

From Japan / RULES FOR DRAWING

Thursday 1 February to Sunday 28 February

Exhibition Essay by Curator, Lisa Pang

It was a tadaima^[1], a call out. Sliding the screen door, stepping in, shuffling out of shoes.

In September 2023 I was back in Japan, a country and culture I had lived in and out of for 4 years. I had left, a little saddened, only months before, not expecting to return so soon. My e-transport pass still worked, and it didn't take long to feel the familiar ease and multiplicity of choices when travelling the immense and convoluted ramen bowl of lines that is Tokyo public transportation. While intimidating initially, I had learnt that there are many ways to get to a destination.

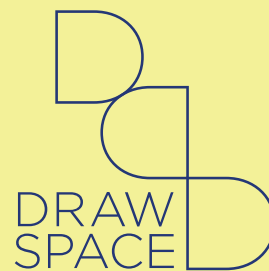
One trip planner might send you intersecting across several curling and differently coloured noodle-like lines. Another app might offer an alternative way; even more colourful changes, but with less walking in between.

On the platforms, columns are jammed with hieroglyphed explanations, diagrammatic explanations for which carriage to ensure the swiftest transfer. Yet another way might preference a private railway, or bus. Distractions abound; consider platform melodies, a favoured food or convenience stop on an underground connection, lines haunted by odd smells, women-only carriages offering pink safe zones at peak travel times. Personally, I have a weakness for the Tokyo Metro Ginza line and often choose its cheerful yellow promise over a more direct way. As one of Tokyo's earliest lines it runs shallower below ground, and there is also hope – a chance of a ride in a green velvet, wood panelled, lamplit retro-themed carriage.

This traveller's internal monologue, of a series of idiosyncratic choices made while tripping, even choosing to become a little lost, is much like the role of process in drawing. It is what happens when we prioritise journeying over destination. Way over result. Means over ends. Chance over Certainty. Quirk over plans. I was in Tokyo to make 5 journeys. 5 artists who through an intense focus on their processes, have come to a set of self-imposed *rules* in their drawings. As drawers they are mark makers led by the marks, guided by motifs, actions, even philosophies. Like any curious traveller, they place precedence over the *ways* they draw, rather than seeking out a predetermined result or image. The drawings they make are distinctly non-objective. Abstracted marks, free of any desire to represent the world, and characteristically serial, these 5 journeys arrive as fragments of a larger, inward-looking exploration of process. In drawing-as-journey, the artist's *rules* are really a way of achieving wonder; a mental state of acute observation, while wandering; the physical process of applying marks to blankness.

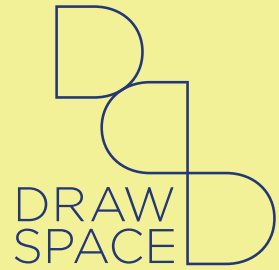
— Journey 1 千葉鉄也 Tetsuya Chiba Oshiage – Shinjuku

Tetsuya Chiba was the last artist I was to meet and I was late. The map reference on my phone was giving me directions in Japanese and overconfident and relaxed, I was on my way to the wrong part of Shinjuku, blissfully unaware I was setting myself up for a long, fast walk to our planned meeting. When we finally met, with our partners, we sat together in a tiny booth of a game restaurant, drinking beer and sharing small, delicious plates. We generally spoke of things other than this show. In the corner, nondescript but carefully wrapped, sat a carry-bag containing the works for this show.



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In a traditional and academic sense, Chiba describes his drawings as preparatory for his paintings. These fracture pictorial space into sharpened angles and planes; triangulations of thickly textured oil paint resemble facets of a jewel, after which they are often named. And yet, these drawings have another quality. Stripped of the physical tactility of paint, absent the bodily presence of the artist's hand they present as ephemeral distillations of intention. Stripped back to compositions wrought from line alone, and drawn digitally, their grey scale and restraint are eloquent. These lines, thickened darkly here, faintly scratched there, suggest a uniformity and relentlessness of intent that underscore the richly coloured jewel-like paintings to come. *'There are always strict rules. However, rules break down when creating a work. That will lead to progress.'* [2] Drawing as preparation for painting is a rule for drawing, for the reliance on mark, visual vocabulary, and the exploration now for something to come, later.

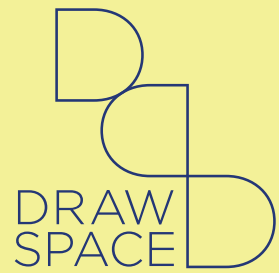
二 Journey 2 福本倫 Rin Fukumoto Shirokane Takanawa - Hibiya

A memory of a journey. It was raining outside when I walked into a solo exhibition of Rin Fukumoto's work in Ginza. When it rains in Tokyo, people tend to be prepared, with ubiquitous translucent umbrellas sprinkling the streets. Inside, as ever widening droplets in a puddle, her works repeated the circle, deploying scale, section, texture, layer, in a sinuous repetition of the orb in a seemingly endless visual variety. The repetition of the shape in the works somehow renders the familiar mark unfamiliar. A circle is a universal motif, perhaps the first thing we learn to draw, imperfectly. In this ongoing investigation it resembles many things, a sun in the sky, a stain on a table, a well in the ground, the impression of fingertips in soft clay. Always a circle, and always, not quite perfect.

On that day, when I first met Fukumoto, unexpectedly, we could best communicate in stumbling (on my part) French. She describes a personal philosophy that informs her ongoing visual quest. As she says, *'life begins in a circle'*. The fecundity of these forms, *'les rondes'*, she observes, is common to organic forms; cells, eggs, and celestial bodies. Fukumoto draws the circle over and over to express the way life cycles of life recur *'in a beautiful equilibrium'*. [3] The mark conveys harmony as well as providing an endless source of imagery. Fittingly, when Fukumoto's works arrive in Sydney from Japan they are rolled. Uncurled and laid out, faraway from where they were made, printed circles spill over in a tumble of warmth and vibrancy. This is drawing by rules, for the primacy of the mark, resonance of the motif and the endlessness of the question.

三 Journey 3 戸山恢 Kai Koyama Shibuya - Omote-sando

It was raining torrentially the September evening we met. Coming up from the subway, rainwater was gushing down the stairs in a series of small waterfalls and by the time I navigated to the calm and dry foyer of the community centre, my shoes and socks were sodden. Each step let out a soft squelch. As the rain continued to pour down outside Kai Koyama, raincoat aside, carefully unwrapped a recent series of drawings on paper (not the works in this show.) He describes his process for drawing parallel lines using a ruler as *very boring work*. Most recently Koyama had found an antique curved dressmakers' ruler and, by chance, the curved line drawings made with it resembled threads woven into textiles. I remarked on their beauty, and by way of response, he spoke into an electronic translator, holding up the screen for me to read:



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Interesting patterns are created there. But that is not my purpose. It is a by-product. People are interested in the patterns, and I am happy about that, but my purpose is a little different.^[4]

Koyama draws to record an action. This may be the simple action of attempting to draw a series of parallel lines. Using a point on carbon paper, the drawn line cannot be seen by the artists and inevitably, small jumps or deviations appear. Unseen, these movements accumulate as the drawing is continued. In another work, the action is a social protest. A methodical collection of paper receipts narrates an ongoing citizen vs. corporation action; a ¥1 underpayment of every bill. This is a rule for drawing, where multiple small actions are marked, marking its maker, time, and place in an ongoing matrix that is a drawing.

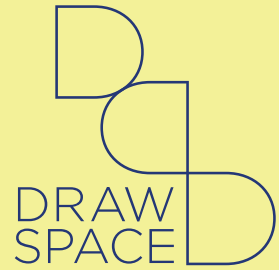
四 Journey 4 高島進 Susumu Takashima Fujino - Nihonbashi

I had left early from the mountains outside Tokyo, where I was staying with a busily working group of textile artists. It was hot and humid, an unseasonal Autumn, and I had spent the day crossing Tokyo on multiple errands. Late afternoon, within the darkened cool interior of the Musée Hamaguchi Yozo, time slowed down as I met Susumu Takashima at his exhibition, together with a small and enthusiastic group of people he knew. A friend of the artist spoke British-accented English and was an eloquent go between. Around us, Takashima's highly intricate works were displayed; sensitively accompanied by torches and magnifying glasses for close looking as well as informative wall labels detailing the process. Also a drawer of parallel lines this is drawing, as is emphasised in the titling, for materials. Takashima draws, as he says not to create an image, but to discover the infinite possibilities inherent in the very materials that make up a (draw)ing.^[5]

While it seems predictable to state that a continuous line drawn by a pencil thickens over time, or that a brush dipped in ink dries and fades, these are drawn marks that have effectively become their own subject. What is not predictable is the roll of a dice, a device Takashima has introduced to reduce his subjective input (choosing colour) while drawing. Time, also unpredictable, is embodied in Takashima's work but especially in the metalpoint drawings. Slowly drawn with sharpened soft metals; copper, silver or gold lines lie within the paper and oxidise slowly, darkening inexorably over time. A sustained focus on materiality and temporality, enlivened by the role of chance, are rules to draw by.

五 Journey 5 遠山 香苗 Kanae Toyama Fujino - Kichijoji

Once again I travel from the mountains to meet Kanae Toyama at an about half-way point. She had sent me a picture of a specific exit gate at Kichijoji station. On a whim I spend some time beforehand unsuccessfully searching foodshops for yuzu koshō^[6]. When we meet, Toyama suggests we walk to a coffee shop where we sit in a dark timbered booth and talk about art and architecture, painting, and her chance meeting with a musician. I discover there is much more to her work than the alluring, floating clarity of translucent paint strokes. The musical quality of her paintings was already apparent; the layers of clear colour and the cube-like forms of a paint-loaded brush touching the white canvas and interacting as a crisp melody on a page. Toyama tells me of her current project in which she is developing a collaboration with the wind musician Hiroshi Suzuki, an extended back and forth dialogue in painting and music. She says, 'I see my work as giving form to rhythms and melodies'.^[7]



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Much later I watch a video of Suzuki performing, and the quality of the saxophone, warm and breathy, echoes the liquid paint marks of Toyama's painting. There is touch too – fingers on keys, brush to canvas. There is space – as pauses between notes. Colour too – in sound quality, length and in vibration. As her coloured marks do, sounds float out in a suspended space. This is a rule for drawing, in the restraint of layering one colour-mark per day, and only as a response. While the paint application on surface is slow, deliberate and controlled, there is delight in the drips and pours that happen on the edges of the canvas, breaking the reverie with whimsy. After we go our separate ways, I do find yuzu koshō and am delighted.

What's essential is invisible to the eye. ^[8]

The 5 journeys I have related took place within a larger moment than my trip to Japan in September last year. There was my time seeing exhibitions in Tokyo and there was a travelling postcard project. I may not have mentioned that I do not speak Japanese apart from very superficially. The artists spoke some English, one didn't but did speak French. So, our conversations were often halting, punctuated by assistance from others or paused as we resorted to translators. Often it was an email exchange where an explanation, phrase, or meaning broke through. While much can be said about meaning and nuance being lost in translation, occasionally it is while we are lost; stumbling and uncertain, that we look more closely at what is in front of us. Even so, often what is essential is not merely seen but is what is felt, shared, and admired. Friendships and respect grew among the drawings. There is perhaps more to be said about communicating outside spoken language alone.

Rules for Drawing is a group exhibition exploring the imposition of *rules* as a generator of drawing. As artists we know that really, there are no rules for drawing. There are materials, there are subjects, and there is always process. Drawing is a direct, immediate language. But when artists self-impose *rules* they turn away from a frontal approach and instead come upon the drawing process sideways, open to unpredictability over design in their outcomes. Essentially, drawing is an action but also a journey somewhere. While there are no rules for drawing, artists are free to set rules to draw by. Paradoxically, the rigour established by rules instead open up vast tracts of drawing space for discovery.

Lisa Pang
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1. Translated from Japanese, *tadaima*: 'I'm home'.
2. Extract from email correspondence between the artist and the writer.
3. Extract from email correspondence between the artist and the writer.
4. Extract from electronically translated conversation between the artist and the writer.
5. Extract from artist statement in Musée Hamaguchi Yozo 2023 Autumn Exhibition Catalogue.
6. *Yuzu koshō* is a paste made from fresh green chili peppers, yuzu juice, peel and salt, which is left to ferment.
7. Extract from email correspondence between the artist and the writer.
8. Translated from French: 'L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux': Antoine de Saint Expeury, *The Little Prince*.