

Drawing outside the lines: Richard Deacon traces 100 years of abstraction

From fuzzy-edged blots by Jackson Pollock to pictures done by Alison Wilding's cat, more than 30 artists feature in this personal selection by Deacon

• Richard Deacon at Tate Britain: roll up for the magical metal mystery tour

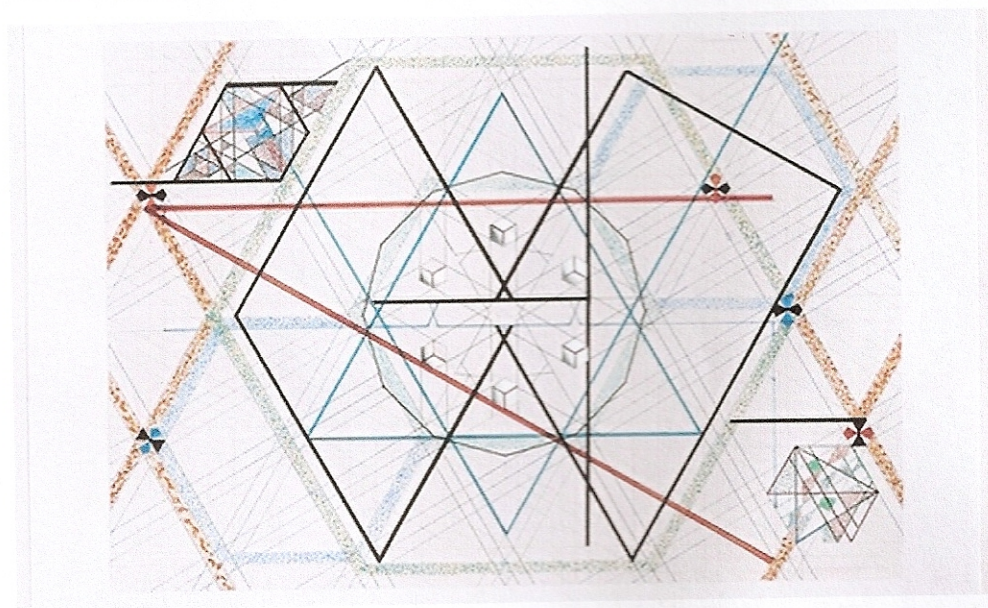


Adrian Searle

Follow @SearleAdrian

Follow @gdnartanddesign

theguardian.com, Wednesday 19 February 2014 13.40 GMT



Open forms ... Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's *Geometric Design with Mirror* (2000). Photograph: The British Museum

As deliberate as a thought, or as primal as a cry, drawing can be many things. It can describe something seen or felt, and it can be a thing in itself, without reference to the visible world.

**Abstract Drawing
curated by Richard
Deacon**

Drawing Room,
London

There are all kinds of drawings here, from the tense, wiry lines of Mira Schendel to the warped perspective of a Richard Wright, in which a tilted horizon forever curves away. Looking at it feels like

SE1 5TE

Until 19 April

Details:

020-7394 5657

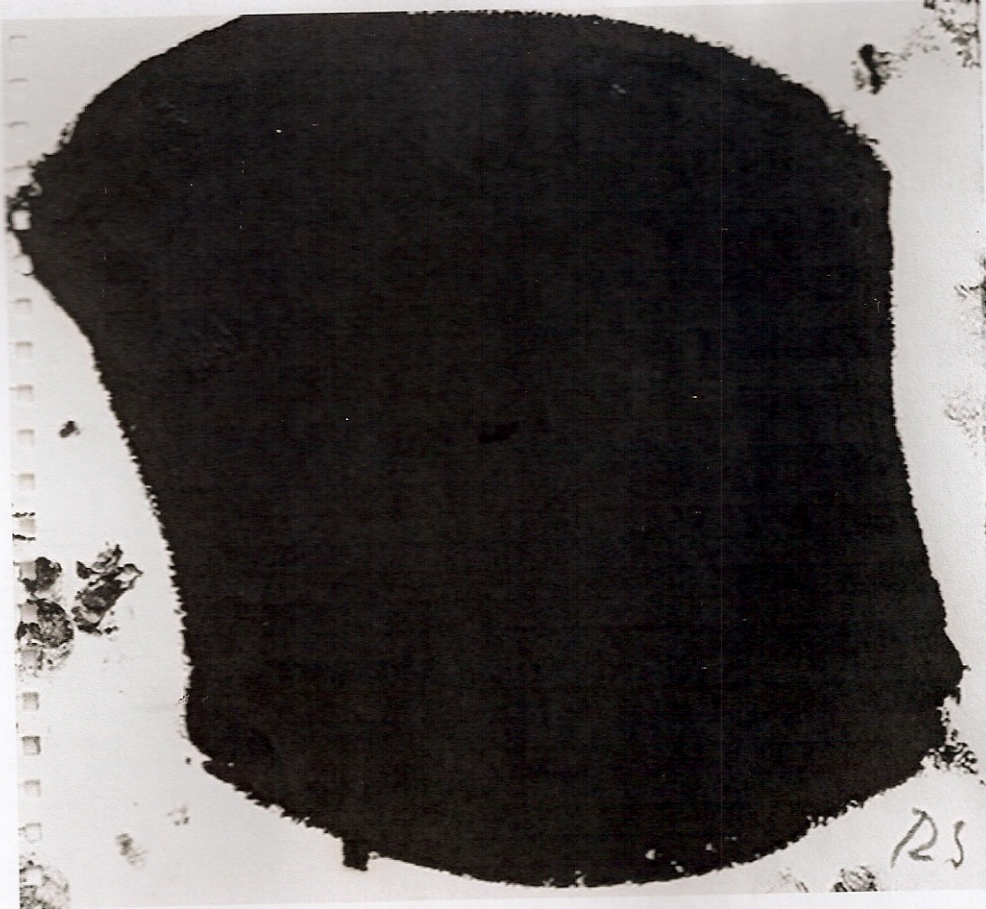
Venue website

floating or diving. Look long enough and you feel you are being led over the horizon by his succession of little gold-leaf marks to disappear in the emptiness of the white paper. In some of the works here, I imagine the artist poring over the paper for hours. Others appear as accidental and as sudden as a sneeze.

Sculptor Richard Deacon, who has spent the last couple of years selecting this show, starts his introductory essay with the simple thought that all drawing is, in some sense, abstract. It is all just marks on a surface. Abstraction has many levels, both conceptually and in terms of execution. At once a language and a thing, drawing is as marvellous and mysterious as it can be plain and clear. One might quibble that the small, delectable Anish Kapoor drawings, the pastels by John Golding and the work by Jackson Pollock are really paintings rather than drawings, and that Dom Sylvester Houédard's works made with a typewriter are really concrete poetry, but what the hell. Drawing, after all, is everywhere.

The pleasures of this exhibition are as various as the works themselves. Paper carved into with a knife by Gordon Matta-Clark, pinpricked by Anni Albers, spat at with a spray gun by John Latham and walked over by a cat (though the cat's contribution to one of Alison Wilding's drawings is no more than an accidental aside), are just some of the material gambits here.

This is very much a personal choice by Deacon, and takes us from the early 20th century and the spiritual notebooks of Swedish artist Hilma af Klint, via a tiny suprematist drawing by Malevich – little more than a cursory notation on a scrap of yellowed paper – to a 1951 Jackson Pollock, in which Pollock used the marks that had seeped through a drawing on porous mulberry paper on to the sheet below, leaving a pattern of fuzzy-edged blots, which he then worked over with white gouache. Pollock's drawing almost, but never quite, resolves itself into an image. Looking at it, I find myself resisting the urge to find figures, or a view, in the way that we see faces in clouds. This urge happens unwilling and is probably hardwired into our brains.



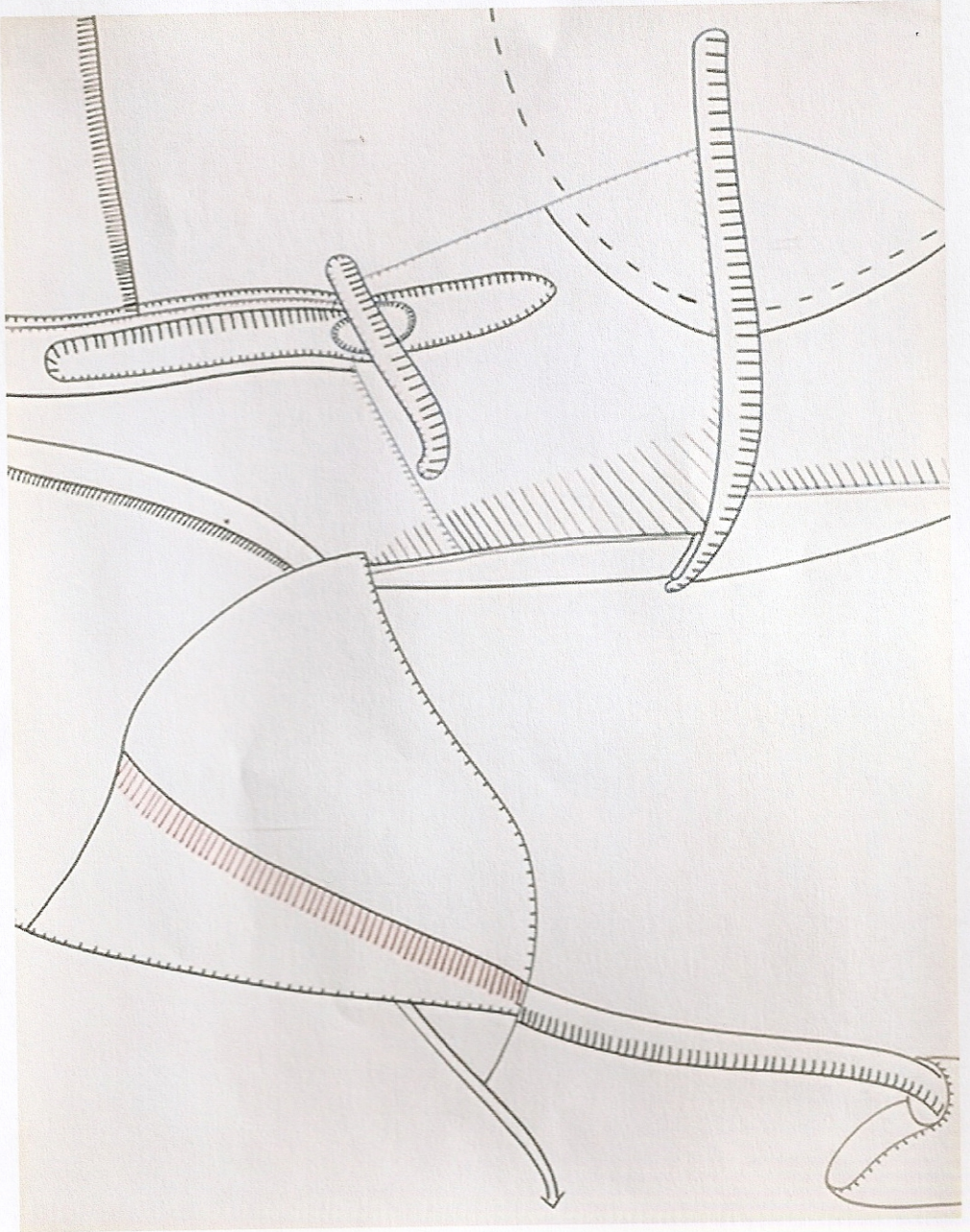
Frontal as a punch ...

Untitled, Richard Serra's paintstick drawing from 2009. Photograph: FXP

There are drawings so small and delicate you have to press your nose to the glass to see them. The Richard Serra is as frontal as a punch. It keeps coming at you. It is about the size of a head. But as I look, it starts reversing itself, and I start to see it as a cavernous hole. The shape slews towards one edge of the paper, and here and there the greasy crumb of the oil stick leaves smudgy traces on the heavy paper. Around the corner is a big black square of closely hatched lines drawn over thin grey wash, by Sam Messenger. Around its border are numerous little marks, where the artist had to clear the clogged nib of his pen. These flecks are more than mere residue. They give the eye relief, somewhere to go beyond the repetitive, insistent labour of the square itself. There's something touching about them.

There are drawings here that must have taken hours, days, even weeks to make. Others were a matter of minutes, or a moment. The tiny Malevich drawing probably took a minute or two. The spray of inky dots by John Latham took exactly one timed second, using a spray gun on a bit of primed wood. There's not much to it. But there doesn't need to be much to detain us and keep us looking. You could spend hours here. How compelling it all is.

Unknownable ... Eva



Hesse's untitled ink on paper work from 1965. Photograph: Estate of Eva Hesse/Hauser & Wirth

Hilma af Klint's 1906-9 sketchbook drawings, with their spiralling pencil tornados

capture a hurtling, breathless, almost furious sense of exaltation. Iranian artist Monir

Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's Geometric Design with Mirror feels like a section from an

endlessly proliferating pattern that keeps on going beyond the confines of the paper. The

wonder is all in the geometry. Drawing with painted tape directly on the wall, Victoria

Haven presents us with two open forms whose folds and joins articulate impossible

figures that flex about themselves. It is as if they were talking back to the viewer.

Something similar happens in Tomma Abts's drawings, and in Eva Hesse's oddly jointed

forms – they are like looking at button-holes, the turn of a collar or the fall of a sleeve.

But that's not quite right. They're too unknowable, and I wallow in what she leaves

undescribed.

viewer in darkness. Amorphous voids loom. Get up close and what looks like spatter resolves into thousands of perfect circles and jangling repetitive marks, all subsumed in a kind of darkness. You can really lose yourself here. Maybe the artist is trying to lose herself, too.

Repetitive mark-making, whether made by hand, generated by computer or produced with typewriters, is the theme of a number of works. One Lothar Götz coloured-pencil drawing looks like shot silk. Another, with its gouache and silver pencil lines, all radiating from two points, pitches and yaws as you look. The eye can never be still.

Looking at a drawing can lead us into a process of deciphering and describing, but also to inhabiting that imaginary space in front of us, and wandering off into its marks and empty passages. There were no ballpoint pens in the middle ages or felt tips to decorate the caves, but we can still respond to drawing as if it were all made yesterday. I find it hard to look at drawings without wanting to go off and start making some myself. It's a temptation that's hard to resist. Drawing can lead us to places we don't expect, so much so I end up feeling like an abstraction myself.



Get the Guardian's Art Weekly email

For your art world low-down, the latest news, reviews and comment delivered straight to your inbox.

[Sign up for the Art Weekly email](#)

More from the Guardian

[What's this?](#)



Sleeping Beauty footage found after 55 years and to be screened on BBC
14 Feb 2014



Dumb Starbucks was the perfect crime, but Starbucks was smart to play dumb
12 Feb 2014



Is it time to join the 'preppers'? How to survive the climate-change apocalypse
17 Feb 2014



Nein danke! National Gallery unveils German art it once sold off as 'ugly'
18 Feb 2014

More from around the web

[What's this?](#)



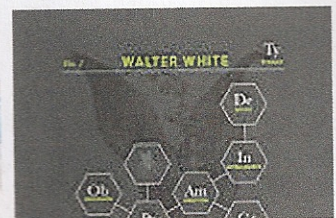
Don't Be Taken in by These 10 Credit Myths (Experian)



Get the look: Nordic Folk (Sainsbury's)



4 Tips for Getting By on a Low Income (Money Advice Service)



The Character Elements of Breaking Bad (Shutterstock)