

# LINE IS THE EDGE, LINE IS THE CONTENT

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There are lines in space and lines on surfaces. Additive and reductive lines. Cuts, cracks, and creases, deliberate or accidental. Straight lines and meandering lines, as in the mapped route versus the wayfaring squiggle. There is the written line (cursive or typed) and the drawn line. There are unbroken lines, dotted lines, and spectral lines that fill the gaps between others in the mind's eye. There are lines that suggest volume and lines that erase it. There are lines made by humans, animals, and plants: trails of scent and vapour, snails, slugs, and ivies. Then there are the metaphorical lines we turn to as motifs to arrange our histories or biographies, extending through time rather than space.

In his 2007 book *Lines: A Brief History*, the anthropologist Tim Ingold offers up these and other categorisations to plot luminous routes across human and non-human cultures. This exhibition of nine modern and contemporary artists based in Scotland offers similar opportunities for wayfaring, for flitting between different expressions of the line in drawing, painting, printing, ceramics, jewellery, and concrete poetry. The course you follow is more likely to evoke the dynamism of the freehand line than the order of the ruled line, because a wide range of connections suggest themselves within the fine tangle of references. Still, like the player of the Exquisite Corpse game beloved of the Surrealists (we called it Heads, Bodies, and Legs), might we extend a few introductory lines over the folded edge of the paper, allowing the viewer to pick things up from there?

## From line to texture

David Connearn's deeply meditative works involve repeatedly drawing freehand lines next to or on top of one another, each extending as far as the reach of the arm will allow. As the image builds itself up, the single line is transformed into an aspect of texture. Writing about a 2023 exhibition at the Kumho Museum in Seoul, Connearn describes his *modus*: "repeat a process until line gives way to the field, and the moment gives way to time."

Approaching similarly lush terrain, the jeweller Andrew Lamb creates finely wrought surfaces using long filaments of wire or aluminium strips in which pattern or shifting colour is in-built. Arranged in regular striations or tightly folded waves, they bury the eye in shimmer and dazzle, suggesting *moiré* patterning or lenticular effects. The intelligent eye is drawn from the all-over image into the detail, however, returned from texture to line in an attempt to unpick the qualities in play.

## Thread or trace?

"A thread is a filament of some kind, which may be entangled with other threads or suspended between points in three-dimensional space,...the trace is any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement" (Ingold, pp.41, 43). When a thread is incorporated into a garment or textile, it is transformed into both trace and surface element. Lamb's jewellery achieves this transformation. Suitably enough, it is deeply influenced by Ikat weaving.

For other artists in this show, too, the conceptual overlaps between thread and trace yield rich confusions. Michael Walton's delightful pieces recreate through painted lines something of the look and feel of the woven, hessian surfaces on which they are composed. The thread is reproduced as a trace. Susan Mowatt, meanwhile, draws with threads, offsetting colourful tangles against black backdrops. Our sense that these compositional elements ought to be knotted together somehow, and/or integrated into the surface over which they are spread, creates some of the resulting sense of drama. In other works by Mowatt, single acts of threading are isolated and made visible. Bright woven strips press through holes in sheets of cotton linter pulp.

## Ghost lines

Ceramicists Lara Scobie and Frances Priest play with our expectations of continuous or harmonious three-dimensional form, reliant on our sense of line as container. Segments of vessels or other free-standing forms appear to have been removed from the overall shape suggested. The viewer is tempted to trace the lines in space that would complete them. The constructivist influence is strong here. We are reminded of Naum Gabo's sculptures in which the framed void is part of the substance.

Since the dawn of perspective, line has also had the uncanny ability to make us picture volume where none is present. Painter Rhona Taylor turns to the feints and tricks of the op art movement, wherein lines can suggest three-dimensional depth in several ways at once. Based on diagrams of ships' sails, her compositions in tape-enclosed strips of acrylic are made on brushed aluminium which itself seems to give way to a deep, clouded emptiness.

## Taking the line for a walk

In Klee's famous formulation, the dot takes a walk to become a line. When the line starts changing direction, repeating itself, stopping and starting, it can become a pattern. Charles Poulsen's large-scale drawings are "rooted" in a grid formation," he states in an artist's talk transcript, "though often only quite loosely." One intriguing element of his pictures is that the role of line and surface, figure and ground, within that grid or pattern, switches as we follow routes across. Created in pencil, wax and gouache, the articulating trace is sometimes white, sometimes grey or black, sometimes additive, sometimes seemingly reductive. There is an elemental play with the manifestation of form through binary contrast.

Other artists, like Scobie and Priest, have the pleasure of working in three dimensions and two dimensions at once,

creating patterns on multiple planes. Scobie speaks of the architectonics of her surface design. "Line is the edge and line is the content," she tells me in discussion. Priest pays homage to the flat grids of Agnes Martin.

## Written or drawn?

When the concrete poetry movement brought visual form to the fore of poetic effect, it was, in a sense, reversing a process that had unfolded over the preceding millennia, whereby the conveyance of information through visual symbols was reduced to a stand-in for phonetic communication. Subsequently, the remaining connection between drawing and writing as manual, embodied processes was severed by the printing press and, latterly, the typewriter and computer keyboard. Yet still we talk about a line of writing, as if it were a kind of drawing.

In Ian Hamilton Finlay's *The Blue and the Brown Poems*, the eye might follow a bar of patterned colours from one side of the page to the other and back again while the mind simultaneously tracks the connections between grammatically similar words. But not all poetry can be read. In asemic writing, the visual line takes on the consistent structural features of a language but yields none of the semantic sense. Might we consider Poulsen's and Connearn's drawings to offer unconventional orthographies? If we do, we reintroduce the sense of linear time that attends to reading as opposed to the all-at-once perception of the visual artwork.

## Lines in time

What unites many of these artists is, perhaps, an interest in the way lines can waver between different functional and expressive manifestations. You will find still others as you bring your own biography and memory to bear on your encounters with their work. Take your line for a walk.