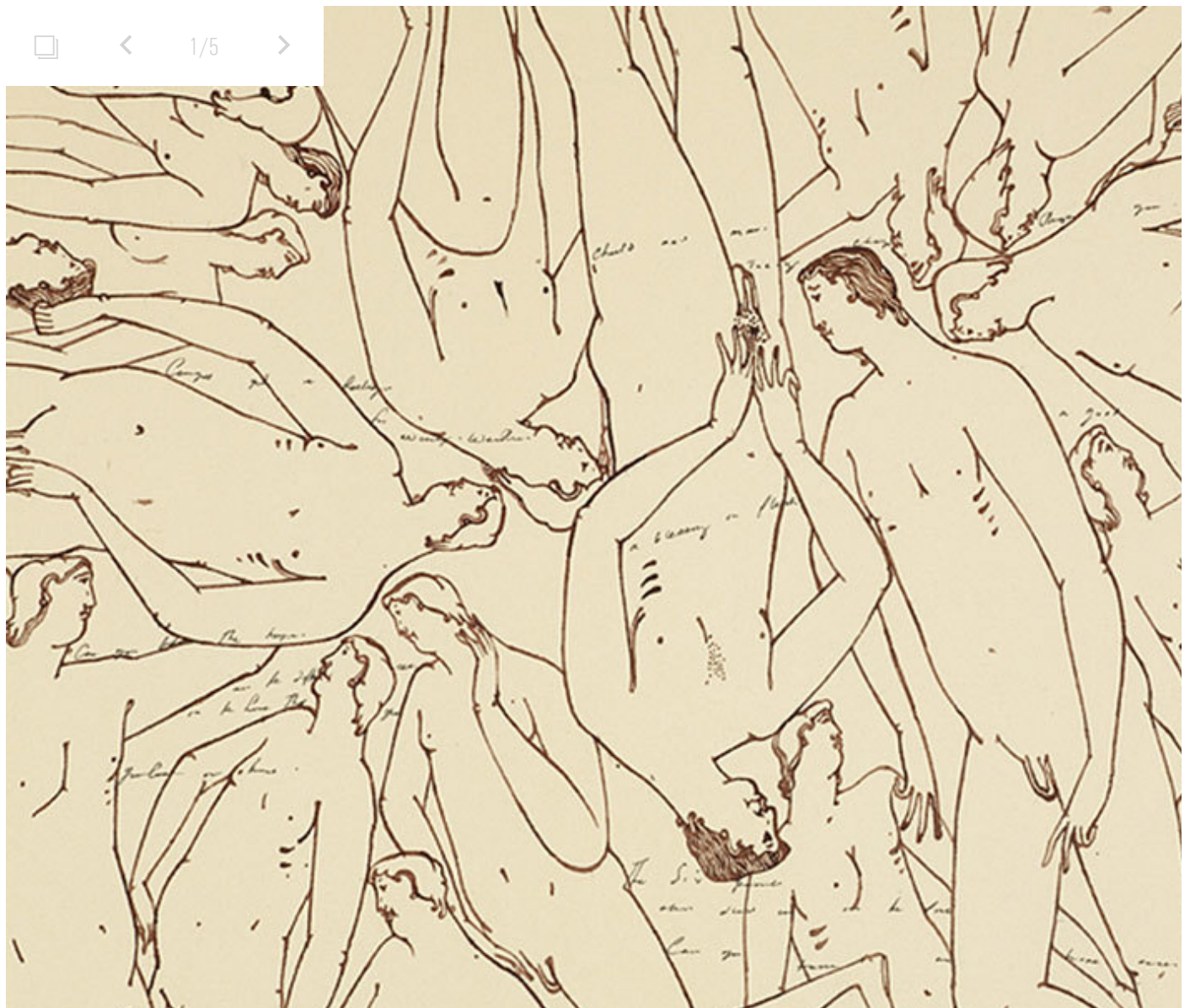




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# why young artists are returning to drawing in the digital age

If you survey the big museum shows opening alongside Frieze this year you'd be hard pressed to find much evidence of one of art's most unsung and under the radar practices – drawing. Alongside the major retrospectives, big group shows and exhibitions of the old guard, it would seem the quietly unheralded art of drawing is still way off the art market's radar. But look a little deeper and you'll find young artists are picking up and experimenting with it in new and exciting ways.





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Tracey Emin, amongst the Daily Mail baiting iconoclasm of her beds and tents, has always returned to exhibiting her drawing and flies the flag for the art of draughtsmanship - finding in the immediacy of scratched out lines the same confessional spirit that has seen her continually invoke her own relationships and personal history throughout her work.

Her recent exhibition, *The Last Great Adventure Is You* at The White Cube was heaped with praise in *The Guardian* and *Standard*. Her success as an artist has always come from the way she daringly exposed herself, here in a series of nude self-portraits with titles like *Alone Is Alright* and *That's How You Think Of Me*, it's the frailty and neuroses of personality that she captures so well, and seem perfectly suited for the tender simplicity of drawing.

We shouldn't then see it as too surprising that the arch YBA in her middle age is becoming as famous for her drawings as she once was displaying her personal life through a more conceptual framework. Throughout art's history drawing has always been about forming the unfinished thought, which comes with a sense of psychological exploration and free association. Drawings are private, human, tactile, and in a world dominated by machines and computers you can see how they could re-emerge as an anti-modernist reaction (alongside fixed wheel bicycles, tweed, beards, etc) yet the resurgence of drawing is much more in tune with the sensibility of digital art than you might otherwise imagine. Its re-emergence has something to do with the openness, shareability and personability of Web 2.0. Emin might be one of the most famous artists working today who extensively uses drawing, but young artists are returning to it in their droves, often as a way of connecting digital art to a wider psychological examination. Or instead seeing the connections that develop between it and other confessional modes; poetry and prose primarily, and journals like *Tender* and *Illuminati Girl Gang* seek a place where the two overlap in a way that is new, full of youth, exciting and politically conscious.

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Kate Macfarlane and Mary Doyle of The Drawing Room in Bermondsey run one of London's few galleries dedicated solely to drawing, which, explains Kate, they set up after they "witnessed drawing being used in insistent and innovative ways," and found how "this crucial medium rarely saw the light of day; the public were not privy to an artistic process that is key to so much creative endeavour." They have stories of designers stealing collections of sketches whilst working for a famous fashion designer in order to save them from the probable bin, and artists who keep their drawings in fire proof boxes "as they are the most precious and irreplaceable part of the creative process." Drawing manages to be both utterly, irreplaceably precious, and a doodle, something throwaway, done in a notebook and forgotten about.

A recent exhibition at The Drawing Room took as its starting point the work of Egon Schiele. Schiele, who died aged only 28 in Vienna in 1918, was famous for his drawings of the body that explored the relationship between naked and the nude, and art and pornography. Schiele's work would have a profound influence on the career of fashion photographer Richard Avedon, who described his drawings as being "built on some kind of lie about who we were, and revealed a truth about who we wanted to be," and influenced by what he sees in Schiele's "confrontational and erotic nature" would redefine fashion photography as action instead of emotionless indifference.

Fashion recently has been having something of a drawing moment too, illustrations of Snoopy, The Simpsons and Disney characters have recently cropped up on clothes by Coach, HYPE and Wood Wood, respectively, and illustrator Fergus Percull helped relaunch Marc by Marc Jacobs as well designing for Palace and illustrating the new issue of Man About Town. It highlights the flexibility of the form that, unlike oil painting for example, is utilitarian in application and as happy with laughter-inducing cartoons as it is making psychological evaluations; always ready to make use of the fact it instantly conjures up an innocent world of nostalgia.

And for a long time it was the cartoonists keeping drawing alive and inventive and moving with the times, but it is in Egon Schiele's paranoid and fantastical self-portraits you can see how drawing survived modernism's obsession with geometry and impersonality. The simplicity of the form allows the often surrealistic and dreamlike expression of the unsettling and unfiltered, it's a Freudian approach to representation, you can see how it has influenced artists like Tracey Emin, and it's from this strain of the history of drawing that the current crop of young artists are using drawing.

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Artists like Bunny Rogers, whose work crosses over between confessional poetry, drawing, installation, and web art, is a proponent, her works like *Spiderbuddy* and *Corners*, use simplistic, MS Paint style drawings; as part of her wider work about feminism she challenges the psychological interpretation of drawing as being about either repression or expression even as her work deals with things that are very personal. Her self-portrait, a photograph of a mop with bow attached to it hints at a whole history of male dominated art. Bunny Rogers isn't an artist who really focuses on drawing, but in the way parts of her works approach or touch on it, you can see again how something so simple can find so many new meanings and ways of expression.

Like at SALTS gallery in Switzerland, whose exhibition earlier this year, *The Printed Room*, collated the works of 40 young artists all on A4 paper, exploring the overlap between digital and analogue technology, with all works being submitted by email and printed on a standard inkjet printer. It fused drawing with the found poetry of internet culture, featuring screenshots of scribbles from Instagram alongside subtitled film stills and snatches of texts and images that built into poems. Whilst it existed on the edge of what we may consider drawing, it shows the extent to which young artists can and are willing to push those boundaries, exploring the flexibility of drawing in online scenes like Alt Lit, who utilise Tumblr and online blogging platforms that make little distinction between poetry, drawing and general blogging. It is this flexibility that has allowed drawing to take on new roles.

"Drawing also has a clarity that other forms don't really have," explains Matthew de Kersaint Giraudeau, an artist who alongside making films, sculptures and paintings, also uses drawing as a large part of his practice. In his work *An Infinitely Ongoing Series Cataloguing Every Object, Both Real and Imaginary, In The Entire Universe* that combines drawings of objects with words as a way of exploring language's relationship to things, "I thought it was kind of funny," he explains, "the idea of this inaccessible world of objects that language never reaches. That's the world my drawings pretend to describe. And it just happens that all objects in that world are ugly, lumpy, blobby things. So like, we use the words "Lars Von Trier" to refer to an acclaimed, controversial Danish film director, but really, Lars Von Trier is a kind of upturned table with fat puffy legs." In Matthew's work you can easily see a meeting point between the juvenile humour of the cartoon and serious enquiry of the conceptual artist.

At Carroll/Fletcher gallery in Bermondsey recently, an exhibition entitled *Pencil Line Eraser* surveyed the current landscape of drawing, and found it existing across collage, video, sculpture and digital as well as on paper. The show was driven by the different processes we can use to create drawing, from the automated drawing machines of Manfred Mohr to Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Seismoscope*, that turns the sounds of the gallery, footsteps or talking, and begins to draw, at random, a portrait. The work of *Pencil Line Eraser* is a world away from the psychological interpretation of drawing, but shows how the simple practice of putting pen to paper has been reclaimed into conceptual art after being abandoned for much of the 20th Century.

And it s in this meeting point, between the psychological and conceptual, that maybe gives the best indication of how drawing will survive and thrive in the future, its flexibility allows it to embrace its contradictions between privacy and openness, simplicity and conceptuality, cartoonish humour and psychological evaluation.

## Credits

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Text Felix Petty

Images courtesy The Drawing Room, Bermondsey

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