



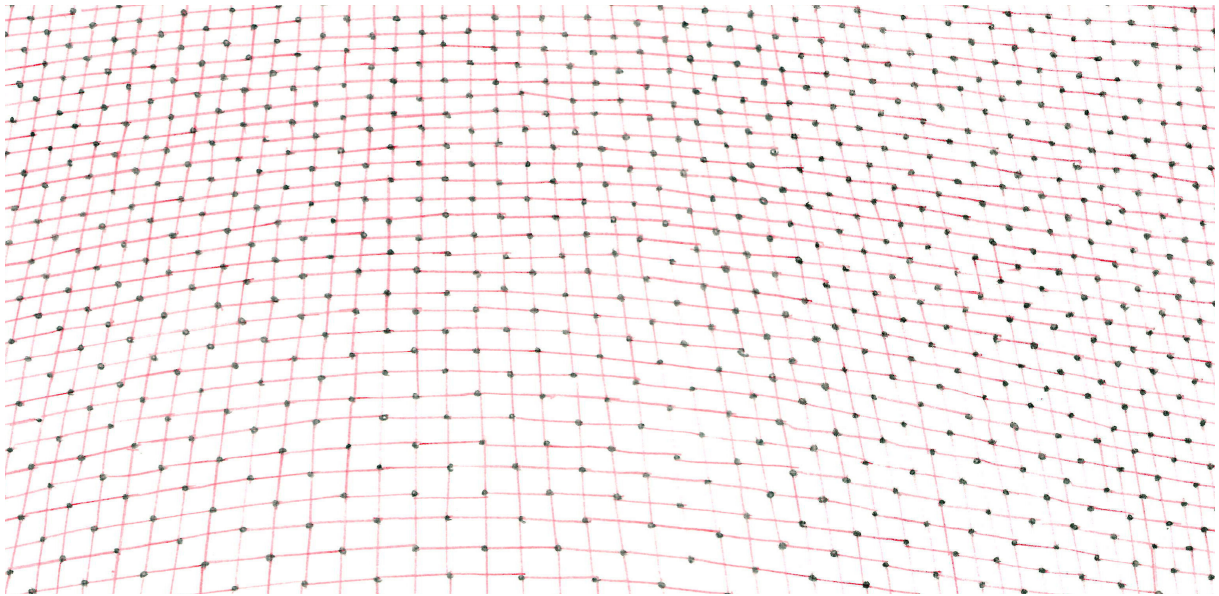
University of Brighton

DUNCAN BULLEN

CONSTRUCTED DRAWINGS

Transformation and dynamism in the
hand-drawn picture

RESEARCH OUTPUT



(detail) **Rose, 1.17**
Pencil and colour pencil on paper,
50 x 50 cm
2017

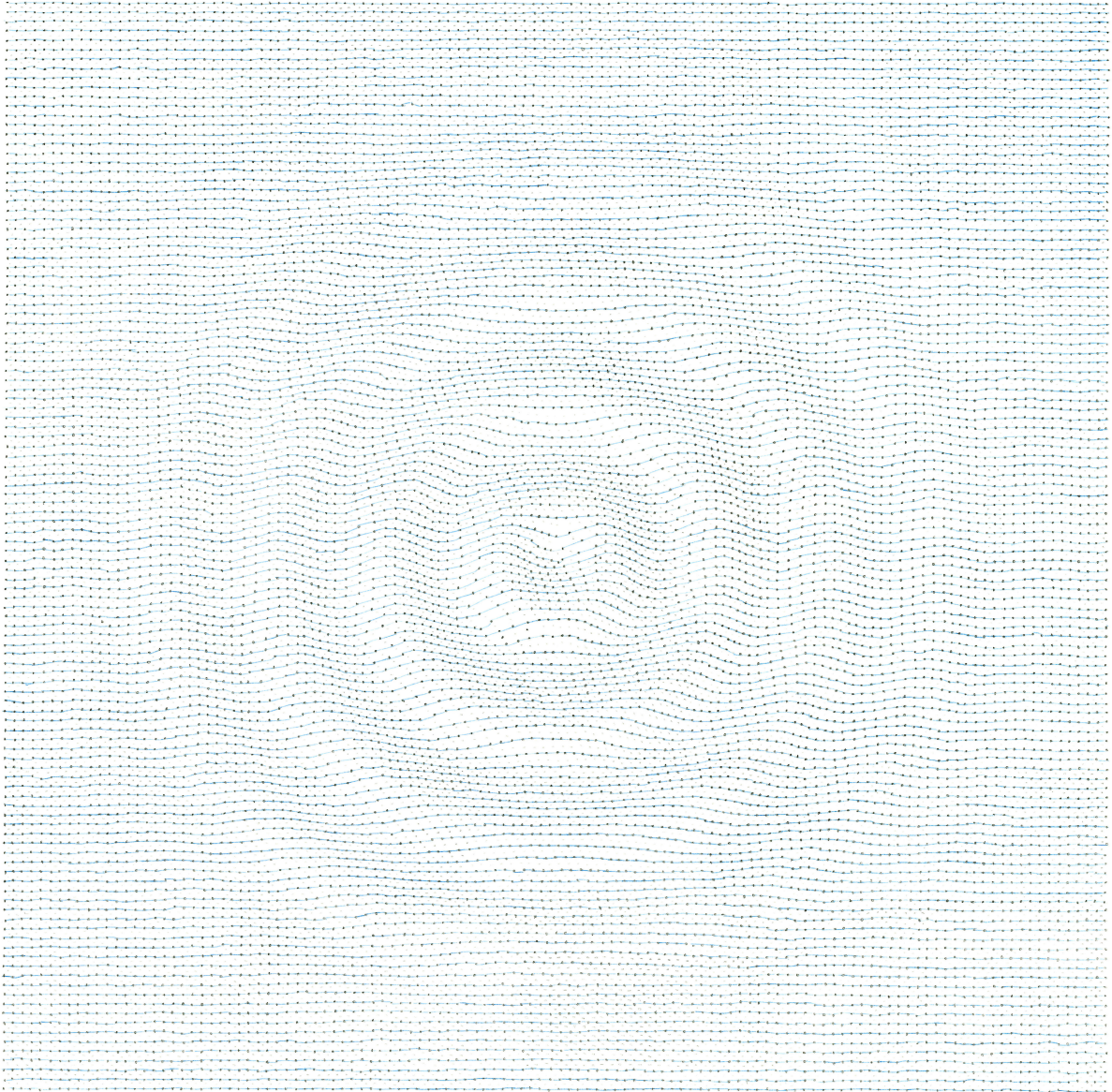
'Constructed Drawings' (2018) is a set of three framed 50x50cm colour pencil on paper drawings, through which Duncan Bullen investigates the relationship between the activity of the artist's drawing and the 'activation' of the picture plane.

These three drawings were produced specifically for the *In Line* exhibition at the Griffin Gallery, London (18 January - 23 February 2018), following the invitation to exhibit by Saturation Point, a curatorial platform for systems, non-objective and reductive art. Each drawing was made in relation to the other through the use of an underlying grid and the repetition of drawn point and line. They are constructed so that each drawing appears to recede or protrude from the centre of the picture plane. While the drawings can be viewed individually, they were designed to be exhibited and understood as a set.

The resulting works examine the relationship between movement and stasis in the process of making and exhibiting drawing. The dynamic quality of the work was recognised in the exhibition reviews: 'From far off we observe a phosphorescent molecular structure which seems to flare; from close in we get the touch and pulse of the drawing' (Noga, 2018). Bullen's research considers how this sense of movement is achieved and how it relates to the conscious activity of drawing.

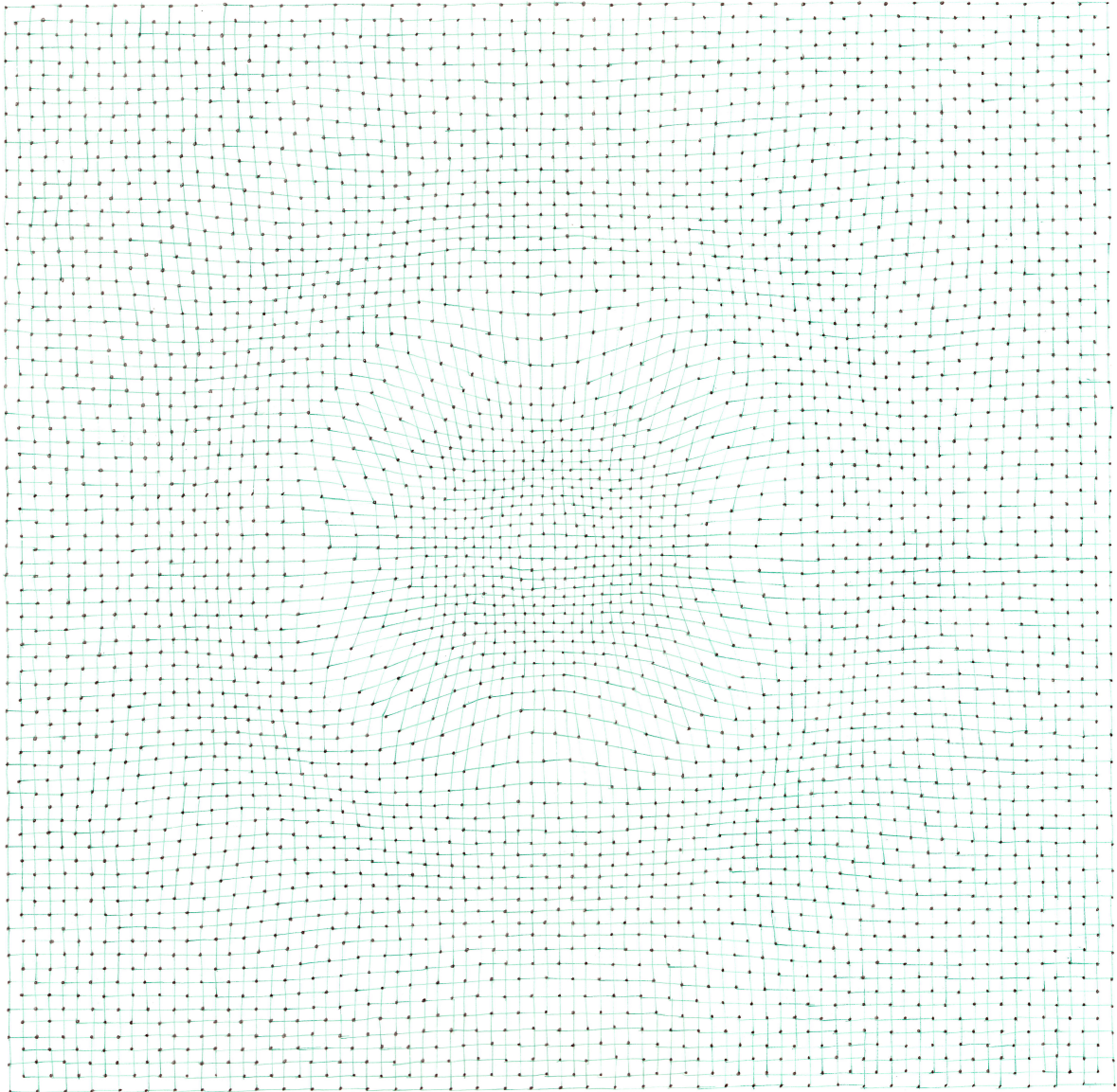
Bullen uses a methodical and reductive drawing process involving pre-determined marks made in series. The composition was designed to stimulate a visual effect of eye-brain perceptual movement and undulation, encouraging viewers to question image and surface. The drawings evidence the activity of mark-making as an indenting as well as a colouring of the paper. Bullen investigates the limits of the hand drawing process and contributes to contemporary debates on manual drawing.

Constructed Drawings



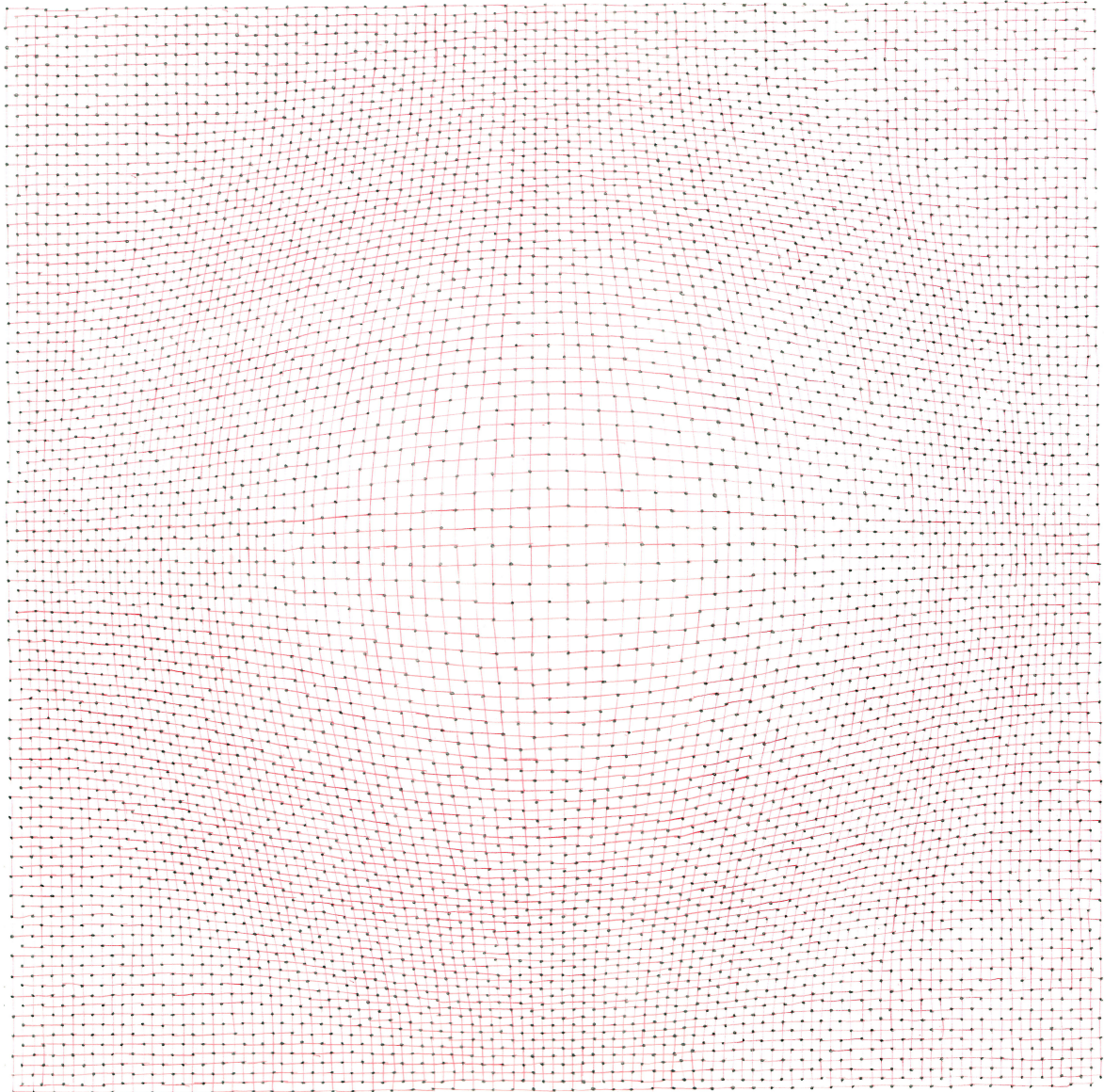
Circling, 2.17
Pencil and colour pencil on paper
50 x 50 cm
2017

Constructed Drawings



Water Mirror Garden, 3.17
Pencil and colour pencil on paper
50 x 50 cm
2017

Constructed Drawings



Rose, 1.17
Pencil and colour pencil on paper,
50 x 50 cm
2017

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



In Line
installation view, with Constructed
Drawings on the right-hand wall

Bullen's research confronts paradoxes of drawing practice: how does a process of precision and patient method relate to the inevitability of flux and change? How does the artist reconcile sensations of energy with the stillness the process requires? By extension, how does an effort at control nevertheless produce works that are capable of reflecting the characteristic variability of the hand?

'Constructed Drawings' tested the boundaries of these aspects of drawing, articulating specific questions as part of that process:

- How can drawings highlight the activity of seeing as a dynamic process of lived interpretive experience?
- How can a drawing process activate the pictorial space of the physical drawing optically and texturally?
- How are the sensations of activity and stillness incorporated within the artist's method and outcome?

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The 'Constructed Drawings' series was specifically commissioned for *In Line*, an exhibition conceived and curated by Saturation Point. This formed the primary artistic context for the research, placing it within a tradition of British Constructivism, Concrete and Systems Art and present-day iterations of artists who use rule-based approaches to making artworks.

The Saturation Point invitation gave Bullen the opportunity to conduct research pertinent to this group of artists, recognising the strong context the *In Line* exhibition would bring to the work. Drawing continues to be associated strongly with traditional artistic media and manual methods, while those traditionally associated with Constructed and Systems Art tend to prefer 'non-traditional materials' (Fowler, 2009). Bullen was invited because of his reputation in the use of repetition, geometry and systematic procedures in drawing. His particular contribution to the group was through the way he uses manual drawing to: explore the picture plane as optical transformation; focus on the tactility of point and line; and construct small connecting points that follow processes of growth.

In addition to Bullen, the artists invited to participate in this exhibition were: Wendy Smith, Robert Currie, Peter Lowe, Patrick Morrissey, Hanz Hancock, Daryl Brown, Lothar Götz and Ben Gooding. Each is concerned with the use of line to generate a complex structure or form bounded by a set of rules that ultimately determines the final work. The central premise of this exhibition was to examine how these distinct practices from across three generations might explore a common territory. Lowe, an original member of the Systems Group (1969-76), contributed a new kinetic sculpture, Götz constructed a large-scale painted wall installation, while Currie took line into three dimensions, using monofilaments strung according to drilled grid points within the confines of a perspex box.

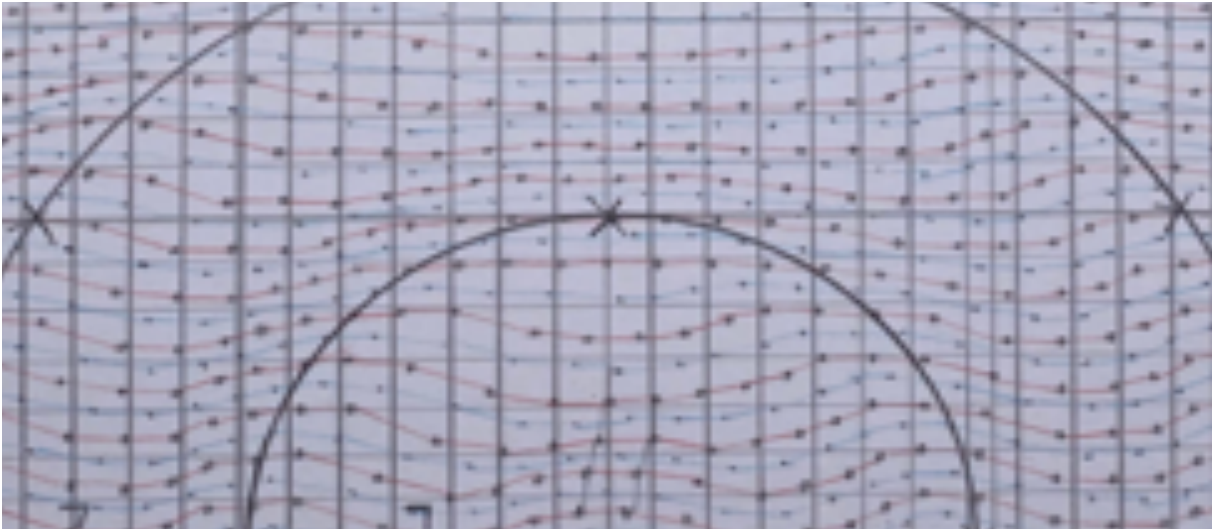
Bullen's work aligned most closely with Wendy Smith, whose meticulously hand-drawn spatial constructions use line and straightedge. This was acknowledged in the curation of the exhibition, with Smith and Bullen's work shown in close proximity on adjacent walls. What distinguishes Bullen and Smith in the context of

this group of artists is their systematic investigation of the two-dimensional picture plane as a phenomenal, illusory space, accessible only through visual perception and made visible on the surface on which they draw. Both Bullen and Smith place emphasis on the physicality of maintaining a steady rhythm of methodical mark making.

The research built upon and strengthened an academic body of work that seeks to understand and articulate the experience and product of drawing alongside its value as research method and pedagogic tool. 'Constructed Drawings' responds to the notion of drawing as dynamic and receptive and uses this as well as testing its further potential. Berger's statement is seminal, 'To draw is not only to measure and put down, it is also to receive' (Berger, 2005), and Bullen's work, with its incremental measurement and precision detail, tests this understanding. Grisewood references the physical importance of touch and the contribution of the artist's mind: 'the emphasis is on latency, not so much on what the line is, but what it can do or be, where drawing is predicated on touch and derives from thought and memory, rather than appearance or observation' (Grisewood, 2012).

In a co-authored paper of 2017, Bullen considers the territory he later explored in 'Constructed Drawings', where drawing gives, 'facility to move between rationality or agency on the one hand and the surrendering of agency to chance on the other' (Bullen, Fox and Lyon, 2017).

RESEARCH PROCESS



(detail, actual size)
Working drawing for
Circling, 2.17

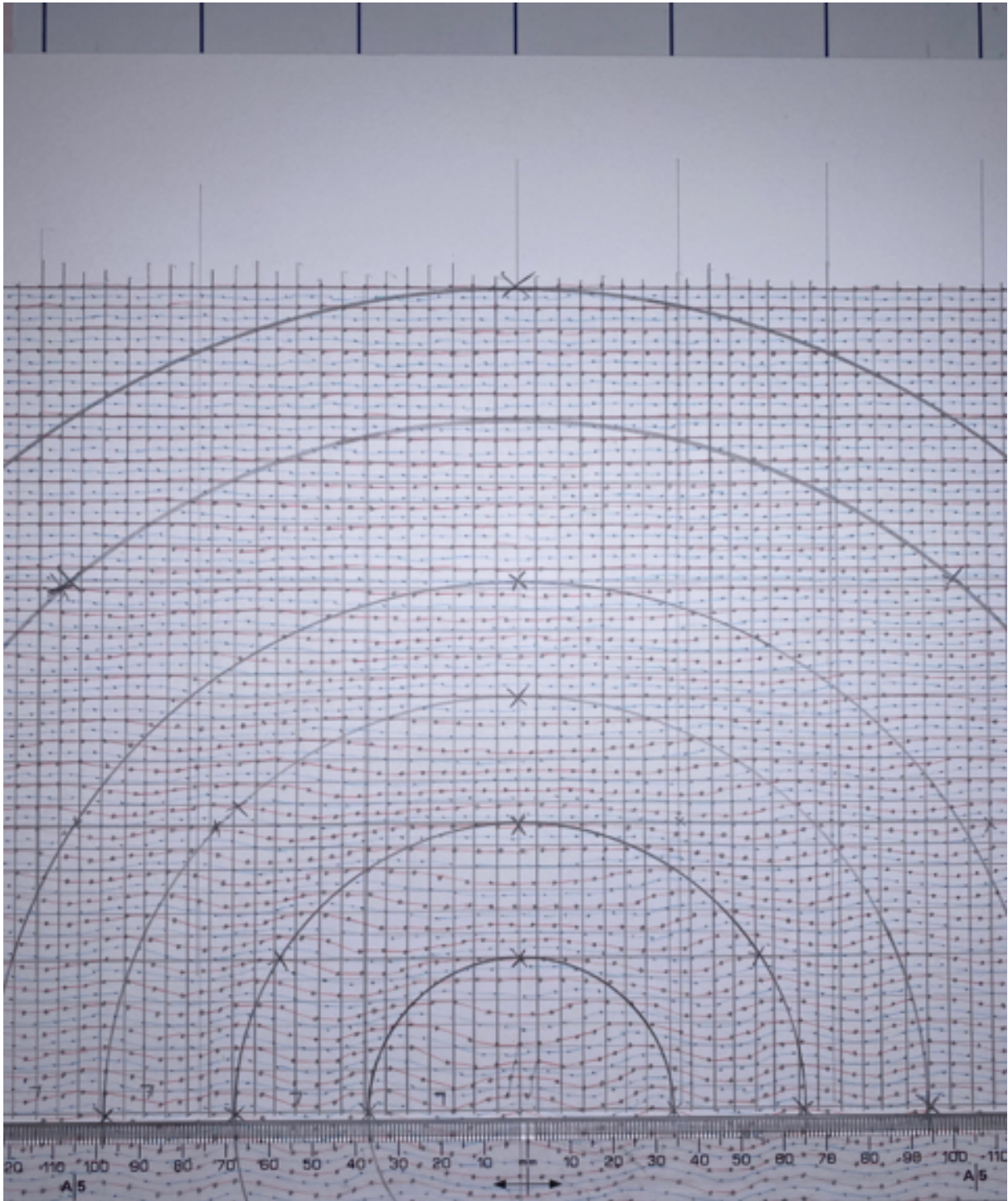
The three drawings Bullen made for this exhibition build upon previous practice-led drawing research that stresses the act of making the same marks, one after another, in a predetermined planned procedure (Bullen 2012; 2013).

The format for each drawing is a square with a geometrical structure. This structure begins with a sketch, which is then computationally reconfigured as a printed grid to use as a guide from which handmade drawings are built and assembled systematically through point and line. The intention is to design each structure to focus attention on the centre of each composition. This is achieved through an investigation of pictorial devices such as the orthographic, circularity and volumetric geometry and is designed to activate the picture plane in such a way that each drawing's centre appears to recede, protrude or ripple. This process involves the computational reconfiguration of a basic grid and a series of measurements to arrive at illusionistic resolution through the activity of manual drawing.

In Bullen's work, the touch of the hand is made present through an individualised marking of the surface, as a means to draw attention to the tension between system-based approaches to pictorial space and non-representational mark making. The intention with these process-driven drawings is to involve and question the perceptual acuity of both artist and audience. This is brought about by an intensified and delicate sense of touch which involves the repeating of the same drawn action with ruler and pencil.

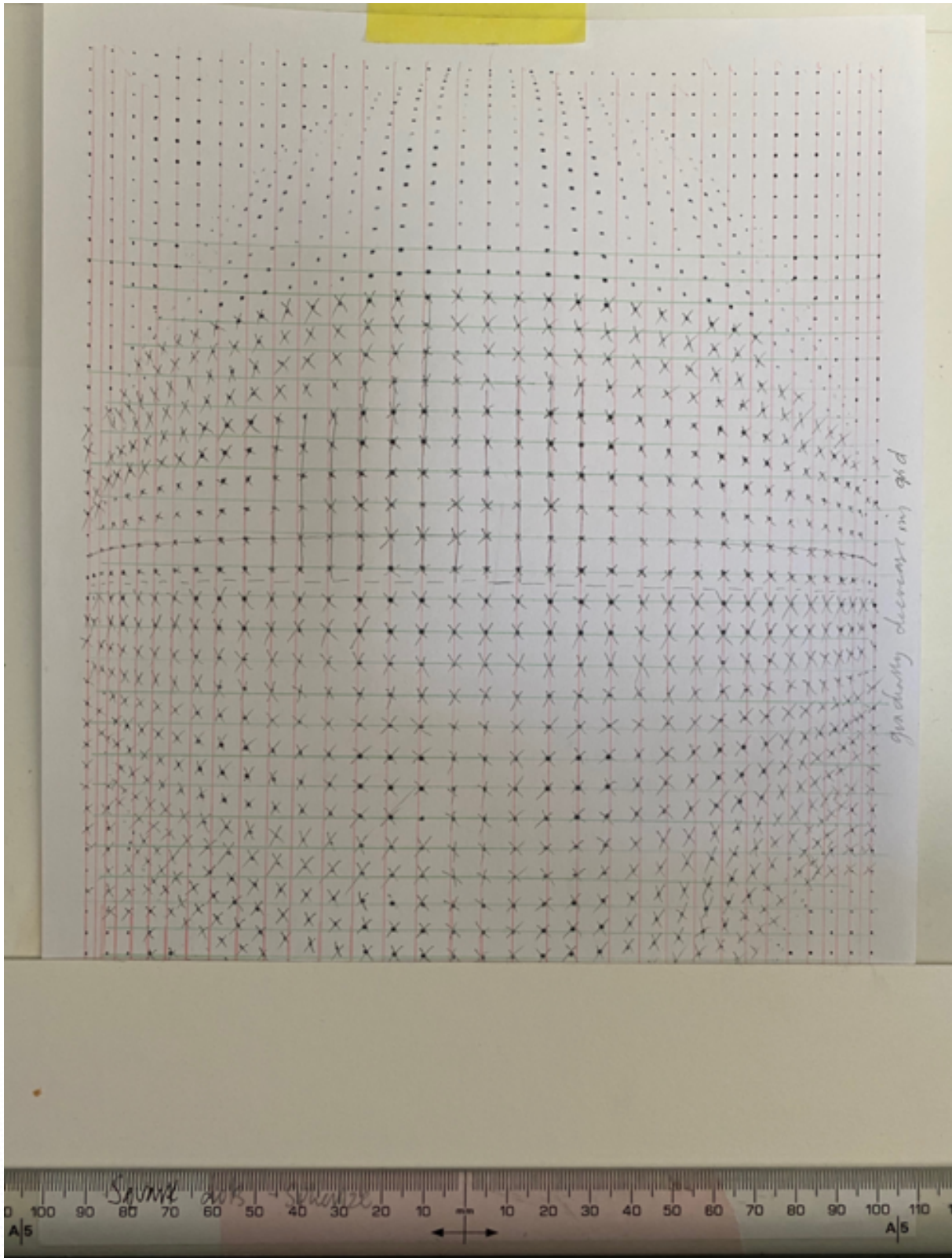
The divergences and irregularities of the hand-drawn line, the weight, the tactility and spacing are all part of the enquiry with its focus on the sensory, haptic and processual. The activity of drawing in this research is concerned with craft and process. The investigation is positioned as analogous to the practice of mindfulness meditation and framed within a phenomenological inquiry.

Constructed Drawings



Working drawing for
Circling, 2.17

Constructed Drawings



Working drawing for
Rose, 1.17

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Bullen's research revealed his drawings as constructions of compositional restraint and slow durational procedures. The evenness of touch when marking the surface of the drawing effected a transformation at the level of the picture plane, one that was visual and sensorially dynamic in character.

Each drawn mark on the surface of the paper became the trace of an action that in turn created a mesh-work of illusory space and optical transformation. The picture plane was built up using a slow and patient marking of the surface, one that had been defined by an initial plotting of patterned formations. Bullen described this as a 'map' in interviews on his technique (Gooding, 2015). The research highlighted the process of discovery, momentum and the relationship between the static representation and the dynamic implications of finding shape and texture.

Bullen discovered that the patterned structures allowed for the constant interplay between pattern and the sensory spread of colour or tone. The surface and its changes became increasingly important to the nature of the artefact and a key part of understanding the process. Bullen investigated the way that these drawings were made, particularly the relationship between predicted and unpredictable elements, and witnessed the way in which each small drawn mark was a gesture with its own unique textural quality. He built on the recognition from earlier works that it was the articulation of the paper's white space from a perceived negative space (no-thing) into a positive (some-thing) that provided the dynamic exchange. The white of the Fabriano 5 paper became, for the artist, an experiential site of potential relationships and an affirmative space.

This questioning of the space also related to the process of activation of the picture plane, where the near invisibility of the drawing led to a deceleration of perception. Bullen experimented with ways in which the artist can induce in the viewer a slower, more concentrated and alert type of looking, heightening the viewer's sensitivity to the slightest variation in perception. Through this research Bullen also confirmed his drawing method as a phenomenologically-organised activity in which seeing is part of the dynamic of picture-making and viewing, something we make, achieve or do, rather than a passive reception. Bullen's research

thus built upon, and contributed to, discussions that position drawing as phenomenology, in which 'to make a mark or trace a single line upon a surface immediately transforms that surface, energizes its neutrality; the graphic imposition turns the flatness of the ground into virtual space, translates its material reality' (Rosand, 2002). At the same time, he challenged the psychologist Richard L. Gregory's assertion that 'Pictures are perhaps the first step away from immediate reality' (Gregory, 1970). By contrast, Bullen proposed a phenomenological understanding of repetitive processes as having the potential to record both the drawer's mind and the drawing's own making. This was essential to the dynamism and transformation that Bullen discovered, identifying the artist's activity as involving a 'fluctuating' state of consciousness which 'fuses awareness between internal and external features' (Harty, 2012) and demonstrating the potential of this to be communicated through the drawn artefact.

DISSEMINATION

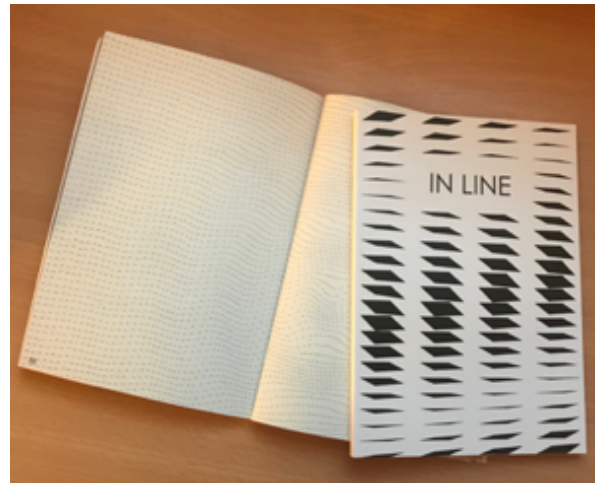
'Constructed Drawings' was produced specifically on invitation for the exhibition *In Line*, Griffin Gallery (18 January - 23 February 2018), curated by Saturation Point Projects http://www.saturationpoint.org.uk/In_Line.html.

Bullen was interviewed by Ben Gooding for Saturation Point in 2015. This enabled Bullen to situate his artistic research with reference to a new audience and contextualise this within a framework of artists working within this specific field of abstraction.

Alongside the three drawings produced for *In Line*, Bullen was commissioned to produce a screen print for the portfolio *Relative Trajectories*, Angus Hughes Gallery, London, (14 July - 5 August 2018) curated by Saturation Point Projects. <http://angus-hughes.org/CELLAR-GALLERY-Saturation-Point-Projects>.

Saturation Point was founded in 2014 by Hanz Hancock and Patrick Morrissey. It operates as an online editorial project exploring the evolving legacy of systems, reductive and geometric art in the UK, with a prime objective to examine and contextualise this particular form of abstraction within the broader spectrum of British art.

The Griffin Gallery in West London was a contemporary exhibition space on the ground floor of the Studio Building in West London, offering a platform for artists to create a dialogue around the artwork on display that promoted an environment of creativity and learning. It ran a programme of residencies and supported an annual award for emerging artists, the Griffin Art Prize. The gallery closed in May 2018 and became Elephant West.



In Line
Griffin Gallery, London
(18 January - 23 February, 2018)

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(overleaf)
Circling, 2.7 (detail)
 Pencil and colour pencil on paper
 50x50cm
 2017

Constructed Drawings

