

## **Drawn from Life – A Green Cardamom project Texts**

### **Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Cumbria 15 January – 26 March, 2011**

Curated by Hammad Nasar and Helen Watson with Justine Blau, Sierra Kaag and Nick Rogers

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## **Drawn to the Lake District**

Hammad Nasar

The first impulse for the 'Drawn from Life' project came almost a decade ago. It was triggered (at least in part) by the exhibition 'Drawing Now: Eight Propositions' at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2001. That exhibition, and so many other exhibitions and doorstopper publications that have followed since, have done much to fight for the place of drawing in a crowded contemporary art scene, at a time when not being able to draw became a badge of honour for many contemporary artists. But the canon of drawing remains, to borrow former BBC director-general Greg Dyke's assessment of his own organisation, 'hideously white'. To put a finer point on it: it is a Euro-American canon, with a smattering of 'exotic' names based in Berlin, London and New York. To a large extent this reflects the density of museums and academic art-history departments in Euro-America. But it is still paradoxical. Drawing is a foundational skill in art schools in many parts of the world outside Euro-America. Art schools, such as Lahore's National College of Arts (alma mater of several artists in this exhibition), require every applicant to pass a drawing test. Encountering the incredibly skilful draughtsmanship of artists coming out of this school as a given, while also in a position to view drawing from South Asia, the Middle East and the UK over the last decade, I was tempted by a 'what if'. What if we could put together a survey of drawing that was truly international? For surely drawing is the oldest and, arguably, still the most universal art form. Every child draws. Humankind in all its hues and colours has drawn for thousands of years – on caves, papyrus, velum and eventually paper. Every part of the world has its own 'masters' of drawing. Rembrandt's collection, study and copying of Mughal miniatures represent a famous cross-cultural exchange of drawing practice. Surely what was possible in seventeenth-century Holland should be possible now.

But how does one go about even conceiving of a 'truly international' drawing survey? This is where an old Gujarati proverb comes handy: 'if you want to eat an elephant, do it in small bites'. Which is precisely what we did. In collaboration with my colleagues at Green Cardamom – Leyla Fakhr and Nada Raza – we put together a series of three exhibitions in 2008-9 at our London gallery space, of works by artists from Australia, Germany, India, Iran, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Tunisia, the UK and the US. There was no attempt to be comprehensive or representative of a place or a region, but simply to present works together that we thought represented currents in contemporary drawing practice from 'scenes' with which we were familiar. The three exhibitions were grouped under the umbrella title 'Drawn from Life', and presented three alternate views or impulses of drawing practice: 'Drawing Process', 'Drawing Space' and 'Drawing Form'.

We were interested in an expanded notion of drawing, one that was not about a particular medium, but about a mindset – about an artistic approach that traverses different media in the service of an idea, a feeling, an impression. Where 'to draw' is not simply to make marks but also to evoke, to make visible, to 'draw out'. So for us 'drawing' could encompass Ayaz Jakhio's collages, Jess MacNeil's video, Ahmed Ali Manganhar's animation, Elizabeth and Iftikhar Dadi's photo montages, Hamra Abbas's paper sculptures and Douglas White's assemblage of yew roots and old tyre. Selecting these works for the three impulses we outlined (Process, Space and Form) sometimes became the subject of

robust debate and, in hindsight, quite possibly arbitrary. For example, while Mohammad Ali Talpur's poetic line drawing tracing the flight path of birds was shown in 'Drawing Process', Douglas White's impressions of octopi obtained by cutting their ink sacs and pressing them against blotting paper was part of 'Drawing Form'. Muhanned Cader's incessant, ever-morphing drawings found themselves a slot in all three. This split, unsurprisingly, was abandoned for the current exhibition, where we have adopted an alternate set of themes – Body Politics, Tracing Landscape, The Everyday and The Diary, – to act as signposts for navigating around the many works.

My colleague Anita Dawood worked with designer Allan Parker to produce a series of large-scale brochures that accompanied each exhibition and acted as a visualisation tool. These became calling cards to introduce the larger project. Our aim was (and remains) to bring the three Green Cardamom exhibitions together in the galleries and grounds of collecting museums in different parts of the world, thereby encouraging a set of visual conversations grounded in an expanded language of drawing between the artists in our three exhibitions – mostly young, emerging or mid-career artists, and those our partner museum has found worth collecting, and who for them represent a canon.

Each exhibition would be accompanied by a publication examining juxtapositions and visual conversations that cross centuries and continents, and include a text by a curator/art historian whom we would invite to reflect on what such juxtapositions suggested to them. 'Drawn from Life' at Abbot Hall Art Gallery is the first such exhibition. Katharine Stout, curator at Tate Britain and associate director of The Drawing Room in London, is our first interlocutor. The exhibition has already advanced our initial idea by introducing an additional element – inviting a number of artists to produce site-specific commissions responding to the site and collection. This engagement with the Lake District and drawing from life is one that goes back in history to many of the great names in the Abbot Hall collection (my co-curator Helen Watson talks about this in her essay in this volume), and makes this collaboration an ideal starting point for our overall project.

From this beginning in the UK, we plan to travel to the Americas, East Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Once we have at least five such exhibitions – each distinctive but sharing a common interest in exhibition-led inquiry – we can start thinking of our collective endeavour as the first draft of a multi-nodal, 'international' survey of drawing. It may take ten years. But then elephants are large beasts – we can only eat them in small bites.

## **An Introduction to Abbot Hall**

Helen Watson

### **Background**

In the early 1960s, Abbot Hall Art Gallery's first director, Helen Kapp, set a course for the future of the gallery, stating that 'Abbot Hall will give much delight to the eye, but also we want it to be a stimulating and vibrant place – a place where clashes of ideas and feelings will generate new thoughts and ideas that will reverberate in all our lives, enriching and stretching our minds.' Today the gallery is widely acknowledged as having one of the most imaginative and independently minded exhibition programmes in the UK outside of London. The 'Drawn from Life' exhibition continues this tradition and presents an installation of work with these principles in mind.

When Hammad Nasar, curator and co-founder of Green Cardamom, and I first discussed the exhibition, we felt strongly that 'Drawn from Life' should go beyond a curated collection of artists' works: we wanted the show to include gallery interventions and site-specific pieces: works that were inspired and instigated by the gallery's existing collections, the Lakeland Arts Trust's two historic and nationally significant buildings and the outstanding area of natural beauty that surrounds them.

With one of the aims of the exhibition being to encompass Abbot Hall and its collection, it seemed fitting for artistic interventions to take place throughout the building, enabling visitors to engage with works not just in the modern exhibition spaces but also those in the ground floor rooms, which are furnished as they would have been when the house was built in 1759, including the eighteenth-century Dining Room and Saloon.

It was therefore instrumental to the exhibition that selected artists whom Green Cardamom had worked with on previous incarnations of the 'Drawn from Life' exhibitions should have the opportunity to visit the Trust's venues. This was so they could witness first-hand the breathtaking scenery of the Lake District and encounter the contrasting styles of Abbot Hall's architecture, built in 1759 in the market town of Kendal, and Blackwell House, built 140 years later beside Lake Windermere. The artists also viewed and researched the Trust's collection spanning the seventeenth to twenty-first centuries. The aim of these visits was for the artists to propose new works in response to what they encountered in the buildings, the collection and the environment.

### **Abbot Hall and Blackwell**

Abbot Hall was occupied by a succession of different families after the original owners, Colonel and Mrs George Wilson and their family, left a couple of years after its completion. In 1897 the house was acquired by Kendal Borough Council, when they bought the surrounding land to turn it into a public park as a legacy of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. The building itself, however, was largely neglected, and by the 1950s was almost in a state of collapse. The newly formed Lake District Art Gallery Trust (now the Lakeland Arts Trust) raised the money for its renovation, and in 1962 it opened as an art gallery.

Abbot Hall holds over four thousand objects, including paintings, sculpture, furniture, drawings and photographs. Like many museums and public galleries, the Lakeland Arts Trust holds the majority of its collection in storage, and space restrictions in the gallery mean that many works are shown only rarely. Working on this exhibition gave us the opportunity to open our stores and invite new, innovative and creative responses to our collections from the visiting artists. The resulting discussions and explorations from these visits proved fascinating for all of the curatorial staff who saw the collections come alive through different reactions and interpretations.

Blackwell, a lavishly decorated, romantic home, sits in sharp contrast to the austere classical architecture of Abbot Hall. It was built as a rural holiday retreat on the shores of Lake Windermere for the Manchester brewery owner Sir Edward Holt and his family. Designed by the architect Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott (1865-1945), the house was completed in 1900. One of the finest houses of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the UK, it survives in a truly remarkable state of preservation, retaining almost all of its original decorative features. Blackwell offered Baillie Scott the opportunity to put his ideas on the use of space, light and texture into practice on a grand scale. The notion of submerging oneself in the landscape is epitomised at Blackwell, as nature's flowing lines can be seen throughout the house. Views from the house are dominated by mountains, looking across to those above the village of Coniston, and by the largest stretch of water in England, Lake Windermere. Both houses were built in response to the landscape. Abbot Hall is on the banks of the River Kent and next to the Holy Trinity Church, which dates to the thirteenth century, and has views of Kendal Castle, which dominates the town. The house was constructed when the first stirrings of the sublime and romantic movements were beginning to take root in England.

Blackwell commands expansive views of the lake and open countryside of the Lake District. Like Abbot Hall, this house is set in its own grounds, with gardens laid out by the garden designer Thomas Mawson (1861- 1933) as a series of sweeping terraces.

Following a well trodden path:

I overlooked the bed of Windermere,

Like a vast river, stretching in the sun.

With exultation, at my feet I saw Lake, islands, promontories, gleaming bays,

A universe of Nature's fairest forms

The Prelude, Book IV, William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

The artists who visited the Lake District in 2010 followed in the footsteps of artists and tourists who, over 200 years ago, visited the Lake District as a destination on what became known as the Picturesque Tour. Following the publication of the earliest guidebook to the Lake District by Thomas West in 1778, and William Gilpin's Observations on the Picturesque in 1772, it became very fashionable to visit the region. Gilpin promoted the ideal of the picturesque in landscape painting,

defining this concept as ‘that kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture’. West’s book, *A Guide to the Lakes in Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire*, described specific ‘viewing stations’ where the outlook was most ‘picturesque’. Later, at some of these viewpoints, stone buildings were constructed, in which windows with tinted glass would add to the ‘effect’ of the landscape for visitors. As a result, the Lake District’s distinctive, but previously isolated landscape became an increasingly popular place for artists to visit. The most popular medium for capturing such images was watercolour: quick to dry and easily transportable. Abbot Hall was leased as a base for Picturesque tourists in the 1780s, and when the gallery opened it was decided to collect views of the Lake District. The resulting collection is evidence of the range of artists who visited the region for inspiration: Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, Thomas Rowlandson, Thomas Hearne, John Robert Cozens, John Constable, J M W Turner and John Ruskin all painted scenes in the Lakes. We have included in the exhibition a number of the greatest watercolours of the period, including works by J R Cozens, John Ruskin, J M W Turner and Thomas Hearne.

Artists continued to be inspired by the region, from John Ruskin in the nineteenth century to Beatrix Potter, Ben Nicholson, Kurt Schwitters, L S Lowry, Sheila Fell and Andy Goldsworthy in the twentieth. Indeed, public recognition of the value of the region’s landscape led to the Lake District becoming one of the UK’s first, and largest, national parks in 1951, over 100 years after the poet William Wordsworth proclaimed the area ‘a sort of national property in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy’. Its distinctive upland landscape of radiating U-shaped valleys – many of which contain long narrow lakes – dotted with small settlements formed by farming communities, is well-recognised in the UK and beyond.

### **An opportunity to look again at the collection**

We aim to present Abbot Hall’s collection in new ways, and to invite the public to engage with different levels of meaning. As curators, we are limited in doing this to the way we display, label and discuss the work: a contemporary artist’s response to a historic piece, however, can shed light on hidden aspects of a work, and highlight new qualities for the public, representing a familiar object in different and challenging ways. Noa Lidor’s commission for this exhibition responds to a pastel portrait by George Romney of the writer Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), dated 1792. Jess MacNeil was drawn to the treatment of figures or the place of the artist within the many landscape paintings in the collection, and the changes in this over time. The works by Edward Wilson in particular, made when he was part of Scott’s Antarctic explorations, struck a chord with her own work. Muhanned Cader was inspired by the landscape surrounding the two properties. His work, *Flag I & Flag II (Unawatuna Beach, Sri Lanka and North Uist, Outer Hebrides, Scotland)* (2010), resonates with the same principles of Baillie Scott’s architectural ethos when designing Blackwell House – an immersive experience, with landscape bringing the inhabitants of Blackwell directly in tune with the flowing lines of nature.

As we approach Abbot Hall’s half-century as a public art gallery, ‘Drawn from Life’ celebrates the original aims of those who founded it. The exhibition explores and represents aspects of Abbot Hall’s

own collection, shedding new light on works that have perhaps never before been in the spotlight. At the same time, opening up the collection and buildings to an international group of artists has provoked new responses and ways of seeing. As an event that examines the many ways in which drawing has shaped our world, it builds, too, on Abbot Hall's longstanding interest in this most essential of art forms.

## **Journeys across space and time: a view to international drawing practices**

Katharine Stout

'Drawn from Life' brings together art from different ages and from the widest spectrum of locations. As the title of the exhibition suggests, what unifies the artists is a wish to engage with, represent and, at times, challenge the environment or context in which they find themselves. They are also connected through the act of drawing, although the definition of what constitutes this medium encompasses a broad range of work made from video, paper and even table salt, as well as the more traditional graphite and pen on paper.

Many artists across time and geography have regarded the activity of drawing as a core practice, from which all other means of expression emerges. Today it is an increasingly visible and innovative part of contemporary practice, which signals a notable shift from its historical relegation to the confines of an artist's private studio or the teaching academy.

In Western art history the repositioning of drawing from an essential, but subsidiary, support to a primary medium in its own right took place during the 1960s and 1970s, when the modernist values that had determined the development of art throughout the twentieth century began to be questioned and reconsidered. Previously peripheral to these formalist narratives and historically regarded as a preparatory medium, drawing became increasingly valued as a means with which to experiment and, in particular, to articulate the concept-based practices emerging at the time. Yet it has never lost its strong association with authenticity and spontaneity, and remains prized, as it has been throughout history, as the medium that most directly and succinctly communicates an artist's intuition and thought processes.

Abbot Hall Art Gallery's collection reflects the strengths of British art history, comprising key works by celebrated artists such as George Romney, John Ruskin, J M W Turner, Graham Sutherland and Lucian Freud, which often have a direct connection to the local history and geography of the Lake District. The contemporary practitioners introduced by Green Cardamom are less known in Britain, especially since many are at an early stage in their careers. Some are based in Britain, others elsewhere, and their countries of origin represent every continent. They are not necessarily familiar with the area in which Abbot Hall is located, although the artists held in its collection may be familiar to them from art history books. Yet despite their differing backgrounds and ages, the artists brought together for 'Drawn from Life' share many themes and artistic preoccupations. Some of these concerns are simple universal subjects such as the common bird, which has motivated artists as culturally diverse as Elisabeth Frink, Jean Arp, Kurt Schwitters and Mohammad Ali Talpur. Frink's figurative sculptures have been popular in Britain since the 1950s, and Harbinger Bird II (c. 1963) is a classic cast-bronze expressionist piece that transforms the ubiquitous bird into an ominous figure of aggression.

In Jean Arp's Oiseau-chute, (1966) the figure of a bird is barely recognisable as a representational

form. A founder member of the Dada movement in Europe, Arp was one of the pioneers of abstraction in the early years of the twentieth century. The unlikely relocation of Kurt Schwitters – another key figure in the history of European art – to Ambleside in the Lake District, after fleeing Nazi Germany, led to the creation of works such as *Flight* (1945). An example of his distinct practice of assembling found objects that he called ‘Merz’, this non-figurative work suggests the act of flight, whether by bird or plane, and alludes to his own ‘flight’ from his homeland. Mohammad Ali Talpur continues this fascination with the bird as both a formally inspirational motif as well as a symbol of freedom and escape. Sitting on his rooftop in Lahore, he traces in felt pen the flight paths of the birds he observes passing, creating fragile and delicate drawings that are not overtly figurative but that capture succinctly the sense of aerial motion.

Other shared interests have a tradition that can be traced throughout history, such as the challenge of representing the human figure. In particular, the classic portrait motivates artists from different generations and origins – Lucian Freud and Ali Kazim. Studies of close or familiar sitters by Freud – heralded by many as the greatest living British portrait artist – have a psychological charge that makes viewers acutely aware of their own bodies and emotions. Freud’s 1991-2 etching of his son-in-law Kai, a regular subject, offers an astonishing life-size representation that has a strong physical presence. Likewise, Kazim’s figures have an almost palpable sense of the human form, particularly the intimate texture of skin and hair. Deploying the techniques of South Asian miniature painting, Kazim has developed a highly skilled and intuitive method for portraying male figures, often naked from the waist up and set against richly coloured backgrounds. His enigmatic figurative paintings convey the physical presence of these anonymous subjects and offer a haunting insight into their inner lives.

The curators Hammad Nasar of Green Cardamom and Helen Watson of Abbot Hall have grouped works together in four overlapping themes – *Tracing Landscape*, *The Diary*, *Body Politics* and *The Everyday* – which are not conceived to be rigid or didactic categorisations but a way to highlight some of the shared interests linking these diverse works. Indeed, the range of themes covers the various genres that define art history, yet the curators avoid addressing the notion or chronology of a so-called grand narrative, instead offering subtle and thought-provoking combinations of historic and contemporary works that shed new light on the art of both the past and present. Green Cardamom’s ongoing relationship with many of the artists in the show, and Helen Watson’s exhaustive knowledge of Abbot Hall’s collection, have resulted in a sensitive and complex selection that integrates works by international contemporary practitioners with those of primarily British-based artists who represent an established canon based on a Western view of art history. The exhibition introduces a global representation of those exploring the medium of drawing in compelling and challenging ways, to a collection that reflects a local or national perspective on art history. This is in keeping with a shift within the discipline of art history and the institutions that represent it, such as those in Britain that hold public collections, to revise and expand the way in which the art is presented and discussed, in order to reveal that its history and context is made up of multiple, often fragmented and layered narratives developed by artists from around the world. On a basic level, this exhibition allows Abbot Hall’s regular audience exposure to work that derives from different traditions and influences – for example, the art training artists received in their countries of origin, or the specific social and political contexts to which

they are responding – serving to expand and, at times, question established notions of history. Visitors less familiar with Abbot Hall might find that they share a heritage or an outlook with some of the contemporary practitioners introduced here, and that the shared themes and concerns explored in the show make the works in the collection more relevant to their own lives and interests than they had previously assumed, extending notions of identity.

One important way in which the curators have approached this ambitious merging of past and present, local and international, is by presenting commissioned and existing work within the historic rooms of the permanent collection, as well as in the temporary exhibition galleries. Invited to spend time exploring the collection at Abbot Hall and the surrounding environment famous for its natural beauty, three artists, Muhanned Cader, Jess MacNeil and Noa Lidor, were commissioned to make new pieces for the show. Struck by George Romney's portrait of Charlotte Smith, a young mother, Lidor set out to investigate the subject, discovering that, although renowned in her lifetime as a poet and novelist, Smith was largely forgotten by the middle of the nineteenth century. Lidor also found that, according to the customs of the day, Smith was forced into an arranged marriage at 15 and went on to bear 12 children. In response, Lidor has translated a sonnet by Smith into Braille. Enlarging and recreating it in table salt, she has then installed it on an eighteenth-century dining table near to which Romney's portrait hangs. Lidor regularly uses salt as part of her formal vocabulary, to evoke the sadness of tears and the arrest of decay and ageing. The illegibility of the text (any attempt to read through touch would ultimately destroy it) acts as a fragile, poignant memorial to this forgotten mother and writer, and alludes to the fact that Smith's writing has largely been lost to the passage of time.

### **Tracing Landscape**

During the eighteenth century many artists who came to make work in this region were celebrated as part of the Romantic movement, which dominated art and literature in Britain and elsewhere. Humankind's relationship with the natural environment is still a pressing subject today, as practitioners find diverse ways to make this theme relevant and responsive to contemporary conditions. Muhanned Cader's practice is driven by an intuitive, intellectual and emotional response to landscape. Initially, his main subject was the familiar views of his homeland, Sri Lanka, but, more recently, his work has been informed by the new terrains that he has encountered. *Scapes in Shapes* (2009), a series of small seascapes in pencil on paper, capture Cader's response to the rough, natural beauty of the coast surrounding St Andrews in Scotland. Struck by its unexpected similarity to the scenery of Sri Lanka, Cader was driven, partly by a wave of homesickness, to depict this somewhat hostile environment, framing it in abstract organic shapes to distance himself and the viewer from the image. More recently, in response to exploring the Cumbrian landscape and towns that surround Abbot Hall, Cader set out to paint a new work entitled *Flags*, which seeks to take landscape painting beyond the literal representation of an observed natural scene. The two paintings that comprise the series are painted on aluminium sheets, which correspond in size to typical international flag dimensions. The three bands of colour allude to earth, water and sky, but also represent a formal investigation into colour field painting. Today, thousands of tourists arrive in this area for its 'picture postcard' views, just as many visit Sri Lanka for the photogenic coastal landscapes. At the heart of Cader's practice is a desire

to go beyond the clichés of commercialised landscape paintings aimed at tourists, and to create works that represent his own sincere, emotional response to the land. They also hint at an underlying politicisation of territory, acknowledging that throughout history land has been acquired or taken from its indigenous dwellers by those with greater wealth or power. Cader wishes to reaffirm the human relationship to land, which, for him, is a universal sign for all people living on the earth. As if to confirm this view, a work from an earlier period, *The Grey Sea* (1963) by L S Lowry, like Cader's work, verges on an almost abstract depiction of a seascape and hints at Lowry's emotional attachment to this timeless subject.

Jess MacNeil explores the conceptual and physical impact of man's movement through landscape, and the final realisation of her work also verges on abstraction. Combining video and painting, her work situates the human figure, and indeed herself, within the landscape, as a way to acknowledge and further develop one of the central themes of Abbot Hall's collection. These evocative pieces are made by projecting video footage of local scenery, taken by the artist, onto paper. Selectively following the movement of the video, MacNeil has drawn on paper and then used these drawings to create the image on the wet painted surface of a large frosted Perspex sheet. Drawing and sculpting with thick oil paint, MacNeil creates a non-figurative topography of texture and colour that offers an impression rather than a narrative of her own experience of the surrounding area. Although the indexical marks capture and give physical form to the artist's experience of moving through the land, the changing play of light as it is reflected and absorbed by the Perspex base emphasises that this is but an ephemeral, temporary encounter. A video work by MacNeil presented in this section, *The Space of Between*, takes as its starting point footage of an observed scene in India, in which four boats gently traverse a river, each on its own journey. Shot from a single vantage point, the film plays with the perception of movement and related distance as it pulls in and out of focus on each boat. This depiction of India has a dream-like quality rather than presenting a literal representation of reality, reflecting the artist's own relationship with the country, which she had heard about from her mother's account of travelling there while pregnant with her.

Andy Goldsworthy takes the notion of nature's ephemerality as his central theme, creating works that are themselves temporary, existing, once they have disintegrated, only in the form of a photograph. *Slits cut into Frozen Snow, Stormy...Blencathra, Cumbria, 12 February 1988* (1988), offers four photographic records of a sculpture made in ice and snow on a hill overlooking Derwentwater. Taken in differing conditions during a single stormy February day, the photographs capture time passing as they record changes in the surrounding weather and light. Anwar Jalal Shemza depicts imagery that is reminiscent of natural forms, but whose subject matter derives from the imagination rather than the observed world. Combining the formal qualities of calligraphy with organic forms, his delicately drawn images appear to portray a botanic life form from another world. *Roots* (1983) is one of a series of works that give life to the Arabic script, taking these linguistic forms beyond syntax to become something eloquently new and surprising. Another work by Shemza, *The Sun and the Sea* (1966), offers a more abstract depiction of the natural scene evoked in the title. Made up of sections of unpainted chair legs that vary in diameter and height, this endearing work offers a representation of a

landscape scene pared down to its most reduced elements, and yet is instantly recognisable, in the same way that a child can capture an image with a few crude lines. A new work by Seher Shah presented for the first time in this exhibition, *Emergent Structures: Planar Landscapes* (2010), also offers an image that appears entirely abstract, despite its more descriptive title. A stark, black, angular geometric form in gouache and graphite sits at the centre of a large sheet of paper, resting on a tilted plane that is suggested by finely drawn perspectival lines receding to a horizon. Trained initially as an architect, Shah has stated that her work is 'informed by the intersection of drawing and architecture, and the use of space as an allegory or metaphor'. She has often presented monumental black cuboid and triangular shapes within more figurative dream-like scenes, such as enclosed urban spaces within an indistinguishable metropolis. In this latest work the contextual landscape has been removed and the symbolic, oppressive form is all that remains, inviting viewers to project their own interpretation of what it represents.

### **The Diary**

Drawing is a quotidian activity shared by professional artists, children and indeed many of us. It is the most immediate means of recording what we see and experience, in order to process and retain resulting thoughts, ideas, emotions and concerns. Drawing can therefore become a thinking process in itself, in which the experience of a particular moment is conveyed through the materiality of the work. This section represents the activity of drawing as much as the way it is deployed to explore a particular subject. So, for example, an artist like Cader belongs as much to this section with his drawing notebooks as he does to 'Tracing Landscape', and so appears in both. Like Cader, Beate Terfloth looks to the natural world for inspiration, collecting sections of fallen tree bark, which she then traces in white gouache onto white paper to create ethereal works that are barely perceptible. Her preservation of a discarded, overlooked material aligns her in approach to the work of artists such as Kurt Schwitters. Similarly, the abstract nature of Nadia Kaabi-Linke's work does not reveal its starting point explicitly in a concrete experience or material. However, the title, *Call Centre* (2004), alludes to the fact that this large drawing created from ballpoint pen on paper is the result of whiling away the time whilst working in a call centre. Reminiscent of the repetitive lines of tree bark or hair, the piece reveals the time involved in its laborious making. Similarly, the striking abstract painting by Bridget Riley, one of the leading figures of her generation in Europe and still working in Britain today, evokes rather than illustrates a sensation or experience, and celebrates pure form and bold colour. A trip to Egypt in the early 1980s led her to explore a palette of strong colours in a body of work of which *Conversation* (1992) is a key example. Layered in diagonal stripes, the colours appear to be in conversation with each other as they flow and ripple optically across the surface of the canvas. Another senior female artist, Zarina Hashmi has developed a distinct non-figurative idiom to articulate her experience of the world and her physical and spiritual journeys through it. She comments on how her earliest experiences informed her approach: 'I had done a considerable amount of travelling within India with my family visiting historical monuments and religious shrines. My creative expression was informed by my exposure to architectural spaces, geometry and calligraphy.' Throughout her adult life Hashmi has lived a nomadic existence, and the journeys she has taken and the places she has lived in continue to influence her work. In *A Few Steps in the Land of Confucius* (2008) she depicts the tiles

that path the way to a Buddhist temple in X'ian, China. This large, densely worked abstract work in graphite conveys a physical impression of space traversed and a sense of the less tangible inner spirituality experienced there.

### **The Everyday**

The sketchbook, often regarded an artist's prized possession, represents drawing as a way for artists to record observations and responses to the world around them. Seemingly straightforward depictions of everyday scenes from the past reveal a great deal about the changing social and political context of the time. Pictures such as L S Lowry's Canal and Mill Scene (1929) are among the most poignant records of the lives of those working in the industrial factories of the north of England during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. David Hockney's The Rake's Progress (1961-3) is a witty update of William Hogarth's suite of paintings narrating the decline of a young heir and socialite in eighteenth-century London. This series of 16 prints tell Hockney's own story of his first trip to the US in 1961, and the revelatory impact his encounter with the vibrant New York scene of the 1960s had on the young artist. More recently, Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso brings together visual icons and branding from Western and Eastern societies, commenting on how each culture views another from a distance. In Oh! What a Beautiful Day (2004) the instantly recognizable form of the Buddha is created using hundreds of stickers, newspaper type and logos. Neda Razavipour's pages from her diary, covered in notes and figurative images, offer a glimpse into her life in Iran. Continuing in a trajectory of art practice typified by the work of both Lowry and Hockney, Razavipour's art provides a record of a place in time while offering insight into the political, social and cultural changes taking place. The dated page ties the event depicted to a specific moment, yet we are left guessing as to the nature of the incidents and encounters that prompted these images, particularly since only readers of Farsi can decipher the accompanying text. In keeping with the notion of the diary as a site for recording innermost thoughts and private feelings, these drawings resonate with an implied narrative and emotional significance that are ultimately withheld from the viewer. Another artist from Iran incorporates anecdotal scenes and stories from her daily life in quite a different way. Nazgol Ansarinia combines the traditional styles of Persian carpets with contemporary digital techniques, to create incredibly intricate drawings that interweave scenes of bureaucratic and domestic life in Iran with ornamental patterning. Laser-cut shapes in velvet create a stark frame around the work, highlighting the precise detail of these captivating ink and digital drawings. Hamra Abbas also deploys craft techniques to create meticulous works, whose labour-intensive demands are often wittily described in their titles, such as It Was a Little Demon, I Can Tell You (2008). Constructed from thousands of tiny strips of paper, each printed with the word 'love', this collage formed into a house-like structure hints at the fragility of human relationships.

### **Body Politics**

This final section returns us to a central theme for art, touched on at the beginning of this essay, which transcends the centuries – our physical selves and our relationship to others. Key works from Abbot Hall's collection reveal the historic desire to portray the human figure in ways that reveal the inner emotion and spirit of the sitter, an ambition that continues to motivate artists today, while others take

the opportunity to explore more political and social concerns. The astonishing variety in the depiction of the human form suggests exactly why this is such a rich subject for artists of different backgrounds and ages. Historically, artists were commissioned to paint the portraits of subjects chosen by those with power and money, as reflected in the works in Abbot Hall. Today, artists are freer to select their own sitters and use the motif of the human figure to explore notions of identity and belonging, or the way that individuals have influenced the development of society. Some artists depict those around them for subjective or personal reasons, as in Celia Paul's tender study of her pregnant sister, which allows a glimpse into a private moment. Like those of Freud and Frank Auerbach, artists who influenced Paul's own figurative style, her works have an atmospheric presence that suggests a strong emotional meaning.

Other artists working today use the language of figurative art to develop their enquiries into the political or social context of their time. Ayaz Jochio's 2009 portraits of two Nobel prize winners from the early twentieth century, the German novelist Hermann Hesse and Bengali writer and educator Rabindranath Tagore, created from acrylic and newspaper collage on board, represent two individuals who had an extraordinary influence on the time in which they lived and on later culture and society. A video work by Ahmed Ali Manganhar entitled *Blackboard History* (2010) also explores the relationship between people and places. Manganhar draws a sequence of characters, mostly from his native Sindh province in Pakistan, but also those found in films, mixing together contemporary and historic narratives as well as reality and fiction. A central character he returns to repeatedly in his work is the Hindu trader Seth Naomul Hotchand, who was rewarded by the British but considered a traitor by the Talpurs of Sindh. Each drawn figure is erased to make way for the next, so the only trace of the image is that retained on the film capturing the process. In works that reveal the trauma of contemporary warfare, Imran Mudassar's drawings of human bodies on photographs of walls pockmarked by bullets, mortar shells and other such damage inflicted on the city of Kabul offer stark visual testimony to the impact such conflicts have on human lives.

It is particularly apt that an exhibition that integrates the work of international artists living and working today with a permanent collection predominantly focused on British artists should take place at Abbot Hall. Artists from all over the world have travelled to the Lake District, attracted by the natural beauty of the region. Journeys, both metaphoric and physical, are an underlying theme that connects the disparate works presented here, reflecting the transient lifestyle that characterises so many artists' existence. 'Drawn from Life' brings together the local and the global through stories and themes that are specific and personal, and yet which go far beyond immediate references to convey universal significance. This exhibition also confirms the vibrant state of drawing today, revealing it as a medium that continues to be deployed as a tool for experimentation and innovation by contemporary artists, wherever they might be situated.