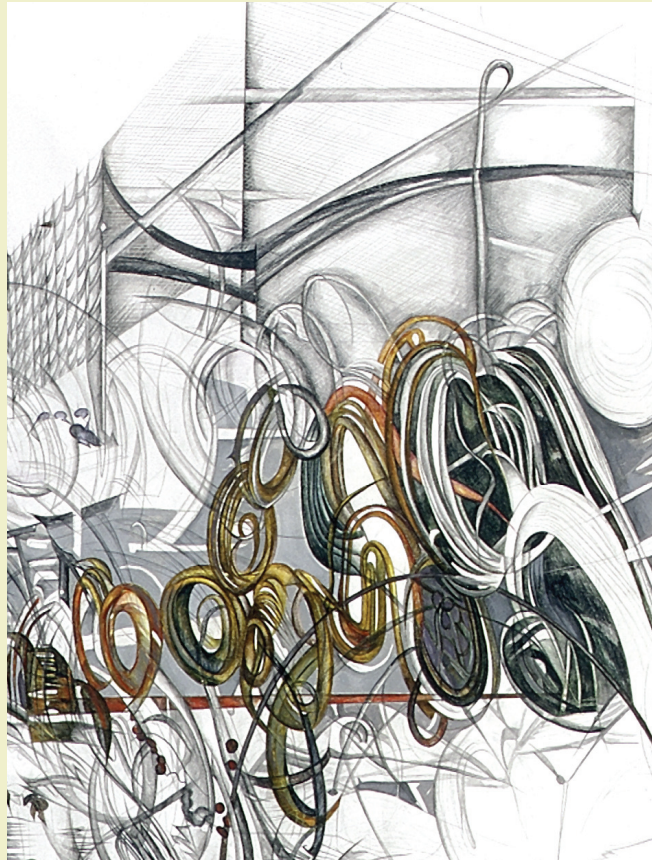
Ann Diener's Uncultivated Borders

by Colin Gardner

"For the limit does not exist."
– Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*

Ann Diener's current drawings focus on both natural and man-made fences and borders, a time-honored subject in traditional landscape painting dating back to the work of English luminaries, Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88) and John Constable (1776-1837). Both artists illustrated the sweeping effects of the enclosure movement on the topography of the landed economy at the end of the eighteenth century as the rural landscape was transformed from unmarked and undivided common land owned and used by all, to the fenced-in, exclusive private property of the emerging upper middle classes. The resultant image of the landscape as a 'patchwork quilt' – most noticeable, of course, from the air – has come to define all subsequent representations of the genre, so that once contrived images of hedgerows and subdivisions have become 'naturalized' to create their own form of cubistic beauty.

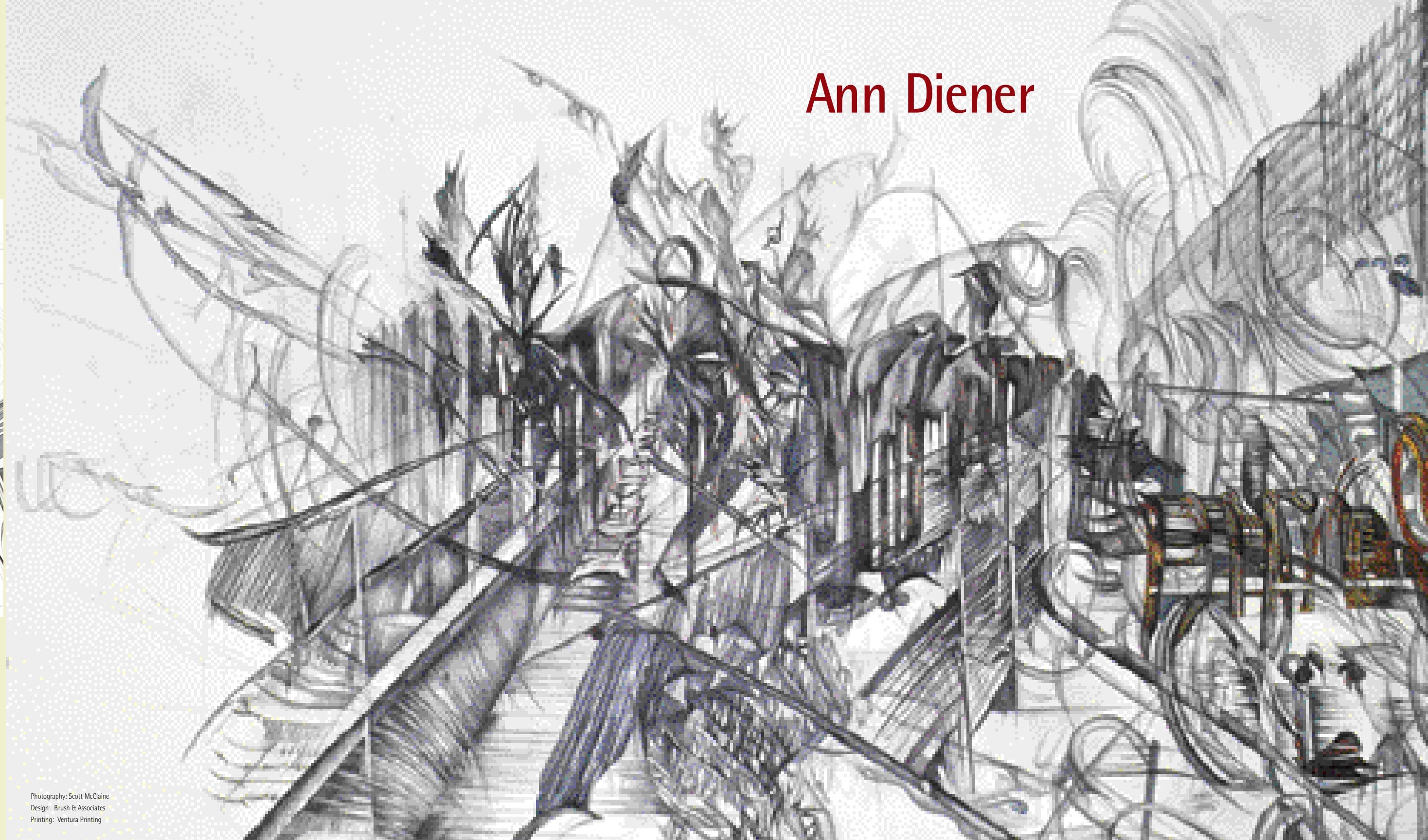
Diener's work acts as a transgressive intervention into this visual orthodoxy. In her case, the landscape under investigation is a topical and local Central Coast phenomenon, specifically the berry farms of Ventura County around Oxnard and Camarillo. Diener traces the transformation of farming practices from a primarily bean-based economy to one dominated by strawberries, and a concomitant change in the method of field enclosure from the use of eucalyptus rows as windbreaks to the employment of opaque and transparent plastic scrims. The latter's resemblance to the unstretched surfaces of



Border Panel #1, detail
graphite and Prismacolor on paper

Front panel : *Border Panel #1*, detail
graphite and Prismacolor on paper

Ann Diener

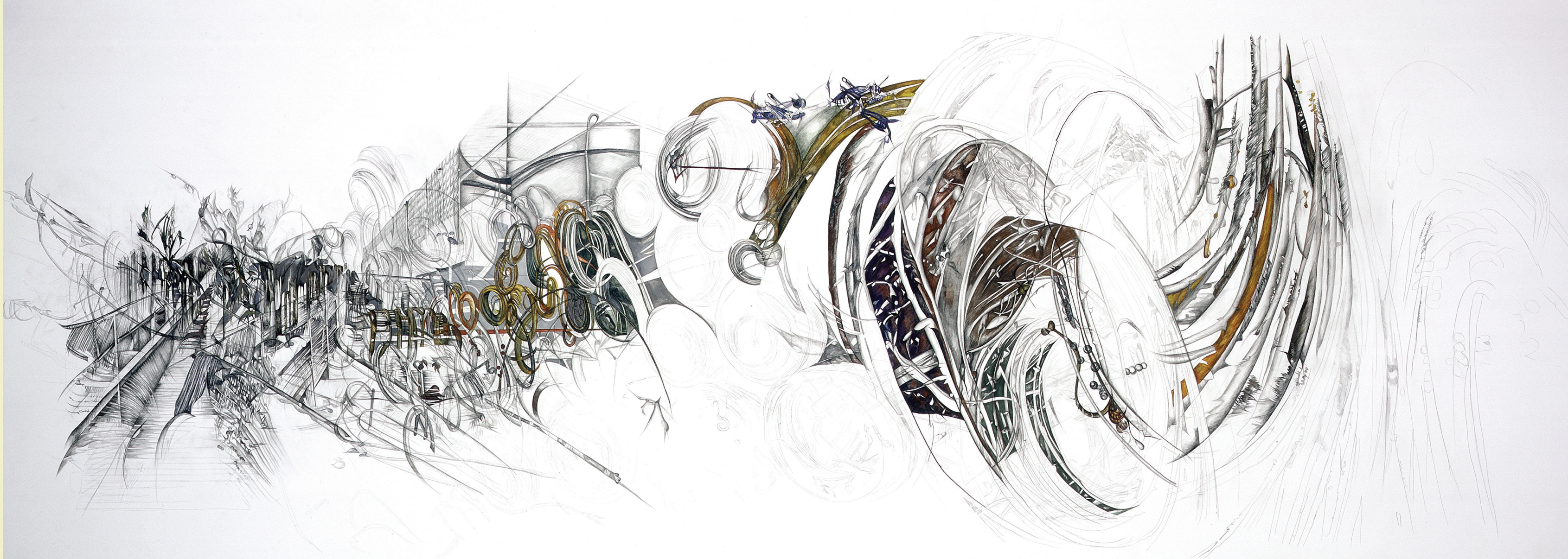


Photography: Scott McClaine
Design: Brush & Associates
Printing: Ventura Printing

painting canvases inevitably act as an irresistible invitation to farm workers and local residents to cover them with graffiti and politico-cultural images so that the signifiers and symbology of the working class and a variety of ethnic groups become embedded in the landscape as a declaration of scripted 'difference', challenging and revising the dominant representational economy of exploitation.

However, rather than use this raw material to restate the obvious binary oppositions between culture and nature, workers and owners, city and country, public and private, Diener translates 'segmentarity' into a far more complex braid of multiplicities, so that the whole concept of borders is viewed less as a barrier between two sides of an unresolved dialectic than as a cut (or more accurately, a pleat or fold) between different equivalences. Diener's method for representing this fold is to return to the tropes of landscape painting but through the intricate detail and line of drawing rather than the more viscous and retinally unstable properties of pigment. Fences, graffiti, vegetation, buildings and text are complexly interwoven in a spidery skein of densely braided lines so that any form of visual and semantic hierarchy is irrevocably overturned. Negative space is now considered to be as important as positive, thinly populated areas are as expressive as densely packed ones.

In addition, Diener uses an extremely wide aspect ratio (in cinematic terms, the drawings would be in Super Cinerama), so that it is impossible to take in the whole picture without stepping a considerable distance back from the surface of the paper. Unfortunately, we then lose sight of all the detail, so we are forced to move in closer, only to lose track of the overall scale and perspective. To make matters worse, the paper has no clear cut border of its own (tacked informally to the wall, it appears to blend in



with its surround), so that the internal structure of the drawing seems to be floating in pure white space.

Thus the more Diener overdetermines borders and margins as both the ostensible form and content of the work, the more unstable they become, forcing the spectator to seek alternative relational boundaries above and beyond the traditional spatial hierarchies of inside vs. outside, here vs. there. The conventional margin is thus forced into the position of

having to erect itself in face of its own effective erasure, to face, in short, what Derrida calls 'the obscenity of its abyss.'

Colin Gardner is Associate Professor of Critical Theory and Interdisciplinary Media at UC Santa Barbara. His recent monograph on the blacklisted film director, Joseph Losey was recently published by Manchester University Press in their "British Film Makers Series." He is currently writing a book on the Czech-born director, Karel Reisz for the same imprint.

Border Panel #1, 2004
graphite and prismacolor on paper
51.5 x 144 inches

Ann Diener has exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions. She received a BA degree from UCLA and an MA from California State University, Northridge. In 2004, Ann received a Pre-doctoral Fellowship from the Inter-disciplinary Humanities Center at UC Santa Barbara, as well as the Abrams Prize and the Israel Levian Graduate Award.