



Title

Equitable ways of being

Author(s)

Kate Macfarlane

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About the author(s)

is a curator and writer and is co-founder and co-director of Drawing Room, London. She began her career in the public visual arts sector at Riverside Studios, London, in 1984 and co-founded Drawing Room in 2002.

Cover image:

Equitable ways of being

by Kate Macfarlane • June 2023. In collaboration with Drawing Room, London • Introduction

What makes drawing relevant today? What can it contribute to the urgencies facing contemporary society: the environmental crisis, the effects of capital accumulation and struggles for social justice in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality? These are some of the questions that we have been asking as Drawing Room prepares to settle into its new permanent home in Bermondsey, London. Drawing Room was founded in 2002 as a public, non-profit institution dedicated to the exploration and display of drawing, its practice, theory and methodology. It aims to reflect what the medium has offered artists for centuries: a means to break an impasse, take risks, think through and personalise historical and contemporary injustice, communicate ideas, trouble and broadcast political issues and resist finish or closure. Our mission is to champion the unlimited potential of drawing to help us understand ourselves, each other and our evolving world.

The inaugural exhibition at Drawing Room's new home will be *UNBUILD: a site of possibility*, which is an exploration of the ways in which buildings affect us – physically and psychologically – and how they are transformed through use. Artists interested in the built environment and its impact on our bodies, minds, memories and dreams have been invited to be part of the discourse that informs *UNBUILD*. For example, in a new commission, Emily Speed (b.1979) will erase the distinction between body and building to draw attention to the built environment as a manifestation of systems of power. A new installation by Ian Kiaer (b.1971) **FIG. 1** will incorporate discarded elements – materials that come with their own marks as signifiers of touch, thought processes, imagination and dreams – which are a crucial means to resist dominant ideologies. Conversations also generate works of art, as with a commission by Jessie Brennan (b.1982), which includes paper made from gardening with the residents of the Setchell Housing Estate in Bermondsey. Selected drawings by Do Ho Suh (b.1962) **FIG. 2** are made in collaboration with architectural modelling software and robotics, a process and outcome that grapples with the artist's experience of cultural displacement. Made over several months, a 'thickened drawing' comprising layers of paper stitched together, by Tanoa Sasraku (b.1995) **FIG. 3**, reflects a long period of isolation and loss that the artist experienced during 2021.



FIG. 1 *Endnote oblique, pink*, by Ian Kiaer. 2023. Acrylic and varnish on repurposed plexiglass, 254.4 by 127.5 cm. (© Ian Kiaer; courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski).

In planning *UNBUILD: a site of possibility* we looked to the ideas of the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, who wrote that ‘every touching experience of architecture is multi-sensory; qualities of matter, space and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle’.¹ Such qualities relate to the work of the Singapore-born artist Simryn Gill (b.1959), whose work was included in the 2019 exhibition *Modern Nature* at Drawing Room, and whose rubbings are the subject of Emilia Terracciano’s article in this journal issue. Terracciano argues the case for rubbing as a form of drawing: a process that simultaneously celebrates the notion of the ‘seeing hand’ and questions the long-held regard for the pre-eminence of the mind over material in the act of drawing. She equates Gill’s rejection of the primacy of the eye with the Surrealist call for more ‘primitive’, infantile and spontaneous experiences. ‘The sense of touch’, she writes ‘has often been demonised, even banished, from the realm of “the visual”, considered to be a “primitive” form of sensing’, but as many scholars have noted, touch is fundamentally about space and presence, of ‘being present to the other’.²

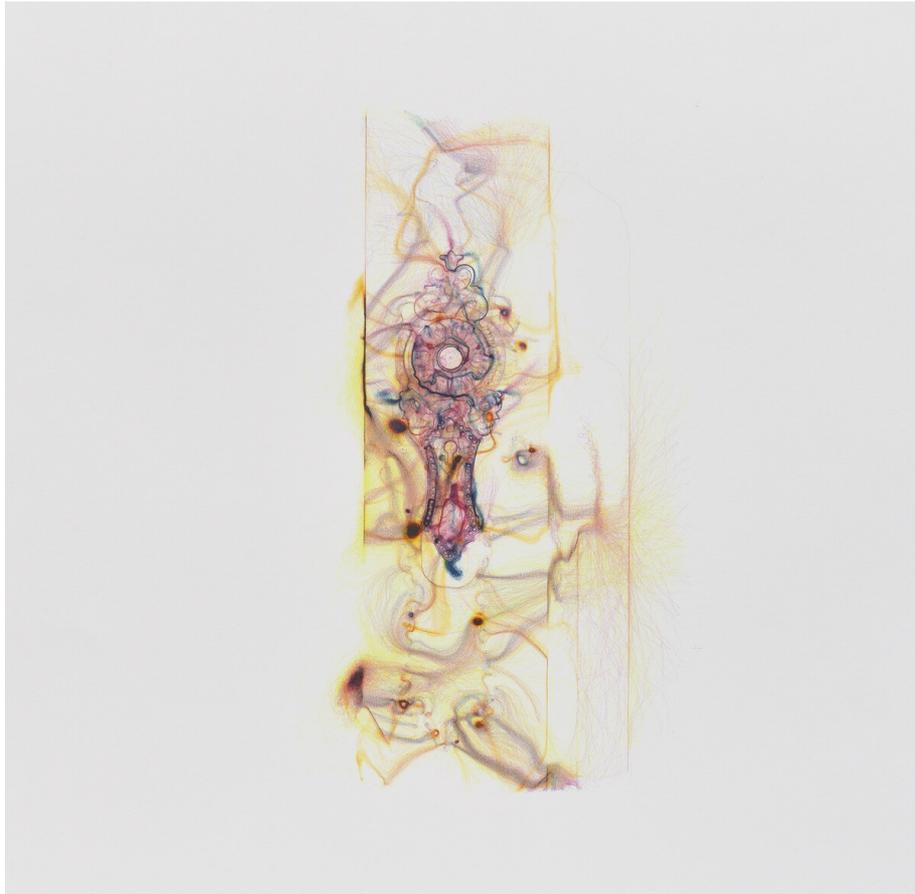


FIG. 2 Detail from *ScaledBehaviour_Drawing (doorknob_elevation_48-H-01)*, by Do Ho Suh. 2022. Robot and pen on paper, 67.5 by 48 cm. (© Do Ho Suh; photograph Prudence Cuming Associates).

This special issue of *Burlington Contemporary Journal* dedicated to drawing includes new commissions by Emma McNally (b.1969) and Jade de Montserrat (b.1981), both of whom are included in Drawing Room's future programme. These artists employ drawing as a radical medium, as a form of material exploration that facilitates a relinquishing of control. It is impossible to distinguish ground from figure in McNally's large-scale graphite drawings: the artist scrambles the matter of carbon and what she is drawing. Adopting strategies that avoid mastery and focus, she seeks to ensure that nothing is marginalised or relegated; all marks are of equal value. Similarly, in a studied attention to equity, every brick in the farm building in which de Montserrat performed *Black (re)Turn* (2023) is blackened with charcoal. Both artists embrace the blur: an approach that addresses the urgency of recognising and redressing the historical wrongs of the transatlantic slave trade and the ongoing impact of colonialism. McNally's and de Montserrat's use of carbon, a naturally occurring compound derived from the earth that is simultaneously strong and slippery, addresses these crimes, which coalesce in the destruction of our environment. Drawing is arguably the medium that is least extractive of the environment's resources, and a celebration of its potential symbolises a need to reset the way humans exist

alongside nature. Painting is the leading currency in art's global capitalist economy; it is no coincidence that many politically engaged artists working today choose to work with drawing instead.



FIG. 3 Detail of *A Tower to Say Goodbye*, by Tanoa Sasraku. 2021. Newsprint, soft pastel, fixative, polyester thread, linen thread and PVA glue. (© Tanoa Sasraku; photograph Alexander Edwards).

Also in this issue, contributions examining the 1960s and 1970s suggest that in this period the radical potential of drawing was intimately linked with conceptual experiments and those around matter and processes as evidence of reality. They include the surprising, erotic, figurative 'cartouches' created by Robert Smithson (1938–73) in 1963–64, which explore the pictorial periphery; work by Giulio Paolini (b.1940) and Gino De Dominicis (1947–98) and other Italian artists who 'performed' drawing to debunk the medium's historical association with sincerity and truth; and Richard Tuttle's (b.1941) drawing as a process of three-dimensional enquiry that incorporated all manner of materials. In this fervently experimental period for the avant-garde, the field of drawing simultaneously widened and contracted. The processes of the medium were radicalised, as well as the materials, for almost any could be used in the production of a drawing. At the same time, figurative and narrative forms of drawing were consigned to the sidelines, where they languished until the 1990s. Lucian Freud (1922–2011) persevered against such odds, as Tanya Bentley discusses in her article about his revelatory sketchbooks. He was by no means alone.

The varied ways in which artists have used drawing to break new ground is an important thread running throughout this journal issue. This has often been on a 'needs must' basis: drawing is affordable, accessible and portable for artists without means.

Many of these, such as Mary Beth Edelson (1933–2021), have not received the recognition they deserve. Her *Trickster* series from the early 1970s celebrated goddess spirituality, a reclaiming of myth and of so-called ‘female qualities’ and ‘attributes’. In her article on Edelson, Clelia Rebecchi revisits this contested period of second-wave feminism, during which the celebration of women’s bodies in art was criticised for endorsing rather than challenging gender disparity while non-objective, deconstructive approaches found parity with mainstream art. Karen Kurczynski’s article proceeds to examine the critical third-wave of feminism during the 1990s. She suggests that the vulnerability of a paper support and the unfinished ‘open’ quality of drawing has made it a particularly significant medium for artists marginalised because of their gender, sexuality or race. She examines the work of the Native American artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (b.1940) and the Sámi artist Britta Marakatt-Labba (b.1951) and discusses drawings by the American artists Nicole Eisenman (b.1965) and Kiki Smith (b.1954). For these artists, drawing has been the means to personalise their pluralistic histories and lived experiences.

In an article that investigates the role of drawing in collective mourning and repair, Jung Joon Lee describes the practices of two South Korean artists that honour those who have died as a result of queerphobic and transphobic violence. The United-States-based Kang Seung Lee (b.1978) uses drawing to revisit the works and lives of LGBTQIA+ artists and activists. In their drawings and animations, Ibanjiha (b.1981) has developed a self-consciously simplified style of figurative drawing to reach this pluralistic community. A similar use of repetition and brevity of execution can be found in the work of the Algerian artist Massinissa Selmani (b.1980). In Selmani’s ‘abbreviated aesthetic, substantial ideas are carried by the barest of means’, as described by Roger Malbert in his article commission.³ Selmani grew up during the Algerian Civil War (1991–2002), and a coping strategy was to consider the humanitarian disaster through the lens of newspaper cartoons. Like other artists discussed here, he employs drawing to scrutinise both the personal and the political.

The sixty years of drawing activity outlined in this collection of articles suggests that it remains the medium of possibility; anybody, however constrained, can find the means to draw. The first mark on a surface is the start of working out who you are, what you want to be and do and, perhaps most importantly, to imagine alternative, equitable ways of being.

Issue 8 of ‘Burlington Contemporary Journal’ is delivered in collaboration with Drawing Room, London.

Footnotes

- 1** J. Pallasmaa: *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the senses*, Chichester 2005, p.45.
- 2** E. Terracciano: 'Feeling with fingers that see: Simryn Gill's "Naga Doodles"', *Burlington Contemporary Journal* 8 (June 2023).
- 3** R. Malbert: 'Massinissa Selmani', *Burlington Contemporary Journal* 8 (June 2023).

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