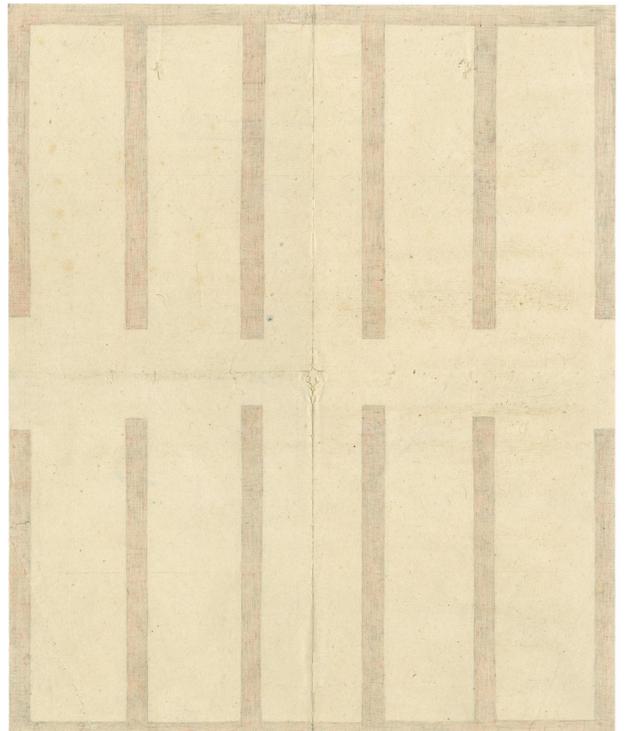


Abstract Art as Political Art: Lynne Woods Turner

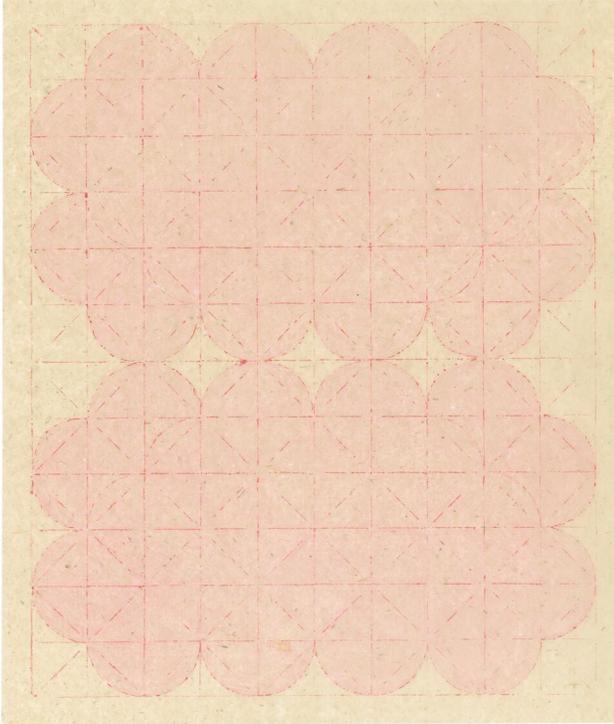
by Sarah Sentilles

Lynne Woods Turner’s abstract paintings and drawings trouble certainty. Her art reminds you that what you think you see might not be all there is to see. It demands careful viewing: Look at a single Turner drawing and watch it shift before your eyes. To be in her studio is to be in the presence of a master, for whom decades of disciplined, daily practice have resulted in a deep engagement with material and form and mind-blowing mastery of craft. Yes, she draws perfect circles and ellipses and straight lines by hand. Turner has been wrestling with abstraction for a long time. Her father saved her very first drawing, which she showed me when I visited her studio—an image of a man built of geometric forms, a horizontal line drawn across his knees. “I must not have known how to draw a bent knee,” Turner observed, and thinks she used the horizontal line to indicate the possibility of movement. “That is abstraction,” she said. “Finding a notation, a language that is beyond language.”

Turner rendered that first drawing—and most subsequent ones—on found paper, someone else’s handwriting still visible on the back. She enters into a reciprocal relationship with the paper she employs. Her drawings are not about imposing her ideas on the blank page; rather, she responds to what she finds there. In *Untitled 1199* (2016), for example, a tiny hole opens at the center of the page, a result of how the paper was rubbed or folded before Turner found it. The symmetrical opening (smaller than a fingernail) looks like ovaries, like the female reproductive system. Turner oriented the slim rectangles she drew around that tiny shape. The theme of reproduction—pollen, seeds, cells, multiplying forms—runs throughout Turner’s work. Tending a magnificent garden around her home in southeast Portland, she’s learned to identify plants by their growth patterns. Witnessing how form changes, from seed to sprout to stem to bud to flower to seed again, shapes her art. She is fascinated by the directional energy in plant life—how a plant can concentrate its life force into a seed and then expand, rooting into the earth and reaching for the sun. Like seeds, Turner’s drawings are small, and their size sometimes causes viewers to mislabel her work as quiet, as if you could equate size with consequence. But just as there is nothing inert about seeds—the whole world opening through one small thing: seed, sprout, leaf, flower—there is nothing quiescent about Turner’s drawings.



Lynne Woods Turner, Untitled 1199, 2016, pencil, colored pencil on old ledger paper, 16 x 13 in., courtesy the artist



Lynne Woods Turner, Red Practice Drawing, 2016, red ink, colored pencil on Chinese calligraphy practice paper, 16 1/2 x 13 7/8 in., courtesy the artist

In Red Practice Drawings (2016), a series of twenty drawings in red ink and colored pencil on Chinese calligraphy practice paper, one shape becomes two, becomes four, becomes six, and so on, a metamorphosis. The pages of practice paper are not identical; the existing lines on some are darker than on others, and Turner allowed the paper to influence how and what she drew, matching her red to the red of the grids, often altering or expanding the practice lines. She drew curved forms—cloudlike, Tantric rosettes—and then colored in the shapes on the back of the page using red pencil. Turner pays attention to what's supposed to remain hidden—undersides, the backs of things, grids meant only to guide the hand. Often she draws on both sides of the page, a nod to embroidery or weaving, work that, historically, women have done. Handmade textile constructions have an inside and an outside, a front and a back, knots on one side, pattern on the other. Turner's back-of-the-page drawings are like those knots, evidence of the hand that made them, a reminder that the image is a construction.

For me, Turner's art highlights the ethical potential of abstraction, revealing that art can have political effects without engaging explicitly political content. Recently, I am struck by how sight may be tied to oppression. Racism, for instance, in addition to being structural and insidious, begins with the visual: we sort bodies by how we see bodies. Part of my learned and inherited privilege as a white person is the false belief that my view of reality is reality. I have been trained to mistake my slanted perspective for objectivity, for truth. Though it is the lens through which I look at the world, whiteness remains largely invisible to me, even as it (mis)shapes how I see myself and "others." And these have been years of mis-seeing, from the use of police guns against brown and black bodies in the United States to the use of militarized drones against civilians around the world. It is imperative, then, to question the *how* of seeing, to render the act of looking itself visible. I think abstract art can do this disruptive work.

At a time in which presumed surety of vision can kill—think of those drones for which camera-sight and missile-sight are linked—Turner's work poses a radical visual challenge. My insistence that her art is anti-war and anti-drone took Turner (and perhaps you, dear reader) by surprise, but I am convinced that war is, at its root, caused by a mis-seeing of the "other." Enemies are constructed and imagined as "other," and then that image of the "other" is used to justify how they should be treated. If images contribute to militarism and terrorism, then, maybe, images can help get us out of such violence, too.

Exploring optical illusions, Turner insists that if you work in the visual you have to understand perception, optics, and how the eye completes things that are not there. The art Turner loves is art that challenges how she sees, paintings and drawings that confuse how the viewer reads the image. "Every time I look," she says, "I have to really think about what I'm seeing." And this is exactly the experience I have when viewing her drawings. Negative space becomes positive space. Subtle shifts between perspectives become visible only after multiple views. Turner is interested in boundaries, in areas of intersection, in the spaces between. She investigates what kinds of

barriers can be permeated. It is not surprising that she has long been drawn to diagrams and maps. For her, such documents are acts of good will, a passing on of knowledge to another person, a way of saying: this is how you can get back to this place. During war, however, maps and diagrams take on sinister meaning, and the flat seeing they demand must be disrupted.

When I study Turner's drawings, I think of Judith Butler's *Frames of War*, a book in which Butler argues that frames determine which lives are recognizable as lives and which lives are not. When frames break, Butler argues, "other possibilities for apprehension emerge."^[1] Opening new possibilities for apprehension—disrupting perception, questioning certainty, demanding careful viewing—is a political project, a project I think visual artists are best prepared to tackle. It is a modest thing, this faith I invest in art, but it is a faith Turner and I share. Her work has at its core something positive, she told me. "That's why my work is delicate and small," Turner explained, "because my hopes and the extent to which I can be optimistic are a small thing." Rather than painting and drawing what she sees that's wrong with the world, she has chosen to represent what could be—growth, balance, reciprocity, beauty.

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1. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 12.

Sarah Sentilles is a writer, critical theorist, and scholar of religion. She is the author of several books, including Breaking Up with God: A Love Story. Her recent book, Draw Your Weapons, was published this year by Random House. It is centered around the lives of a conscientious objector during World War II and a soldier stationed at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, both of whom create art as a response to war. Draw Your Weapons asks whether it's possible to act—ethically, creatively, peacefully—in the face of violence that feels as if it can't be stopped.

At the core of her writing, scholarship, and activism is a commitment to investigating the roles language, images, and practices play in oppression, violence, social transformation, and justice movements. Sentilles earned a bachelor's degree at Yale and master's and doctoral degrees at Harvard. She has taught at Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland State University, California State University Channel Islands, and Willemette University, where she was the Mark and Melody Teppola Presidential Distinguished Visiting Professor.

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