Deanna Petherbridge, 'Time to draw the line: A sculptor writes beautifully about others' work', *The Art Newspaper,* May 14, 2014

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Richard Deacon is very much the artist of the moment, after a recent impressive exhibition of cool, elegant—and complex—sculptures at London's Tate Britain, whose material experimentations serve to enhance the cohesion of a deeply serious and focused practice. The exhibition included a suite of the British sculptor's drawings "It's Orpheus When There's Singing", 1978-79, undertaken during a stay in New York and responding the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke. They lay out a principled methodology that appears to guide the ideological commitment that inflected his selection of works for the "Abstract Drawing" exhibition at the Drawing Room, London, earlier this year.
In the lead catalogue essay, Deacon (Lisson Gallery, Thaddeus Ropac, Marian Goodman) does not attempt to unpick his understanding of "abstraction" beyond an initial statement "all drawing—at the level of mark-making—is, in some sense, abstract". This is partially echoed in the two supporting essays, although Anna Lovatt's focuses closely and informatively on the theoretical construction of some of the more formalist works.

Deacon's commitment to non-objective drawings that have "no direct or apparent external reference" ranges from the early 20th century to a fine Richard Wright work of 2006 and encompasses a wide spectrum from free gestural drawing, mark-making and automatist responses to systems-related works. It extends from sparse, open-ended sheets to heavily worked finished drawings that are densely embedded in the paper, such as those by Emma McNally and Sam Messenger. The strict monochromy of the abstract understatements of Bob Law from 1999 to 2000 sit side-by-side with the evocative pigments, physicality and textual engagement of Anish Kapoor's papier mâché works and John Golding's wax-and-pastel sgrafitti of the 1980s.

Deacon does not attempt to justify this personal and eclectic selection by any grand generalities (apart from a loose taxonomic framework suggesting that drawers are either "transmitters" or "receivers"). Instead, he writes beautifully about single drawings as entities and elucidates how the works are made; the "why" is not addressed. Although he tells us that his selection is concerned with ideas (strictly defined as "what is, or where to locate, the real") it is left to his co-authors to supply historical and theoretical context—a very traditional cohabitation of artist and art historians.

In an interview with Penelope Curtis, the director of Tate Britain, he admits, "Meaning was a problem for me in the mid-70s and may still be a problem." The things that are of concern to Deacon the maker enliven his descriptions of others' drawings. He writes lyrically about layering and transparency and use of paper, as in Dorothea Rockburne's juxtaposition of a light pencil outline and an actual sheet of carbon paper. He is responsive to the delicate pinpricks of Anni Albers's teaching studies that rhythmically perforate the sheet, or the "muscular edge" of Gordon Matta-Clark's Untitled, 1976-77, where a pile of sheets has been excavated to receive a formal image. This drawing is clearly related, although Deacon does not mention it, to Matta-Clark's Conical Intersect, 1975, where he tunnelled a circular window

through semi-demolished houses in Les Halles pulled down for the construction of the Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Curiously for a sculptor, Deacon does not deal with issues of scale or spatial matters, present in Victoria Haven's intended wall-works "Double Sided 'L' Series", 2004, which stretch and curve in extendable space just as the obstinately figurative Eva Hesse coloured outline drawings of 1965 animate their paper supports into vibrating spatiality. Dawn Ades gently picks up this omission in her essay where she discusses the three-dimensional illusionism of works by El Lissitzky and devotes time to a slightly miserable little Malevich pencil composition.

Ades introduces the issue of history that Deacon has muffled, but to discuss the contemporary abstractions of Tomma Abts as being of the same order and intention as the works of the founding fathers of 20th-century abstraction is curious. It is as if the indefinable and slippery portmanteau term "abstraction" at the centre of this book and exhibition is timelessly utopian, universally valid and out of history—a very problematic view for today. Although every single drawing in the world has its own autonomy and life, abstract drawings belong to a linear continuity of serial connections. Whereas a painting or finished drawing can set out an entire manifesto in one work, a small anonymous sketch by Hilma af Klint or one of her anonymous "The Five" group guided by spirits, or a computer drawing by Darrell Viner are segments of a larger idea, practice and process. Time, history and seriality are a condition of linearity.

Abstract Drawing: Curated by Richard Deacon, Dawn Ades, Richard Deacon and Anna Lovatt, Ridinghouse in association with Drawing Room, 128pp, £17.95, $32 (pb)

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