

## **ABSTRACT DRAWING.**

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*Isn't every damn thing abstract now?* – Ad Reinhardt

‘Abstract drawing’ sounds a bit like a tautology: all drawing – at the level of mark-making – is, in some sense, abstract. However, the idea behind my selection for this exhibition was to focus on those drawings that had no direct or apparent external reference, nor were governed by a transcendental or visionary belief system. Thus I have not included any of the many Tantric drawings that I’ve looked at over the years – not because they don’t interest me, but because it seemed to take the selection down too many divergent paths. One of the things that has interested me in making this selection – aside from the intrinsic delight in looking at so many drawings – has to do with ideas about what is, or where to locate, the real. Abstract mark-making, in coherent and definite forms, is very old indeed. There are some suggestions that it may even have been a practice amongst Neanderthal and Homo erectus groups – that is, it is deeply wired into the human genome. Some of this mark-making may have had to do with clan or tribe identification or status; others may have been to do with indicating the particular importance of this or that artifact: not just any piece of ochre but *this* one. The contemporary abstract productions of some African tribal groups – such as the BaMbuti peoples of the Congolese rainforest – only fit tenuously into this long historical perspective. The rock paintings of the San Bushmen in the Kalahari are abstract and complex in different ways, being the residues of a Shamanistic production. I am very stimulated by what can be found coming from Africa, and in how it relates to an idea like ‘abstract’, but in making my selection I was sure that, with the resources and space available, and with my limited knowledge, I could not do justice to such a complex argument.

In general, abstraction in art seems to belong to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In acknowledgement of this, my selection begins with a sketchbook of 1906–09 by Hilma af Klint and a Suprematist drawing of 1917–18 by Kazimir Malevich. The Klint is wonderful. In these early sketchbooks of hers, before the visionary sources and destination of her inspiration became clear, the drawings contained evidence of an open-eyed attempt to put something down while trying to learn at the same time. Malevich, on the other hand – in the middle of the most profound uprooting of all order in the world around him and a re-evaluation of all value – notated a reorganisation of space and time. His was a vision of non-objectivity, in a world (and it is important that a world remained) purged of matter but not of material, and organised around the basic geometries of rectangle, circle and square. The Suprematist composition is a blueprint for the future. If af Klint is a receiver, then Malevich is a transmitter.

A third pole in this configuration of exemplars is the untitled Jackson Pollock drawing of 1951, which, in terms of the transmitter/receiver analogy, would be akin to something like noise on the channel. The work is simply made by dribbling coloured ink onto two sheets of paper, one on top of the other. It is the one

underneath that is the finished work, the mark-making having been twice distanced from the producer, first by being removed from direct contact with the artist's hand and second by being further filtered by the top piece of paper. What is made is therefore doubly stripped of conscious control and yet, paradoxically, highly intentional.

A similar filtering process, though achieved in an upwards rather than downwards movement, underlies the four untitled works of 1964–65 by Mira Schendel. The rice paper is lightly floated onto an ink bed (itself dusted with a first layer of talc or flour) and the resulting light marks scratched across the paper surface and bleeding onto the sheet are a pulled moment from the infinitude of possibilities that the bed holds.

In Susan Hefuna's group of drawings, *Building* (2009), the successive layers of semitransparency have something similar at heart: each layer partially obscuring the ones underneath it as subsequent marks are recorded anew or previous ones fade away, so that the final drawing disappears slightly, as if submerging into the depths of successive layers. There is, of course, a more material and practical connection: the use of tracing paper as a transfer process and as a means of establishing continuity in an architectural or structural context.

Filtering, distancing, extracting and displacement are implicit in these works, just as they are in Dorothea Rockburne's *Carta Carbone* (1972). In this drawing, a piece of carbon paper – that staple of the now disappeared typing pool or old-fashioned office – was sandwiched between the two halves of a larger sheet of folded squared paper, the exterior of which was then inscribed with the outline of a square. The paper has been opened up to reveal the square drawing on the left, and the carbon on the right. Carbon paper is for Rockburne the equivalent of Schendel's inked bed, but here remains physically present, fecund with other possibilities. Though what we see is also, of course, a black square and a white square.

In each of these four examples, the specific material properties of different papers are vital to the processes by which the drawing has been made. The physicality of paper takes on a more muscular edge in Gordon Matta-Clark's *Untitled* (1976–77), the pile of paper containing the drawing having been physically attacked, cut and eviscerated. The drawing is like an archaeological site that, once excavated, erases all the multiple pasts, leaving behind only one record, partial, fragmentary and raw. Contrastingly, David Austen's two painstakingly constructed drawings are the consequence of exquisite control over the application of paint. Where Matta-Clark excavates a drawing through the paper with a knife, Austen releases it from the paper with a fine sable brush.

In Kishio Sugas's *Accumulation of Critical Boundaries* (1987), the abrasive wire mesh sheets, individually stapled to the underlying white card, resist the mark-making attack of the chalk, catching the powder in its sharp corners and folds. The process of drawing that is readable from the surface is one where chalk has

been repeatedly pulled across the abrasive surface, eventually clogging it. Once the loose excess is shaken off, the finished drawing is left behind.

This process recalls Richard Serra's drawing activity— the artist as a motor, driving the wedge of ink-stick over and over again across the paper. Physicality is certainly of importance – weight and measure are the poles of his practice and the means by which the world is understood. These are not independent absolutes, however; there is always an observer from whom and for whom weight and measure are constructed. The small, untitled drawing of 2009 included in the exhibition is perhaps a more propositional example than one is used to seeing, the ink-stick smudging and bleeding around the central form, a thought as much as an assertion, with the artist incorporating the holes down one side of the paper. The drawing itself could even be seen as a hole rather than a solid, particularly when you notice how physically substantial the paper is.

It is around a hole or a pocket that the two untitled Anish Kapoor drawings of 1984 and 1987 are constructed. Seemingly thrown together on a conveniently available surface, they are surprisingly physical renditions of empty space, the red and the white being coloured embodiments of the space contained.

In the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), a running gag riffs on drawing's capacity relentlessly to change the rules: a black circle can be a blot, a hole or a stumbling block. These tricky transformations are a subtext in Victoria Haven's wall-based *Rabbit Hole Study #1* and *#2* (2004), a narrative through time. Time is obviously an important component of drawing. It takes Sam Messenger, for example, a good deal of time to draw all those lines on works like *Ruled Black on Grey* (2013). And, of course, it takes all artists a long time to develop their drawing practice, whatever form it takes. Time can also be the subject of the drawing. All Roger Ackling's works register the passing of time. *A Minute Is Long Enough* of 1977 (paired with a Richard Long photograph taken at the same time and place) is particularly condensed, congealing into something ineffable. For John Latham's *I Second Drawing* (1971), an operator sprayed pigment from an atomiser onto a target board in a one-second burst. Both the Ackling and the Latham convey time as a physical entity. What you get is what you see.

Behind the acceptance of the 'truth' of the uncontrolled mark – in whichever of its many possible senses you wish to interpret that word – there is a history of automatism, or of mechanism. In the late 1960s, Dom Sylvester Houédarde used the typewriter, as a drawing machine. The lyrical results are suggestive of the graphic aspect of Constructivism, but also awkward and obdurate, clearly carried out at the limit of the possibilities inherent in typing. The lovely undated *Typewriter Study* by Anni Albers, through the repetition of brackets and underscore lines, sets up on the page an echo of the weaving that was her principal occupation. Likewise, the perforations in her also undated *Teaching Study Made with Pinpricks* associate themselves not just with a *Concetto Spaziale* by Fontana, or with pinned cloth, but with the punch-cards used to programme instructions into the earliest Jacquard automated looms. It was, of course, from such a

punch-card or punch-tape system that the earliest inputs into electronic computing devices were made. Those days were gone by the time, in the late 1960s, that Frederick Hammersley in San Francisco turned his attention to programming an IBM Golfball printer, using the full gamut of the typography available to make drawings made up of sequences of repeated marks on the page. While in Albers' drawing the typewriter's end stop and the rewind lever have been used to justify each line, Houédarde has clearly periodically released the roller and repositioned the paper on an oversize carriage, allowing him both to overtype and set the type at an angle. On the other hand, it is clear from the side perforations in the paper and the structure of marks that Hammersley's programmes sometimes rewind the paper, building up a second or even third series of marks on top of each other. Putting the rules in and getting the results out are a means of establishing distance or filtering in the same way as the intervening sheet serves as a distancing or filtering device for Pollock. For the youthful Darrell Viner, working at UCL in London in the mid-1970s, the method in his series of *Computer Drawings* is obviously similar (putting the rules in and getting the results out), although the device involved – a stylus driven to position and plot on an X/Y axis – is somewhat different. And the young artist is learning as he goes along, developing a practice in dialogue with the new machine. The vocabulary is of dots, dashes, lines, crosses and points, rather than typography, and both stylus and paper track according to the supplied instruction.

'According to the supplied instruction' is, of course, the mantra of the master of late twentieth-century drawing, Sol LeWitt, over whose lifetime of drawing – according to varied parameters – an oeuvre of quite extraordinary richness, subtlety and diversity poured out. The two small works from 1971 included here are classic in their simplicity and restraint. The drawings of Lothar Götz and of Sam Messenger derive from similar principles, although there is an important difference. For LeWitt the instruction defines the work, the execution being the result of a rigorous application of that instruction, while for both Götz and Messenger the act of execution and the decision of when to stop are equally critical. In Götz's two recent drawings, there are prior decisions concerned with the division and colour of the thin sheet of card, and the points of origin and length of the drawn line. In one case the lines terminate at the edge and a single colour is used; in the other the lines are of indeterminate length but do not impinge on adjacent lines with the same trajectory, and the choice of colour is unrestricted. In both drawings the eventual thickness of the applied line finally brings the underlying card colour into play as a linear element. This is perhaps how the decision of when to stop is arrived at – when the drawing sinks into the card and the card becomes the drawing. In Messenger's large *Ruled Black on Grey* (2013), the paper surface is blackened by a painstakingly applied mesh of lines that do not go to the edge, but stop to leave a more or less even border all around. There is a slight textile feel to the wavering edge. In this border there are what seem like pentimenti, but, as anyone who has used one will know, they are in fact the marks that one makes in persuading the ink in a reluctant Rotring pen to continue to flow. It is their stuttering commentary around the steadfast and painstakingly executed blackened centre that complete the drawing, making it a rich repository rather than the surface preparation that it was originally intended to be. You could say that the drawing was finished before it was started.

The three *Untitled Collage* drawings from 1967–68 by Garth Evans can also be viewed through the mantra of ‘according to the supplied instruction’. In each, the collaged drawing is recomposed from an original, cut into smaller squares and painstakingly pieced together to form a new square or rectangle, so that the lost whole can be assumed. In the earliest it is a piece of squared paper that has been cut up. However, the cut grid is offset from the printed grid so that, in the collaged drawing – which has been re-inserted into a second, and larger, sheet of squared paper – there are no continuities of line across the reassembled squares. The sense of order and jumble between the larger sheet and the recomposed drawing reverses the inside/outside-edge dialogue of Messenger’s drawing. In the second of Evan’s drawings it is a continuous looping scribble that has been dissected and reassembled. Each cut square becomes an independent drawing, a potential stand-in for the lost whole, each held by the collaging principle adjacent to its neighbour and each endowed with value by that association. In the third drawing, a dark scumbled original is given the same treatment. However, in this drawing, since the drawing is rectangular and has clearly been built or glued from the centre out, the consequence is the presence of a half square on the top and bottom edges. This could be an unintended result, only revealed once the process was underway and then pragmatically dealt with, or it could be the result of intentional dislocation. Either way, the sense of reordering a lost original is redefined as a tiling problem and centre is asserted against edge.

Mismatch and mismeasure in the simplest of mark-making are at the heart of the four late drawings by Bob Law (from 1999 and early 2000). In each, the drawn rectangle is simply subdivided, the divisions quietly associating themselves with flags, signs, folds, markers, windows, maps, kisses, crossings out, never quite settling definitively, an ambiguity maintained by their slightly off-kilter placement. They are surprisingly insistent despite their delicacy and apparent simplicity.

The six David Batchelor *Magic Hour Drawings* (2013) refer, at least by title, to that moment in the day when light has gone from the ground, though the horizon remains visible and there is light in the sky. The moment when the light abandons us – *entre le chien et le loup*, as the French say – and the dimensions and contours of what is in front of us, its weight and measure, are intractable. Physically, the drawing gives some clues – the puckering paper, the slightly differing blacks in the collage of black paper tape – but the drawings hide behind their own presence; they seem to be in the way of themselves. We know that they are there, but we can’t tell what they are.

At the beginning of this essay, I proposed that Malevich and af Klint could be seen respectively as transmitter and receiver. Tomma Abts, Victor Ciato, Nasreen Mohamedi, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and Richard Wright seem to fall on the Malevich side, while on the af Klint side are John Golding, Eva Hesse, Emma McNally and Alison Wilding.

Malevich dreamt of a world of non-objectivity, not a non-world; materiality remains in play. Abts resists the idea of the abstract and describes her works as non-objective. There are three drawings in this selection, each from a different group of her works, and one can view each as a different fact. What they have in common is their size, the rest is difference.

Ciato's group of small drawings *Variations in the Spirit of the Tang System* (1973) are strongly resistant – produced in Communist Romania, an environment hostile to the idea of abstraction, and to the corrupting influence of dangerously generalist ideas. The Tang system was a means of representing reality invented by the prince of Tang in medieval China, in which the picture surface is divided according to a pre-established geometric logic. It is this system that underpins the drawing. Tang is also the name of the first set of codified criminal laws in China during the Ming Dynasty, where the offence and the penalty were established, making the 'punishment fit the crime', as Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado sings. Both legal and aesthetic systems, structuring society and representation, are indicated here.

After her studies at St Martins School of Art in 1954–57, followed by a period in Paris from 1961 to 1963, Mohamedi returned to Mumbai. She taught for some years at Baroda University, but for the most part she worked in seclusion and isolation. The underlying premise, and promise, of her work is modernist, and her practice is deeply indebted to the abstract in photography. Her drawing, *Untitled* (c.1980), can be seen as recording, or perhaps notating, the refraction and partial reflection of light on a surface. The second work, *Untitled* (c.1970), consists of three images on sheets of photographic paper. It is the result of the successive masking and exposing of light-sensitive paper, partially developing the print and reworking it, until the final image is generated and fixed.

Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian is a senior Iranian artist and, as with Mohamedi, there is a strongly modernist drive behind her work, but it also draws into its orbit a fixed sense of order through geometry. The underlying pattern is built up from a series of three interlocking and overlying grids, each drawn with a slightly heavier line than the previous one. From this welter of connected lines, the central dodecagon is picked out. Surrounding that is a stippled green octagon and a related series of interconnected hexagons. Thus far so familiar, but as additional elements are picked out, increasing departures from regularity or symmetry emerge – the detail in the top left-hand corner, for example, or the strange asymmetry of the two central forms delineated with heavy black lines. Similar to Ciato's drawings, there is a balance between the particular and the individual and its underpinnings in the overall.

Richard Wright's attention to detail is well known, and, in the main he paints directly on the wall. In these three untitled works on paper of 2003–06, each very different from the other, the same sense of concentrated attention to a specific surface is clear, and is particularly evident in the exquisite, seemingly unfolding gold

gouache. Each is a fact, not a proposition or a plan, and the execution is superbly disciplined. Beauty is a particular, wayward consequence.

If these artists in the Malevich camp work with the rules, the inheritors of af Klint do not. They respond. It seems strange to cast an artist and art historian of Golding's reputation on the side of the receivers, yet the progression evident in these four untitled works, from the discipline of the 1965 collage with its cut edges, to the abandonment of the 1985 drawing, is evidence of an artist trying to learn how a Dionysian impulse can overcome an Apollonian sense of order. Hesse, marooned in an abandoned factory in Düsseldorf during her miraculous year of 1965, converted the very detritus that surrounded her into the most extraordinary wall reliefs and hanging sculptures. The slew of drawings that came out of that year – sparse, linear and deeply strange – have the same quality of asking 'Just what is this and where does it come from?', the coming alive of material. For McNally, that coming alive is evidenced through trace, record, pulse, echo, reverberation, resonance, track, scratch, hiss and stutter; all leave their mark behind and the process of drawing is a kind of index of the ways in which the unseen, the unknown, the deep and the distant are registered on the surface. She is an instrument and the drawing is what the instrument produces or plots.

Wilding's two drawings of 2000–01 seem equally the product of something fine-tuned, although unplanned, perhaps starting with the ugly or accidental and then slowly building up by a process of tracking and looking and attempting to clear up (or hold down) whatever was there in the first place. This sense that what was about to happen at the beginning of the drawing was unknown and unplanned is true of all of these last four artists – in each case the beginning seems to be do with making ready and the end appears to have come when it felt like enough.