

# Art in America

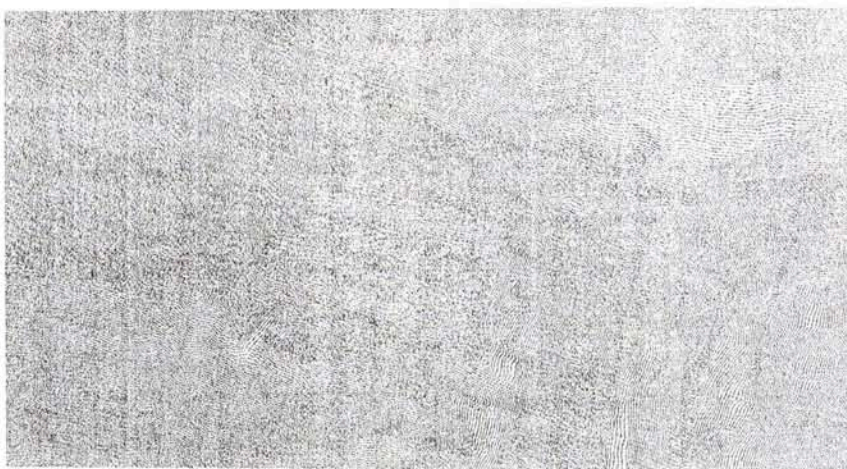
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## Jacob El Hanani at Nicole Klagsbrun

Micrography has a rich tradition in Judaism, used either as decoration or for the transcription of holy texts, but Moroccan-born artist Jacob El Hanani embraces it for its own sake. His is a process-oriented type of drawing, as much about the grueling levels of concentration and physical dexterity involved as about the final product. The extreme nature of these technical tours de force is subsequently transferred to the process of viewing the works, which are overwhelming despite their relatively small size. Since one has to come so close to appreciate their obsessively intricate details, the drawings, in turn, fully envelop the viewer's perception. They are less objects to observe than phenomena, temporal and spatial experiences made manifest by the intense scrutiny they demand.

Each of the seven drawings exhibited, as well as the installation as a whole, elicited dialogues between size and scale, abstraction and figuration. In *Gauze* (2001), every thread is meticulously traced to capture the undulations of the diaphanous matrix as it hovers and sways in the air. *Basket* (2002) depicts a much tighter, stiffer weave, though a similar wave effect is produced, enhanced by the alternating directions of the hatchmarks and gentle modifications in the pressure of El Hanani's pen. And again, each strand of this vast sea of fibers is painstakingly shown, offering a pattern of mind-boggling complexity that is dazzling and utterly absorbing.

The highlights of the exhibition, however, were unquestionably *Alphabet Grid* (2002) and *Letterfall* (2002), both construct-



Jacob El Hanani: *Gauze*. 2001, ink on paper, 23 1/2 by 37 1/2 inches; at Nicole Klagsbrun.

ed from letters that are so minuscule, and yet so perfectly precise, that it is almost impossible to believe that they were drawn by hand. The former consists of the Hebrew alphabet repeated end-to-end in a strict grid pattern. Though contained by its lattice structure, the calligraphic wisps of El Hanani's elegant script occasionally extend beyond their borders, tickling the surrounding white space ever so delicately. With *Letterfall*, the artist breaks out of this grid, scattering his letters—what seem like millions of them—across the page to produce rhythmic vibrations that ripple and pulsate over the entire drawing.

These works are stunningly exquisite. And their implications extend beyond mere form and technical bravura. Ultimately, El Hanani's drawings are meditations on the relationship of the macroscopic to the microscopic, the infinite to the infinitesimal. Their quiet profundity and near-spiritual presence transcend the highly controlled processes by which they are crafted.

—Cary Levine