

Ripple Effect: Recent Drawings by Faye Ballard

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1750 words

A pebble dropped into a still lake, rippling outwards in a pattern of fine concentric circles.

Faye Ballard's recent series of circle-based drawings — some rendered in the spectrum of graphite's many greys; others dazzling in bright watercolour — project a radiant, serene geometry. They are subtle and confident, suggesting artistic maturity: an artist 'hitting the target'. One senses an established drawing practice able to measure contradictory impulses: respecting the outlines of a defined geometric pattern;¹ encouraging an intuitive (if finely attuned) application of tone and colour; and working devotedly across prolonged sessions of concentration. But this is not a mechanical art-making practice, set on repeat. Each drawing gives rise to a unique space of contemplation — 'a reverie', as Ballard describes her state when working, echoing the term used by Wilfred Bion to describe moments of psychoanalytical break-through.

One might be tempted to recite at this point the many symbolisms commonly associated with circular forms, from the sacred symbol of *ensō* in Zen Buddhism to the yin/yang balance of Chinese philosophy. And on and on, to an infinity of symbolisms across religion, astrology, astronomy. Instead, I venture that this series does not primarily broach universals but reflects an intimate journey: a resolution, resulting from a decades-long drawing practice devoted to both honing Ballard's technical virtuosity and the pursuit of self-understanding.

'The drawing is a membrane between [the artist] and the world', artist William Kentridge has written.² What is occurring on Ballard's shimmering paper membrane, in these hypnotic circles? What was the road taken to arrive here, at this unmistakable centre?

I notice in a drawing such as *Untitled xvi* (2020) the exquisite, infinitesimal white line dividing each circle from the next, created by leaving the paper untouched with perfect consistency along each curving

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Using a large compass, the artist follows these self-imposed rules: each circle has a radius of 14, 18 or 56cm, always divided into concentric bands of 5 or 10mm width.

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William Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons*, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 19.

edge. This delicate detail — like the exact shade of grey achieved for each circle, diminishing in minimal increments from centre to edge — are the hallmarks of an exceptionally accomplished draftsman, make no mistake. Ballard, recipient of New York's Drawing Center Recognition Award in 2015 and whose art has been exhibited at the Freud Museum and the Royal Academy in London (among others), is known for her supremely accurate and detailed pencil drawings, often observed from nature. The botanical wonder of *Plant Drawing XX* (200X) is engrossing enough as evidence of Ballard's phenomenal powers of observation. The work turns altogether beguiling, however, when we realise that across the three days (or so) required for the artist to complete this intricate image, the cabbage was curling and sagging, deteriorating unstoppably before her. Much of the artist's skill lay not merely in capturing each vein and turn of the stalk but remembering the leaf's appearance at the start. In this sense Ballard's drawing practice has long revolved around the act of preservation: resisting time's relentlessness in obscuring the contours of the past.



Untitled xvi, 2020; *Plant Drawing XX*, 200X.

Ballard's art took a profoundly introspective and, perhaps, therapeutic turn with the object-by-object still-life series titled *House Clearance* (2014). About six months after the death of her father in 2009, the artist drew selected objects re-found when emptying her childhood home, a 1930s semi in the London suburb of Shepperton where the Ballard family lived since 1959. The artist selected 'modest things that evoked memories': her brother's rubber swimming flipper, wedged beneath a door decades ago and serving dumbly as a doorstep ever since; a lemon left to petrify for forty years on the mantelpiece of her beloved father's study. A second, related series turned toward Faye's mother Mary Ballard, who took ill and died suddenly on a summer holiday in the Alicante when the artist was seven years old. The devastating family tragedy was determinedly never spoken about at home. Confronting the unexplored shadow cast by her mother's death, the artist produced a sequence of drawn objects (whether observed 'in the flesh' or from memory) surround-

ing Mary Ballard's short life. With the current circular series in mind, one notices just how many of these 'random' everyday things are round: an ice bucket, powder case, coin, lampshade, teacup, saucer, watch face, dresser knob, ashtray, potty, pom-pom maker, cut-out paper snowflake.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2009) considers the capacity for inert objects to transform from mute, lifeless clutter into vibrating entities capable of harbouring and emitting sensations. Sometimes material things seem to call to us, to assert their presence as equals. A house cleaning following the death of a parent is, plainly, an especially loaded occasion when ordinary matter begins to speak, to hail our attention. Having survived a loved one's death and spent a long inorganic existence silently standing watch, they suddenly become precious as both prompts and witnesses to countless fading recollections.

Bennett contrasts this undefinable vibrancy of objects with Bergson's notion of perception, which he theorised as centring on the human eye's constant, unconscious effort of visual subtraction. For Bergson, perception relies on the ability to filter our vision continuously, distinguishing urgent subjects from extraneous matter. Curiously, Bergson diagrammed this alleged capacity to instantly prioritise our world of things — ignoring the sofa or the lawn to concentrate on the toddler, for example — as a cone of concentric circles. In accordance with Bergson's schematic mind map, objects of crucial interest occupy the centre of our attention while inconsequential things emanate outwards, existing semi-visibly beyond our conscious seeing. Faye Ballard's operation, however, seem to reverse this selective gaze and is more in alignment with Bennett's thesis: attending lovingly to overlooked things occupying the edges of life. Each object, however humble (a rubber bathing cap) or precious (a gold ring), is offered the same caring gaze, just as in the current series each layered circle is meticulously afforded the same unhurried completion.

Faye Ballard produced a written inventory of the household objects in *House Clearance*, literally taking stock of the remnants attesting to her dispersed family. When the new homeowners refurbished the house, they kindly preserved and delivered to the artist a box of disused vintage bakelite sockets and electrical cords removed from the walls. This gesture reflects considerable sensitivity, a correct interpretation of this detritus — once the home's very pulse, organs and innards — not as rubbish but as treasure for the Ballard siblings.³ This yellowing assortment of breast-like switches and bulging plugs is surely an early source for the circles in Ballard's later works. Yet the act of drawing these lethal-looking electricals, the artist claims, was a wretched business; these flawed, cracked circular things entirely lack the symmetry and peace

³ This differentiation between 'transient objects', which fade over time, and 'durable objects', whose value only grows with time, was discussed in Michael Thompson's early reflection on waste and consumption, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (1979). Interestingly, Thompson's distinction has been applied to an analysis of the work of Faye's noted father, the writer J.G. Ballard. See Walter Viney, "'A fierce and wayward beauty': Waste in the Fiction of J.G. Ballard, Parts I & II", *Ballardian*, 11 Dec 2007, <https://www.ballardian.com/a-fierce-and-wayward-beauty-parts-1-2>, accessed 21 June 2021.

achieved in her current series. With its crudely ripped cords and irreparable circuits, this untethered drawing is tellingly titled *Motherless* (2017).



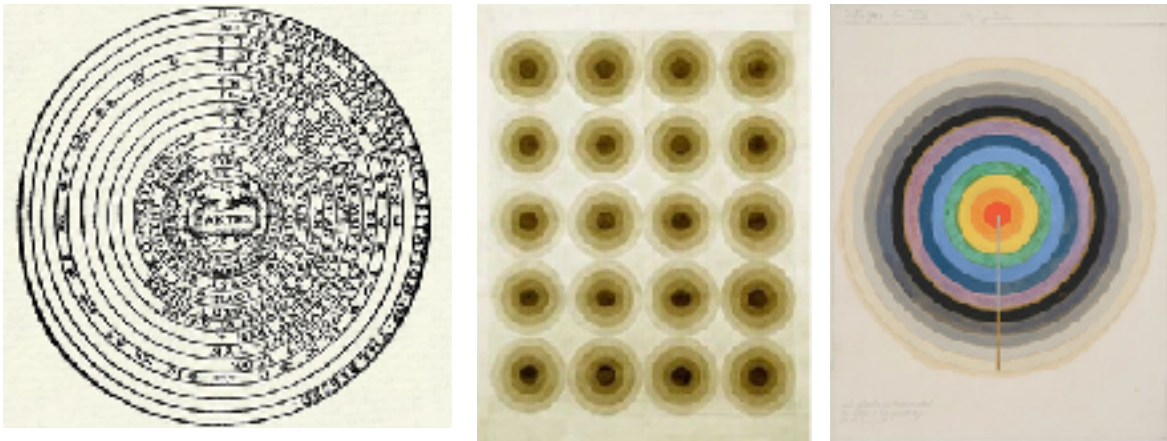
Lemon, from *House Clearance: Drawn from Life*, 2014; *Motherless*, 2017; *Buried Below*, 2017.

Ballard's emotional search for her mother was literalised in a momentous 2017 trip to visit Mary's final resting place, in Spain, where the artist not been since 1964. There — looking down at the ground, as if into the past — Ballard created a vitally important transitional drawing, *Buried Below* (2017). One can hardly fathom the emotional overlaps registered here: at once nature study; homage to a missed and missing parent; long overdue revisitation of trauma; and real-time record of the charged moments spent on this powerful spot. Of special significance here is that, after years of drawing directly from life, Ballard suddenly introduced unexpected doodles and invented forms (shells, swirls, fans): imagined sources not actually before her, permitting herself the liberty to pursue other, less overt, sources.

Following that courageously reparative Spanish trip, Ballard seems symbolically to have continued her journey southwards, away from home. A few years later she visited the city of Fez, to study and draw the magnificent cupolas and brickwork observed overhead in the architecture. The artist seems as if to have pushed geographically beyond the southern emotional reach of Spain, beyond the limits of her past by journeying further, to North Africa. Moreover, and most significantly, her gaze shifted from downwards, toward the earth, to looking upwards, to the heavens. Ballard literally lifted her horizon in Fez (and later, in Tehran) to the domes above her: the limitlessness of sky, perhaps of hope, healing, endurance. This momentous shift —from below and back, to up and ahead— moreover ushered a newfound sense of colour and compositional freedom.

The celestial vaults schematised in these recent works may superficially recall medieval maps of the cosmos; yet the delicacy and quality of Ballard's drawing contradicts any crudely rendered map-making.

They may recall the concentric circles of Eva Hesse, who also enlisted drawing in the pursuit of self-discovery. However, unlike Ballard, Hesse's drawings were not embedded in the attentive observation of the material world around her, they 'do not refer to anything off the paper.'⁴ For Ballard, in contrast, the round shapes obliquely revive mementos of her 1970s childhood, 'fairground rides, psychedelia, gobstoppers, Spirograph and those cardboard spinning discs found in cereal packets'. I will add the grooves of a vinyl LP, and in fact Ballard has likened these drawings to music. In particular she cites a resonance with Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* (1944) which brings together Modernism and spirituality (potentially also recalling the colourful, swirling adventures of early Modernist Hilma af Klint). Messiaen directed as much attention to the music as to the silences in between—perhaps akin to the essential, colourless gaps separating Ballard's floating circles.



The Ptolemaic universe from Andrew Borde's *The First Book of the Introduction of Knowledge*, 1542; Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, 1966; Hilda af Klint, *Cosmic Diagram*, 1920.

They may recall Vija Celmins's hyper-real drawings of stars and webs; but Celmins is attracted to 'anonymous' and scientific imagery⁵ whereas Ballard's drawings might be best appreciated for their emotional untangling, like immense spinning spools. Or, like mandalas, Ballard's meditative circles offer both artist and viewer long moments of quiet. This serenity, however, is not 'god-given' but (perhaps paradoxically) hard-won by the artist: drawing by drawing, discovery by discovery, circle by circle. I return to Bion's idea of a break-through, perhaps symbolically made visible in the tiny compass-point puncture at the dead centre of each page.

⁴ Naomi Spector, 'Drawing Into Herself: Eva Hesse's Work on Paper', *Art on Paper*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (September-October 2002), pp. 56-61 (60) 'Drawing was Eva Hesse's way of getting into her deepest self', Spector writes. Coincidentally, Hesse too lost her mother at a young age, at the age of 10.

⁵ Vija Celmins, cited in Robert Gober, 'Interview', commissioned by this essay's author, London: Phaidon Press, 2004, 11.

The psychological story I have offered here suggests much autobiographical content concealed in these works' beautifully limpid, shadowless abstraction. But Ballard's new drawings can also be appreciated 'just' for their clean, virtuoso drawing quality and for the clarity of thought and motion radiating from them. The genealogy I've re-constructed here isn't so much a linear tale (a dot-to-dot psycho-journey: from searching to finding to resolving) but more of a ripple effect, of one event edging into the next. The whole only turns visible when observed from the end — like the rings of a tree, a record of continual growth and patient acceptance.



Artist's reference images, taken on her travels to Fez and Tehran.