Making Art
Form and Meaning
by
Terry Barrett

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Point

A dot or small, circular shape is called a point. It is the simplest of elements, yet a single point can highlight important information, while a series of points can suggest linearity, and a cluster of points can suggest density. The Washington, D.C. Metrorail map uses points to indicate the locations of stations where commuters can transfer from one line to another.
Metrorail map detail
Washington, D.C.
While a graduate student, Hannah Whitaker made *Constellation* out of points of light. At the time, she was immersed in studying the history of art, and she was particularly interested in classical portraiture, trying to reconcile her skepticism of it with her appreciation of it. She selected a historical painting of a classically posed reclining nude and drew it onto a piece of black construction paper, pierced holes in the paper, and photographed light shining through the paper with a star filter that diffuses light. She says, “In a loose sense, I often try to take advantage of the dramatic potential of loaded subject matter – in this case a naked woman, thinking about how it might fit into my contemporary voice.”
Hannah Whitaker  *Constellation*, 2006. Photograph.
Chuck Close created a softly pointillist portrait of his daughter by using his fingerprints. *Georgia Fingerprint* is a comparatively small work, a print in black ink 22.8 inches high on a sheet of paper that is 30 inches high. Compare this to the enormous canvases of faces Close has made with points, many more than 100 inches high. From a close view, his large paintings look like combinations of very abstract dabs of paint; from a distance, the images appear photographically realistic. Using his fingerprints to make a portrait of his daughter, Close adds emotional importance to the work for him, his daughter, and us: he is her biological father and has re-formed her visually with his fingers.
Chuck Close
Chuck Close

Robert (Robert Rauschenberg)

Paintings

1997

Exhibited at PaceWildenstein, Spring 2000

Material: oil on linen

102" x 84"
Robert (Rauschenberg), 1998
Photogravure, 28.75 x 24 inches Edition of 48,
Published by ULAE
Loreta Lux  

*Sasha and Ruby*, 2006. Ilfochrome print

In her photograph *Sasha and Ruby*, Loretta Lux uses the dots of the girls’ dresses as compelling visual elements. The blue dots of the dresses are striking in themselves, but they also draw connections to the girls blue eyes, dotlike amid the white of the artist’s color palette. The dots also contribute to expressive meanings of the photograph. The girls are twins, and the dots that each wear are reminiscent of the genetic codes they share.
Loretta Lux's best shot 'Dorothea and the cat are waiting for eternity. The cat cooperated very nicely'
Loretta Lux's best shot 'Dorothea and the cat are waiting for eternity. The cat cooperated very nicely'

I took this picture last year. It is one of the few pictures I can elaborate on, but I don't really want to tell too much because it would spoil the image. It’s a picture about time, and timelessness. The girl and the cat are frozen in time. For me, they are sitting on the sofa as if they are waiting for eternity.

The model is a girl called Dorothea, the daughter of friends of mine. I have worked with her many times, starting when she was only two years old. She has this kind of aristocratic look, like you find in the paintings of Velázquez.

I started with an idea about a girl sitting on a sofa and waiting for nothing in particular, and the cat came into the idea later. I love cats, and I had tried to incorporate cats into my images for a long time and never managed it, but this time it worked extremely well.

I think a professional photographer would find my studio very uncomplicated. I don’t use many kinds of lighting, but producing this picture was a long process. From the idea to the finished image took two months. I took some time photographing the cat; you can’t plan exactly how animals will pose, but the cat cooperated very nicely.

However, I did have to repeat the shoot several times, and I retouched it on the computer as well. I need to have control over images, and I take a lot of care with the composition. I take time organising the forms and colours. I also save versions of an image and compare them and analyse why one is better than the other. I spend a great deal of time doing that.

I trained as a painter, and I still love painting, but eventually I became aware that the physical aspect of painting didn't really suit me. I didn’t enjoy working in the medium. It's very messy. I prefer to have it clean, with a nice computer.

Interview by Leo Benedictus

Curriculum vitae

Born: Dresden, 1969

Studied: Academy of Visual Arts, Munich (painting and art) 1990-96

Career high: Receiving the Infinity Award for Art from the International Center of Photography in 2005

Career low: Not being allowed to go to art school in East Germany

Inspirations: August Sander, but I draw my main inspiration from the history of painting, and especially from Bronzino, Velázquez and Runge

Pet hate: Carrying a camera

Ambition: Creating an amazing cat portrait of art-historical value

Dream subject: I don’t really have one, because I don’t really take pictures – I create them at my leisure
Line

Robert Smithson’s massive earthwork sculpture *Spiral Jetty* provides a dramatic example of a huge **line** – a series of connected points that make a length that seems to move in a direction. The spiral is composed of thousands of connected points, actually about 6,500 tons of black basalt rocks that he had placed in Great Salt Lake, Utah. From a distant aerial view of the sculpture, the individual points that Smithson gathered together merge into a continuous 1,500-foot-long and 15-foot-wide line that moves in a counterclockwise direction. Smithson’s line like all lines, has thickness – it is 15 feet wide. The 1,500-foot-long line also has a visible beginning and an end. Some lines, however, are continuous, such as a linear circle, with no apparent beginning or end.
1,500 x 15 ft., Great Salt Lake, Utah
Lines can be actual – made by a tool moving across a surface, as in Cy Twombly’s *Untitled*. This is a clear example of the use of actual lines, made with white crayon by vigorous hand and arm movements on a piece of paper that he first colored with house paint.
Cy Twombly  Untitled, 1970. Oil-based house paint and crayon on canvas, 13 ft. 3/8 in. x 21 ft. 1/8 in.
Lines can also be implied – perceived, for example, where areas of contrasting color or texture meet, or when our eyes connect dots and perceive a line:
hairlines – **implied lines** in nature
Tree lines are examples of **implied lines** in nature.
A line is implied in the Coach handbag where one texture of leather meets another leather. The python embossing implies line and texture. Stitching of the leathers also implies line.
A contour line is an actual or implied line that defines the outer limits of a three-dimensional subject or a two-dimensional shape.

Lines can be “lost” and “found,” or seem to appear and disappear.

In the Matisse drawings, we can refer to these lines as broken line contour.
Henri Matisse
*Sirene*
1949
Henri Matisse, 1869-1954
*Three Quarter Profile*
1936
Pen and black ink
14 15/16 x 11 in.
Henri Matisse, French, 1869-1954
Profile Head with Ruffle
1937
Pen and black ink
380 x 280 mm. (14 15/16 x 11 in.)
This character is drawn with a black contour line. This black line of various widths describes both outside and inside shapes of the subject and his attire.
In two-dimensional art, a line is often a mark made by a pencil or other tool as it moves across a surface. Line is the predominant element in most drawings, although it is also essential to a wide range of art forms. The quality of line—controlled or loose, ragged or smooth, thick or thin—is expressive. That is, it has the power to suggest mood and feeling.
The quality of line in Jean Dubuffet’s ink drawing *Jean Paulhan* is nervous and restless. Debuffet derived the line quality in part from his study of graffiti scrawl and scribbled children’s drawing, examples of gestural lines that convey the energy of the artist’s hand movements across the drawing surface.

Twombly’s Untitled is an example of the use of gestural lines in a nonrepresentational work.

Dubuffet has drawn *Jean Paulhan* in a seemingly naïve manner, but his uses of line are very expressive of the character’s emotional state.
Jean Dubuffet (French, Le Havre 1901–1985 Paris)

Jean Paulhan
Date: 1946
Acrylic and oil on Masonite
42 7/8 x 34 5/8 in. (108.9 x 87.9 cm)
Dubuffet waited until he was forty to devote himself to art. A man of exceptional intelligence, he painted raw, although childlike, images that combine a bold handling of texture with a wry, dark sense of humor. The subjects of his early paintings are city streets, ordinary people performing everyday tasks, and likenesses of his friends. In 1945 Dubuffet had begun creating what he referred to as *hautes pâtes*, paintings in which a thick paste served as the ground, color was used sparingly, and contours were scratched like graffiti. The paste used for the ground was made of tar, asphalt, and white lead, often enriched with cement, plaster, or varnishes, to which sand, coal dust, pebbles, and pieces of glass or straw might also be added. Gradually, color virtually disappeared from his work altogether. In this portrait of Jean Paulhan, the ground and the paint surface are built up with heavy chalk, thus continuing Dubuffet's use of the *hautes pâtes* technique. Consistent with his "anti-art" position, Dubuffet rejected traditional portraiture, which he regarded as facile imitation. Instead of conveying a sitter's likeness or personality, he focused on certain odd features, which he then exaggerated. Paulhan's intense, close-set eyes, long nose, broad upper lip, two prominent upper front teeth, and thick mane of unruly hair are easily recognizable. His strangely monolithic form seems to emerge from plaster or chalk that has been smeared onto a dark wall; the lines of his face, outstretched hands, jacket, tie, and buttons have been scratched, like graffiti.

The painting of Paulhan was part of Dubuffet's large series of 170 portraits of the writers, poets, and painters who were his friends—his sole subject matter at the time. Between July 1945 and August 1947 Dubuffet drew and painted about twenty-eight portraits of Paulhan, a writer and critic, who was the editor of the literary magazine *La nouvelle revue française* from 1925 until his death in 1968. Paulhan's collected works fill five volumes and encompass books on modern painting; essays on rhetoric, language, logic, and love; and prefaces to erotic literature, including the works of Sade and Pauline Réage's *Histoire d'O* (1954), believed by many to have been written by Paulhan himself.
Jean Dubuffet
*Le Géographié*
1955
*Oil on canvas*
Sol LeWitt’s *Wall Drawing #260* relies less on the artist’s hand and more on the artist’s mind. LeWitt intentionally reduces the meanings and emotional content of his work. Each of the lines is mechanical, and each is equally important, with no hierarchy in their use. LeWitt does not even touch his *Wall Drawing* works himself but sends directions to gallery staffs on how to install them. These are the artist’s directions to the installer for *Wall Drawing #260*:

A 12-inch grid covering the black wall. Within each 12-inch square, a straight vertical, horizontal, diagonal right or diagonal left line or an arc from one of the four corners bisecting the square. All squares must be filled by one of the 8 choices. The direction or kind of arc or line in each square is determined by assigning each possibility a number (1-8) and by having the (wo)man pull those numbers 1-8 out of a hat. The drawing must begin with the upper left module, and end with the lower right.

The multiplicity and variety of configurations LeWitt achieves are particularly striking because the drawing relies on only two kinds of lines: straight and arched, without variation of thickness or other variables.

LeWitt’s line drawing is purposely flat with no suggestions of representational subject matter or illusions or three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface.
Line, however, is often used to created the illusion of three dimensionality and depth on a flat surface. Michelangelo’s preliminary study for a sculpture, the Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist, illustrates several techniques dependent on line.

First he made an underdrawing, lightly etching lines into the paper with a stylus (a sharp pointed tool) and no ink; then he went over those barely visible lines with red and black chalk lines, and then he added brown ink lines with pens. through this layering of lines, he made the central figures seem three dimensional by suggesting volumes – spheres and cylinders – shaped by areas of light and shadow. Where light strikes the figures’ shapes, Michelangelo’s layers of line are thin; they are more thickly layered in shadowed areas.
MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist (recto)*, c. 1530. Black and red chalk with pen and brown ink over stylus, 11 x 15 ½ in.
Vincent van Gogh also layers lines in his ink drawing of his mailman, *Portrait of Joseph Roulin*. Van Gogh uses **hatching**, a series of thin parallel lines and **cross-hatching**, or crisscrossed straight lines, layering one atop the other. Hatching can be seen in the man’s hat and on his forehead; cross-hatching is prevalent throughout and is especially noticeable in the man’s beard. Hatching and cross-hatching are also visible in Michelangelo’s drawing, but they are subtler. Michelangelo’s lines are delicate, whereas Van Gogh’s are scruffy. Van Gogh’s use of lines of different thickness is obvious: compare, for example, the thin lines in the background to the thick lines in the postman’s coat. The denser areas of the drawing give the man bulk and a sense of physical substance. Thus you can use hatched and crosshatched lines for visual interest, to vary the tonality in your work, to build volume, to create the illusion of three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface, and to create highlights and shadows that occur when light illuminates a three-dimensional form.
VINCENT VAN GOGH
Portrait of Joseph Roulin
1888
Reed and quill pens and brown ink
and black chalk
12 5/8 X 9 5/8 in.
In his witty cover illustration for the *New Yorker* magazine, Saul Steinberg offers many examples of line in a single drawing. Steinberg’s drawing is an especially effective example of how different types and uses of line can be expressive.
He has given the characters in the drawing different personalities, in part by the types of lines with which he renders them. He drew the seated woman with hatched lines only, and she appears flat, perhaps suggesting that she is a shallow person. The standing man is composed of simple and bold lines, while the seated man is composed of more subtle and nuanced lines, perhaps suggesting that he is the more sophisticated of the two men. Steinberg also made a woman with dots and no lines, suggesting that her personality is hardly formed. He used childlike lines to represent the child.

SAUL STEINBERG  Cover illustration, New Yorker Magazine, November 23, 1968.
He also used lines in different media to achieve different expressive effects. The standing man in Steinberg’s illustration is made with ink, which produces clear, assertive lines: the woman next to him appears to have been made with charcoal or some other soft medium that allows for smudging and blurring of lines. The child is made in the bold colorful lines of crayon.

Lines can be combined in a variety of ways to make different kinds of representations, from the more abstract to the more realistic, and in a variety of artistic styles. Steinberg’s figures appear to exist in different worlds because each is rendered in a different style, yet they inhabit a single space and are likely family members.
The different kinds of lines you can make approach an infinite number. You can develop a vocabulary of variations, which you can continually modify for different expressionistic purposes in your work.