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The draw of these abstracts? Changing the plot lines

Letting your eye rove through a large, abstract drawing by Chuck Holtzman is like cozying up with an epic novel such as "Lord of the Rings." There are switchbacks and surprises, a fascinating variety of lines, textures, and evocations of space. A shift in the drawing -- call it a plot turn; a step out of the haunted forest to find yourself on the brink of an impassable but dramatically beautiful gorge -- may shake up your vision of the piece as a whole.

Holtzman has a gorgeous show up at Victoria Munroe Fine Art. The former sculptor has, for the last several years, been caught up in creating works on paper. You can see the architectural aesthetic of his three-dimensional constructions in these drawings: He uses drafting tools to draw perfect circles, for instance, which he tightly stacks into coils.

In some of the smaller drawings, such as "Untitled (#714)," he crowds the center of the page with these coils, making grids of them that walk the line between compulsive perfectionism and wiggling out. They cluster together against a lovely mottled ground, a picture of fearful regimentation against open, unpredictable spaciousness. These are engaging but seem like experiments, samples of ideas that Holtzman brings together magnificently in his larger drawings.

"Seven Hundred," at nearly 5 feet tall by 3 feet wide, swims with concentric blobs that recall descriptions of mountains in topographic maps. These start as discrete forms, but then a line strays wildly, morphs from

wavering tendrils to straight arrows, and ricochets around. Or it darkens and repeats obsessively. The coil shows up as a shimmering ghost over a colony of black dots. Inky streaks look like the work of a stencil, a squeegee, or both. At the bottom, Holtzman has incised a rectangle out of the page and flipped it, inverting a piece of a black curving form so that it looks like the eyes of a masked man peering out at us.

All this takes place against a ground smoky with charcoal, which could read as the dust kicked up by all the action on the page, or as a soft open space with furrows and shadows against which all these lines and blobs heave and tangle. Either way, "Seven Hundred," with its gothic and obsessive intricacies, is, like all of Holtzman's larger works here, a place in which to lose yourself.

-Cate McQuaid



Untitled (#714) 2006, graphite on paper 14 3/16 x 10 3/16"



Untitled (#699) 2006, ink, charcoal and colored pencil on paper 57 11/16 x 36"