

ARTFORUM

CHICAGO

Ewan Gibbs

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

The tautly focused pursuit of infinitesimal difference within the incredibly tiny is an intriguing pictorial obsession, and Ewan Gibbs has a kind of atom vision. His standard procedure is to take black-and-white photographs and translate them onto paper into a grid of multiple thousands of meticulously drawn cells, each precisely the same minute size, many hatched with a small mark, parallel row after parallel row, to create a teeming, handmade benday dot matrix. From cell to cell, the minuscule differences in the pressure of his pencil give each dot its near-microscopic uniqueness, and through consummate control of this barely perceptible adjustment he creates the ad infinitum incremental tonal shifts that allow these drawings to so closely approximate the original photographs.

To prepare for this show at Richard Gray Gallery, Gibbs visited Chicago and took hundreds of photographs of the area, mostly of well-known sites and downtown buildings. (For a concurrent project at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, he followed the same procedure for that city.) Returning to Oxfordshire, UK, where he lives and works, Gibbs then began the process of transcribing a selection of these pictures, creating the fifteen works on paper (all identically titled *Chicago*; all 2010) included in this exhibition. His take on the metropolis is safely touristic, his concentration on the city's architectural history, a standard response; and his photography fairly amateurish: There are drawings of old Chicago (the Tribune Tower, the Chicago Water Tower, the Wrigley Building), modern Chicago (Marina Towers, the John Hancock Center, the Willis—formerly Sears—Tower), and contemporary Chicago (Trump Tower, Millennium Park), but such a prosaic take is integral to the agenda of these works. Like some mannered, latter-day pointillist take on 1970s Photorealist painting, Gibbs's approach is devoted not to the reality of a site but to its photographic image. And indeed, with the exception of two smaller drawings picturing the El train as it pulls into (or maybe departs?) a Loop station, all images are frozen solid, embalmed in an omnipresent micro process that discourages any impulse to gain macro perspective.

Certainly the popular allure of Gibbs's maniacally rendered knitting-pattern illustrations stems from the stunning difficulty of his task, the monklike patience it requires, and the bravura skill he brings to bear. But the virtuosity of his graphic command proves to be both a means and an end in itself. Pictorially numbing at a distance, the drawings successfully invite a kind of close looking that would otherwise be rare with such hackneyed images. The grid democratizes the image in a way that it does in, say, a painting by Agnes Martin, where each and every square inch gets the same kind and amount of treatment. In Gibbs's case, the signature crown of a skyscraper is no more thoroughly limned than the more anonymous stories below or the seemingly vacant sky above. The intersection of the very large (his subject matter) and the very small (his means of rendering it) retains a sense of tension, though, echoing the age-old dichotomy of form and process.

—James Yood

Ewan Gibbs, *Chicago*, 2009, graphite on paper, 11 3/4 x 8 3/4".

