Mary McDonald on Tad Mike

The composer Cornelius Cardew wrote an instruction in his 1969 Nature Study Notes (HMSIR43) for the participant-performer to walk down the street, “…picking up en route odd items, such as driftwood, scrap metal, etc. Make sounds in any way with the items picked up.”

Tad Mike walks in wooded areas, such as the Maine woods and Florida forests. He picks up bits of organic matter as he walks. Using what he finds, these accumulations become mark-making tools. He likens his selection to combing a beach for shells – one shell sparkles, sings out, is swooped up. What impulse determines this particular selection?

Bonyon Preserve #1 and Bonyon Preserve #7 are part of a series of ink drawings executed in Maine on Westport Island, “a beautiful preserve,” during an artist’s residency in 2007. In these works Mike’s hand guides the tool in a continuous sweep from left to right across the page. The marks form a thick horizontal band, like a progression, movement, or musical score of sorts.

In Bonyon Preserve #7, a hemlock branch was dipped and redipped in walnut-colored ink and slid across the paper. There is a slow curve in the band – a hump, a lazy rise, an elevation – then it descends again before leading you off the page. Two contrapuntal paths are recorded as a hand’s steady sweep, and the tools’ evolution and decay become evident.

In Bonyon Preserve #1, the marks are denser, with a heavier ink concentration in the central core suggesting a spine – prone, supple, with a crescendo in the middle. Tidbits, fragments of the action, leave traces; spits above and below elucidate verticals like a conductor’s wild motion, or like embers ascending, snapping as they ride the summer night’s air.