

# INFINITY

QUESTIONS BY JANE BOYER (JB) . ANSWERS : GEMMA COSSEY (GC) JANE PONSFORD (JP)

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## GEMMA COSSEY

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JB. Who or what influenced the development of your manner of painting?

GC: The list is long, but a few main influences include Agnes Martin and the Agnes Martin exhibition at Tate Modern in 2015, Bridget Riley and *The Eye's Mind* collected writings 1965-1999, Paul Cézanne, Jackson Pollock, Piet Mondrian, Peter Lanyon, David Bowie, Alan Welsford, *Abstract Expressionism* at the Royal Academy in 2016, and *The Indiscipline of Painting* exhibition at Tate St Ives 2011.

Varied rural and urban landscapes I have been fortunate to inhabit and visit have been and continue to be an influence and I have West Country roots with a strong connection to its landscape and light.

Repetitive mark making is something I have returned to over the past 15 or so years, at first using the figure 8 and the square, then simplifying to the line. Some initial influences of this pared down and abstract visual language were the Alhambra and Moorish decoration and architecture in Granada, Dutch architecture and Leicester tower blocks, as well as the work of several of the artists mentioned above. I am drawn to repeated forms and patterns, visual relationships between things around me, to music, languages, maps and codes.

JB: You mention in your statement an “intention to create viewing experiences; a calm minimalism of a distant gaze and something quite different ...when the work is experienced at close hand.” How do these opposites – *distant/near*; *minimal/complex*; *calm/disrupted*; and many others, function in your work? What do you gain by working with oppositions like these?

GC: I am attracted to work that has a strong visual impact or intensity and work that offers me different experiences, so I aim to get some of these qualities into my work. My hope is that viewers gain some sort of visual experience from looking at my work, and that they have different discoveries depending on their own perception and their proximity to the work. In working with oppositions I search for the bit inbetween, the ambiguous bit – is it or isn't it?

When I look at a painting by Agnes Martin, I have one experience gazing from afar, as a ‘field of contemplation’, and then up close I discover and feel something else as I see her visible hand-drawn and imperfect pencil lines or brushstrokes. Arne Glimcher, in conversation with Frances Morris, described her paintings as “visual mantras, a kind of visual music,”<sup>1</sup> and they certainly for me, function in a way that can't be easily described with words. *Untitled 2004* is

the one postcard stuck above my desk in the studio, Martin's last large painting before she died. At Tate Modern as I got nearer to this painting I was particularly surprised and moved by the looseness of brushwork, the bleeding and dribbling paint.

"Things are not all so comprehensible and utterable as people would mostly have us believe; most events are unutterable, consummating themselves in a sphere where word has never trod and more unutterable than them all are works of art, whose life endures by the side of our own that passes away," Rainer Maria Rilke, February 17<sup>th</sup> 1903, in a letter to Franz Xaver Kappus. <sup>2</sup>

JB: There is a certain binary function to these oppositions. Do you feel that your work or working method is a product of a binary system? If so, how would you explain the kinds of imagery you produce which results from such a system?

GC: Yes, there are often two processes going on, one that is based around rule making, the planned and intended, and then another that is serendipitous, arbitrary, more organic and intuitive. The tilting conversation and the push and pull between them is something I find absorbing and worth exploring. They co-exist easily at times, uneasily at others. Sometimes during making work I find myself wanting to take back some of the control once a process has taken hold, reaching for the tape measure when things go too 'awry' and trying to resist temptation to 'correct'. The nature of the material used also dictates the method, such as the scratchiness of the gesso surface, the 'give' of the canvas, the fluidity of paint, the fresh new flow of a new paint pen or a pen running out.

JB: Can you describe the way you go about setting rules for a painting?

GC: Rules are decided upon after experiment and play, exploring 'what if's' and after allowing chance and mistake to play a part. Ideas are pared down and then parameters and constraints are chosen or have naturally arisen. This often results in a long list of options and the task then is to choose what to do first. What needs to be seen the most? Sometimes there is an obvious progression to make from a previous piece, where one rule is slightly changed, other times introducing a new rule. I need rules to make work; they open up possibilities and allow ideas to breathe and to be explored. Rules can also be adjusted during making the piece, as new things are discovered perhaps due to the material, or the scale of the piece compared to the smaller initial experiments or sketchbook drawings.

In his Frank Stella retrospective pre-show prep talk, Jerry Saltz writes, "Remember that all artists start by establishing a set of internal rules or structures that they can build on and work against *but* that that they cannot predict." ("Towards a Unified Theory of Frank Stella," October 30<sup>th</sup> 2015).<sup>3</sup>

JB: Can you speak more about the arbitrary development of a piece within a given set of rules. Can you explain the significance of this for your work and how you play the two off each other?

GC: For example in the *Grid (Blackwhite and Continuum)* each work and its position in the grid was pre-planned according to a set of small drawings. The arbitrary by-product wobbles or shudders that happen during the line drawing/painting, are the result of 'errors' caused by hand

muscle tension or fatigue, uneven surface, a speck of dust or fluff, the effect of music listened to on my ipod or a thought, or breathing. These fluctuations are copied, continued and exaggerated through their repetition, and they change the whole surface as the painting is completed.

Other arbitrary incidents then occur as a result of this process: the whiter shape created by the double layering of lines making up far-from-perfect rectangles and then when paired next to another piece creating an imperfect square, what you termed as 'ephemeral' in our email conversation when planning the piece. The bumpy waved gap at the bottom of each piece is also arbitrary, and is similar in each panel of the grid. In addition the change of the paint flow in the pen creates other shadows and varied spatial depths. In a sense this way of working is 'manipulated chance'. There is a decided process, but plenty of scope for other things to happen along the way.

Making *Circles IV (Continuum)* I used a different method with more decision making throughout, aiming for a balance across the whole surface with different sized circles. Rather than a top to bottom ordered process, this was working on the whole composition, constructing in patches and passages, turning the canvas around, then gradually linking everything together, with the end and beginning of pen life creating faded and then intense white areas. Spaces made available lent themselves towards particular sized circles, creating openings for certain shapes that fit naturally against each other, so this became a fairly organic process.

JB: I raised the issue of the indexical in your work in my curatorial statement for the exhibition. How do you respond to that? Would you agree there are traces of the 'here and now' of your presence which are visible in your work?

GC: I wasn't familiar with the term indexical before reading your curatorial statement, and reading the essay you refer to, "Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace" by Margaret Iversen (Tate Papers no.18, Autumn 2012)<sup>4</sup>, yes I'd agree that there are traces of the 'here and now' of my presence which are visible in my work, particularly in the linear works, that are drawn in an ordered top to bottom way. The gradual construction of marks made could be seen as a large collection or progression of marks of evidence, indicating and signalling different sequential moments in time, as a trajectory of one action repeated, also perhaps a sort of graphic trace. As Iversen says at the end of her essay about Orozco's 'Path of Thought' – "the bumps point to the body's insistent presence and the subject's desire to deviate from the straight line."<sup>5</sup>

But if I take myself out of the equation, which is preferable once the work is complete, does the work remain indexical? As Iversen explains, "Charles Sanders Peirce developed the term the index, he introduced the tripartite division of signs – the icon depends on similarity, the symbol on convention and the index on some physical or existential connection. However he made clear the view that all type of signs involve a combination of these three major types."<sup>6</sup> So if the index depends on some physical connection, is the finished drawn or painted work really still directly connected to something or somebody?

JB: Are there any artists whose work attracts you because of similar indexical qualities?

GC: Henri Michaux's drawings came to mind when thinking about the term indexical, I saw the exhibition of his work and Terry Winters at Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1999. I was thinking especially of his ink drawings of repeated marks and some of his drawings recording specific moments in time and sensation whilst scientifically experimenting with mescaline in the 1960's. It occurred to me when reading the paper by Iversen that cave paintings of handprints, at Cueva de los Manos in Argentina and in Borneo would be clear examples of indexical works. I also thought of Jackson Pollock paintings, but with a large question mark. There is certainly the trace of his action, and perhaps I am affected by the films of him working that I have watched, where the strong physical connection is evident, the actions being recorded by each painted gesture. Some of those marks and indices then become hidden under layers, but do still exist, each mark referring to a context, relating to and pointing to a specific moment and action made in that moment.

JB: Is time an important factor in your work? I mean those temporal traces visible in your work, rather than the matter of time it takes to make a painting. Do you think about the visible trace of time in your work or is it merely a consequence of your working method?

GC: Yes, time is something I have thought about with the work, though the obvious connection as you mention, to the lengthy amount of time taken to sometimes complete work is difficult to remove from the equation, especially when working on a larger scale. I sometimes wonder when something specific at a certain moment in time has occurred during the process, like a wobble due to a particular movement or lack of control or concentration, or due to a thought, feeling or sensation – when this instant has been recorded by a new shudder or bump in the line - could I look back at the work on completion and find that exact section of line again and remember the incident and its cause? But the thought is fleeting and that moment is lost in the ether as work is continued, and when looking back at the work as a whole I do not remember those individual points in time. I prefer to remove myself from the work once the process complete, my hand made the marks but that is no longer important.

Music is listened to, and I prefer working with music rather than without. Without I tend to concentrate too much, more likely to make mistakes and less likely to attain a rhythm. The working process becomes automatic and meditative at times, similar to walking a familiar route when you arrive without being entirely conscious, weren't particularly 'present' and cannot recall the journey. My mind wanders, thinks of other things, feels other things, until jolted or interrupted by something external such as physical discomfort in my hand/back/neck, or the end of a song or album.

JB: How do you see your work developing from here? What kinds of strategies or methods are you beginning to question?

GC: The matter of scale still niggles. Some work demands to be larger, but here in London there are challenging space and funding issues, and hanging space tends to be fairly small in contemporary artist led spaces and galleries, so this has a bearing on work that is made. I've been very fortunate with my studio space and time during the last two years, and being able to hang *H12 (Kintsukuroi)* which is 150cm x 150cm here at Arthouse1 is a privilege and the first time I've been able to see it outside the studio. The ideal size would be 180cm square but this isn't currently very realistic. In the *Abstract Expressionism* exhibition last year at the RA the

sheer scale of work, especially standing in the room surrounded by Clyfford Still paintings made a big impact on me.

There is a time delay with making ideas from the sketchbook, and there is more to do with *Blackwhite* series of work (the title from Newspeak in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "blackwhite: to believe that black is white, to know that black is white, and to forget that one has ever believed the contrary."<sup>7</sup>) As with previous works, the possibilities are endless, but whilst I know I am drawn to time consuming work, the thin and tighter linear work has a physical impact which limits the time I'm able to spend per day on the work. There is also further mileage in the *Square Root* work and the gradual and horizontal construction of loosely painted squares with a brush is a process less prone to RSI.

I'd like to return to the physical acts of mixing colour and applying paint, and to ideas that began a couple years ago that developed through experimenting with colour, light and surface where a loosely painted and transparent matrix acts as a framework for, and against, a painting system where rules are made and broken. The process becomes more of a constant balancing act, using continuous decision-making and an intuitive logic. My work is driven by an interest in the relationship/interplay or sometimes ambiguity between different layers and I'll continue trying to reach some sort of balance within my paintings. I'll also continue questioning how art as a visual language can communicate without the need for words and think further on the idea of Rilke's 'unutterable,' his 'field of sense,'<sup>8</sup> and Martin's 'field of contemplation.'

JB: Thank you, Gemma. It's been a pleasure working with you.

GC: Many thanks to you Jane, Rebecca at Arthouse1 and Jane Ponsford for all the work you've put into the Infinity exhibition.

## Footnotes

1. Arne Glimcher, *Agnes Martin: Arne Glimcher in conversation with Frances Morris*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/agnes-martin-arne-glimcher-conversation-frances-morris>, 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2013
2. Rainer Maria Rilke in a letter to Franz Xaver Kappus, from Letters to a Young Poet, *Rilke: Everyman's Library Pocket Poets*, Everyman's Library, 1996, p.215
3. Jerry Saltz, '*Towards a Unified Theory of Frank Stella*', October 30<sup>th</sup> 2015 <http://www.vulture.com/2015/10/toward-a-unified-theory-of-frank-stella.html> (about the retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art)
4. Margaret Iversen, '*Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace*', Tate Papers no.18, Autumn 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/18/index-diagram-graphic-trace>
5. *Ibid.*, p. 25
6. *Ibid.*, p. 7
7. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin Books, 1989, p. 221
8. Margaret Iversen, '*Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace*', Tate Papers no.18, Autumn 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/18/index-diagram-graphic-trace>, p. 2

## JANE PONSFORD

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JB: How did handmade paper become your medium of choice?

JP: I can remember the turning point that led to me eventually working with handmade paper and that was fairly early on. It was while I was still at art school on a painting course. I had started to become unhappy with working in such a way that the canvas or paper or board was just the vehicle for the main activity – the painting. So I started staining the canvas and leaving it unstretched and laying the paper on the floor and soaking it with dye or ink. I also experimented with working with scraps of torn paper or fabric to make marks that were then sewn or tied in place. Although I wasn't yet making my own paper, this was the beginning of it. The material became the mark or gesture.

You've said your working method is "drawing in the most complicated way possible." Explain the relationship for you between the physicality of making and the physicality of drawing. How does one become the other for you?

'Drawing in the most complicated way possible'....I think your question is partly answered by my answer to your previous question. The material itself or fragments of that material become the marks, so the making of the material or the forming of that fragment becomes the process of drawing. Walking, drawing and making, have become almost indivisible parts of the same process and have an almost ritualistic quality for me. My process, if I am to make a new piece of work, starts with walking and collecting things. The walk can be out in the landscape or just round a space but the activity is important. The things I collect, a twig, a handful of earth, a piece of chalk, some string, can find themselves in the final piece of work or not. I spend some time arranging these things. Do they need to be piled-up, or placed on something or tied round something? Without this stage the piece of work doesn't proceed. My next stage is to begin making paper. If I'm using cotton or linen rag I have to cut the fabric into roughly inch square pieces. That takes a while, maybe a day. I find it quite calming actually. The next stage is to beat the pulp in a Hollander beater which is noisy and repetitive, watching the fragments swirl round until they become a pulp and lastly the pulp is put into a vat and scooped out to be formed into the small elements that I use to make my work. It sounds as if there is no link between the practical process of making my material and the walking and collecting that went before it but to me it's the same journey. The small elements that have been made are each of them a mark or a gesture, which finally become themselves through a repetitive pressure between thumb and palm of the hand which, as you pointed out, is like a nervous tic. By the time the pieces have been formed I know how they should be placed together.

In your artist statement you describe the receptivity of your material, through staining or "forensic investigations" of collecting particulate traces of a location; the dust, ash, chalk, water etc. of a site. You also mention the material catching light and shadows. What does this receptivity mean for you?

I realise that talking about the 'receptivity' of the material can seem like a contradiction to my interest in the embodiment of the mark in the material but I don't see the paper being a passive vehicle but instead drawing the stain into itself. Paper is the traditional material of communication and can last for centuries and it is also fragile and can tear and can be spoilt easily. These qualities aren't in opposition.

JB: Can you elaborate on that? Why are the apparently opposed qualities of longevity and fragility not in opposition for you?



JP: Well-made paper kept in reasonably good conditions can survive unchanged for hundreds of years. If left damp or at the mercy of the elements it can be marked, torn, pulped, burnt, creased and so on. I am interested in this rewriting of the material. I am thinking of one of my first projects working in response to landscape. My initial thought was that paper could be seen as something completely 'other' within that setting. It was an introduced element with which I could 'draw' on the landscape. Several days of battling against wind, rain and mud disabused me of this idea. The landscape was drawing itself on my paper! I realised that the quality I most enjoy about paper is in fact this ability to be marked and thereafter the ability to communicate this marking. It becomes witness to and evidence of the conditions of its making or journey.

JB: I'm curious about the arranging stage of your process. This strikes me as a further indexical aspect to your work; how something gets arranged becoming an index to some essential part or meaning of the work. Would you agree with that?

JP: Arranging and ordering things is very important to me. Initially as I said earlier, it is the prompt that starts the process of making but in fact it has a much more central role than that suggests. It is the structure for the work both literally, in that it controls the form but also in that it teases out meaning. Walking, collecting, arranging, ordering, making are all part of the process and have an almost ritualistic importance to me. I often think of the whole process as being performative.

JB: How do you feel about the discussion in the curatorial statement of the indexical trace in conjunction with your work in general?

JP: I think that this is the key to my work. I enjoy process and grouping areas of notations but without the thought that they trace or point to something, they would hold no meaning for me. Sometimes the work holds evidence of a range of related things. For instance a piece of work made in relation to a place may hold samplings or marks from many different materials from that area. Sometimes though, the piece is made to respond and draw attention to something at the time you view the completed work. Several pieces in 'Infinity' are made to point to the changing conditions of the light or even to your own shadow.

A further aspect to this interest in traces of materials, and tracking light and shade is that I think that these things speak to us quite clearly but we have learnt to ignore them. By reducing the noise, it is easier to perceive the signal.

In your responses a duality becomes visible; the performativity of your working process and the receptivity of the paper material. You've said the walking, drawing, and making have become indivisible, but in terms of the performativity of your actions and receptivity of the material you describe, do you feel they delimit and define each other, remaining separate entities unto themselves, or are they circular and so a singular totality?

To me the two aspects that you identify in the work are part of the same thing. One leads to the other and round again.

JB: Can you name a few artists whose work you admire for these kinds of dualistic qualities?

JP: Perhaps because I find these qualities interesting, that's what I find myself attracted to in the work of others. The epitome of the artist who walks is surely Richard Long, yet he often has to bring material out of its setting and arrange it or use it in order to make clear what he sees. Sometimes his action in the original place is almost enough but it still needs a photograph or words. A very different kind of work is that of ceramic artist and maker Phoebe Cummings who uses unfired clay, continually making and remaking objects, allowing the material to be eroded by water or wind. The situation in which she places her objects continues the creative process.

JB: How do you see your work developing from here?

JP: I find that question very interesting and its one I have been asking myself. Should I proceed along a path emphasising process or substance?

I know that I would like to be able to bring more emphasis to the almost performative aspects of my work by, for instance, working in the gallery space or through film or photography. At the same time I have an urge to focus on the materiality of my work. So maybe the answer to that question is both, rather than either/or.